

Let's Talk Budget 2024/2025 Consultation Report

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1. Introduction

We provide over 800 services to support and improve the lives of residents, businesses, and visitors in Stockport. Our annual budget is £310 million. Every year, we must balance our spend with the income we receive to deliver a budget.

We are shaping our budget within an uncertain, unstable, and complex environment. This includes pressures across public services, our supply chains, and addressing the increasing need within our communities for support. Our Medium-term financial plan (MTFP) shows that the money we plan to spend delivering services is more than our income.

In 2024/25, we need to find £10.861 million savings with further significant savings needed in the coming years. Only by operating differently and making significant changes will we be able to balance our budget.

We recently published our Responding to Our Medium Term Financial Plan update, which outlines how we are responding to the financial challenges ahead. As part of this response, we have developed a number of savings proposals. These proposals outline the changes we are proposing to make to the way we deliver some of our services

2. Methodology

We have sought feedback from our residents, businesses, and other stakeholders on our budget proposals to help us determine how we can deliver services in the best way possible. We have done this through a variety of feedback methods, ranging from elected member engagement through scrutiny committees, employee engagement and the Let's Talk Budget consultation via the online/paper

In order to reach as many people as possible the consultation has been publicised by a range of different methods including;

- Social medial channels,
 - **Facebook**
10,674 reach
114 engagements
 - **Twitter**
11,111 impressions
40 engagements
- Review Extra Newsletter (distribution over 10K)
- Have Your Say Newsletter (distribution 1898 emails)
- Advertised in libraries across Stockport,
- Councils 'Have Your Say' consultation page
- Stockport Council Internal communication channels

- Target communication with partners (PACT – Parent and Carers Together)

The online questionnaire contained two sections. The first seeking feedback on the overall budget proposals, aligned to Scrutiny Committees, the second a specific engagement around the Libraries proposal.

3. Results

There have been a total of 76 responses to the online/paper version of the questionnaire compared to 39 responses last year. Respondents had the option to answer as many parts of the questionnaire as they choose, with some respondents only answering one section and others answering all sections. Of these 76 responses 70 agreed they were happy to complete the 'About You Section' with six not wanting to supply this information.

There were 60 responses to the overall budget question, of which 34 commented on proposals relating to one Scrutiny. There were 62 responses to the libraries specific question. The following summarises the key points emerging from this feedback along with that of the October and November Scrutiny cycles.

4. General Feedback

Through the feedback gained across all methods of engagement and consultation (members, online questionnaire) there were a number of common themes across many of the proposals including:

- Concerns about funding from Central Government and the impact reductions in grants/non recurrent funding would have.
- Some concerns about the level of Council Tax.
- Challenges relating to the rising cost of services and impact this will have on the Council in general.
- Acknowledgement that change is needed on a Council wide basis and difficult decision are ahead.
- New ways of working/delivering service should be explored specifically with those who are impacted by the changes.
- The need to look at staffing structures to ensure that savings are made without having a negative impact on service users – specifically but not limited to libraries.
- Where possible, services should be brought back in-house to help reduce costs and provide consistency.
- Some proposals need further clarification or understanding in order for residents to be able to make valid input.

For consistency and continuity, comments that are specific to individual proposals have been aligned to their relevant Scrutiny Committee and can be found below. Feedback from scrutiny is presented first then results from the wider consultation and engagement follow. The feedback received has been grouped into three categories:

a) Support

- b) Concerns raised
- c) Alternative suggestions on how savings can be achieved.

5. Adult Social Care and Health

Scrutiny Committee Feedback

- The **Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee** took place on 12th October 2023. Overall concerns revolved around the continued reduction in funding and how this will affect services and residents. It was also queried how the approach to managing external care markets will make the council savings. Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote¹.
- The **Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee** took place on 23rd November 2023. Members sought further clarification over the details and approach to a number of the proposals and the confidence levels of achieving the savings targets. The committee also queried what mitigations would be in place for the Grant Maximisation proposal should the outcomes become worse. Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote².

Let's Talk Budget public questionnaire (10 responses)

Support

- Agreement that Adult Social Care provisions needs reviewing while ensuring they are appropriately funded.
- Acknowledgement that services are stretched due to lack of funding.

Concerns

- Concerns around funding being cut.
- Reduction in service Public Health/services may help with current savings but will likely result in increased need in future years.
- More focus needed on person centred approach rather than being technology lead.

6. Children and Families

Scrutiny Committee Feedback

¹ Adult Social Care and Health October Scrutiny Committee – minutes
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/g28971/Printed%20minutes%2012th-Oct-2023%2018.00%20Adult%20Social%20Care%20Health%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

² Adult Social Care and Health November Scrutiny Committee –
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=1004&Mid=28972>

- The **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee** took place on 11th October 2023. Members sought clarification over how the SEN transport proposal would affect provision and impact on budgets. Additionally the committee noted the year on year growth in children’s services budgets while being underfunded by Government. Full minutes can be found on the council’s website as referenced in the footnote³
- The **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee** took place on 22nd November 2023. The committee broadly supported the Independent Travel Training approach within the SEN Transport proposal. Members queried .. the approach to the Health proposal and how the packages of care would be assessed or reviewed. Full minutes can be found on the council’s website as referenced in the footnote⁴.

