



THE PEOPLE'S POLL

Shaping Southampton's future together



A reflective report for Southampton City Council

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About the Southern Policy Centre

The Southern Policy Centre was founded in 2014 as a cross-party thinktank for central southern England.

We specialise in:

- Devolution policy
- Innovative forms of public policy making
- Open Data research
- Health and social care research
- Higher Education policy

Above all, our work will always be rooted in practical policy making. We work with leaders in business, government at all levels, and the third sector to make sure our research has real impact for southern England.

The Southern Policy Centre is chaired by John Denham.

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Introduction

Southampton City Council has established a People's Panel, made up of residents who are interested in taking part in consultations and other opportunities to express their views on council services, health services and living in the city. On Saturday 4th July 2015 the Southern Policy Centre ran a deliberative polling session with some members of the People's Panel to pilot this different way of engaging people in exploring specific issues.

Southampton City Council, like most local authorities, faces major challenges in deciding how to spend its money wisely in a time of budget constraints. Decisions about the balance of prevention, universal services and priorities for the city's future are all contentious. There are no easy answers.

The polling session, brought together policy experts with local citizens to discuss four key proposals that epitomise these difficult choices:

1. 'The council should spend less money on direct services to older people and more money on supporting networks of volunteers to work with older people'
2. 'The council should reduce services that are provided to all households in order to give help to families whose children may end up in care and cost taxpayers a lot of money'
3. 'The council should ask voluntary organisations what services are needed instead of trying to plan services centrally'
4. 'To raise funds to invest in prevention, the council should sell bonds and pay a guaranteed rate of interest funded from the savings made in the future'

Our process enabled the attendees to develop counter-proposals on each of the subjects as well as a series of perceptive questions and criteria for the council to judge these policies.

It was also found, from a quantitative survey before and after the event, that engagement with each of the issues changed the attitudes of participants towards each proposal. Furthermore, the attitudes of those who identified as 'conservative' and 'liberal' were brought closer to a consensus by the process.

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. People wanted to see more such events, and were particularly happy that Southampton City Council was enabling them to play such a constructive part in formulating its policies. Participants were keen to see the council take on board their recommendations.

The deliberative polling process

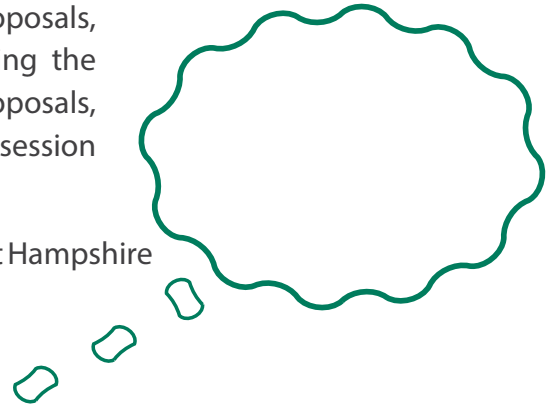
Participants start by filling in a survey, asking them questions about: their political attitudes, their initial thoughts on the four proposals, and background demographic questions. After completing the survey the audience heard from experts on each of the proposals, one arguing for and one against. The four experts for the session were:

Ruth Dixon, previously Deputy Director of Adult Services at Hampshire County Council

Professor Francis Davis, University of Birmingham

Margaret Evans, former Special Services Manager at Hampshire County Council

Dr Rosie Read, Bournemouth University



After hearing the arguments for and against each proposal the participants had twenty minutes to discuss it in a group of five or six.

These discussions were facilitated by trained moderators whose role was to make sure everyone was able to contribute and that the attendees were able to formulate questions and counter-proposals for the experts, without artificially creating a group consensus. Diversity of opinion is key to the process, and for the same reason the presentations from experts are deliberately adversarial; helping the audience understand that these are genuinely contentious issues.

The session ended with the audience filling in a final survey (a replica of the pre-session survey) so that any changes in attitudes could be tracked through quantitative data.

The process illustrates how people respond to policies if they are given the time and space to properly engage with them. Quantitative changes in attitudes are one pillar of this, but the content of the discussion as well as the questions or counter-proposals submitted is just as enlightening.

Ultimately, deliberative polling enables policy makers to understand the opinions of a cross-section of the public in a controlled and constructive way. It's an effective testing ground for new policy proposals, and a way of bringing citizens in to the decision making process at a time when more people than ever feel that politics does not involve them.

Southampton City Council will use the results of our report, along with other consultation, to inform their future proposals.

