



Northumberland

County Council

COUNCIL

DATE: 24TH FEBRUARY 2021

BUDGET CONSULTATION 2021-22

Report of: Cllr Nick Oliver

Purpose of report

This report provides a summary of results of the budget consultation undertaken between 10th December 2020 and 21st January 2021. The budget consultation helps to inform the Council's Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Recommendations

Members are requested to:

- 1. Consider and note the summary results of the budget consultation undertaken between 10th December 2020 and 21st January 2021.**

Link to Corporate Plan

As the budget consultation helps to inform the Council's budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan, it is aligned to all the priorities outlined in the Corporate Plan 2018-21 "A Council that Works for Everyone".

Key issues

1. It's important that the Council's budget reflects services and investments that are most important to residents and businesses in all communities across the County. From 10th December 2020 to 21st January 2021 we consulted on our budget proposals. This report sets out the summary results of that consultation as well as outlining other engagement undertaken as part of the budget process.

Background

1. On 10th December 2020, the Council launched its budget consultation. This was through an online survey tool and was open to anyone wishing to participate. The consultation was promoted through a variety of media channels. As the survey was online and open to all, the responses are not a 'statistical sample' of the population and therefore we are not presenting the results as representative of the population as a whole. However, the results do provide a useful sense of views across a range of stakeholders, including:
 - Residents (88.14% of the responses);

- Local businesses;
- Charities;
- Community Groups;
- NCC staff who are residents;
- NCC Staff who are non-residents;
- Councillors;
- Public Sector;
- Other.

2. In total, we were very pleased to receive **371** responses to the consultation and thank everyone who took the time to share their views. In the consultation, we asked for views on each of the key services. For each of these areas we asked:

- Would you spend more / less / same on this service?
- How important are these services to you (very / important / quite / not)?

3. The following paragraphs summarise the responses to these questions, grouped by high-level service areas.

(i) **Adults, Wellbeing and Health** – the vast majority of respondents (87%) viewed services to adults as ‘important’, ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’. Almost half of respondents (49%) ranked these services as extremely important. Some 91% of respondents would spend more (63%) or the same (29%) on these services, with just 5% saying these would spend less.

Table 1 Adults, Wellbeing and Health: Would you spend more, less or the same on this service?

Option	Total	Percent
More	233	62.80%
Less	17	4.58%
The same	106	28.57%
Not Answered	15	4.04%

Table 2 Adults, Wellbeing and Health: How important are these services to you?

Option	Total	Percent
Extremely important	182	49.06%
Very important	57	15.36%
Important	85	22.91%
Not very important	21	5.66%
Not important at all	10	2.70%
Not Answered	16	4.31%

(ii) **Children’s Services** – like Adult Services, respondents attach high levels of importance to Children’s Services. Some 88% viewed these services as ‘important’, ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’, with 52% respondents ranking these

services as 'extremely important'. Some 92% of respondents would spend more (67%) or the same (25%) on these services, with just 4% saying these would spend less.

Table 3 Children's Services: Would you spend more, less or the same on this service?

Option	Total	Percent
More	249	67.12%
Less	16	4.31%
The same	91	24.53%
Not Answered	15	4.04%

Table 4 Children's Services: How important are these services to you?

Option	Total	Percent
Extremely important	194	52.29%
Very important	66	17.79%
Important	65	17.52%
Not very important	17	4.58%
Not important at all	11	2.96%
Not Answered	18	4.85%

- (iii) **Corporate Services** – these include a range of 'back office'-type services such as HR, IT and Finance. Some 65% of respondents ranked these as 'important'-extremely important'. Some 55% would spend more or the same level on these services.

Table 5 Corporate Services: Would you spend more, less or the same on this service?

Option	Total	Percent
More	70	18.87%
Less	151	40.70%
The same	133	35.85%
Not Answered	17	4.58%

Table 6 Corporate Services: How important are these services to you?

Option	Total	Percent
Extremely important	68	18.33%
Very important	47	12.67%
Important	126	33.96%
Not very important	92	24.80%
Not important at all	19	5.12%
Not Answered	19	5.12%

- (iv) **Culture, Arts and Leisure** – some 78% of respondents ranked these services as either 'important', 'very important' or 'extremely important', with 74% indicating they would spend the same (31%) or more (43%) on culture, arts & leisure.

Table 7 Culture Services: Would you spend more, less or the same on this service?

Option	Total	Percent
More	161	43.40%
Less	78	21.02%
The same	115	31.00%
Not Answered	17	4.58%

Table 8 Culture Services: How important are these services to you?

Option	Total	Percent
Extremely important	128	34.50%
Very important	65	17.52%
Important	98	26.42%
Not very important	47	12.67%
Not important at all	15	4.04%
Not Answered	18	4.85%

- (v) **Local Services** – similar to services to Children and Adults, respondents attach high levels of importance to Local Services such as refuse collection, waste disposal, streetlighting, roads and pavements. Some 93% viewed these services as ‘important’, ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’, with 42% ranking these services as ‘extremely important’. Some 89% of respondents would spend more (50%) or the same (39%) on these services.

