

SOUTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

REPORT BY HEAD OF POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNICATION TO THE MEETING OF SOUTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL OF 16TH DECEMBER 2010

SUBJECT: FEEDBACK FROM THE BIG BUDGET CHALLENGE

PURPOSE

- 1.1. To set out the feedback from the Big Budget Challenge as at December 2010.

RECOMMENDATION

2.1 It is recommended that Council notes:

- **the feedback as set out below;**
- **the intention to keep the web survey and the in-gathering of leaflets open until 14th January 2011;**
- **that a paper with an updated analysis will be provided in a Councillor Information Bulletin in the New Year; and**
- **that engagement with the business community will be undertaken early in 2011 and feedback provided to elected members accordingly.**

CONTEXT

- 3.1 In November/December 2009, South Ayrshire Council held Community Conversations in each electoral ward. They were promoted through a mailing to around 700 community organisations with some light media marketing. The format was a presentation from the Leader, the Resource and Performance Portfolio Holder, and, the Chief Executive followed by a question and answer session. The presentation covered 2 main areas: work underway to make savings and improve efficiency; and, the Council's Improvement Agenda. Whilst the format was useful at pushing information out to those who attended, it was not effective at in-gathering their views on key matters. Furthermore, participation was only feasible via attendance at one of the Conversations.
- 3.2 Given the anticipated budget reductions in the coming years, it was decided to undertake another round of public engagement in 2010 again during November and December.

THE BIG BUDGET CHALLENGE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGN

4.1 The objectives of the public engagement were:

- to raise awareness about the budget situation as it affected South Ayrshire Council;
- to gauge public opinion on specific issues such as reducing services as compared with increasing charges; and
- to create a mechanism for people to feed in ideas about where savings can be made.

4.2 Given the experience of the Community Conversations, it was decided to opt for a multi-platform campaign comprising:

- a leaflet that included basic survey questions and a free text box for suggestions and comments and with a freepost return;
- web participation where people could access more information on how we currently spend money, a podcast from the chief executive about the financial situation and a podcast from the Leader of the Council encouraging people to participate, and the opportunity to complete an on-line survey which has the same shell information as the leaflet but with more opportunity for expansion;
- discussion events in each of the 8 electoral wards throughout November and December.

4.3 It was decided that a branded campaign would be most effective. A clean, simple design was created in-house and carried through all elements of the public engagement campaign:



4.4 The Big Budget Challenge was promoted very actively and through a wide range of channels namely:

- adverts in the local print media and supporting advertorials;
- adverts in local publications (Troon and Prestwick Going Out);
- adverts on the local radio station;
- adverts on the backs of buses;

- a banner outside Burns House;
 - a banner outside each venue for a week before each discussion event;
 - posters in libraries, community centres and What's On boards;
 - direct communication with community councils and the Association of South Ayrshire Community Councils and the Carrick Community Councils Forum;
 - a letter to community organisations listed on our database and to community planning partners;
 - leaflets distributed widely through Council outlets, other key outlets such as doctors surgeries and pharmacies, through community councils and through a school bag drop;
 - elected members engaging with their local communities;
 - for the first three discussion events, direct marketing outside supermarkets and on the high streets near venues comprising handing out leaflets and talking to people about the Big Budget Challenge;
 - for the final four discussion events, emailing people who had provided their contact details at the Community Conversations the preceding year (email addresses were hand written and some email addresses had lapsed so this was of limited effectiveness);
 - the Council's website (throughout November and the first half of December, the Big Budget Challenge held the front page on the website);
 - podcasts from the Leader and the Chief Executive on the website;
 - a specific Youth Forum event; and
 - promoting the campaign with staff in the weekly communications note.
- 4.5 Staff were engaged through a team briefing exercise and the follow through on a leadership engagement event in early September where staff all had the opportunity to contribute ideas for savings which have since been aggregated and are now being considered by CMT. Ask the Chief Executive has remained as a route for staff to provide suggestions and ideas for improving efficiencies and reducing costs.
- 4.6 In 2009, Business Conversations were held but participation was relatively low (26 people across 3 events). Feedback suggested that it would be much more effective to request a slot when existing business forums such as the Elite Business Circle and the Chambers had pre-arranged meetings. The Big Budget Challenge campaign commenced shortly after Ayrshire Business Week and there have not been any pre-arranged meetings that we can tap into since then. Since the Chief Executive did a session at the Elite Ayrshire Business Circle at the end of October, engagement with the business community will be picked up early in 2011. Feedback will be provided to elected members as appropriate.
- 4.7 The structure of the on-line and leaflet surveys allowed a much higher level of input from the public than the Community Conversations. Additionally, the format of the discussion events was designed to maximise the time for input from the public. These were structured with a much shorter presentation and photo-film to set the context, facilitated discussions structured around scenarios, snap shot voting, a Q and A session, and informal discussion over tea and coffee.

