

Douglas sets rate levy at 444p for the 2020-21 financial year

Douglas Borough Council has set the rate levy for the 2020-21 financial year at 444p.

The rate represents an increase of 2.5 per cent over the previous year's figure.

The announcement was made by the Leader of the Council, Councillor David Christian MBE JP, at a public meeting of the Council held on Wednesday January 29, 2020 when he presented his Review and Presentation of the Budget.

In his introduction Councillor Christian referred to 2020 heralding 'seismic changes' for Douglas, the Isle of Man and the United Kingdom.

Those changes would include a new membership composition for the Council with effect from the local elections on April 23 that would see the number of Members reduced from 18 to 12 and the number of Wards from six to four, bringing the latter in line with the House of Keys' constituencies.

Councillor Christian went on to outline changes and achievements of the past two decades and how the Council was now 'fit for the future'.

He also took the opportunity to call for the government to give 'urgent consideration' to local government reform, specifically the creation of five local authorities. He said such a change represented 'a very real opportunity to clearly demonstrate the lines of demarcation between local and central government responsibilities.' He added: 'We also see this strengthening engagement, understanding and mutual respect between the electorate and elected representatives.'

Turning to former Council assets which were no longer 'a good fit' with the Council's core services, he referred to the Villa Marina complex, The Bowl and the Horse Trams service which were transferred by agreement to the government.

He continued: 'The Council is determined to deliver for Douglas but it has a duty to act decisively and without compromise when faced with stark economic realities.'

Councillor Christian went on to outline infrastructure projects in which the Council had invested over the last two decades, citing examples such as town centre regeneration schemes, Noble's Park Pavilion, the Meadows Pavilion at Douglas Golf Course, the Douglas Borough Cemetery and Crematorium and new LED street lighting across the Borough.

He said the Council's record of investment had been 'impressive' since the turn of the century. 'From April 2001 to March 2019 the Council has invested £84million in purchasing and improving its public sector housing and £47million in purchasing and improving its other fixed assets. Together that comes to £131million. That ranged from a peak of £13.5m in 2004-05 to a lowest figure £2.8million in 2011-12, giving an average of £7.3 million a year.

He said investment was set to continue in 2020-21 'thanks to prudent budgeting' and the £690,000 sale proceeds of the horse tram assets. New projects would include a nine-hole crazy golf course in Noble's Park, a new clubhouse and changing rooms at Pulrose playing fields - subject to the Council receiving £100,000 of grant funding from the Football Association - and a perimeter walkway to be laid around Douglas Golf Course.

The Council would also be investing £148,000 to replace around 280 lighting columns and £432,000 in the final phase of its £1.5 million scheme to convert all street lighting in the Borough to LED units.

Staying with lighting Councillor Christian announced that the 2020-21 rate levy would allow for the first phase of a £1 million programme to progress its public street lighting column replacement programme.

In addition, the Council would be implementing a £900,000 bespoke lighting scheme for Douglas Promenade, together with a number of other enhancements.

Staying with the promenade refurbishment scheme Councillor Christian said it was: 'totally unreasonable that it should fall to the Council – and, by extension, to every Douglas ratepayer - to provide rate rebates to compensate businesses on the promenade suffering adverse financial impact. Regrettably, however, the Council has been forced to build in a £100,000 provision in the budget to accommodate this wholly unfair imposition on its finances.' He added that he would be asking the Treasury to use its legislative powers to introduce a rebate scheme, funded by Government rather than the ratepayer.

In addition to investing in infrastructure projects the Council was committed to investing in the community. Councillor Christian cited a number of examples, including the abolition of membership fees and fines for the Henry Bloom Noble Library, partnering with the charity Isle of Play to create a unique play experience in Ballaughton Park and providing 86 allotments at Johnny Watterson Lane. In addition, as a reflection of its status as a UNESCO Biosphere Isle of Man partner, the Council would be implementing a new verge maintenance programme to introduce wildflowers and naturalised grassland in some roadside verges, had invested in low-emission kerbside

collection vehicles and installed underground storage tanks at Ballaughton nursery to harvest around 200,000 litres of rain water a year.

Turning to 'a vision for the Douglas of the future' Councillor Christian referred to the Central Douglas Master Plan. He said: 'This is being driven largely by the private sector, but the Council is ensuring its voice is heard in all discussions'. He went on to express his disappointment that Policy and Reform Minister Chris Thomas had decided to abolish regional regeneration committees without informing the Council. 'For this reason, I have written to the Chief Minister raising my concerns,' he added.

Councillor Christian went on to say that the Area Plan for the East had 'far-reaching implications' for Douglas and that the Council had been heavily involved from the beginning of the process back in July 2016. Central to the Council's submissions were that the 'commercial heart' of Douglas town centre should be protected and that development should be expressly to strengthen the town's long-term economic resilience.

It was against this background that Councillor Christian announced there would be no increase in public parking fees across all its car parks. He then went on say that the Council was firmly of the opinion that it should be managing all the public car parks in Douglas.

Moving on to localisation and the loss of government grant funding Councillor Christian said that at its peak, the funding had amounted to £5.7 million in 2006-07. Successive changes, however, had led to the only grant remaining being the housing deficiency grant, budgeted to be £907,000 for the coming financial year.

Turning to pay awards he said that the three-year cumulative cost to the Council of compliance with pay award agreements would be £750,000. He

went on to say that smarter working practices and efficiencies had contained overtime costs, budgeted at £222,000 for 2020-21, down from £534,000 in 2001-02.

Councillor Christian said that over the past decade the Council had succeeded in containing rate increases to just 15 per cent. 'This has been achieved at the same time as the Manx Retail Prices Index rose by 45 per cent,' he added.

In closing Councillor Christian said that in setting the rate for the 2020–21 financial year the Council was demonstrating 'its unshakeable resolve to look now to the future' and he urged Members to think in terms of 'Douglas 2020. New opportunities in a new decade.'

The full Review and Presentation of the 2020-21 Budget can be downloaded from douglas.gov.im.