

2004/2005

Uttlesford District Council

As part of the Consultation Strategy the Council engages with the public to assist decision-making on council tax levels. For the 2003/04 council tax levels the Council used external market research to seek broad views on service priority and suggested levels of council tax increases. For the 2004/05 council tax cycle the Council requested that council tax consultation via a series of Focus Groups and on line consultation using the Council's new Web Site.

Five Focus Groups were arranged one each to be held in Saffron Walden, Thaxted, Great Dunmow, Stansted and a young persons Forum to be held in Saffron Walden. Four of the five Focus Groups have been held and the Council Tax Consultation Document is available on the Web Site. Attendance at the Focus Groups has been disappointing but broadly in line with any new consultation process and the challenges of attracting people out during winter evenings. However the consultation process via the new Web Site has started well and this is an area of consultation which the Council will develop during the next year

As a result of the consultation certain themes have emerged:

- The most pressing has been the general lack of knowledge about what services the Council provides and the surprise to discover that many of these services i.e. End of Life Cars or Collection of Bulky Rubbish is free. All the Focus Groups felt that the Council needs to promote itself more that we are undoubtedly doing a good job and generally offering value for money but we simply do not get this across to the public.
- There was an even split around the concept of charges for services provided. Some felt very strongly that the Council should not offer a "free " collection service for example and that a realistic charge should be introduced for this type of service. All the Focus Groups were interested in comparative charges and the example of £18 to collect an old mattress in East Herts compared with free in Uttlesford intensified the discussion about the balance between costs and charges. This was most acute around car park charges ranging from why should my Council Tax subsidise car parking charges to charges in Dunmow may well close the Co-op and have a major impact on local retail. The Young Persons Forum felt that increases measured in pence would not be noticed and although some people may grumble it will blow over quickly.

- When prompted about the costs of Council Services most people were amazed that Uttlesford provided so much for £108 on average per year and again we need to promote this more. Some services such as refuse were singled out for consistent praise.
- Examples of the Council spending outside our remit i.e. cash to Essex Police to recruit additional Community Support Officers were well received and seen as very innovatory by Uttlesford and again a strong impression that this contribution represented value for money. There were no criticisms of the Council stepping outside our spending box.
- Partnership spending as an opportunity to get more for our money was seen as the future and examples included:

Subsidising local transport so that the quality of rural life could be increased
 Arranging dances and other social events at local schools to meet the needs of young people
 Free use of leisure facilities at certain times

The Focus Groups did not really care who provided the facilities provided they are provided and partnerships seemed the way forward,

- Case studies around the Council spending £80K on a cinema facility in Saffron Walden and if the contribution of £250K per year to the Saffron Walden Museum represented value for money prompted mixed reactions. Although the idea of a cinema was generally welcomed the suggestion of films in the council offices was not a cinema and it was agreed that more work was required on this proposal. The Young Peoples Group felt that showing films in the school building would be a start but a more neutral venue in the centre of Saffron Walden was really required. Views on the costs of the Museum were favourable – everyone knew about the Museum, accepted it was a district wide resource and had been there at least once.
- The Young Persons Forum felt the Saffron Walden Council Offices were intimidating and that a Shop Front Council presence in the town that was shop hours, including Saturday would do a lot of business.

- The Focus Groups were not asked to vote on Council Tax levels. Examples of an inflation increase that equated to a 6p per week household increase at Band 'D' level were used as a starting point for increase or decreases to the 2004/05 Council Tax levels. There were no requests for decreases and everyone accepted that additional facilities, subsidised transport or new services would push up Council Tax levels. The general feeling was that Uttlesford District Council could increase Council Tax levels above inflation provided *the Council explained in understandable terms what additional services were being received for these increases*.
- The consultation via the Web Site was slightly different. Participants were asked to identify the five most important services and the ten services that should be protected. In addition participants were asked if the Council should agree a Council Tax that is above inflation. The important services varied a little but the services to be protected included Community Safety, Food Safety, Open Space and Day Centres. Comments on Council Tax above inflation were split evenly between those who wished to keep the Council Tax around inflation and those prepared to pay more to receive additional services.

The Main Points

- Uttlesford must promote and publicise our services more
- The District Council Tax Level represent Value for Money
- Services generally good
- Some free services could have a token charge
- Council should aim to have a presence in the main towns – idea of a Shop Front Council Shop in Saffron Walden, open on a Saturday very popular with young people
- More work needed on the idea of a “cinema” before the Council makes a decision
- Above inflation increase in Council Tax is not unreasonable provided we explain what people are getting for the increase