

Re-imagining Norfolk – budget consultation 2016-19

Policy & Resources Committee - findings from the public consultation on Council Tax and Reimagining Norfolk



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Published January 2016



Contents

Introduction	3
Legal and policy context	3
Reimagining Norfolk.....	4
Council Tax	12

Introduction

1. This report summarises the findings of Norfolk County Council's public budget consultation on questions relating to council tax and the council's Reimagining Norfolk strategy.

Legal and policy context

2. Under Section 3(2) of the Local Government Act 1999, authorities are under a duty to consult representatives of a wide range of local people when making decisions relating to local services. This includes council tax payers, those who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority and other stakeholders or interested parties. There is also a common law duty of fairness which requires that consultation should take place at a time when proposals are at a formative stage; should be based on sufficient information to allow those consulted to give intelligent consideration of options; should give adequate time for consideration and response and that consultation responses should be conscientiously taken into account in the final decision.

The details presented in the rest of this document

3. This document presents in order, for each proposal, the equality and rural impact assessment, and the summary of findings for the public consultation. It also, following these, provides findings for other areas of the consultation relevant to this committee – so any further ideas or questions that were consulted upon – including the findings of questions on council tax.

Title of General Idea or Vision

Reimagining Norfolk

Central Government has made it clear that it will continue to reduce the amount of funding available to local government over the next three years. To work with a smaller overall budget we have established a programme to change the way the council works called **Re-imagining Norfolk**.

At the end of the three years the council will still be spending over £1 billion and providing services for people of all ages in Norfolk. We still expect to be a major employer with our staff focused on delivering our key Re-imagining Norfolk priorities. In 2018, for instance, we expect to employ more social workers than we do today.

The County Council of 2019 will be different in other ways. There will be a strong focus on running services more efficiently, getting things right first time so we can run better services with less money. We will work more closely with other councils and public services in the county, looking to avoid duplication and overlap in services. The council will operate out of fewer buildings and will look to deliver more of our services online, letting residents access the council 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There will be a very different relationship between the council and the communities we serve, with the public more involved in delivering services.

In preparing a budget for consultation, the council has taken a decision not simply to retreat to those services that is it our statutory responsibility to deliver. We believe that the council has a responsibility to future generations as well as current residents. Our priorities of Excellence in Education, Real Jobs, Improved Infrastructure and Supporting Vulnerable People are intended to shape the future of Norfolk. We want a well-educated Norfolk where young people are prepared for real jobs that pay well and work with our partners, in both the public and private sectors, to shape a county that welcomes business and supports a quality of life that makes Norfolk a great place to live as well as work.

Respondent Numbers

412 responses were received.

Organisation, group or petition responses

Please describe any petitions received.

Please record any groups or organisations which responded.

38 respondents told us that they were responding on behalf of a business, organisation or group. These were:

- Access Community Trust x 2
- Adult Day Care Limited
- Aylsham Town Council
- Break Charity
- Chloe Smith MP
- Community Action Norfolk
- Cromer Town Council

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diss Town Council • Forward Day Centre Ltd • Great Yarmouth Borough Council x4 • Great Yarmouth Older People’s Network • Home-start Great Yarmouth and District • Home-Start Norfolk Consortium Steering Group • Home-Start Swaffham and District • Making it Real • Malcolm Books • Mid Norfolk Mencap • Mums in the Know Norwich • NANSA • NHS Norwich Clinical Commissioning Group • Norfolk County Council and Stonham Home Group • Norfolk Record Society • Norfolk's Learning Disabilities Providers Forum • North Norfolk District Council • Norwich City Council • Ormesby with Scratby Parish Council • Parish Council • Poringland Parish Council • Sheringham Town council • Snettisham Parish Council • South Norfolk District Council • Tasburgh Parish Council • The BUILD Charity • Thornage Hall • Unite social group. • University of Cambridge • Your Own Place CIC
<p>Please summarise all petition or group responses.</p>	<p>15 organisations commented on efficiency: how services are currently run, how they could be improved: “Yes, it is a better approach to ensuring a more streamlined, effective and cost-effective service for the people of Norfolk.” / “We welcome the proposals of Norfolk County Council to look at their own operational costs in order to become more efficient and develop a more robust business approach to delivering services.” Some also mentioned the need to prevent duplication of services: “We would like to see a rationalisation at NCC to avoid duplication and a commercial approach to much of the work that they do.”</p> <p>14 organisations commented on partners and partnerships, both positive and negative. One parish council said the proposal “is an obligation pushed down the line from central government and that parish councils will end up picking up the cost for these services”. However, other organisations are looking “forward to a closer continuing partnership with Norfolk Council Children Services, Public Health and other Voluntary Sector organisations.” Collaboration and opportunities for future joint working were also mentioned.</p>

7 comments were about the **challenges** faced by Norfolk County Council because of central government cuts, and the current financial climate, which is challenging for all partners: “You are forced into this predicament by Government”.

