

Budget Proposals 2024/25: Reduce funding for gully emptying and bridge maintenance

Consultation Summary Report

Why did we consult?

The council is facing unprecedented financial pressures. From historically high inflation increasing contract costs, to rising housing costs and through to large increases in cost and demand in supporting our most vulnerable residents with social care, the council has some major cost increases.

In 2024/25, we need to find £14.2 million in savings or income generation. This figure is based on the assumption that Council Tax increases by 4.99% overall in line with previous government referendum limits. We have identified £12.2 million worth of savings and income generation, of which approximately £1.75 million comes from proposals that require public consultation.

Through extensive internal discussions and meetings with our service providers, we've identified 10 proposals.

For more information please visit <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget>

Approach

We published all the public facing proposals on our website on 27 November 2023 with feedback requested by midnight on 11 January 2024.

Respondents were directed to a central index pageⁱ, which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals on our Consultation and Engagement Hubⁱⁱ.

Each individual page included further details on the specifics of what the proposal contained and what we thought the impact might be, along with any other elements we'd considered. Feedback was then invited through an online survey, and hard copies of the proposal documents and surveys were made available on request.

As well as publishing the consultations on our website, we also emailed members of the West Berkshire Community Panel (around 2,500 people), local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions. Service Directors contacted those organisations directly affected prior to them being made publicly available.

Finally, we issued a press release on 28 November 2023, and further publicised our consultations through our social media accounts and residents' e-newsletters. We also placed posters in our main offices and other council properties e.g. libraries and family hubs and made them available to WBC Councillors to put up in the wards/parishes.

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Proposal Background

Under the 1980 Highways Act, as Highway Authority we have a duty to maintain the local road network of 1,280 km.

To achieve this, we have a budget of approximately £3.6 million, covering activities such as street lighting, gully emptying, bridge maintenance, winter gritting and dealing with highway emergencies such as flooding, road traffic accidents, fallen trees and other storm or adverse weather damage.

The current budget for gully emptying and bridge maintenance is £384,050.

Gullies are emptied on a risk-based approach, informed by the type of road on which they are situated, the potential to impact 3rd party property and based on surveys undertaken over a number of years which identified those gullies that tend to fill more frequently than others. Based on this information, gullies have been placed on a 6 month, annual, 2 year or 4 year emptying programme.

We have 327 highway structures which require inspection every other year. Many of the structures require special access for inspections and require routine maintenance (drainage clearance, removal of foliage, minor repairs, pump servicing) as part of, or following the inspection process.

We have a team of officers and a Term Maintenance contract with Volker Highways Ltd in place to deliver the full range of highway maintenance services.

Legislation Requirements

Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980.

Proposal Details

To reduce the annual funding by:

Programme	Budget reduction (£)	% of budget
Bridge maintenance	£80,000	44%
Gully emptying	£50,000	25%
Total	£130,000	32%

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Consultation Response

Number of Responses

In total, 279 responses were received through the survey. We also received direct responses from Reading West & Mid Berkshire CLP and Newbury CLP, Thatcham Town Council, and Tilehurst and Basildon Parish Councils. We received no petitions.

Summary of Main Points

The focus of most comments was on gully emptying, the increased risk of flooding, and the impacts that is likely to have. These include damage to roads and properties, increased insurance claims, impacts on mental health and possible loss of life. Whilst there were fewer comments on bridge maintenance, it was noted that this would have to be managed carefully for safety reasons. The proposal to reduce gully emptying and bridge maintenance was considered most likely to increase future costs. Weather experienced this year has already demonstrated that drainage needs improving.

Over 96% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (84%) with the proposals for gully emptying, whereas it was 72% for bridge maintenance.

