

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief Executive

West Dunbartonshire Council – 9th February 2006

Subject :- Budget Forum Meeting – 18th January 2006

1. Purpose of Report

This report provides members with information on the points raised by community representatives at the public forum held to discuss the Council's revenue budget for 2006/07.

2. Background

- 2.1. Community representatives and individual citizens were offered the option of commenting on issues relating to the Council's budget for 2006/07. The main opportunity was by means of a public meeting held on 18th January in Dumbarton Football Club. Information and an invitation to comment were also posted on the Council's website.
- 2.2. The meeting was attended by 15 members of the public, at least eight of whom were representing wider community organisations. Details of the meeting arrangements and publicity are attached as appendix 1.
- 2.3. The meeting opened with an introduction from the Leader of the Council and a presentation on the budget situation from the Head of Finance. The main part of the meeting then took the form of an open discussion, during which most of the attendees took the opportunity to contribute. Attendees were also given the opportunity to make comments on a questionnaire which could be returned at the end of the meeting, or by post in the following days. All comments, including those received via the website, are incorporated in the analysis of responses set out in paragraphs 3.2. and 3.3.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1. Community representatives asked for clarification on a number of issues, and made a number of comments about budget issues. These are summarised in the following paragraphs.
- 3.2. *Questions asked and issues raised*
The discussion focussed on the issues noted below:
 - the meaning of 'corporate procurement'
 - the position regarding additional payments to some employees who maintain a good attendance record

- the reason for the current situation regarding equal pay and the likely impact of addressing these issues
- the meaning of 'direct payments'
- the reasons why the Scottish Executive does not appear to recognise the levels of deprivation and specific needs of an area such as West Dunbartonshire when making funding allocations
- the possibility of using Council reserves to keep the Council Tax increase at a low level
- the actions being taken by the Council to reverse the economic decline in the area and the possible impact of extensive house building without the creation of the jobs which would employ these new workers
- the threat of job losses among Council staff and the question of whether any savings would take some years to show an impact on the budget, (due to the costs associated with redundancies)
- the costs of payments to councillors
- the opportunities for generating more Council Tax from businesses and services – rather than householders
- the action being taken to address non payment of Council tax by Council employees
- the impact on the level of landfill tax if the Council improves its recycling performance
- following the Budget Forum meeting, clarification was requested on the branding of adult literacy and numeracy activity, (i.e. CLAN) – this information will be provided direct to the questioner

3.3. Comments made

During the discussion summarised in 3.2, community representatives made a number of points which they believed to be important for the Council to consider as part of the budget setting process. These were as follows.

- 3.3.1 There was concern about the principle of additional payments to Council employees who maintain a good attendance record, and it was felt that these could also discriminate against those legitimately suffering from ill health. It was noted that the current pilot scheme is being monitored, and it will not be rolled out if it is shown not to work.
- 3.3.2 The issue of the Scottish Executive allocation to West Dunbartonshire, and the limited account taken of deprivation levels was raised. Although it was noted that a strong case had been made, community representatives suggested that more could be done. It was proposed that it would be helpful if community organisations also made the case to MSPs.
- 3.3.3 It was suggested that Council should consider using at least some of its reserves to keep the Council Tax rise to a minimum.
- 3.3.4 It was suggested that the Council should give an increased emphasis to the economic regeneration of West Dunbartonshire, and that this

would depend not just on house building, but on the development of the industries and services which would bring jobs. It was suggested that West Dunbartonshire should ensure that land is not allocated for house building at the expense of land needed to attract industry and services. Members agreed that regeneration is a top priority, and that current activity – supported by the Community Planning Partnership – is providing a renewed focus on this issue. It is envisaged that new housing will increase demand for shops and other services – and so improve the area and generate income to the Council. It was also suggested that it is important to balance the arguments made about deprivation with the need to promote a positive image of West Dunbartonshire to attract investment.

- 3.3.5 There was concern that, despite assurances, some front line services, (such as caretaking and public toilets), are suffering.
- 3.3.6 It was proposed that all necessary steps should be taken to ensure that Council employees with Council Tax arrears clear their debts, but that support and advice be provided if required. It was suggested that the situation should be better monitored to ensure that the same position is not reached again. (It was noted that new data arrangements will make it easier to cross check Council tax records with employee records.)
- 3.3.7 It was proposed that the Council should consider the further steps necessary to ensure that recycling opportunities are available to *all* residents, regardless of the type of property they live in. Following the meeting, a questionnaire respondent noted that litter control and effective waste processing should be high priority.
- 3.3.8 Participants requested further information on the breakdown of the budget proposals. The Head of Finance noted that this information would be available in libraries the following week.
- 3.3.9. A questionnaire response proposed that adult literacy and numeracy provision should receive a high priority.
- 3.3.10 A questionnaire response proposed that Council should consider improvements to the built environment, (e.g. street furniture and signs).
- 3.3.11 The meeting concluded with representatives being asked what they considered to be an acceptable level of Council tax rise. The response was that a figure of around 2% would be reasonable.
- 3.3.12 The Leader of the Council made the commitment that the points raised would be considered by Council when the budget was being set.

4. Recommendation

Council is requested to give consideration to the points noted above when making its decision on the budget for 2006/07.

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Chief Executive

Person to Contact

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Background Papers

A detailed note of the discussion at the meeting is available on request.

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