

Evaluation of Budget Consultation Responses

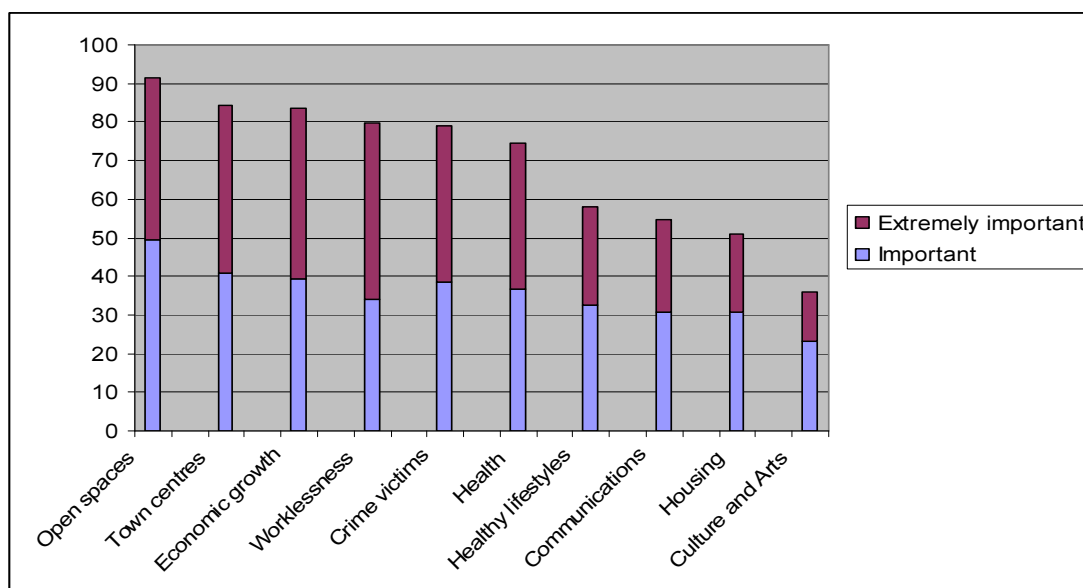
As the report to Cabinet indicates, the budget consultation process ran for six weeks from 1 October to 9 November 2012.

The first graph illustrates the relative levels of importance which residents who returned the questionnaire during the process placed on the 10 core themes.

The five categories used in the questionnaire were:-

- Extremely Important
- Important
- Neither nor
- Not important
- Of no importance at all

By adding the “extremely important” and “important” responses together, we can weight the 10 themes against each other in terms of their overall importance to the 635 residents who responded.



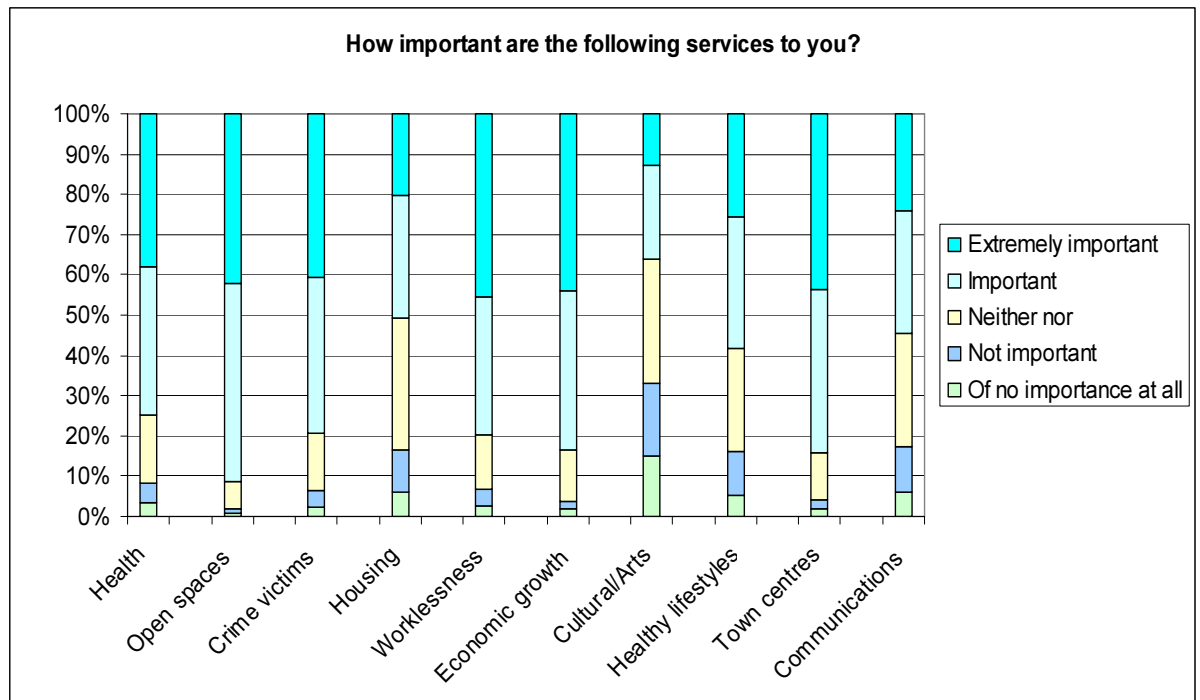
Analysis of this feedback shows three groupings of responses in terms of levels of importance.

