

Proposal to Depool Service Charges from Rents

Consultation Results

October 2024

Introduction

This report outlines the results of Stroud District Council's (SDC) consultation on the proposal to separate service charge costs from rent, known as 'depooling'. At present, several services that are currently provided are not included in the rental charge. The aim of the consultation was to allow tenants (not Independent Living tenants, leaseholders or those with shared ownership*) to have their say about the council's proposal to depool.

Statutory Requirement for Consultation

Stroud District Council (SDC) conducted this consultation in compliance with statutory obligations, adhering to the Regulator of Social Housing's requirements for *Transparency, Influence, and Accountability*, as outlined in recent legislation. This mandate requires social housing providers to engage with tenants transparently and ensure that they have a voice in decisions impacting their housing.

The consultation process met these obligations by:

- **Providing Accessible Information:** Tenants received clear, comprehensive explanations of the depooling proposal, including examples of the potential service charges and their purpose.
- **Facilitating Tenant Influence:** Multiple avenues for feedback—including mailed surveys, an online platform, and in-person and virtual meetings—ensured that all tenants had the opportunity to participate meaningfully.
- **Ensuring Accountability:** By summarising consultation feedback and communicating outcomes to tenants, SDC reinforces its accountability to residents, aligning with the Regulator's standards for fair and transparent housing service provision.

Through these actions, SDC demonstrates its commitment to regulatory compliance, providing tenants with meaningful engagement in housing decisions and upholding the principles of the *Transparency, Influence, and Accountability* requirement.

About the survey

The consultation was carried out between 23 September to 20 October 2024. A letter (Appendix 1) together with questionnaire (Appendix 2) and pre-paid envelope was posted to 4,116 general needs tenants who would be affected by the council's proposal to depool service charges from rent. The letter explained the concept of depooling and reasons for the proposal. Some examples of services which could be charged for were included.

* Independent living tenants, leaseholders or those with shared ownership already have their service charges separated.

To give tenants affected by this proposal the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the depooling proposal, a direct link to an SDC web page giving more in-depth information was included along with an FAQ section and hyperlink to the online survey. In addition, tenants were invited to in-person and online meetings with staff where they could ask questions and gain clarity. The in-person meetings were held in Stroud and Dursley, while online meetings were arranged in the evening and on a weekend to suit people who are working, and/or have caring responsibilities etc. Tenants could also contact the Resident Involvement team by phone or email.

As an alternative to the paper questionnaires, tenants were given the option to complete the survey online. Information about the depooling proposal with links to SDC's website and online survey were also provided on the SDC Housing Facebook page. Reminders about meetings were also highlighted in various Facebook posts.

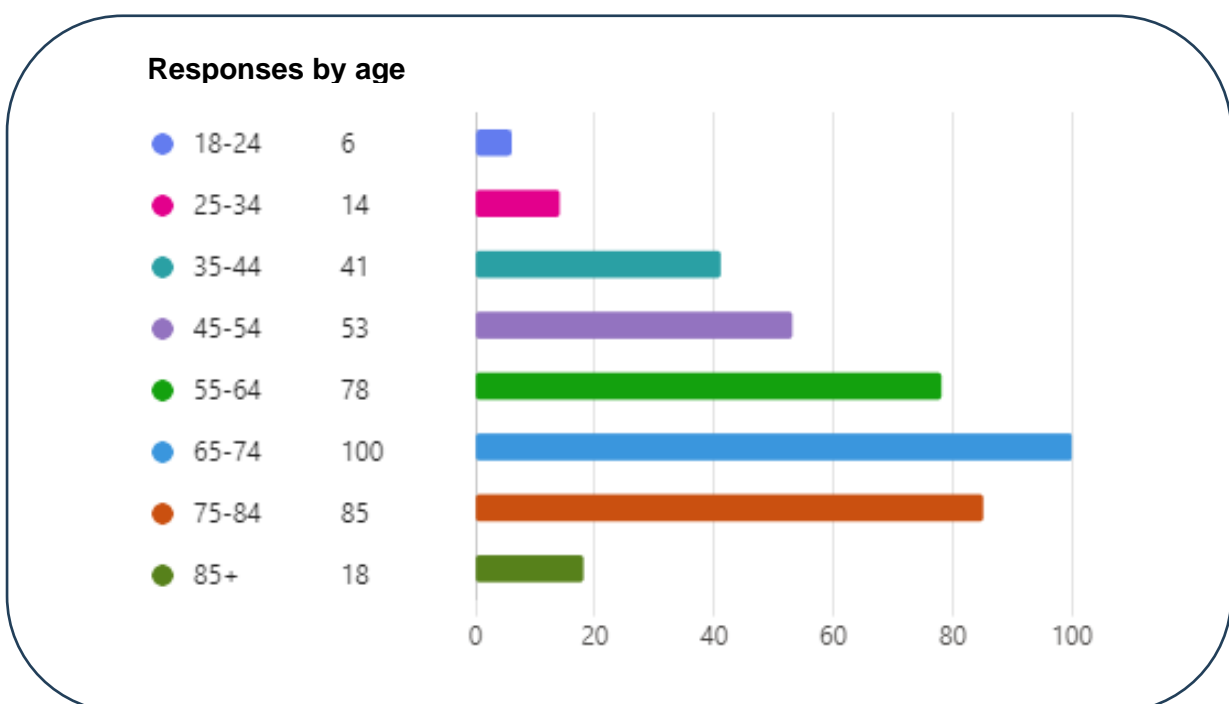
In total there were 398 responses to the survey which represented a response rate just under 10%. Online responses comprised 13% (52) of the total received; the majority being returned by post (346).

