Recommendations:

The Executive is recommended to:

(a) Note the budget consultation feedback received; and

(b) Consider any further changes to the proposed budget from the consultation feedback particularly around black bin replacement charging.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 A new Corporate Strategy and Plan was agreed by the Council in 2015 which incorporates the Elected Mayor’s ambitions for the borough based on his manifesto pledges. The Corporate Plan detail is set out against priorities for the coming year. At its x December 2016 meeting the Executive agreed to a set of priorities for each ambition for 2017/18. These priorities underpin the budget proposal papers for 2017/18 and to be incorporated into the budget engagement and consultation both internally and externally.

1.2 At the same meeting, December 2016, the Executive endorsed a report on how we will resource our delivery against the key priorities of the Council and support the key priorities of the borough and our strategic partners over the next four years and our Budget Engagement Strategy, to enable key stakeholders to be consulted on the proposals during December 2015 and January 2016.
2. CONSULTATION

2.1 Engagement with stakeholders on the initial budget proposals and corporate plan priorities began in the week after the December 2016 Executive Meeting for a six week period as agreed by the Executive. As set out in our strategy we used our website and social media resources and tools to publish budget papers and encourage stakeholders to engage with our range of consultation mechanisms:

- A consultation questionnaire was produced and made available digitally and in hard copy at a number of community venues (76 responses were received);
- Social media was used to encourage and direct people to the questionnaire and budget papers;
- Four public meetings with the Elected Mayor were held in January 2017;
- Sector specific meetings were held in January, including voluntary and community sector and 3 tiers of elected community leaders.
- Business sector statutory consultation took place in January with two events – one in Whitehaven and one in Millom.

2.3 Alongside specific engagement events in 2.2 the Council has taken the opportunity to share relevant issues and elements with customer groups as part of normal operational business and customer liaison.

2.3 Internally, members were offered and have taken up briefings and a detailed formal engagement through Overview and Scrutiny Committee in line with the requirements of the Council’s Constitution and Budget and Policy Framework. Also staff are engaged with the process through existing management framework. A specific session was held with the Trade Unions in January.

2.4 The following stakeholders were engaged during the consultation and engagement period:

- Elected Members
- Residents
- Local Businesses
- Council employees and trades unions
- Customers of affected services
- Community and Voluntary Groups
- Town and Parish Councils
- Strategic Partners
- Media

2.5 The following are a summary of the general comments received. The detailed comments relating to the four ambitions follow this section.
• A strong recognition and support that the Council is proposing a budget with no service cuts and some growth, particularly in waste. The Mayor was at a number of events congratulated on the budget and progress on the corporate strategy set last year.
• A welcoming of detailed presentation to ensure and improve the understanding of the Council’s resources and sources.
• 72% of questionnaire respondents agreed with increasing the council tax on the Copeland 12% element by 1.95%. This proposal was generally supported at the range of meetings. The key issue from the consultation being reasonableness, knowing what the additional money is being used for and for some confusing the District role with the County role.
• Consultees took the opportunity to ask wider questions including on the forthcoming election and the input of the Council/Mayor.
• Expectation that the council have rural proofed and equality accessed the digital access proposals alongside the welcoming of the joint working on cultural awareness into the new budget year.
• The questionnaire comments were generally from the respondents who were not in support. One questionnaire respondent specifically asked for their response to be copied to all members and this will be done separately to this report. Their particular comment is “Can people get answers? There doesn’t seem to be anywhere to get those answers.” As in previous years, the annual budget public meetings were not strongly attended with the largest participation at Millom with 16 external attendees.

Our Corporate Strategy

2.6 We received support to maintaining our Corporate Strategy mission, values, four ambitions and five strategic objectives. The majority of the 76 questionnaire respondents supported that the four ambitions are the right things to prioritise in Copeland. The outcomes from the range of meetings including the statutory business consultation also supported these four priorities.

2.7 The key deliverables for 2017/18 were shared under our four ambitions with our stakeholders. Our main feedback to these deliverables was from the meetings held. The 10 questions on the budget consultation, reproduced at Appendix A, enabled a support, do not support and do not know response with space for particular comment. These responses are also provided under the four ambitions below.

