
Bath & North East Somerset Council

Budget Engagement November/December 2016

Feedback Report

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1. Background

Bath & North East Somerset Council undertook a series of 5 budget workshops in November and December 2016, to help inform the development of its 2017/18 budget and future financial strategy. These workshops were open meetings, hosted by our Connecting Communities Forums, which themselves form part of our wider framework for local engagement and consultation. Our Third Sector Group (comprising local voluntary and community organisations) also met twice to discuss budget issues, attended by the Cabinet member for Policy, Localism and Partnerships. A summary of key points made at these meetings is also included in this report.

The budget workshops took place as follows:

Forum	Date	Venue	Chair
Somer Valley Forum	21 st November 2016	Town Hall, Midsomer Norton	Cllr Linda Robertson
Keynsham Area Forum	22 nd November 2016	Keynsham Community Space	Cllr Alan Hale
Bathavon Forum	28 th November 2016	St Gregory's School, Odd Down	Cllr Hugh Baker
Chew Valley Forum	29 th November 2016	Chew Valley School, Chew Magna	Chris Head
Bath City Forum	1 st December 2016	The Guildhall, Bath	Cllr Bob Goodman

At each workshop, the Council's Portfolio Holder for Finance and Efficiency and the Council's Strategic Director gave a clear presentation which covered:

- The background to the Council's financial position
- Savings that had been achieved so far
- The expected "gap" of further savings that needed to be achieved

The presentation then set out, under each Cabinet portfolio heading, the overall direction the Council was taking to drive efficiency and new ways of working. The presentation also highlighted some of the difficult choices which other authorities had been making with regard to service reductions.

The presentation finished with a series of questions designed to encourage debate and feedback on the open workshop session.

These questions were:

- A) What are your concerns about the impacts of the Council budget direction in your area?
- B) What can you and your community do to help?
- C) What do you think about what other councils have done?

Finally, following this feedback, attendees were invited to be further involved in the budget process through a detailed timetable, including the Council's Policy Development and Scrutiny Panels due to meet in January 2017.

The presentation given to the Forums containing this timetable can be found online [here](#).

2. Summary of Forum Feedback and Responses

Excluding speakers and support staff, 117 people attended the workshops in total. The highest attendance was in Bath, the lowest at Somer Valley. 174 separate questions, feedback points and comments were recorded. A number of questions were answered directly “on the night”- for example specific queries on factual matters relating to the presentation.

From analysis of the detailed points raised at the Forum meetings, a number of key themes have been identified, and these are set out below. It is important that the views and concerns of local people are taken into account as the budget process moves forward, and so a response to the key points made is also included in this report. A number of very useful suggestions have been made to help us address our local budget challenge and wherever possible these will be followed up and acted upon. Again, these are set out below.

A) Concerns about the impacts of the Council budget direction

“We are concerned about the budget reductions affecting vulnerable adults, affordable housing and passing on costs to Parishes.”

Comment at Chew Valley Forum

Participants raised concerns that:

- Budget reductions might hit those who need the most help. There was particular concern about impacts on vulnerable adults and young people.

Response: The Cabinet’s proposals result from a stringent and comprehensive review of all spending carried out over the past year, aimed at finding new ways to increase efficiency and grow income in order to protect priority front-line services as far as possible. The Cabinet has identified £41 million worth of potential savings so far; including £12 million already being delivered in the current financial year despite pressures in the priority area of Children’s Services. However even after driving out all these savings, more is still required and the Council will have to take some tough decisions to balance its budget. Demand for a range of services is also rising quickly as our population grows and changes and this puts pressure on resources. Our savings proposals will ensure that the Council continues to live within its means, whilst protecting frontline services as far as possible and continuing to invest in important local priorities such as affordable housing, transport improvements and economic growth to create good local jobs.

