

## **State of the Area Debate and Budget Consultation**

### **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Council with data to help inform the State of the Area Debate and the formation of the Budget for 2006/07.

### **2. Recommendation**

- 2.1 That a response be given in the budget to the consultation information; and**
- 2.2 That the process and timetable for setting priorities and addressing budget challenges for next year be reviewed to be made more inclusive.**

### **3. Links to priorities**

- 3.1 The Budget consultation process has produced information that should be taken into account in determining budget priorities.

### **4. Methodology and Results**

- 4.1 The Executive in consultation with the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, agreed a timetable which identified two phases. In Phase One the People's Voice were surveyed by a postal questionnaire for their opinions on spending priorities and funding options. In Phase Two the Area Committees were used to facilitate a 'budget game' which sought to identify areas for expenditure and income/savings.
- 4.2 Over 550 people responded to the People's Voice Survey, 13 people completed the website survey. The overall response rate was an increase on last year.
- 4.3 In line with last year, Phase 2 in was designed to give specific results. Groups were asked to prioritise real budget issues. This quantitative data should allow Members to show how the views of the public have been taken into account in the determination of the budget priorities. It is worth noting that participation of members of the public was generally low (with the exception of parish council representatives) and that many of the results consist of the responses of elected members.
- 4.4 Phase One – Peoples Voice Questionnaire.
- 4.5 Respondents were asked to assess the improvement and value for money over a range of services and the Council overall. Taking those issues into account respondents were then asked to state whether or not they agreed that more money should be spent on each of those services.
- 4.6 Over two thirds of respondents are satisfied with the way the council runs things and more respondents felt that things had improved over the last three years, as opposed to those that felt they had worsened. Over 60% felt that things had stayed the same.
- 4.7 The majority of respondents would increase council tax to maintain (41%) or improve (14%) service levels.

4.8 The majority of respondents would like to see more money spent on the following:

- Keeping Public Land Clear of Litter & Refuse (Worse – High recognition)
- Community transport<sup>1</sup> (Slightly Better – Low recognition)
- Affordable Housing (Worse- Low recognition)
- Recycling (Better – High recognition)

*Note: Bracketed comments reflect whether respondents felt service had improved over the last three years. The recognition level refers to the number of respondents who stated they didn't know whether a service had improved or not. Analysis of this response gives some indication of the experience respondents have of the service they are commenting on and arguably the higher the recognition the higher the validity of the response.*

The majority would *not* like to see more money on the following:

- Planning Applications<sup>2</sup> (Slightly Worse – Low Recognition)
- Improved access to services (Better – Low Recognition)
- Benefits Service (Slightly Worse – Very Low Recognition)
- Planning Enforcement (Worse – Very Low Recognition)
- Waste Collection (Better – High Recognition)
- Sport/Leisure opportunities<sup>2</sup> (Slightly Better – Low Recognition)
- Supporting Local Business (Slightly Worse – Low Recognition)
- Preventing Homelessness (Slightly Worse – Very Low Recognition)

4.9 It is worth noting for 10 of the categories one third or over of the respondents did not have an opinion on the service. This has been expressed in the commentary as level of recognition.

4.10 Phase Two – Budget Game

4.11 Budget games took place in groups at the 5 Area Committees and via the website. At Area Committees in the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the game asked groups to agree which categories to spend more, same or less money on.

4.12 The majority of groups wanted more spent on the following items:

- Keeping Public Land Clear of Litter & Refuse
- Community Safety<sup>3</sup>
- Recycling
- Preventing Homelessness
- Community Transport

4.13 The majority of groups wanted the same amount spent on the remainder of the items:

- Affordable Housing
- Waste Collection
- Culture

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<sup>1</sup> Highlighted as an area to spend more money on in 2004 Peoples Voice Consultation.

<sup>2</sup> Highlighted as an area to spend less money on in 2004 Peoples Voice Consultation.

<sup>3</sup> Not a category included in the People's Voice consultation

- Planning Enforcement
  - Benefits
  - Supporting Local Business
  - Planning Applications
- 4.14 In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage Area Committee groups were asked to balance spending and saving priorities to give a final increase in Council Tax in the context of the 10% budget gap. It is worth noting that groups were given a greater amount of financial information about current spending than in previous years.
- 4.15 The majority of groups wanted more investment in the following areas:
- Recycling
  - Community Safety
  - Affordable Housing
  - Keeping Land Clear of Litter & Refuse<sup>4</sup>
  - Community Transport
- 4.16 The majority of groups elected for savings in the following areas:
- Planning Applications Process
  - Culture
  - Processing Benefits Claims
  - Waste Collection
  - Preventing Homelessness
  - Supporting Local Businesses.
- It is worth noting that the investment and savings are within a range of +/- 1.2% which would represent an increase/decrease on the budget of approximately £69,000. The majority of respondents would like to see a zero increase in Council tax.
- 4.17 Further work was done with Members at the Policy days in September and January.
- 4.18 The first policy day work shop in September agreed a priority order for the Council's corporate priorities as set out below:
- Equalities & Diversity, Customer Focus and Partnership Working
  - Minimise Waste & Maximise Recycling;
  - Housing Needs;
  - Cleaner, Safer, Better Streets;
  - Spatial Planning, Local Plan/ Local Development Framework;
  - Buoyant Economy;
  - Healthy Lifestyles;
  - Car Parking & Decriminalisation.
- 4.19 At the workshop members agreed that the budget allocation should focus on core service delivery and improvement before expanding work on discretionary services.
- 4.20 The services were scored on performance, not customer satisfaction, as it was noted that customer satisfaction of some 'bronze' level services may be high.

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<sup>4</sup> The only category where website respondents elected for increased investment

- 4.21 Members were asked to mark the performance level they aspired to for a range of mandatory services. A summary of feedback from both policy days is appended to this report.
- 4.22 It should be noted that Members' aspirations often wanted to improve on existing standards of mandatory service delivery. To achieve this could require an increase in funding derived from a reduction in expenditure on discretionary services.
- 4.23 A list of some of the discretionary services were looked at in this context by Members. Members responded that the majority of services could be run in a different way (i.e. in partnership) with less support from the Council or that the Council should stop providing the service completely. Only Planning Enforcement and Pest Control were identified from this list as services that should continue to be provided by the Council as now.

## **5. Financial Implications**

- 5.1 The consultation data should be used to inform the budget setting process.

## **6. Human Resources Implications**

- 6.1 There are no direct human resources implications arising from this report.

## **7. Equal Opportunities Implications**

- 7.1 There are no direct equal opportunities implications arising from this report.

## **8. Community and Environmental Implications**

- 8.1 There are no direct equal opportunities implications arising from this report.

## **9. Legal Implications**

- 9.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

## **Documents Used in Preparing this Report**

Corporate Business Plan 2005/06

Budget Consultation and Timetable for 2005/06

Response from People Voice

Response from Area Committees Consultation

## **REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC MANAGER, CORPORATE SERVICES TO COUNCIL – 31<sup>st</sup> JANUARY 2006**

Report Author: Will Oulton, Policy & Democratic Services, Corporate Services  
Tel: 01249 706611 Email: woulton@northwilts.gov.uk