

# Information Report



## Scrutiny

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### Part 1

Date: 28<sup>th</sup> April 2023

**Subject** Budget Consultation

**Purpose** To respond to OSMC by providing follow-up information on the points requested in their February 2023 meeting in relation to the budget consultation.

**Author** Head of People, Policy and Transformation, Policy and Partnership Manager

**Ward** City wide

**Summary** The most recent round of budget consultation received almost 1,900 responses from a range of stakeholders. This compares well with neighbouring Gwent local authorities and other Welsh cities. Several 'lessons learned' have been identified and are set out in the report, which are intended to make future budget consultation more accessible, engaging and better promoted

**Proposal** To inform Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee Members on the budget consultation and lessons learned.

**Action by** Head of People, Policy and Transformation  
Head of Finance

**Timetable** Immediate

This report was prepared after consultation with:

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

## 1 **Background**

The aim of the budget consultation is to create opportunities for extensive participation in the budget setting process and particularly to allow citizens potentially affected by decisions to “have their say”. However, there is an important secondary consideration of minimising the costs of consultation within the context of making savings across the Council during a time of unprecedented financial pressures. This has meant we have looked to maximise the use of our existing resources and expertise, for instance using the Wi-Fi technology in local buses, whilst avoiding spend on consultation activities that might not be considered value for money.

The Finance and People, Policy and Transformation teams have now supported budget consultation work for a decade and working with our other service areas have developed insight and intelligence on the opinions and concerns of residents on a range of public service issues. We also want to serve the ambitions of the growing number of citizens who are taking part in new, more active forms of public engagement now being undertaken in Newport. For instance, the 1,200 plus people who have taken part in participatory budgeting events in the past 4 years, to allocate public funds to community projects. We would also emphasise that budget consultation runs alongside other forms of public engagement undertaken by the Council which amounted to over 40 activities in 2022/23 and more the 10,000 respondents, and which informs our intelligence and customer insight.

## 2 **Budget Engagement programme for 2023/24**

The budget consultation programme consists of a range of methods and forms of promotion:

- **Online Survey** – which included questions on all budget proposals. A new question format was used this year, which allows respondents to support the full saving / a smaller saving / no saving, rather than having to simply agree/disagree with the proposal. This provided richer data with the ‘smaller saving’ option being used extensively.
- **Bus Wi-Fi survey** – a supplementary budget consultation survey was run on bus Wi-Fi. This focused on asset rationalisation and the increase in Council Tax and encouraged respondents to complete the wider budget survey.
- **Social Media promotion** - the consultation was regularly promoted on Council social media, and this approach generated a high proportion of the responses. Partner organisations were also encouraged to promote the budget consultation in One Newport social media posts.
- **Newport Matters** – the January edition which went out to most Newport households and businesses carried a full-page article on the budget, including the context, the proposals, the budget setting process and links to the consultation web-pages and the freepost reply address.
- **School parents & teachers** – all schools were provided with budget consultation text to share with parents and teachers to promote participation.
- **Council staff** – employee communications promoted participation amongst staff.
- **Attendance at community events** – Council representatives attended Warm Welcome Centres across Newport including Ringland, Maesglas, Bettws and Gaer.

Representatives raised awareness to over 500 people at the Participatory Budgeting events

- **Service Area engagement** - Service Areas were supported to assess where additional engagement with service users and their families, directly, is needed. This has been undertaken by Adult Services and Children's services, based on the relatively high impact on vulnerable people. This was mainly face to face engagement.
- **Pre-budget engagement** – During the autumn pre-budget engagement on the relative importance of services was undertaken linked to the development of the corporate plan. In total over 850 responses were received, which contribute to our intention of budget engagement being an ongoing and cyclical process.
- **Fairness Commission response** – Finance and the Director's team supported the Fairness Commission to respond to the budget using their principles of fairness.
- **Trade Unions** – HR and finance liaised with the Trade Unions to facilitate their representations.
- **Newport Youth Council** – so that young people's voices were included in the consultation.

During the 2023/24 budget consultation just under 1,900 responses were received. This is a significant increase over the previous year, which was affected by the restrictions surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. In this year's consultation we were able to make wider use of Bus Wi-Fi Consultation technology as passenger numbers increased again. The availability of bus Wi-Fi consultation also enabled us to undertake pre-budget engagement on the prioritisation of council services.

