

Moray Citizens' Panel
Budget Consultation 2009

Summary Report

by

Craigforth

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the Consultation

- 1.1. The Budget Consultation was undertaken to gauge public opinion on a series of budget savings proposed by the Moray Council. These savings anticipate the long term impact of a significant reduction in public spending over the next four years.
- 1.2. Proposed savings were outlined in a consultation document circulated among members of the Moray Citizens Panel for comment. The consultation made it clear that these cuts were already planned; the consultation focused rather on the timing of savings cuts and how these could be scheduled to minimise impact on local communities. Panel members were asked which services should be seen as a priority for cuts, and which services should have their cuts delayed as long as possible. Comment was asked in relation to key service areas within the following grouping of departments:
 - Community Services
 - Education Services
 - Environmental Services
 - Other Services (Council Tax, Estates Management, Financial and IT)

Consultation Approach

- 1.3. The consultation was undertaken during November and December 2009, and involved a summary consultation document and short survey questionnaire being issued to all 973 current Moray Citizens' Panel members.
- 1.4. At the time of consultation closing in late December 2009, a total of 497 responses had been received representing an overall response rate of 51%.¹ This is a very strong response for a postal consultation exercise requiring individuals to respond to a relatively detailed consultation document in a relatively short period of time.
- 1.5. Nevertheless this remains a lower response than is typically achieved through Panel surveys. Contributing factors here are likely to be the timing of the survey (close to the Christmas holiday period) and the requirement to read a consultation document. These are likely to have had some negative impact on response rates.

¹ It should be noted that findings presented in this report are based on 474 "analysable" responses - this excludes a number of blank responses from Panel members who made it clear that they felt there was little value in commenting on the timing of budget savings when the decision to make cuts had already been taken.

2. CONSULTATION FINDINGS

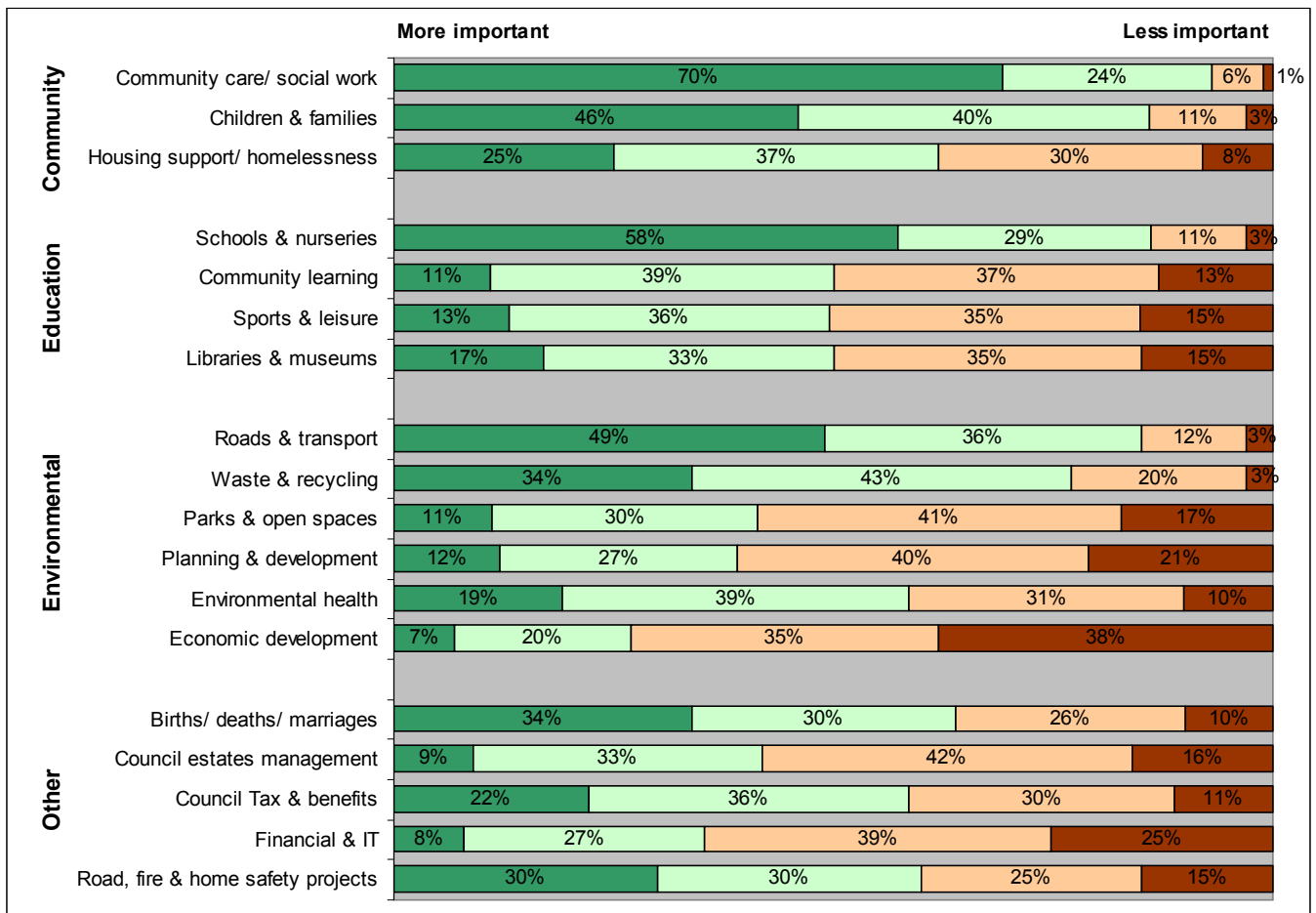
- 2.1. The aim of the consultation was to gauge Panel members' views on the timing of budget cuts set out in the consultation document. The consultation document groups savings around specific service areas, and the survey questionnaire also asked for views in relation to these relatively "high level" service groupings rather than in relation to individual identified savings. A copy of the questionnaire used in the survey is appended to this report.
- 2.2. Although consultation materials made it clear that the consultation was not seeking views on whether specific cuts were required, many respondents nevertheless, expressed strong views on savings which they felt should not be made. Issues of timing of cuts were, consequently, frequently passed over in favour of opposing the cuts or questioning their rationale, or the approach to consultation. We summarise these views alongside the main consultation findings later in this report.

