
Meeting: Executive
Date: 15 November 2011
Subject: Budget and Council Tax Consultation Policy
Report of: Cllr Maurice Jones, Executive Member for Corporate Resources
Summary: The report defines the process for consulting on the draft budget and includes feedback from the market research phase of public engagement in the budget setting process for 2012/13.

Advising Officer: Deb Clarke, Assistant Chief Executive, People and Organisation
Contact Officer: Georgina Stanton, Chief Communications Officer
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Executive
Key Decision No
**Reason for urgency/
exemption from call-in
(if appropriate)** N/A

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The formulation of the 2012/13 budget is fundamental for the Council to progress the achievement of its vision and priority areas of work.

Financial:

1. The programme of public and stakeholder engagement will support the Council in developing a budget that reflects feedback from these key audiences.

Legal:

2. There is a legal requirement on the Council to consult with council tax payers and non domestic rate payers on its revenue budget and council tax. As well as being a statutory part of the budget setting process, effective community engagement during the budget setting process can support decision making.

Risk Management:

3. Not Applicable.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

4. Members of staff who reside in Central Bedfordshire have been actively encouraged to take part in the survey exercise and will continue to be engaged in consultation and communications.

Equalities/Human Rights:

5. Should the Council propose options to change services it will be required to undertake full Equality Impact Assessments on such options.

Community Safety:

6. Not Applicable.

Sustainability:

7. Not Applicable.

Procurement:

8. In delivering the first phase of its communication and engagement plan, the Council procured the services of a market research company, The Research Unit, following a competitive tendering exercise. This provided independence and the specialist skills required.

Overview and Scrutiny:

9. All elements of the Council's communication and engagement activity on the 2012/13 budget will be considered by Overview and Scrutiny during December when they also consider the draft budget options.

RECOMMENDATIONS:**The Executive is asked to:**

1. **note the feedback from the public research on issues relating to the 2012/13 budget; and**
2. **agree the proposed approach to consultation and communication with residents and stakeholders.**

Reason for Recommendations: To meet statutory responsibilities for consultation and to ensure that the Council is able to develop its draft budget informed by public views about priority issues.

Executive Summary

10. In August, the Executive agreed to pursue a three-phased approach to engaging the public in setting the budget and medium term objectives for the council.
11. The first phase was to conduct market research so that residents and stakeholders were able to provide feedback to the Council on their views of priority issues for their areas, on council spending, areas for potential savings and council tax levels.

12. The second phase will be to ensure that the Council's draft budget is made available to the community and stakeholders for consultation in advance of decision making.
13. The third phase will be to feedback to the community the decisions of the Council on the 2012/13 budget through proactive communication.
14. This report provides a summary of the feedback from the market research phase of the plan and outlines next steps.

The Budget Timetable

15. The Budget Strategy and Medium Term Financial Plan for 2012/13 to 2015/16 was approved by the Executive on 23 August 2010. This report established key milestones for the budget setting process including a further report on the proposed Consultation Policy to the Executive at its meeting on 15 November 2011.

The key milestones are identified in the table below:

When	What
23 August	Executive agrees the process for consulting on the budget and Council Tax proposals.
15 November	Executive review market research feedback and plan for consultation activities.
6 December	Executive agrees draft budget and Council Tax .
December to January 2012	Draft budget available for consultation.
14 February	Executive recommend final budget to Council after consideration of consultation feedback.
March/April	Feedback phase with communication of final budget to all consultees.

Communication and Engagement Plan

16. A plan for engagement was approved at the August Executive meeting. The campaign includes three distinct phases of public, stakeholder and partner communication and consultation:
- Market Research.
 - Consultation with the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees, residents and other interested parties.
 - Feedback to residents.

These three phases are explained in more detail below:

Phase 1 – Market Research

17. This first phase of activity sought feedback from the community on service and budget priorities. This feedback has been gathered from three research exercises. These included:
- A sample survey distributed to a random sample of 4,000 households and designed to ensure that the Council has a statistically reliable and representative set of results.
 - A universal survey which has been distributed to all households in Central Bedfordshire and promoted directly to specific groups.
 - Community workshops held in Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard, Sandy and Flitwick, during which residents were able to discuss issues relating to the Council's budget choices.
18. A summary of the results of the market Research are shown in Appendix A

Phase 2 – Consultation on the draft budget proposals and Council tax

19. Following Executive consideration of the draft budget and capital programme in December 2011, the proposals will be extensively promoted to residents, local businesses and stakeholders.
20. The draft budget proposals will be communicated to the public through a range of communication channels including:
- News Central (January edition)
 - Local media
 - Social media
 - Council's website
 - Ward Members of the Council
 - Face to face engagement through Let's Talk Together community meetings and other community engagement activities
 - Information will also be available at Libraries and council offices throughout Central Bedfordshire.

21. Key partners and stakeholders will receive direct communication to inform them of the draft budget and to explain how they can have their say on the proposals. Direct communication will be sent to:

- All MPs representing Central Bedfordshire
- All Town and Parish Councils
- Central Bedfordshire Together Board members
- Children's Trust Board Members
- South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership members
- Chamber of Commerce
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Central Bedfordshire top one hundred businesses
- All local businesses (via monthly Business 2 Business magazine)
- Voluntary organisations
- Equality Forum members
- Schools (via weekly newsletter).

22. We will also discuss the draft budget proposals at the following meetings:

- Business breakfast meetings – date to be confirmed
- Youth Parliament meetings – various dates in December and January
- Older People's Reference Group – 7th December 2010
- Equality Forum – 15th December 2010
- Central Bedfordshire Together meeting – 13th December 2011
- Strategic partners and voluntary organisations workshop – January 2012
- Town and Parish Conference - 25th January 2012.

23. All consultees will be encouraged to submit their feedback via our community discussion website www.letstalkcentral.com or in writing to the Communications Team via a freepost address. This feedback will be fed into the Executive report in February 2012.

Phase 3 – Feedback

24. A variety of communication channels will be used to update residents on the Council's decision making on the 2012/13 budget. These will include the local media, News Central, social media, regular updates on the council's website and direct mail to stakeholders and Council Tax payers.

Background Papers: (open to public inspection)

1. The Research Unit's report from the sample survey and community workshops
2. The Research Unit's report from Community Workshops
3. Full results from the universal survey