

I would firstly like to extend my thanks to you all for electing me as the CLP's Labour Group Observer at the AGM on 22nd February. It is a great honour, and I hope that during my term I can help the CLP feel more connected to the council group. As I am still in Durham, I have been attending the meetings via zoom, but I will be regularly attending in person once I graduate at the end of June. Since the AGM, I have attended 2 meetings which I will detail below. As these reports have to be submitted by the second weekend of the month, it is possible that I will have attended more meetings between now and the AMM, which I will include in the next report.

Meeting 1: Monday 26th February

The main topic of the meeting was the upcoming budget, and how Labour plans to amend it. The main issue the group wants to highlight is housing. The Tories have not done enough on housing for years, however there is scope to be able to do so. It was highlighted that there is £3.5m in affordable housing payments that has been unused, and there was some suggestion that this could be put to supporting housing associations with affordable housing. There was a lot of criticism of BexleyCo, the council's in-house development company, for not doing a good enough job. This seems to be known to council officers, and the amendment could be used to allocate funding that way as well. Outside of the affordable housing payments, there is not much wriggle room in the budget, but in capital there is. That's why this specific section of money could be allocated to a housing scheme, despite the fact that the council is in dire straits.

Outside of housing, the amendment also hopes to talk about children's services. The council overspent by £9m in the September-December period, the majority of which was on children's services and amounted to an overspend of 30%. The council also had an OFSTED audit that rated the council's SEN (Special Educational Needs) provision as poor. As such, something needs to be done to address it. Some councillors were keen to ensure that any amendment did not criticise council officers, and provision will be made to thank staff for the amazing work they do and will continue to do to ensure things improve. It is on the administration to make an action plan, not the officers. Notably, the group want to highlight that we used to have a local authority budget for schools and our grant is now 1/3 of what it was under Gordon Brown.

There is a real sense that Labour can make this budget uncomfortable for the Tories. Failure on housing and children's services/schools can put them under pressure not just at council, but at a general election. There is a lot of worry about our financial position, as the group thinks we are heading for a situation where there is no money left in around 3-6 months' time. By around July, it is thought that the cabinet will need to make serious decisions. Therefore, the amendment is an opportunity to hold the cabinet accountable because it is unlikely to succeed on a vote.

Outside of the budget amendment, an incident with Councillor David Leaf (Blendon & Penhill) was brought up. He interfered in the council's minutes to distort what two councillors had said, which is a misuse of council resources. Whilst an apology has been received, it contained many caveats and some councillors wanted to take it to the Members' Code of Conduct Committee as they considered it unresolved. The Monitoring Officer has suggested that there is a case to answer, and there is a feeling that this is an opportunity to fire a warning shot and require David Leaf to undergo training to

ensure it doesn't happen in future. Someone highlighted that, as cabinet member for resources, Leaf needs to be focussing on getting the council out of this mess rather than play the party political games that they frequently accuse Labour of. The group agreed to take a complaint forward that protects council officers and takes the heat off of the two victims.

The ongoing 'Be A Councillor' sessions were highlighted, and it is hoped that more interested members will come along to those training sessions so that we have active council candidates ready to go. The group are considering which wards to target in Bexleyheath and Crayford, and it is hoped that both Old Bexley and Sidcup and Bexleyheath and Crayford will have General Election Candidates in the next month. The group will revisit its B&C targets when that is in order, as OBS are already doing work in their target wards.

The group are producing a housing booklet that will detail what Labour will do differently on housing in the borough. It was suggested that this leaflet does not foist politics onto people and talks about what we would do differently in a helpful way. They mentioned specifically the single offer policy as that has been a nightmare, particularly for vulnerable constituents that cannot accept housing that is far away. A similar approach was suggested for a separate cost of living booklet the group are producing, and that approach was accepted by the group.

The final item was on the Cory Decarbonisation Project, which I gather is the incinerator being built in Belvedere. Belvedere Councillors in particular are concerned that there is a biodiversity crisis occurring in the area, with building going across natural habitats and likely causing problems for the local wildlife. Particular concern was brought up around carbon capture because CO2 would not be put in the atmosphere if it were not being burnt. Cory are seen to be heroes for solving the issue whilst gobbling up the nature reserve and no recognition seems to be forthcoming about the burning issue. It was felt that talks with the relevant authorities had not advanced anything.

Meeting 2: Monday 4th March

In the week that ensued, a GLA candidate had not been confirmed by region so they will be badgered about selections. Work was ongoing about the Labour Group's response to the Cory Decarbonisation Project, but Ed Miliband's office has not responded. The complaint against Councillor Leaf had been drafted but not sent, and work will ensue on sending it. A representative of the Labour Group joined Sadiq Khan's councillor campaign call and asked what talking points we have for Outer London, as criticism of Sadiq's record in Outer London frequently comes up on the doorstep. They came back with Free School Meals and Transport, particularly the Elizabeth Line. The Labour Group also asked about whether a Deputy Mayor for Outer London could form part of the manifesto, which will be taken on board for discussion, but no commitment made. Bexley was apparently the only borough to mention Outer London issues, though there are Labour Groups in Outer London that back the idea of having its own deputy mayor.

The bulk of the meeting centred around full council preparation as the budget meeting is due to be held tomorrow (Wednesday 6th as I write). The budget amendment agreed last meeting has been

approved by the finance officer, therefore it can be proposed at the meeting. The group did not make many changes, but they did add wording about censuring the council's political leadership and on housing, the amendment will focus on BexleyCo rather than housing associations. The group talked strategy for the meeting, and it was agreed that each speaker would focus on a different area the amendment seeks to address. Generally, each speaker is going to cover area of policy they lead based on either their shadow cabinet brief or which committee they sit on.

Attention turned to how to approach the substantive motion, since Labour's amendment will obviously be voted down. There is a desire to break the momentum on Conservative speeches to stop them from talking too much and, in jest, to make the meeting more bearable. The main points to be discussed are:

Parking Charges- The changes in parking charges seem to do their best to mitigate the impact on Old Bexley and Sidcup, and it is suspected this is to appease OBS Conservative Association. Instead, the increase in parking charges has been felt in the north of the borough, and it will particularly affect North Heath traders. Overnight charges are going to sting and discourage people who do night work, and traders who require parking overnight.

Adult Social Care- 24/7 care is going to be stopped and double handed care is going to be reviewed. Other measures may also be subject to review. We are an aging borough, so care charges are going to increase, and the council must be cognizant of that. Cuts are going to make the pressure worse. We also have to think about contract inflation. There is speculation that the council will overspend in this area again, and by much more.

Nonsense- There is a need to rebut many points they plan to make. It was highlighted that the Tories are leading us to municipal bankruptcy, and July's cabinet meeting will require big decisions. The group want to tease this out and rebut that this is a 'budget for investment'. BexleyCo is meant to be a money generator that is not generating what the council want it to. Labour would use it to help people get a house and generate the council money in the process. More needs to be said about children's services and the political leadership must be mentioned. The cabinet member responsible has been in charge for 10 years and the education cabinet member has seen three changes in that time. The leader keeps talking about lobbying the government for more money, but this has clearly failed as Bexley has never seen an increase in funding.

It was agreed that Labour would be whipping an AGAINST vote on the substantive, and of course a FOR vote on the amendment. The continuing theme to hammer home is that 'the Tories have failed you'.

By the time you read this report, it will have been two weeks since these meetings but I can assure you that any meetings in the interim will be reported on at the next AMM. If you have any questions about the report, please feel free to email me at Jeremy.fosten@aol.co.uk

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