

## **Budget Consultation**

Summary report from research  
carried out on behalf of

**Lancashire County Council**

November/December 2003

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

The Life in Lancashire Citizens' Panel provides an opportunity to approach willing participants on a regular basis to seek their views on a range of topics. The panel has been designed to reflect a cross-section of the population of the County, and the results of each survey are weighted in order to reflect the demographic profile of this population.

Since the panel was recruited there have been nine waves of research, and in addition to this, members have been invited to attend a number of community events and some discussion groups.

## 1.2 Objectives

The objectives of this consultation are:

- To obtain an indication of the service areas that residents believe should be budget priorities for 2004/2005.
- To obtain an understanding of what residents perceive to be an acceptable level of increase in council tax for 2004/2005.
- To compare these findings to those of a similar research project carried out from November to December 2002.

## 1.3 Methodology

A self-completion postal questionnaire was mailed out to the entire Life in Lancashire citizens' panel (1,332 people) on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2003. A reminder was sent out to non-responders on 27<sup>th</sup> November. By 11<sup>th</sup> December 751 questionnaires had been returned, representing a response rate of 56%.

The voluntary nature of a postal exercise like this means that there are different response rates by gender, age, area etc. The data from the questionnaires received were weighted to ensure that the results reflect the demographic profile of the County. All of the figures given in this report (excluding those in section **1.4 Sample**) are taken from the weighted dataset.

## 1.4 Sample

Of the 751 panel members who completed the survey, the proportions of respondents in terms of gender and working status are similar to the population, but there is an over-representation of 45–59 year-olds, and an under-representation of under-25s. This reflects the current composition of the panel, and is illustrated in Chart 1.

### Chart 1: Gender and Age Profile

Base = Total sample (unweighted base: 751)

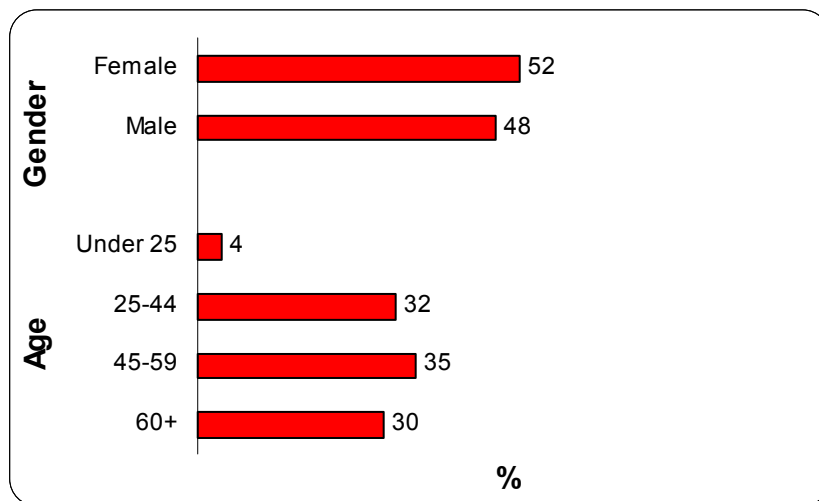


Chart 2 shows that almost six out of ten responding panellists are in work (57%), with just over a third working full time (36%) – this is similar to the economic activity profile of the area’s general population.

Chart 2 also shows that just over half (54%) are of ABC1 socio-economic group.

### Chart 2: Working Status and Socio-economic Group

Base = Total sample (unweighted base: 751)

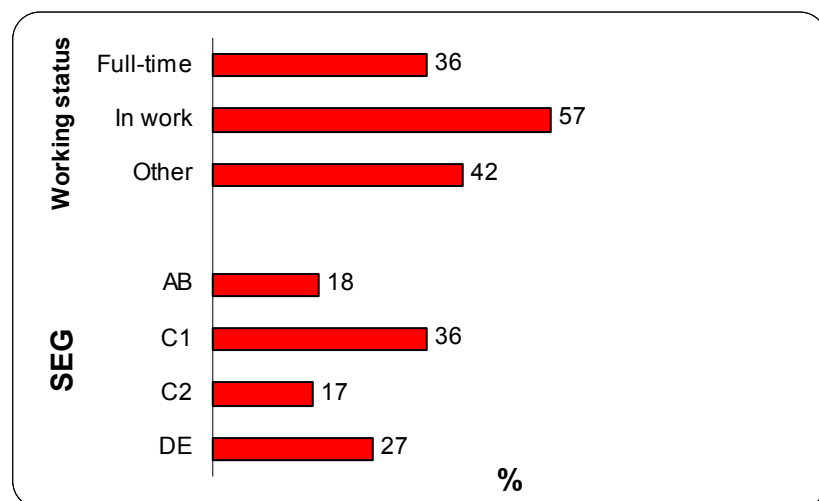
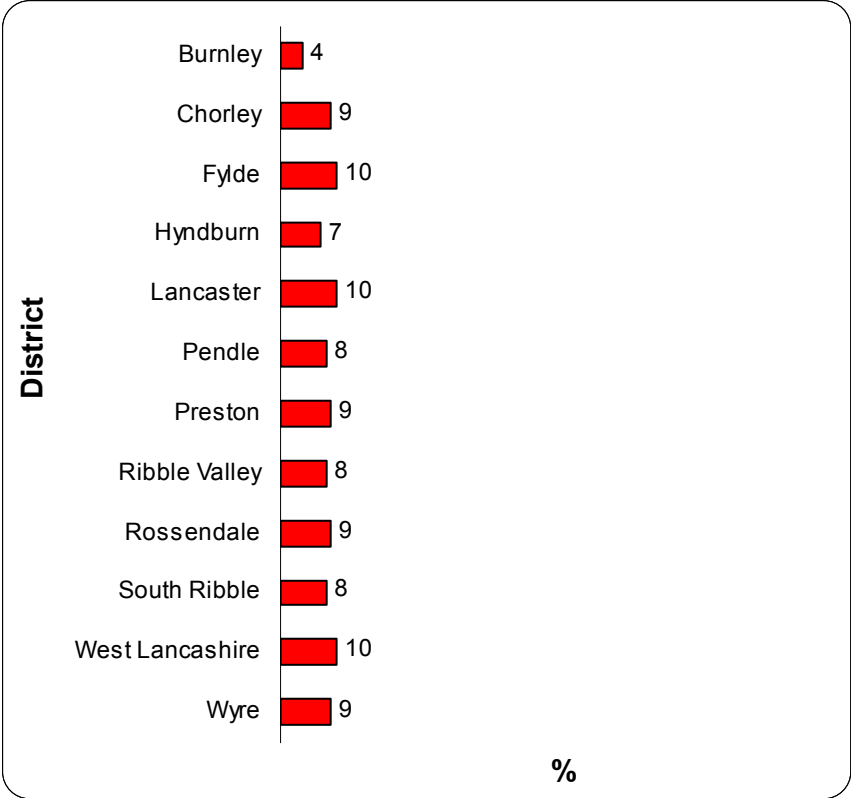


