Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel, 12 April 2012

AGENDA ITEM 5

Background note for framing the debate: An overview of Budget Consultation

Each year Walsall Council undertakes public consultation in preparation for the budget setting process. Through the use of surveys and informal discussion residents and other key groups including business leaders, community groups and voluntary organisations are given the opportunity, each Autumn, to have their say on what they think should be the council's spending priorities for the coming financial year. What issues are important? What most needs improving? And what people think we need to concentrate our resources on?

Typically it is very difficult to get the general public engaged and interested in the budget setting process for a combination for reasons; disinterested, leaving it up to the council and others to decide, apathy, feeling their view won't make a difference and the feeling that the decisions are already made. A general lack of understanding of how councils are funded, the range of services provided and the decision making process overall is also likely to contribute to a lack of engagement in the process. Making budget consultation engaging, relevant and meaningful to the public and gathering information that is useful for budget setting is a challenging task.

Key questions

1. What is it you want to find out?

2. How will the information you gather be used in decision making?

The research objectives
- Understand people's spending priorities for the coming financial year
- The relative importance of various council services
- What needs improving in the local area
- What is most important for making somewhere a good place to live

The target population
- All residents
- Businesses
- Younger people
- Older people
- Vulnerable groups including people with disabilities
- The Community and Voluntary Sector

Research methods used
Over the last 5 years the council has used a range of approaches to gather views on council spending priorities.

1. Qualitative research methods are used as a way of obtaining detailed, contextual and discursive information from local people, in an informal setting. Qualitative research is inherently different from its quantitative partner. Qualitative research derives data from observation, interviews, or verbal interactions and focuses on the meanings and interpretations of the participants. It is not about numbers, percentages, frequencies or significance but is primarily concerned with "Why"? Qualitative is designed to be broadly representative of the population or

target groups. Over the last 5 years, qualitative data for budget consultation has been gathered via;

- workshops
- group discussions
- face to face interviews

2. Quantitative data collection methods seek to gather quantifiable data in numerical form such as statistics and percentages. If gathered using random sampling approaches, statistical inferences and generalisations about the wider population can be made. Over the last 5 years, quantitative data for budget consultation has been gathered via;

- Council's Citizens' Panel,
- Face to face household interviews
- Online surveys
- Budget Simulator

Budget simulator

This online tool has been used over the last 2 years to collect peoples' views in a structured way using a simple trade off approach. The Budget Simulator reflects the council's budget and includes 17 detailed spending areas. The simulator is a high-level approach to consultation and is informative and engaging for people, helping respondents understand the context within which the budget is set and the trade offs that have to be made. Data gathered via the simulator is intended to provide a snapshot of opinion.

Anyone can respond to the budget simulator, with limited control over how many times they can respond, thus results are not intended to be representative, only people with the know how and access to the internet can respond.

Responses are filtered against the IP address of the respondent's computer, however there is no way to track multiple responses if an individual submits responses using different computers. The only way to control responses is to issue personalised invites using a login and password process, which can in itself, be off putting.

In the first year the budget simulator was used, 409 responses were received with responses in the second year being much lower (147). Presumably this is because it had been seen before and sufficient feedback demonstrating clearly how residents' views were taken into account in budget setting was not provided or communicated widely enough.

Other ways to have a say
- Social media - Facebook and Twitter
- in writing
- by telephone
- email
- text message

Reporting
Findings are fed into to Scrutiny and Cabinet as a detailed written report (September and October). All the information gathered through budget consultation is intended to

be used alongside other data and intelligence which together form a rich picture of opinion.
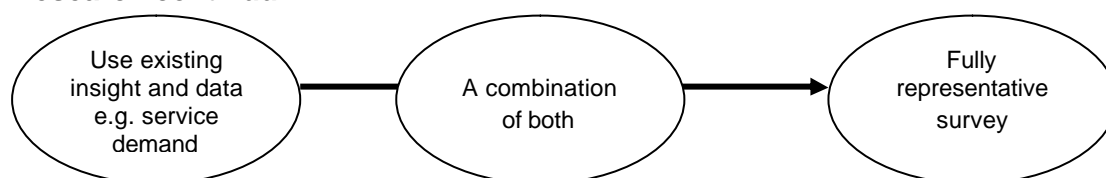
Sampling and robustness
For the last two years the approaches adopted in budget consultation have not used a random sampling approach, meaning that you cannot make certain statistical inferences about the data e.g. significance and generalisations about the whole population.

