



2024/25 Budget consultation

Outline Report



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Consultation context

Somerset Council's 2024/25 budget consultation was launched in December 2023. The aim was to increase understanding of local government funding and the services the council provides, while also seeking the public's views on potential savings options as the council looks to set a balanced budget in February 2024.

In November last year, Somerset Council declared a financial emergency with a projected budget gap of £100m for 2024/25.

Local authorities legally have to deliver a balanced budget and so cannot spend more money than is available.

Both nationally and in Somerset, the cost of delivering services is increasing significantly faster than income, particularly for statutory services like social care for both adults and children.

Our income comes from Council Tax, government grants, and fees and charges such as parking charges and planning fees. Somerset has an historically low level of Council Tax, below the national average and less than neighbouring authorities in Bristol, Dorset, Cornwall, Plymouth, and Bath and North East Somerset.

We have been open and transparent about the challenges we are facing. Ahead of budget-setting in February this year and before any decisions are made, we invited residents, businesses and stakeholders to share their views on a range of high-level options that could contribute towards balancing the budget.

We also asked for options not yet considered and encouraged feedback on the potential impact of the general approach to budget setting.

This report summarises the findings of the consultation exercise.

Methodology

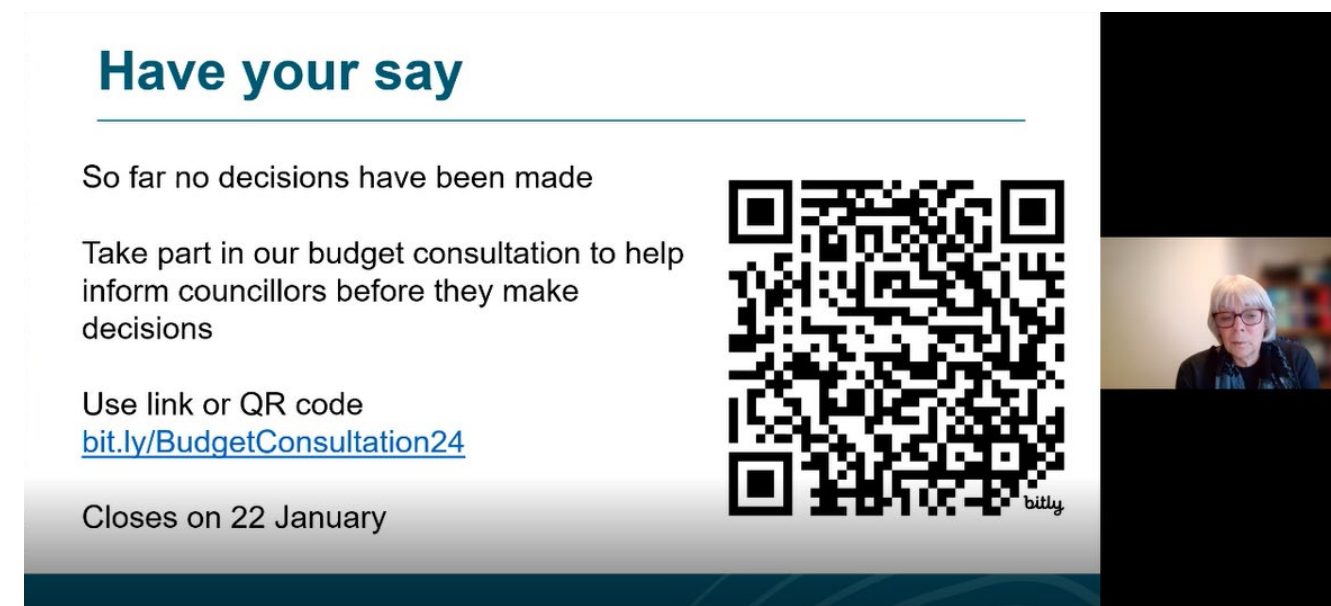
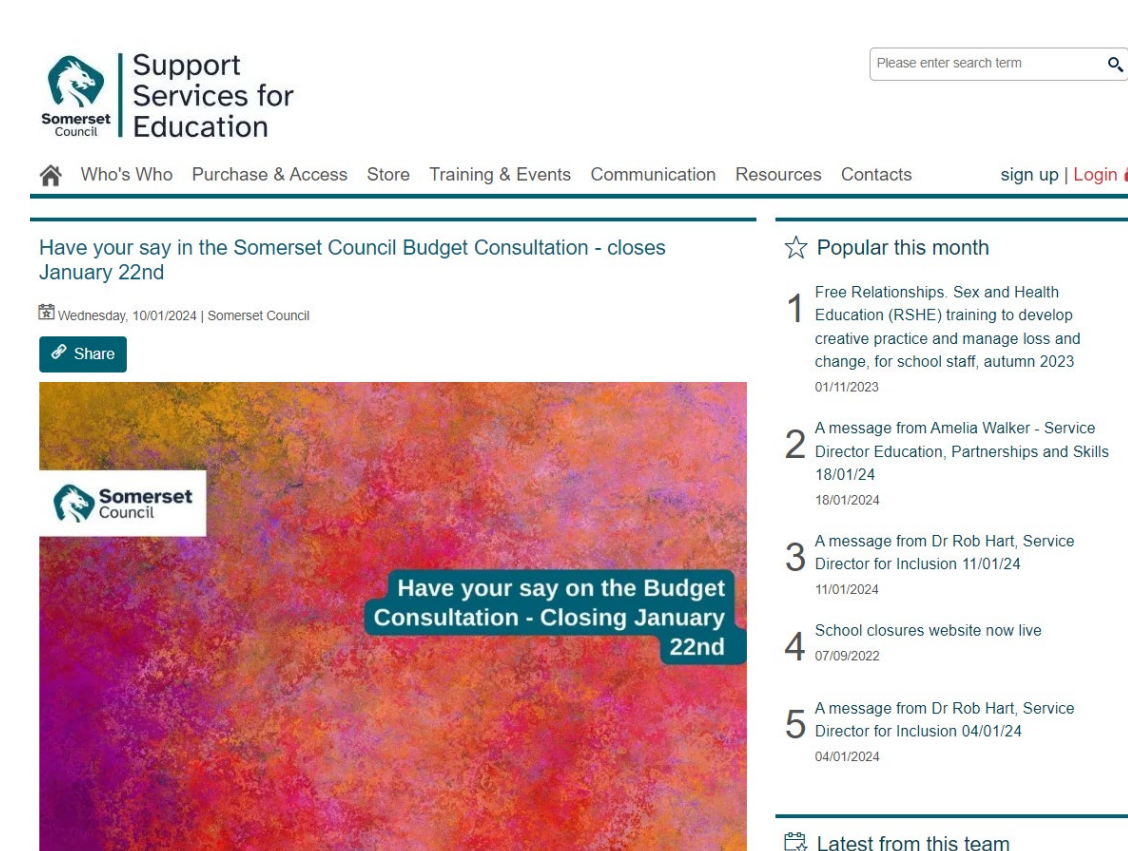
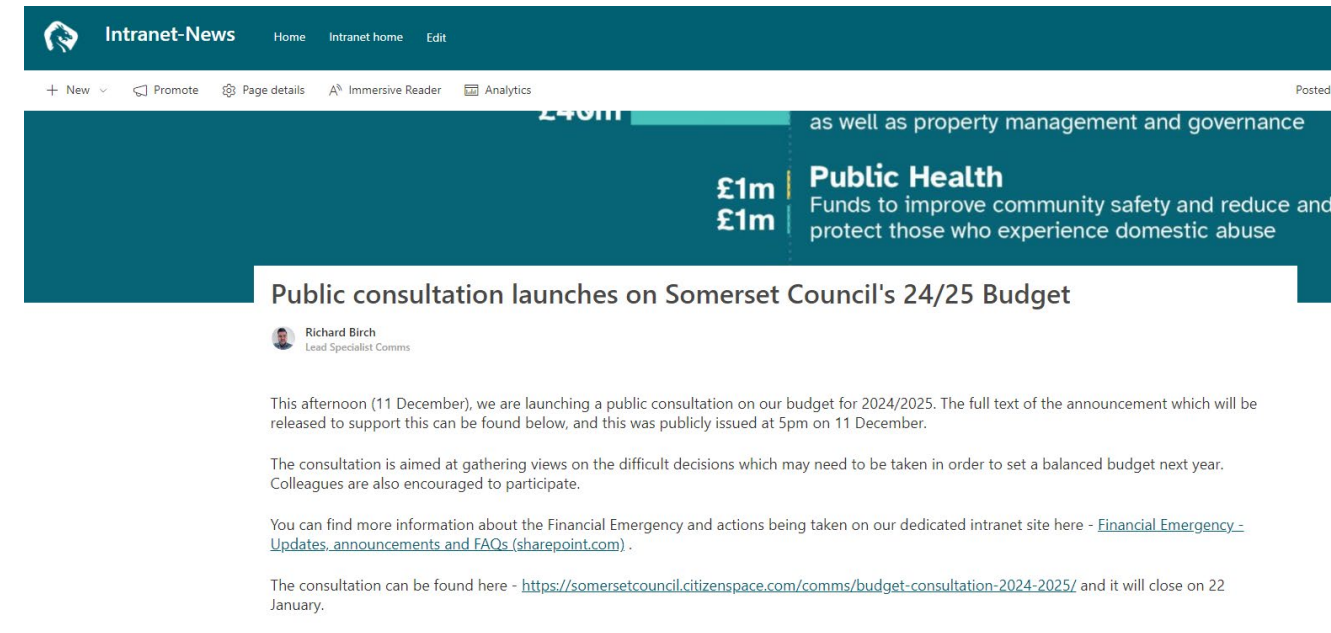
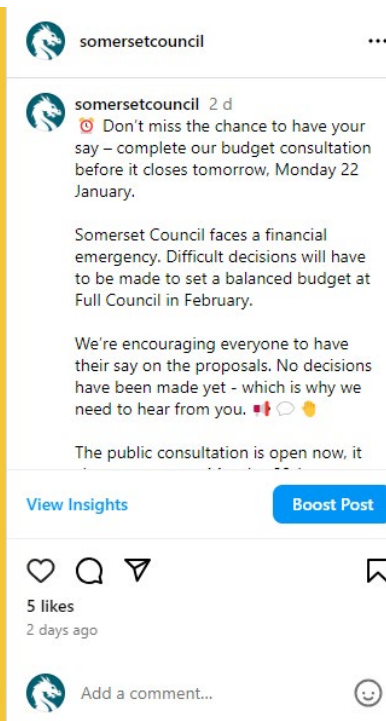
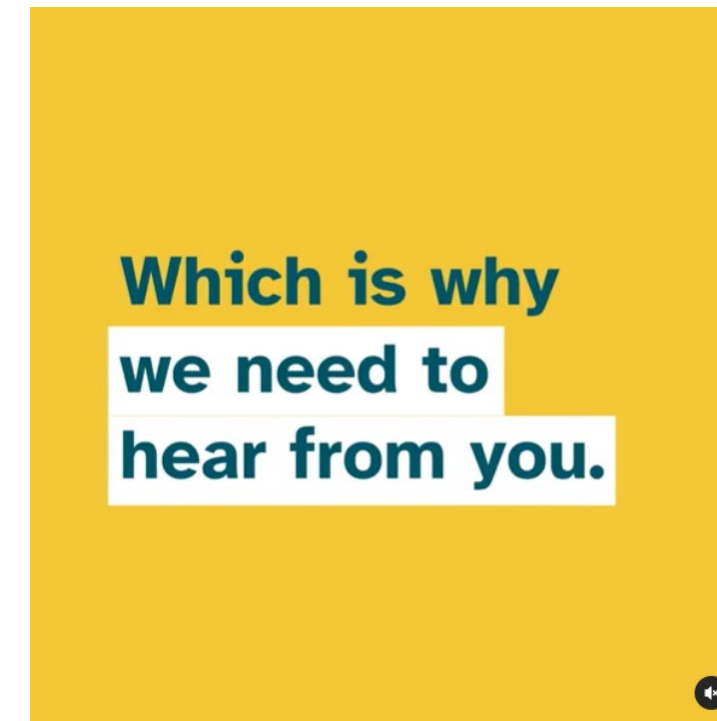
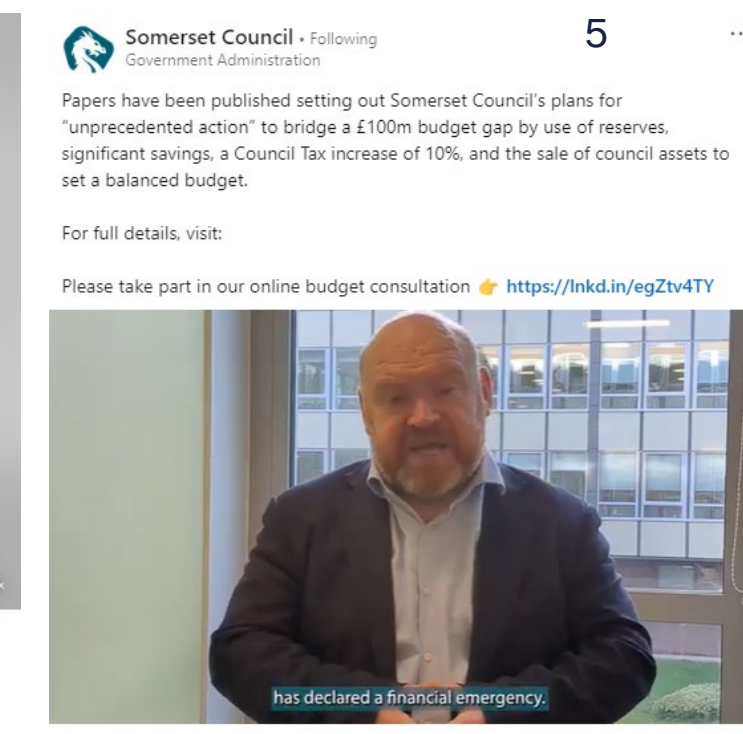