Responses were as follows:

1. An online survey via the public Wi-Fi on Newport buses that received 653 responses.
2. An in-depth online survey, which received 820 responses.
3. In addition to completed surveys, around 400 representations have been received from organisations and were considered by Cabinet Members and Officers as part of the budget consultation
4. Of note, 865 responses to the pre-budget engagement exercise were received in September 2022. This takes total budget engagement for 2023/24 to 2,738.

A full demographic breakdown of survey responses is included in the following attachment which was appended to the budget report to Cabinet in February.



Public budget  
consultation response

### **3 Comparisons with other Local Authorities**

<b>Local authority area</b>	<b>Number of responses to survey for 2023/24 Budget</b>
Newport	1,873 completed surveys  In addition, 865 pre-budget responses were received  Total 2,738
Blaenau Gwent	3,736 completed surveys (note – Blaenau Gwent count responses differently to Newport, recording attendance at events as participation. In previous years their responses have not exceeded 600)
Caerphilly	278 completed surveys
Monmouthshire	244 completed surveys
Torfaen	Not available
Cardiff	A total of 5,932 responses were received for the main survey, with 115 responses to the Youth survey.
Swansea	440 people completed surveys

### **4 Other consultation**

A range of other consultation has been supported through 22/23. This totals over 40 activities and more than 10,000 respondents engaged with. This includes a period which where activities were still limited following the COVID pandemic.

We consulted with residents on matters such as Transport for Wales proposals, perceptions of and safety in Newport, the Climate Change Plan, Corporate Plan and Digital Strategy development.

We also support the Youth Council, 50+ forum and Citizen's Panel as outlined in previous reports.

### **5 Lessons learned**

Whilst it was generally thought that the 2023/24 budget was successful in terms of responses and cost effectiveness, the following points are being considered and may be helpful to the Committee in forming a view:

**Pre-budget engagement** was undertaken to gain a better understanding of the relative importance of Council services, to give people a chance to comment on this and to raise awareness of the challenging financial context and forthcoming consultation.

A total of 865 responses were received in September 2022. Pre-budget engagement could be repeated in the coming year and integrated with other consultation activity throughout the year.

**Consultation Format** - the budget consultation is still primarily online, as this seems to suit the majority of people, however responses in all forms are accepted e.g. hard copy. For instance, we received picture responses from people with learning disabilities. Around 400 letters/e-mails were received in addition to the online survey, these often focus on one or two proposals that directly affect the respondent/their family. We can look to encourage other formats for responses in the future to make the consultation as accessible and appealing as possible.

The new question approach (allowing respondents to suggest a smaller saving) worked well and the smaller saving option was used extensively. This richer question format will be used in future budget consultation rounds. Appendix 1 lists the new questions that were used.

Face to face consultation should be used more extensively and be better advertised.

**Promotion of the consultation** - in response to the OSMC recommendation the budget consultation should be advertised and promoted in advance of its launch so that citizens are aware of it and can prepare to respond.

**Schools** - in previous years Scrutiny had suggested that schools could play a greater part in promoting the budget consultation. Consultation messages were sent to all Newport schools in a format they could easily use to disseminate to parents. This should be continued in future budget consultation rounds.

**Equalities** - the Senior Equalities Officer is now involved in budget consultation planning and shared details of the consultation through relevant networks, along with the Community Cohesion Manager and the Welsh Language Policy Officer. Bus Wi-Fi surveys are used to reach younger and more diverse communities. 'One Newport' partner organisation contacts are used to disseminate the consultation across a wide range of community groups. We can also make further use of city centre and public-building Wi-Fi networks to engage with a more diverse audience in the next round of budget consultation. This will also contribute to the OSMC recommendation of expanding engagement to people who have limited interaction with the Council.

**FEIAs** - The Policy and Partnership Team are working with Newport Fairness Commission to inform opportunities for training and guidance for managers responsible for completing Fairness and Equalities Impact Assessments (FEIAs).

## **Background Papers**

OSMC considered the budget consultation arrangements in their meeting on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023

## **Appendix 1 – Questions asked in the Budget Consultation Survey**

Q1a: What do you think the council should do with this saving proposal?

- Make the full budget saving
- Make a smaller budget saving
- Avoid making any budget savings for this service
- Not sure

Q1b: How important is protecting funding for this service compared to other services in the council's budget savings proposals for 2023/24?

On a scale of 1-5 with 1 of most importance and 5 of least importance

Respondents were also able to give comments on all proposals in their own words

### **Council Tax question**

Respondents were asked, is the proposed increase to Council Tax:

- Too much
- About right
- Not enough
- Don't know