

Northampton Borough Council

Budget, Capital Programme and Corporate Plan Proposals for Northampton 2009-2010

Consultation Results

12 February 2009

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Cabinet approved the draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011 and the draft Revenue Budget 2009-2009 as the basis for consultation on 22nd December 2008.
- 1.2 The aim of this consultation was to gain an insight into local people's views based on a number of proposals and budget options put forward by the Council's Cabinet. The consultation was further used to check if the priorities agreed during the previous year were still right for Northampton and to find out which priorities the Council should concentrate on and develop. People were also asked to prioritise the Council's proposals to invest in assets and infrastructure.
- 1.3 This consultation followed the principles set out in the Council's Consultation Toolkit adopted in 2008.
- 1.4 The results of the consultation are contained in this report. They will be used to by the Council's Cabinet as part of the process of setting a balanced budget (including a capital programme) and priorities for the next financial year (April 2009 to March 2010).

2 METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 Stakeholders were encouraged to provide feedback on the plans and options of the draft budget and priorities during the consultation period and they were provided help to ensure involvement and understanding of the proposals.
- 2.2 People were consulted by the following methods:
 - On-line survey
 - Questionnaires left in public locations across Northampton (including leisure centres and council receptions)
 - Staff briefing from the Chief Executive
 - A newsletter to all members of our residents panel with an invitation to participate
 - Focus groups selected from our Residents Panel
 - Engagement with the business community via the Chamber of Commerce and their network
 - Engagement with members of the sounding board representing the views of tenants
 - Engagement with the voluntary and community sector via their various networks as well as Neighbourhood Partnerships, representatives from the Community Forums and the Youth Forum
 - Engagement with our key stakeholder and partners

2.3 Questionnaires were distributed in the following public locations

- One Stop Shop
- Cliftonville Reception
- Kingsthorpe Housing Office
- Weston Favell Housing Office
- Westbridge Reception
- Lings Forum
- Danes Camp
- Mounts Baths
- Central Museum and Art Gallery
- Abington Museum

2.4 The consultation proposals and questionnaire were available to download and complete on-line via the Council's website. An e-mail address, freepost address and consultation phone line were set up to receive comments/views etc.

2.5 Two focus groups were held on 20th and 21st January 2009. Twenty-four participants were recruited from our residents' panel so as to reflect a range of diverse views and invited to participate. Reports from the events can be obtained upon request.

2.6 Approximately 2,200 questionnaires were sent to individuals, partners, organisations and distributed to public places.

2.7 The consultation was advertised through the media including mail shots and press releases.

3 RESPONSE

3.1 496 people viewed our budget online web page
222 completed questionnaires
17 local people attended focus groups
A number of comments made via letter, phone call and e mail

3.2 Please note that additional activity related to the budget and the Council's priorities was undertaken independently of this consultation during the period of consultation including local press, on-line press sessions, public and residents meetings, forums, etc and that the views expressed during such events are not included in this report.

4 FINDINGS : RESULTS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES

4.1 222 completed questionnaires were received

4.2 Findings are reported so that they mirror the headings used in the consultation, as follows:

- **Current Priorities (Corporate Plan)**
- **Revenue Budget**
- **Capital Programme**

4.3 Current Priorities (Corporate Plan)

4.3.1 Last year, people told us what they thought the Council should concentrate on. We used this to develop our five priorities. These form the core of our Corporate Plan.

4.3.2 This year we asked people if they thought that the priorities the Council needed to concentrate on were still right for Northampton.

4.3.3 This is how people responded:

- **Safer, greener and cleaner communities** - for example, dealing with crime, caring for the environment, keeping the town clean - **99%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Housing, health and well-being** - for example, improving housing quality, providing leisure opportunities, contributing to better health - **92%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **A confident, ambitious and successful Northampton** - for example, improving the town centre, promoting cultural activities, planning sustainable growth - **76%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Partnerships and community engagement** - for example, understanding and talking to our citizens, working with voluntary organisations, contributing to better education - **77%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **A well managed organisation that puts the customer at the heart of what we do** - for example, improving financial management, providing value for money, ensuring fairness in our services- **88%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.

4.4 Conclusion

4.4.1 The responses received provide an almost overwhelming support for the selected priorities to be maintained. It should be noted that a number comments were made stating that the priorities were so generic that it was almost impossible not to agree with them.

