

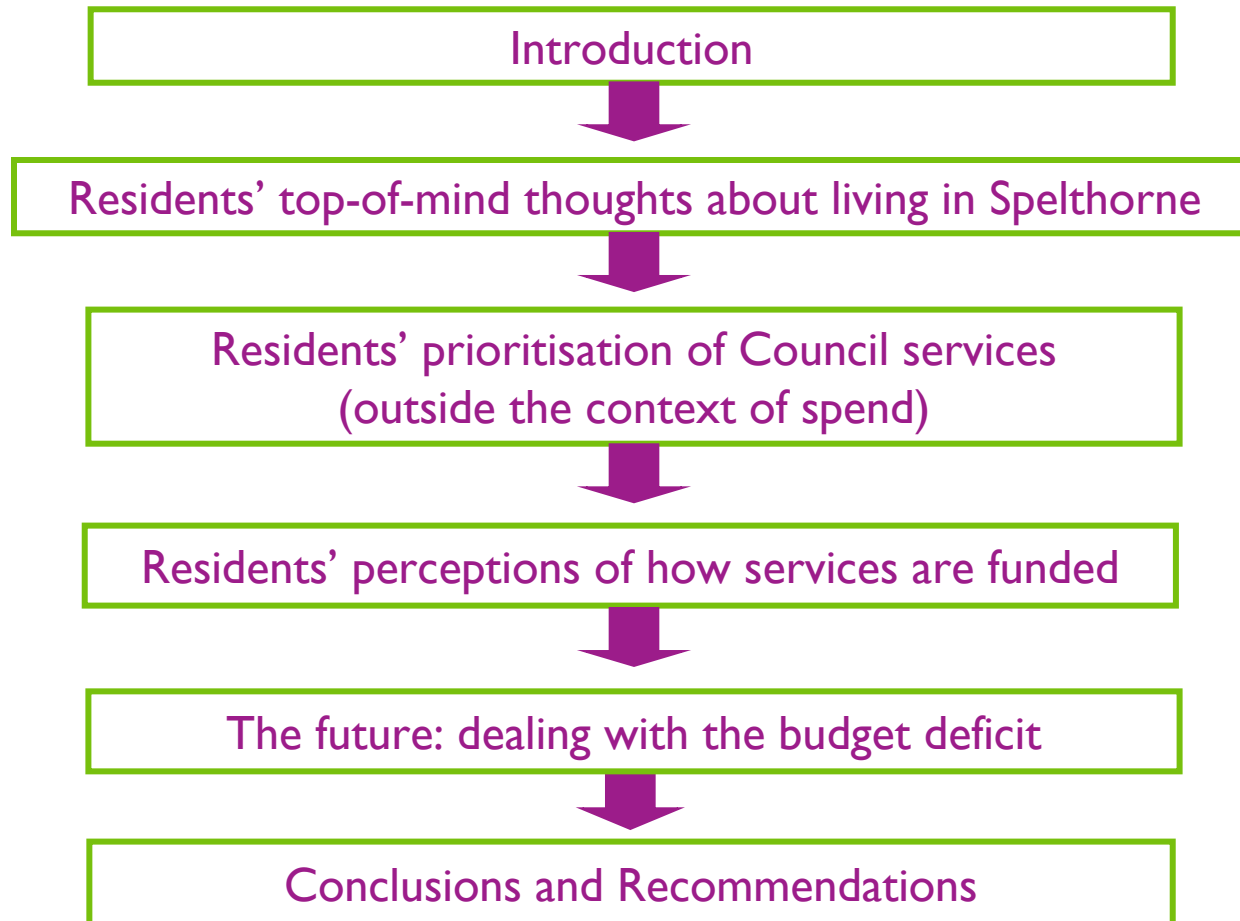


Prioritising Spend in 2007

Qualitative Research Presentation

Prepared for Spelthorne Borough Council
December 2006

Structure of debrief



Introduction



Background

- Spelthorne Borough Council is facing a difficult period financially, as a result of:
 - Central Government reducing grants and placing controls on other ways of raising finance (eg. capping rises in Council Tax)
 - the fact that a high proportion of revenue goes towards mandatory services.
- Even if Council Tax is raised by the maximum 5%, there will still be a budget deficit, which means that spend on certain discretionary services will need to be cut.
- Before setting priorities for spend for the coming financial year, the Council therefore wishes to gain the views of residents as to the best way forward.

Objectives

Overall objective

To determine how residents of Spelthorne Borough believe spend should be distributed across Council services over the coming financial year, given the fact that there will be a budget deficit that has to be addressed.

Additional objectives

- To determine how residents feel about a rise in Council Tax (up to 5%), given the impending budget deficit.
- To establish whether residents feel they are currently getting value for money in terms of the services provided by Spelthorne Borough Council.
- To ascertain whether or not residents have noticed an improvement in the provision of those services where the Council has increased spend over the recent past, namely community safety and youth initiatives.

