

Big Oldham Conversation: Budget 2024/25

Responses to our Budget proposals

Last update: 14th February 2024

1 Overview

- 1.1 The Big Oldham Conversation public consultation on our budget proposals for 2023/24 went live on 16th January 2023 and ran until 9th 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 352 **responses** have been received to the budget consultation to date via the online consultation platform. This is an increase on last year's consultation which gathered 232 formal responses which is a 51% increase. A further 19 responses were received via email to AskHarry, along with 29 consultation forms to Alex Park depot and a final 5 at Moorhey. Across all mediums, this takes the total number of responses received to 405.
- 2.2 The consultation, which was live on Oldham Council'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 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 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. Our budget consultation was promoted using our established channels of communication on the Oldham Council website and across social media on Twitter and Facebook.
- 3.2 "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 3,446 impressions and on Twitter, our budget posts

gained 6,177. In total, therefore, organic social media posts on the budget issued on Council channels were seen by a total of 9,623.

- 3.3 A total of 111 comments were received on Facebook posts promoting the budget consultation and a further 20 comments were received on Twitter posts. These comments have been analysed and are included within the report.
- 3.4 A total of **1,300** views were made to the budget consultation page of the Oldham Council website during the consultation period (16 January to 9 February 2023).

4. Respondents

- 4.1 We received a total of 352 responses to our formal budget consultation along with over 9,623 impressions, including, views, comments and reactions on social media (across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn).
- 4.2 Unlike the previous years' budget consultation, participants were not asked to provide any demographic information. This could be voluntarily provided via the engagement platform and the option to create an account however this was not a pre-requisite to taking part in the consultation. As the majority of participants opted not to disclose demographic information, this will not be part of the analysis.

5. Resident insight

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 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.
- 5.3 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.

5.1 Consultation Responses on Savings

Workforce

- 5.1.1 Reforming the council workforce was one of the most prominent themes which emerged throughout the budget consultation as a means to save money. As with the previous years' consultation, this has remained the most predominant theme around council savings.
- 5.1.2 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. There was a strong feeling from 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.

- 5.1.3 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.

Town Centre Regeneration

- 5.1.4 There were strong feelings on both sides around the value and necessity of Oldham's capital regeneration projects although overall, the picture was highly 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.
- 5.1.5 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.
- 5.1.6 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. It was clear from the volume of responses as well as their tone and content, that residents feel a deep sense of emotional attachment to the Oldham Coliseum.

5.2 Consultation Responses on Spending

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

Children's Services

- 5.2.2 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.

- 5.2.3 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.
- 5.2.4 Investing in the early years and children's centres emerged as a focal point for expenditure, as highlighted by several respondents. They underscored the significance, viewing it as a proactive preventive measure that would mitigate against the need mitigating the need for high-cost services in the future. Residents clearly articulated their belief in prevention and early intervention strategies as a sound financial measure, but also related to this strongly as a point of principle with the need to protect and support our most vulnerable residents.
- 5.2.5 Residents frequently drew a distinction between essential services for individuals and those catering to the community or place, with sentiments such as "support vulnerable children before you pay for firework displays" echoing this perspective. The main sentiment suggested a prioritisation of services based on necessity, emphasising a preference for addressing core human need before allocating resources to more discretionary or 'nice to have' elements.

Adult social care

- 5.2.6 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.
- 5.2.7 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*".
- 5.2.8 Investment in adult social care, particularly concerning the workforce's recruitment and retention, was a focus for many. Some of the comments of this nature would indicate either responses from those with lived experience or those employed in the sector itself. Respondents expressed concerns about the challenges in attracting and retaining skilled professionals, prompting discussions on the efficacy of "grow your own" initiatives. However, wider workforce concerns were prevalent, encompassing issues such as insufficient supervision, inadequate training, and a lack of overall support. These factors not only impact the quality of care but also contribute to the difficulty in retaining dedicated professionals.
- 5.2.9 In articulating the need for strengthened adult social care sector, many respondents strongly emphasised the vital importance of increased investment in the voluntary sector across Oldham regarding this as an instrumental part of the wider system. There was an acknowledgment amongst some respondents of the interconnected nature of the social care system, spanning multiple organisations. This complexity raised concerns about the potential for individuals to slip through the cracks, highlighting the risk of gaps in the system. The recognition of this vulnerability underscored the broader impact on the overall well-being of the general population. The sentiment expressed reflects a shared awareness that a cohesive and well-coordinated social care system is vital to prevent individuals from experiencing lapses in support, ultimately safeguarding the well-being of the wider community.

Clean and Green

- 5.2.10 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".
- 5.2.11 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 including last year's budget consultation in which this issue was repeatedly raised by respondents.
- 5.2.12 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.

Housing

- 5.2.13 Residents identified housing as a crucial area deserving budgetary prioritization. Concerns spanned both social and private housing, with comments highlighting the prevalent poor condition of housing without effective recourse. Criticisms were directed at council housing teams, perceived as lacking authority in addressing issues with rogue landlords or subpar social housing conditions. Additionally, residents expressed dissatisfaction with lengthy waiting lists for social housing, further emphasising the need for attention and funding to address these challenges.
- 5.2.14 Some respondents drew connections between housing concerns and broader issues, particularly in relation to house prices impacting the younger generations. The sentiment was that rising house prices, coupled with stagnant salaries and a cost-of-living crisis, were disproportionately affecting younger individuals. This, in turn, raised concerns about the diminishing equality of opportunity and hindered social mobility. The perception was that the challenging housing market was placing younger generations at a distinct disadvantage, prompting a call to address not only housing conditions but also the larger socio-economic implications for the younger population.
- 5.2.15 Recent focus groups within the Parent Carer Panel, involving school and education staff and practitioners from the Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) sector delved into discussions on barriers and enablers for establishing a robust home learning environment. Practitioners strongly emphasised housing as a pivotal barrier for young children, impacting not only their school readiness but also their emotional well-being and mental health. Examples were shared, illustrating instances where cramped and overcrowded living conditions hindered children's ability to learn, with living rooms transformed into bedrooms to accommodate large families. Moreover, practitioners highlighted cases of families relocating across the borough and Greater Manchester due to insecure housing tenancies, rising rents, and, often, the aftermath of domestic abuse, significantly affecting children's learning and sense of stability. Practitioners

stressed that housing is a fundamental human need, asserting that if the basics, like stable housing, aren't addressed, children cannot thrive, hindering improvements in various other areas of their well-being and development.

5.3 Social Media Themes

- 5.3.1 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.
- 5.3.2 Mirroring the responses seen across the formal consultation, comments were strongly focused on the spending on the council's workforce and in particular councillor's allowances which was felt should be reduced given the picture of local authority funding. Again, comments related to the overall structure of the organisation with suggestions that posts should be deleted and staff should not receive any pay increases.
- 5.3.3 Many other comments related directly to service delivery and individual casework issues with queries around bin collections, potholes and instances of fly-tipping locally. Although this did not entirely relate to the council's questions around spending priorities, it does give some indication of the strength of feeling around clean and green issues locally.
- 5.3.4 Finally, other comments related to the consultation process itself, suggesting that the council should provide more detailed information around their current spending and any future plans or potential service changes so respondents are able to reflect properly and provide commentary and insight from a more informed perspective. This was a very similar sentiment echoed in the previous years' consultation and it may be the case that future budget consultations will provide more prescriptive information around the council's current financial position.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Oldham's budget consultation 2024/25 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.
- 6.2 This report provides an overview of the responses received to our budget consultation following the interim report and has included wider responses received via social media as well as a summary of comments received across all channels.
- 6.3 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.
- 6.4 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.