

CABINET – 21 SEPTEMBER 2010

ITEM 4 – QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS

Questions received from the following Members:

Councillor Steven to Councillor Mitchell

“1. Recent research reveals that over 40% of GP's believe that the proposed changes contained in the Health White Paper (Liberating the NHS) will lead to a postcode lottery, with services to patients becoming more varied. The research also shows that over 70% of GPs believe the changes will lead to much greater private sector involvement in the NHS. Given these statistics, can the Leader of the Council explain why his government is only consulting on the *implementation* of these changes and not the actual changes themselves?”

Answer:

“These figures are taken from a small survey of 300 GPs, compared to over 40,000 GPs in England. From the Government's own discussions with GPs around the country, it is clear that many are enthusiastic about the reforms. Indeed, 92% of GP practices are already part of practice-based commissioning groups, a policy actively espoused by the Labour Government and our proposals for GP-led commissioning simply build upon these.

The actual changes which the Government is undertaking are consistent with the Coalition agreement: a strong local voice for patients through democratic representation and the devolution of commissioning responsibilities to GPs. The reforms the coalition government has announced are simply the most cost-effective way of achieving these changes and that is why the government is consulting on how to implement them. The proposals are to be included in the proposed Health Bill and will therefore be subject to Parliament's approval.”

Councillor Liz Brighouse to Councillor Mitchell:

“2. On Tuesday 14th September Council agreed two motions concerning support for the most disadvantaged. In order to ensure the poorest people in the county are not disproportionately affected by the fiscal policies of the government, will the Cabinet assess each policy change required in relation to its impact on poverty?”

Answer:

“The Cabinet will most certainly be assessing the impact of public spending cuts on all of our residents and, particularly, on the most disadvantaged. However, "poverty" can be defined in many ways and is not necessarily synonymous with disadvantage.

The Cabinet will be concentrating on assessing the impact of potential decisions on all categories of disadvantaged people throughout its budget deliberations and providing an evidence base for this.”

Councillor Roy Darke to Councillor Couchman:

“3. David Cameron said earlier this year that "This economy is going to recover when we get the private sector going, by boosting enterprise." Given the recent announced job losses at the Cowley BMW plant, and the recent collapse of other local firms, can the Cabinet Member for Finance explain exactly how cutting public sector jobs in Oxfordshire is going to boost the private sector?”

Answer:

“This question starts from the premise that the country has an alternative to cutting public spending. It does not. The last government spent more than it received in every year since 2001. This was well before a banking crisis and recession. The last government's level of indebtedness meant the country was ill prepared for the measures necessary to counter the downturn. The present government has inherited a structural imbalance which means that there is £4 of spending for every £3 of income. It will inevitably take time to rectify this structural deficit and, until then, we will be adding to the mountain of debt and not reducing it. The question is not "should we be cutting public spending" but "by how much and how quickly must we make the cuts?". Labour had already planned to cut public revenue spending by 20% and capital spending by 50%. After seeing the degree of the structural deficit, the coalition has increased Labour's 20% of cuts to 25% on revenue and maintained Labour's cuts on capital at 50%.

Cutting public spending is bound to impact on those parts of the private sector that deliver public services. It is inevitable. Oxfordshire is particularly vulnerable, given our high dependence on public sector jobs. This is why it is vital to promote conditions that will allow the private sector to thrive. This involves improving education and skills provision to equip school and college leavers for successful and well paid careers; to enable workers of all ages to re-skill and up-skill where necessary; and to help those not in education, employment or training to gain confidence, skills and pride in employment. It involves making the planning system more welcoming and supportive of the economy. It means improving our transport system to make movement easier. It means stripping away some of the red tape and blockages that inhibit economic growth. It means welcoming overseas investment to a county with the most exciting science and knowledge transfer facilities anywhere and a living environment of equal quality.

That is why an Oxfordshire City Region Enterprise Partnership is so important to capitalise on our assets, address our shortcomings and support a vibrant and growing private sector as the public sector necessarily declines. The country cannot go on spending more than it earns.”

Councillor John Sanders to Rodney Rose:

“4. I was astounded to receive notification of the proposed 25% increases in charges to residents for parking in Controlled Parking Zones in Oxford.

The saga of these charges and their unpopularity goes back several years. One of the strong objections put forward by Oxford residents was that once the system was embedded, the Conservative-led County Council would be free to increase charges as it saw fit. At that time an assurance was given that increases would only be in line with RPI inflation. This was put in writing and repeated at public meetings.

For example:

Cabinet report 19 Sept 2006 (page 29) in response to an objection by residents that "The £40 charge will quickly be increased to a much higher figure" the Council officer comment is "The Draft Traffic Order limits increases in the charge to an adjustment once every three years based on inflation over this period."

Proposed Charges for Residents' and Visitors' Parking Permits: Consultation Information (June 2006). "Adjustments for inflation –The charges will be kept the same for three-year periods. After each three-year period the charges would be adjusted for inflation using the Retail Price Index"
There is no mention of slapping on a hefty increased charge.

Will the Cabinet member for Transport explain why, only three years after a firm promise to the people who reluctantly took part in the consultation, he now intends to renege on it?"

Answer:

“When the City council effectively handed over the running of Oxford on-street parking to the County Council, as they were unable to administer the scheme properly, the County were clear that the charge would cover the administration costs. Since then, national legislation increases in Penalty Charges has seen a 25% drop in offences. We could not have foreseen this result, which has been reflected by other Authorities. We finished up with other Council budgets subsidising the administration costs. In the new climate of a National debt of £950,000,000,000 after 13 years of a Labour government the Council can no longer continue to charge at less than the costs involved.”

Councillor Richard Steven to Councillor Rose

“5. Can the Cabinet Member for Transport explain why nobody from the County Council is being made available to attend the Area Committees to explain the recently proposed above-inflation increase in parking charges that are to be levied on people in Oxford?”

Answer:

All members whether county or city can put their concerns down in writing to officially object to the proposals and I will take their concerns into account when coming to my decision on this matter. The service is not able to resource officer attendance at all of the Area Committees prior to the decision committee. It would be inappropriate for me to attend as this matter is coming before me to make the final decision at cabinet member decisions.