

The Cabinet's response to the budget consultation

This year's consultation consisted of:

1. 2 meetings for residents and stakeholders.
2. 2 meetings with the business community – one with the Cheltenham Business Partnership and the other with the Chamber of Commerce.
3. Presentation and discussion with the C5 group of parish councils.
4. Presentation and discussion with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
5. Online and postal questionnaire – 6 respondents.

The small response may be a reflection of the relatively uncontroversial nature of the budget. However the quality of the discussion at the meetings and the range of topics raised in the written submissions made the exercise useful and worthwhile.

Responses were generally supportive of the main elements of the budget, namely the council tax freeze and the efficiency savings (particularly from shared services).

Particular comments included the following:

Issues raised by residents and stakeholders (at meetings and in writing)

- **Concern about inadequate road and pavement maintenance, street cleaning, dog fouling, and blockages of drains and gulleys.**

Cabinet response: The Council's own environmental services have been protected against cuts. We will do what we can within limited resources to maintain and improve standards of cleanliness. Road and pavement maintenance is the responsibility of Gloucestershire Highways.

- **Concern about the level of business rates.**

Cabinet response: We sympathise with the point and want to do what we can to support struggling businesses, but the level of business rates is determined by central government.

- **Concern about the possible impact of leisure and culture commissioning on fees and charges to users.**

Cabinet response: The savings from leisure and culture commissioning do not depend on large increases in charges.

- **Support for energy-saving measures.**

Cabinet response: Our ongoing programme of carbon reduction measures is continued in the proposed capital budget and further measures will be introduced whenever the opportunity arises.

- **Support for cutting the number of councillors.**

Cabinet response: The Cabinet supports the setting up of a cross-party working group to look at this and related issues.

- **Support for cutting councillors' allowances.**

Cabinet response: The respondent is under the impression that this Council has one of the most generous levels of allowance in the country, which is not the case. We are currently part way through a five-year freeze in allowances.

- **Support for the Council disposing of surplus assets.**

Cabinet response: We have an active programme for reviewing our property portfolio and disposing of surplus property.

- **Opposition to the charging of council tax on empty property.**

Cabinet response: The new policy, which other Gloucestershire authorities have also adopted, is highly discriminating in order to protect vulnerable people and replaces exemption with discounts in specific categories only.

- **Support for reduction of the number of sets of traffic lights.**

Cabinet response: This objective is being actively pursued by the Cheltenham Development Taskforce.

- **Support for charging councillors for parking at the rear of the Municipal Offices.**

Cabinet response: This is already being done.

Issues raised by the business community

- **Interest in how the new business rates pooling will work and how it will benefit economic development.**

Cabinet response: We will continue a dialogue with the Cheltenham Business Partnership and the Chamber of Commerce about these issues.

- **Support expressed for a Business Improvement District.**

Cabinet response: This is a matter on which support and commitment from the businesses community needs to be demonstrated, in which case the Council will support the initiative.

- **Support for reductions in car park charges.**

Cabinet response: Discussions have been held between the Council and the Chamber on this issue and will continue. Cabinet is not in principle against trialling new price structures but would need to protect its income levels.

- **Support for better joint working between the LEP, the Cheltenham Development Taskforce, the Borough Council and the Cheltenham Business Partnership to make the most of economic development opportunities.**

Cabinet response: We support this objective and will do what we can to achieve it.

Issues raised by the parish councils

- **Support for the Council providing activities and services for young people.**

Cabinet response: The Council delivers significant services to young people, both directly (e.g. the holiday playschemes) and indirectly by enabling and supporting community organisations.

- **Support for better resourcing of the work on the JCS and the Cheltenham plan.**

Cabinet response: This is provided for in this budget.

Issues raised by Overview & Scrutiny Committee

- **Request to increase resourcing of the scrutiny function.**

Cabinet response: We are happy to look at how scrutiny can be better resourced, but a growth bid of any meaningful size in the present budget is not possible.

- **Request for increased resources for training of Planning Committee members.**

Cabinet response: £2,000 has been added to the revenue budget for this purpose. This should enable a useful increase in the amount of training available.