

Liberal Democrats Budget Amendments 2021/22

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Putting residents' priorities at the heart of Camden's recovery

Introduction

The past year has been incredibly difficult for communities in Camden and beyond. Residents have lost family, friends and neighbours to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated economic crisis is causing a sharp rise in unemployment. The number of people claiming out of work benefits in Camden rose by 162% between the first lockdown and November 2020, from over 4,000 residents to more than 11,000,¹ a snapshot of the financial hardship now facing so many. Unemployment is rising fastest among 16- to 24-year-olds, risking a lost generation, despite Government schemes intended to prevent this.

There were already serious challenges facing our borough before the pandemic, and the scale of the public health and economic crises that have emerged over the past year have only exacerbated these. From the climate emergency to the Conservative Government's disastrous Brexit deal (regrettably supported by Camden Labour MPs), to youth violence, rising unemployment, homelessness, and food poverty, for many the concept of 'recovery' will feel remote - even once a large section of the population has been vaccinated and, hopefully, the economy begins to open up again.

This is especially true for the families and individuals across Camden pushed into relative poverty for the first time over the past year, and the children and young people whose futures have been put at risk by severe disruption to their education and employability. At this critical moment, it is vital that the Council steps up to address the borough's most urgent challenges and alleviate their impact on Camden residents.

The Liberal Democrats believe now is the time for urgent action, backed up by immediate investment in our borough's people and their potential. That is why rather than holding on to excessive reserves, we propose using a £2.8 million pot of multi-year budget reserves, which officers previously identified as a reasonable sum to draw down,² to support those impacted most by the pandemic and ensure everyone is included in our borough's recovery. Of this £2.8 million of additional funding, the majority - almost £1.7 million - is allocated to children and young people.³

Our amendments do the following:

1. Protect homelessness prevention and temporary accommodation budgets
2. Repeat our call for a scoping study for an all-year-round night shelter for young people at risk of homelessness
3. Create a fund to support leaseholders affected by the cladding and wider building safety crisis
4. Double the Council's tree planting programme to tackle the climate emergency
5. Deliver additional funding to Camden's voluntary sector organisations so that they can provide food and other essential items for families in need as a result of the pandemic and its economic consequences
6. Improve IT and other infrastructure in community libraries, neglected despite the Council's £600,000 expenditure on upgrades to libraries it runs
7. Add resource for high street businesses needing to adapt in order to reach new customers
8. Tackle digital exclusion affecting the education and employability of children and young people
9. Make it possible for vulnerable young people to participate in schemes like Kickstart and apprenticeships

10. Expand the Council's youth safety work to focus on recruiting more youth workers.

These investments tackle the borough's most urgent issues including homelessness, the cladding crisis, the climate emergency, youth violence and unemployment, while investing in strengthening Camden's communities and local businesses so they can guide us into the recovery from the devastation wrought by the pandemic.

Ending homelessness

The Labour administration's three-year Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) has consistently made cuts to homelessness prevention and temporary accommodation management budgets, amounting to £724,000 being taken out of these services over the whole period. We believe this was the wrong decision, so we have found the means to protect these budgets over the last three years of our amendments.

Figures show the problem of homelessness has not gone away: record numbers of people were sleeping rough on the streets of London before lockdown - with Camden having the third highest number in the year to March 2020.⁴ The Government's 'Everyone In' strategy to help rough sleepers off the streets and move those unable to self-isolate in temporary accommodation into hotels should be welcomed, as should the Council's decision to place these people in the Britannia Hotel. It is now essential that the Government adopts a national Housing First approach, so that no one is forced to return to the streets as restrictions ease and a long-term solution is put in place to end homelessness.

Sadly, homelessness among young people has been rising as a result of the pandemic. According to New Horizon Youth Centre, one in 10 people sleeping on the streets is under 25.⁵ As service manager Meghan Roach says: "the problem is there is barely any emergency accommodation and none specific for young people, which is what is desperately needed."⁶ Camden Liberal Democrats have backed the charity's call for an all-year-round night shelter for young people. For the last three years, our amendments have put aside funding for a scoping study - asking the Council to work with the Mayor of London to identify how and where this could be established. We repeat that call in this amendment, noting that the Council has applied to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for funding to set up a 12-month emergency shelter - though this has not been specifically designated for young people and their needs.

