



Tom McDonald
Conservative District Councillor
- Fladbury Ward (Bricklehampton, Charlton, Cropthorne, Fladbury and Wick)

Winter 2013

Hail Janus – a time to reflect and look forward!

Janus, the Roman God of gates and doors, had a distinctive artistic appearance commonly depicted with two faces, one looking backwards and the other looking forward. As we come to the end of this year and prepare to enter the beginning of a new one let's take an early Janus look at our district council doors in terms of their stewardship of resident services.

Working to balance the 2013/14 budget

Wychavon District Council is seen nationally and locally by many of my residents to have a sound track-record and I know that to be no accident.

This council is not purely about traditional statutory duties; the thinking at Wychavon is more inspirational, we build hospitals, leisure centres, seek to support local market towns, provide quality parks and amenities and provide community grants, direct funding streams to our communities, all within what the Government calls the localism agenda. We work with the homeless, the disadvantaged, seek to be "intelligently green", support business regeneration and basically we seek to continuously improve.

With the current deluge of government directives, a few of them rather confusing, some local authorities will find it impossible to balance their books and will go down the road of seeking increased charges and reduction of services. Wychavon will be keeping these to a minimum as we do have reserves and are opening up growth opportunities with supermarkets, schools, colleges, apprentice academies and manufacturing businesses, some of which are already coming on stream. Our growth and how we go about it is not done in isolation, operationally the officers provide the facts and the members, at full council, set the strategy and direction. At a different level the executive board, consisting of the leader and 5 Councillors, shake out the strategies and



their implications and if required any decision can be "called in" to go before an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, but all that is not enough!

What is acceptable to you?

Your inputs are also needed, as Local Authority doors can sometimes creak, stick or trap fingers. Over the last months Wychavon has entered into a lot of communication with residents and focus groups, basically seeking answers to what is 'acceptable to you!'

The context that the council is operating in is that public expenditure will continue to fall over the next 5 years or so. For Wychavon, that means a budget gap of around £4m (our current net budget is £11m pa). So, a new business is required and out of that has emerged our Grow, Save, Charge business programme. This is a dynamic plan which hopefully will provide financial sustainability over the next 5 years. It does not seek to identify the entire funding gap in the latter years (it cannot at this stage). It does, however, fully address the first two years of the plan in terms of deliverable savings, growth or income. By year two of the plan it is expected that the shortfall in the longer term funding gap will be identified.

So, have we matched Janus's aspirations for understanding and new beginnings as we move into 2014 through the Grow, Save and Charge Business programme? In terms of the three themes of the plan, set out below are some examples of how we expect to meet the budget gap:

For GROW we hope to bring in money and play our role in stimulating the economy through planning to generate at least £300k in 2014/15 and £270k for 2015-18 through business rate growth, changes to how we use the now changed New Homes Bonus, a creative new strategic partnership with the private sector (Civica), for service insourcing of transactional work, creating a land bank, opportunity land purchases and the use of assets.

For SAVE we plan to reduce what we do in line with what people feel is acceptable, given we simply cannot continue to do everything. We plan to achieve a reduction of around £1.3m from 2013 – 2015 and at least £375k in 2015-18. This includes a further £200k

reduction in staffing levels. We will also seek to reduce senior management costs by a further £150k to lead the smaller workforce. We are going to cease our food waste collection saving £550k (this was the top option favoured for cuts in a recent public consultation).

For CHARGE we hope to raise income through selling services and the plan includes an additional £240k of income through council tax support, rent reviews and offering consultancy services. Wychavon is currently consulting on a proposed new council tax support regime which would become operational from April 2014.

The changes would mean that all tax payers currently in receipt of council tax support (formerly council tax benefit) would need to pay at least 20% of their council tax bill.

This is likely to affect up to 3,700 households across the district. Those on council tax support would see only 80% of their council tax bill assessed for support. The new regime would bring in around £700,000 in additional council tax revenue which would be for the benefit of the County Council, Police, Fire Services, town and parish councils as well as the District Council itself. It is estimated that this would close the funding gap imposed by the Government when it abolished the national council tax benefits system last April. It will therefore help to maintain public services that would otherwise have to be cut to pay for this. It is recognised that there will be a number of claimants for whom this change will cause particular hardship and so it is also being proposed to set up a £50,000 discretionary hardship fund. The new regime is not unique to Wychavon. Other councils have implemented similar changes from April 2013 and many more are expected to follow from April 2014.

The South Worcestershire Development Plan (SWDP) – not yet approved!

The SWDP (Malvern Hills, Worcester City and Wychavon) is making progress. We have completed stage 1 and have now received the Inspector's letter. He has considered if the number of homes proposed by the SWDP up to 2030 is sufficient. SWDP 3 sets out the amount of development proposed (23,200 homes across South Worcestershire - 8,900 in Wychavon (excluding the wider Worcester allocations).

