

Budget consultation survey results

Background

Following the agreement of the Policy and Resources Committee on 26 November, a consultation was launched on draft proposals for the council's budget for the financial year 2026/27.

This consultation ran for 6 weeks, and responses were encouraged through news release, social media posts, letters to Town and Parish councils, awareness at area committees, and the council website.

The consultation asked people to read key budget documents and then respond to 17 questions.

The consultation closed at midnight on Thursday 8 January, having received 458 responses.

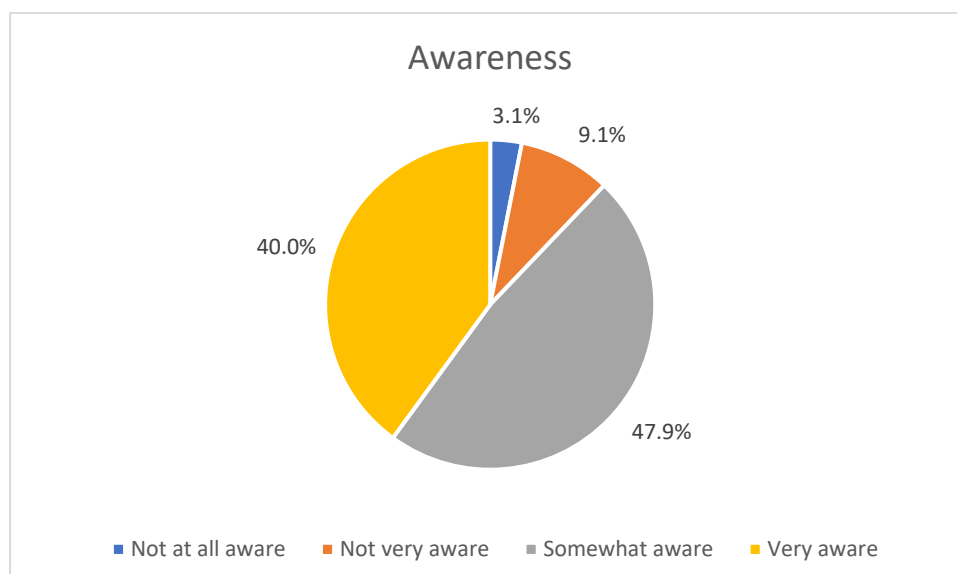
Results – Summary

There was a much higher response rate this year, which was likely driven by proposals around parking charges. Many of the responses included suggestions that are within the control of Swale Borough Council, but there were also a number of comments and suggestions relating to services provided by other preceptors (such as Kent County Council) or which are not possible to implement under current legislation.

A large number of the comments received were in relation to introducing charges in some currently free to use car parks across the borough. This decision was not part of the budget consultation, as this was subject to a different consultation exercise and a separate committee decision. These comments have been removed from free text response analysis, and passed over for inclusion in the relevant consultation.

Results that could be scored are shown in the graphs below. There were some free text response fields, and results of these are summarised later in the document.

Question 1: Before reading this, how aware were you of the financial challenges facing Swale Council?

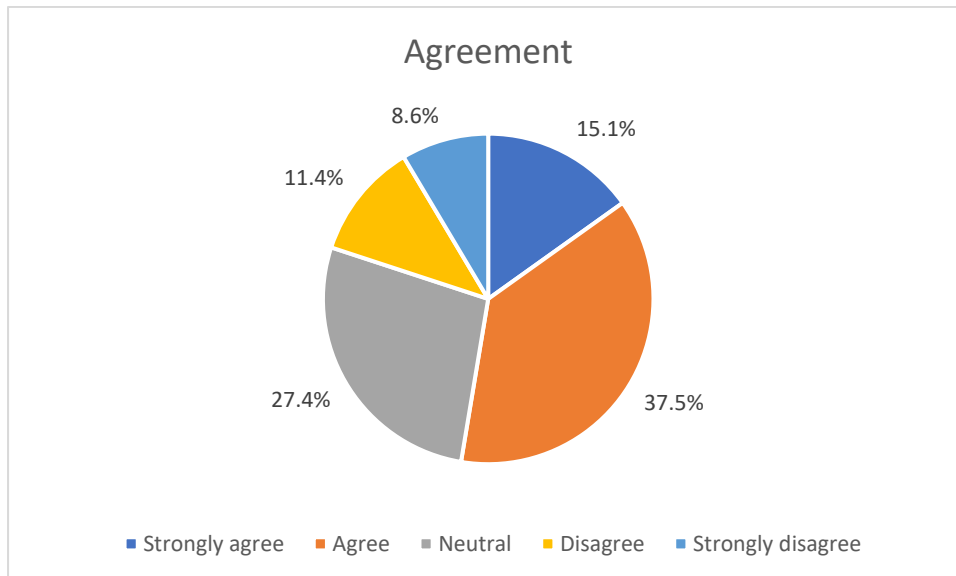


Question 2: To help close the gap, the Council has identified:

- £970,000 in “back-office” efficiencies and financial savings.
- £100,000 in savings from a review of public toilets (agreed last year).
- £335,000 in proposed new income from parking tariffs.

