Part: 1
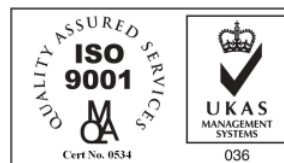# Oxfordshire residents' satisfaction survey 2024

Executive summary of survey results (including a budget focus)

August 2024

Prepared by: **Marketing Means (UK) Ltd**

For:

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

MARKETING MEANS
THE RESEARCH PEOPLE

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ISO 9001
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Executive Summary

Background and method

This report represents the findings of a residents' satisfaction survey which was conducted by Marketing Means on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council between 27 May and 17 July 2024. The survey was sent to a sample of households across the authority area to gauge satisfaction with the council's services and the area where they live, as well as asking about the council's priorities and budget decisions.

The survey was posted out to a random sample of 6,000 households in w/c 27 May 2024. One reminder mailing was issued to non-respondents in w/c 17 June 2024. All residents in the sample could take part in the survey online if they wished, using unique login details included in the covering letter with a link to the online questionnaire, hosted by Marketing Means. These mailings generated 978 responses, 211 of which were completed online.

To boost the number of responses from younger residents, the 2024 survey included a face-to-face in-street interviewing stage, conducted in various locations in Oxford, Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Didcot, Wantage and Witney. This provided a further 167 interviews with residents aged 18 to 44 and brought the total number of survey responses to 1,145 by the closing date of 17 July 2024.

At the data analysis stage, the final respondent profile was 'weighted' by local authority area, age and gender in order to reflect Oxfordshire's population aged 18+ from the 2021 Census profile. All charts and data in this report are based on 'weighted' data.

Overall views of Oxfordshire County Council

- Just under than half of those interviewed (47%) were satisfied with the way that the council runs things, with net satisfaction at +17%, both significant increases from the levels recorded in the 2023 survey.

- Nearly one in three respondents (32%) agreed that the council provides value for money, a significant increase from 25% as in 2023, though the proportion dissatisfied has decreased by only a small amount. These gave a significantly higher net satisfaction score of -4%, compared with -13% in 2023.

- A total of 43% were satisfied with the services provided by the council, a slight increase from the level of 39% in 2023, with a corresponding rise in net satisfaction from +9% to +15% in 2024.

Your local area

- Nearly three-quarters (72%) were satisfied with their local area as a place to live, similar to the 2023 result of 74%.

- Most respondents felt safe when outside in their local area, 90% feeling safe by day (similar to 2023) and 61% feeling safe after dark (significantly down from 2023's result of 71%).

- The issues most likely to be spontaneously named by respondents as the most important that residents in their local area faced were led by **road surfaces in poor repair/dangerous, too many potholes**, suggested by more than a quarter of respondents (26%). Several further themes related to roads and transport, such as poor pavements/pedestrian routes, public transport and traffic management, were mentioned by respondents, but each by less than 10%. The most likely other topics were **issues with new building/ development of new housing, lack**

of infrastructure/amenities (by 7%) and **the need for better health services/social care/mental health support** (by 7%).

- The factors most likely to be selected by respondents as important in making somewhere a good place to live were led by **health services** (60%, a significant increase from 2023's 51%) and **level of crime** (46%, up from 41% in 2023). Several other factors, though selected by a smaller proportion of the sample, had significantly increased in importance since 2023, including **clean streets, job prospects, level of pollution**, **cultural facilities,** and **facilities for young children**. None had significantly decreased in importance since 2023.

- The factors most likely to be selected by respondents as most in need of improvement in the local area were led by **road and pavement repairs** (by 56%, significantly lower than 2023's 61%), and **health services** (46%, not significantly different to the 2023 result). **Traffic congestion** was selected by only slightly fewer (36%), with no change since 2023 and the same applied to **affordable decent housing**. Only one other aspect was significantly less likely to be selected in 2024 than in 2023, **wage levels and the local cost of living** (18%, down from 23% in 2023).

Communications

- The proportion that felt fairly or very well informed on **benefits and services provided** by the council was 43%, similar to the 2023 result. Only slightly fewer (42%) felt well-informed about **what the council spends its money on**, again similar to 2023's result.

- A smaller proportion (30%) felt that the council **acts on the concerns of local residents** a great deal/a fair amount. This was not significantly different to the 2023 results, and nor was the net satisfaction score of -27%.

- Just over a quarter (27%) were very or fairly satisfied with the **number of opportunities the council offers to local residents to have their say**, but 35% were dissatisfied, giving a net satisfaction score of -10%. These were not significantly different to the 2023 results.

Council services

- 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 68% satisfied and net satisfaction of +62% for **libraries**, to only 14% satisfied and -62% net satisfaction for **maintenance of roads** (the latter was also the lowest-rated service in 2022 and 2023). The table below summarises the key figures for each service:

2024 Satisfaction Ratings of Services *(base totals shown after each service)*	% dissatisfied	% satisfied	Net % Score
Libraries (796)	6%	68%	+61.5%
Museums and history service (679)	4%	65%	+60.7%
Household waste and recycling centres (tips) (1,063)	15%	71%	+56.1%
Fire and rescue service - emergency response (719)	9%	63%	+54.6%
Fire and rescue service - public safety and road safety advice and support (698)	11%	56%	+44.4%
Primary education (5-11 years) (450)	11%	53%	+42.1%
Registration of births and deaths, and ceremonies including marriages and citizenship (520)	8%	48%	+39.9%
Early years education (birth to 4 years) (403)	14%	46%	+32.8%
Secondary education (over 11 years) (444)	15%	46%	+30.9%
Countryside services (e.g., rights of way) (904)	22%	50%	+28.3%
Children's social care (protecting and supporting vulnerable children and families) (432)	20%	38%	+17.7%
Trading standards (541)	16%	32%	+16.7%
Support/care for older people (aged over 65) (587)	26%	34%	+7.7%
Public health (helping people to stay healthy and protecting them from health risk) (769)	27%	34%	+7.1%
Support/care for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, and/or mental health problems, general frailty (558)	30%	31%	+1.5%
Parking (enforcement, controlled parking zones, on-street parking) (972)	40%	27%	-12.3%
Road and transport schemes (e.g., new or improved junctions, bus lanes, cycle lanes etc.) (1,000)	50%	27%	-22.3%
Managing the road network (e.g., traffic lights, speed limits, traffic and transport) (1,062)	56%	28%	-28.7%
Maintenance of pavements (1,088)	64%	20%	-43.7%
Maintenance of roads (1,099)	76%	14%	-61.8%

- 12 of the services showed significantly increased net satisfaction compared with 2023. The largest increases were for **children's social care** (16% increase), **early years education** (13% increase), **support/care for older people** and **support/care for vulnerable groups** (12% increase for both). Only **libraries** showed a significant decline in net satisfaction.

- The services felt to be most important for local people in the area were **maintenance of roads** (68%, similar to 2023), **maintenance of pavements** (33%, up from 22% in 2023) and **fire & rescue service – emergency response** (32%, down from 40% in 2023).

- When reviewing the same results but including only those with lived experience of each service, five of the services were by far the most likely to be selected, each by more than 40% of those

with experience of them; **primary education**, **secondary education**, **support/care for older people**, **support/care for vulnerable people**, and **early years education**.

Special statistical analysis

- We have conducted two extra stages of Key Driver Analysis on the survey results to help identify opinions of which specific council services and activities seem to have the greatest impact in driving overall satisfaction, perceptions of value for money and how well residents are kept informed.

- The Correlation Analysis undertaken showed that overall perception of quality of services and value for money are the two key items most correlated with satisfaction with how the council runs things, though this is also moderately correlated with the extent to which the council keeps residents informed on benefits and services.

- Perceptions of value for money in turn are most strongly correlated by overall satisfaction with services, with how the council runs things, and the extent to which the council keeps residents informed on benefits and services.

- The Factor Analysis attempted to identify which specific services, or groups of services, have most impact in driving perceptions of those same four key measures: overall satisfaction with how the council runs things, value for money and the statements about keeping residents informed. The results highlighted, in particular, a group of services related to roads/transport, parking and pedestrian routes, alongside overall service satisfaction, acting on residents' concerns, and giving opportunities for residents to have their say, as a key driver of the four target questions, most notably overall satisfaction and value for money.

    - As in previous surveys and taken together with the results from elsewhere in this report, these findings demonstrate the key role that improvements to services related to roads, travel and transport may play – together with overall service satisfaction, acting on residents' concerns and giving them an opportunity to have their say – in improving overall perceptions of the council.

Council priorities

- After reading summary notes on the council's existing nine priority themes, and being asked to select two as most important for the council to concentrate on, no single theme was selected by a majority of respondents, but the most likely were **prioritising the health and wellbeing of residents**, (48%), well ahead of **creating opportunities for children and young people reach their full potential** (29%), **investing in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable network** (28%), and **supporting carers and the care system** (24%).

    - There were no statistically significant <u>increases</u> in the proportions choosing the priorities compared with the 2023 results.

    - The only priorities selected by significantly fewer in 2024 than 2023 were **put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work** (down to 18% from 22% last year), and **tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire** (down to 7% from 10% last year).

- When asked which two of the same nine themes would be <u>least</u> important for the council to concentrate on, the most likely choice was for the council to **play its part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy** (42%, similar to the 2023 results), followed by **tackling inequalities** (33%, the same as in 2023), and **put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work** (29%, also similar to the 2023 result).

Budget setting

- Respondents were given a brief explanation of the financial challenges that the council faces and asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each of a list of 10 possible approaches that the council could take to make savings / generate income. The table below summarises the proportions agreeing or disagreeing with each and shows that five drew strong <u>net</u> support of nearly +50% or higher. These were the same four most likely to draw agreement in 2023 plus the new approach added - **Reduce costs by collaborating more with partners in voluntary & community sector**. Highest agreement was for **generate additional income by maximising the use of buildings and land the council owns**, which more than eight out of 10 respondents (85%) agreed with as a course of action for the council.

- By far the <u>least</u> popular ideas were generating additional income by increasing council tax and reducing spending on frontline services, with net agreement of -41% and -34% respectively.

APPROACH *(base totals shown after each)*	% disagree	% agree	Net % agreement
Reduce costs by operating from fewer buildings and using those we keep to their full capacity (1,095)	3%	85%	+82%
Reduce costs by using digital technology where it improves how we work and helps us be more efficient (1,086)	7%	79%	+72% ↑
Reduce staffing costs by redesigning services, using fewer agency staff and/or holding vacancies (1,093)	12%	69%	+57% ↑
Reduce the costs of the contracts we use to provide services (1,084)	7%	68%	+61% ↑
Reduce costs by collaborating more with partners in voluntary & community sector so we're not main funder & provider for every service (1,084)	12%	63%	+51%
Reduce spending on services the council is not legally required to provide (1,075)	19%	46%	+28% ↑
Use the council's financial reserves (money set aside for unexpected events), to provide one-off funding (1,085)	23%	44%	+21%
Generate additional income from sales, fees, and charges (1,048)	23%	44%	+21% ↑
Generate additional income by increasing council tax (1,088)	58%	24%	-34% ↑
Reduce spending on frontline services (1,081)	60%	19%	-41% ↑

- Respondents were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed that the council should consider increases of 2.99, 3.99 or 4.99 per cent to help fund adult social care and other key services. These three levels drew general disagreement and net agreement scores of +4%, -33% and -45% respectively. 42% of respondents agreed with the notion of a 2.99 per cent increase, but only 19% supported an increase as high as 4.99 per cent.

- Although nearly half (48%) felt their situation was 'about the same' as a year ago, the proportion who felt better off (5%) was far smaller than the proportion who now felt worse off (46%). Although most people (56%) had never or rarely struggled in this regard in the last year, a quarter (25%) had done so sometimes, 15% most of the time, and 4% all of the time.

Climate change

- Just under a third of all respondents (30%) claimed to be <u>very</u> concerned about climate change and 76% overall were concerned. The proportion very concerned had fallen significantly from 37% in 2023.

- 80% felt that it is important for Oxfordshire as a place to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

- Although 75% agreed that it was important for the council to tackle climate change, this has declined from 78% in 2023 and 83% on 2022. The proportion considering it <u>very</u> important that the council acts has reduced significantly year-on-year from just over half (51%) in 2022 to 37% in 2023 to 31% in 2024.

- A clear majority of respondents would support each of a list of nine actions that the council could take to tackle climate change, especially **encouraging people to be more eco-friendly** (supported by 90%), **increasing biodiversity in the area** (93%), and **increasing the use of renewable energy and improving insulation in buildings in the area** (88%). All were supported by very similar proportions as had done so in 2023, small decrease in the proportion feeling that the council should **encourage people to be more eco-friendly**.

- Just under a third of respondents (32%) claimed that they had already made 'a lot' of changes to their lifestyle to help tackle climate change. This was not significantly different to the 2023 result (35%).

- In 2023, only 8% claimed that they had already visited climateactionoxfordshire.org.uk, but this increased to 16% in 2024.

Volunteering and digital skills

- 42% of respondents had provided unpaid help to a local community group, club or organisation in the previous 12 months, including 11% that did so at least once a week (the latter a slight decline from 15% in 2023).

- More than nine out of 10 respondents (93%) use the internet at work, home or elsewhere.

Part: 2

Budget simulator engagement 2025/26 Key findings

**Report by: Consultation and engagement team
Date: September 2024**

OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL

1.   Introduction and methodology

1.1   Between Wednesday 19 June 2024 and Sunday 21 July 2024 we ran an interactive tool, encouraging residents and stakeholders to take on the role of councillors and create a balanced budget for 2025/26.

1.2   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

1.3   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?

1.4   The budget simulator was advertised to a wide range of audiences using a range of channels. This included organic and paid for social media advertising, eNewsletters, internal communications for council staff and councillors and targeted stakeholder communications. It was also cross promoted to people who engaged with our young people's sounding boards.

1.5   Figures show that 1,060 visitors to the budget simulator site went on to submit a budget, this does not include those people who chose to look at the simulator but did not progress to submitting a budget. The simple, gamification approach certainly engaged a wide range of residents and for some it helped them to understand more about the council *"I really liked this simulator - it is not an easy task you have to balance the budget!"* and *"It's really hard to balance this, I'm glad I don't have to do it for real. It has taught me a lot about what the council does though"*

Respondent profile

1.6   In all 1,060 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 men (56%) responded than women (36%), Oxfordshire's population is more evenly balanced.
- There was a good spread of ages, except for young people and young adults aged (aged 16-24 years).
- Budget simulator respondents were more likely to identify their ethnic group as 'white' (82%), a slight underrepresentation 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.
- 37 people (4%) said they worked for Oxfordshire County Council.
- People from across Oxfordshire responded to the simulator, with significant spikes in response in OX2 (47) in Oxford city, and OX11 (51) and OX12 (48) in South Oxfordshire.

1.7 The map below shows the distribution of responses geographically and the following table, the respondent profile, against Oxfordshire's population.
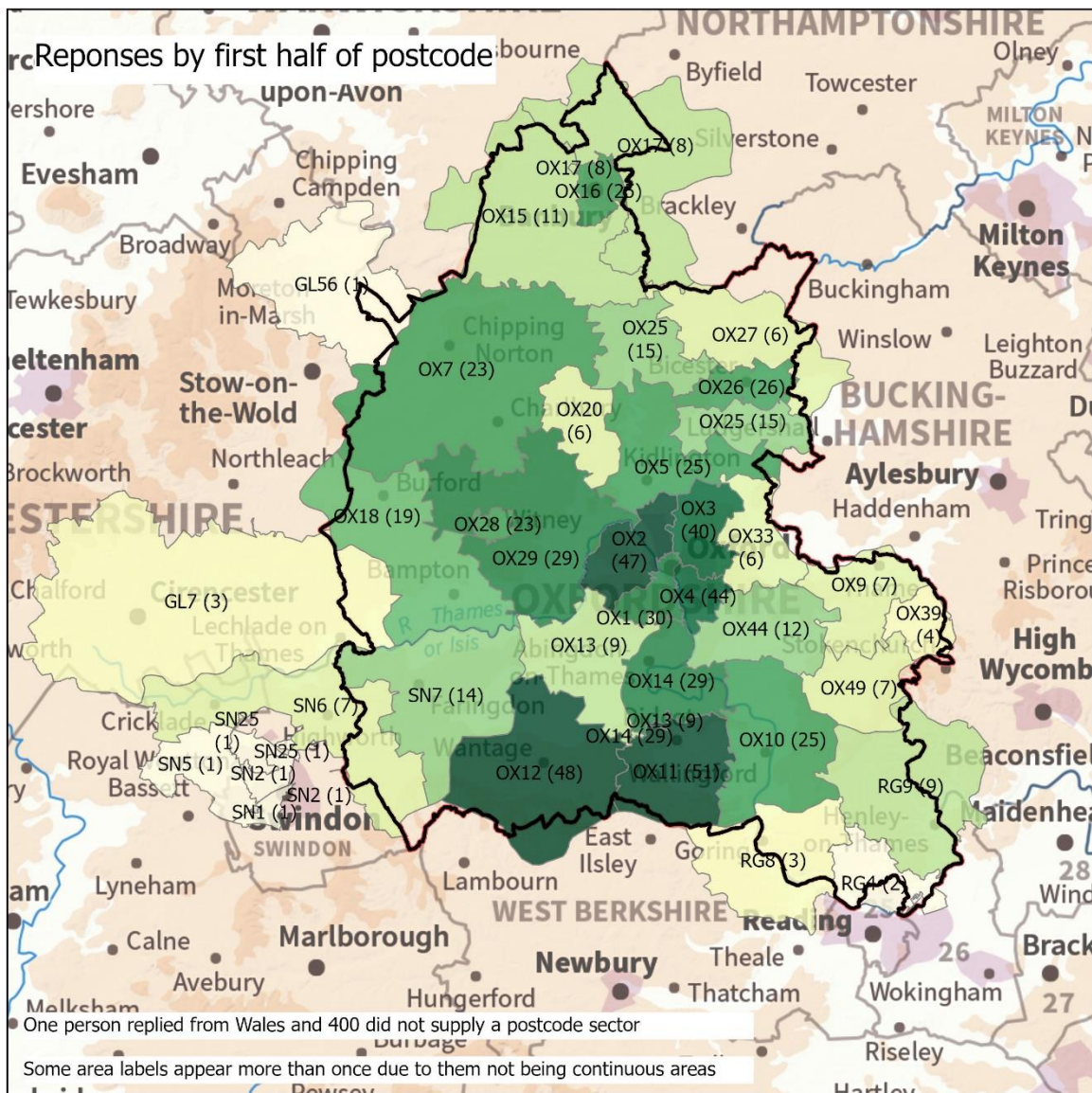
Map 1: Geographical distribution of responses

Table 1: Respondent profile

	Number of budget simulator respondents	% of response budget simulator respondents	Actual % in Oxfordshire's population
Age band			
16 - 24	65	8%	12%
25 - 34	116	14%	14%
35 - 44	161	19%	13%
45 - 54	141	16%	13%
55 - 64	169	20%	12%
65 - 74	111	13%	9%
75 - 84	58	7%	6%
85 or over	5	1%	3%
Prefer not to say	34		
Not answered	200		
Sex			
Female	305	36%	51%
Male	472	56%	49%
I use another term	6		
Prefer not to say	63		
Not answered	214		
Ethnic group			
Asian or Asian British	15	2%	5%
Black or Black British	7	1%	2%
Chinese	5	1%	1%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	23	3%	3%
White	680	82%	87%
Other ethnic group or background	11	1%	2%
Prefer not to say	86		
Not answered	233		
Long term illness or disability			
Yes - a lot	117	14%	5%
Yes - a little	53	6%	9%
No	608	73%	85%
Prefer not to say	56		
Not answered	226		

Main findings

1.8   The budget simulator organised core council services under 10 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 2025/2026.

