

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL**Report by Strategic Lead – Communications, Culture & Communities****Council: 27 November 2019**

Subject: Budget Prioritisation - Engagement Results**1. Purpose**

- 1.1** This report provides an overview of the key results and feedback from the recent budget prioritisation engagement as agreed by Council on 28 June 2019.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1** It is recommended that Council notes the results and feedback from early citizen consultation on broad service area and delivery priorities as part of the 2020/21 budget setting process.

3. Background

- 3.1** Since 2013 the Council has been refining its budget consultation process including a focus on online tools for wider community engagement and more specific engagement with representative groups from across the community. This has led to consistent growth in the numbers taking part. Council has historically reported on the number of residents who filled in any part of the survey. Following feedback from some Elected members in 2017, officers changed the approach to report on the numbers answering each individual question. This change negates the benefit of comparing levels of public participation in 2019 with previous budget consultations.
- 3.2** A proposal to develop an early approach to engagement based on service priorities was discussed and agreed at June Council. This new model was intended to give residents a greater understanding of the overall financial challenge facing the Council, a say in what Council services they valued most, and identify where citizens wanted to see investment made in coming years. The new model avoided the previous approach of focussing on individual and often complex savings options which limited the opportunity for the public to shape future strategy.

4. Main Issues

- 4.1** As agreed through Council early engagement was undertaken over six weeks in August & September 2019. The online engagement asked citizens to rate 25 individual services based on their importance to the individual. This has generated detailed information on which services were more or less of a priority.

- 4.2** The engagement also asked respondents to provide feedback on any areas of service where additional investment was required as well as giving a view on wider service delivery options such as increasing fees / charging or reducing service standards.

Methodology

- 4.3** As in previous years, to ensure broad coverage, the budget engagement targeted the views of residents and employees in a range of ways to improve accessibility and participation in the process. The primary method was to invite residents, employees and wider stakeholders to express their views on the priority of a range of services through an online survey. This online survey was open from 19 August – 29 September 2019. The survey was promoted through the Council website and regular social media posts during the live period. The consultation was also highlighted to Citizens Panel members, and community contacts for wider dissemination.
- 4.4** Additionally, to supplement the online consultation, six focus group sessions took place with a range of representatives from local community organisations, within Dumbarton, Alexandria and Clydebank at varying times of day and evening to ensure as wide a range of participation as possible. Community groups were proactively contacted by letter and email and encouraged to send up to two members to any of the sessions.
- 4.5** Finally, as in previous consultation exercises, all Council libraries and Working4U learning teams also offered support to any resident who required support or assistance to access the form online.

Engagement

- 4.6** The online method of consultation was once again successful at engaging a broad range of stakeholders across West Dunbartonshire with 1,071 citizens completing the prioritisation and investment questions in the survey. As this engagement process followed a different approach it was expected that there would be a lower volume of responses than some previous surveys. For example, the previous individual savings options approach often significantly mobilised affected groups to participate whereas this new method offered a broader overview. In addition, it should be noted that for the first time some Opposition parties called on citizens in West Dunbartonshire to boycott the new budget consultation. Despite this the 2019 survey response equates to 121 responses per 10,000 population or 1.2% of the total population. Industry standards confirm this represents a statistically significant response level and a small statistical margin of error; this means that we are able to be confident that the results are representative of the population.

- 4.7** It should also be noted that response levels are higher in West Dunbartonshire than across a range of similar sized and significantly larger local authorities who have carried out similar online budget consultations, such as Falkirk, Stirling, East Renfrewshire and Edinburgh City Councils. In comparison to West Dunbartonshire's figure of 1.2% of the population, the range for other areas was between 0.1% to 1.2% of the population.
- 4.8** The majority of those who responded to the online consultation identified themselves as living / living and working in West Dunbartonshire (85%) with a further 14% of respondents live in other areas but work in West Dunbartonshire, either for the Council (9%) or another employer (5%). A further 1% stated they neither lived nor worked in the area.
- 4.9** Six targeted focus group sessions were held for community organisations, with 90 minute sessions taking place across mornings, afternoons and evenings in Clydebank, Alexandria and Dumbarton. In total 22 representatives attended these focused discussion sessions, drawn from community organisations representing Community Councils, Tenant and Resident Organisations, and those representing young people, carers, environmental issues, mental health and sports.
- 4.10** The focus group discussions centred on the impact savings options may have on the community, suggestions for areas where improvements to service delivery could be made and examples of positive service redesign/change. Overall there was a recognition that savings had to be made and that these proposals may give opportunities to think differently about service delivery. Participants in the focus groups felt that areas requiring investment included Working4U / employability & skills support, libraries and heritage, education and community centres.
- 4.11** When asked about what needed a new approach attendees highlighted a range of greenspace and environmental services such as grass cutting, street cleaning, roads maintenance, street lighting and parking. The approach to use of community centres and facilities was also highlighted as an area where service improvements could be made. Services delivered through libraries and the one stop shops were highlighted as good practice examples across multiple sessions.
- 4.12** Attendees were also asked about their views on the service delivery options such as increasing charges or changing access to services / service standards. Overall attendees felt that generating additional income through enforcement would be welcome. Additionally the opportunities to work more with the voluntary sector were highlighted.

