St Helens Borough Council Budget Consultation 2023/24

1. Introduction

1.1. The Council ran a public budget consultation exercise from 16 December 2022 to 15 January 2023 seeking the views of residents and businesses on increases to Council Tax and the Council's budget savings options for the 2023/24 financial year.

1.2. The consultation was promoted on the Council's webpage and an active social media campaign was undertaken, encouraging residents, Council employees and businesses to respond and share their views and provide comments. Printed copies of the consultation were readily available for completion at the Borough's libraries, leisure centres and the Contact Centre.

1.3. Arrangements were also made for finance staff to attend 'Warm Spaces' drop-in events, to promote the consultation and engage with the public.

1.4. A total of 983 people submitted responses to the consultation survey, comprising of 891 digital, 83 printed and 9 emailed responses. However, not all respondents provided a complete response to every question. This is a significant increase in the number of participants compared to the previous budget consultation exercise, which received 104 responses.

1.5. The consultation highlighted the financial challenges that the Council faces, with particular focus on inflationary pressures and the cost-of-living crisis. It also included details of a series of budget savings options currently being explored, with participants invited to complete a survey providing feedback on those and the Council's spending priorities.

1.6. The survey comprised 12 main questions; the majority of which were closed questions to understand levels of agreement/disagreement. However, there were open questions where respondents could provide more detailed answers. Participation is generally higher when consultations are closed questions.

1.7. In responding to the consultation, residents, Council employees and businesses were asked to consider the impact not only on themselves and their families, but also to reflect on their immediate and wider communities.

2. Characteristics of Respondents

2.1. The consultation also asked a series of demographic questions, of which the results from responses showed:

- 54% of respondents were female; 31% were male and 15% of participants selected prefer not to say / other.

- The most represented age group was 50–64-year-olds (34%), followed by 40-49-year-olds (25%).
- The least represented age groups were 16–25-year-olds (2%) and 75+ year-olds (4%).

3. Key Findings

3.1. The survey shows there is a small majority support for an increase to Council Tax of 3% plus a 2% increase to the adult social care precept.

3.2. Generally, respondents agreed with the possible saving options. Of the 40 options included in the consultation, 36 received a higher percentage of agreeable responses.

3.3. A summary of the responses for each question is detailed below. Results of the consultation for all saving options is presented by two charts at Appendix A. The first chart is arranged by the highest number of agreeable responses, the second is by the highest number of disagreeable responses.

3.4. Question 1 – Our St Helens Together Borough Strategy 2021-2030 is focused around six priorities. Please select the priority which is most important to you.

3.4.1. The following table provides a summary of responses received in relation to the Council's six priorities. Priority 1 was chosen as the most important priority by the highest number of respondents.

Table 1: Council Priorities	Total No. of Responses	%
Priority 1 - Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life	257	27
Priority 2 - Promote good health and independence and care across our communities	183	19
Priority 3 - Create safe and strong communities and neighbourhoods for all	177	19
Priority 4 - Support a strong, thriving, inclusive and well-connected local economy	120	13
Priority 5 - Create green and vibrant places that reflect our culture and heritage	60	6
Priority 6 - Be a responsible Council	153	16
Total	**950**	**100**

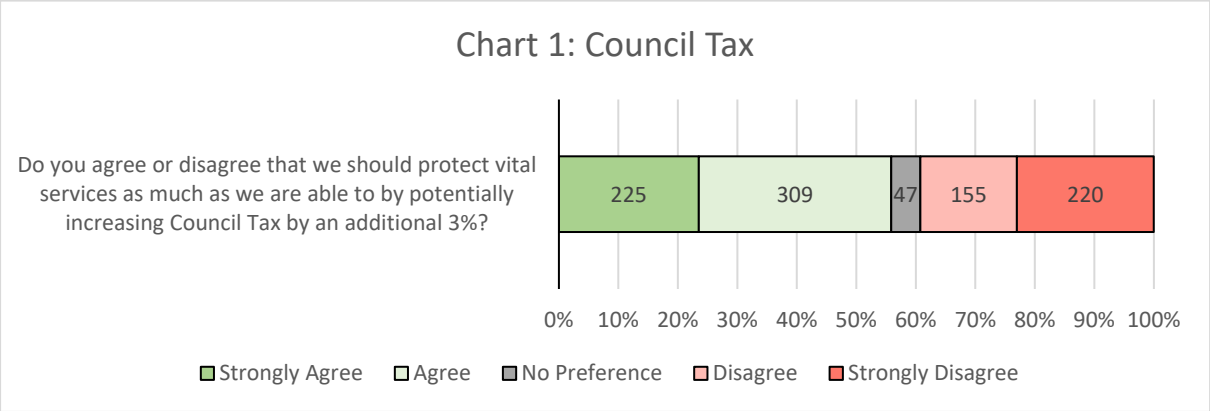
3.5. Question 2 – The Government is allowing Councils to increase Council Tax by up to 3% from April 2023. The Council will decide what increase will apply when it sets the revenue budget for 2023/24 in March 2023.Do you agree or disagree that we should protect vital services as much as we are able by potentially increasing Council Tax by an additional 3%?

3.5.1. Chart 1 provides a summary of the responses received in relation to Council Tax. There were 956 complete responses for this question and the majority of respondents (56%) answered strongly agree / agree to an increase to Council Tax to protect vital services.

3.5.2. A number of respondents did take the opportunity to provide more general feedback. Responses provided by those in favour of a rise in Council Tax, commented that they felt that it was important to protect vital services from facing further cuts, in particular, those relating to Children and Young People.

3.5.3. Although most respondents did agree to a Council Tax increase, additional feedback highlighted that those in agreement also recognised that a 3% increase may not be suitable for everyone and those that are most vulnerable in society should be protected.

3.5.4. The additional feedback from those who disagreed/strongly disagreed to increasing Council Tax, mainly quoted the Cost-of-Living Crisis. Others also suggested that they were frustrated in having to pay more for reduced services.

