



Introduction

Each January, local councils must set a budget for the financial year ahead and decide on the amount of money needed to fund services through council tax, known as the Precept. As Councillors and residents ourselves, we are committed to delivering services and facilities that are affordable and valued by the people of Flitwick. As your elected representatives, we remain deeply concerned about the broader state of the economy and the significant impact the cost-of-living crisis continues to have on everyone in our community. This brief report for residents explains the work and financial position of your Town Council.

About the work of the Council

Innovative services and high-quality events for the community

We've continued to review, revise and expand the services and events we provide for the community, acting on your feedback and ensuring we deliver value for money. Following elections in May 2023, Councillors remain committed to ensuring that everything we do targets the needs and aspirations of Flitwick residents. Launching soon, our Annual Residents' Survey will give you a fresh opportunity to let us know where you think we can improve and what areas you want us to prioritise, helping us shape what we deliver in 2024 and beyond.



Our Public Realm Team has worked hard to maintain our parks and open spaces, including managing the Grade II listed Manor Park, maintaining playgrounds, mowing, planting and dealing with litter. Investments, including installing lighting and CCTV at the Skate Park, CCTV and furniture at the Town Square and works to rebuild the historic gates to Manor Park, have been well-received. We're pleased to have secured funding for a Tiny Forest at Hinksley Road Recreation Ground and that we're now finally able to take the first steps to create a new Nature Park at Maulden Road, with the planting of 27,000 trees expected to begin in February.

Refurbished historic entrance gates at Manor Park

We're proud of our well-established events and activities programme. Our flagship events, including the free Flitwick Family Fun Day and the annual Christmas Lights Switch On, continue to unite our community. Regular activities, such as the Over 60's Lunch Club, Stitchers, Forget-me-not and Dance Fitness, continue to thrive, and new services like free Fitness Classes have proved highly successful.



Residents taking part in our free weekly fitness classes

We continue to invest in services for young people living in the town, run from our dedicated Hub building at Dunstable Road. Our partnerships with Dan Gaze Support Services (DGSS), Woodland Middle School and Redborne Upper School have allowed us to better understand the needs and aspirations of young people, allowing us to tailor the services we provide. Services and activities for the year ahead include our regular youth clubs, mental health support, skate park competitions and the return of the popular DJ workshops.

Addressing the cost-of-living-crisis

Our biggest focus for 2023/2024 has been our work to support residents impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, which will remain a focus in the next financial year. As the lowest tier of local government with public buildings and facilities that offer easy access to services, our community-focused approach to this work has allowed us to provide direct, practical and targeted support for those in our town who need it most.

A 2023 report by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) shows that 350,000 more children were pulled into relative poverty in 2021-2022, up from 3.6 million in 2010-11. 71% of poor children live in working families, and 45% of all children in poverty are in families with the youngest child aged under five. Furthermore, the Flitwick-400 Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) is one of England's 10 to 20% most deprived areas, ranking second in Central Bedfordshire.



Flitwick Community Fridge is reducing food waste and supporting residents struggling with the cost of food.

Flitwick Community Fridge has gone from strength to strength, redistributing approximately 6,000 kilos of food collected by volunteers from local supermarkets and charities to residents free of charge each month. We've extended the offer extensively thanks to grant funding from the Hubbub Foundation, including providing frozen food, a free 'pumpkin carving and soup lunch' event and cookery courses for families.

Running year-round, our weekly Community Hub continues to provide a safe, warm, welcoming space for residents, with lunch and refreshments provided; we're expanding the offer in Q1 to include a free evening meal. Our Job Hub helps people improve their employment prospects through coaching. We've continued our regular Community Movie days, and we'll ensure that as many activities as possible are low-cost or free.

A thriving community

In addition to the things we deliver directly, we have continued to support many community groups across the town financially and practically. We continue to provide land at a peppercorn rent for the Scouts, Sea Cadets, Guides, Flitwick Gardeners' Association and the Royal British Legion. We've recently provided additional land to allow Flitwick Scout Group to extend and refurbish its building, allowing the group to expand to meet demand.

We continue to provide administrative and logistical support and free use of our buildings and outside spaces for regular groups and unique community-run events like the Flitwick Car Show. Our local 'Library of Things', SHARE: Flitwick & Ampthill, has now moved rent-free to The Rufus Centre, and we hope this support will allow the charity to expand its service by providing low-cost borrowing of equipment to residents.

Proud Ampthill & Flitwick (Proud AF), our joint programme with Ampthill Town Council, has celebrated our vibrant local LGBTQ+ community. We've delivered diversity and inclusivity training for local businesses and community groups and successful events to celebrate LGBT History Month and Pride Month.



Proud AF: An evening of drag entertainment

Commercial services that add value to our community

We've seen a sustained positive financial performance of our commercial business at The Rufus Centre, and we expect to deliver another 'surplus' in the region of £100,000 this financial year. Led by our experienced business manager, The Rufus Centre provides serviced office space for small businesses, hosts meetings and conferences, and provides a venue for celebrations and events. The Rendezvous Café & Bar remains popular with residents, providing high-quality, fairly priced food and drink in a relaxed setting and significantly contributing to the business's financial success. Furthermore, Alistair Strathern, MP for Mid Bedfordshire, has selected The Rufus Centre as his constituency base, showing further commitment to our town as the largest settlement in the Mid Bedfordshire constituency.

