



m.e.l
research

**Future of services: Results
from resident survey**

Surrey County Council

**Final report
January 2019**

Project details.....	2
Introduction	3
Key messages	4
Key findings	5
Appendix A – Respondent profile	8

Project details

Project title	Resident engagement on the future of Surrey County Council services
Client	Surrey County Council
Project number	18047
Author	Adam Knight-Markiegi
Reviewer	David Chong Ping

M·E·L Research

2nd Floor, 1 Ashted Lock, Birmingham Science Park Aston, Birmingham, B7 4AZ

Email: info@melresearch.co.uk

Web: www.melresearch.co.uk

Tel: 0121 604 4664



Introduction

Background

Surrey County Council is responsible for delivering a wide range of complex and varied services for almost 1.2 million residents across the county. Yet, like councils up and down the country, the County Council is under unprecedented financial pressure following seven years of cuts to its government funding. Alongside this, the population is ageing, therefore with higher care needs, and costs for vulnerable children continue to grow.

To aid its decision-making process, the County Council was looking to explore in more detail residents' informed opinions on a range of issues, to better understand their priorities. This was to be used for designing services, prioritising and allocating resources and setting budgets in future years.

M·E·L Research were commissioned to help the Council with a resident engagement programme. The research requirements were to engage with residents about potential service changes; to hear their voices and listen to their suggestions on their priorities for these services.

Methodology

The research consisted of two initial deliberative workshops, held in Leatherhead and Woking in late September 2018, with almost 100 residents from across the county, discussing possible service redesigns and carrying out a participatory budgeting trade-off exercise. In addition, three 'chattabout' discussions were held with parents at a children's centre in western Surrey; with Muslim men after Friday prayers in central Surrey; and Hindus at a religious festival in north Surrey. These particularly added depth from their respective standpoints.

The findings were used from this qualitative phase to help design a face-to-face, doorstep survey, conducted with a representative sample of 1,100 residents across Surrey. The sample was randomly selected from across the 11 districts of the county with quotas set by gender and age to ensure a broadly representative sample. Appendix A shows the full respondent profile. Fieldwork took place between 13 December 2018 and 6 January 2019.

With an achieved sample of 1,100 responses, the survey has a margin of error of $\pm 2.95\%$ (for a 50% statistic at the 95% confidence level).

Key messages

Here are the key messages flowing from the results of this large survey of Surrey residents, looking at redesigning services and resident priorities in the face of big budget shortfalls for Surrey County Council.

- Awareness of budgeting pressures facing councils, including Surrey County Council, is high. When pushed, most **residents want to preserve services for vulnerable groups**, for both children and adults.
- Taking part in this resident engagement programme has shown them that **it is hard to radically redesign services**. While some people protested against any cuts, many residents understood the real pressures the County Council faces.
- Residents often opted for **service changes** that can be seen as **positive actions**, such as encouraging people to have greater control over their lives or providing incentives to attract foster carers or people into Family Resilience roles. There is also relatively strong **support** – particularly among younger residents – for taking a **more active role in local community life**. Yet more information is needed to support this and better communication about the difference it makes. Transparency will help here.
- **Technology** can surely be a **vehicle to change services**. As you might expect, younger residents were most receptive to digital communication, yet they also want to see better use of technology in providing library and cultural services and when working with vulnerable adults. In contrast, older residents want to retain contact by telephone and are least swayed by digital communication. This calls for a targeted approach, first moving services used mainly by younger residents to online and digital channels, followed by services used mostly by older people and vulnerable residents. This message came out loud and clear from the workshops too.
- **Raising more revenue** is another way to fill budget shortfalls. While most residents opposed an extra rise in council tax, a strong number do support it. Now may well be the time to run a local council tax referendum. However, residents will expect any extra income to be retained by Surrey County Council, posing a challenge to you in light of rules governing the distribution of council tax.
- However, any changes to services will result in **winners and losers**. The evidence we have presented offers clues about who will win and lose and therefore how best to change services in future to cause minimum impact.

