

County Council

Wednesday 22 February 2023

10.00 am Canalside Conference Centre,
Marsh Lane, Nr. Bridgwater, TA6 6LQ

SUPPLEMENT TO THE AGENDA

To: The Members of the County Council

We are now able to enclose the following information which was unavailable when the agenda was published:

Item 5	<p>Report of the Leader and Executive - for decision (Pages 3 - 12) To consider a report with recommendations from the Leader of the Council, arising from the Executive meeting held on 13 February 2023.</p> <p>The recommendations relate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Paper A – Budget, Medium Term Financial Plan and Council Tax Setting- Paper B – Adoption of the Council Plan for Somerset Council- Paper C – Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2023-24- Paper D – Housing Benefit War Pensions Disregard Policy- Paper E – Housing Revenue Account (HRA) updated 30 year Business Plan and Rent Set 2023/24- Paper F – Somerset Council Asset Management Plan and Strategy
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Democratic Services, A Block, County Hall, Taunton, TA1 4DY

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MTFP

Supplemental Appendix: MTFP Public Consultation Analysis

Summary

The 2023 budget consultation engaged with the business community and members of the public. It gathered 136 responses via the consultation platform and received a further 11 responses by email. The consultation was open for responses between the 10th January to 10th February 2023. It has provided some insight about feelings towards the rise in council tax, and an opportunity for responses on particular areas of the proposed budget where people have a strong opinion.

Summary of findings

Across all the respondents there was a majority of one in favour a lower council tax. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis was the central reasoning behind this view. While a minority felt the level of proposed council tax was appropriate a small group felt it should be raised to protect services. Overall this gave a response of: Lower Council Tax: 67, Proposal is correct or too low 66.

Residents and businesses were also given a brief outline of the services included in each new Department, their budget pressures and how decisions had been arrived at. Ideally these outlines would have been more detailed. A majority felt that, with the information they had, the level of investment and savings was appropriate in all but one Department.

Climate Change and Place was the only Department where a substantial number felt that the balance was incorrect. This was largely driven by criticism of the proposal to reduce council support for parish-based grit bins. In the light of this opposition the Executive has withdrawn this proposal.

Introduction

The consultation asked for views on the overall budget setting for the new Somerset Council. It provided an outline of the Council's thinking in developing the proposed budget and it asked for views on the proposed budget overall and by service.

It stated that there could be some items in the proposed budget that could change the services some residents receive. These will each require a separate consultation and the consultation gave respondents the option to register to take part in those consultations in the future.

The challenge of assembling a single budget for the new Somerset Council on the first day of the new financial year, 1 April 2023, from the five budgets of the existing county and district council in Somerset is explained within the consultation and background information about the unprecedented financial pressures the council

faces as a result of global events such as invasion of Ukraine, the continuing impact of Covid -19 and the period of high inflation.

This report follows a 4-week consultation period which was supported by a communications campaign and business engagement events.

The communications included:

- Featured listing on the Somerset County Council' consultation website
- Multi-channel social media communications
- Press release
- Information shared via business networks

The engagement included

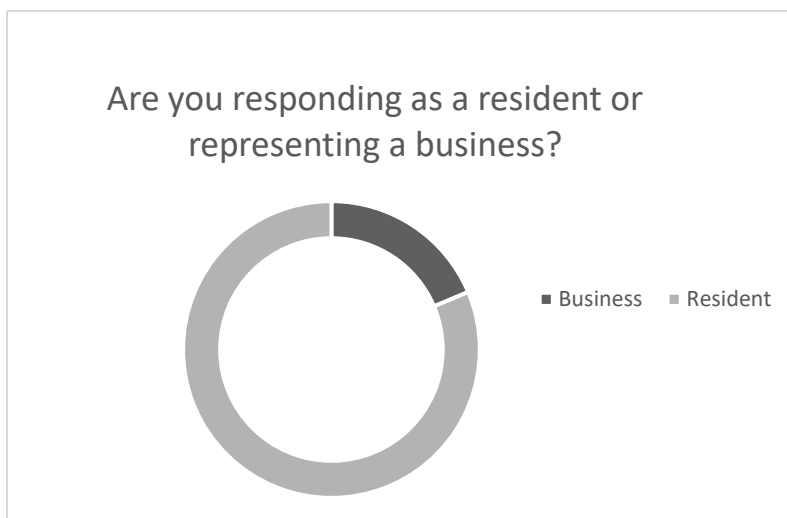
- A meeting with Somerset businesses in Bridgwater
- A meeting with Somerset businesses in Yeovil

A summary of responses to the consultation

The Council received 136 responses, not including the 11 email responses which were specially objecting to one line of the proposed budget (Parish based grit bins).

