

## TOWN (PARISH) OF BRIDPORT

At the **ANNUAL TOWN (PARISH) MEETING** of the Town of Bridport, held in the Town Hall, Bridport on Tuesday 26 March 2019 at 7.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Cllr Barry Irvine, Town Mayor  
Chairman of Bridport Town Council (in the Chair)

15 elected members of the Town Council  
34 members of the public (26 public and 8 staff)

### **1. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Annual Town Meeting held on 6 March 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### **2. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Sandra Brown and Ros Kayes.

### **3. BRIDPORT TOWN COUNCIL BUSINESS 2018/19**

- (a) The Town Mayor, Cllr Barry Irvine gave a review of his Mayoral Year and the engagements he had undertaken as First Citizen of Bridport during the municipal year 2018/19.
- (b) The Leader of the Council, Cllr Sarah Williams gave her review of the municipal year 2018/19.
- (c) The Town Clerk reported on the activities of the Town Council during the municipal year 2018/19.

Copies of the reports from the Town Mayor, Leader of the Council and the Town Clerk were available at the meeting and subsequently on the Town Council's web site.

### **4. ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTED BY THE TOWN COUNCIL**

Rovarn Wickremasinghe of the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Sarah Williams, representing Emily Hicks of the Museum Trust, Will Thrower of the Leisure Centre, Nick Zeibland of the Arts Centre and Kelvin Clayton of the Youth and Community Centre, along with two young people, gave reports on the activities of their organisations over the past year. These organisations are all supported under a Service Level Agreement.

Smaller organisation grant recipients present, who addressed the meeting, were Stan Williams of Axe Valley & West Dorset Ring and Ride, Rosalind Tarry of Bridport Chamber Orchestra, Edward Brand of the Bridport Community Shed, Simon Williams of Bridport Mind Fest, Ruth Curry of B Sharp, Elizabeth Harley of the Chapel in the Garden, Debra Bates of Dementia Friendly Bridport, Tammy Gale

of Home-Start West Dorset, Lucy Hart of the Melplash Agricultural Society, Anna Golding of No Limits and David Sarson of Royal Voluntary Services.

The Town Mayor, on behalf of the Town Council, thanked all the speakers for their presentations and for all their work on behalf of the Town.

## 5. **MATTERS CONCERNING TOWN AFFAIRS**

Mr Paul Nichols of Burton Road raised the following:

### **The precept increase of 9.9% for 2019/20.**

When I received my council tax bill on 16<sup>th</sup> March, I was astonished to discover that BTC are again increasing their precept, this time by an inflation busting 9.9%. This is on top of a 6.3% increase for 2018/19. I moved to Bridport in 2008 and the precept for my band F property in 2008/9 was £167. Now 11 years later it has increased by 96% to £328. BLC do not appear to understand that council tax payers have had to cope with 10 years of austerity, and that incomes have been flat/static. This year my pension will rise by just 2.5%. Nowhere on the BTC website can I find out how and when this was agreed, as the minutes of the relevant meetings remain unpublished.

In my view, the sensible approach to have taken for this year of great uncertainty, would have been to have increased the precept by the rate of inflation (2.5%), and to have taken the shortfall out of reserves, until the future plans of Dorset Council become clearer. As of March 2018, BLC had total reserves of £1M, so what is the point of having reserves in case of a rainy day, if you don't then use them when the rain arrives. It is so unfair to make the council tax payers keep paying more and more, just to "balance the budget". We cannot afford to keep paying more, and the council tax should reflect the reality of the economic situation. It is also very misleading to keep quoting the increases as "an increase of £20 per year, 38 pence per week for Band D, although it will be less than this for most properties in Bridport". **The facts are that all bands A to G will pay 9.9% more than last year, and all are now paying 96% more than they were in 2008/9.**

### **Why are Council Tax payers in Bridport paying for services that are used free of charge by people living in adjoining parishes.**

I have previously raised this with BTC, in the summer of 2018, when they were considering making changes to the parish boundaries. They were broadly sympathetic, but seemed to considerate it as in the too difficult column. This is a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

In 2018/19 BTC had the largest precept of all of the 94 parishes within WDDC. Now following their latest 9.9% increase, they have the largest precept of the 190 parishes under the new Dorset Council. What a shameful message for people looking to live in our town- If you choose to live in Bridport, you will pay more council tax than in any other part of Dorset.

There is a simple reason for this, which really needs to be addressed, especially if BTC is to eventually provide more services. The adjoining parishes of Allington, Bradpole, Bothenhampton & Walditch, and Symondsburry, all use the services

provided by BTC, but make no contribution to their running costs. This is very unfair to the residents of BTC.

It also makes a considerable difference to the amount of council tax payable:-

2019/20	Band D	Band F	
<b>Bridport</b>	<b>£277.54</b>	<b>£328.67</b>	
Allington	£37.12	£53.62	£4.62 less per week for Band D £5.29 less per week for Band F
Both. & Wal.	£27.76	£40.10	£4.80 less per week for Band D £5.55 less per week for Band F
Bradpole	£36.62	£52.90	£4.63 less per week for Band D £5.30 less per week for Band F
Sym'sbury	£27.67	£ 39.97	£4.80 less per week for Band D £5.55 less per week for Band F

I live on the Burton Road, and the equivalent houses on the other side of the road are in Bothenhampton and who pay £288 less per year ( £ 5.55 per week) than I do. **How very unfair that is.** The residents of these parishes should be paying an annual surcharge to BTC to contribute to services provided. This could also be extended to include Chideock, Loders, Shipton Gorge, Burton Bradstock, Pucknowle, and even Charmouth. I implore BTC to give these proposals some serious consideration now.

