

Summary of Herefordshire Council's 2022/23 Budget consultation events

1. Introduction to the consultation

As part of the budget setting exercise for 2022/23 a series of 14 consultation events were held between 1st – 30th September with Parish Councils and other key stakeholders. Due to the on-going restrictions of Covid-19 the consultation events were held using Zoom. Fifty-one people participated in the events which were held concurrently with the annual budget-setting on-line survey which went live on 27 August 2021.

The aim of the sessions was to ask key questions specifically related to the 2022/23 budget but also to have more in-depth discussion about ideas that were introduced in last year's budget consultation sessions. This included exploration of the following areas:

- Alternative options for income generation
- What people's view were about what needed doing to help reach Herefordshire's target of a Net Zero and nature rich county by 2030
- How communities were fairing after the pandemic
- How Parish and Town Councils feel about their public realm and what, if any, areas of the public realm they could take more control of

A list of the questions explored in the Zoom consultation session is included as Appendix A.

The sessions were undertaken with the following groups (numbers booking and attending is in Appendix B):

Parish and Town Councils (P&TCs) in each of the Primary Care Networks (PCNs): Hereford City, East, South West and North.

Community Champion areas (CC): South and West, City, East, North and West.

Additional groups¹: Connexus Housing Tenants and Care leavers. Views were included throughout the report, however the discussion with Care Leavers particularly focused on Preventative Services.

¹ A session with Hereford Sixth Form College students was arranged but none of the participants booked onto the session attended. Similarly several attempts were made to set up a session with Hereford Disability United however within the timescales it did not come to fruition.

Consultation engagement

Levels of engagement were lower than anticipated (based on last year's figures). This can possibly be attributed to the following:

- The consultation events were advertised during August in holiday season
- The sessions were held before most Parish Council's had been able to convene post Summer break to enable a Parish Council wide perspective to be reflected.
- The non-contentious nature of this year's questions, compared to last year's large scale savings, meant that there appeared to be less appetite for engagement.

Approach to consultation sessions

Participants were asked to vote via a series of polls that covered 6 questions as well as three additional open discussion questions (an additional question for Parish and Town Councils about the public realm was included). Responses to each question is considered below. Following the polls there was an open discussion which focused on some key areas but also gave participants the opportunity to highlight their own concerns or issues.

Throughout this report we refer to comments made by, for example, 'a few' or 'many' participants. This reflects comments that were made in the facilitated discussions. As with other qualitative research it is not possible to specifically quantify the participants making these comments but points referred to in the report reflect areas where there were outlying opinions or strong consensus or divergence of opinion.

2. Poll results and discussions

Council Tax options for 2022/23 Proposed Council Tax increase

Question 1

In this section, residents were asked about their preference on the level of Council Tax increase that the council should consider for 2022/23: increase Council Tax by 2.99%, 1.99% or by 0.99%.

Which of the following options would you prefer?

Option A: increase Council Tax by 2.99%	9
Option B: increase Council Tax by 1.99%	14
Option C: increase Council Tax by 0.99%	12
No preference	3
None of the above	2
Don't know	3

There was support to increase the **Council Tax by 1.99%** (Option B) slightly more than Option C (increase the Council Tax by 0.99%). This response likely reflects an acknowledgement of the challenge of providing services but also that not everyone has financially recovered from the pandemic. Comments made in relation to this question included:

- Concerns for those families on low-income
- Council tax should continue to be subsidised for those that can't afford it
- Council tax charges should relate to income levels rather than the size of the property

Participants want to know more information about what additional revenue generated from Council Tax would be spent on; and more information about cost savings i.e., is this being looked at alongside increasing revenue.

Question 2

Families on low incomes currently receive a discount on Council Tax (the council tax reduction scheme), however, due to the pandemic low-income families currently receive an additional discount on their Council Tax.

Do you think the Council should remove this additional discount?

Yes	15
No	17
Not yet	24
No opinion	1

There was strong support that now (or a simple No in general) was not the right time to remove this additional discount. (41 saying no or not yet, as opposed to 15 yes).

