



SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL BUDGET ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED BY LAKE MARKET RESEARCH



"This report complies to ISO 20252 and any other relevant codes of conduct."



BACKGROUND

Surrey County Council is responsible for delivering a wide range of complex and varied services for over 1.1 million residents across the county. This means deciding how to prioritise and allocate available funds for the huge variety of services they provide. The budget setting process involves complex, and sometimes difficult decisions, which reflect national and local priorities, as well as the needs, wants and aspirations of residents. The Covid-19 pandemic, combined with reductions in local government funding, mean services and budget are under considerable pressure, with a need to find at least £200 million in efficiencies over the medium-term.

The current transformation programme will continue to deliver key service improvements and will accelerate work to deliver the Council's [four priority objectives](#). However, to further develop and deliver ambitions and delivery plans, the Council is building a new, cross-organisational approach to address the projected budget gap from 2023/24 onwards. This means a shift in focus for the medium-term towards driving deeper, more fundamental changes and reforms to public services required to deliver the Community Vision for Surrey in 2030.

Surrey County Council commissioned us to deliver research, which sought to understand residents' views on setting budgets, which services they would prioritise to protect in terms of funding and how specific services should be delivered. Some of these changes explored how residents might need to change their behaviours to improve outcomes and likely acceptability of different options the Council are considering to improve services while seeking to close the budget gap.

The findings from this research will inform the Council's decision-making process for their budget for 2022/23 and medium-term financial strategy.

APPROACH

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A three-phase approach to capture a robust measure of opinion and sentiment explored through discussion:

1. Two qualitative workshops with residents in September 2021 aimed at raising awareness of the budget challenges facing Surrey County Council and to have in-depth discussions on service scenarios for how the Council could improve outcomes while also making efficiencies to close its budget gap. These used deliberative techniques to understand 'informed' views on specific issues, following a scene setting presentation from Surrey County Council. 73 residents took part and sessions were held virtually over Zoom.
2. A quantitative survey amongst 1,087 residents across the county, reflective of the Surrey adult population (16 & over) to provide a statistically representative sample. A dual methodology of online and telephone surveying was adopted to ensure representation. Topics covered by the survey included perceptions of the Council and its impact, the most important priorities facing Surrey as a county, views on increasing council tax and approaches to delivering efficiencies and improved outcomes.

3. A final deliberative workshop with a smaller group invited back for a second time to explore attitudes towards resident involvement and ways in which the Council could continue to engage residents in decision making. 35 residents took part in this component of the programme and the session was held virtually via Zoom.

The content and design of all research materials (the discussion guide for the qualitative workshops and the questionnaire for the quantitative survey) was developed in partnership with Surrey County Council.

SERVICE PRIORITIES & BUDGET SETTING

Through the survey, residents were asked which service areas they would prioritise protecting funding for and approaches the Council should take in setting its budget:

- 51% of residents felt the top issue facing the county currently was support for the local health system, including hospitals. This was closely followed by the cost of living in the county (44%), transport and roads (33%), housing (31%) and traffic congestion (28%).
- When asked which services they would most like to protect from funding reductions, 51% said they wanted to protect social care for older people aged 65 and over. This was followed by waste services e.g. disposal and recycling centres (40%), children's social care (37%), education services (37%) and fire and rescue (37%). Residents believe social care funding protection is important for all age groups from children to older adults.
- When residents were asked directly if they would agree with a 2% increase in council tax, over half (54%) thought it should not be increased and the £80 million required savings, on top of the £200 million already required over the medium-term, should come from somewhere else. However, when asked if they would support an increase to protect the most vulnerable, 67% of respondents agreed with an increase under those circumstances.
- When asked if they would support up to 2.5% increase in the Adult Social Care Levy to spend more on the care of the most vulnerable adults and older people, 57% said they would support this if the Council decided to take up the option.
- Residents were asked about the extent to which they would support different approaches to making efficiencies, including ideas for generating income, service prioritisation and alternative approaches to service delivery. The ideas with the greatest support were:
 - Prioritise spending to protect services for the most vulnerable and those in need (83%)
 - Use council land and building to generate income (82%)
 - Encourage local people and communities to deliver certain services, e.g, some highway maintenance responsibilities (81%)
 - Make more efficient use of council assets such as land and property, e.g. disposal of obsolete buildings (80%)
 - Streamlining services to be more efficient to deliver the same outcomes (74%)
 - Lobbying central government for changes to legislation regarding the use and raising of revenue (65%)

Raising fees and charges received comparatively lower support (48%).

SERVICE DELIVERY

For this exercise, residents were also asked for their views on potential approaches in specific service areas to improve outcomes and deliver more efficient services. These areas were selected due to their connections with some of the Council's most important strategic work programmes. These were framed as options for activities the Council could pursue, and not to be interpreted as official Council policy.

