EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

Public Engagement Survey – Budget Priorities

REPORT

Helen Gartell
19 December 2023

Contents

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year East Sussex County Council reviews the priorities for how its budget will be spent and services focused. With limited resources it is vital that these are used effectively.

This year, as part of this process, East Sussex CC held an engagement exercise with the public using an online survey which outlined the priorities for the next three years. The survey asked for views on whether the public agreed these are the right priorities and, if not, what suggestions they might have for better ones and, by definition, better use of the Council's budget. The survey was available on the East Sussex CC Citizen Space platform and was also available in other formats, including paper, if required.

Care should be taken when reading the results as, due to its nature as a self-selecting online survey, the sample is not demographically representative of East Sussex.

The survey ran for 6 weeks from the 30 October to 10 December 2023.

This report is based on 2153 completed questionnaires

Findings:

- Nearly three quarters (70%) agreed the Council were focussing on the right priorities.
- However, when asked for agreement on the way the Council split the budget, respondents were undecided. Nearly a third (31%) agreed and almost a quarter (24%) disagreed. The highest figure, though, was those saying they neither agreed nor disagreed (39%) which, when combined with the don't knows (6%) results in almost half (44%) of respondents being unsure.
- Of the 516 who disagreed with the way Council proposed to split the budget, well over half (63%) felt Roads was a priority for increased funding, with Schools and Education some distance behind at 33%, followed by Community Safety (25%) and Children's Social Care and early help (24%), the latter also coming second in the choice for reduced funding (22%). The first choice for reduced funding was Adult Social Care (33%)
- Asked to rank 4 suggestions for reducing the gap between funding and the cost of producing services, Asking the Government for more funding was the option most favoured by respondents, with 1635 (76%) ranking it as first choice. Charging for Council services was first choice for 271 (13%) whilst Reducing Council Services (126) and Increasing Council Tax (121) were first choice for just 6% of respondents.
- Household Waste Recycling Sites (1638) and Roads (1630) were the top two service used by respondents over the past 12 months with just over three quarters of respondents (76%) having used them followed by Countryside Footpaths (58%), Buses within the County (54%) and Libraries (50%)

Demographics:

- This report is based on 2153 completed online interviews, comprising:

Eastbourne area	351	16%
Hastings area	217	10%
Lewes area	506	24%
Rother area	378	18%
Wealden area	472	22%
Post code not given	229	10%
	2153	100%

  Care should be taken when comparing responses from the East Sussex areas above as a significant proportion of respondents did not supply the level of postcode detail required.
  Post codes entered by respondents have been used to allocate their response to the area they live in on a 'best fit' basis. 52% entered their postcode in sufficient detail to confidently allocate to a district or borough. 38% have been allocated to the district or borough area in which the majority of the given postcode sector population lives, due to the response only containing the first part, or less, of the postcode, and some postcodes at this level cutting across district and borough boundaries. The remaining 10%, where the post code was not given at all, have been allocated to a "Not Answered" group.

- 97% of respondents said they lived in East Sussex, 13% said they work or own a business in East Sussex and 1% said they were visiting East Sussex. Respondents could select more than one answer if applicable and 86 respondents said they both lived and worked/owned a business in the county.

- The age breakdown of respondents was:
  16-24 – 1%
  25-44 – 9%
  45-59 – 18%
  60-74 – 37%
  75+   - 18%
  Which, perhaps unsurprisingly, resulted in 83% of respondents not having any dependent children. 17% of respondents preferred not to give their age.

- 56% of respondents were female and 36% male, 8% preferring not to say and 6 were non-binary.

- 90% of respondents were white and 80% identified as heterosexual, whilst 39% said they didn't have a religion and 44% were Christian.

These results are influenced by the majority of respondents being in the 60+ age brackets and should not be taken as representative of East Sussex as a whole.

2. INTRODUCTION

This report contains the findings from the public engagement survey on Budgets and Priorities for East Sussex.

In 2024 East Sussex County Council will spend more than £500 million of residents' money on public services for East Sussex.

This includes...

- caring for children and adults who need particular protection or support
- maintenance of roads, pavements, cycleways, footpaths, bridges and street lighting
- providing libraries, household waste and recycling sites and other community services
- support for education
- developing our economy
- public health and community safety
- investing in voluntary services

...and much more.

Money and other resources are very limited and spending always involves difficult choices. It's vital resources are put where they will have the greatest effect for people in East Sussex.

Each year East Sussex County Council reviews the priorities for how its budget will be spent. This year, East Sussex, held an engagement exercise with the general public, in the form of an online survey outlining the priorities for next year.

There are currently four priorities that are used to help guide Council work and focus spending. These are based on evidence about the different strengths and challenges of local communities, businesses, and the environment. They are also informed by evidence about where the council could have the greatest positive impact. In selecting priorities, the Council has also considered its legal duties, for example keeping vulnerable children and adults safe.

