

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 7 JANUARY 2016

**CALL IN OF CABINET DECISION – COUNTY COUNCIL’S CONSULTATION ON
THE PROPOSED NEW MODEL FOR CHILDREN’S SERVICES IN OXFORDSHIRE.**

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

(Contact: Paul Cracknell, Tel: (01993) 861523)

(The decisions on this matter will be resolutions or recommendations to Cabinet)

1. PURPOSE

To consider the call-in request relating to a Cabinet decision of 9 December 2015 (Minute No 83) in respect of a response to the County Council’s Consultation on the Proposed New Model for Children’s Services in Oxfordshire.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That the Committee decides whether or not to support the call-in request; and
- (b) That, if the request is supported, the Committee determines whether it wishes to submit any additional comments to Cabinet.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. At its meeting held on 9 December 2015 the Cabinet considered a report regarding the County Council’s Consultation on the Proposed New Model for Children’s Services in Oxfordshire. This Committee had previously considered the matter at its meeting held 19 November 2015.
- 3.2. Members are requested to bring a copy of the report that was circulated for the Cabinet meeting to this committee meeting. The papers can be accessed through the following links [report](#) and [appendix](#) (following the links from www.westoxon.gov.uk/meetings). Copies are also available on request from Democratic Services.
- 3.3. The Cabinet’s decision has been the subject of a call-in request from Councillors J C Cooper, A M Graham, Ms E P R Leffman and Dr E M E Poskitt in the following terms:

“The proposed response is timid compared to the debate at the Economic & Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The strength of the speeches from the Conservative Councillors such as the Chairman and others was not reflected in the debate at Cabinet and, although the proposition from Councillor Carter and Mr Cooper was defeated, to recognise the financial constraints was simply not the view of the committee.”
- 3.4. A copy of the draft response to the consultation, prepared following the Cabinet meeting, is included in the [Appendix](#) to this report, and includes the minutes of both meetings which had considered the matter.

- 3.5. In accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny procedure rules the call-in has been referred by the Chief Executive to this Committee for consideration.
- 3.6. The deadline set by the County Council for the submission of responses is 11:59 pm on Sunday 10 January 2016. Therefore, the County Council was advised of the possibility of the matter being referred back to Cabinet for reconsideration and asked whether, if necessary, a response submitted immediately following Cabinet on 13 January would be acceptable. In response, it was stated: *“Although we appreciate that getting a response through the political process can take time, due to the tight timescales we are working to between the consultation closing and reporting back to Cabinet, we cannot guarantee that any responses submitted to us after 10th January will be included in the consultation analysis. We would of course be happy to receive a response from yourselves prior to 10th January with any caveats that you wish to add regarding the possibility of it being called in for scrutiny”*.
- 3.7. Accordingly, a response will be submitted after this meeting, if necessary to include comment on the call-in aspect.

4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

The Committee could agree with the Cabinet’s original decision and endorse the proposed response in which case the decision will be implemented immediately. The Committee could support the request or recommend an alternative position to the Cabinet for them to reconsider.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

6. RISKS

None

7. REASONS

To enable the Committee to consider the matter in light of the call-in and the information provided in the report.

Keith Butler
Head of Democratic Services

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Date: 17 December 2015

Background Papers:

None

Democratic Services

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Councillor Melinda Tilley
Cabinet Member for Children, Education &
Families
Children's Services Consultation
FREEPOST OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY
COUNCIL

Your Ref:
Our Ref: PC/
Date: XX December 2015

Dear Councillor Tilley

Consultation on the proposed new model for children's services in Oxfordshire

I am writing in response to the County Council's Public Consultation on the proposed new model for children's services in Oxfordshire.

At the outset, I would like to make it abundantly clear that the Council's first preference would be to see existing levels of service maintained, and that this was the overwhelming view of all of the political groups represented on the Council. However, the rest of this letter (i) aims to set out the range of comments and considerations which have arisen; and (ii) in view of the request to express a preference for one of the consultation options, states that to be option 3.

