

CABINET – 25 JANUARY 2011

ITEM 4 – QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS

Questions received from the following Members:

1. Cllr Susanna Pressel to Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger Communities:

"Is the Cabinet satisfied that we can continue to provide adequate access to our museums and to the artefacts that we hold in trust for the people of Oxfordshire if, as proposed, you make a 40% cut in the budget of the museums service and a 50% cut in its staffing, and above all can we be assured that, if these cuts go ahead, the museums service will have sufficient capacity to support the new Oxfordshire Local Heritage Partnership with Oxford University Museums in order to lever in £2 million a year for 5 years, much of which would be spent on work with schools in Oxfordshire?"

Cabinet Member Reply

The budget proposals and service plans for the county museums service are challenging. The service aims to retain a core of professional staff sufficient to maintain the collections at the Museum Resources Centre (MRC), to continue the public services at The Oxfordshire Museum and outreach to schools and target groups (including the elderly). Total staff numbers will be reduced from 30 fte to 15 fte so there will be a significant reduction in service.

The reduction of staffing at The Oxfordshire Museum will require replacement by volunteers if the current opening hours are to be maintained; discussions are already taking place with the Friends of the Oxfordshire Museum and the Soldiers of Oxfordshire about how to plan this and how to extend the opportunity to volunteer to the wider community. The MLA (Museums Libraries and Archives Council) has funded a project to advise museums on the greater use of volunteers.

The museums service continues to work closely with Oxford University Museums with plans to consult heritage organisations throughout Oxfordshire on an Oxfordshire Heritage Strategy. The Oxfordshire Local Heritage Partnership (OLHP) between the County Council, City Council and Oxford University will bid for 'core' museum status; the MLA has yet to announce the criteria and details of these 'cores', but it is anticipated that the details will be published shortly and OLHP is preparing its plans. Core museum funding is likely to focus on the stewardship and use of significant collections (including the County Council's collections at the MRC) with up to £2 million per year for each 'core' to reach new audiences, provide learning opportunities, and improve access.

2. Cllr Zoe Patrick to Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger Communities:

“Grove is expected to expand over the coming years with the first stage of the planning application expected very soon. With the new development comes a S106 agreement to build a new library on the airfield site. Does the cabinet agree that closing the local library now will seriously jeopardise the future of Grove’s library service forever.”

Cabinet Member Reply

At the present time, there are proposals to cease funding 20 out of the 43 libraries currently run by Oxfordshire's Library Service. These proposals are just that, proposals. So to say the Grove library is to close is premature. The consultation period is due to start in February and last for 12 weeks. On conclusion of the consultation all the findings will be analysed and of course all aspects relating to each library taken into account.

In relation to the S106 element, the localities agenda will indeed have to take account of those areas in the County which will experience significant growth. It may well be that Section 106 funding will provide community presence where we can co-host a range of services which need not be a single dedicated library.”

3. Cllr Jenny Hannaby to Cabinet Member for Adult Services

“On 13 December a letter was sent to all users of Oxfordshire County Council’s Internal Home Support Service informing them of the new proposals and the reasons for the changes. The letter stated that formal consultations will take place with users groups.

If the County Council does really believe in choices for all its people when will all 1000 users of Internal Home Support Services be allowed to have their say?”

Cabinet Member Reply

There are currently around 570 Users of internal Home Support. A Helpline has been established, and all Service Users have been given information on who to contact if they wish to comment on the proposed change to the service. Each Service User will be individually contacted and transitioned to new arrangements as part of the roll-out of Self Directed Support. At that stage they will have the opportunity to discuss their needs, and select from the range of services available in their locality.

A programme of consultation with groups representing Service Users has been set up in February and March. Consultation will take place with five independent groups:

- Age UK Panel
- Oxfordshire LiNK Steering Group
- Unlimited (User Led Organisation representing adults with physical disabilities)
- Oxfordshire Carers Forum
- Service User/Carer Reference Group

A consultation paper has been produced which sets out the background, and the details of how proposed changes will affect Service Users and Carers. I have asked the Director to circulate this paper to the Opposition Spokespersons and this paper can be made available to Members on request.

4. Cllr Richard Stevens to Cabinet Member for Adult Services

“On 7 December 2010, Paul Burstow MP, Minister of State for Care Services, said in the context of the overall 26% cut to local authority budgets that an additional “£1 billion that will go into social care directly through the local government settlement [in October 2010] will be available for local government to support social care services. The £1 billion that will go in via the NHS will also be there to support social care, but it will particularly address issues such as reablement and preventive services.”

Would the Cabinet Member for Adult Services confirm:

- (a) how much Oxfordshire County Council is receiving from the £1 billion put into social care through the local government settlement referred to above (which is intended to "support social care services" in Oxfordshire)?; and
- (b) how much Oxfordshire County Council is receiving via the NHS (also intended to "support social care" in Oxfordshire)?

