

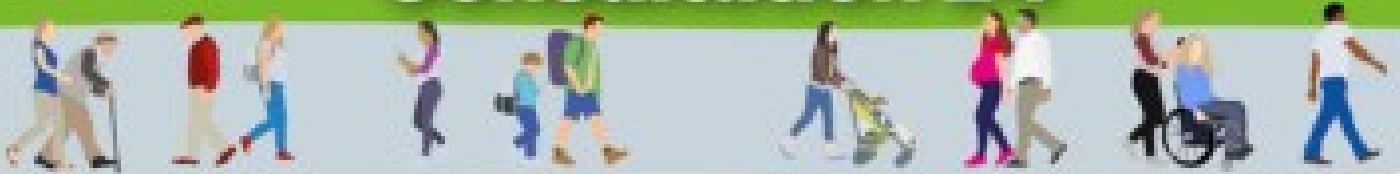
Budget Consultation 2024

Report

February 2024



Budget Consultation 24



1 Introduction, Context, and Methods

Introduction and Context

Every year, Shropshire Council consults on its budget plans with Shropshire residents. However, the budget plans for 2024/25 have been designed in a particularly challenging national and local context.

Shropshire Council is facing a £50m budget gap in 2024, which is caused by ever increasing demand for council services, particularly social care, rising costs and stubbornly high inflation. At the time of the budget consultation, Shropshire Council had already identified £41m towards the overall spending reductions target of £51.4m, principally by changing how services are delivered, doing so more efficiently and focusing on prevention. However, a rising tide of demand for social care already accounts for around £4 of every £5 the council spends, and this is only set to increase.

All of this means that the council will still need to find further ways to reduce spend by around £50m next year - this is despite Shropshire Council proposing to raise council tax by 4.99%, as central government's funding calculations expect.

The budget consultation this year thus sought residents' views on how the council should prioritise its approach to spending and demand reductions while maintaining vital services.

Methods

A survey was designed with a link to the full Medium Term Financial Strategy which took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. This survey was open for six weeks from 15th December 2023 through 28th January 2024 and was available on the council's Get Involved web pages.

The survey was heavily publicised, with multiple press releases, a social media campaign, as well as posters in public places, libraries and leisure centres with QR codes. Residents were also encouraged to email or post their responses to the budget consultation through the TellUs email inbox.

The publicity campaign was highly successful, with 1,064 responses received to the survey – a more than three-fold increase on the 2023/24 budget consultation response rate.

Contents:

This report proceeds in six sections:

- Section 1: Introduction, Context and Methods (this section) details the context and methods for the consultation and report.
- Section 2: Respondents provides a demographic overview of those who responded to the survey.
- Section 3: Council Tax and Capital Investment Plans highlights the respondents' overall assessment of proposed council tax increases and capital investment plans.

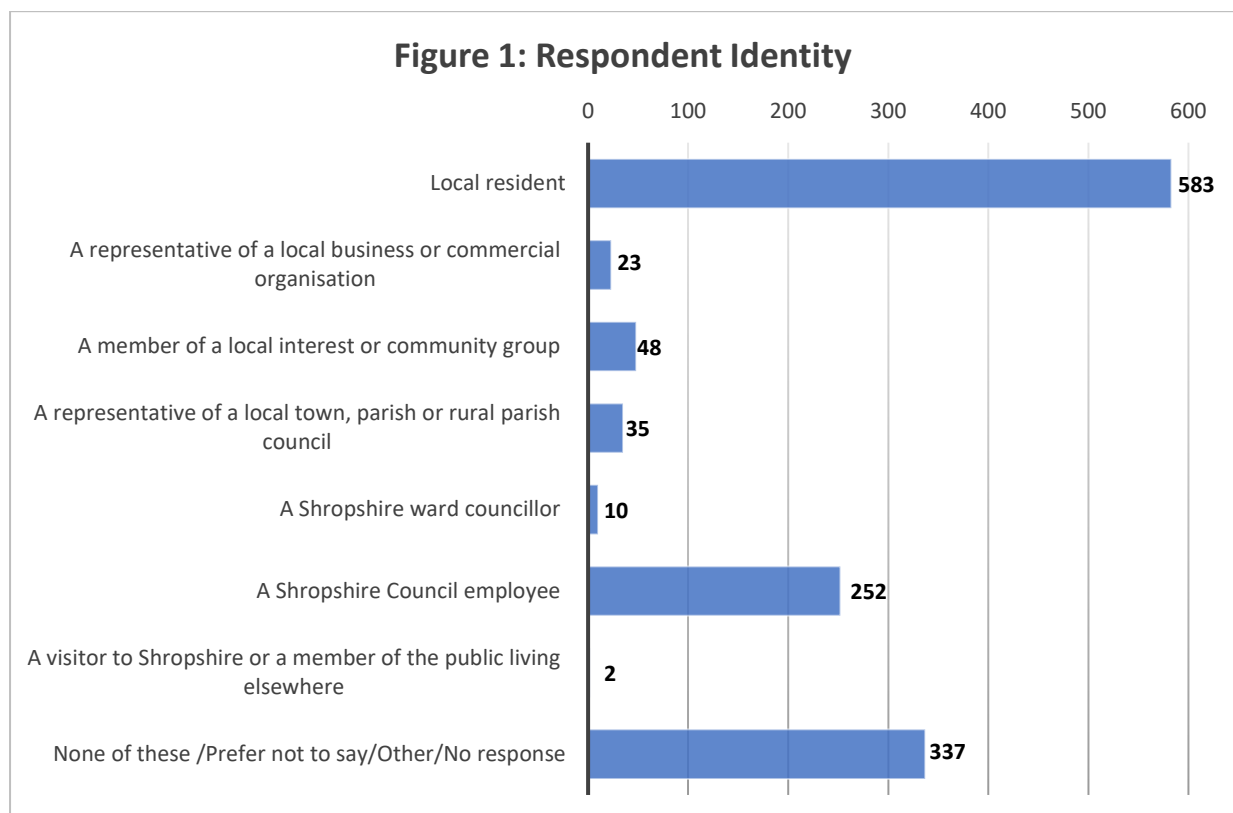
- Section 4: Prioritisation and Service Area Protection details respondents' assessment of the council's prioritisation strategy as well as their ranking of which service areas deserve more protection over others.
- Section 5: Ranking Acceptable Actions offers an analysis of respondents' ranking and assessment for proposals to manage increasing need, achieve savings and generate income.
- Section 6: Overall Budget Assessment and Further Comments details the overall respondent feelings toward the budget proposals, including final comments.
- Section 7: Summary and Conclusion provides a brief description of the consultation's key findings.

2 Respondents

1,064 individuals responded to the survey either directly online or by returning paper copies. Several optional demographic questions were asked toward the end of the survey, and on average around 70% of respondents answered these questions.

Respondent Self-Identification and Location

Respondents were asked to identify themselves in the capacity they were answering the survey and were allowed to tick more than one box to identify themselves (see **Figure 1** for a summary of the results). For example, most respondents (77%) identified as local residents. However, while **a third of all respondents (252) identified themselves as Shropshire Council employees**, 128 of these individuals also identified themselves as local residents.