PARTICIPATION LEVELS

- 5.1 As at 10th December 2010, there had been 1,857 hits on the website. 97 people had viewed the chief executive's podcast and 70 that from the Leader. The option of comments on the website and the podcasts was taken up by only 2 people; one thought that there should be more information on the "budget crisis" and the other commented ""Well done on the high standard of presentation and the ease with which I could find information. Not surprised South Ayrshire website is an award winner!" Of the 1,857 hits on the website, 155 people went on to complete the on-line survey form. An 8.3% follow through rate is healthy for this type of exercise.
- 5.2 A total of 32,000 leaflets were distributed. We have no means of assessing how many of these were read and thus contributed to general awareness-raising but it is assumed to be a reasonable proportion.
- 5.3 As at 9th December, 375 leaflets had been completed and returned to County Buildings, Ayr. A target of 500 was set at the start of the campaign. That may yet be achieved since the campaign will be kept running until mid-January but our return rate at present is on a par with that being experienced by other authorities undertaking public engagement on the budget situation. North Lanarkshire for example, sent budget information and a survey form to every household within the local authority (population approx. 325k) and to all their employees (approx. 18,000) and got around 2,000 survey returns.
- 5.4 In terms of the discussions, 219 members of the public attended (details in table below). This was lower than expected particularly given that 258 attended the Community Conversations. It is to be noted that the events coincided with particularly bad weather (extremely high winds for the event at Belmont Academy and very low temperatures and some snow for the final 3 events).

Venue	Date	Ward	Attending Big Budget Challenge	Attending Community Conversation
Troon Walker Hall	4 th Nov	ward 1	21	31
Belmont Academy	11 th Nov	ward 4	14	16
Prestwick Academy	18 th Nov	ward 2	70	26
Girvan Academy	23 rd Nov	ward 8	28	59
Ayr Academy	24 th Nov	ward 5	21	19
Monkton Primary School	30 th Nov	ward 6	16	08
John Pollock Centre	2 nd Dec	ward 3	13	84
Maybole Town Hall	8 th Dec	ward 7	36	15

- 5.5 The fact that other outlets for participation were created may have been a factor. People unsure whether to attend an event given the weather could participate on-line or by returning a leaflet. Additionally, attendance at the Community Conversations last year was high in Girvan and the John Pollock Centre due to live local issues. Local issues don't seem to have had a significant effect on the Big Budget Challenge Campaign with only Cairn Primary school having an impact on attendance at Maybole. Turnout was very high at Prestwick Academy and this was attributed to very strong activity by local members.

5.6 The Youth Forum conference was scheduled for 12th November and they helpfully agreed to take the Big Budget Challenge as the key theme of their conference. They undertook voting on the main questions within the leaflet appropriately paraphrased and discussed the inherent issues within workshops. 41 young people cast votes through this route.

5.7 Age band data was collected in the web and leaflet surveys and also whether the respondent lived/worked in South Ayrshire and/or whether they were an employee of South Ayrshire Council.

5.8 The table below sets out the percentage of survey respondents within each age group. Two points are worth noting:

- the response rate from the under 25 age group is comparatively low but that is likely to reflect the fact that there was a dedicated Youth Forum event on the Big Budget Challenge.
- The over 65 age group was twice as likely to participate through completing the leaflet survey as compared with through the on-line survey.

