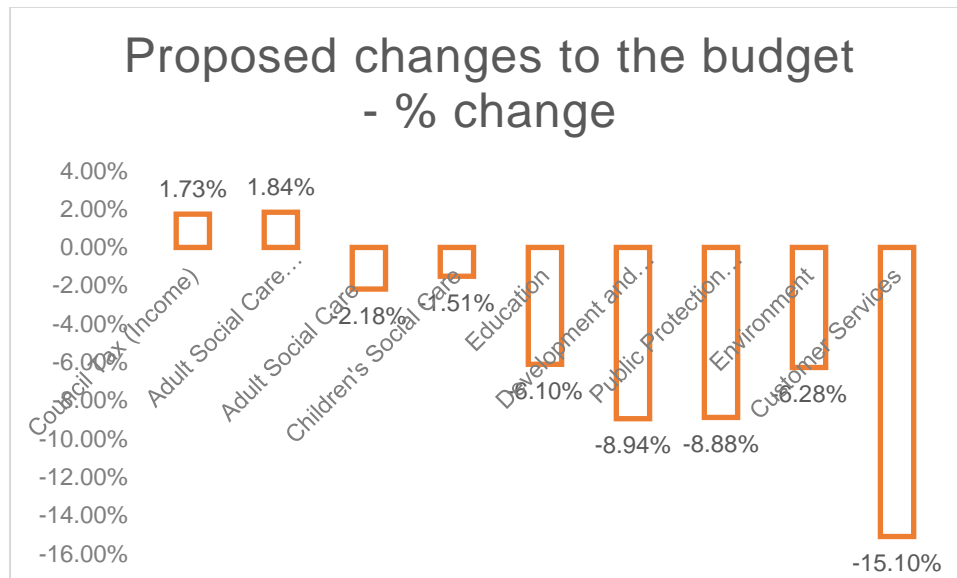


Appendix L – Summary of responses to the budget challenge

To further engage with residents, the council launched a budget challenge between 14 December 2020 and the 11 January 2021. 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.

200 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 3.57%, 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 -1.5%	Customer services -15.1%
Adult's social care -2.2%	Economic Development -11.4%
Highways and Transport -5.7%	Planning and Development -10.6%

There was also a question on investment options and specifically around three areas. There were comparatively low numbers choosing to invest: 8 for weekly food waste; 12 for leisure investment, and 19 for a solar farm. The reasons why this was comparatively low could be due to the difficulty of balancing the budget, highlighted up in the comments submitted, or just that these were deemed lower priority areas when compared with core council services.

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 / difference with the proposed budget include:

- Proposed Council Tax increase in the challenge of 3.6% vs the Council's proposal of 1.99%
- Relative protection for 'people' services is in line with the council's proposals
- A higher saving in customer services in the challenge, compared to the council's proposal to invest in this area, and enhance the digital and online offering to residents

The responses will be further analysed to consider how these views could be incorporated into budget setting in future financial years, as well taking into account demographics of individuals who responded, e.g. age and gender. Some of the individual comments from those who took part highlighted a range of issues for example:

"I would actually try to increase council tax by 3-4% so as to not cut services. Also charge more for recycling garden waste and for use of recycling centres and bulk / non domestic items."

"I would like the option to take some money from the capital reserves. Also to put a pay freeze in place for all council administrative staff or an increase in the individual's personal pension contributions. Pension commitments are a huge drain on council resources funded by council tax payers."

"This was incredibly difficult, and it is very hard to make decisions about where to take budget away!"

"Really fascinating process that highlights the difficult challenges. Unpleasant reality is that we have to accept paying higher local tax for the services. Thanks"

"Exceptionally difficult to balance - I fully support the full increases in council tax and social care taxes to maximise the budget available to the council and minimise wherever possible reductions in service, though this is inevitable without extra funding. Protecting adult and child social care is of paramount importance."

Further information can be found at

<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/37753/Council-offers-Budget-Challenge-to-residents>