In-person meetings were attended by seven tenants and online meetings were booked by four tenants although only two were able to attend. Unique visits to SDC's Depooling website page numbered 123.

The Resident Involvement team was contacted by 21 tenants via telephone and email to talk through their queries. In some cases, staff went through the online survey with them and others said they'd complete the online survey themselves. Amongst these contacts was a tenant with a hearing impairment. An appointment with an interpreter from the Gloucestershire Deaf Association enabled us to explain the process to him so that he was able to participate in the consultation.

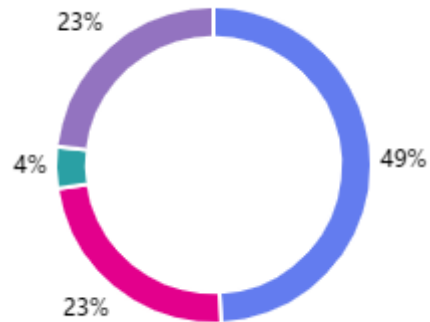
A selection of the 169 additional respondent comments/suggestions which accompany the statistical data (below), give a flavour of tenant feedback.

Responses Overview



Responses by type of property

● House	196
● Flat	93
● Maisonette	17
● Bungalow	92



Do tenants agree with the proposal to depool?

The responses to this question showed a slight majority leaning towards 'no' (54%) and 46% selecting, 'yes', indicating a near split with a small preference for 'no'.

Some of the reasons for opposition to the proposal may be attributed to affordability and the effects of the 'cost of living crisis'. Some of this dissent could also be ascribed to tenants' understanding of what chargeable 'services' are. Numerous comments referred to repairs and maintenance costs which are the council's responsibility and are catered for as part of the rent. The assortment of comments below, reflect these concerns.

Comments around affordability and understanding of what service charges are.

"I would not be happy to pay any extra considering the jump in current rent prices are already affecting us financially."

"... Please leave things alone we are already struggling with the cost of living crisis as it is !!!"

"I would agree with the depooling of the rent if the repair and maintenance services were of at least a good standard. There are a lot of improvements to make with this service before depooling is even considered. From the first point of contact to the repair being completed is just not satisfactory the majority of the time."

"For communal areas makes sense."

Do you agree with the concept of depooling (separating rent and service charges)?

● Yes	171
● No	197



Is showing service charges separately from rent (depooling), fairer?

There is a 60/40 split around this question, with 60% of respondents saying they consider depooling to be fairer. It is also apparent that some respondents don't understand the underlying costs of services which the housing service has a responsibility to provide (to comply with social housing regulations), as the comments below illustrate.

