Council’s biggest challenge draws huge response from Orkney public

By OIC Convener Stephen Hagan

In recent months we’ve been running Orkney Islands Council’s largest ever engagement exercise.

In response to the tough economic times we all face, we set out to discover which Council services are most valued by the Orkney public.

We asked as well for your ideas for ways the Council can save money.

Tough Times-Tough Choices: an apt name for an engagement exercise that’s involved everything from the Council’s first online blog to the 20 public meetings we’ve held in communities across the county.

The response from the public has been gratifying to say the least. The blog on the OIC website attracted more than 276 replies and generated 585 ideas for us to consider.

It is something we will use again to engage with the public and staff on other important issues.

The road shows drew a total audience of almost 700 people, with those in the isles particularly well attended.

We’ve logged everything you’ve told us. In all, by a wide variety of means, we received 1769 responses from the public.

On 1st February 2011 Elected Members will sit down in the Council Chamber to consider some of the most difficult decisions we’ve ever faced, at a budget-setting meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee.

Your views and opinions will strongly influence the debate, with final decisions taken by a special meeting of the Full Council on 10th February.

We need to find £4 million in savings for the next financial year – a huge amount out of an overall budget of £86 million.

This reflects the reduction in our budget from the

“...Scottish Government, as well as an increasing demand for Council services and inflationary pressures like rising fuel costs.

Cuts on this scale have never been proposed before. This is the biggest challenge the Council has faced since it was established in the 1970s. And all the signs are that we will have to find savings of at least £4 million in each of the following two years as well. All your comments have been passed on to the Directors who will propose the budget cuts – and to the Councillors who make those final decisions.

My commitment from the start is that your thinking will help shape the future direction of this Council.”

This special publication summarises the ideas and opinions gathered during the Tough Times-Tough Choices engagement process.

I hope, like me, that you’ll conclude that it’s been a worthwhile exercise.

KEEP IN TOUCH – Although the Council’s public engagement exercise ended on 13th January 2011, you can still read all the blog comments – as well as accounts of each of the 20 road shows.

Visit the Tough Times-Tough Choices pages at www.orkney.gov.uk
Your ideas … a selection from across the county

Some of us believe we could take over the running of our island’s ferry – and that the service would be better and cost less. Why not close the school hostel on Sunday nights? Isles children could then travel in on Mondays, if Kirkwall Grammar School opened later in the morning. It would save on running costs at the hostel - and allow children to spend more time with their families. Has the Council given any thought to management buy-outs? As an example, people currently employed to provide home care could set up as a business to deliver that service. We would like to continue with a weekly rubbish collection in our island. But perhaps you could provide a bigger skip – which could be collected fortnightly rather than weekly. Move to fortnightly refuse collections - after giving homes enough notice time. Drivers should be allowed to pay on exit from car parks – so they only pay for the time their car has been parked. My shop is at the end of a 200 metre private road. In wetty weather, I’d be happy to pay the Council to do the gritting for me. In our island, we are keen to be positive and constructive rather than defensive about savings. Discussions at local level are an invaluable way to find solutions to problems – keep talking to us!

Transport generated many comments – 274 in all. Most opposed a reduction in the present service. On whether the roads services budget should be cut or maintained, more comments were in favour of cuts than in maintaining the current budget (20 and 15 respectively). We received 842 ideas, many about how we can save money. Most (just under a sixth) were about service efficiencies. These ideas alone will not save enough money but they will certainly help. Other popular ideas were:
- Change staff pay and conditions (113 people)
- Although we are largely tied into national agreements on these matters
- Make savings on utility costs (80 people)
- Reduce or remove services (71 people)
- Invest in enterprise (56 people)
- Charge for services (54 people)
- Reduce and improve management (53 people)
- Pay others to provide services currently delivered by the Council (46 people)
- Reduce staff travel (45 people)
- Improve how we manage our property and other assets (40 people)

This summary provides an overview of what has been said, through all the routes chosen by the public and staff.

