

Summary of consultation events

1. Introduction

As part of the budget setting exercise for 2021/22 a series of 17 consultation events were held with Parish Council's and other key stakeholders. Due to the restrictions of Covid-19 the consultation events were held using Zoom. 96 people took part in these sessions which were designed to help the Council:

- get a feel for what services people would most want to protect
- get a feel for people's views on paying for some services
- explore people's views on different approaches to service delivery e.g., use of technology
- explore what role the Council should have in certain service areas e.g., direct deliverer, commissioner
- explore alternative options for income generation

This consultation exercise sits alongside the annual budget-setting on-line survey which went live on 18th December.

Between 1st – 17th December sessions were undertaken with the following groups:

Parish and Town Councils (P&TCs) in each of the Primary Care Networks (PCNs): Kington locality, Ross locality, Golden Valley locality, Ledbury locality, Hereford locality, Bromyard locality, Leominster locality, Mortimer locality and Weobley locality.

Community Champion areas (CC): South and West, City, East, North and West.

Additional groups: Connexus Housing Tenants, Disability United and Carers, Hereford Sixth Form College and Young Farmers and the Business community.

A breakdown of the numbers participating in each session is provided below.

Total	96
PCs Kington	4
PCs Ross	4
PCs Golden Valley	7
Connexus	1
CC South & West	11
CC City	3
Hereford 6th Form	8
PCs Ledbury	6
Herefordshire Disability United & carers	4
PCs Hereford	10
PCs Bromyard	5
CC North & West	3
CC East	1
Businesses	3
PCs Leominster	8
PCs Mortimer	10
PCs Weobley	8

Approach to consultation session

Participants were asked to vote via a series of polls that covered 11 questions. These questions are detailed below. Following the polls there was an open discussion which focused on some key areas but also gave participants the opportunity to highlight their own concerns or issues.

Throughout this report we refer to comments made by, for example, 'a few' or 'many' participants. This reflects comments that were made in the facilitated discussions. As with other qualitative research it is not possible to specifically quantify the participants making these comments but points referred to in the report reflect areas where there were outlying opinions or strong consensus or divergence of opinion.

Overarching comments about the process

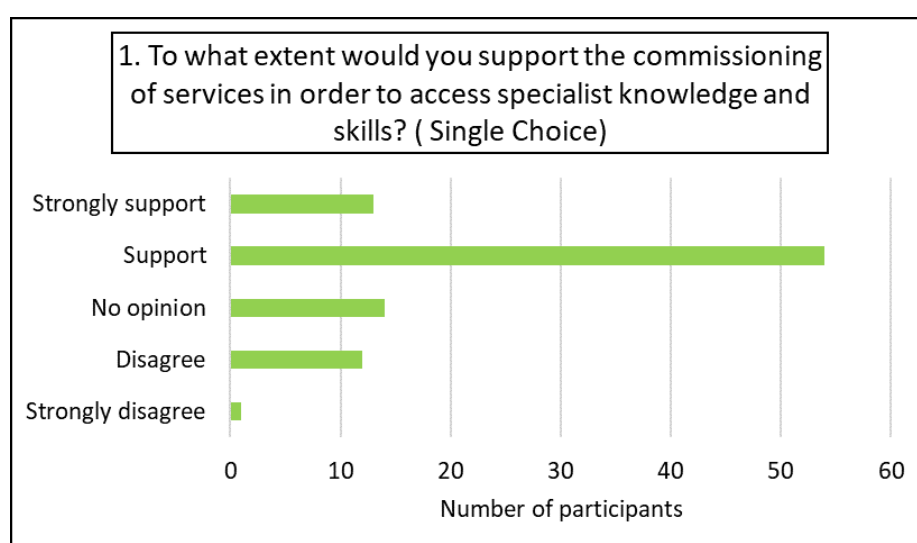
The following comments were received in relation to the consultation process and should be considered when undertaking future consultations.

- There was a significant contingent of participants who felt that the provision of more detailed information relating to the costs of delivering services, how services are currently delivered and the potential scope for savings within different service areas would have enabled them to make more informed decisions. For a small minority this meant they opted out of responding to some of the poll questions.
- There was a feeling that the consultation had been a missed opportunity to gather people's views on how statutory services could be better delivered in order to achieve cost savings due to the focus on discretionary spend.
- The fact that people were being consulted was perceived as very positive and many asked for this to become a regular opportunity, with the focus being on a broader issues and discussing how services can be improved rather than just focusing on financial priorities.

2. Poll results and associated comments

The results of the 11 polls answered during the Zoom sessions are shown in the tables below along with relevant comments (although 1 poll was an open text discussion).