Ambition 1: Town Centre Regeneration

2.8 Meeting participants are generally in support of a capital town centre grants scheme with suggestions for ensuring the scheme is inclusive such as being available to leasehold and freehold applicants; ensuring the specific circumstances of each town are recognised and consider environmental improvements as appropriate. There was a request for further clarification
on how the town centre regeneration grants would work and in particular benefit the four towns. The South Copeland statutory consultation did comment that the 2017/18 budget was a great opportunity for South Copeland.

2.9 Generally the support is positive with comments on how the Council is learning from other towns nationally who seem to have more resources for town centre regeneration. Consultation event participants took the opportunity to discuss, comment and ask questions on town centre regeneration activity and progress in the area. A number of consultees want to see and asked about village regeneration outside of the four main towns and then discussed how this links into the Council’s Social Inclusion investment for all the borough and activity with partners.

2.10 The issue of poor housing stock and the need for more affordable homes in Millom was raised. The Council’s Housing Strategy is being refreshed and will pick up some of the issues through existing initiatives such as the Empty Homes Initiative and new stock condition survey. A further issue raised at a number of meetings was car parking and the opportunities to encourage visitors through an element of free parking.

2.11 The revised discretionary rate relief proposals and our aspiration “to make sure as many organisations as possible can get the business rate reductions that the need” was very strongly supported through this consultation feedback. Respondents highlighted the link between this and empty shops and the need to prioritise small and fledgling businesses. Other comments included suggestions for how to get the message on the scheme out into the borough to ensure eligible businesses and organisations take advantage.

**Ambition 2: Commercialisation**

2.12 Feedback from all mechanisms was in support of the council’s approach to commercialisation and to the case made to reduce the allocation of revenue resource to £50,000 per year.

2.13 Consultation meetings offered the opportunity for questions on the commercialisation projects being considered. In particular risks to residents from any commercial activity, namely an energy company. The Council are developing commercial ideas with a full risk assessment and detail to governance requirements of the council and its residents.

2.14 Feedback from the questionnaire highlights that a number of respondents are not aware of the existing activity and there is an opportunity to provide more communications and information on the commercial activities and income of existing services alongside feedback on the newer commercial projects.
**Ambition 3: Employment, skills and social wellbeing**

2.15 This ambition was strongly welcomed at all the meetings and events. The voluntary and community sector were particularly encouraged by the Council’s attention on social inclusion, mentioning financial inclusion and welfare reform impacts locally. The proposal to maintain our Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to the same level as the past two years has been welcomed by local organisations working with people impacted by welfare reform and residents returning the questionnaire. We are in 10% of local councils in England to keep this level of assistance in contributing to low income household council tax bill payments.

2.16 There was a recognition of the Council’s maintaining community and voluntary sector mainstream grants at previous levels and the need for access to more funding for the third sector. The Council has a continued recognition of the third sector as part of the local infrastructure including following up on suggestion from consultation to work more with partners on digital inclusion opportunities.

2.17 The local understanding of deprivation and the need for this ambition was strongly supported by all feedback mechanisms. Specific issues were raised such as future disabled facility grant resources from County Council through the Better Care Fund.

**Ambition 4: Strengthen the way we operate**

2.18 There is good support for the budget proposal to allocate £200,000 to invest in ICT and specifically improve our website. A good number of comments highlighted the poor nature of our website and welcomed a more accessible facility including e-planning. There was a request from parish and town partners for the Council to engage with their websites more actively to provide information.

2.19 Over 70% of our questionnaire respondents supported the proposed increase in fees and charges in line with inflation in 2017/18. Typical comment related to this being standard expectation and reasonable. Keeping crematorium fees at 2016/17 levels has been welcome by all consultation routes including those stakeholders involved in bereavement services.

