
Council



Forest Heath
District Council

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| Title of Report: | Leaders Statement | |
| Report No: | COU/FH/16/002 | |
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February's meeting of all councillors is when we take the decision whether or not to raise council tax this year. It is probably the most important decision we take because it affects everything we will be doing over the next year. And yet I know we will all find it hard to focus on our usual day-to-day business because I'm sure our thoughts will be with the family, friends and colleagues of the man who should be sitting in the Chairman's seat, Cllr David Bimson. His early, and so sudden, death has robbed us of a gentle, hardworking and genuine all-round 'nice guy' who was respected by all those who knew and worked with him. David loved Brandon, and he loved Forest Heath and I only wish we could have benefited from his care and wisdom for many more years. We will miss him as we carry out our council business at this meeting, and into the future.

The Cabinet is recommending to you all that we do not make an increase in Council Tax this year, not only because we made that commitment in our election manifesto in 2015 but also because I firmly believe we need to look at other ways of generating income. You all know that this council is keen to invest in projects that will give us a good return – money that can then be used to deliver local services. Sometimes they take a while to come together, but we need to focus on a few years ahead because the Government has made it very clear that it expects us to stand on our own feet.

One source of income will be our share of business rates. We don't know yet how large that share will be because there are others whose funds will also come from that pot, but we do know it means we have to concentrate on growth. It's very simple – the more businesses who grow and thrive in the district, the more income there will be for council services. It's not accidental that one of our priorities is economic growth.

We are a super-efficient council giving real value for money with those living in an average Band D home paying Forest Heath just over £137 a year to us. When I look at the range of services we provide and the support we give to our local families and communities I think we should all take a great deal of pride on what we manage to achieve with that £2.64 a week in council tax.

Talking of achievements, there was a time when I thought there would be an uphill battle when it came to talking to the Ministry of Defence about the future of RAF

Mildenhall. It wasn't helpful when they announced there was planning permission for 4000 homes on the airbase. This was baffling because we are the planning authority and we knew that no such permission had been granted. Thankfully we have cleared that up and the MoD has apologised and retracted the statement. Now I feel we're back on top of the issue. We've met the MoD people and have achieved a greater shared understanding of the pressures facing both that Government department and our local communities. We now have a greater shared purpose and I look forward to the discussion at the next meeting of the RAF Mildenhall, Alconbury and Molesworth (MAM) group on 18 March. I will let you know what comes out of that and when we will be holding meetings with the local community to talk further about the changes at RAF Mildenhall, its impact on the local communities and businesses and our shared local priorities moving forward.

As ever, I encourage councillors to get in touch with me if you have any questions about the air bases, or any other matters – I welcome your contact.