

## Budget consultation survey results

### Background

Following the agreement of the Policy and Resources Committee on 27 November, a consultation was launched on draft proposals for the council's budget for the financial year 2025/26.

This consultation ran for 6 weeks, and responses were encouraged through news release, social media posts, letters to Town and Parish councils, awareness at area committees, and the council website.

There were:

- 1,339 views of the consultation page on the council's website
- Social media activity promoting the consultation reached 2,928 people

The consultation asked people to read key budget documents and then respond to 12 questions.

The consultation closed at 5pm on Wednesday 8 January, having received 18 responses.

### Results – Summary

There was an improvement in the responses this year, in that there were fewer suggestions that are outside of Swale Borough Council's control. However, there were still some responses that, whether the suggestion is good or not, are beyond the gift of Swale BC to implement.

#### Q1

The council needs to prepare a balanced budget so that its costs are met by income. The council intends to increase its income. How would you suggest we might do that?

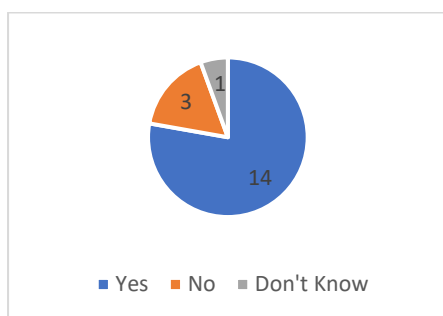
There were 15 responses to this question, with very little in the way of strong themes coming through:

- 3 respondents suggested increasing Council Tax, whilst 1 suggested a Council Tax decrease.
- 2 respondents suggested increasing parking fees, whilst 1 suggested they should be reduced.
- 2 respondents suggested increasing enforcement activity in relation to parking, issuing more fines as a result.
- 2 respondents suggested speaking to town and parish councils to help them reduce their costs.
- Other suggestions included:
  - Stopping councillor expenses
  - Shared Chief Executive arrangement, review of senior salaries, reviewing posts before recruiting to vacancies
  - Encourage involvement by locals and businesses in exchange for better services
  - Selling under-used car parks
  - Additional income from under-occupied offices and buildings

- More family friendly community events
- Reducing Housing Benefit fraud
- Cut down on wasted expenditure
- Lobby Government for more support at a local level
- Business Rates relief for new businesses
- Turn waste into compost, and sell the compost
- Concessions for events filming rights
- Reduce or remove grants to charities
- Fine contractors who fail to deliver services
- Consider the use of volunteers
- Delivery of new builds allocated to Swale BC.

## Q2

Do you believe the council should reduce its spending?



## Q3

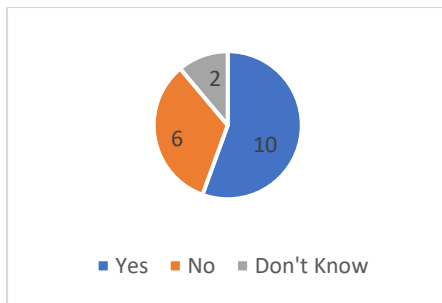
Which services would you reduce?

There were 15 responses to this question:

- 5 made suggestions to reduce costs in salaries, consultants, and expenses
- 2 suggested saving money in relation to Planning services
- 2 suggested saving money in relation to homelessness and Housing Benefits
- 2 suggested no services should be reduced
- Other suggestions included:
  - Waste collection and recycling
  - Asking the local community and businesses to get involved in eg litter picking
  - Leisure services
  - Non statutory services
  - Non-essential grants
  - Public conveniences (where surplus to requirements).

## Q4

Do you believe the council should reduce its spending on some services to be able to spend more on others?



### Q5

Which services would you reduce spending on?

There were 12 responses to this question, with very little in the way of a consistent theme:

- 2 suggested reductions in staff pay or councillor expenses
- 2 suggested a reduction in the spend on Housing Benefits
- 2 suggested a reduction in leisure service costs
- Other suggestions included:
  - Waste collection and recycling
  - Days out
  - Non statutory services
  - Producing surveys
  - Car parks.

