

More money for police and Councils

Yesterday the government presented its budgets for the police service and for local government for the 2019-20 financial year starting in April. The amount of money granted from central government goes up, as does the amount of money they are permitted to spend including local taxation. I was pleased that Wokingham Borough at last got some recognition that it has been receiving very low amounts per person for several years compared to most Councils, and has received some catch up money. West Berkshire too also got an above average increase, reflecting the low budget it has been given in recent years.

The questions to debate are how should this additional money be spent? How much extra should Councils and Police Commissioners raise from local taxation within the limits allowed? How can we be sure that extra cash committed buys us service improvements we want, and helps pay for the staff in these services to be empowered to work smarter and raise productivity?

Councils are gradually equipping themselves for the digital age. Residents are encouraged to pay their Council tax through regular bank transfers rather than through a manual counter service in the Council offices or a postal based system with cheques. Benefits are being moved onto universal credit with scope to make it cheaper as well as easier to work out entitlement and make the necessary payments. Much of government is about taking money off people in taxation and giving it back to people, sometimes the same, sometimes different people, in the form of benefits. This can gradually be more automated to make it more accurate and cheaper to administer.

Residents have three main experiences of their local Council. There is the tax bill, which they want the Council to keep under control, as it can be a large item in family budgets. The second is the refuse collection system, which every house has to use under the Council effective monopoly. People usually want regular weekly collections, and appreciate kerbside collection of recyclable materials as part of the service. The third is the road system which everyone uses to get about. It is essential to get to work, school, shops, leisure activities and social events. People want the roads to be well maintained, have sufficient capacity to avoid traffic jams and sensible designs to minimise accidents.

The education service is very important to those with school age children, and social services can be vital for those in need of assistance with living in their own homes when disabled or elderly. Most of us are happy to help pay for good quality education and social care as part of our contribution to a decent society.

The issue before us is are we spending the right amount, and are these services delivered with the right degree of quality and with sensible cost awareness?