Ipsos MORI
Social Research Institute

TOUGH DECISIONS

Our top ten tips on priority-setting with the public

Tuesday's emergency budget confirms what we already knew: public finances face their tightest squeeze for decades, and this will mean tough decisions for all services at every level of government. Chancellor George Osborne has highlighted the need for collective solutions to our collective national debt – and understanding what really matters to the public is a key element of that.

A large proportion of the public feel they should have a say in these decisions – but there is also a business case for this involvement: cost reduction, enhanced efficiency and public acceptability are all outcomes from well-run consultations.[1]

This briefing draws on the lessons we have learned from designing and delivering research and consultation exercises to help clients set budgetary priorities. While many come from our huge experience of budget-setting workshops and deliberative events, the principles are as applicable across a range of methods, from online debates to open meetings.

1. Make the case for change

People need to understand why you are initiating the debate - why you are asking them difficult questions and why their input is important. The very clear and repeated statements from Government are helping to raise awareness of the challenges facing public finances: we have seen a marked increase in agreement that we need to cut public spending in recent weeks.

But there are significant proportions of the public who have not got the message, or believe that efficiency savings alone will be enough. This is likely to be a particular issue if you are asking people to discuss service prioritisation in an area that the media has reported will be protected.

You will therefore need to set the debate firmly in the context of our financial challenges. And the discussion should be based around wider questions about the role of government. In our experience, people are ready for a debate about what government should and should not do; framing the question in this way is more engaging, and results in more carefully considered decisions.

When broadening the debate in this way, remember that these decisions are not just for now, but will have implications for years ahead. It can therefore be very useful to include information on future scenarios and the big changes society will see from key trends, such as our ageing population and the continuing development of technology.

Deliberative workshops we have carried out for Ofcom on the future of public service broadcasting set the framework for discussion by talking about the changing media landscape. It was made clear that the status quo was not an option for the future, so by NOT making prioritisation decisions, they were in fact accepting some inevitable changes. This helped them trade off the risks and benefits of different priorities and have a more realistic discussion. *Read more...*

[1] Anthony Zacharzewski, Democracy pays: how democratic engagement can cut the cost of government, 2010.

2. Use existing insight

Make the best use of what you already know about the public's priorities. What aspects of service do people rate poorly, what do they say are important to them? Have these perceptions changed over time, and how do they compare with other benchmarks? What aspects of services have received most compliments or complaints? Answers to such questions will point to potential priorities.

But remember too that feedback from exercises presenting real budgetary decisions is often different from priorities in more generalised discussions. For example, one of our county council clients recently ran a face-to-face survey where road and pavement repairs were seen as one of the greatest priorities for improvement. This was echoed in initial discussions at a budgetary workshop. However, when it came to discussing specific aspects of spending cuts or investment, residents changed their minds; they traded-off investment in roads in favour of investing in education and skills for young people.

The 2020 Public Services Trust at the RSA used existing research effectively by commissioning a scoping review on the public's relationship with public services, before they commissioned primary research on the topic to make sure the new research built on existing knowledge. Read more...

3. Get the balance of information right

The public need enough information for their input to be meaningful and constructive; but too much detail can overload the discussion, and can confuse or intimidate some participants. Generally speaking, you should be using information to engage people in solving a problem, not asking them to react to your suggested solution.

When discussing spending on the scale involved with public services, we need to use scenarios and figures that the public can understand and identify with. As a simple example, it can be helpful to present expenditure in terms of the cost per household, rather than the overall £million (or £billion) expenditure per year.

Equally, it is important to explain to participants the reasons why a particular service exists and the wider outcomes that occur as a result. This helps ensure that people do not choose to cut services without understanding the wider context.

Information provision is one of the most difficult aspects to get right – seemingly small differences in exactly how information is presented, how sources are referenced, who presents the information, and so on, can all have a large impact on how the public react (*see our review on trust in government information*). This therefore needs careful planning, and the right people should be on hand to answer questions as they arise.

For an example of how to introduce complex information in an accessible way, take a look at the materials developed for Leicestershire County Council as part of their budget consultation where they gave participants details about the different services participants were being asked to prioritise. Read more...

4. Be very clear about your question…

You need to be clear what is in and out of the scope of the discussion. As all consultation good practice guides tell us, there is nothing more damaging than asking for feedback on something that is already settled. But this also extends to thinking through the precise question you are asking: exactly what you will be deciding as a result of the debate?

As part of this, you need to be aware that people have different roles they can take when approaching these prioritisation decisions – for example, as a citizen or service user. People often react differently depending on whether they are asked to respond on behalf of themselves. their community, or thinking about society as a whole. Usually you will be interested in getting each of these different perspectives – and that is possible through using different role-playing techniques and scenarios.

Ipsos MORI worked with Accenture on deliberative events in key cities around the world which included a role-play exercise in which participants negotiated between the roles of service users and citizens to uncover tensions in demands on government. Read more...

5. ...and how you involve wider stakeholders

It is important to define the role of wider stakeholders up-front. Whether you are running an open meeting or closed research sessions, government partners, lobby groups and representative groups are useful sounding boards and contributors.

