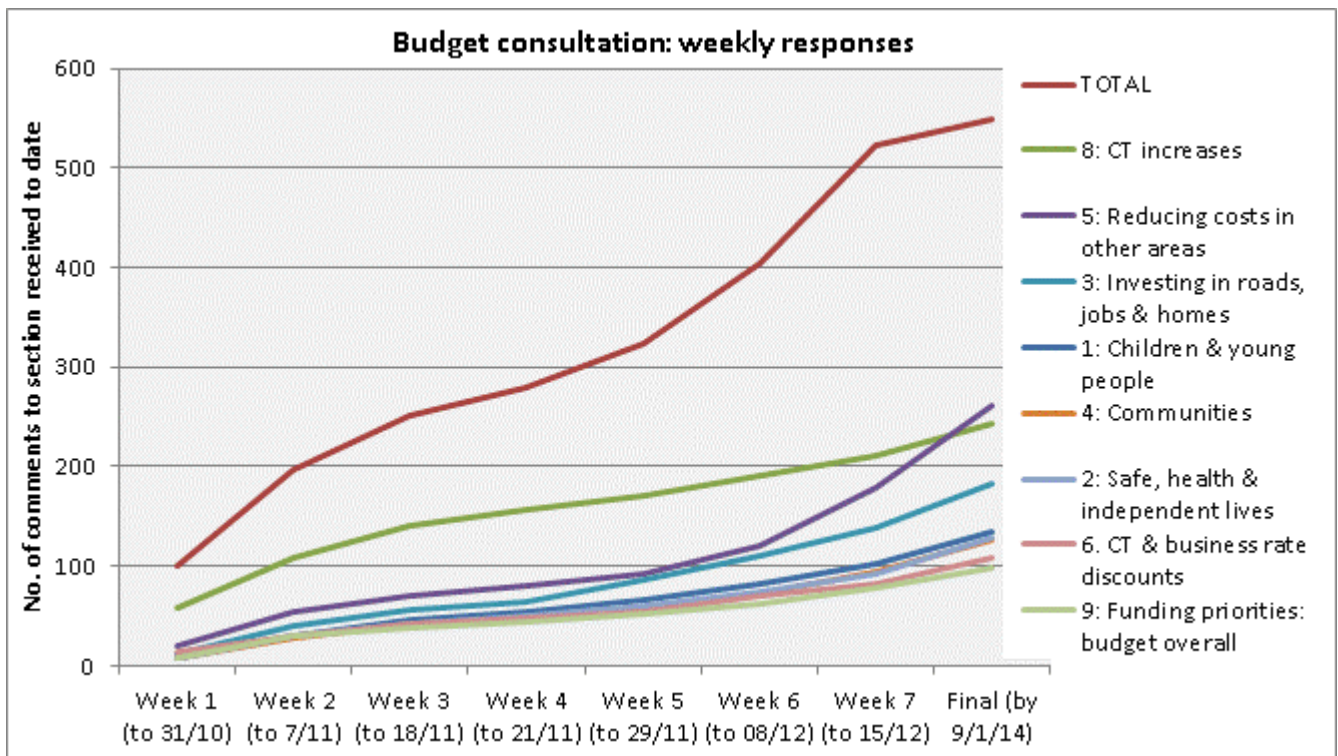


Budget 2014/15 Consultation: analysis of results

(9th January 2014)