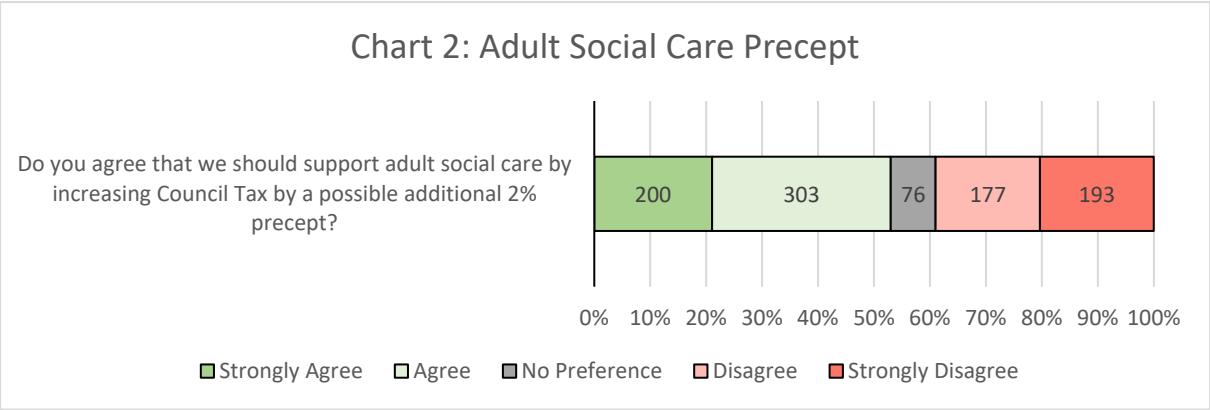


3.6. Question 3 - The Government is allowing Councils to increase Council Tax by an additional precept of 2%, to address adult social care pressures. Do you agree that we should support adult social care by increasing Council Tax by a possible additional 2% precept?

3.6.1. Most respondents (53%) either strongly agreed or agreed with increases to Council Tax of 2%, via the adult social care precept. A breakdown of the responses is shown in Chart 2.

3.6.2. Likewise with question 2 a number of respondents did take the opportunity to provide more general feedback. Generally, respondents who answered strongly agree / agree to question 3, commented that Adult Social Care services are important and an area which needs additional funding, however, they would like to see improvements to services and details of how the additional funding is spent.

3.6.3. Additional feedback from those who strongly disagreed / disagreed to an increase in Council Tax via the ASC precept, expressed concerns of the additional costs to residents given the current Cost-of-Living Crisis. Some respondents felt the Government should provide support to Local Authorities with additional funding rather than the burden being placed with residents. Whilst other participants of the survey thought the Council should make efficiencies in other services and realign funds to support Adult Social Care.

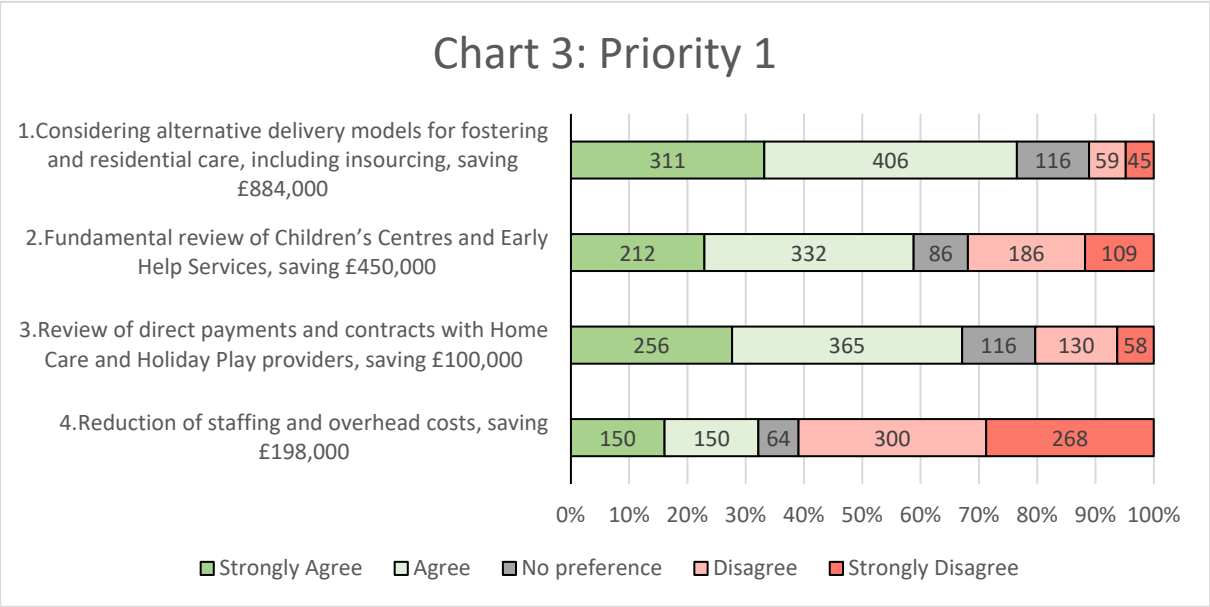


3.7. Question 4 – Priority 1 of the Council's six key priorities is to ensure children and young people have a positive start in life. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following possible saving options?

3.7.1. There were 4 potential savings options directly associated with Priority 1. Responses are detailed in Chart 3.

3.7.2. Saving option 1 offered the largest saving. It also had the largest percentile differential with 77% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing with this option, compared to 11% of strongly disagree / disagree responses.

3.7.3. Conversely, the majority of respondents (61%) selected strongly disagree / disagree to saving option 4, with only 32% strongly agreeing / disagreeing.