Perceived Importance of Council Services

- 2.3. The survey asked Panel members how important they felt a range of Council services were for local communities, likely to be a key factor in terms of individuals' views on the timing of specific budget savings. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of specific services on a four point scale, "1" being more important and "4" being less important. Figure 1 presents survey results.
- 2.4. Panel members did not specify any particular department as being significantly more important than any other overall, although 'other services' were seen as less important than Community Services, Education Services and Environmental Services.
- 2.5. However, responses from Panel members did emphasise the importance of 'frontline' services for more vulnerable groups, and contrasted these with a perceived imbalance between "too many pen pushers and not enough frontline troops". In this context it is notable that Community Care & Social Work was seen as the most important specific service area. Indeed as many as 70% of all survey respondents gave this the top rating in terms of importance to the community.
- 2.6. Schools & Nurseries and Children & Families services were also identified as services working with potentially vulnerable groups that were highly important for local communities. Around 50-60% of all respondents gave each of these services the top importance rating (58% for Schools & Nurseries, 48% for Children & Families).
- 2.7. Infrastructure was also seen as important. For around half of respondents, roads and transport were seen as highly important and over a third felt that waste and recycling were important services to the community. The rating of other services varied, although most services were seen as relatively important by the majority of respondents.

2.8. The least important services tended to have less direct contact with local communities - for example Economic Development and Financial & IT services. However it is interesting to note that Planning & Development and Parks & Open Spaces were also identified as relatively unimportant services, despite both having a fairly direct relationship with local communities.