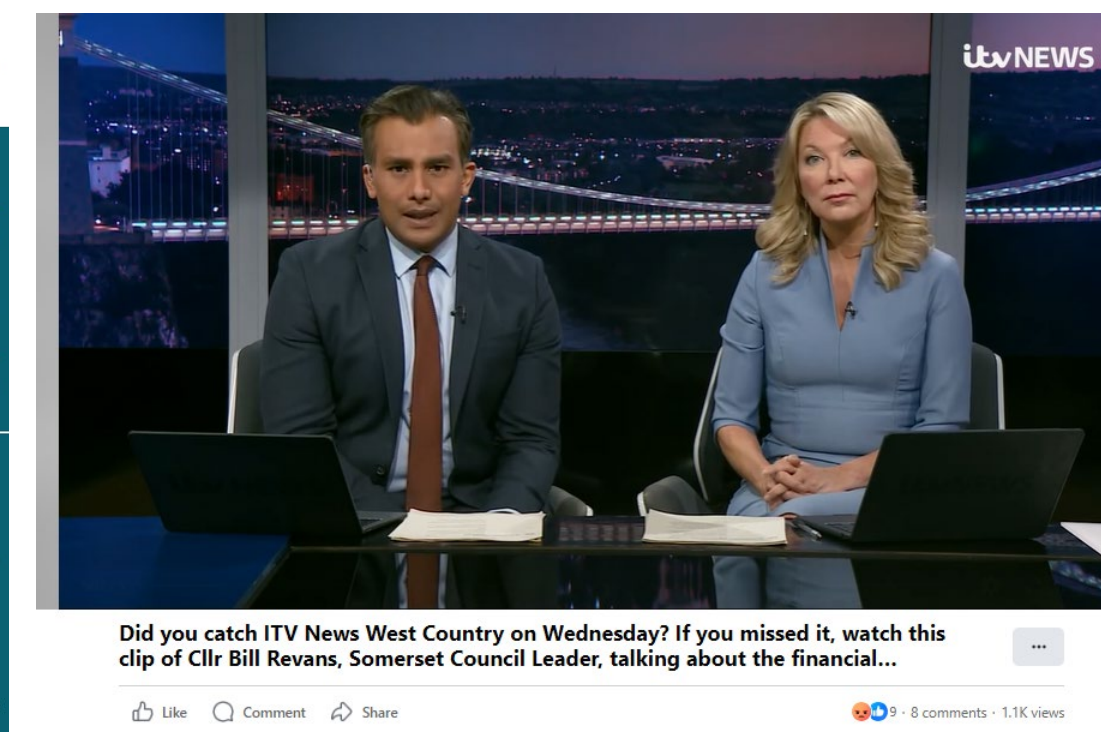
- The budget consultation ran for six weeks from 11 December 2023 to 22 January 2024 and was widely promoted through a variety of online and offline channels.
- Information packs were made available online and in libraries. Structured responses were gathered using the council's consultation platform and informal responses have been gathered via email, comments on social media posts and letters.
- We held four in-person briefing events specifically for businesses. These were attended by both Members and Officers and held in Taunton, Bridgwater, Frome and Yeovil to give a wide geographical spread. There was also a virtual event for those who could not attend in person. These were attended by representatives from 46 businesses.
- The consultation received 5,841 responses via the consultation survey, 17 emails/ letters and nearly 400 comments on social media. We are also aware of a petition about a specific saving associated with Yeovil Rec which has so far generated more than 13,900 signatures.
- Of the responses submitted via the online survey, 5,190 were from people who described themselves as residents of Somerset, 353 from Somerset Council employees, 152 from organisations, groups or businesses, and 82 from Councillors.
- This report summarises the key findings and provides comparative demographic analysis from the Somerset Council Budget Consultation 2024-2025. Notable demographic variances from the average response are also highlighted, including comparison to the demographic profile of Somerset.
- As this was an open consultation, the respondents are not a representative sample of the Somerset population. Most of the consultation questions were optional, and if 'no response' was provided to a question, this was not included in the analysis. As such, the totals for each question generally add up to less than the total number of respondents who replied via the consultation survey.

