

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 2% levy for adult social care
- Opinions on a potential 1.75% increase in Council Tax
- Opinions on a potential 1.95% 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.

Additionally customers and stakeholders were invited to comment more generally on the budget proposals either on line or via face to face engagement.

The consultation was launched on 4th January 2016 and concluded on 8th February 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 our key messages about the consultation with page leads in the Biggleswade Chronicle, Leighton Buzzard Observer, Dunstable Gazette and Bedfordshire on Sunday.

Online coverage on the Central Bedfordshire Budget was also covered in Luton Today, Leighton Buzzard Today and Luton on Sunday.

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 widely to Town and Parish Councils, our

Customer Service outlets and Libraries. Children's Centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux and GP surgeries were also targeted with the promotional materials.

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 Reference Group, Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses.

A sustained on line campaign was also managed with promotion via social media, email bulletins and the website.

Businesses were specifically targeted via dedicated websites and social media channels, such as Let's Talk Business.

In total 1,518 people visited the main website and a further 576 accessed the mobile website looking for information on Budget 2016, demonstrating the level of interest and reach of the campaign.

3. Feedback on the MTFP Proposals

a. The Survey:

In total some 1,180 Central Bedfordshire residents participated in the consultation by completing the survey

Whilst significant minorities of respondents disagreed with the proposals to introduce a 2% levy for adult social care an overall a majority of respondents supported these measures.

Responses on the proposal to introduce a 1.75% increase in council tax in addition to the levy was finely balanced with 48% of respondents agreeing and 49% of respondents disagreeing.

Proposals for the introduction of a 1.99% increase in council tax was less well recieved with 52% of respondents disagreeing with the proposal and 44% agreeing.

b. Council Tax

Q1. The Council is considering a 2% levy to Council Tax, exclusively to avoid cuts to adult social care services, in line with the government's expectation. This would increase the amount an average household would pay by 50 pence each week. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THIS PROPOSAL?

59% of respondents to the consultation indicated that they agreed with the proposal for a 2% levy for adult social care.

40% of respondents indicated that they disagreed.

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

Q2. In addition to the 2% levy for adult social care services, in order to protect other services from cuts resulting from the loss of government grant, the

Council is considering a 1.75% increase to Council Tax. This would increase the amount an average household would pay by 44 pence each week. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THIS PROPOSAL?

48% of respondents indicated that in addition to the 2% levy for adult social care, they supported a 1.75% rise in Council Tax.

49% of respondents indicated that they disagreed.

3% of respondents indicated that they didn't know.

Q3. Alternatively, the Council is considering a 1.99% increase to Council Tax to protect services from cuts resulting from the loss of government grant. This would increase the amount an average household would pay by 50 pence each week. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THIS PROPOSAL?

44% of respondents indicated that they support a 1.99% rise in Council Tax.

52% of respondents indicated that they disagreed.

4% of respondents indicated that they didn't know.

c. Savings Proposals

The proposals were regarded positively by a majority of respondents:

90% of respondents supported the renegotiation of contracts to get better deals and save money. (7% disagreed).

80% of respondents supported reviewing contracts to see if there are more efficient and cost effective ways of running them. (17% disagreed).

70% of respondents agreed with proposals to generate additional income by offering some services on a commercial basis (27% disagreed).

86% of respondents agreed with proposals to invest in independent living (12% disagreed).

80% of respondents supported the reduction of staffing costs by reviewing structures of services. (15% disagreed).

79% of respondents agreed with proposals to target services such as healthchecks and flu jabs to those who are the most in need or those with the greatest demand. (19% disagreeing).

63% of respondents agreed with proposals to reduce opening hours of services such as household waste and recycling centres to ensure they can be available at times when there is the greatest demand (36% disagreed).

87% of respondents agreed with the approach of making better use of technology to improve information and services online (11% disagreed).

66% of respondents agreed with proposals to review grant funding to voluntary organisations. (23% disagreed).

89% of respondents agreed with proposals to work in partnership and share services with other organisations. (8% disagreed).

d. Open Field Commentary

In response to the invitation to make a further comment about the budget proposals, some 577 respondents chose to do so.