1. One way that we can reduce costs is to look at how we use partners more effectively. To what extent would you support the commissioning of services in order to access specialist knowledge and skills? (Single Choice)	
Opinion	Number of participants
Strongly support	13
Support	54
No opinion	14
Disagree	12
Strongly disagree	1



There was strong consensus in support of accessing specialist knowledge and skills where required.

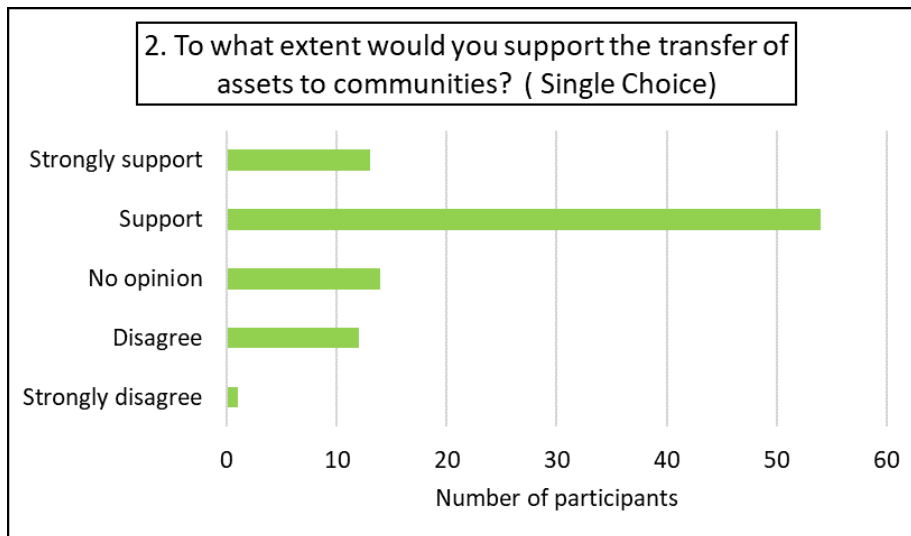
Where there was disagreement it was in relation to the cost of contracting with specialists and that the costs associated with this could potentially be higher than using in-house specialists.

Where people responded 'no opinion' this was mainly in relation to the ambiguity of the question as they felt it wasn't clear whether the question was focusing on bringing in specialist consultants or outsourcing of services.

- A number of people made the point that a long-term view on outsourcing needed to be taken and that it may in the long-term be cheaper to train people up in-house rather than contract with expensive third parties.
- Loss of control and accountability were also raised as a concern in relation to contracting with third parties, as was the need to invest time and resources into effectively managing external contractors. BBLP was used as an example of this.
- The issue of providing best value under-pinned many of the comments relating to this question with many people stating that it didn't matter who delivered the service / provided the expertise as long as it represented best value for money and was a high-quality service.
- A question was raised about the extent to which Herefordshire Councils works in partnership with other councils to jointly deliver services.

2. To what extent would you support the transfer of assets to communities? E.g., development and running of libraries (building and service) to communities. (Single Choice)

Opinion	Number of participants
Strongly support	24
Support	38
No opinion	16
Disagree	14
Strongly disagree	2



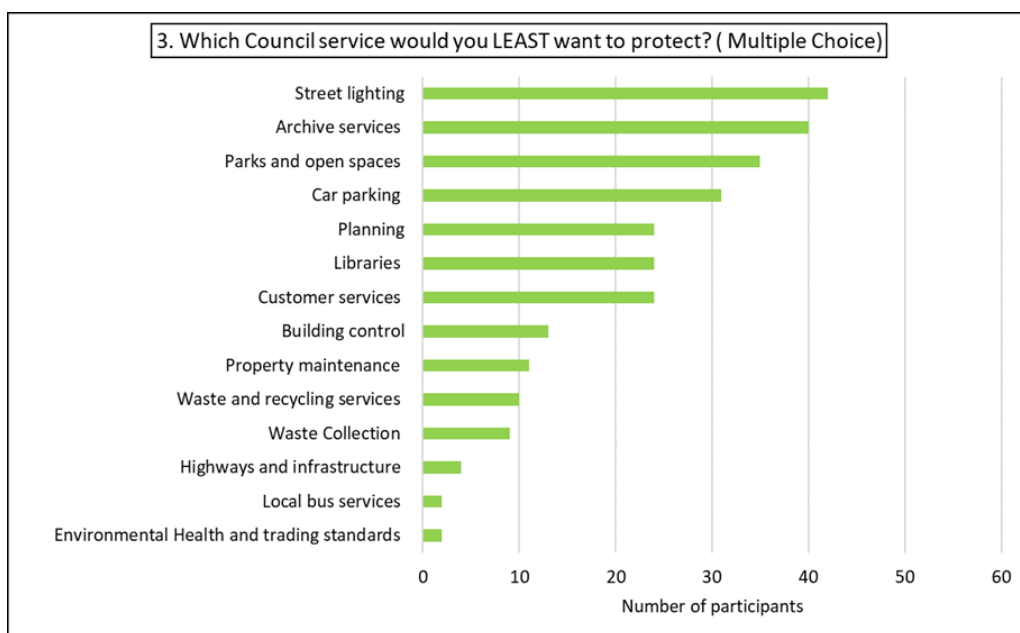
There was strong 'in principle' support for the transfer of assets to communities, however this was conditional on the asset being transferred over in a good state of repair and with an income or potential income attached.

