

Local campaigning group the Socialist Health Association slams “inadequate” County Council consultation on Mental Health cuts.

As part of a draft budget proposal for 2019/2020, Oxfordshire County Council are proposing two major cuts in Mental Health spending: £1 million over two years to the Community and Volunteer Organisations (CVO) providing mental health services; and £600k in mental health social workers.

A consultation began on 6th December and will end on 6th January, with the majority of residents entirely unaware that their views are being sought at all - or indeed that the cuts are round the corner.

The Oxfordshire branch of the Socialist Health Association (SHA) has today slammed both the cuts themselves and the ‘inadequate’ consultation period.

Local NHS Consultant and Labour Councillor Dr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, Chair of Oxfordshire SHA, says

“This draft proposal could have a devastating impact on the lives of our most vulnerable residents. Stripping away social support from those with mental illness will inevitably mean further pressure on acute services which are already at crisis point after a decade of austerity. These proposals also contradict the County Council’s long-term plans of an Integrated Care System, by removing this pre-existing integration of social care and mental health. I sincerely hope a meaningful consultation process takes place away from the distractions of the festive period, and that these proposals are withdrawn.”

Another member and City Councillor, local GP Joe McManners, adds:

“This proposal is really troubling. We all understand the pressures on budgets, but to push these onto those with mental illness is just not right. I have patients who are reliant on these services. I have seen situations where social care has not been there, and this has caused my patients’ health to deteriorate. So this will fall yet again onto a more and more pressured health service, as well as perhaps disastrously letting down some of the most vulnerable people in the county.

“I hope people object to this through the consultation, even though it is over Christmas, so that the County Council listens and these potentially dangerous cuts are reversed.”

Meanwhile Annaliese Dodds, Labour MP for Oxford East, has also weighed into the debate to voice her dismay:

"I was concerned to hear about these cuts in support for people suffering mental ill-health. Oxfordshire already has one of the lowest levels of mental health funding provided in relation to the rest of the Clinical Commissioning Group's budget. This additional cut to support for people with mental health problems will have a severe impact on many people who are already struggling. I hope that local residents will express their concerns about these cuts as part of the consultation, although they don't have long since it is set to close on the 6th January."

The SHA point out that the CVO cuts will reduce the care and support that mentally unwell people have, making them more vulnerable to crisis and less able to take control of their lives. Meanwhile, they say the mental health social work cuts could reverse years of holistic care, splitting up services and making it much harder for social care needs to be met.

The SHA are also angry that that even more pressure is likely then to fall on pared-back NHS services.

SHA Spokesperson Sue Edgar says,

“At a time of year when we traditionally think of the most vulnerable, we have this almost secretive announcement of cuts amounting to £1.6m – an astonishing 20% of an £8m budget. Yet again people with severe mental health problems are bearing the brunt of austerity – and we are only given a risible couple of weeks at holiday time to have our say.

“Has there even been an impact assessment for this brutal cut? People need at least to see some evidence before being ‘consulted’, however inadequately.

“So now think of a young man or woman, living on their own, afraid to leave the house as they are too depressed or suffering from frightening thoughts. The doctors and nurses can help with medication but their self care – getting shopping, preparing food, sorting their bills and benefits, keeping their job, caring for their family – is often dependent on good social care and good support from the voluntary sector. This is all funded by a ‘pooled budget’ from the County Council and the NHS. Cuts to the County Council side will mean simply not meeting some of these needs.”

The SHA are asking everyone to take part in the consultation, and if possible to contact their councillors to object to the insufficient time allowed.