

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP RESPONSE TO BUDGET PROPOSALS - February 2015

Councillor Neil Fawcett Acting leader Liberal Democrat Group

Local Government, and especially the shire counties, continue to face huge financial pressures. Oxfordshire is no exception; in fact we are in an even worse position than many authorities.

It is therefore vital that the County Council's budget for the coming years is strong, realistic and carefully thought through.

In our view the budget proposed by the Conservative and Independent Alliance fails this test.

A year ago the Liberal Democrat group brought a motion to full Council inviting the Secretary of State to come to Oxfordshire and meet with front-line staff and service-users to hear from them about the harm being done by relentless cutting of public services. That was voted down. This year due to a 'light touch approach' given to the directorate budget-challenge sessions our relevant group spokespersons were not allowed to attend, leaving us with incomplete information. The income generation working-group, to which we contributed several sensible suggestions, was disbanded and a promise to reinstate the group has not materialised. We are not convinced that alternative funding sources (municipal bonds, social impact bonds) have been sufficiently researched.

Last year the Liberal Democrat group was at the forefront of calls for a separate scrutiny committee for adult services. That has been ignored. Yet there are gaping holes in the budget in the form of unidentified future cuts totalling several million pounds in Adult Social Care. Both Adult and Children's Services face mounting pressures and have been unable to operate within their current budgets this year. We have no confidence that the administration has got to grips with this. Their proposals are for more of the same. - More threats to valuable preventative services; more pulling back of care services under the guise of increasing independence. Not in our name.

Too much time and effort is spent on kite-flying (for instance the launch of Connecting Oxfordshire) or foolish ideas (for instance the remodelling of Frideswide Square before the station masterplan has been approved) at the expense of the nuts and bolts of sorting out a realistic budget and improving services. Most major capital schemes now overspend significantly as a matter of routine. The City and its ring-road are regularly at a standstill as a result of failure to co-ordinate road-works at principal junctions. The views of both the commuting public and City businesses are dismissed.

A year ago the Liberal Democrat budget amendment proposed that the Council should look at streamlining its senior management structure, including a reduction in the number of directorates by one. The administration said that this was neither necessary nor possible.

We now see rushed proposals to abolish the post of Chief Executive coming forward in the middle of the budget period. We are pleased that savings in senior management are being looked at, but far from convinced that this is the right way to do it. The proposal for a unitary authority deserves honest discussion, but is lobbed into the budget debate at a late stage with no notice to anyone.

Our frequent questions at relevant committees about the cost and performance of major contracts are side-stepped but the problems seem to go from bad to worse.

We believe that the Council needs to take a deeper look at how it operates. A return to zero-base budgeting; a drastic review of the property portfolio and making best use of the buildings we own or rent; a fully thought through restructuring of senior management; a thorough exploration of how further costs can be driven out and better value for money obtained during contract renewal; a serious look at how prudential borrowing could be used to reduce longer term road maintenance and other ongoing costs.

For the past two years this group has constructively challenged and come up with budget amendments deserving of better consideration than they received.

This is the CIA's budget for Oxfordshire and we will not be supporting it.