

To: Council

Date: 16 February 2022

Report of: Head of Law and Governance

Title of Report: Public addresses and questions that relate to matters for decision at this meeting

Introduction

1. Addresses made by members of the public to the Council about matters for decision at this meeting, are below. Any available written responses provided by Cabinet Members are also included.
2. The text reproduces that sent in by the speakers and represents the views of the speakers. Their addresses are not to be taken as statements by or on behalf of the Council.
3. This report will be republished after the Council meeting as part of the minutes pack. This will list the full text of speeches delivered as submitted, summaries of speeches delivered which differ significantly from those submitted, and any further responses.

Addresses and questions to be taken in Part 1 of the agenda

1. Address by Adam Powell-Davies, Oxford Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) – Council Budget

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1. Address by Adam Powell-Davies, Oxford Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) – Council Budget

My name is Adam Powell-Davies, and I'm a hospitality worker currently living in Headington. I'm also the branch secretary for the Oxford branch of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (or TUSC), and it is in this capacity – as a young, working-class socialist – that I am speaking this evening.

Later in this meeting, we'll hear alternative budget proposals from the Liberal Democrat, Green, and Independent council groups. Given that TUSC has no councillors in Oxford, I would like to use this address as an opportunity to formally present some of our alternative budget proposals, as outlined in our 'People's Budget' document, which we submitted as part of the budget consultation last month.

Oxford TUSC understands that government financial support has only partially compensated the cost of keeping our city running during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we recognise that the Council has suffered from a similar lack of government funding in the years prior to the pandemic. We condemn the austerity-driven attacks to council budgets seen over the past decade, which have been implemented by consecutive Conservative governments. But we also reject the idea that Labour-led councils like Oxford have no option but to accept these vicious funding cuts, which are aimed at making the working-class majority pay for the economic crises of a Capitalist system that defends the interests of a super-rich minority.

Concerning this year's proposed budget, Oxford TUSC welcomes proposals to use Council reserves to maintain the provision of services despite the funding shortfall. We also welcome the Council's emphasis on building sustainable, green council housing.

Nonetheless, the proposed budget does not go far enough in providing what our city desperately needs. For example, plans to build 1,114 council homes over the next decade go nowhere near meeting actual housing need. We also oppose proposals to raise social housing rents by 4.1%, as well as plans to again raise council tax by the maximum rate of 1.99%. These rises are attempts by the Council to make local residents pay for the ongoing crisis in local authority funding – in effect passing on Tory austerity to those who can least afford it. We also ask why £200k is being cut from the community funding grant, when the Council still has over £10 million in reserves.

Oxford TUSC demands that the Council's not insignificant reserves be used now to first prevent all cuts; and that they then be used, together with the Council's borrowing powers, to meet the needs of local people.

Adopting this tactic, we would make the following proposals:

- Begin a mass building programme – one that actually meets housing demand – of eco-friendly affordable council homes, while ensuring the local community is consulted throughout.
- Upgrade the Landlord Accreditation Scheme into a compulsory housing register for private landlords and set up council-run lettings agencies, as the means to tackle repair standards, high rents, over-occupancy, extortionate letting fees, and unfair evictions for private homes.
- Use empty business space to tackle homelessness.
- End rises to council tax and council housing rents; demand the Government provides the funding Oxford needs, instead of passing the bill onto those who can least afford it.
- Publicly oppose academisation and demand the County Council bring schools under local authority control.
- Launch a public campaign encouraging the city's vast body of students to get active in the movement for free education.
- Publicly back council unions' campaigns for a 10% pay rise from Local Government Employers, as a first step to winning back the 25% decrease in pay suffered by council workers over the last decade.
- Set a lead in tackling the cost-of-living crisis by paying all workers employed by the Council a £15-an-hour minimum wage. Launch a campaign encouraging

workers in Oxford to join their trade union and fight for a £15-an-hour minimum wage in their own workplace.

- Bring all council services under council control, restoring them to an even better standard of service than before.
- Reverse the planned cuts to the community fund grant.
- Ensure full democratic community involvement in council budgeting and all aspects of decision-making; for communities to be empowered, not merely informed.

