

TITLE OF REPORT: Policy and Service Planning Cycle 2006/07 - Outcome of Consultation on the Council's Budget 2006/07

REPORT OF: Roger Kelly, Chief Executive
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Purpose of the Report

1. This report requests Cabinet note the views of elected members, residents, Trade Unions and the Chamber of Commerce on the Council's budget for 2006/07 and to agree to take these into account in setting the 2006/07 budget.

Background

2. In order to determine the priorities for 2006-07, consultation has been undertaken with key stakeholders. This has included:
 - Meetings with Cabinet Members (Portfolio holders)
 - Focus Groups with all elected members (December 2005, January and February 2006)
 - Focus Groups with residents (Viewpoint) (December 2005 and February 2006)
 - Consultation with all residents in the Borough through a freepost survey in Council News (Appendix 2)
 - Consultation with key stakeholders (Chamber of Commerce; Trade Unions)

The Consultation focused on two key issues:

- (i) **What the Council's priorities should and should not be**
- (ii) **Views on proposals for growth and savings**

Proposal

3. Cabinet is asked to note and to take account of the views of Consultees identified in Appendix 1.
4. Overall, Members were keen to maintain a focus on the delivery of excellent local frontline services and ensure that Council priorities are met. Views from residents were positive, and key priorities were identified such as frontline services, street cleanliness, regeneration of the town centre, transport, education, and social services. Views from external partners (Chamber of Commerce) and views of the Trade Unions were positive and are identified in Appendix 1.

Recommendations

5. It is recommended that Cabinet agree:-

- (i) To note the views of consultees.
- (ii) To recommend Council take account of these in setting its budget for 2006/07.

For the following reason(s)

To ensure that the Council agrees a budget for 2006/07 which is in accordance with the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the Improvement Plan and local priorities and is therefore able to meet its medium term objective of developing capacity to ensure the effective use of resources.

APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. The proposals within this report are in accordance with the outcomes and medium-term objectives as contained within Towards 2010, the objectives of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Improvement Plan and the requirement of the Council in meeting its CPA objectives. In particular the proposals enable the Council to meet its medium term objective of developing its capacity to ensure the effective use of resources.

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Proposal

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Views of the Chamber of Commerce

6. The Chamber of Commerce congratulated the Council on its Annual Audit and Inspection letter which continued to show high levels of performance. The Chamber also congratulated the Council on its role in attracting new businesses to the Borough. A query was raised as to the sustainability of using of reserves and the continued pressure on the Council to find efficiencies. The town centre was identified as a key issue and clarifications were sought as to progress regarding the development of the town centre.

Views of the Voluntary Sector

7. The Voluntary Sector agreed to the significant contribution and role that it makes to the provision of services in Gateshead and that this role should continue to develop and grow in the future.

Views of the Trade Unions

8. Generally the proposals were accepted (subject to minor clarifications). A query was raised regarding reliance on external funding and managing pressures associated with this.

Views on what the Council's priorities should be and Growth and Savings proposals

9. The discussions about Council priorities were structured around the Council's policy priorities and portfolios and are summarised below.

Adult Social Care

10. Members felt that adult social care services are essential and that these should be a priority. In particular, Members agreed that two key priorities are transitions (young people moving to adulthood needing support) and asylum seeker support (required support under the National Assistance Act 1948).
11. Members agreed that the voluntary sector can play a key role in the provision of these services and value for money is an important factor here. Residents felt that grants and funding for voluntary organisations are important – that the voluntary sector is an important partner for the Council in providing services, and that this should be supported.

Outcome : Adult social care services remains a Council priority. Proposed areas for growth in the budget include services for young people with disabilities moving into adulthood and asylum seeker support.

Children and Young People

12. Children and Young People – in particular delivering the outcomes of 'Every Child Matters' - is a key priority for the Council. The Council and its partners are increasingly moving towards integrated, seamless services for young people.
13. Members and residents agreed that reducing out of Borough placements (placements in homes for looked after children) is a priority and support proposals to develop infrastructure to meet the needs of the Borough.
14. Members and residents agreed that the Council should review the way in which it uses its buildings – in particular schools, libraries, community centres, family centres etc. Opportunities through the new PFI/BSF schools and children's centres should be explored so that buildings are used more efficiently.

15. Community centres were agreed as an important community resource and that there are some excellent facilities across the Borough. Those facilities that are underused should be addressed. Effective services for lifelong learning were agreed by members and residents as being important.

Outcome : Savings proposed through a review of Family Centre provision (Birtley and Springwell) and libraries (Lobley Hill and Ryton). Alternative provision of these services (for example adjacent community centres, libraries, schools and mobile services) is currently being explored. A review of administrative functions is a savings proposal to help contribute to key frontline growth proposals such as out of Borough placements and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.

Community Safety

16. Reducing anti social behaviour, tackling the perception of crime and increasing the provision of neighbourhood wardens is a key priority of Members and residents. Community engagement and drug and alcohol interventions were also agreed as being important. A key challenge for the service is short term funding of initiatives (eg neighbourhood wardens) and therefore maximising resources through working in partnership. Residents (through the Council News residents survey) agreed that reducing crime and anti social behaviour was **the** most important issue in making somewhere a good place to live (73%).

