

Policy and Sustainability Committee

10am, Tuesday, 12 March 2024

Budget engagement programme 2024-26

Executive/routine
Wards

All

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 Committee approves the launch of phase one of the budget engagement programme.

Dr Deborah Smart

Executive Director Corporate Services

Contact: David Porteous, Strategy Manager (Insight)

E-mail: david.porteous@edinburgh.gov.uk | Tel: 0131 529 7127

Budget engagement programme

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report outlines the proposal for public engagement on Council spending and priorities for 2024/25 and 2025/26.
- 2.2 This report seeks approval to begin phase one of the engagement, with future phases to be signed off through subsequent reports.

3. Background

- 3.1 The City of Edinburgh Council continues to face high and growing demand for services which exceeds the funding available to provide those services. The Council continues to work to deliver services more efficiently, and works with partner organisations to make best use of all the resources available in the city to tackle poverty and climate change, and make Edinburgh a good place to live.
- 3.2 It is important that the views and priorities of Edinburgh's diverse residents are included in the process of setting our annual budget, and planning for the future. The Council seeks to use different, innovative approaches to engage residents and encourage their participation.
- 3.3 The Council has previously engaged on its budget through a range of methods, but most recently engaged through:
 - 2020/21's "2021-24 Council Budget Engagement" intended to support decisions over a three-year period, with a particular focus on post-pandemic recovery. [All responses to the engagement](#) were published in a searchable format. Due to concerns about the pandemic, only online engagement took place for this engagement activity, however a joint survey with NHS Lothian was commissioned to explore experience of services during the pandemic, and this was performed by telephone. [A special report – Budget Insights 2020](#) was prepared for members which summarised all relevant sources of resident feedback;
 - 2018/19's "Planning for Change, Delivering Services 2019-23" engagement which supported the creation of the Business Plan and agreement of the 2019/20 budget. This engagement included use of an interactive budget planner

which allowed residents to adjust spending on individual services to balance the budget, showing the implications of spending decisions. This engagement also included a group discussion tool which allowed similar decisions to be made in a face-to-face setting.

3.4 In terms of how other Scottish local authorities engage on their budget:

- Glasgow City Council do not appear to have had any engagement activity for their budget in financial years 2022/23 or 2023/24;
- Aberdeen City Council launched a two-phase engagement in July 2023, the first phase includes broad engagement on priorities and the second deals with more detailed discussions about budget savings. Similar to Edinburgh's proposed approach, phase one involved both online and in-person, drop-in activity;
- Dundee City Council launched a budget engagement in September 2023 which closed in November 2023. This engagement appears to have been only through online survey.
- East, Mid- and West Lothian authorities have engaged on their budget within the last three years, but did not engage every year. Their engagement appears to have been only through online surveys.

4. Main report

4.1 This report proposes the following programme of engagement on budget priorities and related issues:

Phase one

4.2 Launching Tuesday, 2 April 2024 and closing Sunday 28 July 2024 – open for 16 weeks.

4.3 As part of phase one, the Council will communicate its overall budget position and strategic priorities to residents, setting out what the Council seeks to achieve for Edinburgh. This information will emphasise that future rounds of budget setting will seek to: change the way services are provided to create efficiencies that can be reinvested into meeting our priorities; save money overall through reducing operational costs; and may, in some cases, reduce the services provided. Within these constraints, residents can shape service delivery and influence long-term priorities.

4.4 Edinburgh residents will be encouraged to answer a small number of questions and provide voluntary demographics to allow us to track who is participating. As part of this response, residents will be able to geographically tag their comments to a specific location. Online, this will be through the Consultation Hub, and in-person this will be on a large map of the city.

4.5 The proposed questions are:

- What is going on in your neighbourhood that the Council should pay more attention to?
- Where do you think the Council has done well in the last year? This could be about anything the Council does, including a service, a project, or an individual employee.
- What ideas do you have for how the Council could save money?
- In order to save money, what service that you receive could the Council reduce or stop providing?

