

BUDGET ENGAGEMENT ANALYSIS

Introduction

In December 2016, the communications team launched a budget engagement programme. A series of infographics were developed, linked to a series of questions asking residents and staff for their views.

There were seven infographics produced – six focused on budget activity and an additional one was developed to get feedback on the council's proposal for a charitable trust to run the council's Sport and Cultural Services. The seven themes were: Income Generation; Increasing Efficiency; Council Tax; Identifying Savings; Investing in our Communities; Savings; Delivering sports and cultural services.

The engagement programme ran until midnight on January 3rd, 2017, with ongoing promotion via social media channels, local media, through staff and community networks.

There were a variety of ways that people could take part in this year's engagement activity. The majority of respondents completed at least one of 7 online surveys which related to the infographics produced. In addition views were fed back through email, Facebook and Twitter. Ten group discussions also took place across Aberdeenshire (led by CLD and an area manager).

Only 15% of respondents stated they had taken part in the council's budget engagement activity in previous years. This means that the approach adopted for the 17/18 budget largely reached an audience that we have not previously engaged with on budget matters.

Social media activity involved 14 Facebook posts and 23 Twitter posts directing the audience to relevant infographics and associated surveys on the council's website.

The activity reached an audience of 179,251, with a total of 12,584 clicks on social media content. This led to 2,323 individuals visiting the budget engagement page of the website, with 3,514 visits in total.

A webinar was held in December which saw the Chief Executive hosting a budget question and answer session with senior councillors. A range of questions were submitted in advance and on the night by the public. To date there have been around 160 views including live and archived footage.

The following table (table 1) illustrates the number of responses received through the seven online surveys and the confidence levels (level of accuracy) of these results are also listed. As the respondents were a self-selecting sample (they choose to participate) and not random, these confidence levels are illustrative.

Budget Theme	Number of responses	Confidence level
Investing in our communities	557	+/- 4.15%
Delivering Sport and Cultural Services	1,073	+/- 2.98%
Income Generation	752	+/- 3.57%
Increasing Efficiency	824	+/- 3.41%
Council Tax	1,190	+/- 2.83%

Identifying Savings	1,105	+/- 2.94%
Pressures	1,274	+/- 2.74%

(Table 1: Results from online survey and confidence levels)

The following sections highlight the summary findings from the online surveys and the group discussions that have taken place.

Theme results

Investing in our Communities: 58.4% of 647 respondents feel that we are spending enough on capital projects until 2031. When asked to rank the priorities within the capital plan, primary and secondary schools were top followed jointly by roads and affordable housing. The full list can be viewed in appendix 1.

Respondents were asked for any general comments regarding the capital plan and the proposals. We received 228 comments, of which the majority (65%) were miscellaneous and not linked directly to the capital plan. 18% of respondents agreed with some or all of the priorities but may have felt that others were missing.

Income Generation: Respondents gave their views to a series of proposals about generating income. Table 2 below highlights the number of people who responded to each proposal and whether they agreed or disagreed with it.

Income Generation	Response Count	Agree	Disagree
• Increased charges for letting out council buildings (£50,000)	792	77%	23%
• Introducing charges for community bedding plants (£145,000)	768	61%	39%
• Raise charges for out of school care clubs (up to £2.50 per session)	787	58%	42%
• Traffic calming and speed reduction measures to be paid for by re-implementing car parking charges across Aberdeenshire (£250,000)	785	51%	49%
• Transferring funding from roads budget to increase investment in walking and cycling (£50,000)	787	34%	66%
• Investing in renewable energy and solar panels which could generate (£50,000)	788	82%	8%
• Revisiting the charging structure for sport and physical activity from 2017 (£650,000)	784	66%	34%
• An increase to burial charges (£350,000)	787	43%	57%

Table 2: % of respondents who agree or disagree with the proposals for income generation

When people disagreed with any of the proposals they were asked to tell us why. 440 respondents provided feedback. The analysis can be found in appendix 2 and the key themes include:

- Almost 48% (including cyclists) felt that Aberdeenshire should not reduce roads maintenance expenditure. The rural nature of Aberdeenshire means that the

majority of travel is by car or bus. Increased availability of public transport would be welcomed.

- 28% of respondents submitting additional comments were against any increase in burial charges.
- 24% were against increasing/reimplementing parking charges as it was felt the result would be a move to online shopping or loss of business to larger towns and cities. Traffic calming and speed reduction measures were not felt to be a priority.
- 24% of respondent felt that increasing out of school care clubs would lead to financial hardship for working parents.

Respondents were also asked for suggestions of services that they would be willing to pay an increased charge for.

A total of 271 respondents answered this question. Approximately 16% of respondents were unwilling to pay a higher charge for services. A large proportion of these respondents (approximately 1 in 4) also mentioned that the council should seek to save money (generally become more efficient, cut extraneous costs, etc.).