Chart 3 shows that there are almost equal proportions of responses from each of the 12 districts within Lancashire (with the exception of Burnley). This is similar to the proportions of the actual population that are resident in each district.

**Chart 3: District**

Base = Total sample (unweighted base: 751)



## 1.5 Interpretation of Data

Citizens' panels are a cost-effective means of obtaining data on the views of a broad cross-section of the population. The potential for achieving relatively high response rates and – in consequence – relatively large sample sizes, makes panels a good way of consulting relatively large proportions of the population, thus providing a regular “sounding board” to establish public opinion on current issues and new initiatives. Citizens' panels are also a means of ready access to a section of the population in order to undertake other research, such as group discussions or other qualitative consultation.

However, although the data have been weighted to a representative profile, it is important to remember that surveys of members of citizens' panels are never fully representative. The panel is made up of people who have volunteered to take part, and as such comprises an atypical sector of the population. Furthermore, over time panel members become ‘conditioned’ both in terms of getting used to completing questionnaires and in terms of becoming more informed about the County Council and its policies. The age of the Life in Lancashire panel means that this conditioning almost certainly affects data representativeness. Weighting can make the data representative in terms of demographic variables such as gender and age, but it cannot make the data representative in terms of attitudes and behaviour. Panel data can give a good indication of the public mood, but it should not be assumed that a panel survey will yield the same results as a survey of a representative sample of the local population.

Because of this, it is not possible to calculate the level of confidence that we can have in the results (the formula used to make such calculations is based on the assumption of a representative, unbiased sample). For the same reason, it is not possible to identify statistically significant variations in the sample. For example, we may observe a difference between men and women, but we cannot be certain that it is a statistically significant one. When such sub-group differences are apparent in the data, we report only on those that are sufficiently large to be notable.

It should also be noted that quantitative data from questionnaire-based surveys should, where possible, be complemented by qualitative data to aid understanding of the views being expressed. This is especially important when consulting the public on complex issues such as the Council's budget and priorities for spending/investment. The data from the Life in Lancashire panel should complement other qualitative fieldwork mechanisms which involve dialogue.

It should be noted that in certain sections of the report, combined figures are quoted, with the separate figures given in brackets e.g. ‘31% say they agree with a statement (30% agree and 2% strongly agree)’. The separate percentages in the brackets do not always add up to the combined percentage. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly both the combined percentage and the two separate percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number. Secondly, because the data are weighted, the base figures are also rounded. The figures quoted in the report are the most accurate available results.

## 2. OVERVIEW

The majority of panel members answer that it is either **very or fairly important** for the County Council to commit money to develop **each** of the proposed service areas. The only exception to this is **libraries**, with almost three in five (57%) responding panellists stating that this service area is either **not very** or **not at all important**.

The key indicator is whether respondents consider an issue to be **very important** to them (the 'socially acceptable' response to this kind of question is 'fairly important'). The service areas with the highest proportions of 'very important' responses are:

- Older people (51%)
- Children and families (48%)
- Schools (41%)
- Waste disposal services (41%)

Results are similar to those of the November/December 2002 budget consultation, with the following exceptions:

- **Waste disposal services** – a **lower** proportion of 'very important' responses in 2003 (41% very important in 2003, 51% in 2002).
- **Schools** – a **higher** proportion of 'very important' responses in 2003 (41% very important in 2003, 33% in 2002).

Working out why these changes in opinion have occurred is difficult without further research. It is possible that they relate to changes in perceptions of how well-funded or well-run these two services are. Alternatively, they may have come about as a result of 'panel conditioning' (see earlier).

In relation to the percentage increase in Council Tax that respondents would be prepared to pay, just one in six (16%) **support the assumed increase of 7% or more**, which suggests that **an argument is still to be won**.

However, half (50%) do support an increase, albeit a lower increase than that which is expected. Almost three in ten (28%) state a preference for **no increase at all**. Therefore a total of 78% of respondents state that they do not support an increase in line with that the County Council is expecting.

### 3. MAIN FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Priorities for Service Development

Chart 4 shows that the majority of panel members answer that it is either very or fairly important for the County Council to commit money to develop each of the proposed service areas. The only exception to this is libraries, with almost three in five (57%) responding panellists stating that this service area is either not very or not at all important.

