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Subject: Budget Consultation 2021-22

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report sets out the approach taken for this year's Budget Consultation, how it was delivered, and the key question topics. It accompanies the presentation being given at Cabinet on 30 November 2020, which will provide a summary of the responses received for each consultation question.

1. Budget Consultation Strategy

- 1.1 Our annual budget consultation is a key part of our budget setting considerations and informs our strategy for setting the budget for the next financial year and our medium term financial plan. The previous two budget consultations have asked about priorities for spending. This year, however, given the scale of the financial challenge we face, the tone of this year's consultation shifted to focus on how comfortable people would be with spending reductions across service areas. The consultation material explained the context: 'We are potentially facing our biggest financial challenge in ten years. We are facing a combination of more growth in spending than in previous years (largely arising from the COVID-19 pandemic) and the potential reduction in how much income we receive from Council Tax and business rates.'
- 1.2 The consultation was aimed at reaching a wide audience of Kent residents and other interested parties to inform them of the budget challenge facing the council. As a result of the consultation we hoped to raise awareness of these issues and encourage residents, businesses and voluntary organisations to respond to the questionnaire with their views, specifically on spending reductions, Council Tax and doing things differently.
- 1.3 The consultation was for a six-week period, consistent with our previous Autumn budget consultations.

2. Consultation Delivery

- 2.1 The budget consultation ran from 14 October to 24 November 2020. The promotion was primarily through direct email and social media. Emails went to a range of voluntary and community sector organisations, Kent Association for Local Councils, and over 3,000 people that have signed up to KCC's consultation directory to hear about new consultations. It also

featured in our new residents' newsletter. Promotional postcards were available at some of our open sites prior to the 5 November lockdown (children's centres, country parks, libraries and gateways). Social media advertising has been an important and effective method of promoting the consultation. It was also promoted by Healthwatch Kent on their channels and with their forums for older people, mental health, physical disability, and the Food Bank.

2.2 A press release was issued on 14 October 2020 to mark the launch of the consultation, focusing on the budget challenge and encouraging residents to have their say. This release achieved coverage in the following: BBC South East Today, Radio Kent, Isle of Thanet News, Canterbury Journal, Times of Tunbridge Wells, Academy FM, The KM Group newspapers, Kent Online, Kent Live and Kent and Sussex Courier.

2.3 Hard copies and alternative formats of the consultation material were also publicised through the press release, with a telephone number, Text Relay facility and email address.

3. Consultation Questions

3.1 The full questionnaire can be viewed online at www.kent.gov.uk/budget. The questionnaire focused on three areas:

- Spending reductions
- Council Tax and the Social Care Levy
- Doing things differently

3.2 Spending reductions:

Respondents were asked to consider the 14 major frontline service areas and state whether or not they would be comfortable with a reduction in spending. The response options to choose from were: comfortable, partly comfortable, not comfortable, and don't know/no opinion. Respondents were given the opportunity to tell us why they had selected their responses.

Respondents were also asked to identify the one area of frontline spending which would be their **priority to save £1**. As respondents could only choose one area to save £1, the responses may show a different pattern compared with the pattern for the degree of comfort on areas for savings. This is because respondents could be comfortable with savings in more than one area of frontline service.

The consultation deliberately focussed on frontline spending as the scale of the challenge means the Council is unlikely to be able to balance next year's budget without impact on frontline services. This does not mean that other areas of non-frontline spending will not be considered for savings.

3.3 Council Tax and the Social Care Levy:

Respondents were first asked whether they agreed or disagreed with raising Council Tax up to (but not exceeding) the referendum limit. The consultation deliberately did not specifically identify what the referendum limit might be as this is set by central government and approved by parliament. They were next asked what they felt the level of Council Tax should be if there wasn't a referendum limit. The response options ranged from 'no increase' up to 'I support an increase above 6%'. A subsequent free text box enabled respondents to tell us why they had chosen their answer. Finally, they were asked if they agreed or disagreed with having the Social Care Levy.

3.4 Doing things differently (linked with the Council's Strategic Reset Programme):

Respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with: reducing the number of buildings we have; delivering more than one service from our buildings; and delivering more services using online technology.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to identify other areas they felt could achieve savings and cost reductions (as a free text response).

4. Next Steps

4.1 The consultation period closed on 24 November and a summary of the consultation responses will be presented at the Cabinet meeting. A full consultation report will be available by 5 January 2021, when the draft budget is due to be published. This report will include a full analysis of the responses, including a demographic analysis. The report will accompany the draft budget plans through the scrutiny process in January, Cabinet on 25 January and County Council on 11 February.

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