

Budget Simulator Engagement Report

Introduction

Dorset Council faces the annual challenge of setting a balanced budget for 2026/27, ensuring that spending does not exceed income while protecting essential services such as social care, waste management, housing, and road maintenance. We rely heavily on income from council tax and business rates to deliver around 450 services to 380,000 residents.

To help shape Dorset Council's 2026/27 budget, we ran an interactive activity inviting residents to explore the challenges of setting a balanced budget and share what matters most to them. This report summarises the results of that engagement, which will inform our proposals and ensure community priorities are considered in decision-making.

Budget Simulator results

Key Metrics

Metric	Value
Total Responses	745 (650 with demographics)
Original Total Income	£342,000,000
Original Total Expenditure	£479,398,040
Average Revised Total Income	£368,033,315
Average Revised Total Expenditure	£461,993,215

Executive Summary

The Budget Simulator engagement received 745 responses providing insights into public preferences for council income and expenditure adjustments. Respondents proposed an average Council Tax increase of 7.61%, raising projected income from £342M to £368M, while reducing overall expenditure from £479M to £462M.

Among those who engaged with the budget simulator, the most significant cuts were directed toward Adults & Housing and Corporate Services, while reductions in Children's Services, Place, and Public Health were more modest. This trend indicates a preference for reducing perceived administrative costs and commissioned programs rather than frontline, highly visible local services.

It is worth noting that the Simulator was designed so responses could only be submitted if the respondent balanced the budget. This is important context as

residents not willing to increase Council Tax, or commit to reducing service funding, may not have been able to submit a response.

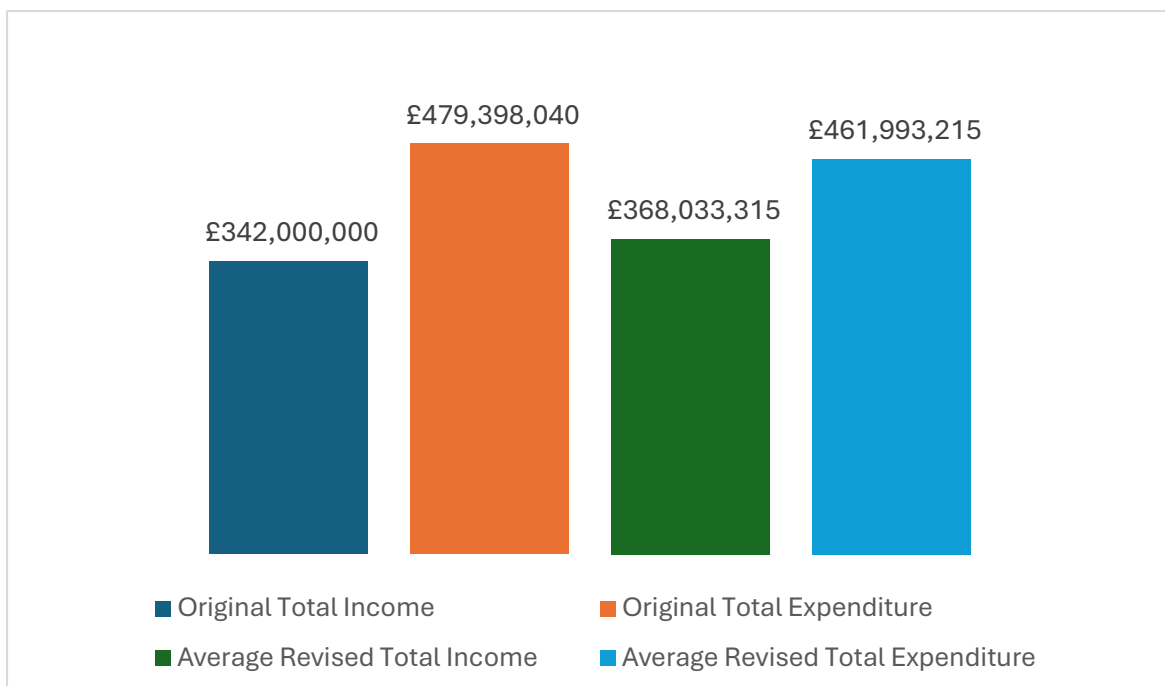
Top 5 Largest Reductions

1. Adult Social Care Commissioned Services: -5.31%
2. Financial and Commercial: -4.78%
3. Democratic and Electoral: -4.58%
4. Adult Social Work: -4.15%
5. Health and Activity: -4.02%

