Budget Consultation 2021/22

(Phase 1)

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

December 2020

CONTENTS

FIGURES AND TABLES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This section provides a summary of the main findings from the Phase 1 Budget Consultation 2021/22.

- The consultation was conducted in-house using a digital by default approach, supplemented by off-line alternatives. Phase 1 of the consultation started on the 26th October and ended on the 7th December 2020.

- 1,044 online survey responses were received.

- The majority of respondents felt that the Council should protect services at their current level through a 2.85% increase in Council Tax (76.8%).

- Respondents were also asked what their preferred level of Council Tax increase for next year would be. The results show that the majority of respondents (59%) would prefer a 2.85% increase (the current modelled level), with 24.4% stating less than 2.85%.

- 81.5% of respondents agreed that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in our schools.

- Respondents were asked to state which services they would want to protect from an increase in fees and charges in 2021/22. The majority (i.e. 50% or more) of respondents felt that fees and charges for the following services should be frozen (no increase);
  - Bereavement Fees (60.7%);
  - Meals on Wheels and Day Centre Meals (58.8%);
  - Car Parking Charges (57.5%); and
  - Adult Social Care Charges (non-residential care services) (55.2%).

- Respondents were provided with a list of Council services and asked to choose which services they felt should be protected and prioritised for any additional resources in 2021/22. The top 3 services that respondents wanted to protect and prioritise were;
  - Children's Social Care Services (95.5%);
  - Schools (92.1%); and
  - Public Health (91.9%);

- 94% of respondents agreed with the Council's approach to efficiencies and 93.6% said that we should continue to expect our managers to deliver more efficient services.

- 82.6% of respondents stated that the Council should continue with its strategy on reserves.

- Respondents were asked if they thought the Council should invest in a number of service areas. The majority of respondents agreed that the Council should invest in all of the areas suggested, with the most support for investment in Flood Alleviation (93.8%).

- A virtual engagement session was held with members of the OPAG (Older Persons Advisory Group) and Disability Forum. Comments are found in section 5 of the report.

- The Council's Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum were consulted (the minutes of which have not been included in this report) and engagement took place with the Community Liaison Committee.

- We held 5 virtual sessions and spoke to pupils from St John Baptist Church In Wales High School, Aberdare Community School, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and Y Pant Comprehensive School. We also engaged with learners from Coleg Y Cymoedd in Aberdare, Rhondda and Treforest campuses. The results of these engagements are included in section 6 of the report.

- Over 1,100 people were engaged in the phase 1 budget consultation process.

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   This report presents the findings of the Phase 1 Budget Consultation 2021/22.

1.2   Section 2 outlines some brief background to the consultation process.

1.3   Section 3 details the methodology.

1.4   Section 4 provides the results of the online questionnaire.

1.5   Section 5 presents the feedback received via virtual meetings, including the Older Persons Advisory Group and Disability Forum.

1.6   Section 6 provides feedback on the young persons' virtual engagement events.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Council undertakes a comprehensive approach to its annual budget consultation, involving a large number of residents and key stakeholders.

2.2 The widespread approach we use and the range of views we capture provides senior managers and Cabinet Members with the necessary information they need to set the budget for the year ahead. In addition, we have found that the vast amount of information we collect can also be valuable for service managers to use for their service planning and development.

2.3 The comprehensive approach undertaken in the last few years has led to increased engagement in the budget consultation process through a more interactive and varied approach.

2.4 The current COVID-19 pandemic brings challenges for public engagement and consultation, where in Rhondda Cynon Taf we have developed a very successful face to face approach with residents and other stakeholders in recent years.

2.5 The approach we have used this year aims to continue the positive work by ensuring that all residents and service users have every opportunity to provide feedback. The 2021/22 budget consultation took on a 'digital by default' approach, whilst continuing to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.

2.6 This report presents the findings of phase 1 of the budget consultation, where views were sought on:

- The level of Council Tax increase;
- The resources allocated to our schools;
- Fees and charges;
- Protection and prioritisation of services for additional resources;
- Delivering more efficient services;
- Council priorities, investment opportunities and Council reserves
- The Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

2.7 Phase 1 of the consultation started on the 26th October and ended on the 7th December 2020.

2.8 Phase 2 of the consultation will commence in January 2021 and will seek to obtain views on the proposed Budget Strategy for 2021/22.

3.   METHODOLOGY

3.1   The 'digital by default' approach included the following methods to consult with a range of stakeholders:

- An online survey to collect responses on key issues, such as Council investment areas, Council Tax levels and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- The use of social media to communicate the key messages to residents and service users, and encourage engagement and feedback regarding the Council's budget and investment areas.
- Emails distributed to all key stakeholders (including the Council's Citizens' Panel, Councillors, Council staff and schools within Rhondda Cynon Taf).
- The option to attend Public Zoom meetings.
- Online zoom seminars with young people in Schools and Colleges.
- An online Disability Forum Meeting.
- An online Older Persons Advisory Group Meeting.
- Online meetings with the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum.
- Online meeting with the Community Liaison Committee.

3.2   As listed above, to replace our usual face to face engagement, we provided the option of virtual meetings to outline the budget approach, answer questions and collect views. These online (Zoom) events used a video presentation for the first time - https://youtu.be/X_DAVVlVDfY The video was then followed by a discussion with online attendees.

3.3   We provided a number of alternatives to online engagement, as it is important to continue to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods. This included:

- A telephone consultation option working with the Council's Contact Centre. The Contact Centre number was made available for people to discuss their views or as a minimum to request consultation materials.
- Individual call backs were offered if required.
- Paper surveys and information available on request.
- Consultation freepost address for postal responses.

