

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
DATE OF MEETING: 18 NOVEMBER 2014
REPORT OF: ASSISTANT DIRECTOR PUBLIC REALM
TITLE: DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULTATION ON HIGHWAYS SAVINGS

Is this a Key Decision?

No

One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards. If this is a key decision then the item must be on the appropriate forward plan of key decisions.

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1 What is the report about?

- 1.1 To consider the City Council's response to Devon County Council's consultation on savings to the 2015/16 Highways and Traffic Management budget.

2 Recommendations:

- 2.1 That the City Council's response to the consultation is as set out in the body of this report;
- 2.2 That the Leader of Council seeks a meeting with the relevant Cabinet Members at the County Council to begin a dialogue about how the two councils can work together to ensure that the economic and social impacts of these proposals on the City of Exeter are minimised.

3 Reasons for the recommendation:

- 3.1 To set out the Council's position on the proposed savings by Devon County Council.

4 What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

- 4.1 No direct resource implications arise from the recommended response, although the report identifies several instances where the proposals being consulted on may result in additional demand on financial or staff resources for the City Council.

5 Section 151 Officer comments:

- 5.1 No comment.

6 What are the legal aspects?

- 6.1 Not applicable.

7 Monitoring Officer's comments:

7.1 No comment.

8 Background

8.1 Devon County Council is consulting on eight proposals to save £3.4 million on the 2015/16 Highways and Traffic Management budget. The consultation period ends on 5 December 2014. Devon County Council has a statutory duty to repair and maintain highways in Devon and maintain bridges, retaining walls, street lights, footpaths and cycle ways, gullies, traffic signals and pedestrian crossings, roadside verges.

8.2 Around £18.5 million has already been cut from the highways revenue budget since 2009. The County Council's objective is to find different, more cost-effective ways of doing things and stop non-essential work in order to maintain a safe and effective highway network while helping to support economic growth. In addition to the eight proposals, they intend to continue to reduce costs of management and support services, as well as raising fees and charges.

8.3 The options for each proposal are to:

- Reduce service as proposed
- Consider alternative cost saving
- Cut budget further
- No comment

9 PROPOSAL 1 - GRITTING AND SNOW CLEARING FLEET

9.1 *"We have two fleets of vehicles which are used to respond to winter weather situations. One is used to respond to normal winter weather and a second is used to respond to severe winter weather such as heavy and prolonged snowfalls. The second fleet of vehicles are used on rare occasions and cost a lot to maintain. We propose reducing the number of vehicles in the second fleet to make savings. However, this would mean we would be less able to respond to issues off the main road network during periods of severe winter weather".*

Current spending: £4,424,000 Proposed saving: £50,000

General observations:

9.2 The fleet referred to here is the one used for the secondary routes in Exeter but it may also have a back-up role for the main fleet in severe weather. Due to climate change extreme weather conditions are more likely to occur more often, therefore cutting the resources able to deal with extreme weather conditions would reduce the future capacity to clear key roads in reasonable timescales.

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

9.3 This is difficult to assess from the information provided but in times of severe weather it may mean that the cities road remain unsafe or impassable for longer.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

9.4 This is difficult to assess from the information provided.

Favoured option:

9.5 Consider alternative cost saving

10 PROPOSAL 2 - GRITTING AND SNOW CLEARING ROUTES

- 10.1 *“When temperatures are forecast to be close to or below freezing we routinely treat certain routes with salt. This is determined by criteria such as community population and traffic flows. To achieve identified savings we propose reviewing the criteria. However, it would mean that we wouldn’t be able to treat access routes to smaller communities and less well used routes with salt. Current spending: £4,424,000. Proposed saving: £103,000 (only £40,000 in first year to allow for criteria review costs).”*

[Map - Primary salting network](#)

[Map - Smaller communities that may be affected by changes to salting routes](#)

