



West
Northamptonshire
Council

West Northamptonshire Council Draft Budget 2024-25 Consultation

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1. Executive Summary

- The Draft Budget 2024/25 Consultation received a total of 654 responses. 647 were received via West Northamptonshire Council’s online consultation platform, 7 were received by email. There were no responses sent via post.
- Respondents were asked to select the closest representation of how they wished to answer the consultation, the majority selected local residents (520, or 82 per cent).
- The consultation detail has been widely promoted using several means including local press, social media, and newsletters.
- Proposal to increase Council Tax by 2.99 per cent to address additional costs of our service provision: 38 per cent agree, 52 per cent disagree, 10 per cent neither agree nor disagree. 306 comments received on proposal. 204 comments received on negative impacts and how these could be avoided.
- Proposal to increase Council Tax by a further 2 per cent to fund the increase in costs providing Adult Social Care: 37 per cent agree, 46 per cent disagree, 17 per cent neither agree nor disagree. 242 comments received on proposal. 138 comments received on negative impacts and how these could be avoided.

- Proposal to increase some fees and charges in line with inflation, in order to help fund services: 50 per cent agree, 32 per cent disagree, 18 per cent neither agree nor disagree or don't know. 121 comments received.
- The invitation to comment on the Draft General Fund Capital Programme 2024-2028 received 63 comments.
- Additional comments on the Draft Budget were invited, 60 further comments were received.
- Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2024/25 proposal to increase rent by 7.7 per cent across the councils housing stock: 57 per cent agree, 28 per cent disagree, and 15 per cent neither agree nor disagree or don't know. 109 comments received on proposal. 60 comments received on negative impacts and how these could be avoided.
- Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2024/25 proposal to increase garage rents by 7.7 per cent: 65 per cent agree, 12 per cent disagree, 23 per cent neither agree nor disagree or don't know.
- Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2024/25 proposal to increase general service charges by 7.7 per cent in line with current inflation: 51 per cent agree, 29 per cent disagree, 20 per cent neither agree nor disagree or don't know.
- Investment plans of £54m in social housing during the next financial year, as part of a total five-year capital programme amounting to £279m: 54 per cent agree, 25 per cent disagree, 21 per cent neither agree nor disagree. 93 comments received.
- Additional comments on the HRA Capital Programme were invited, 23 further comments were received.
- 292 respondents that accessed the consultation questionnaire provided some demographic information.

2. Introduction

2.1 Overview

Every year West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) plans for the money it will have available and how it should be spent on delivering services in line with the priorities and objectives set out in its Corporate Plan.

At their meeting on 12 December 2023, the Council's Cabinet approved plans to consult the public on WNC's draft budget for 2024-25 and we are now seeking views on these proposals.

Our plans and budget proposals make sure that resources are prioritised and allocated so that the most vulnerable in our local community continue to be supported in the most cost-effective way possible.

Like all councils up and down the country, we continue to experience the financial impact of both increasing costs for the services we buy and provide and the rising demand from people who need our help and support.

Our main financial issues include:

- Inflationary and cost of living pressures impacting directly on the cost of providing services,

- Continued additional demand-led and inflationary pressures within Children and Adult's Social Care services,
- Increasing costs and demand for the services we provide to Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Increasing costs and demand for providing home to school transport,
- Increase in demand for temporary accommodation and increased levels of homelessness.

Our draft budget for 2024/25 aims to address these issues whilst protecting the vital services we deliver to our communities in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Here is a broad overview of our main proposals:

- To increase the average Council Tax by 4.99 per cent, comprising 2.99 per cent general increase and a further 2 per cent specifically for adult social care in line with the limit set by Government.
- To increase fees and charges, where possible, broadly in line with inflation to ensure they reflect and address operational cost and service demand. To increase fees associated with planning services to align with recently introduced national guidance,
- Continuing to review services and restructure teams within the organisation, introducing new, more efficient ways of working to make back office savings without impacting on how services are delivered to residents.
- A proposed General Fund Capital Programme proposing a £28m increase for the 24/25 financial year.

The Council has also published a draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget for 2024/25. The HRA is a ring-fenced account which records the cost of managing the Council's housing stock.

Within the HRA are proposals to invest £54m in social housing during the next financial year, which will form part of a total five-year capital programme amounting to £279m.

The Council is proposing to increase rents by 7.7%, in accordance with the Government's amended Rent Standard, equating to an average increase of £8.00 per week, and to also increase service charges and garage rents by 7.7%. This proposed increase in rent is critical in funding the maintenance and delivery of 'fit for purpose' housing.

In light of the on-going cost of living pressures on residents, any underspend from the previous 2023-24 hardship fund will be rolled forward into 2024-25 to provide support to tenants who may be facing additional financial difficulties because of the increase.

This document sets out the summarised results to the consultation which took place from 13 December 2023 to 23 January 2024.

2.2 Related documents

- [Cabinet Meeting Draft Budget 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan report](#), and its appendices:
 - [Appendix A – Draft Revenue Budget and MTFP Summary](#)
 - [Appendix B – Draft Budget Proposals](#)
 - [Appendix C – Fees and Charges](#)
 - [Appendix D – Draft Dedicated Schools Grant](#)
 - [Appendix E – Draft Capital Programme](#)

- [Appendix E1 - Draft Capital Programme schemes](#)
- [2024-25 Draft Housing Revenue Account \(HRA\) Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan](#), and its appendices
 - [Appendix 1 – Draft HRA Revenue Budget 2024-25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan](#)
 - [Appendix 2 – Draft Growth, Efficiencies, and Investment Proposals](#)
 - [Appendix 3 – Draft HRA Capital Programme](#)
 - [Appendix 4 – Draft Northampton Partnership Homes \(NPH\) Management Fee](#)
 - [Appendix 5 – Draft Schedule of Service Charges](#)

2.3 Cabinet decisions and formal consultation

The [Draft Budget 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan](#) received approval from Cabinet on 12 December 2023, with the consultation on budget proposals commencing on 13 December 2023, and concluding 23 January 2024.

The public consultation was carried out by the council's Communications Team. The consultation gave as much detail on the areas that people would feel strongly about as well as encouraging access to all the related documents. Comments were invited on any part of the budget proposals. The consultation followed nationally recognised best practice and allowed for responses to be received digitally and non-digitally.

2.4 Method

The consultation consisted of an online questionnaire which was made available through the council's consultation hub, Citizen Space at:
<https://westnorthants.citizenspace.com/cet/budget-2024-25>

Support in accessing the questionnaire online was made available at most council buildings, and all council libraries. Paper copies were made available where required. Alternatively, people could also respond via email at haveyoursay@westnorthants.gov.uk, or by post using The Guildhall address. There was also an option to contact via phone.

Those who wished to hold a group discussion with others were able provide joint feedback by completing the online Group Facilitator's Feedback Form questionnaire or by downloading a PDF version to send via email or post, this form acted as a toolkit to assist these groups. Direction to this existed within the Draft Budget detail available through the council's consultation hub.

People were invited to contact the council by email, post or telephone should they have had any queries, comments or wished for a copy of the questionnaire in another format.

Within the consultation detail, respondents were provided with explanations around the reasoning for the proposals, additional information, and links to relevant documents were positioned throughout the parts of the online questionnaire for ease of accessing this information.

2.5 Publicity

The consultation was publicised widely before and throughout the duration of the activity using different means including:

- West Northants Life magazine: which when out to circa 200k homes across West Northamptonshire (in November 2023).
- Local press: A series of media releases that went to circa 365 newsrooms and individuals (including hyperlocal, local, regional, and national, print, digital and broadcast including the Chronicle and Echo and BBC Radio Northampton) from the council's Communications Team.
- Social media:
 - 25 promotions across our Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram accounts, reaching a cumulative total of 28,766 accounts, prompting 850 engagements through clicks, likes and shares.
 - A Facebook advertisement was used for the launch through to 23 January 2024, reaching 7,800 accounts, gaining 22,709 page impressions, and prompting 267 clicks.
 - An animated explainer video introducing the budget was created in-house, published on our YouTube channel, and embedded in the Consultation Hub, gaining 462 views.
- E-newsletters featuring articles promoting the consultation were sent on 15 December, 5 January, 8 January, and 19 January to around 8,500 subscribers. Articles were also included in news bulletins to town and parish councils.
- Online council news pages: Internal communications and external public pages.

