

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Scottish Government Draft Budget for 2015/16. This provides some useful information although from a planning perspective a one year outlook does not present a significant opportunity to look forward and strategically align services.

Focussing on the key areas highlighted in the “call for views” I would offer the following comments and observations.

The continued investment in HEEPS funding is welcomed and will allow targeted interventions around energy efficiency in homes where there requires to be a focus on fuel poverty. Any additional leverage that can be brought against the power companies would also be welcomed to maximise the impact in these important area. Similarly, the funding provided to Councils to support the creation of additional affordable rented housing is very welcome. At a local level significant progress has been made on a Council house building programme with almost 200 houses scheduled for completion by 2015. The next phase of building (to 2017) is likely to also include additional support for RSL's that will see a further 350 or so affordable houses for rent being built (between Council and RSL's).

The challenge in maximising the use of grant funding is to build houses that offer optimal energy efficiency balanced against value for money of construction costs. The opportunity to build “green” homes comes at a price and this represents a difficulty when deciding on sites, densities, house type and size and construction method. There must always be an eye towards maximising value for money for the rent payer, and currently the premium for green houses makes this a difficult justification.

This Council welcomes the additional funding identified in relation to Bedroom Tax mitigation through DHP's, and acknowledges that the additional money this will leave with claimants will assist in managing issues around fuel poverty particularly through the winter months. The wider impact of Welfare Reform however, remains a concern and while not directly related to this call for evidence, the recommendations of the Smith Commission, particularly with reference to devolution of welfare, may present an opportunity to address some of these underlying issues.

Availability of good quality, high speed broadband in a number of communities remains a challenge in this inter-connected age. Technological advances are such that any investment in this area must be flexible enough to continue to

adapt to future changes and developments. Rural connectivity is increasingly challenging and the “digital by default” agenda in relation to claiming benefits (eg Universal Credit) will exacerbate this already pressing issue.

Issues around traffic congestion and increasing public transport usage are focussed on particular high cost investments such as the Borders Railway. The widest possible improvements are necessary to ensure the shift towards public transport can be seen. This will require close partnership working across all areas and the ability to access funds to deliver the necessary improvements.

East Ayrshire Council
31 October 2014