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

- 10.2 The map provided as part of the consultation is not sufficient for us to assess the impact on the Primary (AVO) and Secondary (SAVO1 and 2) routes in Exeter. However, it appears no change is proposed for Exeter.
- 10.3 However, if changes are proposed, any reduction in salting will have an impact on vehicular access to parts of the city, affecting public transport, increasing the likelihood of musculoskeletal injury to members of the public and council staff, increasing the likelihood of vehicle accidents. For the council this could mean impacts on rubbish collection and additional costs as a result of additional staffing and vehicle repairs.
- 10.4 In addition, many businesses have employees who commute from outlying areas into Exeter. Reducing road clearance serving smaller communities could very much disrupt the operation of Exeter-based businesses. Additionally, the lack of clearance could result in many more schools not opening in extreme weather conditions, which again could exacerbate the situation further, with employees staying at home to care for children.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

- 10.5 This is difficult to assess from the information provided.

Favoured option:

- 10.6 Consider alternative cost saving

11 PROPOSAL 3 – GRIT BINS

- 11.1 *“Our grit bins are currently restocked with salt each year during the autumn. They are refilled during the winter when reported as necessary and resources permit. To achieve identified savings we propose to stop maintaining or restocking grit bins. The grit bins would not be removed so community groups could take over the restocking of the bins, by purchasing salt through a contract procured by DCC. Current spending: £4,424,000. Proposed saving: £80,000”*

General observations:

- 11.2 There will be an impact on public health as it is assumed that the grit bins are located at high risk areas that are a County Council responsibility. Devon County Council has encouraged self-help by communities in doing their own gritting, but failing to maintain the bins or replace the grit will undermine this form of community engagement and the County Council’s duty of care. The City Council currently funds supplementary gritting to meet its duty of care

responsibilities at the Civic Centre, depot sites and the RAMM.

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

- 11.3 In areas where there are Town or Parish Councils, the provision of grit bins could be funded through their precept should the impact of the budget reduction be thought to warrant it. However, Exeter residents would suffer disproportionately because there are no organisations with similar powers which could take over this function.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

- 11.4 Some highway authorities have managed to get health trusts to fund this (because it's much cheaper than treating broken bones) so this should be investigated, especially in view of the County Council's recent acquisition of responsibility for public health.

Favoured option:

- 11.5 Consider alternative cost saving for Exeter

12 PROPOSAL 4 – PICNIC SITES

- 12.1 *"We currently own and maintain the four picnic sites on the A361/ A39. To achieve identified savings we propose closing these sites and putting the land up for sale. Current spending: £133,000. Proposed saving: £133,000"*

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

- 12.2 None

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

- 12.3 Not applicable

Favoured option:

- 12.4 Reduce service as proposed

13 PROPOSAL 5 – GRASS CUTTING

- 13.1 *"We currently fund the cutting of all highway verges in towns and villages four times a year. On verges in rural areas, a one metre strip is cut twice a year along main roads and significant local roads. To achieve identified savings we propose only funding grass cutting to maintain visibility at junctions and on the inside of bends in towns, villages and rural areas. Current spending: £1,179,302. Proposed saving: £700,000"*

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

- 13.2 The consultation refers only to towns and villages, not cities, and it is unclear whether the intention is to implement this saving in Exeter.
- 13.3 If this were to be the case in Exeter, it would affect the look and feel of Exeter, particularly on key highways routes and in residential areas. As a city aspiring to and delivering economic growth, the public realm is important to maintain the image of prosperity and ensure that the city continues to attract investment. This will be completely undermined if the approaches to the City Centre are scruffy and overgrown year round. This is in contradiction to the County Council's stated objective of supporting economic growth.

