Rotherham
Metropolitan
Borough Council

BRIEFING	**TO:**	Overview and Scrutiny Management Board
	DATE:	29 January 2020
	LEAD OFFICER *(Full name, title and Directorate)*	Shokat Lal, Assistant Chief Executive, Assistant Chief Executive's Directorate
	TITLE:	Budget Consultation 2020-21

Background

1. In 2018, an extensive consultation exercise was carried out on the Council's budget proposals for 2019-21.

   This acknowledged that the scale and breadth of the proposals, with £30m of savings required, would impact the whole of Rotherham and its residents.

   As part of the consultation process in 2018, the public were informed about the necessity of working in a different way and the scale of the challenges faced due to ongoing government funding reductions, which helped to explain some of the difficult decisions faced by Rotherham and many other councils across the country.

   A total of 1,181 people participated in the 2018 consultation overall, through online engagement, face-to-face sessions, letters and emails.

   Given the scope of that consultation exercise and the fact that no new savings are now being proposed, the consultation on the 2020-21 budget has been conducted via on online form, with feedback invited via social media and a letter also sent to key partners seeking their views.
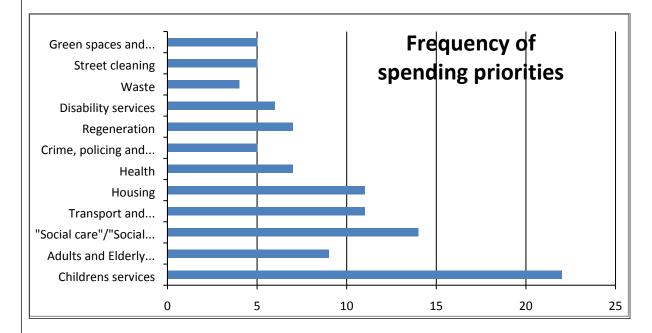
Online Consultation

2. The online consultation was open for one month from 13 December 2019 to 13 January and provided broad information on areas of income and expenditure, as well as a link to the February 2019 council budget report. The online form had 3 questions, which allowed for "free text" responses:

   - What would be your spending and saving priorities?
   - Do you have any concerns about the Council's current two-year budget?
   - Do you have any other thoughts on the budget?
   .
   A total of 54 people completed the online consultation. A summary of responses is set out below.

What would be your spending priorities?

All respondents answered question 1, which was concerned with spending and saving priorities; of these, all but 3 gave spending priorities. Many gave more than one priority:

Frequency of spending priorities

(Chart showing frequency of spending priorities, from top to bottom:)
- Green spaces and...: 5
- Street cleaning: 5
- Waste: 4
- Disability services: 6
- Regeneration: 7
- Crime, policing and...: 5
- Health: 7
- Housing: 11
- Transport and...: 11
- "Social care"/"Social...: 14
- Adults and Elderly...: 9
- Childrens services: 22

- Children are most frequently prioritised (22 mentions by respondents). Of these mentions, 12 focused on schools/education specifically, whereas child protection services and activities/leisure were mentioned twice each. All other mentions of children's services were non-specific.

- Social care and social services were also mentioned relatively frequently (14 mentions). This category represents respondents who referred to social care/services in general terms, without clarifying whether their priority was specifically children, adults/elderly people, disabled people, or another relevant issue.

Nationally, children's services have seen an unprecedented surge in demand in recent years, including a sustained increase in the number of young people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. Recent improvements in children's social services in Rotherham have further impacted on the demand for care locally. The Council is continuing to focus on building in-borough capacity for looked after children and increasing provision for children with learning difficulties and disabilities; as well as further developing interventions and services designed to reduce demand.

The Council is making significant changes to the way adult social care services are delivered to make care more personalised, responsive and cost effective. Alongside this, work continues with local health and care partners to improve integration and reduce demand.

- Of the 11 prioritisations of transport and highways, nine concerned road repairs and maintenance, with the other two mentioning cycling infrastructure and public transport improvement.

The Council's budget for 2020/21 will have a significant focus on providing capital investment for the improvement of local roads, building on the improvement work seen through the delivery of the Rotherham 2020 highways programme (£10m investment). The Council will continue to work with external partners to deliver cycling infrastructure

and public transport improvement schemes, utilising external capital grants available.

o The 11 prioritisations of housing were given in general terms, with four exceptions. Three respondents specifically mentioned homelessness as a priority, while an additional respondent specified that they prioritised improvements to housing.