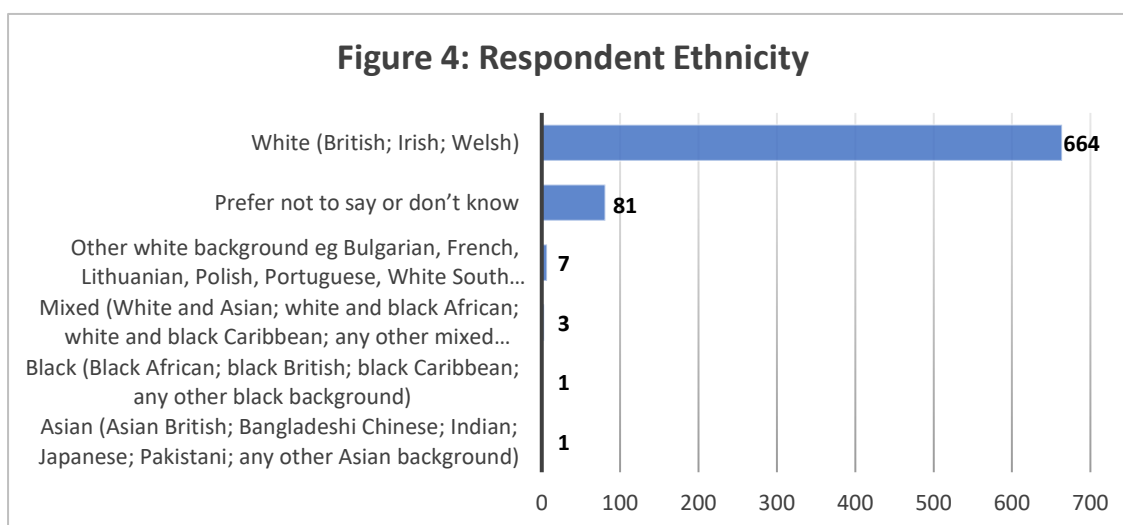
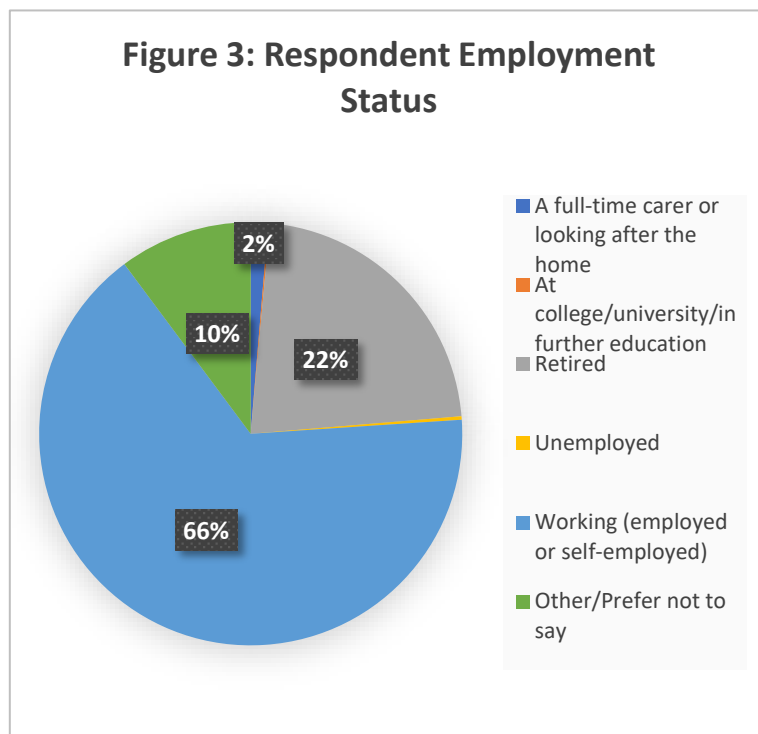
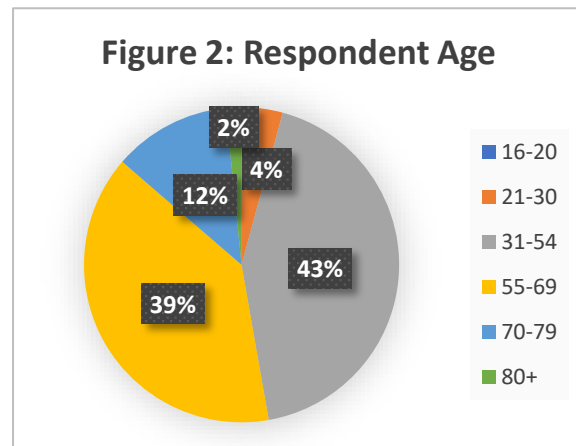


Most respondents (75%) were aged between 31 and 69 years old and most (66%) said that they are working (see **Figures 2 & 3**).^{1 2}

Additionally, 56% of respondents identified as female. 17% of respondents identified as having a long-standing illness or disability and 16% said that they are an unpaid carer.

In terms of ethnicity, 88% of respondents identified as White (British; Irish; Welsh) with many saying they “prefer not to say” in answer to this question (see **Figure 4** for full ethnicity details). However, excluding those who prefer not to say, these results show that these survey respondents skew more White than the general population of Shropshire, where at least 3% identify as other than White (British; Irish; Welsh).³

Finally, responses were returned by individuals living across the county, with Shrewsbury, Church Stretton, and Oswestry having the highest response rates across Shropshire towns (see **Image 1**



¹ One respondent (less than 1%) identified as being between 16 and 20 years old.

² One respondent identified as being at college/university/further education and 2 identified as being unemployed (both less than 1%).

³ See [latest Census data](#).

for map of approximate respondent locations).

Equalities Duty

Respondents were asked whether they had any comments about how the budget proposals might have any impacts on social inclusion and health for different groups of residents. 99 respondents answered this question, and these comments varied considerably. These responses were grouped thematically, and the themes are presented in **Table 1**. Examples of comments covering the three biggest themes are provided below.

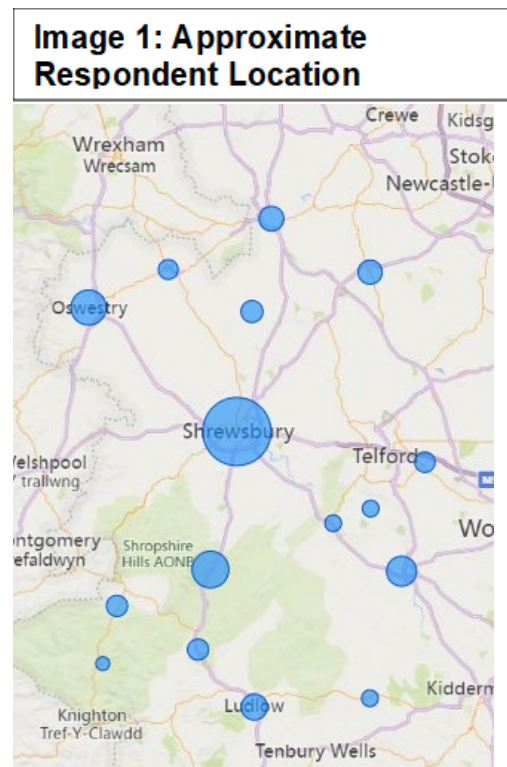


Table 1: Impacts of Budget Proposals on Social Inclusion and Health

Theme	Count	%
Focus on people’s basic needs / supporting the most vulnerable	16	16%
Proposals will impact / greater impact - rural communities	14	14%
Focus on services for everyone rather than specific groups	11	11%
Proposals will impact / greater impact - people with disabilities	9	9%
Reduction in services will have a negative impact on communities/community provision	8	8%
Ineffective management and decision making	8	8%
Proposals will impact / greater impact - people on low incomes	6	6%
Prioritise prevention / early help activities	4	4%
Environmental impact and concerns	4	4%
Improved / targeted communication that meets the needs of different groups	4	4%
Proposals will impact / greater impact - the elderly	3	3%
Quality of services need to be improved / had declined over the years	2	2%
Other	10	10%

The biggest theme to emerge from the responses to this open-ended question was a broad suggestion that the council needs to **focus on people’s basic needs and supporting the most vulnerable residents**. For example:

- “There are more people in need without basics such as food, heating and adequate housing. This will need to be prioritised.”

- “There will undoubtedly be an impact on the least vocal, vulnerable members of our community if reductions are made. E.g. Rough sleepers, children, people in poverty, elderly. How are these voices being heard when it comes to making these plans? They certainly won’t be completing this survey.”

The next most common theme to emerge in responses to this question was that the proposals will **impact rural communities the most**. For example:

- “The SW of the county seems to be left until last for spending across all services a better balance is needed to support those of us in deeply rural areas.”
- “Those living in rural areas do not have the luxury of public transport and rely heavily on cars. Some thought needs to be given to enduring the road infrastructure allows that section of society to be mobile.”

The third most common theme in responses to this question asked the council to **focus on services for everyone, rather than specific groups**. Some of these comments were asking for a broad consideration of everyone in service delivery. For example:

- “Services that are not available to everyone should not be supported.”

Other comments in this theme group expressed a dissatisfaction with the council considering the needs of “minority” groups in services or policies. Examples of these comments have not been included in this report as they run counter to Shropshire Council’s commitment to its Equalities Duty.

3 Council Tax and Capital Investment Plans

Council Tax Increase

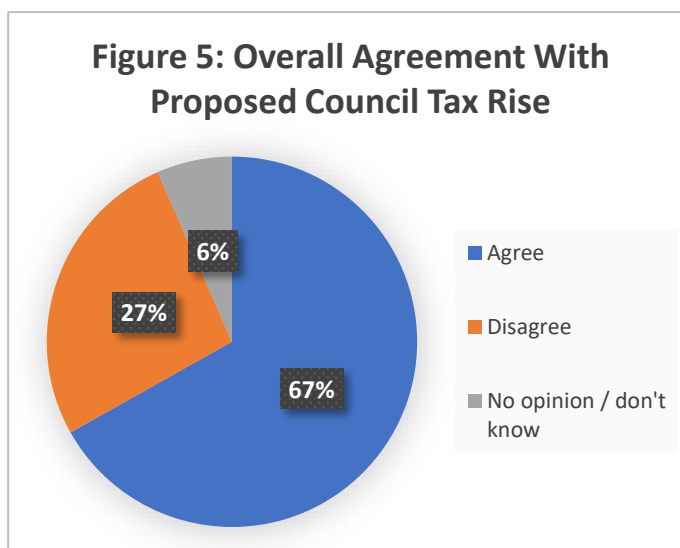
The survey’s introduction provided a brief overview of the current economic context and a link to Shropshire Council’s Mid Term Financial Plan for respondents to look over in full, should they wish to.

