

Council Budget 2023/24 & Beyond



Initial Report on Public Engagement Programme

Public Engagement Report

Summary

Feb 2023

SUMMARY REPORT

Policy, Partnerships and Engagement

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Introduction

Blaenau Gwent Council, like other Councils up and down the country, faces extreme financial challenges as the Government continues to reduce the amount of money that is spent on our public services.

The after effects of the Covid pandemic and the monetary crisis as a consequence of the war in Ukraine have caused a “perfect storm” of soaring inflation, energy costs and material prices that have impacted how we deliver our services to the public. At the same time, the UK Government continues to make reducing the national debt a priority with strict spending policies. Its latest Spending Review for 2023-24 did not deliver for Wales.

Also, there are significant cost increases for pay awards, and increased demands on service areas such as social care, homelessness, additional learning needs and home to school transport.

To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to make savings, and how we can generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models.

Our engagement programme gave people the opportunity to share their views to help us plan our budget and services from April 2023 until March 2024, and beyond. The programme consisted of a number of public events, surveys and other ways to engage people to help shape decision making processes.

What is the challenge we have been set?

As a Council we look to plan our spending over a number of years. This involves forecasting expenditure, income and funding from Welsh Government. Welsh Government funding for councils across Wales from April 2023 ranges from an increase of 6.5% to 7.9%. Welsh Government funding is increasing by 6.5% for Blaenau Gwent (which is the lowest in Wales). Despite the funding increase, there is still a **funding gap of £6.7m for 2023-24.**

Overview of engagement programme activity

The programme operated in early 2023 (closing on 15 February 2023) following the announcement of the Local Government Settlement in mid-December 2023 by Welsh Government. Due to the tight timeframes following the announcement, an engagement programme was developed to look to best provide people the opportunity to participate.

The programme included indoor events for people to attend to find out more information, via information boards (see below), and if they wanted to, they could speak to elected members (local councillors) and/or senior managers. These events were held across our four well-being areas e.g. Sirhowy Valley which covers the Tredegar area, Ebbw Fawr Valley which covers the Ebbw Vale area, Upper Ebbw Fach Valley which covers the Brynmawr, Nantyglo and Blaina, and Lower Ebbw Fach Valley which covers the Abertillery and Llanhilleth area. These events were held at different times during the day e.g. morning (10am to 12pm), afternoon (2pm to 4pm) and evening (5pm to 7pm).

As well as the public events, for the first time when consulting on the budget, the engagement programme included an evening session held online via the Microsoft Teams platform. People were asked to register their interest and any initial questions they had by registering through Eventbrite. People were also able to ask further questions at the event.

All those attending events were encouraged to participate in a survey which was also shared on social media. The intention of this was to get as many people as possible participating and sharing their views on prioritising council services, setting council tax, and potential saving proposals for now and the future.

Information Provided on Display Boards (available bilingually Welsh & English)

COUNCIL BUDGET 2023-24 & BEYOND



The UK economy is currently experiencing its most significant financial pressure in decades.

The after-effects of the Covid pandemic and the monetary crisis caused by the war in Ukraine have caused a "perfect storm" of soaring inflation, energy costs and material prices that have impacted how we deliver our services to the public.

At the same time, the UK Government continues to make reducing the national debt a priority with strict spending policies. Its latest Spending Review for 2023-24 did not deliver for Wales.

Also, there are significant cost increases for pay awards, and increased demands on service areas such as social care, homelessness, additional learning needs and home to school transport.

To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to make savings, and how we generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models.

Extra Info: Some services provided are **statutory**, which means we have to provide them by law. We cannot stop these services, but under certain conditions we can change the level and way they are provided. Other services are **non-statutory**, which means that we can decide whether we provide them or not, and to what level.

1

HOW THE COUNCIL PLANS THE BUDGET



As a Council we look to plan our spending over a number of years. This involves forecasting expenditure, income and funding from Welsh Government.

Welsh Government funding for councils across Wales from April 2023 ranges from an increase of **6.5% to 7.9%**.

The difference between the forecast spend and funding we will receive is called the **funding gap**.

Welsh Government funding is **increasing by 6.5%** for Blaenau Gwent (which is the lowest in Wales). Despite the funding increase, there is still a funding gap of **£6.7m for 2023-24**.

As part of setting our budget we are running engagement events to inform people and get them involved.

The information we present will help raise awareness of what we may have to do to set a balanced budget for April 2023, and provide the opportunity for feedback on key issues to help decision-making.

2

THE COUNCIL'S OVERALL BUDGET



For 2023/2024 the Council's gross Revenue Budget is:

£ 178 million

This money comes from:

Local Government Settlement: £140 million
This makes up almost three-quarters of our budget. It is provided to the Council from Welsh Government through a Revenue Support Grant and the Redistributed National Non-Domestic Rates (NDR).

Council Tax Income: £38 million
This makes up around one-fifth of our budget. It is paid by householders living within the area. Every 1% increase in Council Tax - which is about 26p a week per household - generates approximately £380,000 which otherwise has to be found from other ways of saving money.


In addition the Council generates:

Income from charges: £10 million
This is paid by residents for specific council services, where charging policies are in place, e.g. payment for licensing, planning applications, permits etc. Some council services are either provided free of charge, or do not recover full cost.

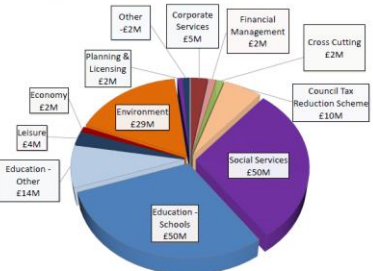
Extra Info: We also receive grants or receive funding for specific projects or initiatives. This money can only be used for specific things outlined in a contract. If we do not follow the contract we would have to give the money back. A good example of this is The Works site in Ebbw Vale, where the money had to be used to regenerate the old steelworks site.

3

HOW THE COUNCIL SPENDS ITS BUDGET



The pie chart below shows how our budget is currently divided between different service areas:




Figures are rounded to the nearest £ million

Our Question to you?
You can see how the Council's budget is allocated, which two services would be your top priorities in a budget setting process?

4

KEY FACTS ON YOUR COUNCIL TAX



Council Tax in our area currently makes up just over **22%** of our budget, which is the 3rd lowest in Wales.

Council Tax bands range from 'A' to 'I' and are based on property values. 'Band D' is commonly used as the standard for comparing levels between areas in Wales.

This gives a misleading picture, as we have the lowest proportion of houses in Band D, and the highest proportion of houses within A and B bands (83%).

This means that in terms of **actual money paid**, Blaenau Gwent residents pay one of the lowest average amounts of Council Tax in Wales.

Also, the Council **does not** get all the money. It gets around **85%**, with the remaining going to the Gwent Police and Crime Commissioner and local Town/Community Councils.


Councils around Wales are considering increases in Council Tax as part of their budget setting. The current proposal for Blaenau Gwent is a **4% increase**. This would mean the following:

91p a week increase for a Band A	} This covers 96% of all households in Blaenau Gwent
£1.06p a week increase for a Band B	
£1.21p a week increase for a Band C	
£1.36p a week increase for a Band D	

Our Question to you?
What do you think of an increase of 4% Council Tax for 2023/24?

