Thank you for your letter of 5 February 2013 on the process followed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar in taking forward its Budget Strategy. I hope that the following information is of assistance to the Committee.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar took an options based approach to addressing its budget strategy for the next two years, and undertook a very extensive, two-stage, consultation process with members of the public directly, as well as Community Planning partners.

The consultation involved either the Leader or Convener, accompanied by either the Chief Executive or Director of Finance and Corporate Resources, attending two series of public meetings in Barra, Uist (two meetings, one for North Uist and one for South Uist), Harris, Stornoway and rural Lewis (two meetings, in different places at each stage of the consultation). The meetings were exceptionally well attended, and consisted of a presentation of savings which the Comhairle was "minded to make" and other proposals for discussion but which the Comhairle was, at the stage of consultation, not so minded. There was also, of course, the opportunity to respond to the consultation documents in writing, by e-mail etc and an on-line facility was set up to enable members of the public to create their own Comhairle budget, based on the options set out for discussion.

The proposals themselves followed a decision by the Comhairle to discuss options representing approximately 10% of its total revenue budget, although only between 5% and 6% of that budget was actually required to meet the Comhairle’s required savings target.

All of the consultation responses, and the notes of the meetings, were reported in full to Budget Strategy Seminars, which consisted of all Members of the Comhairle, and a number of the proposals were changed and modified on account of views expressed by members of the public.

The response from Community Planning partners was less extensive, and one principal consultee did not respond in any detail until very shortly before closure of the consultation process. It should be noted, however, that the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership meets frequently, and budget issues have been considered, both formally and informally, at recent meetings. The Chief Executive of the Comhairle recently brought a report to the Community Planning Partnership on longer-term Public Sector funding issues, and it is likely that a Seminar will follow to discuss the issues raised, which include recognition of the benefits of more integrated working among Community Planning partners, and the need for change, the Comhairle believes, to the delivery of public services in the Western Isles in the medium to long term.

Malcolm Burr, Chief Executive