



THE OXFORD RESEARCH AGENCY

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**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**  
www.oxfordshire.gov.uk

**Budget Consultation 2009  
J4242**

## **SUMMARY FINDINGS**

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## **Background & Objectives**

As with other sectors, the current economic climate is impacting heavily on the financial and business planning of local authorities. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has estimated that the next government will cut spending on public services by 2.3% a year from 2011, which, on top of existing measures to increase the efficiency of local authorities, has left councils facing a prolonged period of constrained resources, with some authorities predicting that their overall funding could be reduced by as much as 15% in the coming years.

Faced with reduced budgets and testing savings targets, the need to consult with residents has never been so great. With this in mind, Oxfordshire County Council commissioned The Oxford Research Agency to undertake its annual budget consultation with Oxfordshire residents. This will enable the Council to reach informed decisions regarding residents' priorities and gain an understanding of the inevitable trade-offs between levels of investment of service delivery.

In response to the Government White Paper Communities in Control: real people, real power, The Oxford Research Agency and Oxfordshire County Council have worked in close partnership to develop a unique and innovative approach to budget consultation.

A cross section of residents were recruited from across Oxfordshire, with quotas placed on age, gender, class, ethnicity, disability and location (including all the Districts, large towns, smaller market towns and rural areas). These residents were asked to attend two workshop sessions held at County Hall.

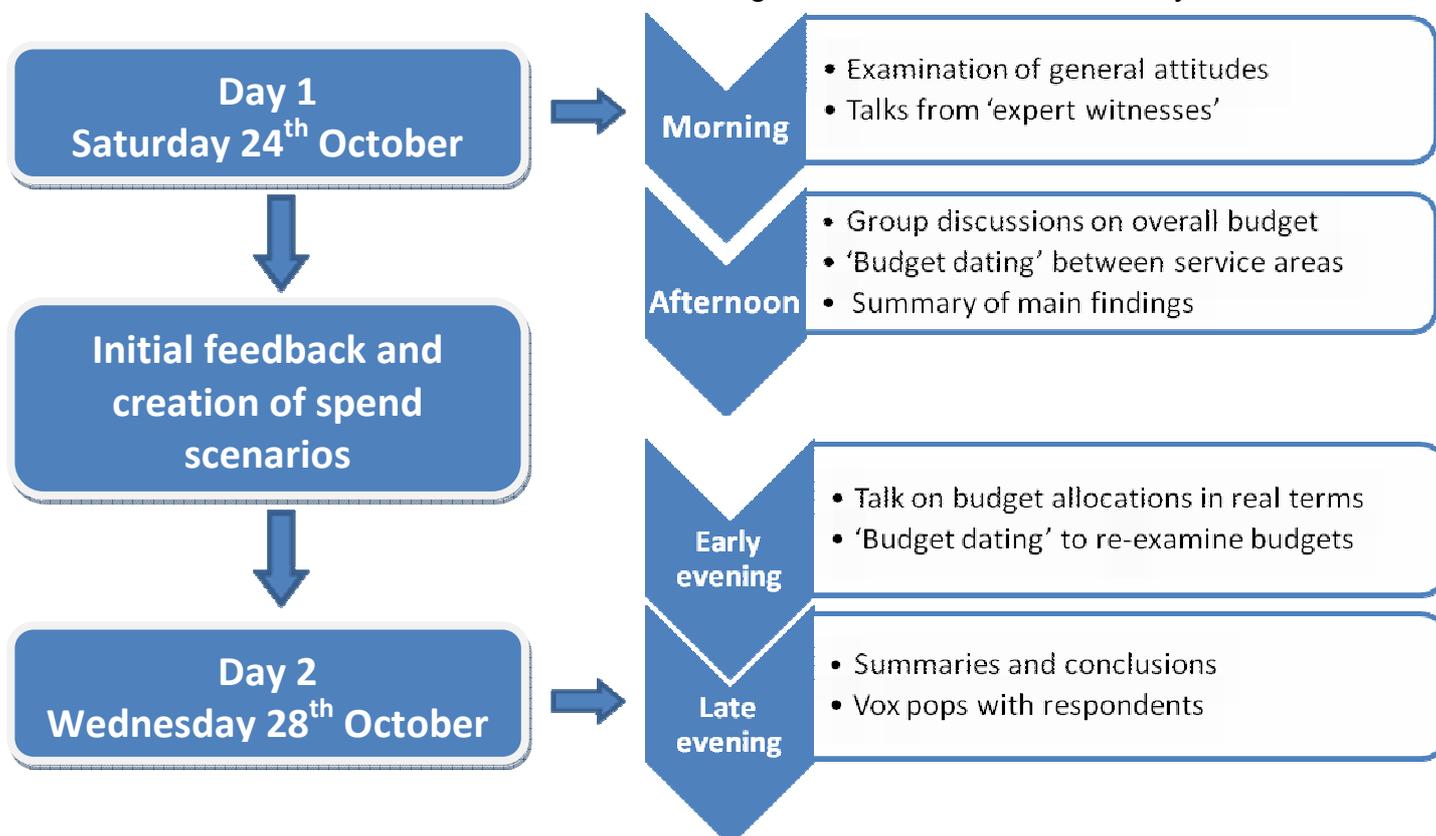
Central to the methodology used for this consultation was a close working relationship between TORA and Council staff.

