Analysis of Budget Consultation Exercises: December 2017

Introduction

The Council carried out two budget consultation exercises in November and December 2017.

Firstly, eight focus groups were held in Musselburgh (1st Nov), Haddington (7th Nov), and Tranent (9th Nov). These groups involved a total of 52 people - 19 in Musselburgh, 22 in Haddington and 11 in Tranent.

Most of the participants in the Musselburgh session were from Musselburgh. The Haddington session included people from North Berwick Coastal and Dunbar wards as well as Haddington. Most of the participants in the Tranent session came from the Tranent ward.

The participants were drawn mainly from the Citizen's Panel and respondents to the 2017 Residents Survey, but also included some people recruited through social media adverts.

The second exercise involved an on-line survey that ran from 24th November until 20th December. The survey, which was advertised via the Winter issue of Living, articles in the Courier and Courier Facebook, via social media and to Council staff via Inform and email alerts, received 920 responses – 524 residents (57%); 330 council staff (36%); and 66 no answer. It should be noted that some of the Council staff will also be East Lothian residents.

Council staff also had the opportunity to attend one of the three Budget Consultation drop in sessions held during lunchtimes on 7th, 8th and 13th December.

The on-line survey respondents were not wholly representative of the general population as two thirds were female and only 30% were male; and they were more 'middle aged' – 60% were aged 35 – 54 and only 13.5% were aged 16 – 34 and 24% were over 55.

This report provides an analysis of the three on-line survey questions: ranking top five priorities from a list of 12 Council services; scoring of 15 'hard choice' budget options on a scale of 1 (least acceptable) to 6 (most acceptable); acceptability or unacceptability of Council Tax rises of 5% and 10%. It concludes with a summary of the focus group discussions which provides a more in depth analysis of public views on the budget challenges facing the Council.

Service Priorities

As is shown in Appendix 1, 'School & Early Years' was clearly the highest ranked service, receiving a composite (average) ranking of 3.4.

The next priorities were 'Services to protect children from harm and to support families' (2.2) and 'Support for vulnerable adults, including frail / elderly people to allow them to remain in their own home' (1.8). 'Maintenance of roads, pavement and lighting' (1.5) and 'Waste and recycling services' (1.2) were the next two most highly ranked services.

Many respondents used the comments box after this question to state that they felt all the services listed are priorities and that they found it very hard to choose or rank only their top fiver priorities. The following are typical of the comments made by respondents: "All are equally important"; "All of the above are essential to a healthy, diverse, functioning society"; 'I think they are all high priority'; and, 'Impossible to prioritise.'

Scoring the 'hard choices' budget options

Appendix 2 provides a breakdown of how the 15 'hard choices' budget options were scored by the on-line survey respondents shown as the percentage of respondents for each score and an average score for each option. The average score has been calculated by adding up the value of each score and dividing the total by the number of respondents who scored the option.

The percentage of respondents scoring options as a 6 or 1 shows the strength of feeling about each option; whilst the average score provides a fuller assessment of all views and an easy comparison between each of the options.

The **most acceptable** budget options across four measures, as shown in Table 1, were:

- Rationalise and review Council assets / office provision
- Introduce charging for uplifts for bulky items
- Transfer the management of village halls to the community
- Review car parking charges
- Limit the provision of free home to school transport
- Review taxi card scheme.

Table 1: Most acceptable budget options

Budget Options	% Scoring 6	% scoring 4, 5 & 6	Mean score – On-line Survey	Mean score – Focus Groups
Rationalise and review Council assets / office provision	41.7	67.9	4.9	4.9
Introduce charging for uplifts for bulky items	33.3	57.1	4.4	4.5
Transfer the management of village halls to the community	32.8	60.4	4.6	4.6
Review car parking charges	27.7	47.8	4.1	4.4
Limit the provision of free home to school transport	25.1	47.8	3.8	3.8
Review taxi card scheme	20.1	48.5	4.2	n/a

The **least acceptable** budget options across four measures, as shown in Table 2, were:

- Close a school with less than 50% capacity
- Review charges for adult social care
- Review school crossing services
- Review provision of outdoor learning
- Introduce charging for instrumental music tuition.

These results show a high level of consistency between the percentage of respondents giving options a score of 6 or 1 and the average score. Also, the focus group scoring exercise was very consistent with the scoring from the on-line survey, suggesting that although the focus groups involved only 52 people they were fairly representative of the general population who responded to the on-line survey.