Top 5 (combination of increases and smallest reductions)

1. Highways: +0.97%
2. Waste Operations: -0.92%
3. Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management: -1.29%
4. Harbours: -1.77%
5. Economic Growth and Development: -1.79%

Analysis

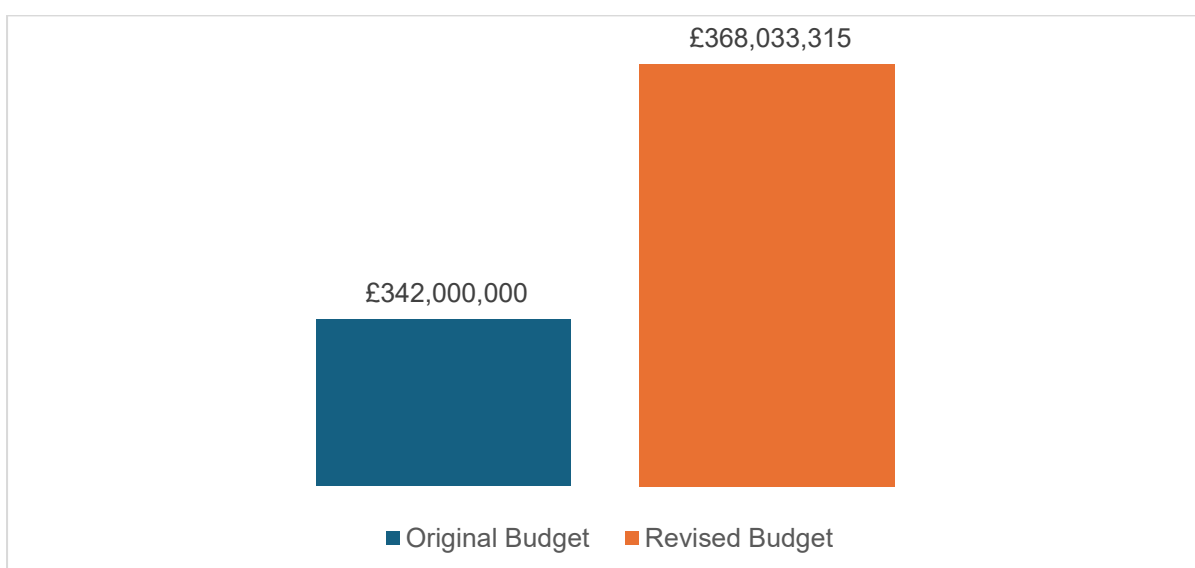


Service	Percentage Change
Highways	0.97%

Waste operations	-0.92%
Flood and coastal erosion risk management	-1.29%
Harbours	-1.77%
Economic growth and development	-1.79%
Children's social care	-1.84%
Assets and property	-2.04%
Early help and schools support	-2.17%
Greenspace	-2.17%
Commercial waste and strategy	-2.43%
Regulatory Services	-2.68%
Libraries	-2.81%
ICT operations	-2.88%
Land charges	-2.93%
Housing	-2.93%
Planning	-3.05%
Dorset Travel	-3.09%
Public Health	-3.12%
Customer services	-3.33%
Leisure, arts and cultural services	-3.36%
Health and activity	-4.02%
Adult Social Work	-4.15%
Democratic and electoral	-4.58%
Financial and commercial	-4.78%
Adult Social Care Commissioned Services	-5.31%

