

## **Budget Speech (2007-08) to Full Council**

*Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2007*

Cllr Andy Sutton, Leader of the Council

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Chairman, I come before you today to make a markedly different speech to the one this Chamber heard last year.

2006 gave me the opportunity to deliver a debut speech on behalf of the new administration and outline a clear vision of our change agenda for the Island. It was by its very nature a political speech – demonstrating how the Island was changing under its new political direction.

Let me reassure you that our change agenda is still very much on course. In fact, it has accelerated – we are even more ambitious for the Island.

But what we have already heard this evening gives me pause for thought, and further increases my determination to turn this Council around. It is clear that there remain substantial challenges ahead of us in giving Island residents the quality of local authority that they deserve.

I am frustrated and disappointed with the unacceptable situation with regard to the Undercliff. It does not reflect well on our reputation, as we work collectively – One Council – for the benefit of the Island.

Our starting point as a Council must be to aspire to do everything to the highest standard. We must give value for money, and we must spend every penny of taxpayers' money as if it was our own – with the same care and assessment of value.

The Isle of Wight Council must become an exemplar of best practice, good governance and transparent and proper decision-making processes – so that every decision we make can be held up to effective scrutiny.

All of this is our duty, and in this case, it seems that the Isle of Wight Council has clearly fallen short. And that is why we have taken the firm course of action that has been outlined. Because I don't want to see that happen again, and more importantly, Islanders don't deserve to see it happen again.

I can therefore only outline our renewed resolve to change the way this Council does business. That process started in May 2005 when we took office, and we are taking up a gear now.

And that is why I now want to address these areas in the first announcement of my budget speech, as we pledge to "put the house in order".

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## **PUTTING THE HOUSE IN ORDER**

I am committing an additional £107,000 to strengthen Legal Services, and a further £124,000 to improve financial management. This investment will be focused solely on improving the capacity of these sections of the authority to help make sounder, more robust decisions for the Island taxpayer. This will be overseen by our Interim Director of Legal & Democratic Services.

Additionally, a further £0.3m will be invested into changing the organisation – helping us to involve and engage more effectively with our most important asset – our staff – and also to develop the leadership we need across the organisation.

We will also be investing £0.5m in ICT and customer service. We are proposing a new Director of Customer Services who will be entirely focused on ensuring that customers remain our number one priority. These are the people we are here to serve – no-one else. Every move we make should consider how it will improve the quality of life enjoyed by Island residents. Improved ICT facilities will play a vital role in improving our customer service in an increasingly e-technological age.

The Island's public sector has a significant property asset that should be managed more effectively. Between the Council, the PCT and the Police we have a huge amount of cash tied up in property – property that is neither customer friendly to visit for residents or efficient to work in for our staff. We want to put this right and quickly. We intend to use our property for the benefit of Islanders by reinvesting cash in services, stimulating regeneration and enabling assets to be used more effectively at a local level by the town and parish councils.

That is why I am putting £0.4m additional funding into making our property strategy a reality. This will help us end the days of Council land being sold off for next to nothing, and instead the taxpayer will benefit by getting the true value back. Nowhere is this more evident than the recent disposal of land in East Cowes with a £2m capital receipt for us to reinvest in our One Island priorities.

After completing his work with the Strategic Asset Management Group, I have been delighted to welcome Cllr George Brown to the Cabinet, to carry on his work on Assets. I would also like to thank Cllrs Mazillius and West for their invaluable contributions to this group.

This significant investment in ‘putting the house in order’ will help us address the issues that were highlighted earlier this evening. Although money is not enough – it will also require hard work by both members and officers. Let me reiterate my resolve to achieve this – let us work as One Council to turn this authority around.

Before I turn to other areas of the budget, let me outline how we got here today. Let me talk about “One Island”.

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## **ONE ISLAND**

Last autumn we undertook the most comprehensive residents’ survey that this authority has ever done. Not only did the results help us identify the issues that mattered most to Islanders, we were also told that 47% of Islanders felt the Council could get a lot better at delivering services. That demonstrates the belief that exists in us being able to improve the quality of services we provide. I agree with the views of Islanders. Now, as a council we must rise to that challenge.

The concerns raised in the survey and in our recent One Island consultation can be broken down into three key themes – respect, pride and value.

