

BUDGET 2016: CONSULTATION FINDINGS

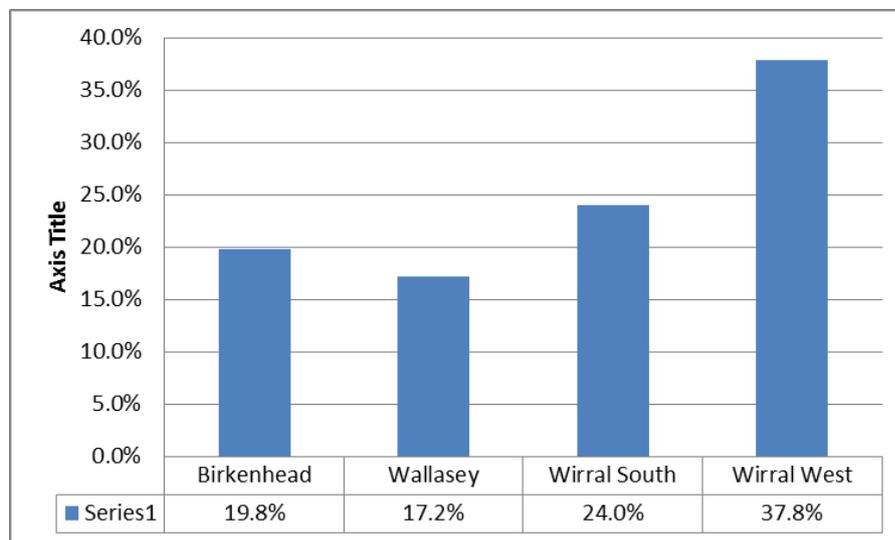
1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consultation feedback which has been received from residents and people using services is presented for Members within this report. The report contains the results of the general consultation questionnaire, as well as the feedback which has been received in relation to each individual budget proposal which was published for public consultation.

Residents were provided with a summary of each budget proposal, covering the level of saving predicted to be achieved, the nature of the proposal, its potential impact and the mitigation which could be employed by the council.

2.0 CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

10,092 consultation questionnaires were returned during the period of consultation between 18 December and 25 January. This once again represents the highest level of engagement for this and any other Council for similar exercises. The response sample is over-represented in terms of older residents and those residents living in the West of the borough, with a lower than expected response from both Wallasey and Birkenhead residents. The breakdown of responses by constituency is shown in the chart below.



In relation to the age of the consultation responses, the majority of respondents were aged 45-64 (45.6%) and 65+ (28.4%). Respondents were relatively evenly split in relation to gender and over 10% of responses came from people stating that they had a disability, which is broadly similar to previous exercises and the population profile as a whole. 95.5% of responses (9342) came from Wirral residents, with 8.1% (789) coming from Wirral Council employees.

The set of data provided to Members below demonstrates feedback from residents on the questions within the general consultation questionnaire.

<p>Many councils work together to provide joint services, which can bring about major cost savings as well as result in more sustainable services. Wirral could work with councils across Merseyside and Cheshire to provide certain services this way. To what extent would you support or oppose this type of development?</p>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Support	29.3%	2918
Support	42.7%	4258
Neither Support nor Oppose	12.1%	1203
Oppose	9.2%	914
Strongly Oppose	6.7%	671

<p>The council provides a number of services either for free, or for a fee which is less than what the service actually costs. The council could charge enough to cover the full costs of providing these services. To what extent would you support or oppose this approach?</p>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Support	9.4%	932
Support	29.2%	2890
Neither Support nor Oppose	22.6%	2232
Oppose	26.6%	2629
Strongly Oppose	12.2%	1211

<p>The council could look into whether the private sector, or a community or voluntary organisation, could provide a cheaper, more efficient service for some council functions. To what extent would you support or oppose this type of approach?</p>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Support	19.3%	1907
Support	37.2%	3669
Neither Support nor Oppose	12.4%	1220
Oppose	17.7%	1748
Strongly Oppose	13.5%	1331

<p>Provided the council was still responsible for making sure services were available at the right quality, would you support the council paying someone else to deliver some services, rather than the council providing them itself?</p>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Support	15.9%	1567
Support	39.7%	3919
Neither Support nor Oppose	12.3%	1218
Oppose	18.9%	1864
Strongly Oppose	13.2%	1303

<p>The council and its partners own a large number of buildings across Wirral. Wirral Council could review the use of these buildings to provide services from a smaller, more cost effective number of locations. To what extent do you support or oppose this option?</p>		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Support	32.7%	3235
Support	45.5%	4499
Neither Support nor Oppose	11.5%	1139
Oppose	6.9%	685
Strongly Oppose	3.2%	321

3.0 BUDGET PROPOSALS

Residents were provided with a series of proposals for how the Council could achieve savings in 2016/17. These proposals were published online and promoted extensively, as well as being available in hard copy at over 50 locations throughout the borough. This section of the consultation feedback provides members with a summary of the proposal as well as a summarised description of the feedback which has been received. Verbatim comments which have been received through the online and paper consultation channels are published on the council website.

