

COUNCIL – 9 FEBRUARY 2010

SERVICE AND RESOURCE PLANNING – 2010/11-2014/15

Report by the Leader of the Opposition

Introduction

1. The Liberal Democrat opposition have always made it clear that the Council needs to invest in the basic frontline services that local people rely on every day. Our budget concentrates on three priorities: children and young people, elderly and vulnerable people and roads, pavements and the environment.
2. We set out in Annex 1 our proposals to amend the Cabinet's budget to invest more in these priorities, whilst making savings to back office functions and setting a council tax increase of 2.5%.

Investment and saving proposals

Children, Young People & Families

3. Our children are our future. Every child should be given the best possible start in life. Our amendments see an increase, in addition to the cabinet budget, of £680,000 in the Children, Young People & Families budget.
4. In particular, we invest £250,000 to expand children's centres and remove the £200,000 cut to respite care for children with disabilities.
5. We are very pleased that the earlier suggested cut to the Fire Cadet service has been deleted from the Cabinet's proposals, but dismayed that a cut in Trading Standards means the cessation of the Junior Citizens' Programme; we reinstate this in our amendments.
6. We consider the youth service to be severely underfunded. We were pleased that the majority of the savings originally proposed for this service were removed after public pressure. However, a cut of £350,000 in 2012/13 and future years remains, and we remove this. Further to this, recognising the underinvestment of past years, we are investing an additional £155,000 to employ one extra outreach youth worker, or full time equivalent, in each District. This is a modest increase, on which we would hope to build when the financial situation is better.

Adult social care and community services

7. Adult social care is facing dramatic changes in Britain as people live longer. Our residents should grow older feeling valued, fulfilled and healthier. We are therefore investing an additional £840,000 in social and community services, on top of the Cabinet's budget.

CC9 – Liberal Democrat Group Amendments

8. In particular, we invest £225,000 in enhancing services at day centres for all care groups, and to invest in intergenerational link work with secondary and primary schools. We are concerned that the cut to payments to nursing homes may mean clients having to go to homes out of county, far away from friends and relatives, and so we allocate a small amount to ensure that any clients upset by this can be accommodated within county instead.
9. Without the voluntary effort of family and friends, the quality of life of disabled, ill and elderly people would be much lessened, and more people would of necessity have to rely on limited and cash-strapped social and health services. We want to show these carers how valuable they are, and to provide them with the support they need, including respite. We therefore invest an additional £250,000 to provide services for carers. We also invest £275,000 in additional respite care for all care groups.
10. In the recession, more people come to rely on Council services and one valuable service, used by many, is our libraries. We do not feel that this year of all years is the appropriate one to make even a small cut in the newspapers and periodicals budget. As household budgets are squeezed, more people rely on the provision in libraries.
11. We think that the cut in fire safety advice to ethnic minority communities is most unfortunate; we have found this small amount to reinstate this advice in our amendments.
12. We will postpone the changes to Fire Cover until there has been further discussion and consultation.

Roads and the environment

13. Oxfordshire's highways desperately need investment. And we wish to continue to invest in the environment, particularly in carbon reduction measures. We are investing an additional £740,000 in environment and economy, on top of the Cabinet's proposals.
14. The recent icy weather has left a sorry legacy of potholes. Following our practice over the last four years, we invest £500,000 in road maintenance to be on-going. In addition, we invest an additional £300,000 in the first year to mitigate the worst of the winter potholes. This is additional to the Cabinet's one-off investment of £750,000, and therefore we are investing over £1m, one-off, to repair roads damaged by snow, and an extra £500,000 on an on-going basis.
15. The recent heavy snow and ice was a problem for very many residents of Oxfordshire. Although this weather was unusual, there has been a severe shortfall in the winter maintenance budget. We do not wish a lack of budget to be a reason in future years for not gritting or snowploughing the roads and so we invest £400,000 in winter maintenance. If this is not needed in any one year, it can be used for general road maintenance.
16. When residents' parking charges were introduced in Oxford, the aim was to cover the costs of administering the controlled parking zones. An increase in

CC9 – Liberal Democrat Group Amendments

the charge now seems a money-making exercise and we do not support this increase. We allow for this in our amendments. Both the boundaries and operation of all controlled parking zones in Oxford should be reviewed, with some urgency, and new ones should not be imposed against the wishes of residents.