5

OUR SAVING PROPOSALS FOR NOW & THE FUTURE



We want to do all we can to protect those services which are important to our residents. However, the **cost of living crisis** and challenges we face are going to be here for many years.

Therefore, we have put together a set of proposals (including cost savings, budget reductions through controlling spend and contract management and income generation) to try and address this year's funding gap but also to start **planning for future years**. They cover the following areas:

Commercial Activity and Business Development - These include things such as a new house growth plans, developing wind turbines and solar farm, and industrial expansion.

Service Change for Efficiency - These proposals include for frontline changes, reductions and potential closures in areas such as social services, leisure services, street lighting, cleansing, public toilets, recycling centres and collections, school crossing patrols, and bus subsidies.

Future Business and Service Opportunities - These proposals include establishing regional arrangements and teams, introducing parking charges, operational building review, reforming Additional Learning Needs functions, and developing options for collaboration with others.

Our Question to you?
Please consider all our proposals, and tell us whether you think they are acceptable or unacceptable to you?

Extra Info: All our proposals can be found in a booklet at each event, or are available in the questionnaire supporting our engagement sessions.

6

Overall Response

A total of 3,740 questionnaires were returned to the council via our questionnaire portal (Snap), with all but four being valid for analysis. The four not valid provided no response (e.g. didn't answer any questions at all). **This means a valid response of 3,736**, which equates to over **5.5%** of the area's population.

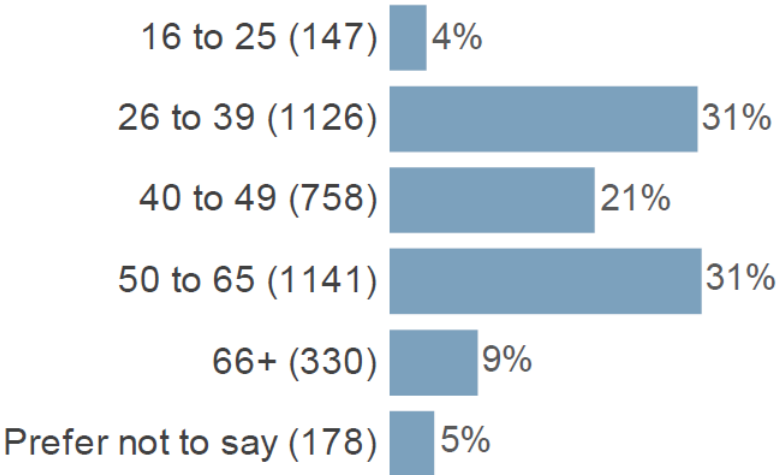
This is by far the highest level of response witnessed for a budget engagement survey carried out by the council (previous response levels have never been above 600), and it is clear that the proposals outlined have led to local people actively encouraging participation through social media platforms, which is encouraging that people wanted to have their voice heard about services delivery and change.

Who responded?

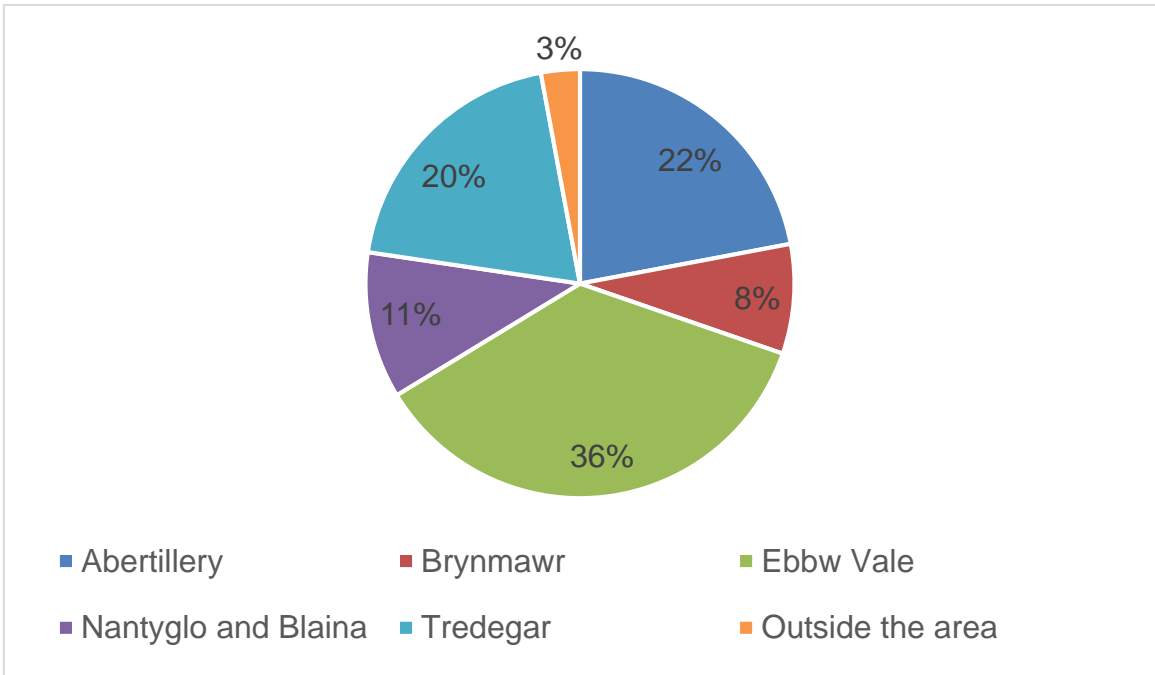
The vast majority of respondents outlined that they were residents of Blaenau Gwent (95%). Almost 1,300 respondents (35%) worked in the area, whilst 72 (2%) studied. 39 (1%) respondents said they were a visitor to the area.

Significantly more females (65%) than males (30%) participated in the process. This shows a gender bias in favour of females, given the Blaenau Gwent average is 51%:49% split female to male. 5% of respondents outlined they would prefer not to outline their sex or gender.

Response by age showed good representation from across the main age groups for people aged 16 and over. Even so, bucking previous trends, there was under representation from people aged 66 and over (9% compared to 23% of the adult population generally in Blaenau Gwent).



