

PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE 2012/13 BUDGET

1 Online Budget consultation survey

- 1.1 An online budget consultation survey was used between 8 September and 1 November to consult local residents on the budget priorities for 2012/13.
- 1.2 The budget consultation contains 5 questions and local residents completed the survey online through a link from the front page of the Council's website. The Borough Panel members were also invited to participate in the survey.
- 1.3 A total of 200 validated responses have been received by the budget consultation deadline; however it is important to note that some respondents did not answer every question.

2 Acceptableness of cut backs in service areas

- 2.1 The survey asked that various spending areas were rated for how acceptable cut backs would be. The following table summarises the ten service areas with the strongest consultation responses:

Areas considered unacceptable to cut back	Percentage of Respondents	Areas considered acceptable to cut back	Percentage of Respondents
Refuse collection	80%	Planning for future development and protecting the environment we live in	80%
Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour with partners (e.g. CCTV, street wardens)	76%	Support for Councillors and democratic arrangements	80%
Support activities for older people (such as day centres, aids and adaptations to the home)	75%	Transportation (e.g. parking enforcement, provision of parking facilities)	59%
Household Recycling	75%	Allotments	55%
Children's play areas	72%	Planning for affordable housing and improving standards of private housing	49%

3 Areas where cut backs are considered unacceptable

- 3.1 The Council is committed to maintain and enhance a cleaner and greener environment and no cut backs are planned in the refuse collection area.
- 3.2 In terms of tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, although the main responsibilities lie with Hertfordshire Police Authority, the Council has listened to the concerns of our residents and budget 2012/13 provides additional funding of four extra street wardens. Furthermore, the Council's capital programme will invest £10k to upgrade our CCTV equipments in 2012/13.
- 3.3 The Council is fully committed to support activities for older people in spite of the fact that the responsibility for providing this service lies with Hertfordshire County Council. It should be noted that the Council will continue to provide supports to a number of day centres in the area in 2012/13.
- 3.4 The Council is very pleased with the marked increase in the household recycling rates following the changes implemented in the household waste collection service. The Council has no plans to make any cuts in the household recycling service.
- 3.5 The Council currently manage 36 playgrounds, catering for age groups ranging from four years to twelve years, with teenage equipment on several sites. The playgrounds strike a balance between providing challenging and stimulating play and learning and meeting current safety requirements. The Council will continue to support these areas from the 2012/13 budget.

4 Areas where cut backs are considered acceptable

- 4.1 The Council has an obligation to plan for future development and protecting the environment we live in, this is especially important for Welwyn Hatfield is deemed to be a high population growth area – in fact the borough has the fifth highest population growth within England and Wales since 2001. It is for this reason; the Council has decided to invest £150k in 2012/13 to allow the work to be completed on the Core Strategy, this will also include an Area Action Plan for Welwyn Garden City Town Centre.
- 4.2 The Council will continue to provide support for Councillors as they form part of the democratic governance structure for the Council. They are voted for by the residents and helps to set the strategic directions for the Council.
- 4.3 The transportation team underwent a restructure last year as a result of the outsourcing of the car park management contract. The Council is

able to make further savings in the 2012/13 budget (£30k) from the tender of the on-street parking enforcement contract.

- 4.4 The Council has seen a huge increase in interest for allotments plots and in the last two years the Council has opened 6 new sites to meet demand. There are currently over 350 plots in the borough, all of which are currently let and there is a waiting list for each site. It is important to note that there are fees and charges associated with using the allotments.
- 4.5 One of the Council's priorities is to encourage prosperity and a healthier community, and this includes planning for affordable housing and improving standards of private housing. However the Council has undertaken management restructures across a number of directorates and has resulted in efficiency savings over £500k in 2012/13.

5 Options to help the Council to balance its budget for 2012/13

- 5.1 Nearly half of the respondents expressed that the most preferable options for the Council to balance the 2012/13 budget is through an increase of fees and charges. The least preferable option is an increase in Council tax. The Council is proposing to freeze its average Band D Council tax for the third consecutive year in 2012/13.

6 Value for Money

- 6.1 45% of the respondents either strongly agree or agree that the council provides value for money. This is much higher than the proportion of respondents (24%) who tend to disagree or strongly disagree with this.

7 Savings suggestions and ideas

- 7.1 Respondents were given an opportunity to include additional savings suggestions and examples in relation to the 2012/12 budget. 99 people answered, often with multiple suggestions. The most common kinds of suggestions are shown in the following table:

Comments
Priority should be given to town centre improvement
Need to focus on services directly affecting people and welfare in this economic climate
Council need to make more efforts in sourcing efficiencies
Savings should be made in Council management and administrative areas
Council tax is excessive or should not be raised further
Planning application fees should be increased
Reduce the frequency of grass cutting
Share Service functions with other local authorities

- 7.2 It is important to note that a majority of these comments are already reflected in the Council's corporate priorities for 2012/13, which is a key element to determine the resource prioritisation in the budget setting process.

8 Nature of respondents

- 8.1 Many respondents did not answer the demographic questions, although those who did mainly identified themselves as residents of the borough. There is an even spread of male and female respondents.
- 8.2 Age groups of respondents were disproportionate to the demographic profile – those under 25 were significantly under represented, even though the survey was publicised on the Council's facebook and twitter pages as well as the Youth Council's facebook page, to encourage responses from younger residents.

9 Conclusion

- 9.1 The online budget consultation survey has been a success this year. The 2012/13 budget and council tax have been set in the context that will deliver significant improvements to our town centre, and this is accompanied with a freeze in the average band D council tax. These parameters match with the majority views of the respondents.
- 9.2 It is envisaged that the online consultation survey will be launched again for the 2013/14 budget setting process.