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**Camden Lib Dems: Fund free school meals for Camden families by saving money on council offices.**

Camden Liberal Democrats have put supporting families through the cost-of-living crisis at the heart of their costed Amendment to Camden Council’s Budget for the next financial year.

Speaking at the annual Budget Debate on Monday 27th February, Liberal Democrat Opposition Group Leader Cllr Tom Simon said: “We should be in no doubt that responsibility for the cost-of-living crisis lies squarely with the Conservative Government. But Camden’s Labour Council has choices it can make about where to spend its budget, and some of their choices are the wrong ones.

“Our Budget Amendment would free up funds by renting out space at the Council’s offices at 5 Pancras Square. Increased hybrid working since the pandemic means the Council must think differently about its office buildings. The Liberal Democrats would put this money towards funding free school meals for secondary school students from low-income families, providing free school meals for primary pupils from Easter, and supporting families with the cost of school uniform. The cost-of-living crisis is hitting families now; the Labour Council could and should be doing more.”

Other Lib Dem Budget Amendments would support communities to tackle the climate emergency, reverse cuts to homelessness services, tackle the planning backlog and improve oversight of building sites, as well as address the Council’s failing “bin bags on the streets” waste collection policies.

ENDS

*Contact for Queries: Cllr Tom Simon on 07970 665935.*

**Notes for Editors**

Camden Council officers have estimated that letting out three floors of 5 Pancras Square from 1 October 2023 would raise £1.8m in 2023/24. The costs of the measures related to supporting families in the Lib Dem Budget Amendment have been estimated as:

* £500k to fund universal free school lunch throughout primary school from Easter 2023
* £230k to fund a free lunch for all primary pupils during this year’s summer holidays
* £575k to offer free school meals to all pupils in KS3 and KS4 whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit
* £32k to fund a part-time member of staff to co-ordinate a school uniform bank.

The text of the Liberal Democrat Budget Amendment is below.

**Liberal Democrats Budget Amendments 2023/24**

This budget setting comes at a very challenging time for the country, with the cost-of-living crisis, rampant inflation, runaway mortgage rates and high rents, plus long NHS waiting lists contributing to people being unable to work. Not to mention the increasingly obvious impact of climate change. The responsibility for this state of affairs lies squarely with the Conservative Government. The choices they have made have either caused these problems or exacerbated them.

We recognise that the situation is 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. During the Lib Dem-led partnership administration of 2006-10 we froze Council Tax for three years out of four. This made sense then, when the Council’s finances were more robust. But not now, with Council budgets severely stretched and many of our residents struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. 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 that some of the choices that they have put forward in their budget are the wrong choices. We think there are opportunities to go further and do better that have been overlooked. Their budget protects the Council’s Corporate Services over the people and communities we all serve. This is a mistake.

Our budget amendment focuses on five areas where choices about the budget can be improved. In the two most critical of these areas - the cost-of-living crisis and the climate emergency – Camden’s Labour administration is doing some good work. But it can and should go further, as well as faster. In the other three, Labour is letting down the people it serves.

1. **Cost-of-living crisis**
2. **Climate emergency**
3. **Housing management and repairs**
4. **Planning and planning enforcement**
5. **Waste collection**

**Cost-of-living crisis**

We are not claiming the Council has been inactive on this front. There is good work happening to help people in Camden struggling with this crisis. The Council Tax Support Scheme and the Cost-of-Living Crisis Fund for example, are measures the Lib Dems fully support. However, this budget setting represents an opportunity to go further. Labour’s budget fails to make the most of that opportunity.

Free school meals

A refrain at the cost-of-living crisis themed debate in November was the importance of free school meals. We heard this from the head teacher at Rhyl Primary School and from former Councillor and Cabinet Member Angela Mason. The threshold for qualifying for free school meals is set at a level that means many families with low incomes struggle and no consideration is given to the number of children a family has.

We note that the Mayor of London has proposed to fund free school meals for all Key Stage 2 children in London. This is welcome and builds on the policy of universal free school meals at Key Stage 1 introduced by the Liberal Democrats in Government. This policy has been shown to have significant health and educational benefits for children, as well as other positive impacts. However, the Mayor’s plan would not start until September this year and there are families that need support now. Our budget amendment provides this support. **We would fund universal free school meals in Camden at Key Stage 2 for the upcoming summer term (£500,000).**

The summer holidays can be a difficult time for children and families. Sadly, some children go without regular hot meals. This phenomenon is likely to be particularly severe this summer, due to the cost-of-living crisis. Camden Council must ensure that this gap in meal provision is addressed, when children are out of school for an extended period of time. **We would extend the universal free school lunch offer to all children in Camden primary schools throughout the summer holidays (£230,000).**

