

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

Budgetary Consultation December 2011 Report of Findings (Forums and Focus Groups)



Opinion Research Services

Spin-out Company of the University of Wales Swansea

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	4
INTRODUCTION.....	4
MAIN FINDINGS (BY PROPOSAL).....	4
Introduction.....	9
THE COMMISSION	9
FORUM AND FOCUS GROUPS.....	9
Consultation Findings: Forums and Focus Groups	11
INTRODUCTION.....	11
ADULTS AND COMMUNITIES.....	11
CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES	15
DEVELOPMENT	19
ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE	21
HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS	25
COUNCIL TAX	27
OVERALL ISSUES AND CONCERNS.....	28

Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased once more to have worked with Birmingham City Council on the important budgetary consultation reported here.

We are grateful to Claire Sanderson and Rachel Hinton, from Corporate Policy and Performance, for their helpful and positive liaison on the consultation process throughout the detailed preparations. We also thank Councillor Randal Brew (Cabinet Member Finance) for attending the People's Panel forum on 10th December and answering participants' questions so conscientiously.

We also wish to thank the members of the public who took part in the consultation and shared their views readily. In the forum and focus groups, they were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public as objectively as possible was recognised and respected.

We hope this report will contribute to Birmingham City Council's thinking about financial issues; and we hope ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen the Council's public engagement through the People's Panel.

INTRODUCTION

1. Birmingham City Council commissioned Opinion Research Services (ORS) to design and implement a consultation programme to consider emerging possibilities for service cost savings in the 2012-13 budget, which included:

A forum attended by 25 diverse members of the public from across the city (some of who had attended such an event before, and some who had not)

Five smaller-scale focus groups - one each with: **women** (9 participants); **people with disabilities and/or their carers** (10 participants); **older people aged over 65** (12 participants); **people with school aged children** (6 participants); and **members of Birmingham's Asian communities** (8 participants).

2. This report is a summary of the main findings that emerged from this consultation.

MAIN FINDINGS (BY PROPOSAL)

ADULTS AND COMMUNITIES

Buy-in some services from non-Council providers

3. Participants at the forum and all five focus groups agreed that outsourcing can often be the only way to maintain services and save on employment costs. However, all groups stressed the need for BCC to control how money is spent and what is delivered, as well as imposing penalties for poor performance.

Extend the Enablement Service

4. The expansion of the Enablement Service was generally endorsed, providing it is done properly and that the assessment service is robust.

Provide Individual Budgets

5. Overall, the forum and focus groups supported the provision of Individual Budgets (preferably as vouchers), so long as the system is monitored to ensure it is working for service users.
6. The following issues were raised by participants: the potential for money to be misappropriated; the possibility of improper care by relatives; administration costs; the need for *a more flexible menu of 'what care is' in the services offered*; and whether support will be offered to individuals requiring assistance in the purchase of their care package. Further, the people with disabilities commented on how difficult it can be to find services to buy, and the need for information on good quality care services to be provided to those who require them.

Greater focus on prevention i.e. 'Telecare' Service

7. The Telecare service was supported in principle by forum and focus group participants - although comments were made about: the reliability of the technology; staff competency; the co-ordination of various support services; the potential unaffordability of the service; and, conversely, the need for means testing to ensure that those who can afford to pay for the service do so. The need to monitor

the system to ensure it is working for service users was also noted. The people with disabilities also commented on: a lack of trust in the equipment; the length of time taken to repair faulty equipment; and the need for users to be properly trained in its use.

Use NHS finding for health-related social care

8. Participants were generally pleased to see NHS money being used for health-related social care. There was, however, some concern that this will have an adverse effect on NHS finances and its ability to undertake certain functions.

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

Academies cost recovery

9. The proposal to charge Academies for Council support services was readily endorsed in the forum and focus groups given that Academy schools have opted out of Local Authority control.

Place more children in foster care (rather than residential homes)

10. All participants praised the proposal to place more children in foster care. They felt it will provide the double benefit of cost savings for the Council and better outcomes for children. They did, however, question how this will work in practice given the shortage of foster parents generally.

Streamline Fostering and Adoption Services

11. Forum and focus group participants were very much in favour of BCC streamlining its Fostering, Adoption and Escort services. People also strongly advocated reducing bureaucracy and 'red-tape' for those wishing to foster and adopt - while not endangering vulnerable children by weakening the vetting assessment process too much. One group in particular stressed the need for ethnic barriers to be reduced.

Reduce the Connexions Service

12. Overall, the forum and the older persons' focus group endorsed the reduction of Connexions - although the availability of some sort of advisory service was considered important. There was concern in the other four focus groups about the potential absence of any assistance or advice for young people in gaining employment. Provision for young people outside the education system was the main concern - and many were not prepared to support this proposal unless they could be convinced that career and life advice would continue to be available to these groups.

DEVELOPMENT

Reduce annual levy to Centro

13. The forum and focus groups agreed that BCC should attempt to reduce the levy it pays to Centro - but there was widespread concern about the potential for Centro to reduce its services as a result. All but two groups (one forum sub-group and the BME [Asian] group) stressed the importance of protecting bus prices, concessionary travel and unprofitable but necessary bus services. Some at the forum felt that the threshold for concessionary travel should increase to 65 and the people should pay a fee of £20 for their card.

Explore options for Shelforce

14. There was a general reluctance to endorse a reduction to Shelforce, with most people agreeing that the Council should support the organisation through the recession for two reasons: the benefits to the employees themselves; and the eventual cost to BCC of supporting those made unemployed. This, they felt, should be done through better management, diversification of products and the promotion of its goods and services to the private and public sector.

ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

Reduce staff organising sports and events (and support others to deliver them)

15. This proposal was approved by most at the forum, although a minority of participants disagreed insofar as events draw visitors and valuable income to the city. There was also some concern that the savings yielded are small compared to the effect the proposal will have on Birmingham.
16. As for the focus groups, the women and the BME (Asian) group were not in favour of this proposal as sports events are important in fostering a generation of healthy young people - whereas the older people and the parents of school-age children were more worried for the staff that could be made redundant as a result of its implementation. The people with disabilities thought that BCC should work in partnership with professional sporting bodies (such as Birmingham Football Club) to organise and deliver sports events – with each party bearing a share of the cost.

Transfer management of golf courses to the private sector

17. Forum and focus group participants were fully satisfied with the transfer of BCC's golf courses to the private sector - providing the successful contractor does not significantly increase its charges.

Charge national/larger charities for tipping waste at BCC tips and replace their textile recycling banks with BCC ones

18. The forum and four focus groups (the women, older people, people with disabilities and the BME [Asian] group) ultimately supported this proposal. There were, however, some caveats - for example the protection of overseas charities and ensuring only larger, national charities are targeted. The parents of school-age children, however, opposed the proposal due to the detrimental effect it will have on charities' income and their ability to help those in need.

Reduce financial support for community events

19. Some forum participants and two focus groups (people with disabilities and the BME [Asian] group) were supportive of this proposal; participants disagreed that the Council should fund community events – unless they make a profit for the city.
20. On the other hand, many of those at the forum and three of the focus groups (women, older people and parents of school age children) were less in favour of BCC reducing its financial support of community events because: communities may discontinue certain events if their funding is reduced (which will then result in fewer visitors and less revenue for the city); community events promote a sense of belonging to Birmingham and bring some cheer into people's lives during difficult times; and there is still a cost to the Council as it must provide clean-up services afterwards.

Reduce community development and play grants to voluntary organisations (and reduce the BCC team that administers them)

21. Many participants at the forum and in the focus groups felt unable to comment on the implications of this proposal as they were very unaware of what this service is or what it achieves. Others, however, had some concern that it might be sensitive as it involves children - and felt that *it all sounds very vague*. Further, some people commented that the savings are small compared with their effects on communities.

Establish a Birmingham Lottery to raise funds for cultural activities

22. The concept of a Birmingham Lottery was widely supported at the forum and in four of the focus groups. The main reason for supporting the Lottery idea was that its proceeds would benefit the city and its people and would allow the continuation of community events that may disappear if BCC reduces its funding for them. The BME (Asian) group was not in favour of the Birmingham Lottery concept as their religion prohibits them from gambling.

HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

Increase the cost of licences for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

23. This proposal was accepted by the forum and four of the five focus groups - although there were some concerns that landlords will pass the cost onto their tenants. There was disagreement in the BME (Asian) group as to whether the licence cost should be increased. Some felt that it should, whereas others claimed that landlords are already leaving the rental market as they are unable to make a profit, which is leading to a lack of HMOs for rent.

Buy-in debt and advice services

24. This proposal was accepted at the forum, albeit cautiously by some who were wary about 'bought-in' services (which were considered of an inferior standard to those provided by BCC). The focus groups were also in favour of this proposal – providing sufficient and quality debt and advice services are available to the increasing numbers of people who require it.

Reduce financial support for Supporting People

25. Most forum members described this proposal as regrettable but acceptable, providing the service becomes more efficient. There were, however, concerns about the extent to which it will affect service providers' ability to do their work, and who will support particular client groups if they are removed from the programme. The remaining participants (as well as the people with disabilities, the BME (Asian) focus group and the parents with school-age children) were fully supportive of the Supporting People programme and thus rejected the proposal to reduce funding for it.
26. The women and the older people did not feel they knew enough about the Supporting People programme (and the amount of money it currently receives from BCC) to make a firm judgement about this proposal – although general concerns were expressed in both groups about reducing support for vulnerable people.

COUNCIL TAX

27. Majorities (mostly unanimous) at the forum and in four of the five focus groups supported BCC's decision to freeze Council Tax and take the one-off 2.5% Government grant, especially given the difficult circumstances in which ordinary people are currently trying to manage.
28. Some participants were worried about potentially large Council Tax increases and/or service reductions in future years to compensate for the freeze. For this reason, a majority in the older persons' group would prefer an incremental Council Tax rise from 2012/13.

OVERALL CONCERNS

29. Across the forum and focus groups, participants main issues and concerns were as follows:
 - A reduction in services for the vulnerable people who need them most
 - The quality of outsourced services, which need supervision and control by BCC
 - The impact of staff reductions across BCC
 - Scepticism as to whether the projected levels of savings will be achieved in practice
 - Unemployment levels across the city
 - Whether BCC is looking at the medium- and long-term benefits of its proposals
 - Ensuring Fostering and Adoption services are improved to provide better outcomes
 - Ensuring older people are better supported by a more streamlined service
 - Maintaining educational standards and offering more training and apprenticeships
 - The possible loss of EU funding and the financial future/recession
 - Protection of the local environment and refuse collection services
 - Libraries, the closure of which is a big loss – especially to people without the Internet.

THE COMMISSION

30. The current national requirement to reduce public expenditure, and the local context of reduced government grants, has challenged Birmingham City Council (like all other councils) to seek major financial savings while also trying to increase revenue. Birmingham City Council is committed to the principle that difficult decisions should be informed by public opinion, and thereby commissioned ORS to design and implement a consultation programme to consider emerging possibilities for service cost savings in the 2012-13 budget.
31. This report is a summary of the conduct and outcomes of the deliberative Budgetary Consultation undertaken for Birmingham City Council (BCC) during December 2011, which included:
- A forum attended by 25 diverse members of the public from across the city (some of who had attended such an event before, and some who had not)
 - Five smaller-scale focus groups - one each with: **women** (9 participants); **people with disabilities and/or their carers** (10 participants); **older people aged over 65** (12 participants); **people with school aged children** (6 participants); and **members of Birmingham's Asian communities** (8 participants).

