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WINSFORD TOWN COUNCIL
FULL COUNCIL
21 SEPTEMBER 2026

BUDGET CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR THE 2027/28 BUDGET AND PRECEPT

Purpose of Report
To present a proposed consultation and engagement framework to support the development of the 2027/28 Budget and Precept and to seek Member approval to commence engagement activities during Autumn and Winter 2026.

The proposed approach seeks to balance meaningful public engagement with value for money, ensuring that consultation is delivered at minimal cost whilst reflecting recognised local government best practice.

Recommendations
Members are recommended to:
1. Approve the Budget Consultation and Engagement Framework for the preparation of the 2027/28 Budget and Precept.
2. Authorise the Town Clerk to undertake a public consultation programme between November 2026 and January 2027.
3. Approve the creation of a dedicated Budget Consultation Hub on the Council website.
4. Support targeted engagement with community organisations, local businesses and partner bodies.
5. Consider whether additional enhanced consultation measures should be undertaken.
6. Receive a report setting out consultation findings prior to the setting of the 2027/28 Precept.
7. Formally set the 2027/28 Precept at the January 2027 meeting of Full Council.
8. Approve the final 2027/28 Budget at the February 2027 meeting of Full Council.
9. Publish a summary of consultation outcomes following the adoption of the Budget and Precept.

Background
The annual budget process represents one of the most important decisions undertaken by any local authority. The Local Government Association identifies the annual budget process as one of the most significant corporate activities undertaken by councils and recommends that budget setting should be closely aligned with corporate priorities, community engagement and long-term financial sustainability.[1] Whilst there is no statutory requirement for a town council to undertake budget consultation, there is increasing public expectation that local residents and stakeholders are provided with opportunities to influence spending priorities and understand how public funds are allocated.

Effective consultation can assist the Council in:
- Understanding community priorities.
- Identifying emerging local issues.

- Improving transparency and accountability.
- Demonstrating value for money.
- Supporting evidence-based decision making.
- Building public confidence in Council decisions.

National best practice guidance advises that consultation should take place before key financial decisions are made and that councils should demonstrate how public feedback has influenced final decisions.

Key Budget Milestones
The following timetable is proposed:

Date	Activity
September 2026	Initial budget assumptions developed by Officers
October 2026	Budget workshops with Members
November 2026	Public consultation launched
November to December 2026	Community and stakeholder engagement
Early January 2027	Consultation closes
January 2027	Consultation findings reported to Council and Precept formally set
February 2027	Final Budget 2027/28 approved
March 2027	Publication of consultation outcomes and "You Said, We Did" report

The timetable ensures that consultation feedback can be fully considered by Members before the Council determines its annual precept requirement.

Consultation Objectives
The consultation programme should seek to:

- Inform residents about Council services and expenditure.
- Explain financial pressures and opportunities.
- Understand community priorities.
- Seek views on future investment.
- Test support for projects and service improvements.
- Gather evidence from residents, businesses and community organisations.
- Strengthen transparency and accountability.
- Support informed budget decisions.

Proposed Consultation Programme

Online Budget Survey
The primary consultation mechanism would be an online survey hosted through Microsoft Forms.

The survey would seek views on:

- Council spending priorities.
- Community facilities.

- Open spaces and recreation.
- Environmental and biodiversity projects.
- Community grants and events.
- Future investment priorities.

This reflects approaches adopted by councils such as Oxford City Council, which uses digital consultation platforms to seek residents' views on spending priorities and budget proposals

Budget Consultation Hub
A dedicated section of the Council website should be created containing:
- Budget information.
- Frequently Asked Questions.
- Consultation timetable.
- Financial context.
- Draft spending priorities.
- Survey links.
- Regular updates.

Social Media Campaign
The Council should utilise its existing social media channels throughout the consultation period.

Suggested activities include:
- Budget Facts of the Week.
- "Where Your Precept Goes" posts.
- Service spotlight features.
- Consultation reminders.
- Short explanatory videos.
- Interactive polls.

Stakeholder Consultation
Alongside engagement with residents, targeted consultation should be undertaken with:
- Community groups.
- Sports clubs.
- Youth organisations.
- Faith groups.
- Environmental organisations.
- Local businesses.
- Partner agencies.

Community Drop-In Sessions
Members may wish to consider holding two informal consultation sessions at community venues such as:
- Brunner Guildhall.
- Winsford Library.
- Shopping Centre

These sessions would allow residents to discuss proposals directly with Members and Officers.

Enhanced Consultation Options
Whilst not essential, the following enhancements could strengthen resident engagement.

Citizens' Budget Summary
A concise graphical summary could be prepared explaining:
- Sources of Council income.
- How the precept is spent.
- Key budget pressures.
- Projected investments.