1.9   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.

1.10   The financial figures used in the simulator were based on the forecast budget for 2025/2026 at the time of its launch, taking account of pressures and proposed savings and were indicative figures only.

1.11   For each of the 20 service items (sliders) in the simulator 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%

1.12   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.

1.13   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

Your goal is to balance your budget and bring the funding gap as close to £0 as possible

Funding gap
£13.90m

Over Budget
2.2%

Total Expenses
£651.40m

| -10% | -5% | 0% | 5% | Consequences |

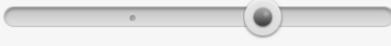**Adult social care**

Children's services >

Highways operations >

Place, transport and infrastructure >

Planning, environment and climate change >

Public health >

Safety services >

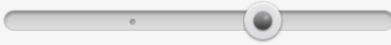Cultural services >

Running the council >

Council tax >

i Adult social work

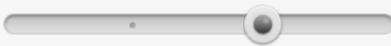We could continue to provide our current level of service. More

i Age well – care and support for older people

We could continue to provide our current level of service. More

i Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults

We could continue to provide our current level of service. More

Your comments on Adult social care (Optional)

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Review and Finish »

1.14 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%
Adult social care	Adult social work	74	287	560	139
	Age well - care and support for older people	54	208	627	171
	Live well - care and support for vulnerable adults	62	247	653	98
Children's services	Children's social care	46	112	721	181
	Family help	60	213	601	186
	Education and schools	32	71	600	357
	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	39	102	605	314
	Home to school transport	108	215	621	116
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	31	101	496	432
	Street lighting	161	388	421	90
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	113	278	447	222
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	166	330	452	112
	Environment and climate action	249	230	354	227
	Waste disposal	29	165	701	165
Public health	Public health	74	186	557	243
Safety services	Fire and rescue	24	76	821	139
	Trading standards	102	308	552	98
Cultural services	Libraries	114	253	537	156
	Museums and history services	161	331	461	107
Running the council	Running the council	272	440	311	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%)
Adult social care	Adult social work	34%	53%	13%
	Age well - care and support for older people	25%	59%	16%
	Live well - care and support for vulnerable adults	29%	62%	9%
Children's services	Children's social care	15%	68%	17%
	Family help	26%	57%	18%
	Education and schools	10%	57%	34%
	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	13%	57%	30%
	Home to school transport	30%	59%	11%
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	12%	47%	41%
	Street lighting	52%	40%	8%
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	37%	42%	21%
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	47%	43%	11%
	Environment and climate action	45%	33%	21%
	Waste disposal	18%	66%	16%
Public health	Public health	25%	53%	23%
Safety services	Fire and rescue	9%	77%	13%
	Trading standards	39%	52%	9%
Cultural services	Libraries	35%	51%	15%
	Museums and history services	46%	43%	10%
Running the council	Running the council	67%	29%	3%

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

- Highways maintenance (41%) * (to maintain service not to improve it)
- Education and schools (34%)
- SEND (30%)
- Public health (23%)
- Place, transport and infrastructure (21%)
- Environment and climate action (21%)

These were all selected by 20 per cent or more of respondents.

1.16 Conversely, the service items which respondents most frequently selected for a decrease in budget (selected by at least 40 per cent of respondents) were:

- Running the council (67%)
- Street lighting (52%)
- Strategic planning (47%)
- Museums and history services (46%)
- Environment and climate action (45%)

1.17 The budget simulator responses indicate that there are divergent views across Oxfordshire's communities on environment and climate action, with this service item appearing in both the list of those most frequently selected for an increase in funding and the list for those most frequently selected for a decease funding.

1.18 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 (77%)
- Children's social care (68%)
- Waste disposal (66%)
- Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults (62%)

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

1.19 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 1.27% to -4.47%.

Table 3: average budget percentage change

Service group	Service item	Average budget change as%
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	1.27%
Education and learning	Education and schools	1.05%
Education and learning	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	0.63%
Safety services	Fire and rescue	0.07%
Children's services	Children's social care	-0.11%
Planning, environment and climate change	Waste disposal	-0.27%
Public health	Public health	-0.43%
Adult social care	Age well – care and support for older people	-0.68%
Children's services	Family help	-0.69%
Adult social care	Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults	-1.29%
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	-1.33%
Adult social care	Adult social work	-1.40%
Education and learning	Home to school transport	-1.49%
Cultural services	Libraries	-1.53%
Safety services	Trading standards	-1.95%
Planning, environment and climate change	Environment and climate action	-2.36%
Cultural services	Museums and history services	-2.58%
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	-2.59%
Highways operations	Street lighting	-2.92%
Running the council	Running the council	-4.47%

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

- Highways maintenance (1.27%)
- Education and schools (1.05%)
- Special education needs and disabilities (SEND) (0.63%)
- Fire and rescue (0.07%)

1.21 These were followed by a further five services items (highlighted in orange), with an average percentage change in budget between zero and minus one per cent:

- Children's social care (-0.11%)
- Waste disposal (-0.27%)
- Public health (-0.43%)
- Age well, care and support for older people (-0.68%)
- Family help (-0.69%)

1.22 The five service items (highlighted in green) with, on average, the greatest negative percentage changes of between -2.36% to -4.47% were:

- Back-office support services (Running the council) (-4.47%)
- Street lighting (-2.92%)
- Strategic planning (-2.59%)
- Museums and history services (-2.58%)
- Environment and climate action (-2.36%)

1.23 These were followed by a further six services items (highlighted in yellow), which had an average negative percentage changes of between -1.29% and -1.95%:

- Trading standards (-1.95%)
- Libraries (-1.53%)
- Home to school transport (-1.49%)
- Adult social work (-1.40)
- Place, transport and infrastructure (-1.33%)
- Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults (-1.29%)

Closing the funding gap

1.24 Our starting budget was £651.4 million with a funding gap of £13.9 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:

- 17 people (1.6%) managed to close the £13.9million funding gap exactly
- a further 841 people (79.3%) made budget reductions over and above the £13.9 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
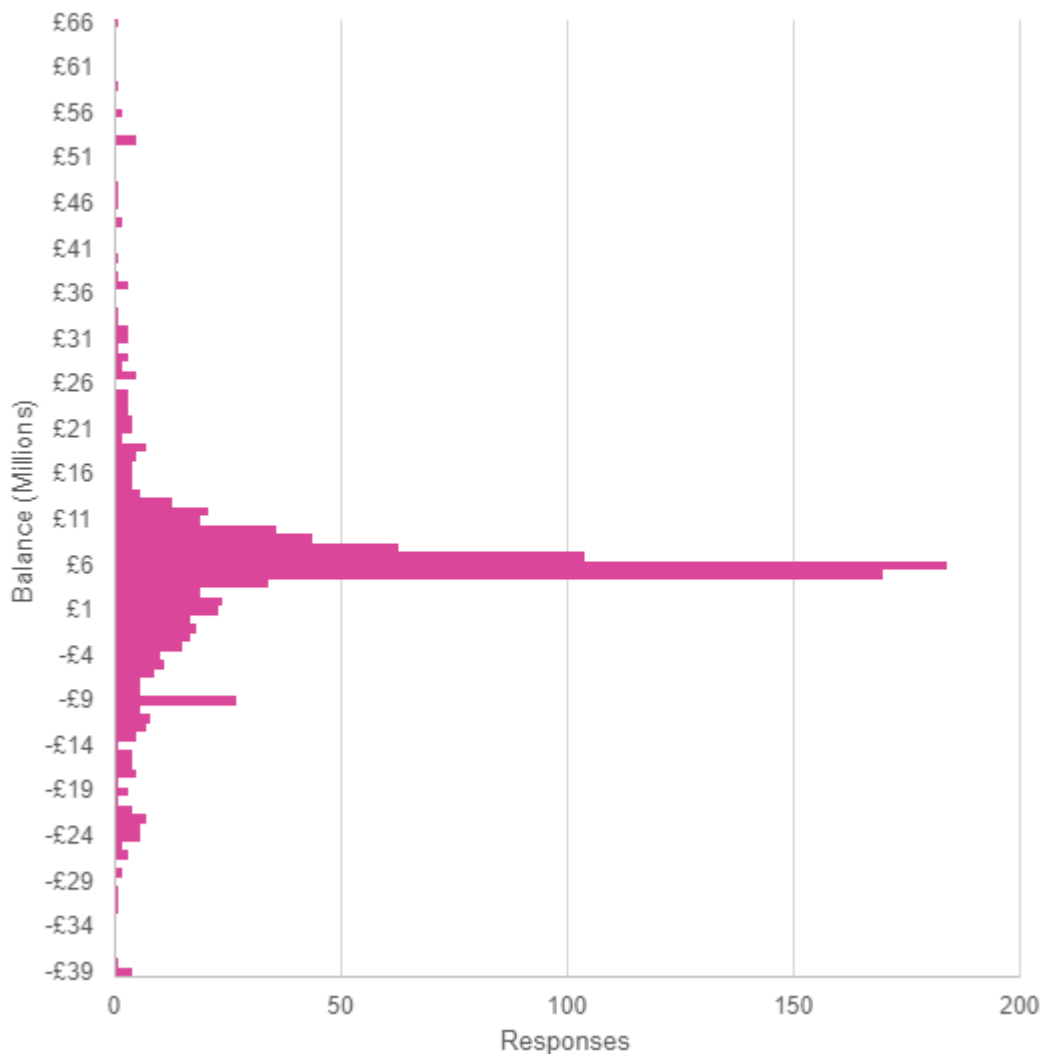
1.25 Before submitting their final budget, respondents were asked if they had any further comments to share with the council. 77 people gave written feedback, which included 105 different comments. Comments, were wide and diverging, however two equally significant areas of comment were:
- Review services for efficiencies / identify waste spending (11 mentions)
- A belief that the county council is responsible for decisions which actually lie with national government (11 mentions)

1.26 Other notable themes were:
- Various mixed comments about the budget simulator (10 mentions)
- A belief that the county council is responsible for services/decisions that lie with others (9 mentions)
- Acceptance of a rise in council tax given the need for additional funding (8 mentions)
- A need for increased funding from national government (6 mentions)
- Negative comments about traffic measures (6 mentions)

- General negative comments about the quality of services (6 mentions)
- Reduce services (6 mentions)

2. Detailed findings

2.1   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 services
- Highways operations
- Place, transport and infrastructure
- Planning, environment and climate change
- Public health
- Safety services
- Cultural services
- Running the council

2.2   The budget simulator descriptions and consequences for the slider choices were written with input from service areas and approved by service directors. 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

2.3   Adult social work
        We help people who are vulnerable or at risk of harm to live safely and independently. We work with people and organisations to protect their rights and prevent abuse and neglect. We also assess their needs and provide or arrange services to support them. This is our legal duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2018. In the last financial year (April 2023 - March 2024) we undertook 22,306 initial adult social care assessments.

        Age well – care and support for older people

        We help older people in Oxfordshire to live independently and stay safe and well. We also provide information and advice, support for unpaid carers and a range of services to meet people's needs. This can include care services and specialist housing. This is our legal duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2018. Currently we care for and support 3,866 older people.

Live well - care and support for vulnerable adults

We help adults aged 18+ in Oxfordshire who have a disability or physical or mental illness to stay well and safe. We provide information and advice, assess their needs and provide or arrange a range of services to support them. This can include care services and specialist housing. This is our legal duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2018. Currently we care for and support 2,978 vulnerable adults.

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 two fifths of respondents (range 38% to 47%) 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 9% to 16%) to improve/develop services.
- 25% to 34% chose to decrease funding across all service areas
- In terms of the average percentage budget change, these were in the mid-range of all services presented on the simulator: age well (-0.68%), live well (-1.29%) and adult social work (-1.40%).
- 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

Running the council
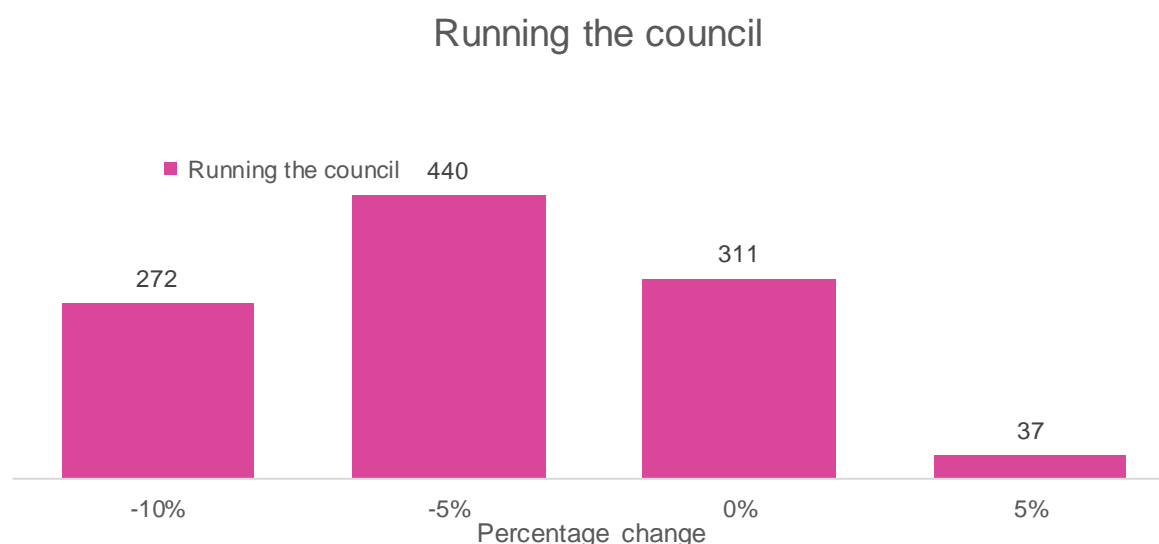
Written feedback

2.4   In all, 101 people gave written feedback to support their choices on the 'adult social care' section of the simulator, which included 100 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 (32 mentions)
- Importance of service (18 mentions)
- The council should not provide this service (16 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (14 mentions)
- Increase income (11 mentions)

2.5 In relation to reducing spending the majority of comments expressed concerns about perceived inefficiency and high spending on social care, with suggestions to reduce budgets and increase self-reliance. *'Find more efficient and joined up ways of working to generate cost savings.'*

The importance of the service was highlighted, with many comments focussing on the need for good care and support for vulnerable and elderly adults and emphasising the importance of community access and independent living. *"So important to give vulnerable adults the care to allow them to gain access the community and to have independent living."*

Many respondents did not want to see a reduction in budget for this service, with comments reflecting frustration with the current social care system and a lack of support for those in need. *"A lot of older people are lonely and struggling with finding care services."*

Suggestions for maintaining the budget included integrating services, promoting early intervention to reduce future spend, and increasing income. *"You ought to be having more spending herein the light of a steady increase in average older rate payers."*

A recurring theme (reflected in both comments about reducing spend and increasing income through higher fees) is the call for individuals and families to take more responsibility for their care, rather than relying on public resources. *"Far too much of council budget is spent on adult social care. People need to be more self-reliant and look after themselves and their families."*

2.6 Other themes for written feedback regarding adult social care related to:
- Service quality (7 mentions)
- Climate action (1 mention)
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power or responsibilities (1 mention)

Children's and family services

Budget simulator descriptions

2.7 <u>Children's social care</u>
We help children and young people in Oxfordshire who are vulnerable or at risk of harm to be safe and well. We work with families and other organisations to protect their rights and prevent abuse and neglect. We also

assess their needs and provide or arrange services to support them. This is our legal duty under the Children Act 1989, 2004 and 2017 and the Health and Social Care Act 2018.

We support children to stay safely with their families or family networks when they need help and protection. Working with parents and children we help make changes and improve outcomes by tackling the things that cause concerns and the family distress. Currently we support 1,738 individuals.

We provide services for 765 children and young people who can't live with their own families, finding them loving foster families and good homes and making sure that they are healthy and happy. When young people are leaving our care, we make sure they have a safe place to live and a plan for their goals for the future.

We provide social care services for 403 children and young people with very complex disabilities and health needs, who need high levels of practical physical care and support.

We welcome children and young people who come to our country alone as asylum seekers and need our help. We give them care, support, education and a chance for a better future

Family help
We help families, children and young people in Oxfordshire who are facing difficulties to overcome them and prevent future problems.

Children and family hubs are places where you can get advice and support on various topics, such as parenting, health, education and more. Currently there are 1,007 individuals being supported by this service.

The targeted youth support service helps young people who are at risk of getting into trouble or harm. It helps them deal with issues such as drugs, alcohol, crime, violence, mental health and more.

Our education, employment and training service supports young people who are not in school, work or training. It helps them find opportunities to learn new skills, get qualifications and find jobs.

We also work with local groups and organisations to provide activities and programmes for families, children and young people. Working with these groups also helps them to connect with other people in their area and access other services.

Education and schools
We provide access to education and training for Oxfordshire's children, including those who are excluded from school or in the criminal justice system. We also oversee the school admissions process, make sure there is enough early years' provision for children under five and provide specialist services to support schools to improve. We also support children and young

people with their education and health and care plans, allowing them to get the support they need to thrive in our schools.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
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. We assess their needs and provide or arrange appropriate support according to their individual needs. Currently 6,639 children and young people in Oxfordshire have an education and healthcare plan.

We also provide an impartial information and advice service, as well as support some SEND pupils in schools with educational psychologists, speech and language therapy and occupational therapists. This is our legal duty under the Code of Practice 2014.

Home to school transport
We help eligible children from reception to year 11 get to school by providing them with transportation assistance. Usually they get a free pass to use on public buses or trains but sometimes we arrange for them to travel on a special bus, coach, or minibus. There are just over 6,000 young people who are eligible to use mainstream school transport in Oxfordshire.
Some children with extra needs may travel by taxi to help them access school and education.

2.8   The children's and family service group contained five sliders: children's social care, family help, education and schools, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and home to school transport.

