

Cllr Jenny Laing: Budget 2017/18

We are all aware of the complexities of the economic climate in Aberdeen. But today I will demonstrate how, despite the problems thrust upon us by a Scottish Government committed to keeping this city at the bottom of the league table of local authority funding, this administration will surmount the hurdles that have been placed in our way.

Aberdeen City Council remains the lowest funded local authority in Scotland.

This is an undeniable fact, but despite this, we remain the nation's 'cash cow' – paying more income, council and business taxes than anywhere else. This river of money flows down to the central belt but we see very little in return.

We have a legitimate claim to being the SNP's 'forgotten city'.

In spite of this, however, this administration has worked tirelessly to ensure that the citizens of Aberdeen do not lose out.

We have used every measure at our disposal to offset the challenges we face – plus come up with new and innovative methods of bringing additional investment into the city. The result of this is that we are in the process of rolling out the greatest programme of regeneration Aberdeen has ever seen.

Aberdeen, along with councils all over Scotland, has suffered five straight years of historic budget cuts by the SNP Government. The impact of this has been enormous. The funding gap has grown wider and wider and the Finance Secretary Derek Mackay's latest Budget for 2017/18 saw local authorities queuing up to condemn the Scottish Government's relentless war on public sector finances.

His initial decision to slash £327 million from local authority budgets, left councils, including our own, wondering whether we would still be able to deliver frontline services. The kinds of services that ordinary, decent families, the young, elderly and infirm, rely upon day-in and day-out. Mr Mackay's Budget was nothing short of callous.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and other members of her front bench attempted to portray the cuts to the funding settlement as a "positive" economic move which

would empower communities. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even the 11th hour deal with the Greens could not sugar coat the pill with one observer likening it to someone stealing £100 from your wallet and then handing you back £50. In the face of this brutal onslaught this administration has always stood up for Aberdeen and the people we represent but where has the SNP Group in this city been while the First Minister and her colleagues continue to slash our funding? Strangely silent, proving their slavish devotion to Holyrood outweighs their commitment to their constituents.

Whilst the focus today will be on key elements we are going to deliver through the 2017/18 budget, it is important we begin by being clear from the outset about what we are not going to do.

Firstly, we are not going to increase council tax despite having the option to do so. It is vital in a time of economic challenge that we protect the interests of the people of Aberdeen.

We are not going to cut school music services, enabling the excellent work being done with our young people to continue. We are not going to impose cuts on the library service, preserving valuable community resources.

We are not going to move away from culture being at the heart of Aberdeen City Council's remit, so will not move to an arm's length approach.

We are not going to close public toilets nor are we going to remove transport marshals from our streets or increase parking charges in the city for residents or visitors.

Those potential cuts which we have been able to avoid will bring reassurance to our residents and businesses – but just as important are the commitments we are making today to what we will do in the year ahead as we strive to become a smarter city.

In the drive to create a Smarter Economy, we will pursue both the Scottish and UK governments with the aim of a second City Region Deal. This is vital in establishing the funding solutions required to support the next set of strategic transport projects which will be identified as part of the scope of the current CRD.

We also prioritise Aberdeen City Council's role as a catalyst for inclusive growth, recognising the need to balance our focus on city wide infrastructure investment with the need for infrastructure regeneration in our most deprived communities. I instruct the Chief Executive to report back to next month's Finance, Policy and Resources committee on options for the allocation of the additional one million pound capital grant announced by the Scottish Government.

Whilst I have spoken about proposals which impact on the place of Aberdeen, it is imperative the people of the city are at the heart of all we do as a Council. As a key part of our Smarter People commitment, we want to embrace the potential of Aberdeen's next generation. With that in mind, my budget includes the expansion of the number of pupil support assistants through an investment of £976,000.

The importance we place on the Smarter Living priorities is best illustrated by our instruction to officers to bring a feasibility report to the March meeting of Council on the potential to create 2,000 additional council homes.

The vision for a Smarter Environment will impact on all of our communities and particularly the city centre. I am pleased to underline our commitment to a greener, cleaner city by re-stating our commitment to the expansion of the hydrogen bus fleet, subject to Scottish Government support, but our efforts do not stop there.

As part of my budget I also instruct the chief executive to prepare a business case around the feasibility of the Council introducing low emission zones throughout the city. We are all aware of the significance of environmental initiatives and this is a high level proposal, in which the Scottish Government and other partners and stakeholders will have an important part to play. It is another step towards a cleaner, greener future for our city but does not sit in isolation.

