



Adrian Waite (Independent Consultancy Services) Limited

20th January 2015

Cllr Stewart Young,  
Leader,  
Cumbria County Council,  
The Courts,  
Carlisle,  
Cumbria.  
CA3 8NA.

cc. Ms. Diane Wood, Chief Executive.

By email.

Dear Councillor. Young,

### **Budget Consultation 2015**

I write in response to your public consultation on the 2015/16 budget for Cumbria County Council.

As you know I am a resident of Appleby, Managing Director of 'AWICS' and Chair of Impact Housing Association. However, this letter is written in my personal capacity.

My observations on your draft budget are as follows:

#### Council Tax

In view of the considerable financial challenges facing Cumbria County Council I feel that it would be appropriate for the Council to raise Council tax by 2%.

I am aware that the government would require the Council to hold a referendum if it wished to raise the Council Tax by a greater amount than 2% and I think that the Council should seriously consider this option. If the resources were to be used to maintain and improve much needed local services that offered value for money I would certainly vote in favour of an increase in Council Tax of more than 2%. I am not sure that the usual presumption that most voters would vote against a Council Tax increase would necessarily be proved correct if the Council were to make a convincing case.

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## Proposals for Savings

I am afraid to say that I found the proposals for savings as described on your website rather vague and difficult to comment on. Most proposals seem to consist of a brief description that suggests in general terms that the service should be improved followed by an estimate of the savings that would result. I was usually left wondering if I really understood what the proposals entailed and what effect they would really have on the service. Surely everyone would be in favour of improved services at a lower cost but is this really what is being proposed?

Having said that I would like to make some specific observations as follows:

- Proposal 1 – We propose to help people to continue to live independently by developing Extra Care Housing. In view of the changing demographics in Cumbria I think that this proposal is very important and that the Council should, if anything, develop a more ambitious programme of extra-care elderly schemes. I assume that the savings shown relate to savings that is estimated would arise from the closure of residential care for the elderly schemes as people transferred into extra-care elderly accommodation.
- Proposals 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 10 – Other Community Services. These are all important services. The proposals to integrate the services with other agencies such as the health service are to be welcomed. However, there is no reference to housing associations that are important partners of the County Council with which partnerships could be further developed. As stated above, I hope that the savings identified here will not result in a reduction in the effectiveness of services and, if they would, I think this should be clearly stated.
- Proposals 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 & 13 – Highways, Planning and Waste Management. I have no specific observations on these proposals.

## Finding New Ways of Working

The Council clearly needs to find new ways of working to meet the financial challenges of the next few years.

In my view the most important thing for the Council to do is to focus increasingly on meeting the needs of the community, developing a service-led rather than a top-down approach. This should involve empowering front-line managers, reducing layers of management and seeking efficiencies in support services.

My responses to your specific questions are:

- Would it be better to change the quality or delivery of our services rather than lose them altogether? – It would be easy to identify specific services that are important either to the community in general or to specific individuals and to argue that these should be protected. However, all services are there for a reason and I would therefore think it would usually be better to change the quality or delivery of services rather than to lose them altogether. In considering this question I think it is important to bear in mind that some services are used by most of the population (such as highways) while others are used by small numbers of people (such as social care) but for whom those services are very important. There is therefore a danger that any public consultation will result in more expressions of support for the services that are used by the 'many'. However, there is still a need for the Council to protect the services for the 'few'.

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- Would you support the idea of more of our services being provided by voluntary organisations, your community or different providers? I would support this approach but there is a need to ensure that the alternative providers can provide an adequate service and can offer appropriate remuneration and conditions to their employees.
- Given a choice, are there any services that you would protect at all costs? No, for the reasons explained above.

### Local Government Structure

I think there should be a unitary council for Cumbria because:

- Having worked in County, District and Unitary Councils my experience is that Unitary Councils are far more effective in many ways than County or District Councils.
- The argument that a Unitary Council could create significant efficiency savings and a more streamlined and effective democracy is also convincing.
- A single unitary authority for Cumbria would have the scale to gain more economies than two or three unitaries and would also have the capacity to take on more significant functions. Having lived in Frizington and Appleby and being familiar with all parts of Cumbria, I appreciate the different issues in different parts of the County but I also consider that there is a common 'Cumbrian' interest.

I think the time has come for Cumbria County Council to become bolder. The Council should ask for (or even demand) the same powers that are about to be given to the Scottish Parliament. We need bold, locally determined policies to tackle the various problems of the County in all policy areas not just those that are currently delegated to local government. I don't see them coming from Westminster regardless of the political balance there.

It may also be appropriate for us to consider options for democratic reform such as proportional representation and the lowering of the voting age to sixteen.

I think that the current structure may soon become unsustainable, especially in view of the reductions in local government funding.

As you suggest I will also write to the Secretary of State to express these views on the local government structure.

### Financial Strategy

I was surprised to find a lack of information in the budget consultation on the Council's financial strategy. For example, I could find no information on the following issues:

- Reserves and Balances – policy, actual levels and planned levels
- Capital Investment and Prudential Borrowing – priorities and approach to funding
- Risk Assessment and Management
- Value for Money Strategy
- Financial Management

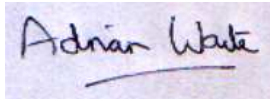
Perhaps in future budget consultations you should provide a greater breadth of information and seek observations on a greater breadth of issues. Eden District Council, in its budget consultation this year provided draft budget papers that I found useful in understanding their financial position (see <http://www.eden.gov.uk/your-council/council-finances/budget-consultation-2015-2016/>). The County Council may wish to consider a similar approach in future.

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I hope that you find these observations helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adrian Waite". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

**Adrian Waite**  
**Managing Director**

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