

Report to: **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Date: **17 October 2017**

Title: **One Council Consultation Process**

Portfolio Area: **Strategy & Commissioning**

Wards Affected: **All**

Relevant Scrutiny Committee: **N/A**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: Any views of the Committee will be reflected in the report to Special Council on 31 October 2017

Author: **Nadine Trout** Role: **Commissioning Manager**

Contact: Nadine.Trout@swdevon.gov.uk

RECOMMENDATION

That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee consider the consultation process and responses and make recommendations to full Council accordingly.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Further to agreement by Council on 27 July 2017 to consult with the public on the One Council proposal, this report provides a detailed overview of the consultation process including how the consultation was devised and the range of methods used to engage with the public.

1.2 The consultation will close at midnight on 8 October 2017. As such the results of the consultation are not available at the time of publication of this report. However, the results and analysis will be supplied to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as soon after the 8 October as possible and before the Committee meets on the 17 October 2017.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** On the 27 July 2017 Council resolved to proceed to consultation with the public and stakeholders from early August through to the end of September 2017, with delegated authority being given to the SH/WD Joint Steering Group (JSG) to agree the final contents of the consultation document prior to its publication.
- 2.2** Council further resolved to task an independent person with reviewing the final version of the draft consultation document prior to its publication.

3. COMPILATION OF CONSULTATION DOCUMENTS

3.1 Joint Steering Group

The SH/WD Joint Steering Group met on the 1 August to discuss the compilation of a balanced key facts consultation document and a consultation process including survey questions. As a result of the meeting consultation documents were drafted and circulated to the JSG for comment. For full openness and transparency the Deputy Leader also circulated the documents to the wider council Membership for comment.

3.2 Specialist Independent Advisor

The Local Government Association recommended an independent and experienced consultation specialist (The Campaign Company) to review the consultation documentation including the survey questions and proposed methods for engagement.

- 3.2.1** The Campaign Company are Members of the Consultation Institute and as such adhere to the Gunning and Cabinet Office Consultation Principles. On 10 August 2017 the Campaign Company made the following statement:

"We believe that the One Council Consultation process is being conducted in a way that aims to be fair, transparent and compliant."

- 3.2.2** The Campaign Company also made the following suggestions:

- a. The consultation take place over an 8 week as opposed to 6 week period
- b. The inclusion of an equalities statement
- c. Availability of financial background information
- d. The provision of paper surveys and if necessary surveys and consultation documents in easy read or other languages
- e. Availability of paper copies of the consultation at events

3.3 Consultation Sign Off

After considering feedback from Members and following up on the suggestions made by the Campaign Company the Joint Steering Group finally approved sign off of the consultation on 11 August 2017. As a result the consultation went live on 14 August 2017 with an agreed finish date 8 weeks later of the 8 October 2017.

4. CONSULTATION METHODS

4.1 Website

A dedicated website went live on 14 August 2017. To ensure continuity of messaging the pages of the website directly mirror the content of the consultation key facts document. The website also contains further information as recommended by the Campaign Company, plus the promotion of engagement events, news items and videos further explaining the consultation.

4.2 Postcards

The week commencing 28 August 2017 over 69,000 postcards were sent to every household in the South Hams District and West Devon Borough.

4.2.1 The postcards encourage residents to visit the consultation website and have their say by completing an online survey. The postcards also inform residents that the consultation runs until the 8 October 2017 and that paper surveys are available from our offices or by telephoning a dedicated number to request one.

4.2.2 The majority of the postcards were delivered using the Royal Mail Door to Door service whereby postcards are delivered to each household but are not individually addressed. Some postcards were also delivered using Royal Mail business postage whereby the postcards were posted in envelopes and addresses to individual households.