Overall method and sample

- 8 focus discussion groups, each lasting 2 hours and arranged as follows.

<u>Group No.</u>	<u>Life-stage</u>	<u>SEG</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Location</u>
1	Pre-nester	C1C2	4 men, 4 women	Staines / Laleham
2	Younger family	BC1	4 men, 4 women	Shepperton
3	Younger family	C2D	4 men, 4 women	Sunbury / Halliford
4	Older family	BC1	4 men, 4 women	Stanwell / Stanwell Moor
5	Older family	C2D	4 men, 4 women	Staines / Laleham
6	Post-nester	C1C2	4 men, 4 women	Ashford
7	Those still living at home / students	BC1	4 men, 4 women	Ashford
8	Pensioners	C1C2	4 men, 4 women	Sunbury / Halliford

Overall method and sample (cont'd)

- Sample definitions:
 - *Young people / students*: aged 18-24, still living at home
 - *Pre-nesters*: aged 20-30 and living independently; young single or married / co-habiting people without children
 - *Younger family*: aged 25 – 40; at least one child aged 2-10 years living at home
 - *Older family*: aged 40 – 55; at least one child aged 11-18 years living at home
 - *Post-nesters*: aged 55+; no children aged 0-18 years living permanently at home
 - *Those on a pension*: aged 65 or over

Fieldwork timings

- Fieldwork took place between 31st October and 6th November 2006.
- The project team was Ben Knight, Samantha Siva and Sali Howells.

Background context:
Residents' top-of-mind emotional thoughts about
living in Spelthorne

In many respects, Spelthorne is a good place to live

Factors linked to the area



- Well-located
(close to Heathrow, Central London and more rural areas)
- Good public transport links
- A friendly “community spirit” (and so a good place to bring up children)

Factors related to Spelthorne Borough Council’s remit



- Good amenities
(shopping centres – particularly Staines, leisure centres)
- Pleasant parks
- Relatively clean streets (with any vandalism of public property dealt with quickly)
- Community events such as Staines regatta

Certain Council services contribute directly to the top-of-mind reasons that residents give for feeling emotionally good about living in Spelthorne

However, there is also discontent about certain aspects of life in the Borough

Factors unrelated to Spelthorne Borough Council's remit



- Traffic congestion
(particularly around Staines and Ashford)
- The closure of A & E departments in local hospitals
- The inadequacy of the local police service
(eg Staines police station closes early, responses from Guildford are slow)

Factors related to Spelthorne Borough Council's remit



- Issues related to local youths (and therefore community safety)
 - youths hanging around the streets
 - low-level anti-social behaviour and vandalism
- The cutbacks being made to services for older people
(day centres, Spelride)
- A lack of sufficient play areas for young children
- The restrictions on recycling

When expressing dissatisfaction, residents tend to point the finger at “the Council” and to make no distinction between Spelthorne Borough Council and Surrey County Council

Inferences from these top-of-mind thoughts about living in Spelthorne

- All the aspects of life in Spelthorne that are top-of-mind for residents and are part of Spelthorne Borough Council's remit relate to *discretionary* services (with the exception of recycling)

The perceived standard of provision of *discretionary* services is likely to play a large part in overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the Council

- Residents like the fact that their life is more pleasant because of Spelthorne's parks, leisure centres, community events and clean streets

A deterioration in these services is likely to be noticed at an emotional level and resented, unless people understand the reasons behind any cuts in spend and buy in to this

- Youth initiatives, community safety, services for older people and play areas for younger children are services that are already a cause of real concern

If these services do not improve, or even worse if they further deteriorate, discontent with the Council is likely to harden

There are few discretionary services that are not top-of-mind for residents as being key to making Spelthorne a place they want to live

Background context:
How residents consciously prioritise Spelthorne Borough
Council's services (outside the context of spend)

