

Difficult Decisions 2021-22

Consulting on our plans to reshape Council services to meet the financial challenge and budget proposals for 2021-22

Introduction

I am sure you are aware of the tremendous financial pressure that Councils are under and they must continue to find ways to function and deliver services whilst budgets continue to be stretched. It is important to recognise that Wrexham County Borough Council has made efficiencies and cuts in its budget of over £64m since the economic crisis in 2007/2008 and the first austerity measures were introduced in late 2008.

We are committed to delivering the services that underpin the six priorities outlined in our Council Plan. We continue to look for ways to improve our services, making them more efficient in order to prioritise (as far as possible) our frontline services. These improvements include modernising the way we work, and reviewing staffing levels and structures to reduce costs whilst effectively delivering our reshaped services. We are also committed to ensuring that we are able to answer your enquiries at the first point of contact wherever possible, and, in keeping with the world around us, increasing our online services.

Clearly, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic continues to present the Council with unprecedented challenges. When setting a core budget, we hope that the Council will be supported by Welsh Government's Covid-19 hardship fund.

Over the past few years, you have told us what you thought about our proposals for savings, through our annual budget consultations (*Difficult Decisions*). Your feedback, thoughts and suggestions have informed the decisions made about the budget we have set each year. They have also informed the way we have looked to identify future savings and transform the way we work.

In Part 1 of the Difficult Decisions Consultation 2021-22, we asked you how you thought we could make further cuts to meet the financial challenge and whether you had any alternative suggestions for provision of these services / areas of expenditure. Thank you to those who took the time to give us their views. A summary of what you told us is included below and has been shared with councillors and senior officers to inform the development of the budget.

There are, once again, difficult decisions to be made and we want to know what you think. In Part 2 of the Difficult Decisions Consultation 2021-22, we would like to hear about any comments you have in relation to the approach the Council is taking in relation to the 2021-22 budget. The feedback you give us will be taken into account before we make our final decisions on the 2021-22 budget in early 2021.

Many Thanks

Councillor Mark Pritchard, Council Leader

Difficult Decisions 2021-22 Consultation Part 1 - Key Findings

There were a total number of 299 responses to the consultation.

- 298 responses to the online survey
- 1 letter

Survey Analysis

Members of the public were asked to respond to two open questions, which yielded a set of qualitative data for analysis. Comments received in the survey were analysed and themed. The most commonly occurring themes have been outlined in Section A below, along with the number of comments received related to that theme.

Summary of responses to the online survey and letter:

Question 1: How do you think we can make further cuts to meet the financial challenge?

Theme of response	Number of responses
Review Council offices and assets - including how they can be better utilised	25
Reduce or remove Elected Member pay/expenses including any pay rise	23
Review senior/middle management structure and staff tiers	22
Reduce the number of Elected Members	19
Income generation suggestions/ideas	19
Review Environmental Services - e.g. Reduction in Recycling, litter pickers, not collecting green bins in the winter, length of time between bin collections, improvements to roads etc..... involving people in improving their environment so that they share the responsibility and provide them with skills.	18
Do not feel that further cuts should be made.	17
Continue forward with the Modern Ways of Working which allows staff and Elected Members to work from home resulting in cost savings on running expensive, offices, travel expenses etc.. Invest in IT provisions	17

Theme of response	Number of responses
Improve process improvement within Departments so they are more efficient therefore further cuts are not required.	16
Review staff terms and conditions (travel, benefits and expenses,) Freeze on vacancies	12
Reduce consultant/external/third sector spend	12
Remove/reduce the role of mayor	11
Departments across the Council to work more collaboratively - resulting in reducing costs and being more efficient across services	10

Letter response (one response):

Theme of response
Do not feel that further cuts should be made.
Review senior/middle management structure and staff tiers.
Review Council offices and assets, including how they might be better utilised.

Question 2: If you have identified areas of Council expenditure for further cuts, do you have any alternative suggestions for provision of these services/areas of expenditure?

