

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 taxpayers 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 3rd January 2019. This reflected a number of budget options which were included in the draft Medium Term Financial Plan report that was considered by Executive on 8th January.

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

- A proposed 1% increase in council tax
- The possibility of a 2% increase in council tax
- Opinions on a range of savings proposals

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of increase they would support to increase investment in the following specific services: community safety; roads and pavements; recreational and leisure opportunities; services for children and services for vulnerable adults.

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, businesses and stakeholders 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 coverage in the Biggleswade Chronicle, Leighton Buzzard Observer and Dunstable Gazette.

The three papers also covered the budget on their websites and there was other online coverage via Bedford Today and Cranfield & Marston Vale Chronicle.

Councillors, Members of Parliament and partner organisations were invited to help promote the exercise, with promotional posters and paper copies of the questionnaires also 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 and email bulletins like Let's Talk Business.

The budget consultation web pages had 22,859 visits in January 2019, demonstrating the level of interest and reach of the campaign.

3. Consultation responses

a. The survey

In total some 1,725 Central Bedfordshire people participated in the consultation by completing the survey. This was an increase of 163 (10%) respondents when compared to last year. The findings are detailed below, please note that the overall percentages may total more or less than 100% due to rounding.

b. Council tax

55% (957) of respondents supported the proposal to increase council tax by 2% for further investment in community safety. 37% (637) supported a 1% rise and 8% (131) chose not to answer.

50% (857) of respondents supported the proposal to increase council tax by 2% for further investment in roads and pavements. 42% (720) supported a 1% rise and 9% (148) chose not to answer.

25% (436) of respondents supported the proposal to increase council tax by 2% for further investment in recreational and leisure opportunities. 63% (1,094) supported a 1% rise and 11% (195) chose not to answer.

46% (785) of respondents supported the proposal to increase council tax by 2% for further investment in services for children. 44% (757) supported a 1% rise and 11% (183) chose not to answer.

44% (760) of respondents supported the proposal to increase council tax by 2% for further investment in services for vulnerable adults. 45% (780) supported a 1% rise and 11% (185) chose not to answer.

Whilst around 10% of respondents chose not to answer the question about council tax, the majority supported either a 1% or 2% rise across all of the specified services.

The most supported proposals for rises were for investment in community safety and roads and pavements, with over half supporting a 2% increase.

Although only a quarter supported a 2% rise for recreational and leisure opportunities, almost two-thirds (63%) supported a 1% increase for further investment in these services.

c. Savings Proposals

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

72% of respondents supported efficiency measures that will save money without affecting customers' experience (13% disagreed).

84% of respondents supported saving money by getting involved sooner in situations where either children, families or adults become vulnerable, to avoid needing more support long term (6% disagreed).

50% of respondents supported residents choosing to make their own contribution to "top up" the service they receive (35% disagreed). Respondents provided further comments relating to this in the open field commentary.

63% of respondents supported the council generating income by offering some of its services to other organisations on a commercial basis and reviewing its charges for some other services (23% disagreed).

d. Open field commentary

In response to the invitation to make a further comment about the budget proposals, some 688 respondents (40%) chose to do so.

59 comments were **supportive of the proposals** and budget, with another 14 commenting that they are happy to see an increase of more than 2%, 27 comments supported a 2% rise and 8 comments supported a 1% rise (108 comments in total).

91 people commented that they **did not want to see an increase in council tax**, with 8 comments wanting a reduction in council tax.

53 residents felt that they need to see **value for money from their council tax**:

"I would have supported a 2% increase in what I have to pay if the money will be spent wisely and if I saw a benefit of the increase."

"The money must go to those that need it most and not wasted."

"We pay more and more and don't seem to get a better service!"

"Councils must do more to ensure that any money spent is needed and services are value."

"I expect our council to already be applying a common-sense approach to our spending and ensuring good value for money and to be able to purchase products and services at a reduced rate that recognises their spending power."

