

## **REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSFORMATION**

### **ANNUAL BUDGET SURVEY 2023 – LESSONS LEARNT**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. To outline lessons learnt from the recent annual budget survey, conducted between 29 September and 12 November 2023, to understand what worked well in the running of the survey and how this success could be built on further, in the delivery of the 2024 iteration.

#### **Information**

2. The Council's budget survey is an important mechanism to understand what the people of Nottinghamshire think the Council's priorities should be, for the forthcoming financial year. As an annual exercise, it gives residents and the business community regular opportunity to have their say on what matters most to them, in relation to the Council's budget planning process.
3. For 2023, Overview Committee members made a [number of recommendations](#) which were considered during the preparation of the survey. These recommendations include but are not limited to:
  - that the public consultation on the Council's budget commence earlier in the year to enable the responses to be considered at an earlier point in the budget development process.
  - that where appropriate, communication activity should take place with residents to show how their responses had been used to inform the development of the area of Council activity that had been consulted on.
  - that relevant communications related to the public budget consultation should clearly state the approximate time that it will take a resident to complete the form.
  - to build on the existing use and to maximise opportunities provided by social media, the "emailme" system, the Council's Citizen's Panel and the MyNotts app, to promote the budget consultation survey to residents.
  - that members of Overview Committee be given the opportunity to comment on the proposed questions for the 2023/24 budget consultation in advance of the launch of the public survey.
  - that paper copies of the budget consultation should continue to be provided, but that the number of copies printed should be reduced.

#### **What Went Well**

4. The following should be noted as areas that worked well for the most recent iteration:

## **Total number of responses**

5. Building on the 2022 budget survey, which at the time saw the highest number of responses received for a budget consultation run by the County Council in recent years; the latest 2023 budget survey continued this positive uptrend, having been completed by a total of 3,911 respondents.
6. This is a significant improvement of 59% over the 2,454 responses received in 2022, and particularly noteworthy against comparable budget consultations conducted by the Council in recent years, which had not exceeded 1,400 responses.
7. The below shows Nottinghamshire County Council's response rate when compared against other local authorities, who have also recently conducted a budget consultation - for 2023, this equates to one in every 213 of Nottinghamshire residents having completed the survey.

<b>County Council</b>	<b>No. of responses</b>	<b>Population <sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
<b>Nottinghamshire</b>	<b>3911</b>	<b>834,822</b>	<b>1 in 213</b>
West Sussex	3397	892,336	1 in 263
Hampshire	2935 <sup>2</sup>	1,416,808	1 in 483
Surrey	2688 <sup>3</sup>	1,214,540	1 in 452
Suffolk	2664	768,555	1 in 288
Oxfordshire	2651 <sup>4</sup>	738,276	1 in 278
Kent	2620	1,593,191	1 in 608
Essex	2159	1,519,509	1 in 704
East Sussex	2153	550,720	1 in 256
Derbyshire	1911	803,464	1 in 420
Hertfordshire	1890	1,204,588	1 in 637
Lincolnshire	1103	775,524	1 in 703
Gloucestershire	965 <sup>5</sup>	652,409	1 in 676
Norfolk	260	925,299	1 in 3,559
Cambridgeshire	172	689,109	1 in 4,006

## **Alignment to the budget setting process**

8. The 2023 survey took place several weeks earlier compared to 2022, having been open to respondents from the end of September through to mid-November. This compares with the 17 November 2022, to 2 January 2023 for the previous year.

<sup>1</sup> Source: LGInform - Total population (id:3281): Date: 2022. Source Name: Office for National Statistics. Collection name: Mid-year estimates.

<sup>2</sup> This is the combined figure of the 2806 responses received via the consultation response forms and the 130 unstructured responses received via email/letter or social media.

