



CLlr Jilly Jordan

Soulbury Parish Council Meeting Mon 26th Feb 2024

Buckinghamshire Council sets budget for next three years

Councillors in Buckinghamshire have approved the council's Medium Term Financial Plan, which sets out its spending plans and how these are budgeted for over the next three years.

The budget has been set amidst a volatile economic environment and outlines where the council will make savings to balance the books over the next three years, while committing spend to the priority areas residents have asked for.

Councils across the UK are facing acute financial pressures, particularly in four key areas that support vulnerable residents; social care for both adults and children, temporary accommodation for homeless people and transport for vulnerable children to get to and from school. These services alone make up 71% of Buckinghamshire Council's budget, leaving only 29% of the budget to pay for all the other services the council provides, from fixing and improving roads, to collecting bins and providing libraries and leisure centres.

The costs of providing some of these services have also risen well above already high inflation rates, for example, a 20-30% increase in road construction and repairs costs. With council tax funding 80% of the council's net operating budget needed to pay for these services, councillors have agreed to raise the base rate of council tax by 2.99% with a further 2% increase in the adult social care precept. **This means an overall rise of 4.99% in council tax bills, or an extra £1.69 per week for the average Band D household.**

The budget also sets out how much the council proposes spending as part of its £666 million 'capital' programme, which is shaped by what residents have told the council they want to see prioritised.

Councillors have also voted through an amendment put forward by Councillors Gareth Williams and Diana Blamires to make an extra £5 million from Reserves available directly to address the deterioration of local roads caused by the severe weather conditions in recent weeks. **It means a total of £110 million is now set aside for roads repairs and improvements over the next four years.**

Overall, the final budget includes spending:

- £110 million on roads with a further £8.4 million on footways
- £26.1 million on services to support housing and homelessness, including affordable housing action plans and disabled facilities grants

- £14.7 million on climate change and flood management
- £37.6 million on town centre regeneration and economic growth

The final budget has been agreed following rigorous cross-party scrutiny of the plans that were originally put forward in January. The financial plans for each portfolio area were looked at in detail during a series of meetings last month. The final plans have also been adjusted in recent weeks after the government made some extra funding available to councils, meaning a further £5 million can now be set aside for Social Care, the majority of which has been allocated to a contingency fund for this service.

The council has also agreed to additional council tax charges on homes that have been empty for more than twelve months. While savings across the board are still being found to balance the books, this additional income has allowed the council to reverse a small number of savings measures originally put forward. For example, for now we will not need to shorten opening hours at our Household Recycling Centres and the council can continue the gully cleansing programme and reinstate a round of weed spraying and litter picking.

However, overall, the council still has to deliver considerable savings to balance the books, over and above the £75.4 million already saved since becoming a unitary council. Some of the savings measures include difficult decisions, such as allocating less money to our community boards and some local voluntary organisations.

The council has also put forward long-term solutions to reduce costs including:

- investing in additional children's homes to reduce the heavy cost burden of external placements
- making savings in Adult Social Care through providing help for some residents, where it fits their need, to live more independently
- rationalising the council's office space, such as closing the King George V site in Amersham
- investing in more housing and temporary accommodation units to bring down the spend on costly nightly-paid accommodation

Buckinghamshire Council Leader Martin Tett said:

"This is the by far the hardest budget we've ever set during my years in local government, and the challenges facing us are acute. However, I'm pleased that we can balance the books over the next three years. We remain prudently run and are not in the same position as a growing number of councils who are becoming bankrupt with some having to put council tax bills up by as much as 10%. We do our best to keep the rise to a minimum but the 2.99% increase in our basic precept and the 2% increase in the adult social care precept reflects the reality of the situation we are in with council tax covering 80% of our net budget. I urge anyone who's worried about paying their council tax bill to contact our team in the first instance to discuss options.