Budget Builder Exercise
A simple budget allocation exercise could be developed using Microsoft Forms. Participants would be asked to allocate a hypothetical £100 across services such as:
- Parks and Open Spaces.
- Community Events.
- Community Grants.
- Recreation Facilities.
- Biodiversity Projects.
- Community Buildings.

Community Roadshows
The Council could undertake consultation activities at:
- Shopping Centre
- Events.
- Community centres.

Measuring Success
To evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation, the following indicators are proposed:

Measure	Target
Survey responses	300+
Stakeholder responses	20+ organisations
Website consultation page views	500+
Social media reach	10,000+ views
Drop-in session attendees	Minimum 2 sessions held
Publication of consultation findings	Within one month of Budget approval

Reporting Back
Best practice guidance highlights the importance of demonstrating how consultation responses have influenced decisions. Following the setting of the Precept in January 2027 and adoption of the final Budget in February 2027, Officers should prepare a public summary demonstrating:
- Number of consultation responses.
- Key themes identified.

- Council responses.
- Changes made as a result of consultation.
- Reasons why specific suggestions could not be implemented.

This "You Said, We Did" approach is widely recognised as effective engagement practice and helps maintain public confidence in future consultations.[4] [5]

Financial Implications
The recommended core consultation programme can be delivered using existing Council resources and digital platforms.

Activity	Estimated Cost
Online survey	£0
Website consultation hub	£0
Social media campaign	£0
Stakeholder consultation	£0
Core consultation programme total	**£0**

Potential enhanced measures:

Activity	Estimated Cost
Community drop-in sessions	£0 - £150
Citizens' Budget design	£300 - £1,000
Roadshows	Approximately £450
Social media advertising	£50 - £500

Legal Implications
The Council is required under the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to determine and notify its annual precept requirement within the timescales prescribed by the billing authority.

There is no statutory requirement for a town council to undertake a public consultation before setting its budget or precept. However, undertaking consultation is consistent with recognised principles of openness, accountability and good governance.

The proposed consultation is advisory in nature and the final decision regarding both the level of the 2027/28 Precept and the approval of the 2027/28 Budget remains a matter for Full Council.

The consultation process should:
- Be undertaken before decisions are finalised.
- Clearly explain the purpose of the consultation.
- Provide sufficient information to enable informed responses.
- Ensure that responses are properly considered by Members.

The Council must also ensure compliance with:
- Local Government Act 1972.

- Local Government Finance Act 1992.
- Data Protection Act 2018.
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).
- Freedom of Information Act 2000.
- Equality Act 2010.

Any personal information collected as part of the consultation process must be processed in accordance with the Council's approved privacy arrangements.

Policy Implications
The consultation programme supports the Council's commitment to:
- Good governance.
- Financial sustainability.
- Transparency.
- Community engagement.
- Evidence-based decision making.
- Value for money.

The findings may also assist future reviews of the Council's strategic priorities and medium-term planning assumptions.

Equality and Diversity Implications
The consultation framework has been designed to maximise accessibility and participation.

Whilst the primary consultation method will be digital, supplementary engagement opportunities should be available where appropriate to ensure participation by residents who may not routinely engage online.

Particular regard should be given to:
- Older residents.
- Young people.
- Residents with disabilities.
- Residents with limited digital access.
- Community groups representing protected characteristics.

No adverse equality impacts have been identified arising from the recommendations contained within this report.

Formal Decision Required
Members are requested to **RESOLVE**:

(a) To approve the Budget Consultation and Engagement Framework for the preparation of the 2027/28 Budget and Precept.
(b) To authorise the Town Clerk to undertake a public consultation programme between November 2026 and January 2027 incorporating:
- An online consultation survey.
- A dedicated consultation webpage.
- Social media engagement.
- Stakeholder consultation.

(c) To receive a report on the consultation findings prior to the setting of the 2027/28 Precept.
(d) To formally consider the consultation feedback when determining the 2027/28 Precept at the January 2027 meeting of Full Council.
(e) To approve the 2027/28 Budget at the February 2027 meeting of Full Council.
(f) To publish a summary of consultation outcomes following adoption of the Budget and Precept.

Risk Assessment

Risk	Mitigation
Low participation rates	Extensive promotion through existing communication channels
Unrepresentative responses	Targeted stakeholder engagement and multiple participation methods
Public misunderstanding of Council finances	Clear explanatory information and FAQs
Consultation fatigue	Concise and accessible survey design
Expectations exceeding available resources	Transparent communication regarding financial limitations
Failure to demonstrate impact of consultation	Publication of consultation outcomes and Council responses

Conclusion
The proposed consultation framework provides Winsford Town Council with a proportionate, evidence-based and low-cost approach to engaging residents and stakeholders in the development of the 2027/28 Budget and Precept.
The recommended core programme can be delivered at no additional cost and reflects established local government best practice. Consultation findings will be available to inform the Council's consideration of the 2027/28 Precept in January 2027 and the formal adoption of the final Budget in February 2027.