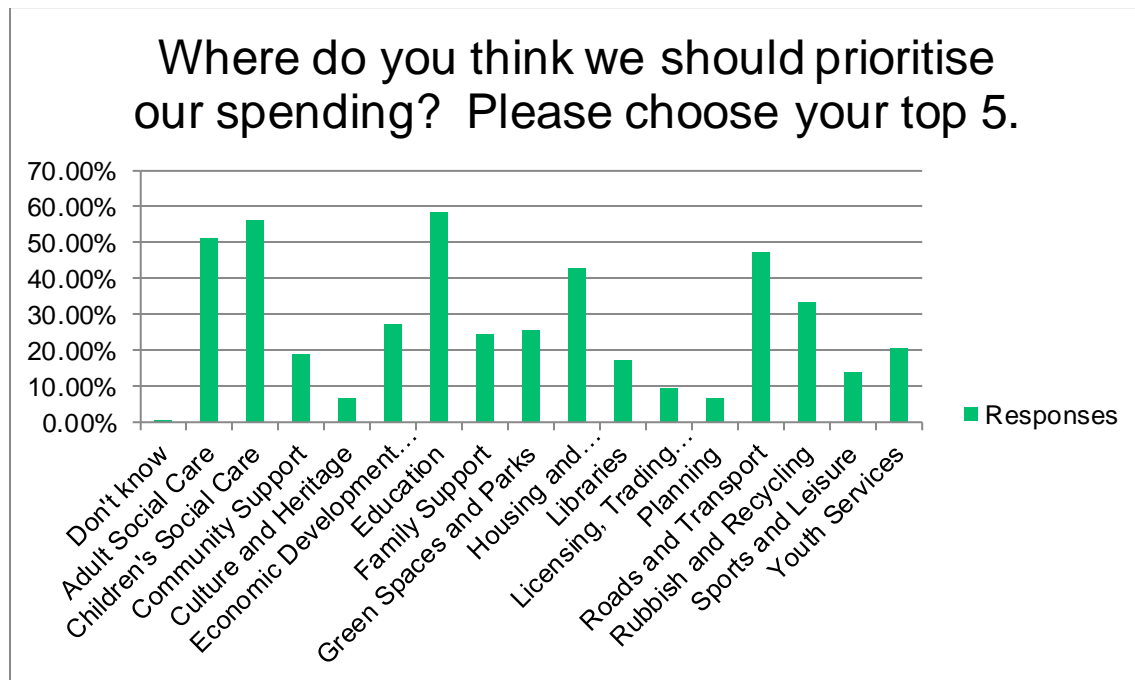


Summary of responses to the budget consultation

To engage residents and businesses in the budget setting process, the Council ran a budget consultation exercise between the 16th December and 19th January (<https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancingourbudget>). The response to the consultation was positive with 376 responses over the period.

The consultation asked a range of six questions with the responses provided in the below. The consultation also some freetext boxes as well and though have not been shared in full below due to the number of responses received, some of the comments have been included to demonstrate the feeling and commentary provided. The results have also been highlighted against the proposals from the Executive to Full Council for the budget to highlight where these align or not when Council members are making decisions on the budget.

1) Spending priorities – respondents were asked to rank the following areas to be their five highest – the summary is shown below:



The focus of investment priorities has a relatively strong alignment with the proposed budget. The largest areas of investment in the budget are in social care, education, highways and transport and housing, those five areas seeing 83% of the total investment and modelled growth in the budget proposals. The lowest area of priority was planning which does see some proposed investment for the delivery of the local plan as well as increased staffing (offset by increased fees).

