

Review Title: Public Engagement on the Council's Budget Review
Overview & Scrutiny Panel: Resources (Task and Finish Group)
Task and Finish Group Chair: Cllr David Dixon
Overview & Scrutiny Project Officer: Alison Enever
Supporting Service Officer: Philip Hall, Head of Finance & Resource Planning

Process for Tracking O&S Recommendations - Guidance note for Executive Members

The enclosed table lists all the recommendations arising from the above Overview & Scrutiny Review. Individual recommendations are referred to the relevant named Executive Members (or whole Executive in the case of a whole Executive referral) as listed in the '**Exec Member**' column of the table. In order to provide the O&S Panel with an Executive response on each recommendation, the named Executive member (or whole Executive) is asked to complete the last 3 columns of the table as follows:

Decision Response

The Executive has the following options:

- **Accept** the Panel's recommendation
- **Reject** the Panel's recommendation
- **Defer** a decision on the recommendation because a response cannot be given at this time. This could be because the recommendation needs to be considered in light of a future Executive decision, imminent legislation, relevant strategy development or budget considerations, etc.

Implementation Date

- For 'Accept' decision responses, give the date that the recommendation will be implemented.
- For 'Defer' decision responses, give the date that the recommendation will be reconsidered.
- For 'Reject' decisions this is not applicable so write n/a

Rationale

Use this space to explain the rationale for your decision response and implementation date. For accepted recommendations, please give details of how they will be implemented.

Public Engagement on the Council's Budget Review: Recommendations

Recommendation	Exec Member	Decision Response	Implementation Date	Rationale
The way in which the Council <i>provides information to the public</i> regarding Council budgets				
Recommendation 1 The current Council Tax leaflet should undergo significant revision in order to make it more accessible and attractive to members of the public.	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Accept	For 2006 leaflet	I accept the T&F Group's view that "the Council Tax leaflet should be viewed as a real opportunity to communicate with the public in a very clear way about what the Council provides in the area, and how the Council Tax money, which residents pay, is spent". To achieve this I accept that the current leaflet requires significant revision.
Recommendation 2 Finance and Resource Planning and Communications and Marketing should work in partnership to produce the Council Tax leaflet, thus bringing a wider range of expertise and time to make the leaflet understandable for the public.	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Accept	For 2006 leaflet	Follows from Recommendation (1). Relevant managers will agree a joint project plan, including a resource plan to manage workload demands.
Recommendation 3 The Council Tax leaflet should be better utilised as an opportunity to inform the public about what the Council does, the services it provides, and its key achievements. The leaflet should therefore include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More information on the breakdown of where Council Tax money is spent - The information currently contained in the "What we do" leaflet which should be merged with the Council Tax leaflet 	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Accept	For 2006 leaflet	All points accepted and will be taken into account within the detailed planning. The "celebration" point could be met via a foreword by the Council Leader.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A celebration of the Council's key achievements and successes of the past year, but also an acknowledgement of failures and areas of potential improvement 				
<p>Recommendation 4</p> <p>Representation should be made to central government, possibly via the Local Government Association (LGA), to advise that Bath and North East Somerset consider that the amount of information which is statutory for inclusion in the Council Tax leaflet is considered excessive and unwieldy.</p>	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Reject</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>The government is not currently seeking views on this issue and so I suspect there is no real prospect of change in the medium-term. I cannot therefore prioritise it given other pressing workload demands but I would be prepared to make representations should the opportunity of a formal consultation arise.</p>
<p>Recommendation 5</p> <p>The Executive is recommended to identify resources to introduce a booklet-style leaflet to replace the fold out wall planner style currently used. This booklet should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be reasonably concise (around 6 pages) - Not contain a wall planner 	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Accept (in part)</p>	<p>For 2006 leaflet</p>	<p>A booklet is a more appropriate format but experience of other authorities shows that 6 pages would be wholly inadequate to provide all the information, both statutory and that recommended in Rec (3), in an accessible and attractive format. I have asked officers to work up a proposal but I anticipate that a booklet of around 24 pages will be required to meet the T&F Group's recommendations.</p> <p>The wall planner is currently produced at net nil cost (although it is part-financed by advertising income from Council Services). There is budget provision available for the production of the Best Value Performance Plan which is no longer required and so I will propose to the Council Leader (as the Executive Member responsible) that provision of £10k is made available to meet the cost of the improved leaflet/booklet. This sum will need to cover costs of project</p>

