

County Councillor's Report 21st March – Coffinswell

Next year's budget has been agreed by Devon County Council, with council tax going up by 4.99 per cent. The increase will mean the yearly bill for an average Band D property will rise by £77.67 to £1,634.13 for the Devon County Council part of the Council Tax. This does not include the huge 15% increase in the Police precept; the Fire Authority and Parish Council precepts and of course the Teignbridge District Council tax which has declined from an upper 9% to 8% of the Council Tax make up.

Council approved the ruling Conservative group's budget plans on 16th February, which will see total spending increase from £629 million to £696 million next year – a rise of 10.5 per cent.

The Budget was rejected by the opposition Liberal Democrats who had their own amendment to pay for more pothole and road repairs and 20 mph zones. Labour members supported the budget, despite the Group describing it as "far from being a good budget" and "a bad budget for Devon".

Extra money in the budget will mostly go towards spending increases of 18.4 and 8.8 per cent on children's and adult services respectively. However, the council tax rise and central funding from government has not been enough for Devon to set a budget without making cuts elsewhere.

As a result, cuts, alternative funding and additional income of £47.5 million have been identified, including £26.4 million of savings in adult social care and £12 million taken from reserves.

Addressing councillors, cabinet member for finance Cllr Phil Twiss said it was an "extraordinary budget for extraordinary times."

But Lib Dem opposition leader Julian Brazil took issue at Cllr Twiss being "proud" of the budget. "I'd be embarrassed about this budget," he said, accusing Cllr Twiss of being from the "school of Trussonomics."

In my speech, I expressed real concern over the deliverability of the nearly £50 million of cuts and savings, noting that proposed savings in the previous three budgets had not been achieved.

One Tory councillor, voted against his own party's budget and slammed the government, calling on it to take back control of adult social care and children's services. "We're really, really struggling. It needs to be given back," he said. "Financially we cannot cope. Why should our residents suffer with such a huge burden on their taxes? Central government need to pull their fingers out of their derrieres and get it sorted for us," Cllr McGeough added. "It's not right. It's not fair."

The Independent and Green groups also rejected the budget. The Independent Leader addressing the big rise in spending on Devon's underperforming children's services said "a good news story you would think for children. I'm not convinced there is a solid plan for the extra (money) to improve outcomes, and Ofsted are definitely not convinced." The government has threatened to intervene over the authority's long-term failings in Children's Services.

Councillors approved the budget by a margin of 40 votes to 13.

Devon County are teaming up with Devon & Plymouth Chamber of Commerce to host the New Ways to Recruit and Retain Staff in 2023 event.

With the region's job market still facing a range of vacancies, this free event aims to help employers, organisations and charities to find out about alternative ways of recruiting and retaining staff.

The event will be held at Exeter Racecourse on Monday 24th April from 8:30am – 1pm, focuses on supporting employers to consider filling vacancies using a wider talent pool of people, how to support those already in employment, to better understand workplace culture and to review how traditional recruitment methods can be adjusted to attract a different audience.

Speakers on the day include Mike Adams OBE, Founder of Purple Tuesday, who will discuss what organisations must do to be disability inclusive, as well as Helen Hart, from Devon & Plymouth Chamber of Commerce's Local Skills improvement Plan Project Executive, and Ruth Gripper, Research Impact Manager at the University of Exeter.

There will also be discussion groups on topics including:

- Workplace Culture – exploring how a positive, inclusive culture can impact your ability to recruit and retain great candidates for your business.
- Differences in our wiring: Flipping the narrative – encouraging a healthy and open dialogue around some of the common strengths and abilities to be found in people with neurodiverse differences such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia or dyspraxia and how we can best support some of the common needs that arise.
- Reaching a wider jobs market: Inclusive recruitment – how to make your recruitment process more inclusive from writing the job description through to the interview.
- Being a mindful manager – Andrea Adey from Mindful Employer will empower employers to take the lead on matters of workplace mental health and wellbeing.
- Access to Work – Job Centre Plus Disability Advisors will discuss Access to Work, a Department for Work and Pension grant scheme which provides money to help people with a disability or long-term health condition stay in work to do their job.

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