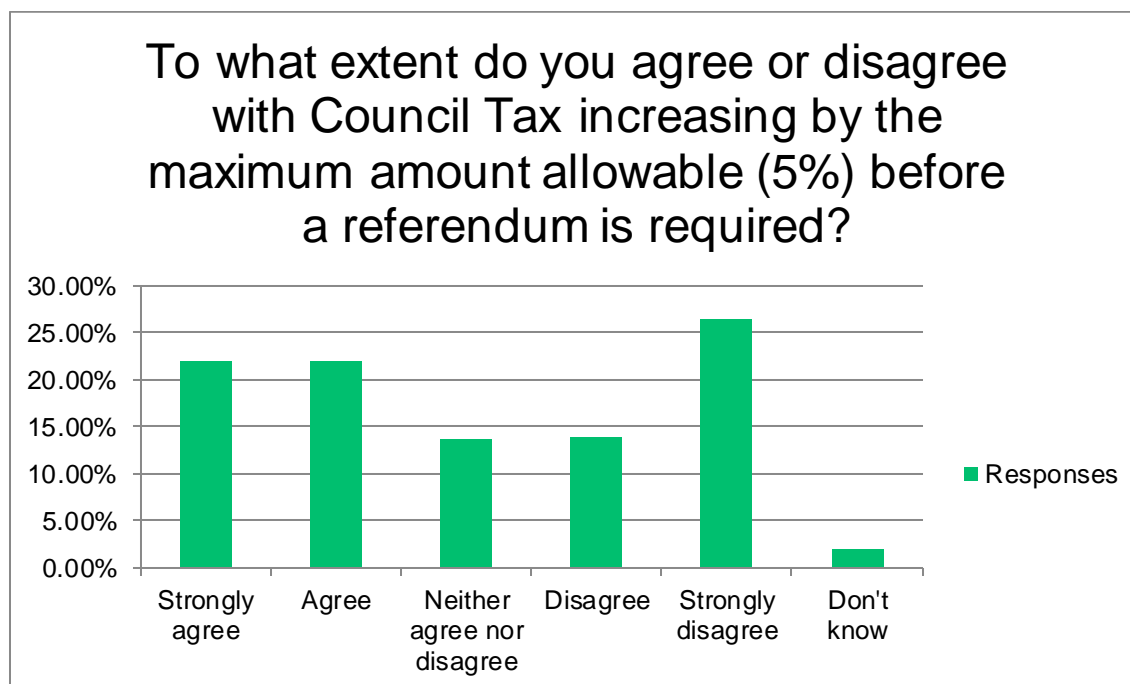
There was a reasonable gap between the top 5 areas and other areas of priority. The comments reflected some of this per the below

“Adult Social care must be top priority. Minimise Green issues and bureaucracy eg Environmental issues”

“All are priorities - but some are essential - eg social care but Areas such as libraries, green spaces etc are so important for people’s well-being”

“It is clearly difficult to choose only five areas and I have selected those we perhaps “should“ focus on. However from a personal perspective, our household values green spaces, sport and leisure and roads maintenance in order to do the things which make the current situation more tolerable”

2) Council Tax (within referendum levels)



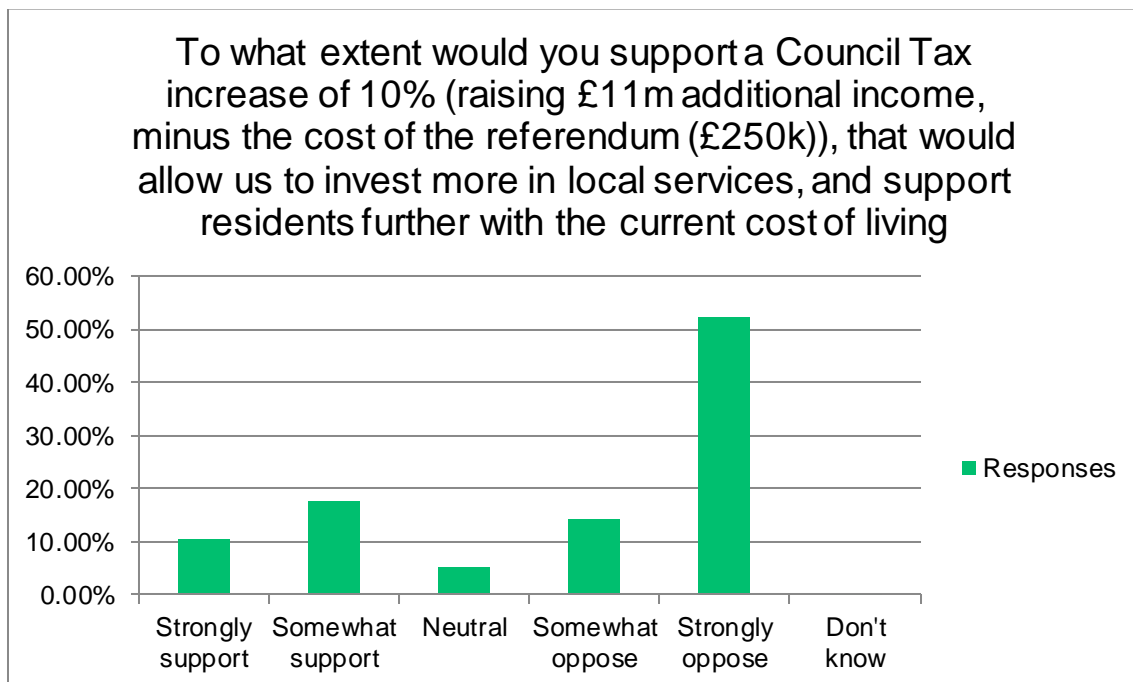
There has been a real split of views on Council Tax changes with 44% of people agreeing or strongly agreeing with a 5% rise and 41% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The proposal in the budget papers is for a 5% increase in Council Tax.

