



Budget Planning 2019-20

Report of Public Engagement Forum

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Opinion Research Services
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We thank the 27 diverse members of the public who took part in the forum and shared their views readily. We are pleased that they were so interested in the issues and presentations, and enjoyed the process, and we trust that this report accurately reflects their views and priorities.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting residents as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for that trust and hope this report will contribute to DBC's complex budget planning for 2019-20 and beyond.

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Introduction

Commission

1. Like other councils, in the context of national reductions in central government funding (and the shift in funding responsibilities from central to local government), Dacorum Borough Council (DBC) has to make savings and consider its council tax precept while also trying to increase revenue. Believing that difficult decisions should be informed by public opinion, the Council once more commissioned Opinion Research Services (henceforth ORS) to facilitate and report a deliberative forum with a wide cross-section of residents to inform its budget setting process for 2019-20. ORS worked in collaboration with DBC to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Deliberative research through public forums

2. The consultation used a deliberative forum because such meetings allow for:
 - Clear presentation of the issues and evidence
 - Questions and clarification of ambiguous or difficult points
 - Deliberation in which participants think through their responses while having an opportunity to listen to the evidence and the views of others
 - Interactive reporting of people's opinions during the meeting – so participants can feel confident that their ideas have been properly recorded
 - Comparison of people's views at the start and end of the meeting.
3. The forum was deliberative in encouraging members of the public to reflect in depth about their priorities in the context of reductions in central government funding for local government. They were asked to think about their personal and community priorities alongside the council's priorities for Dacorum to inform elected members' thinking about difficult financial decisions.
4. Of course, the forum was not to determine the council's budget, for 'accountability' means that public authorities should give an account of issues and/or their provisional plans, and also take into account the public's views; but such consultations are not referenda to make decisions about public policy. They should inform but not dictate the judgements of service professionals and elected members. This premise was understood and readily accepted by all the participants.

Inclusiveness and representativeness

5. In total, there were 27 diverse participants at the session which was held from 10:00am until 1:20pm on Saturday 19th January 2018 at the Forum building in Hemel Hempstead. The participants were randomly recruited by researchers at ORS's Social Research Call Centre – and most had never attended such a meeting previously.
6. Having been initially contacted by phone, all the participants received letters confirming the invitation and arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before the meeting. As standard good practice, participants were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.
7. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venue was readily accessible. The telephone recruitment process was also monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria, including, for example: area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/long-term limiting illness (LLTI); so the participants were a broad cross-section of residents from across the district.

Discussion framework

8. ORS worked in collaboration with DBC to design an effective and relevant discussion guide for the Forum. Without prompting participants, the ORS presentation covered a range of background matters, including:
 - Structure of local government in Hertfordshire
 - Breakdown of council tax between county and borough councils and the police
 - Changing balance between national and local funding of local government services
 - Recent increases in council tax charges for Hertfordshire authorities
 - Range and cost of DBC services.
9. A presentation by James Dean for DBC explained the budget process and:
 - DBC's role (its key aims and targets)
 - Council's medium term financial strategy
 - Shift from central government support for services to funding them from local taxation
 - Scale of required council budget savings
 - Impact of assumed annual £5 Band D council tax increases on the savings targets

DBC's approach to achieve a balanced budget, based on:

Protecting front-line services

Increasing council tax by £5 (Band D, with proportionate amounts for other tax bands) – to yield at total of £270,000

Improving efficiency

Increasing income.

10. The discussion agenda covered the following main issues:
 - Means of increasing council revenue
 - Principle of encouraging further public sector partnerships
 - Principle of outsourcing work to the private sector
 - Council tax – should DBC increase council tax by £5?
 - Any other suggested options.
11. As well as considering the council's council tax proposals, the forum was asked if it was satisfied with DBC's financial management generally.
12. The meeting alternated between presentations, with frequent questions and answers, and round table discussion in groups of six. All the issues were examined on a 'before-and-after' basis by comparing participants' initial ideas with their final judgements (after the presentations and discussions).

