

Cornwall Councillor Report to Saltash Town Council

CLlr Keith Johnson – Saltash Tamar Division

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Council Budget

As a member of the Budget Development Oversight and Scrutiny Committee, I have been closely involved in reviewing the Council's financial position and the proposals put forward by the current administration.

In this role, I examined the detail behind the various council budgets and the assumptions underpinning them. I would also like to place on record my thanks to the administration for recognising that spending priorities must reflect the needs of families. However, despite that acknowledgement, I ultimately took the decision to vote against what was presented as a "balanced budget."

With inflation currently around 3%, a council tax increase to the maximum of 4.99% is, in my view, a step too far, particularly at a time when many hardworking families continue to feel the strain of ongoing cost of living pressures. It is difficult to justify such increases when greater financial restraint should be a priority.

The budget was forecast to grow broadly in line with Bank of England interest rate expectations. However, we now find ourselves facing increased global instability, including conflict in the Middle East, which will undoubtedly create a new wave of upward inflationary pressures. This evolving situation is likely to present further financial challenges in the months ahead and adds additional uncertainty to the Council's financial planning.

A further and significant concern is the scale of historic debt, now in excess of £1.4 billion, accumulated by previous administrations. The cost of servicing this debt, approximately £147,000 per day, continues to divert substantial funds away from essential frontline services. This inevitably limits the Council's ability to invest where it is most needed. and continues to rise.

In addition, I remain concerned about the ongoing disposal of assets to manage this financial position. What can only be described as a "fire sale" approach risks the long-term interests of our communities. We have already seen first-hand the local impact of such decisions, including the situation surrounding Burraton Park.

The administration has stated that it has delivered millions of pounds in savings. However, it is important to question whether these "savings" are, in reality, reductions in services. This is something that will become clearer over time and will require continued scrutiny.

Members were invited to put forward an alternative budget. However, this proved to be unrealistic within the circumstances. The timeframe provided was exceptionally tight, and there was a lack of detailed, accessible information necessary to construct a credible and fully costed alternative proposal. Proper scrutiny requires both time and transparency, and in this instance, both were limited.

I will continue to advocate for greater financial clarity, stronger scrutiny, and a more responsible approach to budgeting, one that better recognises the pressures facing residents across Saltash and Cornwall.

I will keep the Town Council updated as further developments arise.

My question in full council

"You have proposed savings of around £150 million, (over three years) but are these genuinely efficiencies, or are we simply playing games with language while communities face ever more devastating cuts? In my division, I am seeing vital services being slashed and assets like Burraton Park being sold off. Isn't the truth that ordinary people are paying the price for failure dressed up as "savings"?"

Its difficult to understand how any savings (cuts) can be made when we experience on-going lack of road, park and street maintenance.

Education Funding

School funding is one of the most pressing issues I've encountered in my role at Cornwall Council. Through my work on the Together for Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and my background in school governance and as a director of SMART multi-academy trust, I've seen clear evidence that Cornish children are not receiving a fair level of funding compared to other parts of the country.

For that reason, I have requested a cross-party scrutiny work programme, which I would intend to chair. Its purpose is to assess how Cornwall is funded, including a focused look at the National Funding Formula and whether it properly reflects the realities of rural and coastal communities.

A key part of this review will be a deeper look at teacher recruitment and retention. Schools across Cornwall are struggling to attract and keep staff, with housing costs, travel distances, and limited resources all playing a role—issues that are closely linked to funding and directly impact educational outcomes.

This work will produce clear, evidence-based recommendations to Cabinet, alongside a strong case to the Department for Education, to lobby for a fairer funding settlement for Cornwall.

This is not about politics; it is about fairness.

Every child, wherever they live, deserves the same opportunity to succeed.

Tamar Tolls

I recently met with Anna Gelderd to discuss a number of outstanding issues within my division of Saltash Tamar.

One of the key questions I raised related to the ongoing issue of Tamar Bridge tolls. I acknowledged the work she is undertaking in Parliament on this matter, but I was keen to understand what the current barrier is to making meaningful progress.

Given that we now have a Labour MP in South East Cornwall, a Labour MP in Plymouth, and a Labour Government, I asked what the specific bottleneck is that continues to prevent the scrapping of the tolls.

Unfortunately, I did not receive a clear answer.

Residents quite rightly expect that with political alignment at both a local and national level, long-standing issues such as this should be moving forward. If there are obstacles—whether financial, legislative, or policy-driven—then there needs to be transparency about what they are and how they can be overcome.

Until that clarity is provided, it is difficult to see how real progress will be made on an issue that continues to affect so many people in our community.

Hopefully Our residents have taken the opportunity to take part in the recent consultation on Tamar Tag administration Increases.

Burraton Park

At present, representations have been made which call into question the validity of the Section 123 notice. It has been alleged that an incorrect postcode was used and that the wrong Land Registry title number may have been referenced.

I have written on two occasions to the Monitoring Officer, Simon Mansell, regarding these concerns. On both occasions, I have been advised that a formal complaint must be submitted, with any escalation thereafter to the Local Government Ombudsman.

It is also important to consider the Council's original rationale for disposal, namely that the land was deemed surplus to requirements. This raises a broader strategic issue. For that reason, I previously proposed that Saltash Town Council establish a Green Space Working Group to assess current provision and future capacity needs for the town.

Furthermore, it is my understanding that Aldi has now commissioned its own consultants to undertake work in this area, which adds further weight to the need for clarity, transparency, and a coordinated approach.

Cllr Keith Johnson