Within my budget there is also continued support for the Smarter Mobility and Smarter Governance themes, all with the common goal of improving opportunities and outcomes for every resident and business in the city.

Of course these elements I have touched upon represent just a selection of the choices made in preparing the budget proposal for 2017/18. It is important to set the context and it is clear we face many difficult decisions due to the constraints we will operate under in the year ahead.

Any budget process is dictated first and foremost by income and elected members come into today's meeting facing a net reduction of 10.3 million pounds in funding from the Scottish Government. We remain the lowest funded local authority in Scotland.

Although partially offset by various factors, the declining central funding is a significant issue that must be addressed at a time in which demand for our services is changing and growing.

The position identified by officers is a deficit of 17.2 million pounds – which serves to underline the enormous pressure we are under as an organisation with ambitions to not only maintain the services we provide but to build on those year on year. The vision for a better and more prosperous city for all cannot falter, regardless of the stark financial realities.

In response to that 17.2 million shortfall, officers have put forward a range of options for savings and efficiencies totalling 32 million pounds. Can I take the opportunity at this juncture to pay tribute to the hard work, dedication and innovation demonstrated by the chief executive and the many officers in the finance team and across all services. They have made a vital contribution to the process and I know every member would join me in expressing thanks for the diligent job that has been done.

Our duty today as elected members is to decide which of those options we wish to proceed with as a balanced budget for 2017/18 is set. Before that is completed, I think it is important we take the opportunity to look back at 2016/17 and establish the foundations that are being built upon and the progress we have made in meeting our strategic priorities.

On the day we gather to set our own budget, it is fitting to consider the wider economy of the region and the part Aberdeen City Council has to play in strengthening that position through our Smarter Economy framework. For decades this region has led from the front as Europe's oil capital and there is a determination to continue forging a global reputation as a leader in the energy sector - now more than ever.

The headlines in recent years have changed and nobody can shy away from the issues the region faces. The downturn in oil and gas has bitten hard and there is

evidence on a daily basis not only of the impact within the energy sector but across every part of the business landscape. That of course spreads wider and affects individuals and families in different ways.

We cannot deny the pain that has been inflicted on the place and its people but there were two choices – retreat, or regroup and step forward on the front foot. As you would expect, Aberdeen City Council has come out fighting.

Of course it is easy to talk about taking action – the real test is in delivering. I'm proud to say that we are delivering during as challenging an economic period as anyone in the north-east of Scotland can remember. That delivery can be seen in action day in and day out.

The physical transformation can be seen across the city, but the approach runs far deeper than that and there is a commitment to changing the way we work to improve the outcomes for businesses and people here in Aberdeen and the region.

Aberdeen City Council is working to fulfil the key elements of a Regional Economic Plan that sets out a long term plan for internationalisation, investment, innovation and inclusive economic growth. A key feature of our work is the regional collaboration with Aberdeenshire Council and Opportunity North East, working together with the UK Government and the Scottish Government and their agencies, in the City Region Deal.

The deal is an example of the partnership working we view as so essential and has secured 250 million pounds of government investment as part of a programme which we estimate will be worth a total of 826 million when wider and private investment and our own contribution is factored in. This funding is already being put to use to foster innovation and diversification, two of the bedrocks of our plans for a bright and prosperous future.

Throughout our discussions with the UK Government and the Scottish Government we spoke about new ways of delivering economic growth, including a more local and regional approach to delivering jobs and growth here in the north-east, and the local decision-making and powers to achieve this.

In this sense, Aberdeen has been working with the six other Scottish cities on the powers needed to drive city region growth and as a city council it is imperative to look at new ways of implementing our ambitious plans. As I have outlined this afternoon, already we are talking about a second City Region Deal and the way in which we can be empowered to make decisions for the good of Aberdeen and the region as a whole.

Given that opportunity to innovate, we have demonstrated in 2016/17 our ability to lead the way. Becoming the first local authority in Scotland to turn to the capital markets, securing a credit rating and subsequently concluding a successful 370 million pound bond issue through the London Stock Exchange, is an example of innovation within local government and also underlines the investor faith in the solid fiscal foundations of both the Council and the long term economic future of the region.

