

Salford City Council

Calling the tune: consulting on the Budget

Report of the Lead Member for Corporate Services
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1. Introduction

Salford City Council has developed over recent years an increasingly open approach to the building up of its annual Budget. This paper seeks to set out as clearly as possible the rationale behind consultation and the process being used. It is hoped that this will both make it clear what citizens have the right to expect and inform the practices of the directorates of the City Council.

The commitment to consultation on the Budget is a fairly recent one. It began modestly in 1996 when the then chairman of the Finance Committee, Councillor Bernard Pennington, called public meetings at the Lancastrian Hall to seek comments on the budget proposals. This was the culmination of a process of change which had gradually encompassed all Members of the Council in determining the Budget. This is compared to the practice of twenty years ago when the City Council's Budget was shrouded in as much secrecy as that of the Chancellor of the Exchequer!

Public meetings to engage opinion on the proposals have now become part and parcel of the Budget process and, in addition, the Council seeks to give widespread publicity through the local media and its website to the issues we face. The consultation has been extended to enable representations to be made at the earliest stage in the process when the City Council is developing its strategy. We have also opened up membership of the Council's Budget Committee to representatives of business, trade unions and the voluntary sector.

Given the ad hoc developments which have taken place, it would appear to be useful to consolidate our approach within a single document. It is not intended that this should be the last word on consultation processes. Indeed, it is hoped that this document will stimulate debate to enable us to continually improve and extend consultation.

2. Why consult?

Consultation is generally regarded as a good thing and has been adopted as a principle by many organisations. A great danger is that consultation

can become a fashionable adjunct to decision-making rather than a useful tool. Too often, organisations 'go through the motions' of consultation without purpose or commitment. It is absolutely vital that there are clear objectives behind the consultation. Suggestions for these can range from the cynical to the grandiose.

At one extreme, there will be consultation because organisations **have to** consult – usually because of legislation. If that is the motivation then consultation is likely to be rudimentary and a matter of form. Others might consult in order to **evade responsibility**. They effectively put the decision into the hands of others. Salford City Council rejects both of these approaches. We voluntarily engage in consultation because we think it is right, it is useful and it helps us to make better decisions. Councillors, however, are elected to make those decisions and the final judgment on the Budget must be in the hands of the City Council which is directly accountable to the people of Salford through the ballot box.

We believe that there are more compelling reasons for consultation. We hope that through extensive consultation we can build up **public awareness** of the issues we face. This is fundamental to the need for encouraging active citizenship. Apathy – at election time and in political participation – is a threat to local democracy. Poor turnout in local elections calls into question the legitimacy of local government and some would use this as an excuse to remove some of local government's functions. But that would simply remove people's opportunity to have a say in the number of services and the types of service to be provided to the city. We believe that local democracy does matter and we should show through the Budget how it matters. Budget decisions touch on the lives of all citizens from the moment they walk out of their front doors in the morning. In promoting awareness of the Budget, we make the connections between the daily experience of everyday services, the taxes paid for them, and the participation of citizens in the democratic process.

We can also draw on the knowledge and experience of the public as users of services and staff as providers of services to **provide information** on how robust Budget proposals are. Managers and councillors do their best to ensure that proposals in Budget are viable and judgements about the relative merits of competing proposals are right. What is persuasive in an official report, however, does not always stand up to the scrutiny of those who are directly affected by the proposals, whether they be users of a

service, providers of a service or, indeed, alternative providers. Proposals can have unforeseen consequences and constraints which can result in the objective behind the proposal not being met. We seek, therefore, to draw on the expertise and experience of users to ensure proposals are robust.

We also seek **legitimacy** by using consultation to gauge public support for the options. Some local authorities have moved down the road of holding a referendum on the Budget. This type of exercise, though, offers limited options whose selection voters cannot influence. There is also a tendency to offer extreme options which tends to guarantee a majority for the middle option, usually that preferred by the Council. We believe that engaging with citizens in a more open way and using a variety of consultative mechanisms are the best ways to assure ourselves that the City Council's decisions reflect the priorities of the people of Salford.

3. Who is consulted?

The principal purpose of this process is to be as inclusive as possible. All those who have a stake in the Budget should have the opportunity to contribute: this includes citizens, users of specific services and the providers of specific services. This principle has been adopted by the City Council but we continue to learn how best to put this into practice.