Detail about the consultation was also circulated via email, twice, to those registered on the council's Consultation Register and Residents Panel (over 500 contacts) initially and as a reminder, as well as being sent to council members and parish councils. Wider promotion of the consultation was encouraged through these means.

3. Response to the consultation

A total of 654 responded to the consultation. There were 647 online responses to the questionnaire through the council's consultation platform, and 7 email responses.

There were no written (paper) responses.

The consultation questionnaire was structured in a way that respondents were able to comment on individual proposals. There was no requirement for respondents to answer every question, therefore the total of responses for each question differ.

Regular summaries of the responses were circulated to Senior Finance Officers, and all the responses received were sent to decision makers following the conclusion of the consultation.

3.1 Response profile

Respondents were asked in what capacity they were responding to the consultation. This question allowed for one answer which most closely represents how people wish to respond.

There were 634 responses to this question. Most respondents were local residents (520 or 82 per cent).

The following provides the respondent types to the consultation:

Table 1, About you

Respondent type	Count
A resident of West Northamptonshire	520
A West Northamptonshire service user	7
A West Northamptonshire business owner or representative	0
A West Northamptonshire Council employee	78
A West Northamptonshire Council councillor	11
On behalf of a town/parish council in an official capacity	2
A town or parish councillor	6
On behalf of a charity, voluntary or community sector organisation (VCS)	5
A representative of a local community group or residents' association	1
On behalf of an educational establishment such as a school or college	0
On behalf of a health partner organisation such as integrated care or mental health trust	0
A representative of a user group	0
Other	4

There were no (0) group facilitator forms submitted.

3.2 Proposed increase to Council Tax

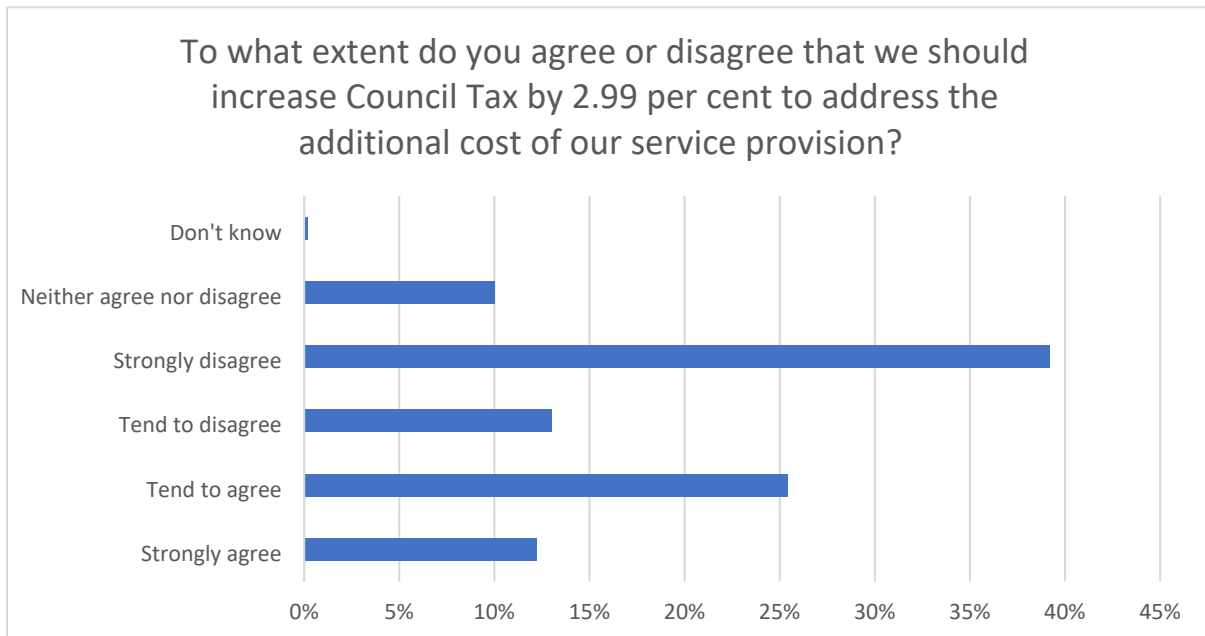
- 3.2.1. The council is proposing to increase the average amount of council tax by 4.99 per cent (2.99 per cent plus 2 per cent for adult social care), in line with the limit set by Government, which allows for this increase without triggering a referendum.
- 3.2.2. The proposed Council Tax increase will result in an additional income of around £14.9m per year which will be used to protect existing services. Without the increase the level of services required to be cut to deliver a balanced budget would be greater than is currently the case in the draft budget proposals.
- 3.2.3. As an example, the Council Tax for a Band D property in this year is £1,693.73 for West Northamptonshire Council services. This will increase by 4.99 per cent to £1,778.25 in 2024/25 for all Council services for the whole year. An increase of £84.52 for the year.
- 3.2.4. A 2.99 per cent general increase would result in an increase of £50.64 per year on a band D property.
- 3.2.5. Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that we should increase Council Tax by 2.99 per cent to address the additional cost of our service provision. There were 508 responses to this question with 191 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 265 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should increase Council Tax by 2.99 per cent to address the additional cost of our service provision?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	62	12%
Tend to agree	129	25%
Tend to disagree	66	13%

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly disagree	199	39%
Neither agree nor disagree	51	10%
Don't know	1	0%

Chart 1



3.2.6. Respondents were invited to provide comments on why they answered in the way that they did. 306 respondents chose to provide a comment. 88 of respondents that agreed with the proposal chose to provide comments and are summarised below:

- a) The majority of respondents that agree understand and support the reason for the increase in council tax being due to inflation, cost of providing services, and demand. Some stating that they would rather an increase than services deplete and note diminishing central Government funding making the rise necessary.
- b) Several respondents were critical of the rise as felt that an increase would lead to non-payment and therefore cost the council more in the long run to recover debts impacting on future budgets or suggest council staff and councillors are overpaid.
- c) Some respondents that accept the proposal also had concerns around residents', or in some cases their own, hardship and struggles with the cost of living. Noting that it is not sustainable.
- d) Some respondents that accepted the proposal indicated concern that services were not up to standard, and less money would affect this further. Others noted that services needed to be maintained and the money would help further.
- e) A small number of respondents felt that the consultations narrative was misleading, or they did not understand the proposal.
- f) A small number were critical of the legacy councils' previous administrations.
- g) A small number that agrees felt the proposal was too much, whereas a similar number felt it was not enough.
- h) Other comments included that options for alternative solutions to the increase should be provided, that effectiveness and expenditure should be examined, that any

money needs to be fairly distributed within West Northants, or only spent on services that all residents see the benefit, or that recent improvements are apparent.

3.2.7. Of those respondents that neither agreed nor disagreed, 24 chose to provide comment:

- a) A number of respondents said although not wanted they understand and accept the increase, commenting that services need to be maintained as a standard and the importance of certain services, that increase should show value for money.
- b) Some felt that people will be more affected than others due to the expense of everything rising fuelling hardship in households. Also, that council tax is an unfair representation of wealth in terms of property bands.
- c) Other comments noted disappointment with previous legacy administrations and central Government, that they have seen no improvements with previous tax increases or services decreasing.

