
Meeting: Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 16th December 2014
Subject: 2015 Budget Consultation and Resident Survey
Report of: Cllr Maurice Jones, Executive Member for Corporate Resources
Summary: The report outlines the methodology used to seek public feedback on financial issues and wider perceptions of the Council and the area. Headline results are also included in the report, in advance of a full presentation at Committee.

Advising Officer: Deb Broadbent Clarke, Director of Improvement and Corporate Services
Contact Officer: Georgina Stanton, Chief Communications Officer
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

1. Public and stakeholder consultation is both a statutory requirement and a local priority for the Council. In terms of shaping policy and developing services the views of our customers, the residents of Central Bedfordshire, are vitally important.

Whilst the feedback on financial issues will be particularly relevant in the context of delivering “value for money – freezing council tax”, public views on a range of community and council issues will also inform assessment of the Council’s performance in relation to all of its priorities:

- Enhancing Central Bedfordshire – creating jobs, managing growth, protecting our countryside and enabling businesses to grow.
- Improved educational attainment.
- Promote health and wellbeing and protecting the vulnerable.
- Better infrastructure – improved roads, broadband reach and transport.
- Great universal services – bins, leisure and libraries.
- Value for money – freezing council tax.

Financial:

2. The Communications and Insight Team hold responsibility for supporting public consultation and market research exercises on behalf of the Council and the resources required to gain feedback in relation to the Budget and the wider resident survey are met from the existing budgets of this team.

Legal:

3. 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 options. Whilst the formal consultation on the budget will take place in January 2015, the market research work conducted in September 2014 provides public feedback on broad financial principles.

Risk Management:

4. Not Applicable

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

5. Not Applicable.

Equalities/Human Rights:

6. The combined research methods of a telephone survey to a representative sample of residents together with a more general survey of the community enable the Council to consider feedback in the knowledge that the opinions of people from all sections of our community including different ethnic groups, disabled people and those from various age ranges are included.

Public Health

7. Whilst there are no specific implications for public health within the report, local health services are included on a list of community issues which respondents were invited to rate in terms of the important and their need of improvement.

Community Safety:

8. Whilst there are no specific implications for Community Safety within the report, levels of crime and anti social behaviour are included on a list of community issues which respondents were invited to rate in terms of the important and their need of improvement.

Sustainability:

9. Whilst there are no specific implications for sustainability within the report, the provision of affordable housing was included on a list of community issues which respondents were invited to rate in terms of the important and their need of improvement.

Procurement:

10. Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

The Committee is asked to:-

- 1. Consider the findings of the Budget 2015 survey and the residents survey feedback in the context of the Executive's development of a proposed budget for 2015/16.**

Context

11. In order to comply with the legal requirement on the Council to consult with council tax payers and non domestic rate payers on its revenue budget and council tax options, a plan for communications and engagement has been developed. The plan includes three phases of activity; market research, consultation and feedback. The market research element of this plan is now complete. In addition to the research on budget related issues, customers have also been surveyed on their perceptions of the area, the council and its services.
12. This report explains the methodology for the research and gives headline findings. A fuller presentation of the results and analysis will be presented to the December meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Market Research Methodology

13. This exercise sought feedback from the community on local priorities and attitudes towards council tax and efficiency.

By conducting both exercises, it is possible to report reactions from the public in general and a sample which reflects the broader community in terms of age, gender and other demographic characteristics.

14. The feedback was gathered through two discrete exercises.

Firstly, a survey was distributed to all households via the autumn edition of News Central. Copies of this survey were also distributed to key service outlets such as Libraries, Leisure Centres and Customer Service Centres. Members took an active role in promoting the survey through their surgeries and the exercise was highlighted in the local media and via our own website.

During the same time period a representative group of residents were invited to respond to the same questions via a telephone survey. Additionally, they were invited to answer a range of other questions relating to the Council, its services and the local area.

