

Liberal Democrat Budget Amendment Explanatory Notes

Our country is facing highly unusual circumstances: recovery from a two-year pandemic has combined with the fallout from Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine to yield a cost of living crisis not seen in decades. Our budget amendment seeks to take a mix of one-off and ongoing savings to provide short-term assistance to people in financial difficulty, as well as charting a long-term path to prosperity.

Proposed Savings

- We restore savings relating to archival and communications roles that were originally proposed in the budget for consultation, but which the administration has since removed. We believe that the council's functioning will not be significantly impeded, or else they would not have made it to the consultation budget stage to begin with, and while any role losses are regrettable we believe the funds can be directed to benefit people in acute need.
- We restore the Ward Members' Budget level agreed in last year's budget, forgoing the administration's proposed one-year rise. We note that individual members often under-spend this budget, which is understandable due to the work required to identify opportunities to use it, and believe that pooling it into a centralised hardship fund will make more effective use of the same money.
- We save on electoral services and members' allowances by adopting quadrennial elections and a single deputy leader rather than the administration's current two deputies, in common with many other local authorities.
- Finally, we propose a one-off sale of artworks from the town hall's collection that we do not believe represent either Oxford's past or the future to which it aspires, and therefore are better shown elsewhere. These are *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, *The Rape of the Sabines*, and a hunting trophy presented to James Morrell by the Berkshire Hunt depicting a man holding a fox over hounds. The three works have a collective market value of £284,000, with the one-off yield directed to a short-term extraordinary hardship fund. By selecting these particular pieces for sale to other galleries or collectors, the City Council can lean its public displays towards pieces that represent Oxford's heritage and values, and away from depictions of past brutality that bear no particular relation to our city.

Proposed Expenditure

- We propose the creation of a short-term hardship fund empowered to make extraordinary grants to people in financial difficulty. We face a cost of living crisis brought about by a mixture of Brexit fallout, the lasting effects of the

pandemic and the shorter-term energy crisis caused by Russian aggression, and central government's efforts to paper over the cracks have been exceedingly lacklustre. By providing a £100,000 supplementary fund for each of the next two years we aim to bolster the City's existing funds for people experiencing housing insecurity or other financial crisis and help as many people as possible feel secure in their everyday needs.

- We propose to restore the £45,000/yr Advice Development Fund that was cut in the previous year's budget. The cost of living crisis means that our advice services need all the funding they can get to help people in financial difficulty find and use the various national and local aid available – in particular, to engage with and access the hardship fund proposed above. In retrospect, February 2022 was the worst possible time for the administration to cut advice funding, with the war in Ukraine dramatically escalated by Russia's launch of a (thankfully completely unsuccessful) drive to take Kyiv just 8 days after the 2022 budget was set, with chaos in energy markets and prices setting in shortly thereafter. It is therefore time to reverse that cut and restore advice funding to its prior state.
- We propose to restore the £25,000/yr grant to Experience Oxfordshire that was recently eliminated. It is good to help people who are in financial crisis, but it is better still to help people to avoid falling into crisis in the first place. With local small businesses that rely on tourism placed under great strain by the pandemic, now is the time to restore funding to an organisation that promotes the city to visitors and thereby helps secure the prosperity of local firms. With every job loss avoided meaning less demand on the advice services and hardship funding described above, we believe this intervention is very likely to pay for itself in the long run.
- Finally, we look to the long term by investing in developing planning policy to get on top of our housing crisis and put Oxford's cost of living on a sustainable path. While Brexit, COVID and Putin have combined to deliver a disastrous short-term shock, we should not ignore that chronic scarcity of housing in Oxford means that the cost of living in our city was unacceptably high even before any of those events. Lack of affordable housing for key workers has been a problem in Oxford for decades, leading to financial strain as well as forcing people to commute long distances, which is bad for our environment as well as quality of life. Delivering housing by nibbling into green space either inside the city or on its fringes is both undesirable if avoidable and politically fraught: by developing the policy instruments to deliver residential densification, we can both spare green land and get on top of the housing shortage that is the root cause of unaffordable Oxford.