First – “Respect” – and by respect I mean those issues about the way we behave to each other. Addressing problems such as crime, and anti-social behaviour, and building strong communities. This means supporting families and vulnerable people. It also means creating opportunities for disabled people, the elderly and the young.

Second – “Pride” – and by pride I mean those issues that impact on the environment. We want to ensure that people live in clean streets. We as an authority must deal swiftly with rubbish, vandalism and graffiti. But we must also protect our coast, enhance our villages, beaches, and get the balance right between planning and development.

And finally – “Value” – and by value I mean focusing on value for money and meeting concerns about the quality of services, such as roads and amenities. This area also covers transport (including ferries), tourism, business, education and health.

Over the past month, we have held a series of meetings across the Island to consult on these three themes – and the public have confirmed the same issues that they raised in the survey.

We have used these results to help us decide the projects we are investing in and announcing this evening. This truly is a budget responding to the needs of Islanders, like never before.

It is the first One Island budget – bringing the Island together through one shared vision. One Island is not a one off. It is a programme of actions to deliver improvements to the quality of life on the Island – and I am announcing the first set of them this evening. One Island will take this Council forward over the two years and beyond.

In overview, this speech details how over the next year we will realise £8m of savings through better partnership working and reducing red tape and bureaucracy at County Hall.

We will also deliver £50m into our capital investment programme – and complement this with an additional £11m on new One Island priorities. For those of you that are experts in local government finance, you will have no doubt worked out the council tax level that I will be setting at the end of this speech.

Firstly I want to talk about our top priority – “our young people”.

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## **OUR YOUNG PEOPLE**

Nothing matters more to us than the future of Island children – and giving them the best possible start in life. And that priority is shared by residents, as they recently told us in meetings around the Island.

As members will know, our plans to put the individual learner at the heart of our education system is the thinking behind the plans currently out for consultation. Everyone on the Island must recognise that the future of education is not about bricks and mortar, but about the quality of education that our children receive.

I hope that all present here this evening will take this message forward to colleagues of all political colours, and none. We will bring a paper to this to council in April and take a bold decision to take our education system forward.

In 2006, for the first time in many years, we saw some noticeable improvements within education. We are now one of the best authorities for improved school attendance; our GCSE results have improved faster than the national rate; and we are the 3<sup>rd</sup> best nationally in year-on-year improvement at Key Stage 2.

However this is only the start – we remain in the bottom third for value added in all key stages and our relative position against other councils at GCSE level continues to slip – currently 139<sup>th</sup> out of 150 Councils. We are actively addressing this, and our recently announced proposed changes will put us at the forefront of development for 14-19 year olds.

I would like to thank all teaching professionals on the Island who serve our children. We also need to recognise the important contribution that the independent sector makes – at Ryde, Priory and Catherine’s Schools – all of whom contribute to improving educational standards.

Members will already know that we have secured £30.5m to rebuild Cowes as a zero-carbon “centre of learning”. Whilst we do not believe that education is about the buildings you are in, this will certainly make a difference in providing the modern facilities needed for 14-19 education on the Island.

I would like to thank my colleague Cllr Patrick Joyce for his unswerving commitment to improving education on the Island – often in the face of resistance to change. To help enable this change, Patrick has been able to secure £1.3m from the Department for Education and Skills to invest in

strengthening leadership in middle and high schools. Whilst this money is quite rightly directed at schools, it demonstrates the faith that the DFES have in us being able to drive this improvement agenda forward.

Patrick is ably supported by Cllr Melanie Swan in her role as Policy Commissioner for Children & School Results.

Whatever we decide to do on education we will invest in the right resources to ensure that changes are made smoothly, whilst attracting the brightest and best to teach and lead in our schools and learning centres at all levels. I can also confirm that this year's direct schools grant is £71.2m – which is an additional £1.3m into Island schools, compared to last year.

But there's more. We don't just want our children to “enjoy and achieve” – this is only one of the five Every Child Matters themes.

We want them to ‘stay safe’. We are investing a further £750,000 in social care for both children and adults to ensure that we can look after our most vulnerable. Off Island placements continue to create a pressure on our budgets. We are looking at proposals for Beaulieu House to help families with more access to respite care.

