

Appendix 8

2022/23 Cherwell District Council budget consultation report

This report sets out the key findings from Cherwell District Council's budget consultation, carried out between 2 December 2021 and 4 January 2022, to support the 2022/23 budget and business planning setting process.

Executive summary

In total, the council received **176** completed online survey responses.

Respondent profile

- 159 survey respondents identified themselves as Cherwell residents.
- Seventeen were identified as other stakeholders: parish or town councillors or representatives, non-residents, business representatives, council employees, and anonymous.

Approach to savings

- A clear majority of respondents (138) **disagreed with reducing spending on frontline services**, with only nineteen actively agreeing.
- Survey respondents' **top three approaches to making savings** from the list provided, were:
 - Reducing staff costs by supporting long-term flexible working eg working at home to reduce printing, travel and energy costs (chosen 146 times as a top three approach).
 - Reduce costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (chosen 146 times as a top three approach).
 - Reduce spending on staffing by redesigning services, using less temporary agency staff and/or holding vacancies (chosen 141 times as a top three approach).

Council tax

- Over half (57 per cent) of the **survey respondents** (101 survey respondents) said yes, they were prepared to support the proposed council tax increase council tax by £5 per year for the average Band D property, whereas just over a third, 36 per cent said no (64 survey respondents). Six per cent (11 survey respondents) did not know.
- Focusing specifically on how **Cherwell residents** responded to the proposed council tax increase, 56 per cent said yes, they supported this increase (89 respondents), whereas 40 per cent (63 respondents) said no they did not. Four per cent (seven respondents) did not know.

Council priorities

- Of the council's four themes, respondents deemed the following priorities to be the **most important** for the council to concentrate on:
 - Healthy, resilient and engaged communities (chosen 98 times as a top two priority)
 - Leading on environmental sustainability (chosen 89 times as a top two priority)
 - An enterprising economy, with strong and vibrant local centres (chosen 88 times as a top two priority)
- Housing that meets your needs was a less popular choice (chosen 66 times as a top two priority).