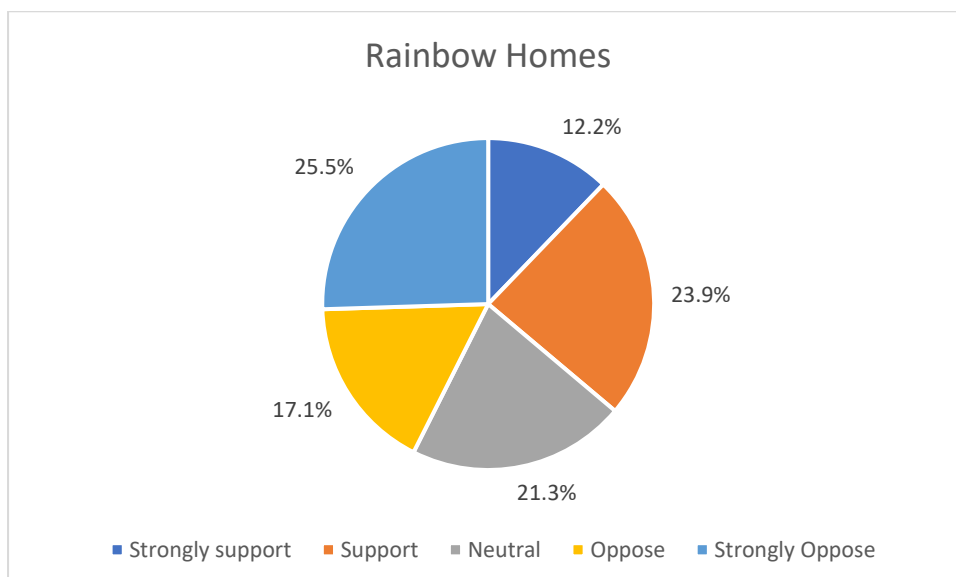
Despite this, we still need to close a remaining £665,000 gap.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the council faces a significant financial challenge?



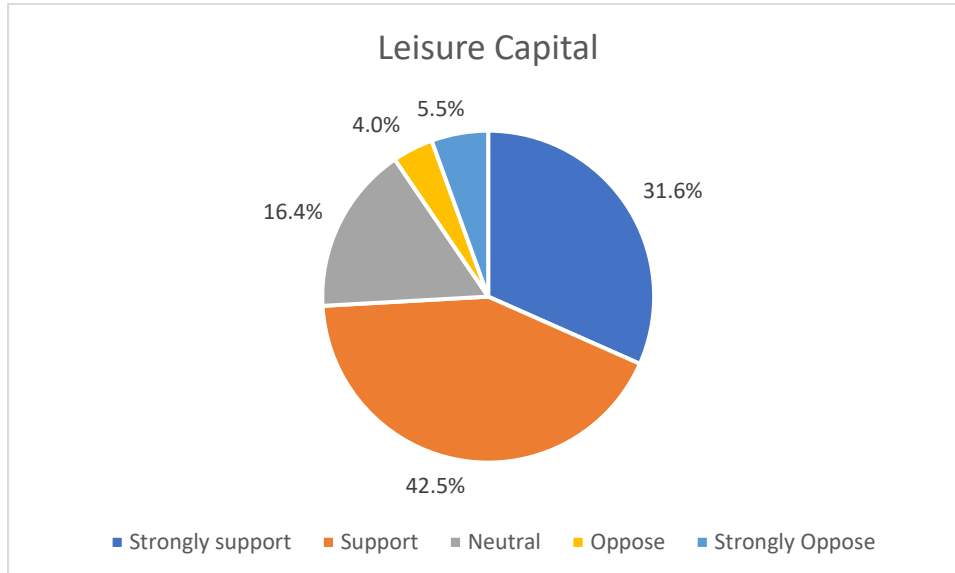
Question 3: We plan to invest £21 million from our capital budget in the delivery of affordable homes, starting with the Cockleshell Walk scheme to build 51 new 100% affordable rent homes. This money cannot legally be used for day-to-day services.

To what extent do you support or oppose this as a council priority?



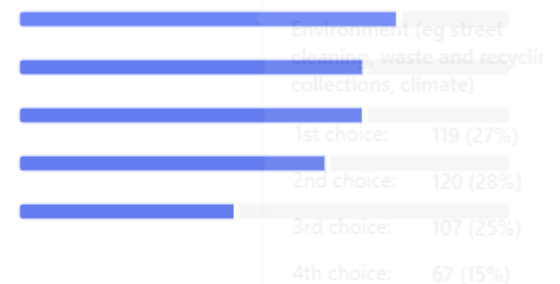
Question 4: We are also proposing to invest £2 million from our capital budget as part of the new contract to keep our leisure centres running. This money is for essential maintenance and infrastructure improvements, for items like boilers, pool filter and air handling systems.

To what extent do you support or oppose this essential investment?



