

Labour Group Budget Amendments 2019/20

Leader of the Opposition Overview

Liz Brighthouse - Leader of the Labour Group
February 2019

- 1. We were told by the Prime Minister in September that 'Austerity had ended': but, again this year, Local Government must make cuts to budgets. The additional short-term money made available in the Budget for Local Government is not enough to adequately fund services cut during 8 years of 'Austerity'. Over the same period Oxfordshire has had a £140m reduction in grant and it has also had to fund the increase in the number of children and older people needing Social Care as well as additional unfunded responsibilities. This has meant cuts of £400m from elsewhere in the budget to fund these pressures. These cuts must stop as all services are buckling under the strain. The Leader of the Council has said that services are now at breaking point. This fact has heart breaking consequences for children, families and older people who turn to Oxfordshire County Council for support. The budget agreed this year can only be short term as we have no idea about the impact of the Fairer Funding Formula or the Business Rate Retention Fund from 2020. This "short termism" in Funding coupled with services at breaking point, massive additional demand, staff shortages and the known and unknown likely consequences of Brexit have crippling consequences on the most vulnerable people in our society as well as on the depleted workforce struggling within every service to deliver more services without sustainable funding streams.*
- 2. The funding available for health services, specialist support services and Children's and Adult's Social Care is woefully inadequate. Much has been said about how the integration of Health and Social Care will help but this will be like moving the deckchairs on the Titanic. The iceberg of inadequate, unsustainable funding must be removed. The financial arrangements vary significantly between Health and Social Care as does the statutory basis of the services. One free at the point of delivery and the other means tested. The increase in Mental illness across all age groups but particularly among children and young adults has been significant. Until we start treating those with Mental illness or Mental Trauma in the same way we do those with physical illness or trauma, those with Mental Illness will continue to be left in long queues for services and services withdrawn, if because of their disability they find it difficult to engage. A properly funded Mental Health Service easily accessible in a crisis is a basic requirement. The police when responding to questions at the County's Performance Scrutiny Committee talked about being the sole point of contact for those in Mental Trauma. Without proper funding or diagnosis those with the most serious of illnesses are being left in the most traumatic circumstances with many becoming homeless and involved in crime.*
- 3. That is why the Labour Group has interrogated the pressures and savings in this budget from the position of those who are most in need of services. We are opposed to cutting any money from services which will leave those with Mental Illness in a worse situation than they are already experiencing. We must ensure that we are providing properly for Social and Community needs alongside Health Provision. Engagement with Oxford Health is crucial to ensure that their services and the services we commission are complementary and appropriate to the*

Diagnosed Healthcare and Social Care Needs of Children, Young People and Adults. The provision of services we commission needs to be scrutinised thoroughly by the appropriate Scrutiny Committee. Much of our spend on Mental Health Services is contracted out to other organisations.

- 4. In relation to the Adult Social Care Budget Savings we support the removal of the cut to the Budget which enables VCS groups to support in many ways those suffering from Mental Illness. Making this cut would make the lives of the users of these services unbearable and could lead to further significant trauma or loss of life. We do however need to ensure those supported are getting the Social Care they need and again Scrutiny should play a role.*
- 5. In relation to the Mental Health Contract for People of Working Age with Oxford Health we have seen that the changes in a similar budget for Older People has enabled Oxfordshire to concentrate this budget on Adult Social Care responsibilities. We recognise that the £300k cut in 2020/21 with a further £300k the year after needs to be carefully scrutinised and reported to the Performance Scrutiny Committee as happened with the change to the Older Persons Budget. If satisfied that Social Care needs required in the contract are being met then we would hope that next year this cut is removed from the budget.*
- 6. We would further wish to work closely with the Oxford Health and VCS to find ways in which parents with poor Mental Health or Trauma (many of these parents will have suffered the disabling impact of domestic violence) are supported to avoid children being taken into care.*
- 7. In relation to the reassessment of people with home care packages, we are concerned about the impact of reassessments which are designed to bring down costs. We accept that for some people the use of new technologies and neighbourhood networks may be better for their quality of life than the traditional short visits scheduled over the course of the day, but we would like to be able to see the outcome of the assessments as they proceed. We believe that carrying out reassessments is crucial to ensure older people are getting the support they need and that they have access to the changing solutions available. When this is done in an atmosphere of cuts, this may lead to a worse rather than a better quality of life for Older People.*
- 8. We look forward to seeing the Business Case for the changed Operating Model in Children's Social Care and hope that we can with the support of other agencies have better co-ordination of interventions in Families where poor Mental Health could lead to children being taken into Local Authority Care. Breaking attachments in vulnerable families can lead to further Mental Health problems and therefore does not necessarily lead to better outcomes for children. All families need support but some more than others. It is not just Mental Health problems, including addictions, which we need to address but isolation, domestic violence and poverty all of which contribute to children being removed from their parents. Removing children should be the very last resort and it is hoped the new Operating Model will lead to better outcomes for children and their families but this will only happen if we have the engagement of others. We look forward to seeing if the appointment of a Director of Housing with Cherwell District Council changes the life chances of these families who often need appropriate intervention and support in relation to housing. There is an African saying "it takes a whole village to raise a child". Where that*

