

IMPLEMENTATION EXECUTIVE
13 MAY 2009

THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN IN WILTSHIRE

Executive Summary

This report concerns the economic recession and a report on its impact in Wiltshire which was considered by the Wiltshire Assembly on 26th March 2009. The report, commissioned by the Council on behalf of the Family of Partnerships, included a range of recommendations.

In this report, background information is set out on the initial steps that have been taken to communicate and consider the recommendations of the report to the Wiltshire Assembly, and generally to establish a programme of work.

Proposal

That the Implementation Executive endorses the initial programme of work initiated by Wiltshire Council to take forward the recommendations of the report prepared for the Wiltshire Assembly.

Reason for Proposal

The approval of the Implementation Executive is requested, to ensure that the Executive gives authority to the programme of work that is to be taken forward by the Wiltshire Council.

Author: **KEITH ROBINSON**, Chief Executive
Contact Details: telephone (01225) 713101

Interim Project Co-ordinator: **Rachel Goff**, National Management Trainee, Chief Executive's Office
Contact Details: telephone (01225) 713931

THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN IN WILTSHIRE – REPORT PREPARED FOR THE WILTSHIRE ASSEMBLY

Purpose of Report

1. The Implementation Executive is requested to endorse the initial programme of work initiated by Wiltshire Council to take forward the recommendations of the report prepared for the Wiltshire Assembly.
2. The approval of the Implementation Executive is requested, to ensure that the Executive gives authority to the programme of work that is to be taken forward by the Wiltshire Council.

Background

3. The coming year will be critical for Wiltshire Council and for Wiltshire too.
4. Economists differ in their forecasts of the depth and duration of the recession; but in any case, the prospects for public expenditure are such that all Councils will face severe pressure on their resources (and under the present system for government grant, the squeeze on Wiltshire Council will continue to be approximately 2% harder than that on Councils generally).
5. In a survey of public opinion in Wiltshire, 63% agreed that 'the Council should lead in getting us back on track'. In difficult financial circumstances there can be a temptation to focus within an organisation, to concentrate on balancing the budget; of course that's always important, but the Council must manage this financial challenge in a way which supports people and communities during the recession, and helps to pave the way for an early and sustained recovery.
6. To achieve that, Wiltshire Council should
 - i. Continue to seek new and more effective ways of working, building upon the success of the past twelve months so that all our services focus upon the customer's needs and provide value for money;
 - ii. Work closely with other public bodies, voluntary organisations and the private sector so that we maximise the impact of our various services and activities;
 - iii. Work with local communities, particularly through the Area Boards and Community Partnerships, so that these communities become strong and resilient, able to shape their future for themselves.
7. These local partnerships are matched at the County level by the Wiltshire Assembly. This provides the means to develop this sense of shared endeavour between the Council, its partners, and local communities. After the first meeting of the Assembly in autumn 2008 the Council commissioned on the Assembly's behalf a study of the likely impact of the economic downturn on the County and what could be done about it. The report was prepared by George Bright, Chair of the West Wilts Economic Partnership and former Principal of Wiltshire College.

George Bright's report

8. George Bright presented his report to the Assembly on 26th March 2009. The report has subsequently been considered by the Wiltshire Public Services Board and the Co-ordinating Group (which co-ordinates the work of the various major partnerships in Wiltshire). The full report can be found by following this link [Wiltshire Assembly 26th March 2009](#). A detailed list of the recommendations in the report and action to implement them is appended, following recent meetings of the Public Service Board and the Co-ordinating Group.
9. In considering action following the Bright report, the Council must take into account, I suggest, three broad issues:
 - i. We must balance immediate action and longer term investment. The recession is affecting people and communities now and action is being taken to ameliorate these effects; at the same time, we should be investing in our communities so that they are better placed to move out of recession into a sustainable future.
 - ii. We must combine action by the Council with actions by others. People have said that they expect the Council to show leadership; at the same time, many other bodies and people can play a part and should be encouraged to do so. The Council will not foster resilience by seeking to do everything itself.
 - iii. George Bright makes clear in his report (especially chapter 9) that the challenges facing the UK go well beyond the direct effects of the credit crunch and the economic recession. They pose deeper questions about how people want to live and about the sort of communities in which they want to live. Members of the new Wiltshire Council will be well placed in the Area Boards and Community Partnerships (provided we ensure that they are open and inclusive) to lead the local consideration of these questions and to use the conclusions to shape the policies of the Council.
10. There are six strands to the recommendations in the Bright report, covering businesses, people and communities:
 - i. Wiltshire Business Support Service: 'to establish a service for businesses which brings together the private and public sector to provide a local personal service'
 - ii. Wiltshire Street Scene Programme: 'to involve the community in working together to sustain the town centre environments of our market towns'.
 - iii. Wiltshire 'Potential' Programme: 'to create a range of opportunities for young people to develop their education and skills further, to gain experience that will support applications for employment in due course and to gain skills that help to promote sustainability'.
 - iv. Wiltshire Citizens' Advice Service: 'to create a stronger support service for individuals and families in Wiltshire who are affected adversely by the credit crunch and economic downturn'.
 - v. Wiltshire Community Finance Initiative: 'to create new local arrangements for the provision of credit... a community based finance initiative that will provide savings and loan facilities to individuals, small businesses and social enterprises'

- vi. The Building Confidence Programme: 'to change the tenor of the language about the credit crunch in Wiltshire'.

