



Budget Consultation 2021/22 (Phase 2)

*Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough
Council*

February 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This section provides a summary of the main findings from the Phase 2 Budget Consultation 2021/22.
- The consultation was conducted in-house. The consultation period ran from the 29th January and ended on the 12th February 2021.
- The 'digital by default' approach included the following methods to consult with a range of stakeholders:
 - An online questionnaire;
 - The option to attend a Public Zoom meeting;
 - Promotion through social media;
 - A Facebook Takeover event;
 - An online Older Persons Advisory Group Meeting (OPAG);
 - Correspondence with the Disability Forum;
 - Presentation and Survey sent to 3 Colleges, 2 Schools and members of the Youth Forum;
 - Series of polls via the Youth Engagement and Participation Service Instagram page;
 - Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee virtual meeting;
 - Community Liaison Committee virtual meeting;
 - School Budget Forum virtual meeting;
 - Promotion with the Citizen's Panel; and
 - An email sent to key stakeholders, including Community and Town Councils, Trade Unions, Councillors, Local Members of the Senedd and Members of Parliament.
- The Council provided a number of alternatives to online engagement, as it is important to continue to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.
- The majority of respondents felt that the proposed 2.65% increase in Council Tax was reasonable (76%).
- 81% of respondents agreed with the proposals for the delivery of efficiency savings for next year.
- 87% of respondents agreed with the proposals for fees and charges.
- 87% of respondents agreed with the proposed additional investment of £50K in the Local Business Rate Reduction Scheme.
- 83% of respondents agreed with the proposed £160K investment in car parking.

- 79% of respondents agreed with proposed £100K investment to support the ongoing work on climate change and carbon reduction.
- 70% of respondents agreed with the proposed £200K investment in the graduate programme.
- 81% of respondents agreed with the proposed £50K investment in well-being support for Council staff.
- 86% of respondents agreed with the proposed £200K investment to provide additional resources to Public Health and Protection Services.
- 91% of respondents agreed with the proposed £50K investment to support flood prevention.
- 82% of respondents agreed with the proposed £75K investment in an Overgrowth Team.
- 90% of respondents agreed with the use of £0.709M in transitional funding to address the remaining budget gap.
- 338 people were engaged in the phase 2 budget consultation.
- Overall (including Phase 1) almost 1,500 people were engaged in the Council's budget setting process.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of the Phase 2 Budget Consultation 2021/22.
- 1.2 Section 2 outlines some brief background to the consultation process.
- 1.3 Section 3 details the methodology.
- 1.4 Section 4 provides the results of the questionnaire and the feedback received from the Older Persons Advisory Group and Disability Forum.
- 1.5 Section 5 provides feedback on the young persons' engagement.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Council undertakes a comprehensive approach to its annual budget consultation, involving a large number of residents and key stakeholders.
- 2.2 The widespread approach we use and the range of views we capture provides senior managers and Cabinet Members with the necessary information they need to set the budget for the year ahead.
- 2.3 Rhondda Cynon Taf's 2021/22 Budget Consultation is a phased approach, so that we can ensure residents and stakeholders have as much opportunity as possible to provide views on the budget and to make sure that views are informed by the most up to date and relevant information.
- 2.4 Phase 1 provided residents and stakeholders with the opportunity to feedback their views on some of the key strategic building blocks used to construct the Council's budget.
- 2.5 The Phase 1 Consultation report was available to support the preparation of the budget strategy proposals and was presented to Cabinet on the 28th January 2021, where a draft budget strategy was agreed.
- 2.6 This report presents the findings of **phase 2** of the budget consultation, which asked for views on the draft budget strategy for 2021/22.
- 2.7 Phase 2 started on the 29th January and ended on the 12th February 2021.

3. METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 This section provides a summary of the main findings from the Phase 2 Budget Consultation 2021/22. The consultation was conducted in-house.
- 3.2 The consultation period ran from the 29th January and ended on the 12th February 2021.
- 3.3 The 'digital by default' approach included the following methods to consult with a range of stakeholders:
- An online questionnaire;
 - The option to attend a Public Zoom meeting;
 - Promotion through social media;
 - A Facebook Takeover event;
 - An online Older Persons Advisory Group Meeting (OPAG);
 - Correspondence with the Disability Forum;
 - Presentation and Survey sent to 3 Colleges, 2 Schools and members of the Youth Forum;
 - Young Person engagement via the Youth Engagement and Participation Service Instagram polls;
 - Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee virtual meeting;
 - Community Liaison Committee virtual meeting;
 - School Budget Forum virtual meeting;
 - Promotion with the Citizen's Panel; and
 - An email sent to key stakeholders, including Community and Town Councils, Trade Unions, Councillors, Local Members of the Senedd and Members of Parliament.

Note: Views from the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and School Budget Forum have been recorded separately in the respective minutes of those virtual meetings.

- 3.4 The Council provided a number of alternatives to online engagement, as it is important to continue to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods. This included:
- A telephone consultation option working with the Council's Contact Centre. The Contact Centre number was made available for people to discuss their views or as a minimum to request consultation materials.
 - Individual call backs were offered if required.
 - Paper surveys and information available on request.
 - Consultation freepost address for postal responses.
- 3.5 The Team designed an Easy Read/Plan English Document in paper format and online, to simplify some of the consultation materials.