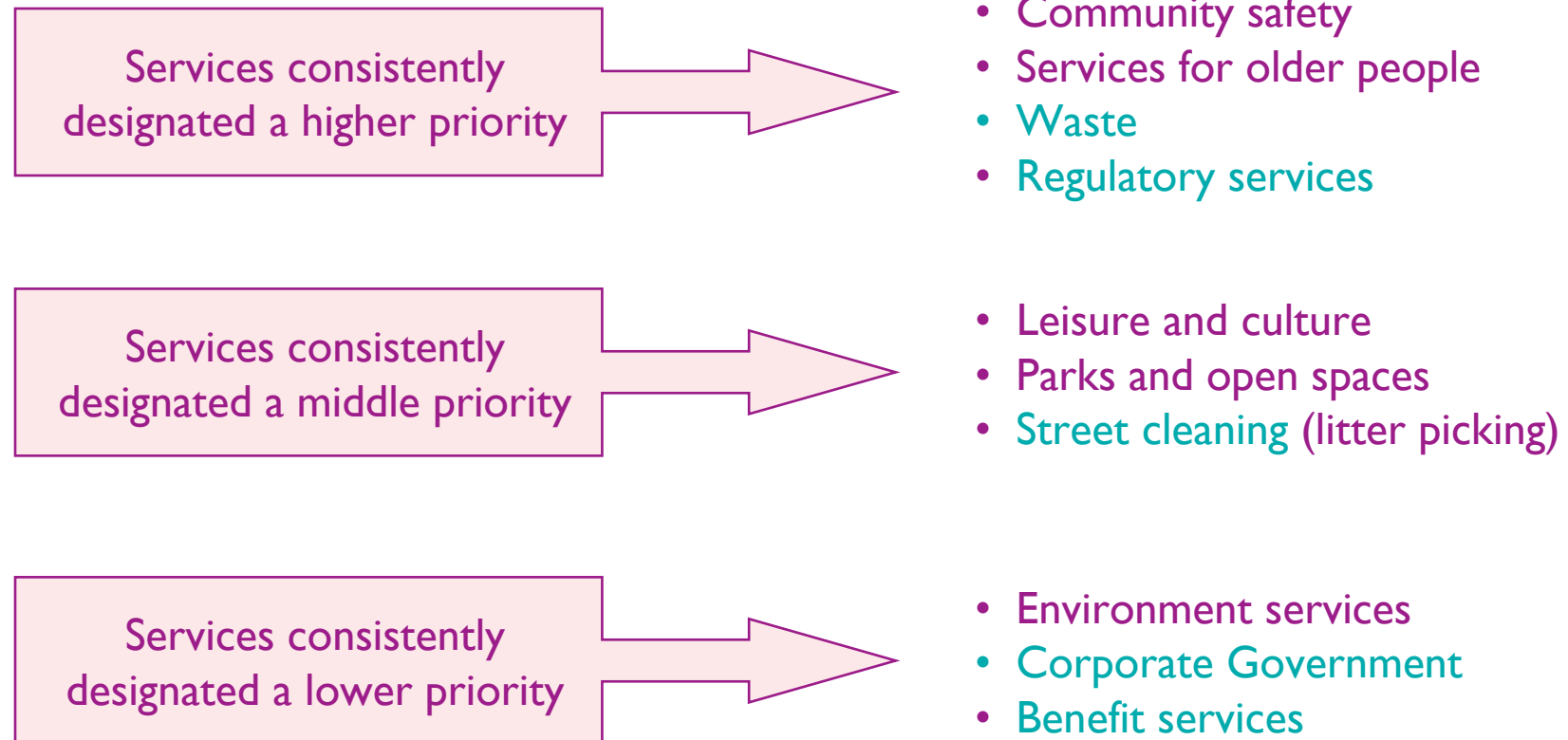
Four key questions drive the prioritisation of services

- Is this service of **personal relevance** to me (or my close friends / relatives) now (or will it be or relevance to me in the future):
 - do I use it?
 - does it make my life in Spelthorne more pleasant?
- Is this a **core service** that is necessary to make any community function (or is it more of a ‘nice to have’)?
- Is there a **moral responsibility** to provide this service, even though I do not personally use it?



- How adequate is the current **provision** of the service:
 - have I been aware of feeling dissatisfaction with it?

There was a high degree of consensus with regard to the prioritisation of services



(There was less consensus about the priority that should be given to housing services.)

Of the discretionary services, only environment services is seen as a lower priority

Community safety

✓ **Personal relevance**

- Everyone should be and feel safe in the place they live
 - not intimidated by gangs of youths
 - not worried about the risk of burglary.

✓ **Core service:**

- It is difficult for any community to function well if there is a fear of crime.

↓ Community safety is given a slightly lesser priority only by those who:

- feel that the safety of residents should be the remit of the police
- personally live in part of Spelthorne that is relatively crime-free.

Community safety (cont'd)

Provision

- Recent initiatives aimed at improving community safety have been noticed:
 - more CCTV (Staines town centre, Stainash Parade)
 - a Community Warden in Stanwell and PCSOs elsewhere
 - promotion of a number for contacting the PCSO service.

- However, the effectiveness of these initiatives tends to be challenged:
 - CCTV is felt by some to have had a positive effect on crime in town centres (with fewer youths hanging around, particularly at night)

but

- PCSOs are generally perceived as a ‘toothless’ presence, with no power to penalise or arrest offenders.