3.4   We designed an Easy Read/Plan English Document in paper format and online, to simplify some of the consultation materials.

3.5   Over 1,100 people were engaged in the phase 1 budget consultation.

4 Questionnaire Results

4.1 The following section outlines the results from the budget questionnaire, which received 1,044 online responses. A selection of comments are provided and the full list of comments will be provided to Cabinet and senior officers to assist with decision making.

Council Tax

4.2 The majority of respondents felt that the Council should protect services at their current level through a 2.85% increase in Council Tax (76.8%).

Table 1: Council Tax preference

	%
Do you think the Council should……	
Protect Council services at their current level through a 2.85% increase in Council Tax	76.8
Reduce service levels to close any budget gap and keep any increase in Council Tax to a minimum	23.2

4.3 Those who agreed with the 2.85% modelled increase to protect services felt it was important to keep services at their current level and the Council should not cut services. A selection of comments fed back were:

"Council tax rise under 3% in RCT is manageable, some councils doing over 5% is wholly unacceptable"

"2.85% is a decent increase personally thinking and maybe even an increase of 3% would still mean RCT is below the average increase in Wales."

"I would rather pay a small amount more and protect services. The increases in RCT over recent years seem to be small and sensible so I'd support a small increase this year"

"As an RCT resident, I think a 2.85% increase is not too much to ask, if it means that more money goes towards the services that are vital to todays pandemic society."

"Happy to agree 2.85% as that's less the 75p a week extra for my household"

Of those who did not agree with an increase of 2.85% the main reason was affordability. Feedback included:

"2020 has been a hard year for many reasons, with many people losing employment. A large increase on ctax would seem unfair due to the current circumstances. Increase the following financial year to give people/Country a chance to recover"

"At the current time and given job uncertainty, especially in the private sector. Any increases in council tax should be kept to a minimum."

4.4 Respondents were also asked what their preferred level of Council Tax increase for next year would be. The results show that the majority of respondents (59%) would prefer a 2.85% increase (the current modelled level), with 24.4% stating less than 2.85%, 11.2% suggesting an increase of more than 3% and 5.3% indicating more than 4%.

Council Tax

- 2.85% (current modelled level)
- Less than 2.85%
- 3% or over
- 4% or over
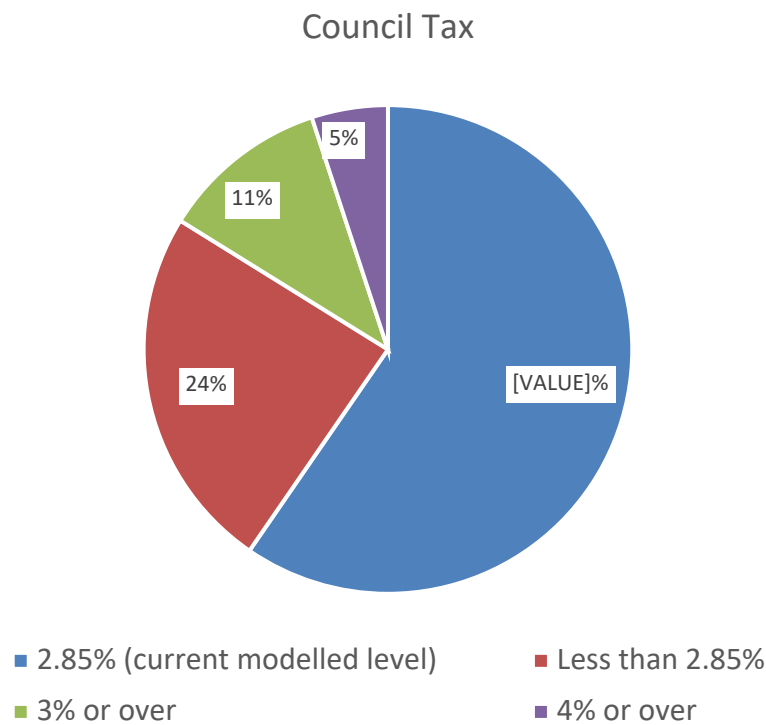
Figure 1 - Preferred level of Council Tax increase

<u>Note</u>: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Schools Budget

4.5   81.5% of respondents agreed that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in our schools.

Schools Budget

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Don't Know
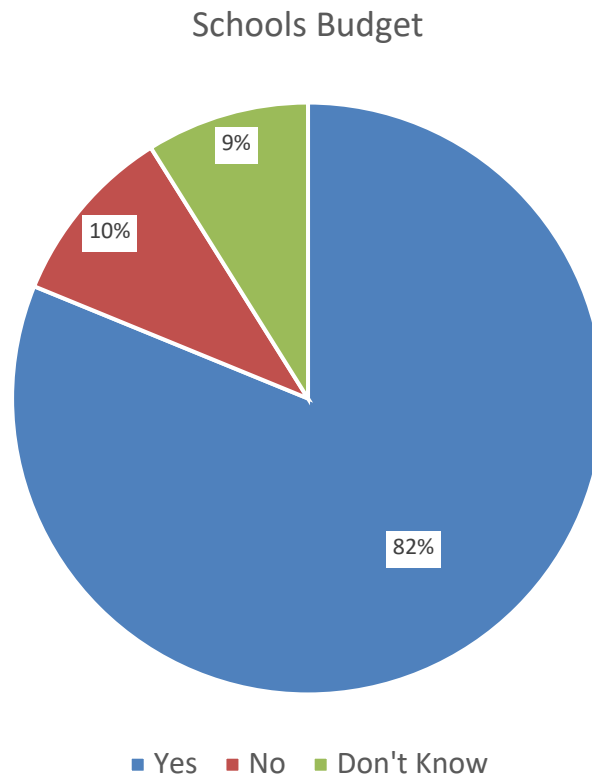
Figure 2 - Agreement with Schools Budget increase