In parallel with that process, Aberdeen City Council has been praised by Audit Scotland for the strength of the Council's finances and the corporate governance framework that is in place. It is a commendable position to be in.

The bond signalled our intent to lead from the front as we seek to support the Regional Economic Strategy and our Strategic Infrastructure Plan. It marked a fundamental change in the approach to financial and economic management and represents the type of attitude being fostered throughout the organisation.

The emphasis on a stronger economy has been clear, given the regional challenges we face, but Aberdeen City Council's commitment to the people, the place and the environment has also been evident.

Closing the gaps in society, both in terms of opportunity and attainment, remains an important focus and there has been a great deal of work done not only with children throughout the city but also with adults and particularly those who are vulnerable. Aberdeen City Council is here to support, encourage and to care. Our Smarter People aims are about a better future for all.

The additions to the school estate we have seen in the past year demonstrate this, showing our commitment to the next generation and the important part education has at the centre of our plans going forward.

The turf will be cut at Stoneywood School tomorrow, the Centre of Excellence is close to completion and the head teacher at the Lochside Academy began work last week in preparing for the opening of what represents the largest single investment ever made in education in Aberdeen.

I am also proud that Aberdeen City Council has been in the driving seat, with our NHS Grampian partners, in supporting our Integration Joint Board budget to oversee the ongoing integration of health and social care services in Aberdeen.

The IJB has led and supported the success of this transition since the board and the Aberdeen City Health & Social Care Partnership went live in April of last year.

We as a City Council have provided significant investment in 2016/17 for core services and for the transformation and change programme which is necessary to make these services sustainable in the longer term as we face up to changing demographics, rising demand, and ever more complex health and social care needs.

And we can be rightly proud of the start we have made and of the progress so far in improving outcomes for adults in Aberdeen.

We have seen progress made towards Locality working, towards the creation of integrated teams of health and social care professionals, and in the emergence of the new senior management structure within the Health and Social Care Partnership to provide the necessary leadership on the transformation of services and new ways of working.

Several new initiatives will soon be launched – for instance in providing extra staffing resource in the shape of Link Workers for GP practices in Aberdeen, and in paving the way for a new pilot project for new ways of delivering community nursing and home care for our most vulnerable citizens.

We have also seen a positive impact on our delayed discharge figures in 2016/17, with significant progress being reported recently in cutting the number of patients stuck in hospital and marked reductions in the number of bed days lost.

All of this is due to the hard work, focus and diligence of the IJB and the dedicated professionals working within the Health and Social Care Partnership – and it is testament to their strategic approach to the challenges we face.

This strategic approach extends beyond health and education, reaching out into the heart of the communities we serve. The development of the Community Planning Partnership and the Local Outcome Improvement Plan have been a great step forward in ensuring localised priorities are identified and acted upon.

I thank officers for reflecting the LOIP within the Strategic Plan members have before them today and hope that all our CPP partners are able to evidence the incorporation of the LOIP into their own strategic frameworks. Underpinning the LOIP will be three locality plans for our most deprived communities and each will have a focus on the regeneration of the place, people and economies within these localities.

With the Community Planning Partnership's work well underway, there is a clear demonstration that regeneration areas will benefit from enhancements specific to them. This is not about imposing our will on communities – it is about listening to the wants and needs of residents and giving them a vehicle to make a difference. Empowering people to make a difference is hugely important and that has been carried through in many different ways, particularly with the success of the participatory budgeting initiatives which have been so warmly received by those who have taken part and represent our emphasis on Smarter Governance.

We have also invested and made clear our priorities around Smarter Living, with a number of projects under construction at present to provide much needed affordable homes and council housing in the city. The developments at Manor and Smithfield in particular are progressing at pace, providing hundreds of properties, and the former Summerhill Academy site is the next on that growing list.

Many of our initiatives cross the boundaries between place and people – with the developments such as the Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre and Music Hall making a significant contribution to the cultural wealth of our residents.

Events are integral to Aberdeen City Council's economic development plans and to that end in the past year we have agreed a comprehensive strategy to enhance our cultural offering. The 63,000 visitors who flocked to Spectra earlier this month bear testament to the potential which exists if the right events programme is in place.

Later this year thousands will travel from near and far to take part in the inaugural Great Aberdeen Run and we will also have elite cycling coming to the city in another coup for Aberdeen. These are just a few of the highlights of a programme which is growing and developing all the time.