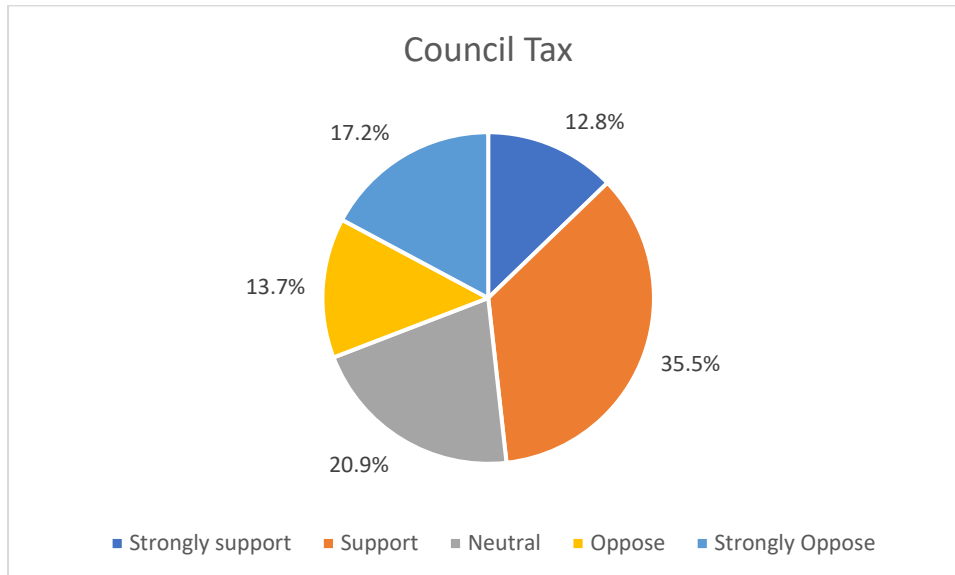
Question 5: Please rank our five Corporate Plan priorities in order of what is most important to you.

- 1 Environment (eg street cleaning, waste and recycling collections, climate)
- 2 Economy (eg supporting business, town centre regeneration)
- 3 Community (eg safety, parks, community resilience)
- 4 Health and housing (eg homelessness, leisure, wellbeing)
- 5 Running the council (eg efficiency, customer service)



Question 6: The help fund services, the council is proposing a 2.96% increase in its share of Council Tax. For a Band D property, this is an increase of £6.12 per year, or less than 12p per week. (Swale Council only keeps 9p of every £1 you pay in Council Tax).

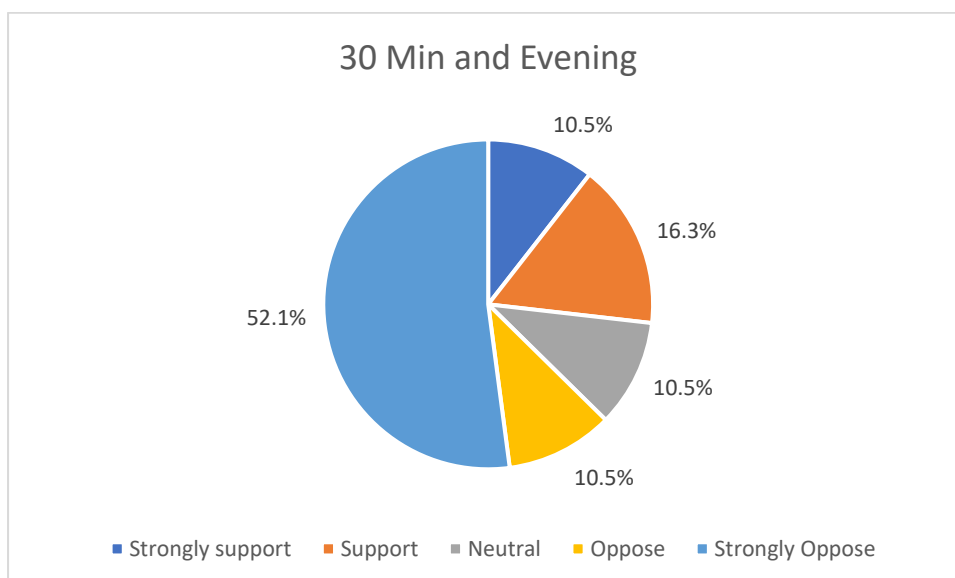
To what extent do you support or oppose this?



Question 7: To generate £335,000 to help fund services like parks and street cleaning, we are proposing several changes to parking tariffs.

