

## **Chesterfield and District Civic Society**

### **The Society's response to Chesterfield Borough Council's 'budget conversation' on-line survey, 14 December 2023**

From: Hon Secretary, Chesterfield and District Civic Society  
To: [feedback@chesterfield.gov.uk](mailto:feedback@chesterfield.gov.uk)  
Cc: CBC Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management  
Sent: Thu, 14 Dec at 12:43

Dear Chesterfield Borough Council,

This is the Chesterfield and District Civic Society's response to the Chesterfield Borough Council's 'Budget Conversation' survey. Whilst this is a written response we have followed the format of the on-line survey (<https://www.chesterfield.gov.uk/your-council/have-your-say-in-our-budget-conversation.aspx>).

Whilst we appreciate that the on-line survey appears to be mainly general (inviting comments around themed areas), we feel it fails to provide participants with sufficient details of the proposed council cuts. Unless those taking part in the survey have read the cabinet papers in full it is difficult to respond effectively on the magnitude of the changes proposed. It could be concluded that the questions are worded to produce answers that are supportive of the council's intended cuts - intentionally steering people down that route. We have consequently not responded to the 'agree/disagree/...' questions. Despite our reservations about the survey, the Civic Society is contributing our thoughts below as part of the much wider public discussion that is now needed on these budget proposals.

We understand that the council needs to make service cuts. It is predicting a £4 million budget shortfall – mainly the result of the cumulative effect of reductions from central government funding, inflation, and the lingering negative impact of Covid. Our main objective in this response (and what will doubtless be further comments on individual proposals as they are developed) will be trying to preserve as much quality as possible in everyday civic life.

Our responses to the conversation are made in italics.

Your sincerely

Hon. Secretary,  
Chesterfield and District Civic Society.

## **Chesterfield and District Civic Society**

### **Responses to Chesterfield Borough Council's 'budget conversation', December 2023**

Responses in this document are set out as the original on-line survey at

<https://www.chesterfield.gov.uk/your-council/have-your-say-in-our-budget-conversation.aspx>.

#### **Budget theme 1 – Identifying efficiencies or alternative funding**

##### **Are there any specific services or processes that you think could be provided more efficiently?**

- *Capital schemes should be rigorously interrogated so that their implications on revenue are thoroughly understood. Generally, capital schemes which will result in an increase in maintenance costs and other revenue implications should not be pursued, or should be reduced in scope to exclude the requirement for increased revenue funding.*
- *Removing roles at the council that haven't been filled or needed for a long time should be part of an overall and robust policy of reassessing each job as the post becomes available. We would not be in favour of a blanket 'not filling vacant jobs policy' and note that this is not suggested.*
- *All steps should be taken to bring money into the borough, but not if it results in expensive and unmaintainable capital schemes.*
- *Further joint procurement initiatives with other purchasing authorities or use of 'framework' purchase schemes should be explored.*

#### **Budget theme 2 – Increasing income and behaving commercially**

##### **Are there any specific services that you think the council could provide more commercially or charge more for?**

- *It is regrettable that service areas of the council may well be reduced or ended. The Civic Society will be considering the detail of these proposals as they are developed. We want to help ensure that the 'civic good' of the borough is maintained wherever possible.*
- *The council should act in a commercial way, but this must not place at risk its primary function of serving the people of Chesterfield.*
- *The revenue and footfall implications of increasing car parking charges or removing the resident's permit should be thoroughly understood before a decision is made on this.*
- *Focus on increasing the use of public transport must not be forgotten. Though public transport coordination is the responsibility of the county council, for members of the public, the maintenance of bus waiting facilities in Chesterfield is substandard when compared to many other towns.*

##### **Do you anticipate any issues with the council taking this approach (increasing income and behaving more commercially)? Please briefly explain what they are.**

- *The costs of withdrawing any services must be thoroughly understood, with an honest appraisal made of the on-costs of ceasing delivery. For example – what will the actual costs be of closing the Revolution House (security, building conservation, etc)? If 'village halls' are closed will they ever be able to reopen and what alternatives will organisations using them have?*
- *The council may wish to sell more of its commercial property portfolio, but this should not be a 'fire sale'. Property disposed of must be subject to rigorous cost/benefit analysis.*