The consultation document was considered by West Oxfordshire District Council's Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 19 November and by the Cabinet on 9 December.

Whilst it was recognised that, faced with reduced budgets and increased pressure for the provision of intensive services such as safeguarding, the County Council was seeking to protect services for those in greatest need, significant concerns were expressed by Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee who found themselves unable to express support for any of the proposed options until it was clear exactly how the new service was to operate.

In particular, Members questioned how the financial support proffered by the County would be allocated within Oxfordshire initially and to what extent this support would be on-going in the future. It was stressed that any solution would need to recognise the rural nature of West Oxfordshire and suggested that any allocation of funding ought to recognise this by applying an appropriate rural weighting. It was also noted that, with limited public transport, those from outlying areas would find it particularly difficult to access a centralised facility.

Whilst it was acknowledged that there was a place for the voluntary sector in supporting certain service provision, there were concerns that this was might not be the case in respect of children's services where issues involved could be of far greater significance. It was also noted that increased mobility in the workforce meant that traditional support networks had been diminished as people became detached from their families.

The concerns expressed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (which are set out in greater detail in the extract from the minutes of that meeting attached as [Appendix A](#)) were subsequently considered by the Cabinet on 9 December.

Whilst the Cabinet accepted there were concerns over the action proposed by the County Council, it recognised that there was a need to appreciate the challenges facing that Authority and to respond to the consultation in a constructive manner.

With this in mind, it was agreed that the County Council be advised that, whilst West Oxfordshire would prefer to see the retention of universal services, it recognises the financial constraints faced by that Authority. Accordingly, of the options put forward in the consultation, this Council favours option 3, the provision of grant funding to the voluntary and community sectors with the proviso that the allocation of resources recognises the rural nature of West Oxfordshire and ensures an equitable distribution of funds.

In reaching its decision to endorse option 3 the Cabinet wished to make it clear that West Oxfordshire's first preference would be to see existing levels of service maintained. However, as this was not an option put forward in the consultation document, it was considered that option 3 represented the best available way forward, subject to the caveats outlined above.

The relevant extract from the minutes of the Cabinet meeting which expands upon the rationale underlying the decision is attached as [Appendix B](#).

Yours sincerely

PAUL J B CRACKNELL
Democratic Services

**Extract from the minutes of the
Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 19 November 2015**

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CHILDREN'S SERVICES – CONSULTATION

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities which set out a recommended response to the County Council's consultation on proposed changes to Children's Services.

The Head of Leisure and Communities introduced the report and explained that, faced with reduced budgets and increased pressure for the provision of intensive services such as safeguarding, the County Council proposed to protect services for those in greatest need by reducing universal services. The proposed new service would see a reduction in the number of children's centres in the County from 42 to eight, reducing their role in delivery whilst focusing on targeted schemes. These proposals envisaged the retention of the centre in Witney, together with the Early Intervention Hubs.

The report's recommendation was that the Council supported option three as detailed in the report on the basis that it would bring in external funding and build resilience within the community.

Mrs Doughty indicated that she felt unable to consider any of the options until the consultation process was complete and it was clear exactly how the new service was to operate. Mr Owen questioned how the financial support proffered by the County would be allocated within Oxfordshire.

The Head of Leisure and Communities advised that, whilst the County proposed to support the community in delivering Children's Services, it was not yet clear how funding would be allocated. She acknowledged that the Council needed to know more about the detail of the operation of the service and the allocation of funding and suggested that it could respond in support of option three as suggested with a caveat to that effect.

The Strategic Director cautioned that, in failing to respond to the consultation, the Council could be perceived as divorcing itself from the process. In consequence, she encouraged Members to formulate a response.

Mrs Doughty noted that £1 Million was not a significant sum in the context of providing such services and emphasised the importance of establishing how funding was to be allocated. She also drew attention to the potential impact upon other services (including those provided by West Oxfordshire) occasioned by the loss of children's centres.

