

Budget consultation and engagement 2024/25

Key findings

Report by: Consultation and engagement team

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Contents	Page
1. Executive summary	3
2. Introduction	11
Main findings: phase 1	
3. Representative residents' survey	13
Main findings: phase 2	
4. Budget simulator	16
5. Budget proposals online feedback form and written correspondence	55
6. "Let's talk budget" sounding boards (young people)	58
7. "Let's talk budget" Oxfordshire conversations (adults)	65
8. "Let's talk budget" targeted focus groups (adults)	71

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Budget consultation and engagement is an important part of the democratic process. This year, our activities included two phases:
 - Phase 1: Representative residents' survey
 - Phase 2: Budget consultation and engagement using an online budget simulator, online feedback form and ten outreach and engagement events.
- 1.2 Oxfordshire County Council provides 80 per cent of local government services in Oxfordshire by expenditure. With new predicted pressures of £36 million in 2024/2025, we face significant financial challenges.
- 1.3 Following the government's confirmation of its financial settlement for local government on 18 December 2023, the council identified a £11.2 million funding gap for 2024/2025. This has grown from £9.1m as set previously in November 2023, due to fewer grant funds being available. As of late November, we had already identified £9.8 million of savings and this figure, alongside the £9.1m funding gap provided the context for our phase 2 budget consultation and engagement. The figures included in the simulator are those as known when the consultation launched and before the local government settlement. This includes the initial £9.1m funding gap not £11.2m.
- 1.4 Our phase 1 engagement comprised a representative residents' survey conducted between 23 May and 18 July 2023. It was a postal survey with an option to complete online, which was sent to representative selection of households across county. The postal survey was supplemented by 166 on-street interviews targeting younger adults aged 18 - 44 years.
- 1.5 Our phase 2 budget consultation and engagement activities, were open to all and specifically targeted Oxfordshire residents including children and young people and seldom heard adults. It was widely promoted across a range of channels including organic and paid for social media advertising (attracting many comments that were largely negative in their sentiment), e-newsletters, internal communications for council staff and councillors and targeted stakeholder communications.
- 1.6 Activity ran for approximately eight weeks as follows:
 - Online budget simulator tool open for six weeks between Wednesday 29 November 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024.
 - Online feedback form for comments on draft budget proposals open for six weeks between feedback Wednesday 29 November 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024.
 - Two in-person sounding board events with children and young people on Friday 17 November and Friday 24 November 2023.
 - Three online Oxfordshire conversations on Monday 4 December, Wednesday 6 December and Monday 11 December 2023.

- five in-person targeted events (and one follow-up session) with seldom heard adults between Tuesday 12 December 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024.

1.7 In all, 1,144 Oxfordshire residents aged 18+ responded to our representative residents' survey and over 1,500 individuals, groups and organisations participated in our phase 2 budget consultation and engagement in some form and specifically:

- 1,364 people submitted a budget using the simulator tool. They also provided 1,674 comments across all sections of the simulator
- 140 online feedback forms were submitted, in addition to 3 emails
- 88 secondary school aged children took part across our two in-person sounding board events
- 32 people took part across our three online Oxfordshire conversations
- 38 people participated across our five in-person targeted events (and one follow-up session) with seldom heard adults.

Key findings

Representative residents survey

- 62 per cent of respondents 'felt worse off' than they were the previous year.
- 26 per cent of respondents said they had 'sometimes struggled' to pay at least one of their household bills over the last 12 months, 11 per cent said they struggled 'most of the time' and 4 per cent said they struggled 'all of the time'.
- 31 per cent of respondents spontaneously suggested road surfaces in poor repair/dangerous/too many potholes as the most important issue that residents in their local area faced.
- Just under two in five (39 per cent) of respondents were satisfied with the services provided by the council, 30 per cent were neutral and 30 per cent of respondents were dissatisfied.
- Of all the council services tested, respondents were most dissatisfied with the maintenance of roads (net satisfaction rating of -62.5%), followed by the maintenance of pavements (net satisfaction rating of -45.7%)
- The services felt to be most important services for local people in the area were maintenance of roads (67%), fire and rescue service – emergency response (40%), and household waste and recycling (34%).
- Respondents were most receptive to the council acting on the following ideas as ways to make savings and generate income:
 - 'generating additional income by maximising the use of buildings and land the council owns (our assets)' (net agreement +83 per cent)
 - 'reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently' (net agreement +65%),

- They were not in favour of:
 - 'generate additional income by increasing council tax' (net agreement of -40 %)
 - 'reduce spending on frontline services' (-56% respectively).
- 34 % of respondents agreed the council should consider a 4.99 per cent increase
- 20% of respondents agreed the council should consider a 5.99 per cent increase
- 16% of respondents agreed the council should consider a 6.99 per cent increase

Budget simulator

- The budget simulator is a great example of the council using innovative digital tools to engage residents. It was specifically designed to give residents and stakeholders the opportunity to:
 - learn more about the services we provide and the financial challenges we face
 - have their say on where we should focus savings and spending, by adjusting core service budgets and council tax income, weighing up choices and making trade-offs
- The simple, gamification approach certainly engaged a wide range residents and for some it helped them to understand more about the council. "A useful and simple insight into your income and your burdens. May help public understand more and be more engaged with the council. Thank you." and "I have newfound appreciation for the work the council does, the scope of its duties and the decisions it makes."
- We received feedback from residents from across the county with spikes in response in the Oxford and Didcot and surrounding villages. This innovative approach to consultation was particularly successful at engaging younger adults (aged under 44 years) and people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, which have previously been underrepresented in our budget consultation exercises.
- Our starting budget was £612.5 million with a funding gap of £9.1 million. The simulator was not designed to especially close the funding gap exactly, rather to explore how people make choices when faced with difficult decisions (as the councillors need to). However, that said:
 - 9 people (0.7%) managed to close the £9.1million funding gap exactly
 - a further 928 people (68%) made budget reductions over and above the £9.1 million funding gap. This included people choosing to increase council tax to create additional expenditure budget.
- The service areas items which respondents most frequently selected for an increase in funding using the budget simulator were:
 - Highways maintenance (37%) * (to maintain service not to improve it)

- SEND (25%)
 - Education (23%)
 - Public health (20%)
 - Place, transport and infrastructure (19%)
 - Environment and climate action (18%)
 - Children's services, family help (16%)
 - Children's social care (15%)
- The service area items most frequently selected for a decrease in funding on the simulator as people sought to balance their budget were:
 - Running the business (55%)
 - Street lighting (45%)
 - Strategic planning (44%)
 - Environment and climate action (39%)
 - Museums and history services (38%)
 - Place, transport and infrastructure (35%)
 - Those service items most likely to be selected to remain at 0 (no change either positive or negative and for these items it would main the service at the current level) were:
 - Fire and rescue (79%)
 - Children's social care (74%)
 - Waste disposal (72%)
 - Community safety (73%)
 - The overall impact of people's budget choices is shown as average budget percentage changes. These are presented for each service item and ranged from 1% to -3.57%.

Service group	Service item	Average budget change as%
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	1.00%
Education and learning	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	0.61%
Education and learning	Education	0.56%
Children's and family services	Children's social care	0.14%
Community safety	Community safety	-0.16%
Fire and rescue	Fire and rescue	-0.24%
Public health	Public health	-0.37%
Planning, environment and climate change	Waste disposal	-0.38%
Children's and family services	Family help	-0.41%
Adult social care	Age well	-0.68%
Adult social care	Adult social work	-1.01%
Adult social care	Live well	-1.09%
Education and learning	Home to school transport	-1.21%
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	-1.32%

Libraries, museums and history services	Libraries	-1.35%
Planning, environment and climate change	Environment and climate action	-1.99%
Libraries, museums and history services	Museums and history services	-2.03%
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	-2.49%
Highways operations	Street lighting	-2.49%
Running the business	Running the business	-3.57%

- Four service items, (highlighted in red) have a positive average budget percentage change:
 - Highways maintenance (1%)
 - Special education needs and disabilities (0.61%)
 - Education (0.56%)
 - Children’s social care (0.14%).
- The four service items, which on average, had the greatest negative percentage changes of between -1.99% to -3.57% (highlighted in green) were:
 - Back-office support services (running the business) (-3.57%)
 - Street lighting (-2.49%)
 - Strategic planning (-2.49%)
 - Museums and history services (-2.03%)
 - Environment and climate action (-1.99%).
- Overall, 741 people chose to increase council tax as part of their citizens’ budget, on top of the 4.99% already proposed in the council’s medium term financial plan.
 - On average, the budget simulator shows that people were willing to increase council tax by 0.84 per cent. To enact this, a referendum would be required.
 - 343 people (25%) chose to increase council tax by an additional one per cent (to 5.99%)
 - 398 people (29 %) chose to increase council tax by an additional one per cent (to 6.99%).

Online feedback form

- While we expressly invited people to give feedback on our published budget proposals, nearly all respondents used this opportunity to give general feedback on council services, spending and budget matters with many sharing their views on a range of matters.
- Highways and transport were the two primary themes, accounting for 69 per cent of all comments. For highways, people felt Oxfordshire roads were in poor condition and complained about the volume of potholes (16 comments). A smaller proportion felt that street cleansing and footpath, cycle path and verge maintenance should be improved (9 comments).

- In terms of transport schemes, active travel initiatives (22 comments), 20mph zones (14 comments), ZEZs (4 comments) and workplace parking levy (6 comments) all came under criticism, with most people who commented considering these to be ‘a waste of money’ and ‘politically driven’ projects. One stakeholder, (CoHSAT - Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel), wrote to the council in support of a range of active travel schemes.
- Support for funding for proposed rail projects (Witney & Grove specifically) featured in four per cent of all responses (4 comments) and we also received two letters of support (of very similar content); one from Railfuture and the other from a member of the public.
- 16 per cent of responses (16 comments) focussed on council tax. Specifically, respondents shared that they would be willing to support an increase in council tax to pay for services (8 comments) and/or that they feel there is a need to reform council tax bands (3 comments).

Qualitative discussions with different audiences

- Our discussions with adults at the Oxfordshire Conversations and at the targeted focus groups; and with young people, focussed on some similar questions:
 - What services matter to you most? (all)
 - Which services do you think we should protect? (conversations and focus groups only)
 - Which services do you think we could reduce? (conversations and focus groups only)
- The discussions at the Oxfordshire Conversations were spontaneous for all, while the focus groups and sounding boards used prompt cards for people to use in their deliberations about which services matter most.

Which services are the most important/matter most?

Oxfordshire Conversations (spontaneous, no limit)	Adult focus groups (card prompts from a list of 20 services, limit of four choices)	Young people’s sounding boards (card prompts from a list of 20 services, limit of four choices)
Social care	Children’s social care (voted for by seven of the 11 sub-groups)	Secondary education (voted for by 10 tables)
Public health, NHS health checks	Support/care for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, and/or mental health problems, general frailty (voted for by seven of the 11 sub-groups)	Fire and rescue service – emergency response (voted for by 9 tables)

Highways maintenance	Fire and rescue service - emergency response (999) (voted for by seven of the 11 sub-groups)	Public health (voted for by 8 tables)
Traffic management	Support/care for older people (voted for by five of the 11 sub-groups)	Children's social care Primary education Support/care for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, and/or mental health problems, general frailty (voted for by 7 tables)
Fix my street		

Which services do you think we could protect?

- **Oxfordshire conversations:** participants didn't focus on individual services, rather that the vulnerable in society should be protected, carers are important and that early intervention is important to prevent problems downstream.
- **Adult focus groups:** a wide range of services were listed, but education and support for older people were recurrent themes, spontaneously mentioned by 3 of the 5 groups.

Which services do you think we could reduce?

- **Oxfordshire Conversations:** It was deemed very difficult to identify services to cut or stop. Participants gave examples of how to reduce costs for example, through the use of digital technology, minimising out of county children's placements, turning off streetlights, reducing reliance on agency staff and consultants.
- **Adult focus groups:** a range of services were suggested, but there was no commonality across the groups. There was discussion about reducing costs by making efficiencies, looking inward and doing things differently. Practical suggestions included turning off streetlights and considering innovations by using digital technology.

Should we increase council tax?

- **Oxfordshire conversations:** more receptive to council tax increases as a way to generate income to prevent cuts, but felt the they council more generally needed more freedom to raise income in different ways such as through fees and charges.
- **Adult focus groups:** Overwhelmingly it was felt that council tax should not increase. However, some felt, that if people could afford it, they should pay. It was

also suggested in two groups that council tax bands need to be reconsidered as they are out of date and unfair.

How else can we make savings?

- Young people at the sounding boards, also provided feedback on different approaches to making savings and generating income (adapted from the residents' survey). They were most receptive to the council acting on the following ideas as ways to make savings and generate income:
 - 'reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently' (chosen by 74 young people)
 - Negotiating with organisations who provide services to make sure we get the best value from the contracts we have (chosen by 64 young people)
- They were not in favour of:
 - Spending less on staff such as: redesigning services so we need fewer people to deliver them, not filling jobs when people leave, and using fewer agency staff to fill gaps (68 young people disagreed)
 - Increasing how much households have to pay in council tax (71 young people disagreed)
 - Using council savings (our financial reserves) ... but once our savings have gone, they've gone forever (78 young people disagreed)

Which of the council's strategic priorities are most important?

- Creating opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential, and prioritising the health and wellbeing of residents were chosen by young people at the sounding boards as their top two council strategic priorities.

Next steps

- 1.12 Feedback from our 2024/2025 budget consultation and engagement programme will be reported to cabinet on 30 January 2024 and to Council on 20 February 2024. The budget, including the council tax level, will be decided at a meeting with all county councillors on 20 February 2024.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Budget consultation and engagement is an important part of the democratic process. This year, our activities included two phases:
- Phase 1: Representative residents' survey
 - Phase 2: Budget consultation and engagement using an online budget simulator, online feedback form and ten outreach and engagement events.
- 2.2 Oxfordshire County Council provides 80 per cent of local government services in Oxfordshire by expenditure. With new predicted pressures of £36 million in 2024/2025, we face significant financial challenges.
- 2.3 Following the government's confirmation of its financial settlement for local government on 18 December 2023, the council identified a £11.2 million funding gap for 2024/2025. This has grown from £9.1m as set previously in November 2023, due to fewer grant funds being available. As of late November, we had already identified £9.8 million of savings and this figure, alongside the £9.1m funding gap provided the context for our phase 2 budget consultation and engagement. The figures included in the simulator are those as known when the consultation launched and before the local government settlement. This includes the initial £9.1m funding gap not £11.2m.
- 2.4 This year, we undertook a two-phase approach to consultation and engagement to inform 2024/2025 budget and business planning:
- phase 1: representative residents' survey
 - phase 2: budget consultation and engagement using an online budget simulator, online feedback form and ten outreach and engagement events
- 2.5 The aims of our activities were to:
- Involve, inform and engage residents, businesses, staff and partners about the financial pressures facing the council and underline our ongoing commitment to delivering against our strategic priorities.
 - Enable the council to develop a clear understanding of what is important to local people, their priorities and the challenges facing their communities and to feed that insight into budget and business planning.
 - Increase understanding of how the council works, the range of services it delivers and what council tax is spent on.
- 2.6 Our phase 1 engagement comprised a representative residents' survey conducted between 23 May and 18 July 2023. It was a postal survey with an option to complete online, which was sent to a representative selection of households across county. The postal survey was supplemented by 166 on-street interviews targeting younger adults aged 18 - 44 years.
- 2.7 Our phase 2 budget consultation and engagement activities, were open to all and specifically targeted Oxfordshire residents including children and young

people and seldom heard adults. It was widely promoted across a range of channels including organic and paid for social media advertising, e-newsletters, internal communications for council staff and councillors and targeted stakeholder communications.

2.8 Activity ran for an eight-week period as follows:

- Online budget simulator tool open for six weeks between Wednesday 29 November 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024.
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- Five in-person targeted events (and one follow-up session) with seldom heard adults between Tuesday 12 December 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024.

2.9 In all, 1,144 Oxfordshire residents aged 18+ responded to our representative residents' survey and over 1,500 individuals, groups and organisations participated in our phase 2 budget consultation and engagement in some form and specifically:

- 1,364 people submitted a budget using the simulator tool. They also provided 1,674 comments across all sections of the simulator
- 140 online feedback forms were submitted, in addition to 3 emails
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- 38 people participated across our five in-person targeted events (and one follow-up session) with seldom heard adults.

This report

2.10 This report brings together the key findings from our phase 1 and phase 2 budget consultation and engagement activities. Separate reports on the 2023 residents' survey, 2023 let's talk budget Oxfordshire conversations and 2023 let's talk budget sounding boards are also published on [Let's talk Oxfordshire](#).

2.11 The executive summary from this document will be reported to cabinet on 30 January 2024 and to Council on 20 February 2024. The budget, including the council tax level, will be decided at a meeting with all county councillors on 20 February 2024.

3. Phase 1: representative residents survey

Introduction and methodology

- 3.1 Oxfordshire County Council's representative residents' satisfaction survey took place between 23 May and 18 July 2023. Its aim is to gauge residents' satisfaction with the council, its services and their local area, and collect opinions on council priorities and budget decisions
- 3.2 It was a postal survey with an option to complete online, which was sent to representative selection of households across county. The postal survey was also supplemented by on-street interviews targeting younger adults.
- 3.3 In total 1,144 residents aged 18+ took part, delivering statistically representative results to +/- 3 per cent at the 95 per cent level of confidence at a county level. All the survey data has been 'weighted' by local authority area, age and gender in order to be reflective of Oxfordshire's population aged 18+ from the 2021 census profile.

Key findings

Personal financial circumstances

- 3.4 Overall, 32 per cent of respondents felt their personal financial situation was 'about the same' compared to a year ago, 4 per cent 'felt better off' and 62 per cent 'felt worse off'. In terms of being able to manage their household bills, 26 per cent of respondents said they had 'sometimes struggled' to pay at least one of their household bills over the last 12 months, 11 per cent said they struggled 'most of the time' and 4 per cent said they struggled 'all of the time'.

Most important issues facing residents, their local area as a place and the people who live in it

- 3.5 When respondents were asked to state in their own words what they felt the most important issues were facing them, their local area as a place and the people who live in it, by far the most recurrent theme was the state of the county's roads: 'road surfaces in poor repair/dangerous', 'too many potholes', 'poor quality of repairs' mentioned spontaneously by 31 per cent of respondents.

Council services

- 3.6 Across 20 different council services, the degree of residents' satisfaction varied widely, as did the proportion of respondents able to rate each service at all given the lack of experience of using or receiving each service. Taking out the "Don't know" responses to give the clearest view of the results for each service, ratings varied from 72% satisfied and net satisfaction of +66% for **libraries**, to only 13% satisfied and -63% net satisfaction for **maintenance of roads** (the latter was also the lowest-rated service in 2022, but with slightly less poor ratings then). The tables below summarise the key figures for each

service:

- 3.7 Only two of the services showed significantly increased net satisfaction compared with 2022; **libraries** (+9% compared with 2022), and the **museums and history service** (+7%). Almost all of the others had shown a significant decline in net satisfaction.

