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## **COUNCIL PLAN and BUDGET ENGAGEMENT and CONSULTATION UPDATE**

**Report by Chief Executive**

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### **SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL**

**29 February 2024**

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#### **1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Council on the steps taken to engage and consult with stakeholders as a vital contribution to development of the Council Plan and Financial Planning. The report describes the feedback received and how feedback has influenced development of the Council Plan and Budget.**
- 1.2 The report explains that the Council Plan and Financial Planning process have benefitted from an inclusive and accessible engagement across a number of different processes, which included online surveys in the form of a Council Plan/Budget Consultation and Secondary Schools Students Survey.
- 1.3 At their close, 1,163 people had responded to the Council Plan/Budget Consultation while 862 students had responded to the Secondary Schools Students Survey.
- 1.4 Together with the Council's Community Conversations, Place-making, consultation with Trade Unions, and dialogue with Community Planning Partners, the online survey results provide a strong evidence base which informs the development of the Council Plan and Financial Planning.

#### **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 I recommend that the Council:**
  - a) notes the feedback provided by respondents through the Council's communications and consultation activities on the Council Plan and Budget priorities, and**
  - b) notes how this feedback has been translated into the Council Plan from April 2024.**

### 3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council has an established commitment to engaging with staff, partners, stakeholders and the Scottish Borders community as part of its annual financial planning process. In maintaining this commitment for 2024/2025, the Council adapted its engagement and consultation approaches to focus more strongly on priorities within the Council Plan. The rationale for this is that a key function of the Council's Financial Planning process is resourcing the delivery of the Council Plan which articulates the Council's strategic ambitions for the year ahead, as well as a long-term vision for the Council. It follows that engagement upon priorities for inclusion within the Council Plan is the point of entry for influencing wider strategic and financial planning. At the same time, the inter-connection between the Council Plan and the Budget is a work in progress at this juncture, and the Council will continue to strengthen and refine this relationship, using engagement to inform priorities.
- 3.2 The approach to engagement sits within the Council's developing 'Engagement Approach', which seeks a paradigm shift in its engagement with citizens and communities, based upon transparency and partnership. As a matter of proportionality and practicality, not every individual representation should nor will be actionable, but feedback evidence helps inform the Council's thinking, and provides assurance around identification of the Council's priorities. The key to this is trend information.
- 3.3 In gathering feedback on priorities, the Council has benefitted from engagement across a range of different processes, including:
- a) **Place-making.** Fundamental to the Council's engagement efforts are the town plans or place plans currently being developed within the four priority towns of Hawick, Eyemouth, Jedburgh and Galashiels identified within the Borderland Inclusive Growth Deal, as well as the place plans at different stages of progress across 54 other settlements. The purpose of these efforts is community led development in which communities come together to develop plans tailored to the needs and aspirations of their respective localities. By working with communities, particularly through its Community Engagement Officers, the Council enhances its understanding of what communities want, improving its decision-making about priorities and budgeting.
  - b) **Community Conversations.** Undertaken through nine separate Community Conversations during September 2023, the Community Conversations are locality-based discussions led by Elected Members and senior officers to hear the thoughts and opinions of the members of the public on what is important to them. A report on 2023's Community Conversations was presented to Council on 25 January 2024 highlighting common themes of discussion around public transport, lack of local facilities, and the building of new schools.
  - c) **Council Plan/Budget Consultation.** Between 30 November and 31 January, a Council Plan/Budget Consultation invited members of

the public to give their views by means of an online survey. The survey was made available to members of the public via the Council website with the purpose of exploring the public's priorities structured around the themes of the Council Plan. Questions also sought to tease out public thinking about the challenging trade-offs the Council continues to be presented with in its decision-making and financial planning in the light of the continuing and unprecedented pressure on local government resources.

In total, 1,163 respondents gave feedback on their priorities. As respondents were asked to rank priorities within the Council themes, direct comparison between the priorities in different themes should be approached with some degree of caution. Nonetheless, the top 3 priorities which emerged from the consultation were:

- More local decision making/consultation with residents/communities around service design and delivery
- Retention of local services within communities, e.g. libraries/Contact Centres, public toilets
- Protecting the public transport network

Appendix 1 of this report sets out the results of the consultation while Appendix 3 provides a comparative analysis of priorities within both the Council Plan/Budget Consultation and Secondary Schools Students Survey. Utilising this information, section 4 of the present report highlights how feedback from the consultation has informed development of the Council Plan.

