

East Renfrewshire Council's Public Consultation on Budget Planning 2023- Summary Report

Introduction

During autumn 2022, East Renfrewshire Council carried out the largest public consultation exercise on budget planning to date with residents, employees and stakeholders. Feedback from the engagement exercise will inform the budget setting that will take place at a Council meeting on the 01 March 2023.

The Council began the consultation process through publishing a series of [budget briefings](#), outlining savings proposals to address forecasted funding shortfalls over the next three financial years.

The consultation process found that although education is a key area of concern, residents are also protective of environmental services, particularly around maintenance and cleanliness; community safety and frontline community services. What is also evident is a strong commitment to supporting our most vulnerable and disadvantaged residents and reducing inequalities.

This report describes the engagement methods used and key findings from the process.

The Engagement Process

The public consultation involved a number of stages and methods including;

- The publishing of three budget briefings on our website with social media posts directing people to the page. The briefings were also made available in print in all public buildings.
- Across our social media channels we posted 40 times with a reach of over 150,000. Links to the survey and briefs were clicked a total of 7,400 times.
- The use of a Budget Simulator, an educational, easy to use, tool that allows people to grapple with the challenges of balancing the Council budget
- A public online survey using the Citizens Space platform which had 1787 responses. Respondents could tick more than one category regarding their circumstances and 1606 selected resident, 345 Council employee and 85 local business.
- Paper copies of the online survey were also made available in all ten public libraries with stamped addressed envelopes of which there were 14 returns.
- Face-to-face budget panel engagement events with 49 attendees, held with five stakeholder groups over a series of nine sessions.
- A further survey with 332 responses through our Citizens Panel platform which is more demographically representative of the local population.
- The Council owned digital advertising screen in Neilston promoted the engagement process to drive people to the survey page, and there were a number of articles in print and online in the Barrhead news and Glasgow Live.

The methods used for the consultation allowed for a breadth of engagement. There was a dedicated **Budget Panel** event for secondary school pupils to engage young people, the panel events also attracted a number of older residents, particularly those using Culture and Leisure Services. It is worth noting that women predominated the public **online survey** results at 70%. The 35-44 year age category accounted for 46% of the total responses, which is 34% above that age group representation with East Renfrewshire demographic profile. Younger and older people were much less represented in the survey (1.7% of 16-24 year olds and 4.3% of people aged 65+). This could suggest that a high number of respondents were parents, invested in maintaining the high education standards of East Renfrewshire.

The **Citizens Panel survey** however had a higher proportion of older adults represented, with 37% of respondents aged over 65. This is 11% above East Renfrewshire population profile where older adults make up 26%. The gender split was slightly more even with men accounting for 44%. The Citizens Panel also demonstrated a reach to minority ethnic communities at 7% of respondents nearly 3% above the proportionate demographic population of East Renfrewshire.

The panel survey is more reflective of the demographic make-up of East Renfrewshire and overall there was a balance of views across key groups. However, some variation in views was evident across respondent age groups. This was most evident for Education services, with under 65s (and especially under 45s) being more likely than older respondents to wish to protect Education services. This was especially notable for staffing and management structures, funding for smaller class sizes in Maths and English, and janitorial, catering, cleaning. Respondents aged 65+ were more likely than others to wish to protect Environment services (especially winter maintenance). Overs 65's were also more likely to protect benefit payments and welfare support, and less likely to protect digital modernisation, subsidised sport/physical activity and town centre regeneration.

Consultation Methods

A number of methods were used for the budget engagement exercise ensuring a mix between face-to-face groups, written and online responses. Each engagement method had its strengths and limitations and appealed to different parts of our communities. The choice of methods recognised that communities are not homogenous and hold a rich tapestry of diverse views, preferences and opinions.

- **Online Public Survey**

The online public survey ran for 6 weeks. The survey was designed to allow respondents to rank spend areas by preference within, rather than across, departments, with open questions to highlight specific concerns or make suggestions to reduce impact. The departments covered were Education (including Culture and Leisure), Business Operations and Partnerships, Environment and Support Services. Health and Social Care Services have undertaken a separate consultation process in line with IJB requirements. The survey also included a question on areas that respondents would be willing to pay more for and the level of council tax increase that would be acceptable.

- **Citizens Panel Survey**

The Citizens Panel membership reflects the demographics of the population. A budget survey was sent to panel members which invited them to prioritise and rank savings in 28 areas across four departments. The survey ran for four weeks and there were 332 responses.

