



**THE
DEMOCRATIC
SOCIETY**

BUDGET PARTICIPATION EXERCISES IN BRIGHTON & HOVE

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Executive summary

Three budget participation events were held over two days, on 12 November (Hangleton in the morning and Patcham in the afternoon) and 14 November (central Brighton, evening).

Participation rates varied, with the Hangleton event attracting 24 participants, the central Brighton 16 participants and the Patcham event 8 participants.

The events ran alongside the council's online consultation, and used the same data set. Experts from the council were available to the council to give background information and answer questions.

Participants were asked to rank the council's services by overall priority, but with a few exceptions most were unwilling to provide numerical rankings, because they felt uncomfortable making – as they saw it – very significant decisions without full knowledge of benchmarks, spending comparisons and other data.

The principal messages to come out of the consultation were:

On prioritising services

1. Participants were unwilling to take responsibility for cuts
2. There was general opposition to cuts (and some expressed the view that Council Tax should be increased further)
3. Participants felt that they had insufficient information on service quality to make judgements
4. Participants generally saw the council in a positive light
5. The consultation events were seen as positive, but participants wanted longer-term engagement – although not longer consultation events.

On adults' and children's services

1. Adults' and children's services as a whole are seen as extremely important
2. There should be greater investment in prevention
3. Priority should be given to work that helps people stay in their own homes
4. There should be greater reliance on communities and families around vulnerable people – but only if they receive appropriate support from the council
5. Youth services were high priority for Hangleton, less important for the other areas

On housing and communities

1. There should be greater community sector involvement in housing and community safety issues
2. Services should be better joined up, with community groups brokering those services at local level
3. There were widely differing views on museums, culture and sport, with some wanting cuts and others seeing them as an essential part of the city's identity
4. There was support for development of social housing
5. Participants wanted to see work on "regeneration without money" through community-led regeneration

On City Infrastructure

1. Save money through greater efficiencies in transport spending
2. Focus on generating income, perhaps through congestion charging or tougher bus lane enforcement
3. Increase efficiency in refuse and recycling by rolling out communal bins and/or retendering contracts.

On Finance and Resources

1. Restrain wasteful expenditure in council services
2. Promote organisational development that encourages new ways of working

Survey responses

Participants were asked to rate services on a scale of one to four, where one meant "spending could be cut a lot", and four meant "needs a lot more money". Most answers clustered around the 2.5 mark (in other words, the balance between "needs more" and "could be cut"), but overall the order identified was:

- Housing and communities (2.77 – slightly in the "needs more" zone)
- Services for adults (2.56)
- Services for children (2.48)
- City infrastructure (2.45)
- Finance and resources (2.24)

There was little difference in the rating between different areas – social services were rated slightly higher in Patcham and slightly lower in central Brighton. City infrastructure was rated higher in central Brighton than elsewhere.

Lessons for the future

As well as the specific comments about council services, we would draw some lessons for future civic engagement work:

1. Information is essential, but there is greater demand for detail than can be satisfied in a single consultation event
2. People are less confident in making decisions than might be assumed, even when those decisions do not have direct consequences
3. Ongoing engagement and participation are essential – starting now for next year's budget process
4. Strong community networks are essential for effective consultation, particularly in areas with lower facility in social media.

The events

Brighton & Hove City Council commissioned three budget participation events, to take place over three days in November 2011, as part of their budget consultation work.

The events ran alongside an online consultation using a budget simulation website provided by Delib at <http://www.budgetsimulator.com>. The offline exercise was structured in broadly the same way, (see "the events" section below) and used the same spending data and division of services.

Recruitment

The recruitment of the events was intended to provide three different audiences. At the outset, BHCC made clear that there should be no incentive payments for participants, and the council no longer maintains a citizens' panel. Since these are the traditional routes for obtaining a balanced sample, and the timescales on hosting the events were tight, it was clear from the outset that it would not be possible to build three demographically balanced audiences.

As a means of bringing together roughly coherent groups that spread across the different demographics in the city, the recruitment was therefore carried out in two separate ways, to cover three demographic/geographical areas. The two events in Hangleton and Patcham were recruited by seeding information into local community networks, flyering and putting up posters in the immediate area around the venue. The event in central Brighton was advertised through Twitter and Facebook and by email to those who had attended CityCamp Brighton in March, and CityForum Brighton in October.

To ensure that community networks were the source of participation online booking to the Patcham event was not initially possible, though it was opened up in the few days before the event, to try to increase attendance. No online bookings were made for Hangleton.

The results of the recruitment varied. In Hangleton, the Hangleton & Knoll project secured 36 sign-ups within a few days, using their extensive network in the area. Of the 36 recruited, 24 attended, a slightly higher drop-out rate than we had expected (33% rather than the anticipated 25).

The Patcham event had a much smaller attendance, although the effort put into seeding community networks was greater. We distributed invitations and flyers through the Patcham LAT, the Community Association, the Youth Centre, and the Neighbourhood Watch. In the week before the event, we followed up initial contacts, and additionally contacted the local branch of the University of the Third Age, several local amenity organisations based out of the community centre, parish churches and community and voluntary sector organisations. We also distributed flyers and posters in the library, the junior school, and around the venue. A week before the Patcham event, we also opened up online

registration for the event. Despite this effort, we had a total audience of eight people, of whom one had signed up online (four further online signups did not attend).

Although the participants who did attend at Patcham had come through the various community networks, it is clear in hindsight that community networks in that part of town are too weak to be a vehicle for recruitment. It was always likely - and we acknowledged in early conversations with the council - that the richer settled area of the city would be the most difficult to recruit in, as residents there have neither the immediate need to rely on public services (as some in poorer areas do), nor the tradition of urban activism of central Brighton wards and the digital community more generally. Even given that fact, the low response rate was a surprise, given that a relatively large number of already-engaged people who were contacted.

The central Brighton event was recruited entirely online, with messages sent twice through the mailing lists for CityCamp (137 members) and CityForum (108), and repeatedly through the Twitter accounts DemsocBTN (255 followers), CityCampBTN (421) and TheBrightonLine (1,983). The message was also distributed through the Democratic Society twitter account, which has 3,493 followers but which has a network that is not Brighton-centred.