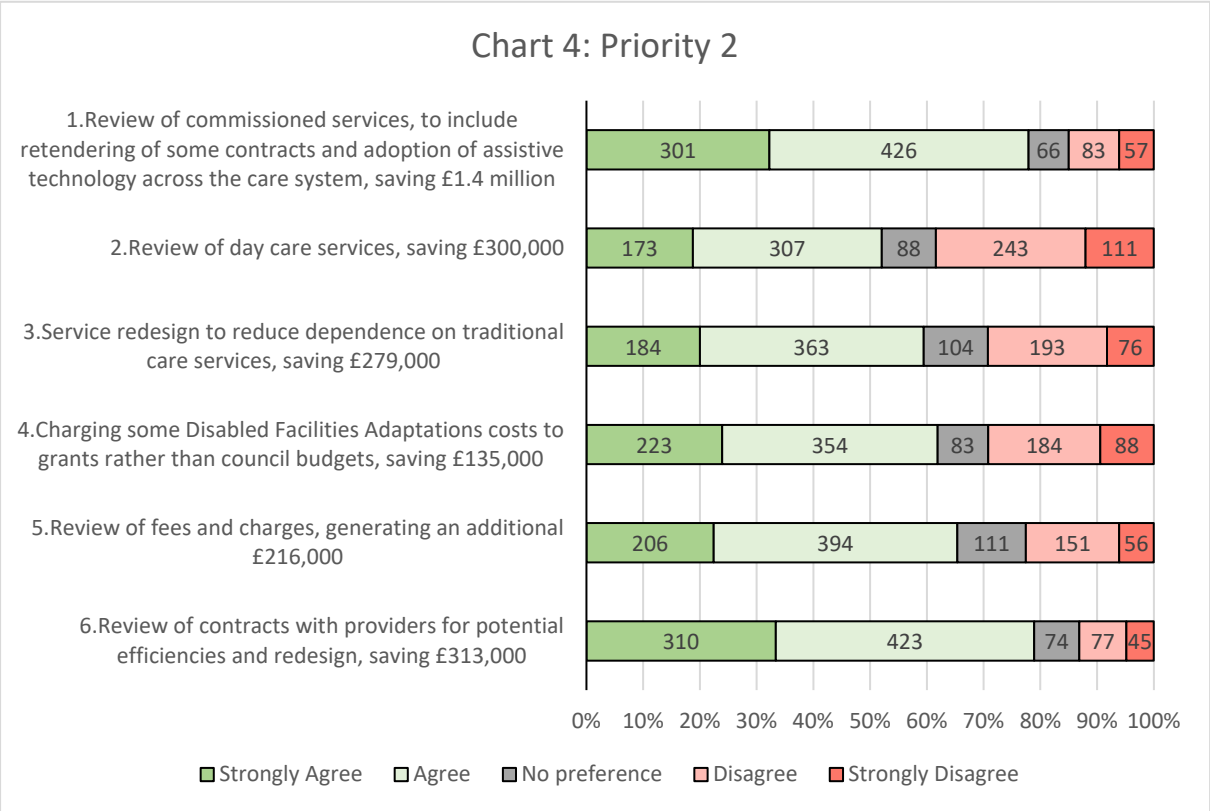


3.8. Question 5 – Priority 2 of the Council's six key priorities is to promote good health, independence and care across our communities. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following possible saving options?

3.8.1. Priority 2 had 6 possible saving options for respondents to consider. The results are shown in Chart 4.

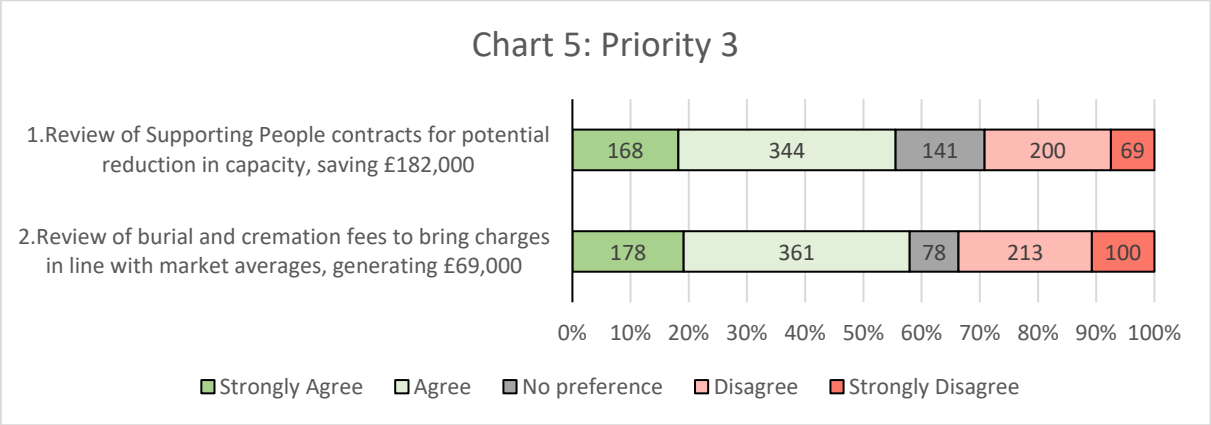
3.8.2. At least 52% of respondents selected strongly agree / agree for all saving options for priority 2. Furthermore, saving options 1, 5 and 6 all received 65% or higher of agreeable responses.

3.8.3. Saving options 1 and 6 received the most strongly agree / agree responses, with 78% and 79% of the total answers respectively.



3.9. Question 6 - Priority 3 of the Council's six key priorities is to create safe and strong communities and neighbourhoods for all. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following possible savings options?

3.9.1. Of the 2 savings options, option 2 received slightly more strongly agree / agree responses with 58% compared to 56% for option 1. However, option 2 also received more strongly disagree / disagree answers with 34% compared to 29% for option 1. Further details of the answers received are shown in Chart 5.



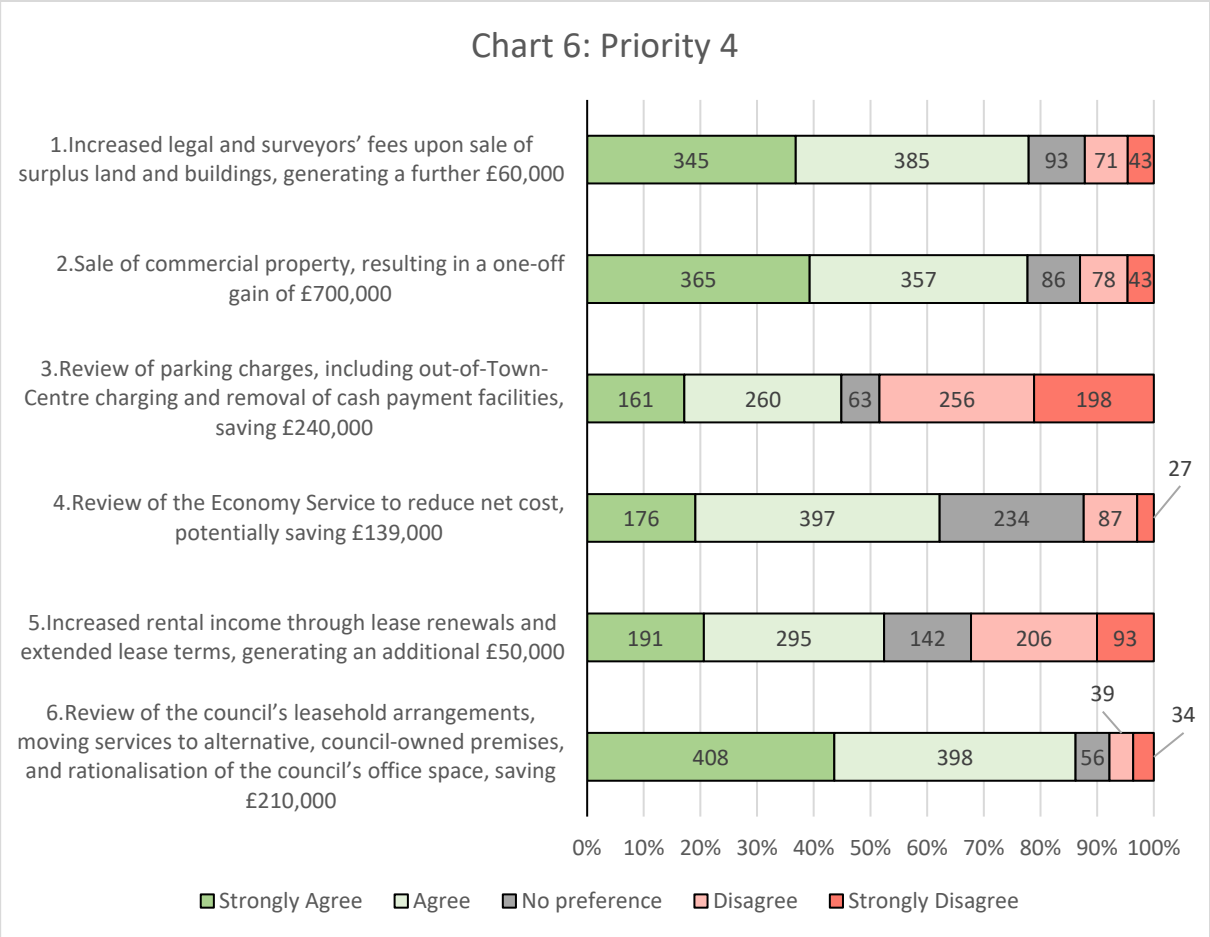
3.10. Question 7 - Priority 4 of the Council's six key priorities is to support a strong, thriving, inclusive and well-connected local economy. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following possible saving options?

