Budget Proposals 2024/25: Reduce weed spraying treatments

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 page[i], which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals on our Consultation and Engagement Hub[ii].

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.

Proposal Background

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West Berkshire Council currently undertakes two rounds of weed spraying along sections of the public highway throughout the district on an annual basis. The areas sprayed includes town centres, residential areas and roads with a kerb and selected rural roads. Our waste contractor, Veolia, is responsible for this service, which is usually provided by a sub-contractor.

Legislation Requirements

There are no legal requirements to spray and remove weeds.

Proposal Details

To reduce the weed spraying treatment from two applications per year to one application per year during the summer months. The council has recently enhanced our Climate Emergency declaration to include an Ecological Emergency. It is anticipated that reduced weed spraying can help improve local biodiversity and the abundance of wildlife.

The proposed change would also result in an annual saving of up to £20,000.

Consultation Response

Number of Responses

In total, 136 responses were received.

We also received 3 separate written responses from:

- Labour Party, Basildon Parish and Tilehurst Parish Council.

Summary of Main Points

The responses to this consultation were mainly positive with people highlighting the environmental and health benefits of reduced weed spraying along sections of the public highway. Concerns were raised over the impact on elderly and vulnerable residents if the weeds got too high. In addition, concerns were raised over the increase in spending that may be needed to repair the highway if the weeds started to cause damage. There was also support for more manual weed removal which could lead to the stopping of chemical weed sprays particularly glyphosate in the future.

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	126	92.65%

A visitor to West Berkshire	7	5.15%
A West Berkshire business owner	6	4.41%
Employed by a West Berkshire business	6	4.41%
Employed by West Berkshire Council	3	2.21%
A Parish/Town Councillor	8	5.88%
A District Councillor	0	0.00%
A partner organisation	0	0.00%
A West Berkshire Council service provider	1	0.74%
Other	6	4.41%

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce weed spraying treatment from two applications per year to one application per year during the summer months?

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	88	66.67%
Agree	17	12.88%
Neither agree nor disagree	3	2.27%
Disagree	8	6.06%
Strongly disagree	16	12.12%

The majority of comments in this section expressed support for the proposal to reduce weed spraying treatments from two applications per year to one application during the summer months, primarily citing biodiversity and environmental concerns related to the use of glyphosate along sections of the public highway in West Berkshire. Some respondents went further by suggesting that the district should refrain from spraying altogether, proposing alternatives such as physical removal of weeds or encouraging residents to manage their own areas. Consequently, they argued that the funds allocated for weed spraying could be more effectively utilised elsewhere in the Council.

However, there were dissenting opinions, with some expressing reservations about the proposal. Concerns included the potential for the district to appear unattractive, coupled with the perception that any cost savings from the reduced spraying would be overshadowed by increased expenses for road network repairs. A minority of respondents emphasised the need for two weed spray applications a year, citing current inadequacies in the application process. They highlighted potential negative impacts on anti-social behaviour, safety concerns for older individuals using walkways, and risks for drivers and pedestrians, as well as potential negative effects on those with pollen allergies.

A few comments suggested the necessity of implementing a proactive plan to prevent weed growth in the first place.

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?

The responses to this question indicated that the proposed changes would either have negligible impacts on people or minimal effects. While several respondents believed that the proposals wouldn't significantly affect individuals, concerns were raised regarding potential challenges for disabled and vulnerable individuals, as well as those with pushchairs. It was noted that if the weeds were to reach an exceptionally high or problematic level, it could hinder the mobility of these groups within the district.

Additional considerations included the potential impact on the overall aesthetics of West Berkshire, with concerns that an overgrowth of weeds could diminish its attractiveness. Furthermore, it was suggested that if weeds were allowed to grow too high, it might impede the visibility of drivers and pedestrians, posing potential safety hazards. Some respondents mentioned minor concerns, such as the impact on individuals with hay fever allergies and the possibility of increased road repairs due to weed damage.