"The council are faced with some very difficult decisions. Costs will have to go up. It is important that the community feel that they are getting value for money, so communication is key, and listening."

52 respondents stated a need for investment in **roads, pavements and cycle paths**:

"The decline in road repairs must be reversed before the resulting catchup costs become overwhelming."

"Rural roads need far more attention than currently given out. These roads are not lit and have high accident rates. Council needs to improve urgent pothole repairs, stop patching and resurface bad areas."

"Improve the roads and lighting which are especially in villages."

45 respondents also stated worries about those on low incomes **not being able to afford to pay council tax** if the rates go up:

"There are many in this area already struggling to pay council tax so any increase will simply make us poorer."

"The continuing increase in council tax is threatening my ability to stay living in my current house."

"Do not raise council tax. It's too high already how is a one working parent with 3 children meant to save enough when it keeps going up!"

The other topics raised within the comments were:

- more facilities and infrastructure are needed for Leighton Buzzard (with specific requests for improvements to health facilities and provision of a Healthcare Hub) (44 comments)
- the importance of policing and concerns about increases in crime and anti-social behaviour (39 comments)
- the need to focus on the basics (35 comments)
- concern about how top-ups would work in practice (34 comments)
- prioritise the vulnerable (33 comments)
- further cuts and efficiencies will affect services (33 comments)
- reduce outsourcing and agency workers (32 comments)
- issues with potential changes to waste collections (and missed waste collections) (21 comments)
- efficiencies with streetlighting (turn off when possible and ensure they are upgraded when needed) (14 comments)

e. Other Feedback

Equality Forum 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. Some 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.

Forum members indicated that they would like to receive presentations at future meetings relating to:

- Remodelling and restructuring of Children's Services senior management structure and commissioning and performance
- Voluntary and Community Sector Funding Review
- Educational Transport
- New Leisure Management Contract

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 completely representative of the wider community. Postcode analysis shows that responses were received from all over Central Bedfordshire, with the highest levels of responses in parts of Leighton Linlade and Flitwick.

The data collected on demography indicates that

Men (59%) were more likely to respond than females (41%).

Older people aged 60+ years were the largest group to respond (39%). 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 one person under the age of 19 responding to the consultation. In addition, only 2% 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 similar to the Central Bedfordshire proportion with 19% responding. The Central Bedfordshire proportion for this age group is 20%. The number of respondents aged 45-59 were overrepresented with 26% 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 same breakdown was seen in the 2018 budget consultation.

The ethnicity profile of respondents was broadly in line with the Central Bedfordshire demographic profile of residents.

There were no significant variations in response by demographic.

4. Consultation on the Housing Revenue Account

The draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget report was presented to the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 31 January 2019. 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 2018, 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), Tenants Scrutiny Panel and TIP on 10 January 2019. Tenants were broadly in agreement with all the recommendations, going on to suggest that there is a definite need for more affordable housing (in particular for rent) of all dwelling types, and also for rehabilitation places, commenting further that people with mental health do not have sufficient facilities to use. They stressed the importance of creating infrastructure to support new housing, building a proportion of homes that would be “disabled friendly”, and that all the towns in the southern part of the Council area require new social housing.

The lack of development locally in Dunstable as part of the Local Plan was identified. With Housing suggested to consider options for homes that are inefficient to heat or hard to let, whilst also promoting rightsizing and development of Houghton Regis Central. They were also keen to stress the importance of sufficient parking provision at new developments.

In relation to the HRA’s Stock Protection Capital programme, tenants have helped the Housing Service to realign funding towards what is important to them whilst maintaining existing stock to a good standard.

It was proposed that the council could create a lending scheme for younger residents to assist them to purchase a home on the open market as part of the “Help to Buy” scheme, with the council providing some or all of the additional 5% deposit that is needed. They also made recommendations about the rate of some fees and charges.

The queries and proposals raised above will be reviewed and the Housing Service will ensure that regular briefings and engagement will continue to take place with tenant groups over the coming months.