South Gloucestershire Council budget consultation 2026/27

Through this consultation, South Gloucestershire Council wants to provide local people with a clear understanding of the significant financial challenges we face, and the potential measures required to balance our budget.

We are proposing new options for consideration as part of this budget consultation, but we will continue to explore further opportunities to save money or generate additional income. We will consult on these separately from the formal budget-setting process where needed.

The financial pressures mean we will have to do some unpopular things, and we will have less freedom to prioritise spending as we all might want to. However, we are committed to being a listening and empowering council, holding adult conversations with local people and other impacted groups and individuals about the challenges we face. And where there are genuine opportunities for you to influence decision-making, we want you to tell us what you think.

The difficult choices ahead

The Council has a fundamental budget problem: our costs continue to increase at a far greater rate than our income. And there are uncertainties around our future funding.

You can find out more about the financial challenges we face here.

Given this uncertainty, to ensure our ongoing financial security, we will need to plan ahead and adopt a combination of the approaches set out over the next few pages to reduce costs and generate additional income. We must:

- Continue to review our internal costs,
- Find the most efficient ways to achieve the best outcomes for residents,
- Invest in preventing people falling into crisis, to reduce the demand for the most expensive support,
- Raise the money we need to deliver services in the fairest ways possible for local people,
- Prioritise services and support, with a focus on the things it has a legal and moral responsibility to provide, with some services identified as potentially needing to be stopped or cut back.

Please help us to understand what these proposals may mean for you so that we can take residents' needs and views into account when considering the way forward.

Members of a town or parish council

We recognise that if you are responding on behalf of a town or parish council, you may want to provide feedback in a slightly different format to individual residents. You are of course welcome to share your views via this survey and there are several open text fields to allow you to provide more detailed consideration.

However, if you would prefer, you can provide feedback by emailing us at consultation@southglos.gov.uk - contributions submitted by email and through the survey form will be considered equally.

Approach 1: Reviewing our internal costs

Our starting point as we face financial challenges is to consider what we are spending to ensure we are operating as efficiently as we can. Our staff know that they must treat every penny they spend at work as if it were their own and we have already delivered savings of over £90m in the last ten years.

Our 'Transform Together' programme is driving change across the council, helping us to work more effectively, make better use of resources and deliver services that meet the changing needs of our communities. The five strands of the programme are data and digital; customers, communities and partnerships; value for money; optimising our assets and resources; and prevention and demand. Together, these enabling areas have focused our approach on effective internal transformation.

Focus areas

- To conduct a comprehensive review of all enabling functions of the organisation (finance, HR, IT, communications etc.) to identify opportunities to reduce duplication and create efficiencies.
- To identify and phase out old, inefficient technology systems and ensure that our technical infrastructure is efficient and effective.

Review of enabling functions

Having delivered savings of over £90million in the last 10 years, the council is already a very streamlined organisation. However, technology continues to make it easier and more efficient to deliver our work and we are now a much smaller organisation than we were, so we need to right-size our enabling functions like finance, HR, IT and communications to the organisation we are today.

We do not go into this exercise with any pre-conceived ideas of where we might be able to make savings but will look to identify opportunities to reduce duplication of effort.

Approach 2: Finding the most efficient way to achieve the best outcomes

We constantly seek out best practice from across the public sector and more broadly to find new, cheaper and more effective ways to deliver services. Most of these changes are small and common sense and so can be implemented immediately, but we wanted to tell you about/get your feedback on more significant changes we are proposing.

Focus areas

- Increasing local provision of specialist services to increase options for families and reduce costs. (With a particular focus on education for children and young people with Special Education Needs and Disabilities).
- Ensuring we're paying the fair cost of care.
- Comparing the costs of direct provision of care versus commissioning to external providers.
- Focusing our flood prevention work in the areas of highest risk.
- Partnering with a charitable or not for profit organisation to run Grimsbury Farm.

- Working with partners to use our joint buying power to secure the best prices.