2023 Satisfaction Ratings of Services <i>(base totals shown after each service)</i>	% dissatisfied	% satisfied	Net % Score
Libraries (750)	6%	72%	+65.8%
Museums and history service (632)	4%	68%	+63.7%
Fire and rescue service - emergency response (651)	9%	60%	+50.7%
Household waste and recycling centres (tips) (1,039)	18%	66%	+48.1%
Fire and rescue service - public safety and road safety advice and support (653)	12%	52%	+40.6%
Registration of births and deaths, and ceremonies including marriages and citizenship (442)	11%	46%	+34.8%
Primary education (5 -11 years) (403)	18%	51%	+32.7%
Countryside services (e.g., rights of way) (865)	21%	50%	+28.5%
Secondary education (over 11 years) (396)	21%	43%	+21.5%
Early years education (birth to 4 years) (344)	21%	42%	+20.3%
Public health (helping people to stay healthy and protecting them from health risk) (713)	26%	34%	+7.8%
Trading standards (491)	21%	28%	+6.7%
Children's social care (protecting and supporting vulnerable children and families) (366)	27%	29%	+1.5%
Support/care for older people (aged over 65) (535)	34%	30%	-4.1%
Support/care for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, and/or mental health problems, general frailty (512)	38%	27%	-10.8%
Parking (enforcement, controlled parking zones, on-street parking) (944)	46%	25%	-20.9%
Managing the road network (e.g., traffic lights, speed limits, traffic and transport) (1,059)	57%	28%	-28.5%
Road and transport schemes (e.g., new or improved junctions, bus lanes, cycle lanes etc.) (1,009)	54%	24%	-29.9%
Maintenance of pavements (1,085)	64%	18%	-45.7%
Maintenance of roads (1,091)	75%	13%	-62.5%

- 3.8 The services felt to be most important for local people in the area were **maintenance of roads** (67%), **fire and rescue service – emergency response** (40%), and **household waste and recycling** (34%). These are the same top three as in the 2022 survey, with maintenance of roads the only one of the three to be selected by significantly more respondents than had done so in 2022.

Approaches to budget management

- 3.10 Focusing specifically on the county council's budget, respondents were most receptive to the council acting on the following ideas as ways to make savings and generate income: 'generating additional income by maximising the use of buildings and land the council owns (our assets)' (net agreement +83 per cent), 'reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently' (net agreement +65 per cent), 'reducing the costs of the contracts we use to provide services (net agreement +55 per cent) and reducing staffing costs by redesigning 'using fewer agency staff and/or holding vacancies' (net agreement +47 per cent).
- 3.11 By far the least popular of the nine ideas for how the council could make savings and generate income presented were: 'generate additional income by increasing council tax' and 'reduce spending on frontline services' (net agreement of –40 per cent and –56 per cent respectively).

Council tax

- 3.12 With regards to council tax levels, 34 per cent of respondents agreed the council should consider a 4.99 per cent increase and 39 per cent disagreed. A majority of respondents disagreed that the council should consider a 5.99 per cent increase and 6.99 per cent increase (52 per cent and 60 per cent respectively). Overall, 20 per cent of respondents were willing to agree that the council should consider a 5.99 per cent increase and 16 per cent a 6.99 per increase – both slightly higher proportions than in 2022 (17 per cent and 12 per cent respectively).

4. Budget simulator

Introduction and methodology

- 4.1 Between Wednesday 29 November 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024 we ran an interactive tool, encouraging residents and stakeholders to take on the role of councillors and create a balanced budget for 2024/25.
- 4.2 The budget simulator was specifically designed to give residents and stakeholders the opportunity to:
- learn more about the services we provide and the financial challenges we face
 - have their say on where we should focus savings and spending, by adjusting core service budgets and council tax income, weighing up choices and making trade-offs
- 4.3 Using the simulator, residents and stakeholders were prompted to think about:
- What services matter to you most?
 - Which services do you think we should protect?
 - Which services do you think we could reduce?
 - Would you raise council tax?
- 4.4 The budget simulator was promoted as our primary phase 2 consultation tool. It was advertised to a wide range of audiences using a range of channels, this included organic and paid for social media advertising (attracting many comments that were largely negative in their sentiment), eNewsletters, internal communications for council staff and councillors and targeted stakeholder communications. It was also cross promoted to people who engaged with our Oxfordshire conversations, sounding boards and targeted focus group events.
- 4.5 Figures show that the Let's talk Oxfordshire page created to promote the budget simulator and the online form had over 7,100 unique page views. Around a fifth (19 per cent) of those viewing the page went on to submit a budget, this does not include those people who chose to take a look at the simulator but did not progress to submit a budget. The simple, gamification approach certainly engaged a wide range residents and for some it helped them to understand more about the council *"A useful and simple insight into your income and your burdens. May help public understand more and be more engaged with the council. Thank you"* and *"I have newfound appreciation for the work the council does, the scope of its duties and the decisions it makes."*

Respondent profile

- 4.6 In all 1,364 people submitted a budget using the simulator. Whilst a sizeable proportion of people chose not to provide their demographic details, for those we do have information for, overall:
- More people who identified as men (62%) responded than women (38%), Oxfordshire's population is more evenly balanced.

- There was a good spread of ages, with the exception of young people and young adults aged (aged 16-24 years). This is more balanced against the county's population than for previous budget years' budget consultations.
- Budget simulator respondents were more likely to identify their ethnic group as 'white' (93%), a slight overrepresentation compared to Oxfordshire's population.
- One in five respondents (20%) stated that they had long-term illness or disability, which impacted them either a little or a lot, again a slight overrepresentation (14%) compared to Oxfordshire's population.
- 51 people (4%) said they worked for Oxfordshire County Council.
- People from across Oxfordshire responded to the simulator, with significant spikes in response in OX2 (82) and OX4 (84) in Oxford city, OX11 (80) in Didcot and surrounding areas.

4.7 The map below shows the distribution of responses geographically and the following table, the respondent profile, against Oxfordshire's population.

Map 1: Geographical distribution of responses

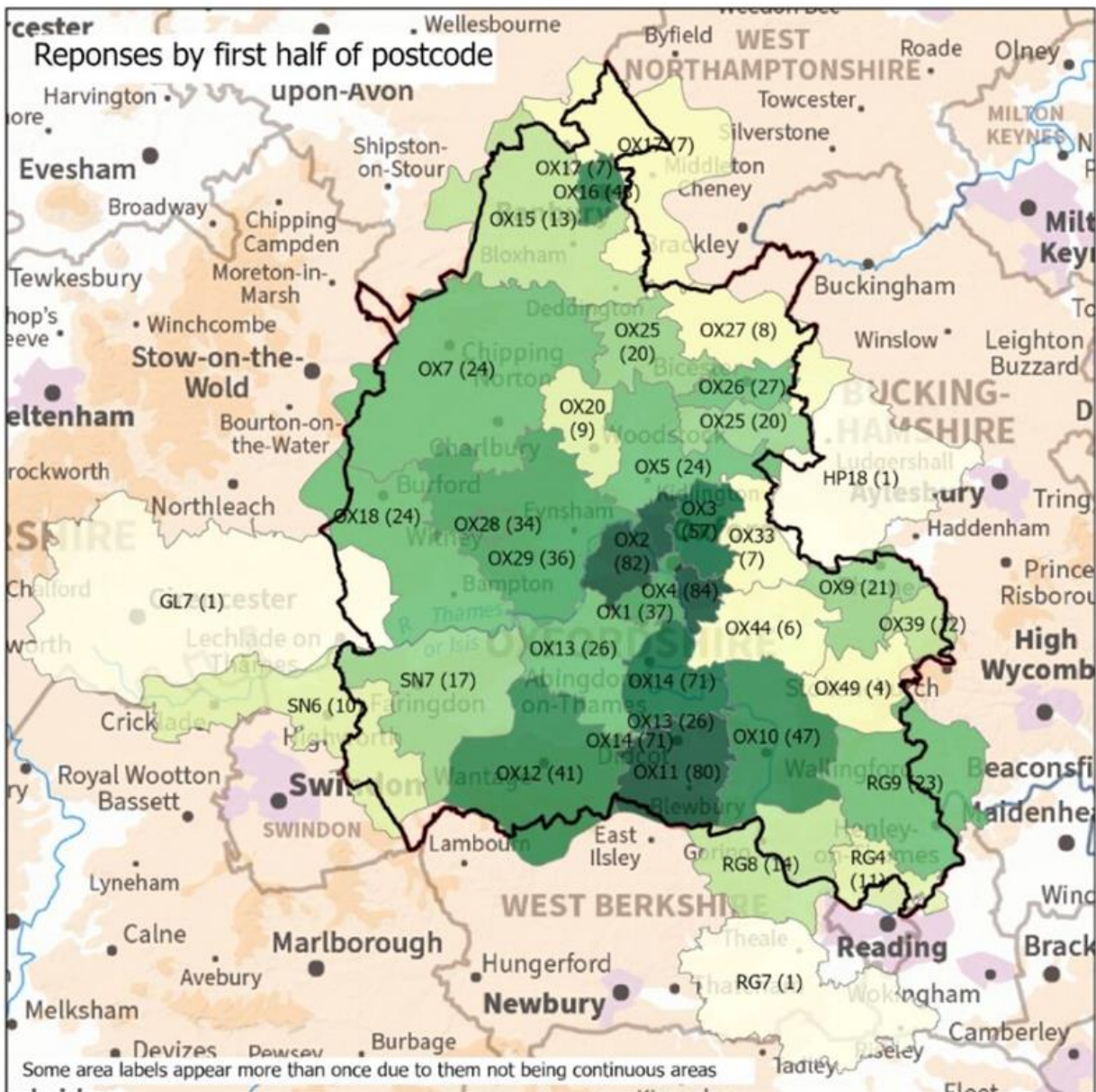



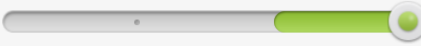

Table 1: Respondent profile

	Number of budget simulator respondents	% of response budget simulator respondents	Actual % in Oxfordshire's population
Age band			
Under 16	1	0%	18%
16 - 24	46	4%	12%
25 - 34	154	14%	14%
35 - 44	215	20%	13%
45 - 54	205	19%	13%
55 - 64	205	19%	12%
65 - 74	178	16%	9%
75 - 84	88	8%	6%
85 or over	10	1%	3%
Prefer not to say	40		
Not answered	222		
Sex			
Female	390	38%	51%
Male	634	62%	49%
I use another term	8		
Prefer not to say	102		
Not answered	230		
Ethnic group			
Asian or Asian British	18	2%	5%
Black or Black British	8	1%	2%
Chinese	4	0%	1%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	27	3%	3%
White	912	93%	87%
Other ethnic group or background	15	2%	2%
Prefer not to say	122		
Long term illness or disability			
Yes - a lot	52	5%	5%
Yes - a little	157	15%	9%
No	835	80%	85%
Prefer not to say	75		
Not answered	245		

Key findings

- 4.8 The budget simulator organised core council services under 12 service groups and gave people 20 service items (sliders), on which to make choices and a further slider to consider an increase in council tax for 2024/2025.
- 4.9 Each of the service items sliders provided information and aimed to give people a broad understanding of what each service area does and the 'consequences' of reducing, maintaining or increasing spending. The sliders were not, however, designed to set out actual savings proposals or pressures.
- 4.10 The financial figures used in the simulator were based on the forecast budget for 2024/2025 at the time of its launch, taking account of pressures and proposed savings and were indicative figures only.
- 4.11 For each of the 20 service items (sliders) in the simulator, with the exception of community safety, four standard choices were given:
- increase the allocated service item budget by 5%
 - maintain the allocated service item budget (0%)
 - decrease the allocated service item budget by 5%
 - decrease the allocated service item budget by 10%
- 4.12 For community safety, the budget could only be decreased by a maximum of 5% because this was tipping point where the council would fail to meet its statutory and legal duties across trading standards, emergency planning and gypsy and traveller services.
- 4.13 It should be noted however, that moving the sliders had different consequences for each service item. For example, for most service areas, moving the slider positively would mean an increase in budget to improve or actively develop a service. However, for highways maintenance and home to school transport this would only maintain services at their current level. Specifically for home to school transport, the simulator stated that even with an increase in funding there would be remaining pressures.
- 4.14 The image below shows the budget simulator as it was presented on a laptop/desktop computer. The top right of the page shows the council's total budget, the top left shows the funding gap to be closed and below this the current status of your choices, ie if you are over or under budget to the nearest million or if you have exactly balanced the budget.

Image of budget simulator

Have a go at balancing the county council budget!		Funding gap £3.71m Over Budget 0.6%	Total Expenses £607.11m			
		-10%	-5%	0%	5%	Consequences
Adult social care	>	<i>i</i> Adult social work - click the 'i' icon for more information 		Delays lead to increased risk of people suffering from neglect and avoidable harm More		
Children's and family services	>					
Education and learning	>					
Highways operations	>	<i>i</i> Age well – care and support for older people - click the 'i' icon for more information 		Invest to improve the experience and efficiency of services More		
Place, transport and infrastructure	>					
Planning, environment and climate change	>					
Public health	>	<i>i</i> Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults - click the 'i' icon for more information 		Reduced care and support services available for vulnerable adults. More		
Fire and rescue	>					
Community safety	>					
Libraries, museums and history services	>	Your comments on Adult social care (Optional) <input type="text"/>				
Running the business	>					
Council tax	>					

Key findings

4.15 The following tables summarise how people made choices when submitting their own budget and the consequences of this in terms of overall percentage budget changes.

Table 1: slider choices

Service group	Service item	Slider options			
		10%	-5%	0%	5%
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	38	154	669	503
Education and learning	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	36	103	883	342
Education and learning	Education	25	105	925	309
Children's and family services	Children's social care	29	113	1012	210
Community safety	Community safety	n/a	206	997	161
Fire and rescue	Fire and rescue	20	149	1071	124
Public health	Public health	81	209	804	270
Planning, environment and climate change	Waste disposal	44	179	977	164
Children's and family services	Family help	47	233	870	214
Adult social care	Age well	69	226	890	179
Adult social care	Adult social work	78	283	840	163
Adult social care	Live well	65	299	867	133
Education and learning	Home to school transport	85	264	910	105
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	139	341	625	259
Libraries, museums and history services	Libraries	135	260	808	161
Planning, environment and climate change	Environment and climate action	259	267	596	242
Libraries, museums and history services	Museums and history services	165	350	723	126
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	188	407	664	105
Highways operations	Street lighting	190	417	640	117
Running the business	Running the business	261	488	578	37

Table 2: slider movements

Service group	Service	% of people who move the slider to decrease budget (-5% or -10%)	% of people who made no change (selected 0%)	% of people who moved the slider to increase budget (+5%)
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	14	49	37
Education and learning	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	10	65	25
Education and learning	Education	10	68	23
Children's and family services	Children's social care	10	74	15
Community safety	Community safety	15	73	12
Fire and rescue	Fire and rescue	12	79	9
Public health	Public health	21	59	20
Planning, environment and climate change	Waste disposal	16	72	12
Children's and family services	Family help	21	64	16
Adult social care	Age well	22	65	13
Adult social care	Adult social work	26	62	12
Adult social care	Live well	27	64	10
Education and learning	Home to school transport	26	67	8
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	35	46	19
Libraries, museums and history services	Libraries	29	59	12
Planning, environment and climate change	Environment and climate action	39	44	18
Libraries, museums and history services	Museums and history services	38	53	9
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	44	49	8
Highways operations	Street lighting	45	47	9
Running the business	Running the business	55	42	3

4.16 When considering and weighing-up choices, the service area items which respondents most frequently selected for an increase in budget were:

- Highways maintenance (37%) * (to maintain service not to improve it)
- SEND (25%)
- Education (23%)
- Public health (20%)
- Place, transport and infrastructure (19%)
- Environment and climate action (18%)
- Children's services, family help (16%)
- Children's social care (15%)

These were all selected by 15 per cent or more of respondents.

4.17 Conversely, the service items which respondents most frequently selected for a decrease in budget (selected by at least 30 per cent of respondents) were:

- Running the business (55%)
- Street lighting (45%)
- Strategic planning (44%)
- Environment and climate action (39%)
- Museums and history services (38%)
- Place, transport and infrastructure (35%)

4.18 As per the views expressed by county residents in our representative residents' survey, the budget simulator responses indicate that there are divergent views across Oxfordshire's communities on environment and climate action and place, transport and infrastructure, with these two service items appearing in the list of those most frequently selected for an increase in funding and in the list for those most frequently selected for a decrease funding.

4.19 Some service items presented in the budget simulator, did not see any significant movement positively or negatively, with people choosing to maintain the current level of budget. Those service items most likely to be selected to remain at 0 were:

- Fire and rescue (79%)
- Children's social care (74%)
- Waste disposal (72%)
- Community safety (73%)

For all these service areas, this equated to maintaining the service at their current level.

4.20 Focussing now on the impact of slider choices, table 3 shows the impact of people's choices on service item budgets, by presenting the average budget percentage change. This ranges from 1% to -3.57%.