“... PC Stupid and PC Useless is what we call them now, because they sort of turn the other way and don't do anything.” (Younger family, C2D)

Community safety is still a high priority because current initiatives are not perceived to have solved the issues of youths on streets and burglary

Services for older people

✓ **Personal relevance**

- Those who use these services now (or whose relatives use them) see them as essential to their well-being.
- Others acknowledge that they may need these services themselves at some point in the future.

✓ **Moral responsibility**

- A feeling that older people deserve to be looked after by the community.

↓ Services for older people is given a lesser priority only by 18 – 24year olds, who feel least connection with the needs of older people (because of their own youth).

Services for older people (cont'd)

Provision

- There is appreciation of the fact that the Council provides a range of services for older people that makes their lives better in several important ways:
 - day centres = an opportunity to socialise and take part in activities (whilst also giving carers some welcome relief)
 - Meals on Wheels = an essential life-line for some
 - Spelride and Span = independence.
- However, there is also awareness of the recent cuts that have led to:
 - a decision to close Stanwell and Benwell day centres (widespread awareness)
“Benwell Centre’s closing, there’s another one ... it’s already closed I think” (Younger family, C2D)
 - reductions to the Spelride service (noticed by those who are older).

The cuts that have recently been made to this service have raised its profile and made it seem even more of a priority

Waste

✓ Core service

- A baseline level of cleanliness is essential.

“I mean, if we’re overrun with waste, then ... we’d have rats and germs.” (Post-nester, CIC2)

Provision

- The basic service is perceived to be good:
 - the collection of household waste is regular and reliable
 - garden waste is taken, which saves a trip to the dump
 - there is doorstep recycling for some types of material.
- However ideally residents would like:
 - an expansion to the types of material taken for recycling
 - free wheelie bins
 - more flexibility with regard to where rubbish can be left for collection.
- If the frequency of household waste collection is reduced to fortnightly (as some believe is planned), satisfaction with the service is likely to decline.

Even though the waste service is currently perceived to be good, residents are reluctant to make it a lesser priority, because they do not feel that this is an area for compromise

Regulatory services

- ✓ **Core service** (*based on residents' attitudes to planning controls, which are the only element of this service that they tend to have knowledge about and views on*)
 - Planning controls are vital if:
 - the character of the local area is to be maintained, eg open spaces preserved
 - the right quantity and type of housing is to be provided for the future needs of the community.

Provision

- A mixed perception of the success of planning:
 - ✓ the regeneration of Staines is applauded
 - “...obviously put a lot of money into it because there's been some significant developments...it's become more modernised” (18-24, BCI)
 - ✓ certain areas have kept their character, because new developments have been limited
 - ✗ there is some mention of a surfeit of office space, with buildings lying empty
 - ✗ there is some mention of a lack of new affordable housing for young local people.

Residents fear that, if planning controls are not given a high priority, the character of Spelthorne will change unacceptably for the worse

Leisure and culture

✓ Personal relevance

- Youth initiatives are felt to be relevant to everyone, because they are perceived to be inextricably linked with community safety:
 - if youths have more activities to keep them occupied, they will not be hanging around the streets and the whole community will be / feel safer.
“The beauty of the youth clubs are that what you pay with one hand you get back in the other. If they've got somewhere to go and congregate, they're not causing a problem, they're not doing damage.” (Older family, BCI, Staines/Laleham)
- Events such as Staines regatta add to the feeling of being part of a vibrant community.

✓ Moral responsibility

- A feeling that a community should give children a good start in life – and this includes sufficient play areas and play opportunities.

↓ Other aspects of leisure and culture are felt to be less important:

- leisure centres and arts and heritage opportunities for adults are perceived to be:
 - ‘nice to have’ rather than essential (and are of low interest to those who do not use them)
 - services that can (and in some cases are) provided by private enterprise.

Leisure and culture (cont'd)

Provision

- Despite the fact that youth initiatives have been a top priority for the Council in the recent past, there still appears to be low awareness of the opportunities that exist.
And when residents are given an overview of what does exist, the feeling is still that more needs to be done:
 - a greater range of activities
 - more activities that take place on a regular basis.
- When judging the standard of the Borough's public leisure centres, residents do appreciate that there is a trade-off between quality and cost:
 - the public facilities are not of the standard of local private facilities, but they are cheaper (and the Spelthorne facility has been improved recently) ... and so in overall terms they are acceptable.

Youth initiatives are still felt to be a high priority – on a par and inextricably linked with community safety

Parks and open spaces

✓ Personal relevance

- Parks and open spaces do make Spelthorne a more pleasant place to live.
- Playgrounds and play areas are important to those with younger children.

↓ However, in relation to some of the other services, parks and open spaces are perceived to be ‘nice to have’ rather than essential (particularly by those who rarely use them).

