

Conservative and Independent Alliance

Oxfordshire County Council, County Hall, Oxford OX1 1ND

On 6 May 2021, evenly divided local election results led to the formation of a 'Fair Deal Alliance' of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green Councillors ('the FDA') in County Hall. In those elections, the Conservatives secured 37% of the popular vote, with Liberal Democrats recording 26% and Labour, 21%. Independent candidates and minor parties took the remaining 16% between them.

On 24 September 2023, the BBC reported that the FDA had collapsed following an excoriating Ofsted and Care Quality Commission report into local Special Educational Needs and Disabilities ('SEND') services. It confirmed that there were "*widespread and/or systematic failings*" within the Local Area Partnership.

For the last three years, thoughtful amendments from the Conservative and Independent Alliance Group ('the CIA') to supplement investment in the processing of Educational and Healthcare Plans, alleviate immediate Home to School transport pressures, and tackle road repairs, drainage and flooding have been rejected by the Liberal Democrat-Green and Labour-Cooperative groups.

Following the collapse of the FDA, a new consensus politics is required that meets the Council's strategic challenges. We must, as a Council, protect the county's most vulnerable children, safeguard taxpayers' money for the long-term and put residents' priorities before party-political preoccupations. This budget cycle presents an opportunity for all Councillors to do that after last year's difficult budget round, in which the minority Liberal Democrat-Green administration accepted an amendment from the Labour-Cooperative Group wholesale without any serious discussion with CIA and independent colleagues. We must find a better consensus politics and tackle the issues this Council faces head-on.

Some of the CIA's arguments seem to have since landed with the administration, with some welcome additional investment appearing in flood mitigation and drainage clearances in the current budget cycle. However, much more needs to be done to address the parlous state of the county's roads.

The CIA continues to believe that Councillors should focus on improving frontline services for which this Council has a direct legal responsibility, rather than using the Council chamber as a platform for discussing matters beyond the Council's control. That is what this budget amendment seeks to do by stripping out unnecessary public relations, senior management and other posts, and providing for a significant additional investment in road repairs, flood mitigation and drainage clearances, whilst protecting frontline social care services for the vulnerable.

The CIA further maintains its principled opposition the minority administration's restrictive traffic measures in Oxford and would welcome discussions with other political groups as to how to find a better way of addressing congestion in and around the city. From a budgetary perspective, it is difficult to unwind these measures at this late stage of the Council term. The CIA will nonetheless continue to work with Councillors of all political persuasions who share our view that blunt, anti-car policies such as bus gates, low-traffic neighbourhoods and the workplace parking tax will serve only to set back the environmental cause by damaging local businesses and public services.

We warmly commend these measures to colleagues and we look forward to more meaningful dialogue between the political groups than occurred last year.

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3 February 2025