The following scenarios were covered: public health, adult social care, foster care, public bus network, greener measures, customer services, engagement / working together with residents, local economic development, dry recycling and libraries and registration services.

Public Health:

Scenario: Seeking views on investing in more preventative health services, "self-help" mechanisms and preferences for accessing support to improve health and wellbeing.

Key messages

- Residents from all demographic backgrounds felt mental health and wellbeing should be the key focus area. However, factors such as weight, substance misuse and smoking are interlinked with mental health and investment in preventative health services is considered critical.
- 84% of residents supported increasing public health support for those most vulnerable whilst providing better resources for those able to self-care and look after their own health.
- 68% of residents preferred to access health and wellbeing support through a service that looks at a person's full physical and mental health needs and offers support across any conditions they have.
- The concept of 'self-help' was well received in the qualitative sessions, but there were concerns the concept may exclude the people that need help the most and may not be able to access it.

Recommendations for the Council

- Invest in tackling digital exclusion and providing support for those unable to access it.
- Invest in working towards a 'triage' type approach to diagnose support needed initially, and then clearly signpost residents to the correct pathway of treatment, that is perhaps self-service based, across all resident profiles.

Adult Social Care

Scenario: Seeking views on managing demand for services through self-service, independent living, and recovery & rehabilitation.

Key messages

- Support for helping people to help themselves, but a need for clear self-help pathways and early assistance with identification of issues
- Broad support for emphasising a preventative approach to health and wellbeing.
- Support for keeping people in their homes as long as possible, but this needs to be optimum solution for the individual and not the 'easiest' solution for authorities.
- Serious concerns over digital exclusion, the vulnerable and those unable to access help and support.

Recommendations for the Council

- Possibility of prioritising funding for early identification of issues (early triage type arrangements suggested).
- Provide clear pathways of support and invest to provide services for elderly, vulnerable and those not capable of helping themselves, ensuring most vulnerable are not excluded.
- Invest in provision of clear pathways of care options that need to be provided for those staying in their own home or making the transition from a healthcare setting to another setting.

Foster Care

Scenario: Testing current approaches to increasing supply of foster carers, including overcoming barriers to becoming a foster carer.

Key messages

- Information, accessibility & promotion of information on how to apply and what's involved is considered to be lacking currently.
- The physical space available in people's homes is considered a key barrier to fostering, together with funding concerns.
- No clear sense of the process and support available is promoted.
- Lack of awareness of how critical the need is for foster carers.
- Too much narrative 'out there' on bad experiences with application process.

Recommendations for the Council:

- Improve narrative promoted on foster care journey.
- Widely promote local support groups where foster carers can meet and share experiences and talk to those considering going on the journey.
- Real life success stories would help raise the profile enormously together with investing in hard hitting adverts showing the need for foster carers along with clear information pathways & support laid out.

Public bus network

Scenario: Gauging priorities for Surrey's bus network, and testing views for Demand Responsive Transport (on-demand bus services)

Key messages

- As expected, road conditions and the need for improvement were considered urgent priorities going forward.
- Additional cycle lanes were mentioned repeatedly as well as more separation of cycle lanes and traffic.
- Most important priorities for the bus network going forward are considered to be lower fares, accessing healthcare (particularly for the elderly), improving reliability of the network as well as school transport.
- The idea of Driver Responsive Transport was well received, but queries were raised regarding digital accessibility, cost, reliability, and availability in given areas.

Recommendations for the Council

- Improved investment in road conditions and addressing historic pothole issues.
- Consider investment in greener methods of transport, particularly cycling and the provision of cycle lanes.
- Prioritise lower bus fares (perhaps looking at greater subsidising), improved bus service reliability (more cohesive approach with roadworks etc to improve network), providing more buses/routes for the elderly and those without transport to access healthcare (hospitals, GP hubs etc).
- Continue with provision of school transport to keep traffic off the road and keep traffic moving.

Greener Measures

Scenario: Options for how the Council can support residents switch away from reliance on gas or oil boilers to more sustainable options, such as air source heat pumps

Key messages

- Residents on board with the Council's green agenda but see it as a UK wide issue and not just an issue for Surrey to solve.
- They were 'pro' lobbying the government and were largely against the introduction of heat pumps being installed due to the costs involved to the Council.
- Lobbying of the government should ideally go hand in hand with looking for different technologies that are cost effective.

Recommendations for the Council

- Invest in efforts to lobby central Government for a UK wide approach to support households to switch from gas and oil boilers to alternative heating systems.
- Invest in time and effort to seek other cost effective solutions for householders such as hydrogen conversion of gas boilers / upgrading thermal efficiency of properties etc.

Customer Services

Scenario: Asking for views on shifting to more digital and message-based online services, including how residents could be encouraged to switch to these channels.

