

Brighton and Hove City Council's Budget Consultation

Background

Brighton and Hove has a vibrant community and voluntary sector providing a wide range of services. Many of these organisations are supported by the city council's discretionary grant programme of just over £1.6 million, including both three year strategic grants to larger organisations, and annual grants to smaller organisations and for specific activity.

The infrastructure support to the sector is provided by a number of different organisations, including the Community and Voluntary Sector Forum (CVSF) which provides information to the sector and a representation mechanism to city partnerships. The panel of representatives includes a number of people who represent the different equality strands.

The chief officer of the CVSF sits on our local strategic partnership (LSP) and we work together strategically on issues of importance to the sector.

Summary

The budget setting process is getting progressively more difficult as the finance gap widens and need continues to grow. The council therefore needed to think more creatively and pragmatically and base their decisions on the best possible local information. The corporate priorities for the new Green Party-led administration include tackling inequality and engaging people who live and work in the city.

It was therefore important for them to have clear engagement processes throughout the budget-setting process and good equality impact assessment.

The process for setting the budget for 2012/13 (and initial plans for 2013/14) therefore included:

- An online budget simulator available on the council's website, intranet and accessible with support through the library network and which a representative sample of 3,000 citizens were written to and invited to complete
- A series of three budget roundtable events over the course of the year including representatives of all political parties, trades unions and the CVSF
- A star chamber process to consider options where representatives of all political parties attended;
- A meeting with representatives of business ratepayers
- Three budget workshops in different communities in the city using a deliberative approach to consultation
- Consultation with council tenants at the City Assembly
- Information in 'City News' inviting comment and feedback
- Staff consultation meetings
- Briefings for Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) on the process
- CVS representative as part of the budget scrutiny undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission
- A meeting with the Older People's Council
- Specific budget consultation meetings/workshops with other equality groups.

The learning from this exercise has already influenced the budget setting for 2013/14 (and initial plans for 2014/15) which is currently in its early stages.

Who is involved?

Council Officers

Strategic Finance

Communications team

Scrutiny team

Communities and Equality team

Children and Family Services

Partners/Partnerships

Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) representatives including Equalities Network

Federation of Disabled People

Black and Minority Ethnic Community Partnership

Youth Council

Carer's Forum

Learning Disabilities Partnership.

The challenges for us

Engaging non-finance people in finance decision making

There were several mechanisms that we used to address this issue. The first of these was the online budget simulator and the associated communications via our 'City News' council newspaper and website. As a process it was one that young people in particular found interesting and it formed the basis for a workshop with young people organised by Children and Family Services.

In undertaking the consultation with other equality groups it was necessary to present the budget proposals under key themes in order that they could start to engage with the papers. This led to many interesting discussions but did not always highlight the most significant equality issues. We addressed this by inviting several key stakeholders to submit written response after the workshops. These responses were more considered and formed part of the equality impact assessment report.

In order that the CVSF representative could truly represent the views of the sector, we worked with them on an event for CVS organisations which explained the process and enabled theme-based discussion.

Ensuring the feedback was taken seriously and was influential

This was helped considerably by the commitment of the minority administration to real engagement. The changes that they made to the budget proposals were clearly as a result of the feedback received. Our main strategy to ensure this was to work with influential people in the CVS and to present their views as directly as possible. The CVSF representative in the scrutiny process was also extremely important and it was crucial that she was able to truly represent the views of the sector and able to express herself effectively. She received support from CVSF staff throughout the process as well as from council officers.

Facilitating dialogue, not just lobbying

There were proposals within the budget which were extremely unpopular and subject of lobbying activity. Clearly as part of the democratic process this is valid and it can produce useful results. If this had been the main result however we could potentially lose support for the engagement process; especially if we were simply hearing from the “usual suspects”.

The key mechanism for facilitating deeper conversation was working with and through the community and voluntary sector. One example of this was the workshop at the Federation of Disabled People which brought a wide range of disabled people together to discuss the proposals. The discussions revealed clear potential impacts on disabled people enabling the officers at ‘the Fed’ to provide a written submission which was included in the papers for councillors and directly influenced some decisions. This process felt productive and useful for those involved and the results mean that they will want to be involved in this way again.

Outcomes

The objective of the exercise was to ensure that interested people in the city were able to engage with the council during the budget-setting process and could influence decision making. The budget report contained an extensive list of changes made by the administration in their proposals. This primarily involved the protection of frontline services and an increase in the savings to be made by our value for money initiatives.

Issues that were flagged during the engagement process have been subsequently addressed such as the protection of the grants to CVS organisations and the piloting of new approaches to ensure that advice provision is available,

The analysis of the use of the online budget simulator showed how difficult it was for participants to make the savings necessary. This was an unexpected outcome however indicated an awareness of the challenge facing the council.

What we learnt

There were several learning points for us that have influenced our planning for this year.

Understanding the budget proposals and structuring discussion – the clearer understanding of this became an outcome in itself

While our on-line tool sought to establish priorities for respondents at a general level it was more difficult for residents to engage with the specifics of the budget proposals as there were hundreds of detailed pages containing budget tables.

Set clear themes and questions for discussion – to enable dialogue and prioritisation

This time around we are keen to establish the key high level questions that the potential proposals are likely to relate to, for example, choices about what type of organisation delivers the various services. These questions/themes will be used in all the planned engagement activity for this year which will be supplemented by specific facilitation of the public events by the New Economics Foundation (nef).

Presentation of equality impact assessment (EqIA)

Councillors found the separate equality impact assessment pack useful during their decision making and valued the feedback from specific groups that was included. The paperwork was however fairly complex and did not cross-reference very easily to the main budget proposal papers. We will make this clearer this year in the presentation of the information and will work with our CVS equality partners to enable their feedback to be embedded more effectively.

Clear ongoing communication

Ensure contributors feel valued and heard, and achieve the best possible inclusivity, using a range of mechanisms for both wide and deep engagement. The communication process last year started with the online tool and included links to the budget papers. We did not provide very much information before, during and after to enable residents to understand what we were asking them and how it would influence the decision making. This year we will start the process earlier and be more explicit.

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