2.20 Feedback on reduction of grant to Parishes saving us £57,000 a year received mixed support through our questionnaires with the majority agreeing. Generally, questionnaires and public meetings were understanding of the financial arguments. CALC did comment that they would have hoped the Council could have passed this albeit reducing settlement on to the parishes. The Council had previously agreed to phase out this grant by 2016/17 and the information was included in the consultation in response to a request by OSC at the 2016/17 budget setting process. A fair proportion of comments were
seeking more information and highlighted responses were from a mix of individuals who were more informed and those who were not. Hence comments ranged from “good savings to be had” to “would surely be pushed back on the charge from the Parish via Council Tax” to “local councils are filling the void by earlier Copeland BC cuts – this would put this at risk”.

2.21 We have reduced our carbon footprint by 25% since 2010 and we were requesting views on our plans to reduce our carbon footprint by a further 5% which will result in some internal efficiency savings on travel, vehicles and utilities. Just under 80% of respondents agreed with this approach with those disagreeing highlighting this is not top priority for them.

2.22 The key frontline service consultation element relates to our forward planning on increasing the number of recyclable materials we collect at kerbside. Our proposals to invest in this service received overwhelming support from questionnaire respondents and attendees at the consultation events. Comments included questions over timing and impact of this extended service in rural areas. Suggestions put forward as comments on areas such as advertising have been passed on to the service team.

2.23 The proposal of charging £15 for first green waste bins was not supported by questionnaire respondents with 58% not in support of the proposal and 34% in support, with 8% don’t know. The key comments received from those not supporting the proposal is not linked to the amount but on principle as believe it is a council duty which it is not and in line with the expectation that this will add to the existing fly tipping activity in the borough. The consultation meetings feedback did not raise this as a concern and hence it can be assumed are not against charging.

2.24 Finally, we set out a proposal to help us achieve our aims in waste service through charging households for new bins when their existing bins break or get lost. If agreed this would bring in £9,200 a year. Whilst this was not raised as an issue at any of the public meetings the questionnaire respondents did not support at a 57% to an agree at 33%. Comments raised echo some member feedback that a number of bins get damaged by our own vehicles and the need for a strong appeal process which in itself could be time consuming.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The Budget Engagement Strategy agreed in December 2016 shaped the range of activity reported on in this feedback paper. The consultation enabled a range of routes for residents, businesses and partners to engage with the Council to provide feedback on the budget proposals for 2017/18. The response levels on the questionnaire were improved on 2016/17 process and were similar for activity with the public, businesses and other stakeholders.
3.2 The Mayor and his Executive have received an endorsement through the consultation feedback to the corporate strategy and its continued relevance to the borough particularly the four ambitions recognising that they are interlinked in implementation and delivering impact for the borough and its residents and businesses. The priorities set out for the 2017/18 key deliverables have broad support with the request for more information highlighting an opportunity to offer more information and communication on the progression against these priorities to our key stakeholders.

3.3 The understanding and support for the Mayor and his Executive in proposing a budget within a changing and challenging public finance setting which whilst challenging does not propose council service cuts and offers some growth in our recycling service is recognised and welcomed through the consultation. The majority of budget specific proposals consulted on over the past six weeks have received support through the engagement and feedback activities. This backs the proposals relating to fees and charges, invest in a new recycling team, remove the parish grants and provide an annual grant to CALC, invest in our IT systems, reduce our commercial activity budget for the next three years, revise our discretionary rate relief scheme as outlined, reduce our carbon footprint by a further 5%, increase the council tax by 1.95% and maintain our Council Tax Support Scheme to help our most vulnerable residents.

3.4 There are two exceptions where consultation has not offered clear support to the budget proposals. Both relate to charges on bins. Firstly, the charging of £15 for the first green waste bin was not supported through the questionnaire and not opposed through the public meetings and stakeholder engagement. The former feedback was against charging for waste collection and highlighting some negative fly tipping impacts rather than the amount. Executive have already stated their position with not implementing this in 2017/18. Secondly, the charging for replacement black bins was not supported through the questionnaire feedback. Consideration to a clear and effective appeals scheme has been highlighted through the feedback and would need to be considered if this proposal was continued.

4. STATUTORY OFFICER COMMENTS

4.1 Monitoring Officer Comments: No specific legal issues arise from the report. Any legal issues arising from specific projects identified in the report will be dealt with as each project develops.