*“Parks and open spaces can go lower down ... unless you go often, who really gives a monkey?”
(Older family, C2D)*

Parks and open spaces (cont'd)

Provision

- The perception is that parks within the Borough vary in terms of:
 - the facilities provided (eg sufficient playground equipment to keep children occupied, tennis courts, refreshments)
 - maintenance of grassed and other areas.
- Greatest satisfaction is expressed by those who live near to or visit larger parks (eg Lammas, Laleham), rather than smaller neighbourhood parks.

Emotionally residents appreciate parks and open spaces. However, they rationalise that other services are more essential

Street cleaning (incl. litter picking)

✓ Core service

- Is seen as a necessary service, like waste.

BUT

↓ Is felt to be a lesser priority than waste, because:

- residents do not admit to dropping litter in the streets (whereas they acknowledge how much waste they produce)
- the streets do not seem particularly dirty, and yet street cleaners and litter pickers are rarely seen.

Provision

- Residents seem relatively satisfied with the cleanliness of the streets, but they do not necessarily give the credit for this to Spelthorne Borough Council, because they do not see the cleaning being done.

If Spelthorne's streets were ever to be less clean, it is likely that residents would make this a high priority service (like waste). The Council would benefit from making the service more visible.

Environment services

✓ Personal relevance

- Events such as Spelthorne in Bloom do help to make Spelthorne a more pleasant place to live.
- Car parks are essential in town centres and at / near the larger parks.

↓ However, overall, environment services are felt to be of lower priority than most other services, because:

- events are ‘nice to have’ rather than a necessity
- flooding is rare
- public toilets are rarely noticed or used.

Provision

- Spelthorne in Bloom is a success in that it makes the area look pretty.
- There is some discontent about car park charges (particularly more recently introduced ones, ie in parks and for those with a disability).

Car park charges are a visible charge that residents do comment on spontaneously

Lower priority services



Benefit services

- ↓ Although residents accept that there are some people who genuinely deserve benefits, the perception is that many of those receiving help are false claimants and illegal immigrants.

Corporate government

- ↓ Residents are unsure precisely what function corporate government has; so they struggle to see the benefits of the service to them personally or the community as a whole.
Unsurprisingly, the perception is that the service is bureaucratic, wasteful and largely unnecessary.

Housing services

There is less consensus about the priority that should be given to housing.

Given a middle to high priority

- ✓ **Personal relevance**
 - For those in social housing or those who can see themselves having housing needs in the future, access to fast, efficient help is perceived to be vital.
- ✓ **Moral responsibility**
 - Others can feel that those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness should be helped and protected.

Given a lower priority

- ↓ Some of those who are secure in their own home ownership can feel little connection with the needs of more vulnerable adults.

Housing services (cont'd)

Provision

- Those isolated respondents with direct experience of Housing Services tended to express dissatisfaction with the service:
 - Social Housing is not easily acquired by local people
 - limited availability
 - unhelpful staff
 - (a perception that priority is given to immigrants).

Inferences from the conscious prioritisation of services

- Of all the *discretionary* services, only environment services are designated a lower priority



Confirmation of the perceived importance of the *discretionary* services relative to *mandatory* services

- Community safety (and linked with that youth initiatives) and services for older people are perceived to be the services that require most attention by the Council



The *discretionary* services designated a higher priority correlate with those that are top-of-mind for residents when they talk spontaneously about what is not so good about life in Spelthorne (rather than what is good)

Background context:
Perceptions of how services are funded

There is little awareness of how Spelthorne Borough Council raises revenue and allocates resources

- Residents are under three misconceptions:
 - the majority of Spelthorne Borough Council’s revenue comes from Council Tax
 - a large proportion of Council Tax goes to the Borough Council
 - the Borough Council is in control of how all its revenue is distributed .
- These misconceptions fuel discontent with the value for money they feel they are currently getting in terms of services provision, because:

Council Tax goes up each year

BUT

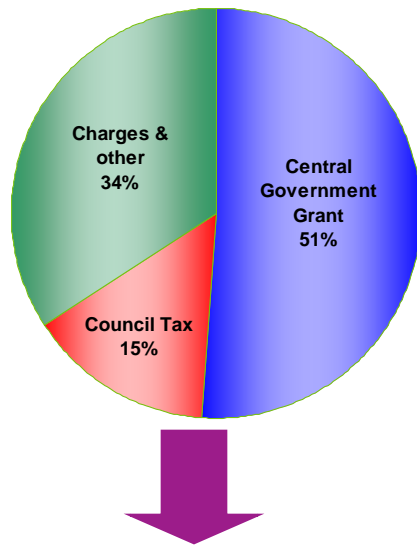
there are cutbacks in key services, eg day centres

SO

there must be wastage of money elsewhere, eg on contractors, on perks for government employees

Communicating the reality of Spelthorne Borough Council's situation does soften attitudes

