

As we enter into the new Council year I would like to reflect both on our progress so far and also our plans for the future.

Last July I set out a vision, based on three main aims:

- Value for Money
- Central Bedfordshire as a Great Place to Live
- Culture Change – can do attitude.

I am pleased to say we have made considerable progress in a number of areas.

- We have set a zero council tax rise, in fact taking into account harmonisation, it was a 0.8% reduction.
- We will have achieved in excess of £19m of savings this year and met our budget.

But it is not all about saving money. One of our critical duties is to protect the vulnerable. Hence it is with great satisfaction that I can report on the considerable progress made in both our Children's Services and Adult Social Care. When we started as a Council three years ago we inherited these two critical services with poor performance. This is no longer the case.

In Children's Services we have had positive feedback from OFSTED Inspectors on our Adoption Service and our Safeguarding of Children.

And I am particularly pleased to report on the improvement in Social Care, Health and Housing, where the Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care Board has acknowledged the significant progress that has been made and Central Bedfordshire's improved status in this area.

I would like to thank officers for their good work in these areas. There are also many other successes to report, for example:-

We have seen an improvement of 5% last year in GCSE results with 59% of children achieving five or more A*-C inc. English and Maths. In Sustainable Communities we have started a programme of enhanced road resurfacing that will see a more holistic approach to maintenance and an additional £16m invested in our roads by 2016, £3m of which brought forward so we are already seeing improvements.

We have made huge progress in saving money through efficiencies by moving into fewer offices, working innovatively with other organisations like Job Centre Plus to enhance our customer offering and renegotiating contracts to get the best procurement deals. But also by working differently such as:-

- In our four Extra Care Courts, successful outsourcing at lower cost of care support, while maintaining service levels which received national recognition with 1st prize award for customer engagement in the Procurex National GO Award.
- Believe the way we have re-looked at Houghton Regis Leisure Centre is symptomatic of what we are trying to do. Providing a better gym facility which will increase income and allow us to keep the dry side open.

On the broader front we are also seeing progress:-

- Center Parcs will open in spring 2014 and we will work with them to seek local jobs and local sourcing of good and services.

- We are also making progress on key infrastructure projects – the Guided Busway linking Luton and Dunstable will be opening in November and with the Public Inquiry for the M1-A5 link road now complete and awaiting the Inspectors decision this summer, we can make real progress unlocking Dunstable’s potential. Elsewhere there are other major projects such as the M1 widening, Thameslink and the Biggleswade South roundabout and feeder roads.

I would like to thank, my colleagues in Cabinet, fellow Councillors and officers for the progress we have made. However we cannot rest on our laurels. We now need to look to the future.

To achieve our aims we recognise we cannot continue as we are. We are all too familiar with the difficult economic circumstances we face. In particular the legacy of Toxic Debt and out of control public expenditure left by the last Labour Government. With an annual Budget Deficit approaching £200bn and Total National Debt of around £900bn, times of increasing Government largess are a thing of the past. We have seen a 28% cut in our grant for the period 2011-2015, and anticipate further pressures in the future. On top of this we are also seeing other cuts that impact us, such as Council Tax Credit and Transport Subsidies. This is a reality and we will have to contend with it.

In addition to this we face demographic pressures, increasing the demands on our services from a greater number of older people, the tough economy and also safeguarding of Children.

We have clearly stated our intention not to burden our residents with higher Council Tax. We also do not intend to cut service outcomes. Thus we will need to find more efficient ways of working. But not everything is about cost, we also want to enhance our services to residents.

We have just produced our plan for the next four years – Delivering Your Priorities. This outlines our priorities and how we will measure whether we have achieved them over the next four years. The priorities are:-

- Value For Money
- Enhance Central Bedfordshire as a Place
- Improved Infrastructure
- Quality Universal Services
- Improve Health and Wellbeing and protect the vulnerable
- Improved Educational attainment.

This is not just about Central Bedfordshire Council but also our partners, the Health Service, Police, Fire, Schools and the Voluntary Sector. Not to mention Town and Parish Councils.

We have set ourselves very ambitious targets such as not raising Council Tax and improving GCSE results. They are not all within our control but many can only be delivered by partnership working. However, we firmly believe that we need to stretch ourselves. I would rather narrowly miss an ambitious target than achieve a comfortable one.

If we are to achieve our aim of enhancing Central Bedfordshire as a great place to live and work we must strive to achieve these.

So in practical terms what does this mean?

We are developing a large number of work streams to achieve our aims such as the Library Strategy which will both enhance our service offering and reduce costs through a one-off investment of £850,000 over the next two years. To create libraries that are fit for the future along with new self service technology, a better online offering, updated buildings and library access points in rural areas.

Core Strategy – this is the “local Plan”, how do we manage sustainable growth while also developing infrastructure, providing jobs and protecting green space? This is a very important project that I would again urge all Councillors and residents to involve themselves with. But it is not just about allocating sites, it is also about design quality, infrastructure and right mix of developments.

We continue to work to de-institutionalise care of the vulnerable. This is not just about personalisation but also innovative schemes such as the recently opened 8-bed Step Up Step Down Rehabilitation Unit in Dunstable, preventing hospital admissions and accepting discharged patients to help them gain independence before returning home.

These are just three but there are many others – in Education, Social Care, Waste, and so on.

There are also internal work streams, Organisational Development to improve our skills base and how we work as an organisation, office rationalisation and a Customer First programme that will transform our interactions with residents to provide more efficient, customer-focussed services.

We are also investing more in infrastructure to improve our area's connections and facilities - road resurfacing, extending superfast Broadband to 90 per cent of homes by 2016 and developing a Leisure strategy to determine future facilities (invest to save).

We will see major changes in our housing service. In particular, the recent self-financing of our Council Housing stock at a cost of £165m. While this is a large financial burden it also provides opportunities to develop our offering further.

In the health arena we are also seeing major changes. The formation of a Shadow Health & Wellbeing Board, bringing together all senior partners from the health organisations and Council to drive the future direction, performance and delivery of health and care services. In addition we are taking on responsibility for Public Health from April 2013.

We are also seeking to develop the economy for more jobs, a "yes" rather than "no" attitude. Seeking to work with businesses to maximise opportunities for local employment. And through working with schools and colleges and the Adult Skills Strategy ensuring we have suitably skilled residents.

In summary we have made substantial progress in the last year and despite the difficult economic circumstances, we are excited about the future, what we, working together can achieve for the benefit of our community.

So, whilst there is no cause for complacency there is room for optimism. We have clear ambitions and targets, a plan for their delivery and a proven track record that demonstrates what we can achieve.