3.2.8. Of those respondents that disagreed with the proposal, 194 chose to provide comments, summarised as follows:

- a) A large number of comments refer to increased financial difficulties or the respondents or their deep concern for other residents' financial stability. Many comments echo that heightened expense is unavoidable however wages have not increased, many also note that everything is increasing in cost with the same level of service or less. A number of these comments also reference that they are not low earners yet are finding the current rises difficult to handle without this increase also being imposed.
- b) A high number of comments were received that note concerns about services being stretched, lacking or reduced. Some referenced that money has been wasted elsewhere on projects instead of on essential services, or that cuts are being made where they are needed most. There is feeling that there nothing to show or little improvement from increasing council tax.
- c) A high number of comments were received that indicate a level of dissatisfaction with the council's money management noting that money is not being spent responsibly or it is wasted, that there have been historic money management issues with no change since unitary formation. Additionally, some feel that budget consultations do not consider comments made, or make little to no difference, some calling for better transparency, and that the consultation should freely detail where money is spent.
- d) Comments relating to the amount being too much were received, further supporting issues highlighted through for the financial strain felt.
- e) Some comments felt that Central Government should provide more support due to their mishandled finances.
- f) Other comment themes were around services being disproportionate dependant on where you live in West Northamptonshire, that the tax bandings are much more than other similar sized local authority areas (outside of West Northants) or large cities.

- 3.2.9. Respondents were asked that if they felt the proposal would have a negative impact, what they thought that impact would be, they were also invited to provide suggestions on how any potential negative impacts could be avoided. 204 comments were received for this.
- 3.2.10. The majority of respondents to this question made comment reinforcing the current financial pressures that everyone faces. There is great concern that any increase is unfair and will push those already struggling into further into poverty, that wages are not increasing, that the council is creating debts, that there needs to be more done to help people and not just those who are on low incomes. Some comments felt they would need to cut down on food, or other necessities to be able to pay. A few comments were made on the increases being further pressure that affects mental health of some and also heightened concerns around those who are considered most vulnerable.

In comparison to the above, a small number of comments were received noting a lack of confidence around the council's money/finance management, how services will suffer, and how money/finance is being misspent or wasted on vanity projects or invested in areas that the public do not benefit from. Comments were received around lacking support, hidden funds, and overpaid staff/members. Additionally, how essential services are not for everyone and therefore fairness is questionable. Comments were also made around Government wasting money leading to local authorities suffering.

A few comments have been received that express that some services are not up to standard or deteriorating, or they are disproportionate dependent on where you live, many noting that most money they see spent is too Northampton centric.

Other comments received include that the council should think about those who receive not subsidies/assistance, not to raise the tax, higher tax bands do not mean higher earnings, essential services should be for everyone, and underspend is apparent on climate change.

There were a number of comments providing suggestions of alternatives or to manage negative impacts, these relate to the council reviewing costs and looking at other ways to generate income being that less of an increase would be more acceptable, that the council should lobby central Government, taxing high-earners, make and encourage traders to use recycling centres at a charge.

Other suggestions included that council tax bands should be reviewed, or that there should be a means test or something similar for those better off as the banding does not fairly represent the household or income. Additionally, that if it was clearer what is delivered by the council, it may help mitigate negative impacts.

- 3.2.11. Respondents were asked to what extent do you agree or disagree that we should increase Council Tax by a further 2 per cent to fund the increase in costs of providing Adult Social Care.

3.2.12. The Adult Social Care Levy was introduced by the Government as a way of funding social care in light of a growing national funding shortfall due to rising costs and demand. In recent years councils like us, that are responsible for adult social care, have been allowed to raise an additional amount through council tax, provided this is spent directly on the care of the most vulnerable adults and older people.

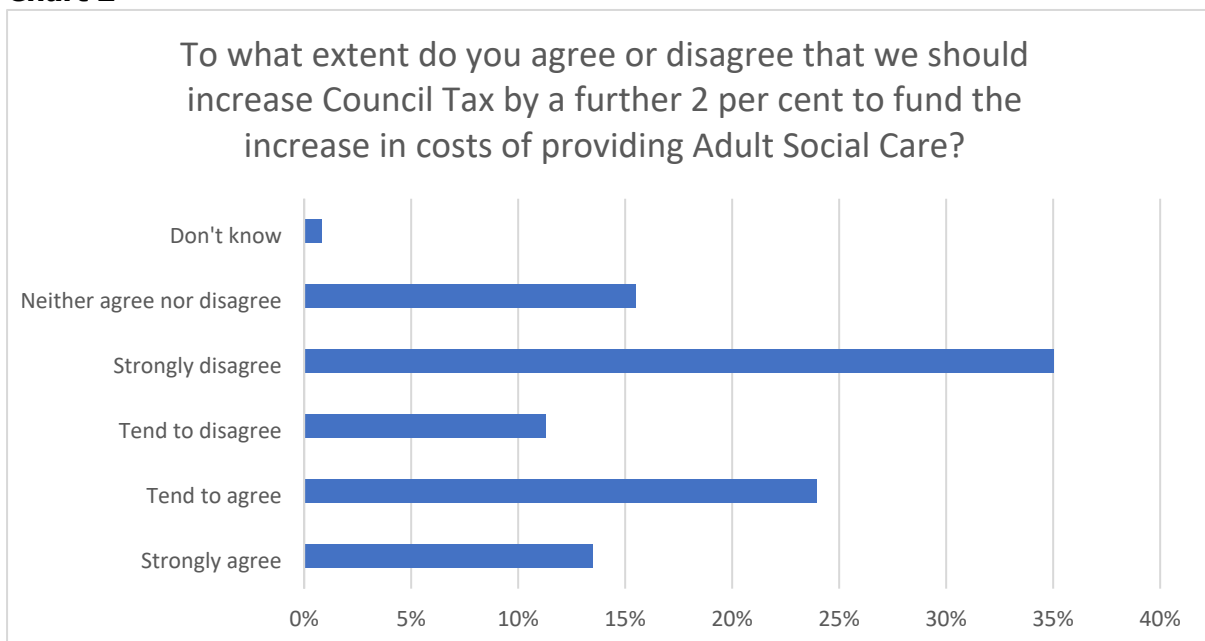
3.2.13. As an example, a 2 per cent adult social care precept increase would result in an increase of £33.88p per year on a band D property.

3.2.14. There were 497 responses to this question with 186 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 230 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should increase Council Tax by a further 2 per cent to fund the increase in costs of providing Adult Social Care?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	67	13%
Tend to agree	119	24%
Tend to disagree	56	11%
Strongly disagree	174	35%
Neither agree nor disagree	77	15%
Don't know	4	1%

Chart 2



3.2.15. Respondents were again asked if they would like to tell us why they answered the question in the way that they did, 242 provided comment. Of those that agree, 89 comments were received.

- a) A high number of respondents understand an increase is required to ensure Adult Social Care services are maintained and can continue to be available for future

generations. As well as general agreement it is recognised there has been historic underfunding and that finances need to be ringfenced and invested in.

- b) Many of these respondents raised concern that Central Government should be providing more to fund Adult Social Care and cite Government as responsible and have neglected this area. Some comments also referred to the system being unfair and requiring audit and improvement on the assessment process. Some felt that the council and previous administrations are accountable.
- c) Some comments noted that they are concerned that Adult Social Care is underfunded and inadequate as a result with some care homes facing closure, stating that it needs to be better funded and resourced.
- d) Other comments where that the council have little alternative option, that spending should be more transparent, council management are overpaid and staff should be reviewed, that stronger partnerships should be made with the NHS, consider prevention methods to social care, consider a smaller amount, the proposal would not make a difference, and that simpler example of the burden would be helpful.

3.2.16. Of those who neither agreed nor disagreed, 26 provided further comment:

- a) Most comments were framed around needed the support as it is essential but also a need to ensure value for money.
- b) Other comments varied and related to ensuring money is spent wisely, understanding care is expensive, that agencies should work together, people should pay for their own care, funds shouldn't be wasted, support is often found elsewhere due to being inadequate, and a lower increase would be more acceptable.

