

Kent Messenger EXTRA – Tunbridge Wells Friday, February 17, 2006

COSTS CUT BUT NOT SERVICES

FEARS council services will be cut in a money-saving budget are due to be eased this week.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council will not scrap services to save money but will increase charges for car parking, some sports centres and its crematorium, according to budget proposal unveiled this week.

But the Council has come under fire after it was revealed a consultation on the cost-cutting plan received only 17 responses – equivalent to 0.02 per cent of the borough's electorate.

The consultation was conducted on the council's website and was intended to tell councilors which services were most important to residents. It was launched in January 2006 with a press release titled "Let the people decide".

The response was criticised at a meeting of the council's overview and scrutiny committee.

Vice-chairman David Neve (Lib Dem) said: "The proposals were put up on the website. One document even said that there were little options for residents at this stage. They treated residents with contempt."

However, council leader Melynn Howell (Con) said the consultation was only one small way in which councillors teamed the views of its residents.

He said: "Dialogue with the public and our partners is a continuous process."

Cllr Howell insisted the budget consultation had not been a waste of time and said it was a Government requirement to carry it out.

He said the council used its work with the Tunbridge Wells Town Forum, meetings with parish councils and other consultations throughout the year to build up a picture of how best to meet residents' demands.

He said: "What we want is for people to participate in our work. Isn't that better than one-off statutory consultations?"

The budget proposals were due to be debated by the council's cabinet on Thursday 16 February and will face a final vote at a full council meeting on Tuesday, 28 February 2006.