FORUM AND FOCUS GROUPS

Deliberative Research

32. Forum and focus group participants were selected randomly from the Council's People Panel (a representative panel of 1,500 people in Birmingham, convened and managed by ORS). Potential participants were contacted from the ORS Social Research Telephone Centre and then received written invitations. All those who wished to attend also received telephone reminders shortly before the meeting. As standard good practice, participants were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.
33. Care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factor. The recruitment process was also carefully monitored to ensure that forum and focus group members were diverse in terms of a wide range of pre-agreed criteria.
34. The consultation used deliberative research 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
 - Open-style reporting of opinions – so participants can feel confident that their ideas have been properly recorded.
35. ORS worked in collaboration with Council officers to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings. ORS' role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the forum and focus groups.

36. Although, like other forms of qualitative consultation, forum and focus group meetings cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the recruitment process gave a diverse range of people the opportunity to participate. Because the recruitment was inclusive and participants were diverse, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meetings (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how opinion in Birmingham would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary, then, the findings are reliable and authoritative guides to both 'uninformed' and 'informed' public opinion on these issues.

Meeting Format

37. The format for the forum and focus groups was as follows. Participants were first given a presentation of key information about the Council's financial position. This covered:

The background to BCC's current financial position

An analysis of BCC's £3.5 billion income and expenditure, with particular reference to...

Government grants (72% of income)

Council Tax (11% of income [£335 million])

'Controllable expenditure' (35% of spending [£1,257 billion], of which 57% is spend on Adult and Children's Services.

38. The presentation then covered each of BCC's draft budgetary proposals for 2012/13 - with detailed questions and answers - before the draft proposals were discussed systematically in round table groups (in the forum, the 25 participants were divided into smaller groups of eight or nine). It should also be noted that participants were informed of a range of possible proposals which were considered but not adopted by the Council - including raising the threshold for free adult social care from Substantial to Critical. These were also discussed where time permitted.
39. At the forum, a final plenary session was held to review findings and report them interactively in PowerPoint.

Important Note

40. In this report some verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Consultation Findings: Forums and Focus Groups

INTRODUCTION

41. A forum and five focus groups were held to explore people's opinions in detail. The range of views expressed at these sessions is outlined below. The focus groups have not been reported separately, except where there were significant differences.

ADULTS AND COMMUNITIES (£29.8m saving in 2012/13)

Buying services from non-Council providers

42. BCC proposes to reduce the cost of social care services by buying them from non-Council providers.

Forum

43. All three forum sub-groups agreed that outsourcing can often be the only way to maintain services and save on employment costs - and that the services provided by the private sector are not necessarily worse than those provided by the public sector. However, they stressed the need for BCC to control how money is spent and what is delivered, as well as imposing penalties for poor performance:

There need to be mechanisms in place that mean if a service isn't performing it can be dealt with quickly and efficiently ...the Council should have the power to do that.

44. One sub-group spoke of outsourcing more generally at this point, suggesting that while it may provide a saving in the short-term, it can prove detrimental if a Council disbands its in-house service and is then subject to cost rises on the part of the contractor. Safeguards should, it was felt, be in place to prevent this. Encouragingly, however, there was a sense that Local Authorities and Government have learned from the 'last round' of outsourcing insofar as the need to manage it properly has been recognised.

Focus Groups

45. Participants in all five focus groups made similar comments about buying services from non-Council providers to the forum members, as highlighted below:

More monitoring of care provided by private sector is needed to keep up quality standards.

When you're buying in services, how do you monitor the quality? What controls does the Council have?

Enablement Service

46. BCC proposes to: provide a wider range of enablement support services; ensure the current Homecare Enablement Service is as cost-effective as possible; and offer enablement support for up to six weeks to all new and existing service users who could benefit from it.

Forum

47. The expansion of the Enablement Service was considered positive, providing it is done properly. For example, one person commented that:

The system needs to work well between Adult Social Care and the Health Service...it can be confusing.

Focus Groups

48. The older people, women and parents of school-age children were in favour of ensuring people can stay in their own homes for as long as possible, and thus supported the expansion of the Enablement Service in principle. However, they suggested that *it doesn't work for everyone* and that the assessment service must be robust.

49. The people with disabilities were not averse to the expansion of the Enablement Service per se, but were also concerned about the assessment process and the different criteria applied in different situations:

It's all about the assessment process they have to get this right

I'm always worried about hospitals and care. There's a divide between the assessor when you're in hospital and those who provide care after discharge.

50. The BME (Asian) group was sceptical about the ultimate success of expanding the Enablement Service insofar as *it doesn't matter what you do, you always end up on the GP, Hospital, Homecare merry-go-round.*

Individual Budgets

51. BCC proposes to: move away from 'overall entitlement' to social care towards more targeted support. This will involve the introduction of 'Individual Budgets' - funding given to service users to spend on care services they choose.

Forum

52. Forum participants could see the logic behind Individual Budgets, and particularly supported their use for activities to keep people healthy, such as exercise classes and gym facilities. There were, however, some issues of concern – the first and most prevalent being that money could be misappropriated, even by the person themselves or their relatives:

There's a danger here. Some people just bank the cash and don't buy services they need

It's a reasonable idea but they have to take care to eliminate the possibility of misappropriation of funds.

As such, it was agreed that a voucher-based system would be most appropriate (although it was acknowledged that this too could be abused by people selling on their vouchers).

53. Other issues were: the possibility of improper care by relatives; administration costs; the need for *a more flexible menu of 'what care is' in the services offered*; and whether support will be offered to individuals requiring assistance in the purchase of their care package:

What if you have an elderly person who is a bit confused about what they need? They could have a conversation about everything and not remember the conversation.

54. With regard to whether support will be offered to individuals requiring assistance in the purchase of their care package, one sub-group discussed the possibility of such help being provided by families.