A note on verbatim coding

To manage the number of free text responses to open-ended questions, we used an inductive approach from a sample of replies to create 'tags' showing the key themes. This means the themes were developed from the responses themselves and were not pre-determined based on expectations to avoid any bias in the analysis.

Communications and promotion

- Press releases and widespread media coverage
- Dedicated consultation page on the Somerset Council website
- Somerset Council e-newsletters
- Waste Services social media and e-newsletter
- Multiple organic posts on all Council social media platforms, totaling 123,382 impressions and 11,430 engagements
- Somerset libraries
- Cascaded details through elected members, staff, partner organisations (including, parish, town and city councils, Police, Fire, Health, schools and community groups)
- Promoted to staff on the intranet homepage and at Staff Q&A and Leadership Briefings
- Business briefings, in-person and virtual
- Including in the weekly Provider Briefing, which goes all care providers, RCPA's newsletter which goes to Registered Care Provider Association members and the school's newsletter
- Posted on the Support Services for Schools (SSE) website



Demographic analysis

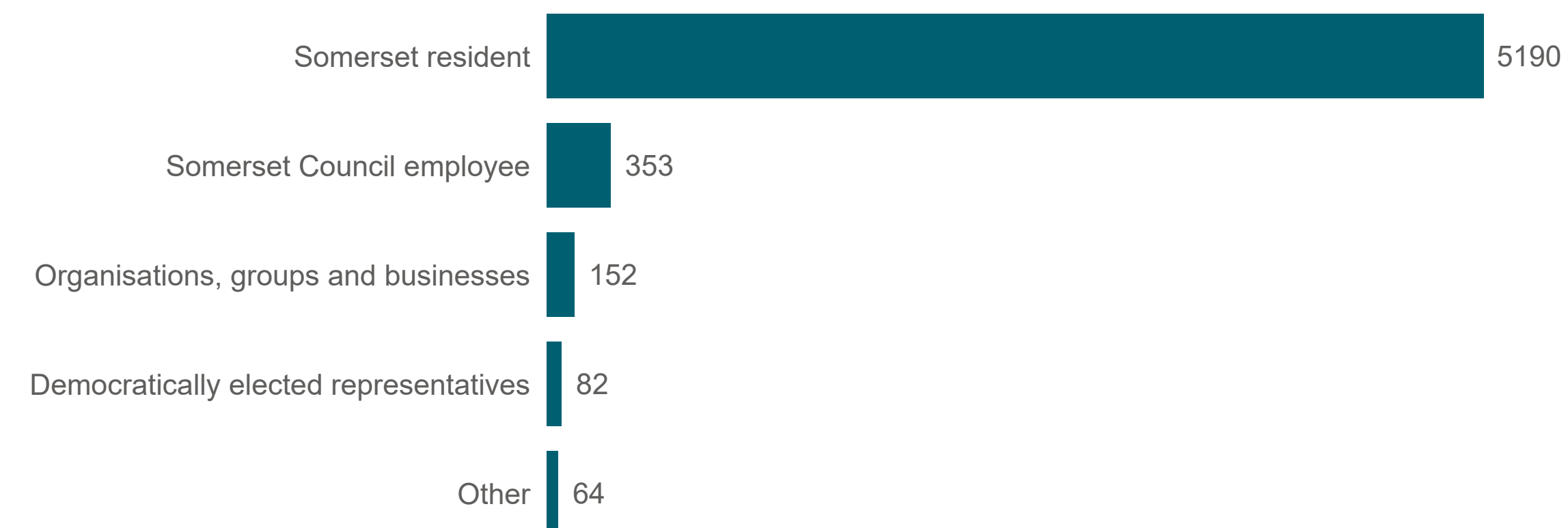
To understand how views may vary among different demographics, we have identified several groups for the more detailed analyses in this report.

In most cases 'not answered' has been removed.

The graphs showing the demographic breakdown on this page compare the consultation respondents to the overall population of Somerset according to census data.

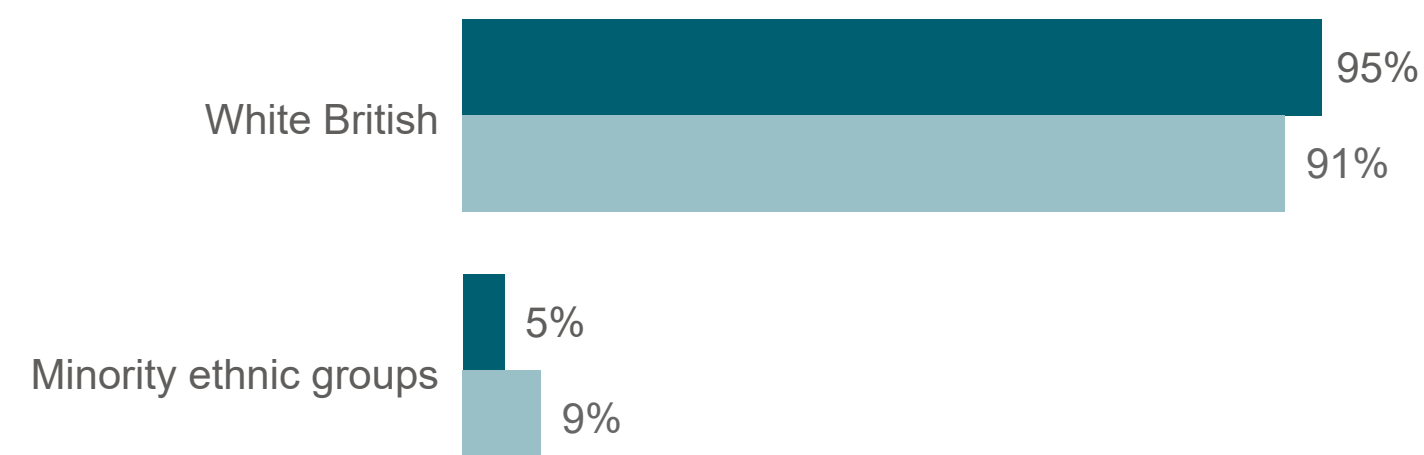
This shows there is a slight over-representation of female respondents when compared to the Somerset population. It also shows people with disabilities are slightly under-represented, although it should be noted there were around 9% of respondents who selected 'prefer not to say'.

Number of respondents by group



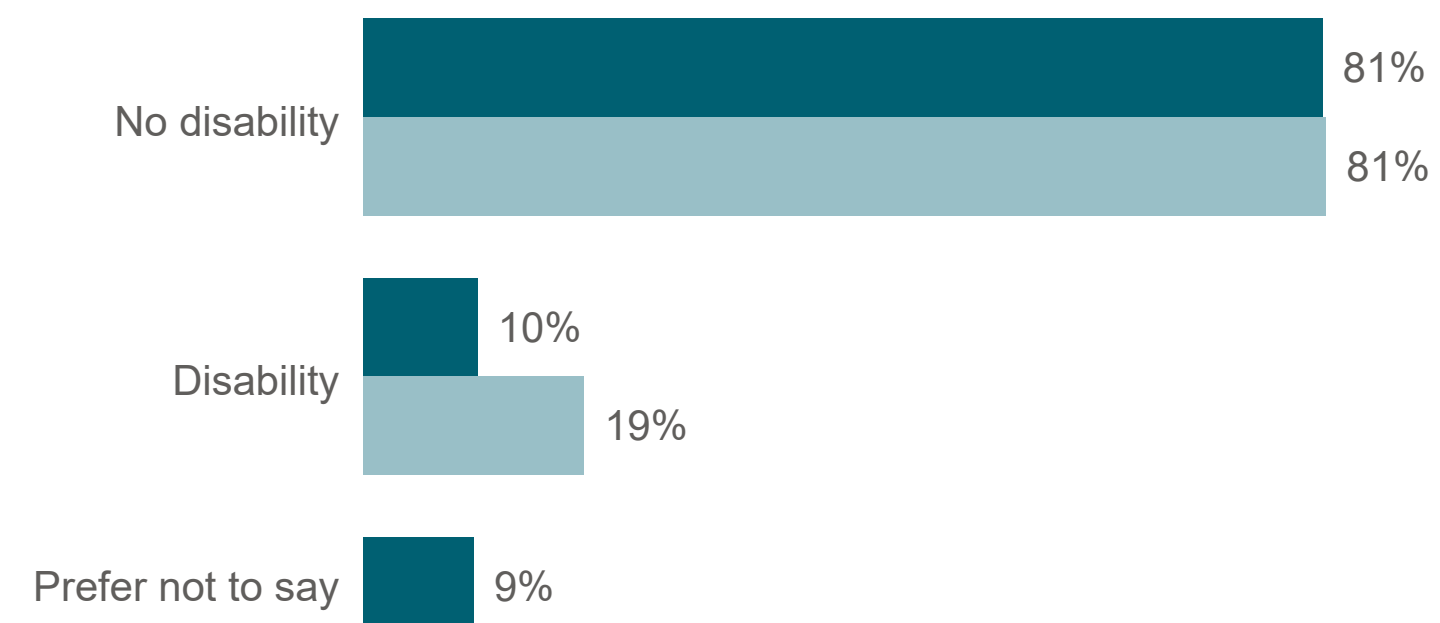
Respondents' ethnic groups, compared to Somerset population (Census 2021)