Other points raised in relation to transfer of assets included (please note this is also discussed in section 3 below):-

- Responses to this question often discussed both transfer of assets and the transfer of responsibility. Future conversations relating to this subject need to delineate the two subjects more clearly.
- Many PC's saw the advantages of asset transfer in relation to greater use of local knowledge and having more local control over the asset / service.
- Many of the smaller PCs didn't see the relevance of the question to them based on the fact there are not assets to manage in their communities.
- Some TC's / PC's felt that a list of assets and/or services that could be transferred would be helpful.
- TC's / PC's stated they would want to be trusted to manage the asset without the Council imposing restrictions or bureaucratic conditions on it.
- The Lengthsman Scheme was frequently cited as a good example of how PC's and HC had worked effectively in partnership however many felt that the removal of the Lengthsman grant had left them 'carrying the can'.

- There was support for a more phased approach to asset transfer with tapered financial support to enable a more effective transition of ownership.
- Transferring the asset in a good state of repair is essential so that you are transferring an asset and not 'transferring a liability'.
- All assets available in a community need to be seen in the context of a local economic plan.
- Many felt it was unrealistic to expect volunteers to take on many of the roles needed to run certain assets e.g., libraries and as such paid skilled staff would be required.
- It was also felt that there is not a sufficient pool of volunteers both within the PC and the wider community to manage and run assets.
- It was felt that the timing of discussions around asset transfer needed to be well ahead of setting the precept and was therefore not applicable for this year.
- One suggestion was that if there were fewer PCs or they worked collectively there would be more precept available to be able to take on assets / services.

3. An alternative option may be to reduce the level of some of the discretionary services currently run by the Council. Which Council service would you LEAST want to protect? (Multiple Choice)	
Council service	Number
Customer services e.g., less customer contact more self-service online	24
Environmental Health and trading standards e.g., reduce the number of health inspections	2
Highways and infrastructure e.g., reduce the amount of money spent on road maintenance	4
Street lighting e.g., energy savings from safely lowering street lighting levels and provision	42
Libraries e.g., automate services, reduce opening hours, establish as community hub with other services such as Health	24
Local bus services e.g., run buses less frequently, start services later/finish services earlier	2
Parks and open spaces e.g., spend less maintaining these e.g., grass cutting or use community partners to support this activity in their local areas	35
Property maintenance e.g., reduce maintenance costs across council buildings	11
Planning (currently subsidised by the council)	24
Building control (a service also provided by external providers)	13
Archive services e.g., consider use of volunteers or other model requiring no council funding	40
Waste collection e.g., reduce the number of waste collections to encourage waste minimalisation	9
Waste and recycling services e.g., reduce the hours recycling centres are open	10
Car parking e.g., could be outsourced to a national provider like NCP National Car Parks, move to cashless payments	31



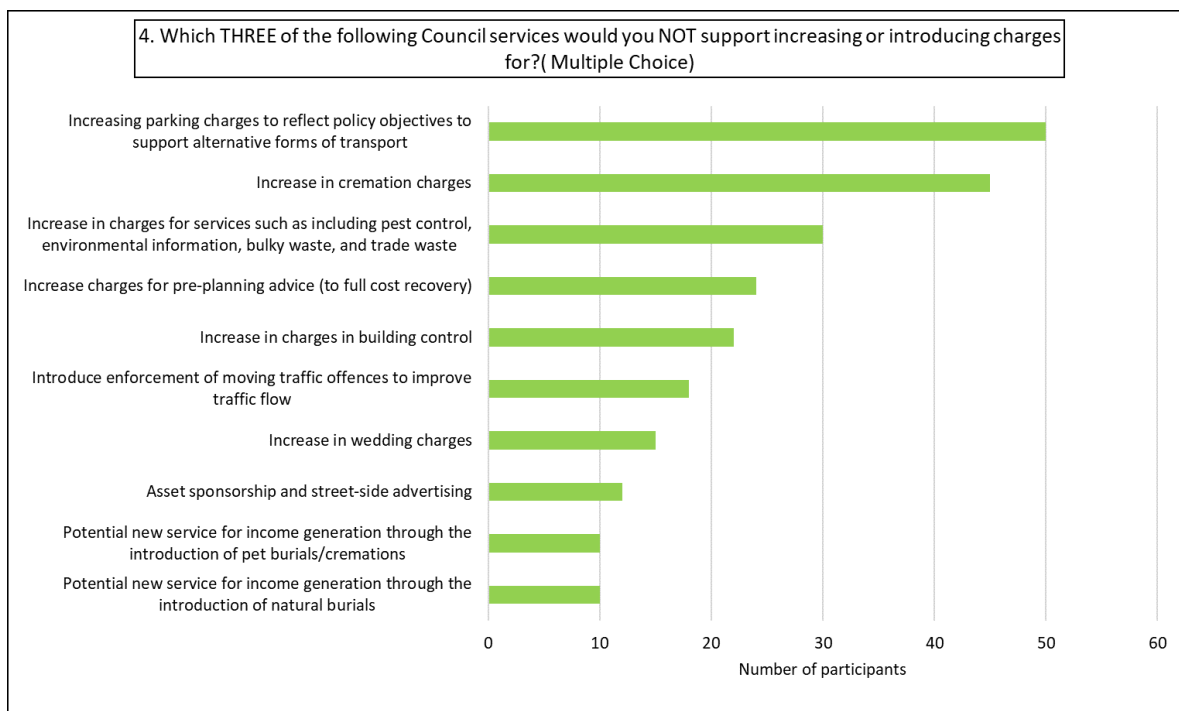
When asked what services people would want to protect least **archive services** and **street lighting** were the most common choices. In relation to street lighting, it should be noted that consultation participants mainly came from rural areas where there is less street lighting. In sessions done with more ‘urban’ participants this was a less popular choice.