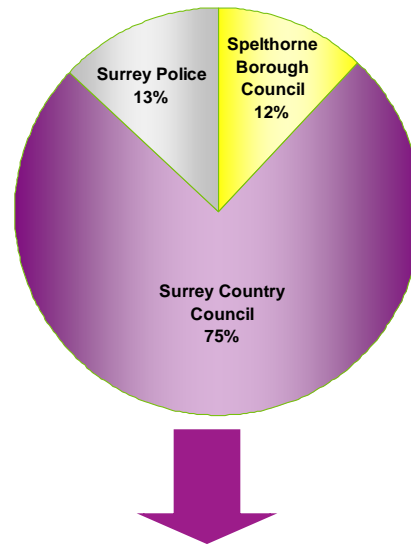
Actual sources of income:



The knowledge that SBC relies so heavily on government grants provides some rationale as to why services are being cut back

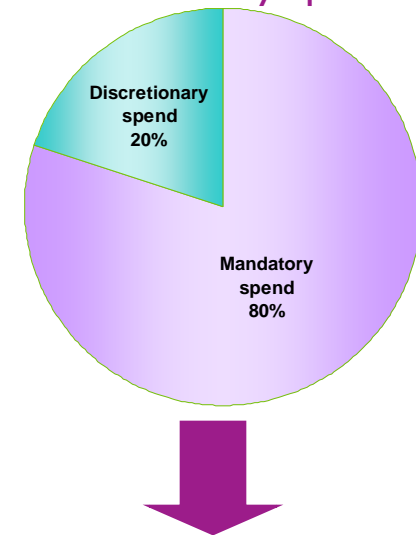
“That’s why their shutting .. things, because they’re not getting enough money from Central Government.”
(Post nester, CIC2, Ashford)

Actual allocation of Council tax:



The knowledge that SBC receives only a small proportion of Council Tax creates greater appreciation of its budgetary constraints ... but also some resentment
“It’s only 12% of the £180 odd quid a month going to the council, going back to into your own services, that’s bad.”
(Pre nester, CIC2, Staines/Laleham)

Actual split between mandatory & discretionary spend:



The knowledge that SBC has control over only a small proportion of its spend creates greater appreciation of why the budgets for certain services seem so over-stretched

Inferences from these perceptions of how services are funded

- Explaining to residents exactly how Spelthorne Borough Council raises revenue and allocates resources does:
 - help them to understand the constraints under which the Council operates
 - lead them to empathise more with the Council.
- However, in reality it is not easy to communicate this information to them, because:
 - they clearly do not read the explanation that goes out with the Council Tax bill
 - it is not the type of information that they are likely to read as a priority if it appears say in Bulletin.
- One solution would be to send out a separate communication to each household just dealing with Council revenue and expenditure (and the budget deficit).
- Alternatively, information may need to be linked more closely to news about individual services (eg residents have identified 'x' service as being a top priority, so in order to focus on that funding has reluctantly had to be reduced for 'y' service).

The future:
dealing with the budget deficit

News about Spelthorne Borough Council's impending deficit does not cause surprise

- Once they are in a position of greater knowledge about how Spelthorne Borough Council raises revenue, residents express little surprise about the impending budget deficit:
 - there is some recall of news about cuts in government grants to Councils
 - there can be a perception that Central Government is more supportive of other Councils (primarily in the North)
 - presumed inefficiencies in Council spending are also assumed to play a part.

Raising Council Tax is an unpopular means of generating extra revenue

Before having to make cuts to services

- Initially there is a very strong negative reaction to the idea of a 5% raise in Council Tax:
 - already pay too much
 - have seen large increases in recent years
 - live in a borough with relatively high Council Tax
 - suspect that Surrey County Council and Surrey Police will put up their portions of the tax too (making the overall rise more than 14p a week)
 - suspect that they will not feel that they are getting value for money for the additional cost

Subsequent to the cutback exercise

- The experience of having to make cutbacks to services can lead to a softening of attitudes towards a Council Tax rise:
 - better to pay an additional amount than to lose valuable services (although some would feel happier if they knew the money would go to saving a service they feel strongly about)
 - “I would happily give my 7 quid [a year extra], if the Benwell Centre is going to open again.” (Younger family, C2D)*
- But, in the final analysis relatively few groups agreed to a rise in Council Tax

Residents suspect that Council Tax will go up anyway – but even when in full knowledge of the facts, they tend to resent this

Raising parking charges is a more acceptable means of raising revenue

Before having
to make cuts
to services

- Overall a more acceptable means of raising extra revenue than Council Tax (despite the spontaneous comments about recent rises):
 - parking is still not as expensive in Spelthorne as in some other areas
 - provides an opportunity to raise some revenue from people living outside the Borough (eg those shopping in Staines)
 - may encourage residents to walk/take public transport rather than drive
- The main concern is for those who park in one of the town centres for work