Table 3: average budget percentage change

Service group	Service item	Average budget change as%
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	1.00%
Education and learning	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	0.61%
Education and learning	Education	0.56%
Children's and family services	Children's social care	0.14%
Community safety	Community safety	-0.16%
Fire and rescue	Fire and rescue	-0.24%
Public health	Public health	-0.37%
Planning, environment and climate change	Waste disposal	-0.38%
Children's and family services	Family help	-0.41%
Adult social care	Age well	-0.68%
Adult social care	Adult social work	-1.01%
Adult social care	Live well	-1.09%
Education and learning	Home to school transport	-1.21%
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	-1.32%
Libraries, museums and history services	Libraries	-1.35%
Planning, environment and climate change	Environment and climate action	-1.99%
Libraries, museums and history services	Museums and history services	-2.03%
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	-2.49%
Highways operations	Street lighting	-2.49%
Running the business	Running the business	-3.57%

4.21 Four service items, (highlighted in red) have a positive average budget percentage change:

- Highways maintenance (1.00%)
- Special education needs and disabilities (0.61%)
- Education (0.56%)
- Children's social care (0.14%)

4.22 These were followed by a further six services items (highlighted in orange), with an average percentage change in budget of less than one per cent:

- Community safety (-0.16%)
- Fire and rescue (0.24%)
- Public health (-0.37%)
- Waste disposal (-0.38%)
- Children's and family services, family help (-0.41%)
- Adult social care - age well, care and support for older people (-0.68%)

4.23 The five service items, which on average, had the greatest negative percentage changes of between -1.99% to -3.57% were:

- Back-office support services (running the business) (-3.57%)
- Street lighting (-2.49%)
- Strategic planning (-2.49%)
- Museums and history services (-2.03%)
- Environment and climate action (-1.99%)

4.24 These were followed by a further five services items (highlighted in yellow), which had an average negative percentage changes of between -1.01% and -1.35%:

- Libraries (-1.35%)
- Place, transport and infrastructure (-1.32%)
- Home to school transport (-1.21%)
- Adult social care – live well, care and support for vulnerable adults (-1.09%)
- Adult social work (-1.01%)

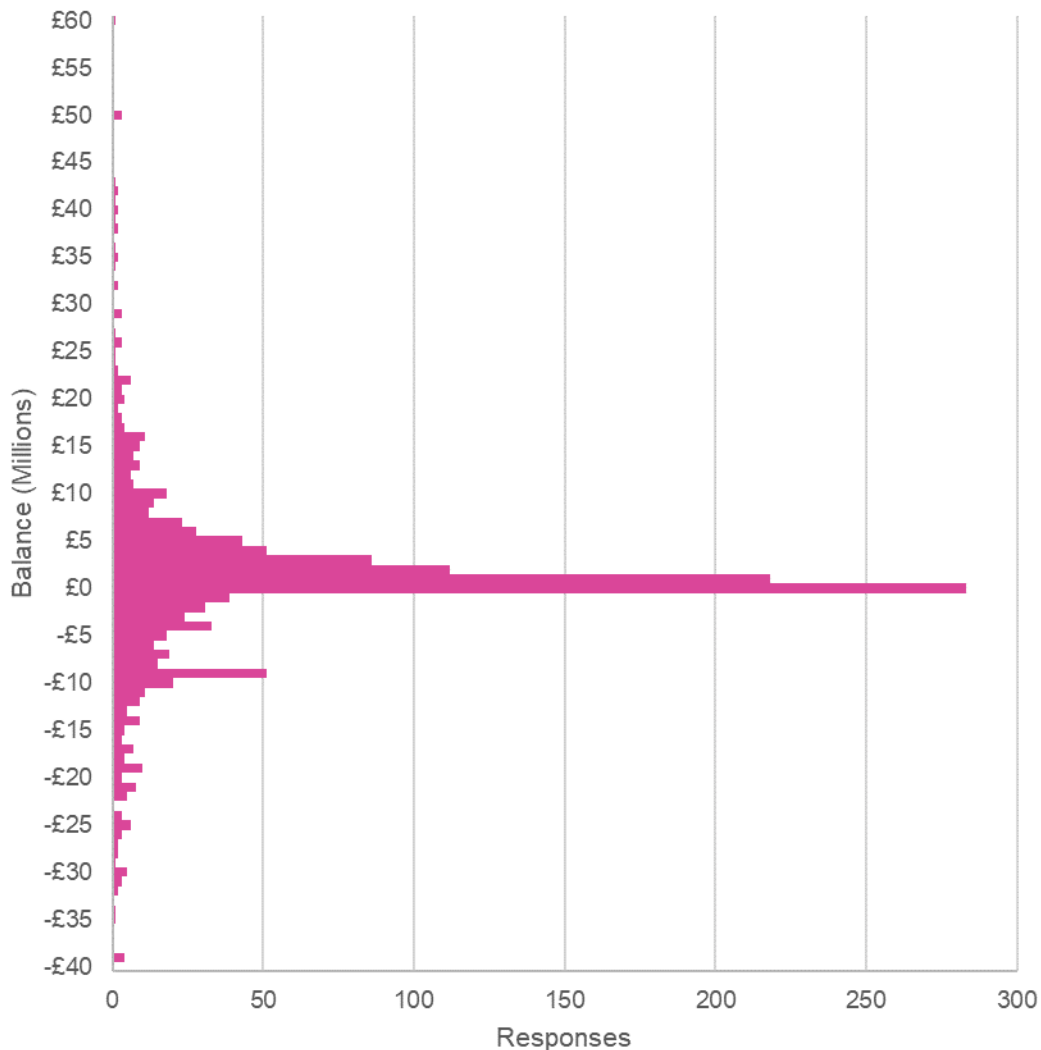
Closing the funding gap

4.25 Our starting budget was £612.5 million with a funding gap of £9.1 million. The simulator was not designed to especially close the funding gap exactly, rather to explore how people make choices when faced with difficult decisions (as the councillors to need to). However, that said:

- 9 people (0.7%) managed to close the £9.1million funding gap exactly
- a further 928 people (68%) made budget reductions over and above the £9.1 million funding gap. This included people choosing to increase council tax to create additional expenditure budget.

The chart below shows the distribution in 'balance' of the budgets submitted, where £0 is an exact balance.

Budget Balance by Responses



4.26 Before submitting their final budget, respondents were asked if they had any further comments to share with the council. 140 people gave written feedback, which included 202 different comments. Comments, were wide and diverging, however two equally significant areas of comment were:

- Review services for efficiencies / identify waste spending (19 mentions)
- An increase in council tax is acceptable (19 mentions)

4.27 Other notable themes were:

- Negative feedback about the budget simulator (12 mentions)
- Positive feedback about the budget simulator (11 mentions)
- Reduce spending and reduce services (10 mentions)
- Council tax - need for increased funding from national government (10 mentions)
- Climate action viewed as unimportant or unnecessary (9 mentions)
- General comments about the need to reduce spending (9 mentions)
- Various mixed comments about the budget simulator (8 mentions)

4.28 The next section of the report sets out how budget simulator respondents chose to adjust each of the service item budgets, within service groups. The section is ordered, as per the simulator.

- Adult social care
- Children's and family services
- Education and learning
- Highways operations
- Place, transport and infrastructure
- Planning, environment and climate change
- Public health
- Fire and rescue
- Community safety
- Libraries, museums and history services
- Running the business

4.29 It also includes an analysis of all the accompanying qualitative comments by service group, which bring to life how people made their decisions for the service item budgets when asked to weigh-up choices and make trade-offs. A coding framework was created to analyse this rich written feedback and all comments across the entire simulator were read and coded against this.

Adult social care

Budget simulator descriptions

4.30 The law says we must work with people and organisations to protect vulnerable adults in Oxfordshire and their right to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect. Safeguarding is everyone's business, and we have statutory and legal responsibilities in this area under the Health and Social Care Act 2018.

We:

- assess the needs of vulnerable adults and develop care plans, setting out the services that people require to support their needs
- monitor and review care packages to make sure they are fit for purpose and meet people's needs
- assess vulnerable adults' needs and either directly provide or commission services (through our age well or live well work areas) if their needs meet a national set of eligibility criteria

We provide a wide range of activities to help older people in Oxfordshire to live independently and stay well and safe by:

- providing information and advice, including support to unpaid carers

- planning, commissioning, managing, and delivering short-term and long-term care and support services with people and their families
- enabling the development of specialist housing schemes

We provide a wide range of activities to help adults aged 18+ in Oxfordshire with a disability or physical or mental illness to stay well and safe.

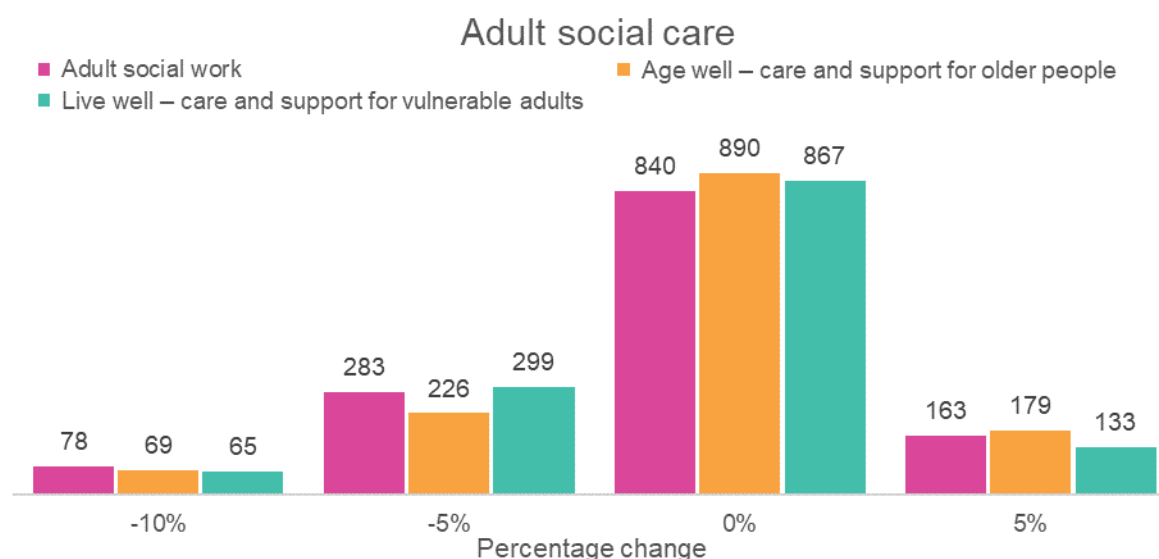
We:

- provide information and advice, including to unpaid carers
- assess people's needs
- plan, commission, manage and deliver short-term and long-term care and support services with people and their families
- enable the development of specialist housing schemes.

The adult social care service group, contained three sliders: adult social work, age well - care and support for older people and live well - care and support for vulnerable adults.

- Around a third of respondents (range 35% to 38%) chose to move one or more sliders in the adult social care group to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Around one in ten respondents chose to increase the budget (range 10% to 13%) to improve/develop services.
- 22% to 27% chose to decrease funding across all service areas
- In terms of the average percentage budget change, these were in mid-range of all services presented on the simulator: adult social care - age well (-0.68), adult social work (-1.01%) and adult social care - live well (-1.09%).
- The chart below shows how people responded for all three service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for adult social care grouping



Written feedback

4.31 In all, 139 people gave written feedback to support their choices on the ‘adult social care’ section of the simulator, which included 149 different comments. More detailed analysis has been undertaken for themes (codes) which received 10 per cent or more comments in section and these are as follows:

- Reduce spending (36 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (35 mentions)
- Importance of service (18 mentions)
- Increase income (16 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (14 mentions)

4.32 As per the actual choices made in the simulator, comments were closely split on whether or not spending in this area should be reduced. However, where people chose to reduce spending in this they wanted to see this through **delivering efficiencies** rather than a reduction of services.

“Work better; work smarter. Waste less. Less agency and other third-party work. Save on external consultancy.”

4.33 Where respondents did not want spending to be reduced, the majority felt that the **investment in the service should be increased**, with many comments highlighting that **services are stretched and in need of improvement**. A recurring suggestion for raising income to fund this was increasing fees and charges for the services.

4.34 Many comments emphasised the importance of this service, especially with an **ageing population** and to **reduce pressure on the NHS**. Where

comments felt that the service is not a priority, two of these said that services for children needed to take priority over those for older adults.

“Adult Social Care is severely underfunded and not fit for purpose. This adds huge pressure to the NHS. Older people suffer with the lack of funding.”

- 4.35 Just over ten per cent of comments stated that the council should not be responsible for funding care, with these people emphasising the role of **personal responsibility** and that care should either be paid for by the individual or provided by family members.

“Individuals and families should both plan and budget better for their old age and also for any issues (such as family problems, disability etc) that come along in life. Less reliance on the state should be the main mantra.”

- 4.36 Other themes for written feedback regarding adult social care related to:
- service quality (10 mentions)
 - misunderstanding of OCC power or responsibilities (3 mentions)

Children's and family services

Budget simulator descriptions

- 4.37 The law says we must work with people and organisations, to protect the most vulnerable children and young people in Oxfordshire. Safeguarding and protection of children is everyone's business, we have statutory and legal responsibilities in this area and are governed by the Children Act 2018 and 2004 and the Health and Social Care Act 2018. Between January and December 2022, we cared for 864 children. We:

- Intervene and provide support when there are concerns that a child needs help and protection, or is at risk.
- Work collaboratively with families to ensure that they are able to care for their children within an extended network when children are unable to remain at home. We always aim to strengthen families and secure long-lasting relationships. At times our work involves legal proceedings, with an aim to keep families together where it is safe to do so.

We strive to be great corporate parents to our children and always be ambitious for their future. We:

- Care for children through our amazing foster carers and great children's homes, paying careful attention to their physical, emotional mental health needs.
- Help, support and nurture our care leaving young people to make sure they have a successful, safe and ambitious future.
- Provide care, support, education and a positive safe future for our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

We assess people's needs and provide joined-up services to support families, children and young people to overcome difficulties at the earliest opportunity and to prevent and reduce future problems and build resilience.

We do this through:

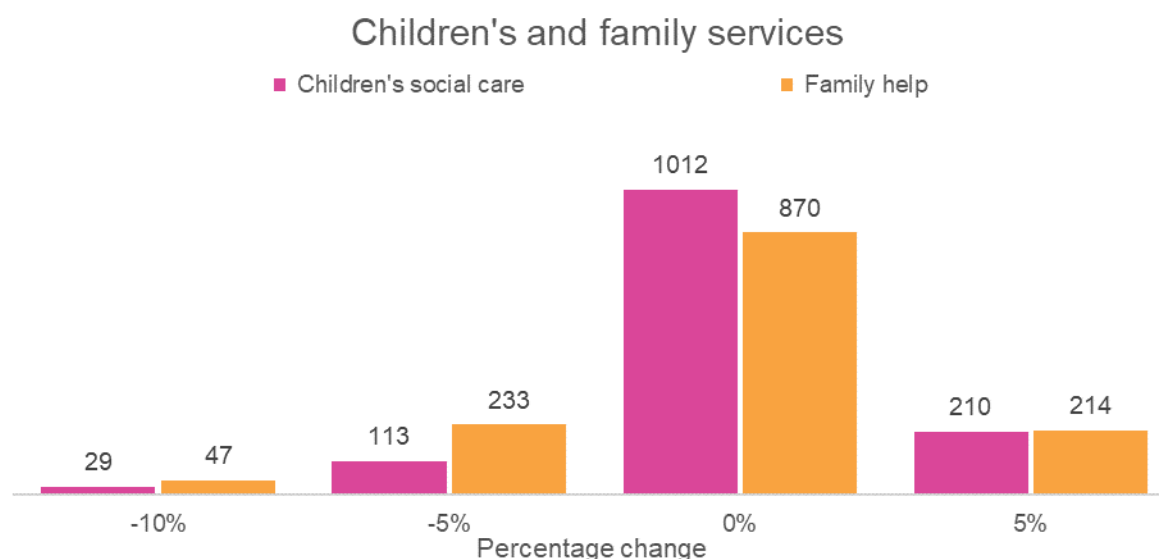
- Children and family hubs
- Education, employment and training service
- Local and community support
- Targeted youth support service

We work with children and families with disabilities through a range of support services.

4.38 The children's and family service group contained two sliders: children's social care and family help.

- Close to one in three respondents (26% for children's social care and 36% for family help) chose to move one or more sliders in the children's and family services group to either increase or decrease funding in this area
- For family help 16% increased the budget, whereas 21% decreased funding, compared to children's social care where 15% increased the budget, whereas as 10% decreased the budget
- the average percentage budget change for children's social care was 0.14% (an increase) and for family help it was -0.41%
- the chart below shows how people responded for both service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for children’s social care grouping



Written feedback

4.39 In all, 90 people gave written feedback on the ‘children’s and family services’ section of the simulator, which included 92 different comments. More detailed analysis has been undertaken for themes (codes) which received 10 per cent or more comments in section and these are as follows:

- Do not reduce spending (27 mentions)
- Reduce spending (26 mentions)
- Importance of service (10 mentions)

4.40 The 27 pieces of written feedback for ‘do not reduce spending’ are split between people wanting to increase the spending/service (15 mentions) and people wanting to protect/maintain what is already there (12 mentions). Some comments called for increasing spend/services due to more families needing support because of the challenging times we are currently in.

“Already been cut to bare bones. Maintain at current levels”.

4.41 The 17 mentions for an increase of spending/services focussed on the following themes:

“Reintroduce SureStart”

“Youth support needs addressing. More Youth Clubs should be staffed and supported”

“There needs to be more help for families in these challenging times”.

4.42 Reduce spending mentions were split around; inefficiencies and that reducing the use of agency staff and consultants would create a saving; two ideas for reducing services were stop benefits for some families and not support unaccompanied asylum seeking children. There were nine mentions for the need to put in place early intervention in order to prevent more spending in the future. One contributor said:

“Helping children get on the right track early will hopefully help them and reducing costs in the long run”.

- 4.43 There were 10 mentions emphasising how the service is of importance, many illustrating the necessity of supporting children

“Children become adults and without getting it right for them when they are children how do we expect their future to look. Including the pressures, they will place”.

- 4.44 Other themes for written feedback regarding children’s and family services related to:

- Increase income (6 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (8 mentions)
- Service quality (8 mentions)

Education and learning

Budget simulator descriptions

- 4.45 We provide fair access to education and training for Oxfordshire’s children, including those permanently excluded from school and those in the criminal justice system. We oversee the school admissions process for primary and secondary schools in Oxfordshire, managing the demand for and parental choice of school places for their children. We also make sure there is enough early education provision for all of Oxfordshire’s 3- and 4-year-olds and for all disadvantaged 2-year-olds. We also provide a range of specialist services to support school improvement for local authority, maintained schools.

We work with partners to meet the needs of children and young people aged 0-25 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families. The law says we must assess children and young people with SEND if their needs meet a national set of eligibility criteria.

We:

- assess needs
- provide, commission and manage appropriate support according to children's individual needs
- provide an impartial information and advice service (SENDIASS)
- support some SEND pupils in schools with educational psychologists, speech and language therapy and occupational therapists
- provide a special educational needs teaching advisory support service.

