

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*
- *Diversionsary 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.