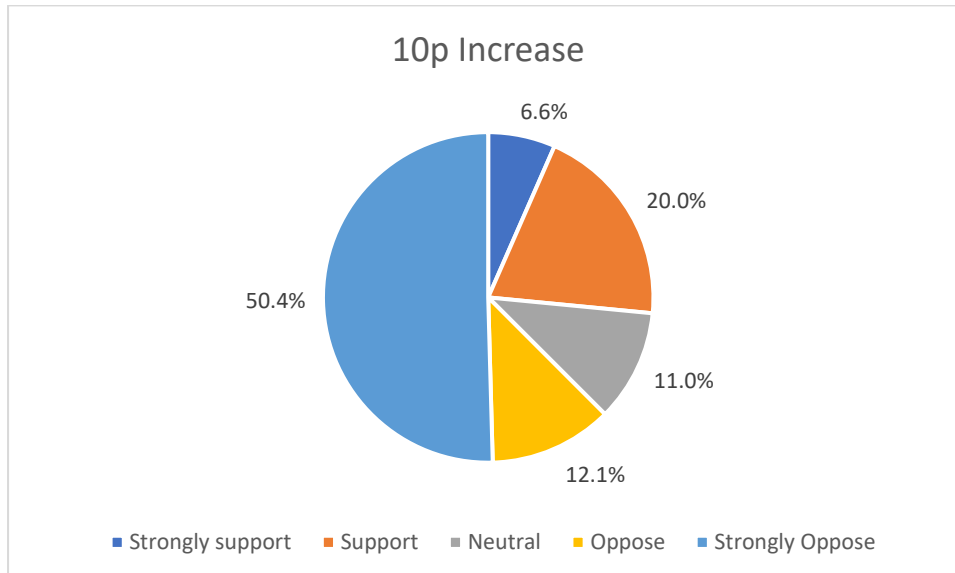
One proposal is to remove the current 30-minute tariff (80p). To help balance this for evening visitors, we propose introducing a new flat-rate evening fee of £2.50 from 7pm to 10pm, after which it's free to park until 7am. This would mean someone going out for the evening would only pay £2.50 to park, instead of £4.80.

To what extent do you support or oppose this combined proposal (removing the 30-min tariff and moving from an hourly charge to a flat rate evening fee from 7pm)?



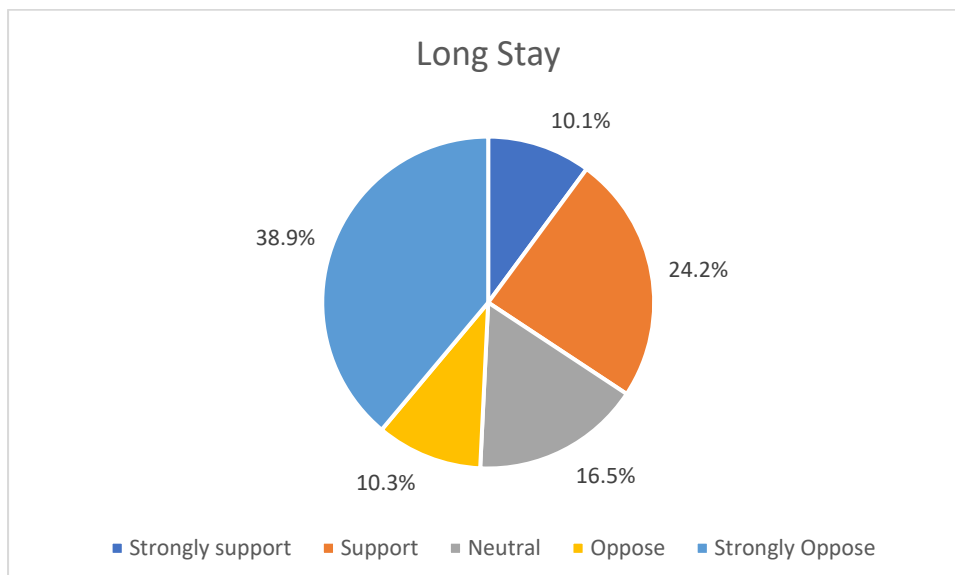
Question 8: A second proposal is to apply a 10p increase to other hourly tariffs (e.g. changing the 1-hour rate from £1.50 to £1.60) to help us keep up with the rising costs of maintaining our car parks.

To what extent do you support or oppose this proposal?



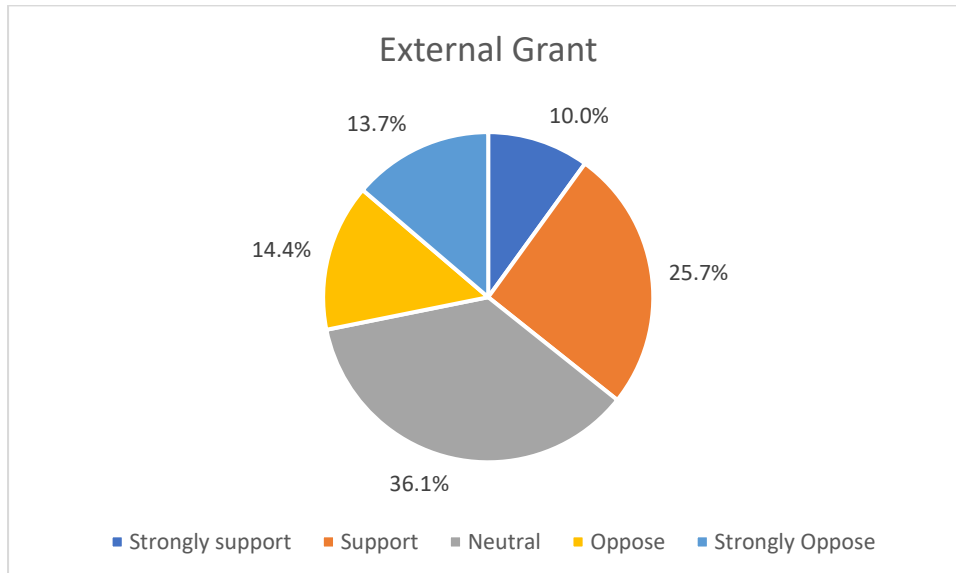
Question 9: The third proposal is to set a standard 'all day' rate of £8 in long-stay car parks. This would reduce the daily charge at Bourne Place multi-storey (currently £10.50), while increasing the charge at our other long-stay car parks (currently £7.50).