Participants were strongly of the view that today's younger generation places too much of a burden on the state in caring for their older relatives, and that if Individual Budgets helps facilitate a process whereby society begins to take more ownership for this care then it has *got to be a good thing*:

It should be the responsibility of the family...they should take ownership of care for their elderly relatives. If a system forces the generations below to take some ownership then I'm a big supporter of it. It could start a societal change away from a reliance on the state and that's got to be a good thing.

Focus Groups

55. The people with disabilities were in favour of Individual Budgets as they offer the service user more control over their care package. However, they did comment on how difficult it can be to find services to buy, and the need for information on good quality care services to be provided to those who require them. The women, older people, parents of school-age children and the BME (Asian) group did not have any grave concerns about Individual Budgets on the whole, providing the system is monitored to ensure it is working for service users.

'Telecare' Service

56. BCC proposes to extend the use of Telecare (which is a service that helps people remain living in their own homes for longer. It combines equipment installed in the home, a contact centre and a team of staff that responds to calls for help).

Forum

57. The Telecare service was supported in principle. It was recognised that people typically wish to remain in their own homes for as long as possible, and that prevention is preferable to reactive intervention down the line:

Prevention is preferable...it's a small amount of cost here versus a much bigger outlay further on.

58. Nevertheless, comments were made about: the reliability of the technology; staff competency; the co-ordination of various support services; and the need for means testing to ensure that those who can afford to pay for the service do so:

Can we trust the technology?

It's only as good as the person at the end of the helpline

How will the Telecare service and Homecare service co-ordinate so that visits are made as required?

I wonder how many people who get this from the Council would be able to fund it themselves. It should be means tested.

59. Further, one participant claimed that *we had a situation where the Council helpline service only passed it on to the family...we were the back-up not them.*

Focus Groups

60. As with the Enablement Service, the people with disabilities were not hostile to Telecare, but commented on: a lack of trust in the equipment; the length of time taken to repair faulty equipment; and the need for users to be properly trained in its use:

It's a trust issue. What if the equipment fails? Who repairs it?

It takes too long to repair; we need a prompt service

It might be ok but we need to be able to use it.

61. The cost of Telecare services was an issue for the women and the BME (Asian) group; participants were concerned that they will be unaffordable for many people who need them. They also argued that the projected savings may be unrealistic given the installation and maintenance costs required:

How will they cover the installation cost? How would it be maintained? I'm not sure it would break even.

62. Again, the older people and parents of school-age children did not have any vital concerns about Telecare on the whole. In fact, they were pleased with the idea of keeping people in their own homes for as long as possible, providing the system is monitored to ensure it is working for service users. However, one member of the older persons' group commented that:

It's glossy and it doesn't work properly. I know of people who have pressed buttons and have been told to call an ambulance. If someone's been on the floor all night and could have a broken hip the response team can't handle it because they're not medically qualified.

NHS Budgets

63. The NHS will transfer money to adult social care to fund services which benefit people's health. This money will help BCC to support the costs of providing care services.

Forum and Focus Groups

64. Participants were generally pleased to see NHS money being used for health-related social care insofar as *community-based practitioners know best what people want and where the health-related social care is needed. They will direct it a lot more accurately.* There was, however, some concern that this will have an adverse effect on NHS finances and its ability to undertake certain functions.

Suggestions considered but not proposed

65. BCC considered: reducing eligibility for social care; reducing its payments to external agencies for the provision of social care; and reducing its investment in the voluntary sector. These options, however, are not being taken forward.

Forum and Focus Groups

66. Participants generally felt that 'substantial' needs are clearly considerable and should be recognised. Further, given that there are so many ambiguities in determining any person's needs, it was agreed that thresholds should remain as they are currently.

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES (£22.6m saving in 2012/13)

Academies Cost Recovery

67. BCC proposes to charge Academy schools for the services it provides (i.e. payroll, school meals, cleaning, music services etc.).

Forum and Focus Groups

68. This proposal was readily endorsed given that Academy schools have opted out of Local Authority control:

No problem – that is what independence means!

Why is Birmingham City Council still providing services to Academies? If they want to become Academies they should be responsible for providing their own services

It's their choice; they opted out.

69. There was some question as to whether BCC can provide services to Academies more effectively *given their scale*. Moreover, the parents of school age children were sceptical that Academies will buy from the Council given that they are run as businesses and will 'shop around' for the cheapest service. One member of this group was also concerned that, if BCC no longer provides certain important services to the Academies, the latter will cut corners in providing them:

I can't see them buying from the Council. They'll shop around as they're more like businesses now and are getting very thrifty...if they can get it cheaper they will. So the Council probably won't make as much money as they think from selling services to them

Will schools cut corners on services like visual impairment teachers or special needs services? If schools are in control of their own pot of money they won't be paying through the nose for services; they'll think 'well our own staff can do it'.

Fostering and Residential Care

70. BCC proposes to reduce the number of children living in Council-run children's homes and increase the number of foster placements available to them. It also proposes to make savings in the purchase of children's social care provided by external agencies.

Forum

71. All three sub-groups praised this proposal in principle. Placing more children in foster care will, they felt, provide the double benefit of cost savings for the Council and better outcomes for the children themselves:

If the money can be used to put vulnerable children with families that's got to be a good thing.

72. Participants did, however, have some issues about how this will work in practice given the shortage of foster parents generally. Indeed, while BCC's campaign to encourage fostering was recognised, recruitment, it was felt, will be challenging:

Are there enough foster places to cope with more placements?

In theory this is great but where are they going to find the foster parents? There's a very big shortage

Will there be a lag on the recruitment of new foster parents?

73. With regard to closing residential homes, it was suggested that BCC must maintain some provision given that certain children have severe behavioural problems that mean they will not be suited to a family environment - and it must be confident that foster carer numbers can be maintained following any closures.

