

Prepared by the Green Group

Green Group Budget Amendment 2015 Explanatory Notes

Resisting Austerity

We have sought in our amendments to the Administration Budget to use available funds to resist the austerity cuts being forced upon us by the Tory/LibDem Coalition Government. Sadly, these look likely to continue beyond the General Election. We need to be prepared.

Our budget is bold, caring and principled. It focuses on the pressing problems that Oxford faces; rising inequality, deprivation and the housing crisis.

Bold

We have funded a number of new initiatives:

- **A new Inequalities Fund (£100k per annum).** We are excited by the potential of the new Inequality Panel set up under the auspices of the Green-chaired Scrutiny Committee. It is the first Panel to respond to the Peer Review challenge to be more pro-active in setting policy and scrutinising the operations of the Council. However, we don't believe that the Panel can be effective without secured funding to support its activities. They could previously have drawn on the Social Inclusion Fund (latterly known as the Community Development Grant) but this has been cut entirely from the budget. We envisage this new £100k per annum Fund being managed by Scrutiny Officers and Inequality Panel under the auspices of the Scrutiny Committee.
- **Research into a Tourist Tax (£20k)** to bring much needed income into the City to offset the direct costs of maintaining a world class city. We have conservatively estimated that such a tax could bring in £100,000 of much needed new income per annum. However, in case the incoming Government chooses not to support such a tax, we have put sufficient surplus into our reserves over the four year period to cover the deficit.
- **Research into innovative affordable housing models (£25k)** – such as municipal bonds, crowd-funding and direct investment models – such as Real Letting. Oxford has the least affordable housing in the Country, we need to be leading the way on new approaches to providing low cost homes. We have an active social investment sector and a track record of community fund-raising. We believe that new funding models could provide the Council with £m's of new money for affordable housing.
- **Establishment of a no-fees letting agency (£50k).** Rents in Oxford are rising well above inflation making private rented housing unaffordable for many. We believe Oxford should follow the example of other Councils in setting up a no-fees letting agency to help keep down the cost of renting.
- **New part-time cycling post (£25k per annum).** We have been disappointed by the slow progress being made on initiative for cyclists. The capital funding is there but not the officer resources to support consultation and project delivery. Our funding would create a dedicated half-time cycling officer.

Caring

We strongly oppose some of the cuts set out in the Administration budget and have sought to reverse those which we believe will most adversely affect the most vulnerable City residents. We have also included additional support for staff and boosted our community and voluntary grant budget. In addition to compensating for the loss of the Social Inclusion Fund/Community Development Grant (see above), we would:

- **Reverse cut to support for housing and homelessness (£150k per annum).** This is particularly critical in the light of the reduced Discretionary Housing Payment and the rising rents being imposed on Council house tenants by the City. Under the Administration's plans, rents will rise significantly in the next three years until rent convergence is achieved. At the same time the benefit cap is likely to affect even more people pushing them into debt.
- **Reverse cut to children safeguarding and vulnerable adults fund (£24k per annum).** In the light of the County cuts and recent concerns around safeguarding, we do not believe cutting this budget is sensible or desirable.
- **Retain on-going Learning Outcomes Grants after the Educational Attainment Programme winds down (£50k per annum).** We recognise that the City's foray into the educational arena has not been entirely successful. There has been poor engagement with schools and disagreements amongst the educational experts tasked to deliver the various programmes. Nonetheless, we believe that there is merit in supporting schools to achieve better learning outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. We would maintain educational funding at a lower rate in the form of a Learning Outcomes Grant open to schools to bid against as part of our open bidding programme.
- **Reverse the cut to the apprenticeship programme (£50k per annum).** There remains unmet need for apprenticeships at the City Council. Reinstating this cut would support eight apprenticeships each year.
- **Reinstate half the cut to staff training and wellbeing budget (£90k per annum).** We expect our staff to do more and be more flexible. We believe that cutting our staff training and wellbeing budget at this time is ill advised.
- **Increased allocation to community and voluntary grant budget (£50k per annum).** Community and voluntary organisations offer an effective means of directly delivering services to those in most need. Unfortunately, most years the City is unable to meet all requests for funding. We believe that as inequality and deprivation increases there is a good case to be made for increasing the size of this budget. We have set out, in Y1, which organisations would be in receipt of this additional funding.

Principled

We believe that a healthy, thriving democracy and public engagement in Council decision-making makes for good Government. Our budget puts additional funds into electoral registration and area committees.

- **Electoral registration support (£50k).** With Councillors representing the University wards of Holywell and Carfax, we are deeply concerned at the drop-off of electors (students in particular) from the electoral register caused by the new, flawed registration system. We

have written to all colleges and spoken to our election officers. Although much is already being done, we are convinced that, with the additional funding we are providing in our budget, still more could be achieved.

- **Additional funds to reinstate Area Committees (£180k per annum).** Together with the re-allocation of ward member spend (£70k), this initiative would provide £250k to refresh and re-vitalise area committees. This funding would be sufficient to support some level of devolved decision-making, increased officer support, and the effective doubling of area committee spending.

Where does the money come from?

We have taken a responsible approach to funding our spending plans. Our budget balances over four years and puts money back into working balances. This money we would use to cover the deficit should the introduction of the Tourist Tax be obstructed by Central Government.

We would also phase the planned increase in Park and Ride charges over two years and increase parking charges by an additional 1% (from 2% to 3%) to cover the stated loss in parking revenues during the Westgate development.

As in previous years, we are supporting the introduction of the so-called 'Late Night Levy' and cutting what we consider to be excessive riverbank enforcement.

However, our main source of revenue comes from reinstating, via borrowing, the lost business rates during the Westgate redevelopment. We do not believe front line services should suffer as a result of the £400k per annum loss over the three year build phase. Finance officers have agreed with us that it is reasonable to prudentially borrow this money on the basis that business rates will substantially increase when the expanded Westgate re-opens. We will start paying back the borrow £1.2m in Y4 out of this increased business rate income.

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