The first three priorities are:

Driving sustainable economic growth:
- supporting local businesses to succeed and grow
- helping people access training and jobs
- helping people stay connected through better roads, transport and digital networks
- protecting our environment
- promoting culture and tourism
- supporting children and young people through their education into further education, training and employment

Keeping vulnerable people safe:
- working together with other agencies to provide the best support for vulnerable children and adults
- people feel safe
- vulnerable children and adults feel supported

Helping people to help themselves:
- supporting local communities to help each other
- helping people to maintain their independence
- providing early advice and services to help those in need

The fourth priority is about how the council works. It supports the other three priorities:

Making best use of resources now and for the future:
- tackling climate change and as a council becoming carbon neutral as soon as possible and by 2050 at the latest
- working together with public, voluntary and private sector partners to provide the best services
- achieving value for money for council services
- bidding for funding and asking Government for the best deal for East Sussex

The survey asked questions about:

- Whether respondents agree with the priorities and what, if anything is missing that should be included
- Levels of agreement with the way the council's spending is split across public services and which services should receive increased funding and which should have reduced funding
- Ranking 4 options, in order of preference, for closing the funding gap
- Other suggestions for closing the funding gap
- Which services have been used during the past 12 months
- Demographics including the Equalities Monitoring Form
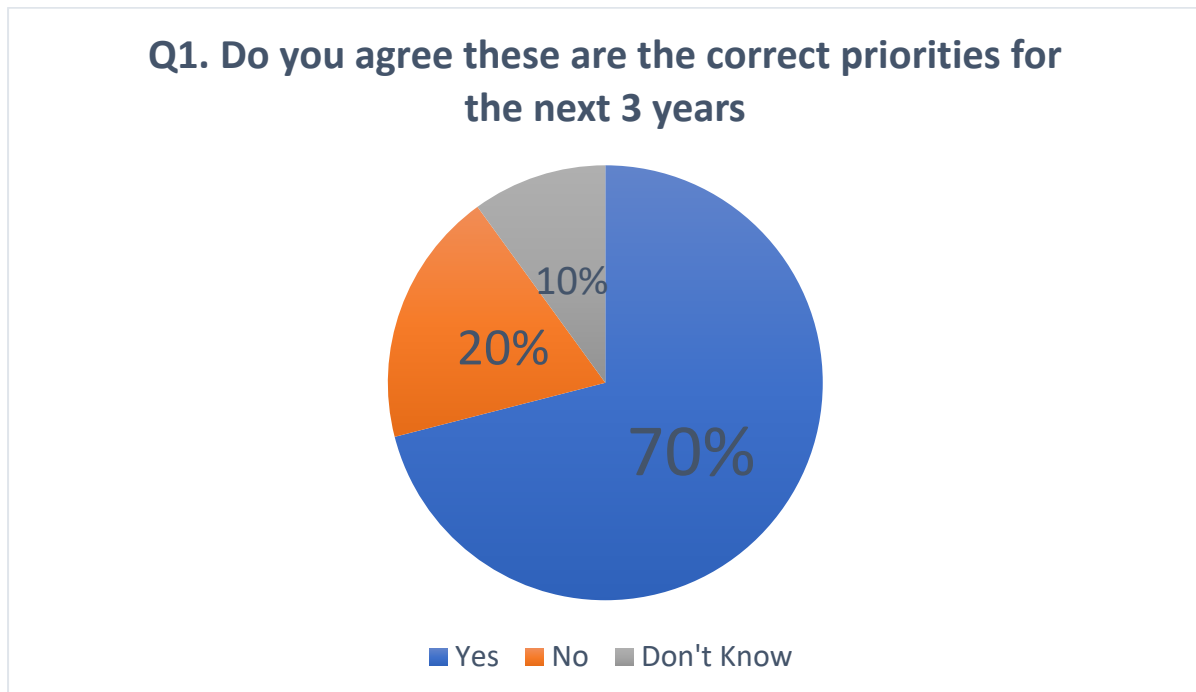
Methodology

The survey was designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data and was carried out for a period of 6 weeks from 30 October until 10 December 2023. This report is based on 2153 questionnaires completed during that period.

3. FINDINGS

This section contains a summary of the findings from the survey and follows the order of the questions.

Agreement with the Priorities

The 4 Council priorities were detailed in the survey and respondents were asked whether they agreed that these were the right priorities for the council to pursue over the next 3 years.

As can be seen from the chart above, the vast majority of respondents (70%) agreed that the council had the right spending priorities. This was consistent across age and area but there was a discrepancy amongst the gender groups. A slightly higher than average 75% of females agreed with the priorities, whilst 9% fewer males (65%) agreed and only 54% of the group identified as Other, (non-binary combined with those preferring not to give their gender), agreed.

