1. Financial Questions

The budget savings proposals with regard to the development of Community Hubs are a '2b proposal' specifically: a saving of £250,000 in 2012/13 and £850,000 in 2013/14 (Source: BUDGET SAVINGS PROPOSALS 2012/2013 – LIST TWO (B) However, the Council are unable to provide any evidence as to how they will achieve these savings.

Question: Why will Wolverhampton Council not provide detailed information about exactly how they propose to make these savings? It is inconceivable that they are expecting the public to agree to vague proposals when there is no evidence that the Council can make good their proposed savings. The Council also claims they will invest £3 million in Community Hubs and save over £1 million a year but where is the evidence?

Question: The Council say that creating Community Hubs is cost-effective yet they will not provide evidence of this. If they cannot provide evidence, then how do they know their proposals are cost-effective?

Question: How is Wolverhampton's Library Service funded and what is its annual budget? What proportion of savings is the Library Service being asked to make in comparison with other Council services?

Question: If the Council's proposals for Community Hubs are accepted, what will happen to the capital receipts from the sale of 'surplus' buildings?

Question: A number of residents have raised the following question with FECH: why are Wolverhampton Council spending £19 million on the Civic Centre at this particular moment in time? The money for essential work to strengthen the car park is allocated from a separate budget so what exactly will this £19 million be spent on? How exactly will the residents of Wolverhampton benefit from this expenditure?

2. The Consultation Process

2.1 Starting and stopping and starting and stopping the consultation process

The consultation process has been confused from the outset. Dates have been set and cancelled and then set and cancelled again. Ultimately this confused process will lead to consultation fatigue and calls into question the validity of the consultation. Our community group FECH responded to the last set of dates by designing and starting distribution of 2500+ leaflets. Members of the community (including people with health problems) have so far delivered in excess of 1200 leaflets which now contain out of date information. The Council are responsible for this confusion as they should have halted the entire consultation process on 27th June after the call-in to Scrutiny.

2.2 Publicity for the consultation

On 3rd July FECH asked the Council how the Community Hubs consultation would be publicised. On 4th July they received a telephone call from Mel Potter in the Council's communications department. Mel informed FECH that he doesn't know the Finchfield area; when asked whether posters would be placed in local shops, businesses, pubs... he said that the Council were 'probably going to be doing something in your local area'. It was pointed out that so far the only visible poster was an A4 one in Finchfield Library to

which Mel replied, 'well that's your local centre' and seemed to think this was adequate publicity. He was unaware of any plans to display information anywhere other than at the planned drop-ins and meetings. When pressed for more specific details Mel stated that the Council may be 'doing more stuff'. Mel informed FECH that only general publicity will be sent to local press and was keen to tell FECH about how the Council use Facebook and Twitter. It was pointed out to him that many elderly people use Finchfield Library and it is unlikely that they are the greatest users of social media. Mel also informed FECH that the Council were relying on groups such as FECH to pass on information through word of mouth.

It was extremely clear from the information given to FECH by Mel Potter that Wolverhampton Council had no specific plan in place to promote the Community Hubs consultation.

The LNP service are carrying out the geographical part of the consultation yet they only send mail to those on their mailing list. The Tettenhall and District LNP failed to publicise their own AGM this year with the result that only 25 people turned up. Tettenhall and District LNP cited lack of resources as the reason for not being able to publicise the meeting.

Question: Why did Wolverhampton Council embark on a significant consultation exercise without having a clear communications strategy in place? What resources will be made available to ensure that a thorough publicity campaign is carried out for the consultation process?

2.3 Two Stage Consultation

In April this year a FOI request was made to Wolverhampton Council asking for detailed information regarding the proposals for Community Hubs. The Council's response clearly indicated that a two-stage consultation process would take place.

That consultation will comprise an initial consultation on the "Wolverhampton Vision for Community Hubs" described in the report, followed by further consultation on more specific proposals.

The two-stage consultation process has now been abandoned. The Council are citing the Budget Consultation as evidence of a willingness to embrace the concept of Community Hubs. The now halted consultation assumes Community Hubs to be fait accompli and only invites comment on how they can be influenced. However, the Budget Consultation indicates only a general feeling of 'cautious acceptance' of the concept and then only 'if service levels were maintained' (Wolverhampton Council 'Outcome of Budget Consultation 2012/13' para 3.14).

In January 2009 a report from the 'Libraries Task and Finish Group' was presented to cabinet. The report was centered around the question 'Are libraries in Wolverhampton in the right place with the right service?' the report notes the following:

One of the things this Review has shown us is that the strategic vision advocated by senior officers for Wolverhampton to have fewer but bigger libraries is at odds with what local residents want. This has been shown through the results of the Citizens' Panel, on-line consultation and the feedback from discussion groups.