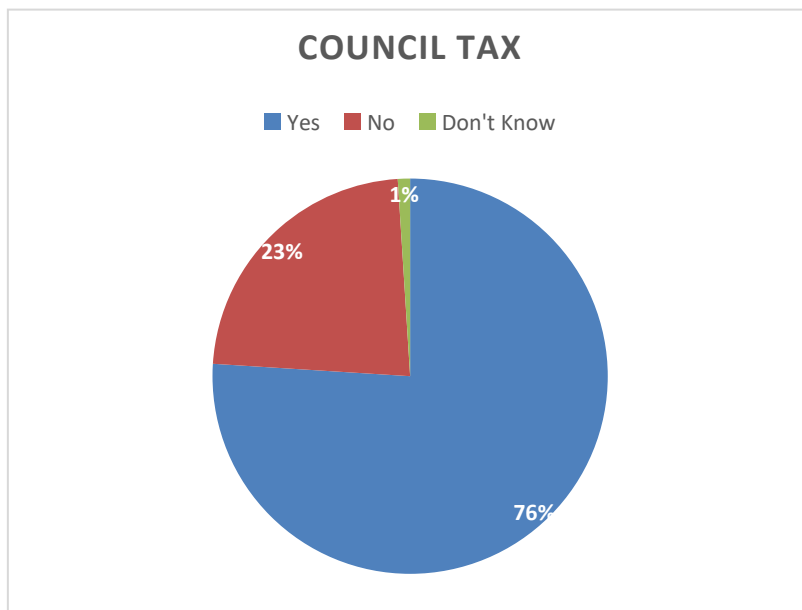
- 3.6 338 people were engaged in the phase 2 budget consultation. Overall (including Phase 1) almost 1,500 people were engaged in the Council's budget setting process.

4. Consultation Findings

- 4.1 The following section outlines the results from the phase 2 budget consultation questionnaire (236 responses) and the feedback received from the Older Persons Advisory Group and Disability Forum members. A selection of comments are provided and the full list of comments will be provided to Cabinet and senior officers to assist with decision making.

Council Tax

- 4.2 The Council is proposing that Council Tax be increased by 2.65% for next year. **The majority of respondents felt that the increase was reasonable (76%).**



Note: Where figures do not add up to 100% this is due to rounding.

- 4.3 The comments on Council Tax, included those who thought the increase of 2.65% was reasonable:

"A very reasonable increase."

"Considering the bad year, it's very reasonable".

"Satisfied with the increase to maintain services".

“While any rise will have some people objecting, I’m happy to support this as it’s modest and lower than first planned.”

- 4.4 There were some suggestions that the increase should be higher than 2.65%;

“Would not object to the initial 2.85%”

“I would prefer it slightly higher.”

“I would be happy for a higher increase”.

- 4.5 And there were those who were against any increase or would prefer a lower increase, mainly due to the financial impact of the current pandemic.

“due to current crisis, I don’t believe the council should increase the council tax”.

- 4.6 OPAG members overall agreed with the proposed Council Tax level of 2.65%.

“I agree, we know it has to go up, due to the responsibilities the Council has.”

“Very reasonable. If the Council can do this without cutting vital services, then that is brilliant.”

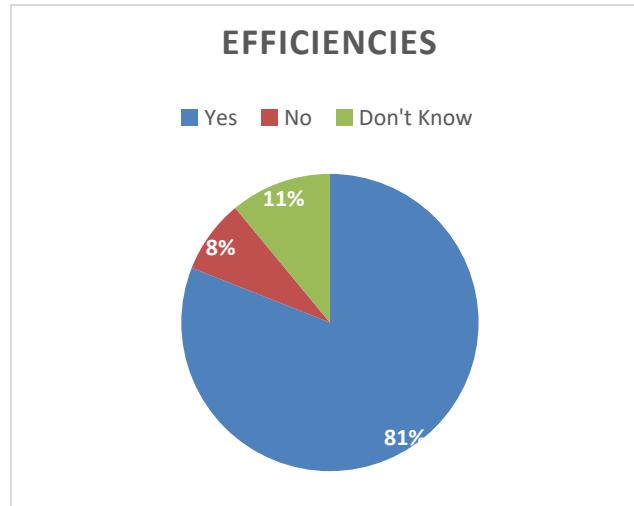
- 4.7 Disability Forum member responses on council tax levels included:

“There’s no need to increase anything for anything COVID-19 related. The Government can do this and has enough money to fund this by reducing pensions.....”

“I agree with a Council tax increase of 2.65% for this.”

Efficiencies

- 4.8 The Council's budget strategy has identified efficiency savings amounting to £4.6M for 2021/22 that will not impact on frontline services.



81% of respondents agreed with the proposals for the delivery of efficiency savings for next year..

Comments included:

"...it's really good to see the Council continue to look to the way it operates to make savings instead of making residents pay."

"The council will need to keep making efficiency savings".

"It must be difficult to make these efficiency's year on year".

- 4.9 A number of the respondents were happy with the level of efficiencies identified, but stressed that this must not be outright cuts to services:

"If these efficiencies are truly efficiencies and not just cuts, then, yes..."

"If these are indeed measures which don't affect services then they are welcome."