### Q6

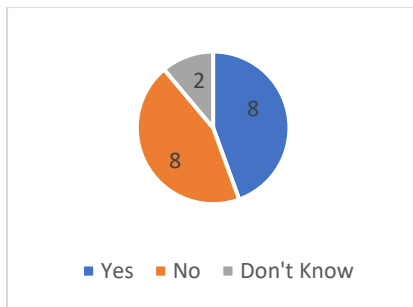
Which services would you spend more on?

There were 15 responses to this question, with a wide range of suggestions made:

- 3 suggested spending more on parks and open spaces
- 2 suggested improving the spend on leisure facilities
- 2 included suggestions around street cleansing
- Other suggestions included:
  - Reducing Council Tax
  - Local Plan progression
  - Supporting the elderly and disabled
  - Safer streets
  - Housing
  - Schools
  - Local companies, CICs and charities that support the work of SBC
  - All essentials
  - None.

### Q7

Do you agree that we should recover the costs of a service through the fees and charges for that service wherever possible?

**Q8**

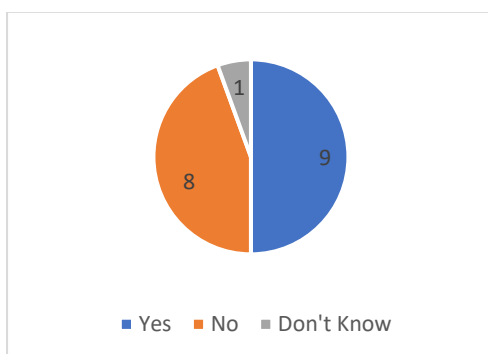
Please use the box below to let us have any views on the proposed increases to the fees and charges.

There were 12 responses to this question, with many of the responses relating to parking fees:

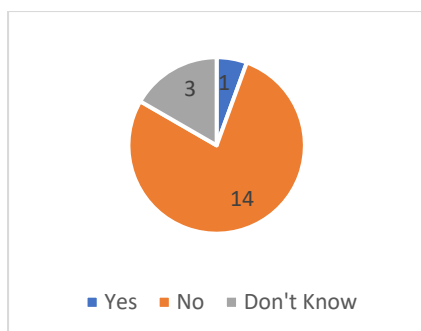
- 6 respondents felt parking fees are already too high, 1 felt they should be increased, and 1 was undecided on the matter
- 1 respondent welcomed 3 hour parking proposal
- 1 respondent felt a short stay car parking fee should be introduced
- Other suggestions included:
  - Don't get value for money from garden waste bin all year round
  - Can bigger taxi firms pay an increased fee?
  - Local land charges need to be considered carefully
  - Sell compost from brown bin contents
  - Introduction of ANPR for car parks
  - Increased charges to property developers for Planning
  - Reduce internal costs and wastage.

**Q9**

The annual Band D Council Tax for Swale Council for this year is £200.70 and the suggested increase for 2025/26 is £5.94. In the current financial circumstances do you think that this is an appropriate amount to charge?

**Q10**

If the government gave us more flexibility to increase the charge beyond 2.99% to help support the council's budget would you be supportive?

**Q11**

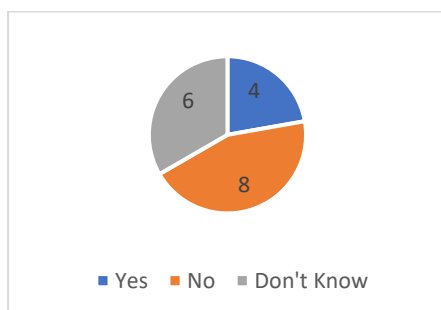
Please use the box below to let us have any views on the capital programme proposals.

There were 10 responses to this question. Suggestions included:

- Creating affordable rental homes
- Sale and lease back of Swale House
- Consider alternative use of properties for staff
- Only carry out capital projects that are grant funded
- Reduce all non-essential capital spend
- Invest in children and elderly adult services
- Invest in children's play areas
- Invest in climate change.

**Q12**

Do you agree with the savings proposals outlined in the report?

**Q13**

Please use the box below to let us have any views on the savings proposals.

There were 10 responses to this question, with a range of views, including:

- Disagree with savings from disposal of green spaces, public conveniences and climate change
- Approve the "big-ticket" savings options
- Encourage big businesses into the area
- Freezing councillor salaries
- Reduction in Chief Executive and corporate overhead costs.