Background

- The Budget 2014/15 consultation went live on Thursday 24th October 2013. This report considers the responses received by the 9th January 2014 (the deadline for responses was the 20th December).
- Online responses were submitted to individual section(s) of the proposals on the council website, or to the whole consultation at once. The latter collected some demographic information about respondents.
- The full survey form was available to print on the website, but a small number of paper copies were also supplied on request (including one large print version) and forty copies were printed for the Courtyard (they requested 200).
- **By the 9th January, a total of 706 individual consultation responses had been received**
 - 439 comments to the different sections on the website
 - 159 responses to the full consultation form online, plus 21 hard copies of the questionnaire posted to the council (i.e. comments about one or more sections of the budget consultation proposal from the same person)
 - 43 e-mails or letters, which were translated into survey responses as far as possible (or considered separately)
 - 39 letters and one petition (signed by 43 people) in response to a letter sent out by Councillor Powell promoting the consultation in relation to proposed cuts to bus subsidies
 - The 706 included responses from 27 organisations: The Courtyard, the Citizen's Advice Bureau (including a petition signed by 628 people), Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce, hvoss (Herefordshire voluntary organisation support service), a submission on behalf of 13 care home providers, Herefordshire Libraries Support Group, Ross Library, Ross Library Development Group, Kemble Housing and SHYPP, Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club, a rural bus operator, Herefordshire Diocese Council for Social Responsibility, Hereford South Wye Team Ministry, West Gloucestershire Art Society, the Community of the Holy Fire, eight parish/town councils, two parochial church councils, one parish hall and Baroness Thomas of Winchester. Responses from organisations will be made available as a separate appendix.
- The consultation was promoted on social media (Twitter and Facebook); 35 comments were received – general themes were: asking for more information; transport cuts; public toilets; salaries; not acting on results of consultations in past.
- The highest number of comments throughout the majority of the consultation period was for **section 8: Council Tax increases** (243 comments in total). However, responses to **section 5: reducing costs in other areas** saw a rapid increase from the end of November, and once the letters about public transport were included this section had the most comments by the end (262). **Section 3: investing in roads, jobs and homes** also saw an increase mid-way through the consultation period (183 in total) - many of these mention the Citizens' Advice Bureau. See chart below.



Who responded

The full survey asked 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 were able to leave a name and email address but didn't have to.

Of the 223 responses where demographics could be recorded:

- A slight majority (52 per cent of those who gave their gender) were female.
- The age profile shows that nearly half of respondents who gave their age were aged 45-64 years (48 per cent), compared with 42 per cent of the resident population; and 19 per cent of respondents were aged 25-44 (lower than the resident population). The proportion of responses from 65-74 year-olds (22 per cent) was much higher than the population, and the proportion aged 75+ was similar (10 per cent).
- 13 respondents stated that they had a disability.
- Of those who gave 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

134 comments received about this section, 11 said that not enough detail was given – see comment as an example.

“ We will make better use of data, information and intelligence” Your suggestions aren't specific and you have access to all the information. How do you expect members of the public to give specific answers? ”

1.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Groups most frequently cited were children and young people, those living in low income households and ‘vulnerable’ groups such as those in care.

“ 4,500 children already living in poverty in Herefordshire. Any cutbacks are going to make life far more difficult for these families. ”

Also mentioned were: all residents, young carers, children with disabilities (physical and mental), single parents, young mothers, early years settings and schools, children from poor social and education backgrounds, children from migrant worker families, young people living in low income households living in rural areas.

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 effective training to ‘frontline volunteers’, particularly around safeguarding.
- Streamline and reduce costs (reduce senior management staff and their pay, “focus on recruiting and retaining competent staff while removing poor performing staff”, use existing buildings more extensively, like schools); avoid duplication of services.
- Support carers of children and young people with physical and mental health difficulties
- Provide more outreach from children's centres.

“ Cut out the costly middle man which has been set up needlessly to monitor and evaluate everything causing horrific duplication unnecessarily. ”

1.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Reduce spend on senior management, reduce management layers and bureaucracy.
- More effective management and commissioning that is accountable if services are not delivered effectively. Improve communication and access to information, use knowledge of frontline staff.
- Greater partnership working, ensure issues are acted on in a timely way – see comment
- Ensure effective transition through stages from children to adult services
- 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 cut funding to these services, lobby government for more money.
- Don't rely on communities or the voluntary sector to provide core services – see comment

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

“Respond quickly to identify 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

129 comments received about this section, three saying not enough information given.

The Herefordshire library support group and Ross rural parish council submitted a detailed response in support of libraries, which will be published in a separate appendix along with those of other organisations.

2.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Responses most frequently cited (in order) were: elderly people, disabled people, 'vulnerable', those on low income and socially isolated older people, especially those living in rural areas reliant on public transport to remain independent. Also mentioned were unpaid

“ Those least able to help themselves and make the best of the new funding arrangements. Those with relatives who can handle this for them will inevitably end up with the best use of resources. ”

carers, older people not able to use web based services and 'all residents in some shape or form'.

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

- Charge those who can pay – see comment. Also applies to bus fares – increase if necessary.
- Support those in need before they are in a critical state – preventative measures.
- Families need to take more responsibility and be involved in the care of their own, working with professionals – even working out shifts together.
- Support unpaid carers or the social care budget will be even higher
- Question of the capability of people to use personalised care, negotiating a complex system, particularly if the don't have support to do so (friends, family). However employing carers directly is more cost effective.