The recently agreed housing revenue account 30-year business plan will ensure that the borough's 20,400 council homes are maintained effectively, and that new homes (that meet resident need) are built to replace those lost through the right to buy scheme. The plan includes a commitment of £130m for housing growth over five years, including approved schemes delivering 388 mixed tenure homes in the town centre and across the borough.

The housing general fund capital budget will continue to be used to address homelessness and deliver aids and adaptations to homes.

o Respondents who prioritised regeneration had mixed priorities: some focused on general development of Rotherham (e.g. one specific respondent focused on culture and arts), whereas others specified geographic areas (i.e. town centres or neighbourhoods) that require regeneration and investment.

The adopted town centre masterplan is being implemented, including the proposal for a vibrant leisure quarter at Forge Island, where flood defence work is underway. Rotherham's new university centre opened in 2018 and the fully refurbished transport Interchange was completed last year. Construction begins on three key town centre housing sites in February, providing a total of 171 new homes for sale, rent and shared ownership.

o Finally, two respondents mentioned libraries or community centres, with a specific suggestion that local libraries could be used to host "public living rooms". There was also a social media comment (see section 3. below) about transferring ownership and management of libraries to community groups.

As part of consultation on the draft library strategy for 2020-25, the Council's Cabinet has considered specific proposals to establish libraries as essential community and cultural hubs and to pilot a community-managed delivery model at Brinsworth library.

What would be your saving priorities?

Whilst all respondents answered the first part of the question, only 46% (25 respondents) included a savings priority. These priorities broke down as follows:

Category	Cutting salaries/ expenses	Organisational and corporate changes	Tackling inefficiency/ waste	More stringent collection of fees, fines and levies	Service changes	Other
Frequency	3	9	4	4	3	2

Two thirds of organisational and corporate changes suggested scaling back the Council's organisation to varying degrees. Alongside this were two mentions of providing services in-house, and one opposing suggestion of outsourcing IT services.

Of the four respondents who prioritised tackling waste and inefficiency, two were not specific as to where they identified wasteful or inefficient practices. The other two respondents identified contractors and (implied manual) "workers" as being wasteful by "not working".

Only three respondents suggested changing a specific service in order to make savings. These suggestions were:

- Fewer family social workers
- Cut back on "non-essential" environmental or cultural projects
- Cutting back on promotion of town centre masterplan

"Other" saving priorities, which could not be separated into any of the above themes, were as follows:

- Cut down on meetings
- Dispose of or utilise buildings that are shutdown

Do you have any concerns about the Council's current two-year budget?

33 respondents (61%) raised a concern in response to question 2; others either left no response or indicated that they had no concerns. Concerns were raised in the following categories:

Category	Specific service	Salaries/ expenses	Efficiency/waste	Budget clarity	Overall spending priorities	Other
Frequency	10	3	4	6	3	9

Respondents commenting on specific services generally felt that not enough money was allocated to the following: housing (two instances), regeneration (one instance), social care (three instances), waste (one instance) and transport. Conversely, there were two singular instances where respondents felt money in transport and administrative functions of the Council's budget were wasted.

Of the six respondents who felt that the budget did not have enough clarity, there were frequent questions asked regarding the Assistant Chief Executive's portfolio and the purpose of funding allocated there.

Concerns raised regarding overall spending priorities expressed general concern that money would not be used to the effective benefit of the borough and its people, but did not identify any particular issue with the budget.

Responses in the "other" category included the following themes:

- Non-specific concern for personal wellbeing and wellbeing of others
- Concerns over allocation of central government funds
- Opinions that spending does not appear noticeable
- Questions regarding competency of the Council
- Feelings that respondent priorities will not be reflected

Do you have any other thoughts on the budget?

Question 3 also received a significantly lower response rate than the first question, likely due to the breadth of the previous two questions in providing scope for residents to air their priorities.