3.2.17. Of the respondents that disagreed, 127 chose to give further comment, as summarised:

- a) Many comments were received again echoing the uncertain financial stability of residents and all increases noting that this is a further strain, so much is becoming unaffordable, debt or further debt will be more common as will the use of food banks and other charitable organisations.
- b) Several comments are critical of central government, and they should be doing more, that adult social care is an unacceptable burden and unfair to be paid by people that may not use it in the future. Some suggest central Government should meet some or all the funding shortfalls or funded by central Government entirely.
- c) Several comments are critical of local governments handling of finances noting wasteful spending asking for scrutiny and efficiencies, that rises are not justified, a call for better money management and ringfencing, and better transparency on money spent and needed.
- d) Some commented that the social care system is underfunded, that the service is not fit for purpose, or it is difficult to access support through the system or assessment process or the assessment is not fair. Also, that there are recent care home closures

which give the wrong impression that further revenue is required, and that other areas of adult social care seem to be reducing.

- e) There were some comments that are critical of council messaging, being that the budget narrative does not justify the increase.
- f) Some comments said that they feel the increase will make no difference
- g) Other comments note that the council is unfair to use residents to balance their books, that WNC staff should be reviewed, finances in this area should be ringfenced or look at other income generation, the proposal is too much, concern around those abusing the system, higher earners should pay more.

3.2.18. Respondents were also asked here if they felt the proposal would have a negative impact, what they felt that impact would be, and they were also invited to provide suggestions on how any potential negative impacts could be avoided.

There were 139 responses to this question.

The most common comment being the impact on those struggling financially and those considered as vulnerable. Working households are struggling with income not increasing with inflation and the general cost of living. Additionally, many felt that increases, as well as the current financial climate, are negatively impacting on theirs or others mental health, with people barely affording essential household necessities and having to approach charity organisations. Some also felt that the working population are being affected the most.

Several comments felt that the council could not justify the increase as no benefits are shown, or that the council mis-manages money, or is not clear about where money goes.

A number of comments focused on the increase being high and unsustainable, with others concerned or critical of the management of Adult Social Care, being that it is not value for money, not ringfenced, and a service that is unfair on those not using it.

There is concern around services lacking, reducing or being unsupported or neglected, noting that that Adult Social Care is not fit for purpose. Also, a concern that increasing budget in care may distort the market and contribute to further inflation.

Some comments related to not being listened to by the council in historic budgets, that previous administrations are at fault, and that there is a general lack in confidence in the council's budget setting.

Suggestions on how any potential negative impacts could be avoided included cutting unnecessary council projects, lowering/reviewing council tax system and banding, lobby Government to pay for adult social care, asking for contribution from service users, take more from those who can afford to pay more, engage younger generations, be transparent on spending.

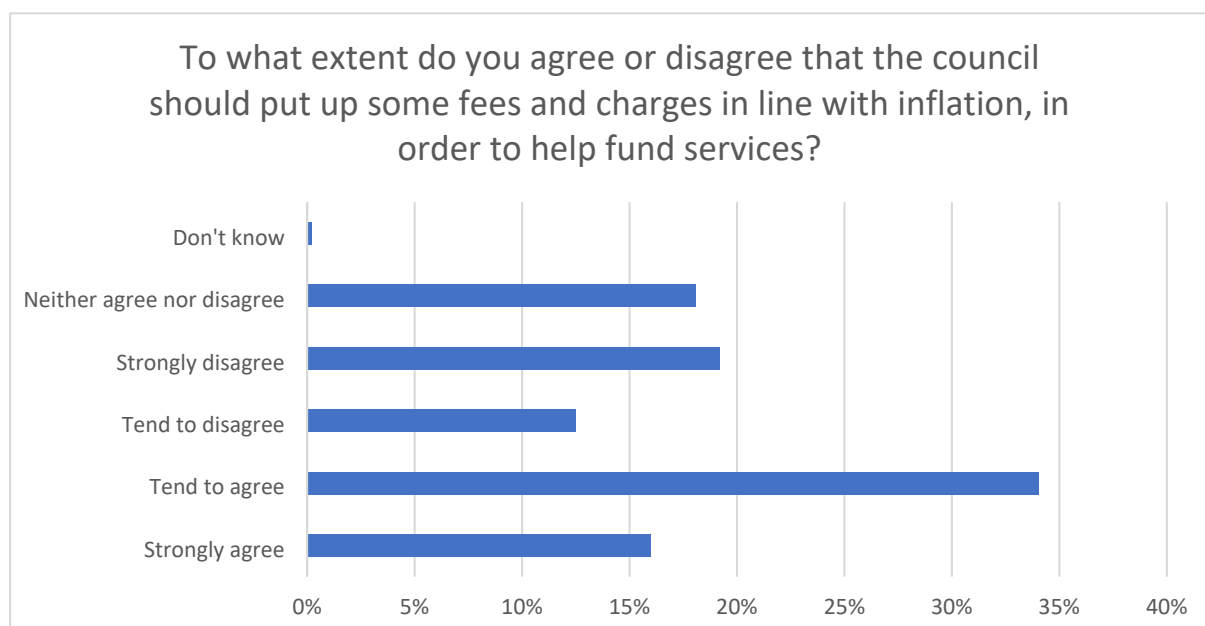
3.3 Fees and charges

- 3.3.1. Income from fees and charges represents an important source of funds to the council and enables a range of services to be provided within the area and beyond.
- 3.3.2. West Northamptonshire’s Draft Budget generates Fees and Charges income in the region of £27.5m.
- 3.3.3. It is good practice each year to review, and where appropriate, increase fees and charges to cover any increasing cost of service provision, the impact of any inflationary increases and align with national benchmarks, and nationally set fees (in the case of planning related services). We do not raise fees and charges where the charges are set by Government. Some of our fees such as our car park fees are not increasing.
- 3.3.4. Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that the council should put up some fees and charges in line with inflation, in order to help fund services. There were 432 responses to this question with 216 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 137 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the council should put up some fees and charges in line with inflation, in order to help fund services?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	69	16%
Tend to agree	147	34%
Tend to disagree	54	13%
Strongly disagree	83	19%
Neither agree nor disagree	78	18%
Don't know	1	0%

Chart 3



- 3.3.5. Respondents were invited to provide comments on the council putting up some fees and charges in line with inflation to help fund services. 121 respondents chose to provide a comment. The following provides a broad summary of the key themes and insights regarding the fees and charges proposed.
- 3.3.6. Waste services: The most prevalent theme on fees and charges is around waste services. Most of these comments focused on the compostable waste collection service noting further increase is unwelcome due to dramatic above inflation increase previously, that other local areas do not pay as much, that it encourages people not to recycle or to fly-tip, adds to pressure on recycling centres, penalises those who are trying to care for the environment. There is also some feeling that residents are already paying enough for green waste collections and are not getting value for money due to frequency of use and not the best service.
- 3.3.7. Some comments were provided around fly-tipping, and that it should be discouraged by increasing penalty fees and making bulky waste collections free. Also, that income could be generated from commercial businesses at recycling centres, or incentivise commercial waste recycling to prevent fly-tipping.
- 3.3.8. All fees and charges: increases should be determined on appropriateness such as income of the customer, that it is reasonable to increase only if the cost to deliver is going up and there is no profit to be made, that those needing the services should bear the costs, that cost should go up on all fees and charges.
- 3.3.9. Car parking and transport: There should be more being done to encourage footfall in town centres, do more to encourage active travel or buses, don't increase parking fees to further discourage town centre use or remove completely. Other comments related to car parking and transport felt the council were acting responsibly by not increasing parking fees, and that out-of-town shopping centres should charge for parking. Some felt it unfair that country park parking fees apply, penalising those wanting to enjoy outside space.
- 3.3.10. Planning: Developers should pay more for building homes, home alterations to help with climate change should be free of charge
- 3.3.11. Licencing: Apply a higher fee for HMOs and liquor licensing as these cause issues in towns. Pest control shouldn't be increased, or at least a discount should apply to those on low income.
- 3.3.12. Other comments made were critical that the list of charges is lengthy and not prepared to read the document, that comments will not be taken into account, fixed penalties should be increased, that increase shouldn't happen due to the current financial climate, that services are not improving, unfair due to wages stagnating, village statements are not fit for purpose and should not increase, library charges should stay the same and the charge list on this is not clear, there needs to be a balance, appreciate the need for some increases, childcare grant should be more, child related costs should be paid by those who need them.