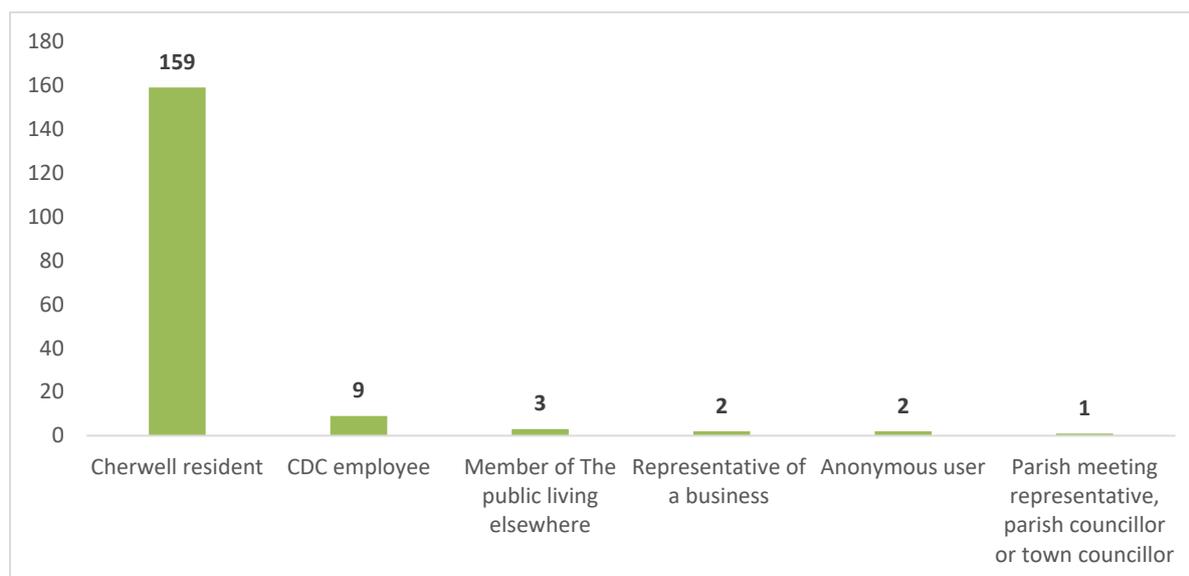
Approach

1. Between 2 December 2021 and 4 January 2022, the council invited comments on its budget proposals for 2022/23, including its proposed council tax increase. Residents and stakeholders were also signposted to a supporting consultation booklet for background information and to the published budget reports.
2. Feedback was primarily collated using an online survey on the council's digital consultation and engagement platform, Let's Talk Cherwell, with residents and stakeholders also being able to submit comments by email. A small number of paper copies of the consultation booklet and promotional posters were distributed to libraries across the district and arrangements were put in place to supply information in alternative formats on request.
3. The budget consultation was actively promoted to a wide range of audiences using multiple channels (media, social media and other digital platforms, the website, advertising) and to staff and councillors to help them spread the word. The social media posts stimulated some comments. Where genuine questions were raised, we responded to clarify any misunderstandings and provide helpful information.

Responses and feedback

4. In total, the council received **176** online survey responses and **two** email responses, which were both from stakeholders. These are summarised after the responses to the online survey at the end of the report. Not everyone answered each question in the online survey (as was permitted) and the data in this report focuses on the total number of people who answered each question.
5. Seventeen were identified as other stakeholders: parish or town councillors or representatives, non-residents, business representatives, council employees, and anonymous. A full breakdown of who responded to the survey is shown in the chart below.

Chart 1: Profile of survey respondents



6. In terms of the demographic profile of respondents (where information was provided):
 - Slightly more men (87 people or 49 per cent) than women (70 people or 40 per cent) completed the survey.
 - People of all ages responded to the online survey. Sixty-nine respondents (or 39 per cent) said they were aged 44 years or under, including one person who said they were aged under twenty-four. Ninety-five survey respondents (or 54 per cent) said they were aged over 45 years, including 26 who were aged 65 years or over.
 - The majority 140 of the survey respondents (or 80 per cent) are white British, Irish, Scottish or any other white background, while all other ethnicities made up a very small proportion (12 people or seven per cent).

7. This consultation feedback will be shared as follows:
 - This consultation report will be shared with all councillors and forms part of the budget papers for Executive to consider on 7 February.
 - The report will be published on the council's digital consultation and engagement platform, Let's Talk Cherwell. This will be supplemented by a 'you said, we did' update on Let's Talk Cherwell after decisions have been made.
 - A deposit of all consultation responses (suitably redacted to comply with GDPR) will be compiled and made available for all councillors to review on the members' portal.