Key messages

- Perception that telephone is considered the best approach for urgent matters.
- Online considered useful and is used, but not that popular because of a perceived lack of action and timely response to the query submitted and people are not kept informed.
- Different methods for contacting the council suggested - a council 'app,' online live chats, intelligent online forms that triage people to where they need to go.
- Residents would like a clear response with timescales for any contact made online and not simply an automated response to acknowledge receipt.
- Some felt the definition of what is considered 'urgent' is the wrong term to use; what is urgent to some, isn't considered urgent to others. As such all issues should be treated the same.

Recommendations for the Council

- Clear response mechanism with timelines given to those using online facilities.
- Investigate use of apps, online live chats and easy reporting options such intelligent forms for signposting residents to where they need to go.

- Ensure residents feel they are ‘heard’ – they receive clear tailored response to all queries and clear timeline of action.
- Reinvigorate website to make it more accessible and intelligent; use it as a full consultation tool. Have video’s ‘how do I?’ etc to help.
- Live stream feed to alert residents to key issues to prevent calls made to report key issues.

Engagement / working together with residents

Scenario: how we can support residents to increase their influence and say on local issues, and their role in shaping future communities.

Key messages

- In the qualitative sessions, many claimed they do not know how to get involved on local issues with Surrey County Council.
- General sense of not feeling informed about matters – county wide or at a local level.
- General perception in the qualitative sessions that any local issues or concerns wouldn’t be listened to, and their views do not matter.
- For some, there is a strong sense of mistrust about local authorities. Some respondents felt the County Council was ‘distant’ and ‘too far removed’ from residents as individuals. Many felt there was a lack of two-way interaction. There is a desire for Surrey County Council, Parish and District Councils to continue to strengthen their partnership working.
- Significant proportion would like to get more involved in decisions affecting their local area, predominantly in the form of surveys, local events and informal neighbourhood resident groups.

Recommendations for the Council

- Continue to deliver ‘hearts and minds’ campaigns to raise profile of Surrey County Council’s drive to inform and involve residents.
- Make Surrey County Council more ‘accessible’ to residents and look at ways to engage at a local level that build trust and tap into local level relationships
- Consider filtration of area specific activities and plans, using a local lens, and work to engage through different types of engagement – informal meetings, local events, online forums and zoom workshops for Q&As.

Local economic development

Scenario: how we could re-imagine town centres and the role residents play in place-based partnership working.

Key messages

- Some felt the sense of close community and unity had been lost over lockdown because of the pandemic. Effort is needed to return to that in the form of community events, festivals, markets etc that can help to unite and bond communities.
- Councils at all levels should work together to engage residents to ensure they have a shared understanding of issues facing localities.

- General conclusions are that consultation needs to occur at a local level where the consultation is directly relevant to residents individually and this will ensure 'ownership' of issues. This needs to be across the spectrum of ages to engage all groups.
- Areas of importance to focus on to reinvigorate local economies were considered to be culture & leisure provision, employment & job opportunities, business investment / opportunities, investment in road infrastructure & public transport, health & wellbeing, green spaces, digital access and neighbourhood safety.

Recommendations for the Council

- County, district and borough and parish councils work together to promote need for involvement at a local level and to get involved.
- Look to create local working consultation groups for economic regeneration and development projects with residents who want to be involved.
- Look to help regenerate high streets with new businesses and reviewing rates to encourage new business into local communities.
- Work to provide more community events that help build and unite communities with a drive from the council to consult and engage.

Dry recycling

Scenario: approaches for reducing contamination of dry mixed recycling.

Key messages

- 86% of residents supported increasing the materials accepted at sites outside of Recycling Centres. 72% also supported local advertising to promote the importance of recycling and the cost of recycling bins that are contaminated/misused.
- Lower levels of support for issuing fines to residents whose recycling bins are contaminated / misused (51%).
- Greater support among younger adults, aged 25 – 44, for issuing vouchers to residents to encourage regular recycling and employing neighbourhood champions to help advise residents on what can be recycled.

Recommendations for the Council:

- Explore possibility of additional materials being accepted outside of Recycling Centres.
- Adopt local advertising to promote the importance of recycling and the impact of contamination / misuse.
- Explore incidence of contamination / misuse and age profiles at a local level to determine whether vouchers or neighbourhood champions would most benefit.

Libraries & Registration services

Scenario: Views on increasing impact of volunteer-led libraries and increasing income from weddings provided by Registration services.

Key messages

- 74% of survey respondents supported the idea of local communities putting on events / activities to support the ten community libraries run by volunteers across Surrey.
- Lower levels of support (46%) for increasing fees for wedding registrations to generate income to improve services.

Recommendations for the Council

- Explore ways to facilitate events / activities for residents to support community libraries; financial, enabling use of venues / physical space, advertising.
- Explore support for specific fee levels for wedding registrations so residents can express their support more accurately.