

AGENDA MANAGEMENT SHEET

Name of Committee Cabinet

Date of Committee 8th December 2005

Report Title Public Consultation on 2006/2007 Budget and Council Tax: Process

Summary The report seeks Members' approval to the planned public consultation on the 2006/2007 Budget and Council Tax. It was been considered by Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29th November 2005.

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Would the recommended decision be contrary to the Budget and Policy Framework? No.

Background papers None

CONSULTATION ALREADY UNDERTAKEN:-

Other Committees Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 29th November 2005.

Local Member(s)

Other Elected Members Cllr Mrs Tandy, Cllr Roodhouse, Cllr Booth & Cllr McCarney – noted for consideration

Cabinet Member Cllr Farnell, Cllr Cockburn – noted for consideration

Chief Executive Jim Graham – For information

Legal David Carter – For information

Finance David Clarke – Reporting Officer

- Other Chief Officers
- District Councils
- Health Authority
- Police
- Other Bodies/Individuals

FINAL DECISION

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS:

- Further consideration by this Committee
- To Council
- To Cabinet
- To an O & S Committee
- To an Area Committee
- Further Consultation

Cabinet - 8th December 2005

Public Consultation on 2006/2007 Budget and Council Tax: Process

Report of the County Treasurer

Recommendation

Is it recommended that Cabinet:

- Approve the content of the report and its proposals regarding the process for the public consultation on the 2006/2007 Budget and Council Tax

1 Background

1.1 The public consultation on the 2005/2006 Budget and Council Tax consisted of three aspects. These were:

- A questionnaire distributed to selected people throughout Warwickshire
- A public meeting in each district to enable people to learn more about the budget process and participate in a workshop/discussion to set their own budget
- A web-based game designed to inform people about the budget process and to enable people to set their own budget

1.2 Although the 2005/2006 consultation produced a considerable volume of results and analysis that were presented to Cabinet to assist in the budget setting process, a number of issues arose that have warranted a review of the consultation process. The 2005/2006 consultation is reviewed in section 2, with proposals for the 2006/2007 process outlined in section 3.

2 Review of the 2005/2006 public consultation process

2.1 The paragraphs below provide a brief review of the success each of the three aspects of the consultation process in turn.

2.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire generated a large quantity of information on a wide range of issues, and formed the bulk of the information presented in the February report to Cabinet. This was in spite of the response rate being low at around 15%. However, the responses to the questionnaire were disproportionately from males over the age of 50, ensuring that any information generated was not representative of the population as a whole. Overall it is felt that the questionnaire could be a successful way of gaining the views of a wide selection of the community. If the issues surrounding response rates and proportionality of the respondents can be overcome then it is felt that some form of questionnaire should be retained

2.3 Public Meetings

The public meetings were very poorly attended (i.e. 59 at the five meetings) and were dominated by individuals with their own political agenda. This ensured that the workshops, a key part of the meetings in which attendees could participate in setting their own budget and Council Tax, had to be either significantly curtailed or abandoned completely. As a result of this, very little useful information was obtained from these meetings. Unless a format can be found that increases attendance at public meetings both in numbers and representation, and allows the objective of the meetings to be delivered, it is recommended that they are not continued

2.4 Website Game

More people played the website game than responded to either the questionnaire or attended the workshops. What is more, 141 out of 381 (37%) of those who played the game were under the age of 30, an impressive figure given that this group are normally understood to be hard to reach. However, delays encountered with the software company in updating the game for 2005/2006, coupled with a tight schedule, meant that sufficient data was not available for inclusion in the report to Cabinet in February before the budget was set. From the results obtained, it is felt that the website has the potential to be a very useful tool in the consultation process, especially with regard to reaching younger people. However, this is dependent on any practical issues surrounding timing being resolved. Given this, it is recommended that the website should be used in future consultations.

3 Proposals for the 2006/2007 public consultation

- 3.1 Building on the conclusions above, this section outlines the proposed process for the 2006/2007 public consultation on the budget and the Council Tax taking account of the issues in the previous section. In doing so it is felt that it would be preferable to rebuild the consultation process in a phased manner.
- 3.2 From the setting of the 2007/2008 budget onwards it is hoped to adopt a two stage approach to consultation on the budget and Council Tax process, seeking to consult initially on more general service priorities during the summer and early autumn, and then to consult on more detailed budget proposals in late autumn once the local government settlement has been announced. However, it is expected that during

the forthcoming year there will be significant changes in the manner in which local government is funded, such as the introduction of the Dedicated Schools Grant and three-year grant settlements. The uncertainty these significant changes will bring points to a more straightforward, single stage process is proposed for the 2006/2007.

- 3.3 Due to the considerable problems encountered with the public meetings during 2005/2006, it is not proposed to repeat these this year. Rather, it is proposed to deliver presentations on the 2006/07 budget to the first meeting of each area committee in 2006 (see **Appendix A** for details). It is intended that there will be an opportunity for members of the public to comment and respond to these presentations.
- 3.4 In addition, it is intended that the consultation should be based on a set of questions relating to the 2006/2007 budget and Council Tax delivered through a combination of the Citizen's Panel, the Council's Public Satisfaction Survey (PSS). Furthermore, given the response achieved last year, it is also planned that the Council's website be used in the process in a manner that will enable information to be obtained in time for inclusion in the Cabinet report on the consultation.
- 3.5 This approach has the following advantages over last year's consultation.
 - The use of the Citizen's Panel and the PSS will give much greater public penetration than the response achieved previously and the balanced demographic profile of participants in these surveys should enable more useful results to be produced.
 - As the Citizen's Panel and the PSS would go ahead regardless of whether questions are asked on the budget, this year's budget consultation process will be considerably more cost effective than in previous years.
 - By not holding public meetings, officers will not be required to carry out the inappropriate task of entering an essentially political arena and engaging with political issues with disgruntled members of the public.
- 3.6 It is intended that a broad range of questions will be asked on the subject of the 2006/2007 Budget and Council Tax, with the intention they will provide information that will be of maximum use to members when considering the budget. The questions themselves will be determined once more details of the budget pressures facing the Council are known and will include questions to find out the public's preferences regarding the level of Council Tax versus the level of services provided.
- 3.7 It is intended that results and analysis from the consultation will be presented for consideration to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17 January 2006 and Cabinet on 2 February 2006.

David Clarke
County Treasurer
Warwick
8 December 2005

Schedule of Area Committees for 2006/07 Budget Presentation

Area Committee	Committee Date
Rugby	11-Jan-06
Stratford	18-Jan-06
Warwick	24-Jan-06
Nuneaton & Bedworth	25-Jan-06
North Warwickshire	1-Feb-06

Note:

Above based on revised timescales for the production of reports as per Janet Purcell's email dated 27/10/05.