4.2.3 The reason postcards were delivered using different methods was to make the cost of the mailing efficient and ensure only residents in South Hams and West Devon received them. The Royal Mail Door to Door Service only costs 6 pence per item compared to 35 pence per item for business postage. The Door to Door Service however, is only cost effective when used for full post code areas within a district or borough boundary. The South Hams District and West Devon Borough includes some partial post codes whereby a post code like EX20 2 includes some residents inside the West Devon boundary as well as residents in neighbouring authorities too, in these instances business postage was used.

4.2.4 Three people have complained to the Commissioning Manager that residents in their area have not received post cards. In order to investigate this further the Royal Mail need the addresses of 5 households in a given post code. None of the complainants have provided these details and as such the matter has not been pursued.

4.3 Surveys – Online, Telephone and Paper

Care has been taken to ensure all survey formats whether online, by telephone or on paper contain the same questions. All respondents have also been able to make open comments in addition to answering set questions.

- 4.3.1 Some concerns have been raised about the Council Tax Equalisation question being compulsory for South Hams residents. The reason for this is if Council agree to pursue the One Council proposal it is important that the thoughts of all respondents concerning the equalisation period (regardless of whether they support the proposal) is given due consideration. The Department of Communities and Local Government has made it clear that the Council would need to clearly evidence a proposed equalisation period. It is also important to note, the Campaign Company endorsed this line of questioning.
- 4.3.2 Where possible provision has been made to ensure that respondents only submit a consultation survey response once. As such paper surveys have been sequentially numbered to ensure they are not photocopied and filled in multiple times by the same applicant. Paper surveys where possible have only been provided on receipt of a name and postal address.
- 4.3.3 The online survey only allows a survey to be submitted once on any given device (smart phone, tablet, laptop or home computer). Again this is in a bid to try and stop multiple responses from the same individual. If however, an individual owns a number of devices they could submit a number of responses. To mitigate this the survey records the IP address of each respondent and when the results are collated there will be clear evidence to show if the same IP address has been used on multiple occasions. However it is also recognised that more than several people may all be using the same IP address.
- 4.3.4 The telephone survey (which has been contracted to a local research company) will ensure contact is made with a demographically representative sample of residents. Before conducting a telephone survey the research company will ask residents whether they have already completed a paper or online survey and if so they will not continue with the call. This is again to mitigate duplicate responses.
- 4.3.5 Ultimately Members will be relying on survey respondents to act honestly.

4.4 Press & Social Media

The Council has adopted a phased communication approach to the One Council Consultation. Prior to the consultation going live the Communications Team spent time setting the scene by relaying the following key messages via videos from the leaders, social media, press releases and member and staff workshops and briefings:

- Why the councils are considering the One Council proposal
- The financial position of both councils
- What you get for your council tax
- The services the council provides

- 4.4.1 During the consultation the Communications Team has ensured the promotion of the consultation and events by working with councillors, locality officers and Town and Parish councils to share the following key messages and enable as many people as possible to have access to the consultation material and respond.

Key Messages from the Communication Team

- What the proposal is about
- What the timeframes are
- Where to find the facts and key information
- That councillors have not made their minds up yet
- That the councils are being open with financial information
- That councillors are keen to talk at engagement events
- Let Towns and Parishes know that we will come and talk to them
- Let residents know how to have their say or talk to the council

- 4.4.2 The Communications Team has also ensured a timely response to questions on social media and used social media to promote the consultation events and videos. In addition the team has harnessed digital media to issue e-bulletins to the business community and ensured digital footers have been added to all Council emails to promote the consultation and a link to the online survey.

- 4.4.3 Throughout the consultation the Council has issued regular press releases to local press, radio and TV to ensure a high profile of the consultation and to relay key facts and address any mistruths. Unfortunately the media has not always chosen to publish these press releases. Results of media coverage will be shared with Members at the close of the consultation.

4.5 Consultation Engagement Events

Joint Steering Group members were keen to ensure as many events as possible were held to promote the consultation. As such 12 public events took place between 10 August and 23 September at Bere Alston, Chagford, Exbourne, Hatherleigh, Lifton, North Tawton, Okehampton, Princetown and Tavistock.

