

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET

19 JANUARY 2021

REPORT OF THE INTERIM CHIEF OFFICER - FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND CHANGE

OUTCOME OF THE CONSULTATION 'FIT FOR THE FUTURE'

1 Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet of the outcome of the 'Fit for the Future' 2020 consultation which asked citizens to share their views on how they think the council should shape its services going forward, as part of its 'Restart, Recover and Renew' strategy, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The intention was to understand how the public felt that the council could look like and how it could deliver sustainable and effective services for the next 5 to 10 years.

2 Connections to corporate well-being objectives / other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:

1. **Supporting a successful sustainable economy** – taking steps to make the county borough a great place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focussed on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions for all people in the county borough.
2. **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
3. **Smarter use of resources** – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

- 2.2 The 'Fit for the Future' 2020 consultation sought to obtain views on the future direction of the council following the Covid-19 pandemic. The allocation of financial resources determines the council's ability to meet its well-being objectives. As such the report links to all the well-being objectives.

3 Background

- 3.1 Following a number of years of reductions in funding from central government, and continued financial pressures, along with addressing post-Covid-19 recovery, all councils across the country are continuing to change the way they work and the services they provide so that they can manage with less. Bridgend County Borough

Council (BCBC) has made reductions from its budget of £22 million over the last four years (2017-18 to 2020-21), with an expectation of significant further reductions required over the next four years.

- 3.2 A public consultation exercise was undertaken over an eight week period from 19 October 2020 to 13 December 2020. Respondents were asked to share their views on a range of areas including:
- Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic;
 - Business and the economy;
 - Health and wellbeing;
 - Customer access to Civic Offices;
 - Digitalisation;
 - Council Tax levels;
 - The future.
- 3.3 Budget consultation exercises have been undertaken annually since 2013-14. This 'Fit for the Future' 2020 consultation exercise has built on the knowledge gained from the previous consultations and further developed the consultation to include new ways for people to participate and engage with the council, as well as adapting to the challenges around social distancing that the pandemic has created. A wide variety of methods of communication were used including surveys, social media, a number of online engagement sessions, online FAQ sessions as well as videos, radio adverts and media releases. Due to the impact of Covid-19 and the inability to engage with residents face to face in the community, the council wanted to make sure that as many people as possible could get involved in the consultation and ensured that accessible versions of the survey were available – large print, easy-read and youth, as well as standard. An advert was also placed in the Glamorgan Gazette notifying non-domestic rates payers of the consultation, and inviting them to participate, as required by Section 65 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.
- 3.4 In order to gather views of young people, the consultation team attended the Bridgend Youth Council meeting on 24 November 2020. The Youth Council took part in discussions around some of the key questions within the consultation and were encouraged to complete the full consultation online. 11 young people engaged in the session. In addition, in order to encourage participation of young people in secondary schools and Bridgend College, the consultation team wrote to all Governing Bodies and headteachers as well as the Principal of Bridgend College to promote the consultation amongst their learners as well as school staff and parents/carers.
- 3.5 The budget consultation was live between 19 October 2020 and 13 December 2020. The surveys were available on the council's website and paper copies were sent directly to residents upon request.
- 3.6 The consultation aimed to reach the following key stakeholders: general public/residents, Citizens' Panel members, elected members, BCBC employees, Bridgend businesses, town and community councils, school governors, Bridgend Community Cohesion and Equality Forum (BCCEF) members, local interest/community groups, Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations

(BAVO), Bridgend College, partners, secondary schools (including head teachers) and media outlets.

