

Information Report

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

Part 1

Date: 19 October 2023

Subject Update on Budget Consultation arrangements

Purpose To inform OSMC of the arrangements for the 2024/25 budget consultation and to review last year's consultation and the lessons learned.

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Ward All wards

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. However, to contribute to continuous improvement, 'lessons learned' are set out in this report, with the intention of making future budget consultation more accessible, engaging, and informative.

Proposal To outline the arrangements for the 2024/25 budget consultation and invite feedback from OSMC.

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
Head of Finance

1 **Background**

The aim of budget consultation is to create opportunities to participate in the budget setting process and to allow citizens potentially affected by decisions to “have their say”. However, there is also an important secondary consideration of minimising the costs of consultation against a context of significant financial pressure. This has meant we have looked to maximise the use of our existing knowledge, resources, and expertise, for instance using the Wi-Fi technology in local buses, whilst avoiding spend on consultation activities that might not be cost effective.

Finance and People, Policy and Transformation have supported budget consultation work for several years and have developed insight and intelligence on the opinions and concerns of residents on a range of public service issues. We also want to support the growing number of citizens who are taking part in new, active forms of public engagement in Newport. This includes, the 1,200+ people who have taken part in local participatory budgeting events in the past 4 years, allocating £800k of public funds to community projects.

It is also important to emphasise that budget consultation runs alongside other forms of public engagement undertaken by the Council which amounted to over 40 activities last year with more than 10,000 respondents, which, in turn, contributes to our intelligence and customer insight.

2 **Building on last year’s Budget Consultation**

During the 2023/24 budget consultation just under 1,900 responses were received. This was a significant increase over the previous year, which was affected by the restrictions surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. We were again able to make wider use of Bus Wi-Fi consultation technology as passenger numbers increased. 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 received from organisations 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.

The following table compares the response rate achieved in Newport with neighbouring local authorities.

Local authority area	Number of responses to the 2023/24 Budget consultation
Newport	1,873 completed surveys In addition, 865 pre-budget responses were received

	Total 2,738
Caerphilly	278 completed surveys
Monmouthshire	244 completed surveys
Torfaen	Not available
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)
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

3 Lessons learned

Whilst it was generally thought that the 2023/24 budget was effective in terms of responses and cost effectiveness, the following points are being considered:

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 has already been undertaken for 2024/25 and was integrated with other consultation work. This received almost 300 responses and indicated the relatively high level of importance that residents attach to community safety and community cohesion in terms of spending (further analysis is underway and will be reported alongside the final budget consultation findings).

Consultation Format – in line with the ambitions of the digital strategy and the Corporate Plan the budget consultation is still primarily online, however in order to ensure fair access 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 will 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.

Face to face consultation e.g. at Warm Welcome centres, will be used more extensively and be better advertised.

Earlier promotion of the consultation - in response to the OSMC recommendation the budget consultation will be advertised and promoted in advance of its launch using NCC communications channels, 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. For 2023/24 consultation messages were sent to all Newport schools in a format they could easily use to disseminate to parents. This will be continued in this year's budget consultation.

Equalities - the Senior Equalities Officer is 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 plan to use 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.

The Policy and Partnership Team will be meeting with the Lead Officer for the Young Interpreter Scheme to see if this can be used to make the budget consultation more accessible in households where English is a barrier to responding.

Fairness & Equalities Impact Assessments - The Policy and Partnership Team will be running FEIA drop-in sessions to support service management. FEIAs are critical to informing decision making and also to minimising the impacts of budget savings on protected equalities groups. They are also important in directing engagement with affected groups. Steps are being taken for 2024/25 to better integrate FEIAs with the process of developing savings proposals, through a package of new digital documents.

Newport Fairness Commission –

The Fairness Commission has previously written a report on the budget proposals being consulted upon. This is a narrow window through which to look at the parameters of fairness. Therefore, the Commission is developing a model by which they look at the following:

- Vulnerable groups
- Relative and competing priorities
- Risks, mitigation, and emerging issues
- Decision making frameworks in place e.g. the Housing Register
- The evidence base
- Statutory constraints, funding, and partnerships
- The strategic context and transformation- e.g. long-term aspirations for housing, the Local Development Plan etc.

Budget Engagement programme for 2024/25

The 2024/25 budget consultation and communications programme will consist of a range of methods and types of promotion, including:

- **Pre-budget engagement** – consultation on relative spending priorities has already been undertaken, which contributes making budget engagement an ongoing process.
- **Online Survey** – this will include questions on all budget proposals. A new question format was used last year, which allowed respondents to choose between supporting 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. The proposed questions are given in appendix 1.

- **Have Your Say – NCC Webpage** – the full set of proposals, survey, links to FEIAs and background information will be included on the Have Your Say webpage on the Council website.
- **Bus Wi-Fi survey** – a complementary budget consultation survey will run on bus Wi-Fi. This will focus on the proposed increase to Council Tax and will encourage respondents to complete the wider budget survey.
- **Social Media promotion** - the consultation will be regularly promoted on Council social media, which has previously generated a high proportion of the responses. Partner organisations will also be encouraged to promote the budget consultation in One Newport social media posts.
- **Newport Matters** – the January edition will carry a lead article on the budget, including the context, the proposals, the budget setting process and links to the consultation webpages and the freepost reply address.
- **School parents & teachers** – all schools will be provided with budget consultation text to share with parents and teachers to promote participation.
- **Council staff** – employee communications will promote participation amongst staff.
- **Attendance at community events** – Council representatives will attend community events e.g. last year these included Warm Welcome Centres across Newport including Ringland, Maesglas, Bettws and Gaer.
- **Service Area engagement** - Service Areas will be supported to identify where direct engagement with service users and their families is needed. For example, last year, this was undertaken by Adult Services and Children's services, based on the relatively high impact on vulnerable people. This took the form of face-to-face meetings.
- **Trade Unions** – HR and Finance will liaise with the Trade Unions so they can make representations.
- **Newport Youth Council** – The Fairness Commission will be working with the Youth Council to help facilitate their budget response.

Background Papers

OSMC considered the budget consultation arrangements in their meeting on February 23rd 2023

Appendix 1 – example survey questions (taken from last year’s budget consultation)

Partnership x

To reduce the financial contribution that the council makes to its strategic partnership with [the partnership]. This would be followed by a restructuring and remodelling of the partnership, to focus available resources on the families in greatest need of intensive support.

Currently the partnership delivers a range of specialist elements of support for the benefit of families and children in Newport.

The main areas impacted would be:

- *The main areas would be outlined here.*

Other services that would be reduced are:

- *Any impacts on other services would be outlined here.*

Proposed Savings: £xxxk (2023-24)

1a.	What do you think the council should do with this saving proposal? (Please note, that if the council does not go ahead with this particular saving proposal, or makes a smaller saving, it will have to find other savings elsewhere, or increase its income e.g. through council tax)
	<input type="checkbox"/> A: Make the full budget saving
	<input type="checkbox"/> B: Make a smaller budget saving.
	<input type="checkbox"/> C: Avoid making any budget savings for this service.
	<input type="checkbox"/> D: Not sure
	B: Make a smaller budget saving. If so, what do you think we should do?
	C: Avoid making any budget savings for this service. If so, can you suggest where savings could be made as an alternative?
1b.	How important is protecting funding for this service compared to other services in the council’s budget savings proposals for 2023/24?
	1 of most importance 5 of least importance

	<input type="checkbox"/> 1		<input type="checkbox"/> 2		<input type="checkbox"/> 3		<input type="checkbox"/> 4		<input type="checkbox"/> 5
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1c.	Do you have any other comments about this proposal?