



# Research Findings

December 22

Budget Consultation Focus Groups  
for City of York Council

ideagroup™

  
**QaResearch**

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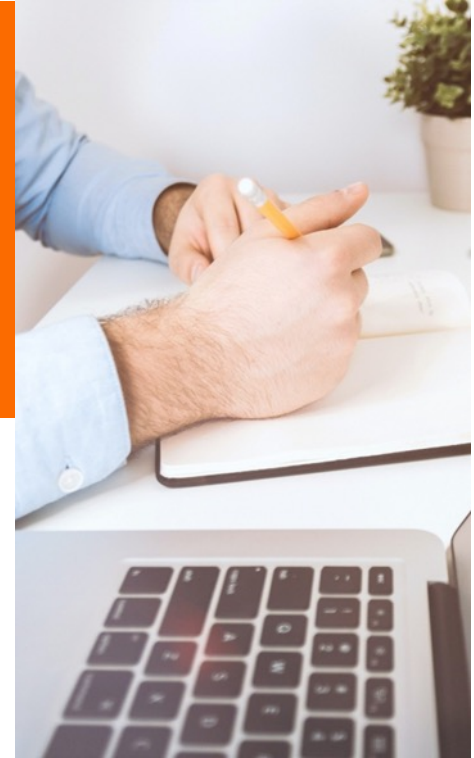
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# Summary of Key Insights



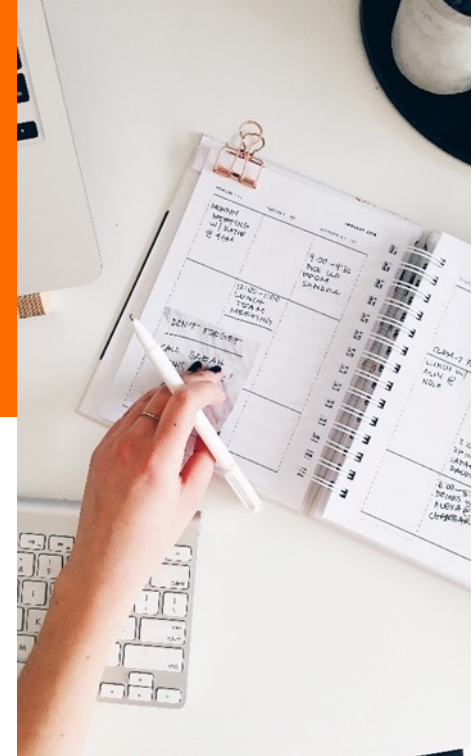
# Summary of the key insights from this qualitative research

- There is low awareness over what Council Tax funds specifically – only a few mentioned unprompted the two largest areas of spend - adult social care or schools
- Therefore, the initial viewpoint from many, is residents get very little for the Council Tax they pay
- The first things mentioned are the frequent and tangible services they see delivered (or not) such as bin collection, recycling, road repairs, street cleaning, public toilets and libraries – with a feeling these services are getting worse
- Very few residents appreciate the financial challenges and difficult decisions Council's have to make, until they are asked to prioritise spending areas or decide what services could or should be cut or how services should be paid for
- It is easy to criticise the Council or demand more until put in the position of having to make difficult financial and service choices
- The descriptions in the pie chart shown in the focus groups to illustrate the allocation of Council Tax between services and the different priority areas, were both seen as too vague and lacking any detail to make any informed decisions regarding any cuts, increases or changes that they would support

# Summary of the key insights from this qualitative research

- When presented with the stark options of increasing charges for services, increasing council tax or providing fewer services, residents recognised the 'Hobson's choice', recognizing all three are likely to be needed. Only then do they start to appreciate the challenges faced by CYC
- After discussions and being taken on the 'journey' of the choices that could be made, or what areas should be prioritised, there is a reluctant acceptance that Council Tax will need to be increased and by the full amount permitted
- Seeing a figure of an increase of 5% sounds considerably more than when it is presented as the cost in pounds and pence per week (for a band D property £1.76 per week is less than a cup of coffee or what many spend on Deliveroo!)
- However, an increase of 5% is not expected to result in a reduction of service. Indeed, most wanted CYC to clearly communicate where the additional money will go and the positive impacts it will have
- No-one mentioned inflation at 10% and increasing costs (e.g. staff salaries, energy bills) to deliver services suggesting a challenge if this increase in Council Tax is not going to result in a tangible improvement in provision
- Residents recognise that CYC will need more money to pay for services and that this may need to come from both an increase in Council tax, as well as other sources and are keen for a variety of approaches to be explored and used.