A link to the full report can be found on the agenda on the public website:

<http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/portal/publicsite/doitonline/finditonline/committeepapers>

## Methodology

An innovative two-phased approach to conducting workshops was used, involving residents being re-convened for a second half day session to allow for a more detailed and realistic assessment of the budget allocation exercises on day 1:



A cross section of 34 Oxfordshire residents attended both workshops. The workshops comprised both plenary sessions and breakout groups where participants were split into small groups (split by age, i.e. 18-25; 26-40; 41-55; 56+). The aim of the plenary sessions was to introduce participants to the various financial commitments that Oxfordshire County Council has to meet. The breakout groups focused on prioritisation and trade-off exercises, with respondents firstly allocating budget at a service area level, before then embarking on a 'budget dating' exercise and prioritisation within service areas. This involved asking respondents to hypothetically allocate proportions of the overall budget within service areas. To begin with, this was done as an individual exercise, which was followed by discussion around the reasoning behind people's individual allocations, before reaching a consensus within the group and a combined allocation. Respondents were then asked as a group to make a 10% saving on the combined allocation. The process was then repeated with a different moderator for the next service area. Four

overall service areas were examined: Children; Adults; Environment & Transport and Community.

## Summary

While there was some confusion about the role/ remit of OCC and surprise at the financial demands facing the Council, respondents were clear about their priorities:

Service Area	Top Priority	Lowest Priority
<b>Children</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Surprise at disparity in budget allocated to adults vs children</li> </ul>	<b>Child Protection</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seen as a critical service</li> <li>'Baby P' top of mind when making allocations</li> </ul>	<b>School Transport</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Removal of entitlement of free transport to faith schools supported</li> </ul>
<b>Adults</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considered toughest to allocate</li> <li>Majority prepared to pay more to protect</li> <li>Savings to be made through reducing waste (e.g. equipment)</li> </ul>	<b>Older People</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support a policy of more in-home support and less residential care</li> <li>Savings made without reduced service levels</li> </ul>	<b>Learning Disabilities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Although considered vital, many believe a wider support network exists</li> <li>Again, support a policy of home care (would not like overnight respite service to be reduced)</li> </ul>
<b>Environment &amp; Transport</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Polarised respondents, but majority saw as extremely important</li> <li>Maintenance preferred to new projects</li> </ul>	<b>Highway Maintenance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Condition of road surfaces a concern – not happy to see fewer pot holes repaired</li> <li>Switching off half of all street lights was seen as acceptable</li> <li>Felt that savings could be made through better planning</li> </ul>	<b>Planning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult area for respondents - lack of clarity of the role of the Council</li> <li>Current plans felt to remain relevant in the future</li> <li>Emergency services seen to respond to emergency situations not OCC</li> </ul>
<b>Community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considered easiest to allocate due to contrast in 'importance' of Fire Service vs. others</li> </ul>	<b>Fire Service</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seen as key priority</li> <li>Concern current service underfunded (newspaper coverage impacting on perceptions)</li> </ul>	<b>Trading Standards &amp; Safer Communities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trading standards little used among respondents and thus unappreciated</li> <li>Frustration at funding traveller sites</li> <li>Confusion why safer communities is not police funded</li> </ul>

The majority of respondents would begrudgingly accept the proposed 3.75% Council Tax increase. However, this is on the proviso that there are no large Officer bonuses/ salary increases/ Member expenses. OCC will need to clearly demonstrate where efficiencies have been made as residents still feel that there is much that can be done in this area. Communication is more important than ever. Review current communications (especially the Council Tax leaflet) and consider other ways of communicating the budget (e.g. stalls in town centres).