

CONSULTATION WITH PARTNERS AND RESIDENTS - PHASE ONE

1. Partners

A meeting was held on 29 September 2005 for Members and Wider Partners, chaired by the Lead Cabinet Member for Corporate Resources, to discuss and gather views on the process for reconciling the Council's policy priorities with the budget likely to be available for 2006/07. The Council was applauded for doing a good job in keeping people informed about the policies and budget and for the transparency of the process.

Suggestions were made about how we could try and get a fairer deal. The comments included:

- an apparent lack of knowledge amongst senior civil servants about how the formula share is calculated and a lack of awareness that those most in need are getting the lowest grant. It was agreed that the Council should consider lobbying other Departments, as well as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). Joint lobbying from the Council and Health also to be considered;
- widening lobbying to all those who may have an interest in the impact of formula grants in delivering their priorities e.g. quality of pavements leading to injuries due to falls;
- lobbying on a 'pan Sussex' basis as several partners represent 'pan-Sussex' groups and may only be able to help if lobbying is at this level;
- the need to influence the national picture of the affluent South East and the risk of East Sussex being regarded as a wealthy county.

The issue of whether Council Tax is an appropriate form of taxation was discussed and whether other options were more appropriate. The impact of high Council Tax levels and any increases over inflation were emphasised and acknowledged.

Concerns were raised about the impact the financial situation of the Health Authorities in the County is having on services, in particular voluntary organisations. The health of the community and voluntary sector was acknowledged as significant to both the County and the County Council.

The importance of raising skills levels and the role the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and colleges had to play were highlighted.

In summary:

- partners welcomed the overview of the agreed policy direction and anticipated financial position of the County Council;
- support for lobbying for a fairer deal was offered; and
- the Council will review how wider partner briefings can be further developed.

2. Workshops with Residents

Qualitative research was undertaken as part of the reconciling policy and resources consultation in the form of workshops involving 59 residents, nearly three times the number consulted last year. The workshops, which were professionally facilitated, were held in Bexhill, Eastbourne and Uckfield during the first week of October.

Participants were drawn from the membership of the County Council's Residents' Panel as well as from the electronic Citizens' Panel. Discussions were chaired by the Deputy Leader and Lead Cabinet member for Corporate Resources, with the support of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources.

The introduction to each workshop outlined the Council's services, budget and financial pressures, followed by a discussion session on service specific issues. The Bexhill group looked at adult social care issues, the Eastbourne group discussed community services and transport issues, while at Uckfield the focus was on some aspects of childrens' services. This was a different format from the previous year's consultation, and was designed to establish residents' views on some of the Council's main policy steers for 2006-07 and beyond.

Some common themes came through at all three workshops:

- A need for better co-ordination and integration of services
- Long term planning for the future (within the Council and people taking responsibility for planning their own future)
- Better use of research and analysis to find out specific needs of residents
- Improved information about services and how to access them
- The importance of volunteering and a suggested role for the Council in encouraging residents to become volunteers.

Service specific suggestions and ideas are being fed back to departments and a selection have been tested via the wider East Sussex Residents' Panel (see below) A full report on the workshops has been sent to all the residents who took part and is also available on the Council's website.

3. Residents' Panel Survey/Your County Magazine/Website

The County Council has recently recruited more residents to its Residents' Panel, as part of continuing initiatives to encourage more people to get involved and to ensure that enough responses are received to postal surveys that make up a representative sample of the population of East Sussex. Just over 1600 local people are now on the Panel. A postal questionnaire was issued during November which included some of the points made by the workshops mentioned above and also asked residents how they would rank some of the Council's key, outward facing policy steers. In addition, residents were also able to receive a copy of the questionnaire on request when it was advertised in the latest edition of Your County, the Council's magazine for residents. The survey has also been posted on the Council's website and was sent to members of the E-Citizens Panel. Accompanying publicity has helped to raise awareness of the survey. At the time of this paper going to print, around 900 responses have been received.

Detailed findings of the survey are still to be analysed and will be reported to the January 31st Cabinet, along with results of a further follow up workshop for residents to be held in the second week of January.