

APPENDIX 10

Investing in Reading: budget consultation 2020/21 - Results Report

1. The budget consultation

Reading Borough Council has a net budget of almost £150 million a year to run day-to-day services for more than 160,000 residents, businesses and visitors. These services include parks, playgrounds, libraries, waste and recycling, planning, transport, highways, street cleaning, environmental health, children's services and adult social care. The money available for this is called the revenue budget. The Council also spends millions of pounds a year investing in the town to maintain and improve assets such as buildings and leisure facilities. This is funded from the capital budget.

Each year, the Council sets its budget for the coming year. The elected councillors vote on this budget in February.

The proposed budget for 2020/21 consists of:

- General Fund net revenue budget of £148.8m for 2020/21
- General Fund capital investment of £357m over three years 2020/21 to 2022/23
- Efficiency savings and increased income totalling £11.4 million in 2020/21 (£33.1m over three years 2020/21 to 2022/23)
- Council Tax increase of 3.99% in 2020/21 comprised of a 1.99% rise in Council Tax and a one-off social care precept of 2.0%

The Council consulted on the draft proposals between Thursday 19 December 2019 and Sunday 19 January 2020. The content is available online at <https://consult.reading.gov.uk/css/reading-borough-council-budget-consultation>

2. Communication

The Council invited input from people who live and work in Reading, partners, local businesses, and people who come into Reading to use services. The consultation was promoted:

- In local media
- On the Council's website and social media channels
- At key Council locations including:
 - On the digital screens in the civic office reception
 - Copies in libraries and hubs
- Emailed to in the monthly residents e-newsletter (6,000 people)
- Emailed to the citizens panel (1500 people)
- Emailed to the Council Tax base (40,000 people)
- Emailed to local businesses through Reading UK's monthly email
- Shared with key partners and forums
- Face to face briefing with business partners and stakeholders

620 individuals/organisations responded. The majority of responses were received online through the Consultation Hub. One email was received.

3. Respondents

A broad range of people took part, generally comparing well with the 2011 Census population profile for Reading on age and ethnicity. More men than women participated.

Characteristic	Budget consultation responses		2011 Census
	No	%age	%age
Age			
Under 16	2	0.32%	19.34%
16-25	11	1.78%	16.49%
26-35	144	23.26%	19.21%
36-45	134	21.65%	14.64%
46-55	107	17.29%	11.30%
56-65	94	15.19%	8.21%
66+	11	1.78%	10.79%
Gender			
Male	325	52.50%	50.2%
Female	207	33.44%	49.8%
Ethnicity			
White	441	71.24%	74.8%
Mixed	7	1.12%	3.9%
Asian	30	4.85%	12.6%
Black	10	2.27%	7.7%

The majority of respondents (92%) were residents.

Responding as	Total	Percent
Resident	567	91.60%
Service user	10	1.62%
Family or friend of service user	5	0.81%
Voluntary organisation	3	0.48%
Business	4	0.65%
Public Sector	1	0.16%
Employee of Reading Borough Council	4	0.65%
Other	9	1.45%
Not Answered	16	2.58%

4. Responses

The consultation asked four questions:

Q1. What alternative suggestions do you have for how we could we make the savings required to balance the budget?

Q2. We are proposing a 2% Adult Social Care precept. What alternative suggestions do you have for how we could fund the rising costs of and rising demand for adult social care services?

Q3. We are proposing £357m of capital investment over three years. What alternative suggestions do you have for where we should invest to ensure we

modernise facilities, infrastructure and services for residents and help the Council achieve its net zero-carbon target by 2030?

Q4. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how our proposed budget might adversely impact on people, and how could we mitigate this impact?

Respondents were able to comment against each question and could include as many or as few points as they chose. There were 620 responses and a total of 1,546 comments across the four questions. One comment often covered multiple topics. Some comments did not include an alternative suggestion.

The analysis of the comments made is by identification of key themes emerging for the alternative suggestions. The frequencies included should be considered indicative rather than absolute.

5. Consultation response - headline issues and the Council's response

To analyse the results officers have grouped responses by topic across the four questions. There are ten topics that received more than 20 alternative suggestions.