4.2 S151 Officer Comments: The Section 151 officer has been involved in the compilation of the report and has no further comment.

4.3 EIA Comments: In undertaking the process for setting its budget, the Council’s aim will at all times be to secure compliance with its
responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 and in particular the public sector equality duty under that Act. The outcome of decisions made following the budget engagement process, will be subject to further equality impact assessment if required.


Appendices:

Appendix A – Budget Consultation 2017/18 - Questionnaire

List of Background Documents:
Budget working papers, MTFS, Corporate Strategy 2016-20 and committee reports

Appendix A

BUDGET CONSULTATION DOCUMENT 2017-18

Below are some of our main plans for spending and saving in the next financial year. Some of them could affect you and we would like your views on our plans. You can agree/disagree with a tick or give us a comment on any or all of the questions.

1. FEES AND CHARGES
   We want to increase our fees and charges (except for Crematorium fees) in line with inflation in 2017/18. Our Crematorium fees will not be increasing at all this coming year.

   SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW
   Comment:

2. WASTE AND RECYCLING
   This year we are required to increase the number of recyclable materials we collect at the kerbside, so we will be investing in that service. We also want to make sure our waste service is well resourced so that we are able to collect waste from all the new housing that is planned for Copeland.
   We want to do that by bringing in the following package of measures:
   
   • Spending £74,000 on a new team of three waste staff and one vehicle for a year. This will be in place by September 2017.
   SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW
   Comment:
• Charging £15 per year for the collection of all first green waste bins. Currently this service is free, and charging for it could raise up to an additional £55,000 a year after the costs of providing the service. SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW Comment:

• Charging people for new bins when their existing ones break or get lost. This could bring us £9,200 a year. SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW Comment:

3. GRANTS TO PARISH COUNCILS
As agreed last year, we plan to remove the £60,000 of grants to parish councils and provide an annual grant of £3,000 to the Copeland Association of Local Councils, which represents all parish and town councils. This would save us £57,000. SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW Comment:

4. OUR SYSTEMS
We want to invest in improving the IT systems that help our customers. We have allocated £200,000 to this. This includes:
• Improving our website, allowing you to access more services 24/7
• Upgrading our Geographical Information System (a mapping system which underpins many of our services)
• Replacing the major IT systems behind our planning and building control – this will allow people to access planning applications online.

SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW Comment:

5. COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY
We still want to become more commercially active – but at a smaller cost to the council. We want to reduce the money allocated to this from £200,000 last year to £50,000 for each of the next three years. This is appropriate to our budget and we will offset it by maximising external support and investment for commercial activity.

SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW Comment:

6. BUSINESS RATES
We want to make sure as many organisations as possible can get the business rate reductions that they need. There are several ways in which we can exercise our discretion to provide reductions for certain organisations (charities, registered community amateur sports clubs and non-profit-making organisations.) We’ve put some new criteria in place to
help more people apply for and get these reductions. We’d like you to read this (see the supporting documents on our website) and give us your comments.

Comment:

7. OUR CARBON FOOTPRINT
   We plan to reduce our carbon footprint by 5 per cent, which will result in small savings on travel expenses, council vehicle costs and utilities.

   SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW
   Comment:

8. COUNCIL TAX
   We plan to increase our part of the council tax by 1.95 per cent. On a Band B home this means an increase of 6p per household per week. The Copeland Council element of your council tax bill makes up 12 per cent of the total.

   SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW
   Comment:

9. COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME
   Please take a look at the supporting documents on our website regarding the Council Tax Support Scheme, and give us your view.

   SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW
   Comment:

10. OUR PRIORITIES
    Our four ambitions for the council remain:
    • Town centre regeneration
    • Commercialisation
    • Employment, skills and social wellbeing
    • Strengthening the way in which we operate.

    You can read about our four ambitions in more detail in the supporting documents on our website. Do you think these are the right things to prioritise in Copeland?

    SUPPORT/DO NOT SUPPORT/DON’T KNOW
    Comment:

If you have any further comments on any of our budget plans or priorities, please include them here