

## CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

### **Direct Feedback in relation to budget proposals**

The following outlines the main issues arising from direct consultation on the budget proposals.

#### **“Lets hear your views on the Council Budget” Leaflet**

- Up to the time of writing 178 leaflets, emails, letters and telephone replies have been received, 22 of which expressed support for the budget proposals. Whilst ticking “Yes”, several respondents made comments, which are included in the attached information.

The responses that expressed opposition or concern generally referred to one or more specific proposals. Responses covered a diverse range of issues but the key themes were: -

- Bus subsidies
- Parish Council Grants
- Desire for the Council to make more efficiency savings

Support for more spending was expressed in relation to environmental issues, climate change, recycling, youth provision, public transport, and the Community and Voluntary Sector.

Respondents expressed support both for more spending and reductions in spending in relation to Children’s services, sport and leisure, support for vulnerable groups and community safety / ASB.

Table 1 provides quantitative analysis of the responses received to date. Some respondents commented on more than one proposal, hence the total number of comments is more than the 178 individual responses that were received: -

**Table 1 – Responses Received to Budget Proposal Consultation**

Issue	Number of comments
Supported bus services - object to proposals to end subsidies for services 17 & 97	86
Parish grants – oppose proposal to cease payment	28
Efficiency / reduce employee and Members costs	27
Happy with overall proposals	22
Concessionary travel – unhappy with 9.30 a.m. limitation	15
Council Tax – unhappy with proposed increase	9
Environmental, climate change, recycling - more spending / high priority	7
More spending on youth provision	7
Street Scene – improve maintenance and cleanliness	7
Reduce leisure spend	4
Reduce Education spend	4
Trading Standards Civil Advice - not supportive of cuts	3
Reduce spend on Community Wardens	2
More spending on gulley and drain maintenance	2
More spending on public transport	2
Keep car allowance and mileage	1
Town Centre – not elderly or disability-friendly	1
More spending on sports facilities	1
Highways – improve standards of maintenance	1
Reduce spend on subsidized housing and benefits	1
Reduce spend on vulnerable groups	1
More spending on vulnerable groups	1
Stop parking charges	1
More spending on ASB	1
Support for the voluntary and community sector	1
Improve / provide seating at Bus stops	1
More spending on Children’s Services	1
Improve pavement maintenance	1
Residents Parking – inconsistency / unfair charges	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>239</b>

Individual comments received are attached at **Annex 1**

## **Budget Panel**

Two meetings of the Citizens Budget Panel have been held. The Budget Panel is a group of 30 people, drawn from the Citizens' Panel, which is a representative cross-section of over 1,000 Darlington residents. Recruitment of the Budget Panel was carried out by NWA Social and Market Research to ensure representation from all areas of the Borough, with a balance of gender and age ranges. The meetings were also facilitated by NWA. This was the first year of the Budget Panel. From feedback received including exit questionnaires, it was judged by those who took part to be successful. Working with this smaller group enabled issues to be debated and explained in greater depth. It is proposed to repeat this exercise as part of the consultation on the 2009-10 to 2012-13 MTFP. Some of those who took part this year expressed a wish to be involved again next year. It is hoped that a mixture of some continuity and some new participants will enable the Panel to build on this first year experience.

The first meeting was held on 3rd November 2007, attended by 27 residents. Key messages from the first meeting were :-

- Better services were more important than keeping Council Tax low.
- Value for money, increasing efficiency and eliminating waste is very important, as is being consulted and kept informed.
- The Panel were keen to emphasise they did not wish their views to be seen as an 'open cheque'.

