

**Report into Findings of Focus Groups (December 2005 and January 2006) on Council Tax Levels and the Budget Allocation of Resources**

**Final Report**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 In December 2005 and January 2006, Stratford-on-Avon District Council undertook a series of focus groups across the district to explore in more detail local peoples' views on council tax levels and the budget allocation of resources.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

- 2.1 The consultation exercise comprised of three focus groups. Letters were sent to a sample of names and addresses taken from the Citizens' Panel (Focus Group) database of Stratford District Council inviting them to attend the focus groups. They were informed of the subjects to be covered and that a contribution of £15 would be given to them towards their expenses.
- 2.2 The focus groups lasting approximately two hours were held on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> December 2005 at Stratford-on-Avon Council Area Office, The Grange, Coventry Road, Southam, on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> December 2005 at the One-Stop Shop Council Office, Globe House, Priory Road, Alcester and on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006 at Shipston Primary School, Station Road, Shipston.
- 2.3 The focus groups explored issues surrounding council tax levels and the budget allocation of resources. This was a follow up to the questionnaire entitled Stratford-on-Avon District Council Budget Consultation Survey December 2005 sent to the Citizens' Panel that included the same issues.
- 2.4 Each attendee was given a financial contribution of £15 as a thank you for their time and contributed towards any travel expenses they may have incurred. (N.B. Two Shipston attendees donated their contributions to Age Concern). Six residents took part in the group held in Southam, nine residents attended the focus group in Alcester, with a further thirteen attending the one in Shipston. It should therefore be noted that this piece of consultation represents the views of a small number of residents and therefore should be treated with some caution.

## **3.0 FOCUS GROUP RESULTS**

- 3.1 The majority of attendees had lived in the Southam area for many years.
- 3.2 The length of time that the attendees had lived in the Alcester area ranged from ten to over forty-three years.
- 3.3 In Shipston, the length of time the attendees had lived in the area ranged from four and a half years to some over forty years.

## **3.4 FEEDBACK REGARDING COUNCIL TAX**

With particular reference to question 3 of the Budget Consultation Survey regarding the services provided by the Council and the corresponding proportion of council tax allocated to the level of that service provided, attendees were given a presentation on the budget by David Buckland, Head of Resources and were invited to comment and ask questions throughout the meeting.

### **Issues raised at the Southam focus group included:-**

- With Section 136 agreements with Parish Councils changing in respect of grass, litter and play areas, what impact would this have on council tax? This caused ill-feeling towards the District and it was felt that this showed the real feelings of the districts against the parishes – had done the District Council a lot of harm in the future.
- Revenue budget – does this include the salaries?
- Council Tax – What is the rate of non-payment? And how much tax is collected? Is it worth not taking people to court over non-payment more than is occurring now?
- Pensioners are “capped” on their pensions – rate higher is unfair.
- Council tax is good value for money according to the group.
- Why cannot rises be set to the inflation rate?
- Why do the County Council always seem to have higher council tax increases in recent years?
- The average person does not know the cost of council tax in other areas. There was surprise that SDC collect an average of £110 in council tax rather than the £180 the government suggest districts should be charging.
- Suggestions that SDC should show what expenditure was in more detail. The public would appreciate the situation more if it was explained. They appreciated that as tax collector it is confusing for the public.
- More specific information required on budgets etc – “make it real”.
- More actual examples required of spending set out in a concise manner.
- Ensure that the information concerns the whole of the District.
- The “Review” is too long.

### **Issues raised at the Alcester focus group included:-**

- What steps does the authority take to catch business rates? David Buckland replied that three visiting officers are successful. If properties are not covered by council tax and if let, then they are subject to business rates.
- One Alcester attendee reminded the group that Stratford only received only approximately 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the council tax and that the County Council should have focus group meetings like these. (David Buckland replied that they would need to run twenty...).
- At Alcester, one attendee felt that there were not enough funds for SWAHA and there was no money available for peoples’ needs, for example installing showers for the disabled.
- Several of the Alcester focus group attendees felt that people in the villages were suffering because of the popularity of Stratford: “Alcester

does not get one quarter of the benefits". Everything always seemed to be for Stratford, for example, the villagers felt they were paying for Bancroft Gardens.

- David Buckland replied that Stratford subsidises the district with the income generated from car parking services. Also he pointed out to the group that refuse services were far more spread out in rural areas whereas in Stratford they were close next door.
- One Alcester attendee believed that, based on her twenty years of working in social services, rural areas were penalised and they do not have the facilities, whereas care in Stratford was given straight away.
- It was felt that "£800,000 should have gone into the Greig Hall and not the Sports Hall at Alcester Grammar School..."
- Regarding use of the Internet, four of the Alcester focus group attendees said they use the Internet and with regards to planning applications said it was excellent.
- Another Alcester attendee commented that Bleachfield Street in Alcester was an eyesore with mountains of hard core and the archaeological dig. It was agreed that Alcester is a very important site and you can look at all the objects found. "Alcester was here long before Shakespeare".
- One Alcester attendee commented: "We all grumble, but if we want services we have to pay for them. I think budgeting is a very good idea".
- Concern was expressed at Alcester for retired people and the council tax going up by 5%: "unfortunately our income does not go up by 5%".
- Also, it was queried if we knew how Stratford District Council provides services compared to other councils...
- One Alcester attendee believed that there were a lot of people on benefits that did not deserve them.
- Everyone at the Alcester focus group believed that the council tax was too high.
- The subject of tourism tax as in France was mentioned.
- It was queried how many environmental health people are in Stratford District Council...
- One Alcester attendee believed CCTV should be improved.

