



Budget Consultation 2010-11

SUMMARY REPORT Budget Consultation Strands for Dacorum Borough Council

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Consultation

- 1.1 Opinion Research Services (ORS), in conjunction with Dacorum Borough Council (DBC), carried out various budget consultations with members of the Citizens' Panel, members of the public, members of the business community and members of staff within the Council). In summary, the elements of the consultation were as follows.

Quantitative

- 1.2 **Panel Survey:** the panel survey was distributed to 1,002 members of DBC's panel via two channels. 624 completed questionnaires were returned; 366 by post and 258 online, yielding a response rate of 62%.
- 1.3 **Listening Day Survey:** this survey was conducted by DBC and consisted of 281 face-to-face interviews with residents of Dacorum.
- 1.4 **Visitor Survey:** DBC distributed paper questionnaires to several voluntary organisations, including Marriage Guidance and Citizen Advice Bureaus for visitors to those offices to self-complete and return to DBC. Parish Councillors also handed out questionnaires to visitors to the parish council offices. DBC received 67 responses.

Qualitative

- 1.5 **Public Consultation Forum:** ORS ran a deliberative forum with 28 members of the public, drawn randomly from the Dacorum Citizens' Panel. Participants were asked for both their initial and final opinions about the budget, having by then been given background information and encouraged to discuss budgetary issues.
- 1.6 **Maylands Partnership Consultation:** DBC consulted on priority issues for the 2011 budget with 15 members of the Maylands Partnership. The partnership represents the interests of over 700 businesses in Dacorum.
- 1.7 **Staff Spending Challenge:** 21 Council staff took part in the Staff Spending Challenge run by DBC. Staff members were asked to provide suggestions for saving money and raising income.
- 1.8 **Staff Workshops:** DBC ran two workshops with council staff in which participants answered various budget-related questions about council services, saving money and value for money.
- 1.9 **Social Media:** DBC used Twitter and Facebook to get feedback from members of the public on the following statement:

Because of the economic downturn, DBC will have less money from central government. This means that we will need to make quite big savings. Some savings can be made through being more efficient, but we still need to save more through reducing services or raising money from other sources.

Chapter 2: Value for Money and Efficiency

Council Tax: Value for Money – Citizens’ Panel Survey; Listening Day Survey; Visitor Survey

2.1 Just under two-fifths of residents from the Panel survey (39%) agreed that Dacorum Borough Council provides value for money from their Council Tax. A similar proportion neither agreed nor disagreed (37%), while a quarter (24%) disagreed. A higher proportion of correspondents from the Listening Day agreed (48%) and a smaller proportion from the Visitor surveys disagreed.

Figure 1

To what extent do you agree/disagree that Dacorum Borough Council provides value for money from your Council Tax?

Council Tax: Value for Money	Panel Survey	Listening Day Survey	Visitor Survey
Agree	39%	48%	29%
Neither agree nor disagree	37%	25%	31%
Disagree	24%	27%	41%

Council Tax: Value for Money – Staff Workshops

2.2 DBC staff said that DBC seems to be a few steps ahead of other councils and offers particularly good value for money in allotments and adventure playgrounds. While officers seem enthusiastic, some thought that departmental barriers and bureaucracy could be reduced, and that service/line managers should be consulted more before making decisions.

Overall

2.3 In general, the public and staff have a reasonably positive impression of value for money in DBC. Staff would like to see bureaucracy and delay reduced.

2.4 The last Place Survey (2008) found that the residents agreeing that they got value for money from the Council was 31% - so there might have been an improvement (but the questions were not quite identical).

Chapter 3: Priorities

Council Services and Priorities – Panel Survey; Listening Day Survey; Visitor Survey

Important Council Services

3.1 Across all three surveys, the five services that residents said were *most important for them and their families* were:

Bins / collecting waste

Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Environmental Services (such as street cleaning, removing graffiti, removing abandoned cars and preventing/cleaning up fly tipping)

Parks and play areas

Recycling.

Figure 2

Please tell us what Council services are important to you and your family?