Increasing local provision of specialist services

We are seeing rapid increases in how much it costs us to transport children and young people with Special Education Needs and Disabilities to and from schools and other education and training settings. Often this is because families are choosing to send their children to specialist facilities far away from where they live, including outside South Gloucestershire.

Increasing local provision will be better for families and reduces costs to the taxpayer. Our priorities include:

- Enhancing facilities in mainstream schools so young people with less complex needs can get the support they need while attending their local school.
- Introducing new capacity to support children's development in early years (aged 0-4).
- Expanding local post-16 options for young people with additional needs, focusing on technology and digital skills.

At the same time, we want to better understand why parents might not send children and young people to local schools where their needs can be accommodated closer to home.

Ensuring we're paying the fair cost of care

The council has a legal and moral duty to provide care for those who can't support themselves. To ensure the best outcomes for those individuals, and for taxpayers, we need a fair cost. We have robust mechanisms in place to enable us to monitor our services and costs, and benchmark them against services provided in other local authority areas.

What do we mean by fair?

There are several elements to fairness:

- Ensuring skilled, hard-working front-line staff are paid a fair wage, which attracts talented people into the profession.
- Taking into account actual local costs e.g. land and recruiting staff
- Where it makes sense for private sector organisations to deliver services, ensuring they receive a fair price, which accounts for local factors like housing and labour costs, and allows them to offer a good quality service – whilst providing value for money for the taxpayer.
- Where we share joint outcomes with other organisations - for example between health and social care – ensuring each partner organisation is making a fair and proportionate contribution.

We know in South Gloucestershire the costs for some care services are higher than in other comparable areas and we are working with staff and partners to bring costs into line.

Comparing the costs of direct provision of care versus commissioning to external providers

We know there are some services the council provides which cannot be effectively provided by the external market. However, in benchmarking our costs, we have also identified the council

may not be best placed to deliver some services directly – specifically for expensive support like residential care.

Further investigation will be conducted to evidence whether in these instances, we could achieve similar outcomes more cost-effectively by commissioning an external company/ies to deliver services on our behalf.

In looking at these opportunities, we must consider how we can best align commissioned services with our in-house provision to achieve the best outcomes.

Focusing our flood prevention work in the areas of highest risk

Some areas are more susceptible to flooding than others. We know where these areas are, and we know what is effective in minimising the chances of flooding – clearing gullies and drains and sweeping roads.

We plan to increase how often we clear drains and gulleys in the areas which are most prone to flooding, but to create capacity to do this, we need to reduce how regularly we do this in other places. In this way, we can more effectively prevent flooding whilst reducing how much we spend.

Partnering with a charitable or not for profit organisation to run Grimsbury Farm

Over the last year, the council has been looking to secure a more stable long-term plan for the management of Grimsbury Farm - a local community farm in Kingswood, which the council manages. Following increasing operating costs and a loss of income, the farm was costing taxpayers roughly a quarter of a million pounds a year to keep going.

We are currently in discussion with charitable/not for profit organisations with the background, resources and infrastructure interested in partnering with us to run the farm and minimise the financial shortfall to taxpayers. We hope to have a new operating model in place in Spring 2026.

Increasing our buying power to secure better terms and prices

The council works with partners in health to achieve joint outcomes. We have identified some opportunities to join up and align our procurement processes to increase our buying power and achieve better terms.

We believe there are further opportunities to partner with other Local Authorities and organisations to secure better value for money services, which we will explore.

Approach 3: Investing in prevention to improve outcomes and reduce need for the most expensive support

Rationing services targeted at the most vulnerable in society often leads to poor outcomes for individuals and costs us all more over the long term. However, we've seen that we can reduce the need for many of our most expensive services - especially social care - if we concentrate support and resources on preventative measures.

Focus areas

We have identified opportunities to do more of this, benefiting individuals and the taxpayer:

- Offering information, guidance and support at an early stage to help people as they get older and frailer to continue living independently and safely in their own homes.