Key findings

The residents survey explored many themes including awareness of budgetary pressures, service priorities for the Council and service re-design, as well as 'resident agreements' and views on changes to customer services. The appetite for raising revenue through a rise in council tax was also explored. Here are the key findings:

- The overwhelming majority of respondents (81%) were aware of budgetary pressures faced by councils across the country, though fewer were aware of budgetary pressures faced by Surrey County Council (73%). That means that around one in four (26%) were unaware of these pressures for the County Council.
- Like the workshops we ran earlier in this exercise, residents mostly prioritised services for vulnerable groups, with adult social care ranking highest (74%), followed by services for vulnerable children (67%) and special educational needs and disability (SEND) support (64%).
- Residents were also asked to choose from a list of service changes. Many residents found this hard to do, as the workshop participants had found previously. Sometimes, people chose options with higher points – which equate to higher spend. This may suggest a preference to limit the number of services that are affected, though it may also reflect the challenge of redesigning services, with residents more likely to choose options that get as close to the required total as simply as possible.
- However, four of the top five options can be seen as positive actions, encouraging people to have greater control over their lives or increasing incentives to attract foster carers and Family Resilience professionals. Libraries and cultural services sharing the building with other services gained the highest support (59%), which probably reflects a desire to retain these services, albeit in shared premises. Residents generally preferred to retain services than to cut them, with some residents challenging the notion that services must be cut. In contrast, four of the five least preferred options relate to families and children, showing much less support for these changes.
- Some residents also gave other comments about service changes. The highest number called for a cut in salaries, jobs or expenses in the County Council, though a desire to focus on funding care for vulnerable people and attention on local issues also came out strongly.

- Recognising the need to deliver public services in different ways, the survey asked residents about their views on how organisations in the public, voluntary, community and faith sectors can help and serve people. Residents were most supportive of the council providing services to those most in need, even if this means reduced spending elsewhere, with nine in ten (90%) agreeing. Yet, about six in ten (61%) residents agreed that they would like to participate more in civic life if they can see how their efforts would make a difference to the wider community and over half (53%) also agreed that they would be willing to get more involved in their community but do not know how.
- In order to achieve this, residents wanted more awareness or better access to information on how to help; they wanted a desire to feel part of the community; and for a push on volunteering, particularly focusing on support for vulnerable groups. Here is a desire to get more involved in the local community but more information or support needed to do so.
- The survey also asked residents about possible changes to the way the County Council runs its customer services. Large majorities were happy just to receive email (78%), happy to do everything online (73%) and happy to do web chat (61%). Most always wanted a telephone option (72%). This suggests that many people are willing to use digital means to communicate, though still value a telephone service, most likely with concern for older people and when dealing with more complex issues. This mirrors messages from the workshops we ran.
- As well as changing how services are delivered, raising more revenue is another way to fill budget shortfalls. Although most respondents (56%) were not prepared to see council tax rise above 2.99% (the rise allowed without a local council tax referendum), a large share of residents said they were prepared to stomach this. Over four in ten (44%) were willing to see it rise by a further 1%, while close to a quarter (23%) were prepared to see it rise by a further 2%.
- In general, we can see that many residents were most supportive (or protective) of services that they use or benefit from most. For example, younger people and those with children supported family-related services, while older residents were more in favour of adult social care. This is understandable, though it means there may always be winners and losers with any change to services, leading to both support and opposition for service re-designs.

- There were various differences in responses by sub-groups:
 - Younger residents were happier to embrace technology, whether used to support residents or to communicate with the Council.
 - While more middle aged and older respondents were aware of budgetary pressures affecting councils, younger residents agreed most that they would participate more in civic life if they could see how their efforts would make a difference to the wider community.
 - Middle aged respondents were also more supportive than others of raising council tax, given the financial pressures the County Council is under.
 - Respondents with children were supportive of participating more in community life, including direct support for vulnerable adults.
 - While white respondents were most supportive of emphasising recovery and rehabilitation through care plans, Asian respondents were most supportive of using assistive technology and being more involved in community activities. With concentrations of Asian residents in Surrey, this cultural identity is understandable; it also came out of the chattabout discussions we held with religious groups as part of this project.
 - Respondents with a disability were more supportive of bus routes that receive financial support and would otherwise be unviable. Yet they were least happy for customer services to move to a digital-only offer and did not support extra delays to receive a response from the County Council. Due consideration must therefore be given to Surrey residents with disability with any changes to customer services.
 - Respondents in urban areas agreed most that it is important for the council to provide services to those most in need, even if this means reduced spending elsewhere. While those in rural areas were more supportive of a (1% or 2% extra) rise in council tax.

