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**MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN CONSULTATION**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member – All Members**

**Responsible Director – Chief Officers Executive**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide details of the activities that were carried out as part of the medium term financial plan (MTFP) consultation, and to provide members with an overview of responses and alternative proposals that have been suggested.

**Summary**

2. The budget consultation ran from 11 February 2016 to 31 May 2016. During this time a communications plan was put in place with the aim of ensuring that anyone potentially affected by the proposals was aware of proposals, understood the proposals and why the savings were necessary, and had the opportunity to give their views to the people who would decide whether or not to implement the proposals. A key objective of the communication plan was to illustrate transparency in developing the proposals and in the decision making process. To support this, the comments received have been published on the budget website [www.darlington.gov.uk/budget](http://www.darlington.gov.uk/budget).
3. The proposals affect a wide range of council services; therefore it was highly likely that nearly all residents served by Darlington Borough Council could be affected to some degree. With this in mind, a number of communications channels were used to disseminate the information and gather feedback.
4. There was a statutory duty to carry out a separate library consultation, which ran in parallel with the MTFP consultation. Comments about the library proposals that were received through the MTFP consultation are included in the library consultation, which is covered in a separate cabinet paper.
5. Equality impact assessments (EIAs) were carried out in order to identify the impact of the proposals on protected characteristics. EIAs were completed against individual proposals and an exercise was carried out to consider the multiple impacts of proposals against protected characteristics. Details of the EIAs are

contained in a separate cabinet paper.

### **Recommendation**

6. It is recommended that Council members note the content of this report.

### **Background Papers**

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Neil Bowerbank, Head of Communications : Extension 6052

S17 Crime and Disorder	Feedback from the consultation (contained in this report) makes reference to crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	Feedback from the consultation (contained in this report) makes reference to health and well being.
Carbon Impact	Not applicable
Diversity	<p>A number of different channels were used in an attempt to communicate effectively with a wide range of audiences, using the resources available within the communications team and council services in general.</p> <p>An aim was to explain information in plain English, and this was done as much as possible using print, radio, television, and a number of opportunities for people to meet in person.</p> <p>A budget website was created to present the information. This was developed to be compliant with website accessibility standards.</p>
Wards Affected	All wards affected
Groups Affected	Many individuals and groups are affected by the proposals. Feedback have been included in this report and other reports on the agenda.
Budget and Policy Framework	Not applicable
Key Decision	Not applicable
Urgent Decision	Not applicable
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	Not applicable
Efficiency	Not applicable

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

7. A number of approaches were used to share information and gather feedback about the budget proposals. These are as follows;
8. **Cabinet members:** Cabinet members were actively engaged and met with a number of community groups, organisations, and individuals throughout the consultation process. Furthermore they regularly accommodated requests from the media for interviews, shared information about the consultation through their newsletters, and offered opportunities to discuss the proposals at ward surgeries.
9. **Public meetings:** Two public meetings were held to discuss all of the budget proposals, and a further two meetings were held to discuss the library proposals

(see separate report). The two budget meetings took place in the Dolphin Centre on 16 March (2pm and 6pm), and were attended by approximately 400 people in total. During these meetings cabinet members presented the proposals, the background to the proposals, and invited questions from the public. In total over 47 questions were asked and discussed. Each meeting lasted over 3 hours. The 6pm meeting was filmed and is available on the budget website (<http://www.darlington.gov.uk/budget>).