- Increasing provision of extra care housing, supported living and similar accommodation to allow people with additional needs to continue living independently.
- Identifying opportunities to better support people with dementia to maintain independence and delay need for expensive residential care.
- Taking a longer-term view with the children and young people we support so we can better plan future service need.
- Additional support for families with early years children (aged 0-4) who show clear signs of delayed development.
- Better signposting to support for families with children with autism or another similar neurodiversity.
- Proactively supporting struggling families, to reduce the number of young people being taken into care.
- Working with young people in residential care to help reunite them with their family or support them into foster care.
- Support for at risk groups and individuals to reduce levels of homelessness twinned with work to help homeless people out of temporary accommodation.

Helping people age independently and well

We spend almost half (48%) of our budget on adult social care, supporting older people and those with special educational needs or disabilities to live well.

The most expensive part of this budget is residential care. Going forward we want to spend more of this money on things which we know can have a dramatic positive impact in preventing or delaying the need for residential care and expensive social care support.

Getting older can be unsettling. Small deteriorations in health can knock our confidence, making us question what we can achieve in later life. Getting good early information and advice to help us stay active and connected to our friends and communities is so often the difference between people living happy, safe, independent later lives in their own homes, and a far less fulfilling life.

We want to make information and support easier to find and access so that individuals and their families can make the small changes which allow them to continue living the lives they aspire to.

Sometimes our advice is quite simple, using technology and other cleverly-designed products to help us stay living in our own homes longer. But it can also completely transformative, signposting people to groups and organisations where they can meet people with similar interests and remain active in their community – it's so important to keep engaged and involved to counter loneliness.

Our team are experts. As well as supporting people to help people live more independently, they also know when someone needs more focused support or care.

Clearly, this preventative approach brings significant benefits to individuals and families, but the taxpayer also wins when it removes or delays the need for expensive social care.

Increasing provision of extra care housing, supported living and similar accommodation

All of us, irrespective of our needs, want to stay living independently for as long as we can. Typically, the best way to achieve this for people with especially complex needs like learning or physical disabilities is to offer purpose-built accommodation which combines independent living space with on-site care and support services or emergency support. We want to build facilities in the heart of our towns and villages, so that individuals can continue to play an active role in their communities

By working to increase provision of extra care housing, sheltered accommodation and other similar developments we can help more people live independently, safely and reduce the need for more expensive residential care.

Identifying opportunities to better support people with dementia

Keeping mentally and physically active is so important for people with dementia. We plan to explore how we might expand opportunities to engage people in meaningful activities to help prolong the amount of time they can spend living independently and therefore reduce the costs of residential care.

Specifically, we want to see how we can best integrate our day care services with broader support available from the council and more widely.

Taking a longer-term view with the children and young people we support so we can better plan future service need

Because of the nature of the challenges they face, many children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities go on to need further help in their adult lives. With a solid early understanding of the needs of the whole cohort of young people, we can model future support requirements and can pre-plan service provision.

With good data, taking this kind of approach could be transformative in preventing poor outcomes for individuals (and the knock-on costs to the taxpayer) by building in comprehensive preventative and demand management support.

Helping every child have the best start in life

The first months and years from birth set the foundations for an individual's cognitive, emotional and physical development. As well as being a critical point for developing communication and physical skills, this is also when babies and toddlers are at their most vulnerable and most need encouragement and support from their parents and carers.

We want to work with families where there are clear signs of delayed development to identify and address issues early before they become significant problems. In doing so, we know we can improve long term outcomes by ensuring parents and carers have access to the information and provision they need.

Better signposting to support for young people in secondary school who have autism, neurodiversity, or other social communication needs

Secondary school can be a challenging and stressful place for young people with autism or other social communication needs. We are seeing more cases of school absence and families experiencing behavioural issues, meltdowns and violence as children get older and physically stronger.

Specialist support is available.

We want to work with schools to formalise that offer and better signpost families (including those without a formal diagnosis) to resources and support groups who can help them.