# Aims & Objectives



# Research Aims & Objectives

## **Overall aim:**

- To establish the views of a selection of York residents about the possible increase in Council Tax and charges for services provided by the CYC

## **Research objectives:**

- Understand residents' current situation with regards to the cost-of-living crisis
- Establish how residents feel about potential increases in council tax and other services provided by CYC
- Understand which areas CYC should prioritise

# Method



# Sample – who took part in the research

90-minute qualitative focus group discussions with:

York Residents who pay Council Tax

From a mix of inner and outer wards of York

Participants fitting the agreed criteria recruited by the research company

Focus groups undertaken 13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> December

With the 3 sessions split by lifestage



## **Pre-Family**

Ages 21-35 with no children



## **Family**

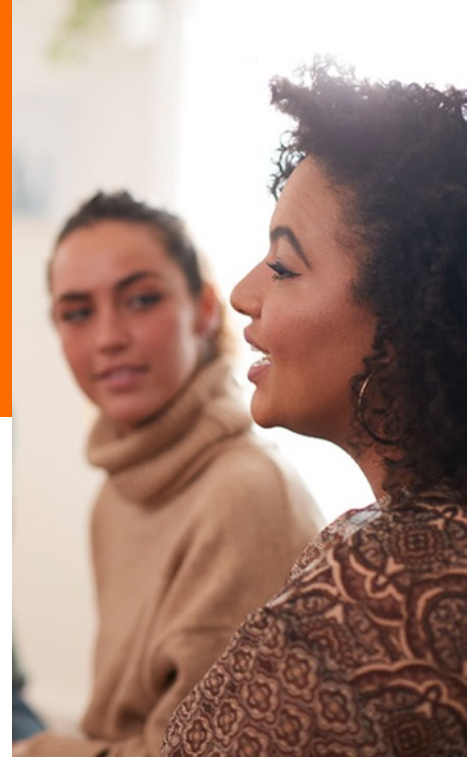
Parents with children of 0-16  
Working full time / part time



## **Post-Family**

Age 65+  
Some using social care & support

# Current situation



# The cost of living crisis is on everyone's mind

- **The current situation:** Even if residents are not yet feeling a financial pinch themselves, they're aware that many people living in York are currently, or will be once mortgage repayments, rent and/or other bills increase in the New Year
- **Residents were more concerned** with immediate financial concerns e.g., rising prices of gas, electricity, food prices, mortgage and rental costs rather than Council Tax, although recognise that the combination of everything going up has a large collective impact
- **Household budget challenges** are expected to continue rather than get easier anytime soon
- **It is not always clear what the CYC does** or funds or has responsibility for; what is paid for by general taxation; comes from central government or is provided by other organisations e.g. York BID & charitable groups - Do CYC subsidise food banks? Do they pay St Nick's for recycling? Therefore, it can be difficult to understand how much Council Tax is needed to provide various services
- **There is a lack of clarity about what the council is responsible for** which can lead to criticism directed at the council for areas it is not responsible for delivering, for example: many mentioned spending on Christmas Lights in the city centre during the current crisis, without appreciating that CYC is not always involved in these elements

## Easy to complain when they are not sure what CYC does or doesn't provide

**The Pre-family group** had the least opinion about the performance of CYC and where their Council tax contribution goes

- These participants felt more positive about living in the city of York, but did mention how it felt overrun by tourists, the expensive cost of housing and rental prices, the roads being very congested, lack of public toilets, and lack of software apps to track public bus routes