	Under 25	25-44	45-64	65+
Web responses	3.9%	43.9%	42.5%	9.6%
Leaflet responses	1.3%	35.0%	41.8%	21.8%

5.9 The table below sets out the percentage of respondents who live and work in the area.

	Live in South Ayrshire and employed by Council	Live and work in South Ayrshire (other than for Council)	Live in South Ayrshire	Work in South Ayrshire (not for Council)	Work for South Ayrshire Council (but not living in area)
Web responses	21.9%	20.6%	45.2%	5.8%	4.5%
Leaflet responses	7.1%	22.0%	68.1%	1.1%	1.6%

ANALYSIS

- 6.1 Five main areas were explored in the Big Budget Challenge Campaign:
- using the phone and the internet to do more business with the Council;
 - outsourcing services;
 - whether an increase in the council tax was favoured in the event that the subsidy was removed from Government;
 - paying more charges to preserve existing services; and
 - reducing services rather than pay new or increased charges.
- 6.2 The final 2 areas are closely related but the emphasis on the first question is directly on paying new or increased costs and the emphasis on the second question is on reducing services. That slight change in emphasis did generate some differences in voting patterns. It also prompted different follow-on discussions; the latter drawing out in particular which services the public thought could be reduced.
- 6.3 To ease analysis, the leaflets were input into the database hosting the web information but they were given an identifier so that differences in response could be identified.
- 6.4 The tables below summarise the distribution of views from strongly agree to strongly disagree for each source of information (web, leaflet and youth forum). Snap shot voting was undertaken at the discussion events driving people to agree or disagree with the statements. This is also captured below.
- 6.5 In an effort to identify an overall position, the 'neither agree nor disagree' responses were removed from the calculation; the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses were aggregated together as were the 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' responses. These were then pro-rated into an overall 'agree' and 'disagree' for each of the main areas considered in the surveys. This is shown in bold at the end of each table.

Using the Phone and the Internet

- 6.6 Overall, 77.4% agreed that they would be would be happy to do more business with the Council over the phone or the internet. 22.6% took the opposite view. Not surprisingly, those completing the on-line survey and members of the youth forum were most inclined towards increasing use of technology to transact council business. A slight age effect was in evidence with those in the 65+ age group slightly more likely to disagree with doing more business over the phone or the internet. However, the age effect was not significantly marked.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Web	40.6	37.4	12.2	6.4	3.2
Leaflet	26.4	33.6	18.1	11.7	10.1
Youth Forum	35.0	37.5	25.0	2.5	0.0
Snap shot vote at discussions	N/A	72.8	N/A	27.2	N/A
Overall (684 responses)	77.4%		-	22.6%	

6.7 Those completing the web survey were asked to expand on which services in particular should be considered for increased phone and internet access and this was also explored in the scenarios within the discussion events and at the Youth Forum workshop. The most common areas identified were:

- council tax enquiries and payments;
- special uplifts and other waste management issues;
- reporting defects;
- accessing general information and making complaints;
- library services (downloadable books);
- information being sent through schools to parents; and
- making bookings for golf and the theatre.

6.8 There was a recognition that progressive use of the telephone and internet for Council business needs to be carefully approached. Points highlighted for further consideration included:

- The risks of isolating some people particularly those not comfortable with technology (respondents often highlighted older people as being at risk of technological exclusion).
- That increased use of technology would sit most comfortably with the roll out of one stop shops and consistent access to services throughout South Ayrshire.
- All contact with council staff whether face to face or over the phone or internet would be most efficient if staff were multi-functional and able to deal with the full range of basic enquiries and know how to sign post for more specialist services and advice.
- That for remote areas within South Ayrshire consideration should be given to the use of webcams in local offices to access more specialised service advice.

- That increased use of the internet would require reassurance on the security of personal information particularly payment information.
- Care should be taken to avoid a sense of anonymous/faceless bureaucracy. There was particularly a concern that being able to drop into a local office can be an important dimension for the elderly community providing them with social contact and providing the Council with an opportunity to identify any major issues for individual elderly or vulnerable people.
- That what happens following contact by whatever means is really important. Some members of the public were not fussed about the means of contact so long as their issue was auctioned.
- Email contact was seen as providing a fast, clear and accountable method of communicating.
- That the public in general, dislike call centres but accept that their widespread use in the private sector had led to their reluctant adoption and that there was no reason why they shouldn't now be embraced by the public sector.

