



## **YouChoose: Budget Consultation Tool**

*YouChoose* is an online budget simulator that encourages members of the public to consider where council budget cuts should fall, where efficiencies might be made, and where income might be generated.

The tool was developed by the London Borough of Redbridge to engage its citizens in the difficult decisions that arise from a substantial potential reduction to its budget. In partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA) and YouGov, *YouChoose* is now freely available to all councils and fire and rescue authorities in England and Wales. Local authorities can use the tool to help them engage their citizens in decisions about how they spend their budgets, and help their citizens understand the tough choices local authorities face.

As democratically-elected representatives, councillors make the final decisions, but this tool helps them hear directly from their residents.

### **How do I get YouChoose?**

To acquire *YouChoose* for your council, please contact Matt Vincent in the Local Government Association's Research and Information team, at email: [matthew.vincent@local.gov.uk](mailto:matthew.vincent@local.gov.uk) or telephone: 0207 664 3123.

### **What is YouChoose?**

It is an online budget simulator that allows members of the public to indicate areas of spending where they feel adjustments could best be made while at the same time showing the likely consequences of those adjustments.

It starts with the basic premise that the available budget is overspent and identifies the council tax adjustment that would notionally be needed to meet all demands on the budget. The council enters details of the budget broken down by service area and the maximum acceptable council tax increase. It is then down to the citizen to get council tax to a reasonable level by making adjustments to the budget for various departments and services.

The tool is necessarily less complicated than real life decisions: but it is still able to give residents the opportunity to indicate which services they prioritise most highly or feel are least important. Citizens can reduce or increase budgets, identify cuts in staff pay, and identify where (from a list provided by the council) possible efficiency savings and methods of income generation might be made.

The tool shows that councils face hard decisions: so, for example, it is impossible to advise a reduction in council tax without seeing the consequences for services (the tool allows councils to suggest positive and negative consequences for different levels of reductions or increases to service spend). Citizens can also contrast the different approaches: the salami-slice from all services, or making the savings in just a few budget areas in order to protect (or maybe even enhance) some priority areas.

The software will allow anyone, officers or the public, to see the results as they come in. A number of graphical presentations are available instantly, for example, how the number of responses change over time and which are the spending categories most frequently selected for cuts. The data can also be downloaded in CSV or XML format for other sorts of analysis.

You can see a 'demonstrator' version of the tool, which you can play with without spoiling anyone's consultation, at: <https://youchoose.yougov.com/conversari>.

### **How much does YouChoose cost?**

The Local Government Association, London Borough of Redbridge and YouGov have worked in partnership to make *YouChoose* completely free to all councils and fire and rescue authorities in England and Wales.

### **What do I get?**

Once a council has indicated that it would like to receive the tool (see 'How do I get YouChoose?'), within 48 hours the contact person will be sent:

- website space on the YouGov server, unique to the council, so the consultation is hosted remotely (and the council can link to it from its own website)
- a username and password, providing administrative access to the *YouChoose* tool on that website
- an administrative guide, with instructions on how to tailor the *YouChoose* tool to meet the needs of the council and how to launch the consultation.

At the end of the consultation (or during the consultation if required), the council is able to download:

- the dataset, containing all the responses to the consultation, with demographic information attached so the council can weight it to reflect their population, should that be required (for an example of that data download, go to Redbridge's site and click on 'view results', then download the data file, save it, and open it in Excel; this will not include the demographic information, but will do when you download from the administrative site)
- the additional suggestions that people made for savings when prompted at the end of the consultation exercise.

The graphs, which can be seen when clicking on 'view results', can also be printed.

Analysis of the dataset is not included, although the tool itself allows anyone to see top level results as they come in. For more detailed study, councils will need to analyse the dataset themselves, or can commission analysis from YouGov. YouGov has a menu of analysis options available, for a range of fees between £950 for a set of weighted data tables to £3,000 for a full report: contact Anne Gammon at email: [anne.gammon@yougov.com](mailto:anne.gammon@yougov.com) for details.

### **How can YouChoose be used?**

Anyone who has access to the internet can take part in the online survey. However, it is important to consider which residents may be excluded from this. Councils may want to look at ways for people without access to a computer and internet connection, or who are not confident in using the internet, to take part. For example, the London Borough of Redbridge has made it available in libraries and trained staff there to help people; they have also made it available and provided help to use it at events held in community groups and day centres.

When presenting the results, it might be helpful to remind the audience that:

- the *YouChoose* tool is necessarily simple (for example, not all services and not all consequences can be included) – but it does give a broad indication of which services and sources of income and efficiencies are most important to people
- the tool is most likely to be used by people with direct internet access, who are confident online and are willing to spend time giving their views – however, this does not devalue the exercise and, as suggested above, there are ways of helping those less familiar with, or without access to, the internet.

Councils may also want to use the tool as part of their wider engagement strategies (visit the Consultation and Engagement Community on the Knowledge Hub for ideas about other practical ways of engaging communities: <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/consultationandengagementcommunity>).

### **Is YouChoose available in other languages?**

*YouChoose* is available in English and Welsh. It is not currently available in any other languages.

### **What should I do while I wait for YouChoose?**

Once you have requested *YouChoose*, the website that will host your consultation will be set up and your username and password will be created. YouGov will send you details within two working days.

The tool is very simple and quick to tailor. The most time-consuming element is agreeing the description of the services and the consequences of making reductions or increases to services: that is because these will be specific to the council and so work best if personalised (for example, naming leisure centres that may close if the leisure service has its budget cut). While waiting for *YouChoose*, councils may want to start this process of agreeing the text for the tool.

Note, however, when a council is given access to the *YouChoose* tool, it shows the service spending categories relevant to that authority (depending on whether they are district, county or unitary authorities). They are: community safety; council support and public engagement; culture and leisure; children's services and education; environment and waste; housing and homelessness; roads, planning and economy; and adult social care.

Ideally, leave the title of these spending categories as they are, as this will allow the responses of residents in this consultation to be compared to those in other consultations. Instead, modify their description, and/or the titles and descriptions of the service elements beneath them. However, all items and factors can be tailored, if the council feels this is crucial.

### **How do I find out more about consultation, participatory budgeting and other forms of community engagement?**

Visit the Knowledge Hub, which has a number of communities that might be helpful including:

**YouChoose budget consultation tool** community for advice and specifically about YouChoose  
(<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/youchoosebudgetconsultationtoolusersgroup>)

**Consultation and Engagement Community** for more general advice  
(<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/consultationandengagementcommunity>)

To receive a more accessible version of this guide, please contact:  
Email: [info@local.gov.uk](mailto:info@local.gov.uk) ‘