**Unprecedented Times CWaC Budget consultation.**

**Response from OPAL - We Support Older People and Carers in rural Cheshire West.**

**Recognising the huge budget pressures.**

We fully appreciate the massive challenges faced by Cheshire West and Chester Council. Having had to reduce budgets by almost £400 million over the past decade, many services are already under great strain, with a reduced offer to the community.

We recognise that the figures used in the consultation document are tentative and subject to a range of variables. However, they are significant and pose a real threat to our communities unless a proper balance can be achieved.

We also understand that whilst the government has yet to announce the settlement for 2021/22, this will for certain, be only a one year arrangement.

**Unprecedented times.**

**General comments.**

We found that many of the proposals are generalised and impossible to fully understand without greater detail being provided.

In turn, as the focus of OPAL is older people and carers in rural areas of the Borough, we must highlight the potential of compounding the effects of service reductions.

However, as stated before, without detail our views have to be speculative.

**Specific comment.**

In 1.1 a reduction of £120,000 to Mental Health spending was identified. We, along with many others locally and nationally are aware of the huge increase in the need for mental health support.

Indeed as the Covid 19 crisis continues, it has to be assumed that this demand will increase.

We link this to 1.20 and reinvestment of Public Health expenditure.

Public Health should be about systemic change. For Older People, we would see this linked to the Age Friendly initiative which, is central to the World Health Organisation’s decade of ‘ Healthy Ageing’.

Mental Health needs are already identified by the Council, in 3.6 it is recognised as a Borough wide priority, sharing an investment of £300,000. We endorse this approach.

In 1.5 savings of £400,000 are identified by joining services with the NHS. We say yes, but the rhetoric needs to be actioned. The Covid crisis has seen closer working however, this needs to be consolidated and become the norm. We’ve been talking about this approach for twenty years or more.

In 1.10 a streamlined carers service, in which we declare an interest, was identified, saving a modest, but significant £90,000. We see no detail of this however, strains and pressures on carers are huge, especially as many other support services aren’t being delivered. Any adjustments must be very carefully planned and the promises and ideals set out in the very recent ‘All Age Carers strategy’ need to be realised. We are not clear how both can be achieved at the same time ?

In 1.11 savings of £268,000 to community support services are set down. We must declare an interest here too.

The proposal lacks detail, though it makes significant assumptions about duplication. These would need to be fully understood, as would the nature of voluntary organisations as individually governed entities.

Without this level of detail it is hard to make any meaningful observation.

In 2.7 concessionary fares are highlighted, with savings of £170,000. This scheme disproportionately impacts on older people and whilst there is an argument that we should all walk more, rural living and distances often mitigate against this.

In turn with services in rural areas already being depleted, the cumulative impact for older people and carers of increased isolation, disenfranchisement and loneliness may be the consequence.

In 3.3 savings of £149,000 in support to the voluntary and community sector is identified. Again, there is insufficient detail to fully understand this or comment in a meaningful way on it. Is there duplication in this ?

In 3.4, a reduction of £2.2 million from ‘ contracts ‘ was identified. Again without detail understanding is difficult. Is this as above duplication ?

In 3.7 savings of £317,000 was identified by digital transformation. Whilst no doubt this is important and possible, the direct impact on older people must be recognised. As an organisation OPAL offers support to people to be able to ‘ Go online ‘ however to achieve true accessibility and to avoid further exclusion this needs significant investment and time.

**The place of ‘ Third sector ‘ voluntary groups.**

We were heartened to read Louise Gittins introduction, recognising that the community has been at the forefront of the response to Covid 19 crisis.

Along with recognition of the charitable funds, the sector is able to attract, it is important that the contribution of volunteers, their time, skills and efforts all given freely, are fully appreciated and valued. OPAL has over 200 such people.

In turn a clear recognition that the voluntary sector in Cheshire West and Chester are working more closely together. This is unquestionably the case.

However, the changed approach needs to be supported and sustained.

Put simply, the sort of recognition of the place of the sector, is in our opinion vital as we together face the challenges ahead.

Support for and the promotion of ‘ Healthier ageing ‘ will not be delivered by single agencies, nor by the culture of silo working, we have for so long witnessed.

It requires a community response, it requires real partnership, real collaboration, where we together focus on the outcome for individuals and communities.

Organisations, across the voluntary sector are part of the solution. This requires a fundamental shift in thinking and attitudes.

The sector is not a threat to officers nor members, it is an asset that will bring huge advantage to our communities and to the individuals living in them. It will reinforce the place of local democracy and bring broader understanding to all.

**Conclusion**

OPAL recognises and understands the budget pressures the Council are experienced and anticipating.

Detailed comment on many proposals is not possible because they are very generalised and don’t provide the context in terms of baseline figures which the savings are set against.

The place of the voluntary sector needs to be embedded in all appropriate areas of work across the borough and of course the need to adequately fund and support it must be recognised

**The Board of OPAL Services**

**November 2020**

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