

## **Oxford Community Independents Budget Amendment explainer:**

We are disappointed (if not so surprised) that the Labour Group has tabled a “cuts budget”, with savings made against front line services. Our residents don't need more of the status quo: of service cutbacks and increased costs. They need a bold local authority that puts residents needs first and uses our influence to push for better from central government. Residents have come to expect the maximum allowable (without referendum approval) Council Tax increase of 2.99% each year. But let that not come with a worse service as well.

You don't need to look far in Oxford to find neighbourhoods that have been blighted by fly tipping. Whether it's discarded appliances, old furniture or bedding, this can be a public health hazard, is a nuisance, and makes our streets and estates look uncared for and neglected. Accumulation of litter and fly tipped items encourages further additions, exacerbating the issue. Rightly, the Council undertakes its duty to tackle and clean up after fly tipping. But, by that point the problem has already done damage, and we are forever playing catch up. The sad truth is that, as reasonable as we want our waste collection charges to be, there will be residents who would struggle to pay bulky waste collection charges. While discounted rates apply, only those on specific benefits are eligible. In any case, several bulky items can become very costly.

By resolving to introduce a “fly tipping amnesty”, 3 times per year (for 2 years), in the 9 most deprived Lower-layer Super Output Areas of the city, we would help: Clean up some of our most neglected estates; tackle persistent fly tipping issues; reinforce pride in the appearance of our neighbourhoods; residents dispose of waste responsibly; save many residents from paying costly charges that they may struggle to afford.

We need to do what we can to maintain the resident experience and frontline services. This is one of the most frequent gripes that we hear on the doorstep. Residents sometimes feel that the Council is remote and inaccessible, and unable to engage with their concerns. Cuts to front line services and digitalisation will serve to further frustrate access to Council services for many of the most vulnerable. There are still a significant number of people, not just the elderly, who do not access the internet, do not have a smart phone, or have email. Many more lack confidence with online access or simply prefer in person access. It is vital that this is maintained, and at current levels or better. For this reason, we would reverse the Customer Experience Programme savings from year 1 to 4.

Our community organisations, including advice centres, provide a vital service to local communities and to the whole city. Across those organisations, millions of pounds are saved for people who may be at significant risk of deprivation. This comes in the form of: successful benefit claims; emergency relief; debt relief; and more. Our grants allocations budget is returned, several times over, in positive financial outcomes for people in Oxford. This is why we believe our budget should seek to increase the grants budget from year 4.

We believe that the replacement of outdoor gym equipment is an unnecessary sweetener to a budget of cuts, with a “bung” of free leisure provision for Blackbird Leys Park. As much as research shows that outdoor equipment is well liked by those that use it, the levels of use by the wider public are harder to establish. On the other hand, Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre is very well used. Likewise, green spaces, that local residents have at times had to fight to protect due to threats of development, have clear value to the community. With no clear indicator that outdoor gym equipment in Oxford has a meaningful impact on public health and activity levels, that goes beyond the established provision of, for example, sports pitches and leisure centres, we find it hard to justify such an investment in replacing the current outdoor gym equipment provision.

With these albeit modest amendments, and other sensible amendments from opposition councillors, we can go some way to improving the lived experience in our city. We don't need to tie up our budget with gimmicks and nice spots for a photo opportunity, we need to have strong ideas that support our residents, and to maintain and improve the way that we deliver services and engage with residents.