Appendix A – Respondent profile

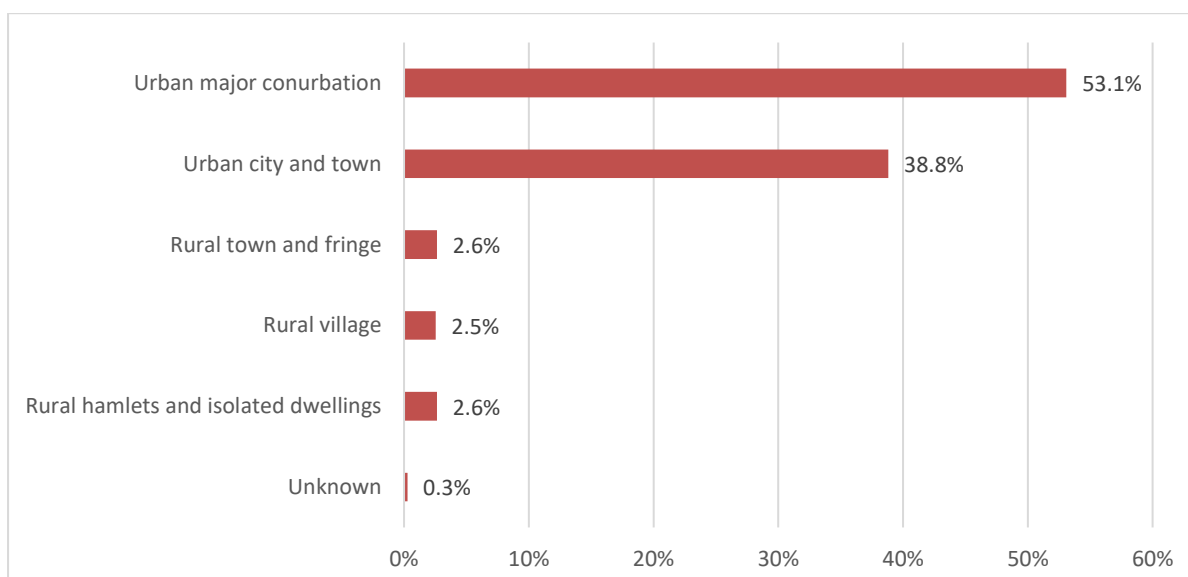
Respondents by district

There was an even split by Surrey district.

District	Achieved sample
Elmbridge	98
Epsom and Ewell	103
Guildford	101
Mole Valley	99
Reigate and Banstead	100
Runnymede	100
Spelthorne	100
Surrey Heath	103
Tandridge	100
Waverley	95
Woking	101
Total	1,100

Urban or rural

The overwhelming majority (92%) of respondents lived in an urban area, with small pockets spread across more sparse rural areas.

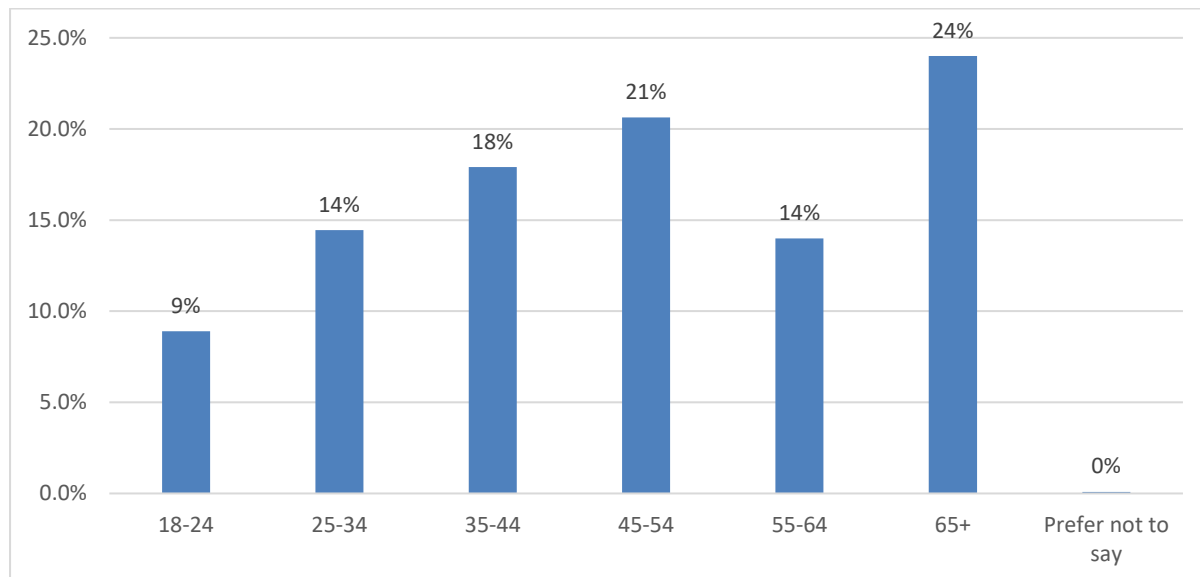


Gender

We achieved a good split by gender, with 50.3% male and 49.7% female. This is close to the population across Surrey.

