APPENDIX 6A

– BUDGET CONSULTATION RESPONSES

1.   BACKGROUND

The budget strategy set out in this report has been informed by a wide-ranging consultation programme with the local community. This has included:

➢   Postal surveys of the Community Panel of around 1000 local residents (653 responses) and the Senior Citizens Forum (318 responses)

➢   An online survey on the Council's Website (7 responses)

➢   Meetings with external and internal stakeholder groups, including:

- Parish Council Forum
- Local Strategic Partnership – Agenda Group
- Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)
- Chamber of Commerce (Policy & Representation Board)
- Children and Young People's Forum
- Connecting Communities Group
- Rural Forum
- Senior Citizens Forum
- Disabilities Forum
- Employee Joint Information and Consultation Forum (trade union meeting) - EJICF
- Corporate Employee Focus Group

Section 2 of this appendix summarises the responses received to date. The budget strategy has also been considered by the Value for Money Scrutiny Group, which comprises members from all political and other groupings. Appendix 6b) sets out the Value for Money Scrutiny Group's formal comments on the budget.

2.   SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES

   Postal surveys

The postal surveys sought views on the following themes:

a)   Key principles underpinning the budget strategy;
b)   Priority policy objectives i.e. the key areas where additional resources need to be invested;
c)   Investment in Adult and Children's Social Services;
d)   Investments to enhance facilities and infrastructure in the longer-term;
e)   Savings proposals – prioritisation of Council services;
f)   Council Tax;
g)   Concessionary travel.

The same questionnaire was sent to both the Community Panel and the Senior Citizens Forum. Results for the Community Panel (the Panel) are given in detail. Where results for the Senior Citizens Forum differ from those of the Panel, these are highlighted in the relevant section.

a) **Budget Principles**

There is substantial support amongst the Community Panel for the majority of core principles that we have used to develop our strategy, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Budget Principles

Budget principle	% of Community Panel who strongly agreed or agreed with principle
Spread our resources fairly and openly across the Borough, whilst taking account of the needs of different areas	93%
Seek to minimise the level of Council Tax increase, balanced against growing demands for Council services and protecting services from cuts	92%
Maximise external investment e.g. Government grants, to create prosperity and success	91%
Develop investment proposals that are based on and address the community's needs and priorities	87%
Deliver at least £3m efficiencies and savings a year, as far as possible minimising the impact on the quality of services	86%
Use limited amounts of the Council's balances to help minimise Council Tax increases and protect key services	84%
Set aside some money to deal with any unforeseen circumstances caused by the current economic situation	83%
Sell some of the Council's land and property to fund investment priorities (if it is practical and prudent to do so)	57%

The principle with the lowest level of agreement (57%) and highest level of disagreement (25%) is 'sell some of the Council's land and property to fund investment priorities'.

Results are similar for the Senior Citizens Forum, although agreement with most principles appears to be somewhat lower, most notably:

- Develop investment proposals that are based on and address the community's needs and priorities (77% agreed/strongly agreed, 10% lower than the Panel);
- Maximise external investment (83% agreed/strongly agreed, 8% lower than the Panel);
- Deliver at least £3m efficiencies and savings a year (80% agreed/strongly agreed, 6% lower than the Panel);
- Sell some of the Council's land and property (51% agreed/strongly agreed, 6% lower than the Panel).

b) **Priority Policy Objectives**

The Community Panel and the Senior Citizens Forum were asked about the importance of a number of priority policy objectives. These are the key areas where additional resources need to be invested to deliver better outcomes for the community. They were also asked to identify the three priority policy objectives that

they felt were the most important for the community overall. Results for the Community Panel are shown in Table 2.

Table 2- Priority Policy Objectives

Priority Policy Objective (PPO)	% of Panel who identified PPO as 'Top 3' priority	% of Panel who felt PPO is very/quite important
Protecting and maintaining services for older people, vulnerable adults and children	79%	97%
Tackling crime, anti-social behaviour and alcohol misuse	69%	96%
Delivering high quality education services and facilities	43%	94%
Securing affordable, accessible and sustainable housing	35%	86%
Maintaining, protecting and improving the local environment and our rural areas	22%	90%
Regenerating and improving our Borough Towns and most deprived communities	22%	86%
Promoting growth and prosperity	18%	86%
Enhancing customer services and improving organisational efficiency	7%	78%

Table 2 shows that whilst there is support amongst the Community Panel for all the priority policy objectives, protecting services for '**older people, vulnerable adults and children'** and '**tackling crime, anti-social behaviour and alcohol misuse'** appear to be the highest priorities.

