Exeter City Council – Budget Consultation Report

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Purpose

To gather feedback on public priorities for spending and savings across the 2010/11 budget

Methods

A number of methods were used. All methods were based on ten service themes (Museums/heritage & tourism, leisure/recreation, waste collection, street cleaning, environmental health, other environmental services, planning and economic development, housing, corporate & democratic, other central services).

1. Wavelength residents' panel. Survey sent to 901 panellists, 576 returned. Focussing on panellists' priorities for Council services and corporate objectives, identifying budget reductions and measuring panellists' attitudes to cuts and Council spending.

2. Budget day public event. Used activities which required participants to identify budget cuts across service areas and to prioritise spending. In total 113 members of the public attended during the course of the day.

3. Online budget simulator. Participants were required to build a budget to achieve a total saving of £1m by increasing/decreasing funding to the ten service areas. There were 235 online returns at the time of writing.

In total there have been 883 interactions with the various methods. This is not the same as 883 unique individuals as there may be some crossover between methods (a Wavelength panellist could also complete the online budget simulator and attend the public event). However, this still represents a good level of participation. All of the publicly accessible methods (public event and online budget simulator) were supported by publicity such as the Exeter Citizen and media work. There was also a high profile link from the homepage of the Council website and an 'adspot' which appeared all over the site. All methods featured consistent explanations of what each of the ten service groups did.

Purpose of this report

This report aims to give a summary of the three methods used to engage the public with the budget setting process.

Wavelength 21

In total 576 forms were returned from 901 sent out. This is a return rate of 64%. A weighting is applied to take account of the shortfall in panellists of some age groups and the over representation of other groups. This process helps to ensure that the results are an accurate reflection of the demographic make up of the city and are not skewed by any one age group.

Q1 - How important would you say are the following services for the city council to provide?

	Q1 - How important would you say are the following services for the city council to provide?									
	Very important		Important		Neither		Not important		Not important at all	
	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %
Museums, heritage + tourism	139	26.0%	309	58.1%	71	13.3%	13	2.4%	1	0.1%
Leisure & recreation	207	36.8%	301	53.7%	39	6.9%	14	2.6%	0	0.0%
Waste collection	426	75.4%	135	24.0%	2	0.4%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Street cleaning	320	57.0%	230	41.1%	10	1.7%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Environmental health	313	55.7%	226	40.3%	19	3.4%	3	0.6%	0	0.0%
Other environmental services	137	24.9%	325	59.0%	74	13.3%	15	2.6%	1	0.2%
Planning & economic development	142	26.5%	296	55.3%	79	14.7%	15	2.9%	3	0.6%
Housing services	186	33.3%	298	53.2%	53	9.4%	19	3.3%	4	0.8%
Corporate & democratic	44	8.3%	293	55.4%	126	24.0%	54	10.2%	11	2.1%
Other central services	45	8.7%	258	49.6%	180	34.6%	27	5.2%	9	1.8%

Very few people rated any of the service groups as Not Important or Not Important At All. The table below ranks the service groups in order of the aggregated number of people who rated them as Very Important or Important.

	Important (aggregated)
Waste collection	99.4%
Street cleaning	98.1%
Environmental health	96.0%
Leisure & recreation	90.5%
Housing services	86.5%
Museums, heritage + tourism	84.1%
Other environmental services	83.9%
Planning & economic development	81.8%
Corporate & democratic	63.7%
Other central services	58.3%

Waste collection was the top rated service group, with over 99% saying that it was an important function for the Council to provide. Most of the other service groups scored highly with two exceptions. Corporate & democratic and Other Central Services scored significantly lower than the other groups.

Q2 - To what extent do you agree that the services listed below need improving?

Street cleaning came out as the service group most in need of improving, followed by Leisure & recreation.

Q2 - Needs improving?	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Street cleaning	50.1%	30.6%	19.4%
Leisure & recreation	46.5%	39.7%	13.7%
Waste collection	43.5%	38.1%	18.4%
Housing services	40.2%	48.2%	11.6%
Environmental health	36.3%	47.7%	15.9%
Museums, heritage + tourism	34.0%	47.8%	18.1%
Other environmental services	31.4%	56.1%	12.6%
Planning & economic development	27.8%	52.9%	19.4%
Corporate & democratic	17.6%	63.1%	19.3%
Other central services	16.8%	65.5%	17.7%

There is a strong correlation between the perceived importance of a service group (**Q1**) and the extent to which it needs improving. The more important a service group is the more it needs to be improved, according to the perception of the panellists.