5. **KEY BUDGET PRIORITIES FOR THIS YEAR**

5.1 In response to the economic recession, Cabinet proposed that the Council needed to focus on a number of additional priorities. People were asked to indicate if they agreed or did not agree with them

- **Continuing to improve the performance, quality of services and value for money provided by the Council** - 90% of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Maintain the vitality of the town** – 89% by investing in the town centre, promoting the town and encouraging others to invest in Northampton
- **Support the vulnerable and those suffering from the effects of the recession** – the local council is one of the first places people in trouble turn to for support - 83% of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Secure the long-term regeneration and growth of the town – while focusing on the short term we must not lose sight of the long-term future of Northampton** - 84% of those expressing a view want to keep this.

5.2 Conclusion

5.2.1 Once again, the additional priorities proposed received a majority support.

6. **FURTHER ACTIVITIES AND IMPROVEMENTS THAT PEOPLE WOULD LIKE TO SEE (INCLUDING COMMENTS)**

6.1 As people made more than 600 comments, these have been bundled together to capture an indication of the views and opinions received. A full list can be obtained upon request.

6.2 Here is a summary of the activities or improvements that they would like to see in relation to the priorities above.

6.3 About the organisation and its management

- Some people felt that there were too many managers
- Stop using consultants -Trust your own people and listen more to those on the front line.
- Do not reward poor performance or pay handshakes when not deserved
- Reduce councillor expenses
- Improve financial management -Stop wasting money on non-essentials and get rid of unnecessary posts
- Stop consulting - Make hard decisions - get on with the job!

- Better communication-even if it is bad news
- Lead the Local Strategic Partnership

6.4 Hot topics

- Parking- maximise resources-provide free/cheaper parking to encourage shoppers-review employee parking- develop and use park and ride
- Sixfields- this generated a lot of debate
- Market Square- this was a very popular and contentious issue. People suggested lowering rents in difficult times to help traders, consider handing market over to trader.
- Racecourse
- Town-improve signage, transport, visitor centre and town information

6.5 Housing, Well Being and Health Issues

- Reduce number and length of empty properties
- Improve housing repairs and maintenance
- Improve insulation to reduce costs
- Use wasteland to create new homes
- Consider recession and the need to have more affordable houses
- Promote sports and leisure
- Support all sporting local teams
- Make the most of our heritage
- Promote arts and leisure
- Improve facilities for young people across the board

6.6 Environmental Issues

- Main concerns relate to litter, fly tipping, fouling, graffiti and anti-social behaviour-effective strategies and enforcement
- Consider restorative approach. Use community responsibility and resources. Get tougher with enforcement and consider zero-tolerance
- Look after and develop parks, green spaces, provide a better environment for children.

- Remember the whole town, in particular estates, do not focus just in the town centre

6.7 About Community Engagement

- Listen to residents and businesses - do not just pay lip service
- Improve and support tenant and community participation in decision making
- Improve community resources and support vulnerable groups (in particular older people, homeless people, etc.)
- Several people were concerned about the effect of migration on council resources. There is a need to manage perception and understanding, particularly in a recession, to avoid community tensions.

6.8 About the consultation process

- Better publicity
- People made some positive comments about being asked for their involvement but many would have liked priorities to have been more specific- "*the devil is in the detail*"
- Information about proposals was difficult to find and understand e.g. "*What is a One Stop Shop transformation*" "*What are Community toilets*"?
- Public meetings can be very helpful to understand proposals and put forward views. This is particularly important for people who may be put off by a more formal written process. People do not mind bad news. They want to understand why and how decisions are made.
- Some people believed that decisions had already been made and that they were not able to influence outcomes.
- Some people found ranking confusing-they were unsure as to how questions were formulated

6.9 Other

- Do things like twinning with other UK towns
- Sell assets such as Cliftonville House or redundant buildings
- Consider unitary council
- Switch off lights etc

6.10 About issues or services provided by partners or other organisations

6.10.1 Some people told us about things that are provided or relate to issues that are not within our control, we will pass their comments onto the relevant bodies and partners. These include:

- Street lighting, footpaths, cycle lanes and transport strategies
- Schooling and educational achievement
- More policing
- WNDC

7. BUDGET OPTIONS –PROPOSAL TO KEEP

7.1 As a result of the financial situation experienced by the Council, it will be necessary to look very carefully at our budget to see how far we can make it go and ensure that money is being spent on the services that people value most. We will also have to find greater efficiencies and make sure that every pound spent gives the best possible value if we are to minimise cuts to services.