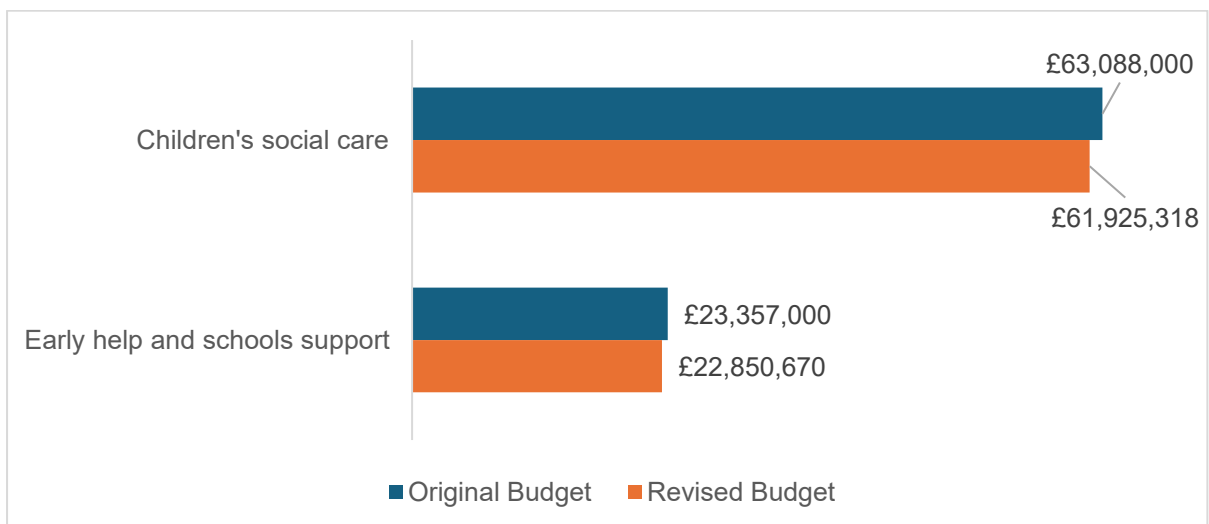
Average budget change by Service Group

Council Tax



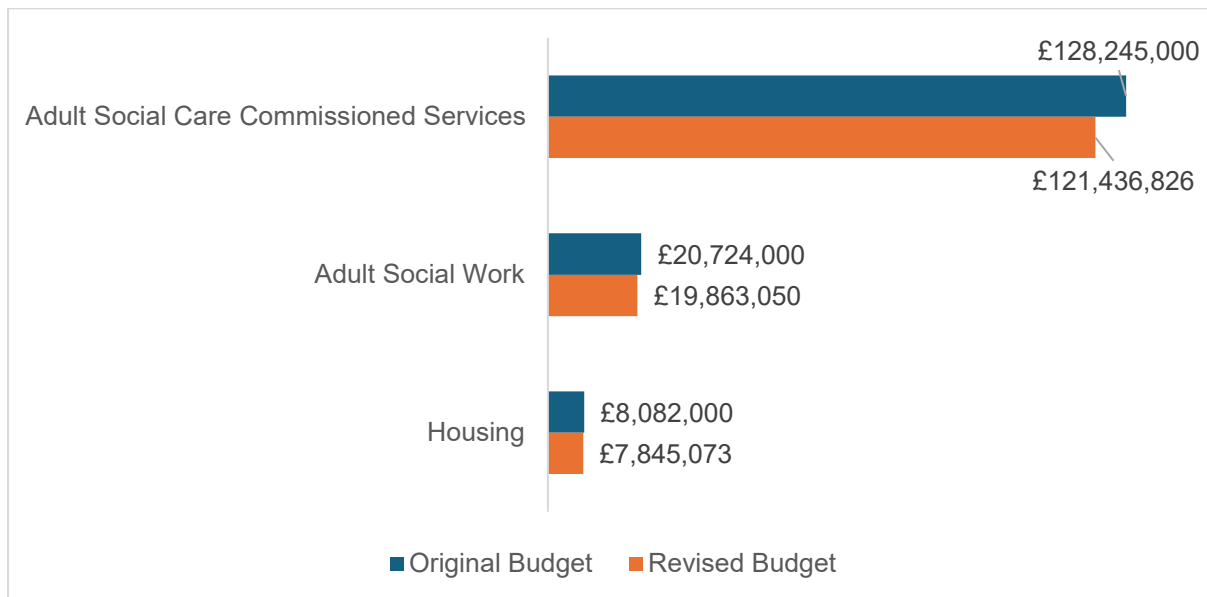
Service Group	Service Item	Original Budget	Average Change %	Average Revised Budget
Council Tax (Income)	What are your views on a council tax increase above 4.99%, which may be used to protect or improve council services? The council would have to hold a local referendum to get permission to raise council tax any higher than 4.99%.	£342,000,000	7.61%	£368,033,315