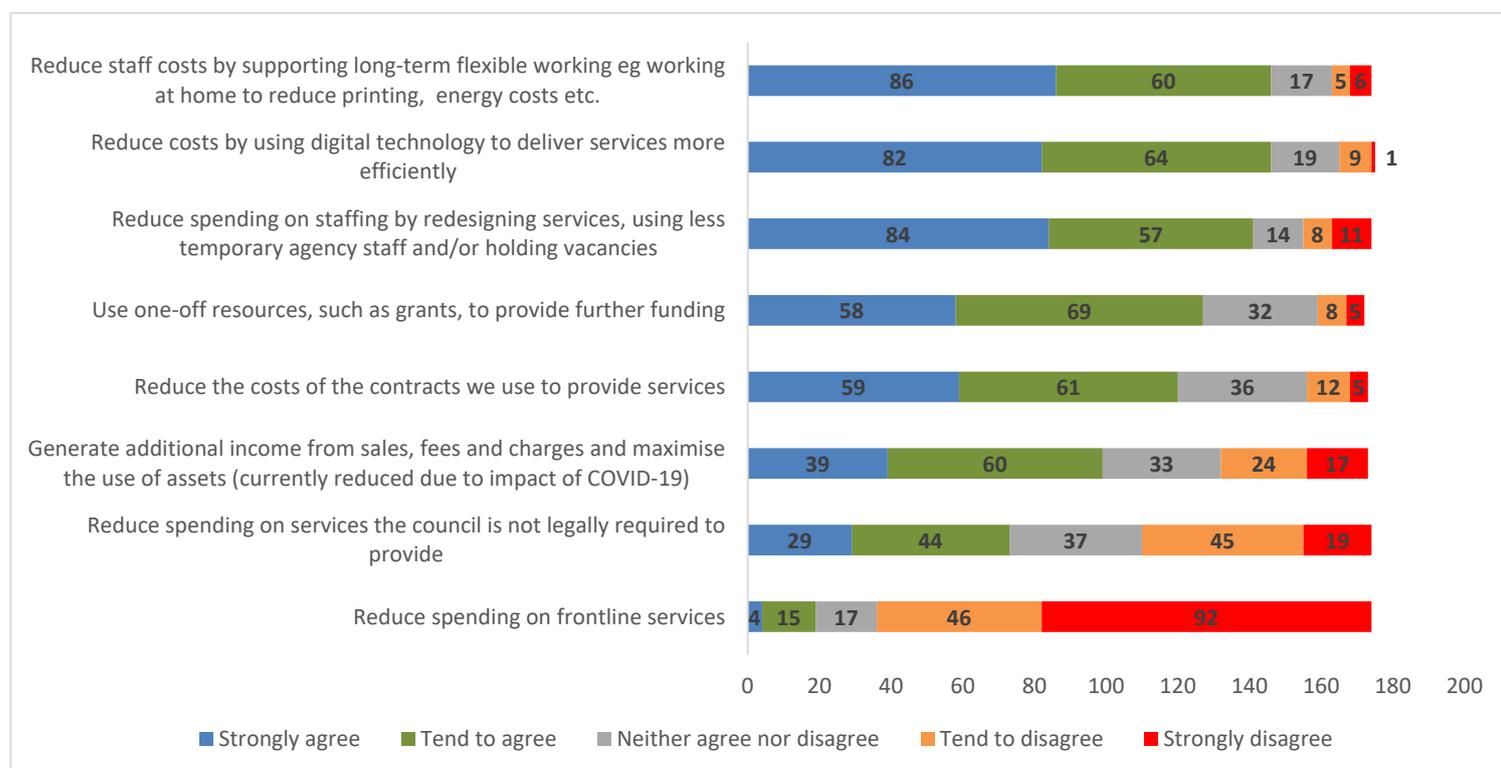
Approach to savings

8. Survey respondents were informed that 'Cherwell District Council alongside all other local authorities faces an uncertain funding situation. In 2021/22, a combination of national and local factors came together to present significant financial challenges for the council, which resulted in us needing to make

savings of £4.4 million. This year, the challenge remains meaning we need to make new savings of £2.6 million in 2022/23'.

9. They were then presented with eight different approaches the council could take to make savings. We asked, 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following?' A rating scale was set for: strongly agree; tend to agree; neither agree nor disagree; tend to disagree; strongly disagree.
10. The chart below shows the spread of responses across the eight options. It has a base of 176 respondents and is ranked in descending order of total agreement. Please note that it shows the number of responses not percentages

Chart 2: Views on all proposed approaches to making savings



11. A clear majority of respondents (138) **disagreed with reducing spending on frontline services**, with only nineteen actively agreeing.

12. Respondents were also **less receptive** to the council reducing spending on services the council is not legally required to provide – to note though, however, more agreed (73) than disagreed (64). Forty-one respondents disagreed with the proposed approach to create additional income from sales, fees and charges and maximise the use of assets (currently reduced due to the impact of COVID-19). Thirty-seven were undecided, saying they neither agreed nor disagreed, and 99 agreed.