Q3 Response rate	
Response	No response
25	29
46%	54%

"No response" includes indications given by respondents that they have no further thoughts/comments. Responses received were separated into the following categories:

Category	Queries	Service comments	Budget priorities	Organisational comments	Other
Frequency	3	4	12	4	7

Two of the three queries restated earlier comments on lack of clarity regarding the budget; an additional query was raised regarding whether the Council should charge more for services.

Of the four comments regarding services, two aired previously stated concerns/priorities (reflected in above analysis). Of the two new concerns, one related to the quality of street cleaning, with the other mentioning perceived increases in violence and the need for policing.

"Budget priorities" refers to occasions where individuals restated their key spending/savings priorities, as broken down in earlier questions.

In the four responses relating to organisational comments, two suggested organisational cutbacks for the Council. The following themes were also mentioned:
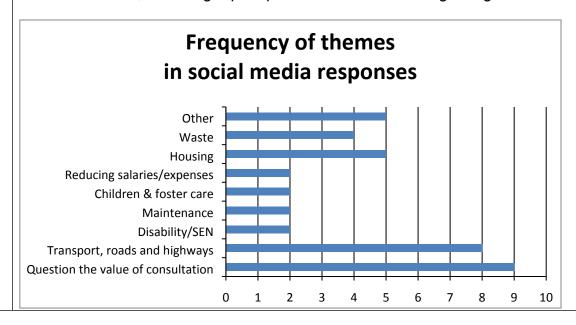- Increasing BME employment
- Improve cross-service working
- Bring services in-house

Comments in the "other" category were placed here due to not conforming to other discrete categories. Themes include:
- Greater consultation surrounding spending
- Longer term budgets to reflect long-term goals
- Recruit apprentices
- Increase stringency of arrears collection
- Seek greater government funding
- Better "distribution" of funds towards the most vulnerable

Social Media Engagement

3. Social media engagement returned 39 significant responses (i.e. responses broken down into theme, removing repeat posts from individuals regarding the same theme).

Frequency of themes in social media responses

Theme	Frequency
Other	5
Waste	4
Housing	5
Reducing salaries/expenses	2
Children & foster care	2
Maintenance	2
Disability/SEN	2
Transport, roads and highways	8
Question the value of consultation	9

The two most frequent themes reflect the opinion that the budget consultation itself is pointless (typically reflecting the opinion that the Council will pay little heed to responses) and the prioritisation of transport, roads and highways. The majority of comments under the latter theme were focused on improving road maintenance, while two focused on parking improvements.

Of the respondents commenting on housing, two individuals prioritised the reduction of homelessness and three commented on council housing. Of these latter three, two emphasised punitive measures against council housing tenants for antisocial behaviour/disturbances, while the final respondent suggested an end to council housing services altogether.

The three comments on waste suggested:
- Review of bin collection services
- Review of vehicles permitted in "dump sites", in order to curb fly tipping
- Stopping the Droppingwell landfill site

Respondents commenting on children and foster care suggested an end to all cuts to children's services, and an increase of special guardianship order pay in line with foster carers, respectively. Similarly, disability/special educational needs (SEN) comments suggested more support - in one case this was expressed in terms of physical support for disabled people, in the other case SEN was referred to specifically.

Maintenance here refers to maintenance of public spaces; these two respondents focused particularly on the aesthetics of parks and estates.

Other comments included the following themes:
- Mandatory community service for those who are unemployed
- Turning off lights in operational buildings (i.e. Riverside House)
- Questions regarding spending on flood defences
- Concern over "obesity" and provision of community facilities to encourage active lifestyles
- Suggestions to sell council services to other boroughs or provide maintenance services to private individuals at a fee
- Transfer ownership and management of libraries to community groups

Other responses

4.	**Letters and emails**

Four responses have been received to the letter sent to key partners. These were from Rotherham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Barnsley and Rotherham Chamber of Commerce, Voluntary Action Rotherham and Alexander Stafford, the new Member of Parliament for Rother Valley.

All four were generally supportive and noted the need to work collaboratively. Alexander Stafford noted the funding provided by government and suggested this should be used to tackle the "social care crisis". He also drew attention to specific issues in his Rother Valley constituency, including:
- Improving roads, transport links and bus routes between villages
- Tackling fly-tipping and litter
- Opposition to HS2

Recommendations	
5.	1. To note and consider the findings as part of the overall budget discussions.