

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL - BUDGET SPEECH 2018

Thank you chairman

I would like to start by thanking Lorna Baxter, Chief Finance Officer, who has been invaluable in helping to prepare this budget. She has been ably assisted by Katy and the rest of her team.

Also I would like to thank Cllr Bartholomew for his hard work. Cabinet member for finance is always a challenging portfolio.

I would like to thank my independent colleagues who have supported the budget process to enable a stable administration to deliver this budget.

I think the residents want that stability rather than listening to us arguing and scoring points at today's meeting.

Last year I said the council had made some tough decisions. I don't want to downplay the impact these decisions have had on council services, but without those difficult decisions we might be facing a very different budget.

By focusing resources where they have greatest impact, I can present an affordable budget to Council. Services for the most vulnerable adults and children across the county will continue.

Our finances are in good shape compared to the state of local government finances generally. Northamptonshire's Chief Finance Officer was forced to issue a formal notice stop council spending. The public finance body, CIPFA, has warned that other councils may follow.

Our financial position is still extremely tight, and we must work hard to deliver the savings in the medium term financial plan. But I am confident we can and will make those savings.

As in previous years, I have been very open with the main opposition parties by providing information on the budget process. I want to see if we can deliver a united budget today.

I'm sure that we all remember two years ago when all Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Independents voted together on the budget.

We took difficult decision to reduce bus subsidies, and reorganise family support services and day services for adults. That meant that we could deliver a balanced four year budget. Today we benefit from that difficult vote we all took in 2016.

In proposing this budget, we have taken into account comments from Performance Scrutiny Committee and public responses to the consultation.

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People are rightly concerned about the impact of savings on services, and on the voluntary sector that does so much in our communities.

I am concerned about this too, and believe this budget will make the best use of scarce resources. I would particularly like to highlight the way more than 30 community groups have stepped in to provide services such as 'stay and play' for families with small children. We have provided some financial help, but it is them that have made it happen. That is what we mean by 'thriving communities'.

From 2010, when started a savings programme to the end of this financial year we will have saved £360m. Most of that money has been be reinvested in services, particularly for vulnerable children and adults.

This has been set against a back drop of the number of adult care packages we provide nearly doubling since 2010. The number of looked after children has increased by 60%, and demand for child protection services continues to grow.

With these sorts of budget pressures, we have to target our resources to providing vital services to those vulnerable adults and children who require them.

It's a tribute to our staff that we have been able to make the savings while continuing to run services day in, day out that help our communities thrive. Here are just some examples of the services we deliver:

- Assess the care needs of over 10,000 vulnerable people and rising
- Provide long-term social care for 6,500 adults
- Organise a million hours a year of support a year, as well as assisting thousands of informal carers.
- Assess almost 4,000 children, including over 1,500 child protection issues
- Support, currently, 700 looked after children, and support 600 on a child protection plan
- Work to turn around 550 families with real problems so can thrive again
- Register 20,000 births, deaths, and marriages
- Maintain almost 3,000 miles of road
- Issue or renew over 40,000 concessionary bus passes in year
- Dispose of over 300,000 tonnes of waste
- Respond to over 5,000 fire and rescue incidents

That's what business as usual looks like at Oxfordshire County Council. But demand for services continues to rise as our population grows and ages.

The Conservative government has already recognised the pressure by allowing us to raise a 3% precept to pay for social care as part of Council Tax.

This year the government enabled us to increase Council Tax by an additional 1% in further recognition of the pressure on all social services.

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This will mean we will raise the council tax by the maximum allowed without triggering a referendum of 5.99%

I do not believe in raising taxes unnecessarily as I understand the impact on our residents who may not have had an increase in their wages.

However I am confident that people understand about the rising cost of social care they will understand.

In return, we will always ensure the money is spent as efficiently as possible.

Government funding for councils was announced last week after the budget papers were printed. We have been given an additional £1.4 million which is welcome news for Oxfordshire. Once again, it shows that the government is aware of the pressures on Adult Social care.

I feel we need to carefully consider how to best use the additional funding. I propose to increase our contingency fund so that we can respond to the demand for adult social care over the course of the year.

The Conservative government has recently provided an additional £916,000 this year for highways repairs. This will be used to do longer term patching work in the spring. In the meantime, we will continue to carry out urgent repairs to our roads, which we all know have suffered over the winter.

For the first time, we have created a 10 year capital programme that enables us to take a longer view of the costs and benefits of road repairs.

I am hopeful that we will be able to spend our maintenance budget more effectively. By taking the long view, we can spend less on filling potholes and more on repairs that will last for years.

There will also be more money to spend on roads as a result of government funding. Although that money is for improving the road network, it means money that would have been spent on maintenance on those roads can be used elsewhere.

Last year I said I wanted Oxfordshire to have its own infrastructure fund. I'm pleased to say that yesterday cabinet agreed to sign the Oxfordshire Growth deal, worth £215m.

This money is reflected in the new capital programme and I am becoming more optimistic that we will be able upgrade our road network in the coming years.

These are large amount of investment, that will fund the infrastructure needed to support the predicted growth in jobs in Oxfordshire and ensure our economy continues to thrive.

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On the subject of roads, I note the amendment by the Liberal Democrat group regarding a cycling officer. This was a position I was considering following the review of cycling provision for the National Infrastructure Commission. We are still waiting for Andrew Gilligan's report and I did not wish to pre-empt any of its recommendations.

In addition to the £155m for planning and delivering improved infrastructure, we have been given £60million to deliver more affordable homes across Oxfordshire.

The affordable homes won't come overnight, but homelessness is becoming a national problem, and Oxfordshire has its share of the problem.

I propose that we continue to fund homelessness support for an additional year in 2019/20 by £500,000. This will follow on from the current consultation on supported housing, and discussions with our City and District colleagues.

In this budget, I want to make sure that communities have a say in how money is spent.

To achieve this I am proposing a Councillor Priority fund, this will be £15,000 a year for each councillor this year and next.

If it's successful I would like to see the fund grow to give greater decision making to local members as they understand their divisions the best.

I would encourage members to work with others in their locality. Perhaps they could find match funding to gain greater spending power.

I know that residents are concerned about highways so that may be where most of the funds will be spent. But the money could also be used for day centres, community bus projects, children's centre, homelessness projects or even funding a church bell. It will be the members who make the decisions, in consultation with their communities.

I also propose to commit £25,000 on improving partnership working with parishes and town councils, which already do so much in their communities. Together, we can do more.

Finally there will be £30,000 set aside for World War One commemorations to mark the centenary of the Armistice in 1918. I welcome views on how that money can be most appropriately spent.

This budget is not only compassionate as it is:

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- increasing the funding on adult social care by £11.7m,
- increasing the funding on Children's social care by £8.5 m

It is also about localism as we are providing funds that will deliver local solutions by County councillors who know their divisions best.

This is a budget that delivers for Oxfordshire people and Oxfordshire communities.

COUNCILLOR IAN HUDSPETH

Leader of the Council