We are also greatly concerned about keeping children safe on their way to school – a concern shared by residents. That is why I am pleased to announce that we will be introducing 20mph speed limits outside schools across the Island. So where the law allows it, that is what we will do.

This will be rolled out over the next 12 months and beyond, and tonight I am announcing the first three locations: Wellington Road, Newport – benefiting four schools; Perowne Way, Sandown; and Luccombe Road, Shanklin.

Our children are entitled to arrive at their schools without having traffic racing past outside. This initiative will require drivers to slow down to 20mph – and we will work with our partners, the police, to ensure this is enforced. I will talk more about the safety of our children and young people on our roads in a few minutes.

And we want our children to “be healthy” – another Every Child Matters theme. Which is why last week saw us repeat the provision of free swimming for children during half-term. I am pleased to

announce that this will now be available during the school holidays throughout the year. We will shortly be meeting with other leisure providers on the Island to discuss expanding this initiative to include them – so the benefits are enjoyed by all communities.

How will they get to the swimming pool? With our popular 50p bus fare of course. We were delighted by the take-up and to ensure demand is met we are continuing to fund the increased demand to the tune of £1m.

Our young people are also using the 50p bus ticket to exercise choice and attend the variety of youth clubs across the Island – including Shanklin Youth Club, which is run entirely by an excellent team of volunteers.

We need to look at our own services in this area and Cllr Swan has already started an enquiry through her Commission which will look at how we can engage more effectively with our young people. One of the key recommendations from the recent One Island meetings was consulting with residents – and in particular young people. This enquiry will allow us to consult widely with them and find out what services they need.

We want a youth service that will not only provide a diverse range of activities out of school hours, but one that engages young people in taking ownership and responsibility for their activities.

We also want our youth service to play a leading role in providing career advice on life opportunities – and that's why we going to pool resources by bringing Connexions in house. I look forward to seeing the work of the Commission in due course.

We are investing £150k, rising to £300k in the base budget next year, to help modernise our own youth service, make it fit-for-purpose and open to meet the demand from young people – including during school holidays. Our youth clubs must respond to the demands of their users.

Part of this funding will also help us address the final theme of Every Child Matters, i.e. to help young people “make a positive contribution”. We will create opportunities for local young people to be employed by the local authority, with places for 10 modern apprentices and between 6 and 8 graduate trainees. These selected individuals will be trained with the skills and resources to become high-performing council officers, working in areas such as Children's Services and helping drive our education agenda forward.

It is not just schools and the youth service that support the development of our children, libraries have a key role to play. I would like to thank Cllr Hunter-Henderson for his work in overseeing the improvement in our library service – with its Best Value Performance Indicators in the top quartile in the country. We also anticipate our CPA direction of travel statement to recognise the success of our library service.

Following last year's investment of an additional £140,000 in new books, I am delighted to announce that our two biggest libraries – Ryde and Lord Louis – will be opening seven days a week from the beginning of April. This puts us way above the national average and the government's targets for accessibility. Other major branches will open five days a week, based on customer usage. This will help adults and children learn actively together – achieving higher reading levels.

I now want to talk to about a future event which goes much wider than just our young people, but will involve them particularly and leave a lasting impact on the next generation of Islanders. That is the International Island Games 2011.

As members know, a year before the London Olympics, we will be welcoming up to 3000 athletes from islands around the world to aspire to sporting excellence on the Isle of Wight. This event presents so many opportunities for our young people – sporting participation, cultural awareness and meeting our Every Child Matters priority for “being healthy”. But the event goes much wider than our young people – we want it to be a truly One Island event – to bring our Island together and show it off to the world.

We must create a games that puts the Island on the international map as the spotlight begins to focus on the UK ahead of the Olympics. We want them to reach London 2012 via the Isle of Wight.

That is why I am pleased to confirm that we will be continuing £100,000 of investment, year-on-year in the run up to 2011, for the organisation and management of the event. We are also now pledging a further £0.8m to help the Island prepare for a world-class games and maximise the legacy the Island will receive from it. That amounts to a total investment of £1.3m over five years. That is the strength of our commitment to making these games the biggest success they possibly could be.

This additional funding will be invested in a number of ways: creating more opportunities for Islanders to participate in sport both locally and internationally; recruiting and appointing two national sports personalities to be 2011 ambassadors; to recruit a suitably experienced and qualified Games Director in 2009; and to draw additional funding to the Island to invest and create the legacy.