<i>Topic/ service area</i>	<i>No. of responses</i>
Transport, planning and parking	146
Reducing costs, streamlining and efficiencies	126
Climate change and the environment	115
Sport and leisure facilities	52
Funding for adult social care	51
Waste and recycling	42
Highways, roads and footpaths	38
Council Tax and Housing Benefit	32
Impact on low income groups	27
Improving the Council's use and quality of technology	21

Transport, planning and parking (146 responses)

It is clear from the number of responses that the management of transport, planning and parking is a topic of high interest. The suggestions were varied and did not always point to a single preferred outcome, for example there are suggestions for both increasing and decreasing parking provision and charging, and both for and against charging for road use in congested areas. In terms of sustainable transport options, the results confirm that more needs to be done to support people who want to switch to using the bus or to start cycling or walking.

In the main, the responses to the budget consultation reflect the findings from the transport consultation conducted in the summer of 2019 and support proposals that deliver sustainable transport outcomes. The Council's proposed capital programme allocates funds to support that agenda including the completion of the £20m Green Park Station, upgrades to Reading West Station, and bus and cycle lane improvements.

The findings will be considered as the Council develops its new transport strategy, the Local Transport Plan, which is due for publication later this year. The Local Transport Plan will set the framework for all aspects of travel for Reading and responds to the development ambitions set out in the recently adopted Local Plan.¹ It recognises that there are difficult choices to be made to tackle challenges such as the need to reduce carbon emissions from transport and improve air quality.

The responses to the budget consultation also focus on the need for the Council to better manage its approach to parking and parking enforcement. The Council will review its civil enforcement contract in order to secure a new contract by October 2021 and ensure that the approach taken maximises on digitalisation and technology to deliver a more efficient and effective offer. The Council will continue to lobby central government for a change in the law to allow local authorities to carry out Civil Enforcement which is currently only enforceable by the Police. An annual report to show the level of enforcement on a street-by-street basis is published by the Council and is available on the Council's website. Residents can also use the website to report illegally parked vehicles.

Reducing costs, streamlining and efficiencies (126 responses)

Many respondents referred to the need for the Council to streamline the organisation and its activities, to reduce costs and to increase efficiency. Delivering services that are efficient, customer focussed and offer value for money is at the heart of the Council's philosophy.

In early 2018 the Council established an ambitious transformation programme to drive out £40m of savings and efficiencies from Council spending, and to transform and modernise services. Over £34m of savings and efficiencies have been achieved to date, with a further £33m to be delivered over the next three years. The change programme is also designed to transform service delivery by investing in staff and harnessing new technology to continue to improve services for Reading residents. The programme is supported by a £13.5m investment fund, that has provided additional resource and expertise to deliver the programme at pace.

Climate change/ environmental schemes (115 responses)

The number of responses on this subject illustrate the continuing high level of public interest and concern which led to the Council's declaration of a climate emergency in 2019. To date the Council has reduced its own carbon footprint by 18.5% in 2018/19 and by 62.5% since 2008/09, avoiding costs of £11 million in the process.

Respondents made a range of specific suggestions for actions the Council could take to tackle climate change, become more energy efficient and reduce carbon emissions. Suggestions included supporting infrastructure for drivers of electric vehicles, planting trees, creating better recycling facilities and introducing penalties for not recycling, installing solar panels, having better sustainable transport options (e.g. Park and Ride, cycle lanes), and introducing a low emission zone.

¹ https://www.reading.gov.uk/media/10410/Reading-Borough-Council-Local-Plan/pdf/Local_Plan_Adopted_November_2019.pdf

Many of the specific suggestions made have been undertaken or are planned for the future, for example the Council has:

- Installed solar panels on 46 buildings and 457 houses;
- Replaced 13,000 streetlights with low energy LEDs, achieving a 54% cut in energy use from this source;
- Pledged to go 'single-use plastic free' to reduce waste and cut emissions;
- Set pioneering net zero carbon standards for new development in the Reading Local Plan which was adopted in November 2019.

The proposed budget includes a significant investment of £7.5 million in energy efficiency and renewable energy measures over the next three years. This represents a step change in the Council's investment in this area and will enable us to work towards net zero carbon emissions from our own estate by 2030. We also have plans to:

- Refurbish more of our own buildings to improve energy efficiency and install renewable energy.
- Expand our fleet of electric vehicles and install new charging points.
- Continue to upgrade our housing to improve insulation and reduce energy bills.
- Purchase our energy from a 'green' tariff under a new contract which comes into force in April.
- Take forward further plans to 'de-carbonise' our Bennet Road depot, on which solar panels have recently been installed.