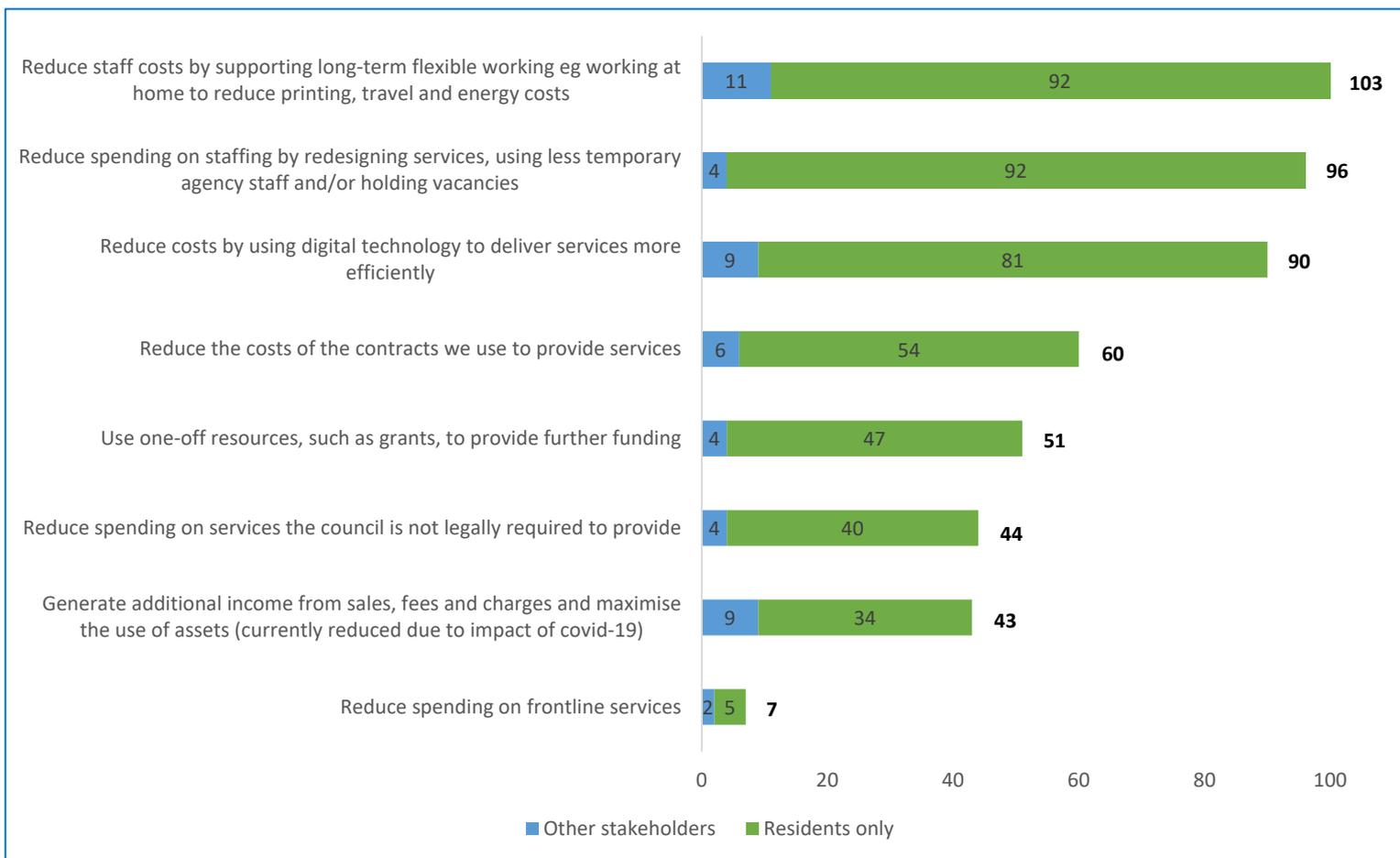
13. Respondents were **most receptive** to the council using the following three proposed approaches.
- Reducing staff costs by supporting long-term flexible working eg working at home to reduce printing, travel and energy costs (146 agreed, including 86 who strongly agreed).
 - Reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (146 agreed, including 84 who strongly agreed).
 - Reducing spending on staffing by redesigning services, using less temporary agency staff and/or holding vacancies (141 agreed, including 84 who strongly agreed).
14. We offered survey respondents the opportunity to **suggest their own approaches** to making savings and 32 responders shared their thoughts with us. Comments with three or more mentions are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Suggestions put forward by survey respondents for making savings

Comment	Mentions
Restructure staff	7
Sell Bodicote House (Cherwell District Council HQ)	5
Critical of Castle Quay	5
Improve efficiencies	4
Reform tax	4
Scrap or realign Cherwell District Council	4
Cut staff salaries	3

15. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.
16. When respondents were asked to select their **top three approaches**, these were:
- a. Reducing staff costs by supporting long-term flexible working eg working at home to reduce printing, travel and energy costs (chosen 103 times as a top three approach).
 - b. Reducing spending on staffing by redesigning services, using less temporary agency staff and/or holding vacancies (chosen 96 times as a top three approach).
 - c. Reducing costs by using digital technology to deliver services more efficiently (chosen 90 times as a top three approach).
17. These preferences are consistent with the previous question (chart 2 shown above). Reducing spending on frontline services remains the least preferred approach, only chosen seven times as a top three approach.
18. The stacked bar chart below, which has a base of 165 respondents, shows survey respondents' top three preferences in rank order. The bars give the total number of times the approach was selected as a top three approach and how it is split between Cherwell residents and other stakeholders.