Budget Strategy Proposals

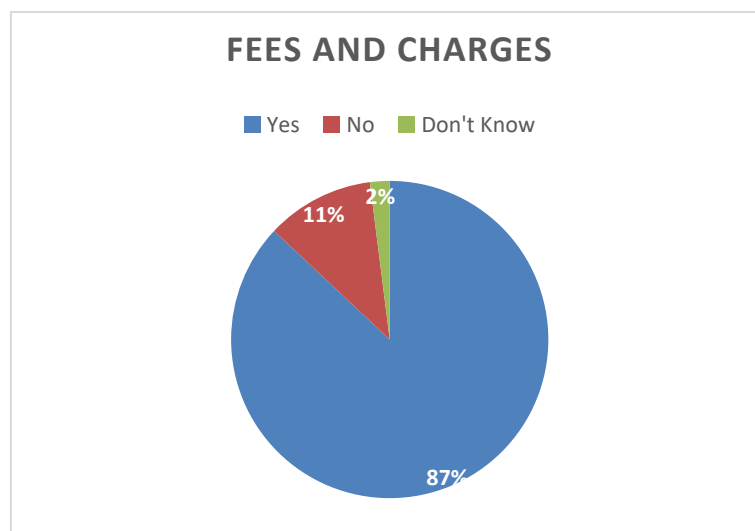
Fees and Charges

- 4.10 A standard increase of 1.7% (in line with the Consumer Prices Index) is proposed on all fees and charges with a number of specific exceptions.

Area of Charge	Proposed Exception
Leisure for Life	Freeze
Car Park Charges	Freeze
Summer and Winter Playing Fees (sports clubs)	Freeze
Meals on Wheels / Day Centre Meals	10p per meal and then frozen until 2023
School Meals	Freeze (as per decision taken in 2020/21 to hold prices until April 2023)
Bereavement Fees	Freeze
Lido / Rhondda Heritage Park	Freeze

The impact of these draft proposals would cost **£185k** more than if the Council increased all fees and charges by 1.7%.

87% of respondents agreed with the proposals for fees and charges.



- 4.11 Overall the approach to fees and charges was welcomed:

“Excellent thank you”.

“People expect some increase”.

“Freezing these fees is good”.

“Very pleased to see so many price freezes”.

- 4.12 There were some concerns about the 10p per meal proposed for meals on wheels and day centre meals:

“Meals on wheels and day centre meals should not be increased. The individuals relying on these meals are already struggling. I would much rather the elderly get fed and not be put in hardship and pay an extra 10p to park.”

- 4.13 Some of the comments suggested that the fees for the Lido and Heritage Park should be increased:

“I think the Lido could be increased.”

“Charges for the Lido & Heritage Park should be increased. These are optional non-statutory services, and those using them should be paying for their upkeep by paying higher fees at the very least in line with inflation.”

“Lido fees can definitely go up; residents will happily pay more as the charges are so low and they want to see it open for years to come”.

“Agree with all of them apart from Lido and Heritage park. I can’t see no reason for not putting the prices up unless they had gone up a bit before they were closed due to the pandemic.” (Disability Forum)

- 4.14 The OPAG were generally supportive of the approach.

“Looks ok to me.”

“I can’t see any problem with them.”

Members questioned the meal charges:

“Strange figure for meals on wheels, could it be rounded bit odd.”

“Doesn’t make sense to stick a 5p on the end, as most older people would use cash for meals on wheels”.

The Lido increase of 50 pence was discussed:

“The Lido was shut last year due to COVID, this although not the Council’s fault, seems unfair.”

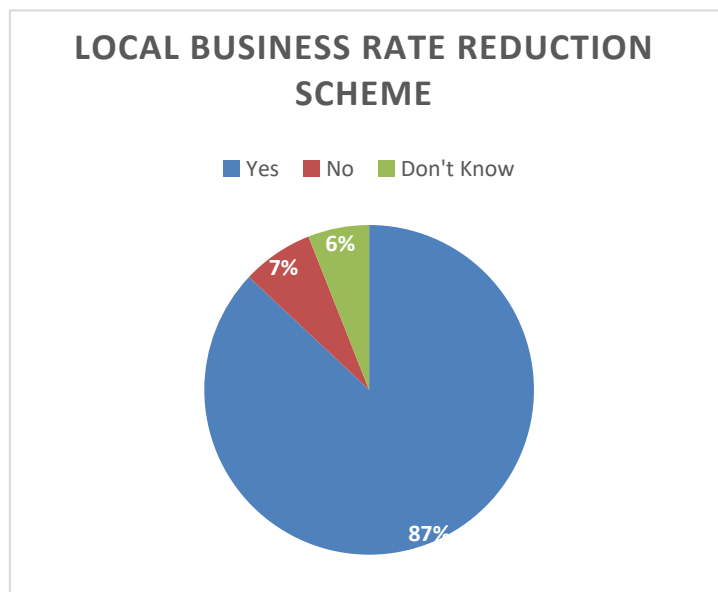
OPAG members were happy that the Council was planning to freeze services that encourage people to get outside.

Local Business Rate Reduction Scheme

- 4.15 Cabinet last year (13th February 2020) determined to implement a local Business Rate Reduction Scheme for 2020/21. The scheme supplemented the Welsh Government High Street and Retail Rate Relief Scheme by providing a further relief of £300 per qualifying business.

An additional investment of £50K is proposed so this local relief can be continued for 2021/22 and increased to £350 per qualifying business.

87% of respondents agreed with the proposed additional investment.



