

Executive

6 May 2008

Report from Democratic Services Manager

Scrutiny Management Committee - Request For Additional Scrutiny Funding

Summary

1. This report presents a request from Scrutiny Management Committee for additional funding to finance a citywide survey on the broad strategic options available to the city to tackle traffic congestion.

Background

2. In January 2008, Scrutiny Management Committee (SMC) received an interim report from the Traffic Congestion Ad-hoc Scrutiny Review. The report detailed the work completed to date, sought approval to extend the timeframe for the review and requested additional funding in the amount of £17,000 for a consultation exercise which would gather residents views on the broad strategic options available to the city to tackle traffic congestion. This consultative work would be specific to the scrutiny review and not part of any ongoing work being carried out by City Strategy.
3. The meeting was attended by the Chair of the Traffic Congestion Ad-hoc Scrutiny Committee who explained that the aim of the suggested method of consultation was to ensure residents participation and engagement, rather than just gathering statistical analysis. SMC queried what other funding sources might be available for the survey e.g. European Union funds, and what consideration had been given to ways of reducing the costs involved e.g. by incorporating the survey in the new Council newspaper when it is introduced.
4. The Committee agreed to defer their decision on funding the survey until their next meeting to allow further information on alternative costings and funding sources to be provided and to ensure an appropriate officer was in attendance to answer questions on consultation and engagement mechanisms.

Consultation

5. In February 2008, the Scrutiny Management Committee considered a further report that detailed the alternative options for gathering responses of York residents – see Annex B.

6. The Head of Marketing and Communications attended the meeting to provide information on the various methods available for engaging the public. He drew a distinction between consultation and research by defining research as 'the collection and analysis of data to provide greater understanding' and consultation as 'a process of dialogue that leads to a decision.' With this in mind, he advised that as the intention of the survey was to understand residents' attitudes to congestion rather than to ask for their comments on the findings of the review, the survey could only be defined as research and not consultation. As scrutiny is not in itself a decision making body (and consultation needs to be part of a defined decision making process) he advised that consultation would not be appropriate.
7. The Council's tailor-made research tool is the citizen's panel talkabout, which is representative of all sections of the city and is also established for research purposes. The Head of Marketing and Communications therefore recommended the best way for scrutiny members to gain an understanding of attitudes to congestion would be through a talkabout special, which would cost around £6000.00.
8. SMC discussed the differences between holding a talkabout special and sending a survey to all residents through the Your Ward/Your City route. Some Members expressed concern that the talkabout panels were not comprised of a good socio-economic cross-section of the community; they also questioned how much could be achieved for £6,000. Officers confirmed that the talkabout facility would allow for more information to be given and more in-depth questions to be asked.
9. The Chair of the Traffic Congestion Ad Hoc Scrutiny Committee believed that these issues were relevant to the whole of the York public and therefore everyone should be consulted which is why it was necessary to request the £17,000 to enable full consultation to take place.
10. Having considered all of the information provided, Scrutiny Management Committee agreed to submit a request to the Executive for additional funding in the amount of £17,000 to enable the survey of all York residents via the 'Your Ward/Your City' publication.

Options

11. Having considered all the information contained within the report and annexes Members may:
 - i. Approve the recommendation within this report to provide additional funding in the amount of £17,000
 - ii. Allocate a lesser amount of additional funding of £6,000, in line with the alternative option shown in Annex B, as suggested by the Head of Marketing & Communications
 - iii. Refuse the application for additional funding.

Analysis

12. A full analysis of options (i) and (ii) is included in Annex B.

Corporate Direction & Priorities

13. In regard to the recommendation within this report, it is recognised that the additional funding of £17,000 will enable ad-hoc scrutiny committee to identify the views of residents and inform any future decisions made in regard to tackling congestion, which is in line with our corporate value to 'Deliver what our customers want'.

Implications

14. **Financial** - At its meeting in January 2008, SMC agreed to make a recommendation to Budget Council to increase its research support budget for 2008/9 to £20k. This was not approved, but Council agreed to put £14,000 into contingency for future scrutiny use that SMC could request, subject to requirements. However, as this report is requesting additional funding for a one-off specific review, the money cannot be drawn from that contingency.
15. Instead, the Council has reserves that can be used to fund non-recurring expenditure, which will leave the contingency available to fund recurring items. It is important that the Council maintain a minimum level of revenue reserves to deal with any unforeseen events. The value of the minimum level of these reserves is determined by a risk assessment undertaken by the Director of Resources and included in the annual Revenue Budget report. The resulting calculation indicates that the council should, as a minimum, hold general reserves of £5.219m for 2008/09 and £5.375m for 2009/10. The Director of Resources recommended that the Council looks to remain above this target for the next two years, although the current forecasts show the Council will move below these levels in the future, and that it is particularly important that the reserves are reviewed once the 2007/08 out-turn is known. It is estimated that there will be approximately £1.376m of other revenue reserves available, thus the level of the general fund balance should not fall below £3.843m. The current forecast level of the general fund balance at the end of 2008/09 is £4.575m, although there are also future commitments to use the general fund reserve amounting to £1.316m, which will take the level down to £3.259m. If this application is approved the balance will reduce to £3.242m.
16. **Human Resources (HR)** – Irrespective of the method used i.e. a survey of all York residents via the 'Your Ward/Your City' publication, or a talkabout special, Marketing & Communications would seek to absorb the extra work into the existing workloads in the research team. Given the subject matter, they will require a six week lead-in time to ensure the right information is presented and the relevant questions are included.
17. **Legal** - With the exception of urgent action, the executive may only make decisions within the confines of the budget allocated by Full Council, subject to any flexibility afforded by the council's financial regulations. Any decision resulting in expenditure outside of the budgetary framework will be conditional

upon the approval of Full Council. (Legal Implications provided by Quentin Baker).

18. There are no known, Equalities, Crime & Disorder, ITT, Property or other implications associated with the recommendation within this report

Risk Management

19. There are potential risks associated with both consultative options outlined in Annex B in that neither may truly engage residents in the way that Members of the Ad-hoc Scrutiny Sub-Committee are hoping. Equally, any form of consultation about broad strategic options for dealing with congestion could raise public expectations about future Council decisions.

Recommendations

20. Members are asked to consider the request for additional funding in the amount of £17,000, to be taken from reserves, in order that SMC can allocate this to the Traffic Congestion Ad-hoc Scrutiny Committee for carrying out a survey of all York households.

Reason: To ensure:

- all York residents understand the options available to the city for tackling congestion and their consequences
- any future difficult decisions made by the Council in regard to tackling congestion are fully informed of residents views.

Contact Details

Author:

Melanie Carr
Scrutiny officer
Scrutiny Services
Tel No.01904 552063

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

Dawn Steel
Democratic Services Manager

Report Approved



Date 1 April 2008

Specialist Implications

Legal Implications:
Quentin Baker
Head of Civic, Democratic & Legal
Services
Tel No. 01904 551004

Financial Implications:
Patrick Looker
Finance Manager
Tel No.01904 551633

HR Implications:

Matt Beer
Head of Marketing & Communications
Tel No.01904 551071

Wards Affected:

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: Traffic Congestion Ad-hoc Scrutiny Review – Interim Report
dated 28 January 2008

Annexes

Annex A – Costings for carrying out a survey via ‘Your Ward/Your City’

Annex B – Report to SMC dated 25 February 2008