Ten Most Important Services for RESIDENTS and their FAMILY	Panel Survey	Listening Day Survey	Visitor Survey
1	Bins / Collecting waste	Bins / Collecting waste	Bins / Collecting waste
2	Tackling ASB	Environmental services (street cleaning, removing graffiti, removing abandoned cars and preventing/cleaning up fly tipping)	Environmental services (street cleaning, removing graffiti, removing abandoned cars and preventing/cleaning up fly tipping)
3	Environmental services (street cleaning, removing graffiti, removing abandoned cars and preventing/cleaning up fly tipping)	Recycling	Tackling ASB
4	Parks and play areas	Tackling ASB	Recycling
5	Recycling	Parks and play areas	Parks and play areas
6	Environmental Health (rats and pollution, and inspecting places that sell or serve food)	Environmental Health (rats and pollution, and inspecting places that sell or serve food)	Environmental Health (rats and pollution, and inspecting places that sell or serve food)
7	Supporting local businesses	Car parking and control	Providing bus passes and taxi vouchers
8	Police Community Support Officers	Police Community Support Officers	Supporting neighbourhoods and community projects
9	Supporting neighbourhoods and community projects	Availability of affordable housing	Police Community Support Officers
10	Collecting council tax	Supporting local businesses	Council Housing

3.2 When asked what Council services are *most important for the community*, residents identified a similar range of services, but also mentioned *affordable housing* and *collecting waste*.

Priorities for Local Areas

3.3 According to the results for all three surveys, the most important priority that the Council and its partners should have is *reducing crime and creating a safer Dacorum*. *Meeting the needs of older people* and *creating a cleaner healthier environment* also featured in the top three most important priorities, as the table below shows.

Figure 3

The Council, with its partners, has committed to certain priorities for the local area. Looking at the priorities below, which do you consider to be the most important?

Most Important Priorities for LOCAL AREA	Panel Survey	Listening Day Survey	Visitor Survey
1	Reducing crime and creating a safer Dacorum	Reducing crime and creating a safer Dacorum	Reducing crime and creating a safer Dacorum
2	Encouraging business and local employment	Meeting the needs of older people	Meeting the needs of older people
3	Creating a cleaner and healthier environment (improve the environment and reduce global impacts)	Creating a cleaner and healthier environment (improve the environment and reduce global impacts)	Meeting housing need (good quality affordable housing)
4	Meeting housing need (good quality affordable housing)	Encouraging business and local employment	Improving social care and health
5	Meeting the needs of older people	Meeting the needs of children and young people	Creating a cleaner and healthier environment (improve the environment and reduce global impacts)
6	Improving social care and health	Meeting housing need (good quality affordable housing)	Encouraging business and local employment
7	Meeting the needs of children and young people	Improving social care and health	Meeting the needs of children and young people
8	Encouraging community involvement (in local activities and local decision making)	Encouraging community involvement (in local activities and local decision making)	Encouraging community involvement (in local activities and local decision making)
9	Promoting culture, arts, leisure and tourism	Delivering lifelong adult learning (adult learning)	Delivering lifelong adult learning (adult learning)
10	Delivering lifelong adult learning (adult learning)	Promoting culture, arts, leisure and tourism	Promoting culture, arts, leisure and tourism

Council Services and Priorities – Public Consultation Forum

3.4 People's views on DBC's main priorities did not shift significantly during the deliberative forum – for affordable housing was the most popular throughout, closely followed by safe clean environment. Regeneration and building community capacity also featured prominently in the discussions. Other priorities nominated by participants at the Forum connect with the above and included: roads and transport (including parking and public transport), protection of green spaces, sports facilities, working family friendly policies, reducing management and administration costs by being more efficient, and encouraging the voluntary sector.

Council Services and Priorities – Maylands Partnership Consultation

- ^{3.5} Members of the Maylands Partnership thought the following were the most important services and priorities: transport network and links / connectivity, internal and external communications, technology / IT infrastructure, safety, provision of skills, clean and green community.