But the need for free school meals does not end at primary school level. The Liberal Democrats nationally have called for free school meals to be extended to all children whose parents are in receipt of universal credit. This policy would make a significant difference to families that need it most, effectively amounting to Universal Credit uplift of £15 per child each week. In the absence of action by the Conservative Government on this front, Camden Council can and should step forward to provide this service. **We would extend free school meal provision to all children at Key Stages 3 and 4 whose parents are in receipt of Universal Credit (£575,000).**

School uniform bank

At the November Council meeting this Council passed a motion calling on the leadership to “investigate setting up a Free School Uniform Bank scheme, as set up by Sutton Council”. While there are some schools in Camden that have an effective system for helping families get the uniforms they need, it is a fractured landscape. During the themed debate, school uniforms was identified by our external speakers as an area where additional action is needed. Yet to date, there has been no indication of meaningful activity on this front by the Labour administration. The time for action is now. **We would fund an officer to emulate the success of Liberal Democrat-run Sutton Council by coordinating a Camden School Uniform Bank to support families finding it hard to fund the costs of school uniform (£32,000).**

Hygiene poverty

Another key area identified at the November themed debate was hygiene poverty, with people of all ages struggling to afford the basic dignity of keeping themselves clean. **We would set up a ward-based grants programme specifically targeted at addressing hygiene poverty (£40,000).**

**Climate emergency**

We welcome the focus this administration has on the climate emergency. There are areas of activity we think Council should go further and faster on, but which fall outside scope of the budget setting. There are two funding areas we think need more attention:

1. Demolition and building works are major contributors to carbon emissions, which the planning framework provides an opportunity for the Council to regulate. The Local Plan review is exploring whether a net carbon zero requirement could be applied to new developments. This is a sensible move but is too limited in scope. **We would fund a senior officer to extend this work to a wider range of planning applications, not just new developments (£60,000).**
2. 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 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 (£264,000).**

**Housing management and repairs**

We recognise that the state of the Housing Revenue Account leaves little room for manoeuvre. Were there a choice, we would make it a priority to fund the housing repair services and housing management at higher levels than is being proposed. We are concerned that the plan to improve the effectiveness of these vital services while also making cuts will achieve the latter but not the former. Both these services too often fall short of the standard Camden should aspire to.

Yet there are choices around housing the most vulnerable people in our borough. As with all our budget amendments going back to 2019, we would improve funding for tackling homelessness. It is important to recognise that the number of households that the Council has placed in hotels or bed and breakfasts has approximately quadrupled since 2019-20. People facing this level of housing insecurity often report that the Council is slow or unresponsive in providing information, with decisions about where they will be living often made at the eleventh hour.

We think the temporary accommodation service needs an additional boost to ensure that we are doing the best we can for people who rely on it. **We would restore last year’s cuts to temporary accommodation service management, to improve the response to those experiencing homelessness (£168,000).**

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) Project 195 seeks to save money by reviewing the private landlord incentive scheme, which has failed to produce the hoped-for results. While this review makes sense, we see it as a further opportunity to improve the service. **We would redeploy the savings identified to other ways of supporting those experiencing homelessness in the Borough (£150,000).**

**Planning and planning enforcement**

Planning, both in terms of dealing with applications and in terms of planning enforcement, is a constant source of frustration for residents and organisations in our borough. Delays create uncertainty, can have financial consequences and impact on the quality of lives of our residents. Both services are too often seen as being slow and unresponsive.

A principal reason for the delays to processing planning applications is that the Council has failed to shift the backlog in planning cases it was left with following the pandemic. This Labour administration needs to do better. **We would fund two extra planning officers to focus on tackling the backlog (£116,000).**

In terms of planning enforcement, an area of weakness is how we operate and finance our Construction Management Plan (CMP) system. We should investigate building on the CMP system and introducing Codes of Construction Practice, funded by developers, to support high standards in construction, as done by other London Councils. **We would fund a senior policy officer to review the way that Camden's CMP system is operated and financed, as part of the Local Plan Review. This would include looking at best practice from other central London boroughs (£58,000).**

**Waste collection and recycling**

This is an area where Camden Labour continues to fail residents. The ‘bin bags on the streets’ policy remains a problem, with rubbish routinely piling up in many parts of the borough. The Council must identify better ways of working. **We would fund a senior officer to review the operation of business waste collection and the "flats above shops" policy ahead of the Veolia Contract Review (£58,000).**

A success story in Camden in tackling this problem is the ‘Belsize Village Bin’, as championed by Liberal Democrat Councillors in Belsize. This uses containers in the style of grit bins as a way of getting rubbish off the streets. **We would fund rolling out the Belsize trial to six high streets to clean them up (£24,000).**

Recycling rates in Camden have been stagnant for over a decade and the Council shows no ambition to improve the situation. MTFS Project 278 saves money by reviewing bespoke waste disposal approaches. The review should take place, but we would redeploy the savings to help improve awareness about both rubbish and recycling services. **We would use the funds to improve communication with residents, landlords, letting agents and businesses about rubbish and recycling arrangements (£140,000).**

**How we would fund these improvements**

Together, these changes form a serious package of improvements to the Labour administration’s budget and programme, boosting services for residents in critical ways within Camden.

