

Oxfordshire County Council Report 2010/11

The Oxfordshire County Council

Conservative controlled that provides around 80% of the County's local authority services. These include social care, schools & children's services, waste management, trading standards, roads, transport planning, land use, countryside, the registration service, the fire and rescue service, countryside service, libraries, museums, emergency planning, public health and Youth services.

Cabinet Membership - Councillors

Keith R Mitchell CBE	Leader of the Council
David Robertson	Deputy Leader of the Council
Arash Fatemian	Cabinet Member for Adult Services
Ian Hudspeth	Cabinet Member for Growth & Infrastructure
Jim Couchman	Cabinet Member for Finance & Property
Kieron Mallon	Cabinet Member for Police & Policy Co-ordination
Louise Chapman	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Families
Michael Waine	Cabinet Member for Schools Improvement
Rodney Rose	Cabinet Member for Transport
Mrs J Heathcoat	Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger Communities

Budget Setting

The Cabinet Member for Finance & Property's report to Cabinet on 25 January 2011 set out the strategy that this administration has taken to deliver a well planned and financially sound budget and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for the authority whose key aims are delivering high quality services to the residents of Oxfordshire within a challenging and necessary period of public sector spending constraint.

Even though this year has seen an unprecedented reduction in the resources available to the Council, it still delivered a budget within the framework set out in the Corporate Plan. **Council Tax has been frozen (0% increase)** owing to our long-term prudent planning and to the grant from the Government; **Real choice is** still being provided in many of the services, although that choice has had to be reduced in some areas; and the Council is continuing to provide those services with **improving cost effectiveness** year on year.

The Council's medium term objectives have been reviewed and it has been concluded that they remain broadly the drivers for growth in Oxfordshire through which the Council can provide leadership and ensure a prosperous future for its citizens. Understandably, in the current economic climate, the Council needs to ensure that services are efficient and modernised. The Corporate Plan sets out the detail of the Council's vision and the delivery plan proposed for the coming year based on:

- (a) Growing our World Class Economy
- (b) Promoting Healthy & Thriving Communities
- (c) Combating Climate Change & Improving Our Environment
- (d) Delivering Efficient Public Services

With the cross-cutting theme of Breaking the Cycle of Deprivation.

The Plan links to the Business Strategies for each of the directorates that have been updated and are available on the internet (www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/businessstrategies).

Low Taxes – the level of Council Tax

The Council's Medium Term Plan reflected the Conservative Party manifesto that promised a freeze on Council Tax for two years, with the provision of a grant to support those authorities that restricted the effective increase to 2.5%. Having found the national finances to be in a much worse position than expected, the coalition Government has still been able to provide that grant for 2011/12 and this has made it possible to freeze the Council Tax for the residents of Oxfordshire.

The previously planned increase of 2.5% for next year is reflected in the Council's revenue plans, in the hope that the Government may yet find a way to maintain the grant to enable the freeze on Council Tax to be for two years. In the future, though, it is expected inflation to have risen by 2013/14 and that will mean that the Council Tax level may have to rise to maintain services.

Prioritisation

The two areas that have been protected from front line service reductions are Children's Social Care and the Fire & Rescue Service. Both of these are life saving services that help those at their most vulnerable. For other service areas, the Council is prioritising, through the service and resource planning process, the challenges facing the County Council. This ensures that the County Council will continue to deliver excellent services to its customers within a greatly reduced financial envelope.

Other Service Changes

The Council's budget has been examined line-by-line, debating priorities and looking across directorates. Consideration has been given to the needs of the many communities, including those through an overarching equality impact assessment. As well as scrutinising the three large directorates, the Council has also scrutinised senior and middle management, the corporate core, shared services, property and elected members' costs. Consistently looking "outside the box" for innovation and different service delivery models that are able to meet need from a much reduced resource base. Senior management posts will have been reduced by 40% by the end of the current financial year. The process continues through the management structure, considering levels of management and spans of control. Assessment of management will continue for some time to ensure that the Council has an affordable and effective structure in the new financial regime. Elected members have contributed to savings by sharing the staff pay freeze and reduction in travel expenses; by deleting the political assistant posts for the three main parties and by a successful bid to the Boundary Commission to reduce the number of Councillors by approximately 10 from the next elections in 2013.

Careful thought has been given to relative priorities for those service areas that have not been ring-fenced. It was found to be unacceptable to exempt other areas from cuts and it has been necessary to work on the basis that all services needed to start from a broadly similar level of cuts.

Public attention has inevitably focused on those services nearest to them in proximity if not always in usage. Libraries have dominated the media and the post-bags of members. Despite the fact that the library service has gross expenditure of only £8.7m compared to £973m for the Council as a whole. The library service is asked to find the same level of savings as other services and has been able to show how those savings could be delivered by offering a radical new approach to a 21st century service with more emphasis on electronic provision and community engagement.

