Budget 2020/21 and Corporate Plan 2020-24 consultation: key findings

CONTEXT

The public consultation and engagement about Herefordshire Council's budget for 2020/21 and Corporate Plan for 2020-24 took place in three stages:

1. Informal, qualitative engagement undertaken by Impact Consultancy between September and November informed the priorities to be formally consulted on. Over 1,500 people engaged with this exercise, at a range of events targeted at specific groups of people.

2. The formal, online consultation ran throughout November 2019 (6 November to 4 December). A total of 269 responses were received to the questionnaire, all but three from individuals responding in a personal capacity. About two-thirds were aged 45-64, an over-representation compared to the population (40%).

3. Alongside the online consultation, Impact Consultancy ran six 'pop-up' events in Hereford and each of the market towns. The focus of these events was on the quality of the conversation, rather than the number of consultees. Using three tokens, the 137 people who got involved were asked to 'vote' for their priorities out of the ten areas for additional investment. Probably due to the nature of these events taking place during the working day, the vast majority were older people.

An event with local businesses is planned for early January 2020.

RESULTS: THE BUDGET

The first section of the online consultation questionnaire asked respondents about their views on the proposed budget and 4% increase to Council Tax, along with questions about discount schemes. The face-to-face engagement did not address these topics.

The main results were that:

- There was an **almost equal split in terms of support for the proposed Council Tax increase**, with just over half thinking a 4% increase was about right (36.9%) or too little (14.6%), compared to just under half (48.5%) thinking it was too much. A similar pattern of responses received to the last year's consultation.

- **A small majority (53%) disagreed with the allocation of Council Tax** as set out in the budget till receipt, whilst only a quarter (26%) agreed and the rest (21%) said they had no opinion. Although the spending allocations that were set out were different to last year, this was a very similar pattern of responses.

  Analysing the comments to this question to understand **why people disagreed** with the allocation of spend, the most common themes seemed to be about the proposed increase in Council Tax. More than one in four of the 136 comments mentioned that the

proposed rise was too high compared to inflation / that it wasn't value for money, whilst one in five negatively referred to the organisational costs of running the council.
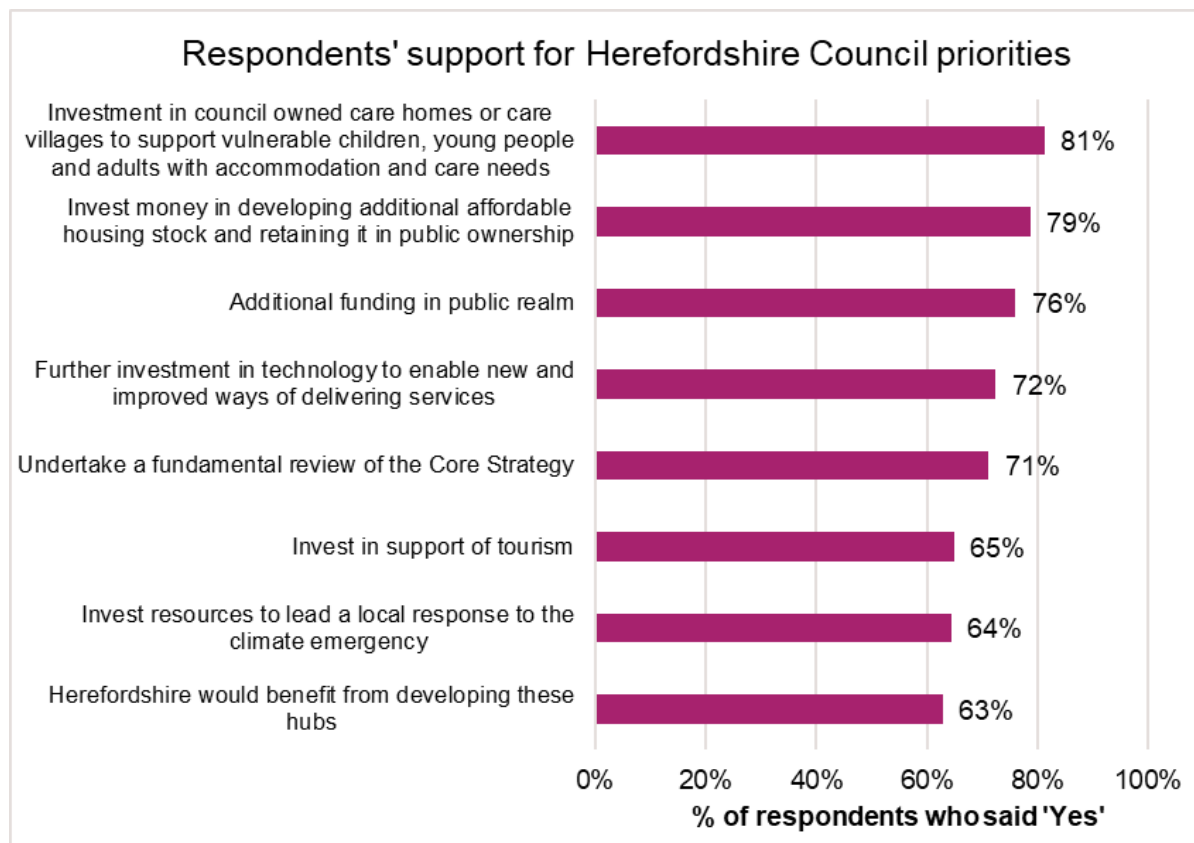
Comments that expressed an opinion about the allocation of spend were mostly saying that not enough was allocated to particular services, rather than too much. Services mentioned most frequently were **related to the environment and place**; not enough on:

- climate change / public spaces / environment / recycling and waste collection (20 comments)
- public / community / sustainable / rural transport (17 comments)
- roads / road safety and infrastructure / cycle paths / public rights of way (16 comments)

RESULTS: THE PRIORITIES

The next section of the online consultation focused on the areas identified as priorities for additional investment, with respondents first asked for their views about each of the areas (including whether they supported the proposal), before being asked to rank these areas in order of priority.

There was **majority support for all of the areas identified for additional investment**, with as many as four out of five agreeing with additional investment in council-owned care homes or villages (81%) and publicly-owned affordable housing (79%). Even the areas with lower rates of support were supported by almost two out of three respondents: developing community 'super-hubs'; leading a response to the climate emergency; and investing in tourism.

Respondents' support for Herefordshire Council priorities

Priority	%
Investment in council owned care homes or care villages to support vulnerable children, young people and adults with accommodation and care needs	81%
Invest money in developing additional affordable housing stock and retaining it in public ownership	79%
Additional funding in public realm	76%
Further investment in technology to enable new and improved ways of delivering services	72%
Undertake a fundamental review of the Core Strategy	71%
Invest in support of tourism	65%
Invest resources to lead a local response to the climate emergency	64%
Herefordshire would benefit from developing these hubs	63%

% of respondents who said 'Yes'