One key feature of the plan involves a planned increase in council tax by 4.99%. The survey asked respondents to give their overall view on this proposal and clarified that the increase would be constituted by a 2.99% rise on council tax and 2% on the adult social care precept.

Overall, a majority (67%) of respondents agreed that a rise in council tax at the rate of 4.99% was warranted (**see Figure 5**). While respondents identifying as Shropshire Council employees agreed at a higher rate (75% agreed with the rise), a majority of non-employees (64%) also agreed that this rise was necessary.

Respondents were then asked to indicate whether they would agree or disagree with Shropshire Council applying council tax increases at a level higher than 4.99% if allowed by Central Government.

A majority of respondents (57%) said they would not agree to a further increase in council tax. Among council employees, this was 50% who would not favour an increase, and among non-employees 60% would not favour an increase.



Respondents were also asked to provide any comments they wish to about this proposal to increase council tax. 452 respondents took the opportunity to provide further comment on this question, and these responses were grouped thematically and are presented in **Table 2**. Themes are discussed with examples in further detail below.

Table 2: Comments on Proposal to Increase Council Tax

Theme	Count	%
Necessary to increase council tax to maintain services	112	25%
People can't afford council tax increase/raise unfair	86	19%
Need to make sure council tax increases have clear impacts	59	13%
Consider inequality in ability to pay increase/some should pay more or less	54	12%
Don't get value for money with current rates/wasting money	55	12%
More central government funding needed	34	8%
Find the funds elsewhere/decrease costs instead	32	7%
Unequal benefits of council tax between rural/town or not enough spend outside Shrewsbury	12	3%
Other	8	2%

The most common theme to emerge from respondents about the proposal to increase council tax by 4.99% was that this increase is **necessary to maintain vital public services**. For example:

- “I think it's necessary to support essential services, e.g. social care.”
- “We are all having to pay extra for goods and services, the council are no different.”
- “Of course SC should raise this tax to pay for services. Divided across the year this is a relatively pain free way of making a vital contribution.”

25% of respondents (112 total) touched upon this theme. Only 25 of those making this as their main point identified as Shropshire Council employees, meaning that it was still the most popular theme even among non-employees.

Many of the respondents whose comments reflected the next most popular theme came from the 27% of respondents who disagreed with the proposed rise in council tax. In this theme, respondents noted that **people can't afford an increase in council tax** or that an increase would be unfair, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis. For example:

- “Our tax levels are already high in comparison to other countries. Our disposable income is low due to high energy bills and a high cost of living. I believe that taxing us further is unnecessary and unfair.”
- “Due to cost-of-living crisis I don't feel this would be a good idea at this time.”
- “The proposed increase far outstrips wage increases, with food inflation and other rising costs many families will struggle to find this extra money.”

The next largest theme to emerge was among respondents who mostly agreed with the increase in council tax, but who went on to make an explicit point about the need for **the impacts of this increase to be clearly evident** and/or to be meaningful. For example:

- “Happy to pay if the service level is good - paying and receiving a 'lesser service' or experiencing cuts to service (i.e. to the environmental services sector) is less palatable.”

Around 12% of respondents left comments that could be grouped into a theme around the **current council tax rates not being spent well or being wasted**. For example:

- “I can't see what we get value for money for the amount we already pay. In fact, we seem to only get some of our rubbish removed, the remainder e.g. cartons we have to take to the tip ourselves. Shocking, especially as we have no choice but to pay.”
- “That would depend on how the additional money would be used. It would need to be targeted for a specific, auditable reason.”
- “It would need to be accompanied by a robust positive marketing campaign about what the tax payer is getting for this additional payment, not just to dig the Council out of debt.”

A similar number of respondents also wanted to make clear that **any rise in council tax should only be undertaken in a way that takes into account inequality**. This included some respondents providing their thoughts on council tax being a “regressive” form of taxation, some suggesting alternative bandings, and others just noting that the “rich” should pay more. Examples include:

- “The increase should be on a level with inflation and scaled proportionately to the housing bands so those in larger dwellings pay more.”
- “Should be only increasing it for those earning over £40k. And reducing it for the poor.”

- “Get the rich to pay proportionally more on council tax.”

A clear theme among 8% of respondents was to simply comment that **central government needs to fund local authorities better**. For example:

- “Social care is a national issue and should be dealt in the same way as the NHS by central government.”
- “Central government has shamefully underfunded councils for years, callously shifting the unpleasant burden of cuts on to them. Don't stand for this any longer! Never stop lobbying for fair central funding.”

7% of respondents wanted to make a case with their comments for **finding funds elsewhere or decreasing costs** rather than raising council tax. For example:

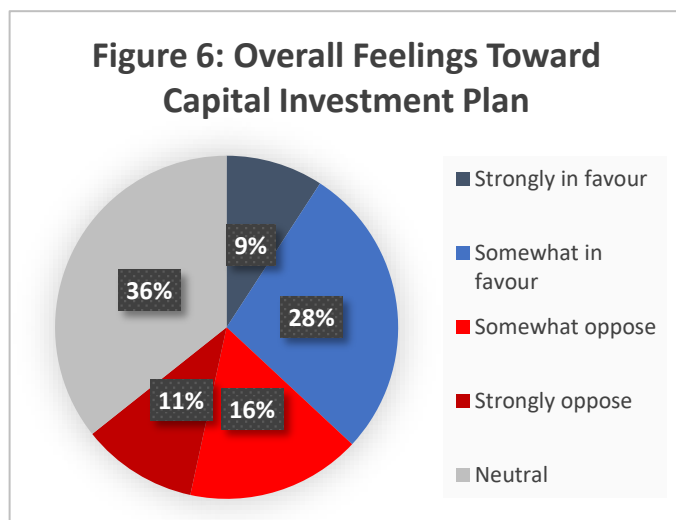
- “It is insulting to the people of Shropshire to see in the local press the amount of money you plan to spend on items such as the £28m for sports village pools, big town plan and the so called 'relief' road. I strongly suggest that you fix the shortfall and issues you have boiling over at the moment before you start asking for more money from people in a cost-of-living crisis.”
- “I feel that the shortfall should not be passed on to the public. There are other areas where the saving can be made to fund adult social care and other services.”

Finally, 12 respondents (3%) made a comment about the benefits of services paid for by council tax being **unequal for rural areas/areas outside Shrewsbury**. For example:

- “We in rural areas already pay full whack with very little in return. There needs to be some type of system in place to charge most where full services are received.”
- “Money needs to be spent outside Shrewsbury- nothing is invested in Ludlow, roads need repairs, many temporary repairs in historic town centre are still outstanding. Lifts not working.”

Capital Investment

By way of introduction to the question asking about people’s views on capital plans, survey respondents were given a brief overview of Shropshire Council’s capital investment plans for 2024/25. This introduction also explained to those taking the survey that capital cannot, by law, be used to fund day-to-day council services. Respondents were then asked to rank their position on this proposal on a



scale of strongly favour to strongly oppose. The overall results of this question are displayed in **Figure 6**.

A majority of respondents (73%) are in favour of or neutral toward the council's capital investment plans. Among council employees, the percentage is even higher, with 85% in favour of or neutral toward capital investment plans. However, even among non-employees, a majority (67%) still favour or feel neutral toward these plans.

4 Prioritisation and Service Area Protection

Approach to Prioritising Spending Reductions

The council has outlined an approach to prioritising spending reductions across council services in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. These priorities are as follows in this order:

- 1) Reducing costs and improving efficiency
- 2) Increasing income raised
- 3) Reducing spend on suppliers and third parties
- 4) Reviewing staffing levels

Survey respondents were asked to provide their feedback on these priorities and their ordering through two questions. The first question asked about overall agreement with the priorities and their order. The second question asked for open-ended feedback.

Overall, **70% of respondents agree with the council's approach to prioritisation**. This broad agreement was reflected across the board, as 82% of council employees agreed, and 64% of non-employee respondents were also in agreement.

That being said, 351 respondents made more detailed comments about the prioritisation, and in particular the order in which the priorities should be considered. Comments were grouped into broad themes and these themes are presented in **Table 3**. Examples of comments for most themes are also provided below.

