

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Chief Officer – Citizen, Culture & Facilities

West Dunbartonshire Council: 30 October 2024

Subject: Budget Conversation 2025/26 - Engagement Results

1. Purpose

1.1 This report provides an overview of the key results and feedback from the recent Budget Conversation 2025/26 engagement.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that Council notes the results and feedback from early citizen consultation on broad service areas and delivery priorities as part of the 2025/26 budget setting process.

3. Background

3.1 Over the last 10 years the Council has refined and adapted its budget consultation model. The approach has included both option-based and priority-based consultation models and incorporated online tools, focus groups, in-person events with live voting and more specific engagement with representative groups from across the community.

3.2 The last Budget Conversation exercise was undertaken online in August 2023 to inform the 24/25 budget setting process. The priority-based approach did not focus on individual savings options, instead asking residents for their views about which services were most important to them.

4. Main Issues

4.1 The same priority-based approach was agreed for the 2025/26 Budget Conversation and early engagement was undertaken with citizens over eight weeks between April and June 2024. The online budget conversation generated detailed information on which activities were more or less of a priority to the respondents.

4.2 The engagement also sought feedback on any areas of service where respondents felt savings should be targeted and any services they felt should be protected as well as seeking views 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 15 April – 10 June 2024. The survey was promoted through the Council website, in local media and on Council social media channels regularly during the live period. The consultation was also highlighted to employees via the intranet and a workforce email, Citizens Panel members, and community contacts for wider dissemination. A dedicated Web page was created to provide detailed information around the Council budgets.

- 4.4** As with previous consultation exercises, all Council libraries and Working4U learning teams offered support to any resident who required assistance to access and complete the form online. The Budget Conversation was also promoted at a range of facilities including libraries and community centres with paper copies of the survey available at these locations.
- 4.5** 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 as well as with the West Dunbartonshire Equality Forum, West Dunbartonshire Youth Council and the Trade Unions. Sessions were offered at varying times of the day and evening to ensure as wide a range of participation as possible. Community groups were proactively contacted by email and encouraged to send a representative to any of the sessions.

Social media engagement

- 4.6** 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 over 68k people, with over 556 shares, likes and comments and approximately 448 post clicks.

Engagement

- 4.7** The online method of consultation engaged a broad range of stakeholders across West Dunbartonshire with 685 people completing the prioritisation and investment questions in the survey. The 2024 survey response equates to approximately 94 responses per 10,000 adult population or 0.94% of the adult population (16 years +). Industry standards say this represents a response level with a small statistical margin of error; this means that we can be confident that the results would be repeated with a similar sample of respondents. Though the sample was self-selecting, and this can skew results, responses were sufficient from different population groups to allow any major variations between groups to be gauged.
- 4.8** The majority of those who responded to the online consultation identified themselves as living in West Dunbartonshire (89%), a further 4% of respondents stated they were business owners within the area, 11% stated

they were part of a community organisation and 31% stated they were parents or carers of school age children in West Dunbartonshire, while 43% stated they were employed in West Dunbartonshire.

- 4.9** Based on the responses provided by those who took part in the online survey, a relative ranking of all key statements has been compiled and arranged by strategic priority area. This ranking, shown in Appendix 1, is based on ranking each statement with one being the highest. As can be seen from the tables in Appendix 1, the following were ranked as the top priorities:

Online survey top ranked responses

Priority 1: Our communities

- Community safety including CCTV and response to anti-social behaviour and noise complaints
- Maintaining operating hours/access at current levels for library and cultural services
- Maintaining sufficient staff numbers to support children and families within Education services
- Support for children and adults who require to be protected and are at risk of harm

Priority 2: Our Environment

- Investment is focused on refuse collection and recycling facilities
- Investment is focused on road maintenance and lighting, including (potholes, road markings and signage)

Priority 3: Our Economy

- Regeneration of town centres and neighbourhoods
- Focus investment in areas with the highest child poverty rates

Priority 4: Our Council

- Maintaining the number and location of public buildings including offices, depots, libraries and community facilities

- 4.10** Respondents were asked to provide any relevant comments on each priority area as well as to specify a service area for investment or disinvestment. A summary of the main comments is included in the findings in Appendix 1. In the main, comments focus on a desire for the Council to cease making service cuts (particularly in areas such as health, education, road and environmental improvements) and a feeling of a general decline in the appearance of the area.