I want to now return to transport – “getting round the Island”.

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## **GETTING ROUND THE ISLAND**

Last year we achieved the biggest shift to bus use outside London by giving a 50p fare to young people and free bus travel to the over 60s. This investment will continue. And this year moving about the Island is still a major theme.

But what about everyone else?

As members will know, we outlined plans in 2005 to offer a £1 bus fare for Islanders. Over the past 20 months, this Council has enjoyed close partnership with our local bus company Southern Vectis which has resulted in the huge take-up I have just mentioned.

We have continued to work with Southern Vectis – this time to look at how this £1 bus fare could be delivered. To this end, we allocated £1m of funding, year-on-year, towards this initiative.

However, the vast increase in bus usage, along with rising fuel costs, has meant that this £1m investment cannot in itself deliver a £1 bus fare, but Southern Vectis’s success has meant that they can offer a £1.50 rate (with their £21 weekly rider ticket), without any need to draw from the public purse.

As we have promised to spend every penny of taxpayers’ money as if it was coming from our own pockets – we have therefore decided to put this £1m back into the taxpayers’ pocket. That means £1m back not only in this year’s budget, but year-on-year – and £1m towards a lower council tax increase. Our manifesto commitment regarding bus fares is now updated, and completed – and the Island’s taxpayers are better off as a result.

We have also looked at how people can be better informed about the bus services on the Island – particularly those travelling alone who may feel vulnerable. That is why we are investing £35,000 in a text-messaging Bus Information system. This will be rolled out over the next few months before becoming fully operational by October this year.

Mobile phone users will be able to access details of scheduled timings of bus services from any of the 1,500 bus stops on the Island. We expect this to be of benefit to bus users of all ages – particularly as mobile phone usage is now typical at all ages.

And whilst we're on the buses – what about the red carpet? Following the completion of the bus station development, I am pleased to announce that we are currently in discussions with Southern Vectis to amend or remove the red carpet, as far as we can within the current law. If we amend it, we are actively looking at whether it could become a high-occupancy vehicle lane during peak hours.

And to further delight Newport residents, I can tell you that the traffic flow in Trafalgar Road will be permanently revised. It is currently operating in a westerly direction under a temporary traffic order and the permanent order will be advertised in the next month to make this a fixed arrangement.

I would like to thank my colleague Cllr Ian Ward for all his hard work in turning this round.

Our support for public transport is matched by being the motorist's friend. We will support our motorists with continued investment in our highways infrastructure, as I will shortly outline. This investment is made possible by our efficiency savings as a Council, our prioritised resources – but also by appropriate and nationally comparable parking charges on the Island.

April 2007 will see an increase in casual parking charges of 9% in car parks and at meters. This is being implemented in recognition that an increasing number of Islanders have taken advantage of our residents' parking permit – therefore exempting themselves from casual parking charges. This will continue to provide amazing value-for-money, slashing the cost of parking for Islanders throughout the year.

As such, I am pleased to announce that there will be no change to the cost of this permit – which remains at £50 (and £35 for pensioners) for residents. Nor are we increasing the costs for visitors

and coach permits. That means the cost for all these permits will be less in real terms, given inflation. And of course, residents can pay for an all Island permit in monthly instalments.

Let me now talk about permits in the context of a wider agenda – “a green Island”.

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## **A GREEN ISLAND**

As part of this agenda, parking could cost you a staggering ZERO pence if you use an environmentally friendly vehicle – as recognised by the DVLA environmental criteria. That’s right – we want to encourage the use of environmentally friendly technology, by providing free parking in our car parks to these vehicles – from April. Not just this, there will be three free charging points for electric vehicles – including electric cycles, from November 2007.

We want to do even more to put the Island at the forefront of the green agenda, and lead by example. Earlier I announced our intention to make the Cowes pathfinder a neutral carbon development. But there are other practical ways for us to reduce our carbon footprint.

For example we are investing in cycle paths and we are encouraging more people onto public transport. We are in the early stages of discussions about having a Kyoto style conference on the Island where we challenge all local organisations – private, public and third sector – to sign up to reduce emissions.

We are also exploring with other potential partners how we as an organisation can use biomass as fuel and exploit opportunities for tidal power generation, for the Island to move towards becoming self-sufficient.