Mr Beaney concurred, questioning whether funding was to be allocated based upon population. He also expressed concern over continuing funding arrangements in the future. In response to a further question it was explained that, whilst retaining the centre in Witney, it was proposed to close those in both Abingdon and Bicester.

Mrs Carter suggested that the role played by universal children's services was not properly recognised and, whilst there was a place for the voluntary sector in supporting certain service provision, this was not the case in respect of children's services where issues involved could be a matter of life and death. Universal children's services needed to be valued and understood.

As they were at the cutting edge of communities, Mrs Carter suggested that the loss of children's centres was short sighted and would have a highly detrimental effect upon other

services. There was no evidence to suggest that the extension of Early Intervention Hubs would be effective. Current provision for teenagers was failing and Mrs Carter questioned whether a mix of age groups would be appropriate.

Those members of the public who had protested against the closures felt that their concerns had not been recognised and the review of services had been carried out during the summer months when demand for services was reduced. Mrs Carter also made reference to the valuable contribution made by the service to families of those in the armed forces currently deployed in the service of their country.

Mrs Carter indicated that she was unable to support any of the options put forward by the County Council and proposed that the Cabinet be requested to respond to the consultation in the following terms:-

It is essential that we maintain universal services at our well used and desperately needed children's centres. The Council believes this to be one of the most important services undertaken by the County Council and should therefore receive a high priority.

The Council therefore resolves to work with the County Council to ensure universal services remain a key feature of service provision in our district"

The proposition was seconded by Mr Cooper.

Mr Handley suggested that the Council should make it clear that it did not support any of the suggested options and would wish to see all the existing children's centres remain open. The Council had been placed in an impossible position by being asked to respond to a consultation, the details of which were not available. Each centre had differing requirements and district councils should be afforded the opportunity to consider the matter further having been provided with further information detailing exactly how the new service would operate before any decision was taken by the County Council.

Mrs Little noted that the service helped more than just children, offering assistance to families throughout the District. She suggested that the County could look at reducing budgets within individual centres before implementing wholesale closures, perhaps reducing hours of operation. She reiterated the importance of ensuring that the service was staffed by trained professionals rather than volunteers and in conclusion, reassured Mrs Carter that service families at Brize Norton were catered for by OXPIPS, an organisation funded through SAAFA and the Carterton Town Council.

Mrs Fenton indicated that she would wish to see the existing centres remain open, emphasising the rural nature of the District. She noted that, with limited public transport, those from outlying areas would find it particularly difficult to access a centralised facility.

Whilst expressing her sympathy for Mrs Carter's position, Mrs Crossland reminded Members that it was important to remember that there were many other vulnerable groups throughout the District. Whilst important, Children's Centres were not the only priority service provided by the County Council and Mrs Crossland cautioned against supporting these to the exclusion of all else.

Mr Cooper noted that increased mobility in the workforce meant that traditional support networks had been diminished as people became detached from their families. He suggested that any allocation of funding ought to recognise the rural nature of West Oxfordshire by applying an appropriate rural weighting.

Mrs Doughty suggested that the request for County Council representation at the Committee should be renewed and reiterated her view that all centres should remain open.

Mr Beaney stressed that all centres should be retained and expressed his support for the generality of the proposition. However, he suggested that the second paragraph could be seen as placing a burden on the District Council and should be deleted. He supported the introduction of a rural weighting and, given the lack of detailed information available to Members, agreed that the County Council be invited to address the meeting before a decision was made.

The proposition was then put to the vote and was lost.

(Mr T N Owen requested that his abstention from voting on the proposition be duly noted)

Thereafter, having been proposed and duly seconded it was:-

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet be advised of the concerns expressed by Members as detailed above and requested to take these into account when formulating the Council's response.