These stakeholders can also have an important role to play as expert witnesses in discussions with citizens. If you do decide to involve stakeholders, be clear about how and why they are participating. In particular, are they there to help participants? Or are they there to put forward their personal point of view or that of their organisation? Each can be useful, but needs to be explained clearly.

In workshops for Leicester City PCT we needed to introduce information about the eight clinical pathways (developed by Lord Darzi) before they could be discussed. Instead of a Q&A session, we designed eight 'stalls' with posters and an experienced clinician who could explain the decisions required in more detail.

6. Use highly skilled and independent facilitation

The public are very capable of making tough decisions – but often prefer not to. The challenge is to develop a context in which participants commit to help answer your questions and do not feel they are being used as a 'rubber stamp' for cuts that they do not agree with.

In this context it is important to consider whether your facilitators are (and appear to be) sufficiently neutral to ask for views on inherently difficult decisions. This does not necessarily mean that the facilitators need to be external to your organisation, just that their role on this task is clearly defined and believable.

We also need to remember that these are particularly challenging and emotive discussions for people and therefore the facilitators you use need to be highly experienced and skilled in dealing with the types of concerns people will raise. This applies as much to online forums as events or meetings.

A simple example of applying good practice in facilitation is having a session/notice board before going into the detailed prioritisation discussion where people can get their complaints and concerns off their chest. For example, in workshops for Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Avon and Somerset Police we did this to set the context for discussion. It also helps to allay fears that you are trying to exclude the opinions participants are most keen to voice.

7. Choose your methods and techniques carefully

The methods you choose will depend on a wide range of factors, including the nature of your service and users, the timescales involved, your information needs and, of course, the costs involved. The pressure to be cost-effective in this process is clearly going to be even greater than usual – people may ask why you are spending money on finding out how to cut spending. Therefore low-cost options such as online and using existing forums should be used as much as possible, while also ensuring "seldom heard" groups have a say. Your engagement plan should cover all your key groups, using different methods, as necessary.

Within any method you also have decisions to make about which questioning techniques you use, from pretty straightforward questions on priorities to more sophisticated trade-off techniques. The latter "stated preference" approaches, which are more widely used in the private sector, can provide deeper insight into real preferences, if they are properly designed and analysed.

But these structured questioning approaches should be combined with more qualitative techniques, including discussion groups, to help unpick the reasons behind decisions.

In a deliberative study on the future of welfare for DWP, we used a qualitative trade-off exercise asking participants to deliberate, then share out a 'proxy pot of benefits' among different groups so that they could see the results of their decisions. Read more...

8. Understand why people make the decisions that they do

Understanding why people draw the conclusions that they do is vital, as their preferences might be based on misconceptions about, for example, inefficiencies and waste in the service.

Information on why people make decisions is also vital because it will last beyond the current round of consultation. Knowing what criteria people use will help inform any future judgements you may need to make.

For the Pan-Birmingham Cancer Network we ran a deliberative workshop which explored how members of the public trade off one cancer service or treatment against another, in order to highlight their underlying values on a range of services or treatment types. It also helped us to understand how the public expects difficult decisions around healthcare to be communicated and explained, where services are limited or unavailable.

9. Tell people what you do: "we asked, you said, we did"

People are often sceptical about whether their input will have an impact. This means feeding back that they have been listened to is vital.

But people are usually realistic, and know that not all their preferences can be met. Therefore, as the Consultation Institute point out, it can be useful to distinguish between feeding back "outputs" (an honest assessment of what participants said) and "outcomes" (what you've actually done as a result).

"We asked, You said, We did" is well established as good practice in feeding back on what actually changes, and provides a simple framework for messages. It is useful to have this in mind throughout the process, not just at the end.

Deliberative workshops and discussion groups for Waltham Forest Council with residents and discussion groups found that the growth of fast-food take-aways in the borough was a cause of great concern. Consequently, the local authority banned fast-food outlets within a 400m radius of schools, leisure centres and parks. The Council Leader made sure people knew they had been heard and action was being taken with the local Planning Committee. Read more...

10. This is not the end – keep the dialogue going

What next after the consultation? We often find that when people have been involved in these types of exercises they are more interested and engaged in seeing what happens on the issues and with the services generally. But often this does not last long, as there is no follow-up and people also just get back to their day-to-day lives.

Not all will want to stay engaged, but you should consider the options for keeping the dialogue going with those that do, through review and evaluation exercises and setting up citizen or service user panels.

In our public dialogue for DECC on the Big Energy Shift, 250 members of the public came together to decide on the policy interventions which would best help people prioritise using low carbon technologies. Participants were consulted to assess whether they felt their views had been expressed as they would have wanted in the report, and some were involved in further policy discussions. Read more...

Further Information

Ipsos MORI has years of experience in working with service providers to address these challenges – and offer a diverse range of tools to help engage the public in the tough decisions you will need to make. If you have any thoughts, observations or questions in response to our tips and case studies, please get in touch.

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About Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute

The Social Research Institute works closely with national government, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its 200 researchers focus on public service and policy issues, and each has expertise in a particular part of the public sector. This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, ensures that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.

The Participation Unit

The Ipsos MORI Participation Unit was set up to understand the theory and practice of engagement. We are experts in upstream engagement with the public, and draw together stakeholders, policymakers, and expert communities such as scientists and other practitioners to carry out both closed and open public dialogues.