

**Oxfordshire County Council**  
**18 February 2014**  
**Leader of the Opposition Overview**

**Background**

Since 2010 the Coalition Government has cut grant to Local Government, with core funding falling by 46%. The ability of Local Government in England to raise the Council Tax to fund services has also been restricted. This nationally imposed straitjacket of centrally imposed cuts leaves Oxfordshire in an extremely difficult position. They constitute an attack on Local Democracy which also has to wrestle with pressures requiring extra expenditure as a result of an ageing population and a doubling of the number of children coming into care.

We are told that the economy is now improving, but even so the Coalition Government has not seen fit to put money into local services. The problem is that the financial crisis has given the two parties in government nationally the smoke screen to cover an antipathy to Local Government and in the process disregard the poor who rely heavily on local services.

**Oxfordshire's Financial Position**

In the County Council's Medium Term Financial Plan there were already cuts of over £201m: that was before the Financial Statement in June which required a further £64m of savings. We finally heard on 5th February that the restriction on the amount the County could raise through Council Tax was set at below 2%. Anything above that would trigger a referendum. Oxfordshire County Council had expected to be able over the life of the MTFP to raise the Council Tax to 3.75%.

All of this would be bad enough if it wasn't the case that there is increasing demand for services such as Adult Social Care and Children's Services. Providing these services is not a choice: we have an absolute obligation to ensure our older people are cared for and our children protected. Previous cuts have put enormous strain on services and on those struggling to deliver them in all directorates.

On top of the problems related to the revenue budget, Central Government has taken £19m from the basic needs capital budget for our schools. Each Free School which opens is likely to reduce further the budget which Oxfordshire needs to create extra school places for the rising school population.

**Process**

Directors were asked to come up with proposals to deliver the savings required, and meet the pressures which needed to be funded. These were discussed in sessions with all County Councillors. Labour Councillors attended these sessions and also all the 'Talking Oxfordshire' meetings held around the County. Representation was made to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in response to a motion from the Labour Group and supported by the County Council. Central Government remained adamant that the cuts had to be made. The Council did not have all the information it needed to finalise the budget until 5th February leaving it ridiculously late to get the budget published in the timescale needed to set the Council Tax on 18th February.

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The Labour Group has focused its attention on the most vulnerable in the County and in particular on the commitments made in the manifesto on which Labour Councillors were elected.

### **Labour Group Proposals**

The Labour Group, on the evidence it had, did not believe the electorate of Oxfordshire would vote in a referendum to increase Council Tax beyond the 2% dictated by Central Government. It was also concerned that any hike in Council Tax would disproportionately hurt the poorest people who have had their wages frozen while facing higher energy bills and cuts in benefit. This was raised during the 'Talking Oxfordshire' sessions by people who said they were struggling to pay their bills at the moment without them being pushed higher. We were also concerned that the cost of a referendum would have to be met and if an increased tax were not agreed, then the £600,000 one-off cost would bring no benefit. The Labour Group decided that given these factors the risk in requesting a referendum on an increased Council Tax rise was too great.

Some of the proposals which the Labour Group had agreed to put forward have been incorporated into the Administration's budget, in particular the Laundry Service for those experiencing incontinence, grants to information and advice centers, the Pegasus Theatre and re-phasing the cuts to Housing Related Support. The funding which has been put into Adult Social Care will create a more personalised approach which will remove the need to curtail home visits to 15 minutes only. The Labour Group however continues to be concerned about the level of pay and status of those who care for vulnerable elderly people. This, in a County with low unemployment and many high earning jobs, has led to a lack of people becoming carers.

The Labour Budget includes money to fund youth workers. At the moment, although much youth work has been funded across the County from the Councillors' Community Budgets and some work is taking place within the Hubs, this is either on the basis of one-off funding or targeted at the most disadvantaged. There is a need to have a network across the County of dedicated youth workers working from local community buildings developing work with youth people and supporting the volunteers who are already there. There is also a need to work in partnership with Parish, Town and District Councils, many of whom are already funding services to ensure that young people in Oxfordshire become active citizens.

We are also concerned that we have enough money available to employ additional Social Workers to meet the needs of the additional children and young people coming into care. The caseload of our Social Workers is already high and this needs to be addressed if we are to meet the needs of these vulnerable children and young people.

Dial -a-Ride provides a much needed transport for those unable to get to the bus stop to use other services. It helps these often elderly people to socialize and to remain independent. Any cut to the service will impact on the, already stretched Adult Care budget. Within the now integrated Transport Budget therefore, we have ring-fenced money to support this essential service for the many people unable to use public service but who without this Dial -a-Ride will become isolated and lonely.

The transfer of the Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans to the County Council from the Department of Work and Pensions has not gone well. This could have been foreseen as the County did not have the infrastructure to support the activity and the company who won the tender to run it struggled. We are proposing to put £150,000 into the budget to

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enable a discussion to take place with the Credit Union to support those who need emergency financial support without them having to resort to Loan Sharks.

We are well aware that these amendments go a very small way to alleviate the misery which is being inflicted on people in Oxfordshire as a result of these cuts. Until there is a government which understands and respects democratic local government, it will be the poorest and most vulnerable in our local communities who continue to suffer most.

Meanwhile the richest 1%, among whom are the bankers, whose greed and irresponsible behavior plunged us into the crisis in the first place, are enjoying a rise in their standard of living as a result of our unfair personal and local taxation system.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**We RECOMMEND Council to approve:**

- 1) A budget for 2014/15 and medium term financial plan for 2015/16 – 2017/18 as amended in Labour Group Annex 1**

**LIZ BRIGHOUSE**

**Leader of the Opposition**