3.4 Draft General Fund Capital Programme 2024-2028

- 3.4.1. The Draft General Fund demonstrates how the Council will make expenditure and investment decisions with the finances available in line with the Corporate Plan which sets out the Council's objectives and priorities.
- 3.4.2. The Draft General Fund sets out the key objectives and broad principles to be applied by the Council when considering capital investment and its funding and provides the context for how the Medium-Term Capital Programme seeks to support the realisation of the Council's vision and corporate priorities. The Draft General Fund Capital Programme has been developed to ensure a robust mechanism to deliver our priorities within the finances available and is our approach to effective, long-term planning and investment for the benefit of our residents.
- 3.4.3. The draft budget includes additions to the current capital programme which have been assessed and recommended for inclusion in the budget.
- 3.4.4. Respondents were asked if they had any comments to make on the proposals set out in the Draft General Fund Capital Programme 2024-28, which received 63 comments.
- 3.4.5. A theme that received many comments were related to County Hall and other council assets. Some felt that the County Hall building should be sold as it serves no purpose, requires too much maintenance, maintenance is too expensive, spending is not justified, and any renovation should be towards carbon neutral/net zero. There were also comments regarding office optimisation being expensive before carrying out any actual changes, that the Council should not be renting property but instead make use of what it has, that council equipment and vehicles should be invested in, and old equipment invested in.
- 3.4.6. Several comments referred to finances being targeted mainly at Northampton with little investment in other towns and the wider rural area.
- 3.4.7. Some comments that were received were mainly around how the council manages money, and investment could be spent on more meaningful projects, and question why the capital program does not cover climate change initiatives including net zero and air quality.
- 3.4.8. Some comments related to road maintenance requiring further investment, and road extensions being unneeded.
- 3.4.9. Other comments were about lack of detail on schemes or not easy to understand, that waste services should not be reduced, there is money not being spent, nursery places should be funded, checks should be made on standard of project works, evidence for previous years capital spend should be publicly available, a few comments received felt the projects were justified.

3.5 Other comments

Respondents were asked if they had any other comments that they wished to make about the proposals in the draft budget that they had not already told us, including any alternative ideas about how we could save the same amount of money or generate the same amount of income as outlined in the proposals. 60 provided further comment. The following provides an overview of the comments made:

- a) Several comments were received providing suggestions to increase revenue or decrease expenditure including investing in de-carbonisation on built assets, locating finance that has not been spent or accounted for, look at other ways to fund adult social care and children's school meals and transport, utilise care home spaces, bring services in-house and cut down on contracted work, increase penalty fees.
- b) Respondents to this question wanted the council to be more efficient and review its own operational budget costs, including back-office and staff costs. Some felt that services are disproportionate based on where they live.
- c) Some comments were critical of the council or the council's money management asking to ensure public money is not wasted, that it is spent to benefit all residents and is value for money. Some also felt that proposals should be communicated prior to consultation, or they are not clear enough, and that there are too many councillors or high level staff.
- d) Some comments were transport or highways related including: Look at ways to improve better town transport that can address air quality issues and help with tourism, fund improvements to roads and footpaths with pleas to fill pot holes in towns.
- e) Other comments wanted more climate/natural environment related investment, and that investment needs to be in the right places.
- f) A few comments were not related to the council budget.

4. Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2024/25

- 4.1. Local housing authorities are required by law to keep a Housing Revenue Account (HRA).
- 4.2. This HRA shows the accounts for the council's housing provision, identifying the major elements of expenditure and how these are funded, mainly from rents. Any money that enters the HRA, can only be spent on social housing and it is the council's responsibility to set a balanced HRA and avoid financial shortfall.
- 4.3. There are strict rules surrounding the costs and income that can be charged to this account. Much of the income and expenditure is dictated by legislation and regulation leaving the council with limited direct control over a number of these budgets.
- 4.4. The council has a housing stock which is managed by its arms-length management organisation, Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH).
- 4.5. The Rent Standard 2023 which is a national policy ordinarily allows annual rent increases on both social rent and affordable rent properties of up to the rate of

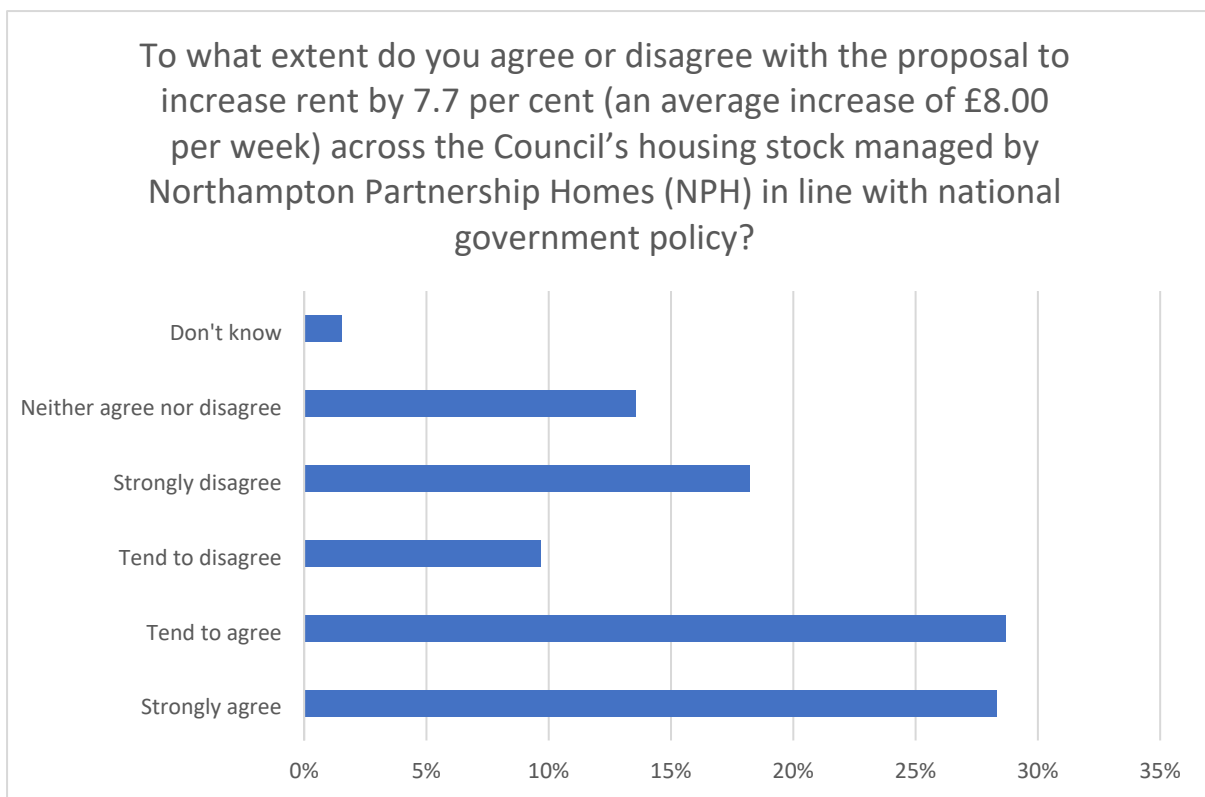
inflation at September (Consumer Price Index - CPI) plus 1 per cent. The CPI in September 2023 showed an increase of 6.7 per cent due to the high levels of inflation.

