

DARLINGTON CITIZENS' BUDGET PANEL CONSULTATION REPORT OF WORKSHOP HELD 3RD NOVEMBER 2007

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

As part of its preparation for and consultation about the Budget 2008/2009, the Council invited a group of residents from its Citizens' Panel to give their views this year, for the first time, using a qualitative approach. This approach was in the form of a workshop consisting of three facilitated focus groups held on 3rd November 2007.

The workshop commenced with a presentation from an Officer of the Council and the workshop then split into facilitated focus groups. The process of the groups was structured to allow participants to consider for themselves the issues that they felt the Council should take into account when setting the budget, then to consider whether more or less should be spent on some services; and finally to give their views on the importance of maintaining or improving services or keeping Council Tax low.

Key Issues

The issues perceived as being important, and raised spontaneously by participants, for the Council to take into account when considering the budget were:

- *Efficiency/Value for Money*
- *Consultation/Information and Local Issues*
- *Climate Change and Energy Conservation*
- *Equality of Access to Services*
- *Specific Groups and Their Issues*
- *The Council's Partnerships*

Groups that participants felt the Council should pay special attention to when setting the budget were:

- *Children and young people*
- *Older people*
- *People with illnesses of disabilities*
- *Local business*
- *Minority groups*
- *All other vulnerable people*

When considering children and young people participants felt that the Council should consider issues such as:

- *Pre-school education especially in rural areas*
- *Play area provision*

- *Diversionary and policing activities to encourage 'good behaviour' amongst teenagers*
- *Use of the schools not just for after school activities but to provide a community base – this not only to be provided in deprived areas but in all areas of the Borough.*
- *Provision of not only sports activities but drama, art and music*
- *Consultation with young people and/or with local people on what they want or need*
- *Action in the community against anti-social behaviour*
 - *The Council should consider the provision of an equivalent service to GOLD, with a similar service provided to younger people*
 - *Education in respect of 'social' and 'environmental' issues*

Participants considered it important for the budget to reflect the rise in the number of older people living in Darlington and *'not just rise with inflation'*. Interventions suggested included:

- *The provision of 'preventative care' e.g. home care and additional provision of supported housing.*
- *Organised activity such as 'field trips', walking activities or sports; . social and educational activities*
- *Expansion of GOLD and publicity about existing facilities/activities*

To encourage and support business participants spoke of:

- *Consultation with business*
- *Offering incentives; reducing rents*
- *Ensuring the quality of life in the town by the provision of services and facilities such as leisure and arts*
- *Links between schools and colleges and employers*

All groups wished to see improvements of various types for people with disabilities, including:

- *Support for the carers*
- *Assisting people to know what benefits and support they are entitled to.*
- *Ensuring that the town is 'wheel-chair' friendly including dropped kerbs*
- *Reinstatement of the 'bleep' at crossings*
- *Policing of the disabled parking*
- *Greater access to sports and physical activities for the disabled*

When considering other minority groups participants referred to:

- *Inequity in provision of service to the rural areas*
- *Targeting minority groups such as people with disabilities, with information*
- *Training to encourage independence*
- *Parenting classes.*
- *Providing opportunities for integration by supporting cultural events*

A number of other diverse 'messages to Councillors when considering the budget' were discussed. These included offering incentives for recycling; ensuring the safety of residents in respect of road and pavement maintenance and lighting, (in parks as well as on street); and addressing anti-social behaviour.

Services the Council should spend less on

All groups had difficulties in identifying areas where they felt that the Council should spend less.

Participants felt that the Council should make every effort to make cost-savings ('labour efficiencies', 'streamlining' and 'benefit analysis'), and produce services in the most 'cost effective way'. However, there was general consensus that the Council should '*not generally reduce spending on services, if this resulted in a reduction in service provision*'.

It is important that the public are made aware of why spending is deemed to be necessary, where possible the public is consulted and options for spend given, and feedback given on the projects with the costs broken down.

A number of suggestions were made, although not necessarily universally agreed within the groups:-

- *More recycling facilities may allow the costs for waste disposal to fall*
- *Provision of services on a local basis may reduce the need for people to travel, thus indirectly saving on expenditure.*
- *Expenditure on Neighbourhood Wardens was potentially not as effective as previously*
- *Consultation with local communities should be undertaken to review requirements for spend*

Services the Council should spend more on

In contrast to the question on areas where the Council should spend less, all groups could identify areas where additional spending could be made. These included:

- *Services for young people*
- *Services for the elderly*
- *Recycling services/facilities*
- *Transport, (subsidised for rural areas) and the reduction in traffic congestion*
- *Safety especially in respect of street lighting and lighting in parks, and pavement maintenance*
- *Community facilities and the benefits of the same in respect of youth disorder, community cohesion and support for the growing number of elderly people in the town*
- *Addressing anti-social behaviour*
- *Sports and leisure facilities for all age groups*
- *Dealing with litter*

Which is more important – improving or maintaining services or keeping council tax payment low?