- 4.11** Of the six focus groups, one was held for discussion with Trade Unions, and five others were targeted sessions held for community organisations. These were 90-minute sessions taking place in Clydebank, Alexandria, Dumbarton

and online with over 200 organisations contacted to take part. In total, 30 representatives attended these focused discussion sessions, drawn from community organisations representing Community Councils, Scottish Youth Parliament, citizen's advocacy groups and those representing young people, carers, environmental issues, and mental health. .

- 4.12** 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.

Focus group summary responses

Priority 1: Our communities

- Community safety was important with good lighting, well-kept roads and pavements noted as key priority areas. Accessibility needs to be considered in all developments at the start (e.g. drop pavements for wheelchair users, and prams); Young people, in particular, felt it was unsafe to travel on public transport due to harassment.
- Strengthening community networks; creating opportunities for community groups to explore for example, sharing of resources, joint funding bids, signposting to services and wider understanding of other groups that are operating in the area.
- Partnership with WD Community Planning and WDCVS could be improved or utilised more, felt there was a lot of silo working.
- Recent Child Poverty Conference was seen as a positive step for all agencies to be involved in the conversation and solutions and felt similar events to prevent silo working would be useful and would support grassroots connections.
- Strategic/Community partners felt that when budget decisions were made, no clear consideration was given to the contribution that community partners and community groups have in the delivery of support to the wider community, particularly in relation to health and well-being benefits and tackling social isolation. They expressed concern about the impact on Council services if community partners are no longer financially able to operate or offer the same level of support. In addition, they felt cuts to Council services resulted in increased demand for support from Strategic/Community partners to support vulnerable people.
- Strategic/Community partners felt the budget process does not consider the cumulative impact that funding cuts have to Strategic/Community partners. Funding from the Council provided Community partners with leverage to attract further funding, as often grants are based on match funding, therefore cuts from Council can result in further cuts from other grant bodies.
- Strategic/Community partners felt they had no opportunity to influence budget setting process.
- Felt that it was a lot to ask community to take on a community asset with little or no support. If the direction was for community facilities to be managed by the community, then increased support with Asset Transfers in relation to

areas such as managing of lease holding, managing upgrade/repairs and sourcing/securing external funding would be welcome.

- Groups felt that, with the obvious challenges of balancing the budget, both over the last few years and for the next few anticipated years to come, there was an opportunity for real Community Development to happen to mitigate some of these challenges, although felt that the Council was not engaging and involving community groups enough to let that happen.

Priority 2: Our Environment

- Groups felt West Dunbartonshire was a good place to live and that in conjunction with the community it could be improved. They said simple solutions could be implemented to improve the environmental appearance and promote sustainability and the Council should listen to community opinions around these. Ideas such as improved cycling routes and better maintained recycling facilities were noted.
- Community gardens, vegetable plots in Faifley and the community orchard in Drumry were noted as good examples of working well within the community and involving young people – they would like to see more of this.
- Double parking and pavement parking was noted as a problem in community areas which prevented people with mobility issues getting out and about safely with confidence.
- Levensgrove park was highlighted by multiple groups including young people, as an area where they could see improvement and pride in the area. It was noted that the park looked well-kept and well used.
- General appearance of the area looked unkempt making the area look run down.
- Noted the housing improvements within the area, particularly in relation to new build housing and generally felt they were welcome; some concern about changing the heritage look of some areas with over concentration of new builds.
- Improved environmental impact assessments would ensure better decisions were being made. Felt that some decisions were not taken with the community in mind and without proper consultation to understand the impacts it would have to the local environment in terms of appearance, to the local area and businesses.

