

## **Green and Independent Group**

### **Budget Submission for General Fund**

**23 February 2023**

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### **Introduction**

The group is pleased to present its General Fund budget submission which will be presented jointly by Cllrs Davies and Bennett.

Our reports include:

An update on our last year's budget suggestions ("NB")

Our new budget proposals:

Regeneration of the Market ("SD")

Elections and democratic engagement ("NB")

There will also be brief comments on our general approach. As usual, our report will be as informal and accessible as we can make it and make minimal use of formal accounting analysis.

We believe "less is more" and have chosen to comment on two items in depth rather than doing a line by line analysis.

**The recommendations proposed (which are for separate votes) are:**

A To reallocate the proposed £35k saving from the unused tourism budget (\$5104) and the proposed £25k increased income from the cessation of the market traders Direct Debit reduction (115138) to enable the recruitment of further staff to the central market team.

B To note and to reflect upon of the recommendations in section 3 and convene a cross party group to meet at regular intervals with a view to placing final proposals before full council in early 2024.

**Climate change, equality and anti-poverty implications**

Supporting the Central Market:

- **Equality impact** – No impacts have been identified based on information in this proposal.
- **Climate Rating** – Nil Climate Change rating as no direct impact on emissions.
- **Anti-Poverty Rating** – No impact based on information in this proposal as does not directly impact on people's income.

**Section 25 Report**

This budget amendment would not require any substantive changes to the existing Section 8 – Section 25 Report. **[Section 8, Page 32 refers]**

The overall financial impact of the amendment is to use a saving of £35k (\$5104) and increased income of £25k (115138) to fund a bid of £60k for staff costs. This results in an increase in the five-year net new savings requirement of £60k, to £11.158m. Over a five-year period, these amendments would result in a reduction in the GF reserve balance of £300k.

**I therefore consider, in relation to the budget resulting from the application of these amendments, the estimates for the financial year**

**2023/24 to be sufficiently robust and the financial reserves up to 31  
March 2024 to be adequate.**

**Caroline Ryba  
Head of Finance and S151 Officer**

## **1 An update on our last year's budget suggestions**

In 2022, we raised the following concerns:

- 1.1 The need for simpler and clearer information so that we can all participate in the budget process on equal terms.
- 1.2 The decarbonising of our treasury reserves
- 1.3 The cruel and cynical farce of central government funding that pits councils against each other in what Mayor Streets has described as a "begging bowl" culture and sabotages the city's climate emergency work
- 1.4 The annual grant treadmill that we ourselves inflict on the charities and community groups the city supports.

We would like to thank our fellow councillors for listening to and sharing our concerns and for officers to the very substantial work put in towards these goals.

We made it very clear from the outset that we were looking for step by step improvement rather than overnight change. We welcome the changes already started and are eager to see more over the coming year. We are delighted that you supported our suggestion of protecting the communities grants pot from further cuts and getting better value for money by reducing the administrative burden of charities and community groups We are particularly keen to see greater use of three yearly grants and will continue to look for updates on progress.

We hope that you will treat this year's budget concerns with the same openness and acceptance

## **2 Supporting the Central market**

The first of our budget amendments this year is designed to safeguard the central role of the market, and its traders, in our city

Markets have always been at the heart of urban spaces and human connection. In the C21st, they offer a unique environment for providing locally distinctive, sustainably sourced goods and services which appeal to both permanent residents and temporary visitors. They act as a seedbed for new locally-owned micro-businesses, contributing to community wealth building. In addition to these functional benefits, they are a focus for civic identity and civic pride.

But markets need nurturing and proactive management to ensure their vitality and their relevance. And while this Council has recently devoted considerable time to consideration of the future of our Market Square, the physical space in which our market sits, the market itself has been battered and buffeted by the dual effects of the Covid pandemic and changing shopping habits. Although footfall in the city centre has largely recovered to pre-pandemic levels, the market has lost eight of its most senior traders in the last year. And looking ahead, the prospect of the disruption ensuing from the proposed heat pump exploratory project may cause further traders to reduce or cease trading, and dissuade others from starting.