Overall

- ^{3.6} Members of the community place great importance on what might be called the Council's basic janitorial and environmental services that people see and experience in their everyday lives – like rubbish collection, keeping the streets clear and so on. They also attach great importance to public safety and efforts to reduce anti-social behaviour. Beyond those issues come a number of community issues like affordable housing and good roads and transport, as well as a wide range of other important social goals.

Chapter 4: Saving Money; Services, Charges and the Big Society

Suggestions for Saving Money

Staff Spending Challenge; Staff Workshops

- 4.1 Staff suggestions for saving money in the context of current public expenditure restrictions, included offering staff the option of working fewer hours, reviewing some current terms and conditions, and reducing management costs. Some staff also suggested shared services agreement with the County Council and some shared officers.

Panel Survey; Listening Day Survey; Visitor Survey

- 4.2 Residents' suggestions on how DBC could save money and/or increase income included:

- Outsourcing services
- Partnership working
- Sponsorship/donations
- Paying councillors/staff less
- Reducing the numbers of councillors/senior staff
- Encouraging volunteering/work experience
- Using the unemployed and those who have committed crimes to undertake work in the community
- Cutting down on unnecessary leaflets/booklets/newsletters
- Encouraging people to look after their communities.

- 4.3 Suggestions from the Listening day survey and Visitor survey included:

- Downsizing the number of staff employed
- Capping councillors' expenses
- Reducing waste and Civic Centre functions
- Reduce business rates to generate businesses, increase employment and therefore increase economic prosperity and create revenue.

Social Media

- 4.4 In response to the statement DBC issued, people on twitter/facebook suggested savings could be made by:

- Being more energy efficient in council buildings
- Cutting down on outsourcing services and consultancy
- Charging tenants for failed appointments for repairs
- Saving on postage/printing where possible
- Reviewing salaries.

Services and Charges

Public Consultation Forum

Reducing Services and Increasing Charges

- 4.5 Before coming to the Forum, over four in ten of this randomly selected group of Dacorum residents were of the opinion that DBC should save money by reducing some services, but this increased to an overwhelming majority after considering all the financial issues and reviewing the range of services in detail – with three-quarters finally taking this view. Please see the table below.

Do you think the Council should reduce some services in order to save money?	Initial views	Final Views
Yes	43%	76%
No	25%	20%
Don't Know	32%	4%

- 4.6 Before coming to the Forum, a third of the participants thought DBC should increase its charges for some services, but this also increased to overwhelming majority by the end of the meeting – with 84% taking this view. Please see the table below.

Do you think the Council should increase some of its charges in order to raise more money?	Initial views	Final Views
Yes	32%	84%
No	46%	12%
Don't Know	21%	4%

- 4.7 The area on which opinion shifted less significantly during the Forum was in relation to the Big Society idea that councils might do less while their local communities do more for themselves. Clearly, this idea attracts many residents – for exactly half were in favour at the beginning of the meeting – but, following the discussions, participants' opinions had changed hardly at all. As the below table shows, residents remained divided on the issue, though with a majority in favour.

Do you think Dacorum Borough Council should do less and the local community should do more?	Initial views	Final Views
Yes	50%	52%
No	38%	36%
Don't Know	14%	12%

Sharing Services in the Public Sector

- 4.8 Towards the end of the Forum, participants were asked if DBC should reduce costs by sharing some services with other local authorities and/or outsourcing some services to the private sector. In response, having heard all the discussion and on their final questionnaires, almost

everyone (96%) thought that the DBC should share some services with other local authorities. There was a sense that consideration should be given to sharing services wherever doing so would reduce management and administrative costs and maximise efficiency.

- 4.9 It seems that, because people find it hard to nominate particular service areas for cuts, when challenged by the financial savings required informed residents opt for the strategic re-design of basic administrative functions and systems. They seem to see this approach as a way of reducing the number and depth of service cuts to be made.

Outsourcing to the Private Sector

- 4.10 However, there was more caution about outsourcing services to the private sector – for opinion was broadly divided on this issue (with 44% in favour, 48% against and 8% don't know). The main objections about outsourcing to the private sector were based on concerns about quality, accountability, irreversibility and the profit motive.

