

Budget Consultation

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

The council prepared a consultation document and survey which was launched on 4th January 2018. This reflected a number of budget options which were included in draft Medium Term Financial Plan report that was considered by Executive on 9th January.

Specifically, the following budget options were included in the consultation materials:

- A proposed 3% precept specifically for Adult Social Care
- A 1.5% increase in council tax (in addition to the Adult Social Care precept)
- A 3% increase in council tax (in addition to the Adult Social Care precept and as an alternative to the 1.5%)
- Opinions on a range of savings proposals.

Consultation materials were made available both as an online survey and a paper questionnaire.

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 and Dunstable Gazette. The same three titles also ran Cllr James Jamieson's monthly leader's column, highlighting key issues in the budget and encouraging residents to have their say in the consultation.

The three papers also covered the budget on their websites, and there was other online coverage via the Bedford Times & Citizen, Houghton Regis Newsdesk and Public Sector Executive.

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 and various voluntary organisations and partners.

A sustained online 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.

The Budget 2018 web pages had 18,064 visits in January 2018, demonstrating the level of interest and reach of the campaign.

3. Consultation Responses

a. The survey:

In total some 1562 Central Bedfordshire residents participated in the consultation by completing the survey. This was an increase of 496 (47%) respondents when compared to last year.

b. Council Tax

Whilst significant minorities of respondents disagreed with the proposal to introduce a 3% levy for adult social care, overall a majority 56% of respondents supported this measure.

The proposal to introduce a 1.5% increase in council tax in addition to the adult social care levy was supported by 49% of respondents, with 43% of respondents disagreeing.

The proposal to introduce a 3% increase in council tax in addition to the levy was less well supported, with 58% of respondents disagreeing with this option and 37% of respondents agreeing with it.

c. Savings Proposals

All of the proposals were regarded positively by a majority of respondents:

88% of respondents supported efficiency measures that will save money without affecting customer experience (6% disagreed).

86% of respondents supported the proposal to save money by getting involved sooner in situations where either children, families or adults become vulnerable, so that more intense, expensive and long-term support is not required (5% disagreed).

63% of respondents supported the proposal to reduce the financial demands the Council faces in some areas by giving customers the option to make their own contribution to "top up" the service they receive (24% disagreed).

73% of respondents supported the proposal for the Council to generate income by offering some of its services to other organisations on a commercial basis and reviewing its charges for some other services (18% disagreed).

d. Open Field Commentary

In response to the invitation to make a further comment about the budget proposals, some 845 respondents chose to do so.

Frequent reference was made to a need to **find further efficiencies internally at the council**, rather than continue to increase local Council Tax.

"We are already paying a high enough rate of income tax and also tax on everything else we purchase. Increasing the council tax is not the correct way of doing this. Smarter spending and budgeting is what all households need to do and so expecting the council to do the same makes more sense."

"The council should be looking for efficiencies rather than passing on additional costs. Becoming more aligned to profit making, commercial organisations: increasing the quality of staff on competitive incomes, seeing staff churn as a positive rather than 'a for life' expectation, reducing resource wastage."

Another frequently raised point was about **the difficulty people on fixed incomes would face in meeting the increased charges**.

"As pensioners on limited income, we cannot afford the proposed increases as our state pension is not being increased in line with your increases."

"Very difficult as everyone is feeling the pinch, and I cannot happily agree with a huge increase on my bill, as my income has not increased in years. However I also accept the need to provide services. So agree to a smaller increase but an increase of £1.84 per week is too much for my limited budget"

As well as putting pressure on their finances, many residents felt they were **not currently getting value for money from their Council Tax.**

"I have no issue with paying an increased level of council tax for a decent service. However, I don't agree with paying an increased council tax when bins are not collected (despite being put out correctly), verges are overgrown, roads and pavements are pot holed, etc. Fix the basics."

"...Put the money to better uses and people will not mind paying a bit more, we never really see any of the benefits hence why people get annoyed at the price rising all the time."

Many residents want to see the council **invest money back into council services**, such as schools, leisure and public transport.