7 comments were received about the **preventative** nature of some services or the need to preserve presentative services: “there will always be a difference in priorities and the setting of them, however the council must first meet its statutory responsibilities, and then focus on an agenda that targets the most vulnerable and then those interventions and services that provide the best opportunities for preventing further suffering or costs in the future”.

Themes

128 people **critiqued** this idea.

- A range of views were expressed about the **general approach** from the positive: “Yes, this is the right approach although that is the only proper approach which can achieve anything anyway and should have already been that way in the past” and “Yes. Carrying on as before, papering over the cracks and hoping for a bright future will not help to meet the challenges. I agree that a creative and very different approach to providing public services is needed”, to the more critical: “I do not believe that what is outlined in this consultation is the right approach. I do not believe that cutting services to the bones will realistically achieve any of the aspirations as above: Real jobs, Excellence in education etc. The reality is that less money = less services and there is no way to dress this up. NCC is not a business, it is a public service and this should not be forgotten”.
- Comments about our **priorities**, in relation to Reimagining Norfolk were also made: “This seems contrary to the savings proposals you are making in other areas”, “have the budget savings been identified with re-imagining Norfolk in mind? I'm not sure I can see this - it looks as though each budget area has been challenged to identify the same level of savings proportionately” and “the priorities demonstrate that there is no re-imagining going on - you're emphasizing more new roads and footloose inward investment”. One respondent questioned whose priorities our approach reflected: “I think it rather depends on whether your priorities correlate closely with the needs of your population. We must ensure we know the impact of cutting costs on ALL services in Norfolk prior to taking decisions and what you might save in social care, may increase demand in health etc”. One person told us: “You do not fully understand or appreciate the impact these proposals will have on those that cannot help or fend for themselves”.
- Objections were expressed around the **Reimagining Norfolk title**: “I find the language of re-imagining a bit repellent”, “weasel words”, “wasted money on thinking up an unnecessary strap line”, “Re-Imagining is not a very good, eye-catching title... what about “The first cuts weren't the deepest, comments

please", and "I object strongly to the way such initiatives are given meaningless, hopelessly optimistic names such as 'Reimagining Norfolk'".

- Comments about how we **communicate** the idea of Reimagining Norfolk ("I think the name is patronising and inaccurate") were also received: "I think it's a buzzy phrase to convince people they have a say when they don't really", "I understand the necessity for this but please don't sell it as a great idea, loss of services are not a great idea", and "call it what it is. Cuts are cuts no matter how hard you use your imagination!" One respondent noted apparent inconsistency in our communications: "this could be the right approach, but it appears to be changing as the Council progresses things. Earlier this year, I listed to Dr Wendy Thomson on Radio Norfolk talk about how the Council's approach would be to think about what it can spend its remaining budget on rather than what it won't be spending it on. Since that time every single discussion and report has focussed on the latter, which clearly wasn't the original intention. I fail to see what has been re-imagined".
- The **consultation process** was also commented on: "It [Reimagining Norfolk] could be if done properly, and you listen to what the people of Norfolk say and want, and not just do the consultation and do what you want anyway" and "as good as any [our approach], as long as consultation feedback is truly considered rather than just being a tickbox exercise". The cost of the process was also queried: "I'm sorry, but this 're-imaging Norfolk' smacks of the use of an expensive consultant. I want to see my County Council spend my money on running the county for me and the rest of Norfolk's population by utilising in-house staff." / "The concern will always be that decisions have already been made and justifications prepared for why the Council may not follow the outcomes of consultation, if they do not match the pre-conceived solutions."

