

TITLE:	Budget Consultation 2024-25
Background	
1.	Consultation on the 2024-25 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 8 December 2023 to 14 January 2024 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 112 people completed the online consultation, this was an increase on the 76 responses that were received on the budget consultation in the previous year. A summary of responses is set out below.</p> <p>What would be your spending priorities for the Council? A total of 32 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 the maintenance of roads and pavements (51 mentions), comments mostly related to repairing potholes and improving the condition of roads and pavements. A number of respondents (7) made specific references to parking and road safety issues and 7 respondents made specific complaints about either cycle or bus lanes ○ The second most frequently mentioned spending priority was street cleanliness/waste management (24 mentions) ○ The third most frequently mentioned spending priority was social care (22 mentions), with 14 specific references to adults, 13 specific references to children and 8 referencing both. A number of respondents (5) prioritised looking after the most vulnerable ○ Also mentioned frequently were priorities relating to community safety and tackling crime/ASB (21), education/schools (16 mentions with a further 5 respondents specifically referencing SEND provision), health (11), parks and open spaces (10) and transport (10).

Where would you suggest the Council could reduce spending?

A total of 14 areas for spending reductions were identified, spread across a wide range of themes.

- Adjusting service offers was the main category of saving suggestions (27 mentions). Comments included bringing services 'in-house', finding efficiencies via automation and better systems
- Twenty-five respondents suggested reducing staffing levels or salaries/benefits/expenses. Of these 25 responses, 11 specifically mentioned elected members and 10 mentioned senior management
- Twenty-two respondents were not supportive of spending on bus and cycle lanes
- Eleven respondents suggested that spending on the town centre should be reduced, with three of these specifically mentioning the Forge Island development
- Eight respondents specifically mentioned reducing spending on 'wasteful or vanity projects'
- Six respondents made suggestions around reducing costs associated with Council buildings/properties.

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

Just over seventy percent of respondents (81) raised a concern in response to question 3. Twenty-four concerns related generally to ensuring value for money, good financial management, efficiency and stopping waste. A further nine respondents were concerned about overspending and debt. Themes included:

- Not overpaying for goods/services/projects
- Avoiding waste and careful budgeting around projects
- A focus on debt collection and debt management
- Concerns regarding a potential lack of funding for essential services – particularly for vulnerable residents
- Concerns around the delivery of regeneration projects - respondents thought they may fail, be too late or not be as successful as hoped (town centre, Forge Island).

Other relatively frequent responses related to service priorities (14) and nine respondents had concerns that council tax was too high and may be raised even further. Seven respondents raised specific issues in their local area.

Do you have any other thoughts on the budget?

Around sixty percent (67) of respondents 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 main comments were focussed on:

- *Abiding by the set budget* – comments focussed on not getting into debt and working within set budgets
- *Providing value for money* – comments focused on providing value for money for taxpayers, and researching any potential cost/efficiency savings
- *Local issues, maintaining services and council tax affordability/increases* were also frequent responses.

Council Plan themes

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

	<p><i>Every neighbourhood thriving</i> (98 respondents provided comments in response to this question) There was some scepticism about this theme with around forty percent of respondents who provided a comment stating that they were unsure what it meant or critical of the theme in general, whereas around a quarter of respondents were positive about the theme. ‘Local priorities’, comprising suggestions for spend in a particular part of Rotherham, received eighteen responses. The other most frequently mentioned topics were the need to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, and the need to address funding inequalities between different areas (including limiting both additional funding for deprived areas and the focus on the town centre). Other topics receiving more than one mention included fostering pride and community involvement, the need for community facilities and improved street scenes/cleanliness.</p> <p><i>People are safe, healthy and live well</i> (96 respondents provided comments) Crime and anti-social behaviour had the most mentions within this theme (37). Health issues also featured in multiple responses, with specific mentions of difficulty accessing health services (GP and hospital). Parks and open spaces (including not building on green belt land/open countryside), support for those struggling with the cost of living, more activities and transport issues received a number of mentions. Other topics receiving more than one mention included education, street scene/cleanliness, social care, mental health, independent living, and taking individual responsibility.</p> <p><i>Every child able to fulfil their potential</i> (87 respondents provided comments) There was a focus on good quality education and guidance (11) in the responses to this theme, as well as concerns about support for children with special educational needs and a lack of funding in mainstream education also. Additional topics mentioned were parental responsibility, more activities for children and young people and safety/crime.</p> <p><i>Expanding economic opportunity</i> (77 respondents provided comments) About a third of respondents were critical of, or sceptical about this theme. Support for businesses (e.g. rent/rate reductions and supporting local businesses) received 13 comments. Job creation (attracting/growing businesses) was mentioned in 7 responses. Other topics with a number of mentions included local issues, town centre investment/improvement, workforce engagement/development, better transport links and the provision of good quality jobs.</p> <p><i>A cleaner, greener local environment</i> (95 respondents provided comments) Issues relating to clean streets, litter and fly-tipping were predominant (26 mentions). Other topics mentioned several times were the importance of access to green spaces (and protecting them from development), road/traffic issues, improving the street scene, a need for better public transport (especially busses), and more renewable energy sources.</p>
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Social Media Engagement	
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3.	<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: 16
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Total impressions (the number of times the user saw the posts): 49,656 ○ Link clicks generated to the consultation page: 421 ○ Residents were asked some of the budget questions on social media such as “What would your spending priorities be” to encourage comments on posts and link clicks ○ Please note, additional posts were also shared on LinkedIn and Instagram. <p>Comments on posts</p> <p>Around 100 comments were made in response to the social media posts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expressing concerns around a lack of street lighting ● Calling for footpath and road repairs ● Calling for improved drainage and flood defences at locations across the borough ● Expressing concerns around active travel schemes <p>The budget consultation was promoted through the Council’s email bulletins, which 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 newsletter, issued 15 December 2023 and 12 January 2024 to 10,719 subscribers ● News from your Neighbourhood newsletters, issued across December 2023 to January 2024 to 11,401 subscribers ● Total link clicks generated: 106
Other responses	
4.	<p>Partners</p> <p>One response was received to the letter sent to key partners. This was from NHS South Yorkshire Integrated Care Board and was broadly supportive and included an offer to continue to work collaboratively where any difficult decisions are required.</p>
Recommendations	
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To note and consider the findings as part of the overall budget discussions.