- 4.6. The Council and NPH are proposing to increase rent from 1 April 2024 by 7.7 per cent, on average across the Council's housing stock in line with national government policy. This will raise the average rent from £103.79 to £111.79 per week, which is an increase of £8.00 per week. This increase will help to manage the increasing costs that are also being experienced in this area. We continue to provide support to tenants facing difficulties with the increase in rent, by rolling over any unspent funding from the previous year's hardship fund.
- 4.7. This increase ensures we are able to continue to invest in a high-quality housing service for our tenants and any income generated will go back into the Council's housing pot to be spent on maintenance, improvements in energy efficiency, and building new homes. Failure to increase the rents by the statutory amount will not only have a significant impact on income in the current year but also in each future year. It is estimated that a 1 per cent reduction in the rent increase would reduce the rental income by about £0.6 million in the current year.
- 4.8. The Council and NPH are also proposing an increase of 7.7 per cent for tenant and leaseholder service charges, (in line with CPI at September 2023), and to increase garage rents by 7.7 per cent. This will increase the average rent per garage from £10.96 to £11.80 (or 84 pence per week).
- 4.9. Within the HRA there are plans to invest £54m in social housing during the next financial year, which forms part of a total five year capital programme amounting to £279m. Also built into the plans is investment in decarbonisation which is estimated to impact on 500 homes.
- 4.10. The investment in 2024-25 includes:
 - £7m on external improvements
 - £11m on internal works improvements
 - £2.3m on disabled adaptations
 - £24m on new build programmes and major projects; and
 - £10m on buying back social housing and for spot purchases of suitable properties.
- 4.11. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to increase rent by 7.7 per cent (an average increase of £8.00 per week) across the Council's housing stock managed by Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) in line with national government policy. There were 258 responses to this question with 147 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 72 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to increase rent by 7.7 per cent (an average increase of £8.00 per week) across the Council’s housing stock managed by Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) in line with national government policy?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	73	28%
Tend to agree	74	29%
Tend to disagree	25	10%
Strongly disagree	47	18%
Neither agree nor disagree	35	14%
Don't know	4	2%

Chart 4



4.12. Respondents were invited to provide comments on why they answered in the way that they did, 109 comments were received.

- a) 50 respondents that agreed with the proposal chose to provide comments. Respondents who strongly agree or tend to agree said that social rents are very low and needs to level up with the private sector. Some said that should the stock be better managed, and that properties need to be suitably maintained. A few felt the increase was sensible but were concerned how affordable the rent would be for those on low to no incomes, that households income should be taken into account. Some also felt it unfair that council housing is subsidised.
- b) 11 comments from respondents who neither agree nor disagree. The comments mainly focused around concerns of affordability. Others noted they could not

comment due to not being social housing tenants, messaging was unclear, or unfair on those not renting.

- c) Many of the 46 comments from respondents disagreed with the proposal as they feel social housing tenants, are already struggling financially with the cost of living and that the proposed increase would affect those more vulnerable. They said that the rent was already too high and this along with increases in other areas would cause greater hardship. Some were concerned in finding money to cover the rent increase. A small number of comments noted a lack of understanding or questioned the increase.
- d) The small number of respondents that commented that they didn't know, one was not a tenant and the other noted concern around financial stability.

4.13. Respondents were asked that if they felt the proposal would have a negative impact, what they think that impact would be, they were also invited to provide suggestions on how any potential negative impacts could be avoided. There were 60 comments.

4.14. The most frequently mentioned impact is that the increase would put additional financial pressure on residents including those that are vulnerable, already struggling with the cost of living and everything increasing in cost. The proposal would enhance negative impacts faced by low-income families. Many thought that it was not sensible proposal as it would increase debt and force choices about what essentials can be cut. Some felt that the rise would not matter to those most financially pressed due to benefits, others felt that there will be more people claiming benefits.

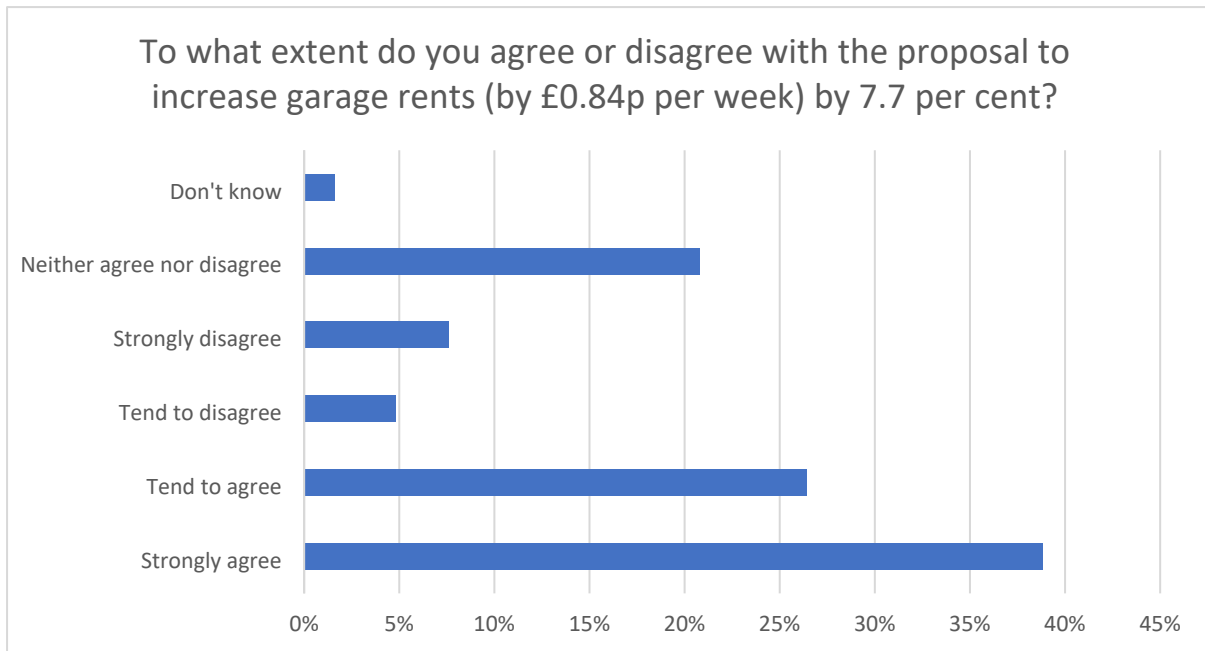
Some suggested introducing the increase in a more managed and stepped way.