10. **Scrutiny meetings:** Eighteen scrutiny meetings took place to consider the proposals. Members of public were invited to attend these meetings and make representation. Points raised at scrutiny meetings were formally reported back to cabinet members.
11. **Budget website (with feedback form):** A dedicated budget website was developed and is available at [www.darlington.gov.uk/budget](http://www.darlington.gov.uk/budget). The website contains searchable full list of the proposals, a timeline of events (highlighting opportunities for people to have their say), background to the proposals, regularly updated questions and answers, and an online form enabling people to give their views. Where comments were received and it is clear that they were intended to be made public, they can be accessed via the website. Included within the site are a number of films that were recorded during some of the public meetings. During the consultation period the website was visited by more than 4,341 people in excess of 7,129 times, leading to more than 42,698 page views. Each visit to the website lasted an average of 5 minutes 8 seconds. A total of 398 comments were received via the online form.
12. **Darlington Borough Council Website:** The council's main website ([www.darlington.gov.uk](http://www.darlington.gov.uk)) has an average of 2,819 visits per day. A link to the budget website was displayed predominantly on the home page for the duration of the consultation, and a countdown clock was added to the home page during the final weeks of the consultation to remind people to have their say. Elsewhere within the website a link to the MTFP website was made available within the consultation section and Council, Cabinet, and Scrutiny meetings (along with supporting documents) were listed within the democracy section.
13. **Social media:** Social media was used to inform people about the consultation, explain the proposals, inform people about the ways in which they could have their say, and gather their feedback. The approach involved the use of the council's existing profiles due to the existence of established audiences. At the time of writing, 8,320 and 8,000 people were following the council's Facebook and Twitter profiles respectively. Social media was used to broadcast key updates during a number of public meetings, gather views and comments from people throughout the consultation period, and for a live online question and answer session with the Leader of the Council.
14. **Feedback email address:** An email address ([feedback@darlington.gov.uk](mailto:feedback@darlington.gov.uk)) was set up as an alternative online communications channel through which 92 comments were received. This feedback can be found in the comments section of the budget website.

15. **Comments via post:** A postal address was set up to allow people to submit comments via this route. A total of 55 letters were received from a combination of residents and organisations.
16. **Press and media:** The Northern Echo is the dominant local newspaper and it embarked on a prolonged campaign to raise the debate about the proposals, and at times articles were being published on a daily basis. In addition to this, local radio and television took a significant interest and covered the proposals as news stories and interviews with cabinet members and senior council officers. In addition to press releases, 44 media enquiries were received, 10 from television stations, 9 from radio stations, and 25 from the local press.
17. **One Darlington Magazine:** The One Darlington magazine is produced every other month and is delivered to households across the Borough. Prior to the consultation period the magazine was used to illustrate the broad range of services provided by the council. The January 2016 edition of the magazine carried an article explaining the impact of the Government settlement, introduced the need for some proposals to address the issue, and timescales for the budget consultation. The March 2016 edition carried 6 pages dedicated to consultation, explaining some of the key proposals, the criteria used to establish the proposals, responded to some of the regularly ask questions, and explained to people how, when, and where they could have their say. The May 2016 edition carried 2 pages about the consultation, primarily reminding people to have their say, and to let people know what will happen once the consultation ends. The July 2016 edition currently has 4 pages planned to include details of the outcome of the consultation.
18. **Targeted consultation:** A number of council services carried out targeted activities with service users in the form of surveys and meetings. Much of this work was to inform equality impact assessments, details of which can be found in a separate report.
19. **Petitions:** A number of petitions were received during the consultation period. The petitions were shared with cabinet members and senior council officers for consideration, and are referenced within the comments section of the budget website and against the relevant proposals.
20. **Partner briefings:** The Chief Executive along with other senior council officers met and briefed a wide range of strategic partners, where potential implications on their organisations and service users were discussed in detail. Feedback from these organisations was received through a range of channels, with a number of organisations providing written responses which be found in **Appendix 1**.
21. **UNISON:** A detailed response was submitted by UNISON. The full response can be found in **Appendix 2**. The comments and alternative proposals put forward by UNISON are included in the budget website, and referenced where appropriate in **Appendix 3** and **Appendix 4**.

## **Outcome of Consultation**

22. The consultation attracted a lot of feedback. Where it is clear that the feedback was intended to be shared publically, or where feedback could be shared with personal information removed, it has been added to the MTFP website. All of the relevant feedback can be found in the comments section of the website, and attempts have been made to display feedback against the relevant proposals.
23. A summary of the comments received against the individual proposals can be found in Appendix 3.
24. The proposals were carefully developed to achieve the necessary savings and meet any statutory requirements. As part of the consultation process people were encouraged to submit alternative proposals that would achieve the same objectives. Many comments were received that gave an opinion about the proposals and illustrated the impact that the proposals would have on individuals and organisations. A smaller number of comments were received that provided some considered alternative proposals. This information is summarised in Appendix 4. All of the feedback received has been considered and used to help revise some of the proposals and has been shared with service managers to consider as a way of improving services and reducing costs.