Focus Groups

74. All five focus groups applauded BCC's proposal to reduce the number of children living in Council-run children's homes and increase the number of foster placements available to them – but expressed the same concerns and issues outlined above.
75. The people with disabilities were also concerned that the support available for foster parents who are willing to take on older, more challenging young people will be insufficient, and that BCC should be focusing on adoption rather than fostering:

It's not fostering but adoption that should be first choice for children.

Fostering and Adoption Services

76. BCC proposes to streamline its Fostering, Adoption and Escort services by changing the way it works with each other, the courts and service providers. This may include reducing staff numbers and buying some services from external providers.

Forum

77. Forum participants were very much in favour of BCC streamlining its Fostering, Adoption and Escort services. As aforementioned, it was considered very important for children to have a home, and anything that contributes towards making this a reality for more young people is, it was felt, to be applauded.
78. Participants also strongly advocated reducing bureaucracy and 'red-tape' for those wishing to foster and adopt - while not endangering vulnerable children by weakening the vetting process too much:

They're putting too many hurdles in front of people who want to foster and adopt...there's a lot of red tape and it needs to be streamlined

There are cases where the process hasn't been done well enough so we don't want to put the most vulnerable people in an even worse situation.

79. One group in particular stressed the need for ethnic barriers to be reduced - with two personal examples given to highlight how interracial adoptions can succeed and should be considered more readily. One participant spoke of an Asian family they knew, who had adopted a two year old black child twenty years ago with a very happy and positive outcome. Another - a young White male - spoke of his time at a residential care home where he was told he would stay: no attempt was made to foster him. He felt strongly that he would have preferred to grow up in a family environment as he had no *really personal care from someone interested* at the care home – and certainly would not have had any objection to being fostered and/or adopted by a family from a different ethnic background.

Focus Groups

80. Participants in all five focus groups were in favour of this proposal – and also raised all of the various concerns and issues outlined above.

Connexions Service

81. BCC proposes to redesign the Connexions service to fit available funding (as Government funding for the service has been cut). This will hopefully result in the service paying for itself.

Forum

82. The Connexions service was viewed somewhat negatively by most people who have used it:

Connexions did little for me at school except help me write a CV but I learned that all over again later

I found Connexions completely useless!

I'm a teacher and the in-school Connexions careers service is not very good and it has no value attached to it by the kids. It seems to be just a signposting service and you can use the internet for that. And the library of resources can also be found on the internet and in public libraries.

83. In fact, only one person at the forum spoke positively about Connexions; she valued the service she received in terms of having access to a face-to-face adviser, good career advice and a library of resources. They were concerned that non-students will lose a valuable resource if Connexions is reduced:

Other people, not students, will not have access to Connexions. I used it when I was in my forties and others may use it when they're not in school.

84. Overall, there was no disquiet about the reduction of Connexions – although the availability of some sort of advisory service (perhaps provided through the Job Centre) was considered important:

Should still have advisory services that people can approach

Perhaps they need to integrate Connexions with the Job Centre – there does seem to be a bit of a duplication of resources

Could be streamlined and combined with Job Centres.

Focus Groups

85. Again, the Connexions service was viewed somewhat negatively by many of the focus group participants with direct or indirect experience of it:

Connexions don't really help you; you have to have GCSE's

It doesn't appear to work as it is

When you talk to young people they say Connexions are very poor.

86. Nevertheless, there was concern in four of the five groups (the older persons being the exception) about the potential absence of any assistance or advice for young people in gaining employment – which they considered especially troubling given the unstable job market:

If BCC reduce funding they won't be helping young people

It seems strange that they're cutting this when so many young people need jobs

I know they have to make savings but with so many people out of work this seems like the wrong thing to do

Lots of young people can't get jobs and they need all the help they can get

Kids can't get jobs these days; they've no experience and now no support

Considering Birmingham as a city has got the highest unemployment rate and youth unemployment is so high why are they thinking about cutting this?

It's ironic that Connexions is to be cut at a time when there are no jobs for youth

Not every kid is brilliant and there is no work for a lot of them...anything that can help get the kids off the streets is necessary whether we like it or not.

87. Provision for young people outside the education system was people's main worry - and many were not prepared to support this proposal unless they could be convinced that careers advice would continue to be available in some form to these groups:

What about the young people who aren't in school or college? They need somewhere to go and that what Connexions used to do

Young people go in and look for jobs and training and a lot of them won't go on to sixth form and college. There's nothing for these young people and I'm worried about where they will go...especially the NEET groups

Your average young kid who needs help with a CV or to talk to someone about jobs or training or college...there's nothing for them so where will they go?

It doesn't seem to be being replaced with anything tangible...some sort of careers advice is needed.

There was certainly some doubt (especially among the women and parents of school-age children) about the Job Centre's ability to adequately replace the service provided by Connexions:

You've got all these probably clueless young people leaving school not knowing what to do next. You go to the Job Centre but you don't get much time with an adviser

There's a myth that the Job Centre is there to help them but they don't do careers advice and guidance.

Suggestions considered but not proposed

88. BCC considered: restricting eligibility for Home to School Transport; reducing funding for new Integrated Family Support Teams; ending direct provision of Youth Services; and reducing Early Years Schemes and Children's Centres. These options, however, are not being taken forward and participants typically agreed with this decision.

DEVELOPMENT (£2.3m saving in 2012/13)

Centro Levy

89. BCC proposes to reduce the annual levy it pays to Centro, the West Midlands Integrated Transport Authority.

Forum

90. All three sub-groups agreed that BCC should attempt to reduce the levy it pays to Centro – while also trying to protect the services the latter provides:

The Council should say we want the same service but for £1.3m less; they need to drive a hard bargain

The Council should always be encouraging external companies to improve efficiencies and reduce their costs.