Extract from the minutes of the Cabinet meeting – 9 December 2015

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL – CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED NEW MODEL FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN OXFORDSHIRE

The report of the Head of Leisure and Communities was received seeking agreement on the Council's response to consultation on changes to Children's Services proposed by Oxfordshire County Council.

Mr Courts indicated that, whilst there were concerns over the action proposed by the County Council, there was a need to recognise the challenges facing that Authority and to respond to the consultation in a constructive manner. He proposed that the Council should endorse option 3, universal services being supported through community investment from the County Council. This offered the opportunity to increase the role of the voluntary sector and, whilst it envisaged the provision of services in a different way, it was critical to protect the provision of support available to the most vulnerable families.

However, Mr Courts stressed that the allocation of resources must recognise the rural nature of West Oxfordshire and ensure an equitable distribution funds.

The proposition was seconded by Mr Dingwall.

Mr Cooper suggested that the Council's response should be more robust, indicating that it failed to reflect fully the strength of feeling and the concerns expressed by Members of the Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee. In response to a question from Mr Norton, he expressed his support for the retention of universal services and the proposition put forward to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee by Mrs Carter.

Sir Barry acknowledged the concerns expressed but cautioned against submitting a response that could result in West Oxfordshire becoming dissociated with any future discussion on service provision. Sir Barry indicated that responding as suggested, expressing a preference for option 3, would enable the Council to retain the best level of service possible for residents of West Oxfordshire.

Mr Saul concurred with Mr Cooper, indicating that he did not consider any of the options put forward to be acceptable for the people of West Oxfordshire.

Sir Barry suggested that there was a need for the Council to be pragmatic in its response as he did not believe that it was realistic to request the County to allocate funds to retain the existing level of service. By seeking to secure grant funding for the voluntary and community sector, the Council was attempting to secure the best of the potential outcomes.

Mr Saul reiterated his view that option 3 was not acceptable.

Mr Mills also acknowledged the concerns expressed but suggested that, in the current financial climate, it was inevitable that there would be some change to current service delivery. Accordingly, it was essential that the most vulnerable in the community were protected and option 3 provided the best possibility of doing so. He noted that it was not possible to look at all the existing hubs in the same way as each operated on a different basis, some services already being provided by the voluntary sector in County Council premises. Option 3 offered the opportunity to provide the best level of service possible to local residents.

Mr Mills emphasised that it was vital that the Council gave a constructive response. By doing so, it was not saying that it liked the option, rather that it recognised that it was the best available. By taking a practical standpoint, the Council would be in a position to engage in future consultation on service development and delivery.

Mr Dingwall concurred and Sir Barry emphasised that the proposition was based upon the premise that, if it had to express a preference, the Council would favour option 3.

Mr Cooper questioned whether there was sufficient support for the withdrawal of universal services amongst County Council Members and suggested that West Oxfordshire should stand behind the retention of existing arrangements.

Mr Robinson noted that the proposition put to the Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee by Mrs Carter and Mr Cooper had been lost. In response, Mr Saul indicated that, whilst the proposition had been lost, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had not wished to support option 3.

Mr Harvey indicated that the County Council had made it clear that retention of universal services was not an option offered in the consultation, the only possibilities being those set out in the report. Sir Barry reiterated that the concerns expressed should be made clear in the Council's response to the County and it was **AGREED** that the final response be agreed in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member.

DECISION: That the County Council be advised that, whilst West Oxfordshire would prefer to see the retention of universal services, it recognises the financial constraints faced by that Authority. Accordingly, of the options put forward in the consultation, this Council favours option 3, the provision of grant funding to the voluntary and community sectors with the proviso that the allocation of resources recognises the rural nature of West Oxfordshire and ensures an equitable distribution of funds.

REASONS: The Cabinet considered that its response to accord with the Council's objective to work in partnership to sustain vibrant, healthy and economically prosperous towns and villages.

OPTIONS: The Cabinet considered the concerns expressed by the Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee and those put forward at the meeting as outlined above.