Following on from this question all respondents were asked what, if anything, they thought was missing from the priorities. This was an open question, looking for new suggestions but of the 61% of respondents who answered this question, 17% took the opportunity to expand on the existing 4 priorities and give reasons why they thought the priorities were right, 11% expressed their views on how they are being delivered, and 3% suggested some existing priorities should be removed. As far as new suggestions were concerned, respondents particularly commented on the state of the roads in East Sussex and potholes in particular. 14% of respondents answering this question, listed this as a priority with Hastings and Wealden being slightly higher than average at 18% and 19%. 65 (2%) of respondents said nothing was missing.

The following table lists the suggestions under broad themes but, apart from those commenting in various ways on the existing priorities, and the potholes priority, the spread of numbers is too small to be considered significant.

17%	Variations on existing priorities
14%	Urgent priority to fill in potholes
11%	Comments on delivery of existing priorities
4%	Access to social/affordable housing
4%	Improve/Repair pavements/footpaths/cycleways
4%	Better public transport facilities
3%	Improve the local environment/street cleaning/road signs/litter/
3%	Removal of existing priorities
3%	Better infrastructure for new/existing areas
3%	Priorities too vague/unfocussed/generic
2%	Supporting education/schools/teachers
2%	Support for the homeless
2%	Less greenfield housing development
2%	Support for elderly/loneliness/technology support/transport
2%	Climate change/Carbon neutral/Net Zero not so important/should be scrapped
2%	Better flood prevention
1%	Priorities too ambitious/Over complex
1%	Climate change/Carbon neutral/Net zero important priority
1%	Visible/Local policing
1%	Provide/Maintain/Keep open public toilets
1%	Tackle rising crime figures/anti-social behaviour
1%	Tackle immigration/refugees
1%	More sporting facilities/gyms/swimming pools
*%	Immigrant/Refugee support/integration
1%	Increase revenue from commercial enterprises
*%	Employ a professional fund raiser
*%	Organise a borough lottery
*%	Consider a unitary authority
*%	Encourage use of public transport/Better transport

Example responses are shown below.

"Your plan obviously includes road maintenance. You claim to 'maintain a highway that is safe and secure for our customers'. But roads throughout the county are in an awful state and a massive improvement is needed."

"You say that protecting the environment is a priority, but all we see is more and more green fields being destroyed by new housing. Great for the developers but appalling to the rest of us."

"We should spend more on restoring the beautiful houses we already have so people can buy or rent them at affordable prices than carving up the local green spaces and woods to build new builds".

"Too generic to be able to assess, noble as the overall ambitions seem to be".

"Too much new building: Eastbourne is getting too crowded. You are with your car restrictions coming in about to strangle shopkeepers and businesses. You have surveys and planning observations and ignore the views of your voters."

"These are very good priorities, but will we actually see them evolve in practice? I have a feeling that I often read admirable plans and ideas (priorities) but they do not seem to appear in the real world."

"There is nothing missing provided you undertake a significant improvement in the roads which are truly awful."

"Supporting Charities who do much of the work in your priorities."

"Something for young people (youth clubs?) to try to head-off anti-social behaviour and the costs associated with having to deal with this."

"SEN should be highest priority. Helping these children early in life gives great benefit."
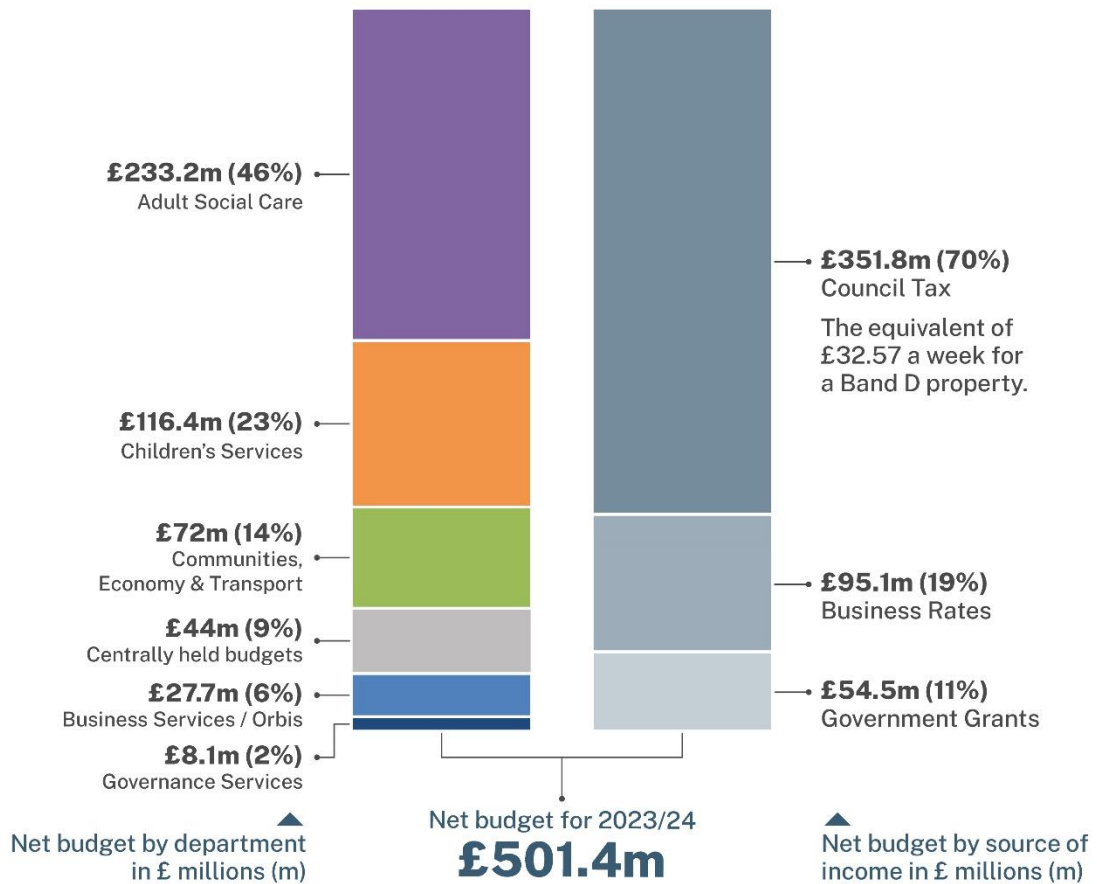
"Restricting housebuilding on open countryside which is destroying trees, hedgerows and wildlife.
Ensuring appropriate dwellings are built, e.g. low cost flats/small properties for young people, not large 5-bed detached homes."