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## **LET’S PUT AN END TO ROAD DEATHS**

I would like to return to the issue of both drivers and young people, which I have touched on previously. We have all been shocked by the deaths of Island youngsters on our roads. Every time I see a loss of young life, I am struck by what an absolute waste it is, both for them and their family. And we must do everything we can to stop these tragedies occurring in the future.

As the County Press led last Friday - "let's put an end to road deaths". And I thank Suzanne Pert and her colleagues at the County Press for covering this subject so sensitively. Clearly it is an issue of huge public concern – residents told us this in our recent meetings. The local paper echoes the public's worries.

Our "Drive Safe, Stay Alive" campaign has had a huge impact in our schools – but we must match education with action – and improve our roads to reduce the number and severity of skid related accidents. That is why I am announcing – as reported last week – £800,000 capital investment for anti-skid road works – resurfacing to improve skid resistance.

These works will be prioritised based on existing accident data, and will commence now with completion by September. As members will know, we are waiting for the outcome of our PFI roads bid to the Government – but we cannot wait or rely on that funding – we must lead the improvements ourselves, irrespective of any future additional funding decisions.

This will be complemented with a targeted communications campaign around speeding – working with our partners, including the police – starting in April this year.

Part of this campaign will inform Islanders, young and old, of our new initiatives. For instance, along with our 20mph speed limits outside schools, we will also be pro-active in warning residents and visitors of existing limits that are in place.

Over the past year, we have placed speed indicator signs in a few locations across the Island. These have resulted in a noticeable reduction in speed by passing drivers. This initiative will now be rolled out across the Island, with a combination of stand alone and portable devices.

To enable this, £0.9m, a mixture of capital and revenue funding in 2007 has been allocated for actual works and a speed reduction educational campaign.

I am also pleased to talk about the future of the fixed speed cameras around the Island. From April arrangements for the Safety Camera Partnership are changing, and we are getting a grant through our Local Transport Plan to take greater responsibility for local decisions on their operation. As such, from September 2007 we will be introducing an initiative where drivers can choose to attend Speed Awareness Courses, at their own expense, instead of receiving points on their driving

licence. This ties in with our campaigns around safer driving and our commitment to improve road safety amongst all drivers.

And a further initiative on speed – Community Speed Watch. I would like to thank Cllr Diana Tuson, our representative on the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police Authority, for driving this forward. We have already have much positive feedback from responsible town and parish councils, in identifying roads where local people can take ownership in monitoring the speed of passing traffic, and passing that information onto the police.

I am pleased to announce, not only that we are putting £15,000 into this initiative, but the first three sites where we expect them to be located are The Broadway (Sandown), Church Road (Shanklin) and The Fairway (Lake), subject to final agreement with the local town and parish councils. These sites have been chosen as pilots after we received positive feedback from the local parishes. I look forward to seeing more coming on board in the future.

We have turned to our town and parish councils on this issue – because the effective ones – including those with quality status – know their neighbourhoods best and know where the problems lie. As an authority, we are committed to placing decisions closest to the people – and the anticipated complete emparishment of the Island will make this a reality.

This now gives me the opportunity to talk about “pride in local communities”.

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## **PRIDE IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Just as we work towards being a four-star, high-performing local council – the same aspirations towards excellence exist within our communities. Which is why we are continuing to invest £100,000 over the next financial year to help our town and parish councils achieve quality status: take on responsibilities for running services – where they so wish to do so – and exploiting external funding opportunities.

Our investment in town and parishes will help achieve this across the Island, where there is the ability to do so.

Cllr Jilly Wood has been instrumental in driving this agenda forward – not just on the Island, but gaining us a national profile for our partnership work with town and parish councils.

Talking of empowering town and parish councils – we want to give town and parish councils more responsibility for local amenities and we are keen to fulfil the spirit of the recent White Paper but it is not that straightforward – we need to ensure that we are devolving services that are fit for purpose and not just passing on a problem.

We need to refurbish local assets and then where appropriate give them to the local communities to manage. For example, we are in discussion with two of our quality town councils, Brading and Wootton, about handing over responsibility for running and managing their local public conveniences, and in due course, the wider public realm.