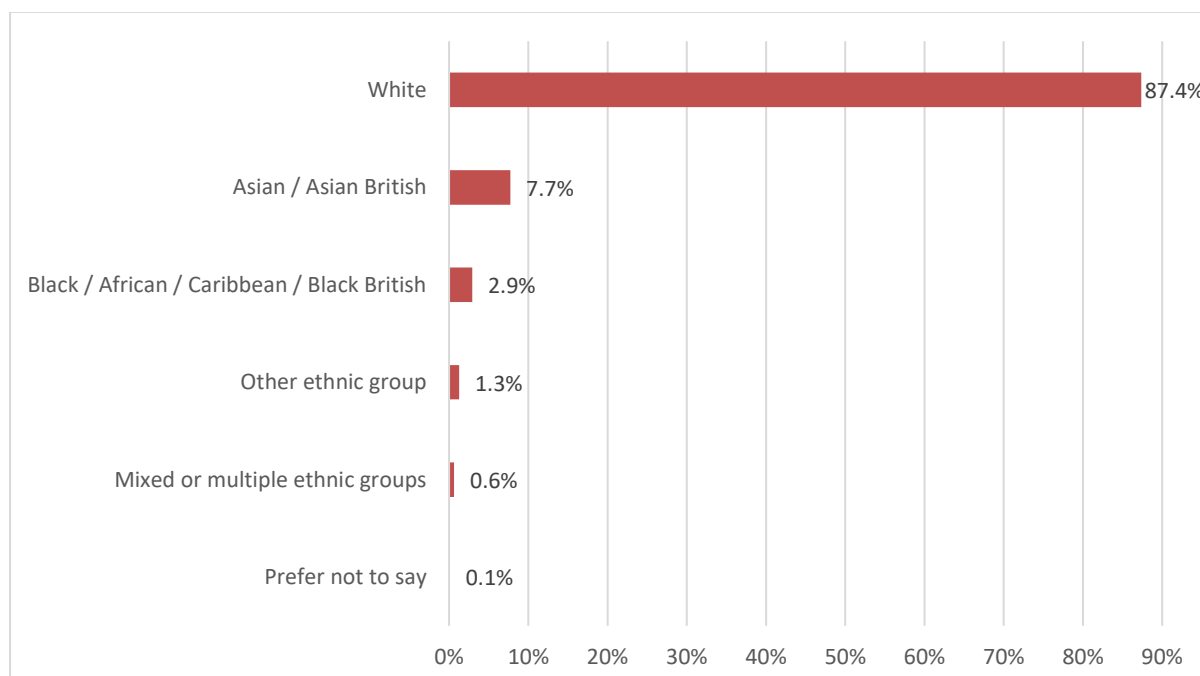
Respondent age group

The age profile of respondents broadly follows the age bands of the whole population of Surrey. This means the results are representative by age group.