**Issues raised at the Shipston focus group included:-**

- Is it possible to charge tourist tax? (Like some other countries).  
One attendee experienced too many tourists in Stratford to go shopping. Another expressed his belief in tourism promotion and the economic benefits of tourists and wealth creation being very important. Another saw tourism as good, clean and pleasant, saying he would rather see golf courses and hotels rather than factories.

- Concerns were expressed regarding the salaries of young people – believed to be insufficient to purchase a home in the area. One attendee believed social problems would occur as a result of building social housing next door to larger half million pound properties, with less well-off children seeing how more well-off children lived. The relevance of social housing in villages was brought into question as most people were working in the towns or cities and then would need transport. It was queried whether the social housing was actually going to local people. David Buckland confirmed that they were going to local people. He also informed the group that 1100 properties across the district were standing empty and that the Council has stopped the discount on Council Tax after six months, in an attempt to help prevent them remaining empty and that the discount had been reduced from 50% to 10% on second homes. Responses to which included:- “Good thing at last to increase rates on second homes”.
- It was queried regarding planning how much control does Stratford District Council actually have? David Buckland replied that the targets were given by central government.
- Shipston’s leisure centre was cited as being one of the bigger investments made by the Council.
- David Buckland promoted the benefits of the park and ride scheme.
- One person queried whether any projects for 2007/8 were planned – to which David Buckland confirmed some were.
- An explanation of the Wellesbourne project was requested and it was explained that potential options were being looked at including a badminton hall and potentially a swimming pool. One attendee said: “ We have got nothing at Kineton” and told the group that she had never been able to use the swimming pool at the High School. “Kineton has absolutely nothing”.

### **3.5 FEEDBACK REGARDING FREE BUS TRAVEL AFTER 9AM FROM 1<sup>ST</sup> APRIL 2006**

David Buckland advised focus group attendees of the free bus travel scheme for disabled and people aged 60 and over from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2006. Journeys need to start or finish in Warwickshire.

#### **Feedback from the Southam group was:-**

- Concessionary fares – wanted to know the cost of the new arrangements compared with the token system.
- Concessionary Fares – Will it help rural bus transport in the area to be increased in frequency?

#### **Feedback from the Alcester group was:-**

- There was a non-existent transport service.
- Free bus travel only worked if there was a bus in the village.

- The majority of the Alcester focus group attendees appeared to prefer the flexibility of the tokens system and commented upon how useful they were.  
"Are travel passes required?"  
Some were not against concessionary fares, but knew it would all cost...

**Feedback from the Shipston group was:-**

- Hysterical laughter.
- There's only one bus that goes twice a week to Banbury.
- I am thoroughly anti paying for anyone having this facility.
- Not everyone should have it – not everyone needs it – they have cars.  
Better to use less cars.  
Trying to discourage using cars.  
Can I finish? Mine (free bus pass) sits on the mantelpiece...
- In Wellesbourne, there are 4 or 5 double-decker buses that go around the estate with hardly anyone on.
- Shouldn't the Council have its own bus service? (David Buckland responded that the Council does not want to have its own bus service but went on to explain that the Council had purchased 3 buses to circulate in villages which were not served at the moment).
- Has anyone done any work on linking buses with volunteers?  
Capacity for 25 is what is required.

**3.6 FEEDBACK REGARDING THE REFUSE SERVICE**

David Buckland explained that each district council has a different recycling philosophy and that there was not one standard regime across the country.

**Feedback from the Southam group was:-**

- Green wheelie bins have been a good investment by SDC and those present were pleased to hear the recycling figures for the Council.
- Refuse and recycling – raise revenues in order to bring in plastic recycling. Is there the possibility of generating more income from recycling? Supermarkets should be encouraged to produce less packaging. A compost bins should be provided, especially for families. The collection of packaging and cardboard should be considered. Do sub contractors involved in refuse make money from salvaging goods?
- Street Cleaning – OK with service provision.

**Feedback from the Alcester group was:-**

- First class refuse service.  
Yes perfect.  
Very efficient service.

- We are a throwaway society. A package society. One attendee had been to a grocery store in France and had to ask for a bag. Customs change – years ago people used to go out with a basket.
- Street cleaning is very good. Excellent.
- One attendee queried who deals with dumped cars and David Buckland advised the group that it was the council's responsibility.
- More litter bins were required in Kinwarton.

