

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**CABINET
MONDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2003 AT 2.00 P.M.**

Agenda Item No.

10

CONSULTATION ON BUDGET 2004/05

Report of the Chief Executive

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1. Purpose of report

The report considers options for consulting the public on their spending priorities to inform the County Council's decision on the 2004/5 budget.

2. Background

ODPM guidelines published in 2002 recommend that local authorities seek the views of the public on spending priorities before taking a final decision on the budget. Last year, the Council used the Autumn edition of the HertsDirect newspaper to carry out a detailed survey. This involved taking soundings from the public on whether their preference was to keep Council Tax levels as low as possible, even if that meant making cuts to services, or whether they preferred to pay enough Council Tax to enable existing services to be maintained or to pay a higher level of Council Tax to enable improvements to be made.

The Citizens' Panel of 2,000 residents was also consulted on the same issues by means of a postal survey. This was followed up by a series of focus groups to enable the public's views to be explored in more detail.

The majority of consultees wished to avoid service cuts and indicated that they would be willing to pay higher levels of Council Tax to maintain existing services and to make improvements in priority areas. The decision on the budget for 2003/4 reflected the outcome of this consultation exercise.

3. Options for consultation on the 2004/5 budget

This Autumn's edition of the HertsDirect newspaper is to include a ten step guide to the funding of local authority services so that the public understand the context for the Council's budget decisions. In addition, there will be a

short questionnaire to establish whether the public's views have changed since last Autumn's consultation exercise.

Although using the newspaper is an inclusive method of consultation in that all households can participate, the responses received will not necessarily be representative of those of the population as a whole. Consultation via the newspaper could therefore again be supplemented by a further Citizens' Panel postal survey to check the extent to which the views expressed are representative of those of the population as a whole.

The process and timescale for agreeing the budget means that it has been necessary in previous years to carry out public consultation before the Government announces the provisional financial settlement for local authorities in late November or early December. This year the Government intends to make its announcement on an earlier date in mid-November. Because of the length of time needed for a postal survey, this date would still be too late to enable a postal survey to be postponed until after the settlement is announced. However, it would be possible to carry out some further consultation after the announcement has been made.

One option would be to run a workshop in late November or early December at which members of the public would be given detailed information about the Council's financial position, including details of the provisional settlement, and would hear evidence of the pros and cons of different options. Participants would then be asked to deliberate on the various options and try to reach a consensus on what the Council should do on the basis of all the facts. Budget workshops along similar lines were held in 1998 and 1999 and both members and those participating found them to be a useful part of the budget-setting process.

The results from this workshop could be supplemented by a series of focus groups which could be held in late November. These could probe the attitudes of different groups of citizens in more detail than is possible in a postal survey or workshop setting.

4. Financial implications

The costs of carrying out consultation in the ways outlined in this paper could be met from the existing corporate consultation budget.

5. Conclusions

Members are asked to decide whether a Citizens' Panel postal survey, a series of focus groups and a budget workshop should be held to supplement the consultation being carried out using the Autumn edition of the HertsDirect newspaper.