

# Big Oldham Conversation: Budget 2023/24

**Interim update: Budget proposals**

Last update: 3rd February 2022

# 1 Overview

- 1.1 The Big Oldham Conversation public consultation on our budget proposals for 2023/24 went live on Wednesday 11th January 2022 and will run until Friday 10 February 2022.
- 1.2 This report summarises all responses received to the budget consultation to date. A fuller report, including responses received via social media, through direct stakeholder engagement and through individual separate correspondence (including emails and letters) will be prepared once the consultation has closed, and will be submitted to Full Council on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2023.
- 1.3 The final report will also include full details of the publicity carried out to promote our budget consultation to as many residents, businesses, stakeholders and partners as possible across Oldham.

## 2. Summary

- 2.1 A total of **171 responses** have been received to the budget consultation to date.
- 2.2 The consultation, which is live on Oldham Council's website, sets out the scale of budgetary pressures over the next two years, highlighting the need for savings. The survey asks respondents two broad questions. The first question asks respondents where they feel that savings should be made. The second question asks respondents to outline the service areas where spending should be prioritised.
- 2.3 Respondents were asked to provide basic demographic information including whether they were responding as a resident or as a business and the ward in which they live. Respondents overwhelmingly identified themselves as residents, rather than businesses. Information on the nature or name of the businesses was not collected.

## 3. Consultation Responses

- 3.1. Respondents were asked two questions relating to the Budget. The first asked respondents where the council should seek to make savings and the second asked which services were most important to invest in.
  - 3.1.1 This section of the report provides a summary of the feedback on the specific budget proposals, gathered through the online consultation portal. The report looks at the two questions asked and analyses these by common themes. Responses to the question on where savings should be made are set out below:

## 3.2 Consultation Responses on Savings

### Workforce

- 3.2.1 Reforming the council workforce was one of the most prominent themes which emerged throughout the budget consultation as a means to save money.
- 3.2.2 The most common suggestion amongst these was for senior management teams to be streamlined and management posts to be cut, with many respondents citing their belief that salaries for senior officers were inflated and could be reduced. Some residents drew comparisons with other local authorities in Greater Manchester, suggesting that Oldham had disproportionate numbers of managerial positions and that *“Manchester doesn't have anywhere near all these managerial posts and it's three times the size of Oldham”*.
- 3.2.3 Similarly, many respondents referred to the number of councillors across the borough and their associated allowances, with some respondents highlighting their feeling that councillors did not provide value for money and savings could be made by slimming down the number of councillors in Oldham and reducing the value of their allowances, particularly cutting vice-chair positions on committees.
- 3.2.4 Amongst the broad sense that the workforce should be reformed as a mechanism through which to reduce council spending, residents relayed their belief that the council has an over-reliance on costly consultants and agency staff which should be addressed in order to save money. Many of the responses relating to the workforce came from council employees and who cited their own personal experiences of *“wasting thousands of pounds on a regular basis by appointing consultants to write reports and business cases”* believing that with additional training, this could instead be delivered in-house.

### System-wide transformation

- 3.2.5 As well as the workforce, there was a general sense that savings could be made by focusing on transforming the wider system and the way in which the council works with local partners and the Greater Manchester region. Better partnership working was a key theme amongst respondents, with suggestions which included the planning and sharing of services amongst Greater Manchester authorities.
- 3.2.6 Within the broad theme of system-thinking, many respondents felt that better use of digital technology and innovation would help to save money. It is clear that many of the respondents who highlighted this as a key area where savings could be found were council employees as well as local residents and cited their personal experience of *“using old IT systems which need updating to make our time more efficient”*.
- 3.2.7 Some respondents felt that the council had not adequately learned lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents highlighted the quick, effective crisis response during the pandemic, demonstrating the speed at which decisions can be made when there was limited “red tape” proving that when staff *“were able to get on with doing things, what an impact this organisation can have.”* Many residents felt that the council has returned to business-as-usual without properly embedding learning, suggesting that the council should save money by becoming “more agile” and cutting officer time spent on *“producing numerous briefings that are simply not required.”*

### *Town Centre Regeneration*

- 3.3.8 Resident views around the regeneration of Oldham Town Centre and Creating a Better Place were mixed, however, residents responding to the budget consultation broadly felt that with dwindling resources, funding would be better spend protecting statutory council services, stating that “*wasteful schemes like the Eco Park, spindles shopping centre, Tommyfield Market destruction and replacement coliseum*” should be halted.
- 3.3.9 Other residents felt that redevelopment should be used as a revenue raising tool, citing museum entry prices as too low when considered against comparators and free weekend parking unviable in times of fiscal restraint.
- 3.3.9 Despite sentiment being mixed, insight gathered over the last twelve months indicates that there is a strong feeling across the borough that the town centre offer is poor with a substandard retail offer and little to no cultural or food and drink facilities. Indeed, this was amongst the most common answer to the question of what improvements need to be made to Oldham during the borough-wide resident survey. It is important that future council communications draw a distinction between revenue and capital spending to reassure residents that spend on large-scale regeneration projects does not eat into the budget of spend on statutory services.