There will naturally be some overlap between those groups. Assuming that half the CityForum mailing list is also on the CityCamp mailing list, and that half the followers of DemsocBTN also follow CityCampBTN, we can say that the initial invitation would have hit at least 2,500 individuals, with a wider audience probable since the event information was also distributed through the Community and Voluntary Sector Forum's mailing list, and retweeted on several occasions by the City Council's Twitter feed (6,063 followers), and Cllr Ben Duncan's (1,377).

Assuming a 3,000 initial audience, perhaps a conservative figure given the number of followers of BHCC, the event signup of 22 (with 16 attending) represents a response rate of 0.73%, which is a reasonable rate for non-personalised social-media-driven campaigns.

The data provided

The only area of Council spending that the exercise covered was spending over which the Council had a considerable degree of control. This excluded the Housing Revenue Account, as well as direct payments to schools. In total, £362m of revenue was included.

The spending was described in gross spending terms, with no income offsetting for income-generating services. In a few cases, this distorted the "spend" number, making it look like considerable amounts of council tax were being spent on a service that in reality was balanced by a large offsetting income. All three groups were told that income was generated by some services, but the

third group (central Brighton) received a more explicit warning that some of the high spend numbers were distorted by the absence of offsetting income.

To assist in understanding the large numbers involved, the total council budget was divided by 250,000 - an approximation of the total population of the city - to create a "per-person" budget share of £1,450 (in fact, £1,449.69).

This divided between the six service blocks used, as follows:

- Services for children spend £312.76 per citizen
- Services for adults spend £444.97 per citizen
- City infrastructure spends £259.04 per citizen
- Housing and communities spend £234.81 per citizen
- Resources and finance spend £198.11 per citizen

Did the per-person budget number aid understanding?

The intention behind using a per-person budget share was to get away from the very large numbers that the actual budget represents, and create an accurate but human-scale description of the council's budget.

Participants seemed to find this approach helpful. Although (as will be described later) they were generally unwilling to make specific recommendations on budget numbers or priorities, when they were discussing the different budget items on the tables, they seemed to be able to understand the different shares of expenditure that services represented, and to grasp the scale of differences more easily.

There was some confusion over the use of the term "per-person budget", which two participants at different events took to mean the share of the budget that was spent on a typical service user, rather than the entire council budget shared across (an approximation of) the population. In general, however, people made the right assumptions about what the budget share represented, and we believe that it helped them understand the different scales of expenditure more easily, without being daunted by the large numbers involved. Although we used this per-person division for every group, so there was not control group, it is an approach that we would recommend for future exercises, and as part of any budget literacy training.

Preparation for the events

We prepared three sheets for participants, examples of which are attached, which were:

* "What are we dealing with" - a two-page document describing the council's existing spending and income, and briefly detailing the level of cuts required.

* "What can we do" - a one-page document answering questions that we believed might come up (for example, whether the council could increase council tax or charges further to alleviate cuts)

* "What's going to happen" - a two-page document setting out the running order for the day.

We also produced a "Other information" sheet, with background information on privacy and background on Demsoc Brighton & Hove.

The sheets were available on the tables at the event for people to read in advance, and to use as reference materials. For the central Brighton event, where people had generally signed up online, the sheets were also sent out in advance in PDF format.

How we ran the events

The planned running order for each event was identical. Participants were welcomed on arrival and offered tea, coffee and cake. They were then moved through to the event space, where five tables (two tables in the case of Patcham) had been laid out with the relevant papers. Participants were allocated to the tables at random in the central Brighton and Hangleton events, in Patcham one table looked at Adult and Children's Services, and the second at the other service blocks. We shifted participants at the Patcham event to ensure that neither table was entirely made up of men.

Once people were seated and settled, the facilitator welcomed them, and asked them to start by filling in two surveys on the table. One was called "Five Quick Questions", and asked for participants' opinion on the Council's spending now, and areas where they believed spending needed to be increased or decreased. (The same survey was repeated at the end of each event).

Participants also had a demographic questionnaire. They were told: "you don't have to fill it in, or answer all the questions, but we would be grateful if you could. It helps us to know who has come to the event and how representative of the local population it is. Your personal information will not be passed to the Council."

This part of the event took between five and ten minutes. Participants reported confusion with one of the questions (on whether the council has enough, not enough, or too much money to spend). The question was designed to draw out whether participants felt the council was "flush" and therefore had considerable scope to make relatively pain-free spending cuts. Although not all participants answered all questions, there were no other problems reported with the questionnaire.

Once participants had had the chance to complete the questionnaire and demographic information sheet, those papers were collected in, and the facilitator gave the main introduction.

The facilitator explained that the purpose of event was to gather information on people's budget priorities in advance of the council taking decisions on spending for the forthcoming financial year. It was made clear that no budget decisions had yet been made, and that there would be further opportunities to give views on the detailed proposals.

The facilitator also explained that the specific task for the session was to agree on each table a priority rating out of 100 for each area of the budget block that the table was looking at. It was made clear that because this was a discussion exercise rather than a survey, the whole table needed to agree.

The one-to-a-hundred priority mark was explained as: "If you think something is the most important top priority, and should have spending increased if at all possible, that's 100. If you think it should be cut to zero and no further questions, that's 0."

It was made clear that there was no requirement to propose specific budget numbers, but that there was a space on the sheets to write that in if people wanted to. The cuts requirement was explained as £64 per person, or about £13 per table, £16m across the city as a whole.

Finally, it was pointed out that suggestions and wider comments were welcome from all participants - in Hangleton and in central Brighton we provided blank paper for people to write them down, and collected in all notes that people had made on their sheets.

The council's experts were then introduced. The facilitator told participants that the experts weren't there "to tell you what you should think", but to explain the budget blocks, what each of the services provided, what the consequences of cuts or extra funding would be, and to answer any specific questions to the best of their ability. It was made clear that the experts might not be able to answer every question.

The facilitator said that the second stage of the event would be feedback, and a comparison and group discussion of people's priority rankings. Even once it became clear (see below) that participants were unwilling to rank the different services, this introduction was still given so that the conduct of each event was comparable.

