

BUDGET CONSULTATION 2009/10 – SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

Q1. Do you feel that a 3.5% council tax increase (an extra £6.20 a year or 12p a week) is:

	Yes	No	%
Too Much	2		50
About Right	1		25
Not enough to maintain local services	1		25
Total	4		100

Q2. What do you think should be the Council's priorities for improving services? (up to 3 can be chosen)

	Response	%
Preventing crime & disorder		
Flood Prevention	1	10
Supporting voluntary organisations	1	10
Parks and gardens		
Preserving the town's character and heritage		
Public health		
Neighbourhood regeneration	2	20
Promoting redevelopment of under used town centre sites	1	10
Waste collection and recycling	1	10
Arts and culture	1	10
Promoting sport and health living		
Street cleaning	1	10
Affordable housing		
Promoting tourism		
Promoting business and employment	1	10
Other (See below):	1	10
Total	100	100

Reponses to Q2 under 'other':

- Cost cutting in council white collar employees of middle management level

Q3. What improvements would you most like to see the Council make to the town?

- Prevention of parking on pavements, and cleaning drains to stop pools forming on footpaths. Keeping a close eye on town centre roads to ensure contractors quickly rectify damage caused by their vehicles and working practices (e.g. A footpath on St Georges lane has been unusable for months near Chelsea Court). Encourage library services to return to their roots in providing books rather than computer services.
- Safe crossings, pavements and access to shops and services for people in wheelchairs and with mobility problems.
- Better provision for independent trade and local businesses, more markets and support for original business ideas in order to make the town more individual and a real destination spot for tourists and people wanting a good shopping destination. Clampdown on antisocial drinking, which prevents people coming to the town centre late into the evenings, and also contributes to both serious crime and petty crime in the town Improved bus services to aid people to access the town at all hours and reduce car usage.

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Q4. The Cabinet is proposing £708,000 of efficiency savings, including cutting management and administration costs. What further savings do you believe the Council make in the running of the Council?

- Unable to say.
- Better intercommunication between the various departments and a clearer job description and areas of responsibility for every council member of staff from senior manager to front line staff.

Q5. Do you have any comments on the charges the Council makes for its services?

- For the vast majority they do not get value.
- Not able to judge without comparison figures from other similar sized authorities.

Q6. The Cabinet has identified £95,000 which the Council will save from the temporary reduction in VAT, and which is not already being given back to local people in reduced charges. Have you any suggestions as to how this could be used in 2009/10?

	Response	%
Holding more of the town's car park charges at the current level?	1	25
Introducing some days of free parking to stimulate trade?	1	25
Reducing or freezing other charges?	1	25
Other (see below):	1	25
Total	100	25

Q6 - Responses to 'Reducing or freezing other charges?':

- Reduced or free parking for short stay parking, a greater charge long stay businesses in these areas.
- Council tax so everyone will share a very little.

Q6 – Responses to 'Other':

- Keep council tax down
- Projects to help people back into work or meaningful activity following redundancy or distance from the workplace.

Q7. Finally, do you have any general comments on the proposed budget?

- It is iniquitous that the only voluntary and community groups to receive funding are those who have previously received funding and there is no application process or mechanism for other organisations to receive support from the Borough Council despite the contributions they make to the services and quality of life for the people of Cheltenham.
- Higher car parking does nothing to stimulate trade in any specific area, people resent it. Car parks that are primarily for shoppers are often filling up with long term parkers who use them all day. Parking should be cheap for the first hour rising in the second and third and be expensive for longer than three hours.

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PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE BUDGET – CABINET RESPONSE

Methodology

The consultation went live on the website on 17th December 2008, including a summary of the budget proposals and a questionnaire. Council officers worked with Cheltenham VCA to ensure that the budget consultation was circulated widely. As a result, the budget leaflet and questionnaire was emailed to over 200 local community and voluntary groups on 22 December.

Parish councils were each provided with a full set of budget papers.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Culture and the Chief Finance Officer together held consultation meetings with the business community (17 November) and the C5 group of parish council representatives (26 November). The Cabinet Member held a meeting with voluntary sector representatives (19 January).

In addition, the Chief Finance Officer gave a presentation to Cheltenham Strategic Partnership (11 December) at which representatives from the PCT, Police, County Council and the Learning and Skills Council were present.

