Cabinet – 15 December 2010

Budget Consultation Feedback 2011/12 – Public Consultation

Portfolio: Councillor C Towe - Finance and Personnel

Service: Finance - council wide

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: Yes

1.   Summary of report

1.1   The council's vision sets out our aim for the borough to be a place where people get on well together, support and look after each other, young people fulfil their potential and the borough prospers economically and materially. Seven of the council's ten priorities focus on the needs and aspirations of local people.

1.2   With unavoidable cuts in public spending listening to the views and opinions of local people and working to meet these needs is more critical than ever. Part of our commitment to listen to local people is to consult people on what they think about council services and spending priorities and how this should be reflected in the annual budget.

1.3   Through the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods the views of more than 550 residents have been gathered. Through the use of various approaches people were able to have their say on what they think should be the council's spending priorities for the coming financial year. This report contains results of the Budget Simulator.   Budget consultation took place between September and November 2010.

1.4   This report to Cabinet summarises the findings from budget consultation to support decision making regarding the council's draft budget proposals for 2010/11. Appendix 1 reports the findings.

2.   Recommendations

2.1   That the findings from the budget consultation, set out in this report, be used and evidenced alongside other feedback and available data by Cabinet as it develops the council's 2010/11 draft corporate revenue and capital budget.

2.2   That the Corporate Management Team use these findings to inform service planning for 2011/12 onwards.

2.3   Cabinet approve this report and its appendix to be published on the council's public website along with feedback of outcomes.

3. Background information

3.1 The council consults annually as part of its budget process. This year consultation has gathered the views of local residents, the community and voluntary sector, children and young people, older people, representatives from the business community, carers and people with disabilities. This report presents findings from consultation with these groups with a focus on the council's spending priorities for 2011/12.

3.2 Children's Services is the spending area in the budget simulator which most respondent(s) decided to increase. Planning and Building Control is the spending area which most respondent(s) have decided to decrease and Youth Services is the spending area which most respondent(s) have decided not to change. See section 4 of appendix 1 for more detailed results of the budget simulator.

3.3 In line with other research and feedback, people want a borough that is clean, green and attractive. Litter and run down buildings appear to be strongly interrelated and directly influence how people feel about the area.

3.4 Having effective, reliable, cheap and clean public transport and easy access to car parking are recurring themes. Highway maintenance is raised as in need of improvement. Pot holes and traffic congestion being the main concerns as well as pedestrian safety and traffic congestion.

3.5 Making sure the borough is a safe place and tackling anti-social behaviour remain a priority.

3.6 Respondents recognise the importance of education for all, however some people have concerns about the standard of the borough's schools and attainment levels. Unemployment and the borough's ability to cope with future government cuts concern many respondents.

3.7 Key issues identified by business representatives included providing continued support for new and existing businesses, a general lack of understanding of what skills businesses need.

3.8 Respondents recognise that a healthy society provides for a healthy and prosperous workforce. Having the right services and advice at the right time is important for those who are, or may become, vulnerable.

3.9 It is important for residents to have enough facilities and activities that reflect the borough's diverse communities and cultures.

3.10 Some people think that Walsall does not celebrate or shout about its successes enough and that the negative attitude towards the borough is in need of reversing, the outcome being a borough that is proud.

3.11 People understand that cuts are inevitable however they do not want the cuts to impact on or affect the quality of services they receive. Many people put forward suggestions for how they think the council can operate in a more efficient manner and save money. Many of these suggestions have already been implemented by the council, indicating the need to better communicate these messages.

4.   Resource considerations

4.1   **Financial**:

Consultation undertaken was funded from existing revenue budgets. It is important to ensure the views of a range of stakeholders is considered and used to inform the setting of the budget and ensure resources are allocated i priority areas.

4.2   **Legal**:

The council has a legal duty to set a balanced budget and to consult with Non Domestic Rate Payers (NNDR). Business representatives were consulted at a meeting on 28 September 2010. A subsequent meeting is planned for 11 January 2011.

4.3   **Staffing**:

None directly related to this report.

5.   Citizen impact:

5.1   Listening to the views of local people is key to our decision making. Ensuring the findings from budget consultation are clearly evidenced in budget setting demonstrates the council's commitment to listening and acting on the views of local people and improving the services we provide.

5.2   The approach to budget consultation supports our duty to involve, ensuring that local people have greater opportunities to influence decision-making and get involved. By feeding back to those who took part and the wider public, we will make it clear how the input of representatives of local persons has contributed to influencing our decision/s.

6.   Community safety

6.1   There are no direct implications arising from this report however please see section 3.5 of this Cabinet report and section 4.4 of Appendix 1 for detailed feedback relating to community safety.

7.   Environmental impact

7.1   There are no direct implications arising from this report however please see 3.3 of this Cabinet report and sections 4.1 and 4.2 of Appendix 1 for detailed feedback relating to the environment.

8.   Performance and risk management issues

8.1   **Risk**:

Actively listening and acting on the feedback from local people, including feedback gathered through budget consultation is critical to the effective decision making of the council. The council must make it clear how the views of local people have been used to influence decisions.

8.2   **Performance management**:

Feedback gathered will be used by services in the development of appropriate customer performance measures, monitored through performance boards. Feedback will be fed into Area Partnerships and shared with partners as appropriate.

9.   Equality implications

9.1   None directly related to this report.

10.   Consultation

10.1   The process is an example of how the council is continuing to consult with stakeholders on key issues as part of a council wide strategy for consultation and engagement.   Budget consultation has included residents, business representatives and the voluntary and community sectors. Employee consultation is being held via the trade unions.

Background papers

Appendix 1 – Budget consultation 2011/12 summary of findings.

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06 December 2010   06 December 2010

Budget Consultation Financial Year 2011/12

December 2010

Summary of findings

Report contents

1. **Executive Summary**

   1.1. Feedback has been collected from a wide range of sources which provides a good insight into the spending priorities of local people. Naturally people think of the services they use, rely on and know of. It must be remembered that because services are not mentioned it does not necessarily mean they are not important. This information should be used alongside other data and intelligence.

   1.2. Each year Walsall Council undertakes public consultation in preparation for the budget setting process. Residents and other key groups including business leaders, community groups and voluntary organisations are given the opportunity to have their say on what they think should be the council's spending priorities for the coming financial year.

   1.3. The views of over 550 people were gathered. 409 of these were gathered through the council's online budget simulator which enabled people to tell us how they think money should be allocated to different council services.

   1.4. Results from the budget simulator show that;

   - Children's Services is the spending area which most respondent(s) decided to increase. A total of 196 respondent(s) or 23% decided to increase funding for Children's Services.

   - Planning and Building Control is the spending area which most respondent(s) have decided to decrease. 290 respondent(s) – (71%) decided to decrease funding for Planning and Building Control.

   - Youth Services is the spending area which most respondent(s) have decided not to change. 118 respondent(s) equating to 29% decided not to change funding for Youth Services.

   - On average the majority respondents made cuts to most of the spending areas.

   1.5. In line with other research and feedback, people want a borough that is clean, green and attractive. People express concerns about litter and run down buildings which make the area unappealing and lead to the perception of a lack of pride in the area.

   1.6. Litter and run down buildings appear to be strongly interrelated and directly influence on how people feel about the area.

   1.7. Regenerating the borough is seen as a priority with derelict buildings and empty shops giving a bad impression.

1.8. Having effective, reliable, cheap and clean public transport and easy access to car parking are recurring themes. Walsall town centre bus station attracts particular criticism. The ability to easily travel around the borough is seen as important for quality of life and wellbeing.