Outsourcing Services

6.9 Overall, 72.5% agreed that the Council should outsource certain services where they could be run by someone else for less money. 27.5% disagreed with outsourcing. The participants in the Youth Forum were most likely to adopt this view and people completing the web survey least likely.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Web	29.9	18.8	13.0	20.8	17.5
Leaflet	33.1	33.3	13.1	9.9	10.7
Youth Forum	20.0	68.0	12.0	0.0	0.0
Snap shot vote at discussions	N/A	73.8	N/A	26.2	N/A
Overall (682 responses)	72.5%		-	27.5%	

6.10 It was anticipated that those currently employed by the Council might be least likely to support outsourcing. A separate analysis was undertaken of responses for employees completing either the web or leaflet surveys. There was some difference in result with 61% of respondents who worked for South Ayrshire Council agreeing with outsourcing and 39% not favouring this route.

6.11 The areas most frequently highlighted by respondents as appropriate for outsourcing were:

- swimming pools and other leisure services;
- winter maintenance;
- roads maintenance;
- waste management;
- housing repairs and other trade functions within the Council; and
- back office functions such as IT, HR and payroll;

6.12 Other issues highlighted for consideration with respect to outsourcing included:

- some comment (and not just from employees) questioning the value for money of outsourcing since the service still has to be provided and that is where the bulk of the cost falls;
- a recognition that some services were not amenable to outsourcing; care for the vulnerable and children's services were most frequently highlighted in this regard;
- where outsourcing takes place, oversight and quality control is critical and needs underpinned by very clear contracts and contractual monitoring;
- if outsourcing extends to the creation of trusts that they can often access funding not accessible to local authorities;
- that lessons should be learned from areas already outsourced before further moves in this direction are considered;
- that partnership working offers as viable an option as outsourcing. A case study of working with the Energy Agency in Girvan was quoted as a model that could work elsewhere.
- that outsourcing was only merited if costs were cheaper and/or quality higher than could be provided by the Council and that in that eventuality, the real issue was for the Council to replicate the costs and quality of the external market.

Council Tax

6.13 When the leaflet and the web survey were being designed, the continuation of the Council tax subsidy was the subject of media speculation and political debate. A question was therefore included about people views on options in the event that the subsidy was withdrawn. In particular, respondents were asked whether they would pay more council tax to save and/or maintain council services. By the time the discussion events were underway, the council tax situation was clearer so a scenario and snap shot vote was not included related to the council tax. The votes from the other sources are as set out overleaf:

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Web	10.3	20.0	21.9	18.7	29.0
Leaflet	6.7	22.9	18.9	25.3	26.1
Youth Forum	0.0	2.5	15.0	22.5	60.0
Overall (459 responses)	34.6%		-	65.4%	

- 6.14 Overall, 34.6% of respondents agreed that in the event that the council tax subsidy was withdrawn that they would pay more council tax if that preserved services. In contrast, 65.4% disagreed with this proposition. This view was particularly strong amongst young people. There was a slight difference in results by South Ayrshire Council employees who were closer to an equal split on this question (46.7% agreeing, 53.3% disagreeing).
- 6.15 The on-line survey had a follow-on question about which services respondents would like increased resources directed towards. The most frequently recurring responses were:
- care services;
 - education;
 - services for children and young people;
 - leisure services;
 - roads services to rid South Ayrshire of potholes;
 - domestic violence;
 - community development and enabling communities towards empowerment.
- 6.16 There was comment in relation to council tax that it had been some time since a valuation exercise was undertaken. As a consequence, current bandings don't reflect increases in relative house values from extensions, modernisations and area improvements. There was speculation that revisiting this could raise additional income and improve equity.

New or additional charges to save existing services

- 6.17 Few respondents strongly agreed with the proposition that they would pay new or additional charges to save existing services. However, there was a significant proportion who strongly disagreed with this statement (just under a third for both the web and the leaflet surveys). This issue had quite a lot of respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed. When these are removed from the analysis then overall, 41.3% of respondents were prepared to pay more charges as compared with 58.7% were not so inclined.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Web	8.4	18.7	18.1	24.5	30.3
Leaflet	4.0	24.0	20.8	19.5	31.7
Youth Forum	5.0	35.0	30.0	27.5	2.5
Snap shot vote at discussions	N/A	53.4	N/A	46.6	N/A
Overall (647 responses)	41.3%		-	58.7%	

6.18 Areas identified where new or additional charges could be applied included:

- library services from a small charge per book withdrawn to a small annual subscription;
- bus travel since free bus service for the elderly was considered by some to be unsustainable;
- golf in Ayrshire's municipal courses and golf lessons;
- leisure services more generally although the associated risks (below) were readily identified for swimming pools and community halls;
- nursery snacks and school stationery supplies;
- cremation and burials;
- special uplifts;
- freedom of information requests; and
- car parking in key areas in Ayr where charges don't currently apply.