- **Budget Panel Events**

The Budget Panel events were externally facilitated and ran throughout the month of November at a number of locations including Barrhead High School, Giffnock Library and Woodfarm High School. Community Councils, Parents Councils, faith groups, community organisations, Tenants and Residents Associations, business representatives, and third sector partners, were invited to take part. There were five groups in total including Education (Parents and Pupils separately), Culture and Leisure and two groups which covered Environment, Business Operations and Partnerships and Support Services budgets.

Each group had two sessions with the first as a general information session followed by a second more detailed discussion two weeks later. They covered the current context in relation to budget setting and explored key themes, concerns, solutions and ideas from the participants which are summarised in the findings section below.

Key Responses and Findings

The following section outlines key themes and responses across the three main consultation and engagement methods.

Online public survey

Education:

For the section on Education, respondents were asked to rank spend areas which they **most want protected from savings** and the results are outlined below;

1. Devolved school budgets involving teachers
2. Devolved school budgets involving other staff groups and budgets
3. Centrally-based education staff and budgets

Key concerns highlighted in the survey were the impact of savings on vulnerable children and those with additional support needs, the reduction of pupil support and the cutting of school hours. A number of suggestions were given for reducing the impact of the cuts however the most prominent was to increase means testing and charging for school meals.

Culture and Leisure

Respondents were asked to **rate in order of importance** the key Culture and Leisure Services they would want to **protect**. These are ordered as follows;

1. Leisure Facilities
2. Libraries
3. Community Facilities
4. Non-fully funded sports and physical activities (e.g. Vitality. Live Action and GP referral, MacMillan Cancer Support and support for veterans and other vulnerable groups)

The key thematic concerns identified were the impacts of cutting library services and the overall impact on health and wellbeing that could come with the reduction in Culture and Leisure Services. Suggestions for mitigating these impacts included increasing of fees and not progressing the New Eastwood Leisure Centre.

Environment

Survey respondents **prioritised the following in terms of importance**;

1. Services for waste and parks operations
2. Roads budget
3. Services in housing and economic development
4. Services in planning and building standards
5. Management restructure
6. Office accommodation

The main thematic concerns identified in the open questions were a reduction in refuse collection and increased charging; and cuts in roads maintenance. Suggestions to mitigate the impacts of cuts included rationalisation of the Council estate and a review of management structures, along with, in contrast to the concerns raised, increased charges for refuse collection.

Business Operations and Partnerships

The following service areas were ranked in **order of importance**;

1. Community Safety
2. CLD (Youth Work & Community Group Support)
3. Customer Services
4. Revenues & Benefits
5. Support for local democratic functions
6. Management Restructure

The key concerns highlighted in relation to this area were the impacts on community safety and support to young people. It was deemed important to prioritise all aspects of community safety and to review management structures and pay before making cuts.

Support Services

For support services respondents were again asked to rank these in order of **importance for protecting**.

1. Services to support governance control, statutory reporting and digital infrastructure.
2. External digital contracts to support the Council's work

Concerns highlighted were the impact on other services should these support functions be reduced and a delay in digital modernisation that will ultimately lead to efficiencies. Suggestions included a review and rationalisation of contracts and increased collaboration and sharing of resources across Local Authorities.

Council tax and Charging for Services

Survey respondents ranked in order the Council services they would be **willing to pay more for**. The top five were:

1. Non-statutory registration fees for marriages and civil-partnerships
2. Increase school dinners by 20p
3. Increase administrative costs for the Duke of Edinburgh awards
4. Water Direct charges where water and sewage charges are taken directly from benefits for those failing to pay
5. Charges for collection of garden waste and offer additional Brown Bins
6. Charges for parking in Council Carparks and introduction of residential parking permits

An open question then asked if there were any other services not listed that residents were willing to pay more for. The top three suggestions were: Leisure Services (30 respondents), Car Parking (26) and school meals (24), though 28 respondents said they were not willing to pay for any additional services.

Respondents were also asked if they would be willing to pay a higher rate of council tax if it protected service cuts with 53% indicating they would pay higher council tax, 35% stating they would not want to pay more and 12% undecided. For those that agree to a higher rate, they were asked what level of increase they would be willing to pay; 3%,4%,5% or greater than 5%. 1 in 5 are willing to pay over 5% and 45% are willing to pay a 3% increase.

