

Consultation on Cumbria County Council's draft budget

Summary feedback report

1. Approach

A draft council budget and associated public consultation document were published on 16 December 2011. The consultation document provided an overview of the council's financial situation and details of the two public facing savings proposals included in this year's draft budget. A feedback form invited public comment on both proposals. In addition the public were asked to consider how further savings could be made in future years. To this end space was provided for written suggestions and a question asked the public to prioritise different areas of council service for protection from future spending reductions.

This document was made available online and in hardcopy. Hardcopy documents were sent to all council libraries, main council offices and a range of other public buildings. Parish Councils were also sent hardcopies of the document as well as being emailed with electronic copies and provided with links to the document online.

In addition to the response form within the consultation document the public were offered a range of other ways to have their say. This included:

- Running six public consultation events around the county
- Providing a dedicated consultation website including discussion forums
- An online survey form

In addition to consulting with the general public the council made specific efforts to consult with key stakeholder groups:

- Chamber of Commerce
- 3rd Sector Network
- Schools Forum
- Trade Unions

2. Level of response

Compared to last year's budget consultation the response this year has been relatively muted. Arguably this reflects the fact there were far fewer public facing proposals included:

In total:

- 82 hardcopy consultation feedback forms have been returned
- 9 emails have been received to the official yoursay@cumbria.gov.uk email address
- 131 people attended the six consultation events
- Approximately 700 people have visited the consultation website, 50 people have become members of the site, with approximately 150 discussion forum posts (although the number of different individuals posting is much lower)
- 138 people have completed the online survey

The Chamber of Commerce invited their membership to respond via the general consultation response channels.

Discussions were held with both the 3rd Sector Network Executive and the wider 3rd Sector Reference Group.

The Schools Forum Budget Working Group discussed the proposals at their 16 January meeting.

Two meetings with Trade Unions were held through the corporate Joint Consultative Group on 9 December and 16 January. Trade Unions were invited to submit any comments to feed into the final budget papers to go to council on 16 February.

3. Feedback

Proposal 1: Residents' parking charges

Based on the survey (online and hardcopy) results this proposal was relatively polarising; 45% of respondents were in support and 48% opposed.

Feedback at the majority of consultation events was dominated by residents who would be affected by the charge and tended to be opposed. Views on the discussion forum were broadly opposed to the introduction of a charge.

Those in favour of charging tended to view it as reasonable that those who benefit from a residents parking zone (RPZ) should be asked to contribute to its costs. The £25 charge was seen as acceptable or even too low. Some argued that the charge should generate additional income, not simply cover the cost of administration and enforcement.

By contrast those who were opposed raised a number of objections:

- It is wrong in principle, the argument being this is what people already pay their taxes for;

- That the charge would unfairly discriminate against people on lower incomes who, it is claimed, are more likely to live in RPZ areas;
- That it is unfair to charge some people to park and not others (particularly when RPZ boundaries appear arbitrary to many);
- That the council would seek to significantly increase the charge each year.

A further group of respondents would be willing to accept a charge if:

- the current arrangements for RPZ, including boundaries and nature of restrictions, was thoroughly reviewed to ensure consistency across the county;
- the issue of non-residents abusing the system by parking in RPZ areas (by using parking discs) was resolved;
- there was significantly improved enforcement of the RPZ to deter abuse; and
- residents were guaranteed a parking space outside their home.

Some also suggested that through more rigorous enforcement and higher fines an equivalent level of income could be generated without the necessity of introducing a charge.

It is also clear that there is a degree of public confusion about what constitutes a RPZ and what does not and the distinctions between on-street, off-street and residents parking.

Proposal 1: Reducing subsidy for care

A majority (43%) of survey respondents (online and hardcopy) opposed this change, 36% were in favour with the remainder undecided.

The proposals prompted very little debate on the discussion forum.

From the other feedback received several themes are apparent:

- That this proposal comes at a time when this group is facing changes to services on a number of different fronts that may be unsettling and cause distress. Therefore if reducing the subsidy is necessary it should be delayed to allow other changes bed in.
- That this group is also dealing with increases in charges (or reductions in income) as a result of other local and national changes.
- In conjunction with the point above, despite charges being means tested some people may be unable to afford to pay for all the care they need. This will have a negative immediate effect on their lives and increase costs to the council further down the line.
- That the proposal penalises those who have been thrifty and saved for their retirement, whereas those who have made no such effort are “bailed out”. It is argued that this removes the incentive to save.

- That targeting increases in charges on vulnerable elderly people is wrong in principle.

Those in favour of the change tend to argue that those that can pay should pay; provided that their payments are to cover the cost of their care not cross subsidise the care of others and that the means testing is fair.

Priority services for future budget rounds

The feedback form included a question that asked the public to prioritise five different areas of council service for protection from future spending reductions.

The five most commonly selected areas of service were:

1. Fire and Rescue Services
2. Adult Social Care
3. Schools
4. Children's Services
5. Roads and rights of way

Service Area	% of respondents who selected service
Fire and Rescue Services	58.2
Adult Social Care	55.9
Schools	52.7
Children's Services	49.1
Roads and rights of way	42.7
Waste and Recycling	37.7
Buses and transport	37.7
Libraries	28.6
Supporting businesses and the economy	24.1
Planning and environment	11.8
Supporting local communities	11.8
Community safety	10.0
Archives	8.6
Sustainability	8.2
Registration and Coroners' services	6.8
Trading standards	5.9
Emergency planning	3.6
Health and safety	3.2
Customer services	3.2

Further suggestions for how the council could save money

Consultation respondents were asked to suggest further ways in which the council might save money in future. Below is a summary of suggestions provided:

- Look at duplication of posts with similar functions across public sector organisations and rationalise.
- Pay freezes or reductions for staff.
- Rationalise senior management posts, review number of councillors and use of external consultants
- Charge for on street parking
- Reduce energy usage in council buildings/use renewable energy sources
- Become Unitary authority
- Look at Council Tax on empty/second homes
- Turn off/dim street lights at night
- Reduce number of council offices/share premises with other organisations
- Move more services online to reduce transaction costs
- Cut community grants
- Cease paying Union representatives, they should be paid for by the Unions
- Cut sickness terms and conditions
- Charge for bus passes
- Stop council magazines
- Promote tourism more
- Reduce opening at HWRC, but do not close
- Increase fines for traffic violations
- Sell advertising space on council vehicles and buildings
- Cut arts funding
- Remove free parking for staff
- Reduce waste in road resurfacing works – do it once and do it right
- Streamline recruitment processes
- Review size and fuel efficiency of fleet vehicles used
- Look at innovative ways to process, and turn a profit from, gully waste.

Feedback from key stakeholders

Chamber of Commerce:

No standalone feedback was received.

3rd Sector Network:

Provided written response. Feedback focussed on changes to adult social care and substantive comments included in discussion above.

Schools Forum Budget Working Group:

Discussed budget and noted future funding challenges but made no further comment.

Trade Unions:

Responses were received from the Fire Brigades Union and Unison. FBU feedback focussed on the need to maintain high quality training provision for fire fighters and a call to ensure that vacancies are filled to ensure adequate staffing levels. Unison raised a number of concerns in relation to the Amey transition, changes to Supporting People contracting arrangements and changes to the HWRC network.