<sup>3</sup> Surrey County Council ran various engagement and consultation strategies between July 2023 and January 2024, split across two phases. This figure represents responses received through a YouGov commissioned survey with a statistically representative sample (614), an open survey exercise available to all residents from 8 September 2023 to 6 October 2023 (891), responses received through the surveying of partner organisations (50), and a subsequent open survey exercise open from 28 November 2023 to 5 January 2024 (1133).

<sup>4</sup> Oxfordshire County Council had two phases of consultation and engagement, with various means of participation. This figure represents responses received through a representative residents' survey (1144), submissions to the Council's budget simulator tool (1364), and via online feedback forms (140) and email (3).

<sup>5</sup> This is the combined figure of the 758 responses received via online questionnaire and 207 comments received via social media. The Council also received feedback from the Gloucestershire Youth Climate Group and trade unions.

9. The 2022 results were presented to Full Council on [9 February 2023](#). Comparatively, the 2023 results were made publicly available and presented to Cabinet on [21 December 2023](#), allowing for several additional weeks scrutiny of the results to feed into the budget setting process.
10. The final budget proposals themselves, as set out in the [22 February 2024](#) Full Council report, state “the responses to the consultation have been taken into account when constructing the 2024/25 Annual Budget”, to provide assurance that residents opinions were considered.

### **Means of promotion proved efficient / effective**

11. A combination of the primary online form, alongside physical paper copies, digital promotion and social media campaigns allowed the survey to have an expansive reach, contributing to the final response rate. Online means accounted for the majority of responses – 3,904 (99.8%).
12. An estimate of “The budget survey takes just minutes to complete” was also indicated in promotional material to account for the different lengths of time it might take different individuals to complete the survey, therefore not placing any undue pressure on respondents to complete within a certain timeframe.
13. More specifically, the survey was publicised through a number of platforms, including:
  - A dedicated space on the Council’s website, hosting background information and linking through to an online survey that was open to all Nottinghamshire residents.
  - Emailme bulletin, sent to all 141,931 subscribers to the Council’s emailme system. The initial email, sent on 29th September 2023 with a further reminder email, sent on 6th November 2023.
  - Targeted communications to encourage completion were also sent to:
    - i. 178 Parish Councils
    - ii. Members of the business community - 14,245 recipients
    - iii. Citizen’s Panel - 1714 recipients
  - The Council also utilised social media to promote survey completion. 39 posts were published (19 on X, 19 Facebook and 1 LinkedIn) from 5 September 2023 through to 12 November 2023. In total these reached 24,900 residents, with 48,100 impressions and resulted in 21 comments, 40 likes and 54 shares/reposts.
  - Polls were run on Instagram and X that were seen by over 900 people.
  - Printed posters and survey booklets produced and distributed to 60 Libraries across the county. Completed copies of the survey could either be handed in at the library or posted back to the Council using the provided freepost address. 7 hard copy returns were received. This differs to 2022, where printed copies were also sent to all 59 Children’s Centres.
  - Electronic versions of the posters and booklets were emailed to all elected members and children’s centres, to promote and encourage survey completion.
  - For residents needing support with completing the survey, there was also the option to phone the Council’s Customer Service Centre, where the operative would assist and fill the survey out on the resident’s behalf.
  - A press release and newspaper column were sent countywide on 29 September, with the consultation link included in a number of press releases from across Departments, during October and November.

- The Cabinet Budget report on 9 November 2023 led to a number of interviews on TV, radio and in print with residents being encouraged to fill in the consultation. The Cabinet Member for Finance did a number of 1:1 interviews and discussed the consultation with regards to how it helps with budget planning.

### **Cross departmental feedback**

14. As part of good practice, following the survey's closure those colleagues who were involved in the process were asked to feedback on what they perceived had gone well and areas for potential development. Departmental colleagues were positive about the refined production for the 2023 survey, with it being noted that both the timelines and the outcome of the consultation fed in well to the budget setting process. Colleagues were also broadly positive about how the process was run this year in general, with regards to the collaboration between teams to ensure the survey ran as smoothly as possible.