	Q1 – important rank	Q2 – needs improving rank
Street cleaning	2	1
Leisure & recreation	4	2
Waste collection	1	3
Housing services	5	4
Environmental health	3	5
Museums, heritage + tourism	6	6
Other environmental services	7	7
Planning & economic development	8	8
Corporate & democratic	9	9
Other central services	10	10

This can be more clearly seen on the following plot. The steep angle of the line indicates a strong correlation between the score for each of the two questions
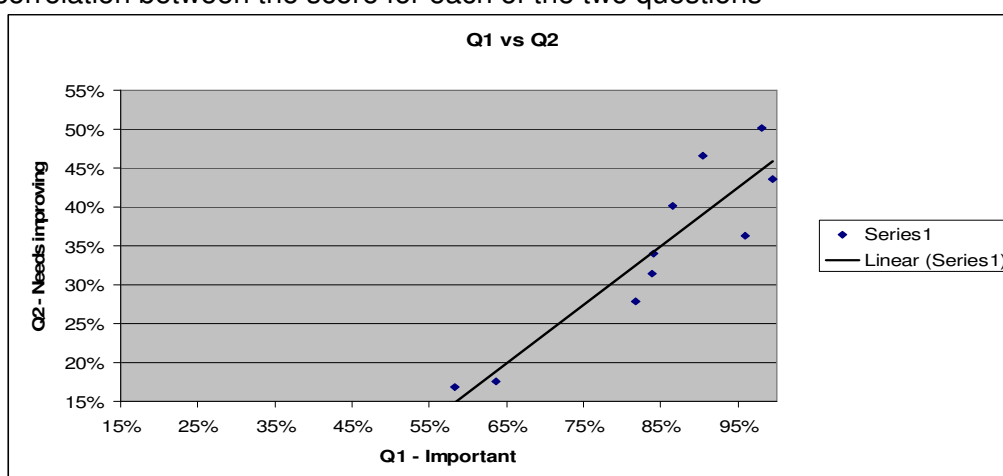
Q3 - By how much would you change the amount of spending on each of the following?

	Q3 - By how much would you change the amount of spending on each of the following?					
	Reduce by 20%		Reduce by 10%		Stay the same	
	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %
Museums, heritage + tourism	129	23.2%	268	48.1%	160	28.7%
Leisure & recreation	74	13.2%	280	50.1%	205	36.7%
Waste collection	9	1.7%	53	9.4%	496	88.9%
Street cleaning	16	2.8%	137	24.8%	401	72.4%
Environmental health	19	3.4%	163	29.5%	370	67.1%
Other environmental services	148	27.0%	252	45.8%	150	27.2%
Planning & economic development	127	22.9%	293	52.9%	134	24.2%
Housing services	62	11.2%	152	27.4%	340	61.4%
Corporate & democratic	292	52.9%	188	34.0%	73	13.1%
Other central services	212	38.3%	209	37.7%	133	24.1%

The service group which the panellists would reduce the most was Corporate & democratic (52.9% would reduce by 20%) followed by Other central services (38.3%).

Q3 - By how much would you change the amount of spending on each of the following?	Reduce by 20%
Corporate & democratic	52.9%
Other central services	38.3%
Other environmental services	27.0%
Museums, heritage + tourism	23.2%
Planning & economic development	22.9%
Leisure & recreation	13.2%
Housing services	11.2%
Environmental health	3.4%
Street cleaning	2.8%
Waste collection	1.7%

This table is almost a mirror image of the importance attached to service groups in **Q1**, with the most important service groups attracting the lowest number of people wanting to reduce spending on them.

Coversely, the more important a service group was, the more likely it was that people would prefer to see spending on it left the same.

Q3 - By how much would you change the amount of spending on each of the following?	Stay the same
Waste collection	88.9%
Street cleaning	72.4%
Environmental health	67.1%
Housing services	61.4%
Leisure & recreation	36.7%
Museums, heritage + tourism	28.7%
Other environmental services	27.2%
Planning & economic development	24.2%
Other central services	24.1%
Corporate & democratic	13.1%

Q4 - How important do you feel each of the Council's corporate objectives is?
+
Q5 - How good do you feel the Council is at delivering each of its corporate objectives?