The conversation and discussion with experts then began in the groups. This was the main part of the event, taking about an hour in all three locations. It was made clear to participants at the start of this session that the experts would step away from the tables once they had answered all questions, to ensure that people could have the discussion on priorities in private. In practice, only in Hangleton were experts asked to step away once finished. In Patcham, and in Central Brighton, they were asked more questions, or asked to stay and listen into the discussion.

The intention had been, once tables had decided on their priorities, to write up the full list in order, and then discuss it in the whole group, moving items around if needed. As things turned out (see below) participants were unwilling to rank services, so the final comparative ranking did not take place, and instead there was feedback from each individual table, and then a general discussion in the room on what others had said.

At the end of the event, participants were handed a thank you letter and asked to leave contact details if they wanted to receive a follow-up letter from the council explaining how their contribution would be used. They were also asked to complete the "Five Quick Questions" survey again, to see whether their views had changed as a result of the event. Participants were encouraged to point people to the online survey as well.

Prioritising council services

As described above, the main purpose of the events was to create a prioritised list of council services (and possibly to garner some specific suggestions on budget cuts). Participants were aware that this was the purpose from the start of the event - in the case of central Brighton, in advance.

Although there were no complaints about the priority ranking at the start of the discussion phase, almost no participants were prepared to make a priority ranking between services, and only one table (the Housing and Communities table at the Hangleton event) completely followed the instructions and created a ranking on which they all agreed.

The principal learning points in this area are set out below.

1. Participants were unwilling to take responsibility for cuts

Participants said that the main reason for refusal to prioritise was that they were uncomfortable with making decisions in a time of cuts, knowing that any lower preference expressed would certainly lead to cuts in that area which might have a bad effect on fellow residents. They did not, with a few exceptions, take the attitude that "it's the council's job and they should do it", but there was a feeling that at a time of reductions rather than increases in overall spending the link between lower priorities and higher cuts was very clear.

Views of participants:

"I don't want to put priorities against things when I know that if I do, those are things that will be cut." [H]

"I don't agree with the cuts at all, I don't think they should be happening, and the council should be fighting them harder." [C]

"All of these services need to happen. There's no way we can make a priority between them" [H]

"I'd rather there was an across-the-board cut of whatever's needed rather than priorities." [H]

"It would have been better to have looked at a single area in more detail" [P]

"The elected people should make these decisions .they have been elected for this – we are doing their work for them." [C]

2. There was general opposition to cuts

We expected that there would be a considerable opposition to cuts in general, and that there might be participants who had come solely for the purpose of protesting about cuts. In the event, only two participants were identifiably there with the intention of sending a message back that the cuts were unacceptable, and both participated in the discussion once they had made their initial point. However, although there were no arguments or hostility, there was a general underlying unhappiness about the cuts agenda in general - and some participants remarked that the political leadership should be working harder to campaign against them.

Views of participants:

"We couldn't identify anything that we thought could be reduced" [P]

"The councillors should tell the Government they're not going to make any cuts. These are local councillors – we have elected them. They have power. They need to fight back." [C]

"When the councillors campaigned they did it on a stop the cuts platform. And now they are 'here are the cuts.' Responsibility of councillors to demand that the government reinstates the funding." [P]

"All these things need to happen." [H]

"Who caused all of this? The bankers, the treasury and so on. But no help like they get is being provided to ordinary people." [P]

3. Participants felt that they had insufficient information to make decisions

Participants felt that the information provided was insufficient to make decisions - an interesting point given that the presence of service experts provided more opportunity to receive information than those participating in the equivalent online exercise. The additional information most often asked for was benchmarking on costs compared to other authorities; the extent to which prevention could reduce costs in the future; the comparative cost of salaries between authorities, and between authorities and the private sector.

We asked participants whether they would have wanted more information available on the day, and the general view was they would not have been able to process it in the time available - they expressed a preference for it being put online, and shared more widely over a longer period of time. No participant said that the event was too short, or that they would have wanted to devote a whole day to the event. This conflicting desire to know more but to learn it over time is an element of the argument for ongoing involvement and budget literacy work, set out later in this document ("Lessons for the Future").

Views of participants:

"If we had had more information on the consequences of the cuts - what 5% means, what 10% and what 15%, we might have been able to make more decisions" [P]

"Go to the people who are using the services and then see what they think. There are the best people to inform you." [H]

"There's lots of potential flexibility in shifting small amounts of money. But we don't have enough information or a sense of the political will to understand what would be feasible." [C]

"We would want to understand what the cost savings from prevention could be in the future, so we knew how much we should focus on prevention." [C]

"If provide summary then people want more information if provide more, people find it difficult to understand." [P]

"We could identify shortcomings in services we had used, but we didn't know about the ones we hadn't" [P]

"Finance and resources is a very technical area, we didn't know what effect their services had so we couldn't prioritise" [H]

"How do we know where money is being wasted? What are the benchmarks?" [C]

"If anything, I have learned today that it is immensely complex and I am not capable of this. I trust and pay people do it for me." [P]

"This is a massive amount of money here - there was a description but no quality or quantitative info." [H]

4. Participants generally saw the council in a positive light

Slightly to our surprise, the attitude of participants to the council seemed broadly positive. We had thought that - particularly in Patcham - there might be a small number of politically-motivated participants who would come with a definite "cut everything" agenda, looking to send back recommendations from the group that focused on perceived inefficiencies in the council, and the illegitimacy of council tax increases. However, this element did not materialise - in fact, there was no sense that the political parties or other interest groups had sought to pack any of the events, which is perhaps a benefit of seeding through community groups rather than broader advertising.

Views of participants:

"In some of the areas it would be interesting to know council officer's salaries against services" [H]

"If we do things on the cheap we get cheap things. My council tax is good value for money and I would be willing to pay more." [P]

"We should run a more efficient office and staff not always think of cutting good projects." [H]

"Really difficult to look down the list and say where would you make the cuts. The council and the councillors do seem to have their hearts in the right place." [C]

"The council are cutting by efficiency drives rather than front line service reduction. This seems the correct approach." [H]

5. Consultation was generally seen as positive, but not if it was one-off

Although participants felt uncomfortable with the prioritisation exercise, as described above, the overall view of the events themselves was positive. Only one participant saw the events as being "the council asking us to do their job", and when participants at the Hangleton event were asked whether they would want more or less consultation on council matters, the view was unanimous that they would want more.

