

Business Consultation on the Council's Budget 2020/21

1. *Do you think that the Council's approach to managing its finances over the medium term is acceptable?*

The Council has managed its resources well and is very much recognised as a business-supportive Authority. It must be enabled to maintain this strong position to continue the progress made, so as to ensure the development of communities that are well balanced placing businesses at their heart.

Looking through the various documents it is clear that the Council continues to walk a tightrope of keeping charges (Council Tax) at a level acceptable to Councillors and residents whilst at the same time seeing reducing direct grants from Government.

The Council's medium term approach to financial management, its savings and additional income supporting the closing of the deficit gap is particularly welcome at a time when we see some local authorities increasing their deficit without any strategic plan.

We believe the Council's medium term strategy is about the best we can get and we are thankful that it continues to give priority to Town Centres recognising their importance as revenue generators and centres of wellbeing for our residents.

2. *Do you have any comments on the savings/income options and spending plans as set out in the report?*

I think it vital that public realm space in Romsey continues to be maintained to a high standard, I am fearful that putting budget holders under pressure to make savings could see unacceptable reductions in areas such as parks and street cleaning. I suspect I am already noting some changes but would hope the standards will be maintained. I want Romsey to pass the test of a discerning visitor who will compare the Town to other destinations they might visit such as theme parks, country properties etc.

We wish to ensure that Council investment continues into street cleaning, and maintenance of street furniture and that the appearance of floral arrangements is maintained and improved. We will continue to work closely with you in helping to identify possible areas of additional funding and in measuring base line statements.

I note the capital spending policies and would like to see the Council acquire some retail space in Romsey as an investment – there is an underlying demand for facilities like pop-up shops such as those introduced to Chantry Centre, but suspect this may have to wait for the South of Romsey Town Centre scheme to deliver that, although I would make the observation that the Abbotswood development included two medium sized retail units and six small units; a couple of the latter in the Town Centre would have been far more use than lying empty at Abbotswood. I do accept that the Council can only buy when property comes on the commercial market so not easy to achieve.

Andover businesses are delighted with the Council's proactive stance and the recent acquisition of The Chantry Centre which will hopefully ensure that the future of the centre is key to the vitality of the town centre. We applaud your initiatives and short-term success in reducing the number of empty units in the centre and the introduction of a pop-up shop scheme. The strength of Andover's growing independents in the town should be recognised and initiatives to further increase the number of Indies that wish to trade here will require careful management and close partnership working with the Council.

According to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) Quarterly Survey, small businesses are pessimistic about the future. There is a lot of uncertainty over Brexit and policies of the new government. In particular retailers face particular challenges as their sector changes, so the FSB welcomed the Council's purchase of the Chantry Centre and hope to see the centre managed for the interests of the tenants and customers alike.

We welcome the focus on the Town Centres as small businesses in these locations are particularly challenged whether they are retailers or just located in a declining environment.

We welcome the recent introduction of contactless parking facilities which again, the businesses have welcomed and we hope that we can work with you on other car parking initiatives aimed at increasing footfall and dwell time.

In terms of your budget commitment, we wholeheartedly support efficiency whilst ensuring the vision which has been agreed for Test Valley is achieved. It is particularly beneficial for businesses to see that work is imminent on the first phase of the town centre redevelopment and the Pocket Park/Town Mills Riverside project. This will help to bring enthusiasm, confidence and a sense that investment has already started in the town centre. The refurbishment of the Chantry Centre toilet facilities has also been welcomed.

3. *Do you think that the Council could do more to help the business community, and if so, what should it be doing?*

In recent years TVBC has demonstrated through its work great commitment to developing partnerships with the business community despite ever-growing funding challenges. There is however a clear need to provide greater levels of relevant, accessible and affordable business support.

The growth in business units across the area has been healthy but has not provided an equivalent growth in productive employment. The blend of town and rural business communities provides particular challenges in supporting modern communications technologies and logistical ease. Andover however is among the larger towns in the EM3 LEP area with some good employment and quality commercial floor space. Although a recognised manufacturing cluster, being to the west of the stronger economic clusters, it could benefit from investment, support, and recognition to achieve higher value/higher productivity jobs mix, cutting edge specialist employment and enhanced modern infrastructure. This is exacerbated by some skills shortages in key sectors and lower proportion of residents in Andover with NVQ4+ level qualifications.

Support to the local market towns and villages across the Test Valley needs improving with mobile coverage and broadband speeds limiting the scope of business innovation and growth. Greater investment in communications, transport and the public realm is needed to attract business investment, and help innovative start-ups to prosper. A post Leader programme needs to be considered to support rural businesses.

It is clear the tax burden on business needs to be reduced with greater support provided to SMEs and growth businesses if the underlying tensions are not to be exacerbated. A new high-level government and business partnership needs to be established. Specifically as has long been demanded the tax burden needs to be re-balanced away from business rates, particularly in town centres, as they are essential to maintain the vibrancy of the local economy.

Andover, like many towns and cities has a number of empty retail premises and with the ever changing consumer environment, there are likely to be more casualties this year. We would like to work closely with the Council in ensuring that as much support as possible can go towards putting pressure on government to reduce business rates and in developing strategies around rent free and rent reduced premises to encourage new and different businesses to experience town centre occupancy.

In Romsey the retail vacancy rates, at historic low levels, suggests that Business Rates are less of a problem here than in other towns – However, retail managers and owners still suggest it is an issue and they would like to see size of exempt premises increased, the introduction of a scheme that links Business Rates to profit or a scheme similar to that for rural pubs where a particular shop is seen as essential to a particular retail centre.