7.2 Cabinet have suggested that the following should **not** be changed. People were asked if they agreed or disagreed

- **Car parking prices should not be increased** – to help local businesses and encourage visitors to the town - **86%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Grants to the voluntary sector should be maintained at their current levels** – the voluntary sector provides vital services to vulnerable people including those suffering from the effects of recession - **75%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Maintaining the level of subsidy to the theatres and cultural establishments** – to attract people to the town - **65%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.
- **Keep all our Leisure Centres open** – leisure centres cost the council a significant amount each year but provide a vital facility for local people- **85%** of those expressing a view want to keep this.

7.3 The responses received support the options proposed. More divergence appears to exist on maintaining the level of subsidy to theatres and cultural establishments

7.4 To achieve the savings needed, around £5.4 million potential savings, mostly from internal efficiencies were identified.

7.5 People were asked – given that it was necessary to make reductions somewhere – if they thought that these were in the right areas and to state which they supported the most and which they supported the least.

8.0 BUDGET OPTIONS –RANKING OF PROPOSALS

8.1 People were asked to rank the options they supported, where 1 is the option with most support and 15 with least support.

8.2 The responses were analysed in two different ways: by considering the average (mean) and by considering the frequency (mode/class) of such responses. The dual analysis was undertaken because sometimes looking at average values can mask the breath of the views provided.

8.3 The list below shows the proposals in order of preference:

8.4 Ranking of options (by mean)

1. Increase fees for licencing
2. End the Balloon Festival
3. Reorganise the neighbourhood wardens and enforcement on environmental issues
4. Introduce charges for pest control
5. Reduce the cost of community centres through efficiencies
6. Close Weston Favell and/or Kingsthorpe Housing Office

7. Remove the facility to store furniture for homeless people
8. Do not add inflation to community grants
9. Increase use of electronic switchboard
10. Focus street cleaning and grounds maintenance
11. Increase fees for collecting bulky waste
12. Replace the Balloon Festival with a summer festival based on the Market Square
13. Replace public conveniences with community toilets scheme
14. Increase charges for leisure
15. Close museum(s) for part of the time

8.5 Ranking of options (by class)

8.5.1 Options receiving most support include:

1. End Balloon Festival
2. Increase fees for licencing
3. Re-organise the neighbourhood wardens and enforcement on environmental issues
4. Introduce charges for pest control
5. Closure of Weston Favell and/or Kingsthorpe Housing Office
6. Reduce cost of community centres through efficiencies

8.5.2 Options receiving medium support included:

1. No inflation to community grants
2. Remove facility to store furniture for homeless people
3. Increase use of swithboard

8.5.3 Options least supported include:

1. Closure of museum(s) part of the time
2. Increase fees for leisure services
3. Replace toilets with “community toilets”
4. Replace Balloon Festival
5. Focus street cleaning and grounds maintenance
6. Increase fees for collection of bulky items

8.6 It should be noted that ranking could be affected or skewed by multiple voting or by staff or individual groups with a campaign but this was a risk inherent to this type of consultation where anonymity was optional.

8.7 Conclusion

8.7.1 Regardless of the method used for the analysis, people **supported** the options relating to the closure of the balloon festival, increase in licensing fees, re-organisation to neighbourhood and environmental services and increase pest control charges whilst **objecting** to the “community toilets” scheme, increased charges for bulky items, closure of museums part time and increase in leisure charges.

8.7.2 People were asked to think where the Council should look to reduce costs or increase income. Full details can be obtained upon request.

9.0 CAPITAL PROGRAMME

9.1 The capital budget enables the Council to invest in assets and infrastructure (for example improvements to buildings) to improve service delivery. It is funded separately to the ‘revenue’ budget above. Our capital resources are also limited, so it is necessary to prioritise bids for new projects. For 2009/10 a ‘short list’ of new bids was made available and people were asked to prioritise them.