Generally speaking, the top 5 services that respondents were willing to pay a higher charge for are as follows (table 3):

General Services	% of Respondents
Leisure Facilities / Services	10.0%
Waste Disposal / Recycling / Re-generation	10.0%
Parking	6.6%
Library Services	6.6%
School-related costs (dinners, stationery, transport, education generally)	5.5%

Table 3: % of respondents willing to pay a higher charge

As a general point of observation, it was not always clear whether the respondent was personally willing to pay a higher charge for a particular service or if they simply believed people generally should be charged for the service they specified.

Increasing Efficiency: Respondents were asked questions based on increasing efficiency. The full analysis can be seen in appendix 3. The responses were as follows:

- 84.6% of 889 respondents said they would be comfortable to access a broader range of services online
- 86.9% of 811 supported the principle of spending money in advance if it will deliver savings later on
- 93.6% of 891 respondents agreed that as services change the council reviews the management and staffing support required.

373 respondents provided general comments regarding the council increasing its efficiency which included:

- Streamlining costs associated with staff – in particular those in supervisory roles (22%)

- Long term planning – using evidence and fully considering the change prior to starting it (21%)
- Improving working practises and procedures in general (11%)
- Promoting the use of technology/digital tools (12%) of respondents

Council Tax: Out of 1,243 respondents, 53.4% are supportive of local councillors raising Council Tax by up to 3%. 319 respondents explained why they disagreed and reasons include:

- Making better use of resources and improving efficiency (36.8%)
- Ensuring any rise is fair and equitable across all bands and not just bands E-H (17%)
- The additional money should come from alternative sources – go back and ask Scottish Government for a fair and equitable block grant (16%)

548 respondents provided general comments relating to Council Tax and a number of key themes emerged. The full analysis is within appendix 4 with the top three themes list below:

- 31% of respondents expressed conditional support for a rise in Council Tax which were linked to improving service delivery and spending income raised locally
- Reviewing Council Tax bands/overhauling the tax system (20%) This view was supported by those who both agreed and disagreed with a proposed increase
- Allocate resources effectively – generally making the council more efficient (35%)

Identifying Savings: 1099 people responded to the range of suggestions put forward to identify savings. Figure 1 below illustrate the number of people who agreed/disagreed with each proposal.