- d) **Secondary Schools Students Survey.** An online survey of students at Scottish Borders secondary schools was conducted between 9 January and 7 February. It sought the views of students on the opportunities and challenges they face, the most important issues for region and how they would prioritise these. Teachers within the region's schools worked diligently to promote strong return rates from among students.

In total, 862 students gave feedback on their priorities. As students were asked to rank priorities within the Council themes, direct comparison between the priorities in different themes should be approached with some degree of caution. Nonetheless, the top 3 priorities which emerged from the consultation were:

- More affordable housing
- More online services and functionality
- Increase access to health and wellbeing support for young people, e.g. mental health

Appendix 2 of this report sets out the results of the survey while Appendix 3 provides a comparative analysis of priorities within both the Secondary Schools Students Survey and Council Plan/Budget Consultation. Utilising this information, section 4 of the present report highlights how feedback from the survey has informed development of the Council Plan.

- e) **Consultation with all Trade Unions.** Dialogue with the Trade Unions was undertaken through the Joint Trade Union Committee to

engage them as part of the Council Plan and Budget planning processes.

- f) **Dialogue with Community Planning Partners.** Building on existing dialogue with partners across the region, a draft of the Council Plan was issued to Community Planning Partners for comments. Partners were supportive of the objectives pursued in the draft Plan while underlining the need for greater partnership working amongst Community Planning Partners to address the region's challenges.

## 4 HOW ENGAGEMENT HAS INFORMED DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNCIL PLAN

- 4.1 Together the engagement processes have provided an evidence base to inform the development of priorities within the draft Council Plan. For example, the Community Conversations, Secondary Schools Students Survey and Council Plan/Budget Consultation contained notable feedback concerning the importance of the local public transport network. While facing significant financial challenges, the Council has sought to address the issue within the Strong Inclusive Economy, Transport and Infrastructure theme of the draft Council Plan from April 2024, as set out below:

- Continue to advocate for the electrification of the 1st stage of the Borders Railway, and develop the business case for the extension of the Railway to Hawick and Carlisle.
- Develop a local access and transport strategy + Active Travel Delivery Plan, informed by the South of Scotland Cycling Strategy, with the overarching aspiration being a fully integrated transport system between bus, rail and other transport modes across the region, using community and business travel pattern data to inform infrastructure decision-making for new active travel investment (wheeling, walking, cycling) supporting integration into bus and rail.
- Complete the Bus Network Review of the Scottish Borders, with the objectives of designing a network which is based on community and business needs and supports increased use of public transport, and lower greenhouse gas emitting modes of travel.
- Implement a rural taxi-bus pilot funded through Shared Prosperity Funding for three areas in the Scottish Borders, around Selkirk, Jedburgh and Newcastleton, to provide agile and cost-effective connections between rural areas and the identified towns.
- Continue to support the well-received Demand Response Transport Pingo Service within Berwickshire.

4.2 Similarly, efforts are made to address concerns (expressed in the Community Conversations and 'free' responses in the comment feedback from the Council Plan/Budget Consultation) around a 'lack of local facilities' through a range of measures which include development of new community school facilities in a number of settlements, an enhanced partnership with *Live Borders* and play park provision and skate & pump tracks in a number of settlements across the region. Within the Localities Actions section of the draft Council Plan, references to new and refurbished school facilities and particularly to community engagement around those developments seeks to respond to the wish to be involved in discussions around the developments highlighted during the Community Conversations. At the same time, strong emphasis throughout the draft Plan on 'community-led place plans across rural communities and towns to enable communities to take control of their own destinies' directly responds to the top priority of the Council Plan/Budget Consultation for 'more local decision making/consultation with residents/communities around service design and delivery'.

4.3 Further feedback gathered through the Council Plan/Budget Consultation focuses on the Council's internal processes and organisation, highlighting a perceived need for greater efficiency, service delivery, and transparency in communicating with local communities. While some of this feedback may reflect frustrations beyond the control of the Council, the new iteration of the Council Plan responds to these concerns at several levels. For example, under 'Working Together, Improving Lives', the Council has committed to:

*'Redefine SBC's Transformation Programme for next 5 years, including the development and implementation of a new Operating Model, to ensure ongoing high service standards, financial sustainability and modernisation in a rapidly changing context. This will include developing:*

- *a new SBC-wide strategy for commissioning services to ensure best value from all SBC spend.*
- *a strategy to maximise external funding opportunities for investment in the Scottish Borders.*
- *a review of all key processes in order to streamline all SBC services towards better customer outcomes.*
- *a review, modernisation & consolidation of all SBC's estate to ensure financial and environmental sustainability, including clear partnership co-location options aligned with customer needs.'*

4.4 'More affordable housing', the highest priority within the Secondary Schools Survey is reflected in the following proposed Council Plan 'actions':

- With partners, promote the potential for inward investment within the Borders, focusing on the development of business space and housing, as part of the South of Scotland Inward Investment Strategy.
- Implement the Scottish Borders Local Housing Strategy 2023-2028 with a view to delivering more homes, including affordable homes, in well designed, sustainable communities that increase opportunities for all, supporting personal independence, health and wellbeing, and address homelessness.