● Consultation respondents ● Somerset population



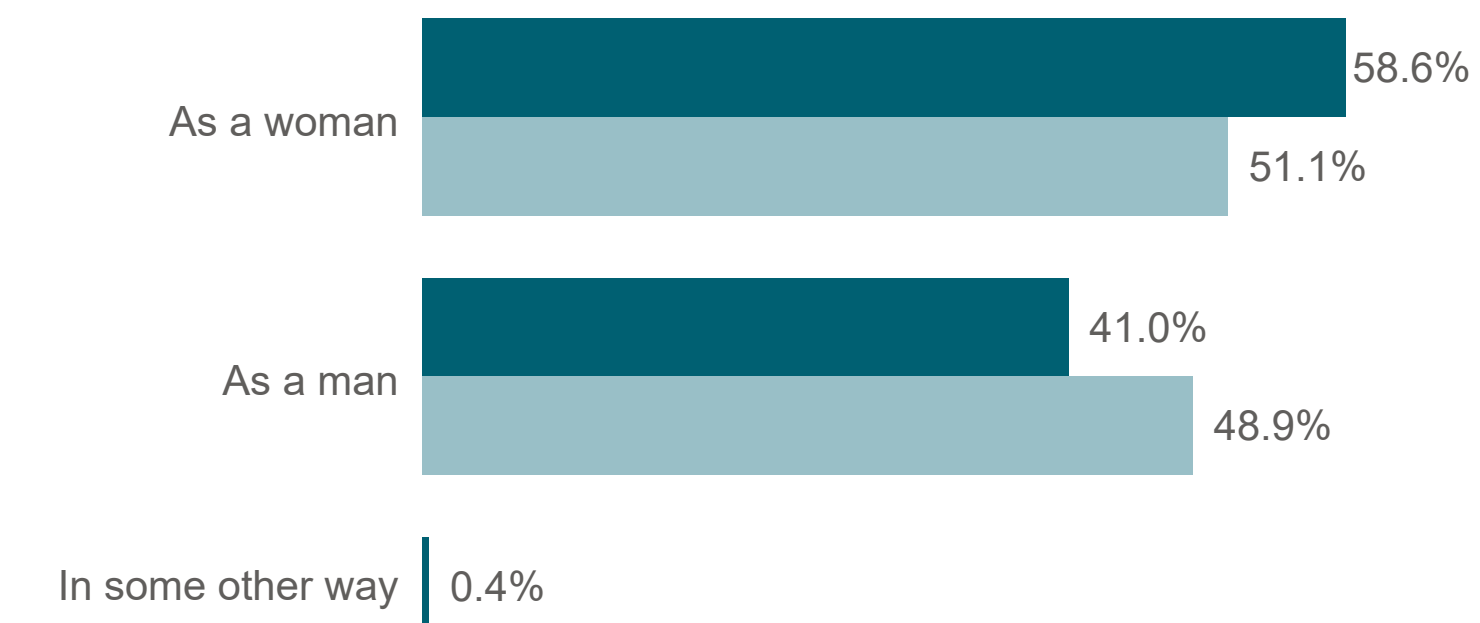
Proportion of respondents who said they had a disability compared to Somerset population (Census 2021)

● Consultation respondents ● Somerset population



Respondents' sex identity compared to Somerset population (Census 2021)

● Consultation respondents ● Somerset population



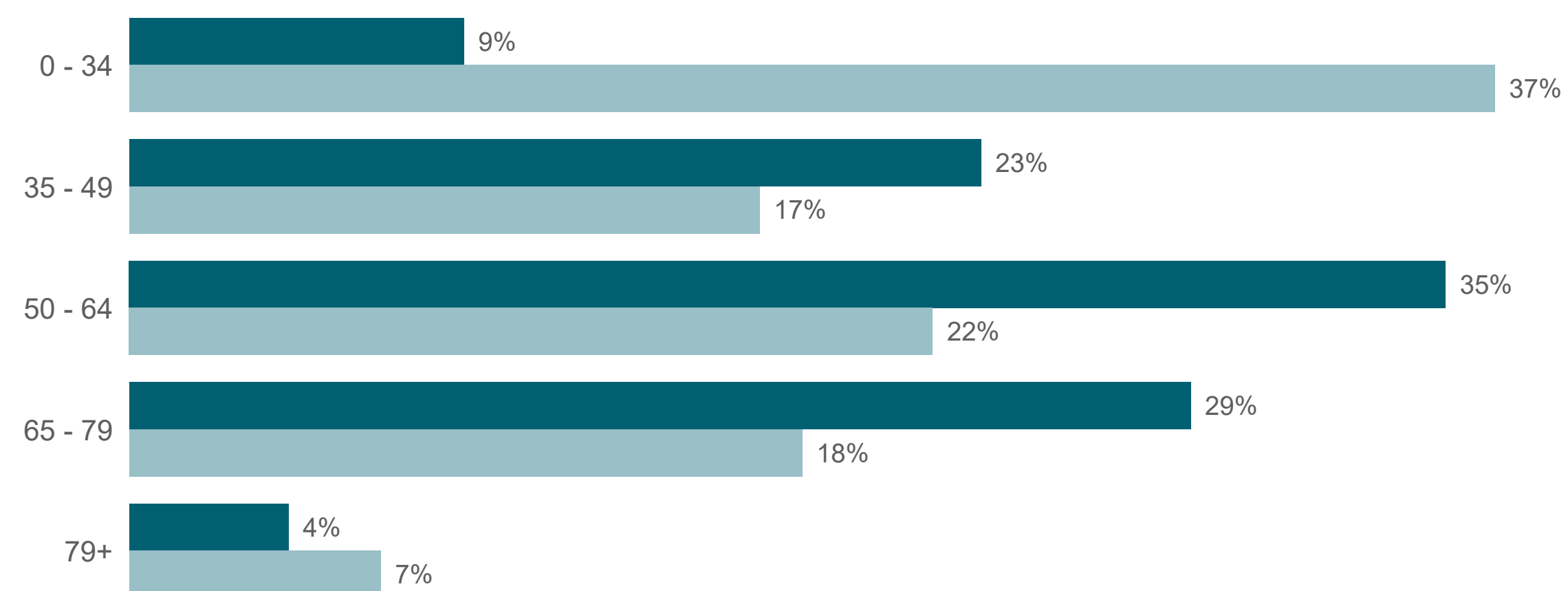
Demographic analysis

The age data should be used with caution due to the relatively low number of respondents aged under 34, and particularly aged under 24. The results clearly show that young people's views are under-represented throughout the survey and people over the age of 50 are over-represented. Efforts were made to promote the survey to younger people through channels such as social media and school newsletters, but these results are not unexpected with a consultation of this nature.