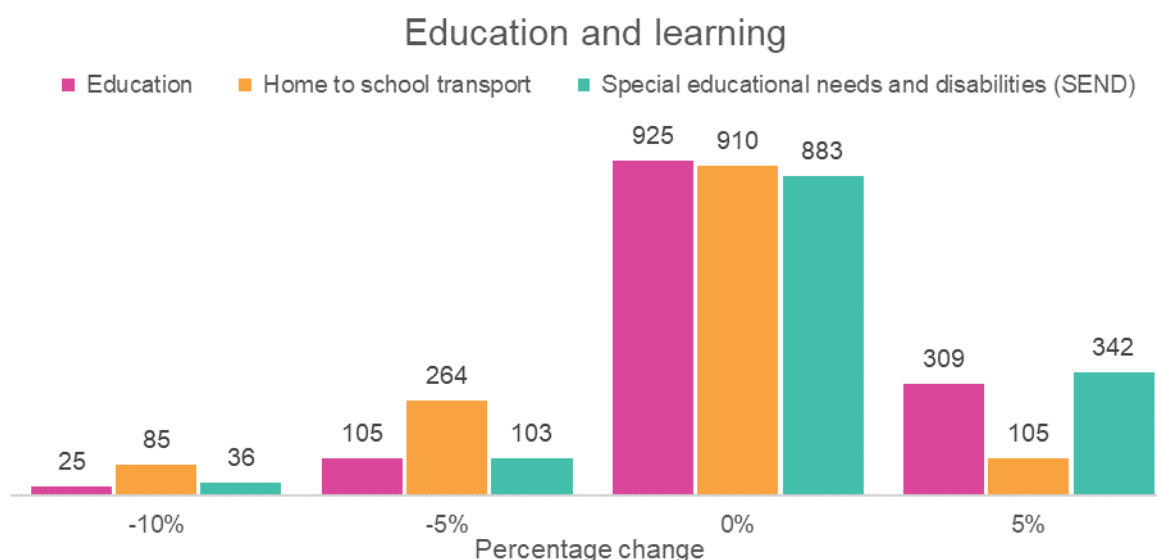
We oversee the provision of home to school transport assistance for eligible children in reception to year 11. Transport provision is usually through a free pass to use on public buses or trains; however sometimes it is through specially contracted bus, coach or minibus services. A small number of children may have to be transported by taxi to meet their individual needs.

We also oversee the paid-for spare seats scheme for contracted home to school transport services.

4.46 The education and learning grouping contained three sliders: education, home to school transport and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

- Just over one in three respondents (35%) chose to move one or more sliders in the education and learning group to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Around one in four (26%) respondents reduced the budget for home to school transport, compared to 10% for education and for SEND.
- Around one in four respondents increased the budgets for SEND (25%) and for education (23%). Eight per cent increased the budget for home to school transport.
- Two of the service options for the education and learning group saw positive average budget percentage changes: SEND (0.61%) and education (0.56%).
- The remaining service option, home to school transport had a negative average budget percentage change of -1.21%, ranked 13 of the 20 service items.
- The chart below shows how people responded for all three service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for education and learning grouping



4.47 In all, 123 people gave written feedback on the 'education and learning' section of the simulator, which included 127 different comments. The key themes emerging were:

- Reduce spending (39 mentions)
- Importance of service (21 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (18 mentions)

- Increase income (14 mentions)

4.48 Written feedback for education and learning was very mixed, with variation mainly based on which slider the comments were referring to. Overall, there was support for maintaining education and SEND services, but a strong desire to reduce home to school transport. Many respondents wanted to see home to school transport services reduced or viewed them as a waste of money, with comments reflecting a strong feeling that providing this (either practically or by paying for the service) should be the **responsibility of parents**.

“Parents should shoulder responsibility of getting their children to school”

“Parents need to be more responsible for their children and not expect to receive everything. As a parent myself, we all need to do our bit.”

Comments also reflected a misunderstanding of what the home to school transport provides, with a belief that the service will take a child to any school in or outside of the county.

4.49 Support for education was high, with comments highlighting the importance of investing in children as future adults and that this would **save money in the long term**.

“I have increased education because if we don't invest in our children, we have no worthwhile future.”

“Vital and by providing more funding for education, particularly around SEND, it will save money in the long run. I would invest even further in these.”

4.50 SEND services were identified as a priority area, with numerous comments emphasising the importance of these services and the need to increase investment to improve poor quality services.

“essential to spend more on SEND. There is nothing more important than children's education”

“Failing SEND services must be fixed to fulfil your legal and statutory obligations”

4.51 Other themes for written feedback regarding education and learning related to:

- Service quality (10)
- Council should not provide this service (8)

Highways operations

Budget simulator descriptions

4.52 By law we must maintain a safe highways network. We are responsible for maintaining 3,000 miles of roads in Oxfordshire, as well as footways, cycle ways, bridges and trees. We repair defects, carry out resurfacing, implement

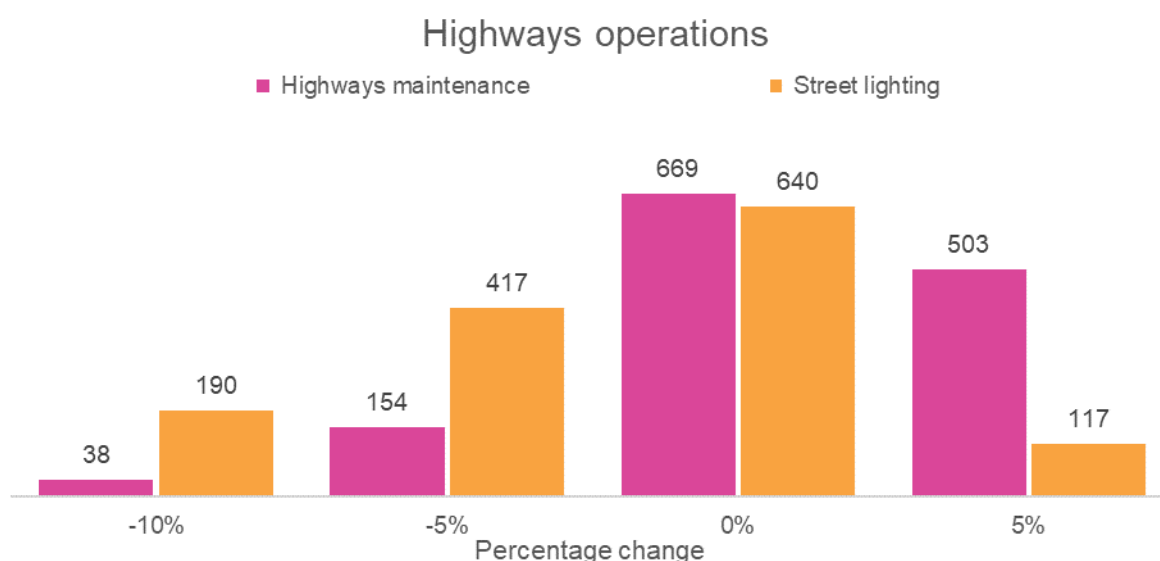
road safety measures, grit roads and clear snow during the winter, clear drains, and cut grass verges.

4.53 We maintain over 60,000 streetlights, illuminated traffic signs and bollards on the public highway, the majority of which are LED lights. Our streetlights are set automatically to turn on from dusk to dawn, however LED lights dim to 50 per cent on residential roads from 10pm to 6am and 75 per cent on traffic routes from midnight - 6am.

4.54 The highways operations grouping contained two sliders: highways maintenance and street lighting.

- Just over half the respondents (51%) chose to move one or more sliders in the highways operations group to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Just under half of respondents (45%) reduced funding for street lighting and 14% reduced it for highways maintenance.
- Nearly four in 10 respondents (37%) increased funding for highways maintenance, this was presented as maintaining the service at its current level not improving the services. Nine per cent of respondents chose to increase the funding for street lighting to improve the service.
- Highways maintenance saw the greatest positive average percentage budget change for all service items on the simulator (1%), in the red section of the previous table
- In contrast street lighting was ranked 19 out of 20, with an average change of -2.49%.
- The chart below shows how people responded for both items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for highways operations



Written feedback

- 4.55 In all, 193 people gave written feedback on the ‘highways operations’ section of the simulator, which included 226 different comments. Comments in this section focussed on roads and transport (99 mentions) and reducing spending (75 mentions). Feedback was largely negative in tone, especially around perceived poorly maintained highways.

“Oxfordshire roads are a disgrace and with the potholes dangerous”

- 4.56 There were also many negative comments about traffic measures, with low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs), traffic filters and 20mph speed limits all receiving criticism. Feedback suggests that there is misunderstanding about the costs and funding for these schemes, as shown by suggestions that removing LTNs would “fix” the budget. Comments which proposed a reduction of services were dominated by suggestions of ceasing LTN and 20mph schemes.

“Prioritise road maintenance and stop wasting money on unwanted and failed traffic schemes like ltns and 20 mph everywhere”

- 4.57 Other themes for written feedback regarding highways operations related to:
- Service quality (16 mentions)
 - Do not reduce spending (14 mentions)
 - Increase income (12 mentions)
 - Climate action (4 mentions)
 - Importance of service (2 mentions)

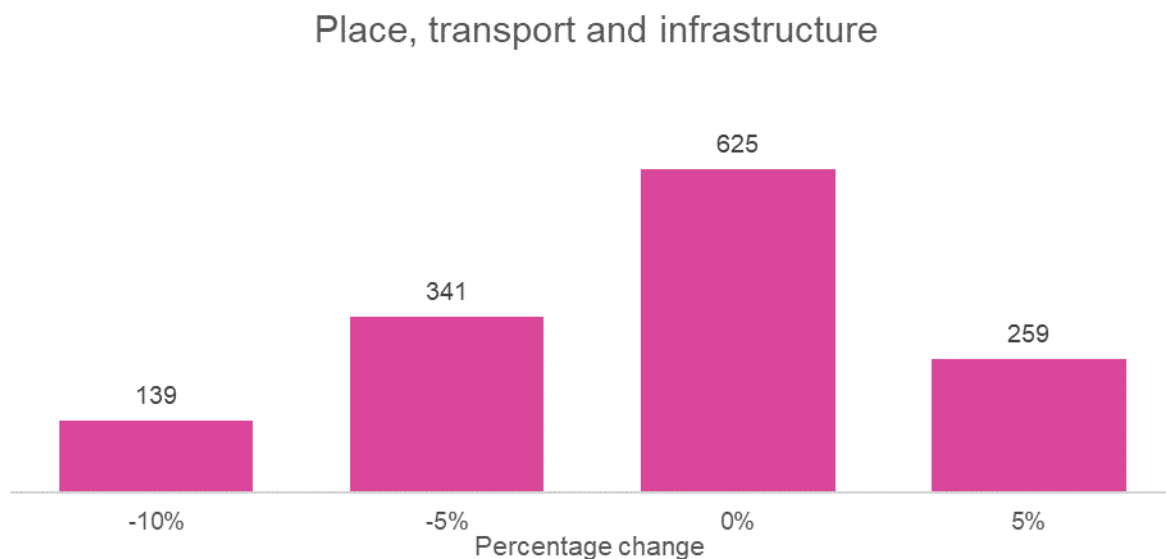
Place, transport and infrastructure

Budget simulator description

- 4.58 By law we are responsible for Oxfordshire’s local transport and connectivity plan and related area strategies, which set out the transport priorities for the county. We:
- promote active travel and public transport through a range of partnerships, contracts and direct delivery
 - design and deliver transport infrastructure, utilising capital funding secured from government departments
 - work with others to create sustainable communities, where new jobs are created, health inequalities are reduced and sustainable transport is encouraged
 - administer bus pass schemes for disabled people and their companions and older people
 - oversee new developments being built by developers to make sure they fit with Oxfordshire’s strategic vision and priorities
 - develop future transport and infrastructure schemes and source funding for their delivery
- 4.59 The place, transport and infrastructure group had just one slider.

- Just over half of the respondents (54%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Around one in three (35%) respondents reduced the budget for place, transport and infrastructure and around one in five (19%) increased it.
- This service options saw a negative average budget percentage change of -1.32%, ranked 14 of the 20 service items.
- The chart below shows how people responded for place, transport and infrastructure as presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for place, transport and infrastructure



Written feedback

- 4.60 In all, 148 people gave written feedback on the 'place, transport and infrastructure' section of the simulator, which included 177 different comments. The key themes were 'roads and transport' (91 mentions) and reduce spending (29 mentions).
- 4.61 More than half of comments about roads and transport focussed on public transport. These comments were mixed, however, and spoke both about the need to improve public transport networks (especially in rural areas) and a desire to see new bus lane and bus gate schemes cancelled. The secondary focus for these comments was low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs), with 28 negative comments about them, with them being characterised as ineffective and unwanted.
 "Maintain rural bus services"
 "The money for the above is just wasted on LTN's, 20mph zones, bus lanes and other bad initiatives."
- 4.62 Within the reducing spending theme there are two key areas of comment: reducing services making savings through efficiencies and reduction of waste spending. Those people who spoke in favour of reducing services were

aligned with the comments on roads and transport, focused on halting LTNs, bus lane and 20mph speed limit schemes.

“Our Council is wasting money on unwanted schemes for Oxford which are deeply divisive in the community and unlikely to succeed. All work on bus gates etc should be stopped and the money redeployed more productively elsewhere.”

4.63 Here is a high-level thematic summary of the other comments made for ‘place, transport and infrastructure’:

- Increase income (16 mentions)
- Service quality (16 mentions)
- Importance of service (8 mentions)
- Climate action (4 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (4 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (4 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (1 mention)

Planning, environment and climate change

Budget simulator description

4.64 By law we are responsible for minerals and waste planning across Oxfordshire. We also provide strategic infrastructure planning advice through statutory consultation responses to planning applications and local plan consultations.

By law we are the flood authority for Oxfordshire, responsible for setting the plan to mitigate surface water flood risk and working with partners and communities to investigate flood incidents and co-ordinate action. We are also the nature recovery authority for Oxfordshire, working with the district and city councils to improve and enhance the quality and quantity of nature and green space in Oxfordshire.

We provide opportunities for countryside access and by law we must map, maintain and signpost rights of way in Oxfordshire, including designated footpaths, bridleways and byways. We work with a network of local volunteers and community organisations to improve and safeguard the quality of the environment for current and future generations to enjoy.

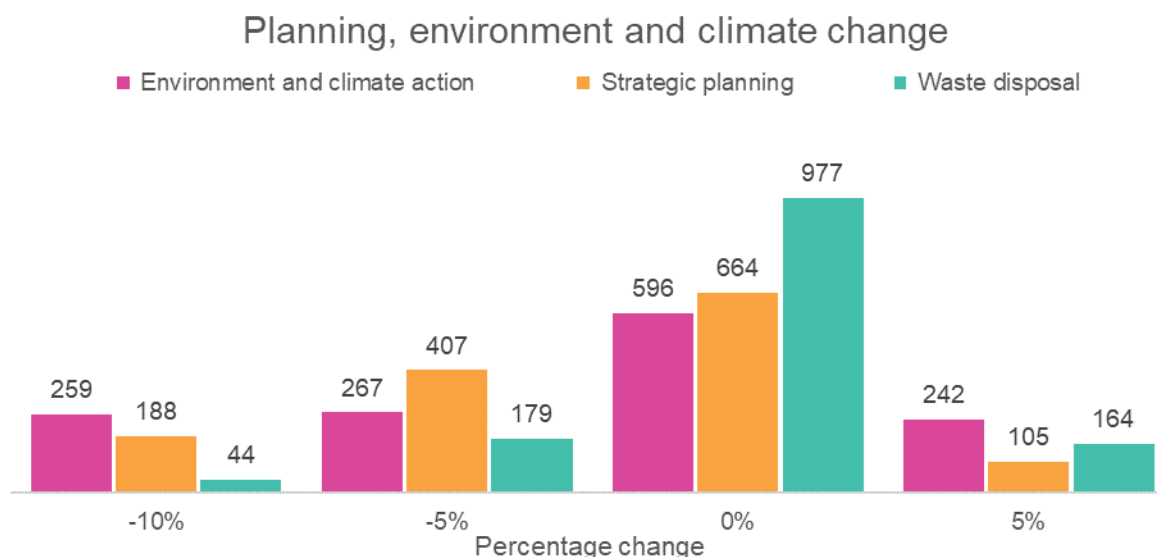
Climate action underpins all we do as a council and we work with, to reduce pollution and be resilient to more extreme weather. This means reducing pollution created by the council’s buildings, vehicles and suppliers, and working to reduce pollution more widely in Oxfordshire through planning and supporting communities and businesses.

By law we are also the waste disposal authority and responsible for disposing of household waste in Oxfordshire, this includes all recycling, green waste and residual, black bin waste. We also have a legal duty to provide two Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) where residents can recycle household waste. There are seven HWRCs in Oxfordshire, which collectively

receive around one million visits each year and accept approximately 40,000 - 45,000 tonnes of residual and recyclable material each year.

- 4.65 The planning, transport and climate change grouping contained three sliders: environment and climate action, strategic planning and waste disposal.
- Just over half of the respondents (56%) chose to move one or more sliders in the planning, transport and climate change group to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
 - Around one in five (18%) respondents increased the budget for environment and climate action compared to for waste disposal (12%) and strategic planning (8%).
 - Sizeable numbers of respondents chose to decrease the budget for strategic planning (44%) and environment and climate action (39%) compared to waste disposal (16%).
 - All three service options saw negative average budget percentage changes: waste disposal (-0.38%, ranked 9 out of 20), environment and climate action (-1.99%, ranked 16 out of 20) and strategic planning (-2.49%, ranked 18 out of 20).
 - The chart below shows how people responded for all three service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for planning environment and climate change



Written feedback

- 4.66 In all, 160 people gave written feedback on the 'Planning, environment and climate change' section of the simulator, which included 169 different comments. The key themes were:

- Climate action (38 mentions)
- Reduce spending (34 mentions)

- Increase income (20 mentions)
- Service quality (17 mentions)

4.67 Comments about the council's climate action work were significantly more likely to be negative (26 comments) than positive (9 comments). The negative comments tended to focus on a perception that climate change isn't a concern, and that the council should not be spending money on addressing it.

“Stop all the climate nonsense. It's not a local authorities responsibility”.

4.68 The nine positive mentions felt the council should continue to spend money on climate change actions, with a focus on combatting the climate emergency.

“We are in a climate emergency - this needs to be top priority.”

4.69 Overall, most of the 34 mentions which proposed 'reducing spending' wanted the council to identify inefficiencies and reduce waste spending to make savings. In addition, there were also ideas on how that could be done with technology and waste collection. The remaining comments ranged from reducing services such as the number of waste centres and also having early intervention measures to prevent costs in the future.

“Reduce apart from addressing flooding”.

4.70 In the 'increase income' theme, the feedback shared focused on increasing the financial responsibility of residents for things such as fly tipping and waste collection; and businesses/developers needing to contribute to the local community to address local concerns/needs.

“Property developers to contribute more. Houses pay more for their waste collection and recycling”.

4.71 The 17 mentions of 'service quality' were predominantly negative with many commenting on the high-level aspects of planning. In addition, there were some comments that mentioned the need for better mitigation for flooding and also a few positive mentions.

“There is nothing strategic about the present planning”

“Seems pretty good. Access to nature important”.