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Fees and Charges

4.6   Respondents were asked their views on fees and charges levels for 2021/22, based on the modelled assumption that they would be increased by 1.7% (i.e. the Consumer Price Index (CPI)). Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Fees and charges levels

Analysis % Respondents	CPI (increase (1.7%)	Higher than CPI (higher than 1.7% increase)	Freeze (no increase)
Leisure Centre Pay and Play	48.1	9.5	42.4
Summer and Winter Playing Fees (Sports Clubs)	41.4	10.9	47.7
Car Parking Charges	31.0	11.5	57.5
Cinema (entrance fee)	50.8	19.0	30.2
Pontypridd Lido (entry for adult users)	52.0	21.1	27.0
Rhondda Heritage park	57.5	16.5	26.0
Meals on Wheels and Day Centre Meals	32.6	8.9	58.8
Adult Social Care Charges (non-residential care services)	36.1	8.7	55.2
Bereavement Fees	33.5	5.8	60.7
Fixed Penalty Notice (for environmental crimes e.g., Fly Tipping)	15.8	77.7	6.5

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

4.7 The table shows that the majority (i.e. 50% or more) of respondents felt that fees and charges for the following services should be frozen (no increase);

- Car Parking Charges (57.5%);
- Meals on Wheels and Day Centre Meals (58.8%);
- Adult Social Care Charges (non-residential care services) (55.2%); and
- Bereavement Fees (60.7%).

Those services with a majority supporting an increase at 1.7% (i.e. the CPI level) were;

- Cinema (entrance fee) (50.8%);
- Pontypridd Lido (52.0%): and
- Rhondda Heritage Park (57.5%).

It is worth noting that 77.7% of respondents suggested an increase higher than the CPI for fixed penalty notices, with only 6.5% suggesting a freeze.

4.8   A selection of comments provided by respondents on fees and charges levels are provided below, noting that a number of comments refer to the on-going Coronavirus pandemic as a factor.

Overall

"Any service or provision that is entertainment related should be subject to rate of inflation."

"Due to pandemic some of these have not been accessible so to increase the cost would be another financial burden for the communities"

"Due to the impact of lockdown and many people having reduced hours in work etc, it hardly seems appropriate to increase entry fees and parking charges".

Leisure

"After the awful time everyone has had leisure needs to be kept affordable"

"I think supporting leisure centres and sports activities is extremely important next year. It is so important for mental health"

"leisure and sports clubs as well as cinemas are struggling in the pandemic and I believe that extra charges for currently reduced services would be detrimental to the services they provide"

Summer and Winter Playing Fees (Sports Clubs)

"I think it has already been a very difficult year for sports clubs where they have been unable to raise money due to C-19."

"Summer and winter playing fees should be increased however, more funding should be found for improved facilities to enhance participation which in turn improves wellbeing and health across the County."

"With the current pandemic, sports and leisure centres are the only places some people are leaving the house for, and it supports health and wellbeing, increasing prices at the moment may cause a wider issue where people can't afford to use the facilities and aren't leaving the home, in addition to working from home people may become more isolated."

Car Parking Charges

"Car parking ensures local towns are utilised to support local business, raising the fees will stop people using the towns …"

"Car parking should be frozen to support businesses on the high street to recover after the pandemic."

"Car park charges impact town centre viability - need to promote other modes but public transport difficult during C19"

Cinema

"I think it is fair to increase the prices of optional leisure services i.e., cinema"

"Cinema, Heritage park are luxuries so should increase above CPI"

"Where services are purely for leisure, eg, optional, such as cinema or leisure centre pay and play, they could be increased."

Pontypridd Lido

"the lido… however things that benefit health and wellbeing should be frozen."

"There are some things that I agree with raising the cost such as the lido, if this is for adults only as this help raise money after the damage caused by the floods earlier in the year."

"As an adult with no children I feel it would be unfair for me to have to pay more to use the lido to further subsidise free access to children when many families earn more than me"

Rhondda Heritage Park

"The heritage park should also see an increase in fees paid by visitors."

"The Heritage Park is a museum and to keep people going there the cost must be affordable. An increase in price will put people off."

Meals on Wheels

"Meals on Wheels and Day Centre meals should be frozen so that the most vulnerable can continue to enjoy a warm cooked meal."

"Meals on wheels have been critical for many and I think increasing their fee would not be fair since they have no other means to get what they need."

"Essentials like Social Care and MOW should be frozen, as during the pandemic, service users will rely on these even more and if prices rise, those that need it the most may not be able to pay for it."

Adult Social Care Charges

"Adult social care charges should be increased though as you need to recruit more social workers especially after the pressures C-19 has put on people."

"Fees on uncontrollable events and requirements should not be increased, as it's not something people choose to need. Examples include Bereavement Fees and Adult Social Care."

Bereavement Fees

"At a time when people are being hit with increased bereavement, I think that this should be frozen"

"especially bereavement fees are hitting people when they are already vulnerable."

"Agree with increase...except for Bereavement fees"

Fixed penalty notices

"Be more realistic with fines for fly tipping. It needs to be high as a deterrent"

"For fly tipping I think this should be increased significantly."