				management in Communications & Marketing, external design, copy-writing and internal printing.
Recommendation 6				
The Executive is asked to consider options for revising the amount of advertising in the leaflet. Options could include removing the advertising entirely, however costs for the new booklet format might in part be offset by selling advertising space to our own internal service areas and further promoting the use of Direct Debit which could incur savings for the authority	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Accept	For 2006 leaflet	These options can form part of consideration of the design specification.
Recommendation 7				
Space freed up by removal of some existing aspects of the leaflet, such as the wall planner, should be utilised to introduce more reader-friendly language and larger easy to read print. The leaflet should also be fully accessible in other languages and Braille for the partially sighted or blind.	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Accept (in part)	For 2006 leaflet	I agree that the booklet must meet the Council's accessibility standards, including larger easy-to-read print. The Council's standards recognise that the cost of routinely producing leaflets and publications in other languages and formats is relatively high for the numbers involved, and it is therefore envisaged that these will continue to be made available on request. Any change from this standard would need to be considered on a council-wide basis.
Recommendation 8				
The booklet should be made more visually appealing by the use of photographs of the local area on the front cover, and use of the corporate identity, and a more visually accessible colour-scheme. The booklet should fully address the issues of the whole area of Bath and North East Somerset and not appear to be Bath-centric.	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Accept	For 2006 leaflet	Will form part of design specification.

<p>Recommendation 9</p> <p>Avon Fire Authority should be asked to produce a separate leaflet setting out their precept information, so that the booklet content is clearly identifiable with and attributable to Bath and North East Somerset Council.</p>	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Reject</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>I am advised that if the Fire Authority is asked to produce a separate leaflet then the cost will fall on Bath & North East Somerset Council so this is likely to be cost-prohibitive. I accept the T&F Group's point about clearly identifying the Fire Authority as a separately accountable body but consider this can be done via use of colour and branding within the booklet.</p>
<p>Recommendation 10</p> <p>The Executive is asked to introduce production of an Annual Report. This should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - be around four pages in length - be in plain English - highlight the key achievements and issues of the past year - be produced by Communications and Marketing, with information provided by Finance and Resource Planning - be issued with Council News in late summer or early autumn 	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Defer</p>	<p>Decision by late November</p>	<p>I support this proposal in principle but it needs to be considered as part of a wider review of Council News which is currently being undertaken by the Communications & Marketing Manager. I will ensure that this recommendation is considered as part of that review, which is due to be completed by late November</p>
<p>The way in which the Council <i>engages with the public</i> on Council budgets</p>				
<p>Recommendation 11</p> <p>The Executive introduce public consultation on the Corporate and Financial Review and the Council's budget, which should focus on the key strategic decisions to be taken that year.</p>	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Accept in principle but defer</p>	<p>Autumn 2006</p>	<p>I agree fully with the T&F Group's conclusion that "that the budget setting process is a complicated one, and that the budget itself does not stand in isolation, but that there is an interlinking between the</p>

