

APPENDIX B.6

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE - 2 FEBRUARY 2010

Title:

BUDGET CONSULTATION FINDINGS

**[Portfolio Holder: Cllr Mike Band]
[Wards Affected: N/A]**

Summary and purpose:

This report presents the findings of the participatory budget consultation exercise commissioned by the Council to help inform the preparation of the Council's budgets for 2010 – 2011, and outlines how public preferences have been fed into the spending proposals to be presented to Council.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

The Council's priority is to deliver value for money to local residents. This means that it is important for Council decisions on spending priorities to be informed by public opinion, as residents will only perceive that they are getting value for their Council tax if they believe that their main concerns are being addressed.

Equality and Diversity Implications:

The consultation involved a face-to-face survey with a random sample of 250 residents. The age range, gender balance and ethnicity of the sample matched the general population. The sample used is statistically valid to within 1% confidence. This means that the results can be taken to be statistically representative of the views of the community.

Resource/Value for Money implications:

Having sought the views of the public on their spending priorities, it is important for the Council to be able to demonstrate that we have listened to those views, and taken them into account when setting our budgets both for the coming year and into the future. The risk, otherwise, is that public confidence in the value for money provided by the Council will diminish.

Legal Implications:

There are no specific legal implications.

Background:

Headlines from the consultation responses:

- 1 This consultation exercise sought to identify residents' preferences for spending and savings across a range of discretionary services:
 - Children's play equipment
 - Grant-finding to the Citizen's Advice Bureau
 - Funding for Meals on Wheels
 - Funding for care of older people
 - Hoppa community transport
 - Care for the countryside
 - Grants to arts centres
 - Street cleaning
 - Locality offices
 - Parks, playing fields and open spaces
 - Grass cutting
 - Environmental health
 - Noise, animals and pest control
 - Public toilets
 - Making Waves magazine
 - Cardboard recycling
 - Car parking charges
 - Planning enforcement
 - Funding for museums

- 2 The methodology used does not ask respondents for their absolute likes or dislikes in relation to individual services, but rather seeks to tease out their preferences by setting a scenario in which resources are rationed, and asking respondents to select their top priorities to receive limited resources.

- 3 The consultation revealed some clear preferences for Council spending. The top preference for increased spending is children's play areas. Services aimed at providing support for vulnerable people in our communities (care for older people, CAB grants, meals on wheels) and the Hoppa service were also strong preferences, as were street cleansing and grounds maintenance services.

- 4 Services that the public felt should be looked at to provide savings to finance their priorities were the locality offices, Making Waves and planning enforcement. In addition, respondents considered that they would be prepared to see car park charges increased by 5% to provide finance for their priority services.

How these findings have informed Waverley's budget-setting

- 5 Waverley's budgets cover significantly more detail and complexity than can be realistically included in public consultation of this type. Many of our services are driven by statute, and therefore cannot simply be reduced or discontinued, regardless of whether or not they are popular priorities. In addition, a significant proportion of our expenditure is on the back-office support (IT, office accommodation costs, accountancy services, costs of committee administration etc) that is necessary for the running of the Council. These areas of expenditure are unsuitable for public opinion testing in this type of methodology.
- 6 It is the role of the Council's Executive and senior management team to present a balanced budget, that takes into account the resource needs of the organisation across all its areas of activity. However, there is much that can be learned from this public consultation exercise, and there are some very clear messages contained in the responses.
- 7 The Council's general revenue expenditure can be said to be divided into four principal areas:

Universal services that improve the quality of the Borough as a place to live – e.g. street cleansing, recycling, leisure, parks.	Services aimed at supporting and protecting vulnerable people – e.g. day centres, meals on wheels, community transport, citizens' advice bureau.
Back-office support services – e.g. office accommodation costs, committee administration, I.T., accountancy, H.R., payroll, communications.	Services aimed at regulation and control – e.g. environmental health, planning, licensing, building control.

From the results of the survey, we can see a clear preference being expressed for the service areas in the top portion of this grid. As the Council is operating in an environment of significant pressure on its financial resources, the message from the public is to seek to reduce the costs of operating the services in the bottom portion, so that resources can be released to fund those services in the top portion. The Council is committed, indeed, to doing this, through our work over the coming 12 – 18 months to establish shared back-office service delivery with other Councils in Surrey, and to reduce the costs of our transactional operations. Our new strategic director, who took up post in December, is leading the detailed investigatory work into our operating costs, and there is a report elsewhere on this agenda to establish a Member Special Interest Group for this project. The budget consultation survey indicates that there will be broad public approval of this approach.