Figure 1: Perceived Importance of Council Services



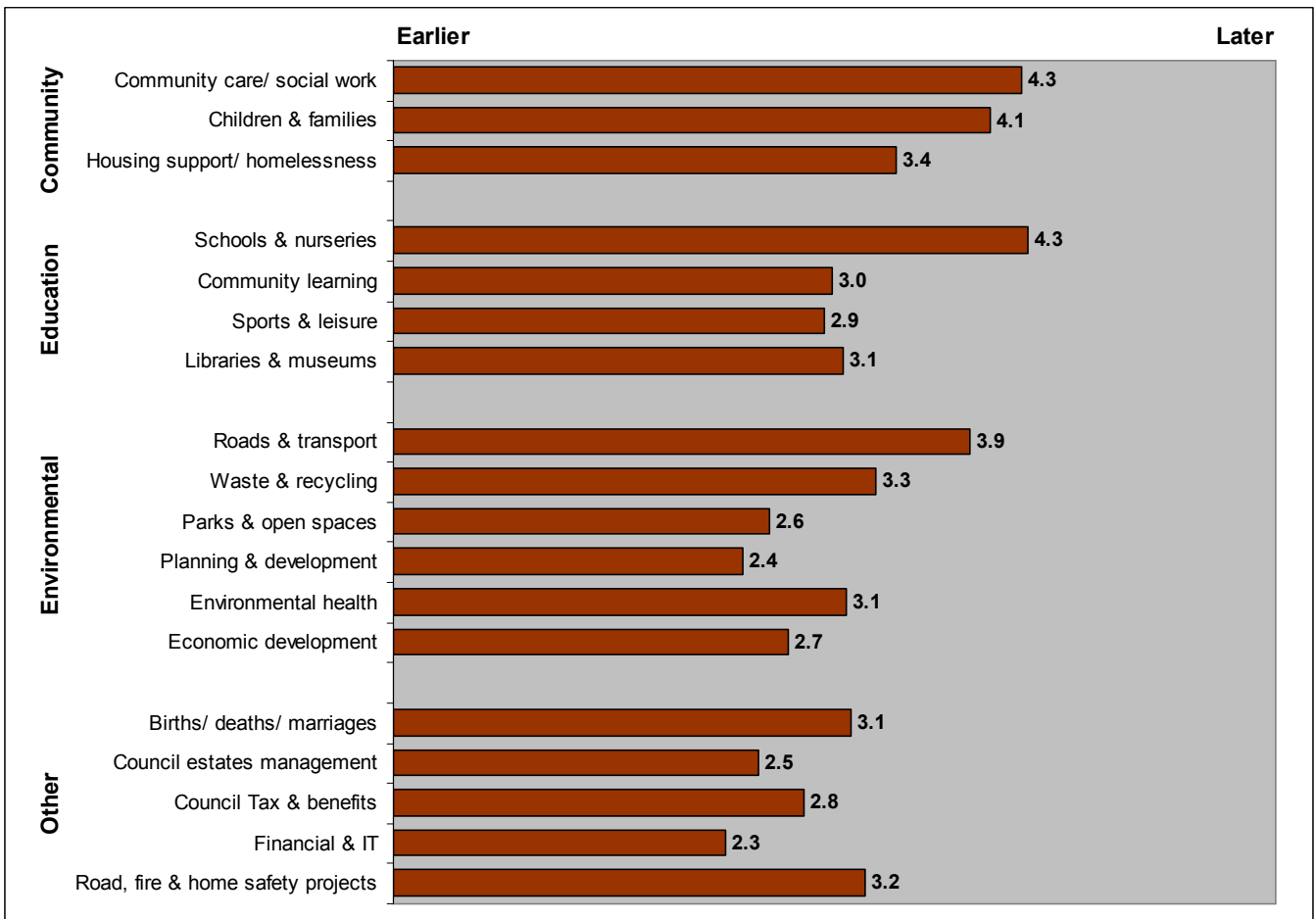
2.9. It is interesting to note that there were relatively few significant variations in the perceived importance of services across key respondent groups, such as age or area. The only points of note were:

- Forres respondents tended to ascribe less importance than other respondents to libraries & museums, and Council Tax & benefits services; and
- Elgin respondents see planning and development services as less important than other respondents, while this service is highly important for Keith area respondents;