Let’s Talk Budget public questionnaire (11 responses)

Support

- Overall sentiment in relation to these proposals are positive
- Agreement with bringing key services in-house (Council Care Homes)
- Support for increasing local provision to keep children within Borough for both schools and care.

Concerns

- Changes to services need to be (where possible) co-produced with those specifically impacted by the change.
- Concerns the word ‘review’ normally means reductions.

7. Communities and Transport

Scrutiny Committee Feedback

- The **Communities and Transport Scrutiny Committee** took place on 9th October 2023. The committee noted that charges for bereavement services were due to increase and queried whether hardship funds would be available for those who would struggle to pay. Further concerns were expressed in general with redundancies and reduced capacity within services. Members sought clarify of the impact of further parking fee increases and any knock effects on usage and any associated services near the effected car parks. Full minutes can be found on the council’s website as referenced in the footnote⁵.

³ Children and Families October Scrutiny Committee - minutes
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/g28989/Printed%20minutes%2011th-Oct-2023%2018.00%20Children%20Families%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

⁴ Children and Families November Scrutiny Committee –
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1009&MId=28990>

⁵ Communities and Transport October Scrutiny Committee – minutes

- The **Communities and Transport Scrutiny Committee** took place on 20th November 2023. The committee raised concerns about the lack of availability of cashless payment systems across the library estate and in particular where FTE reductions were taking place. Members raised concerns whether this is the correct time to implement charges to fee car parks while a number of parking reviews were taking place. Further concerns were expressed in relation to the increase in taxi licensing fees and the danger of pushing taxi drivers to sign up with other local authorities. Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote⁶.

Let's Talk Budget public questionnaire (32 responses)

Support

- There was some agreement in increasing parking charges or charging for those that are currently free
- Acknowledgement that times are changing and services need to be suitable for all – so a mixture of options on library opening options are acceptable

Concerns

- It was felt that there will be negative impacts from increased parking charges on town/district centre business and a balance is needed
- Negative impact on residents who currently use free car parks due to not being able to park in front of their homes, notably in relation to St Matthews Terrace
- There could be displacement issues in busy areas (e.g. near schools) leading people to park on residential streets resulting in increased risk to locals and children
- The income from the introduction of charging for free car parks will not be met due to cost of implementation/maintenance as well as people choosing to park elsewhere
- The potential impact of reduced staff hours in libraries in helping residents with non-library specific elements (loneliness, information advice and guidance) as well as providing a warm space for those who need it.

Alternative suggestions

- Generate income from illegal parking and other traffic offences.
- Reduce adult books not children's and introduce a book donation scheme.

<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/g28977/Printed%20minutes%2009th-Oct-2023%2018.00%20Communities%20Transport%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

⁶ Communities and Transport Scrutiny November Committee –
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1008&MId=28978>

8. Corporate, Resource Management and Governance

Scrutiny Committee Feedback

- The ***Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny*** took place on 10th October 2023. Members raised concerns about the reduction to the mayoral hospitality budget and the councils ability to present to guests and the wider benefits which that might bring. The committee also commented on the Digitally Enabled Savings and making sure the proposal was carried out in an inclusive manner. Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote⁷.
- The ***Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny*** took place on 21st November 2023. Members again raised concerns about the reduction to the mayoral hospitality budget and the councils ability to present to guests and the wider benefits which that might bring. The committee also enquired about staff turnover, training and inter mobility within the Staffing Review and Digitally Enabled Savings proposals. Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote⁸.

Let's Talk Budget public questionnaire (5 responses)

Support

- Digital solutions can offer good alternatives as long as the appropriate training supports it
- Support for the removal of the chatbot
- Support for making services more effective and efficient.

Concerns

- Concerns that digital solutions are not always the best for residents.

9. Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change

Scrutiny Committee Feedback

- The ***Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee*** took place on 12th October 2023. Concerns were raised over the removal of caddy liners, any potential increases to charges or reductions to collections.

⁷ Corporate, Resource Management and Governance October Scrutiny – minutes
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/g28983/Printed%20minutes%2010th-Oct-2023%2018.00%20Corporate%20Resource%20Management%20Governance%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

⁸ Corporate, Resource Management and Governance November Scrutiny –
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=144&MId=28984>

Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote⁹.

- The ***Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee*** took place on 23rd November 2023. Members were generally supportive of the proposals, however, concerns were raised over possible changes to legislation which could affect the viability of the Waste Review. Full minutes can be found on the council's website as referenced in the footnote¹⁰.