1.9. Highway maintenance is raised as in need of improvement by several people. Pot holes and traffic congestion being the main concerns as well as pedestrian safety and traffic congestion.

1.10. Making sure the borough is a safe place remains a high priority. Comments tend to focus on the borough's district centres and in particular, Walsall town centre, where some people identify the need for a greater police presence especially in the evening.

1.11. Anti-social behaviour remains a concern and a priority that people want addressing. People congregating in groups is a concern for many.

1.12. Respondents recognise the importance of education for all, however some people have concerns about the standard of the borough's schools and attainment levels.

1.13. Unemployment and the borough's ability to cope with future government cuts concern many respondents, particularly in a borough where there are already communities with pockets of deprivation, unemployment and child poverty.

1.14. Key issues identified by business representatives were the need for more help to start businesses and more support for new businesses, although some felt that support should not be confined to new / start-up businesses but should be provided to existing and long-established businesses as well.

1.15. Business representatives also identify a lack of understanding of what skills businesses need i.e. enterprise is as important as qualifications with the promotion of work experience in schools and visits from business people to schools both suggested as possible solutions to this problem.

1.16. Service users speak positively about the social services they receive, the community and voluntary organisations and the people who support them. Respondents recognise that a healthy society provides for a healthy and prosperous workforce. Having the right services and advice at the right time is important for those who are, or may become, vulnerable.

1.17. Young people identify parks, playing areas and having a wider range of things to do as in need of improvement. Facilities and activities need to reflect the borough's diverse communities and cultures.

1.18. Many respondents refer to Walsall as a friendly borough with a good community spirit with lots of potential. Some people think that Walsall does not celebrate or shout about its successes enough and that the negative attitude towards the borough is in need of reversing, the outcome being a borough that is proud.

1.19. Feedback indicates that people understand that cuts are inevitable however they do not want the cuts to impact on or affect the quality of services they receive. Many people put forward suggestions for how they think the council can operate in a more efficient manner and save money. Many of these suggestions have already been implemented by the council, including streamlining tiers of management, voluntary redundancy, cutting non essential spending and other efficiency savings, this perhaps indicates a lack of awareness amongst local people of what the Council is currently doing to address these issues and the need to better communicate these messages.

2. Budget Consultation Financial Year 2011/12

2.1. The consultation process

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 to have their say on what they think should be the council's spending priorities for the coming financial year. Views on spending priorities were collected between 6 September and 5 November 2010 (8 weeks).

2.2. Ways to have a say

People could have their say via a range of methods including interactive tools, group discussions and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Detailed descriptions follow here.

2.3. Consultation with community groups and organisations

Specially designed budget consultation packs were sent to 50 key community and voluntary sector organisations and the same information was published on the council's website for anyone to access, use and respond to. The consultation packs were designed to encourage people to think more widely about council services rather than just the services they use or can remember. A picture of a 'typical' street accompanied by a list of services helped people think about all the different services the council provides or supports.
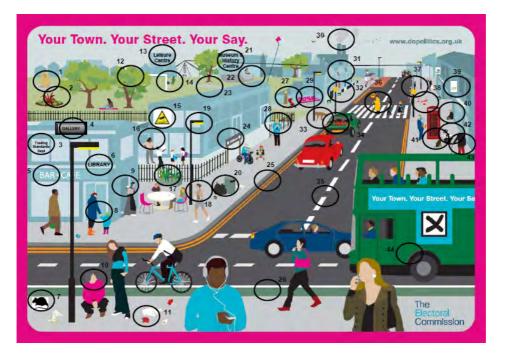

Fig.1 Group leads used this picture and a list of services to help respondents think about all the different council services.

Officers also attended and interviewed people at Age UK[1] road shows, held discussions with service users, met people with learning disabilities, gathered feedback at the Centre for Independent Living and held discussions with younger people. The groups and organisations who used these consultation packs and responded were;

- Age UK (formerly Age Concern and Help the Aged) – (AUK)
- IYPSS (Integrated young people's support services) Walsall Wood, Aldridge and Streetly areas
- Royal Mencap Society Making Our Choice (MOC) people with learning difficulties
- Service Users Empowerment (SUE) people with mental health issues
- Supporting People Service User Planning Group
- Walsall Carers Network – Asian Men's Support Group
- Walsall Carers Support Group
- Walsall Centre for Independent Living (CIL)
- Walsall Disability Forum (WDF)
- Walsall Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender (LGBT) including Walsall Women against Anti-Social Persecution (WAASP)
- Walsall Society for the Blind (WSFTB)
- Walsall Street Teams and Ten Thirty Five English Class
- Youth Inspectors

2.4. Business Representatives

On 28th September 36 representatives from the business community attended a breakfast meeting to discuss what they believe are the priorities for the borough. As well as informing spending priorities for 2011/12 the findings will be used in the Local Economic Assessment.

Fig.2 36 representatives from the business community attended the meeting which included a question and answer panel consisting of the council's Executive Directors, Cllr Andrew and Cllr Towe.

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[1] Age UK formerly Age Concern and Help the Aged.

The session began with a presentation on the council's financial outlook and its challenges for the future. Attendees were then split into three groups for discussions using pinpoint facilitation techniques. Firstly, everyone was asked to write down their responses to the following question;

'Ensuring the long term economic success in the borough depends on the creation of local jobs and wealth. What are the biggest barriers to achieving this in the borough of Walsall?'

All issues identified were then grouped thematically and ranked in terms of importance.

2.5. Budget Simulator

On 6 October 2010 the council launched its Budget Simulator www.walsall.gov.uk/budget-simulator, this online tool allowed people to find out about the services the council provides and how much they costs each year. Respondents could then decide how to allocate the budget across 17 different services.

409 people took part. Budget Simulator was publicised in the local press, on the council's website and staff intranet as well as via local community groups and organisations. The Budget Simulator was online from 6 October until 5 November 2010.

2.6. Social Media

The 'Our Walsall' Facebook page has 290 'fans' and 2,112 people are following Walsall Council on Twitter. Key questions were posted on the council's Facebook page and Twitter feed to which people could respond and comment.

People could also have their say in writing, by telephone, email or text message. Alternative formats were also available on request.

2.7. Qualitative and quantitative research methods

Qualitative research in the form of group discussions and interviews was 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"?

Moreover, it must be remembered when interpreting the results that they are not based on quantitative statistical evidence. The findings are based on a small sample, which is designed to cover a cross-section of residents, but this should not be confused with statistical representativeness.

Quantitative data was collected using the council's online Budget Simulator. Whilst this tool collected the views of 409 people it must be noted that the simulator was solely available online and therefore represents the views of those with access to the Internet. Regardless of this, the demographic profile of these respondents is fairly broad and a response of 409 provides statistically reliable data at the 95% confidence interval with a margin of error of ±4.84%.

2.8. Key questions for Budget Consultation

People responding to the consultation packs and social media were asked six key questions, the responses to which are included within this report. The six key questions were;

1. What is most important for making somewhere a good place to live?
2. Thinking about the Borough of Walsall what most needs improving?
3. What makes you proud of Walsall as a place to live?
4. What, if anything, doesn't make you proud of Walsall?
5. Which Council services are most important to you?
6. Which Council services are less important?