We are further concerned by the slow pace of upgrades to the Council's temporary accommodation portfolio. Despite allocating almost £1.5 million⁷ to this project at the outset of the three-year MTFS, adopted in early 2019, poor planning and execution of this strategy meant that as of late December 2020, almost half of Camden families who were living in temporary accommodation in the England's Lane Residence had been moved out of the borough.⁸

We warned the Council not to end the lease on the England's Lane Residence early, before delivering sufficient replacement accommodation. But the administration pressed ahead with this plan, even during periods of lockdown, including in the run

up to Christmas, causing severe anxiety for many residents already in tough circumstances. Labour has let down those families, who report feeling ‘pressured’, ‘blackmailed’ and ‘bullied’⁹ into accepting accommodation outside of their home borough and support network. It is vital the Council learns lessons from its poor handling of this situation, maintains contact with the former residents and offers them a pathway back to the borough.

Supporting victims of the cladding crisis

More than three years after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it is a disgrace that thousands of Londoners are still living in potentially unsafe homes constructed with dangerous cladding and other materials. Here in Camden, a Liberal Democrat written question to the Cabinet Member for Better Homes revealed 70 private tall housing blocks have had to apply to MHCLG for funding for remediation works.¹⁰ Despite a subsequent announcement from the Secretary of State that leaseholders in such buildings would have the costs of these works met by Government, it has since transpired they will not be eligible for replacement cladding funding unless they can meet other costs relating to building safety works themselves. Residents living in buildings under 18 metres tall have also been excluded from funding guarantees, with the Government expecting leaseholders to take on loans and pay up to £50 a month to cover the cost of works.

The Liberal Democrats believe leaseholders should not have to pay a penny to make the buildings they live in safe. Responsibility clearly lies with building owners. In Parliament, on the London Assembly, and at council level, including here in Camden, the Lib Dems have consistently called for the Government to cover these costs and recoup them from building owners. In the absence of Government action, our budget amendment sets aside £250,000 to support leaseholders affected by this scandal - a fund which can be used to help cover legal and surveyor costs.

It is disappointing that the Labour administration has failed to proactively contact these Camden residents and offer them support, while doing little to stand up for them in public. Meanwhile residents living on the Chalcots Estate are still waiting for replacement cladding on their buildings, nearly four years since they were forced to evacuate their homes by the Council due to unsafe cladding of the same type used on Grenfell.

Cleaning up our air

Another urgent issue that has not gone away is the climate emergency. During lockdown, our city has been able to breathe cleaner air and nature has been able to thrive more freely. As human activity starts to return to normal levels alongside the planned easing of restrictions this year, so too emissions and pollution levels will increase. That is why the Council must take urgent action now to mitigate the impact of higher pollution levels, in addition to measures to encourage behavioural change that can help reduce emissions.

Our budget amendment last year called on the Labour administration to increase its tree planting programme by 50%. We are pleased that this proposal is now being

considered, albeit a year later, and that the Council may plant 600 trees instead of 400 - although it remains unclear when this target would be delivered by.

Every year we don't do enough is another year lost in the race to protect our planet from irreversible damage. So this year, we propose using the multi-year budget reserve to plant 800 trees - a doubling of the Council's existing target. We also think the Council should look at reducing its excessive maintenance budget, currently used to prune and pollard trees more than is necessary - which can be damaging for certain species. The savings could then be reallocated to increase Tree Preservation Orders for mature trees in the borough, preventing an overall loss of tree stock.

Strengthening local communities

The pandemic has placed unprecedented financial pressure on the organisations, businesses and people that strengthen our local communities. Yet they have responded in a generous and open-hearted way to support those most in need. When the Government refused to provide free school meals to families last year, local businesses, schools and individuals from right across the borough.¹¹ When older and vulnerable people were asked to stay at home and shield for months, residents organised themselves into Mutual Aid Groups to make sure none of their neighbours were left without food, medicine and friendship. Camden's voluntary sector organisations, from charities to faith groups to food hubs, have played a phenomenal role in helping to mitigate the worst effects of the crisis, from hunger to loneliness.

As liberals, we believe local government is at its most effective when it plays an enabling role for communities. That is why we have set aside a direct grant of £250,000 to fund 10 voluntary sector organisations in Camden helping to make sure families have the food and other supplies they need up until December, in recognition of the sad reality that many will continue to struggle even as the economy begins to open up over the coming months. With unemployment already rising, furlough ending in April, the continuation of some restrictions negatively affecting businesses, and a large number of individuals excluded from any financial support throughout the pandemic, for many these pressures will be too much to bear. The voluntary sector here in Camden has shown it can step up and support local communities at their time of need, so we think these organisations should be given direct financial support by the Council to continue carrying out their important work.

