

Summary of responses to the budget challenge

To further engage with residents, the council launched the budget challenge again for 2022/23. The simulator allowed residents to increase or decrease budgets for various services, to amend Council tax (up to referenda levels), the Adult Social Care Precept, and to look at specific investments.

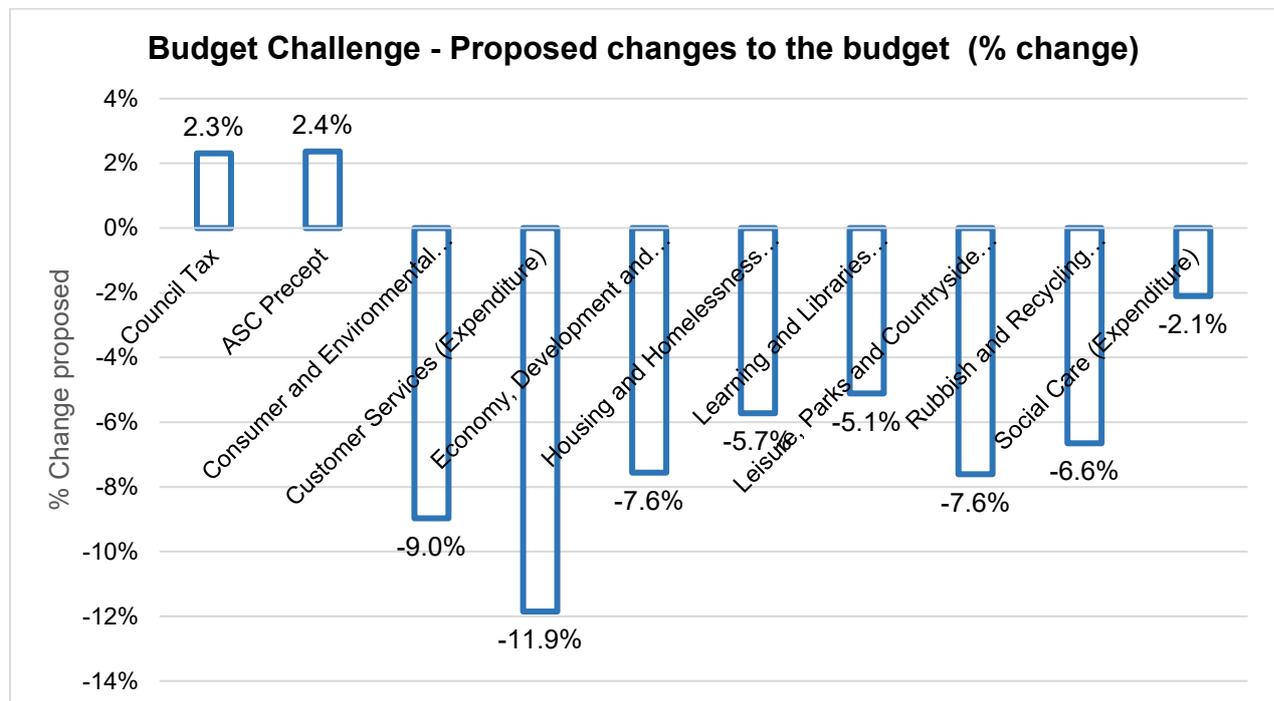
We published the Challenge online on our Consultation and Engagement Hub on 18 October 2021, with feedback requested by midnight on Sunday, 28 November 2021. (<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/budgetchallenge>)

We emailed members of the West Berkshire Community Panel (around 1,173 people), local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Finally, we issued a press release on 19 October 2021, and further publicised our consultations through our Facebook and Twitter accounts. We also placed posters in our main offices and libraries, and made them available to WBC Councillors and Parish and Town Councils to put up in the wards/parishes.

98 people took the challenge and the summary of their choices is as follows:

Chart 1.1: Summary of responses to the budget challenge



Overall, the average Council Tax rise proposed was 4.7%, split between Council Tax income and the Adult Social Care precept. The summary of the proposals in service areas was for a higher area of budget protection for 'People' services, Adult and Children Social Care, and to a lesser extent Education, with the least amount of protection for customer services.

In more detail, the top three individual services within the above headings that were the most and least protected are highlighted below:

Chart 1.2: Specific services changes

Most protected	Least protected
Children’s social care -1.2%	Customer services -11.9%
Family Support -1.7%	Economic Development and Regeneration -10.7%
Youth Services -1.8%	Culture and Heritage -9.9%

Comparison versus the proposed budget

The responses have been considered at a summary level, and broadly align with the council’s proposals. Since the budget challenge was launched, there was additional funding through the draft Local Government Finance Settlement that would have made it easier to balance the budget.

Some of the key areas of alignment and difference with the proposed budget include:

- Proposed Council Tax increase in the challenge of 4.7% vs the Council’s proposal of 3.99%
- Relative protection for ‘people’ services is in line with the council’s proposals; indeed this is an area which will receive significant investment, especially through the financial model for growth in children’s, adult’s and education services
- The move to more services being provided online and making them increasingly accessible will generate further savings, though it is important for the Council to maintain access for all as highlighted through its Communications and Engagement Strategy
- One of the least protected areas was economic development and regeneration. This area has been enhanced in recent years as it has been one of the Council’s priorities in the Council Strategy 2019-23. Growth in this area supports businesses in the district and help to make West Berkshire a great place to live, with additional funds support local masterplan work in Newbury town centre and forthcoming with Thatcham and Hungerford.

