

SLOUGH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

2022 Local Elections

It's time for a change:

Councillors should consult, count & cooperate effectively



LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

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It's time for a change:

Councillors should consult, count & cooperate effectively

Lib Dems say Slough councillors should:

1. *Acknowledge the unprecedented failings and cuts of Slough's Labour-run Council - as the Council's new Director of Finance reported (9/3/22):*

- **Slough's budget deficit: *"is of a magnitude which has not been seen before across the UK"***
- **Incredibly *"the Council has no complete and fully accurate accounts since 2015/16"*!**
- **The cumulative failings over many years mean *"The current estimates for 2022/23 show that the budget requirement is 78 per cent greater than sources of funding"***
- **From *"2022/23 to 2028/29 very significant savings in the order of £20m will be required per annum in addition to further capitalisation. The £20m per annum savings will require cost cutting to a degree not seen anywhere else"***

2. *Recognise factors behind the failings of the Labour-run Council*

- **Long-standing failures are a key factor. An official report into the Council said: *"The roots of the failure go back to 2011 and an OFSTED judgement on their Children's Services."* Labour councillors too often refuse to take advice from others – they have not listened.**
- **The *"recklessness"* of the way councillors managed Council affairs included uncontrolled borrowing and spending, with a failure to effectively count costs.**
- **The failed political culture of constant antagonism and political point-scoring, led to Labour councillors not listening to others. Tories failed to provide effective, detailed scrutiny and their point-scoring 2021 budget would have made things even worse.**

3. *Adopt effective consultation, counting and cooperation*

- **Effective consultation means taking notice of what others suggest and asking residents what they think about issues before making decisions, and not after as the Labour-run Council did with the A4 bus lanes.**
- **Effective counting means checking there is enough income for spending proposed.**
- **Effective cooperation means working together with all on the Council to get the best services and outcomes for all Slough residents, and make best use of opportunities.**

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CONTEXT:

The elections for Slough Borough Council on 5th May 2022 take place in an unprecedented context. This includes: Putin's savage attacks on the Ukraine; the continuing pandemic; the UK facing a cost of living crisis that threatens to bring a substantial fall in living standards, and is made worse by Tory Government policies; members of the Tory Government including the Prime Minister being investigated by the police; and a Labour-run Council whose deficit *"is of a magnitude which has not been seen before across the UK"*.

The extraordinary mess created by Slough Labour Party means the details of the local Lib Dem manifesto have to be different from usual because **over the next 7 years the Council will need to make so many cuts, whoever is in power. Also, the current councillors have been so incompetent that the Government had to send in Commissioners to oversee the work of the Council. Cuts are already beginning in many important Council services such as social care, education, street cleaning, and library opening hours. Cuts will get worse in coming years.**

A key theme running through the international, national and local crises is the need for cooperation. In response to Putin's appalling attack on Ukraine, Lib Dems in the UK Parliament have emphasised the importance of working cooperatively with other European countries to support Ukraine to the maximum extent possible. Lib Dems and others note that previously Putin had deployed Russian state social media teams to support Brexit as another way of causing disunity and weakening Europe. **In the context of the devastation being caused by Putin in Ukraine, many people are angry at learning that the Tory Party has selfishly been accepting very large donations from people with links to Putin for years.**

Lib Dems will continue to lead calls for cooperative action on issues such the Climate Emergency. By 2015 the Lib Dem Energy Minister had developed plans for a large extension in cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy from on-shore wind farms. There was widespread support for this plan from experts and the general public. In 2015 the Tory extremists gained control of energy policy and scrapped further development of on-shore wind farms. Now all of us and the environment are paying the price of Tory extremism through paying higher prices for energy that is dirtier and less secure. This is also one of the key reasons for the current cost of living crisis and shows Tory mistakes are it making worse.

Slough is facing some major long-standing challenges, many of which have been made worse during the COVID pandemic and now by the Labour Council's financial crisis. **Challenges for recovery include funding and staff shortages in health and wellbeing services; knife crime and anti-social behaviour; environmental threats and poor air-quality; poor traffic management; restoring education; shortage of affordable housing; and reversing the decline of the town centre. Often the best way forward is through agencies working together and through working with and consulting the community.**

The challenges in relation to crime and anti-social behaviour have been exacerbated by the decision in 2021 of the newly elected Tory police boss for Thames Valley (i.e. the Police and Crime Commissioner) to announce a 40% cut (as reported in the press) in the funding to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour in Slough.

After the local elections in May 2022, the Labour Party will still have a majority to run Slough Council. But the room for manoeuvre for any of Slough councillors is limited because major cuts in services will be required every year until 2028-29 to clear Slough's financial deficit.

