

Councillor Lindsay Ferris – Budget Speech

The Conservatives have now been in control of Wokingham Borough Council for 16 years and it badly shows.

The Council has been drifting for the last 18 months or more, it is rudderless. The ruling group has run out of ideas, is split on many issues, in-fighting has been rife, but more importantly they have lost their focus, we have thought for some time that the ruling Group put self-interest and the Tory Party ahead of the residents of Wokingham Borough – now it seems even more the case.

With that in mind it is time we, the Liberal Democrat Group provide an alternative budget, one which addresses the needs of local residents.

It is vital that local services are supported. Once a Council stops providing, or severely cuts these services, one must ask the Question “What is the Council for?”

Under the Conservatives the Council has focussed too heavily on a **21CC restructure unproven in any Unitary Authority** to save money and has continued with this proposal come what may. Anyone who has questioned this activity has been pushed aside, or ignored, Children’s Services & Adult Social Care in particular require significant levels of staffing to provide for some of the most vulnerable in our community. This restructure has also caused confusion for many staff whose morale is at the lowest level I have encountered whilst being on the Council.

This year, Lib Dems would invest an additional £2.1M into Adult Social Care plus just under £1.0M across all other services, including Children’s Services and Highways. This is over and above the £1.9M required to just stand still due to reductions in Government settlements and other reasons that the ruling group has already

agreed to nationally. It is not all the Tory Governments fault; the fault lies with WBC Tories as well and residents need to be aware of this.

There are far too many interim (temporary) staff, particularly at more senior levels. I have been advised that there are just under 70 temporary staff (at the last count). This is not good for the efficient running of the Council. Here the Lib Dems would cut the allowed budget for interim staff from the current figure of £3.5M to £2.5M next year and then £1.5M the following year. We would achieve this by employing fewer staff on contracts that require us to pay agency fees every week and if we have to have temporary staff, employ them on short term contracts instead. It is about time the Tories allowed the Council to recruit good permanent staff. Without these people the Council cannot do its job properly and the drift will continue.

The **Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration project** is based on information that is now nearly 10 years out of date. The Tory administration has largely ignored the changes that are now occurring on the High Street with the growth in internet click & collect services. Over the past few years High Street footfall across the Country has fallen markedly with many well-known Companies closing stores in many parts of the Country including Wokingham with the recent closure of M&S. Our concern is that this project is ploughing on despite all the evidence that change is happening and this Tory administration does not have the courage to realise there is a need for a change in direction. The days of the large multi-store are numbered. On line purchases have grown significantly over these past 4-5 years whilst traditional shopping activities have fallen. We are concerned this project may well leave the residents of Wokingham Borough with a large debt to pay. Costs for this self-contained project have increased significantly these past couple of years from under £80M to over £120M thereby reducing any financial benefits that were originally budgeted for. Its continued viability must now be questioned.

Not only that but the works taking place have made Wokingham Town look like a bomb site. There is little or no coordination between the individual elements of the schemes. It would have made much more sense to complete Peach Place prior to moving onto the next stage as the Lib Dems argued. The dates for the various individual projects have changed so that now they are all clashing with one another. Existing local businesses have been forgotten and unfortunately a number have closed these past months. What good will the Regeneration be, if the existing businesses have been either seriously financially impacted, or worse. There is no leadership here. Lib Dems' first action would be to call for a **Moratorium on the Project** before further stages commence to assess whether the activities are still correct and to assess the financial impact on the Council & its residents.

One of the most important issues for many of our residents is finding somewhere affordable to live. I know many local parents who still have their adult children living with them, many in their 20's or 30's and some even in their 40's with little or no hope of finding somewhere affordable locally to live. Older residents also have their problems too. Many want to downsize from their homes, but cannot find anywhere suitable.

The Liberal Democrats would invest in local housing under the banner HOMES FOR LOCAL PEOPLE.

We would expand the capability of Wokingham Housing Limited (WHL) to build truly affordable homes, for purchase and rent, including council houses, from the current average of 60 homes a year to one that can produce between 200 & 250 homes a year. We would gear WHL up to be able to achieve this level of building over a 2 to 3 year period. There is a desperate need to provide truly affordable one bedroom and two-bedroom properties for local young people, plus we would build purpose built one & two-bedroom bungalows suitable for older people to live in for the rest of their lives. If the developers, who

are driven by profit will not build these properties then a Lib Dem Council will.

This will require investment, we estimate around £20M over a two-year period, and a drive from within the Council. Lib Dems say the time is right for the Council to step in where the developers and the Tory Led Council have persistently failed. A Council's motivation should be for the needs of the residents, this Tory led council has lost its way.

Schools/Education Department. Lib Dems will continue to press the Government for proper fair funding, not one that just moves our area slightly up the table so we are the 4th worst instead of the worst. The Council has a severe financial problem in Children's Services. There is an overspend in the 2017/18 budget, due to the serious omission of £300K to cover basic services. In addition, the Tory Government has not given any additional funding this year to cover Children's Services. Lord Porter Chairman of the LGA and Tory Peer earlier this month said *"local authorities face a funding gap of more than £5bn by 2020, but Children's Services was the area most in need of urgent attention"*. This issue will need to be addressed urgently, otherwise the viability of certain parts of this vital area will be in doubt.

Highways – Lib Dems will push for **infrastructure first** followed by the homes we need. This will help with some of the traffic problems that have occurred these past years. Basic Road repairs are an important issue and has been largely ignored by the Tory Administration. We would set up a proper assessment capability to ensure that the most deserving roads are addressed, rather than residential roads in wards where existing Tory Councillors will shortly be up for re-election.

The Highways Department requires a complete overhaul and is struggling to cope. All the roads currently under construction, or in the planning have been delayed for one reason or another. These delays will only exacerbate the situation over the coming years.

Adult Social Care requires a truly National cross-party response. The use of Council Tax to cover Adult Social Care costs is in our view only a temporary measure. In the long term there needs to be a dedicated NHS & Care Tax, based on a reformed National Insurance system, with the ability to set this figure locally, so we can more accurately meet our own local needs.

This year Lib Dems propose to increase the budget for Adult Social Care by £2.1M. However again we are hampered by yet another over spend, this time in the region of £770K, the majority of which needs to be covered in the 2018/19 budget. Lib Dems have therefore front loaded our increases for Adult Social Care into this year, but have left a small increase capability for next year.

There has to be a clear line of income that can be achieved by the Council. Lib Dems would look at more innovative ways of increasing revenue streams. The old adage of just putting up fees and the like will not be sufficient and in some cases can be counter-productive.

The finances of Wokingham Borough Council are severely stretched by a combination of Tory National cuts and local Tory mismanagement. Not only has the Council needed to find £1.9M just to stand still, it has had to cover just over £1M in over spends from last financial year. Hardly a good recommendation for so called Tory prudent management.

The increases indicated in this speech would work out at a 5.2% increase in Council Tax.

Lindsay Ferris

Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Wokingham Borough Council & Member for Twyford

22nd February 2018

This page is intentionally left blank