Moreover, in prioritising actions around transport and digital connectivity, and around employability and skills, the draft Council Plan recognises the interdependency of housing, connectivity and skills/employability to the future prosperity, sustainability and resilience of the region.

- 4.5 Finally, in undertaking a range of engagements, it is to be expected that feedback may not be fully consistent. For example, while the second highest priority within the Council Plan/Budget Consultation was 'Retention of local services within communities, e.g. libraries/Contact Centres, public toilets, for students within the Secondary Schools Survey, the second highest priority was 'more online services and functionality'. Apparent inconsistency of this kind simply reinforces the fact that engagement processes provide a range of different contributions to the Council's decision-making and delivery. Consultations and surveys are primarily evidence, while place-making and the empowerment of communities creates a framework in which Council's and communities can work together. Weighing different evidence and assessing the trade-offs between competing objectives is precisely what the Council is there to do. At the same time, the stronger and more effective the Council's engagement process, the more informative the evidence available to it and the greater the prospect of alignment between local aspiration and Council decision-making and actions, with communities empowered to take increasing control of their own destinies a long-term objective. With this in mind, officers are looking at how the Council provides feedback to those who responded to the consultation and survey. This recognises that respondents are more likely to contribute to future consultations/surveys if they receive timely feedback on their views. This is considered to be particularly important in sustaining future engagement with young people.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial**

There are no direct financial implications resulting from this report.

### **5.2 Risk and Mitigations**

The Council is committed to an active engagement with Scottish Borders citizens and communities, which supports a shared approach to garnering opportunities and addressing challenges. By conducting a range of engagement processes around the development of the Council Plan, the Council aims to ensure that breadth, diversity and integrity are built into the evidence of stakeholder views which informs its primary strategic framework and thereby its wider decision making. This ensures that the Council Plan, financial planning and decision-making are sensitive to public aspirations and concerns, support understanding of and 'buy-in' to Council decisions and mitigate reputational risks to the Council. The "You said, We did" and the Secondary Schools Students analyses further help increase transparency and signpost specific strategies and activities that have been or are being implemented and are in response to feedback or consistent with feedback.

### **5.3 Integrated Impact Assessment**

An integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken and published in relation to the Council Plan from April 2024. Council Plan and Budget Communications and Consultation are integral to the development of the Council Plan and financial planning and are referred to specifically in the

Integrated Impact Assessment for the Council Plan from April 2024.  
Reference should be made to the IIA for the Scottish Borders Council Plan from April 2024.

#### 5.4 **Sustainable Development Goals**

No direct economic, social, or environmental effects arise from this report, but the Council Plan itself has significant implications for delivering against the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and a checklist has been completed in relation to the draft Council Plan from April 2024. Reference should be made to the UN SDGs checklist for the Scottish Borders Council Plan from April 2024.

#### 5.5 **Climate Change**

No direct effects on carbon emissions result from this report. However, a Climate Change Checklist has been completed in relation to the draft Council Plan from April 2024. Reference should be made to the Climate Change checklist for the Scottish Borders Council Plan from April 2024.

#### 5.6 **Rural Proofing**

Engagement in relation to the draft Council Plan has been undertaken across a range of formats and different processes as described in this report. The objective has been to ensure an inclusive, easily accessible engagement with communities, facilitating the participation of those people, businesses and stakeholders based in rural locations.

#### 5.7 **Data Protection Impact Statement**

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

#### 5.8 **Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

The are no changes to the Scheme of Administration arising from this report.

## 6 **CONSULTATION**

- 6.1 The Director (Finance & Procurement), the Director (Corporate Governance), the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Director (People Performance & Change), the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and their comments received incorporated into this report.

### **Approved by**

**David Robertson**

**Chief Executive**

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**Background Papers:** Scottish Borders Council Plan (from April 2024)  
**Previous Minute Reference:** Budget Communications Strategy 2023/24 (23 February 2023)

**Note** – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Michael Cook can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at:

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