The most significant concern raised was the timing of any potential withdrawal of additional discount, particularly for those in receipt of Universal Credit who have now had the additional £20 uplift payment withdrawn. Therefore, if these same families were also to lose the additional Council Tax discount then this could lead to very challenging financial difficulties.

Raising additional finance

Question 3

In last year's consultation there was support for raising money to help support vulnerable residents through a Voluntary Contribution Scheme. Building on that, this year respondents were asked how they would like to see any money raised through a Herefordshire Lottery Scheme or Voluntary Contribution Scheme spent.

Geographical priority areas	17
Thematic areas such as children, vulnerable adults, climate emergency	29
Specific charities or local groups	20
Allocated to Parish and Town Councils to decide with local residents for their area	40
Other	18

There was a lot of support for additional income generated to be 'Allocated to Parish and Town Councils to decide with local residents for their area', however this result is unsurprising given the majority of the consultees were from Parish and Town Councils. There was also support for funding to be allocated based on 'thematic areas such as children, vulnerable adults and the climate emergency', however there were not strong views about which specific thematic area should be prioritised.

Comments received in relation to this question included:

"Thematic policy areas may be fairer in terms of allocating funds. Also, would be motivational for those participating in the lottery."

"Lottery - What will the scheme cost to run and do you have enough interest to ensure it is sustainable."

"All areas are important - i.e. in terms of prioritising for additional income. Also, geographical areas are important."

"Need a clear purpose for both schemes to boost engagement"

"Could do different thematic areas in different bidding rounds"

Question 4

Local authorities have the opportunity to borrow money from central government and other sources, and currently Herefordshire Council has not borrowed as much as it is able to. Respondents were asked whether they agreed that the council should borrow more money to achieve its wider aims?

Yes	22
No	8
Don't know	9

Overall, there was support for this, especially with current interest rates being so low, and especially if the spend was targeted. However, there were concerns about future generations having to pay it back. Participants who answered 'don't know' felt they would require more specific information about the purpose of borrowing money before they could make a decision. See examples of the comments below:

"If money is borrowed to boost the economy, it may pay for itself. If not then how repayment is to be made needs careful consideration."

"If going to borrow money then needs to be evidence based i.e. what is the areas of greatest need and what are the benefits - clarify the business case WITH the Voluntary and Community Sector."

Question 5

If additional money was borrowed in which areas would you like to see it spent?

I don't support borrowing	1
Measures to address the climate emergency	21
Road maintenance	25
Adult social care e.g. care homes, day care services, mental health support	27
Children's services (not education) e.g. children in care, respite care, support for children with disabilities	23
Providing affordable housing	20
Other	4

Views were fairly evenly split with most of the suggested areas of spend receiving support, with no one theme particularly standing out.

Most of the comments received were about the condition of the roads and concern if any additional money was generated through borrowing whether this could be used on potholes

on existing roads, or more widespread resurfacing or whether it was only to be used for new roads. Many participants felt that additional information was required in order for them to give an informed view.

Environmental measures - Net Zero & Nature Rich Herefordshire

Question 6

The questions in this section were about the council's carbon management plan and the corresponding action plan.

Do you agree that Herefordshire Council is doing enough towards achieving its ambition of a net zero and nature rich county by 2030?

Yes, enough	17
No, not enough	24
Don't know	17
I don't agree with Herefordshire Council working towards this ambition	3

The overwhelming response to this question is that many participants did not feel they could answer without additional information on what Herefordshire Council is doing already.

There was slightly more consensus for the view that Herefordshire Council is not doing enough to achieve its ambition of a net zero and nature rich county by 2030.

Question 7

What are the key things you would like to see done differently in the county to help mitigate the climate emergency?