Note: Where figures do not add up to 100% this is due to rounding.

The comments were overwhelmingly positive and included:

“Businesses needs all the help available”.

“Businesses have really suffered this year, directly or indirectly, and any additional support and help will make the effort of the owners and staff members just feel that little more valued.”

“I would welcome any strategy available to help Local Businesses as in my area they have suffered greatly and cannot compete with the larger retail businesses that have been springing up everywhere....”

“This is good news for businesses”.

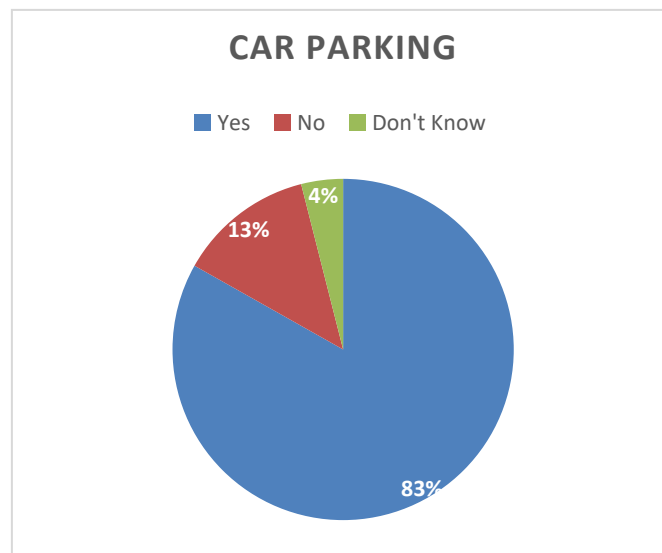
“Definitely, small business needs all the support they can get.” (OPAG)

Car Parking

- 4.16 The Council's town centres have been significantly impacted by the restrictions placed on retail, leisure and hospitality businesses plus the need to put in place measures to adhere with social distancing and enhanced cleaning and hygiene regimes. In order to encourage visitors to the town centres and to aid the recovery of our valued businesses, it is proposed that we tailor car parking charges, noting that in all town centres other than Pontypridd and Aberdare, parking is already free.

The proposal is that car parking is free after 3pm on Monday to Fridays and free all day (after 10am) on Saturdays. The cost of this proposal in terms of income foregone is **£160k**.

83% of respondents agreed with the proposed investment in car parking.



- 4.17 Those in agreement with this investment included:

"I think longer term plans need to reduce the need for car use. Offering free parking after 3:00 seems a reasonable suggestion".

"Hopefully this will help encourage people into town instead of retail parks".

"Funds from parking up to 3pm Monday to Friday as proposed will cover over a period of time the lost income. Why are Pontypridd & Aberdare not free parking??"

- 4.18 Some of the respondents suggested that free parking would need to be brought in alongside other investment, to make the town centres more appealing;

“Would rather investment in town centre as nothing to shop for if shops keep closing”.

“I do not think this will encourage people in given the risk of the Pandemic and how used to shopping online everybody is. I do not think free parking would be enough. There needs to be enticing shops, Pontypridd for example needs to attract a better range of shops and cafe's.....”

“I'm not sure that car parking is what is stopping people attending town centres but if evidence points to that then yes, I would agree. I believe it's the content of the town centres is what has led to a reduction in footfall even before the pandemic.”

- 4.19 Some of the respondents questioned the timing of the proposed free parking and thought it should be earlier:

“3pm is too late in the day.”

Timing was also mentioned in the virtual OPAG meeting:

“If you do after 3pm, little open, should be earlier maybe from lunch time instead of 3pm.”

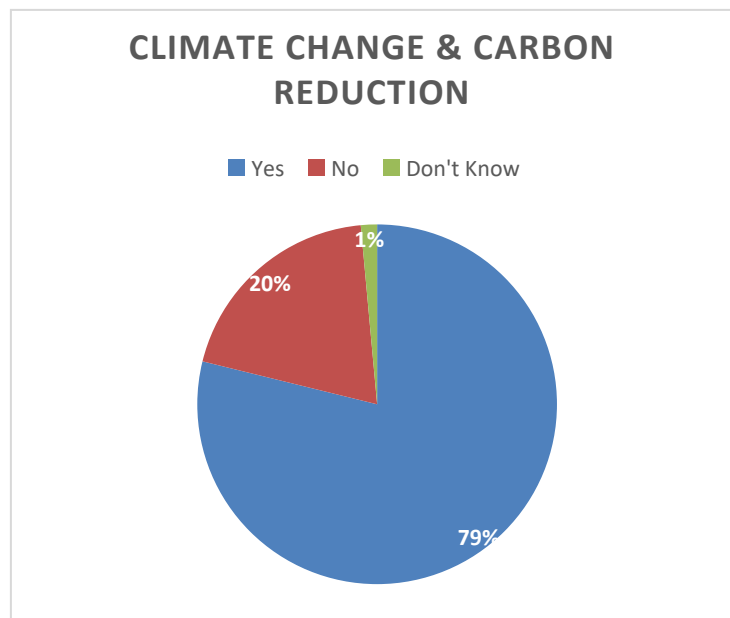
“Good after 10am, as people working in town will not fill the spaces.”