Life is expected to return to a degree of normality over the coming months, so now is the time to focus investment in the spaces where people from all parts of our community can come together. Our borough's community libraries already provide far more services than book lending alone. They are spaces for families to interact, residents to attend yoga classes, talks and live music sessions, as well as use a computer.

That is why for two years running, the Lib Dems have proposed a direct grant to community libraries to use as they see fit for infrastructure upgrades. While the Council has made a real terms investment of £370,000 in IT and other infrastructure upgrades for the libraries it runs over the past three years,¹² no

direct funding has been given to Camden's community libraries. Liberal Democrat councillors have provided local Community Investment Levy funds to the Belsize Community Library to help it reopen as well as carry out internal works, but we believe there should be a fund which all Camden's community libraries can apply for and access when needed. This investment is needed now, so that all people in Camden can enjoy our local libraries and benefit from their services once it is safe again.

Our high streets are the lifeblood of our local economies and communities. Outside central London, high streets are home to half of our capital's jobs. Having been forced to close for much of the past year, many businesses on the high street have had a tough time. The Liberal Democrats have called on the Government to extend the current business rates holiday until March 2022, including businesses outside of retail, hospitality and leisure, such as hairdressers. Furlough should be extended until December to protect jobs, given some businesses will not even be able to open again until mid-June.

The Council can also take steps to ensure our high streets not only survive, but thrive in future. For some small businesses, the shift to online sales has felt like a threat to their business model. But for those able to embrace change, this is also an opportunity to reach new customers. We welcome the Council's establishment of My Virtual Camden, an online directory listing small and independent businesses with some tools to help businesses make the transition to digital sales. However, this won't solve the whole problem for businesses needing to adapt. Some small businesses simply do not have the skills and capacity to spend time learning and exploring how to reach new customers online. That is why we are recommending the Council dedicates human resource to giving these businesses technical support, using a one-off £30,000 investment this year.

Investing in children and young people's futures

Children and young people are the future, yet their futures have been impacted most by the pandemic. In the last year, they've missed out on both education and work opportunities. The shift to online learning has put children from the poorest families at the greatest risk of falling behind, due to lack of access to their own devices and / or an internet connection. As of January 2021, 3,729 pupils in Camden still did not have their own device and 734 children did not have adequate internet access.¹³ Though schools are set to reopen on 8 March, these children still need devices to learn both inside and outside school. Young people also need devices and internet access in order to find employment opportunities. We have therefore set aside a £250,000 fund to subsidise laptop purchases and data to support children's education and young people's employability.

The scale of the jobs crisis risks having a devastating impact on young people, with unemployment rising fastest among 16- to 24-year-olds despite Government schemes such as Kickstart and the Apprenticeship Levy aimed at preventing this situation. London has the highest unemployment rate in the whole of the UK, at 7% as of December 2020.¹⁴ To help ensure young people in Camden don't become a lost generation, our biggest investment proposal is a fund that tops up the wages of vulnerable young people across Camden so they can access Kickstart and apprenticeship schemes on London Living Wage rather than National Minimum

Wage. This £600,000 sum would be enough for the equivalent of 100 care leavers aged 19 to 21 to participate in Kickstart on a full-time London Living Wage.

The Liberal Democrats are also campaigning for reform and expansion of the Apprenticeship Levy and Kickstart nationally, to improve take up by businesses. London-wide, we have proposed the creation of a London Apprenticeships Hub - so that young people can find opportunities easily and to encourage businesses to create more apprenticeships across the capital.¹⁵ Currently, only 8% of London businesses employ apprentices.

Making sure young people are not forgotten means urgent action to address youth violence. In the past year, knife crime and other incidents involving violence in Camden have been suppressed - partly due to multiple lockdowns since the pandemic began and partly as a result of successful action by the police. But sadly the risk of violent incidents occurring has not gone away, and local police expect this activity to rise again as restrictions ease.¹⁶ Across London, the Lib Dems are calling for the number of dedicated ward officers to be doubled, rising to four for each ward by 2024, and the reopening of 33 police stations closed by the Mayor of London.