4.72 Other themes for written feedback regarding environment and climate change related to:

- Roads and transport (16 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (11 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (6 mentions)
- Importance of service (4 mention)
- Waste (15 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (8 mentions)

Public health

Budget simulator description

4.73 We provide public health improvement and prevention services to reduce health inequalities and support people in Oxfordshire to live longer, healthier lives including interventions to prevent illnesses that can be passed from one person to another. We also support local healthcare services to provide cost-effective, efficient and accessible healthcare that meets the population's needs. Finally, we work with other council services, with local communities and with other organisations from across the county to understand and address inequalities and to help create healthy places. Services that we commission include:

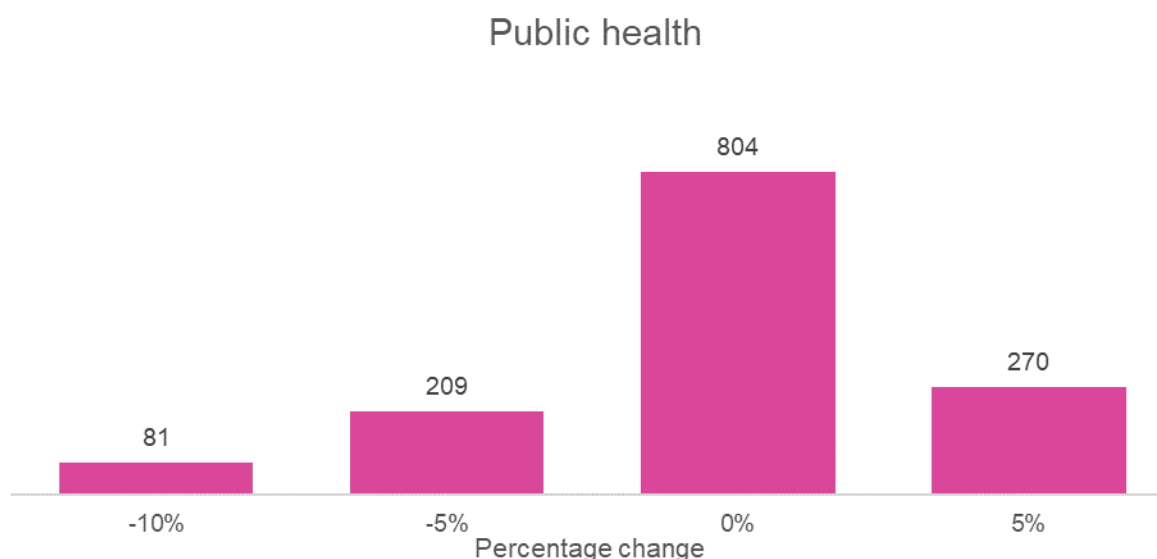
- health visiting services and school health nurses
- NHS health checks for over 40's
- services to reduce harm from smoking, alcohol, drugs and obesity
- sexual health services

Public health funding provided by government is protected, which means we cannot make savings in this area. It can be topped up if the council chooses to spend more on public health activities.

4.74 The public health group had just one slider.

- Around two in five respondents (41%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Near equal proportions (around one in five) of respondents increased the budget for public health (20%) and decreased it (21%).
- This service option saw a small negative average budget percentage change of -0.37%, ranked 7 of the 20 service items.
- The chart below shows how people responded for public health as presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for public health



Written feedback

4.75 In all, 92 people gave written feedback on the Public Health section of the simulator, which included 99 different comments. Key themes were:

- Reduce spending (29)
- Do not reduce spending (18)
- Importance of service (11)

4.76 For those who wanted to the council to reducing spending on public health, they wanted this to come from efficiencies rather than service reductions.

“Public health is important but increase efficiency and transparency.”

“Needs reforms not money thrown at it”.

4.77 Other comments in this area noted that investment in these services now will reduce future spending on adult social care and in health services. Many highlighted the importance of public health services should be protected and felt that the service was important.

“Crucial to prevent more ill health and future increased costs”.

“Public health is of uppermost priority”.

“While we are on the back of COVID recovery, this feels like a good place to maintain spend to promote more people back into good health - and hence more economically active”

4.78 Other themes for written feedback regarding public health to:

- Service quality (8 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (8 mentions)

Fire and rescue

Budget simulator description

4.79 Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is part of the county council. We:

- protect life and property in the event of fires
- rescue people from road traffic accidents and promote road safety
- protect life during chemical incidents, flooding, heat wave and other extreme weather events
- work with partners to deal with major emergencies
- protect communities, reduce harm and save lives through education and advice about fire safety

Our firefighters operate from 25 fire stations. Between January and December 2022, we attended 6,340 fire and rescue service call outs. We are the statutory fire authority for Oxfordshire. By law we must also carry out fire safety inspections, audits and advise businesses on their fire safety responsibilities. We also take enforcement action against businesses when required to ensure safety.

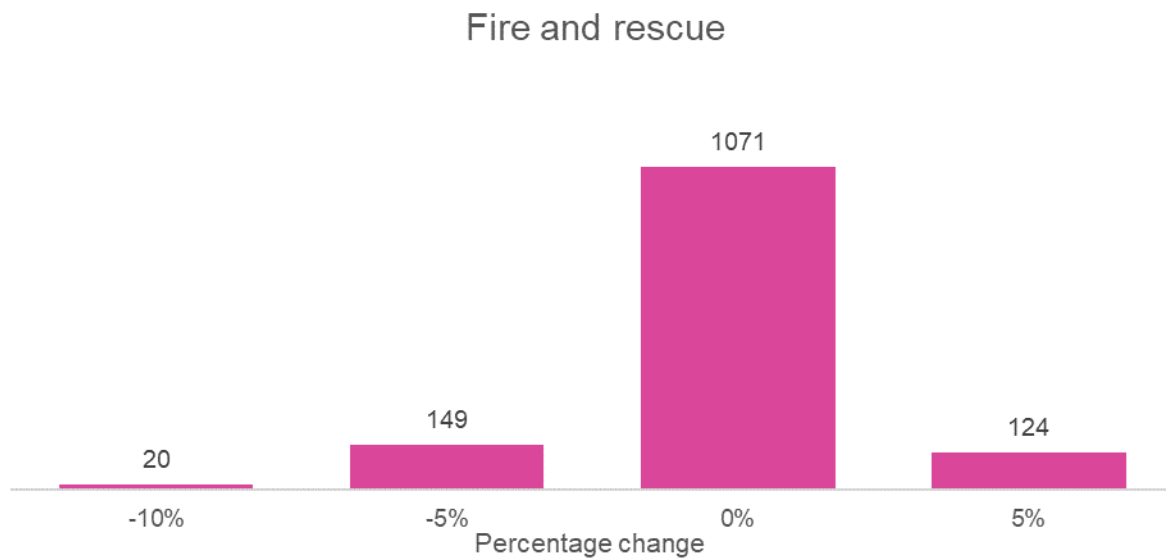
We support safety in Oxfordshire through a range of activities including:

- our 365 Alive safety website
- a range of outreach activities including the footsteps pedestrian safety scheme and cycle training for children and adults
- we provide home fire safety visits for vulnerable adults and families (Safe and Well visits)

4.80 The fire and rescue group had just one slider.

- Around one in five respondents (21%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Near equal proportions (around one in ten) of respondents increased the budget for fire and rescue (9%) as decreased it (12%).
- This service options saw a small negative average budget percentage change of -0.24%, ranked 6 of the 20 service items.
- The chart below shows how people responded for fire and rescue as presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for fire and rescue



Written feedback

4.81 In all, 58 people gave written feedback on the 'fire and rescue' section of the simulator, which included 62 different comments. The two key themes emerging were polarised, do not reduce spending (20 mentions) and reduce spending (15 mentions). For those that felt spending could be reduced, some felt it could be reviewed for efficiencies and/or to identify waste spending

"Can't really cut back on fire safety".

"Needs more spent on it."

"Whilst Fire and Rescue seems like an essential service, there are certainly savings which could be made."

"basic provision only"

"cut their grossly inflated salaries and luxury work schedules"

"...retained fire(wo)men are inexpensive by comparison".

4.82 Other themes for written feedback regarding fire and rescue related to:

- Increase income (9 mentions)
- Importance of service (7 mentions)
- Service quality (6 mentions)

Community safety

Budget simulator description

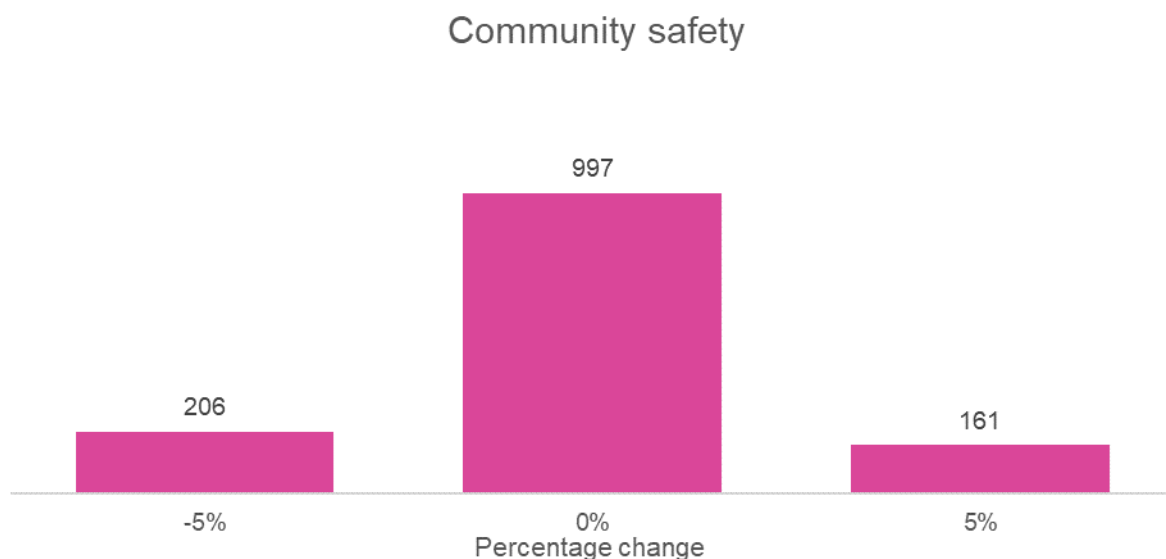
4.83 We are part of the **Safer Oxfordshire Partnership**, a group that brings together community safety partners to work together to improve outcomes for local people under the Crime and Disorder Regulations 2007. Our **trading standards** services keep Oxfordshire's individuals, communities, businesses and livestock safe from harm. Our enforcement work protects the public, the environment, consumers and others. We help businesses and others to meet their legal obligations, including prosecution where appropriate, against those who flout the law or act irresponsibly.

We meet our legal duties for **emergency planning** (Civil Contingency Act 2004) by supporting organisational resilience and business continuity. We also provide business continuity advice to local businesses. Our **gypsy and traveller service** deals with unauthorised encampments and manages the six county council owned permanent gypsy and traveller sites, which generate income for the council. We also conduct consultation and negotiations between the gypsy and traveller communities and settled communities.

4.84 The community safety group had just one slider.

- Just over one in four respondents (27%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area
- Near equal proportions of respondents increased the budget for community safety (12%) and as decreased it (15%).
- This service saw a small negative average budget percentage change of -0.16%, ranked 5 of the 20 service items
- The chart below shows how people responded for community safety as presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for community safety



Written feedback

- 4.85 In all, 58 people gave written feedback on the 'community safety' section of the simulator, which included 58 different comments. The key theme was 'reduce spending' (18 mentions), which can be further broken down into: 'make efficiencies across the council' (10 mentions), reduce services (6 comments), largely focussed on reducing/removing of the traveller services and early intervention to reduce future costs.

"Identify non critical services and cut them, remove process waste and non-value add activity".

"Reduction of traveller support specifically".

"Investing in proactive work reduces overall workload balancing the spend while lowering the crime".

- 4.86 Other themes for written feedback regarding community safety related to:
- misunderstanding of the OCC power/responsibilities (9 mentions)
 - do not reduce spending (8 mentions)
 - importance of service (5 mentions)
 - service quality (5 mentions)
 - council should not provide this service (3 mentions)
 - increase income (3 mentions)

Libraries, museums and history services

Budget simulator descriptions

- 4.87 By law (Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964) we must provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service' for all persons who live, work and study in Oxfordshire. Our 44 libraries deliver a universal service for everyone in our communities, although we recognise that not everyone wants or needs a library. While many visitors use our library to borrow books and find useful information, they are also safe and welcoming places for people to gather, use free Wi-fi and public access computers and make social connections. We know some people cannot get to library buildings; so we also offer a libraries app, a range of online resources and a home library service for vulnerable adults.

We care for and preserve Oxfordshire's history and heritage through five cultural venues:

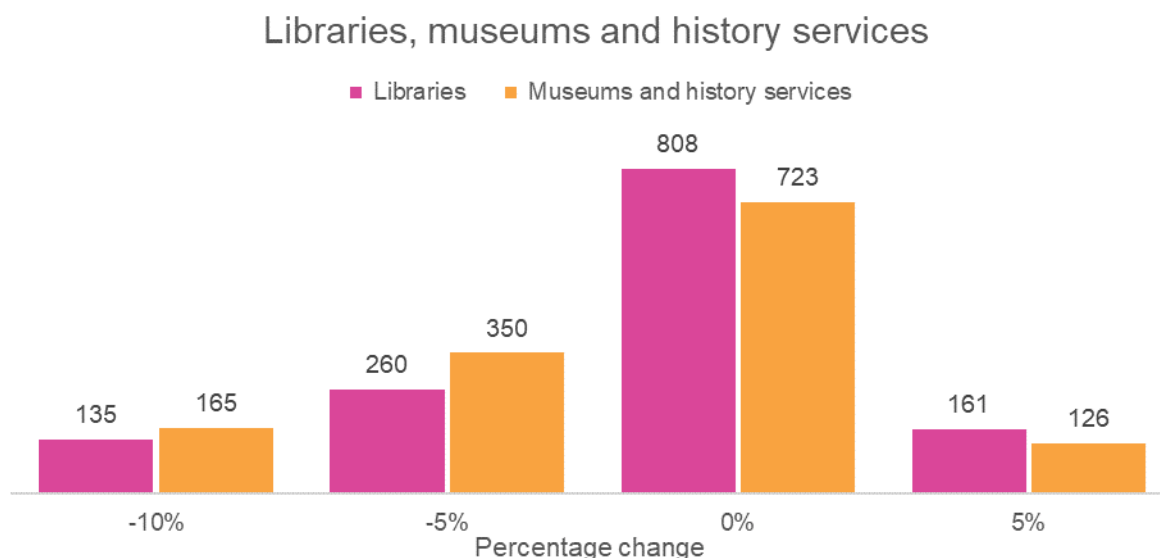
- Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock (housing our permanent collections, the exhibitions and activities programme)
- Museums Resource Centre in Standlake (housing our reserve collections, and the learning and access service)
- Swalcliffe Barn near Banbury (a Grade 1 listed medieval barn, housing large agricultural and trade vehicles)
- The remains of the Bishop's Palace in Witney
- Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley (housing the county's public archives, records and core local history collection)

We deliver a universal service (with some statutory responsibilities) for everyone in the community, although we recognise not everyone wants or needs history and heritage services. As well as running our own cultural venues, we also support a wide range of organisations providing access to heritage across the county, such as the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire.

4.88 The libraries, museums and history services grouping contained two sliders: libraries, and museums and history services.

- Nearly half of the respondents chose to move one or more sliders in the libraries, museums and history services group to either increase or decrease funding in this area. 41% moved the slider for libraries and 47% moved the slider for museums and history services.
- Similar proportions of respondents (around one in ten) increased the budget for libraries (12%) as for museums and history services (9%).
- Sizeable numbers of respondents chose to decrease the budget service items in this grouping, with notably more for history services (38%) than for libraries (29%).
- Both service options saw sizeable negative average budget percentage changes: libraries (-1.35%, ranked 15 out of 20) and museums and history services (-2.03%, ranked 17 out of 20).
- The chart below shows how people responded for both items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for libraries, museums and history services



Written feedback

4.89 In all, 111 people gave written feedback on the 'libraries, museums and history services' section of the simulator, which included 157 different comments. Note: for these service groups people had strong opinions about specific parts of the service (libraries, museums or the history service), but had different

opinions about other parts – eg people often felt one section of the service should be protected, whereas another part of the service could be reduced. This made analysis of this section quite tricky to report on.

4.90 From reviewing the comments, the key themes emerging were:

- Reduce spending (45 mentions)
- Importance of service (40 mentions)
- Increase income (34 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (21 mentions)

4.91 The area that received the most comments overall, related to reducing spending (45). Of all comments, approximately half (24) indicated that services should be reviewed for efficiencies and/or to identify waste spending. Note: two thirds of these (18) seemed to be commenting about all parts of the service, and a third (6) referred to libraries only.

“I think there could either be options to combine some of these services (museums could also house libraries for example or vice versa)...”

“Reducing opening hours for library services and combining library space for other social services such as youth groups could save money and encourage reading.”

4.92 About a third (16) made comments which related to reducing services. Of these, three quarters (12) seemed to relate to all parts of the service, and a quarter (4) were just in relation to museums. A few people (3) made comments linked to reducing staffing, but these were all suggestions to recruit more volunteers to support the service, alongside volunteers already being used.

“I'd reduce these by much more: the world has changed since these services began: time for a rethink.”

“There are many Talented Volunteers who would be delighted to support libraries and museums in addition to the Already Committed Volunteers.”

4.93 The second highest area receiving comments related to how important the libraries, museums and history service is (40). Of all comments, just under two thirds (25 people) commented that the service was very important. Of these, 12 applied to all parts of the service, 10 comments referring to libraries, 2 to museums and 1 to the history service. Other comments showed that although people valued the services, it was felt they could be reduced, if necessary, unlike other kinds of services.

“Libraries and Museums don't cost much, and yet provide many support services, such as WiFi or even someone to talk to at times. Effective way of providing self-adult social care”

“Important services but should not be exempt from modest cuts although all must be kept open...”

4.94 Just over a third (15 people) felt the service was not important, with most seeming to refer to the whole service, but about a third mainly referring just to libraries.

“Libraries are merely nostalgia in an age where everyone is permanent connected to the internet

“Libraries are essential, museums are not”.

4.95 Comments made in relation to increasing income (34) were split, with more than half (20) suggesting increasing costs to residents to use the service and just over a third (13) suggesting an additional source of income, with ideas including seeking voluntary support/more use of volunteers, getting support from the universities, getting commercial sponsorship for museums, finding ways to bring in more money from tourists, allowing private hire of spaces, closer collaboration with the private sector to partially fund services, reducing books and prioritising online services.

“These can be self funded through admission charges”

“seek voluntary support to offset gap”.

4.96 Of those who made a comment related to not reducing spending (21), just over half (11) wanted to protect the service, with current spending maintained and a similar number (10) felt service provision and/or spending should be increased.

“Libraries are a vital resource and should be funded. Please don’t cut these!”

“It’s very cheap to improve these services, but it can make a significant difference”.