- Around four in ten respondents (range 32% to 43%) chose to move one or more sliders in the children's services group to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Between 11% (home to school transport) and 34% (education and schools) of respondents chose to increase the budget.
- Between 10% (education and schools) and 30% (home to school transport) chose to decrease funding across all service areas
- In terms of the average percentage budget change, these were very mixed. Education and schools (1.05%), and SEND (0.63%) services saw increases in investment, while others saw varied decreases: children's social care (-0.11%), family help (-0.69%) and home to school transport (-1.49%).
- the chart below shows how people responded for service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for children's services grouping

Children's services

- Children's social care
- Family help
- Home to school transport
- Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Education and schools
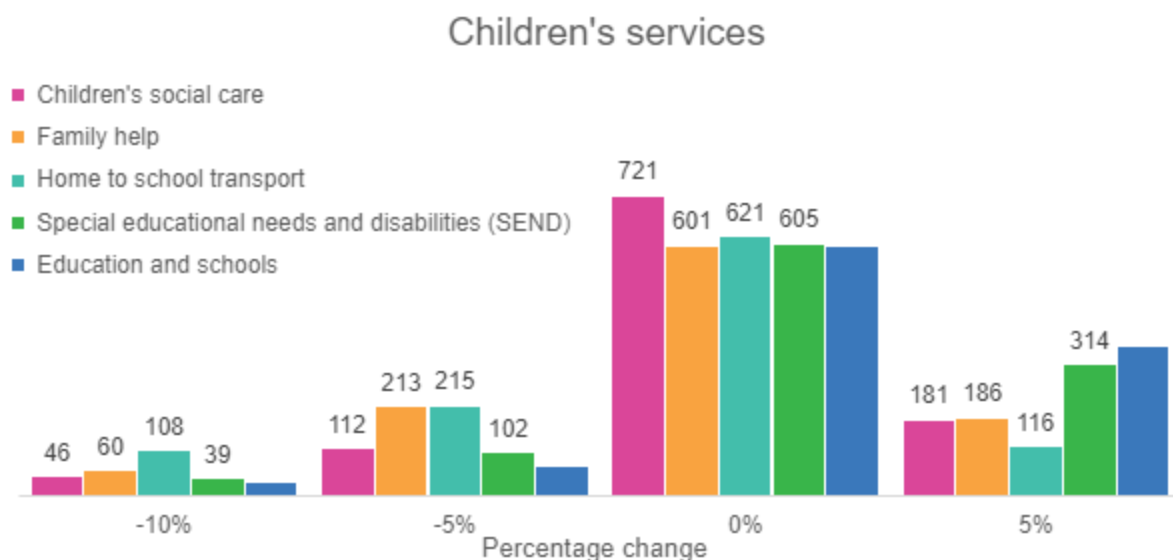
Written feedback

2.9   In all, 84 people gave written feedback on the 'children's and family services' section of the simulator, which included 98 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 (28 mentions)
- Importance of service (19 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (18 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (13 mentions)

2.10   Comments showing a desire to reduce spending overwhelmingly related to home to school transport. Many comments emphasised that parents should be responsible for their children's transport and care, with mixed views on whether it should be provided at no cost to families, fully funded by parents, or only available for those on benefits or low incomes. *"It is the parents of the children who should take them to school, look after them etc. It's not my money which should be going to them."*

People also felt that a lack of local primary school places increased the need, and therefore cost, of home to school transport. *"Not enough primary school places and children can no longer go to school in their own village this needs to be the top priority. It's failing families."*

Many respondents highlighted the importance of services for children and indicate a belief in the long-term benefits of investing in children. There is a sentiment that money spent on children's services is generally saved in the future. The importance of children's mental health and the need for early family help to reduce the need for further services later on are also mentioned. *"I think investing more in young people is an efficient use of*

money, because problems that are not supported in childhood often have more expensive long term consequences."

Some comments express concerns about the impact of reduce spending on these services, particularly on SEND services. The timeliness of assessments for ADHD/autism was a concern. *"SEND needs to expand to cope with need and demand."*

2.11   Other themes for written feedback regarding children's services related to:

- Increase income (6 mentions)
- Service quality (6 mentions)
- Roads and transport (4 mentions)
- Stop diversity work (2 mentions)
- Climate action (1 mention)
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (1 mention)

Highways operations

Budget simulator descriptions

2.12   Highways maintenance
We have to keep the roads in Oxfordshire safe for everyone. We look after 3,000 miles of roads, as well as paths, bridges and trees. We fix potholes, resurface roads, make roads safer, clear snow and ice in the winter, unblock drains and cut grass on the sides of the roads.

Street lighting
We maintain over 60,000 street lights, signs and bollards that light up the roads and paths in Oxfordshire. Most of them are LED lights, which use less energy and last longer. Our streetlights are managed (what times they are on and when they are brighter or dimmer) to save energy.

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

- Just over half the respondents (57%) chose to move one or more sliders in the highways operations group to either increase or decrease funding in this area.
- Just over half of respondents (52%) reduced funding for street lighting and 12% reduced it for highways maintenance.
- Approximately four in 10 respondents (41%) increased funding for highways maintenance, this was presented as maintaining the service at its current level not improving the services. Eight 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 (1.27%), in the red section of the previous table

- In contrast street lighting was ranked 19 out of 20, with an average change of -2.92%.
- The chart below shows how people responded for both items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for highways operations
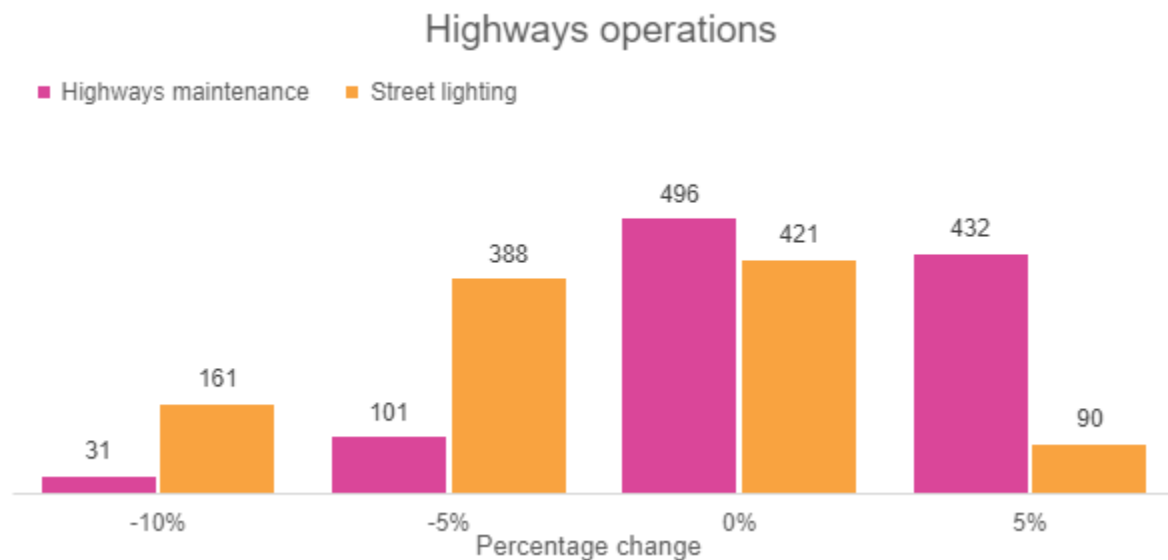
Written feedback

2.14 In all, 123 people gave written feedback on the 'highways operations' section of the simulator, which included 178 different comments. Comments in this section focussed on roads and transport (69 mentions) and reducing spending (66 mentions). Feedback was largely negative in tone, especially around perceived poorly maintained highways. *"The state of roads in Oxfordshire is appalling and needs improving."*

2.15 Many comments emphasise the need for better road repair and maintenance, particularly fixing potholes and improving road conditions. *"Maintenance. This is poorly carried by those doing repairs and clearly done to the minimum standard and budget by outside companies."*

Respondents expressed frustration with the council's handling of roadworks and maintenance, describing it as inefficient and wasteful. *"Pay once for quality work on the highways instead of paying the same people to patch it up constantly." "Ensure work carried out on roads is actually done and to the correct standard before you pay the bill."*

Several comments suggest reducing street lighting to save costs and reduce light pollution. Some comments also propose using solar lighting and LED bulbs. *"Switch the lights off after midnight, less light pollution, more environmentally friendly and a lower bill gif running them."*

Many respondents are critical of traffic measures introduced in recent years, such as low traffic neighbourhoods, traffic filters and 20mph speed limits.

Comments recommend ceasing these projects and redirecting the funding into road maintenance. *"Reduce expenditure on LTNs and Filters to zero. Stop unnecessary and costly 20mph schemes. Spend that saved money in the BASICSs - pothole and road surface repair."*

2.16 Other themes for written feedback regarding highways operations related to:
- Service quality (11 mentions)
- Increase income (4 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (3 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (2 mentions)
- Importance of service (2 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (1 mention)

Place, transport and infrastructure

Budget simulator description

2.17 Place, transport and infrastructure
We support and encourage thriving communities in Oxfordshire, mainly by managing travel and connectivity so that people can easily get to important places (such as health services, education, shops and workplaces) and goods can be moved in Oxfordshire. We have a plan for the county that respects the individual needs of different areas in Oxfordshire, and more local travel area plans to help us understand what transport might be needed to support communities in the future.

We encourage people to travel by walking, cycling and using public transport. We work with other groups and organisations to provide services and make changes that improve travel and transport. We also build roads, bridges and other transport facilities that are funded by government, work with businesses who build new housing and business properties, and by working with others in partnership to deliver services.

We want to make Oxfordshire a better place to live and work, where people can benefit from types of transport that help prevent climate change and improve air quality improving the health and wellbeing for residents.

We support bus services and provide free bus passes for older people and disabled people and their companions. We ensure that new housing and commercial developments and new cycleways, walking routes, bus lanes and roads meet our communities' needs and the overall vision for Oxfordshire as a greener, fairer and healthier county.

2.18 The place, transport and infrastructure group had just one slider.
- Just over half of the respondents (58%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area.

- Around one in three (37%) respondents reduced the budget for place, transport and infrastructure and around one in five (21%) increased it.
- This service options saw a negative average budget percentage change of -1.33%, ranked 11 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

Place, transport and infrastructure

■ Place, transport and infrastructure

		447	
	278		222
113			
-10%	-5%	0%	5%

Percentage change
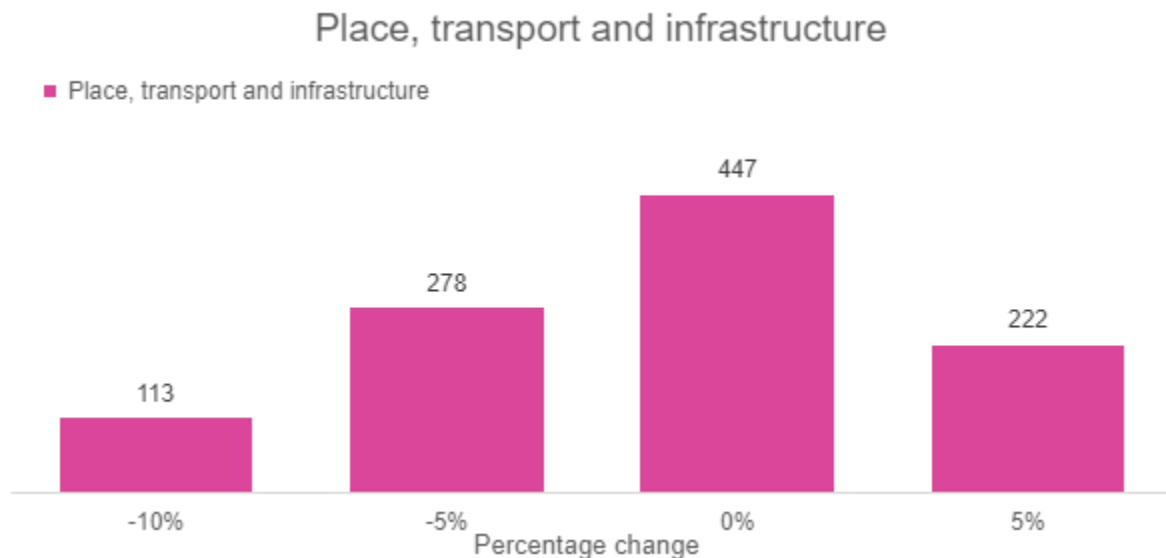
Written feedback

2.19 In all, 100 people gave written feedback on the 'place, transport and infrastructure' section of the simulator, which included 112 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:

- Roads and transport (68 mentions)
- Reduce spending (13 mentions)

2.20 Respondents highlight a need for more buses and better coordination between bus companies, along with concerns about the cost of bus services and the need for subsidies. Suggestions include using smaller buses in less frequented areas and providing more frequent services in rural areas. Additionally, there are calls for investment in public transport to reduce traffic and carbon emissions. *"Less buses in large towns. Re- direct transport services to rural areas. It crazy you can get 10 different buses every 10 minutes out of oxford but only 1 and hour to semi rural areas."*

There is strong opposition to traffic filters, LTNs (Low Traffic Neighbourhoods), and 20mph speed limits, along with frustration with roadworks and traffic 'experiments'. Many believe that significant savings could be made by halting or reversing these measures. *"You're currently wasting money wrecking Oxford with wildly unpopular traffic filters and LTNs. Your transport projects actively make the city (and county) worse."*

Comments show strong but mixed feelings about cycle lanes; some see them as a waste of money, while others call for better maintenance and protection. Additionally, there are suggestions to reduce spending on cycle paths and focus on road maintenance. *"Stop sacrificing bus lanes to cycle lanes that no one uses!" "More cycle ways and EV charging".*

There is frustration with council spending and perceived inefficiencies. People suggest that there are opportunities to reduce costs, such as by employing offenders to do maintenance work and reducing unnecessary street signage. Additionally, there are calls for better planning and prioritisation of resources, along with suggestions to optimize resources and involve community groups and businesses in environmental efforts. *"Far too much spent on vanity projects that are unwanted and unnecessary."*

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

- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (10 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (9 mentions)
- Increase income (3 mentions)
- Service quality (3 mentions)
- Importance of service (3 mentions)
- Climate action (2 mentions)
- Feedback on the budget simulator (1 mention)

Planning, environment and climate change

Budget simulator description

2.22 <u>Strategic planning</u>

We are in charge of planning for minerals and waste in Oxfordshire. We also give advice on planning for infrastructure, such as roads, schools and health services. We do this by responding to consultations on planning applications and on local area plans.

Environment and climate action

Reducing our impact on the environment is important to us and is part of all the work that we do. This part of our budget is about the work of our environment and climate action teams, who play an important part in improving the natural environment and people's access to it, reducing pollution and making sure we are ready to deal with more severe weather.

We are responsible for fixing drainage and flooding issues on highways and roads across Oxfordshire, including blocked drains and gullies on the road. We are also responsible for co-ordinating the emergency response to flooding and managing the flood risk from surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses. We work with a range of organisations including the Environment Agency, Thames Water, the city and district councils, farmers and landowners to do this.

We also work with the city and district councils (and local communities) to protect and improve nature and access to green and open spaces. We work with the Local Nature Partnership to protect our heritage, wildlife and landscapes in Oxfordshire, as well as increasing the number of trees.

We help people enjoy the countryside by looking after and expanding the paths and trails that people can walk, cycle or ride horses on. We work to keep these paths clear, mapped and sign-posted, as required by law. We work with volunteers and community groups to make our environment better and safer for everyone.

We work to reduce pollution and make Oxfordshire more energy efficient by:

- Supporting people on very low incomes to make their homes more energy efficient. This helps to reduce their bills as well as keeping them warmer and healthier.
- Working with other organisations to make sure Oxfordshire's energy system can support communities and homes to have more chargers for electric cars and use more renewable energy.
- Reducing how much energy council buildings use, and switching to vans, cars other vehicles that create less pollution. We also support schools to make these changes.
- Working with companies that supply things to the council to help them reduce their environmental impact.
- Reducing traffic congestion and encouraging people to walk, cycle or use public transport (where possible) instead of driving.
- Supporting communities to do things that are good for their local area and the environment. For example, having repair cafes, planting community orchards and giving people advice on how to lower their energy bills.

Waste disposal

We are responsible for getting rid of household waste in Oxfordshire. This includes recycling, green waste and black bin waste. However, we don't do bin collections; they are arranged by your local district or city council.

We also have to provide places where people can take their household waste to be recycled. These are called household waste recycling centres. We have seven of these in Oxfordshire. They are visited by about one million people every year and they take in about 40,000 to 45,000 tonnes of waste every year.

2.23 The planning, transport and climate change grouping contained three sliders: strategic planning, environment and climate action and waste disposal.

- Just over half of the respondents (53%) 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 (21%) respondents increased the budget for environment and climate action compared to for waste disposal (16%) and strategic planning (11%).
- Sizeable numbers of respondents chose to decrease the budget for strategic planning (47%) and environment and climate action (45%) compared to waste disposal (18%).
- All three service options saw negative average budget percentage changes: waste disposal (-0.27%, ranked 6 out of 20), environment and climate action (-2.36%, ranked 16 out of 20) and strategic planning (-2.59%, 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

Planning, environment and climate change

■ Environment and climate action   ■ Strategic planning   ■ Waste disposal
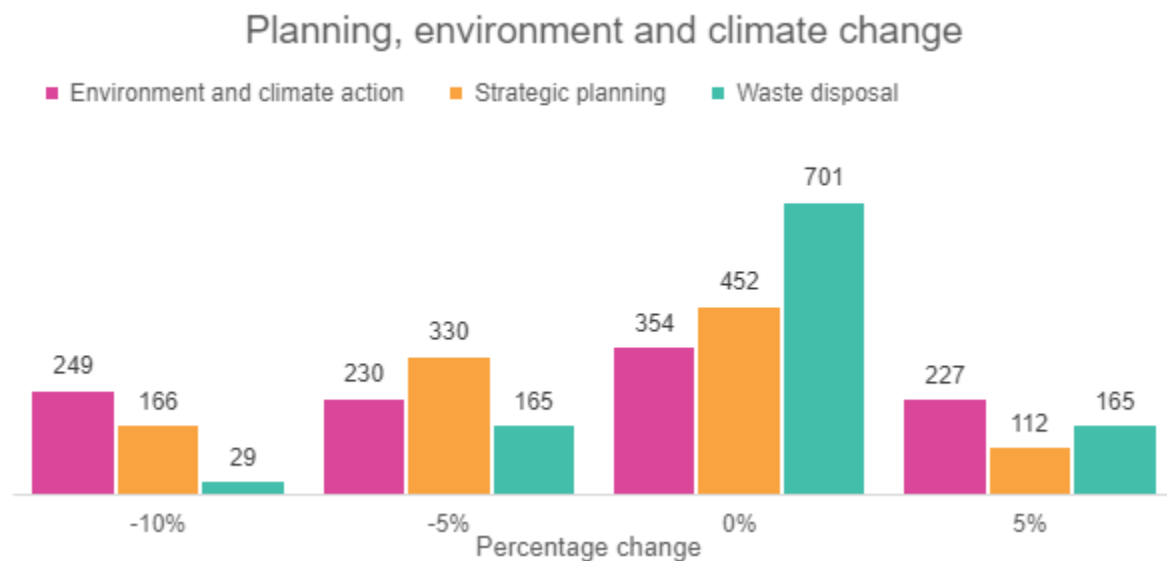
Written feedback

2.24   In all, 91 people gave written feedback on the 'Planning, environment and climate change' section of the simulator, which included 119 different comments. The key themes were:
- Climate action (26 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (25 mentions)
- Reduce spending (21 mentions)
- Roads and transport (15 mentions

2.25   Several comments reflect scepticism about climate change initiatives, with some calling them a waste of money and others questioning their effectiveness. Others criticise the council for prioritising environmental issues over immediate needs. *"People today are more important than climate action which is not scientific."*

Other comments emphasise the importance of climate action, as well as maintaining green spaces and wildlife habitats. *"This is, for me the absolutely most important area to focus on. If we don't get this bit right, we may as well not bother with the rest."*

Concerns were raised about new housing developments and a perception that there is inadequate infrastructure to support them. *"You're creating - or wanting to create - thousands of new homes - yet the infrastructure to support is not available eg schools and health care especially GP practices. You can't simply keep increasing the housing available without sorting out infrastructure (which also includes public transport eg trams or more frequent bus services)."*

Many respondents express opposition to changes in road networks, such as low traffic neighbourhoods and traffic filters, and criticise the council's strategic planning. *"Your planning causes chaos on our roads, best not done."*

"LTNs and traffic filters in one city aren't going to solve climate change—they're going to increase congestion and make residents miserable."

