

## Budget Consultation 2023/24 – Questionnaire

Rhondda Cynon Taf Council is a large organisation and provides a wide range of services across Rhondda Cynon Taf, for example, collecting residents' recycling and wheelie bin / black bag waste, street cleansing, Homes for the Elderly, Leisure Centres, Theatres and providing funding for our schools and working in partnership with them to deliver high quality education for children and young people. Its total net revenue budget for 2022/23 is £566M and is funded in the main, 78% by Welsh Government with Council Tax raised accounting for 21% with the use of Council Reserves used alongside.

As a consequence of the ongoing impact of Brexit, the recovery from the pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, inflation and the cost of living crisis, the Council is projected to face a significant budget gap over the next 3 years. Based on the UK Government's spending plans (as set out in last year's Comprehensive Spending Review) the Council is projecting a budget gap of over £40 million for next financial year (2023/24) alone with this forecast to increase to over £80 million by financial year 2025/26.

Without a change of course by UK Government, there will be a need for this Council to reduce its annual recurring spending on Council services. The Council has reserves set aside and will use these as part of transitioning to a lower level of ongoing spend going forward in light of real terms Government cuts to funding provided. We cannot look to the local council tax payer alone to bridge the gap.

The Council has been able to invest in services and infrastructure over recent years, in line with a long-term plan, providing improvements across many areas including Schools, Town Centres, Roads, Bridges, Parks and Play Areas. The Council has also received positive feedback from residents on how it uses one-off funds to invest in services and it is an approach it is planning to continue to do to build on the strong foundations in place.

However, the situation now requires the Council to address forecasted budget shortfalls, continue its responsible approach in managing public money and prioritise how it uses the limited funding available to it.

Please take part in the survey below to share your views on the budget, and help us develop a Budget Strategy for 2023/24.

This survey asks for your views on the budget and will be used to develop a Budget Strategy for 2023/24.

### **How we use your personal information:**

The information you provide will only be used for the purposes of this consultation. To learn more about how your information is used, please visit the Council's Consultation Privacy Notice and Data Protection Pages.

## **Part 1 – The Council's Budget**

### **Schools Budget**

The Council has always aimed to maximise the resources we provide to schools especially when viewed against the level of funding which the Council has received in overall terms. Since 2013/14 the overall schools' budget has increased by over 28% as compared to the Council's overall budget increasing by 11%.

The total schools budget in Rhondda Cynon Taf is £174.9M for the 2022/23 financial year. The Council is committed to continue supporting our schools and is proposing an increase in their budget next year, which will fully cover increased pay costs (such as teacher and non-teaching staff pay awards) and non-pay inflation on day to day running costs of schools (e.g. energy, equipment, consumables).

**Q1. Do you think the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and cost pressures in our schools?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

### **Social Care Budget**

The Council recognises the essential role social services play in supporting the most vulnerable people, families and children in our communities and prioritises the allocation of additional resources to these areas as part of its annual budget setting processes, for example, employing more social workers and care workers; supporting residential care, home care and fostering services to cope with increasing demand; and investing in the social care workforce. Over 28% of the Council's budget supports Adult Social Services and Children's Social Services and, over the past three years, the budget for these areas has increased by £21M (around 15%).

**Q2. Do you think the Council should continue to prioritise social services as a key area for additional investment?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

## Fees and Charges

Each year the Council is faced with rising cost pressures and increased demand for services. Fees and Charges provide income which can help the Council to continue to provide important services. The Council raises approximately £23M a year from fees and charges for services such as leisure centres and swimming pools, bereavement services, adult education, car parking and theatre entry, and each year the level of these charges are reviewed.

When the Council prepares its budget it assumes an increase in fees, based on the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). The Consumer Price Index (CPI) measures the average change in prices over time that consumers pay for a pre-determined basket of goods and services such as transportation, food, and medical care. The latest rate of CPI (as at October 2022) is 11.1%.

We do not consider that an across the board increase of 11.1% for all our fees and charges is acceptable and would consider that fees and charges need to be reviewed individually having regard to service user impact. There are also services which we provide for which we do not charge and these could be reviewed.

### Q3. Do you think this is a reasonable approach?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

**If you have any comments about Fees and Charges, please add them here:**

## Service Levels

The Council reviews service levels and delivery arrangements on an on-going basis to ensure they continue to be required and provide value for money, for example, transforming service delivery through digital technology during the Covid-19 pandemic via increasing self-service and on-line options for customers to interact with the Council.

### **Q4. What service areas provided by the Council are important to you?**

### **Q5. Do you think the Council should consider changing the level of services for any of these and if so how?**

## Council Tax

As part of initial budget planning for 2023/24, the Council has modelled an increase in Council Tax of 2.0% (excluding Community Council and Police precepts), noting that the council tax modelling was prior to an updated forecasted budget gap of over £40M.

Council Tax has increased in Rhondda Cynon Taf by the lowest level across Wales for 3 of the past 4 years, and for 2022/23 it was 1.00%. compared to a Wales average increase of 2.20% (excluding Community Council and Police precepts).