“ 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. ”

“ People's ability and desire to manage their own care can be very variable. As a retired health care professional, I was involved in estimating costs of care and equipment to enable the most seriously disabled in our communities to have a reasonable quality of life. This type of responsibility is overwhelming for some sectors of our community - so access to relevant help is essential through such organisations as CAB and disability charities. ”

- Work more effectively with other agencies such as disability charities, citizen's advice bureau, Age UK, GPs by working directly with them without added layers of costly administration. Use local facilities such as schools, village halls and churches to work with communities.
- 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.
- However there were several suggestions about using libraries more as a hub, either socially or for local agencies.

- Proposals look good but focus on those in real need.

2.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Work directly with service providers rather than through layers of bureaucracy – see comment

“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.”

- Keep libraries open but widen use to include social and cultural activities, co-locate with customer service and tourist information centres, use volunteers guided by professional librarians, make systems more efficient e.g. electronic return of books. Investigate ways of income generation.
- Increase taxes and face the consequences and reduce councillor expenses.
- Reduce bureaucracy and commission more effectively, use evidence – see comment:

“Use current, evidence based approaches to services, which are more efficient and effective” So have you been using out of date evidence up to now? Disregarding evidence?”

- Negotiate with hotel chains to provide some emergency temporary accommodation as part of social responsibility with trade-off of reduced business rates.
- 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, particularly working with voluntary and community sector.

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

This section received 183 comments with four stating not enough information was given to make an informed response and particular to this section were six comments that proposed cuts to the Courtyard, hvoss, CAB and others were 'buried' in this section alongside roads, jobs and homes.

A detailed response was submitted by the following organisations in relation to budget savings proposals in section 3:

- **hvoss** (Herefordshire voluntary organisation support services) in relation to this particular section, which has 250 members and a wider network of 1,100 groups.
- **Herefordshire Citizen's Advice Bureau** submitted a response, in addition to a separate petition asking the Council not to cut funding to CAB, signed by 628 people.
- **The Courtyard**
- **The Chamber of Commerce**

Responses from these and other organisations will be published as a separate appendix.

3.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

The groups most frequently cited were:

- Anyone who seeks advice on a debt, employment, legal or financial problem - specifically people who rely on the citizen's advice bureau.
- 'other' – including road users, 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.
- Those with low income, or on benefits or unemployed (particularly young people).
- 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, which saves money in the long-run and reduces problems of compensation later; keep drains clear in summer months to avoid flooding and damage to roads in cold and wet weather.

- Several suggestions in changing priorities for investment or spending by the Council such as a focus on protecting our vulnerable people and not spending money on 'unnecessary' highway works or 'quasi-consultations' – see comment:

“ Stop wasting money on one consultation after another which I believe serves to conceal rather than address the real issues affecting us all. I should like to know exactly how much money has been wasted on one useless survey after another! The outcomes of these quasi consultation exercises serves to meet the statutory duties of the council but the solutions have, it seems, already been decided upon in advance. What a waste of money. If you are to engage in a consultation make it real and listen to the concerns of residents. ”

- Reduce street lighting - amount and switch off after midnight in some areas.
- 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.

3.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Most of the comments in this section relate to objections to the proposed cut in funding to the Herefordshire Citizen’s Advice Bureau (CAB) stating it would be counterproductive and result in more people requiring support from the Council. The CAB submission cites how much income is brought into the county from helping people to access financial help.

“ Do NOT reduce funding to CAB. This is the only place many people can go for advice. You surely cannot deem it fair to fund the building of shopping centres and other resources many will not use and then take away the one place people can gather information they need to ascertain if they have been treated unfairly. ”

- Related to this were comments against cutting funding to other voluntary organisations such as *hvo*ss which support and enable volunteers. Invest in the voluntary sector to achieve savings elsewhere.
- Some felt that the Courtyard and Visit Herefordshire should be self-sustaining but *hvo*ss should still have financial support. Others asked that funding for the Courtyard should not be cut citing its many positive contributions to the health and well-being of residents and attracting visitors from out the county.
- HALC can raise funds from its own members but CAB, the Courtyard and others can’t do this very easily so please don’t cut their funding.

- There were also many comments about roads; either maintenance or decisions about a relief road, bypass and New Market street and cycling routes. 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.
- The 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.

4. Help more communities deliver more of their own services

127 comments received about this section to date and five stated that there was insufficient detail in the budget savings proposals.

