

# Big Oldham Conversation: Budget 2024/25

**Interim update: Budget proposals**

Last update: 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024

# 1 Overview

- 1.1 The Big Oldham Conversation public consultation on our budget proposals for 2024/25 went live on 10th January 2024 and will run until Friday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2024.
- 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.
- 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 **223 responses** have been received to the budget consultation to date.
- 2.2 The consultation, which is live on Oldham's new digital engagement platform, 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. Unlike previous years, respondents were not explicitly asked to share demographic information. Respondents can create a user account with Engagement HQ which does collect household information however this is not a prerequisite for participation. Very few respondents opted to create an account, therefore we have limited information on demographics.

## 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. Many respondents felt that there is a top-heavy structure with unnecessary layers of management and fewer frontline practitioners who work directly with families in Oldham to drive improved outcomes.
- 3.2.3 Many respondents felt that the council had an over-reliance on costly consultants and agency staff and not enough was being done to implement a 'grow our own' approach to workforce development.

### *Town Centre Regeneration*

- 3.2.4 Resident views around the regeneration of Oldham Town Centre and Creating a Better Place were mixed. Although there were many positive comments around the town centre regeneration plans and saw this a mechanism for revenue raising, the vast majority of respondents viewed the investment as at the direct expense of frontline services including interventions for children and young peoples' services, social care and alleviating the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.
- 3.2.5 As with the findings of previous years' budget consultations, the current findings offer a valuable occasion to transparently communicate and elucidate the council's revenue streams. This opportunity serves as a platform to improve public understanding and foster greater clarity regarding the sources of income that sustain the council's operation and draw a distinction between revenue and capital spending. By communicating this to residents, the council not only engages in a proactive approach to financial transparency but also establishes a foundation for building trust and accountability with residents.
- 3.2.6 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. In addition, there were a significant number of respondents who felt the proposals for the new theatre in Oldham were unnecessary, would not replicate the Oldham Coliseum and funding would have been better spent in protecting the future of this institution.

## **3.3 Consultation Responses on Spending**

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

### *Children's Services*

- 3.3.2 Survey participants were clear and unanimous in their call for prioritising education and creating more opportunities for young people in council spending. The overwhelming agreement highlights the community's strong belief in investing in the future of our youth. Respondents stressed the need for increased funding in educational infrastructure, vocational training programs, and initiatives that broaden access to diverse learning opportunities.
- 3.3.3 Respondents emphasised the need for increased support for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the development of high-quality mental health care for our most vulnerable young people.

### *Adult social care*

- 3.3.4 Adult social care was highlighted as a key spending priority for respondents. Some respondents cited the difficulty in accessing adult social care services for elderly relatives and the worry they have of the potential costs involved. Residents felt strongly that our adults should be protected as they enter older age and become more vulnerable.

### *Clean and Green*

- 3.3.5 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".
- 3.3.6 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 specifically related this to overall pride in the borough. There was a feeling that districts in Oldham are in decline with many respondents referring to neighbourhoods as scruffy and unsightly. This echoes findings of previous consultations over the last two years.
- 3.3.7 The maintenance of parks and green space was considered a key priority in spending plans. There is a clear sense of pride across Oldham in the quality of local community parks, greenspace and surrounding countryside. Residents in Oldham expressly linked the priority placed on maintaining parks and green spaces to the crucial aspect of mental health. The overwhelming sentiment is that these natural environments serve as vital havens for relaxation, recreation, and a break from the pressures of daily life. Survey responses consistently highlighted the recognised positive impact of green spaces on mental well-being, underscoring their role in reducing stress, enhancing mood, and providing a space for physical activity.

## 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 9<sup>th</sup> February 2024 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 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024.