Table 3: Comments on Approach to Prioritisation

Theme	Count	%
Reducing spend on third parties should be a higher priority	95	27%
Need a totally different approach	49	14%
Reviewing staffing levels should be a higher priority	46	13%
These priorities are interconnected	31	9%
Priorities are difficult to achieve/need to be done right	28	8%
Increasing income raised should be a higher priority	26	7%
This prioritisation won't do any good	20	6%
Increasing income raised should be a lower priority	14	4%
Cautions about making cuts to staff/services	12	3%
Need more information	12	3%
Reducing spend on third parties should be a lower priority	3	1%
Other	15	4%

As **Table 3** demonstrates, four of the themes identified in these comments related to the order of prioritisation. The largest theme, for instance, with 27% of those commenting touching upon it, was that **reducing spend on third parties should be higher in the ranking of priorities**. Examples of such comments include:

- “Reducing spending on third party suppliers should be higher up the list of priorities.”
- “I think reducing spend on suppliers and third parties should be a higher priority - too much is spent on external consultants rather than using/training existing staff, which results in staff cuts and/or staff being disillusioned at the lack of opportunity at the council and seeking work elsewhere.”

13% of respondents thought that **reviewing staffing levels should be a higher priority**. For example:

- “Staffing levels should be a higher priority. The cost of labour in the council has risen to levels higher than in the private sector. Years ago pay wasn't considered to be as high working for the council but it was thought to provide safe and steady employment with added perks of extra holidays and a good pension. The perks still remain but pay is expected to be the same or exceed that of the private sector.”
- “Reviewing staffing levels should be a priority - posts aren't filled correctly in terms of grading. Secondments aren't always being filled, putting more pressure on the broader team.”

7% of respondents thought that **increasing income raised should be a higher priority**. For example:

- “Increasing Income Raised. There are unused Council offices (Raven House) where we have had numerous outside organisations contact for hiring of desks/rooms/facilities, but because there is limited access to only Shropshire Council staff, they have all been turned down. There is also an unused cafe there which could generate income. These buildings and resources should be looked at to generate income.”

However, 4% of respondents thought that **increasing income should be a lower priority**. For example:

- “Increasing income raised should be the last priority after the others have been exhausted.”

In the final theme pertaining to the order of priorities, three respondents said that **reviewing third party spend should be a lower priority**. These comments all cautioned about the potential for lower quality goods and services from cheaper third party sources.

A theme that was large and unrelated to the ordering of priorities was for 14% of respondents to suggest that **a totally different approach is needed**. These suggestions ranged from the constructive to the highly improbable, from the broad to the very specific. Some examples of more specific suggestions include:

- “Bringing services back in house and reducing dependency on outside agencies- reshoring services and investment in local economy and employment opportunities for local communities.”

- “You could increase the amount of annual leave that can be bought by staff. I know that lots of staff would happily buy 2 weeks and some 3 weeks or more.”
- “Scrap the NWRR now. Reduce and cap wages, councillors and officers; fewer of each. Sell the shopping centre.”
- “Seems to me you have a lot of duplication across the council - why don't you have 1 team collecting all of the debt owed to the council as opposed to several teams working in isolation.”

While 6% of respondents used their comments to complain that **prioritisation won't do any good**, 8% of respondents said that the priorities are good, but they may be **difficult to achieve and need to be done right**. Examples of these comments include:

- “Improving efficiency sometimes places more work on already stretched staff. This can lead to stress and ultimately sickness absence. There has to be real understanding of this and active strategies to mitigate the impacts.”
- “Improving efficiency is a big priority but not at the cost of cutting staffing levels on the front - line.”

Finally, 3% of respondents left comments **cautioning about making cuts to staff/services**. For example:

- “We have seen reduction in costs and improving efficiency by getting rid of pest control. This year is the first time I have seen rats in homes built in the last 20 years. Can costs be cut further without cutting services? I don't believe cutting services is the same as improving efficiency.”

Protection of Service Areas

The next section of the survey asked respondents to consider service areas broadly, and to provide a ranking for which services ought to be most protected from any spending reductions. Respondents were asked to rank the service areas they would most like to protect, with rankings of 1 being most protected and 16 being least protected. When averaged, the services receiving the most support for protection rise to the top of the list, and those services that respondents wanted least protection for are toward the bottom.

The overall results are presented in the two tables below. **Table 4** presents the order and average rankings given to each service area overall. **Table 5** provides the same information for Shropshire Council employees and non-council employees side-by-side.

Table 4: Overall Services Ranking

Service	Average Ranking
Adult Social Care	3
Children's Social Care	3.5
Children and Families, Early Help services and Youth Services	3.8
Education, Schools and Home to School Transport	5.2
Benefits and Welfare	6.3
Highways, Transport, Car Parking and Environmental Maintenance	7.1
Housing Services	8
Economic Growth	8.2
Leisure and outdoor spaces	9.6
Public Health Services	10.4
Libraries	10.5
Waste and Recycling	11.4
Regulatory services	11.6
Council running costs and support services	11.7
Planning Services	12.5
Theatre, Arts, Museums and Archives	13.3

Table 5: Council Employee and Non-Employee Ranking Comparison

Council Employee Services Ranking	Average Ranking	Non- Employee Services Ranking	Average Ranking
Adult Social Care	2.7	Adult Social Care	3.2
Children’s Social Care	3	Children’s Social Care	3.7
Children and Families, Early Help services and Youth Services	3.7	Children and Families, Early Help services and Youth Services	3.9
Education, Schools and Home to School Transport	5.2	Education, Schools and Home to School Transport	5.2
Benefits and Welfare	6.4	Benefits and Welfare	6.2
Highways, Transport, Car Parking and Environmental Maintenance	7.7	Highways, Transport, Car Parking and Environmental Maintenance	6.8
Housing Services	7.7	Economic Growth	8.1
Economic Growth	8.5	Housing Services	8.1
Public Health Services	9.7	Leisure and outdoor spaces	9.3
Leisure and outdoor spaces	10.4	Libraries	10.1
Council running costs and support services	11.2	Public Health Services	10.6
Regulatory services	11.2	Waste and Recycling	11.4
Waste and Recycling	11.3	Regulatory services	11.7
Libraries	11.5	Council running costs and support services	11.9
Planning Services	12.5	Planning Services	12.5
Theatre, Arts, Museums and Archives	13.3	Theatre, Arts, Museums and Archives	13.3

As **Table 5** makes clear, there are very few differences between the rankings of what services are most or least in need of protection from spending reductions. In fact, the top six areas earmarked for protection do not differ across the two groups of respondents. Additionally, planning services and theatre, arts, museums and archives services are equally bottom for both groups in terms of the protection they should be afforded in consideration alongside other services.

It is only in the middle rankings that the two groups diverge somewhat, but again, not by much – just one or two ranks above or below. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that **Table 4** represents a general view of what service areas the council should consider protecting the most from spending reductions.

5 Ranking Acceptable Actions

In the most substantive section of the survey, respondents were asked to share their view on approaches that have been “tried and tested” to help Shropshire Council and other similar local authorities manage increasing demand, make savings, and generate income. These questions were not meant to be a comprehensive description of the council’s plans, but rather were designed to test some possible ideas out with Shropshire residents and determine which actions might be more or less acceptable in the community.

Managing Increasing Demand

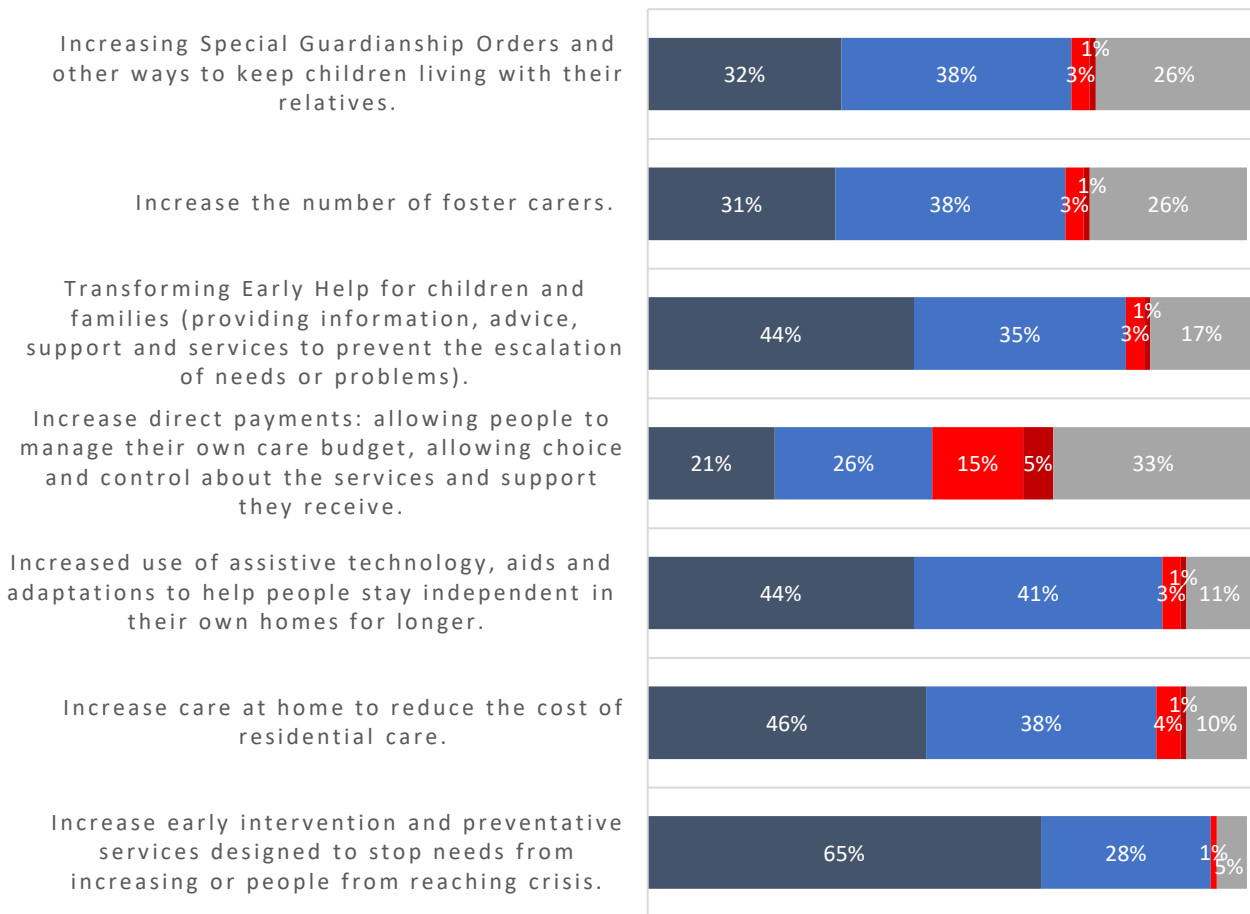
This question began with an explanation that around 80% of the council’s budget is spent on social care, and that demand for (and thus the cost of) social care is increasing. Respondents were asked to share whether they agreed or disagreed with a list of possible approaches to help reduce demand. The results are shown in **Figure 7**.

