

Council – 10 October, 2022

Motions

The following motions have been submitted in accordance with the notice required by Standing Order 13.1 and are listed in accordance with Standing Order 13.2.

1. COST OF LIVING CRISIS AND FAIR FUNDING FOR WIRRAL COUNCIL

Proposed by Councillor Janette Williamson

Seconded by Councillor Paul Stuart

Council notes that Wirral Council has made huge improvements in its finances since 2021 and was on course to set a balanced budget for 2023/24, despite 10 years of austerity and a loss of £224m to its budget.

However, the Cost of Living crisis has now resulted in a funding gap for 2023/24 of potentially £49m.

The current dire budgetary forecast is a result of factors beyond the Council's control, namely:

- Inflation
- Rise in energy costs
- Wage pressures

Wirral is not on its own and the LGA and CIPFA has expressed in the strongest terms their concerns to Government about the financial sustainability of the majority of local councils in England as a result of the Cost of Living crisis

Council notes that Rishi Sunak, ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer, recently admitted to diverting central government funding from 'deprived urban areas' like Wirral to affluent Conservative areas like Royal Tunbridge Wells. Wirral residents deserve better than this.

Council notes that the tax cuts in the 'mini budget' and the lifting of the cap on bankers' bonuses will punish the public sector and send the wrong message at a time when most people are struggling between heating and eating and striving for a fair wage. This was a budget for the rich and was underpinned by the much discredited ideology of 'trickle down' economics.

This Government has cut taxes for the richest while ordinary people cannot afford to feed their children or turn on the heating. Now it is starving local councils of funding so that we cannot help our residents when they need us most.

Council notes that the 'mini budget' of 23rd September 2022 did not set out a package of measures for local councils. Without Government intervention, councils such as Wirral will be forced to cease all non-essential services that are so vital and cherished by our residents. Without appropriate funding, Wirral and many other councils could be forced to file for bankruptcy.

Council demands fair funding for Wirral.
Council requests a fair, long-term funding settlement for Wirral by central government in December 2022.

Council instructs the Leader to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer Kwasi Kwarteng as a matter of urgency, asking for the support Wirral needs and deserves in order to maintain and deliver much needed services to our residents.

2. PROTECTING WIRRAL'S GREEN BELT

Proposed by Councillor Mike Collins
Seconded by Councillor Tom Anderson

Council notes that under The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004, all local councils were required to have a clear Local Plan for development. This Plan would clearly state the areas to be protected and conserved, such as Wirral's Green Belt, and those areas which would be earmarked for development for housing and commercial use.

Council further notes that in March 2018, the then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government wrote to the then Leader of the Council signalling his intention to intervene in Wirral's Local Plan process.

Council finally welcomed a draft Local Plan in May 2022. The draft Local Plan, which received all Party support, does not designate any Green Belt for development and, instead, requires developers to invest and regenerate the eastern side of the Borough.

Council notes one of Wirral's largest landowners has submitted seven planning applications for 788 houses and has indicated its intention to submit a further application for another 240 houses, all to be built on Wirral's precious Green Belt land.

Council is disappointed that representatives acting on behalf of the landowner have so far refused invitations from local councillors to attend any public meetings organised to discuss these applications.

Council therefore wishes to reaffirm its commitment to protecting Wirral's precious Green Belt and urges all Wirral landowners to work with our local communities and the Council to do the same.

3. ENERGY EFFICIENCY / RESIDENTIAL

Proposed by Councillor Naomi Graham
Seconded by Councillor Judith Grier

Council welcomes the national and local financial support to help residents with energy bills.

But rising energy costs are not a one off. To protect against future energy price increases and maximise the return on expenditure, Council believes all housing in our borough should be insulated to a minimum of Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) 'C' standard with good quality loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, double-glazing and draught exclusion.

