

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief Executive

Council : 27 January 2011

Subject: Outcomes of public consultation on budget savings options for 2011/12

1. Purpose

- 1.1** This report provides Council with an overview of the public consultation process on the budget savings options for 2011/12 including:
- a) The collective results of the public's response through the budget consultation questionnaire
 - b) A summary of feedback and issues raised by community representatives and members of the public at the public forum meetings
 - c) A summary of feedback gained through the Council's website budget portal

2. Background

- 2.1** Residents and community representatives were invited to participate in public forums with the purpose of gaining the public's assessment of the budget savings options presented for 2011/12. Three forums were held over consecutive evenings (11th – 13th January) in Dumbarton, Alexandria, and Clydebank.
- 2.2** A total of 175 participated in the forums representing a strong increase on previous year's attendance:
- Dumbarton 22
 - Alexandria 80
 - Clydebank 73
- 2.3** This year's process adopted a different style of consultation to facilitate a more inclusive agenda and ensure the public had opportunity to make an appropriate assessment of the budget options presented. This included presentations on the financial context and an overview of the priorities considered by the Administration when selecting the most suitable budget options to address the budget gap for 2011/12.
- 2.4** The open discussion session also varied from previous years whereby participants were split into groups and invited to consider the options selected for 2011/12 and record their agreement or disagreement with each option through a questionnaire (Appendix A). Where there was disagreement

participants were asked to select a preferred alternative option as a substitution.

- 2.5** Following the December Special Council meeting it was acknowledged that any assessment by the public would be difficult without detailed information on the impact and implications of each budget option. To alleviate this, and enable the public to make an informed assessment, a handout pack was developed incorporating additional information on each option and highlighting the potential impact on service delivery and the savings likely to be generated.
- 2.6** Following the group discussion, a facilitated question and answer session with the panel (comprising Elected Members and senior managers) allowed the public to put forward their views and questions on key options and issues. The panel provided direct responses to the public views and were supported with additional input from the Executive Directors on specific areas of expertise.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** From the outset a key aim of the consultation exercise was to create a genuine and meaningful process which enabled the public to assess the savings option package selected for 2011/12 and potentially influence final budget decisions.
- 3.2** This was the first time the Administration had presented options in the format of a draft budget and overall the public responded positively to this alternative approach. Equally the style and set-up of the forum was well received and provided ample opportunity for discussion and debate through either the group sessions or the open forum.
- 3.3** The only drawback highlighted was the complexity of the supporting information provided within the handout pack which was extensive for some participants to consider in such a short session. However to compensate this participants were given the option to complete the questionnaire at a later time either on-line or by returning in the post. Notwithstanding this 114 questionnaires were completed across the three events.

Key results

- 3.4** An overview of the consultation results is illustrated within the appendices:
- **Appendix B:** Summary of the questionnaire results for each evening and a collated summary
 - **Appendix C:** Summary of votes received on alternative options
 - **Appendix D:** Summary of questions and feedback collected through feedback cards
 - **Appendix E:** Summary of website feedback

- 3.5** It was evident across the three forums (and through the website feedback) that option EDC10 proposing the removal of eight Heads of Centre from early education centres and implementing an alternative service delivery model, provoked a strong and unfavourable reaction from both centre employees and parents within the communities affected.
- 3.6** This option was a recurring focus across each forum and the feedback at Appendix D illustrates the questions and feedback put forward to the panel on this topic. Much concern was expressed by participants on the emotional bond and the quality of working relationships developed between these roles and their clients (mainly children and parents) and the potentially adverse impact from removing these key roles within the centres.
- 3.7** In considering alternative options to those selected the following areas received the highest votes from the public as preferred options to some of those chosen (see Appendix C):
- EDC11: Close Garshake and Gartocharn nurseries
 - EDC19: Remove free school milk
 - EDC20: Reduce free school transport to statutory levels
 - HED04: Reduce Christmas lights and remove Christmas switch-on events
 - HED07: Review events activity
- 3.8** Appendix D also provides wider opinion on other options and further suggestions put forward by participants. All questions and feedback were posed to the panel at each forum through a question and answer session.
- 4. People implications**
- 4.1** Any personnel issues will relate to the options which are taken forward.
- 5. Financial Implications**
- 5.1** Any financial implications will relate to the costs identified within each saving option.
- 6. Risk Analysis**
- 6.1** The risks related to each option have been considered and the impact highlighted through the further information provided to the public.
- 6.2** In relation to the process itself, consultation of this kind is very challenging considering the complexities of the budget planning process and expectations that the public are unlikely to respond positively to any reduction in local expenditure or service provision. Nonetheless it is important that the principles of public consultation are applied and that the process is viewed as genuine and meaningful with opportunity to influence future decisions by Council.

- 6.3** It will be important for Council to demonstrate that public opinion has been considered and that the inclusion or exclusion of their views in any future decision on the savings options is reflected through a clear business rationale aligned with the Council's priorities.

7. Equalities Impact

- 7.1** All savings options have been equality screened and where required have been the subject of an equality impact assessment.

8. Conclusions and officer's recommendations

- 8.1** The different approach adopted for the public consultation on the financial challenges for 2011/12 has been a successful process and well received by the public.
- 8.2** The forums facilitated good discussion and debate on the options selected, as well as those options deferred, and provide elected members with an appropriate gauge of the public's assessment of the budget savings options presented for 2011/12.
- 8.3** Council is invited to:
- i. Consider the points within this report on the consultation process itself.
 - ii. Consider the public assessment and feedback contained within Appendices B-E when making decisions in relation to the 2011/12 budget.

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Date: 17 January 2011

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Appendices:

- Appendix A:** Budget Consultation questionnaire
- Appendix B:** Summary of the questionnaire results for each evening and a collated summary
- Appendix C:** Summary of votes received on alternative options
- Appendix D:** Summary of questions and feedback collected through feedback cards
- Appendix E:** Summary of website feedback

Background Papers: **None**

Wards Affected: **All wards**