

Executive Leader's Budget Speech

Full Council

27 February 2018

Members and officers of the council, it is an honour and a privilege to stand before you today and present my first Budget as Executive Leader of Tameside Council.

But it is also a moment tinged with sadness.

Since the tragic events of two months ago, we have been overwhelmed by the numerous and heartfelt tributes to Kieran. There's not a great deal that I can add to what has already been said, but one thing is clear.

At a time where cynicism about politics has never been higher, I challenge anybody to look at what Kieran did and said during the course of his life, and then say that politicians don't make a difference. We are all living in the house in that Kieran built.

This budget is a continuation of his legacy for Tameside. Indeed, many of its foundations were laid by Kieran himself before his untimely passing.

How many times over the past seven years have we gathered here and been told that we were living in tough times, and that hard decisions would be required to protect the services that so many of the residents depend on?

Since then the situation has perhaps, if possible, got even worse. In 2011 we were concerned about the sustainability of local government services. In 2018 we are concerned about the sustainability of local government itself.

--

I'm sure everybody here is familiar with the events currently unfolding in Northamptonshire, whose county council has become the first local authority in over two decades to effectively declare bankruptcy via the issuing of a Section 114 notice.

Since then we have also learnt that Surrey Council, one of the richest local authorities in one of the richest parts of the country, is facing a funding gap of £105 million – the equivalent of over 12% of its current budget. This comes after they threatened to defy the government and hold a referendum to pass a 15% increase in council tax last year.

Now, it would be remiss of me to not point out the irony that, after years of listening to the Tories and their allies in the media preach the gospel of austerity, it is Conservative-run councils in the heart of middle England that are becoming their first victims.

But turning this into an exercise in partisan points-scoring ignores the sheer scale of the potential catastrophe that is looming in front of us.

8 out of 10 local authorities have said that they have serious concerns about their financial position. It's looking very much like Northamptonshire and Surrey may be the tip of the iceberg.

The alarm bell is being rung by people as diverse as Conservative head of the LGA Lord Porter, who has said that *"Large scale national problems can't be fixed by raising random amounts of*

money across the country” and Liverpool Mayor Joe Anderson, who warned, “There is no more fat to cut and we are now carving into bone”.

We really are all in this one together, albeit perhaps not in the way that the government intended.

Let’s be clear. This is not something that happened by accident. This is the cumulative result of almost eight years of austerity, complacency and cynicism.

Time after time the government had a chance to take another road, a better road. Time after time they washed their hands of the entire matter.

Over the past few years, their favourite trick has been to devolve responsibility for raising and collecting funding for vital services to local authorities. We’ve seen it with the precept on adult social care, and it looks like the wheels are in motion to do the same with certain parts of the NHS as well.

The unfairness of this has been plain for all to see. Analysis by the Municipal Journal has shown that a 1% adult social care precept in Tameside is worth just over £800,000, less than half of the £1.9 million the same 1% raises in Cheshire East. And that isn’t even the worst case. Down in London, a 1% rise is worth £1.7 million in Barnet, but £757,000 in Barking and Dagenham. That’s almost three times as much.

Local funding has been decoupled from local needs. Those that can raise the most don’t need the most, and those that need the most are being left behind.

The true cost of austerity can no longer be denied. Local government may have been the most badly hit, but the damage now stretches into every area of the public sector.

Hospitals. Schools. Social care. Police and community safety. Even our armed services are no longer safe from austerity’s grasp.

It is because of this that we have moved in this year’s budget for a 4.99% increase in council tax, incorporating 2% for the adult social care precept and 2.99% for other council services.

This will allow us to raise nearly £5.6 million to invest in council services. That sounds like a lot, but it’s a drop in the ocean compared to the £140 million we’ve had to cut since 2010.

Since 89% of all the properties in Tameside are either Band A, B or C, I’ll explain directly what that means for them.

Properties in Band A will pay no more than an extra £1.12 a week altogether, split between 86p a week for council services and adult social care, and 26p a week for Greater Manchester fire, police and mayoral precepts. Properties in Band B and C will pay an extra £1 and £1.15 a week for council services respectively, and 26p and 30p more a week in Greater Manchester precepts.

All other council tax bands in Tameside will pay an average of £2.46 extra a week for local services and GM precepts. Put into perspective, that’s about the price of a Starbucks coffee, and, unlike Starbucks, we know that most people in Tameside actually pay their tax.

That being said, I’m not going to pretend that this is an easy decision. We know that many of our residents are struggling to make ends meet as well, but financial cuts and government complacency have left us no other option.

But, at the same time, I make these two promises to every resident in Tameside.

Firstly, we will never stop looking for and finding new ways to deliver high standard and sustainable services in the face of future government cuts.

