

# **Liberal Democrat Group Budget Statement**

## **February 2019**

### **“The period of Austerity is over???”**

(Only apparently for the Conservative Cabinet)

Under Transformation plans, Oxfordshire County Council is losing up to 25% of its staff. Meanwhile, the Tory administration has seen fit to expand its Cabinet posts by more than 25%. The Liberal Democrat Group believes that this is costly and unjustifiable. Cabinet should be cut by the same proportion.

We understand the pressures that face this Council as it strives to come up with a balanced budget for 2019-20. As with recent years, there is little room for manoeuvre.

In recent years, we have proposed funding for Children’s Centres, additional resources for Youth provision, and using prudential borrowing to bring an end to the hopeless “managed decline of our roads” policy of this administration. Liberal Democrat ideas ridiculed when first presented, were then taken up later. Whilst we are happy to be used as a source of good ideas (there is certainly a desperate need for them), the knee-jerk rejection of such ideas simply because they are someone else’s cannot be in the best interests of Oxfordshire residents.

In the case of prudential borrowing to address the pothole crisis, had the administration taken on the idea when we first suggested it, we would have fixed the problem before yet more miles of county roads fell into the red category.

Still, better late than never.

### **We must not give up on Unitary**

In his very brief letter to the Leaders of SODC and VWHDC, the Rt. Hon Rishi Sunak MP explained that the government will be “pausing” its consideration for an Oxfordshire unitary council while other changes to local government in Oxfordshire take place.

The Oxfordshire/Cherwell link up is expected to achieve savings of around £2m per annum for Cherwell which is required to balance its budget – yet this initiative is being used as the main reason for delaying a Unitary decision which could still produce savings many times greater. Meanwhile Councils all around us are going Unitary. All the evidence is that Unitary councils have survived the challenging years of austerity much better than others.

Only the outstanding efforts of our own Council’s finance team has prevented us from going the way many others have gone or will be going in the coming months and years. And yet our reward for financial competence is to be told we cannot go Unitary and make those much-needed savings. What kind of message is that sending out? To be allowed to go Unitary – just go bust?

The Liberal Democrat Group will continue to point this out to HM Government and to the ruling administration at every available opportunity. It is the *only* long-term solution to local government finances and every year we duck the issue is another year of savings missed. A pause there may be, let's make sure it is only a pause.

## **What the Liberal Democrat Group would like to do**

There is a creeping habit of using the pots of money derived from last minute small windfalls to plug holes produced by progressive austerity-induced cuts.

Such an idea is the 1m provision for a youth clubs. It is encouraging that the administration are finally listening to calls to do something for young people, but there is a limit to what the voluntary sector can do with short term pots of money that requires match funding.

We believe that we can find additional savings to re-establish a council run Youth Service, funding 6 new posts on an ongoing basis. This new team will sit within the Fire Service alongside their education and community safety work and deliver open access and detached youth work across the county.

We will use the £1m that we have released to establish a reserve of £750k for our OCC bus officer to co-ordinate and improve the provision of bus services particularly those for rural areas and £250k to pilot a loan scheme for 16-18 year old's to purchase the most economical bus passes upfront.

## **Money saving/income generation proposals**

1. **Cutting 3 Cabinet posts** from our increasingly bloated Cabinet. We would point out that under the Transformation process, we are likely to lose up to 25% of our staff and that a similar scale of cut to the Cabinet would set the right example.
2. **Cutting 3 posts from our communication team** and
3. **Business parking rates** should be raised from £100pa to £200pa (tax deductible).
4. **Hiring out Ground Floor rooms in County Hall in evenings and weekends** to raise a conservative £20K pa

## **Recommendation**

The Council is RECOMMENDED (in respect of revenue) to approve a budget for 2019/20 and a medium term financial plan for 2019/20 – 2022/23 as amended in Liberal Democrat Group Annex 1;

Richard Webber Cllr

On behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group OCC