

Budget Consultation 2019/20

Executive Summary

1. This annex sets out the key themes from Oxfordshire County Council's budget consultation exercise carried out to support its Service and Resource Planning process including setting council tax levels.
2. Concerns about and objections to the council's proposed mental health savings proposals (20AD19 and 20AD15) was the dominant theme of this year's budget consultation, generating 598 unique representations.
3. 146 people who responded to the consultation booklet (online or in hard copy) were either supportive, understanding or broadly accepting of the need to increase council tax. For many this acceptance came with conditions such as the council undertaking to provide better services, protecting the most vulnerable and 'saving' mental health services.

Approach

4. Between 6 December 2018 and 6 January 2019, the council invited comments on its budget proposals. These were set out in a summary document and detailed in full in the papers published for consideration by the Performance Scrutiny Committee on Thursday 13 December 2018.
5. The consultation was primarily carried out online, with paper copies of the consultation document and feedback form also made available in libraries. Residents and stakeholders were invited to share feedback using the online form, by submitting an online response document, in paper form, by email or by letter.
6. The exercise was promoted via a news package sent to media outlets, stakeholders and published on the news section of the county council website. It was also promoted, via the council's corporate Facebook account (15,221 followers), its twitter account (39,400 followers) and in YourOxfordshire, the council's fortnightly eNewsletter for residents.
7. To ensure key stakeholders were aware of the council's budget proposals, details of which were published in the Oxfordshire MPs Briefing and Oxfordshire Matters, the council's monthly eNewsletter to stakeholders (circulation of 600+, including all parishes and town councils).

Analysis and response

8. In total, the budget consultation received 662 responses and the consultation document was downloaded 352 times. The council received 445 online form responses, 3 response documents, 213 emails and one hard copy response. Most of responses were from residents (including 84% who responded via the online portal), with a small number of councillors and stakeholders also choosing to share their views with the council.
9. All the responses to the budget consultation exercises have been read, coded where appropriate, and the main themes are summarised in this report. Nearly all the questions were open-ended inviting detailed comments rather than simple 'tick box' questions.

10. The full responses to the consultation (redacted where appropriate) have been placed on deposit for all county councillors to review and take account of as they seek to set a balanced budget and agree Council Tax levels.
11. Please note that a small number of people/organisations have chosen to write to different people (councillors, senior officers and to the general budget consultation email address) and submit the same response in a number of different ways. Where possible, we have separated these out so that responses are only counted once in the analysis.

Findings

Budget proposals

12. Concerns about and objections to the council's proposed mental health savings proposals (20AD19 and 20AD15) dominated this year's budget consultation. It was the subject matter of all the email responses (190 with duplicates removed) and the 3 response documents. It was also directly referenced in 91% of responses to the more wide-ranging consultation feedback form (405 people).
13. Many people took the opportunity to share their first-hand experiences of mental health either as current or past service users, carers, family members or professionals and expressed their concerns rooted in direct experience of local services. Very few people referenced the two-separate mental health saving proposals and instead focussed on the combined proposed saving of £1.6m.
14. Nearly all the responses (642) relating to the mental health savings proposals were submitted between the 2 January and 6 January 2019. This followed the publication of an open letter signed by all members of the Oxfordshire Mental Health Partnership on the 2 January 2019. The open letter was covered extensively by the media and shared widely on social media. Oxfordshire County Council provided a formal response to the open letter, which included promoting how people could share their views as part of the public consultation.
15. Aside from the mental health, a very small number of people also provided comments on one of more of the council's other budget proposals and these are summarised in the table below.

Proposal/Theme	Number of mentions
Communities – street lighting (20CM12) - Support for the proposal to replace our current streetlighting with more energy efficient LED lighting	2 mentions
Corporate – SEND (20CM2) - Supportive that SEND funding is important	1 mention

Proposal/Theme	Number of mentions
Adult Social Care – National living wage (20AD4) - Generally supportive of national living wage	1 mention
Adult Social Care – Learning Disabilities (20AD10) - Not supportive of the proposal to review/reassess of care packages	2 mentions
Adult Social Care – Older People (20AD12) - Not supportive of the proposal to review/reassess of care packages	1 mention
Children’s Social Care Fostering (20CH16) - Supportive of the proposal and fostering in general - Not supportive of the proposal to reduce reliance on foster care agencies	1 mention 1 mention
Children’s Services - Children’s Social Care (20CH17) - Not supportive of the proposal about changing how we provide social care to children and families	1 mention
Children’s Services Social Care – Children’s Social Care (20CH14) - Not supportive of the proposal, based on the ‘safer sooner approach’	1 mention

16. Some people used this opportunity to comment on themes not directly related to the council’s budget proposals, ask points of clarification about specific proposals/background information, make representations against cuts/austerity in general, raise concerns about aspects of council spending and to request for further investment in services. These are summarised below:

Theme	Number of mentions
- Raised points, questions, areas for clarification around many budget proposals including 20CH3, SOCM2, 20AD12, why pressures differ between years, why OFRS not referenced	3 mentions
- Against cuts to services/austerity in general	2 mentions
Concerns	
- Concern about councillors pay	1 mention
- Concern about Westgate in general and parking at Westgate which is perceived to impact on other roads	1 mention
- Concerned in general about cuts to children’s social care/children’s services	3 mentions
- Concerns about cuts to older people’s services	1 mention
- Puzzled and concerned about the why the demand for children’s service is rising so fast	1 mention
- Concerned budget does not support people to live independently at home	1 mention

Requests for investment	
- Request for investment in affordable housing	1 mention
- Request for investment in services for homeless	1 mention
- Request for investment in cycle infrastructure	3 mentions
- Request for investment to make school entrances car free zones during drop-off/pick-up	1 mention
- Request for more investment in highways maintenance	1 mention
- Request for more investment in transport generally	1 mention
- Request for more investment in elderly care	1 mention

17. Another key part of the budget consultation is to invite people's views on the council's proposed council tax increase, for their suggestions on how the council might save money or provide better value for money and if they had any suggestions on how we might improve our services. This is aligned of our key priority of listening to residents so we can continuously improve our services and provide value for money.

Council tax levels

18. 325 people provided comments on the council's proposed council tax increase of 2.99%. Of these, 146 people were either supportive, understanding or broadly accepting of the need to increase council tax. For many this acceptance came with conditions such as the council undertaking to provide better services, protecting the most vulnerable and 'saving' mental health services. A small number of people (29) found the increase unacceptable, too high or simply unnecessary.
19. Of the other comments received specifically in response to our question about council tax levels, themes included: the perceived unaffordability of the county and in particular Oxford, the unfairness of a proposed rise in council tax against stagnant wages and/or levels of inflation, and concern about the affordability/impact on vulnerable people – those least able to pay.

Suggestions for savings and providing better value for money

20. 275 people provided comments on how the council might save money or provide better value for money. Many individual suggestions were given ranging from investment in early intervention/prevention services in both adults and children's services and improvements to how highways services are delivered, to improvements to the day-to-day running of the council including management of assets, reducing inefficiencies, reducing the use of contractors and consultants to reviewing staff wages. 37 ideas were put forward that are unfortunately outside the remit of the council to address.

Suggestions for how the council might improve our services

21. 229 people provided comments for how the council might improve its services. Again, a large number of individual suggestions were given and 35 people used this an opportunity to re-state their opposition to the mental health budget proposals. The most frequently mentioned theme was the importance of the council listening to and engaging with residents, service users, communities, staff and organisations (17 mentions).