

CONSULTATION ON ROTHER DISTRICT COUNCIL'S REVENUE BUDGET 2018/19

Consultation Period and Invitations

1. The Revenue Budget consultation opened on 11 November 2017 and closed on 5 January 2018. An invitation was sent out in 'My Alerts' during the eight weeks of the consultation period. 'My Alerts' emails go to over half the households in Rother. Personal invitations to consult were emailed to the Rother Citizens Panel and local business organisations including the Chambers of Commerce. A reminder was emailed before Christmas. Notifications and updates were included on the Council's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Responses

2. The Council received 238 individual responses online from residents and no responses from local organisations or businesses. The breakdown of respondents is:
 - 49% lived in Bexhill and 51% lived in rural Rother, which is representative of Rother's population.
 - 63% were male and 37% were female, which means women were under represented from Rother's population.
 - 48% of respondents were of working age (18-64) and 52% were retired, which means working age people were slightly under represented from Rother's population.
 - Only 4% of respondents were disabled, which means disabled people were under represented from Rother's population.
 - 92% were white British, 8% were from another white background, 1.5% were mixed heritage and 0.5% were Black. This means white British respondents were very slightly under represented, other white background were over represented and Asian or Asian British people were not represented at all from Rother's population.
3. In the previous budget consultation, the Council received 355 responses over a similar period in 2016/17, so we had a 34% decrease in responses. The causes of the fall in responses and the under representation from parts of the community will be reviewed and if necessary changes to the consultation process considered.
4. All submissions used the online response form or a printed response form. Two emails were received with questions about the consultation but without a response to the consultation.

The Options for Council Tax in 2018/19

5. Overall 62% of the respondents supported raising Council Tax by an average of £5 based on a Band D property (and proportionately to the other bands). This is the same result as last year's consultation. The samples for ethnicity and disability are not large enough to make comparisons. There are no significant variations between men and women and from where people live in Rother. However, there is a difference between those who are over

retirement age and those of working age (18-64). 72% of retired people supported raising Council Tax where 50% of working age people supported raising Council Tax.

Table 1: Savings option – all responses

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Raise the Council Tax to RDC by £5 year	148	62%
No change to Council Tax	69	29%
Raise Council Tax but by less than £5 a year	21	9%
TOTAL	233	100%

6. In addition, 29% of respondents supported freezing Council Tax at the current level. This is a similar result to last year. Again, there is a difference in the responses between age groups. 41% of working age people supported no change to Council Tax compared to 29% of respondents over retirement age. Overall, 9% of all respondents supported a rise in Council Tax but by less than £5 (also similar to last year). There are no significant variations in demographic groups for this option.
7. The strong similarity to last year's responses suggests this sample has been large enough to be confident that these results reflect the opinions of the general population of Rother, within reason.

Why did the respondents choose their option?

8. As most people have chosen to raise Council Tax, those reasons dominate the comments received. Nearly half of those who commented said that they wanted to protect services and were prepared to raise their Council Tax payment to do so. A further 10% of respondents gave general comments that the amount was affordable or that it was the right or fair thing to do.
9. However, one quarter of people who answered the question had given their answer because they had a low or fixed income, both pensioners and of working age, or had not had any increase in their wages or not in line with inflation and rising bills. 9% of respondents felt the Council should make more savings instead of raising Council Tax. Most of these people selected to freeze Council Tax but a small number were prepared to pay more but commenting that the Council could make more savings as well.
10. 1% of respondents to this question made suggestions about changing the Council Tax system to one they considered to be fairer. Suggestions included replacing with a local income tax, charging each adult and not property and setting bands based on income. One person suggested that district councils were no longer viable and all authorities should be merged and re-organised into either unitary authorities or combined larger districts along the lines of Eastbourne Borough Council and Lewes District Council.
11. Three people mentioned having difficulty selecting an option because they could not be sure what the other precepting authorities were going to add to their parts of the Council Tax.

