

**THURROCK COUNCIL
COUNCIL TAX CONSULTATION
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS
FINAL REPORT – JANUARY 2004**

Prepared For: Thurrock Council

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1.1 Background

Thurrock Council conducted a consultation process between November 2003 and mid January 2004 in relation to setting the 2004/05 Council Tax.

Underpinning the process was the publication of a consultation document "Proposals for 2004/05 Budgets" (produced as a hard copy document and published on the Council's website) and a programme of focus group discussions.

The focus group discussions were undertaken by **mruk** research and this report summarises the main findings to emerge from the qualitative programme.

1.2 Methodology

Two groups were recruited from the Citizens Panel. Due to logistical difficulties the majority were unable to attend group sessions arranged in December. A total of 14 respondents attended a group at 11:30am on 12 January (a number scheduled for the afternoon expressed a preference to attend the earlier session) at Thurrock Carers Centre. 4 attended a smaller session at 2:30pm in the same venue. Respondents were of a mixed gender although the majority were aged over 45 years.

In the evening a further group involving four elected members, one community representative and one representative of the voluntary sector attended a group at Grays School. A final group was held on 15 January at the Civic Offices, Grays at 6:30pm attended by twelve elected members, four community representatives and a police representative.

The groups from the Citizens Panel were entirely conducted and moderated by Glenn Adcock, Senior Research Director (**mruk**). The other group discussions were preceded by a presentation from Andrew Hardingham, Chief Finance Officer (Thurrock Council) to ensure clarity in relation to the technicalities and procedures of the budget setting process for the particular benefit of elected members.

The Council's consultation document (which had been issued in advance) was used as the main discussion stimulus and the key questions in the document provided the main structure for each group.

2. THE CONSULTATION PROCESS - GENERAL VIEWS

While the Council's consultation document was used as the main discussion stimulus for each group a number of wider issues were raised by one or more of the groups in relation to the broad consultation process, its effectiveness and potential impact:

- All the groups welcomed the Council's initiative to consult earlier this year and in publishing a consultative document. However, some concerns were expressed that views would "not be listened to" and that "decisions had already been made". 3 of the 4 groups still felt that "the public consultation process needs to start earlier" than it has even on this occasion.
- Other comments included concerns that there had been no "consultation event" for wider access by voluntary sector organisations and that the response deadline to the consultation document itself was "too tight".
- One group concluded that the consultation document was "not balanced enough" and assumed Council Tax increases without commenting sufficiently on how efficiency savings can be made and to what extent.
- All groups emphasised that Council Tax rises in excess of inflation (and particularly large rises like last year) significantly erode the net free income of older people reliant on pensions. A number of older respondents believe the Council should be looking for achieving a level of Council Tax that "leaves things as they are" and concentrates more on making existing services "cost effective and value for money".
- If the consultation document technique is to be used again it needs to be refined and, information contained within it made clearer (particularly expenditure within budget heads and definitions). Balance needs to be found between some group members calls for wider/earlier distribution and the costs of producing and making such a document more readily available.
- One group felt very strongly that Council Tax setting should place more emphasis on "maintaining what we already have" than introducing new initiatives. Ultimately the majority of groups believe the key driver should be "the cost effectiveness of services" and ensuring Council Tax payers are receiving "value for money".
- Citizens Panel groups agreed that it was important for the Council to provide feedback on how the consultation process has worked and, how views have been taken into account?

3. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY OBJECTIVES

All groups discussed the "good housekeeping" implications (and benefits) of ensuring medium term financial strategy objectives are in place. The majority in each group perceived the objectives to be "common sense" and "would expect them to be in place and being met".

- In view of this, all groups agreed the Council could use the objectives described in the consultation document to help it set the 2004/05 budget.
- This view was also qualified by one of the Citizens Panel groups who agreed, that the stated 'flexibility' should include re-directing any 'year end under-spend' and/or being able to carry monies forward - "it should never be lost to the Council to utilise".
- One of the elected member/community representative groups suggested Objective 4 (financial management and monitoring) should be further clarified. The other group suggested that the relationship between the objectives and the statutory/discretionary funding (and therefore accounting measures) should also be made clearer.

4. HOW THE COUNCIL GETS ITS MONEY

Groups examined the explanation of how the Council gets its money and then turned their attention to the value of using comparisons (for example - Band D rate Council Tax) against neighbouring or similar authorities.

- Mixed findings emerged - one of the Citizens' Panel groups suggested that a wider range of comparisons are needed to help residents make "comparable value for money judgements". The group felt (for example) that there was no tangible or visible evidence of any value derived from a significant Council Tax increase in Thurrock last year so more comparisons would be helpful in understanding what is happening elsewhere.
- Other groups felt the comparisons offered in the consultation document to be appropriate.
- At this stage the question was posed "would you be prepared to pay more Council Tax in return for improved Council services"? Again 1 group (Citizens' Panel) gave an unequivocal "no" for the same reasons of no visible improvements for last years large increase. The three other groups replied with a qualified yes - the qualification relating directly to "demonstrable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and value for money".