"Anything like environmental crimes should see the biggest increase in charge, as well as noise nuisance and backyard fires, things that are affecting not just the environment but the people who live in RCT."

Council Services

4.9   Respondents were provided with a list of Council services and asked to choose which services they felt should be protected and prioritised for any additional resources in 2021/22 and those that should not be protected.

Table 3: Council services to be protected and prioritised

	%'s	
	Protect and Prioritise	**Do Not Protect**
Schools (Current budget £161.6M)	92.1	7.9

School Support Services (£42.3M)	84.9	15.1
Libraries and Adult Learning (£2.3M)	61.3	38.7
Apprenticeship Scheme (£0.23M)	75.0	25.0
Youth Provision (£1.7M)	81.4	18.6
Adult Social Care Services (£97.1M)	90.8	9.2
Children's Social Care Services (£49.8M)	95.5	4.5
Public Health (£4.9M)	91.9	8.1
Housing (£1.1M)	71.1	28.9
Parks and Play Areas (£5.1M)	67.7	32.3
Highways, Transport and Street care Services (£13.9M)	73.1	26.9
Waste and Recycling Services (£18.3M)	79.6	20.4
Cultural, Tourism and Heritage Services (£2.5M)	53.0	47.0
Regeneration / Supporting people out of work (£26.5M)	72.6	27.4
Leisure Services (£3.9M)	59.4	40.6
Music Service (£0.14M)	57.4	42.6

4.10   The **top 3 services** that respondents wanted to protect and prioritise were;

- Children's Social Care Services (95.5%);
- Schools (92.1%); and
- Public Health (91.9%).

4.11   The **bottom 3 services** that respondents wanted to protect and prioritise were;

- Cultural, Tourism and Heritage Services (53.0%);
- Music Service (57.4%); and
- Leisure Services (59.4%).

Efficiencies

4.12   Respondents were provided with the following statement and asked whether they thought this was a good strategy.

> *Each year in balancing our budget and ensuring the effective use of resources, all service managers are required to contribute toward a council-wide efficiency (savings) target. This means that all of our services are becoming more efficient, without impacting on front line services.*

The majority of respondents thought this was a good strategy (94%) and 93.6% said that we should continue to expect our managers to deliver more efficient services.

4.13 The following comments have been placed under themes and provide examples of how respondents felt the Council could be more efficient;

Note: A large number of responses were received to this question and will be available to Councillors and Officers as part of the reporting process.

Enforcement

4.14 The Council is limited in how much it can raise fines for some enforcement activity, such as dog fouling. However, as shown in section 4.6 above there is widescale support to increase them where it is possible.

"More fines for fly tipping"

"Increase dog fouling officers and fine heavily"

"Enforcement - more fines for littering/dog fouling/fly tipping"

Digitalisation

4.15 A number of comments further support digitalisation, which is one of the Council's key areas of focus to maximise resources and deliver improved services.

"Reduce back office and move more things online if possible"

"ICT - Self-service for customers. Keep working from home to save on fuel costs, e-expenses"

"Digital transformation is key to simplifying and improving efficiency on services with the public."

Working from Home

4.16 Comments fed back as part of the consultation process support the need for the Council to continue the approach to home working, which was introduced widely across the Council as a result of the pandemic.

"The pandemic has shown that many council workers can work from home this would surely save money if this was continued"

"We've seen that many staff are working adequately, if not better, from home. Do we need to support this as an ongoing way of working and reduce heating bills, cleaning costs for some buildings?"

"Working from home has proved a cost-effective strategy, so councils could become more efficient by closing down office space."

With the majority of staff working from home now you could reduce your "office sites"

Difficult to find further Efficiencies

4.17 There were some concerns that it may be difficult for the Council to continue to make further efficiencies, on top of those already made in recent years.

"You can only become so efficient before services are affected and I would rather we stop just short of being as efficient as we can this go too far to the detriment of these services"

"I find it difficult to think that there are many more areas for efficiency, given the loss of staff and increased automation in my time with the council."

Use of external contractors

4.18 There was a perception by some that the Council used contractors and there were calls to use them less.

"Better training for council employed staff and investment far outweighs the cost of constantly hiring sub-par contractors."

"Stop using outside contractors directly employ local people to promote growth for local economy and the welfare of local people and families"

Joint Working

4.19 Partnership working was suggested as a way of saving money.

"Bring common council services together in one team / location"

"Share the HR department with other neighbouring local authorities"

Senior Managers

4.20 As in previous budget consultations, some of the respondents felt that savings could be made with the Council staff structure.

"Reduce the number of Managers at high levels within RCT and get more resources on the shop floor level"

"Reduce expenditures on directorate and senior management"

Council Reserves

4.21   Respondents were provided with the following statement and asked if they thought that the Council should continue with such a strategy in terms of the Council Reserves.

> Reserves play an important part of the overall financial management of the Council. The Council's General Reserve balances at 31st March 2019 amounted to £10.498M and following an approved in-year allocation of £1.5M to support the Council's recovery work from Storm Dennis coupled with an in-year overspend of £0.289M, the remaining balance at 31st March 2020 is £8.709M.
>
> The level of general reserves will be kept under on-going review and replenished going forward, as appropriate, and taking into account the financial risks the Council faces.

The majority of respondents (82.6%) think the Council should continue with this strategy.

Any Other Comments

4.22   Respondents were given the opportunity to provide any other comments on the budget and the following is a selection of feedback received. There were a large number of comments related to Council reserves, a key factor considered to be the "Any Other Comments" question directly following the "Council Reserves" question.