How we engaged
- The first ever public blog on the Council website
- A special Tough Times e-mail and postal address for your comments
- Questionnaires to the public and Community Councils
- The Tough Times– Tough Choices mailshot to all households
- A live debate from the Council Chamber on BBC Radio Orkney
- A special e-mail address and blog for staff
- Twenty road shows in each Community Council area
- Video interviews with Voxy – the computer in a yellow box
- Special meetings with minority groups
- Convener’s discussions with pupil councils

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What happens now? – the way ahead for OIC

By OIC Chief Executive Albert Tait

Early next week Elected Members will debate how to reduce the Council’s budget for the year ahead by £4 million.

Cuts on this scale take OIC into uncharted territory, but I am confident that the Council is well prepared for the challenges ahead.

Our public engagement exercise started in August last year with the opening of the Tough Times-Tough Choices blog on the OIC website.

This was a first for the Council – as was the decision to hold 20 public meetings across Orkney.

Five months on we have a clear picture of what you the public see as priority services for the Council.

This has been invaluable for Council Directors who have had the task of drawing up the budget savings proposals that will be debated at a special meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee on 1st February. Elected Members have also been kept abreast of all the feedback we’ve received from the public and from our staff.

Again, this will help Councillors make final decisions on the best way ahead for OIC. These decisions will be agreed at a special meeting of the Full Council on 10th February.

The cuts for 2011-12 will be spelled out in some detail in public at the Committee and Full Council meetings, apart from those that affect individual members of staff, which will be dealt with in private.

More generic proposals will be put forward for the following two years. We expect our budget to be reduced by a further £8 million during the course of 2012-13 and 2013-14. But the full detail of this won’t become clear until after the Scottish Government election in May.

You might expect this to be a time of doom and gloom for the Council and undoubtedly these are difficult times for Elected Members and staff – and for the public we serve.

But at each of the road shows I’ve ended my presentation by saying that I see the challenging years ahead as a time of opportunity for OIC.

We introduced a system of vacancy management in June last year – only filling posts that become vacant if they are seen as critically important.

The Council currently employs the equivalent of 1566 full time staff. That is less than the total figure four years ago – and since then a sizeable number of previously casual staff have actually joined the workforce.

So to be employing around 20 fewer staff than we were in 2006 is quite an achievement – as is the fact that our budget for the current financial year is underspent by a considerable amount, thanks to the efforts of managers and staff.

This places us in a strong position to cope with the tough times ahead of us.

I’m confident that at the end of this process this Council will be more effective and more efficient – and that public respect will have grown for the way we provide our services.

On the road with Voxur

The computer in a yellow box called Voxur became a star attraction of the Tough Times-Tough Choices engagement exercise.

People of all ages took the opportunity to have their views recorded by the laptop’s built-in video camera, in response to six questions from Council Convener Stephen Hagan.

In all, 114 interviews were recorded at road shows, schools, the Youth Café, the St Colm’s Day Centre and the Blide Trust.

Here are just a few of the responses we received:

**Perhaps most ferry services could be available on request to save boats running empty. Hoy road show.**

If you start cutting ferries, you’re potentially deciding not to keep the isles populated. Evie-Rendall road show.

Funding for schools is very important. If there are less subjects on offer, people wanting to go on to further education will be more limited in what they can study. Pupil at Stromness Academy.

Make more use of people on Community Service to do jobs like sweeping streets and cutting the grass. Service user, St Colm’s day centre.

I think care for older adults is really important as well as keeping the roads safe. Young person at Youth Café.

Often there are council services and private services and if both do the same thing - why pay for the Council service if someone else can do it better. Service user at the Blide Trust.

I thought it was fun – the computer in the yellow box is really cool. Pupil at St Andrews primary school.

If you require this publication in a larger print or another format contact the Council’s Communications Unit on 01856 873535

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