

Healthwatch Birmingham's response to Birmingham City Council's Consultation on the 2020+ budget

Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes the opportunity to respond to Birmingham City Council's consultation on the 2020+ budget. Healthwatch Birmingham is pleased to see that the council is using feedback from Birmingham residents on previous budgets and annual satisfaction surveys to inform decision-making on priorities for Birmingham. We hope to see the council continue to engage and consult Birmingham residents in developing the identified priorities. We believe that this will be key to the council's plan to be more innovative and can be crucial to redesigning services in a way that meets people's needs within the current financial constraints. If the Council is to radically change how it interacts with and supports local communities in a way that improves outcomes and delivers positive change then the development of a clear communication and engagement strategy is crucial.

Such a strategy clarifies how and why the public will be engaged in decision-making. It would make sure that there is commitment across the Council to using the public's feedback to inform decisions. As well as clarifying the stages at which the public should be involved. We believe that the basic approach of Healthwatch Birmingham's Quality Standard for Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) would help the Council develop this further. The Quality Standard has a set of questions relating to staff and PPI, which ascertain the following:

- Whether there is a clear strategic approach for PPI that staff understand across the organisation?
- Whether the strategic approach for PPI prioritises engagement for equality and diversity?
- Do staff understand what their responsibilities are in relation to PPI?
- Do they have set objectives for PPI that are regularly monitored?
- Do they understand how PPI informs decision-making in their service area to make improvement and address inequality? and,
- Do they understand that improvements or changes made as a result of feedback should be shared with patients and the public?

The Council has stated in the consultation document that consultations are being held with specific groups, but it is not clear:

- What these groups are
- What the composition of these groups are
- How representative these groups are
- What issues the different groups are being consulted on
- How members of the public, who are not aware of these groups, can get involved.



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Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes that the Council has made a comprehensive assessment of the challenges facing Birmingham in relation to the financial burden that makes meeting these challenges difficult. Including the challenges to planning in the face of uncertainty over funding available to local councils. However, we are concerned that the plans presented in this budget document are devoid of the information that members of the public need in order to make informed comments and meaningful contributions. Whilst mention is made of the existence of more information on these proposals in the 2019/2023 MTFs, the public are not signposted to this document.

Unlike the 2019/20 budget proposals, the Council has not provided adequate information to support the proposals being made in this budget. It is not very clear what the proposals mean for the public and service users. The equality impact assessments for each service do not contain enough information to understand the impact and how this will be mitigated. We note that the Council intends to carry out further work to consider the impact of the proposals for different groups such as older people, children and those with disabilities. We would like to see an equality impact assessment that:

- clearly shows the sections of the community that will be most affected
- links effectively to engagement activities so that those groups affected are prioritised for engagement and influences decisions being made by the Council around services.
- takes into account the findings of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment that is currently being worked on.

Healthwatch Birmingham's key role is to make sure that patients, the public, service users, and carers (PPSuC) are at the heart of service improvement in health and social care in Birmingham. In line with our role, we have made our comments to ensure that the voice of the public is central to decision-making and that the Council carefully considers both the short term and long term impact of planned cuts, and the inequalities decisions might cause. Healthwatch Birmingham understands the immense pressures the Council is under and increased demand for services. Hence, the difficult decisions the Council has to make in the distribution of these resources. We make our comments with these considerations in mind.

Public Involvement

We are pleased that the Council has continued to start the budget consultation at an earlier time taking into consideration the busy Christmas period. As we indicated in our response to the 2019+ budget consultation, this gives people more time to reflect on the proposals and time to respond before the festive season starts. We are however concerned that the Council did not amend its plans in light of the general election. We appreciate that plans to hold a budget consultation might have already been in place by the time the elections were announced. However, taking into account the elections and the Christmas period, we do not believe members of the public have had adequate time to be part of this process.



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Several issues could also have compounded and impacted the ability of members of the public to get involved in the budget process and contribute effectively. First, is that there was only one public meeting and this was conducted as a drop in session. This assumes that all sections of the public can understand the document and be able to ask the appropriate questions. We believe that having Council staff explain the plans to the public engages sections of the community that might otherwise be unable to engage with the process. At the same time, it opens up debate and challenge to the proposals. We believe this is a missed opportunity for the Council. In addition, it is still a concern, as we have mentioned year on year, that one central public meeting is not sufficient. It does not enable all sections of the community to get involved in the budget process. Second, as it has been highlighted above, the budget document does not explain the proposals in enough detail to enable effective participation.