## **3.4 Consultation Responses on Spending**

- 3.4.1 Responses to the question on where spending should be protected are set out below:

### *Children’s Services*

- 3.4.2 Safeguarding residents, but in particular, safeguarding our vulnerable children and young people was by far the most prevalent response when asked where council spending should be prioritised. The prevalence of responses highlights the strength of feeling locally around protecting children and young people and may be related to the recent context in Oldham. Responses focused on the need to ensure effective and efficient support for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and providing high-quality social care for our most vulnerable children.
- 3.4.3 Amongst the most prevalent themes was the feeling that there was a lack of a proper youth offer within the borough, suggesting that with “*the exception of Mahdlo, there isn’t another youth club in the town. Young people just wander aimlessly around their districts with nothing to do.*” The feeling of a limited local youth offer was also strongly articulated in the recent resident’s survey carried out by Enventure Research when asked what improvements can be made. For many respondents, the provision of youth services is strongly linked to the need to address crime and anti-social behaviour.
- 3.4.4 The early years and children’s centres was cited as a priority area for spending with some respondents articulating this as an effective prevention measure which would save spending on high-cost services in the longer term with some explaining that they felt that children’s centres in “*other local authorities offer a lot more services to children and families.*” Investing in a well-trained early years workforce was seen as critical to improving outcomes and achieving “*high quality education within early years settings*”. The focus on early years is pertinent given the council’s move to a Family Hubs model and it is likely that the additional investment will be well received locally.

### *Adult social care*

- 3.4.5 Adult social care was highlighted as a key spending priority for respondents. Although there was little in the way of tangible or specific spending priorities within this broad theme, there was a sense that residents recognised the relationship between adult social care and the impact on the quality and availability of local NHS services.
- 3.4.6 Some comments drew comparisons with the services that had been offered locally many years ago indicating that they felt there has been a reduction in quantity and quality of local adult social care services with *“council run care homes either closed been privatised or are now run by NHS”*.

### *Clean and Green*

- 3.4.7 Clean and green issues and the local environment was referred to as an area in which spending should be prioritised in the upcoming budget with residents drawing a distinction between the provision of ‘essential services’ and stopping “spending money on vanity projects”.
- 3.4.8 One of the most prevalent responses was around the need to ensure clean, well-maintained streets to improve the look and feel of local areas. Residents commented on *“roads in shockingly poor condition”* and pavements “where there is dog poo everywhere”. Again, responses to the consultation have mirrored those within the recent resident survey which highlighted concerns around “scruffiness” and areas feeling “run-down and dirty”.
- 3.4.9 The maintenance of parks and green space was considered a key priority in spending plans. Previous engagement activities demonstrate there is a clear sense of pride across Oldham in the quality of local community parks, green space and surrounding countryside, with this being one of the most prevalent responses to the question *“what makes you most proud of Oldham?”* in the recent survey and it is likely that any investment in local parks and greenspace would be well received and broadly supported by residents.

## 4. Conclusion

- 4.1 This report provides an overview of the responses received to our budget consultation to date, however, a full report will be provided to Council once the consultation closes on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2023 which will include wider responses received via social media as well as a summary of comments received across all channels.
- 4.2 In the meantime, the communications team are working to promote the consultation through our social media channels to ensure high levels of responses and promote diversity of views.
- 4.3 As outlined above, there are clear, emerging themes around residents' broad priorities and although we will publish a full report once the consultation period has closed, it is not likely that the themes outlined above should change substantially. Many of the responses received to date corroborate what we already know about resident views through previous engagement and consultation activities and add weight to the sense we have of local sentiments.
- 4.4 The feedback on the budget reduction proposals will also be used to help shape the council's spending plans, helping drive future strategic planning across the system.

## 5. Next steps

- 5.1 Cabinet members are asked to note the contents of the report and ensure that resident views and experiences are considered when making budget recommendations.
- 5.2 Members of the communication team will prepare a full report to be included on the agenda at the Full Council meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2023.