



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

FINANCE & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19th OCTOBER 2020

ENGAGEMENT ON THE COUNCIL'S BUDGET 2021/22

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND COMMUNICATION, CHRISTIAN HANAGAN IN DISCUSSION WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER, CLLR M WEBBER.

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform Members of the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee of the proposed 'digital by default' approach to resident engagement and consultation in respect of the 2021/22 budget, considered by Cabinet on the 13th October.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Members:

- 2.1 Support the suggested 'digital by default' approach to the Council's budget consultation for 2021/22, whilst providing alternative means of engagement for those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.
- 2.2 Support the Council's statutory requirements regarding consultation on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Council Tax levels will be met via the proposed approach.
- 2.3 Support the budget consultation process taking place during the autumn of 2020, with the dates to be confirmed following clarification of the likely Welsh Government budget settlement timescales and note the involvement of the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee in this process.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To provide residents with the opportunity, via a range of methods, to provide feedback to the Cabinet on the 2021/22 budget setting process.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In previous years the Council has undertaken a comprehensive approach to its annual budget consultation, involving a large number of residents and key stakeholders.
- 4.2 The approach has developed to include a wide range of face to face events in the community across the County Borough, as well increased social media engagement and the use of an online budget simulator, which gives residents and service users the opportunity to set the budget themselves and engage in a more interactive way. Over 4,000 people were involved in last year's 2020/21 budget consultation process.
- 4.3 The widespread approach we use and the range of views we capture provides senior managers and Cabinet with the necessary information they need to inform budget setting for the year ahead. In addition, we have found that the information we collect is also valuable for service managers to use for their service planning and development.
- 4.4 The current COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges it brings present a unique set of circumstances for engagement and consultation. Face-to-face engagement is not possible and may not be for quite some time.
- 4.5 As a result the 2021/22 annual budget consultation will take on a 'digital by default' approach, whilst continuing to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.
- 4.6 This new approach was used in the recent consultation on the Dog Fouling PSPO and was found to be an effective way to engage with a wide range of residents and stakeholders. The online methodology complemented with offline alternatives provided a meaningful consultation.
- 4.7 It was therefore agreed by Cabinet that the approach outlined in section 5 below is utilised for the 2021/22 budget consultation process.

5. PROPOSED APPROACH

- 5.1 The 2021/22 budget consultation will take place in 2 phases. The first phase will take place in the autumn of 2020 and will aim to collect views on investment priorities, council tax levels and efficiency savings. This will enable the Cabinet to consider the feedback received whilst developing a draft Budget Strategy for 2021/22. Phase 2 will take place early in the New Year and will engage with residents on this draft strategy.
- 5.2 The approach will be mainly online, but it also provides a number of alternative methods to ensure that it is inclusive of those who are not online or would rather provide their views in a different way;

Online Approach

- 5.3 The use of an online budget simulator providing information on the services the Council provides and the potential consequences of increasing or reducing funding to services to set a legally balanced budget.
- 5.4 The use of social media to communicate the key messages to residents and service users and encourage engagement and feedback regarding the Council's budget and investment areas. This will include online polls via social media channels.
- 5.5 An online survey to collect responses on Council investments, Council Tax levels and the Council Tax Reduction scheme.
- 5.6 Emails to be distributed to all key stakeholders (including the Council's Citizens' Panel, Councillors, staff etc.).
- 5.7 To replace our usual face to face engagement, we will undertake a number of virtual meetings to outline the budget approach, answer questions and collect views. These online (Zoom) events will give residents the opportunity to engage with and speak to Cabinet Members and senior officers regarding the Council's budget and investment priorities and will include;
- A number of Zoom Public meetings
 - Engagement with older people via the Older Persons Advisory Group meeting
 - Engagement with young people via Rhondda Cynon Taf's Youth Forums.
 - A presentation and discussion with young people via our schools.
 - Reporting to the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum.
 - A presentation at the Community Liaison Committee

Alternatives to online

5.8 As already stated it is important to continue to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.

- A telephone Consultation option working with the Council's Contact Centre – The contact centre number would be made available for people to discuss their views or as a minimum to request consultation materials.
- Individual call backs if required. For example, some of the members of the Disability Forum requested phone calls to provide their views during the recent Dog Fouling consultation.
- Paper surveys and information available on request.
- Consultation freepost address for postal responses.
- Easy Read/Plain English Documents – These will still need to be produced and placed online as well as being available in paper copy on request.
- Opportunity can also be provided to engage in virtual sessions through a land-line

5.9 In addition to the above, all members have had opportunity over recent months at Cabinet and through Full Council to engage in the ongoing work on the Council's Medium Term Financial Planning arrangements.

Council Tax, Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Investment Priorities

5.10 The proposed approach will ensure the Council's duty to consult regarding Council Tax and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme are met as well as providing residents and service users with the opportunity to feedback on the Council's investment priorities.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. As noted in section 5, there will be a range of options for all to get involved in the budget consultation. The consultation will also involve the Council's Disability Forum.

6.2 The online budget simulator is accessible on mobile phones and tablet devices, and residents without internet access or smart phone/tablet devices can request a hard copy of the budget consultation questionnaire.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The recommendations outlined in the report seek to ensure a range of engagement opportunities are provided to residents and service users as part of the budget consultation process.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 8.1 There are no financial implications directly aligned to this report.

9 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 9.1 The Council has a statutory duty to consult on Council Tax and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme which will be met under the approach to budget consultation outlined in this report.

10. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 10.1 The budget setting process clearly impacts on the delivery of all Council services and contributes in turn to the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan.

11. CONCLUSION

- 11.1 The comprehensive approach undertaken in the last few years has led to increased engagement in the budget consultation process through a more interactive and varied approach.
- 11.2 The current COVID-19 pandemic brings challenges for public engagement and consultation, especially in Rhondda Cynon Taf where we have developed a very successful face to face approach with residents.
- 11.3 However, the approach outlined seeks to continue the positive work by ensuring that all residents and service users have every opportunity to provide feedback. The 2021/22 budget consultation will take on a 'digital by default' approach, whilst continuing to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.
- 11.4 The results of the consultation will be presented to senior officers and Cabinet Members early in the new year to inform the construction of a proposed 2020/21 Revenue Budget Strategy.