

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	26 April 2005
Subject:	Report of the Pilot Community Budget Group
Responsible Officer:	Director of Organisational Performance Director of Financial and Business Strategy
Contact Officer:	Alicia Weiderman, Scrutiny Officer
Portfolio Holder:	Finance
Key Decision:	No
Status:	Part 1

Section 1: Summary

Decision Required

That the committee:

- Note the findings of the pilot Community Budget Group; and
- Agree to refer the report to Cabinet for consideration.

Reason for report

The Budget Scrutiny Review presented its Interim Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2005. As part of this report, it was recommended that the Council investigate alternative ways at working with residents on budget issues. As a result, a pilot Community Budget Group was formed.

The group had initially agreed to scrutinise Harrow Council's budget for 2005/06. As this information was not available, or in an easily understandable format for the group, they have instead focused on improving the presentation and format of budget information for residents.

Benefits

This report provides a set of recommendations on improving budget processes

for residents, as developed by group of residents. It provides a source of feedback on current council processes from the point of view of its key customers. It will allow the Council to consider alternative ways to present information so it is more accessible and transparent for the public.

The report also recommends that the Council continue to investigate participative budget processes through the Community Engagement scrutiny review.

Cost of Proposals

See '2.4 Financial Implications'.

Risks

The recommendations of the group suggest a new way of presenting Council information to the public. The report also suggests that a wide range of corporate documents be made public (e.g. service plans, performance scorecards). This may be a sensitive issue within the Council.

The group finally recommend that the Community Engagement scrutiny review consider future options for a Community Budget group prior to the next budget cycle. This may place pressure of this scrutiny review's timetable.

Implications if recommendations rejected

This development of this report represents a new step in engaging with the public on a contentious issue. If recommendations are not noted, it will result in a lack of confidence from those involved in the group on the value of participating in a process such as this.

Section 2: Report

2.1 Brief History

On 9 September 2003, the meeting of Cabinet approved the development of a two-stage budget consultation process and approved work to be undertaken to improve the consultation process.

The review group provided their Interim Report of the Budget Scrutiny Review to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 31 January 2005. This report was then referred to Cabinet on 17 March 2005. The report was well received at both meetings. One of the recommendations in this report was that the Council consider alternative ways to work with residents on budget issues. As a result, a pilot Community Budget Group was established.

The CBG was offered a number of reporting mechanisms:

1. Submit a report to the February Council meeting at which Harrow's budget for 05/06 will be determined, via an Overview and Scrutiny executive action.

2. Submit a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee following February full Council meeting making recommendations for the 06/07 budget participatory mechanisms.
3. Write a one-page article for the Harrow People to be circulated in the Budget issue of the Harrow People.
4. Issue press releases as it sees fit, with the assistance of the Communications Department.
5. Maintain a page on the Harrow website.

The group felt it impossible to conduct a meaningful review of any aspect of Harrow's budget in the time allocated with the information available. It instead has focused on producing recommendations on improving the nature and presentation of actual and budget data for the benefit of residents, Councillors and officers.

The group also considered options for a future CBG but agreed to recommend that other areas of the Council take this up.

2.2 Options considered

N/A

2.3 Consultation

This document was formed through direct consultation with a nominated resident group. The group worked with Council officers and members to gather information for this report.

2.4 Financial Implications

There may be some costs attached to fully implementing the recommendations in terms of staff time. The new ERP system that will be delivered through the Business Transformation Partnership will make the production of financial and performance information easier.

2.5 Legal Implications

None.

2.6 Equalities Impact

The findings of this report aim to increase resident's access to understandable budget information. It seeks to address an inequality in terms of the current information which is difficult to understand for those residents who are not financially inclined.

Section 3: Supporting Information/Background Documents

Appendices:

Report of the Pilot Community Budget Group