

The past year has been a momentous one for the Green Party. Not only did we more than double our representation on this council after the local elections, we saw similarly convincing wins across the rest of the country giving the Greens the greatest level of representation ever, with 859 local councillors across 181 councils and many Greens sitting in key positions.

In September we elected a new and inspiring leader in Zack Polanski and our membership more than tripled to 190,000 making us the third largest political party in the UK (and still growing). Zack has since come to define the Green Party's message of hope and optimism for a future where everyone can live safe, healthy and productive lives by working together towards a fairer, greener world, not just for those of us alive today but for the generations that come after us.

All this has inspired my group to be bold in our approach to this budget setting process with proposals that think outside the box and respond to many of the issues we know are important to our residents. Our revenue proposals are relatively modest yet bring funding to projects that could have a massively positive impact on the lives of our current residents, their children and their grandchildren. We also propose a significant shift in our capital spend priorities.

The impacts of climate change are now ever present and grow more apparent with every year. The effects that we are seeing now were locked in by our actions (or inaction) 20 or more years ago. What we do now can't change that in the short term, but we can build a safer future for all of us. In the meantime, we have to adapt to and mitigate the inevitable outcomes of decades of environmental damage.

Thousands of our fellow residents watch the skies in fear every time heavy rain is predicted. We've all seen the heartbreaking results of these floods and we know that it can take years for communities to fully recover. But as climate change brings more extreme weather it's likely that more of us will feel the direct effects of the forces of nature on our everyday lives. We have to take steps to deal with the fundamental causes of flooding as well as building resilience for communities faced with the very real impacts of an overwhelmed drainage system. Building more 'hard' defences will play a part, but we also need to tackle the root causes of flooding and harness natural defences to help reduce the severity of floods before they reach our communities. There's evidence from other local authorities who are already doing this that the value for money in such initiatives is substantial.

Along with flooding, we're seeing increasing heat impacts throughout the summer months with the Met Office confirming 2025 as the hottest year on record for the United Kingdom since national temperature records began in 1884. Heat stress is now a major public health risk in our once temperate climate and is something we have been less prepared to deal with as a result. We need to specifically address the risks of both flooding and heat to keep our communities safe and healthy, especially those who are most vulnerable.

The mental health impacts of climate change cannot be ignored, especially in terms of the anxiety that it creates for younger and more vulnerable people. We need community focused support across the county to help to mitigate the psychological stresses that a changing climate is producing. These should be grass roots driven initiatives based on a listening and supportive approach.

We've also recently seen a fracturing of our communities driven by divisive forces that have sought to give agency to prejudice and distrust for political gain. A recent motion, supported and seconded by the Green Group, called for projects to foster greater understanding and cohesion within all our communities to combat the isolation and fear that many people may feel as a result. The campaign to festoon our public spaces with flags is clearly motivated by a wish to make some of our friends and neighbours feel uncomfortable and less welcome. We need to send a strong message that those behind these campaigns do not speak for the majority of us. We want to ensure that funding is guaranteed to facilitate local projects and movements that help counteract these negative elements to foster a positive and nurturing community spirit and a welcoming environment for everyone. This

may involve being prepared to listen to and engage with uncomfortable truths based on lived experiences.

Finally in terms of our revenue proposals we are looking to provide specific funding to ensure our paths, pavements and cycleways are properly maintained and fully accessible. Too many of our paths are overgrown and narrowed by brambles and other invasive plants. Many of our pavements are uneven and dangerous meaning our older and more infirm residents feel trapped in their homes for fear of a trip or fall. More needs to be done to address this and we are proposing a relatively modest sum specifically to address these problems.

In terms of capital expenditure, our boldest proposal, and one which we are aware may be controversial, concerns the removal of funding for the Watlington Relief Road. This is a project that so far has not received planning permission yet has consumed over £4m of Housing & Growth Deal funding. Along with developer contributions and funding allocated in last year's budget, the total estimated cost of the project before this budget was £18.6m. The reason it features in the current budget is the proposal that a further £3m be allocated to cover predicted overspend even before a single meter of tarmac is laid. This brings the total for this project to a staggering £21.6m. Given the current estimations of Watlington's population of 2691, this represents a per capita spend of just over £8,000 per person. It's also notable that the proposed £3m represents an increase of over 15% in just one year. If that trend continues, where will we be this time next year?

Moreover, this is a council that has passed a climate change emergency motion. It's also a council that was until recently in coalition with the Green Party. It's a council that has in many other ways taken bold, positive steps to tackle climate change, improve air quality, reduce emissions (especially from transport). It has also worked towards better active travel infrastructure and a reduction in private car use. Yet this is also an administration that seems to have a pronounced blind spot when it's faced with proposals to build roads.

We're aware of all the arguments for building relief roads or bypasses, but those arguments simply don't stack up in the face of the ever worsening climate change crisis we are all now facing. The solution to too many cars, lorries, vans and other motor vehicles is not to build more roads to accommodate them. The principle of induced demand is well known and was comprehensively discussed by this council during the consideration of the HIF1 road scheme. This is another controversial project that is set to consume huge quantities of public money to facilitate yet more traffic and was originally rejected by our planning committee before what many regard as an inappropriate and inadequately resisted intervention by the Secretary of State. Yet here we are again proposing substantial and inequitable funding for yet another major road.

The Green Group says we need to think again. Whilst we understand the plight of the people in Watlington and are keen to help them, we feel there are alternative solutions to local congestion that have yet to be explored. Indeed at the last Performance And Corporate Scrutiny Committee meeting I requested sight of the options appraisals for this new road. It's yet to be established if other less costly and possibly just as effective proposals have been assessed such as congestion charging, low emissions zones, traffic filters or ANPR enforcement of weight limits.

In the meantime we feel that the council funding of £14.1m for the Watlington Relief Road would be better spent on projects to improve adaptation to climate change rather than one which is inevitably going to make climate change worse. Projects that tackle flooding risks at source and provide funding for long awaited active travel projects, all of which will benefit a vastly greater number of our residents than a single road for a single town. Indeed the bulk of the original funding for this proposed new road was taken from a budget earmarked principally to support the development of active travel projects. We regard it as disingenuous to raid such a budget to fund a road and

justification that it will include some active travel infrastructure as missing the point by yet again placing motor vehicles at the top of the transport hierarchy.

In conclusion, both our revenue and capital proposals represent pragmatic, practical and equitable solutions to the increasing pressures of climate change and address the widespread concerns of our residents across the whole county. We hope that they will be viewed seriously in that context and given due consideration by all members of the council. I'd also like to thank officers for their support and forbearance in helping our group to finalise these proposals during what I know has been an especially busy time for them due to the unusually late confirmation of the national funding settlement.

Cllr Ian Middleton

Group Leader

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