“At this time of strain for households increases should be avoided”

“5% is far less than current inflation and so this is necessary. Council tax is good value for money”

“This question is difficult. My answer does not explain the situation in as much as this will mean a ~£100 extra for a Band D resident and is probably fine for those who can afford it and terrible for those who can't. Most people will be unable to change their housing situation and any pay increases working people might have will already be more than absorbed by the cost of living. As there is no easy way to determine each person's current position unless they are on benefits, I am leaning towards a disagree”

3) Council Tax (potential for a referendum)



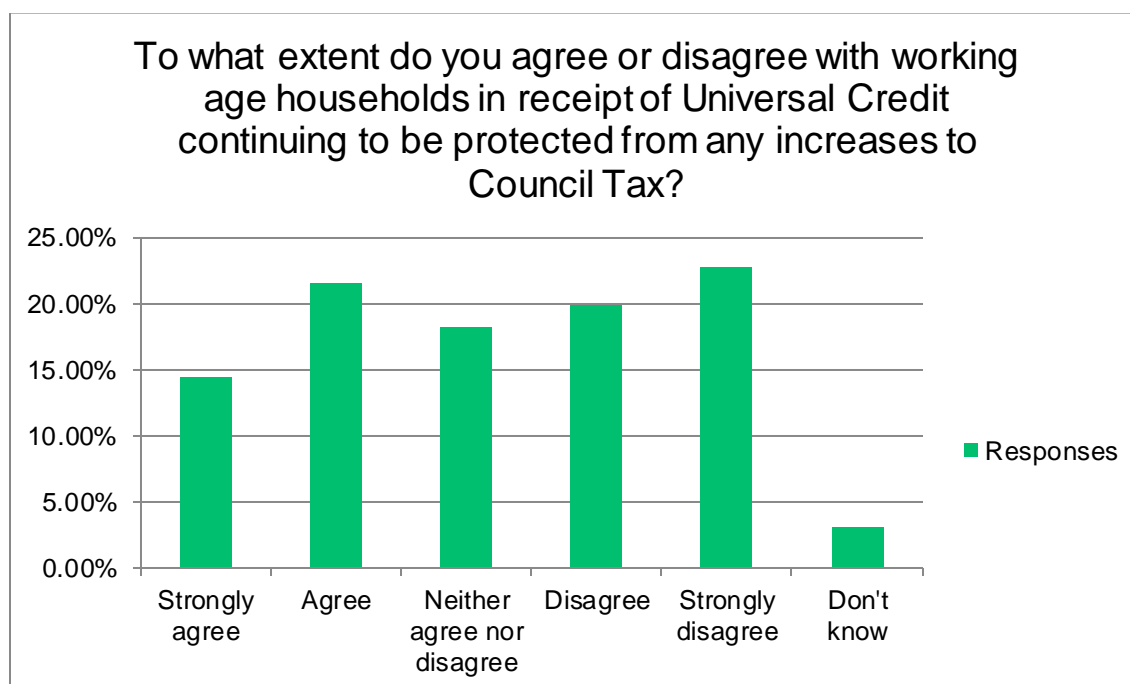
There is a clear disagreement in support of a Council Tax increase of 10% (as noted above the proposal in the budget papers is for an increase below the referendum trigger levels). The comments received on not going for a Council Tax rise of 10% were based around cost of living, Council finding more efficiencies and issues with Council Tax property bandings. There were some supportive comments, 28% of respondents did support the proposal, with some of these were proposing greater grading of Council Tax bandings.

“We have childcare costs going up to £8.55 an hour in the new year. This is to enable us to work full time. Raising council tax would not be helping me with current cost of living pressures”

“With the cost of everything else rising I believe the council should do everything they can to avoid adding to the pressures of local residents rather than increasing council tax by this amount “

“This should be graded against council tax bands. People in higher bands should pay more than people in lower bands.....”

4) Supporting working age households with Council Tax Support



This question elicited a higher disagree/strongly disagree comment as opposed to agree/disagree though there was quite a similar level of response across all areas. The proposal is for there to be a £150 additional support with Council Tax for those of working age in receipt of universal credit. Since the release of the consultation, the Government proposed for a £25 protection for *all* claimants of Council Tax Support.

