

SUFFOLK SPEAKS PARTNERSHIP

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL **Report of Public Consultation** **To Inform the 2009-10 Budget**

Opinion Research Services

Spin-out Company of the University of Wales Swansea

2008

SUFFOLK SPEAKS PARTNERSHIP

Report of Public Consultation For Babergh District Council To Inform the 2009-10 Budget

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Contents

ORS Project Team	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Introduction	6
Commission and Project Design	6
Statistical Reliability	6
Scope of the Interviews.....	7
The Report.....	7
Survey findings.....	8
Awareness of Council Tax allocations.....	8
District Council Tax	8
Expenditure on specific District Council services.....	10
Awareness of range/number of District Council services	12
Charges for District Council services	12
Conclusions	14



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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have undertaken this interesting study for Babergh District Council and we hope the findings will contribute to the Council's thinking about services, council tax and charges.

We thank Babergh for the commission and we confirm that at all stages of the project ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public as fairly as possible was recognised and respected. We are also grateful to the Council officers who contributed to the questionnaire design and generally helped to make the project a success.

Above all, we are grateful to the 402 randomly selected Babergh residents who took part readily in the survey.

Introduction

Commission and Project Design

- 1 Within the Suffolk Speaks Partnership's framework contract, ORS was commissioned to design and conduct a programme of public consultation to inform the budget setting process for Babergh – alongside a similar commission from five other Suffolk district/borough councils and the County Council. (Only Ipswich did not take part.)
- 2 All the participating Suffolk district and borough councils opted to use a telephone survey based upon an achieved random sample of 400 of their residents. The County Council opted for the same approach, but with random County-wide samples of 500 residents and 50 businesses.
- 3 All interviews were carried out from the ORS Social Research Call Centre using computer assisted telephone interviewing to manage the calls and record the responses. A picture of the Call Centre is shown below.



Statistical Reliability

- 4 The Babergh sample consisted of 403 heads of households or their partners and is broadly representative of the council tax-paying population of the District. The data was slightly weighted by age. The achieved weighted sample comprised 47% of men and 53% of women. 26% were aged 17-44; 40% were aged 45-59; and 34% were household heads or partners aged 60 and over. 45% of the sample was in full time work, while 19% were in part-time work and 35% were not in paid employment.
- 5 The 400 sample size was chosen as a reasonable compromise between statistical precision, on the one hand, and cost, on the other. A random sample of 400 cases yields findings accurate to within plus or minus 5% points at a 95% level of confidence. That is, if the whole population were interviewed, and the results compared with those from the 400 random sample, then 19 times out of 20 the two sets of results would not differ by more than plus or minus 5% points. (A probability of 19 times out of 20 is equivalent to 95% level of confidence.)

- 6 Therefore, the Council may be confident that the findings of this survey are statistically significant and provide sound indicative evidence of council tax-paying residents' opinions in Babergh.

Scope of the Interviews

- 7 All the Suffolk telephone surveys covered the following issues:
- Awareness of how the total council tax is divided between the district/borough councils and the county council
 - Awareness of the range of services provided by the district/borough
 - Opinions about to what extent council tax should be increased
 - This question was asked twice – once at the beginning and once later in the interview – to allow residents to give both an initial and a more a considered answer based upon all the issues covered in the survey
 - Priorities for increasing or reducing expenditure on a wide range of services
 - Priorities for increasing or reducing charges for certain services
 - Interest in taking part in further consultation
 - Personal profile section.
- 8 However, while the six Suffolk surveys all shared a common structure and purpose there were some variations in the detail of the questions – particularly in those about to what extent council tax should be increased.

The Report

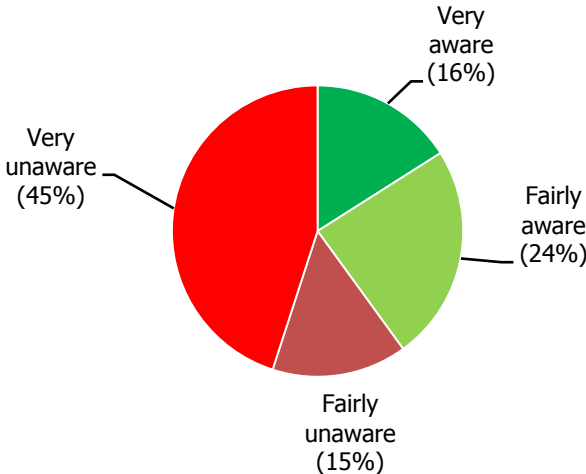
- 9 Reports have been prepared for each authority separately. There is no executive summary because the main report is relatively concise; but there is a short conclusions section.
- 10 The graphs are colour-coded for simplicity. Generally, shades of green indicate a positive response while shades of red indicate the opposite. Amber indicates an intermediate response and 'don't knows' are shown in pale blue. The term 'positive' does not imply any approval by ORS; and the colour-coding is used only for easy recognition.

