

# Appendix 15

## Big Oldham Conversation: Budget 2023/24

### **Responses to our Budget proposals**

Last update: 21 February 2023

# 1 Overview

- 1.1 The Big Oldham Conversation public consultation on our budget proposals for 2023/24 went live on 11th January 2023 and ran until Friday 10th February 2023.
- 1.2 This report summarises all responses we received to the budget consultation, including those received through our website as well as via social media.
- 1.3 Additional insight, from a number of varying sources, is provided where this has been collected within the last 12 months and where pertinent to overall sentiment on council spend, service delivery and resident priorities.
- 1.4 The report also details the communication and engagement activity carried out across channels to promote our budget consultation to as many residents, businesses, stakeholders and partners as possible across Oldham.

# 2 Summary

- 2.1 A total of 223 **responses** have been received to the budget consultation.
- 2.2 The consultation, which was 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 asked respondents where they feel that savings should be made. The second question asked 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.
- 2.4 Comments were also collected on our Council social media accounts, including Facebook and Twitter, both of which have a large, local following. Residents were able to add comments under the posts and reply to one another, prompting discussion amongst residents themselves. Due to the nature of the posts, there is no way to discern demographic information, although it is likely that contributors live within borough.

# 3. Publicity

## 3.1 Media and advertising

- 3.1.1 Our budget consultation was promoted using our established channels of communication in the traditional media (i.e. local and regional newspapers), on the Oldham Council website and across social media on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.
- 3.1.2 "Organic" (i.e. unpaid) social media posts ran on Oldham Council's social media channels throughout the duration of the consultation period, signposting members of

the public to the online consultation portal as well as inviting them to comment online. On Facebook, these posts received 33,611 impressions, on Twitter, our budget posts gained 19,257 impressions and on LinkedIn, we received 1,296. In total, therefore, organic social media posts on the budget issued on Council channels were seen by a total of 54,164. Responses are analysed in the next section of this report.

- 3.1.3 A total of **2,473** page views were made to the budget consultation page of the Oldham Council website during the consultation period (11 January to 10 February 2023).

## 4. Respondents

- 4.1 We received a total of 223 responses to our formal budget consultation along with over 50,000 impressions, including, views, comments and reactions on social media (across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn).
- 4.2 Predominantly, respondents to the budget consultation identified themselves as being residents of Oldham with a minority identifying themselves as a local business. However, many of the comments received pointed to a significant number of Oldham Council staff responding both in the capacity as a local resident but referring to their professional experience of Oldham Council services.
- 4.3 The remainder of responses did not directly state their connection to Oldham. These were primarily the comments received via social media.

## 5. Resident insight

- 5.1.1 As part of the formal budget consultation survey, 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.
- 5.1.2 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.
- 5.1.3 The report also considers the emerging themes for those who responded and social media and finally summarises insight taken from other engagement and consultation activities where this is relevant to the budget setting process and resident views around council services and spending priorities.

### 5.2 Consultation Responses on Savings

#### *Workforce*

- 5.2.1 Reforming the council workforce was one of the most prominent themes which emerged throughout the budget consultation as a means to save money.
- 5.2.2 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*”.

- 5.2.3 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.
- 5.2.4 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*

- 5.2.5 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
- 5.2.6 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 the vast majority of the respondents who highlighted this as a key area where savings could be found were council employees and cited their personal experiences of “*using old IT systems which need updating to make our time more efficient*”.
- 5.2.7 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*

- 5.2.8 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.
- 5.2.9 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.

5.2.10 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.

### 5.3 Consultation Responses on Spending

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

#### *Children's Services*

5.3.2 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.

5.3.3 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.

5.3.4 The early years and children's centres were 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*

5.3.5 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.

5.3.6 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

- 5.3.7 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".
- 5.3.8 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".
- 5.3.9 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.

## 5.4 Previous Engagement

- 5.4.1 As part of the budget consultation, we have conducted a literature review of existing insight from a number of engagement activities over the last twelve months. Although these sources did not directly relate to the budget setting process, the insight their answers provided have application within this consultation.
- 5.4.2 The main sources used for this literature review were the results from the Residents' Survey, the Children and Young Peoples Voice, a summary of findings from consultation with Children and Young People on the Oldham Plan, The Alliance Strategic Outcomes and Make Your Mark 2022, and themes from the Poverty Truth Commission.
- 5.4.3 The recently conducted residents' survey used a representative sample of Oldham's population. The survey contained several questions regarding the way money is spent and elicited responses from residents that are relevant to the budget setting process. When asked about council value for money, respondents were broadly split between positive and negative sentiment. When compared to national LGA benchmarking, residents in Oldham are more likely to believe that the council does not provide value for money when delivering services.
- 5.4.4 The survey also asked residents about their priorities for improvements in the local area and qualitative responses have been thematically analysed. A number of prominent themes emerged with the suggested improvements for Oldham. One of the most common themes centred around developing the local retail offer and improving nightlife and opportunities for cultural and social activities. This was prevalent across those surveyed and not limited to a particular ward or age group. Although the retail offer was a key concern for residents, consultation with children and young people to support the development of the Oldham Plan found that young people prefer to shop online and would value local centres for other uses such as socialising and housing, rather than having shops close to home (by a ratio of 2:1).