Views on Budget Proposals

- 2.10. Panel members were asked for their views on the timing of budget savings set out in the consultation document. This included a question asking individuals to rate each service area in terms of the extent to which proposed savings should be made quickly or should be delayed until later in the period to 2014. The question used a six point scale with “1” indicating cuts to be made early in the period 2010-2014, and “6” indicating cuts that should be delayed until later in the period.
- 2.11. Figure 2 over the page shows survey results as an average score for each service area. Higher scores indicate where Panel members feel cuts should be delayed, and lower scores where Panel members feel cuts could be made sooner.
- 2.12. Community Services, dealing with the more vulnerable sectors of society, emerged as the department where survey respondents would most like to see savings delayed. This was particularly the case for Community Care & Social Work (score of 4.3 out of 6) and Children & Families services (4.1).
- 2.13. These responses reflected respondents’ feelings about the importance of specific services, with those felt as most important being the services where most respondents would like to see cuts delayed. In particular, Schools & Nurseries (4.3) and Roads & Transport (3.9) were also identified as areas where savings should be delayed as far as possible.
- 2.14. A number of service areas were identified as having potential for savings to be implemented more quickly, particularly within Environmental Services. Financial & IT (2.3), Planning & Development(2.4), Council Estates Management (2.5), Parks & Open Spaces (2.6) and Economic Development (2.6) were all areas where a significant proportion of respondents felt cuts could be made earlier in the period 2010-2014.
- 2.15. Reflecting survey results in relation to perceived importance of services, there was little variation across respondent groups on views on the timing of budget proposals. Indeed the only significant variations were:
 - Older respondents would prefer to see Council Tax & Benefits cuts delayed until later in the period to 2014 - for most this reflected a concern that a reduction in funding for benefit fraud detection was not desirable.
 - The majority of younger respondents wished to see cuts to schools & nurseries budgets delayed for as long as possible, expressing much stronger and clearer views than older respondents.

Figure 2: Views on the Timing of Proposed Savings



2.16. The results presented above provide a useful overview of Panel members' views on the timing of proposed budget savings. In addition the consultation gave individuals the opportunity to identify specific issues relating to the timing of budget savings - for example reasons for delaying proposed cuts until later in the period 2010-2014.

2.17. In practice, survey respondents raised a wide range of concerns and issues relating not only to the timing of budget savings, but also the principle of whether proposed savings should be made and the possibility of further cuts to some services. Often specific points raised by respondents were relevant to the timing of savings, but also reflected wider concerns around the potential impact and the desirability of specific savings. There was also concern over how the consultation had been handled, with a number feeling there had been little opportunity for debate, and that the consultation exercise was in itself, wasteful;

I think that this consultation exercise is an abdication of the council's responsibility, as meaningful consultation is very difficult, time consuming and costly and we cannot afford it.

- 2.18. A number of respondents suggested that if cuts were to be made, they should be implemented quickly to maximise the savings and minimise long term impact - "bite the bullet as soon as possible". Others suggested that instead of cutting services altogether, the teams delivering them could be downsized to increase efficiency and reduce costs.
- 2.19. However there was also a more common - and in places very strong - view that any savings which would have an impact on direct services to local communities should be delayed for as long as possible, if they could not be avoided entirely. This points was made particularly in relation to cuts to services for vulnerable people, as we highlight in relation to Community Services below.
- 2.20. Many of these centred around a common perception that senior management and administration costs could, and should, be cut more. One respondent captured the mood of many responses over the emphasis of the budget cuts;

I agree that the council should make cuts by reducing administration and management costs. however trying to make savings from essential services, for example from disabled and older people is just immoral - hitting the most vulnerable.

- 2.21. Points similar to this were made across all service areas, and indeed some felt that there should be significantly more savings to management costs than is set out in the consultation document, as well as a wider, and deeper, change in culture and approach;

Serious savings can only be achieved when Moray council adopts a business attitude to its overall operation...a serious reduction of senior management on high salaries followed by a streamlined, effective appraisal of departments to produce a value for money statement. Only when the mindset is switched on, can a meaningful result be attained.

- 2.22. Other points related more specifically to departments and service areas and we summarise these in turn below.

Community Services

- 2.23. There was a widespread view that cutting services to the most vulnerable parts of the community should be "a last resort". Older people, young people at risk, people with learning disabilities and users of victim support services were highlighted, and in particular those living in more rural areas at risk of isolation if services are withdrawn. Many suggested that these are groups are most in need of help from the Council, and least able to adapt to change or meet their own needs. There was significant concern that cuts to these services could then, seriously affect the quality of life for parts of the community.