### **Feedback from Overview Committee members**

15. Ahead of being presented to Cabinet in [September 2023](#) for review, the questions themselves had been distributed to members of Overview Committee to ensure opportunities for feedback.
16. In alignment with the previous review by Overview Committee, where possible, the wording and format of the questions themselves was also kept the same as last year, to make it easier to compare and contrast against previous analysis and to help make the survey feel familiar for respondents.

## **Potential Areas for Further Development**

### **Increased social and digital media footprint**

17. Whilst acknowledging that paper copies provide an effective alternative, online remains the predominant mechanism by which residents express their views. As such, the following (subject to further consideration and approval) could be considered means to improve completion and further increase the Council's already comparatively high response rate, for 2024:
- Increased presence and activity on our social media forums, as well as via a Budget Consultation banner visible on the intranet, emails, and the Council's homepage (external site).
  - Explore the possibility of more frequent email send outs/ reminders to subscribers, without creating survey fatigue.
  - Look into the use of Polls and local Facebook groups as a means of increasing engagement.
  - Further work with the Council's Comms & Marketing Team regarding outreach, to ensure best practise is being undertaken at all times.
18. Following Overview's previous scrutiny, where members agreed that consistent questions asked over several years would enable detailed analysis on how residents' priorities were changing over time; as part of iterative development, other possible areas for further improvement (subject to further consideration and approval) may include:

- Consideration of promoting through local radio stations where possible.
- Exploration of the capabilities of modern Artificial Intelligence during the analysis phase, to increase efficiency and streamline processing behind the scenes.
- Consideration of a children and young people's version to increase the response rate amongst younger demographics.

19. It should be noted that to effectively embed the above areas of further development, budget allocation may be required. Cost estimates will be sought depending on the scope of the areas recommended.

20. Consideration will also need to be given to any new approach or content, ensuring the right balance between response rate and meaningful analysis. For example, residents may unsubscribe from the Council's mailing lists should they perceive that they are receiving too many communications.

### **Other Options Considered**

21. Not to consider further refinement to the Council's budget survey – this would limit the Council's ability to maximise its consultation apparatus. Therefore, this option has not been considered.

### **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

22. To further refine the Council's annual budget survey itself, alongside its production processes.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

23. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Financial Implications**

24. The results of the 2023 budget survey helped inform the Council's annual budget proposals. No financial implications have been incurred as a direct result of this report or the lessons learnt from the 2023 annual budget survey activity.

25. Should Overview recommend additional areas for development, this may incur a future financial cost.

### **Consultation**

26. The Council's annual budget survey forms part of a larger consultation apparatus that enables the views of Nottinghamshire's residents, partners and key stakeholders to help shape key services and local deliverables.

### **Implications for Residents**

27. Further fine tuning and improvements to the ways the Council conducts its annual budget survey will help ensure greater clarity and transparency to residents, as to how their responses to the survey are used to inform decisions that matter most to them.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

1) That Overview Committee recognises the progress made, regarding efforts to refine the development of the Council's annual budget survey.

2) That Overview Committee consider the areas of further development referenced at paragraphs 18 and 19 and confirm those deemed appropriate for further investigation for the 2024 budget survey.

## **COUNCILLOR BRUCE LAUGHTON DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSFORMATION**

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### **Constitutional Comments (HD 17/04/2024)**

28. Overview Committee has the authority to consider the matters within the report and to determine any relevant recommendations.

### **Financial Comments (SES 16/04/2024)**

29. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- Outcomes Of The Scrutiny Review Of Council Consultations And Resident Engagement – [29 June 2023](#)
- Annual Budget Report 2023-24 (Appendix G) – [9 February 2023](#)
- Annual Budget Survey 2023 (Analysis) – [21 December 2023](#)
- Response to the Recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Council Consultations and Resident Engagement – [21 September 2023](#)
- Annual Budget Report 2024/25 – [22 February 2024](#)

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

- All.