These results are generally consistent with those of the Senior Citizens Forum with a high percentage of respondents (80%+) agreeing that all the priority policy objectives are very/quite important. Senior Citizens Forum respondents appear to place less importance on 'delivering high quality education services and facilities' and 'regenerating and improving our Borough Towns' (89% and 81% very/quite important respectively, both 5% lower than the Community Panel) and more importance on 'enhancing customer services and improving organisational efficiency' (83% very/quite important, 5% higher than the Panel).

The priority policy objectives are ranked in exactly the same order as in Table 2 apart from that the positions of 'delivering high quality education services and facilities' and 'securing affordable, accessible and sustainable housing' are reversed for the Senior Citizens Forum.

c)   <u>**Investment in Adult and Children's Social Services**</u>

Leading on from the questions about priority policy objectives, the Panel and Senior Citizens Forum were specifically asked for their views about the Council's proposal to focus additional revenue spending around **Adult and Children's Social Services**. In line with the findings in section b) above, there is strong support with 83% of Community Panel respondents and 81% of Senior Citizens Forum respondents stating that they strongly supported or supported this proposal.

d)   Investments to Enhance Facilities and Infrastructure in the Longer-Term

Looking at the other priority policy objectives, the Community Panel and the Senior Citizens Forum were asked about the degree to which they supported a range of initiatives to enhance facilities and infrastructure in the longer-term. They were also asked to identify which of these initiatives would be their top five priorities for investment.

Results for the Community Panel (see Table 3) show the % of respondents strongly supporting/supporting investments ranging from 52% (Information Communication Technology) to 95% (roads and pavements), with the two highest priorities for investment being **roads and pavements** and **extra care housing**.

Again, results for the Senior Citizens Forum broadly mirror those of the Community Panel with levels of support for initiatives being within +/-5% of those shown in Table 3. The one exception is **repair and maintenance of Council buildings, including improving disabled access to buildings open to the public**, which is supported or strongly supported by 76% of Senior Citizens Forum respondents (13% higher than the Community Panel).

Similarly, the five initiatives that the highest percentage of Senior Citizens Forum respondents identified as a top priority exactly matches those highlighted by the Community Panel (see Table 3). However, the Senior Citizens Forum rank both improving parks and play areas and customer service higher and regeneration of New Town estates lower than the Panel.

e)   Savings Proposals – Prioritisation of Council Services

To help prioritise future savings, the Panel and Senior Citizens Forum were asked to consider an extensive list of Council services and to identify the five services that are most important to the community overall and the five services most in need of improvement. The services identified by a relatively high percentage of Community Panel respondents as being both important and most in need of improvement are:

- Prevention of crime and anti-social behaviour;
- Maintenance of roads and pavements;
- Social services for older people;
- Litter picking, street sweeping and fly tip removal.

f)   Council Tax

The Panel and Senior Citizens Forum were asked to consider the Council's proposal to bring down the level of Council Tax increase to less than 4% in March 2009 and to less than 3.5% in March 2010. There is strong support for this approach with 86% of the Panel and 85% of the Senior Citizens Forum stating that they strongly support/support bringing the level of Council Tax increase to below 4% in March 2009. There are similar levels of support for an increase of less than 3.5% in March 2010 (85% of Panel strongly support/support, 87% of Senior Citizens Forum strongly support/support).

Community Panel and Senior Citizen Forum members who did not support the proposal (5% of respondents in both cases) were asked to give their reasons for this view. The most common reason given was that the Council Tax increase should be significantly lower than the proposed level, with a number of people stating it should be zero or less than 2% in the current economic climate. Some respondents,

particularly from the Senior Citizens Forum, felt that the Council should actually look to reduce Council Tax, stressing that pensioners will find it particularly difficult to pay. In contrast, a few concerns were also raised about whether reducing the level of Council Tax increase would result in cuts to services.

g)   Concessionary Travel

Finally, the Panel and Senior Citizens Forum were asked for their views on an extension of the current **concessionary travel** scheme, involving free bus travel for eligible groups before 9.30am and after 11pm on weekdays. Although only 30% of the Panel think that extending the hours of concessionary travel scheme is either very or quite important for them or their family, almost half of respondents (46%) think it is very/quite important for the community overall. This figure increases to 57% for members of the Senior Citizens Forum.

Online Survey

The online survey linked directly into the Cabinet report, which set out full details of the Council's draft Budget strategy. **However, due to the low number of responses (7 respondents), the following results should be interpreted with great caution**.