In RBA's view, the key rating that shows respondents' opinions is the proportion of those answering that development of a service area is **very important** to them. This is because, unless they have a strong opinion on the matter, respondents tend to feel that the 'socially acceptable' response to this type of question is to say 'fairly important'.

By this token, the services that appear at the top of panellists' priority list are services for older people and services for children and families (51% and 48% respectively rate these as very important). Two in five state that schools and/or waste disposal services are very important (both 41%).

Several service areas are selected as very important by about one third of respondents:

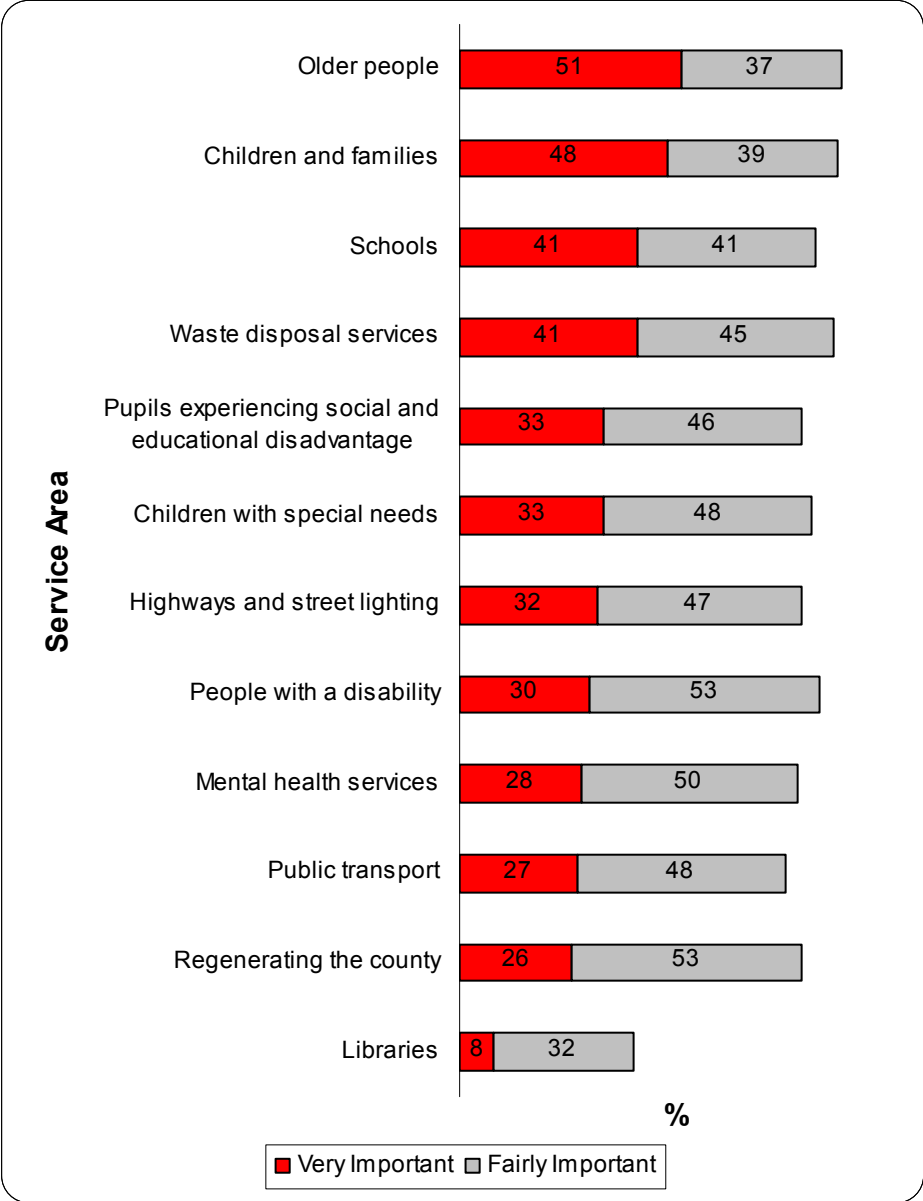
- Pupils experiencing social and educational disadvantage (33% very important)
- Children with special needs (33%)
- Highways and street lighting (32%)
- People with a disability (30%)
- Mental health services (28%)

Service areas that still receive high proportions of combined 'very' and 'fairly important' ratings, but receive slightly lower proportions of 'very important' ratings in isolation are public transport (27% very important) and regenerating the county (26%).



**Chart 4: Importance of Developing Service Areas**

Base = Total sample (weighted base: 730; unweighted base: 751)



These findings are also shown in the table below, which presents the mean score<sup>1</sup> given to each service area by responding panellists.

**Table 1: Mean Score for each Service Area**

Base = Total sample (unweighted base: 751)

<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
Older people	1.31
Children and families	1.21
Waste disposal services	1.13
Schools	1.06
People with a disability	1.01
Highways and street lighting	0.94
Children with special needs	0.94
Pupils experiencing social and educational disadvantage	0.93
Mental health services	0.89
Regenerating the county	0.85
Public transport	0.76
Libraries	-0.23

<sup>1</sup> The mean score is calculated by allocating a number of 'points' to each service area. For each respondent giving a 'very important' rating, 2 points are awarded, for a 'fairly important' rating, 1 point is awarded, for a 'not very important' rating, 1 point is subtracted, and for a 'not at all important' rating, 2 points are subtracted. The total number of points is then divided by the number of respondents giving a response (excluding 'don't knows') to yield the mean score.