Children's Services



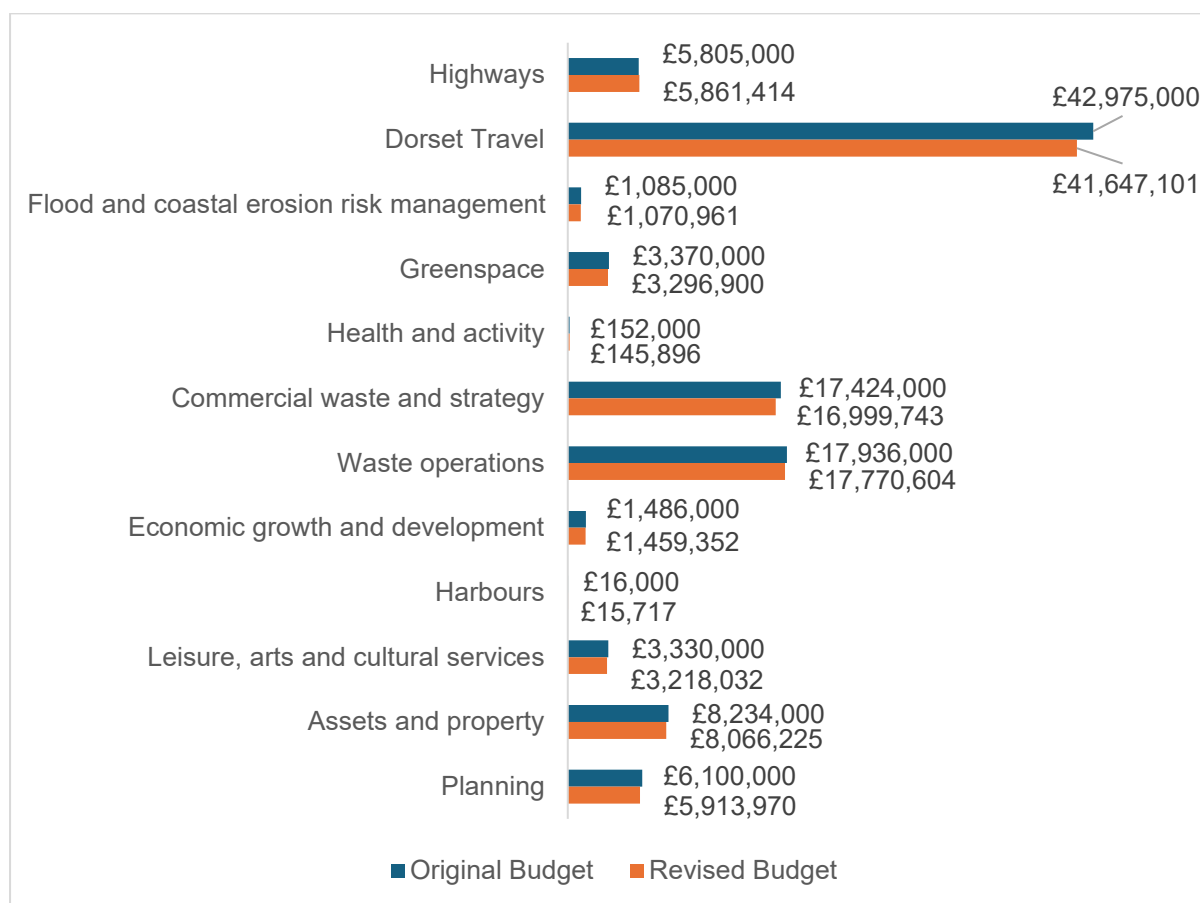
Service Group	Service Item	Original Budget	Average Change %	Average Revised Budget
Children's services (Expenditure)	Children's social care	£63,088,000	-1.84%	£61,925,318
	Early help and schools support	£23,357,000	-2.17%	£22,850,670

Adults and Housing



Service Group	Service Item	Original Budget	Average Change %	Average Revised Budget
Adults & Housing (Expenditure)	Adult Social Care Commissioned Services	£128,245,000	-5.31%	£121,436,826
	Adult Social Work	£20,724,000	-4.15%	£19,863,050
	Housing	£8,082,000	-2.93%	£7,845,073

