

Budget Consultation 2026/27

Summary of Key Issues From the 2026/27 Budget Consultation

The public consultation on Aberdeen City Council's 2026/27 budget proposals generated a high level of engagement across a wide range of service areas. Across almost every proposal - whether relating to culture, sport, community services, education, transport, or environmental services - respondents consistently expressed concern about the cumulative impact of service reductions on the city's most vulnerable residents.

A central narrative emerged: residents believe that cuts to preventative, community-based, and educational services will create higher long-term social, health, and economic costs. Many comments highlight the risk that short-term financial savings will be outweighed by longer-term pressures on the NHS, social work, policing, and the wider local economy.

While many themes recurred, several issues stand out due to their frequency, intensity, and cross-cutting impact:

1. Protection of Vulnerable Groups

The strongest, most consistent theme. Cuts to ASN support, school counselling, community centres, play schemes, and sports facilities are widely seen as directly harming the most vulnerable.

2. Long-Term Costs vs Short-Term Savings

Respondents repeatedly warned that reductions in preventative services—education, youth support, mental health, social inclusion programmes—will increase the long-term cost to the Council and wider public services.

3. Education and Children's Services

Education-related proposals consistently generated high levels of concern, especially those affecting:

- Additional Support Needs
- School counselling
- Learning provision reductions
- Music and creative learning
- School hours

This is viewed as undermining the city's future workforce, wellbeing, and attainment.

4. Mental Health Risks

The potential loss of counselling, play schemes, community centres, and youth/sporting activities was strongly associated with increased mental health pressures, particularly in young people.

5. Social Isolation and Community Safety

Concerns about street lighting, removal of bus services, and reduced community spaces highlight fears of increased isolation, reduced mobility, and diminished safety, especially for the elderly.

6. Economic Competitiveness and City Reputation

Cuts to cultural events, tourism promotion, and environmental improvements raise concerns about Aberdeen's ability to:

- attract visitors
- diversify its economy
- maintain civic pride
- retain skilled workers

7. Digital Exclusion

Digital-only access is seen as a major barrier that could cut off entire groups from essential services, rather than delivering efficiencies.

Detailed Thematic Analysis by Service Area

1. Culture, Sport and Leisure

Key Themes

- Health and wellbeing prevention
- Accessibility and affordability
- Community cohesion and inclusion
- False economy of disinvestment

Analysis

Respondents consistently view investment in sport, leisure, and culture as preventative public health spending. Reductions to Sport Aberdeen, Aberdeen Sports Village, cultural investment, and arts infrastructure were widely seen as undermining physical and mental wellbeing, particularly for children, older people, disabled residents, and those on low incomes.

There is strong concern that reduced funding will increase costs elsewhere - particularly the NHS - through poorer health outcomes and reduced opportunities for early intervention. Cultural assets such as the Art Gallery and citywide events are also viewed as central to civic pride, tourism, and Aberdeen's reputation.

Critical Issues

- Loss of affordable access for vulnerable groups
- Increased health inequalities
- Long-term economic and reputational damage
- Reduced participation leading to social isolation

2. Communities and Community Centres

Key Themes

- Community centres as lifeline services
- Disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations
- Risk of closure and service withdrawal
- Energy costs as a systemic issue

Analysis

Community centres are repeatedly described as essential local infrastructure, often providing services the Council no longer delivers directly. Reductions or removal of energy support and grants were seen as likely to lead to closures, higher charges, or reduced opening hours.

Respondents emphasised the importance of these spaces for social connection, mental wellbeing, youth activities, older people, and marginalised groups. The loss of centres is viewed as weakening community resilience and increasing isolation.

Critical Issues

- High risk of centre closures
 - Loss of safe, affordable local spaces
 - Increased isolation and mental health pressures
 - Knock-on demand for statutory services
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3. Citizen Services and Access

Key Themes

- Digital exclusion
- Transparency and democratic participation
- Safety and public reassurance
- Accessibility of council services

Analysis

Proposals to move to digital-only contact and reduce access to online committee broadcasts raised significant concerns about exclusion, particularly for elderly residents, disabled people, those without internet access, and individuals with low digital literacy.

Stopping taxi marshals and reviewing security provision generated mixed views, but safety - especially for women and vulnerable people - was a dominant concern.