The City Council needs to ensure that its proposals represent the broad opinion of the public. The ultimate test is the ballot box. We will, however, ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to have their say, individually and collectively. We will pay particular attention to ensuring we have effective consultation with those groups with perspectives that may differ from the dominant assumptions about public opinion. Such groups would include women, younger people, older people, ethnic minorities, and the disabled. We will be proactive in identifying and encouraging participation by such groups.

The City Council is committed to developing its relationship with the business community whose contributions are important both as users and providers of council services. The tax paid by business – the National Non-Domestic Rate (NNDR) - is set nationally and collected by the Council as agents of the Government. This money is then redistributed to

councils according to a formula. The Government has indicated a willingness to restore some control over the NNDR to local government. A strong relationship with the local business community is essential to promote cooperation on the use of any new powers.

Employees of the Council have the right to be consulted not only because Budget decisions can affect their livelihood, terms and conditions, but because they can make a positive contribution through their insights into the practicalities of service provision.

Other agencies, both voluntary and statutory, are affected by Budget decisions – either because they are directly funded by the City Council or because they work in partnership with the authority. Budget decisions may also have implications for the services provided for other agencies – for example, leading to an increase in demand for their services.

4. When are citizens consulted?

Stage one

The budgetary process begins after the Council's summer recess when a report is made to the City Council on the issues it is likely to face in the forthcoming budget round. This report seeks to identify:

- the likely demands on the Council's resources; and
- an estimate of the resources available to the Council.

It will seek views on:

- the strategy that should be adopted (including the level of spending and level of tax set as an objective);
- the robustness of assumptions made;
- the priorities for allocating resources.

This report will then be submitted for consultation and Cabinet will recommend a firm strategy to the City Council at a later meeting.

Stage Two

Once the Revenue Support Grant settlement is announced by the Government (usually in December), a report will be submitted to Cabinet which outlines:

- the total resources available to the Council;
- the Government's assumptions about national Council Tax levels;
- the estimated base budget;
- the level of savings required/growth possible to match resources to the base budget;
- the options available showing a range of levels of spending, the Council Tax for each level, the consequences in terms of savings or growth.

The Cabinet will then recommend to Council that more detailed proposals identifying specific savings proposals and growth bids should be prepared on a range of options. This will form the basis of a consultation, probably in early February.

Report back

A Report on Consultation will be made publicly available. It will summarise the representations received, and respond to technical or information points.

The results of the consultation will be reported to Cabinet which will then propose a Budget to the Council before the end of February and agree a response to the Consultation Report indicating how it has responded to the issues raised.

Continuous monitoring

Monthly meetings will be held of the Budget Committee which will:

- satisfy itself that there are no significant variations from the Budget;
- where there are, call for action plans from directorates to remedy the variation;

- satisfy itself that such action plans are viable;
- satisfy itself that specific proposals for change in the Budget are effectively implemented.

The Budget Committee shall issue a Report after each meeting which shall be publicly available. The membership of the Budget Committee shall be open to major stakeholders in the Budget, including the voluntary sector, the business community and employees.

5. How citizens are consulted

All citizens as taxpayers will have the opportunity to influence the Budget of the City Council. To this end we will:

- write to every household inviting citizens to register on a panel which will automatically receive key consultation documents. This will normally be done with the Council Tax bill or any correspondence from the Council Tax office;
- invite such registration through the City Council's magazine *Salford People*, the Council's website and the media;
- invite directly citizens and groups who have registered an interest to participate in seminars on the Stage Two consultation and provide the relevant documentation;
- arrange seminars for specific groups where these have been requested;
- use innovative ways of encouraging participation by groups often excluded, drawing (for example) on the experience of consultation for the Unitary Development Plan in involving young people and using existing forums and centres of youth activity;
- publish documents on the Council's website and make them available to the local media, including publications by voluntary groups such as the Salford Talking Newspaper;
- ensure that, through a 'Freepost' address and an interactive web page, it is as easy as possible for the public to respond;
- use the results of existing surveys of the opinions of Salford people.

As consumers of services, citizens should have the opportunity to have their say on specific proposals. To this end we will:

- require Directors to indicate in their submissions to the Budget Committee and Cabinet the specific consultation that has taken place with users of the service;
- require Directors to report on any survey of opinion that is relevant to proposals they are putting forward.

As employees of the Council, we will seek to ensure that staff comments on proposals are channelled through the appropriate consultative committees and through direct representation on the Budget Committee. Employees who are citizens of Salford have the same rights as other citizens to be involved in wider consultation.