4.97 Other themes for written feedback regarding libraries, museums and history services related to:

- Service quality (8 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (6 mentions)
- Waste (1 mention)

Running the business

Budget simulator description

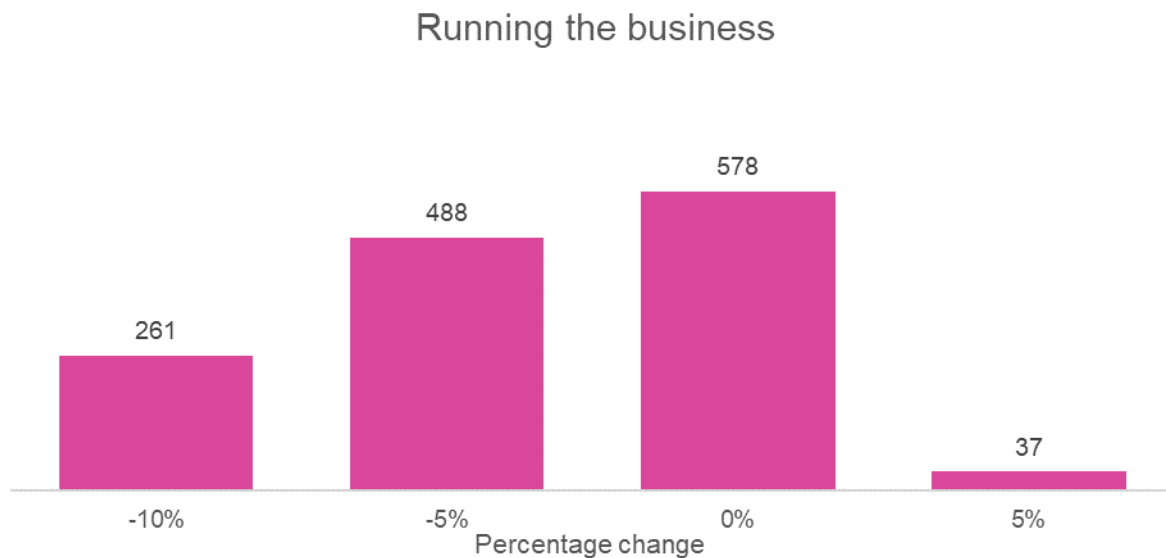
4.98 The county council needs services which support and enable us to deliver our wide range of services to Oxfordshire’s residents and communities and meet our statutory and legal responsibilities. These services include finance, human resources, information technology, law and governance, communications, customer services, policy and performance, procurement and property services.

4.99 The running the business group had just one slider.

- Nearly six in ten respondents (58%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area
- Over half of all respondents chose to decrease the budget for running the business (55%) and only 3 per cent increased it.

- This service option saw the largest negative average budget percentage change of -3.57%, ranked bottom (20) of the 20 service items
- The chart below shows how people responded for running the business as presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for running the business



Written feedback

4.100 157 people gave written feedback on the ‘running the business’ section of the simulator, which included 179 different comments. Most comments coalesce around the theme of ‘reduce spending’ (147 mentions). When we look into this more closely we can see that there are two significant areas of comment. The most common with 83 comments were for the council to be more efficient such as by reducing bureaucracy, introducing automation/self-service and making better use of buildings.

‘An efficiency drive seems appropriate. More automation and self-service.’

4.101 The other area of reducing spending had 55 comments related to reducing staffing/staff pay. Many of these comments included suggesting the top salaries should be reduced; and that reducing pensions could be a way to save money. There were comments that savings should not be at the detriment of staff who delivered services on the ground.

‘Stop wasting our money on over inflated salaries and pensions. Enough’.

‘Cut the numbers, salaries and benefits of senior staff rather than junior front line.’

4.102 Other themes for written feedback regarding running the business related to:

- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (8 mentions)
- Feedback on the budget simulator (6 mentions)

- Do not reduce spending (5 mentions)
- Increase income (4 mentions)
- Service quality (3 mentions)

Council Tax

4.103 Budget simulator users were informed that in Oxfordshire, council tax bills are made up of several different amounts of money that go to different organisations and that Oxfordshire County Council's element of their council tax bill is made up of two parts:

- The 'core' or general council tax used for all county council services, including highway maintenance; children and adult social care; waste management and recycling; fire and rescue, and libraries.
- An adult social care 'precept', which is an additional charge on top of core council tax that can only be spent on adult social care services.

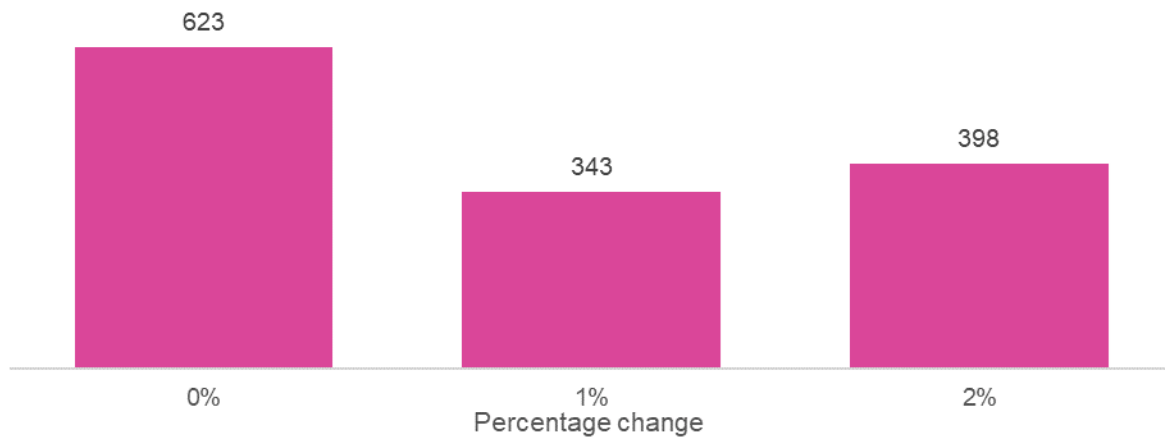
Budget simulator users were also informed that

- Councils are allowed to increase their core council tax rate each year to cover inflation and other costs (reflecting the expectations of government), to 2.99 per cent before needing a local referendum.
- In 2023/24 and for 2024/25, government also gave councils the flexibility to raise an adult social care precept of up to two per cent.
- Our medium-term financial strategy (and draft budget) is based on the maximum government-expected 4.99 per cent council tax.

4.104 The council tax slider had three options as follows:

- 0%: Our current medium term financial strategy includes the maximum government expected 4.99 per cent rise, (including 2 per cent ringfenced for adult social care). This is shown as 0 per cent in the simulator.
- 1%: Increasing this by one per cent is equal to an overall 5.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £4.8m for services.
- 2%: Our current medium term financial strategy includes the maximum government expected 4.99 per cent rise, (including 2 per cent ringfenced for adult social care). Increasing this by one per cent is equal to an overall 6.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £9.2m for services.

Council tax



- Overall, 741 people chose to increase council tax on top of the 4.99% already proposed
- On average, the budget simulator shows that people were willing to increase by 0.84 per cent. To enact this, a referendum would be required.
- 343 people (25 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by an additional one per cent (to 5.99%)
- 398 people (29 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by an additional two per cent (to 6.99%)

Written feedback

4.105 203 people gave written feedback on the council tax section of the simulator, which included 236 different comments. The primary theme was around increasing income (194 mentions), including:

- Increase in council tax is acceptable (86)
- Increase in council tax is not acceptable (38)
- Review of council tax banding so that higher value properties pay more (34)
- Reduction in council tax (27)

4.106 Of those comments which related to increasing income, 185 of these related directly to council tax. Whilst more people who commented acknowledged that raising the council tax was acceptable, many comments were with an element of reluctance, in order to allow services to continue or be improved.

“If all the services are required, council tax should be increased but departments should be charged with making savings also.”

4.107 Many respondents did not find any increase in council tax acceptable, and felt that the council wasted money, should find efficiencies, cut staff and find other ways to finance services.

“It’s already too high and this feels like a sorry excuse to justify increasing it when the council has wasted millions on its foolish schemes to reduce speed limits across the county.”

“The council tax is already at an all time high and increasing it further will severely damage the capacity to own homes and ability to afford rental properties.”

4.108 A significant number of comments suggested that council tax bandings should be reviewed, particularly for higher value properties.

“A re-evaluation of housing bands for Council tax is long overdue.”

4.109 Whilst the budget simulator didn’t provide an option for reducing council tax, 27 people felt that council tax should be reduced and some commented that they were frustrated that this wasn’t an option in the simulator.

“Don’t seem to be able to reduce this - why not?”

“Should reduce council tax, the burden is too high, my council tax is more than all my other bills combined.”

4.110 Here is a high-level thematic summary of the other comments made for council tax:

- Reduce spending (22 mentions)
- Roads and transport (6 mentions)
- Climate action (3 mentions)
- Feedback on the budget simulator (3 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (3 mentions)
- Waste (3 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power or responsibilities (2 mentions)

5. Budget proposals feedback form

Introduction and methodology

- 5.1 Between Wednesday 29 November 2023 and Wednesday 10 January 2024, the council invited comments on its draft proposed budget for 2024/25 as published as published for consideration by performance and corporate services overview and scrutiny committee on 8 December 2023. Residents and stakeholders were also signposted to the budget proposals and supporting papers and encouraged to engage with these detailed before sharing their feedback.
- 5.2 Feedback was primarily collated using an online feedback form on Let's talk Oxfordshire, with residents and stakeholders also able to submit comments by letter or email.
- 5.3 The feedback form was promoted alongside the budget simulator, to a wide range audiences, using a range of communications channels. This included organic and paid for social media advertising, eNewsletters, internal communications for council staff and councillors and targeted stakeholder communications. The social media posts stimulated many comments, largely negative in sentiment.
- 5.4 Out of 140 people who filled in our online feedback form, exactly 100 provided comments.
- most stated they were county residents (113 respondents).
 - 2 respondents said they were councillors, and one said they represented a business
 - 70 respondents identified as men and 43 as women
 - most were older adults aged over 45 years (100 respondents)
 - most identified themselves as white (102), with 7 respondents stating they identified as from another ethnic group
 - 25 respondents stated their day-to-day activities were limited because of a long-term illness, health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months.

Key findings

- 5.5 While we expressly invited people to give feedback on our published budget proposals, nearly all respondents used this opportunity to give general feedback on council services, spending and budget matters with many sharing their views on a range of matters. It should be noted however, that nine per cent of comments criticised the poor presentation and inaccessibility of the council's budget papers
- 5.6 Highways and transport were the two primary themes, accounting for 69 per cent of all comments. Specifically for highways, people took the opportunity to feedback that they felt Oxfordshire roads were in poor conditions and to complain about the volume of potholes (16 comments). A smaller proportion

felt that street cleansing and footpath, cycle path and verge maintenance should be improved (9 comments).

- 5.7 In terms of transport schemes, active travel initiatives (22 comments), 20mph zones (14 comments), ZEZs (4 comments) and workplace parking levy (6 comments) all came under criticism, with most people who commented considering these to be 'a waste of money' and 'politically driven' projects.
- 5.8 Support for funding for proposed rail projects (Witney & Grove specifically) featured in four per cent of all responses (4 comments) and we also received two letters of support (of very similar content); one from Railfuture and the other from a member of the public.
- 5.9 Sixteen per cent of responses (16 comments) focussed on council tax. Specifically, respondents shared that they would be willing to support an increase in council tax to pay for services (8 comments) and/or that they feel there is a need to reform council tax bands (3 comments).
- 5.10 Two stakeholders and one member of the public wrote directly to the council, with detailed submissions. These have been summarised below, all were transport related.

Rail specialist interest group (Railfuture, Thames Valley branch)

While the group recognised the financial pressures the council is under, they considered it vital that bus and train services are maintained and enhanced across the county. They stated that a lack of public transport is forcing increased car use, going against the stated environmental objectives of the county, city and district councils and adding to congestion. They considered this problem has been exacerbated because so many new housing developments are located away from bus routes and railway stations. The group strongly supported the various rail schemes which have been developed in consultation with the county council and others which set out a number of vital investments at Cowley, Hanborough, Didcot and Wantage/Grove Parkway.

They considered these to be important schemes to enhance the rail network where continued budgetary provision from the council is necessary to support the business cases in order to obtain approval from DfT. They also suggested budgetary provision is vital to implement planned bus/rail interchanges at Banbury and Culham and the associated expansion of bus services linking to many more stations.

Email submission from a member of the public:

This response replicated that of the rail specialist interest group above.

Transport specialist interest group (CoHSAT - Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel)

Whilst recognising the significant budgetary burden of adult and child social care services, they considered that the benefits of active travel could help reduce costs in this area through resultant improvements to physical and mental health.

They agreed with capital budget proposals to help reduce the chronic traffic congestion in Oxford city, towns and the county as a whole. They would like to see full implementation of traffic filters, ZEZs and the workplace parking levy as set out in the central Oxford travel plan in 2022.

They also supported funding for a feasibility study for the Eynsham – Salt Cross A40 Underpass/Bridge to avoid Salt Cross becoming another ‘severed development’ of the type that has become car-dependent in Didcot and around Oxford.

They proposed the Active Travel hub be provided with a small capital budget for small works (e.g. lining, barrier removal, dropped kerbs, benches, minor junction improvements) that can significantly improve walking, wheeling or cycling experiences. They suggested £200,000 to be appropriate.

6. “Let’s talk budget” – Sounding Boards

Introduction and approach

- 6.1 On Friday 17 November and Friday 24 November 2024 we held two in-person sounding boards for secondary school aged children.
- 6.2 The aims of the sounding boards were to:
- engage young people in citizenship conversations and specifically how the council and local politics work, the role of the council, its services and priorities and how it is financed
 - help young people to understand more about personal money management, using a simulated exercise
 - seek feedback on their priorities for the council and its services
- 6.3 The Oxford budget sounding board was attended by 43 young people, from three schools in the central Oxford area and Banbury. The Didcot budget sounding board was attended by 45 young people from 4 schools in the surrounding area, including one school for young people with learning disabilities, one all boys school and one all girls school and a private school.
- 6.4 Both budget sounding boards followed a standard agenda:

Agenda	
9:30am	Arrive & register
10:00	Welcome: housekeeping and icebreaker
10:20	Session 1: How decisions are made and what the council does
10:50	Session 2: How Oxfordshire County Council manages the budget
11:05	Break and back to seats
11:25	Session 3: Budgeting skills Activity: Solve Sam’s budget
12:05	Feedback: What did we find out?
12:10	Lunch Back at 12:45
12:50	Quick Quiz
12:55	Session 5: What are your priorities?
13:40	Evaluation and talk by the county council future generations champion
13:55	Thank you and close

- 6.5 The sounding boards were hosted by one of the council's engagement specialists. Three cabinet members co-hosted different elements of the day to frame discussions and were also on hand to answer questions and listen at first-hand to what the young people had to say. All the discussions and activities were facilitated by council staff, with mixed groups across all schools to ensure each group had a variety of different views and experiences. Teachers moved around the room and supported students where/when they were needed.

Key findings

- 6.6 The following paragraphs summarise the outputs of voting and discussions by young people across both sounding boards as relevant to the 2024/2025 budget. A full report of the entire sounding board is published on Let's talk Oxfordshire.

Budget management

- 6.7 Sounding board participants were given an overview of the financial challenges that the council faces by a cabinet member attending and asked to feedback if they agreed or disagreed with each of a list of four possible approaches that the council could take to make savings (framed for the young people as 'reduce our costs' and a further four possible approaches the council could take to generate income (framed for the young people as bring in extra money). Each student was able to give one answer to each statement. However, some students didn't vote on all the statements, and some voted more than once.

Reduce our costs (make savings)

- 6.8 Overall, there was support from a clear majority of young people at the two sounding boards for the council to reduce costs by using digital technology to deliver services (74 agreed) and by negotiating with organisation to make sure we get the best value for money from the contracts we have (64 young people agreed). These two options were also perceived as acceptable by a strong majority of adults in our 2023 residents' survey.
- 6.9 A majority of young people disagreed that the council should be spending less on staff (64 agreed) and opinion was more divided on the council spending less on 'nice to have' services we choose to offer, but don't have to by law. 43 young people disagreed, 12 agreed and 19 could not express an opinion. 10 young people did not know. The views of young people diverged from adults in our 2023 residents' survey, in terms of the reducing spending on staffing with a majority supporting this option but like the young people, opinion was more divided on charging.

Statement	I agree	I don't have an opinion	I disagree	I don't know
By using digital technology to deliver services such as: online application forms, digital payments and self-service checkouts	74	8	3	3
By negotiating with organisations who provide services, to make sure we get the best value for money from the contracts we have.	64	2	5	2
By spending less on 'nice to have' services we choose to offer, but don't have to by law	12	19	43	10
Spending less on staff such as: redesigning services so we need fewer people to deliver them, not filling jobs when people leave, and using fewer agency staff to fill gaps	11	9	64	2

Bring in extra money (generate income)

- 6.10 A majority of sounding board attendees did not think the council should use council savings or reserves to generate income (78 disagreed and only one young person was in favour). This was a clear view compared to adults in the 2023 residents' survey who were more divided in opinion, however the wording for the young people was more stark and clearly spelled out the consequences. Similar to adults in the 2023 residents' survey, most young people also disagreed with the council increasing council tax (71 disagreed and six young people were in favour)
- 6.11 Sounding board attendees were divided in opinion on whether the council should 'bring in extra money by charging more rent for council buildings and land, and/or by selling the buildings and land we no longer need' (35 young people agreed versus 43 young people who disagreed). It is important to note, that discussions at the table indicated that some young people thought this may include charging more in rent for council houses, which is not a county council responsibility.
- 6.12 More sounding board attendees disagreed (39 attendees) with the council 'bringing in extra money by charging more for services we are allowed (by law) to ask people to pay for, and by increasing fees/fines people have to pay if they break council rules', than were positive about this option (19 attendees); a reverse of the views of adults expressed in the 2023 residents survey. A high level of attendees did not have an opinion (21 attendees), unlike for the other propositions put forward.

Statement	I agree	I don't have an opinion	I disagree	I don't know
Charging more rent for council buildings and land, and/or by selling the buildings and land we no longer need	35	7	43	3
Charging more for services we are allowed (by law) to ask people to pay for, and by increasing fees/fines people have to pay if they break council rules	19	21	39	3
Increasing how much households have to pay in council tax	6	6	71	2
Using council savings (our financial reserves) ... but once our savings have gone, they've gone forever	1	4	78	1

Service priorities

- 6.13 To help the young people to get into the mindset of making difficult decisions, a short exercise was run to explore their top four service priorities and the reasons why. For this task the young people were given a list of 20 county council services and were asked to identify 'which FOUR services are most important for local people? This was done in group format and there were fourteen tables of young people across both sounding boards.
- 6.14 The views expressed and views largely coalesced around three service areas:
- **secondary education (over 11 years):** voted by 10 tables. This was selected because of how important education is for the future and how it will impact lives later in life. Several comments also mentioned that primary education was just as important for basic reading and writing and that it was hard to separate the two levels of education.
 - **fire and rescue service – emergency response:** voted by 9 tables. This was selected because this service is too important to lose, it saves lives
 - **public health:** voted by 8 tables. This was selected because it is for everyone, that public health was a right so that people could keep healthy and improve the quality of their life
- 6.15 A further three service areas ranked in joint fourth place, voted for by seven of the fourteen tables.
- **Children's social care (protecting and supporting vulnerable children and families).** No supporting comments given.