But as I said we won't be handing these toilets over in their current state – we will not insult our quality town councils by handing them poor facilities to run. Wootton and Brading's public conveniences will be refurbished by March 2008, before being placed in local people's hands to manage and run.

And those are not the only toilets we are tackling. We have identified those most in need of improvement, and I am pleased to announce that facilities in two key tourist locations will also be completely rebuilt – also by March 2008.

But I know that March 2008 isn't soon enough for some of our key tourist areas, which need improved facilities for this coming season. That is why I am also announcing today that one set of public conveniences in each of the following towns – Cowes, Ryde and Sandown – will be completely refurbished by May 2007 – ready for this summer season.

Residents have told us again and again – and in the recent One Island meetings – that the state of our public conveniences is appalling and that is why we are putting £0.8m into these 7 public conveniences. We believe that this provides the right mix of toilets in residential and tourist areas.

We are also investing £50k for full time attendants in key public toilets during the summer season to ensure that they are kept clean and well stocked, with an immediate focus on our tourist areas.

I can tell you now that this programme will continue to be rolled out year-on-year – with stock across the Island being renewed and replaced as each yearly cycle goes by. The Island, and its tourist industry, will soon have public conveniences that it can be rightly proud of.

We take the view that getting the basics right is vital to us being an effective council – not just in serving our residents, but the many visitors who will surprisingly remember the state of our public conveniences as part of their memories of the Island.

However, we don't just want to impress visitors and residents with improved toilets. We want our town centres to be tidy. This was identified in our recent residents' survey, and in our recent consultation meetings, as one of the top concerns for local residents. Residents told us that they want to see our streets clean, our street furniture smart, our signs maintained, our bins emptied and all other concerns that blight our town centres tackled. These actions do take place, but not always effectively.

That is why I am pleased to announce another exciting initiative that forms part of this budget – 11 Town Centre Managers to be employed across the Island. These uniformed and highly-visible individuals will be deployed in our towns where we have the most identified and urgent problems. We are putting £750,000 into this over the next year – and we will have these new appointments in place by the end of May.

The new town centre managers will play a key part in ensuring that all the services the council delivers in a particular area are of the highest quality. They will also play a role in community liaison and education and will only be enforcers as a last resort.

One of the key recommendations from our recent One Island consultation meetings was tackling anti-social behaviour – this is something we will do in conjunction with our partners in the police, and which is why we are again investing £175k into PCSOs who along with the town centre managers will help us identify and tackle local problems that need to be dealt with.

And these recognisable faces on the street will be complemented by our new parking attendants, who will be taking up their new roles on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, as promised last year, when enforcement for on-street parking transfers from the police to the Council.

Last year, I announced almost £0.5m additional funding to prepare for this – bringing our signage and markings up to the standard for proper enforcement. I am therefore pleased to announce that this work is nearing completion, and we are investing a further £430,000 and from 2<sup>nd</sup> April, will have 30 attendants on our streets, as promised last year, the enforcement will become a reality.

And whilst we're on the streets – we have identified that there is no contract in place to clean street furniture – such as public benches in our town centres, in parks and by the beach. This is another inherited major gap in service provision – but is a prime example of the basics that as a council we should be doing. That is why we are putting £0.3m to fill this funding gap and help us create pride in our streets.

But what's the point of cleaning street furniture that is falling apart? The County Press quite rightly identified recently where such furniture and signage and was not up to standard, rusty and not painted. We already knew this and that is why we are investing £0.5m into the initial prioritised locations of the Bay Area, West Wight and East Cowes to put that situation right.

We also want to keep our streets and beaches clean of dog fouling. One of issues that came out in the residents' survey was public disgust at a minority of individuals who allow their dogs to foul in public places and don't clear it up. We will be running a publicity campaign from April to June informing dog owners of our intention to operate zero tolerance of uncleared dog fouling, with robust enforcement starting from June.

This will involve more effective deployment of dog wardens - employing them during peak hours of dog walking to catch the culprits and in the known hotspots for fouling. I am pleased to announce that £200,000 of revenue and capital funding will be invested in this initiative.

As has already been reported, we also plan to brighten up all corners of the Island with an ambitious one million blooms being planted between April and August of this year. This will build on the work already done by Wight in Bloom, Garden Isle and Roundabout Sponsorship – and make our public spaces much more enjoyable for residents and visitors alike.