- There may not be sufficient volunteers coming forward to support local community projects, and volunteer projects may not be appropriate in some circumstances

Response: Our area is fortunate to benefit from a wide range of voluntary and community sector organisations and many enthusiastic volunteers. We work closely with the Volunteer Centre to ensure that we can match volunteer roles with those who wish to give of their time, and we are always looking for new ways to harness local energy and enthusiasm. A good example is the Good Gym which brings together a community of runners and qualified trainer in ways that help the community. Our Paulton Hub now has 70 volunteers and New Oriel Hall community library is run by the local community. New volunteer roles such as Snow Wardens enhance our local communities. However, we recognise the limits of volunteering and will always ensure it is used appropriately.

- Parish councils may not have the resources and capacity to manage services

Response: It is recognised that our town and parish councils are very diverse, and that local communities have a range of priorities. Parish councils already deliver a wide range of high-quality services tailored to local needs. Where there are opportunities to reduce duplication and improve services by working more closely with parish councils, we will consider these carefully. We are currently working with parishes on a new Parish Charter to develop further these new ways of working.

- There were uncertainties about the impact of proposed changes in Adult Social Care

Response: £5.6 million of cost increases have been avoided as part of increased efficiency and redesigning services to maximise people's independence. This links with planned developments through Your Care Your Way.

- Whether the Park and Ride to the East of Bath is deliverable

Response: Bath & North East Somerset Council's Cabinet will be considering a report setting out the possible locations for an east of Bath Park & Ride site on 25th January.

B) What communities can do to help

*“Don’t waste opportunities to work together”
Comment at Somer Valley Forum*

*“Invest in behaviour change – especially in regard to recycling”
Comment at Chew Valley Forum*

Participants identified opportunities to:

- Build on the wide range of good local projects - for example, the Keynsham Wombles

Response: The Council is very proud of the wide range of local and community groups which enhance our area. We have improved the information we provide on external funding and training opportunities we provide to such groups. Through the local Forums we will find new ways of sharing good practice and support. An information pack for volunteer litter pickers is also available.

- Work with parishes to utilise their local knowledge. Some “seed” funding would assist in fully realising these opportunities

Response: The Council fully agrees that parishes can use their local knowledge to improve their neighbourhoods. It is therefore exploring a Community Empowerment Fund to encourage and support projects that involve communities in enhancing promoting pride in local areas.

- Streamline and join-up services e.g. through better use of buildings

Response: Our work on local hubs continues to develop, drawing on the success of the Keynsham one stop shop, library and community space. There are plans to integrate our Library and one stop shop in Bath and Midsomer Norton as well as for a Library/Health Hub in Radstock. We are actively exploring the transfer of some Children’s Centre buildings to community organisations who can make better use of them- enabling the Council to make savings without reducing the front line service.

- To use the “local portion” of the Community Infrastructure Levy.

Response: Parishes already can allocate 15% of CIL funding to local schemes, rising to 25% where there are neighbourhood plans, of which there

are 4 in our area with 121 underway. The Bath City Forum has now agreed a process for working with local communities to bring forward recommendations for investing the neighbourhood portion within the City and this will be used on projects that meet the demands of development in localities.

C) What participants think about what other councils have done

“In Swindon it has been agreed that there will be three large parish areas created, this will allow additional precepts to be collected that could not be achieved through Council Tax which is capped”

Comment at Bathavon Forum

Participants identified examples from other areas as follows:

- Some Councils are introducing local lotteries

Response: Local authorities, subject to obtaining an operating licence from the Gambling Commission, may run a local lottery for any purpose for which they have the power to incur expenditure. The Council is aware of at least five Councils who are currently running or planning to run a Council lottery and would welcome any comments on such an idea.

- Consider introducing precepts to Bath through creating new Parishes, as in Swindon

Response: The Council has established a Bath City Forum following a detailed review of governance arrangements for the City. Any proposals for new parishes in the City would be considered through the proper processes, and due weight would need to be given by the Council to the various local identifies within different parts of the City. It should also be noted that central government are considering imposing limits on the increases to Parish Precepts.