All participants were of the opinion that ultimately 'better services' were more important than 'keeping Council Tax payments low' although there was some unease at seemingly giving the Council the 'green light' to increase Council Tax and the potential that their viewpoint would be publicised in order for the Council to 'justify' increases in Council Tax to residents.

The importance of the Council continuously striving to 'reduce costs' (*'there must be no waste'*), was stressed and participants were keen to emphasise that agreeing to '*increased spending*' is

'NOT an open cheque', and that if there was increased spending, improvements must be seen to be done.

Respondents were of the view that providing better services now on 'young people', 'the elderly' and 'the environment', will not only benefit the community as a whole in the short term, but will also provide long term savings. Spending more money now on 'better services', it was thought, would contribute to the health of residents both directly and indirectly, attract people to come to the town, assist in ensuring 'better behaved children'. People are *'happier when they are more satisfied with their public services'*.

Information on which services are to be improved and accountability were important with participants needing to know how and where money is spent.

There were fewer arguments about why Council Tax should be kept low and services reduced, mostly because participants were not in favour of this eventuality. However, when pressed, participants explored arguments such as *'low council tax makes living in Darlington more affordable therefore people are happier'*, *'lower council's tax attracts people to the town'*, and *'wages and pensions don't go up in line with the rises in Council Tax'*.

The 'final thoughts' of the groups can be summarised as that generally, as long as increases in Council Tax represent value for money, then participants found rises in Council Tax if not welcome then at least understandable and acceptable. Improvements however should only be made as and when they are needed or to extend services with any rise being kept within reasonable boundaries and any increase should be as small as possible. People should be kept informed about what is being spent and spend should be monitored and reported back.

As noted above however, a slight concern was raised that this conclusion would lead to 'a headline in the paper saying local people vote for council tax rise', and participants were at pains to point out that the caveats, such as expressed need, consultation, monitoring and feedback, together with vigilance in review of current spending were also taken into account.

**DARLINGTON CITIZENS' BUDGET PANEL CONSULTATION
REPORT OF SECOND WORKSHOP HELD 26TH JANUARY 2008**

1.0 Key Findings

- 1.1 As part of its preparation for and consultation about the Budget 2008/2009, the Council invited a group of residents from its Citizens' Panel to give their views this year, for the first time, using a qualitative approach. This approach was in the form of a workshop consisting of three facilitated focus groups held on 3rd November 2007, with participants meeting again on 26th January. This report refers to the meeting held on 26th January which commenced with a presentation of the Cabinet's proposals and was followed by discussion in facilitated small syndicate groups.
- 1.2 Issues raised immediately following the presentation included questions about projected staffing levels; sustaining the increase when grants decrease in coming years; issues relating to concessionary travel; frequency of waste collection; the effect of the plans for the Ring a Ride service and whether the proposed increases included the increases for the Police and Fire Service.
- 1.3 Initial comments in the facilitated groups on the proposed budget were generally positive, with participants commenting that they had expected 'worse' or 'a bigger increase': The majority of the issues raised in the previous group had largely been taken into account and the questions they had raised in this meeting had been responded to directly. The increase in Council Tax that could be expected from the proposals, it was said, would be '*value for money*'.
- 1.4 Nevertheless participants expressed surprise that the budget presentation had not included anything about 'education/ children/ young people' and 'rural services'. Both issues had been highlighted as high priority issues at the previous meeting.

Comments on increased spending proposals

- 1.5 Participants questioned what services come under Adult Social Care. There was some opinion in one group that £1.5M was a large increase with the principal concern being that the increase in spend may mean that the service does not make as many 'efficiency savings' as it possibly could.
- 1.6 Participants were largely 'unsure' about increases in employee costs. Whilst there was some opinion that if it included 'equalisation' costs it may be reasonable, there was also some opinion that perhaps this could be reduced if there were more 'efficiencies' in staff working practices.

- 1.7 There were no concerns expressed about proposed increased spending on 'Highways'.
- 1.8 There was concern that the proposed concessions did not include 'free transport' for the elderly prior to 9.30 am, and several participants felt that this may disadvantage those who need to travel prior to 9.30 am for doctor or hospital appointments etc.
- 1.9 Some explanation was needed in some groups about what community and public engagement actually related to. However when explained several stressed during the discussions that it was important that the Council 'keeps listening' to residents.
- 1.10 At several points during the discussion participants commented that 'education/ young people's services' and 'rural services' was not referred to in the presentation and this was an issue raised in all groups

Comments on reducing expenditure proposals

- 1.11 There were mixed views on increasing income from non-residential care services, with participants appearing satisfied with the explanation given during the presentation as to how this will rationalise existing charges. In another group, however, there was some 'unease' about this especially if the care is provided by private companies, with participants questioning whether '*checks are made on providers costs*'.
- 1.12 No concerns were expressed about reduction in expenditure of parking, as long as this relates only to long-stay parking, and not to 'short-stay'. Participants in one group generally felt that 'short-stay' parking charges were currently very high and discouraged visits to the town centre. Participants generally felt that if the 'Ring-a-Ride' service was not well used it was acceptable to discontinue the service.
- 1.13 Concern was also expressed about cuts to rural transport services with participants believing that some rural areas may be left completely without a public transport service and again to concessionary travel being limited to after 9.30am.
- 1.14 Participants were not aware of just what reduction in Environmental Services and Trading Standards meant in terms of service provision, and queried this. This concern was expressed in several of the groups.
- 1.15 Participants had no concerns about the Council stopping paying grants to Parish Councils, on the understanding that Parish Councils would have the facility to raise their own revenues.

