

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 17 July 2013
Report for: Decision
Report of: Democratic Services Officer, Helen Mitchell

Report Title

APPROACH TO BUDGET SCRUTINY 2014/15

Summary

On an annual basis, Scrutiny Members consider the draft budget proposals and provide comments to the Executive prior to their agreement by Council.

In recent years, the process has been revisited and altered in order to enhance the outcomes arising from budget scrutiny and minimise, as far as possible, demands on Members' and Officers' time.

The purpose of this report is to secure agreement from the committee on an approach to budget scrutiny based on feedback from Scrutiny Members, the Executive and Corporate Management Team.

Recommendation(s)

Recommendation 1: That the Director of Finance and colleagues work with Democratic Services to prepare the paperwork which will support the budget setting process.

Recommendation 2: That the Executive note Scrutiny's wish to be involved at the earliest opportunity in the scrutiny of the draft budget proposals.

Recommendation 3: That the 2013/14 approach to budget scrutiny be formally adopted as the approach for 2014/15 subject to any comments by Members.

Recommendation 4: That Scrutiny Members consider the involvement of partners within the budget scrutiny process.

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

Name: Helen Mitchell
Extension: 1229
Background Papers: None

Background Information

The Scrutiny and Health Scrutiny Committee possess the responsibility for holding the Executive to account for its decisions. Part of this responsibility extends to ensuring that the Council sets its budget in accordance with its own strategies and, increasingly, those of our partners.

In this challenging financial climate, reductions to the Local Government Settlement and other policy changes will impact on our citizens. As a result, the Scrutiny and Health Scrutiny Committees have a responsibility to ensure that the plans to mitigate the impact and to balance the budget are robust and fit for purpose.

Each year Members strive to refine the budget scrutiny process and last year was no exception. In order to capture this improvement and make changes to secure further improvement, the views of Scrutiny Members, the Executive and CMT have been sought and will be presented within this report.

Budget Scrutiny 2013/14

The approach taken in 2013/14 was to enhance the overall process to secure more focussed recommendations to the Executive.

The key differences between the approaches adopted in 2013/14 and 2012/13 are highlighted below: -

Pre-Meetings and Agenda Setting

In contrast with the previous year, pre-meetings were organised in order to –

1. Enable Members to identify key points of scrutiny from directorate proposals;
2. With the support of finance officers, further examine the budget paperwork in order to clarify understanding prior to the budget scrutiny workshops;
3. To set an agenda for the workshops.

This change supported Members to better understand the proposals as it afforded a further opportunity to clarify understanding within the overall process. Additionally, it enhanced the Member-led approach to Scrutiny as agendas were set in line with their priorities. Lastly, the development of an agenda supported the Executive and Corporate Directors to be better prepared and, as a result, it contributed to a more focussed and informed discussion at the workshops.

Self Selecting Topic Groups

A key strength of the establishment of Topic Groups within the Scrutiny structure is their self-selecting nature. Members with an interest in a proposed topic are able to join and contribute to a project which in turn drives the review forward successfully. Each Topic Group was allocated a directorate's draft budget to scrutinise in 2013/14 (with the exception of ETO and EGP, of which were examined simultaneously) and Members joined a Topic Group that they had a specific interest in. This contributed to better questioning and a more detailed and focussed discussion.

Timing

As the process was undertaken much earlier than usual, it allowed more time for meaningful consideration by the Executive of the Scrutiny recommendations prior to the formal decision being taken.

Comments on Budget Scrutiny 2013/14

Executive Comments

Comments received from the Executive explicitly stated that the process was 'helpful' and that Members were 'happy' with it. One comment received focussed on the preparation of Scrutiny Members and that an opportunity existed for participants to better appraise themselves of the information presented. A further comment expressed that an 'early heads up of thorny issues would be no bad thing for the process to incorporate'. These comments broadly endorse the approach to budget scrutiny which was adopted last year.

In relation to Scrutiny Members being better prepared, this can be addressed through the clear identification of what Members wish to achieve from the budget scrutiny process. By doing this, officers in Democratic Services and Finance can work closely with a view to developing budget paperwork which enhances understanding and supports the achievement of their desired aims. Additionally, Topic Group Chairman should encourage Scrutiny Members to attend pre-meetings and clarify their understanding at every opportunity.

Scrutiny Members have always welcomed involvement in the budget setting process at the earliest opportunity and to support an 'early heads up' would require Scrutiny's involvement at the formative stages of the process. In order to formalise this, it would be helpful to note it and ensure that Scrutiny Members are involved in the formative stages of the development of the draft budget proposals.

Recommendation 1: That the Director of Finance and colleagues work with Democratic Services to prepare the paperwork which will support the budget setting process.

Recommendation 2: That the Executive note Scrutiny's wish to be involved at the earliest opportunity in the scrutiny of the draft budget proposals.

Corporate Management Team Comments

Similar to the comments received by the Executive, CMT welcomed the refreshed approach to budget scrutiny as it allowed for more time to provide considered comments.

Scrutiny Comments

Comments received from Scrutiny Members overwhelmingly preferred last year's approach and one Member cited that the process is 'moving in the right direction'. A further Member advised that the early start to budget scrutiny had a very positive effect on the overall process as there was enough 'time to question and receive answers'.

Budget Scrutiny 2014/15

This report has highlighted that, subject to some minor amendments, the approach adopted in 2013/14 is working for Scrutiny and Executive Members, as well as Corporate Management Team.

Recommendation 3: That the 2013/14 approach to budget scrutiny be formally adopted as the approach for 2014/15 subject to any comments by Members.

Involvement of Partners

As referred to elsewhere within this report, part of the responsibility of Scrutiny Members is to ensure that the Council sets its budget in accordance with its own strategies and, increasingly, those of our partners. In order to do this, Members may wish to consider whether there is any scope for enabling our partners to participate, in an appropriate fashion, within the budget scrutiny process.

Councils such as the City of Plymouth involved the Police, Shadow Clinical Commissioning Group, Fire and Rescue Authority and local Health Authorities as part of their approach. This had the effect of providing Members with a Plymouth-wide view of the budget and highlighted a number of strategic and operational issues faced by partners. Scrutiny Members may feel that a similar approach, involving key partners such as those mentioned above, may be beneficial.

Recommendation 4: That Scrutiny Members consider the involvement of partners within the budget scrutiny process.