

Leaders at Devon County Council are stuck between a rock and a hard place. On Thursday 16th February the County Council put out a press release saying that their 4.99% "Council tax rise would fund care for elderly and vulnerable". This was a rise £60.30 for a band D property taking the Council Tax up to £1,267.92 for next year. And yet Council Leader John Hart only five days later was on TV saying "We are seriously concerned that the final local government settlement announced yesterday provides no new funding for councils in 2017/18 and has totally failed to address the crisis in social care.

"Whilst we welcome the ability to raise additional council tax this income will not bring in anywhere near enough money to cover the costs of the services needed to protect the old, the young and the vulnerable.

The background to all this is that the Adult Services Budget will increase in monetary terms to £216.493 million – an increase of £18.7 million. This sounds good but the reality is that it is mostly inflation, increases in pension contributions and the National minimum wage. We calculate these huge budgets by breaking them down into numbers of services users and at a time of "Unprecedented increases in demand" we are planning on increasing from 14,500 service users by 185. With huge increases in previous years, without the closure of local hospitals, I suspect that with closures taking place our budget will be blown apart pretty quickly later on in the year.

So key figures from the budget agreed are £216.5m for adult services, £118.1m for Children's services, £35.2m for communities, public health and environment, £33.4m for Corporate services and £56.4m for Highways – that is a 3.5% real terms reduction by the way – making a Service total of £459.6 million. This means that the Council budget has reduced by £208 million since 2011 – five short years!

To these figures were added the schools budget of £523 million which is covered by central government funding – as I am sure you are aware our Local Authority has historically been the lowest funded tier of Education Authorities in the UK - £290 per child less than the national average. This was slightly mitigated by the ludicrously named "Fairer Funding for Schools" where nearly two thirds of our schools had a very small increase in their budget and the rest a swinging cut. However due to changes in the High Needs Budget Devon schools were further penalised by the County Council with another cut of £33 per child.

My group in our alternative budget proposed to fill this funding gap from a £12m reserve fund. We also proposed to re-introduce four school safety inspectors and an additional £1million to go into our roads. After a nearly four hour debate, sadly the cuts prevailed. Make sure you are sitting down when you receive your Council Tax demand.

Finally at the end of the year my Locality Budget has been fully spent. It went on the following:- £250 for a strimmer for Coffinswell PC; £325 for a grit bin in Abbotskerswell; £500 for a coffee station in Ipplepen Village Hall; £500 for nets at Ipplepen Cricket Club; £250 to the Kingskerswell Directory and £250 for the Kingskerswell Fete; £500 for lights to the Kingskerswell Village Hall; £4,095 for defibrillators Broadhempston, Coffinswell, Denbury and Ipplepen; £1,000 for planting on the Aller Interchange roundabout; £500 to Buckland football club juniors; £500 for Teignbridge Titans Netball Team; £1,000 for Hits foodbank when they were in crisis; £200 for the Devon Youth games and £130 to a Christmas Lunch for local care leavers. In addition to that I allocated through Investing in Devon £2,000 to Ipplepen tennis club for a new court surface; £2,500 for improvements to Ipplepen Village Hall and £5,500 for new windows to Kingskerswell village hall