

Results of Budget Consultation

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report outlines the main issues raised by residents as part of the formal budget consultation process. The report highlights a number of key areas of concern for local residents in dealing with the current economic climate and also focuses upon the Council's services and residents' perceptions of the value for money received from their Council Tax.

2. Background

- 2.1 Tower Hamlets Council is committed to consulting local stakeholders about spending plans and the Council Tax level. Consultation is therefore an integral part of service planning in the borough and as part of this year's budget process, the Tower Hamlets Partnership was asked to convene some focus groups of Tower Hamlets residents to provide an opportunity for residents to discuss the affect of the current economic climate on them, their communities and how they felt the Council could respond to their concerns when formulating the budget for the following financial year.

- 2.2 As part of this year's budget consultation process, a series of focus groups were held to discuss the following:

- The current economic climate; how it affects them and their communities.
- How important is it to keep council tax levels low?
- Would you be able to live with a small increase in council tax if services continued to improve?
- To discuss which services are a priority for council tax spend.

- 2.3 Statutory consultation with the business community was also undertaken, from which no feedback was received.

3. Summary Results

- 3.1 In January 2010, six focus groups were held at venues across the borough, comprising of residents from several economic social groups.

- 3.2 A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people is asked about their attitude towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members.

- 3.3 The following key themes emerged from the focus groups:

- Rise in Prices
- Employment and Training

- Council Tax: Level, Value for Money and Services
- Tower Hamlets Council: Improvements in Service Delivery.
- Recession: Length and Effect

3.4 Rise in Prices

3.4.1 Focus on Food prices and Utility Bills

There was a general consensus amongst all focus group attendees that prices in general have risen. There was a real focus in particular on food prices and utility bills.

3.4.2 Socialising

Lots of residents stated that their lifestyle has changed as a result of the recession. There appears to be change in how residents approach “going out”. Several residents stated that where they used to go out regularly for coffee, to the cinema or to the pub; these activities are now a lot less frequent.

3.5 Employment and Training

3.5.1 Local Unemployment

Local residents had a generally negative perception of local employment. Residents felt there was a real lack of employment opportunities locally and several residents expressed difficulty in finding work. There was a particular concern shared across the focus groups that the situation was particularly bleak for young people.

3.6 Council Tax

3.6.1 Council Tax Level and Value for Money

Whilst there was a real consensus amongst residents that council tax should not rise in the next financial year and should stay the same or decrease, many residents indicated that they would accept a small increase in council tax only on the proviso that they physically saw the benefits in their locality, for example an extra policeman.

3.6.2 Services

Some residents were unclear as to how council tax was spent. Residents recognised that priority areas for council spend differed by each individual and during the discussion came some way in recognising the budget pressure realities. The areas in which residents stated council tax should focus more on included; Crime, Social Services: Meals on Wheels, Carers, Health, Unemployment, Housing, Adult Education, Local Jobs, Youth Provision, Community Facilities. There was a concern from some residents that a freeze or low council tax would have an effect on services and the softer services would go first such as Adult Education.

3.7 Tower Hamlets Council – Improvement in Service Delivery

3.7.1 Improvement in Service Delivery

In five of the six focus group sessions it was highlighted that service level improvement has really improved at the council areas which were highlighted as a real improvement included; parks and open spaces, rubbish collections, idea stores.

3.8 Recession

3.8.1 Length

Residents shared the view that the recession was not over but differed in their viewpoint as to whether we were at the start of the recession or in the middle.

Residents felt media reports and government information were largely misleading and their individual decisions on their recession were made on their actual and local circumstances; local jobs, local prices etc..

3.8.2 Effect

Residents highlighted that the recession effects different people in different ways with some residents affected more than others.