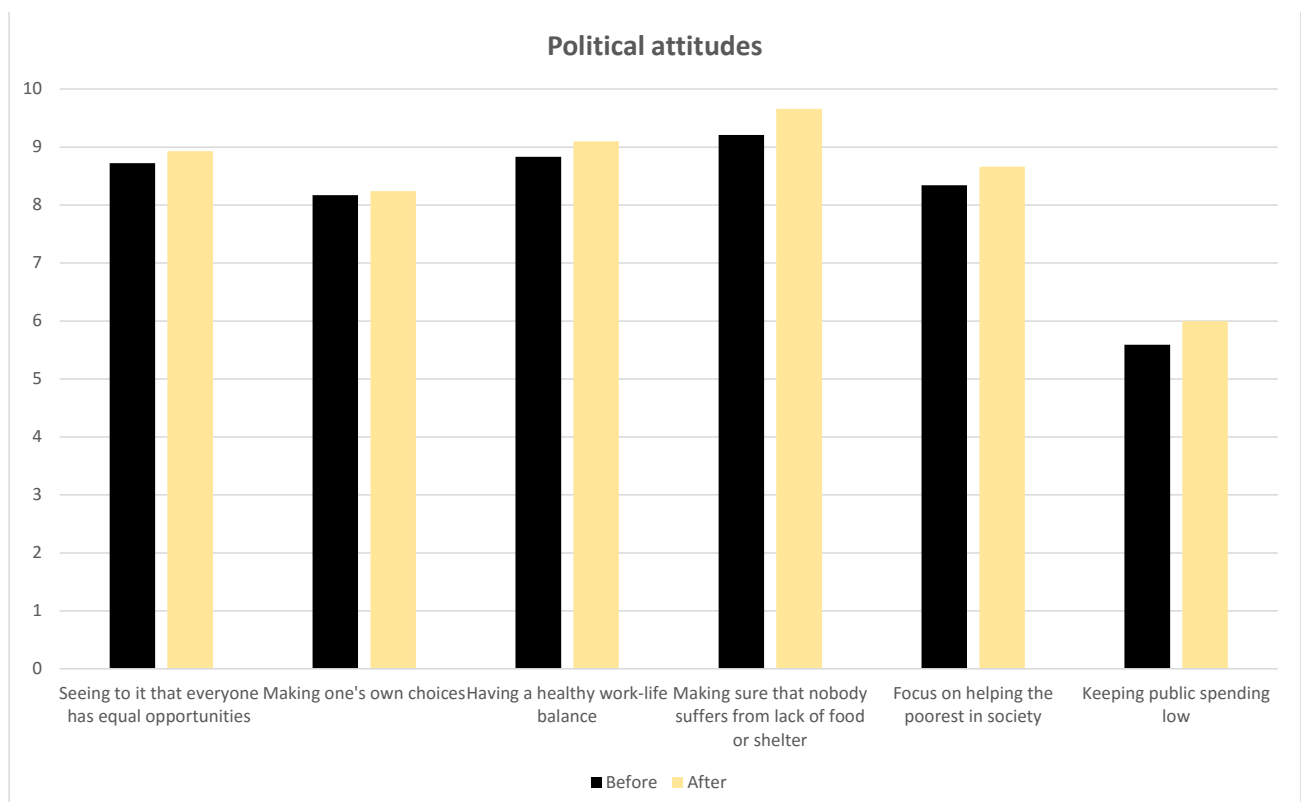
The discussion results

Before reading through these results it should be noted that the audience was largely made up of older members of the community (an average age of over 60), and that the majority identified as White British. Naturally this means we cannot take these findings as representative of the whole Southampton population, and a means of ensuring a more diverse attendance would be an improvement for future events.

The next four pages outline what the audience felt about each policy proposal, the key questions that they identified and counter-proposals that they put forward for the council. The table below, showing the participants' response to general attitude questions, provides useful context to their qualitative responses.

Table 1: General political attitudes

'Here are some things that people find more or less important for themselves or society. On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is extremely unimportant, 10 is extremely important, and 5 is exactly in the middle, how important or unimportant would you say each of the following is to you?'



Proposal 1

'The council should spend less money on direct services to older people and more money on supporting networks of volunteers to work with older people'

Key points:

- Southampton City Council would need to clarify which services could be provided by volunteers and which could not.
- The council would need realistic strategies for increasing volunteers.
- The audience showed particular concern for how quality and reliability would be assured in reference to volunteer led services.
- That the council support the voluntary sector in new ways of organising, including the example of a social enterprise which could re-invest profits.
- It was suggested that the integration of health and social care would be a viable counter-proposal, because it would enable investment in prevention and allow the unlocking of healthcare budgets to invest in direct, professional services for older people which were considered highly valuable by both the experts and audience.

