

Responses to the public consultation

This was not a year in which response to public consultation was large. This may have been because there were no particularly objectionable proposals in the draft budget and no new proposals for capital investment beyond those agreed in 2015. Nonetheless the consultation, especially the various meetings held or attended by the cabinet member for finance and officers, was useful in teasing out a number of concerns and giving a snapshot of local opinion.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was published on the website and in paper form and completed by 14 residents.

On the question of what respondents thought about the proposed council tax rise, 8 thought it was about right, 4 thought it was too little and 2 thought it was too much.

On the question of whether people supported the savings listed in the introductory information, 11 answered yes, 2 answered no and 1 was unsure.

In the detailed comments, one respondent objected to the twinning expenditure. One questioned the justification for the spending on the new Pittville Park play area and the work being done to adapt some of the old telephone kiosks in the Promenade. One urged that we should seek a far better return on investment from the Gloucestershire Airport. Another called for the disbanding of the Cheltenham Development Taskforce and was critical of the acquisition of Delta Place.

When asked what services they most wanted to see improved, services for the homeless and poor, more affordable housing, the revamping and improvement of the High Street, reopening North Place as a car park, street cleaning, tourism, improvements to the bus station and weekly bin collections were all mentioned.

Cabinet response: The pool of respondents, although small, shows general support for the approach taken in this budget. Most of the priorities for improvement that were suggested by the respondents are addressed in this budget or (in the case of works in the High Street and improvements to the bus station) have already been budgeted for in the capital programme.

A fuller summary of the responses to the questionnaire are posted on the Council website.

Budget Scrutiny Working Group

The BSWG met on January 5th to look in detail at both the draft general fund budget and the housing revenue account budget. A number of detailed questions were asked requiring further work by the deputy section 151 officer. The answers were emailed to the working group and can be supplied to any other members on request.

Residents' forum

An open meeting to discuss the budget was promoted on the website and in the media and held on January 14th at the Municipal Offices. The points raised and the answers given are posted on the Council's website.

The C5 group of parish councils

The cabinet member for finance with the deputy section 151 officer attended the meeting of the C5 group on January 4th to talk about the budget. They expressed concern about a possible cut in the Parish Council Support Grant but the cabinet member indicated that this would be maintained at its current level.

The question of 'double taxation' was raised and Charlton Kings Parish Council indicated that they would write to the Council Leader on the subject.

Voluntary sector

The cabinet member for finance and deputy section 151 officer met representatives of the voluntary sector on January 11th. He explained that although the budget for 2016/17 was unlikely to impact negatively on the voluntary sector, the following year's budget was likely to be very difficult. Representatives asked if they could be consulted at an early stage about any proposed changes or cuts in services.

Chamber of Commerce

The cabinet member and the deputy section 151 officer attended a meeting of the Chamber on January 18th to consult on the budget. The cabinet member explained that part of the Council's strategy is to maximise its future business rates by supporting economic development in the town. Chamber members expressed their concern that the Borough Council lacked the planning powers to stop business premises being converted to residential use.

Cabinet response: Cabinet members and officers are exploring ways of exerting more control over the conversion of business premises and land to residential use.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

The cabinet member and the deputy section 151 officer attended the Committee on January 25th to report on progress with the final budget. No specific questions were asked.