Looking at the Smarter Environment objectives, in the past year the Aberdeen Hydrogen Bus Project has really blossomed as the commitment to green transport earns recognition nationally and that economic focus has also brought agreement on the £150 million Energy From Waste, which will help meet ambitious carbon reduction targets and alleviate fuel poverty in the south of the city.

The £27m materials processing centre at Altens and the new waste recycling centre planned for the Bridge of Don are also part of a wider emphasis on waste management, with food waste collections now rolled out throughout the city as we seek to have 90% of waste diverted from landfill by the end of 2017.

Of course, a cleaner, green city is critical to ensuring a vibrant city centre and when we link our environment commitments to our plans to rejuvenate Union Street and the emerging proposals for union terrace gardens, we really start to restore Aberdeen to its former glory whilst building a city of the future.

Smarter Mobility is another area in which great progress has been made. With the AWPR progressing at pace, within the city itself the road network is also being transformed with the Berryden Corridor work now in progress and the Airport link road and, most significantly, the Diamond Bridge already open to traffic.

As well as our transport links, key to securing our economic future is transformation of our digital connectivity and our ability to attract increasingly mobile investment, skills and talent to our region.

Aberdeen City Council is taking a lead role in this sense, through the City Region Deal, with proposals developed to stimulate additional investment in our digital infrastructure and in turn, inward investment to the region.

We are fortunate to live in a forward-thinking part of the world where there is a hunger to adopt new digital technologies – creating the right environment and the

right digital infrastructure is where we can provide impetus, delivering ultrafast connectivity to allow us to compete on a level playing field on the global stage.

For the business community this will support growth, attract further investment and also lead to new enterprises being born. For individuals and communities we will improve both public and private sector service delivery and in turn tackle inequality and improve social outcomes.

These individual elements I have touched upon provide a snapshot of the great strides being taken on a daily basis. We are living and working in a city which is on an incredibly journey of transformation at present - it is vital that we do not ease off and continue to push ourselves forward, which is why today's budget is so important.

It is important we continue to review our progress, but today is about looking forward to the year ahead and beyond to the long term priorities.

The proposal outlines a budgeted spend of £889 million, comprising £240m capital and £649m revenue expenditure. The report also outlines the 2017/18 to 2021/22 general fund revenue budget, the non-housing capital programme for the same period and the long term financial plan. Income is bolstered by an expected increase in the council tax base of £1.2 million.

Many local authorities have set their budgets in recent weeks and council tax has been one of the main issues, understandably so given the impact it has on residents and their own household budgets. This is particularly significant in the north-east, where clearly many individuals and families have been impacted by the wider economic pressures in this area.

Aberdeen City Council has the authority to increase Council Tax by up to 3% and implementing that rise had been proposed as an option by officers as they considered every avenue for both increasing revenue and making cost savings.

As has been publicised in recent weeks, the Scottish Government has legislated to change the council tax multipliers for properties in bands E to H. Whilst that will result in an increase in revenue of £5.9 million, I was delighted to get unanimous agreement at the urgent business committee in January that this change by the Scottish Government undermined the principal of local accountability and autonomy.

Our position on Council tax is that there will be no increase in Council Tax as we recognise the negative impact the Scottish Government's increases of between 7.5% and 22.5% in council tax for bands E to H will have on property-rich/cash-poor households and considers the impact of this considerable increase for some council tax payers, out with the Council's control, means that preventing a further hike in charges is imperative. Making no change to general Council Tax rates will prevent further pain for those in bands E to H while ensuring there is no increase for hard pressed taxpayers in Bands A to D, many of whom often have the least resources.

Whilst council tax is a major consideration for those with residential properties in Aberdeen, the business community is also facing change – in many cases not for the better. In light of the announcement by the Scottish Government yesterday regarding Non Domestic Rates, it is our intention to have a report brought back to the next meeting of the Finance Policy and Resources Committee to provide a measured response to the latest developments.

In setting the budget for 2017/18 we face many difficult decisions. I emphasise again the challenge of balancing decreasing financial resources with the increasing demand for our services – this process is not one any of us in the chamber today will take lightly.

It is imperative we make the choices which serve Aberdeen not only for the year ahead but beyond. Long term planning is vital to provide the stability which will be the bedrock for the success of the city and the proposals we have in front of us have been prepared with that mindset.