Other major capital investments - for example in Green Park Station, the South Reading Mass Rapid Transit project and our tree planting programme - will also contribute to achieving our 'net zero' carbon ambitions.

The Council will ensure that all the relevant suggestions made in response to the budget consultation are considered in the development of the Reading Climate Change Strategy (being drawn up by the Reading Climate Change Partnership) and, where suggestions relate specifically to our own operations, into the development of the Council's own Carbon Plan, which is being reviewed in parallel.

Sport and leisure facilities (52 responses)

Many respondents commented on the proposal to invest in improved leisure facilities across the Borough. Some welcomed the proposals and said the investment would benefit residents. Others expressed concern that £40m sounded like a lot compared to other investments, or that leisure seemed a luxury compared to basic needs such as adult social care.

The Council's investment in new and improved leisure facilities is a cross-cutting project that includes sport and leisure for fun, and for the goal of improving the health and well-being of residents. As well as modern, fit-for-purpose facilities, the programme of improvements has a strong public health component and includes £450,000 of investment from the Council's public health budget.

The Council's partner, Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL), will work to a series of targets that include public health goals, for example increasing participation in physical activity among target groups including young people (under 16), older people (over 60), people with mental

health problems, physical disabilities or learning disabilities, and providing support to people referred by GPs to use exercise to help manage long-term medical conditions.

The programme takes into account the needs of lower income and vulnerable groups. There will be support to encourage wide participation in sport and leisure activities, such as free taster sessions and discounts on classes and memberships for key groups.

The money for the investment comes from the Council's capital programme. This is one-off expenditure to improve the Council's facilities and infrastructure and is funded from proceeds from capital receipts or prudential borrowing. This money cannot be redirected to fund day-to-day costs such as running waste collection services or delivering adult social care. These services are funded by the revenue budget using income such as Council Tax and business rates.

The Council's investment of £40m will deliver improved sports, leisure and fitness services across the Borough over a period of 25 years in partnership with GLL. Over the life of the contract, the partnership will provide a positive revenue position for the Council.

Increasing charges to pay for adult social care (51 responses)

A high number of respondents commented on the costs of adult social care, and the proposed 2% adult social care precept. Some respondents were supportive, stating a commitment to supporting adult social care funding. Others expressed concern at the lack of a long-term solution to the challenges of social care funding, and suggested the government should play more of a role in funding services or that the Council should actively lobby the government for more funding. Some respondents suggested that people should be charged for the care and support they receive, and that these charges should be increased. Others suggested that the level of adult care services provided by the Council should be reduced in order to reduce costs.

The Council charges people for their care and support in line with a Charging and Financial Assessment Framework and associated policies which aligns with the legislative framework for adult social care (the Care Act 2014). The Council uses a financial assessment as a way of looking at a person's financial situation to decide how much that person can afford to pay towards the care and support. If the person has capital assets above a certain limit (called the "upper capital limit" which is currently £23,250 set by Government), the person is expected to pay the full cost of their care and support.

As eligibility for care and support is set nationally as assessed under the Care Act, Reading Borough Council cannot make local adjustments for example to change the level at which people are liable for the costs of their care.

The Charging and Financial Assessment Framework has been developed to meet national principles to:

- Ensure that people are not charged more than it is reasonably practicable for them to pay for care and support;
- Be comprehensive - to reduce variation in the way people are assessed and charged;
- Be clear and transparent - so people know what they will be charged;

- Apply the charging rules consistently - so those with similar needs or services are treated the same and minimise anomalies between different care settings

Once assessed a person receives a care and support package that promotes independence not dependence. We ensure that the level of care and support is fair and equitable and meets the person's eligible needs. Once the package of care and support is in place, it is regularly reviewed to ensure it continues to meet the person's needs.

The Council's Adult Social Care teams continue to seek more efficient ways of providing services to meet people's needs in line with our statutory responsibilities. In the last three years the department has saved over £8.5million. Future initiatives to further promote independence and reduce care costs include increased usage of technology, 'outcome based' delivery support and enhanced reablement for mental health and learning disability service users.

