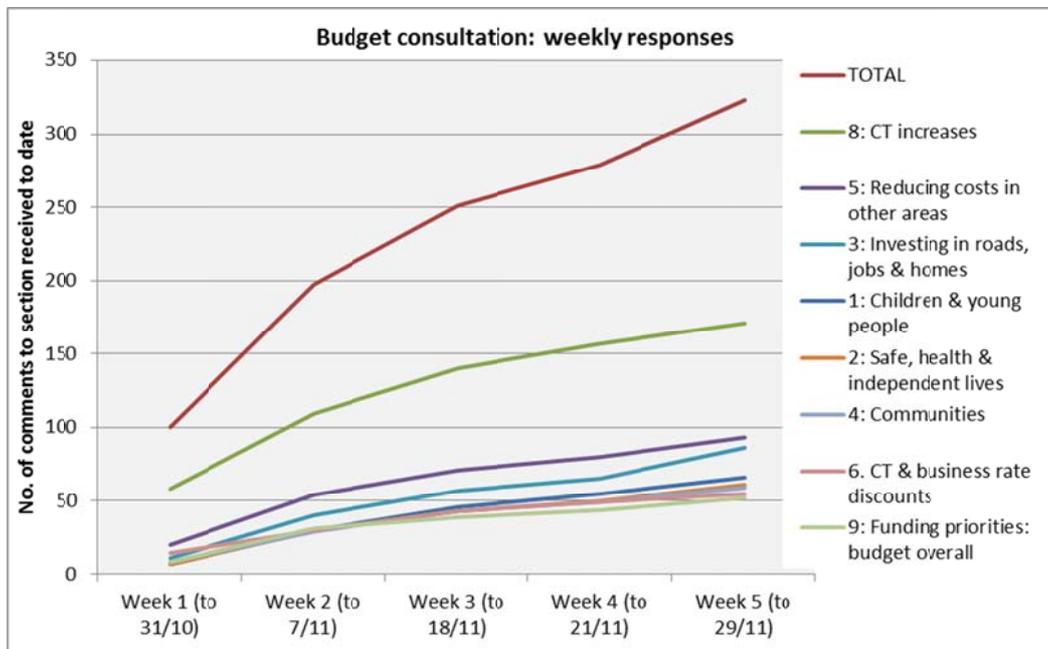


Budget 2014/15 Consultation

Interim Report 5 of 8 (week ending 29th November 2013)

Background

- The Budget 2014/15 consultation went live on Thursday 24th October 2013. This report considers the responses received by the 29th November. **New themes are highlighted in blue.**
- Online responses can be submitted to individual section(s) of the proposals on the council website, or to the whole consultation at once. The latter collects some demographic information about respondents.
- The full survey form is available to print on the website, but paper copies are also being supplied on request; so far three individuals have been sent hard copies (including one large print version) and forty copies were printed for the Courtyard (they requested 200).
- **By the 29th, a total of 323 individual responses had been received**
 - 221 comments to the different sections on the website.
 - 99 responses to the full consultation form online (i.e. comments about one or more sections of the budget consultation proposal from the same person)
 - 3 hard copies posted to the council
- For the first time, the **most comments this week have been received about section 3: investing in roads, jobs and homes** (21 comments). Many of these mention the Citizens' Advice Bureau. Although section 8 (CT increases) still dominates the responses. See chart below.



Who is responding

The full survey asks respondents for some basic demographic information, including whether they are responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. Those leaving comments on the blog are able to leave a name and email address but don't have to.

Of the 103 responses to the full survey:

- Two have indicated a response on behalf of an organisation, the first didn't say which; the second the Courtyard but they were also responding as an individual.
- A slight, but reducing, majority (52 per cent of those who gave their gender) are male.
- The age profile so far shows that the majority of respondents are aged 45-64 years (52%), a much higher proportion than the resident population; and 22% of respondents are aged 25-44 (similar to the resident population). The proportion of responses from 65-74 year-olds (18%) is higher than the population, but the proportion aged 75+ is lower (7%).
- Eight respondents have stated that they have a disability.
- Of those who have given their ethnicity, all but four said they were 'white British'.

1. Keeping children and young people safe and giving them the best start in life

66 comments received about this section to date

1.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Responses so far: young carers, children in poverty, children with disabilities (physical and mental), all vulnerable young people, early years settings and schools, children from poor social and education backgrounds, children from migrant worker families, young people from poor families living in rural areas, families with young children.

