



West Northamptonshire Council Budget 2024-2025

Liberal Democrat Proposals

February 2024

Liberal Democrat Group - Proposed amendments to the West Northamptonshire Council Budget 2024-2025

Introduction

This document sets out some alternative budget proposals from the Liberal Democrat Group for the 2024 - 2025 West Northants Council budget. There are seven core proposals as follows:

1. School Counsellors
2. A home retrofit advice partnership scheme
3. The recruitment of an additional staff member for the Sustainability Team
4. An acceleration of the modular homes temporary accommodation project
5. An Investment in signage to further develop the Brampton Valley Way as a linear park
6. A funding project for LAP's to further their health and wellbeing agendas
7. Feasibility Study - Film and TV Production/Economic Development

All of these proposals are linked to the council's corporate objectives and many further support the council's health and wellbeing strategy and the emerging climate strategy. As per the constitution, these proposals have been discussed in detail with the S151 Officer and his comments can be found in the summary at the end of this document.

1. School Counsellors

We recognise there is a need to provide additional support in our schools. A school counsellor works with students in school settings to help them reach their full potential by providing care, support and a safe space to discuss sensitive issues. The main aim of this role is to help young learners overcome any issues they face that impact their school performance and development. The LGA have reported that since 2004, research suggests there has been a sharp rise in mental ill-health among children and young people in England and have recommended that counsellors should be in all secondary schools. Our recommendation is to create a funded pilot project to create counsellor roles in schools where they are most needed and to review benefits/impacts after a two year period.

Funding required: £300k per annum for two years (a total of £600K over the two years)

Source of funding: High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant

2. Home Retrofit Advice Partnership Scheme

Consuming less energy means emitting less energy and cheaper bills. Working in partnership with the National Energy Foundation under their Super Homes Scheme, this proposal identifies the opportunity for the council to establish a scheme allowing residents to get an energy assessment completed on their private dwelling (this is not aimed at landlords or multiple property owners). There would be two options available under this scheme:

- Whole House Retrofit Report
- Hero Plan (a simplified 'lite' version of the above)

Each version of assessment under this scheme would be subsidised by the council by 50%, so the Full Report would cost £660 and the Hero Report £330.

Either of these reports will provide a road map for residents to reduce their overall energy consumption and ultimately their carbon footprint, which will contribute to the councils 2045 net zero ambition. The budget requested allows for some project management and up to 200 energy reports to be completed. Project management/promotion would cost approximately £26k over two years, and the report subsidy for 70 Full Reports would be £23,100 and for the Hero 'lite' Report it would be £21,450. Residents would pay the balance of the report fee. We advocate agreeing an income level cap for those in the middle earnings segment for eligibility of these grants and aim to deliver 100 reports per annum.

Furthermore, we would encourage the council to promote the National Energy Foundation's free help and advice through their advice line under the 'Better Housing, Better Health' scheme.

National Energy Foundation (NEF) - Better Housing Better Health
<https://www.bhbh.org.uk/>
0800 107 0044 (free advice and helpline)

Funding required: £35,500k per annum (£71,000 over two years)
Source of funding: Re-purposed earmarked reserves

3. Strengthening the Sustainability Team

The work of the Sustainability Team continues to grow as work on a number of interconnecting and interdependent Council strategies come forward. Whilst there are four team members, two of these work part-time. There are funding streams and opportunities that we believe the council is missing out on to accelerate its net zero goal. The appointment of an additional team member would substantially strengthen the overall resource and be charged with seeking funding streams with the ultimate goal of effectively becoming self-funding. Our proposal would be to pilot this role for two years.

Funding required: £75,000 per annum (total of £150k over two years)
Source of funding: £150k one-off from base Contingency Fund

4. Modular/Alternative Homes for Temporary Accommodation

We are aware that there is work being carried out already in this area. This funding would be an additional one-off funding pot to accelerate the exploration of all temporary housing options, most likely through the engagement of additional temporary resource. The objective would be to get provisions put in place more rapidly to provide relief to those who find themselves in this difficult situation, as well as ensuring that the council had options for the medium term that are more cost effective than utilising the private sector. We would encourage the exploration of not only modular, but existing council buildings, office conversions as well as garage conversions.

Funding required: £50,000
Source of funding: Re-purposed earmarked reserves

5. Signage for the Brampton Valley Way

The Brampton Valley Way is recognised as an important cycling and walking route and in the emerging local plan, chapter 12, Natural Environment Policies section 12.14 it is identified as a Sub-Regional Green Infrastructure corridor within West Northamptonshire identified through the West Northamptonshire Green Infrastructure and Natural Capital Study, - which broadly follow the strategic waterways, valleys and ridges. This proposal outlines a small capital investment plan to introduce new and redevelop existing signage to maximise the benefits of this green corridor for its many users. Work has already been undertaken by the parks team, with signage designs made from Oak. These signs are expected to have a minimum lifespan of 20 years.

