

Leader of the Green councillors Charlie Bolton
Speech to Full Council on the Council budget 2017

“You know, there are actually parts of this budget we can support.

With considerable reluctance - we support the council tax rise of 4.99%. Not because we like it, not because it is anything other than a regressive tax, but because it is the only way local government can raise the cash to counter the cuts it has to make to its core services. It is also why last year, we were the ones to bring a budget amendment for the then 2% social care precept - without which this council would be in even worse straits than it is now.

With a couple of exceptions, we basically agree with the capital programme. Although we do wonder what has happened to all those tier 3 proposals which seem to have disappeared from it altogether.

We support the treasury management proposals. We do wonder whether the council is still committed to ethical investment – after all, the previous mayor gave just such a commitment.

And we agree with the proposed use of reserves.

But.

We come on to the revenue budget with its enormous cuts to public services. You have to put this into context. The council has recently been discussing the NHS STP plan – which is -in effect – a massive cut to the Health service. We have also been briefed on the proposed cuts to our schools budgets. And we all know about the cuts to benefits, including the benefit cap – cuts directed at the most vulnerable. And now this. Put them together and you have what amounts to a ‘perfect storm’ of an attack on public service in this city.

So looking at the revenue budget:

Overall there are 29 budget items concerning restructures. The word ‘restructure’ is of course a euphemism for ‘sacking people’. Leaving aside whether or not we think these restructures are achievable - and given the councils past record, you have to wonder - then at best that means 29 sets of jobs being lost, 29 sets of services being diminished

and 29 sets of surviving workers who will be expected to do more for less. On top of 6 years of already being expected to do more for less.

There are 4 or 5 proposals to 'recommission services to get the best quality and value from the new contract'. We have, of course, seen a number of examples of those winning tenders just walking away from their contracts - because they got their maths wrong or decided they couldn't do it for some other reason. The phrase 'recommission services to get the best quality and value' actually means push down someone else's wages, someone else's costs and make them do more for less. It is in fact out-and-out Thatcherism

There are a couple of proposals to close offices - which is all very well unless combined with centralising services and making service recipients travel further (and therefore passing on the cost to them). In particular the proposals to close customer service centres in Fishponds, Hartcliffe, Southmead and Rodingleaze constitute a direct attack on those most in need.

And then we come on to the other proposals:

Cuts to children's centres, adult drop-in centres, respite services, community meals provision, school travel, cuts to Destination Bristol, cuts to services to dementia sufferers, cuts to the local crisis and prevention fund - which gives support to those most in need.

Cuts to the numbers of PCSO's, closing citizens service points, dismantle the libraries, dismantle the parks service, dismantle neighbourhood partnerships, do 'who knows what' to public toilets, maybe close a swimming pool, cuts to planning enforcement, cuts to subsidised buses, end the seagull egg-oiling programme, and increase cremation charges - that means making us pay more for dying

It is a list which is impressive only in the extent of its awfulness. Although, at least the seagulls will be ok.

In preparing for this meeting, I was reminded of my first as Green group leader - last May - the one when all you Labour councillors had just been elected, and looked immensely pleased with yourselves. And it made me think to look at Marvin's manifesto, and compare it with this budget. Here is what I found:

Labour manifesto: We will protect children's centres

Labour budget: cut the children centre budget by £750k

Labour manifesto : Focus on cutting crime through building a strong partnership between the Council, communities and the police.

Labour budget: cut £180k from the budget for police community support officers

Labour manifesto: Develop a sustainable schools transport policy to promote walking and cycling.

Labour Budget – cut the number of lollipop people to 80 schools

Labour manifesto: Ensure Bristol has library facilities fit for the 21st century

Labour budget: close most of them down

Labour manifesto: Protect green space and ensure all parks are served by a park keeper

Labour budget: take away the funding for parks

Labour manifesto: Reform and strengthen Neighbourhood Partnerships so that meaningful local decision-making is supported.

Labour Budget: cut budget by £500k this year and basically close them down

Labour manifesto: Ring-fence funding for community organisations working on issues faced by women, BME communities, people living with disabilities, older people, LGBT people and other protected characteristics.

Labour budget: cut £643k from the budget to floating support services, sheltered housing, supported living and other advice and guidance services

And last, and probably least:

Labour manifesto: begin a mass registration of voters to ensure no one loses their right to vote

Labour budget: stop sending residents a reminder letter for voter registration

It doesn't make for pretty reading.

And the point in me telling you this is to remind you that the people of Bristol did not elect a Tory mayor to run Bristol last May. But we seem to be getting Tory policies anyway. This is not local democracy. It is local government implementing central government dictat.

What we need, what we have needed for the last several years, is a co-ordinated and concerted campaign to fight these cuts. We asked the mayor to take the fight to government. Lets face it, Labour runs all the core cities in the UK. Real opposition to austerity was only ever going to happen with concerted effort either from Labour, or a broad-based campaign from all of those who oppose the cuts. As far as we can tell, all the core cities did was write a sternly worded letter. Labour can put out leaflets saying 'Your Labour Council is fighting to protect local services' but the question has to be 'when are you going to start'?.

The experience of Bristol is matched by experience elsewhere. The Joseph Roundtree Foundation has produced a report on austerity and local government in which it asks 'Have local authorities reached a tipping point?'

Its answer is to point out that

'Where previous studies of the early years of the cuts suggested that local government was coping, this study finds that resilience is coming under increasing strain. Where previous studies have suggested that the impacts have been mitigated by the ability of councils to focus savings on back office or other efficiency measures, this report finds a marked shift to reductions in frontline services.'

So in conclusion, I say this:

I have fought elections for the Green Party over a period of 28 years. Mainly, I have lost. Occasionally, I have won. I fought those elections because I believe in creating a society which is environmentally sustainable and which is socially just.

I did not fight all those elections so I could come here today and vote to close down some libraries. I did not fight those elections to vote to close customer service points. I did not fight those elections to make the lives harder for those who are most in need. I did not fight those elections to vote to cut, cut and cut again,

These cuts are too deep and go too far. It is my belief that - and to borrow from the words of former Labour leader Neil Kinnock

'If this budget is approved and you are a resident of Bristol, I warn you not to be ordinary. I warn you not to be young. I warn you not to fall ill. And I warn you not to grow old.'

I will vote against this budget and urge you to do the same.