There were polarised views around **libraries**. Some strongly in support of a continued need to access books with others seeing it as an access point for wider services, IT, and social interaction. Where people were not in favour of protecting libraries, this was often due to the perception that they would be better managed at a local level. This was also why many people selected **parks and open spaces**.

There were a number of views about **car parking**, these were largely around support for different ways of providing these such as the move to cashless payments; however, there were strong views in the following poll that would NOT support an increase in charges for car parking.

4. Which THREE of the following Council services would you NOT support increasing or introducing charges for? (Multiple Choice)

Council service	Number
Increase in charges in building control	22
Increase charges for pre-planning advice (to full cost recovery)	24
Increasing parking charges to reflect policy objectives to support alternative forms of transport	50
Introduce enforcement of moving traffic offences to improve traffic flow	18
Increase in charges for services such as including pest control, environmental information, bulky waste, and trade waste	30
Increase in cremation charges	45
Increase in wedding charges	15
Potential new service for income generation through the introduction of natural burials	10
Potential new service for income generation through the introduction of pet burials/cremations	10
Asset sponsorship and street-side advertising	12

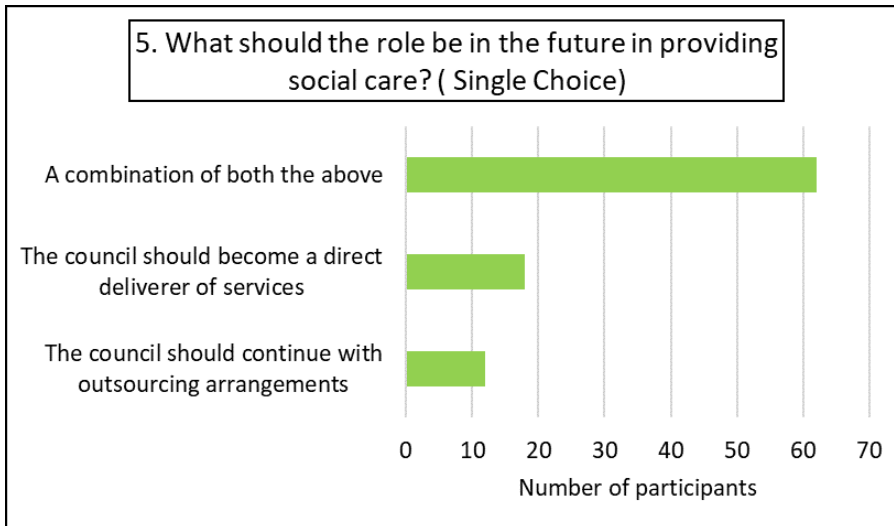


Car parking was the most popular answer to this question with many people stating that they felt increasing car parking charges would have a detrimental impact on the retail / tourism sector. Also, in relation to this some Town Councils stated that they would like more control over car parking locally (this was also an example of an asset that could be transferred). Other points to note in relation to this question include:

- There was strong opposition towards increasing cremation charges.
- There were concerns that introducing charges to remove waste could increase cases of fly tipping.
- The introduction of charges relating to planning and building control received a mixed response. Some felt that the introduction of charges for pre-planning advice may prevent some people from getting advice which may result in delays later in the planning process. As such it may be a false economy.
- There was a feeling that pet burials and natural burial services didn't 'sit' well within this question – people not understanding the potential cost benefit of introducing these services.
- People were unclear about the 'moving traffic offences' option in terms of what sits within the Councils jurisdiction and how offences would be enforced. Concerns were raised that it may cost more to deliver and enforce than it would generate.