The Council are using previous consultation outcomes to force through their proposals for Community Hubs but are ignoring other consultations which do not fit with their proposals. By making the assumption that Community Hubs are going to happen, all of the evidence gained will be used by the Council as evidence to support their proposals for Community Hubs.

A two-stage consultation would mean that needs and usage of services could be carried out, and then DETAILED AND INFORMED proposals could be put to the public for consultation in the second stage. The current proposals for consultation do not provide enough detail for residents to make informed choices.

Question: Why have the plans for a two-stage consultation process been dropped?

Question: Why is a simple question not part of the consultation process: 'Do you want Community Hubs? Yes or no?'

Question: Why is Wolverhampton Council apparently ignoring the findings from their own Libraries Task and Finish Group?

2.4 Wolverhampton Council's approach to the consultation is misleading and confusing

The Council's language in the document 'Proposals for the Development of Community Hubs' is emotive and leading - it will influence the outcome of the consultation. FECH were not allowed to distribute their literature on Community hubs via the LNP service on the grounds that 'it may influence the consultation.' However, Wolverhampton Council's literature is blatant propaganda which endorses their 'vision' as a cost-effective' way to 'improve services' NB There is no evidence available to inform the public and back up the Council's claims.

The Council's literature claims that people want convenience and cite shopping for groceries and clothes in one place. To compare the retail sector with service provision is not to compare like with like and is misleading. Moreover, out of town shopping centres have been the death knell for town centres – Wolverhampton has suffered particularly badly as a result of this phenomenon.

Question: Why are the Council copying a delivery model that has been proven to destroy communities?

Question: Why are LNPs used to promote Council propaganda yet FECH, a local community group, is not allowed to forward comments via the LNP service to our own community?

3. The questionnaire

The Council's own policies state on many occasions that they will involve people in decision-making 'It is the right of all people living in Wolverhampton to have the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process about the services they use or that affect their lives.' By making the assumption that Community Hubs are going to happen, all of the evidence gained will be used by the Council as evidence to support their proposals. However a number of people have already pointed out to FECH that there should be an option on the questionnaire for rejecting the Council's proposals for Community Hubs.

The Council's questionnaire is flawed and confusing.

- The first question asks people their preference for the following statement: 'I would like to be able to access a range of services in my local area rather than travelling all over the city'. There is no indication at all of what 'local area' means. The Council can therefore interpret this information as they see fit and claim it is evidence of the public's preference for Community Hubs. The 2011 Walsall Library consultation asked questions based on specific distances. Wolverhampton Council should do likewise.

- Section 1 of the Council's questionnaire contains a series of either positive or negative statements which have to be either agreed with or disagreed with. It is extremely confusing to go from a positive to a negative statement in this way.

- The questionnaire (including the background information) is considerably lengthy; this may be intimidating to some people.

- The questionnaire contains leading statements and the associated literature is emotive and misleading. For example: 'Wolverhampton City Council has set itself a challenge to not only protect its library, community and youth services, but to improve them too.'
- The questionnaire does not always distinguish between Community Hubs and Community Service Hubs – this is confusing and could lead to people choosing preferences they had not intended.
- The questionnaire asks for an opinion on issues of service provision without knowing what a person's knowledge of current provision is. Any responses are therefore of questionable validity. An example of this is: 'the small hubs do not sound any different to what is in place now in libraries' FECH is aware that people's understanding of what services a library provides varies considerably.
- How can people possibly be expected to know what services they will need in the future? It is unlikely they will even be aware of the full range of services presently available.
- At present it is not possible to make uninterrupted progress through the questionnaire (you have to flick forwards and backwards to the supporting information). As a result it is possible for someone to get option 1 and 2 mixed up and choose an option they had not intended. Explanatory notes should be with the questions, not placed in a separate document or link.
- The questionnaire assumes acquiescence with the Community Hubs vision. Where is there a simple option for saying that you do not agree with the vision for Community Hubs?
- The paper version of the questionnaire has inadequate space for additional comments.
- The paper version of the questionnaire misses the headings off the second page. This could result in ticking the wrong column.

Question: What is the qualification of the person who has composed the questionnaire?

Question: What training has been given to those who have been facilitating the questionnaire?

Question: How many drafts of the questionnaire were produced and how was it pre-tested? For example: skirmishing/observational studies/pilot testing? What flaws were detected and how was it decided to overcome them?