Chart 3: Top three preferred proposed approaches to making savings



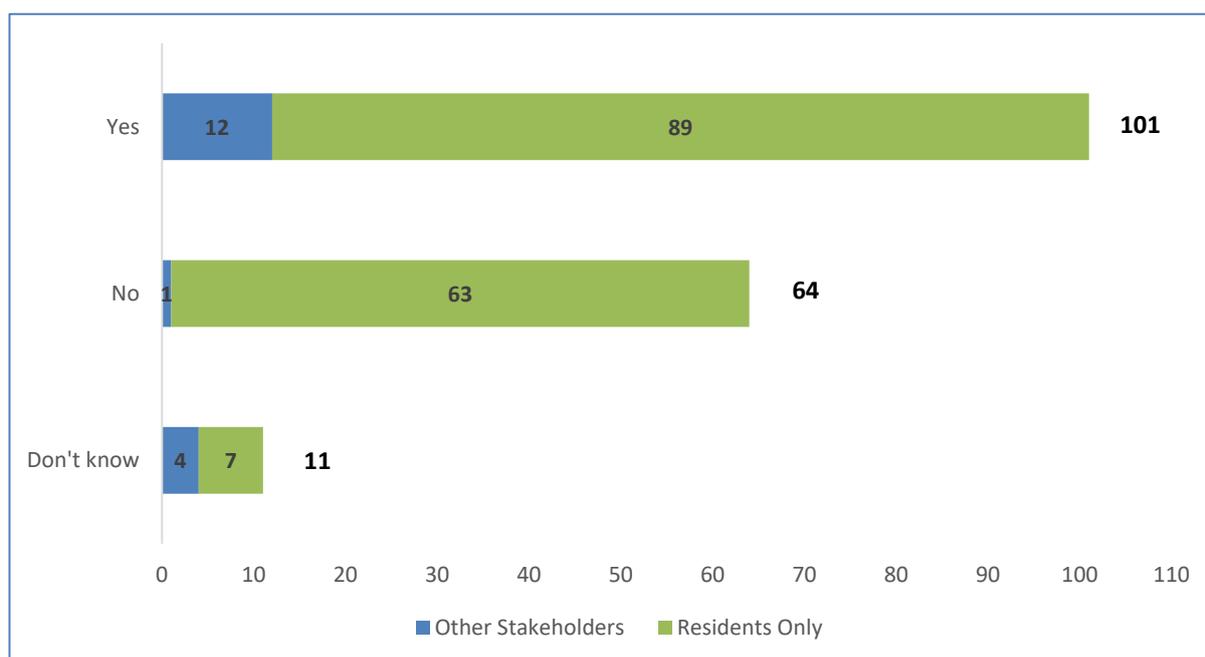
Proposed council tax increase

19. We informed people that in 2022/23, Cherwell District Council is proposing to increase council tax by £5 per year for the average Band D property. This works out at less than 10p per week and is the maximum amount the government will currently allow. We asked people if they would be prepared to support this proposed increase.

20. Over half (57 per cent) of the **survey respondents** (101 survey respondents) said yes, they were prepared to support the proposed council tax increase council tax by £5 per year for the average Band D property, whereas just over a third, 36 per cent said no (64 survey respondents). Six per cent (11 survey respondents) did not know.

21. The stacked bar chart below, which has a base of 176 respondents, shows how people responded. The bar gives the total percentage and how it is split between Cherwell residents and other stakeholders.

Chart 4: Would you be prepared to support the proposed council tax increase? (All respondents)



22. Focusing specifically on how **Cherwell residents** responded to the proposed council tax increase, 56 per cent said yes they supported this increase (89 respondents), whereas 40 per cent (63 respondents) said no they did not. Four per cent (seven respondents) did not know.

23. 101 respondents gave further feedback to support their response. The main themes are summarised in the table below, shown in rank order of comments per theme.

Table 2: Comments to support response to council tax question

Comment	Mentions
Happy to pay for good services	30
Services don't justify	16
Taxed enough already	12
Can't afford	12
Garden waste increases a factor	8
Cut costs	5
Not enough information	3

24. The comments shared were consistent with the response they had given to the previous question about the proposed council tax increase, for example:

- Those who said yes they would pay the extra £5, said they agreed on the proviso that it was essential to maintain services.
- Those who said they were happy to pay for good services had said yes, though questioned if everyone could afford it.
- Those that said they couldn't afford it or the services didn't justify the increase had said no.

- d. Those that commented that they didn't have enough information or asked, "For how long?" had responded don't know.

25. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.

General comments on the council's budget proposals

26. All survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide comments on our budget proposals. Although signposted to the full budget papers as published on the council website, some people used this opportunity to make more general comments.