4.15. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed in the proposal to increase garage rents (by £0.84p per week) by 7.7 per cent. There were 250 responses to this question with 163 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 31 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to increase garage rents (by £0.84p per week) by 7.7 per cent?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	97	39%
Tend to agree	66	26%
Tend to disagree	12	5%
Strongly disagree	19	8%
Neither agree nor disagree	52	21%
Don't know	4	2%

Chart 5

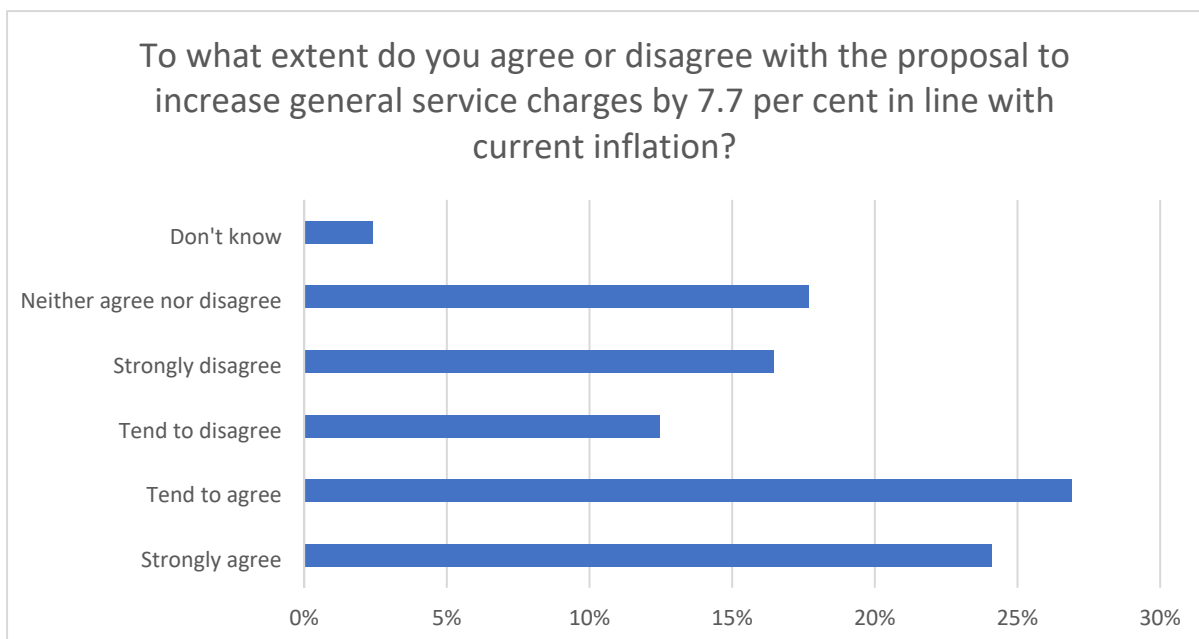


4.16. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed in the proposal to increase general service charges by 7.7 per cent in line with current inflation. There were 249 responses to this question with 127 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 72 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to increase general service charges by 7.7 per cent in line with current inflation?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	60	24%
Tend to agree	67	27%
Tend to disagree	31	12%
Strongly disagree	41	16%
Neither agree nor disagree	44	18%
Don't know	6	2%

Chart 6

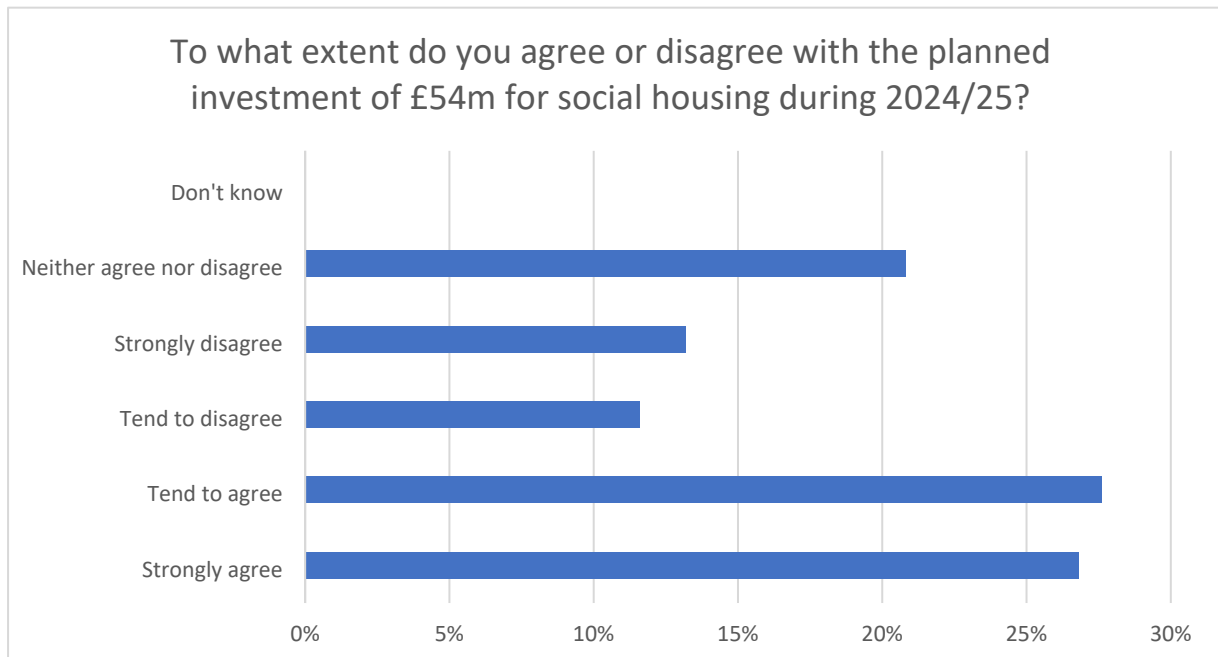


4.17. Within the HRA there are plans to invest £54m in social housing during the next financial year, as part of a total five-year capital programme amounting to £279m. Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the planned investment of £54m for social housing during 2024/25. There were 250 responses to this question with 136 stating they strongly agreed or tended to agree, and 62 strongly disagreed or tended to disagree.

Table 8: Within the HRA there are plans to invest £54m in social housing during the next financial year, as part of a total five-year capital programme amounting to £279m. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the planned investment of £54m for social housing during 2024/25?

Response	Count	Per cent (%)
Strongly agree	67	27%
Tend to agree	69	28%
Tend to disagree	29	12%
Strongly disagree	33	13%
Neither agree nor disagree	52	21%
Don't know	0	0%

Chart 7



4.18. Respondents were invited to provide comments on why they answered in the way that they did, 93 comments were received.

- a) Of those that agree, many felt that they would like to see some reasonable and much needed investment and therefore the proposed is sensible, they would like to see more homes sold by "Right to Buy" replaced like for like as there is not enough social housing suitable for different needs and sizes.
- b) Of those who neither agreed nor disagreed comments were limiting the sale of needed housing stock, more investment needed in repairs and maintenance, that evidence is needed for any investment, that housing should be bought in-house.
- c) Comments where respondents disagreed mainly focused on ensuring homes go to those in housing need, that housing maintenance should be improved, and only completed if no "Right to Buy", that access to social housing is too restrictive to agree to investment that doesn't benefit most, that housing and planning need to be more joined up.
- d) The few comments where respondent didn't know how to answer were that there is concern on homes being built in the wrong places and countryside, and that generally the area is overpopulated.

4.19. Comments were invited should respondents have any comments regarding the HRA Capital programme and indicative budgets as summarised in the Draft HRA Revenue Budget 2024-25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan report, and Appendices. A total of 22 comments were received.

4.20. Comments vary and include that housing investment proposals are welcome but timescales adjusted and realistic budgets set, the council should not sell it's stock, more needs to be done to tackle climate change, and more social housing is needed.

- 4.21. Further comments were invited on the Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget report and its appendices. A further 7 comments were received.
- 4.22. The comments include housing needs to be brought back in-house, that the assessment needs to be robust, and housing should go to the most in need. Other comments were general and not related to the HRA budget.