Outcome: Community Safety remains a priority for the Council. External funding is sought to address new priorities and the Council will continue to maximise resources through its Local Area Agreement. Neighbourhood Wardens are proposed as a growth item for 2006/07.

Culture

17. Opportunities for local people to participate in cultural activities remains a Council priority. In particular, targeting leisure/culture activities for hard to reach groups and maintaining attractive leisure facilities. Residents commented on 'Explore Music' and felt that this should not be confined to the Gateshead Quays area only but extended across the Borough.
18. Members agreed that more innovative ways of providing the Spring Flower show should be explored, however this should not be at the expense of residential amenity or the environment and that managing parking would be a priority.
19. Members felt that grants and awards to community associations are important and these should be monitored to ensure that they are used effectively.

Outcome: Proposal to repackage the Spring Flower show identified as a saving. Explore music is proposed as a growth item, however only for one year, during which time alternative funding will be identified.

Environment

20. Residents and Members agreed that street cleanliness, street lighting, traffic management and the environment generally are a priority. Street cleanliness and

domestic refuse collection scored highly in the Council News residents survey as an important factor in making somewhere a nice place to live.

21. Residents and Members were concerned about proposals for savings which involved street cleansing.
22. Members agreed that street cleaning, recycling and waste management were a priority. Residents were very supportive of Green It. It was also suggested that the Council could do more in terms of recycling (eg plastics). Members agreed that exploring alternative and innovative sources of funding for street lighting improvements should be a future priority.

Outcome: Additional Green-it collections are proposed as an area for budget growth. Proposal for reductions to the street services budget will be partially met by exploring external funding opportunities (eg the Local Area Agreement).

Employment and Economy

23. Members and residents agreed that the redevelopment of the town centre is a priority for the Council. Residents commented on progress on the town centre, in particular demolition of eyesore buildings. Residents were keen to see the heritage of the town centre maintained.
24. Members and the Chamber of Commerce commented on the need to maintain a good economic development service to ensure people want to live and work in Gateshead.

Outcome: Employment and economy remains a priority area for the Council. The town centre is a proposal for growth in the Council's budget.

Health

25. Members agreed that the health of local people is a Council priority. Working in partnership (for example through the Local Area Agreement) should be a priority for the future.

Outcome: Community health workers are a proposed budget growth item.

Housing

26. Members agreed that the quality of the housing stock is a priority and the recent award of 'Two Stars' to The Gateshead Housing Company and subsequent capital funding programme is a priority for the future. Residents commented that housing repairs are generally perceived to be efficient and are improving. Reducing anti social behaviour and an attractive environment are seen as important considerations in making somewhere a good place to live.
27. Members raised the issue of proposed closure of Area Housing Offices. These should be seen in the context of improved use of Council buildings.

Outcome: Housing remains a Council priority. Support to The Gateshead Housing Company as a key Partner is a priority for the future.

Transport

28. Members agreed that access to an integrated, affordable and safe transport system is a priority for the Council. Residents raised traffic congestion and traffic safety as an area for concern – with traffic safety being identified in the top ten priority areas. Members agreed that priorities for the future should be the Local Transport Plan, pursuing decriminalisation of parking, a speed management plan and addressing capacity of major road networks (the A1) and reducing congestion.

Outcome: Transport remains a Council priority and will be pursued through the bid to the Government's Transport Innovation Fund.

Fees and Charges

29. Members agreed that fees and charges should be reviewed regularly to ensure that a realistic rate is being applied (it was felt that in some instances the Council under charged for services). Members and residents agreed with the savings proposals to charge for bulky household waste collections (after the first 3 free collections). This was regarded as reasonable and in line with other local authorities. Residents agreed that the Council could charge more – especially fines for litter and parking.

Outcome : Proceed with budget saving proposal for charges for collecting bulky household waste after the first 3 free collections.

What is less of a priority?

30. Residents (through the Council News survey) considered, out of 27 services identified, that advice to consumers was the least important activity in making somewhere a good place to live (Appendix 2).
31. Members (in the focus groups) considered unnecessary printing and paperwork as an area where the Council could spend less.

Consultation

32. Consultation has been undertaken with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Vitality.

Alternative Options

33. There are no alternative options – the Council must consider the views of consultees.

Implications of Recommended Option

34. **Financial Implications** - The Strategic Director, Finance and ICT confirms that any financial implications arising from the views expressed during the consultation process will be considered as part of the final budget proposals.
35. **Risk Management Implications** - none
36. **Human Resources Implications** - none

37. **Equality and Diversity Implications** – Maximum provision was made to ensure that all stakeholders could take part in the consultation events in accordance with the Council's equalities policy.
38. **Crime and Disorder Implications** - none
39. **Sustainability Implications** - none
40. **Human Rights Implications** – none
41. **Ward Implications** - All