Table 9 Local Services: Would you spend more, less or the same on this service?

Option	Total	Percent
More	186	50.13%
Less	25	6.74%
The same	146	39.35%
Not Answered	14	3.77%

Table 10 Local Services: How important are these services to you?

Option	Total	Percent
Extremely important	156	42.05%
Very important	103	27.76%
Important	86	23.18%
Not very important	5	1.35%
Not important at all	0	0.00%
Not Answered	21	5.66%

- (vi) **Regeneration, Commercial and Planning** – 80% of respondents ranked these services as ‘important’, ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’. Some 71% would spend more or the same on these services.

Table 11 Regeneration, Commercial and Planning: Would you spend more, less or the same on this service?

Option	Total	Percent
More	139	37.47%
Less	90	24.26%
The same	125	33.69%
Not Answered	17	4.58%

Table 12 Regeneration, Commercial and Planning: How important are these services to you?

Option	Total	Percent
Extremely important	102	27.49%
Very important	68	18.33%
Important	127	34.23%
Not very important	49	13.21%
Not important at all	7	1.89%
Not Answered	18	4.85%

4. The survey also sought views on priorities for the Council to invest in jobs and businesses. Respondents were given three broad areas for investment and the ranking is set out in the table 13 below:

Table 13: What investment priorities do you think are most important to help jobs and businesses grow?

Item	Ranking
Skills and employability: including apprenticeships, training, support to help people back into work	1.65
Infrastructure: including roads, rail, employment sites	1.54
Investing directly in businesses: including start-up grants, grants to help businesses grow	1.20

5. We asked respondents to rank which services were most important to them. Support to children and families was ranked top, with Adult Social Care second. Table 14 (below) shows there was not a big difference between the top three ranked services (Support to children & families, Adult Social Care and services to all neighbourhoods).

Table 14 Ranking of Services

Item	Ranking
Support to children and families, including children’s social care and education and skills	2.54
Adult social care services	2.41
Services in all neighbourhoods such as bins, waste disposal, recycling, roads, pavements and streetlighting	2.21
Services that support the economy, businesses and jobs	1.75
Culture, arts and leisure, including libraries	1.49

6. The Council is delivering on its ambitious Climate Action Plan, investing in services and infrastructure to reduce the county’s carbon emissions. So, the Council wanted to know residents’ priorities for tackling this agenda. The top ranked priority was ‘investing in ways to generate green energy’, with ‘supporting households and communities to reduce emissions’ the second ranked priority.

Table 15: Ranking of Climate Change priorities

Item	Ranking
Investing in ways to generate green energy	3.50
Supporting households and communities to reduce emissions	3.40
Reducing staff travel / mileage	3.15
Making sure the goods and services we buy are sustainable	3.01
Making council buildings greener	2.82
Planting new trees	2.61
Other	0.75

7. The budget proposes a 1.75% increase in the Adult Social Care Precept for 2021-2022. When asked in the survey whether this should be more, less or the same, some 74% of respondents indicated this should be more (32%) or the same (42%).

Table 16: Adult Social Care Precept

Option	Total	Percent
More	120	32.35%
Less	80	21.56%
The same	155	41.78%
Not Answered	16	4.31%

8. We asked for ideas on how the Council could raise more income or deliver services differently to save money and received 385 suggestions and comments. These comments fell into eight broad themes although, naturally, there was a degree of overlap between the comments. The paragraphs below summarise the responses to this question.

- (i) **Organisation** – we received 150 suggestions and comments on how we could make savings through organisational improvements and efficiencies. These covered a broad range of issues, including: staff salaries / expenses, management structure, how we procure goods and services; opportunities for joint services with other partners or councils; general efficiencies; and, costs associated with local democracy.

Example comments:

“Continue with staff working from home and reduce the portfolio of offices, both owned and leased in.”

“Working from home - council has saved money on expenses - can this not be used constructively?”

“There are still savings to be made within individual departments to ensure there is a cross department approach to spending on resources, materials/equipment.”

“Look at the management structure within the council. Private industry have reduced levels of management over the years.”

- (ii) **Tax base** – there were 48 suggestions on how the Council could raise more income through the local tax base. However, this was not simply about increasing Council Tax and there were comments for and against Council Tax increases. Many of the suggestions on this theme were focused on: how the Council could grow the tax base by supporting more business start-ups; providing people with education and skills to get into work; and, encouraging more people and businesses to come to the county.

Example comments:

“Think more dynamically in terms of investing in public projects and encouraging employment. Northumberland needs more good quality jobs...”

“Use the council’s economic levers such as procurement, business rates, communication campaigns to support local businesses and the employment of local people...”

“More affordable housing, more jobs = more income.”

“I think by investing more funds in the people, infrastructure of Northumberland, this will in time bring economic growth and with it more funding through taxation.”

