

Annex 4

Summary of the results from Talking Oxfordshire

Introduction

1. Talking Oxfordshire was a county-wide exercise to inform residents about the level of additional savings the council would have to make and to listen to their views and suggestions. It was designed to inform the 2014/15 service and resource planning cycle. It ran throughout October and November 2013 and its aim was to provide an opportunity for people to share their views at a formative stage in the budget setting process.
2. This annex sets out a summary of the feedback received. A more detailed report will be published on the county council website (www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/talkingoxfordshire) alongside a summary note of each meeting.

Approach

3. Talking Oxfordshire comprised of:
 - Explaining the council's financial situation and budget pressures using an easy-read summary of the council's budget position provided as a leaflet and on the council's website
 - Hosting a series of public meetings, one in each district council area
 - Supporting a public meeting organised by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) focussing on rural issues
 - Providing a structured online feedback form hosted on the council's website
 - Giving other opportunities for people to engage via email, letter, petition or social media
4. Talking Oxfordshire was publicised throughout the county via posters in council buildings and community noticeboards; a street team handing out flyers; media and outdoor advertising, the council's Your Oxfordshire newsletter, press releases and social media tweets and messages.
5. The council informed the following stakeholders about Talking Oxfordshire:
 - all county and district councillors
 - Oxfordshire's MPs
 - Oxfordshire Partnership Board
 - parish and town councils
 - Oxfordshire Lieutenancy
 - members of the Oxfordshire public involvement network (who comprise a wide range of groups, organisations and individuals with different circumstances, including 'hard to reach' groups)
 - individuals who had registered an interest in receiving information and consultations

PSC4

6. Key questions that people were asked to consider and debate as part of Talking Oxfordshire were:
- Should we (Oxfordshire County Council) only provide services we have to?
 - Should we increase fees?
 - Should we charge for more services?
 - Should people and communities do more from themselves?
 - Would you support a Council Tax increase?
 - What services could you live without?

Main Findings

Part A: Public Meetings

7. In total, nearly 1,000 people attending the five Talking Oxfordshire public meetings. Each meeting was chaired by an independent host from the local media who was asked to focus on the key questions. Councillor Ian Hudspeth, Leader of the Council and Joanna Simons, Chief Executive, introduced the council's budget position and proposed approach to making savings, and took questions.
8. The key theme for these meetings was concern about the future of the Early Intervention Service and children's centres. This was in response to very recent media reporting based on a 'worst case scenario' for budget savings in the service. Strong support was shown for children's centres as integral, local institutions in the community. Service users and professionals talked about their value as a safe place for parents and carers to seek and receive support and to meet others. They also set out their role in protecting vulnerable people.
9. Audiences wanted to find out more about plans for the Early Intervention Service and children's centres and whether other options had been considered; and some people expressed concerns about the potential impact of reducing these services on child protection and adult social care. Some attendees suggested charging and other ways to generate income. It was emphasised that no decisions had been taken and Cabinet would publish proposals in December.
10. The other main talking points common to at least two or more of the public meetings were:
- protecting the most vulnerable in society so they are not further disadvantaged
 - not compounding rural isolation and forgetting the needs of rural communities
 - Council Tax increases
 - the need to lobby/challenge government and make representations about the council's financial situation
 - increasing collaboration and joint working between the council and other local authorities, including sharing resources and for some exploring the potential for unitary authorities in Oxfordshire
 - using the council's reserves to plug funding gaps
 - exploring opportunities for increasing the capacity of communities

PSC4

- more collaborative working with the voluntary sector
- income generation such as private sector investment and sponsorship or 'crowd funding'

11. A number of specific concerns, points and questions were raised at each meeting. These were often issues specifically relevant to the local area and are captured in the summary reports.

Part B: Oxfordshire Rural Community Council Talking Oxfordshire Event

12. Approximately 70 people took part in the Talking Oxfordshire 'rural' event organised by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC). Councillor Ian Hudspeth and Joanna Simons provided contextual information and took questions from the floor. At this session, people took part in round table discussions to encourage an ongoing flow of conversation.