**Results – Detailed**

The responses from each free text question are set out below.

**Q1**

The council needs to prepare a balanced budget so that its costs are met by income. The council intends to increase its income. How would you suggest we might do that?

There were 15 responses to this question.

Suggestions were:

- I do not mind the increases in council tax or parking fees. My concerns are that these increases are not being spent in the right places.
- Two choices – increased revenue or cut expenditure. As the latter has been exhausted, I recommend:
  - Increasing Council Tax by the maximum permitted without a local referendum
  - Explore an increase over the referendum threshold
  - Modest increases to other elective services, such as parking etc.
- Stop all expenses for councillors
- Where possible the council considers a shared chief executive across different local authorities. This was undertaken some years ago by Gravesham Council alongside Tonbridge and Malling Council. Consideration for the vehicle fleet that is currently under the council's ownership are there cost savings that can be made from or in and around this fleet? Please consider asking Traffic Enforcement officers to not just police the car parks around the Faversham area but also look outside of the town centre this although unpopular is a potential revenue generation project. As has been undertaken within central government look at the churn and replacement of staff. Does a role need to be replaced when someone vacates or are there staff that are able to take on the workload and absorb the amounts. Consider a drive to ask locals and businesses to do their bit in exchange for cleaner streets and areas. What can be undertaken by residents or business owners that the council are currently expected to undertake? Senior figures salary reviews – This is a considerable issue within Local Authorities across the United Kingdom with some earning considerably more from the public purse. Undertake conversations with Parish Councils and others as to how their budgets can be spent more wisely with some of the burden falling on their activities with considerations and improved planning before events or decisions costing a considerable amount are undertaken.
- By selling little used car parks for development thereby reducing on-going maintenance costs and improving the visual appearance of the area. By seeking additional income from under-occupation of Council office/properties.
- The car parking prices in Sheerness are far to high. Reduce them and people will use them more thus generating more income.
- But putting on more event for the community at smaller costs that are family friendly, more fines for parking especially around school would increase income greatly. More investigations in to people whole fraudulently claim housing benefit.
- Cut down on wasted expenditure and expenses and put council tax down to match the drop in standards of the services the Council provides.
- Council tax increases so every resident pays and increase.
- Cut top bosses wages.
- Lobby Government for more support at a local level.
- Give new business (under 5 years old) a break on business rates to encourage more new businesses into Swale. Give everyone with a garden a free brown bin, and

those with no garden a mini brown bin for veg peels etc, which could then be turned into compost, then sell the compost.

- Concession charges for events filming rights, and catering in parks from the private sector. Train your staff in income generation, talk to other councils. Reduce or stop paying out grants via councillors and to charities (supporting charities is not your function). Fine/recover income from contractors who fail to provide services. Talk to parish/town councils about reducing their costs. Consider where volunteers could help.
- Make housing developers ensure 60% of new builds are allocated to Swale BC, thus allowing people in temporary or emergency housing to have a home, therefore paying rent, council tax etc.
- Reduce excess unproductive services and resource.

### Q3

Which services would you reduce?

There were 15 responses to this question.

- Waste collection and recycling. With the shambolic appointment of the new contract they've been unreliable and even gone as far as accruing people of lying in relation to bins being placed outside of properties. I also believe that too much money is being spent on housing benefits and homelessness. In the age where bills are going up for those of us that have jobs and houses it feels like we are being punished for some of others' situations. Granted that some of these are unavoidable but in situations where someone has made themselves homeless or makes no effort to be employed then I feel aggrieved that I have to pay for that.
- Elective services with no wider social benefit should be moved closer to covering their costs.
- None.
- As suggested there are a number of areas where the council could ask the local community and big business to step up and assist in sorting issues like littering. Learning from other Local Authorities is a big step in assisting/learning which services could be reduced or considered for changes.
- Leisure.
- Non statutory services.
- None the community is already running on empty.
- Expenses – Town centre managers – planning officers.
- Housing benefits.
- CEO bonuses. All top bosses wages.
- External consultants & senior management costs.
- Non essential grants. Public conveniences if they are surplus to requirements.
- Amount spent on payments for councillor for travelling expenses, etc.
- Dealing with planning and applications.
- Chief Exec and Human Resources.

