

## Budget Proposals 2016-17: Access Officer

### Summary of Feedback Received and Key Findings

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#### Why we consulted?

Over the last four years we have had to make savings of £23m because we've received less money from central government. We have done this by becoming more efficient at what we do, by reducing some of our administrative functions and increasing our income. Throughout this period we have done our best to protect front line services.

We now have to find another £20m over the next four years, with almost £11m to be found in 2016/17. Much of this will come from further efficiencies within the council, but £4.6m will have to come from services that will impact the public.

In order to inform the budget setting process for 2016/17 we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives

#### Approach

All the proposals were published on the council's website on 3 November 2015 with feedback requested by 14 December 2015. Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), with a video message from the Chief Executive outlining the background to the exercise.

Information relating to this proposal was linked directly from this index page. This contained more detailed information on what was specifically proposed, information on what we thought the impact might be, as well as what else we had considered in developing and arriving at this proposal. Feedback was then invited through an online form and through a dedicated email address.

Each individual budget proposal was placed on our [Consultation Portal](#) which automatically notified those registered that an exercise had been launched. Members of the West Berkshire community panel (around 800 people) and local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations were also emailed directly, notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Heads of Service made direct contact with those organisations affected by any of the budget proposals prior to them being made publically available.

A press release was issued on the same date, as well as publicised through Facebook and Twitter.

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#### Background

The council employs an access officer to advise council staff and external customers and partners on access and inclusiveness, specifically for people who have disabilities.

The post monitors compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and ensures we provide services that are accessible to people with disabilities, which is a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The post also trains external service providers (including companies that deliver services on the council's behalf) with training on access and equalities, for example taxi drivers. The post provides expert scrutiny of planning applications and supports the Planning Access Panel to provide comment on accessibility and inclusivity. This post also manages and consults with the various stakeholder groups such as the Disability Alliance.

The Access Officer (AO) post will be removed with a saving of £48,000. The Access Panel will also cease to operate.

#### Summary of Key Points

A total of 21 responses were received:

- 14 from individuals
- One from WBC's Activity Team
- One from West Berkshire Disability Alliance
- One from WBC's Transport Services team
- Three from Parish Councils - Pangbourne, Tilehurst and Holybrook
- One from Unison

The Disability External Scrutiny Board did not respond but as part of a stage 2 Equalities Impact assessment I contacted them and asked for comments. These comments are included below.

#### Overview of comments received:

Most comments received were against the proposal whilst a small number supported the proposal. Some respondents went on to make suggestions as to how the impacts of the proposal could be limited or how the saving might be made in other areas.

- The information and advice provided by this post can be provided in other ways, internet, charities, stakeholders and the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Impact will be minimal as the legislation has been in place for some time and the principles should be well known.
- There is currently no organisation with this knowledge who can advise on inclusivity and access for disabled residents, putting them at a disadvantage.
- The recent staff survey highlighted that disabled staff or those with mobility issues are at a disadvantage. Removal of this post will only make this worse.
- The loss of this expertise and the advice it provides within and outside the Council will have a deleterious impact on disabled services making the situation worse for disabled people in the District. Much of what has been gained over the years will now be lost. There is a concern about impacts on services for disabled children.
- Hackney carriage and private hire taxi drivers lack training in access for disabled customers. Mandatory training is required and is due to be carried out. This will no longer happen unless a private training provider can be found.

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- This post monitors compliance with the 2010 Equality Act, without this scrutiny the risk of challenge increases.
- This post provides a link to stakeholders such as the Disability Alliance. This group provides advice to the Council on access matters including compliance with the DDA and they comment on planning applications both large and small.
- Increased cost to WBC seeking this advice from 3rd parties.
- Developers may save the expense of providing up to date and fit for purpose access and facilities in developments at the expense of the most vulnerable in society.
- Those Parishes who responded valued the advice received.

#### 1. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people?

There is an overriding concern that this proposal will impact on the most vulnerable members of the West Berkshire Community and that a lot of work carried out to date to try to bring about equality of access and inclusiveness will be lost. This post is a link between officers, decision makers, external stakeholders and customers. The loss of this post will have a disproportionate affect on good communications and relations between the Council and the vulnerable members of the community it serves. There were some comments that the post, working alongside stakeholders and local disabled experts may actually have provided a saving to the Council. The Disability Alliance considers the post cost neutral at worst on this basis alone.

Those supporting the proposal stated a common theme that advice and help with DDA matters is available from other sources such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), other charities and indeed the Disability Alliance which will continue to operate despite the potential loss of the post.

#### 2. Do you feel that this proposal will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so, how do you think we might help with this?

It is clear from the consultations that this post, which exists solely to advise on inclusiveness and access matters, provides valued support to council officers, members and external customers. Should the proposal go ahead, there will be an impact on those with certain protected characteristics unless another means can be found to harness the advice available from third parties.

#### 3. Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so, please provide details.

- Remove the post and make use of existing sources of advice such as the CAB, stakeholder groups and other charities. Keep the Council's website up to date with advice on provision of access for the disabled community.
- Sign post people to other sources of information and advice like the CAB.
- Share post with another authority or organisation.
- Charge private business for advice received through this post.
- Make the post part time to reduce the impact on vulnerable groups.
- The current postholder is not visible enough and their impact is therefore limited. Have a campaign to raise awareness.
- This Post needs to focus on priority activities, reduce the job description and broaden responsibilities out to other existing officers.

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4. **Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.**

No individual or organisation made any suggestions in this respect. It was suggested that the Citizens Advice Bureau might have a role to play.

5. **Any further comments?**

This post is valued by some and the current incumbent of the post is well respected. There is a concern that much good work and progress will be lost in the long term.

That this is a post the Council can no longer afford.

### Conclusion

The Council as a public sector service provider has legal duties under the DDA. The responsibility for compliance has always sat with the front line Service areas but advice on compliance has been provided by the Access Officer. With this post cut Service Areas will have to seek other sources of advice (if required). This could expose the Council to a risk of challenges under the DDA.

The Equalities Policy, makes reference to some activities carried out by the AO Post, these will become more difficult to achieve. This policy promotes equality of access and aims to eliminate unlawful discrimination.

The post is clearly valued by customers and stakeholders but there is no statutory requirement for the post to remain in the Council's structure. The overall impact also includes the loss of a key, familiar and respected link with the disabled community. This post has harnessed their advice over a number of years and it is likely that this will be lost consequent to the removal of the post.

Finally the Planning Access Panel that comments on access issues related to planning applications will cease to operate. Although 'Access and facilities for people with disabilities' is included in the Building Regulations there could be a reduction in the standard of access to new developments.

**Please note:** *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

*The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.*

*All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.*

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6 January 2015  
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