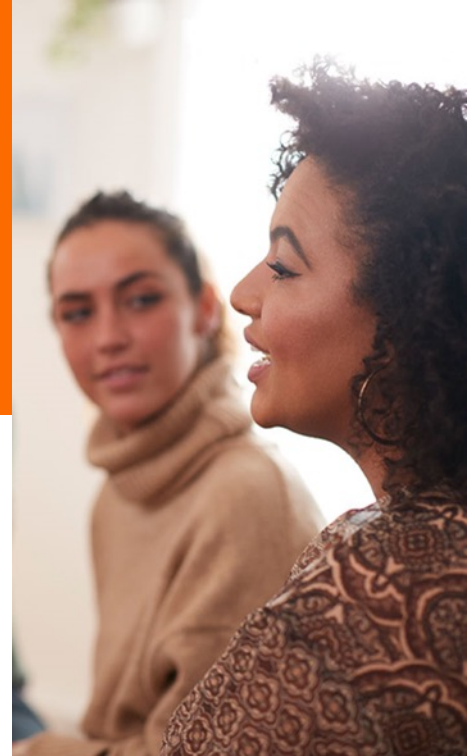
**The Family group** had low awareness of what Council Tax funds directly

- They had a lot more to say about the Cost of Living and aspects of the city which they felt aren't working well - the cost of rentals and housing, the cost of parking permits and inadequate parking space in the city, poor maintenance of cycling lanes, street cleaning and inadequate supply of council housing

**The Post-family group** were the most informed, having spent the most time - - 30+ years - as York residents

- Participants of this group were the most knowledgeable about what CYC funds directly and specifically which services provided by the CYC had declined, such as
  - Street cleaning / removing leaves in Autumn
  - Repairing potholes
  - Leisure activities (now privatised)
  - Funding for Youth Clubs
  - Fewer Council run care homes
  - Fewer Council houses
  - No public toilets in the city centre

# Attitudes towards current cost and usage of Council Tax



# Lack of information makes informed decisions/opinions difficult

## How We Spend Our Budget – What do you think your Council Tax Pays for?

- Participants asked for information where their Council Tax goes, with most unaware they get this with their Council Tax bill
- Before being shown the pie chart for CYC, the consensus among all three groups is that residents pay a lot and get a lot less than they used to in the past
- Very few know how Council Tax rates in York compare to other areas, so opinions are solely based on what they see CYC providing
- They were shown the pie chart opposite and were initially pleased to see the sort of breakdown that they wanted to see
- But on further review, found the descriptions too vague
- Residents want to *know and believe* that Council Tax is being well spent and not wasted before being asked to contribute even more. The information in the pie chart and lack of any other communications doesn't help them make that decision.



# More clarity and understanding is needed before residents can have an informed opinion

- Many of the descriptions are vague: what do the terms cover?
  - supporting Capital Investment was meaningless but is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest category
  - it was unclear what *adult care* actually comprises, and who receives this help – it tended to be called *social care*
  - housing and homelessness were seen as two separate areas and what CYC does regarding either is not known; many perceive the Council has fewer and fewer council and most help for homelessness is perceived to be provided by charities
  - Transport, highways and planning being grouped together hides how much is spent on '*repairing the roads*'
- Many perceive categories like adult care and schools receive funding from central government so asked if the money shown here was only a proportion of the actual spend on these areas
- There was surprise that adult care has twice as much spent on it than schools, along with surprise that housing is so low
- Questions were raised over why the Council Tax funds schools if they are nearly all now "Academy Trusts"
- Before making an informed judgement there is a desire for more description around each of the items to help it become more understandable. The information does not help residents know if CYC is providing good value or if spending is effective – actual examples of what the money pays for may help provide greater clarity.



# Council Priorities



# Participants struggled to decide upon a ranked order of priorities

- Participants had lots to say about why different areas were important but struggled to decide upon a ranked order
- The broad descriptions shown (below) were viewed as too generic and vague around what any changes will actually mean
- Concrete examples were requested to better understand what each aspect covers ahead of making a more informed decision
- Most cynical (albeit a minority) consider CYC disguising potential cuts behind meaningless descriptions
- It would be easier to decide between between clearly defined options if specifics were identified: a cut in x or a reduction in y, or increase in provision of z - rather than broad priority areas
- When thinking about and discussing different priority areas most areas are seen as interlinked, so cutting one area will have a knock-on effect in other areas – and vice versa
- There is a reluctance to cut, reduce or place anything as a lower priority – all important for someone.