2.26 Other themes for written feedback regarding environment and climate change related to:
- Waste (11 mentions)
- Increase income (9 mentions)
- Service quality (7 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (3 mentions)
- Importance of service (2 mentions)

Public health

Budget simulator description

1.53 Public health
We provide services to improve people's health and help them to avoid getting sick. This includes work to tackle health inequalities (for example, where people in one area of Oxfordshire have worse health or don't live as long as people in another area) so that everybody can live longer, healthier lives.

We provide services that help to stop illnesses that can be passed from one person to another and we help local health services to meet the needs of people in Oxfordshire. This includes making sure that services are easy to access, effective and good value.

We work with other council services, communities and organisations to reduce the differences in health between different groups of people and to make places healthier.
Services that we pay for include:
- childhood health visitors and school nurses
- NHS health checks for adults over 40 years old
- reducing the harm caused by smoking, drugs, alcohol and obesity
- sexual health services.

Most of the money for these services comes from a special grant that we can only use for public health. The simulator slider for public health represents what is paid for with the council's money and other grants, mainly services that reduce health inequalities and help people who are affected by domestic abuse or drug and alcohol problems.

1.54 The public health group had just one slider.
- Just under half (47%) 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 (23%) and decreased it (25%).

- This service option saw a small negative average budget percentage change of -0.43%, 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
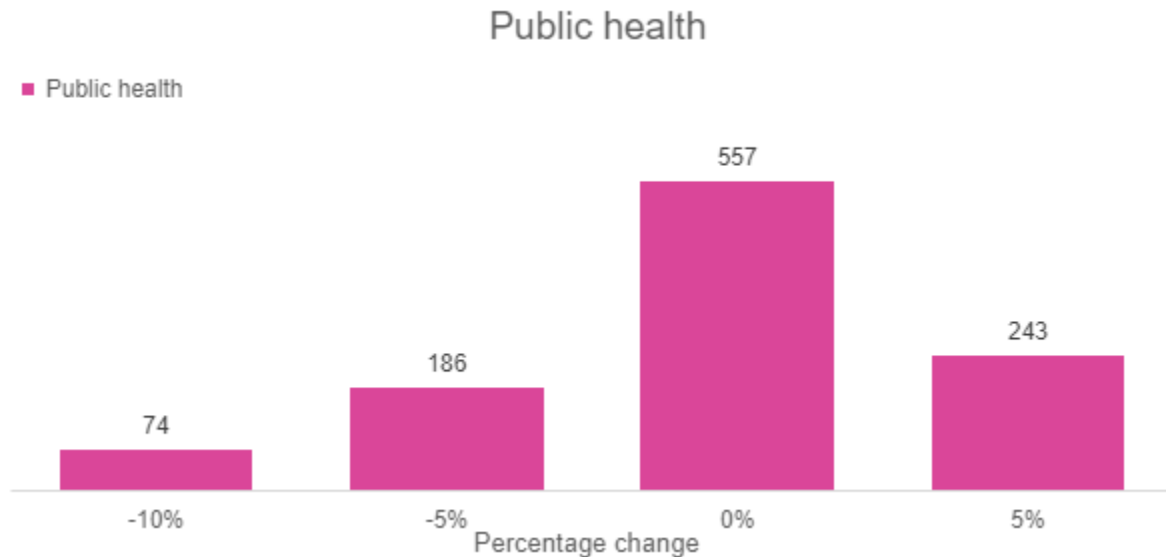
Public health

Written feedback

1.55   In all, 52 people gave written feedback on the Public Health section of the simulator, which included 55 different comments. Key themes were:
- Reduce spending (19)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (10 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (7)

1.56   Many comments focussed on reducing spending in this area. Some comments suggest that public health services should be more efficiently managed, with a focus on reducing bureaucracy and cutting costs. *"Efficiencies could produce better results."*

Some respondents recommended that services be reduced and emphasised the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own health. Others view public health initiatives as overreaching and unnecessary, suggesting that they can be cut back. *"People need to take responsibility for their own weight etc… this help me society is ridiculous".*

Several comments suggest that savings could be made if the service had alternative funding, and that public health should be funded and managed by central government rather than local councils. *"Public health material is more efficiently produced at a national level - councils should lobby for greater proportionate central spending so that they can reduce their own expenditure and prevent duplication."*

The importance of improved public health and preventative services was emphasised, with respondents fearing that a reduction in spending would increase the burden on the NHS, mental health, and social care services. *"I*

think prevention is key across the board and this has minimal impact on budget here but should positively impact other things like social care use."

While not issues that can be determined by the council, a number of respondents wanted to see an increase in the availability of local NHS services and reduced waiting times. *"Really need more GP surgeries and a minor injury centre also more NHS dentists."*

1.57   Other themes for written feedback regarding public health to:
- Increase income (5 mentions)
- Service quality (5 mentions)
- Council should not provide this service (5 mentions)
- Feedback on the budget simulator (2 mentions)
- Stop diversity work (2 mentions)

Safety services

Budget simulator description

2.27   Fire and rescue
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is part of the county council and our firefighters operate from 25 fire stations across the county. We protect communities, reduce harm and save lives through education and advice about fire safety. We also respond to emergencies, such as fires, road accidents, chemical incidents, flooding and extreme weather. We work with partners to plan and prepare for major incidents.

We are the statutory fire authority for Oxfordshire. That means that it is our job to check buildings for fire safety, give advice to businesses on fire safety responsibilities and make sure they follow the rules. If they don't, we can take action to make sure everyone stays safe. This is our legal duty under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

Trading standards
Trading Standards works to protect residents and businesses and takes action, including enforcement, when needed.

This covers things like weights and measures; product safety; food standards; unfair trading practices; animal health and disease control; environmental requirements; and price marking and comparison.

In addition, it covers rules around the sale of products that have age limits, such as tobacco and vapes; the licensing and inspection of sites storing explosives and petroleum; and the safety certification of sports stadiums. Trading Standards also works to protect people from financial abuse, like scams, and enforces weight restrictions on roads.

2.28 The safety services grouping contained two sliders: fire and rescue and trading standards.
- Just under half of the respondents (48%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding for trading standards, while just under a quarter of respondents moved the slider for fire and rescue (23%).
- Around one in ten (11%) respondents increased the budget for safety services.
- Sizeable numbers of respondents chose to decrease the budget for trading standards (39%) compared to fire and rescue (9%).
- Fire and rescue saw a small positive average budget change (0.07%, ranked 4 out of 20), while trading standards had a negative average budget percentage changes (-1.95%, ranked 15 out of 20).
- The chart below shows how people responded for the two service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for safety services

Written feedback

2.29 In all, 33 people gave written feedback on the 'safety services' section of the simulator, which included 55 different comments. Key themes were:
- Reduce spending (11 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (10 mentions)
- Increase income (5 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (4 mentions)

2.30 Several comments express frustration with the council's handling of safety services and highlight the need for the council to become more efficient and stop wasting money. There are suggestions to reduce unnecessary expenditures and focus on practicalities. *"Become more efficient stop wasting money."*

While some comments suggest that fire and rescue services could be made

more efficient and that there might be room for minimal cuts, many emphasise the importance of fire and rescue services, stating that they should not be cut back. Some suggest paying firemen more and improving fire standards in buildings to reduce fires. *"Whilst the fire and rescue service is a valuable resource and should be supported, there are many ways that improvements can be made to reduce running costs and wasted money within the service."*

Views on trading standards are varied, with some viewing the service as overreaching and suggest cutting unnecessary bureaucracy, while others emphasise the importance of protecting people from scams and suggest that trading standards should be prioritised. There are also suggestions to recoup costs through fines and insurance claims. *"Room for some savings on the trading standards, but saves so little it's not really worth it - seems to be a reasonable cost-efficient service."*

2.31 Other themes for written feedback regarding safety services related to:
- Climate action (1 mention)
- Importance of service (1 mention)

Cultural services

Budget simulator descriptions

2.32 <u>Libraries</u>
We have to provide a library service for everyone who lives, works and studies in Oxfordshire by law. Our 45 libraries are open to everyone and they offer many things such as books, information, free wi-fi and computers and social activities. We know that some people cannot come to the libraries so we also have an app, online resources and a home library service for people who need it.

<u>Museums and history services</u>
We run five places where you can learn about Oxfordshire's history and heritage:
- The Oxfordshire Museum (Woodstock), where you can see our permanent collections, exhibitions and activities.
- The Museums Resource Centre (Standlake), where we keep our reserve collections, and where people can learn about Oxfordshire's history and see important historical information.
- Swalcliffe Barn (near Banbury) is a medieval barn where we display large vehicles used for farming and trade. The barn is a Graded 1 listed building, which means that we have to protect it and not change it.
- The remains of the Bishop's Palace (Witney), which was built more than 800 years ago.
- The Oxfordshire History Centre (Cowley), where we keep the county's public archives, records and core local history collection.

We offer these services to everyone in communities. We also have some legal responsibilities to look after these places and collections.

As well as running our own places, we also help other organisations that provide access to heritage across the county, including Oxford City Council (who run the Museum of Oxford) and the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire.

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

- Approximately half of the respondents chose to move one or more sliders in the cultural services group to either increase or decrease funding in this area. 49% moved the slider for libraries and 57% moved the slider for museums and history services.

- Similar proportions of respondents (around one in ten) increased the budget for libraries (15%) as for museums and history services (10%).

- Sizeable numbers of respondents chose to decrease the budget service items in this grouping, with notably more for history services (46%) than for libraries (35%).

- Both service options saw sizeable negative average budget percentage changes: libraries (-1.53%, ranked 14 out of 20) and museums and history services (-2.58%, ranked 17 out of 20).

- The chart below shows how people responded for both items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Budget simulator choices for cultural services

Cultural services

■ Libraries ■ Museums and history services

(values by Percentage change)
- -10%: Libraries 114, Museums and history services 161
- -5%: Libraries 253, Museums and history services 331
- 0%: Libraries 537, Museums and history services 461
- 5%: Libraries 156, Museums and history services 107
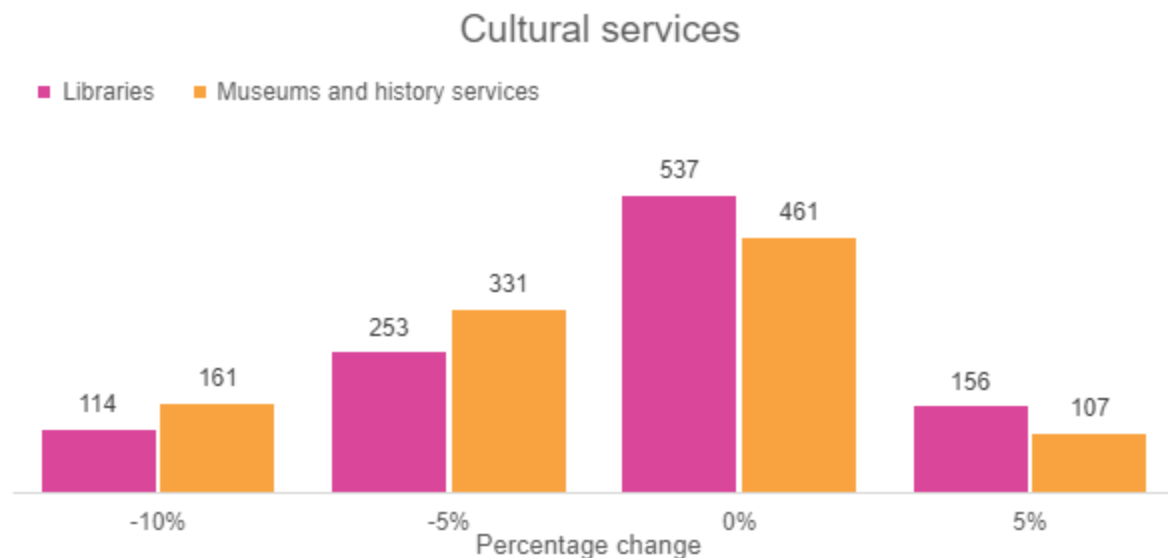
Written feedback

2.34 In all, 77 people gave written feedback on the 'cultural services' section of the simulator, which included 82 different comments. From reviewing the comments, the key themes emerging were:
- Do not reduce spending (26 mentions)
- Increase income (20 mentions)
- Importance of service (17 mentions)
- Reduce spending (9 mentions)

2.35 Many comments emphasise the importance of libraries, particularly for young people and those learning English. They highlight their role in education and community engagement. There are suggestions to keep libraries open, improve their services, and even extend their hours. *"These resources ought to be freely available and accessible to all as important places to learn and enjoy culture of various forms."*

Several comments suggest introducing charges for museums and other cultural services to generate additional revenue. This includes charging tourists and implementing small fees for entry. *"I hate this but it seems like a necessity for now. I'd especially support any opportunities you have to increase fees in a vaguely means-tested way, so e.g. students, pensioners, and low incomes don't pay higher fees but most working-age adults do."*

There are also some critical comments, suggesting that cultural services are outdated and not essential in the current climate. Some suggest closing libraries and museums, while others propose reducing their hours or focusing on more essential services. *"It's 2024... Close the libraries. Second hand books can be bought and sold on Amazon extremely cheaply."*

Some comments propose making cultural services more efficient by using volunteers, implementing self-checking systems in libraries, and partnering with colleges for museum support. *"Use volunteers and those on community service to provide extra staff."*

2.36 Other themes for written feedback regarding cultural services related to:
- Council should not provide this service (5 mentions)
- Roads and transport (2 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (1 mention)
- Service quality (1 mention)

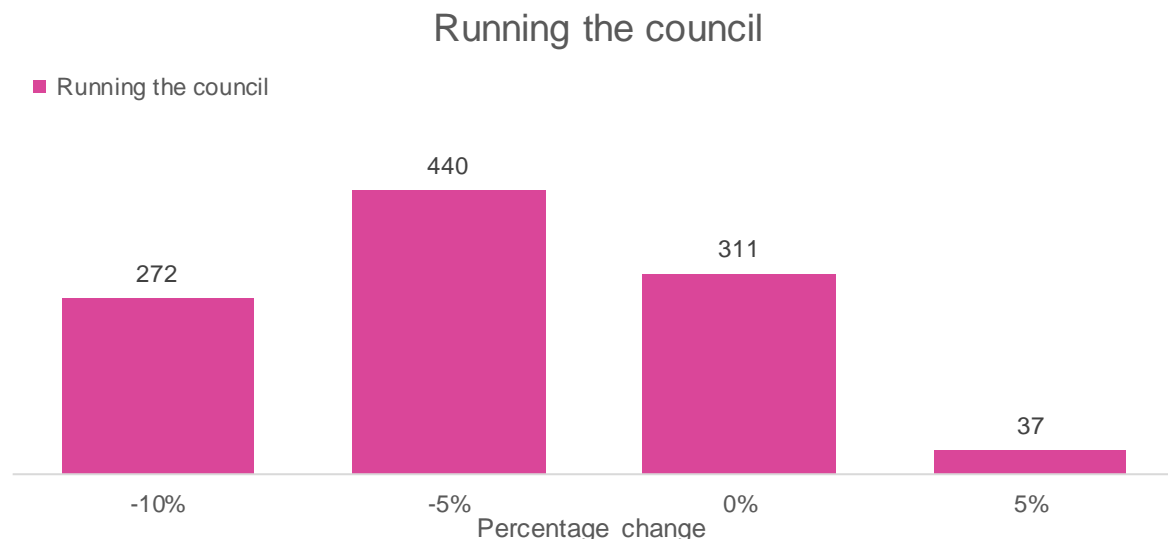# Running the council

Budget simulator description

2.37   Running the council

The county council needs services that help us to do our work for Oxfordshire's residents and communities and meet our legal responsibilities. These services include finance, HR, IT support, law and governance, communications, customer services, policy and performance, procurement and property services.

2.38   The running the council group had just one slider.
- Over seven in ten respondents (71%) chose to move the slider to either increase or decrease funding in this area
- Over two thirds of all respondents chose to decrease the budget for running the business (67%) and only 3 per cent increased it.
- This service option saw the largest negative average budget percentage change of -4.47%, 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 council

Running the council

■ Running the council

| | -10% | -5% | 0% | 5% |
| 272 | 440 | 311 | 37 |

Percentage change

Written feedback

2.39   119 people gave written feedback on the 'running the business' section of the simulator, which included 123 different comments. From reviewing the comments, the key themes emerging were:

- Reduce spending (99 mentions)

.
2.40   Responses showed a desire for reducing spending in two key ways, by improving efficiency and reducing staff costs.

There are multiple mentions of the council being inefficient and having too much wastage, with suggestions to reduce bureaucracy and streamline

processes. *"There is still a huge perceived waste of money at the council, from top down this needs reviewing and action taken."*

Several respondents felt that top council staff are paid too much, with suggestions to cut salaries and bonuses to save costs. *"Maybe the council should look at there wages especially those at the top and reduce any bonus if you can manage you budget."*

There are suggestions to adopt a work culture similar to the private sector, emphasising more efficient working by fewer staff. *"Working smarter with fewer people is the answer and is what you see in the private sector."*

Some respondents express a desire for the council to focus on essential services and cease work on projects seen as non-essential. *"Perhaps the council could concentrate on the important things and not spend so much time trying to provide areas that are no go areas for car drivers."*

2.41 Other themes for written feedback regarding running the business related to:
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (6 mentions)
- Stop diversity work (5 mentions)
- Service quality (5 mentions)
- Roads and transport (4 mentions)
- Increase income (2 mentions)
- Climate action (1 mention)
- Feeback on the budget simulator (1 mention)

Council Tax

2.42 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:
- Funding for the financial year 2025/26 is currently uncertain for all local authorities because of the general election. This includes money from government, grants and our ability to raise council tax.

- The government tells local authorities how much we can raise council tax by without needing a referendum; this is called the referendum limit. If we want to raise council tax higher than the limit, we would have to ask people in Oxfordshire to vote on it, and could only do it if they voted yes. We don't yet know what the referendum limit will be for the financial year 2025/26. The government will tell us later in the year.

2.43 The council tax slider had three options as follows:
- 0%: Our current medium term financial strategy includes a 1.99 per cent rise. This is shown as 0 per cent in the simulator.
- 1%: Increasing this by one per cent is equal to an overall 2.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £5m for services.
- 2%: Increasing this by two per cent is equal to an overall 3.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £10m for services.
- 3%: Increasing this by three per cent is equal to an overall 2.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £15m for services.