We believe there will be particular benefit for families of young people following the transition from primary to secondary school when issues can be most challenging.

Keeping kids out of care

We have a legal and moral duty to spend a significant part of our budget on children's social care - helping children, young people, and families facing extra challenges, such as special educational needs or disabilities. The most expensive support is residential care, which can cost hundreds of thousands of pounds per year for each young person.

We want to invest more in approaches that prevent family breakdowns and reduce the need for costly care. Removing a child from their family is always a last resort, as it can be deeply disruptive for young people and families. Too often we see young people forced into care when early family-focused support could have made all the difference to their prospects.

We want to do more up-front work to keep families together, including:

- **Expanding shared-care fostering:** Foster families provide short-term care - for example over weekends or during crises - to relieve pressure, so families can continue caring for their children long-term.
- **Mentoring for young people:** Positive adult role models can turn lives around, and we want to increase access to independent mentors.
- **Building on the Mockingbird programme:** This connects foster carers into supportive groups, sharing expertise and easing the challenges of caring for young people with complex needs.

Where possible, we also want to help more young people in residential care reunite with their families, move into foster care, or switch to another form of accommodation where they can build their independence whilst being able to access the support they need. This approach is better for families and young people - and it is better value for taxpayers than having too many young people spending too much time in care.

Reducing homelessness and helping people build back their lives

More people are presenting as homeless in South Gloucestershire. The causes of homelessness are varied and often complex. However, through our work in this area over many years, we believe there are opportunities to work with struggling families and individuals to both

reduce incidence of homelessness in the first place, and to help people get back on their feet quickly, preventing worse outcomes for individuals and the taxpayer.

We need to ensure we have the capacity and expertise within our team to address these growing challenges. And we need to increase provision of more suitable longer-term housing to reduce the need for temporary accommodation. Providing more reliable housing provides people with a solid base to help them build back their lives and reduce the time spent homeless.

Approach 4: Raising money fairly

We also need to raise more money to help balance the budget.

Wherever possible, our focus is that those who are in a more fortunate position and can best afford it should be making the largest contribution. However, we are limited by what we can do locally, and we await an update from Central Government on the financial settlement for the year ahead, which will clarify our financial position.

Focus areas

- Increasing Council Tax by 4.99% in line with the assumption Central Government makes to allocate funding to the council.
- Increasing the cost of the green waste subscription service to £75 per year for 2026/27 to allow us to continue to cover the costs of providing the service.
- Increasing the price of our community meals service to help cover the operating costs.
- Ensuring all South Gloucestershire's towns and parishes are fairly funded.

Increasing Council Tax

Whilst we recognise the financial pressures local people face, each one percent increase in council tax provides us with approximately £1.9m in additional income each year. This is a much bigger sum than we can raise or save from any other option we are considering through this consultation.

In the calculations Central Government uses to allocate funding to Local Government, they assume Council Tax will increase by the maximum permitted percentage of 4.99%, so any alternative to increasing taxes by this amount would mean we need to make further, substantive cuts to services.

In the calculations Central Government uses to allocate funding to South Gloucestershire Council, they assume we will increase Council Tax by the maximum permitted percentage of 4.99%. This means that if we were to increase taxes by a lower level, we would need to make substantive cuts to services, which would be extremely damaging to the most vulnerable people in society.

We are therefore proposing to increase taxes by 4.99%. We recognise the financial pressures local people face and we have measures in place to support those who genuinely cannot afford to pay Council Tax.

Increasing fees and charges for services

Historically, charges for services like green waste collections have been much lower in South Gloucestershire than in other parts of the country – and far below the costs of delivering them.

However, with more constrained council finances, it feels unfair to continue to subsidise services like these which the council is not required to provide, where there are alternative companies in the private sector providing a service. We have therefore changed our approach to set fees at a fair level, which helps cover our costs, so we can prioritise funding towards essential support like social care for the vulnerable.