3. Summary of findings from Budget Simulator

3.1. Walsall's budget simulator

This online tool will collected peoples' views in a structured way. The Budget Simulator was tailored to reflect the council's 2010/11 budget and included 17 spending areas capturing the bulk of council services and spend. The simulator is a high-level approach to consultation on the budget and is a very informative and engaging for people, helping respondents understand the context within which the budget is set.

Results from the budget simulator should be used along side the information presented in sections 4 onwards of this report as well as other existing data and intelligence.

3.2. Spending areas

The following spending areas were included in the budget simulator, along with their respective budget. For ease and to keep the number of spending areas to a manageable number some services, along with their budget, were combined. Please note that property services, Walsall Partnership and a number of core support services were not included in the budget simulator.

The budget used in the simulator totalled £207.31m, approximately £38m less than the actual 2010/11 budget.

The spending areas were;

- Libraries, Arts and Heritage
- Revenues
- Benefits
- Community Safety
- Children's Services
- Supporting Education & Attainment (excluding schools)
- Adult Social Care
- Street Cleansing
- Grounds Maintenance and Greenspaces
- Youth Services
- Waste Services
- Roads and Maintenance
- Planning and Building Control

- Housing
- Leisure, Sport and Recreation
- Economic Regeneration
- Public Protection

3.3. The profile of respondents

409 people took part in the budget simulator exercise and had a go at setting their own budget for Walsall Council. Of these, 127 provided additional comments, all of which were available to view on the website.

44% of respondents did not supply their gender, however, of those that did 29% were female and 27% were male. Just over 30% were aged between 25 and 44 and 18% between 45 and 64. 43% did not disclose their age.

Nearly half of the respondents were White British, the largest non White group was Asian/Asian-British Indian at 2.2%.

45% of respondents were in employment and 44% did not state their economic status. Just 1.2% stated that they were unemployed.

3.4. Key findings

- Children's Services is the spending area which most respondent(s) decided to increase. A total of 196 respondent(s) or 23% decided to increase funding for Children's Services.

- Planning and Building Control is the spending area which most respondent(s) have decided to decrease. 290 respondent(s) – (71%) decided to decrease funding for Planning and Building Control.

- Youth Services is the spending area which most respondent(s) have decided not to change. 118 respondent(s) equating to 29% decided not to change funding for Youth Services.

Fig 3. (page 12) shows that on average the majority respondents made cuts to most of the spending areas. Results show that Benefits was the service area with the largest average cut at -6.8%. Results and comments indicate that there may be some misunderstanding regarding the benefits service, in particular many respondents think that it is the council who decides eligibility criteria and that the council foots the benefit bill and hence why this spending area has been cut the most. Children's Services was the area with the largest increase at 1.7%.

Fig 4. (page 13) shows how the average budget allocation compared to the current 2010/11 budget.
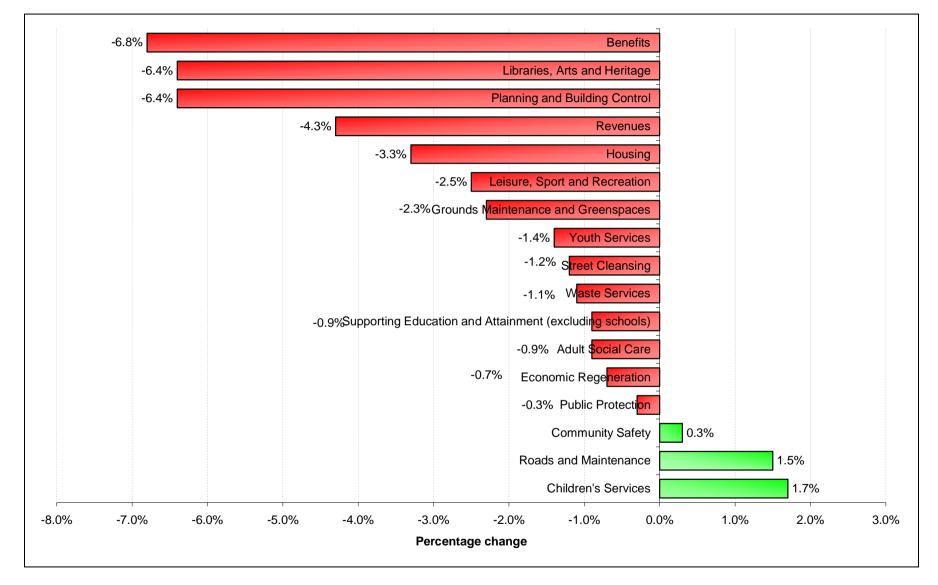
Fig.3 Budget Simulator Results 2011/12 – Allocation of spending across council services.

Fig 3. Results from the council's budget simulator clearly indicate where people's spending priorities lie. Based on the responses of 409 people.
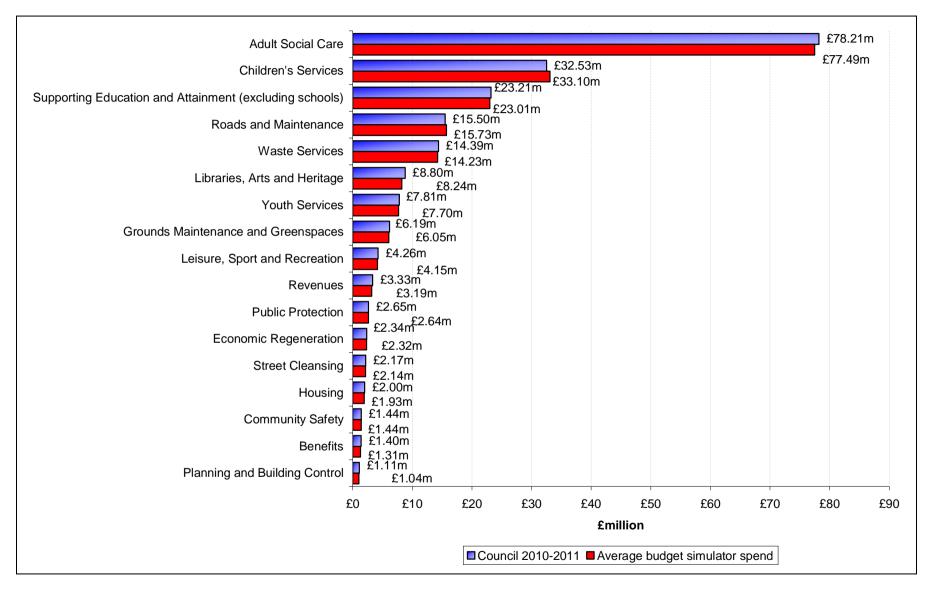
Fig 4. Budget Simulator Results 2011/12 - Average budget simulator spend against 2010/11 council spend.

Spending Area	Council 2010-2011	Average budget simulator spend
Adult Social Care	£78.21m	£77.49m
Children's Services	£32.53m	£33.10m
Supporting Education and Attainment (excluding schools)	£23.21m	£23.01m
Roads and Maintenance	£15.50m	£15.73m
Waste Services	£14.39m	£14.23m
Libraries, Arts and Heritage	£8.80m	£8.24m
Youth Services	£7.81m	£7.70m
Grounds Maintenance and Greenspaces	£6.19m	£6.05m
Leisure, Sport and Recreation	£4.26m	£4.15m
Revenues	£3.33m	£3.19m
Public Protection	£2.65m	£2.64m
Economic Regeneration	£2.34m	£2.32m
Street Cleansing	£2.17m	£2.14m
Housing	£2.00m	£1.93m
Community Safety	£1.44m	£1.44m
Benefits	£1.40m	£1.31m
Planning and Building Control	£1.11m	£1.04m

£million

■ Council 2010-2011 ■ Average budget simulator spend

Fig 4. The average budget per spending area compared with the actual 2010/11 budget.