- 4.5.1 In planning the public consultation events care was taken where possible to use heavy footfall locations. Events were also held in the late afternoon/early evening or weekends to allow for a wide range of attendance. Banners and posters were used to promote events and paper copies of the Key Facts document, FAQs and surveys were made available at all events and a record was taken of event footfall and key issues.
- 4.5.2 Two dedicated events were held solely for town and parish councils. Members have also attended a wide range of town and parish council meetings to discuss the proposal. A breakdown of attendance at these meetings and the public consultation events will be provided when the consultation closes.

4.6 Stakeholder Letters

During the first week of the consultation letters and or emails were sent to nearly 100 partners and stakeholders advising of the consultation and providing information on how to find out more. The types of stakeholders include the following:

- All neighbouring authorities
- Housing Associations
- Devon & Cornwall Police
- Clinical Commissioning Groups
- Business groups, networks and associations
- Voluntary sector
- Significant grant funding recipients

4.6.1 In addition to the above background information, letters and emails were sent to all Town and Parish Councils.

4.6.2 Each stakeholder was asked to provide a formal response to the consultation by the 8 October 2017 and to share any comments they might have. A summary of these responses will be circulated to Members when the consultation closes.

5. OUTCOMES

5.1 As stated in the Executive Summary the results of the consultation aren't yet known. It is recognised however, by independent consultants, namely the Campaign Company that the consultation has been planned on good consultation principles. The results of the consultation will be circulated to Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members before the 17 October 2017.

5.2 It is anticipated Overview & Scrutiny Panel will take a view on the survey analysis and results and will ask Council to consider the following:

- Overall numbers of responses
- Split between the South Hams District and West Devon Borough
- Yes/No split
- Council tax equalisation period
- Any significant differences between the phone responses and the online/paper responses
- Any shortcomings in the methodology
- Common themes with regard to benefits, concerns and Member representation
- Any conclusions to be drawn from the numbers of respondents/non-respondents

6. CONSULTATION OPTIONS AVAILABLE AND CONSIDERATION OF RISK

6.1 In order to consider submitting a proposal to the Secretary of State the Council needs to demonstrate it has consulted with the public. The Secretary of State has not been prescriptive in how the Council undertakes a consultation. However the Council has sought specialist independent advice to ensure the consultation is inclusive and fair. If a proposal is submitted it will include the full results of the consultation for the Secretary of State to consider when weighing up the merits of the proposal and making his decision.

6.2 Some have questioned why the Council has not undertaken a referendum ensuring one person one vote. The reasons for this are as follows:

- There is no statutory requirement for a referendum
- A referendum would cost West Devon Borough Council at least £100,000

7. CONSULTATION COSTS

7.1 The following table provides a breakdown of West Devon Borough Council's consultation costs:

Website including online survey	£773
Events venue hire	£142
Postcard print	£312
Telephone Survey	£3,884
Postcards – Door to Door Delivery	£916
Postcards – Business Class Delivery	£3,965
Key Facts, FAQs, banners print costs	£747
TOTAL	£10,739

7.1.1 Note the cost of the telephone survey and website represents 50% of the total cost. The remaining 50% has been met by South Hams District Council.

7.1.2 The postcard costs relate only to postcards sent to West Devon residents.

7.1.3 In addition to the costs listed above it is estimated independent analysis and collation of the results will cost West Devon Borough Council approximately £375.

8.0

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance	Y	Overview & Scrutiny Committee has the responsibility to make reports and/or recommendations to the Council and/or its Committees and/or any joint committee on matters which affect the Council's area or the inhabitants of that area.
Financial	N	Consultation expenditure is budgeted for.
Risk	Y	As outlined in section 6.0 of the report
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity	Y	The consultation contains an equality statement.
Safeguarding	N	
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder	N	
Health, Safety and Wellbeing	N	
Other implications	N	

Further Information

All documents associated with the consultation can be seen as pdfs at:
www.onecouncil.org.uk/further-information