"A key part of this budget is about managing the considerable risk and continuing turbulence, which is why we've put most of the extra funding we have had from government in recent weeks into our adult social care contingency pot. We're making some tough choices to deliver the savings we need to balance the books and we're also closing under-used office space and examining the best ways to maximise efficiencies from our activities overall – but there really is very little room for manoeuvre indeed as we've been finding savings year after year already.

"It's a tough but realistic budget and as we cannot run in deficit like central government, I truly believe this is the best we can do, that continues to deliver for our residents.

"This budget underpins our over-arching priorities of protecting the vulnerable, strengthening our communities, improving our environment and increasing prosperity."

E-scooter trials in Buckinghamshire extended for a further 2 years

Buckinghamshire Council has extended its e-scooter trial in Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Princes Risborough until 31 May 2026. This follows the Department for Transport (DfT) extending the national e-scooter trial to continue their assessment of impacts and allow legislation to be put in place to legalise e-scooters.

The continuation of the e-scooter trial will help to reduce the use of private e-scooters, which are illegal to ride on pavements, roads or public spaces. The scheme also supports the council's Climate Change and Air Quality Strategy by promoting sustainable low-carbon transport alternatives for shorter trips.

The e-scooter trial is managed at zero cost to Buckinghamshire Council and operated by Zipp Mobility.

Steven Broadbent, Buckinghamshire Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Transport, said:

"The e-scooter trial has so far proved successful with a high level of usage, particularly among younger users. Continuing the scheme means we will continue to offer a sustainable travel option to the local community, helping to reduce congestion. To date, more than 327,000 trips covering more than 507,000 miles have taken place across the three trial areas. A large proportion of these trips would have been made by car, and so enabling people to use e-scooters means we are also reducing carbon emissions and improving air quality.

"The trials to date have, overall, had a strong safety record in Buckinghamshire. This is due to us being able to control the Zipp e-scooters by limiting the areas they can be used in, limiting their speed and ensuring they have enhanced braking systems. Where people misuse the permitted e-scooters then they are either reported to the police or have their account revoked. Extending the e-scooter rental trial will also help to minimise the use of private e-scooters by offering a safer and legal alternative."

In Buckinghamshire, only Zipp Mobility e-scooters are legal on the road, pavement or in a public space. Riders of privately-owned e-scooters in these areas risk receiving a large fine, points on their driving licence, and the possibility of their e-scooter being seized.

You can find out more about e-scooter use on the [Thames Valley Police website](#).

A new vision for parking across Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire Council has unveiled its vision and ambition for parking across the county as part of a new Parking Strategy which sets out how the service will develop in coming years.

From embracing new technology to providing customers with greater choice and flexibility and from streamlining parking charges to promoting greater safety and reducing congestion, the document, which was agreed by Cabinet yesterday (Thursday 22 February), starts to align the different on and off-street parking arrangements from the previous legacy councils into one strategy which covers the whole county.

Key aims within the strategy include:

- ❑ A commitment to maintaining the upkeep of quality parking provision across the county.
- ❑ Working to ensure the council's parking operations are fully self-funded as is required legally.
- ❑ Exploring ways to give people flexibility in parking options across the county.
- ❑ Intelligent use of parking enforcement to ensure effective enforcement locally and county-wide.
- ❑ A gradual transition to online/digital payments for all parking, reflecting trends in payment preferences which have accelerated in recent years, whilst maintaining cash payments for as long as economically possible in existing locations.
- ❑ Ensuring residents and customers are kept fully informed of changes.

The strategy has been informed by a previous review of current parking arrangements and starts to address inconsistencies across the county and identify where changes are needed to provide a better service for residents.

One of the first actions the council is taking is signing up to the National Parking Platform (NPP), a Department for Transport pilot scheme which aims to provide greater flexibility in paying for parking while providing value for money. The scheme will be piloted in council car parks in Wycombe and will allow customers to choose which supplier they purchase their parking time through.

