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POINTS OF VIEW

We must get the message through that local councils aren't crying wolf

MONEY. It's the thing that, traditionally, nobody is supposed to talk about. I'm not really sure why that is, but it's that time of year when councils across the country run by political parties of all different colours are setting their budgets for the year to come. Most of them are fast running out of money. And we absolutely must talk about it.

Around the country and within the coming financial year, one in five councils are expected to formally declare that they have run out of money. That's huge. It signals a crisis that should really worry everyone.

While Westminster and central government get far more media coverage than local government, it's arguably local government – local councils – that affect your life on a day-to-day basis far more.

Are your bins collected regularly and on time? Are your parks maintained? Are your potholes filled? Can you get the support you need from adult social care or children's services? All of these are the responsibility of local councils and lots of them are about to go bust.

I don't have a huge amount of sympathy for some of these councils. The leadership of places like Thurrock and Birmingham, for example, have a lot to answer for in terms of dodgy investments and failures to fix systemic problems.

But the danger is that we assume that all councils that are holding up their hands and saying they're running out of money are treated the same way, when many of them have been fairly well run over a long period of time.

Chelmsford is like that. Chelmsford City Council has been financially well run by both Conservative and Liberal Democrat administrations over a long period of time and we certainly don't expect to run out of money in the next year or so, but we aren't at all immune to the financial pressures facing so many councils and, if we don't get the support that we need from central government, it won't be too much longer before we get into trouble.

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Cllr Marie Goldman

Our ambition at Chelmsford City Council is to make Chelmsford a fairer, greener, more connected community and we've created a strategy, called Our Chelmsford, Our Plan, for doing just that



We are, of course, doing as much as we can to stretch the council's resources as far as they can go. We've pushed back some spending on projects that can wait a little bit longer to ensure that we don't have to cut the services that residents understandably rely on.

We are looking at all the options we have available to us and have put together what we believe to be a robust and sound budget. In fact, we know that our opposition at Chelmsford City Council, the Conservatives, can't think of anything else we could

do because at last week's Full Council budget-setting meeting they didn't even put forward an amendment to our budget, which is what oppositions usually do when they have better ideas. In fact, an opposition councillor even said at the meeting that he didn't

think any other party could have done a better job than the Liberal Democrat administration. Much appreciated praise from an unexpected source.

So, what to do? Well, we somehow have to get the message through to central government that local councils aren't crying wolf. There isn't some magic wad of cash stashed in a filing cabinet somewhere. And by the way, the very small sticking plaster that the Government has recently handed out will soon be saturated. It's nowhere near enough.

Frustratingly, I've lost count of the number of times that I've heard of people from local councils trying to explain to central government how local government finance works, but they still don't seem to get it. Which is a bit worrying, to say the least.

I mean, they're making decisions about funding without understanding how it works and therefore the impact those decisions will have, not just on councils but far more importantly on the residents they serve.

I wanted to bring up this very topi-

cal subject because I often talk in these columns about the truly fabulous work that local charities and not-for-profit organisations are doing in our city.

We have to remember that many of these groups receive some of the funding that allows them to operate through grants from local government.

Speaking to one local charity just a few weeks ago, they told me how their funding from the county council had been cut over the years and now they have been told that they won't be receiving anything despite their services being in more demand than ever.

I say this not to bash the Conservative-run county council, but simply to illustrate my point – with councils forced to make cuts, it's services like this that will suffer first, as well as the many, many local residents that they help.

But it's not all doom and gloom. At Chelmsford City Council, we are ambitious for the future of our city and there are lots of exciting things

happening. These include projects that will hopefully improve and safeguard our city's future prosperity.

For example, we've still got a new train station coming into the north of the city; work is well under way to install the new bridge from Baddow Road to Wharf Road to unlock the potential of the brownfield Waterside site, previously the gasworks.

We've been building more affordable homes to tackle the housing crisis. We've been supporting businesses and investing in our public realm. We've been investing in arts and culture, and we will continue to do that.

Our ambition at Chelmsford City Council is to make Chelmsford a fairer, greener, more connected community and we've created a strategy, called Our Chelmsford, Our Plan, for doing just that, despite the financial constraints we are facing.

You can read more about our plan here: <https://www.chelmsford.gov.uk/your-council/our-chelmsford-our-plan/>

Marie