

Full Council

Thursday 15 February 2024 6pm

A General Budget Commentary by the Green Group

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1 Overview

The Green Group's focus continues to be:

- protecting residents from the cost of living crisis
- protecting residents from the climate emergency
- ensuring that residents voices are heard.

There is not a neat dividing line between these issues. They are closely connected.

Our budget commentary reflects the financial crisis facing the council. Money is short. So we have focussed on those areas where a small amount of money can have a big impact. We have also chosen ideas which have already been considered by other cities so that we can benefit from their experiences.

However, in a time of crisis, it's also important to consider the future we face as well as dealing with present challenges. With Michael Gove's supersize Cambridge proposals attracting so much attention, it is more important than ever to set out our own visions for our city.

2 Access all areas -a more inclusive Cambridge

Why a more inclusive city environment will help future proof shops and services for local residents.

2.1 The problem

Cambridge is a very challenging urban environment for residents and visitors with disabilities and their carers. It is important to understand that this is not just about physical disabilities.

There is a widespread attitude that we have a lot of historic buildings and it's just too difficult to make the public realm more inclusive.

2.2 Is a better public realm possible?

Yet, Chester, an even more historic city than Cambridge, a city with Roman and mediaeval buildings, is the only UK city to win the prestigious EU Access City Award.

Perhaps it isn't our buildings we need to change in Cambridge but our minds?

2.3 Why should we encourage change?

Our hostile public realm does not just exclude residents but it also means that they are more likely to spend their money elsewhere. At a time when hospitality and retail closures are at a 6 year high, the purple pound is more important than ever.

<https://wearepurple.org.uk/the-purple-pound-infographic/> shows how much businesses are missing out if they cannot cater for disabled families and their carers.

This extra income can help businesses survive the cost of living crisis. It's very noticeable when touring Chester, that the high street and hospitality businesses have held up far better than those of its neighbours.

2.4 Tourism

Purple tourism could be particularly important for Cambridge. Visit Britain notes that **a fifth** of all domestic overnight stays

and day trips are made by travellers that include at least one person with an impairment in their party.

<https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/make-your-business-accessible-and-inclusive/discover-value-purple-pound>

2.5 A long term project, not a quick fix

How can we work towards a more inclusive Cambridge?

Chester City Council have emphasised the importance of a holistic and thoughtful approach. They are very clear that this is a long term project not a quick fix. Many of the individual steps are small and inexpensive but they all need to fit together to work. Even today, 8 years after winning the EU award, they and their local partners continue to improve their access offer.

<https://towntoolkit.scot/case-studies/disability-and-accessibility-chester>

2.6 Next steps

We ask for senior officers to lead a study of the Chester model and bring back an initial report to Strategy and Resources in January 2025.

We also recommend the following early stage steps. These are:

- Training for councillors. (see our motion)
- Using the access work already done by the city's own property team to build a case study library for businesses
- Partnership working with business groups to encourage them to embrace change
- To approach BID about officers' proposals for better signage of public toilets
- A pause on any further public toilet closures

3 Access all areas -tackling travel troubles

Cost effective ways to remove barriers to active travel.

Councillors will already be aware that while key investments in cycleways has been made, cycling rates have actually declined.

In this section, we explore some suggestions to make active travel more popular and reverse that trend.

3.1 Fix our mobile speed cameras

We know that slower speeds on the roads make active travel safer and more pleasant for all of us. UK Transport Research Laboratory has stated that every 1% drop in urban speed limits means a 6% fall in road casualties. Over the years, councillors have diligently applied for 20 mile limits and mobile speed cameras to encourage drivers to respect those 20 speed limits. This cost the city council £13,000 in contributions to shared costs.

Today, not one of these 13 speed cameras is in working order and the county council has no plans to repair them.

We ask the city council to write to the county council and ask them to either get these 13 mobile speed cameras repaired (or replaced if this is not possible or more cost effective) and state a date by which they will do so. We understand that the problem is a financial one rather than an engineering one.