Table 2: Least acceptable budget options

Budget Options	% Scoring 1	% scoring 1, 2 & 3	Mean score – On-line Survey	Mean score – Focus Groups
Close a school with less than 50% capacity	31.7	57.1	2.9	3.5
Review charges for adult social care	27.6	62.5	2.6	2.6
Review school crossing services	22.7	56.0	2.8	2.5
Review provision of outdoor learning	21.0	40.5	2.8	3.6
Introduce charging for instrumental music tuition	17.9	45.9	3.4	4.0

The only significant deviation was in relation to three education related options which were amongst the least acceptable options in the on-line survey – reviewing provision of outdoor learning, closing a school with less than 50% capacity, and introducing charges for instrument music tuition. These options were more acceptable to people who participated in the focus groups.

As is highlighted above, the on-line survey respondents included a higher proportion of people in the 35 – 54 age range, who are more likely to be parents with children at school and this will have contributed to the education related budget savings options scoring so lowly in the on-line survey.

In addition, further analysis shows that there was a relatively high response from people in the catchment areas of small rural schools, in particular Stenton and the surrounding area, which was the focus of a campaign against possible closure of the school. Respondents from these areas were almost unanimously against the possible closure of a school with less than 50% capacity.

Analysis by respondents' postcode shows relatively little variation across the county on the potentially contentious issue of the possible introduction of car park charges. The on-line survey provided an overall average score on the option of reviewing of car park charges of 4.1. Analysis of the postcode of respondents shows that there was very little variation across the county with the average scores of respondents from Musselburgh and North Berwick being 4.3 and Haddington only slightly lower at 4.2.

There were over 600 comments made by respondents to the on-line survey – ranging from one-line comments on single subjects to lengthy comments covering multiple issues. Consequently, it has not been possible to carry out a quantitative analysis of the comments and a qualitative analysis would be extremely lengthy and complex. A full record of all comments will be lodged in the Members' Library.

Many respondents used the comments box to provide an explanation of their budget option scoring – why they supported or opposed specific savings options. For many options there were as many comments in favour as there were against and many contradictory views were expressed. For example, two opposing views on the possible closure of a small school:

- "Closing rural schools which operate at less than 50% capacity seems a sensible cost saving measure … Indeed I believe that it may in fact be beneficial to their education and development to ensure that the children are educated with an appropriate sized peer group."

- "Saving money by threatening rural schools is disgraceful. Why should families living in the countryside be deprived of a local school? .. I would be devastated if our local school was closed. .. This village school demonstrates education at its finest."

The option of reviewing car parking charges also provided some contradictory views in favour and against. For example:

- "If the projected income for parking charges is really as much as £5m, it would be absurd not to introduce this, regardless of the likely public protest. … This measure will not only generate income, but will also reduce the strain on numerous other council cost centres.. and will increase the commercial viability of public transport within East Lothian."

- "More taxation of drivers through parking charges is unacceptable. High Street traders will suffer as people will definitely move to the retails parks. I certainly will."

Some respondents made suggestions for budget savings or income generation that were not included in the consultation paper's options. As would have been expected, some of these related to reducing bureaucracy, management costs and the pay of senior officers. Other suggestions, such as providing more on-line services, generating income from advertising and reviewing transport services are already being considered and taken forward as part of the Council's Transformation Programme

Council Tax increases

The on-line survey asked respondents whether they would be prepared to support Council tax increases of 5% or 10%. As is shown in the table below, 60% of respondents stated they would be prepared to support a 5% increase in Council Tax, but only 20% would support a 10% increase. However, the analysis of responses from residents and council staff shows that just under 55% of residents would support a 5% increase in Council Tax compared to 68% of Council staff.

Table 3: On-line survey respondents views on possible Council Tax increases

	Prepared to support up to 5% increase			Prepared to support up to 10% increase		
	All	Residents	Staff	All	Residents	Staff
Agree	59.8%	54.4%	67.9%	20.2%	19.1%	22.1%
Disagree	38.5%	44.1%	30.9%	77%	77.8%	76.4%
No answer	1.7%	1.5%	1.2%	2.8%	3%	1.5%

Summary of Focus Group Discussions

The focus groups allowed a conversation to take place around the budget challenges and the 'hard choice' budget options faced by the Council.

The main findings from the focus group discussions were:

- Most participants were surprised at the scale of the financial challenges and constraints faced by the Council.

- Participants were strongly of the view that the Scottish Government should fully fund its commitments that are delivered through councils.

- Many participants suggested that developers should contribute more to the cost of additional services required because of the growth in population.