3.5. Budget Simulator comments by theme

127 people provided additional comments alongside their simulated budgets. Comments are presented here under the following themes:

- Transport / Roads
- Community Safety
- Clean / Green
- Supporting Vulnerable People
- Education, Jobs and Employment
- Lean and Efficient Council
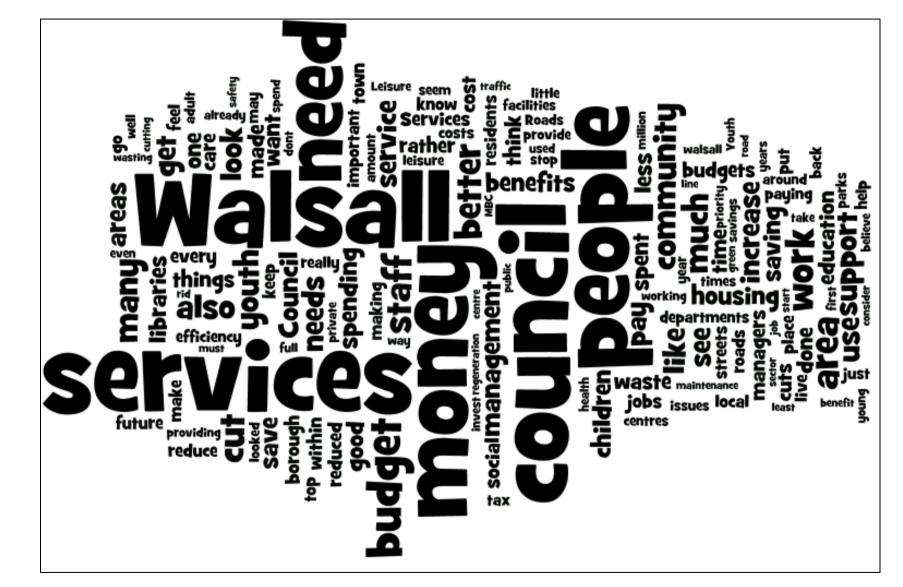
Fig. 5 Budget Simulator Word Cloud

Fig 5. This 'word cloud' has been generated from all the comments made on the Budget Simulator. The cloud gives greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the text. (www.wordle.net)

3.6. Transport / Roads

Comments regarding transport and roads often centred on the perceived poor condition of the roads in Walsall Borough and the feeling that large amounts are paid in road taxes but nothing is done to improve the condition of the roads. This is highlighted in the following quote:

> 'Roads should be a priority, we pay so much road tax (I pay £230 a year) that the roads should be looked after a lot better than they are. Some roads near where I live such as Friezland Lane in Brownhills, have had potholes since last Christmas, and nothing has been done about them...'

Respondents also felt that a lot of time and money is spent digging up roads for various maintenance works and that this should be coordinated to maximise efficiency and minimise disruption.

3.7. Community Safety

Community safety was regarded by many respondents as a key spending priority, with respondents stating that this is an area where cuts should definitely not be made. Residents were particularly concerned about anti-social behaviour and the efforts being made to address this.

> 'While some parts of community safety fall short of any real targets, anti-social behaviour is a serious issue that should be supported to the upper most..'

> 'Community safety in Walsall is paramount to all that are dealing with anti- social behaviour on a daily basis. This is an issue that will not go away and hence the government and the Police are dealing with this as their top priority.'

3.8. Clean/Green

The cleanliness of the Borough, the street scene and other environmental services were highlighted by many as a priority service, whereas some respondents felt that street cleaning and environmental services were ineffective and should be outsourced or replaced to save money.

> 'Street Cleaning, if we had a council who stepped up and started doing the job they should do and stop litter and dog fouling and start fining them we could create a income and create more jobs.'

> 'Is there any way community payback schemes can be utilised for community services i.e. street cleaning?'

> 'Less money should be spent on cleaning streets. By keeping streets clean encourages people to be lazy and drop litter. Litter is on streets as soon as it is picked up. On spot fines to people who drop litter.'

'Parks and green spaces are traditionally one of the first areas the local authority looks to reduce spending when in fact parks and green spaces are key to the borough…In a time of austerity, unemployment and cuts, parks and green spaces are one of the only services / facilities available to meet the needs of all our communities which do not involve a charge. Let's protect and safeguard our boroughs green assets.'

3.9. Supporting Vulnerable People

Whilst many of the respondents felt that investment and spending on services for vulnerable children and adults was an important spending area others felt that a disproportionately large amount of the budget was allocated to these services and were keen to see greater efficiencies made in these areas.

'Adult social care - 70 million for this area is ridiculous that is a huge amount of money. I would be interested to learn exactly what that money is spent on and how it benefits the people that are paying for it.'

'With the biggest budget by far, I am sure that efficiencies could be made in the Adult Social Care budget in order to protect other services.'

'I have protected Children's social care (currently under funded) from any cuts and only relatively small cuts in Adults Social Care (big efficiency savings are possible and needed but more money needs to go into actual delivery.) Both these services protect vulnerable people so whilst they should always seek to work more efficiently, they should not suffer from any drop in service standard that might be tolerated elsewhere in the current climate.'

'£78.21m for Adult Social Care = £312 for EVERY man, woman and child in the borough, regardless of need. According to ONS, there are 10692 with mental health issues, 10,510 on Incapacity benefit and 16480 on Disability Living Allowance. Assuming no overlap that is £2075 for every one, but that means that about 15% of the borough's population require some sort of social care. I find that very hard to believe - it seems to me that we are spending a disproportionately large amount on a very small number of people.'

3.10.   Education, Jobs and Employment

Many respondents felt that investment in education and jobs would lead to wealth creation and increased prosperity in the Borough which would in turn lead to increased inward investment in the area.

'I personally believe that money should be spent on economic rebuilding in terms of infrastructure, buildings and more investment into local businesses. Priority area should be jobs, jobs and more jobs for Walsall.'

'We need to make the town into somewhere where people can invest, the roads around the industrial west of the region are shocking. The is great industrial land for use with easy access to the hub of the motorway network but no one will invest because of the state of the infrastructure. More jobs means more council income, more shops and commerce, more rates and a reduction in the reliance on social services…'

'Support education = educated workforce. Support regeneration = attract businesses to employ the workforce/businesses are attracted by educated workforce. Educated & employed workforce = reduced need for benefits, community safety ,public protection. Educated & employed workforce = more disposable income and more use of leisure sport & recreation facilities. It all starts with education and support for schools...'

3.11.   Lean and Efficient Council

A great many of the comments made by people responding to the budget simulator relate to perceived inefficiencies and wastage in council spending. There is a clear need to ensure that the residents of Walsall are aware of and are reassured by the range of efficiency savings that have been introduced in Walsall Council and those which are forthcoming.

'Walsall council have one of the highest level of council tax in the UK and we have seen many examples of money wasting by the council. The heart of the problem lies with an over inflated council budget and over-manned, inefficient council departments. Residents pay council tax to receive services, not to provide jobs for people. Unfortunately council managers don't spend our money wisely because they don't care. It's not their money they're wasting. The council should work toward improving efficiencies and out-sourcing services, and thereby cut the budget and council tax…'

'The council is top-heavy and inefficient. What we need is less money for managers, less money on managers = more money on front-line workers!!'

