

The Highland Council

8th May 2014

Agenda Item	14
Report No	HC/3/14

Budget consultation

Report by the Chief Executive

Summary

This report sets out a proposed approach to consulting on budget savings proposals.

1. Background

1.1 At the Council meeting in March, Members were advised that a public consultation on future budget proposals would be undertaken in 2014. This report sets out the proposed approach to that consultation. It takes into account the experience of earlier budget consultations in 2010 and 2012 and the pre-referendum period when public engagement by the Council is constrained.

2. Budget consultation approach – two stages and themes

2.1 It is proposed that the consultation on the budget from April 2015 onwards takes place over two stages this year.

1. The first stage would run during May and June and involve wide public consultation on budget themes and some more detailed proposals. This would include the public consultation on the Customer Service Review (including Service Points) agreed at the Council meeting in March and provide an opportunity to promote the Community Challenge Fund. There may also be scope for gathering views on the new LEADER programme in rural communities given its focus on community action.
2. The second stage would run from mid-September to early November. It would be developed largely from the consultation responses from stage one and would have a greater focus on specific proposals with detailed projections of savings and impacts.

Specific consultation questions are currently being drafted. This timing should allow for firm budget proposals to be considered by Members from December 2014 onwards.

2.2 The budget consultation themes are likely to be around:

1. What services should be provided and by whom?
2. How should we provide our services?
3. How can we organise our service provision (including Service Points) in the future to deliver efficiency savings?

4. Can we provide less of some services, some services less frequently or stop providing some services altogether?
5. What more could we do to generate income to pay for services?
6. How do we prevent costs in the future?

On balance, these are about transforming how we provide services, rather than about identifying service reductions and cuts.

- 2.3 Where the consultation is to be face to face, the questions need to be drafted to promote conversation. This will allow us to probe why people hold particular views and to enable some challenge of them.
- 2.4 To inform conversations on budget savings, we will need to provide contextual information such as:
 - the scale of the budget challenge, the overall budget situation looking ahead and why we must do things differently;
 - how much some services cost;
 - what we have saved already; and
 - what the public have told us before, how we used that information and why we need their help again.
- 2.5 Services are currently undertaking consultation with staff across the organisation to identify savings that can be considered for inclusion in the budget strategy and the outcomes will be fed into phase 1. Further consultation will then take place with unions and staff, as part of phase 2 consideration of detailed proposals.

3. Consultation Methods

- 3.1 It is proposed that the methods to use in Stage 1 are:
 - Face to face budget focused events in May and June. Provisional dates are being booked now and can be confirmed following this Council meeting. It is likely to mean two or three budget consultation meetings per week during this period. Some of the venues will be selected where service points are included in the review to attract the public concerned and enable discussion about them. The format of these community events can follow previous budget consultations, with: short presentations to set the scene; some Q&A time; facilitated discussion around tables each focusing on a specific themes, with people choosing which themes they want to spend time discussing. The primary objective of these events must be to listen to the views of the public.
 - Social media and a budget blog during May and June, with the theme changing each week.
- 3.2 It is proposed that the methods to use in Stage 2, because that would involve specific proposals with projections of savings and impacts, would be:

- A survey of the Citizens' Panel in late September;
- Running focus groups with people less likely to engage in the methods above (e.g. disability groups).
- Running focus groups or targeted consultation with specific interest groups. Some themes and questions would benefit from informed/expert opinion from specific groups and the timing of this can be scheduled with Service Directors e.g. education provision needs to be discussed with head teachers, parent councils, pupil councils and Unions. It will also include consultation with other public service partners in the community planning partnership.

3.3 To strengthen our engagement methods we propose to create an additional panel for surveys comprised of representative groups in the Highlands, such as community councils, parent councils, tenant participation groups and equalities groups. It would exist alongside the Citizens' Panel. Such a Communities' Panel would be established in time for the stage 2 consultation when the Citizens' Panel survey is planned (from mid-September).

3.4 From May to November work will be undertaken to assess the impact of proposals on equalities groups and on rural communities and this will be informed too by the feedback we receive at ward forums.

4. Implications

4.1 Resource implications

The consultation planned will help gauge public opinion about budget choices and this will help members in their decision-making. The costs of consulting can be met within current budgets for surveys and Ward Forums.

4.2 Legal implications

The Council has a legal duty to consult with communities over changes to services that will affect them, from community planning legislation. The proposals will help meet these duties and the requirement to consult with partners.

4.3 Equalities implications

The proposals include methods for engaging with equalities groups, through focus groups and by involving representative equalities groups in a new Communities' Panel. Budget proposals will be assessed for the impact on people with protected characteristics under equalities legislation and these will be reported to members to help in their decision-making.

4.4 Carbon clever implications

Face to face methods of consulting will involve travel for staff, members and people in the community. Staff and members can co-ordinate travel to these events to reduce carbon emissions. On-line methods for engaging via the blog and on-line surveys will reduce paper and postage costs and associated carbon emissions.

4.5 Risk implications

There is a risk that the budget savings proposals focusing on transforming services will prove to be insufficient in scale or be deemed unacceptable. This means that service reductions and cuts will have to be identified. By consulting on the scale of the savings required and the alternatives to transforming how we deliver services, the general public should have information to help them provide views on meeting the budget challenge.

4.6 Gaelic implications

In our written documentation we will comply with the policy of appropriate Gaelic translation to help promote the Gaelic language. Indirectly, by consulting in rural areas and taking rural impacts into account we would be more mindful of the needs and circumstances of those communities and they tend to have more Gaelic speakers.

5. Recommendation

5.1 The Council is asked:

1. To agree the two stage approach in 2014 for consulting on the budget from 2015 onwards;
2. To note that the consultation in stage 1 is more about transforming services rather than reducing services with the consultation themes as described in paragraph 2.2, enabling the consultation also to gather views on the Customer Services Review (Service Points) and to raise awareness of the Community Challenge Fund;
3. To agree that a range of methods is used across both stages, as in earlier consultations, with an additional method devised by creating a Communities' Panel comprised of representative community groups to respond to surveys sent also to the Citizens' Panel and for stage 2 beginning in mid-September 2014.

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