- **Primary education (5 -11 years).** This was selected because: a good foundation in education can be built on and it sets you up for future learning and jobs.
- **Support/care for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, and/or mental health problems, general frailty.** This was selected because: it is important to ensure essential services are provided to vulnerable people as they need more support to do the things others can do and for those who don't have people to help them.

6.16 To a much lesser extent, the following five services were prioritised a small number of sounding board attendees:

- Managing the road network (eg traffic lights, speed limits, traffic and transport information etc.) (voted by 2 tables)
- Registration of births and deaths, and ceremonies including marriages and citizenship (voted by 2 tables)
- Road and transport schemes (e.g. new or improved junctions, bus lanes, cycle lanes etc.) (voted by 2 tables)
- Early years education (birth to 4 years) (voted by 1 table)
- Support/care for older people (over 65) (voted by 1 table)

6.17 The following county council services were not selected at all in this exercise:

- Countryside services (eg rights of way)
- Fire and rescue service - public safety and road safety advice and support
- Household waste and recycling centres (tips)
- Libraries
- Maintenance of pavements
- Maintenance of roads
- Museums and history service (Oxfordshire Museum, local history service, Victoria County History etc.)
- Parking (enforcement, controlled parking zones, on-street parking)
- Trading standards (responsible for enforcing a range of consumer protection and/or public safety legislation)

Strategic priorities

6.18 To help the young people gain a better understanding of the council's vision and strategic priorities, information was provided to young people both in presentative format and in writing to consider and discuss as a group.

6.19 For this task young people had to decide which of the 9 council strategic priorities were most important (select two) and the least important (select 2) strategic priorities, again adapting a question from the 2023 residents' survey. The table below presents the outcomes of the young people's deliberations. It should be noted however, that was a challenging exercise for the young people and some groups could not finalise their most and least important strategic priorities.

Strategic priority	Top 2 most important priorities	Top 2 least important priorities
Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential	8	1
Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents	7	0
Support carers and the social care system	3	1
Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire	3	1
Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit	2	4
Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work	1	1
Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.	0	8
Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy	0	5
Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces	0	4

Top two strategic priorities

6.18 Two strategic priorities, where selected more frequently than any others by sounding board attendees in their top two priorities, there were:

- **Creating opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential:** selected by 8 tables. The reasons for its selection included: education and opportunities for young people help them thrive and to consider their future from jobs to the environment.
- **Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents:** selected by 7 tables. The reasons for its selection were: residents need to be healthy so they can live good lives and thrive in the community and work and help towards ill health and other needs.

The two priorities were also important to adults in the 2023 residents' survey.

6.19 The following county council strategic priorities were not selected by any of the tables of young people in their **top two most important priorities**:

- Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network
- Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy
- Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces

This differs from the views expressed by adults in the residents' survey, where a sizeable number of people prioritised Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.

Top two strategic priorities

6.20 Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network was the most frequently selected strategic priority in sounding board attendees top two **least important priorities** (selected by 8 tables). This is a surprise finding as in previous focus group discussions with young people to help shape the 9 priorities, this was identified as being very important. Adults were more divided in their opinion in the 2023 residents' survey.

6.21 Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network was selected in tables **top two least important priorities** because: other issues are more important and that the elements of climate change within this priority was already addressed in the climate change strategic priority.

6.22 Other strategic priorities selected by at least four tables; top two least important priorities were:

- Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy (selected by 5 tables). This was because: other strategic priorities were more important and that as they were young didn't have a vote.
- Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces (selected by 4 tables). This was because: although nice to have especially for mental health, it wasn't as important as the other priorities.
- Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit (selected by 4 tables). This was because: other issues were more important.

6.23 Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents was not selected by any of the tables of young people in their **top two least important priorities**.

7. “Let’s talk budget” - Oxfordshire Conversations

Introduction and approach

- 7.1 Between 4 December and 11 December 2023, we organised three Oxfordshire Conversations to ‘talk budget’. These sessions were designed to create an opportunity for residents to share their priorities for local services, their views on increasing council tax directly with cabinet representatives.
- 7.2 All the sessions took place online via MS Teams and were chaired by an independent facilitator from The Consultation Institute. They were widely promoted using the council’s digital channels (website, newsletters), stakeholder communications, media release and social media advertising.
- 7.3 Participants were asked to register to attend the meetings and information outlining the purpose and format of the meetings, as well as budget proposals and supporting information was shared in advance, thus providing participants with sufficient information to make informed comment.
- 7.4 In all, 32 residents participated across all three events, with 86 people registering their interest.

Date	Time	# Registered	# Participated
Monday 4 December	13:00 to 14:30	23	11
Wednesday 6 December	19:00 to 20:30	27	7
Monday 11 December	16:30 to 18:00	36	14

- 7.5 Each Oxfordshire conversation session used the following standard agenda.

Timing	Item	Who
5 minutes	Welcome and introductions	Leader
5 minutes	Housekeeping	Chair
15 minutes	Setting the scene (presentation)	Leader/cabinet member for finance
10 minutes	Immediate reactions from audience to presentation	Chair
50 minutes	Questions to panel and discussion, hosted by chair	Chair, panel comprising all attending cabinet members, supported by senior officers
5 minutes	Thank you, next steps and goodbye	Leader/ chair

- 7.6 To frame discussions, Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, informed participants about the council's vision and responsibilities. Cllr Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, explaining how the council is funded and what we spend on services. The £36 million financial pressures we are facing, how we are working to close that gap, and that a further £9.1 million needs to be found in order to set a legally balanced the budget for 2024/25.

Initial thoughts and comments

- 7.7 Following the presentation, the chair invited participants to ask questions / comment on what they had heard in the presentation. This section summarises the main themes raised by participants during all three meetings.
- Pleased to hear that the council is seeking to rationalise its property portfolio to release capital, reduce costs and bring empty buildings and land back into use. The current economic climate and how buoyant the market is for selling buildings and converting them into residential dwellings was questioned. Although capital receipts can only be used for capital projects, it was seen as important in terms of cutting costs and utilising council assets effectively. (04.12.23, 06.12.23)
 - Ensure better use of buildings, particularly given many staff are working from home or could work from home. Buildings could be better used or reduced. (06.12.23)
 - Observation that only 11% of income comes from business rates (06.12.23)
 - The link between new housing and income from council tax was noted, with a query raised about where population growth targets come from and resulting additional pressure a growing population puts on services. (06.12.23)
 - Impressed by social care figures showing increased numbers of people who have been seen and helped. But concern about unmet need. (11.12.23)
 - Feeling that people would see a value if they saw better infrastructure being maintained. Poor maintenance seen to impact people's lives eg flooding preventing people from getting to work (11.12.23)
 - It was asked how the council is seeking to use more green energy. (06.12.23)
 - Knowing more about the things that the council might need to stop doing to balance the budget and the rationale behind decisions would be beneficial. Expenditure on tree planting was highlighted as an example. (06.12.23)

Budget conversations - key findings

- 7.8 Following the opportunity to ask questions on the presentation, the discussion moved to focus on exploring service and spending priorities. This section summarises the main themes raised by participants across all three meetings.

What services matter the most?

Health and social care

- Social care was seen as an important priority area. Maintaining / increasing funding for community spaces that directly or indirectly support vulnerable people was also mentioned as being important and potentially overlooked. (04.12.23)
- Protecting adult social care services in general and supporting people in the community to live independently, in their own homes was identified as services that really matter. Supporting people when leaving hospital was highlighted. (06.12.23)
- NHS Health Checks (commissioned by Public Health) were praised as simple and effective service and seen to have a positive impact. (1.12.23)
- In terms of health and wellbeing, an early intervention, preventative approach that ultimately seeks to reduce the costs was supported. This approach was also advocated for dealing with potholes. (06.12.23)
- Concerns were raised about the low level of pay in the care sector and that working via an agency offered better pay. Increasing pay for this sector was thought to attract more people into key roles. (06.12.23)
- Developing community hubs and funding community and voluntary organisations who support vulnerable people was suggested as a way to minimise pressures on social care – something the council is looking to develop further by developing family centres, hubs, libraries and other community spaces. (04.12.23)
- How best the council and the community and voluntary sector can collectively pull together to meet the needs of people across the county – particularly health and social care. Collaborating with the community and voluntary sector to achieve better outcomes is important. (11.12.23)
- Grant funding for local community and voluntary organisations was identified as a priority, providing key services on behalf of the council. Community transport was given as an example. Working closely with and developing the community and voluntary sector was viewed as a great way to deliver services, support the voluntary sector and make savings. (04.12.23)

Highways and traffic management

- Highway maintenance was highlighted as receiving a relatively small proportion of the budget and the state of the roads in the county being poor. A long-term solution to improving roads by carrying out long lasting resurfacing rather than patch repairs was preferred and believed to be most cost effective. Tackling potholes was seen as a priority for increased funding. Although dangerous road defects are prioritised, concerns were raised about damage to vehicles. (04.12.23, 06.12.23)
- Potholes were highlighted as being particularly dangerous for cyclists. In some areas segregated cycle lanes are not joined up and just end, posing a danger to cyclist and other road users. Cowley Road was given as an example. (11.12.23)
- Along with improving and maintaining road surfaces, maintenance of lining, particularly outside schools was suggested as a priority, yet lack of funding meant it had not been done and seemingly forgotten. (04.12.23)
- Important to hold utility companies to account for substandard repairs following work in the carriageway / footway. Ensure inspections take place and the importance of local people reporting issues. (11.12.23)
- Maintaining effective traffic flow and reducing congestion, especially around the Banbury / M40 interchange was highlighted as a problem area. Being able to comment on and contribute to area transport strategies would be welcomed. (04.12.23)
- Fix My Street was generally praised as an effective mechanism for reporting issues but it could be better and some weaknesses existed. The council needs to be more responsive in terms of communication via Fix My Street, particularly regarding when things will be addressed and if not, why not. (04.12.23)

Which services should be protected?

- No one really wants cuts to services. People want to see the services they use protected. (04.12.23)
- The most vulnerable in society have to be protected first and foremost, whether it's children or people with disabilities. (11.12.23)
- Need to make sure that there is a universal level of service provision across the diverse county where high levels of need exist - balancing acute levels of need and building resilient, healthy communities. Early intervention and the wider determinants of health are important, as well as focusing on the sharp end of the most vulnerable. (11.12.23)

- Do not overlook the vital role that family and young carers play when other services are reduced. Young carers and adult carers, many of them very elderly, need a lot of help and should never be forgotten. (11.12.23)
- Although the responsibility of the city and district councils, providing affordable social housing was suggested as something that needed to be protected for the future. (06.12.23)

Which services should be reduced/cut /stopped?

- Given everything has been cut to the bone 'hammered' it was deemed very difficult to identify services to cut or stop (06.12.23)
- Reducing costs where possible e.g. minimising expensive out of county placements (children's services) (04.12.23)
- Seek to reduce energy costs and the council's carbon footprint by dimming and turning off more streetlights. (11.12.23)
- Save money through use of technology e.g. digital communications and minimise duplication. (11.12.23)
- Reducing reliance on agency staff, particularly in social care, and instead seeking to directly employ people was seen as a simple way to reduce costs. Converting agency staff into permanent employees. Hope that increased salary and on costs associated with direct employment can be offset. Likewise minimising expenditure on external consultants and instead draw on and develop internal expertise. (04.12.23, 06.12.23)

Thoughts on increasing council tax and income generation

- The proposed increase in general council tax and the social care precept was seen as the only way to generate additional income (04.12.23)
- Suggested that residents get good value in return for the council tax they pay and the feeling that Council Tax could definitely go up. (06.12.23)
- It's hard to see where savings can be made without services suffering more. Need more freedom to raise income. (11.12.23)
- Felt that it would be easy to put up fees and charges eg parking enforcement (06.12.23, 11.12.23)
- Consider a congestion charge in Oxford - in addition to traffic filters, zero emission zone and the workplace parking levy - with money raised being reinvested into transport related projects (06.12.23)

- Happy to pay a little bit more to prevent services being cut, however it was noted that amid rising inflation some people would really struggle. (06.12.23)
- Work more closely with parishes who have the freedom to set their element of council tax that can be spent on local priorities. (11.12.23)

Other comments

- Difficult choices to be made, there is a need to collaborate and involve people and resource communities and community-based organisations, to help find the solutions to really difficult choices. (11.12.23)
- It was recognised that councils across the country are struggling financially and that efforts should continue to lobby government to properly fund local government (04.12.23, 11.12.23)
- Balancing the budget and deciding where savings need to be made was described as 'being between a rock and hard place' (04.12.23)
- Feeling that the council does a good job in 'virtually impossible circumstances.' (06.12.23)

Closing remarks

- 7.9 Each Oxfordshire conversation was closed by Cllr Leffman thanking participant and outlining the next steps in the budget setting process. All participants were encouraged to also share their views using the online budget simulator.

8. “Let’s talk budget” - targeted in-person, adult focus groups

- 8.1 Between 12 December 2023 and 9 January 2024, we delivered five targeted in-person focus groups for seldom-heard adults, taking account of:
- groups with low socio-economic status (SES)
 - those who are digitally excluded
 - those protected by the Equality Act. (Protected characteristics: Age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation).
 - military families
 - carers
- 8.2 The sessions were made as accessible as possible, and were designed to enable residents to ask questions, provide in-depth feedback about their priorities for local services, to ask their views on increasing council tax, and to support people to use the online budget simulator tool (using hired iPads), to submit a balanced budget and address digital exclusion.
- 8.3 Three groups were held in areas, identified through statistics as being in the 20 per cent most deprived communities nationally: Banbury (focusing on Ruscote, Neithrop, Grimsbury), Abingdon (focusing on Caldecotte) and Oxford City (focusing on Blackbird Leys, Northfield Brook). Our fourth group centred on military families (based at RAF Benson) and our fifth group focused on adults with learning disabilities – with members of My Life My Choice (MLMC).
- 8.4 Partnership working was crucial to the delivery of the focus groups, and we worked closely with community leads who took responsibility for recruiting people to join the sessions and provided support on the day – a flyer was created to support their efforts. We would like to recognise and thank the community leads for all their support.

Local lead	Role and organisation
Lorraine Squire	Community Development Manager, The Hill Sports and Community Facility
Georgina Hicks and Sam Frankum	Centre Manager, Abingdon Carousel Family Inspiring Minds Community Group
Meg Wickett	Community Development Officer, RAF Benson
Suzy Donald	Director of Community Development, Oxford Hub
Yazz Davies and Iarfhlaith O’Connell	Deputy Charity Coordinator, My Life My Choice Research and Easy Read Coordinator, My Life My Choice

8.5 All sessions were facilitated by a council officer. A payment was offered to all attendees as an incentive and thank you for their involvement and time at sessions. Refreshments, and snacks were also provided at all sessions. In total 38 residents participated.

Date	Time	Location	# Participated
12 December 2023	12:30 to 14:30	Banbury, The Hill Community Centre,	12
13 December 2023	10:30 to 12:30	Abingdon, Preston Road Community Centre	7
14 December 2023	10:30 to 12:30	RAF Benson	7
19 December 2023	10:00 to 12:00	Windale Community Hub, The Leys, Oxford	8
9 January 2024	10:30 to 13:00	Westgate Collaboration Space, Oxford	4

8.6 The first four sessions followed the same agenda (which included a short break), and involved a mix of group activities, presentations, group discussions and an opportunity to use the budget simulator.

Timing	Item	Who
5 minutes	Welcome, introductions and housekeeping	Facilitator
7 minutes	Introduction to the council and its services	Cllr Liz Leffman (video from Oxfordshire Conversations)
10 minutes	Activity A: 'Who does what?' (tiers of government)	Small groups
13 minutes	Where the money comes from, and goes, and our current financial position	Cllr Dan Levy (video from the Oxfordshire Conversations or officer presentation)
5 minutes	Immediate reactions from group to the finance presentation	Facilitator led
10 minutes	Activity B: 'Your service priorities'	Small groups

30 minutes	Let's talk budget! Group discussion	Facilitator led
30 minutes	Activity C: Budget simulator tool. Over to you!	Group

- 8.7 Video footage from the Oxfordshire Conversations was used to frame discussions. Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, informed people about the council's vision and responsibilities.
- 8.8 We then showed a video clip of Cllr Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, from the Oxfordshire Conversations events. In the film he explains how the council is funded and what we spend on services, the £36 million financial pressures we are facing and how we are working to close that gap, and that a further £9.1 million needs to be found in order to set a legally balanced the budget for 2024/25. For two of the four groups, the video was replaced by an officer presentation, to allow for questions and points of clarification to be given in the moment.
- 8.9 The approach for the fifth session (with members of My Life My Choice) was amended to meet participants' needs. Easy Read materials were used throughout the session. Before discussing council services and finances we facilitated an activity ('Spending money – what's important to me...') to support the group to understand the importance of budgeting, and how this can involve making difficult choices.
- 8.10 It was agreed with the local lead from MLMC that this session would not include using the budget simulator tool, as it was felt that this would not be accessible to the participants.

Initial thoughts and comments

- 8.11 Residents were then invited to ask questions / comment on what they had heard in the session so far. This section of the report summarises the main themes raised by participants across all focus groups when invited to start talking budget. The bullets below are paraphrases, not verbatim comments.

Cost of living

The cost of living in Oxfordshire was acutely felt by participants across all groups.

- Oxfordshire is a very expensive county, there are some very wealthy people here. Most people on the base are posted here not from here. Need to recognise the people on lower income thresholds, but who are not vulnerable. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- We rent, one of our wages goes instantly. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- People don't have the financial buffer they used to. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Inequalities

Inequalities, its causation, the perceived role of “those in authority” in perpetuating this, and the impact on individuals and communities was discussed by the Leys group.

- Our doctors voted as one of the worst 10 in the county. Why? (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Leys leisure centre. People can't afford to go to the gym in their own area (Fusion), it's too expensive. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- The council (councillors and those in higher authority) send deprived people to Blackbird Leys (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Blackbird Leys has a bad reputation, it's not in tandem with the development that has happened around us (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Reduce our reliance on agency staff, particularly in social care

Reliance on agency staff was mentioned in the first four groups, with a lengthier discussion in the Abingdon group. Pay differences (agency staff are perceived to be paid more and have many of the same benefits of directly employed staff) is a disincentive for people to move, alongside the flexibility that agency work gives to some people.