Let's Talk Budget public questionnaire (27 responses)

Support

- Strong support for the reduction of green bins to fortnightly
- Some support for the reduction of caddy liners
- General preference to reduce green waste collections rather than charging for the service
- Support for continuous improvement in service efficiencies

Concerns

- The impact of reducing the green bin to fortnightly may lead to an increase in rodents in the summer months
- A reduction in caddy liners may result in an increase in general waste or an increase in people using non-recyclable bags for food waste
- Some opposition to the increase in planning fees given the current level of service.

Alternative Suggestions

- A number of responses suggested that aligning the collection of the Blue bin with the Brown bin (reducing collections to every 3 weeks)
- Suggestion to reduce the green bin to align with the brown bin (3 weekly) in the winter and weekly in the summer
- Increase service efficiency with the expansion of the online report tool for issues such as blocked gully's/grid
- Focus on environmentally friendly proposals such as reducing carbon emissions and increasing the number of public recycle bins

10. Libraries Engagement

There were 62 responses to the libraries engagement with the overall response to this specific proposal is mixed. There are a number of responses that acknowledge

⁹ Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change October Scrutiny Committee – minutes
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/documents/g28995/Printed%20minutes%2012th-Oct-2023%2018.00%20Economy%20Regeneration%20Climate%20Change%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=1>

¹⁰ Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change November Scrutiny Committee –
<https://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1010&MId=28996>

that the way people use library services are changing and therefore the service needs to adapt and evolve. A growing number of people prefer to use the facilities independent of staff members or during quieter hours, meaning Open + gives them the option to use the facilities during unstaffed hours.

There is also an acknowledgement that this is not the same for all, and some library users will continue to need support from staff not just in relation to borrowing books. For some it's their connection to the community. There is still a significant concern around people's safety if using the facilities during unstaffed hours, with a number of options provided from respondents.

Overall, it is clear a balance is needed between hours that are staffed and unstaffed in order to cater for the diverse needs of the users of Stockport libraries.

Support

- Good support for the right balance mix of staffed and unstaffed hours.
- Support for the flexibility that open plus allows.
- Some users prefer to access the library when it quieter (unstaffed hours)
- Warm and secure place even when unstaffed.
- Support for preserving the number of libraries there are even if staffed hours will be reduced.
- Support for standardising hours across libraries if this support the libraries staying open.

Concerns

- The main concern for residents is around safety during unstaffed hours
- Impact on the staff who would be losing their jobs due to the reduction in staffed hours.
- The knowledge and services provided by library staff cannot be replaced by Open + hours.
- A concern was raised that there would be a discrepancy between staffing reductions between political represented wards.

Alternative Suggestions

- If additional security measures were introduced people would feel less apprehensive about using Open + (security guards or access to an emergency call centre).
- A range of options from reducing the number of underutilised and unutilised buildings to closing all libraries. Reducing the numbers or closing libraries will help save money.
- Reduce or modify opening to suit staff availability rather than use Open +.

11. Limitations and considerations of the public consultation

The low response rate is acknowledged – this report needs to be taken in the context that this is not a full representation of the population of Stockport. 76 respondents

out of a population of over 290,000 cannot be deemed significant however the responses themselves should be considered.

12. Conclusion

The aim of our consultation and engagement was to obtain feedback on our approach to ensuring a balanced budget for 2024/2025 and specifically the change proposals we are developing. It is clear that there are a number of factors that mean challenging decisions need to be made. Preserving the right level of service while adapting and evolving to the ever changing landscape is clearly a concern for those who have provided feedback.

Responses to proposals are mixed in support, concerns and alternative suggestions. Feedback is mainly positive for proposals relating to Children and Families specifically supporting in-house options for care and SEN transportation. Corporate Resource Management and Governance feedback was mainly positive in relation to ensuring we have efficiencies across the council. And Economy, Regeneration and Climate Change was mainly positive in relation to the changes proposed within the Waste Review.

Adult Social Care and Health was mixed with respondents showing concerns regarding further reductions in service provision but with an acknowledgement that things do need to change. Communities and Transport proposals also received a mixed response with concerns relating to increases in parking charges leading to displacement issues and safety concerns in relation to additional unstaffed hours in libraries. However again there is an acknowledgement that times are changing and services need to be adapting and evolving while ensuring they are accessible to all.

The libraries specific engagement received a mixed response with support for the technology and to keep the service going while concerns were raised around safety while some alternative options for consideration were provided.

13. Additional information

Currently response rates are similar to those experienced in previous years. The age of respondents ranged from 25 – 84 years with approximately 71% of respondents aged between 45 - 74.

We included a question to capture 'where did you learn about this consultation'. The majority of responses included:

- 29% from a library
- 26% from newsletters/email distribution
- 20% social media platforms / website
- 14% word of mouth (friends/SMBC Staff/Cllrs)
- 11% not answered/other