



Budget Planning 2015-16

Report of Public Engagement Forum

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We thank the 26 members of the public that took part in the forum and shared their views readily. We are pleased that they generally enjoyed the process and trust that this report accurately reflects their views and priorities.

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Introduction

The Commission

1. Like other councils, in the context of the national requirement to reduce public expenditure and reduced central government funding of local government, Dacorum Borough Council (DBC) faces a continuing need to make major financial savings while also trying to increase revenue. Believing that difficult decisions should be informed by public opinion, the council commissioned Opinion Research Services (henceforth ORS) to design and implement a deliberative forum with a wide cross-section of residents to inform, at an early stage, its budget setting process for 2015-16. ORS worked in collaboration with DBC to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Deliberative Research: Public Forums

2. The consultation used a deliberative Forum because such meetings allow for:
 - Clear presentation of the issues and evidence
 - Questions and clarification of ambiguous or difficult points
 - Deliberation in which participants think through their responses while having an opportunity to listen to the evidence and the views of others
 - Interactive reporting of people's opinions during the meeting – so participants can feel confident that their ideas have been properly recorded
 - Comparison of people's views at the start and end of the meeting.
3. The forum was designed to be qualitative and deliberative in order to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about their priorities in the context of current reductions in public expenditure. They were asked to think about their personal and community priorities alongside the council's priorities for Dacorum – in order to inform elected members' thinking about difficult financial decisions.
4. The forum was not to determine the council's budget. In this context, 'accountability' means that public authorities should give an account of issues and/or their plans and take into account the public's views – but such consultations are not referenda to make decisions about public policy. In the context of representative democracy, they should inform but not dictate the judgements of service professionals and elected members. This premise was understood and readily accepted by all the participants.

Inclusiveness and Representativeness

5. In total, there were 26 diverse participants at the session (which was held from 10:00am until 1:00pm on Saturday 17 January 2015 at the DBC offices in Hemel Hempstead).
6. The attendance target for the forum was between 20-25 people, so the recruitment programme was successful. Participants were randomly recruited by researchers at ORS's Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. As standard good practice, participants were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.
7. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venue was readily accessible. The telephone recruitment process was also monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/long-term limiting illness (LLTI). Overall, as shown below, participants were a broad cross-section of residents from across the district:

Gender	Male: 14 Female: 12
Age	18-34: 7 35-54: 8 55+: 11
Social Grade	AB: 7 C1: 8 C2: 6 DE: 5
Ethnicity	BME: 3
LLTI	5
Geographical Area	Hemel Hempstead area: 12 Tring/Aldbury area: 5 Berkhamsted area: 4 Chipperfield/Bovingdon area: 5

8. Forums are typically 'over-recruited' to take account of unpredictable withdrawals at the last minute. On this occasion, the number of late withdrawals was almost nil – which reflects the degree of interest in the meeting.

Discussion Framework

9. ORS worked in collaboration with DBC to design an effective and relevant discussion guide for the Forum. Without prompting participants, the presentation covered a range of inter-connected issues, including:
 - National and local finances and their impact on DBC
 - Structure of local government in Hertfordshire
 - Council tax breakdown
 - Range and cost of DBC services
 - DBC budget and expenditure profile
 - DBC's approach to achieve a balanced budget.
10. The discussion agenda covered the following main issues:
 - Budget reduction strategies – 'salami slicing' or strategic reductions
 - Areas for possible service reductions
 - Principle of encouraging further public sector partnerships
 - Principle of outsourcing work to the private sector
 - Council tax – in principle, should DBC increase council tax by, say, 1.8%, which would involve rejecting the "1% freeze grant"?
 - Any other suggested options.
11. During the main discussions, the forum learned that DBC's proposed financial strategy has three main elements, namely:
 - Not to cut front-line services to the public
 - To make substantial efficiency savings
 - To increase the council tax precept by 1.8% in April 2015.
12. The forum was asked to consider how reasonable this approach was and the participants entered enthusiastically into spirit of the meeting and clearly enjoyed it.

Qualitative Research

13. In-depth qualitative research and engagement can be rigorous, inclusive and representative in the sense of involving diverse groups of people; but it should not be understood as achieving a 'statistical sample of the population'. To say this is not to undermine or devalue the process, but only to understand its nature as qualitative research – which seeks to learn a lot from relatively small numbers of diverse people, rather than learning little from simple standardised

questionnaires administered to large random samples of people. Qualitative research is about facilitating ‘conversations’ about issues rather than gathering large numbers of standardised responses from large statistical samples of the population.