5. HOW THE MONEY SHOULD BE SPENT

The consultation document provides a breakdown of the current contribution per service (from a Band D Council Tax). The groups then discussed (from a large table of services) which five services they would spend more money on and which five services they would spend less on.

After significant discussion in each group on the size of the "education" related contribution (few respondents realised how large the Education budget is) the following was agreed by the majority of the respective groups:

Figure 1: Spending Indicators

GROUP	SPEND MORE (SERVICE)	SPEND LESS (SERVICE)
Group 1 (CP)	Youth Service Education Social Care Sports/Recreation	'Others' Arts/Museums Libraries Road Safety & Traffic Management Planning Permissions
Group 2 (CP)	Education Social Care Community Safety Road Repairs & Maintenance Enforcing Public Health Regulations	'Others' Road Safety & Traffic Management Libraries Waste Collection
Group 3	Social Care Community Safety Sports/Recreation Youth Service Grants & Voluntary Organisations	'Others' Road Safety & Traffic Management
Group 4	Social Care (vulnerable) Youth Service Support for Schools Sport/Recreation	'Others' Planning Permissions

- In general respondents found it much easier to identify services for more expenditure than less. It was also notable that if "pushed to make choices" the groups containing elected members found it more difficult to suggest services on which to spend less than the Citizens' Panel groups.

- Groups felt choices should still be subject to qualifications relating to increased efficiency and the need for any spend on Social Care to be fairly distributed across all 'types' of care. One group (and particular representatives) also expressed concerns about the levels of awareness people have of the services concerned when proposing any for less spending. The feeling was that some service heads are "too generic" and people do not fully appreciate what those services involve (grants to voluntary organisations was identified as a particular example of a "soft target" due to lack of information on organisations that receive grants, what they do, how much they receive and why?).
- Overall, Social Care, Youth Services, Sports/Recreation and Education services were favoured for more spending. The most readily identified for less spending (albeit reluctantly) were the category for 'Others' (for which more information was requested), Road Safety and Traffic management (largely to do with perceptions of cost and questionable effectiveness of speed bumps), Libraries and Planning Permissions.
- The majority of the groups also felt more could be done to look at services that could become more 'self financing' (ie Arts/Museums and Events, Planning Permissions and Libraries). However, a number of respondents in each of the groups voiced counter concerns about charging for services and thus creating further exclusion of some members of local communities who would be unable to afford charges.

6. PROVISION OF EDUCATION SERVICES

- All groups recognised the need for Education to be regarded as a priority for spending and, on the future impact education has on lifestyles and use of services.
- The Citizens Panel groups expressed concerns about educational standards in Thurrock, the impact of School closures and also felt the Council needs to be more clear about what happens to finance raised through the sale of school sites and land.
- The consultation document explains that to spend more money on Education would mean either a reduction in other services or a higher increase in Council Tax. In view of this groups were asked if they think the Council spends enough on Education or if it should be spending more or less? The outcome was:

- **3 groups (including both CP groups) think more should be spent on Education**
- **1 group think the current level (+ inflation) is sufficient**

- A number of qualifications on Education spending were suggested including the need to limit increases to a reasonable sum that is linked to specific needs and to make increases subject to the relationship with government funding and government requirements.

7. PROVISION OF SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

- A similar question was asked in relation to Social care taking into account the same statement relating to either increasing Council Tax or reducing other services. The groups findings emerged as:

- 3 groups (including CP groups) think more should be spent on Social Care

- 1 group think the current level (+ inflation) is sufficient

- One group felt the consultation document should provide for this (and other services) illustrations such as pie charts showing levels of spending and numbers of users so that the public can judge 'proportionate' expenditure (i.e. cost of providing service against usage/number of recipients).
- Other groups felt that it is difficult to understand and judge the demands made and levels of care associated with different categories of social care. In turn this makes it difficult for ordinary people to comment in a well-informed manner. One respondent commented 'unless you or a family member receive Social Care it is a less visible service than others so difficult to know whether enough money is spent or, if it is being properly spent'.

8. NON HRA HOUSING SERVICES

While most Housing Services are paid for from within the Housing Revenue Account there are a small number (ie homelessness, housing advice, needs register and letting Council properties) that are funded from the General Fund. It is proposed to increase the total money available for this service by £68,000 in the coming financial year. This was explained to all groups and they were then asked if more or less should be spent based on the same criteria as Education and Social Care.

- The following views emerged from the groups:

- 1 group (CP) thinks less should be spent on housing services.
- 1 group (CP) thinks more should be spent
- 2 groups think sufficient is spent at present

9. GETTING BACK TO BASICS – ENVIRONMENTAL & COMMUNITY SAFETY

Given that Environmental and Community Safety Services have an impact on the lives of everyone in Thurrock, respondents were asked to consider a table in the consultation document showing suggested expenditure that may be allocated on a discretionary basis for 'getting the basics right'.