- 5.4.5 During the resident survey, participants were asked which council services they were most satisfied with, with very high levels of satisfaction reported across key services including waste collection, parks and green spaces and sports and leisure facilities. This correlates with findings from the Children and Young People's Voice Summary carried out in 2022 which stated that parks were highlighted as young people's favourite aspect of the borough and identified that critical to helping young people feel proud and ready for life is living in communities with improved environments.
- 5.4.6 Consultation with young people has consistently demonstrated the importance attached to local environment, with youth engagement over the last year showing that young people prefer clean air and reliance on public transport over private vehicle transport. As part of Make Your Mark, 'Cheaper and Safer Public transport' was identified as one of the Top 3 Local issues voted for by Oldham Young People. Improving transport facilities was also mentioned by residents during the Residents' Survey, as a way of improving Oldham more generally.
- 5.4.7 Finally, previous engagement with Oldham residents has shown the overwhelming support for the funding and support to alleviate cost of living pressures on households. The doorstep engagement teams routinely report cost of living pressures as the primary concern of residents. The team receives consistent praise for the council's efforts to protect residents as far as possible from price rises. The resident survey showed significant levels of concern regarding energy bills, the increasing cost of food and changes to household income. Engagement with the Poverty Truth Commission over the last 12 months has highlighted the main ways in which those who are experiencing poverty would prefer to be supported, including through '*welcoming points of contact*', the '*reduction of stigma through raising hope*' and '*places of belonging*' including the need for shared community bases. It is likely that any further support for residents in this respect will be well received by local residents.

## 5.5 Social Media Themes

- 5.5.1 As part of the communications plan, the budget consultation was promoted widely across social media including on Oldham Council's Facebook page which has a large, local following. Residents were able to add comments under the posts and reply to one another. There was a strong sense that views expressed during the budget consultation would not be taken into account during the budget setting process, with one resident describing it as a "*sham*" and suggesting that "*without proper information being made available to residents, councillors and journalists, how can any meaningful input be expected?*" Similarly, many residents expressed frustration that the budget consultation had not provided context in terms of current spending levels making it difficult for residents to make suggestions on spending priorities. This feedback will be taken into account when developing next year's budget consultation.
- 5.5.2 Comments were strongly focused on the council's revenue streams with many residents expressing confusion over how council funding could be spent. Given the timing of some of the posts, many of those responding queried why funding couldn't be found to secure Oldham Coliseum's future.
- 5.5.3 Some expressed consternation that council tax would be increased suggesting a sense of unfairness that residents will be "*paying more and getting less*" and placed this in the wider context of budgetary restraint and central government austerity over the last decade, with many expressing a need to improve employment opportunities which would, in turn, increase the council tax base. Throughout the social media comments, residents were cognisant of dwindling resources and the impact on service delivery the support offered locally.

## 6. Conclusion

- 6.1.1 Oldham's budget consultation 2023/24 has engaged with residents, service users, staff, local businesses and partner organisations, to gather feedback on this year's proposals. This has included a wide range of feedback mechanisms, including a multi-channel communications strategy incorporating digital, social and traditional media, consultation events and through the dedicated online portal.
- 6.1.2 This report provides an overview of the responses received to our budget consultation following the interim report which was presented to Cabinet Members on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2023 and has included wider responses received via social media as well as a summary of comments received across all channels.
- 6.1.3 As has been outlined above, there are clear, emerging themes around residents' broad priorities, with a strong focus on protecting our vulnerable adults and children, maintaining high quality key services such as street cleaning and bin collections, as well as maximising and improving local parks and green space.
- 6.1.4 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.

## 7. Next Steps

- 7.1 Elected members are asked to note the contents of the report and ensure that resident views and experiences are considered when making budget recommendations.
- 7.2 In line with some of the findings, members of the communication team will be developing plans to increase resident awareness of local government funding criteria, including how capital and revenue spending can be used. It is envisaged that greater clarity this increase resident confidence in the council's spending plans and the large-scale capital projects throughout the town centre.