The thematic analysis of all the survey comments found that the **top five concerns** from residents were primarily around the impact of reducing Education budgets.

1. Education: The impact of education cuts of children with Additional Support Needs and vulnerable children and young people.
2. Education: A reduction in Pupil Support Assistants.
3. Education: A reduction in hours of the school week.
4. Education: a decrease in the quality of education.
5. Environment: reducing or charging for refuse collection

The top five suggestions for **reducing the impact of cuts** were;

1. A review of management pay and structures
2. Rationalising of the Council estate
3. Increased charges for refuse collection or changing of collection frequency
4. Increased means testing and charging of school meals
5. Increased fines

Citizens Panel

Panel respondents were presented with a number of service delivery areas across departments. They were asked to rate these areas in terms of how much they would like to protect them from budget savings from one to ten. When asked to consider the full range of services, respondents identified a wide range of **spending areas as priorities to be protected from savings**. The ten spending areas scoring as the highest priority are listed below;

1. Winter maintenance (Environment)
2. Roads and pavement maintenance and repairs (Environment)
3. Leisure centres (Culture & Leisure)
4. The frequency of waste collection and the Barrhead recycling site (Environment)
5. Janitorial, catering and cleaning services (Education)
6. Community safety (Business Operations & Partnerships)
7. Subsidised sports and physical activity (Culture & Leisure)
8. Community libraries (Culture & Leisure)
9. Benefit payments and welfare support (Business Operations & Partnerships)
10. Additional in-school support (Education)

In contrast to the Public Online Survey, respondents were most likely to prioritise Environment and Culture & Leisure spending areas over Education.

In terms of areas ranked as the **lowest priority**, starting from the lowest:

- Number of Council office buildings (Environment)
- Democratic services (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support)
- Support services to run the Council (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support)
- Planning and building standards services (Environment)
- Digital modernisation and transformation to make efficiencies (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support)

Maintenance of mixed tenure blocks of flats (Environment)
Centrally-based education staff (Education)
Town centre regeneration and other support for local business (Environment)
Customer-facing services for enquiries and complaints (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support)
Classroom supplies, trips, activities/clubs, outdoor education (Education)

In addition to the scoring of all service areas, respondents were also asked to identify up to **five spending areas they would like to protect from savings** as follows;

Roads and pavement maintenance and repairs (Environment) – 42% would like to protect this from savings.
The length of the pupil week for primary schools (Education) – 39%.
Benefit payments and welfare support (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support) – 36%.
Community safety (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support) – 35%.
Staffing and management structures in schools and early years (Education) – 32%
The frequency of waste collection and the Barrhead recycling site (Environment) – 32%

Respondent were also asked which five areas they think should be **least protected from savings**;

Number of Council office buildings (Environment) – 65% feel these should be least protected from savings.
Democratic services (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support) – 52%.
Digital modernisation and transformation to make efficiencies (Business Operations, & Partnerships & Support) – 46%.
Support services to run the Council (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support) – 40%.
Customer-facing services for enquiries and complaints (Business Operations & Partnerships & Support) – 37%.

Budget Panel Events

Overall panel summary:

The Budget Panels allowed for a more detailed discussion around the complexity of budget setting, which can be challenging to convey in online consultations. Participants were also given time to use the Budget Simulator tool and discuss the challenge of balancing budgets. However, although each

panel was given a detailed briefing on the budget planning process it did highlight some limits in public knowledge around financial process such as moving spend between capital and revenue budgets, and this should be considered in future communications and public briefings. There was some scepticism as to whether the Council has done everything it possible can to address “efficiency” savings that would not necessarily impact on service provision and individual outcomes, though some of the efficiency suggestions made would not necessarily have a financial impact on savings.

Across the Budget Panels, it was clear that participants were concerned about the potential scale of budget cuts, the extent to which these would impact on the services provided and the consequent impact on individuals, particularly the most vulnerable. The most commonly expressed areas of concern related to budget savings within Education. This was particularly so amongst Parent Council participants but was also reflected in the other groups. Within this, however, the desire to ensure that any savings that are made do not impact on the most disadvantaged pupils was particularly apparent.

There were also concerns raised about wider department cuts in areas including, for example, reductions in grass cutting which would mean the effective loss of football pitches and closure of existing community amenities and facilities.

