

Conservative and Independent Alliance

Oxfordshire County Council, County Hall, Oxford OX1 1ND

Our three strategic objectives:

- (i) safeguard services for vulnerable children;**
 - (ii) secure the Council's finances for the long-term; and**
 - (iii) put residents' priorities before political preoccupations.**
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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 [here](#) 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 Local Area Partnership services and that "*[t]oo many children and young people [in Oxfordshire] do not receive the right help until they are close to crisis*".

In last year's budget, key amendments from the Conservative and Independent Alliance Group ('the CIA') that would have provided additional investment to help better processing of Educational and Healthcare Plans and alleviate immediate Home to School transport pressures were rejected by the FDA. Further details of such funding can be found [here](#).

Following the collapse of the FDA, a new consensus politics is required that meets three strategic objectives. We must, as a Council, protect the county's most vulnerable children, safeguard taxpayers' money for the long-term and put residents' priorities before ideological and party-political preoccupations. This budget cycle presents an opportunity for Councillors of all parties and none to do just that.

The CIA believes 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 virtue-signalling on matters beyond the Council's control. Above all else, this Council exists to provide social care services to vulnerable children and adults, keep the county's roads in good repair, deliver government-funded infrastructure projects such as 'HIF1', and maintain vital community services.

Despite additional investment from government of some £51 million last year¹ and an additional investment in social care services of nearly £5 million earlier this month, the Council risks squandering its strong financial legacy unless the current budget round is resolutely refocused on ensuring the long-term provision of key public services.

Regrettably, the minority Liberal Democrat-Green administration's emerging budget plans still contain millions of Pounds of hidden taxes and spending on projects for which there is no public consensus. For example:

- In its first year of operation, the Council's Zero Emissions Zone ('ZEZ') pilot raised over £685,500 in income. Meanwhile, previous work by the Council's own consultants indicated that an expanded ZEZ could raise £25 million over a five-year period, subject to the final charging regime;

¹ Based on the increase in Core Spending Power in the Final Local Government Settlement for 2023/24.

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- The Council's restrictive and complex traffic filters – also known as bus gates – that seeks to split Oxford into four sectors is estimated to provide gross Penalty Charge Notice income of £2.2 million per annum, equivalent to £11m over a five-year period; and
- Current estimates for the Council's proposed Workplace Parking Tax, based on a charge of £600 per space per annum similar to the Nottingham City Council scheme, and subject to the precise boundary, are that it would raise £42million over a ten-year period, equivalent to £21million over a five-year period.

Taken together, these measures could raise £57million from Oxfordshire residents in covert charges and fines over a five-year period, with further charges and fines relating to LTNs and CPZs left unaccounted for.

The CIA considers it vital that the Council focuses on what it is established to do in law. To this end, the CIA's alternative budget seeks to realise the following key policy aims that speak to its three strategic objectives:

1. Develop an Oxfordshire Way for Children's Services, building on the huge success of the Oxfordshire Way in Adult's Social Care introduced in the last Council term (2017-21);
2. Review and develop an alternative resource base model to better support children and young people with SEND in mainstream educational settings;
3. Help our Children's Centres with rent support over and above the level planned by the minority Liberal Democrat-Green administration to ensure that they have longer-term financial security;
4. Improve our county's roads, gulleys and ditches via a targeted Potholes and Drainage Fund;
5. Provide additional cuts to verges, footways and cycleways over and above the minority Liberal Democrat-Green administration's plans in both urban and rural settings;
6. Develop a comprehensive HGV survey for Henley and the Windrush Valley to alleviate longstanding routing difficulties across South and West Oxfordshire; and
7. Postpone the Council's traffic filter, ZEZ plans and Workplace Parking Tax, and establish a cross-party, business-focused and University-informed Congestion Commission that builds a pro-green, pro-business and pro-civil society consensus on how best to tackle city centre congestion as a priority in the next Council term (2025-29).

We warmly commend these measures to Councillors of all parties and none as a consensual, alternative budget that puts people before politics.

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20 February 2024