

Offline local consultation on Somerset Council Budget

Held at the Market House Castle Cary, 10am-12 noon, 13th and 20th January 2024

Aim: to provide those who do not have easy access to the online consultation to give their views and to discuss the issues over a cup of coffee.

Organised by: Judi Morison and Laura Tilling

Attendance: approx. 80 people in all, mainly 60 years old and above. Henry Hobhouse and Kevin Messenger attended the session on 20 January.

MAJOR OUTCOMES AND PRIORITIES:

- ❖ Dismay at the possible removal of Southwest Coaches' No 1 bus service – willingness to pay a £2 per journey fare to avert this.
- ❖ Dismay at the possible closure of Dimmer for household recycling – willingness to pay a small sum to use the facility
- ❖ Concern about the state of Castle Cary's pavements
- ❖ Willingness to accept a 10% rates increase in order to avoid service cuts – everyone seemed to be shying away from the possibility that rates might need to be raised to this extent *and* services cut in order to balance the budget.
- ❖ Anti-social behaviour

It became clear, through discussion, that many attendees were unaware of the complexities underlying some of the issues addressed, and also unaware of the role the Town and Parish Councils already took in supporting local facilities financially – eg free parking, ongoing provision of public toilets, and were now being requested to take on more. We also aimed to raise greater awareness of statutory versus discretionary services and the difference between direct government funding and funding via Unitary Councils. The recent amalgamation of District and County Council added another layer of complexity to be addressed.



METHODOLOGY

The consultation was available only online; this is understandable as a hybrid approach, with an alternative paper copy for those not wishing or able to do it on line would have added an enormous expense. We felt it important to catch the views of less computer-savvy residents. At the sessions we offered to help them fill in the consultation online but there was virtually no take up of this. (Nor has there been any take up at the local library, where a public computer is available.)

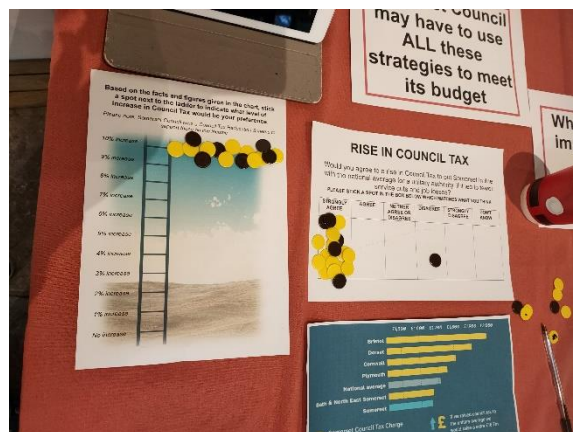


Laura had managed with difficulty to convert the consultation document into separate question sheets and people were encouraged to fill these in. See appendix for outcomes and individual comments. She also used a priority wheel for question 2 (“Choose your 3 major concerns”) and a ladder device for the questions on acceptable rise in the rates. People seemed to enjoy using these and they created a good forum for discussion as people made choices. See photos.

Judi and Laura started planning these sessions because they realised that there were no coffee mornings booked in the Market House on these Saturdays.

This meant that publicity was last minute. We used visits to local groups meeting those weeks, the Cary Crier, facebook, word of mouth, the Primary School newsletter etc. More people from outlying villages attended than is usual for a coffee morning event – important as their views on issues reflected where they lived – often not on a bus route at all, and not so much using Cary as their natural centre.

It could be argued that the age range of those attending skews the outcome of this sort of consultation method, but remember that these are people who will not fill in the consultation on line. Their choices need to be added to the choices of those who do respond online in order to create some sort of balance.



We felt that what we did was useful but we are not sure that feedback from it can have much influence against the automatic analysis of the online consultation.

However there are issues here that can be followed up locally especially those which were strong priorities. The sessions also showed how little people are aware of how their local services work and how they are funded. This also needs addressing in new ways. We felt that every effort is made to keep people informed, but they do not hear or see. Possibly because they do not look or listen except in times of crisis! Areas of investigation needed are:

Transport: Conversations about No 1 bus also led to conversations about the CAT bus which was viewed in a very positive light by those who use it but seen as very expensive in some contexts, and heavily booked so not always available when needed. (The CAT bus is already supported by financial contributions from local councils of course.)