Garden Waste Charging

Summary of Proposal

The council provides a discretionary service which collects garden waste from residents' homes. The service currently costs £35 per year per household. This proposal would implement an increase in that charge, resulting in each resident who wants the service to pay £40 per year, with a discount of £5 if they pay online. This increase amounts to around 10p per week.

Summary of Feedback

202 comments were received from residents on this proposal. General themes of feedback can be summarised as;

- A large proportion of comments received actually supported the proposal to increase the cost, stating that a £5 increase in the annual cost was reasonable.
- Those people who disagreed with the proposal expressed concern that it could lead to increased levels of fly-tipping and reduced recycling rates if people opted out of the service.

Re-Provision of Girtrell Court

Summary of Proposal

Girtrell Court is a respite breaks facility, providing short breaks for carers of adults with complex physical and learning disabilities. This is the only directly provided care home for adults owned by the council. The majority of this type of care, in Wirral and across the country, is now provided by the independent sector.

The care that is currently being provided at Girtrell Court could be provided by an extensive range of independent providers across the borough and the region. The council could achieve increased choice, better value and ensure the same quality of care and support through following best value commissioning practice.

Summary of Feedback

A statutory consultation process in relation to the Girtrell Court has been commenced and is ongoing. This consultation process involves every family currently accessing a service from Girtrell Court taking advantage of a one-to-one meeting with a social work professional to explore potential options for meeting their assessed need. This consultation will last three months (from 18 December 2015), and the feedback reported here is in addition to the feedback collected through the statutory process. In addition to the feedback related here, Councillors and officers have received letters and other representations from residents, an e-petition has been created on the council website and we have been made aware of a social media campaign (Save Girtrell Court – Facebook). All of this feedback has been considered as part of the consultation process. 189 comments were received through the Council's consultation channels, which can be summarised as follows:

- Residents expressed concerns about the level and quality of alternative provision available in the private and voluntary sector; these concerns are being addressed in the ongoing consultation process.
- Residents were concerned that relationships with staff and other users of the Girtrell Court facility would be lost should the service be re-provided elsewhere.

Self-Assessment

Summary of Proposal

People want to be more independent and self-sufficient; it's our role to enable and support that to happen. We need to improve access to information and decision making for vulnerable people and their families. From January a new interactive online system will allow direct access to advice and information so that people can make their own decisions about their care and support.

This proposal would see the council working with families and people who need services to support and encourage them to identify and access the support and services they require themselves.

Summary of Feedback

48 comments were received relating to this proposal, which can be summarised as follows:

- This proposal was generally supported provided that provision was made to support those people unable to complete self-assessments.

Community Safety

Summary of Proposal

This proposal would see the council make changes across a number of its community safety services, moving towards being financially self-sufficient, through increasing income from external organisations such as schools and landlords, while at the same time making a small reduction in the management of the service.

We will also put a major focus on reducing dog fouling throughout the borough through increasing enforcement activity.

Summary of Feedback

42 comments were received related to this proposal, which can be summarised as follows:

- Residents were keen to ensure that any changes to the community safety services mentioned did not lead to a reduction in service.

Leisure Centre Concessions

Summary of Proposal

Our 2015 residents' survey told us that this was our lowest priority service: this does not mean it is not important, but rather that residents feel it is not where the council's limited resources should be invested. Our ambition is to find a new way of running leisure centres, to keep them financially viable. To achieve that ambition we must make the operating business model sustainable and attractive. Our leisure centres at the moment run at a combined cost of over £4 million per year.

To reduce this subsidy, and put the leisure centres in a position where they are more sustainable for the long term, we need to remove many of the discounts and free access to the facilities which we currently offer. This includes providing free access to the facilities for long-serving council staff, to foster carers and their families, and free swimming for under 18s during school holidays and over 65s between 9am and 12pm.

