

The Green Group would like to extend our thanks to the finance team and all officers involved in the process of developing the budget this year. It is widely understood that the economic context this Council finds itself in is incredibly challenging. The aftermath of Covid-19, the energy crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have created conditions which have put huge pressure on all Councils, including this one. While this is undoubtedly true, it is also the case that the decisions of the Westminster government have exacerbated all of these pressures. Over a decade of austerity, the continued failure to invest in local government and a lack of willingness to tackle spiraling energy costs have left Councils in a dire situation. Until we have proper funding for local government and greater freedom to raise income locally, we will continue to be hampered from setting the kinds of budgets that all members would want to see.

While this Council has faced these challenges, the challenges the residents of our city face are far greater. That is why our budget amendment seeks to harness what power we do have to mitigate the worst effects of the cost of living crisis. Our amendment also recognises that the climate emergency is becoming ever more urgent and pressing, and that this Council can and should go further in taking action to address it.

The Green amendment would deliver a balanced revenue budget over the mid-term financial plan through investing in measures which would increase the income of the Council, enabling us to invest in projects which address the cost of living and climate crises.

Our budget amendment would invest in additional capacity for commercial property debt collection - an invest to save measure designed to reduce the provision the Council is currently making for bad debt from its commercial property portfolio. We believe the estimates of debt recovery made in this to be conservative.

It would also reorient a portion of the capital project away from 'regeneration' investment and instead into renewable energy, to support the Council's commitments to addressing the climate emergency and generating a modest financial return to the Council in years 3 and 4 of the MTFP. This investment is loaded at the back end of the MTFP to enable sufficient time to identify suitable projects and to lower the risk in the plan. Our group has long made the case that the Council should be reorienting its investments away from commercial property and towards more socially useful and financially viable investments, provided they comply with PWLB rules.

Our amendment would also utilise a small portion of the unforeseen 'windfall' generated by the deferral of central government policies in order to finance one-off spending to alleviate hardship in our city. While this would see an additional draw on reserves, the amendment would see more funds return to reserves than was in the administration's initial consultation budget. This hardship fund would be a substantial contribution to alleviating the worst effects of the cost of living crisis on Oxford's residents, creating a centrally held discretionary fund which can be distributed to service areas as needed.

In addition to these items, our budget would:

- Create new officer capacity for social prescribing, enabling a dedicated officer to be based in community centres across the city connecting residents to pre-existing activities and services which they may not otherwise be aware of.
- Utilise the saving from the scrapping of recycling banks to invest in wider work on developing Oxford's circular economy.
- Providing a publicity budget for small and independent businesses in non-city centre commercial zones, supporting initiatives already being done in communities across the city - such as Magdalen Village - that lack support and funding.
- Reduce the concessionary rate for garden waste bins to the level this fee was at before last year's budget.
- Create a fund and officer capacity for the development of pocket parks in under-utilised spaces across the city.