The way in which participants envisaged it being delivered, however, was over a longer period, and being more involved in understanding services and their delivery, rather than being asked about specific numbers that - to them - bore no relationship to their lived reality.

Views of participants:

"I find the discussion sterile. There's a localism bill but then the Government says you can't spend any more on this or that." [P]

"More involved is better but not a tick box system. Most of us have gone beyond tick boxes and making proper comments is vital." [H]

"I would be happy if we knew that the money was being spent on the genuine needs of the community not on political ambitions. You need to consult the people with events like this." [H]

"We get our council tax bill in and it says so much has been spent on this, so much on that. This event gives a different perspective on how council tax is spent - people would understand it more and they would maybe more willing to have an increase." [P]

"We want to work with the council about how to deliver the services for ourselves. Not just where to cut services." [H]

"Different kind of consultation is needed - what we priorities and how we spend. The dignity of people and how we serve them. Any consultation should take that on board too." [H]

"We want better tools to think with - we are being asked to consider cuts without understanding the fuller picture of the global council issues. More information in itself may not be useful. It is the framework which is useful." [C]

Adults and Children's services

Adult services and children's services were the two areas that participants felt it was most difficult to cut. They understood that the services were high-intensity and high-cost, and delivered to people in very serious need. Most had not experienced the services directly, and were unwilling to make a judgement about them because they felt they lacked direct experience.

Participants' ideas for the service tended to be expressed as positive policy preferences - sometimes potentially expensive proposals - rather than as areas that could be cut. A greater readiness to come up with ideas was a general pattern across all areas. It suggests that a creative and solutions-focused

discussion (with better information, as discussed above) would be a good model for future events. The only specific suggestion for cuts (from Hangleton) was to reduce spending on agency workers in social care, and replace them with permanent staff.

These services were more prominent in the discussions in Hangleton and central Brighton than during the discussion in Patcham.

The principal points from the discussions were:

1. Adult and children's services as a whole are seen as extremely important

The presence of the experts ensured that the nature of the services and the vulnerability of the people who use them was well understood among participants. There was an understanding that the services were overall high-cost as a share of council services, but the route to cost reductions was seen as efficiency and cost-benchmarking, combined with better prevention (see next point).

Views of participants:

"Can't really make savings to these figures" [H]

"How do you provide for your family? Who looks after old people? Maybe I should be allowed to pay more council tax as some of these things are worth paying for." [P]

"Nothing should be cut. They are all priorities and if they do there should be no more than a 5% cut in any area" [H]

"Early years is essential but the problem is that there is a 20 year lag until you see the benefits" [H]

"These are baseline services which need to stay in place and are essential." [H]

"Need to tighten up all people in these areas with employment contracts – generally wastage. Sickness contracts tightened up for the people delivering the services." [H]

"With the information we have there is nothing on this list that we would be happy to say that there is anything we would like to be cut." [P]

"Reduce funding for residential and nursing care a bit as that is reducing anyway." [C]

"Assessment and care management is the engine room and can't really reduce a lot without having an impact elsewhere." [C]

"We would want to increase funding in some areas to have savings further down the line" [C]

"Council is not going to get this money back. It is communities and families who are going to have to make up the difference. It's really difficult to look down the list and say where would you make the cuts." [C]

"Focus on the main issues – focus on individuals who are vulnerable. That's the core business of the council" [P]

"There is an enormous variation between services provided by the council vs those provided by the private sector. This is because council staff are paid more, and are therefore more motivated." [P]

2. Greater investment in prevention

Participants could see a clear case for spending in preventive services, and identified this as a route to reducing spending in the longer term, although they acknowledged that it would not produce savings on care immediately.

Views of participants:

"Prevent people from getting ill by promoting opportunities for older people to stay active" [H]

"Cuts in some areas will bleed through into others, the council has to be smart about its reductions to prevent this." [C]

"Invest in early year services then deliver what is good for children and good for society. Will cost council more to clear up the mess of the broken children." [C]

"We've looked at each area and agreed that prevention is much better than cure." [H]

"Preventative services should be shared with the PCT. Preventive services and innovation might help in the longer run but not in 2012/13" [C]

"We would want to invest in areas that will bring service savings down the line." [C]

"Would like to see more information on the social return on investment, and how the council can benefit by saving the NHS money." [C]

"The council should borrow to invest in early years services, and look to repay through social return on investment rather than through financial return." [C]

"We should be asking staff and service users to identify efficiencies to make savings later rather than 'your job or his' which is the model for the exercise." [C]

3. Prioritise ability of people to stay in their own home

Related to the point on prevention, the ideal care setting for adults was seen as people's own homes. Residential care was seen as a poor alternative to family or community care, but where it needed to be provided, participants wanted assurances of quality.

Views of participants:

"Preventative and support services are the most important thing, particularly to enable people to live a full life without becoming dependent on residential care." [H]

"Trend is for people to stay in their home, we should encourage that. If necessary reduce funding on residential care - it is going down anyway." [C]

"Home care should be a really clear priority – preventative and cuts here would lead to a big spike in other areas." [C]

"Equipment and adaptations is such a small amount compared to the costs of residential care: it is a good investment." [C]

4. Greater reliance on community and families (if they have the appropriate support)

Participants were very supportive of services being delivered by local community groups and volunteers, but not on private sector delivery of personal services (as opposed to infrastructure services - see later). They saw families as having a first-line responsibility, with the community and voluntary sector working alongside. It goes without saying that this is a difficult area in which to craft messages: participants were happy to say for themselves that families needed to be the first line of defence - they would probably be much less receptive to a similar message coming from the council.

