

BUDGET CONSULTATION

Submitted by: Head of Communications

Portfolio: Communications, Policy and Partnerships / Finance and Resources

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To provide Cabinet with information relating to the outcomes of the 2013 budget consultation process.

Recommendations

- a) **Cabinet notes the outcomes of the budget consultation process.**
- b) **Cabinet authorises the Portfolio holders for Communications, Transformation and Partnerships and Finance and Resources to further review the consultation process and consider how budget consultations could be developed for the future.**

Reasons

The six-week process held during October and November 2013 was the second year running that the council had carried out a major budget consultation. The responses and comments from the public will help the borough council as it considers its spending pressures and priorities. Other feedback from community groups will also be fed into the process over the coming weeks and months to further shape the council's budget and spending proposals.

1. Background

- 1.1 Between Monday 30 September and Friday 8 November the borough council carried out a major budget consultation process. This was the second consecutive year the council had run such a process with an eight year gap between the previous consultation in December 2004.
- 1.2 Last year's process involved the production of a mini budget Reporter which set out how the council spends money and gave the consultation contextual background information. A sister document was produced which posed 10 questions to residents and for each they had to tick a box showing the level of importance they placed on that factor ranging from "Extremely Important" to "Of No Importance."
- 1.3 Analysis of the feedback showed three groupings of responses in terms of levels of importance. In the upper group were economy and environmental issues with keeping streets and open spaces clean and clear; vibrant, active and safe town centres and promoting economic growth regarded as the three most important areas for residents.
- 1.4 In the next grouping were reducing worklessness, supporting victims of crime and vulnerable citizens as well as improving public health.

- 1.5 In the next grouping, which could be assessed as being of lower importance were promoting healthy lifestyles; improving the way the council communicates; improving housing standards and choices; cultural activity and promotion of the arts.
- 1.6 Cabinet agreed to run another budget consultation process in 2013 and following a series of discussions it was agreed that it would be beneficial if this second process built on the data gathered during the 2012 budget consultation. This would enable the council to compile a more comprehensive picture of local views and opinions with regard to budget issues and priorities. It was agreed that a mini budget Reporter would again be produced to set the context for the consultation (this is attached as Appendix A). In addition, it was agreed that to develop the consultation process a more probing questionnaire involving qualitative responses would be put together for residents to complete (this is attached as Appendix B).
- 1.7 In 2012, the council received 635 responses to its consultation. This year the figure was 270. This means the council has received information from more than 900 residents as this cumulative information is helping it to gauge the thoughts and priorities of the public over local public spending. The detailed findings have been drawn together in Appendix C which is attached to this report.
- 1.8 During the consultation process contact was made with a range of community groups including parish councils, Locality Action Partnerships and residents' associations. Cabinet members offered to visit meetings and discuss the budget issues with community groups. Although some organisations took up the offer immediately others have been slower to respond and some invitations are still outstanding. These will be met by Cabinet members and data collected will be added to the responses already gathered during the formal six week process with the public.

2. Issues

- 2.1 Cabinet members once again agreed to lead the consultation process with officers from the Communications Service – which has corporate responsibilities for consultation and engagement at the borough council - working alongside.
- 2.2 The questionnaires asked residents six questions:-
 - a) What do you think the council could do to make the town centre more vibrant, active and safe?
 - b) What do you think the council should do to promote economic growth?
 - c) What do you think the council should do to reduce worklessness?
 - d) How do you think the council can improve support for victims of crime and vulnerable citizens?
 - e) How do you think the council can better promote healthy lifestyles?
 - f) Would you pay a few extra pence if it meant protecting public services?
- 2.3 Some of the headline information from the responses can be summarised as:-
 - (i) A significant majority of respondents would be prepared to pay more to protect public services.
 - (ii) Business rates are perceived as a problem locally and a barrier to economic growth and vibrant town centres. The rating lists are created and maintained by the Valuation Office Agency, a Government executive agency, billing and collection is the responsibility of local authorities such as the borough council.
 - (iii) Concerted action is required to develop and regenerate our town centres.
 - (iv) Residents support taking positive action to increase skills and employment opportunities locally.

- 2.4 When the consultation process ran during 2012 it was the first of its kind for a number of years. A “lessons learned” process did take place involving Cabinet members and officers and as a result a number of changes were made to this year’s process.
- 2.5 Fewer public meetings were organised; a greater emphasis was placed on distribution of information rather than standing with residents to collect questionnaires from them (this was because of the time required to fill in a form); greater emphasis was placed on advertising and promotion.
- 2.6 The detailed proposals for this year’s consultation were brought to the Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee for its consideration, comments and suggestions prior to the process itself starting.

3. **Proposal and reasons for preferred option**

- 3.1 As a result of the consultation process, the borough council has received a significant amount of up-to-date information from residents concerning their priorities for service areas.
- 3.2 This will undoubtedly play an important part in the council’s budget setting and will be aligned to information which is fed into process from other quarters such as community groups – dialogue is still going on with some in the borough over briefings from Cabinet members – the Scrutiny Café in January and so on.

4. **Outcomes linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

- 4.1 One of the borough council’s corporate priorities is to “become a Co-operative Council delivering high quality, community driven services.”
- 4.2 One of the key outcomes which will undoubtedly enable the borough council to fulfil its obligations within that corporate priority is that it will be an “open, honest and transparent organisation which undertakes regular consultation with its residents and listens to their views.”

5. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

- 5.1 The council has a statutory duty to consult with the business sector only with Government guidelines stating as a body the council has to consult with “persons or bodies appearing to it to be representative of persons subject to non-domestic rates.”
- 5.2 However, it is the council’s ambition to go further than this as indicated above in 4.1 and 4.2. As a result, it has carried out this six week long consultation to allow all sections of the community to get involved.

6. **Equality Impact Assessment**

- 6.1 Although an Equality Impact Assessment was not carried out on the budget consultation exercise, the diversity of the channels used ensured there was no negative impact on any section of the borough’s community.

- 6.2 All of the work carried out was in line with the council's Communications Strategy – which includes a section on consultation. This strategy and an associated Equality Impact Assessment was approved by Cabinet in March 2012.

7. **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 7.1 At its meeting on 2 September 2013, the Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the issue of the budget consultation and the programme of work which was being organised as part of the process.
- 7.2 That programme of work was delivered and the human and material resources outlined below were considered at the scrutiny committee again on 2 December:-

Meetings

- Three public meetings were held with Cabinet members in attendance to talk to residents about the budget pressures and issues. These were at the Civic Offices in Newcastle, Kidsgrove Town Hall and the Madeley Centre.
- Seven “stop and chat” events were held at locations across the borough.
- Presentations were given to two residents associations who accepted an offer from Cabinet members to go and discuss the budget at their meetings.

Material resources

- 5,000 mini budget edition Reporters were printed and distributed together with the same number of questionnaires. Forty of each of these documents were sent to all councillors.
- Most of the mini Reporters were distributed at public meetings, stop and chat events and also through ad-hoc site visits at different locations in the borough by the Communications Team.
- Pop-up banners in place for three weeks prior to the public events at the host venues.
- 10 A3 posters promoting the consultation and events were also displayed at the events which were to host the public meetings.
- An article outlining the process to be undertaken and the locations of public meetings and the “stop and chat” events featured in The Reporter which was distributed between 26-31 August.
- Two press releases were produced and circulated to the local media promoting the public meetings and the “stop and chat” events. These did receive local coverage.
- Following a suggestion from Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee, all community centres received a letter on the budget consultation together with a poster advertising the process and a quantity of mini Reporters and questionnaires.
- A similar process involved the Locality Action Partnerships.

Human resources

- Approximately 12 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. This is significantly fewer than the 44 hours spent on this area of work last year. This is because production templates are now in place and no flyers were written, designed or printed.
- Twenty hours were spent by staff distributing materials – some posters were taken out to promote events but the main human resource here involved distributing mini-Reporters and questionnaires in short and sharp guerrilla

marketing/promotion trips to a variety of locations. This is slightly less than the assessment of 28 hours last year.

- Approximately 56 hours were spent by staff supporting Cabinet members at sessions with the public. Two staff were at each of the four-and-a-half hour “stop and chat” events during the week with four at the Saturday event in anticipation of greater public demand. Staff also supported Cabinet at the three public meetings in the evenings. Some of these hours were paid at overtime as they took place at weekends and in the evenings.
- Approximately 40 hours have been spent inputting, collating and evaluating data received during the process. Although there were fewer responses this year, because they are comment based it has taken much longer to assess and evaluate. More than 200 of the responses were in electronic format which has significantly reduced inputting demands.

Financial resources

- £796 was spent on advertising space in The Sentinel; Kidsgrove News; Junction 15 magazine and on pop-up banners for the three venues which hosted the public meetings. These banners were in place for three weeks before the events.
- £404 was spent on printed materials – all of which were done in-house.
- £86 was spent offering Freepost returns on the questionnaires.
- £30 on room hire.
- £691.31 in staff overtime.
- £70 on transport.
- The total for financial resources is just over £2,000.

- 7.3 All of the costs identified above – including the overtime payments to staff – can be met from within existing budgets for consultation services at the borough council.
- 7.4 As far as the human resources are concerned, the focus on the budget consultation has been very resource intensive both for Cabinet members and for the Communications Service at the borough council.
- 7.5 Cabinet members have been on hand at public engagements to ensure any political questions could be answered and dealt with. Presentations outlining the budget issues facing the council have also been delivered by the Cabinet Portfolio holder responsible for finance and budget management. Members have also been in attendance at the face-to-face sessions.
- 7.6 Devoting officer time to supporting the initiative has had an impact on the Communications Service as staff from all sections of the department have been involved in the events schedule. This has meant some lower priority work being re-scheduled, other elements being postponed and in some instances work has been cancelled such as pro-active media releases.
- 7.7 This has been another significant piece of work for the borough council and if Cabinet is mindful to repeat budget consultation exercises on an annual basis then continued evaluation and development must take place to try and ensure as many residents as possible are given an opportunity to come forward and take part in the process.
- 7.8 Significant changes this year included greater publicity devoted to the consultation; a reduced number of public meetings to make better use of resources; wider distribution of printed materials and information; an offer from Cabinet members to personally visit and talk to community groups; more informal “stop and chat” events.

8. **Major Risks**

8.1 There are no major risks associated with this report.

9. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

9.1 There are no earlier Cabinet/Committee resolutions relevant to this report.

10. **Background papers**

10.1 Appendix A is a PDF of the four-page “mini” budget Reporter produced for the consultation.

10.2 Appendix B is a PDF of the questionnaire distributed as part of the process.

10.3 Appendix C is a breakdown of the results of the budget consultation process which ran from Monday, 30 September to Friday, 8 November 2013.