

Cuts to public spending: why lobby your MP?



This briefing aims to:

- help you prepare to meet your MP
- outline the general arguments against cuts to public spending
- outline arguments against cuts to Building schools for the future (BSF)
- outline concerns over changes to pensions
- outline concerns over public funding going to academies and free schools
- provide alternatives to the proposed cuts
- give details of lobbying at the Palace of Westminster on 19 October 2010 and in MPs' surgeries on 22 and 23 October
- give details on how to report back on your meetings.

How to prepare for meeting your MP

You may wish to lobby the MP in whose constituency you live and/or you may wish to lobby the MPs in whose constituencies your workplace and/or branch falls. It depends on which MP you feel needs the most persuasion over your argument. You can find information on how to lobby your MP at www.atl.org.uk.

Once you've made your arrangements to meet your MP at the Palace of Westminster or at their surgery, you will need to think carefully about what you will say to them.

Firstly, do you know if your MP opposes or supports the cuts? This will affect how you approach the meeting as you will either offer them information to help strengthen their opposition or you will be seeking to change their mind.

Secondly, you need to be well-prepared with your arguments, remembering to talk as much as you can in the context of real life stories from the constituency.

Thirdly, should your MP oppose the cuts, you need to find out what they're going to do about the situation. Should they support the cuts, you need to ask them to justify why they take this stance.

The following briefing outlines many arguments around the proposed cuts – you don't have to use them all, pick ones which are relevant to your area and remember to use real examples to back up your argument.

The general arguments against cuts to public spending

On meeting your MP, thank them for seeing you, explain your job or role in the union, say you're keen to hear their views on the impact of cuts on education and the wider community and explain you will be reporting back the conversation to colleagues.

The TUC's briefing with key arguments against cuts and an alternative approach can be found at www.tuc.org.uk/alltogetherfor/why_we_are_lobbying.pdf.

In summary, the arguments are as follows:

- The government wants to cut the deficit in four years: the TUC argues this is too fast and does not give enough time for economic growth to impact on the deficit. Such deep cuts could slow the economy down and cause a double dip recession.
- The government wants 80 per cent cuts and 20 per cent tax rises: the TUC argues cuts hit the poor and vulnerable hardest as well as hitting services which the majority of people use. Cracking down on tax avoidance and a Robin Hood tax on the banks is a fairer way forward.
- The government says the cuts will be fair and the poor and vulnerable will be protected: the TUC says this is not possible with such deep cuts, and the poorest will be 13 times more affected than the richest. Anyone earning under £20,000 is likely to receive a significant blow to their income and certain regions of the UK will be hit harder than others, widening the north-south divide. Changes to housing benefit will make 82,000 households homeless in London alone, according to TUC calculations.
- The government argues cuts to public services will be backroom jobs: the TUC argues backroom support in areas such as payroll, processing medical tests, and booking appointments impacts on frontline delivery. Cuts will lead to redundancies, pay freezes and large-scale reorganisations which will damage morale among public sector workers. Loss of skills and experience among the workforce will damage service delivery and slow economic growth. Any cuts to public services will also lead to cuts in the private sector. Health (£71 billion) defence (£26 billion) and economic affairs (business, innovation and skills and transport; £23 billion) are the biggest customers of the private sector.
- The government wants more private providers delivering public services to cut costs and increase efficiency: the TUC says the private finance initiative (PFI) often ran over budget and imposed inflexible conditions.

Building schools for the future (BSF)

An early move by the coalition government was to cut much of the BSF programme destined to repair dilapidated schools and build new schools in areas of greatest need. ATL strongly opposes these cuts for the following reasons:

- Regardless of whether the BSF programme represented the best way forward, pupils' learning undoubtedly suffers if they are working in temporary classrooms, suffering extremes of hot and cold or if there are leaks in their school's roof.
- ATL is particularly concerned that the failure to renovate or replace school buildings leaves a continuing risk from unsecured asbestos, which is potentially lethal to pupils and staff.
- The government is simply shifting funding from BSF to its pet projects of academies and free schools. Up to £75 million has been allocated to fund outstanding schools converting to academies, and £500,000 has been given to the New Schools Network to encourage free schools. And the government is using £50 million from the schools' technology fund for free school start-up costs.
- Substantial investment in education and training, including the infrastructure, is vital to develop a workforce which can create hi-tech, high value goods and services to export. We cannot compete against the massive, low-cost labour economies of China or India without such investment in our future.

Pensions

ATL has submitted a full response to Hutton's interim report on public sector pensions released October 2010. Points raised on funding public sector pensions include:

- The notion of gold-plated pensions in the public sector is a myth: the average pension for 530,000 retired teachers is £9,000 per year; a teaching assistant receives an average £4,000 per year; and the value of public sector workers' pensions is less than 30 per cent of salary.
- The National Audit Office (NAO) forecasts the proportion of GDP accounted for by public sector pensions is in fact falling from 1.9 per cent of GDP in 2010-11 to 1.4 per cent of GDP by 2060. The government will already be making a huge saving by switching any annual increase in pensions from RPI to CPI.
- The public service pensions model means all employees are in the same scheme and benefit from the same scheme model. In the Local Government Pension Scheme, high earners contribute a greater percentage of their income towards their pensions. Public service pension schemes are equitable, unlike the private sector where executives, partners and board members receive massive pension packages, while their employees aren't even in a pension scheme.
- No one goes into teaching to get rich. Teachers accept their salaries are not in the same league as that of other graduate professions, so an attack on their already modest pensions is unacceptable.
- According to an ATL survey of October 2010, nearly 90 per cent of teachers regard their pension as an important part of their remuneration package, and just under 70 per cent said it plays a key role in keeping them in education.
- The Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) was reviewed as recently as 2005 so any increases in contributions should be based on the scheme's valuation, not as part of a wider decision to increase the entire public sector's contributions.
- If contributions to TPS go up then many recently trained teachers with huge debts thanks to increased tuition fees and those with young families won't be able to afford to contribute which could jeopardise the whole scheme.
- At a time of high inflation (RPI is currently 4.7 per cent) and at a time when teachers and support staff face a pay freeze in 2011 and 2012, an increase in contribution rates is a cut in take-home pay.