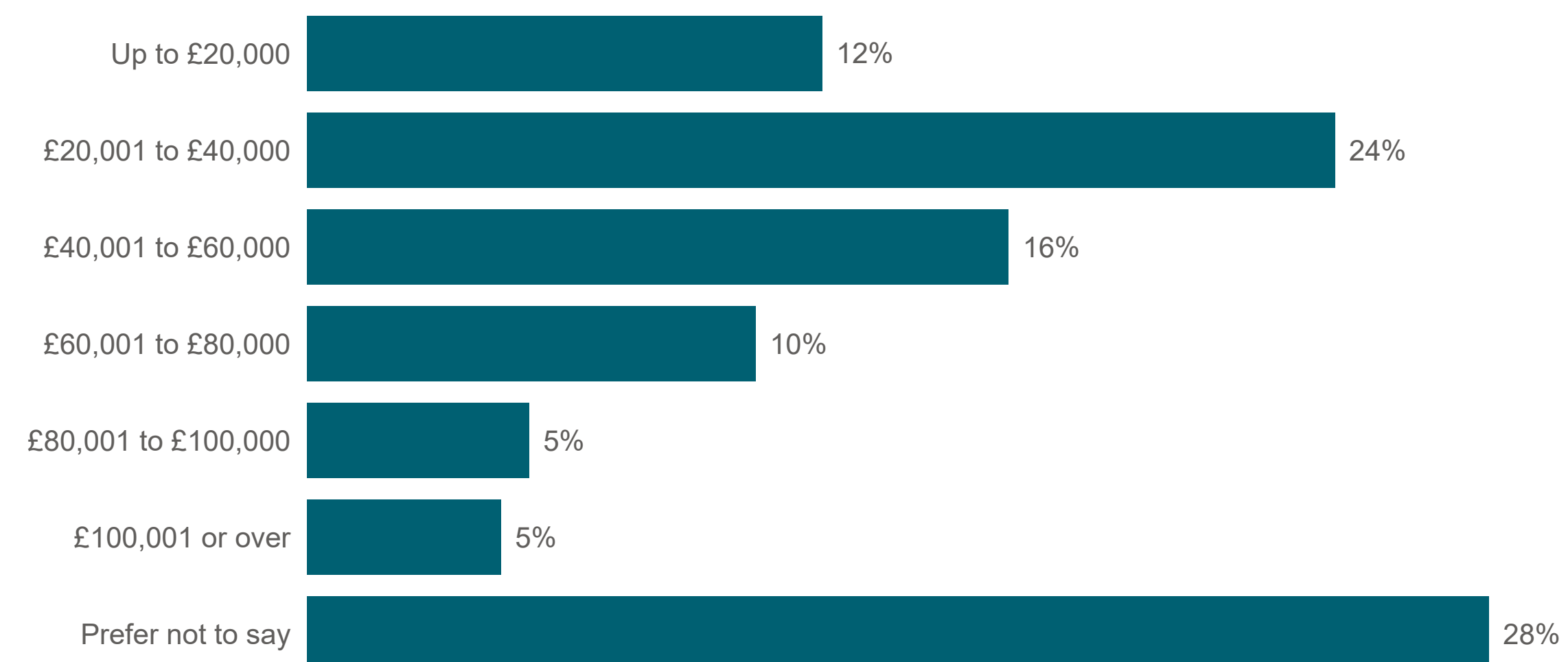
We also gathered data on household income to compare responses to questions about Council Tax. Overall 28% of respondents selected 'prefer not to say', 36% of respondents said they have a household income of under £40,000, 26% have a household income of between £40k to £80k, and 10% over £80k.

Respondents' age profile compared to Somerset population (Census 2021)

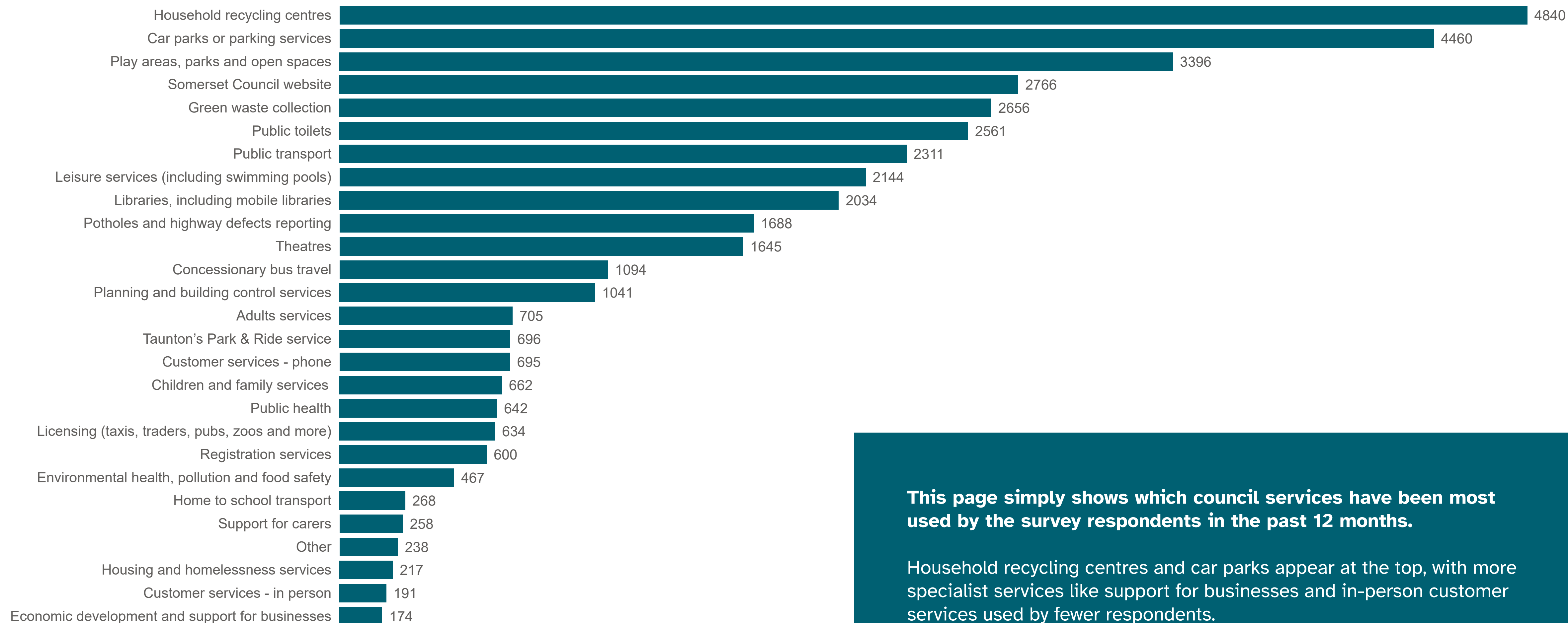
● Consultation respondents ● Somerset population



Respondents by household income



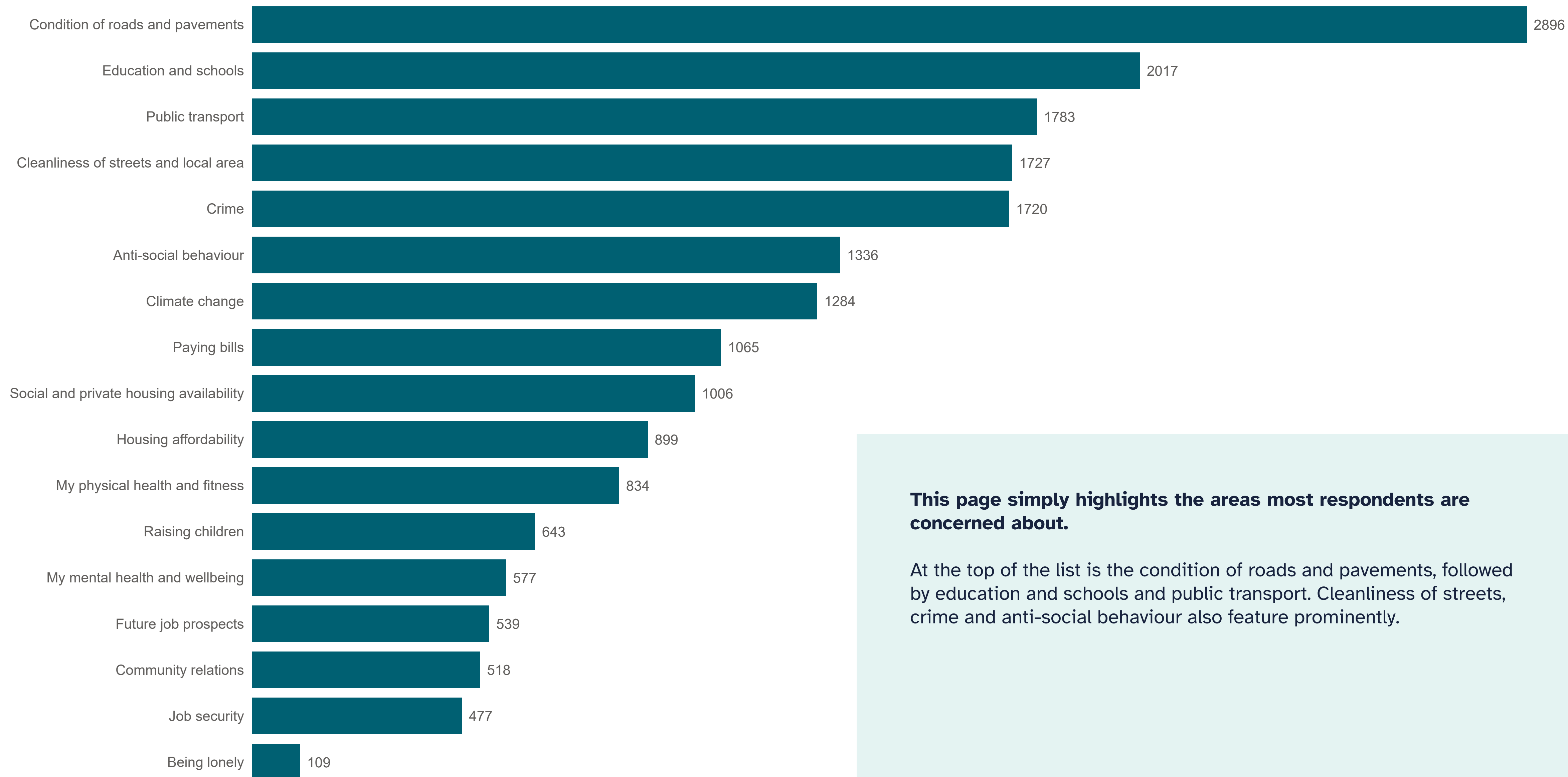
Services used in past 12 months



This page simply shows which council services have been most used by the survey respondents in the past 12 months.