6. How is consultation followed up?

It is not enough for the public to have an opportunity to put their views forward. They have a right to know what the Council's response is to those views and why the Council has responded in a particular way – hence the proposal for a formal Report on Consultation which will be made publicly available and copies sent to those who request it.

7. Background documents

Audit Commission (1999) *Listen Up: Effective Community Consultation*, London.

Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998) *Guidance on Enhancing Public Participation in Local Government*, London.

Local Government Association (1998) *Listening to business: building stronger partnerships between local government and business*, London.

Appendix A: Guidance notes

Documentation

All documentation should be written in plain English
Documents should be available in languages other than English
Documents should be accessible for those with special needs
Documents should be published on the Intranet so they can be available at any Council office

Seminars

Seminars should be well advertised with appropriate accommodation arranged in advance for certainty of information
Seminars should be clearly signposted with adequate staff on duty to register the public
Seminars should be arranged in small groups of no more than 25 and seating should be in the round to facilitate discussion and maximise the opportunity for everyone to contribute
Each seminar should be attended by at least one Lead Member and one finance officer.

The Budget Committee

The Budget Committee shall be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Budget; assessing the viability of Budget proposals, and making a response to the Budget consultation.

Its membership shall include all political parties on the Council, representatives of staff unions, the voluntary sector and the business community.

Its members shall receive adequate training in budgetary issues and scrutiny techniques.

It will be chaired by an elected member who is not a member of the Executive (ie neither a Lead Member nor Deputy Lead Member).

The Committee will issue a Report, which will be publicly available, after each meeting. The Report will comment on:

- the Committee's overall view of the progress of the Budget;
- any specific recommendations that the Committee wishes to make to Cabinet or Council;
- the management of the budget of each directorate, referring to variations in budgets, slippage on specific proposals and the effectiveness of action to remedy variations and slippage; and
- any matter within the competence of the Committee.

Appendix B: List of consultees

A number of individuals have asked, as a result of the leaflets included with Council Tax Bills and general publicity, to be consulted on the Budget. For obvious reasons, their personal details are not published here.

Below is a list of organisations which were consulted directly or indirectly last year (because they are represented on Community Committees) on the Budget. We would welcome suggestions for extending the list. We appreciate that this list may require updating.

Leisure

Albert Park Vets Bowling Club
Amblecote Rangers FC
Boothstown Festival Committee
Boothstown Fun Run Committee
Boothstown Lads' Senior FC
Boothstown Project
Worsley/Walkden Community Choir
English Amateur Dancesport Association
Friends of Blackleach
Grove Boxing Club
Irlam and Cadishead Local History Society
Irlam Writers' Group
Manchester and District Swimming and Water Polo Association
Northern Counties Facilities Committee
Ordsall Community Arts
Spanish Conversation Group
Wise Monkey Theatre Group
Worsley ASC

Environmental Groups

Irlam and Cadishead Natural History Association
Salford and Trafford Groundwork Trust
Walkden Monument Restoration Committee
Worsley Civic Trust

Business

Business Link Salford
Danceworld UK
Hulton District Centre
Langworthy Road Shop Traders
Manchester TEC
Mocha Parade Business Watch
Salford 'Black Cab' Driver/Owners
Salford Shopping City
United Northwest Co-op

Unions

Salford Trades Union Council
UNISON

Tenants & Residents Associations

Agecroft Residents Association
Albert Park Residents' Association
Alliance Community Tenants Association
ALMA
Amblecote Community Association
Apple Tree Court Tenant Management Co-operative
Armitage Residents Association
Astley Court Residents Associations
Athole Street Tenants Association
Barton Fields Residents Association
Beech Court Tenants Associations
Beech Farm Residents' Association
Bickershaw Residents' Committee
Birch Road Estate Residents Association
Boothstown Residents' Association
Boothstown Tenants' Association
Brindley Residents Association
Brookhouse Tenants' Association
Broomedge Residents Association
Brydon Close Tenants Association
Bryony Close