The Plan also sets out which sites are to be allocated for housing but the SWDP has yet to be approved - hopefully that will take place next year. The inspector gave some good news in relation to employment and retail provision and found we had worked well with neighbouring councils; he could not reach a conclusion on the overall housing level for South Worcestershire. Interestingly the inspector took this approach despite the councils' detailed submissions and evidence submitted from the development industry, all of which sought a higher number. **Whilst he has not indicated by how much he expects the overall housing requirement to rise he has indicated that the final number will be substantially above the current number of 23,200 proposed in the South Worcestershire Development plan.**

Where to next?

The Inspector has asked for further technical work to be completed so that he may establish a housing number. The Councils have committed to complete this work as soon as possible so that the inspector can reconvene the examination. Once a number has been established the Inspector will then look to commence the next stage of his examination which will look at the specific policies of the plan and the sites proposed to be allocated for development.

Water, Water Everywhere!

Currently I represent the Centre for Local Government West Midlands on the Severn Trent Water Forum and also sit on the Inland Flood Risk Management Group. My role within the Water Forum is to ensure that key issues such as water bills, impact of welfare reforms and the needs of local authorities are understood and incorporated into the STW's new Business Plan for 2015/20.

Within the Inland Flood Risk Management Group (FRMG) my current role is the promotion of a recent report which demonstrates how councils have provided leadership in supporting their communities during flood situations and highlights the results that can be achieved through identifying key partnerships and effective partnership working to reduce risk". In the FRMG I seek to ensure that the flood problems within this region are listened to and acted upon where possible.

Tight Times – Homelessness, Vagrancy and Food Banks

There have been a number of homelessness and vagrancy issues in the ward which caused you to question me on who does what, and what is the situation in Wychavon. Who better to answer those questions than Amanda Cooke, the Wychavon Housing Need Team Principle Housing Officer.

“There are currently 19 accepted statutory homeless cases in priority need on our case load, of which we have 2 singles and 1 family in B&B. There are 6 families, 3 couples pregnant and one single currently accommodated in temporary units (two bed flats and a shared unit in Evesham).

Last year (April 2012 – March 2013) Wychavon had 292 homeless applications with 162 of those being accepted as statutory homeless. In the previous quarter, April – June 2013, there were 55 homeless applications and 34 were accepted, whereas in the previous year in the same quarter we had 78 applications and 45 accepted.

The Local Authority spent £203,000 in 2013 on B&B (this figure does not reflect any payments of housing benefit). So far this year we have spent £14,000 and if we can maintain this level we can reduce the previous year’s figure by 50% which we have promised to do. In the previous quarter we did not have any families in B&B for more than 6 weeks, which can sometimes happen if we are accommodating a family who have lost their previous accommodation through their own actions. As I write we have 9 rough sleepers who have no access to public funds, 2 UK Nationals who are not engaging with our service and 2 persons on gold plus who should be rehoused within a short period of time.

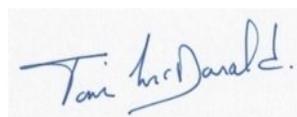
As a prevention tool we can offer financial assistance to families and individuals in priority need by way of the rent deposit scheme, a recyclable pot of money which is an interest free loan. Since April we have spent £17,500 through the scheme as we are finding our customers are more open to the private rented sector to resolve their housing need. As of

November 2012 the Local Authority now has the power to accommodate our homeless applications through the private rented sector and discharge our duty, as long as the property is suitable and affordable for their needs. Last year we spent nearly £28,000. We do not have any council food banks within Wychavon, although the Christian Church in Evesham offers food parcels to those in need, as do the Salvation Army in Droitwich. I understand from the Christian Centre there has been a huge demand for this service since the end of crisis loans issued by the DWP and the introduction of the welfare assistance scheme currently provided by Worcester City Housing team”.

Doing nothing wrong is not enough!

Not many of us get the opportunity to hold the world in our hands, but we do all get to hold a part of it and no matter how small that stewardship is, it is never inconsequential. Some time ago I was told a Councillor will always be supported as long as they do nothing wrong. For me doing nothing wrong, ticking all the boxes, begs the question have I done anything right? If I have, much of that is attributable to not just consulting but communicating with those I serve - how could it be otherwise!

As always in support of Fladbury Ward residents I wish you all early season’s greetings and a good 2014.



Tom McDonald
Conservative District Councillor
(Executive Board Member – Economy, Regeneration and Flooding)



Wishing Well Cottage, Salters Lane, Fladbury, Pershore, WR10 2PD

Home Telephone: 01386 860260 or Mobile 07815175488

My ‘mini round-ups’ and other information can also be accessed via my website at www.wychavon.gov.uk or my parish council websites