Climate Change and Carbon Reduction

- 4.20 The Council's commitment to responding to climate change and carbon reduction has already been well documented, with the Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group having met regularly since its inaugural meeting in November 2019. The initial work programme set out in December 2019 has been delivered alongside an ambition to be further impactful and a community leader in this area, recognising the wider role that our residents, businesses and partners must play.

In order to support this work, it is proposed that a core base budget is put in place in order that a lead coordination role can be established along with a resource which can commission work from third parties to continue and, where possible increase the pace of our work in this area. The cost of this proposal is **£100k**.

79% of respondents agreed with this proposed investment.



- 4.21 There was widescale support for this proposal:

“More money should be invested in this”.

“The amount invested needs to be higher - this is a major issue and needs strong input and support.”

“This investment needs to be higher. I think we are already directly witnessing the impacts of climate change in RCT as we have already seen with the devastating impact of flooding throughout 2020.....”

“This needs to be agreed as we do face a real climate emergency”.

“Yes, agree and we need to show an example to other local authorities.”
(OPAG).

- 4.22 Although some of the respondents suggested that the Council should utilise existing resources to take this forward:

“utilise current employees & diversify their roles”.

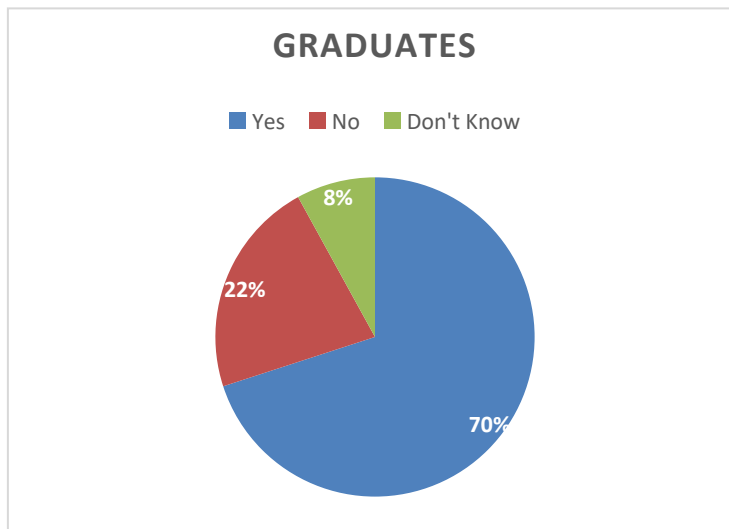
“If this involves using consultants, then No. If it’s to tackle and combat climate change then Yes.” (Disability Forum Member).

Graduates

- 4.23 The Councils’ graduate programme has already provided the opportunity for over 100 graduates to join the Council and develop and progress into middle and senior management roles. It is a key part of the workforce planning strategy and service continuity arrangements, developing our own staff to meet the ongoing and changing needs across our services.

It is proposed that additional resources are set aside to enable a further 6 graduates to be appointed, over and above our existing commitment. The cost of the proposal is **£200k**.

70% of respondents agreed with this proposed investment.



Comments in support of the proposal included:

“Good to see the Council supporting people and giving opportunities”.

“There needs to be jobs for our younger people.”

“Important to provide opportunities for apprenticeships and graduates”.

“Totally support this.” “Think it’s great.” (OPAG)

“Yes if they are required, if they are value for money. If they are doing something” (Disability Forum Member).

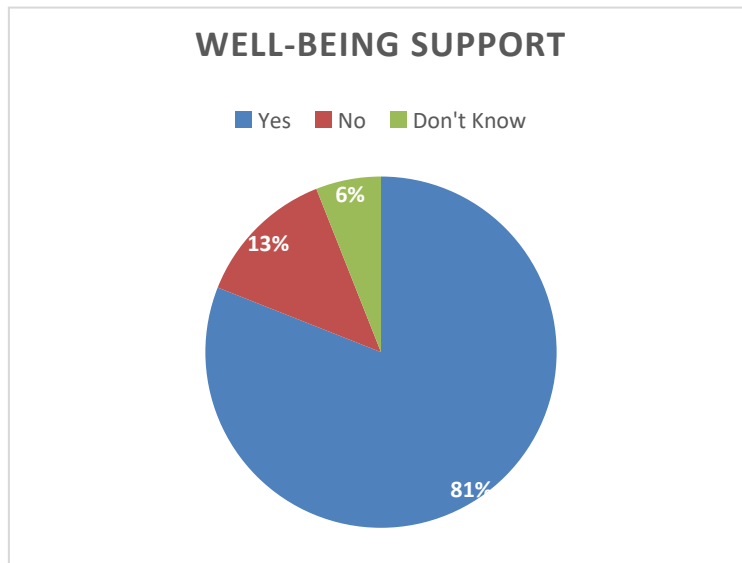
- 4.24 There were some suggestions that existing staff could be utilised and trained up to undertake the roles.

“Promote & train from within, recruit base level employees from job centre”.

Well-Being Support

- 4.25 The Council staff are without doubt our most valued asset – they are the front face of the Council and represent and uphold our key values as public servants. We recognise the challenges faced by staff and have ensured that we continue to support their welfare and wellbeing. An additional resource of **£50k** is proposed to enable us to expand upon the current support programmes we have in place and further develop these programmes across the workforce.

81% of respondents agreed with this proposed investment.



- 4.26 The majority of comments were in support of this proposal:

“This is badly needed.”