Question 1

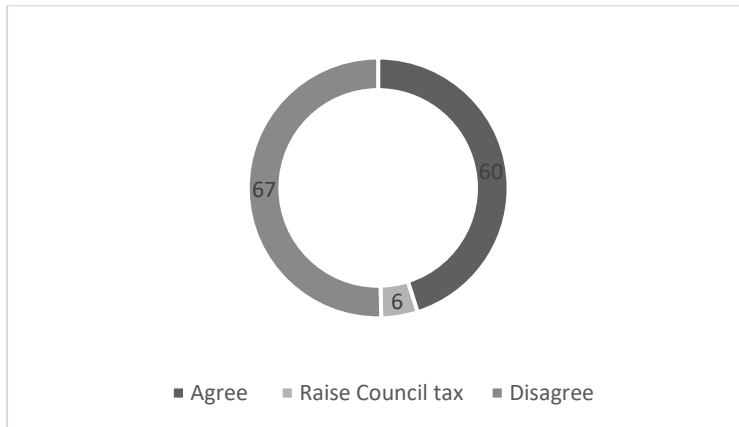
Of the 136 responses, 122 were from residents and 14 were from people representing businesses.



Question 2

In response to Q2 45.1% of respondents agreed with the proposed level of council tax and 54.9% disagreed.

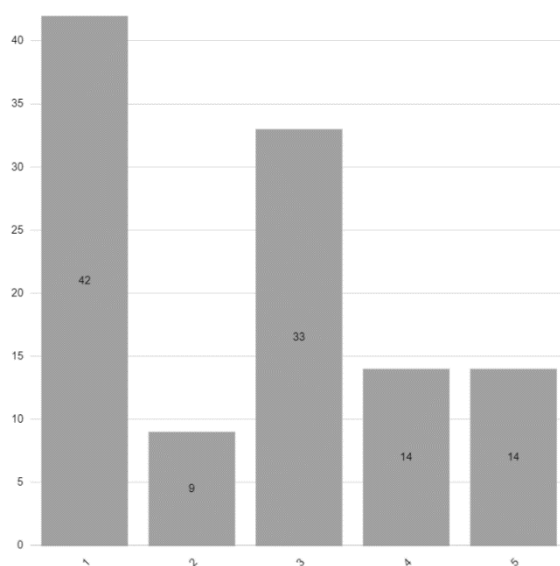
Of the 73 people/ businesses who disagreed with the proposed level of council tax six respondents said it should be increased further, the other 67 stated that it should either not be increased by 4.99% as proposed or should be further reduced.



Question 3

Rate your view on the balance of the council tax rise and council service savings.

1 meaning more savings to be found from existing services, 3 being neutral and 5 increasing income including council tax.



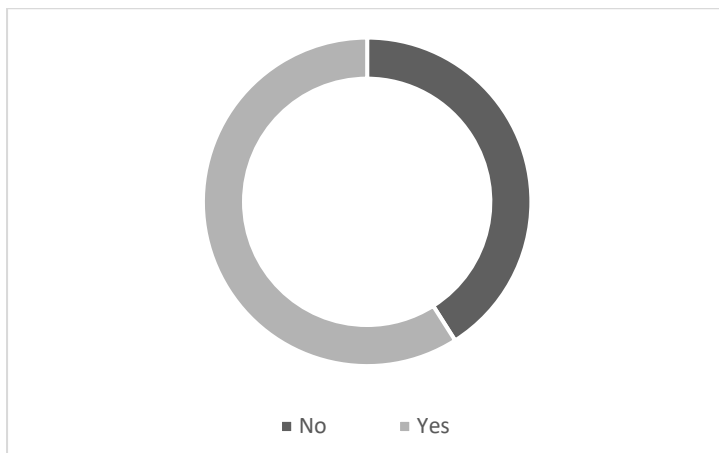
37.5% of respondents think more savings should be found from existing services.