The online survey sought views on:

a) Investment Package

5/7 respondents strongly supported or supported the proposed investment package. Comments included:

➢ Prioritise regeneration of the market towns;
➢ Invest more in public transport – we need better rail and bus links;
➢ Invest more in the arts e.g. a museum/art gallery;
➢ Prioritise regeneration, public transport, further recycling and taking services closer to the public and away from the Town Centre.

b) Savings Package

4/7 respondents strongly supported or supported the proposed savings package. Comments included:

➢ In times of recession you can't keep spending money on non-essential services e.g. footpaths, cycle ways, additional street lights and translation costs. Get rid of departmental empires;
➢ There seems to be too much spent on publicity;
➢ Internal costs need to be addressed without delay e.g. publicity, pension funding and middle management costs.

Table 3 – Long-term Investments in Facilities and Infrastructure

Priority Policy Objective	Proposed Investment	% of Panel who identified as 'Top 5' priority	% of Panel who strongly supported or supported
Maintaining, protecting and improving the local environment and our rural areas	Roads and pavements – a planned programme of maintenance of the Borough's roads and pavements	70%	95%
Securing affordable, accessible and sustainable housing	Extra Care Housing – providing specialist extra care housing for older people: high quality independent accommodation and communal facilities in a secure environment	69%	92%
Tackling crime, anti-social behaviour and alcohol misuse	Street lighting – replacing and/or providing new street lights, particularly in crime 'hot spots'	58%	91%
Securing affordable, accessible and sustainable housing	Housing supply – supporting the provision of more affordable, decent housing	56%	83%
Delivering high quality education service and facilities	Schools (Campus Telford & Wrekin) – modernising schools and wherever possible, creating new community and sports facilities alongside them	53%	86%
Regenerating and improving our Borough Towns and most deprived communities	Borough Towns Initiative – regenerating the centres of Newport, Wellington, Dawley, Madeley, Oakengates and Ironbridge	47%	85%
Regenerating and improving our Borough Towns and most deprived communities	Parks and play areas – enhancing facilities at both local parks and Telford Town Park	38%	75%
Regenerating and improving our Borough Towns and most deprived communities	New Town Estates – continuing to regenerate the most deprived parts of the Borough, particularly Brookside, Sutton Hill and Woodside	25%	74%
Enhancing customer services and improving organisational efficiency	Customer service – improving access to services, such as developing a one-stop shop and more services available online	14%	63%
Enhancing customer services and improving organisational efficiency	Repair and maintenance of Council buildings – including disabled access to buildings open to the public	13%	63%
Enhancing customer services and improving organisational efficiency	Information Communication Technology (ICT) – providing new ICT systems to improve the quality and efficiency of services	5%	52%

APPENDIX 6A

Consultation Meetings

All consultation meetings involved a discussion about the Council's budget position and future spending priorities. In addition, the Children and Young People's Forum were asked to take part in a specific exercise to identify their top 5 long-term investment priorities.

Comments from members of the groups and forums consulted were around three main areas: long-term investment priorities, other investment priorities, including extension of the concessionary travel scheme, and other issues/concerns.

a)   Long-term Investment Priorities

The Children and Young People's Forum was asked to consider a number of investments to enhance facilities and infrastructure in the longer-term (similar to those listed in the Community Panel Survey). They were then divided into four groups and asked to identify and explain their top five areas for investment. Whilst there was some consensus between the groups, particularly around support for **Campus Telford & Wrekin** and the inclusion of leisure and community facilities alongside the modernisation of schools, there were also variations between the groups. Interestingly, this group prioritised improving New Town Estates higher and maintenance of roads and footways lower than the Community Panel. A summary of the combined results of all four groups is given in Table 4.

Table 4 – CYP Long-term Investment Priorities

Rank	Investment area	Examples of reasons given
1	Campus Telford & Wrekin	"because it covers everyone and gives people things to do", "schools are very important places for young people, we spend most of our time there"
2=	Improving New Town Estates	"they need a lot of improvement", "it will encourage people to move to Telford", "because so many people live in a small space"
2=	Extra care housing	"care costs a lot and isn't always very good", "the increase in population means we need more care", "because older people deserve respect and facilities"
4	Improving parks and play areas	"more areas for children to go instead of hanging around the streets"
5	More affordable housing	"to help with the credit crunch and first time home buyers", "so more people can come to Telford and afford to buy houses", "stops abandoned houses"
6	Borough Towns Initiative	"the existing towns that made up of Telford should be looked after as well (as the Town Centre)"
7	Repairing and replacing street lighting	"they are pretty bad at the moment", "lots of young people out at night and it increases safety", "makes it more of a community"
8=	Maintenance of roads and pavements	N/A – not in top 5 for any group
8=	Customer service e.g. one-stop shop, more services online	N/A – not in top 5 for any group

Across the other groups and forums, there was widespread support for extra funding to address the effects of the **credit crunch**, particularly to ensure that more people are able to access **affordable and accessible housing** and to stimulate the **housing market** (Chamber of Commerce Policy & Representation Board, Children and Young People's Forum, Parish Council Forum, Council for Voluntary Services, Local Strategic Partnership Agenda Group).

