

Stratford on Avon District Councillor's Monthly Report for February 2024

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Delivering better services responsibly

Stratford District Council's public consultation on its proposed 2024/25 budget ends on Tuesday, 6th February. The Council stresses that no decisions have been made yet as it wants residents and businesses to have their say.

Improving residents' lives by delivering better services is at the core of the administration's first budget, which focuses on implementing the new Council Plan approved in December. The draft budget promises continued delivery of all existing services as well as sound financial management and makes clear that the District Council has a five-year strategy for making sure the books are kept properly balanced.

Support for disadvantaged residents during the ongoing cost of living crisis is a key part of the proposed budget, which will see £250,000 earmarked for providing grants to those in most need of help, such as with energy bills.

New funding for Rural Crime Advisors will improve the response to rising rural crime, while a new Leisure Community Instructor will provide targeted support for residents with long-term health issues. A contribution of £85,000 towards running the UBUS service will ensure it continues to provide a vital connection for isolated communities.

Stratford District Council's previous administration declared a climate emergency in July 2019 and committed the Council to becoming carbon-neutral by 2030. The new administration is now proposing to tackle the largest part of the Council's carbon footprint, namely exhaust fumes from its fleet of refuse lorries.

It is looking into switching its lorries from diesel fuel to hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO). There are about 50 councils across the country that already use HVO for their refuse fleets.

This interim measure will make a substantial contribution to ensuring – before longer-term renewable energy alternatives are developed capable of covering the district's 978 sq km – that the District Council is carbon-neutral by 2030. It will also significantly reduce exhaust emissions and improve air quality for the benefit of residents.

A provision of £250,000 has been put aside for additional fuel costs to achieve this outcome, which is underpinned by a commitment that any replacement HVO fuel has to be derived from waste materials. There are several international and UK-recognised certification schemes for making sure this happens.

Money will also be available from the District Council's £500,000 Climate Change Fund for small- and medium-sized improvements to local assets, thereby improving their carbon efficiency and reducing running costs.

Over the next four years, a Change Programme, worth £2 million, will implement the new Council Plan, benefitting residents within six areas of focus, including delivering better homes, boosting the local economy, increasing green spaces, encouraging alternative modes of transport, supporting Parish Councils and improving the overall effectiveness of the Council.

The Programme will transform the Council's approach to planning, for example, ensuring that buildings not only meet local needs, but are attractive, environmentally-sustainable and fit for purpose. It will also safeguard services for the future by investing in new ways of working. These will streamline Council processes and deliver more cost-effective outcomes.

Residents in a Band D property will see a £5 increase in their Council Tax in line with government recommendations. When compared with inflation figures, this 3.1% proposed rise will only partly offset the District Council's increased costs and the extra demand for services over the past year.

The proposed Band D rate for the District Council will be £164.12 for 2024/25. Stratford-on-Avon remains a relatively low-tax authority, the 18th lowest out of 164 District Councils across the country in 2023/24.