91. The potential for Centro to reduce its services as a result of a lower levy from BCC was an issue for some participants in two of the forum sub-groups, who stressed the importance of protecting concessionary travel and unprofitable but necessary bus services:

If the Council reduces the amount it gives to Centro then Centro could reduce its services and the quality of its services

We still need to protect unprofitable services for shift workers.

92. The remaining group, on the other hand, was very much in favour of reducing the subsidy required for free bus passes by raising the age of qualification to 65, requiring payment from those who can afford it and, potentially, prohibiting concessionary travel at peak times:

People would be happy to pay basic charge for bus pass as we do for rail; this would make it more fair

This should not be a free universal benefit for the particular people concerned. Many people don't need it, including working people who get it

Could also stop bus pass use at peak times but that might be difficult to do...

Focus Groups

93. The BME (Asian) focus group was wholly in favour of this proposal but the potential for Centro to reduce its services (and increase its costs) as a result of a lower levy from BCC was an issue for participants in the four remaining groups – especially the older people and the people with disabilities. They again stressed the importance of protecting concessionary travel and unprofitable but necessary bus services:

How will Centro react? What will they cut?

Bus fares have already gone up; it'll go up even more

I'm worried about any impact on concessionary fares; older people have to wait until 9.30 now to use their pass

The concessionary travel is a lifeline for some older people to get out and about

I was a shift worker and the concession saved my job.

Shelforce

94. BCC proposes to address the trading deficit of Shelforce, an employment provider for disabled people – either by helping it break even or finding alternative ways of supporting employment options for people with disabilities.

Forum

95. There was reluctance in all three forum sub-groups to endorse a reduction to Shelforce - although one group felt it could accept a reduction in the on-going subsidy *for relatively few people*, providing BCC can help those subsequently made redundant to find alternative employment.
96. The other two groups thought that the Council should support Shelforce through the recession for two reasons: the benefits to the employees themselves; and the eventual cost to BCC of supporting those made unemployed. This, they felt, should be done through better management, diversification of products and the promotion of its goods and services to the private and public sector:

How much would it cost if staff became unemployed?

For some people it's not about the money they get it's about the personal satisfaction

They really need support. They want to work and it's all they've got. It's about the management. They should diversify into new products and areas and advertise and promote their products to the private and public sectors.

Focus Groups

97. Reducing Shelforce was not acceptable to focus group participants, who were of the view that the subsidy should remain in place until the building trade recovers, as lowering it will result in 70 unemployed disabled people:

They're a special case because of who they employ

The recession will end at some point and the building industry will pick up again...

Keep Shelforce going – they're amazing.

Indeed, helping Shelforce break even (probably through the diversification and better promotion of products) was a priority for all five focus groups:

They shouldn't be touched...they should try and improve the trading position

Why can't they find them something else to make that will sell?

98. Should Shelforce be reduced, the people with disabilities argued that BCC should look to employ those made redundant wherever possible – and questioned whether closer collaboration with Remploy may provide some solutions.

ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE (£3.4m saving in 2012/13)

Sports and Events

99. BCC proposes to reduce the number of employees who organise sports and events activities across the city and commission/support other organisations to deliver these activities.

Forum

100. This proposal was approved by a majority in two forum sub-groups, although a minority of participants within these groups disagreed insofar as events draw visitors and valuable income to the city. The third group felt that the savings yielded by this proposal are disproportional to the effect it will have on Birmingham and its people (and the same was thought to apply to reviewing the amount of financial support given to community events and community development and play services).

Focus Groups

101. The people with disabilities were of the view that BCC should work in partnership with professional sporting bodies (such as Birmingham Football Club) to organise and deliver sports events – with each party bearing a share of the cost.
102. The women and the BME (Asian) participants were not in favour of this proposal as sports events are important in fostering a generation of healthy young people - whereas the older people and the parents of school-age children were more worried for the staff that would be made redundant as a result of its implementation:

Sporting events are good for communities and for people's health

It's such a small saving to put more people out of work

It's quite a small saving and if means reducing the number of staff then it doesn't seem worth it.

103. One member of the older persons group mentioned BCC's 'Get Walking, Keep Walking' initiative, which apparently benefits thousands of people across the city. The number of people employed to organise this initiative has already reduced from two to one and it was suggested that the impact of reducing it further (which was a concern under this proposal) would be disproportionate to the amount of money saved:

Thousands of people would be affected if this was reduced. It has made an enormous difference and it would be a big thing just to save a paltry sum.

Golf Courses

104. BCC proposes to transfer the management of its seven golf courses to the private sector.

Forum and Focus Groups

105. Two of the three forum sub-groups and all five focus groups were fully satisfied with the transfer of BCC's golf courses to the private sector – providing the successful contractor does not significantly increase its charges.
106. While in support of the transfer, the third sub-group was of the view that there are too many golf courses in the city which renders some them unviable and unlikely to succeed:

Even private golf courses are precarious and campaigning for members.

Charities' Waste Procedures

107. BCC proposes to review the free tipping of waste for larger and nationally-based charities and replace charity recycling banks on the streets of Birmingham with BCC collection banks.

Forum

108. While one forum sub-group was in favour of this proposal, views differed in the other two (although they were ultimately in favour – with important caveats).
109. In the first, some argued that charities dispose of a great deal of material and should thus be charged for it, whereas others were concerned that their income - and thus their ability to help the vulnerable - would be reduced. Overall, and after discussion, the group came down in favour of the proposal - providing overseas charities are protected.
110. The second group suggested that, if BCC implements this proposal, it must ensure it targets the larger, national charities as opposed to the smaller, local ones *who are often taking the waste of vulnerable people to the tip on their behalf. It's not their waste but the waste of the people they're helping.* Further, this group also suggested that:

BCC should target organisations that we wouldn't necessarily think of as charities...more like businesses that happen to have charitable status.