- 1.16 When considering the proposals relating to reducing expenditure in some cases participants were unsure exactly what each 'saving' would actually entail the loss of, so would need increased detail before an informed opinion on the appropriateness of the saving could be made. Further explanation would include '*how were the decisions reached*' and '*why are these positive decisions?*'. Reference was made to the extract from the Cabinet report and the "Other options considered – Not recommended" section.

Comments on improving efficiency proposals

- 1.17 Whilst participants were generally pleased that the Council was making efficiency savings, there was some opinion that perhaps there was still room for improvement and that the Council should continue to strive to maximise these. Others were concerned that cutting costs in staffing would lead to a reduction in service. Also of concern was that reduced staffing this might lead to '*undue pressure*' on the fewer numbers of staff remaining and queried whether the staffing cuts would be made through 'natural wastage' or whether this would in fact mean compulsory redundancies.
- 1.18 Some concern was expressed in one group that one cost cutting measure may be to shift access to services to an internet based system. Participants felt that although this would be an advantage for some, protection needs to be in place for those who could not access online facilities.
- 1.19 There was some confusion amongst participants as to what exactly was meant by 'accommodation' and what this efficiency would involve. In one group this was assumed to be because of 'centralisation' of offices/staff and this suggestion was positively received in the group, the opinion being that '*it is good to centralise*'
- 1.20 Nevertheless generally participants felt that all of the efficiency proposals suggested appeared to be attainable.

Balance between tax and spending

- 1.21 The general opinion was the balance between tax and spending was 'about right'. Nevertheless there was some concern that an increase in Council Tax of 4.9% was still a large increase, particularly for those on 'fixed incomes' (i.e. private pensions that do not rise with inflation). Participants tended to feel that the balance between the amount of Council Tax they pay and the Council spending was not an '*area in which they had much influence, i.e. whether they felt this balance was right or wrong*' and '*Council Tax was simply a fact of life.*' On this balance participants felt that there needed to be more communication and consultation with the public.

Overall support

- 1.22 When asked what they felt is the most positive aspect of the Cabinet proposals the following were commented upon:

- The Council is trying to cut expenditure and has achieved a reasonable 'balance'.
- It is very important that the Council '*keeps listening to residents*'.
- The budget provides for an increase in provision for Adult Services
- Evidence that the Council had '*looked across the board*'

When asked what they least liked about the proposals respondents referred to:

- '*Uncertainties relating to the increase of £1.5M spending on 'adult social care' with the concern that this might mean that the service is not striving to make 'efficiency' savings.*
- Incomes do not always keep pace and whilst most felt that a 4.9% rise was reasonable this may be too large for those living on fixed incomes.
- Lack of reference to 'children', 'young people' and 'rural services'

Feedback Questionnaire

- 1.23 At the end of the discussion, each participant was given a short self-completion questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire asked about participant's level of support for the proposals put forward, and also their views on the arrangements for the meeting. Although not all participants completed the questionnaire the responses are summarised below:
- 1.24 Fourteen of the fifteen respondents who completed questionnaires (93.4%) were either 'wholly' in support of the proposals for increased expenditure (6.7%), or 'mostly' in support (86.7%).
- 1.25 Of the fifteen respondents, fourteen were either 'wholly' in support of the proposals for reduced expenditure (6.7%), or 'mostly' in support (86.7%). One respondent was 'neither in support nor against' these proposals.
- 1.26 Views on the proposals for improved efficiency were positive, with five respondents (35.7%) 'wholly' supporting the proposals, with a further eight respondents (57.1%) 'mostly' supporting these proposals. One respondent was 'neither in support of these proposals nor against', and the remaining respondent did not answer this question.
- 1.27 Overall, two respondents (14.3%) 'wholly agreed' that the current proposals set the right balance between tax and spending, while twelve respondents (85.7%) 'mostly agreed' that the balance was right, with the remaining respondent not answering this question.
- 1.28 When asked about the extent to which respondents felt the current proposals had taken account of views expressed at the previous meeting, one respondent felt the proposals did this 'very well', with a further fourteen respondents feeling the proposals did this 'fairly well'. The remaining respondent did not answer this question.

1.29 Finally, when respondents were asked about the proposals overall, all respondents felt that they were either 'wholly' in support of the proposals put forward (3 respondents, 20%), or 'mostly' in support of the proposals put forward, (12 respondents, 80%). No respondents were against the proposals.