

Evening All,

Just wanted to share my notes from the Town and Parish Council Forum on Tuesday. The presentation slides were not shared via email so have written up my notes from the evening.

The forum largely went as expected, with many fellow councillors expressing concern and frustration about the proposed cuts and the increased workload that would fall on parish and town councils. I raised the issue of reducing the number of councillors, which was met with strong criticism from Cllr John Baker, who supports the cuts. However, Cllr Adam Zerny spoke to me afterwards and expressed his disagreement with Cllr Baker's position, indicating strong support for retaining our current number of councillors.

The meeting discussed the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP), which includes various cuts across several sectors, particularly adult social care and healthcare, children's services, and community and leisure facilities. The forecasted reduction of £17 million in year one, increasing to £40 million over three years, was attributed to government funding policy. There were suggestions to analyse where funding increases and cuts have occurred, as some patterns may reflect strategic government priorities.

Key cost pressures highlighted included:

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and social care: Approximately £1,000 per week/ £52,000 per year per person, so an extra 72 individuals needing care, totals around £3.2 million annually.

Children in care: Projected costs for 2026/27 are around £8,000 per week, with some cases reaching £16,000 per week for children needing 24/7 care. Government measures are expected to address the "seller's market" in care provision.

Financial overview:

Reserves: Forecasted at £48.8 million at the end of the financial year.

Agency expenditure: Expected to reduce by 50%, from £14 million to £7 million.

Council Tax impact on low-income families: Families who previously paid no council tax may now contribute 28%, equating to a suggested 5.5% increase in Central Bedfordshire Council's tax for these households. Overall, tax rises are being framed as a government-imposed necessity.

Further points discussed included:

Year 2/3 plans: Theatres, childcare centres, and youth centres may face double taxation or shared burdens to remain open, similar to practices in Milton Keynes.

Social media is suggested as an avenue to be used to communicate these issues more effectively.

Highways concerns: Poor planning of works in Shefford was noted, causing disruption and repeated work. Cllr John Baker attributed this to health and safety requirements (e.g., 15+ minute works needing traffic lights). The suggestion was made to raise issues with local MPs.

Consultation: Responses and feedback from ward councillors were requested by 19th February. While we have already consulted with Cllrs Clinch and Smith, it may be worth confirming whether they need anything further such as a formal statement or recommendation e.g., maintaining current council numbers and avoiding unnecessary elections at this level.

S106 funding: Advice was given to strictly adhere to rules, as developers may withdraw funding, which is rarely recovered.

Overall, the forum highlighted the challenges ahead for parish and town councils, particularly regarding funding, workloads, and maintaining services, as well as the differing views among councillors regarding council size reductions.

Happy to discuss further if you want more information, as this was just a brief summary.

Kind Regards
Antonia