

**CONSULTATION ON THE COUNCIL'S BUDGET PROPOSALS  
JANUARY 2015**

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1. Between December 2014 and January 2015 the Council undertook an eight week period of consultation on its budget proposals for 2015/16, prior to making the final decision on its budget.
- 1.2. The Council reported on its priorities, the budget setting context and local financial position and gave an outline of the proposals to balance the Council's 2015/16 budget. The Council asked consultees for their views on its proposals for delivering services in the future while achieving the saving needed and also asked how communities and organisations could get involved in designing and delivering services in a different way.
- 1.3. To help to explain the budget context and implications of the proposals more clearly, a short video was made available for people to view on the Council web pages. The page also had links to more information including the detailed reports. The web page had good coverage with over 3000 visits in addition 5623 people viewed the video on Facebook and 921 on YouTube.

**2. Consultation process**

- 2.1. A series of meetings were held during January and early February, the consultation process was led by the Cabinet Member Strategic Finance and Resources and supported by members of Strategic Management Board and other senior managers. Wherever possible, the opportunity was taken to attend existing meetings held by local organisations and groups to maximise participation in the consultation process.
- 2.2. The consultation involved the following:
  - Coventry Youth Council
  - Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce
  - Local Public Service Board
  - Partner organisations in the Public and Private Sector
  - Voluntary and Community Groups
  - Local Residents
  - Older People's Partnership
  - Physical and Sensory Impairment Partnership
  - The Council's Trade Unions
- 2.3. Representatives from organisations and residents who were unable to attend the meetings were given the opportunity to receive the related reports and to send their comments directly to the Council. Five written responses were received.
- 2.4. In addition to the public meetings, the Council hosted a survey on its website asking for people's views of the budget proposals as well as asking about what things they are currently doing in their community, what they could do more of and what support they may need to continue doing this. This survey was publicised through the local press, the Council website and Facebook pages. There were a total of 170 responses and the results of the survey are summarised in section 4.

- 2.5. The Council consults with the trade unions on an ongoing basis on the implications of specific reviews. Comments and issues raised by the trade unions on the individual reviews are addressed at project level. The Trade Unions were consulted on the draft budget proposals at a series of meetings held in November 2014 and December 2014. In addition a written response was also received from one trade union. The Council continues to consult with the trade unions on the impact and implementation of the Council's budget.
- 2.6. A total of seven petitions were registered during the consultation period. Six of these related to potential cuts to libraries and library services. Once the petitions have closed they will be referred to the appropriate Cabinet Member to consider alongside more detailed proposals on the City Centre First Strategy once these are available. One other petition related to the budget cuts and will be considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 24th February 2015, along with the budget proposals.

### **3. Outcomes of the public consultation on the Council's budget proposals**

- 3.1. The main themes and issues raised during the public consultation meetings are summarised below in section 3. The main themes and issues from the on line survey and written feedback are summarised in section 4.
- 3.2. A full list of comments from the meetings, on line survey and written feedback can be received by contacting [insight@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:insight@coventry.gov.uk)

#### **Council Priorities**

- 3.3. A summary of comments in relation to the Council's priorities and investment proposals are summarised below.
- 3.4. There was a general agreement that economic improvement and growth was important for the city. Getting the infrastructure right had many benefits in terms of jobs, housing and retail offer. Housing growth was seen to be a key issue to meet population growth and both the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber and Youth Council discussed the difficulties of having to take unpopular planning decisions to deliver new housing. Whilst more jobs had been created it was important to make sure that this was reflected in increased spend in the city centre as a result regeneration of the city centre, improved road networks and infrastructure were seen to be key priorities.
- 3.5. There was also agreement that focusing on the most vulnerable is the right thing to do. The Youth Council was of the view that early years support for children and families would help to avoid problems further down the line. It was noted that new money was going into children's services but that this was not the case for services for older people. A comment was made that this appeared to be directly opposed to the intention of Coventry being an Age Friendly City. Comments were also made that proposed cuts to services may increase vulnerability and also move pressures to other services particularly in the voluntary sector for example via increased demand on advice services.

#### **Key Strategies**

- 3.6. The Council outlined its strategy for delivering services whilst meeting the need to reduce budgets. Comments have been grouped under the following three strands: Customer First, Working Differently with Partners and Communities and City Centre First.

### **Customer First**

- 3.7. It was generally acknowledged that the Council had to do things more efficiently and that one way of doing this would be through more on-line customer transactions. On the other hand concern was expressed that the overall levels of service were to be reduced with less ways for people to be in contact with the Council in the future. One of the main concerns was for older people who may not have sufficient confidence or have access to their own internet facilities. Whilst this would be an increasingly diminishing problem for future generations, a transition period was requested in which there would continue to be some options for face to face and telephone contact. There was some concern over the accessibility of the new Customer Centre which was to be located on the second floor at Broadgate.