Various steps have already been taken in response to the Bright report:

- Wiltshire business support service – research has recently been completed by a Wiltshire Association of Chambers of Commerce (WACC) representative to explore what local businesses now need from the support service, that is not already being provided by existing partners;
 - Proactive marketing of the existing rate relief to businesses – a programme of work is drawing to a close after marketing across the county;
 - Review of the 'Buy Wiltshire' website to increase awareness of its potential and opportunities for Wiltshire businesses – this also links with WPSB members placing tenders on the 'Buy Wiltshire' website when appropriate;
 - Easy access to available property information – the use of the 'Invest in Wiltshire' website to support actions re town centre and street scene initiatives to provide current and assessable information on property that might be available for new business 'start-ups'. This is a development of an existing tool and is planned to begin over the next few weeks;
 - Identifying barriers in the 'stalled' development projects – the 'Vision' directors will be taking this forward as an ongoing programme of work;
 - Support from the Wiltshire and Swindon Economic partnership (WSEP) and other partners for emergency response teams to respond to redundancies occurring, including job clubs. Ongoing work is taking place with Jobcentre plus to meet needs when redundancies occur.
11. Corporate and Service Directors have also been considering the implications of the recession for every Council service and the contribution which each can make. Housing is an obvious example: our service has been working with home owners and finance companies to avoid repossessions; libraries can help to promote information and advice about how to reduce energy costs (which was identified as the top concern in the public survey); and so on.

Next steps

12. The Implementation Executive is invited to refer to the detailed list of recommendations in the report and action to implement them which is appended.
13. All members of the Public Service Board are being asked to consider the implications of the report for their services; and I recommend that the Area Boards should be asked likewise when they meet after the new Council is elected on 4 June.

Financial Implications

14. It would be a mistake to assume that every step to ameliorate the impact of the recession and prepare for recovery will require new and additional expenditure. This aim after all should be part of the 'core business' of every public and voluntary organisation which exists to improve life in the County.
15. Nevertheless, some of the recommendations in the Bright report clearly involve additional costs. Also, if we are to ask local communities through their Area Boards to consider what can be done locally, some 'pump priming' will clearly help to encourage local initiatives.
16. The 'Performance Reward Grant' which the government will pay to Wiltshire Council during 2009/11 can provide this funding. Over these two years approximately £5.4m will be paid to Wiltshire Council as a result of our success, with partners in the Wiltshire Strategic Board (the forerunner of the Wiltshire Assembly), in achieving the targets agreed with government in the Local Public Service Agreement. A separate report on the agenda recommends that (as the Board agreed at an early stage) some of the Grant should be re-invested in the areas where the original targets were achieved; the balance of approximately £3.9m is available for investment in measures to implement the Bright report and other priorities in the current Local Agreement for Wiltshire. A further report will be brought to an early meeting of the Cabinet of the new Council about this.

Programme Management Arrangements

17. A Programme Board is being established to ensure that appropriate, agreed action is taken, and prospective Board members are being contacted. Support for the programme is currently provided on a full time basis by Rachel Goff, a National Management Trainee located in the Chief Executive's Office. The Economic Development and Regeneration team have very substantial delivery involvement in a range of the key actions. The programme management arrangements will be reviewed by the early autumn.
18. A communications plan is being drawn up. Regular reports from the Programme Board will be made to the Wiltshire Public Service Board and to the Wiltshire Coordinating Group (the former is constituted by public service organisations and the latter is made up of representatives of the different thematic partnerships in the county). The Assembly itself next meets in the autumn. More widely, bulletins will be circulated and Members will be included in their circulation.

Main Considerations for the Implementation Executive

19. Co-ordinated action to address a number of the local impacts of the recession is likely to meet with the approval of the public and to enhance the reputation of the Council and its partners. The Council's leadership of a range of actions as indicated in the 'menu of actions' fulfils a community leadership role in this challenging context. There are opportunities for action at the county wide strategic level and at the level of the Community Area Boards. Communication will be important as the action planning arising from the report to the Assembly

involves some actions that will be completed in the short term and others that are necessarily medium or longer term initiatives.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

20. At the meetings of the Wiltshire Assembly and the Wiltshire Coordinating Group the issue of sustainability was emphasised and the Coordinating Group will be considering how this can be fulfilled.

Equality and Diversity Impact of the Proposal

21. The recession is likely to have differing impacts on social groups within the population and on differing communities within the county. This issue has been examined in the Bright report to the Wiltshire Assembly. Monitoring and review as the programme develops will be key, to inform an Equalities Impact Assessment that will be considered by the Programme Board.

Risk Assessment

22. The Programme Board will consider risk assessments of the overall programme and where they are required, of specific projects. The Council's risk assessment procedures will be used for this purpose. Further reports to the Wiltshire Council Cabinet will incorporate a risk assessment of the programme.

Legal Implications

23. The actions to be taken forward by the Council as set out in the 'menu of actions' are governed by the legal framework within which the Council operates. Where there is any uncertainty as to the legal position on any specific issue, advice will be sought from Legal Services.

Options Considered

24. The 'menu of actions' at this stage reflects for the relevant partner organisations a range of potential options as to how the objectives are taken forward. It may be the case that the current consultation with partners and consideration by Council services will result in a number of suggestions to reshape some of the recommended actions to align them more closely with existing programmes, organisational objectives or available resource capacity. Such proposed variations to the current recommended actions will be considered by the Programme Board.

Conclusion

25. The Implementation Executive is requested to endorse the initial programme of work initiated by Wiltshire Council to take forward the recommendations of the report prepared for the Wiltshire Assembly.
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Background Papers:

The full and summarised reports presented at the Wiltshire Assembly are available at: [Wiltshire Assembly 26th March 2009](#). The 'menu of actions' has been circulated separately to IE Members.