“It’s important to look after the staff”.

“Counselling is a key demand from employees so if this investment is in that area of support then I fully support that move”.

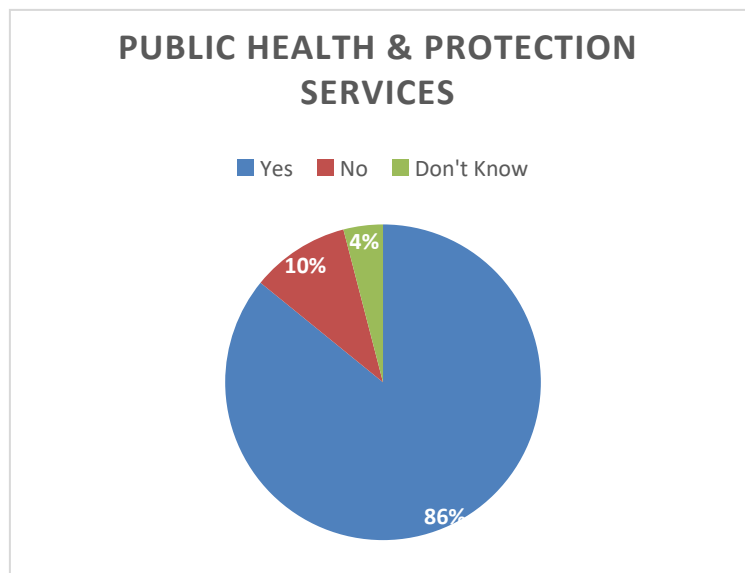
“Staff support in these uncertain times are well received.”

Public Health and Protection Services – Additional Resources

- 4.27 The Public Health and Protection service has played a key role this year in ensuring the public health and wellbeing of our communities, providing advice and guidance and leading on initiatives such as the Test Trace Protect programme.

The additional investment proposed in the service will enable additional resources to be employed, further strengthening the team and providing future resilience for the service. The cost of the proposal is **£200k**.

86% of respondents agreed with this proposed investment.



The majority of comments were in support of this proposal:

“We have to be ready for future situations.”

“Absolutely vital, probably for a good few years to come.”

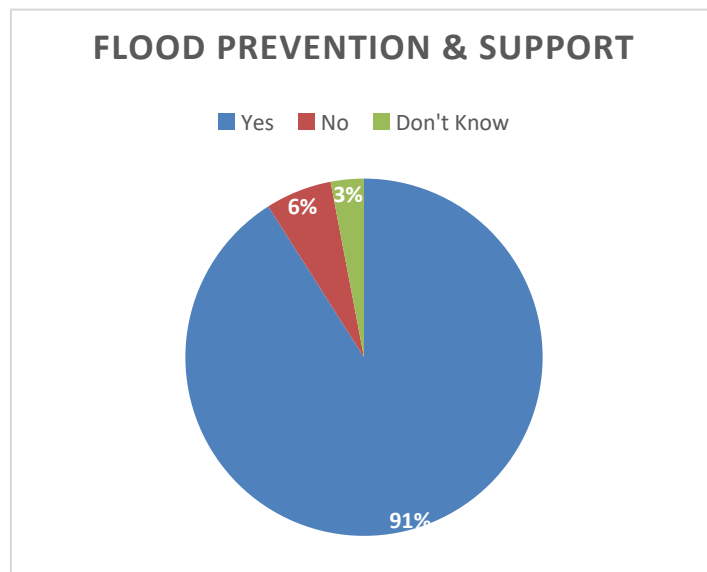
“With COVID-19 this last year this extra £200k will be needed”.

“Seems a good investment.”

Flood Prevention Support

4.28 Over 1,000 homes and 400 businesses were flooded during Storm Dennis. It is proposed that alongside all other support being provided, that an advisory role is put in place to ensure that our residents and businesses are supported in protecting themselves as far as possible from any storm damage, including for example insurance availability and physical property protection opportunities. The cost of this proposal is **£50k**.

91% of respondents agreed with this proposed investment.



4.29 Most of the comments were in support of the proposal:

"This is vital, and the urgency is of the utmost importance."

"It needs to happen for communities devastated by these floods. More investment needs to be put into this area to prevent further reoccurrence".

"So many homes have been devastated so this is needed".

"Vital - likely to see more damage from flooding over the coming months & years so money must be found."

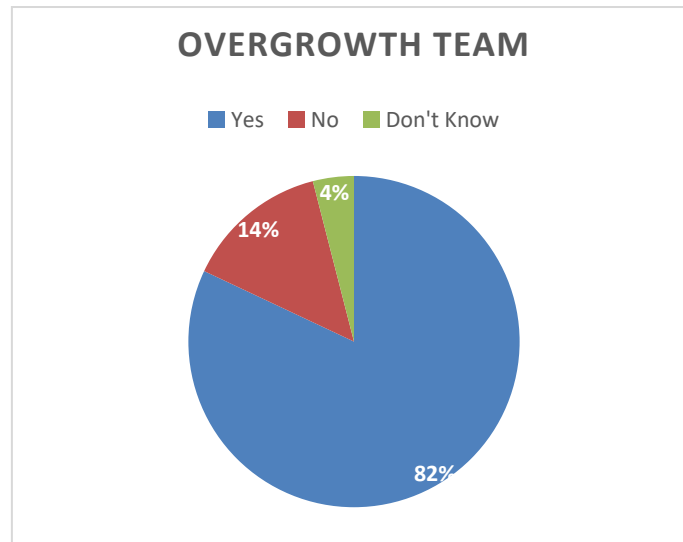
"I agree with the £50k." (Disability Forum Member)

OPAG members supported the funding proposal and suggested it may need an even larger investment.