But we also believe the violence taking place in our borough and across the capital cannot be resolved through enforcement alone, a belief that is backed up by evidence from a successful approach taken in Glasgow. We therefore propose investing in a significant expansion of the Council's youth safety work, to help prevent vulnerable young people being drawn into a dangerous life of crime. Our amendment would more than double the number of full-time youth officers working within the Council's Youth Violence and Exploitation Team, albeit on a year's contract towards the establishment of a larger team.

The Labour administration established the Youth Safety Taskforce in September 2017, and spent £270,000 establishing the Safer Camden Network last year, but it is unclear what either of these initiatives have achieved. Furthermore, almost two million pounds will have been cut from the Council's youth safety services over the lifetime of the three-year MTFs, with the deepest cuts of £629,600 taking place in the upcoming financial year (2021/22).¹⁷ To repair some of this damage, we propose an investment of £573,000 into direct recruitment of more youth officers this year to help vulnerable young people realise their potential and avoid a life of crime.

Overall, our budget amendments add almost £1.7mn of extra funding¹⁸ to make sure children and young people have the best start in life during a critical year for their development.

The Council has the wrong priorities

We were surprised to discover that the Labour administration is holding back £2.8 million previously earmarked from the Multi-Year Budget Reserve, which could be spent on tackling the borough's most urgent challenges and supporting the Camden community's recovery from the pandemic. According to the MTFs Review Paper put forward in December:

“Officers have carried out an initial exercise to identify ‘earmarked’ reserves that may no longer be required for their stated purpose. An initial review of the reserves has identified reserves within the Council ‘Multi-Year Budget Reserve’, (reserves held for potential future pressures whose timing is unclear) of £2.8m that are no longer required for their stated purpose.” ¹⁹

After a year that has brought such hardship for so many in our borough, and with another year of economic difficulty anticipated, we believe now is the time to invest in the people of Camden and their needs.

We call into question the work of the Council’s Renewal Commission, which we previously welcomed and supported as a good initiative in principle, but appears not to have taken any meaningful action since it was established in June 2020. The Commission is estimated to be costing Camden taxpayers £25,000, money that could otherwise be spent on direct support to Camden families and individuals in need.

The Camden Learning ‘Coming Back Stronger’ Strategic Board, consisting of the Lead Member, Director, two people from Camden’s Educational Group, a Trade Union representative, an academic from UCL and two consultants, is meanwhile costing the Council an additional £25,000 to £30,000. The board does not include any parents, teachers, college lecturers, employers, or young people. This money could be spent elsewhere, including on direct investment in the immediate needs of children and young people.

We are also yet to receive a satisfactory answer about the work of the Participation Team, costing half a million pounds, which boasts of “ensuring residents’ voices are at the centre of shaping neighbourhoods and creating a more inclusive borough”, but appears to be undertaking work in arbitrarily-chosen areas, including Euston, Gospel Oak, Haverstock, and Fortune Green.

Finally, the Liberal Democrat Group does not agree that now is the right time for councillors’ allowances to be raised while so many residents are in financial difficulty. This year we are opposing an increase, in favour of a one-year freeze. That cost is equivalent to our proposal to invest in technical support for high street businesses needing to adapt to online marketing and selling, and double the amount needed to restore funding for health and support for homeless people on the streets for one year.

Conclusion: urgent action and investment is needed now

The next municipal year will be vital for determining the future of Camden and its residents, many of whom have suffered substantial hardship as a result of the pandemic. In order to help our communities heal, the Liberal Democrats believe the Council should be using its resources to support our borough’s recovery and make sure no one is left behind. Labour often speaks of this ambition, but seems unwilling to put it into practice. Our amendments offer practical solutions to ensure those hit hardest by the impact of the pandemic including the homeless, leaseholders trapped in potentially unsafe buildings, families in poverty, and children and young people receive the support they need to get through what is likely to continue to be a difficult 2021 and have a chance of living better, fuller

lives. We also look to the future with cautious optimism and give meaning to the Conservative Government's otherwise empty phrase 'Build Back Better', by investing in the fabric of our local communities including our libraries, small businesses and environment.

Comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services

The Executive Director Corporate Services confirms that, should the amendments be agreed, the assurances required by Section 25 of the Local Government Act [2003](#) with regard the adequacy of the reserves and the robustness of the estimates have been met and, therefore, that this still constitutes a balanced budget for [2020/21](#). The Executive Director Corporate Services or other officers have not been able to give these proposals the depth of consideration and due diligence to be able to recommend this as a course of action. It has not been possible to make a full and comprehensive assessment of the impact of these proposals (such as those linked to the future use of our buildings or the impact on the existing workforce) and the associated implementation issues and risks.