Budget simulator choices for council tax
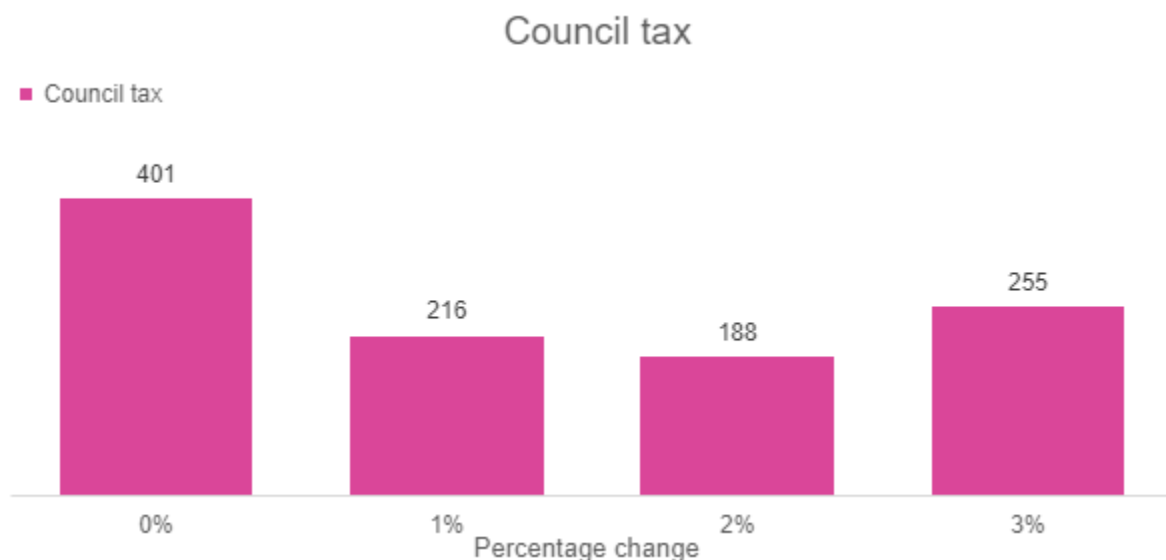
- Overall, 659 people chose to increase council tax on top of the 1.99% already proposed
- On average, the budget simulator shows that people were willing to increase by 1.28 per cent.
- 216 people (20 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by an additional one per cent (to 2.99%)
- 188 people (18 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by an additional two per cent (to 3.99%)
- 255 people (24 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by and additional three per cent (to 4.99%)

Written feedback

2.45 138 people gave written feedback on the council tax section of the simulator, which included 152 different comments. The primary theme was around increasing income (123 mentions), including:
- Increase in council tax is acceptable (51)
- Increase in council tax is not acceptable (27)
- Reduce council tax (18)
- Review council tax banding so that higher value properties pay more (11)

2.46 Several comments indicate a willingness to support an increase in council tax, provided the additional revenue is used wisely and transparently. Some suggest that people would accept an increase if there were clear improvements in services. *"It's worth asking to put the council tax up - I know I would generally support it so long as it was communicated what the money would be spent on and that was well explained."*

Many comments express frustration with the current level of council tax, describing it as too high and not providing good value for money. Some suggest that council tax should be reduced, particularly for those on low incomes or living alone. *"Council tax should be reduced, it's my highest bill and provides the poorest service."*

Many comments suggest that council tax should be adjusted to reflect the current value of properties, with higher rates for second homes and high-value properties. Some also propose redistributing council tax to ensure fairness. *"Make the wealthier residents help fund things, especially people owning multiple properties, not the people who are struggling to pay rent."*

Some comments suggest alternative methods for raising revenue, such as setting up a local bank, charging for certain services, or increasing parking fees. *"I think there is a key issue in Oxford specifically - so many students using services that are not paying into the council. I think the universities should be required to give a percentage of student tuition to the councils on behalf of students."*

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

- Reduce spending (14 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power or responsibilities (6 mentions)
- Feedback on the budget simulator (4 mentions)
- Roads and transport (3 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (2 mentions)

Part 3:
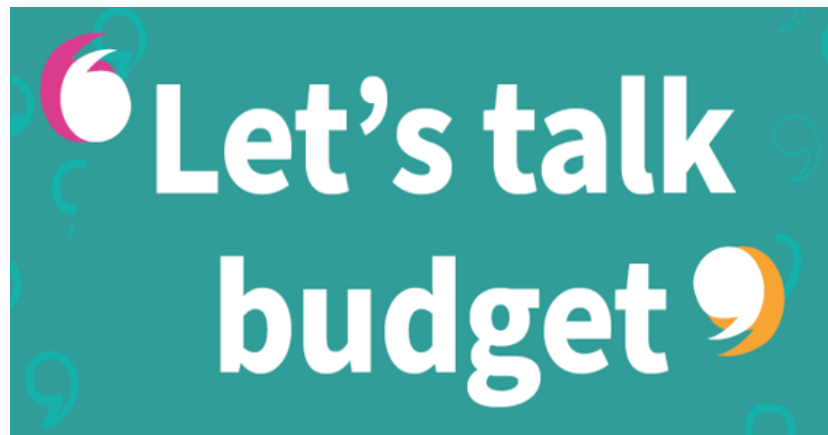
Children and young people's budget engagement 2025/26
Key findings

Report by: Consultation and engagement team
Date: September 2024

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report summarises the findings from the council's three different participatory activities involving children and young people that were specifically designed to engage young people with the county council's 2025/26 business and budget planning. It is in three sections to reflect the different activities undertaken:

- Section 1: Findings from the budget simulator for children and young people.
- Section 2: Feedback from two focus groups designed to engage young people with the budget simulator and to seek feedback on the council's strategic priorities.
- Section 3: Feedback from the two sounding board events designed to engage young people in citizenship conversations, help them understand more about money management and to seek feedback on the council's strategic priorities.

Key findings

- In all, 30 young people submitted a budget using the simulator, with all but one of these completing it during a focus groups setting.

- All the young people who completed the simulator managed to close the £13.9 million funding gap through their slider choices, with many choosing to increase council tax.

- When considering and weighing-up choices across the 20 service area slider options presented in the budget simulator, young people were most likely to select the following service areas for an increase in budget: 'environment and climate change' (21 young people), education and schools' (20 young people), 'public health' (19 young people) and special educational needs and disabilities' (15 young people).

- Conversely, the service items which young people most frequently selected for a decrease in budget (selected by at least half of all respondents) were: 'libraries' (17 young people), 'museums and history services' (16 young people) and 'street lighting' (16 young people).

- The young people's budget simulator responses indicate that there are divergent views on 'place, transport and infrastructure' sliders, with approximately a third choosing to reduce, maintain and increase this service's budget.

- Some service items presented in the young people's budget simulator did not see any significant movement positively or negatively, with young people choosing to maintain the current level of budget to either keep service provision as it is, or to

accept a decline in service provision (home to school transport only). Those service items most likely to be selected to remain at zero were: fire and rescue (18 young people), home to school transport (17 young people) and adult social work (16 young people).

- Focussing now on the impact of slider choices on service item budgets, the average budget percentage change ranged from 1.27 per cent to -4.47 per cent.

- Overall, 23 young people chose to increase council tax on top of the 1.99% already proposed. On average, they were willing to increase it by 1.33 per cent.

- At both of the two sounding boards events and at one of the budget simulator focus groups, young people were asked to consider the council's nine strategic priorities. Specifically, they were asked to deliberate in group format on which two priorities were most important to them as young people and which two were the least important to them.

- 'Creating opportunities for children and young people to reach our full potential' and 'prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents' were more likely to be selected than any others in the young people's top two strategic priorities selected by six out of eleven groups. These were selected by participants at both the sounding boards and budget simulator focus group, however the second ranking strategic priority at the focus group was 'put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work' selected by two of the three groups.

- For 'create opportunities for children and young people to reach our full potential', most of the comments were about needing a good education so young people have better life chances and to fulfil their potential; *"if we don't build their future, who will lead the world?"*

- For 'prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents', a majority of comments focused on everyone had the right to feel healthy, in mind and physically. Many comments said that the negative impact of this has a greater 'knock on effect' from pressure on the NHS, contributing to society and potential for death. *"Health and wellbeing is most important because without it people are unable to have good futures or contribute to the community".*

- The strategic priority most likely to be chosen as the least important by the young people when combining the views expressed in the sounding boards and the focus group was: 'play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy' chosen by over half of the groups (seven out of the eleven groups). There were a fair number of comments about young people not being able to vote, so felt they were not able to be part of the participatory democracy. There were also comments, stating there were systems in place for a participatory democracy already *"In my opinion we already have a good system set up for voting and democracy, so everyone has a say".*

- This was followed by 'invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network' (five out of the eleven groups – with all five chosen from the eight groups at the sounding boards, making it their 'top' least important strategic priority out of the nine).Most comments shared the idea that there were more important issues, and that people could walk if they needed to get somewhere. It was felt that there were already some good aspects to transport that already existed, such as public transport, it was well organised and it aided people too. However, a few comments did state cost, access in rural areas and getting to school did need to be improved, as well as its sustainability credentials.

- *It should be noted that 'invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network' was not selected by any of the three tables in the budget simulator focus groups. These groups were more diverged in their opinions, with three of the nine strategic priorities each receiving one vote.*

1. Budget simulator

Respondent profile

1.1   In all, 30 young people submitted a budget using the simulator, and all of these provided their demographic details.

- More young people responding identified as female (60 per cent) than male (37 per cent).
- Only three (ten per cent) of participants young people were aged 15-17. Eight 12 year olds and eight 14 year olds participated, and eleven respondents were 13 years old.
- Most Budget simulator respondents were more likely to identify their ethnic group as 'white' (87 per cent), with the remaining four participants identifying as Asian or Asian British.
- Approximately three quarters of the young people responding (77 per cent) stated that they did not have a long-term illness or disability, with a further six having a disability or illness which impacted them a lot, and one preferring not to say.
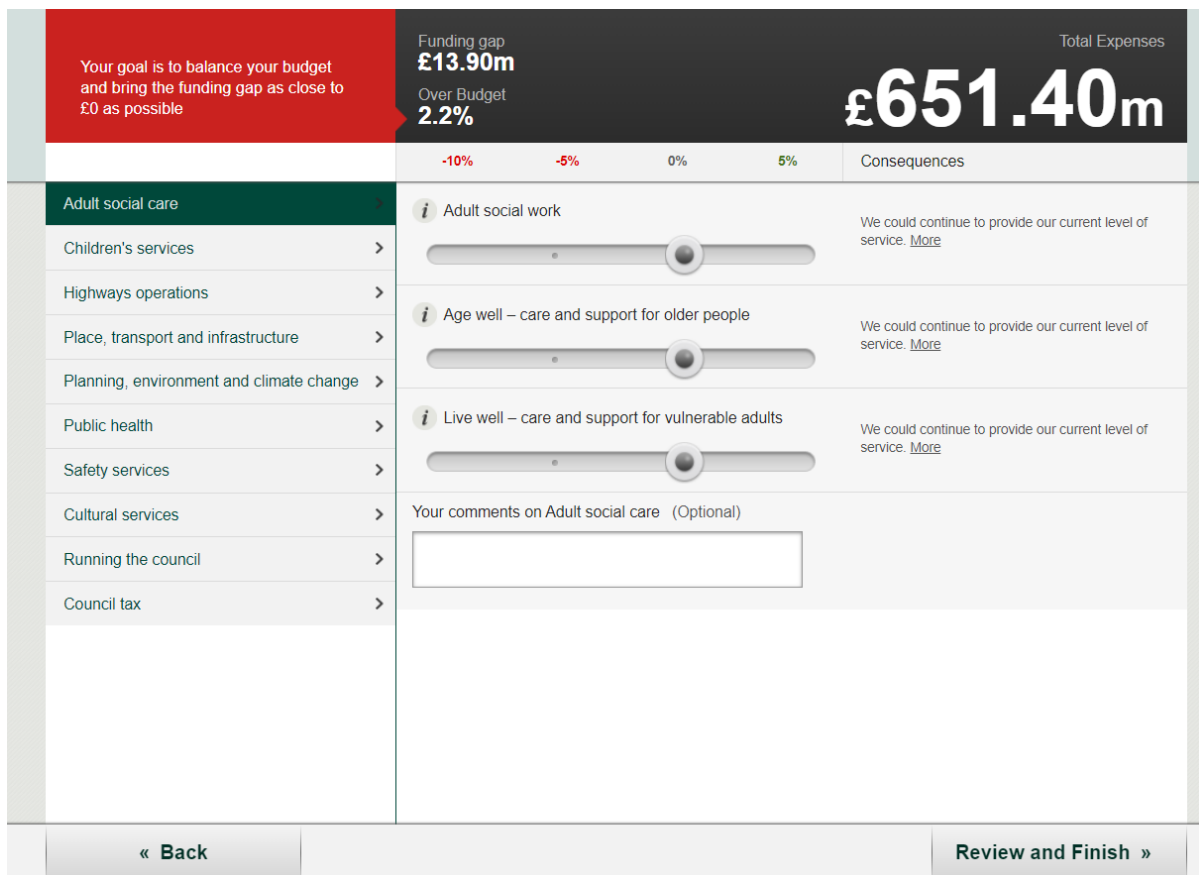
Key findings

1.2   The budget simulator organised core council services under 10 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 2025/2026.

1.3   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.

1.4   The financial figures used in the simulator were based on the forecast budget for 2025/2026 at the time of its launch, taking account of pressures and proposed savings and were indicative figures only.

1.5   For each of the 20 service items (sliders) in the simulator four standard choices were given:
- increase the allocated service item budget by 5 per cent
- maintain the allocated service item budget (0 per cent)
- decrease the allocated service item budget by 5 per cent
- decrease the allocated service item budget by 10 per cent

1.6   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.

1.7   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

Key findings

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

Table 1: Young people's slider choices

The slider option choices are shown as the number of young people who selected them.		Slider options			
Service group	**Service item**	**-10%**	**-5%**	**0%**	**5%**
Adult social care	Adult social work	3	9	16	2
	Age well - care and support for older people	3	5	14	8
	Live well - care and support for vulnerable adults	2	10	14	4
Children's services	Children's social care	0	4	15	11
	Family help	0	3	14	13
	Education and schools	0	2	8	20
	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	0	1	14	15
	Home to school transport	2	7	17	4
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	1	9	13	7
	Street lighting	3	13	10	4
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	0	11	9	10
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	3	10	13	4
	Environment and climate action	0	3	6	21
	Waste disposal	0	9	13	8
Public health	Public health	0	1	10	19
Safety services	Fire and rescue	0	7	18	5
	Trading standards	5	9	9	7
Cultural services	Libraries	3	14	9	4
	Museums and history services	6	10	9	5
Running the council	Running the council	6	7	13	4

Table 2: Young people's slider movements

Service group	Service	No. of people who move the slider to decrease budget (-5% or -10%)	No. of people who made no change (selected 0%)	No. of people who moved the slider to increase budget (+5%)
Adult social care	Adult social work	12	16	2
	Age well - care and support for older people	8	14	8
	Live well - care and support for vulnerable adults	12	14	4
Children's services	Children's social care	4	15	11
	Family help	3	14	13
	Education and schools	2	8	20
	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	1	14	15
	Home to school transport	9	17	4
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	10	13	7
	Street lighting	16	10	4
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	11	9	10
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	13	13	4
	Environment and climate action	3	6	21
	Waste disposal	9	13	8
Public health	Public health	1	10	19
Safety services	Fire and rescue	7	18	5
	Trading standards	14	9	7
Cultural services	Libraries	17	9	4
	Museums and history services	16	9	5
Running the council	Running the council	13	13	4

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

- Environment and climate change (21 young people)
- Education and schools (20 young people)
- Public health (19 young people)
- Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (15 young people)

These were all selected by 50 per cent or more of the young people responding.

1.10   Conversely, the service items which young people most frequently selected for a decrease in budget (selected by at least half of all respondents) were:

- Libraries (17 young people)
- Museums and history services (16 young people)
- Street lighting (16 young people)

1.11   The budget simulator responses indicate that there are divergent views across on 'place, transport and infrastructure', with approximately a third choosing to reduce, maintain and increase this service's budget.

1.12   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 (18 young people)
- Home to school transport (17 young people)
- Adult social work (16 young people)

1.13   Focussing now on the impact of slider choices, table 3 shows the impact of young people's choices on service item budgets, by presenting the average budget percentage change. This ranges from 1.27 per cent to -4.47 per cent.

Table 3: Young people's average budget percentage change

Service group	Service item	Average budget change as%
Education and learning	Education and schools	3.00%
Public health	Public health	3.00%
Planning, environment and climate change	Environment and climate action	3.00%
Education and learning	Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	2.33%
Children's services	Family help	1.67%
Children's services	Children's social care	1.17%
Planning, environment and climate change	Waste disposal	-0.17%
Place, transport and infrastructure	Place, transport and infrastructure	-0.17%
Safety services	Fire and rescue	-0.33%
Adult social care	Age well – care and support for older people	-0.50%
Highways operations	Highways maintenance	-0.67%
Education and learning	Home to school transport	-1.17%
Adult social care	Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults	-1.67%
Safety services	Trading standards	-2.00%
Planning, environment and climate change	Strategic planning	-2.00%
Adult social care	Adult social work	-2.17%
Highways operations	Street lighting	-2.50%
Running the council	Running the council	-2.50%
Cultural services	Libraries	-2.67%
Cultural services	Museums and history services	-2.83%

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

- Education and schools (3 per cent)
- Public health (3 per cent)
- Environment and climate action (3 per cent)
- Special education needs and disabilities (SEND) (2.33 per cent)
- Family help (1.67 per cent)
- Children's social care (1.17 per cent)

1.15 These were followed by a further five services items (highlighted in orange), with an average percentage change in budget between zero and minus one per cent:

- Waste disposal (-0.17 per cent)

- Place, transport and infrastructure (-0.17 per cent)
- Fire and rescue (-0.33 per cent)
- Age well, care and support for older people (-0.50 per cent)
- Highways maintenance (-0.67 per cent)

1.16 The seven service items (highlighted in green) with, on average, the greatest negative percentage changes of between -2 per cent to -2.83 per cent were:

- Trading standards (-2.00 per cent)
- Strategic planning (-2.00 per cent)
- Adult social work (-2.17 per cent)
- Street lighting (-2.50 per cent)
- Back-office support services (Running the council) (-2.50 per cent)
- Libraries (-2.67 per cent)
- Museums and history services (-2.83 per cent)

1.17 These were followed by a further two services items (highlighted in yellow), which had an average negative percentage changes less than -2 per cent:

- Home to school transport (-1.17 per cent)
- Live well, care and support for vulnerable adults (-1.67 per cent)

Closing the funding gap

1.18 Our starting budget was £651.4 million with a funding gap of £13.9 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). All the young people who completed the simulator managed to close the £13.9 million funding gap through their slider choices, with many choosing to increase council tax.