Overgrowth Team

- 4.30 Our local environment remains a key priority of the Council, keeping our physical places clean, removing eyesores and ensuring that our natural resources are appropriately maintained. We already have a number of teams who are responsible for ensuring that our overgrowth is effectively maintained, and it is proposed that an additional team is put in place to further enhance this work. The cost of this proposal is **£75k**.

82% of respondents agreed with this proposed investment.



- 4.31 Comments in support of this proposal included:

“Really important as more residents have been walking/visiting the countryside in RCT”

“Investment needs to be higher, with more teams being put in place. I would also like to see council organise more local litter-picking events, so the community can take joint ownership of improving and maintaining our local environment.....”

Although some of the respondents suggested that the Council should utilise existing resources/staff:

“This should already be part of what we pay for”.

“make better use of current resources”.

- 4.32 OPAG members agreed with the proposal and asked if there was any scope to use volunteers to help the Council.
- 4.33 A number of comments mentioned leaving the grass verges overgrown:

“.... People don't want to see aggressive over mowing of grass verges etc obliterating any chance for biodiversity. I hope this money can be invested in managing council land better to attract more biodiversity which could go hand in hand with the climate change commitment and making our towns more attractive to investment.....”

“The slightly overgrown and wild verges added much needed colour last spring and I'd like to see these continue”.

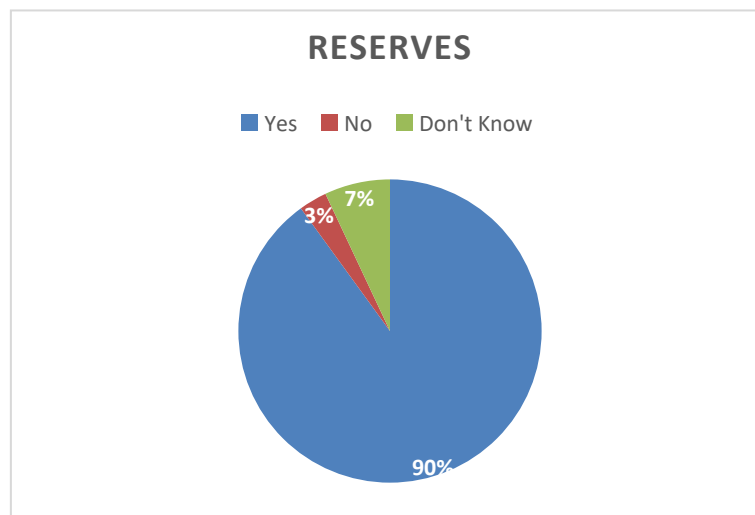
“Overgrowth of plants I'm assuming needs to be managed long term and replaced with more sustainable planting”.

“i would like to see improvements as regards to the roadside verges. i think it would be viable for the council to consider a less and later mow routine and the end of weed killers/pesticides..the restoration of native wildflowers to these areas would be a welcome addition to all, if careful consideration is applied further savings could be achieved.”

Use of Council Reserves

4.34 After taking account of the above proposals, proposed level of Council Tax, the delivery of efficiencies and other budget requirements the remaining budget gap is £0.709M. It is proposed that an allocation of £0.709M is made from the Transitional Funding reserve (i.e. a specific reserve set aside for this purpose) for 2021/22. This would facilitate a balanced budget for 2021/22 and would leave £3.621M in the Transitional Funding.

90% of respondents agreed with the use of this transitional funding.



Comments included:

“Replenishment is essential could this figure be increased”.

“I'd encourage greater use of these reserves to better protect your residents and businesses from increases at such a difficult time....”

“Must keep reserves for emergencies like that big storm last year”.

Other Comments

- 4.35 A number of further comments were made on the proposed budget strategy and these included:

Positive;

“I think in general they are doing a good job”.

“The budget looks like a well thought out and sound financial budget”.

“It seems fair given the various constraints the council operates under.”

“Welcome the engagement”.

- 4.36 There were a number of comments that mentioned the need for services to assist with the aftermath of the pandemic:

“You've a difficult task this year, and I don't envy you the job. I do, however, hope that every resident's needs, regardless of level of education, health, wealth, background, or any other identifying characteristic will be taken into account as, more than ever, we face a difficult time emotionally, mentally and psychologically which no one is immune to.”

“The council needs to invest in services that will help residents with their personal resilience and mental health and wellbeing after what has been and continues to be a very traumatic event”.

- 4.37 The move to remote working was seen as a positive and something that the Council should continue with post COVID, with potential savings through optimising the use of buildings and also generating income from further rationalisation of buildings.

“Maybe sell council offices and encourage staff to desk share or work from home”.

“I think that the council could save money by getting rid of a number of buildings. The staff that are struggling and need to be in the office, given an office space when the pandemic is over, and it is safe to do so. As things are unlikely to ever return to the way they were before, there will be no need to have all the office space...”