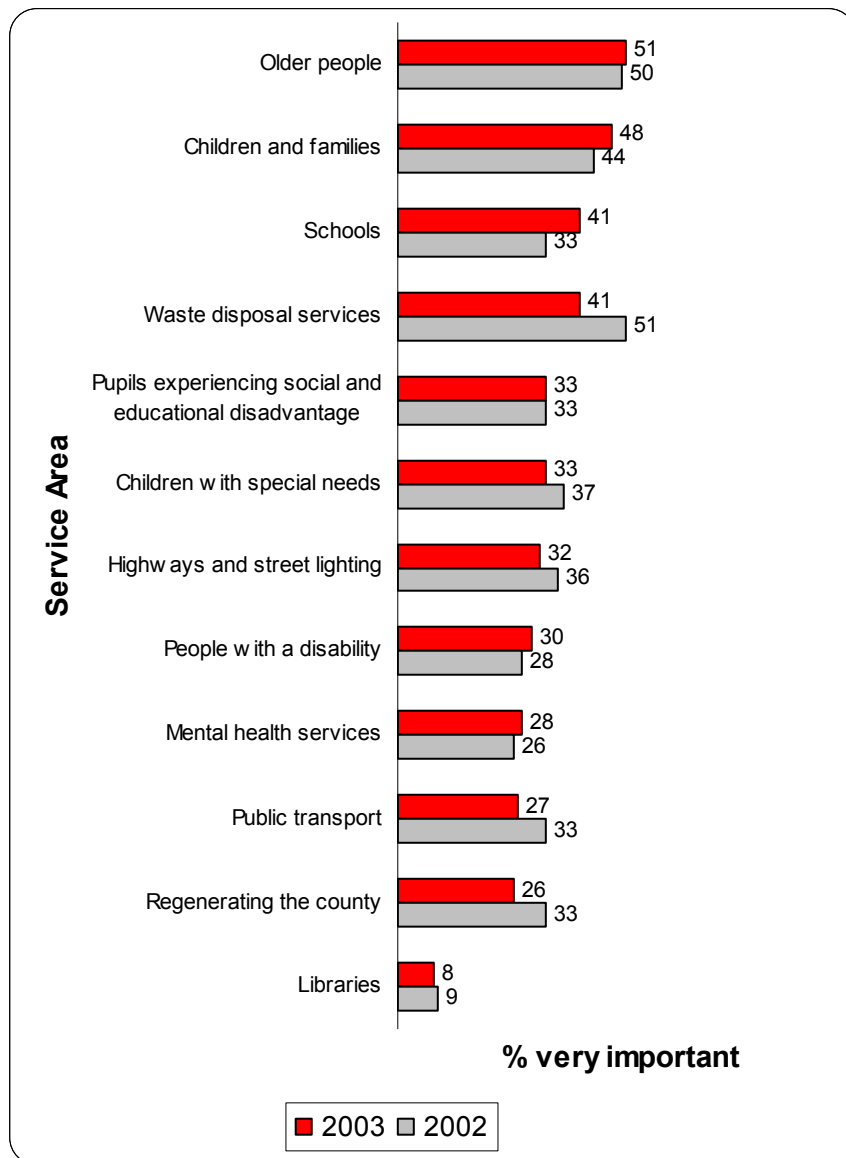
In terms of the proportions rating each service area as 'very important', Chart 5 shows that the November/December 2003 results are similar to those obtained in November/December 2002, with the following exceptions:

- **Waste disposal services** – a **lower** proportion of 'very important' ratings in 2003 (41% very important in 2003, 51% in 2002).
- **Schools** – a **higher** proportion of 'very important' ratings in 2003 (41% very important in 2003, 33% in 2002).

Working out why these changes in opinion have occurred is difficult without further research. It is possible that they relate to changes in perceptions of how well-funded or well-run these two services are. Alternatively, they may have come about as a result of 'panel conditioning' (see earlier).

### Chart 5: 'Very Important' Ratings – Trends

Base = Total sample (2003: weighted base: 730; unweighted base: 751)  
 (2002: weighted base: 731; unweighted base: 741)



Looking at each service area individually it is possible to identify differences between sub-groups. Service areas are presented in order of the proportion declaring the service '**very important**'.

***Older people:***

- Not surprisingly, older residents are more likely to state that this is 'very important' compared with younger residents (63% of those aged over 60 years answer very important, 54% aged 45-59, 43% aged 25-44, and 26% aged under 25 years)
- Residents in Council / Housing Association accommodation are more likely to answer 'very important' compared with owner-occupiers (69% and 49% respectively)

***Children and families:***

- Women are more likely to answer that this is 'very important' than men (57% and 38% respectively)