1.19 Before submitting their final budget, the young people were asked if they had any further comments to share with the council. 10 gave written feedback, which included 10 different comments. The most significant area of comment was feedback on the budget simulator (5 mentions), with participants feeling positive about the exercise but in some cases finding the amount of information overwhelming. *"Makes sense, helps me (as a kid) understand budgeting. Information bits are a bit wordy."*

1.20 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 services
- Highways operations
- Place, transport and infrastructure
- Planning, environment and climate change

- Public health
- Safety services
- Cultural services
- Running the council

1.21 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 the written feedback and all comments across the entire simulator were read and coded against this.

Adult social care

Budget simulator descriptions

1.22 <u>Adult social work</u>

We help people who are vulnerable or at risk of harm to live safely and independently. We work with people and organisations to protect their rights and prevent abuse and neglect. We also assess their needs and provide or arrange services to support them. This is our legal duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2018. In the last financial year (April 2023 - March 2024) we undertook 22,306 initial adult social care assessments.

<u>Age well – care and support for older people</u>

We help older people in Oxfordshire to live independently and stay safe and well. We also provide information and advice, support for unpaid carers and a range of services to meet people's needs. This can include care services and specialist housing. This is our legal duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2018. Currently we care for and support 3,866 older people.

<u>Live well - care and support for vulnerable adults</u>

We help adults aged 18+ in Oxfordshire who have a disability or physical or mental illness to stay well and safe. We provide information and advice, assess their needs and provide or arrange a range of services to support them. This can include care services and specialist housing. This is our legal duty under the Health and Social Care Act 2018. Currently we care for and support 2,978 vulnerable adults.

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.

The chart below shows how people responded for all three service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for adult social care grouping

Adult social care

■ Adult social work
■ Age well – care and support for older people
■ Live well – care and support for vulnerable adults

Percentage change
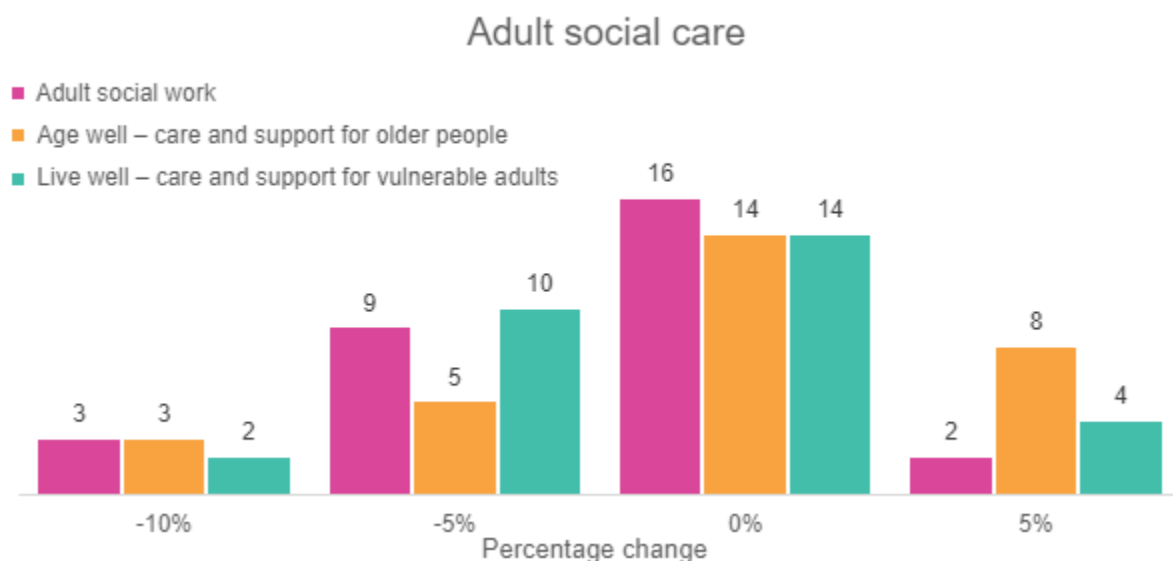
Written feedback

1.23   In all, 18 young people gave written feedback to support their choices on the 'adult social care' section of the simulator, which included 20 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:

- Importance of service (7 mentions)
- Reduce spending (6 mentions)
- The council should not provide this service (4 mentions)

1.24   Comments emphasised the importance of services for older people, with a feeling that they deserve support in their later years. *"I think older people should get more support if they need/want it so they can enjoy their life for as long as possible and don't have to spend it somewhere that they don't like."*

The importance of providing help for vulnerable adults was also highlighted, with a desire to see them supported in their daily activities and to be active members of their communities. *"Care for vulnerable adults is very important."*

Suggestions for reducing spending included prioritising services for younger children to prevent future problems and reliance on services as adults. *"If we priortise younger children, we could try and help them and provide support there, and there might be less problems as adults."*

Some comments suggest reducing spending on adult social care to encourage self-sufficiency. Additionally, some suggest that families should take on more responsibility for caring for relatives. *"I also think that some responsibilities fall on financially able families I think the same applies for elderly people I think sons or daughters could look after parents"*

1.25 Other themes for written feedback regarding adult social care related to:
- Do not reduce spending (2 mentions)
- Increase income (1 mention)

Children's and family services

Budget simulator descriptions

1.26 Children's social care
We help children and young people in Oxfordshire who are vulnerable or at risk of harm to be safe and well. We work with families and other organisations to protect their rights and prevent abuse and neglect. We also assess their needs and provide or arrange services to support them. This is our legal duty under the Children Act 1989, 2004 and 2017 and the Health and Social Care Act 2018.

We support children to stay safely with their families or family networks when they need help and protection. Working with parents and children we help make changes and improve outcomes by tackling the things that cause concerns and the family distress. Currently we support 1,738 individuals.

We provide services for 765 children and young people who can't live with their own families, finding them loving foster families and good homes and making sure that they are healthy and happy. When young people are leaving our care, we make sure they have a safe place to live and a plan for their goals for the future.

We provide social care services for 403 children and young people with very complex disabilities and health needs, who need high levels of practical physical care and support.

We welcome children and young people who come to our country alone as asylum seekers and need our help. We give them care, support, education and a chance for a better future

Family help
We help families, children and young people in Oxfordshire who are facing difficulties to overcome them and prevent future problems.

Children and family hubs are places where you can get advice and support on various topics, such as parenting, health, education and more. Currently there are 1,007 individuals being supported by this service.

The targeted youth support service helps young people who are at risk of getting into trouble or harm. It helps them deal with issues such as drugs, alcohol, crime, violence, mental health and more.

Our education, employment and training service supports young people who are not in school, work or training. It helps them find opportunities to learn new skills, get qualifications and find jobs.

We also work with local groups and organisations to provide activities and programmes for families, children and young people. Working with these groups also helps them to connect with other people in their area and access other services.

Education and schools

We provide access to education and training for Oxfordshire's children, including those who are excluded from school or in the criminal justice system. We also oversee the school admissions process, make sure there is enough early years' provision for children under five and provide specialist services to support schools to improve. We also support children and young people with their education and health and care plans, allowing them to get the support they need to thrive in our schools.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

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. We assess their needs and provide or arrange appropriate support according to their individual needs. Currently 6,639 children and young people in Oxfordshire have an education and healthcare plan.

We also provide an impartial information and advice service, as well as support some SEND pupils in schools with educational psychologists, speech and language therapy and occupational therapists. This is our legal duty under the Code of Practice 2014.
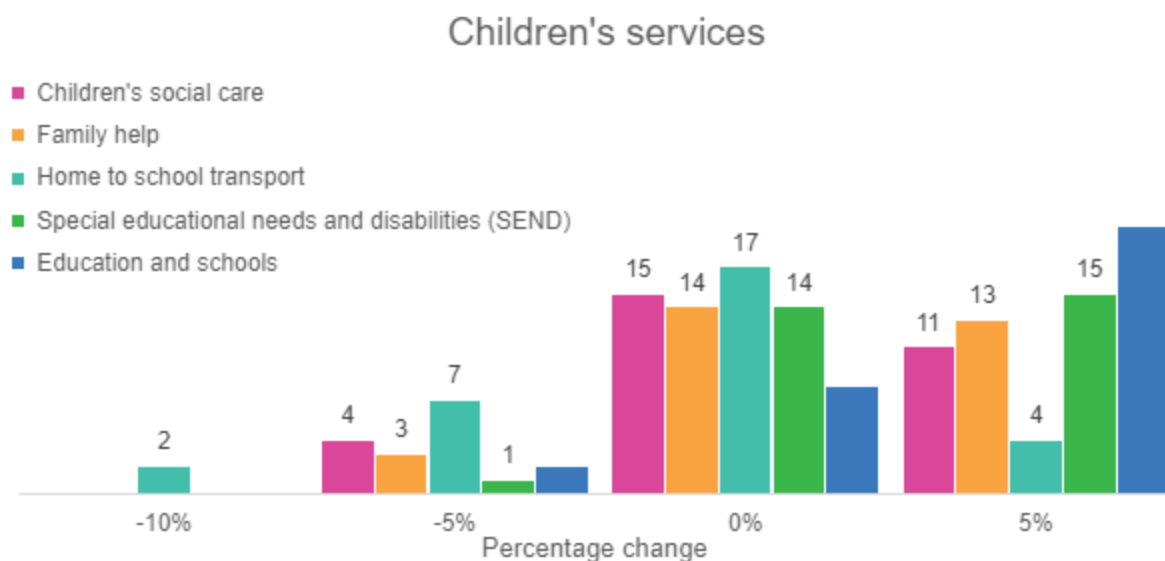
Home to school transport

We help eligible children from reception to year 11 get to school by providing them with transportation assistance. Usually they get a free pass to use on public buses or trains but sometimes we arrange for them to travel on a special bus, coach, or minibus. There are just over 6,000 young people who are eligible to use mainstream school transport in Oxfordshire.

Some children with extra needs may travel by taxi to help them access school and education.

1.27   The children's and family service group contained five sliders: children's social care, family help, education and schools, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and home to school transport.

The chart below shows how people responded for service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for children's services grouping

Children's services

Legend:
- Children's social care
- Family help
- Home to school transport
- Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Education and schools

Data values by percentage change:
- -10%: Home to school transport 2
- -5%: Children's social care 4, Family help 3, Home to school transport 7, SEND 1
- 0%: Children's social care 15, Family help 14, Home to school transport 17, SEND 14
- 5%: Children's social care 11, Family help 13, Home to school transport 4, SEND 15

X-axis: Percentage change

Written feedback

1.28 In all, 22 young people gave written feedback on the 'children's and family services' section of the simulator, which included 24 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:

- Importance of service (9 mentions)
- Service quality (5 mentions)
- Reduce spending (4 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (3 mentions)

1.29 Many comments emphasised the importance of supporting young children as they are seen as the future contributors to the economy. There is a strong sentiment that children deserve to be supported and provided with opportunities. *"Children's lives are very important because you need happy and smart children to build a good future."*

Comments also highlighted the importance of helping children with special educational needs and disabilities. There are concerns about the quality of SEND services, including a lack of places in SEND schools. *"SEN children are often ignored and if we help them as children there could be less strain on the adult services."*

Home to school transport received the majority of comments relating the reducing spending, with suggestions that public transport schemes and car sharing could be better for the environment as well as helping to reduce the cost of providing home to school transport. *"I decreased this because there*

are other transports that are public which is better for the environment."

Comments against reducing spending on children's services emphasised the impact on, and importance of, children's mental health. There are concerns about children struggling with school and mental health problems, and the need for support services. *"children social care we do need… as most kids struggle with school and mental health problems"*

1.30 Other themes for written feedback regarding children's services related to:

- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (2 mentions)
- The council should not provide this service (1 mention)

Highways operations

Budget simulator descriptions

1.31 Highways maintenance
We have to keep the roads in Oxfordshire safe for everyone. We look after 3,000 miles of roads, as well as paths, bridges and trees. We fix potholes, resurface roads, make roads safer, clear snow and ice in the winter, unblock drains and cut grass on the sides of the roads.

Street lighting
We maintain over 60,000 street lights, signs and bollards that light up the roads and paths in Oxfordshire. Most of them are LED lights, which use less energy and last longer. Our streetlights are managed (what times they are on and when they are brighter or dimmer) to save energy.

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

The chart below shows how people responded for both items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for highways operations
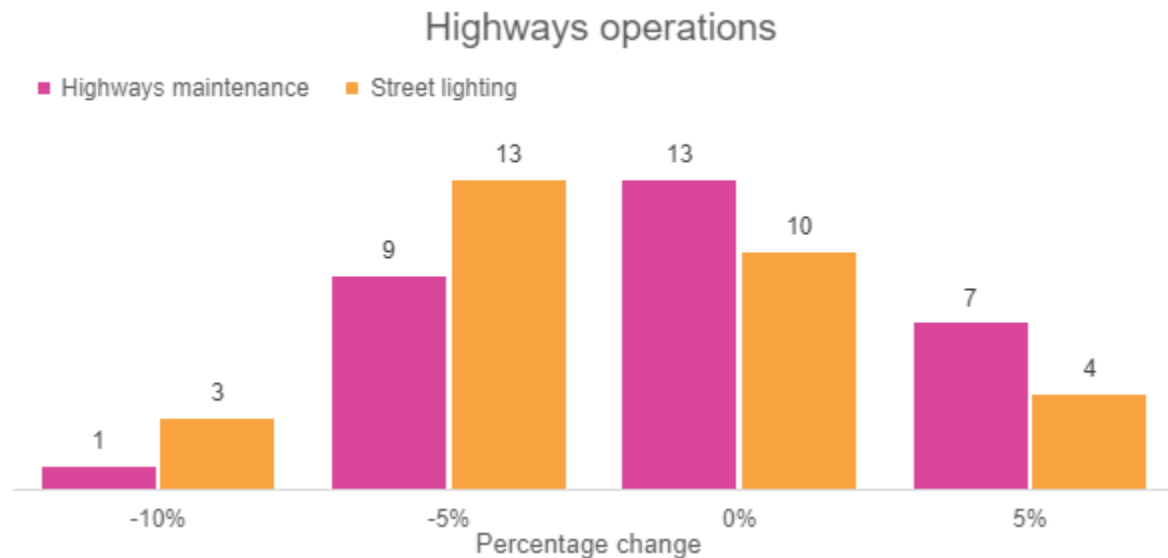
Written feedback

1.33 In all, 16 young people gave written feedback on the 'highways operations' section of the simulator, which included 23 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 (6 mentions)
- Roads and transport (5 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (5 mentions)
- Importance of service (4 mentions)

1.34 Several comments suggest reducing street lighting to save costs whilst reducing light pollution. There are suggestions to reduce cost and energy use by using solar lighting and LED bulbs. However, there are also comments emphasising the importance of street lighting for safety, especially in darker times of the year. *"Increasing street lights can increase the safety of areas because some people feel scared to enter areas which are dark."*

Many comments emphasise the need for road repair and maintenance, particularly fixing potholes and improving road conditions. Some feel that highway maintenance funding should not be reduced, and is especially important in rural areas of Oxfordshire. *"…other things are more important like highway maintenance which lower the accident rate on the highway."*

1.35 Other themes for written feedback regarding highways operations related to:
- Service quality (2 mentions)
- Increase income (1 mention)

Place, transport and infrastructure

Budget simulator description

1.36 <u>Place, transport and infrastructure</u>
We support and encourage thriving communities in Oxfordshire, mainly by managing travel and connectivity so that people can easily get to important places (such as health services, education, shops and workplaces) and goods can be moved in Oxfordshire. We have a plan for the county that respects the individual needs of different areas in Oxfordshire, and more local travel area plans to help us understand what transport might be needed to support communities in the future.

We encourage people to travel by walking, cycling and using public transport. We work with other groups and organisations to provide services and make changes that improve travel and transport. We also build roads, bridges and other transport facilities that are funded by government, work with businesses who build new housing and business properties, and by working with others in partnership to deliver services.

We want to make Oxfordshire a better place to live and work, where people can benefit from types of transport that help prevent climate change and improve air quality improving the health and wellbeing for residents.

We support bus services and provide free bus passes for older people and disabled people and their companions. We ensure that new housing and commercial developments and new cycleways, walking routes, bus lanes and roads meet our communities' needs and the overall vision for Oxfordshire as a greener, fairer and healthier county.

1.37 The place, transport and infrastructure group had just one slider.
The chart below shows how people responded for place, transport and infrastructure as presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for place, transport and infrastructure

Place, transport and infrastructure

■ Place, transport and infrastructure
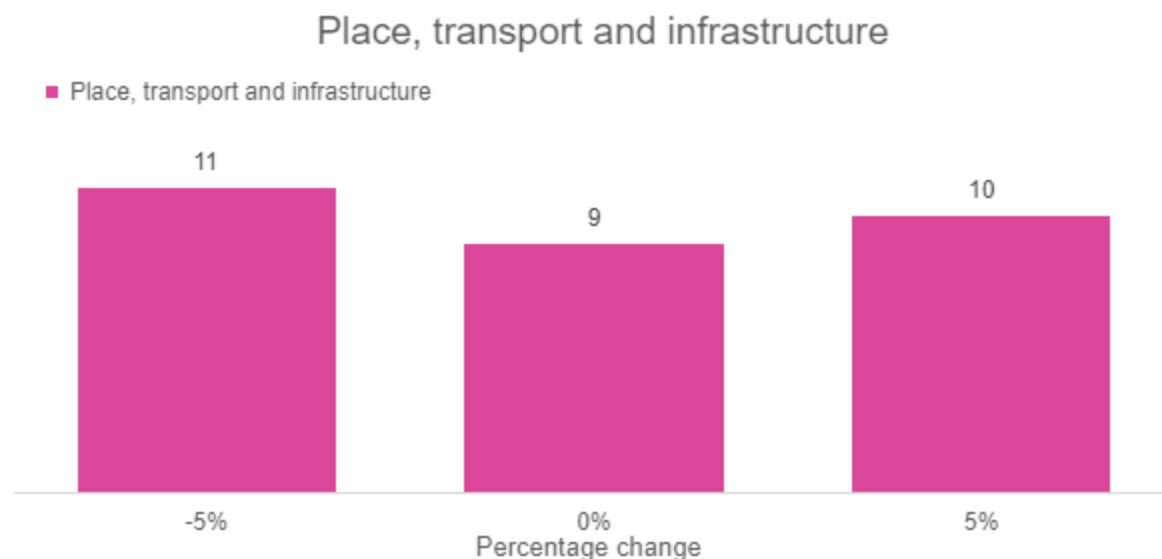
Written feedback

1.38   In all, 15 young people gave written feedback on the 'place, transport and infrastructure' section of the simulator, which included 22 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:

- Roads and transport (9 mentions)
- Importance of service (5 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (4 mentions)

1.39   Comments were primarily focussed on public transport services, highlighting their use by young people and emphasising the need for continued investment public transport. It is suggested that if the council takes over transport costs and fares might go down, encouraging more people to use public transport. "Travel is important and should be cheaper."

1.40   Here is a high-level thematic summary of the other comments made for 'place, transport and infrastructure':
- Feedback on the budget simulator (2 mentions)
- Reduce spending (1 mention)
- Service quality (1 mention)

Planning, environment and climate change

Budget simulator description

1.41   Strategic planning

We are in charge of planning for minerals and waste in Oxfordshire. We also give advice on planning for infrastructure, such as roads, schools and health services. We do this by responding to consultations on planning applications and on local area plans.