"Potholes on the roads. In the Highlands of Scotland there was very few potholes. So, if they can keep the roads safe why can't you."

"People should be encouraged to help themselves.   During and after the war Councils did very little to help. As late as the 1990's we had to manage on our own and with the help of neighbours and friends this should be encouraged again."
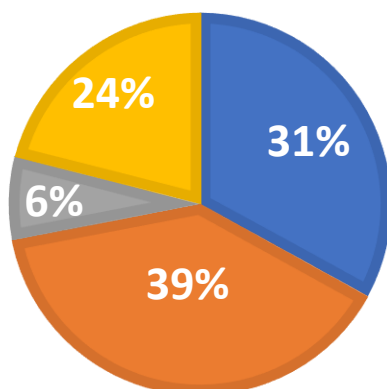
Agreement with how the Council's spending is split across service areas

.

£233.2m (46%)
Adult Social Care

£116.4m (23%)
Children's Services

£72m (14%)
Communities,
Economy & Transport

£44m (9%)
Centrally held budgets

£27.7m (6%)
Business Services / Orbis

£8.1m (2%)
Governance Services

Net budget by department
in £ millions (m)

Net budget for 2023/24
£501.4m

£351.8m (70%)
Council Tax

The equivalent of
£32.57 a week for
a Band D property.

£95.1m (19%)
Business Rates

£54.5m (11%)
Government Grants

Net budget by source of
income in £ millions (m)

Respondents were shown the chart above which gives details of how the council spends its money and how it raises its money.   They were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with how the council's spending is split across the different service areas.

Q3: DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH HOW THE COUNCIL'S SPENDING IS SPLIT ACROSS SERVICE AREAS?

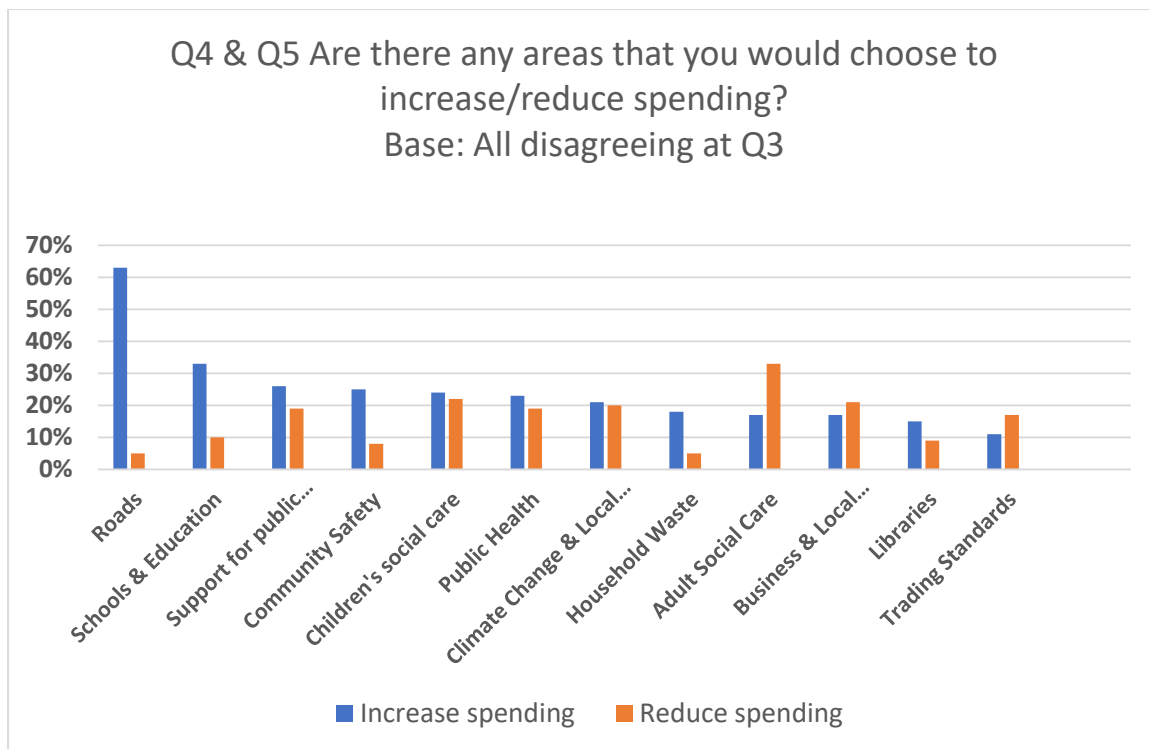■ Agree   ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree   ■ Don't Know   ■ Disagree

