

AVON AND SOMERSET POLICE AUTHORITY

FINANCE COMMITTEE

24 JANUARY 2012

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

BUDGET CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

PURPOSE

1. To present a summary of the consultation and engagement undertaken in relation to the budget for 2012/13 and provide some initial insight into the findings.

BACKGROUND

2. Members will recall that a key part of the Authority's Communication, Consultation & Engagement Strategy and Action Plan is budget consultation. The aim this year being to build on the good work undertaken last year. The main focus of this year's budget consultation has been the decision facing Members in relation to the policing part of the council tax – namely whether to accept the government offer of a one-off grant and freeze the policing part of the council tax in 2012/13 or whether to reject the offer and increase it.
3. Two issues faced the Authority this year in relation to this budget consultation. Firstly, unlike the grant offered by the government last year, this year's was a one-off in return for freezing the policing part of the Council Tax for 2012/13. As Members are aware, this causes issues for the budget in the medium term as funds are removed from the council tax base, which would have implications for future council tax decisions or the budget itself. Secondly, as the Local Confidence Survey has now ceased (due to the budget no longer being provided by central government) the Authority needed to maximise participation through other means.
4. The first of these issues has been addressed by ensuring that extra explanation of the budgetary situation has been available. Thus in each of the consultation methods outlined below extensive efforts have been made to explain this complex issue in as simple a format as possible, without losing the important detail required to make an informed decision. The second issue was addressed by maximising participation by extending the consultation methods to include online and paper surveys, focus groups, and attending public places. The survey has also been widely promoted. This has included three e-newsletters, letters and hard copies of the survey sent to parish

councils and libraries, interviews for the local press (both radio and newspaper) and a number of updates on our primary social media channels – Twitter and Facebook. As a result the Authority has consulted with over 600 people as part of this budget consultation.

BUDGET CONSULTATION

5. The Authority has undertaken a significant programme of consultation and engagement in recent months in order to provide Members with as broad a range of opinions as possible to help inform budget setting decisions. The range of mechanisms utilised are briefly outlined below.

Online Survey

6. The online survey provided us with the opportunity to cover the greatest range of topics and questions of any of our consultation methods. Questions were asked in relation to the policing part of the council tax, whether residents have noticed any impact from budget reductions to date and also questions relating to perceived levels of crime & anti social behaviour and confidence in local policing. Feedback from these latter questions is not included in this report, but will be reported to the Citizen Focused Policing Board on the 7 February.
7. Given the complexities of the decision on the council tax, the Treasurer recorded a video to further explain the key issues. This video was made available on YouTube and uploaded to our consultation website for individuals to view before they completed the survey, if they so wished. Similarly, a Police Authority report explaining the background to the Council Tax was inserted into the online consultation using Scribd.
8. The providers of the online surveying software, Delib, have held up the Authority's use of the software and general approach to consultation (format, type of question, feedback etc) as best practice and have written an online blog to such effect.¹ Given that a number of other local authorities, police authorities and government departments also use their software this is encouraging feedback.

Face-to-Face Events

9. The Authority has visited a number of supermarkets and shopping centres over the last couple of months to speak to shoppers about the policing part of the council tax. At least one venue has been visited in each basic command unit district. The background to the decision was explained to shoppers and they were then asked to vote (in a ballot box type exercise).

¹ <http://www.citizenspace.com/blog/2012/01/03/how-to-use-citizen-space-as-part-of-wider-consultation-methods-a-case-study-of-avon-somerset-police-authority/> [9/1/12]

Focus Groups

10. Focus groups were again held this year. However the Authority did not use open recruitment, as this has tended to provide similar participants to those who participate via other methods. As such, in order to diversify participants, the Authority made it be known (via local contacts) that we were prepared to come and discuss the budget with groups already meeting if they were interested. Those who took up this offer included Bristol Disability Forum, Stand Against Violence, the Wobbly Bus Stop, the Disability Independent Advisory Group, Somerset East Independent Advisory Group and joint sessions with Victim Support consulting victims of crime.

Stakeholder Engagement

11. The Chair, Chief Executive and Treasurer are currently in the process of meeting with senior councillors and officers of each local authority across Avon and Somerset. At these meetings the budget and Medium Term Financial Plan are discussed as well as potential areas for savings and joint planning.

RESULTS

Council Tax

12. Encouragingly, via the online survey, **72% agreed or strongly agreed that current contributions to the police part of the council tax provide value for money.** 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
13. **55% of respondents to the online survey felt the Authority should accept the government grant and freeze the policing part of the council tax,** whilst 33% felt the Authority should reject the government offer and increase the council tax. Interestingly the relatively high figure of 10% selected 'do not know.' 3.7% were in favour of a 1% rise, 7% in favour of a 2% rise, 11% in favour of a 3% rise and 11% in favour of a rise of 4% or more.
14. Results from the face to face events are slightly different. Whilst **accepting the government grant and freezing the policing part of the council tax was favoured by 35%** of respondents and therefore received the highest number of votes of any one category, **a majority were in favour of some level of increase.** 21% favoured a 1% rise, 18% a 2% rise, 11% a 3% rise and 14% a rise of 4% or more.
15. The general direction of the feedback received from focus groups was that **the Authority should accept the government offer and freeze the policing part of the council tax.** The main reasons cited included being unable to afford to pay more and a feeling that any money on offer from the

government should be taken. Individuals who made this latter comment felt that the government should be lobbied in the coming year to continue with this funding and/or the next year should be spent considering how the money could be best recouped. A number of focus group respondents were keen to know what policing services would be safeguarded if they paid more and conversely what policing services would be reduced if they did not pay more. Similarly this question was asked by a number of individuals who participated at shopping centres and supermarkets.

Budget Reductions

16. As with the summer survey, respondents were again asked whether they had noticed any impact from budget reductions to date. **Encouragingly 63% stated that they had not.** Of the 35% who stated that they had noticed an impact a range of issues were sighted and from a range of service providers. The most commonly identified issues provided by respondents included reduced police service delivery (22%), other public sector (8%) and increased crime and anti-social behaviour (2%).

DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

17. All sections of society across Avon and Somerset have been encouraged to participate in the focus groups and to complete the online survey. Additional efforts have been made this year to target groups who have previously been underrepresented in Authority consultations, such as providing more hard copy surveys to parish councils and libraries and seeking to attend focus group sessions with groups already meeting, but that we do not usually hear from. Demographic information is recorded as part of the online survey and will be used in future consultations to improve the diversity of respondents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

18. That Members discuss the report and consider the feedback in setting the budget and precept for 2011/12.

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Appendix A – Budget Survey Results January 2012
Appendix B – Budget Survey District Results January 2012
Appendix C – Face to Face Events Results January 2012