

Camden Liberal Democrats Budget Amendments 2024/25

Once more, this budget setting comes at a challenging time for the country. Inflation remains high, the cost of living crisis is still with us and the economy flicks in and out of recession. The responsibility for this situation lies on the shoulders of the Conservative Government. The choices they made have either caused the problems we face as a country, or exacerbated them.

We recognise that the situation remains difficult for local government, with a real-terms cut in finance from central government and the failure to provide any indication of funding settlements beyond the immediate future. It is hard to build on shifting sands. Again, this is because of choices made by the Conservative Party.

We recognise also that the financial settlement provided for this year by the government is based on the assumption that Council Tax will be raised by the maximum level permitted. The actions of the Conservative Government in deliberately starving local government of funds and their failure to tackle the rising costs of adult social care, despite many promises, have left the Council with little choice but to go down this road. What flexibility remains in our finances must be targeted at those who need it most, whereas a Council Tax freeze would disproportionately go to those who need it the least. It would be the wrong choice.

This Labour administration has choices to make as well, ones that will have a very significant and tangible impact on the lives of people here in Camden. We think there are key opportunities to go further and do better that have been overlooked.

This Liberal Democrat amendment focuses on the two biggest challenges facing us at this time – tackling climate change and ensuring everyone in the borough has a safe and warm home.

It urges the Council to take radical action to reduce the carbon footprint of its own buildings and invest the savings in making the buildings it provides for council tenants free of damp and mould, less expensive to heat, and more carbon efficient.

The Rough Sleeping Snapshot published last week shows that Camden had the largest increase in the number of people sleeping rough last autumn of any borough in the country. No-one can forget the shameful debacle of Council officers joining police in forcibly removing rough sleepers from Huntley Street last year. Our amendment provides funding for additional staff to keep people from becoming homeless, and to support them off the streets if they are sleeping rough.

Our amendment also takes the opportunity to celebrate one of Camden's strengths – the creative industries that give both joy and good jobs in our area. We want to build on Camden Council's reputation for supporting music in schools by introducing the "Every child a musician programme" pioneered by Newham Council, so that, eventually, every Camden child can learn to play a musical instrument, no matter what their family's income.

Expenditure

Boosting the Carbon Management Plan

We recognise the funding gap on reaching net zero here in Camden by 2030 is huge and that at the same time, the sooner we take action, the better. With the Old Town Hall back in service, the Council needs to be more radical in looking at its use of buildings. The sale of the Crowndale Centre would free up £15 million, providing a much-needed capital funding boost for Carbon Management Plan projects, while re-providing the library based in the Centre. These funds could be used to leverage further funds from external sources and focus on retrofitting council homes. This would have the triple benefit of:

- 1) Improving the quality of the housing stock, helping to address ongoing problems with damp and mould, and housing repairs.
- 2) Reducing energy bills for council tenants, thus helping with the cost of living crisis.
- 3) Reducing the carbon impact of the housing stock and helping tackle the climate emergency.

We would fund (and leverage further funding) to retrofit over 600 council homes (£15,000,000)

Reprovision Camden Town Library

Selling the Crowndale Centre would necessitate reprovisioning the library there in a new location. **We would allocate £5 million in capital and £479,000 in revenue for this purpose.**

Resident engagement on climate action

The Council's Climate Action Plan 'People' strand has a focus on engagement with schools and businesses. While those are important areas, we think the Council also needs to step up its direct engagement with residents. **We would fund five officers to work across the borough, working with existing voluntary sector and other local organisations where appropriate, to engage with residents about steps they can take to tackle the climate emergency (£304,000).**

Rough sleeping

Last November's shameful debacle of removing rough sleepers from Huntley Street should never have happened and highlighted weaknesses in the council's service provision. We acknowledge that welcome steps have been taken to address the wrongs that happened then. The latest Rough Sleeping Snapshot, published on 29th February, showed a 34% increase in rough sleeping last year. We recognise that there are complex factors, many of which are outside the council's control, but it is clear that more needs to be done. **We would fund ten additional officers for the Routes of the Streets outreach team to ease the rough sleeping chaos in Camden (£474,000).**

Temporary accommodation

The Council is facing a growing problem with temporary accommodation, driven partly by factors beyond its control, such as the shrinking of the Private Rental Sector, and partly by its own failings, i.e. the long delays in opening the hostels on Chester Road and Camden Road. The overspend in this area is projected to be £4.5m this year, due largely to the growing need to place people in hotels. Demand for tenancy sustainment/homelessness prevention services have increased by 39% and officers are handling 80 cases each. They are struggling to deal with the workload and

this then adds to the great uncertainty and stress facing vulnerable residents relying on their support. **We would fund ten additional Temporary Accommodation support officers (£505,000).**