When respondents were asked to **rank the areas in order of importance**, five stood out as being more important than the others (chart below shows the score for each as a weighted average of the ranks):
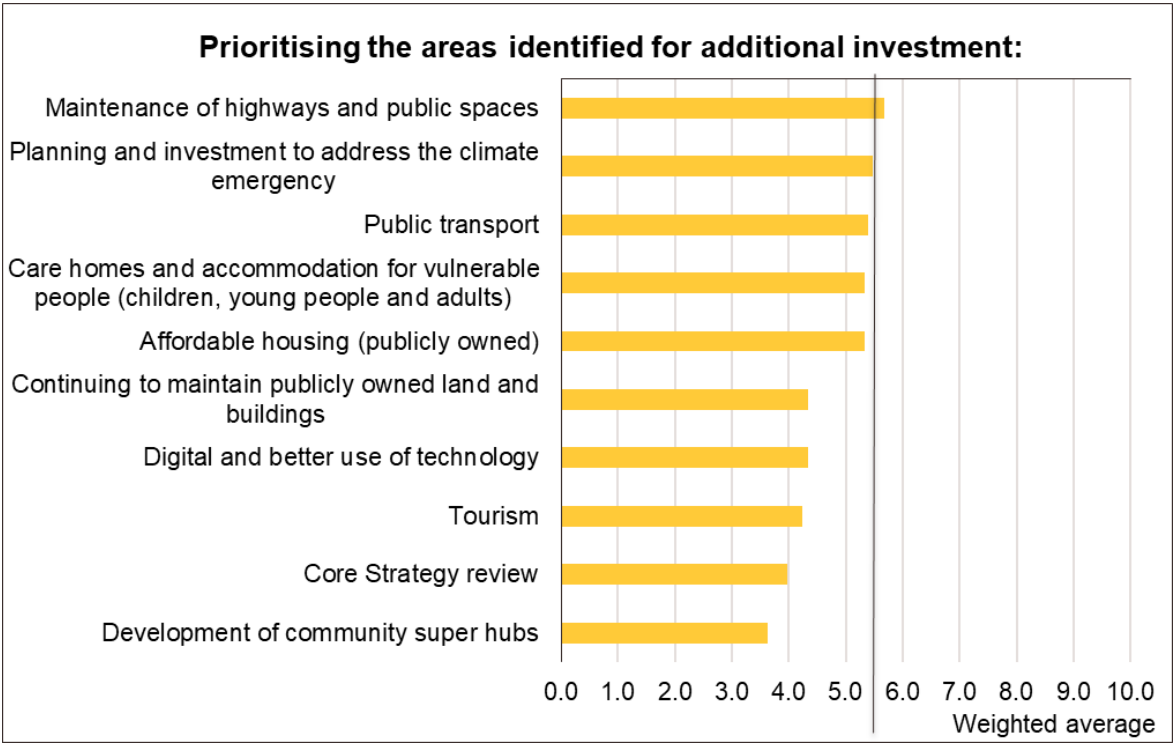
- ✓ Maintenance of highways and public spaces
- ✓ Planning and investment to address the climate emergency
- ✓ Public transport
- ✓ Care homes and accommodation for vulnerable people
- ✓ Affordable housing (publicly owned)

The same five areas were the most favoured in the face-to-face engagement as well.

Uniquely amongst the topics, views on **planning and investment to address the climate emergency** were polarised. 26% ranked it as most important (ten percentage points more than any other option), and it was in the top three for 40%. On the other hand 21% ranked it as *least* important (ten percentage points more than any other option), and it was also in the bottom three for 37% of respondents.

Comments against spending on this area covered themes such as
- it's not a priority / don't care
- should be central government's responsibility
- costly / won't make any difference / not achievable

Prioritising the areas identified for additional investment:

THE PRIORITIES: REASONS

The table below summarises the broad themes in the comments about each of the areas identified for additional investment. The right-hand column identifies feedback from the face-to-face engagement that ran alongside the online consultation.

There weren't any areas where the views expressed during the face-to-face engagement were dramatically different to the responses to the online questionnaire.