Views from participants:

"Improve support for families to care for older residents." [H]

"I'd rather have services delivered by people motivated by public service rather than private companies." [P]

"Grants to voluntary organisations are good, but it depends on people working themselves to the bone to deliver services. It feels like it could be transferring services to cheap labour, and too open to being misused" [P]

"There should be more activities that allow people to stay in own home and have help from families, and improved support for families to care for residents." [H]

"Families should be able to keep the savings generated if they help a family member stay out of residential care." [H]

5. Youth services seen as high importance on estates

Youth service funding was only specifically picked out in Hangleton, where it was seen as a particularly important area of service. Participants believed that youth services were an investment against anti-social behaviour in the area (they characterised ASB as a problem from the past that had been solved by better youth services and quicker intervention). By comparison, in the other two areas, youth services were not mentioned separately from children's services as a whole.

Views from participants (all in Hangleton):

"Youth services – this is essential for all young people – the benefits are long term but you will see them."

"The atmosphere in this place has been transformed because of youth services in recent years, we don't want to go back."

"More money for community groups, youth groups, volunteers etc. more prevention less cure."

6. Individual suggestions (not mentioned in discussions)

"There should be no social care support for people moving into the city." [H]

"Discourage drug takers from coming here and send them home if they do." [H]

Housing and Communities

Unlike social services, participants felt that they understood housing and communities issues, although there was still the same preference for suggesting new ideas rather than engaging with the cuts agenda. The differences between areas were also striking, with discussion in Patcham largely based around the cultural and economic services provided under this heading, while Hangleton and Central Brighton took a broader view.

This area was the only one in which a whole table came to an agreement on a priority ordering – this was in Hangleton, who collectively rated the services as follows (0 = lowest priority):

- Supporting people: 100
- Tourism, Pavilion & Museums: 100
- Communities and Equalities: 100
- Community Safety: 100 (focus on youth service)
- Libraries and Information Service: 90
- Sports and Leisure: 70 (focus on low-cost sports facilities)
- Homelessness: 60
- Housing Strategy: 50

This spending block also covered culture and sport - the only area of all those covered where there was a wide disagreement about the value of the service. Participants were divided between those who thought culture spending was important, and those who thought it was a luxury.

The principal points from the discussions were:

1. Greater community sector involvement in housing and community safety

Here as elsewhere, community and voluntary sector provision was supported. This was in part because of a desire for more localised provision around community safety and housing, which came out particularly strongly in Hangleton, reflecting its strong internal identity.

Views of participants:

"Why is the council the provider of housing support and advice? People do not want to go to the council for this service, they would prefer to go to a local community group." [H]

"Grants go to youth workers, community workers and community. The council should spend the same amount but better targeted." [H]

"We don't see any grants going to local community safety initiatives here. Money is being channelled but not to all the relevant areas. Community groups can treat the cause not the problem" [H]

"Community groups are left to do things themselves, working alongside the police and NHS (which is what local groups do) - that tackles problems at the roots. Send money right to community level – people there know where the money goes." [H]

"Prioritise grants to community rather than using council officers. Why should council services be best run by the council?" [P]

"There are lots of grants for community and voluntary sector. Are we creating a funding dependency culture for charitable organisations?" [C]

"Anti social behaviour is better tackled by spending the money on community groups, not on council staff." [H]

"Community safety support should go to the community, youth work and community development to work alongside NHS and police. Stop the problem not mop up afterwards." [H]

2. Joined-up services, possibly brokered at local level

Alongside localism and community-level service, participants were keen to see boundaries between services and organisations broken down. This was framed generally as a way of producing better outcomes, rather than as an example of waste. The question of how services should be joined up often threw up the suggestion of community groups as co-ordinators of service at local level. There are some potential lessons here for neighbourhood councils that are drawn out in the "Lessons for the Future" section later.

Views of participants:

"It feels like there is duplication of services between police, NHS and council - can we join them up more at local level?" [C]

"Supporting people should be about connecting services" [H]

"Group together similar services with one contact/ website approach rather than have each sector with each having a separate approach. Put it all together." [C]

"The three areas of housing, homelessness and supporting people are right in my opinion but should be amalgamated and rationalised to avoid duplication of effort. It is possible that costs could then be cut without any loss of service to the community." [C]

"If there are charities working together supporting housing or homelessness they can work together to find common solutions – work better together. If you cut the funding for charities tomorrow – we need to be building a strong group of voluntary groups and charities." [C]

3. Differing views on tourism, culture and sport

This was one of the only areas where there was both an expressed desire for cuts, and differences of opinion within the groups. Some participants felt that culture and tourism spending did not benefit them, and had little effect on the wider economy, while others saw it as an essential part of "what makes Brighton Brighton". On sports, similarly, some thought that sport development was essential and others that it was a luxury. There was more general support for

keeping access to sports facilities cheap and easy. The numbers of people expressing opinions on either side was roughly in balance - but the fact that some participants were ready to propose cuts makes this a possible area for savings.

Views of participants:

"It is a wonderful museum but it could be outsourced. This is not the business of the council." [P]

"I feel the heritage and tourism stuff is really important to me. Universal access to this is really important. Bringing up my children here I want them to have access the history and background. These are important facilities for me and I would reconsider living here if they went." [P]

"Library buildings are not well-used, they should be made available for wider community uses." [H]

"I'd much rather money was taken from museums and put into sports. Sports are important for health, and with the obesity epidemic even more important." [C]

"Museum services and archives maintain our history and there is an enormous amount of material and records that is vital to know who we are and where we are." [P]

"Sports and leisure need to be affordable to the public. And they need to be provided with better and cheaper parking, people round here can't get there and can't afford to park when they do." [H]

"Sports development is a luxury, it should all go. Focus on providing cheap spaces for sport." [H]

"Libraries and info services could be cut moderately. No libraries to be closed but hours could be cut. Likewise staff numbers (to be honest libraries seem to be well staffed). Don't cut mobile library services though as they are great." [C]

"Cut culture and tourism spending dramatically. I am not convinced that income from tourism trickles down significantly to the average resident. Especially those on the outer estates" [C]

"Our museum spending is shockingly high - it should be cut dramatically and museums should be outsourced if necessary." [C]

4. Support for developing social housing

There was some desire to look at the Housing Revenue Account budget in parallel with the main budget in future consultation exercises (although it should be said, that was probably not said with a full understanding of the restrictions on HRA spending). More generally, there was support for council housing and an understanding of the housing problems in the city.