*“It's such a difficult choice to make because coming out of the pandemic, we're only scratching the surface at the moment; there is going to be an absolute tsunami of mental health problems, social problems because people have never experienced being so isolated and cut off from general society. I think we're sleepwalking into what's coming” – Post-family*

*“I would hope that all the services that are provided are essential” – Pre-family*

*“Increase charges for service would be the one we would have to choose... It's not a straightforward choice to make” – Family*

# All areas equally important, hence addressing the short term financial crisis led the prioritisation

Providing targeted support for those who need it the most

Protecting frontline services, such as waste collection and street cleaning

Supporting local communities through the cost of living crisis

Supporting local businesses & regeneration projects to accelerate sustainable

Maintaining & developing highways & infrastructure assets, including cycling / walking

Maintaining & improving parks, play areas, libraries & leisure facilities

Maintaining and upkeep of schools

Tackling climate change & carbon emissions to make the city cleaner and greener

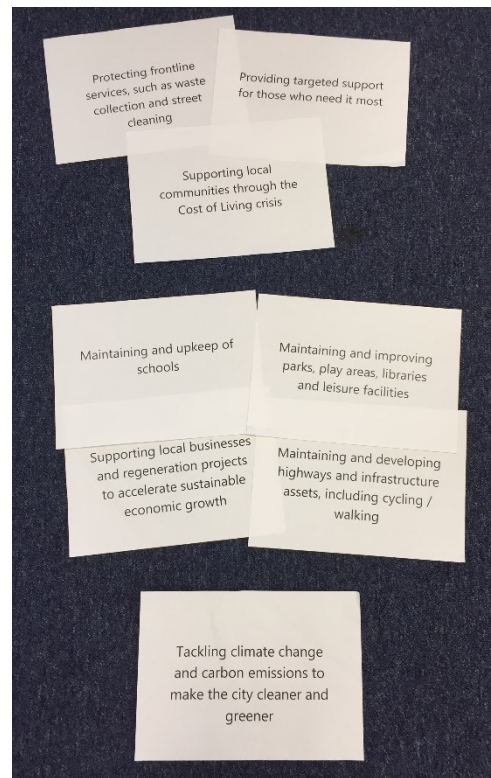
- Critical immediate help in the 'here & now'
- Core functions of the Council
- No-one else will step in to provide
- Confusion how targeted support and supporting local communities is different – seen as the same thing (without having more detail)
- Want to know more detail before being able to really make an informed choice

- All important to provide for long term / ongoing economic growth
- Is it maintaining or developing / improving – as these are seen as two very different things?
- Some funded by central government or other bodies so unclear the impact if Council (via Council Tax) reduce their spending here
- Some provided in part by others outside CYC so will still receive some form of service
- What role does the Council have in schools now?

- Not immediate but still important
- However can still happen even without CYC

## The priority exercise raised questions and ranking priorities therefore a challenge

- The more participants discuss, debate and think about where they feel CYC should prioritise spending, the more difficult they recognise the choices are
- Very difficult to really make a decision or choice from broad descriptions – for example *targeted support for those who need it most* in principle is a high priority but the specifics of what and for whom may alter opinions
- If the Council doesn't provide frontline services what is its function? Some already feel provision is worse, especially post family who have seen services decline over time, so they are worried if it is cut even further
- Many in all groups but especially post-family, are reluctant to deprive anyone of good provision even if they themselves no longer need it, hence, schools, parks and green spaces are high priorities. Older respondents in particular acknowledge that they have used certain provisions when they had younger children and recognise the value of these
- Many unclear what CYC contributes via Council Tax to some of the priority areas – for example:
  - Schools - The Local Authority is no longer seen to run them and they assume schools are funded by central government so what is CYC role?
  - Roads - in part paid for by other taxes so unclear what would happen if Council Tax didn't contribute to this
- Some areas such as reductions in carbon emissions can and will occur anyway from national & international changes – CYC has a part but significant differences can occur by other channels



## More information about direct and indirect impacts is required to make informed choices

*"This one bothers me because it's very vague [Support through cost of living crisis]. Does it mean giving handouts? Foodbank? It sounds important but they seem synonymous" – Pre-family*

*"If we have to choose, Libraries and Climate would go to the bottom of the list.....is maintaining and upkeep of schools is an issue now with the opening of Multi-Academy Trusts" - Family Group*