3.10.1. Chart 6 shows the responses to the 6 possible saving options for priority 4.

3.10.2. A total of 86% of respondents selected they strongly agree / agree with saving option 6, this was the highest number of agreeable responses across all the priority specific saving options.

3.10.3. Savings options 1 and 2 also received a high majority of strongly agree / agree responses with 78% of respondents agreeing with these options.

3.10.4. Saving option 3 received an ambivalent response, 48% of respondents selected strongly disagree / disagree, and 45% of responses strongly agreed / agreed with this saving option.

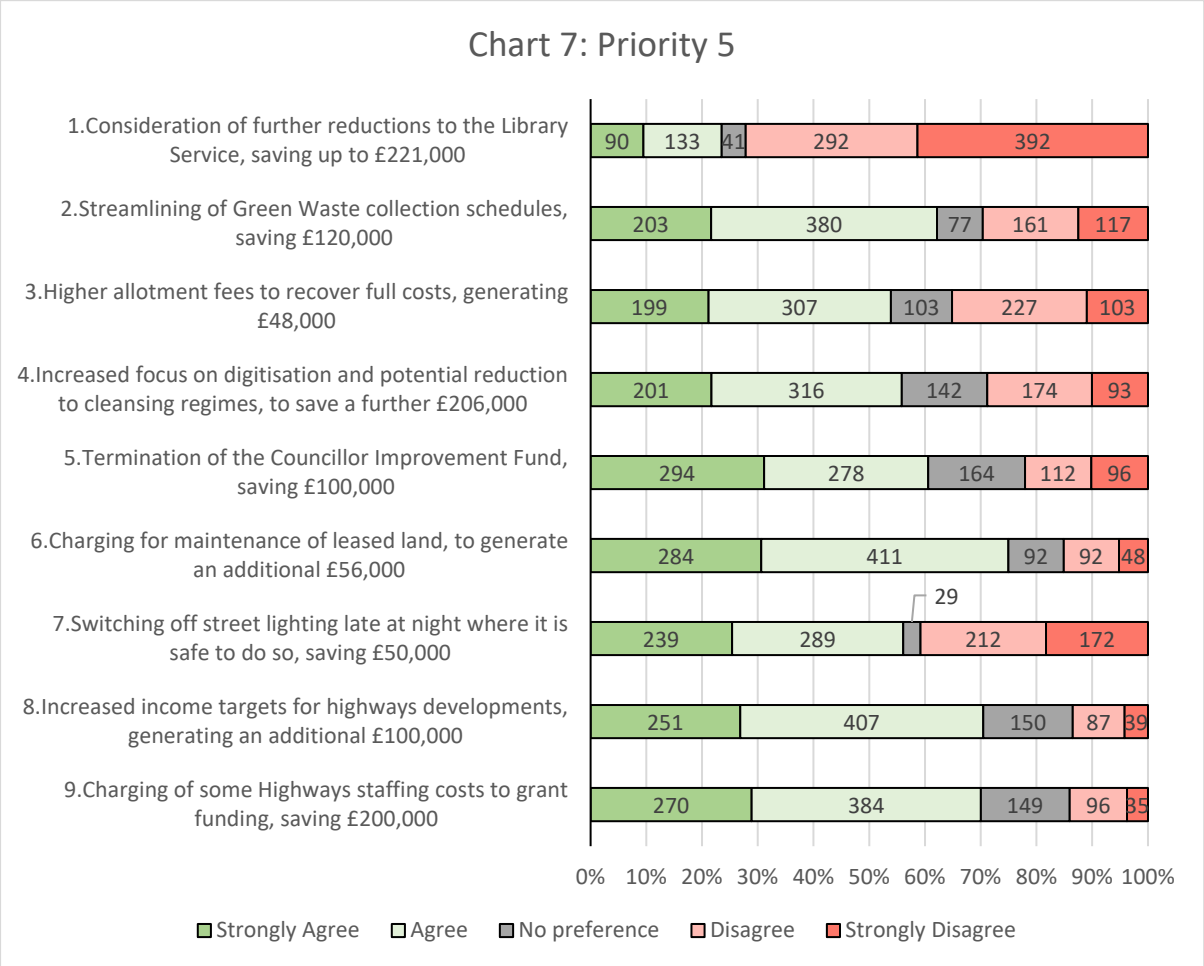


3.11. Question 8 - Priority 5 of the Council's six key priorities is to create green vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following possible saving options?

3.11.1. Priority 5 had 9 potential saving options. Except for option 1 the majority of respondents answered strongly agree / agree for each option.

3.11.2. As shown in Chart 7, 72% of participants selected strongly disagree / disagree with saving option 1. Particular consideration will be given to this saving option, following recent objections to the closure of libraries.

3.11.3. Arising from the consultation, several representations were received via email regarding saving option 5. The emails set out a number of reasons why they strongly opposed the removal of the Councillor Improvement Fund. These responses have been included as strongly disagree in the overall responses shown in Chart 7.