Many libraries with the lowest footfall may have to close if not taken over by local communities and help provided by the Big Society Fund. There are many difficult issues that will have to be addressed with great care after the consultation stage.

The youth service faces significant change from a generic service to one based on seven hubs but designed to provide significant outreach, targeted at young people and their families with the greatest need. This will require a significant culture change from staff currently working in different Council areas. Many youth facilities already operate without County Council funding or intervention and it is hoped that communities will apply Big Society principles where they see a local need that the Council cannot afford to fund. Early plans anticipated closure of youth facilities with effect from 1 April 2011, however recognising that decisions will take longer to implement, the Council has set aside some of the recently identified additional funding, to allow more time to deliver plans for the Early Intervention Service, including the impact on the Council's property portfolio.

It is hoped that the consultation process will help communities to develop Big Society solutions and new models, enabling them to retain the best attributes of their local library or youth centre that the County Council can no longer afford to fund in whole or in part. It is anticipated that the Council will support serious community bids in relation to these and other Council services.

A Big Society fund has been established to support such bids. It will be one-off funding designed to support change, not to perpetuate delivery models that are no longer affordable.

A considerable worry is that the largest single area of cuts lies in social care, including older people, learning disabilities, physical disabilities and mental health. A service that accounts for some £250m of spending per annum cannot be exempted from the scale of cuts that the Council faces. Both the Adult and Children's directorates have taken the decision to exempt Support for Carers and Young Carers from any cuts. However, the rest of social care faces real challenges in delivering serious levels of cuts. Given the Council's close working with the NHS, this will require the most careful of monitoring.

Children, Education & Families have lost many specific grants providing the directorate with an opportunity to review and restructure so as to concentrate on its highest priorities. There is continuing investment of over £34m in schools through the capital programme, with priority being given to the provision of school places, and essential maintenance.

Environment & Economy is a critically important directorate if the Council is to support Oxfordshire's private sector in growing to fill the gap left by a downsized public sector. This does not mean it has been exempted from a fair share of cuts. The "easy" solution of making huge revenue cuts in highway maintenance has been resisted, conscious of the damage from the recent severe weather that needs addressing. The Council's new highways contract is expected to contribute significantly to real savings while continuing to address road condition. There is continuing capital investment in the transport infrastructure of over £19m. Although reduced from previous years, the Council has been able to continue to fund key road maintenance schemes.

Securing Secretary of State support for the energy-from-waste facility provides welcome relief from the costs of continuing to dispose waste to landfill. The Council is also investing from its capital programme in waste recycling centres, along with essential maintenance of its public buildings and provision of extra care housing.

It is anticipated that military repatriation will be returning to RAF Brize Norton soon and a modest sum, to deal with the public engagement and transport implications has been set aside. Similarly, the Council has planned for a small sum in 2012/13 to deal with the transport implications of the Olympic Torch passing through the County. The Council aspires to work with the military community in Oxfordshire to further the social and economic well being of service personnel and their dependents.

Efficient Public Services

Delivering savings targets and changing work patterns – much work has already been done, with more to come. Top tiers of management have been reduced by 40%, and further work on the next tiers are being undertaken also reducing back office costs to ease the impact of cuts on frontline services. Changes are being made to the way the Council works, including re-engineering staff working practices and processes. The property portfolio is being rationalised to reduce the ongoing costs and achieve capital receipts where possible. This also links to delivering more joined up services with the Council's partners, looking at co-location or new ways of delivering services. This includes taking a stronger commercial approach and looking at strategic partnering options with the private sector. The conditions of service have been revised, including reducing redundancy payments and freezing increments for most staff to help meet our savings targets.

Conclusion

The Council's Revenue and Capital Financial Plans for 2011/12 to 2015/16 delivers Low Taxes, Real Choice and Value for Money for Oxfordshire County Council. It achieves this in a prudent and sustainable form, against a continuing background of economic problems, a large structural imbalance in the national finances and anticipated severe cuts in public spending.

Your local Councillor

Elected Vice-Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council on 6th April'10. Presently serves on the following working groups: - Local Transport Plan No.3, and Minerals & Waste. A public combined consultation on the preferred spatial strategy for mineral working also for a preferred waste spatial strategy will take place during June/July 2011. Of local matters, has pressed for more road safety measures, and has been taking particular interest in safety issues on the Reading Road (A329) concerning the Fairmile development. Continues to press for better and a quicker response to road repairs. Has frequently requested for more speed checks and enforcement measures in 30mph limits within the Moreton Division.

Your Division member thanks the Parish Councillors for their co-operation throughout the year.

Cllr Patrick Greene - Moreton Division – Oxfordshire County Council – April 2011