Survey findings

Awareness of Council Tax allocations

- 11 Respondents were first told what proportion and amount of the total council tax collected is actually kept and spent by the District Council. (On average and in round figures, about 10% of the council tax collected in each Suffolk district/borough is spent by that district/borough, whereas about 80% goes to the County Council.)
- 12 Four in ten Babergh respondents said they were at least fairly aware of these proportions, whereas nearly half (45%) were 'very unaware' and a further 15% were 'fairly unaware' – as the graph below shows:

Resident's awareness of how Council Tax is spent



District Council Tax

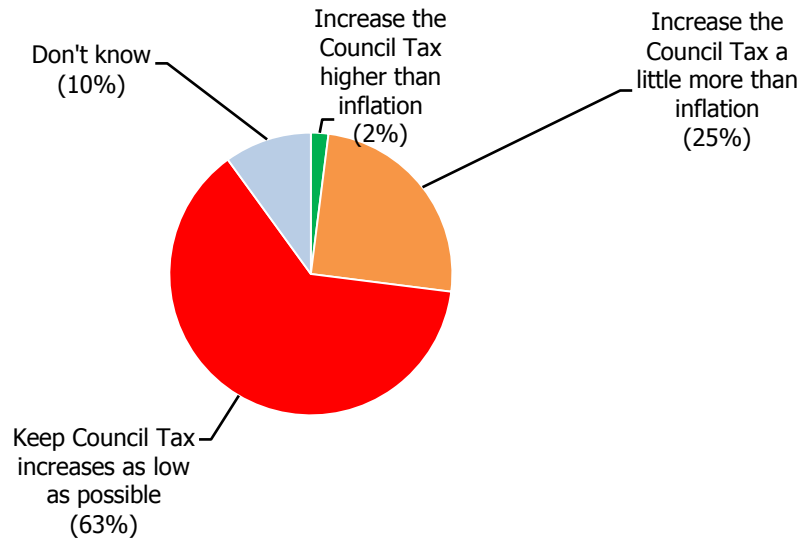
- 13 As already explained, there were two identical questions dealing with the future level of council tax – one at the beginning of the survey and the other later, following questions about people's awareness of council services and about which services should have increased or reduced expenditure. In other words, the first question gauged people's initial or immediately inclinations, while the later repeated question perhaps invited a more considered response. The question was:

*Babergh District Council has a policy of increasing Council Tax by no more than the rate of inflation. Thinking about the £131 of Council Tax that currently goes to Babergh District Council, do you think the Council should: (a) increase the Council Tax charge **higher than inflation** in order to improve the services it provides or (b) increase the Council Tax a **little more than inflation** in order to try to improve services or (c) keep Council Tax increases **as low as possible** even if it means reducing some services?*

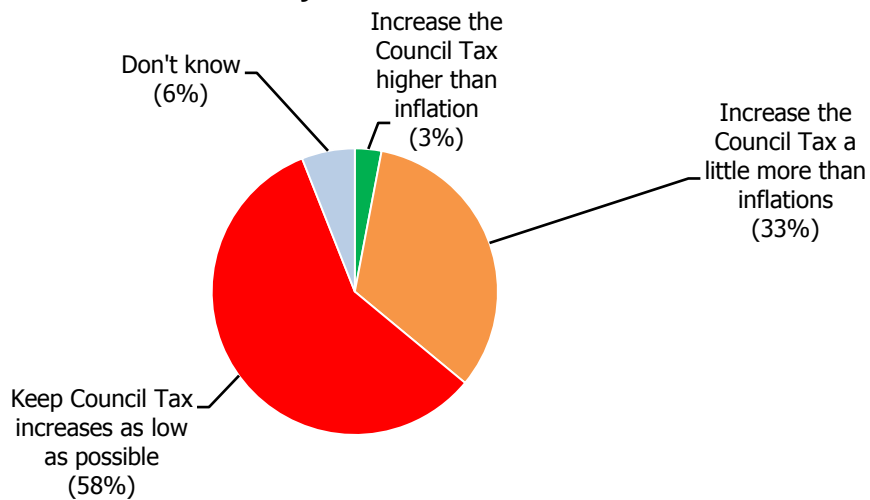


14 In the Babergh survey, responses to the two questions were very similar but not quite identical – as the two following graphs show.