Responses

- 4.13** Based on the responses provided by those who took part in the online survey, a relative ranking of all 25 services considered has been compiled. This ranking, shown in appendix 1, is based on the high priority ratings (scores 6 and 7) given by respondents. As can be seen from the charts in appendix 1, primary and secondary education, roads & transportation, waste services and services for children & young people rank as the top five priority service areas. The services highlighted as being of lowest priority to them were school transport, arts & heritage, business support, funding for public transport and registration services.
- 4.14** Appendix 1 also details the number of respondents who feel that additional investment is required across each service area. This is broadly reflective of the ranking of services, although community safety & Anti-social behaviour is seen as more of a priority for investment than waste services when looking at the top five ranked services.
- 4.15** Respondents also provided a relative rating (on a scale of 1-7) for a range of service delivery options. Based on the high priority ratings on this question set, respondents are most supportive of closing some buildings and moving services into convenient shared locations.
- 4.16** On each broad question area, respondents were asked to provide any relevant comments. Word clouds have been provided in appendix 2, showing the key words on the questions regarding priority services, areas for investment and service delivery priorities. In the main, comments focus on the need to stop making service cuts.

Social media engagement

- 4.17** Alongside the high number of responses received to the consultation there has also been debate and discussion on the Council's social media accounts, with many people commenting and sharing information. On the Council's Facebook page alone the various posts regarding budget consultation have reached just under 35,000 people, with over 400 shares, likes and comments and almost 5,000 post clicks.

5. People Implications

- 5.1** There are no people implications associated with this report.

6. Financial and Procurement Implications

- 6.1** There are no financial and procurement implications associated with this report.

7. Risk Analysis

7.1 A number of risks were identified in relation to this activity:

- There is a risk that this sample size is not seen as representative of the views of West Dunbartonshire residents. However, as detailed in 4.6 above the sample size is statistically significant. Appendix 3 shows a breakdown of respondent information.
- There is a risk that this largely online survey was not accessible to a number of residents in West Dunbartonshire and they were therefore excluded from participating and having their views heard. This was mitigated this by the provision of support through libraries and digital teams and also the 6 focus group events across a range of days, times and venues to ensure accessibility.
- There is a risk that officers do not take account of this public feedback when generating their savings proposals for Councillors to consider. Results and responses have been considered by the strategic leadership group and will also be considered by full Council. There is a duty on officers and members to ensure options considered reflect public opinion.
- There is a risk that too much focus is applied to the findings of the focus groups which represent a very small number of those who participated. However the focus group discussion did not require participants to rank the services. Instead it focused on discussion on the risks and potential impacts of savings decisions.

8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

8.1 To ensure the process was accessible to the widest range of stakeholders each element was planned to ensure maximum coverage and accessibility for residents. All venues were assessed for suitable access and facilities and additional support was made available on request to ensure it was specific to the requirements of the individual. Focus groups were carried out in five different venues and at different times to ensure they were as accessible as possible to residents, based on feedback from previous consultation and engagement activity. EIA attached as appendix 4.

9. Consultation

9.1 This report has been shared for consultation with Legal, Finance and Procurement as well as members of the Corporate Management Team.

10. Strategic Assessment

10.1 The results and outcomes of the budget savings consultation process will support decision making across each of the Council's strategic priorities. Specifically this consultation activity supports delivery of the strategic priorities:

- Meaningful community engagement with active, empowered and informed citizens who feel safe and engaged; and
- Open, accountable and accessible local government.

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Budget Consultation summary responses
Appendix 2 – Open comment word clouds
Appendix 3 – Respondent profile
Appendix 4 - EIA

Background Papers: None

Wards Affected: All