5. The cost of social care to the Council is considerable. Currently the Council outsources many of its social care services, e.g. care home placements, support for people with complex needs. What should the role be in the future in providing social care? (Single Choice)

Council role	Number
The council should continue with outsourcing arrangements	12
The council should become a direct deliverer of services	18
A combination of both the above	62



The overriding premise in relation to this question was that people wanted best value for money and a high-quality service (i.e. good outcomes for the clients). It is also worth noting that people would have welcomed more specific information about why HC moved to outsourcing and what plans they have for the direct delivery of social care.

Open Text discussion question 6: Herefordshire Council are proposing to increase use of technology to provide services online. For example, cashless car parking charges, online services for libraries/customer services. What do you think would be a good alternative use of technology?

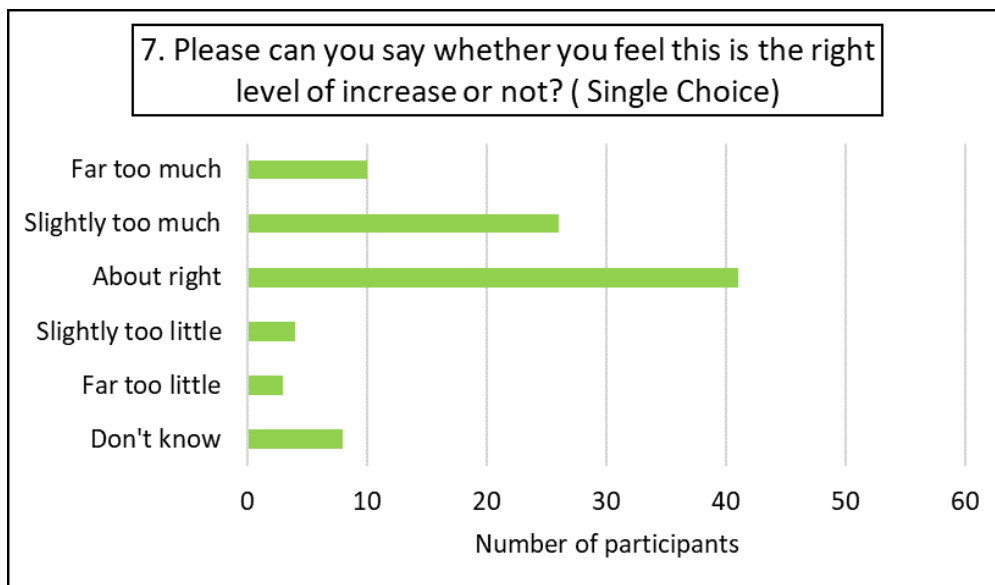
There was a strong consensus that whilst moving services on-line was a pragmatic decision that careful consideration was needed about how this might impact on the most vulnerable sections of society that may be prohibited from accessing on-line services due to a lack of IT literacy and/ or affordability of broadband / smartphone. Other points raised included:

- Concerns about general access to the internet due to the infrastructure in the county. Many people felt that significant investment was still required for there to be equitable access across the county.
- A number of people made the point that on-line access is not ONLY an age-related problem. For example, it may also be a barrier for people with disabilities and people on low incomes.
- It was noted that some cost savings had been achieved by the recent switch to remote working and the use of technology such as Zoom e.g., reductions in staff / councillors travel expenses.

- Views over cashless parking were quite polarised e.g., enables people to stay in town without the restrictions of a return time to the car, however people said it is a real barrier for people without a card or a smartphone.
- Some also felt that now was an opportune time to make more moves to online services, building on the fact many people have had to get used to this type of service delivery during lockdown periods.
- There were a number of references made in relation to Herefordshire Council’s website and how difficult it was to navigate.

7. Given the challenges that have been outlined and in order to protect vital frontline services such as social care, the Council is proposing a Council Tax increase of 4.99%. Please can you say whether you feel this is the right level of increase or not? (Single Choice)

Level of increase	Number of participants
Far too much	10
Slightly too much	26
About right	41
Slightly too little	4
Far too little	3
Don't know	8