*"They're all so interconnected ... it's very, very difficult to prioritise one without another one being impacted" – Post-family*

*"Obviously, there is an issue with the cost of living crisis, but taking money away from schools and them becoming worse, you could stop a child from becoming a doctor or something else important" – Pre-family*

*"To what extent can the council keep it at bay, the wider economic issue [by supporting local businesses]. So on a local, I guess I'm making the same argument as climate change [CYC have a small impact compared to central government]" – Pre-family*

*"Is it a matter of talking each other into inaction... having been to a few Council meetings personally... they are people who hide behind points of order" - Family Group*

*"I think York's prosperity relies on tourism. So if that all [street cleaning, not supporting local businesses] goes to pot, then the council will not have as much money and everything else will be affected" – Pre-family*

*"I think it's one of those again, that is the job of the local authority. Some of the others are very blurry. When I think more about that one I don't know how many council run schools are remaining in York, a lot of them are Academies. So what's the council's responsibility there? Whereas that [waste collection] is just like obviously, the council" – Pre-family*

*That's a bit of woolly thinking, I'm not clear what it means. I'm fully in favour of providing targeted support to people who need it. I'm not sure what supporting local communities actually means" – Post-family*

*"We're going to have a cholera epidemic again like we did 1831 if we're going to just turn a blind eye to rubbish ... people will die. You'll end up with a generation who've got conditions that died out years and years ago, you'll end up people with rickets and God knows what" – Post-family*

# Short term issues seen as immediate priority - the longer term can wait

- When forced to make decisions, selecting immediate short term priorities was seen as preferable and a way to make them feel they are not cutting anything – as the lower priority areas can always be returned too once the cost of living situation has improved
- This again highlights how participants **don't want to** make cuts and find making the decision an impossible choice

*"The cost of living crisis is perhaps a little bit more immediate" – Pre-family*

*"Maintenance and improvement of parks, almost seems like a luxury, obviously it isn't because we should be improving our environment but in terms of comparing to immediate things where there's like human suffering involved, it's probably not as important" – Pre-family*

*"In terms of money being spent on that globally, I mean York City Council's effect on the climate and on the local climate is going to be pretty negligible" – Pre-family*

*"Supporting Local communities through the Cost of Living Crisis is probably at the top of the list but Climate Change is just as important, it's hard to choose which should be prioritised first" - Family*

*"There's more important things at the moment, basically, we've got a crisis at the moment. People can't afford to heat their homes, and eat and things; so I'm sorry but that [climate change] will have to take a backseat at the moment" – Post-family*

*"We're saying not to forget this. It's essential but this is crisis at the moment" – Post-family*

*"Because it's a slow burner, and we're not going to solve that anytime soon" – Post-family*

*"And yet, the city is supposed to play its part in meeting government targets" – Post-family*

The 'here and now' priority areas

Short term

Longer term

Tackling climate change & carbon emissions to make the city cleaner and greener

## The discussions helped participants appreciate challenges faced by CYC

- Respondents had lots to say about the different priority areas but were reluctant to make any decisions over what to prioritise and therefore what to potentially cut or reduce
- Participants had high expectations of what the council delivers until they were put in the position of having to make difficult decisions
- Not obvious what can be reduced - all areas seen as important
- The post family group recognised at this stage the challenges faced by CYC in making difficult choices, as many areas were seen to be interlinked and all important.
- The family group were apprehensive about making such decisions.
- The pre-family group found it difficult to sacrifice some aspects as all have an impact on some residents (even if not themselves directly).

*"The Council have got an extremely difficult task to balance the books. So therefore, we will see huge differences in what the council are actually able to provide for us. Unless we're prepared to pay an awful lot more council tax, they [CYC] are providing what they can with what we provide them with"*  
– Post-family

*"They've already been stripped down to the minimum"* – Pre-family

*"The government are going to be slashing budgets again, I mean, they're massively in debt through COVID. And councils are going to be feeling the pinch, coupled with an ageing population means that that adult social care costs are probably not going to go down, so budgets will be squeezed further"* – Pre-family

# Attitudes & expectations regarding Council Tax

Customer and Corporate Services  
Financial Services  
West Offices  
Station Rise  
York  
YO1 6GA

