



## **Report to Cabinet**

**Subject:** Budget consultation/Satisfaction survey 2010

**Date:** 2 September 2010

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### **1. Purpose of the Report**

- To inform members of proposals to consult with residents about satisfaction with the Council's services and future budget options.

### **2. Background**

The Council has a long tradition of seeking residents' views about the services it provides.

In recent years, its flexibility on this issue has been constrained by the requirement to take part in a national exercise for local authorities tightly prescribed by the government. In the early 2000s, this took the form of the Best Value Satisfaction survey - more recently this has been through the Place Survey.

As part of its plans to shift power away from Whitehall and reduce centrally imposed burdens, the Coalition Government confirmed on 10 August 2010 that the Place Survey is to be scrapped. The relevant National Indicators derived from it will no longer need to be gathered and reported on.

The Council has also sought residents' views on budget options on a number of occasions in recent years. The prescriptive nature of the Place Survey has meant it has been difficult, if not impossible, to combine surveying residents' satisfaction with services with surveying their views on budget options, even though there are significant overlaps between the two issues.

The scrapping of the Place Survey offers the opportunity to either discontinue the work entirely, or to seek residents' views in ways more appropriate to local circumstances. It also opens up the possibility of both seeking residents' views on services generally and also on future budget options in one combined exercise.

The Government is also encouraging councils and other public bodies to be more transparent in explaining their performance and how they spend public money. The Council has published a Summary Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for a number of years, alongside the Council Plan and its predecessor documents. Those documents are, however, fairly technical in nature, and recently have only been made widely available online.

### **3. Proposal**

Discussions have been held with the Leader, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Customer and Members' Services about how the Council might want to take these issues forward in the current year.

Given the Council's commitment to customer focus, it is felt appropriate to continue to seek residents' views about overall satisfaction with key services, and with the Council overall, as previously gathered through the Place Survey. Surveying satisfaction with wider aspects of life in the Borough, often relating to service provision from other organisations, is felt to be less of a priority for the Council, given the current financial situation.

The Council is likely to face some challenging budgetary decisions in the months and years ahead, as the government works to tackle the deficit. Residents' views will be important in helping to prioritise future spending, so it is therefore felt to be timely to seek those views through a budget consultation exercise.

Previous Place Survey exercises have been based on a random sample of households, generating a minimum of around 1,000 replies. This meant that not all residents had the chance to have their say, and businesses were not included. Given the nature of the issues that now need to be probed, members involved feel it is important for all residents and businesses to be given the chance to contribute.

It has therefore been agreed to combine the relevant issues from the Place Survey and Budget consultation in a single exercise. That exercise will be delivered through a questionnaire in a special edition of "Contacts" magazine, which will also include key information about the council's services, how they are performing and how much they cost, presented in a simple, accessible format. The publication effectively combines and replaces the Place Survey, budget consultation and the Annual Report (a Summary Statement of Accounts will still

be published separately, available online and promoted in the next regular edition of the magazine).

It will be distributed to all households and all businesses in the Borough, in line with the approach for regular editions of the magazine, thus reaching a far wider audience than the Place Survey. Contacts has been used for previous budget consultations and good responses have been received. The questionnaire will also be made available for completion online.

The magazine will be distributed over two weeks from mid-September. This will allow the questionnaire to be closed in early October, allowing results to be available in time to feed into budget decisions shortly after the results of the Comprehensive Spending Review are announced.

Content of the questionnaire has been discussed and agreed with the Leader and relevant portfolio holders. A draft copy of the questionnaire element is attached at **Appendix A**. At the time of writing, work is in progress on the remaining pages.

#### **4. Resource Implications**

Cost of design, print and distribution can be met in full from resources that had been allocated to fund the Place Survey. Total costs will depend on the volume of responses received but are likely to be considerably cheaper than the combined cost of a Place Survey and budget consultation (while reaching a far wider audience), and can be accommodated from within existing agreed budgets.

#### **5. Recommendation**

Members are **recommended** to note the report.