A number of groups also highlighted the need to continue to **regenerate the Borough** and to support the **local economy**, although some concerns were expressed about the affordability of some of the Council's long-term investment proposals given the current economic climate (Parish Council Forum, EJICF). Comments and issues raised included:

➢ Concern that some wards and the local centres (specific reference to St Georges and Wrockwardine Wood) don't fit the priorities and don't get any regeneration (Parish Council Forum)
➢ Concern that people's perceptions are that all the regeneration originally planned will be delivered – this could impact on services for vulnerable people (Parish Council Forum)
➢ Request for the Council to use some of its capital to involve/work with local businesses to help the local economy to recover (Chamber of Commerce Policy & Representation Board)
➢ Need for the Council's procurement framework/strategy to look at contracting with local businesses and to be proactive in getting more new/local businesses on the Council's approved supplier list (Chamber of Commerce Policy & Representation Board).

Comments on other issues included:

➢ Need to ensure that **roads and footways** are repaired, particularly after work on gas, electric or water supplies (Senior Citizens Forum)
➢ A specific query about whether the new **swimming pool at Abraham Darby School** will be joint use i.e. available to the school and the public (Disabilities Forum)

b) **Other Investment Priorities, including Concessionary Travel**

Headline messages from all groups and forums included:

➢ Need to ensure that the budget pressure that the Council has, now in the future, will not impact on the priorities set out in our **Local Area Agreement** as partners e.g. PCT have aligned their resources to these shared/agreed objectives (Local Strategic Partnership Agenda Group)
➢ Support for more services in **rural areas** (Rural Forum)

In terms of the option of extending the current **concessionary travel** scheme, comments included:

➢ Support for extra funding for concessionary travel – could this be achieved by diverting funding from schools/education in light of a drop in pupil numbers? (Senior Citizens Forum)
➢ Suggestion that the concessionary travel scheme be made available from 9am - buses are empty at this time, as children are already in school and most people have travelled to work (Senior Citizens Forum, Council for Voluntary Service)

➢ Query about whether the dial-a-ride scheme could be used to extend the concessionary travel scheme (Council for Voluntary Service)
➢ Concern that concessionary travel could be affected by budget pressures and that the Council, not Arriva, will bear the cost of any extension to the scheme (Parish Council Forum)

c) **Other Issues**

A number of other issues and questions were raised about a range of other budget-related topics, including:

➢ **Savings/efficiencies:**
- What is the Council doing to fundamentally restructure/reduce employee numbers to make savings? (Chamber of Commerce Policy & Representation Board)
- Have you looked at merging or closing services i.e. closing libraries (Council for Voluntary Service)
- How is the Council managing vacant properties? (Chamber of Commerce Policy & Representation Board)
- Need for the Council to consider the impact of cutting services on the voluntary sector as they fill the gap in public services. Funding for some services e.g. voluntary sector day care centres, has reduced significantly in recent years (Council for Voluntary Service)
- Concern about the impact of service reviews on service delivery and staff, including potential job losses (EJICF, Corporate Employee Focus Group)
- How much Council Tax is outstanding? Need to ensure we are as efficient as possible at collecting it (Parish Council Forum)
- Could incentives be offered to employees e.g. money being fed back into services, to encourage them to come up with new savings ideas? (Corporate Employee Focus Group)

➢ **Financial management and funding pressures:**
- Concern that Government funding will reduce and impact on services (Chamber of Commerce Policy & Representation Board)
- Concern about the impact of the creation of new academies on funding for Education & Schools (EJICF)
- Concern about the impact of Single Status on the Council's budget (Corporate Employee Focus Group)
- Query about whether the Council is prudent in its expenditure/treasury management – e.g. did the Council lose money in the Icelandic banks? (Connecting Communities Group)
- Query about the volume of reserves held by the Council (Council for Voluntary Service)

➢ **Other issues:**
- Pension contributions – a number of queries about pension contributions for both employees (Rural Forum) and members (Senior Citizens Forum)