The majority of respondents (45%) either didn't know or said they neither agreed nor disagreed with the Council's spending allocations. This was standard across all areas apart from the age groups, where there was a significant difference with only 36.5% of those under age 44 saying they were unsure, whilst 28% of those under age 60 actively disagreed with the allocations. This was 10% more than the over 60's at 18% disagreeing.

The 24% (516) who disagreed with the Council's spending plans were presented with a list of spend areas and asked to choose which they would like to see receiving a spending increase and which areas should have reduced spending.

Once again, the condition of roads, was the main priority for increased spending, with well over half of the 516 respondents (63%) choosing that. There were, though, some significant differences. 57% of females and 72% of males specified roads, whilst 76% of Hastings and 73% of Rother respondents also specified roads. Across the age groups, just 53% of the under 60s wanted more funding for roads, as opposed to 70% of the over 60s.

Schools and Education was the second choice with 33%.

Adult Social Care was the first priority for reduced spending with 33% choosing it and Children's Social Care coming next with 22%. There is a significant difference in percentages for the choice of Adult Social Care - 26% female and 40% male but, apart from that the selections are broadly similar across gender, area and age.
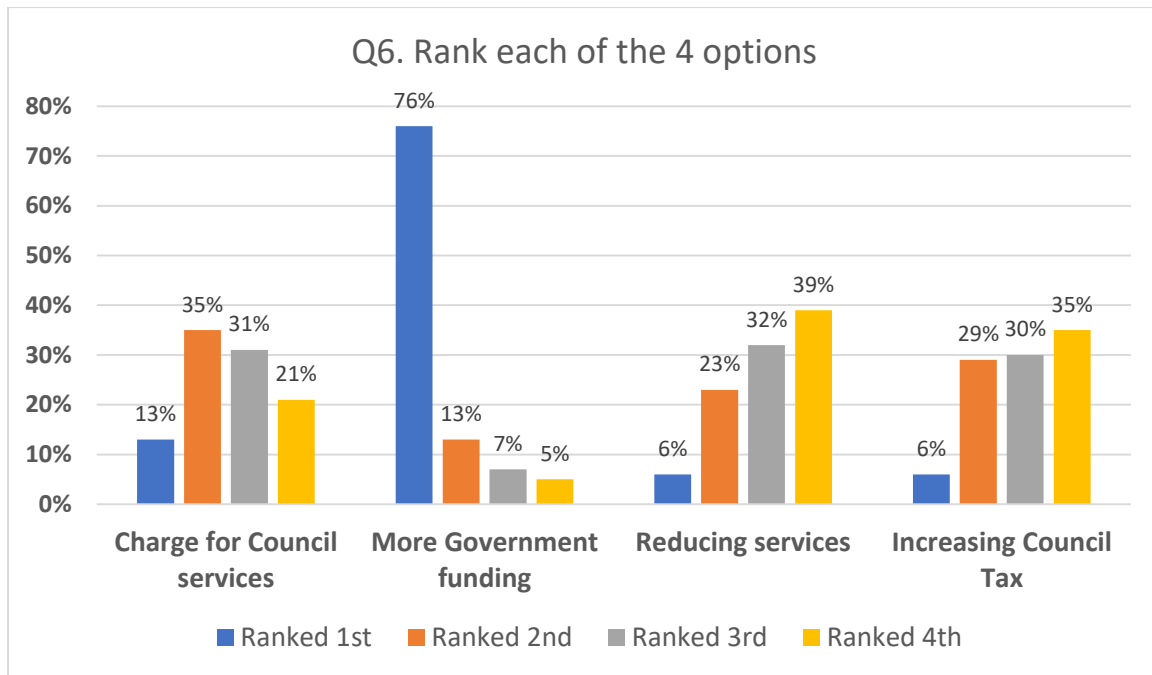
Balancing the Budget

Asked to rank 4 options for bridging the financial gap in order of preference, the overwhelming majority of respondents opted for Increased Government Funding as their first choice with 76% (1635) respondents putting this first. There were very few people placing Increased Council Tax and Reducing Services first, with just 6% for each of them. 13% (271) opted for Charging for Council Services as their first choice.

