Budget consultation 2025/26
Key findings

Report by: Consultation and engagement team

Date: January 2025

1. Budget proposals feedback form

Introduction and methodology

1.1 Between Thursday 28 November 2024 and Thursday 2 January 2025, the council invited comments on its draft proposed budget for 2025/26 as published for consideration by performance and corporate services overview and scrutiny committee on 6 December 2024. Residents and stakeholders were also signposted to the budget proposals, supporting papers and a summary document. They were encouraged to engage with this content before sharing their feedback.

1.2 Feedback was collated using an online feedback form on Let's talk Oxfordshire. Residents and stakeholders were also able to submit comments by letter or email, but no one chose to do so.

1.3 The consultation was promoted to a wide range audiences, using a range of communications channels. This included organic and paid for social media advertising on Meta and Nextdoor, eNewsletters, internal communications for council staff and councillors and targeted stakeholder communications and posters for larger libraries.

1.4 Overall we reached 41,244 people on Meta and on the paid for advertising achieved 889 click throughs. For Nextdoor we achieved 11,872 impressions. For email marketing, we had 795 click throughs in Your Oxfordshire and 258 from the Consultations eNewsletter.

1.5 Our promotion of the consultation resulted in 3,054 visits to the Let's talk Oxfordshire 2025-26 budget consultation page and 143 responses to the consultation feedback form. Overall, 2,561 people engaged with the content on the consultation page including: 384 downloads of the summary document, 229 of the budget report etc. and 52 of the media release

1.6 With regards to social media, the ability to comment was largely turned off as we wanted to channel people to respond to the consultation using the feedback form provided. However, they remained on for the Meta advertising campaign and this resulted in 112 people leaving 153 coded comments. These were largely negative in sentiment.

Respondent profile

1.7 Of the 143 people who submitted a response to the budget consultation using the feedback form, 96 of these chose to provide demographic details. For those we do have information for, overall:

- Most respondents were residents of Oxfordshire (73), followed by residents outside Oxfordshire (11), representatives of groups or organisations (6), businesses (2), parish, town, district or county councillors (2) and other (1).

- More men (58 per cent) responded than women (38 per cent). For context 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 consultation respondents were more likely to identify their ethnic group as 'white' (91 per cent), a slight overrepresentation compared to Oxfordshire's population.
- Approximately one in seven respondents (14 per cent) stated that they had long-term illness or disability, which impacted them either a little or a lot. This is in line with Oxfordshire's population.

Key findings

1.8 While we expressly invited people to give feedback on our published budget proposals, nearly all respondents used this consultation opportunity to give general feedback on council services, spending and budget matters with many sharing their views on a range of matters.

Q1. Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to new investments as shown annex 1b

1.9 In all, 58 people gave written feedback to 'Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to new investments as shown annex 1b', which included 79 different comments. More detailed analysis has been undertaken for themes (codes) which received 10 per cent or more of overall coded comments in this section and these are as follows:

- Roads and transport (27 mentions)
- Approval / disapproval of budget proposal (15 mentions)
- Reduce spending (12 mentions)

1.10 Feedback on roads and transport was diverse, with many emphasizing the significance of active travel and supporting initiatives. *"Please prioritise spending on transport links that don't involve car travel"*.

Several responses also highlighted the need for investment in road and gully maintenance to prevent future flooding risks. *"More needs to be spent on Highways and Transport following years of decline in this area across Oxfordshire. The recent flooding in local communities across the county illustrates how more needs to be done. It's not just about pot-holes."*

This was one of two key proposals that received approval, alongside investment in social care services. *"Hugely supportive of funding childrens social care. This is such a problem area and has huge impact on child health and cost to health services."*

However, there were objections to using active travel funds for the Watlington relief road. *"However, claiming 13.6m is to be invested in active travel is an outright line. The Watlington Relief Road is not an active travel scheme and it should not be grouped with it."*

Opinions on reducing spending were mixed, with the most common suggestions being to cut services and staffing. *"Cut out waste. Stop pandering to the 'ADHD, Autism, and Mental Health' spongers. Stop funding small pressure groups. Freeze salaries. Lay off unnecessary staff."*

1.11 Other themes for written feedback answers to 'Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to new investments as shown annex 1b':

- Feedback on budget papers (7 mentions)
- Councillors (5 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (4 mentions)
- Alternative provider of service (3 mentions)
- Increase income (2 mentions)
- Service quality (2 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of the council's power/responsibilities (2 mentions)

Q2. Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to pressures as shown annex 1b

1.12 In all, 42 people gave written feedback resulting in 66 different coded comments to Q2: 'Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to pressures as shown annex 1b.' More detailed analysis has been undertaken for themes (codes) which received 10 per cent or more of overall coded comments in section and these are as follows:

- Roads and transport (17 mentions)
- Approval/disapproval of budget proposal (12 mentions)
- Reduce spending (9 mentions)
- Increase income (8 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (7 mentions)
- Feedback on budget papers (7 mentions)

1.13 Although feedback on roads and transport varied, five of the 17 comments highlighted the need for investment in road and gully maintenance to prevent future flooding risks: *"The trend of cutting back highways maintenance has to change. The consequences of flooding due to poorly managed drains and gullies is costing the county a lot of money in knock on costs. Solve the problems at source and introduce a maintenance program, which would save money longterm."*

Three of the 17 comments also commented in support of active travel initiatives: *"On highways, increase the fund for improvements to pedestrian*

crossings and footpaths. Invest more into active travel schemes than new roads for cars if you take your pledges seriously.”