15. By conducting both exercises, it is possible to report reactions from the public in general and a sample which reflects the broader community in terms of age, gender and other demographic characteristics.

Levels of Engagement

16. In total some 2,500 Central Bedfordshire residents participated in the market research.

1,286 responses were received through the Budget 2015 survey that was distributed to the community in general.

A further 1,211 residents took part through a telephone survey conducted by an independent research company.

Results Relating to Budgetary Issues

17. Whilst there was some variation in the results from the two exercises, there was broad consensus on attitudes to council tax, efficiency measures and community priorities.

18. **On Council Tax**, 68% of respondents to the telephone survey indicated that they would favour a council tax freeze, (compared to 60% of those who responded to the general survey).

22% of respondents to the telephone survey indicated that they would support an increase in council tax (compared to 27% of those who responded to the general survey) and 10% favoured a reduction in council tax (compared to 13% of respondents to the general survey).

19. With regard to **efficiency measures** the most support was given to the option of getting better value from our contracts (87% of phone survey respondents supported this and 80% of respondents to the general survey).

Other well supported options were sharing services across the public sector (80% support from the phone survey and 69% from the general survey) and generating income from our assets (72% from the phone survey respondents and 58% of respondents to the general survey).

Less supported efficiency options were changing eligibility criteria (supported by 35% of phone respondents and 26% of respondents to the general survey).and introducing or increasing charges (favoured by 32% of phone survey respondents and just 17% of those who responded to the general survey).

Finally, residents were invited to indicate those issues which they felt were most important in making an area a good place to live.

The most selected issues were:

- Clean streets
- Levels of crime and anti social behaviour
- Parks and open spaces
- Shopping
- Education
- Road and pavement repairs
- Sport and leisure facilities.

The least selected issues were:

- Decent/affordable housing
- Job prospects
- Libraries
- Community spirit
- Traffic congestion

And the issues that were most frequently cited as being in need of improvement were:

- Road and pavement repairs
- Levels of crime and anti social behaviour
- Shopping
- Public transport
- Sport and leisure facilities
- Clean streets.

Next Steps

20. The first of the three phases of activity in our Budget Communications Plan is now complete.

The second phase of this plan will be to consult on the draft budget. Once this has been prepared and published, the draft budget report will be extensively promoted to the community including local business, the media, the equalities forum and other stakeholder groups in order to elicit further feedback on the proposals within it. Feedback from this phase of activity will feed into the Executive and Full Council consideration of the budget in February 2015.

The final phase of activity will be to feedback to the community and stakeholders, the decisions of the Council through a range of communication channels and activities including the conventional leaflet together with social media, our website and face to face opportunities.

Results relating to perceptions of the Council, its services and the area:

Since Central Bedfordshire Council was created, it has committed to conduct regular market research in order to measure and monitor how its customers are experiencing the Council. This research informs policies and strategies, such as those relating to customer services and communications.

The telephone survey with a representative sample of customers included a number of core indicator questions as recommended by the Local Government Association.

On overall customer satisfaction, the Council has more than doubled the proportion of customers who express satisfaction. In 2009, 35% of respondents were satisfied, compared to 78% in 2014.

One of the key drivers of overall satisfaction is perception of Value for Money. In 2009, 19% of residents indicated that they felt the Council offered Value for Money. By 2014, this had increased to 62%.

Other factors that influence satisfaction are communications and service experience.

In the 2014 survey, 67% of respondents felt informed about the Council, compared to a national average of 66%.

74% believe that the Council [provides good quality services (an improvement of 35% since 2011) with marked improvements in satisfaction with specific services such as litter and refuse collection (up 15%), pavement maintenance (up 20%) and sports and leisure facilities (up 31%).

Whilst satisfaction with the area as a place to live remains high (at 91%), fewer residents feel they are able to influence decisions in their local area than those who do not.

Results Relating to Perceptions of the Area, the Council and its Services

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