Focus Groups

111. While the older people, the people with disabilities and the BME (Asian) participants were in favour of this proposal, views differed in the other two focus groups. The parents of school-age children ultimately opposed it due to the detrimental effect it will have on charities' income and their ability to help those in need. The women (who focused on the issue of BCC replacing charity textile banks with their own) felt they could support the proposal providing people continue to have a choice as to whether they wish to use BCC banks or donate to charity shops:

If you want to give them to charity you can take them to a charity shop and if you don't you can take it to a Council recycling bank. I think it's an easy saving to make...as long as people have the option to take it to charity if they want.

Community Events

112. BCC proposes to review the amount of financial support it gives to events such as St. Patrick's Day, Christmas, Eid and Vaisakhi.

Forum

113. One forum sub-group supported this proposal and felt that businesses should be encouraged to make a greater contribution to community events through sponsorship. There was, however, some concern that a funding reduction might threaten the Christmas decorations that are a draw into the city (indeed, some had already seen a reduction in bonfire and firework displays), and participants agreed that there is a need to publicise the events that do take place to give a sense of 'city celebrations'.

114. The other two groups were less in favour of BCC reducing its financial support of community events because: communities may discontinue certain events if their funding is reduced (which will result in less revenue for the city); and there is still a cost to the Council as it must provide clean-up services after events:

What about the money this brings into an area ...this will all be lost?

115. It was also suggested that the idea seems ill-defined insofar as *which events are included? Does it include Birmingham in Bloom?*

Focus Groups

116. The people with disabilities and the BME (Asian) group were in favour of this proposal; participants disagreed that the Council should fund community events – unless they make a profit for the city:

Don't agree with funding these...it's a waste of money

If they generate cash for the city then fine, but don't support them if they make a loss.

117. There was disagreement in the other three groups (women, older people and parents of school age children), where some participants were less in favour of BCC reducing its financial support of community events because: it could result in fewer visitors to, and thus less revenue for, the city; that community events promote a sense of belonging to Birmingham; and that they simply bring some cheer into people's lives during difficult times:

People come from all over the country to things like the German Market. And Vaisakhi takes over the whole of Handsworth Park and Soho Road. It brings in a lot of people from the whole of the country. If we cut these things I think we stand to lose more than we gain

I think that would be a real shame and I disagree with it unless they can get the money from somewhere else. The events give a sense of belonging to Birmingham and after the riots in the summer that's really important...they bring Birmingham alive

They aren't essential but they do cheer people up a bit...give people something to look forward to.

Community Development and Play Grants

118. BCC proposes to reduce the number of staff working in community development and the money available to fund community development and play services.

Forum and Focus Groups

119. One forum sub-group felt unable to comment on this proposal as its members were very unaware of what this service is or what it achieves. Another, however, had some concern that this might be sensitive as it involves children - and felt that *it all sounds very vague*. The third again commented that the savings yielded are small compared to their effects on Birmingham and its people.

120. The above sentiments were echoed across the focus groups. Generally speaking, participants had little concept of what Community Development and Play involves and thus felt unable to comment on the implication of this proposal.

Birmingham Lottery

121. BCC proposes to introduce a Birmingham Lottery to raise funds for environmental, sporting and cultural activities.

Forum

122. The concept of a Birmingham Lottery was widely supported at the forum:

It's local so you know the money is going to help your city and your community.

123. There was, however, some scepticism about how a Lottery would work in practice (and in particular how much it would yield after set-up and administration costs) and whether local people would actually play it:

Given a choice would people go for a local lottery or go for one with the biggest potential return?

Focus Groups

124. The women, people with disabilities, older people and parents with school-aged children were generally satisfied with the Birmingham Lottery concept (although some participants would prefer the proceeds to be spent on education, health and charities rather than cultural activity). The main reason for supporting the Lottery idea was that its proceeds would benefit the city and would enable the continuation of community events that may disappear if BCC reduces its funding in this area:

If Birmingham City run a lottery I could well be persuaded to buy the odd ticket because I would know where the money is going

Because of the financial difficulties, funding events through a lottery or something may be a better idea

If you know what your money is going towards then you're more likely to play.

125. The BME (Asian) group was not in favour of the Birmingham Lottery concept as their religion prohibits them from gambling:

As a Muslim, I don't agree with the Lottery

As Muslims we won't play the Lottery and we couldn't take the money raised.

Suggestions considered but not proposed

126. BCC considered: ending the planned collection of street-by-street bulky (large) waste items; introducing a charge for green (garden) waste; introducing a charge for collecting bulky (large) items of waste from individual houses; and reducing the levels of street cleaning. These options are not being taken forward and participants typically agreed with this decision. It should be noted, however, that some participants (especially in the women and older persons' focus groups) would be prepared to pay BCC for collecting bulky items of waste from their homes – and felt that the majority of the population would be socially-conscious enough to adhere to the charge if it was introduced. Most others disagreed, however, and felt that introducing a charge would lead to an increase in fly-tipping - the clean-up cost of which would eventually negate the income received.

HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS (£4.4m saving in 2012/13)

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licencing

127. BCC proposes to increase its charges to landlords for licences to let HMOs (houses where more than five unrelated adults live and share bathroom or kitchen facilities).

Forum

128. This proposal was accepted by all three forum sub-groups. Participants strongly agreed with the need for a proper inspection service for HMOs (and, encouragingly, had seen an improvement in properties as a result of active council inspection services) and were fully in support of increased licence costs providing the money is used for this purpose – especially at the lower end of the rental market:

A pound a week is a drop in the ocean for landlords

It's important at the bottom end of the market...

