

### **Budget and Council Tax Consultation Results**

This appendix provides details of the methodology and the results from the consultation on the Council's draft budget for 2012/13.

A plan for engagement was approved at the August Executive meeting. The campaign included 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**

This first phase of activity sought feedback from the community on service and budget priorities. The feedback was 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.

Over 2,000 people took part in this research. The results were fed back to Executive in November 2011, this feedback was used to inform the draft budget 2012/13.

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

Following Executive consideration of the draft budget and capital programme in December 2011, the proposals have been extensively promoted to residents, local businesses and stakeholders. The communication drew particular attention to the proposals which will impact on service users.

The draft budget proposals were communicated through a range of channels including:

- News Central - delivered to every household in Central Bedfordshire
- Local media
- Social media

- Council's website
- Face to face engagement in town centre and market walkabouts (Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Ampthill, Biggleswade and Leighton Buzzard)
- Local business magazine
- School newsletter
- Information was also made available at all Libraries and council offices throughout Central Bedfordshire.

Key groups, partners and stakeholders received more direct communication to inform them of the draft budget and to explain how they could have their say on the proposals.

Direct communications were 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
- Voluntary organisations
- Equality Forum members
- Youth Parliament members

The draft budget proposals have also been discussed at the following meetings:

- Older People's Reference Group – 7th December
- Central Bedfordshire Together meeting – 13th December
- Equality Forum – 15th December
- Social Care providers forum – 5<sup>th</sup> January
- Carers forum – 10<sup>th</sup> January
- Business breakfast meeting -13<sup>th</sup> January
- Town and Parish Conference - 25th January
- Strategic partners and voluntary organisations workshop – 26<sup>th</sup> January

Consultees have been able to comment on the proposals in a number of ways: submitting their views via [www.letstalkcentral.com](http://www.letstalkcentral.com); by email or in writing.

### **Summary of the consultation feedback**

The draft budget proposals were based on comprehensive public and stakeholder feedback. During the consultation the Council has received relatively little critical feedback about the proposals. From discussion with customers there seems to be general support for key elements of the draft budget such as the proposals to:

- Freeze council tax for 2012/13
- Protect frontline services as much as possible
- Make savings from the back office/ running costs of the council such as reducing the number of staff.
- Explore new ways of delivering services – as long as they deliver value for money
- Protect services to support vulnerable people (young and old)
- Invest more in repairing our roads
- Use more cost effective street lighting technology

Some queries have been raised to clarify specific proposals and customers have queried how the Council intends to harmonise council tax. Members of the public also provided many comments and suggestions about road repairs, parking and the need for more streets cleaning.

A conference with Town and Parish Councils was held in January in order to invite feedback to the draft budget. Representatives from these authorities regarded the proposals to be “broadly sensible” and were particularly positive about the proposals to increase investment in roads.

There has been some concern expressed about the proposals for changing the support for informal carers and bringing respite care charges in line with other authorities. For these two proposals and the modernisation of day services, service areas will conduct bespoke consultation with service users and other interested parties as part of the development of the new policies. These will be brought back to the Executive for consideration later in the year.

### **Service specific consultations**

**Blue badge charges:** As part of the draft budget consultation the Council proposed to increase the charge for disabled car parking badges (Blue Badges) to £10 every three years. This change is to enable the Council to cover the cost of producing the new Blue Badges and is being considered by all Councils in response to the national changes to the Blue Badge scheme.

4,661 Blue Badge holders have responded to this consultation and 77% (3,573 responses) agreed that the proposed charge of £10 every three years is reasonable. The more detailed results of this consultation will be used to help inform the council’s revised policy for Blue Badges.

**Services to Schools:** In the autumn of 2011, Head Teachers were informed that the Council was considering a change to some of the non statutory services provided to schools on a traded basis, including HR, payroll and bursary services. Further detail on this and consultation on the proposed changes was contained in a booklet issued to all schools in January 2012 which set out all traded services. At the same time, the Leader of the Council made a ‘minded to’ decision to withdraw these services from the autumn term of 2012, with a proviso that no school would be left without a service (with those schools who still wanted to purchase these services doing so on a full cost recovery basis) if they could not find an alternative provider.

In January 2012 the Customer and Shared Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee unanimously supported a report which set out the reasons for this proposed service change.

27 (out of a total of 136) schools have responded to this proposed change. Of these responses, 23 were from Lower Schools, and two of those were from Bedford Borough Schools. There were also three responses from Trades Unions. The majority of respondents said they understood the reasons for the proposals but were not in favour of them. Many respondents stated that it would be necessary to receive support to identify alternative providers.

So, given that the majority (about 80%) of schools did not respond to the consultation – and there is substantial evidence that most schools are successfully making arrangements for alternative provision – it is proposed to implement the proposal as made, with efforts to be made to support schools to find alternative provision, particularly lower schools.

The budget that is to be agreed by council set out in this report therefore includes an assumption that non statutory HR, Payroll and Bursary Services will cease generally from September 1<sup>st</sup> 2012. Where schools have been unable to make alternative provision however a service will still be provided on a full cost recovery basis.

### **Phase 3 – Feedback**

Following Executive and Full Council approval of the final budget a variety of communication channels will be used to update residents on the Council's decision making. 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.