Second, we will join forces with our Members of Parliament, who at this very moment are making the case to every politician, every newspaper and every think-tank, that the current system of local government funding is no longer fit for purpose.

A new consensus is forming. We've known for years how damaging austerity is to public services and the public sector in general, but now our arguments are being echoed locally and nationally, from the left and from the right.

All of us are saying the same thing. The austerity delusion has run out of road. Councils now have less than half the resources they received in 2010, yet in most cases are expected to do much more. It's no exaggeration to say that we are literally being starved of cash.

We need a conversation, at a national level, about what a system of local government funding that is fair and workable for councils and taxpayers in the 21st century looks like. Whether it's restructuring the existing way of doing things, or building something completely new; nothing should be off the table.

Now isn't the time for us to say, "We told you so", no matter how satisfying it might be. Now is the time for us to stand together and say, as one, that "There is a better way".

Part of that is also taking a look again at the level of accountability for private companies in public sector partnerships.

It's no secret that the Council had a contractual relationship with Carillion; a relationship that over the years led to improvements and good work carried out in Tameside that would not have been possible otherwise. Not just in terms of day-to-day work such as facilities management, but long-term projects such as new schools and Vision Tameside, our ambitious project to build new facilities for the college, council and Wilkos while releasing £300 million in economic impact.

Unfortunately, significant issues in the way the company was run at the boardroom level led to its collapse and liquidation at the beginning of the year. Since then, we have all been shocked to learn the extent of the problems Carillion faced, particularly around cost overruns, project delays and unsustainable debt loads.

My sincere thanks go out to all our local Carillion contracted staff, who have been nothing but the absolute model of professionalism, keeping our services running like clockwork in the most challenging of circumstances.

They have done the right thing, and now we will do the right thing as well. I restate tonight my commitment to support all our staff, and to find a solution that works for them, the council and the residents who rely on our services.

I'm also happy to say that we have already taken significant steps to ensure a smooth transition on Vision Tameside.

Earlier in the month the Cabinet gave approval for our infrastructure partner, Inspired Spaces, to conclude an agreement with Robertsons Construction Group Limited to secure a prompt remobilisation for completion of the project.

Despite all of this we must never forget that, even in the midst of crisis, our first duty is to deliver on the issues that matter the most to our residents.

Many of these have an impact that reaches far beyond the borders of Tameside. That's why I will make it a priority this year to seek a closer and deeper relationship with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and other councils in the region.

There is no splendid isolation for local authorities. The issues we face do not stop at Tameside's border. They extend into Oldham, into Stockport, into Derbyshire and even further afield.

We will listen. We will engage. We will deliver.

We will work together on air pollution in Greater Manchester. An issue both particularly close to my heart due to the proximity of the M60 to Denton, and an issue that, if not addressed, will have devastating consequences for all of us, especially the most vulnerable in our society.

We will continue the pioneering scheme to collectively retain business rates, creating a central GM pool which can then be distributed according to need, to local authorities in Greater Manchester. It's a first-rate example of how local government is doing locally what isn't being done nationally to ensure fair and sustainable funding for all. There is absolutely no doubt that if we only retained the business rates created within Tameside itself, we'd be a whole lot poorer.

We will engage with local and national charities and the Office of the Mayor of Greater Manchester to end homelessness, offering a helping hand up to those who have fallen through every safety net as a result of government austerity and cruelty.

We will deliver for Stalybridge through the Mayor of Greater Manchester's Town Centre Challenge, collaborating with housing providers, landowners, businesses and other partners to drive accelerated and sustainable development in the town. At the same time, we will continue to invest in all of Tameside in the same way, working hand in hand with members, residents, businesses and charities across the borough.

Where we spend money, we will spend money with a clear purpose. Every investment will provide a solid return. Sometimes that might be measured in money, and sometimes that might be measured in making our residents lives better.

Nowhere can that be seen clearer than in the great advances we've made in Care Together, our trailblazing project to bring together health and social care in Tameside and Glossop.

The ambition and scope is vast indeed, and the entire country is watching what we do right here in Tameside. But changes and improvements on the scale we're talking about here are never going to happen overnight. They require step by step changes of mind-sets, lifestyles and cultures in everybody who interacts with the health system, including GPs, healthcare AND Social Care professionals and residents.

That's why the best examples of the work we're doing in Care Together don't always involve millions of pounds, or thousands of people, or anything particularly large in scale. It's about the individual, it's about the details, and it's about the little bits of improvement and learning that, when put together, make the real difference.