Reserves

4.23   There was a general feeling amongst respondents that having reserves was an important part of the budget strategy.

"Reserves are important, cannot cut reserves"

"Reserves are vital and must be maintained for extraordinary events."

"There should always be an emergency fund for when things out of control happen in RCT. and enough to support individuals as well as businesses and companies."

4.24   However, the majority of respondents suggested that some of the reserves should be used to improve services and to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. There was a feeling that now was the time to use them and they could be replenished in subsequent years.

"Although, in principal, I agree with a reserve, this seems a lot of money set aside, just in case! I think at least half of this reserve would be better spent on improving services and pay."

"Reserves are good however there may be a need to defer recovering next year given added pressures following covid."

"It is great to see that there is money left behind even after all this turmoil that we've been through this year. Perhaps this has shown that not as much needs to be left behind and more could be used and we'd still have enough as a safety net"

4.25 A number of other comments related to efficiencies and working from home, these being covered in other sections of this report.

4.26 There were also a number of comments that praised the Council for the work it has done and is continuing to do to deal with the impact of the pandemic and flooding, earlier in the year. Comments included;

"Good luck. It's a thankless task but you lot are bloody good at this. Keep going!"

"Good work in tough times"

"I think all council staff are under such immense pressure, and they are all doing an excellent job giving these trying times."

"I think the council are doing an amazing job in very difficult financial circumstances and have been for a number of years."

"It must be incredibly hard to balance the books after 10 years of austerity, but the council has done extremely well this year faced with the floods and Covid-19"

The Council's Priorities

4.27 The Council focuses on five key areas to maximise resources and deliver improved services.

- **Digitalisation** – taking the opportunity new technology provides to deliver better services for residents, visitors, businesses and how we operate internally;
- **Commercialisation** – utilising our scale and expertise to deliver services for other organisations and customers and thereby generate income;
- **Early Intervention and Prevention** – investing in preventative services to deliver savings in the medium term;

- **Independence** – reshaping our services for vulnerable residents to ensure that we promote independence and deliver first class care services; and
- **Efficient and Effective Organisation** – challenging our ongoing service delivery and driving out further efficiencies through for example, a reduction in administration costs and reducing property costs linked to new ways of working, for example through agile working.

4.28 Respondents were asked if they thought the Council should focus on these key areas. The majority of respondents agreed with all of the key areas, with the highest response being for Early Intervention and Prevention (89.6%).

Table 4: Key areas of focus

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Digitalisation	80.3	10.3	9.4
Commercialisation	70.6	15.4	14.0
Early Intervention and Prevention	89.6	6.3	4.1
Independence	82.0	10.0	8.0
Efficient and Effective Organisation	88.0	6.6	5.4

Council Investment Opportunities

4.29 Respondents were asked if they thought the Council should invest in a number of service areas. The majority of respondents agreed that the Council should invest in all of the areas suggested, with the most support for investment in Flood Alleviation (93.8%).

Table 5: Areas of Investment

Analysis % Respondents	Yes	No	Don't Know
21st Century Schools (new and remodelled schools)	69.7	19.5	10.7
Roads &Transport (repairs and resurfacing and major projects such as A4119 dualling, Llanharan bypass and Mountain Ash Cross Valley link)	74.5	17.3	8.2
Recycling & the Environment (improving recycling performance)	78.2	15.1	6.7
Town Centres & Regeneration (improving the town centres e.g., Llys Cadwyn, Pontypridd)	76.4	16.3	7.3
Empty Properties (Grant to bring properties back into use)	73.2	18.6	8.1
Leisure (improvements to facilities)	57.6	30.8	11.7
Play Areas and Parks (upgrading the equipment and standard)	66.6	23.3	10.1

Extra Care/Community Hubs (focus on independence for older people)	83.8	10.5	5.7
Employment (apprenticeships and graduate placements)	77.0	15.5	7.5
Events/Arts (investment in attractions and theatres)	52.5	32.3	15.3
Flood Alleviation (investing in flood prevention schemes)	93.8	4.2	2.0

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding
.

4.30   The following are a selection of comments received on the Council's investment areas. A number of responses noted that all of the services were important.

"All areas are important to different people in our communities - play areas for young families, apprenticeships for young people to gain skills for employment".

"All entirely commendable areas in which to invest."

"All of these things are essential to provide our residents with a good and balanced environment to live in".

Roads &Transport

"I think there needs to be investment in roads especially where they are found to be in a less than acceptable state and where potholes exist"

"Investment in repairs to side streets should also be given priority."

"roads pavements, making our areas clean, safe and lovely places to live in"

Recycling & the Environment

4.31   Positive responses were fed back in respect of the Council's recycling service.   In addition, under the environment theme a number of responses were received in relation to climate change issues.

Climate Change

"If the Council is serious in its consideration of the climate and biodiversity emergencies then these must be addressed in the budget…..Revenue funds are necessary if environmental management is to help store carbon, reduce flooding, engage communities, raise awareness, manage our urban green infrastructure etc….."

"Climate change and decarbonisation should be a common theme through each initiative."

"In addition to Flood alleviation, other areas of climate change mitigation and minimisation should be a priority."

"Invest in climate change measures both physical and operational to meet councils Net Zero goals"

Sustainable Transport

4.32   Linked to the climate change comments was feedback on the need to invest in more sustainable transport and to build on the behavioural change brought about by the pandemic.

"The council needs to invest in healthier, sustainable and more affordable alternatives. This should be reworking our towns to prioritise walking and cycling…..The council should be investing in more frequent and comfortable bus journeys and boosting public services to help people get around safely and planning and designing our communities to be accessible to those without a car….."

