



## City Budget Speech, given on 19 Feb 2018, by Green Group Shadow Portfolio Holder for Finance, Cllr Craig Simmons

This is the time of the year when the City sets the overall shape of its budget for the next four years.

As in previous years, the Opposition have taken an active role in shaping the budget. Finance Panel, and I must pay credit to my successor as Chair of Finance Panel, James Fry, for his hard work. We have prodded and poked the budget numbers, made many formal and informal recommendations; which have largely been accepted by CEB. I must pay tribute to officers as well – the finance team and officers across the organisation – for their hard work and their positive engagement with the scrutiny process.

That is as it should be as it creates a large degree of consensus around the budget, delivers a robust budget and leaves this debate to try and iron out any policy differences between the political groups.

Of course, the landscape outside this Council Chamber is also changing. We have a weak Government under the thumb of rabid right-wingers and a divided opposition. Unless much changes, this budget will span the countries departure from the EU – the significance of which to the economy, social and environmental policy cannot be under-estimated.

So, against this background of uncertainty, it is easy to lose focus. This Council must continue to challenge Government, of course, and vigorously oppose Brexit but it must also look at what it can do and how it can make this City better, more sustainable within its own limited sphere of influence.

I wrote down something that Cllr Rowley said at CEB earlier this month. He was talking about homelessness services, but what he said could just as easily be applied to any other services that we deliver. He said ‘we can pat ourselves on the back but we cannot relax.’.

**And as an opposition party we have a duty to make sure you do not relax but continue to question the decisions you make and why you make them.**

Perhaps the worst decision in this budget is to go ahead with the £3.5m expansion of Seacourt Park & Ride. The arguments have been well made in planning; it is costly, there is no demonstrable need, it will damage wildlife and it will ultimately attract more traffic on to our already congested ring road and radial routes out of the City.

But there are other bad decisions – to sell-off community facilities, spending more than £1.5m paving over parts of our estates. Cut voluntary sector grant, end small cycle scheme funding and so on.

There are also decisions that are well meaning – but simply don’t go far enough. If we are serious about reducing our carbon footprint – as we are committed to doing – then we need far more investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy than this budget provides. The same for homelessness, we need more money than has been committed to ensure that everyone that wants to can access a warm, safe bed at night and has the opportunity to contribute to society.

Our budget amendment goes a long way to address these shortfalls in the administration’s budget without attempting to unravel the good work that has been done.

At the heart of our budget amendment is a simple decision – what is most important; investing our limited financial capital in building more social infrastructure or expanding our car parking provision. Tarmac or more community facilities, homeless accommodation and reduced carbon emissions?



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For the Greens, this decision is a no-brainer morally, financially and environmentally. Our budget frees up close to £3.5m by cancelling the costly and environmentally damaging Seacourt P&R extension – we have also reversed the Administration’s decision not to go ahead with Park & Ride increases and implemented these along with the planned 1% increase in City Centre parking charges (the latter is less than inflation – we were told it amounted to 6% not 1%!). We have also roughly halved the money being spent on paving over green spaces in the estates.

We use this one-off money to avoid the sell-off of some community facility, top-up the SALIX Plus fund to allow investment in more carbon reduction projects and set aside £1m to provide capital to support improve homeless facilities in the City. We also recycle the money saved by not paving over green spaces in the estates back into the estates - to improve the green spaces and implement energy efficiency measures that will result in long term savings to residents. We have also purchased an additional street cleaning machine to allow existing staff to work more efficiently and in more comfort.

My colleagues will talk further about some of our spending plans, so I will be brief.

### **Our budget includes:**

- An extension to the small cycle schemes (which are current cut in Year2)
- Extension of the Police Community Support Officers from one year to four years
- Reinstate of voluntary sector grant – which is otherwise cut by £43k per year
- Increase in homelessness budget by an additional £200,000 starting immediately
- Aerial transport study
- Restoration and installation of seven water drinking fountains to cut down on single use plastics
- £20k each year to help with food poverty in the form of additional core support for initiatives such as Oxford Homeless Project, Food Bank and Community Emergency Foodbank
- £20k each year for a community climate fund – in the form of support available to low carbon groups
- A new pollution monitoring station in St. Clements. This street, the worst in Oxford, is not even monitored regularly.

What we have put together is a budget that, at an uncertain time, invests in this City’s homeless accommodation, community facilities and in tackling climate change.

As I said earlier, at the heart of our budget is a simple decision –what legacy do you want; more tarmac for parking cars or a healthier and happy community and a better environment? Your choice.