In the upper group are economy and environmental issues with keeping streets and open spaces clean and clear; vibrant, active and safe town centres and promoting economic growth regarded as the three most important areas for residents.

In the next grouping are reducing worklessness; supporting victims of crime and vulnerable citizens and improving public health.

And in the final grouping, which could be assessed as being of lower importance, are promoting healthy lifestyles; improving the way the council communicates; improving housing standards and choices; cultural activity and promotion of the arts.

This second graph below shows how all 10 themes scored overall against each other in the five weighted areas.



As well as being asked to assess the importance of the 10 themed areas, residents who took part in the consultation were also asked to answer two supplementary questions.

Question One - Please tell us of any other services, not mentioned above, which are provided by the borough council and which are important to you.

Analysis and evaluation of these comments enables us to pinpoint some key themes which have emerged from residents who answered this question.

The first point of interest here is that the theme of economic regeneration and vibrant town centres is a theme which follows through from the “prompt” sections above through to this “unprompted” section where residents can raise points and issues of their choice.

A total of 23 people identified regeneration, particularly for the borough’s town centres, as an area which they regard as important.

The cleaner and greener agenda is also picked up strongly with this question. The single most common service identified as being important to residents - with 53 individual responses – was maintaining the level of the council’s national award winning recycling service.

The borough’s transport infrastructure – roads, clean and clear streets, maintenance of good public transport services and street lighting – emerged as another key area for residents with a combined total of 57 responses on these issues.

There was also a clear message from residents who answered the questionnaire that young people, play areas and leisure are important to them. In total, there were 37 separate responses which identified these as important.

Question Two - *How do you think the council could save money?*

There was a much more diverse response to this particular question however, analysis does point to a cluster of themes once more.

Encouraging the council to be more efficient and effective is certainly a common theme put forward through a variety of comments.

This theme covers a range of comments from residents and includes reducing bureaucracy and being more efficient (combined total of 28 comments); working more effectively with the Third Sector (16); shared services and greater collaboration with other councils (15); collecting all fines and taxes efficiently (13).

Reducing the level of recycling services offered in the borough (13) and scaling back initiatives for young people were also put forward (12).

A number of residents also urged the council to consider carefully the issue of staff and overheads. There seemed to be an appetite from residents who returned the questionnaire for “cuts” both in terms of council staff related issues but also councillor related issues. However, it must be said that there is nothing sitting below the headline comments which offers greater insight into the reasoning behind the proposals.

The Consultation Process

As the main report to Cabinet indicates, this is the first time in eight years that the borough council has carried out a significant exercise relating to budget consultation.

As a result, levels of participation may be expected to grow in future years if the consultation process becomes a more recognised and regular feature of the Budget setting process in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

The report also highlights the substantial amount of work which has gone in to generate the 635 responses received. The number of people eligible to vote in the borough is 97,669 so the level of returns represents less than one per cent of that total.

So, although the responses should be treated with a degree of caution, the total number of 635 still provides Cabinet with a substantial body of evidence for it to consider in its Budget deliberations.

Moving forward, one of the recommendations being considered by Cabinet is that a “lessons learned” process involving key portfolio holders and officers takes place. This would most certainly help Cabinet identify how the process can be improved if Members decide to repeat the consultation on a more regular basis.

Conclusion

From the consultation, we can conclude that residents have clearly identified six areas at the top end of their scale of importance – open spaces; town centres; economic growth; employment; supporting victims of crime and health.

This mirrors the key streams of work which are already under way at the borough council as identified in the Council Plan and also key strategies approved by the authority.

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