Subsequent to
the cutback
exercise

- The experience of having to make cutbacks to services leads to even more acceptance of a rise in parking charges
“It’s not even a cup of coffee or a bowl of chips. I don’t know what you’re moaning about.”
(Post-nester, CIC2)

There may be scope to raise parking charges by more than 10 pence an hour

Residents struggle with the task of cutting services to address the budget deficit

- When they try and cut services to address the budget deficit, residents realise how difficult the task is, because:
 - almost all the discretionary services seem important
 - many seem under funded already
 - the consequences of making cuts are unpalatable
 - large numbers of cuts have to be made (especially if Council Tax is not raised)



- The difficulties associated with the task lead to residents:
 - going only so far as to cut the budget for certain services to plug the deficit, rather than also redistributing the remaining money between services (because that would involve “robbing Peter to pay Paul”)
 - empathising with the dilemma facing Spelthorne Borough Council

“Every time you think of well we’ll go with than, you think actually ... what it means and then it’s hard to.” (Post-nester, CIC2)

How residents decide to address the budget deficit

Untouchable services:

- Where cuts would be unacceptable

- o Services for older people
- o Leisure and culture
 - youth initiatives
 - leisure and play development
- o Community safety

Sacrificial services:

- Where cuts would be reluctantly accepted, in order to save other services

- o Street cleaning
- o Environment services
 - Spelthorne in Bloom
 - flooding
- o Parks and open spaces
- o Leisure and Culture
 - leisure centres
 - arts and heritage

Expendable services:

- Where cuts would not be greatly felt

- o Environment services
 - public toilets
 - car parks (if this does not result in net loss)
 - (bus station)

Services for older people

Untouchable for

- All life-stages except 18 – 24 year olds

Reasons why untouchable

- Older people are often vulnerable and in need of help
“These elderly people are on a fixed income, a lot of them are on a pension. You can’t really stitch them up.” (Post-nester, C1C2)
- Cuts have already been made to day centres and Spelride
“You can’t really touch any of those; they’re closing the day centres anyway.” (Younger family, C2D)
- If the Council does not provide these services, no-one will
- Older people have contributed during their working lives to the community, and now deserve support

Acceptable cuts (for those who decide to cut)

- 18 – 24 year olds would accept a further reduction in provision for day centres (in the expectation that older people could be transferred elsewhere)

Leisure and culture – youth initiatives, leisure and play development

Untouchable for

- All life-stages

Reasons why
untouchable

Youth initiatives

- Even when residents are made aware of existing initiatives, they still perceive that there are insufficient appealing youth activities that take place on a regular basis
- If existing initiatives are cut back:
 - residents fear that they and their families will feel less safe
 - it will be a false economy, because there will then be an onus on the Council to provide more effective community safety initiatives (which in turn will cost money)

Leisure and play development

- There is a reluctance to cut leisure opportunities aimed at children, because of a belief that society should provide them with a good start in life, and play is part of that

Community safety

Untouchable for

- All life-stages, except pensioners (PCSOs) and drugs (18 – 24 year olds)

Reasons why untouchable

- Given the importance of community safety to everyone, the amount of discretionary spend allocated to it already seems disproportionately low

Acceptable cuts (for those who decide to cut)

- Pensioners feel that a reduced number of PCSOs is unlikely to have a noticeable impact on community safety, because:
 - their lack of any real power means that residents do not feel reassured by them and youths do not respect them
- 18 – 24 year olds would cut initiatives aimed at preventing drug use or treating drug users, because:
 - they do not see drugs as a big social issue
 - they do not feel “their” money should go towards tackling the issue

Street Cleaning

Who would
sacrifice

- Younger family, older family

What they would
cut and why

- The family groups would reduce the frequency of litter picking because they are unconvinced that it has a great impact in the overall context of street cleaning given that:
 - the level of discretionary spend is so insignificant when compared to mandatory spend on this service
 - they claim rarely to see litter pickers in action
- They also perceive that:
 - mandatory spend could be made to stretch further – so limiting the impact of cuts
 - fines could be imposed for littering, to raise additional revenue for street cleaning

“In Glasgow, they do on-the-spot fines for people dropping litter ... if they introduce things like that, they’re going to get more revenue and that would cover some of that.” (Older family, BCI)

Environment Services – Spelthorne in Bloom, flooding

Who would
sacrifice

- Pre-nesters, older family, post-nesters, pensioners

What they would
cut and why

Spelthorne in Bloom

- Although this event is a success in that it makes Spelthorne look pretty in springtime, it is a 'nice to have' whereas other discretionary services are more of a necessity

Flooding

- Dispense with defences, because flooding is so rare

"I've lived here 20 odd years and I've never been flooded; I live about half a mile from the Thames." (Post-nester, CIC2)

