

Draft Budget 2022/23 – Consultation Report

About the consultation

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council's constitution requires the organisation to consult on its draft budget proposals.

In previous years the council has focused consultation on inviting comments from the business community. However, as this year's proposals included changes to a range of services, including making financial savings by reducing some services, RBBC opted to increase promotion of the budget consultation to reach a wider audience and to provide a standardised response form to make it easier for people to give their views.

This report provides an overview of the process and a summary of the consultation findings.

Key findings

- While participants largely do not welcome an increase to council tax, many sense that it is necessary and do not object.
- The move to providing services digitally – such as billing and providing information online – is seen as an opportunity for efficiency by many but there is concern that people who are not online will suffer.
- Participants tend to support savings from removing vacant posts or restructuring, such as in Management Team and Planning though some raise concern about increased burden on remaining staff.
- Increased fees, such as for planning, are generally accepted but participants prefer to see these absorbed by commercial customers.
- Proposals for Community Partnerships attracted the most comments and were largely opposed by participants.
- Participants, particularly those within the sector with relevant experience, are concerned about the impact of reduced funding of grants to voluntary and community organisations in the current climate.
- They are also concerned about the impact of the pausing of grants on residents, particularly vulnerable people who they feel would be disproportionately affected.
- There is notable concern about the effect on the lives of elderly and disabled people that removal of taxi vouchers could have, described in some detail and evidenced by voucher recipients themselves.
- There is some reluctance to support budget growth for new technology (such as a new election management system) unless this would result in a clear efficiency saving.
- Participants generally accept budget growth for Neighbourhood Services (Waste & Recycling specifically) but many are unhappy about a lack of clear explanation on the meaning of budget realignment and so would not support the growth proposed for this element.
- Many participants wanted more information provided through the consultation about some elements of the budget proposals in order to participate more meaningfully.

Methodology

The council provided a standardised questionnaire asking individuals and organisations for their views on each of the proposed savings and additional income proposals. The questionnaire was limited to open 'free text' questions to enable participants to give their views in their own words.

The questionnaire also collected demographic data on participants and asked them in what capacity they were responding. Finally, a further open question enabled respondents to add any further comments they wished about the proposed budget. The survey was hosted on the council's corporate SmartSurvey account and invited people to take part anonymously. The council also gave participants the option of writing to the council at a dedicated email address or by letter.

The consultation was promoted through a press release, social media, council e-newsletters to residents and businesses and by email to a list of approximately 350 stakeholders. This included deadline reminders in the closing weeks of the consultation period.

Recognising that online methods do not suit everyone, RBBC provided hard copies through its three community centres and made them available on request. Recipients of the council's taxi voucher scheme – a service referenced by one of the draft proposals – were also provided with a paper version of the survey as they are largely older people and less likely to go online. Completed surveys could be returned free of charge using a Freepost address.

The consultation was open from 22 November 2021 until 17 January 2022.

Participation

The council received 75 completed surveys. It received a further 3 representations by letter or email. Not all survey participants commented on all of the proposals.

Participants were asked in what capacity/ies they were commenting. They could select multiple answers.

Capacity respondents are taking part in survey	No of participants
Resident	58
Run a business	3
Representative of a community or voluntary organisation	24
Work in the borough	10
Visitor to the borough	0
Other	0

Further detail on the breakdown of participants can be found in the Demographics overview on p10.

Statutory stakeholders Horley Town Council and Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council participated. Voluntary Action Reigate & Banstead (VARB) also submitted a response.

Results

The consultation aimed to invite general feedback on the proposals rather than to measure the proportion of residents or stakeholders in favour of or against any given element (this being considered an overly simplistic approach to seeking views). Accordingly, participants have responded with observations and queries as well as comments in favour or against proposals.

Nevertheless, some analysis has been carried out to gauge the levels of support or objection to each aspect of the proposals. The commentary below gives an overview of the flavour of responses, the

range of issues raised and an indication of the direction of participants' views where these were clear. For each proposal, the number of responses¹ is provided and a selection of quotes.

Council tax: 51 responses received

There was broadly an even split of participants between those who accepted or supported the proposal and those who were against it. Around a third supported it, a third objected and the remaining third gave comments but not a clear view. Horley Town Council and Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council both supported this proposal.

Participants cited pressures on household expenses, lower wages and a mismatch between the cost of council tax and the value of services received as reasons to oppose the increase; some wanted council tax to be reduced.

Of those who accepted or supported this proposal, some mentioned that they wished to avoid the cost of a referendum to the public or that they felt an increase in council tax was inevitable.

