

Labour Group Budget Amendments 2021/22 Leader of the Opposition Overview

Liz Brighthouse - Leader of the Labour Group
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No one has got through this year without being touched by the impact of the Pandemic. Some have been affected more than others: residents in our care homes, members of the BAME Community, older people living alone, those with life limiting illnesses and our children and young people.

As we come through this pandemic, we must ensure that our services for these groups of residents are fit for purpose and can support them in recovering after this awful time.

The response made by Local Government to the pandemic has been heroic. From the work in Public Health, Schools, Children and Adult Social Care, the Fire and Rescue Service through to our Customer Services, Libraries, Museums Highways and everyone who has gone the extra mile. All our public servants have carried on despite the crisis to do the “business as usual stuff” as well as working in different ways and with different challenges. It has shown the strength of Local Government which is built on local accountability and engagement. We as elected members need to thank all of our staff who have made an enormous difference to the lives of so many. One hopes that the ingenuity and commitment shown will be recognised by National Government even if it is driven by centralisation and outsourcing.

The administration’s budget has highlighted many of the issues which the Labour Group have been concerned about and have argued for on numerous occasions. In particular the provision cycle and how we agree contracts and ensure they are delivering by monitoring outcomes. Also, how we use our assets to support our expenditure. We are particularly pleased that having removed, in August the finances which had been put in last year as a Labour amendment to fund youth provision that it is now back in the budget. However, there are savings listed in Public Health in relation to contracts and we will be looking carefully at those to ensure there is no diminution of Service. We are pleased to see that an Inequalities Fund is proposed in Public Health and would hope to see this increased in future years.

There are issues we would wish to see addressed and in relation to these we have made modest amendments:

In relation to children and young people we are deeply concerned about the distress they are feeling which has been getting worse over the past few years and the COVID Pandemic has shone a light on the plight of our future generations. This needs to be considered urgently. We already spend a significant amount of money on Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services and on writing Education and Care Plans and large numbers of children and young people under stress are excluded from schools. Services seem to be fragmented with various different organisations delivering services and they are not timely in dealing early with distressed children and young people. A different and more dynamic approach is needed. That is why we have talked to our new Director of Children and Education and some money from the Youth funding will be directed into focussing on this group of young people.

In relation to Adult Social Care we have shifted money into getting more people into Apprenticeships not just at entry level but with progression up to degree level. There are many young people who would never consider a career in Adult Social Care mainly because it is not seen as a career path and often as a dead-end job. That needs to change. There are many routes carers can take from training in the caring professions nursing, OT, management and even music therapy as well as continuing to be exceptionally brilliant carers. We need to look at Adult Social Care in an entirely different way and employ those with the potential to deliver a different sort of care for adults and older people not based on their disability but their potential. That is why we have also redirected funding to be made available to set up different delivery vehicles such as Social Enterprises and Co-ops for enablement, support and care services. Our Director of Adult Social Care has advised us on how to find that money.

In addition, we have stopped the increase in the charges for the Comet service. We are mindful of the need to transform our Public Transport system. Many people with mobility impairments, or with no bus to use because it has been taken off because of cuts in subsidy need to use a car to get around. Putting in Bus gates or barriers will not stop those with no alternative to driving and will increase the length of many journeys so contributing to the climate emergency. There is a desperate need to find ways to fund services to meet the needs of our residents. No one should be left isolated and lonely because they do not have access to transport. Many years ago, Oxfordshire voted to implement Workplace Parking Levies. It seems that this project has not been taken on board systematically apart from in the Eastern Arc where the bus which I believe is proposed will not meet the needs of local residents. The Workplace Parking Levy can be used to fund public transport and that transport needs to be geared towards all who need it. Nottingham developed a whole new transport network. Could we be as imaginative as Nottingham? Reducing the need for car use must be a priority.

After the plague and fire in London nearly 400 years ago the people of London rebuilt their City setting the foundations of the metropolis we have today. After the Second World War when all Europe was on its knees the NHS which has steered us through this awful time was formed. It is incumbent on us to rebuild our communities and renew services in Oxfordshire so that those so severely distressed by the pandemic can come out the other side with the services they need.

Recommendation:

The Council is RECOMMENDED (in respect of the budget and medium term financial strategy – at Section 4) to approve a budget for 2021/22 set out in Section 4.4 and a medium term financial strategy for 2021/22 – 2025/26 set out in Section 4.1 as amended in Labour Group Annex 1;

Liz Brighthouse

Leader of the Labour Group and the Opposition, Oxfordshire County Council