- 3.7 The consultation was supported by a full communications and promotional plan. The main activities included three media releases, a BCBC budget explainer video, various press release/editorials in the media, a social media/web campaign, radio campaign, direct marketing to key target audiences e.g. businesses, schools, youth council and internal communications for staff and elected members.
- 3.8 As well as the explainer video, four additional videos were created to promote the consultation on social media due to the impact of the pandemic. These videos featured the Chief Executive, Leader, Deputy Leader and Youth Mayor.
- 3.9 In addition to general social media content, four polls were created on Twitter which generated 122 votes to key questions within the budget consultation survey.
- 3.10 The Fit for the Future consultation was included in eight weekly govDelivery bulletins and one stand-alone bulletin during the live period. govDelivery is a new communications tool that has been implemented by the authority in 2020 to send messages directly to residents' email inboxes in the language of their choice. There are currently 37,360 English language subscribers and 220 Welsh language subscribers from Bridgend County Borough to the weekly Covid-19 update emails. Overall, the govDelivery emails generated 1,839 link clicks through to the budget consultation webpage.

4 Current situation / proposal

- 4.1 The attached consultation report (**Appendix A**) sets out in detail the views expressed by those who participated.
- 4.2 Overall, the council has received 1,831 interactions from a combination of survey completions, engagement at various meetings, social media engagement and via the authority's Citizens' Panel. Due to the impact of Covid-19 this is a decrease of 5,606 (75%) on the 7,437 interactions from last year. A total of 1,421 survey responses were received, which is a decrease of 58% on last year's survey completions.
- 4.3 The response rate, by method of interaction is set out below:

Interactions	Number
Survey completions	1,421
Events/meetings/workshops	203
Emails	3
Letters	1
Telephone calls	2
Social media comments	79
Social media polls	122
Total interactions	1,831

- 1,421 responses to the surveys were received in total.
- Overall 203 people attended the various online events and meetings.

- A total of 201 interactions were received via social media. This includes 79 social media comments and 121 social media poll votes.
- 6 comments were received by email, telephone and webpage feedback.

4.4 Headline figures and themes include:

4.4.1 Responding to the pandemic

- 45% of respondents stated that customer services had performed well or very well during the pandemic;
- 64% of respondents stated that communications had been performed well or very well during the pandemic;
- 47% of respondents stated that the support for vulnerable residents had been performed well or very well during the pandemic;
- 39% of respondents stated that the support for businesses had been performed well or very well during the pandemic;
- 50% of respondents stated that support for town centres had been performed well or very well during the pandemic;
- 70% of respondents stated that the support for communities had been performed well or very well during the pandemic;
- When asked what services they had missed during lockdown, respondents stated that the services that they had missed the most were community recycling centres, followed by gyms and/or swimming pools and then parks and playing fields;
- When asked which maintained services should be a priority for the future, respondents stated general waste and recycling collection services followed by street lighting including responding to street lighting faults and then domestic abuse support;
- 58% of respondents stated that council staff working from home should be adopted as an approach for the future.

4.4.2 Business and the economy

- 87% of respondents stated that support for local businesses was important or very important;
- 73% of respondents stated that promotion of town centres as places to visit was important or very important;
- 73% of respondents stated that supporting the visitor economy activities and services in our tourist attraction areas was important or very important;
- 69% of respondents stated that sustainability of culture and leisure venues was important or very important;

- 79% of respondents stated that labour market opportunities were important or very important;
- 71% of respondents stated that business start-up was important or very important;
- When asked if respondents had any other ideas about how the council should support local businesses, respondents stated to reduce business rates and rents followed by the need to invest/regenerate the town centres and empty properties, encourage more shops, ensure cleanliness and reduce anti-social behaviour followed by better and free car parking.

4.4.3 Health and wellbeing

- When asked about which support services the council should focus on to help its most vulnerable residents as it recovers from the pandemic, 92% of respondents stated that support for older people was important or very important;
- 81% stated that ensuring those who are homeless are kept safe as lockdown restrictions ease was important or very important;
- 78% of respondents stated that food poverty – (for example should BCBC support and promote food banks and provide children eligible for free school meals with food parcels during school holidays) was important or very important;
- 77% of respondents stated that council tax support for residents who had difficulty paying their council tax as a direct result of the pandemic was important or very important;
- 86% of respondents stated that during the pandemic support from community organisations was either important or very important ;
- 68% of respondents stated that the council should protect funding for the third sector.