Council notes

- The insight from Wirral Intelligence service that almost 1 in 7 households in Wirral were estimated to live in fuel poverty in 2020, with large inequalities between wards - over 1 in 4 households in Bidston and St James ward (25.2%) compared to 1 in 12 in Heswall ward (8.3%) (1). The report to Policy and Resources Committee in August 2022 which outlined that the proportion of households in England living in fuel poverty could rise to 42% of households after October 2022(2).
- The Fuel Poverty, Cold Homes and Health Inequalities report which highlights the 'dangerous consequences' of living in a cold home to a child's health and future life expectancy (3)
- The Great Homes Upgrade report identifying that one in four pounds spent on heating is wasted (4) and the Energy Saving Trust Report from December 2020 commissioned by Wirral Council, highlighting that our existing housing stock is less energy efficient than the UK average.
- The Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group (EEIG) estimate that if all homes were upgraded to the EPC C efficiency band, households would save on average £400 per year (5).
- The economic benefits of retrofitting with the potential for high-value local jobs in retrofitting. The UK Energy Research Council (UKERC) estimate that for every £1 invested by in domestic energy efficiency, GDP could be increased by £3.20 and tax take by £1.27.
- The Government target to upgrade all housing to Energy performance certificate (EPC) level C or above by 2035. To achieve that target, 7,095 homes on the Wirral need to be insulated per year (6).
- Cool 2 Wirral's Climate Strategy to reduce the overall demand for energy in Wirral across residential, commercial and industrial sectors making sure all homes currently below Energy Performance Certificate Band C that can be upgraded are improved to this level or better by around 2030".

Council acknowledges the work already being done as outlined in the Update on the Low Carbon Housing Retrofit Programme to Wirral's Housing Committee in November 2021 (5) but commits to increasing the pace of delivery.

Council appreciates the scale of this challenge but at the same time makes a commitment to end fuel poverty, poor health and excess carbon emissions from poorly insulated homes.

To support this, Council asks the Economy Regeneration and Housing Committee, to include as part of its' work programme, actions to enable the Council to

- Have an ambitious stated year on year insulation or EPC target for Wirral.
- Develop a plan by the end of financial year to help realise the target.

- Actively identify potential sources of funding (within current budgets and via external funding) to enable improvements to start this winter.

¹ <https://www.wirralintelligenceservice.org/state-of-the-borough/> (all wards at https://wirral.communityinsight.org/?indicator=fuel_pov_alt_11_dr_20200101#)

² <https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50093142/Cost%20of%20Living%20Crisis.pdf>

³ <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fuel-poverty-cold-homes-and-health-inequalities-in-the-uk>

⁴ <https://greathomesupgrade.org/housingCampaign/campaign>

⁵ <https://greathomesupgrade.org/about/faq>

⁶ <https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50083141/Update%20on%20Low%20Carbon%20Housing%20Retrofit%20Programme.pdf>

4. BANK AND CASH SERVICES THAT MEET LOCAL NEEDS

**Proposed by Councillor Phil Gilchrist
Seconded by Councillor Dave Mitchell**

Council recognises that, over a number of years, there has been a marked reduction in the number of bank branches in Wirral. This process has continued in the face of concerns raised by the communities facing the impact of those closures.

In 2022, the closure of over 400 bank branches was either announced or implemented, despite concerns raised by the affected communities including, most recently, the facilities in Port Sunlight.

Council appreciates that the Post Office network has been, by arrangement with the banking sector, able to take on a number of the functions and services relating to deposits. In a further step, access to cash has continued with the provision of cash machines in many retail locations.

Council understands that, in order to try to meet the gaps in services where communities have lost banking facilities with no reasonably convenient and accessible services nearby, banking ‘hubs’ have developed in a number of locations, though the roll-out of these has been on a small scale. The ‘hubs’ require a degree of co-operation between the major banks and the Post Office.

Council aims to secure the regeneration of Wirral and believes that no communities should be left behind.

In view of this, Council requests that the Group Leaders should write a joint letter to the Link organisation asking them to look at the pattern of services in Wirral. The organisation can be asked to consider the creation of a ‘hub’ or ‘hubs’ in Wirral with a view to securing the long-term future of accessible local services.

The response from the Link organisation should then be considered by the Policy and Resources Committee at an appropriate time.

Council notes that relevant information and statistics have been included in reports compiled by the researchers at the House of Commons library and requests that Wirral's MPs pursue the issues raised here in the interests of Wirral's residents.

5. THE IMPACT OF INFLATION ON MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Proposed by Councillor Brian Kenny
Seconded by Councillor Gill Wood

Wirral Council notes that the Home Office and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) have recognised the magnificent work Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) carried out to support the country's response to the COVID-19 and the work it does to protect the local community and businesses from fire risk.