"During lockdown, there were fewer cars on the road, the sky was clearer, birdsong was louder, and things seemed calmer. Air pollution plummeted. Many people got more comfortable with the idea of walking, cycling, and using new forms of travel."

Town Centres & Regeneration

"All important particularly town centre regeneration"

"Invest in the towns (education/infrastructure/health) especially Aberdare (10th biggest in Wales). Please make them the focal point in a post-Covid environment."

"Improve parking facilities in areas such as Treorchy, Tonypandy & Porth so that people have easy access to these town centres."

Play Areas and Parks

"Different families have different needs - therefore it is important that all areas are considered when investing. e.g., Investment in parks and play areas gives families areas to visit - healthier lifestyle."

"I think RCT have invested well in Play Areas and Parks, Leisure and Events so I feel there is no need for further investment this year"

"More investment needs to be made in parks to provide better facilities and activities to people in order to help with their mental health and wellbeing."

Employment (apprenticeships and graduate placements)

"Apprenticeship programme is excellent for the young people, giving them opportunities to train and hopefully gain local employment"

"The apprenticeship programme is great too"

Flood Alleviation (investing in flood prevention schemes)

"A priority should be to build adequate protection against flooding for all residents."

"Flood defences improvements should come from central government"

"More investment in flood defences is welcomed"

Corporate Plan

4.33　In March 2020, the Council agreed a new Corporate Plan 'Making a Difference' 2020 – 2024 that set the overall direction for the Council over the four-year period. The Corporate Plan is a key component of the Council's budgetary and business planning process, and it recognises that Rhondda Cynon Taf Council and the wider public sector continue to face significant financial challenges.

> *The Council's vision is: "To be the best place in Wales to live, work and play, where people and businesses are independent, healthy, and prosperous".*
>
> *The Council's purpose is: "To provide strong community leadership and create the environment for people and businesses to be independent, healthy and prosperous".*

89.4% of respondents agreed with the Vision and purpose.

4.34　The Council is focused on the following three priorities that have also been adopted as its Well-being objectives in line with the Well-Being of Future Generations Act:

- Ensuring People: are independent, healthy and successful.
- Creating Places: where people are proud to live, work and play; and
- Enabling Prosperity: creating the opportunity for people and businesses to: be innovative; be entrepreneurial; and fulfil their potential and prosper.

92.8% of respondents agreed with these priorities.

5.   VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

5.1   This section outlines the views collected at the virtual consultation discussions that took place with the Older Person's Advisory Group (OPAG) and Disability Forum. 3 Public Zoom meetings were also arranged at different times of the day, but they did not go ahead due to low take up. The online meetings replaced our usual approach to face to face resident engagement.

5.2   A video was used to present the background to the Council's budget and then a set of discussion prompts were used to aid discussion and questions were answered by Finance Officers present.

5.3   The engagement session with members of the OPAG was held on the 25th November 2020.

5.4   A varied range of feedback was provided by OPAG members on the level of Council Tax. Some of the members thought that 2.85% was reasonable;

   "On hearing on what others are doing that is quite reasonable"

   "Very reasonable expected it to be higher"

   Some OPAG members suggested that it should be higher than 2.85%:

   "Think it should be more, maybe 4%, don't know what's going to happen in the next year, but the reality is we are stuck with the current situation and the council is going to need all the money it can get hold of"

   However, not all agreed and some OPAG members thought 4% was too high, due to more people out of work as a result of the current pandemic.

   "Always managed and done a good job at under 3% in the past"

   Those that didn't agree with 4% said they were happy with the 2.85% increase.

5.5   Everyone at the OPAG meeting agreed that the school's budget should be increased.

5.6   With regard to Fees and Charges levels, there were concerns that the Council would not be generating income from facilities such as car parks and cinema entrance fees, due to the impact of the pandemic and the increase in online shopping.

   There was support for an increase in enforcement fees.

"Enforcement, need money increase for fly tipping to discourage people."

"the fixed penalty notice for environmental crimes should be increased."

5.7   OPAG as a group agreed that all Council Service Priorities listed should be protected and prioritised. There was a short discussion around the apprenticeship scheme, the take up and the demand for it and general support

5.8   All agreed that the Efficiency Savings strategy outlined was a good one and it was fed back that home working should provide opportunity to support the continued delivery of more efficient services.

5.9   With regard to Council reserves, there was support to utilise reserves to aid the recovery from the pandemic.

"COVID was a good reason to use some of the reserves"

There was also support to keep the reserves for the future.

"Maybe take some out of the reserves to help now, but don't take it all, as we need back up."

"We need reserves for saving for emergencies."

5.10   When the Council's priority of Digitilisation was discussed, it was noted that not all members of the Older Person's Forums are online and have chosen to not do so. Forum Members fed back that some of the information the Council provides does not always include a telephone number, just a website address.

5.11   A general comment was made by a member of the OPAG at the virtual meeting.

"Pleasantly surprised how well the Council is doing with the money after the year we have had."

Disability Forum

5.12   Letters and emails were sent to the Disability Forum, inviting them to attend a virtual meeting on the 1st December 2020. Within the letters, we included Easy Read copies of our Budget survey and gave Forum Members the option of speaking to a Consultation officer over the telephone.

5.13   We received 9 surveys in the post and 3 members of the forum attended our virtual meeting.

5.14   Comments from the surveys included:

Schools budget

"I think schools should get more money because what they do for the children."

"As displayed by the Covid-19, the importance of education in schools, hence if more money can be found, it should."