The Town Clerk responded as follows:

Firstly, I would thank Mr Nichols for his questions and comments. It is important that our residents feel able to challenge councillors' decisions and raise questions for the future.

I will address your first question about the level of increase. When setting its budget and Council Tax for next year, the Town Council faced some major challenges. In 2019, for the first time, we will be required to meet the full cost of Town Council elections. We are also bound by nationally agreed arrangements for staffing costs, and we have had to accommodate significant cost increases here too. We have also absorbed reductions in external funding, including the loss of nearly £60,000, over five years, in Council Tax support previously paid by the District Council. The Council also faces inflationary pressures of its own – costs of energy, equipment and repairs are all rising faster than the nationally published inflation figure. In drafting our budget, we have tried hard to offset some of these increases by efficiency savings, and in many individual areas of the budget we have not applied any increase for inflation.

In recent years the Council has taken on or supported new services – youth services, grounds/highway maintenance, public transport, licensing, and tourism services, to name but a few. These are services that would have been cut by the larger councils and would be lost to the community if we did not provide them. This is a political judgement for councillors to make, and as your elected representatives, they have decided that protecting services is important to the town. This process of taking on devolved services is continuing, and as a result we have made some

provision in next year's budget for the expected transfer of even more services. All I can say to Mr Nichols is that the judgement on what to do and what not to do is a balance – councillors have by no means rescued everything that has been cut by the District and County Council, but in talking to their residents they have formed a view that they must do as much as they can, and that there is general public support for their approach – even if this means increases in Council Tax. Mr Nichols may regard this as 'shameful', but I am sure councillors will be proud to have protected the community in this way.

Of course, if the councils that are reducing their provision could make reductions in their element of the Council Tax, this would completely offset the additional cost of our provision – indeed we would argue that in general, we can provide services at lower cost. However, the larger councils have themselves suffered huge reductions in funding from central government, and so find themselves raising the same amount or more from Council Tax, despite reducing the services they provide. This is a consequence of government policy. It is also national policy that town and parish councils should not receive any part of local business rates. These are issues that the local council sector is campaigning on.

The Town Council did consider options for funding part of the increase in Council Tax from its reserves. They did have to consider how this would affect the need to maintain an appropriate level of general reserves – currently enough to fund about four months of our annual expenditure, against a recommended level of between 3 and 12 months. Councillors recognised too that funding annual expenditure from reserves – in effect from a 'one off' savings pot – all too often leads to the annual revenue budget falling behind, and resulting in even bigger increases in the future to 'catch up'.

Overall, whilst the rise is above the rate of inflation, Council Tax paid for a Band D property in Bridport will rise by 39p per household per week in the coming year. My report earlier set out what we do with that money, and it is for the community to judge its value and reasonableness. 60% of properties in Bridport parish are in the lower Council Tax Bands A, B and C.

Finally, it is perhaps also worth noting that the Council recoups over half of its expenditure from sources other than the Council Tax, and that those in single occupation or eligible for benefits receive significant reductions in their Council Tax bills.

One point of information in respect of Mr Nichols' first question: The budget and Council Tax were considered at five public Council meetings before being set. These were:

- Best Value and Scrutiny Sub Committee 4 December 2018
- Finance & General Purposes Committee 12 September 2018
- Finance & General Purposes Committee 14 November 2018
- Finance & General Purposes Committee 16 January 2019
- Full Council 22 January 2019

The agendas, supporting reports and minutes for these meetings are available on the Town Council's website, or can be viewed at the Council offices by appointment.

On Mr Nichols' second question, regarding the effect of parish boundaries on Council Tax, councillors agree in principle that the situation is unfair on Council Tax payers in Bridport, who pay more than in the immediate surrounding parishes of Allington, Bothenhampton & Walditch, Bradpole and Symondsbury. Residents of those parishes benefit from quite a lot of what the Town Council does. However, councillors also recognise the strong desire for surrounding parishes to retain their parish identity, and have no desire to be seen to be 'empire building'. This does not mean that they are not trying to address the issue. One approach is to look to new developments just outside the Bridport boundary, and to request that these be included in Bridport. Such a request has been made in respect of Vearse Farm. Unfortunately, the District Council has deferred this request and will not now consider it until the new unitary council is formed, but we are hopeful that it will be successful.

Another approach is to ask surrounding parishes to contribute to costs of services that benefit their residents. We are having some success in this respect, with contributions being made towards our community bus service, the Neighbourhood Plan, and the Lengthsman scheme. We would like to see this partnership approach continue and expand over time.

A point of information in respect of Mr Nichols' second question: The figure quoted for Band D in Bridport in Mr Nichols' question is overstated by £50 and should read £227.54 rather than £277.54.

## **6. ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OTHER BUSINESS**

The Town Mayor thanked those present for their attendance and declared the meeting closed at **8.55pm**.