"This does not appear to be an unreasonable increase." Representative from community organisation.

"No increase is welcome but probably realistic." Banstead resident.

"Due to ongoing financial challenges for individuals and families and national tax rises, council tax should NOT be increased. Indeed I would recommend a 1.99% REDUCTION in council tax." Redhill resident.

"Increases must be kept to a minimum. Families are currently struggling with unavoidable cost increases across other areas such as energy costs. R&B and other public bodies must keep their increases to an absolute minimum and deliver services according to what is affordable." Horley resident.

"I support the maximum increase. I would also support a larger increase which would require a local referendum." Banstead resident.

Communications: 57 responses received

The majority of respondents who commented on this proposal supported it. However, several respondents raised concerns about how digitally excluded audiences – whether themselves or others – would access council information. Furthermore, several participants assumed (incorrectly) the publication would be available digitally even if it was not printed.

"What will you do for resident in RBBC who don't have digital skills so find it hard to go on your sight [sic] for information" Resident.

"We live in an area of high numbers of people who need human interaction. Do not assume we all do smart phones or tablets." Female, 65-74.

"Don't make savings spend more." Horley resident.

"Good idea. I have a young family but don't see a lot of value from this publication. Why not just put the whole thing online and reduce costs further?" Male, 35-44.

¹ Total number of survey responses (excluding those given as 'no comment') and other written responses relevant to the proposal.

"Whilst the Borough News is an informative communication I agree that this is a non-urgent priority." Representative from community organisation.

Horley Town Council said: "In our experience, the 'Borough News' magazine has always been very well received in the past by residents and visitors. It contains comprehensive information and updates across the borough; vital information on how to access important services; outreach support (especially during the Covid-19 pandemic) and advertising opportunities for local businesses. Whilst we appreciate the cost in production and delivery to every household twice yearly is high, the reduction in frequency to just one edition per year would be a great loss." The town council's preference, should the proposed change be accepted, was to adapt the service to a digital solution supplemented with paper copies provided on request. Salfords & Sidlow Parish council noted the proposal and was also keen that digital communications be promoted as an alternative.

Community Partnerships: 70 responses received

Participants were generally unsupportive of this proposal, although sentiment varied according to the different elements included in it. In particular, there was considerable concern about the pausing of grants and taxi vouchers, with many participants referring to personal experience or professional involvement in the issues. As many participants commented only on specific elements of the proposal, these are discussed in turn below.

CCTV

Participants generally supported this element although often with the caveat that they still felt it was important and that they did not want the quality of the service to be compromised.

Horley Town Council said: "The Council queries what changes are being proposed to CCTV maintenance? Whilst we appreciate the need to find a way of saving money, we seek clarification that this would not be at the expense of community safety which we consider to be of paramount importance."

Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council stated it would support the proposal provided that there would be "no detrimental impact to the service."

"If the CCTV maintenance is as good but with reduced costs, there seems little reason to oppose it. If, however, a reduction in costs is accompanied by increased time with cameras out of service, this could have an adverse effect on safety," Female, 55-64.

Small and medium grants

VARB was one of 12 representatives from the voluntary and community sector to participate in the consultation. VARB opposed the pausing of grant funding, stating:

"Pausing of grant funding will have a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable residents of the borough. When the grant schemes were introduced in 2019 the Council's own equalities screening identified the 'positive equalities implications, both directly to the VCS organisations ... and indirectly to several target groups amongst our residents whom the VCS organisations support.' Over the past 2 years, 84% of medium grants and 49% of small grants have been directly used to support disadvantaged groups. These include disabled people, the deprived, and the elderly. (The remainder has been used to support community buildings e.g. scout and guide huts and environmental improvements.)"

VARB also stated that the voluntary and community sector is under greater pressure, citing increased demand in the areas of mental health, poverty and ageing.

VARB continued: "There is no easy way to substitute this funding, therefore it represents a real cut to the voluntary sector. The idea that voluntary organisations can easily find funds elsewhere is misleading. Fundraising is an extremely time-consuming activity that diverts resources away from delivering services. (Grant applications take many days to complete and the average success rate is between 10%-20% i.e. for every 5 to 10 applications submitted only one will be successful. The RBBC Small and Medium grants are much appreciated by the local voluntary sector as they offer an entry-level opportunity to apply for funds with a reasonable chance of success."

VARB felt that fundraising advice provided by RBBC offered limited added value to the support available elsewhere and so the grants in themselves were a more effective way to provide support: "... the small and medium grants are often used as seed funding that can be used by voluntary organisations to attract other funders to support a project."