There is continued uncertainty across Health and Social Care departments as to how the services we deliver can continue to be increased and improved without sufficient funding. A number of national bodies continue to lobby the Government for additional funds to support the health and social care system manage the increasing demands, not least because of the fact people are living longer.

Waste and recycling (42 responses)

A number of responses concerned waste and recycling in Reading. Respondents were supportive of initiatives to increase recycling rates for environmental and cost reasons. Some respondents suggested introducing charging or penalties for people who throw away more rubbish or recycling less of their waste. There were a number of suggestions to increase penalties for offences such as fly tipping. There were multiple suggestions about the upcoming changes to waste and recycling services that will be made in autumn 2020, with the introduction of weekly food waste collections broadly welcomed and some suggestions about how to make implementation work in flats.

The Council is committed to improving the recycling rate achieved in Reading to over 50%. A weekly food waste collection service will start and 240l grey refuse bins will be swapped for 140l for residential households in autumn 2020. For green and bulky waste services, the Council's charges are comparable to neighbouring authorities and offer value for money for local residents. As part of the re3 waste disposal partnership, the Council is continuing to promote waste reduction, recycling and reuse. As a result there have been significant reductions in waste sent to landfill.

The Council has invested in a dedicated Recycling and Enforcement team that will promote recycling for residents and businesses in the Borough, and that will enforce penalties for environmental crime such as fly tipping and littering. The outcome of such penalties will be widely publicised to reassure residents that the Council takes this issue seriously, and as a deterrent to others.

Highways (38 responses)

A number of respondents commented on the condition of roads and pavements in Reading, with many saying they are in poor condition and that this posed a health safety risk, or that is discouraged sustainable transport such as walking and cycling.

The condition of Reading's classified (main arterial) roads compares favourably with other Local Highway Authorities and are being maintained to a reasonable standard. However, due to the pressure on Council budgets, local unclassified residential roads have not received the same level of investment in recent years. This has led to a deterioration in their condition which has resulted in a perception of poor-quality roads.

To address this issue, the budget proposals included an investment of £9 million over the next three years to improve the condition of the local residential roads and footways across the Borough. This investment is over and above the Government's annual road maintenance award. This investment will significantly improve the road and footway condition and help make the public highway safer.

The Council repaired over 3,680 potholes last year and is introducing measures to improve efficiencies of the operation. This will enable the service to reduce the current intervention level, i.e. to tackle potholes earlier (when they are less severe).

The Council has also completed a comprehensive LED lighting upgrade scheme across the Borough, reducing energy consumption by over 55%. Smart control systems allow the Council to reduce lighting levels where appropriate and safe to do so, which saves energy. This system also reports streetlighting faults directly and speeds up the repair process.

Council Tax and Housing Benefit (32 responses)

There were a number of responses in relation to Council Tax, Housing Benefit and business rates. Some respondents suggested that higher earners and those in higher bands contribute more towards Council Tax. Many also suggested that Council Tax should not be raised and that the Council should fund services in other ways, such as making cuts in other areas or reducing investments.

The majority of the investments in the Council's budget will be made from the capital programme. This budget is funded by borrowing and this money cannot be redirected to fund day-to-day costs that are underpinned by Council Tax, such as running waste collection services or delivering adult social care.

Council Tax bands are determined by Central Government, ranging from A to H. Every year, the amount of Council Tax charged is set by Reading Borough's Full Council of elected members, who decide how much the Council Tax will be for a Band D property as prescribed by legislation. The amounts charged for the other bands (A-H) are then calculated out using a proportion of 'ninths', which is fixed by legislation. Reading Borough Council cannot make local increases to this.

Some vulnerable groups are eligible for support. For older people, the Government prescribed default scheme can provide Council Tax Support of up to 100%. Those of working age continue to have support available up to 65% of their Council Tax Liability, and there are no plans to reduce this support.

The Council recently consulted on three changes to our current Council Tax Support scheme, which would benefit those eligible for Council Tax support. The main change eases the administrative burden when migrating from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit by removing the need to reclaim Council Tax Support. The consultation saw nearly 1,600 responses with over 80% in favour of the recommended changes, which will now be implemented.