Significance of forums

13. In-depth deliberative research can be rigorous, inclusive and representative in the sense of involving diverse groups of people; but it should not be understood as achieving a 'statistical sample of the population'. This does not undermine or devalue the process, but only clarifies its nature as qualitative research – which seeks to learn a lot from relatively small numbers of diverse people, rather than learning the answers to standardised questionnaires administered to large random samples of people. Qualitative research is about stimulating questioning and facilitating 'conversations' rather than gathering large numbers of standardised responses from large statistical samples of the population.
14. So, like other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, but the recruitment process gave a diverse range of 27 residents the opportunity to comment in detail on DBC's financial planning. We are thus satisfied that the outcomes of the consultation (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how opinion in Dacorum would incline after similar discussions.

Report

15. This report reviews the opinions of the participants before and after considering and discussing important information. Some verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them, but for their vividness in capturing points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately. While quotations are used, the report is not a verbatim transcript, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Consultation Findings

Introduction

16. This section summarises the overall findings from the forum. Not all the individuals gave equal emphasis to each aspect of the discussion, but, taken overall, they considered a wide range of issues that are reported fully below.

Financial awareness

17. Before receiving any information or presentations, the participants were asked some initial factual and policy questions to indicate briefly their awareness and knowledge of local government structures and finances.
18. Most participants were aware that DBC collects their council tax, but they were generally unaware of how the total charge is generated and how the total collected is divided between different authorities. Rather strikingly, most were unaware that Hertfordshire County Council receives most of the total council tax paid by households, and they had little or no idea about the cost of adult and children's social services. In fact, most participants seemed to believe that DBC receives most of the council tax they pay!
19. When asked to 'guesstimate' what proportion of their total council tax DBC receives (12%), only a minority of the participants were in the right range: most either had no idea or thought the proportion was 22% or even more than half! Therefore, most of the residents had little or no idea of how much DBC's services cost Band D households per day, per week or even per year.
20. There was some surprise when it was mentioned that a council tax increase of £5 (for Band D) would yield only about £270,000 next financial year.
21. Later, after the council's financial position and strategies had been explained, the forum considered the main policy issues in depth. Despite the initial unawareness of many financial issues, all the residents followed the presentations with interest while also asking numerous questions.

Initial and final opinions

Before and after

22. At the start of the meeting, the forum members were asked to state their “initial opinions” on important policy issues because (as with the ‘awareness’ questions above) the forum’s initial views are a guide to general public sentiments. Then, following the presentations and small group discussions, the residents were asked for their final judgements on the same questions – so the slides shown below were completed partly at the beginning and partly during the final stages of the forum.

INITIAL V CONSIDERED OPINIONS



Do you think Dacorum BC should **reduce SOME services** in order to save money?

	Initial	Considered
YES	0	0
NO	17	14
? DON'T KNOW	10	13

INITIAL V CONSIDERED OPINIONS



Do you think Dacorum BC should **increase SOME charges** in order to protect services?

	Initial	Considered
YES	9	17
NO	3	3
? DON'T KNOW	13	7

INITIAL V CONSIDERED OPINIONS



Should DBC **share more services** with other LA?

	Initial	Considered
YES	18	16
NO	4	0
? DON'T KNOW	5	11




Should DBC **outsource more services** to the private sector?

	Initial	Considered
YES	8	7
NO	12	15
? DON'T KNOW	6	5

Your Initial v Considered Opinions






Are you broadly satisfied with the DBC's current financial performance?

	Initial	Considered
 YES	9	26
 NO	1	1
 ? DON'T KNOW	17	0

INITIAL V CONSIDERED OPINIONS



Do you think Dacorum BC should increase its Band D council tax by £5 in April 2018 in order to protect services?

	Initial	Considered
 YES	17	26
 NO	4	1
 ? DON'T KNOW	6	0

Reducing expenditure by cutting some services

23. At both the start and end of the forum none of the participants wanted to reduce DCB's expenditure by reducing or discontinuing some services – although at the end the rejection was less emphatic than at the start (14 rather than 17 against) and there were more 'don't knows' (13 rather than 10). In any case, the forum found it very difficult to nominate any specific services to reduce or discontinue, even though they were shown a detailed list of what functions DBC does. In other words, while there was a significant number of 'don't knows', cutting front-line services is always likely to be controversial.