6.19 Services which respondents particularly wanted preserved as a consequence of increased charges included:

- services which improve the transport and economic viability of the area;
- education;
- services for children and the vulnerable;

6.20 Issues related to increasing charges identified within discussions and responses included:

- the risks of decreasing service usage and social inequalities since higher charges would have a disproportionate effect on certain groups;
- charges generally should reflect ability to pay and that increasing charges should be set against that backdrop;
- the risk of declining income overall (an unintended consequence) if higher charges discourage uptake or people divert to private sector providers;
- increased charges would need to be matched by sustained quality and people would be more content to pay increased charges if local government services transparently improved their efficiency;
- things which are free tend not to be valued so there is a case for increased charges for non-essential services but the justification and basis for the charges should be clearly set out;
- for some services, the administrative cost of applying a charge could outweigh the income from charging so common sense should be exercised when considering new charges;
- questioning whether the subsidies paid to bus operators through SPT provided value for money;
- care needed to be applied in fragile communities since increasing let charges to community organisations could force them to close which would be to the social detriment of that community and thus the area;
- increased charges should not all be focused on local residents; options for increasing charges to local businesses should be explored particularly for commercial waste and licensing; and
- increasing income did not necessarily mean increased charges; income could increase from enhancing participation or from sources such as advertising and sponsorship.

Reduce services rather than pay new or increased charges

6.21 As indicated earlier, this question on reducing services and that of paying new charges are closely related. However, the intention of this question is to change the emphasis from increasing charges to reducing services and to draw out responses about which services the public would contemplate reductions in. However, the increase in people voting neither agree nor disagree and the number of abstentions within the snapshot voting suggest that the question may have been confusing rather than subtle.

6.22 There was evidence that people voted differently when the question was put differently. For example, around 30% of web and leaflet respondents strongly disagreed with paying new or increased charges to preserve services but only 20% and 13.6% respectively strongly agreed they would prefer to see services reduce than pay new or increased charges. In all cases, the proportion of respondents strongly disagreeing with reducing services outnumbered the proportion strongly disagreeing with increased charges. This suggests that when the focus is put onto reduced services as opposed to increased costs, there is some softening of opposition.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Web	20.0	19.4	18.1	27.1	15.5
Leaflet	13.6	22.1	29.9	22.4	12.0
Youth Forum	7.3	17.1	36.6	26.8	12.2
Snap shot vote at discussions	N/A	40.5	N/A	59.5	N/A
Overall (584 responses)	46.7%		-	53.3%	

6.23 Overall, 46.7% agreed that they'd like to see services reduce to avoid paying new charges with 53.3% disagreeing with this proposition.

6.24 When the two closely-related questions are placed side by side, the proportion of respondents who favoured charges to preserve services (41.3% and 53.3%) is weaker than those who favoured service cuts rather than increased charges (58.7% and 46.7%).

6.25 The areas identified as possible candidates for service reductions included:

- uplift of brown bins in the winter;
- the frequency of black bin (glass) collections could possibly be reduced to once per month;
- the opening hours of some services (local libraries) and the operating arrangements for others (street cleaning is over provided for in some areas and under provided in other areas and should be reduced at weekends if this costs more than weekdays);
- public libraries with comment made that school libraries should be opened to the public since having both represents duplication;
- street lighting with scope to consider rationalising street lights outwith peak times for travelling in the dark but this needs assessed against the risk of increased accidents;
- the opening hours for some facilities – providing a service from an office does not mean that that office needs to open from 9 to 5 , five days a week. On the other hand however, if we had fewer assets concentrated in one stop shops then we should be seeking to maximise the use of these so it may be efficient and effective for them to operate from early in the morning until late at night.
- a programme of rationalisation of schools (some small schools could be joined up);

- curriculum for excellence which was seen by some to be a new gloss on perfectly good education provision;
- the extra nursery time being offered to 3 and 4 year olds and whether this is really adding educational value particularly when it means that they have to be collected at a different time from older siblings in primary schools;
- switching responsibility for planters on main streets to the local shops and businesses who significantly benefit from their presence;
- the provision of debt advice given that there are other 3rd sector providers of this service;
- dog fouling patrols – their role is like looking for a needle in a haystack and by being present the needle will go into hiding;
- cleaning the beaches in the winter when tourism is very quiet and the wind and the tides will quickly reverse the effects of cleaning in any event;
- hanging baskets and excessive floral displays;
- expensive Christmas light switch ons and keeping the Christmas lights on during the day when they have little impact; and
- streamlining of management structures within the Council.