14. So, like other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, but the recruitment process gave a diverse range of 26 residents the opportunity to comment in detail on DBC’s financial planning. We are thus satisfied that the outcomes of the consultation (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions – and we were able to learn a considerable amount about the issues at the heart of this study. Due to the deliberative nature of the meeting, it was also possible to compare people’s initial/uninformed judgements with their final/informed judgements at the end of the forum.

The Report

15. This report concisely reviews the opinions of the participants before and after considering and discussing important information. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Consultation Findings with Commentary

Introduction

16. This section summarises the overall findings from the forum while also revealing the reasoning of participants. Not all the individuals gave equal emphasis to each aspect of the discussion, but, taken overall, they considered a wide range of issues that are reported fully below.

Initial Awareness

17. Before receiving any information or presentations, the participants were asked some initial factual and then policy questions – in order to indicate briefly their awareness and knowledge of local government structures and finances. Later, after the council's financial position and strategies had been explained, the forum considered the main policy issues again.
18. All the 26 participants were well aware that DBC collects their council tax, but they were very unaware of how the total charge is derived. Nearly half thought that DBC sets the whole, total charge; and a quarter thought the government does so.
19. Even more surprisingly, only four people in the 26 knew that Hertfordshire County Council receives most of the total council tax that households pay. Ten of the 26 had assumed that DBC receives and spends most of the council tax they pay.
20. When asked to 'guesstimate' what proportion of their council tax, DBC actually receives, many felt unable to make any estimate at all – and only 4 of the 26 estimated 10% (the actual proportion is 12%). Another ten thought that Dacorum receives 50% or more of the total council tax they pay.
21. When asked to guesstimate how much council tax Dacorum charges Band D households per day, well over half of the forum (15 people) estimated that cost to be £1.28 or more per day – whereas the actual sum is 48 pence.
22. Not surprisingly, in this context, people were very vague about just how much money Dacorum gets per year from Band D households' council tax. Half could not hazard a guess, but seven thought it was 'up to £500 per year', and six thought it was 'more than £500 a year'. The actual figure that DBC receives is, of course, much lower at £177 per annum for Band D.

23. The audience was otherwise relatively well informed and followed closely the detailed presentations with interest and commitment – so they were not in any way less interested or less informed than average members of the public. It seems there is considerable general vagueness about how local government finances and structures work.
24. The forum members were pleased to learn that DBC services cost Band D households only 48 pence per day (£3.30 per week) and that the current DBC council tax precept is £177 for 2013-14 for Band D households.

Initial and Considered Opinions

25. At the start of the meeting the forum members were also asked to state their “initial opinions” on important policy issues – which were then compared at the end of the meeting with their “considered opinions” after hearing the presentations, asking all the questions they wanted, and discussing the issues in five small groups of five ‘round table’ discussion groups. The information provided and the subsequent detailed discussions evidently had a major influence on people’s opinions for their considered or more informed views were in many cases significantly different from their initial views. Therefore, most of the comparisons below show a marked difference at the two stages of the meeting.
26. Of course, it is the forum’s considered views that are important to the council now, as the outcome of a deliberative forum; but their initial opinions are helpful, too, as a guide to general public sentiments.

Proposed Council Tax Increase

27. In contrast to their initial views, the forum ended with almost unanimous agreement that it would be reasonable and acceptable to them for DBC to increase its council tax precept by 1.8% in April 2015. Before giving their considered views the forum members were made fully aware that such an increase would involve rejecting the government’s 1% ‘freeze grant’.

Should DBC’s council tax precept be increased by 1.8% in April 2015?

	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	8	25
NO	9	0
DK	9	1

28. Some typical comments during the discussion of council that there were:

The property basis of the council tax is not fair since there should be a higher tax band (above H) for very expensive properties

It’s important that by a freeze on council tax we don’t fall further and further behind inflation, assuming it continues at a typical rate

I didn't realise how little Dacorum gets of the money we pay.

Tax increases are not wholly unacceptable.

In some areas of the borough the council needs to spend more money on basic cleaning and to do it better.

Options to Reduce Costs

29. The forum also considered some options for the council to save money. By the end of the meeting there was complete consensus that it should adopt a 'salami slicing' approach to services.

Should DBC reduce all services a bit in order to save money?

	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	0	0
NO	13	26
DK	13	0

Should DBC make selective strategic reductions in some services in order to save money?