Increasing revenue by raising some charges

24. At the beginning of the meeting, only a third of the 27 participants agreed that DBC should increase its revenue by raising some unspecified charges, but (following the discussions) the number in favour increased to almost two-thirds, and the 'don't knows' reduced substantially. Nonetheless, the forum understood and accepted DBC's reasons for not increasing commercial and garage rents; and in any case, there was no support for parking charge increases.

Sharing services (with other councils) and outsourcing (to the private sector)

25. The participants were strongly in favour of making efficiency savings and in both their initial and final judgements, they supported the council sharing more services with other Hertfordshire authorities to reduce costs. They asked about the number of local authorities and thought there was scope for more collaboration and for joint services without sacrificing local access points.
26. In this context, there was some interest in the creation of unitary authorities (currently being considered elsewhere in England), given that Hertfordshire has a total of 11 local authorities.
27. In contrast, the participants were opposed to outsourcing more services to the private sector. There seems to have been a shift of opinion on this topic over the last two years (following Carillion?), for more now reject outsourcing if done on 'ideological' grounds, and many doubt that it works in practice (without increasing costs and worsening service standards). Even those in favour often said outsourcing was worthwhile only if it achieved worthwhile savings and was sustainable.

Proposed £5 (Band D) council tax increase

28. Even at the start of the meeting, before any of the explanation or presentation, almost two-thirds of the forum members were in favour of increasing the DCB's Band D precept by £5 for 2019-20, with only four objecting (and six 'don't knows'). It is interesting that, after the pressure in recent years to freeze or minimise council tax increases, the forum's initial opinions were so positive about the proposed increase.
29. The final judgements were even more emphatically in favour of the proposed increase – with almost everyone in favour and only one opposed, with no 'don't knows'. Of course, learning about DBC's share of the total council tax and the level of its daily Band D charge certainly reinforced the forum's conclusions about the appropriateness of a £5 council tax increase. Nonetheless, even the initial opinions were supportive, with a large absolute majority in favour.

DBC's financial strategy

30. At the beginning of the meeting, a third of the participants were broadly satisfied with DBC's financial performance whereas two-thirds were 'don't knows'. However, by the end of the meeting people's 'considered judgements' had shifted considerably – with almost unanimous approval for DBC's financial performance.

Overall priorities

Ranking priorities

31. During the forum, the five discussion groups were asked to complete a group task of allocating 100 notional “points” between five possible priorities to indicate their agreed relative importance for the council’s financial strategy. Significantly, the findings from this group exercise were highly consistent with the findings reported above from the individual expressions of opinion, for (in order of importance) the two most highly rated priorities were:

Raising council tax by £5 for Band D

Increasing efficiency.

32. While ‘increasing efficiency’ was a high priority, this did not mean that people criticised the council, though (as we have seen) they definitely favoured more shared services. However, one person said with some emphasis:

If in recent years you have been able to reduce your expenditure so markedly (due to the financial pressures from the government), doesn’t that imply that you were very inefficient before? So are you sure you can’t make further efficiency savings? How do you analyse your optimum size workforce? Do you have external reviews to assess your performance?

33. It is also noteworthy that, while people generally supported a council tax increase, there were those who said that:

There are affordability issues for people! Many feel squeezed, even if they don’t want to save money by reducing services – so we have to remember the overall burden of council tax rises across authorities.

Conclusions

34. The forum of 27 Dacorum residents worked well: people were particularly attentive and interested, and they engaged in thoughtful discussions of the issues.
35. There was general and ready understanding of the need to achieve a balanced budget by a combination of approaches – particularly pursuing greater efficiency, raising council tax and (where possible) increasing income while protecting front-line services to the public.
36. The forum thought that existing services should be protected as far as possible and that the Council should seek efficiency savings wherever possible (especially by sharing services with other councils in Hertfordshire).

37. Even initially (before presentations and discussions) there was general acceptance of the Council's draft proposal to increase DBC's Band D council tax by £5 for next year; and following discussions this was strongly endorsed (by almost everyone) as reasonable and fair in the circumstances.
38. Opinions about outsourcing services to the private sector were more negative than some years ago – probably influenced by the Carillion collapse and other matters.