Discussion relating to this question was dominated by a lack of knowledge amongst participants of what Herefordshire Council is currently doing to address the climate emergency. Participants expressed that they wanted more information on what Herefordshire Council are doing, specifically:

- What are the biggest causes of carbon emissions?
- Guidance on recycling and planning to pass on to residents.
- More information on the cost saving benefits and wider economic benefits of some of the environmental schemes / projects / proposals e.g. investment of low energy street lighting cost 'v' cost saving over x years. People want to know what the biggest issues are and what actions will have the biggest impacts.

Additional comments raised:

- Stronger links between the waste strategy, planning policy and the climate emergency.
- A need for sustainable travel was mentioned (although this could have been stimulated by Herefordshire Councils launch of the free bus travel on weekends initiative)
- Free buses at the weekend were thought to be a good idea, although many participants highlighted they were eligible for free bus passes already.
- Younger care leavers identified that many buses were being cancelled with little alternative provision put in place.
- Further investigation into school transport is needed. However, road safety and cost were highlighted as barriers.
- How could residents be encouraged to not use their cars for short trips?
- Planning standards and policy were felt to be areas where some of these issues could be addressed, in terms of housing particularly, which will have a direct impact on the climate emergency in terms of sewage, river quality and phosphates, insulation and energy use. Additional themes related to planning mentioned were parking for bikes, and areas for recycling bins.
- Parish and Town Councils wanted guidance on planning standards and policy to be able to assess planning applications and advise their residents on best practice.
- There was a general consensus that climate change targets can only be met by Herefordshire Council working in partnership with others.
- Participants felt it was important to recognise the economic benefit of some of the environmental schemes, such as the better sustainable transport which might have a positive impact on tourism, easier access to walking routes, busier town centres.
- The waste strategy was also seen as contributing to addressing the climate emergency, particularly if it focused on reduction of use, an element of reduction of food waste (potentially linked to reduction in food poverty and intergenerational projects around learning about how to reduce food waste), better recycling information “what is recycled from the green bin”.
- Guidance on key actions that individuals can take would also be useful add full stop as full stops in bullet points above

Preventative Services

Question 8

In last year’s budget consultation preventative services were identified as an area in need of more prioritisation. What preventative measures would you like to see?

Health and well-being was a key point mentioned, there were examples of good practice such as the Falls Prevention work but on the whole, there were concerns around the gaps

particularly in mental health services for all age groups. Support for older people to remain in their own homes through timed appointments, Occupational Health assessments, offering assistance before acute services at the hospital are required. Also practical advice and support available to those who need it, such as 'support for older people to sell their own homes and move into a more suitable property'.

Adult Social Care was felt to be an area where prevention services could be focused particularly in terms of *"Helping elderly stay healthy stay in their own homes"*. However this was also raised in terms of the cost of Adult Social Care (see next point) and how care homes are supported, particularly around support for staff; pay rates, career development and retention.

There was a general concern around value for money and specifically around Adult Social Care, making sure what is spent will have an impact; who this conversation needs to be had with i.e. a national conversation; and the investment that might be needed.

Comments made in relation to this question included:

"Would like to see more transparency on how money has been spent and reassurances regarding value for money"

"Useful to know per capita spend, also some benchmarking and how/what other options are being explored."

"Concern about national focus on raising taxes to pay for social care. This needs to be a local debate, or with the Local Government Association (LGA)."

"Social Care is taking a lot of the budget, may need more for the rest of what is provided by general council tax."

"Voluntary and Community Sector organisations are often active in preventative services BUT the length of time for funding prevents organisations from addressing issues properly, a longer term view is needed."

"But this needs investment - longer term"

There were views from participants raising concern about the impact being in a rural area has; particularly around the lack on investment in rural areas; the lack of ability to access Section 106 monies from planning and building developments; and the lack of services and facilities, such as playgrounds for older children.

There was also support from participants for children and families to be an identified area of need, as well as those on lower incomes and at risk of homelessness. See examples of the comments below:

“Agree with spend on children's services - assisting families, keeping families together. “

“Support for families - early help has been cut back significantly over the years. This did help, more investment needed. Schools can't support this within their funds.”