Fees and charges

"I think charges should stay the same."

"I think disabled people should not pay for car parking."

"Meals on wheels should be lowered, so should adult Social services and homes services. Why hit the vulnerable and the older people?!!!"

Council Tax

"This should be paid by people who can afford it."

"We need to make sure of value for money, going to be tight for the near future, spend wisely."

Reserves

"Money should be held in reserves to be used to keep things going."

"Reserves are just that in case as example it is there to act straight away before trying to obtain funding of WAG or UK Government depending on the emergency."

5.15   The virtual meeting was run by the Consultation Team with help from the Equalities Team and a presentation by the Service Director - Finance and Improvement Services. A short video on the Council's budget and challenges faced was also shown during the meeting and a number of questions then posed to Forum Members.

5.16   Service Priorities

"protect parks, youth provision, highways and access - considering accessible buildings near train stations, regeneration for that reason also, adult social care priorities for the council"

"A lot of members are concerned about accessibility of highways / pavements and streets, the members feel that it's important to know how much of the Council's budget goes towards that."

"culture services only servicing a certain demographic currently…."

5.17   Council Tax. What is your preferred level of Council Tax increase?

"nobody wants Council Tax to increase, so need to convince us but understand the problem. But it has been very hard this year with COVID"

"You have to remember that this year has been really tough on people and they have a lot less money than they had before… people are going to have to claw back next year."

5.18   Efficiencies.

"Estates are going to be a major player when we get out of Covid."

5.19   Reserves

"Given climate change reserves are important"

5.20   Council Priorities

"More opportunities for more people will improve people's mental health."

"We need to be more accessible in all areas of RCT."

6. VIRTUAL YOUNG PERSONS ENGAGEMENT

6.1 In previous years the Consultation Team have held face to face sessions with secondary schools and young people across the Borough. Due to the restrictions as a result of the pandemic, this year virtual sessions were arranged in place of the on-site / face-to-face visits.

6.2 We engaged with 2 secondary school groups and 3 college groups. We held 5 virtual sessions and spoke to pupils from St. John Baptist Church In Wales High School, Aberdare Community School, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and Y Pant Secondary School. We also engaged with learners from Coleg Y Cymoedd in Aberdare, Rhondda and Treforest campuses.

6.3 The sessions were attended by 2 members of the Consultation Team along with a finance officer. During the sessions the young people were shown a video outlining the budget challenges followed by a short presentation with discussion prompts and questions from the full budget consultation.

6.4 The questions were centred around Council Tax levels, Fees and Charges, Council Service Priorities, Efficiencies and the School budget. In total we engaged with 48 young people and a summary of their responses will follow in this section. The sessions were well supported by the teachers and college staff and all young people engaged well with the format.

Council Tax

6.5 We asked the groups 'Should council Tax be increased by 2.85% to keep services at current levels or should there be a smaller increase risking losing some services?'

6.6 Of the 48 young people we spoke to, 27 were in favour of increasing Council Tax by 2.85% although they were only in favour of this after seeking confirmation that core services would not be affected. The remaining 21 young people fed back that Council Tax should have a lower increase or even remain at the current level, and was based on the view that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on employment locally and therefore people may struggle to afford an increase. There was also the belief that services such as grass cutting had been stopped during the initial lockdown and therefore were not deemed to be essential to justify any increase.

Fees and Charges

6.7 We asked the young people whether they felt there should be changes to a range of Council fees and charges, providing the options for fees

and charges to be increased or decreased / frozen. The feedback provided is noted in Table 6.

Table 6: Changes to fees and charges

Service	Increase	Decrease / Freeze	Total
Leisure Centre Pay & Play	0	43	43
Sports Club Playing Fees	6	27	33
Car Parking Charges	14	26	40
Cinema entrance fee	7	41	48
Fines (Dropping litter / dog mess etc.)	47	0	47
Lido Adult entrance fee	46	2	48

(**Note:** Not all participants provided a response for each area).

6.8   Some comments for each area included:

Leisure Centre Pay & Play:

"The fee should be kept as low as possible so that it encourages more people to go."

"Decrease fees for the short term and then increase."

"Freeze – access to gyms is quite important for people at the moment with everyone being kept inside."

"It's not going to motivate them to join (if fees are raised) and people aren't exercising as it is."

Sports Club Playing Fees:

"Fees for sports clubs are high enough at the moment and you might put people off participating if they are raised."

"There should be a slight increase – the benefit of going to meet your friends outweighs the additional cost."

"I agree with freezing. I think these facilities should still be accessible to people and due to the impacts of covid, increasing the price would make it less accessible."

"The costs should depend on the size of the teams. For small teams if the cost goes up it could stop them playing but for bigger teams, they would be able to afford the increase."

Car Parking Charges:

"Private car parks are overpriced. Council Car Parks should be frozen."

"A slight increase in the short term, would help to encourage more people to take public transport helping the environment whilst also making more money for the Council."

"Cheaper car parking ensures that people park in the correct areas." There should be student discount for parking."

"If car parks are too expensive in Town Centres it might put people off using the shops there."

<u>Cinema Entrance Fee:</u>

"No increase – it's already expensive for young people. If you increase it too much they may not go."

"Prices should be frozen or lowered. People deserve to go and make use of it."

<u>Fines:</u>

"Definitely increase these."

"Definitely higher to deter people. It should be advertised more that you can report people who do this all the time as I didn't know this."

"Dog fouling – we need more enforcement."

"Refresh the signage to remind people of the fines."

"I don't think the consequences are really enforced."

