

1. Purpose of Consultation on the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

The Council has a specific legal responsibility to consult with non domestic rate payers on its budget. It is also considered good practice for local authorities to consult with council tax payers on budget proposals and council tax options.

Since its creation in 2009, Central Bedfordshire has conducted such consultation on an annual basis.

2. The Consultation Process for the MTFP

Following the announcement of the local government settlement by the Government in December, a consultation document was prepared based on the revised draft budget options which included questions on:

- Opinions on a proposed 3% levy for adult social care
- Opinions on a potential further 1.75% increase in Council Tax
- Opinions on a range of savings proposals.

This document was made available both as an online survey and a paper questionnaire.

The consultation was launched on 4th January 2017 and concluded on 30th January in order to maximise the opportunity for the public to respond.

The consultation was supported by a comprehensive communications campaign which alerted the public to the opportunity to express their views through various promotional activities.

News releases were issued to local media groups across the area, resulting in good uptake of key messages to promote the consultation with page leads in many print titles (Leighton Buzzard Observer, Biggleswade Chronicle, Times Citizen) and features on local news websites (Dunstable Today and Bedfordshire Today).

Councillors, Members of Parliament and partner organisations were invited to help promote the exercise with promotional posters and paper copies of the questionnaires being distributed to our Customer Service outlets and Libraries.

In addition to inviting feedback via the survey, a number of stakeholder groups were also provided with briefings, such as the Equality Forum, the Older Persons Network, Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses.

A sustained on line campaign for the public was managed with promotion via social media, email bulletins and the website. Businesses were also targeted, with the promotion of the survey on dedicated websites and social media channels, such as Let's

The Budget 2017 webpages had more than 11,500 visits across the campaign demonstrating the level of reach and interest in the consultation.

3. Feedback on the MTFP Proposals

a. The Response Rate

In total some 1066 Central Bedfordshire residents participated in the consultation by completing the survey.

b. Council Tax

Whilst significant minorities of respondents disagreed with the proposals to introduce a 3% levy for adult social care an overall a majority 55% of respondents supported these measures.

Responses on the proposal to introduce a 1.75% increase in council tax in addition to the levy were also supported by 53% of respondents agreeing and 45% of respondents disagreeing.

Q1. Central Government has introduced an Adult Social Care levy (known as a precept) which requires local people to contribute towards the cost of services for older and vulnerable residents. Central Bedfordshire Council proposes to raise council tax by up to 3% for the social care precept which would increase the amount that an average household would pay by 78 pence per week. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

55% of respondents to the consultation indicated that they agreed with the proposal for a 3% levy for adult social care.

43% of respondents indicated that they disagreed.

1% of respondents indicated that they didn't know.

Q2. In light of reducing grant funding to local councils, Central Bedfordshire Council proposes to increase council tax by 1.75% to protect the services it provides in addition to adult social care. This would increase the amount that an average household would pay by a further 46 pence per week. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

53% of respondents agreed with the proposal for a 1.75% rise in Council Tax, in addition to the 3% level for Adult Social Care.

45% of respondents indicated that they disagreed.

2% of respondents indicated that they didn't know.

c. Savings Proposals

The proposals were regarded positively by a majority of respondents:

89% of respondents supported efficiency measures that will save money without affecting customer experience. (9% disagreed).

86% of respondents supported the proposal to save money by getting involved sooner in situations where children, families or adults become vulnerable, so that more intense, expensive and long-term support is not required. (10% disagreed).

70% of respondents supported the proposal to reduce the financial demands it faces in some areas by giving customers the option to make their own contribution to "top up" the service they receive. (26% disagreed).

68% of respondents supported the proposal to generate income by providing some of its services on a commercial basis to other organisations and reviewing its charges for some other services. (27% disagreed).

64% of respondents supported the proposal to withdraw or reduce what it offers where there isn't high demand for services. (33% disagreed).

d. Open Field Commentary

In response to the invitation to make a further comment about the budget proposals, some 548 respondents chose to do so.

Frequent reference was made to a need for **Central Government to do more to meet the additional funding gap for Social Care through income tax**, rather than applying Social Levy increases through local Council Taxation.

"I support the increase in council tax to fund adult social care only because this service needs the finance. This ought to be funded by central government to ensure there is no postcode lottery"

Another frequently raised point was about **the difficulty people faced in meeting the increase charges**. There were repeat references to the challenges those on fixed incomes would face, particularly pensioners (who were overrepresented in the sample).

"As a pensioner every penny counts and with the low inflation rates pensions are either static or with very small increases. An increase of this extent will obviously have an impact on my disposable income, therefore reducing my savings making it more likely that I will not be able to fund my own care should the need arise. Swings and roundabouts!".

Many residents wanted the Council to **ensure that they continued to get best value for money**, particularly there was a concern from residents living in villages and rural areas were less well serviced by the existing infrastructure e.g. buses

“As far as we are concerned, living in a rural area in Central Bedfordshire means we are forgotten! Minimal services provided while the towns benefit from the villages' poor services”.

In terms of suggestions for savings, there were a number of recurring themes.

A significant number of respondents commented on **remuneration of both Members and Officers and on levels of management**.

“Don't reduce community services to save a few pennies. Look at the salaries of the higher council officers many are earning more than our MPs who run the country not just part of a small county”.

Many residents supported the proposed efficiency measures; however some felt that some **efficiencies may not be achievable without impacting customer experience**.

“Efficiency measures have so far had a negative effect in customer experience by moving to fortnightly grey bin collection”.

A repeat theme was residents expressing **concern over proposals to cut services**, particularly where it was felt that this may cause an inequality for some groups.