To what extent do you support or oppose this proposal?



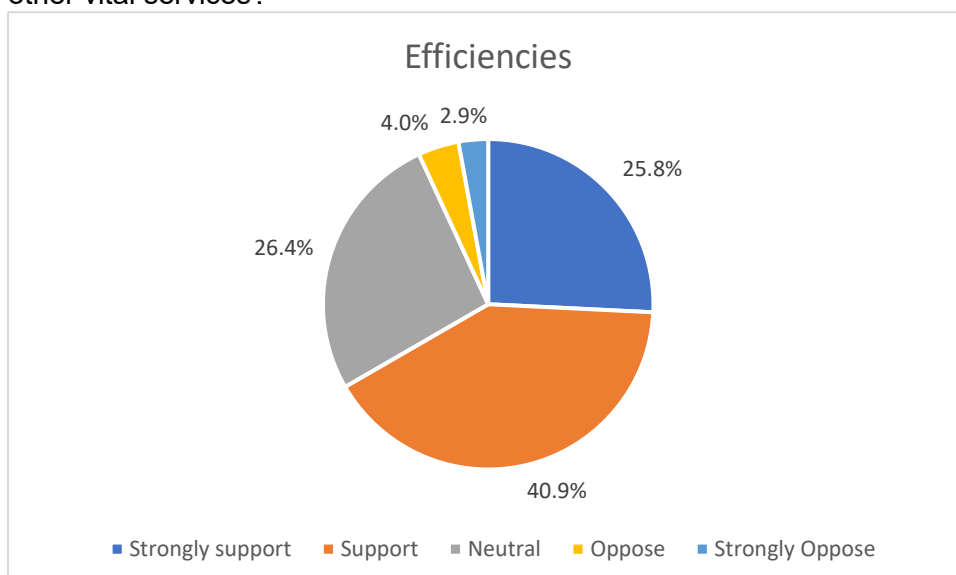
Question 11: We are proposing to save £20,000 by reviewing the grants we provide to external organisations and the voluntary sector.

To what extent do you support or oppose this proposal, balanced against the need to protect other vital services?



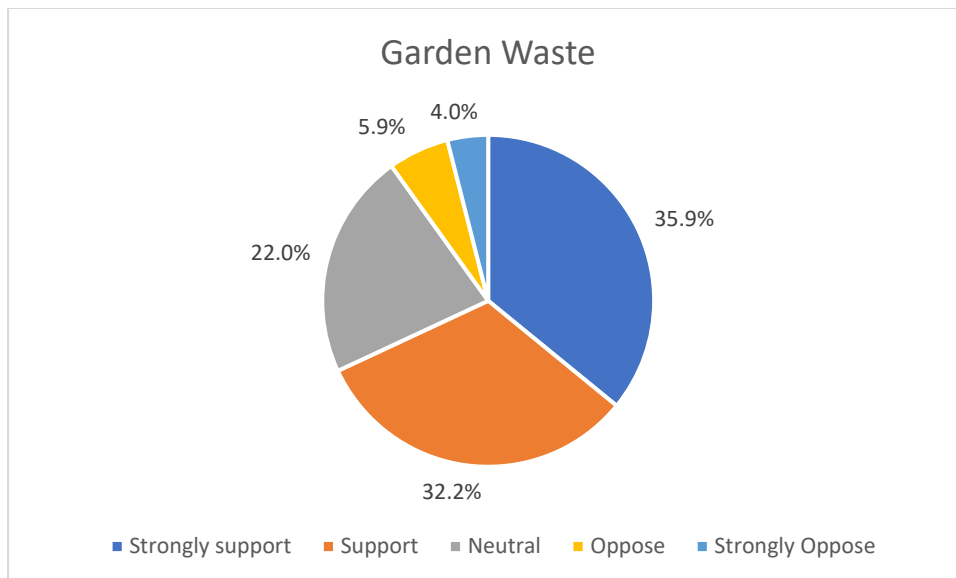
Question 13: We plan to save more than £160,000 by reviewing how we do things, including the services provided at our Faversham office, customer services, and stopping paying external consultants for heritage, conservation areas, and property management, by carrying out this work in house.

To what extent do you support or oppose this proposal, balanced against the need to protect other vital services?



Question 14: Annual garden waste subscription fees could be frozen for 2026/27 in recognition of the disruption to the service during the rollout of the new contract.

To what extent do you support or oppose this?