Parks and Open Spaces

Who would sacrifice

- All life-stages

What they would cut and why

- There is a reluctant preparedness to accept a reduction in certain standards of maintenance:
 - grass in parks cut less often
 - some open spaces left to grow wild
 - even fewer flowers

“cutting the grass less and maybe painting things a little less” (Younger family, BCI)

 - possibly a smaller park (or an open space) sold for development (particularly if this leads to affordable housing for young local people)
- This is because:
 - discretionary spend on this service is seen as surprisingly high (and residents struggle to see why this is the case)

“that’s 27 [% of the spend]; that’s really high” (Pre-nester, CIC2)

 - other discretionary services are more essential

Exclusion

- The provision and maintenance of equipment in children’s playgrounds

Leisure and Culture – leisure centres, arts and heritage (for adults)

Who would
sacrifice

- Pre-nesters, younger family, older family

What they would
cut and why

Leisure Centres

A slight increase in charges could be introduced to off-set any cut (so allowing the current offering to be maintained)

Arts and heritage

A reduction in the number of opportunities provided for adults, because:

- arts and heritage is perceived as a minority interest
- other aspects of Leisure and Culture (ie play and youth initiatives) are more essential

Environmental Services – public toilets, car parks, (bus station)

Who would
sacrifice

- All life-stages

What they would
cut and why

Public toilets

- Close all that cannot be made self-funding through a charge
“make them like a pay system, 10p to use the toilet” (18 – 24 year olds, BCI)
- Never use them so would not miss them

Car Parks

- Feel there may be some way to reduce spend e.g.
 - installing automated barrier systems (which may then lead to a need for fewer staff such as inspectors)

Bus Station

- Maybe some savings could be made here?

Conclusions and Recommendations



Conclusions

- Residents do not feel that they are currently getting value for money from their Council Tax, because:
 - the Tax goes up each year and yet there are cutbacks in key services
 - they do not appreciate the constraints on the Council in terms of raising revenue or allocating spend.

- Even when they are in possession of all the relevant facts (including the extent of the budget deficit facing the Council in the coming financial year and the prospect of further cutbacks to key services), they still resent the prospect of another rise in Council Tax – but tend to assume it will happen anyway.

They would prefer extra revenue to come from a rise in parking charges.

- Whatever cutbacks the Council makes are likely to be unpalatable, because it is the discretionary services (rather than the mandatory services) that are top-of-mind for residents when they think about their life in Spelthorne and what makes it satisfactory or less than satisfactory.

Conclusions (cont'd)

- There are certain services where residents are unprepared to tolerate the consequences of any reduction in spend:
 - community safety and youth initiatives (because not enough is felt to have been achieved yet, despite these services being a top priority in the recent past)
 - services for older people (because cutbacks have been made to these services only recently)
 - (leisure and play development for younger children).

(These services are characterised by the fact that they are already felt to be underfunded and a cause for concern.)

Conclusions (cont'd)

- Given the above, residents look to make cutbacks to other services, and they suggest first of all:
 - the closure of all public toilets that cannot be made self-funding (environment services)
 - making changes to how car parks operate, so that there can be fewer staff such as car park inspectors (environment services)
- and then more reluctantly
 - a reduction in the frequency of litter picking – combined possibly with on-the-spot fines for littering (street cleaning)
 - dispensing with Spelthorne in Bloom and flood defences (environment services)
 - reducing the frequency of grass cutting in parks and letting some open spaces grow wild (parks and open spaces)
 - possibly selling one of the smaller parks / open spaces for the development of affordable housing for young local people (parks and open spaces)
 - a reduction in the arts and heritage opportunities provided for adults (leisure and culture)
 - possibly less spend on leisure centres, with the shortfall made up by an increase in charges (leisure and culture).

Recommendations

- Increase car park charges by 10 pence an hour (or possibly slightly more).
- Raise Council Tax as well (by possibly slightly less than 5%) and cut back spend in line with residents' suggestions, but in the knowledge that this is likely to lead to a decrease in overall satisfaction with Spelthorne Borough Council (because residents will be paying more, only to see a deterioration in services that contribute to their feeling good about living in Spelthorne).
- Make every effort to address the ensuing dissatisfaction through communication that seeks to explain to residents:
 - the constraints under which the Council operates, and the importance it places on staying in control of its finances
 - the fact that the Council has engaged with residents about which services should be given priority (but that this can only be done at the expense of other services)
 - what initiatives are in place for those services being given priority
 - what action the Council is taking to bring in money from elsewhere (eg forging links with businesses / community groups)
 - how residents themselves can contribute to making funds stretch further (eg by following tips on how to increase personal safety, by not dropping litter ...).
- Consider making the above a separate piece of communication that goes to every household (outside the context of a Council Tax bill or Bulletin), in order to maximise the chances of it being read.