

Section 5 - Consultation

Introduction

A number of consultation exercises have been carried out in order to develop the County Council's Business Plan for 2014-15. This short document summarises the results. A fuller report is available on each of the exercises on request.

The consultation exercises carried out for the 2014-15 plan were as follows:

- A total of 1,124 household interviews on budget setting using the “You Choose” methodology, carried out for the County Council by QA Research.
- An on-line budget setting survey using the “You Choose” methodology completed by 511 people.
- An on-line survey targeted at businesses which received 102 responses, which is a comparatively good response from the busy business community.
- Face to face interviews with 17 businesses and business organisations such as local Federations of Small Businesses.
- Smaller workshops with the Voluntary Community Sector staggered throughout the year.

Additional work carried out during 2012 and reported in last year's business plan documentation was used to test and establish what the County Council's priorities should be. This established broad support for three priorities covering developing the local economy, supporting vulnerable people and helping people to live healthy and independent lives.

Consultation Summaries

Household Interviews using ‘You Choose’

The household consultation, using the 'You Choose Methodology', allowed people to indicate what level of Council Tax they would support and what their detailed spending priorities would be. As a starting point, respondents were given a budget that represented maintaining expenditure at current levels with a resulting rise of 17% in council tax.

It was clear that respondents found it difficult to identify further cuts to services in addition to those already undertaken and overall they were prepared to see a reduction in budgets allocated to some services but not to others. Taking the results for individual services together across the whole sample, respondents opted to increase the proposed level of Council Tax by 17.25%. This increase was driven by small percentage increases in the budgets for “Children and Young People's Services” and “Adults' Services”, which have by far the largest budgets.

On-line responses using ‘You Choose’

The on-line ‘You Choose’ survey was promoted using traditional and digital means such as press releases and promotional material in libraries and other public buildings, along with promotion through Twitter and websites. It should be noted that this survey has a self-selecting sample and will be biased towards specific groups in the population e.g. more

men completed the on-line survey than women.

The 511 respondents appeared more willing to make cuts and on average they opted to increase the level of Council Tax by 5.0%. 66% of respondents accepted a Council Tax increase of some form, whilst only 10% worked for a reduction. All top-level services saw a recommended reduction in budget of some form. The greatest decrease was seen for Corporate Services, with a proposed reduction of 13%. The 'Getting Around' theme saw the lowest reduction, at 2%.

On-line Survey Responses from Businesses

Respondents cited transport/commuting (80%) and housing issues (66%) to be the challenges with the greatest impact on their workforce. Childcare provision (72%) and quality school places (73%) were deemed to have the least impact by most. Other comments included parking difficulties and other wider commuting issues both for workforce and customers, including the price of fuel.

Respondents were asked about the growth of their business in the county. Nine potential issues were put forward, and respondents were asked to highlight which posed the greatest barrier to their business. 'Access to new markets / clients' (41.2%) and 'appropriately trained staff' (37.3%) were included the most.

Interviews with Businesses and business organisations

For business organisations 'housing provision' and 'transport issues' were considered the most important challenges facing

the workforce in the County. They suggested that their members see Cambridgeshire as a buoyant economy with a diverse business community, a high-tech image and with good access to R&D capital. Negative perceptions focused on poor infrastructure, lack of transport options, traffic congestion and poor broadband. It was also recommended that the Council look beyond the A14 to other roads such as the A47 and A428 and to improve connections between the fens and Cambridge.

For the businesses interviewed, 'transport' and 'commuting options' were considered to have the greatest impact on their workforce. Difficulties were also identified when seeking potential staff with the correct skill set. Positive comments on Cambridgeshire as a business location highlighted the financial prosperity of the county compared to other regions, whilst negative reflections focused largely on transport issues, road network difficulties such as the A14, and the high cost of living in Cambridge City.

Conclusions

When presented with the budget situation the public are finding it increasingly difficult to identify cuts to services in addition to those made in previous years. Significant savings have been made already in 'acceptable' areas such as IT and other back office services yet further cuts to frontline services are needed in order to balance the books. Both the public and businesses identify that roads and transport are a key area of service provision alongside services that care for children and older people.