Through this difficult period, officers in the Markets team have worked hard to promote the market, keep it a clean and safe location, and maintain positive working relationships with the traders. But there is only one permanent member of staff and two agency staff Pressures on team members

mean that they are too often working reactively - troubleshooting - rather than proactively, strengthening and developing the market, bringing on the next generation of traders and embedding it as a central element of our civic infrastructure.

For this reason, the Green and Independent group is proposing to redirect the proposed £35k saving from the unused tourism budget (\$5104) and the proposed £25k increased income from the cessation of the market traders Direct Debit reduction (115138) to enable the recruitment of staff to bring the team back to its full complement. This will ensure that it is in the best possible shape to both help with continued economy recovery and prepare for the next phase in the market which has been an enduring focal point for our city and served its citizens for hundreds of years.

### **3 Elections and democracy**

#### **3.1 Budget Proposals**

Our comments relate to the following proposals:

URP5012 Increase in Members' allowances of £80,000 a year (total, all members)

URP5036 Increase in cost of running city council elections of £76,000 in 2023/24 falling to £50,000 a year thereafter

B5037 Cost of Electoral Support Officer of £30,000 a year due to loss of government funding

#### **3.2 Low voter turnout**

It will come as no surprise to councillors that there was little enthusiasm in the Citizenlab responses for any additional spending in this area. Only two in five adult residents vote in our council elections. When the turnout goes over 40%, we cheer.

With the voter ID changes coming in from May, we fear that voter turnout could drop even further. We would like to re allocate costs within this cost centre to help residents get ready to vote.

### **3.3 Attracting working age councillors**

The basic member allowance is £5554. This works out to just under 10 hours per week at the current Real Living Wage or 5 hours per week at the average city wage.

During the Executive Council meeting on February 8, I listened to a discussion about how raising this allowance by £1 a day rather than 50p a day would help the council continue to attract working age councillors and ensure our demographic as councillors reflected our city.

While this aim is praiseworthy it ignores a much more serious barrier, which is councillor hours. And this is not just an issue for working age councillors, but all councillors.

It is not a new problem as this Guardian article shows.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/apr/30/abuse-long-hours-and-pitiful-pay-younger-councillors-abandon-local-politics>

Last year, the council's independent remuneration adviser made a number of recommendations on managing councillor hours. No steps have been taken to implement this report despite general acceptance of the points made.

We accept that it is not politically acceptable to raise councillor allowances and may not be for a long time. Surely this makes it even more important to manage councillor hours and efficiency?

Without such a commitment, there is no prospect of a £1 a day pay rise achieving the stated goal.

### **3.4 Local area committees**

A discussion has already been had about abolishing area committees. Few councillors seem to have a good word for them or find them an effective means of fostering local engagement.

We propose that area committees are scrapped from 1 April 2024 and that each ward is allowed to make its own arrangements for local engagement and provided with its own small share of community grant and environmental improvement pots. Public art ward pots (where these are still held) could also be allocated at ward level meetings with each ward making its own recommendation to the relevant executive councillor.

Wards would be free to work with either democratic services or the local stakeholders of their choice to facilitate meetings. Rather than trying to attract residents to council meetings, we could take the functions of those committees out to community events where residents already go.

### **3.5 Planning and regulatory sub committees**

Three councillors are considered enough for licencing subcommittees but we expect a full complement on the equivalent planning committees. This may be justified when dealing with a major or controversial scheme. However, it seems disproportionate and intimidating to have the full committee sitting on minor matters. A smaller subcommittee for minor planning matters could reduce waiting times and increase resident satisfaction. It is proposed that these changes are introduced from 1 April 2024.

### **3.6 Moving to all in, all out elections- cash savings**

URP 5036 calls for additional costs to cover the rising costs of council elections. Democratic services say that their best estimate of election costs is expected to be £110,000 in 2023/24. However,



election costs vary from year to year depending on what other elections (Mayor, PCC, General and County)

URP stands for Unavoidable Revenue Pressure which suggests that this expenditure is inevitable. However, it is only inevitable if we continue to have annual local elections rather than switching to all in all out elections every four years.