"A break down of the rent payment which shows how much goes into the service charges etc and a calendar of what jobs/tasks will be done and completed and a list of jobs that aren't covered in the service charges/ rent would be good."

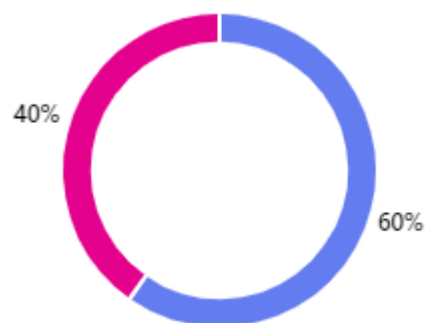
"As you are trying to manage your budget more effectively this maybe helpful..."

"To me depooling may give us tenants an overview of service charges but this is also a ruse to put up our rents whenever charges to the council goes up. You have been using Ubico for grass cutting but you are definitely being overcharged as their service is very slipshod and poor. I also question how some tenants get the grass cut in front of their properties and others don't ? It would be better if you employed your own council workmen for this purpose. This also applies to some of the other contractors that you use who in my opinion are cowboys ! Their work is inferior. When the council employed all their own staff it was much better."

"We have a children's play area in xxxxxxxx, this area is not used by any of xxxxxxxx community, we are nearly all pensioners. This is very unfair to even consider charging us for the upkeep. We do have the front grass area to our properties, most of which are cut by ourselves. a) because we take a pride in our properties. b) because a Council contractor make such a bad job of it."

Do you think showing the services you are charged for separately from your rent is fairer?

● Yes 224
● No 151



Would the introduction of service charges help to improve communal areas?

Almost two thirds of respondents argued that the introduction of service charges would not improve communal areas. Tenants' comments throughout this report reveal how they currently feel about services (towards both housing and council services generally). The

survey results underline the general mood of tenants in relation to service provision improvements as a consequence of depooling.

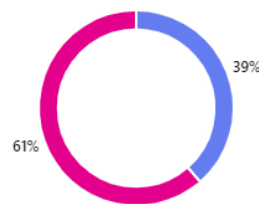
“If the services were to be charged for separately and prices increased-

a. Standards of workmanship would need to be improved.

b. Most people in social housing accommodation don't have the money, most are struggling to feed and clothe their families. This would put pressure on both the tenant and the council, i.e. the grounds maintenance where I live has not been maintained properly since April. The grass has been cut three times. On occasions elderly tenants have had to cut their own grass. If tenants are being asked to pay extra they would expect the works to be carried out to a much higher standard and far more frequently.... I do feel relationships between tenants and councils greatly need to be improved. Standards should not be allowed to decline.”

Do you agree that the introduction of service charges would help to improve communal areas?

● Yes 129
● No 205



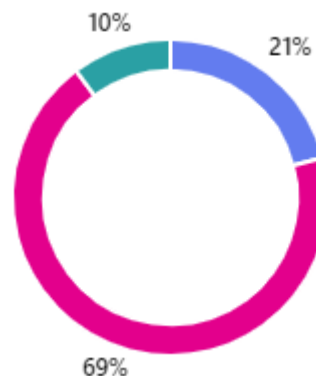
Do you have any shared services or communal areas?

Out of the total number of respondents, 21% live in communal areas (diagram below). The proportion of general needs tenants who live in SDC maisonettes / blocks of flats (and have communal areas) across the district is approximately 27%. About 7% of council residents living in flats/maisonettes have therefore responded to the survey.

The majority of those who have communal areas tend to live in blocks of flats and it is these tenants who will be most affected by the introduction of depooling. They receive more services than those living in houses or bungalow.

Do you have any shared services or communal areas?

● Yes 80
● No 263
● Don't know 39



If you have shared services or communal areas, are you happy with their condition?

Out of the 110 residents sharing communal areas, 41% are happy with their condition, while 59% are not. The comments expressed around cleaning and grass cutting for instance, can

be seen to present a strong case for improvement in the level of performance for these two services. Depooling would therefore, allow greater transparency; thus, providing residents with a more accurate picture of the costs and whether they are getting value for money.

“I am happy with the condition but unhappy with how. I already pay for a service charge for an aerial I don't use. I am also the only person in a block of 4 flats that cleans the community area. If you want to start charging for cleaning, then I am going to send you a bill for the last three years.”