By implementing these kinds of policies in its budget – policies which would radically improve the lives of local people – Oxford Council could buy time to launch a mass campaign that unites local trade union branches, student groups, community campaigns, and others – including other councils nationally – to resist austerity and win adequate, long-term funding from the Government.

Should Oxford win the funding it actually needs, the Council would no longer have to rely on its ‘Oxford Model’, which we view as a ‘clever’ work-around to avoid the need for genuine mass struggle. We can have no trust in council-owned companies and commercial premises to deliver the funding Oxford needs, and this much has been shown by dwindling council revenues over the pandemic.

To finish: TUSC seeks to provide a fighting, political alternative to the pro-big business, anti-working-class policies of the Tories and Starmer’s New Labour. We will be standing as widely as possible in the May elections, both in Oxford and nationally. Oxford TUSC warmly invites any councillors who agree with our approach to join us in building an anti-austerity, working-class, community fightback in Oxford. But to any councillors who will not stand up to win the funding our communities need, we say: step aside for someone who will.

Thank you.

Written Response from the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management, Councillor Ed Turner

Thank you for taking the time to address us. Obviously you mention that you represent a political party without any councillors in Oxford – it is your good right to stand in elections and make whatever points you wish in your manifesto for voters. Nonetheless, I would like to address a few points of principle that you raise.

First, our Council has been clear that Government funding for local government was inadequate before the pandemic and has got substantially worse since. We lose no opportunity to raise this with Ministers – as both Elected Members and officers – and while we sometimes make progress, this has been insufficient. It is my view that under-funding of local authorities represents a conscious choice, underpinned by ideology, from the current Government, and the only long-term solution is for there to be a different Government. I am happy to be campaigning every week for there to be that different Government, and believe the best way to achieve it is with support for the Labour Party, not splinter groups on the far left.

Secondly, it seems quite wrong for our Oxford Model to be criticised. It works like this: rather than cutting services, instead we try to raise income by in-sourcing work which would otherwise be done by others. That way profits from the work can be retained and

reinvested in front-line Council services (rather than paying a profit to private shareholders), we can be confident that the Oxford Living Wage applies, and that workers are fairly treated. We are proud of what this model – with excellent support from our two staff trade unions, Unison and Unite, has achieved.

On some of the points of detail: the address refers to remaining reserves. To be clear, these are reserves earmarked for a purpose, and I would encourage you to read the report of our Chief Financial Officer on the adequacy of our reserves. What you are encouraging us to do is run down reserves further, in order to meet ongoing costs. I think you can be clear from the report of the Section 151 Officer that such a move would put us at serious risk of seeing a statutory notice issued stopping discretionary spending, and take us close to having commissioners put in by Government to run our services. That is where the road of spending money in local government that you don't have takes you.

You urge a Council Tax and council rent freeze. In the case of Council Tax, we are one of relatively few local authorities to continue to provide full Council Tax relief to those on the lowest incomes, and the effect of such a freeze would simply be less money for the Council each and every year to provide services. In the case of council house rents (which are supported by housing benefit when they cannot be afforded), it would mean we would need to scale back our council house building programme. These are choices we have to make, and I think we owe it to people who rely on our services, on those who need our support, on those who will benefit from new council housing, not to run away from them.

We appreciate your comments about our new council house building programme. I am happy to reassure you we do not think that this represents the full scale of genuinely affordable housing that is needed: other affordable housing will be delivered through routes such as contributions from the planning system.

You imply that there are lots of services that we have outsourced that should be brought back in-house. I am puzzled by this, because at Oxford City Council we are not in the business of outsourcing services, instead we choose to retain services in-house and deliver them ourselves. I am surprised this approach is not being acknowledged and praised in the address.

It strikes me that what is being said here is really that we ought to avoid taking any difficult decisions in our budget. We ought to rip up our successful Oxford Model (which would have the effect of passing more work to private, for-profit companies). We ought to hammer our sources of income that enable us to fund our front-line services and build new council houses. We ought to make our budget balance by speculating that continued lobbying of Government will lead the Conservatives suddenly to release millions of pounds to us to fund services properly. If – or more likely when – that does not happen, then we would have no reserves left, we would be barred from discretionary spending, we'd be laying staff off left, right and centre, and we'd be letting down precisely the people we were elected to serve. I, for one, have no interest in being part of such an atrocious betrayal of my community.