- (iii) **Assets** – this theme was essentially about how the Council makes better use of its assets, including: selling / letting / making more efficient use of buildings, land & facilities; taking more commercial approaches generally; and, use of charges for services. There were 75 comments and suggestions on this theme.

Example comments:

“Utilise building space more efficiently and sell off buildings that are no longer required.”

“Increasing charges to services that people access (such as gyms and leisure centres), is a way of increasing income, however, again this has to be managed

carefully as increased payments could have a significant impact on people then not being able to use the service...”

“Enforce law and fines on littering, fly-tipping and dog-fouling. Not enough is being done in these areas.”

“Sell off under used assets.”

- (iv) **Reduce investment** – whilst many suggestions supported investment as a way of encouraging business growth and increasing jobs, some people suggested the Council should look to prioritise spending on critical services and where necessary reduce investment, particularly where this is not deemed essential. There were a total of 17 suggestions and comments on this theme.

Example comments:

“In these difficult times get rid of any vanity projects and concentrate on providing services to all in the whole of Northumberland.”

“Where perfectly good signs to towns and bins are in places don’t renew them. Only renew damaged ones.”

- (v) **Reduce services** – this theme included suggestions (25 in total) and comments on how the Council should prioritise spending on what people felt where critical services. There were also a small number of suggestions on how the Council could support communities to do more for themselves.

Example comments:

“Focus on essential services and provision for children until there is sufficient economic recovery.”

“Not waste money on things like art and statues etc.”

- (vi) **Climate Change & sustainability** – we received 22 comments and suggestions on how we can save money or raise income as part of our overall approach to tackling climate change and delivering environmentally sustainable services.

Example comments:

“Stop publishing paper copies of anything especially newsletters that just get thrown away.”

“Offer the public of Northumberland the opportunity of buying the shredded material produced by your pruning so they can use this for chipping / compost home gardening...”

“Support a growth of Green industry and technology to attract more employment, training and skilled jobs.”

- (vii) **Parking** – there were 12 comments on re-introducing car-parking charges (in areas where we don’t charge) or increasing existing car parking charges.

Example comments:

“Re-introduce parking charges and increase parking availability together with EV infrastructure.”

“Charge for all car parking with an exception for Northumberland residents parking for short periods for shopping etc.”

- (viii) **Government** – some people suggested that Government should provide more funding to the Council to support local services and investment. In total, there were 36 suggestions and comments on this theme.

Example comments:

“Central Government should ensure that Local Councils have the funds to properly provide essential services.”

“Lobby the government to make good on their "levelling up" agenda and promises to help councils through the coronavirus by providing more money.”

“Find creative ways for additional funding from Westminster.”

“The Government should be finding a different way to fund social care for the elderly.”

Other engagement

9. In January, the Leader and Portfolio Members presented the budget proposals to the five Local Area Councils (LACs). This gave LAC Members the chance to consider the proposals and ask questions. These meetings were open to the public to view through the YouTube channel. Table 17 (below) summarises LAC participation in the budget consultation.

Table 17 LAC Participation

Area	Members	Views (YouTube)
Morpeth LAC	12-13	338
Tynedale LAC	13	91
Ashington and Blyth LAC	14	155
Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley	16	72
North Northumberland	10	163
Total	66	819

10. In addition, the Leader of Council hosted a public question time session on the draft budget proposals, supported by the Cabinet Member for Corporate Resources and the Executive Director of Finance and Section 151 Officer. Questions from members of the public were invited, and the livestream had **141** views.
11. The budget consultation was promoted on the Council’s social media channels and reached **33,471** people – 353 engaged with our social media posts and 24 people commented.

Implications

Policy	The Budget Consultation helps to inform the Council’s Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan
Finance and value for money	Whilst there are no financial implications arising directly from this report, the results of the consultation and wider engagement on the budget help to inform the Council’s Budget which is detailed in the separate report to Council (Budget 2021-22 and Medium-

	Term Financial Plan 2021-2024).
Legal	Whilst there are no legal implications arising directly from this report, the results of the consultation and wider engagement on the budget help to inform the Council's Budget which is detailed in the separate report to Council (Budget 2021-22 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2021-2024).
Procurement	There are no specific Procurement implications within this report.
Human Resources	There are no specific HR implications within this report.
Property	There are no specific Property implications within this report.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	There are no specific Equalities implications within this report, although the results of the consultation have been considered as part of the equalities impacts process in relation to the Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan.
Risk Assessment	There are no specific risk implications within this report.
Crime & Disorder	There are no specific crime implications within this report.
Customer Consideration	There are no specific customer implications within this report.
Carbon reduction	There are no specific carbon reduction implications within this report although the feedback on carbon investment priorities will be shared more widely with teams leading on the Council's plans for carbon reduction.
Health and Wellbeing	There are no specific health and wellbeing implications within this report.
Wards	All wards

Background papers:

Budget 2021-22 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2021-2024

Report sign off.

	Full Name of Officer
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Monitoring Officer/Legal	Neil Masson
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Chris Hand
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