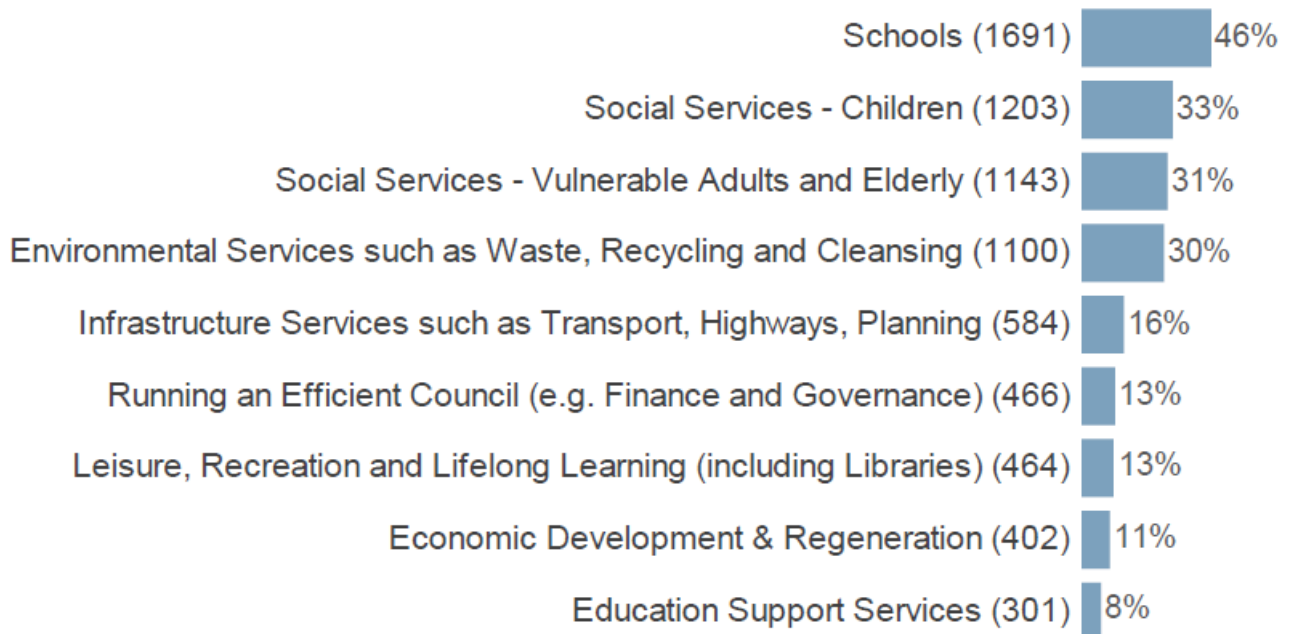
Response by area shows similar patterns to that of the general population with Ebbw Vale the most population area (34%) followed closely by Abertillery (23%) and Tredegar (22%). Nantyglo and Blaina (14%) is next followed by Brynmawr (8%). As seen below, there could be considered minor bias by area, which is not notable. Furthermore, 3% of responses were received from people living outside the borough.



Prioritising Services

Respondents were asked to consider a list of services and outline their top two priorities for budget setting. Two were set to prevent respondents selected all services. As can be seen below, there was clear stand out priority for schools (46%).

The second most prioritised service was social services for children (33%) and then social services for vulnerable adults and the elderly (31%). These were closely followed by Environmental services such as waste, recycling and cleansing (30%).

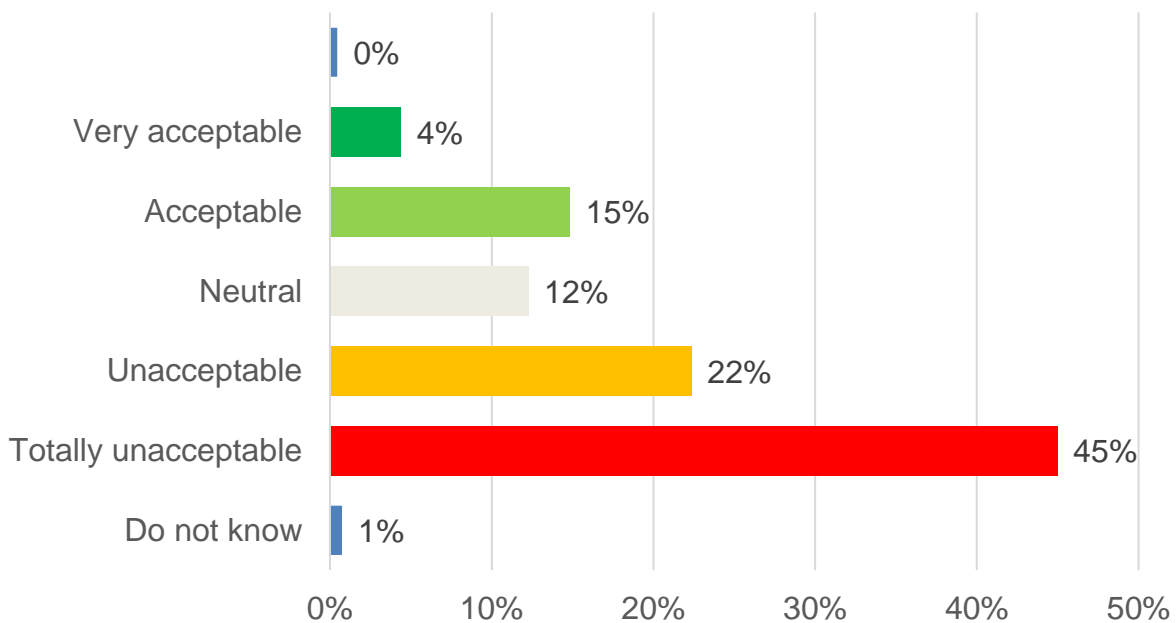


Setting Council Tax

Respondents were asked to consider how acceptable a 4% increase would be to Council Tax for 2023/24. As in previous years, over two-thirds of respondents generally considered this increase as either unacceptable or totally unacceptable (67%).

One in five outlined that such an increase would be acceptable or very acceptable, and 12% of respondents had neutral views on the increase.

A small proportion (under 1%) outlined that they did not know.



Saving Proposals for Now and the Future

Overall, the Council presented 44 proposals for consideration to respondents, which included things like cost savings, budget reductions, controlling spending and income generation.

Respondents were asked to consider each proposal and outline how acceptable they were on a five-point scale. The scale covered 'very acceptable', 'acceptable', 'neutral', 'not very acceptable' and 'not acceptable at all'. Respondents could also indicate if they 'did not know' or choose not to answer the question (no response).

The saving proposals were categorised into three broad categories covering: Commercial Activity and Business Development; Service Change for Efficiency; and Future Business and Service Opportunities.

The category with the most saving proposals, Service Change for Efficiency, was subdivided into additional broad areas for the questionnaire e.g. Social Service; Education, Schools and Learning etc. as presented below.

The following presents a series of graphs summarising response by category as well as two graphs outlining all proposals, one sorted by acceptable and one sorted by not acceptable.

