

Traffic Congestion Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Sub-Committee – Request for Funding

Background

1. At the last meeting of Scrutiny Management Committee (SMC) in January 2008, Members deferred a decision on a funding request received from Traffic Congestion Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Sub-Committee in the sum of £17,000 to enable all York residents to be surveyed on the issues.
2. SMC specifically requested officers to report back with alternative options for engaging, and gathering the responses of York residents on the subject, together with details of any other potential funding sources.

Consultation

3. The Head of Marketing & Communications has been consulted on alternative options requested by Members. His comments are as follows and he will be attending the meeting to answer questions as necessary:

“The council has many mechanisms at its disposal for conducting research and consultation, depending upon the aims of the project, the audience needing to be reached, whether the information required needs to be quantitative or qualitative and the budget available. Different types of research and consultation provide different types of information. A questionnaire such as the staff survey provides the proportion of people agreeing with statements, but not the reason why they agree. A focus group will provide the 'why' but may not be representative of opinion as the numbers questioned are statistically insignificant.

The market research team run the council's consultation projects and ensure that consultation is ethical, statistically viable and affordable. They apply the professional standards of the market research society and the council's standards included in the consultation protocol (shortly to be incorporated into the council's first explicit consultation strategy) and in 'perspectives: how to make consultation accessible and inclusive'.

A distinction between consultation and research needs to be drawn. The research team define research as 'the collection and analysis of data to provide greater understanding' while consultation is defined as 'a process of dialogue that leads to a

decision'. Our understanding is that scrutiny members are looking to understand attitudes to congestion and that is not directly linked to a decision therefore, this is research rather than consultation. As scrutiny is not in itself a decision-making body (and consultation needs be part of a defined decision-making process) consultation would not be appropriate.

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 Marketing & Communications team would therefore recommend the best way for scrutiny members to gain an understanding of attitudes to congestion would be through a talkabout special, which would cost around £6,000.

We would not recommend a city-wide consultation so close to the budget consultation and the recent every-household LDF/Festival of Ideas 2 document, as we are concerned that another city-wide consultation would lead to consultation-fatigue. In addition the recent budget consultation has shown people's tendency to assume a question asked will lead directly to a decision. The Talkabout Panel, recruited as they are by the council, have a much greater understanding of their role as 'sounding-boards' and they are therefore less likely to be confused.

In addition a city-wide consultation is potentially less representative of opinion, in that it is self-selecting. Talkabout would provide greater representation of true opinion, by area, gender, ethnic group and socio-economic breakdown as the panel is already representative of the city.

Plans for a monthly city-wide publication are still being investigated. The OJEU process has recently started and expressions of interest are being made, but until that process is at an end (June is the earliest date) and the bids evaluated it is impossible to say when a new publication would be available for city-wide consultation. The existing publication Your City is quarterly and distributed with Your Ward, the ward newsletters. This could be used to distribute a city-wide consultation (as it was with the LDF consultation mentioned above). The next two issues of Your City are to be distributed March/April and August/September.”

Analysis

- Members will need to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of the Head of Marketing & Communications suggestion for a 'Talkabout Special', compared to the proposal from Traffic Congestion Ad-hoc Scrutiny Sub-Committee to produce a full survey distribution as part of Your Ward/Your City. The table below contrasts the 2 available suggestions based on advice received from the Head of Marketing & Communications.

	Costings	Advantages	Disadvantages
Your Ward/Your City Survey	£17k	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guaranteed distribution to all York households in an effort to secure the views of a diverse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expensive Consultation 'fatigue' may undermine feedback / engagement Self-selecting and

		cross section of residents	responses not guaranteed from cross section of community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing of survey restricted to production of Your Ward
Talkabout Special	£6k	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Known research tool representative of the community • Guaranteed engagement from cross section of community • Proven record as representative sounding board • More financially viable • Flexibility over timing of 'consultation' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not reach 90,000 households

Options

5. Members can choose to:
- (i) support in principle either of the above options for consultation with residents but in so doing will need to make a request to the Executive for the appropriate level of funding to be made available in the current financial year; or
 - (ii) reject the application from Traffic Congestion Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Sub-Committee for additional funds for a consultation exercise.

Implications

Financial

6. Scrutiny Committees have an annual available budget of £6k to support reviews with research etc as reported to Members at the last meeting. Taking into account the additional funds allocated last time by SMC to Traffic Congestion Scrutiny and the extra monies likely to be awarded to Education Scrutiny Committee (see separate report on agenda), it is estimated that approximately £2,350 remains unspent in 2007/8.
7. If Members wish to approve either of the consultation methods set out in this report, SMC will only be in a position to allocate up to £2,350 towards those costs in the current financial year.

8. At its last meeting, SMC made a recommendation to the Executive to increase its research support budget for 2008/9 to £20k. A decision on this level of funding will be known after Budget Council on 21 February 2008.
9. There are no known Legal, Equalities, HR, or other implications associated with the recommendations within this report.

Other Issues

10. At the last meeting, SMC also sought clarification on the following issues:

Legal Powers

11. The Monitoring Officer advises that scrutiny has no legal powers to enforce the Executive to allocate funds for incurring expenditure in relation to supporting the scrutiny review process.

Alternative Funding Sources

12. The Council's Partnership Officer has been contacted with a view to establishing whether any European Union or other funds might be available to assist with the funding of the request from Traffic Congestion Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Sub-Committee. Further information will be reported to Members at the meeting.

Corporate Strategy

13. The ongoing review relating to traffic congestion could be said to contribute to the following priorities for improvement:

'Reduce the environmental impact of Council activities and encourage, empower and promote others to do the same';

'Increase the use of public and other environmentally friendly modes of transport.'

Risk Management

14. There are potential risks associated with both consultative options outlined in the report in the sense 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, of course, raise public expectations about future Council decisions.

Recommendation

15. Members are asked to consider this report and decide whether they wish to support any of the 2 consultative options set out in paragraph 5 and to make any request to the Executive for a supplementary estimate or carry forward in the current financial year .

Reason: To ensure Members are in a position to undertake effective consultation in this review area in accordance with budgetary provision and procedures.

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Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers: Interim Report on Traffic Congestion Review – SMC – 28 January 2008