### Q5

Which services would you reduce spending on?

There were 12 responses to this question .

- Waste collection and recycling. With the shambolic appointment of the new contract they've been unreliable and even gone as far as accruing people of lying in relation to bins being placed outside of properties. I also believe that too much money is being spent on housing benefits and homelessness. In the age where bills are going up for those of us that have jobs and houses it feels like we are being punished for some of others' situations. Granted that some of these are unavoidable but in situations where someone has made themselves homeless or makes no effort to be employed then I feel aggrieved that I have to pay for that.
- Much expenditure is statutory, so can't be reduced. The answers to qq 6 and 7, respectively, must be political decisions, within the headline mandate from this consultation.
- Jollies and days out.
- I feel without the full desktop study and facts there is not a possibility to answer this as it is too broad a question. Cost savings can be made related to where there are for example fleet vehicles that are not worth repair or there are better alternatives if another or different option considered.
- Leisure.
- Non statutory services to statutory services.
- Producing these silly surveys that we no you will take no notice of.
- Housing benefits.
- CEO bosses. Top bosses wages.
- Leisure centres.
- Payments to councillors for expenses etc and buying new office equipment. I don't update my computer, mobile phone for a new one every year.
- Car parks.

## Q6

Which services would you spend more on?

There were 15 responses to this question.

- The council run gyms and leisure facilities. Swallows swimming pool and changing rooms needs cleaning and the changing room facilities are below par.
- Reduce council tax.
- Again it is difficult to say where more money should be spent this is something that faces all decision makers as there are always winner and losers in this type of scenario.
- Local Plan progression. Failure to be up to date will increasingly see decision making taken away from the Council and determined by the Planning Inspectorate/Government which will be to the severe disadvantage of the area in terms of the scale of development.
- Supporting elderly people.
- Leisure, cleaning the street, cleaning public toilets, safer streets.
- None.
- Littering, fly tipping; street cleaning.
- All essentials
- Parks. A public lido in Sittingbourne would be amazing. Green spaces. Wildflowers on the sides of the A249, etc no need to mow!!!
- Parks and open spaces because they are more visible and have a larger audience.
- Schools, local amenities, housing.



- Care for the elderly, disabled and schools.
- Parks and open spaces.
- Local companies, CIC's and charities that make a difference and complement the work of SBC.

### Q8

Please use the box below to let us have any views on the proposed increases to the fees and charges.

There were 12 responses to this question

- My 'Yes' is qualified. This principle should apply to elective services, such as parking.
- Sack them all.
- Although I broadly agree with the changes being made to things like Parking there is a part of me that also suggests that this will decrease trade in places like Faversham. You only need to look towards Dartford and Gravesend where the high streets are empty of people and shops. There needs to be a reason for people to come to an event or want to come to events. Personally I have not renewed my garden waste bin for the very reason that I want to prevent KCC removing the Faversham Tip for it to be sold to Redrow or similar. I personally also do not feel I was getting value for money from my bin all year around. In the winter months apart from when the real Christmas tree is cut up for recycling there is little use of the bin. Taxi licencing charges freeze is welcome however; could there be the potential to ask those that are bigger businesses to pay a little extra for this service as they will have a bigger monopoly on the smaller firms that operation within Swale areas? 3 Hour parking is welcome especially if you want to use the café's and cars in and around areas like Faversham. This does however; mean car parks like the central will not be seeing the turn over of cars and this will mean some choose not to travel into Faversham and may consider going to Bluewater or further afield where there is free parking. Local Land and search charges need to be considered carefully, if someone is trying to improve their home in the borough or they have a Tree that has a TPO why should they pay the same amount as a multi national house builder looking to make millions on land within the borough?
- No information is provide on the level of activity (number of applications/visits/documents) associated with the fees which makes it difficult to suggest areas for change.
- Car parking fees in Sheerness are far to high, if you reduce them, more people will use them.
- Car parking is expensive enough for a town with nothing in it, it should not go up more.
- Why increase garden waste fees people will just start hiding it in the general and recycling bins. Or fly tipping – THINK ABOUT IT!
- Do no increase car park prices. Will inevitably result in loss of people using the car parks/visiting the town centre etc.
- Parking fees already deter people from local spaces. I think people would visit the high street more often if it was free for the first hour. What happens with the bits from the brown bins? There's a place up north that sells compost from it. There's also a place who's crematorium heats the water in the towns outside swimming pool.