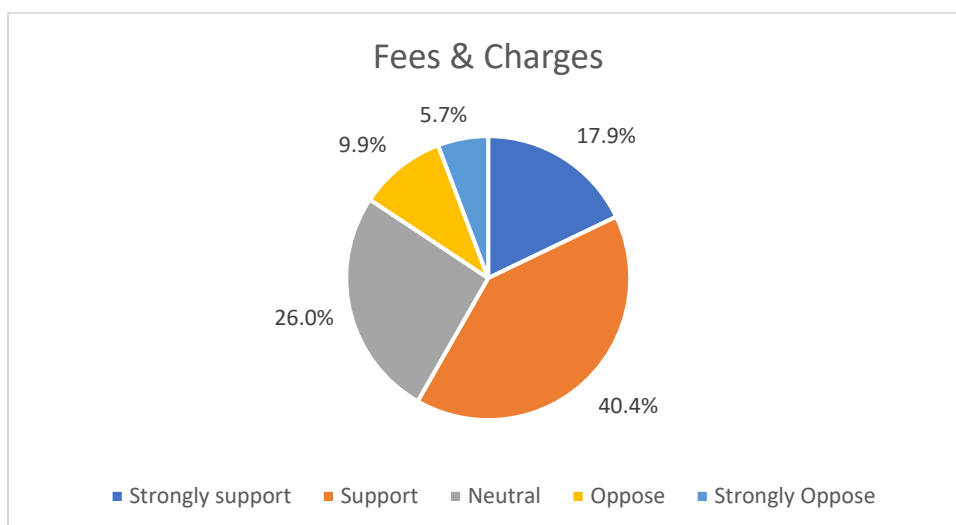


Question 15: We propose increasing our other general fees and charges based on inflation, so they cover their own costs.

These cover a wide range of services, including:

- Providing licences for animal welfare, and large events
- Giving advice on planning matters and processing planning applications
- Hiring out sport and leisure facilities
- Providing sites for burials, and other memorial activities
- Inspecting food premises

To what extent do you support or oppose the proposal to apply inflation based increases to the remaining fees and charges?



Our budget, your views – summary of free text feedback

This summary was put together with the use of Gemini, using the following prompt:

Task: Summarize the attached consultation responses for Swale Borough Council's budget proposals.

Requirements:

Thematic Summary: For each question, summarise the responses, and when free text comments are included (columns O, Q, U and V) group similar comments into key themes. Use active voice and simple language.

Identify any comments regarding the proposal to turn free car parks into paid ones. Please list these separately under a heading called "Feedback on Car Parking Charges".

Output Format: Provide a bulleted list for each question.

Feedback on car parking charges

Note: A significant majority of all free-text comments across all questions focused on the specific proposal to introduce charges at currently free car parks on the Isle of Sheppey. This was the dominant theme of the entire survey.

- **Destruction of community assets:** Residents view the car parks at Queenborough (Library/Park Road), Halfway, and Little Oyster not just as parking spaces, but as essential access points for community life. They argue charges will stop people using libraries, community centres (Castle Connections), and local beaches.
 - **The "Ship on Shore" precedent:** Dozens of respondents pointed to the Ship on Shore car park as a failed experiment. They observe that since charges were introduced, the car park stands empty while the adjacent road is dangerous and congested. They predict the exact same outcome for Little Oyster and Queenborough.
 - **School safety:** There is deep concern regarding the Halfway car park. Parents use this for school drop-offs. Residents warn that charges here will force parents to stop on the main road or clog up residential side streets, creating a severe safety risk for children.
 - **Economic damage:** Respondents believe the revenue forecast is unrealistic. They argue the cost of installing and maintaining meters will outweigh the income, as locals will simply boycott the car parks.
 - **Fairness across the borough:** Some support for charging for the free car parks as parking charges should be fair across all three areas of the borough.
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Expanded analysis of consultation questions

1. Parking proposals

Respondents were asked for comments on the specific proposals regarding the removal of the 30-minute tariff, the 10p increase, and evening charges.

- **The 30-minute tariff:** There is strong resistance to removing this. Residents argue that this option is vital for the "pop-in" economy. They state that no one will pay £1.60 to pick up a prescription, a takeaway, or a newspaper. They predict this will directly hurt small high-street businesses and pharmacies.
- **Faversham evening charges:** A specific technical issue was raised regarding Faversham. The proposal sets the evening flat rate to start at 7:00 pm. Residents pointed out that cinema screenings and restaurant reservations often start at 7:00 pm, meaning customers would have to pay the day rate *plus* the evening rate if they arrive at 6:30 pm. They suggest moving the start time to 6:00 pm to genuinely support the night-time economy.
- **Long-stay vs short-stay:** Some respondents welcomed the reduction in long-stay costs at Bourne Place but felt it did not compensate for the increased cost of short visits, which affects more daily users.
- **Enforcement frustrations:** Several comments noted that parking rules are not currently enforced well. Residents see cars parked illegally on double yellow lines and pavements without penalty. They suggest the council should enforce existing rules to raise money rather than penalising law-abiding drivers with higher fees.

2. External grant review

Respondents were asked where else the council should find £20,000 if they did not cut grants to the voluntary sector.

- **Staff and councillor costs:** The most frequent suggestion was to reduce the cost of council leadership. Suggestions included cutting the Chief Executive's salary, reducing Senior Management teams, and lowering Councillor allowances.
- **Office expenditure:** There is specific anger regarding a recent purchase of "expensive chairs." This was mentioned repeatedly as a symbol of wasteful spending. Residents also suggested cutting "jollies," free lunches, and unnecessary expenses.
- **Asset management:** Many respondents suggested selling or renting out Swale House. They argue that since many staff work from home, the building is under-utilised and costing money to heat and light.
- **Fines as income:** Residents suggested a "zero tolerance" approach to environmental crimes. They want to see heavy fines for fly-tipping, littering, and dog fouling used as a revenue stream to subsidise other services.
- **Protecting the voluntary sector:** Many argued that cutting £20,000 from the voluntary sector is a false economy. They noted that groups like Citizens Advice save the council money by preventing homelessness and debt crises.