The Council is also looking to adopt the Citizens Advice Council Tax Protocol to improve partnership working with the advice sector and better support those residents that are struggling financially. The process will result in better communication, with targeted campaigns to ensure residents are receiving all the support to which they are entitled.

Impact on low income groups (27 responses)

The consultation specifically asked what adverse impact the proposals might have. Both in response to this question and in response to the consultation in general, a number of respondents commented that an increase in Council Tax would have an impact on vulnerable groups most likely to experience low income particularly elderly people, people with a disability and families with young children.

Respondents suggested the impacts could be mitigated by communicating changes clearly, and introducing more support for vulnerable groups. To improve communication with residents the Council is committing to:

- A new website design with an improved 'news and updates' function;
- A twice-yearly residents newsletter delivered to every household in the Borough;
- Monthly e-newsletters which anyone can sign up to receive;
- Better engagement with partners;
- Increased promotion of consultations and opportunities to influence Council policy and decision making.

The section above outlines the support available to vulnerable people in paying their Council Tax.

Improving use and quality of technology (21 responses)

Respondents commented on advances in digital technology and suggested ways the Council could make use of this, such as better access to services online.

The use of digital technologies is a fundamental pillar of our recently published Customer Experience Strategy.² This sets out how, over the next three years, we will transform the quality, accessibility and ease of use of our services through culture and process change, as well as through the use of digital. Projects already in train range from a refresh of our website to the scoping of a pilot of Robotic Process Automation (a technology that automates administrative processes to improve speed and efficiency and which was mentioned in some responses).

² <https://democracy.reading.gov.uk/documents/s9963/Customer%20Experience%20Strategy.pdf>

Of equal importance - as some respondents observed - is the need for our people to have the information technology they need to work effectively and efficiently. We are currently upgrading the office software (Microsoft Windows and Office) across the organisation to the most recent versions, and replacing hardware that can no longer perform to the level needed. In parallel, with our current IT outsourcing contract expiring in March 2021, we are putting in place a future operating model for digital and information technologies that is in line with the most up-to-date best practice. That model will be designed to allow the Council readily to make best use of new technologies and digital services for the benefit of the residents and businesses of Reading.

6. Consultation response - detailed analysis by question

Q1. What alternative suggestions do you have for how we could we make the savings required to balance the budget?

There were 413 responses to this question. Alternative suggestions fell into 7 key themes.

i	Reduce costs/increase efficiency
ii	Enforcement to increase income/reduce costs
ii	Increase/find extra opportunities for charging
iv	Incentives to encourage use/change behaviour
v	Reduce services
vi	Income generation
vii	Development

i Reduce costs/increase efficiency

The highest number of comments related to the Council being more efficient by rationalising management and staff and having more effective processes for operating services

“Are you streamlining your services to ensure that you don't carry overheads not needed ie to many managers /staff ratio etc.”

This was followed by suggestions for the Council to spend less or not at all on projects such as Green Park Station, swimming pools and leisure facilities, council vehicles, council property, line painting, bus lanes, new houses, housing, buying Reading Gaol, buying the police station, a flood defence scheme. There were also suggestions for the Council to review and reduce contractor costs and improve the use and quality of technology, including more digitisation of services, web chat and self-service options.

“Can the council use email more and go paperless?”

“Please try improve the website access.”

ii Increase/find extra opportunities for charging

There were more than 50 suggestions relating to increasing or finding extra opportunities for charging. These ranged from congestion/pollution charging; increasing Council tax or

introducing progressive taxation; charging for additional waste services and increasing or extending parking charges.

iii Enforcement to increase income/reduce costs

Alternative suggestions relating to enforcement were predominantly around fining for littering and fly-tipping and enforcing parking and traffic restrictions e.g. parking fines, bus lane, speeding, pavement cycling fines.

“Increase the fines on fly tipping and littering especially when it comes to shops and restaurants on Oxford Road.”

“I also think fines need to be imposed for parking on paths and other unlawful places in residential streets.”

iv Incentives to encourage use/change behaviour

Suggestions related to incentives to encourage use or change behaviour such as not to increase parking charges, or to have free or longer parking to encourage more people visiting the town and shopping and eating out, leading to more business tax collections, or to promote walking, cycling and public transport initiatives.

“Instead of parking charges, can free parking be introduced at least once a month? With more people visiting the town and shopping and eating out, this will lead to more business tax collections.”