“I may be prepared to pay more if standards were being met. Currently the communal area is in a shocking state. It smells, it's dirty, paint peeling off walls, carpets not hoovered & cob webs everywhere. Just to name a few issues. Why pay more if the current job is not being done to the standard it should be. I've had to wait since May just to have work done on the property (still not done) yet more money is wanted out of me when a low standard cannot be kept at it is.”

“I once paid for communal areas with a service charge in two separate places, one being the parking area with bushes etc, the other being a hallway & staircase and it was never done and once a year with the parking area. So felt I was paying for nothing. So as long as things are done then I think it is a good idea.”

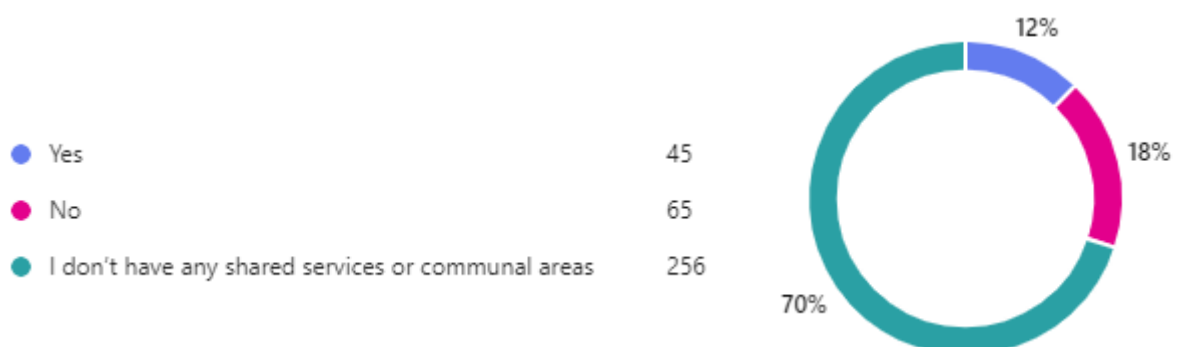
“In my opinion we don't have proper estate management or maintenance where I live. I cut my own grass because I prefer to and the council cut some of the grass i.e. children's play area, the grass is always full of weeds and files everywhere because they don't pick it up properly. We have weeds and grass growing in the side of the road and that's why I do my own.”

“...There is no cleaning that I have seen in the past 7 years of living here. I feel this is pointless as it needs doing weekly at a minimum with the footfall through the hallway. I am a ground floor flat and pay to have my windows cleaned every 6 weeks ...”

“The grass cutting we have seen is pretty awful, left everywhere and left for too long between cuts....”

“The standard of the grass cutting in the play area and areas outside our property are disgusting. Cut this morning grass left everywhere. P.S., Most of the time, I cut my own grass as I do a better job”

If you have shared services or communal areas, are you happy with their condition?



Do you have any communal areas that are cleaned regularly?

Only 14% of respondents said that their communal areas are cleaned regularly. For historical reasons, there are a small number of blocks of flats where cleaning is not included

in the cleaning contract (see comment below). Nevertheless, this not necessarily account for the high percentage of respondents who said 'no'. In the light of the data above, it appears that this particular data set (below) could be skewed. It is probable that some of the 300 respondents who answered 'no', do not share a communal area.

"We see other blocks of flats next to us who get their communal areas cleaned and yet ours is never touched. Don't see why when we pay for service charge as well."

"One of the residents regularly cleans our communal areas which I also help with if needed. We would like to keep this arrangement if possible, please."



Are those sharing communal areas happy with the standard of cleaning?