Cabinet Member Reply

- (a) Although we had assurances from the Department of Health that the money had been made available through the personal Social Services Grant, we have not been able to find the evidence of it, nor have colleagues working for other authorities. We believe that it has been used to offset the overall settlement to local government, but we are not in a position to confirm this for certain.
- (b) Oxfordshire County Council is receiving £6.1m as stated in paragraphs 34 – 37 of the report.

5. Cllr Liz Brighouse to the Leader of the Council

“The Council carried out a consultation exercise in relation to the budget and an Equality Impact Assessment was also written. Can the Leader tell us in what ways the Draft Budget changed in response to the consultation and what

has been done to mitigate the impact of the cuts on the most vulnerable in our community: older people, children and young people living in poverty or having a disability”

Reply from the Leader of the Council

We have been extremely forward thinking in our approach in that, for many of the areas where efficiency savings have been proposed in the budget, we have had early discussions with staff, service users and members of the public alike over the last six months. Hence the proposals were developed with input from these groups. However, it will be vitally important for the service users and members of the public to be able to inform service change going forward and, once the budget is set, the county council will consult on key service changes as appropriate.

In terms of formal consultation, the Cabinet has also considered the comments on the draft budget proposals from individual Scrutiny Committees held on 20 December 2010, as well as the outcome of the Big Debate public consultation which was undertaken in September 2010. The results of the Oxfordshire Voice Panel have provided further views which have been taken into account. The Council has invited comments on its overall proposed budget and three comments were received. A summary of comments and feedback that has helped inform the proposals is attached to the Service & Resource Planning Report being considered at this meeting (Item 8, Annex 1). We were told that the services people were most concerned about were those supporting the vulnerable - older people, children and those with disabilities. The reductions to some services, such as ceasing to fund directly a number of our libraries, is part of trying to prevent reductions in direct services to these vulnerable groups.

Officers have conducted equality impact assessments for the proposed service changes and the initial assessments are available on the county council's website. A link to these documents has been circulated to all councillors. The documents are intended to be an initial assessment of the impact of the proposals on vulnerable groups and include potential mitigation actions should the proposals be agreed by Council. Cabinet members have been specifically briefed on the law relating to equality impact assessments.

A specific example of work flowing from the consultations and equality impact assessments described above has been development of the Big Society Fund and of a protocol for assessing bids to it. The Big Society Fund is intended to help local communities to sustain valued local services that the County Council can no longer afford to fund. .

6. Cllr Val Smith to Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger Communities

“We have learnt in the last month - that it is just not a question of books being borrowed and books going out the door; a large part of the service is to do with schools and being aware of books. The Blackbird Leys Library is used

by all the primary schools for story time sessions - by the children's centre for reading with Mums and by Mabel Pritchard School which is a school for severely disabled children.

Those children could not get to Temple Cowley library - it would mean hiring a bus and in the case of the disabled children in wheelchairs using their County Council transport. Many of you will have experience of taking a couple of children on public transport - let alone a whole class.

I am sure you all agree with me that losing this valuable aspect of the service must not happen and can I be assured that:

- (a) These important questions have been thoroughly examined
- (b) That these functions are part of the Councils statutory requirement and must be kept.

Cabinet Member Reply

Many, if not all of our libraries provide a wide variety of services and I'm surprised that Cllr Smith was not aware of this? All aspects of the service provision for each library has and will be considered within the proposals relating to the ceasing of funding of 20 out of 43 of the Oxfordshire libraries. The current proposals within the budget are just that at this moment in time, proposals. There is to be a full consultation undertaken which is due to start at the beginning of February and will cover a period of 12 weeks. Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken, too and full analyse of the material collected during the consultation and period. All correspondence received to date, emails and letters will also be included within the analyse of data.

We are proposing to fulfil our statutory duty to provide a comprehensive library service by providing 24 hub libraries supported by an online service together with a mobile library service. Communities may develop solutions in areas where we are proposing to cease funding a particular library - or indeed where there has never been a library.

We are in the process of preparing detailed guidance on what support might be available for a community run library. The building - current, or a new building would of course be one of the issues. The guidance will be available for the start of the formal consultation.

7. Cllr Roy Darke to the Leader of the Council

“Has the leader written to Eric Pickles asking for clarification and explanation of why the Secretary of State chose to set up a smokescreen by referring to Oxfordshire County Council only getting a reduction of 1.87% in local spending power when the draft budget and service planning analysis have been indicating for some time that loss of government grant under the settlement announced before Christmas shows a much higher percentage

reduction in revenue support for OCC and, indeed, that this massive reduction is front loaded with heart-rending reductions in front line services in 2011/12?"

Reply from the Leader of the Council

No. I refer Cllr Darke to my answer to Cllr Larry Sanders at the January Council which raised a similar issue.