Although responses were mainly similar across all respondents, there were a few notable differences.

- Whilst Increased Government Funding was the first choice of 76% there were significant differences across the board. 81% of females put this as first, but only 69% males. 81% also chose this in Rother and 84% of those aged under 60 ranked it first but only 73% of the over 60s did so.
- Whilst increasing Council Tax was ranked 4th by 35% overall, only 28% of the over 60's ranked it 4th with 37% of the under 60's ranking it 4th,
- Reducing Council Services was regarded as the worst option overall with 39% voting it as their 4th option.

Other than these points, there are similar choices made across the whole sample.

Below is a chart showing how each priority was ranked.

Q6. Rank each of the 4 options

After ranking the Council's list of 4 options, respondents were given an open question to suggest any other ways of closing the funding gap.

Not everybody answered this question and, of the 1184 who did, 16 said they didn't know and 36 simply said they didn't have any suggestions.

Again, some respondents used this as a space to expand on how the 4 options should be executed, or they used it to express their irritation, but some respondents made some new suggestions.

The numbers for these responses are too small for any differences to be significant except for the top suggestion which concerns Council efficiency, pay and number of employees. This received the most mentions, at more than double the second most suggested.

16%	Be more efficient/Employ fewer staff/Pay yourselves less
7%	More scrutiny of fund usage/Stop wasting money
5%	Ensure value for money from/stop/consultancies/contracts/outsourcing
3%	Get local people/businesses/charities/volunteers to sponsor and invest
2%	Invest wisely
2%	Increase council tax/charges on empty/second/executive homes/holiday homes
2%	Challenge/Stand up to/Demand more money from Government
2%	Reduce bureaucracy/Levels of government
2%	Sell/Hire out unused office space/premises/assets
2%	Make benefits harder to get/Cut back on benefits
2%	Scrap all job roles/initiatives relating to diversity, equality, woke etc.
1%	Scrap net zero/carbon neutral/climate change initiatives
1%	Create new taxes e.g. tourist/congestion etc./Fines for not recycling etc.
1%	Collaborate with neighbouring councils
1%	Charge for services, such as bus passes, library services
1%	Increase parking charges
1%	Reduce overheads/Find cheaper premises/Hybrid working
1%	Enforce laws/fine payments/council tax payments
1%	Apply for government/any funding available
1%	Spend less on social care/school transport
1%	Maintain rather than build new roads/houses
1%	Increase business rates
1%	Lower business rates to encourage new businesses
1%	Encourage tourism/Better advertising of events etc.
1%	Increase revenue from commercial enterprises
*%	Employ a professional fund raiser
*%	Organise a borough lottery
*%	Consider a unitary authority
*%	Encourage use of public transport/Better transport

Some examples:

"A huge part of the outgoings go on adult social care. Some private providers are excellent. But please review how these services are provided and who by as so much money is going to private providers who give an appalling service"

"Be stricter with who benefits are given to and push those that are realistically able to work to do so, less benefits for those having lots of children by choice."

"Be responsible for your spending. Many services and goods are grossly inflated when a public body is paying for them. It is your responsibility to ensure that you are not over paying".

"By looking closer at why you have this funding deficiency and see how you can make cuts in spending."

"Carefully review the necessity for all council employees. Eliminate all counter-productive positions, such as diversity officers. Stop spending money on sub-standard services, e.g.: repairing potholes MUST be done to a high and durable standard"

"Charge second home owners double in council tax"

"Cut all 'woke' projects/employees - no spending for diversity management etc . Any job with diversity/equalities etc go. we achieve this without £ being wasted on non-jobs and futile projects. No waste on cycle lanes etc just mend roads."

"Cutting back on contracted out services, even if that means employing more staff the overheads would surely be lower and therefore save money."