The response to public consultation was disappointing in terms of numbers, despite the usual steps being taken to make budget information available and to seek opinions. However the consultation meetings were fruitful, as were the discussions within the Council at the three Overview & Scrutiny Committees. Some responses came in at the last minute and were obviously triggered by the Echo article on car park charges on 22 January.

A budget presentation was made by the Cabinet Member for Finance and Culture to each of the three Overview & Scrutiny Committees, followed by discussion and questions.

The Cabinet's response to the public consultation

Three letters were received, from Cheltenham VCA, Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish Council and the Chamber of Commerce. These are summarised below, together with the Cabinet's response. The Cabinet's response to the general issues raised in the completed questionnaires is also set out below.

The Social & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee made a number of specific recommendations which, together with the Cabinet response, are summarised below.

Comments from Cheltenham VCA

Cheltenham VCA is pleased to see that support for the voluntary and community sector is continued in the draft budget proposals for 2009/10. We would particularly like to support the inclusion of the following strands: additional funding for the BoME working budget; and purchase of Grantfinder. We would also urge the council to include the following in their budget which are currently unsupported in the budget proposals:

- VCS Representatives - a proposal went to the Cheltenham Strategic Partnership for all key partners to contribute to the 'backfill costs' of providing VCS representation at thematic partnerships. £2k would be Cheltenham Borough Councils contribution to this.

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The payment would go to the VCS organisation to enable it to release its staff member/volunteer to provide the representative role on behalf of the whole VCS. Cheltenham is often upheld through the county as having a positive model of engaging and enabling VCS representation. To contribute towards the cost of this would send a powerful and positive message to many in the county and really demonstrate a commitment to 'developing a thriving third sector' (one of the LAA targets).

- Recruitment of a corporate funding officer – this should be a voluntary and community sector role if it is about generating additional funding to deliver services in communities and supporting organisations to make collaborative bids.
- We are supportive of the Homelessness Prevention Officer post, as we know there is likely to be more demand for advice and support with the current economic climate.

In addition: the VCS Forum is pleased that their requests for easier access to the budget consultation had been heard. The budget is easier to find on the CBC website this year and the discussion between Cllr Rawson and the VCS Forum was felt to be really useful and is something that should be repeated in future years as part of the consultation process.

The Cabinet's response to the VCS

The Cabinet has responded to the VCS comments by including the £2,000 for back-filling of partnership work in its final budget proposals.

Comments from Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish Council

I have been asked to write to you concerning the increase in Council Tax charges for the next financial year. This Council considers that any increase should be as minimal as possible, and in any case not higher than the projected rate of inflation for April. Many Council tax payers will be feeling the effects of the economic downturn, with many receiving no increase in their salaries, and some even taking pay cuts in order to retain their jobs. A large increase in this tax could result in problems for many people and the Council asks that restraint is applied to the increase that is agreed.

In addition, the Council is requesting that consideration be given to the suspension of parking charges on Sundays in an attempt to boost the number of visitors into the town and to other shopping areas in the borough with a view to increasing the economic viability of the area. This should be considered in conjunction with a capping of car parking charge increases for the next financial year. Any increase, large or small will result in a loss of use of the car parks and therefore result in less customers to local shops.

The Cabinet's response to Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish Council

The Cabinet recognises the importance of keeping council tax as low as possible in the present difficult financial climate. For that reason it has reduced the proposed increase to 3 per cent, or £5.32 per year (just over 10p per week) for a Band D taxpayer. However it is important to recognise that the Borough Council's tax charge is a relatively small part of the council tax residents pay, and that the increases decided by the County Council and the Police Authority will impact more on the final bill.

Free Sunday off-street parking was a proposal carefully considered by the Cabinet in the context of utilising the VAT windfall. However, it is strongly opposed by the County Council,

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who feel it would damage their income from on-street parking without actually delivering any significant benefits. We recognise the concern about parking charges generally, especially as they impact on small businesses. After four years when parking charges have been frozen (five years in the case of the one- and two-hour charges) we feel we have little alternative but to introduce some limited increases. However we have once again frozen almost all the one-hour charges – which will significantly protect the interests of small businesses – and held the overall increase down to 3.2 per cent.

