

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Board recognise and accept that £22 million of reductions to Torbay Council's budget over the next two financial years must be achieved.

6.2 The Panel read and heard representations during the course of its review with increasing frustration that the issues that it heard were the same issues which had been raised in the last two reviews of the Council's priorities and resources. The conclusion from last year's report was:

"...there have been three emerging and interlinked themes to which the Overview and Scrutiny Board would like to draw attention:

- *the need for a three year "business plan" for the authority;*
- *the need for a co-ordination of efforts between the Council, its partners and the wider community (including the voluntary sector); and*
- *the impact on Council services and those of partners and the voluntary sector of the forthcoming welfare reforms."*

Supporting People

6.3 The Panel feel that those fortunate citizens of Torbay who have uncommitted disposable income are hardly touched by the budget reduction proposals with the majority of service departments being required to make reductions of around 20% to 25%. However, against all natural justice, Supporting People have been asked to find a swingeing reduction that is in excess of 70%. This reduction hits the poor, the vulnerable and the severely disadvantaged. The Panel considers that the effects on those who are least able to help themselves are so profound that the proposals for Supporting People are calling the morality of the whole process into question.

6.4 The substantial percentage imbalance between the various proposed departmental reductions brings into serious question the whole purpose and raison d'être of why elected councillors are here. The Panel believes that councillors have a duty of care to those who elected them and those constituents who they represent to ensure that, in extremis, the worst off in our society deserve, and have the right to expect, our protection within the limited financial resource that is available. This can be achieved by ensuring that financial reductions to all departments' budgets are as evenly spread across the spectrum as possible and that their introduction is timed to ensure that the minimum possible damage is caused to the life and existence of the clients who receive Supporting People services.

6.5 Sadly, the Panel notes that the present proposals in relation to Supporting People do not meet this basic test and are therefore wholly unacceptable for the following reasons:

- The proposed reductions to departmental budgets are indefensibly and unevenly spread across recipient departments in percentage terms with

those citizens who are most in need and those who are most vulnerable being hit the hardest.

- The timing of the proposed reductions in the Supporting People budget is ill thought through. All of the evidence heard by, and representations made to, the Panel point irrefutably to the fact that terminal damage will be caused to many clients who rely on Supporting People services for their survival if the reductions are not amended to meet the quite reasonable requests of those making representations to the Panel that the reductions are delayed for one year to allow provider organisations time to make alternative arrangements for the provision of their services. Most representatives said it can be done but time is needed in which to do it.

6.6 The Panel also heard economic arguments against the proposals as well as social and moral arguments. There will be a cost implication across the public sector in Torbay as other agencies see an increase in activity as a result of the proposed reductions in Supporting People services.

6.7 The Panel does not believe that the obviously serious financial situation in which the Council finds itself is a justifiable reason for throwing even-handedness, compassion, humanity and principle out of the window and appeals to the Mayor to act accordingly. In short, the Panel believes that the £22 million of reductions can and must be achieved by a more equitable and evenly balanced means.

6.8 More flexibility needs to be allowed within the Supporting People proposals so that the cuts are not so deep in 2014/2015.

6.9 Similarly, flexibility around the proposals in relation to the Voluntary Sector Block Contracts should be considered with other sources of funding being explored.

6.10 It is therefore recommended:

That the level of budget reductions in relation to Supporting People are reduced to ensure that those services that help the most in need and the most vulnerable are protected. In reducing the level of budget reductions, serious consideration should be given to the fact that smaller organisations are doing just as much valuable work as the bigger organisations.

That it is not unreasonable to ringfence the current underspend within Adult Social Care to mitigate against the proposals within Supporting People given the likely cost shunt towards social care as a result of the current proposals.

Community Development Trust

6.11 It appears to the Panel that a large reliance is being placed on the Community Development Trust to support and develop the community and voluntary sector in Torbay. The Panel questions whether the Trust is advanced enough at this point in time to take on this role in the manner that is being expected by services across the Council.

