

Full Council

Monday 24 February 2025 6pm

General Budget Commentary

Green Group

Cllr Naomi Bennett Green Finance Spokes/ Leader

1 Overview

Our budget commentary reflects the circumstances that this city faces. We present a proposal that reflects the expected Local Government Reorganisation and achieves further savings.

We hope that these savings will be used to safeguard jobs and protect services.

2 Civic quarter project

The anticipated local government reorganisation means that Cambridge City Council as we know it will cease to exist from 2028. The decision as to where the headquarters of the new local authority will be based will be taken by the new principal authority council, not the old city council.

Whether the new council is at the smaller or larger end of the scale, it is unlikely to continue to be under Labour control. There will be new political leadership and those leaders will need to forge connections across a much wider area. The shadow cabinet for the new council is not expected to be in place until after the May 2027 elections and accordingly this decision needs to be paused for at least two years until they are in place. We cannot make that decision for them.

We cannot say whether the new principal authority will choose to be based in the historic centre of Cambridge, or even in Cambridge at all.

The new leaders will have to consider the travel needs of a workforce spread over a much wider area as well as that of residents. There are good reasons why major employers choose locations at the edge of the city or outside it rather than in the historic centre.

The Guildhall is not even the only office building within Cambridge owned by a local council. Old Shire Hall is still vacant.

If the decision to press ahead with plans for the Guildhall, it is likely that those plans will become obsolete almost as soon as they are completed and the millions of pounds spent on consultants will be wasted.

Apart from the financial waste, a decision to continue to work on the Guildhall plans is likely to be seen as arrogant, out of touch and Cambridge-centric. At this stage of any reorganisation, a cooperative and open stance is needed if the new council is to have any chance of achieving an appropriate environment for success.

Blindly pushing on with this passion project will not only alienate future working partners by showing a less than open attitude to future co-operative working. It also reduces the confidence of the public that their funds will be spent wisely.

We ask you to pause this project during the local government reorganisation. This would return £1m to reserves and generate a cash return of £75,000 over the two year pause period, which could be used to reduce the need for cuts in staff numbers and service levels.

Finally, we have chosen not to present spending plans for the savings generated. Here's why.

We are well aware that the national Labour government expects to make savings from its local government reorganisation plans. We are also aware that the reports of

Price Waterhouse Coopers and Grant Thornton make it very clear that there will be increased costs rather than savings in the short term from the local government reorganisation. Finally, we have heard over and over again the testimony of increased costs and reductions in service levels from councillors in regions that have already undergone centralisation.

Before the white paper announcement, the Green group had worked up a number of plans to utilise any savings from pausing the civic quarter project.

However, the white paper has changed our plans. We now feel that any savings from pausing the civic quarter project should be spent on reducing the deficit, protecting jobs and maintaining service levels.

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.

Cllr Naomi Bennett

20 February 2024