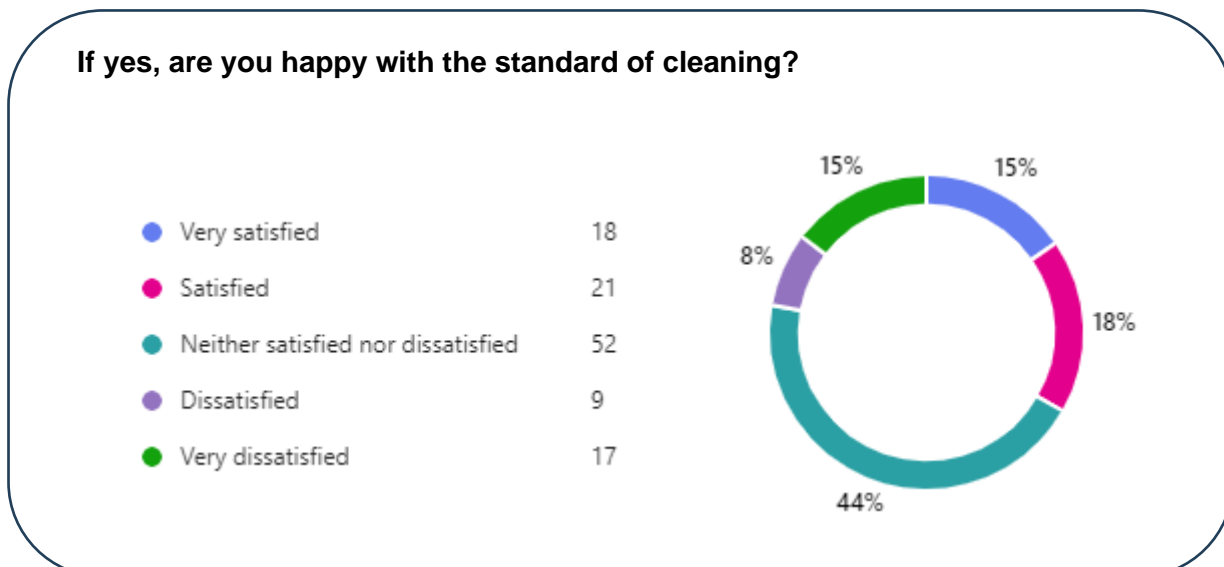
Around half of the respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the standard of cleaning. The percentage of respondents who said they were satisfied came to just under a quarter of this survey cohort. Similarly, slightly more than a quarter were dissatisfied.

Comments by respondents focussing on communal cleaning standards are:

"We have cleaners and all they do is wet mop bitty floors, no sweeping beforehand."

"I think floors in hallway could be cleaned in a better way. But I don't blame cleaner it's the cleaning equipment that could be better."

"No window sills, hand rails, front + back doors included in the cleaning regime here! Is this an exercise to justify a job for someone?"



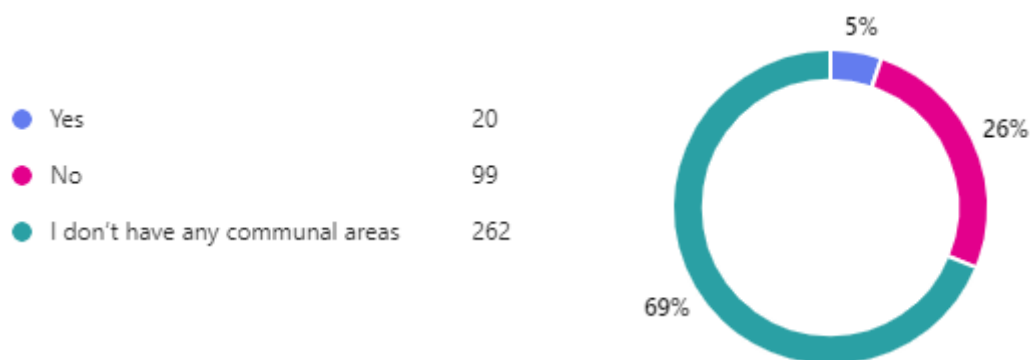
Although not part of the depooling project – Would residents be happy to pay more for a higher standard of communal area cleaning?

The majority of respondents (66%) sharing communal areas indicated that they were not prepared to pay more for a higher standard of cleaning. Only a third (33%) of respondents said they'd be prepared to do so.

"It is currently already in my rent payment which I do not want raised any higher. The cleaning is poor, the people are lovely, the equipment is poor. It smells bad after they have been. It's a quick wipe with a dirty dry mop that's it. Almost pointless + I wouldn't like to pay more for it."

