

North Hinksey Parish Council response to the OCC consultation on £50m savings

North Hinksey Parish Council's position relating to the proposed additional £50m of savings to be achieved through 95 listed budget 'Saving Options' 2016-17 can be summarised as follows:

- Whilst we fully understand the pressure of increased costs combined with significantly reduced Government funding levels we have serious concerns regarding the scale of the proposals and the areas being affected.
- We would strongly urge Oxfordshire County Council to make further representations to the Government regarding the level of cuts being imposed on them combined with restrictions applied by the Government in terms of funding cuts, referendum requirements for Council Tax rises over 1.99% and other methods of income generation.
- Specific areas of concern are identified in this document where we would consider cuts in services to be unacceptable due to their potential impact on our parishioners.
- Overall if no other option were available to ensure the continuation of these essential services we would consider a referendum on a rise in County Council Tax to be the appropriate course of action by Oxfordshire County Council in order to allow people a clear choice between paying additional tax and cuts in services.

Further details relating to the above statements follow.

Areas of particular concern:

In terms of local impact the potential closure of Elms Road Children's Centre is one of our major priorities. Only £2m of the proposed £8m budget cuts are included under Saving Option No. 59, with the other £6m having been assessed under a previous part of your budgeting process. We have provided a detailed response to this issue under your separate consultation on Children's Services and will not repeat our comments here beyond restating our strong opposition to closure of this valuable community service.

A number of Saving Options have been identified by Oxfordshire County Council as having no direct impact on the general public and even in a few cases a positive impact. Overall these options total nearly half of the proposed £50m savings.

The absence of detailed evidence makes it very difficult to accurately assess the impacts of the proposed cuts, however, the following list includes those services where we would consider the likely impact of the proposed cuts (taking into account indirect impacts and possible impacts on carbon emissions) to be unacceptable, particularly on our parishioners:

- Environment & Economy: 1, 2, 3, 13, 15, 19
- Adult Social Care: 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 37, 38, 39, 41, 43, 45, 48, 49, 50, 52
- Children, Education & Families: 59, 60, 62, 63, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70
- Fire & Rescue and Trading Standards: 72, 78
- Libraries / Cultural Services: 80 (section c relating to potential staffing cuts)
- Corporate Measures: none
- Corporate Services: none

Representations to Government

Recent media interest has made everybody well aware that there have been differences of opinion between Oxfordshire County Council and the Government relating to proposed cuts in services. We would strongly urge the County Council to apply more pressure on George Osborne and David Cameron on this issue, and we will be encouraging our local MP, Nicola Blackwood to do likewise.

It was made clear to our representatives at a recent County Council presentation at Matthew Arnold School that there are several areas where Government actions are having a major negative impact:

- The implementation of swingeing cuts to County Council funding, which David Cameron mistakenly appears to consider only minor. Given the already low levels of funding in Oxfordshire compared to other areas we feel that this county is not being treated fairly in comparison, and that the County Council should be more robustly assertive in stating our case for smaller cuts in Government funding.
- The restrictions imposed on County Councils limiting the ability to generate other income through charging organisations for certain types of expertise or services, or via other means. There would appear to be opportunities for significant income generation schemes were the Government restrictions not in place and the County Council should be lobbying strongly for their removal.
- The Government's legal requirement for a costly referendum for proposed Council Tax rises over 1.99% leading to an unwillingness by the County Council to recommend such an increase in order to reduce the necessary level of savings. Again, pressure should be applied to the Government to remove this restriction.

Overall recommendations

North Hinksey Parish Council would strongly encourage Oxfordshire County Council to find means to restrict the proposed cuts to Options which have minimal or no direct negative impact on the general public. We have identified areas of particular concern in this document where we would consider cuts at the proposed level to be totally unacceptable and we would insist that those Saving Options should not be implemented. Additional income needed to fund this position would equate to around one half of the £50m savings options identified by the County Council.

It is possible that this additional income could be provided either by additional Government funding and a removal of restrictions on income generation by the Government, and the County Council should be lobbying for both of these options. Should those opportunities not provide fruitful we would urge the County Council to raise their Council Tax by the required amount, which would be in excess of 1.99%. Based on the current position that would require a referendum, allowing the public to decide whether or not to support such a rise in order to maintain services.

Given that this referendum could be held alongside another election in May 2016 the costs would reduce significantly from the £800k required for a stand-alone referendum. We believe that it should be possible to restrict costs to around £500k, and certainly we would expect it to be less than the c.£600k figure suggested at the Matthew Arnold School presentation. As such we would consider those costs acceptable in the context, and would recommend the holding of a referendum on a Council Tax rise as the most appropriate action should other methods of funding prove impossible to achieve.