Points raised on raising the retirement age include:

- Raising the state pension age within six years to 66 for men could have a huge detrimental impact on young people. Extra jobs will have to be found to keep people in work longer and provide jobs for new entrants to the labour market. Nearly one million 16-24-year-olds are out of work and the birth rate is rising, so the problem is likely to get worse.
- The NAO reports that the gap in life expectancy is widening between the rich and poor. Raising the pension age will mean that men in less advantaged areas will have even shorter and less well-resourced retirements than they do currently.

Academies and free schools

ATL has raised a series of strong concerns over the involvement of private companies in academies and free schools:

- The creation of academies and free schools independent of local authority oversight unpicks the 1944 Education Act's premise of a national service, locally administered.
- The loss of local authority support will mean an end to planning for places as well as planning for children who need extra support such as those with special needs.
- Encouraging private companies to compete with local authorities in providing services to schools will lead to economies of scale but will also lead to a one-size-fits-all education system without the resource or specialist knowledge to meet the diverse needs of pupils.
- Schools will no longer work collaboratively; instead they will compete for the best students and resources to secure future funding based on their success in the league tables.
- If academies determine their own pay and conditions, this will create uncertainty for staff and could make it even harder for the most deprived schools in the toughest areas to recruit staff, leaving them to sink.
- When there is no proof that academies improve children's education, certainly no more than any other school with extra funding, and with several academies in special measures, it is particularly irresponsible to push more schools down this route.
- According to an ATL survey conducted in July 2010, the majority of school staff are fundamentally opposed to state schools being run for profit: 7 in 10 staff working in state schools said they disagreed with state-funded schools being run for profit, with over 4 in 10 strongly opposed. Over 60 per cent of staff working in independent schools also opposed the idea.
- In both sectors staff overwhelmingly think state schools should be run by local authorities (86 per cent of state school staff and 80 per cent of private school staff). Allowing private companies to run state schools was one of the least favoured options, with only just over 10 per cent of state staff supportive and slightly under 25 per cent of those in private schools.
- Staff are deeply sceptical about the benefits of academies: 40 per cent of state school staff said academy status would be detrimental to their school. The remaining respondents were unconvinced that changing status would make a difference to their current standards, with 46 per cent of state school staff saying the academy programme is unlikely further improve student attainment in their school, and 34 per cent thinking it will have no impact to their current standards.
- Staff in both sectors are concerned about the impact of funding cuts in state education on pupils with special educational needs and those with disabilities, with 84 per cent of state staff expressing concerns and 75 per cent of independent staff.
- Nearly 7 in 10 state school staff said they would be unhappy about working in a free school run by parents, with only 1 in 10 happy about the idea.

Alternatives to the proposed cuts

The TUC argues for a sensible, flexible long-term approach to reducing the deficit based on fair taxation and the proceeds of growth.

- Fair taxation: the TUC argues taxes are raised and lowered relatively quickly so can address the deficit more immediately than long-term spending cuts. Taxes can be set not to disadvantage the lower and middle income bracket.

- Robin Hood tax: even a tiny Robin Hood tax on big financial transactions by banks could raise £3 billion a year, according to the TUC.
- Crackdown on tax avoidance: the TUC estimates £25 billion is lost to tax avoidance by wealthy individuals and companies each year and a further £8 billion is used up in tax allowances and reliefs by the well-off. The government is planning to cut HMRC damaging the department's ability to collect tax and uncover fraud.
- Investing in growth: the TUC supports working closely with the European Union (EU) and countries outside Europe to take coordinated action to reduce the deficit. Public spending must be maintained across the world to prevent another global recession. The TUC also calls on the government to invest in green technology to create skilled jobs and exports, as well as tackling climate change.

Rally and lobby on 19 October

As part of the TUC's 'All together for public services campaign', members of public sector unions are invited to attend a rally at Westminster Central Hall from 12.30pm followed by a lobby of MPs at 2.30pm.

The TUC has organised for each MP to receive one group of members from a range of public sector unions who can articulate how the proposed cuts will directly affect them and the services they provide. Each MP has been written to by Brendan Barber so they should be expecting your group.

To join the group destined for your MP, contact Mark Holding at mholding@atl.org.uk.

Two rooms in the House of Commons have been booked for lobbyists: committee rooms 9 and 10 are in the main Palace of Westminster, booked in the name of Frank Doran MP and Tony Lloyd MP. No banners or placards will be allowed inside the Palace, but can be held while in the queue and given to a TUC steward. Bags can be left at the cloakroom at Westminster Central Hall.

Meetings at MPs' constituency offices/surgeries on 22 and 23 October

Following 19 October's rally and lobby, members are encouraged to make an appointment to meet their MP in their constituency. Please let Mark Holding know if you meet your MP at mholding@atl.org.uk.

How to report back on your meetings

The TUC will be collating reports on meetings in order to hold MPs to account on their promises. You can pick up a form at the lobby on 19 October or complete an online form at www.tuc.org.uk/lobbyfeedback. Please also email your comments to Mark Holding at mholding@atl.org.uk.