Further comments from representatives of the community and voluntary sector:

"Whilst the Charity I am CEO of will be thankfully unaffected by the closure of the medium grants programme I did want to comment... my concern for other charities is whether they will be able to continue their vital work, supporting the most vulnerable in the community, without this funding stream. Charities that support vulnerable people save money from the public purse."

"The funding which supports local charitable organisations is given back to the most vulnerable residents in the community many times over by those organisations. Therefore, the impact of pausing these grants will probably be greater than anticipated. This is particularly true in the current climate, where fundraising for voluntary organisations has been significantly impacted."

Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council raised similar concerns about the potential impact of the pausing of grants: "The pause in offer of grant funding will have an impact on local charities who provide essential services within the community. So many classes and support are offered behind the scenes, over and above what local government offers, and these are seen as a lifeline to some residents. This reduction should be seriously considered before being implemented/ taken away. Often when a service is removed it is never re-instigated."

Taxi vouchers

Participants largely opposed the pausing of the taxi voucher scheme. Several were current users of the vouchers, raising specific concerns should the proposal be accepted.

Horley Town Council wanted more information about the service: "The Council would like to understand who currently uses the taxi vouchers, and how much saving pausing the taxi voucher scheme alone would give? We are very concerned that this would lead to vulnerable people, including school students and senior citizens, having such services cut in a most detrimental way".

Salford & Sidlow Parish Council opposed the proposal: "We do not agree at freezing taxi costs and grants. We believe these are funds put into local authorities' hands to spend on their residents and not to fund a deficit."

Taxi voucher recipients detailed impacts on their lives such as difficulties getting to health appointments, carrying out everyday tasks such as shopping or making social trips and added that alternatives such as public transport were not adequate solutions. Some mentioned that they did not have family or able-bodied friends to drive them.

"I won't be able to get out very far anymore. I've relied on them for two years to go shopping and to get to the doctors and the dentist. I feel awful about it and I'm worried about how I'm going to get out and about from now on. It's just the old people that are suffering – we don't count any more."
Voucher recipient.

"I will really miss taxi vouchers, I have so many hospital appointments, I now have bowel cancer, and having lots of tests. Some appointments at Crawley, that's over £30 for taxi, I'm not always able to use bus." Voucher recipient aged 85+

"I am very disappointed. I will be 91 in 2022. Vouchers have helped me to be independent ... my only relative lives in Sydney. I have extremely poor eyesight. ...Getting about by taxi has helped to keep me out of depression. I'm much safer in taxis. Buses are a worry getting on and off. I would have been grateful to continue with taxis, all friends are ancient." Redhill voucher recipient.

"They have been invaluable to get me to hospital appointments etc, at all times. I did have a disabled bus pass allowing me to get to appointments before 10.15 but that was cancelled a few years ago and cannot be used before 9.30," Horley resident and voucher recipient, aged 85+.

"By cutting the taxi vouchers it will cause us many problems as we do not own a car and due to our bad mobility problems cannot use public transport. We need the vouchers for surgery, hospital and shopping visits." Voucher recipient, Horley, 75-84 years.

"Obviously I am disappointed as an unwell lady who can no longer drive. All costs are going up but not my pension so I will be very affected by the loss of taxi vouchers. I live alone and depend on taxis." Voucher recipient, Redhill, 75-84.

"I live in [redacted] where there is no public transport. I am 88 years old and don't drive and without taxi vouchers, I'd be housebound - WHY!" Voucher recipient, aged 85+.

"Absolutely disgraceful attitude. Why take taxi vouchers away from those who most need it. Do the Council really not want their residents to leave their own homes to go shopping / attend appointments / attend groups. You must remember not everybody can afford to use taxis and absolutely rely on the service." Redhill resident, 45-54 years.

"Cessation of taxi vouchers has already further isolated the most vulnerable in our community and if it is to cease, there needs to be alternative solutions in place - most of which will depend on the charities to whom funding is to be cut." Female resident from Redhill.

General

Participants did not comment specifically on reductions to staff and partnerships project funding although some mentioned the value of the relationships they had with Community Partnerships. There were limited comments supporting the proposals in their entirety, such as:

"This sounds better, the savings should help to not increase council tax," (male resident, 35-44) and "This is fine. Can you reduce spend any further?" (borough resident).

Electoral and Democratic Services: 37 responses received

Overall, more participants supported this proposal than opposed it. Participants tended to support the savings outlined but several were not convinced of the proposal to invest in a new elections system, adding they would be more inclined to support it if the spending would result in a future savings. Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council said: "This is an important role within the Borough and

imperative that residents stay engaged with local democracy and voting. If changes being suggested help to enhance this facility and ensure more residents sign up for voting this is of benefit."