Bury New Road Tenants' Association
Camp Street Residents' Association
Canon Green Tenants' Association
Canterbury Gardens Tenants Association
Central Walkden Residents
Church Street Tenants' Association
Cliffside Residents' Association
Clifton 2000
Cloughfield Tenant Association
College Croft Tenants Association
DATA
Duchy Community Group
Eccles Forum
ECCTA
Ellesmere Park Community in Action
Ellesmere Residents Association
Ennismore Close Residents Association
Fitzwarren Court Tenants Association
Gerald Road Residents Association
Hanover Court Tenants & Residents Association
Highcedars Ltd
Hill Street Residents Association
Holm Court Tenants Association
Hornbeam Court Tenants Association
Irwell Valley Residents Association
Kellets Residents Association
Kembal House Tenants Association
Kenyon Residents Association
Kersal Cell Tenants Association
Kimberley Norton Residents Association
Linen Court Residents Association
Littleton Road Action Group
Lombardy Court Residents Association
Magnolia Court Tenants Association
Malus Court Tenants Association
Minoan Gardens Residents Association
Monton Village Community Association
Monton Village Residents Association
Moorside Residents Association
Moorside South Residents Association

Moss Meadow Estate Residents Association
Moss Vale Residents Association
Mount Skip Residents
Mulberry Court Tenants Association
New Barracks Tenants Management Co-op
New Weaste Tenants Association
Newlands Residents Association
North East Ordsall Tenants Association
Oakhill Court Tenants Association
OPTRA
Ordsall Lane Tenants Association
Paddockfield Tenants Association
Parkfield Residents Association
Peach Tree Court Tenants Association
Peel Residents Association
Philip Street Residents Association
Plum Tree Court Tenants Association
Poets Corner Residents Association
Precinct Forum
Rainbow Residents Action Group
Salix Court Tenants Association
South Clarendon Tenants Association
Southgarth Residents Association
Southway Tenants Association
Spike Island and Riverside Residents Association
Spruce Court Tenants Association
Sutton Residents Association
Sycamore Court Tenants Association
Teneriffe Estate Tenants and Residents Association
The De Traffords Residents Association
The Horseshoe Residents Association
The Park Residents Association
The Valley Residents Association
Thorn Court Residents Association
Trinity Court Residents
Victoria Lodge Tenants Association
Wellington Street West Residents Association
Westwood Park Community Association
Whit Lane Residents Association
Wiltshire Street Residents Association

Windsor Albion Tenant Management Co-operative
Worsley Village Community Association
Zebra Street Area Residents Association

Health, Community and Social Services

A to Z Counselling
Aguda Community Services
Albert Park Credit Union
Arthritis and Rheumatism Council
Attention Deficient Disorder Support Group
Beis Rochel
Beis Rochel Satiner
Belz Communities
Bikur Cholim & Gemiluth Trust Chessed Advice
Binok of Manchester
Boothstown Luncheon/Elderly Group
British Red Cross Society
Catholic Handicapped Fellowship
Community Drugs Team
DIAL
Fiddlers Lane Parents Group
Greater Manchester Police
Irlam and Cadishead Carers Group
Irlam Probus Club
Jewish Marriage Council
Lower Broughton Health Centre
Mandley Park Credit Union
MENCAP
Oporto House
Ordsall Resource Centre
Probation Service
Relate
Safer Salford
Salford and Trafford Health Authority
Salford Citizens' Advice Bureau
Salford Community Health Council
Salford Community Health Project
Salford Community Transport
Salford Consortium

Salford CVS
Salford Disabled Motorists
Salford Royal Hospitals NHS Trust
Salford Talking Newspaper for the Blind
Salford TUC Centre for the Unemployed
Salford Victims Support
St George's Church and Family Centre
Swinton Enterprises
Zichron Yechezkel

Older People

Care for the Elderly Association
Irlam Old Age Pensioners
Irlam Retired Persons Group
Salford Forum for Elderly People
Salford Pensioners

Women's Groups

Eccles Townswomen's Guild
Little Hulton Women and Family Centre
Salford Women's Aid
Salford Women's Centre

Education

All schools in the city
Boothstown Methodist PTA
Salford College
SETAS
University of Salford
Eccles College
Special Needs Jewish School
Playgroups

Youth Groups

1st Worsley Scout Group
Little Hulton 7-11 Project

Under-8s Play
District Guide Associations

Ethnic Groups

Eccles Link Project
Salford Link Project

Religious Groups

Eccles 'Churches Together'
Salford Urban Mission
St Andrew's Church, Walkden
St Ignatius Church, Ordsall
St John's Church, Walkden

Housing Groups

Salford Community Housing Association
Irwell Valley Housing Association
Housing for Under Privileged
Agudas Israel Housing Association