"I am concerned that the service charge would be added on, and not reflect the rent portion being decreased as is inferred by the word Depooling. I have a communal bin and walkways which are only cleaned by residents. I am concerned that a cleaning charge may be applied and having no-one come to clean, as no-one ever has. I may be prepared to pay for above ground level window cleaning, only if ground level windows were cleaned also."

Although not part of the depooling project – Would you be prepared to pay more for a higher standard of communal area cleaning?



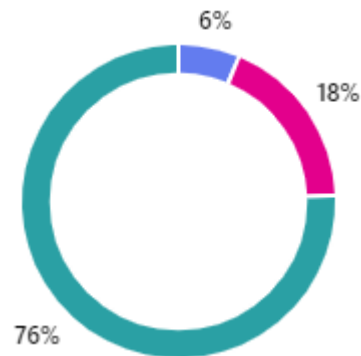
Would those living in blocks of flats be prepared to pay for additional services such as above ground level window cleaning?

Of those respondents who live in a block of flats, only 26% indicated that they would be prepared to pay for additional services such as window cleaning while 74% said they would not.

"Think the cleaning at my communal hallway is ok. Just maybe need twice yearly window clean. But don't know how they would do it in a 3 story block of flats. Would not be very fair if 2,3 could not be cleaned because of being too high up."

This question applies to flat blocks – Would you be prepared to pay for additional services such as above ground level window cleaning?

● Yes	21
● No	60
● I don't live in a flat block	251



Conclusion and Next Steps

The consultation results reveal that tenant understanding and concerns around service charges remain varied, with some uncertainty around the specific coverage and purpose of these charges. The Council remains committed to addressing these concerns with clear communication and proactive support.

To enhance transparency, each tenant will continue to receive a single bill combining rent and service charges, with a breakdown provided in the annual rent letter. This will outline each cost component clearly, such as rent, estate management fee and flat block charge where applicable. By offering a straightforward overview of these charges, we aim to mitigate misunderstandings and support tenants in budgeting.

Furthermore, the Council will strengthen its support for tenants with financial concerns regarding service charges. As previously communicated, many service charges qualify for housing benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit. For those not eligible, the Council's advisory services are available to offer guidance. This support will be emphasised in ongoing communications to address the financial concerns voiced by tenants.

In response to feedback, we will also provide additional clarification on specific issues:

- Calculation of service charges: A clear methodology will be outlined to ensure that charges align with actual service usage.
- Coverage of communal gardens and maintenance: Defined parameters will be provided for services included in communal garden maintenance.
- Support for queries related to repairs and maintenance: Information on the Council's repair policy, including what may be considered rechargeable, will be readily accessible.

These steps, coupled with clear, consistent communication, will enhance transparency and help build a more informed understanding among tenants.

APPENDIX 1



STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Ebley Mill • Ebley Wharf • Stroud • Gloucestershire • GL5 4UB
01453 766321
www.stroud.gov.uk

[Contact_Name]
[Address_1]
[Address_2]
[Address_3]
[Address_4]
[Post_Code]



**Please complete & return the enclosed questionnaire
or scan the code above to fill it out online.**

20th September 2024

Dear [Contact_Name],

Depooling Rent and Service Charges Consultation and Information for Council Tenants

The Housing Team is reviewing the optional services it provides to tenants and the costing model for continuing to deliver these services. A number of services that are currently provided are not included in the rental charge. As a result, we are considering introducing a 'service charge' to cover the cost of these additional services. This factsheet explains what the charges will be for and how they will affect you.

What is depooling?

Depooling of rents and service charges means separating the costs of specific services from the overall rent. This way, you can see exactly what you are paying for each service. It makes the costs more transparent and ensures you only pay for the services you use. This change helps the Housing Team manage its budget better and provides a clearer breakdown of expenses for tenants.

Examples of the services that may be shown separately:

- Estate management and maintenance
- Buildings insurance
- Aids and Adaptations (repair & maintenance)
- Water charges
- Septic tank

Why are we doing it?

There are two main reasons for this. First, we want tenants to clearly understand the services they receive and have options to choose from. This means they can make informed decisions about what works best for them. Second, we need to ensure that we can afford to provide these services while also offering good value for money. This helps us

manage our budget effectively and ensures that tenants get the best possible services without unnecessary costs.