Theme of response	Number of responses
Review senior/middle management structure and staff tiers	12
Continue forward with the Modern Ways of Working which allows staff and Elected Members to work from home resulting in cost savings on running expensive, offices, travel expenses etc.. Invest in IT provisions	7
Income generation suggestions/ideas	7
Process Improvement within Departments so they are more efficient therefore further cuts are not required.	6

Theme of response	Number of responses
Review Environmental Services - e.g. Reduction in Recycling, litter pickers, not collecting green bins in the winter, length of time between bin collections, improvements to roads etc..... involving people in improving their environment so that they share the responsibility and provide them with skills.	6
Remove/reduce the role of mayor	5
Reduce consultant/external/third sector spend	5
Review staff terms and conditions (travel, benefits and expenses,) Freeze on vacancies	4
Review Council offices and assets - Including how they can be better utilised	4

Council Tax

Council Tax is a locally raised tax that is payable on all domestic properties. It is made up of three separate elements - a Wrexham County Borough Council Charge, a North Wales Police & Crime Commissioner Charge and a Community Council Charge.

Wrexham County Borough Council collects all of these charges and retains the amount due to itself and pays the Police Authority and the individual Community Councils the amounts collected on their behalf. The amount paid is dependent on the 'Band' into which a property has been placed. These bands range from 'A to I' with 'A' being the lowest charge up to 'I' being the highest charge made. Reductions are also made where a person lives alone or a property is vacant.

In respect of the Wrexham County Borough Council element, the current council tax charge for a typical 'Band D' council tax bill is £1,233.27 a year. This is the 4th lowest Council Tax charge across all Local Authorities in Wales.

A breakdown of how the current annual council tax charge for a typical 'Band D' bill (£1,233.27) is outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Average Council Tax at Band D 2020/21

Service	Total
Education including Schools	£526.15
Adult Social Care	£225.72
Children's Social Care	£103.76
Capital Financing Costs (i.e. cost of funding capital projects)	£65.64
Council Tax Reduction Scheme & Discretionary Rate Relief	£56.80
Waste Collection & Disposal	£44.03
Recycling Costs	£42.81
Fire Levy	£35.05
Highway Maintenance(including street lighting)	£26.26
Recreation, Sport & Open spaces	£15.46
Corporate Management & Other Central Costs	£13.77
Housing (excluding management of own council dwellings)	£11.47
Library service	£10.51
Democratic representation and management	£9.03
Street Cleansing	£8.47
Environmental Health (including food safety &housing standards), Trading Standards, Flood defence &Climate change costs	£8.21
Economic, Community Development & Business Support	£5.91
Culture and heritage	£4.77
Transport	£4.46
Local tax collection	£3.58
Planning & Building Control	£3.21
Tourism	£2.42
Registration of births, deaths and marriages, Elections, Emergency Planning	£2.29
Community Safety	£2.10
Coroner's Service	£1.38
WCBC General & Special Expenses	£1,233.27

For 2021/22 we are considering a range of options, including an increase in council tax equivalent to 6.95% (as per the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan which was approved by Council in February 2020) in a Band D property. An increase of 6.95% will cost a family in a Band D property approximately £7.14 extra a month.