29.5% of respondents are neutral.

12.5% of respondents think the council should increase income, including from council tax.

Question 4 – Adults Social Care

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

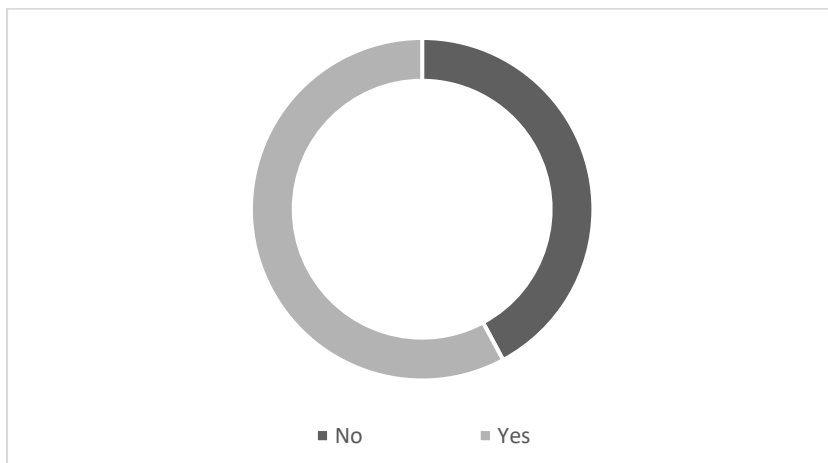


59% of respondents agreed

41% of respondents disagreed

Question 5 – Children's services

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

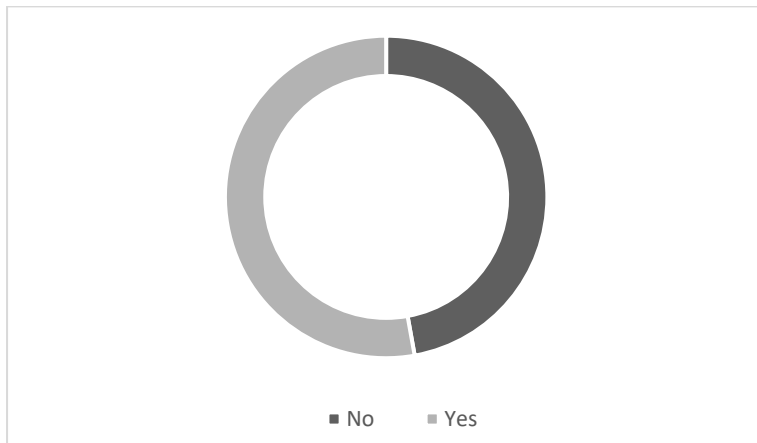


58% of respondents agreed

42% of respondents disagreed

Question 6 – Community services

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

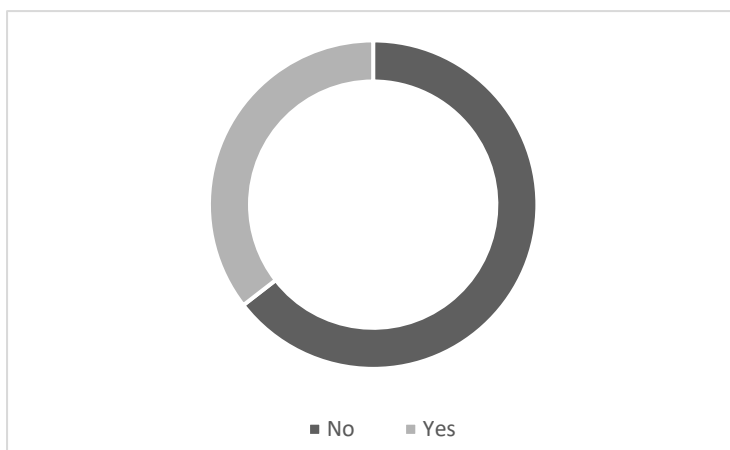


53% of respondents agreed

47% of respondents disagreed