We would fund these improvements by making different choices about where to make savings and by taking advantage of revenue streams neglected by the Council.

The MTFS lists the Council’s priorities in this order:

1. service design
2. workforce
3. improving access to services for residents.

The savings that the Council proposes to make focus on people and communities, and not corporate services. In the MTFS, the savings required from Corporate Services amount to 0.2%, whereas that from the Supporting People Directorate is 2% and from Supporting Communities it is 3%.

We think this shows that the Labour administration has got its priorities wrong. It makes no sense to protect the internal systems of the Council while degrading the services it provides. We would put vulnerable residents first, not Labour’s pet projects. **We would increase savings in Corporate Services to 1.5%, saving £573,000.**

Anyone who has spent time at the Council’s offices at 5 Pancras Square will recognise that the space is under-used. Last year 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. This year, with the Town Hall on Judd Street reopening and space at the Crowndale Centre becoming available, the Council has increased flexibility about how it can work. **We would rent out three floors of the Council's offices at 5 Pancras Square from October 2023, raising £1,800,000.**

The Council intends to introduce a night-time shut down of the 5 Pancras Square offices. This makes sense for financial reasons and because of the climate emergency, but is not set to happen until April 2024. **We would bring this forward to October 2023, raising an extra £42,000.**

**Taken as a whole, this budget amendment fixes the poor choices made by Labour and corrects the misaligned priorities. It puts residents first, particularly vulnerable residents.**

Table of amendments

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **2023/24 £000** |
| **Investments we want to make** |  |
| ***Cost of Living*** |  |
| Introduce Universal Free School Lunches throughout primary school - from Easter 2023 - ahead of the Mayor of London's plan | 500 |
| Extend the Universal Free School Lunch offer to all pupils at Camden primary schools throughout the summer holidays (2023) | 230 |
| Provide an offer of free school meals for pupils in KS3 and KS4 at Camden schools whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit | 575 |
| Fund a part-time officer to co-ordinate a School Uniform Bank to support families finding it hard to fund the costs of school uniform | 32 |
| Funding for VCS for tackling hygiene poverty | 40 |
| ***Climate Emergency*** |  |
| Fund a senior officer to explore extending net zero carbon requirements to a wider range of planning applications (not just new developments), as part of the Local Plan Review | 60 |
| Step up engagement with residents (working with existing voluntary sector and other local organisations) to engage people in taking climate change action | 264 |
| ***Housing Management, Repairs, Homelessness*** |  |
| Restore last year's cuts to temporary accommodation service management, to improve Camden's response to those experiencing homelessness | 168 |
| Restore cuts to homelessness services - redeploy savings from the review of the private landlord incentive scheme to other ways of supporting those experiencing homelessness in the Borough (MTFS Savings Project 195) | 150 |
| ***Planning*** |  |
| Investment in tackling the Planning backlog - funding two officers on a one-year fixed term contract | 116 |
| Fund a senior policy officer to review the way that Camden's Construction Management Plan system is operated and financed, as part of the Local Plan Review. To include looking at best practice from other central London boroughs | 58 |
| ***Waste & Recycling*** |  |
| Tackle Camden's "bin bags on the street" policy - fund a senior officer to review the operation of business waste collection and the "flats above shops" policy ahead of the Veolia Contract Review | 58 |
| Roll out the "Belsize Village Bin" Trial to six High Streets, with the aim of getting bin bags off Camden's high streets | 24 |
| Restore cuts to Management of Veolia contract / decommissioning of Garchey Waste and redeploy funds to improve communication with residents, landlords, letting agents and businesses about rubbish and recycling arrangements (MTFS Savings Project 278) | 140 |
| **Total Funds Required** | **2415** |
|  |  |
| **Savings to fund the above** |  |
| 1.5% saving across Corporate Services (rather than 0.2% saving as planned) | -573 |
| Rent out three floors of the Council's offices at 5 Pancras Square, taking account of increased hybrid working since the pandemic | -1800 |
| MTFS Savings Project 230. 5PS Efficiency - bring forward savings from not staffing/ heating/lighting 5PS on a 24/7 basis to 1 October 2023 (Note: this applies to six floors). | -42 |
| **Total Savings** | -2415 |