

## CONSULTATION WITH PARTNERS AND RESIDENTS - PHASE ONE

### 1. Partners

1.1 A meeting was held on 21 September 2004 for Members and Wider Partners, chaired by the Lead Cabinet Member for Corporate Resource Planning and Management, to discuss and gather views on the process for reconciling the Council's policy priorities with the budget likely to be available for 2005/06.

The main points raised were:

- Cabinet's decision to plan on the basis of only marginal reductions in the resources available for Highways and Social Services was widely endorsed;
- the need for partnership working to improve the economy of the County;
- the importance of the Council lobbying Central Government for a fair deal for the people of East Sussex;
- recommendations that the Council continue to look at outsourcing services to others, e.g. voluntary groups or small businesses; and
- the need for joint working between health and the Council on preventative care and the possibility of pooled funding to address the funding loss to health.

1.2 In addition, an initial written response from People Against Rises in Council Tax (PART) was received. PART is concerned about the full extent of opposition to council tax and to further rises in council tax. They argue that any increase in spending should be avoided, unless required by law, so as to limit any consequent increase in council tax.

### 2. Workshops with Residents

2.1 Qualitative research was undertaken as part of the reconciling policy and resources consultation in the form of workshops involving 20 local residents on 29 September 2004. Discussions were professionally facilitated and were held in an urban (Eastbourne) and rural (High Hurstwood) setting. Residents were drawn from previous 'council tax helpline' contacts and those who had expressed an interest through the Council's web-based panel of residents. Discussions, chaired by the Lead Cabinet Member for Corporate Resource Planning and Management, with the support of the Director of Corporate Resources and Deputy Chief Executive, were based on residents views of the Council's priorities, the County Council's budget and how the Council reconciles policy and resources.

2.2 The following are the key themes from feedback:

- All the groups said they had a greater understanding of the Council's difficulties in relation to reconciling policy and resources, once the situation was explained to them. The presentation and debate had a positive impact on their opinion of the Council.
- Clear and open communications, with opportunities for feedback are important for residents with budget and priority information communicated in plain English.

- They wanted the Council to be clear about its purpose and role and to see any inefficiencies and overlaps in service provision and control clarified.
- Participants felt that service provision should be linked to community need.
- The groups wanted to be clear about local, regional and central government functions and control and 'who was responsible for what' including partners such as police, health and voluntary groups..
- Many felt that if communities had a greater understanding of the Council's budget position, community involvement and support networks could be increased.
- A range of suggestions and ideas were put forward by the groups in relation to developing the Council's top priorities, although residents understood the debate was in the context of what could realistically be achieved against the current financial backdrop, rather than a 'wish list'.

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

3.1 The County Council has recently recruited residents to a new, representative Residents' Panel as part of continuing initiatives to listen to local people's views and as part of its quantitative research activity. The first survey of the Residents' Panel, conducted in October/November 2004 carried forward some of the points made by the workshops mentioned in point 2 above and also asked residents how they would rank the Council's 7 priorities in terms of importance. The same question on priorities was also asked in the Council's magazine 'Your County' issued in September 2004, and also included as a 'quick poll' on the Council's website.

3.2 The topline results just received from the Residents' Panel show that minimising council tax increases and reducing crime and the fear of crime are the most important priorities for residents. Nearly 400 residents responded out of a total of 755. (More detailed findings from this survey will be reported to Cabinet on 1 February 2005).

3.3 1021 responses were received within the survey timetable for 'Your County' residents' magazine, with a total of 1171 eventually received. Although this was a self selecting survey, it does contribute to the overall picture of people's views on the Council priorities. Here, the top priorities were reducing crime and the fear of crime, followed by improving services to older people and minimising council tax rises. The same question on priorities was also put up on the County Council's website. 38 responses were received, with crime and the fear of crime identified as the most important priority, followed by providing safer and better maintained roads and street lights, and supporting teachers to raise standards in schools.

3.4 In total, over 1600 residents have responded with their views on Council priorities. A summary of this feedback will be posted on the Council's website.