9826160720023802414

**CITY OF YORK COUNCIL**

**Council Tax**  
Annual Bill for 2022/23

Council Tax Enquiries:  
Online at: <http://www.york.gov.uk>  
Email: [council.tax@york.gov.uk](mailto:council.tax@york.gov.uk)

Date: 26-FEB-2022

Payment reference number:  
**8823802413**

Please tell us this reference number when you write or make payments

Property reference number: 0351177

Valuation Band: D

Address of property the charge is for (if different): [REDACTED] LR

	£	Percentage Change *
<b>Breakdown of charge</b>		
City Of York Council	1315.82	2.0
Adult Social Care Precept	179.96	1.0
North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service	75.61	2.0
Police And Crime Commissioner	281.06	3.7
<b>Gross Amount of Council Tax for Band D Property</b>	<b>1852.45</b>	<b>3.1</b>

\* The percentage change is rounded to one decimal place

	£
Charge For Period	1852.45

The Government is providing a £150 one-off Energy Bills Rebate for most households in council tax bands A-D. We will pay out the £150 energy rebate to eligible residents soon. For further information see the guidance enclosed with this bill.  
The council tax attributable to City of York Council includes a precept to fund adult social care.

**Amount to pay** 1852.45

**Payment instructions**

Payment by Direct Debit (instalments will be automatically requested from your bank account)  
A First instalment of £158.45 due on 01/04/2022 followed by 11 further instalments of £154.00 due on the 1st of each subsequent month. Your final instalment is due on the 01/03/2023

If you are in receipt of a discount you must advise us immediately if your circumstances change and you are no longer entitled to this discount. Anyone who knowingly gives false information may be prosecuted and/or subject to penalties.

## Given explanations and understanding the three choices CYC face were accepted

When presented with the stark options residents recognised the 'Hobson's choice' and started to appreciate the challenges faced by CYC - it is easy to be critical and demanding of CYC until asked to make a decision

### Increase charges for services

- Easy to agree with doing until it is a service they use themselves
- Hence reluctance to pay more for bus, parking permits, parking etc
- Not expect this will raise a considerable amount
- An uncomfortable choice as will exclude people from services they need

### Provide fewer services

- Most do not think there are any services left beyond the core ones to cut
- Council services already down to the bone
- Even though some efficiencies may be possible – not expected to be significant
- An uncomfortable choice as will prevent people from getting services they need

### Increase Council tax

- Which only really leaves Council Tax increases

## There is an acknowledgement that more money is required – so increasing Council Tax may be the obvious – and least “bad” option

*“We know Council Tax will go up..... But can it be tested to check if money is being allocated correctly ... My grandparents-in-law receive more money from Council benefits than they require” – Family*

*“The money has to come from somewhere to provide that. So it's just a horrendous situation we are facing” – Post-family*

*“I think the services they provide have been stripped back as far as they could go already. So all that is left is the very, very essential. So I'm, again, leaning more towards the increase in council tax” – Pre-family*

*“Prices are going up and up enough for everything, just to carry out repairs, to empty bins, to provide street lighting, the services they provide, everything - year on year, the price of all those are going up. So unless we're prepared to pay more, then York Council will not be able to fund all the services that we believe are necessary” – Post-family*

*“I'd say rather than doing anything extravagant, I don't think they [CYC] come across as a Council that is trying to do any kind of showy things” – Pre-family*

*“All of them are going to be extremely difficult to provide thoroughly without an increase in funding” – Post-family*

*“I think increasing councils is kind of expected” – Pre-family*

*Increase the council tax because all these issues are emergent but only an increase provided that there is some sort of programme to know exactly where they're planning to spend the money in much more detail than this would be great” – Pre-family*

*“I am naïve about Council Tax but I pay it and I'd like to know more about where my money is going... I'm aware that tax is going up” - Family*

*My biggest takeaway so far living in these three years is lack of investment in and efficiency of public transport” – Pre-family*

## Following discussions a resigned acceptance that Council tax will rise and by the full amount permitted

- There is little surprise that Council Tax may go up
- Especially after going through the 'priority decision making journey' so had had the time to recognise and accept the challenges CYC face
- 5% in the context of increasing costs and likely demands on CYC being seen as an increase just to stand still
- In the current climate many are expecting the rise to be higher
- Although paying more is not welcome, there was a resigned acceptance rather than outrage or verbal revolt