1.2 Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need?

- Involve and integrate with communities, charities and companies to support or sponsor schemes

- Invest in prevention to avoid need for direct intervention – e.g. supporting and educating families

“ More family support, education, encouragement and handholding is necessary to bed in the info, advice and guidance. This will develop the confidence necessary for a shift in attitude and culture. ”

- Don't cut these services as you'll pay in the long term – including culture and libraries
- Provide training to 'frontline volunteers'
- Streamline and reduce costs (reduce senior management staff and their pay, use existing buildings more extensively, like schools); avoid duplication of services.
- Support carers of children and young people with physical and mental health difficulties

1.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Greater partnership working, ensure issues are acted on in a timely way – see comment
- Ensure effective transition through stages from children to adult services

“Social workers and school authorities must co-ordinate information to monitor children at risk or underachieving at school.”

- Recruit permanent social workers, and retain and enable them.
- Learn from elsewhere – see comment, or outsource or merge with another county to gain expertise.

- Don't rely on communities or the voluntary sector to provide core services – see comment

“Respond quickly to identified problems so that intervention services remain low level. Stop supposing that the local community will pull together like "the old days" and solve various problems. The priority is to save money so what is the purpose of running a pilot for 19 year olds with learning disabilities to remain in education. This kind of work has been piloted all over the country...and in other parts of the western world for over 25 years.”

2. Enabling, within the resource available to us, residents to live safe, healthy and independent lives

61 comments received about this section to date

2.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Responses so far: unpaid carers and elderly people not able to use web based services, all vulnerable people including those disabilities (physical and mental) and socially isolated older people, especially those living in rural areas reliant on public transport to remain independent.

“Please look at your public transport cuts and how they will undoubtedly affect the lives of your older people, isolating them even more and hence leading to more mental health issues etc etc!”

2.2 Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need?

- Charge those who can pay – see comment
- Support those in need before they are in a critical state – preventative measures.
- Involve families more in the care of their own members, working with professionals; support carers
- Social services should be a higher priority than saving libraries – the latter could be run by volunteers and most people have access to the internet at home now.

“I would support charging for services for those who are able to pay and welcome more emphasis on home care and less on institutional care.”

2.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Work directly with service providers rather than through layers of bureaucracy – see comment
- Negotiate with hotel chains to provide some emergency temporary accommodation as part of social responsibility with trade-off of reduced business rates.

“Trust voluntary organisations such as Age UK and refer - they can support older people with all needs (not just those who are FACS eligible by having critical and substantial needs). They can keep people out of the ASC system for longer.”

- Less inpatient and institutional care, more support within local communities.
- More efficient and effective services e.g. the equipment loan programme for patients; outcome based commissioning.
- Think long-term – invest in prevention now (e.g. free gym membership for those on benefits)

3. Investing in projects to improve roads, create jobs and build more homes

This section received the most comments in the last week (21): 86 in total to date. It is worth noting that many of these new comments are opposed to the proposals to cut funding to the Citizens' Advice Bureau

3.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

- Unemployed (particularly young people).
- People living in villages; people living south of the river.
- Young people and families who can't access social housing but can't afford to buy on the open market.
- Anyone who may potentially have a debt, employment, legal, financial problem and who can't get legal aid/afford a solicitor. **Specifically people who rely on the CAB.**
- Vulnerable people (including young people without transport, the elderly)

3.2 Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need?

Most comments relate to roads and housing – an example is quoted below:

“*Being more thorough when reviewing tenders for road maintenance, producing low cost housing in joint venture with reliable, cost effective companies with a history of good practice and value for money. Dispense with expensive consultants and middle men during the decision process. Council should take direct responsibility for their action without negating decisions or risks to 3rd parties which seems to have become a generational escape from ownership/responsibility.*”

- Build more flats in towns and city; reduce need to travel especially if near bus routes.
- Attract and retain younger people and families in the county by providing affordable housing including for people who are ineligible for social housing but can't buy outright.
- Fix potholes **properly once – saves money in long-run** - and reduce problems of compensation later; keep drains clear in summer months to avoid flooding and damage to roads in cold and wet weather.
- Reduce street lighting.
- Facilitate planning applications for developments that generate jobs and improve living standards.
- Improve the energy efficiency of housing to reduce fuel poverty.
- Broadband project spend in areas which already have sufficient broadband.