INITIAL RESPONSE: Do you think the District Council should:



CONSIDERED RESPONSE: Do you think the District Council should:



15 In both questions, a large absolute majority of residents agree with the Council's policy that council tax increases should be as low as possible, even if it means reducing some services. The proportion thinking thus reduces from 63% to 58% between the two questions – but, of course, 58% is still a very large absolute majority in political terms.

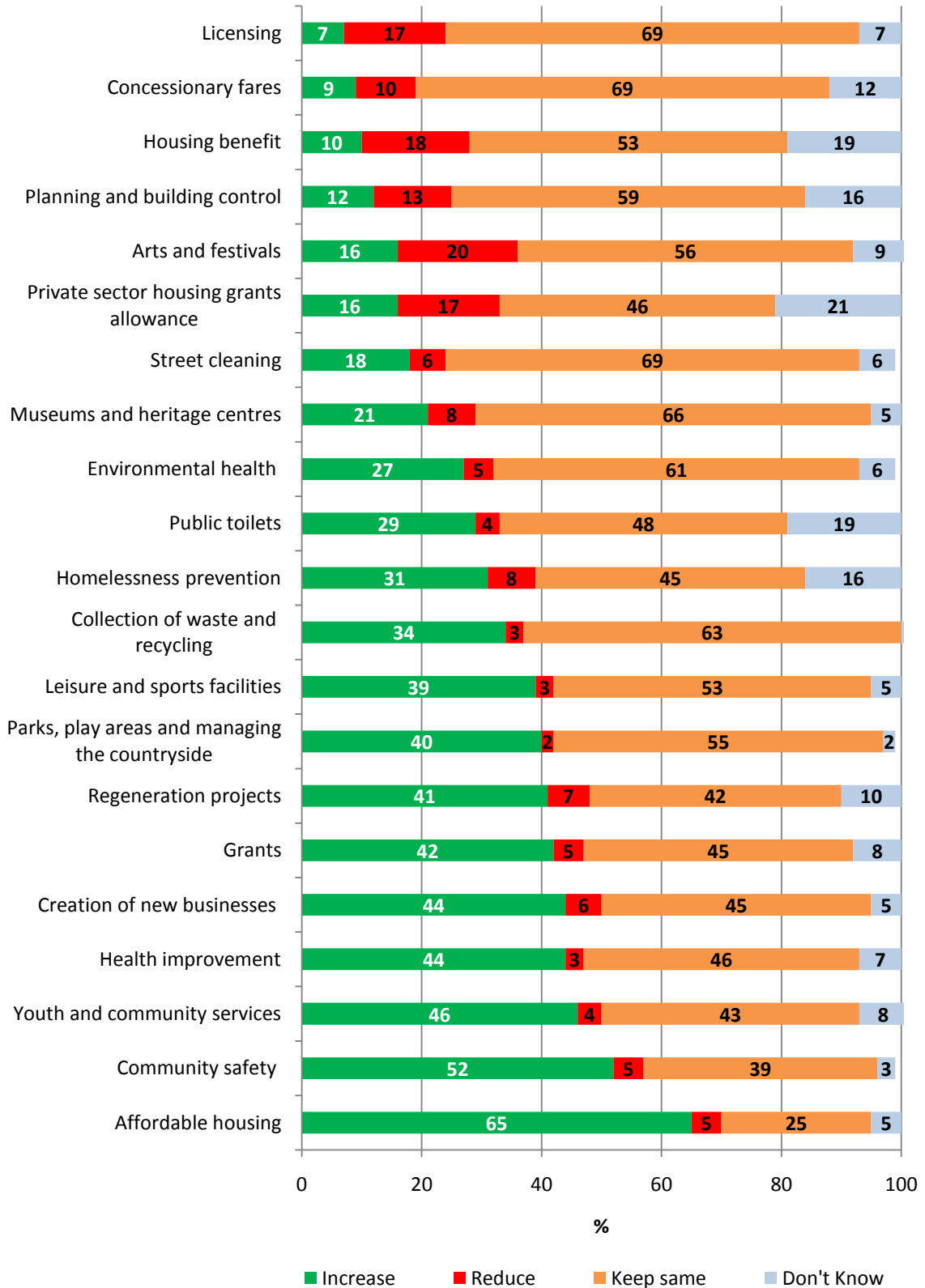
16 The proportion of those wishing to increase council tax a little to maintain services increases from a quarter to a third over the two questions. Significantly, though, the numbers wishing to increase council tax significantly changes hardly at all – only from 2% to 3%.