3.2 Ultra secure cycle parking

We know that another invisible barrier to bicycle use is theft. We welcome that the police have made this a special focus area and have achieved a substantial reduction. However, cycle theft is still a major deterrent to wider bicycle use in Cambridge, particularly for residents on lower incomes.

If the stolen bicycle is specially adapted for disabled use, any replacement has to be built to order and will cost thousands of

pounds, so the impact of theft on cyclists with disabilities is particularly severe.

Residents visiting the Netherlands have praised the fully enclosed cycle cages and other storage provided for a small parking charge or free in Amsterdam, Maastricht and Utrecht. We call upon the council to investigate similar provision in Cambridge

3.3 Potholes, parking and pollution

Another deterrent to active travel comes from potholes. We recognise that potholes are the responsibility of the county council not the city council. However, there is something that we can do to prevent our potholes getting worse.

Not all cars cause the same levels of damage to the highways. We ask that the city council follows the lead shown by Paris and introduces higher parking charges for heavier lifestyle choice cars such as SUVs.

Heavier cars also have higher emissions so encouraging drivers to leave SUVs at home or at the Park and Ride would also protect air quality. More importantly, SUVs involved in a road traffic accident are twice as likely to kill pedestrians as other cars.

3.4 Bat friendly solar lighting on offroad cycle and footpaths

Less confident cyclists particularly enjoy the ability to cycle away from car traffic on off road routes. However, in winter, it gets dark by the time people leave school or work. This forces people back on to busy roads at the second most dangerous time of day. In some cases, this means that they will not commute by bicycle at all.

Some popular cycleways benefit from small areas of bat friendly solar studs such as Midsummer Common. Solar powered motion sensitive lighting can provide additional safety with minimal biodiversity impact. We call upon the city council to confer with partner councils and agree a biodiversity friendly lighting standard for key off road bridleways and cycle routes and institute a rolling lighting installation programme for its parks.

3.5 Encouraging effective off road policing

The Chisholm trail has been a huge success story and has seen increased numbers on our off-road cycleways and bridleways. However, there has also been an uptake in drug related activity particularly at bridges and other intersections.

Resident groups say that they feel less safe in our green spaces and have begun to curtail their visits. This means that the active travel and health benefits of the £21million Chisholm Trail are reduced.

The purchase of 6 electric bicycles for long term loan to the police would cost under £10,000 and allow an effective second plain clothes patrol to operate over the very large area of green spaces, cycle paths and bridleways in our city.

Although PCC office has expressed enthusiasm for the proposal, they are not permitted to fund operational expenses by statute. A further application has been submitted for police funds. However, because the potential benefit to residents is so great and the cost so small, we ask the city council to consider funding the capital cost themselves should the police be unable to secure funding.

3.6 Be kind signage on parks and green spaces

Councillors will be well aware of resident complaints that walking and active travel in our green spaces has become unpleasant and unsafe because of fast travel by some

motorcycle and high speed hybrid cycles. Residents are also concerned about the impact on the Cambridge cattle.

We ask the council to agree and publish a recommended maximum speed guideline for our parks and green spaces

With the increased numbers expected from the greenways and the extended Chisholm Trail, there is a need to encourage more thoughtful and considerate behaviour.

Although there is no national legal speed limit in parks and green spaces, individual parks elsewhere in the UK have limits. It is still possible to use advisory signage to encourage more considerate behaviour. Some parks do have speed limits although these are generally those with roads going through them.

University of East Anglia studies show a positive impact from well designed advisory signage.

Closer to home, we have also seen the positive impact of the citizens' switch off campaign in Great Shelford against engine idling.

We ask for clear signage asking people to consider the impact on animals and other humans and cycle slowly through our green spaces.

All in all, we recommend these measures as a cost effective combination to remove barriers to active travel and so increase health benefits, tackle anti social behaviour and make Cambridge a better place to live and visit.

4 Preventing financial hardship to residents

In an ideal world, we would be making proposals for a local Universal Basic Income trial. This is not that world. Instead, we present proposals to use the council's spending more effectively to tackle the continued cost of living crisis.