6.26 The areas identified for follow on action were therefore quite different from the earlier question on charges. The only additional issue identified as needing careful consideration was that of unintended consequences and the risk of a reduction in a service area leading to complications in other areas. Amongst the scenario discussions for example, the scale and nature of service provision to addicts was sometimes questioned but there was a recognition that reducing this could prompt demand for increased services in other areas.

6.27 At the discussion events, facilitators were invited to identify any additional questions arising from discussions that could be voted on by those in attendance. Two additional questions were included in individual discussion events:

- in Girvan a question was asked about whether people considered that they got value for money from council services. All those present (28) responded negatively to this question;
- in Belmont Academy a question was posed as to whether there were too many tiers of Government. 12 people (86%) voted yes and 2 people (14%) voted no.

SUMMARY OF OTHER ISSUES ARISING IN THE BIG BUDGET CHALLENGE

7.1 The web and leaflet surveys and the scenario discussions were designed to elicit responses on specific issues. However, a key additional element was the opportunity for participants in the Big Budget Challenge to raise other issues either in discussion groups, through the question and answer session at the events, and through the free text boxes in the web and leaflet surveys. The key themes emerging include:

- The case for a single Ayrshire authority and what savings could be achieved by South Ayrshire amalgamating with North and East Ayrshire. This came up repeatedly in the discussion events and in the surveys.
- The use of consultants within the Council. This may reflect recent media coverage on our spend on consultants which failed to highlight that one of those payments was on a percentage of VAT recovered through their work.
- Whether the current number of councillors is required and more general questions about whether Scotland is over-governed.
- Despite being lean in comparison with other authorities, a perception that the Council has swathes of top managers.
- Council and civic hospitality and whether this represents value for money.
- Increased clarity was considered desirable on statutory as compared with non-statutory services.
- The challenge of early intervention when the demand for service is rising and budgets falling and the dangers this poses in the longer-term since it will impede the scope to reduce public sector funding in the longer term.
- The importance of community empowerment in the current financial climate.
- The economic benefits of keeping as much resource within the local economy so for example contract suppliers should as far as possible be local and people should be encouraged to stay in South Ayrshire for their shopping rather than travelling further afield.
- That people should receive things like the Big Budget Challenge leaflet with their council tax bill so that an association is made between paying local taxes and expressing an opinion on issues such as increasing charges and reducing services.
- The use of Council vehicles was a theme frequently highlighted in survey returns.
- Rationalising work across utilities and other service providers who otherwise have to dig up roads to minimise the disruptions that drivers and pedestrians experience and to reduce the damage done to the road and pavement surfaces.
- Whether the approach being taken on reserves is merited – concern was expressed over making service cuts and/or increasing charges when the council is growing its reserve funds.
- Internal charging within the Council which can be considered bureaucratic for no added value to services.
- Whether there is scope to use volunteering capability throughout South Ayrshire to much greater effect. It currently is patchy and there may be scope to look at some very strong local initiatives and see if these can be applied elsewhere.
- The pay and conditions of Council staff and what scope there is to reduce everyone's hours to 95% for example thereby preserving jobs by a moderate sharing of the pain.
- pursuing people who haven't paid their council tax or who otherwise owe the Council money. There was a sense in survey returns that people who were efficient payers were subsidising poor payers.

