'Making the most of your money' public consultation feedback

1. The County Council undertook an open public consultation *'Making the most of your money'* which ran for six weeks from 12 June to the 23 July 2023. The consultation was promoted to residents and stakeholders through a range of online and offline channels including, but not limited to: the County Council's website, social media channels, Hampshire Perspectives residents' forum and Your Hampshire e-newsletter; in County Council libraries and buildings, at bus stops, and on electronic noticeboards, in countryside parks and Hampshire County Council care settings; via media releases to the local TV, radio and written press; via targeted social media advertising; via direct email contact, and the Leader's Stakeholder (email) newsletter – between which cover a wide range of individuals, groups and organisations across Hampshire (such as Hampshire MPs, district and parish councils, businesses and the education sector, voluntary and community sector groups and organisations, and service providers), which promoted onward dissemination, as well as response. Information Packs and Response Forms were available on-line and in hard copy as standard and Easy Read, with other formats available on request, and a short animation was produced to help people understand the financial context. Comments could also be submitted via email or by letter, and comments on County Council corporate social media posts were also taken into account.

2. The consultation sought residents' and stakeholders' views on a range of proposals that could contribute towards meeting the expected revenue budget shortfall by 2025, as well as the potential impact on residents of the proposals being considered, and any suggestions not yet considered by the County Council. The consultation explained that, due to the considerable size of the estimated budget gap by 2025 of £132m, it was likely a combination of the potential options being considered would be needed, given the limited ability the County Council has to generate income and the need to continue to deliver statutory service obligations. For example, the Information Pack illustrated the amount of savings that would still be required even if council tax was increased by up to 10%.

3. The options were:
    - Lobbying central government for legislative change;
    - Using the County Council's reserves;
    - Generating additional income;
    - Introducing and increasing charges for some services;
    - Reducing and changing services;
    - Increasing council tax; and
    - Changing local government arrangements in Hampshire.

4. Information on each of the above approaches was provided in an Information Pack. This set out the limitations for the County Council of each option, if taken in isolation, to achieving required savings. For example, supporting information explained that the £132m estimated budget shortfall took into account an assumed increase council tax of 4.99%, of which 2% must be spent on adult social care services. The Pack also explained that if central government were to support changing local government arrangements in Hampshire, savings would still take several years to be realised. Residents were similarly made aware that the use of the County Council's reserves (which are retained for service investment and to help manage financial risk) would not provide a sustainable solution to address ongoing financial pressures. The Pack further explained that if these were used to meet service delivery these would be used up very quickly, and so only temporarily delaying the point at which other savings would need to be found.

5. Therefore, whilst each option offers a valid way of contributing in-part to meeting the budget shortfall, addressing the estimated £132m gap would inevitably require a combination of approaches.

6. A total of 2,935 responses were received to the consultation – 2,806 via the provided Response Forms and 129 as unstructured responses through email, letter and social media.

7. The key findings from consultation feedback are as follows:

- Agreement that the County Council should carry on with its **financial strategy** now stands at 60%, compared with 45% in 2021, 52% in 2019, and 65% in 2017. This involves targeting resources on the most vulnerable people; planning ahead to secure savings early and enable investment in more efficient ways of working; and the careful use of reserves to temporarily help address funding gaps and plug additional demand pressures (e.g. for social care).
- The data suggests that respondents are concerned about the implications of further service changes and charges and increasingly feel that the solution lies with **central government**.
- Both data and verbatim comments indicate the respondents want the County Council to continue to **lobby central government** for a longer-term funding solution for local government, and to allow additional charging in a number of areas:
  - 90% agreed with lobbying for additional funding to deliver social care services for adults and children.
  - 83% agreed profit margins for providers of children's homes should be capped.
  - 81% agreed the underlying funding model for county councils should change.

  - 81% agreed that there should be national consistency in the approach to residential placement fees for children's social care.
  - 79% agreed that there should be an increase in central government funding for highway maintenance and major road and structural repairs.
  - 78% agreed that there should be national rules on engagement of agency resource to support children's social work.
  - 75% agreed to enable local circumstances to be taken into account when determining adult social care provision.
  - 68% agreed to allow a move to locally devised policies and means testing for Home to School Transport.
  - 66% agreed that a review should be undertaken of the range of statutory functions that must be carried out by qualified social workers.
  - 59% agreed to allow for a deferred payment option for adults' domiciliary (home) care provision.
  - 55% agreed that a small charge should be applied to concessionary travel.
  - 52% agreed that a fee should be charged for issuing an Older Person's Bus Pass.
  - 48% agreed that there should be greater council tax setting freedoms (29% disagreed, with the remainder neither agreeing nor disagreeing).