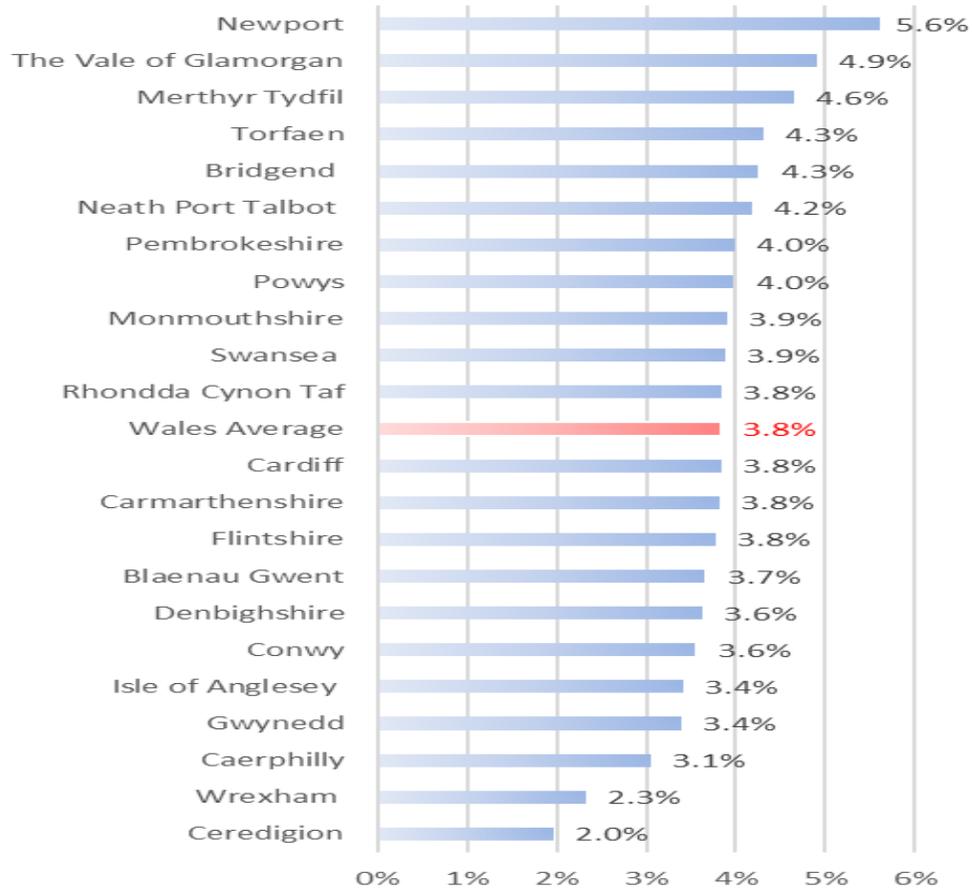
Whilst we appreciate that many people's budgets are tight, we want to do all we can to protect important services such as schools and social care, and this increase in council tax will help us to do this.

Each year the Welsh Government does an assessment of how much it expects each Local Authority to need to spend to deliver its services (known as the Standard Spending Assessment). It then provides a proportion of this funding, and the rest has to be made up from generating income and council tax. In order to meet the budget that Welsh Government states we will need, we would actually need to increase council tax by around 17%. We are not proposing to do this and so we currently bridge this funding gap through very tight budgetary control and being as efficient as possible. However, in response to the particularly low budget settlement for 2021-22, we will have to increase Council Tax to 6.95% and we will not be able to fund inflation for services. The chart below illustrates how Wrexham's settlement is well below the average granted to other local authorities across Wales.

We continue to believe there has to be an increase in council tax to support essential frontline services that you, as residents, feel are important.

Provisional Local Government Settlement 2021-22

Figure 2: Changes to AEF, 2020-21 to 2021-22 by local authority



Source: WG Provisional LGF Settlement 2021-22

Next Steps

The challenges we face, while significant, are something we can address with your support. This reshaping process is not only about making financial savings, it is also about striving for excellence, being a modern and fit for purpose organisation, and working closely with our partners and communities. The Council is changing, and part of this change is about giving local people more opportunity to be involved in the improvement of services and the quality of life in their communities.

Budget proposals are guided by our agreed six Council priorities which are:

Promoting Good Health and Wellbeing (with a focus on Children's Services)

Good health (both physical and mental) and well-being is one of the most important things a person can have and this impacts on so many other areas of their life. Supporting and enabling individuals, families and communities to be resilient and have good physical and mental health and wellbeing are therefore vital. We will focus on Children's Services to ensure all children feel, and are, safe and are able to fulfil their potential. We will also prioritise prevention and early intervention to reduce costly services later on. Therefore, we have increased the budget in Social Care by 7%.

Developing the Economy

The economy is a major player in improving communities in Wrexham and continues to be a key priority for the Council. While the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge effect on the economy and while our short-term plans will have to change in light of the pandemic, our long-term goals remain the same. We will support those who have been made redundant across the County Borough. We will continue to work regionally with Welsh Government to increase business growth to increase employment opportunities and we will raise the profile of Wrexham as a place to live and work.