"Forget the environmental funding as there are countries like India & China that will continue to pollute the atmosphere, therefore no matter how much we save, it won't make any difference."
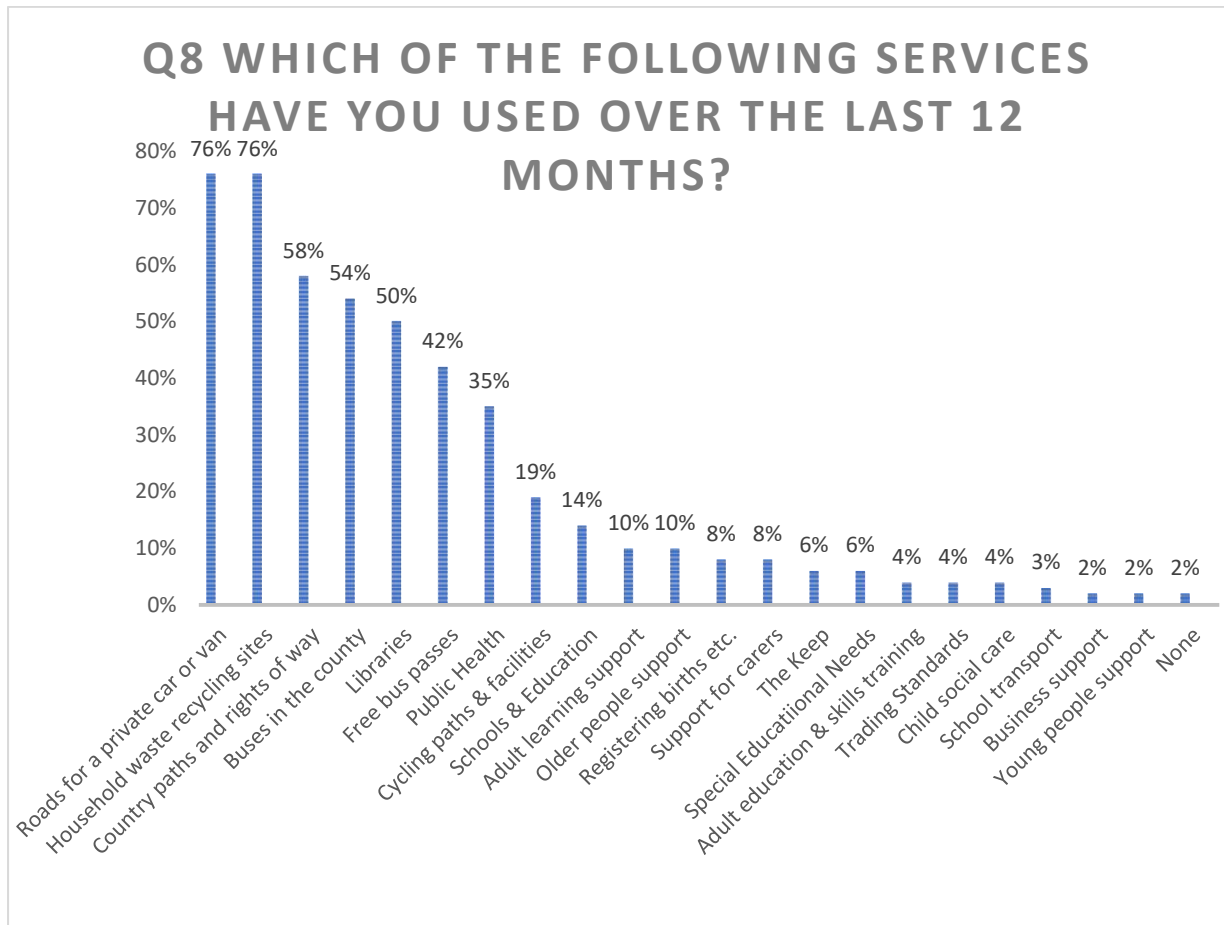
"Freeze councillors wages"

"Get rid of the prevalence of middle managers over 50k. One of the worst in the country! Get rid of that monstrosity of county hall. Rent somewhere cheaper"

Finally, in the main questionnaire, respondents were asked which council services, from a list of 22, they had used in the last 12 months.

76% (1638) respondents said they had used household waste recycling sites (tips), and 76% (1630) said they'd used the roads for driving a private car or van. There was then a drop to 58% (1246) of respondents who had used countryside footpaths and rights of way, followed by 54% (1154) who had used buses within the county. More people aged under 44 (63.5%) had used country paths than those over 75 (49%) which is significant but not surprising. Likewise, more respondents aged over 75 had used the buses (63%) than the average 54% but only 46% in the 45-59 age group had used them. The base number of respondents for each group – 386 in the 45-59 age group and 398 in the 75+ group coupled with the number of respondents selecting this option (176 and 252 respectively) is robust enough to make this difference significant.