Expenditure on specific District Council services

- 17 Residents were asked whether a wide range of typical district council services should receive increased or reduced expenditure, or whether expenditure should remain as now.
- 18 The bar chart on the next page show people's priorities for each of the listed services. Green and red indicate the proportions thinking that expenditure should increase or decrease respectively. Amber means keep expenditure as now; and blue means 'don't know'.

IEWS ON EXPENDITURE ON DISTRICT COUNCIL SERVICES

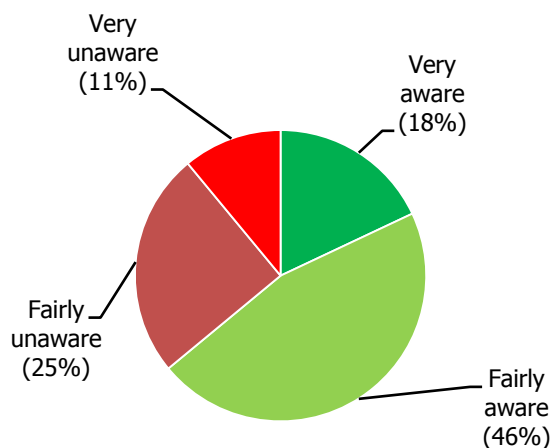


- 19 There are no services where a majority of residents wish to decrease expenditure. Indeed, the proportion of people wishing to reduce expenditure on any service never exceeds 20% - for arts and festivals (followed by housing benefit (18%) and private sector housing grants (17%)).
- 20 However, residents make encouraging the provision of affordable housing their number one priority for increased expenditure – with 65% support.
- 21 Some way behind, community safety and crime prevention attract 55% support for increased expenditure.
- 22 There are a number of service areas where at least 40% of respondents would like to see increased expenditure – namely, youth and community services (46%), health improvement (44%), creation of new businesses (44%), grants (42%), regeneration (41%), and parks, play areas and managing the countryside (40%). Leisure and sports facilities fall only just short of 40% support, with 39%.

Awareness of range/number of District Council services

- 23 Respondents were asked if they were aware of the number of services provided by the District Council.
- 24 In contrast to the division of council tax (see above), nearly two thirds of residents said they were at least ‘fairly aware’ of the range/number of services, while a quarter ‘fairly unaware’ and 11% were ‘very aware’. Overall, then, over a third was fairly or very unaware, but many more were at least fairly aware.