Frequent reference was made to a ***need to protect vulnerable people***. Some recorded their support for the adult social care with comments such as;

“Civilised societies with wealth such as ours should fund excellent public services”

Whilst one respondent suggested that the Council should dramatically cut back on social services, the following was more typical on the commentary for care services, “supporting social care by 2% is an issue that I would fully support”

However, another frequently raised point was the ***difficulty people anticipated in meeting the increased charges***. There were repeated references to the challenges those on fixed incomes would face, particularly pensioners (who were overrepresented in the sample).

“Consider those surviving on a pension with little in the way of savings as back-up support.”

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***.

“Prioritise front line roles and reduce expensive leadership roles.”

Others, often from a commercial perspective, urge the Council to be ***more business like in its approach***, with an emphasis on driving out efficiencies.

Specific ideas for efficiencies included reducing print, selling land for development, reducing traffic calming schemes and switching off street lights at midnight.

Proposals for ***differential charging*** were also mooted, so that only those which children, for example, would pay for education.

“Cut out free school buses (parents responsibility) Charge for sports facilities Stop duplicating services e.g. road safety on schools(police)

Reduce unnecessary road works e.g. humps/chicanes. They add nothing to safety”

Finally, respondents chose to comment on a wide range of other issues including membership of the EU, roads and pavements and the willingness of the Council to listen and respond to consultation exercises such as this.

A further recurrent theme was that whilst use of technology was supported, there was some concern to ***maintain alternative access channels*** for those who may not have the use of a computer.

e. Other Feedback

Additionally, Members of the Equalities Forum expressed concerns about the budget proposals, particularly those relating to efficiencies in Adult Social Care, Children’s Services and the voluntary sector, which they felt needed more detailed explanations.

Members of the Forum were sceptical about the extent to which such substantial savings could be made in relation to proposals such as re-ablement and right- sizing without changing levels of eligibility or significantly reducing packages of care. They requested that further information be provided to their next meeting in March.

The Forum also expressed concern about any changes to CCTV camera provision, the role of discretionary rates in supporting charities and suggested that the proposal relating to concessionary fares should be referred to the Older People’s Reference Group because this would be of particular concern.

f. Demographic profile of respondents

This second phase of work is essentially an open consultation exercise through which the whole population are given the opportunity to give their feedback. This means that the 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 and views of this group are also overrepresented with 36% of respondents being between 60 to 74 years old compared to the Central Bedfordshire average of 16%

Conversely the views of younger people are underrepresented. For example only one person age 19 years or under responded to the consultation and 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 overrepresented with 23% responding, the Central Bedfordshire average for this age group is 6%. The number of respondents aged 45-59 were also overrepresented with 31% responding, the Central Bedfordshire average for this age group of 22%.

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, 2014 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

4. Consultation on the Housing Revenue Account

Effective engagement with tenants and their representatives is fundamental to the Housing service operation and a joint meeting of tenant groups was held on 14th January to provide an opportunity for tenants to discuss all the recommendations in the HRA report, including proposals for debt repayment, the revenue budget, the Investment Plan and capital programmes, and the proposed rent decrease.

Tenants were given the opportunity to share their views, either at the meeting or in writing, with a closing date for written responses of 22 January 2016.

The recommendations were unanimously supported. In particular, the continuing commitment to building new Council properties to address housing need was commended, especially given the context of the challenges posed by the recent legislative changes. There was also support for balancing investment in new build with debt repayment, to reduce interest payments in the medium term and enable the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) to be debt free in the longer term.

Some feedback was received that requested an increased focus on programmes that delivered renewable energy solutions, such as solar power, and where the Council could conceivably apply for Government funding (such as the “green deal”). This feedback will be taken into consideration and reviewed by the Asset Management Team and Tenant Investment Panel (TIP), as they assess Energy Conservation and Investment Panel programmes going forward.

The proposal for an Independent Living scheme at Houghton Regis was endorsed and respondents to the consultation indicated that further Independent Living schemes should be brought forward for consideration, balanced with additional spend on Estates Improvements. Options for Independent Living solutions will continue to be reviewed, within the constraints of resources available in the Landlord Service Business Plan. The Asset Management service will work with tenants to identify their priorities for Estate Improvements.

The proposal for the rent decrease was supported, and was agreed to represent value for money in the context of the revenue and capital investment that is proposed over the next 6 years. It was also noted that this will offset the increase in Council Tax that is currently proposed.