Again, we are working with our town and parish councils to identify where these blooms would be best placed. This is not just rhetoric, but substance – we have committed £160,000 of capital and revenue funding to make this a reality.

I've talked about partnerships within our communities – let me extend that to talk about another shared agenda – “community wellbeing”.

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## **A SHARED AGENDA – COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

I would like refer back again to our newly-strengthened working relationship with the IW Healthcare PCT. As I mentioned earlier, we have recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining how we intend to work together, which has been hailed as a national exemplar by the Department as Health. This is a groundbreaking initiative that puts us at the forefront of national partnership working in this field – with a shared public health post; aspirations to shared headquarters; and joint commissioning of services. I would like to thank Danny Fisher and Ed McAllistair-Smith for their professionalism and commitment which has made this a reality.

I would also like to thank my council colleagues, Cllrs Cousins and Oulton for their respective roles in taking this forward on behalf of the local authority. In particular, Cllr Cousins has been able to help us secure an even higher national profile in her role as a member of the LGA Wellbeing Board.

Dawn has also put our Supporting People service on a sound financial setting, turning round an inherited debt to having over £1m in place to assist residents to stay at home.

Our partnership with health gives me the opportunity to announce one of biggest projects in this budget. As members will know, I asked Dawn at the beginning of this financial year to carry out a comprehensive review of homecare provision and – we have outlined innovative plans to reshape Wightcare to offer an enhanced specialist and 24/7 service.

In particular, we wish to remove expenditure in back office administration and place it into frontline care – and reward those who have served the Island over the years. This was identified as one of the top issues in our recent One Island consultation meetings – “supporting and protecting vulnerable people”.

Therefore, I am pleased to announce now that we will be easing the financial burden on local residents, by offering free personal care for those aged 80 or over who are eligible for local authority support – with effect from April 2007.

The Isle of Wight has a large number of elderly residents – an increasing number of who wish to remain in their own homes, and maintain independence – and rightly so.

This initiative will mean that financial constraints are no longer a worry for our octogenarians – if they need personal care, they will get it for free. We want these residents not to worry about their savings being spent on residential care. Homecare is a cheaper option for older people, leaving them with money to spend to enrich their lives and support their families. This will make an enormous contribution to help care managers, nurses and doctors to arrange packages of care for older people without having to worry about who pays for what.

And still talking about our partnership with health, I would like to confirm that we are continuing to contribute £50k to support travel for cancer patients receiving treatment in Portsmouth and Southampton. This funding will continue to be channelled through the Primary Care Trust who will make it available to those patients.

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## **A MODERN & EFFICIENT FIRE SERVICE**

Of course, we don't just look across the Solent for health treatment. We may be looking to Hampshire as part of a combined or collaborated fire service. Or we may retain governance control on-Island. Our decision on the future of the Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue Service will be made next month, after we have looked carefully at the results of the recent consultation exercise, and ultimately what is in the best interests of the Island.

One of the most difficult challenges I gave to a Cabinet Member last year was to drive through the improvement agenda in our Fire and Rescue Service. I would like to thank Cllr Barry Abraham for taking on this daunting task. Early last year an external critical friend (the Improvement and Development Agency) described our Fire and Rescue Service as unrecognisable from the one we inherited.

Recently, the Audit Commission have looked at our Fire & Rescue Service's direction of travel. To make even the slightest improvement in such a short space of time would be a mammoth task. However, I can inform the Chamber that the service has just been rated, by the Audit Commission, as "improving well".

This is a tremendous achievement and I would like to thank again not only Barry, but Cllr David Williams, our Commissioner for Safer Communities for helping to make this a reality.

We will take all of this into consideration when we make our decision on the future of the Fire and Rescue Service next month. And I can confirm now that this year's fire budget of £5.8m will fund the service at the required level, irrespective of whether its governance is provided on or off Island.

The consultation on the future of the Fire Service has generated a substantial response – which indicates a healthy public interest in how local services are run.

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## **COMMUNICATING WITH RESIDENTS**

None of this would have been possible without a targeted Communications Strategy.

Our new magazine, One Island, has already received very positive feedback from residents – as it details information about a range of council services that Islanders can take advantage of. Residents told us in recent meetings that they wanted improved communications from the Council. That is why we are putting an additional £50,000 forward to make One Island a monthly publication.