13. Subjects debated at the tables included:

- use of county council reserves to plug funding gaps
- Parish Councils delivering grass-cutting services
- potential savings for setting up a unitary authority
- reviewing the competitive tendering process of the County Council
- cutting of school transport subsidies
- communities taking responsibility for filling potholes

The services that were identified as being especially important to rural residents were:

- rural transport
- social care for adults and children
- children's services
- road maintenance
- support for the voluntary and community sector.

Part C: Online Feedback Form

14. The council received 472 responses to the Talking Oxfordshire online feedback form. 444 people identified themselves as residents, with three-quarters of the responses were from women; around two-thirds were from people aged 25 - 44 years. There was a good spread from across the five district council areas. However as this was a self-selecting group it cannot be considered as truly representative of the county's residents.

PSC4

15. The results are summarised below. Please note that not everyone chose to answer each question, so the total numbers vary (the number of responses to each question is shown in brackets). A number of comments were made about the need for more information to enable people to answer the questions; we have made a note of this as part of the evaluation Talking Oxfordshire and will seek to improve this in future exercises run by the council.

Question	Yes	No	Don't know	Comments
Should Oxfordshire County Council only provide services it legally has to?	10% (49 responses)	80% (375)	10% (46)	The comments associated with this question included: 39 people saying that non-statutory services are still important and that the council should provide what people need, 23 people saying the council should attend to the needs of vulnerable people, and 21 people saying services should exceed the statutory minimum.
Should Oxfordshire County Council increase fees?	43% (200)	31% (143)	26% (120)	The comments associated this question included: 31 people saying yes, if it saves services, yes, but only if it is affordable and 19 people saying no, they already pay council tax and that the council should make efficiencies.
Should Oxfordshire County Council charge for more services?	45% (208)	30% (139)	26% (120)	The comments associated with this question included: 71 people saying yes, a small amount, 36 people saying yes, for those that can afford it, and 33 saying it depends on which services.
Should people and communities do more for themselves?	59% (269)	25% (115)	16% (73)	The comments associated with this question included: 63 people saying that delivering a community response requires support, money and training, 43 people pointing out that a lot happens already, and 22 people saying that a lack of free time prevents people's involvement.
Would you support an increase in the Council Tax?	55% (255)	34% (160)	11% (51)	The comments associated with this question included: 53 people saying yes, if it saves vital services, 32 people saying yes, a small, proportional increase, and 21 people giving a caveat saying it depends on what it is spent on. Fifteen people asked the council to means test any rise to protect those that can't afford it and 15 people felt they already paid too much and could not afford it.

16. The online feedback form also asked two open ended questions. When asked which services they could live without, those most frequently mentioned were:

- libraries and museums (31 mentions)
- highways maintenance/street lighting (26 mentions)
- early intervention services including children's centres (18 mentions)
- 47 responses called for the council to cut back on internal bureaucracy and cost of 'politics'

PSC4

17. The final question on the online form provided a free space for people to share their views on county council services. The comments given broadly echoed those shared at the public meetings.
- Concerns were expressed that the most vulnerable in society (older people, children, those at risk, children with special needs) should not be put at further disadvantage as a result of cuts, and should be protected
 - Concerns were expressed that cutting back on Early Intervention services would mean more expense to the council in future years
 - There was a feeling that those who can afford to pay more through Council Tax and fees and charges
 - People felt that the county council should be lobbying central government and questioning the budget cuts
 - Some people suggested that a unitary authority approach would be a good way to save money and have less bureaucracy

Other correspondence

18. A few letters, emails and social media posts were also submitted as part of Talking Oxfordshire and these continue to be received even after the consultation has closed. For the most part, this correspondence focuses on children's centres although some stakeholder responses address other specific issues. Redacted copies of all emails and letters will be made available to all councillors to review as part of the budget setting process and an analysis will be included in the full Talking Oxfordshire report. Finally, a petition of over 15,500 signatures in defence of children's centres was handed to the Leader of the Council on 28 November, the day before Talking Oxfordshire closed. This is available to all councillors for review.