Examples of other comments are:

"Agreed saving of £8000. Not sure about the growth - need more information - feel uncomfortable about an increase in spending unless it is guaranteed to save money over a ten-year period."

Banstead resident and businessperson.

"Is new elections management system necessary this year? Put it off." Reigate resident.

Management Team: 46 responses received

Participants' comments largely showed support for this proposal although some voiced concerns about ensuring an effective structure and leadership.

"Sounds sensible, as long as there is enough continuity to ensure effective leadership is maintained." Female participant, 55-64.

"Good idea, public sector organisations are always top heavy." Male participant, 35-44.

"As long as it is well thought out and that there is capacity within the team to deliver all that is needed. Staff need to be well looked after not over-burdened." Community organisation representative.

"Reducing management wages to sensible living level would help." Male resident, 75-84.

Neighbourhood Services: 43 responses received

Participants were generally supportive of the proposals for additional waste crews and for tackling ash die back disease (although some argued for alternative solutions).

The proposal relating to budget alignment attracted numerous comments from participants who felt it was not adequately explained and therefore perhaps even an indication of inefficiency. As such, they felt unable to support it.

"I am against the £100,000 - we need to cut not increase, the demand is not proven at all. I am against the £135,000 - this is just a pot for inefficient managers to fall back on. Yes to saving £25000," Banstead resident, male.

"What the heck is impact alignment of various budgets? Waste should be incinerated. Then added to insultation blocks." Female Horley resident.

"All sounds necessary expenditure." Female resident, Reigate. And, "Recycling options at my flats are almost non-existent. This needs to be improved with provision of proper bins. Aligning various budget should result in saving not growth. You need to find a way to achieve this," Male, 25-34.

"It is essential that household waste is collected from residents' properties to help reduce fly tipping within the Borough. This budget growth is supported. Maintenance of trees and dealing with Ash Die back is important and funding should be provided for this service." Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council.

Horley Town Council supported the proposals: "The Council is supportive of the proposed increase for additional waste crew to cater for increased demand and rise in residential properties across the borough. We would also add the importance to continue raising awareness to protect the environment and for householders to be reminded of the urgent need to reuse, repair and recycle as much as possible and this could perhaps be communicated through sporadic environmental campaigns. The Council would also be interested to know if the borough has considered growing its

commercial waste collections for which they can make a charge as well as receiving income from the recyclables collected.”

Planning: 38 responses received

More participants supported than opposed this proposal although views varied on the two aspects.

Salfords & Sidlow opposed the aspect of the proposal to delete a vacant post: “The Parish Council is not happy about the proposed budget saving of £55,000 from deletion of a vacant staff post in planning. S&SPC has previously raised serious concerns about staff shortages in this department to be able to effectively manage and process enforcement matters and reduction in staff will exacerbate this situation.”

Some residents also raised concerns about pressure on the service, although they were in the minority:

“Resident engagement with the planning department can be difficult due to limited numbers of staff, who are often overstretched, will the deletion of a staff post just make a bad situation worse?” Banstead resident, 55-64.

There was slight concern among residents about increases to pre-application fees. Some suggested ways of reducing the impact of these on residents, although comments indicated some confusion between planning application fees (which are not set locally) and pre-application fees (to which the proposal relates).

“Application fees increased for large businesses and developers not residents of the borough,” Horley resident, 35-44.

“Saving £55,000 is a good idea, application fees are already expensive anyway.” Male, 35-44.

“Pre-application fees are worrying as they reduce householders feeling able to access advice needed to get planning applications right first time. I therefore feel it is better to charge at application stage. I would be against further increases before application.” Reigate resident, female.

Property and Facilities: 38 responses received

Several of the comments on this were not directly related to the proposal (e.g. general comments about business rates and the current challenges to local businesses). Of those that were, some objected to the proposal, instead suggesting RBBC sells more of its properties. The remainder felt that the budget growth was unavoidable and therefore accepted the proposal.

“Disagree. Could the Council do more to sell off vacant properties or encourage employees to adopt a more flexible approach to home/office working to reduce the space required by the Council?”

Horley Town Council questioned the need for proposed growth in this area: “In the light of the Government announcement to cancel the usual CPI increase for 2022/23 and that therefore there would be no increase in Business Rates, the Council would like to understand the basis for this proposal such as by how much are business rates expected to rise and whether this would be a similar figure for other surrounding councils.”

