

ANGUS COUNCIL – 4 NOVEMBER 2021

CONSULTATION ON OUR PLANS & BUDGETS – FEEDBACK AND NEXT STEPS

JOINT REPORT BY VIVIEN SMITH, DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC POLICY, TRANSFORMATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM AND IAN LORIMER, DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

ABSTRACT

This report sets out the feedback from the consultation process on the Council's plans and budgets as agreed at Angus Council on 24 June 2021 (report 215/21 refers) and considers next steps and lessons learned arising from this work.

**1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

1.1 It is recommended that the Council:

- a) note the three-strand approach to consultation and engagement which has been undertaken as part of the 2022/23 planning and budgeting cycle as agreed at Angus Council on 24 June 2021, (report 215/21);
- b) note the feedback from the consultation process as set out in Appendix 1 to this report;
- c) agree that the results of the consultation be given due regard as the Council develops its plans and budgets for financial year 2022/23 and ultimately approves those updated plans and budgets in February 2022.
- d) notes the lessons learned for future consultation exercises as set out in Section 6;

**2. ALIGNMENT TO THE COUNCIL PLAN**

2.1 This report contributes as a whole to the Council Plan. The results of the consultation should be given due regard when the Council Plan is next updated in February 2022.

**3. BACKGROUND**

3.1 In June 2021 the Council agreed to consult on its plans and budgets as part of the 2022/23 planning and budgeting cycle. A three strand approach to this consultation was agreed as set out below:-

**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 was set up so that participants had a set number of points that they could allocate to different priorities and options. However, there were not enough points available to deliver all priorities in full, thereby requiring choices/compromises to be made. This reflects at a very high level the challenges the Council faces in balancing competing demands. It also gave participants the opportunity of indicating to the Council the relative importance of our existing priorities to citizens.

The simulator included 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 were 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 and a 5<sup>th</sup> heading related to potential increases in Council Tax and Fees and Charges.

**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 was drawn from the summary financial information in our 2021/22 Finance and Change Plan. Videos and graphics through social media channels were also used to convey what can be quite complex issues and to hear what the public's questions and comments are via a discussion board. Participants had the opportunity to leave comments or ask questions (see Appendix 1).

**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 strand involved hosting a Teams meeting with participants who responded to an invite to take part. The session was not recorded but the feedback from the session is included in Appendix 1.

#### **4. FEEDBACK / OUTCOMES**

- 4.1 The three-strand approach used was intended to give members a sense of some of the key issues being raised by citizens and how the public view our existing priorities. However, it was never intended to represent a poll on specific budget choices. The feedback from the different strands has been collated in Appendix 1 for members' information and consideration along with information about respondent numbers, and equalities information.
- 4.2 In relation to Strand 1 – the Budget Simulator. The results show that on average, tackling child poverty and investment in the Angus Health and Social Care Partnership were areas of highest priority while community empowerment / participatory budget and preserving non-digital methods of communication were on average the lowest priorities for those participants/respondents.
- 4.3 The Budget Simulator enabled users to increase the points they had available if they opted to increase Council Tax and / or Fees and Charges as additional options but these were not well supported options.
- 4.4 Feedback through the Social Pinpoint discussion board (strand 2) generated 22 responses with answers and recognition provided to the questions and points raised. These covered a variety of issues, including some specific asks around particular areas of service. See Appendix 1.
- 4.5 The online question and answer session (strand 3) attracted only a small number of participants but was still a very worthwhile part of the process and offered a rich and interesting dialogue. This is something officers believe should be revisited on future occasions.
- 4.6 Overall the consultation and 3 strand approach are considered a success as an initial programme. Although the numbers taking part represent a very small proportion of the total Angus population, the overall reach of the consultation, through social media and other channels, has been significant. Further, the number of participants is comparable with other general and high level consultations and as such are considered reasonable as a baseline.

#### **5. NEXT STEPS – USING THE CONSULTATION RESULTS**

- 5.1 As members are aware, it is important when undertaking public consultation to have regard to the results of that consultation. Therefore, it is recommended that the consultation feedback be given due regard as the Council develops its plans and budgets for financial year 2022/23 and ultimately approves those updated plans and budgets in February 2022. As the Council's budget strategy and updated Council Plan are developed over the next 4-5 months, the Council should reflect on the consultation results in making key decisions. Members will of course wish to reflect on the output from the consultation along with other information and constraints to inform its decisions on priorities, plans and budgets.

## **6. LESSONS LEARNED / FUTURE CONSULTATIONS**

- 6.1 As set out in Report 215/21, the consultation undertaken this year was intended to be the start of an ongoing process of consultation and engagement and not a one-off exercise which ends when plans and budgets are set for 2022/23. It is also important to emphasise that because it has not been used before by Angus Council, the content and options for the Simulator were deliberately pitched only at a high level for this year. The Simulator appears to have worked well in that participants have successfully engaged with the platform. It is intended that it is used to carry out more detailed consultation with more sophisticated options in future.
- 6.2 In terms of lessons learned the following points would need to be taken into account in future consultations:-
- a. Levels of participation were low overall and there was no engagement via the non-digital methods of participation offered. This suggests an opportunity exists to improve participation, particularly among under-represented groups, and greater involvement with third sector and community groups is advised in future years.
  - b. Participant engagement with the Delib Simulator showed that the platform worked well, with very few issues identified.
  - c. There would be benefit in offering more opportunities for direct discussions with Angus citizens using the question and answer format (Strand 3) – this type of engagement would help us understand more directly some of the key issues for citizens, while providing a platform for senior officers to explain what can be quite complex aspects of the Council's business and finances.
  - d. The officer time required to prepare and facilitate the consultation is significant and needs to be carefully planned and scheduled alongside other work and commitments.
  - e. The response to the demographic questions was good, with nearly all participants providing at least some detailed demographic information which is presented in Appendix 1. However, it must be noted that the demographics of participants broadly reflects the profiles of the social media feeds used. Again, this underlines the need to try to improve take up through non-digital forms of engagement in future consultations.
  - f. There is no evidence of 'vote rigging' or block voting. Both Social Pinpoint and Delib Simulator provide IP addresses which have been checked for multiple entries. Social Pinpoint responses have two examples where two comments have come from a single IP address but this is actively encouraged by the platform. There is no repetition of IP addresses in the responses to Simulator.
- 6.3 The intention would be to undertake further consultation on the Council's plans and budgets into future years but proposals in this regard will be a matter for the new Council to consider after the May 2022 local government elections.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 There are no additional financial implications for the Council arising from the recommendations in this report. The costs of the consultation have been contained within existing budgets. It is intended to renew the Council's subscription to the Delib Simulator. This £5,000 cost will be met from existing 2021/22 budgets.

## **8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESMENT**

- 8.1 An equality impact assessment is not required.

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