Services and Charges

- 4.11 While various suggestions for reducing some services were made, the overwhelming impression was that core janitorial functions – like keeping the environment clean and safe – should definitely be retained. In other words, people saw this as a basic duty of the Council to the public.

Targeted Reductions

- 4.12 Many Forum participants rejected 'salami slicing' and questioned some areas of DBC expenditure in a targeted and strategic way. In particular, they identified DBC's expenditure of £7.4 million on Culture and Related Services as very large and were keen for the Council to consider it could be reduced. They also questioned the costs of £4.6 million for Planning and Development. They assumed that this sum was primarily the cost of officers' salaries – which they said seemed very expensive.

Panel Survey; Listening Day; Visitor Survey

- 4.13 Please see Chapter 3 for commentary on the services that residents of Dacorum feel are important to the residents and the community.

Staff Budget Workshops

- 4.14 When DBC employees were asked what services should be protected, they prioritised the One Stop Shop/Customer Service unit, environmental health and refuse collection services.
- 4.15 Some staff also suggested reviewing the Council's use of buildings, increasing the efficiency of benefit systems, increasing charges for allotments, cemeteries, adventure playgrounds. Some also suggested that arts and leisure facilities could be funded and run by the private sector; and others thought that DBC land should be offered on the open market.

The Big Society

Public Consultation Forum

- 4.16 Overall, Forum opinion was divided on the Big Society: some people embraced the idea with enthusiasm, but others were more doubtful (suggesting that it could be way for public bodies to

pass the buck by getting rid of paid workers). There was a recognition that reducing the role of public bodies will not automatically generate community involvement. Many worried that the health and safety agenda might prove to be a big obstacle to the Big Society's short term growth. They said the expectation might be a burden to those few who get involved and that some services might just disappear without replacement. The lack of accountability and consistency that might result from the devolution of services to local communities and organisations was also a concern for some.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

- 5.1 In general, the Citizens' Panel deliberative forum, Citizens' Panel Survey and Staff Forum are probably the most representative and informed forms of consultation – that should probably carry the greatest weight in reaching an overall judgement about the outcomes. Least informed and least representative were the responses to the social networking consultations.
- 5.2 Dacorum residents and staff are fairly positive about whether DBC provides value for money from their Council Tax. Residents in the Listening Day Survey were more likely to agree that DBC offers value for money (48%) than those in the Panel and visitor surveys (39% and 29% respectively).
- 5.3 Overall, the surveys and Forum found that people most value and want to protect the basic and familiar janitorial services the Council provides – including waste collection and keeping the environment clean and tidy (including parks and play areas). In the surveys, respondents also wanted to protect initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour, affordable housing and the needs of older people.
- 5.4 In the deliberative forum, affordable housing was by far the most popular both at the start and end of the meeting, closely followed by 'safe, clean environment'. Regeneration and building community capacity also featured prominently in the discussions. Other priorities nominated by participants at the Forum were roads and transport, car parking and public transport.
- 5.5 Before attending the deliberative forum over four in ten of the participants thought DBC should save money by reducing some services, but this increased to three-quarters after considering the financial issues. Before the Forum, a third thought DBC should increase its charges for some services, but this also increased to 84% by the end of the meeting.
- 5.6 No one found it easy to propose budget cuts, but the Forum favoured targeted, strategic reductions rather than 'salami slicing'. In particular, they identified DBC's expenditure of £7.4 million on Culture and Related Services £4.6 million for Planning and Development as worthy of reductions.
- 5.7 The deliberative forums also made important suggestions about how DBC could save money by sharing certain services and officers with other public sector organisations in Hertfordshire. There was a sense that consideration should be given to sharing services wherever doing so would reduce management and administrative costs and maximise efficiency; and they seemed to see this approach as a way of reducing the number and depth of service cuts to be made.
- 5.8 The public was more cautious about outsourcing services to the private sector and they would want to be reassured about quality, accountability and reversibility, if this were to be done.
- 5.9 Overall, the findings from the Listening Day, Visitor and Panel surveys are compatible with the paragraphs above – because they also recommended restructuring the Council, reducing the numbers of staff, and partnership working, rather than just cutting specific services.