



## Case study pro-forma

**Case Study Title** Budget Consultation: Use of a Budget Simulator (web-based tool) to facilitate and stimulate public engagement

**Partner Organisation (s)** Carmarthenshire County Council

The scale of the financial challenge facing public organisations in Wales has been well documented through recent media and political discourse. Never before has the ‘trickling down’ effect, in respect of budget cuts from National to Central to Local Government, been so prominent. As a consequence, statutory authorities are presented with an almost insurmountable challenge – how to balance the budget effectively at a time when the demand for service provision has never been higher.

Over the past several months, through meticulous and conscientious planning, numerous efficiency saving proposals have been identified by each Council directorate to help meet the budget deficit. However, the financial department has not sought to work in isolation. With due regard for public engagement, consultation officers have been justly positioned at the forefront of the budget agenda in order to facilitate ‘citizen-focused’ or ‘citizen tailored’ service delivery, which endeavours to situate residents’ needs and expectations at the heart of the organisation’s modus operandi (manner of working).

However, this can only be accomplished through effective public engagement. This ‘paradigm shift’ is encapsulated by OPM, who proclaim “ *the relationship between public services and citizens is changing. Increasing emphasis is placed on spending limited public money strategically and efficiently, engaging citizens in the design of their services and involving them in decisions about local budgets and assets*” (OPM, 2013).

Subsequently, in accordance with the National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales, Carmarthenshire County Council has sought to deliver a streamlined budget consultation programme that will have real bearing on the decision making process. Furthermore, with reference to Anstein’s (1969) conceptualisation of the level of power implicit in the engagement process, Carmarthenshire County Council endeavours to foster an environment for effective and meaningful consultation and to work in partnership with consultees’ in doing so.

The authority will, for the first time in its consultation history, make use of a budget simulator – YouChoose – to elicit views on the matter. YouChoose is a web-based tool developed by the London Borough of Redbridge and which has since been made available, free of charge, through the Local Government Association, for use in other public sector organisations. While other third-party applications are available on the marketplace, ranging in price from £1500 - £8000(+), it is somewhat of an incongruous juxtaposition or misnomer/oxyoron to consult with citizens on cost saving measures using an apparatus that has high financial implications for the authority. Indeed, it could serve to undermine the entire consultation process, whilst contravening the spirit of public engagement.



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By hypothetically placing the council's budget in the hands of participants', the simulator allows respondents to take ownership of the Council's priorities and weigh which services are most important to them in a mechanism that is democratic, open and efficient. Accordingly, we proposed that a web-based budget simulator would be utilised to:

- Enhance the consultation and engagement process and provide a fresh, enriched, stimulating and interactive experience for participants
- Educate respondents with a view to understanding, and perhaps sympathising, with the difficult decisions that have to be taken when managing budgets and redesigning services in a climate of severe budgetary constraint
- Increase transparency
- Encourage participation from a wide variety of stakeholders, in particular 'luring' the younger demographic who historically have been underrepresented in consultation activities conducted across the authority. In general, younger people are generally less receptive to traditional consultation methodologies.

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of complex 'technical' issues, the provision of information in an accessible and 'bite-sized' format was essential to circumvent any literacy and/or numeracy barriers.

Conversely, the budget simulator will supplement, not supersede, our 'tried and trusted' consultation mechanisms – principally surveys and focus groups. Thus it could be said that the authority has adopted and embraced a 'mixed methods' approach to ensure validity, through triangulation, in its research findings.

Lastly, during the analysis stage of the investigation, we will draw upon a technique labelled the average index score to "quantify the qualitative". The strength of the aforementioned technique lies in the analysis of likert scale data (questions which ask respondents to what extent they agree/disagree with a listed statement). There is a tendency to group these results into two overarching categories: % who agree; % who disagree. As a consequence, any natural distinction between the different response groupings (e.g. strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) is lost or concealed by this artificial classification. To circumvent this issue, each response should be weighted – allocated a score ranging from -2 (strongly disagree) through to +2 (strongly agree) - and a mean score calculated.

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