I	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	22	7
NO	1	18
DK	3	0

30. The considered and initial opinions are very different in respect of selective strategic reductions: by the end of the meeting people's considered views were that the council should not do this (by a majority ratio of about 2.5 to 1).
31. Some typical comments made during the discussion of these issues were:

There's a big need to protect spending on street cleaning, basic repairs and street lighting generally – within context of the safe and clean environment strategy

Efficiency can need investment – like LED bulbs for street lighting – that would save money and let you keep street lights on.

There should be more community responsibility for tasks

We should outsource and share services more systematically

We should encourage companies to contribute to their communities.

We need LED smart street lighting and public involvement in cost savings – like litter picking and care of environment

We need better procurement

We should make better use of CCTV to fine people for litter and other anti-social behaviour – and take action against big stores and fast food outlets – with corporate enforcement and more local responsibility

We should make better use of community service sentences for really useful community work.

Options to Increase Revenue

32. The forum also considered whether the council should increase its charges (for example, for car parking and garage and commercial rents). Once more, people's considered views contrast markedly with their initial opinions: by the end of the meeting there was unanimity that the council should not increase such charges because of the negative effects such policies could have on the local economy.

Should DBC increase its charges significantly in order to raise more money?

	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	6	0
NO	10	26
DK	10	0

33. One representative comment was:

Charges could be increased a little – there is some scope; but it must be very moderate in order not to penalise enterprise and competitiveness (like parking charges which can discourage visitors to the towns).

Sharing and Outsourcing Services

34. Overall, there was less of a contrast between initial and final opinions in relation to considering the sharing of services, as the following table shows. Nonetheless, the presentations and participants' emphasis on efficiency led more of them to support the selective outsourcing of services where money can reliably be saved by doing.

Should DBC share more services with other local authorities?

	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	23	25
NO	0	0
DK	3	1

35. Nonetheless, the presentations and participants' emphasis on efficiency led more of them to support the Council considering the selective outsourcing of services to the private sector where money can reliably be saved by doing – as table on the next page shows.

Should DBC consider outsourcing more services to the private sector?

	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	10	19
NO	11	6
DK	5	1

36. In this context, some typical comments were:

If it saves money there's no argument about it.

But it does cost people's job

Once services are outsourced, you lose the expertise and it's no longer possible to reverse it: you lose the ability to deliver that in-house at all.

Overall Priorities

37. The forum was also asked to weigh the importance of the key options by scoring each of them out of 100. The resulting 'sums' are not 'measurements' in any proper sense, but simply an indication of the relative importance the forum attached to each one. There were five discussion groups who awarded relative scores to each of four options (with their scores totalling to 100 in each case). The outcomes for each round table discussion group are show in the table below.

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
COUNCIL TAX + 1.8%	80	70	65	88	30
SERVICE REDUCTIONS	0	0	0	0	0
INCREASE CHARGES	5	10	25	12	10
SOMETHING ELSE	15	20	10	0	60

38. The highest priority was given to a council tax increase, with a total of 333. Making service reductions was the least popular option, with no points at all. Increasing charges came third, with 62 and 'something else' came second with 105 points.
39. The most popular 'something else' was 'efficiency. The forum emphasised that they wished the council to pursue efficiency at all levels and in all its activities – for example:

We want back office savings. That's efficiency.

You should target efficiency everywhere. Efficiency should be more actively pursued

We should outsource and share services more systematically

We need better procurement.

DBC's Financial Strategy

40. The least degree of contrast between people's initial and final judgements was found, interestingly, in their views of Dacorum Borough Council's overall financial strategy. At the beginning of the meeting 17 were satisfied with DBC's strategy and by the end of the meeting, after the strategy had been explained in detail, the number of positive views had grown to 25, with only one 'don't know'. The results were as shown below.

Are you broadly satisfied with DBC's current financial strategy?

	INITIAL VIEWS	CONSIDERED VIEWS
YES	17	25
NO	0	0
DK	9	1

Conclusions

41. The forum worked well: people were attentive and interested, and they engaged in thoughtful discussions of the issues. There was general understanding for the need to achieve a balanced budget by a range of different approaches – particularly the pursuit of greater efficiency combined with a council tax increase.
42. At the end the meeting was almost unanimous for an increase of 1.8% (declining the government grant equivalent to a 1% increase).
43. There were big majorities against service cuts; for pursuing efficiency and savings by sharing services with other authorities and/or outsourcing more services to the private sector; and against increased charges.