Overall impression: the transfer of services would have to be managed cautiously, and there was a general preference for the direct and professional approach. The audience generally agreed that some services could be run by volunteers, and that the focus of the council should be to discern which services these would be and to ensure quality.

Post-event survey rating of this proposal: 5.44/10



Proposal 2

'The council should reduce services that are provided to all households in order to give help to families whose children may end up in care and cost taxpayers a lot of money'

Key points:

- The audience wanted a list of the possible universal cuts.
- Crucially, it was felt that the public should know what they would lose; what is the true cost of these policies, and would the public have the right to know?
- The audience had questions around how the council would target and make sure it reaches the right families.
- A key question was identified: do you focus on the most expensive families or the most in need? And how do you define 'vulnerable'?
- There was a view that parents should be supported to be accountable.
- Counter-proposal: it was felt that frontline workers would be the most connected with their community and should have a leading role, including the flexibility and power to redesign which households receive help and what kind of help they get.

Overall impression: the response to this question breaks down into two themes. The first was that more information about which cuts would be made was needed, and the second was the question of correct targeting, with a general preference for frontline staff having a say in this and having the flexibility to adapt their service.

Post-event survey rating of this proposal: 5.11/10



Proposal 3

'The council should ask voluntary organisations what services are needed instead of trying to plan services centrally'

Key points:

- Some audience members suspected that certain outside organisations already had undue influence and that voluntary organisations do not represent everybody, and that therefore it is the council's job to ensure everyone has the opportunity to shape the strategy.
- There was scepticism about whether the council would really follow the will of outside organisations, when they already have set political priorities and ideas.
- A key demand was that the council works hard to make it a transparent process, with clarity over objectives, who is setting the budget, how it is spent and what the benefits are as a result. Transparency was an overwhelming theme.
- The question of conflict between local and national priorities was raised.
- Measurement of the results of the work carried out by voluntary organisations was seen as an important way to keep these organisations accountable.
- There was a preference for a less binary process, with residents and user groups involved in the process too, so that you engage the whole population.
- Counter-proposal: the council should run a deliberative consultation with an audience of voluntary organisation representatives. The results would need to be anonymised (there was particular emphasis on this point) in order to decrease the influence of 'big' players compared to smaller charities. The result would influence the planning of services.

Overall impression: the focus for the audience was on this process being open, transparent and accountable. No one concluded that a wholesale handover to voluntary organisations was a good idea, but that integrating their experience through something like a deliberative process would be a positive step forward.

Post-event survey rating of this proposal: 6.74/10



Proposal 4

'To raise funds to invest in prevention, the council should sell bonds and pay a guaranteed rate of interest funded from the savings made in the future'

Key points:

- The point was made that return on investment can come far down the line, so it is difficult to know when to gather the 'profits'? Subsequently, it was felt that you would have to focus on 'quick return' projects, and there would be a cost and limitation in identifying these.
- Similarly, the difficulty of measuring long term impact was discussed.
- The council would need a high calibre communications plan if it were to roll out social impact bonds, in order to generate community understanding, buy in and carry the community with them (based on minimal public knowledge of the concept).
- Similarly, there is a significant question of how you turn this into something that could be popularised and accessible to the community. The counter-proposal of combining them with a lottery or scratch card was put forward (as a form of crowd-source funding).
- A further counter-proposal was that the council runs a pilot project, with the investments ring-fenced at first to local residents and businesses. It was seen that this would build community buy-in for the policies - the communities seeing both a financial and social return.
- Ultimately, more information would be needed before a decision could be reached. Will the bonds be open to everyone, businesses and individuals alike?
- There was general support for ethical investment for social benefit. Many people use credit unions not to maximise their investment but for the greater social good.

Overall impression: this session proved the value of the polling process in that the audience quickly got to grips with the idea of social impact bonds, although more information beforehand would have helped the process further. The audience focused on community participation and investment, rather than raising revenue as such.

Post-event survey rating of this proposal: 5.86/10



The survey results

The before and after survey enables us to track changes in attitudes, which is the second half of the polling results. This report illustrates the key figures through four tables:

Table 1 (page 5) shows the general political attitudes of the participants.

Table 2 shows the responses to each of the four policy proposals before and after the event.