4.4.4 Customer access to Civic Offices

- 81% of respondents stated that they had not missed coming into Civic Offices while it has been closed;
- When asked how they have accessed services while Civic Offices has been closed respondents stated the website, followed by telephone and then email;
- 37% of respondents stated that they had accessed customer services while the council has been closed. Respondents stated that they had most commonly done this by telephone followed by email and then social media;
- The reasons most commonly stated for contacting customer services were recycling and waste, followed by council tax and then Covid-19 related advice;
- 41% of respondents did not think it should be a priority to reopen Civic Offices;

- 60% of respondents stated that when Civic Offices does reopen, the council should move to an appointment based system.

4.4.5 Digitalisation

- 59% of respondents stated that they had accessed services online. Of these 55% accessed services themselves whereas 4% had someone else to do this on their behalf;
- 59% of respondents stated that when Civic Offices does reopen, they will continue to access services online. A further 20% of respondents stated that they always preferred to access services online;
- When asked what would help you or someone you know access services online, 44% stated that they did not need any help accessing services online. This was followed by 15% who stated that they would find printable 'how to' guides useful and 14% who stated that they would like to have videos on the Bridgend council website. 12% of respondents stated that they would like access to community learning sessions and 11% stated that they would like appointments with a member of the customer services team to show them how to access services online;
- 76% of respondents stated that they had not signed up to govDelivery. When asked why not, the most common responses were that they were not aware of this service, followed by not needed/required/interested and then that they can find information independently through the internet, newspapers, social media, contacting the council etc.

4.4.6 Council tax levels

- When asked to select which statement best represents their views on setting the council tax for 2021-22 37% of respondents were prepared to increase council tax slightly to help protect the most important services where possible (4.5% increase), followed by 36% of respondents who stated that they would want to keep council tax levels the same, resulting in a reduction in the level of services provided, followed by 19% of respondents who were prepared to increase council tax more significantly to protect more services (6% increase) and then 8% of respondents who were prepared to pay as much as is needed to maintain all council services at existing levels (16% increase).

4.4.7 The future

- When asked what the council's long term priorities for the future should be respondents selected to make in-house efficiencies, followed by focussing on services that benefit everyone in the borough and then encouraging citizens to take more responsibility;
- When asked which three services the council should prioritise when recovering from the pandemic respondents most commonly chose care for older people, followed by schools and then recycling and waste;
- When asked what lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic should be considered when setting medium and long term funding priorities respondents most commonly stated

that the council should have an emergency fund, not waste money and make internal savings i.e. streamline services, staff and councillors pay/expenses and review external contracts. This was followed by the need to have a caring society, support social services and vulnerable people including children, older people, disabled people, care homes, carers and homelessness and then for the council to plan and prepare for the future and be adaptable;

- When asked if respondents had any further comments to make Bridgend County Borough fit for the future respondents most commonly stated that the council should make internal savings i.e. review number of staff and councillors, pay, expenses and review funded external partners followed by evaluating spending, providing value for money and provide more clarity on where money is spent, and then the council should be more prepared, improve transparency and make bold plans and decisions for the future.

5 Effect upon policy framework & procedure rules

5.1 There is no impact on the policy framework and procedure rules.

6 Equality Impact Assessment.

6.1 There are no equality implications arising from this report.

7 Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

7.1 The well-being goals identified in the Act were considered in the preparation of the Budget Consultation. Officers have considered the importance of balancing short-term needs in terms of meeting savings targets, while safeguarding the ability to meet longer-term objectives and maintain sustainable services, when proposals were devised. A full Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 assessment will be completed for the final Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) presented to Council in February 2021.

8 Financial implications

8.1 The consultation report seeks to inform and aid Cabinet Members' decisions on the future direction of the council and how to meet the challenging budget constraints in the years ahead.

9 Recommendation

9.1 Cabinet is recommended to note the outcome of the consultation with interested parties as detailed in the consultation report attached as Appendix A.

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Background Documents: None