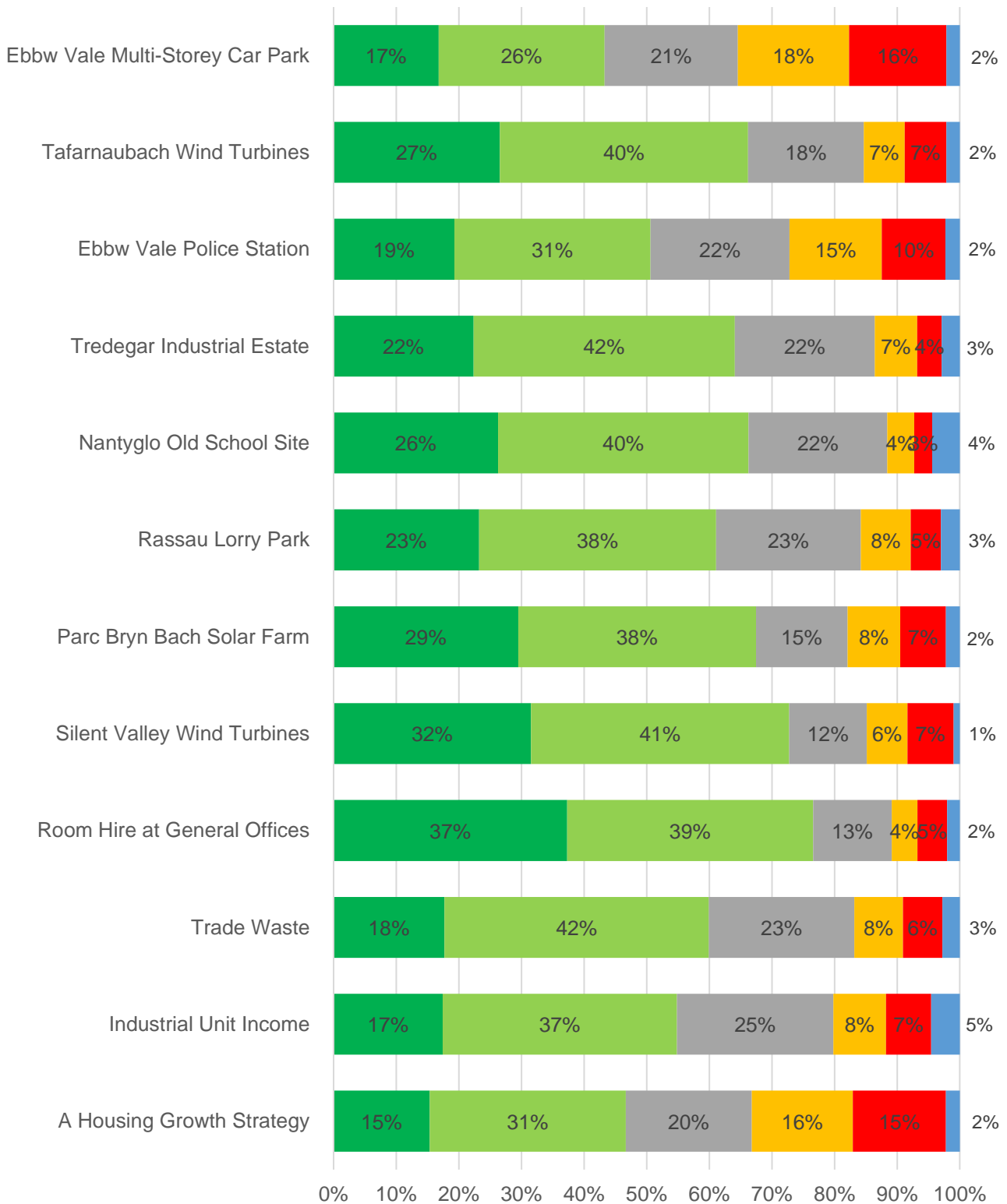
An appendix is provided with a graph for questions from throughout the survey, with response numbers and percentages.

Commercial Activity and Business Development

The following savings proposals were categorised as ‘Commercial Activity and Business Development’:

<p>A Housing Growth Strategy – Generate more income from Council Tax by granting sites for new house building</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £100,000</p>
<p>Industrial Unit Income – Generation of additional income from the Council’s industrial portfolio</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £100,000</p>
<p>Trade Waste – Develop our trade waste service to generate more income.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £64,000</p>
<p>Room Hire at General Offices – Increase opportunities to generate income by offering meeting rooms for rent / hire.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £60,000</p>
<p>Silent Valley Wind Turbines – Develop a project for wind turbines at Silent Valley Site, Ebbw Vale.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £72,000 (in one years’ time)</p>
<p>Parc Bryn Bach Solar Farm – Develop a project for a solar farm at Bryn Bach Park, Tredegar</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £To be determined</p>
<p>Rassau Lorry Park – Develop a lorry park at Rassau Industrial Estate, Ebbw Vale – this will generate income from users of the lorry park</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £To be determined</p>
<p>Nantyglo Old School Site - Develop a plan for the site of the old Nantyglo Secondary School, Nantyglo.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £To be determined</p>
<p>Tredegar Industrial Estate – Expand the Tredegar Industrial Estate to generate additional rental income</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £To be determined</p>
<p>Redevelopment of Ebbw Vale Police Station to support the regeneration of the town centre</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Savings: £To be determined</p>
<p>Tafarnaubach Wind Turbines – Develop a project for wind turbines at Tafarnaubach, Tredegar</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £To be determined</p>
<p>Redevelopment of Ebbw Vale Multi-Storey Car Park site to support the regeneration of the town centre.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Potential Income: £To be determined</p>

Respondents were asked to indicate how acceptable they found each proposal on a five-point scale. A 'don't know' option was also provided. No response has been removed in all cases. The graph below shows the response.



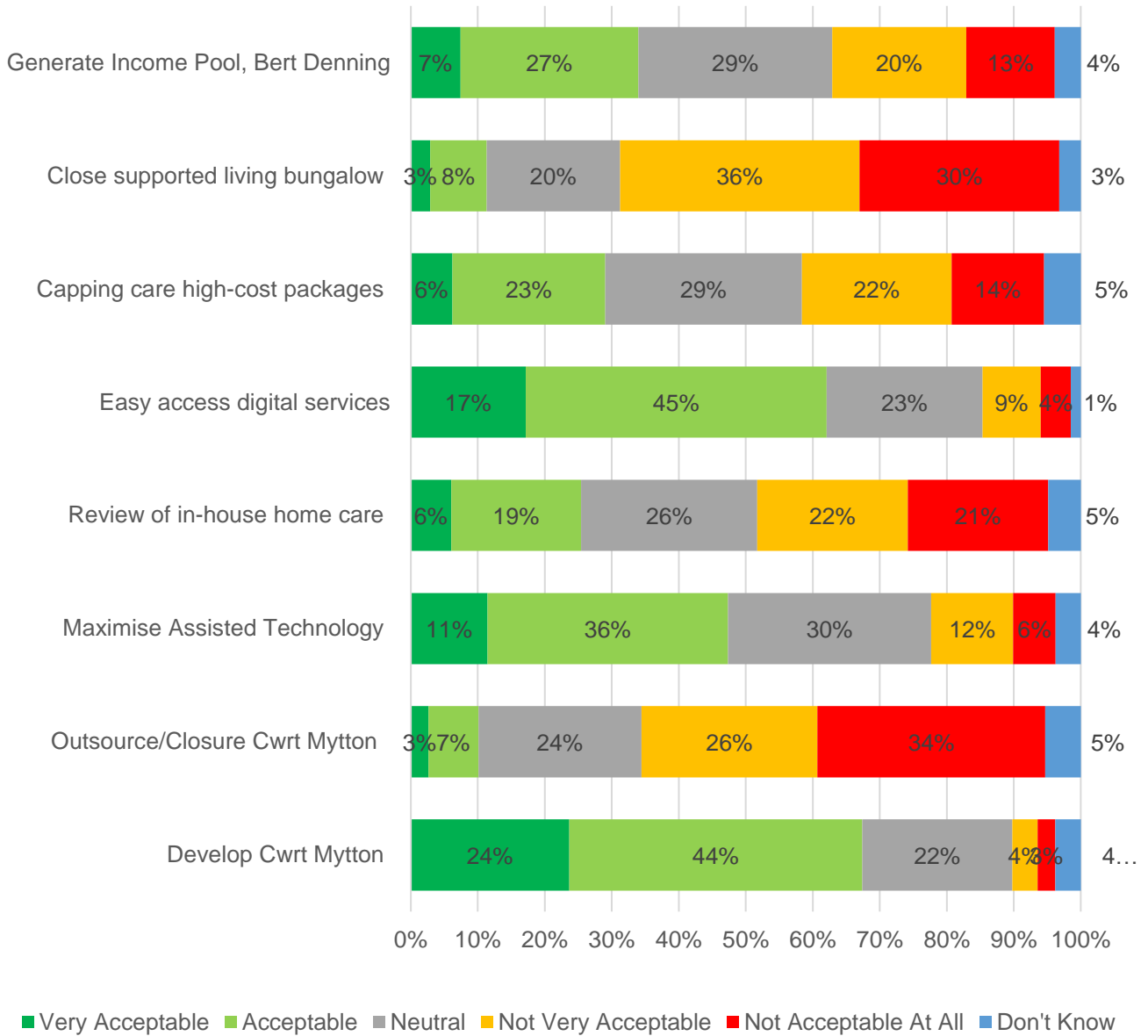
Very Acceptable Acceptable Neutral Not Very Acceptable Not Acceptable At All Don't Know

