

## **LABOUR & CO-OPERATIVE PARTY BUDGET AMENDMENT 24/25**

### **LEADER OF THE GROUP OVERVIEW**

I would like to start by thanking our Officers for the work they have done in putting together the Minority Administration Budget which we have before us today. I would particularly like to thank all those who work in Finance.

Our Executive Director for Resources and Section 151 Officer has through many turbulent years given exemplary service to Oxfordshire. The Finance Team has also given support to the Labour & Co-operative Group's Finance and Corporate Services Spokespeople, Cllr Baines and Cllr Phillips, who I also thank for their hard work and diligence over the past months as they worked on the Labour & Co-op Amendment.

In putting together our Budget Amendments the Labour & Co-operative Group were mindful of the economic situation we find ourselves in as a Country, as a County and as individuals.

People are suffering after over a decade of Conservative chaos. Working people are thousands of pounds worse off from falling real wages, soaring mortgages and 25 Tory tax rises. Years of austerity has left public services on their knees, struggling to provide the services our residents need and deserve. Falling life expectancy and worsening inequality means healthcare providers are unable to meet the current need.

Nothing seems to work in Britain. This is having a major impact on Local Government at all levels.

Local Authorities are facing effective bankruptcy as they struggle to meet demand for statutory services. Budgets nationally for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) are over £3 billion in debt. In Oxfordshire our reserves will struggle to meet the current and growing £50 million cumulative deficit in the High Needs Block. Home to School Transport is also heavily overspent and the digital system which was commissioned to address this issue failed to deliver. Years of underfunding from Central Government have left our roads in a mess leading to claims being made against the County Council for damage to vehicles. At the same time Council Tax has doubled since 2009/10. This affects the poorest most as they struggle to pay their bills and get access to the overstretched services they need.

Rather than being broken down, barriers to opportunity are being reinforced. Oxfordshire is one of the richest counties in England yet too many people, old and young face poverty and isolation. There are a high number of private schools in the County. Children going to those schools have as much spent on their education in a year as a parent living in poverty has to spend in total. No wonder the gap in attainment is widening and children are growing up anxious and without hope. The number of children facing severe mental health challenges is horrific and services hollowed out by previous cuts struggle to meet demand. Building more equitable communities and supporting our schools as oasis of learning, compassion and understanding needs to be a priority for those responsible for Education. The closure of the Children's Centres when the Coalition Government ended the Sure Start Grant has had an enormous impact on the lives of children and their families as has the chaotic funding of Early Years Childcare and Education. The latest initiative by Central Government could well make the situation worse for our most marginalised families.

Too many older and disabled people are trapped in poverty with the services they need at breaking point and left in homes which they struggle to keep warm. We need to be addressing this injustice urgently. The use of the 'Oxfordshire Way' in strong, resilient communities works well. But we need to build resilient communities across the entire County to ensure inclusion and equity. We must leave no one behind.

Putting the spotlight on the communities with the greatest disadvantage helps Local Authorities break down barriers to opportunity in those communities, but the challenge is to support those who live elsewhere as well. Those who cannot get out of their freezing homes because they cannot get to the bus stop or there is no bus need targeted transport to meet their needs. Keeping active and engaged should not depend on your income. We need more widely targeted early intervention support across our communities and generations. That is the only way we will ease the demand for the services the state is struggling to deliver. Having better, more reliable public transport, under public control, is necessary if we are to end the reliance on private transport and address the issues of congestion and pollution.

Equity and inclusion need to be our watch words, and this is certainly the case when it comes to digital solutions. If properly designed and delivered by those who need to use them working alongside professions with the knowledge, skills and creativity to design and build solutions we could reduce many of the inequalities experienced by so many people in Oxfordshire. We need to focus on our digital needs rather than solely on what money might be available for projects with limited application. Our Schools and Academy Trusts need to be engaged. Financial access to broadband is not an option for many households and we need to address this urgently. The switchover of landlines has shown starkly the problems faced by many vulnerable households.

Setting a Budget for Oxfordshire County Council was never going to be easy this year. Local Authority Budgets have been hollowed out over the last 13 years, recent Government decisions have almost crashed our economy, put the squeeze on working people and exacerbated demand for key statutory services.

It is these significant challenges that are the focus of the amendment by the Labour & Co-operative Group. Our amendment reflects how a Labour & Co-operative Administration would end sticking plaster politics and adopt a mission driven approach to tackling the issues holding Oxfordshire back.

**We are focused on tackling the priorities of the people of Oxfordshire.**

**Building a financially resilient Council** by securing the long-term financial health of the Council and maximising the social impact of every pound spent.

**Tackling the Tory cost of living crisis** by restoring support to local advice centres.

**Making our care system fit for the future** by investing in children's development and strengthening support for families in need.

**Taking back our streets** by bringing buses under public control, fixing our broken roads and giving the public a say on the future of transport.

**Getting Oxfordshire moving** by tackling congestion at source and providing more options for people to get around by walking and cycling.

Should our Amendment be agreed, we will work to ensure the Scrutiny Committees make certain the agreed Budget is implemented in full, and that the money is spent effectively to the benefit Oxfordshire residents, and that the outcomes of the target expenditure are transparent.

The Labour & Co-operative Group are particularly concerned that we should be constantly evaluating our expenditure in relation to equity and inclusion. This means ensuring that all work by the Council reduces socio-economic inequality.

By example in Children's Services, we want to ensure that SEND Services are delivered across the County closer to where children live. This will stop our most vulnerable children having to spend hours in traffic jams to get to and from school. We also want all our schools to be able deliver trauma informed practices. Children we care for should not be sent miles away from Oxfordshire to live and those who because of age or disability need care should have that care provided appropriately with different enabling interventions available for them and family carers.

Different choices can mean the end of sticking plaster politics and delivering real transformative change for our communities. Let's be bold and build a brighter future for Oxfordshire.

I move the Labour Co-operative Group Amendment (attached).

**Cllr Liz Brighthouse**

Leader of the Labour & Co-operative Group