Question 7 – Climate and Place

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

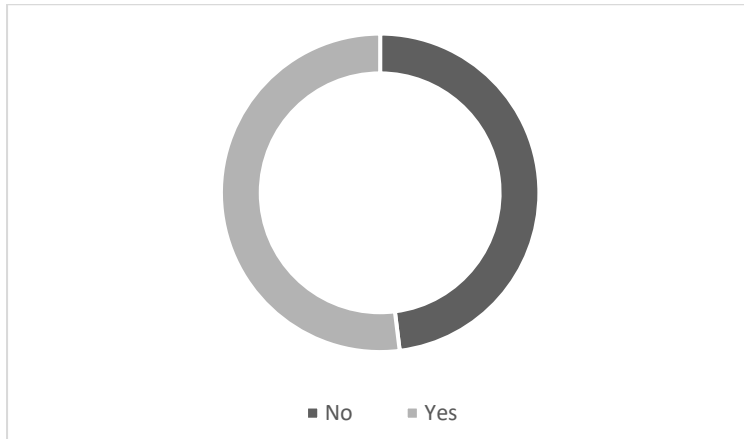


35% of respondents agreed

65% of respondents disagreed

Question 8 – Strategy, Workforce and Localities

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

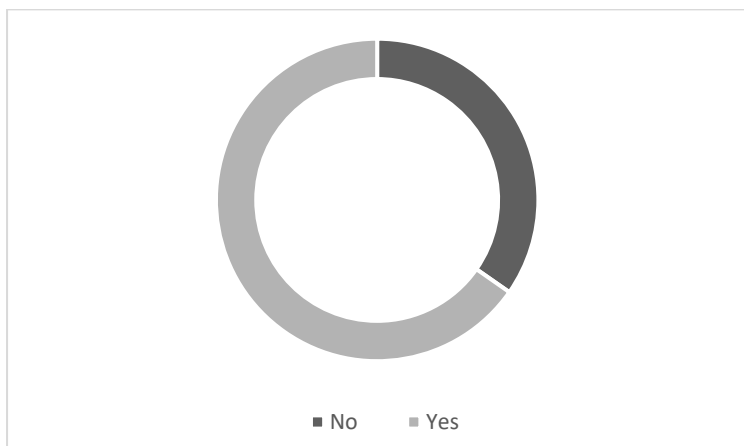


52% of respondents agreed

48% of respondents disagreed

Question 9 – Public Health

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

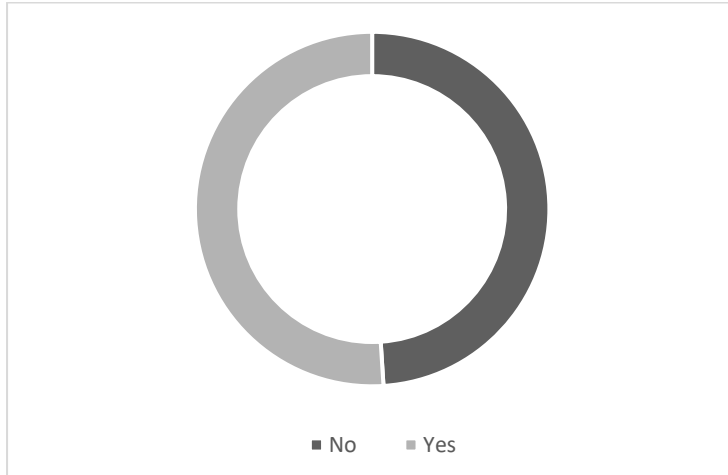


65% of respondents agreed

35% of respondents disagreed

Question 10 – Resources and Corporate Services

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?