108 people made comments about how **effectively we manage our services** and how we could make improvements. Comments were about the following themes:

- **Avoiding duplication** – "Duplication? Transport is now ordered through Care Arranging, but was ordered direct through admin a few years back, less work, less mistakes, less communication using third parties. This system is shambolic to the service user." / "I believe that you need to take the idea of closer integration with other councils further and the argument for a single tier council across Norfolk is unanswerable - it will produce at the last estimate at least £20 million savings with no impact on front line services simply through rationalising District Council services."
- **Commissioning and procurement** – "The right approach is to eliminate waste and ensure best value is achieved when procuring services and goods through following robust procurement, and following up with effective contract management."
- **Finding ways of working more efficiently** – "There should always be a focus on providing a better service and value for money every day of the week. That should be a normal perspective of all employees of any council department." / "Yes, this is the right approach although that is the only proper approach which can achieve anything anyway and should have already been that way in the past. Having priorities, setting goals/targets and working with

other people rather than working against them or just duplicating what they do as well is what most would call 'good housekeeping' and what others would call 'common sense.' / "It is always good to appraise ones methods and policies critically, with the objective of improving cost-effectiveness." / "Getting things right first time' - surely you should be doing this anyway! It's concerning you need to even put this down as a goal."

- **Managing our resources better** – "I think this is the right approach, to an extent, maybe not cutting services but making them more efficient. One approach I would adopt would be having the people working for the council not taking up essential office space, but, maybe working from home thus cutting the need for office space then less buildings to maintain." / "Less buildings and more centralised so in theory better communication should be a better way." / "Efficiency savings only go so far. Trying to run services on a shoe string becomes inefficient. An efficient service requires up to date, fit for purpose equipment and IT, enough staff, and suitable premises. Providing a service of some sort for less money is not the meaning of 'efficient'. It may be necessary, but if you mean 'cuts' say it, and don't patronise service users by spinning."
- **Getting the balance right between front line and back office cuts** – "Seeking greater efficiency wherever possible is sound thinking, but much has already been done in that regard and we are surely getting down to 'cutting into the bone' of local services." / "Why only now are you talking about working more efficiently? Surely this should have been the focus before any single cut to services or service deliverers. What exactly are you going to cut?" / "Central costs need to be trimmed back with front line services being protected."

47 people referred to the role of **central government** in imposing budget restrictions or to **NCC's role in challenging central government** about the extent of the cuts: "you need to back to central government and say we have already had 3 years of cuts there is nowhere else where we can cut we have removal the excess flesh from the bones so these cuts will affect every individual to the negative in Norfolk. They need to support our local councils and start to look at Whitehall to cut rather than the soft target of local councils". / "I believe that to keep slashing budgets means we will end up not providing vital services. The Government needs to stop reducing Council budgets." / "I would like all Councils to take a more aggressive approach against the cuts being imposed by this Government on our public services. Public services hold our communities together and without them it is once again those on lower incomes who have to pay the price. People like David Cameron do not use public libraries, public swimming pools, public education, public transport, public care services for their parents. They will be unaffected if they disappear. Everyone else is affected and we need Council leaders to stand up for us and be counted. Our public services are being dismantled." / "The cuts are not necessary and the funds are available. The Government should be challenged on its draconian cuts policy for local government. This means all councils opposed to cuts should stand together, refuse to implement them and councillors should mobilise the public to support such a stand."

43 people made comments about **partners or working in partnership** and the drawbacks and benefits of such working: some welcomed "the opportunity to engage in this consultation process and recognises that working collaboratively is a key

enabling factor in delivering service in the future. We look forward therefore, to continuing the work around the public services summit and other collaborative partnerships". Some practical aspects of existing partnership working were mentioned, such as shared hotdesks between voluntary and statutory service staff. However, others were concerned that demand for partner's services would grow as Norfolk County Council reduced service provision: "this [reverting to statutory duties] would result in putting greater pressure on the Third Sector which is already struggling to manage" and we should not "assume that the voluntary sector can pick up the pieces."

41 people made comments about **staff (including councillors)**. One respondent said: "NCC is not a business, it is a public service and this should not be forgotten. However it needs experienced, hard-working, credible and honest leaders who really have Norfolk's best interests at heart". Other remarks were around the following themes:

- **Use of consultants** – "A forward thinking council needs top quality people who are able to take risks to make things happen. How much is allowed in all these savings for bringing in consultants who in my experience are better qualified at taking the risks and making changes."
- **Staff costs** – "Your staffing costs are far too high." / "Reduce your top executive wage bill first [before making cuts]."
- **Staff structure** – "Staff must go from the bloated middle-management level. I frequently attend events and conferences which are swimming with NCC employees. This is unnecessary." / "It goes some way towards the goal but the council could do a lot more internally to cut unnecessary processes and improve systems. There are still too many managers and people who do nothing but manage other people." / "Further, NCC could try and reduce the amount of internal re-organisations, which result in loss of experience amongst its staff and renders it difficult to build a long lasting working relationship with suppliers."
- **Social workers** – "Yes the approach is right, however, more social workers are needed now, not in 2018!" / "Shall the new social workers in 2018 be fully trained from engagement?"
- **Councillors** – "We currently have a three tier council. We do not need this. If we were to cut the middle layer is Breckland, etc. we could cut the amount spent this would save an absolute fortune in councillor expenditure and we could trim the numbers of staff needed to administer three councils." / "Cutting costs must include looking at staff numbers and in particular, the need or otherwise, of having the number of Councillors. Are there really over 400?" / "Councillors need to understand that senior staff should work harder to deliver services. It's all too cosy at the moment with members not challenging service delivery enough - less spin and more honesty from well paid Councillors required!"