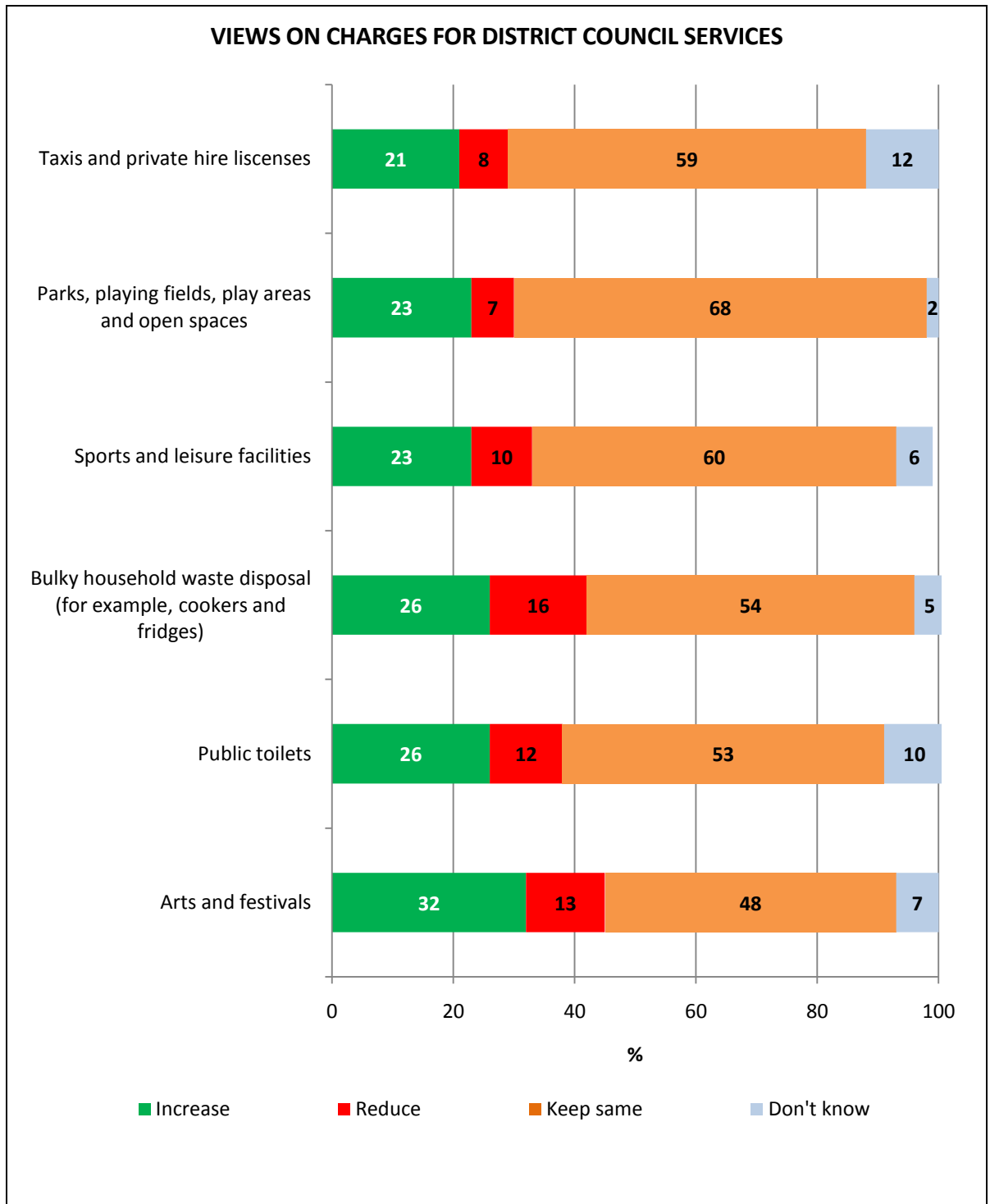
Resident’s awareness of District Council services



- 25 In other words, residents understand the range of District Council services far more than they understand how their council tax is divided between different authorities.

Charges for District Council services

- 26 Residents were asked whether the charges for some typical district council services should be increased, reduced or kept the same.
- 27 The chart on the following page shows people’s opinions. Once more, green and red indicate the proportions thinking charges should increase or decrease respectively. Amber means keep them the same as now; and blue means ‘don’t know’.



28 Overall, residents clearly favour keeping charges for services the same as now – with large absolute majorities in each case (except for arts and festivals (where the support for the status quo is 48%).

29 Quite substantial minorities favour increasing some charges – particularly for arts and festivals – but they are outnumbered by those wishing to keep charges as they are now.

Conclusions

30 Most residents are unaware of how their council tax payments are split between the District Council and the County Council and Police.

31 Most residents understand the range of District Council services far more than they understand how their council tax is divided between different authorities.

32 Very few residents want to reduce expenditure on specific council services.

33 A large majority of respondents favour increased expenditure on encouraging the provision of affordable housing and community safety and crime prevention.

34 Some other service areas have substantial support for increased expenditure – namely, youth and community services, health improvement, creation of new businesses, grants, regeneration, parks, play areas and managing the countryside, and leisure and sports facilities.

35 Only minorities of residents want to increase charges for council services, whereas large majorities want to keep them as now.

36 However, only 3% of residents (one in about thirty-three) want to increase council tax significantly in order to improve services. In contrast, at least 58% of residents want to keep council tax increases as low as possible even if this means reducing some services.

37 While certainly endorsing the Council's policy on keeping council tax increases as low as possible, the survey findings do not clearly identify particular service areas for reduced expenditure; and nor do they identify particular service charges that should be increased.

38 The challenge for the Council seems to be to limit council tax increases severely while prioritising expenditure and avoiding the impression of across-the-board cuts in important services.

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08-09-08