The second meeting was held on 26th January 2008. Of the 27 residents who attended the first meeting, 17 returned to the 26th January meeting. Key messages from the discussions at the meeting and questionnaires completed were:-

- Generally happy with the proposals for increases and reductions in spending
- Generally satisfied that efficiency and value for money are being actively pursued, it is important that the Council continues to strive to maximise efficiency
- Would prefer a smaller Council Tax increase but were not surprised by or strongly opposed to the proposed 4.9% increase

Some concerns were expressed about specific proposals :-

- Concessionary travel 9.30 time limit
- Rural transport
- Trading Standards Civil Advice and Pest Control
- Some concern that comments made at the previous meeting regarding services for children and young people and rural services did not appear to be reflected in the budget proposals

## Comments Received on “Let’s Hear Your Views on the Council’s Budget Proposals” Leaflet

Outlined below are responses to the questions contained within the leaflet

**‘If you are not happy with the budget proposal which aspects are you unhappy with’.**

- No restrictions on pensioners bus fares (Diversity you have a policy action it)
- How many council employees are there? Do they get too many benefits compared to private sector employees? Are employees on performance related pay?
- Three respondents stated that there needs to be more spending on concessionary travel to allow travel between 9.30am. Paid for by reduced member allowances.
- Spend less money on Community Wardens and use the money to pay for more police.
- I object to the loss of grant to Middleton-St- George
- Stopping grants to rural areas
- Do not remove the grants to the villages
- Why are Middleton- St- George losing the £12k grant we need it.
- Withdrawal of the £12k grant will have a strong effect on village facilities as we have to maintain our own play areas.
- If the Parish grants are removed then the Council should take over responsibility of providing and maintaining play equipment and open spaces and all the other things provided by the Parish Council through the grant. It is unreasonable to expect the Parish Council to raise the precept as the residents of Middleton- St- George have already paid the same amount of council tax as any other ward in the Borough.
- Do not withdraw parish grants from councils
- Proposed cuts to Parish Councils should be reversed
- I am concerned about the proposals to withdraw grants to Parish Councils, which will ultimately add to the already high costs, we pay to Darlington Council via Community Charge.
- Withdrawal of grants to rural communities
- Council tax should rise by inflation and not more
- Stop producing the Town Crier
- Get rid of essential car allowances for all managers
- You cannot year on year squeeze those people on pensions by imposing above inflation council tax rises. The market is out of date, let it pay for itself. Spend less on subsidized housing, benefits etc.
- I am concerned about plans to cut back on car allowances and mileage. I feel the proposed cut backs are equally unacceptable due to the high increases in car tax, car insurance and petrol.
- An increase of 4.9% is not at all acceptable
- I am concerned about the reduction in staffing in Trading Standards, which will affect its ability to police the law relating to traders and the sale of alcohol to underage children. It is not feasible that this service can be carried out by a call centre.
- Why is there an increase in council tax? Middleton- St- George has far more houses. There must already be a large increase.
- As someone on a fixed inflation related income I find it difficult to reconcile the council tax increase of well over twice the rate of inflation. Stricter controls on spending the public's money should be the key
- The Council should stop using money to fund other people’s hobbies. If theatre goes value the theatre sufficiently, they should be prepared to pay for it. There is no justification for any

operation, which is not a true public good to be financed, in whole or in part, from public funds. A leisure facility is not a public good.

- Less money spent on education as a single working person without children I don't see why my council tax should go towards this. More money needs to be spent on conserving the environment and climate change so recycling and waste removal is a very important factor. More people need to be in employment and less land built on as we are destroying every last bit of land by building houses and new developments
- I don't think I currently get value for money. My perception of the council's spending is very low right now
- Make the refuse collection service more efficient
- Stop people parking on grass verges which results in the need for remedial works.
- Proposed change to concessionary bus fares will affect many people detrimentally and will be negative to the perception of the Council. I suggest after 9.30am would be reasonable
- I am not happy with it the 97 bus service Sadberge
- I would like to see less for Children's Services and more help for small and new businesses in the form of grant and support
- Stop unnecessary parking charges
- Darlington/ Stockton to save money, don't know how
- More consultation with the public and acting on people's views. Closure of sports facilities and then nothing to replace them. Muggas are shut to the public, no indoor facilities
- Would like to see more of the budget spent on what people really want, not what the Councils thinks e.g. High Row
- Why are bus passes starting at 9.30am. I would like buses to be cheaper for others
- Spend more on transport
- No services to be cut
- 9.30 bus pass start, don't agree with it
- Rural areas are being taxed twice and are spending cuts through grants (parish)
- Transport for older people-keep early morning travel. Older residents are not given enough
- Pedestrian Heart and Bypass both millions over budget why?
- The Academy is going to be Christian based it shouldn't be it should be for everyone. Don't want business to take over education