“Don't increase parking charges but make bus fares cheaper to encourage more use.”

v Reduce services

Some suggestions related to reducing services and ranged across services including streetlights, grass cutting, planting on roundabouts, adult social care, Housing Benefit, Council Tax benefit and libraries.

“Switch off some of the traffic lights when there's no traffic - or put roundabouts back in.”

“Stop maintaining verges in residential areas, residents can do this.”

“Close libraries (reluctantly)”

vi Income

Alternative suggestions relating to generating income included making the most of organic waste, investing in renewable energy to generate income and increasing income from cultural and leisure activities.

“Create a passive income stream! Invest in wind, hydro and solar farms to generate power that you sell to the grid or local business.”

vii Development

Suggestions included spending on social housing or placing more obligations on developers.

“Do not build swimming pools and leisure facilities ... Build more housing on local authority land - ie the car park behind the station and use the proceeds to build social housing.”

“Force plc builders to create more schools/community spaces/buildings and gp practices/walk in centres.”

Q2. We are proposing a 2% Adult Social Care precept. What alternative suggestions do you have for how we could fund the rising costs of and rising demand for adult social care services?

There were 351 responses to this question. The main alternative suggestions were to reduce costs/improve efficiency and increase charges for Adult Care or other services. Further suggestions, to a lesser degree, were to place more financial responsibility on business/developers, to lobby government, to make more use of the voluntary sector and volunteers, to make more use of prevention activities and to reduce Adult Social Care services.

“Reduce management and councillors pay, reduce amounts of contractors.”

“Revise eligibility criteria so that those who can afford to contribute to the costs of their own care do so, and plan ahead for this eventuality properly.”

“Make people pay for services or add value to services that people don't mind paying for such as cafes or parking.”

“I would suggest focusing on more efficient services and asking for people to volunteer more. I would gladly volunteer to help for example clean and maintain our local park and tennis courts which are a mess.”

Q3. We are proposing £357m of capital investment over three years. What alternative suggestions do you have for where we should invest to ensure we modernise facilities, infrastructure and services for residents and help the Council achieve its net zero-carbon target by 2030?

There were 421 responses to this question. The highest number of alternative suggestions were for schemes to protect the environment and tackle climate change.

“Incentives for those who use electric cars, more investment in individuals who wants to install solar panels or other green alternative, for exam. a reduction on planning fees if they do an extension that is environmental friendly. More recycling facilities and heavy penalties for those who use the recycling bin for general rubbish.”

This was followed by transport, highways and leisure investment

“The roads are in dire need of repair in some areas, but it is very difficult to know if £9m is enough.”

“Delighted you are going to improve leisure facilities.”

Q4. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how our proposed budget might adversely impact on people, and how could we mitigate this impact?

This question was asked to understand what the impacts might be on those protected under the Equality Act 2010. There were 361 responses.

The main equality impacts raised were those in relation to the impact of an increase in Council Tax on people with low income and those equality groups that are more likely to experience low income particularly elderly, disabled people and families with young children.

“As ever it is the low income families and a number of the elderly and infirm who are most impacted by council tax rises, as each rise is not met with any relevant increase to the benefits they receive to be able to offset any rise in council tax.”

“The additional stress and pressure being applied to these groups of individuals is incredibly dangerous and is placing families at risk, not only of mental health issues but even potential homelessness!”

“My family are totally reliant on state benefits to boost earned income to literally survive from salary to salary, each time our council tax bill has risen, it has taken further money away from what little we already survive on, yet the penalties for non payment are so severe, even when we simply can't afford to pay it, it has to be paid.”

“Families of disabled children often lose out with cuts - it can take 2 years to get an assessment of possible ASC and ADHD and there are long waits for counselling for young people.”

Suggestions made on how impacts could be mitigated were that the changes should be communicated clearly and managed to make a smooth transition.

“Please be aware of those on low income and in particular single people on benefits so that they receive a fair consultation and are clearly made aware of any changes and need to apply for CT support. It is not sufficient to just send a letter through the post as some people do not open their post, do not realise the implications of not responding, cannot read or understand the contents. A text message or phone call might be helpful.”

“a sustained educational campaign with clear explanations and examples of benefits on medium and long term”