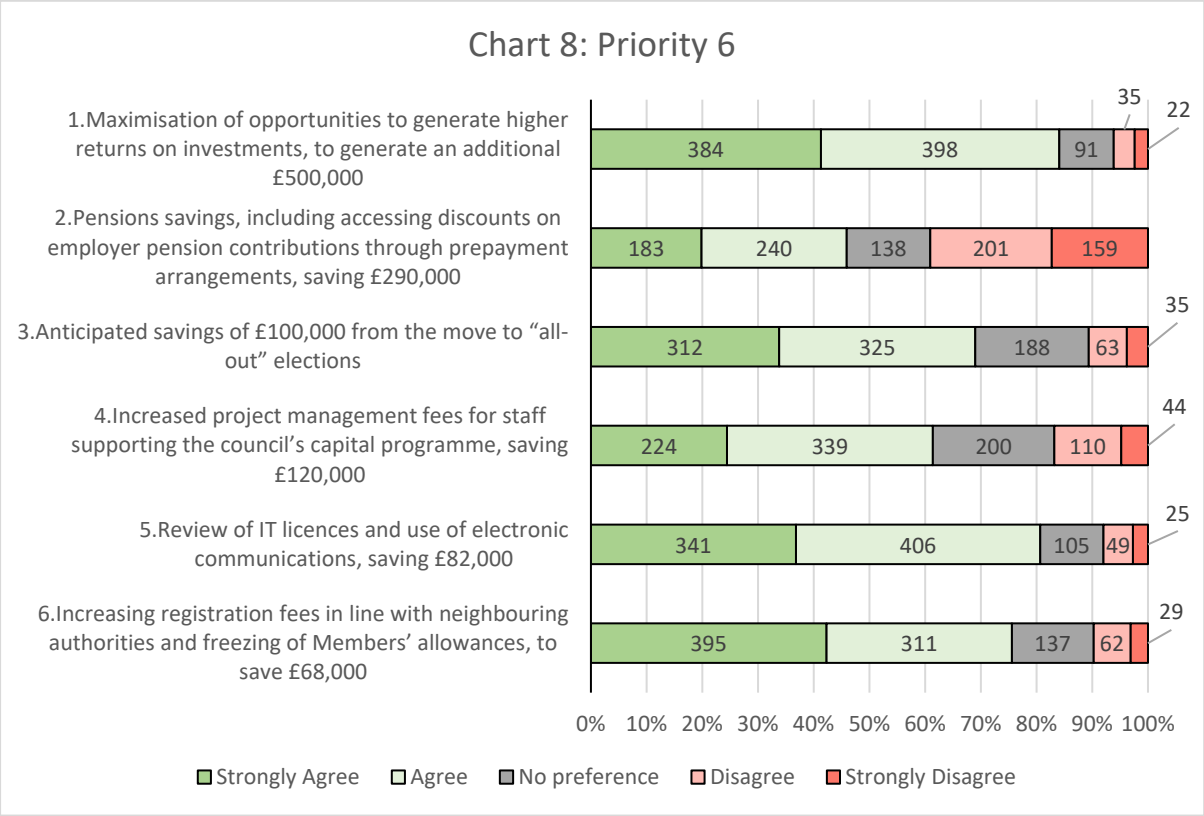


3.12. Question 9 - Priority 6 of the Council's six key priorities is to be a responsible Council. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed saving options?

3.12.1. There were 6 potential savings options directly associated with priority 6. Responses are detailed in Chart 8.

3.12.2. A total of 84% of respondents selected they strongly agree / agree with saving option 1. This was the largest number of agreeable responses for saving options for priority 6. This was closely followed by saving option 5, which 81% of respondents strongly agreed / agreed with this option.

3.12.3. Saving option 2 received the highest percentage (39%) of strongly disagree / disagree. However, more participants (46%) agreed with this saving option.

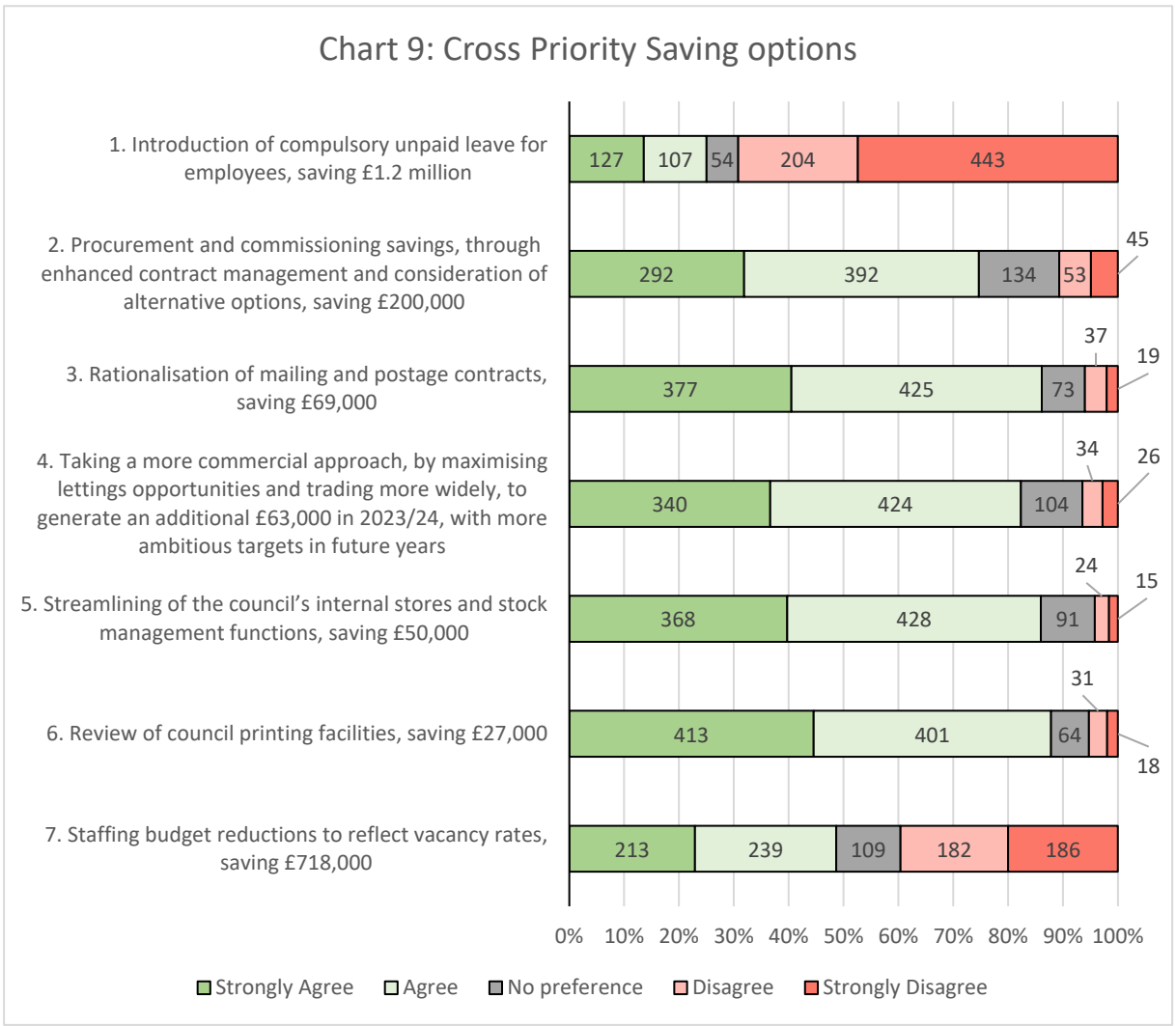


3.13. Question 10 - In addition, a number of savings options are cross-cutting, spanning across all six Council Priorities. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following possible saving options?