Online access to meetings was strongly associated with transparency, trust, and democratic accountability.

Critical Issues

- Risk of excluding vulnerable residents from services
 - Reduced transparency and public trust
 - Perceived erosion of public safety
 - Increased pressure on frontline staff
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4. Education and Children's Services

Key Themes

- Early intervention and prevention
- Protection of Additional Support Needs (ASN)
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Long-term educational and social outcomes

Analysis

Education-related proposals attracted some of the strongest and most emotive responses. Cuts to ASN services, school counselling, learning centres, music tuition, librarians, and creative learning were widely viewed as undermining children's wellbeing, attainment, and future opportunities.

Respondents stressed that removing support services places additional strain on mainstream schools and teachers, increases behavioural challenges, and risks widening attainment gaps—particularly for vulnerable learners.

Critical Issues

- Disproportionate impact on children with ASN
 - Increased mental health risks for young people
 - Long-term educational and economic consequences
 - Increased pressure on teachers and schools
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5. Childcare and Early Years

Key Themes

- Access to childcare enabling employment
- Early development and socialisation
- Equity and affordability
- Questionable financial assumptions

Analysis

Rationalisation of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and reductions to holiday play schemes were seen as creating barriers for working parents—particularly low-income families—and undermining early childhood development.

Respondents expressed concern that changes would reduce children’s socialisation opportunities and increase family stress, potentially leading to higher future costs for education and social services.

Critical Issues

- Reduced ability for parents to work
 - Negative impact on child development
 - Increased inequality
 - Risk of higher long-term public costs
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6. Transport and Mobility

Key Themes

- Access to healthcare and essential services
- Social isolation
- Contradictions with climate objectives
- Equity of access

Analysis

The proposed removal of the X14 bus subsidy was strongly opposed due to its role in enabling access to healthcare, employment, and social participation. Respondents warned that reduced public transport would disproportionately affect elderly, disabled, and low-income residents.

Transport cuts were also viewed as counterproductive to climate goals, likely increasing car dependency and emissions.

Critical Issues

- Reduced access to healthcare (notably ARI)
 - Increased isolation and inequality
 - Environmental contradictions
 - Reduced mobility for non-drivers
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7. Roads, Environment and Public Realm

Key Themes

- Safety and dignity
- Civic pride
- Environmental responsibility
- False savings

Analysis

Cuts to cemetery maintenance, bus shelters, street lighting, and environmental projects were widely criticised as undermining safety, dignity, and the appearance of the city. Respondents emphasised that poorly maintained environments reduce civic pride and can increase fear of crime and antisocial behaviour.

Environmental projects were strongly linked to long-term cost avoidance, climate resilience, and community wellbeing.

Critical Issues

- Safety risks (lighting, shelters, cemeteries)
 - Damage to city image and morale
 - Long-term environmental and financial costs
 - Reduced community engagement
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8. Economy, Tourism and Business Support

Key Themes

- Economic diversification
- City identity and reputation
- Support for local businesses
- Value of preventative investment

Analysis

Reductions in tourism promotion, cultural events, and business support were seen as risking Aberdeen's economic recovery and diversification, particularly in the context of decline in oil and gas employment.

Respondents argued that investment in place-making, tourism, and small businesses generates wider economic returns and supports employment, footfall, and confidence.

Critical Issues

- Undermining economic diversification
 - Reduced visitor numbers and spend
 - Weakened city identity and morale
 - Lost opportunities for regeneration
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9. Council Tax

Key Themes

- Affordability and cost-of-living pressures
- Fairness and value for money
- Protection of essential services

Analysis

Views on Council Tax increases were mixed, but strong concerns were raised about affordability for low-income households and pensioners. Many respondents were more willing to consider tax increases than service cuts if the revenue clearly protected essential services and vulnerable groups.

Critical Issues

- Regressive impact on fixed-income households
 - Need for transparency and accountability
 - Public resistance to cuts to frontline services
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Overall Cross-Cutting Observations

Across all service areas, four consistent messages emerge:

1. **Protect vulnerable groups**
2. **Avoid false economies**
3. **Prioritise prevention and early intervention**
4. **Maintain trust, access, and inclusion**