A number of common underlying principles emerged from the various Budget Panels, as follows;

- The Council should prioritise maximising “efficiencies” before cutting services or increasing charges or costs; in particular, this would include demonstrating that the Council is adapting to new methods of working post-pandemic in terms of its premises requirements and use of digital technology.
- There should be protection of services that impact on the most vulnerable individuals and communities.
- Beyond this, seeking to ensure that budget savings or other changes do not add to existing disadvantage and inequality (whether economic or otherwise).
- Maintaining some level of service where possible, even if lessened in scope or different model of delivery is used, however don’t just cease delivery.
- Being more open to those budget savings where a reasonable mitigation can be put in place.
- Taking the more damaging savings as late in the 3-year budgetary period as practical, this reflecting a hope that the environment for Council finances over the period may not be as difficult as expected.

In general, there was a degree of greater openness to charging for services, increasing charges and increasing council tax at a higher level than previous years. However, for some panels an increase in council tax came with caveats that residents could specify how they would want this allocated e.g. Education services for some, community services for others. Overall communication around this area would need to outline limitations and challenges better.

Some panel participants highlighted concerns about Council job losses and the impact on those individuals and their families but also in relation to the wider economic impact that this would have on the area.

Departmental Panel summaries:

The following outlines a summary of key themes which emerged from each stakeholder panel group.

Education (Pupils)

- Pupils recognised that East Renfrewshire’s schools are of high quality and that this has a very positive impact on individuals, families and communities across the Council area; their concern was about the long-term impact of some of the potential savings options.
- They placed a high priority on protecting elements focused on those most in need. There is a strong sense of fairness and desire to protect support for pupils with Additional Support Needs.
- There was recognition that while some cuts had negative impacts, innovative digital approaches could mitigate impact (absence/class sizes/shared classes across schools).
- There were mixed views on reducing the length of the primary week especially around childcare impact on families so this may require more clarity.
- Though open to efficiency savings, pupils recognised the importance of understanding support roles and the impact of this, in particular for non-teaching staff roles.
- Some savings were seen as less damaging, more often in “non-core areas” e.g. campus police. Pupils had mixed views on importance of school librarians but some quite significant concerns over loss of Bilingual Support Workers and Multimedia Technicians.
- It was felt that higher than previously planned increases in council tax would be merited to reduce impact.

Education (Parents Council)

- Participants recognised the Council has wider budget challenges but placed a particularly high priority on protecting the Council’s investment in education, describing it as the “Jewel in the Crown” of East Renfrewshire and a significant motivator for people to wish to live in the area.
- A high priority was placed on education support for those most in need e.g. Pupil Support Assistants. Similarly to the pupils’ panel there was a strong sense of fairness, particularly protecting support for pupils with Additional Support Needs.
- There were significant concerns raised about reducing the length of the school week for primary with the impact this would have on attainment and childcare
- The Parents Council members raised a number of concerns around loss of school libraries and librarians.
- It was felt that while school offices could be more efficient, they have a wider value in terms of culture and care, and should be retained.

- Savings should focus on non-core areas out with the school day. Although reluctantly, it was agreed some cuts could be made to central improvement functions, Easter Schools & Outdoor Education with scope to charge those who can afford it.
- Higher than previously planned increases in council tax between 3-10% are merited though any increase should be ring-fenced specifically to education.

Culture and Leisure

- The panels highlighted some challenges in relation to the distinct situation within Culture and Leisure, with services delivered by the Trust but with direct and indirect Council support. There were discussions around where decision-making responsibility lies, especially, with respect to how any changes in service provision impacts on the Council's finances
- There was a measure of concern about the closure of individual libraries and community facilities. It was felt by panel members that ERCLT/ERC need to make better use of assets, with recognition that this may not generate significant savings.
- In general participants felt that services should be reduced rather than eradicated completely with an assessment of impact taken on any proposals, and for community facilities every option should be explored.
- There were mixed views on a temporary closure of Neilston Leisure Centre with a view that if closed it would be lost forever.
- Participants felt that a case-by-case approach needs to be taken with part-funded programmes (e.g. MacMillan Cancer Support, Veterans Support) but did have a concern that a cessation would impact on more vulnerable and disadvantaged people and offset any savings in terms of long-term implications.
- There was some perplexity from participants around committing to capital projects while major savings were being made, revealing a need for better communications around capital and revenue rules.
- Participants were open to higher than previously planned increases in council tax (though in most cases below the current rate of inflation). This view was expressed strongly by some who went as far as to suggest that increases at the lower end of the scale would be unacceptable to them.