***Schools:***

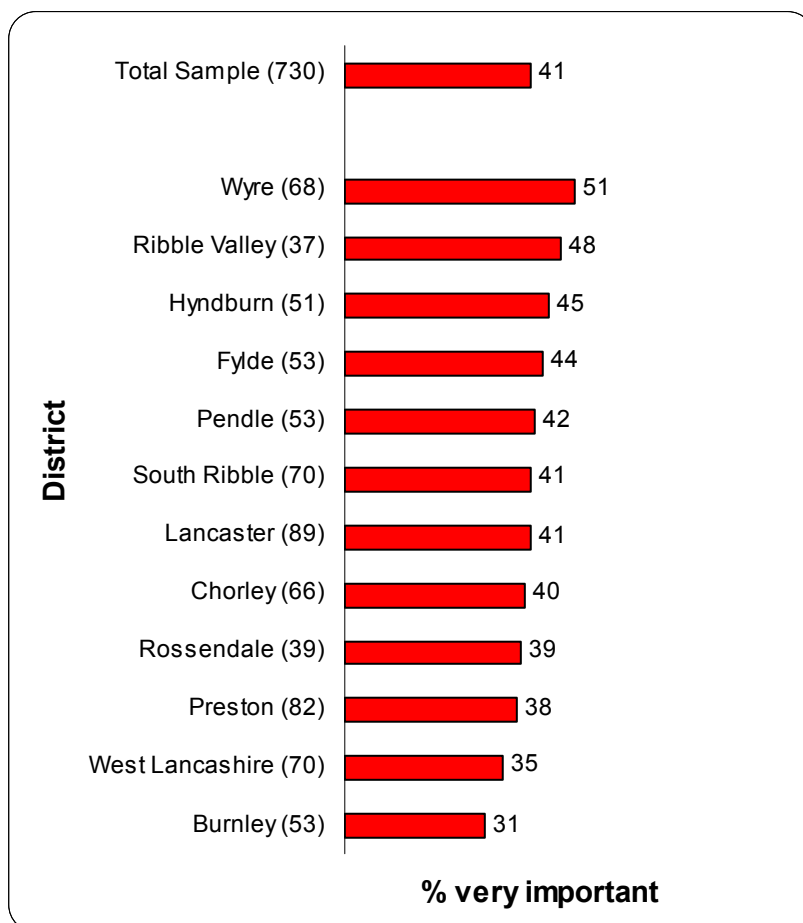
- As is the case regarding services for children and families, women are more likely to answer that schools are 'very important' compared with men (49% and 32% respectively)
- Those with children are more likely to state that this is 'very important' than those without (51% with children, 36% without children)

### **Waste disposal services:**

- Differences in the proportion of respondents who declare this very **important by district** are shown in **Chart 6** below:

### **Chart 6: Importance of Waste Disposal Services by District**

Base = Various (for weighted bases see figures in brackets)



### **Pupils experiencing social and educational disadvantage:**

- Several groups are more likely to answer that this is 'very important':
  - Younger respondents (45% of under-25s, compared with 33% of those aged 25-44, 36% of those aged 45-59, and 26% of those aged over 60)
  - Women (41% of women compared with 24% men)
  - Those with a disability (39% with a disability compared with 30% without)
  - Those with children (41% with children, compared with 28% without children)
- These results show a shift in results from last year. In 2002 there were no particular differences amongst panel members with and without children, and the age group who were most likely to answer 'very important' was 25-44 year olds.

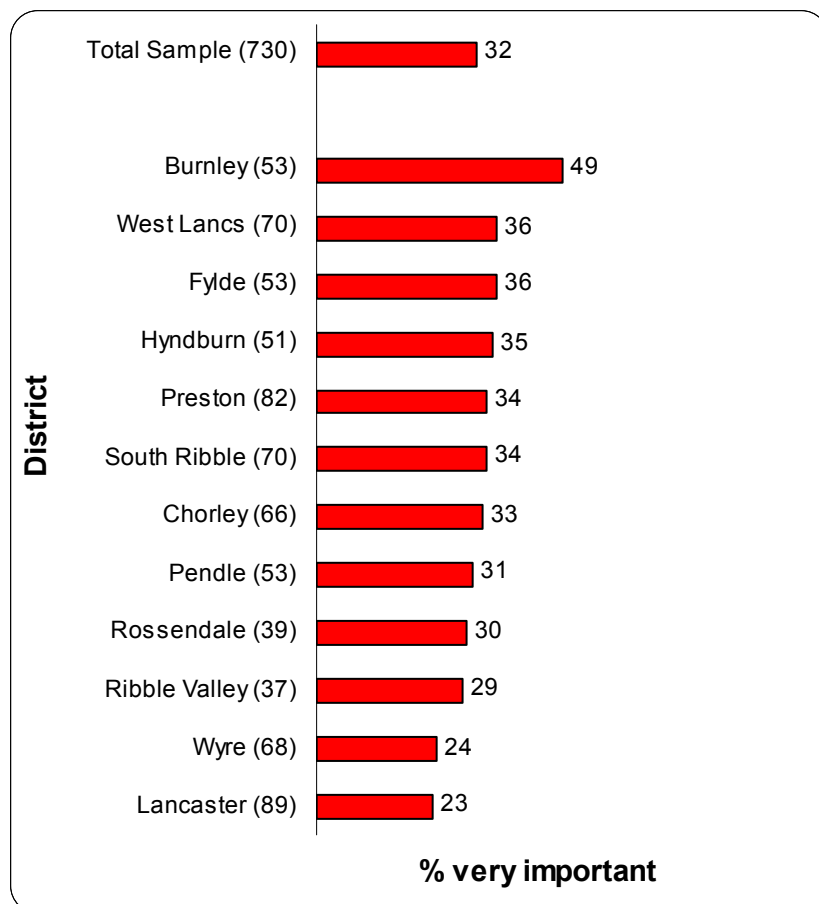
**Children with special needs:**

- A higher proportion of women answer ‘very important’ (40% women, 25% men)
- Those who do not have access to a car are also more likely to answer that this is very important (50%, compared with 31% of those who do have access to a car)
- These differences appear to be more pronounced this year than in November/December 2002

**Highways and street lighting:**

- Under-25s are less likely to answer that this service area is very important, than those aged 25 years and over (11% of those aged under 25 years answer very important, 29% of those aged 25-44, 30% 45-59, and 43% over 60 years)
- Those with a disability are more likely to rate this as ‘very important’ (39% with a disability, 28% without)
- Respondents in the DE socio-economic groups are also more likely to state that this is very important (47% DE, 28% C2, 26% C1, 23% AB)
- Differences by district are shown in Chart 7 below:

**Chart 7: Importance of Developing Highways and Street Lighting by District**  
Base = Various (for weighted bases see figures in brackets)