How are the charges worked out?

All the costs will be based on the actual expenses incurred for the services you receive. This means that every charge reflects the true cost of providing these services. Stroud District Council does not make a profit from these charges. Our goal is to ensure transparency and fairness, so you can be confident that you are only paying for the services you use, at their real cost.

How will the costs change?

The service charges are worked out from the actual cost of providing the services to you. If the cost of the service goes up during the year we will increase the charge by the same amount. All charges will be calculated and set out in the annual rent letter that is sent to tenants in February/March each year.

Impact of service charges

Most service charges are eligible for benefits. If you receive full housing benefit, the cost of these services will be covered by your benefits. For those on Universal Credit (UC), the housing element of UC can also cover these service charges. This means that if you qualify for UC, you may not need to pay out of pocket for these services. If you are not currently receiving benefits, you will be responsible for covering the full cost of the charges.

Consultation

To tell us what you think of this change please complete the enclosed questionnaire and return to us using the pre-paid envelope provided. Alternatively scan the QR code at the top of this letter or go to stroud.gov.uk/housing/depooling. The consultation closing date is 20th October 2024.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss these changes, **please book a place** at one of our upcoming in person or online meetings. You can do this by emailing resident.involvement@stroud.gov.uk or calling the **Resident Involvement Team** on 01453 766 321.

In Person Meetings	
Location	Time & Date
The Conservatory, Cotswold Bowls Club Golden Jubilee Way, Stroud GL5 3HQ	11am – 12pm Wednesday 2 nd October
Centenary Lounge, Chantry Centre, 34-36 Long Street, Dursley, GL11 4JB	10:30am – 11:30am Tuesday 8 th October
Online Meetings	
Time	Date
7pm - 8pm Tuesday	1 st October
11am - 12pm Saturday	5 th October
7pm - 8pm Tuesday	15 th October

For more information about service charge depooling, please visit our website
stroud.gov.uk/housing/depooling

APPENDIX 2



Depooling of rent and service charges

Privacy and Data Protection

You are invited to participate in this optional survey. By completing this survey, you agree to the following uses of the data you submit.

This survey will be used for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating feedback to our depooling of rent and service charges consultation. Responses and written comments will be used to help us shape the services that we provide. Reported data and comments will be anonymised.

Authorised personnel from Stroud District Council will have access to the survey data. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact resident.involvement@stroud.gov.uk or call us on 01453 766 321.

To see how Stroud District Council manages personal data please visit www.stroud.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/transparency-and-open-data/access-to-information/privacy-notice/privacy-notice

If you would like to make a complaint about a Council service, please visit www.stroud.gov.uk/complaints

The following 10 questions are related to depooling (separating rent and service charges)

1. Are you responding as:

- A Stroud District Council Tenant
- A Stroud District Council Leaseholder
- Neither of the above

2. What is your age group?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75-84
- 85+



- 3. What type of property do you live in?**
- House
 - Flat
 - Maisonette
- 4. Do you agree with the concept of depooling (separating rent and service charges)?**
- Yes
 - No
- 5. Do you think that showing the services you are charged for separately from your rent is fairer?**
- Yes
 - No
- 6. Do you agree that the introduction of service charges would help to improve communal areas?**
- Yes
 - No
- 7. Do you have any shared services or communal areas?**
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
- 8. If you have shared services or communal areas, are you happy with their condition?**
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't have any shared services or communal areas
- 9. Do you have any communal areas that are cleaned regularly?**
- Yes
 - No
- 10. If yes, are you happy with the standard of cleaning?**
- Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Very dissatisfied

The following 2 questions are about potential future changes and are not related to depooling.

11. Although not part of the depooling project - would you be prepared to pay more for a higher standard of communal area cleaning?

- Yes
- No
- I don't have any communal areas

12. This question applies to flat blocks – Would you be prepared to pay for additional services such as above ground level window cleaning?

- Yes
- No
- I don't live in a flat block

13. Please let us know any comments or suggestions that you have regarding depooling.

If you need more space, please use the reverse of this page

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your feedback will help us improve our services and better meet your needs. The consultation results will be published in due course.