Views of participants:

"Housing there is so much of a knock on effect of not having a decent stock of affordable rented housing – homelessness and so on - but the council has no powers to expand this stock. It needs to be addressed. It can't just be left on one

side – need to put together a strategy and reject the straightjacket we are being put into it." [P]

"The right to buy means losing social housing we can't afford to lose." [C]

5. Desire for community-led regeneration

Regeneration as a topic was not much discussed, but it did come up briefly in Hangleton and central Brighton, where the focus was on "regeneration without money", using community efforts to smarten up buildings, short-term cheap or free leases to community groups.

Views of participants:

"There should be wider work on regeneration, a big conversation about how we do it when there's no money around. Regeneration should deliver mixed spaces with residential and business." [C]

"Giving all the empty shop windows to charities and community groups to do window displays. Or possibly peppercorn rents to actually use the building. This is regeneration for free!" [H]

City Infrastructure

Although city infrastructure, which covered refuse, recycling and transport, is by far the most commonly-used service of those discussed, it was the area where there was least discussion and comparatively few comments.

The view of participants was much more business-focused than community-focused, unlike in other areas. Generally participants thought that costs could be reduced through outsourcing and better contract procurement - but here, unlike in other areas, they also wanted the council to maximise its income generation potential. We did see the general reluctance to specify cuts, as in other areas.

The principal points raised in discussion were:

1. Saving money on transport

Transport was identified as an area where some policy changes could reduce costs, but as with other areas there was a reluctance to specify cuts to services.

Views of participants:

"We should try not fixing pot holes for a while but only short term." [C]

"Local contractors would be cheaper for roadworks if they were procured more sensibly." [H]

"Issue older people with day tickets rather than having them take multiple single journeys with a bus pass." [H]

"Reduce the specification of cycle lanes - all it needs is a bit of paint." [C]

2. Income generation

The one area where income generation was discussed was transport. In general, participants were not willing to see non-transport charges increased. A few participants were willing to see further increases in Council Tax, but most were not. It should be noted that transport charging was only raised as an issue in the central Brighton event – and participants in Hangleton wanted to see reductions in parking charges for sports venues.

Views of participants:

"Congestion charging should be considered, but it needs to be joined up so that it doesn't hurt the business community." [C]

"Charge people for damaging roads – if they drive into bridges for instance." [H]

"Increase fines and enforcement for those driving in bus lanes – set up costs are cheap and fantastic income earner." [C]

"Night time economy - use a polluter pays principle. Anyone who retails after midnight pays a premium for street cleaning." [C]

"Charge utilities for digging up roads." [C]

3. Refuse and recycling

Refuse and recycling was identified as a significant expenditure, but participants had few specific proposals for cuts or reducing costs. The issue of fortnightly collection did not come up, but communal bins received support from people in the central Brighton event.

Views of participants:

"Refuse collection – is there a different way of doing things? Working with a partner organisation, ideally a not-for-profit to reduce costs." [C]

"Communal bins work. We should roll them out beyond the current area." [C]

"Generate income through selling wider range of recyclables or composting." [C]

"Put the city clean contract out to tender again. A private company or a not for profit coop could do that cheaper now." [C]

4. Other suggestions

Participants raised a number of other issues in this area.

Views of participants:

"It's important that there are no cuts to money for crossings outside schools." [H]

"Planning or building control – cut more red tape and ease the amount of time spent. Some of the applications take far longer as have various bodies looking into aspects of the application." [H]

"Trading standards and environmental health essential - very important to prevent cuts in this area." [H]

"The sustainability team needs more resources to enable it to save energy and money for the council elsewhere." [C]

Finance and resources

Participants generally found the finance and resources budget difficult to understand, because it is so internally-focused and no information on benchmarking was available. However, because it deals with the HR and other staffing functions of the council, there was no shortage of suggestions on how the council should manage its business.

Participants generally looked for continuing pressure on efficiency and reassurance that council officer salaries are good value. They felt that staff time could be used more effectively.

Although we expected back office functions to be highlighted for cuts, many participants understood that the central functions of the council had an essential role in making the council run, and in building efficiency.

The principal elements of the discussion were:

1. Restraining expenditure in council services

Participants were most concerned with waste in Hangleton. They did not seem to believe that staff were generally profligate or lazy, but that the systems and habits of the council as an organisation encouraged waste that could be avoided.

Views of participants:

"Tackle waste and efficiency. Ensure that council salaries are in line with similar work elsewhere" [H]

"There is scope for budget savings though centralising ICT functions regionally or nationally." [H]

"There should be incentives to departments to come in under budget in such a way that they are then able to keep those budgets for next year, rather than doing mad end-of-year spending." [H]

"Staff should pay for their own transport to encourage them to walk more." [H]

"Don't provide expensive bottled water in meetings – tap water is fine to drink." [H]

"Cut waste in the offices – paper, paper clips, photo copying, cut time waste too. Smokers chat in corners – we all know who is lazy." [H]

"Look at overall efficiency of services and staff in general." [H]

"Spend on HR seems to be very high. It must be possible to make reductions here." [C]

"Need to tighten up contracts and sickness among people delivering the services." [H]

"The council should not be using bottles of bottled water - £2 per time, 6 on the table." [H]

"Special permission for colour photocopying would save thousands." [H]

"Ensure all meetings are within civic buildings." [H]

2. Promoting organisational development and new ways of working

While participants in Hangleton focused on waste, the main discussion in central Brighton was around new ways of working and promoting organisational change within the council. This reflects the broadly solutions-focused nature of the conversation across all areas in central Brighton, which is unsurprising as they were recruited through routes linked to CityCamp and civic innovation.