### ***People with a disability:***

- Women are more likely to answer 'very important' (39% women, compared with 21% men)
- As might be expected, a greater proportion of those with a disability report this is 'very important', than those without a disability (37% with a disability, 26% without)
- A higher proportion of residents in the DE socio-economic group answer that this is very important (42% DE, compared with 26% AB, 25% C1, and 26% C2), although it should be noted that a higher proportion of residents in the DE socio-economic group are disabled (53% DE are disabled, 13% C2, 23% C1, 9% AB)
- Those living in rural areas and in Council / Housing Association accommodation also appear more likely to answer 'very important' (22% rural compared with 34% urban and 41% market town; and 48% Council / Housing Association compared with 29% owner occupiers)

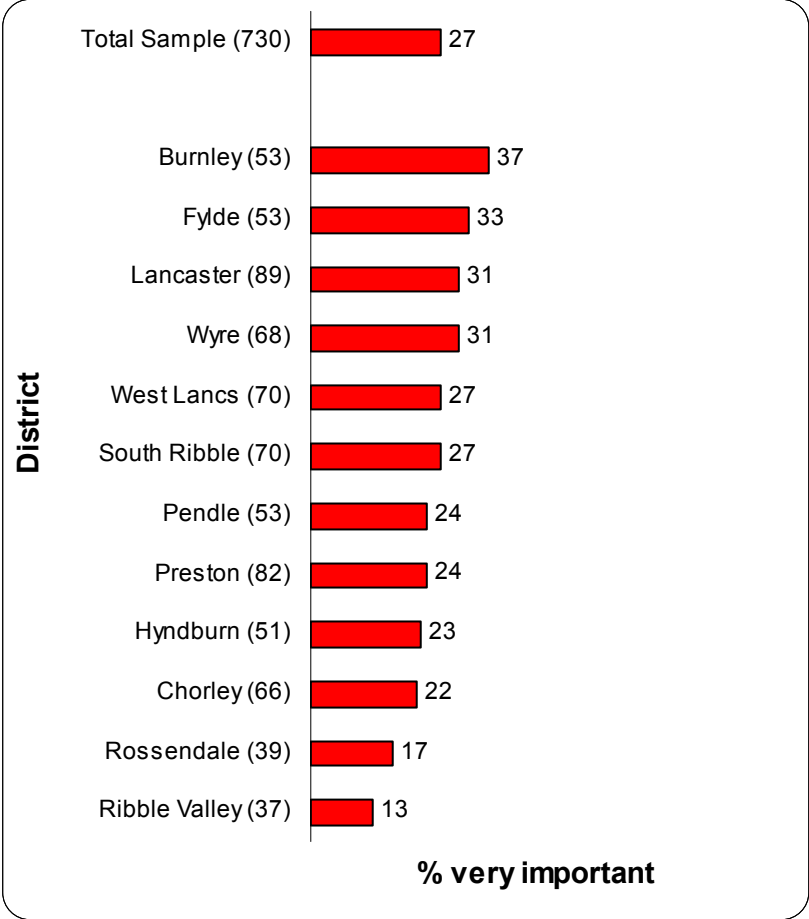
### ***Mental health services:***

- Women are more likely to answer that this is 'very important' than are men (36% women, 20% men);
- Those with a disability are more likely to report this 'very important' compared with those without a disability (36% with, 24% without);
- Residents in the DE socio-economic group are more likely to answer that this is very important than other groups (39% DE compared with 28% AB, 21% C1, and 23% C2)

**Public transport:**

- As we would expect, residents without access to a car are more likely to answer that it is a very important budget priority for the County Council to commit money to (52%, compared with 22% of those with access to a car)
- Differences by district are shown in Chart 8 below:

**Chart 8: Importance of Public Transport by District**  
Base = Various (for weighted bases see figures in brackets)



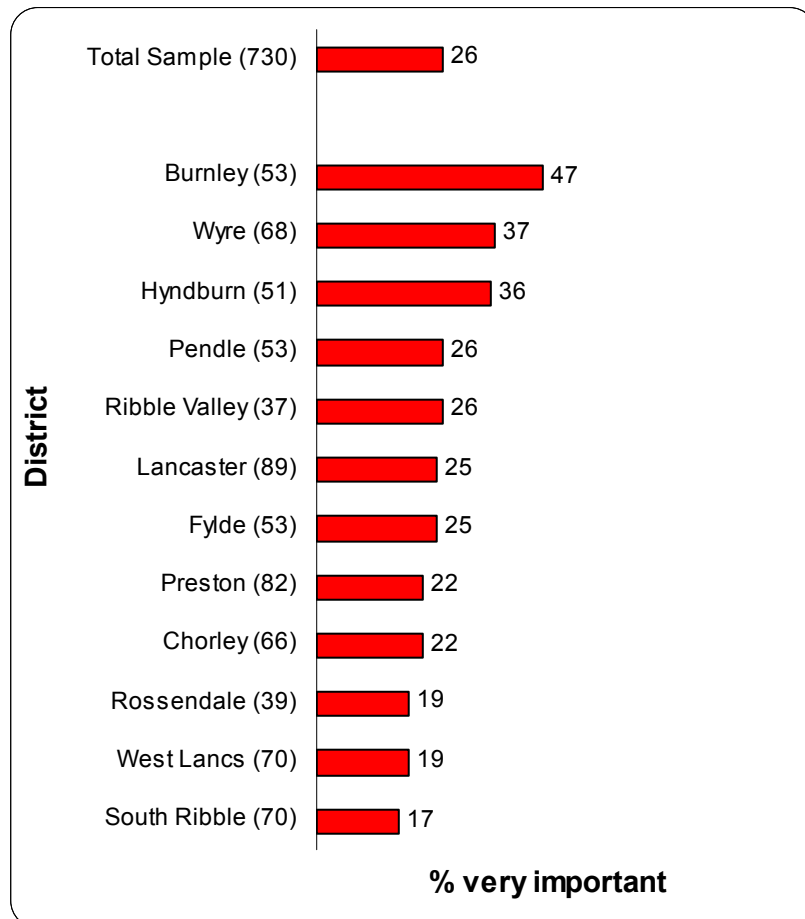


### **Regenerating the county:**

- Women are more likely to answer that this is 'very important' compared with men (31% women, 22% men)
- Differences by district can be seen in Chart 9 below:

### **Chart 9: Importance of Regenerating the County by District**

Base = Various (for weighted bases see figures in brackets)



- There appears to be a slight shift between the answers given this year and those given in 2002, with a smaller proportion of responding panellists stating that this is very important and a larger proportion stating that it is fairly important this year compared with 2002 (26% answer 'very important' in 2003 compared with 33% in 2002; 53% answer 'fairly important' in 2003 compared with 44% in 2002)

### **Libraries:**

- In 2002 respondents in Burnley were most likely to answer that this was very important (18% did so). However, this year only 7% of responding panellists in Burnley answer that this is very important, and the highest proportion of residents who consider this important is in West Lancashire (13%)

### 3.2 Opinion on Acceptable Level of Council Tax Increase

Panel members were provided with some background information about the County Council's Council Tax funding and rates. For next year (2004/2005) Lancashire County Council expects the Council Tax to increase by at least 7%. Residents were asked what amount they are prepared to pay to fund a budget that will maintain and begin to improve services.

Just one in six (16%) responding panellists support the assumed increase of 7% or more, which suggests that an argument is still to be won. However, half (50%) do support an increase, albeit a lower increase than that which is expected. Almost three in ten (28%) do not support any increase at all.

**Chart 10: Summary of Increase Residents would be Prepared to Pay**  
Base = Total sample (weighted base: 730; unweighted base: 751)

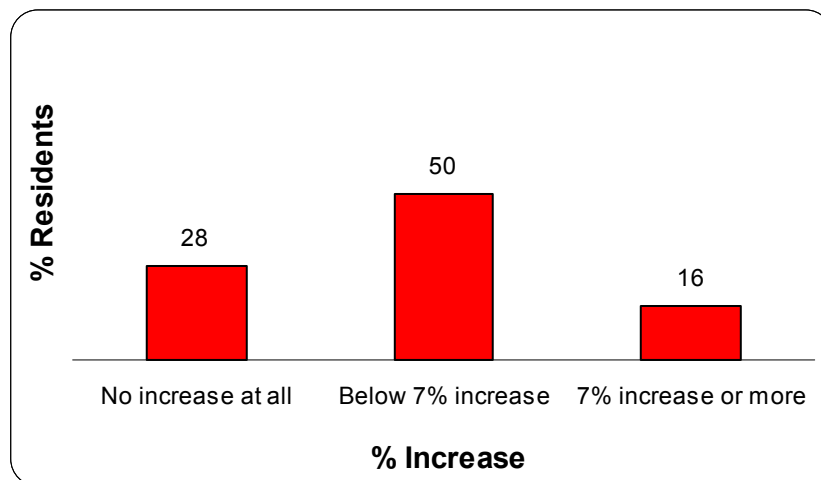


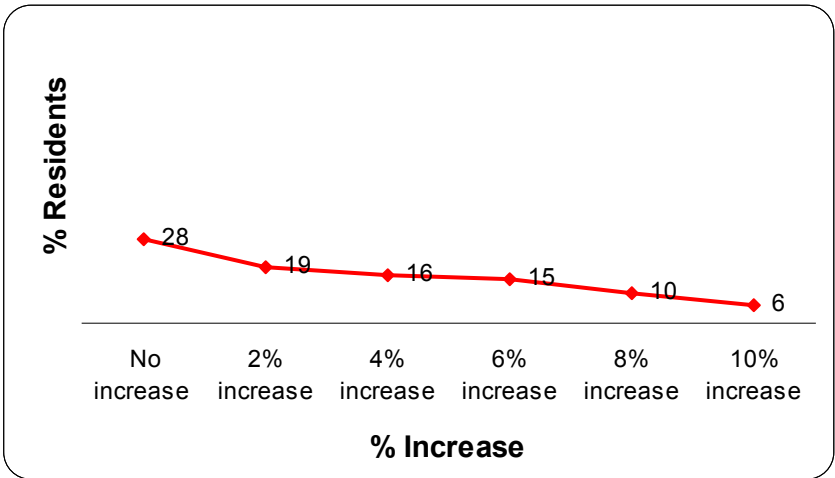
Table 2 below shows how the data can be compiled to show the total proportions of residents that say they are willing to pay each percentage increase.

**Table 2: Cumulative % of Respondents Prepared to Pay Increase**  
 Base = Total sample (weighted base: 730; unweighted base: 751)

Increase in Council Tax in 2004/2005	Cumulative % of respondents prepared to pay increase
No increase	95
With a 1% increase	67
With a 2% increase	60
With a 3% increase	48
With a 4% increase	37
With a 5% increase	32
With a 6% increase	21
With a 7% increase	17
With a 8% increase	11
With a 9% increase	7
With a 10% increase	6