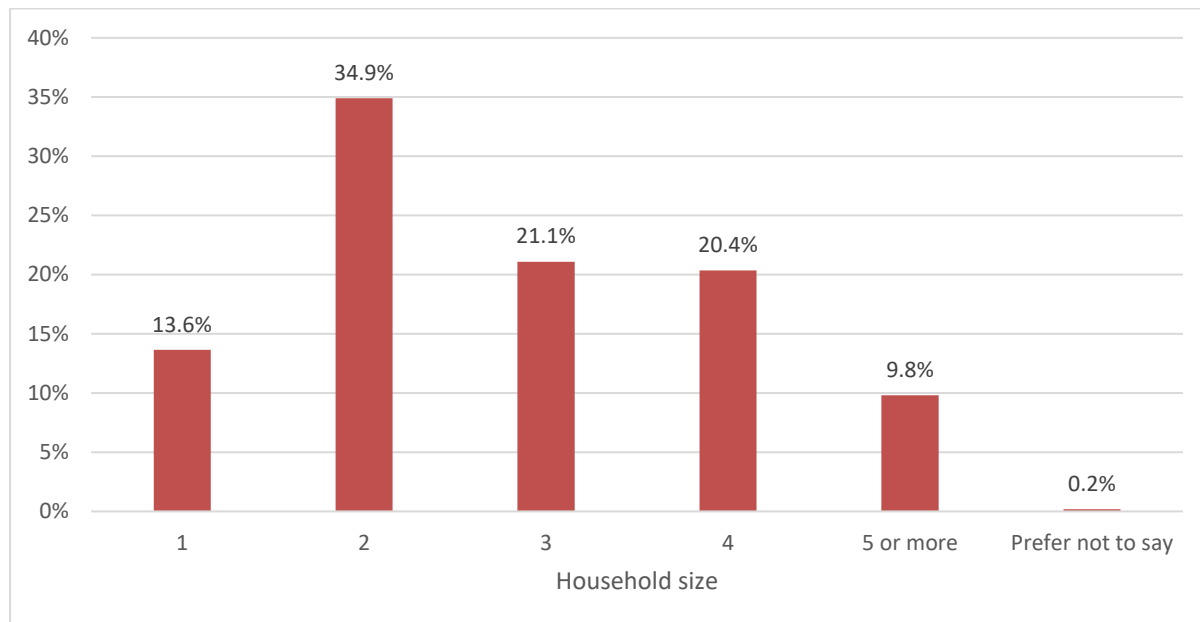
Respondent ethnicity

The largest share of respondents was white, similar to the whole Surrey population.



Respondent household size

We heard from residents living in a mix of household sizes, so a variety of families across Surrey.



Children

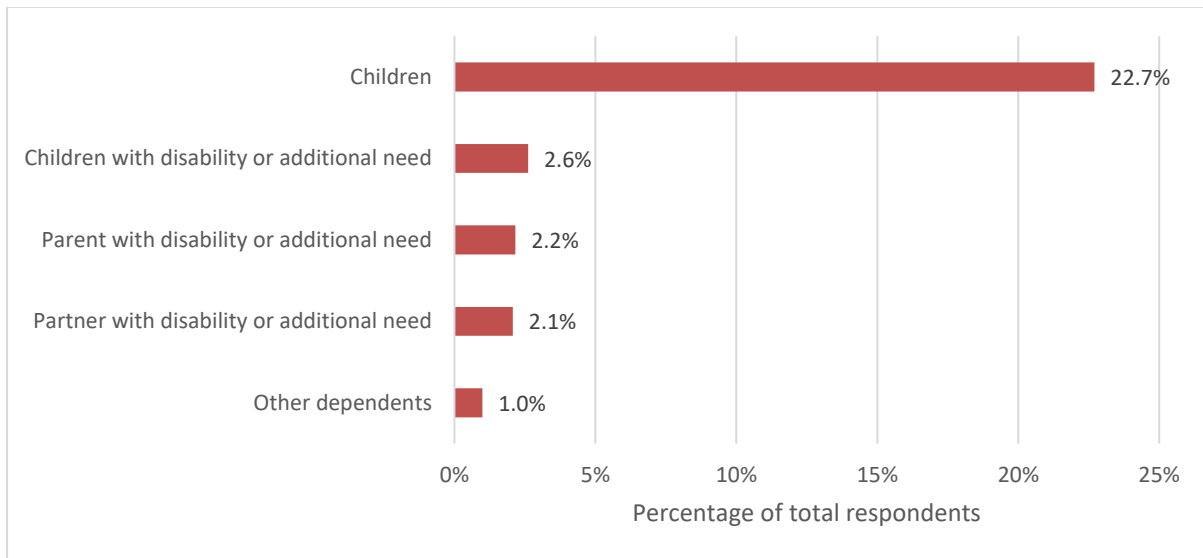
Just over a third (35%) of respondents had children aged 17 or younger in the home.

Disabilities

A relatively small number of respondents stated they had a disability, just 7.5%, or about one in 13 respondents.

Caring responsibilities

Three in ten respondents (30%) had caring responsibilities, as shown below.



Pregnant

Just 2.1% of respondents – about one in 50 – were pregnant, on maternity leave or had returned from maternity leave within the past year.



m·e·l
research



M·E·L Research

www.melresearch.co.uk

0121 604 4664

This page is intentionally left blank