4.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Parish councils and volunteers were cited most frequently as being affected by the savings proposals in this section, particularly already over-stretched volunteers. ‘All

“ 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 ”

residents or communities in some way or another were cited many times too. Other groups included those on low income, vulnerable people (including older and younger people), disabled people, those living in rural areas and 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, volunteers and libraries.

- 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.

“ There seems an obvious contradiction between cutting financial support to HVOSS, the organisation that supports voluntary and community activity, whilst simultaneously expecting the voluntary and community sector to pick up the gaps left by reduced Council provision. Are councillors fully aware that there is no such thing as a free volunteer? Yes there are one off people who do amazing things, but the scope of the problem is not going to be addressed by an ad hoc approach entirely dependent on individuals. We are not in the 1950's now. Women are working; grandparents are doing more caring then ever. A more coordinated, sustained and skilled approach is needed if many people are not to be left struggling on the margins of our society ”

- Recognise the savings the voluntary sector delivers, and provide funding for them so they in turn can provide training and support to ensure they are effective.
- .Listen to existing staff and groups before employing consultants to ‘preach what we already know’
- Make information and advice easy to find.
- Improve the effectiveness of managers and reduce inefficiencies shown by the comment:

“ Make better use of council buildings. Double up on usage by combining functions. Insure that heating is at a reasonable level & that lights are turned off where possible.”

4.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- Most frequently cited were suggestions to reduce staff costs (such as reduce high salaries and posts at the top of the Council); wages and expenses paid to Councillors; expensive initiatives such as investment in offices and computers.

There were also many comments about volunteering:

- 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 – see comment
- Work more efficiently with volunteers – see comment:

“ 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 ”

“ We have trained volunteers that are twiddling their thumbs as referrals to them from the Council have stopped. So yes, answering your emails and working together is essential. ”

5. Radically reducing costs in other areas

222 comments received about this section in response to the consultation, plus 39 letters and one petition (signed by 43 people) sent to Councillor Powell about the importance of particular bus services.

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 mentions were for public transport, libraries, culture and the arts (specifically the Courtyard), and others covered libraries, public rights of way, public toilets, waste collections, public transport and parking charges.

Comments about the nature of the impacts focused on the value of cultural experiences and libraries for residents (for example in education for all); the benefits of culture, public footpaths, transport and parking for tourism and the economy. Also the roles that certain facilities play in helping people stay healthy, independent or out of financial

difficulty and preventing them from need more costly council services (e.g. the Courtyard, CAB, libraries, footpaths, transport). Several indicated that cuts to cultural services and public rights of way and increases in parking charges 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. ”

The following example highlights many of these issues:

“ I oppose the proposal to introduce parking charges at Queenswood Country Park since such charges would be in conflict with a central Government and the Council's own Core Strategy policies to encourage walking as an outdoor activity to improve the health and well being of the community leading to lower costs to the NHS etc.

I recall the previous decision to charge for parking which led to a steep decline in visitor numbers with the direct consequence that income from this source did not match predictions and was discontinued resulting in unexpected costs for the removal and disposal of the charge meters. It was concluded at that time that car park charges in fact led to loss of income.

The commercial viability of the café would again be put in jeopardy and it is obvious that the future of the National Trust shop and information point would be at serious risk through the certain loss of sales income from considerably reduced visitor numbers. ”

There were relatively few comments in terms of particular groups of people affected compared to other sections of the consultation. Those that were mentioned include the most vulnerable in society (including elderly, children and those already struggling financially), but others said 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 suggested alternatives to protect the services they were most concerned about, so as a whole can contradict each other – for example the most common themes were to protect transport, libraries and cultural services, but a smaller number said that spending on these should be cut to protect other services, for example for children and the elderly.

The balance of such comments was:

- Need to maintain public transport because of preventative role in helping to keep people active and independent – community transport schemes unlikely to be an adequate replacement. Some suggested money could be saved by cutting Sunday routes; not paying for school transport other than to nearest school.