Service Change for Efficiency – Frontline Services (Social Services)

The following savings proposals were categorised as ‘Service Change for Efficiency – Frontline Services’ for Social Services:

<p>Cwrt Mytton - Development of additional capacity at facility to increase the number of residents and increase income generating opportunities <i>Potential Income: £100,000 (2025/2026)</i></p>
<p>Outsource / Closure of Cwrt Mytton As an alternative to the above proposal, consider placing residents of Cwrt Mytton into other private sector provision <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>
<p>Maximisation of Assisted Technology – encourage social services clients to use technology to support their independence <i>Potential Income: £240,000 (2025/2026)</i></p>
<p>Review of in-house domiciliary care service (Home care) – to consider externalising the service <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>
<p>Making it easier for people to access our services digitally where possible, and when they can <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>
<p>Capping of Community domiciliary care high-cost packages - Consideration of alternative options to providing high-cost domiciliary care packages <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>
<p>Closure of supported living bungalow – Review of supported living arrangement, with a possible reduction the number of bungalows from 4 to 3 <i>Potential saving £40,000 (2024/2025)</i></p>
<p>Review of Income generation opportunities of the Hydrotherapy Pool (Bert Denning) – To implement charging for the use of the pool <i>Potential saving £12,000</i></p>

Respondents were asked to indicate how acceptable they found each proposal on a five-point scale. A 'don't know' option was also provided. No response has been removed in all cases. The graph below shows the response.

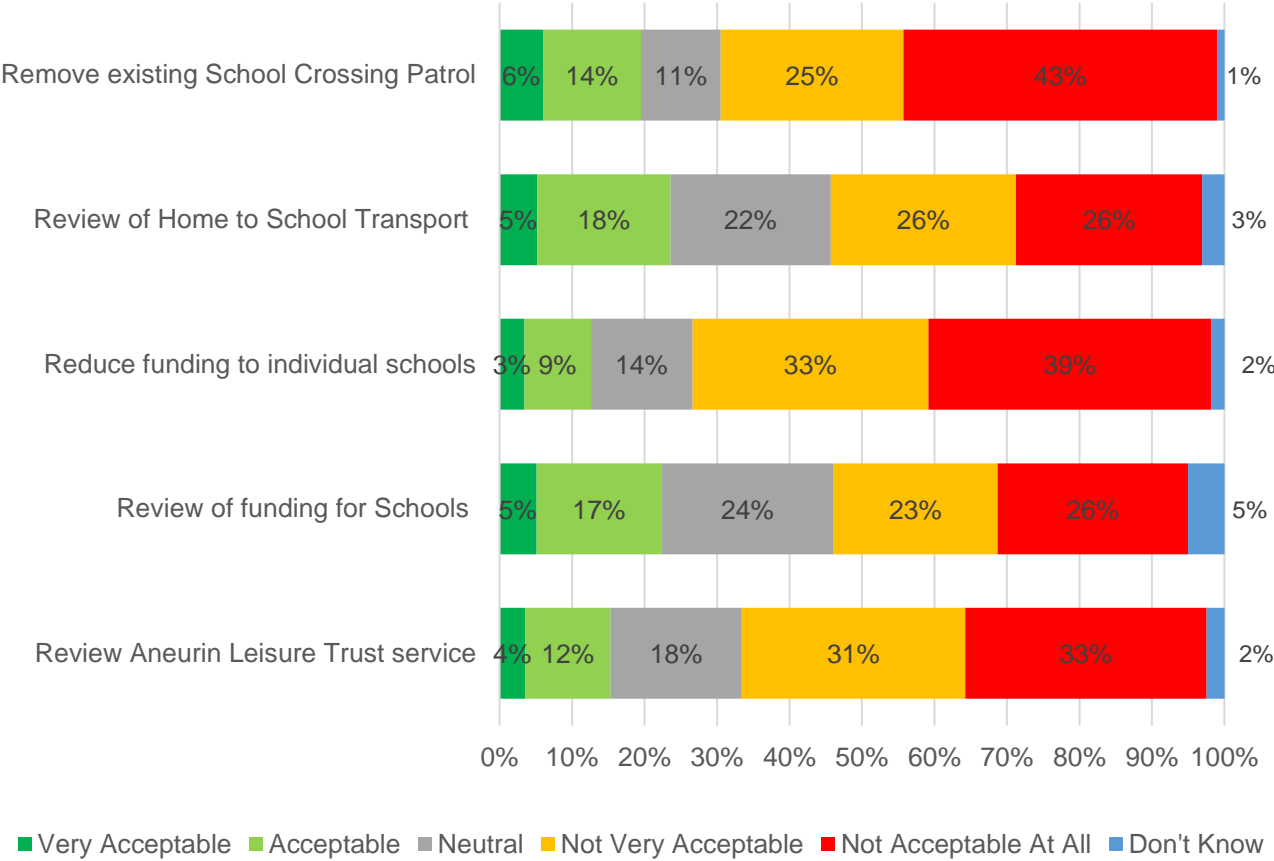


Service Change for Efficiency – Frontline Services (Education, Schools & Leisure)

The following savings proposals were categorised as ‘Service Change for Efficiency – Frontline Services’ for Education, Schools & Leisure:

<p>Review of services provided by Aneurin Leisure Trust – <i>Potential for reduction / stopping services</i></p> <p>Potential Saving: £92,000</p>
<p>Review of funding arrangements between Schools and LEA – the potential to transfer part or all the costs to schools relating to staff termination costs and match funding for the Education Improvement Grant.</p> <p>Potential saving £120,000</p>
<p>Reduction in Council funding to individual schools</p> <p>Potential saving £252,000</p>
<p>Home to School Transport Service Review <i>Review of arrangements for delivering the Home to School Service</i></p> <p>Potential saving £58,000 (2024/2025)</p> <p><i>Review of the Council’s Home to School Transport Policy and consider bringing the provision of transport in line with WG guidance</i></p> <p>Potential longer term saving: To be determined</p>
<p>Remove existing School Crossing Patrol service, this is a non-statutory service</p> <p>Potential saving £177,840</p>

Respondents were asked to indicate how acceptable they found each proposal on a five-point scale. A 'don't know' option was also provided. No response has been removed in all cases. The graph below shows the response.