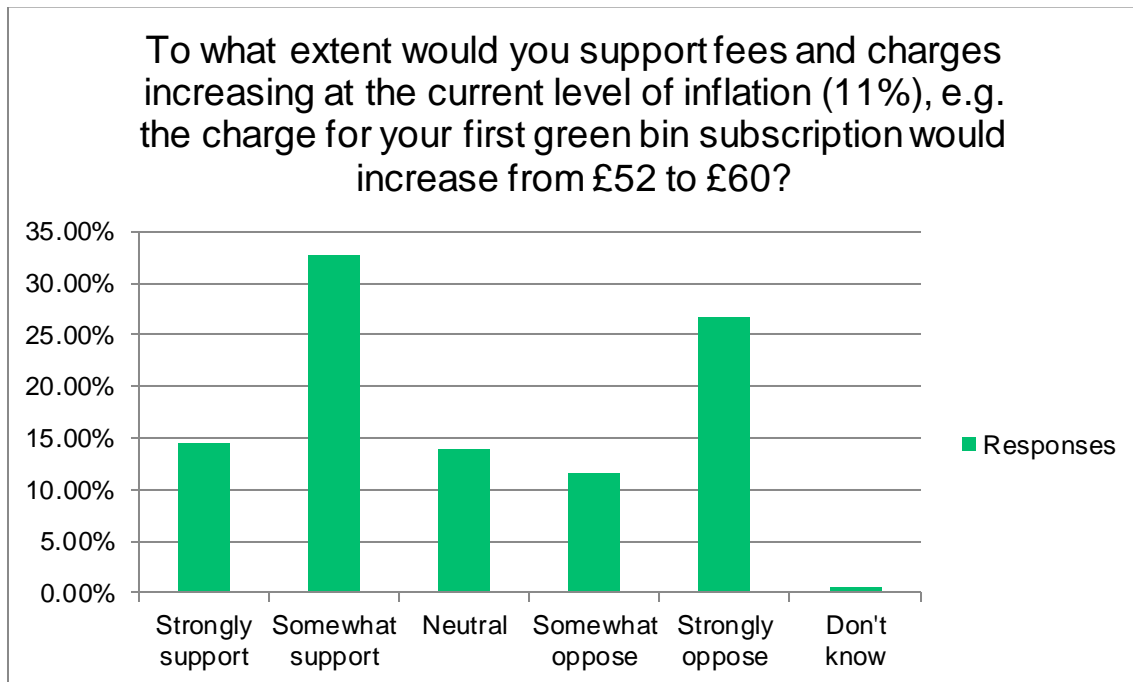
Some of the comments received were around ensuring all pay Council Tax (the Council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme ensures that those of working age are required to pay a minimum of 30% of their Council Tax bill) and that the cost of living is impacting everyone at present.

"Everyone needs to share burden"

"I would agree with partial support but everybody needs to feel that they are really contributing"

"At the moment it is the duty of those of us who can afford it to help those who can't. I hope eventually things will improve and this could change."