'I've gone over budget because I can't find the section where I cut top salaries and councillors allowances! With over 90 senior managers earning £50k+,the chief exec earning £190k+ and councillors awarding themselves £843k, that's more than £5.5 MILLION. £5.5million saved from the budget I've submitted comes in at about £203m, the proposed amount for next year. Simples.'

'Merge Revenues and Benefits - remove surplus management. Merge Children's' Services and Youth Services - remove surplus management Merge Public Protection and Community Safety - remove surplus management…'

Essentially many of the respondents feel that the required cuts in budget can be achieved not by cutting services but by reducing inefficiencies and cutting out waste. Two of the many cost saving suggestions put forward by the respondents are shown below:

> *'All departments need to prioritise the services they offer and look at ways of making better use of their budgets through more efficient working. Walsall is a compact borough with fairly good transport links and I would question whether every neighbourhood needs a library and consider that a high quality leisure centre in the town centre would provide better value for money..'*

> *'Efficiency gains of at least (at least!) 5% I believe can be absorbed by all council departments in terms of staffing and resource utilisation - utilities, paper, photocopying, printing, etc.'*

Many respondents advocated the amalgamation of the revenues and benefits services as a way of reducing costs and eliminating surplus management.

3.12. Benefits

Results and comments indicate that there may be some misunderstanding regarding the benefits service, in particular many respondents think that it is the council who decides eligibility criteria and that the council foots the benefit bill. Many people saw reducing benefits as a way of saving money and this is reflected in the 6.8% average cut to the benefits budget.

> *'It's time for a complete overhaul of the benefits system. Too many people are taking advantage of benefits resulting in more and more people not contributing to this once great country. Help get people working and contributing to ease financial pressures.'*

> *'I do not expect the cost of running a service to be reduced. I expect the cost of the benefits provided to the residents to be cut thereby reducing the overall spending. Get long term unemployed with bad backs, drug addicts, alcoholics back into work.'*

3.13. Libraries and Leisure

Libraries, arts and leisure services were all identified by a number of respondents as potential areas to cut and this is reflected in the higher average budget cuts allocated to these spending areas.

> *'A lot less people use the libraries. And the leisure and recreation is not used a lot.'*

> *'Libraries etc: Arts and heritage - put them on hold. Adopt the American model of altruistic donations to support these. Libraries - unbelievably under funded for years, a necessary part of a community, often*

overlooked (due to dwindling numbers) and an easy target for cuts. Bring them into the modern age by making them e-hubs of learning.'

'Big savings need to be made across the piece, I have opted for Culture and Leisure to take the bigger share as 'luxury' services that other sectors can pick the slack up from.'

The view that the provision of library, arts and leisure services may not be a top priority in these difficult times is summed up in the following quote:

'Libraries and sports centres are very nice – but in a recession money could be better spent elsewhere.'

However, other people make strong cases for not reducing spending in these areas.

'More investment should be placed within the library sector as libraries are 'free' places providing an extensive collection of information based material. They are ideally placed in the community and serve everyone, and are an essential and important council service which is unique in this economic climate!'

'More money should be put into leisure and sports by reducing youth services, this way we tackle obesity but also provide activities that are healthy for young people to do. Leisure services needs to do more and put on activities that the youth want and in those areas…'

4. Summary of findings from all groups, meetings and interviews (qualitative)

Feedback highlights a number of reoccurring priority themes;

- Cleaner and greener
- Regeneration
- Public transport, parking and highways
- Community Safety
- Education, jobs and employment
- Care and support for vulnerable people
- Community and things to do
- A lean and efficient council

Please note that all verbatim quotes used in the following pages are referenced according to the source. The list of abbreviations can be found on page 7 of this report.

4.1. Cleaner and greener

In line with other research and feedback, people want a borough that is clean, green and attractive. People express concerns about litter and run down buildings which make the area unappealing and lead to the perception of a lack of pride in the area.

> *'Cleanliness is very important.' (WSFTB)*

> *'There still appears to be rubbish on the street, dull old buildings and poor road surfaces.' (Asian Men's Support Group)*

> *'It's important to make sure the area is kept clean, without rubbish being left out and dogs messing in the streets.' (IYPSS)*

> *'Litter and dirty streets, rubbish everywhere, doesn't make me proud.' (MOC)*

> *'Slightly run down Town centre - please don't go the way of Dudley - and LITTER! Sorry, my pet hate.' (Male, Facebook)*

One person summarises the range of services they think the area needs as 'social comforts'. Clearly it is not one thing that makes somewhere a good place to live but a whole range of factors.

> *'Social comfort - community safety, cleanliness, no anti social behaviour, area based services, good services and facilities, street lighting, refuse, road maintenance, shops libraries.' (AUK)*

People in the Supporting People User Planning Group feel that there is a lack of civic pride and that local people need to take more of an active interest in the place where they live. This lack of pride is seemingly evident by the

perception that people *'just drop litter and don't care'*.

> *'There's too much of this 'can't be bothered' attitude and 'don't care' culture.' (Supporting People User Planning Group)*

> *'There's no civic pride.' (Supporting People User Planning Group)*

> *'People just drop litter and don't care' (Supporting People User Planning Group)*

Litter and run down buildings appear to be strongly connected and directly influence on how people feel about an area. The appearance of an area can affect how people feel, influence their behaviour and form an immediate opinion about the general performance of the Council. There is perhaps the perception that 'no one else cares, so why should I?' which may need to be tackled.

This perhaps indicates a 'broken window' scenario which should be addressed through maintaining urban environments in a well-ordered condition which may prevent further littering, vandalism as well as an escalation into other crime.

Even though there have been increased efforts by the council to keep streets and litter hot spots clear of rubbish and litter, plus the launch of a focussed campaign to tackle environmental crime in the borough, some people continue to feel that cleanliness in some areas still needs to be improved.

> *'Areas of central Walsall are kept litter free all day, outlying areas are ignored. First class service in Walsall, 2nd class elsewhere.' (CIL)*

Fig 6. Park Street, Walsall

Views around cleanliness may be related to particular hotspots, hot times of the day / week or particular types of litter (food, cigarette ends, dog fouling). It is not possible to know what people are thinking about when they say litter is a problem, future research should ask respondents to identify the problem areas, the time of the day or the type of litter.

Whether there is a lot of litter or very little, respondents rate street cleanliness as an area for continued investment. However, it is important to understand these views in more detail so that activities can be even more focussed and importantly communicated so that people notice the difference.

Although the question was not directly asked, only one person commented that they have seen an improvement in cleanliness standards in our streets and towns.

> *'The market is good. Cleanliness has improved.' (CIL)*

Results of the October 2010 Walsall Town Centre survey[2] show that the majority of respondents (44%) feel that the cleanliness of the town centre over the last 5 years has stayed the same, whilst a third feel that it has got worse. Conversely, 17% of respondents indicate that cleanliness in the town centre has improved.

The feeling that some areas are not clean may be closely linked to the number of derelict buildings and empty shops many of which attract fly posting, graffiti, vandalism, have dirty windows and dirty entrances, not all of which are issues the council can deal with.

Many people mention derelict buildings as a problem in the borough. The general perception that many areas are run down, shabby and not looked after may exacerbate the perception that an area is littered and not clean.