- However, there were exceptions, namely that:
  - Most respondents (68%) did not agree that a nominal fee should be charged for using household waste recycling centres.
- The majority of respondents agreed that the County Council should explore:
  - Changing services to support achievement of savings (69% of respondents).
  - The possibility of changing local government arrangements for Hampshire (62% of respondents).
  - Increasing existing charges for services (54% of respondents).
- The majority of respondents disagreed with the proposal to reduce services (63% disagreed vs 23% who agreed).
- Opinion was divided on the use of reserves and the introduction of new service charges:
  - 45% agreed that reserves should not be used, vs 42% who disagreed.
  - 47% agreed that new service charges for currently free services should be introduced, vs 42% who disagreed.
- 46% of respondents first preference was for the County Council to raise **Council Tax** by less than 4.99%. This compared to 38% of respondents whose first choice was to raise council tax by 4.99% and 18% who would choose an increase of more than 4.99%.

- Suggestions were made by respondents for generating additional income, including making money from unused buildings and land, introduction of charges to service users, selling services to other organisations, and parking charges. Other suggested for alternatives to the budget options presented included improving council efficiency, reducing expenditure, and prioritising spending where it was most needed.
- Just under half of respondents (48%) specified impacts that they felt would arise should the County Council continue with its financial strategy and approve the proposed options. Almost half of these related to financial impacts on household budgets, both due to potential increases in Council Tax (25%) and rising service charges (11%), alongside the broader financial impacts or rises in the cost of living (12%) and other ongoing day-to-day costs (2%).
- More generally, 36% of respondents considered that the proposals would impact on the level of service provided, with particular mention made to service reduction, worsening road conditions, and rising service demand. Social impacts, including poorer mental wellbeing and physical health, as well as a reduced quality of life were also referenced by 19% of respondents.
- Just under half of respondents felt that impacts could arise for the protected equalities characteristic of age (49%), with further impacts on poverty (35%), disability (34%), and rurality (25%) also commonly mentioned. The potential environmental impacts were also noted in around a third of the comments submitted (31%).

  The 129 unstructured responses to the consultation, submitted via letter/ email or on social media, primarily focussed on the perceived impacts of the proposals, stating concern about reductions to services and potential impacts on vulnerable groups, and the financial impact on other organisations, but recognising the budgetary pressures and the need to reduce some services. A smaller number of respondents noted that services were underfunded, and the need to lobby central government for additional funding.

8. Of the 2,935 responses received, 157 included comments directly related to the Hampshire 2050 Directorate savings proposals, summarised as follows:

- **Grant reductions** – the general provision of centrally administered grant funding was included in the consultation as an illustrative example. 64 comments were received with 18 in support of the general proposal, 34 against and the remainder mixed or neutral. Those who supported the proposal generally indicated a preference for public funding to be spent on core, statutory functions, whilst those who did not agree with the proposal citied a range of concerns including impacts on arts, culture, heritage, communities, place-shaping, environment, climate, health and wellbeing. Further comments highlighted concerns that reduced funding to community organisations would leave these organisations less able to respond to the wider impacts of public service reductions. In light of consultation feedback,

the general proposal relating to grants has been split into three separate proposals as described in paragraph 21.

- **Office accommodation** – 72 comments were received with 62 in favour of the proposal, 5 against and the remainder mixed. Those in favour referenced a strong desire to see the County Council operate more efficiently and rationalise its assets, recognising changing working patterns and the potential savings or income which could be generated from surplus accommodation. The 5 comments against the proposal objected to the principle of working from home.

- **Organisational redesign** – only a very small number (20) comments were received broadly relating to Hampshire 2050 functions. Of these, 17 supported the proposals and the remainder were mixed. Responses were relatively non-specific and supported a desire for greater efficiency and a focus on core functions.

Overall, no additional equality impacts for the Hampshire 2050 proposals were highlighted through the consultation beyond those which had already been identified in the Equalities Impact Assessments.