EVALUATION OF THE BIG BUDGET CHALLENGE

- 8.1 Generally, those who participated in the Big Budget Challenge were positive about the experience. Of the 219 people who attended a discussion event, 142 completed an evaluation form. All but 2 people rated the venue as excellent or good. 78% felt that the event matched with their expectations and comments in the relevant box were positive feeling that their participation had been worthwhile. For the remaining 12%, the usual reason for expectations not having been met was that they had been looking for more detail on options being considered and/or felt they had insufficient detail to respond to the questions and scenarios on an informed basis.
- 8.2 There was comment from a few participants that noise made it difficult for them to participate in large groups. There were 2 locations where groups were atypically large. We hadn't expected such a large turnout at Prestwick and thus were short of facilitators and so had to increase the number of participants within each group. At Maybole, severe weather reduced the number of available facilitators and thus there also had to be some increase in group sizes. If this format is to be used again, it is desirable to keep group sizes to between 8 and 10 and for there to be plenty of space between tables.
- 8.3 More generally, whilst the format of the Big Budget Challenge discussions was much more effective from a public participation perspective than the preceding Community Conversations, they were more challenging to organise. We had to have facilitators available and have a group discussion set up for an unknown number of people attending each event. We sought to use information from the Community Conversations and general local intelligence to inform the likely turnout and then to rota a few more facilitators than it was likely would be required. This model worked well except in Prestwick where we had expected attendance to be only a little higher than the preceding year. The availability of facilitators in the final events was affected by the severe weather but with the exception of Maybole this did not impact on the running of the events.
- 8.4 The low turnout at some events by the public meant that there were issues with some tables having a high number of councillors relative to members of the public. This could sometimes change the dynamic of the discussion group with the focus more on asking the councillor questions rather than accessing the public's views using the scenarios as a prompt.
- 8.5 Generally, there was a call for more information to have been provided prior to the events. There may have been merit in putting the scenarios to be discussed on the website and some additional information on how the Council's budget is made up and spent and encouraging people to consider this before attending the discussion events. There was also a request for events of this type to open with a summary of action arising from the preceding event. "You told us x, we did y and now the position is z."
- 8.6 Despite heavy promotion of the events and the web and leaflets, participation was not as high as hoped. The extreme weather and dark nights is thought to have been a factor and if public engagement events are to be held next year, it is suggested that they take place in early autumn before the darker, colder nights arrive. It is also considered worth trialling different times of the day with perhaps a session in local schools before the school day ends and events earlier in the evening to catch people coming home from work and perhaps later in the evening when they have had time to have their tea and put children to bed. It is also considered worth exploring whether existing meetings of community council forums and other community associations could be used for public engagement.

- 8.7 The costs of the Big Budget Challenge are still being aggregated but the print and advertising costs directly associated with the campaign amounted to around £12k and venue and technical costs were approximately £6k. It is estimated that the Big Budget Challenge costs will total around £18.5k in comparison with the £7.5k for the Community Conversations. Given that in addition to the 219 members of the public attending discussion events we secured 1857 web hits, 163 podcast viewings, 155 completed web surveys, 375 completed leaflets (with more to come) and engagement at the Youth Forum's November conference, it is considered to have been a significantly more effective campaign.
- 8.8 The evaluation forms at the discussion events asked about where people had heard about the Big Budget Challenge. The most frequently cited sources were advertising in local newspapers, banners outside the venues, the community council and approaches from individual elected members. The least frequently cited were the banners on the backs of buses and local radio advertising. The results will be further analysed against advertising spend to inform future public engagement campaigns but it is estimated that in future around £2k could be shaved from the advertising spend without significantly reducing the effectiveness of the campaign.

NEXT STEPS

- 9.1 The severe weather prevented all the leaflet boxes located throughout South Ayrshire from being checked for completed survey forms prior to this analysis being run. Furthermore, leaflets were still arriving by Freepost on a daily basis. It is therefore considered appropriate to let the campaign run until early in the New Year. A news release will be issued in the coming days requesting that people complete and return the leaflets and the web survey by 14th January 2011. The final analysis will be undertaken in the subsequent week and reported to elected members in the subsequent Councillor Information Bulletin.
- 9.2 Engagement with the business community will be undertaken early in 2011 as their pre-scheduled meetings take place and the output will be reported to elected members as appropriate.
- 9.3 In terms of the detailed content from all elements of the Big Budget Challenge, CMT will consider this further in the context of recommendations to Council for possible areas for savings.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 None immediately arising from this report.

RESULTS OF CONSULTATION

- 11.1 A key rationale for the Big Budget Challenge was to engage with the public. The next step will be publicity highlighting that the on-line survey should be completed and leaflets returned by 14th January 2011. The Leader of the Council has been consulted about the content of this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Feedback from Community Conversations, Council December 2009

PERSON TO CONTACT:

Claire Monaghan, Head of Policy, Performance and Communication

DATE: 12th December 2010