We are proposing to increase the annual fee for our green waste collections from £63 to £75.

Increasing the price of our community meals service to help cover the operating costs

Our community meals service is currently losing more than £125,000 per year - or approximately £2.20 for every meal we deliver. These losses have increased markedly in recent years when the price people pay for their meals has been frozen at a heavily discounted rate during a period when our main costs (food, energy and wages have risen sharply). We cannot continue to use the money local people pay in Council Tax to subsidise meals.

We therefore intend to increase the amount people to pay to help offset some of these losses.

Ensuring all South Gloucestershire's towns and parishes are fairly funded

Due to historical differences in our district with some areas being parished (having a Town or Parish Council) and some not, at the current time some towns and parishes in South Gloucestershire receive more funding than others for local services such as parks and public toilets.

Now that all of our district is parished we want to ensure that the funding approach for these services is consistent across the district and are funded solely through the parish precepts charged by individual town and parish councils.

Approach 5: Stopping, cutting back and prioritising services and support

Through our budget-setting process, we have looked at all possible options before cutting services. We are in a relatively financial stable position, but this has only been possible because we have taken difficult decisions early. Therefore, given the cost pressures and uncertainties around our future funding, we think we will need to continue this approach of planning ahead and make some cuts over coming months and years.

Focus areas

- Ensure that those who receive adult social care support from the council are receiving care that is proportionate with their needs, scaling back care support where it helps individuals build and maintain independence.
- Consider options to stop subsidising the HandyVan service.

- Consider options for our pest control service.
- Review the business case for delivering services on a commercial basis to schools.

Ensuring people are receiving care which is proportionate to their needs

The cost to the taxpayer of providing social care for adults has increased dramatically in recent months and years and this makes up the single largest proportion of our annual budget. Some of the cost increases, like higher prices of food, electricity, gas and wages are out of the council's control. We are also facing demand pressures as more of our population gets older.

However, we have a duty to ensure we are effectively managing costs and demand, and so we are introducing more regular evaluations for those we support to ensure the package of care they are receiving remains proportionate with their needs. This approach aligns with our focus on helping individuals build and maintain their independence; supporting people during periods of crisis and then helping them get back to their normal ways of life.

Consider options to stop subsidising the HandyVan service

Due to financial pressures, the council needs to focus on services it is legally required to provide and those that support the most vulnerable people, such as children in difficult situations, older adults, and disabled people who need social care.

While the HandyVan service is valued by customers, it does not meet these criteria and consistently does not cover its costs. Therefore, the council is exploring options to stop subsidising the HandyVan service and use the money saved to support essential services for local people.

However, the Occupational Therapy service will still be available to help people eligible for support through their care plan to make home adjustments so they can live independently.

Consider options for our pest control service

Due to financial pressures, the council needs to focus on services it is legally required to provide and those that support the most vulnerable people, such as children in difficult situations, older adults, and disabled people who need social care.

The council's pest control service has many happy customers. However, this is not a service which the council must provide and there are companies in the private sector who offer a good value alternative. Despite the best efforts of the service it has not been possible to make sufficient financial return, so we need to consider future options.

Review the business case for delivering services on a commercial basis to schools

Due to financial pressures, the council needs to focus on services it is legally required to provide and those that support the most vulnerable people, such as children in difficult situations, older adults, and disabled people who need social care.

The council delivers several services to local schools on a commercial basis, but many are not covering the costs of delivering them. We therefore plan to complete a review of services to ensure resources are being used in the best way to deliver the council's priorities.

We know no-one wants to see the council cutting back services. We believe the above measures will help us meet our financial challenges in a way which minimises impact for residents.

Cumulative impact of cuts

In the last ten years, the council has delivered cuts and savings of over £90m. Wherever possible, we've tried to do this in ways which improve our efficiency, minimising the impact on our residents and service users.

However, the scale of the cuts has meant that we haven't always been able to maintain service delivery to the same level. We'd like to know what impact you think this has had for you and people like you.