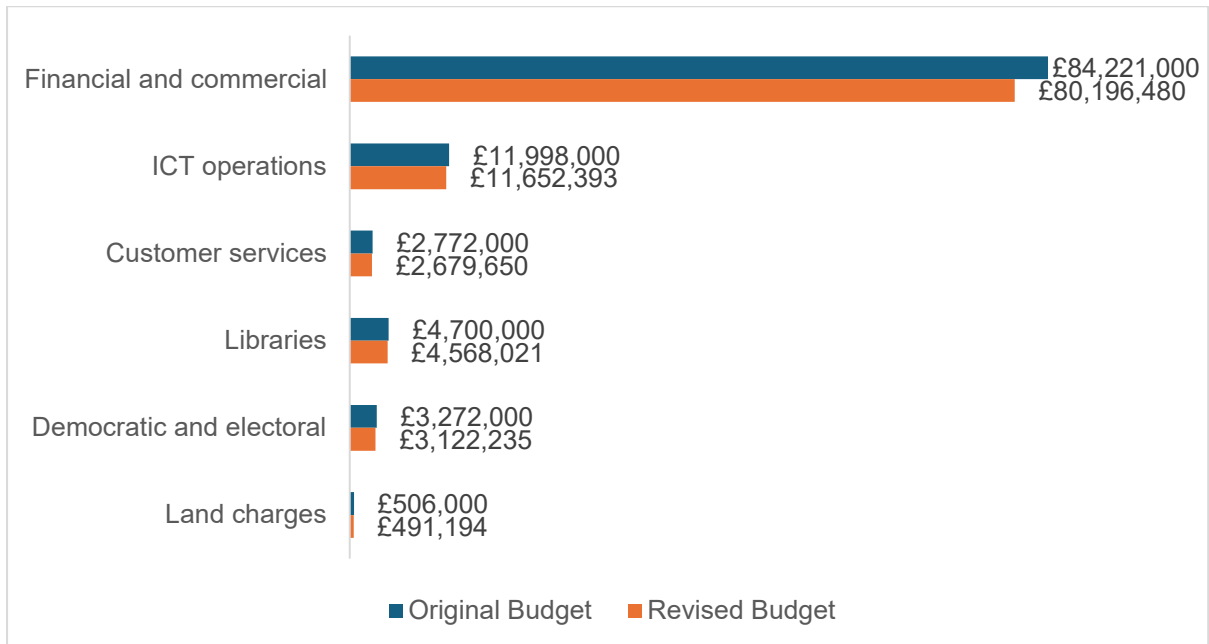
Place



Service Group	Service Item	Original Budget	Average Change %	Average Revised Budget
Place (Expenditure)	Highways	£5,805,000	0.97%	£5,861,414
	Dorset Travel	£42,975,000	-3.09%	£41,647,101
	Flood and coastal erosion risk management	£1,085,000	-1.29%	£1,070,961
	Greenspace	£3,370,000	-2.17%	£3,296,900
	Health and activity	£152,000	-4.02%	£145,896
	Commercial waste and strategy	£17,424,000	-2.43%	£16,999,743
	Waste operations	£17,936,000	-0.92%	£17,770,604
	Economic growth and development	£1,486,000	-1.79%	£1,459,352
	Harbours	£16,000	-1.77%	£15,717