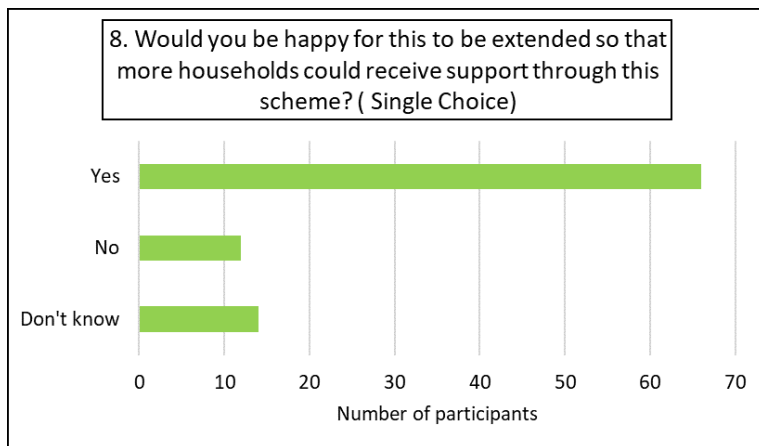


There was some consensus that the potential increase was ‘about right’. However, it is worth noting that those that voted ‘about right’ appeared resigned to a rise due to inevitable economic impact of Covid-19 and the current financial climate.

- Where people voted ‘too much’ this was set within the context of the impact of Covid-19 and the financial difficulties that many households will be experiencing as a result.
- Some people wanted more information about additional services they would receive as a result of the increase.

8. Herefordshire Council provides financial support in certain circumstances to households that are in financial difficulty. Would you be happy for this to be extended so that more households could receive support through this scheme? (Single Choice)

Opinion	Number of participants
Yes	66
No	12
Don't know	14

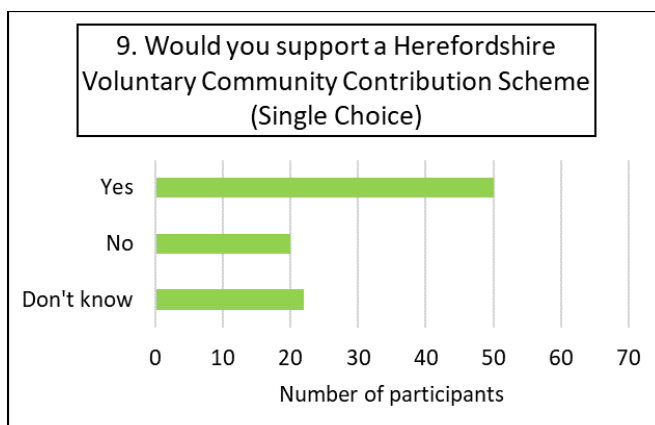


There was a majority in support of additional support being given. Those answering 'don't know' were unsure whether this should be the responsibility of Herefordshire Council or Central Government. People who disagreed with this commonly felt that people experiencing financial difficulty may find additional advice / education in terms of financial planning may be more beneficial in the longer term (i.e., shifting the emphasis to prevention and education).

There were a number of questions about what 'financial difficulty' meant and how it was means tested. People felt this information would have been useful to help them determine their response.

9. Would you support a Herefordshire Voluntary Community Contribution Scheme that would fund activity that supports the ambitions for Herefordshire as set out in the County Plan? (Single Choice)

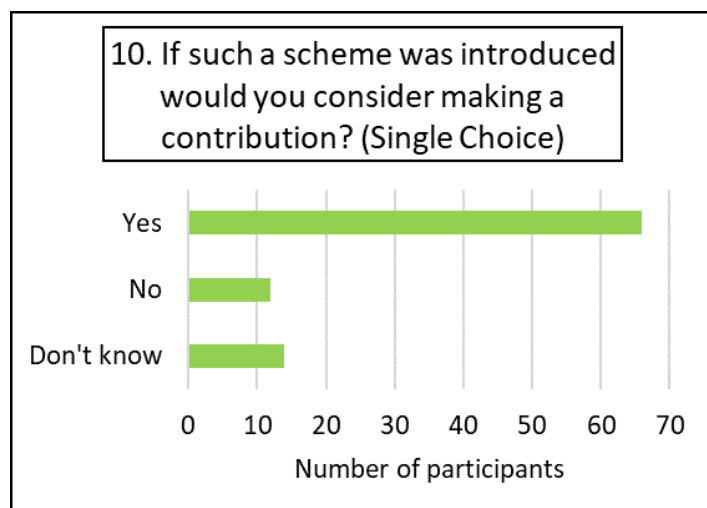
Yes	50
No	20
Don't know	22



There was broad agreement for this type of voluntary contribution scheme but more information about the types of projects that would be supported as a result contributions was considered useful. For example, if this type of scheme was to go ahead then it would be more successful if specific targets/projects were promoted so that people felt fully informed about how monies would be used.