**Feedback from the Shipston group was:-**

- One Shipston focus group attendee was concerned about people (not registered charities) opening up the black bin bags at her local waste disposal site, selling contents on site and pocketing the proceeds. (It is recognised that in Stratford the money does actually go to charity).
- Refuse service is very good. Want to see more recycling – plastic milk containers should go in it.  
Refuse service is very smooth, very effective.
- Garden refuse is marvellous.
- Recycling costs money so it is not truly recycling – not at all clear where recycled stuff goes.
- Do the Council audit where rubbish goes? It would be useful for residents to know...

**3.7 OTHER ISSUES DISCUSSED**

**At Southam:-**

- Are there a lot of officers in planning and economic development?
- Was concessionary parking still in operation?
- On the Revenues budget does tourism and recreation pay for itself?
- CCTV – OK about spending levels.
- Housing – encouragement should be given to provide more affordable housing for key workers. Increase spending.
- Community Leisure Services – happy with service.
- Tourism – Important this is supported so tourism is sustained in the area.
- Public Conveniences – spending should be kept at the same level.
- Planning – happy with service, but would like to see more enforcement of motorway advertising displays.

- Parks, Playing Fields & Open Spaces etc – Southam may not get the benefit from this as much as people who live in Stratford. May cut spending a little.
- Southam Pool was regarded as being better run than facilities in Warwick and Leamington.
- Perception of more money spent in Stratford than in rural areas of the district - Stratford town biased.
- SDC now charging £400 in relation to work surrounding disputes regarding high hedges. This is too much.
- Concerns raised over the amount of expenditure caused by claims against the Council.

**At Shipston:-**

- David Buckland informed the group that the Council's insurance premiums have increased due to the no-win, no-fee culture. He also said that the Council now charges a fee for people using credit cards. One attendee queried whether there were any discounts for payments over the internet, to which David Buckland responded negatively.
- David Buckland also informed the group that the Council had made £230,000 staff savings.
- Some discussion took place as to if Warwickshire had become a unitary authority would it have reduced the community charge. David Buckland said yes if the County Council were abolished... He also said that cost comparisons could be made between authorities on costs per 1,000 population, but there was also the level of service to take into account. For example, with recycling, Stratford offered a high level of service. It was felt that if we did away with county councils they would be replaced by regional authorities and that small villages such as Ratley – home to one of the focus group attendees – would get lost...
- It was requested that if we call democracy "admin costs" can we have a separate cost for councillors... David Buckland advised the group that the councillors' allowances and expenses are published annually in the local papers.
- There was a brief discussion regarding community leisure services and the Gallery at Stratford leisure centre exhibiting the work of students – one person within the focus group did not know the Gallery even existed. It was questioned if we were doing enough to promote community leisure services to all age sectors of the community. We could tie in leisure and travel to get over sixties to swim.
- David Buckland advised the Shipston group that noise was still being monitored at weekends but not during the week.
- Regarding planning applications, one Shipston focus group attendee commented: "At £38 planning applications were too cheap..."

- One Shipston attendee believed that CCTV had done nothing to reduce crime.  
Another thought that the camera in Stratford was marvellous.  
It was queried as to whether there was coverage in Shipston and the group was informed that it was 24/7.
- One Shipston attendee reminded the group that we are discussing only 10% of the Council tax and that we tend to ignore the fact that we are also paying the county council. There is some duplication, for example in street cleaning – highways and tourism. David Buckland advised the group that they are aiming to avoid duplication and that improvements can be made.
- One group member was very concerned about the increase in ragwort.
- Another Shipston attendee wanted to see David Buckland's equivalent from Warwick District Council to come and talk to them.

#### **4.0 SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL**

- 4.1 Provide full information on the Free Bus Travel Scheme from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2006.
- 4.2 Increase peoples' general awareness of what happens to recycled rubbish through an article in Your Review.
- 4.3 Consider paying more attention to verges and ragwort and plans to control it as it is regarded as lethal to cattle, etc.
- 4.4 The Shipston focus group requested seeing someone from the District Council to come and talk to them at a focus group. (David Buckland suggested Oliver Winters). The Alcester focus group also commented that the County Council should run focus group meetings.
- 4.5 Further to the focus group meeting in Alcester, concentrate on promoting the benefits of the Council's work in the villages. They felt everything was being done in Stratford (in particular Bancroft Gardens)... This perception needs to change. Regarding Parks, Playing Fields & Open Spaces, etc – it was also noted that Southam may not get the benefit from this as much as people who live in Stratford. Promote the benefits of Stratford's facilities available to villagers.
- 4.6 Investigate the comments made regarding the "eyesore" of Bleachfield Street in Alcester.
- 4.7 Further to Alcester group comments, bear in mind pensioners' income does not go up by 5% when council tax rises by 5%.
- 4.8 Compare services provided by Stratford District Council to other councils.
- 4.9 Promote the benefits of the services provided through the council tax, to help overcome the belief (of all the Alcester focus group attendees) that the level of council tax is too high.

- 4.10 Consider the introduction of a "tourist tax" – mentioned both at Alcester and Shipston focus groups.
- 4.11 Install more litter bins in Kinwarton (requested at Alcester focus group).
- 4.12 Regarding CCTV, consider raising awareness of it in the villages (referring to discussions at Alcester and Shipston focus groups). Promote the benefits of CCTV.