Objectives	Q4 - How important do you feel each of the Council's corporate objectives is?		Q5 - How good do you feel the Council is at delivering each of its corporate objectives?	
	Important	Rank	Good	Rank
Use resources effectively and provide high performing, value for money services that focus on customer needs	88.0%	1	33.9%	7
Ensure that there are enough well-designed, well-maintained and affordable homes in the city	83.5%	2	37.0%	6
Enhance and protect the environment, reducing the causes and minimising the impact of climate change	81.4%	3	46.4%	4
Maximise the potential of all our citizens by tackling social disadvantage and deprivation	76.3%	4	24.4%	8
Ensure that Exeter is a buoyant, dynamic and innovative regional city with sustainable growth	76.2%	5	59.9%	1
Have strong and clear governance arrangements that enable communities to influence and help shape decisions about their area and city	69.3%	6	44.6%	5
Promote an extremely positive image and reputation and ensure high levels of satisfaction	66.9%	7	49.0%	3
Further improve the character of the city and facilities for culture and leisure	58.7%	8	53.8%	2

The most important objective, perhaps coloured by the overall focus of the survey, was to use resources effectively and provide high performing, value for money services that focus on customer needs (88%). The least important objective was to further improve the character of the city and facilities for culture and leisure (58.7%).

The ranking for delivery is not an exact mirror image of importance but it is striking that the objectives which the panellists felt that the Council was most successful in delivering were among the lowest ranked for importance. Conversely, the most important objective was seen as the second least successful in terms of delivery.

It is interesting to note the low ranking for the importance of leisure and culture in light of the high status that leisure enjoyed during the budget consultation event.

Q6 - To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Q6 - To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Rank	Agree Row %	Neither Row %	Disagree Row %
I understand that the council has to make savings	1	86.2%	9.0%	4.8%
I would not want to see charges for services increased	2	58.3%	25.3%	16.5%
I think the Council provides good value for money	3	55.2%	29.8%	14.9%
I would prefer to pay higher charges for services rather than see services reduced	4	33.2%	15.9%	50.9%
I would prefer to pay more on my council tax to avoid cuts in services	5	31.2%	17.1%	51.6%
I would prefer to see services stopped than pay more council tax	6	20.4%	28.0%	51.6%

The statement with the highest degree of agreement was that the Council has to make savings (86.2%). Panellists would prefer not to see charges for services increased (58.3% in agreement). There was a clear majority of panellists (50% or more) who disagreed with the final three statements.

It should be noted that people also contradict themselves in that they do not want to pay more council tax, pay higher charges or see services stopped whilst understanding the Council needs to make savings.

Q7 – Comments
These have not yet been fully analysed. However initial examination suggests there are a number of key themes in the comments

- Reduce management/bureaucracy
- Improve staff efficiency (comments with regard to staff wages/work practices/pensions)
- Costs associated with Councillors and the Lord Mayor
- Reduce the generosity of the concessionary fares scheme or recoup some costs from over 60s
- Reduce/change services
- Extra charges/improve collection of taxes, fines and revenue

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Key findings

- **There was a clear link between the importance attached to a service group, the desire for it to be improved and the amount of money that panellists wanted to spend on it.**
- **Panellists understand that the Council has to make savings and do not want to pay more for services.**
- **There was also little enthusiasm for seeing services stopped rather than paying more council tax.**
- **The corporate objective identified as the most important was also the second least successful in terms of perceived delivery**

Online budget simulator

This has been running since November 12 and so far (December 15) there have been 235 completed submissions.

Although the survey does ask for demographic details, only 69 of the 235 submissions have these. These figures show a similar profile to Wavelength, with respondents skewed towards the 35-65 age range. Unlike Wavelength, the online budget simulator results are not weighted.

Age group	Count	Online survey	Wavelength weighted
Under 18	1	1.4%	-
18-24	4	5.8%	18.2%
25-34	11	15.9%	20.8%
35-44	18	26.1%	15.7%
45-54	14	20.3%	14.0%
55-65	11	15.9%	13.3%
65 +	10	14.5%	18.0%
	69	100.0%	100.00%

The budget simulator required people to allocate either a saving or an increase to the ten service groups in order to achieve a 5% (£1m) saving. It was also possible to leave a service group untouched.

By adding up the savings/increases identified for each service group it is possible to come up with an overall percentage saving.

Total identified budget	£18,520,647
Identified saving	-£1,919,353
Corporate + democratic	-7.70%
Museums, heritage + tourism	-5.68%
Other central services	-5.19%
Leisure + recreation	-4.62%
Planning + economic development	-4.43%
Environmental health	-3.02%
Other environmental services	-3.00%
Housing	-2.62%
Street cleaning	-2.28%
Waste collection	-1.43%

From this table it is clear that respondents have, in fact, identified budget reductions of almost £2m. If a smaller reduction was desired then the corresponding percentage reductions in service group budgets could be scaled down. For example, to achieve a £1m budget reduction Corporate & democratic would be reduced from -7.7% to -3.85, Museums/heritage & tourism reduced from -5.68% to -2.84% and so on for the other service groups.