Priority area	% agreeing with investment	Comments from online consultation		Themes from face to face engagement
		In support of	Not in support of	
Developing super-hubs	63%	No qualitative questions were asked on this topic. Most common response was that if super hubs were to be developed, they should be located in the market towns (69%), followed by larger villages (47%) and the city (43%) Overall support for all of the services that could be offered, particularly health and social care (79%); wellbeing help, advice and activities (73%) and children's centres (71%). Other suggestions included legal, financial and housing advice and other information resource.		Range of public services, nothing very different to the online consultation.
Developing additional affordable housing stock and retaining it in public ownership	79%	- build more houses for rent - stop developments with no social or additional affordable houses - additional affordable housing should be good quality, energy efficient and sustainable.	- developers should be made to build more affordable housing that is actually affordable - state should not encourage dependency - tenants should be made to give up larger properties when under occupied - infrastructure cannot support additional housing	Affordable housing was felt to be important, particularly starter homes or making renting more affordable, and also bringing empty properties back into use.
Investment in council owned care homes or care villages to support vulnerable children, young people and adults with accommodation and care needs	81%	- if they're built, care homes or care villages must provide value for money - should free up housing for younger people	- very expensive to build and run these so it will not provide value for money - it's central government's or individual families' responsibility to look after vulnerable children, young people and adults	- Priority for old and young people - Quality is key - Not necessarily council-owned, but council should have oversight / control - Also important to enable vulnerable people to stay in their own homes

Priority area	% agreeing with investment	Comments from online consultation		Themes from face to face engagement
		In support of	Not in support of	
Investment in support of tourism	65% (very / fairly important)	Respondents insist that investment needed to support tourism.	- private sector should be responsible and will do better - more tourism will create more traffic and will increase pollution (more carbon emissions) - sort out roads first	People suggested investing in tourist information centres as they've been closed. - Not appealing for tourists - Concerns about shops, especially in Hereford city - Not done enough to promote the county and its offerings.
Undertaking a fundamental review of the Core Strategy	71%	- current plan needs improvement - new or different priorities required	- nothing wrong with the current plan or smaller scale review better - very expensive so not value for money - take too much time and too disruptive - some believe it will be ignored anyway	Overall very low choice; people did not fully understand the implications. - If it happens it has to be comprehensive and done well - some people felt it was essential if radical changes is to happen in the county, especially climate change and transport
Additional funding in public realm	76%	If this is implemented: - ensure that these services are provided properly and value for money - make sure areas are not neglected - avoid contractors/ if use contractors ensure accountability	- this is not a priority - waste of money and not confident that it will improve anything - do not approve of using contractors or the current contractor, they are not value	Some people commented on about there being better contract management including managing overspends, better scrutiny and consequences for not meeting goals.
		81% supported closer community involvement in setting the BBLP annual plan, involving parish councils or neighbourhood development partnerships.		

Priority area	% agreeing with investment	Comments from online consultation		Themes from face to face engagement
		In support of	Not in support of	
Invest resources to lead a local response to the climate emergency	64%	expressed support and provided suggestions for how to achieve carbon reductions.	- it is not a priority / don't care - should be central government's responsibility - costly /won't make any difference / not achievable	- People want Herefordshire Council to show leadership on this agenda and reflect the climate emergency in their policies and action e.g. building energy efficient housing, having a green public transport plan. - Where they don't have direct influence they need to lobby and educate. - Suggestions for local partnerships / organisations in relation to accessing specialist knowledge/to help plan and advise on this agenda.
Further investment in technology to enable new and improved ways of delivering services	72%	Although respondents supported, they are cautious about digital exclusion and suggested to: - keep other formats for elderly who struggle with new technology - develop infrastructure before investing in technology enabled services	- not a priority and it will not provide value for money. - unemployment can go up (threat to jobs) hence negative impact on economy.	Reflects the views made online but very low support: - preferred face to face service delivery especially for elderly. - access to adequate broadband needed to be improved consistently across the county.
Public transport	No question asked about support for this, the questions asked why they don't use	Only 16% of respondents were regular users; the most common reasons for not using public transport were: - lack of availability of public transport in my local area - timetables do not match my needs		Similar themes to online - Strong views that public transport is not an option in rural areas - Question of choice: those who can use other methods choose to do so, but it's important because some people rely on it - Poor connectivity and timetabling that doesn't meet needs
Publicly owned land and buildings	No question was asked about support for this	Majority of respondents (54%) felt that the council should retain and manage assets on behalf of everyone, but no qualitative questions were asked about this topic.		There weren't any common themes: equal (small) numbers of people saying they should be retained as transferred into community hands