In addition to these main themes, a number of other themes emerged:

- **38** people made statements which included a **proviso**, sometimes agreeing with one part of the idea while disagreeing with others: "agree **as long as**

people's jobs are protected" and "I think we are all aware that money needs to be saved. After working for NCC for over 14 years I think Reimagining is the right approach **if** followed through carefully".

- **34** comments were about the importance of services (**'key services'**) often described as vital: "costs have to be cut, that is agreed, but not at the cost of cutting services that are at the heart of the community". Which services are considered key varied from respondent to respondent: "cuts to the Museum and culture sector are not justifiable in times of contraction. Services such as this are need to rebuild and develop the cultural and imaginative spirit in an area previously leading in this area" and "I fear that a reduction of our emergency services especially our fire service police and ambulances will result in deaths".
- **32** people referred to our **statutory duties** - either that we should retreat to statutory duties "focus should be on statutory services not just popular services or those seen by the public as important", or that it was positive that we are not retreating to statutory obligation, "it is commendable that Norfolk is committed to maintaining services to the maximum level possible".
- **Technology** was referred to in **32** comments: "Sounds a good approach to work differently, but am very concerned that in order to offer online services 24/7 may not be helpful for people who are not IT literate or are IT phobic." / "Living in a rural village where a number of the inhabitants have no broadband (often for reasons of expense), I am concerned about the increase in services online." / "o.k. but please remember that many of your citizens do not appreciate having to keep in touch by the internet, or are unable to do so." / "Your ultimate aim should be to automate and centralise as many functions as possible and get people to self-serve online removing the need for an employee."

Ideas

10 ideas were suggested. People told us that we should learn from others (use best practice), raise money through advertising when interacting with the public, manage our budgets between departments better, change our commissioning to "make better use of social enterprise to add social value in a cost-effective way", reduce reserves and delay the capital transport spend. A parish council suggested that we "should consider greater partnership working with Parish Councils, exploring delegated authorities so that parishes can perhaps get better deals in order to maximise funding available. The Local Council Award Scheme could be used to benchmark those Councils who are the highest performing and who would be given priority to take on delegated services." Some ideas related to activities not currently within our remit: "Also raise more income to support local services: 5% rise in council tax, higher parking fees, more parking enforcement with bigger fines, increase planning fees".