- Continue to support libraries – several suggestions about ways of generating income (e.g. room hire, small charges for books / internet); making better use of the space – including working with other partners such as the police, job centre and community groups; book donations.
- Continue to support the arts, specifically the Courtyard but also museums and other theatres – a specific impact mentioned were the implications on the services being able to access funding without match-funding from the council. 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)
- Increasing car parking charges could be counter-productive for shops in town centres.
- Need to maintain public rights of way because of health and tourism benefits.
- Keep public toilets open (could charge for use, or sell / lease to private enterprise).
- Don't cut CAB funding.
- Cut spending on landscaping – suggestions include parish councils or communities taking on responsibilities; several comments about perceived inefficiencies of Amey / Balfour Beatty / “council” in landscaping.
- Support for cutting spend on waste - including fortnightly rubbish collections, with suggestions for reducing the impact including having alternative arrangements in hot weather, separate weekly collections of food waste, longer opening hours for the tip, more encouragement of recycling or charging for more than one bag of rubbish (instead of fortnightly collections).

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

- Work with other local organisations and volunteers (e.g. to run libraries; help parish councils do more for themselves) – but they can't be relied on solely without any professional support
- Take a long-term view rather than short-term “sell everything” approach
- 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

“ You propose to make extensive use of volunteers, but this is only possible in a limited way: volunteers need leadership, training and supervision from qualified staff. They cannot replace professional staff - they can only work alongside them ”

5.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently to meet priorities

The most frequent comments related to cutting operational costs and improving efficiency and effectiveness, including:

- cut numbers, salaries and pension contributions 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

“ Start thinking of direct results. No passing the buck. Direct proposals, with direct impact, working directly with those who represent the vulnerable people and can bring about significant change. More action less proliferation. ”

Other ideas and suggestions included:

- Increase Council Tax or introduce charges for services (e.g. museums)
- Generate income in other ways (e.g. selling assets) or seek alternative funding sources – e.g. through government opportunities, sponsorship
- Develop ‘cultural partnerships’ outside the county
- Match-funding from businesses

6. Council Tax and business rate discounts

108 comments received about this section.

The strongest themes in this section as a whole were that those on low incomes would be most affected, followed by charities; voluntary and community organisations; and small, independent and/or new businesses. The vast majority of relevant comments were in favour of raising tax revenue through empty properties (82 per cent of 28 comments), although some highlighted potential mitigating circumstances that could be taken into account.

Although less clear-cut, by the end of the consultation, the balance of relevant comments was against the proposed reductions in CTR (18 of 30 comments – see 6.1 for an example), although others supported it:

“ 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. ”

There were also frequent comments about reducing organisational costs.

6.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

Council Tax: by far the most frequent comment was people on low incomes, but also the most vulnerable and most needy; private landlords (in relation to empty properties and tenant turnover).

“ This is entirely daft As is being illustrated nationally by the "bedroom tax", in these difficult times people on low income simply do not have the means to meet increases , which result in arrears, evictions, choices between food or heating, and ultimately to homelessness, family disruption, ill-health and even on occasions suicide or death. The pips cannot squeak any more... ”

Business rates: small, independent and/or new businesses; charities and voluntary organisations; community groups (e.g. village halls).

“ Small businesses-positive impact, necessary for growth & sustainability in our towns & villages. ”

There were several comments about the impact that reducing discounts for charities, voluntary and community groups (e.g. who have received asset transfers) might have on those organisations at the same time as them being asked to do more; also the subsequent effect on their vulnerable clients if they are unable to continue operating.

“ It is self-defeating to reduce the discount on business rates for some charities - they will just go out of business meaning the voluntary sector will be even further reduced in size and further unable to do the work the Council used to do in terms of holding local communities together and society will be left with nothing. ”

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

Council Tax:

- The most frequent suggestion was to 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; empty properties
- Increase other charges – e.g. for planning applications; unused agricultural land
- Apply the changes equally to everyone – including pensioners
- Phased reduction in CTR over several years
- Don't increase Council Tax too much
- Make sure people know what they are entitled to and supported
- Alternative ways of Council Tax charging – e.g. per person, not dwelling; “revert to old rateable values”; income-based; greater reductions for those in rural areas with higher travel costs.

“ Absolutely DO NOT increase the rate for low earners - instead, increase the rate for high earners, or those with bigger properties.”

Business rates:

Most of the comments related to either support to encourage small, independent and/or new businesses; or to helping charities continue to support the other priorities:

- Reductions in first year for start-ups
- Favourable rates compared to charities – particularly large national ones
- Distinguish between national charities and small / local ones in charges
- Charge supermarkets or big companies more
- Reduced rents to increase occupancy

6.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

The most frequent suggestions were about reducing operational costs, e.g. staff, councillors, ICT, managing money better, efficiencies in collection systems.

