



How to maximise participation with your Budget Simulator

Running budget consultation online is a great move and we want to help Councils and residents get the most from the experience. Below are a series of tried and tested ideas that will help you gain a great response on your budget consultation...

First steps

1. Place a direct link on your Council's home page to the Simulator

A seemingly obvious thing to point out, but this is an easy way to boost the success of your consultation. The home page is invariably the busiest on a Council's website. Even if a resident is logging on for some other reason, they might see the link to your budget consultation and click through to it.

2. Organize a press briefing with local press

All publicity is good publicity and many residents are likely to read a local newspaper every day. Covering all local channels of communication available to you is the best way to ensure each person has an opportunity to hear about and use the Budget Simulator. If they run the story, ask them to link to the Simulator from their website - this will boost your SEO.

3. Run a news story in your community newsletter

Residents often expect to hear from Councils through newsletters - which makes it one of the best ways to let your residents know about your Simulator. Be sure to include the URL of the Simulator and tell people the benefits of engaging on the budget.

4. Put up a banner at council offices reminding people about the Simulator

Council staff tend to be some of the most actively engaged of all local residents. Ensuring that staff and visitors know about the consultation is a great way to boost your response levels. They'll probably go home and tell their friends and family about the Simulator too!

The screenshot shows the Cumbria County Council website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Contact us, Help, Site map, FAQs, Low Graphics, Accessibility, Text size (A, B, C), and Text Reader. A search bar is present with the text "I'm searching for..." and a "Go" button. The contact information "01228 606060" and "info@cumbriacc.gov.uk" is displayed, along with a "Here to help" speech bubble icon. Below the navigation bar is a green banner with "Services: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z". The main content area features a sidebar with a list of services: Adult Social Care and Health, Advice and Benefits, Business, Children's Services, Community and Living, Council and Democracy, Environment and Planning, Jobs and Careers, Learning, Leisure and Culture, Libraries and Archives, and Transport and Roads. The central content area displays a "Budget Simulator" banner. The banner includes the Budget Simulator logo, the Cumbria County Council logo, and a "Welcome to the Cumbria County Council Budget Simulator" message. Below the message is a "Create your budget" button. To the right of the banner, there is a "Budget Simulator" heading and a description: "Complete the council's online budget simulator to show how you would choose to spend the council's budget." Below this description is a "play" button and a "Show all content" link. On the right side of the page, there is a "Cumbria Flood News" section with a "Do it online" heading and a "Report it" dropdown menu. Below this, there is a list of categories: Abandoned vehicles, Benefit fraud, Highways (roads, potholes, streetlights), and a "Report more >" link. At the bottom right, there is an "Apply for it" dropdown menu.

Cumbria placed a prominent link to their Simulator from their home page

Making the most of in-house resources

5. Offer a prize-draw for all participants

It doesn't need to be something outrageous, but offering a small incentive is a good way to show your appreciation for people getting involved. Good examples are vouchers to spend at a music store or supermarket - something everyone could do with.

6. Email your Citizens Panel

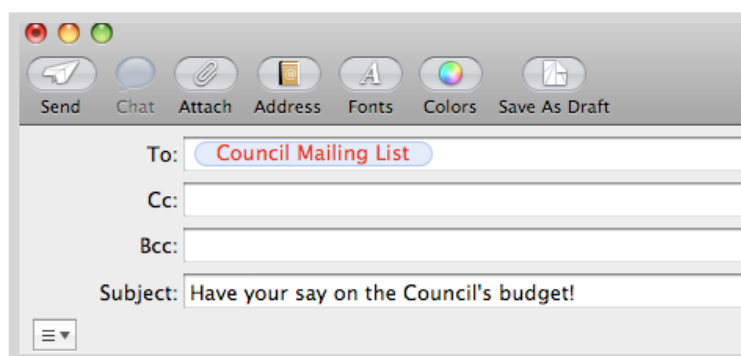
Citizens Panels are fantastic - a pool of actively engaged individuals that are ready and willing to let you know their thoughts on the Council's actions. Be sure to let them know early so that they can spread the word further for you. They'll appreciate the opportunity to engage using something different.

7. Distribute leaflets to Council tenants, local voluntary and charity organisations, visitors to local libraries and Parish Councils

Any location where local residents congregate offers an opportunity for engagement. By distributing a small leaflet detailing that a Budget Consultation is being held, where they can access it and why they might want to contribute, you can boost the number and diversity of respondents.

8. Send an email to members of your Council mailing list

A mailing list represents a bank of individuals who have opted-in to be contacted about council affairs. The other great thing about contacting people by email is that they are only one click away from accessing your Budget Simulator - making it easier for them to get involved.



Contacting local networks - spreading the word

9. Send an online news release to local media and blogs

You'd be surprised what a quick trawl of the web can find. Most areas have bloggers that discuss local issues. Whatever their blog covers, there's a good chance they'll be interested in linking to your Budget Simulator. Pop them an email and ask them if they'd like to link to it from their blog - again, this will help to boost SEO for the consultation.

Added boosters

10. Post link from Council Twitter and/or Facebook Account

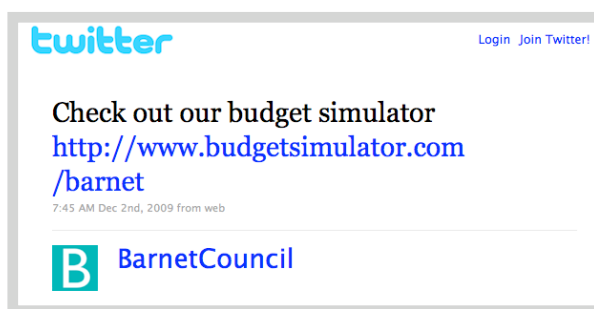
Social media is on the rise. With many people including a Facebook visit every time they log on to the internet, it's important to link people to your online consultation from your Council's social media accounts. If you don't have a Facebook or Twitter account, it's time to make one!

11. Demonstrate the Simulator at Town Hall meetings or Universities

Using a projector to display and demonstrate your Budget Simulator has been done before to great effect. It's both a great visual aid to discussing budget decisions, and a great chance to talk people face to face as to ways they can have their say on the budget.

12. Consider using Google Adwords

You can run a short term campaign for people searching for your Council's name + e.g "finance" or "budget". There might be a whole host of reasons people are searching for this term, and with a little work you can ensure that the link to your Budget Simulator is at the top of the search rankings every time.



Barnet tweeted about their Budget Simulator

Following success

13. Use Analytics or search your Budget Simulator's URL in Google

Being able to see where you're receiving traffic from helps you make the most out of your exposure on the web. Maybe there's an opportunity to engage with the conversation on a website that you didn't even know existed. With Google Analytics, you can do this for free.

14. Consult on meaningful issues

Your residents are likely to feel more empowered to discuss the budget when the issues are of relative importance. The more people that feel passionate about the areas available for consultation, the higher the response levels your Simulator will achieve.

15. Demonstrate how you've listened

By including previous consultation findings and the actions that your Council took to address those issues, the more residents will feel that their contribution to the Simulator will bring about benefits to the community.