129. There was some concern in one sub-group that landlords would pass the cost onto their tenants, with one person suggesting that BCC *base the cost of the licence on rental costs...it could be cheaper for those who charge a lower rental cost. There's then an incentive not to charge tenants as much.*

Focus Groups

130. The women, people with disabilities, older people and parents with school-aged children were generally satisfied with this proposal (with some even suggesting that the licensing scheme should be widened to include more HMOs) - although again there was some concern that landlords will pass on the cost to their tenants:

They should widen the criteria so that more HMOs are licensed...houses with three or more people or families for example. That would generate income for the Council

It's a good income earner for the Council but who's going to be paying the increase in the long run? Is it the person who owns the house or the person renting it?

131. There was disagreement in the BME (Asian) group as to whether the licence cost for HMOs should be increased. Some felt that it should, whereas others claimed that landlords are already leaving the rental market as they are unable to make a profit, which is leading to a lack of HMOs for rent:

We've seen a drop in the number of HMOs...landlords can't make any money.

It was generally agreed that HMO landlords should be encouraged not penalised - not least because HMOs are essential in providing emergency accommodation for homeless people:

They're cheaper than a B&B and could save the Council money.

Debt and Advice Services

132. BCC proposes to look at different ways of providing debt and advice services.

Forum

133. This proposal was accepted readily by one group, but cautiously by the other two. Participants were again wary about 'bought-in' services, which were considered of an inferior standard to those

provided by BCC, and suggested that a poorer service will result in more homeless people - at an eventual cost to the Council:

Why do this when it's in the Council's interest to keep homelessness down? If the new service has reduced quality, then the Council will end up with more homeless people.

Focus Groups

134. The focus groups were in favour of this proposal – providing sufficient and quality debt and advice services are available to the increasing numbers of people who require it.

Supporting People

135. BCC proposes to reduce the funding it provides to the 'Supporting People' programme, which is a funding stream to fund services that support vulnerable adults to live independently.

Forum

136. Two sub-groups described this proposal as regrettable but acceptable, providing the service becomes more efficient. There were, however, concerns about its effect on service providers' ability to do their work, and who will support particular client groups if they are removed from the programme:

Is it salami slicing all budgets or are actual groups being cut out? If groups, who will pick them up?

137. The third group was of the view that, as Supporting People funding is distributed across hundreds of charities that support vulnerable groups incredibly efficiently, this proposal will not yield a saving in the long-term if the Council has to step in and help those who are no longer eligible for help under the programme.

Focus Groups

138. The people with disabilities, the BME (Asian) group and the parents with school-age children were fully supportive of the Supporting People programme and thus rejected the proposal to reduce its funding:

They're already cutting back on Supporting People; it's a big problem

If Birmingham City Council don't support this sector then the service will disappear completely

The Council shouldn't cut the service they should increase it.

139. The people with disabilities and the parents of school-age children also suggested that Supporting People actually saves the Council money by providing support to vulnerable people in a more cost-effective way than if it were to be delivered directly by BCC. They thus described this proposal as something of a 'false economy'.

140. The women and the older people did not feel they knew enough about the Supporting People programme (and the amount of money it currently receives from BCC) to make a firm judgement about this proposal – although general concerns were expressed in both groups about reducing support for vulnerable people.

Suggestions considered but not proposed

141. BCC considered reducing Community Chest funding. This option, however, is not being taken forward. No participants expressed concern about this.

COUNCIL TAX

142. BCC has decided to freeze Council Tax levels for 2012/13 in return for a one-off Government grant equivalent to a 2.5% Council Tax rise (£8.3 million), accepting that it will have to 'catch up' in future by increasing Council Tax and/or making more savings. Participants were asked for their views on whether this is the correct approach, or whether they favoured a more incremental increase over the next few years.
143. Majorities (mostly unanimous) in all three forum sub-groups and four of the five focus groups supported BCC's decision to freeze Council Tax and take the Government grant given the difficult circumstances in which ordinary people are currently trying to manage:

It's a good decision to take it this year because times are hard for everyone...especially with the cost of living going up so enormously

Get the grant while it's there...we're in a bad situation as my husband has lost his job. We're on a much lower income and this would give him an extra year to find a job before we have an increase

It could be the straw that breaks the camel's back for a lot of people

It's £8.3 million that this city wouldn't have otherwise and it will help with the front-end savings

It would be silly to turn down a cheap £8 million for an expensive £11 million

It would be daft to do anything else for the sake of an extra £3.3 million.

144. There was some concern that, by making this decision, BCC is *storing up trouble* for the future. That is, participants were worried about potentially large Council Tax increases and/or service reductions in future years to compensate for the freeze:

What if it goes up 7 or 8 per cent in 3 years' time?

It could be counter-productive and more painful in the long-run. There could be no increases this year or next year but how would we feel if we had a 10% increase in three or four years' time?

Will that mean a machete to services then?

For this reason, a majority in the older persons' group would prefer an incremental Council Tax rise from 2012/13 *rather than have to pay it all in one big hit down the line.*

OVERALL ISSUES AND CONCERNS

145. Across the forum and focus groups, participants main issues and concerns were as follows:

A reduction in services for the vulnerable people who need them most (such as young people, older people and people with disabilities)

Outsourcing - although it was acknowledged that buying-in services would yield savings as 'outside' companies are typically cheaper, many comments were made about the quality of outsourced services, which need supervision and control by BCC

The impact of staff reductions across BCC and the level to which staff have been involved in the decision-making process

Scepticism as to whether the projected levels of savings will be achieved in practice

Unemployment levels across the city (which, it was felt, could be combatted - and 'social capital' increased - by BCC facilitating a Community Volunteer scheme for social, public, and environmental works')

Whether the Council is looking at the medium- and long-term benefits of these proposals and ensuring they are not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the need for immediate savings

Ensuring Fostering and Adoption services are improved to provide better outcomes for young people

Ensuring older people are better supported by a more streamlined service

Maintaining educational standards and offering more training and apprenticeships for young people

The possible loss of EU funding – and the financial future/recession

The protection of the local environment and refuse collection services

Libraries, the closure of which is a big loss – especially to people without the Internet.