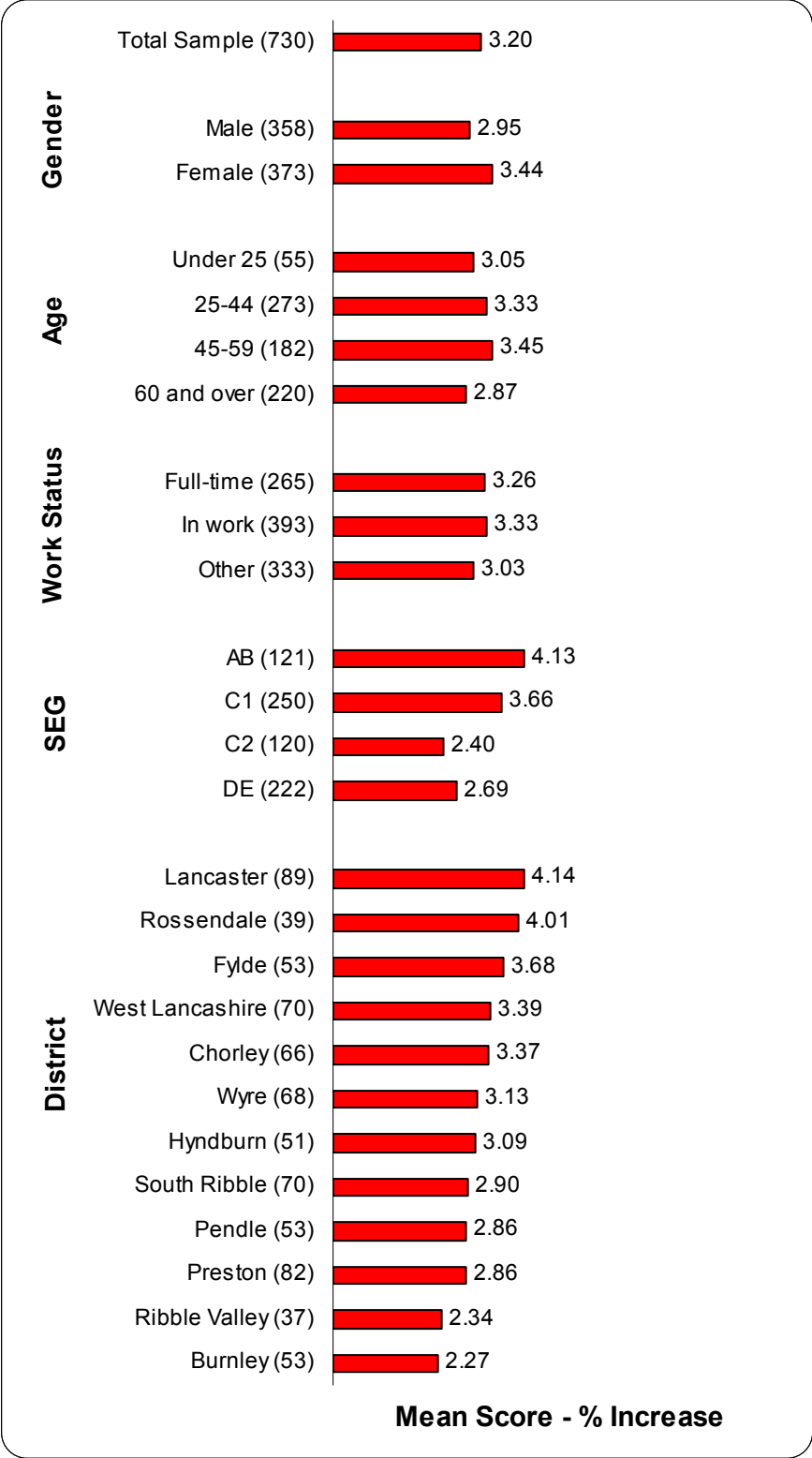
Chart 11 shows the percentage increase in council tax that responding panellists say they are prepared to pay in 2004/2005. The higher the proposed council tax increase, the smaller the proportion supporting it. Almost three in ten say they are not prepared to pay any increase at all (28%), and just one in sixteen say they are prepared to pay a 10% increase (6%).

**Chart 11: Level of Council Tax Increase Residents would be Prepared to Pay**  
 Base = Total sample (weighted base: 730; unweighted base: 751)



These data can be broken down by the key demographic profiles of gender, age, work status, SEG and district to show the average level of Council Tax percentage increase different sub-groups are prepared to pay (see chart 12).

**Chart 12: Average Increase Residents Prepared to Pay by Demographic Group**  
 Base = Various (for weighted bases see figures in brackets)



#### 4. Development Pointers

- The majority of panel members answer that it is either very or fairly important for the County Council to commit money to develop **each** of the proposed service areas.
- The only service area that the majority of responding panellists do not answer very or fairly important is **libraries**, specifically introducing more convenient opening hours, where 57% answer that it not very or not at all important for the County Council to commit money to develop this.
- Answers of **very** important give an insight into those service areas that residents consider particularly important. The service areas with the highest proportion of 'very important' responses are:
  - **Older people** (51%)
  - **Children and families** (48%)
  - **Schools** (41%)
  - **Waste disposal services** (41%)
- One in six responding panellists support the County Councils expected increase of 7% or more (16%), which suggests that **an argument is still to be won**
- Half are prepared to pay below a 7% increase (50%)
- Almost three in ten respondents answer **no increase in at all** (28%)

Budget consultation and establishing residents' priorities is a complex matter, highly sensitive to the exact questions asked, so the data from this survey should be one of several inputs into the decision-making process. In particular, it is important to consult residents via qualitative methods that facilitate dialogue, a deeper understanding of their views and preferences, and more informed responses as well as an understanding of the more 'real' uninformed responses. It is also important to bear in mind that, in RBA's experience, those who volunteer to join a panel tend to be more 'pro-public sector' than those who do not join, so the data from this survey could well over-state the level of support for council tax increases.

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## **APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**

**Marked Up Questionnaire**

**APPENDIX B**

**Questionnaire**