3.13.1. There were 7 possible saving options that did not align specifically with one Council priority. Chart 9 provides a breakdown of the number of responses provided for this question.

3.13.2. Option 5 has the lowest percentage of disagreeable responses across all of the saving options with only 4% of respondents choosing strongly to disagree / disagree. Conversely, saving option 1 received the least agreeable responses, with 47% of participants strongly disagreeing and 22% disagreeing with this option.

3.13.3. A total of 88% of respondents strongly agreed / agreed with saving option 6 which is the highest percentage of agreeable responses across all saving options.



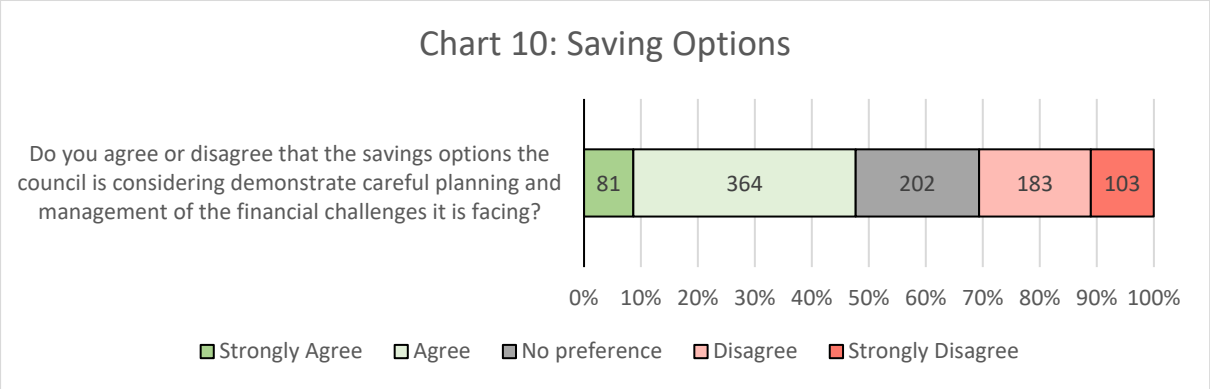
3.14. Question 11 - Do you agree or disagree that the savings options the Council is considering demonstrate careful planning and management of the financial challenges it is facing?

3.14.1. Question 11 received 17% more agreed than disagreed responses . A total of 48% of respondents strongly agreed / agreed that the savings options included in the consultation demonstrate careful planning and management of the financial challenges the Council is facing. As shown in Chart 10, there was a high number of respondents that selected no preference.

3.14.2. Around 27% of survey participants did take the opportunity to provide more general feedback. Many respondents would have liked more detail of the saving options including the impact that would be felt across the Borough if these were actioned.

3.14.3. Many of those that agreed with question 11, thought the Council is in a difficult position with hard decisions to make.

3.14.4. Conversely those that selected strongly disagree / disagree expressed concerns the saving options would negatively impact services that already require improvement. Some participants specifically opposed the option of further reductions to the library services. Other respondents opposed the introduction of unpaid leave for employees, with specific concerns of the impacts this saving may have on lower paid staff.



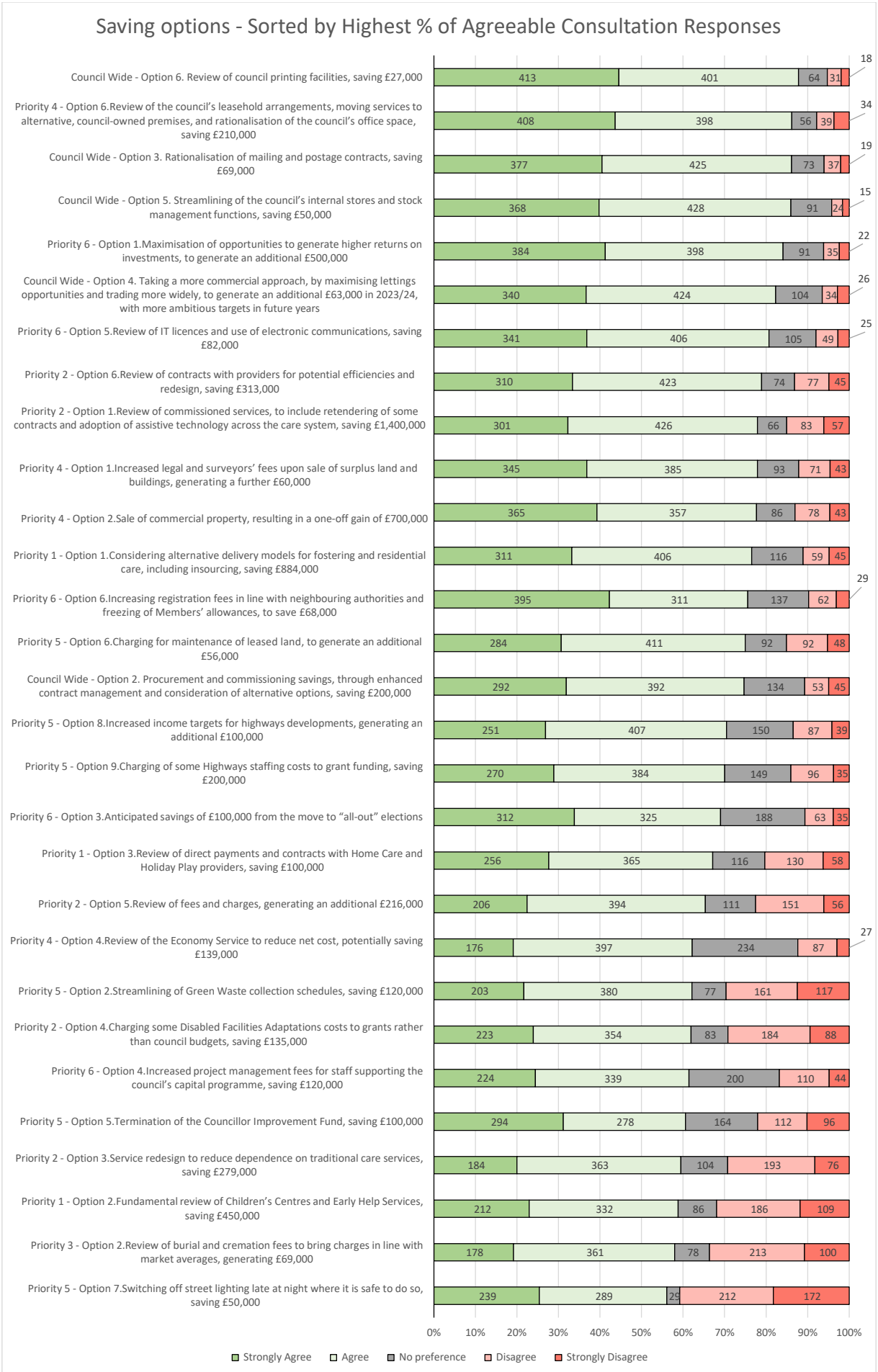
3.15. Question 12 - Are there any further savings options that you would propose?