Respondents are essentially self selected or are approached using convenience sampling e.g. attending existing meetings and groups or approaching people at events. Randomness is forfeited in favour of ease of administration and cheapness.

Where a suitable sampling frame, an up to date representative contact database (e.g. Royal Mail Postal Address File, Electoral Roll etc), is available, a random sample may be drawn and used as the basis for contacting respondents e.g. postal survey, household survey.

Research continuum

Pros and Cons of possible approaches

Approach	Pros	Cons
Use existing information and insight e.g. service demand, complaints, talking to customers	• Direct collection • Easily accessible • Up to date • Cheap • Ongoing	• Not necessarily collected in a usable format • Service users only - unrepresentative • Latent demand • Accuracy and interpretation issues
Workshop / focus groups	• Rich insight • Build relationships and understanding • Ability to explain things in more detail • Face to face dialogue • Recruit to be broadly representative of the population • Design to be engaging and informative • Convenient - go to where people already gather / meet • Reach the seldom heard • Does not rely on literacy skills	• Cost / resource intensive • Expert / independent facilitation required • May need to pay incentives
Online survey / tool	• Cheap • Easy to set up • Design to be engaging / informative	• Online community only • Not representative of the population
Random sample survey e.g. postal / telephone / face to face household survey	• Statistically representative, findings may be generalised to the wider population • Robust findings • Wide reach	• Challenge of conveying complex information in a questionnaire or over the phone • Cost

Costs

Random sampling approaches are more resource intensive and therefore more expensive than their non-random counterparts. Some illustrative costs;

- Based on a recent postal survey, to generate 1,100 responses (statistically robust sample) one would need to send out 10,000 questionnaires (£5,000 alone in outgoing postage costs).

- 1,000 face to face household interviews lasting 10 minutes would cost in the region of £20,000.

- 600 telephone interviews using random digit dial and lasting 8 minutes costs in the region of £7,000.

- Focus groups and workshops £2,500 to £5,000

Key questions for debate

- What is the business problem? Why is the research needed?
- What are the aims and objectives of the research? What specifically do you want to find out?
- How will the findings be used? What decisions will be made?
- Who is the target population?
- What level of accuracy and robustness is required?
- What methods should be used? What level of involvement?
- What are the reporting requirements?
- What is the timescale?
- What is the budget for carrying out the research?
- How will feedback be provided demonstrating how what people have said has been used to inform decision making?

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APPENDIX 1

Top tips for priority setting with the public Adapted from Ipsos MORI

1. Be clear about why we are asking difficult questions and **why their input is important**

2. Set the debate firmly in the **context of financial challenges** and that decisions made are not just for now but will have implications for the future

3. **Use existing insight** – what do we already know remembering that feedback in the context of budgetary decisions is often different from priorities in more generalised discussions

4. The public need enough information for their input to be meaningful and constructive. **Too much detail can overload, confuse and intimidate participants.** Use information to engage people in solving the problem

5. Use figures that the public will understand and identify with e.g. scale down

6. Explain the reasons why a particular service exists and the wider outcomes that occur as a result

7. Be clear about what is in and out of the scope of the discussion; exactly **what will be decided as a result of the debate**

8. Define the role of stakeholders up-front, **be clear about why they are participating**

9. **Use neutral facilitators**, highly skilled in dealing with the types of concerns people will raise with those who can answer more specific questions in attendance

10. The methods used will depend on a range of factors the respondents, timescales, information needs, costs. **Cover all key groups using different methods as necessary**

11. Keep it **cost effective** – people may ask why are you spending money to find out how to cut spending. Use online methods and existing forums ensuring the 'seldom heard' have a say

12. What questioning methods to use – straightforward questions on priorities or sophisticated trade-off techniques which can provide deeper insight into real preferences. **Structured questioning should be combined with qualitative techniques** to help unpick the reasons behind the decision

13. People are often sceptical about whether their input will have an impact, **feeding back that they have been listened to is vital** – outputs and outcomes

14. **Keep the dialogue going**. After being involved people tend to more interested and engaged in seeing what happens, but this does not last long. Consider options for keeping dialogue doing with those what want to stay engaged.