5. Organisations

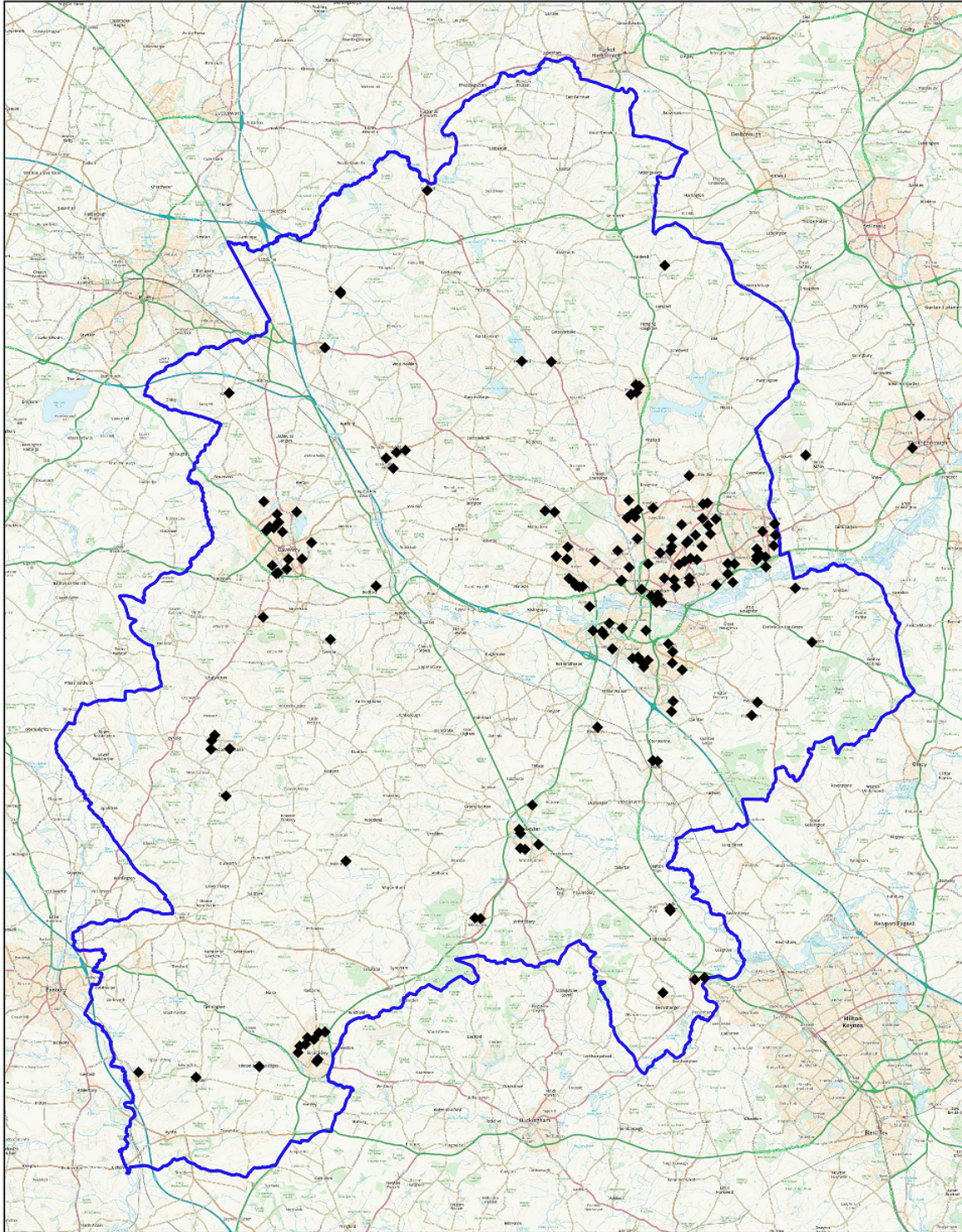
5.1. Organisations or community groups

Those who identified that they were responding to the online consultation on behalf of an organisation were asked to provide detail namely their organisation name and job role. Of the 14 that responded, they identified as West Northamptonshire Parish Councils (8), and local community, interest, or project groups. Job roles of respondents has been omitted from this report to protect anonymity.

6. Demographic information

6.1. Individuals

- 6.1.1. Respondents, where answering as an individual, were encouraged to answer a series of questions to help build insight of the characteristics and communities responding. 290 per cent of those who accessed the survey, completed all or some of this part.
- 6.1.2. As identified in section 3.1., many of the respondents are local residents within West Northants. The demographic detail asked for a postcode to help understand where people were responding from. The following map broadly shows this information:



Title: WNC Budget Consultation 2024 responses

Date: 02-02-2024

Scale: 1:239,399 @A4

Drawn: Simon Hume

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5.2.1. Of those that chose to answer, 137 were female (47 per cent), 130 were male (45 per cent), 8 per cent stated they would 'Prefer not to say'.

- 5.2.2. The most frequent age given by respondents were those aged from 30 to 49 and those aged from 50 to 64.
- 5.2.3. Of those that chose to complete this section; other demographic detail provided demonstrated that 12 per cent were disabled, with physical disability as the most prevalent. Respondents identified themselves as White British (80 per cent), 20 per cent stated they were another ethnic background or preferred not to say. The most frequent religion identified was Christian (56 per cent).
- 5.2.4. The last question sought detail about how the respondent heard about the consultation. There were 282 responses to this question, and respondents could choose more than one answer. The most prevalent method of hearing about the consultation was via social media (38 per cent of all selections), this was followed by email alerts from the council (28 per cent).

6. Written responses

There were 7 written responses received by email. They included responses from individuals and organisations.

Responses provided from individuals commented on the need for better bus routes, that WNC executive salaries should be reviewed, financial concerns, concerns about the future of the Guildhall, and gave project ideas.

Responses provided by organisations provided distinct areas of road, footpath and pavement safety and on service for children and families.

One organisation felt that the budget did not reflect the need to reduce out CO2 emissions, highlighting transport as being the biggest cause. They said that just like the council had borrowed £20m for a new road, it should borrow the same amount to address:

- Pavements – to make them safe and convenient for all users, improve street lighting on key routes, for shared use pavements to follow government guideline LTN1/20. On footways and cycleways, remove all barriers that do not comply with accessibility legislation to give people equal rights to use the routes and to help ensure cargo bikes, or bike trailers can be used.
- Junctions and crossings – start a prioritised program of pedestrian improvements so that junctions are easy to cross on foot as by car; that it is safe to use on foot or by bike. Also, to establish a prioritised program to make junctions on side streets narrower to ensure a safer crossing; and prioritised program so that cars change levels, not pedestrians.
- Schools- They highlighted that the school run is often the worst rush hour of the day, which, they said, is highly damaging to children’s lungs. They asked for action to ensure that children learn good habits for life which also would help reduce ill-health. They asked for the introduction of programme where the school streets are closed to motor traffic at pick-up and drop-off times, with controlled with cameras; they also asked for engagement with parents and headteachers to discover the infrastructure changes for children to be able to safely walk, wheel or cycle to and from school.

- Roads – they stated that the council should implement 20mph limits on all residential streets, making street safer and encouraging more people to walk and cycle. They mentioned the creation of more bus lanes and bus priority routes; and allowing 2-way cycling on one-way streets; building safe cycle routes to schools, to Northampton Town Centre, and to the train station; and on busy routes, keep bikes segregated from both pedestrian and motor traffic.
- Parking – to install bollards where necessary to prevent cars parking on the pavement and to add cycle parking at all locations where shops are clustered.
- Management - Appoint an active travel commissioner for Northampton who has the authority to oversee all pavements and cycle routes.

An organisation delivering services for children and families commented that the council should consider investing in voluntary sector services to provide support that can reduce the demand for Council services and in this way impact on financial pressures. This would require the Council to take a short- and longer-term view of reducing demand for children's and families' services and for the council to be committed to discussions with the voluntary sector regarding ways of improving services. They felt that the budget was not clear on what financial support may be available to help sustain the voluntary sector, but they stated principle - 'Opportunities to invest in improved services will be explored' is encouraging. They noted that the principle that 'non-statutory service investment will need to be funded by matching efficiencies once the Council has identified a balanced budget', represents a challenge, but provided an opportunity to work with the voluntary sector to achieve improvements that impact on costs.

They also mentioned that they were encouraged by the transformation activities to increase the council's early help offer and proposed that the council looks to Home-Starts to be involved in the discussions to progress this; and to further links and collaborations with them for the development of family hubs and the Local Area Partnerships.

-End of report-