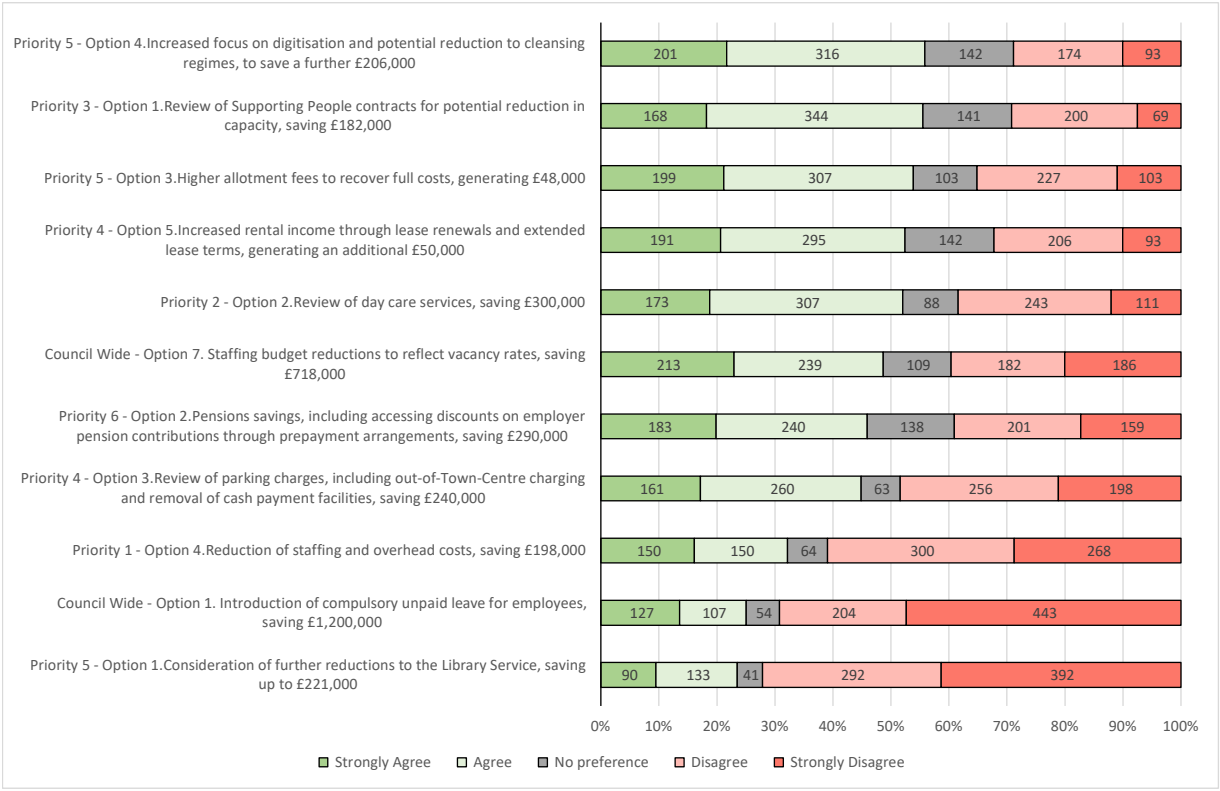
3.15.1. The final question enabled respondents to provide feedback of other saving options the Council could explore. A total of 325 responses were received.

3.15.2. A high number of responses suggested that savings could be made by reviewing the Council's current management structure, followed closely by recommendations for the review of Electoral Services, specifically in relation to reducing the number of Councillors per ward and reducing their expenses.

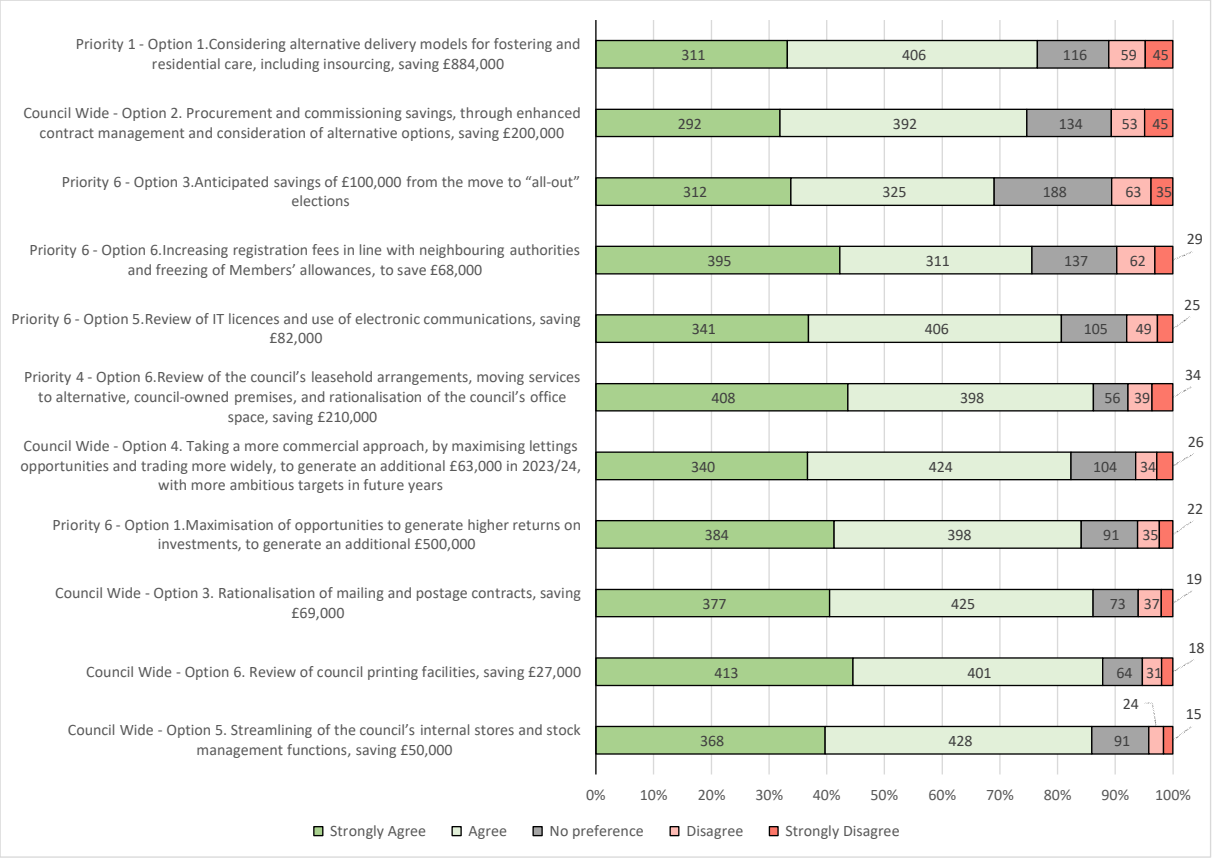
3.15.3. Other key themes included suggestions of reducing the costs of supplies and services, mainly through reducing the number of consultants used by the council, and energy savings.