- 2.24. There was also a very strong view that cuts to services for these most vulnerable groups should not be made under any circumstances. Some expressed concern that services were already under-resourced and that cuts now could lead to greater problems and increased cost in the future - particularly in the context of projected increases in the older population for example.
- 2.25. Others suggested that if there was no way to avoid cuts to services, any savings should be delayed for as long as possible. Some indicated that a longer period would be required to plan for cuts and to help vulnerable people to adapt. However it was clear that some hoped more rapid economic improvement over the coming years could negate the need for these savings.
- 2.26. There were some respondents who, while unsupportive of the cuts overall, did feel certain services should be "shaken up" and reviewed. Suggestions here included a freeze on recruitment to higher grade posts, and revising the remits of certain services (particularly where they had expanded significantly beyond their original or 'core' function). This seemed to reflect a concern that services varied considerably in terms of staffing and delivery, and also that the programme of cuts had been hurried through and had not been made on the basis of a considered review of services.

A thorough review needs to be undertaken with particular attention to learning disability and disabled services and should remain ongoing. I am aware statistics are falsified and client numbers are faked to keep people in jobs. Reviews are also selectively done to support a positive outcome from the service itself.

- 2.27. Most respondents appeared to support a move to specialist fostering, but felt that this should be delayed to allow time for recruitment and training of foster carers. A significant number of respondents made points relating specifically to this, and felt that if the move was 'rushed' it could seriously disadvantage the young people and children involved. Others were supportive of the move to fostering as they felt it would improve on current arrangements for young people;

If there was more specialist fostering, there would be less youngsters in hostels, most sixteen year olds are not capable of holding a tenancy.

- 2.28. Some did however, question the plan along the grounds of whether this might endanger the children and young people involved, or whether any real savings might be effectively lost to the demands of a new system. The latter group of respondents queried whether specialist fostering could ensure the required level of care for all young people. The other group raised the point that any perceived potential savings could be easily negated if some level of 24 hours support would be required to help foster carers in an emergency.

Education Services

- 2.29. A similar picture emerged in relation to Education Services. Many respondents suggesting that any savings in Education budgets should be a last resort measure, and should be delayed as much as possible. Moreover, there was a widespread perception that schools were already struggling under tight budgets and that this situation should not be exacerbated by further cuts. This also reflected a common view that the provision of good quality education services now is crucial to the future prosperity of Moray - "the foundation to the future of our country".
- 2.30. There was significant and widespread concern regarding reduction in Additional Support Needs provision, and again this related to a widespread view that any cuts affecting the most vulnerable should be delayed as much as possible. It was also suggested ASN provision was already struggling to meet pupil needs, and that over the coming years these services would be vital in progressing the Curriculum for Excellence and meeting Statutory Requirements.
- 2.31. Many suggested that cuts with less direct impact on the quality of education provided to pupils should be prioritised. This included cuts to Continuous Professional Development for teachers, and particularly more and quicker cuts to central education services. There was a clear view that cuts to school budgets must be delayed and avoided if at all possible, and fears that cuts could put further pressure on the education system in Moray, and teachers in particular;

As a parent of school children I feel education should not be cut. Children have the right to education. Teachers are already feeling stressed with the restrictions already imposed.

- 2.32. Many respondents felt the cuts were not realistic and had not taken account of the realities within the school system. This panel member was particularly forthright, but gives a flavour of the overall mood of the responses;

I feel some of these cuts have been plucked from "mid-air". Do the elected members actually realise how schools operate? At a time where class sizes are an issue cutting staff is increasing rather than decreasing class sizes.

- 2.33. A few respondents did feel there was some room for greater efficiencies in education, and that the salaries and roles played by teachers were a priority for review, especially in the higher levels of the profession. In the case of these respondents, the list of priorities was often quite mixed;

Very high paid teachers (i.e. £150,000 and over) should be reduced. Class sizes should remain small (less than 20). school meals are always necessary and should depend on income pro-rata.

- 2.34. A number of respondents specifically suggested that cuts could go further in some places by reviewing decisions on school closures - there was a clear view from some that budgets for schools with a very small pupil roll should be diverted to other schools to avoid the need for cuts to school budgets. There were also a number of comments that supported reducing the use of outside agencies and contractors in schools, shifting instead to in-house provision.
- 2.35. Implementing savings quickly was supported across a number of proposals including stopping free bread and milk with school meals, and cutting leisure and arts budgets.
- 2.36. There were mixed views on proposed savings to community learning and library budgets. Some clearly felt that these were less important than "core" schools and education budgets. However others pointed out that stopping mobile library services for example could significantly disadvantage those in more rural areas, and these cuts should be delayed.

