

TITLE:	Budget Consultation 2023-24
Background	
1.	Consultation on the 2023-24 Council budget was conducted via an online form, with feedback also invited via social media. In addition, a letter was sent to key partners seeking their views.
Online Consultation	
2.	<p>The online consultation was open from 19 December 2022 to 22 January 2023 and the online form had five questions, which allowed for “free text” responses:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would be your spending priorities for the Council? 2. Where would you suggest the Council could reduce spending? 3. Do you have any concerns about the Council’s current budget? 4. Council Plan budget priorities 5. Do you have any other thoughts on the budget? <p>Question four was sub-divided into five separate questions, with respondents asked to give their budget priorities for the five themes in the Council Plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every neighbourhood thriving • People are safe, healthy and live well • Every child able to fulfil their potential • Expanding economic opportunity • A cleaner, greener local environment <p>A total of 76 people completed the online consultation. A summary of responses is set out below.</p> <p>What would be your spending priorities for the Council? A total of 23 spending priorities were identified, spread across a wide range of themes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The most frequently mentioned spending priority was social care (29 mentions), with 14 specific references to adults, 10 specific references to children and 4 referencing both. A number of respondents (6) prioritised looking after the most vulnerable. ○ Also mentioned frequently were issues relating to the condition/maintenance of roads and pavements (14), and cleanliness/waste management (13). ○ There were several mentions each of: prioritisation of education (10); the economy/regeneration (8); crime/community safety/ASB (8); and the environment (6). <p>Where would you suggest the Council could reduce spending? A total of 13 areas for spending reductions were identified, spread across a wide range of themes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Adjusting service offers was the main category of saving suggestions (26 mentions). This included spending less on ‘unnecessary/wasteful schemes’ that are not viewed as a priority, joining with other councils to commission at scale and ‘cutting bureaucracy’.

- Twenty-two respondents suggested reducing staffing levels or salaries/benefits. Of these 22 responses, 11 specifically mentioned either senior management or elected members.
- Eight respondents suggested that spending on the town centre should be reduced, with five of these specifically mentioning the Forge Island development.
- Five respondents stated there should be no reduction in Council spending at all, and there were five suggestions around reducing costs associated with Council buildings/properties.

Do you have any concerns about the Council's current budget?

Just over two-thirds of respondents (52) raised a concern in response to question 3. Twenty-one concerns related generally to service priorities. This included:

- Areas of the borough looking untidy, regardless of the amount spent on improvements and invested in them (Eastwood Village was highlighted as an example).
- A potential lack of funding for essential services – particularly for vulnerable residents.
- Priority given to projects that respondents thought may fail or not be as successful as hoped (town centre, Forge Island).
- A lack of a long-term view/vision – some projects perceived to be short-term and not sustainable.

Other relatively frequent responses related to the Council 'wasting' money, ensuring value for money and concerns that council tax was too high and may be raised even further. Nine respondents commented that the council was underfunded and some of these respondents were concerned about the potential for additional cuts to services.

Do you have any other thoughts on the budget?

A third of the respondents (25) provided additional comments in response to this question. Again, there was a wide spread of topics and many served to reinforce points made in response to previous questions. The only issues to feature more than twice were:

- *Providing value for money* – comments focused on providing value for money for taxpayers, alongside concerns about council tax increases and affordability.
- *Support for the vulnerable/cost of living crisis* – concerns that services for the most vulnerable residents be maintained and worries about the impact of the cost of living.
- *Engagement and communication* – comments focussed on providing more information to the public, greater levels of inclusion around decision making and not 'over-promising'.

Council Plan themes

Respondents' views on budget priorities for the five Council Plan themes are summarised below.

Every neighbourhood thriving (39 respondents provided comments in response to this question)

There was some scepticism about this theme with around a third of respondents who provided a comment stating that they were unsure what it meant or critical of the theme in general. 'Local priorities', comprising suggestions for spend in a particular part of Rotherham, received eleven responses. The other most frequently mentioned topics were local engagement and community support, and crime and anti-social behaviour. Housing, public health and limiting spending (in more deprived areas) were the other topics to receive more than one mention.

	<p><i>People are safe, healthy and live well</i> (30 respondents provided comments) Crime and anti-social behaviour had the most mentions within this theme (9). Health issues also featured in multiple responses, with specific mentions of difficulty accessing services. Support for those who are the most vulnerable, socially isolated or struggling with the cost of living received more than one mention.</p> <p><i>Every child able to fulfil their potential</i> (29 respondents provided comments) There was a focus on parenting skills and parental responsibility in the responses to this theme (6), as well as support for community groups and activities for children and young people. Additional topics mentioned were education and additional funding for education, improving/increasing support for children with special educational needs, local issues and crime and anti-social behaviour.</p> <p><i>Expanding economic opportunity</i> (29 respondents provided comments) There were an equal number of responses relating to job creation/promotion (attracting businesses to Rotherham), support for businesses (e.g. reducing rents, support for small independent businesses) and the town centre (including some negativity around empty/derelict buildings). Other topics with more than one mention included more local/community investment, limiting spending in this area (other themes were seen as more important) and support for individuals (with mental health conditions or disabilities) to re-enter the workplace.</p> <p><i>A cleaner, greener local environment</i> (37 respondents provided comments) Issues relating to waste collection, clean streets, litter and fly-tipping were predominant. This was followed by responses that suggested that this theme was now a lower priority due to the challenges people were facing relating to the cost of living. Other topics mentioned more than once were transport (mainly better public transport – especially buses), local issues and improved/greater access to green spaces.</p>
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Social Media Engagement

<p>3.</p>	<p>The budget consultation was publicised widely to different audiences using the Council's main communications channels, as set out below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media – press release issued and picked up by a number of local outlets, including the Rotherham Advertiser. • Social media – regular posts on the main corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Total number of posts: 13 ○ Total impressions (views): 15,035 ○ Link clicks generated (to consultation): 214 <p>Comments on posts A small number of comments were made in response to the social media posts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing concern about an increase in Council Tax while other bills are also increasing • Questioning the point/effectiveness of the consultation • Calling for improved road repairs • Calling for the scrapping of parish councils
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	<p>E-mail bulletins were issued to those people on the Council's database who have consented to receive information directly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rotherham Round-Up, issued 6 January 2023 to 9,200 subscribers.• Member bulletin, issued 19 December 2022 to 128 subscribers• Total link clicks generated: 121
Other responses	
4.	<p>Partners</p> <p>One response was received to the letter sent to key partners. This was from Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust (RDaSH) and was broadly supportive.</p> <p>In addition, a letter was received from Alexander Stafford, the Member of Parliament for Rother Valley. Mr Stafford drew attention to a range of issues in his Rother Valley constituency.</p>
Recommendations	
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To note and consider the findings as part of the overall budget discussions.