

## **Budget Engagement**

Engagement with residents and others took place between 27 November 2018 and 6 January 2019. This was via on-line questionnaires published on the North Tyneside Council website and face to face sessions with the Residents Panel and other key stakeholder groups.

In face to face discussions attendees were provided with information, about the Council's Budget overall. They were asked to give their view on Cabinet's initial Budget proposals, the options for Council Tax levels and for suggestions on how to close the Budget gap.

Through the face to face sessions, residents and others have been able to understand the context of the initial Budget proposals and have had the opportunity to put forward ideas for saving and raising money.

Residents welcomed the approach taken in the face to face engagement discussions and felt it was greatly improved on last year. Residents attended 3 sessions which ensured that they were given information to help them look at the proposals and several opportunities to ask questions. In particular they appreciated meeting with the Elected Mayor, Cabinet Members and Senior Leadership Team, being able to discuss the proposals in more detail and receive answers to questions.

This year the online engagement was separated into individual surveys for each of the Budget proposals, asking whether they met the needs of the borough. The online engagement also had a survey which asked people to choose a level of Council Tax increase and give reasons for their choice; it then calculated the Budget gap and asked for suggestions on how the Council could obtain a balanced Budget.

Residents were also offered to access information and complete the surveys in hard copy through Customer First Centres.

134 people actively took part in the engagement process, either in the face to face sessions or online. Overall the feedback was positive with support for all the Budget proposals and also the following key points;

- Managing money - it was suggested that the Council continues to ensure value for money and quality of service delivery for its services delivered via a contract
- Best use of assets – by generating more income and rationalising accommodation for example turning empty shops especially on the High Streets into social housing to generate more income and reduce homelessness, using Quadrant at weekends to hold conferences, increasing charges and fines, charging for some services that are currently free, attracting sponsorship/funding to meet or contribute towards existing costs and further rationalising the Council's buildings e.g. sell surplus property, rent out rooms, share accommodation with other organisations and move to cheaper accommodation

- Voluntary work - volunteering was an area that people felt could be developed more including considering the skills of those retiring
- Tackling litter - it was suggested that if people understood how much the Council spent on picking up litter there could be a campaign to reduce this. Running totals could show money saved, enforcement levels and the increase in recycling
- Promoting the Borough - residents were keen on promoting North Tyneside regarding its great services, good value and great places to visit. Also there was support to encourage the employment of local people as much as possible increasing training and opportunities for all. It was felt that these would make North Tyneside more attractive and help the Council increase its income
- Introducing more efficient working practices and processes - getting things right first time, reducing printing costs by increasing the use of electronic communication and reducing the number of issues of the Our North Tyneside Magazine
- Reducing staffing costs, including those associated with senior management

Feedback on the level of Council Tax question was mixed. In the face to face sessions, residents supported a 2.99% rise in order to address the financial challenges and maintain the level of services but this was on the basis that people on low incomes continue to receive Council Tax Support. On the on-line survey the majority (64 out of 97) supported a 0.99% rise on the basis of affordability with no real detail on proposals to meet the additional financial gap that this would create.

Overall the response to the engagement process has been positive, with residents feeling that they now have a clearer understanding of the very challenging financial situation facing the Council.