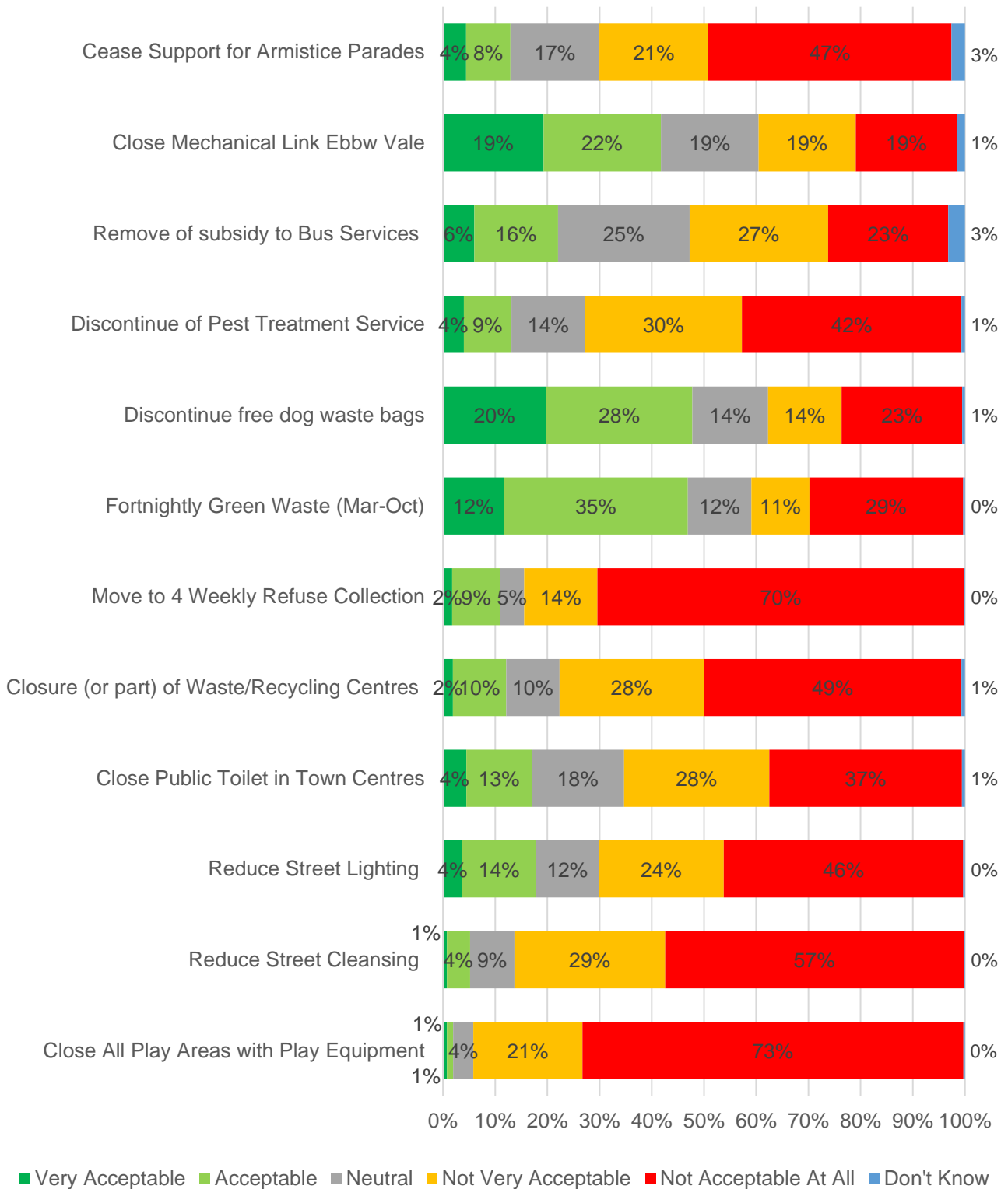


Service Change for Efficiency – Frontline Services (Environmental Services, Economic Development, Regeneration and Highways & Transport)

The following savings proposals were categorised as ‘Service Change for Efficiency – Frontline Services’ for Environmental Services etc.:

Closure of All Play Areas with Play Equipment	Potential Savings: £50,000
Reduction in Street Cleansing Provision	Potential saving £120,000
Reduction in Street Lighting Provision – Consideration to switching off lights to reduce energy usage	Potential saving: £To be determined
Public Toilet Provision within Town Centres – Withdraw Council Contribution	Potential saving £17,000
Closure / Part Closure of Household Waste Recycling Centres – To review operating hours at each of the Councils’ Housing Waste Recycling Centres.	Potential saving £70,000
Move to 4 Weekly Refuse Collection	Potential saving: £To be determined
Fortnightly Green Waste collection (March-October)	Potential saving £63,000
Discontinuation of free dog waste bags	Potential saving £14,600
Discontinuation of Pest Control Treatment Service	Potential saving £35,000
Removal of the Council’s financial subsidy to Bus Services – Welsh Government provide a Bus Service Support Grant which is match funded by the Council, the proposal is to remove this match funding	Potential saving £107,680
Closure of Mechanical Link Ebbw Vale Town Centre to Ebbw Vale Learning – primarily affecting students and some rail service users as it provides a direct link from the Works site to the town centre	Potential saving £41,000
Cease Support for Armistice Parades	Potential saving £2,400

Respondents were asked to indicate how acceptable they found each proposal on a five-point scale. A 'don't know' option was also provided. No response has been removed in all cases. The graph below shows the response.

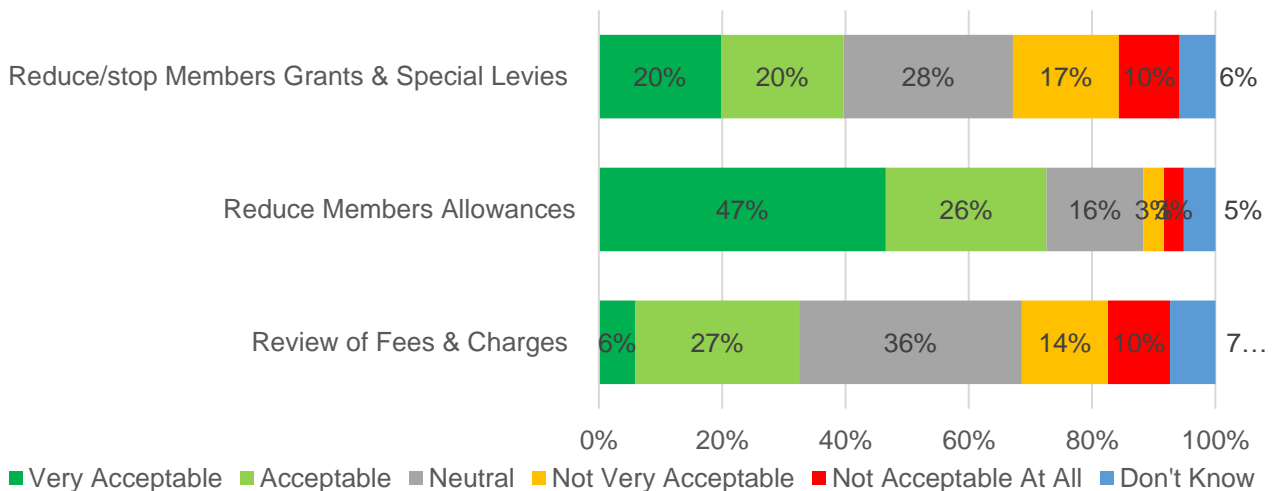


Service Change for Efficiency – Back Office Services

The following savings proposals were categorised as Service Change for Efficiency for Back Office Services:

<p>Fees & Charges – Review levels of fees & charges for income generating services across the Council <i>Potential saving £100,000</i></p>
<p>Reduction in the Budget for Members Allowances <i>Potential saving £50,000</i></p>
<p>Reduction/Discontinuation in Members Grants and Special Levies – Reduction in grants to small local organisations <i>Potential saving £8,910</i></p>

Respondents were asked to indicate how acceptable they found each proposal on a five-point scale. A ‘don’t know’ option was also provided. No response has been removed in all cases. The graph below shows the response.