It should also be noted that the full economic and social impact of the Covid pandemic into [2021/22](#) is not yet known. The social and economic impact of any ongoing measures to address the pandemic may adversely impact the viability of the proposals.

Table 1: Liberal Democrat Group 2021/22 Budget Amendments

Permanent/ One-off	Proposal	2020/21 Estimate
1.		
Investments		
One-off	Restore funding for Improving Health and Support Provision for Street Population	15
One-off	Restore funding for homelessness prevention	100
One-off	Restore funding for temporary accommodation service management	158
One-off	Partially restore funding for adult hostels	300
One-off	Scoping study for all-year round night shelter for young people	10
One-off	Support for leaseholders affected by the cladding and wider building safety crisis	250
One-off	Double tree planting across the borough	180

One-off	Support for 10 voluntary sector organisations assisting families facing food poverty up until December	250
One-off	Funding for community libraries to upgrade their IT and infrastructure	114
One-off	Technical support for high street businesses to help market their services online	30
One-off	Laptop and internet connection subsidies to tackle digital exclusion among Camden children and young people	250
One-off	Top up wages of vulnerable young people across Camden to improve access to Kickstart and pay them London Living Wage	600
One-off	Add 13.6 new full-time youth officers to the Youth Violence and Exploitation Team for one year	573

TOTAL
INVESTMENT
S in 2021 /
22: 2,830

2. Savings		
One-off	Freeze all councillors' allowances for one year, instead of a 2.75% increase	(30)

TOTAL SAVINGS in 2021 / 22: 30

Savings plus transfer from multi-year budget reserves: 2,830

	2020 / 21 estimate e £000	
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Sum of budget amendments	(2,800)	
Transfer to/ (from) reserves	(2,800)	Multi-year budget reserve recommended
Net budget	0	Amendments are required to balance to zero, as per statutory requirements.

Proposed by: Cllr Luisa Porritt

Seconded by: Cllr Flick Rea

¹ [2021/22 Revenue Estimates and Council Tax Setting](#), Report to the Resources and Corporate Performance Scrutiny Committee, 22 February 2021, p.41

² [Review of the Camden Medium-Term Financial Strategy \(CS/2020/30\)](#), Report to the Resources and Corporate Performance Scrutiny Committee, 14 December 2020

³ Our proposed investments in research towards a dedicated shelter for young people at risk of homelessness, food and other supplies for families in poverty, devices and internet connection subsidies for children and young people, funding to help young people access Kickstart and other schemes on a decent wage, and investment in additional youth officers collectively amount to £1,683,000.

⁴ Rough sleeping in London, [CHAIN reports](#), GLA

⁵ [More rough sleepers are now under 25 due to pandemic](#), Camden New Journal, 12 February 2021

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ This figure represents the real terms investment, after £2.72mn of investment and £1.25mn of cuts

⁸ [‘It’s torture’: Homeless single mothers on fear of being ‘shipped’ out of Camden](#), Ham & High, 22 December 2020

⁹ [‘Dumped and forgotten’: Homeless families on life in England’s Lane Hostel](#), Ham & High, 24 February 2021

¹⁰ [Written Questions from Councillors](#), Question 1 to the Cabinet Member for Better Homes by Cllr Flick Rea, Council Meeting, Monday 18 January 2021, p.3

¹¹ [Donations keep CNJ food van rolling!](#), Camden New Journal, 29 October 2020

¹² Libraries as community hubs, Project Reference 44, [Camden Council’s Medium-Term Financial Strategy](#), p.85

¹³ According to Martin Pratt, Executive Director for Supporting People, this number is expected to lower for the month of February, following fundraising for devices by the Council

¹⁴ [Labour market in the regions of the UK: February 2021](#), Office for National Statistics, 23 February 2021

¹⁵ [Luisa Porritt: Apprenticeship hub could help lost generation](#), This Is Local London, 17 February 2021

¹⁶ [Kentish Town murder stab victim named as Jack Ampadu](#), Camden New Journal, 18 February 2021

¹⁷ 'Youth safety and support into adulthood,' Table 1: Summary of savings and investments, [Camden Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy](#), p.16

¹⁸ See endnote 3.

¹⁹ [Review of the Camden Medium-Term Financial Strategy \(CS/2020/30\)](#), Report to the Resources and Corporate Performance Scrutiny Committee, 14 December 2020, para 2.43