Often, it involves using technology to find new ways of doing the same things better. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our Digital Health Centre. Starting out in four care homes in March last year, it has now been spread to every care home in Tameside and Glossop, as well as the

Council's community response service. Thanks to its success, we have been able to deliver bespoke care to older residents from the comfort of their own homes, improving care standards and quality of life while also reducing costs.

We've also engaged with our residents during this period of great change, holding consultations on changing the way we provide Intermediate Care and Urgent Care services.

Some of the conversations we've had during these processes haven't been easy by any definition, but they have been necessary to follow through on our commitments to continue to provide quality, sustainable care for all.

But at the same time as we are looking at investments in Tameside's future, we're also keeping our eye on how to make our resident's lives better in the here and now.

It goes without saying that one of the most important issues on the agenda, if not the most important, is continuing our improvement journey in Children's Services.

Progress has been made following our "Inadequate" judgement in 2016. We have new leadership, a new improvement plan and significantly increased resources. Teams have been strengthened, caseloads reduced and support increased.

I want to mention as well my appreciation for the staff in Children's Services, and those who have worked closely with them, for the hard work that they've put in so far.

That work is starting to produce real results. Ofsted's latest feedback letter, received earlier this month, notes "some early signs of success" and that the council "demonstrates a good understanding of the scale of change required in systems, culture and practice".

Our work on children's services has also extended to how to best look after those who are about to leave them as well. Supporting our young care leavers as they start out on their own lives is as much of a responsibility as getting them to that position in the first place. So to give them a helping hand, in the Budget we've made them exempt from council tax and increased the personal allowance for young people living independently for the first time.

It has been a long road over the past year or so to get here, and there is still quite a way to go. However, I'm glad to see that it is now acknowledged that we're heading in the right direction. To take the next steps, we're making the commitment in the Budget to invest a further £18 million into the service over the next 3 years.

I have every confidence that we will continue to make the improvements we need to make sure all our children get the care and attention they need. We know we can do it because we did it before with GCSE results.

Last year Tameside was ranked 3rd out of 10 Greater Manchester authorities for the proportion of students attaining level 5+ in both English and Maths at GCSE level, giving them the best possible chance to secure good employment and access to post-16 education.

What's been particularly encouraging is while some of this improvement has been driven by good schools doing better, a significant factor has been the schools that have found themselves in difficulties over the past few years turning the corner in a big way. Their success has been measured not just in GCSE results, but also in some extremely encouraging reports from Ofsted.

Years ago we were below the average for Greater Manchester, let alone the rest of the country. Now the M.E.N. is highlighting our schools performances as one of the reasons why families are choosing to move into the borough.

There was no magic wand or quick fix. It took bringing everybody involved in education in Tameside together, investing in the areas that allowed them to use their skills in the most effective way, and bucket loads of good old-fashioned hard work. It's a model that works, and it's a model that can be applied elsewhere too.

But there can be no room for complacency. In particular, we know that we need to do more to meet the increased need for secondary school places. That's why we hope to welcome the Laurus Ryecroft School into Tameside in time for the new academic year. Built on the site of the former Little Moss School, it will provide 150 Year 7 places in time for September, with a further seven cohorts to come at the start of every academic year thereafter. I'm also delighted to report that the new Cromwell School building is continuing to provide a first-class education to young people in need of specialist support since it reopened last autumn following the horrific fire that gutted the old school.

Over the course of the next year, I also intend to use the powers at our disposal to make a real difference to people's lives in other ways.

If you asked somebody to write a list of what they thought local government was responsible for, I'd be willing to bet good money that infrastructure; roads, street lights and amenities, would be one of the first things that they mentioned.

That shouldn't come as any surprise at all. A high-quality, well-maintained system of infrastructure is one of the most powerful assets that a local authority can possess. Not only does it boost productivity and growth, it also has a drastic effect on the safety and quality of life of all our residents. I talked previously about investing for financial returns or making our residents lives better. Infrastructure is one of the areas that allow us to achieve both these goals.

It is because of this that the Budget contains a comprehensive program of investment and renovation for Tameside's infrastructure. This includes £20 million over 4 years for highways improvement, a near quadrupling of the current resources for such activity. We're also committing to see our £5 million program to replace every street light in Tameside with more cost-effective, high-performance and environmentally-friendly LED lights through to a finish. £600,000 will also be spent over the next 2 years to give a facelift to 35 playgrounds and play areas in all our parks and towns.

I'm also delighted to announce that Sport England have backed our £20 million project to invest in our health and leisure facilities by pledging £1.5 million to support development of the Wellness Centre in Denton.

There isn't a single part of Tameside that won't feel a benefit, and wherever possible spending will be focused on local suppliers, providing a further boost in the area's economy.

It's also no secret that one of the greatest problems with face in Britain today is a lack of housing, both in terms of cost and conditions.