Environmental Services

- 2.37. Whereas respondents were highly protective of Community Services and Education Services, they were generally more willing to consider savings to Environmental Services
- 2.38. Waste Management and open spaces services (including the Ranger service) were generally seen as areas where savings could be made quickly. Similarly there was general support for increasing parking charges in the short term, and in particular implementing charges to Council staff parking.
- 2.39. Roads maintenance emerged as an area where the majority of respondents felt that savings could not be made, and at the very least where savings should be delayed. This reflected a common view that the current standard of roads was relatively poor and that any further savings could have significant implications in terms of road safety, particularly on rural roads.

In such a rural area we rely on our cars and in winter the roads can be treacherous. we need to ensure our roads are kept at a high standard to avoid accidents - and save lives.

- 2.40. Generally, respondents felt that any cuts to road maintenance should be minimal. It is worth remembering that at the time of consultation, Moray was badly affected by the adverse weather conditions, so this is likely to have been a real and pressing issue for many respondents;

Roads maintenance is important...and the council could have increased insurance claims if roads become 'sub-standard'.

- 2.41. Views were more mixed in relation to increasing charges for some services. Some felt that this could be a sensitive issue in terms of uptake of services, and for example that there would be no benefit if increased charges lead to fewer people using services. A similar point was made in relation to increased parking charges impacting on income for high street shops, although the general view was that there was an opportunity for some increase to charges here.

Other Services

- 2.42. Finally in relation to savings across other services, proposed savings here were generally supported and it was suggested that if cuts are to be made in the short term then most of those identified under "Other Services" should be prioritised. There was a view that some of these services were inherently wasteful and would not be missed;

Too much time is wasted by people recording and collecting figures for reaching targets and creating statistics. These are too often dishonest and misleading and should be reduced earlier rather than later.

- 2.43. Statements such as this reflect a fairly common view that the culture and working practices of the 'top-heavy' council should also be under review, alongside any programme of service cuts. A number suggested the Council might reduce its staffing and freeze wage increases. In particular there was support for moving to a shared Council Tax and Benefits service with neighbouring authorities, and the general view was that this should be implemented as soon as possible. Some however, were very clear that budget cuts should not undermine the benefits system, or make it harder to track down and identify fraudulent claims.

Please don't reduce budgets for detection of fraudulent benefit claims - the more people caught the better and it would be counteractive to saving

- 2.44. Proposed savings to Victim Support and Moray Youth Justice were identified as areas where if possible grants should be reduced rather than stopped, and certainly that any savings should be delayed as much as possible. Again this reflects a concern that savings affecting the most vulnerable parts of the community should be avoided or delayed.
- 2.45. There were mixed views on proposed savings to benefit fraud services. It was clear that some felt this service should result in a net saving for the Council if it is effective in reducing fraud, although it was also clear that some felt the principle of preventing fraud was sufficient to warrant delaying any savings.

APPENDIX: SURVEY FORM



Moray Citizens' Panel

Budget Consultation - 2009

Please use this survey form to give your views on the proposed budget savings summarised in the enclosed consultation document. Your views will help the Council to make decisions on how to schedule the required cuts over the coming 4-5 year period.

Your use of Council services

Q1 For each of the services provided by Moray Council, please indicate how important you feel services are for you and your local community. Please circle ONE option for each service

	More important	←————→ Less important		
Community Services				
Community care and social work <i>Including support to older people, people with disability, people with health or care needs</i>	1	2	3	4
Children and families services <i>Including child protection, adoption/ fostering, residential care</i>	1	2	3	4
Housing support and homelessness services <i>Including lets of Council housing, property repairs, homeless services, housing grants</i>	1	2	3	4
Educational Services				
Schools and nurseries <i>Including learning support and childcare</i>	1	2	3	4
Community learning <i>Including adult learning & literacy, financial support</i>	1	2	3	4
Sports and leisure <i>Including sports/ leisure facilities and programmes</i>	1	2	3	4
Libraries and museums	1	2	3	4
Environmental Services				
Roads and transport <i>Including road design and maintenance, transport and car parking</i>	1	2	3	4
Waste and recycling <i>Including waste collection, recycling centres, fly tipping and litter</i>	1	2	3	4
Parks and open spaces <i>Including open spaces, outdoor access, ranger service</i>	1	2	3	4
Planning and development <i>Including planning permission, building regulations</i>	1	2	3	4
Environmental health <i>Including enforcement of regulations, pest control</i>	1	2	3	4
Economic development <i>Including lottery and other community funds advice</i>	1	2	3	4
Other Services				
Registration of births/ deaths/ marriages	1	2	3	4
Council estates management	1	2	3	4
Council Tax collection & benefits services	1	2	3	4
Financial & IT support to Council services	1	2	3	4
Road, fire and home safety projects	1	2	3	4