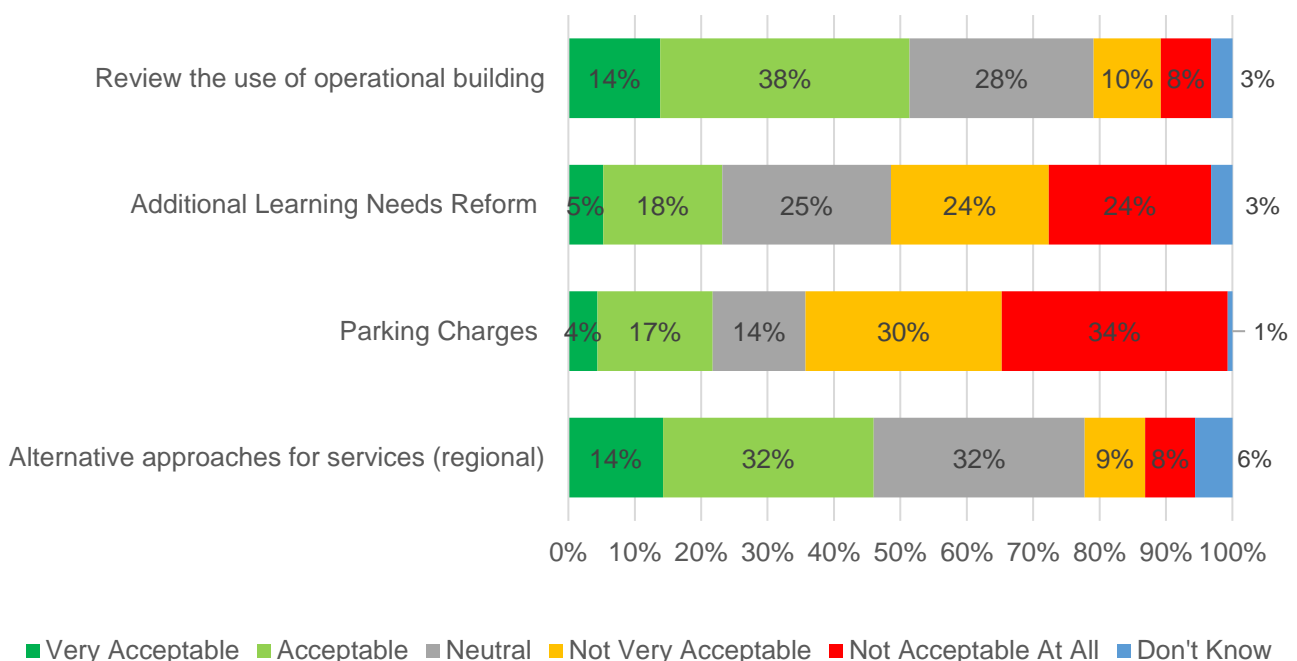


Future Business and Service Opportunities

The following savings proposals were categorised as ‘Future Business and Services Opportunities’:

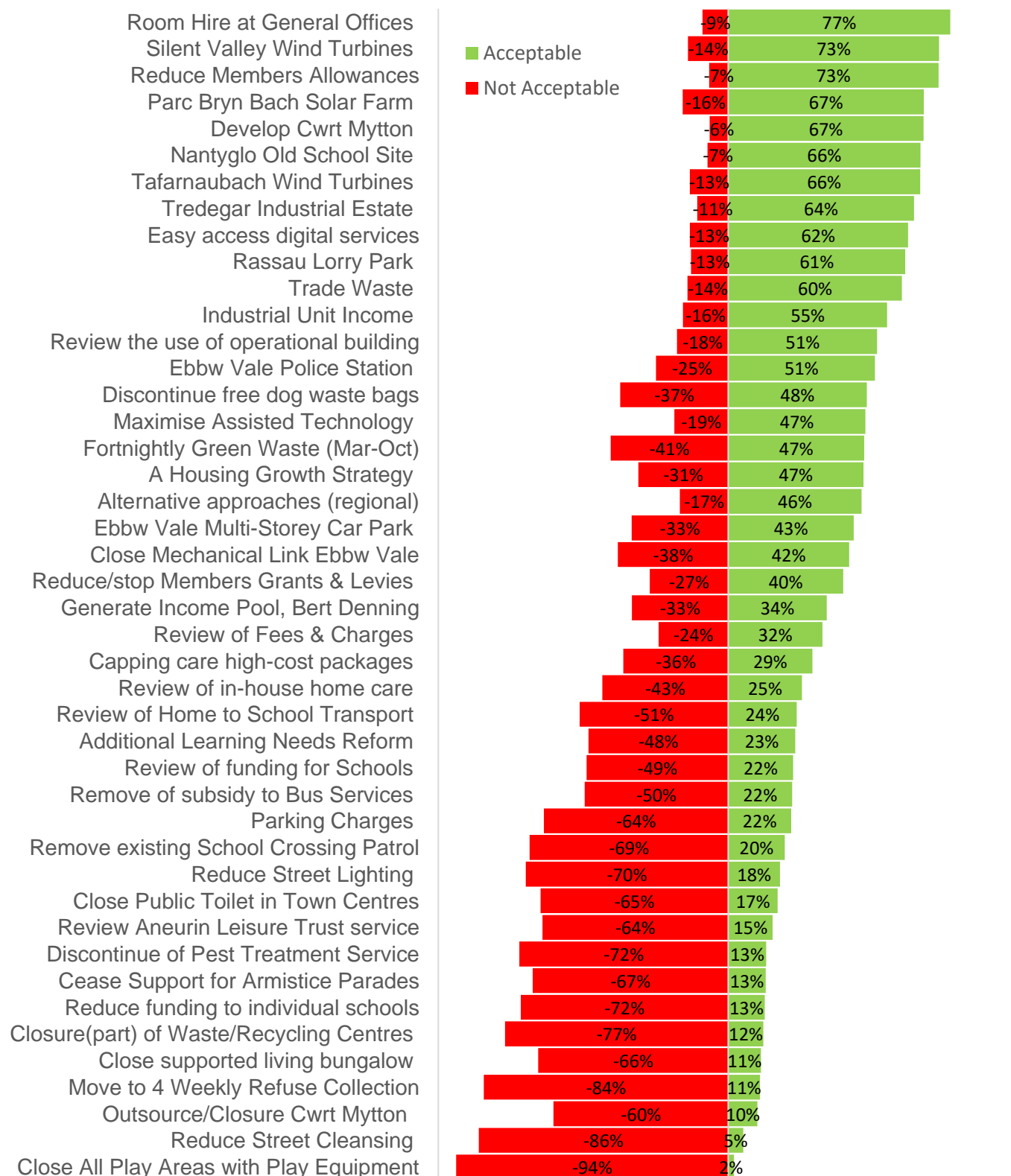
<p>Parking Charges – Consideration of introducing charges for parking in Council owned Car Parks, parking permits etc <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>
<p>Additional Learning Needs Reform – A review of placement options for learners with additional learning needs <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>
<p>Review the use of operational buildings to determine future requirements - This might include a change to opening hours / closure. <i>Potential saving £250,000</i></p>
<p>Alternative approaches to delivering services to the public - This may include collaborating on a regional or sub regional basis with neighbouring Local Authorities <i>Potential saving: £To be determined</i></p>

Respondents were asked to indicate how acceptable they found each proposal on a five-point scale. A ‘don’t know’ option was also provided. No response has been removed in all cases. The graph below shows the response.



