

LibDem alternative budget proposals February 18th 2015

As Liberal Democrats we believe in letting local people decide local issues as far as practically possible. We have welcomed the introduction of Neighbourhood Plans to enable residents to have more of a say in how their local area is developed. We propose the creation of an officer post to advise and support those communities working to develop a Neighbourhood Plan; the expertise would be invaluable in guiding them through what is a complex and at times difficult process.

We are very much in favour of encouraging commuters, visitors and shoppers to use Park and Ride instead of driving into our increasingly congested city. The original idea was that it should be cheaper as well as less polluting to leave your car at a Park and Ride and take the bus into the city. Sadly this is already being eroded by the charges introduced for parking at the Park and Ride sites. We are therefore very much against the Labour proposal to increase the parking charges from £2 to £3 a day from 2018/19. Our budget proposals show that this is perfectly financially possible as well as eminently desirable for both the air quality in the city and the pockets of the low-paid workers unable to afford to live in Oxford and having to commute in to work.

The recent revelation that the City has been squandering public money on an unsuccessful scheme to raise attainment in eight Oxford primary schools has depressed us. We were in favour of working with schools to raise attainment but it seems that the wrong scheme was chosen, so that while some children have benefitted, in some schools the results have actually got worse. We are therefore moving the residual budget, as yet not allocated to anything, into a fund to which schools can apply from whatever they think will most benefit their pupils. Teachers tend to know best what will help their pupils.

We are proposing a new senior post to support the delivery of the many excellent low-carbon and energy-saving initiatives from the Low Carbon agenda. We also believe that developers need to be given more advice and encouragement to adopt truly sustainable practices in their buildings, making the best use of new technology and learning from others in how to meet the zero-carbon standard, so are proposing an officer in the planning department to take this on.

Better consultation on planning applications is sorely needed, as recent well-publicised disasters have shown. We propose to reinstate the practice of delivering letters to neighbours of all planning applications, so that the chance of a nasty surprise over the wall or round the corner is hugely reduced.

We have been very alarmed at the proposal by the County Council to reduce and perhaps remove altogether the grants to Community Action Groups in the county. Oxford has benefitted more than elsewhere from the work of these groups, so we have proposed a £10k grant for each year as a start to keep them afloat.

The very splendid and very popular Cutteslowe Park attracts people not only from across the city but from the surrounding areas as well. The duck pond is a favourite with children. Sadly this pond is leaking and smelly at times; the surrounding path gets muddy and has a set of steps which buggies and wheelchairs cannot manage.

Unless the walls are repaired soon there is a danger that that they will collapse altogether, meaning an expensive, unplanned repair job. We have found the required £90k needed to sheet-pile the whole pond, stopping the leaks , and to improve the path to make it disabled-friendly as well as buggie-friendly.

Overall we propose measures that will much improve the Council's commitment to real localism, helping local people to make well-informed local decisions and which will support the work needed to fulfil the Council's commitment to a low-carbon economy. Stabilising the parking fee at the City Park and Ride suites will remove what might well be a disincentive to people to use the sites, leading to more traffic in the city and perhaps discourage low-paid workers from taking a job in the city at all.

Our budget has a higher General Fund balance at the end than at the beginning of the four-year period – and this is in fact higher than the Labour administration's predicted balance. What we propose is a financially sound package of significant improvements for citizens, city workers and the city's aspirations for a low-carbon economy.

Jean Fooks

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