The Government has also sent Commissioners into Slough, at a cost to residents of over £1,000 a day for each Commissioner, to oversee the actions of the councillors and council officers and ensure sufficient savings are made annually. They will also oversee the necessary sale of hundreds of millions of pounds of Slough Council's assets.

Some of the proceeds will be used in an approach called capitalisation under which the Government allows Councils meeting strictly applied conditions to use the sale of capital assets to reduce the deficit in their revenue accounts. This, in combination with a programme of cuts, is necessary to achieve the balancing of books that Councils are legally required to do each year. The single largest amount within the capitalisation is due, according to the Director of Finance's Section 25 Report in March 2022, *"to the incorrect accounting for Minimum Revenue Provision for many years."* This relates to the money that has to be allocated each year from the revenue account to repay the borrowing incurred by the Council going into debt to buy assets, including ones out of Slough. The Council amassed debts of £760 million with no accurate repayment plans.

The new Director of Finance's report in March 2022 makes clear there is **NO** viable alternative for Slough Council other than making savings of £20m a year until 2029 and continuing the capitalisation programme, which presumably means applying the maximum permitted rise in Council tax. **Shockingly Slough Tories are behaving as irresponsibly as in March 2021 and claiming in leaflets: "There is an alternative", then failing to give any relevant details.**

In such extraordinary circumstances, Slough Lib Dems believe it is extremely important to elect new councillors to SBC who will push for a better approach to dealing with the crisis, albeit within the very tightly controlled unique circumstances. Therefore, instead of a series of more detailed proposals, Slough Lib Dems now elaborate this better approach.

NECESSARY ACTIONS

Lib Dems say Slough councillors should:

1. Acknowledge the unprecedented failings and cuts of Slough's Labour-run Council (as stated in the report from the Council's new Director of Finance – 9/3/22)

Slough Labour Party need to be more honest with residents about the extremely dangerous position the Council has fallen into as a result of their failures over many years. And more honest about how just many years of cuts, austerity and pain are going to be needed to put things right.

In his official report, called a Section 25 Report, Slough Council's new Director of Finance was honest about the extent of the crisis. He started his recommendations by saying:

“The seriousness of the Council's financial position cannot be understated...It must be acknowledged and understood that Slough's position is precarious.”

Five more quotes from the Director of Finance's Report underline the unprecedented depth of the extraordinary crisis, and the many years it is going to take to put right:

- Slough's budget deficit: ***“is of a magnitude which has not been seen before across the UK and is accompanied by a range of issues that are likewise extremely wide ranging, unique in their appearance and size at one Council”***
- Incredibly ***“the Council has no complete and fully accurate accounts since 2015/16”!***
- The cumulative failings over many years mean ***“The current estimates for 2022/23 show that the budget requirement is 78 per cent greater than sources of funding”.***
- From: ***“2022/23 to 2028/29 very significant savings in the order of £20m will be required per annum in addition to further capitalisation. The £20m per annum savings will require cost cutting to a degree not seen anywhere else”***
- A major reason for the budget requirement being so much higher than sources of funding, and the savings required being so high, is that a large amount of spending is to go towards charges on the £760m debt that Slough Council accumulated without making adequate preparation for repaying the debt: ***“debt charges will total circa £ 32m or 30% of net revenue for 2022/23”.***

2. Recognise factors behind the failings of the Labour-run Council

Slough's Labour leadership need to recognise that the long-standing failures in how they have run Slough Borough Council are a key factor behind the current financial failures of the Council. An official report into the Slough Council's Governance, in other words, the processes through which Council conducts its business, was conducted by Jim Taylor. It reported in September 2021. Its opening sentences highlight just how long things have been going wrong in the Labour-run Council, and how Labour councillors too often refused to take advice from others:

“It has only just become apparent that Slough Borough Council has been failing its Best Value duty under the Local Government Act 1999. The roots of the failure go back to 2011 and an OFSTED judgement on their Children's Services....

An OFSTED inspection of November 2015, published in February 2016, again found Children's Services to be inadequate. It was only in 2019 that the OFSTED inspection rating began to improve to 'requires improvement to be good'.

Such a failure in children's services, over this length of time, reflects on the whole council leadership....The fact that it took so long to demonstrate any significant improvement indicates that the council has been unable to improve a statutory service at the pace required.”

Slough Council's Labour leadership also need to recognise that there have been long-standing failures and incompetence in how they have managed the Council's financial affairs, including uncontrolled borrowing and spending, with a failure to effectively count costs. In his Section 25 Report in March 2022, Slough Council's Director of Finance included extracts from a review by the Commissioners who were sent into Slough Council in late 2021 to oversee its work. This review exposed the **“recklessness” of Slough Council:**

“The set of budget reports presented to this cycle of meetings exposes the recklessness in the way the Authority has managed its affairs over the past few years and the scale of both central government support required and the challenge in re-establishing financial stability.”