Salfords and Sidlow Parish Council was also unclear about the basis of the proposal and wanted RBBC to look for alternative solutions: “It is not clear if the proposed budget growth of £120,000 to cover an increase in business rates costs for council properties is more income or more expense. In all other sections growth seems to mean more income but the need to cover an increase in business rates looks like expense! We also ask why R&BBC are asking for cash to fund business rates on

existing infrastructure? We believe the last two years has amply demonstrated that flexible working means you can repurpose some space or sell it off. Could R&BBC be a bit more ambitious and maybe share space with Surrey County Council at the new Woodhatch Place (Old Canon building) to save money.”

Revenues, Benefits and Fraud: 40 responses received

In principle, most participants, including Salfords & Sidlow Parish Council, who expressed a view accepted the proposal. However, regarding the move to providing billing and information online only, there was concern – including from Horley Town Council – for residents who are not online.

“The Council is broadly in favour of electronic billing however it is concerned about what facilities would be put in place to help those residents without a computer or internet access and how would they be supported?” Horley Town Council.

“No to online only for council tax or other services as not all people can access online services.” Female resident from Merstham.

“Many residents do not have good access to the internet (I know this from working in a school) and older residents find it difficult to access, even with good equipment and support. I believe a significant proportion of the borough could feel disenfranchised by this move, which saves only £5,000 in any case.” Redhill resident.

Additional general comments: 26 responses received

The questionnaire provided space for any other comments participants wished to make. Sentiments ranged from a request to go further in making savings to concern about the impact on residents already experiencing financial pressures. Participants mentioned examples of spending (some from RBBC, some from other organisations) that they felt were wasteful.

Participants also said they wanted more information about the budgeting process such as what other options had been considered or wanting the opportunity to input earlier in the process.

“I am concerned that those who set the budgets do not really know what life is like for those who are on or near the breadline, struggling day to day. We are a Borough who has povity [*sic*] within it, and it is foolish for those who have priviledged [*sic*] lives to think otherwise. We are not all earning huge salaries, some of us are living beyond our means to pay the bills etc and they should be recognised. We have foodbanks within this Borough for goodness sake. Do not penalise those who do not have internet access, who need the taxi vouchers and other benefits.” Redhill resident.

“What are the reserves actually for? Seems a lot of money gaining interest, is this interest used or added to the reserves.” Horley resident, 55-64.

“Let Reigate & Banstead lead the way and show other Councils just what we can achieve. Look at the litter pickers - amazing volunteers and results. Get others to Volunteer... The Council is for the things that we cannot achieve ourselves, that need an efficient service, shame that previous senior management have been so greedy, selfish and uncaring about expenditure on their watch. Lets move forwards positively.” Banstead resident.

“I do hope that all Councillors will seriously consider the impact that these budget savings will have on the lives of the most vulnerable at this time. Both the direct impact of removing taxi vouchers and the indirect impact of weakening the voluntary and community sector by removing the option to apply for small and medium grants.” Female resident, Banstead.

Demographics overview

Age – young people (under 35s) are under-represented in the survey. Older people (65+) are over-represented. The age group 35-64 years is in line with the local population.

Age range	No of participants	% of participants who provided data
18-34	1	2%
35-64	34	55%
65+	27	44%
Prefer not to say / Did not answer	15	-

Gender – 27 participants (46% of those who gave any gender) were male, 30 (51%) said they were female. 2 (3%) participants gave their gender as non-binary. A further 18 preferred not to say or did not provide an answer. This is broadly in line with the local population (men slightly under-represented.)

Health and disability – although those with health concerns or disability (particularly those ‘affected a lot’) are notably over-represented in comparison to the wider population, this is likely in part to be due to the number of responses from taxi voucher participants in a relatively small consultation.

Affected by health concern/ disability?	No of participants	% of participants who provided data
Yes, a lot	11	19%
Yes, a little	4	7%
No	42	74%
Prefer not to say / Did not answer	20	-

Location – Redhill and Reigate are slightly over-represented among participants, Horley and Banstead are slightly under-represented.

Area	No of participants	% of participants who provided data
Banstead and northern villages	18	31%
Horley	9	16%
Redhill	17	29%
Reigate	14	24%
Prefer not to say / did not answer	18	-

Ethnicity – 53 participants described their ethnicity as white British, 2 as another white background and 2 provided other descriptions (e.g. European). Non-white ethnic backgrounds, which make up around 9% of the borough’s population, therefore appear to be unrepresented among participants. 20 participants did not provide this data or preferred not to say.