Aside from the above, any differences are based on too small a base number to be significant.
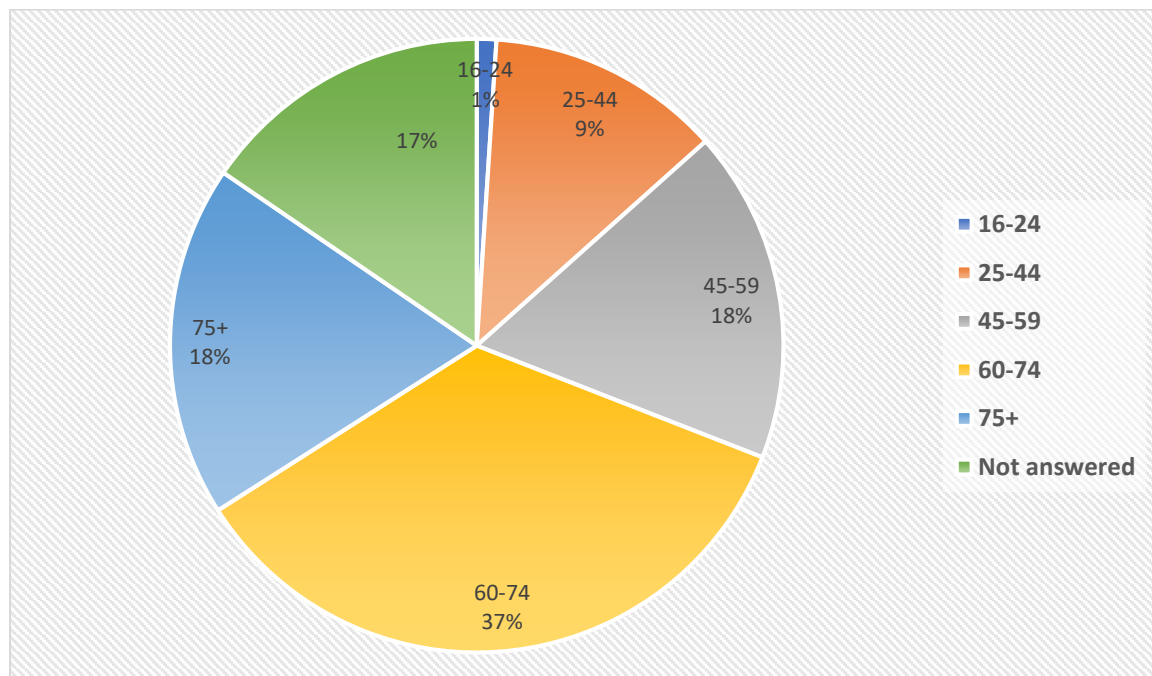

Asked if they were responding as residents of East Sussex, 97% of respondents said they lived in East Sussex, 13% said they work or own a business in East Sussex and 1% said they were visiting East Sussex. Respondents could select more than one answer, if applicable, and 86 respondents said they both lived and worked/owned a business in the county.

83% of respondents do not have children under the age of 16 living in their household. The high figure reflects the balance of the ages of respondents, with 55% being in the over 60 age group.

4. EQUALITIES MONITORING

AGE

GENDER and GENDER IDENTIFICATION

What is your gender?
by Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

	Total	Yes	No - please write in	Prefer not to say
Total	2153	1971	4	178
Female	1210	1190	2	18
	56%	60%	50%	10%
Male	769	750	0	19
	36%	38%	0%	11%
Non-Binary	6	2	2	2
	*%	*%	50%	1%
Prefer to self-describe	2	0	0	2
	*%	0%	0%	1%
Prefer not to say	166	29	0	137
	8%	1%	0%	77%

ETHNICITY

WHITE	1931	90%
MIXED OR MULTIPLE ETHNIC GROUPS	29	1.35%
ASIAN OR ASIAN BRITISH	7	Neg
BLACK, BLACK BRITISH, CARIBBEAN OR AFRICAN	7	Neg
PREFER NOT TO SAY	186	9%

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

STRAIGHT/HETEROSEXUAL	1725	80%
GAY OR LESBIAN	59	3%
BISEXUAL	31	1%
PREFER TO SELF-DESCRIBE	7	Neg
PREFER NOT TO SAY	331	15

RELIGION

CHRISTIAN	954	44%
NO RELIGION	838	39%
BUDDHIST	19	1%
HINDU	4	Neg
JEWISH	4	Neg
MUSLIM	1	Neg
OTHER RELIGION OR PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEF	52	2.5%
PREFER NOT TO SAY	281	13%

PHYSICAL AND/OR MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

39% (850) respondents said they had a physical or mental health condition or illness that was expected to last 12 months or longer. Of these 26% (219) and 59% (419) said the condition or illness affected their ability to carry out day to day activities a lot or a little, respectively. Overall,10% (216) respondents preferred not to say whether they had a condition or illness.

CARERS

Asked whether they looked after, or gave any help or support to, anyone with long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses, or problems related to old age, 31% (662) said they did.

These respondents were caring for:

PARENT	208	31%
PARTNER/SPOUSE	189	21%
CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS	92	14%
OTHER FAMILY MEMBER	90	14%
OTHER	60	9%
PREFER NOT TO SAY	16	2%