3. Comments on other specific proposals

Respondents were asked for views on other budget proposals, such as efficiency savings and fees.

- **Contractor performance:** There is widespread dissatisfaction with external contractors (specifically mentioning waste and landscape maintenance). Residents feel the council pays too much for poor service. They suggest reviewing these contracts or bringing services back "in-house" to save the profit margin currently paid to private companies.
- **Public toilets:** Although not a headline question, many respondents used this space to complain about public toilet closures. They view this as a basic health and hygiene requirement and a barrier for elderly people and families visiting town centres.
- **Garden waste:** Reaction to the fee freeze is positive, but conditional. Residents are willing to pay but expect the service to be reliable, citing missed collections in the past year.
- **Planning and development:** Residents suggested increasing fees for developers. They feel that with the amount of housebuilding in Swale, the council should be generating more revenue from planning applications and Section 106 agreements.

4. New ideas for savings or income

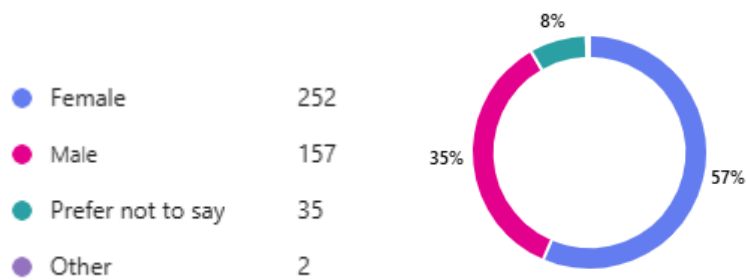
Respondents were asked for new, "blue sky" ideas to help close the budget gap.

- **Tourism and events:**
 - Charge for entry to specific events or festivals that are currently free.
 - Invest in "staycation" facilities (e.g., beach huts, campsites) to generate rental income.
 - Better marketing of the coastline to attract tourists who will pay for parking and amenities (if the amenities exist).
- **Structural changes:**
 - Merge services with neighbouring councils (shared services) to cut back-office costs.
 - Reduce the number of councillors.
 - Move to a Unitary Authority model to remove duplication between Swale and Kent County Council.
- **Operational efficiencies:**
 - Turn off street lights earlier or dim them to save energy.
 - Use volunteers or offenders (community payback) for basic street cleaning and maintenance to reduce labour costs.
 - Stop printing and posting documents; move all council tax and letters to email by default.
- **Commercial mindset:**

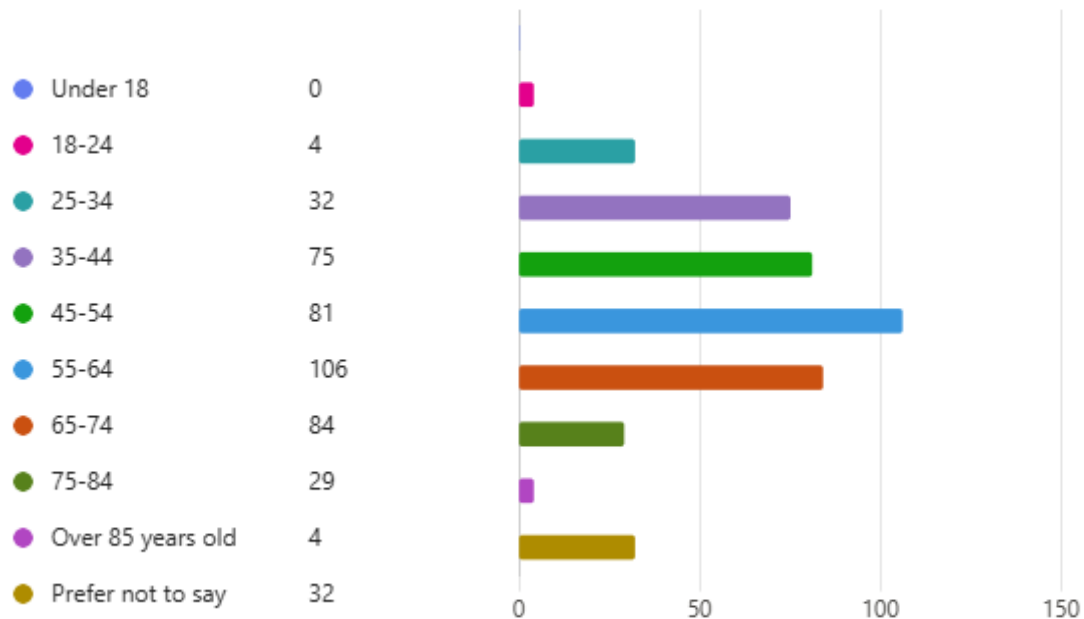
- Rent out empty office space in council buildings to small businesses.
- Offer council services (like grounds maintenance or MOTs) to the public for a fee.