- It should be recognised that early intervention by the voluntary sector can prevent the young, elderly and vulnerable from getting into crisis before they become a burden on the council.
- Don't spend money on 'unnecessary' highway works

3.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

Most comments relate to **roads**, either maintenance or decisions about a relief road, bypass and New Market street. Related to this is the suggestion that parish councils are asked to implement low level road repairs.

The next most common response relates to **reducing inefficiency and costs** within the Council e.g. cutting management layers, not using expensive consultants.

- Don't cut funding to the Citizen's Advice Bureau - counterproductive as they support those most in need.
- Invest in the voluntary sector to achieve savings elsewhere. Council should leave economic development to businesses. Provide apprenticeships for local infrastructure projects to improve skills.
- Build affordable homes using cooperative building projects, self-build projects, use local companies and community-led improvements. Release council-owned land for this.
- Courtyard and Visit Herefordshire should be self-sustaining but HVOSS should still have financial support.
- Please don't cut support to the Courtyard Theatre – it's a valuable resource.

4. Help more communities deliver more of their own services

59 comments received about this section to date

4.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

“ Voluntary groups which service a great deal of local authority schemes need to be supported by the local authority, you can't cut back financial support and expect more of us volunteers to do more of the work, we will run out of volunteers ”

Parish councils and other voluntary groups (who will have to take on more), rural areas, anyone living in low income areas, working families too short of time and money to support voluntary community work.

4.2. Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need?

Most comments relate to communities and volunteers.

- Use local community centres as distribution points for information or services.
- Don't close libraries but cut down the hours.
- Reduce bureaucracy for volunteers (health and safety, insurance)
- Develop intergenerational co-partnership models where older people with time and experience can mentor young people and enable them to develop skills for life
- More volunteer groups in communities.
- Recognise the savings voluntary groups deliver, and provide basic funding for them
- Listen to existing staff and groups before employing consultants to review

4.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Reduce staff costs (training, travel expenses, reduce high salaries or posts at the top of the Council); wages and expenses paid to Councillors.
- Encourage companies to support employees who volunteer. Make it mandatory for high earners at the Council to volunteer.
- Decentralised services to communities means it may cost them more as they don't have the buying power.
- Let volunteers staff museums and community libraries.
- Can't rely on volunteers to do everything

“ The Council could re-visit its interpretation of the Localism Act and acknowledge that it is designed to empower local communities; it is not designed to make them do social and other work for free ”

5. Radically reducing costs in other areas

93 comments received about this section to date

Note: The Courtyard promoted the consultation to its email distribution list early in the consultation.

5.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

The proposals in this section cover a wide range of very different services, but many responses focus on one particular service or area of interest – and how the proposals will affect users of those services. The most frequent responses so far have been about culture and the arts (specifically the Courtyard), and others have covered libraries, public rights of way, public toilets, waste collections and public transport. This week, several comments have mentioned the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) specifically.

The nature of the impacts have focused on the value of cultural experiences for residents, the benefits of culture and public footpaths for tourism and the economy. Also the roles that certain facilities play in helping people stay health, independent or out of financial difficulty and preventing them need more costly council services (e.g. the Courtyard, CAB, libraries, footpaths, transport). Several have indicated that cuts to cultural services and public rights of way would be short-sighted – for example:

“ Cuts to cultural provision and the arts will impact significantly on the attractiveness of the county as a place to live, work and visit. This is a short-sighted saving that will achieve relatively modest reductions with an irreversible and major effect on future economic prosperity and regeneration plans. In a rural area, such cuts would also have a disproportionate effect on those living in areas away from the urban centre of Hereford. ”

There are relatively few comments in terms of particular groups of people affected compared to other sections of the consultation. Those that are mentioned include the most vulnerable in society (including elderly, children and those already struggling financially), but others say that everyone would be equally affected. Also specific mentions for those in rural areas, those who cannot drive or don't have access to a car and those with limited internet access (cost / rurality), and clients of the CAB.

5.2 Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need?

Many comments suggest alternatives to protect the services they are most concerned about, so can contradict each other – for example the most common themes in the responses to date are to protect cultural services and libraries, but a smaller number say that spending on these should be cut to protect other services, for example for children and the elderly.