“village” isn’t available - and it usually isn’t for poor isolated single parents who “do not engage”- then we need to create it. Homestart and People create networks very successfully for families with under 5s this needs to be replicated for vulnerable families with older children.

9. *The Transition Fund, which the Labour Group was successful in getting others to support has funded Open Access Sessions for families with under 5s across the County. For many families this is the only provision available to give support and encouragement in their parenting roll. There is £124k still available to spend and the Labour Group are now proposing that Groups which received funding but are now struggling to attract sustainable funding and those who only received 2 years of funding are asked to apply again. In addition to the £124k we would add a further £76k increasing the funding to £200k.*
10. *Currently there are 8 members of the Cabinet plus a Leader and a Deputy. This group meet in private to discuss and agree public policy which is then voted on in the public Cabinet later. Establishing a system of a Leader and Deputy and 5 Committees covering the various Directorates of the Council would be more open and democratic and ensure the involvement of a wider group councillors in policy making. It would also release money from the Special Responsibility Allowance Budget to be spent on Detached Youth Workers.*
11. *The Labour Group is committed to resurrecting Youth Work funded by the County Council and accountable to local democracy for supporting young people. Since Youth Workers became Hub Workers in 2011, openly accessible Youth Workers have become non-existent. The crisis facing young people has never been greater: this manifests itself in the rising number of exclusions from schools, part-time timetabling of young people by Schools, truancy, Mental Health issues and crime. Many young people are not connected to any responsible concerned adult and few make relationships with any adult in schools where they do not fit in, often because of difficult behaviour. The Labour Group proposes that 8 Detached Youth Workers are employed in the Children and Family Centres across the County to work in local communities supporting vulnerable young people in the places they congregate. With the support of Children’s Social Care TVP have been successful in getting a small amount of funding for detached Youth Workers and it is hoped the County Youth Workers would collaborate with them as well as with Hub Workers, Schools and other VCS provision. There is an urgent need to respond to the needs of these young people who feel hopeless and often without any stake in society. Not intervening will simply lead to greater heartbreak for these young people and for the schools, families and communities where they live. Putting money into a fund so that existing groups can bid will not lead to better outcomes for the most vulnerable and marginalized young people in society. Oxfordshire needs to employ skilled professional youth workers who know and understand how to engage with marginalized young people.*
12. *In relation to the Capital Budget. The Labour Group is pleased that we are at last moving forward on several schemes which will make an enormous difference to the most vulnerable. It is good to see that Northfield School will be rebuilt and that a network of special units will be built to provide facilities closer to home for SEND Children and so reduce the cost and trauma of long taxi journeys. We are pleased to see that we are to use assets to reduce revenue costs and hopefully in the future to provide sustainable revenue streams.*

13. *The bankruptcy of Carillion has had a significant impact on many projects and it has taken too long to get to the bottom of what Carillion were doing in relation to building maintenance but we are pleased that we are now moving forward. It would be hoped that any outstanding costs we have in relation to the failure of Carillion will be paid by the administrator. Continuous Scrutiny of this 3rd Party Spend in Carillion meant that Oxfordshire was in the process of ending our relationship with Carillion before it collapsed. We must be more active in ensuring the vast amount of our squeezed budget which goes to others to spend is accounted for transparently and meets the requirements of the Contract. To that end we hope that this whole area of work is strengthened through our contracting and scrutinising processes.*
14. *Getting around in the future must focus on walking, cycling and rail and bus services which are accessible to those with mobility impairments. We hope that we will soon see the opening of the Cowley Branch Line and that the Oxford to Cambridge Line, will after decades, become a reality. This new route will open up opportunities for car free developments along its length without the need for a costly road which will not fulfil our aspirations to reduce car journeys and lower pollution.*
15. *I ask you to support the Labour Budget amendments which are attached at Annex 1. Although the Labour Group has to operate within the constraints of a budget which has suffered almost half a billion cuts and where the need for Social Care and Support for all ages has never been greater, we have given council options to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and in particular to provide a resource which will provide real support for our most excluded young people.*

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 Labour Group Annex 1;

*Liz Brighthouse
Leader of the Labour Group and the Opposition
Oxfordshire County Council*