### **Working Differently with Partners and Communities**

- 3.8. There were a range of positive offers from groups and organisations wanting to be involved in helping to design and deliver services in different ways. The request was made that organisations should be involved in the earliest stages of planning and the Council was asked to consider the value of a phased approach. Details of interested individuals and organisations were recorded and these will be followed up as part of future community engagement work.
- 3.9. Alternative suggestions were made for the operation of services such as libraries, parks and youth services ranging from social enterprises, community interest groups and involvement of schools and universities. The churches also commented that they had networks and services that could potentially help and be developed to bridge some of the gaps. Other organisations also highlighted advice and support that they could offer to up and coming groups, social enterprise and business.
- 3.10. With regard to volunteering, the voluntary sector suggested that they were particularly well placed to develop a volunteering strategy for the city. The over 55s age group were seen as one group that could be actively encouraged to participate in volunteering. There were however some associated difficulties highlighted around the use of volunteers including health and safety issues, training and transport costs.
- 3.11. There were a number of people already involved in delivering community based services e.g. friends of parks, who said that it was important for the Council to maintain a presence and some professional input into service delivery. There was also a perceived danger of services being set up using short term funding opportunities that could not be sustained in the longer term.

### **City Centre First**

- 3.12. The rationale for bringing more services into the city centre and reducing the number of buildings that the Council operated from was clear, although transport links and parking costs were of concern. There was a lot of interest in how the Council planned to use its vacated buildings and a range of opportunities were discussed from generating new business in the city centre, making neighbourhood based assets available for community groups, sharing locations with other partners and disposal.
- 3.13. By far the biggest concern was the lack of information given on the location of the remaining 3 or 4 hubs. The majority of people said that there must be further consultation once more detailed proposals were available. Early involvement in any proposed changes was extremely important for community organisations to enable future planning.

3.14. There was also considerable concern over the impact that the City Centre First strategy would have on local areas and services. The possible closure of libraries, community centres and youth centres would have most impact on older and young people, increasing the need to travel and thereby disadvantaging the most vulnerable. There was also a risk that some areas would have more capacity to take over community facilities than others which would further reduce opportunities for poorer areas.

### 3.15. Budget Proposals

Other suggestions and comments on the budget proposals included;

- Generating income through selling services or utilities.
- Sharing costs by delivering services jointly with neighbouring authorities and local organisations.
- Using the Council's remaining reserves to fund services rather than making cuts.
- Opposing austerity and government cuts.
- Impact of borrowing and financial decisions on future generations.

## 4. Feedback from the on line survey and written feedback

4.1. The feedback from the on line consultation identified some similar themes. The majority of comments received were opposed to cuts being made, a large number of respondents pointed out that both libraries and community centres are vital resources in communities and their closure would have enormous effects on the well-being of an area. Respondents also voiced concern over the City Centre First proposals highlighting the fact that the most vulnerable would bear the brunt of the impact. Other common themes were the Council should stop wasting money on big new schemes, they should spend their reserves and they should oppose the austerity cuts and lobby Central Government.

4.2. A large number of respondents stated that they were already doing things in their community and would be prepared to do more, however a common theme emerged that there was a need for a lot more information about what services need to be run and what this would entail from the Council before respondents could fully respond to a question like this. Areas of support that were mentioned were access to funding, rooms and facilitation/coordination support. 23 respondents registered their details so they could receive invitations to take part in future consultations or to be invited to getting more involved in helping to reshape the way services are designed and delivered.

4.3. Written responses included letters from residents, a twitter conversation with the Cabinet Member and a formal response from trade union (Unison). The main theme of the letters was concern over the proposed cuts to libraries, community centres and children's centres. The view was given that the Council would not be making savings by closing libraries, it would have a radical impact on communities and also a knock on effect on other services such as adult education. There was also concern that if services such as libraries were to be dismantled it was unlikely that they would be re-instated and therefore gone forever. There was also concern over Council plans to reduce the amount spent on repairing vandalism and the feeling that this would have a detrimental impact on the local area and the city.

4.4. A wide range of issues were raised in the trade union (Unison) written response and a separate reply has been prepared. Some of the key concerns included the lack of detail for City Centre First, the impact on communities and in particular the impact on vulnerable, older and disabled people. Other issues raised included the impact of the workforce strategy on employees terms and conditions, the plans for disposal of assets in the city centre and how funding would be used. It was also suggested that plans to

become a City of Culture in 2020 were at odds with cutting various visitor facilities in the city.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

- 5.1. The feedback from the consultation indicates that the Council's priorities for; growing the city and protecting the most vulnerable; were clear and supported. There were significant concerns over the level of savings outlined in the budget proposals. The biggest issue raised was the lack of detail available around the City Centre First strategy upon which to comment. There was also concern over the potential impact on local neighbourhoods as well as the potential closures of libraries, community centres and youth facilities. The Council will need to consider its plans to inform, involve, consult and engage with all interest groups once more detailed proposals become available.
- 5.2. The consultation has given the Council an opportunity to talk to partners, community groups and individuals about some of the challenges and how they can be involved in the design and delivery of future services. This has resulted in some positive offers and potential interest which will be followed up through further discussions.