

# **Report to Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**July 2013**

## **Budget Consultation Proposals 2013/14**

### **Introduction**

In 2012, the borough council ran a six week consultation process which was the first of its kind since December 2004, when a budget consultation exercise using a process called "SIMALTO" – Simultaneous Multi-Attribute Level Trade-Off took place.

More than £15,000 was spent on the Simalto exercise which involved a private sector company carrying out interviews with residents and then also hosting a series of workshops and focus groups.

Last year, Cabinet members endorsed and led a consultation exercise aimed at enabling residents to have an influence in shaping spending priorities for the financial years 2013/14 and 2014/15 with the council's budget forecasts indicating savings of at least £2.5 million being required.

Cabinet has decided to build on the success of the 2012 consultation exercise with another consultation which is aimed at further shaping spending priorities for the 2014/15 financial year.

### **Background**

In the last consultation process the council used a number of communications channels to try and reach as wide an audience as possible. These included:

- A special budget edition "mini" Reporter was produced and distributed;
- A budget questionnaire was produced and distributed with a Freepost address;
- Reception room one at the Civic Offices in Newcastle was turned into a 'living room' for a day as part of a drop-in coffee morning session;
- Seven public meetings were held at locations across the borough;
- 10 face-to-face 'stop and chat' events were held across the borough;
- The council's E-panel was consulted;
- All 60 borough councillors were given the special edition Reporters and questionnaires to distribute in their communities;
- Bespoke budget consultation content and the budget questionnaire were placed prominently on the council's website;
- Flyers and posters promoting the consultation were distributed;
- Discussion with Newcastle Partnership Strategic Board;

- Press releases, media interviews, briefing notes produced to generate local coverage of the consultation;
- Pop-up adverts used on key landing pages on the council's website;
- Bluetooth and Wi-fi messaging used to contact mobile phone users;
- A scrutiny café was held for interested stakeholders.

There were two main elements to the consultation. Firstly, residents were encouraged to complete a questionnaire which asked them to decide how important some key service areas were to them. They then had to mark the services on a five point scale with one end of the scale being 'Of no importance' and the other end of the scale being 'Extremely important'.

The consultation also served to raise awareness of the financial constraints facing the borough council.

As far as human and material resources are concerned, it is estimated that during the course of the 2012/13 budget consultation process:

- 5,600 mini budget edition Reporters were distributed together with the same number of questionnaires;
- 3,100 A5 flyers promoting the consultation and events were handed out and 81 A3 posters displayed in shops, businesses and other public areas;
- A total of 44 hours were spent by staff in the production and printing of material associated with the consultation – mini Reporter, questionnaire, pop-ups, flyers and posters, website content;
- 28 hours were spent by staff distributing materials – flyers, posters to promote events;
- 45 hours were spent by a number of staff supporting Cabinet members at sessions with the public – the coffee morning, public meetings and face-to-face sessions;
- Some of these hours were paid overtime as they took place at weekends and in the evenings;
- Approximately 25 hours was spent collating and evaluating data received during the process.

As far as finances are concerned, it is estimated that:

- £600 was spent on printed materials – all of this work was carried out in-house by the council's design and print service;
- £130 spent on pop-up promotional banners;
- £425 on venue hire, transport costs, refreshments for those who attended the public meetings and face-to-face sessions;
- £45 for Freepost costs.

All of the costs identified – including the overtime payments to staff – were met from within existing budgets for consultation at the borough council.

In total, 635 questionnaires were returned to the borough council. Of the total number of responses received, 393 were received through electronic

channels; 91 were received through the post; 120 came from face-to-face sessions and 31 from public meetings.

## **Proposals**

A number of 'lessons learned' discussions have taken place with the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet portfolio holder for finance and resources and staff in Communications who supported the consultation process during 2012/13.

It is clear that some aspects of the consultation worked better than others.

It is also clear that the consultation posed significant pressures not only on Cabinet members but also the Communications Department. Despite that it did provide excellent feedback and it should be remembered that this is a process not carried out for almost a decade in the borough so getting it off the ground was always going to be hard work.

Now that the process is off the ground and some lessons can be learned, it is anticipated the next budget consultation can be delivered more efficiently and effectively.

A number of key recommendations are therefore outlined below for members to consider for the 2013/14 budget consultation:

1. The consultation process will run over a six week period from Monday 30 September to Friday 8 November.
2. Cabinet members will lead the process and will be supported by other councillors and the Communications Department.
3. Three public meetings will be held to enable residents to come along, ask questions and discuss budget issues with Cabinet members. These will take place in a one week period during the fourth week of the budget consultation:
  - a. One will be held in Newcastle, one in Kidsgrove and one in the rural area.
  - b. A public notice will be placed in The Sentinel one week prior to the meetings outlining the time, place and date of the meeting.
  - c. Information will also be placed on the home page of the council's website and distributed to the media.
4. Six face-to-face 'stop and chat' events will take place – two in each of the first three weeks of the consultation:
  - a. Two will be at locations to be decided in Kidsgrove.
  - b. One will be at a location to be decided in Newcastle.
  - c. One will be at the Farmers' Market in Newcastle on 18 October.
  - d. Two will be held at locations to be decided in the rural areas.
  - e. A public notice will be placed in The Sentinel one week prior to the first event outlining the six times, places and locations.

- f. Information will also be placed on the home page of the council's website and distributed to the media.
5. A special budget edition 'mini' Reporter will be produced. This will include information on the budget issues the council is asking residents to express and opinion on and also a Freepost questionnaire:
  - a. This will be a full colour, four sided A5 document produced in-house.
6. The August edition of the Reporter will be used to increase awareness of the budget consultation process and how residents can get involved.
7. The borough council's E-panel will be consulted.
8. All 60 borough councillors will be provided with 40 copies each of the special budget edition 'mini' Reporter and be asked to distribute them within the communities they serve.
9. Bespoke budget consultation content and the budget questionnaire will be promoted on the home page of the council's website.
10. Throughout the six week consultation process the Communications Department will embark on a variety of 'guerrilla' marketing ventures with large scale distributions of editions of the special budget edition 'mini' Reporter.
11. A presentation on the budget issues will be organised by the Head of Business Improvement and Partnerships to the Newcastle Partnership Strategic Board.
12. A series of press releases, media interviews and briefing notes will be produced to generate local coverage in the media of the consultation process.
13. Pop-up adverts will be used on key landing pages on the council's website to promote the process and encourage online completion of the budget questionnaire.
14. The council's Bluetooth and Wi-fi transmitter will be used to send key messages to mobile phone users at key locations throughout the borough.
15. A scrutiny café will be held in January for interested stakeholders. This will be organised by the Business Improvement and Partnerships Team.
16. Key stakeholders such as LAPs, parish and town councils, business groups etc will be contacted and asked to submit their views as part of the consultation process. This will be overseen by the Business Improvement and Partnerships Team.

17. Pop-up banners will be produced and located in each of the locations for the public meetings for three weeks to promote attendance at the events.

The council's Budget Review Group met on 19 June 2013 and endorsed the consultation proposals outlined in this report.

It is now to be considered by the Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee before going to Cabinet in September.

## **Conclusions**

It is vital that the council settles on dates, questions, information content as early as possible for this consultation process.

This will allow the council to encourage residents to get involved much earlier in the process than was possible previously. And as a result, participation will either match or exceed that seen last year.

All of the existing activity and proposals outlined above can be met from within existing consultation budgets at the borough council.

4) It is vital that any information produced as part of this process indicates how resident opinion from the previous consultation has been used to shape decision making. This follows the 'you said, we listened, we did' consultation model which has proved successful elsewhere in the country.

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