Household recycling centres and car parks appear at the top, with more specialist services like support for businesses and in-person customer services used by fewer respondents.

Which of the following are you concerned about?



This page simply highlights the areas most respondents are concerned about.

At the top of the list is the condition of roads and pavements, followed by education and schools and public transport. Cleanliness of streets, crime and anti-social behaviour also feature prominently.

Budget preferences

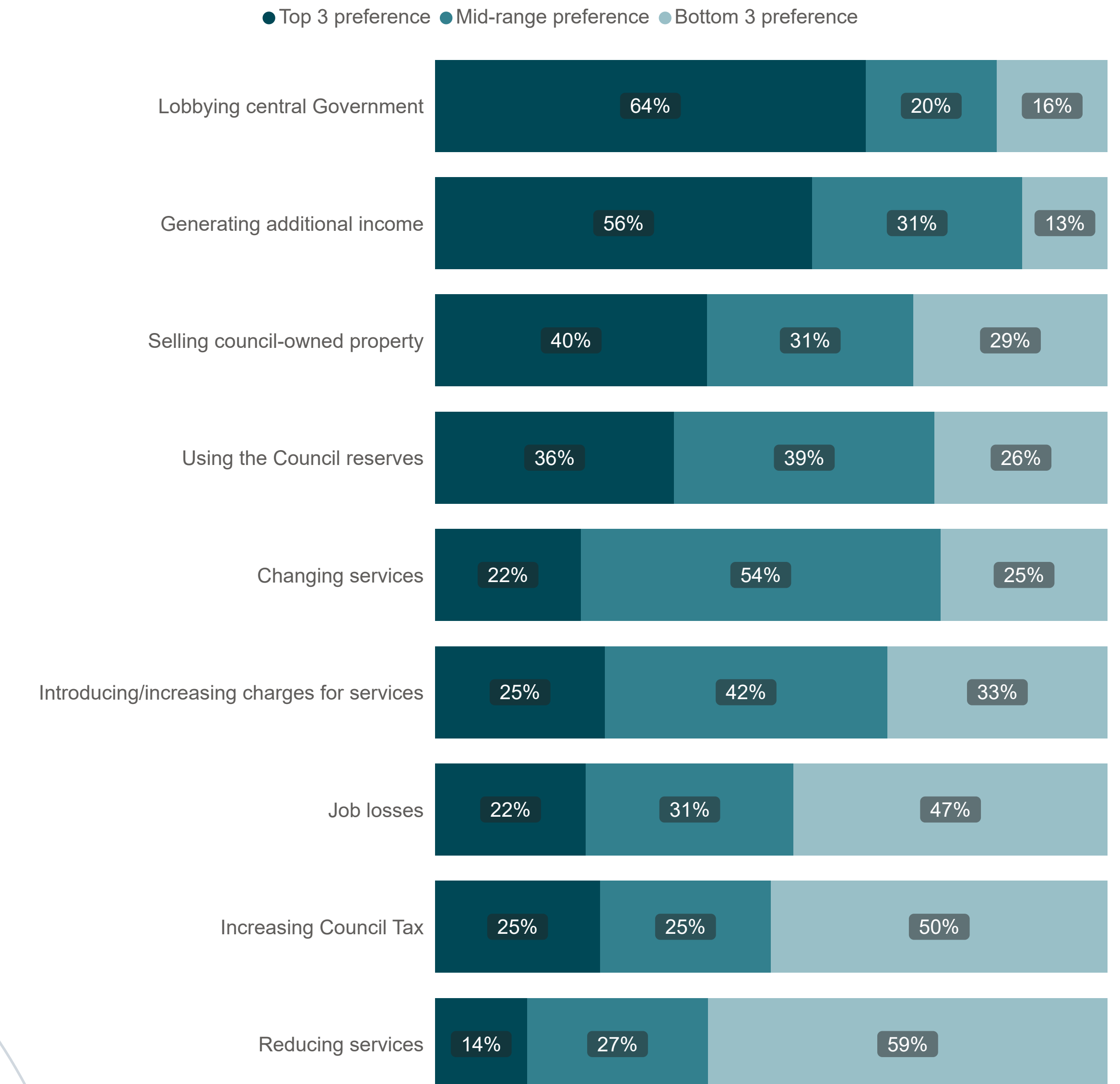
In this section we asked the public to consider various actions we could take to help balance our budget by ranking options in order of preference.

The graph shows the preferences in order.

There is strong support from respondents for Somerset Council to lobby central government to change the laws on local government funding. Other preferences include generating additional income and selling council-owned property.

The least popular options were increasing council tax, job losses and reducing services.

Order of preference for budget options



Lobbying Government

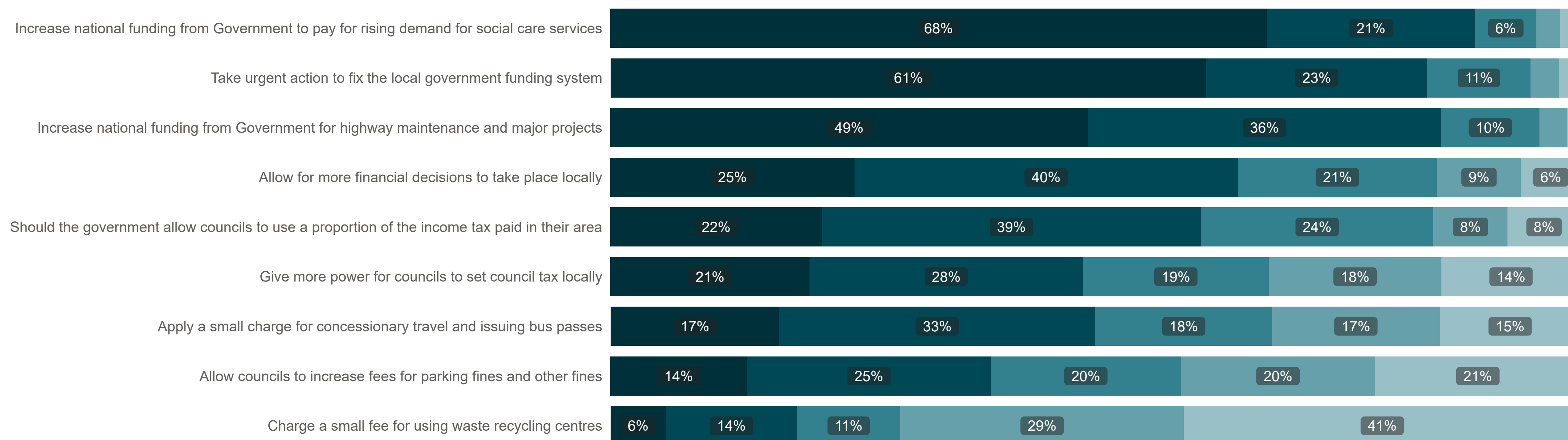
In this section we asked for views on lobbying and gave options of areas where we could call for the Government to make changes to national policy.

Respondents are strongly in favour of Somerset Council lobbying for an increase in national funding to pay for rising demand in social care services. They were also supportive of us calling for action to fix the local government funding system, and for an increase in national funding for highway maintenance and major projects.

The other notable result regards charging a small fee to use household waste recycling centres with a clear majority either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This corresponds with the high proportion of respondents who said they have used recycling centres in the past 12 months.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Somerset Council should lobby the Government for change in the following areas?