All Slough's councillors, Labour and Tories, should accept that another factor contributing to the extraordinary financial failures of the Council was the failed political culture of constant antagonism and political point-scoring on the Council. This was long seen in the frequent failure of Slough's Labour councillors to listen to others and take advice, e.g. over the Children's Services.

Too often, Slough's Tory councillors appeared to be more interested in point-scoring than in scrutinising plans in ways that would have been necessary to provide effective Opposition to the

failing Labour-run Council. **These failures by the Conservative councillors were most clearly seen in the point-scoring budget proposals they made in 2021, which unbelievably would have made key parts of Slough Council's financial crisis even worse.**

The new Director of Finance's report in March 2022 makes clear there is no viable alternative for Slough Council other than making savings of at least £20m a year until 2029, and continuing the capitalisation programme, which presumably means applying the maximum permitted rise in Council tax. **Shockingly Slough Tories are behaving as irresponsibly as in March 2021 and claiming in leaflets: "There is an alternative", then failing to give any relevant details of what this might be.** If the Tories believe there is an alternative, it would have to consist of deeper cuts and/or holding a referendum to increase Council Tax by more than the maximum allowed by the Government. **The Tories should come clean about whether they want more severe cuts or higher Council Tax.**

3. Adopt effective consultation, counting and cooperation

In response to this extraordinary crisis, and with the finances of Slough Council in such a dire state, Slough Lib Dems decided for this election not to make detailed proposals for spending. Instead, Slough Lib Dems set out three key approaches Slough Councillors should take to improve how the Council is run. These are approaches any Slough Lib Dem elected to Slough Borough Council would adopt. We encourage other councillors to adopt these approaches as well.

- ***Effective consultation means taking notice of what other councillors suggest and asking residents what they think about issues before making decisions, and not after as the Labour-run Council did with the A4 bus lanes.***
- ***Effective counting means checking there is enough income to cover all planned work and staffing before making spending proposals. It also means recognising that borrowing has to be repaid, and adequate provisions for this need to be made on a regular basis. In recent years Slough councillors had collectively failed to ensure this was happening.***
- ***Effective cooperation means working together with all on the Council to get the best services and outcomes for all Slough residents, and make the best use of opportunities that will arise in Slough and East Berkshire in a post-COVID recovery. All councillors need to take responsibility for this.***

Here is an example of how these approaches could be applied in relation to improving air quality and traffic management in Slough.

EXAMPLE OF POTENTIAL APPLICATION OF THE LIB DEM APPROACHES

To illustrate situations in which the approaches would be useful, we show how they could have helped address the issue of traffic management and air quality in Slough in a more productive way than that adopted by Slough's current councillors.

1. The consultation by Slough Borough Council was deeply flawed because it only happened after the A4 bus lane experiment had started. They should have consulted on the more general issue of how best to encourage alternatives to car use where possible. Furthermore, had the Council consulted effectively they would have been reminded, as the Lib Dems did as soon as we had the chance, about the valuable existing bus lanes that could have been used through the Trading Estate. Why didn't the Council attempt to make better use of the bus lanes running parallel to the A4 through the Trading Estate that the Council had heavily promoted with videos etc only a few years earlier in 2016? By failing to consult effectively Slough Council ended up with two bus lanes in each direction through the Trading Estate, and very few buses. But at the same time there was an enormous amount of slow-moving traffic in the one lane in each direction. Also, had the Labour-run Council consulted effectively, the Lib Dems and others would have had the chance to highlight the importance of measuring air quality and impacts on other roads increasingly used as alternatives.
2. Had Slough Council properly counted all aspects of the costs of the bus lane "experiment" before starting it, they would have included a full estimate of the cost of removing the bus lanes if they turned out to be unpopular and/or ineffective. As it is, the Council are now saying it would cost too much to remove all the signage etc associated with the bus lanes even if the policy is not working out properly. Furthermore, had they consulted properly beforehand, the Council would probably not have had to make so many costly adjustments to the scheme after it had started.
3. On the new policy of creating a park and ride scheme from the Brands Hill/Junction 5 area, it was disappointing to see knee-jerk opposition from Tory councillors to a scheme that could reduce traffic in the congested A4 through Langley and Upton wards. Clearly, a proper analysis of running costs as well as capital costs should be made before going ahead. But once again Slough's Tory councillors seemed more interested in point-scoring than in collaborating with other councillors to begin to tackle traffic management and air quality issues in Langley and Upton.

Contact Robert Plimmer: Tel: 01753 551574; cippenhamlibdems@hotmail.co.uk



Published and promoted by Robert Clive Plimmer for and on behalf of Slough Liberal Democrats, all at 149 Weekes Drive, Slough Berkshire. SL1 2YW.