

## **Budget Proposal - Liberal Democrat Group**

### **Response to Budget Proposals**

On behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group

The Liberal Democrat Group has been fighting hard to prevent the wholesale closure of Children's Centres, the removal of all bus subsidies, and the drastic reduction in adult social care provision – all of which are being put forward, with other unwelcome measures, by the ruling administration in their budget proposals. We believe that none of this is in the best interests of Oxfordshire residents.

The Prime Minister's letter of 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015 to the Leader of the Council has at least challenged the administration to explain why, when the problems facing the Council were clearly visible several years ago, the bold decisions which might have alleviated the grave situation, in which the Council now finds itself, were not taken. Oxfordshire, with one of the strongest economies in the country, finds itself amongst the least prepared to cope with Mr Osborne's cuts. It is also fair to say that Mr Cameron's letter displayed an appalling ignorance of the effect Mr Osborne's cuts to Local Government were having on all Councils – but particularly the Shire Counties.

Yet the response of the Tory/Independent administration has been to make ever more heavy cuts everywhere but to avoid making long-term strategic decisions. We now find ourselves facing another round of cuts – deeper than ever before and with too few staff even to consider any innovative ideas. We have reached a stage of spiral decline from which there seems no escape. If we continue down this path, we will surely be back next year, and the year after, and the year after that trying to explain to the angry, and increasingly unbelieving residents of Oxfordshire “why we must make that year's cuts” and “we don't want to make them” and “we hope they understand”. This seems to the Liberal Democrat Group to be a message without hope, and an approach that is verging on pathetic.

We cannot support the closure of Children's Centres. We believe the proposals to be storing up social and financial problems that far outweigh any potential savings. We have tried to suggest alternatives through our participation in the Cabinet Advisory Group, but the administration has been determined to pursue its own “solution”. As a result, we do not support the current proposals for Children's Centres emerging from the Cabinet Advisory Group. And unless, or until there is a major change of direction we will no longer be participating as members of the Cabinet Advisory Group on Children's Centres.

We cannot support the cuts being proposed to adult social care. Again, we believe the proposals to be storing up social and financial problems that far outweigh any potential savings.

We cannot support the proposed cuts in subsidised bus services, the social isolation, the added environmental damage and the harm to those who depend on public transport to get to work, these cuts will cause.

But we acknowledge that the council is faced with a shortfall in its budget of up to £70 million over the next five years and we have racked our brains to find ways of addressing this. We have been involved with, and proposed ideas on Income Generation; demanding that the Government reconsider the derisory 20% share of New Homes Bonus allocated to County Councils; economies in management structure, and making better use of the £900m+ of property owned by the Council.

But the hard fact is that, even if all these things were to be delivered, it would not be anywhere near enough to make the savings required to preserve what we, and other residents wish to preserve. Large-scale increases to the Council Tax would impact disproportionately on those least able to pay and referendum costs. We know that more time must be spent trying to convince Central Government and the County's Conservative MPs that local government must be better funded. Experience on both fronts over the past nine months make us fear that this will have little effect, and will divert us from what we should be doing – finding ideas which are capable of making a difference, and quickly.

The most obvious of such ideas is a Unitary Council for Oxfordshire. Not a new idea, indeed it was proposed by the Leader some months ago. The savings predicted in the Report by Ernst & Young (commissioned in November 2014) from the forming of a single, Unitary council were of an order which could save the Children's centres, save the bus subsidies and save much of adult social care. We congratulate the Leader for commissioning this report: ten out of ten for the proposal – but only two out of ten for the way it was handled. The proposal was presented as OCC "taking over" all other Councils. No attempt was made to prepare or negotiate. We must do better now.

As ratepayers in Oxfordshire we should all want the best possible value for money, and as councillors it is our duty to provide it. If a Unitary Council could save the services currently under threat, we must have that conversation with residents now. An Oxfordshire Unitary Council could come about within 2 years, and start achieving substantial savings within a further two if Oxfordshire residents wanted it - quickly enough to avoid many of the wholesale cuts being proposed.

We propose that a full and timetabled consultation be put in place to discuss this issue on a cross-party basis with district, town and parish councils with the clear aim of bringing it to fruition.

In the meantime, the Liberal Democrat Group is not willing to follow the spiral of decline and defeatism which has gripped the Council by supporting the budget being proposed by the Conservative and Independent Alliance administration.

Councillor Richard Webber

Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group.

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