- Respondents were asked to try and come to a collective group agreement on their top five priority items for expenditure for 2004/05 from a selected list. The following emerged from the majority in each group:

Figure 2: Priorities

GROUP	1 st Priority	2 nd Priority	3 rd Priority	4 th Priority	5 th Priority
Group 1 (CP)	Police Community Support Officers	CCTV Expansion	Improve Outdoor Sports Facilities	Enhance street warden service	Fear of crime survey
Group 2 (CP)	CCTV Expansion	Police Community Support Officers	Concierge CCTV staff costs	Improved rural verge maintenance	Street Cleaning staff
Group 3	CCTV Expansion	Police Community Support Officers	Street Cleaning staff	Improve outdoor sport facilities	Additional park wardens
Group 4	CCTV Expansion	Police Community Support Officers	Improved rural verge maintenance	Improve outdoor sport facilities	-

- Considerable discussion took place within each group reflecting personal preferences typified by strong support from individuals within one group for a fear of crime survey to outright rejection of the same idea by individuals within another.
- Clear priorities emerged such as CCTV expansion, Police Community Support officers, improving outdoor sports facilities and improved rural verge maintenance. However, a call generally emerged from each of the groups for 'more police officers' and getting 'more police back on the street'. One group also called for 'community wardens to work at night time'.
- The relationship between the Council's consultation on its own budgeting for the Council Tax and money that needs to be raised through the Council Tax for other public bodies in Thurrock such as the Police Authority was a source of some confusion within the groups and it was suggested by a range of individuals that this should be made clearer in the future.
- Overall when asked if the Council spends enough or should spend more/less on Environment and Community Safety (in the same context as Education and Social Care) the majority view in each group was:-

- **3 groups (inc 1 CP) think more should be spent**
- **1 group (CP) thinks sufficient is spent at present**

Groups were asked to consider three separate statements about Thurrock's council tax and try to come to a collective view on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each.

- The group views:-

Group 1 – Wanted the option of 'no increase; and/or inflation only increase without adversely affecting any service.

Under duress only (which they specifically asked to be noted) they strongly disagreed with statements A and B. At best they would only agree with statement C.

Group 2 – Could not come to a collective view. Half of the group strongly disagreed with statements A and B. Half agreed. Half disagreed with Statement C and half agreed.

Group 3 – 'Disagreed' with statement A, 'strongly agreed' with Statement B and 'disagreed' with statement C.

Group 4 – Agreed with statement A, strongly agreed with statement B and disagreed with statement C.

- The outcome on this set of questions was particularly inconclusive and caused at times quite heated discussion, The 'assumption' that Council Tax must go up above inflation to maintain or improve services was challenged by Citizens Panel groups who wanted options that do not result in what they perceive will be an 'unreasonable increase'. All groups called for the 'affordability' of Council Tax to be a primary factor.

Finally, each group was asked if the consultation process (particularly the document and group discussions) had helped respondents understand some of the issues the Council must consider when deciding how to spend the money?

- All groups agreed it had helped and that the Council is 'moving in the right direction'. However the following views also emerged: -
 - the consultation document should not refer to 'our' money but 'your' (ie. The Council Tax payer) money.
 - Access to consultation should be widened and documents distributed earlier.
 - Separate/additional consultation events are needed.
 - Some of the content of the document needs to be clarified and expanded. By contrast it was also felt other parts of the document needs to be simplified therefore, the document should be subject to a general review.
 - Overall process should start earlier.
 - Document is too 'leading', should be more 'genuinely consultative' and not assume above inflation increases are necessary.

Based upon the focus group discussions and response to the key questions posed within the Council's consultation document the following conclusions can be drawn:-

General

- While the consultation process was welcomed, respondents still think it should be started earlier, be more widespread and accessible to a wider range of the public and other organisations.
- The document itself was regarded as helpful but needs to be refined. In particular more clarity, to be more 'balanced' (ie. Not "assuming" above inflation increases) and illustrating how efficiency savings have/will be made.
- Feedback to respondents, organisations and the wider public on how their views have been considered by the Council will be essential if future consultation is to remain credible.

Specific

- The medium term financial strategy objectives are regarded as good financial practice that should be used to set the budget.
- While there is mixed level of support for paying more Council Tax in return for improved services – even those supporting would wish to see "demonstrable" improvements (particularly in efficiency, effectiveness and value for money)
- Those services attracting most support for increased spending included:
 - Social Care
 - Youth Services
 - Sports/recreation
 - Education
- Those most immediately identified for less spending included:
 - 'Others'
 - Road Safety and Traffic Management
 - Libraries
 - Planning Permissions

- In broad terms perceptions seemed to slightly favour spending on Non-HRA Housing Services remaining the same (although groups were fairly divided)

- In relation to 'getting back to basics' discretionary funding the clear priorities emerged as:
 - CCTV expansion
 - Police Community Support Officers
 - Improving outdoor facilities
 - Improving rural verge maintenance

- There was majority support for increased spending on the Environment and Community Safety.

- Views were mixed and inconclusive on the extent to which the Council should 'maintain' or 'improve' services if this means increasing Council Tax by more than inflation. Similar mixed views emerged as to how important it was for the Council not to increase Council Tax by more than inflation even if this means a 'reduction' in services.

- All agreed the consultation process had been helpful in increasing awareness and understanding of issues the Council has to consider. However, the general call was for the process to be refined and further developed for next year.

APPENDIX A: Copy of Consultation Document