Analyst notes

<p>Any other things you think report writers should know when presenting findings</p>	<p>One comment was made about our legal duties: “I believe the Libraries and Museums Act 1964 created a legal duty to provide libraries but surely there are other ways to provide them or secure their provision? For example, combining them with other local authority functions such as housing them in schools; or in community centres; providing them jointly with community groups; enabling bookshops to run them. You should drastically re-think how libraries are provided.”</p> <p>A small minority [106 or 25.7%] were broadly in favour of the general approach and a very small minority [29 or 7.04%) were less in favour of the general approach.</p>
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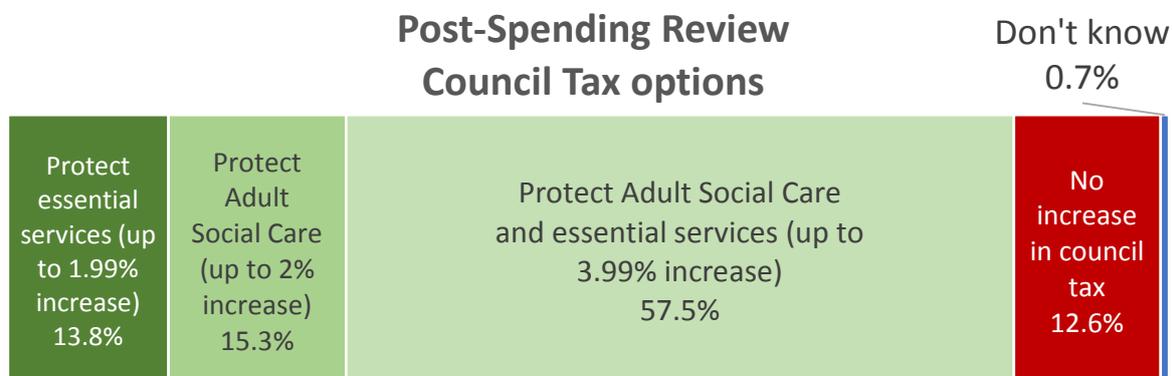
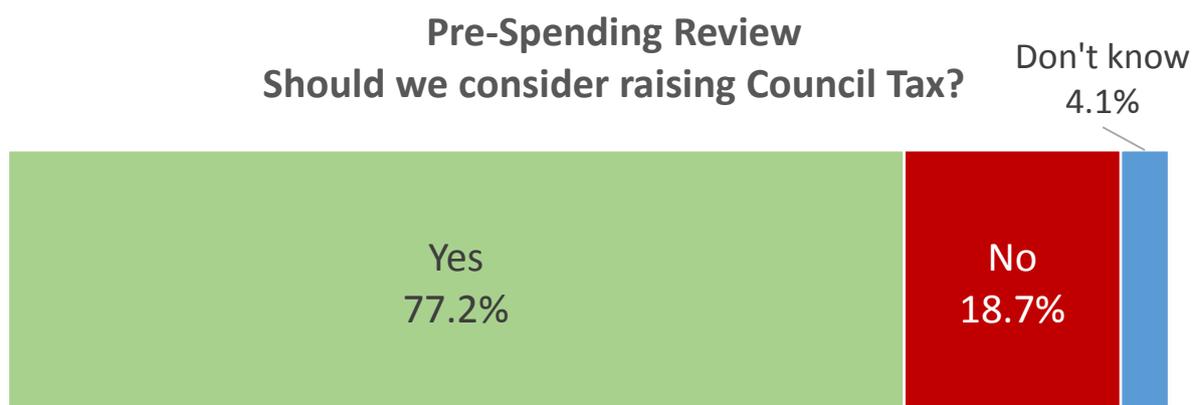
Summary completed 21.1.16, Business Intelligence and Performance Service, v5

Council Tax

The consultation asked people to describe their views on what the Council should do about its share of Council Tax.

The question asked about Council Tax changed during the consultation. Up until 26 November 2016, 202 people had responded to the question “should Norfolk County Council raise its share of the Council Tax by up to 1.99% in 2016/17 in order to protect essential services and reduce the level of cuts?” From the 26 November, 412 people responded with their views on a range of options prompted by the announcements in the Spending Review.

Overall 614 people responded to the questions about Council Tax, the highest total response to Council Tax question in the last three years. The results of both the pre-spending review and post-spending review questions are set out below.



People’s comments on council tax

Whilst the consultation did not specifically ask people to explain their views on Council Tax, a number of people mentioned it in their comments responding to other questions and proposals.

People that suggested that Council Tax should be increased suggested that they would be prepared to pay more to keep vital services open, and argued that it is a socially fair way of spreading costs.

Those opposed to an increase tended to do so on one of two contentions. Firstly a number of people suggested that an increase would be too much the pay for people, and in particularly those already struggling within a challenging financial climate. Secondly, a number of other respondents argued that a Council Tax rise was wrong in principle, and was unfair given that services were reducing. Some of the latter group suggested that a reduction in Council Tax would be preferable.

Prioritising services

Respondents were also asked to prioritise the services that should be protected if the Council did increase Council Tax. 801 people responded to this question. Because the question asked people to rank services in an order of 1-7, and people inevitably put things in different orders, the results are necessarily complicated. This report has tried to simplify the results by presenting both the percentage of respondents stating each service as their top priority, and a 'weighted score' that accounts for the relative ranking of each service. These are presented and explained in the results table below. Against either approach the overall ranking is the same, with Children's Services stated as the highest overall priority, closely followed by Adult Social Care.

Service	Priority rank							% stating service as top priority	Weighted priority score*
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Children's Services	220	172	69	22	21	15	14	27.5	3112
Adult Social Care	193	152	89	36	24	24	17	24.1	2989
Fire and Rescue	162	87	129	75	37	28	5	20.2	2773
Roads, transport, waste, environment & planning	81	76	98	150	68	43	11	10.1	2414
Libraries	62	56	73	95	120	85	40	7.7	2085
Museums, records and the arts	53	38	59	62	109	160	48	6.6	1837
Other	30	6	2	4	9	8	101	3.7	416

* Overall weighted priority score calculated by assigning every number 1 priority a score of 7, every number 2 priority a score of 6, and so on, and then summing the total score for each service.

The weighted priority scores are presented in the graph below.