Funding required: £50,000

Source of funding: Capital

6. Seed Funding for Local Area Partnerships

Established as part of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the Local Area Partnerships have been up and running for approximately 12 months (excluding the two pioneer LAPs which have been in place for longer).

Much discussion has taken place with each LAP having now identified their priorities. Our view is that for these LAPs to be fully and truly 'vested' in generating outcomes within their communities, each LAP should have the opportunity to invest in activities aligned to their local priorities.

Therefore we are proposing a two year pilot project which provides each LAP with an annual budget (over two years) of £25k (£50K per LAP for the two year pilot period). It will be up to the members of the LAP to determine how they best invest the funds at a local level. If the LAPs operate effectively, there is a major opportunity for them to operate in the 'prevention' arena, which could ultimately result in further beneficial savings to the council and the NHS/local health practices.

Funding required: £225K per annum for two years (£450K in total)

Source of funding: Re-purposed earmarked reserves

7. Feasibility Study - Film and TV Production/Economic Development

With the recent successes of young producer Tyla Sharp, who at the age of 19 already has two short film successes under his belt ("Keep off the grass" and "Mr Apple") we believe there is a opportunity to develop a feasibility study into how West Northamptonshire might capitalise on the booming film and TV production sector. Tyla himself describes Northampton as "the perfect location for the film industry. There are some beautiful villages and a pool of talent in front of the cameras and behind the scenes. The cast and crew of *Mr Apple* were all local. In fact, the lead had never acted before, but was discovered at a local workshop." Scenes from the Netflix series "The Crown" were also recently filmed at Lamport Hall. London and Birmingham, major production hubs, are just an hour away and official 2022 statistics reveal a record £6.27 billion film and high-end television production spend in the UK.

Funding required: £50,000

Source of funding: Repurposed contingency reserves

| Proposal | Corporate Plan Area | Amount of Investment | Source of funding | S151 Comment |
|---|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| School Counsellors | Improved Life Chances | £300k per annum for 2 year pilot (£600K in total over two years) | To work in schools to reduce mental health pressures and prevent school children falling into the care system. £300k ongoing expenditure. To be funded from the high needs block of dedicated schools grant. | It is likely that this would need to be funded through the high needs block of the dedicated schools grant. There is already financial pressure in this area and this could add to that, but it is accepted that it could reduce other costs currently in the system if successful. |
| Retrofit Partnership with National Energy Foundation | Clean and Green | £71K over a two year pilot period (£35.5k per annum) | 200 Supported House assessments - at a cost of with a 50% support fund contribution from the council (whole house retrofit plan and simplified HERO plan). The funds would only be used if reports requested. | This funding is supporting a time limited project and therefore it is appropriate one off funding |
| Sustainability Team - an additional full time officer | Clean and Green | £75k per annum for 2 year pilot | Additional member of staff within the team for two years to seek out sustainability grant funding. Run as a pilot to see if it can essentially be come self-funding whereby the total of resources coming into the Council as a result of the post is greater than the cost of the post. | The staffing resource is likely to be ongoing to attract external funding. It is reasonable to use the base budget contingency. Any use of the contingency has to lead to a riskier budget but given the amount being suggested the additional risk is slight and therefore could be supported. |
| Temporary Modular Housing Feasibility (accelerator fund) | Improved Life Chances | £50k | Funding of £50,000 for feasibility study on the options and potential savings on temporary accommodation that could be generated if we embraced modular housing to help with our homelessness problem. This would be funded using one off reserves as it is for a specific piece of work. | The study is a one-off piece of work and therefore the use of a re-purposed earmarked reserve is appropriate |

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| Brampton Valley Way Signage Project | Clean and Green | £50k | Refresh signage. £50,000. Anticipated this could be capitalised so should add to the capital programme. Signage is likely to have a 20 year life span | No issues with this proposal |
| LAP seed funding | Improved Life Chances | £450K (£225k per annum for two years) | £450k from general reserves, split over two years, each LAP (9) being awarded a budget of £25k per annum for two years. | This funding is supporting a time limited project and therefore it is appropriate one off funding |
| Film & TV Industry Feasibility Study | Economic Development | £50K | A feasibility study, exploring the opportunities for West Northamptonshire to take advantage of one of the few growing sectors in the UK - film and TV production which generates some £6.27 billion of revenue (figures from 2022). | This funding is supporting a time limited project and therefore it is appropriate one off funding |
| | | | Funding summary for 2024/2025 £300K High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant £360.5K Re-purposed earmarked reserves £50K Capital £50K Repurposed contingency reserves | |