We're continuing our plans to modernise the building, ensuring it meets the requirements of our community and commercial customers and reducing the environmental impact. Upcoming investment in the Lockyer Suite, our large hall, will replace life-expired audio-visual equipment, modernise the decor and improve lighting. We've continued refurbishing office space as it's become vacant, reduced the Council's office space to increase the available commercial office space and increased rents in line with inflation.



The cake selection at the Rendezvous Café & Bar

Our business remains in a solid financial position, and we are confident that our business strategy will continue to deliver positive outcomes for the people of Flitwick, including a significant annual return to supplement the precept and fund capital projects.

A voice for the community

As the closest level of government to the community, the Council is here to ensure that the needs and aspirations of our community are communicated to decision-makers. The speed of the Post Office and Barclays Branch closures surprised us all, and we quickly worked with the other local authorities to lobby for a Banking Hub. While we would have preferred Flitwick, we're pleased with the decision to open a Banking Hub serving our local area in Ampthill in the spring.

Improving our Town Centre

The Council's purchase of 3 Station Road, the former Barclays building, in November 2021 has created a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve and shape our town centre. Residents are rightly frustrated by the dilapidated state of this vacant building, but the commercial offer from Barclays for early termination was not in the interests of Flitwick taxpayers. Our commitment to residents that the Council will not increase the precept to fund this project stands.

Possession of this building will revert to the Council on 18th March when the lease expires, and we have advancing plans to refurbish the building to provide commercial space and services. This is a significant project, especially considering the impact inflation has had on construction costs; it will take time to bring this project to fruition. It's important to get this right, and we ask you to bear with us while we complete our scoping and commercial discussions.



Councillors testing out the newly installed furniture at the Town Square

Financial Planning for the year ahead

Managing the impacts of inflation

Elected by residents to make decisions on behalf of the residents of Flitwick, Councillors are required each year to set a budget that balances the needs of the community and the financial impact of any increase to council tax against our responsibilities to ensure that the Council remains on a sound financial footing.

The impact of inflation running at over 12% for long periods in 2023 has again significantly impacted our staff costs and day-to-day operational costs. Delivery costs for capital projects have increased by over 25%, and insurance costs have increased by 55%. Furthermore, we're budgeting for a 5% national union-negotiated pay settlement in 2024, which is outside our control.

Councillors and senior officers have continued to take bold, proactive financial decisions to modernise the organisation, increase commercial income and control costs. Our January 2023 decision to close the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) for new staff reduced employer pension costs by £21,000 in 2023. We've managed our energy costs through fixed-price contracts, and our solar panels at The Rufus Centre saved £17,900 in 2023, a decent return on investment!



The Rufus Centre showing our Solar Panels

Precept for 2024/2025

Councillors have set the Flitwick Town Council precept for 2024/2025 at £1,031,242, a headline increase of £30,037 or 3%.

In real terms, this will result in a council tax charge of £202.84 for each Band D household, an increase of 1.9%, £3.87 for the year or £0.32 per month.

2024/2025 service delivery costs

We are committed to transparency, and our full budget summary is published on our website alongside this report. We are budgeting a net expenditure (excluding borrowing costs and capital funding) of £1,075,052 on service delivery predominantly funded from the precept, with approximately £609k (57%) of our spending focused on Community Services.

Funding new projects and services

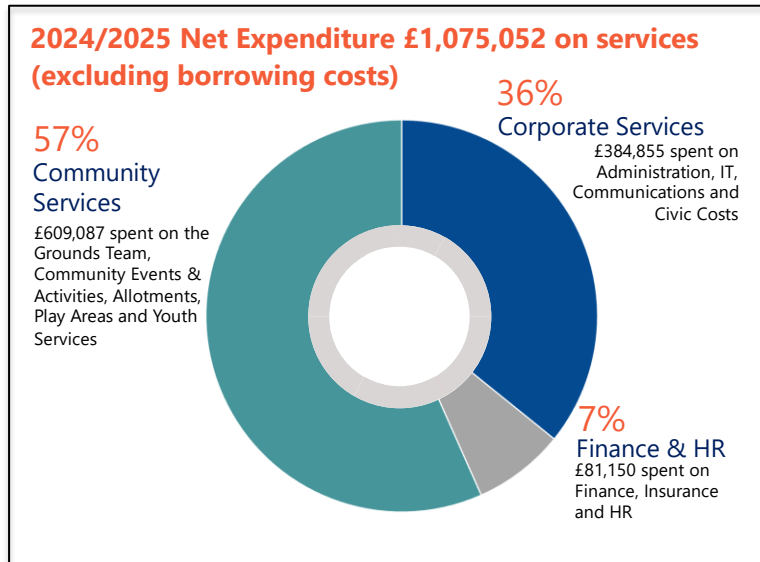
This year, the contribution to our Projects Fund, which we use to fund investments in new projects and services, will be a modest £30,000. Council staff have done exceptionally well raising over £120,000 in grant funding during 2023, and we've challenged them to continue their winning approach.

We are fortunate to have a strong community spirit in Flitwick, and we look forward to working with residents to help build on this further. We know that any level of increase to taxes is never welcome, but we hope you'll understand the reasons for this decision and see this as a worthwhile investment in our community.



A. Snape

Cllr Andy Snape, Town Mayor 2021-2024



Flitwick Residents gather for the Christmas Lights Switch On at the Town Square, December 2023 taken by Ben Jemmett