<p>Recommendation 12</p> <p>A questionnaire should be introduced which would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consult with the public by providing information and options, with a view to gauging which options are acceptable for the coming year's strategic-level budgetary direction - Take the form of questions which set out reasons for a budgetary shortfall, and the possible options for resolving it, for example creating headroom in other services, or a rise in Council Tax. - Seek the public's view on how acceptable each option is - Be linked to and feed through into the strategic direction for the Council's budget and the 4 year Financial Plan - Be produced by Communications and Marketing, with information provided by Finance and Resource Planning - Be issued together with the Annual Report, with Council News in late summer or early autumn - Be well publicised through the media, Council News, website, and the Council Tax booklet, with a view to encouraging the best possible participation 	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>			<p>Community Strategy, Corporate Plan, Financial Plan, Budget and individual Service and Resource plans. the kind of public consultation which would be most useful and helpful for the public, would be on the more strategic and overarching issues, rather than the individual detail of individual budget allocations".</p> <p>However I am concerned about the meaningfulness of public consultation at this particular time. This is due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Council is now in year 3 of its 4-year Corporate and Financial Plan, which forms the key plank of the joint administration. In political terms the Panel will recognise that it would be difficult for the joint administration to consider significant changes to its stated priorities for the fourth and final year of the Plan; • the Council is entering a financial plan review with significant uncertainty nationally due to a range of government funding changes all due for implementation in April 2006 (grant methodology, 3-year settlements, school
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<p>Recommendation 13</p> <p>The schedule of Council News despatch should be revised in order to accommodate the dissemination of the Annual Report and Questionnaire with a late summer or early autumn issue.</p>				<p>funding) so the Council is very unsure of its likely level of resources, making the provision of information on say the size of budgetary shortfall (as recommended by the T&F Group) very difficult to provide.</p>
<p>Recommendation 14</p> <p>The Executive should give consideration to wide dissemination of consultation, not only issuing the questionnaire through Council News but also targeting residents through the Citizens' Panel, the website, press releases, and asking for feedback through the Parish Liaison and other key stakeholders on future key priorities and strategic direction.</p>				<p>I do however accept fully the value of seeking the public's views on our Corporate Plan and progress to date. The Executive will shortly be considering a proposal to conduct a Residents Survey (likely to be a telephone survey of c750 people) as part of our CPA self-assessment requirements. I am keen that appropriate questions are included in this survey, but would want the parameters of the Survey to be clearly defined so that participants avoid confusion about its purposes.</p> <p>I also accept that a questionnaire of the type in Recommendation 12 would be most effective, so long as it is integrated into the strategic choices within the Corporate Plan rather than focusing solely on budget matters.</p> <p>I also believe that the most effective time for the Council to undertake a public consultation exercise on its Corporate Plan and Financial Plan would be in a year's time, when the existing Plan will be coming to an end and when political groups will wish to take into account the public's views in informing the priorities of the incoming administration in May 2007.</p>

<p>Recommendation 15</p> <p>The Executive should also investigate the possibility of using Democratic Action for Bath and North East Somerset Youth (DAFBY) to involve the Youth Council, in order to gain some feedback from the younger and traditionally harder to reach audience.</p>	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Accept</p>	<p>Autumn 2005</p>	<p>Meetings already take place during the course of the Corporate Plan Review with Trades Unions, Chambers of Commerce and the Local Strategic Partnership. It would be appropriate to offer an invitation to DAFBY to discuss the Council's priorities and the major long-term financial issues affecting the Council.</p>
<p>Recommendation 16</p> <p>Consultation with the public on individual Service and Resource Plans should be channelled through the Overview and Scrutiny panels, with steps taken to raise the profile of Overview and Scrutiny, and to encourage greater participation from the public in the process.</p>	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Accept (in part)</p>	<p>Winter 2005/06</p>	<p>I agree that Panels have a valuable role to play in reviewing and contributing to service and resource planning, and I was particularly impressed by the contribution made by the Resources Panel last year. This Panel can help raise awareness of other panel members of the value of considering service and resource plans. I think it is important though that each Service continues to have the responsibility to consult directly with stakeholders on the issues raised by their service and resource plan proposals.</p>
<p>Recommendation 17</p> <p>Representation should be made to central government (possibly through the Local Government Association) to encourage a repeal of statutory consultation with businesses.</p>	<p>Cllr Malcolm Hanney</p>	<p>Reject</p>	<p>Autumn 2005</p>	<p>I will include a reference in my response to the ODPM's current consultation on 3-year grant settlements to highlight the archaic nature of the statutory duty for business consultation. However I believe that the Council should continue to be inclusive in its engagement with the business community on key corporate planning and medium to long-term financial issues. It is clearly</p>

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				inappropriate for the business community to be singled out as the sole <i>statutory</i> consultee but I would not wish to give the impression that the Council did not wish to engage effectively with the business community.
Recommendation 18 The Executive should give consideration to encouraging the introduction of roadshows or meetings around the authority, possibly held by the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel, to inform the public about Council budget issues, and encourage engagement.	Cllr Malcolm Hanney	Defer	Autumn 2005	This issue of "roadshows" is a more general one that the whole Executive has begun to consider and I will ensure that this recommendation is included within its consideration. If roadshows were to be held I think it would be important that they were "fronted" by the group with accountability for developing the Corporate Plan and Financial Plan, which is the Executive.