

As most residents know, the council faces yet another budget gap because of central government underfunding. In November councillors from all parties and dozens of representatives from our local public, private, faith and voluntary sectors wrote to the Chancellor calling for urgent help to deal with the cost of living and fair funding for services. We've had no reply.

Councils are legally obligated to set a balanced budget, so with less funding from government we have no choice but to make cuts. Before Christmas the government did announce some extra money including more for social care and a 5% council tax increase, so we don't expect the budget gap to be as big as the £14m we anticipated a few months ago - but it will still be significant.

On council tax, I know that everyone would like to freeze it. So would I. But the fact is that if councils don't increase it – as they're expected to do by government – they have to make more cuts. Every 1% increase in St Helens raises about £850,000, so the full 5% increase would protect around £4.25m of services. If we don't increase it, it's another £4.25m of cuts instead. With all of us facing rising household costs right now, it's an extremely difficult choice for councils.

Budget options for 2023/24 include more library closures, turning street lights off at night, closing children's centres, increasing fees, and more. It's shocking, but like other public services that are struggling this is inevitably what happens when proper funding isn't given.

Senior council officers have met with opposition group leaders to discuss the budget situation, and I hope they'll come up with real deliverable alternatives rather than just point fingers. There's no monopoly on good ideas and if the opposition have any, I'll listen.

The council's budget consultation is still open for all residents to have their say until this Sunday, 15<sup>th</sup> January. You can take part at [www.sthelens.gov.uk/budgetconsultation](http://www.sthelens.gov.uk/budgetconsultation) and there are paper copies in libraries and leisure centres.

Like all other public services, councils have been fighting for years for fair funding. Until we get it, more difficult decisions lie ahead.

Best wishes to all Star readers.

**This continues to be a difficult time for many of us. If you need support with bills, housing, health and wellbeing or anything else, please visit [www.sthelens.gov.uk/sthelenstogether](http://www.sthelens.gov.uk/sthelenstogether).**