### Q6 Do you think the Council should:

- ☐ Protect as many Council services as possible at their current level by applying a reasonable increase in Council Tax to contribute to closing the budget gap
- ☐ Reduce service levels to close any budget gap and keep any increase in Council Tax to a minimum

**If you have any comments about Council Tax, please add them here:**

### Q7 What would be your preferred level of Council Tax increase for next year?

*NOTE: every 1% increase in Council Tax would add approximately £0.20 per week to a "Band A" property in Rhondda Cynon Taf and £0.30 per week to a "Band D" property (excluding Community Council and Police precepts).*

- ☐ 0% to 3%
- ☐ Between 3% and 5%
- ☐ 5%+

## Efficiencies

Each year in balancing our budget and ensuring the effective use of resources, all our service managers are required to contribute toward a council-wide efficiency (savings) target. This means that all of our services are becoming more efficient without impacting on front line services, and, over the past decade in excess of £100M of savings have been delivered that represents a reduction of 19% of the Council's budget.

### Q8 Do you think this is a good strategy?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

### Q9 Are there any specific areas where you think the Council should consider becoming more efficient / any examples of not being efficient?

### Q10 Do you think we should continue to expect our managers (including Schools) to deliver more efficient services?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

## Council Reserves

Reserves play an important part of the overall financial management of the Council. The Council's General Reserve balances at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 amounted to £10.2M. The level of general reserves are kept under on-going review alongside the financial risks the Council faces.

The Council also has reserves earmarked for specific financial risks and future / ongoing investment. The Council has used reserves appropriately to balance its budget for a number of years and with the significant pressures being forecast for next year there may be a need to increase the use of reserves (note that the use of one off funding merely defers the need to make permanent savings to the Council's ongoing budget).

### Q11 Do you think the Council should continue with such a strategy?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

### Q12 Any other general comments on the Council's budget?

## **Part 2 – The Council's Priorities**

The Council focuses on five key areas to maximise resources and deliver improved services.

- **Digitalisation** – taking the opportunity new technology provides to deliver better services for residents, visitors, businesses and how we operate internally.
- **Commercialisation** – utilising our scale and expertise to deliver services for other organisations and customers and thereby generate income.
- **Early Intervention and Prevention** – investing in preventative services to deliver savings in the medium term.
- **Independence** – reshaping our services for vulnerable residents to ensure that we promote independence and deliver first class care services.
- **Efficient and Effective Organisation** – challenging our ongoing service delivery and driving out further efficiencies through for example, a reduction in administration costs and reducing property costs linked to new ways of working, for example through agile working.

### **Q13 Do you think that the Council should focus on these areas?**

	Yes	No	Don't know
Digitalisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commercialisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Early Intervention and Prevention	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Efficient and Effective Organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



### **Part 3 - Council Tax Reduction Scheme**

Welsh Government are responsible for providing a Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTR scheme) which provides financial support to low income households across Wales in the form of a reduced council tax bill. In Rhondda Cynon Taf around 24,000 households benefit from the CTR scheme, at a cost of £25.5M with approximately 19,400 receiving 100% Council Tax support i.e. these households pay no council tax.

The Welsh Government's regulations allow the Council discretion to vary the CTR Scheme in the following areas, with the additional costs of doing so falling on the Council.

#### **Extended Payments**

The CTR Scheme gives the Council the ability to increase the period of paying CTR support for a further 4 weeks to people who return to work (provided they have been in receipt of a relevant qualifying benefit for at least 26 weeks). The CTR Scheme adopted by the Council for 2022/23 did not increase this standard period. The estimated amount of CTRS paid in relation to extended payments by the Council for 2022/23 is £2,000.

#### **Q14. Do you think that 4 weeks is a reasonable period to continue paying Council Tax Reduction when someone returns to work?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

#### **Disregard War Disablement Pensions/War Widow's Pensions income**

Under the national CTR Scheme, the Council can exclude part, or the whole amount of War Disablement Pensions and War Widow's Pensions when calculating CTR Scheme entitlement. The CTR Scheme adopted by the Council for 2022/23 excluded all of this type of income from assessments. This means that some people receiving War Disablement Pensions and War Widow's Pensions received higher Council Tax relief than if it had been included in our calculations. The estimated additional cost to the Council of excluding all of the income for War Disablement & War Widow's Pensions for 2022/23 is £24,000.

#### **Q15. Do you think that it is reasonable for the Council to continue to totally exclude War Disablement and War Widow's Pensions income when assessing entitlement to CTR Scheme?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

## Backdating Claims

The existing CTR Scheme regulations specify that the standard period that a claim can be backdated is 3 months, with the Council having the discretion to backdate the claim for a longer period if it wishes. The CTR Scheme adopted by the Council for 2022/23 extended the period of backdating to 6 months (from 3 months). The estimated cost to the Council of backdating claims for 2023/23 is £10,000.

**Q16. Do you think that 6 months is a reasonable period to backdate claims for working age and pensioner claimants?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

**Q17. Do you have any other general comments with regard to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme?**

## **About You**

### **Q18. Your Postcode:**

### **Q19. Are you responding as: (Please tick any that apply)**

- ☐ a local resident
- ☐ a local business
- ☐ an employee of the Council
- ☐ a member of a voluntary / community group
- ☐ other (please state below)

**Under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duties, the Council has a legal duty to look at how its decisions impact on people because they may have particular characteristics.**

### **Q20. How would the Council's Budget proposals affect you because of your:**

1. Sex
2. Age
3. Ethnicity
4. Disability
5. Sexuality
6. Religion / Belief
7. Gender identity
8. Relationship status
9. Pregnancy
10. Preferred language

**Q21. With regards to the Council's Budget proposals, and the impact they may have, please let us know:**

If you feel it could impact opportunities for people to use and promote the Welsh Language (Positive or Negative) and if in any way, it treats the Welsh Language less favourably than the English Language?

How positive effects could be increased, or negative effects be decreased?