If such a change were to be made, the earliest date it could be introduced would be 2024 so there would be plenty of time to prepare for the change. In practice, 2026 would be a more plausible start date.

For this reason, cost reductions would not be immediate, but would be substantial.

The two tables at the end show the expected costs if no change is made and if we switch to all in all out elections on the earliest practical date.

The saving over 4 years would be £220,000

This could be used to cover B5037 (Electoral Support Officer) which would be £120,000 over the same period and leave a healthy £100,000 for voter outreach.

Alternatively, the city could just reduce it's Not -so Unavoidable budget increase by £220,000 over 4 years.

I would add that in my view it would be more practical to make the change in 2026 which would reduce the cost reduction by £110,000.

### **3.7 Moving to all in, all out elections- non cash savings**

Annual elections mean two periods of disruption each year when the council is operating at less than peak efficiency and residents may experience less case work support.

These are the six week short campaign period and the month after election when induction takes place.

Councils cannot conduct some types of business during the short campaign period and councillors are expected to canvass for their party.

This takes us into June where we have a short window before the disruption from school holidays starts.

Continual elections may be yet another barrier to councillor recruitment and retention

Compressing the council's business to fit round our election cycle reduces the efficiency of our council and increases peak workloads for officers and councillors alike.

It is very difficult to put an accurate cost figure on the disruption but the risk management and efficiency implications of such a considerable period impacted by elections each year seem clear.

## **4 General comments and background**

### **4.1 Open debate**

We are an unwhipped administrative group and not a political group. We encourage all group members to be candid and discuss our differences openly in the hope of achieving true consensus wherever possible and at least acknowledging our differences respectfully where it is not.

### **4.2 Independent not opposition**

We regard ourselves as an Independent group not an opposition group. If we like proposals put forward by other groups we will say so. When we dissent, you can be confident that this represents genuine concerns.

### **4.3 The air that we breathe, the water we drink**

We consider that any purely monetary budget process should be an opportunity to consider wider resource issues. A purely monetary process that does not take into account the impact on clean air, fresh water, uncontaminated land and upon the services that we all rely upon such and the people who make them possible.

### **4.4 Inequality and the perma-emergency**

In this connection, we note that this council has unanimously declared a climate emergency and a cost of living emergency. To this we would add the growing public health emergency. We are not just the most unequal city in the UK in financial terms but in all ways. Residents in Abbey, Arbury and Kings Hedges are not only poorer, but have worse

health outcomes and shorter lives than those in wealthier wards. But even in wealthier wards, there are smaller pockets of inequality and exclusion.

#### **4.5 Brave new world or broken dreams?**

In council we work to systems, laws and decisions from a very different era. What was good enough for us twenty years ago may not be fit for purpose now. We are currently going in to the 5 yearly Local Plan review where our planners have shared population growth forecasts which have caused widespread concern at the pressure on our natural resources.

If we don't like the forecasts produced by the planners, the answer is not to blame the planners but to change the decisions we make as councillors and stop encouraging uncontrolled and unsustainable employment relocation to our tiny city. We can't afford to indulge in magical thinking that ignores our limited natural resources. We can't afford to gamble our residents' future by relying on a reservoir that will be under salt sea water before it is finished.

And if we want to convince our residents that we have their interests at heart, we have to put the brakes on the policies pricing them out of Cambridge.

The landmark City Deal of 2014, the creation of the Greater Cambridge Partnership, even the long held dream of some to relocate the sewage works away from Cambridge North to outside the city border met with widespread praise at the time. These are now coming to be viewed as legacy decisions and their fitness is being questioned widely.

We can't go on dodging these questions and brushing them aside. They are real, they matter and it is our job to answer them.

#### **4.6 Nice to have or need to have?**

in our budget commentary, we wish to consider all these three emergencies in our response. In simple terms, we need to consider whether proposals are only nice to have or need to have. We have applied the same criteria to our own budget proposals.

#### **4.7 Note of thanks**

We would like to thank the many officers whom we consulted in the course of our work.

We also want to thank the residents, fellow councillors and local groups who contributed to this report.

Any errors or omissions are of course our own.

Cllr Naomi Bennett

Cllr Sam Davies