Pilot of Every Child a Musician scheme

There is clear evidence that learning to play a musical instrument not only enriches a child culturally but has a substantial beneficial effect on their academic and social development. Camden Council does excellent work to help schools deliver music education but there is always scope to go further. We believe that every child, from every background, should have the right to a free musical instrument education. The Every Child a Musician programme, developed by Labour-run Newham Council and championed across the country, provides a strong and proven effective model. **We would fund a pilot project in six Camden Primary Schools, for all children in years 5 and 6 to receive a free musical instrument and in-school music tuition in small groups of four children. The pilot would start with year 5 in the first year and then year five and six in subsequent years. We would prioritise those schools with the lowest levels of musical instrument tuition and the highest levels of disadvantage (£300,000)**

Restore visitor parking scratch cards

The recent decision to scrap visitor parking scratch cards was a mistake. It will undoubtedly make life harder for vulnerable people in Camden, while failing to make any impact on carbon emissions. **We would restore visitor parking scratch cards (£35,000)**

Clean streets

The Council has acknowledged in its plans to renew Veolia' contract that too many streets in Camden suffer from problems with waste and litter, and its Budget proposes welcome investments in street cleaning and improved collections. However the Cabinet paper also said that, "It was suggested there should be more public education to ensure that people understand how to manage their waste and recycling, so residents and businesses are more accountable for their waste." The Council has chosen to ignore this finding, and focus on reactive, rather than proactive activity. The Council's Education and Enforcement officers have shown themselves to be effective when focusing their efforts on a hotspot for a sustained period of time, but there are not enough of these officers to tackle the scale of the problem. **We would fund an additional four officers to help clean up our streets (£243,000)**

Income

Sale of the Crowndale Centre

The Crowndale Centre is under-utilised as an asset and costs the council net £1.1m/year to run. We would sell the building, generating approximately £20m in capital, along with revenue savings. The library we would re-provision elsewhere, setting aside £5m of the sale proceeds for that purpose and £450,000 of the revenue to cover its running costs. **This would leave £15m for capital investment and provide revenue savings of £650,000.**

Renting out 5PS

Anyone who has spent time at the Council's offices at 5 Pancras Square will recognise that the space is under-used. Last year and the year before we proposed renting out space to raise revenue for Council services, but Labour spurned this opportunity. It was a mistake to ignore our proposal then and would be now too. **We would rent out 2 floors of the main floors (not the lobby or floor 11 or 12) of the Council's offices at 5 Pancras Square from October 2024, raising £1,240,000.**

Table of Amendments

	2024-25 £000	
	Capital	Revenue
Investments we would make		
<i>Climate Emergency/Cost of Living Crisis/Housing Repairs</i>		
Fund (and leverage further funding) to retrofit over 600 council homes, as part of the Carbon Management Plan	15000	
Step up engagement with residents (working with existing voluntary sector and other local organisations) to engage people in taking climate change action		304
<i>Homelessness</i>		
Ten additional Routes Off the Streets outreach workers		474
Ten additional Temporary Accommodation support officers		505
<i>Every Child a Musician</i>		
Funding for the first two years of a pilot programme for six Camden primary schools		300
<i>Visitor Parking Scratch Cards</i>		
Restore visitor parking scratch cards to situation before the Cabinet meeting on 28/02/24		35
<i>Clean Streets</i>		
Fund four additional Education and Enforcement Officers		243
<i>Reprovision Crowndale library service</i>	5000	479
Total Funds Required	20000	2340
How we fund these proposals		
Capital from sale of Crowndale Centre	20000	
Revenue savings from sale of Crowndale		1100
Rent out 2 floors of the Council's offices at 5 Pancras Square		1240
Total additional income	20000	2340

The Executive Director Corporate Services confirms that, should the amendments be agreed, the assurances required by Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 with regard the adequacy of the reserves and the robustness of the estimates have been met and, therefore, that this still constitutes a balanced budget for 2024/25. The Executive Director Corporate Services or other officers have not been able to give these proposals the depth of consideration and due diligence to be able to recommend this as a course of action or to assess the financial impacts of the proposals beyond 2024/25. It has not been possible to make a full and comprehensive assessment of the impact of these proposals (such as those linked to the future use of our buildings or the impact on the existing workforce) and the associated implementation issues and risks.

It should also be noted that the full economic and social impact of both the Covid pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis into 2024/25 and beyond is not yet fully known.