That challenge has been made all the more difficult by the impact of global and national economic factors in recent months that have far exceeded the inflationary assumptions within the current Budget and Financial Plan approved in February 2022.

Council notes that the MFRA is committed to facing these challenges positively and constructively. However, Council recognises the real current impact of inflation on their ability to deliver much-needed services for local people and businesses, including in Wirral

The highest levels of inflation for four decades are now driving up the costs of the raw materials, labour, energy and other costs which the Authority must pay for in order to provide essential public services and capital investment in the Service.

The Authority's budget for 2022/23 was set in February 2022 based on estimates that price inflation and wage growth would both be in the region of 2% to 3% in 2022/23. These were not unrealistic assumptions as they reflected the Government's own forecasts for inflation in 2022 and 2023, specifically:-

- In October 2021, the Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021 Statement set out forecasts that the Consumer Price Index could reach 4% in 2022, but would fall to 2.6% by 2023;
- In December 2021, the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement uprated grant funding for 2022/23 by the actual Consumer Price Index as at September 2021 (3.1%); and,
- In February 2022 (when MFRA budgets were being finalised), the Office of Budget Responsibility forecast that the Consumer Price Index could reach 4.7% in 2022, but would fall to 2.3% by 2023.

Council notes that, since then, there has since been a dramatic shift in these expectations. The latest estimates from the Office of Budget Responsibility are that

the Consumer Price Index will reach over 10.% this year – significantly higher than both the inflationary increase in funding which the Authority received and the forecast increases which informed the MFRA budget for 2022/23.

Coupled with continuing growth in demand for Protection services and meeting increasing risks such as flooding, Council recognises that the MFRA is now facing enormous financial difficulties.

Council notes that the Institute for Government recently estimated that local authorities in England will be facing unbudgeted costs of up to £2bn as a result of inflation being significantly higher than was forecast in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Autumn Budget and Spending Review announcements. The Authority has estimated that this impact could exceed the revenue provision by £2m in 2022/23 and the expected increase in capital expenditure is potentially +£10m;

- The Authority had a fixed price electricity contract that ended in March 2022. The new contract has increased prices by +200%. Gas prices have had a similar increase. The additional cost in 2022/23 is estimated at £1.6m;
- Capital projects – many of which are essential in providing firefighters with the relevant training, PPE and equipment to provide an effective and safe fire response, have also been hit. The Authority is facing significant extra costs due to increases in the price of raw materials and labour. The proposed new Training and Development Academy / fire station, fundamental to keeping our firefighters safe and able to respond quickly and effectively, has seen its costs increased from £25m to £39m, of which a significant element relates to increased raw material and labour costs;
- The local government and firefighter pay award for 2022/23 have yet to be resolved –with inflation forecast to exceed 10% this year, pay disputes are inevitable if pay offers represent significant real-terms pay cuts. While removing any “cap” on pay increases, the Government has previously stated that any pay award must be funded from the Authority budget. This was already going to be difficult when pay was forecast to rise by around 2.5%, pay awards above those levels will add significant pressure on Authority finances if they are not resourced from additional funding provided by the Government. Each additional 1% = £0.5m; and,
- Operational revenue budgets across the full range of Authority services are being impacted by increases in the costs of materials, fuel, labour and a higher indexation ratio being applied to outsourced contracts.

Council recognises that the financial challenge of inflation comes on top of the enormous pressures faced by the Authority after a decade of austerity when the biggest cuts in local authority funding impacted on the authorities in the most deprived areas of the country because they relied more heavily on the Government grants which were cut so severely. The Authority is also less able to raise income from increases in Council Tax and Business Rates.

Council is concerned that, without extra support, the Authority may have to once again balance the books by cutting more essential services to our vulnerable residents, including those in Wirral.

Council notes that, over the last decade or so, the MFRA have prioritised every possible option to achieve greater efficiency and minimise the need to cut budgets for essential services. It is clearly not realistic to expect financial pressures of this magnitude to be addressed through further efficiencies.

