

Budget Proposals 2016-17 Phase 2: Citizen's Advice Bureau

Consultation Summary Report

Why We Consulted?

From 3 November to 14 December 2015, we consulted on the need to make £10.8m of savings in 2016/17. £4.6m of these savings affected frontline services. The consultation generated over 2,500 responses and covered [47 individual budget proposals](#).

Shortly before Christmas, however, the Government began a [public consultation](#) on local government funding and proposed to reduce our funding by 44% (Revenue Support Grant). This announcement was totally unexpected, and we were faced with the challenge of finding an additional £7.6m of savings, whilst also considering increases in Council Tax.

In order to inform this process, 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 15 February 2016 with feedback requested by 7 March 2016.

Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals.

Each individual page included further details on the specifics of what the proposal contained and what we thought the impact might be, along with any other elements we had taken into account.

Feedback was then invited through an online form and from a face to face meeting with CAB, 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 publicly available.

A press release was issued on the same date, and was further publicised through the council's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The period in which we invited responses was reduced to three weeks in this case, instead of the usual six. This is because the funding announcement from government was both unexpected and very late in the financial year. It was not possible to extend the consultation period without negatively impacting the delivery of the 2016 council budget. In order to minimise the impact of this shorter timescale, we undertook extra activities to publicise the consultation in addition to our usual channels. This included making potential consultees

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aware of the impending exercise much earlier than normal via press releases and associated PR activities.

Proposal Background

The council has a service level agreement with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide services for people in the district needing support and guidance with a range of financial advice relating to:

- Debt worries
- Benefits enquiries
- Housing and employment problems
- Concerns about consumer or tax issues

CAB also provides:

- Advice on legal matters;
- Advice on immigration;
- Advice on family and personal matters;
- Support for carers.

CAB currently operates 4 days a week and a significant number of the advisers are volunteers.

We have reviewed the numbers of clients seen by CAB and appreciate that there has been a reduction. We are also aware that the future enquiries relating to Universal Credit, the replacement for the current benefits system, will, when introduced fully, be managed by a government agency set up specifically for that purpose. This could mean that the number of clients CAB sees could reduce.

We consulted with you from 3 November to 14 December 2016 with a proposal to reduce CAB's funding by £15,000. We are now suggesting that this should be reduced by a further £25,000 making a total of £40,000.

Proposal Details

The proposal is to reduce CAB's funding in 2016/17 by a further £25,000 making a total of £40,000.

Consultation Response

Number of Responses

In total, 91 responses were received, 81 of which included comments. Of those who responded:

- 85 were individuals
- Four were a group / organisation
 - Citizen's Advice Bureau
 - Newbury Family Counselling Service
 - Loose

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- Unison West Berkshire
- Two were a Town / Parish Council
 - Tilehurst Parish Council
 - Compton Parish Council

24 responses were from non-users of the service.

Summary of Main Points

CAB is a service which is essential to vulnerable people living in West Berkshire. With the introduction of the new welfare and benefits allowances having access to free independent financial advice and support is crucial. One of those responding made the point that a "crisis" will not wait for an "appointment" suggesting that although an appointment system is in operation within CAB this was not appropriate in all circumstances.

Although some of those responding acknowledged that support was available online they also recognised that in many instances vulnerable individuals wanted reassurance and support which could only be provided face to face contact with an Advisor.

Several people who responded to this proposal suggested that with the council losing significant numbers of jobs, the services offered by CAB were even more relevant at this time.

Summary of Responses by Question

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

51 of those responding were users of the service.

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

If the impact of this proposal is to reduce the hours of operation of CAB, then those that need the service most will be impacted because they will have to wait much longer to see an advisor. The reduction in funding, and hence the services available, will impact on those that cannot afford to pay for services delivered by others.

3. What do you think about potentially having to wait longer to see a CAB advisor?

Some of those responding considered that delays in being able to see an advisor could impact on individual's benefits that they received or not. Others considered that the stress that individuals might suffer could impact on their health and result in costs in other parts of the public sector (GP surgeries etc).

4. 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?

Some of those responding considered that anyone in receipt of any Government benefit could potentially be impacted by this proposal. Others that responded considered that the elderly and disabled people could be impacted.

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5. **Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way, but still achieve the same level of saving? If so, please provide details of any alternative proposals.**

One of those responding considered that having an online booking system would help to alleviate some of the stress in trying to see an advisor. One person also suggested that the "better off" who use the CAB service should be asked to pay a contribution to the service that they receive.

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.**

No suggestions were forthcoming about how those responding could help mitigate the impact of the proposal.

7. **Any further comments?**

There were no other issues raised which need to be referred to in this section.

Officer conclusion and recommendation can be found in the associated Overview of Responses and Recommendations document.

Andy Day
Head of Service
Strategic Support
11 March 2016

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.