The following charts summarise the characteristics of those who completed the consultation.

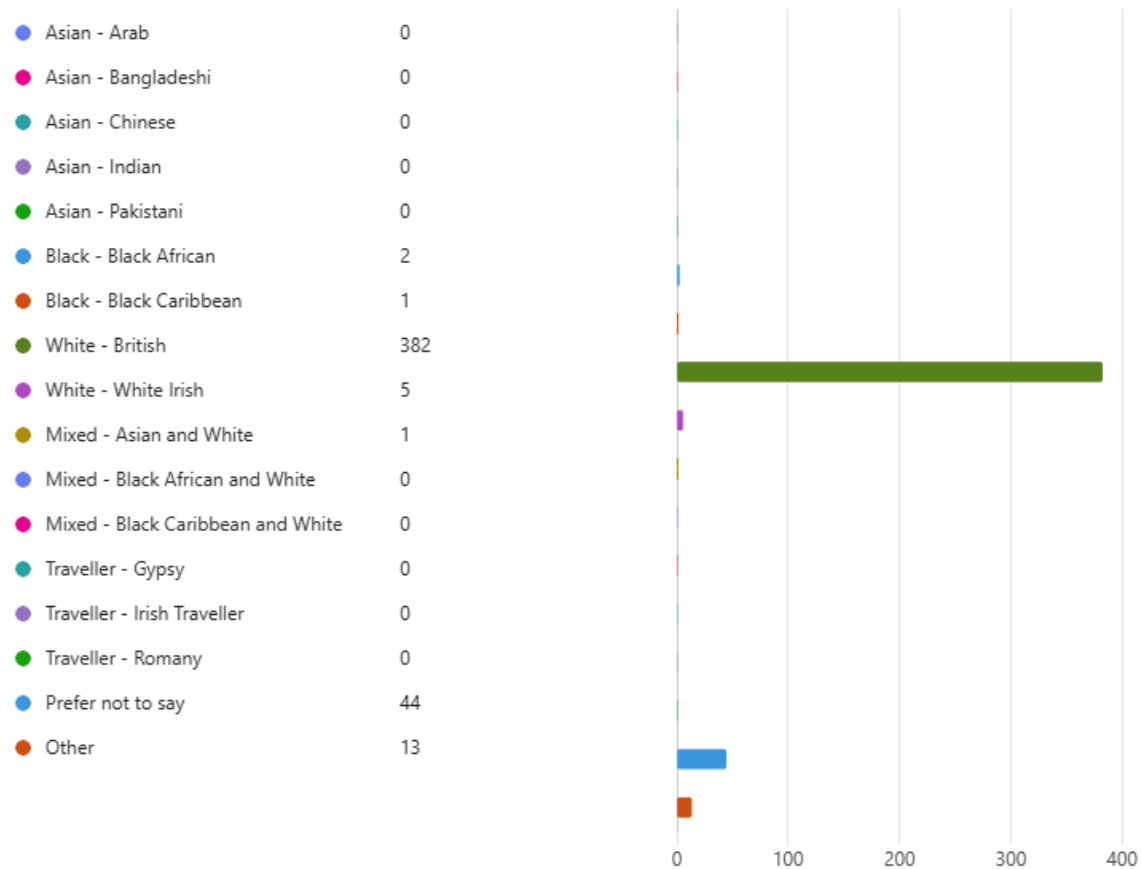
How would you describe yourself?



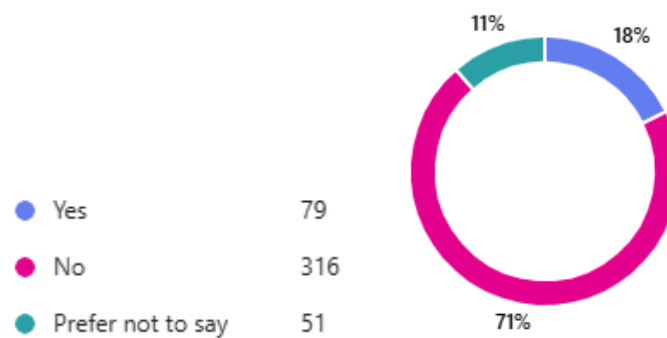
What is your age?



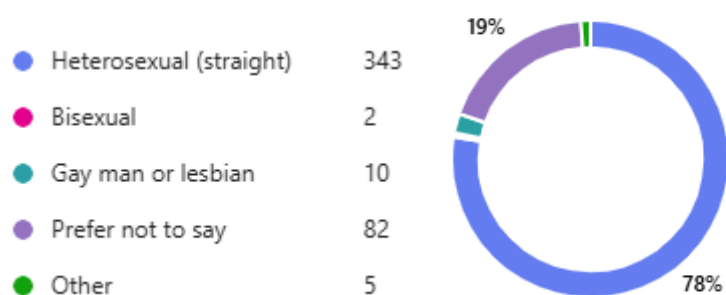
How would you describe your ethnicity?



Do you consider yourself to have a disability?



How would you describe your sexual orientation?



How would you describe your religious beliefs?

