

Report from the Oxford City Labour Group 2017/18

This will not be comprehensive but covers some key points from the year 2017/18.

Growth Deal for Oxfordshire

Councillor Bob Price as Chair of Oxfordshire's Growth Board has led a complex negotiation with the Leaders of the other five Oxfordshire councils and central government that has resulted in the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth [Deal](#). This will bring £215 million of Government funding to Oxfordshire over a five year period. It will support the planning and delivery of 100,000 new homes across Oxfordshire from 2011 to 2031. The deal simply wouldn't have happened without the diplomatic skills of Bob and some key City Council officers.

This will go some way towards addressing the severe housing shortage and expected economic growth. The Deal also ties in the Government to supporting Oxfordshire's knowledge-intensive economy. Support will also be provided, working with employers and universities, to identify and address the long term skills needs of the Oxfordshire economy. This will involve building a pathway for young people to develop the skills needed to capture opportunities in the emerging growth sectors of Oxfordshire and facilitating social mobility for those at risk of social exclusion.

Westgate Shopping Centre and the Covered Market

After years of planning, the new Westgate Shopping Centre opened its doors for the first time in October 2017. The new shopping centre has increased footfall in the whole city centre, bringing benefits to the wider economy of the city as well as being a popular destination for local people and visitors. There have been some suggestions that this has had a negative impact on the Covered Market. There is no causal relationship between the decision of a couple of longstanding Covered Market Traders to move and the opening of the Westgate – the shops are different in the Westgate (no new fresh food on offer) and the Covered Market has seen an increase in footfall in line with the rest of the city centre. Nonetheless, we are not complacent. The Covered Market has a special place in our City and so we are investing in its structure and marketing in this year's budget to ensure a vibrant future.

Housing and Homelessness

In addition to the affordable social housing that the council is currently building at Barton Park, the city has successfully bid for more government infrastructure funding that will support regeneration of The Leys. This will include the delivery of 300 new homes including a substantial number of affordable homes. The money will also support infrastructure to deliver the Northern Gateway, which in turn will also provide more affordable housing. Labour councillors in Oxford are proud that we have over many years fought to keep our council housing. We are ensuring its future and protecting against the right to buy by developing our local housing company to continue maintaining and building genuinely affordable housing.

In a year that saw the tragedy of Grenfell Tower the City Council was already investing in our council towerblocks, including installing sprinkler systems throughout. The cladding on our blocks was checked again in light of what was learned from Grenfell, and in the case of two blocks the cladding has now been replaced. The City Council is one of the first in the country to replace cladding and also to introduce sprinklers in existing blocks.

Homelessness remains a scourge on our city caused by Tory government policies of cutting back government grant (which led to the Tory controlled County Council withdrawing its support for a

number of crucial services), the cuts in the NHS which have seen the decimation of complex mental health needs services and the impact of government welfare policies, in particular the local housing allowance which has meant housing has become unaffordable locally for many people. This is a national disgrace and the City Labour Group campaigns alongside our MP and party colleagues to increase funding and change the disgraceful policies that lead to people sleeping on our streets.

Labour councillors on the City Council have ensured that services have been protected from the cuts by the County Council as much as possible (and we are grateful to our County Labour colleagues for intervening in their budget to reduce future cuts), increasing our funding of homeless services when others have cut them.

We know there is more to do, but we have managed in the face of these difficulties to ensure that overall emergency beds have not been cut and that we continue to have the support and outreach services that we know are needed. Through the providers that the City Council supports, homeless people in Oxford have space during the day where they can shower, take shelter, get advice, access to services and food. Through the hard work of Cllr Mike Rowley and our City Council officers, and the generosity of our local churches and their volunteers, we have been able to open up additional beds throughout the winter in Oxford churches to provide shelter. A key development moving forward is the [City Conversation](#) on Homelessness which has brought together a coalition of professionals working with homeless people (from charities and the public sector) and volunteers who are interested in trying to help in any way they can.

Councillor Bob Price

I have not yet had a proper opportunity to pay tribute to Bob. It is hard to know where to start. Bob has been a councillor representing his local community in South Oxford for 35 years. During that time he has campaigned tirelessly in and for his local community. Bob has held many roles on the council in his time including Lord Mayor, Chair of Finance but he will be particularly remembered for his 12 years as Leader of the Labour Group, ten of which were also leading the City Council.

Oxford and the City Council owe a debt of gratitude to Bob. Under his leadership the Council has had a clarity of purpose and vision. The city's economic growth has been a huge focus, but at the same time his commitment to financial and social inclusion has always sat alongside that vision to ensure that no citizen should be left behind.

It seems hard to imagine the City Council without Bob. He has been a constant presence in my 17 years as a City Councillor. Bob – we will miss you hugely and I will do my very best to match your commitment to our great city. Thank you for everything you have done for Oxford.

Susan Brown

Leader of Oxford City Council

Council Finances and Budget for next year

In publishing our consultation budget, I noted that it had been produced in challenging times for Oxford, with significant pressures on services but reductions in funding. That situation has been exacerbated by developments since: in particular, latest assessments of our funding from retained business rates have had to be revised downwards, and the government seems set to confirm the deletion of revenue support grant for Oxford City.

- Substantial increases in funding for homeless services (£200,000 extra per year from 2019/20 onwards, plus an extra £280,000 for the homelessness reserve, from which we will look to extend provision in the winter months).
- £5 million to purchase properties for local homeless families, £10 million for council housing at the redevelopment of East Oxford Community Centre, and £74 million of loans to our new, council-owned Local Housing Company.
- Continuation of full Council Tax Benefit for those on lower incomes: this year we are one of just 37 councils out of 326 nationwide to do so.
- An increase in the budget for grants to voluntary sector organisations, funding for improvements to Manzil Way Gardens, and a new pavilion at Five Mile Drive.
- A freeze on the basic Park and Ride car park charge, funded by increases in city centre and suburban parking charges (but with increases at Headington substantially reduced in the light of budget consultation).
- £1.6 million of capital works to Oxford's Covered Market.
- Establishment of a "Local Authority Trading Company", wholly owned by the council but providing services to other organisations as well, ploughing its profits back into frontline council services.
- A new project fund to promote the Oxford Living Wage; the council will continue to pay all its staff at least the Oxford Living Wage, and will require its contractors to do likewise.

We were especially pleased to learn, in the run-up to the budget, that the County Labour Group had persuaded the Tories to back down on their proposal to delete all funding for homeless hostels in a couple of years' time. With the dramatic rise in rough sleeping in Oxford, it is essential that all public authorities work together to get people off the streets, and we will be holding the Conservatives at local and national level accountable for their actions on this.

The city council opposition budget proposals were a big disappointment. The Liberal Democrats and Greens both proposed to cut funding from the "Housing Revenue Account" (council tenants' rental income) to improve verges and parking provision there, in spite of the popularity of these works amongst tenants. Remarkably, the Green Party also proposed to increase Park and Ride charges by 50%, which would have encouraged more traffic into the city centre and generated more pollution.

We remain grateful for the support of Labour members, and if you have any questions about the budget, please drop Ed Turner (e.o.turner@gmail.com) a line.

Councillor Ed Turner