- 13.4 In the rest of Devon, the impact of this may not be so great as in Exeter. Every other settlement is covered by a Town or Parish Council that can not only precept to raise money to undertake this work but are much more able to mobilize community resources to do it.
- 13.5 The City Council does not have the budget or capacity to undertake this service. The management costs of identifying and programming work would be disproportionate.
- 13.6 For both the above reasons, Exeter should be considered as an exception from this blanket policy and the two councils should work together to minimize the impact.
- 13.7 The public reaction to such a proposal is likely to be considerable but most residents do not distinguish between the city and county council. This proposal will lead to public complaints and comments in the local and social media and this will inevitably place a drain on staff capacity at the city council.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

- 13.8
- Have open dialogue about the proposals so that we can influence where grass cutting is vital to maintain the prosperous look and feel of the City and continue to attract investment.
 - Consider Exeter as a special case and allocate a higher proportion of funding to the city.
 - Work with local residents to encourage them to take pride in their own community and undertake grass cutting themselves. The lack of Town and Parish Councils in Exeter makes it a special case for the County Council to invest capacity in this.
 - Consider attracting commercial sponsorship to supplement the budget.

Favoured option:

- 13.9 Consider alternative cost saving.

14 PROPOSAL 6 – WEED TREATMENT

- 14.1 *“We currently fund targeted weed spraying and treatment of noxious weeds (thistles, docks, and ragwort) mainly in town and village centres. Ragwort is either weed sprayed (if in large quantities), or hand-pulled if there are small isolated pockets. We propose to stop targeted weed spraying and treatment of noxious weeds, but will maintain a small budget to enable use of Community Payback volunteers. Current spending: £343,916. Proposed saving: £250,000”*

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

- 14.2 Again, it is unclear from the information above whether the intention is to stop spraying the invasive weeds, such as Japanese Knotweed, or to stop spraying all vegetation on footpaths.
- 14.3 If the former, there is no cost implication to the city council from this proposal. Devon County Council would be liable for damage caused by Japanese knotweed.
- 14.4 If this also refers to weed control on urban footpaths, the implications are severe. We know what impact this will have in Exeter because the spring weed spray was missed this year. The whole city, including the city centre retail area, looks scruffy and poor – in direct contrast to the indicators of economic growth – and the level of complaints and comments in the media have been high. A policy approach not to spray weeds would have (and has had) an immediate impact on how investors and business owners feel about the economic potential of the city and it will inevitably have a long term impact as investment falls away and the

economic indicators reverse. As a city aspiring to and delivering economic growth, the public realm is important to maintain the image of prosperity and ensure that the city continues to attract investment. This will be completely undermined if the approaches to the City Centre are scruffy and overgrown year round. This is in contradiction to the County Council's stated objective of supporting economic growth. It is also shortsighted because the County Council's budget benefits from business rates retention and if economic growth in Exeter is stifled by this policy approach there will be a financial impact on the County Council.

- 14.5 In addition, it is increasingly difficult to maintain adequate standards of street cleaning due to weed growth, a situation exacerbated during leaf fall. This will have efficiency implications for the City Council and will likely lead to a drop in street cleaning standards.
- 14.6 In the rest of Devon, the impact of this may not be so great as in Exeter. Every other settlement is covered by a Town or Parish Council that can not only precept to raise money to undertake this work but are much more able to mobilize community resources to do it.
- 14.7 For both the above reasons, Exeter should be considered as an exception from this blanket policy and the two councils should work together to minimize the impact.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

- 14.8 Have open dialogue about the proposals so that we can influence where weed spraying is vital to maintain the prosperous look and feel of the City and continue to attract investment.
- 14.9 Consider Exeter as a special case and allocate a higher proportion of funding to the city.
- 14.10 Work with local residents to encourage them to take pride in their own community and undertake weed control themselves. The lack of Town and Parish Councils in Exeter makes it a special case for DCC to invest capacity in this.
- 14.11 There is little visible evidence of work by Community Payback this year. If the Community Payback scheme is to be used to replace weed spraying it needs to be much better planned and targeted than in Exeter in Summer 2014.