Table 3 compares the responses of conservative and liberal audience members before the event

Table 4 compares the responses of conservative and liberal audience members after the event

The political classifications for tables 3 and 4 were judged by the responses to the following question:

On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is extremely liberal, 10 is extremely conservative, and 5 is exactly in the middle, where would you place your political views on this scale?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I haven't thought much about this

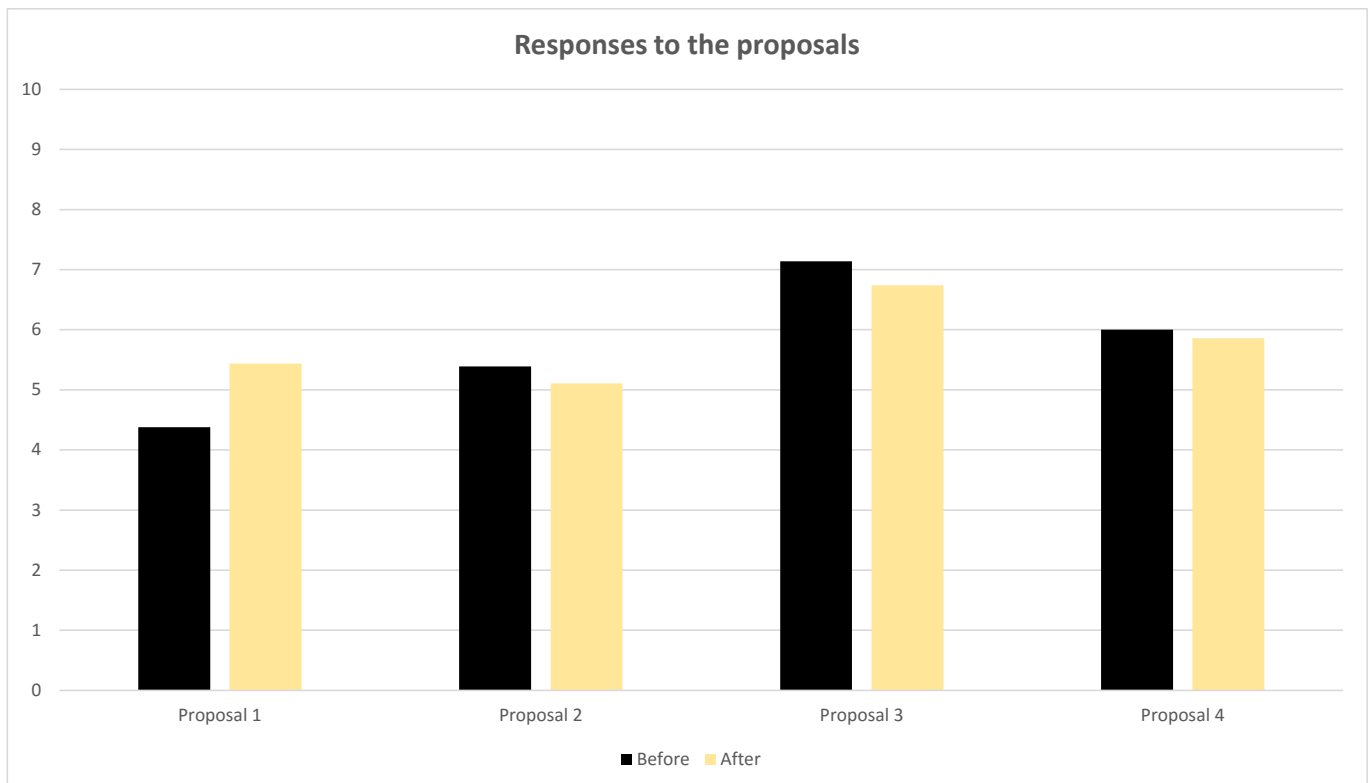


Table 2

Overall responses to the four policy proposals, before and after

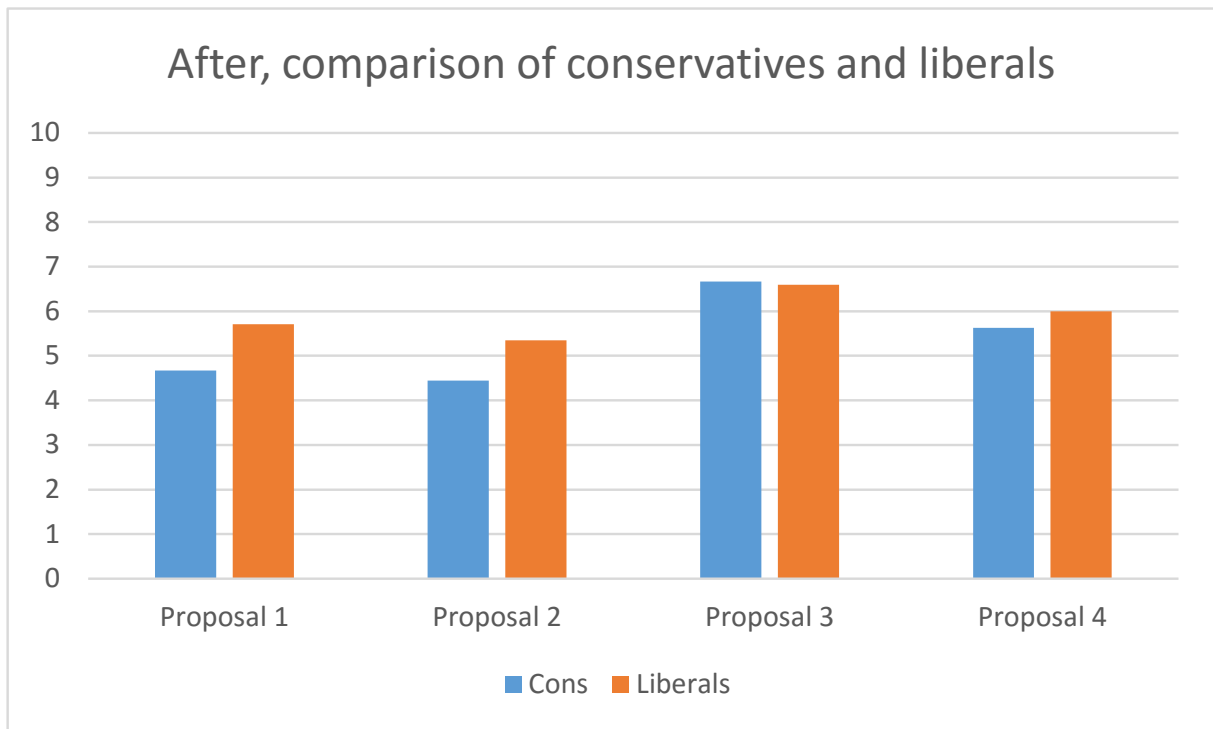
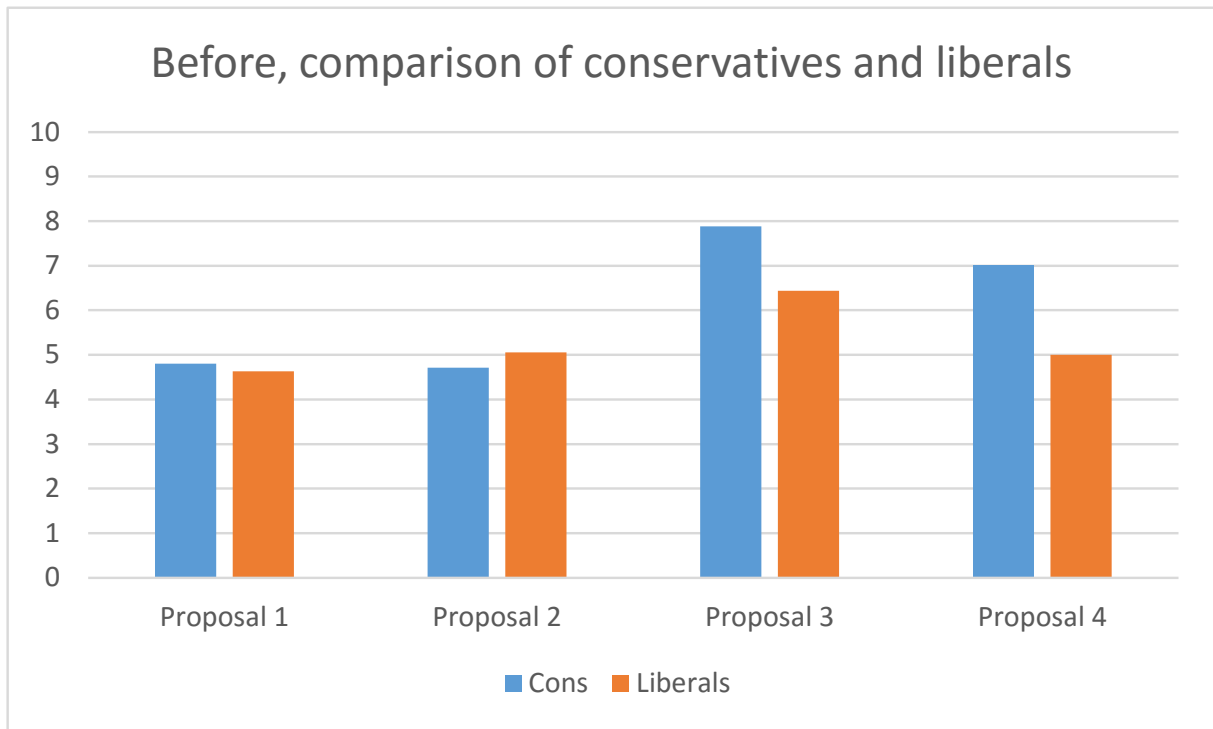
'Now here are some proposals we would like your opinions on. On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is "extremely undesirable," 10 is "extremely desirable," and 5 is exactly in the middle, how desirable or undesirable would you say are each of the following:'