- 6.12 That said, the Panel do believe that the Community Development Trust needs to be empowered to become involved in specific projects. In particular, in relation to the Acorn Centre, the Council and the Trust need to engage positively so that a clear strategy for the future of the Centre can be established.
- 6.13 Similarly, a more proactive approach towards the funding of the Learning Disability Development Fund should be undertaken, again including the Community Development Trust.
- 6.14 The Board would wish to review (in three to six months) how well the Community Development Trust is operating given the number of issues which have been passed to it as a result of budget reductions within Torbay Council. The Board would particularly wish to receive an update on the proposals for the Acorn Centre to become self sustaining.
- 6.15 The Panel also received a commitment from the Director of Children's Services that he would spend the next two to four months "exploring how Children's Services can more radically do things". The next Children and Young People's Plan was due to be published in June 2014.

Riviera International Conference Centre

- 6.16 The Panel believe that, given the need to find huge savings across the Authority and the impact that this is likely to have on services provided to the most vulnerable in the community, it is now time to prove or disprove whether the Mayor's arguments in relation to the Riviera International Conference Centre are correct. The Panel believe an options appraisal should be carried out to identify the uses and routes by which the Centre can be self financing.
- 6.17 It is therefore recommended:**

That an options appraisal on the future of the Riviera International Conference Centre be undertaken by the Torbay Development Agency, free from political interference, within the next three months.

Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust

- 6.18 The Panel wish to see a Coast and Countryside Trust which is financially resilient but do not feel that it has a full enough understanding of the issues to make informed comments. The Panel hopes that further progress can be made before the budget is set in relation to releasing capital for the Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust so that the Trust can invest to save in the long term.

English Riviera Tourism Company

- 6.19 It is recommended:**

That the Mayor give sympathetic reconsideration to the proposal from the English Riviera Tourism Company and a commitment to the end of the contract period. The

local authority should do all in its powers to support the proposed Tourism Business Improvement District otherwise the Tourism Company will have no long term future.

Library Services

- 6.20 The Panel was disappointed that it was not able to receive the outcome of the consultation in relation to Library Services and therefore is not able to make any comments on the proposals which have yet to be articulated. This is likely to be an area that the Overview and Scrutiny Board will consider as part of its Work Programme for the coming year.

Citizens' Advice Bureau

- 6.21 Last year there was a proposal to reduce the grant paid to the Citizens' Advice Bureau by £30,000. Following recommendations from this Board, it was agreed that this reduction in grant be delayed to enable the Bureau to make savings with a reduced grant being introduced in 2014/2015. Now it is proposed that the grant will be reduced by £75,000 and the Panel was informed that this would make the Bureau unsustainable.
- 6.22 The Council should be strengthening its safety nets and the Board believe that this should be one of the last areas to be cut. At a time when services for the most vulnerable are facing major reductions in their funding – services which provide support and advice – where are people expected to go for advice?
- 6.23 The Board does however acknowledge that there is probably a large amount of duplication of the advice available to the public between the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Council, Job Centre Plus and housing associations to name but a few. This should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

6.24 It is therefore recommended that:

That the reduction in the grant to the Citizens' Advice Bureau be limited to £30,000 in 2014/2015.

Future Strategy

- 6.25 Despite its recommendations last year on the need for a three year "business plan", the Panel believe that Torbay Council has no long term strategy for how it can manage its long term financial issues.
- 6.26 The Council needs to establish its "2020 Vision" to determine whether it is fit for purpose in the environment it finds itself in. A wide range of options need to be considered including how the Council works with its neighbouring authorities and with local health trusts. The opportunities for joint commissioning between health and social care need to be seized together with the opportunities arising from Pioneer status. The Overview and Scrutiny Board could be best placed to develop this vision. Another year cannot be wasted.

- 6.27 The Board will also be reviewing the budget setting process itself although it appears on the face of it that the process should commence earlier in the year with all councillors being briefed and that Executive Leads should be asked to demonstrate how their individual strategies will support Torbay Council's long term aims and objectives.

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