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neither agree nor disagree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree



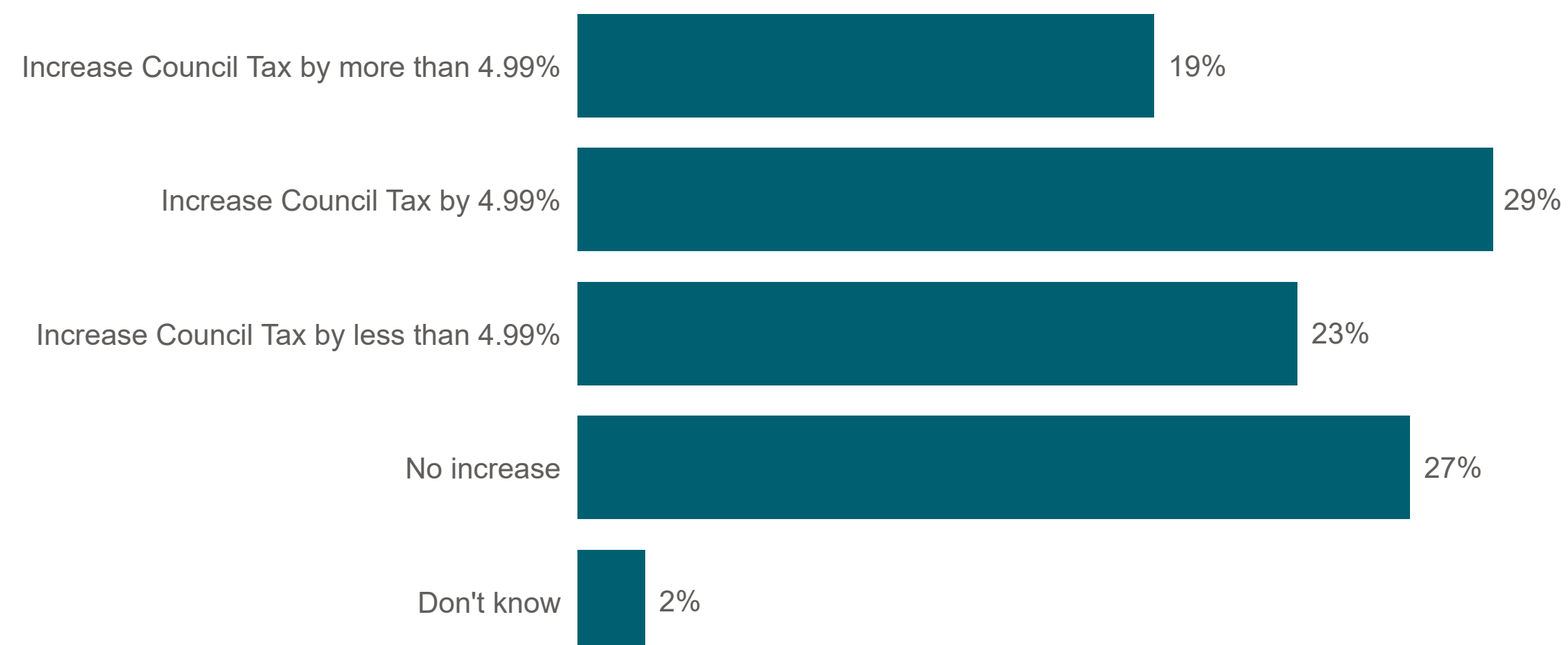
Council Tax

Council Tax is the main income source for local councils but the ability for councils to increase Council Tax is carefully controlled by the government. In this section we asked whether Somerset residents would be happy to consider paying more in Council Tax if it was permitted.

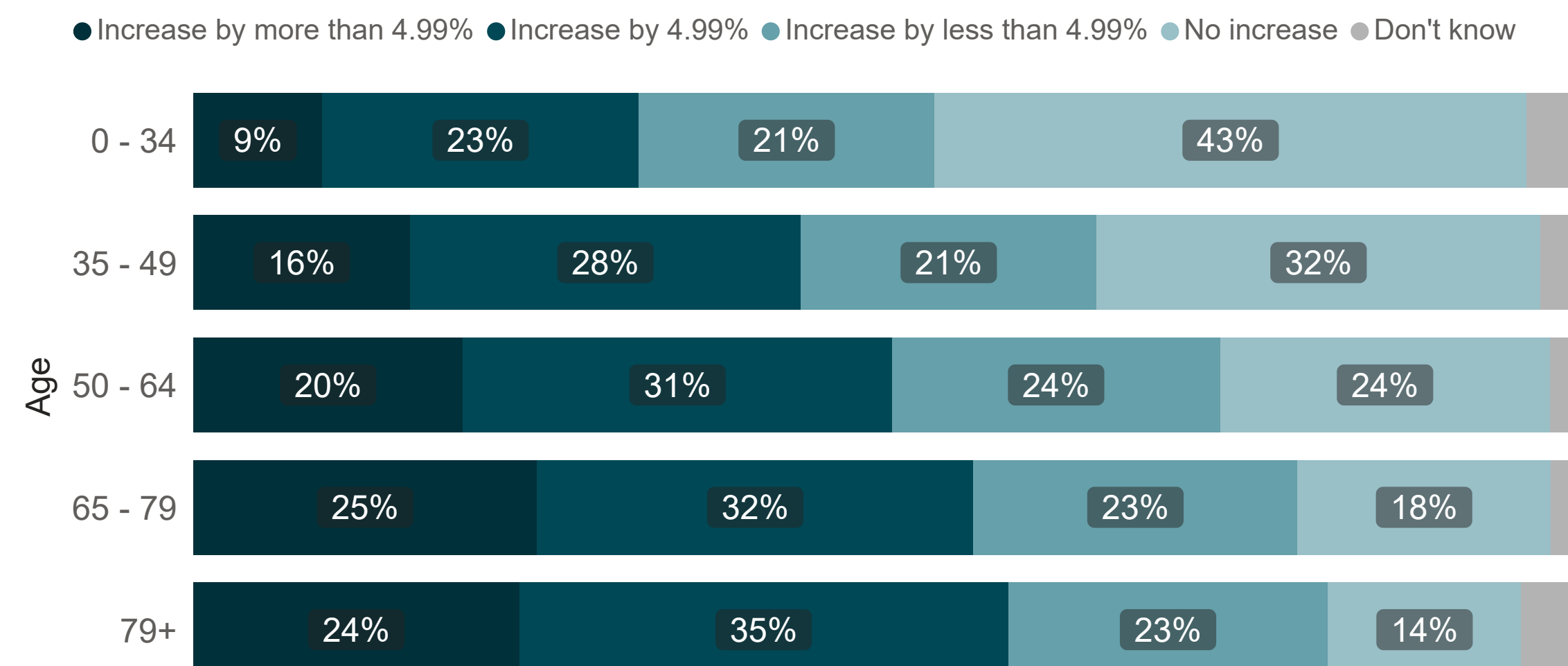
Overall, the results show most respondents were in favour of an increase, with 19% in favour of a rise by more than 4.99%, 29% in favour of a rise of 4.99% and 23% of a rise by less than 4.99%. Just over a quarter of respondents (27%) preferred no increase in Council Tax.

When broken down by age, the results showed the older people were the more likely they were to support a higher rise in Council Tax. When split by household income, the higher the household income, the more likely respondents were to support a higher increase.