The balance of such comments so far is:

- Continue to support the arts, specifically the Courtyard and libraries – suggestions for reducing the impact of cuts on these services are phased reduction of funding, or only providing funding in alternate years (see 5.3 for suggestions of different ways of doing things)
- Need to maintain public transport because of preventative role in helping to keep people active and independent - cut the Sunday routes; save money by not paying for school transport other than to nearest school
- Need to maintain public rights of way because of health and tourism benefits
- Keep public toilets open (could charge for use)
- Cut spending on landscaping – suggestions include parish councils or communities arranging flower beds themselves if wanted; several comments about perceived inefficiencies of Amey / Balfour Beatty in landscaping.
- Support for cutting spend on waste - including fortnightly rubbish collections, with suggestions for reducing the impact being separate weekly collections of food waste, alternate weeks only in the cooler months, longer opening hours for the tip, more encouragement of recycling or charging for more than one bag of rubbish (instead of fortnightly collections).
- Don't cut CAB funding

Other suggestions about how to reduce the impact on these services focus on cutting costs elsewhere (mainly operational - see 5.3) or raising revenue:

- Spend on enforcement instead of using public money to rectify problems, and/or to raise revenue (e.g. landowners, traffic violations).
- Increase Council Tax; charge 'wealthier' more
- Work with other local organisations and volunteers (e.g. to run libraries; help parish councils do more for themselves)

5.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently to meet priorities

By far the biggest number of comments to the whole of section 5 relate to cutting operational costs (a quarter of the 93 comments), including:

- cut numbers and salaries of management, councillors and staff
- outsource as much as possible or merge with another council
- stop spending on ICT, training, refreshments, expenses
- consolidate assets, locating staff in cheapest places
- Fixed term contracts instead of agency workers

“ Reduce councillors and pet projects. I want the basics for my money, toilets, rubbish collection, libraries, basic amenities for the elderly and young, not fancy footwork by the council on well paid expenses ”

Other specific ideas and suggestions include:

- Develop 'cultural partnerships' outside the county
- Charge for entry to museums
- Match funding from businesses
- Book donations for library – to use or sell
- Ask pensioners who can afford it to "give back their pensions"
- Generate income – e.g. through government opportunities, charges for use of facilities, sponsorship.

6. Council Tax and business rate discounts

55 comments received about this section to date

The strongest themes in this section so far are that those on low incomes will be most affected, followed by small, independent and/or new businesses. There seems to be general support for raising tax revenue through empty properties and limited support for the proposed reductions in CTR, but also frequent comments about reducing organisational costs.

6.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Council Tax: by far the most frequent comment is people on low incomes, but also the most vulnerable and most needy; working families. A small minority of relevant comments support the proposed reductions in CTR.

“ Probably the people on job seekers benefit. However, why should working people face a 5% rise when others pay so very little. A bit of fairness is called for and reducing council tax reductions seems fair. ”

Business rates: small, independent and/or new businesses; charities; private landlords (in relation to tenant turnover).

6.2 Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need

Council Tax:

- Most frequent suggestion: make savings through those who can afford to pay instead of cutting discounts for those who can't – e.g. increase Council Tax more for higher bands and second homes
- Apply the changes equally to everyone – including pensioners
- Don't increase Council Tax too much
- Make sure people know what they are entitled to and supported

“ Low income residents should be helped to understand any increases in council tax and one on one discussions could analyse their ability to pay. ”

Business rates:

Majority of comments relate to support to encourage small, independent and/or new businesses – e.g. reductions in first year; favourable rates compared to charity shops.

Other suggestions include helping charities with rate reductions so they can keep supporting the other priorities and reducing rents to increase occupancy

6.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

Most frequent suggestions are about reducing operational costs, e.g. staff, councillors, ICT, managing money better.

Other suggestions include:

- Charge take-away shops an extra fee because of litter
- Spend on the basics
- Charge for more services
- Need to encourage more businesses – suggestion of mentoring scheme for new firms
- Charges should be based on number of people living in household
- Volunteers could find tax evaders

7. There are no questions for section 7: future years

8. Council Tax increases

171 comments received about this section to date

8.1 To what degree do you agree that we should propose an increase of 5% to the council tax in a referendum?

The majority of comments remain opposed to increasing Council Tax, although the proportion has fallen slightly (from 66 per cent to 62 per cent):

- 20 per cent opposed to putting a 5 per cent increase to a referendum (including comments about the cost of a referendum)
- 22 per cent opposed to 5 per cent increase
- 19 per cent opposed to any increase at all

The most frequent comments supporting these views mention:

- Impact of increasing Council Tax at a time when other living costs are also rising, but wages aren't. Particularly the disproportionate impact on those with low incomes
- Operational costs (staff numbers and salaries, consultants, buildings, waste) should be reduced first
- Better financial management needed (see comment above)

However, an increasing minority indicate that they would support a referendum or some level of increase – although many are qualified with how the money should be spent (see comment).