27. Table 3 summarises the key themes shared. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.

Table 3: Most frequently mentioned comments put forward

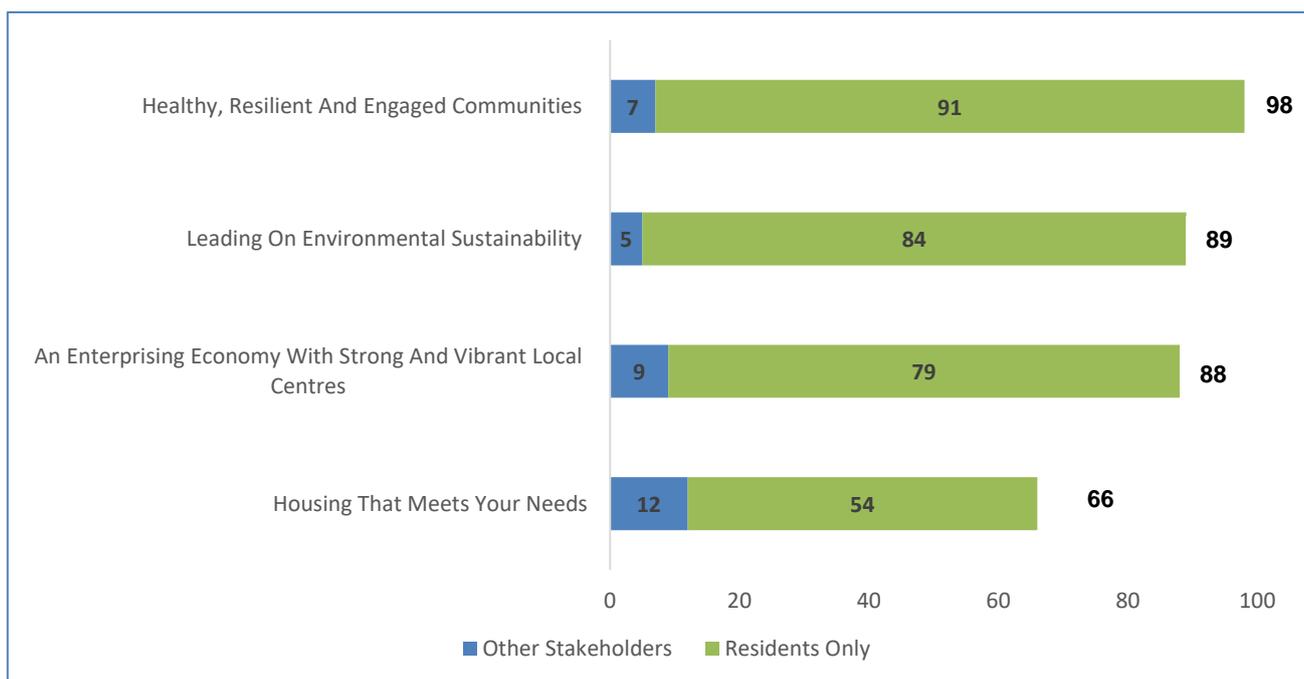
Comment	Mentions
Maintain frontline services	4
Maintain CCTV	3
Cut car parking fees	3
Long term thinking	3
Cut salaries	2
Need long term thinking	2

Shaping our business plan

28. Survey participants were told that every year the council reviews its priority themes as part of its budget setting process. Taking account of the council's four priorities as they currently stand in the council's business plan, they were asked which **two** they consider to be most important for the council to concentrate on.

29. The stacked bar chart below, which has a base of 170 respondents, shows how people responded. The bars give the total number of times a priority was chosen as a top two theme and how it is split between Cherwell residents and other stakeholders.

Chart 5: Preferred priorities



30. Of the council’s four themes, respondents deemed the following priorities to be the **most important** for the council to concentrate on:
- Healthy, resilient and engaged communities (chosen 98 times as a top two priority).
 - Leading on environmental sustainability (chosen 89 times as a top two priority).
 - An enterprising economy, with strong and vibrant local centres (chosen 88 times as a top two priority).

Housing that meets your needs was overall a less popular choice (chosen 66 times as a top two priority).

31. 23 respondents gave further feedback as to clarify their specific selections. These are show in table 4 below.

Table 4: Comments to support response to priorities question

Comment	Mentions
Questioning the building of housing	7
Caring for the vulnerable is important	3
Stressed importance of public safety	2
Stressed importance of education	2

32. All councillors will be able to view the full feedback in the consultation deposit should they wish.

21 January 2022