Comments from the Chamber of Commerce

We appreciated the opportunity to talk about the budget back in November 2008 at one of the Chamber's Executive Committee meetings. Since November the scale of the downturn we face has become much clearer and every part of the economy is wrestling with its impact. In the Chamber's view, now is not the right time for the Borough Council to increase the costs to businesses and home owners in Cheltenham or visitors to the town. The viability of running businesses and of attracting shoppers and visitors is currently most fragile and highly price-sensitive at present.

Regarding car parking charges, regrettably we feel we cannot support any increase because we believe that doing so will lose shoppers (perhaps permanently) to Gloucester, Bath, Cribbs Causeway and Cabots Circus. Ideally there would be no increase in any charges. Certainly no charge should increase more than the rate of inflation. It is totally unacceptable for any charge to rise >60%.

Similarly, we do not want to see any degradation to customer facing services as they are vital to the effective running and well being of the town. This leaves the Council with the same stark option that many other organisations are having in balancing their books. We acknowledge this is not an easy course of action to follow but do feel that it is the right course of action at this time.

The Cabinet's response to the Chamber of Commerce

The Cabinet has faced an unprecedented challenge in making a budget which keeps council tax down while protecting services. We entirely agree with the Chamber about the importance of protecting customer-facing services, and we have done this. We also agree that the Council must react to the present financial difficulties as a business would, by cutting costs and improving efficiency. The budget proposals include over £700,000 of efficiency savings – an excellent result bearing in mind the efficiency savings that have already been implemented in previous years. We have also significantly cut the cost of our borrowing.

Regarding car park charges, it is important to recognise that the increase the Chamber specifically condemns – the increase from £3 to £5 for parking over three hours at Bath Terrace and Commercial Street – is being done to deter all-day parking and will therefore be to the benefit of shoppers and traders. Overall the proposed increases on parking charges – the first for four years – average out at 3.2 per cent, which is close to the present rate of inflation. Almost all the one-hour charges will remain unchanged, which will be of benefit to traders. Equally it is important to stress that great care has been taken to keep our parking charges below those of Gloucester and Cabot Circus, precisely to remain competitive and avoid losing business.

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Comments taken from the completed questionnaires

- Opinion is divided on whether the proposed council tax increase is too high.
- Parking on pavements, road safety, anti-social drinking and anti-social behaviour are identified as issues which people would like to see the Council prioritise.
- More support for small business and better bus services are also requested.
- Opinion was divided on the possible use of the VAT windfall, with half the respondents advocating lower council tax.
- A more open system of applying for voluntary sector grants was requested.
- Concern was expressed by one respondent about parking charges, but the respondent also advocated higher charges for stays of more than 3 hours in order to deter long-term parkers.

Responses to the comments in the completed questionnaires

- In response to the views expressed, the VAT windfall has been used to reduce the council tax increase to 3 per cent.
- Crime and anti-social behaviour are high priorities for the Council. This is why an anti-social behaviour officer post is being mainstreamed into the revenue budget, which also levers in additional resources from the Police.
- The budget provides substantial support for small business through the Economic Development budget.
- The proposed increases in off-street parking charges are weighted towards longer stays, with almost all one-hour charges remaining unchanged.
- Other issues which are not specifically budget related will be raised with the relevant Borough Council or County Council department.

Recommendations from the Social & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee

The Committee contributed to the budget process in two ways: by setting up a working party to examine the budget proposals; and by making a formal recommendation that will be presented at the budget meeting of Council.

The working party was supportive of a number of growth bids which now form part of the budget proposals, including the additional funding for BoME work and the additional funding for oiling seagull eggs. It was not supportive of the additional Homelessness Prevention Officer post or the funding for back-filling of VCS representatives engaged in partnership work.

The Committee at its meeting on 23rd December formally recommended to the Council that the Borough Improvement Reserve should be earmarked as a contribution towards the cost of a new joint cricket and gymnastics facility.

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Response of the Cabinet to the Social & Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee

The Cabinet considered the views of the working party on the Homelessness Prevention Officer and the VCS money. However it considers that the case for the additional post is robust, given the likely increased housing need due to the recession. It also decided to accept the VCS backfilling growth bid after receiving representations and additional information from the voluntary sector.

The Cabinet's view is that the Art Gallery & Museum redevelopment should be given priority for the Borough Improvement Reserve money. This is a full Council commitment which was originally intended to be funded from the Midwinter improvement scheme. However, negotiations are still continuing on Midwinter, while the Art Gallery & Museum scheme needs to be funded in the 2009/10 financial year.