

# **ANNUAL BUDGET SPEECH**

**MR COUNCILLOR D WATSON**

**LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

**FRIDAY 30<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2026**

**Full Speech:**

Mr Mayor and Members, at a time where instability is the defining feature of politics at home and abroad, our job is to ensure that our community has the resilience it needs to adapt and thrive in a changing world. Our job is to provide stable, competent governance. Our job is to care. Our job is to invest.

A budget is an expression of values. The services we provide, the buildings we construct and the work we do is the result of the strength of our community and the empathy of those we choose to lead. No councillor will get rich through public service, but we can enrich our society and ensure no-one gets left behind.

- This is why we are investing in improving and modernising our library services. Douglas City Library will receive brand new PCs and tablets, which means that anyone, regardless of income, will have free access to modern technology. Whether it's to study, do homework, write a CV or print job applications, these resources will be there for all. As our world becomes increasingly digital, we are making sure online services remain accessible to all.

A competent local authority ensures that all people can live in a clean, healthy environment.

- Which is why we are thrilled to note that our Keep Britain Tidy Bin Your Butts campaign has seen a 50% reduction of cigarette litter in our city's entertainment areas.
- Our recycling programme, which we continue to invest in, is now being used more than ever. Since the introduction of our biweekly collection system, the amount of waste being recycled has risen from just 5% to 28%, - a more than five-fold increase. This is a clear environmental benefit, but also means we are reducing our reliance on using ratepayer funds to burn waste.
- Recycling isn't simply about how we dispose of household waste, but also how we can reclaim value from what is discarded and, in the coming year, we will be partnering with Men in Sheds to roll out a repair shop at the Eastern Civic Amenity Site to bring tools and appliances back into use.

- We are seeing clear benefits from the adoption of environmental policy. Carbon emissions by the Council have dropped by 14% since 2019, and the shift to electric vehicles means savings in fuel costs of £75 000.

We are often told there is a trade-off between environmental stewardship and public services, but we are proving that assumption wrong. Reducing fuel costs, and consequently emissions, is a mechanism to free up money that we can reinvest back into the community.

A local authority that works is a local authority that invests in families and children.

- This is why in both the upcoming year, and in years going forward, we will be investing an additional £240 000 into overhauling, improving and rebuilding parks and play facilities across the city. Children are only young for such a short period of time, which is why we are committed to undertaking this work as the first major programme of this administration. We are also establishing a park maintenance fund that will help ensure that parks are safe, clean and well looked after.

- In the past year, we've retained Nine Green Flags, an international best standard for park standards and cleanliness. This is something we will continue to strive for as those who live in our city deserve parks that are kept to the best possible standards.
- We are establishing masterplans for Noble's Park and will be creating masterplans for public amenities across the municipality so that the people of our city know when improvements to services can be expected and how they will be delivered.
- In the coming year we will be delivering pedestrianisation of the Quay, review Dog byelaws, developing a new parks and playground on the promenade – all this after a year in which we have carried out improvements to Noble's Park football pitch and completed maintenance improvements to paths around Willaston.

A local authority that is efficient is a local authority that innovates:

- Which is why we have rolled out a new website, integrated recruitment with jobtrain, an online procurement system, and are about to launch a Whatsapp line so we can communicate with the public about disruptions and changes to waste collection services more speedily.

- An innovative local authority is a local authority that is self-reliant and grows its capacity to act independently, which is why we are investing in in-sourcing several critical services, including legal services and painting teams. This improves service delivery and reduces costs compared to contracting these services externally.
- This year, we will be signing a friendship agreement with Dublin City Council. This marks two important milestones. Firstly, this is the first time a local authority on the Isle of Man has signed such an agreement with a city of this size or global impact. Secondly, this will deliver practical benefits at low cost and will help build cultural, language, travel and commercial links with a city that is deeply connected to the global economy and Europe.
- This year we will be investing in improving and modernising our Island's only crematorium. This is critical national infrastructure, and improving this service is deeply important to ensure that people and their loved ones have a seamless and dignified service at the end of their lives.
- We also continue to invest in better street lighting and column improvements.

A local authority that works is a local authority that makes life easier for small and local businesses:

- Which is why we are proud to announce that we are rolling out free weekend car parking at Shaw's Brow car park for a year. High street retail businesses have consistently called for this and we have listened, and secured funding to trial this proposal for a year to provide needed relief during this cost of living crisis and gather data on its impact. This comes after significant work on Shaw's Brow to secure and maintain this site, which provides 692 car parking spaces to the people who live, work and visit our city.
- We're adopting a City Centre Strategy which will make our city centre more vibrant and accessible.
- Our online procurement system will make it easier for local businesses to bid for Council work.
- We are refurbishing the Grandstand Art Deco Toilets to ensure that we contribute the best possible facilities to the TT and events throughout the year.
- We have successfully reduced the number of dilapidated and dangerous properties in Douglas by 42% over the past two years.

- With the coming introduction of changes to how properties are rated, it ensures that we maximise rate income, and encourages owners of properties to better maintain their buildings. This is about fairness, and this is about efficiency.
- We are hosting multiple events in the city in the coming year, including Beach Day, City Day and Family Fun Day which provide additional opportunities for small traders and hospitality businesses.

A local authority's value is expressed to the extent which it guarantees the fundamental rights of its constituents:

While social housing is funded by rent and deficiency payments, and not by rates, and therefore has no impact on the rates homeowners pay, it is a core part of what we do and makes up around half the budget of this council. Housing is a core human right, and we are working to ensure that right is realised.

- Over the past year we have allocated 170 properties to people in need, this means that hundreds of families and people now live in, quality, safe, affordable accommodation.

- We have constructed Willaston apartments which demonstrate the best example of what social housing can offer: energy efficient, spacious, triple glazed windows and solar panels, high performance building fabric. This complex alone will mean removing close to 50 families from our housing waiting list.
- We have refurbished 120 VOID properties, and are also on track to more than halve our long-term vacant stock, ensuring public assets are used to house the people who need them most.
- We are willing and ready, if government wants to partner with us, to finish the work of clearing the social housing waiting list by building the affordable housing that people so desperately need.

A local authority's value is the extent to which we keep people safe:

- Which is why we are investing in improving the CCTV camera network used by ourselves and our partners in the police to monitor, deter and solve crimes. Douglas has many things that make it special, and one of our core objectives is to preserve and maintain its status as one of the safest capital cities in the world.

We also need to offer a vote of thanks, to my Council colleagues and our dedicated chief officers and their respective teams who have laboured to find efficiencies and savings to make this budget work. Thank you one and all. None this is possible without your leadership and work. To all the staff of this Council, you have incredibly challenging and dynamic roles and you do an exceptional job at keeping the city a safe, clean and wonderful place to live. To my colleagues on the Council, thank you for giving up your time and effort to serve your community. And to the people of Douglas, I thank you for making this city what it is, for placing your faith in us and for working, living and raising families in this city.

**Mr Mayor, Members of the Council...I am proud to propose these improvements and investments, paired with a recommended rate increase from the Executive Committee below the rate of inflation of 2.99% for the year 2026/2027.**