- Consider congestion charging and workplace charging for Bath, as in some other cities

Response: There would need to be considerable local support for any such scheme, but to be viable it would probably also need to be approached across the whole of the West of England rather than a standalone scheme of the City of Bath.

- Introduce a tourism tax or levy

Response: There is currently no statutory basis for this, but if there is local support this may be something that could potentially be explored through further discussions relating to devolution.

- Increase taxes on second homes

Response: We charge the maximum possible Council Tax under government rules for second homes. We also charge 150% Council Tax on properties that have been empty for two years. The aim of this is to try and reduce the number of long-term empty properties in our area so we can get as many as possible back into use for local people.

- Consider asking students to make a contribution

Response: It is not possible to charge Council Tax to students. The Council has been lobbying government for the pressure on our services to be recognised as the new system of local government finance is set. Further details can be found [here](#).

3. Third Sector Group Budget Feedback (extracts from meeting minutes)

Meeting of 8th December 2016

Cllr Paul Myers opened the discussion on the budget and in particular highlighted the budget workshops hosted by the 5 Forums. Cllr Myers explained that his Cabinet role encompasses working with the third sector and parish/town councils to identify new ways of working to improve communities. Feedback from the discussion included:

- Some members of the group considered that the information that has been provided on the budget challenges so far have not been detailed enough to understand where the pressures exactly will be. If help and advice is needed from the third sector, there will need to be more information shared and at an earlier stage. Organisations at the meeting reported that no specific budget discussions had taken place with them at this stage in the process.
- Groups would welcome conversations to share information and use intelligence that the third sector organisations can bring to future planning.
- Members of the group identified specific impacts on the viability of organisations as a result of rent rises.
- Members of the group confirmed that they were very aware of the challenges facing councils and of the national context, but requested an open dialogue about local impact.
- There are opportunities for better signposting when dealing with the public. There are times where channelling people to the third sector for help can deliver a better overall user experience.

Cllr Paul Myers agreed that a framework was required so that there was greater clarity as to how the Council can work together with local organisations, for example on involvement in service delivery. The Parish Charter sets out how B&NES Council works together with Parish Councils, and this is currently being reviewed. There was the potential for this process to be drawn upon and for there to be a “Third Sector Charter”.

It was explained that the initial budget challenge presentations at the Forum meetings had been designed to provide an overview of the issues and to find ways to join up through ongoing conversations. In January 2017 there will be more specific detail that will be made available at the various panels, particularly through Directorate Plans. Impacts examined through the process include equalities, VCS impacts and staffing impacts.

Information was shared by group members on actions that have been taken by other Councils.

The group identified mental health services as an important area, if cuts are made to early intervention services the result will be an increase in level of services being needed “downstream”.

The Cabinet member thanked everybody for their input into a high-quality discussion. The feedback provided by this meeting will be added to notes taken at the five area forum meetings. This group will meet again on Thursday 5th January 2017 at 3pm to look at budget impacts in more detail.

Meeting of 5th January 2017

Hard copies of the Appendices to the Directorate Plans going before the PDS Panels were circulated. These had previously been sent as links on the day they had been published to the web. Dates of PDS Panel meetings were also made available. A number of points were made by VCSE representatives on these detailed proposals, as below:

- Some of the plans referred to “reducing dependency”. However, as people became older and frailer, it was likely that dependency would remain a key issue and that high levels of support would continue to be needed, for example in relation to transport. Services such as the Wellbeing College were not always appropriate for people with these higher levels of need.
- It was noted that there was also a positive emphasis in the documents on promoting and maximising independence, and that this reflected a shared approach to reducing dependency over the longer-term.
- Potential impacts of reductions in schools prevention programmes and sexual health were highlighted.
- Reference was made to figures in the press of £5.6m spending reductions in adult social care. The group noted however that the Council was in fact increasing its total spend in this area and there were considerable demographic and other cost pressures such as the national living wage with net additional funding of £1.6m.