A majority of respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” with proposals for managing increasing need. The most disagreement is evident for the proposal to increase direct payments, where 20% of respondents either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with this proposal.

When employee responses and those of non-employees were disaggregated, there was very little difference between the two in terms of agreement on these proposals.

FIGURE 7: AGREEMENT ON PROPOSALS FOR MANAGING INCREASING NEED

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree/don't know



When asked whether they had comments to make about ways that Shropshire Council could reduce demand and service pressure, 228 respondents took the opportunity to provide more detail. These open-ended responses have been grouped thematically and are presented in **Table 6**. Examples of comments illustrating the most common themes (with more than 5% of respondents mentioning them) are included below.

Table 6: Comments on Managing Increasing Need

Theme	Count	%
Early intervention	19	8%
Address poor management, bureaucracy and inefficiencies	18	8%
Reduce reliance, reduce support and build self sufficiency	16	7%
Meet higher level needs (lower level interventions not always effective)	14	6%
Not enough information to prioritise provision/comment	13	6%
Reduce agency workers and external fees and contracts	12	5%
Rural focus - meet needs locally with live in carers, community based services	12	5%
Community services for quality of life (transport, leisure, culture, financial advice and respite)	11	5%
Meet care needs at home	12	5%
Education to enable self-help or prevent need	11	5%
Respite and more support for carers	7	3%
Increase volunteering, community provision and VCS commissioning	12	5%
Work as a system with other agencies, merge services	9	4%
Concerns around direct payments	8	4%
Educate parents and impact of poor parenting	7	3%
Bring services in house and keep local	7	3%
Concerns around use of SGOs and need for investment	5	2%
Keep children within families or in foster placements	5	2%
Reduce waiting times, delays and poor referral	5	2%
Offer occupational therapy	5	2%
Lobby Government for adequate funding	3	1%
Other comments	17	8%

As is evident from **Table 6** respondents provided a wide variety of constructive suggestions for how Shropshire Council might manage increasing demands.

The most common theme appearing in 8% of comments had to do with **early intervention**, or taking preventative measures to help curb needs at the start of the social care pipeline. For example:

- “Getting to the root cause of the problem needs to be invested in - the council is very reactive to the problem that is presented to them, without proper investigation into the reasons why, which need to be tackled at a much earlier stage.”
- “Any intervention to prevent further escalation of problems is paramount. If more foster carers are needed I 100% agree they are vital but what changes can happen to stop children having to end up in foster care, this is completely unfair on children from the start. What intervention can happen to prevent people having children that have no intention to care for them or their wellbeing?”

Another common theme in these responses (8%) asked the council to **address poor management, bureaucracy, and inefficiencies**. For example:

- “Common sense, less bureaucracy, less management, greater workforce.”

7% of respondents suggested that in order to manage demand, the council needs to work more to **reduce reliance, reduce support, and build self-sufficiency**.

Comments included, for example:

- “As much emphasis as possible on people helping themselves where possible.”

6% of respondents urged the council to **prioritise higher level needs**, noting that for some lower-level support is not as effective. For example:

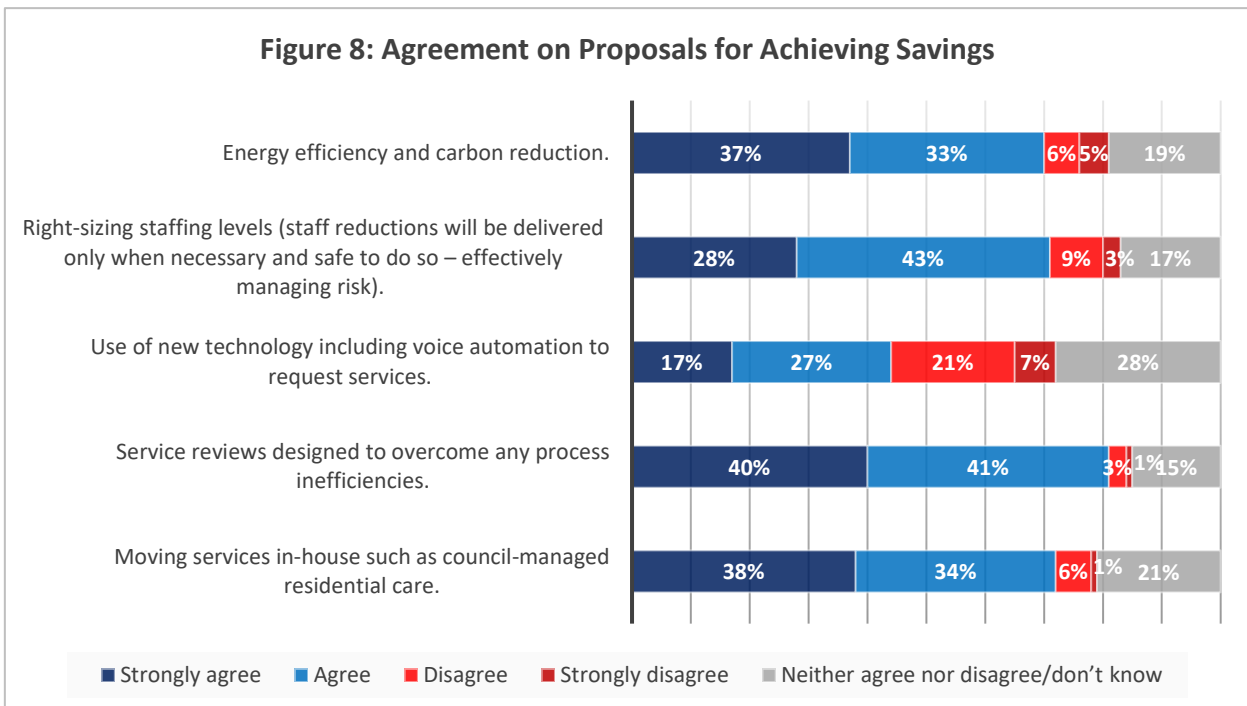
- “You can't "reduce demand" - if people need the services they must have them.”
- “There is a point where residential care is needed and people’s quality of life should not suffer because of cost cutting. If people can stay at home their lives should be made more comfortable with aids - but they should not be the only thing on offer if they do not meet people’s actual needs.”

Making Savings

Respondents were next asked to share their views on a series of proposed savings options. The full results are presented in **Figure 8**.

A majority of respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” with proposals for achieving savings, with the exception of the use of new technology to request services, where only a large minority agreed with this proposal, and 28% either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”.

As with managing increasing need, for this question on making savings, there was very little difference between Shropshire Council employees and non-employees in their responses to this question.



Once again, respondents were given the opportunity to provide further comment on this question, and 245 individuals did so. Their responses were grouped thematically, and all themes are presented in **Table 7**. The largest themes are discussed in more detail with examples provided, below.