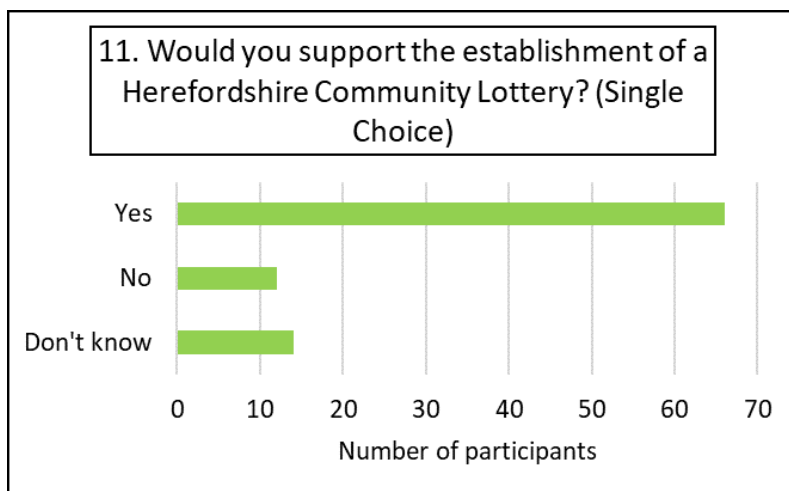
Views were also expressed that this should not be run/managed by Herefordshire Council but that a local external agency rooted within the community should administer it e.g., Hereford Community Foundation

10. If such a scheme was introduced would you consider making a contribution? (Single Choice)	
Response	Number of participants
Yes	31
No	26
Don't know	35



The high number of people selecting 'don't know' reflects the need for more information about the potential level of contributions and the scheme itself.

11. Would you support the establishment of a Herefordshire Community Lottery which would generate additional funding for community-based projects? (Single Choice)	
Response	Number of participants
Yes	69
No	17
Don't know	6



There was broad agreement in relation to the establishment of a community lottery but as with the voluntary contribution scheme people were keen to know what types of projects would be supported. In addition, the following comments were made:

- There was some concern that those people more likely to participate in a lottery are possibly those that are most likely to not be able to afford a lottery ticket.
- As with the voluntary contribution scheme views were expressed that this should not be run/managed by Herefordshire Council but that a local external agency rooted within the community should administer it e.g., Hereford Community Foundation

3. Points made during open discussion

The open discussion part of the session focused on the following key areas:

- Asset transfer – whether people had a view of the type of asset that could be transferred and also what may help communities to manage assets
- Services that were seen as a priority in local communities
- Concerns that people may have in relation to budget setting for their communities
- Review and discussion of suggested principles (NB this was introduced after the 4th session during which the principles were suggested by participants)

The session with businesses asked some specific questions about the role of Herefordshire Council in support of Business and the impact of changes to services on business. NB not all poll questions were used for the session with businesses.

Asset Transfer

What type of assets should/could be transferred to communities?

Please see comments above re: asset transfer under section 2, question 2.

The view was that this really depends on the assets that are available in a community, particularly for very rural parishes there are no assets available to be transferred. Bigger parishes also need to be made aware of assets currently in the ownership of Herefordshire Council that could be transferred.

Also, future dialogue needs to clearly make a distinction between transfer of *ownership* of a physical asset and transfer of *responsibility* for the delivery of a services within a community. Either way a partnership/phased approach is favoured which gives time for the asset to develop an income stream and for the community to fully develop the capacity needed to manage and run the asset. There was also a view that future delivery should be in the control of the Parish Council i.e., that should be given the freedom to deliver the asset or run the service in the way that best meets the need of the local community and with as little bureaucracy as possible.

There also needs to be a realistic view taken about the availability of volunteers in local communities that have the time, skills and expertise to take on more responsibility and asset management. Many PCs are struggling to find Parish Councillors, therefore, to expect volunteers to take on more responsibility is unrealistic. There was also the view that it is inappropriate to expect a volunteer to take on a role previously undertaken by a paid member of staff and that this may be considered 'displacement'. One solution could be a 'paid support lead' with the required skills for that asset could be in post to lead volunteers.

Conversations in relation to asset transfer should take place on an annual basis with discussions starting in the summer in time for precepts to be set.

What might help communities take on assets in the future?

As mentioned above understanding from Herefordshire Council which assets they would like to transfer to Parish and Town Councils would be a good starting point. Ideally there should be a published list of all assets (including land) for each parish. There needs to be open dialogue about assets, their contribution to local communities and the feasibility of transferring them.

It was also felt that appropriate training for those expected to take on the asset would be welcomed. Linked to this helping communities to access appropriate funding would also be useful. Although it was generally agreed that assets need to be self-sufficient and be able to generate enough income to be sustainable.

Priority service areas for communities

Overall, this was a difficult question for people to answer as it was felt that they were *all* important. People also found it difficult to comment on statutory services relating to health and social care, as there was an acknowledgement that these are a 'must have' and therefore not directly comparable in terms of priorities with, for example, library services. Also, it was felt that services had already been cut significantly during the previous years of austerity, which has left little room for further cuts.

There is the need to identify the areas of the budget that have high expenditure and review the potential for change and reduction in spend. Linked to this some people expressed a wish to be consulted on statutory services in more detail in particular the delivery of social care.