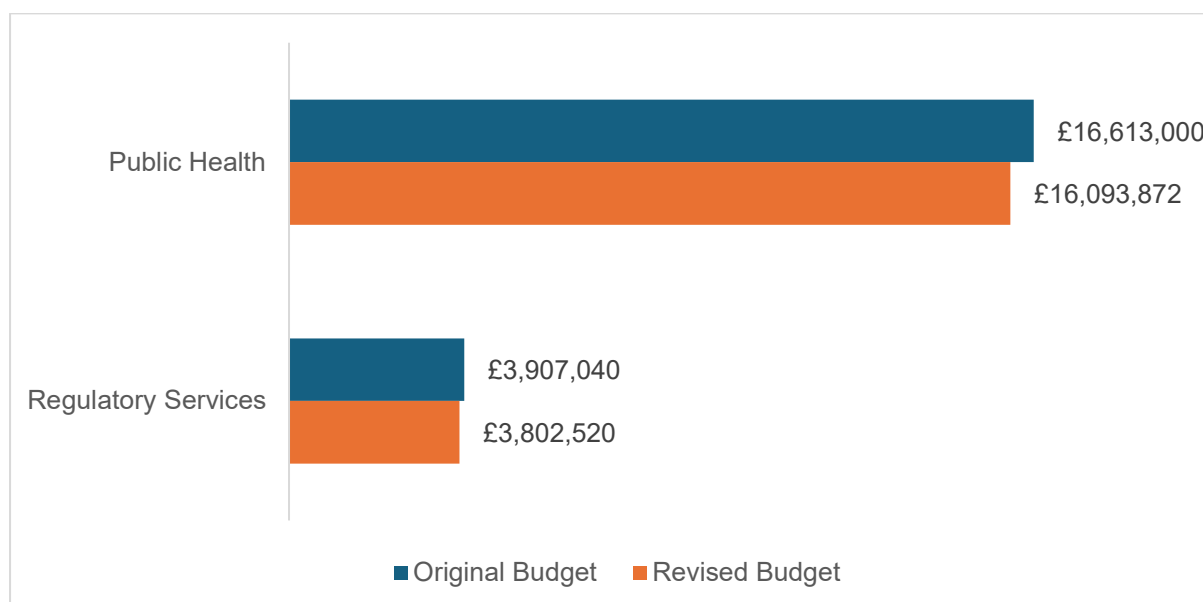
	Leisure, arts and cultural services	£3,330,000	-3.36%	£3,218,032
	Assets and property	£8,234,000	-2.04%	£8,066,225
	Planning	£6,100,000	-3.05%	£5,913,970

Corporate Services



Service Group	Service Item	Original Budget	Average Change %	Average Revised Budget
Corporate services (Expenditure)	Financial and commercial	£84,221,000	-4.78%	£80,196,480
	ICT operations	£11,998,000	-2.88%	£11,652,393
	Customer services	£2,772,000	-3.33%	£2,679,650
	Libraries	£4,700,000	-2.81%	£4,568,021
	Democratic and electoral	£3,272,000	-4.58%	£3,122,235
	Land charges	£506,000	-2.93%	£491,194

Public Health and Prevention



Service Group	Service Item	Original Budget	Average Change %	Average Revised Budget
Public Health and Prevention (Expenditure)	Public Health	£16,613,000	-3.12%	£16,093,872
	Regulatory Services	£3,907,040	-2.68%	£3,802,520

Final Comments

Base (n-124)

The individual comments have been coded into themes and can be seen in the table below.

Comment/Theme	Total
Budget tool/activity feedback	51
Wasted funds/lack of efficiency	26
Efficiencies/better ways of working/productivity/use of digital	19
Increase in service funding	17
Reduction in service funding	15
Back to basics/if we can't afford it, don't offer it/strip to legal requirements only	15
Other	15
Alternative funding/ways to raise funds	14
Increase in Council Tax (with caveats)	13
Staff costs/wages/pension/Cllr provisions	11
Personal responsibility	10

Comment on council tax already one of the highest in the country	9
Council tax banding to be reworked/more fair/equitable/council tax tweaks	7
Opposition to rise in Council Tax/reduce council tax	7
Accountability (or lack thereof)	4
Lobbying and policy reform	4
Volunteering and community engagement	4
Better market management	2

Demographics

Age

Base (n-648)

Age group	Total	Percentage
Under 18	8	1.2%
18 to 24	9	1.4%
25 to 39	120	18.5%
40 to 49	110	17.0%
50 to 59	122	18.8%
60 to 64	74	11.4%
65 plus	156	24.1%
Prefer not to say	49	7.6%

Sex

Base (n-643)

Option	Total	Percentage
Female	186	28.9%
Male	382	59.4%
Prefer not to say	75	11.7%

Gender

Q. Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

Base (n-630)

Option	Total	Percentage
Yes	554	87.9%
No	5	0.8%
Prefer not to say	71	11.3%

Disability

Q. The Equality Act 2010 describes a person as disabled if they have a longstanding physical or mental condition that has lasted or is likely to last 12 months; and this condition has a substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. People with some conditions (cancer, multiple sclerosis and HIV/AIDS for example) are considered to be disabled from the point that they are diagnosed.