Environment and climate action

Reducing our impact on the environment is important to us and is part of all the work that we do. This part of our budget is about the work of our environment and climate action teams, who play an important part in improving the natural environment and people's access to it, reducing pollution and making sure we are ready to deal with more severe weather.

We are responsible for fixing drainage and flooding issues on highways and roads across Oxfordshire, including blocked drains and gullies on the road. We are also responsible for co-ordinating the emergency response to flooding and managing the flood risk from surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses. We work with a range of organisations including the Environment Agency, Thames Water, the city and district councils, farmers and landowners to do this.

We also work with the city and district councils (and local communities) to protect and improve nature and access to green and open spaces. We work with the Local Nature Partnership to protect our heritage, wildlife and landscapes in Oxfordshire, as well as increasing the number of trees.

We help people enjoy the countryside by looking after and expanding the paths and trails that people can walk, cycle or ride horses on. We work to keep these paths clear, mapped and sign-posted, as required by law. We work with volunteers and community groups to make our environment better and safer for everyone.

We work to reduce pollution and make Oxfordshire more energy efficient by:

- Supporting people on very low incomes to make their homes more energy efficient. This helps to reduce their bills as well as keeping them warmer and healthier.
- Working with other organisations to make sure Oxfordshire's energy system can support communities and homes to have more chargers for electric cars and use more renewable energy.

- Reducing how much energy council buildings use, and switching to vans, cars other vehicles that create less pollution. We also support schools to make these changes.
- Working with companies that supply things to the council to help them reduce their environmental impact.
- Reducing traffic congestion and encouraging people to walk, cycle or use public transport (where possible) instead of driving.
- Supporting communities to do things that are good for their local area and the environment. For example, having repair cafes, planting community orchards and giving people advice on how to lower their energy bills.

<u>Waste disposal</u>

We are responsible for getting rid of household waste in Oxfordshire. This includes recycling, green waste and black bin waste. However, we don't do bin collections; they are arranged by your local district or city council.

We also have to provide places where people can take their household waste to be recycled. These are called household waste recycling centres. We have seven of these in Oxfordshire. They are visited by about one million people every year and they take in about 40,000 to 45,000 tonnes of waste every year.

1.42   The planning, transport and climate change grouping contained three sliders: strategic planning, environment and climate action and waste disposal. The chart below shows how people responded for all three service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for planning, environment and climate change

Planning, environment and climate change

■ Environment and climate action   ■ Strategic planning   ■ Waste disposal

Percentage change
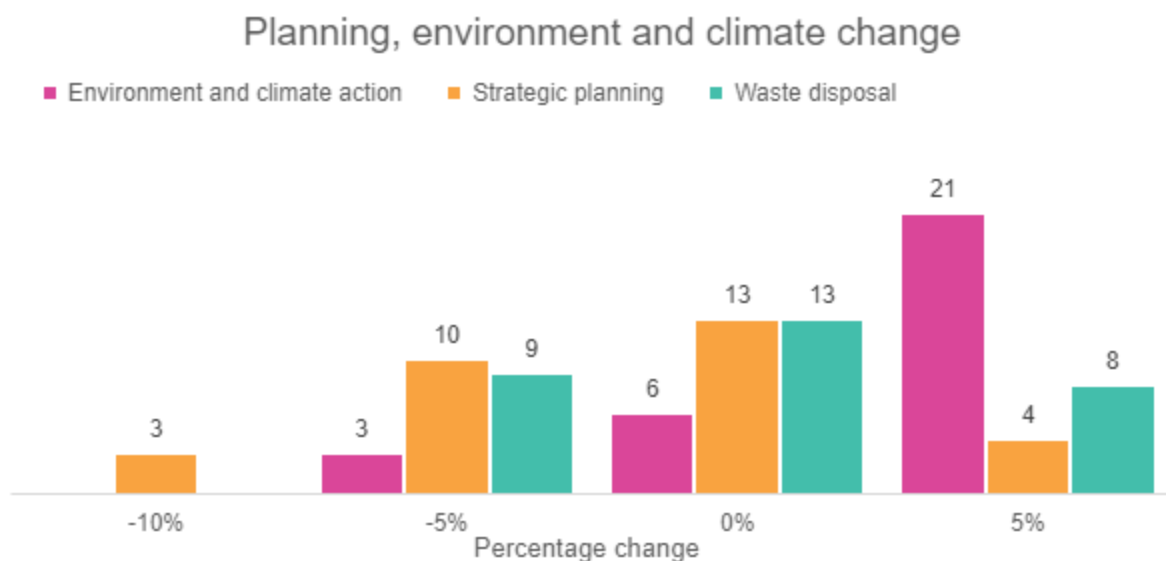
Written feedback

1.43   In all, 19 young people gave written feedback on the 'Planning, environment and climate change' section of the simulator, which included 27 different comments. The key themes were:
   • Climate action (18 mentions)
   • Reduce spending (4 mentions)

1.44   There is a strong sentiment that the environment is crucial for future generations and that immediate climate action is needed before it is too late. There is a belief that future spending can be reduced by addressing climate change now. "We really need to work on the environment and the climate as future generations will have to suffer from our actions."

   There is a sentiment that spending on other services, such as planning, can be reduced to prioritise the environment. "Planning is important but saving and preserving our environment is vital to survive."

1.45   Other themes for written feedback regarding environment and climate change related to:
   • Waste (2 mentions)
   • Importance of service (2 mentions)
   • Do not reduce spending (1 mention)

Public health

Budget simulator description

1.46   Public health
   We provide services to improve people's health and help them to avoid getting sick. This includes work to tackle health inequalities (for example, where people in one area of Oxfordshire have worse health or don't live as long as people in another area) so that everybody can live longer, healthier lives. We provide services that help to stop illnesses that can be passed from one person to another and we help local health services to meet the needs of people in Oxfordshire. This includes making sure that services are easy to access, effective and good value.

   We work with other council services, communities and organisations to reduce the differences in health between different groups of people and to make places healthier.

   Services that we pay for include:
   • childhood health visitors and school nurses
   • NHS health checks for adults over 40 years old
   • reducing the harm caused by smoking, drugs, alcohol and obesity
   • sexual health services.

Most of the money for these services comes from a special grant that we can only use for public health. The simulator slider for public health represents what is paid for with the council's money and other grants, mainly services that reduce health inequalities and help people who are affected by domestic abuse or drug and alcohol problems.

1.47   The public health group had just one slider.

The chart below shows how people responded for public health as presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for public health
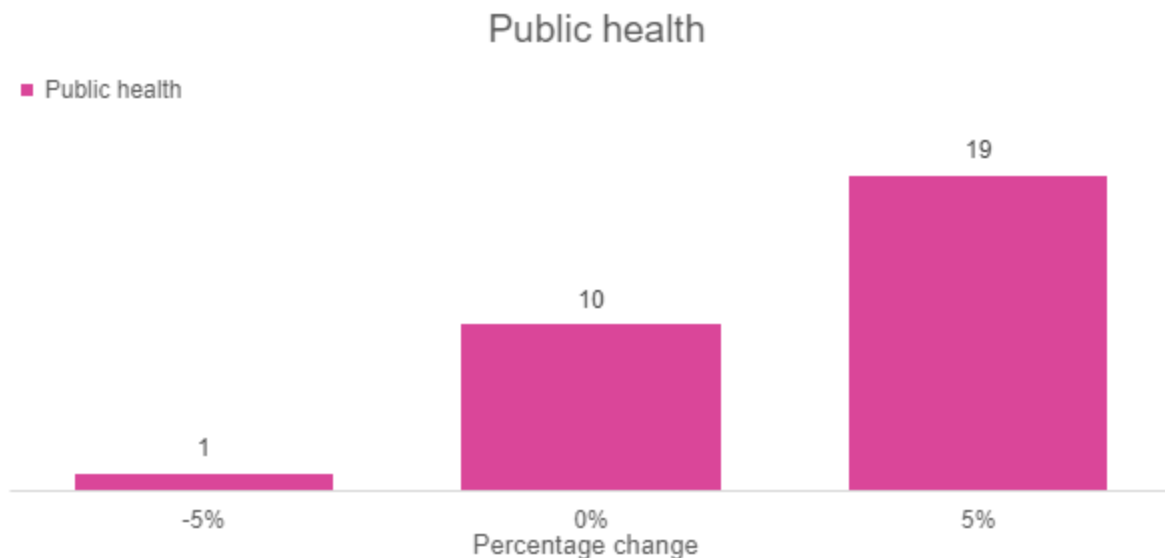
Public health

Written feedback

1.48   In all, 19 young people gave written feedback on the Public Health section of the simulator, which included 22 different comments. Key themes were:
   • Importance of service (10)
   • Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (4 mentions)

1.49   Comments emphasise the importance of public health, stating that it saves lives, helps people live longer, and is essential for a functioning council. There is a strong sentiment that health should always be a high priority, especially in light of recent contagious diseases like COVID-19. *"Health is the upmost priority as there is no point making a perfect future if there is no one to live in it."*

Some comments express frustration with long waiting times for doctors and the perceived unfairness that those who can afford private doctors receive quicker treatment. Recommendations for improving this include higher wages to increase staffing. *"lots of the times there is a big wait for the doctors and some people might not be able to wait that long."*

1.50   Other themes for written feedback regarding public health to:

- Increase income (2 mentions)
- Service quality (2 mentions)
- Reduce spending (1 mention)
- Do not reduce spending (1 mention)

Safety services

Budget simulator description

1.51   <u>Fire and rescue</u>
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is part of the county council and our firefighters operate from 25 fire stations across the county. We protect communities, reduce harm and save lives through education and advice about fire safety. We also respond to emergencies, such as fires, road accidents, chemical incidents, flooding and extreme weather. We work with partners to plan and prepare for major incidents.

We are the statutory fire authority for Oxfordshire. That means that it is our job to check buildings for fire safety, give advice to businesses on fire safety responsibilities and make sure they follow the rules. If they don't, we can take action to make sure everyone stays safe. This is our legal duty under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

<u>Trading standards</u>
Trading Standards works to protect residents and businesses and takes action, including enforcement, when needed.

This covers things like weights and measures; product safety; food standards; unfair trading practices; animal health and disease control; environmental requirements; and price marking and comparison.

In addition, it covers rules around the sale of products that have age limits, such as tobacco and vapes; the licensing and inspection of sites storing explosives and petroleum; and the safety certification of sports stadiums. Trading Standards also works to protect people from financial abuse, like scams, and enforces weight restrictions on roads.

1.52   The safety services grouping contained two sliders: fire and rescue and trading standards.

The chart below shows how people responded for all three service items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for safety services

Safety services

■ Fire and rescue ■ Trading standards

Written feedback

1.53   In all, 16 young people gave written feedback on the 'Safety services' section of the simulator, which included 14 different comments. Key themes were:
  - Importance of service (10 mentions)
  - Reduce spending (2 mentions)

1.54   There is a sentiment that trading standards are important, particularly addressing issues such as vaping among young people. Underage sales are highlighted as a significant problem, with several comments mentioning issues at schools. *"Vaping has become a large issue for younger people and being able to control it would hopefully reduce the easiness of being able to get products like this."*

Comments also emphasise the importance of the fire and rescue service and how they are keeping people safe. *"Fire and rescue are very important to save peoples lives."*

Some respondents felt that spending could be reduced, with a suggestion that some responsibilities could be transferred to businesses. *"I think that personally we could spend a little less on safety services"*

1.55   Other themes for written feedback regarding cultural services related to:
  - Climate action (1 mention)
  - Importance of service (1 mention)

Cultural services

Budget simulator descriptions

1.56   Libraries
We have to provide a library service for everyone who lives, works and studies in Oxfordshire by law. Our 45 libraries are open to everyone and they offer many things such as books, information, free wi-fi and computers and social activities. We know that some people cannot come to the libraries so we also have an app, online resources and a home library service for people who need it.

Museums and history services
We run five places where you can learn about Oxfordshire's history and heritage:
- The Oxfordshire Museum (Woodstock), where you can see our permanent collections, exhibitions and activities.
- The Museums Resource Centre (Standlake), where we keep our reserve collections, and where people can learn about Oxfordshire's history and see important historical information.
- Swalcliffe Barn (near Banbury) is a medieval barn where we display large vehicles used for farming and trade. The barn is a Graded 1 listed building, which means that we have to protect it and not change it.
- The remains of the Bishop's Palace (Witney), which was built more than 800 years ago.
- The Oxfordshire History Centre (Cowley), where we keep the county's public archives, records and core local history collection.

We offer these services to everyone in communities. We also have some legal responsibilities to look after these places and collections.

As well as running our own places, we also help other organisations that provide access to heritage across the county, including Oxford City Council (who run the Museum of Oxford) and the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire.

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

The chart below shows how people responded for both items (sliders) presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for cultural services
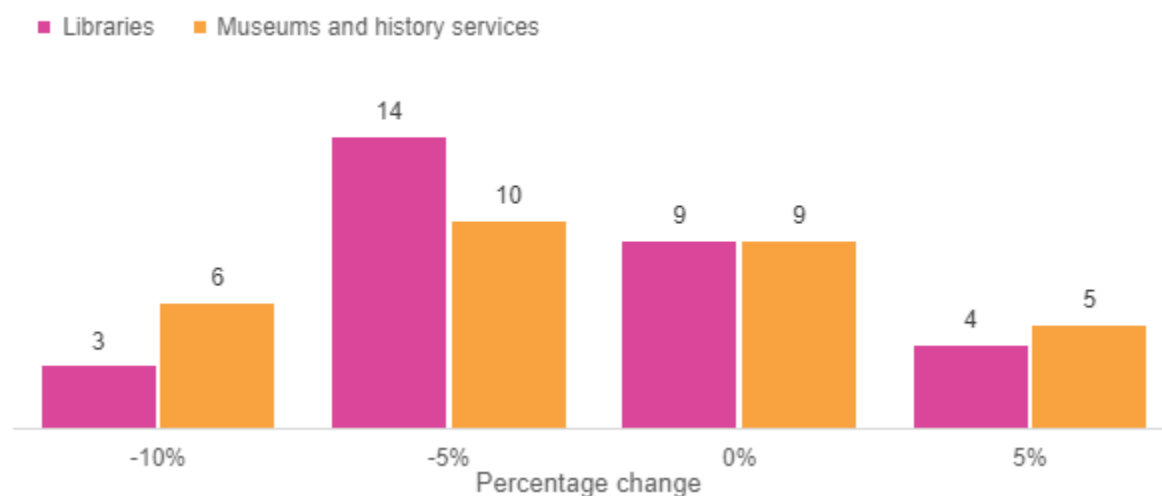
Cultural services

Written feedback

1.58   In all, 22 young gave written feedback on the 'cultural services' section of the simulator, which included 29 different comments. From reviewing the comments, the key themes emerging were:
- Reduce spending (13 mentions)
- Importance of service (12 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (3 mentions)

1.59   There are conflicting sentiments on the importance of cultural services. Some comments suggest that these services are not essential and that the budget could be better allocated to more important services like education, housing, and healthcare. "libraries aren't used much because schools have libraries and book are cheaply available at charity shops."

However other comments emphasise the importance of cultural services for education and community engagement, particularly for young people, and highlight the need to protect their funding. Libraries and museums are seen as valuable resources for learning and personal growth, providing safe and warm spaces for people. "The information helps teach us so much and will make us happier people. These places aren't just a source of education for all ages, they are a safe, warm place that people can somehow find support."

1.60   Other themes for written feedback regarding cultural services related to:
- Service quality (1 mention)

Running the council

Budget simulator description

1.61 Running the council
The county council needs services that help us to do our work for Oxfordshire's residents and communities and meet our legal responsibilities. These services include finance, HR, IT support, law and governance, communications, customer services, policy and performance, procurement and property services.

1.62 The running the council group had just one slider.

The chart below shows how people responded for running the business as presented in the simulator.

Young people's budget simulator choices for running the council

Running the council

Written feedback

1.63 15 young people gave written feedback on the 'running the council' section of the simulator, which included 13 different comments. From reviewing the comments, the key themes emerging were:

- Reduce spending (6 mentions)
- Service quality (4 mentions))
- Importance of service (2 mentions)

1.64 Many respondents expressed the belief that the council spends too much money on things that are not noticeable, while others mention that having good staff would mean that not so many staff are needed. Commenters suggest that a reduction in spending here could be used to fund front line

services. *"I think their could be cuts made into running the council that would further benefit other services."*

A positive perception of the council is shown in some comments, with a sentiment that the council is run well and is in a stable condition. *"I think the council are doing a great job."*

Some commenters highlight the importance of this service in supporting council functions. *"Its very important otherwise everything else doesn't work."*

1.65 Other themes for written feedback regarding running the business related to:
- Do not reduce spending (1 mention)

Council Tax

1.66 The young people 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:

- Funding for the financial year 2025/26 is currently uncertain for all local authorities because of the general election. This includes money from government, grants and our ability to raise council tax.

- The government tells local authorities how much we can raise council tax by without needing a referendum; this is called the referendum limit. If we want to raise council tax higher than the limit, we would have to ask people in Oxfordshire to vote on it, and could only do it if they voted yes. We don't yet know what the referendum limit will be for the financial year 2025/26. The government will tell us later in the year.

1.67 The council tax slider had three options as follows:
- 0%: Our current medium term financial strategy includes a 1.99 per cent rise. This is shown as 0 per cent in the simulator.
- 1%: Increasing this by one per cent is equal to an overall 2.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £5m for services.

- 2%: Increasing this by two per cent is equal to an overall 3.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £10m for services.
- 3%: Increasing this by three per cent is equal to an overall 2.99 per cent council tax rise, would give an additional £15m for services.