4.1 Support for private tenants

HRA has an excellent financial advice and inclusion service for council tenants. The service is very busy and runs at full stretch. Officers are keen to use podcasts and other social messaging to get their message out to other officers, councillors and tenants and do as much good as possible with their time.

Not only would this create a valuable resource for council tenants, but the materials could be used by housing association and private tenants too.

The cost of living crisis is entering a new year and shows no sign of ending. Helping residents in this way would not reduce the quality and quantity of the service provided to council tenants.

It also helps prevent other residents from falling into debt and homelessness and needing the services of the HRA.

4.2 Fixed Penalty Notices / Volunteering

In October 2023, the council increased the levels of its Fixed Penalty Notices for environmental crimes. The stated aim of this policy was to provide a more effective deterrent.

<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/news/2023/10/10/council-to-increase-fixed-penalty-notice-for-some-environmental-crimes>

We hope that this is the case in practice.

The problem is in getting the level of the fine right. A Fixed amount can't be right for everyone, particularly in the UK's most unequal city. What is an unpleasant hiccup for a wealthier resident is a financial catastrophe for our poorest residents.

There is no affordability check done before an FPN is issued. Even when the resident's address suggests that they are on a low income. Even when the FPN is issued just before xmas, when financial pressures are increased.

A £500 fine at short notice is enough to cause poorer residents to fall out of creditor payment arrangements or take out a pay day loan. This creates problems both for the resident's family and can increase pressure on council services.

The answer is not to lower the fines and make the deterrent less effective.

It is not to introduce a means test or a sliding scale of fines. This would make the FPN system too slow and too expensive as well as being invasive for residents.

(Studies show that if a penalty is set too low for the culprit, it can actually increase the problem behaviour it is designed to curb.(Source Gneezy and Rustichini experiment <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022103114000675>))

We propose that offenders be given the option of doing community service volunteer work, preferably related to the offence. A typical FPN of £500 would equate to 33 hours litter picking at a notional exchange rate of £15 per hour. A reduction could be agreed for residents who complete their service quickly. In the short term, we propose that the FPN enquiry form be amended to include a prompt to include financial hardship details if desired.

5 Comments on the Budget process

As is the tradition for the Green group, we include comments on the budget and MTFS process.

5.1 Budget presentation

We are pleased to see more use of charts and graphics, but would like to see:

- Bar charts rather than pie charts (easier to interpret)
- Limiting reliance on colour (it gets copied in b&w)
- More labelling/ use of keys (clarity)
- No print smaller than 12 point (inclusion)

5.2 Budget content

Because of the s151 rules, a council must present a legal budget, even if that budget does not address all of the city's anticipated current and future needs.

We would like to see some simple information about some of the most important of those unmet needs.

In the past, the Housing Revenue account has included information on costs of retrofitting its social housing stock. We would like to see this extended to the city's general fund property portfolio and updated each year.

We also would like to see the council publish more of its high level risk assessment and horizon scanning along with the budget and MTFS papers.

A short and simple statement listing key risks, threats and associated costs would help councillors and officers to assess whether the budget and MTFS are fit for the future.

5.3 Basis of audit

We want to query the audit assumptions which include an assertion that the climate emergency has no significant impact

on the city council's finances. Can that assertion still be justified?

5.4 A robust reserves policy

We have a duty of care not just to current residents but to future ones. We should have a robust policy on how we use reserves rather than disbursing them on an ad hoc basis.

Put simply, we should be spending on needs to have, not nice to haves. and have a process in place that ensures we do so.

We take this opportunity to thank officers for their help in researching this report.

5.5 Technical note

This report is a commentary, not an amendment proposal. This reflects normal practice outside Cambridge City Council. Because we have chosen to focus on projects that do not require large sums of funding, if the ruling group chooses to take them up, all of them can be funded through existing budgets or using the virement procedure. A formal amendment is not required.

6 Closing remarks

The voices of our residents, their questions and our case work are the foundation of this report. We also wish to thank officers for their help and advice.

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Cllr Jean Glasberg

Cllr Elliot Tong

5 February 2024