- Car parking fees in Faversham are already unrealistic and too high. A short stay car parking fee should be introduced. ANPR for car parks may reduce staff costs. Why are you freezing tax charges and putting everything else up that makes no sense.
- Car parking is too expensive. Property developers should pay a lot more for planning etc.
- Squeezing the local people is not the answer. Reducing your internal costs and wastage is the answer.

## Q11

Please use the box below to let us have any views on the capital programme proposals.

There were 10 responses to this question.

- We need affordable rental homes, be it for 'locals' (sic) or those displaced from other LA areas. If the property speculators won't supply these homes, then SBC must commission them or impose them as a requirement under 'section 106', which must then be enforced. Ideally, supply and demand would be coordinated and managed with neighbouring councils.
- Don't keep wasting money.
- Is there the possibility that Swale House could be sold and then leased back from the new owner for example this has happened with the MoD building in Whitehall this is on a 100 year lease from the UK Government to Amey. Improvements that are being made to Swale House are welcome and of course I want the staff to work in a building that is comfortable and allows for the best use of both their time and public money. I however; wonder of there are better or even considerations of alternatives within the borough that could be used? Examples of this is flexible working and allowing staff to work in a different area or office. Given that we are all facing more and more asks on resources and money is this a good time for the council to consider only undertaking those works that are funded by grants rather than spending out money this is borrowing or reserves that maybe required or needed elsewhere? Although we all want to see improvements to the borough is there anything that could be added to a nice to have list but this is not essential. I know from my own role that this is being asked to be considered at all levels of the public sector.
- This can only be sensibly resolved when the Government funding position is a little clearer although that is unlikely to be of much assistance in relation to the short to medium position. Unless there is some incredibly proactive, and courageous work undertaken by the Treasury the future of the whole of local government looks to be in jeopardy. No mention is made to the potential cost savings, if any, arising from a move to a single tier governance models for Kent which could happen in 2027 and might influence thinking on what level of resources are left to any incumbent authority.
- Reduce all non essential capital programmes and invest in children and elderly adult services. Sheerness is an area of social deprivation (one of the highest in the UK) requires stimulus for growth.
- Most of the capital expenditure will be vanity projects the information given is lacking detail.
- All new estate developers should have to pay a chunk of cash to the area, there should be hedgehog holes in all fences and all new trees planted should be fruit trees. Preferably non commercial and at risk varieties.

- The childrens play areas are badly in need of capital investment and have been neglected for decades. Areas like climate change investment should also be a high priority.
- All been said before under Conservatives, Labour will be just as bad.
- No comment.

### Q13

Please use the box below to let us have any views on the savings proposals.

There were 10 responses to this question.

- In fact, my answer is 'Yes and no'. I disagree with the 'savings' from, disposing of green spaces, public lavatories and climate change expenditure. These save comparatively small amounts but have a disproportionate impact on our quotidian lives and on visitors to, for example, Sheppey. The real savings, of which I approve, come from the big tick (six-figure) items.
- Leave things as they are.
- Although I have said I broadly agree of which I do these are like any budget that is drafted within the public sector they are based on assumptions. Sadly there is not a place for assumptions and this is where robust cost modelling with as much as possible experts working on this needs to come in to place. There are many assumptions that are made overall around anything in life I assume that I will wake up tomorrow and go to work this is not a guarantee. I would encourage any future savings to be grouped in a way that there are some added percentages and where there is a likelihood of success. Grants can not be relied upon as Swale is in the South East there can also not be an expectation that big business will come and or stay in the borough. Where this could be encouraged is regular communication on plans and then hope that said business sees worth in an area.
- See suggestions for other income.
- Future savings appear to be coming from a rather huge increase in council tax.
- Labour Council and MP are letting us down.
- Given the poor financial position that the council now finds itself in there is probably little choice left but to make savings!
- No salary increases for Councillor.
- As a pensioner already struggling, these proposals will make me homeless and feeling suicidal.
- Chief Exec costs and corporate overheads need to be reduced.