

Mr Mayor, Members

I am pleased to be proposing this balanced budget to you for the forthcoming year.

The presentation of the Budget is one of the most important if not the most important event of the year and I am proud of the work which has gone into this year's Budget which is before you in the papers. I am grateful to Councillor Pike, who you will hear from shortly, for his work as the Finance Portfolio holder. I am also grateful to Lydia Morrison and Andrew Clarke and the finance team for their hard work. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Directors and Heads of Service who have gone through budget challenge sessions to identify savings and opportunities. Whilst there are always time pressures, since the time I was the Cabinet Lead for Governance, I have sought to provide sufficient time for scrutiny and member understanding of this vital aspect of Council business. I am pleased that this year the GAF Board has had greater opportunity than before to make recommendations and members have had a comprehensive series of training sessions to aid their understanding.

When I was first elected Leader of the Council I set out my priorities which included a new revised Corporate Strategy refocusing our work on what we believe is in the best interests of, was needed by and wanted by our residents. The main focus is upon regeneration and the renewal and reshaping of our towns and district centres to reflect the changes in the way we work and live and to ensure prosperity and economic growth within a pleasant and attractive place to live. You have a revised Strategy, you have a Local Plan which includes the infrastructure provision which we believe is required for both the necessary and seemingly inevitable changes which will be brought upon our Borough whether we like it or not. The budget to finance that programme is a vital aspect.

When elected Leader, I made clear to you that I wished to ensure that we had the financial stability and security of a balanced budget. It is a difficult balance between our statutory obligations, our aspirations and ambitions for the Borough and our social responsibility towards those residents who are less fortunate than many in this room. This is despite the end to the rate support grant and the diminishing or disappearing 'new homes bonus'.

When I was first elected in 2010, we had to respond to the first austerity budget and we responded with a programme of efficiency savings and joint working which ensured our survival as an authority. Government policy is changing and it would appear that we are in step with national policy in terms of our regeneration ambitions and the grants available for those projects which are in tune with the national mood. We are beginning to unlock that funding and we believe that measures within the Budget will help us identify and unlock further funding opportunities.

Regeneration will be at the centre of the Council's work for the foreseeable future and all other aspects will feed into this central hub. You will have noted measures to free up resource both human and financial to enable that work to proceed. But other concerns have been highlighted by residents and members, such as enforcement, improving recreational facilities and taking a lead with environmental improvements. The budget has regard to these concerns and enables HBC to take either a funding or an enabling role.

Whilst I am delighted to be proposing this balanced budget to you, we cannot be complacent for the future. We will need to maintain a tight rein on our finances and to be agile to take advantage of opportunities to increase our income and cost effectiveness, by a mixture of joint ventures, joint working, investment and prudent asset management. At a time when the National economy is facing

an uncertain future, we must remain flexible and manage risk and opportunity to maintain our position as will be clear from our medium term financial strategy.

I will now handover to Councillor Pike, who will be outlining the scope of next year's budget in more detail.

Michael Wilson

27th February 2019