- Most had not heard of the term 'social care precept' but when phrased as adult social care, broadly understood what it covers
- All grouped together the core 3% increase and 2% for social care precept as a single increase of 5%, rather than discussing these as two different elements
- Questions asked if police & fire precept will also increase overall Council Tax

- However, an increase of 5% is not expected to result in a reduction of service. Indeed, most wanted CYC to clearly communicate where the additional money will go and the positive impacts it will have
- They seem to forget their previous comments that 5% will result in just standing still given costs increases!
- No-one mentioned inflation at 10% and increasing costs (e.g. staff salaries, energy bills) to deliver services suggesting a challenge if this increase in Council Tax is not going to result in a tangible improvement in provision
- This raises warning bells for CYC – if the additional 5% is simply swallowed up in increased costs and does not result in an improved service. Additional cuts or a deterioration in provision (albeit it less than would otherwise have been the case) is likely to be difficult for residents to understand (and difficult to communicate) if they are being asked to pay more

- However, there were some concerns that increasing Council Tax by 5%, in addition to other rises, may mean that some residents will not be able to pay this, which could result in people defaulting on their Council Tax or needing financial help to pay it – hence it may not result in a larger pot of money for CYC

## Suggestions to raise funds and keep Council Tax rises as low as possible

Only one or two participants suggested these ideas but other participants were then keen for a variety of approaches to be explored and used in addition to increasing Council Tax

Chase up non-payers and those in arrears

*"I think they do need to chase people that don't pay because I saw something on social media just before it came out, how many people in York are behind with their [Council Tax] payments" – Post-family*

Tourist tax - as levied in other overseas destinations - on overseas visitors to help fund upkeep of city centre, releasing CT funds to go on something else

Can volunteers and community groups be facilitated or coordinated by CYC to help provide some services which otherwise will have to be reduced? - raised by post-family group

### Optimising Council revenue

*"Outsourcing things and it's not saving money, it's costing money and losing control as well. I think they need to be on the money and spending our money wisely" – Post-family*

Charge students Council Tax – given they are using the services and everyone else is being asked to make an additional contribution – suggested by pre-family despite many recently being students themselves

Look for efficiencies and avoid any unnecessary wastage - hence frustrations when seeing repeated work done on road repairs in the same place for example

*"I feel that maybe there is some waste in City of York Council's expenditure, things that are not necessarily, for instance Micklegate Bar is lovely with all the lights on but you know it's a time of energy shortages. And by itself, it would only be one thing, but actually I think that's maybe duplicated throughout York" – Post-family*

# Insight for communicating any increase in Council Tax

- Although not welcome news, it is not unexpected given the current climate. Undoubtedly easier to accept if CYC are open and honest about the pressures and costs for delivering services
- Tangible examples are much easier to understand than broad generic descriptions to show the difficult decisions that have to be made and the funding required
- Time to go through and think about the priority spending exercise in the research gave respondents a real sense of the difficult decisions to be made. Getting residents to go through a similar mental 'journey' will help them better appreciate the difficulties faced
- Showing the rise in £ and pence per week – rather than as a percentage – sounds much less of an increase and helps put the increase into context – often seen as much less than buying a coffee or less than many spend on a Deliveroo!
- Residents want to know what the additional Council Tax will fund – what are they going to get in return?
- It is easier to accept and harder to criticise having to pay more if residents do not see any wastage and perceive CYC is being as efficient as possible
- There is a desire for CYC to report back or demonstrate the impacts the additional funding has had.

*"If extra money is sourced and given mainly through the council tax then we need communication as to what that extra money has been used for, for the benefit of the whole of the York area telling us, showing us we've done this to improve that, we've increased this; then we actually can see that the money is being used for things that are important" – Post-family*

*"I think the council should have to report back to residents after a defined period and say this is what we've done with your money. This is what's improved" – Pre-family*

*"Just being really transparent with what is how the money is being used" – Pre-family*

*"We pay it because we have to but it would be good to have better or more direct communication from the Council" – Family Group*



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This research was carried out in compliance with ISO 20252, (the International Standard for Market & Social research),  
The Market Research Society's Code of Conduct & UK Data Protection law.