Table 7: Comments on Making Savings

Theme	Count	%
Insufficient staffing levels in many services	26	11%
Energy efficiency and carbon reduction can't be a top priority at present	19	8%
Energy efficiency and carbon reduction must be a priority with investment	12	5%
Reduce outsourcing/ Bring service in-house	33	14%
The council shouldn't bring services in house (can't deliver for less)	15	6%
Address inefficiencies	9	4%
Concerns over new technology and voice automation - digital exclusion	39	16%
Improve management of the council	20	8%
Focus on maintaining service quality	7	3%
Don't invest in North West Relief Road (NWRR)	5	2%
Reduce support and/or increase charges	2	1%
Prevent any over-spending	2	1%
Reduce managers/staffing at top and councillor expenses	17	7%
Concerns over ineffective service reviews (e.g. consultants not staff led)	16	7%
Can't answer/ not enough information to answer	6	2%
Other comments	17	7%

Respondents left a wide range of comments, though some common themes emerged as most prominent.

The most common theme, expressed by 16% of respondents, was a **concern over new technology and voice automation** mentioned as one of the savings options in the question. Here, several respondents asked the council to consider the problem of digital exclusion if taking this route for savings. For example:

- “Inclusion and accessibility needs to be factored into any changes such as voice automation.”
- “voice automation- be aware of those that can't hear, this isolates deaf people- offer alternative ways such as text number or email address.”

Another large theme to emerge among 14% of respondents was the suggestion that **bringing services in house** might be a good way to achieve savings. For example:

- “In house services, managed and paid properly, will develop a pride in the work which will make the Council a popular employer and go some way to solve the labour shortage.”
- “Domiciliary care should be taken back in house in rural areas.”
- “Bring highways / road services back in-house as contracted out poor service and profit making causing higher costs.”

However, 6% of respondents said the opposite – **the council shouldn't bring services in house** – as it cannot achieve savings by doing so. For example:

- “I would like to have answered 'strongly agree' with moving services in house but do not believe the LA is capable of efficiently managing such operations. Short working weeks, long holidays, high sickness levels, working from home all compound to make the LA uncompetitive and incapable of such 'competitive' tasks.”
- “Only agree with council managed residential services if it is funded adequately and it is staffed correctly without cutting corners. Good staff to resident ratio and not just a means of reducing cost so residents get poor care.”

11% of respondents expressed concerns over savings affecting staffing levels, noting already **insufficient staffing levels in many services**. For example:

- “The term 'right sizing' SHOULD NOT be seen as a green light to reduce staffing. In some departments, staffing is already at dangerously low levels following numerous cuts over the years.”
- “The staff levels in some services are currently at bare bones. To reduce staff levels any more it will require the Council to chop off a limb. It is better to provide less services at a quality level than a below average service for more services.”
- “Understaffing is a primary cause of delays and inefficiencies. Reducing staffing, or restricting the ability to hire will only make that worse. "Right sizing" only makes sense if it's the right size for the department, not the right size for pre-determined budget allocations.”

There was an interesting divide among respondents to this question around the importance of **energy efficiency and carbon reduction**. 8% of respondents felt that these **can't be a top priority at present**, while 5% made the point that **they must be a priority**. Examples of these contrasting comments include:

- “I think energy efficiency is important however could be pushed to a longer term plan, whilst the debt is recovered.”
- “We must not lose sight of carbon reduction and energy efficiency whilst trying to find savings. There is no point declaring a climate emergency if this is not going to be followed through and this will save money long-term.”

As with the question around managing increasing need, **improved management of the council** was also a popular theme, covered by 8% of respondents.

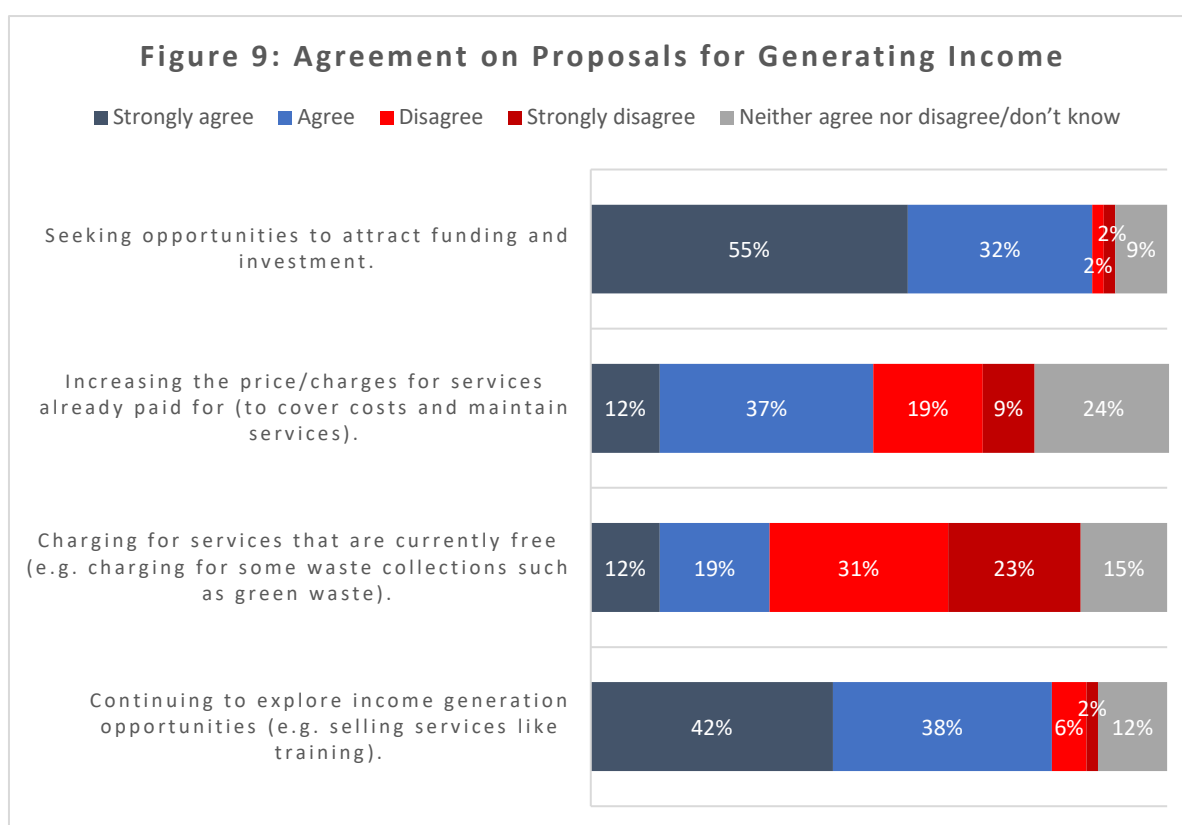
- “A lot of money is being 'wasted' on many, many reviews and consultants and consultations - there is a LOT of senior managers within the council and these reviews and decisions should be what they do (as are being paid to) and not buy in additional services - let the managers earn their wages.”
- “Each area must live and be managed to their allocated budget and be held to account. NO OVERSPENDING just because you can borrow more money. That's the way to disaster.”

Generating Income

Respondents were asked to share whether they agreed or disagreed with a list of possible approaches to helping generate income to minimise service losses or reductions. The results are shown in **Figure 9**.

A majority of respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with seeking opportunities to attract funding and investment, as well as exploring income generation opportunities. However, a majority “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the proposal to charge for services that are currently free. A large minority (28%) also disagreed with increasing charges for things already paid for.

As with managing increasing need and making savings, for this question on generating income, there were very few differences between Shropshire Council employees and non-employees in their responses to this question. The one exception to this was that for “seeking opportunities to attract funding and investment” some non-employees disagreed with this option (5% of non-employees either said they “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” with this option). Among council employees, however, there was no disagreement with this option.



As with the previous questions around managing increasing demand and making savings, respondents were given the opportunity to provide detailed comments on the proposals for generating income. 260 respondents did so, and their responses have been grouped thematically. These themes are presented in **Table 8** and examples of comments representing the most common themes are provided below.

Table 8: Comments on Generating Income

Theme	Count	%
Sell assets and/or lobby Government	13	5%
Maintain quality of services/ core services as priority	6	2%
Already pay council tax, no charges	32	12%
Stop paying for consultants	6	2%
Charge for services or request voluntary donations (e.g. green waste)	29	11%
Council tax increases for those who can afford to pay more	8	3%
Concerns about income generation and selling (e.g. lack market or skills)	27	10%
Stop North West Relief Road	2	1%
Inefficiencies and criticism of organisation's financial management	16	6%
Invest in ideas to raise income and make money	15	6%
Negative consequences of charging for services (e.g. fly tipping and impact on low-income residents)	58	22%
Obtain investment through external funding and bids	10	4%
Don't increase car parking (impact on economy)	6	2%
Too little information available to comment	6	2%
Other comments	26	10%

The most common theme by far, expressed by 22% of respondents answering this question, was to make the point that there would be **negative consequences associated with charging for services**. For example:

- “If you are charging for services that are currently free exactly what it is that we are all paying for council tax for? If for example you start reducing waste collection even more then we all have to start living with yet more rodents, fly tipping and illegal waste disposal.”
- “If you charge for green waste collection, residents will just not recycle food/garden waste - which would discourage recycling.”

