

BUDGET OPTIONS: REPORT ON THE 2004 PUBLIC CONSULTATION
REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND COMMUNITY
AND COUNTY TREASURER

BUDGET PANEL

17 JANUARY 2005

Purpose

1. From October to December 2004, the Council carried out public consultation on future budget options. This paper summarises the various methods used to consult and the results. It invites the Budget Panel to have regard to the results as it considers its advice to Cabinet.

THE BASIS OF THE CONSULTATION

2. The consultation was based on the prudent broad assumption for 2005-06 that taking into account:
 - inescapable service and other spending commitments
 - the then likely ceiling on acceptable Council Tax increases
 - the then estimated level of Government grants
 - £1 million of growth in services, particularly to respond to the needs of increasing numbers of older people
 - £2 million of efficiency savings

The Council would need to reduce service levels to save associated expenditure of £3 million.

CONSULTATION METHODS AND RESULTS

3. ***The Research for Today household survey.*** The centrepiece of the consultation, and the starting point for all the consultation methods, was a survey of 504 households throughout the county undertaken by *Research for Today*. Conducted face-to-face, this required households to choose between types and levels of 24 services so as to produce the required net savings of some £3 million. It therefore replicated the process by which the Council has to prioritise services within a finite total budget.
4. The full service options presented for the consultation are at were available to Budget Panel and are available on request.
5. This household survey was the only method that, as it turned out, provided a statistically reliable and representative sample of the whole adult population. It was also the only method that generated systematic and reliable information about the public's preferred trade-off between levels of service and levels of Council Tax.

6. Overall, 55 per cent were predicted to favour a package of services that would produce the required net savings of £3 million and restrict the increase in Council Tax for a Band D house to £52. Amongst the over 60s, 62 per cent were predicted to favour this package. Although only 48 per cent of under 40s did so, this was the package predicted to be favoured by the greatest number in this group too.
7. A summary of the results in terms of preferred service levels is in the first three columns of Annex 1.
8. ***The Herefordshire Voice Citizen's Panel.*** A questionnaire, based on the *Research for Today* household survey service level options, was sent to the 1,000 members of the Citizen's Panel. There were 156 responses, of which 76 were completed correctly so as to give total net savings of £3 million.
9. This was a low response rate compared with previous surveys of the Citizen's Panel. This was, however, a challenging task for members of the public to undertake without the face-to-face assistance provided as part of the *Research for Today* household survey. Moreover, there is evidence that some Citizen's Panel members chose instead to complete the much simplified version of the questionnaire (see below). The future arrangements for the Panel are under consideration as part of a wider review of community consultation.
10. The results are summarised in columns four and five of Annex 1.
11. In view of the low response rate, this cannot be considered a reliable or representative sample of the whole population. It is noteworthy, however, that in most respects the results reflect the preferences indicated by the *Research for Today* household survey.
12. ***The Council's web-site.*** In essence the same questionnaire as issued to the Citizen's Panel was placed on the Council's web-site. 64 responses were received: 39 completed on-line, and 25 downloaded and returned by FREEPOST.
13. The results are summarised in columns six and seven of Annex 1.
14. Once more, this cannot be considered to be a representative or reliable sample of the whole population, but it does give results that generally correspond closely with those of the *Research for Today* household survey and the Citizen's Panel.
15. ***The simplified questionnaire.*** A greatly simplified version of the questionnaire was published in *The Hereford Times* and *Herefordshire Matters*, made available at the Council's Info. Shops and libraries, and downloadable from the Council's web-site.
16. This did no more than list the 24 areas of service that had been included in the full questionnaires for the *Research for Today* household survey, the Citizen's Panel and on the web-site, without specifying different levels of services and associated spending. It asked respondents simply to tick each service area to show whether they wished to see expenditure on it reduced, maintained or increased. Choices were not therefore constrained by a net savings target.
17. 1,695 responses were received. Of these, 502 came in two batches – from users of the Bridge Street, Leominster leisure centre and from *the Herefordshire Citizen's Advice Bureau* - where respondents had indicated their views in respect of only one service option.
18. Of those that were submitted individually, almost half were from *Herefordshire*

Matters, fewer than 10 per cent from *The Hereford Times*, over 24 per cent downloaded from the Council's web-site, and over 18 per cent from Info. centres and libraries.

19. Despite the large of responses, this cannot be considered a representative or reliable sample of the whole population, but it does again show priorities that are, for the most part, consistent with those from respondents to the full questionnaire.
20. It is also noteworthy that a much smaller number of respondents indicated a wish to see increased spending on particular services than wanted to maintain or reduce it: in the case of only four service areas did more than 20 per cent of respondents want to increase spending.
21. **Youth Times.** As part of *Local Democracy Week*, six councillors were interviewed by young people. Twelve 13 to 25 year-olds took part, with others contributing by e-mail. This was the only method of consultation that tested the opinions of people under 18.
22. The results are summarised at Annex 2. Although they cannot be regarded as statistically reliable or representative of all young people in the county, they do show that this group, at least, has very different priorities from the majority of the adult population.
23. **Written comments from partners and other organisations, and from individuals.** 22 partner and other organisations, and 54 individuals, sent written comments.
24. The comments from organisations concern the services of direct relevance to them. Typical examples are the plea from local NHS trusts for the increased investment in support for older people that would end the blocking of hospital beds; and the assertion by the voluntary and community sector of the value of their contribution, coupled with urging comparison of the cost-effectiveness of the services they provide with those provided directly by the Council.
25. Most individuals press the case of one service area, such as Tourist Information Centres or the Courtyard Theatre.
26. **Local Area Forums.** Special meetings of the six Local Area Forums were held. 172 members of the public attended, with numbers ranging from 13 at the Central Herefordshire LAF to 50 at the Hereford City LAF.
27. There was no dominant theme as to which services should be reduced, maintained or increased. Indeed, the most frequent points raised were not about service levels as such but were instead requests for more information about the relative costs of different services; testing of whether the Council was doing enough to reduce expenditure by means of increased efficiency rather than cutting services; and, more generally, to probe as to whether the Council was addressing the right issues.

SUMMARY

28. The only statistically robust and representative reflection of the views of the whole adult population of the county is that produced by the *Research for Today* survey of 504 households. The results are summarised in the first three columns of Annex 1.
29. That said, a broadly similar set of priorities emerged from the other methods of

consultation that used either the full or greatly simplified questionnaires based on the service area choices in the *Research for Today* household survey.

30. The *Research for Today* survey also indicates that the majority of adults would be likely to favour a package that combines a relatively modest increase in Council Tax with, if necessary, targeted service reductions of up to £3 million.