

From: Peter Oakford, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance,
Corporate and Traded Services

John Betts, Interim Corporate Director of Finance

To: Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee 13th July 2022

Subject: Budget Consultation Process

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

This report provides an overview of this year's budget consultation process with residents, businesses, voluntary and community groups and other interested parties.

Recommendations:

Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee is asked to comment on the process of this year's budget consultation as set out in this report.

1 Background

1.1 The Constitution sets out a requirement for the Council to undertake sufficient internal and external consultation on the annual budget and medium-term financial plan proposals. The external consultation has included a very broad public consultation on the overall budget strategy. In the past we have undertaken both quantitative and qualitative research through budget surveys, workshops, and focus groups. The strategy consultation has not sought views on individual aspects of the budget other than Council Tax. Detailed consultation on individual aspects of the budget is undertaken by services. The consultation culminates with the opportunity for Cabinet Committees to scrutinise the final draft budget proposals and make recommendations on them.

1.2 In recent years, the strategic consultation questions have focused on three key areas.

- Area 1 - Spending priority/Spending reduction – we have provided a list of the 14 main front line service areas and asked respondents to prioritise where we should be spending additional investment or focussing on spending reductions.
- Area 2 – Council Tax – we have asked for views on increases to Council Tax, both the general increase and the adult social care levy.
- Area 3 – Doing things differently – we have asked for views on generic areas, where we are proposing a different approach to service delivery e.g., greater automation or reducing the number of buildings we operate from.

1.3 A link to the 2022-23 Budget Consultation webpage, where all documents including the final report can be found, is located in the background document section at the end of this report.

2 The Budget Consultation Process

2.1 Staff in Finance have already started planning, with colleagues within the Engagement and Consultation team, for this year's strategic budget consultation. This plan takes into consideration other planned consultation activities within the Council as well as being able to report on key messages from the consultation ahead of the publication of the draft budget proposals in late December 2022/early January 2023.

2.2 The plan is to launch a strategic consultation later this month before school holidays commence. The consultation is planned to run for seven weeks and will close in early September 2022. A media release will be produced to accompany the launch of the consultation.

2.3 The consultation will, like in recent years, be online based through the Council's engagement website "Let's Talk Kent". It will be promoted through KCC's social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Next Door) with paid adverts on Facebook to help extend the reach of the consultation. Promotional posters and postcards will also be available in some of our community buildings e.g., libraries, Gateways and Country Park visitor centres. Hard copies and alternative formats will be available and publicised through the media release, posters and postcards, with a telephone number, Text Relay facility and email address.

2.4 The consultation will be promoted through email to a range of voluntary and community sector organisations, business networks, the Kent Association for Local Councils, and over 5,000 people who have signed up to KCC's engagement platform and expressed an interest in hearing about consultations regarding budget and finance and general interest. It will also feature in the residents' e-newsletter. We intend to engage with the voluntary sector through existing forums or to re-establish a budget specific discussion with the sector.

2.5 We will be seeking the assistance from Healthwatch Kent to promote the consultation through its various forums.

2.6 We will engage with both staff and trade unions as part of the consultation. Staff engagement will be through the promotion of the consultation through internal communication activity, and meetings with the trade unions are currently being arranged.

2.7 It is proposed that the consultation will consist of the following documents, which will all be available on the launch day on the consultation webpage.

- A background document setting out the context of the financial challenges facing the Council. This year the impact of rising inflation on the budget will be a key part of this context, as will the continuing impact on demand for our services. We intend to provide a high-level analysis setting out the estimated

scale of the challenge. In the absence of an indicative settlement from central government this will be based upon our assumptions for grant settlement and Council Tax referendum principles using evidence from the Autumn 2021 Spending review. This showed the only additional resources for the local government sector as a whole in 2023-24 (other than grant to implement the social care funding reforms) coming from Council Tax and retained business rates

- A questionnaire with consultation questions. The intention is to have a shorter set of questions this year, with the focus being on Council Tax. It is believed that a shorter questionnaire, taking less time to complete, may result in a greater number of responses. The questionnaire will also include optional questions about the respondent so that we can analyse response from particular social groups, as part of our equality impact assessment.
- Alongside the questionnaire we will use a “Virtual Ideas” board to provide the opportunity for people to feedback on their preferred method of working smarter or making savings, by liking our ideas or suggesting their own or liking or commenting on others. This feature aims to provide a fresh and engaging way for people to provide their feedback.
- An initial equality impact assessment on the budget strategy.

2.8 A report summarising the consultation responses and its key messages will be produced shortly after the consultation closes. The report will be published on the consultation webpage. This report will accompany the draft budget proposals which will be presented to all Cabinet Committees, including the Scrutiny Committee in January 2023.

3 Recommendations

Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee is asked to comment on the process of this year’s budget consultation as set out in this report.

4 Background Documents

KCC’s 2022-23 Budget Consultation webpage
<https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/finance-and-budget>

5 Contact details

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