Do you consider yourself to be disabled as set out in the Equality Act 2010?

Base (n-634)

Option	Total	Percentage
Yes	103	16.2%
No	429	67.7%
Prefer not to say	102	16.1%

Q. At the previous question you stated you consider yourself to have a disability. Please state the type of disability which applies to you.

Option	Total
Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)	3
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	16
Autistic Spectrum Conditions	24
Blind	2
Deaf	3
Dyscalculia	3
Dyslexia	20
Dyspraxia	10
Hearing loss	19
Learning disability	5
Long term health condition	51
Medical conditions	32
Mental health issues	29
Mobility issues	25
Physical impairment	16
Sign Language User	2
Specific learning differences	2
Visually impaired	4
Wheelchair user	5
Other	9

Ethnicity

Base (n-608)

Option	Total	Percentage
White: British	489	80.4%
White: Other	12	2.0%
Mixed: Other	5	0.8%
Mixed: White and Asian	5	0.8%
White: Gypsy	3	0.5%
White: Irish	4	0.7%
Black or Black British	2	0.3%
Mixed: White and Black African	2	0.3%
Other ethnic group	2	0.3%
Asian or Asian British: Indian	2	0.3%
Asian or Asian British: Other	2	0.3%
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	2	0.3%
White: Irish Traveller	1	0.2%
Prefer not to say	77	12.7%

Sexual Orientation

Base (n-601)

Option	Total	Percentage
Heterosexual or straight	460	76.5%
Bisexual	14	2.3%
Gay or lesbian	14	2.3%
Asexual	5	0.8%
Other	11	1.8%
Prefer not to say	97	16.1%

Marital Status

Base (n-600)

Option	Total	Percentage
Married	339	56.5%
In a registered civil partnership	8	1.3%
Separated, but still legally married	2	0.3%
Divorced	25	4.2%
Never married and never registered a civil partnership	105	17.5%
Widowed	14	2.3%
Prefer not to say	107	17.8%

Maternity

Q. Are you currently pregnant or have you been pregnant in the last year?

Base (n-596)

Option	Total	Percentage
Yes	7	1.2%
No	506	84.9%
Prefer not to say	83	13.9%

Religion or belief

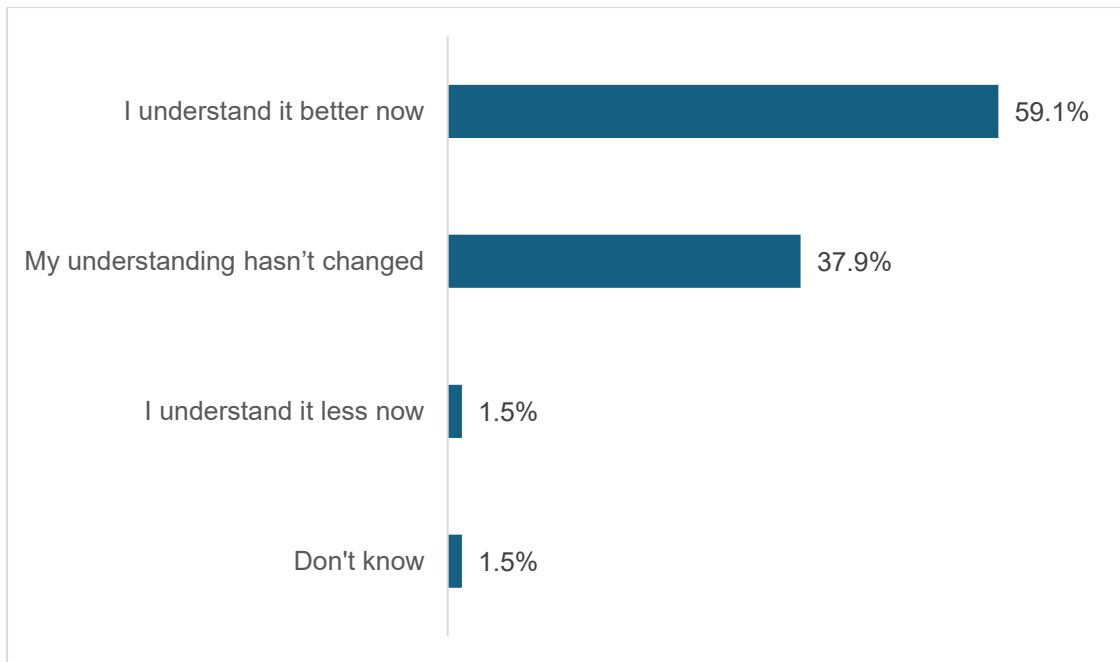
Base (n-600)