Although the stakeholder groups for Environment, Business Operations and Partnerships and Support Services were combined, the following highlights concerns and suggestions raised at a departmental level.

Environment

- Participants commonly raised a concern around implications of reduced grass cutting on usage of certain facilities. In particular, loss of football pitches, which was considered to have a very significant negative social and health impact.
- There were also concerns highlighted around the closure of the Household Recycling Centre at Barrhead, with this impacting significantly on a more disadvantaged part of the Authority and could lead to consequences such as increased fly tipping.
- A reduction on town centre regeneration was viewed as having a negative effect on the local economy.

- The potential closure of Connor Road Supported Accommodation for Young people was highlighted due to its impact on a particularly vulnerable group.
- There was more acceptability around some service reductions including; extending waste collection cycle to 4 weekly, reductions in front-facing services such as Trading Standards, planning/building services, park operations and maintenance of mixed tenure/private sector housing blocks.
- The panel were open to reducing office accommodation, repairs budgets and management restructures while being mindful of unintended consequences.
- Increased income through garden waste, land leasing, parking charges and permits were considered to be “less bad” options given the scale of challenge, though consideration must be given to affordability.

Business Operations and Partnerships and Support Services

- Overall few concerns raised in these areas due to the prevalence of “back office” services, with a caveat that cuts should not be taken at levels to put compliance of statutory duties at risk.
- Where concerns were raised, they related to community safety and, especially, Community Learning and Development.
- There was an understanding that reductions in Customer First and Revenues & Benefits services would impact negatively on quality/standard of service but this was less of a concern than the loss of “visible” services.
- There was general acceptance of proposals to increase income for marriages and civil partnerships; charges for Duke of Edinburgh Awards scheme; and, taking contributions from water charge directly at source from Benefits- ‘Water Direct’.
- However Water Direct was an area where views were somewhat more divided with at least some participants feeling that this impacted particularly on people who were already struggling (though the explanation of “ability to pay” guidelines did give some reassurance in this respect).
- Participants were likely to suggest that the Council should seek to maximise revenues through higher than previously planned council tax increases though some concerns about the extent of this. There was concern that the public would be making a greater contribution whilst the levels of service would be reduced (in some cases visibly and significantly).

Other engagement responses

Just over 40 emails were received by Elected Members or via the East Renfrewshire Listening inbox and these were reviewed in addition to the thematic analysis carried out through the online survey. Education concerns predominated the emails followed by concerns around the closure of Culture and Leisure services and the impact this will have on health and wellbeing.

The key concerns identified in the emails were:

- A reduction of Pupil Support Assistants (PSA) and Additional Support needs in schools
- A reduction in the length of the primary school week
- The overall impact on any education cuts to the quality of learning, attainment targets and safety in schools.
- The impact of cutting school and community library provision.

Some suggestions were also put forward in emails including;

- Culture and Leisure- more partnership working with voluntary organisations to make best use of resources
- Prioritisation of education and health and social care services
- A review of capital spend for Leisure Centres and schools
- Introducing additional taxes e.g. car taxes.

The Council also received stakeholder feedback in emails from the Police and Community Councils. The police raised concerns about a reduction in community safety services and impact this would have on anti-social behaviour and dog fouling. Barrhead Community Council specifically expressed their concerns about the closure of the Barrhead Civic Amenity site and the impact on the local community, reduced collection of refuse and increasing fees for garden waste.

Conclusion

East Renfrewshire Council has worked hard to reach and hear many voices across the Authority through a number of methods. This has resulted in the largest public budget engagement exercise carried out in East Renfrewshire.

While the most prominent area of concern is Education, the consultation has found that residents also want to protect environmental services such as roads maintenance, grass cutting, recycling and refuse collection, community safety and support to young people in the community and ensure that customer services continue to be available for those that most need them. Though “back office” and support services are not always prioritised, there is recognition that reducing their functions would have an impact on the smooth running of the Council, support for departments and statutory obligations. Residents want East Renfrewshire to be an efficient, effective and well-run Council that delivers good public services, especially to our most vulnerable residents.

There is a recognition across the different consultation process that while council tax increases are not popular, there is an unprecedented acceptance in the current financial climate and given the rate of inflation the level of council tax increase will need to be higher than has been the case in recent years in order to protect services, but it is important this is communicated clearly.

Through all the consultation methods there is a strong commitment to protecting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable residents. Fairness, inclusivity and addressing inequalities remains important to many East Renfrewshire residents.