“Preventive = enabling people to access services that help get them out of rural poverty and poor housing ... not investing at the symptoms of children safeguarding/looked after. We are looking in the wrong direction.”

In terms of prevention work, whilst there was a will from Parish and Town Councils to help with this area of work there was an acknowledgement that specific skills were missing. There was potential to work better with Talk Communities within this theme to help with the professional support and information to signpost.

Talk Communities were also felt to be a good opportunity for some joined up working and support for local areas. See examples of the comments below:

“I agree there needs to be a level of coordination in developing preventative services. Stepping back and hoping the third sector will fill the gap can't work without resourcing and a level of coordination. I hope that Talk Community can help facilitate and support this process in the future.”

“Support to get involved but safeguarding issue: need a central management system, potentially Talk Communities.”

Care leavers had a number of points to raise about preventative services:

- Providing respite care to families early on may prevent children needing to be moved into care.
- A support service along the lines of Reese Foundation, which provided funds for various items, beds, white goods, or paid rent arrears.
- Money for transport for going for interviews.
- Better emergency accommodation that doesn't place vulnerable young people in overnight accommodation with active drug/alcohol mis-users.
- Practical support – as well as providing cooking, laundry, and a general safe place, the young people felt that they needed to learn how to do some of these practical tasks.
- Option to get a free hot meal when times are difficult.
- More counsellors available for children of all ages.
- Need all options available to access services, face to face personal support and over the telephone talking to strangers.
- Services are particularly needed for single parents.
- Children's views need to be taken into account.
- Still a trust issue with Social Care, worried won't get support; accused of not coping.

Question 9

Pandemic Recovery

When asked 'What would be the most effective way to help your community recovery from the pandemic?' some positives highlighted were:

- That fact that not many smaller businesses have closed suggesting they are resilient,
- Community and voluntary organisations have adapted to continue providing much needed services, such as befriending services by phone,
- Agricultural businesses have been less affected,
- Tourism has had a bit of a boost with the influx of staycations,
- Community events have been adapted and run to promote local traders,
- Government grants have supported village halls.

However, there were some real concerns about the impact the pandemic has had on people's mental health and loneliness, particularly for older people, as well as children and young people. It was also recognised that there is still a fear to 'get back out there', particularly from older people. It was felt there was an opportunity to help support the smaller groups and community events with reopening and helping engage with these people less willing to go out.

It was felt that central support for Talk Communities or organisations that run this type of community intervention (such as Venture) from Herefordshire Council would help to support the wider recovery of the community.

Despite an appreciation for the efficiency of online shopping there was a recognition of the impact this was having on Town Centres. It was felt Town Centres needed to 'up their game' and provide more of an 'experience' rather than just an opportunity to buy shopping.

It was also recognised that there were some families who were really struggling financially and emotionally as a result of the pandemic and that face to face support or case workers could provide 'hand-holding' support were critical at times like this.

There were also concerns that as life starts to return to 'more normal', that the host of volunteers and helpers available during the pandemic are no longer available returning to work etc. Therefore support was wanted to try to stop this decline in numbers of volunteers post covid, there were discussions about how to help community and voluntary organisations with their volunteer base and what Herefordshire Council and HVOSS could do to support this in terms of marketing, advertising, recruitment, and promotion of volunteering.

Question 10

Public Realm (For Parish and Town Councils only)

The public realm is commonly defined as any space that is free and open to everyone.

Parish and Town Councils focused on the following areas when talking about having greater control / influence over the public realm in their local area:

- The relationship with Balfour Beatty Living Places (BBLP)
- Drainage and flooding
- The lengthsman scheme (drainage and verge maintenance)
- Footpaths

On the whole, the comments about the relationship between parishes and BBLP were that there was still significant room for improvement. Although there was some recognition that improvements had been made, many parishes reported still not being listened to, issues with maintenance and routine improvements not happening, and difficulties using the reporting app.

Routine clearing of roads, pathways and drains were concerns raised often in relation to having to make use of volunteers to maintain this work, and the knock-on effect of this not being done was flooding. Drainage grants were mentioned as an option.