> *'The standard of cleanliness in the town centres and public places needs improving.' (Supporting People User Planning Group)*

> *'Cleanliness needs improving. The town is dirty' (CIL)*

> *'People come into Walsall and think it's a dirty place to be!!' (CIL)*

4.2. Regeneration

Regenerating the borough is seen as a priority. Many people highlight the number of derelict buildings and empty shops which people do not feel reflect well on the borough or encourage people to visit. A number of people comment on the appearance of Park Street and Bridge Street in Walsall town centre saying that it is run down and unwelcoming, with one person stating that Walsall is 'deemed rough'.

> *'Certain areas in Walsall look run down.' (User Carer Reference Group)*

> *'It is [Park Street and Bridge Street] very cluttered, untidy and dirty and even more so now the market stalls are there. It certainly does not welcome people to Walsall.' (Asian Men's Support Group)*

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[2] Walsall Town Centre Survey 2010 ran throughout October achieving 1,200 responses.

'The Market on the Bridge is unsightly and the 'Overstrand' needs removing as it is old and an eyesore.' (WSFTB)

'Walsall is deemed as rough.' (User Carer Reference Group)

Respondents are keen to see empty shops utilised, preferably with the stores and services local people want and need. Empty shop windows could be used innovatively, perhaps by local community and voluntary organisations to promote services and display information.

'They need to regenerate the town centre so more shops don't close – coming in from Birmingham practically everything down the road is closed. When will the council realise the situation is serious?' (SUE)

'They need to make Walsall a better place to go shopping so people will want to come here and spend money.' (SUE)

'Too many derelict areas and empty shops.' (User Carer Reference Group)

'Modernise Walsall, make use of empty shops.' (MOC)

Half of all respondents to the Walsall Town Centre Survey 2010 think that the range of shops in the town centre is acceptable, with 28% stating it's good. One fifth (20%) said that the range of shops in Walsall town centre is poor. When asked what is lacking, most respondents (50%) indicate that they would like to see more places to eat (café's and bars) and 47% would like to see a department store (non food) as an addition to the current range of shops and stores in Walsall town centre.

Some respondents comment positively on the range of shops in the town centres, as well as the borough's markets. A number of people request that public toilets are provided in Walsall town centre, which is also the case in the Walsall town centre survey where 72% of respondents to the think that the town centre needs visitor toilets.

'Shops and markets are good.'(AUK)

'There are no public toilets in town centre.' (AUK)

There are large proportions of respondents to the Walsall town centre survey travelling to shop in Birmingham (62%), Dudley / Merry Hill (36%) and Wolverhampton (34%) perhaps drawn, amongst other things, by the greater range of shops, stores and facilities on offer or a more appealing environment. More information is needed in order to fully understand these responses.

4.3. Public transport, parking and highways

Public transport and car parking are recurring themes. Some people comment that it is important that you can easily find a safe place to park and that any difficulty doing so can put you off visiting again. Several people suggested that car parks in Walsall town centre should be free, the feeling that free parking would encourage people to visit the town and spend their money there. No one referred to the revenue that is generated from council car parks.

'All car parks should be free, including hospital car parks.' (MOC)

'I don't shop in Walsall. It needs better parking, long stay rather than short stay.' (AUK)

'There are not enough affordable places to park.' (Business rep)

Views regarding civil enforcement officers (traffic wardens) are polarised, some people think there are too many and are a waste of resources, while others think they are a valuable service, for controlling parking and keeping pavements clear of illegally parked vehicles.

'Don't cut the number of traffic wardens' (SUE non-drivers.)

'Cut the number of traffic wardens.' (SUE drivers).

'Stop people parking on the pavements.' (WSFTB)

Business representatives speak of 'over zealous' parking attendants.

Lots of people are critical about Walsall town centre's bus station, something that has been raised in budget consultation before. People say that it is difficult to find your way around and are worried about safety.

'The bus station is still in need of improvement.' (Asian Men's Support Group)

'It is difficult for buses to get in and out.' (MOC)

'The bus station layout is difficult to navigate through.' (WSFTB)

'Need a new bus station, the current one is too dangerous, not big enough. The zebra crossing is in the wrong place.' (User Carer Reference Group)

The bus station is certainly not described as welcoming and easy to use, which may put people off visiting Walsall by bus or visiting at all.

Many respondents to budget consultation rely on public transport and community transport for all aspects of their life and are worried that services may be cut or prices increased.

'Keep the good public transport – don't let that deteriorate. Keep it cheap.' (SUE)

It is important that public transport is clean and on time.' (Supporting People User Planning Group)

'A number of bus services have stopped or reduced.' (User Carer Reference Group)

Those who rely on public transport, in particular respondents with disabilities stress the importance of being able to get around independently and the community and social benefits of this. A number of people commented that without public transport and community transport services they would be very isolated. Although people point out areas for improvement, clearly public and community transport enhances the quality of life of many people.

'Community transport is really important, getting to college and back.' (MOC)

'Ring and ride service, although it is difficult to always get, I would be totally isolated without this. Although there is no cross boundary service.' (AUK)

'Pensioner's free bus passes are important, which are needed to allow people to get out and about and not be stuck inside.' (WSFTB)

One young person highlights the fact that public transport should meet the needs of local people, understanding these needs is critical.

'Bus routes need to reflect an area's needs.' (IYPSS)

'There is a need for a bus service directly into the grounds of the Manor Hospital.' (WSFTB)

The proximity of Walsall to the motorway network is seen as major advantage for the borough, even though it is a major bottleneck and that the M6 junction 10 is described by one business representative as *'it looks like Beirut'* and although under the remit of the Highways Agency, the appearance of our motorway junctions may contribute to perceptions of an unclean, unkempt borough and a perhaps a poor performing council.

'Walsall has good transport connections to the motorways. It's a town but the countryside is within easy reach. It's not hard to get to anywhere in the country.' (SUE)

Highway maintenance is raised as in need of improvement by several people. Pot holes and traffic congestion being the main concerns as well as pedestrian safety and traffic congestion.

'They need to continue to improve the roads – both the surface and how busy they are - you know you are driving in Walsall because of the pain in your bum!' (SUE)

'The roads need constant repairs.' (CIL)

'Pot holes should be filled in properly so that they last longer.' (User Carer Reference Group)

Business representatives identified problems regarding traffic congestion with the suggested solution being a park and ride scheme. The quality of roads (pot holes) was also mentioned and a better system of renewing and maintaining roads was proposed with a particular focus on the main roads into Walsall.

Fig. 7 The council's highway contractor Tarmac re-surface a road in the borough.

Road safety, in particular safety for pedestrians is also important, with some people highlighting the Arboretum junction as a particular 'challenge'.

'I am a walker and struggle to get to shops and post office. People park everywhere, they go through red traffic lights at crossings.' (AUK)

'More 20mph zones to improve safety and more cycle lanes.' (LGBT)

'The Arboretum junction is a disaster – it needs lines painted on it to show drivers who don't know it where to go.' (SUE)

'The road signs at Walsall Arboretum are confusing.' (User Carer Reference Group)

The Supporting People User Planning Group identify a number of transport and highway related issues they would like to see addressed; blocked drains and trees growing in drains, the pollution levels in Walsall, congestion from traffic, parked cars blocking pavements and other obstructions, poor planning to co-ordinate utility road works and pot holes in the roads.

People with disabilities have particular concerns about access and the condition of roads and pavements and noise pollution, more so than other groups as it can directly impact on their ability to live independently.