Ranking the service groups in order of budget reduction reflects almost identical priorities to those identified by the Wavelength panellists. Waste collection (the most important service group and the one that Wavelength panellists were most likely to maintain current spending on) was the service groups with the smallest budget reduction (-1.43%). Conversely, corporate & democratic (second least important and least likely to have spending maintained at current level) attracted the highest level of budget reduction (-7.7%).

Key findings
• **Results from the online budget simulator match the priorities identified in the Wavelength survey**
• **Waste collection was the service group with the smallest budget reduction**
• **Corporate & democratic was the service group with the highest identified budget reduction**

Budget Consultation day

The Budget Consultation day on 14 November enabled members of the public to voice their opinions on their priorities for Exeter City Council's spending during the current recession period. People took part by assessing which City Council services they would allocate spending to and which services they would make cuts through two budget simulator activities. City council staff and councillors were present to explain and assist the public through the activities and answer general queries. The online budget simulator was also available via a laptop and wifi-link.

Budget Information
A set of boards explained the City Council's budget dilemma. Falling incomes from car parks, rents, fees and government grants coupled with increased demand for services such as housing and benefit payments created a £1 million budget gap in 2010. People were also reminded that the concessionary fares scheme was still not sorted out with the government only consulting on giving Exeter the £1.65 million it is owed.

Overall 113 people visited the consultation. The age profile was characterised by the majority of people being under 44 with a significant group of 65+ as well.

The Budget Bullseye

This activity demonstrated the decisions faced by Exeter City Council before implementing savings. Participants had to deposit 10 £ slips (each £ representing £100,000) from the services on the board into the bank in the centre to make their £1 million saving. Each £ slip taken away resulted in a reduction to the service summarised on a slip underneath each £. The consequence of each service reduction was explained in more detail by council staff.

The Budget Bullseye

Around 13 people took part in this exercise. Although only a small number of people took part in this particular exercise, those who did spent a considerable amount of time on it. Many of them commented on how difficult it was to make the decisions. Their comments in regard to budget cuts:

"Exeter City Council is doing a good job as it is and should be properly funded to carry on doing it. I wouldn't mind paying more council tax to do this." Resident, Newtown.

"We should look at saving money by cutting posts at more senior management level, rather than taking from the community itself." Resident, St James.

	Proportion of overall savings
Corporate & democratic	20.6%
Museums, heritage + tourism	15.0%
Housing services	11.9%
Planning & economic development	11.1%
Environmental health	11.0%
Other environmental services	10.3%
Waste collection	8.7%
Other central services	8.7%
Street cleaning	6.3%
Leisure & recreation	1.5%

Corporate & democratic was again the most popular choice of service group for cuts (20.6%) and the least popular was leisure & recreation (1.5%). Waste collection (8.7%) and street cleaning (6.3%) were also favoured by participants, as were other central services (8.7%).

Although the exercise was very similar in principle to the online budget simulator and parts of the Wavelength survey, described earlier in this report, the results were slightly different. This may have been due to the 'consequences' of each reduction and the presence of Council officers who were on hand to answer questions and discuss the choices that people made.

Building the Budget

Here participants started with a blank canvas. People were reminded that out of a band D council tax of £1,426.53, only £120 is received by Exeter City Council for all its services. Balls represented money (£12 per ball) which could be allocated to a container which represented a service. Each participant received 10 spending balls to allocate into the services (equivalent to £120 tax). Just over 80 people took part in this activity. At the end of the day the overall results were as follows:

Service	Allocated balls	% of total balls	£ of city council tax allocated (out of £120)
Leisure and Recreation	124	15.64%	£18.76
Waste Collection	105	13.24%	£15.89
Street Cleaning	96	12.11%	£14.53
Museums, Heritage and Tourism	94	11.85%	£14.22
Housing	84	10.59%	£12.71
Environmental Health	82	10.34%	£12.40
Planning and Economic Development	74	9.33%	£11.20
Other Environmental Services	74	9.33%	£11.20
Other Central Services	43	5.42%	£6.50
Corporate and Democratic	17	2.14%	£2.57

The service group receiving the largest proportion of spending was Leisure & recreation (15.64%). This runs counter to the results of the online simulator and Wavelength, where Leisure & recreation was ranked in the middle for importance and for budget reductions.

Corporate & democratic was allocated the smallest proportion of spending (2.14%) which is in line with the importance and budget reductions identified for it in the online simulator and Wavelength survey.

Key findings
• **Leisure & recreation was the most important service group, attracting the smallest budget reduction and the highest allocation of spending.** • **The least important service group was Corporate & democratic, which attracted the largest budget reduction and smallest allocation of spending.** • **The results for Leisure & recreation run contrary to the results of the other budget consultation elements (online simulator and Wavelength).**