Similar stories were given about the footpaths, with these also not being routinely maintained and were not in a good state of repair. The use of volunteers for maintenance and inspection was again mentioned.

There was strong support for any reintroduction of the Lengthsman scheme, particularly if this came with funding and training for any personnel. It was felt to be a good opportunity if the Parish Paths Partnership could also be included as part of this scheme.

Appendix A - Questions asked during the Zoom Consultations.

1. In last year's budget consultation preventative services were identified as an area in need of more prioritisation. What preventative measures would you like to see in any of the following service areas? Or another service area? (Open discussion)
 - a. Children's services
 - b. Adult social care
 - c. Support for vulnerable people
2. Do you agree that Herefordshire Council is doing enough towards achieving its ambition of a net zero and nature rich county? (Poll)
3. What are the key things you would like to see done differently in the county to help mitigate the climate emergency? (Open discussion)
4. Families on low incomes receive a discount on Council Tax (the council tax reduction scheme), however due to the pandemic low-income families currently receive an additional discount on their Council Tax. Do you think the Council should remove this additional discount? (Poll)
5. What would be the most effective way to help your community recovery from the pandemic? (Open discussion)
6. Which of the following options would you prefer?

Option A: To increase Council Tax in 2022/23 by 2.99% general Council Tax This would be an increase of £49.40 per year (or £4.12 per month) for a band D household. This would raise an additional £3.4 million.

Option B: To increase Council Tax in 2022/23 by 1.99% general Council Tax This would be an increase of £32.88 per year (or £2.74 per month) for a band D household. This would raise an additional £2.2 million.

Option C: To increase Council Tax in 2022/23 by 0.99% general Council Tax This would be an increase of £16.36 per year (or £1.36 per month) for a band D household. This would raise an additional £1.1 million.
7. If a Herefordshire Lottery Scheme or Herefordshire Voluntary Contribution Scheme was to go ahead, how would you like to see the money spent? (Poll followed by discussion)
8. Local authorities have the opportunity to borrow money from central government and other sources, and currently Herefordshire Council has not borrowed as much as it is able to. Do you agree that Herefordshire Council should in principle borrow more money to achieve the wider aims of the Council? (Poll)
9. If additional money was borrowed in which area/s would you like to see it spent? (Poll)
10. Where would you like greater control / influence over the public realm in your local area? (Open discussion question only Parish and Town Councils).

Appendix B - Engagement - A breakdown of the numbers participating in each session is provided below.

Session no.	Time/Date	Area	Number booked on	Number attended on the day
1	Wed 1 st September, 7-8.30pm	Hereford City PCN area Parish and Town Councils	2	Cancelled due to low numbers
2	Thursday 2 nd September, 7-8.30pm	East PCN area Parish and Town Councils	13	8
3	Monday 6 th September, 7-8.30pm	South West PCN area Parish and Town Councils	14	8
4	Tuesday 7 th September, 7-8.30pm	North PCN area Parish and Town Councils	11	10
5	Wednesday 8 th September, 7-8.30pm	Hereford City community groups	2	Cancelled due to low numbers
6	Thursday 9 th September, 7-8.30pm	East community Groups	3	4
7	Tuesday 14 th September, 12.30pm-2pm	Hereford City community groups	6	3
8	Tuesday 14 th September, 7 – 8.30pm	South West community groups	6	3
9	Wednesday 15 th September, 7 – 8.30pm	North West community groups	1	Cancelled due to low numbers
10	Thursday 16 th September, 5.30 - 6.30	Hereford 6 th form students		No attendance
11	30 th September 1:30-2:30 Face to Face at Plough Lane	Care leavers	7	7
12	Thursday 16 th September, 7-8.30pm	Connexus Housing		2
13	Wednesday 22nd	Hereford City PCN area Parish and Town Councils		4
14	Wednesday 29th Sept	Leominster PCN area Parish and Town Councils		1