3.15.4. Other common savings proposals included, reviewing the way that the Council uses its buildings, outsourcing services, redesigning services, and centralising and making investments to Council staff and services.


Saving options - Sorted by Highest % of Agreeable Consultation Responses
Council Wide - Option 6. Review of council printing facilities, saving £27,000
413
401
64
31
18
Priority 4 - Option 6.Review of the council's leasehold arrangements, moving services to alternative, council-owned premises, and rationalisation of the council's office space, saving £210,000
408
398
56
39
34
Council Wide - Option 3. Rationalisation of mailing and postage contracts, saving £69,000
377
425
73
37
19
Council Wide - Option 5. Streamlining of the council's internal stores and stock management functions, saving £50,000
368
428
91
24
15
Priority 6 - Option 1.Maximisation of opportunities to generate higher returns on investments, to generate an additional £500,000
384
398
91
35
22
Council Wide - Option 4. Taking a more commercial approach, by maximising lettings opportunities and trading more widely, to generate an additional £63,000 in 2023/24, with more ambitious targets in future years
340
424
104
34
26
Priority 6 - Option 5.Review of IT licences and use of electronic communications, saving £82,000
341
406
105
49
25
Priority 2 - Option 6.Review of contracts with providers for potential efficiencies and redesign, saving £313,000
310
423
74
77
45
Priority 2 - Option 1.Review of commissioned services, to include retendering of some contracts and adoption of assistive technology across the care system, saving £1,400,000
301
426
66
83
57
Priority 4 - Option 1.Increased legal and surveyors' fees upon sale of surplus land and buildings, generating a further £60,000
345
385
93
71
43
Priority 4 - Option 2.Sale of commercial property, resulting in a one-off gain of £700,000
365
357
86
78
43
Priority 1 - Option 1.Considering alternative delivery models for fostering and residential care, including insourcing, saving £884,000
311
406
116
59
45
Priority 6 - Option 6.Increasing registration fees in line with neighbouring authorities and freezing of Members' allowances, to save £68,000
395
311
137
62
29
Priority 5 - Option 6.Charging for maintenance of leased land, to generate an additional £56,000
284
411
92
92
48
Council Wide - Option 2. Procurement and commissioning savings, through enhanced contract management and consideration of alternative options, saving £200,000
292
392
134
53
45
Priority 5 - Option 8.Increased income targets for highways developments, generating an additional £100,000
251
407
150
87
39
Priority 5 - Option 9.Charging of some Highways staffing costs to grant funding, saving £200,000
270
384
149
96
35
Priority 6 - Option 3.Anticipated savings of £100,000 from the move to "all-out" elections
312
325
188
63
35
Priority 1 - Option 3.Review of direct payments and contracts with Home Care and Holiday Play providers, saving £100,000
256
365
116
130
58
Priority 2 - Option 5.Review of fees and charges, generating an additional £216,000
206
394
111
151
56
Priority 4 - Option 4.Review of the Economy Service to reduce net cost, potentially saving £139,000
176
397
234
87
27
Priority 5 - Option 2.Streamlining of Green Waste collection schedules, saving £120,000
203
380
77
161
117
Priority 2 - Option 4.Charging some Disabled Facilities Adaptations costs to grants rather than council budgets, saving £135,000
223
354
83
184
88
Priority 6 - Option 4.Increased project management fees for staff supporting the council's capital programme, saving £120,000
224
339
200
110
44
Priority 5 - Option 5.Termination of the Councillor Improvement Fund, saving £100,000
294
278
164
112
96
Priority 2 - Option 3.Service redesign to reduce dependence on traditional care services, saving £279,000
184
363
104
193
76
Priority 1 - Option 2.Fundamental review of Children's Centres and Early Help Services, saving £450,000
212
332
86
186
109
Priority 3 - Option 2.Review of burial and cremation fees to bring charges in line with market averages, generating £69,000
178
361
78
213
100
Priority 5 - Option 7.Switching off street lighting late at night where it is safe to do so, saving £50,000
239
289
29
212
172
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Strongly Agree
Agree
No preference
Disagree
Strongly Disagree


Priority 5 - Option 4.Increased focus on digitisation and potential reduction to cleansing regimes, to save a further £206,000
201
316
142
174
93
Priority 3 - Option 1.Review of Supporting People contracts for potential reduction in capacity, saving £182,000
168
344
141
200
69
Priority 5 - Option 3.Higher allotment fees to recover full costs, generating £48,000
199
307
103
227
103
Priority 4 - Option 5.Increased rental income through lease renewals and extended lease terms, generating an additional £50,000
191
295
142
206
93
Priority 2 - Option 2.Review of day care services, saving £300,000
173
307
88
243
111
Council Wide - Option 7. Staffing budget reductions to reflect vacancy rates, saving £718,000
213
239
109
182
186
Priority 6 - Option 2.Pensions savings, including accessing discounts on employer pension contributions through prepayment arrangements, saving £290,000
183
240
138
201
159
Priority 4 - Option 3.Review of parking charges, including out-of-Town-Centre charging and removal of cash payment facilities, saving £240,000
161
260
63
256
198
Priority 1 - Option 4.Reduction of staffing and overhead costs, saving £198,000
150
150
64
300
268
Council Wide - Option 1. Introduction of compulsory unpaid leave for employees, saving £1,200,000
127
107
54
204
443
Priority 5 - Option 1.Consideration of further reductions to the Library Service, saving up to £221,000
90
133
41
292
392
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Strongly Agree
Agree
No preference
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

Saving options - Sorted by Highest % of Disagreeable Consultation Responses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Council Wide - Option 4. Taking a more commercial approach, by maximising lettings opportunities and trading more widely, to generate an additional £63,000 in 2023/24, with more ambitious targets in future years
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31
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Council Wide - Option 5. Streamlining of the council's internal stores and stock management functions, saving £50,000
368
428
91
24
15
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Strongly Agree
Agree
No preference
Disagree
Strongly Disagree