

North Hinksey Parish Council response to OCC consultation on Children's Services

North Hinksey Parish Council wishes to state its strong opposition to the Government's financial cuts and the resultant proposed budget cuts in Oxfordshire's Children's Services leading to the potential closure of Children's Centres.

We are appalled by the prospect of Children's Centre closures across the county, with particular concern for the Centre located in our Parish in Elms Road, Botley. This Centre is a vital asset to our community, providing a wide range of essential services to families living in and around our Parish. In addition the less formal local peer support and skill sharing amongst Children's Centre users would not be replicable elsewhere.

We do not feel that integrated children's services for ages 0-19 offered through a very limited number of hubs is an effective way of providing the required levels of support. Effectively there will be no services provided for children in the age range from 0 to 2.

Children's Centres play a crucial role in *identifying* vulnerable and disadvantaged families in non-stigmatising settings, as well as providing them with essential additional support. We believe that the proposed new hubs would not be able to carry out that preventive role effectively, leading to families slipping through the net. It is essential to continue offering a wide range of services to all families, not only to identify and appropriately support the most vulnerable children and families, but also to maintain the Children's Centres' capacity for regular, ongoing support throughout the community. The proposed cuts would create a sharper divide between identified 'struggling' families – who will be increasingly isolated through the individualised outreach work of the new hubs – and 'normal' families who in fact may be struggling silently towards poor outcomes in the absence of support.

The physical closure of the Children's Centres would also impact heavily on other partner users, resulting in increased costs for those organisations or alternatively further cuts in the services that they provide. Overall this would mean that additional costs would arise elsewhere in the system (e.g. within the NHS, which is already severely constrained); these budget cuts would therefore be a false economy. It is irresponsible for Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to eliminate funding for essential universal services, since OCC's 'savings' will become costs for other public bodies under equal economic strain. It may also contribute to a progressive weakening of support for County Council funding of the remaining targeted services as less people benefit directly from them.

We have seen no evidence of any form of long term economic modelling having taken place relating to the proposals. What consideration has been made regarding the investment that has already taken place to establish the Children's Centres? What are the likely impacts on social workers in terms of their workload and the costs of recruiting additional staff in order to handle the inevitable increase in serious cases following the removal of preventative services? Any rudimentary modelling that has taken place focuses on short term costs and budgeting / legislation restrictions without consideration of longer term direct and indirect impacts, which is an extremely short-sighted approach.

Our opinion is that the County Council should continue to press the Government, with the support of District and Parish Councils, to reverse financial cuts so that funding is available to cover the costs of maintaining Children's Centres. Failing that, additional income raised through a rise in Council Tax

would be the obvious route to protect these services, given the restrictions imposed by the Government in terms of other types of income generation. We believe that a referendum giving people the choice would be the appropriate course of action and we would urge our parishioners to support the level of rise required to keep Children's Centres open in their responses to that referendum. Any such referendum should clearly state in detail exactly what purposes the additional income received from a rise in Council Tax would be used for in order to enable an informed decision, and clearly explain the benefits of continued funding of these services as outlined above.

Forcing responsibility onto local communities to provide funding (mainly through Parish and Town Councils) and operational management (through a community organisation run by local volunteers) would in no way be as effective, consistent or fair across the county as a centrally managed service operated under OCC.

OCC have suggested that ongoing costs for keeping the majority of Children's Centres open but operating a reduced range of services and times (option 3) could provide savings of at least 50%, with scope for additional services arising from further local funding. If it is considered essential to reduce the budget the question arises as to why OCC has not considered an option 4, under which they continue to run Children's Centres within this reduced budget, thereby producing at least £4m worth of savings. We do not in any way support the removal of any funding from Children's Centres leading to a reduction in the level of services, however this option 4 would be preferable to any of the other three options actually put forward as proposals by OCC.

Also this option 4 would significantly reduce the level of Council Tax rise required to maintain the service should that method of additional funding be implemented. At a minimum, if the cuts are adopted then OCC should provide transition funding to keep Children's Centres operational for at least a full financial year. It would be unreasonable and unethical for OCC to expect Parish and Town Councils to find significant levels of new funding to maintain their Children's Centres within this short time frame.

In sum, North Hinksey Parish Council strongly opposes the level and speed of funding cuts to our county's vital Children's Centres. The proposals, particularly the County Council's Preferred Option 1, are a short-sighted false economy that would have an irreversible negative impact on the well-being of all young children and their families across Oxfordshire.