12% of respondents made comments along the lines of **already paying for services with their council tax, and not wanting extra charges**.

- “You can't ask people to pay for waste collections – that must come from Council tax.”
- “I believe it is extremely unfair charging people extra for services or charging extra for already chargeable services in addition to raising Council Tax charges.”

11% of respondents made suggestions around **charging for services or requesting voluntary donations** to help generate income. For example:

- “I had no problem paying for green waste in area where I was paying half the amount of council tax I pay now. I have no problem with increasing costs for services such as car parks to help cover maintenance etc.”
- “Charging for services like green waste disposal is reasonable for those who have access to recycling centres etc.”
- “I would like to be able to add a voluntary donation when making a Theatre Severn or Old Market Hall booking, or when renewing my Church Stretton

leisure centre annual membership.”

A further 10% of respondents expressed some **concerns around the council’s ability to generate income or sell services**. For example:

- “Income generation should not be pursued at the cost of delivering services to the council i.e. internal provision reduces because of savings targets but externally provided services to other organisations need to be maintained to deliver contractual obligations? Are these arrangements truly generating a sustainable income for the services provided and to the council?”
- “Council staff are not business-savvy and don’t have a good track record on selling services profitably, lots of operating costs are hidden or absorbed so not properly accounted for, limiting true commercial gains. This resource should be dispersed into providing services internally that enable the effective delivery of essential services.”

Ranking Cost Saving Options

Respondents were once more asked to go through an exercise of ranking preferred options. This time, they were asked to rank options that other councils have used to make savings from 1 to 16, with those options ranked closer to 1 being the most acceptable option and those ranked closer to 16 being the least acceptable option.

When averaged, the options receiving the most acceptable cost savings measures rise to the top of the list, and the least acceptable options fall toward the bottom.

The overall results are presented in the two tables below. **Table 9** presents the order and average rankings given to each option by respondents overall. **Table 10** provides the same information for Shropshire Council employees and non-council employees side-by-side.

Table 9: Overall Ranking of Proposed Savings Measures

Proposed Savings Measures	Average Ranking
Increased car parking charges	5.4
Reduce spending on waste through a waste minimisation strategy which could include charging for green waste	5.7
Reduce investment in carbon reduction activities	6
Reduced spending on libraries and leisure centres which could include reducing opening times or fewer premises or increased charges	6.2
Reducing investment in businesses and town centres	6.9
Reduced spending on heritage, archive and museum services which could include reducing opening times or fewer premises or increased charges	7.7
Reduce road and highways works and repairs	8.6
Reduce support for public transport	8.7
Reduction in maintenance of and/or access to parks and outdoor spaces	8.7
Reduce home to school transport funding to a statutory minimum	8.8
Reductions in street cleaning	9.2
Reduce face-to-face customer contact and replace with automation and self-service where possible	9.8
Reducing services for refugees and rough sleepers	10
Introduce discretionary additional council tax payments if permitted by Government legislation	10.5
Reduced spending on day care services in adult social care, which could include reducing opening times or fewer premises or increased charges.	11.7
Reduce non-statutory early help services for families and young people	12.1

Table 10: Employee vs. Non-Employee Ranking of Proposed Savings Measures

Employee Ranking of Proposed Savings	Average Ranking	Non-Employee Ranking of Proposed Savings	Average Ranking
Increased car parking charges	4.9	Increased car parking charges	5.5
Reduce spending on waste through a waste minimisation strategy which could include charging for green waste	5.3	Reduce investment in carbon reduction activities	5.8
Reduced spending on libraries and leisure centres	5.4	Reduce spending on waste through a waste minimisation strategy which could include charging for green waste	5.9
Reduce investment in carbon reduction activities	6.5	Reduced spending on libraries and leisure centres	6.6
Reducing investment in businesses and town centres	7.2	Reducing investment in businesses and town centres	6.8
Reduced spending on heritage, archive and museum services which could include reducing opening times or fewer premises or increased charges	7.3	Reduced spending on heritage, archive and museum services which could include reducing opening times or fewer premises or increased charges	7.9
Reduction in maintenance of and/or access to parks and outdoor spaces	8.6	Reduce road and highways works and repairs	8.5
Reduce support for public transport	8.8	Reduce support for public transport	8.6
Reduce face-to-face customer contact and replace with automation and self-service where possible	8.8	Reduction in maintenance of and/or access to parks and outdoor spaces	8.7
Reduce road and highways works and repairs	8.9	Reduce home to school transport funding to a statutory minimum	8.7
Reduce home to school transport funding to a statutory minimum	9	Reductions in street cleaning	9.2
Reductions in street cleaning	9.4	Reducing services for refugees and rough sleepers	9.6
Introduce discretionary additional council tax payments if permitted by Government legislation	9.9	Reduce face-to-face customer contact and replace with automation and self-service where possible	10.2
Reducing services for refugees and rough sleepers	10.9	Introduce discretionary additional council tax payments if permitted by Government legislation	10.7
Reduced spending on day care services in adult social care	12.3	Reduced spending on day care services in adult social care	11.4
Reduce non-statutory early help services for families and young people	12.8	Reduce non-statutory early help services for families and young people	11.7

Despite the strong disagreement for charging for services such as green waste expressed by respondents in **Figure 9**, it seems that **when asked to rank this option among other possible savings, reducing spending on waste is ranked as second from top overall as one of the most acceptable savings proposals, and third from top among non-staff respondents.**

There is also agreement among respondents that the most acceptable savings measures are to increase car parking charges, while the least acceptable are to reduce spending on day care services in adult social care and non-statutory early help services for families and young people.

There are some dissimilarities between council employees and non-employees in the middle rankings. For example, council employees are happier than non-employees to reduce face-to-face customer contact, while non-employees are happier than employees to reduce investment in carbon reduction activities.

When asked to provide further comments on these proposals, 177 respondents did so. These responses are grouped thematically, and these themes are presented in **Table 11**. Examples of comments illustrating some of the most common themes are presented below.

Table 11: Comments on Proposed Savings

Theme	Count	%
All services are equally important / don't agree with reductions in services	27	15%
Need to prioritise essential services / consider the impact on vulnerable residents	20	11%
Better management of existing services / reduce inefficiencies	19	11%
Don't know / too difficult to decide	18	10%
Consultation is confusing / don't like the consultation	15	8%
Preventative and early help measures to reduce the need for services (e.g. for social care)	10	6%
Increase the use of volunteers /community groups and town councils to deliver services	11	6%
Stop funding large projects (e.g. NWRR, Riverside, etc)	9	5%
Increase revenue / Charge for services that are currently free (e.g. green waste collection)	8	5%
Reduction in consultants and agency staff and management	6	3%
Refugees and Homeless are two separate groups	3	2%
Sell council assets to raise the funding to deliver services	3	2%
Stop delivering non-essential services	2	1%
Reduction in staffing and associated costs	2	1%
Other	24	14%

The largest theme to emerge from these open-ended responses was that 15% of respondents **value all services equally / don't agree with reductions in services**. For example:

- "I cannot rank these- it's impossible! most of us are sick of trying to do this every year - we are being asked to make impossible choices and all that happens is we get poorer services or not at all."

- “Each of these services are essential to a civilised society. Reductions in any will harm people or the local economy.”

11% of respondents emphasised that the council should **prioritise essential services and consider the impact on vulnerable residents**. For example:

- “Focus on statutory services. Businesses can look after themselves - most pay no business rates.”
- “When the budget is very tight then it should be the 'nice to have' facilities, which suffer, not the essentials.”

Another 11% of respondents urged **better management of existing resources and reducing council inefficiencies**. For example:

- “Reduce the amount of money spent on administration.”
- “Where it says 'reduce', maybe sometimes it could say 'do more efficiently'. For example, street cleaning is already dreadful, so can't be reduced. But are there ways to make it more efficient?”

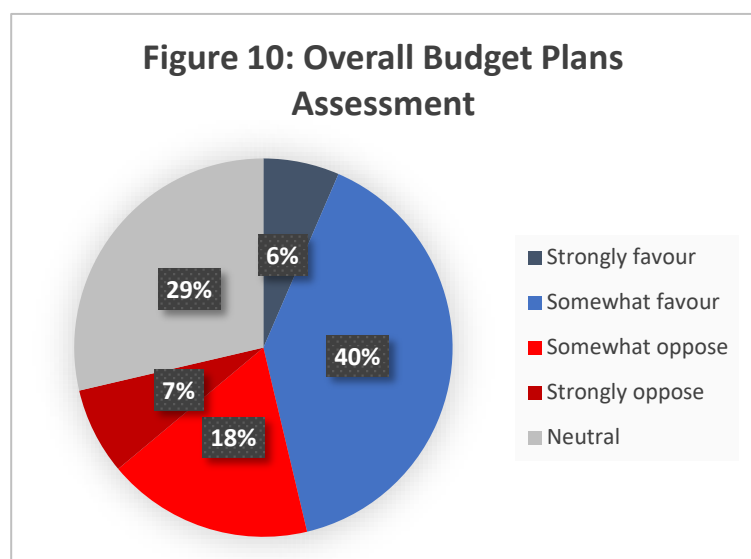
A large portion of these comments were not happy with being asked this question about prioritising savings. 10% of respondents said that they **could not decide** how to prioritise these proposed savings measures, and 8% complained **that this consultation is confusing** in asking residents to do this prioritisation exercise. For example:

- “The way this survey is worded is very confusing and contradictory. I don't think any of these reductions are acceptable.”

