

Committee: Scrutiny

Agenda Item

Date: 20 June 2017

9

Title: Budget and LCTS consultation methodology

Author: Richard Auty, Assistant Director Corporate Services

Item for information

Summary

1. This report summarises the methodology used to conduct the annual budget and Local Council Tax Support Scheme consultations, including changes in approach being put in place for 2017.

Recommendations

2. None

Financial Implications

3. The cost of the consultations as set out in the report is built into the 2017/18 budget

Background Papers

4. None

Impact

- 5.

Communication/Consultation	This report covers consultation methodology
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	None

Situation

6. For the past six years the council has carried out a consultation asking for residents' views on the headline priorities for setting the budget for the approaching financial year. With the introduction of Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) in April 2013 the council has also run an annual consultation asking for residents' views on the provisions that Uttlesford District Council makes for local people within the scheme.
7. The Scrutiny Committee previously requested a report outlining the approach the council takes in conducting these consultations.
8. Consultation is a delegated function under the council's constitution and therefore does not require formal member approval at any stage. That said, the consultations are carried out in order to assist members in making an informed decision on spending priorities. The current consultation methodology was developed with the Cabinet Member for Finance and other Cabinet colleagues in 2015. This was the last fundamental review of the way budget consultation is carried out at the council. The methodology has recently been reviewed by officers and Cabinet members, who have reconfirmed it is the approach they consider most appropriate.

Budget Consultation – methodology and response rates

9. Prior to 2015, budget consultation was carried out via Uttlesford Life, through a survey asking residents to rate a series of statements relating to corporate priorities in order of importance.
10. Since 2015, the council has used a service-based approach to questions and the following methods to consult residents and businesses:
 - A telephone survey of 500 residents (qualitative research – sample size recommended by professional market research companies as proportionate for the size of the district. It is profiled by age and ward and has a confidence interval of 95%.)
 - Online consultation open to all residents
 - Paper questionnaires in libraries and UDC customer service points
 - Through the council's Citizens' Panel
11. In addition, businesses have been engaged through:
 - A dedicated business focussed version of the consultation available online, details of which were circulated through the Uttlesford Business Database
 - Direct contact at business networking events

12. Last year, 512 responses were received from the telephone survey, 14 responses were received via the website online form and 146 responses were received from members of the council's citizens' panel.
13. Overall this represents a substantially higher level of response than that achieved by other comparable local authorities e.g. Braintree District Council achieved 84 responses to their budget consultation for setting the 2016/17 budget or Rochford who had 210 respondents from their 2016 consultation for the 2017/18 budget.
14. In 2015 the Council also trialled face-to-face consultation in key population areas; however this was not repeated in 2016 as it did not prove to be an effective way to gather responses.

LCTS consultation – methodology and response rates

15. Up until 2014, consultation on the LCTS schemes was carried out via a combination of online surveys and direct promotion to preceptors, emails to all large housing providers, letting agents, estate agents and other stakeholders (e.g. CAB).
16. Since 2015, information about the LCTS setting process and a survey have been:
- Distributed as an insert with the Uttlesford Life and including a prepaid reply envelope
 - Made available as an online consultation
 - Made available as paper questionnaires in libraries and UDC customer service points
17. Last year, 1,115 responses were received using the pull-out survey distributed with Uttlesford Life. A further 91 responses were received via the website online form/paper copies. Overall this represents a substantially higher level of response than that achieved by other comparable local authorities, for example Braintree received 257 returns.

Changes being made for the 2017 consultations

18. The figures set out in paragraph 17 suggest that including a tear out and return form with a prepaid envelope in Uttlesford Life does drive the response rate. Therefore in 2017, the budget consultation will be included in addition to the LCTS consultation in a September edition of the magazine. Residents will have the option of completing one or both consultations and sending one or both back in a single envelope. The exact mechanics of the form have yet to be determined but officers will ensure the two consultations can be separated in some way (most likely perforation).

19. The other methods of consultation, as set out in paragraphs 10 and 16, will continue.

Consultation questions - budget

20. As mentioned in paragraph 9, the council has since 2015 conducted the budget consultation by asking consultation respondents to rate council services based on their level of priority. An additional question asks for views on the Council Tax level. An example is appended to this report. Please note that this is not the final list of questions to be used in the 2017 consultation but is provided to give Members an idea of what the survey looks like. The break in the list of services is inserted primarily for the purpose of the phone survey as it helps the interviewer.

21. There are of course advantages and disadvantages to any consultation approach. Council budget consultations fall into two categories – corporate priorities or services. Officers have looked at a large number of council budget consultations and service-based consultations similar to the one Uttlesford conducts are by far the most common.

22. The advantages of this approach for 2017 include:

- It is meaningful for most residents – they are being asked for their opinion on services which they will recognise
- It allows for comparison with previous years, meaning trends can be identified
- It is simple to administer, simple to understand and produces a result which gives a clear indication of where residents believe council money should be targeted

The downside to this approach is that it does not directly reference the council's corporate aims as set out in the Corporate Plan nor does it necessarily reference any one-off or cross-service initiatives the council may be undertaking (although this can be addressed if there are such initiatives under way or being developed when the questions are reviewed and refreshed).

23. Some authorities do use a corporate priority approach instead, although as mentioned in paragraph 21, this is less common. This is the approach Uttlesford took until it reviewed its budget consultation in 2015. The most common form these types of consultation take is a series of statements linked to the council's corporate plan priorities, which respondents are asked to express a view on in terms of importance to them.

24. The advantage of this approach is that the consultation links more directly with the Corporate Plan and could help contribute towards the development of new corporate aims as well as budget setting.

25. However, members of the public may be less likely to identify with the broad aims of the corporate plan than with the services they receive, which may adversely affect the response rate. In addition, the key aims of the corporate plan are high level and the underpinning delivery plan is a one-year document for 2017/18, while the consultation is for the 2018/19 year.
26. Cabinet Members have requested an additional question be included in this year's consultation, asking residents their view on whether they believe the council consults with them an appropriate amount. This question will give respondents options to state they are consulted too much/too little/the right amount.

Consultation questions – LCTS

27. Despite the potential for this consultation to be challenging for respondents due to the complex financial nature of the subject matter, the council has in fact received relatively few adverse comments on it. Indeed, the LCTS consultation has produced some of the highest response rates for non-Planning consultations in recent years.
28. There are certain key matters within the scheme that must be consulted on each year; therefore in 2017 the consultation will not be markedly different to previous years. There will be three questions asked of respondents, which have been asked each year since the consultation began. Questions relevant to previous changes to the scheme have been removed. The three questions which will form this year's LCTS consultation are appended to this report.

Risk Analysis

29.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
If the council does not use an effective methodology, then the public will not respond, leading to an unrepresentative result	1	2	The methodology uses a variety of channels which give residents the opportunity to take part should they wish to. The inclusion of a qualitative, profiled element in the budget survey ensures a representative sample.

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.