

Appendix A

Budget Consultation – Summary 2014

Introduction

Focus groups were undertaken engaging local residents as well as town and parish council representatives. Focus groups are an opportunity to test public opinion and can be used to discuss both specific ideas and general concepts. During the focus groups opinions were sought on specific ideas which could generate budget savings. It was also an opportunity to have discussions around some funding principles and the council's priorities. In particular discussions were had in relation to:

- the council's new Families and Communities agenda;
- awareness and understanding of shared services;
- channel shift and online services.

This document sets out a summary of views of attendees on the specific budget proposals.

Focus group findings:

1. Markets – improvements and investments.

Views about the various markets depended on the demographic of the participants. Typically older/retired and younger people with no children were more positive as they have more time to shop at markets. Younger participants were receptive to the idea of 'continental' or 'farmers' markets. There was a general view that until recently the markets were not promoted as well as they could have been. There was agreement that there is a need for investment in markets.

2. Local parks – quality and potential to use volunteers

Participants were encouraged by the idea of recruiting volunteers to support work in parks to continue the 'Olympic legacy'. There were mixed views as to the potential for volunteers, with the feeling it would depend on whether or not people are interested in the particular location or skills base required.

3. Housing – investing in house building

There was a range of views towards council house building and these very much depended on personal experience/circumstances. However, overall there was a view that there was a housing gap to fill and any additional housing would have a positive impact for local jobs, growth and infrastructure.

The majority of participants were in favour of the commercial case for a 'build to let' scheme, with the caveat that it was 'a good idea in principle, however the devil lies in the detail'. Therefore a clear business plan needs to be in place for such an initiative.

4. Charging for replacement bins

On the whole, there was little support for the proposal to charge residents £25 for a replacement bin. Reasons for this include a perceived rise in bin theft, an increase in fly-tipping and also the notion that it could impact on recycling. There was however agreement that "repeat offenders" should be charged.

5. Mildenhall Bus Station – ownership / different delivery models

There was surprise at the running costs of the bus station. When different models of operation were discussed, most participants were generally supportive in principle of a commercial use being installed in order to off-set costs. There were some caveats around the number of established cafes in the area.

All supported the need to have public toilet facilities, which should be regularly checked and cleaned but not necessarily a need for permanent staffing. There was strong opposition to the introduction of toilet charges. This information is currently being used to develop options for future delivery models at the bus station.

6. Money from development

There were a variety of views on how “no strings attached” money from development should be spent, depending on the experience of the individuals or their particular areas. However following discussion it was generally agreed that there was a middle ground of money being spent at the local level where necessary and appropriate and put aside for larger projects that benefit the wider area.

7. Renewable energy

Rent a roof schemes on new developments

There was general agreement that investing in renewable energy is a good idea. However there were concerns around the practicalities of the scheme; who would own/repair the panels, what was the cost -v- benefit of the borrowing; and uncertainty around the long term availability of the feed-in tariff.

Rent a roof schemes on business premises

Of the three options this was the more popular option mainly because participants could envisage where sites are available.

There was also a consensus the energy costs for businesses would be a significant outgoing therefore this scheme could have a significant impact. It was also felt there could be associated benefit of units with solar panels attracting businesses to the area, increasing economic growth and the number of jobs.

Council-community solar farm

It was felt that involving the community would be the key to success of any scheme. Some participants felt that there was little or no low grade land available, whilst the others felt any available land should be utilised for housing in the first instance. There were concerns that solar farms are unsightly and were likely to be opposed by residents.