

Summary of issues arising from Budget Focus Groups, 27th November 2007.

The Council has a general duty to consult with residents, taxpayers and local businesses under the Local Government Act 2000. This agenda has been strengthened by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and is emphasised in guidance for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of councils and the new Comprehensive Area Assessment. The Council has clearly stated its commitment to consultation in its Improvement Plan for recovery from Voluntary Engagement.

As part of the budget consultation for 2008/09 two Focus Groups were commissioned from SNAP surveys who run the Council's Customer Panel. The groups were held on 27th November 2007 and 19 residents from around the district attended. Attendees were asked to consider the high pressure budget bids that have been submitted by Heads of Service for the 2008/09 budget round. These budget bids link to the five corporate priorities agreed by Full Council at its meeting on 17th September 2007 as a result of public consultation in the summer. The Focus Group discussions were digitally recorded and notes were also taken to ensure an accurate record was made of all the opinions proffered.

The 2008/09 budget consultation is an ongoing process and the detailed budget proposals are currently available for the public to view on the Council's website, together with a feedback form that members of the public have been encouraged to complete. The ongoing consultation has been publicised in the local press, and any feedback forthcoming will be fed into the Cabinet and Full Council reports ahead of the respective meetings or reported verbally if necessary.

The key issues arising from the groups were as follows:-

- Residents focused on arts as an area where the Council should spend less and suggested the Council should look to make greater use of sponsorship; however, there was broad support for the sports development officers and street theatre expansion budget bids. The Council should therefore be careful about cutting expenditure in areas that help bring communities together, especially where views are contradictory and particularly given the 'Sense of Community' corporate objective.
- The attendees did not express a great deal of opinion on the CRB vetting budget bid due to its small size. However, not progressing the bid could have massive consequences for any victim and for the reputation of the Council. Equally, the 'Scores on the Doors' bid was too small to create a great deal of opinion. This bid was originally a staff suggestion, so it would be good for staff to see this bid go ahead.
- The feedback on Neighbourhood Wardens was expected to be positive. Comments were actually mixed and may have been

influenced by negative national media coverage around Community Support Officers, and the fact that attendees are likely not to have had any personal experience of the Neighbourhood Wardens (there are only three in the whole district). There was certainly a sense that the attendees were not fully aware of the powers possessed by the wardens. An evaluation to confirm the positive effect of existing wardens on the neighbourhoods they serve should be considered alongside raising the profile of the wardens, should this bid proceed.

- The bid on additional CCTV control room staff also received a mixed response, however there was again a sense that the attendees were not entirely aware of the work undertaken by the existing staff at the control room as it is not 'visible' to the public.
- Feedback on the Town Centre budget bid indicated the attendees thought investment was clearly needed. This bid is also directly linked to the Council's 'Town Centre' value.
- The 'Making temporary Disabled Facilities Grant staff permanent' bid received a variety of positive and indifferent comments with some attendees seeing no reason why the current post holders should not remain in temporary employment. However, in terms of the Council being an 'Investor in People', Members should consider the type of employer it wants to be (i.e. an employer of choice that recruits to permanent posts) and balance the benefits of a secure and happy workforce against the costs associated with this bid.
- Attendees were not supportive of the Assistant Drainage Engineer bid and suggested outsourcing the work involved; however, this would mean a loss of the knowledge available to the Council, and this loss would become more critical in the face of further climate change and an increased potential for flooding in the District.
- The Aspiren software budget bid received general support, as did the Housing Market Assessment and other housing bids.
- The feedback on the Hit Squad staff for Street Scene and Waste Management Services was interesting; whilst litter was recognised as a problem the attendees did not largely support the Council's solution. Feedback from attendees who lived outside of Bromsgrove was markedly different to those who were from the town (who regarded litter as much more of a problem). The Catshill litter picker was specifically identified, suggesting that this type of visible clean up did make a difference to the attendee that had experienced it.
- Like the Customer Panel survey feedback reported in September 2007, attendee comments about their experience of using the Customer Service Centre were positive, suggesting there was no need to employ additional staff; however, PI outturn data for average speed of calls answered and the percentage of calls answered has until recently been

consistently poor. Targets were reduced in October and November 2007 and the average speed of answer was 31 seconds against a target of 35 (previously a target of 20), whilst the 86% of calls were answered against a target of 80% (previously 85%). The level of performance suggests extra staff and a continued focus on improving the interface between the CSC and “back office” are required to consistently achieve our targets for the CSC.

- The attendees gave a mixed response to the bids around ICT equipment and support for Members, but were on the whole positive.