- There was a fairly strong feeling that the Council generally provides high quality services and does its best with the money available.

- Participants were generally assured that the Council is doing what it can to be more efficient and keep costs and staff numbers down.

- Participants liked the idea of the Council working with communities and the voluntary sector; enabling / empowering communities to do more for themselves and using volunteers – not to replace staff, but to add value.

- It was generally agreed that it is acceptable to target areas with more need based on good evidence to allow targeting of resources.

- There was an acceptance that early intervention and prevention will lead to reduced costs but will need to be resourced.

There was general acceptance amongst focus group participants that because of the financial challenges it faces the Council will need to:

- Do more with less
- Do things differently
- Provide more services on-line (but provide support for people who cannot access on-line service)
- Be more entrepreneurial/ commercial
- Work in partnership with community and voluntary groups
- Make the hard choices and be on the front foot making changes rather than run the risk of reaching a budget crisis situation.

The discussion around the 'hard choice' budget options showed some fairly nuanced views about some of the options. Where there was a strong view against stopping a service there was acceptance that the service could be reviewed to identify savings from better targeting of the service.

For example, stopping provision of the school crossing patrol service received the lowest level of support from the focus group participants. However, there was a significant amount of support for reviewing the crossing patrol service and possibly withdrawing the service in places where there are alternative road safety measures in place such as traffic lights.

Closing public toilets, an option included in the focus groups but not as one of the 15 on-line survey options, received the second lowest average score amongst focus group participants. However, participants were willing to consider or support alternatives to closure such as charging, community involvement in keeping toilets open or closing toilets where alternative facilities can be made available for public use.

Similar views were expressed in relation to the garden waste collection service. Most focus group participants were not supportive of stopping this service but there was support for either charging for the service, reducing it to a monthly service or providing it through a social enterprise or voluntary organisation.

Limiting home to school transport to the statutory provision for secondary school pupils – those living 3 miles or more from school – received a fairly high average score of 3.8 from the focus group participants as well as on-line survey respondents. Many focus group participants suggested that given the choices that are having to be considered the Council should only fulfil its legal requirements rather than going beyond it, although consideration should be given to different approaches to take account of local factors such as access to public transport or cycleways in each area.

As is noted above, a higher proportion of focus group participants than on-line survey respondents found introducing charges for instrument tuition acceptable. Many focus group participants accepted that instrument tuition is not a core educational requirement and that charging should be considered, although with the caveat that it should be means tested.

The focus groups showed that charging for services was generally more acceptable than stopping services.

Reviewing and possibly introducing charges for on-street and off-street car parking received similar levels of support from the focus groups (4.4) and the on-line survey (4.1). Many focus group participants mentioned the potential benefits of car park charging in relation to traffic management and the positive impact on local shops if there is better flow of traffic and people can find parking spaces. It was also pointed out that residents with parking permits already are not able to park on streets with restricted day-time parking so they would not be any worse off if day-time charges are introduced.

There was a fairly high level of support for charging for bulky uplifts – 4.5 amongst focus group participants and 4.4 in the on-line survey. In the focus groups It was generally accepted that since there can be a long wait for the bulky uplift service people would be prepared to pay, although any charge should be means tested). There was some interest in exploring the option of a charity or social enterprise taking on the service as many of the items put out for bulky uplifts could be recycled.

The focus groups and on-line survey provided some additional suggestions for savings and income generation, many of which are already being considered by the Council as part of the Transformation Programme or budget preparation process.

Appendix 1: Composite (average) ranking of 'Your Priorities'

	Composite Rank
Schools & Early Years	**3.40**
Services to protect children from harm and to support families	**2.22**
Support for vulnerable adults, including frail / elderly people to allow them to remain in their own home	**1.80**
Maintenance of roads, pavement and lighting	**1.52**
Waste and recycling services	**1.12**
Homelessness Services	**0.87**
Community centres / village halls	**0.64**
Maintenance of parks, gardens and open spaces	**0.64**
Swimming pools / leisure centres	**0.64**
Libraries	**0.60**
Support for business and economic growth	**0.50**
Subsidised public transport	**0.37**
Museums / Arts / cultural activities / heritage activities and events	**0.23**