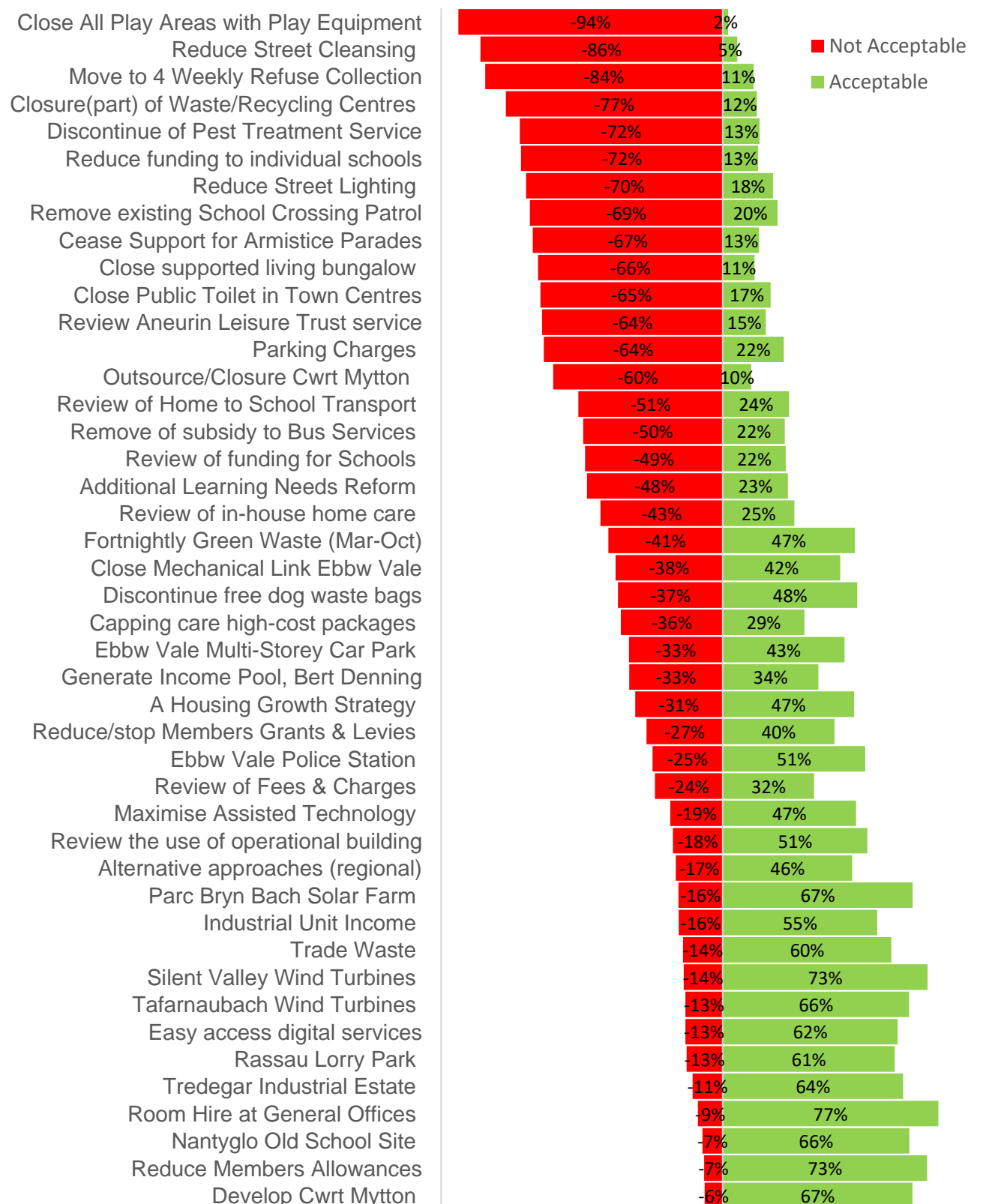
All proposals – ‘Acceptable’ to ‘Not acceptable’ (sorted by acceptable)

The chart below ‘Acceptable’ includes *Very Acceptable* and *Acceptable* aggregated together, whilst ‘Not Acceptable’ includes *Not Very Acceptable* and *Not Acceptable at All*. It shows all proposals sorted by most acceptable.



All proposals – ‘Not acceptable’ to ‘Acceptable’ (sorted by not acceptable)

In the chart below ‘Not Acceptable’ includes *Not Very Acceptable* and *Not Acceptable at All*, whilst ‘Acceptable’ includes *Very Acceptable* and *Acceptable* aggregated together. It shows all proposals sorted by least acceptable.



Suggestions on How the Council Could Save or Generate Income

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide 'free text' comments on their thoughts or suggestions on how the Council could save or generate income, and of the 3,736 respondents completing a survey, over 40% provided comments and suggestions (1,623 comments).

Categorising Comments

Following an initial categorisation of the responses the majority related to **Service Change for Efficiency** (1,277 comments) making up over three-quarters of the comments (79%). Ideas and suggestions related to back office services, Council Tax, use of Council reserves, waste and street services, street lighting, social care, education, partnership working. Examples of comments:

“Reduce the number of Councillors”

“Stop using agency staff in care settings and other council services”

Just over one out of every 10 comments (12%) related to **Future Business and Service Opportunities** (195 comments). Ideas and suggestions related to business collaboration, car parking, buildings, and shops. Examples of comments:

“Rationalise the use of Council estates spaces and sell-off half empty buildings. Bring useful old buildings back into use for the community”

“Blaenau Gwent as a county is too small and needs to be joined with other counties”

“Continue to attract new businesses to our area, by offering suitable buildings or offices that will have competitive rental rates”

Under 5% of respondents (4.6%) outlined comments relating to **Commercial Activity and Business Development** (75 comments). Ideas and suggestions

related to tourism and leisure, renewable energy, community development, working with the third sector and partnership working. Examples of comments:

“Become more commercial - e.g. energy initiatives such as Wind Turbines”

“.... Opportunity for development of tourism...walking, cycling, country pursuits etc. in Cwmtillery valley.

“Encourage businesses into the empty shops and utilising buildings available. Look again at high profile industries /opportunities ...”.

Finally, just under 5% of comments provided by respondents were not categorised within the outlined themes but processed as miscellaneous or ‘other comments’.

Further analytical work will be carried out on the plethora of comments received which will be utilised to shape future budget decisions.