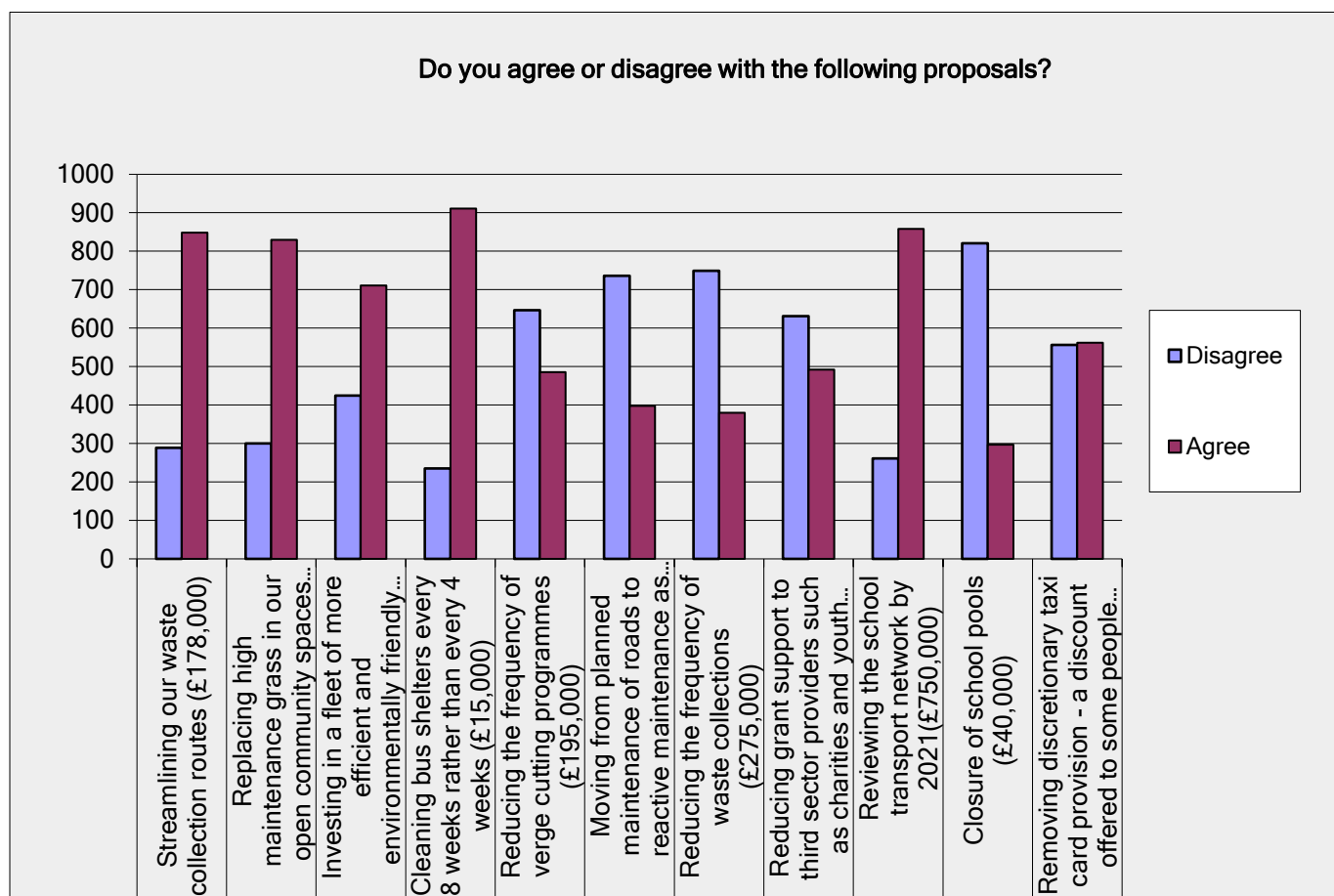


Figure 1: Agreement/Disagreement with suggestion for identifying Savings

If respondents disagreed with any of the suggested savings they were asked why. 779 comments were received with the following themes highlighted:

- 67.3% of respondents felt that spending on roads should be protected. This included not moving from proactive to reactive roads maintenance as well as not reducing the verge cutting programme
- 36.2% of respondents disagreed with the closure of school swimming pools both from a health and wellbeing point of view and from the view that the savings is not a large amount
- 36.1% of respondents do not agree that the frequency of waste collections should be reduced as they believe this would have a negative impact on their household. There are also concerns regarding risk of vermin, flytipping and overflowing bins.

437 respondents provided general comments about the suggested proposals. The key themes that emerged included:

- 41% felt the council should be more efficient in terms of reviewing its delivery of services and administrative costs associated with these. It was also suggested that additional revenue was raised through charging for non-essential services.
- 14% felt that manager and councillor positions could be reduced to generate savings
- 10.8% believes that communities should be doing more for themselves through both local volunteering and community empowerment.

Further analysis of this theme is in appendix 5.

Pressures: From the 1,258 respondents who responded to this question 77.2% felt that communities could do more to support one another.

Respondents were asked to suggest how they think communities could achieve this and 411 respondents provided suggestions of which the main ones are summarised below:

- More than 1 in 5 respondents felt that a volunteer register should be set up to co-ordinate this. Promotion should be through social media or an app that people can download
- Increased promotion and information of community groups and voluntary opportunities in their community (19%)
- Nearly a quarter of people felt the council would have to provide some support to volunteers, establish community leaders or set up groups to organise volunteers. Furthermore, 7% of respondents believe this is a role for community councils.

When asked what would prevent communities from doing this there were 291 responses. 30% of respondents felt that people are too busy or unable to volunteer due to health reasons. A further 23% felt that it would come down to the same few individuals in a community to volunteer. 17% of respondents felt that this should be delivered by local or national government – that is why they pay their council tax.

When asked for general comments, 16% of 281 respondents felt that efficiencies, savings and tax increases should be considered before cutting services and 9% felt that communities required more information about the pressures faced by the council. Further information can be found in appendix 6.

Delivering Sports and Cultural Services: There were 1,073 responses to the question *Do you agree that the council should continue exploring whether a charitable trust could deliver sports and cultural services in Aberdeenshire?* 60.54% of respondents chose 'yes' and 39.46% of respondents chose 'no'.

253 comments were received, outlining why respondents chose 'no' and 287 additional comments on a range of topics were received. The top three recurring themes, in order, raised by respondents who chose 'no' were as follows (please note that percentages relate to the number of times the theme was mentioned):

- Concerns about reduction in service quality, increased costs for users, closure of facilities (19.63%)
- Belief that these are public services and should remain the responsibility of the council to deliver (15.19%)
- Concerns about the perceived failure of other charitable trusts (14.81%)

In terms of additional comments, the top three recurring themes were as follows:

- General support that a trust should continue to be considered (22.46%)
- Support as long as it does not lead to service reduction, higher charges or changes to jobs (17.11%)
- Disagreement with a move to a charitable trust (14.97%)

Further detail on the above analysis is attached in appendix 7.