Young people's budget simulator choices for council tax
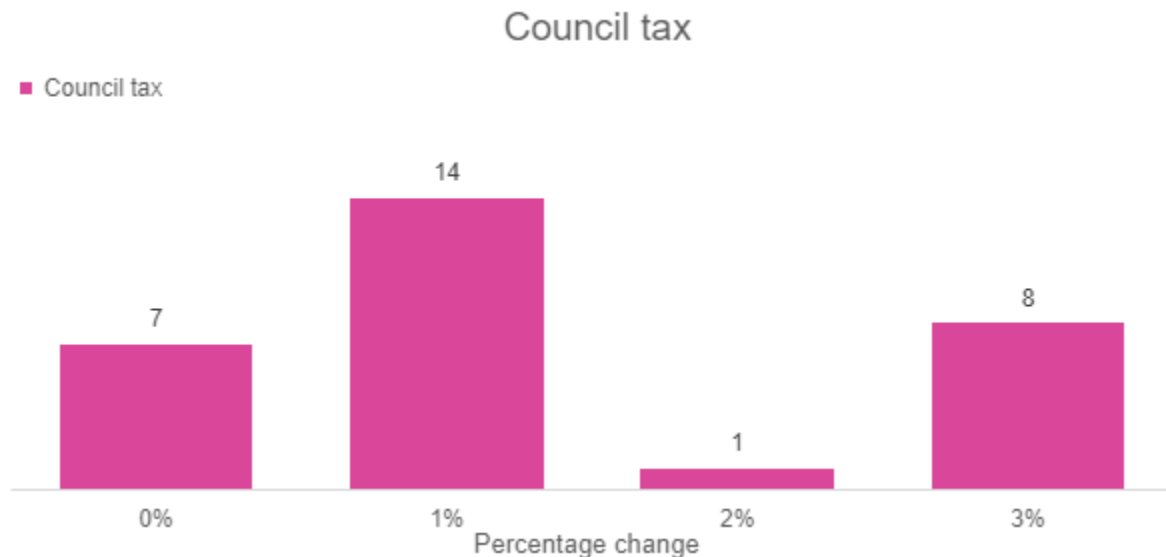
Council tax

- Overall, 23 young people chose to increase council tax on top of the 1.99% already proposed
- On average, the budget simulator shows that people were willing to increase by 1.33 per cent.
- 14 young people (47 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by an additional one per cent (to 2.99%)
- 1 young person (3 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by an additional two per cent (to 3.99%)
- 8 young people (27 per cent of respondents) chose to increase council tax by and additional three per cent (to 4.99%)

Written feedback

1.68 22 young people gave written feedback on the council tax section of the simulator, which included 19 different comments. The primary theme was around increasing income (17 mentions), including:
- Increase in council tax is acceptable (14)
- Increase in council tax is not acceptable (1)
- Reduce in council tax (1)
- A need for increased funding from national government (1)

1.69 Many comments suggest that increasing council tax could help fund services that benefit everyone. There is a sentiment that those who can afford to pay more should do so to improve the quality of life for others. *"It would do well for*

everyone to help but it has to be from those who can afford it, otherwise it worsens the situation and not helps it."

Several comments express concerns about the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of higher taxes on struggling families. *"Lots of people are already struggling, no one family should have to pay more than they have to. I think families with more children, poorer housing, disability or in foster care should be able to pay less."*

2. Budget simulator focus groups

Introduction

2.1   On Thursday 20 June and Friday 19 July 2024 we held two in-person focus groups for secondary school-aged young people, so they could try out our budget simulator and tell us their priorities.

2.2   Both focus groups were held between 5.30pm – 8.00pm at County Hall and were facilitated by members of the council's engagement and consultation team. Equipment was provided (laptops and/or iPads) for attendees to use. A set £20 thank you payment was offered, alongside reimbursement of travel expenses. Additionally, hot food, snacks and refreshments were provided and a certificate of participation for all attendees was awarded.

Approach

2.3   The aims of the focus groups were to:

- engage young people with the council's budget simulator
- explore what additional support or changes may be needed to the budget simulator to empower young people to use it
- seek feedback on young people's priorities for the council and its services

2.4   The first focus group was a tester session to enable young people to pilot, and feedback on, the budget simulator tool itself and as well to have a go at submitting a balanced budget. As this was a pilot, we deliberately did not provide much in the way of an introduction, as we wanted young people to test out using the simulator based on only the information provided on the simulator pages. Following the first group, some changes were made to the budget simulator to make it easier to use. We also recognised that it is still a complex tool and for young people it is best suited to being used in a supported environment such as in a group, classroom environment etc.

2.5   With this in mind, to give more young people the opportunity to take part in the budget simulator we organised a second focus group. This focused on giving

more introductory information about the county council, the services we provide, and how decisions are made. We did not specifically seek feedback in this group on the young people's views on the budget simulator tool itself. Instead, we used it as an opportunity for young people to provide feedback on the council's nine strategic priorities to add to the views of other young people collated at the budget sounding boards.

Recruitment and attendees

2.6   To recruit participants for the first focus group, information was provided, along with a combined 'register your interest' and consent form on the county council's consultation platform, Let's talk Oxfordshire. Emails with a link to this page were sent to young people on the engagement and consultation team's mailing list (and/or their parents/carers) for which young people have previously signed up to stay in touch and learn about future opportunities to get involved and share their views.

2.7   For the second focus group, information about the opportunity was again provided, on the county council's consultation platform, Let's talk Oxfordshire. Again, emails were sent to the young people on the Engagement and Consultation Team's mailing list (and/or their parents/carers) and in addition, information was shared with residents across the county through the 'Your Oxfordshire' newsletter. This was with a focus on encouraging parents/carers to get their children to participate. Schools who'd registered their interest in the sounding boards but were unable to attend were also actively targeted with information about the opportunity for their pupils to get involved. Finally, councillors who expressed an interest were also given the information to promote where possible through their local secondary schools or local youth groups.

2.8   Overall, the two focus involved a total of 29 young people from across Oxfordshire (13 at the first focus group and 16 at the second focus group). They were all aged between 12 – 17 years old and their demographic profile reflects the details given in the budget simulator section of the report.

Key findings

Feedback on the council's strategic priorities

2.9   As specified above, this task was only completed by the 16 participants at the second focus group. The young people attending the focus group were divided into three groups and were asked to choose their two most important and two least important of the council's nine strategic priorities from a young person's perspective, and write individual post it notes for each saying why they made these choices. As the three groups each had two choices, this meant there were six 'votes' in total for both the most important and least important strategic priorities.

Table 4: Young people's choices for most important strategic priorities

2. **Strategic priority**	3. **Number of tables where the priority was mentioned**	4. **Ranking** 5.
6. 1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.	7. 2	8. 1
9. 3. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.	10. 2	11. 1
12. 7. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.	13. 1	14. 2
15. 9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.	16. 1	17. 2

The strategic priorities not chosen by any tables as the most important were:
- 2. Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire
- 4. Support carers and the social care system
- 5. Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network
- 6. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces
- 8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy

Table 5: Young people's choices for least important strategic priorities

18. **Strategic priority**	19. **Number of tables where the priority was mentioned**	20. **Ranking** 21.
22. 8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.	23. 3	24. 1
25. 6. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces.	26. 1	27. 2
28. 4. Support carers and the social care system.	29. 1	30. 2
31. 9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.	32. 1	33. 2

The strategic priorities not chosen by any tables as the most important were:

- 1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work
- 2. Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire
- 3. Priorities the health and wellbeing of residents
- 5. Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network
- 7. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential

Written feedback

<u>Group 1</u>

Group 1 consisted of five young people, who chose as their two most important strategic priorities:
- 1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.
- 7. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.

The young people gave the following reasons for choosing these as their most important priorities:

1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.
- *"Number 1 is important because it covers a lot of the stuff that we need to change in our community."*

- *"#1 linked in with a lot of other things like #5 and #6. It is important because if we don't go extinct, we can fix everything else."*

- *"Number one is important because climate change kills animals and destroys homes."*

- *"Number one is important because if the climate emergency is not addressed soon then the climate will continue to get hotter. If we fix it, 9, 5 and 6 will also be fixed."*

- *"To tackle our climate emergency before we run out of time and it's too late."*

7. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.
- *"To help those who may need extra support or help."*

- *"#7 also links to a lot of other things, like #2. There are a lot of mental health issues in young people and schools are horribly underfunded."*

- *"Number 7 is important because children need to be well educated and so that when they are older they will be able to make important decisions."*

- *"Number 7 is important because children are the world's future leaders."*

- *"7 is important because many children's full potential is wasted by lack of teachers facilities and they won't be able to have a bright future."*

Group 1 chose the following as their two least important strategic priorities:

- 6. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces.
- 8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.

The young people gave the following reasons for choosing these as their least important priorities:

6. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces.
- *"I don't think number #6 is as important because it closely links to #1 and we said #1 was very important."*

- *"I thought 6 was important but everyone else disagreed with me."*

- *"I think 6 is the least important because it is a less impactful version of 1."*

- *"It links in with number one but doesn't [?] have much support."*

- *"I think 6 is not important because it's like 1 just worse."*

8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
- *"8 is not as important because locals are not as well-informed as experts."*

- *"I think that 8 isn't that important because I think that it is better to have people in charge who know what they are doing than to ask people who don't know much."*

- *"I don't think #8 is as important because it is, in my opinion, less of a priority."*

- *"Isn't that important or urgent [?]."*

- *"I think 8 is not as important as the others."*

Group 2

Group 2 consisted of five young people, who chose as their two most important strategic priorities:

- 9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
- 3. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.

The young people gave the following reasons for choosing these as their most important priorities:

9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
- *"I think 9 and 3 are the most important… 9 can help local business which will help our community out."*

- *"Because it will help the economy, business owners, and establish closer bonds between businesses, taxpayers and the government."*

- *"This is good because it can help with global warming as businesses contribute to global warming."*

- *"Local businesses because they run the local economy."*

3. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents
- *"I think 9 and 3 are the most important… 3 because it will also contribute to the wellbeing of our communities and social manner."*

- *"Because everyone should have access to health and health affects everyone in some way."*

- *"Prioritising the health and well-being of residents can cause people to flourish not just physically but mentally. As well as this can make people feel better/confident in wherever they are [?]."*

- *"Health and well-being because I enjoy health and makes communities happier."*

- *"The most important - to prioritise health and well-being of residents because it is important [?] to have a healthy country and it also saves money in other sectors."*

Group 2 chose the following as their two least important strategic priorities:

- 8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
- 4. Support carers and the social care system.

The young people gave the following reasons for choosing these as their least important priorities:

8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.

- *"Democracy does not always get what people want as well as if the majority choose a group and there is a downfall everyone has to suffer the consequences."*

- *"I think democracy because making it less of a forefront issue won't make it a communist country."*

- *"Democracy isn't fair, the voting system is often corrupt and easily manipulated or subject to change."*

- *"We chose democracy (and social care and carers) as our least important because we do not believe they need to be prioritised in a financial manner."*

- *"Democracy because is kind of unsafe [?] since some people overpower others."*

4. Support carers and the social care system.
- *Carers are important however if we improve general health services for everyone.*

- *We chose social care and carers (and democracy) as our least important because we do not believe they need to be prioritised in a financial manner.*

Group 3

Group 3 consisted of six young people, who chose as their two most important strategic priorities:

- Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.
- Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.

The young people gave the following reasons for choosing these as their most important priorities:

1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.
- *"Number 1 is important as it ensures the next generation can thrive."*

- *"Climate change is underestimated threat we desperately need to address."*

- *"If we don't have good climate then we will have to possibly move houses away from the beaches and like sea levels might rise and kill people and in the less fortunate countries they might struggle."*

- *"1 is important because climate change is very urgent and if we don't quickly deal with it there will be severe consequences on a global and local scale."*

- *"We need to preserve our future and without our planet, there is no life, no future."*

- *"Because climate change is serious and we need to act now before it's too late"*

3. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.
- *"There are not enough mental health services or health services in general."*

- *"Number 3 is important because it means people are fit and healthy to be helpful and happy in society."*

- *"Wellbeing (mental and physical) should be priority otherwise we'll all really suffer."*

- *"We all have a body and a life [?]. We all get unwell or need an extra bit of care. We all have a mind. We all want to be happy."*

- *"If we don't have good health of people then we will have a lower population which is bad and there will be lower life expectancy."*

- *"Health and wellbeing is very important because people must be happy for a good community."*

Group 3 chose the following as their two least important strategic priorities:

- 8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
- 9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.

The young people gave the following reasons for choosing these as their least important priorities:

8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
- *"We already have a democracy so instead of spending on parties advertising, save money."*

- *"We already have a democracy so we don't need this as much."*

- *"We live in a country of democracy. We can scale back on everything to create a more gentle approach and not so full on."*

- *"We already live in democratic society."*

- *"We already live in a democracy country and they wasted a lot of money in the last vote that could have been put into something more important."*

- *"I think 8 is not so important because we live in a country where democracy is a valve [?] and people pick the government anyway."*

9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
- *"Local businesses can support themselves they made need support but more important services first."*

- *"Local businesses already get a lot of support."*

- *"Local businesses can adequately [?] support themselves and independently be successful."*

- *"Businesses can support themselves and already are being friendly and eco."*

- *"I think 9 is not so important because people can still invest in businesses."*

- *"We do have lots of very important businesses that already deal with all of this."*

3. Budget Sounding Boards

Introduction

3.1 On Wednesday 3 July and Thursday 11 July 2024, we held two in-person sounding boards for secondary school aged children. The aim of the sounding boards was to gather insight from a student's perspective, of the council strategic priorities and spending. Young people were also invited to submit a response into the budget simulator after the event, should they wish to.

Attendees

3.2 The two events brought together 35 young people across the two days, aged between 11 to 15. The Oxford budget sounding board was held at County Hall and involved students from Greyfrairs Catholic School, the second event was held at Warriner School near Banbury and involved its students.

Methodology

3.3 Schools were invited to bring students to an event that would meet curriculum needs as well as meeting the council's engagement expectations for the budget. With a captive audience from schools, there was no requirement to pay or 'entice' an audience to the event. 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 money management, using a simulated exercise
- seek feedback on their priorities for the council and its services

3.4 The sounding boards were hosted by one of the council's engagement and consultation specialists. The table discussions were facilitated by a mix of staff from the engagement and consultation team and youth workers. An agenda was created to ensure the council could not only gain insight, but so the day was engaging and informative for the students. It was important to set the scene and to ensure that all the young people equally understood what the council does and were ready for what was expected of them later in the day. Therefore, we delivered tasks 1, 2 and 3 to enable the young people to understand what the council does, how it spends its money, how budgeting works and how difficult it can be.

- Task 1: How decisions are made and what the council does
- Task 2: How Oxfordshire County Council manages the budget
- Task 3: Budgeting skills - activity: Solve Sam's budget

3.5   After lunch we focused on the final task which was delivered in 3 parts

Task 4: Council's strategic priorities: what are your most and least important

- Part 1:   Discuss the service priorities and consider questions you have about them
- Part 2:   Council's Strategic priorities; what are your two most and least important and why
- Part 3:   Raise questions with the directors and other officers

3.6   Young people were asked to note down their questions, thoughts and reasons at each stage allowing us to gain insight into their decision making. The three directors and other senior staff who attended the two events listened, discussed and answered questions directly with the young people.

Key findings

3.7   The afternoon session was 'council's strategic priorities: what are your most and least important'. The session focused on what the young people thought of the strategic priorities. For this task the tables of young people had to decide which two of the council's nine strategic priorities were most important to them and which two were least important to them. With eight groups both having two choices, this meant that there were up to 16 'votes' for the strategic priorities. Whilst all the groups managed to choose their top two priorities, many found it difficult to identify their least important. Some individuals found it hard to agree on a group decision and were offered an opportunity to share a different priority, however individuals' choices are not reflected in the charts below.

Most important strategic priorities

Table 6: Young people's choices for most important strategic priorities

34. Strategic priority	35. Number of tables where the priority was mentioned	36. Ranking 37.
38. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.	39. 5	40. 1
41. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.	42. 4	43. 2
44. Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.	45. 3	46. 3
47. Support carers and the social care system.	48. 2	49. 4
50. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.	51. 2	52. 4
53. Strategic priorities that were not chosen		

54. Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.
55. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
56. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces.
57. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.

3.8 Five groups out of the eight chose 'Create opportunities for children and young people to reach our full potential' as one of their top two priorities. Most of the comments were about needing a good education so young people have better life chances and to fulfil their potential; *"if we don't build their future, who will lead the world?"*

3.9 Some comments also cited having a good job was important for their future but also for society. Other comments stated there was a need for improvements regarding their educational experience, such as having a wider choice of topics and qualifications as well as better transport to school.

3.10 'Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents' was the second highest chosen priority and chosen by four out of 8 groups. Majority of comments said everyone had the right to feel healthy, in mind and physically. Many comments said that the negative impact of this has a greater 'knock on effect' from pressure on the NHS, contributing to society and potential for death. *"Health and wellbeing is most important because without it people are unable to have good futures or contribute to the community".*

3.11 Young people felt it is important to address the priority 'Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire' so that fairness could be provided for all which was chosen by 3 groups. Two groups felt very strongly about this, stating that racism and difference needed to be addressed and it is important so that everyone could feel safe and all cultures could be respected. Additional comments raised that whilst this was an important issue, other issues were even more important. Some young people felt this priority was addressed in school lessons.

3.12 Two groups chose 'Support carers and the social care system'. Their comments were mostly around helping those who need it the most, they should have somewhere safe and supportive and that other people should understand why caring is important.

3.13 Two groups put 'Action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work' amongst their most important issues. Although, not a priority to many young people, there was consistent mention that this issue was important although not as important as looking after people. Mostly citing the impact was going to affect people, animals and planet now, as well as future generations. One comment also mentioned the impact across the world. *"Climate change is the most important because it has the biggest impact on*

everyone and our future depends on it because if it keeps getting hotter thousands of lives will be destroyed."

3.14 There was one person who felt very strongly and disagreed with their groups priority neither did it come up in any of the groups. This was 'Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces'. Their comment was about wanting to be a farmer in the future and how wildflowers were important to soil and this having an impact potentially causing a food struggle.

Least important strategic priorities

Table 7: Young people's choices for least important strategic priorities

58. Strategic priority	59. Number of tables where the priority was mentioned	60. Ranking
61. Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.	62. 5	63. 1
64. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.	65. 4	66. 2
67. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces.	68. 2	69. 3
70. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.	71. 2	72. 3
73. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.	74. 2	75. 3
76. Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.	77. 1	78. 4
79. Strategic priorities which were not chosen		
80. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.		
81. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.		
82. Support carers and the social care system.		

3.15 Five out of eight groups chose 'Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network' as their least important issue. Therefore, making it the top least important strategic priority out of the nine. Most comments shared the idea that there were more important issues, and that people could walk if they needed to get somewhere. It was felt that there were already some good aspects to transport that already existed, such as public transport, it was well organised and it aided people too. However, a few comments did state cost, access in rural areas and getting to school did need to be improved, as well as its sustainability credentials.

3.16 Half of the eight groups chose the strategic priority, 'Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy', making it the second top in the least important list. There were a number of comments about young people not being able to vote, so felt they were not able to be part of the participatory democracy. There were also comments stating there were systems in place for a participatory democracy already. *"In my opinion we already have a good system set up for voting and democracy so everyone has a say"*.

3.17 Whilst two groups chose 'Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work', only one group's comment was positive towards addressing this issue saying, during the pandemic they saw change was possible because of the lack of transport and that rivers were cleaner. The other group cited the financial cost of addressing climate change as well as electricity needing fuel, were their reasons for this priority to be in their least important list.

3.18 Two of the eight groups chose 'Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces' as their least important issue. However, one of the groups could not decide on a second priority, so they chose this priority and consequently struggled with their reasons why it was their choice. Consequently they wrote many positive factors for their choice. For example *"[It's] important to look after the green space because it can help the plants grow…"*. They also said the priority aligned with the climate change priority and should be within that. Their choice has still been recorded in the chart above. The other group's only given reason for this priority was because green spaces should be built on for the need of housing homeless people.

3.19 Two groups chose 'Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit' as their least important strategic priority. Just under half of the collated comments were from one group who felt distrust when using local businesses. The other comments were that this priority only benefits a small group of people.

3.20 One group out of the eight chose 'Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire' as their one of their least important priorities saying that, inequality was 'fading away', it wasn't something the council could help with, and schools are addressing it.