17. On the other hand, we reintroduce parking charges for visitors to Oxford in the evenings and on Sundays, at the level that matches the off-street parking charges. This is primarily for traffic management reasons and for fairness with the many residents who pay to park outside their own homes.
18. We will bid for money for Wantage Market Place in the Local Transport Plan 3 process.
19. We continue to place the environment at the heart of our thinking. It is now more important than ever because of the threats of climate change. We will buy 100 Smart Meters to be borrowed free of charge from libraries by members of the public to enable them to check their appliances and electricity use. This not only helps the environment but also helps people save money on their household bills – a boon in this recession.
20. Council staff who have to use their vehicles on council business will be offered training in fuel efficient driving. For a very modest investment, this provides a saving both to the Council in the use of its own fleet and a direct cash benefit to staff who use their own cars, as well as reducing carbon emissions.
21. We also include a modest investment to pump prime rolling out “Plugged In Places”, with partners, across the county. This will provide electric plug in points for electric cars in the main market towns.
22. We invest a small amount in improving public transport information, for example to roll out “Where to Catch Your Bus” posters to other market towns, and for additional promotion and marketing of premium bus routes, in partnership with the bus companies.
23. We understand how important community transport schemes are for those living in rural areas without public transport, and put £75,000 into our budget to support use of concessionary passes on these schemes.

Capital

24. We make one modest change to the capital programme, by contributing £50,000 from the revenue budget towards improvements to the Sweatbox youth centre in Wantage.

Savings

25. We pay for this investment in front line and vital services by cutting backroom functions and by increasing Council Tax from the 2009/10 level.

CC9 – Liberal Democrat Group Amendments

26. We reduce the number of staff in two backroom offices – media and communications and policy. The Local Government Association is calling for a reduction in red-tape and bureaucracy, and we say that this should be the area where we need to look first at what is being delivered at the taxpayers' expense.
27. We see some scope for sharing senior management with other local authorities, and would like to explore this further.

Council Tax

28. We do not accept that it is a foregone conclusion that Conservatives will form the next Government, and so we do not accept the administration's assumption of a Government grant to reduce Council Tax to zero.
29. We will increase Council Tax by 2.5% or £1,158.88 for a Band D house a year. This increase is less than the Cabinet's by 0.25%. We recognise that any rise in Council Tax is not ideal, but cuts in services impact even worse on the most vulnerable and poorest residents. Liberal Democrats would replace the unfair Council Tax with a fair tax based on ability to pay, and have also announced that no-one will pay income tax on the first £10,000 they earn, meaning millions of low earners and pensioners will stop paying taxes altogether, while millions more will get hundreds of pounds back in their pockets

Conclusion

30. We consider that these amendments show our commitment to investing in our priority, frontline services, whilst removing the worst excesses of the Cabinet's cuts. They strike a balance between spending on the essential services that the most vulnerable in our community rely upon and the need to keep Council Tax levels as low as possible.
31. **The Liberal Democrat Group therefore RECOMMENDS Council to approve the recommendations set out in the report of the Cabinet subject to the following amendments:**
 - (a)(1) **a budget for 2010/11 as set out in Annex 4 and a medium term financial plan for 2010/11-2014/15 as set out in Annex 1 to the Cabinet's report as amended by the proposals set out in Annex 1 to this report;**
 - (a)(3) **the Council Tax and Precept calculations for 2010/11 as set out in Annex 5 to the Cabinet's report amended to:**
 - (i) **a precept of £280.508m; and**
 - (ii) **a Council Tax for Band D equivalent properties of £1,158.88.**

Cllr Zoe Patrick
Leader of the Opposition