"In order for the community to agree to increases we need to see material gains that benefit the whole of that community and so I have some comfort in agreeing to increases that support improvement to, Recycling, Policing, Care Home provisioning, Elderly care..."

"I think more serious consideration needs to be given to the following three items that receive very little of the money: leisure/active lifestyles, libraries, and economic regeneration and employment. These are preventative services with social capital. The more active people are, the healthier they tend to be and they interact more with others which can combat loneliness and depression. Libraries are wonderful! They also could be better used as community meeting points. And investing in local jobs and regenerating the places we live can really build community."

A consultation response was received from Community Action Beds in relation to **ongoing efficiencies for grants to infrastructure organisations.**

"There is concern among many that the diminishing funding currently provided to Community Action by Central Bedfordshire Council (£55k pa down to £zero by 31 March 2019) will seriously put at risk the valuable work the organisation undertakes in supporting and coordinating the voluntary and community sector"

A significant number of respondents raised concerns that **charging at Household Waste Recycling Centres would encourage flytipping.**

Any charging for waste disposal will always result in fly tipping. Is it cost effective to charge for this when taking into consideration the cost of the clear up?

"Generating income by charging for disposal of plasterboard, rubble etc. is not a good idea. You're just going to create more problems with fly tipping as the majority of the current fly tipping is from household renovation and unscrupulous builders and homeowners tipping it wherever they feel..."

However some other respondents were more **supportive of the Council Tax plans.**

“I think that explaining the actual cost to householders is an excellent way of explaining the relatively low impact on their pocket. I also hope it will encourage others to understand that unless people are willing to pay a little extra to support their local community, the services offered by the council will gradually decrease to a point where vulnerable people are not suitably protected or supported.”

“We need to maintain services and it is reasonable that the costs are met as a general increase in Council Tax whereby the contributions of the many pay for the needs of the few.”

“The services need to be safeguarded especially for the vulnerable. If the only way to do this, is to increase council tax for those that can afford it, then it needs to be done.”

e. Other Feedback

Equality Forum Budget Consultation 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

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 carers.

Children Services

Forum members indicated that they would like to be involved in the proposals relating to funding for youth support services and leaving care.

f. Demographic profile of respondents

The Budget consultation is open to everyone to take part, this means that the responses are unweighted and will not necessarily be representative of the wider community.

The data collected on demography indicates that

Older people aged 60+ years were the largest group to respond (41%). This group represents 23% of the overall population in Central Bedfordshire and is therefore overrepresented in the budget consultation.

Conversely the views of younger people are underrepresented with only three people under the age of 19 responding to the consultation. In addition only 4% of respondents to the survey were from the 20-29 years age group, whilst we know that approximately 11% of our population are this age.

The number of respondents aged 30-44 were slightly overrepresented with 24% responding. The Central Bedfordshire proportion for this age group is 20%. The number of respondents aged 45-59 were also overrepresented with 32% responding, while the Central Bedfordshire rate for this age group is 22%.

People with disabilities were somewhat underrepresented in the consultation with 9% 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.

4. Consultation on the Housing Revenue Account

The draft HRA Budget report was presented to the Corporate Resources Committee on 25 January 2018. Comments from this meeting are reported in an appendix to the General Fund budget reports. Consultation with the Tenant Investment Panel (TIP) over the Investment Plan occurred during the autumn of 2017, with full tenant approval of all project lines.

The Budget and Investment Plan were approved at a joint meeting of the Way Forward Panel, Supported Involved Residents Forum (SIRF) and TIP on 9 January 2018. Tenants were in favour of the re-profiling of debt repayment to enable the acquisition of properties that can be used in the short to medium term to address the increase in homelessness pressure, and that in the longer term will continue to enhance and grow the HRA's asset base. They also strongly supported the commitment to building and acquiring properties in the northern part of the Council area. They emphasised the importance of engagement with tenants and residents over new build and regeneration projects. The Housing Service will ensure that regular briefings and consultation will continue to take place with tenant groups and the communities concerned.