Your views on budget proposals

A significant reduction in public funding is expected across Scotland over the next few years to deal with the unprecedented level of current UK debt. As a result all local authorities will be required to make substantial savings in their budgets.

Council Officers and Councillors in Moray have been undertaking a major review of all Council budgets over the past four months to identified potential savings. The enclosed consultation document sets out specific cuts to be made over the next 4 years.

These cuts will need to be made to take account of the expected cut in government funding. However the Council would like to hear your views on issues affecting how cuts should be timed over a 4 year period.

Please use this section of the questionnaire to raise any substantial reasons for some specific cuts to be delayed until later in the 4 year period. These might include cases where you think making proposed cuts earlier in the period will jeopardise other services, or where you think a longer period of time is required to plan and prepare for required cuts.

Q2a Issues relating to Community Services.

Proposed savings here include...replacing young people's residential care with specialist fostering; reviewing learning disability and older people services; reducing the Council's contribution to a range of support, advice and counselling services; reducing administrative and management costs.

Q2b Issues relating to Educational Services.

Proposed savings here include...reducing the Childcare Service budget; reducing schools' budgets in relation to management, class sizes, teachers professional development and Additional Support services; ceasing provision of free bread and milk with school meals; reducing Additional Support reducing community learning, libraries, leisure and arts budgets.

Issues relating to Environmental Services.

Q2c Proposed savings here include...reducing waste management advertising and monitoring budgets; reducing budgets for roads maintenance; restructuring Speyside Way and Ranger Services; reducing grounds maintenance budgets; increasing car parking charges; restructuring planning and development sections; reducing Tobacco Control services; increasing charges or work volume for Pest Control; increasing HMO licensing charges.

Issues relating to Other Services.

Q2d Proposed savings here include...reduce budgets for detection of fraudulent benefit claims; savings through the creation of a joint revenues and benefits service with other Councils, reduce spending on road safety and fire and home safety projects; cease grant to Moray Youth Justice, Victim Support and violence reduction; cease production of antisocial behaviour statistics.

The timing of savings

Q3 Thinking about the proposed budget savings for each service, and any issues you have mentioned at Q2a to Q2d, please give your views on how cuts should be timed over the 4 year period. For each service please indicate if you think that, overall, cuts should be made earlier or later in the period to 2014. Please circle ONE option for each service

	EARLIER 2010 ←————→ LATER 2014					
Community Services						
Community care and social work	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children and families services	1	2	3	4	5	6
Housing support and homelessness services	1	2	3	4	5	6
Educational Services						
Schools and nurseries	1	2	3	4	5	6
Community learning	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sports and leisure	1	2	3	4	5	6
Libraries and museums	1	2	3	4	5	6
Environmental Services						
Roads and transport	1	2	3	4	5	6
Waste and recycling	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parks and open spaces	1	2	3	4	5	6
Planning and development	1	2	3	4	5	6
Environmental health	1	2	3	4	5	6
Economic development	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other Services						
Registration of births/ deaths/ marriages	1	2	3	4	5	6
Council estates management	1	2	3	4	5	6
Council Tax collection & benefits service	1	2	3	4	5	6
Financial & IT support to Council services	1	2	3	4	5	6
Road, fire and home safety projects	1	2	3	4	5	6

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

Please return your completed questionnaire using the reply PRE PAID envelope provided to:
Craigforth, 47 Stirling Business Centre, Wellgreen, Stirling, FK8 2DZ

ANY QUERIES?

Freephone **0800 027 2245** or Email **office@craigforth.co.uk**

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