We will also continue negotiations with the community over the potential transfer of Beechwood Recreation Centre, keeping a much valued facility open and operated by the community it serves.

Summary of Feedback

114 comments were received relating to this proposal, which can be summarised as follows:

- Residents were generally understanding and at times supportive of the proposal to reduce concessions to make leisure centres more cost-effective.
- Some concerns were expressed about the impact on health and wellbeing and suggestions made about different proposals and pricing structures for the services which are currently available for free.

Re-Provision of Library Service

Summary of Proposal

Wirral must and will ensure we always enable and provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, and one which meets the needs of our communities. This proposal would see the council make a relatively small saving through working with community organisations and volunteers to increase their involvement in running council-funded library buildings.

We do not believe we will have to close any library buildings as part of this proposal. We are already seeing many community organisations, groups and volunteers take an active role in running their local library; we believe we can encourage more of this work and allow the council to make the savings we need while keeping the facilities open for the communities who want them.

Summary of Feedback

The Council has received detailed feedback on this proposal from the Friends of Wirral Libraries Steering Group, which has been considered as part of this consultation process. 90 further comments were received, which can be summarised as follows:

- Residents expressed concerns that a library service relying more on volunteers and community support would be less reliable and quality would suffer.
- Some residents were in general agreement with this proposal if it resulted in no library closures, and other residents highlighted that a smaller number of better libraries would be the preferable option.
- A number of residents expressed concern about the potential loss of professional librarians and their associated knowledge and expertise.

Community Partnership: Parks

Summary of Proposal

Wirral has 240 parks and open spaces which the council maintains; the maintenance of which currently provides good value for money. This proposal would see the council achieve savings through increasing opportunities for community groups and volunteers to take a more active role in our parks and open spaces.

Summary of Feedback

The Wirral Parks Friends Forum has expressed concerns in relation to this option around the availability of volunteers, and the wider deliverability and impact of the proposal. 55 comments were received relating to this proposal, which can be summarised as follows:

- Residents expressed how valuable Wirral's parks were to their local communities and the wider environment.
- Many residents were generally supportive of this proposal, provided volunteers were provided with enough advice and support.
- People made a number of other suggestions related to income and efficiency to further protect Wirral's parks and open spaces.

Charging for Pest Control

Summary of Proposal

The council delivers a comprehensive pest control service for residents, businesses and organisations. Parts of the service are provided at a cost, and some other elements are currently provided for free, including treatment services for rats and cockroaches. This proposal would see the council begin to charge landlords, business and those residents who can afford to pay.

Local businesses may benefit from the review of this service as the council will be competing on a more commercial basis with reduced subsidies.

Summary of Feedback

38 comments were received, which can be summarised as follows:

- A number of residents disagreed with implementing a charge for this service. Around an equal amount of residents did agree, with many of these stating that a form of means-testing should be employed to ensure the most vulnerable were still able to access the service if required.

Highways and Road Safety

Summary of Proposal

The condition of Wirral's highways is among the best in the UK, and residents have indicated that they should remain among our highest priorities. This proposal would see the council use only government grant – and not council revenue funding – for preventative road maintenance.

It would also see the council retain all 298 roadside grit bins, but require communities or constituency committees to fund the filling of the 198 bins which are not on the council's gritting priority routes for grit bins. We would also work with education and health partners; including schools to explore seeking alternative funding – or stopping – the operation of school crossing patrols in those locations where a pedestrian crossing is also in place.

Summary of Feedback

The Council received a petition in relation to part of this budget proposal, which has been referred to in the substantive report. 72 further comments were received, which can be summarised as follows:

- This proposal received mixed feedback, with most comments focussed on ensuring safety was paramount when making any changes.

Discretionary Housing Payments and Advice

Summary of Proposal

The council receives a grant from Government to pay for Discretionary Housing Payments. This grant falls short of the cost of the payments the council makes. This proposal would see the council limit the payments to the level of the government grant amount.

This option would also involve the council stopping its current 'welfare rights' service, due to similar services being provided by other organisations such as Citizen's Advice, which are also funded by the council.

Summary of Feedback

A number of letters have been received specifically in relation to the council's welfare advice services, which have been considered as part of this consultation. A further 60 comments were received, which can be summarised as follows:

- Residents were generally comfortable with the proposal in relation to Discretionary Housing Payments. Comments mainly focused on the welfare rights service provided by the Council, with residents expressing how valued the service was.