Council notes that, in effect, the Local Government Finance Settlement was determined on the basis of a set of assumptions which has since been proven to be significantly inaccurate. Council appreciates that those assumptions were legitimate at the time, but global and national events since then have created a wholly different set of circumstances. It would be unfair and unrealistic to expect the Authority to be able to cope with the scale of those changes. Wirral Council therefore urges the Government to ensure that the inflationary pressures facing fire and rescue authorities in 2022/23 are properly and fully funded.

Council asserts that, in the longer-term, for Levelling Up to be effective, it is essential that inequalities in local government funding are addressed. This must be reflected in both the forthcoming "Fair Funding" Review and the 2023/24 Local Government Finance Settlement – which should ensure that local authority funding is fairly distributed on the basis of local levels of deprivation and properly reflects the prevailing rates of price inflation and wage inflation which affect the services that the Authority delivers.

Council urges the Government to appreciate that the fire and rescue sector cannot resolve the current difficulties without national Government support.

The Council Leader is therefore requested to write to the appropriate Government Minister, to seek such financial support, as a matter of urgency.

6. SUPPORT FOR LOCAL GREEN SPACES

Proposed by Councillor Lesley Rennie
Seconded by Councillor Ian Lewis

Council thanks residents of Wirral for continuing to engage in the development of a Local Plan, following adoption of the updated Statement of Community Involvement by the Regeneration and Economic Development Committee at its meeting on 4th March 2021.

In particular, Council notes the findings of the review of sites for Local Green Space designations which contributed to the draft Local Plan and the additional protections offered to valued and long-standing green spaces, often in urban areas where green space is at a premium.

Council thanks residents and community groups for their ongoing support for the retention of local green spaces, including:

1. School Lane fields (Wallasey Village);
2. Tower Grounds (New Brighton) and
3. Ditton Local Nature Reserve (Leasowe)

and the safeguards afforded to all designated Local Green Spaces within the draft Local Plan.

7. STOP THE ATTACKS ON OUR COUNTRYSIDE AND NATURE

Proposed by Councillor Liz Grey

Seconded by Councillor Steve Foulkes

Council notes that the Government has, in its announcements of 21st and 22nd September 2022, proposed, “liberalised planning rules to release more land” in “tax cutting investment zones” to “unlock housing development”.

Council notes that this deregulation of environmental protection to enable housing and other building development includes the green open spaces around Wirral.

Council also notes that the new Retained EU Laws Bill could see the end of the basic protections known as Habitat Regulations – laws that protect birds and animals across the country and that this deregulation has been described by the RSPB as “places you love from the shires to the cities – all under threat from bulldozers, from concrete”.

Council believes that our countryside and nature deserve more protection, not less, and that this attack on our green open spaces must stop.

Council therefore requests that this Government reverse any plans to reduce legal protection of natural spaces and asks that the Leader of the Council write to the Government urging it to retain and not abandon the protections we have in this country, which is already the most nature depleted country in the Western world.

8. STOP FRACKING

Proposed by Councillor Liz Grey

Seconded by Councillor Sue Powell Wilde

Council notes that the Government has lifted the 2019 ban on fracking, despite its own commissioned report by the British Geological Survey concluding that there is no scientific evidence that fracking is safe for local communities.

Council also notes the comments by The Secretary of State (SoS) for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Jacob Rees-Mogg, that:

“While HM Government will always try to limit disturbance to those living and working near to sites, tolerating a higher degree of risk and disturbance appears to us to be in the national interest.”

And from Kwasi Kwarteng, when himself SoS for BEIS, and asked if fracking would lower energy prices:

“No amount of shale gas from wells across rural England would be enough to lower European price any time soon. With the best will in the world, private companies are not going to sell the shale gas they produce to UK consumers below the market price.”

Council believes that while the former SoS for BEIS believes fracking won't lower energy prices and the current incumbent believes that local communities should just put up with the risk of earthquakes, we do not share the Government's disregard for their economic and environmental wellbeing, nor the disregard for the climate emergency.

Council notes that a Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence 184 (PEDL184) is currently held by a company with interests in fracking and this licence includes part of the Wirral West constituency.

Council therefore calls on the Government to reinstate the ban on fracking and protect our communities from the fear and distress involved.

Council requests that the Leader of Wirral Council writes to the SoS for BEIS urging him to invest instead in renewable energy and subsidise adequate home insulation programmes across the country to properly deal with the cost of living crisis, the climate emergency and to better provide energy security.