6 Overall Budget Assessment and Further Comments

On the whole, a **majority of respondents (75%) are either in favour of or neutral to the council's budget plans** (see Figure 10).

Shropshire Council employees are even more positive about the plan, with 91% of employees saying they are either “strongly favour”, “somewhat favour” or are “neutral” to the overall plans. A majority of non-staff (67%) are also in favour of the plans or neutral toward them.



Respondents were then given one final opportunity to provide open-ended responses as to “how we might make further savings or provide any alternative suggestions to those set out within the proposals.” 293 respondents provided detailed comments, and these have been grouped thematically and the themes presented in **Table 12**. The most common themes are illustrated with representative examples of comments, below.

Table 12: Any Further Comments/Suggestions

Theme	Count	%
Scrap the NWRR / unnecessary projects	65	22%
Sufficient staffing to deliver services / less agency workers / contractors	37	13%
Improved strategic management of the council	29	10%
Increase commercial activity / raise income through other sources	25	9%
Prioritise essential services / reduce non- essential services	24	8%
Reduce inefficiencies	20	7%
Prioritise economic development	15	5%
Reduction in staffing levels / wages	16	5%
Build on / improve existing services	12	4%
Unclear of proposals within the consultation / consultation not clear	11	4%
Work to remove the reliance on benefits / council services	9	3%
Support for environmental projects / climate emergency	7	2%
Increase council tax to pay for essential services	6	2%
Preventative activities	6	2%
Other	11	4%

The largest theme to come out of this request for respondents’ final thoughts was that 22% of respondents said the council should consider **scrapping the North West Relief Road (NWRR) and/or other “unnecessary” projects**. Even though the difference between capital investment schemes and the difficulties with balancing the day-to-day budget of the council were explained earlier in the survey, many respondents still felt that this was an important point to make. For example:

- “The Relief road and the Riverside Scheme are proposals I think are not for now but in the future when the Economic Climate is more stable.”
- “The council recently asked for 2 more councillors which was turned down but it seems to reflect an overall 'out of touchness' with the reality we live in- who was going to fund these councillors? The electorate- the council has not put forward any savings in reducing the number of councillors or the cabinet- which in essence should be the first place they look for savings...The council's capital spend includes many spends that do not provide value for money and won't cover their costs- swimming in Shrewsbury cannot be called needed, strategic or essential, the northern relief road is not wanted by anyone from government down to Highways England and is just a conservative led vanity project- it should be cancelled- why because all of the capital spend will have to be borrowed and paid back at some point and who will fund it- the council tax payer so we will inevitably see bigger council tax bills in years to come.”

13% of respondents wanted to make a point about the need to invest in **council staffing levels that are sufficient to deliver services and/or to reduce agency spending**. For example:

- “Get rid of the third parties and the bosses who do nothing. Employ more people on the ground who actually do something.”
- “Stop hiring in third parties like roadworkers - have teams in house to do the work yourselves rather than lining the third party companies’ pockets.”

10% of respondents made the point that they want to see **improved strategic management of the council**. For example:

- “Our Priorities need to be reassessed and ranked in the context of MUST DO and NICE TO HAVE but not essential and NOT NOW.”
- “I feel there is a lack of innovation and creative thinking.”
- “I think a staff wide consultation and restructure is required to save money and reduce costs. I think the council is somewhat stuck in its ways in terms of the way it does things when other councils do the same job more efficiently so lessons could be learnt from other authorities. I think there are lots of managers and not enough actual staff to do the work.”

9% of respondents emphasised a need to **increase commercial activity / raise income through other sources**, including demanding more from central government. For example:

- “Demand more money from Central Government to be acquired via Income Tax and increased Council Tax.”
- “There are many empty properties which could be brought back into use, including commercial. Sell the Shirehall ground for housing make small flats and offices for us and other businesses in town centres where there are increased properties empty, the Council could utilise some of these offices until the riverside is completed. But put the Council out into the Towns across Shropshire, with technology we can easily achieve this now.”

Also important, according to 8% of respondents, is to **prioritise essential services and/or reduce non-essential services**. For example:

- “Outside of statutory obligations (which you should probably lobby to have reduced), the focus has to be on turning kids into useful members of society, and economic growth. Everything else will naturally follow if it's needed, once the books balance.”
- “Please save vital services such as Adult and Children's Social Care, Housing, Education, and Public Health. Time to fund what really matters and underpins the Healthy Shropshire Strategy.”

7 Summary and Conclusion

Summary

Typical Respondent Snapshot:

- There were 1,064 responses, which is more than a three-fold increase in responses to last year's consultation.
- 33% of respondents (252) identified themselves as Shropshire Council employees.
- 75% of respondents are between 31 and 69 years of age.
- 66% of respondents are working.

Key Statistics:

- Overall, a majority (67%) of respondents agree to the 4.99% increase in council tax.
 - o 75% of council employee respondents agree.
 - o 64% of non-employee respondents agree.
- A majority (57%) do not agree with a further increase in council tax beyond 4.99%, though a third of respondents would agree to a further rise.
 - o 50% of council employees do not agree.
 - o 60% of non-employees do not agree.
- A majority (70%) agree with the council's approach to prioritisation.
 - o 82% of council employees agree.
 - o 64% of non-employees agree.
- A majority (73%) are either in favour of or neutral to the council's capital investment plans.
 - o 85% of council employees are in favour or neutral.
 - o 67% of non-employees are in favour or neutral.
- A majority (75%) are either in favour of or neutral to the council's budget plan overall.
 - o 91% of council employees are in favour or neutral.
 - o 67% of non-employees are in favour or neutral.

Protection of Service Areas:

- Adult Social Care, Children's Social Care, Children, Families, Early Help services and Youth Services, Education, Schools and Home to School Transport and Benefits and Welfare were the top five service areas that respondents want to see protected from spending reductions.

Agreement with Specific Budget Proposals:

- A majority of respondents agree with each of the proposals for managing increasing need. The most disagreement is evident for the proposal to

increase direct payments, where 20% of respondents either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with this proposal.

- A majority of respondents agree with most of the proposals for achieving savings, with the exception of the use of new technology to request services, where only a large minority agreed with this proposal, and 28% either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”.
- A majority of respondents agreed with most of the proposals around seeking opportunities to attract funding and investment, as well as exploring income generation opportunities.
 - o However, a majority “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the proposal to charge for services that are currently free.
 - o A large minority (28%) also disagreed with increasing charges for things already paid for.

Ranking Spending Reductions Options:

- There is agreement among respondents that the most acceptable savings measures are to increase car parking charges, while the least acceptable are to reduce spending on day care services in adult social care and non-statutory early help services for families and young people.
- Despite the strong disagreement for charging for services such as green waste expressed by respondents elsewhere in the survey, when asked to rank this option among other possible savings, reducing spending on waste is ranked as second from top overall as one of the most acceptable savings proposals, and third from top among non-staff respondents.
- There are some dissimilarities between council employees and non-employees in the middle rankings. For example, council employees are happier than non-employees to reduce face-to-face customer contact, while non-employees are happier than employees to reduce investment in carbon reduction activities.

Conclusion

Many thanks are extended to the over one thousand Shropshire residents and/or stakeholders who participated in this survey. These responses provide incredibly valuable feedback as the council considers difficult choices around how to close its budget gap in the coming year. Thanks as well to the Shropshire Council Communications Team for ensuring that the word got out about this important consultation.

While there is much to be debated about the details, the majority sentiment among respondents to the survey was that the council’s approach to its budgeting priorities, its capital investment plan, and its overall budget plan for 2024/25 is sound. Moreover, a majority of respondents are in favour of a 4.99% council tax increase to help meet the council’s current challenges and in order to maintain vital public services. More work needs to be done, however, to find ways to close the budget gap, especially as the council carefully considers spending reductions and efficiencies that may have impacts on these services.

February 2024

Analysis and reporting by:
Feedback and Insight Team, Communications and Engagement, Resources
Shropshire Council
Email: TellUs@shropshire.gov.uk

Shropshire Council Lead Department: Finance



Shropshire
Council