Improving Secondary Education

During 2020-23, our priority is to improve secondary education and close attainment gaps. Covid-19 continues to have a significant effect on education and schools and, while our objectives remain relevant, we have had to review our plans and milestones in light of this. We will continue to work in collaboration with schools, other local authorities across the region, GwE (the regional school improvement service) and Estyn to ensure that our schools are well supported and our education services are delivered resiliently. We have increased the budget for schools by 2.6%, which includes support for free school meals.

Ensuring Everyone is Safe

Keeping everyone safe and preventing harm is one of the Council's most important roles. Whether it is ensuring equality in our communities, providing access to housing, reducing crime or helping deliver the Track, Trace and Protect programme in response to the pandemic. We continue to work towards creating a resilient Wales and a resilient Wrexham, with cohesive communities and a County Borough in which people can thrive. In light of the ongoing pandemic and service pressures, we have increased the budget in Planning & Regulatory Services.

Improving the Environment

The Welsh Government has declared a Climate Emergency in Wales and set ambitious plans for the public sector to be carbon neutral by 2030. Wrexham has become a leader in delivering carbon emission savings and we will be continuing this work through the Decarbonisation Plan. This focuses on looking after green spaces, ensuring there are connections between rural communities and ensuring that our towns and villages are kept clean and attractive with highways that are in good condition, while working hard to reach our target of recycling 70% of all waste.

Ensuring a Modern and Resilient Council

The Council is faced with having to do more with less. To do this we will focus on transforming our working environments and practices, making sure we are able to use the power of digital technology and having secure and resilient ICT systems, with the capacity to serve our communities. We will ensure employees and Elected Members are supported to have the right skills to deliver efficient and accessible services, while supporting a resilient Wales which is globally responsible and has a vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.

These six priorities were previously consulted upon in June/July 2019 as part of the consultation for the Council Plan 2020-22. In addition, areas of focus for the Council Priorities were consulted upon in February/March 2020 as part of the consultation for the Council Plan 2020-23. Results of the consultation showed general support for the priorities.

Your ideas for 2021-22

In the first phase of the consultation process (during November-December 2020), we asked about any suggestions that you may have in order to meet the financial challenge we face in 2021-22. Now that the Welsh Government has published the provisional settlement and provisional budget for 2021-22, in this second phase of the consultation process (January 2021), we want to know whether you have any comments on the approach the Council is taking.

What happens next?

Once this consultation closes on 5th February 2021, the results will be analysed and findings will be presented to all Elected Members. These findings will allow Elected Members to make informed decisions about the budget for 2021/22. The budget is being presented to the Executive Board in January to agree recommendations for Full Council in February 2021. We will ensure that we feedback to you the results of the consultation once the final decisions have been made. We will put together another report entitled 'You Said, We Did' for 2021-22 to let you know how your views influenced the decisions we have made and this will be available on the Your Voice website.

In order to keep up to date, you can follow us on Twitter or Facebook, and keep your eye on our website and the local press. To register your interest in consultation and engagement opportunities please [click here](#) to log into or to register with 'MyAccount', Wrexham County Borough Council's self-service information portal. Ensure that you have selected to receive information about consultations on the 'My Updates' tab.

We want to know whether you have any comments on the approach the Council is taking to setting our budget for 2021-22.

There are a number of ways you can take part in the consultation. You can:

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1. Complete the survey – either online or in paper. The survey will run from/to 20.01.21 to 05.02.21. Paper copies can be obtained by emailing telluswhatyouthink@wrexham.gov.uk or by telephoning 01978 292000.
2. You could also write to us at 'Tell Us What You Think'. 3rd Floor Annex. The Guildhall. Wrexham. LL11 1AY
3. Or email us at telluswhatyouthink@wrexham.gov.uk (please mark your correspondence 'Difficult Decisions')

The closing date for responses to this consultation is **5th February 2021**.

Please note that whilst we will welcome and take account of all views received, we are not able to reply to individual questions or comments sent in response to this consultation.

Thank you for taking part in this consultation – we value your views.