Healthwatch Birmingham's Views on the proposals

Current Financial Position

We welcome that despite the prolonged reduction in expenditure of around £730m in the last nine years the council has progressed a number of initiatives. We note the work done in promoting enablement, shared living, community capacity and support so that the older population benefits from self-reliance, living independently for longer and there is reduced isolation, better citizenship and closer community working. Of course, there are areas that the Council can improve based on the feedback that Healthwatch Birmingham has received over the year. We have heard about the challenges people with sight loss face when they access enablement services:

You can get your certification that you are blind but you are left on the sofa with no support for 18 months.

People need to have holistic assessments - when people lose their sight. Investing time on the issue when diagnosed to integrate the person back into the community.

I had a mobility officer from the council come out and stayed for 15 minutes. She gave me a cane and a two minute instruction of how to use it and said she would come back.

I would benefit from access to technology equipment to stay independent. Currently the equipment is very expensive especially when most blind people are on benefits. Half of us can never afford this equipment without saving up for six months to a year.

Diagnosis, then you are banded (i.e. low vision) and for us is recognising that it's not the sight loss but how to adapt that is key issue and give us the things to enable us to live life i.e. being with people, take your dog out, go for a run.



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Equally, in our study into the experiences of Birmingham's direct payment users we found that for recipients to be truly independent, they need to have choice, control and flexibility over their direct payment¹. Based on the above, continued engagement with the public to better understand their needs will be crucial to improving people's experiences of enablement services.

We welcome the work being carried out in redesigning how services are provided, taking account of the potential to work in partnership with voluntary organisations, businesses and social enterprises, and using 'arms-length organisations', trading companies, social enterprises and partnerships with other local authorities and public bodies. We also note the increased roll out of a digital solution for customers to access Council services, so they can access them at times suitable for them.

We look forward to engaging with the Council concerning the proposed 3.99% council tax increase to be implemented by 2020/21. We ask the Council to ensure that it engages with the public in reviewing the amount of Council Tax Support awarded in future years and ensure that their views inform the proposals and changes made.

Digital and Customer Services

Healthwatch Birmingham agrees that the Council should be working to extend the ways in which it communicates and engages with its citizens. Therefore, we believe that in theory the introduction of online services for citizens to transact with Birmingham City Council is a good thing. However, in practice, this should not replace other forms of communicating and engaging with the Council. For example the budget 2020+ proposal of ceasing taking planning calls via the call centre, and directing callers to online information.

As we indicated in our response to the 2019+ budget whilst online services are useful and preferred by some individuals, the Council should aim to ensure that all individuals are given equal opportunities to engage with the Council. This requires that the Council offers a range of methods for people to engage with the Council. The Council would benefit from having a clear communication and engagement strategy that guides how it communicates with different groups. We know from our engagement with the public in Birmingham that ways of accessing services should meet the needs and communication preferences of all potential users. People have told us that they have found that some commissioners and providers have

¹ Read our report 'Direct Payments in Birmingham: Choice, control and flexibility – do recipients feel informed and supported by social care workers to take control over the choice of services they access' <https://healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HWB-DP-Report-F-Online-Version-F-1.pdf>



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a preference for email or telephone over face-to-face contact which was their preferred method of contact. For others, use of online services and the telephone are their preferred choice. Clearly, one method is not appropriate for everyone.

Education and Skills

We note the plans to merge education safeguarding with school and governor support, thereby reducing the number of posts by one in each team. We welcome that there will be no redundancies as a result of staff retirement, however this still represents a reduction in staff. Therefore, a potential impact on the service provided. We note that the Council plans to raise subscription cost to the service and we wonder whether this will be affordable for schools. On the other hand, it is not clear what 'make savings through income generation' means in practice.

We also note that the Council would like to reduce the use of Business Support for specific and technical expertise by the School and Governor Support service. Again, it is not clear what sorts of issues S and GS contact Business support for and whether they would have the expertise to address these effectively to ensure that schools are getting the advice, support and guidance with regard to safeguarding?

We welcome the Council's plan to extend support available from council services to childcare providers who are rated good or outstanding. As an income generating activity, we wonder how many of these childcare providers are likely to take up this service so as to offset the cuts planned. As the Council's risk assessment clearly identifies, the plans success is dependent on schools continuing to want the service especially as this was subsidised last year.

Birmingham Children's Trust

Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes the plans set out in the budget document on key areas which could contribute to managing demand. We look forward to engaging with the Council as it develops and implements plans to transform early help across the city, prevent higher cost social care interventions and a targeted multi-disciplinary, locally based approach. We look forward to supporting the Council on plans to develop alternatives to care, promote self-reliance and independence, and work on improving the transition process for vulnerable young adults including disabled young people and SEND.

We welcome that the Council will be carrying out Equality Impact Assessments around these plans. We would like to see these impact assessments not only help the trust to identify those affected but also underpin the engagement it carries out.



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Yours Sincerely,



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