Option	Total	Percentage
Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)	214	35.7%
Buddhist	1	0.2%
Jewish	4	0.7%
Muslim	4	0.7%
Any other religion or belief	14	2.3%
No religion	248	41.3%
Prefer not to say	115	19.2%

Follow-up survey results

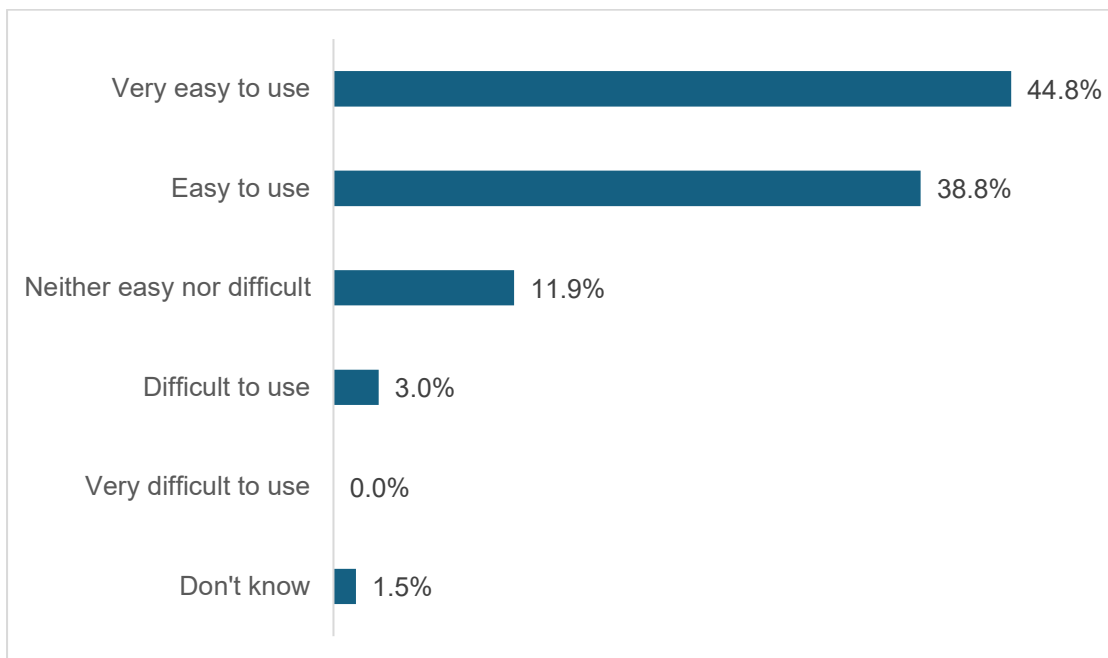
Q. Which of the following best describes your understanding of the council budget after taking part in this activity?

Base (n-66)



Q. What was your experience using the budget simulator?

Base (n-67)



Q. Did anything stand out to you while using the budget simulator?

Responses for this question have been coded into themes and can be seen in the table below.

Theme	Total
Improvements/suggestions for the tool	20
Engagement and understanding	16
Wording/framing of the Simulator/biased or emotive	13
Efficiencies/working more effectively	12
Ideas to raise funds/balance the budget	10
Omissions from the simulator	10
Reference to wasted funds/wasteful spending	6
Service prioritisation	6
How some services can be more expensive than others	5
Increase in council tax to cause big issues for those already struggling/Council tax too high for services received	5
Non-statutory services must bear savings if efficiencies not possible/devolved to T&PCs/live with money you have	4
Criticism of paying to run the Simulator/resourcing it	3
Council Tax to be reworked	3
Will it be used? /Hope it will be used	2
Other	12