The significance of taking a long term view is made clear to us by the emphasis the head of finance has placed on the Council's balance sheet. It is unusual for a budget report to have as much emphasis on the balance sheet – but that is a product of the bond, and it falls upon us to consider the needs of the city broadly while we consider our own finances.

One of the options contained within the report which will potentially have the greatest impact on the staff of Aberdeen City Council is the proposal to open up voluntary severance or early retirement to officers as part of the transformation of the organisation, recognising that with modernisation and efficiency comes the potential

to deliver services with fewer people. This is made possible by digitisation and embracing technology, but as a Council with a duty to protect the people of the city and that includes our staff.

Whilst we understand the potential benefits of VSER in terms of streamlining and long term savings, can I put on record the expectation that the chief executive will fully engage with trade unions around the management of the process. It must be stressed that not all who volunteer will be accepted – decisions will be taken on the merits of each individual and have to be balanced against the needs of the member of staff and the needs of the business.

It is vital that this is undertaken in a fair and transparent manner and that anyone who is not accepted for voluntary severance or early retirement understands the reason for that decision.

With regards to the funding of a VSER scheme, I'd like to be prudent in some of my assumptions. Therefore, at this stage I don't feel able to confidently commit any expected underspend in 2016/17 to cover the cost of change, both in terms of redundancy payments and external support.

Therefore within my budget I wish to allocate 3.1 million pounds into a change fund reserve in order to give the chief executive the certainty of resource to allow the transformation of the organisation to begin in 2017/18. This change fund will continue in future years to support the strategic and transformational direction of the Council.

By removing 100% of all staffing underspends from vacant posts, officers have identified the potential for 5.75 million pounds of savings and my budget includes that recommendation.

In taking options which directly affect our staff, I do so with a heavy heart, as I direct the Chief Executive to begin the transformation of how the Council does its business. I do so with the sole objective of protecting the vital services we provide to the city.

I would ask the whole Chamber to respect the impact on our staff of the changes which are beginning and to be thoughtful about the demands we place on staff.

By working smarter we are able to deliver savings that protect services and staff. Smarter procurement has also been identified as contributing 3 million pounds of savings and I am pleased to support this as part of our drive to change the way we do our business. Our partnership with Aberdeenshire Council and Highland Council in this respect demonstrates the advantages of creating a larger procurement entity and that will continue to be important as we move forward.

My budget does not only include options for savings but also for income generation, such as the 1 million pound allocated to increases in the building services trading account as well as additional measures to maximise income from assets – rationalising them going forward.

This approach will enable additional resource to be allocated to areas such as education, as I have outlined, and to health.

My Administration will continue to support the wider transformation of health and social care at a Locality level, and build person-centred sustainable services at a time of increasing demand and constrained finances. We are proud of our stewardship and leadership of this challenging agenda with our partners in NHS Grampian, and remain committed to ensuring the best possible outcomes for people.

Savings and efficiencies must be made in 2017/18 of course, because no area of the public sector is immune, but my Administration will be providing the Integration Joint Board budget with a net budget transfer of £83million from the City Council to continue on the transformation journey in the coming financial year and to forge ahead from this impressive start.

Given the considerable development and investment being made in infrastructure, I would also instruct the Chief Executive to commit Aberdeen City Council to the UCATT construction charter – providing health and safety assurances within the construction industry through a six-point action plan.

Remaining on the theme of supporting the city's workforce, we are committed to maintaining the grant funding to Sport Aberdeen to enable Sport Aberdeen implements a 1% pay rise for its staff, in line with that awarded to local authority employees in 2016/17.

Through today's budget I also wish to agree to accelerate play park upgrades throughout the city, bringing forward the next 20 on the list of planned projects to ensure they are carried out in 2017/18.

What we have before us are proposals which protect our residents by freezing council tax rates, support our young people and adults through investment in key services, drive forward our ambitions for a city that faces its future with confidence while acknowledging the economic pressures of the here and now.

The budget set out today is part of a wider, overarching vision for the city – the place and its people. We are working under financial constraints which make this task a difficult one, but we have demonstrated in Aberdeen our ability to be resilient and overcome adversity – qualities which we as a local authority will have to continue to demonstrate given the funding difficulties we face.

I commend this budget to you today as we embark on the next phase of an exciting transformational journey. We have set out to protect and enhance services, innovate and look forward to a brighter and more prosperous future for all.