It should be an expectation in a modern, developed country that every person should be able to afford a roof over their head. It should be an expectation that no person should have to live in

damp, overcrowded or mold-ridden homes. Too often, it is an expectation that we as a country have failed to meet.

We know that the majority of private landlords provide their services fairly and ethically. However, we know that there are a minority who take no interest in the quality of their property or the welfare of their tenants. To these rogue landlords, the people under their roofs, many of whom are young or vulnerable, are little more than lines in a rent book.

That's why another one of our priorities for this year will be to work with private landlords, not only to improve housing quality in the private rented sector, but also to help them provide their tenants with access to public services in the same way as our social landlords do.

This cannot be achieved unless we have access to more information about the makeup of the housing sector in Tameside, including who owns what, where and how.

To that end, I am calling for the creation of a comprehensive, accessible register for all landlords in Tameside; public and private. Similar schemes already exist in Scotland and in the London borough of Newham.

Hand-in-hand with this, we are also rolling out a comprehensive and effective plan for dealing with the full introduction of Universal Credit in Tameside on 7th March. Council officers are already working closely with housing associations, GPs, Citizens Advice and JobCentre Plus on how to best support residents in the run up to, during and after the transition period. We're also drawing upon the learning that other local authorities, most notably our neighbours in Oldham Council, have acquired from their rollouts.

We are not the only ones who have voiced our concerns about the grave consequences that appear to have resulted from Universal Credit in other parts of the country.

Unfortunately, it appears that these concerns have fallen on deaf ears as far as the government is concerned. It therefore falls upon us to mitigate the worst excesses of Universal Credit in its current form. Once again, local government is stepping in to deal with what Whitehall cannot or will not handle themselves.

That being said, it should not be forgotten that this year has provided us with some causes for celebration too.

I said at the start of my speech that it was an honour and a privilege to stand before you today. But I am only here because of the sacrifices and struggles of all the women who came before me.

While the city of Manchester undoubtedly holds an important significance in the history of women's suffrage, Tameside has its own unique connection to the movement.

The name Hannah Mitchell may not mean much to some, but in her eventful lifetime she worked for both the Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union, and the early Independent Labour Party. She was also a prominent magistrate, writer and campaigner in her own right.

This daughter of a poor Derbyshire farming family, who lived on Elizabeth Street in Ashton-under-Lyne with her family for over 10 years, will be one of the local links in a series of cultural events scheduled between June and September by Portland Basin Museum, the council's own Local Studies and Libraries services and the Scallywags theatre company.

In celebration of International Women's Day next month we will also be giving all of Tameside's residents a chance to let us know their views about the women who inspired them and made a real difference to the world today through the "Tameside Tied Together" campaign.

I've asked Councillor Feeley and Councillor Cartey to go into some more detail when I've finished, so all I'll add for the moment is this. These events will be celebrations of the very best of Tameside, commemorating the moment when real power, not just the power of the vote but the power to effect change, was placed into the hands of the women of Britain.

The story of the suffragettes at the dawn of the 20th century, their refusal to accept injustice and their willingness to work together and campaign for change, has close parallels with what we need to do in the situation we find ourselves in a hundred years later.

It's true that the problems we face in 2018 are unprecedented – especially from a financial perspective, but the solutions remain the same.

We will listen and engage transparently with our residents and local members, and encourage them to get involved wherever possible.

We will identify and promote best practice to improve our services, regardless of whether that comes from within or outside Tameside.

We will be vocal and forceful in telling the government not just what we want, but what we need, to survive and prosper.

The Budget presented to you tonight provides the strong foundations needed to begin delivering on our priorities for the borough; completing Vision Tameside, delivering the Wellness Centre; continuing to improve our Children's Services; addressing housing conditions, especially in the private rented sector; improving education, protecting the environment and renovating Tameside's infrastructure.

Where we need a helping hand to make these priorities a reality; we will always keep money and investment flowing in Tameside by looking to local suppliers and businesses first.

Some of the decisions we have made on what, where and how to prioritise have not been easy. However, even if we cannot bring everybody along with us, we must make sure that everybody at least understands the reasons why we made those decisions.

If we want to achieve our priorities for Tameside, they must be delivered by partnerships and defended by open, honest and transparent debate. It is not just the right way to do things; it is the only way to do things.

I honestly believe that, after all the harsh years of austerity, the winds of change are starting to blow. Not just through Tameside, but through the entire country.

No matter the difficulties we face; the ideas, the drive, and the sheer human ingenuity is in place to make sure that Tameside endures together, that Tameside adapts together and that Tameside improves and prospers together.

I therefore commend this Budget to the council.