5) Increased charging for services



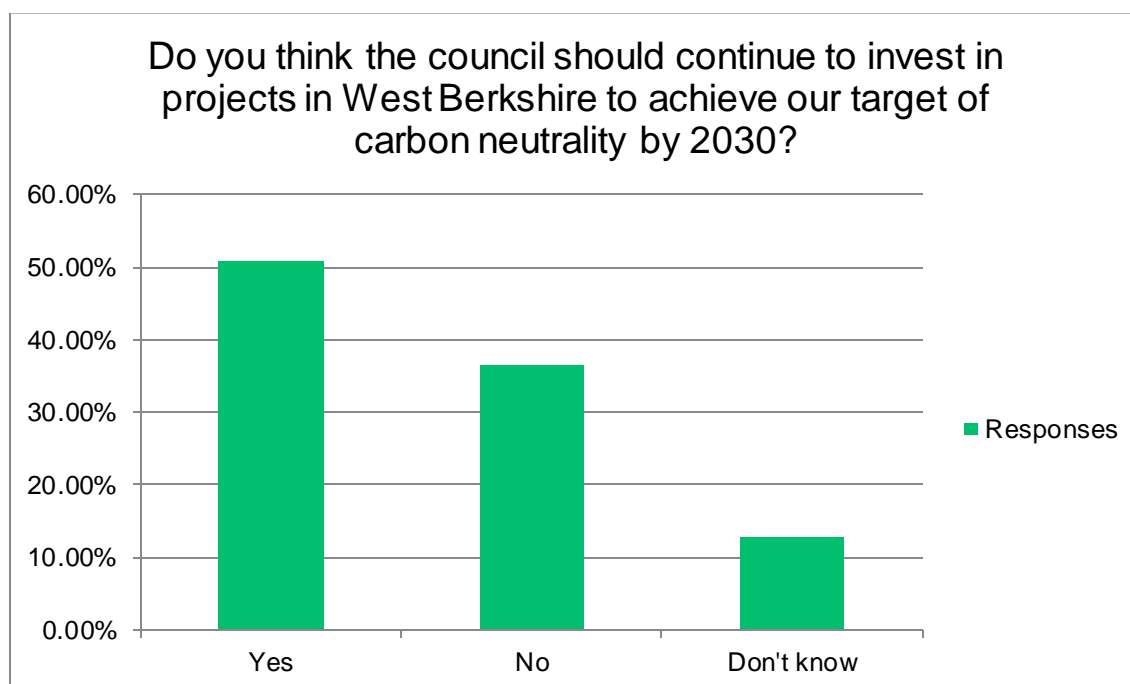
A preference supporting increasing fees and charges has been expressed (47%) though there was still a substantial minority (38%) in favour of not increasing them in line with current inflation (at the time). There were a range of comments, many focussed on concerns over fly-tipping rising and residents ceasing to pay for the garden waste service.

“For services which could be considered luxury such as garden waste, yes”

“Increase in costs is going to encourage flytipping of green waste”

“5-6% increase tops”

6) Investing in carbon neutrality



There was a preference expressed to continue investing, though a reasonable sized minority support stopping investment. This question elicited the second highest number of responses, with support from many and wanting more work on this and highlighting that climate change is increasing costs to the Council, but also many comments around West Berkshire being a relatively small place compared to the country as a whole / internationally, and support for this agenda but after the cost of living has fallen back down.

“Absolutely. This cannot and should not be dropped. It would be a short-termist and catastrophic action which would damage future residents of our area.”

“Carbon neutral projects can be complimentary to economic development and growth (and other priorities) if planned properly and therefore shouldn't be seen as an either / or situation”

“With the current budget problems the money spent here could be utilised elsewhere for a couple of years”

Business Representation

The Council is also required to consult with businesses. Of the overall responses, 29 (8%) were from business representatives within the district. Five of the top six areas of priorities were the same (with a different order) as the overall priorities, but there was a higher value placed on economic development and regeneration which was 2nd highest for business representation. In respect of Council Tax, there was quite a marked difference with the overall population with no overall support for Council Tax rises of 5% or 10%. There was no overall support for agreeing with the proposal on working age households in receipt of Universal credit receiving continued protection from increases to Council Tax. There was also lower levels of support for inflationary uplifts in fees and charges (with an overall majority not in support). In respect of investing in net zero, there was also much lower support than the overall responses, with a majority (56%) in support of not continuing to invest in projects to achieve carbon neutrality.

Some of the comments included:

“My business has to go through planning to open much needed new sites and it takes an incredibly long time, the process is tied up in red tape and is unnecessarily difficult as soon as we open we pay business rates and contribute back, if this process was quicker and smoother more business would be able to pay business rates quicker increasing the council income”.

“Please do more to support businesses struggling on the high street, especially with rateable values changing in April. Those who have done well to survive the pandemic and the beginning of the cost of living crisis will be penalised the most for their hard work. The high street is dire as it is and without help, particularly for small independent businesses, it’s going to get worse. These businesses are peoples entirely livelihood and the council should finally step up and support them. Without these businesses, West Berkshire is nothing”.

Representation of this consultation

The survey also asked some question of individuals concerning their age, ethnicity, gender, postcode. These are summarised in the below to show how the consultation responses compare against the wider population in West Berkshire:

Sex

Item	West Berkshire	Budget consultation
Female Residents	50.6%	54%
Male Residents	49.4%	45%

Age

Age range	West Berkshire %	Budget consultation %
Aged 24 years and under	28	2
Aged 25 to 34 years	11.3	8
Aged 35 to 64 years	41.2	67.1
Aged 65 to 74 years	10.6	16.2
Aged 75 years and over	9	6.6

Ethnicity

Ethnicity	West Berkshire %	Budget consultation %
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	3.7	1.7
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	1.3	0
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	2.4	0.3
White	91.9	95.9
Other ethnic group	0.7	2.1