1. 'The council should spend less money on direct services to older people and more money on supporting networks of volunteers to work with older people'
2. 'The council should reduce services that are provided to all households in order to give help to families whose children may end up in care and cost taxpayers a lot of money'
3. 'The council should ask voluntary organisations what services are needed instead of trying to plan services centrally'
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Tables 3 and 4

Comparing attitudes to the proposals for conservatives and liberals before and after the event



Survey results summary

The results show that after deliberation there is an increase in support for spending less money on direct services for older people and more money on networks of support, but small decreases in support for proposals 2, 3 and 4. Nonetheless, proposal 3 – that the council should ask voluntary organisations what services are needed instead of trying to plan services centrally – remained the most popular both before and after the process.

Perhaps just as illuminating is the change in attitudes once you segment the respondents into liberals and conservatives, illustrated in Tables 3 and 4. For proposals 1 and 4 the preferences switched – conservatives previously in favour dropped their support, while the liberals overtook them as their support for the propositions increased. Proposals 2 and 3 also saw dips in support from conservatives after sustained engagement with the issues, and proposal 3 sees something more like a consensus emerge.

While the data represented by these tables forms a useful quantitative backdrop to the deliberative polling results, the discussion results are undoubtedly the most useful. The tables show relatively small shifts in attitude once participants are engaged with the proposals in more detail, while the discussion showed how members of the public are able to draw out the key issues in any policy and suggest improvements, even when they differ politically.

Report conclusion

The first deliberative polling session held by the Southern Policy Centre was on the subject of immigration. This was a more heated debate than the subject of council budgets (with a more partisan audience), and saw a greater polarising of opinions. On the other hand, the proposals outlined in this report saw some highly constructive discussion from the audience. Some important themes emerged, in particular the desire for more community involvement combined with greater transparency and accountability for voluntary and professional services alike.

Finally, a note on proposal 4, which was on the subject of social impact bonds. Almost all of the attendees were unaware beforehand of what these are, yet they were able to come up with intelligent and penetrating questions/proposals. Perhaps the lesson from that discussion is less related to the value and limitations of social impact bonds, and more to the wisdom of crowds in public policy making.

Audience feedback

Our impression was that audience members enjoyed the process, and got a lot out of it. Feedback left on the surveys was entirely positive and included:

“Very much enjoyed the event and **would like to be involved in others.**”

“Very interesting morning. **I hope these issues** we have discussed **will be taken on board** by the various Council Departments.”

“I would like to attend future events as I think it is good that the people’s poll are using service users and the public. To give feedback, I thought **today’s event was excellent** and **well organised.**”

“Overall **localism seems a positive step** and more events like this is a good thing. It would be great to see more traditionally less engaged people involved too although this is always a challenge. I would be happy to participate in future events.”

“I found this a useful experience. **Rewarding to know that I was able to participate** in possible consideration of policy for Southampton for the future”

“**Issues for council:**

- Value for money: how is it being demonstrated
- Staggering services
- Monitoring quality
- Make sure voluntary organisations that are being consulted, consult service users
- Ethical concerns of businesses – who invests in the council”

Future improvements to the process

- Information on each of the proposals to be shared with attendees a few days before the event.
- Introduce a more formal way of capturing the questions and counter-proposals from each table.
- At least two months to plan and implement the service is necessary, and would provide opportunity to ensure a more diverse and representative audience.
- Further pre-work with the client in regards to audience composition.
- In the future we will circulate the discussion points immediately after the event to check the levels of agreement for each point.



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