- 4.6 Throughout the engagement period, drop-in sessions will take place in libraries and community centres to encourage people to pin information to maps. Additional outreach, including targeted drop-in sessions, would be conducted over the engagement period to include groups who are not responding to the online survey.
- 4.7 Elected members will be provided with a list of dates and times when drop-ins will take place in their locality and asked to promote these through their own social media. Trade Union representatives will be briefed on the budget engagement approach and asked to encourage Council colleagues to participate.
- 4.8 Where residents raise issues that can be addressed through existing systems and services, these will be dealt with normally, but feedback on the issue will be recorded as part of the budget engagement.
- 4.9 Officers will explore how members casework system can also provide input to the budget engagement process.
- 4.10 Council colleagues will be invited to participate where they are also Edinburgh residents, and reflect on their experiences as residents. As in previous years, whether someone is a Council employee will be captured as part of the online survey. Non-residents will be able to take part in the phase one engagement, but will be recorded and reported separately.
- 4.11 Phase one engagement will be supported by a communications campaign, including in-street lamppost wraps and digital advertising.
- 4.12 Phase one will target a minimum of 1,500 responses, which is realistic based on previous budget engagement exercises.
- 4.13 Results from phase one will be reported to committee alongside more detailed proposals for phase two. Results will also be reported to Trade Unions. These results will show what priorities residents expressed, where we are seen as succeeding, public suggestions for change, and any problems resolved through normal systems. Results will be communicated internally to the Senior Leadership Team and Council Leadership Team to assist with the preparation of budget options.

Phase two

- 4.14 Launching in autumn 2024, subject to approval by Policy and Sustainability Committee.

- 4.15 A series of focus groups (estimated 14) will be conducted on subjects which were either raised by residents during phase one or are felt to be essential for discussion. The list of focus group subjects will form part of the phase two approval report.
- 4.16 In outline, the focus groups will address:
- Definition of the problem;
 - Definitions of success where 1) there are no limits on resources; and 2) resources are very constrained;
 - How residents should be kept informed of progress
- 4.17 Edinburgh residents who participated in phase one, and expressed an interest in taking part in further engagement, will be randomly selected for invitation to participate in the phase two focus groups. Depending on the subjects discussed, it may be necessary to invite additional residents or representatives to participate to ensure appropriate inclusion.
- 4.18 All participants will be offered a £40 flat fee remuneration to incentivise their participation and cover minor travel costs. Further participation funding will be available for residents who would incur additional expenses through their participation – for example: caring responsibilities; special travel; accompanied attendance. Residents selected for focus groups will be informed of this funding and encouraged to request it where it is needed.
- 4.19 Elected members will be invited to participate in similar workshops exclusively for them, addressing their experiences. The focus of those groups will be determined as part of the phase one reporting.
- 4.20 Officers from relevant services will be invited to participate in workshops that relate to their services and outputs of workshops will be shared directly with relevant services as they become available.
- 4.21 Results from phase two will be reported to committee alongside more detailed proposals for phase three.

Phase three

- 4.22 Launching in spring 2025, subject to approval by Policy and Sustainability Committee.
- 4.23 A series of workshops held with Council colleagues, Trade Union representatives, and representatives of partner organisations looking at problems and solutions identified from phase two, with a particular focus on complex issues that require multi-agency cooperation.
- 4.24 Outputs from phase two will be shared through online discussion forums, enabling all residents to see progress and actions, and to contribute to the detailed discussions happening as part of phase three.

- 4.25 Results from phase three will be reported to committee as part of a final engagement summary report along with any relevant action planning, next steps, and public communications.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 The Council will launch phase one of the budget engagement on Tuesday 2 April 2024.
- 5.2 Phase one results on approvals for phase two will be presented to committee in autumn 2024.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 It is estimated that this activity will require a budget of £58,600. This includes:
- £20,000 software costs for two years, for geospatial and online discussion forum
 - £20,000 communications costs to be split between phase one and phase three
 - £14,000 workshops with public, remuneration and additional participation costs
 - £4,000 workshops with partners
 - £600 printed materials
- 6.2 It is estimated that these costs would fall approximately 60% in 2024/25 and 40% in 2025/26. Financial impact will be updated as part of subsequent reports.

7. Equality and Poverty Impact

- 7.1 As the budget engagement does not relate to any developed plans, no impact assessment can be conducted. However, the work will seek to be inclusive with regard the Council's duties and to enhance equality through diverse and inclusive participation.

8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

None

9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

- 9.1 As a high-profile engagement activity, failure to effectively involve, act, and report back to residents could have negative impacts on the Council's reputation, resulting in worsening participation in all future consultation and engagement activity. This risk will be managed by the Policy & Insight Team.

10. Background reading

- 10.1 [Budget Insights 2020](#) – a report summarising resident views from a range of sources including the Capital Residents Survey 2020.
- 10.2 [2021-24 Budget Engagement Responses \(redacted\)](#) – the full responses from participants to the 2020 budget engagement activity with personal identifying information removed.

11. Appendices

None.