> *'The roads and paths need repairing, they are uneven and have lots of pot holes. This also applies to the roads in local cemeteries.' (WSFTB)*

Respondents from Walsall Disability Forum also highlighted the need for more dropped kerbs and improved access into Walsall town centre for disabled people.

4.4. Community Safety

Making sure the borough is a safe place remains a high priority. Comments tend to focus on the borough's district centres and in particular, Walsall town centre where some people identify the need for a greater police presence especially in the evening.

> *'It is important that the area where you live is safe for everyone. Free of crime and disorder and free of litter.' (CIL)*

> *'Daytime is OK because you see police and PCSOs about but at night time you have bouncers in the town centre but don't often see police. Some areas are OK but some are not safe at night' (Youth Inspector)*

> *'More police on the beat' (MOC).*

> *'There is a need for more policing and quicker responses to burglaries.' (AUK)*

> *'Increase police presence in deprived areas e.g. in Caldmore there is a big problem with prostitution and drug dealing.' (AUK)*

Whilst some people feel safe in Walsall town centre others do not, in particular feeling that the town centre is not safe after 6pm.

> *'I feel safe in Walsall Town Centre, it's a safe place to go shopping.' (SUE)*

> *'If I have organised a night out and need to come back into Walsall I do not feel comfortable travelling back after 6.00 pm as I do think it is a safe place.' (User Carer Reference Group)*

> *'After 6pm Walsall Town Centre is not family orientated.' (User Carer Reference Group)*

> *'The crime in the town centre at night needs tackling.' (MOC)*

Anti-social behaviour remains a concern and a priority that people want addressing. People congregating in groups is a concern for many, behaviour that can be very intimidating for some people. In response to the question

about what doesn't make you proud of Walsall, some young people said 'the gangs'.

> *'Remove the Fountain on The Bridge [Walsall town centre], people congregate there and cause trouble.' (WSFTB)*

> *'Anti-social behaviour, gangs hanging around on the streets and in bus stops and shelters.' (WSFTB)*

> *'We now seem to have a 'Dog Culture' in the town with people hanging around having brought their dogs into the town centre and sometimes it doesn't feel safe' (Supporting People User Planning Group)*

> *'People drinking in the street, young people making you feel intimidated.' (CIL)*

Fig 8. Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs)

Continued focussed reassurance activity, work to improve community cohesion and encouraging different groups to mix, for example through community and intergenerational projects, may have wide ranging benefits in reducing anti-social behaviour and concerns about community safety.

4.5. Education, jobs and employment

Respondents recognise the importance of education for all, however some people have concerns about the standard of Walsall schools and attainment levels.

> *'Schools and lifelong learning are most important.' (Asian Men's Support Group)*

> *'Schools and education are most important.' (MOC)*

When asked 'What is most important for making somewhere a good place to live' people responding to the 'Our Walsall' Facebook thread are particularly critical about the standard of schools and education in the borough, so much so that one parent states that they are planning to move out of the area in

order to improve their daughters educational prospects.

> *'For me, it's the schools. They have a bad reputation and grades around me and while my little girl is only 5 months, we're planning on moving out of the borough in time for her to attend a better school. Of course, everything else plays a part but schools most important now we're a family.' (Female, Facebook)*

> *'Walsall does have a couple of good schools without doubt but it is a lottery getting into these and most children end up having to make do with the poor-performing schools. Until all schools in Walsall are brought up to an acceptable standard children are being let down badly.' (Female, Facebook)*

One person on Facebook points out that whilst education is important there is a lack of appropriate skilled and technical jobs in the borough, ones that can sustain the economic prosperity of the borough and its residents.

> *'Walsall needs real jobs not those that are currently being offered in retail, mostly selling products made in far away countries. Walsall and our country needs skilled jobs in manufacturing and technical' (Male, Facebook)*

> *'It's important to have a centre of industry - Walsall has suffered from the decline in industry and hasn't replaced it with anything.' (AUK)*

> *'Need to develop business to replace traditional manufacturing services.' (Business rep)*

Unemployment and the borough's ability to cope with future government cuts concern many respondents, particularly in a borough where there are already communities with pockets of deprivation, unemployment and child poverty. Some respondents comment on people hanging around the streets seemingly with nothing to do.

> *'There is high unemployment in the area and the sense that there are no prospects unless you get out.' (SUE)*

> *'I saw some statistics that say Walsall is 314th on a list of resilience to cuts.' (Youth Inspector)*

> *'There are people hanging around in the town centre and public places with nothing to do' (Supporting People User Planning Group)*

> *'Getting people back to work so they can't hand around the streets.' (AUK)*

> *'There needs to be motivation to work hard.' (Business rep)*

Key issues identified by business representatives were the need for more help to start businesses and more support for new businesses, although some felt that support should not be confined to new / start-up businesses but should be provided to existing and long-established businesses as well. Advice on tendering for council services, information on the economic regeneration function of the council and cost saving advice were also called for.

Raising educational attainment, ensuring young people leave school with good qualifications, the right skills and retaining this talent is important to representatives from the business community.

'Business support (existing, new, proposed).' (Business rep)

'Grass root communication of support available from Council.' (Business rep)

'Raising education standards - especially literacy and numeracy within the prospective workforce.' (Business rep)

'Work readiness of young people.' (Business rep)

'People are not coming out of college / university with practical skills. (Business rep)

'Build in more work experience and on the job experience onto courses.' (Business rep)

Fig 9. Senior officers of the council took questions from the floor at the business breakfast meeting held on 28 September 2010.

Business representatives identify a lack of enterprise and a general skills shortage and meaning there are not the right candidates for the jobs available. The image and profile of the borough is highlighted as in need of improving. Having a poor image, the existence of old engineering black spots and a general 'brain drain' to other more prosperous, attractive areas are all issues business representatives identify as barriers to achieving economic success.

Poor standards of education, the need for more work placements and the lack of a cohesive skills strategy supporting local people to gain skills were identified as in need of attention, as well as the lack of pride in Walsall amongst young people.

> *'Work with young people on what makes you employable.' (Business rep)*

Business representatives also identify a lack of understanding of what skills businesses need i.e. enterprise is as important as qualifications with the promotion of work experience in schools and visits from business people to schools both suggested as possible solutions to this problem. A lack of a common or shared employment strategy was also problematic for some participants and the proposed solution was support for a local apprenticeship joint strategy.

> *'Walsall needs a more professional image.' (Business rep)*

> *'Pride in Walsall is lacking in young people – there is a desire to move out of Walsall.' (Business rep)*

> *'Walsall needs to attract / retain employees of high calibre.' (Business rep)*

Business representatives feel there is a included a lack of access to support from suitable sources and linked to this, knowing where to go for support, a lack of concentrated support (i.e. all in one place) and too much red tape to navigate when starting a business. Possible solutions included publicising and raising awareness of sources of information, and providing a mentoring service which matches successful and established business people with new start ups and having a one stop shop for business support all under one roof.

Some significant problems related to finance and included lack of finance to start a small business, a lack of support from the bank and lack of understanding and empathy for SMEs (small and medium enterprises) – all large businesses were once small businesses. Proposed solutions included a pro-active micro finance scheme, exerting pressure on the banks *'we bailed out'* to lend to businesses and protecting SMEs through investment and procurement opportunities.

4.6. Care and support for vulnerable people

Service users speak positively about the social services they receive, the community and voluntary organisations and the people who support them. Respondents recognise that a healthy society provides for a healthy and prosperous workforce.