I would also like to use this opportunity to thank our local media – as I see them also as partners in our One Island agenda, in helping us change the Island for the better.

I have already mentioned our print media in the County Press. With broadcast media, both IW Radio and Solent TV regularly provide the opportunity for us to speak about the Council's plans to their listeners and viewers. From Alex Dyke's radio phone-in putting us in touch with the many characters of the Island, to Solent TV's international presence on Sky (219), we are fortunate to have some very unique elements to our local media.

I will now return to "One Island" – led by "One Council".

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## **ONE COUNCIL – ONE GOAL**

Chairman, I have outlined all these initiatives as part of a bold, radical programme for an ambitious Council, for an ambitious Island. And nowhere has this been more recognised than in Central Government itself.

We recently saw a new set of performance ratings which put the Island's standards of street cleansing in the top five nationally. We have a four star revenue and benefits service transformed over one year from a failing service, our libraries service has achieved a high rating in the CPA and continues to attract even more visitors, and our adult services retained two stars and continues to improve all its key performance indicators.

Following a visit from the Audit Commission earlier in 2006, we received a Comprehensive Performance Assessment report, which recognised strong political leadership, along with shared and understood priorities with partners.

With all this potential identified, we were keen to exploit for the benefit of the Island, and Islanders – unleashing the talent. Therefore, we invited Sir Brian Briscoe, former Chief Executive of the Local Government Association, to help us develop our vision for joined up public services.

This has been supported by the Leadership Centre for Local Government, making us one of only two local authorities in the country to benefit from being part of their government-funded place-shaping agenda.

The progress I have mentioned, and we are now seeing, towards shared functions between us and other public services, has been a direct result of this capacity building.

And I now want to share with you, for the first time, what our external regulators think about us. As I have mentioned, we know our Fire Service is “improving well”. Well, I am pleased to announce that the same direction of travel now applies to the whole of our local authority.

Members, after years of stagnation, I can announce that we are an authority that is officially “improving well”. That is no mean feat. Let me read you what the summary to our direction of travel statement says – as published tomorrow:

*The Council has improved its services for local people, with 40 per cent of indicators among the best performing nationally. The housing benefit service is performing well and library services have*

*improved. Initiatives to address homelessness and to reduce the number of empty properties have been successful. Improvement in GCSE results this year is above the national rate but they remain well below average and further improvement is a priority. Social care for adults continues to be good. The use of public transport has increased, but the condition of roads is poor and traffic congestion remains a concern. Speed of deciding planning applications has improved. Car theft is low, but the number of burglaries and violent offences has increased. The volume of waste collected has reduced but is higher than most councils. The percentage of residents that want the Council to do better taken as a whole is 47%. The Council has been through much change in 2006 and a new management team is now in place. It is focused on using this capacity to deliver improvement in the next year.*

And I would like to pay tribute to the individuals who have achieved this. It would be easy for me to stand here, as Leader of the Council, and take all the credit for this result. However, that would be disingenuous and a disservice to those who are really behind this.

We are “improving well” because of the commitment and dedication of this authority’s staff.

I am very proud of what we have achieved so far, and optimistic and excited about what we can achieve in the future.

And I am also pleased that we can again deliver this programme with a council tax increase less than the rate of inflation. In fact, one of the lowest of any other unitary or county council in the country and at the lowest rate since the Isle of Wight Unitary Authority was created in 1995.

Tonight I believe that I have set out an ambitious agenda to improve the quality of life for young and old alike.

We will improve standards in education, to give our young people the best possible start in life.

We will allow our older citizens dignity in old age

We will ensure that our roads are safer and our public transport improves further.

We will build One Island characterised by mutual respect, local pride and good value for all Islanders.

Chairman, may I conclude my speech by recommending a council tax increase that will amount to just 42 pence per week for residents in Band D properties. That, Chairman, and Members, amounts to just 1.89% increase, well below inflation, during the next financial year.

We hope that, with the quality of services we are now beginning to provide – and beginning to be recognised by our regulators, as we “improve well” – this will provide true value-for-money.

That is our aspiration and we are well on the road to achieving it for Island residents.

May I commend this budget to the Chamber and I look for a seconder from the floor.