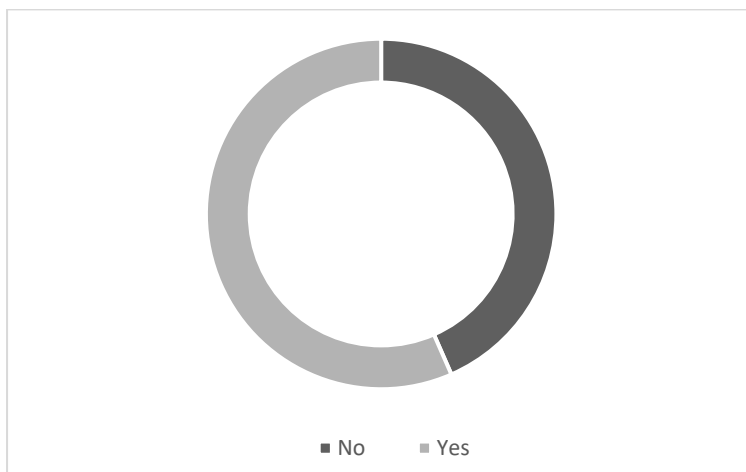


51% of respondents agreed

49% of respondents disagreed

Question 11 – Local Government Reform

Are you content with the decision-making process behind the department budget (this does not represent approval or otherwise for any separate service-based consultation)?



57% of respondents agreed

43% of respondents disagreed

Sample qualitative responses

Below is a sample of comments received about the proposed level of council tax.

As a single person, I can't afford any additional outgoings. I don't agree with my Council tax being increased when I already pay more than my fair share - the 25% single person "discount" should surely be 50%?

We are in a cost of living crisis and households across Somerset are struggling, t Council first and foremost have a responsibility to its residents and is has to start with affordability.

The Unitary Council has a £40m debt largely caused by poor management of the District Councils and this is no doubt part of the impact of this increase. The Unitary Council should be looking at where costs can be retrieved to prevent such a steep rise in Council Tax- this should begin with selling of assets purchased by the district councils that reside outside of the County's Boundary's. South Somerset alone had over £50m of property assets, most of which are external to Somerset. Focus needs to start at home and that means only investing in Somerset.

Also the Council should look at the many unpopular and unproductive projects that are being proposed around Somerset and streamline some of these, the Octagon which is due to get an almost complete rebuild should be scraped at this time.

It should go up more, it's not even in line with inflation.

At a time when many households are struggling I believe the council has a duty to shield its citizens as much as possible. I think 3% would be an adequate increase at this time.

I don't agree to tax increases above my income increase.

In response to question 7 – Climate and Place: , The consultation received 32 comments and 11 emails about the removal of grit bins. Below is a sample of those comments.

We do not believe the Council has taken sufficient note of the impact on road safety and impact of local businesses in rural areas such as Exmoor in the proposal to remove funding for grit bins. Exmoor is particularly prone to significant snow and ice forming on roads due to its altitude (circa 1000ft above sea level). Removing the grit bins is a retrograde step in helping us to keep our community working and creates major safety issues for residents. Our road network is vital for the community, particularly as much of it is far from primary routes. If our roads are not salted this would significantly impact local businesses and puts lives at serious risk.

How can you justify taking away the salt bins and bags. There is a big rural community that is not on the primary gritting routes. It requires volunteers to spread the grit but this is the only way children can get to school and people can get to work. The rural communities do not benefit from bus services and street lighting, what we receive for our council tax is very limited, please do not take away one of the only benefits the Council provides.

To not fill grit/salt bins in our rural area would make driving my children to school or the school bus journeys lethal and there would definitely be an accident in no time at all. Children have already over covid lost so much time at school and it would be awful to have to keep them off school every time the roads are icy! It would be absolutely ridiculous and I'm sure

money can be cut from other areas instead. Please keep our roads safe, it is HIGHLY important ?

We live in the middle of Exmoor... under point 94 grit bins... I own [REDACTED] [REDACTED] due to the lack of gritting this year, the roads into the village were not drivable/passable and I had to close for 5 days in January and also 4 days in December. [REDACTED] is at the bottom of 2 hills... therefore grit bins and gritters are a necessity. Also my 3 children were unable to get to school due to no access and school buses couldn't get in. Exmoor is remote and relies on transportation. We have to have grit bins and gritters to keep the community safe and moving. Do I come to you with a bill for when I close my business due to unsafe roads?? A cost of approx £1000 per day??

We do not have gritted routes all around us so it is imperative that the grit bins and salt bags are refilled so we can take control of our own community. The council cannot cut both, if reducing gritting routes, have to top up salt for members of the community and local parish councils to manage.

All comments will be sent to the appropriate Lead member and Director.

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