

Budget Proposals 2016-17: Cash Office, Market Street

Summary of Feedback Received and Key Findings

Why we consulted?

Over the last four years we have had to make savings of £23m because we've received less money from central government. We have done this by becoming more efficient at what we do, by reducing some of our administrative functions and increasing our income. Throughout this period we have done our best to protect front line services.

We now have to find another £20m over the next four years, with almost £11m to be found in 2016/17. Much of this will come from further efficiencies within the council, but £4.6m will have to come from services that will impact the public.

In order to inform the budget setting process for 2016/17 we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives

Approach

All the proposals were published on the council's website on 3 November 2015 with feedback requested by 14 December 2015. Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), with a video message from the Chief Executive outlining the background to the exercise.

Information relating to this proposal was linked directly from this index page. This contained more detailed information on what was specifically proposed, information on what we thought the impact might be, as well as what else we had considered in developing and arriving at this proposal. Feedback was then invited through an online form, and through a dedicated email address.

Each individual budget proposal was placed on our [Consultation Portal](#) which automatically notified those registered that an exercise had been launched. Members of the West Berkshire community panel (around 800 people) and local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations were also emailed directly, notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Heads of Service made direct contact with those organisations affected by any of the budget proposals prior to them being made publically available.

A press release was issued on the same date, as well as publicised through Facebook and Twitter.

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Background

Residents can currently pay their council bills, for example Council Tax, at the Cash Office at Market Street, by Direct Debit, Standing Order, at the Post Office, through the Internet, by telephone, or by postal cheque.

The Cash Office is currently open to take payments Mondays and Fridays, and half day Wednesdays.

The proposal is to close the Cash Office located in the council offices (Market Street, Newbury) to release savings of £44k per year. In addition to paying bills by all the current methods available, it is proposed to extend the alternative payment provision currently available through a third party provider which utilises district wide 'Paypoints'.

'Paypoint' is one of the UK's leading premier branded retail networks for the convenient local payment of household bills. There are 5 located in close proximity to the council offices and 55 within the district (24,000 places in the UK) where you can pay, for example in newsagents, convenience stores, supermarkets and garages; most open long hours, many seven days a week and the service is free.

Summary of Key Points

In total 23 responses were received. Of these 17 came from individuals, three from internal service units, one from a Parish Council, and one from UNISON. One individual supported the closure, whilst the Parish Council did not foresee any issues.

Of the remaining 21 respondents those opposed to the proposal were concerned that this would impact most on the elderly and disabled users of the service.

1. Are you, or anyone you care for, a user of this service?

12 respondents indicated that they were carers or users of the service.

2. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people?

Respondents were generally concerned that this would impact on older users of the service and those that were disabled. The denial of personal interaction and a distrust of alternative payment methods were common themes

3. Do you feel that this proposal will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so, how do you think we might help with this?

Once again respondents were concerned with the impact on the elderly and disabled. Few alternatives were suggested other than keeping the Cash Office open.

4. Do you think the alternative methods of payment will help to reduce the impact of this proposal? Please explain the reason for your response.

11 respondents replied to this question four of which simply stated no, a further three stated possibly. The remaining comments provided no clear suggestions as to how

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the impact could be mitigated and cited a general distrust of alternative methods and the absence of payment receipts.

5. Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so, please provide details.

Other than keeping the Cash Office open no suggestions were received.

6. Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.

None other than comments from internal users of the service suggested that procedures could be changed to accommodate the proposal.

7. Any further comments?

11 comments in total; some considered that the savings to be small in nature and that savings elsewhere could be used to keep the cash office open, others were concerned for the future employment of staff concerned, and once again concerns for the elderly and disabled users of the service.

Conclusion

In general the comments from respondents were generally consistent; the impact on the elderly and disabled service users, a lack of trust in the alternative payments methods, and the removal of a personal service.

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.

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Head of Customer Services
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