Favoured option:

- 14.12 Consider alternative cost saving

15 PROPOSAL 7 - PARISH LENGTHSMEN SERVICE

- 15.1 *"There are currently 13 teams across Devon, each made up of two people. In the past, Lengthsmen have visited each parish four times a year to carry out locally determined highway drainage and cleaning activities. Due to last winter's extreme weather and budget cuts, they have only been available for locally determined highway drainage and cleaning activities for a few months this year. We propose reducing the number of Lengthsmen and making the cleaning of drainage features such as grips and easements, and hand cleaning of gullies their only duty. This would leave no time for locally determined highway drainage and cleaning activities. Current spending: £1,981,624. Proposed saving: £430,000"*

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

- 15.2 Parish Lengthsmen are a critical frontline service that prevent and/or react to potential or actual causes of surface water flooding. The consultation proposes removing the team's capacity to undertake *locally determined highway drainage and cleaning activities*. Again, it is unclear what that would mean in practice. The impact of reducing this service is

disproportionate upon the increased number of households who will be affected by flooding as a result, and on the City Council in terms of increased costs for recovery which can include rehousing. As the Lead Local Flood Authority the County Council has a duty to improve the way the risk of flooding in Devon is tackled. Withdrawal of this service will lead to increased costs as a result of increased flooding and may even impact upon other budgets within the County Council.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

15.3 It is difficult to consider how the impact might be reduced.

Favoured option:

15.4 Consider alternative cost saving

16 PROPOSAL 8 - NEIGHBOURHOOD HIGHWAY TEAM STAFFING

16.1 *“There are currently seven Neighbourhood Highway Teams across Devon. The frontline officers in the teams liaise with councillors, town and parish councils, and community groups. They also investigate and assess highway and traffic management enquiries and requests from customers. To achieve identified savings we propose reducing frontline staff by about 20%. This would mean less frequent or responsive liaison, and not being able to investigate lower priority enquiries. Current spending: £1,375,000. Proposed saving: £260,000*

What impact would this proposal have on ECC?

16.2 Any reduction in responsiveness and termination of dealing with low priority issues, is likely to result in greater demand to local councils as citizens seek help elsewhere. All of this demand will be failure demand.

What could they do to reduce the impact on ECC?

16.3 Not applicable

Favoured option:

16.4 Reduce service as proposed

17 Conclusion

17.1 The City Council is pleased to be given the opportunity to influence the County Council's decisions about how it will meet its budget challenges in the next financial year. We recognise these challenges and understand that difficult decisions do need to be made right across the public sector as a result of reductions in central government grant.

17.2 We are, however, concerned about the low level of detail set out in the consultation and in many cases we are unclear whether some of the reductions are proposed for Exeter. The consultation refers to reductions in services in Devon's towns and villages. We do hope that this means that the County Council recognises that the City of Exeter in its role as economic driver for the rural hinterland is a special case for continued investment in its the basic fabric. If this is not the case, and the proposals are also intended for the City of Exeter, we have grave concerns that the impact of the proposed savings to the County Council's highways budget will have a disproportionate impact on the City's economy and on its citizens, given that there are no Parish Councils to take on these essential services.

17.3 We would welcome a dialogue with the County Council around the details of these proposals and how both Councils could work together to minimise the economic and social impact in the City of Exeter.

18 How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

18.1 It will affect the Council's desire to keep the City looking good and to improve public health and wellbeing, as well as impacting upon the success of our investments in developing the City Centre and driving economic growth.

19 What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

19.1 Not applicable

20 What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

20.1 No direct impact from our proposed response. However some of the proposals being consulted on are likely to have an impact on some of these groups (for example reduced gitting disadvantaging those who are less able to walk). The County Council's Impact Assessment recognises this.

21 Are there any other options?

21.1 Exeter should be treated as a special case in recognition of its role as an economic driver for the County of Devon.

SARAH WARD

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

www.toughchoices.co.uk

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