**If you want to pay less Council Tax what services would you reduce to make this possible?**

- Gritting the roads when it is not necessary
- Reduce the wages bill and stop final salary pensions
- Children Services. We have spent a huge amount on new schools in recent years.
- Care for vulnerable groups
- Community safety, we are not a nanny state.
- Reduce big salaries
- Introduce a fairer tax to higher paid families so they pay more council tax than poorer paid families
- On totally unnecessary and over the top road improvements as in the road works to the rear of Middleton- St- George school. Everyone accepted the need to reduce the speed of traffic but the scheme is causing chaos.
- Council wastage, overspending, incompetence could be cut. Too much money is spent on grandiose schemes for the benefit of Darlington and the Council. The £12k grant to the Parish Council is used for work in the village and should not be removed.
- Sports and Leisure/i.e. the Dolphin Centre
- Having worked in a similar environment for many years I am convinced that there is a massive unnecessary expenditure on salaries, equipment, furniture, stationary etc. A radical

independent review of the Council's spending is essential to identify where the appropriate savings can be made.

- The Civic Theatre, the Arts Centre, the Dolphin Centre should be operated as commercial enterprises, receiving no subsidy at all. A £9m saving would reduce council tax substantially. Even if the saving were distributed across all funding sources, council tax could be reduced by 4%.
- Education
- Library and Leisure Services
- Wasting cash on tarmac over the grass on Yarm Road
- I would like to see less councillors and a small expenses account and more accountability for budgets that always run over
- Lower rates in town for businesses. Incentives for businesses better quality shops
- Would like more recycling and wheelie bins, sport facilities
- More recycling of plastic bottles and cardboard for the kerbside
- I believe the reduction in front line staff would be detrimental to the quality of life in the town
- Bin men are not doing their job. If there were an increase would we actually see it being spent on something we can see?
- Happy to pay the same just don't want an increase
- Cut in senior management, more efficient management who can operate savings
- Wages for staff (senior management) car allowances, councillor's expenses and wages
- Wasted resources used better-spent on better things rather than on things that waste time and money for residents
- Reducing costs through energy savings such as fortnightly bin collections. Cut costs on overspending on transport
- Heighington village Parish Council Tax-bit mix and match of services being paid for. Transport issues to villages
- Reduce services for single parents and immigrants
- Reduce councillors too many on high salaries

**If you want to pay more Council Tax how would you like to see the extra money spent?**

- Seats are needed at all bus stops/stands otherwise free travel is useless
- Better public transport
- On the local environment such as parks, waste & cycling and providing a cleaner healthier place where pollution is kept to a minimum
- Improve roads and the general ambience of an area
- Street lighting
- Better Recycling
- Improving street scene
- Children Services
- More youth provision facilities for young people
- More refuse spending
- Grass verges to be cut more often. Cleaning up after bin men
- More money allocated for teenagers who have nowhere to go especially in the winter time
- Care for the elderly and vulnerable groups
- Tidy Denes up
- I want current funding spent on better recycling cardboard and plastic, also more on young people
- More for the younger generation to keep them off the street

- Lots more recycling in the town, mobile recycling unit, Waste Management, Drinkfield Marsh, Anti-Social Behaviour units
- Street cleaning and recycling
- Cleaning alley ways. More for children to do
- More services better equipped and equal access to the town
- More street cleaning
- More Lollipop people
- Bigger push on recycling and penalise people who don't. More youth provision/facilities
- Young plays at Arts Centre need things for 50+ activities. Women international days in Leeds there is nothing in Darlington

**DARLINGTON'S BUDGET PANEL**  
**REPORT OF SECOND MEETING**  
**HELD 26<sup>TH</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2007, with participants meeting again on 26<sup>th</sup> January. This report refers to the meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> 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.

*Report written by NWA Social and Market Research*