

Budget Statement Leader of the Labour & Co-operative Group February 2025

I start this statement by thanking all of those who work behind the scenes in Finance to ensure that our resources are well managed and are used effectively to support Oxfordshire residents. In particular, I would like to thank our long serving Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 officer, Lorna Baxter, who over many years has ensured Oxfordshire is financially stable. I would also like to thank Cllrs Brad Baines and Glynis Phillips, as well as Kathy Wilcox and the many other officers who have supported them on the amendments to the Minority Administration Budget. Oxfordshire County Council is lucky to have so many committed staff.

On 4th July 2024 the Country voted for change. A new Labour Government was elected. The Prime Minister, Chancellor and Cabinet Members soon uncovered the huge black hole that had been left in the finances of the Country and quickly got to work in rectifying the financial mess which had been created after 14 damaging years of Coalition and Conservative Governments.

Change is needed and the Government is committed to make that change happen including changes to Local Government. Two tier areas like Oxfordshire will be reorganised to make local government more efficient and more transparent to residents who mostly have no idea who does what. There will be an end to the costly competitive bidding for money to fund projects. Instead, Local Authorities will in future years be given multiyear funding settlements which will enable better planning of services. For this year, additional funding has already come from Government to the County Council for Adult and Children's Services.

In addition to new Councils to deliver services, Mayoral Combined Authorities will be established to enable finances and powers to be devolved from Whitehall. This will enable areas like Oxfordshire to have the resources necessary to respond to local need and in particular to provide better public transport which is desperately needed. This will bring Oxfordshire in line with other areas of England already benefitting from devolution.

Oxfordshire is well placed to respond to the Labour Government's ambition in relation to economic growth and house building. It is one of the most successful Counties economically in the Country and one of the richest but also has some of the most deprived areas in the Country. A challenge has to be ensuring that all of our residents benefit from Oxfordshire's wealth.

Providing enough homes in Oxfordshire for those in inadequate accommodation must be a priority. This has to be alongside new housing to attract people to come to live in Oxfordshire to fill the many jobs which are vacant. Oxfordshire County Council struggles to fill many posts and this results in agency staff being employed. A practice which drives up costs without the benefit of having directly employed workers who have a vested interest in getting services right.

The modest Labour & Co-operative Group Amendments to the Minority Administrations Budget address some of the key issues which are causes for concern.

We need in everything we do to listen to the voices of those lives are most affected by the decisions we take. In relation to transport policy the lack of meaningful speaking and listening has led to many of our communities being torn apart because of the impact of these policies on their lives. We need to ensure that the recommendations from the Citizens Assembly set up as a result of the Labour & Co-operative Amendment last year are addressed.

Likewise, the recommendations of the Education Commission, set up as a result of the Labour & Co-operative Group's concern about inclusivity and trauma informed practices in our schools, need to be implemented. The Commission took evidence from those working in schools and from parents and children. Their professional voices need to be heard.

The High Needs Block which funds the provision of services for Children and Young People with Special Education has been overspent since the Coalition Government added an additional seven years of statutory provision. A virtuous act but they did not give Local Authorities the money to fund it and so the deficit has been growing. This means that the resources are not available to fund the rising number of children and young people who now require special provision. This also affects the authority's ability to put in place early help which for some children would have an impact on the need for future provision. By the end of 2025/26 the cumulative high-needs debt in Oxfordshire is predicted to have risen to £110.9 million.

Our new Government has already started to look at how it can support our Children by committing to fund new provision. The Labour & Co-operative Group are committed to making sure that our communities across Oxfordshire benefit from this new funding.

I will leave it to our Finance Spokesperson to take Council through our amendments in Labour & Co-operative Group Section 4.2 and Section 5.3.

Cllr Liz Brighthouse OBE
Leader of the Labour & Co-operative Group.

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