Views of participants:

"Partnership seems really important - it's an area where we should make investments." [P]

"We need a new tool that uncovers underlying, systemic issues that are preventing the Council from delivering their services more efficiently and effectively." [C]

"It seems that it is the human resources in the organisations that holds the key and that leadership at certain levels – particularly middle management – effect the culture significantly. Intrinsic motivation seems to be key and this can be tapped into for little cost." [C]

"Giving people recognition will get people working harder. Noticing colleagues doesn't cost anything but can be very motivating. Understanding what motivates and drives people – unleash potential across the council. Understand all levels of the council." [C]

3. Other ideas

Two other ideas came up briefly in discussions, which do not fit easily above:

"I believe the council does far too much in far too many areas. Focus on the main issues, close down the rest." [P]

"Something like this [the preparatory information] should go out to every person paying council tax." [P]

Demographic information

The demographic questionnaire was distributed to all participants. Of the 48 participants, 39 filled in the questionnaire.

Age

The age profile of participants was older than the city's age range. In total across the events, no participants who completed questionnaires were under 20 (one was under sixteen, but she did not complete a demographic questionnaire).

Three were between 20 and 29, 8 between 30 and 39, 7 between 40 and 49, 8 between 50 and 59, 6 between 60 and 69 and 7 were 70 or above.

As might be expected from the recruitment routes, Patcham and Hangleton had an older age profile than central Brighton. Patcham's mean age was 58, Hangleton's 49, but central Brighton's 43.

Gender/Ethnic Origin/Sexuality

Overall, 17 of 39 respondents were male, and 22 of 39 female. Patcham was the only event that did not have a female majority - Hangleton had a 2:1 majority of women.

All bar two questionnaire respondents identified as white, with one Asian/Asian British and one "Prefer not to say".

All questionnaire respondents at Hangleton and Patcham identified as "Heterosexual/Straight". In the central Brighton event, eight questionnaire respondents identified as "Heterosexual/Straight", and one each as "Gay man", "Lesbian/Gay Woman", "Bisexual" and "Other".

Household Income profile

The income distribution was much wider than the age distribution, in all of the events.

The Patcham event was quite polarised, with half the questionnaire respondents reporting incomes beneath £20k, one an income between £45k and £60k, and one more over £60k. Two others preferred not to say.

Slightly less polarised was the central Brighton event. Four questionnaire respondents reported incomes under £15k, one £15-20k, one £20-25k and two £25-30k. Two other participants reported incomes over £60k, and the other three questionnaire respondents preferred not to answer.

The Hangleton event had a broad income spread, skewed to the lower end. Six questionnaire respondents (one third) reported incomes under £15k, two £15-20k, two £20-25k, three £25-35k, one £35-45k, one £45-60k, and two more over £60k (one questionnaire respondent preferred not to say).

Health and caring responsibilities

No questionnaire respondents at Patcham or central Brighton reported having their activities limited by a long-lasting health problem. Five of the eighteen questionnaire respondents (28%) at the Hangleton event reported that their activities were limited by a long-lasting health problem.

Caring responsibilities were more widely spread. Two of eight questionnaire respondents at Patcham, four of eighteen at Hangleton, and one of thirteen at central Brighton reported being a carer for a friend or family member (other than as paid employment).

“Five quick questions” survey

The intention behind the "five quick questions" survey was to understand the attitudes of participants before and after the event, and to discover whether their exposure to the information provided about the council had improved or worsened their opinion. We asked all participants to complete the questionnaire at the start and at the end, but not all did so - with fewer completing it at the end.

At Patcham seven out of eight participants completed the "before" questionnaire, and five out of eight the "after". At the central Brighton event, sixteen completed it before, and seven after. At the Hangleton event, twenty-one completed it before, and seven after.

Because of the low number of "after" responses it is difficult to analyse any change in opinion, but for completeness's sake the "after" answers are shown below in brackets.

The first question asked participants to rate the statement "I think that overall the Council does its job" with 1 being "Not well at all", 2 being "not that well", 3 being "fairly well", and 4 being "Very well".

At central Brighton, the average score was 3.13 (2.71 after), at Patcham 2.71 (3.0 after), and at Hangleton 2.86 before and after.

The second question asked participants to rate the statement "I think that in general the Council uses its money..." on the same scale.

At central Brighton, the average score was 2.88 (2.66 after), at Patcham 2.43 (3.0 after), and at Hangleton 2.62 (2.0 after).

The third question asked participants to rate the statement "I think the amount of money the Council spends is...", on a scale where 1 is "much too much", 2 is "slightly too much", 3 "slightly too little", and 4 "much too little".

At central Brighton, the average score was 2.69 (1.93 after), at Patcham 2.14 (3.5 after), and at Hangleton 2.24 (2.29 after).

The fourth question asked participants to rate the statement "I think that Council Tax is...", on a scale where 1 is "much too high", 2 is "slightly too high", 3 "slightly too low", and 4 "much too low".

At central Brighton, the average score was 2.4 (2.6 after), at Patcham 1.3 (1.7 after), and at Hangleton 2.3 (1.9 after).

The final question asked participants to rate each of the services under discussion on a scale where 1 was "spending could be cut a lot", 2 was "spending could be cut a little", 3 was "needs a bit more money", and 4 was "needs a lot more money". This rating means that the balancing point between cuts and no-cuts is 2.5. Services with ratings higher than 2.5 are thought to need more funding, on average. Services with ratings lower than 2.5 are thought to need less funding, on average.

- ❖ Services for children were rated 2.89 (2.29) in Hangleton, 2.19 (2.0) in central Brighton, and 2.5 (3.0) in Patcham.
- ❖ Services for adults were rated 2.95 in Hangleton (2.3), 2.25 in central Brighton (1.86) and 3.0 in Patcham (3.0).
- ❖ City infrastructure was rated 2.43 in Hangleton (2.0), 2.31 in central Brighton (1.43), and 2.5 in Patcham (4.0).
- ❖ Housing and communities was rated 3.0 in Hangleton (2.43), 2.63 in central Brighton (2.07), and 2.5 in Patcham (4.0).
- ❖ Finance and resources was rated 2.29 in Hangleton (2.0), 2.19 in central Brighton (1.86) and 2.33 in Patcham (2.8).
- ❖ On the basis of these rankings, the overall priority order (averaging the before and after rankings for both groups) between services is:
 - ❖ Above the halfway line, implying a perceived need for funding:
 - ❖ Housing and communities (2.771)
 - ❖ Services for adults (2.558)

Below the halfway line, implying a perception that some cuts were possible:
Services for children (2.476)
City infrastructure (2.445)
Finance and Resources (2.244)

Lessons for the Future

As is clear from the results of the events described above, the events did not produce a clear prioritisation of different services, or specific suggestions for budget reductions in most areas. Instead, they operated in a space between a traditional focus group and a participatory discussion event like CityForum.