On a positive note, respondents acknowledged the potential benefits of the proposals, anticipating positive impacts on wildlife, biodiversity, and air quality.

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

In response to the question, two primary suggestions emerged. First, a significant number of respondents expressed the view that the proposal would not have a negative impact. Alternatively, there was a prevalent suggestion to engage volunteers for the weed spraying activity as a means of reducing the impact on affected individuals.

Additionally, it was proposed that efforts should be made to communicate the benefits of using less weed killer to residents. Some minor suggestions included physically removing weeds, implementing weed spraying on request, or refraining from the activity altogether.

5. Do you see any benefits or opportunities that may arise from this proposed change? If so, please provide details.

Respondents' opinions clustered into a few main categories. The primary benefit identified by a majority was the potential for increased pollinators, wildlife, and wildflowers. This was often linked to the anticipated reduction in chemicals and pollution, emphasising the environmental advantages of the proposal.

Another significant category highlighted the cost savings associated with the proposed change. Additionally, some respondents saw an opportunity for community engagement, particularly if volunteers or residents took an active role in clearing their own communities. On the contrary, a segment of respondents expressed the belief that there would be no discernible benefits resulting from the proposed change.

6. Are there any areas of the district which you believe do not need to be sprayed at all? If so, please provide details.

The most prevalent response was a general sentiment that most or all of the district did not require spraying. The following two popular suggestions were that individuals should be allowed to handle the spraying themselves, and that the verges did not need to be treated.

Other specific areas identified as not needing spraying included area that we do not spray such as bases of trees, on kerbed rural areas, verges. Other area mentioned include areas deemed non-essential for highway safety, locations within 5 meters of water courses, roundabouts, the A4, areas where council members reside, areas near houses, conservation areas, zones adjacent to schools, high-traffic areas, spots near allotments, close to playgrounds, roadside nature reserves and East Garston.

7. 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.

We received a diverse range of proposals emerged from respondents. Here is a summarised overview of the suggestions:

Operational Efficiency:

- Reduce the use of consultants.
- Cut down on postage expenses.

Community Engagement:

- Increase community work or involve volunteers.

Service Adjustments:

- Abandon the 20mph rollout.
- Implement means testing for care homes.
- Reduce the use of weed spraying.
- Cap council salaries and bonuses.
- Reduce grass cutting.
- Reduce waste.

Financial Measures:

- Consider charging more council tax.
- Increase garden waste charges.

- Increase parking charges.
- Increase planning charges.
- Allow people to pay for parking with credit cards instead of an app.

Cost Control:

- Turn off lights outside Mortimer library.
- Cap council salaries and bonuses.
- Use the best value contractor.
- Reduce staff salaries or consider staff reorganization.
- Stop WBC employees from working from home.

Miscellaneous Suggestions:

- Eliminate unnecessary expenses labeled as "stop wasting money."
- Implement selective hedge cutting/grass cutting.
- Reduce the number of dog poo bins.
- Stop putting exercise machines in parks.
- Reevaluate and potentially halt green initiatives.

8. If you, your community group, or organisation think you might be able to help reduce the impact of this proposal, if the decision is taken to proceed with it, please provide your contact details below.

26 individuals or groups provided the contact details.

9. Any further comments?

The predominant sentiment expressed was in favour of the proposal. Additional comments included observations about the two quoted savings figures in the proposal and suggested actions such as bringing weed spraying in-house.

Other ideas put forth encompassed encouraging dog walkers to take their dog poo home, enhancing wildflower planting, fostering greater involvement from community groups, providing more advice on weed management, considering an increase in council tax for larger properties, and maintaining the green bin charge.

Overall, the majority of comments reiterated support for the proposal, while diverse suggestions were made to refine and enhance its implementation.

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

Daniel Warne
Waste Manager

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Environment
18/01/2024

***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.

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[i] https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget
[ii] https://www.westberks.gov.uk/consultations