12. Sample comments from those that want to protect services:

- "Services are already being cut and I do not think there is room for any more austerity. £5 a year is a small amount and I think it is worth keeping it to avoid more cuts."
- "To keep Council services I benefit from costs money and I should pay for that. However this does not mean efficiency savings and value for money should not still be high priority for RDC."
- "I do not feel we can afford to freeze or lose any local services."
- "I would like to see our services maintained to the highest level that the council can afford. Therefore we must be prepared to pay more."
- "Cutting services in the long run is a step that will see our towns and villages suffer to everyone's detriment, as we have seen with our very poor roads that have not been maintained properly for years."
- "Because you really must continue to provide all the services you do and I see no way in which you could reasonably do more to reduce your costs."

13. Sample comments from those that said it was affordable, reasonable or fair:

- "It is an affordable rise in locally raised Tax. It should be a lot more than this and the Tax should be per person over the age of 18."
- "If I've read it right and you are just talking about an increase of £5, that's peanuts. If you mean £50/year, that's still not a great amount."
- "It is reasonable and fair as a average rate increase. As you say A – C band will pay less others will pay more."
- "£5 is a small increase in our overall annual tax, and is worth paying to keep existing services. The vast majority of Council Tax payers can afford such an increase, and we must not be blindsided by the small percentage who have a genuine problem. Such households should be able to claim support where absolutely necessary."
- "This is a minimal increase and might prevent a much larger increase in the future."
- "Think this is a fair increase to limit the amount of cuts required to meet budget."
- "£5 a year extra on council tax is not going to hurt anyone."
- "Extra funding will need to come from 'us' while the Government continues to sort out the country's finances."

14. Sample comments from those who said it was not possible on their income or that they paid too much already:

- "We are retired pensioners with a very low income. We cannot afford to

pay more. Council tax should be scrapped and replaced by a local income tax. That would be much fairer.”

- “Because I do not have an income which has increased. And am being very frugal to pay the tax at the moment...I have reduced heating to only a few hours a week. Plus other economies. So any increase would be a frightening prospect. As this tax is not based on the ability to pay.”
- “Northiam Council's borrowings re the Blue Cross issue have greatly inflated our total council tax and I am unwilling for that reason to contemplate an overall council tax increase.”
- “Council tax is already too expensive. As a family we pay almost £300 per month for which we see no value in the service provided. The only service which we use is refuse collection and that is ineffective.”
- “We live in a Band D property, I had to retire early due to ill health & am not yet state pension age, our sole income is my company ill health pension which rises only by CPI. Living in a Band D property does not imply one is necessarily better off and I resent the idea of focussing on Band D Council Tax payers. Living in a rural area we lack pavements and street lights and do not benefit from all that some other residents do.”
- “Because the council tax was increased by £300 last year.”
- “Keep things as they are to match the lack of pay rises in recent years.”

15. Sample comments from those that said the Council should make more savings:

- “Savings by reducing numbers of highly paid staff and limiting top salaries to less than central government....”
- “Continue to find efficiency savings.”
- “Council could better manage its financial affairs by cutting waste, junkets, non-jobs and excessive bureaucracy.”
- “ALL of the short-fall in income could be met easily by chopping many of the higher paid individuals that you employ, and realising that this island is full up - that's not a racial statement, it's a fact! - so do not use any of our now-stretched infrastructure to support more people!”
- “I accept that inflation creates a need to increase the budget, but I also think that some services could be cut, or funded in other ways.”
- “Savings need to be made by the Council.”
- “From what I experience, I believe the Council could save money in some services and raise money from others, both of which I would like to see more of before thinking about putting up the Council Tax.”