“ The Council cannot simply keep increasing Council Tax to meet its needs. It has reached its limit. It must live within its means, like the rest of us have to. ”

“ I agree strongly that a council tax increase should be put to the vote, provided that it is accompanied by a proposal for how the money should be spent ”

8.2 If we did increase the council tax by 5% what do you think we should spend the additional £2.4 million income on?

The balance of comments has shifted from the initial stages: more (22 per cent of total) have now made suggestions about specific services that the money should be spent on (or simply “the ones facing cuts”), although 11 per cent still say that there shouldn’t be an increase in council tax so there’s no need to think about what to do with the money. Others don’t mention services, but say the money shouldn’t be wasted or spent on staff.

Those that do mention specific services include (in order) roads and traffic, protecting the vulnerable, children and young people (including education and playgrounds), economic development, the arts and culture, supporting the third sector and libraries.

“ I would be prepared to pay an extra 5% CT to support the Council's aims of preserving services to the elderly and infirm, and to maintain the artistic/cultural life of Herefordshire; but I suspect that in the present economic climate, and in the present atmosphere of [not entirely undeserved] suspicion and antipathy towards local political processes and personnel there will be many who will see the suggestion as 'bailing out' an 'incompetent' administration. If the Council does decide to venture £160K in the hope of gaining £2.4M, it needs to present the electorate with evidence of [a] a much more efficient and stringently economical approach to its business, and [b] a more sensitive attitude in future in dealing with their concerns, than heretofore! ”

9. Funding our priorities – considering the proposed budget overall

52 comments received about this section to date

9.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Most frequent comment is “everyone” (a quarter of relevant comments), but others mention vulnerable groups including those on low incomes as well as children, the elderly and disabled people. A couple mention working tax payers who would have to pay more tax.

Specific services mentioned include public rights of way and the Citizens’ Advice Bureau for their preventative roles.

9.2 Ways to reduce the impact whilst still making the significant budget reductions we need?

The most common response so far relates to continuing to support those who can prevent the need for direct intervention by the council - specifically in terms of health and social care (e.g. carers, especially young carers; community transport; public rights of way) and financial hardship (CAB and food banks).

Also schools and communities in general.

Other suggestions:

- Target funds on the most vulnerable
- Spread the cuts over all services; cut non-essentials

“ It is shortsighted to cut funding to an organisation like the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in Herefordshire which is providing a much needed service within the county. Supported by voluntary effort and cost effective, the CAB provides vital help and advice to people without which they would face increasing financial hardship and social difficulties. The absence of the CAB in Herefordshire is likely to impact on the Council's future costs through increased demand on existing Council services. Repercussions will be felt within the wider community in areas such as health and social wellbeing. ”

- Monitor the impact on 'at risk' people – see comment
- Change priorities (basic services for people in rural areas)

“Retain a computerised record of 'at risk' individuals (elderly or single mums/children) and monitor how any cuts are affecting them”

9.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- The most common suggestions are still various ways of cutting operational costs, mainly management and other staff costs (for example pay cuts or reduced hours; “thinning out” of management structure; councillors’ expenses) but also reduced “bureaucracy” and running costs – and not doing questionnaires like this.
- Other suggestions include:
 - Encourage economic development and investment in the county
 - Lobby government for fairer funding; seek new sources of funding
 - Raise revenue in other ways – e.g. traffic fines (cameras at box junctions, tractors in town centres between nine and five), taxing second home owners more, or increasing Council Tax by 8% for Bands E and above
 - Means-test benefits for pensioners:

“Your aims are admirable but I have no specific comments apart from advocating that it is time that dispensations for pensioners were means-tested. Many of us fortunate enough to have retirement incomes above average earnings feel guilty about free bus passes, prescriptions, heating allowances, etc. and such savings would ameliorate spending on services that benefit us.”