

## **Ashby Town Council Response to NWLDC Budget Consultation**

### **1. Legacy Fund**

Ashby Town Council supports the proposed establishment of a Legacy Fund.

However, we believe that it should be substantially larger than currently envisaged, considering the large levels of reserves forecast over the next three years. A fund of £4m and a maximum award of £500k, with potential to top up in next year's budget, would be much more likely to facilitate delivery of the type of Project needed.

Also, it is essential to ensure that the funds are distributed fairly around the District taking into account the considerable funding for Coalville regeneration projects proposed elsewhere in the capital programme (£7.1m over three years, 40% of General Fund capital budget).

The awarding mechanism must be fair and transparent with published scores against pre-agreed criteria which have cross-party support.

We do not support a requirement for match funding. The availability and degree of match funding could be considered in the scoring of projects but should not be a prerequisite as this would rule out a significant number of potential bidding groups and projects. Of course, for projects with costs above the maximum grant level proof of sufficient additional funding to ensure completion, including an adequate contingency, would be essential.

Projects should be sufficiently ambitious to ensure a lasting legacy for NWLDC. They should predominantly involve building, improving or acquiring physical infrastructure, though funding for feasibility studies and design stages for such projects should be included with the chance of following up with a larger award for construction if feasibility proves positive.

### **2. Investment in Community Projects and Services**

The government's Fair Funding Review has provided NWLDC with a wonderful opportunity to leave a significant legacy both in terms of long-term community projects and improved services. It is important speedily to establish a higher than the current standard for the Council's services with a view to ensuring that is taken as the benchmark for service delivery by the new Unitary council going forward. This should apply across the board to council housing, planning, enforcement, community support, leisure provision and refuse, waste and recycling services. The council also needs to up its investment towards achieving Net Zero for its daily activities, across its property portfolio and its council housing.

We welcome the announcements of additional capital expenditure in existing services made since publication of the original budget, particularly the Concurrent Grant scheme for closed churchyards, the additional Community Focus Officer, and the reinstatement of the Age UK and Ashby Museum grants and the funding of the next stage of the feasibility studies into Mine Water Heating. However all but the latter scheme should be added to the base revenue stream to ensure that they are maintained following LGR.

### **3. Council tax**

It is advisable for councils in general to seek to increase their council tax by around the annual level of inflation. This ensures that services can be adequately maintained and improved where needed though efficiency savings should always be pursued. We understand that 2.75% is close to the maximum allowed by the current rules given that increases in special expenses must be taken into account and it is well below current inflation.

NWLDC put itself into extreme financial jeopardy by pursuing a council tax freeze for a significant period, as it allowed its revenue funding stream to become increasingly reliant on central funding and business rate income. This situation has only been alleviated by a change in central government and the generous 3-year award received this year. This situation must not be allowed to reoccur.

### **4. General Fund Capital Programme**

The establishment of an enhanced legacy fund (see above) should be a top priority for the capital programme, but this should not be to the detriment of the other capital investments included in the budget.

We understand that the council has announced a parking review and possible introduction of a pay on exit system. There should be no investment in new payment machines until that review is completed and consulted upon though inclusion of an appropriate sum in the budget is prudent. All replacement machines should include a cash payment option for those without credit cards or smart phones and revenue investment is required for the staff to service this facility.

The parking review should also seriously consider capital investment in new or extended car parking locations including multi-storey or underground, particularly in Ashby which may be losing the Co-op carpark.

The forecast level of reserves appears more than adequate to include further important capital infrastructure investments across the District as was envisaged in the district wide regeneration framework, published in December 2024. These should balance the current heavy bias towards schemes around Coalville town centre. Funding for implementation of the highest priority parts of the LCWIP would be particularly welcome, especially the much-needed off road connection between Ashby and Hicks Lodge, as well as investment in the Ashby Canal and Moira Furnace.

We hope that any unspent funds allocated to Moira Furnace in last year's capital budget are carried forward.

It is essential that adequate funding from reserves is made available for achieving Net Zero in Council owned property. This includes property directly occupied by the council and that rented or leased to third parties. Speedy development and implementation of appropriate schemes for solar generation, improved insulation, non-fossil fuel heating and cost reduction through use of battery storage are required.

It is particularly important to reduce the use of fossil fuels at the Council's leisure centres. We welcome the recently announced addition to the budget of funding

for the next feasibility phase of the mine water CHP scheme. The potential to use mine water as an energy source needs to be fast tracked as it has significant implications for the Coalville and Whitwick Leisure centre in the first instance and much wider potential benefits across the District, much of which is located above flooded mine workings.

The council also needs to speed up its migration to electric vehicles for its own use wherever possible.

We are shocked to see an additional £2.4m is needed to complete Coalville's Marlborough Centre refurbishment. This indicates a past failure in due diligence by NWLDC. A similar large overrun also occurred on the Marlborough Square project. These funds could have been invested elsewhere in the District where they could have made a big difference. We trust that such failures will not be allowed to happen again.

## **5. General Fund Revenue Budget**

All four of the areas for revenue investment mentioned for prioritisation in the consultation are equally deserving but, whilst investment in car parking is certainly required, we strongly oppose the current parking proposals.

No changes to parking arrangements should be made until the parking review, recently announced by Cllr Wyatt, is completed and consulted open, and this review should cover the whole District and include both revenue and capital investment. It should ensure that all areas of the District are treated equitably

Both a 10% increase in parking charges and introduction of two hours free parking in more Coalville car parks are completely unacceptable in their obvious bias against Ashby. They would result in those visiting Ashby having to pay even more for their first two hours, effectively subsidising the free parking in Coalville.

Coalville already has one-hour free parking in several council car parks and two hours free parking at the Market Hall and the private Belvoir shopping centre, which have plenty of spare capacity. Ashby's parking arrangements need urgent reconsideration with a positive incentive for long stay at Money Hill by reducing the charge and reassignment of current town centre long stay spaces.

We strongly welcome the closed churchyard scheme which has recently been added to the budget, as it will address the current inequitable double taxation which has been imposed upon Ashby, Castle Donington and Kegworth. It is essential that the mechanism for drawing down from the fund is designed and agreed swiftly but with proper consultation with the affected Town and Parish councils and ward members. We note that it is currently listed as a capital project and point out that it should cover revenue costs of maintenance as well as capital items. We also question the short-term funding of the scheme from reserves. It needs to be incorporated into the base revenue funding stream to ensure its continuation beyond LGR.

We also welcome that the Community Focus team is to be restored to 3 officers plus a team leader and assistant through funding from reserves. The Community Focus team provide an excellent service and are a valuable conduit to Town and Parish councils but has been eroded by recent cuts. This team, at full strength, needs to be funded for the long term rather than on a temporary basis as currently proposed.

Similarly, the Age UK befriending service and Ashby Museum grants are welcomed but should both be incorporated into the base revenue stream to ensure their continuation after LGR.

We also welcome the inclusion of the Net Zero officer post into the ongoing revenue expenditure on salaries

## **6. HRA**

The consultation document does not seek input on the Council's housing budget. This omission is unfortunate.

We note that NWLDC continues to suffer a net loss of properties through Right to Buy despite its New Supply programme. This trend needs to be reversed particularly as 100% RTB proceeds can now be used for stock replenishment and RTB discounts have been significantly reduced by the new government. We welcome the increased New Supply budget this year but believe it should be larger and at least adequate to maintain the overall level of council housing stock.

We welcome the increase in investment in housing repairs, stock improvements and Net Zero work in this budget.