Service Stopped or Reduced

16. Respondents were asked if there were any council services they would be prepared to see stop or reduced in order to make savings. 187 respondents answered this question but a number of people made several suggestions so the total number of mentions of different services was 256. Percentage calculations are based on the number of people answering this question.
17. A list of all the main council services was provided and most respondents quoted from that list. 29% wanted to keep all services and did not wish to see a reduction or cut in any of them. Not included in this count are any services or functions not currently provided by Rother District Council (RDC) that would not be provided by RDC in the future or not in the control of RDC. This includes suggestions around on-street car parking, East Sussex County Council and Sussex Police services and some parish councils. Unfortunately, a number of respondents persist in their misbelief that any income (and they believe there would be an income) from the introduction of civil parking enforcement would come to RDC. This has affected respondents' views on the options available to the Council. The top 18 suggestions are in the table below.

Stop or Reduce	% of respondents
Arts, culture, venues and events including De La Warr Pavilion and museums	18%
Housing benefit	9%
Tourism	8%
Allowances (including Councillor) and wages	6%
Developing affordable housing	5%
Public conveniences	4%
Economic development/regeneration	4%
Council Tax reduction scheme	4%
Car parks	4%
Helping homeless and those at risk of homelessness	4%
Sport	4%
Employees	4%
Charge more in car parks	3%
Planning services	3%
Leisure centres	3%
Street cleaning, litter bins	3%
'Efficiency' in general	3%

Services to be Protected

18. The consultation asked which services respondents would like to protect from any savings that have to be made. The list of the main RDC services was provided again and most people selected from the list. 200 respondents suggested their list of services they would protect. Percentage calculations are based on the number of people who answered this question. What was not included in this analysis are any services provided by other organisations or other unrelated statements. The results are in the table below and show higher levels of support for services than the previous question on which services should be cut. One in four respondents commented without giving any named priority service and said that all or almost all services were important and should be kept.

Important Services	% of respondents
Waste and recycling and bring centres	38%
Street cleaning, litter and dog bins	29%
All services	25%
Helping the homeless and at risk of homelessness	22%
Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour	21%
Public conveniences	17%
Environmental health services	14%
Arts, culture, venues and events	14%
Beaches, foreshores and seafronts	13%
Environmental crime, fly tips, graffiti, etc.	12%
Planning services	12%
Green spaces, parks, playgrounds	12%
Housing benefit	11%
Supporting the development of affordable housing	9%
Council Tax reduction scheme	8%
Tourism	8%
Economic development	7%
Collecting Council Tax and business rates	6%
Car parks	5%
Sport facilities	5%

Other Things to Take into Account

19. We asked respondents if there was anything they would like the Council to take into account when determining the budget and Council Tax. There were a further 119 comments. For the purpose of analysis comments about

services not provided by RDC or actions that RDC cannot take have not been counted. Also not counted are repeated comments or suggestions already covered in previous questions and analysis. New or additional suggestions to take into account are:

- I am willing to pay more Council Tax (five respondents).
- The Council should campaign or lobby the Government for fairer, more or improvements to funding arrangements (four respondents).
- The Council should keep in mind all the residents on low incomes, fixed incomes and those whose wages have not risen for years as well as the rise in other costs of living (five respondents).
- The Council should reduce funding elsewhere in order to provide free or reduced charges in car parks to support the local economy (four respondents).
- If the Council devolves more services to parish councils, those parishes need on-going support to build their capacity to make good quality decisions about those services (one respondent).
- A new Bexhill Town Council would help or would have helped through devolving services, filling in gaps in services and so on (11 respondents).
- The impact of public service cuts is visibly evident in my town or community, for the worse. I don't want them to go any further or I want to see improvements (four respondents).
- Sell the town hall and get a more efficient building (two respondents).
- Do more communication and tell residents what the Council is doing to reduce costs, support services, etc. (one respondent).
- Extend the number of shared services with other councils (one respondent).
- Remember the impact on younger people and young families because they are the future of the area (one respondent).

Conclusion

20. In conclusion, the majority of respondents supported a rise in RDC's part of the Council Tax by £5 based on the average Band D property.

Programme Office and Policy Team
Community and Economy Department
12 January 2018