

Budget Proposals 2016-17: Empowering West Berkshire

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

Empowering West Berkshire (EWB) is an organisation which was established in 2011 to promote any charitable purpose for the benefit of the public, principally but not exclusively in West Berkshire. In particular EWB is responsible for building the capacity of voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and providing them with the necessary support, information and services to enable them to pursue or contribute to any charitable purpose.

EWB is also responsible for promoting cooperation and partnership working between the voluntary and community sector, statutory and other relevant bodies in order to achieve the best outcomes for people in West Berkshire.

The proposal is to cease the funding provided to EWB saving the council £50,000.

Summary of Key Points

There were 62 responses to this savings proposal. 24 of these responses were from organisations or sporting clubs/societies etc.

The organisations that responded to this proposal were:

- Empowering West Berkshire
- Dingley Family and Specialist Early Years Centres
- Children and Young People Voluntary Sector Forum/Berkshire Youth/East Downland Churches
- Clayhill residents Association
- Volunteer Centre West Berkshire
- Hoarding Disorders UK
- Cold Ash Pre School
- BMSTC
- ABC to Read
- Loose Ends
- West Berkshire Children & Young People Voluntary & Community Sector Forum
- Newbury and District Clinical Commissioning Group
- Home Start West Berkshire
- Young People and Children First
- West Berkshire Neurological Alliance
- Cold Ash Boys and Girls Football Club
- Thatcham Rugby Club
- Berkshire Youth
- Chieveley Pre School
- Happy Days Autistic Club Coles Diner
- A2Dominion West Berkshire Abuse Service
- Newbury Family Counselling Service
- Get Berkshire Active
- Enrych Berkshire

Those that responded to this proposal commented on the valuable support and guidance that they had received from EWB on such crucial matters as governance and training. For instance, in Chieveley the pre-school had achieved the Quality Standards Mark as a result of the direct help and advice provided by EWB.

Furthermore, Thatcham Pre-School contacted EWB for advice on their governance, finances and HR issues. The new committee had concerns about the financial situation of the pre-school. The pre-school was on the verge of closing due to financial errors, lack of reserve funds, a breakdown of the committee and un-resolved/mismanaged HR issues. EWB provided support and guidance to the new committee which included facilitating meetings

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with external partners such a firm of local solicitors with a view creating an efficient and sustainable pre school.

Other organisations that responded commented on the expertise on offer for the voluntary and community sector in areas such as fundraising, training and governance.

In relation to fundraising, EWB have supported organisations in putting together funding bids which have delivered over £800,000 in funding coming into to West Berkshire.

Other comments referred to the Council's priority of communities helping themselves and the need for an umbrella organisation to help the Council and its communities meet this challenge.

Comments were also made about Central Government's wish to see local communities 'deliver more' and the need for communities to be supported and trained, particularly in relation to safeguarding.

The Newbury and District Clinical Commissioning Group responded by saying that EWB provided an experienced and valuable resource in relation to building relationships with the voluntary and community sector. They also made the point that at a time when all partners were trying to engage communities EWB was a vital vehicle in supporting this approach.

Several of those responding questioned where existing or new voluntary and community sector groups might receive support from if the Council proceeded with this proposal.

1. Have you received advice, guidance and support from this organisation?

38 of the 43 responding to this proposal had received direct advice and support from EWB.

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

Without an umbrella organisation to support the voluntary and community sector West Berkshire Council's aim of building stronger communities that are able to deliver 'local services' for themselves will be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

There would be potentially less people engaged in volunteering work across the district as there would be no support organisation that would be able to deliver support, advice and training on key areas of activity such as governance, safeguarding and fundraising.

EWB is available to all and offers free and independent advice which supports a dynamic voluntary and community sector. The continued shrinking of the public sector will place an ever increasing demand on the voluntary and community sector. However, without a support organisation to turn to, the capacity of this sector will reduce and significantly impact on how West Berkshire operates in general.

The loss of an umbrella organisation and the consequent impact on the voluntary and community sector would eventually impact on the Council when its communities seek help to resolve local issues.

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The overall tone of the comments was that this proposal was inappropriate and one which made no real sense when the Council, and its fellow partners, were seeking greater input from the voluntary and community sector.

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?

A number of the responders to this proposal considered that the vulnerable could be impacted by the absence of local groups. It was suggested that the potential loss of volunteers could result in all of the communities in West Berkshire being impacted. If people were unable to receive advice on governance and training on important issues such as safeguarding then West Berkshire itself might suffer as a result.

Several of those responding considered that there was a potential for this proposal to restrict the growth of more youth clubs or sporting clubs if parents were unwilling to run these because of a lack of support on matters such as fundraising and safeguarding. This would then impact on the district as a whole and could have an impact on other services in due course.

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

25 of those responding considered that the costs of managing this service was highly competitive. Other responders considered that a nominal charge could be made for training but accepted that this would not, in itself, resolve the current proposal.

EWB has suggested that they could continue to run the organisation with a 20% funding reduction (£10,000). This would mean that EWB would have to secure other sources of funding but in return for this they would like some stability in the form of a three year service level agreement (SLA).

5. 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.

There were no suggestions forthcoming on how other parts of the voluntary and community sector could help EWB apart from paying for some of the services they receive. However it was considered that this approach could deter new groups coming forward and could impact on those groups already in place but in need of support.

6. Any further comments?

The only other comments made by several of those responding suggested that this proposal would have a significant impact on the way the communities of West Berkshire operate and would leave the sector devoid of support at a time when central and local government policy was aimed at increasing activity across the voluntary and community sector.

There was one response (unnamed) who suggested that the VCS should not be supported and that the funding should be used in other ways.

Conclusion

There has been a very good response to this budget proposal. With the exception of

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couple of negative responses, who felt that the VCS did not need supporting in this way, all other responders were united in their praise for the work and support offered by EWB.

24 of those responding are well established existing VCS organisations. The overwhelming message from these organisations was that EWB provided excellent support in a range of areas but particularly in relation to governance, funding and training. Many of these organisations referred to the Council's priority of 'communities helping themselves' and suggested that EWB would be the appropriate vehicle to achieve this.

EWB has suggested that it would be prepared to receive a 20% reduction in Council funding (£10,000) in order to be able to continue to support the VCS. EWB would have to secure other funding to bridge the gap and would want an SLA that secured the new funding arrangement for a three year period.

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.

Andy Day
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14 January 2015