The responses of participants give some clear ideas for approaching future budget consultations, and the neighbourhood democracy work currently underway in the council.

The lessons we would draw from the events are:

1. Information is essential, but there is greater demand for detail than can be satisfied in a single consultation event

2. People are less confident in making decisions than might be assumed, even when those decisions do not have direct consequences
3. Ongoing engagement and participation are essential
4. Strong community networks are essential for effective consultation, particularly in areas with lower facility in social media.

1. The role of information

The most common reason participants gave for not ranking or prioritising services was that they did not feel that they had sufficient information to make the decision. The information that was provided for the exercise was based on the Delib consultation materials, but the presence of experts from the council should have meant that participants had more information than those taking the online consultation.

When the facilitator probed concerns about the lack of information, it was clear that participants wanted access to information that would enable them to make qualitative judgements about the services that the council was delivering. The types of information mentioned were salary scales, benchmarks of cost and quality, and comparisons between service levels in different authorities.

The demand for information was considerable, but the readiness of participants to learn more by taking more time over the events was limited. In Hangleton, it was agreed that the 2 hour format was the right length, and that longer would have required an unrealistic commitment of participants' free time. However, the information that people asked for was far more extensive than could have been absorbed in a two hour period, even with pre-reading materials.

Participants in Hangleton agreed that they were not looking to participate in a whole-day event, or to receive more information in advance. Instead, they said that they wanted to be informed about the council's budget and performance all the time. We did not press on how realistic it was to expect people to keep up with such information.

In the same way, the audiences in Patcham and central Brighton looked for more information while being unwilling to commit more time to the event. One participant at Patcham asked the Council to send a summary of spending information to every resident every year - unaware that this information is provided alongside the Council Tax bill. Participants at the Patcham event expressed general ignorance of the nature of the information provided alongside the bill, suggesting that the council tax leaflet cannot be relied upon as a route to disseminate spending and performance information.

2. Reluctance to make decisions

We were slightly surprised by the reluctance participants expressed about making decisions. The event was explicitly billed as a consultation event, and we

had assumed that general scepticism about consultation as a process would mean that participants did not see a direct connection between the views they expressed and the council's decisions. At the start of each event, we made clear that any final decision on budgets would be for the Council as a whole to make.

It is clear, though, from the reaction of participants that budgets, particularly in a time of service cuts, were an area where people made “on the record” comments very cautiously.

Many participants said that they were unwilling to make any recommendations for cuts. This was not generally on the basis that the council ought to rely on its democratic mandate, and make such decisions without consultation. In fact, there was a willingness to be more involved in decisions on services - but also a view that people who received those services were the best placed to specify whether or how they should be changed.

This draws out a distinction between participatory budgeting and prioritisation of service delivery across the whole council.

Participatory budgeting usually operates within the ring fence of a ward or neighbourhood budget, rather than across the whole range of council services. One big decision is already taken: that the ward or neighbourhood will have £50,000 to spend, and the choices are then only between the different options for spending, and people are able to make those choices on the basis of their own experience.

This exercise, by contrast, was spending “other people's money”, or rather deciding on other people's services. The confidence threshold that people felt was therefore much higher than in a simple “spend here or spend there” budgeting exercise. This is both a credit to the approach taken and the trust participants had that they would be listened to - people clearly felt that the decisions would be taken seriously - but also a challenge. It is hard to envisage a manageable single event that provides enough information and decision support to allow members of the public to make such difficult choices.

3. Ongoing engagement and budget literacy is essential.

If participants want more information and more involvement, this can only be practically delivered by budget information provided over a longer term as part of a comprehensive engagement strategy. This will involve commitment by the council and its partners to make service budgeting and performance even more easily available and more transparent.

Of course, even the most transparent and open information is pointless if no-one looks at it - so there is a corresponding need to ensure that those who are interested in involving themselves in local democracy (between fourteen and thirty-four percent of the population, on recent surveys), are targeted and shown how to involve themselves.

This type of awareness-raising and open information will be essential if the council's intentions on neighbourhood governance arrangements, as well as central government's promises community plans and community budgets are to be implemented successfully. We are aware work to develop these approaches is already underway, through the council's consultation on neighbourhood governance arrangements and the NESTA-funded programme *We Live Here*.

4. Strong neighbourhood networks essential

The recruitment method used for this exercise was - intentionally - an experiment with three different sets of networks, the online networks around social media and the CityCamp events; the established networks in Hangleton & Knoll; and the more informal networks in Patcham.

Of the three, at least for this event and on this topic, the neighbourhood network in Hangleton & Knoll was most ready to be engaged, even though participants there were on average poorer, more disabled, and had greater caring responsibilities. This is testimony to the benefit that comes from building strong trusted networks over a number of years. Hangleton & Knoll is perhaps the clearest example of a neighbourhood that would be ready for more devolved forms of governance, because it has existing networks that are strongly interconnected, a sense of itself as a place, and a number of key influencers who bridge different parts of the community. We know from our work on the *We Live Here* programme that a community network mapping exercise will shortly take place in Hangleton & Knoll, and we expect it to show a strong network with high penetration in the community.

The social media/CityCamp network is something different. As might be expected from a loose set of connections through social media, the response rate overall was much lower than in Patcham or Hangleton (although social media and email meant that more people could be contacted).

The nature of the central Brighton group's engagement was also rather different. Because the participants came from various parts of the city, even if predominantly the urban core, there was no sub-city geography that they could identify as "theirs", and so the issues they discussed tended to be general in nature rather than location-specific. Perhaps because a relatively large share of the group was from the CityCamp community, the central Brighton group was far more ready to look for new things to do (with the intention of saving money later), rather than ways to save money or cut services. As a corollary, however, also more ready to see services change than the groups in Hangleton and Patcham, which mostly looked to preserve things as they are.