Further individual comments were made and include the below on themes such as:

Mergers and shared services

“To be perfectly honest, West Berkshire Council is no longer viable as a council in its own right. Full merger with surrounding councils should be sought urgently”.

“Fundamentally more income is required, and hence an increase in council tax if critical services are to meet citizens’ needs. What is the council doing to reduce its back office operations (HR, Finance, Procurement, Payroll, etc.), perhaps by looking for opportunities to outsource to established providers of these services, or to join with

Appendix L

another council to achieve economic efficiencies? Central Government is already doing this on a major scale, as are a number of UK police forces”.

“We need to get much more realistic about the costs of the public expected services and stop being capped by central government. Perhaps a larger combined authority could be more cost effective”.

“West Berks should explore opportunities to collaborate and share services/investment (eg new technology)/procurement with neighbouring councils to achieve efficiencies/cost reductions/service level improvements”.

Environment

“Regarding climate change and ecological protection, there should be a separate budget for this so that services that contribute to carbon zero and biodiversity are protected from budget cuts. Eg. Tree planting or electric car charging points”.

“...reduce rubbish collection - black bins to once a month keep recycling at alternative weeks”.

“Increasing the capacity of the recycling centres and increasing what can be recycled at kerbside would alleviate fly tipping issues”.

“Grass cutting - I think there are a lot more opportunities for doing meadow cutting in open space and highways areas - such as leaving meadow margins to public green space, or mown edges to grass areas which are only cut once or twice a year”.

Libraries

“The Library budget must be increased to keep this service open and contributing to the above childhood programmes”.

“Libraries are the precious resource for the future of this nation”.

“...We also need to balance who and how services are being used. For instance, we as a family would never use a library, however recognise the older generation might but to what extent/frequency? Libraries should be kept open in pivotal areas and a mobile service upheld for outlying villages and communities”.

Changing services

“I enjoy culture but really don't feel Shaw House and the museum need to be open several days a week - it would make total sense to me if the museum was only open 3 or 4 days a week if it meant they could expand their schools programme”.

“Cash reduction is not the way to review this - streamlining services to save cash, more emphasis on technology and greater efficiencies through day-to-day operational activities is the way I'd like to see cost savings (rather than clicking a button and being told it would reduce the number of FTEs). How about looking at the salaries of those in the upper echelons?”.

“The Council needs to review how they are being contacted...very rarely need to call the council or visit in person”.

“Within current budgets we already have:

potholes, limited gritting, delays to London Road development (3 years), limited urban landscaping, a household waste centre operating a restricted timetable for the last 18 months, suspension of green services x 2, limited action from Environmental Health on pollution/nuisance matters, waiting lists for special needs schools whose children struggle and cause disruption in mainstream school. Why not dispose of Council building assets/rents which have not been and are not being used with employees working from home?”

“Open space budget - Not sure why cutting the budget resulted in dog bins being removed but increasing the budget did not mean that more were provided!! Locally there is increased need for dog bins. Perhaps the Council can think of way to get dog owners to contribute to the cost of them? Parking levies at popular dog walking spots perhaps”.

London Road

“...just stop wasting money on unwanted vanity political projects such as LRIE and moving the Football Club”.

“No mention of money wasted that now needs to be cut from the budget. No mention of money wasted in contracts to companies that do poor work. The 9 million that needs to be save could have been done more or less in one go just by cancelling the movement of the football pitch”.

General comments

“A complex exercise. I would have preferred smaller percentages to enable the budget to be balanced with less impact”.

“What a complete waste of time and money. This “survey” is the first thing I would cut. Both the time and effort to set it up, the cost of distributing it, as well as the cost of analysing the results. If the purpose is to demonstrate how difficult it is, then show leadership and don't ask the public questions that they have little insight into their overall impact. It is superficial and disingenuous to suggest that people have sufficient insights to make such decisions”.

“I work in adult social care, so my priorities lie there. It is a difficult thing to do. But it is only for a year. My theory being that the areas that have taken a hit will then be balanced out”.

“Run a public competition to get ideas about other ways to raise funds. Any winning ideas which are implemented get the idea or a refund on council for X years, depending on savings made.

Appendix L

Offer bursaries to people to do up their house to enable an elderly relative to stay there. An investment in bribing people to look after their relatives in multi-generational house, and reduce the ASC bill”.

“As I said last year, it is appalling that you have to make so many cuts. I, and I hope many others, would be happy to pay more in council tax to fund the work you do. It's a shame the govt doesn't feel the country deserves much investment”.

“Adult social care and roads and transport spending seem to be the biggest areas of spending but should not take budgets away from other equally important services. Local Authorities need to work with central government/NHS to come up with genuine sustainable solutions to the Adult Social Care problem and send a clear message to this affect by cutting services. Local Authorities should not prioritise the vulnerable elderly at the expense of other vulnerable people such as the homeless, people suffering with mental health, SEN children, struggling families”.

Further information can be found at <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/budgetchallenge>