Summary of Responses by Question

1. Which of the following best describe you? Please select all that apply.

	Number	Percentage
A resident of West Berkshire	263	94.27
A visitor to West Berkshire	6	2.15
A West Berkshire business owner	11	3.94
Employed by a West Berkshire business	12	4.30
Employed by West Berkshire Council	6	2.15
A Parish/Town Councillor	15	5.38
A District Councillor	1	0.36
A partner organisation	1	0.36
A West Berkshire Council service provider	0	0
Other	13	4.66

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2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposals to reduce the annual funding for gully emptying and bridge maintenance?

i. Gully emptying (£50,000 / 25%)

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	0.74
Agree	5	1.86
Neither agree nor disagree	3	1.12
Disagree	33	12.27
Strongly disagree	226	84.01

ii. Bridge maintenance (£80,000 / 44%)

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	0.80
Agree	11	4.42
Neither agree nor disagree	55	22.09
Disagree	68	27.31
Strongly disagree	113	45.38

Most comments related to gully emptying and the adverse effects this will have on flooding of roads, homes and businesses, which is already seen by many as a real issue. It would negate the impacts of the flood alleviation schemes, lead to more potholes, and increase pollution of watercourses.

Reductions in both areas would be a false economy, as they would lead to increased costs in the short-term from flood damage, and the longer-term for maintenance and insurance claims. It was also noted that there could be significant consequences if a bridge collapsed due to poor maintenance.

3. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how these proposals might impact people? For example, do you think they will affect particular individuals more than others?

They will particularly impact people in areas that are prone to flooding. Flooded roads and footpaths could adversely impact cyclists and motorcyclists, those with less mobility or with small children, and those in rural areas where there are fewer alternative routes. Flooded property could cause significant damage

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and inconvenience. Flooding in general could cause isolation and impact mental health.

4. If the decision is taken to proceed with one of these proposals, do you have any suggestions for how we can reduce the impact on those affected? If so, please provide details.

Consider different gully designs. Maintain gully emptying where there is a risk of flooding, where most people would be adversely affected, and when storms are forecast. Allow residents to clear gullies, or parish councils to award private gully cleaning contracts. Ensure surface water road drains are cleared regularly. Provide a better response to public identification of blocked gullies. Increase road sweeper activity to remove leaves and debris.

Provide more flood defences and better drainage. Ensure land owners clear their ditches. Issue sandbags and install traffic lights where roads are likely to flood. Limit HGV movements and consider weight limits for heavier vehicles. Do not allow development in flood plains.

Better communication.

5. Do you have any suggestions on how we might save money or increase income, either in this service, or elsewhere in the council? If so, please provide details.

A few suggestions for savings were received. The saving could be taken for one year only. The contract could be renegotiated or brought back into the Council. The contractor could do a better job. Surface water road drains should be cleared regularly. Parish councils could contribute. Local farmers may be cheaper than contractor. For bridge maintenance, look at technological advancements and monitoring techniques.

General options for saving money: Reduce staffing costs (management, staff, agency staff, contractors, consultants, dealing with underperforming staff and sickness, freeze staff pay, administration). Reduce councillor expenses. Remove funding for fringe groups. Stop vanity projects (cycle lanes, Net Zero initiatives, pedestrian zones, speed limit reductions). Reduce costs in social care (including reviewing management). Reduce costs for environmental services (maintenance of verges and parks, bin collections, street lighting, grass cutting, HWRC hours). Other suggestions were to reduce office space, use IT more, reassess council house users, reduce spend on large budget items, think more about long-term finances, and to reduce the fund ward councillors have for local initiatives.

Options for income: Increase council tax. Adequate government funding. Introduce speed cameras. Increase charges for use of community spaces and halls. Ensure full occupancy of Council-run care homes. Keep the green bin

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subscription and increase with inflation. Charge for discretionary services. Allow more housing. Generate solar energy from roofs and above car parks.

6. **If you, your community group, or organisation think you might be able to help reduce the impact of these proposals, if the decision is taken to proceed with one of them, please provide your contact details below.**

40 individuals provided contact details.

7. **Any further comments?**

Many responses repeated earlier comments. It was pointed out that this year's weather has repeatedly demonstrated the inadequacy of roadside drainage. It was suggested that there is a need for better top level Government knowledge and aptitude for rural affairs, but that the Council should be making the case to the Government that funding needs to be improved. There should also be a wider debate about all areas of spend.

Officer conclusion and recommendation can be found in the associated Overview of Responses and Recommendations document.

Peter Walker
Service Lead – Highways & Transport Innovation
Environment Department
15 January 2024

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

ⁱ <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/consultations>