Condition on the pavements in Cary. This was seen as a major health hazard especially for people with mobility problems – one or two people cited specific accidents caused by the state of the pavements.

APPENDIX

Question 2 from priority wheel - amalgamating the two sessions

(Note: the "Crime" heading unaccountably disappeared at the first session!)

Priority concerns. With such a small sample it is risky to put too much weight on priority order but the concerns did fall into four distinct groups:

- ❖ Public transport. *This far outweighed the other choices.*
- ❖ Condition of Roads and Pavements, Anti-social behaviour
- ❖ Social and private housing availability, education and schools, climate change, housing availability, cleanliness of streets and local area
- ❖ Community relations, Being lonely, Future job prospects, My physical health and fitness, raising children, Job security, Paying bills, My mental health and fitness *These heading got hardly any "votes" at all*

Highways and Public Transport

Question: How important are these services to you?

Again the sample is too small to deserve too much weight but priorities fell into clear groups with order of priority:

- ❖ Buses. *Considerably outstripped the rest, as in Question 2*
- ❖ Road safety, highway maintenance and grass and hedge cutting came next
- ❖ Highways drainage and road markings and signs
- ❖ Multi user paths, park and ride

Individual comments

GENERAL

The current services are stretched in all directions and any further cuts would extend the problem.

HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT - buses

No 1 Bus. Happy to pay for bus pass or small amount per journey.
Bus route essential to increase mental and physical well-being of those who don't drive, and helps strongly Town Centre Businesses"

An essential service. Would accept paying some contribution with bus pass. Services still poorly advertised. Published timetables need to be much larger for public display and leaflets should be available in public buildings. Better co-ordination with trains would also help.

+ from another person "I agree with the comments above,"

"I use the bus, although I can drive but parking fees in Yeovil prevent me spending my pension in this way. Trying to keep healthy and fit and not be a burden to society on a small pension is not easy and any facility, such as a free bus pass and the ability to travel helps."

"Pay £1 for the bus. Pay £2 for the journey. We want the bus. An essential service for those without cars. You cannot cut off a town with a growing population. Yeovil in particular has Banks!! Paying £2 for the journey is more than acceptable"

Essential for hospital visits.

Banks, Hospital, Opticians, Pain clinics. Priority. Prepared to pay on top of bus pass

Buses 1 and 667. Most people would pay £2. CAT bus £6.80 return to Wincanton

Must keep the No 1 bus going. Important for all

Please keep the Bus Route No 1 between Shepton and Yeovil going. All of it is important.

I only use the train but buses are vital for those without a car

POSSIBLE CLOSURE OF DIMMER

We are supposed to be recycling! If no Dimmer then more people will put their rubbish in black bins. And some people will dump stuff so cost for removal from field etc.

Must be kept open! Environmental impact assessment must be done. Extra car journeys to facilities further away – plus increase in fly-tipping.

Needs to be kept open as it's always busy with cars safely dumping household and garden waste which needs to be removed by local residents.

+ "I agree with the above" (another person)

A saving in costs of petrol for those that use this very good facility, so better for climate change as people are more likely to be responsible in how they dispose of excess rubbish. If this closes will the waste collectors be encouraged to take more rubbish?

Please do not close Dimmer. Recycling centre. It is an essential service to the community. And without it flytipping will increase to the detriment of the environment. A small charge would be acceptable

Keep the recycling centre. Could reduce hours.

Dimmer – if closed it would just mean flytipping

RAISING OF COUNCIL TAX

Why not put more effort into recovering the huge amount of unpaid Council Tax? Why is Council Tax unpaid? Can some people genuinely not afford to pay?

Raise Council Tax as long as raise is used to prevent loss of service.

ADULT SERVICES

I don't feel qualified to make suggestions in this area as I don't know how the Council spend in this area.

Where people can pay, then pay more. Those who cannot afford – free.

Other comments on specific issues

Reduce invasive streetlights.

Yeovil athletic track could be commercial.

Crime on increase

Keep the public toilets open.

Public loo. Vital. It is used a lot

Safe homes for all