

# Budget Proposals 2024/25: Close or find an alternative provider to run Willows Edge Care Home

## Consultation Summary Report

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### 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<sup>i</sup>, which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals on our Consultation and Engagement Hub<sup>ii</sup>.

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.

A meeting was held with residents' families and staff was held on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023

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

West Berkshire Council is currently developing its Care Home Strategy to ensure we can deliver value for money and meet the needs of our residents. We currently run three care homes for older people: Birchwood, Notrees and Willows Edge. We aim to provide a high standard of care with dedicated staff who we support to gain specialist knowledge.

- **Birchwood** is a large care home (60 beds) in Newbury that delivers both residential and nursing care and is around 13 years old; there are currently around 40 residents and 81.5 full time equivalent staff posts - a refurbishment of the home took place in 2023 and all rooms are en-suite
- **Notrees** is a small home (18 beds) in Kintbury that is over 40 years old; the residents have generally lower levels of need than those in Birchwood and Willows Edge - there are currently 13 residents and 19.4 full time equivalent staff posts; most bedrooms are equipped with en-suite toilets, and there are purpose-built bathrooms for safe and accessible bathing
- **Willows Edge** is a medium size home (37 beds) in Newbury that is over 50 years old - the care is focused on people with dementia; there are currently about 31 residents and 37 full time equivalent staff posts - none of the rooms are en-suite

Many local authorities do not operate their own care homes, due to the rising cost of maintaining older homes and the availability of lower cost, quality provision by private providers.

We have experienced challenges over the past few years in recruiting staff for our care homes which has resulted in the employment of a high number of agency staff, at a higher cost than directly employed staff. We have worked to reduce this reliance on agency staff, with numbers reducing substantially in recent months, but the cost of a council provided bed remains approximately 20% higher than one in the private sector.

The Adult Social Care Management team and the council's Executive has assessed our current provision as follows:

- **Birchwood** provides the type of care which we expect to be in high demand in the coming years - the building is relatively new, in a good location and has recently had dementia-friendly adaptations installed
- **Notrees** provides the type of care for which there is a reducing demand, but it is relatively low cost to run - a consultation was held on a potential closure in 2022 and the decision was taken at that time to continue operating the home

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- **Willows Edge** provides the type of care which is in high demand; however, it is being delivered in an older building which does not meet modern expectations, for example, most rooms are not en-suite - the maintenance requirements are also higher, due to the age of the building; alternative beds can be found at Birchwood and in private sector care homes in West Berkshire and neighbouring districts

## Legislation Requirements

As a local authority, we have a duty to arrange the provision of nursing and residential care for eligible people in our area under the Care Act (2014). This can be provided either through the independent/external care homes market or directly by the council.

We also have a duty to ensure that the care provided in West Berkshire is of good quality and meets the requirements of the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

## Proposal Details

To cease operating Willows Edge as a care home from 1 April 2024. There are two options:

- option 1 - to close the home and relocate residents to Birchwood, other private care homes in West Berkshire and, if required, care homes in neighbouring districts; the site would be available for other uses, for example, conversion to housing or being sold as a freehold for redevelopment, resulting in a capital income for the council
- option 2 - to source an alternative provider to continue to operate Willows Edge, with a cost of provision more aligned to that in the private sector; this could include an agreement on investment to improve the service and/or no investment from the provider to operate the business

For both options, we would expect to save between £250,000 and £500,000 per year, depending on occupancy and staffing ratios.

*\*Please note that Willows Edge Care Home is subject to another budget proposal about the restructuring of care home fees, alongside our other care homes.*

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### Consultation Response

#### Number of Responses

In total, 280 responses were received.

We also received 2 petitions signed by a total of 1852 people:

- An online one had 1786 signatures of which 722 (40%) had an 'RG' postcode
- A hand-collected one had 65 signatures of which all but one was 'local'

#### Summary of Main Points

Overall respondents are strongly against closing Willows Edge, with c80% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing and c15% agreeing/strongly agreeing. Of the 180 comments on Question 3 (What impact could this have), 103 (60%), raised concerns about the stress, distress and negative physical and mental health impacts on residents who would be moved. 24 (13%) commented negatively on the increased distance families would have to travel to alternative accommodation. Whilst a direct comparison cannot be made, this equals the number of service users who responded.

Opinion on option 2, seeking another provider is split, with 43% for the idea and 43% against. 7 respondents commented on this, of which 6 were positive and 1 negative.