Since becoming a unitary authority in 2020 we have been working hard to reduce inconsistencies across the county. We have looked at how we can make improvements, listening to what people have said and analysing trends and data to come up with this vision.

We are keen to embrace new technologies and innovation whilst also making the most of our parking assets and enforcement powers to support our corporate priorities. Our parking offer must be right for the future and our communities and must be financially sustainable. This vision sets out how we plan to do that.

The Parking Strategy can be viewed [here](#).

Council secures further £1.9m for hundreds of new on-street electric vehicle (EV) charging points across the county

Buckinghamshire Council will be extensively increasing electric vehicle charging access in areas across the county where there is little off-street parking available, using £1,991,000 in funding recently granted from the UK Government's [Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure \(LEVI\)](#) capital fund.

Residents and businesses who have private parking can already access funding support from Government via their [Homecharge and Workplace Charging](#) schemes. LEVI aims to support those who cannot install their own charge points at home and so will enable more people to be able to make the switch to EVs.

There are currently 294 publicly-accessible EV chargepoints in Buckinghamshire, owned by various operators. The new LEVI-funded installation programme will be a step change and help us work towards our target of 1,000 publicly-accessible chargepoints in Buckinghamshire by the end of 2027, as set out in the [Buckinghamshire Council's 5-year Action Plan](#).

The new LEVI funding builds on the Council's earlier successes with the [Wendover electric vehicle charging trial](#) that is already underway and the [On-Street Residential Chargepoint Scheme \(ORCS\)](#) funded charge points in 20 Buckinghamshire Council car parks, providing 160 EV-only charging spaces. This year the Council has also recruited 2 new EV focused officers to help continue to develop and deliver these projects.

Steven Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport, said:

"It's excellent to hear that we've been successful in our funding bid to further support the installation of hundreds of new chargepoints across Buckinghamshire. This funding will ensure the rollout continues at pace, with those without access to off-street parking benefiting hugely.

"It will not only help us work towards reaching our target of 1,000 publicly-accessible EV charging spaces in the county by 2027, but it's also another great example of the extent of the work we're doing to tackle climate change here in Buckinghamshire."

For more information on the council's ambitious EV Action Plan, please visit [Buckinghamshire Council's website](#).

Groundwater Flooding

Due to the high levels of rain over the winter period, water tables have been rising, creating a risk of groundwater flooding across the Chiltern Hills and Berkshire Downs. Groundwater flooding occurs when water gathers beneath the ground's surface, causing the water table to rise and eventually reach the surface.

Groundwater levels are high in the Chiltern Hills, in the southern part of Buckinghamshire. We have produced and published [groundwater flood maps on our website](#), showing the likely locations for groundwater flooding, where it is most likely to emerge and what locations it will impact. These are available for Chesham, Marlow, Hambleden, Wycombe and West Wycombe.

Our Strategic Flood Management Team is working to monitor the risk and support our residents. Project Groundwater, our Defra-funded project looking into groundwater flooding, has also created a page with advice about [what to do in a groundwater flood](#).

The following advice has been sent out in a press release regarding the groundwater flooding situation. Residents can [check their risk](#) on the government website.

- If a resident experiences flooding, they can call Floodline for advice on 0345 988 1188. [Flooding should be reported on the Buckinghamshire Council website](#).
- If it is an emergency and flooding is causing a risk to life, residents must call 999.
- Groundwater can infiltrate the sewage system. If there are problems with flushing toilets or sewage is emerging, residents must contact Thames Water on 0800 316 9800.
- The most important thing our residents can do to prepare for groundwater flooding is to have a personal flood plan. [Flood Mary's website](#) has many resources for creating a plan, including a template to fill in.
- If residents are struggling and would like someone to talk to, the National Flood Forum is a charity that helps, supports, and represents people at risk of flooding. They can be called on 01299 403 055.

If there are any local issues with flooding, this will be shared on our social media channels and where needed, a member email with further information will be sent.