### **Budget theme 3 – Transforming service delivery**

#### **Are there any specific services that you think the council could transform and deliver differently?**

- *If it has not already developed this, the council needs an overall culture of continuous service improvement, such as used in some leading industrial concerns (e.g. Lean). Rigorous process mapping may help the council in streamlining its processes, if this has not already been undertaken. A cycle of continuous service review needs adopting, if this is not already embedded using tried and tested techniques such as the PDCA (plan, do, check, adjust) cycle.*
- *The council may be able to look at bench-marking against commercial rates for services such as planning and other professional advice and charge these.*
- *The possibility of providing some more services jointly with the county council and other boroughs should be continuously examined.*
- *The council should look more closely at working with ‘partners’ to deliver enhanced or new events.*
  - *It should use the links that its own members may bring to help identify these.*
  - *It could also more effectively use national events, such as the annual heritage Open Days, where some towns have a fully coordinated programme of events (The Civic Society may be able to assist in this).*
  - *Expertise within local organisations to assist in developing such things as town trails, guides, etc. should be identified and used.*
  - *It should also be looking at welcoming volunteers as a ‘resource’ alongside working with local community organisations, that may wish to support certain activities rather than those functions cease altogether.*
- *We understand that some form of ‘town centre [advisory] board’ may be constituted. We think that such a board, with representatives from stakeholders and the council would be good idea, so long as it is not just a ‘talking shop.’ This may help focus on the need to continually improve our town centre.*
- *If this is not already the case, the council should look to have a designated town centre officer – cutting across different disciplines, with defined duties to ensure the quality of the town centre environment.*
- *The council may wish to look at a more joint approach to a museum provision in the borough – particularly with the county council whose current single provision (at Buxton and currently closed) can hardly be described as a county museum service.*
- *If other adjacent district councils do not contribute to the upkeep of the Pomegranate and Winding Wheel the council might, subject to a cost/benefit analysis and operational practicability, introduce differential pricing for non-borough residents. (It is accepted that this may well be difficult if not impracticable to achieve).*

#### **Do you anticipate any issues with the council taking this approach (transforming service delivery)?**

##### **Please briefly explain what they are.**

- *The impact on reliance of digital delivery of services needs to be thoroughly understood.*
- *We have already raised our concerns regarding the specific issue of closure of the Visitor Information Centre. It will have an impact on the tourist economy and significantly reduce access to information for those who are not ‘digitally’ capable. Closure will also remove an important facility for local organisations to publicise events and distribute leaflets. Visitors will also be unable to access leaflets and other information vital to the improvement of tourism and the economic wellbeing of the town. The Society therefore feels that if the facility is to be closed all available steps should be taken to provide at least some town centre information facility jointly with the County Council’s central library, perhaps in its foyer.*

- *We will want to look at individual service alterations/withdrawals. Our aim will be to try and measure some form of retention of what we term as 'the civic good' of the borough.*

#### **Budget theme 4 – Reducing services offer / stop doing**

**How strongly do you agree or disagree that we should reduce or stop providing some services in order to reduce the council's budget gap?**

**Are there any specific services that you think the council could reduce or stop doing?**

- *This, of course, is a difficult area – as ideally the council should not stop or reduce any important services. Most (if not all) have already been significantly reduced over the last 13 years.*
- *Though this is periphery, there may be some savings to be made in reducing publicity costs. Production and distribution costs versus the take-up for leaflets should be fully understood before they are produced. Whether or not leaflets and publications should be produced in full colour (which seems to be the default) also needs assessment. (We understand that a decision has been made for the council magazine to go entirely digital – which, given the circumstances, we support).*
- *Could savings be made by fully combining 'Destination Chesterfield' within the council's tourism section?*
- *It seems sense to look at the value for money that is being delivered by the council's events programme. But this value must be seen in its wider sense of boosting the visitor economy and maintaining the civic good of the town. Presumably bench-marking and best practice have already been undertaken with similar local authorities. If not, this should be.*

**Do you anticipate any issues with the council taking this approach (reducing services offer / stop doing)? Please briefly explain what they are.**

- *The main issue is that, inevitably, services will end, be radically altered and/or significantly reduced. This will have a negative impact on both the social and civic good of the borough.*
- *The council needs to have an open and honest conversation with residents over this. The initial communication strategy appears to be unclear – we have set out our reasons for this in our general comments. We would hope that as options are further developed residents and other stakeholders are able to be part of the further 'conversation' with straightforward facts, and options (where there are any) laid out as part of this.*

#### **Budget theme 5 – Rightsizing the organisation**

**Do you anticipate any issues with the council taking this approach (rightsizing the organisation)? Please briefly explain what they are.**

- *Reorganisation of any kind like this will be unsettling to staff and moral will suffer. Staff must be properly supported throughout the process. Managers must be supportive and themselves supported.*

## **Budget theme 6 – Asset Rationalisation and Effective Asset Management**

The council owns and operates a number of buildings and land. Under this theme, we will need to consider rationalising (reviewing and reducing where appropriate) the assets we own and operate in order to raise capital funds and reduce the costs of running our buildings. This would involve selling off some property, to ensure that we can effectively maintain those which we keep.

**Do you anticipate any issues with the council taking this approach? Please briefly explain what they are.**

- *The council may wish to sell more of its commercial property portfolio, but this should not be a 'fire sale'. Property disposed of must be subject to rigorous cost/benefit analysis.*
- *Buildings 'moth-balled' which have a community use (as an example – if the Revolution House or 'village halls' are moth-balled) must not be sold-off as they are community assets.*

## **Summary and overview**

**Overall, are there any services that you feel should be protected from reductions in budget? Please tell us what services these are.**

- *At the date of this survey submission the Civic Society has identified one service - the visitor information service – that should remain, roughly, as at present.*
- *We would wish to look at other proposals as they are worked-up.*

**Where would you choose to target spend reductions?**

- *Reductions, wherever possible should be concentrated in 'back-office' functions, such as IT.*
- *Smarter ways of procurement (as outlined above) should be adopted.*
- *The effective use of 'spend-to-save' schemes should be encouraged – e.g. energy efficiency, combining services, cross service working.*

**Do you think we have missed out any important themes? If so, please tell us what they are:**

- *None identified*

[ENDS]