

MPWIR BUDGET SPEECH

In the short time available to me I will draw on what we learned through scrutiny of the budget this year. We added a third round of scrutiny, but that was not so much to find late savings as to take account of last-minute information from government. Still, none of us have experienced a year long pandemic before.

So, the final outcome is not as bad as we feared back in December. We have not had to make any staff redundant, neither have we been forced into hasty cuts to services. Compensation still outstanding for lost income from sales, fees and charges will go some way towards replenishing the reserves used to close the budget gap for 2021/22 (£5.4m) and for 2022/23 (£7.2m).

The Department for Education effectively admits that the deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant (£27m and rising) is unsustainable, without offering a solution. Any movement on this would transform our financial position.

So, there are reasons for cautious optimism. Unlike some neighbouring boroughs in South London there is no threat of a Section 114 notice and we are not going bust. We can afford to breathe a little more easily.

Against that we know we face a changed landscape as we emerge from the pandemic, and in many ways it will be a landscape changed for the worse. Inequalities between east and west of the borough have been exacerbated by the pandemic, with higher infection rates in the east.

It is the most vulnerable members of our community who have suffered the most. Think of pupils struggling with home schooling without adequate IT kit, parents with front line jobs who cannot work from home trying to juggle childcare responsibilities, those shielding and the elderly who live alone and have been in lockdown for much of the past year, those with disabilities and mental health issues.

The pandemic will leave a long-term legacy that we do not begin to understand, but it will stretch our social services. As we review how we provide those services over the next two years, it's not simply a matter of finding smarter ways of continuing what we do now. We will need to expand our services to rebuild cohesive communities, and cohesion rather than cost saving must be the goal.

This is the right time to take stock as we embark on rebuilding after the pandemic.

So the recently announced "Your Merton" consultation is timely, but let's make sure it leads somewhere. We haven't had a straightforward statement of our aspirations for Merton since the July principles (penned by the two Marks), and that was 10 years ago, largely in response to the age of austerity. So, I encourage the administration to use this consultation as a basis for setting out its ambitions for Merton and how it proposes to achieve them.

Cllr Peter Southgate
Leader, MPWIR

This page is intentionally left blank