<u>Lido Adult entrance fee:</u>

"Increase as it's only £2."

"Increase – as long as it's kept reasonable so people can afford it then it's ok."

"It's already quite cheap so this could be increased. People would pay more in other areas so this wouldn't be a bad thing to increase."

"I'd say the Lido fees right now should be closer to £5."

Council Service Priorities

6.9   We asked all groups to identify which Council services were important to them. We provided a list of service areas and discussions were held

around which ones the groups felt should be a priority and the levels of funding provided.

6.10   Apprenticeship schemes were identified as a consistent trend amongst all groups as an area of high importance and where funding is most needed. The groups all felt these schemes played an important part for young people and that sufficient funding would help to see the schemes expanded and widened to cover different service areas. It was identified in one group that 7 young people would have liked the opportunity to apply for an apprenticeship instead of University but held back because they felt there was not a wide variety of apprenticeships available for all academic levels.

Some comments included:

"Apprenticeships are important. More money would give us more of a chance. There's so many people applying for 1 job these days that we don't get a chance."

"We had around 40 young people interested in apprenticeships, but the group felt they were too low level. They felt that they would have wasted 2 years on A levels to go back to a GCSE level."

6.11   Another priority identified across the groups was funding for housing grants / schemes. The ability to be able to access suitable housing options was seen as important by the groups and one that they felt could benefit from increased funding. Feedback included:

"It allows those who may otherwise struggle to be able to afford their own homes which in turn will benefit local economies."

"It's important to help people be able to afford to live somewhere."

"Improving availability could allow many young adults to pursue the career they wanted but may not have had access to otherwise."

6.12   Schools and Education were also a priority by some of the groups. The importance of being able to access a good education with sufficient resources was the main reason for this being a priority for young people. Feedback included:

"Schools are a hub both for children and adults alike. It is the focal point for after school clubs as well as being a place of education therefore its budget should definitely be protected or increased."

"Schools experience is an extremely influential part of a child's life and new resources are always needed due to the rapid advancements in technology and teaching methods."

6.13   Public Health was also identified by some of the young people as being a priority service area. Given the impacts of the global pandemic in 2020

young people felt that this required adequate funding to be able to manage the ongoing impacts of Covid-19. Feedback included:

"Public health is also very important, and its money should be increased because in the current climate we really need to put as much of our resources into finding the best way to manage Covid in our communities."

"It is extremely important to fund these services especially during these times when there is an existing strain on public health services."

6.14 Music services emerged as a strong priority amongst one group with the agreement that the service would benefit from more funding. Members of the group discussed their own personal experience of using the Music service and how they had noticed a decrease in the availability since joining secondary school. Feedback from this group included:

"If there's more support, more people might want to go down that route. I enjoyed it in Primary School."

"Not enough funding for this. There should be a wider range of music in Secondary School. There are more options in Primary school than Secondary."

"This should be protected – it provides children with skills they may use in the future."

6.15 The remaining service areas also received individual comments throughout the sessions which have been noted below:

Library and Adult Learning
"Most learning courses for adults can be done online."

"Although these are important, a lot of the resources used, and more are accessible on the internet."

"The advertising from the Council isn't great, people like my grandparents wouldn't know about them."

Waste
"I have chosen waste and recycling services to be protected because they are the services that do not get enough credit. If they were given extra money it would mean that people would be more aware of the necessary work they do, which we don't really notice."

Adult Social Care
"Adult social care – similarly to Children's social care, there is a high demand for adult social care due to the ageing population."

Roads and Transport Services

"It is important to provide efficient and accessible transport links as a tremendous amount of the local economy is affected by the viability of transport."

Children's Social Care
"There is an increasing demand for children's social services and it is in great need of funding."

Leisure Centres
"Vital part of the community and encourages good health and well – being."

Parks and Play Areas
"During these times parks may not be in need of a lot of funding as it is unlikely that they are being used often due to the social distancing measures."

Cultural, tourism and heritage services
"Greatly benefits the economy."

Regeneration and supporting people out of work
"Has the potential to significantly decrease unemployment rates."

Efficiencies

6.16   We discussed the requirement for the Council to aim to be as efficient as possible and asked for the groups' views on this approach and if they had any ideas of ways in which the Council could become more efficient. The groups all felt that looking for ways to become more efficient was a useful task and the changes to the way in which Council offices are run, particularly during the pandemic, were discussed as a way of embracing working digitally and remotely. Some questions were raised on the process of identifying efficiencies amongst service areas and whether there could be a benefit to having an outside perspective.

6.17   Feedback included:

"Being efficient is probably more important now because everyone is being forced to work so differently. I think more tech work would be a great way to improve efficiency."

"Would it be better to employ specific people to look at efficiencies in the Council from the outside through a fresh pair of eyes?"

"Highways/Road repairs can be unnecessary. They take a long time and seem a waste of money."

"Digitalisation – working from home frees up building costs, utility costs. There could be a building review and centralisation of services."

"Working from home is efficient but is it as efficient as being in the office as people are missing bouncing ideas off each other."

Schools Budget

6.18   When asked whether the groups agreed with the Council's approach to protect and prioritise the Schools budget, 33 young people agreed with this. Of those that agreed, there was agreement that education is an important service area for young people and is something that should continue to receive adequate funding. The groups acknowledged that the increased budget could be used to provide better buildings and school equipment to give learners the best experience possible.

6.19   Feedback included:

"Increasing or even freezing the budget gives children the best education they can have."

"Important to keep up to date with technology and IT facilities."
"I think schools should be a priority."

"Even though it has been maintained, we feel it should have been increased."