

ANGUS COUNCIL – 17 DECEMBER 2020

**DEVELOPING THE COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT
ON OUR PLANS & BUDGETS**

**JOINT REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC POLICY, TRANSFORMATION
AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM AND THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE**

ABSTRACT

This report seeks Council approval of proposals for developing the communication and consultation processes for the Council's plans and budgets over the medium-term including options for the 2021/22 planning and budgeting cycle. The report identifies options which include using some online consultation tools with a view to enabling the Council to undertake more detailed consultation and engagement in future years subject to member agreement.

1. RECOMMENDATION

1.1 It is recommended that the Council:

(i) note the proposals for developing the Council's approach to consultation and engagement on its plans and budgets over the medium term as set out in this report;

(ii) note the 3 options which have been identified for the 2021/22 planning and budgeting cycle as set out in Section 4 including the timescales and what those options would mean for finalising the plans and budgets in late February 2021;

(iii) note that although challenging due to the timescales involved officers consider Option 1 to be the best approach on the basis this would allow views to be expressed initially to inform 2021/22 plans and budgets as well as more generally to inform future priorities and plans;

(iv) determine which of the 3 options in Section 4 the Council should adopt;

(v) approve, if Option 1 in Section 4 is adopted, the draft intended content for the Simulator and Social Pinpoint in Appendices A and B respectively noting this may be subject to some minor final edits and corrections as part of uploading the content into the online tools;

OR

(vi) approve, if Option 2 in Section 4 is adopted, the draft intended content for Social Pinpoint in Appendix B noting this may be subject to some minor final edits and corrections as part of uploading the content into the online tool;

OR

(vii) note that if Option 3 in Section 4 is adopted the content for the Simulator and Social Pinpoint would be the subject of a further report prior to the summer recess in June 2021;

(viii) note that if Option 1 or 2 is adopted the intention is to offer by exception a paper version to anyone wishing to participate but who is unable to use the online tools; and

(ix) note the intention to increase the scope and scale of public consultation and engagement in future years set out in Section 3 of the report which will be subject to further reports and separate approval processes at the appropriate time.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Council has over the years used a number of methods to share information about its plans and budgets and consult with the public on aspects of these. A large scale consultation on budget choices was undertaken in financial year 2013/14 but nothing on that scale has been undertaken since partly because the Council's approach to identifying savings options has changed (through our Change Programme) and also because the financial challenges have been so large that choices on budget options have been relatively limited.
- 2.2 In recent years communication and engagement on the Council's Plans and Budgets has focused mainly on sharing information, key messaging and trying to help the public and council staff understand some of the challenges being faced with some two-way interactions using social media. This has helped explain the context and reasons for some of the decisions the Council has had to make and the areas it has sought to prioritise. There is however a need to do more.
- 2.3 Public consultation and engagement on the Council's budget and the setting of its priorities (where we ask people for their views and reflect on this in finalising our plans and budgets) is a known gap in our existing arrangements and one which officers believe needs to be addressed. This is especially relevant with so many challenges in the here and now and on the horizon.
- 2.4 In addition, there is perhaps a unique opportunity to connect with the public in the wake of the pandemic on where the Council should focus its limited resources in future recognising the financial challenges for the Council are now even bigger than they were before. We know for example how successful our community engagement and partnership working was at the height of the pandemic and through the full lockdown period. We know also that better outcomes can be achieved through engagement and that the realities of financial pressures mean we have to do less as a Council and help communities do more for themselves.
- 2.5 Although no large scale consultations on our plans and budgets have been undertaken recently the Council is well placed to do this based on investments made in a number of tools as follows:
- We have Social Pinpoint which is an online tool for consultation and engagement useful for geographically based issues (such as Sustrans)
 - We are now using Gov Delivery to provide eNewsletters on issues relating to COVID-19, Education and now Waste and Recycling. We hope to add Communities and Budget information to the group. As this is email based, evidence is that this reaches an older demographic than social media typically does. It is also more directive and results in greater 'call to action' response levels.
 - We have procured an online budget simulator which is already widely used by many other Councils
 - Our social media presence is strong and has proven once again to be the 'go-to' channel for citizens looking for real time information, particularly in evolving/emerging situations such as the changes to services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with key posts reaching in excess of 33,000 people. Our twitter feed recently hit 1 million impressions.