9.2 The list below shows how people ranked them in order of preference

1. Call Care replacement lifelines - Call Care monitors community alarms for elderly and vulnerable people both in sheltered housing and through independent lifeline units
2. Disabled Facilities Grants - assisting adapting private homes for easier bathing and access
3. Carbon Management Programme – undertaking a range of energy-saving projects at various locations to reduce our carbon emissions in line with Council policy
4. Security software – enhancing the security of data kept by the Council

5. 'One Stop Shop' transformation – improving the experience for customers

- 9.3 It should be noted that responses from the focus groups also placed less priority on security software and on the transformation of the One Stop Shop
- 9.4 People were also asked about were they thought the Council should invest further. Full details of responses received can be obtained upon request.
- 9.5 It must be noted that when considering the number of responses, not every person completed the entire questionnaire. Therefore the total responses did not necessarily match the total number of people responding.
- 9.6 It should also be noted that whilst the results may not be statistically significant due to the nature of the sampling method, these are indicative of the views of the people and organisations of Northampton and provide a flavour of their feelings regarding the proposals.

10 FOCUS GROUPS

- 10.1 Two focus groups selected from our residents/citizens panel were held at the Guildhall on 20th and 21st of January 2009.
- 10.2 The purpose was:
1. The group to find out if the Council's current priorities were right and to consider what else they should include.
 2. To review the Council's revenue budget options, prioritise them and consider their impact on those affected.
 3. To review further budget options and their priority.
 4. To review the capital programme options and their priority.
 5. To review a range of reports from other organisations and indicate the style/format the group they would prefer the council's annual report to have.
- 10.3 A summary of findings is as below. Fuller details can be obtained upon request.

• On the Corporate Plan

- 10.4 Existing priorities for the Council were fully endorsed. The groups felt that it was almost impossible not to agree with them.

10.5 The groups were asked to specify what they would like the Council to address. Below is a list of some of the issues identified:

- Crime reduction and enforcement
- Town cleaning, fly-tipping
- Safer, cleaner parks and community areas-Dog fouling
- Housing for young people-Fairer housing allocation
- Provide activities to engage young people
- Toilet facilities in the town and information about where to go
- Bus station
- Unoccupied properties
- Transport strategy
- Talking and listening to the community
- Consider handing back management of outer parks to parish councils
- Understand financial position of tax payers
- Consider vulnerable people
- Appraise and maintain housing stock
- Use technology to save costs
- WNDC
- Parking
- Accountability and prioritisation

• **On the Revenue Budget**

10.6 The groups discussed the various proposals and considered the impact they would have on the community and to rank them in order of support.

10.7 Views varied widely reflecting the individuality of those attending.

10.8 For one of the groups, the option(s) most frequently supported include: **closure of district offices**, reorganise neighbourhood wardens, no inflation to community grants, charges for pest control, increase licensing and the option(s) most frequently disliked included: **community toilets, end balloon festival**, increase charges for leisure, closure of museums p/t, focus street cleaning in critical areas, community toilets, closure of district offices, removal of storage for the homeless.

10.9 For the second group, the option(s) most frequently supported include: **increase bulky collection** charges, no inflation to community grants, charges for pest control, community centre efficiencies and the option(s) most frequently disliked included: **end balloon festival**, increase charges for leisure, closure of museums p/t, focus street cleaning in critical areas, community toilets, closure of district offices, removal of storage for the homeless.

10.10 It should be noted that the options relating to the Balloon Festival, licensing and public conveniences were the most controversial.

- **On the Capital Programme**

10.11 The group discussions supported the findings from the main survey, giving priority to Disabled Facilities Grant, Call Care lifeline and Carbon Management and less priority to improvements to the One Stop Shop and Software security.

- **Observations**

10.12 The groups had a very lively debate on a range of issues relating to the budget proposals. It should be noted that whilst initially people appeared to have some resistance to some of the proposed changes, following a detailed explanation by officers on the specific details of such proposals, views changed to endorse them. This should be noted for future consultations.

10.13 Attendees were happy to have been asked to participate in the focus group and confirmed their interest in attending again in the future.

11. EQUALITIES

11.1 This consultation was designed using the principles established in the recently adopted Consultation Toolkit to make sure that it was accessible to local people, businesses, partners of the Council and the voluntary and

community sectors. The recommendations from the Equality Impact Assessment undertaken during 2007/08 were used as the basis to develop the programme for this process wherever possible. Individual options and proposals were also subject to screening and impact assessments were carried out as appropriate. Further details, including information about stakeholders are available upon request

11.2 The Cabinet will consider the results of this consultation and of all relevant impact assessments to make an informed decision regarding the Council's budget and priorities.

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