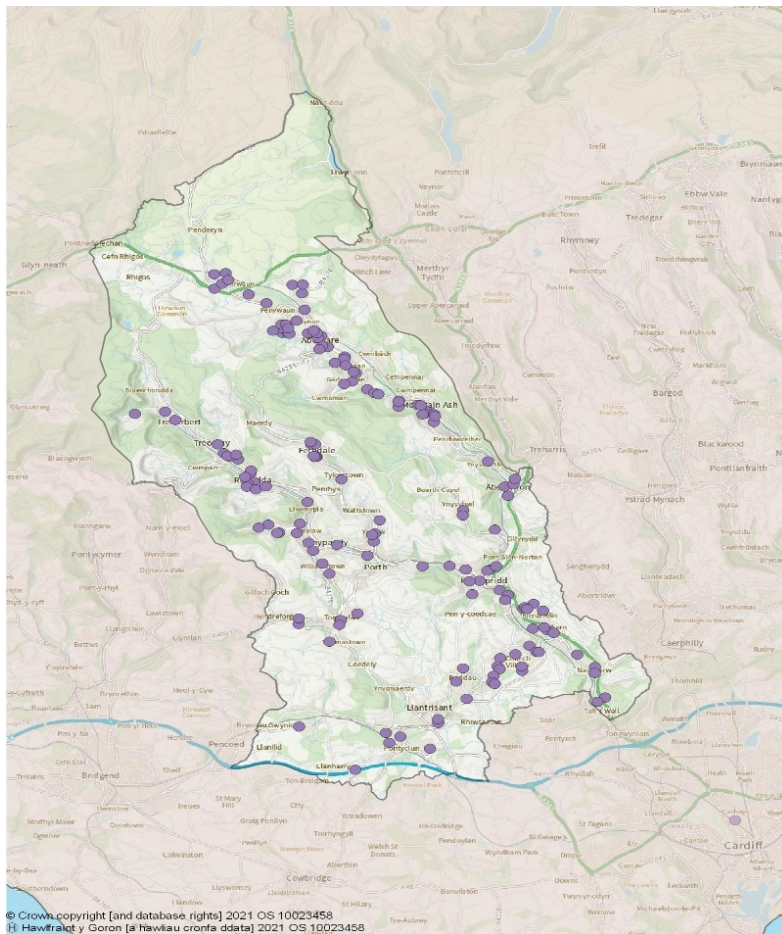
About You

4.38 The majority of respondents to the survey were residents (89.2%).

Base	100.0%
Are you responding as?	
a local resident	89.2%
a local business	4.1%
an employee of the Council	25.2%
a member of a voluntary / community group	5.4%
other	0.5%

Note: This was a multiple response question.

4.39 The following map shows the postcodes of those people who responded to the survey.



5. YOUNG PERSON ENGAGEMENT

- 5.1 As part of our engagement with Young People we utilised the Youth Engagement and Participation Service Instagram page to promote the consultation and ran a series of poll questions over the course of a week. The questions were based on the information in the full survey and asked young people whether they agreed or not with the proposals.
- 5.2 The posts were spread over 5 days and asked Young People whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposals on Council Tax levels, Fees and Charges, Efficiency savings and 5 areas of investment. These were Public Health and Protection Services, the Council's Graduate Scheme, Climate Change, Flood Prevention Support and Car Parking.
- 5.3 The table below shows the results of these polls:

Day / Topic	Question	Yes	No
1 – Council Tax Levels	Do you think a Council Tax increase of 2.65% is fair?	10	16
2 – Efficiency Savings	Should the Council continue to look at ways of saving money?	19	2
3 – Fees and Charges	Do you agree with these proposals?	8	2
4 – Investments: Graduate Scheme / Public Health and Protection	Do you think these investments are a good use of Council money?	13	2
5 – Investments: Car Parking / Flood Prevention Support / Climate Change	Do you think these investments are a good use of Council money?	2	0

- 5.4 We also created a PowerPoint presentation and shared this with the schools and colleges that had taken part in Phase 1 of the consultation. We engaged with Coleg Y Cymoedd groups from Rhondda, Aberdare and Treforest campuses along with Y Pant and St John Baptist Church In Wales High School. A tailored version of the survey was also created and this link was shared with the schools / colleges. They were asked to share the information with their groups and invite them to take part. We also shared these materials with members of the Youth Forum.
- 5.5 The table below shows the results for the questions based on Council Tax levels, Efficiency savings and Fees and Charges:

Question	Yes	No	Don't Know
Do you agree that 2.65% is a reasonable increase in Council Tax?	2	1	3
Do you agree with the approach to efficiency savings for next year?	3	-	2
Do you agree with the Council's approach to fees and charges?	1	2	2

Comments:

“The costs for the meals on wheels program should be frozen and the minor cost increase proposed should instead be levied on car parking charges.”

- 5.6 We also provided information about a range of budget investment proposals and asked whether young people agreed with these. The table below shows the results:

Proposed Investment Area	Yes	No	Don't Know
Local Business Rate Reduction Scheme	3	-	2
Car Park charges	2	-	3
Climate Change and Carbon Reduction	3	1	2
Graduate scheme	2	-	3
Well-Being support for staff	1	1	3
Public Health and Protection Services – Additional Resources	3	-	2
Flood Prevention Support	3	-	2
Overgrowth Team	2	-	3

Comments:

“More money should be invested in Well being for staff, more for climate change and a little less for the Overgrowth team.”