Of the comments expressing approval or disapproval of specific budget proposals (12 mentions), 8 were negative. The content of these varied, but two themes emerged – several felt that *“Highways need much higher budgets than allocated so that drains and gullies can be cleared on regular basis…”,* as previously mentioned, and others felt there was: *“Too much expenditure on children's needs”* and that: *“Throwing more money at SEND every year isn't going to fix it. Is this the only solution we have?”*

Three comments were positive, with most relating to SEND: *“Children's services: Totally agree with allocation of additional funding for SEND service. Additionally OCC should fund/contract with local support groups such as Be Free Young Carers to provide specialist support to SEND and children's services.”*

Although comments varied widely in relation to reducing spending, six felt that services should be reviewed for efficiencies and/or to identify waste spending. Others also suggested early intervention to reduce future spending in some areas.

Six comments made in relation to increasing income referred to council tax. These included comments relating to the increase not being acceptable and the need to re-assess council tax banding: *“The council tax should not rise. I already feel I am paying too much because of the way our house was extended by the previous owner. We are not the biggest house in the street but are paying the most council tax.”*

The seven comments asking us to not reduce spending were evenly spread between increasing spending/service provision, and maintaining current spending/protecting services. Increased spending was primarily suggested for highways: *“In the rural parts of the county, the potholes are outrageous. Last week a colleague burst two tires as the result of hitting one. The proposed increase in allocation to potholes seems insufficient to me”,* as well as for active travel measures. Comments relating to maintaining current spending were in relation to children's services/SEND and highway maintenance around drains, gullies and ditches, as previously highlighted.

Comments made giving feedback on budget papers, were also varied, with 4 comments being negative, or doubting the impact of the budget consultation, and about half being more general comments. One person pondered: *“It's an interesting concept saying £14Million of forced increases and nearly £19Million of "savings". That looks like £5million of savings. So one wonders what's being cut and whether those cuts are realistic.”*

1.11 Other themes for written feedback answers to 'Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to pressures as shown annex 1b':

- Importance of service (3 mentions)

- Alternative provider of service (1 mention)
- Misunderstanding of OCC power/responsibilities (1 mention)
- Councillors (1 mention)

Q3. Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to savings as shown annex 1b

1.12 In all, 34 people gave written feedback to 'Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to savings as shown annex 1b' section of the simulator, which included 34 different comments. More detailed analysis has been undertaken for themes (codes) which received 10 per cent or more of overall coded comments in section and these are as follows:

- Reduce spending (12 mentions)
- Approval / disapproval of budget proposal (8 mentions)
- Roads and transport (7 mentions)

1.13 Feedback on reducing spending suggests a perception that the council operates inefficiently and that costs could be lowered by improving efficiency and reducing staff numbers. *"Stop wasting money, freeze salaries lay off 20% of staff."*

All responses that directly addressed the proposals were positive, indicating approval. *"Support all the proposals for budget savings".*

Opinions on roads and transport were mixed, with some advocating for the removal of low traffic neighbourhoods and 20mph zones, while others called for investment in both highways and alternative transportation methods. *"Stop wasting money on pointless 20mph speed limit signs and other stupid nonsense just because a minority of people cannot drive properly.". "Please provide a bus service from Wootton that is both affordable and regular."*

1.14 Other themes for written feedback answers to 'Please use this box to provide comments on any of our budget proposals relating to savings as shown annex 1b':

- Feedback on budget papers (3 mentions)
- Increase income (2 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (1 mention)
- Climate action (1 mention)

Q4. Please use this box to provide comments on any other aspects of our budget proposals

1.15 In all, 104 people gave written feedback to 'Please use this box to provide comments on any other aspects of our budget proposals' section of the

simulator, which included 133 different comments. More detailed analysis has been undertaken for themes (codes) which received 10 per cent or more of overall coded comments in section and these are as follows:

- Roads and transport (69 mentions)
- Approval / disapproval of budget proposal (40 mentions)

1.16 A large majority of the comments related to road and transport concerned active travel (59 mentions) and the importance of schemes to support this. *"Cycling and walking make people healthier, reduce the burden on the NHS, reduce the burden on roads, and ease the cost of living crisis for people."*

This was also borne out in the comments expressing approval or disapproval of specific budget proposals, with two clear themes emerging, possibly as a result of coordinated efforts to encourage individuals to give feedback on these issues.

The comments show there was significant opposition to the use of active travel funds for the Watlington relief road (22 mentions) *"I object to the council using the active travel budget to build the Watlington Relief Rd. Instead this active travel budget should be used to provide infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians to facilitate safer active travel."*

The comments also show a great deal of support for investment in an active travel link between Thame and Haddenham (42 mentions) *"I support spending money on the Haddenham and Thame Active travel scheme as if the council wants to introduce the Oxford traffic filters in the future they do need to make it easier to get around areas outside the city by public transport."*

1.17 Other themes for written feedback in this section of the consultation were:

- Reduce spending (7 mentions)
- Increase income (5 mentions)
- Climate action (3 mentions)
- Feedback on the accessibility of budget papers (3 mentions)
- Service should be provided by someone else (2 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (2 mentions)
- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (1 mention)
- Councillors (1 mention)

Comments on Meta adverts for the budget consultation 2025-26

1.18 112 people left comments on our Meta adverts for the budget consultation 2025-26, which included 153 different coded comments. The key themes were:

- Negative comments relating to roads and transport (60 mentions), including people sharing views on low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) and 20mph zones.
- Perceptions that the council will not listen to feedback on budget consultation (33 mentions)
- Various calls for the council to reduce costs by eliminating wasteful spending and reducing staff pay (19 mentions)

1.20   Other themes included in the Meta advert comments:

- Misunderstanding of the county council's power/responsibilities (13 mentions)
- Councillors (11 mentions)
- Increase income (8 mentions)
- Do not reduce spending (6 mentions)
- Alternative provider of service (3 mentions)