- Never going to resolve the problem between agency and permanent staff, agency pays a lot more. If you made staff permanent, wages should be aligned with the agency staff, shouldn't be so much less. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Agency workers, get paid better and better conditions. Until there is parity they are not going to go to change. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- You need to recognise that agency works suits people really well, it's flexible, but it's not a secure job. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Carers are not getting paid enough and on time. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Embrace technology where it improves productivity and connectivity

Recognising and addressing digital exclusion was discussed in the Leys group, it was felt to be important as the council evolves, not to leave people behind.

- Technology is taking over and it's not good. We need to be more inclusive for those who do not like technology (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Commercial contracts

The value for money of the county council's highways contract was questioned at the RAF Benson group, based on experience.

Finance

- Councillor allowances: How are councillors allowed to give themselves an extra 5%? (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- “They” (the council) are separate from people on the ground (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- It’s not fair that council tax is increasing (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- The council tax referendum would cost money, and if it’s not positive it would be a waste of money. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Organisation of local government in Oxfordshire

- There are too many councils they should all be as one! (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Listening to people with learning disabilities

- Often, as people with learning disabilities, it feels like when we feedback people don’t listen to us. Our feedback isn’t as important as other people’s and what we want doesn’t happen. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- Participants wanted to see a local group set up for people with learning disabilities to give feedback to the county council. (09.01.24, MLMC) (Explained that we work with existing local groups to facilitate this, such as working with MLMC to have this session).

Service priorities

- 8.12 A short exercise was then run in all five sessions to explore the top four service priorities of participants, and the reasons why they chose them. This task was adapted from a question in the residents’ survey, and was designed to help residents get into the mindset of making difficult decisions.
- 8.13 The table below summarises the responses given across all five focus groups, which were split into 11 sub-groups. (There were three sub-groups in the Banbury session, and the other four sessions had two sub-groups each.) Of the 20 services presented, thirteen were selected once or more by the various groups. The fire and rescue emergency response service, along with people-focussed services (and specifically support for children and the most vulnerable adults), were the most frequently mentioned.

Service area	Frequency selected by 11 sub-groups	Reason for choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children’s social care (protecting and supporting vulnerable children and families) 	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children matter. (12.12.23, Banbury) • This needs improvement. Children are missed and it needs to be a priority. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Better early outcomes, less cost later. (13.12.23, Abingdon) • If children in need get better support, they might be less vulnerable as adults (13.12.23, Abingdon) • Children deserve the right start to their future to enable them to build their future. (14.12.23, RAF Benson) • Initial support can prevent further breakdown, prevention rather than reaction. (14.12.23, RAF Benson) • Lots of stuff going on in schools with bullying, and also teachers abusing children. This affects their future and carries on through life. It’s important so they can talk to someone and get the help they need. (09.01.24, MLMC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support/care for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, and/or mental health problems, general frailty 	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This supports a wide range of people. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Quality of life. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Not enough support for people with complex issues. Specialist! Ongoing cost prevention. Early support like preservation. (13.12.23, Abingdon) • Protect people in later life and people that can’t help themselves (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford) • Encompasses all ages – not just focusing on the elderly (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford) • People with disabilities or mental health problems find life harder so they need extra support to be independent and happy. (09.01.24, MLMC) • So we are made to feel equal and treated like everyone else. It protects people with disabilities. We might look the same on the outside but aren’t on the inside. (09.01.24, MLMC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire and rescue - emergency response (999) 	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do not want to die – life or death! (12.12.23, Banbury)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolutely invaluable – they need every penny to be the superheroes they are. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Quicker responses mean more lives saved! More manned places to respond faster. (13.12.23, Abingdon) • Life saving for everyone. (14.12.23, RAF Benson) • Life saving/prevention. 1 fire – entire row of houses (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford) • Keeping people safe. Important to be in local area for quick response. (09.01.24, MLMC) • It saves lives! It stops people’s dying. (09.01.24, MLMC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support/care for older people 	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a group this one impacts on us due to our age group. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Old people matter. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Because they look after you! Everyone gets old! (13.12.23, Abingdon) • As getting older I hope support will be there for my neighbours and friends. (14.12.23, RAF Benson) • Care costs are so expensive. If you have money, why should we pay so much for care? (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary education (5 -11 years) 	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is the age that is so important for the progress in the future. (12.12.23, Banbury) • I think if the system hasn’t caught you yet, it would not ever. (13.12.23, Abingdon) • To give a good start for children’s education. (14.12.23, RAF Benson) • Give best start in life (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public health (helping people to stay healthy and protecting them from health risks through services and interventions - eg tobacco control, health visiting etc). 	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public health covers all aspects of the community. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Health is so important for everyone. Thinking of COVID-19. What you can do to keep healthy. (13.12.23, Abingdon) • Health for all at all ages and stages (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford) • Because it makes it easier for people to be healthy. Helps people through workshops like cooking healthily and making sure people have the information they need to keep healthy. (09.01.24, MLMC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Household waste recycling centres (tips) 	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste is to make sure the carbon footprint is helping environment. (12.12.23, Banbury)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rats and vermin control if waste not dealt with. Effective reuse of materials (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford) • Then we know where the rubbish is going to. It's important to protect the environment and do this in an environmentally friendly way. So we live somewhere clean. Can make sure we re-use things. (09.01.24, MLMC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire and rescue public safety and road safety advice and support 	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire and Rescue covers all of general public. (12.12.23, Banbury) • Help with people getting into a dangerous situations, would help reduce the need for emergency services. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary education (11 -18 years) 	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills at an <u>opportune time</u> (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance of roads 	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost/repair. Improve roads as a safe roads help everyone get to and from point to and from point B. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing the road network 	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without good traffic infrastructure we won't be getting anywhere – includes parking, roads and pavements (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early education – birth to 4 years 	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to afford childcare. Get £100 relief each month, better not to work but then the child gets little benefits. If don't work mental health of parent affected. Not enough jobs with school hours. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registration of births and deaths, and ceremonies including marriages and citizenship 	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So you can get married, and so you can do it legally. You need a birth certificate to register your child - so they can use the NHS, buy a house and get benefits etc. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Budget conversations – key findings

- 8.14 A key section of all of the five sessions was dedicated to whole-group discussion, focusing on council services and finances, based on the following four questions:
- Question 1: What services matter to you most?
 - Question 2: Which services do you think we should protect?
 - Question 3: Which services do you think we should spend less on/reduce?
 - Question 4: Should council tax be increased?
- 8.15 Questions one and two were largely discussed together by the groups, as the services that mattered most were also the ones they wanted to protect. This

section of the report summaries the themes from the main budget discussion across all five focus groups. The bullets below are paraphrases, not verbatim comments.

Questions 1 and 2: Which services matter most/should be protected?

Children's services

Children's services were spontaneously discussed in all five groups, but most extensively in Abingdon. The concept of early help (largely in terms of age) and support was a thread that ran through discussions on children's services, with prevention of future issues/crisis being a key driver.

- Anything to do with children. Give them a good start in life, without support at that early stage it starts a vicious circle. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Left to 'rot' more if they are struggling (12.12.23, Banbury)
- Education, children's services (Banbury)

Early years support

- Focus strongly on supporting children (and their families) in their early years, to prevent them from ending up in mental health crisis later. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Early intervention is really important. If the early intervention is there, there has to be a cost saving later on. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Education

- People will be more of a burden if not educated. Needs to be more practical skills/life skills in education. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Lack of training for people. This should be included whilst people are in school eg life skills. Bring businesses to teach and train children in schools (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- It's important for children to learn what they need for life. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- The social aspect is important, they can meet different people and make friends and be happy. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- Children should learn about learning disabilities in school, it's good for them to learn about different people. (09.01.24, MLMC)

SEND

- Focus on SEND. Crisis with SEND support in school (assessments). Not that there is not a willingness from schools, but they don't have the budget for SEND support and early intervention too. That early intervention at primary age is important. Hopefully will not end up in mental health crisis later. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Childrens services

- Support for sexual health/domestic abuse, if you don't have support like the Hill, it's difficult for families. (12.12.23, Banbury)
- Foster care, no/not enough support. (12.12.23, Banbury)

Mental health

- Children's mental health, when waiting for a diagnosis, we worry about support for education. (12.12.23, Banbury)
- Children's mental health, very long wait between appointments (7 years). If children are supported more during their time of need, won't get to crisis point later. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Youth services

- A lot of the youth services there used to be when I grew up aren't there anymore. Youth services can give support alongside CAMHS (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Voluntary and community-led provision

- Job to be done here in terms of mapping services. There are services in the community that can help (not diagnosis) but a problem with awareness raising/community knowledge that they are there. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Health and social care

Health and social care services were also discussed in all five groups and in particular in Abingdon, Banbury, RAF Benson and My Life My Choice. The Leys group felt strongly that these should be protected but did not debate this topic in detail.

- These services should be protected: public health, mental health services, protecting the vulnerable people. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Adult and health and wellbeing services (12.12.23, Banbury)
- Large range of people do not get support (12.12.23, Banbury)

Support for older people

- No one has mentioned the elderly, it's one of the key things we should protect. They looked after you and they get old. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Support for older people over 65. More support should be given to older people. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Older people want to live their own lives, support helps them keep some independence. (09.01.24, MLMC)

- People can get very lonely staying at home. Lockdown was especially hard and some people are still stuck at home. They need help to go out and see people or they need visitors. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- It helps to keep them safe. If they fell at home and lived alone then nobody would know and they need help. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Health and wellbeing

- Everyone is happier if they are healthier. Children are far more at risk of smoking and unhealthy eating, which will impact them as adults. Behavioural change activities need to be more fun, need more in the community, more awareness. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Main one for me is the support for mental health. Matters most and shouldn't be reduced. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Support for carers

- There's little or no support for carers. Staff who are carers (employed) are not supported. Young carers need more support (12.12.23, Banbury)

Adult social care

- Not all changes work. As cost savings in day services for older people we had to mix in with day services with learning disabilities and it didn't work. The older people disappeared because people don't want to go. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Support/care for vulnerable groups

- Supporting vulnerable people is really important. If I didn't have support I would be home all day all the time and would be really down. I think I would end up in hospital again. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- Without help I wouldn't have been able to get a job. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Highways

Highways matters were discussed in length in the Leys group and at RAF Benson, in particular perceived inefficiencies and the human impact, with discontent expressed.

Highways maintenance

- Maintenance of pavements, potholes, roads are atrocious in Oxford 19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Companies are taking too long to repair roads. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Roadworks and potholes. The work done is not good enough quality, not lasting and it's a perpetual cycle. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

- Keeping the road verges long is ridiculous. I can't see round the corner, dangerous, I can't see round the corner and what is the point of encouraging wildlife near roads? (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

Street lighting

- No streetlights in certain areas and not repaired as quickly (we need this to be safe, not good for people) (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Parking

- Parking is an issue; we need to have more parking spaces. Many shops that you can't go to now (East Oxford) as there is nowhere to park. If you don't have your car, you can't carry it home if it's a big shop. 19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Other council services

Other council services considered to be important and/or protected by individual groups were:

Fire and rescue service

- Fire and rescue, 999 emergency response. It's very important. Do valuable work with little pay (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Fire service (12.12.23, Banbury)
- Fire and rescue service – public safety and road safety advice and support. It's very important. It saves people's lives if they don't have the fires in the first place. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Libraries

- Libraries: young people and older people use them. If done in the right way, they are social places. Needs to be supported, need to work with communities. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Libraries are very important for people with learning disabilities. They are a safe and quiet space that you can go to during the day. There are people there that will help you if you need help and it's a free space for everyone. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- It is one of the few places you can go these days where you don't have to spend money (09.01.24, MLMC)

Household waste recycling centres (HWRCs)

- Household waste recycling centres, encourage people to take their waste to the tip. Should be an incentive to use the tips. People fly tip when HWRC sites are not open, you can see evidence of dumped materials on the approach to them. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

- Give a financial incentive to recycle such as bottle deposit schemes. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

Other services

Although not specifically under the county council's remit, we do have a partnership role in these areas:

- Public transport: if train fees, bus fares were a reasonable rate and they ran at better times, aligned to working hours we would use them more. Would be better for climate change. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Manage e-scooters, considered dangerous. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Planning, build on brownfield not greenfield. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- NHS provision. (14.12.23, RAF Benson – general, 19.12.23, Leys, Oxford - GPs, 12.12.23, Banbury – ambulance services)
- Water, quality and sewage flooding. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Local shops are no more. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Question 3: Which services do you think we should spend less on/reduce?

Museums and history services

Museums and history services were mentioned spontaneously by the Abingdon and RAF Benson group. Neither group wanted the services to disappear, rather they wanted the council to focus on income generation or privatisation.

- Possibly museums. Would be sad, children may lose out. Instead of it being free for all, maybe should charge people a £1 to keep it going? (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Lot more important things to protect than this. Could they charge a fee, privatise it. Someone else: still think they provide a service, its education. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

Highways

Highways services were identified as an area by the Abingdon group, where spending could be reduced, but service delivery could be maintained or improved by getting others such as housing developers and utilities companies to do the work.

- Better coordination is needed when highways are repaired and when utilities dig it up. That's what causes the potholes. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- If the telecoms companies come in and dig a section of road up, they should also fix the potholes next to it. It doesn't matter whose responsibility it is. Collaborate, join up. For example, if Thames Water is digging up the road and need to repair it, why can't they just resurface it at the same time? (13.12.23, Abingdon)

- The building companies building new housing, their heavy goods vehicles are damaging the road they should be paying to repair it. (13.12.23, Abingdon)

Countryside services

The My Life My Choice group felt that countryside services could be reduced, compared to other services, as they were less important.

- I'm not in the countryside so it's not important to me. It doesn't affect most people because we live in towns and cities. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- It is less important that keeping people safe. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Parking

The My Life My Choice group felt that parking services could also be reduced, which led to a wider discussion on travel and parking.

- Too much is spent on it and people don't follow the rules anyway. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- People should go on the bus more and park their cars less, it's better for the environment. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- Make it cheaper to park in Oxford and then more people will come and spend more time there and then you will make more money overall. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- The blue badge scheme is really important and should be kept, but it is important to make sure only people who really need them get them. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Doing things differently

When posed with this question, the RAF Benson group started thinking creatively about how services could be maintained by doing things differently.

Street lighting

- Why do the lights need to be on all the time. I grew up in the countryside, it was dark. Could they go off? If there was a sensor on the light, the light would come on when needed.

Parking enforcement

- Parking, free zones are good it does encourage people to use the shops, but you don't need people to patrol parking. Instead use cameras, develop an app for citizens' self-reporting of illegal parking. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

Registration services

- Have to pay for registration services, should be able to go online and just get a piece of paper – go digital, automate. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)

Council management (general)

The Leys group felt the council should look inwards and challenge our working practices.

- Reduce red tape and bureaucracy. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Be more efficient and effective. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Bring things back under council control and less subcontracting. Take learning from the private sector into your own workforce and then bring services back. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Increasing council tax isn't necessarily what you need to do to bring in money, we need to pick up where inefficiencies are. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- In July, Birmingham City Council went broke, example of a council mismanaging its money. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Question 4: Thoughts on increasing council tax and income generation

Overwhelmingly it was felt that council tax should not increase. However, some felt, that if people could afford it, they should pay. It was also suggested in two groups that council tax bands need to be reconsidered as they are out of date and unfair.

Against increasing council tax

- Don't put it out of people's price range that they can't afford to pay it. People are retired and can't afford it with their pension. Young families are already struggling. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- No, people are hurting already. Very expensive. You increase it every year, we haven't seen the wage increase to cover it. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- Understand why it needs to happen, but the demographic here is wrong for the question. The little people are suffering, not seeing any benefit. (14.12.23, RAF Benson)
- They shouldn't increase it at the minute – not seeing anything extra for our money. Don't increase it at all. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- No. If it goes up would we really see an improvement? I don't think so (09.01.24, MLMC)
- It's expensive as it is. With the cost of living crisis it's not easy to live and it's getting harder. Costs are going up everywhere, up and up and up. I appreciate that the council needs more money and it has to come from somewhere but we are struggling. People won't be able to afford to eat and they'll die. You should assess people individually, some can afford to pay more but some can't. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Possibly increase council tax

- If people have a higher wage and can afford, they should pay more council tax and MPs shouldn't get an increase in salary (12.12.23, Banbury)
- If we feel it would go on something to help us, then maybe yes. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Yes, slightly but need to be sensible about it, where they can afford it. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Only if people on benefits don't have to pay more. We get a certain amount of benefits and that doesn't go up very much at all so it's like it's going down. It isn't very much and we can't afford to pay more. (09.01.24, MLMC)
- It depends how much it would go up. (09.01.24, MLMC)

In favour of increasing council tax

- Yes, so that the council can spend more and not have to cut important services. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Greater transparency required

- We don't know what they are doing with council tax, are they wasting it? (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Rethink council tax bands, payment plans

- No! The nationally set council tax bands need to be worked out correctly. Needs to come from higher (government), it's out of date. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- Most people pay over 10 months, could you pay over 12 months to keep it a lower amount each month? Same total but spread more widely across the year. (13.12.23, Abingdon)
- You need more money but it should come from national government, not us. It's their fault not ours. (09.01.24, MLMC)

Other comments

Although not specifically related to the council's revenue budget, the groups did want to share their views with the council on the following topics.

Public transport

- Cost for tickets are too expensive. Families can't afford it and would rather walk if they are not able to use a car. (12.12.23, Banbury)
- There are no buses on Sunday, we can't get to Oxford. (12.12.23, Banbury)
- Bus passes are hard to get if you have a disability. (12.12.23, Banbury)

Traffic management

- We need to get rid of LTN's, traffic filters/new bus gates. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Cycling is being prioritised too much, don't agree. Prioritising students (is it because they are bringing Oxford money), elders are now being pushed to cycle – I can't use a bike! (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Feel the road network is working against me. I'm supportive of sustainable transport, I do walk, but also need to drive. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)

Business rates

- 58% of council budget is already covered from tax and small amount (11%) from business rates. Why can't businesses pay more? Sensible to increase business rates however businesses might not be able to afford this and then close. (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Comes a point when businesses can't afford to pay, then everyone loses (19.12.23, Leys, Oxford)
- Reduce rent for businesses/shops – having shops and services locally will encourage people to 'come in' and spend/use what is in town centres. (12.12.23, Banbury)

Budget simulator and next steps

- 8.16 The final section of the first four focus groups was dedicated to explaining the budget simulator tool and supporting participants to use it. Hired iPads were provided. (This section was not included in the My Life My Choice session, as it had slightly different content, as planned with the local lead to meet the needs of participants.) Council officers and support staff were on-hand to support individuals if required. If time was short or participants needed to leave early signposting information to the online simulator was supplied.
- 8.17 After participants has trialled the budget simulator, they were invited to submit their claim form. (Payments for MLMC members attending the fifth session were organised separately.) As a final step for all groups, an explanation was given on next steps in the council's budget setting process.