Appendix 2: On-Line Survey: 'Hard Choices' Scoring

	1 = most unacceptable	2	3	4	5	6 = most acceptable	No answer	Mean
Close a rural school with less than 50% capacity	31.7% (292)	11.5% (106)	13.9% (128)	9% (83)	6.5% (60)	15.7% (144)	11.6% (107)	2.9
Review charges for Adult Social Care services	27.6% (254)	18.2% (167)	16.7% (154)	8.4% (77)	4.2% (39)	7.3% (67)	17.6 % (162)	2.6
Review of School Crossing Services	22.7% (209)	17% (156)	16.3% (150)	8.9% (82)	7.3% (67)	7.8% (72)	20% (184)	2.8
Review provision of Outdoor Learning	21% (193)	17% (156)	18.5% (170)	8.5% (78)	7.2% (66)	6% (55)	22% (202)	2.8
Introduce charging for Instrumental Music Tuition	17.9% (165)	14.1% (130)	13.9% (128)	10.5% (97)	10.8% (99)	16.9% (155)	15.9% (146)	3.4
Limit provision of free home to school transport	14.6% (134)	11.3% (104)	14.4% (132)	9.5% (87)	9.9% (91)	25.1% (231)	15.3% (141)	3.8
Remove Concessionary Rail Travel Card	11.1% (102)	10.5% (97)	17% (156)	11.6% (107)	9.7% (89)	19.2% (177)	20.9% (192)	3.7
Review the delivery of the Garden Waste collection service	9.8% (90)	11.9% (109)	18.6% (171)	15.9% (146)	11.9% (109)	12.9% (119)	19.1% (176)	3.6
Review of car parking charges	8.7% (80)	7.8% (72)	13.6% (125)	9.6% (88)	10.5% (97)	27.7% (255)	22.1% (203)	4.1
Introduce charging for uplifts for disposal of bulky items	8.4% (77)	6.2% (57)	9.2% (85)	9.8% (90)	14% (129)	33.3% (306)	19.1% (176)	4.4

Reduce Partnership Funding to organisations	7.9% (73)	10.4% (96)	21% (193)	15.5% (143)	10.1% (93)	11.4% (105)	23.6% (217)	3.6
Reduce financial support for public events	4.2% (39)	9.1% (84)	21.5% (198)	15.3% (141)	13.6% (125)	14.4% (132)	21.9 % (201)	3.9
Transfer the management of village halls to the community	3.6% (33)	5.2% (48)	13.3% (122)	10.9% (100)	16.7% (154)	32.8% (302)	17.5% (161)	4.6
Review Taxi Card Scheme	2.5% (23)	6.7% (64)	17.3% (159)	15.2% (140)	13.2% (121)	20.1% (185)	24.8% (228)	4.2
Rationalise & review Council assets / office provision	1.6% (15)	2.6% (24)	10.2% (94)	12% (110)	14.2% (131)	41.7% (384)	17.6% (162)	4.9

Appendix 3: Focus Groups 'Hard Choices' Budget Options Scoring Exercise Result

Lowest and highest group scores and average score across all groups (from 1 unacceptable to 6 acceptable)

	Lowest Group Average score	Highest Group Average score	Overall Average Score
1. Stop providing school crossing patrol service	2.0	3.1	2.5
2. Close selected public toilets (50% of total toilets)	2.3	4.0	2.7
3. Stop providing Garden Waste collection service	2.3	4.8	2.8
4. Close a small library	1.8	4.8	3.0
5. Introduce new charges for non-residential care	2.3	3.7	3.1
6. Stop Economic Development Service's support for events in East Lothian	2.3	4.0	3.3
7. Review Adult Resource Centre provision to reduce current budget by 10%	2.2	4.6	3.4
8. Reduce Countryside Rangers service	2.6	4.7	3.4
9. Close a rural primary school with less than 50% capacity	2.5	4.8	3.5
10. Stop directly providing a Museum Service	3.0	5.3	3.5
11. Stop providing Outdoor Learning Service / move to Education	2.8	4.3	3.6
12. Home to school transport – move to statutory provision only for secondary school pupils (those living 3 miles or more from school)	2.8	4.8	3.8
13. Reduce subsidy / grant to Enjoy Leisure (by 10%)	2.8	4.4	3.9

14. Charge for instrument tuition	2.0	4.4	4.0
15. No teacher allocation to nursery classes – use nursery nurses	3.1	5.2	4
16. Charge for on-street and off-street car parking (possibly £1 an hour)	3.2	5.1	4.4
17. Charge for bulky uplifts	3.5	5.7	4.5
18. Dispose of Council managed village halls or transfer them over to be run by the community	3.6	5.3	4.6
19. Discontinue CCTV Service (hand over to Police Scotland)	3.8	5.5	4.6
20. Review Council buildings that deliver customer services and rationalise where appropriate	4.2	5.2	4.9