> *'The social services in Walsall are very good – how they look after us in mental health – Broadway north and the community teams.' (SUE)*

'Having a healthy society and good social care is important.'
(Supporting People User Planning Group)

Having the right services and advice at the right time is important for those who are, or may become, vulnerable. Ensuring people are aware of the services they are entitled to and making it easy for them to access those services when they need them is critical. Some people indicate that existing services and support need extending or making more flexible.

'Making sure that people who need help get the help they deserve when they need it. Being able to speak to people you need to (i.e. social work)' (AUK)

'Health and social care services and access to them needs improving.'
(Supporting People User Planning Group)

'Assistance in acquiring care in people's own homes. Not everyone is eligible for care - it would be good if there was more flexibility.' (AUK)

'Social care for the elderly (need more help from social workers).District nurses are excellent.' (AUK)

Individuals who access and use particular services provided by the community and voluntary sector and support groups such as Making Our Choice, explain just how important they are to them and their families. Without such groups they feel they would be forgotten, with no where to go and no where to have their say.

'Community groups and support groups make me proud of Walsall.'
(MOC)

'Social groups like this one [Making Our Choice] are important. I would feel left out if it wasn't here. It's an opportunity to socialise, get the chance to say what you think about things and find out what's going on.' (MOC)

'The Gateways Leisure Group is really important; I wouldn't want to see that end.' (MOC)

'There is a lot of help with the elderly, mentally ill and vulnerable people, i.e. the Glebe centre, Age UK, Neighbourhood Community Officers and floating support.' (AUK)

4.7. Community and things to do

Young people identify parks, playing areas and having a wider range of things to do as in need of improvement. Other respondents make suggestions for positive activities in order to occupy and develop children and young people in the borough.

'There are not enough adventure centres in Walsall.' (IYPSS)

'More activities for children and teenagers to take part in.' (WSFTB)

'More support for children and young people after school.' (IYPSS)

'Facilities for young people - youth clubs/skate park. Also day centres for elderly and mental health.' (AUK)

'Services for young people (personal development). After school clubs and extra curricular activities.' (AUK)

Others felt that it was important for local people to be involved in their community and for there to be a range of community facilities and activities available, ones that encourage local people to get involved and make a difference – 'Big Society'. Some respondents raised the need for more community groups that address the needs of isolated and vulnerable people in the borough.

'Something should be done to get people to think about how they can contribute to the community' (Supporting People User Planning Group)

'You need good community understanding and helping each other.' (CIL)

'The one [library] near me has a SureStart attached so brings the community together. It is a learning hub for the whole community.' (Youth Inspector)

Facilities and activities need to reflect the borough's diverse communities and cultures.

'There is a lack of community groups where I can go to meet other people. I am very isolated and cannot speak English.' (AUK)

'There need to be a wide range of facilities meeting local needs (for a variety of cultures). (AUK)

'More community groups where I can go and chat to other Asian women. I was happy when I used to work. My husband is disabled and cannot take me anywhere.' (AUK)

Whilst feedback identifies a lack of things to do, particularly for young people, some respondents highlighted the availability of facilities and activities in the borough.

'Good things for me are the provision of things to do with babies. There's something for us to attend in Brownhills most days at very reasonable prices, 50p or £1.' (Female, Facebook)

> *'The Town Hall has good events at a good price.' (WSFTB)*

Many respondents highlighted the need for more entertainment venues to increase the appeal of the local area for all ages which can help tackle issues of anti-social behaviour.

> *'There is a need for entertainment venues for all ages; theatres and cinemas which are within the Town Centre and are easily accessible by public transport.' (WSFTB)*

> *'We need more entertainment venues, we only have the Town Hall, there are no cinemas or theatres within Walsall town centre.' (WSFTB)*

> *'The lack of a decent live music venue - if Wolverhampton can manage it with the Civic and Wulfrun Halls and the Slade Rooms, why can't Walsall?' (Male, Facebook)*

Given their criticisms many respondents refer to Walsall as a friendly borough with a good community spirit with lots of potential. If this is the case then Walsall should be well placed to meet the localism agenda and the challenge of Big Society. It is important to harness this 'community spirit' and connect communities in new ways for the benefit of the borough and everyone who lives, works and does business here.

> *'I live on Pheasey Estate there are good schools there, good library, streets are cleaned every week, people there are friendly.' (CIL)*

> *'We moved from Birmingham and what struck us was how friendly the people were.' (CIL)*

> *'What is most important is community spirit and having a harmonious area to live in. Especially not a run down area, make it pretty' (CIL)*

One 'Our Walsall' Facebook follower clearly thinks that Walsall does not celebrate or shout about its successes enough and that the negative attitude towards the borough is in need of reversing, the outcome being a borough that is proud.

> *'… The town has so much potential - proximity to road and rail links, new college, great range of shops, Art Gallery, the Arboretum etc. and despite of all that - I don't get the feeling the people of Walsall take pride in their town and it's amenities. How do you change that attitude? Why do some of our neighbours prefer to shop in Lichfield or Sutton Coldfield instead of visiting the town on their doorstep?' (Male, Facebook)*

> *'…celebrate good things and showcase success.' (AUK)*

4.8. A lean and efficient council

Feedback indicates that people understand that cuts are inevitable however they do not want the cuts to impact on or affect the quality of services they receive. Many people put forward suggestions for how they think the council can operate in a more efficient manner and save money. Many of these suggestions have already been implemented by the council, including streamlining tiers of management, voluntary redundancy, cutting non essential spending and other efficiency savings, this perhaps indicates a lack of awareness amongst local people of what the Council is currently doing to address these issues and the need to better communicate these messages.

> *'We have some very good services in Walsall. We mustn't cut back on these services or the most vulnerable people are the ones who will suffer.' (CIL)*

> *'Slim down management tiers of staff in Walsall Council to ease staff costs.' (Asian Men's Support Group)*

> *'The council employs too many staff.' (User Carer Reference Group)*

> *'Try not to cut any services, try to deliver them more efficiently – when Walsall Council is in trouble it always cuts – but they never lay off the people in the back* rooms *– the council never seems to get any smaller.' (SUE)*

> *'Improve the management of Walsall's services – cut the inefficiencies and bad practice in the council.' (SUE)*

Some suggestions mirror the objectives of the council's Working Smarter programme which aims to cut out waste and spend less, improve customer service and change the way we do our business.

> *'The council needs to be leaner and more efficient – they need to do more with less in the council instead of always recruiting more staff. They need to make the council cheaper to run so they can lower the council tax or stop it going up.' (SUE)*

> *'Too many meetings take place.' (User Carer Reference Group)*

> *'Cut down on things within council offices, things like coffee machines, turn off the lights and computer monitors.' (MOC)*

> *'Anything involving money wasting, council high wages when funds could be better used for more deserving things.' (AUK)*

In balancing the competing priorities of over 250,000 people the council has difficult decisions to make which is summed up by this comment left by someone using the Centre for Independent Living;

'I think all council services are important to someone. What might not be used by one person could be used by someone else. Everyone's needs are different.' (CIL)

5. Conclusion

5.1. It is clear that a combination of things make somewhere a good place to live. Key factors include a clean and safe borough, with good transport links, well maintained roads, buildings and facilities. Excellent schools turning out talented young people ready to become the borough's sustainable workforce of the future are also critical.

5.2. Comments indicate that people are not convinced the council is listening and acting on their views. Active, ongoing dialogue and feedback will ensure the needs of local people are understood and evident in the decision making of the council.