Overwhelmingly in rural areas people cited bus services as an area they would want to see protected. Other services that were mentioned and highlighted during the discussion were:

- Roads and highways were also identified as a high priority and particularly drainage issues (i.e., to prevent local flooding).
- Waste management
- Talk Communities
- In the majority Parish Councils valued the contribution that the Planning department offered, although they also acknowledged lengthy timescales.

Concerns about the budget setting process

The primary concerns raised by people were that a short-term view would be taken in relation to the budget cuts without taking into account the longer-term impact of the decisions and that proposed cost savings would impact on the most vulnerable. In addition, people felt that households already experiencing financial difficulties will be hardest hit by income generating proposals such as the council tax increase, increase of charges for car parking etc. Another concern highlighted was that decisions made will not be effectively communicated and consequently the rationale behind changes to services will not be understood.

Business perceptions re: changes to the budget and also how Herefordshire Council can best support business in the future.

When asked what role Herefordshire Council should take when it comes to supporting businesses in the county, the response was that it should aim to facilitate business i.e., make it easier for business to grow, make processes easier not more difficult. An example given related to business parks and the fact that although Herefordshire Council *can* deliver these, it doesn't necessarily *need* to; businesses will create their own opportunity in the open market and potentially private developers would push forward more to overcome barriers.

Other points raised were:

- There was a feeling that there needs to be better management of private contractors to ensure that they are delivering efficiently and effectively.
- There was also felt a need to be more open and transparent about developments and changes in services in order for businesses to plan.

Discussion of the 'principles' suggested by participants

During the first Community Champion session, participants put forward a view that changes to services should be assessed against the following principles. These were then shared at all future sessions (which led to some additions and refinements). Some participants felt that due to a lack of detail, discussing and agreeing principles to underpin decision making could be more effective than selecting service areas that are more/least important.

- Changes to service should not penalise the most vulnerable (and should have an anti-poverty aim)
- Invest to save.....invest in prevention to relieve the pressure on acute services – linked to this help people to help themselves e.g. ensure changes to services enable people to access work or health related services
- Support the voluntary and community sector and let them do what they do best i.e deliver effective services to those most in need (linked to this there needs to be a review of commissioning and procurement processes)
- Communication – let people know WHY decisions are made and that the impact of changes to services is fully understood. (linked to this listen to people about their concerns and ideas for how services can be changed)
- Ensure efficient and effective delivery of statutory services – undertake regular reviews and ensure that the Council itself is 'lean and mean' (although refined to 'lean and fit for purpose') to protect the resource for the frontline services.
- Ensure changes to services impact positively on the environment

- Decisions should enable Herefordshire to become a vibrant economy - a place that encourages business to start and grow.
- The future of the County should always be considered – it should be considered attractive/possible for young people to work and live in Hereford

Comments made in relation to principles

- There was broad agreement for the principles
- It was highlighted that many of the principles are interlinked and are at times in conflict with one another i.e., at times the delivery of one may have a detrimental effect on another.

Additional comments

The following comments, which don't directly relate to any of the areas outlined above, were also made:-

- There is a need to make commissioning more accessible i.e., breaking down the high-level contracts to make it more possible for smaller organisations to tender.
- There were perceptions that money has been 'wasted' by reviewing the link road.
- Views shared that if the Council was a private business, they would be looking for greater efficiencies e.g., salary cuts etc.
- It was acknowledged that the cost-of-service delivery in a rural area is more than in built up areas.
- Some people opposed (politically) to any cuts or charging for services. Comments were made about the double standards of tax system for large corporates and yet it is Ok to raise council tax for families struggling financially.
- Recognition of the value/contribution of the VCS and how they can often prevent people from accessing acute services (which is more costly in the long run). Specific examples that were given in relation to this included foodbanks and CAB (and other advice services), services delivered to older people to prevent isolation, and support for families.
- There is a need to take a longer-term view rather than make decision for short term benefit
- Communication and transparency relating to all Council activity is KEY and an absolute priority.
- There is an appetite for future consultation in relation to; how things can be improved/delivered differently, asset transfer, deliver health and social care services.
- There was some recognition of the positive impact the new NMite university would have the county and the economy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made as a result of the consultation and relate to (i) key outcomes emerging which should be considered as part of the budget setting decision making (ii) providing feedback and future consultation.

1. A series of feedback sessions are held to convey results of budget setting consultation but also to look at how engagement may be undertaken in the future and what form it may take.
2. Herefordshire Council considers how the principles could be used to underpin decision making.

3. Feedback and future consultation features in Herefordshire Council's Communication Strategy and Engagement Framework.
4. Consultation with Parish and Town Councils relating to potential asset transfers should take place on an annual basis in plenty of time for precepts to be set.