Other suggestions included:

- Lobby government for fairer funding; changes to the system
- Need to encourage more businesses and tourism – suggestion of mentoring scheme for new firms; tax breaks for historical sites or cultural events
- Spend on the basics
- Charge for more services
- Increase enforcement – e.g. spot-checks for single occupancy; volunteers could find tax evaders
- Charge take-away shops an extra fee because of litter
- Allow voluntary contributions to save specific services

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

8. Council Tax increases

243 comments received about this section.

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 (62 per cent) of responses to this question expressed some opposition to increasing Council Tax, although the strength of this fell during the consultation:

- 25 per cent were opposed to putting a 5 per cent increase to a referendum (including comments about the cost of a referendum)
- 20 per cent simply expressed their opposition to a 5 per cent increase
- 18 per cent were opposed to any increase at all.

The most frequent comments supporting these views mentioned:

- 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
- Better financial management needed (see comment above), including "live within means" and "not giving you more to waste"
- Operational costs (staff numbers and salaries, councillors' expenses, consultants, buildings, waste) should be reduced first
- Why should people pay more when services are being cut and they already "don't get much" for their Council Tax.

“ 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. ”

However, more than a third (36 per cent) indicated that they would support a referendum or some level of increase (including some suggestions that it should be higher than 5 per cent) – although many were qualified with points such as:

- How the money should be spent – e.g. correctly, or "not wasted" (see comment).
- Support increase but not the cost of a referendum, and provided concessions remain for those who can't afford it
- Only hold a referendum if research suggests you would win, and people are fully informed
- Alternative increases: e.g. 10 pc this year, followed by reduction next; increase higher bands only

“ 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 ”

“ 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! ”

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 shifted from the initial stages of the consultation, when the most frequent response was that there shouldn't be an increase in council tax so there was no need to think about what to do with the money (only 7 per cent by the end).

A third of all comments made suggestions about specific services that the money should be spent on (or simply "essential" or "core" services, or "the ones facing cuts"). Others didn't mention services, but said the money shouldn't be "wasted" or spent on staff.

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

9. Funding our priorities – considering the proposed budget overall

99 comments received about this section

9.1 Particular groups that will be affected?

The most frequent comment was "everyone" (almost two-fifths of responses to this particular question). Others mentioned vulnerable people; by far the single most common group mentioned (by a third) was people on low incomes or struggling financially, followed by children and young people, the elderly and disabled people. A few mentioned working tax payers who would have to pay more tax.

Specific services mentioned in this section included the Citizens' Advice Bureau, public rights of way, libraries, leisure and the arts – mainly in relation to their various preventative roles.

“ It is short-sighted 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. ”

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

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

Other suggestions:

- Careful planning and spending (see right for e.g.); only fund initiatives that are used
- Spread the cuts over all services; cut non-essentials (see next page)

“ Focus support to where it really makes an economic difference, not to where a councillor can point to a reduced figure on a balance sheet. No-one has any respect for that sort of short-termism. ”

- Target funds on the most vulnerable
- Assess and monitor the cumulative impact of cuts and changes on the most at risk, in the context of national changes too.
- Change priorities (basic services for people in rural areas)

“ I am particularly concerned about the threat to the Herefordshire CAB. This is an invaluable service supported mostly by volunteers. To even consider losing this wealth of effort, given completely free, is tantamount to vandalism and would be a disaster to so many people who look to them for support and help. If cuts must be made, cut in areas where volunteers do not contribute, to desirable, but non essential services, libraries, baths, parks etc. ”

9.3 Ideas and suggestions about doing things differently

- The most common suggestions were 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. A couple suggested sharing services with other counties.
- Other suggestions included:
 - Encourage economic development and investment in the county
 - Lobby government for fairer funding; seek new sources of funding – including by working in partnership with the third sector to harness other funding streams
 - 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 in one way or another.
 - Means-test benefits for pensioners:

“ Budget reductions have gone on for too long. The council is in a difficult situation but it makes no sense to make short term cuts which will be very damaging to the future of the county, so bite the bullet and increase council tax. ”

“ 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. ”

10. Any other comments

The online survey had a section for ‘any other comments’. The most frequently cited were requests to not cut funding to the citizen’s advice bureau followed by comments about the design of the consultation – mostly negative e.g. not enough information given to make a rational response, unstructured. The next most cited comments were about the library followed by those related to reducing management overheads and operational costs.