
BUDGET 2014/15 COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION

1.0 SUMMARY

- 1.1 Argyll and Bute Council aims to work with as well as for the people of Argyll and Bute. In previous years we have therefore held consultation exercises during our budget planning process. The budget outlook report to the Council forecasts a small funding gap of around £971,000 over the next 2 years before a return to a significant funding gap. A separate report on the budget strategy sets out an approach of preparing a budget for the period of the 2014/15 to 2015/16 finance settlement. This report on budget communication and consultation has been drafted on the assumption that strategy is agreed.
- 1.2 In 2014/2015 we are entering a period of relative financial stability. The need to make significant savings which has impacted on our budget in previous years is likely to be reduced for 2014/15 and 2015/16. However funding levels are projected to reduce significantly from 2016/17 onwards. A key objective in our financial planning over the next two years is to prepare for delivering services with the reduction in funding projected for 2016/17 and beyond.
- 1.3 It is proposed therefore to hold a communication and consultation exercise this year that will mark the beginning of a longer term conversation with our citizens on the planning of future council service delivery.
- 1.4 Keeping citizens informed of council news, engagement events and other council matters that impact upon them is an on-going priority. We receive useful feedback from our Citizens Panel on how people get council information. Our Citizens Panel consists of 1,000 people that together are a representative sample of our population. Seeking views more widely on how we communicate could provide valuable opportunities to develop and improve how we work.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

- 2.1 Agree that the council will hold a communication and consultation exercise asking for people's comments on what matters to them about council service delivery.

- 2.2 Agree that the council will take the opportunity to ask people how they would like to receive information in future from the council on news, engagement events and other council matters.

3.0 DETAIL

- 3.1 The budget communication and consultation exercise would be aimed at explaining the council's proposed approach to the budget over the next 2 years, creating a stable environment during which we plan for projected budget reductions in year 3 and beyond. It would advise of the council's proposed approach to achieving efficiency savings of 1% over these 2 years. It would set out that the council will apply efficiency savings evenly across all services and that this will not have an impact on service priorities.

- 3.2 The key points for communicating with our communities are proposed to be:

- We are entering a 'preserve and prepare' period in our financial planning.
- We can look forward to 2 years of stability in our funding
 - Our focus will be on preserving services and jobs
 - We will continue to modernise our ways of working so that we achieve efficiencies and can deliver services that meet the needs of those who depend on them.
- We must also look ahead to significant financial challenge
 - Public sector funding pressures nationally and our falling population locally will mean a fall in funding after 2016.
 - We must plan ahead for delivering services with less funding.
- We have agreed as a partner in the community planning partnership to an ambitious single outcome agreement that has a focus on economic growth and reversing our declining population.
 - This will require resources to be aligned to SOA priorities.
 - Funding will be required to invest for future growth.

- 3.3 The consultation will set the council's budget in the context of the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA). The SOA sets out the nationally and locally agreed priorities for the council and our community planning partners. These priorities are:

- The economy is diverse and thriving.
- We have infrastructure that supports sustainable growth.
- Education, skills and training maximises opportunities for all.
- Children and young people have the best possible start.
- People live active, healthier and independent lives.
- People live in safer and stronger communities

We propose to ask communities what matters to them about council service delivery in the context of the SOA priorities. Given the relative stability of the financial position for the next 2 years and the proposed budget strategy this consultation will begin the longer term conversation we will seek to have with our citizens as our longer term financial and community planning processes develop.

- 3.4 Finally, the consultation will ask communities their views on how they like to receive information from the council. This will inform future consultations and the activities of the council's Communications Team.
- 3.5 Based on what has proven most useful to citizens in previous budget consultation exercises, the communication and consultation exercise would be made available through the council's on-line channels (website and social media), through our Citizens Panel, and we would work with other organisations who play a key part in our communities in promoting it more widely, for example voluntary organisations through our Third Sector Partnership and local media. The consultation would be a simple series of questions. The council leader has previously held a web chat on the budget consultation. This would be incorporated in this consultation exercise to help ensure that citizens have the information they would like to respond to the consultation.
- 3.6 Communication channels such as the budget simulator, printed materials and presentations have proven to be less popular and so are not proposed for this exercise.
- 3.7 A summary report setting out the key points emerging from the budget communications and consultation exercise will be prepared for consideration as part of the final budget deliberations. The draft budget papers will not reflect the feedback from the budget communications and consultation exercise as these will be for members to consider in finalising the budget. It is likely that it will be late January 2014 before the budget communications and consultation exercise is finalised. A report will be made available in advance of the Council meeting in February.

4.0 CONCLUSION

- 4.1 A consultation exercise would provide an opportunity to involve citizens' feedback in the financial planning process of the council; and to develop the ways in which we communicate with citizens.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

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| 5.1 | Policy | The budget consultation approach ensure that the council is compliant with its duties under the Local Government Act 2003 and the recent guidance from the Scottish Government on joint resourcing for Community Planning |
| 5.2 | Financial | There is no cost for consulting via the council's electronic channels. Any cost of consulting through the Third Sector partnership can be met within existing budget. |
| 5.3 | Legal | none |
| 5.4 | HR | none |
| 5.5 | Equalities | The consultation will include appropriate activities to engage with hard to reach groups and will take account of groups with protected characteristics. |
| 5.6 | Risk | none |
| 5.7 | Customer Service: | A consultation exercise would provide an opportunity to involve citizens' feedback in the financial planning process of the council; and to develop the ways in which we communicate with citizens |

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