3. DEVELOPING OUR APPROACH OVER THE MEDIUM TERM

- 3.1 There are challenges to the scope of what can be done this year due to time constraints and other demands on officer time caused by the pandemic so this report sets out options for members to consider in regard to the 2021/22 planning and budgeting cycle. We are also constrained in getting into a consultation based on specific budget options for 2021/22 because those options are still emerging, budget choices will again be very limited and we aren't in a position to project with complete confidence the scale of the budget gap that needs to be addressed.
- 3.2 The intention therefore is to start a process of information sharing and consultation with the public, which would build up (become wider and deeper rather than be a one-off) over time as part of a medium-term engagement strategy on Council plans, priorities and budgets. Over the medium term the objectives would be to:-
- Develop and populate an online budget simulator tool so it can cover budget choices/options. Use of a simulator is expected to become part of our normal cycle of activity but perhaps every 2 years rather than every year.
 - Engage more comprehensively with communities to help shape the next iterations of our priorities and Council Plan; and
 - Develop the next phase of participatory budgeting (PB) during 2021/22 and ultimately move to mainstreaming of PB from 2022/23 onwards

4. OPTIONS FOR THE 2021/22 PLANNING AND BUDGETING CYCLE

- 4.1 Officers have identified a number of options for the 2021/22 planning and budgeting cycle which recognise the need to develop our approach but also the time constraints involved. Consultation to inform 2021/22 Plans and Budgets would ideally have taken place over the October – December 2020 period but that has not been possible due to the significant additional workloads caused by the pandemic. There does however remain an opportunity to undertake a high level consultation ahead of the finalisation of 2021/22 plans and budgets.
- 4.2 The options identified are:-

Option 1 – Three Strand Approach undertaken during January 2021, outputs fed into the finalisation of plans and budgets in late February 2021

Option 2 – Two Strand Approach undertaken during January 2021, focus on information sharing and answering questions, no consultation using Simulator

Option 3 – Information Sharing Only in lead up to budget setting in late February 2021 with Three Strand Approach developed further for launch in Autumn 2021

Option 1 - Details

- 4.3 The three strand approach under option 1 would be as follows:-

Strand 1) We use the Delib Simulator tool to test it out and get feedback from the public on some of our existing Council Plan priorities.

The simulator would be set up so that participants have a number of points (scoring) that they need to allocate to different priorities and options. However, there will not be enough points available to deliver all priorities in full, thereby requiring choices/compromises to be made. This will help citizens understand at a very high level some of the challenges the Council faces in balancing competing demands and will also give the Council a sense of the relative importance of our existing priorities to citizens.

The suggested content for the Simulator is set out in Appendix A of this report so members can consider the merits of this option and approach. The simulator would include some brief background on the purpose of the consultation including links to more information and the further information on Social Pinpoint (see Strand 2 below). Participants would be able to allocate between zero and five points against 3 options under the 4 headings in our Council Plan of Economy, People, Place and Our Council, i.e. there will be 12 options overall to allocate points against. There is no right or wrong answer to how points are allocated – if this option were adopted we would be testing the relative importance of the 12 options to the Angus public.

It is important to emphasise that because of time constraints and because its not been used before by Angus Council the content and options for the Simulator are deliberately pitched only at a high level for this year. The Simulator is intended to be used as an opportunity to gauge in relatively simple terms the public's view on our existing priorities. If the Simulator is well received it can be used to carry out more detailed consultation with more sophisticated options in future.

Strand 2) We use the Social Pinpoint tool to share key information about the Council's plans, budgets and challenges to enable an online conversation to take place with the public.

The content of Social Pinpoint would be drawn from the summary financial information in our 2020/21 Finance and Change Plan. The intention would be to use videos and graphics to convey what can be quite complex issues and to hear what the public's questions and comments are via a discussion board.

The suggested content for Social Pinpoint information is set out in Appendix B of this report. Social Pinpoint would be used mainly to share information about the Council's Plans and Budgets and to respond to comments and questions raised by the public. The Social Pinpoint tool would be used to complement the Simulator tool but could be used on its own (see option 2 below).

Strand 3) We offer a phone-in/online questions and answer session where the public can contact us to ask questions about our existing plans and budgets and hopefully have them answered there and then, or if not answers can be posted later. A video of the session could also be posted on the Council's You Tube channel.

This would provide another means of engagement and would help promote the engagement tools in Strands 1 and 2 above. Further detailed planning for this is required but holding it during January 2021 is the intention under options 1 and 2.

- 4.4 Under Option 1 the Simulator and Social Pinpoint tools would go live in early January 2021 and run for around 4 weeks, concluding no later than 1 February 2021 in order that the results from the Simulator can be quickly collated and taken into account as plans and budgets are finalised. This timing will mean the results are available just after the Council receives details of its 2021/22 Government Grant settlement and allows all of the information to be considered together in the lead up to the 2021/22 plans and budgets being set. A summary of the output from the consultation work would be captured formally in a report to the Council's budget setting meeting in late February 2021 with more detailed analysis being used to inform future consultation and engagement work.
- 4.5 Option 1 would give members a sense of some of the key issues being raised by citizens and how the public view our existing priorities, but it would not provide information on specific budget choices. Members would of course wish to reflect on the output from the consultation in finalising their plans and budgets, but this will be just one of many pieces of information to inform those considerations and there is no intention for the output from the work to determine specific decisions in the budget for

2021/22. It is important to note that the intention of this report is for this to be the start of a process of consultation and engagement not a one-off exercise which ends when plans and budgets are set for 2021/22.