Specific budget decisions for 2010 – 2011

- 8 The specific preferences for spending or savings in particular service areas that have been revealed by the consultation have been given careful consideration in the preparation of this year's budget, as follows:
- Play areas. There is increased provision in the capital programme for playground replacement (£233,000)
 - Grants to CAB, day centres. While the Council has had to maintain the overall grants budget available this year at the same level as 2009-10, the proposed distribution of grants has recommended a small increase in funding to the day centres and granting the CAB the full amount requested.
 - Meals on Wheels. The Council has been able to secure additional external funding for this service, which has avoided the need to seek increases in the price of meals.
 - Hoppa. An additional £10,000 is proposed, to assist Hoppa with vehicle replacement.
 - Street cleansing. No reduction in expenditure is proposed. The service has been tasked with changing the way this service is organised, to enable a greater presence of street cleansing operatives on our streets, and higher visibility for this service.
 - Grounds maintenance. No reduction in expenditure is proposed.
 - Environmental health. Respondents did not want to see a cut in the levels of service delivered. Accordingly, an increased budget of £30,000 is proposed, to enable the Council to strengthen the current staffing levels to the service.
 - Car park charges. While the survey favoured a 5% increase in charges, what is being proposed instead is a package of management adjustments in pricing levels in particular car-parks (aimed for example at controlling demand in the busiest short-stay car parks), and, in addition, the introduction of charging on Public and Bank Holidays (except Christmas Day). These proposals will generate £60,000 additional income.
 - Planning enforcement. This service has not been reduced, despite this being a popular choice in the budget consultation, as the Council's priority is to preserve and safeguard the quality of our environment. Enforcement against breaches of planning control is considered essential to ensure that our strict planning policies are complied with. It is recognised that the majority of the public do not ever have the need to use this particular service, and therefore respondents may not be so conscious of its importance or value.
 - Making Waves. The clear view of consultees was that communications was an area of expenditure that could be reduced in order to finance other service areas. The irony, however, is that, if the Council does not publicise its services or communicate with residents about what it is doing, then residents will not regard Waverley as providing value for money. There is clear research evidence that the public's satisfaction with their Council very strongly correlates with the extent to which they feel well-informed about the Council. It is not proposed, therefore, to

cease publication of Making Waves. However, the budget proposes a reduction in editions from 4 to 3, saving £10,000, and the discontinuation of the on-line video magazine, which has attracted very few readers, saving a further £5,000.

- **Locality Offices.** The survey responses indicated that the Council's locality office service could be an area to target for budget savings. Respondents, who represent the population as a whole, were relatively happy to elect for the opening hours or the number of locality offices to be reduced. However, the Council, in taking any decision on locality offices, needs to be aware that this is a service that is disproportionately used by older people, and people who do not have access to the internet at home. The budget being proposed does identify a significant savings target of £45,000 from the locality office service but not through closures. Instead, officers are looking to restructure the service, using the localities as a base from which to deliver front-line services on a 'surgery' basis. A detailed report on the proposals will be brought before the Executive before implementation.

9 It is clear from the above examples that this budget consultation exercise has had a strong influence over the way that service heads have approached this budget preparation process, and that the residents' views have been listened to and accommodated wherever possible.

10 There are two other clear policy drivers behind the current budget proposals, which were not specifically tested in the budget consultation, but which are very much in line with the general spending preferences we have seen from the responses:

- **Growth items aimed at supporting our residents and local communities through the recession.** The majority of the growth items proposed are aimed at supporting both individuals and small businesses. It is recommended to continue the very successful "don't lose your home" project, and to open a second Waverley Training Services outlet in Haslemere. Town Centre initiatives are also proposed to receive additional financial support, and Waverley intends to continue with our revised payment terms to small businesses (10 days, rather than 30).
- **Food waste recycling.** We know that the public has a strong preference for the Council to expand the range of materials that we collect for recycling. Food waste recycling in particular has been a clear priority of this Council for some time. The budget proposes making available £75,000 to finance the first phase of introduction of a new food waste collection service, concentrating on areas of high housing density.

Conclusion:

11 The participatory budget consultation has provided valuable insights into the views and preferences of local residents. These have been used by service heads and portfolio holders to inform the budget proposals that are to be presented to Council. Wherever possible, the preferences of local residents have been catered for in the preparation of this budget. The findings from the survey will also be used to inform the Council's medium-

term financial and service delivery strategy as continuing pressure on public finance will require us to continue to identify savings in future years.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that this report be received.

Background Papers (CEX)

Full report on the consultation exercise.

CONTACT OFFICER:

Name: Mary Orton

Telephone: 01483 523208

E-mail: mary.orton@waverley.gov.uk

Comms/exec/2009-10/020210/022