Priority 3: Our Economy

- Improved local tourism across the authority was noted as an area that could be improved upon to help generate money into the area.
- Suggested the council need a dedicated anti-poverty strategy rather than just a report as they felt this would help shape budget decisions.
- No clear strategy for Town planning resulting in a lack of diversity of businesses on high streets. The Community felt that there is an abundance of supermarkets in the area however would like to see a wider variety of local businesses operating.
- A general consensus across the authority was that in relation to smaller businesses, these were mainly dominated by barber shops or fast-food

outlets; the latter of which tended to operate more in the evenings thereby leaving the town centre shops closed during the day resulting in the town centres lacking any appeal. Thought introducing conservation areas or business improvement districts in town centres could help manage the types and variety of businesses in the area as well as improving the overall look of the area.

- The shop local approach that was fostered out of necessity during the pandemic has been eroded and the Community would like to see that restored.
- Felt the Council could do more to attract and support local businesses opening in the area through preferential rates to stimulate interest in the area.
- Lack of social/leisure activities (not sport related) across the authority. General behaviour is for people to leave the authority area for activities such as shopping (not groceries), cinema, eating out or music events etc. This was noted for all age groups, however younger people felt there was really nothing to keep them in the area. Young people noted traveling out with the authority as a barrier due to cost, curfews, distance and lack of reliable public transport.

Priority 4: Our Council

- Community groups would benefit from having a single point of contact in Council for dealing with queries.
- Develop cost benefit analysis of proposed cuts as Strategic partners rely on funding to support vulnerable people and retain service.
- More communication on Council achievements and initiatives, groups noted it could be difficult to know what's going on.
- Current methods of communication with young people are a bit dated, need to explore alternative avenues for communication with young people, although it was recognised that it wasn't that straightforward, and no clear ideas/ solutions were provided by participants.
- Felt that community links could be improved. Community Councils were under-utilised as a way of getting information out to communities and information into the Council from communities.
- Centralise services where possible with other Local Authorities to share expertise in key areas and reduce cost on Council.
- Felt communication within the Council itself could be improved; seems like departments don't talk to each other or take a joined-up approach.
- Felt there was a lack of transparency from the Council around decision making including the budget. Felt that there was no long-term vision regarding the Council budget and instead was looked at in a fragmented fashion; services need to have joint approach towards budget process.
- Felt the Council could demonstrate better value for money for public work/repairs.
- Young people were supportive of a dedicated young person's Citizens Panel as a means of participation.

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 although the information within will contribute to the 25/26 budget setting process.

7. Risk Analysis

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

- It is important for Council to demonstrate public opinion has been considered. In circumstances where Council proposes to change service provision or reduce budget levels for a specific service, there is an underpinning reputational risk. This risk is mitigated by undertaking public consultation, ensuring the widest number possible of residents had an opportunity to express their views.
- There is a risk the sample size is not seen as representative of the views of West Dunbartonshire residents. However, as detailed in 4.7 above the sample size means that we can be confident that the results would be repeated with a similar sample of respondents. Appendix 1 shows a breakdown of respondent information.
- There is a risk 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 by the provision of support through libraries and digital teams and also the four 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 risk that too much emphasis is placed on 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 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. An EIA is attached as Appendix 2.

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 outcomes of the priority focused consultation process will support decision making across each of the Council's strategic priorities. Specifically, this consultation activity supports delivery of the strategic priority 4 and underlying objectives:

- Our Council - Inclusive and Adaptable
 - Our residents are engaged and empowered
 - Our Council is adaptable and focused on delivering best value for our residents

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01 October 2024

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Appendices: Appendix 1 - Budget Consultation summary responses
Appendix 2 - EIA (997)

Background Papers: None

Wards Affected: All