- 4.6 Option 1 is not without some challenges. The time period available so that results from using the simulator can be reviewed and fed into the finalisation of plans and budgets in late February 2021 although manageable is very tight and the public may consider this an insufficient amount of time to take part. Members may also have concerns about having limited time to reflect on the results as they make key decisions on 2021/22 plans and budgets. A further consultation from the Council may not be well received by the public at a time when other consultations are underway (former Lochside Leisure Centre) or have recently completed (car parking). Given these challenges members may wish to consider whether Option 2 or Option 3 below are a more appropriate approach.

Option 2 - Details

- 4.7 The two strand approach under option 2 would be the same as Option 1 but without using the Simulator tool (Strand 1). Under this option the Council would not be consulting on its priorities but would instead be sharing information, offering a discussion board and responding to questions raised. The focus under this option is on information sharing and there would be no specific results to feed into the Council's finalisation of plans and budgets in late February 2021 under this option.

- 4.8 Option 2 would be a step forward compared to the approach adopted in previous years but would stop short of including a consultation element for the 2021/22 planning and budgeting cycle. This option would deny the public the opportunity to provide feedback on the Council's existing priorities that Option 1 would achieve.

Option 3 - Details

- 4.9 This option would mean adopting a similar approach to the preparation of plans and budgets adopted in previous years for the 2021/22 cycle which would focus on information sharing and communication about the Council's plans and budgets. Neither the Simulator nor Social Pinpoint would be used and no online/phone in aspect would be offered. This option would however mean adopting the three strand approach proposed in Option 1 as part of the 2022/23 planning and budgeting cycle. If this option is adopted by Council the content for the Simulator and Social Pinpoint would need to be updated but the principles and intention would remain the same as in Option 1. A further report seeking sign off to the approach and content would be brought forward prior to the summer recess in June 2021.

Summary of Options

- 4.10 A brief summary of the main pros and cons of the 3 options is below for members to consider in reaching a decision.

Option	Pros	Cons
1	Includes consultation using Simulator to inform 2021/22 plans and budgets A good step forward compared to current practice 3 strand approach is comprehensive	Tight timescale to participate, evaluate and reflect on results Would be another consultation from the Council in close proximity to 2 others
2	A step forward compared to current practice and a new way of engaging with the public which	Would mean no consultation element using Simulator so no opportunity for public to influence

	<p>can bring benefits</p> <p>Opportunity for the public to use Social Pinpoint which would hopefully encourage use again in future</p>	<p>decision making around Council priorities and spend at this time</p>
3	<p>Minimises additional work for officers at a time when capacity is under strain due to COVID response work</p> <p>Enables officers to plan ahead with certainty for 2022/23 potentially allowing a more sophisticated approach to be adopted</p>	<p>Effectively means continuing with existing approaches for 2021/22 and adopting Option 1 for 2022/23 planning and budgeting cycle</p> <p>Expectations from best value guidance regarding engaging with communities would not be addressed for 2021/22</p>

- 4.11 Although it has a number of challenges officers consider Option 1 to be workable and preferable as an approach given this would begin to address gaps in existing arrangements. If members are concerned about the drawbacks with Option 1, Option 2 would allow some progress for 2021/22 whereas Option 3 would effectively defer a change in approach to the 2022/23 planning and budgeting cycle.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The COVID-19 pandemic creates specific challenges to consulting with the public this year which means public meetings won't be possible. If members choose Option 1 or Option 2 as the approach for 2021/22 this would mean an online only approach being adopted. Recognising that not all citizens would be able to participate using online consultation methods if members wish to adopt Option 1 or Option 2 it is proposed to offer by exception a paper version to anyone wishing to participate but who is unable to use the online tools. This would most likely be facilitated via libraries (to be confirmed) and supported through the Council's ACCESSline. An equalities impact assessment is appended to this report.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There will be officer time to run a consultation process but this will be met by prioritising existing staff resources and using existing budgets given the importance of this work. There is a cost of £5,000 for a one year subscription to use the simulator software and this can be met from the 2020/21 Provision for Additional Burdens revenue budget. The Simulator can be used multiple times for different purposes during the year long subscription so there would be no additional cost to delaying its use to the 2022/23 cycle under Option 3.

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