“I strongly disagree with cuts to services and introduction/increase of fees for services that are already provided. These sorts of measures disproportionately affect those on lower incomes”.

Other comments included the need to **continue to invest and upgrade the local infrastructure** and many residents put forward ideas to **encourage environmentally sustainable policies** through incentivising community support

“Investment in business services especially in business start up facilities creates new businesses in the area and increase employment and increase income from business rates reducing the need for such harsh increases in council tax. The council needs to start planning for the future rather than surviving today”.

“Introduce both incentives (and penalties?) for service users to encourage increased and correct recycling, reducing food waste and spearheading neighbourhood involvement. Example maybe: 1) The introduction of an incentive which adds 'credits' or 'cashback' to their council tax (for the following year) by way of litter picking and uploading before/after images to an

app. 2) Possibly a joint partnership evolved by way of Section 106 agreements with developers/large businesses that encourage local/affected neighbourhoods to 'combine efforts' for a common cause - voluntary transport schemes for school runs, older persons shopping buses"

There were balanced views from residents on the **proposed introduction of top-up contributions for services**; some residents supported the idea but wanted to ensure it was fair to everyone.

"I support the principle of 'top up' of service as long as the core service does cover the needs of clients".

"I also agree with residents not eligible for financial assistance being able to pay to top up services in order to keep them affordable for those that most needs them".

e. Demographic profile of respondents

The Budget consultation is open to everyone to take part; this means that the sample of respondents will not necessarily be representative of the wider community.

The data collected on demography indicates that

Older people aged between 60-74 years were the largest group to respond to the budget consultation. Consequently the views of this group are also overrepresented with 42% of respondents being between 60 to 74 years old compared to the Central Bedfordshire average of 15%

Conversely the views of younger people are underrepresented. Whilst we know that approximately 11% of our population are young working age people, only 3% of respondents to the survey were from the 20-29 years age group.

The number of respondents aged 30-44 were slightly overrepresented with 23% responding, the Central Bedfordshire average for this age group is 20%. The number of respondents aged 45-59 were also overrepresented with 26% responding, the Central Bedfordshire average for this age group of 22%.

The analysis by equality groups was broadly in line with overall responses.

People with disabilities were somewhat underrepresented in the consultation with 7% indicating that they had a disability compared to the Central Bedfordshire average 14%.

The ethnicity profile of respondents was broadly in line with the Central Bedfordshire demographic profile of residents.

Information Sources:

Gender: 2011 Census Table KS101EW, Usual resident population

Age: Office for National Statistics, 2015 Mid Year Estimate

Disability: Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census, Table QS303EW, Long-term health problem or disability

Ethnicity: Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census, Table KS201EW, Ethnic group

f. Equality Forum Feedback

Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Public authorities must demonstrate that they are making financial decisions in a fair, transparent and accountable way, considering the needs and the rights of different members of their community. This is achieved through assessing the impact that changes could have on different protected groups.

All the efficiency proposals have been screened to assess their potential relevance to equality. A number of efficiency proposals will be subject to formal consultation and Equality Impact Assessment in the coming months. As part of the consultation process, the proposals have been considered by the Central Bedfordshire Equality Forum which acts as an advisory and consultative body to the Council. Feedback is provided below.

Social Care Health and Housing

In relation to delivering improved care and reablement services, a member of the Forum highlighted the importance of speech and language services in assessing an individual's ability to swallow and the resulting impact on their capacity to eat and drink.

Whilst Forum members understood the need to review and modernise service provision relating to Learning Disabilities, they expressed concern relating to the particular vulnerabilities and isolation experienced by this section of the community. Forum members requested that officers leading on the Day Opportunities Review and the Learning Disability Market Position Statement be invited to attend future meetings of the Forum.

Forum members indicated that they would like to be involved in the proposals relating to clarification of the social care offer for new customers and the review of the offer to Carer's.

As part of the discussion relating to Intensive Property Management, Forum members endorsed the important role of housing officers in providing support to tenants and residents in terms of helping them fully understand their housing options and explaining relevant processes.

Forum members also expressed concern that a possible reduction in the number of face to face, customer contact centres could potentially

disadvantage vulnerable sections of the community and requested that the lead officer be invited to attend a future meeting of the Forum to discuss this further.

Children Services

Forum members were pleased to see recognition, as a budget pressure, of the need to provide support to Child and Adult Mental Health services.

Concern was expressed as to how it would be possible to reduce numbers of looked after children, at a time when numbers are rising nationally and when the Council's budget proposals have also identified the need to review early intervention services including Children's Centres and youth support.

Forum members requested that a member of the Children Services Management Team attend a future meeting of the Forum as part of the consultation relating to the Children's Services Transformation Plan.

Public Health

Forum members requested that a member of the Public Health Management Team be invited to attend a future meeting so that the Forum could develop a deeper understanding of the Public Health proposals.

4. Consultation on the Housing Revenue Account

The draft HRA budget report was presented to the Social Care, Health & Housing and Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committees during January 2017. Comments from these meetings are reported in appendix J to the General Fund budget reports. Consultation with the Tenant Investment Panel (TIP) over the Investment Plan occurred during the autumn of 2016, with full tenant approval of all project lines.

Tenant involvement in the budget process has been greater than in previous years. Tenants were keen to be informed of the legislative changes and the impact on the Investment Plan, and then to have an influence over the revisions required. The Budget and Investment Plan were approved by a joint meeting of the Way Forward Panel, Sheltered Tenants Action Group (STAG) and TIP on 10 January 2017. Tenants emphasised the importance of engagement with tenants and residents over plans for retail units at Houghton Regis Central, and in relation to the redevelopment of garage sites. The Housing Service will ensure that in both cases regular briefings and consultation will take place with tenant groups, and the communities concerned.