Many of the comments from relatives of service users commented positively on the quality of care from the staff the attitude of the staff towards. A number of comments acknowledge that the facilities are old and not en-suite, but felt these issues were outweighed by the sense of community built up by residents and staff.

In terms of minimising impact, the most common response was to not go ahead with closure. 51 (33%) of comments stated that good communication and planning, involving residents, families and staff, would be key to reducing the impact of any change.

On the broader question of reducing costs and saving money, responses were diverse, with the most common being to reduce spending on non-core activities. Projects cited included several references to bike lanes. Other reductions suggested included cutting posts in the council and reducing/freezing high salaries.

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### Summary of Responses by Question

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

	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
A user of the service	25	8.93%
A resident of West Berkshire	209	74.64%
A visitor to West Berkshire	14	5.00%
A West Berkshire business owner	3	1.07%
Employed by a West Berkshire business	8	2.86%
Employed by West Berkshire Council	27	9.64%
A Parish/Town Councillor	6	2.14%
A District Councillor	2	0.71%
A partner organisation	1	0.36%
A West Berkshire Council service provider	3	1.07%
Other	27	9.64%

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### 2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following proposals?

#### *i. To close the Willows Edge care home and relocate residents*

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	19	7.6%
Agree	20	8.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	9	3.6%
Disagree	19	7.6%
Strongly disagree	183	73.2%

#### *ii. To source an alternative provider to continue to operate Willows Edge care home*

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	59	24.38%
Agree	46	19.01%
Neither agree nor disagree	33	13.64%
Disagree	30	12.4%
Strongly disagree	74	30.58%

### Summary

73.2% of respondents strongly disagreed with the proposal to close Willows Edge. The majority cited the disruption, stress and potential health impacts on residents, with some noting the stress on families of residents as well. This point was emphasised by respondents who have or had family members in Willows Edge. A significant number of comments, especially from families, commented on the commitment and quality of care from staff. Other topics raised included:

- Wider concerns about the availability of care home beds in the area if Willows closed, given the trend in aging populations
- Concerns over potential alternative uses for the site
- From staff members, challenging why we are proposing to close Willows given that it has a 'Good' rating compared to Birchwood's 'RI' and is cheaper to run
- Rather than closing, the home should receive investment to improve facilities

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For option 2, respondents were split 50/50 for agree/disagree. Comments focussed on this being a preferable option as it would reduce stress for residents and families and keep the staff in place. There were fewer comments on this point. Those who disagreed challenged why a private provider's cost would be lower and whether the quality could be maintained. Those who agreed were comfortable with the change.

### **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?**

181 answered

The responses mirrored those comments made for question 2 to a large extent. The dominant issue was concern over the negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing and mortality of residents if Willows Edge were closed. These points were particularly emphasised by residents' family members, who frequently cite that their relative was now settled and receiving good care. Concerns were also raised over distance to travel for visiting.

Keeping the home open and transferring to another provider received a more positive response, although concerns over maintaining care quality were raised and some challenged the view that this would save money. A few respondents noted that Birchwood is rated 'Requires Improvement' compared to the 'Good' rating at Willows Edge, which historically has had fewer issues.

### **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.**

153 answered

There was a wide variety of comments. 42 (27%) made comments to the effect that closure should not happen, again usually linking to the negative impact on residents, although some also identified the wider supply issues for beds. 51 (33%) commented that any change should be carefully planned with strong communication with residents and families. 15 (10%) felt that engaging a new provider would be positive, as long as there was good planning and communication. 5 (3%) commented on the need for further investment to improve the setting.

Several respondents referred to the need to ensure the impact on staff was mitigated and that they were treated fairly.

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### 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.

141 Responses were made

The suggestions were very diverse, but among the most common were:

- Reduce spending on less essential projects such as bike lanes, free buses, Christmas lights, new cafes, lower salaries for senior staff, reducing posts and agency staff
- Increase income through raising council tax, selling other assets, sponsorship, charitable fund raising, privatisation of care homes
- Promote volunteering more

### 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.

37 people responded with names and email addresses. No organisations were named and nearly all are personal email addresses. One response was from Hartford Care, who have expressed an interest in operating Willows Edge if option 2 is selected.

### 7. Any further comments?

83 people commented. The majority re-emphasised their opposition to closure because of the impact on residents, with several stating very positively about the quality of care. Several responses expressed over employment prospects for the staff. A few respondents recognised that difficult decisions needed to be made, but more questioned whether this cut was needed, when other local and national areas of expenditure seemed less necessary.

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

John Carpenter  
Market Management Lead  
Adult Social Care  
17/01/2024

**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>