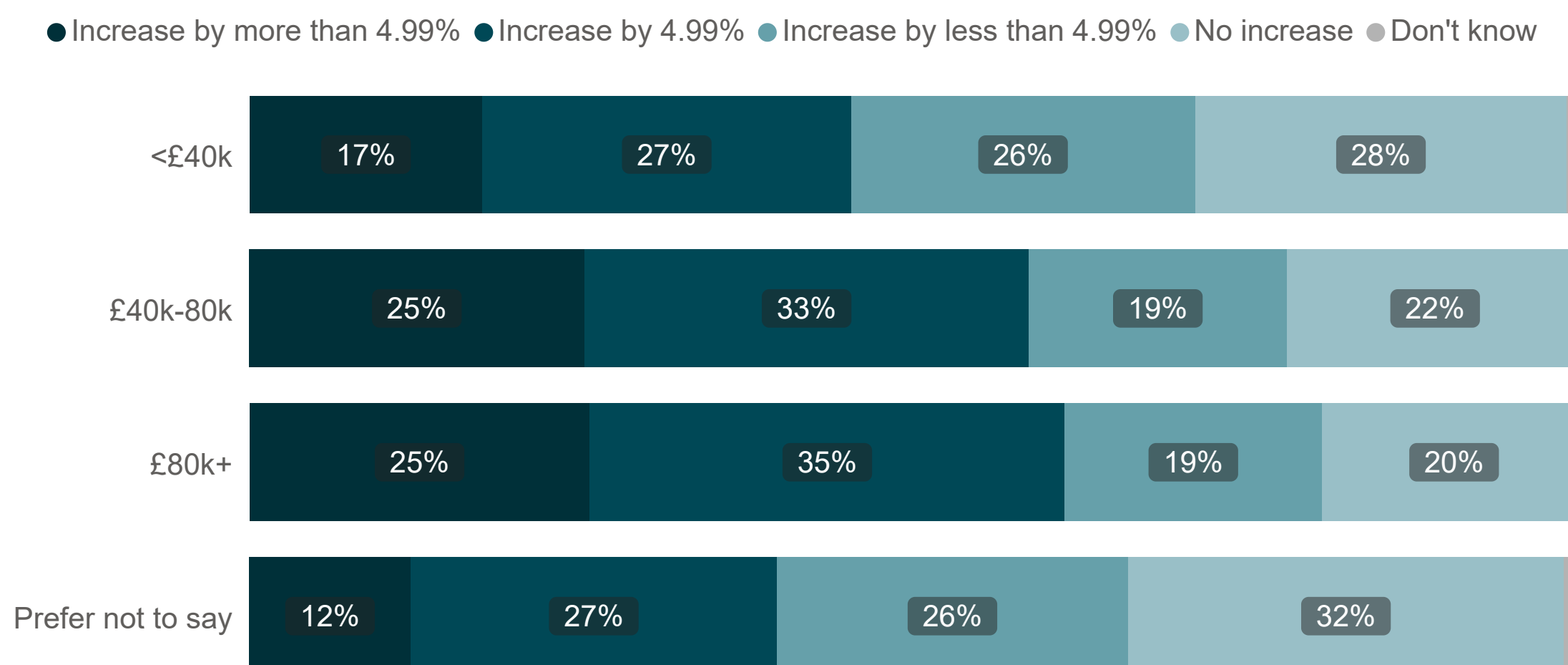
Preferred council tax increase



Preferred council tax increase, by age



Preferred council tax increase, by household income



Council Tax

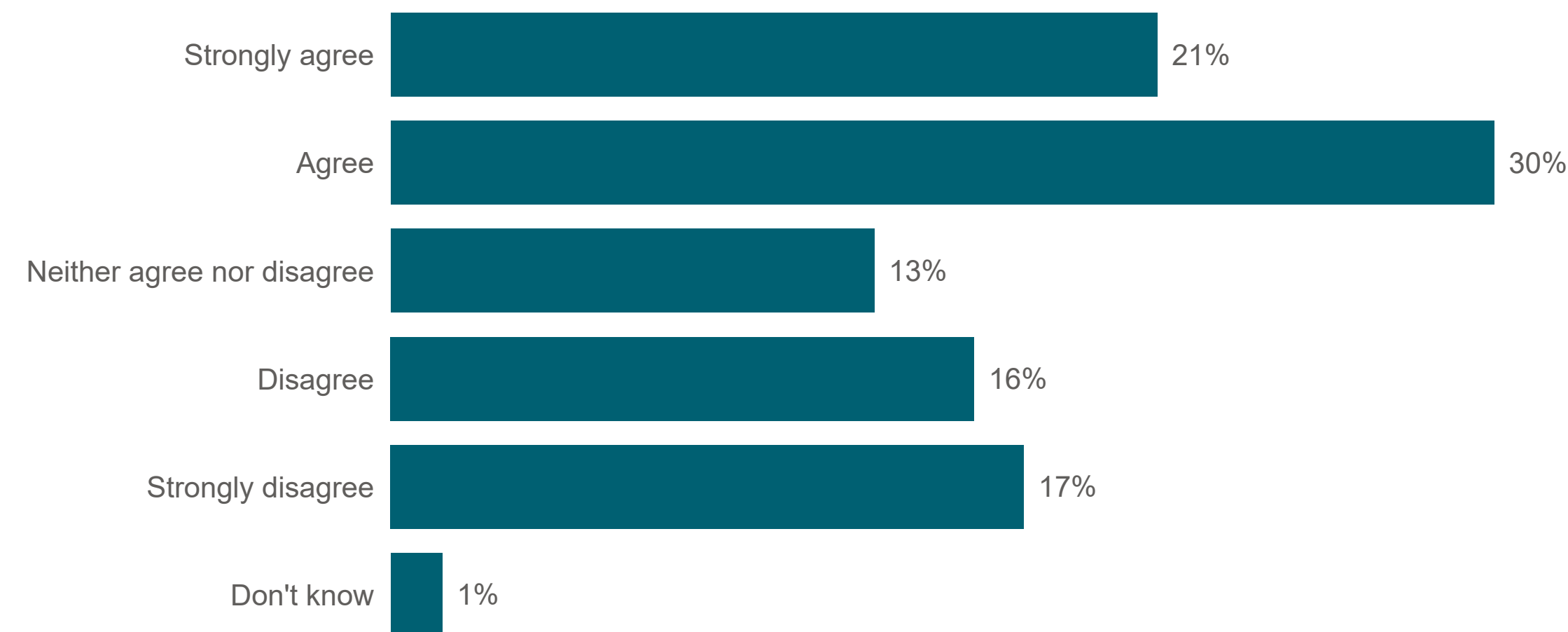
We also asked people if they would support a rise in Council Tax to put Somerset in line with other unitary councils if it led to fewer service cuts and job losses.

Again, the majority was supportive with more than half (51%) of respondents either strongly in favour, or in favour of an increase. Around a third (33%) were against, either strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with a rise.

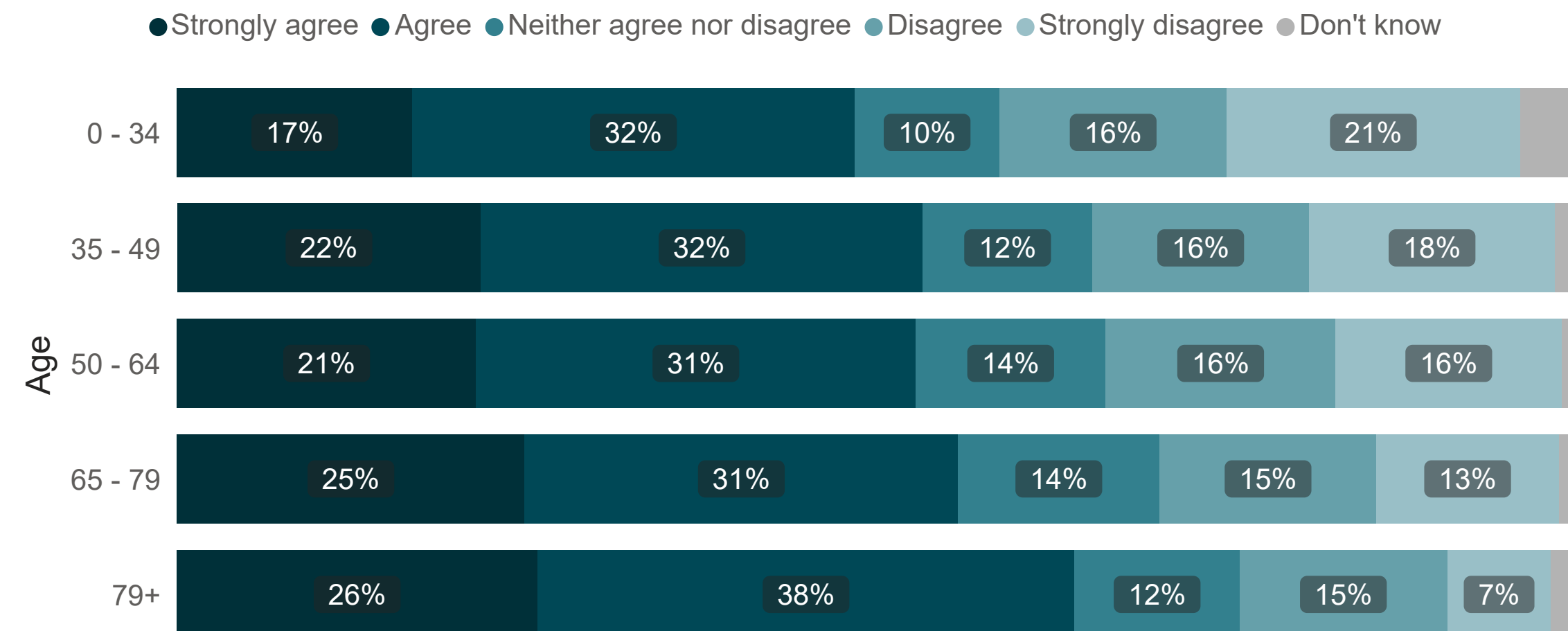
When split by age, the results again showed that older people were more likely to agree or strongly agree with a rise in Council Tax.

In terms of household income, higher earners were generally more supportive of Council Tax increases, although it should be noted that 50% of those with a household income under £40k were still supportive of a Council Tax increase.

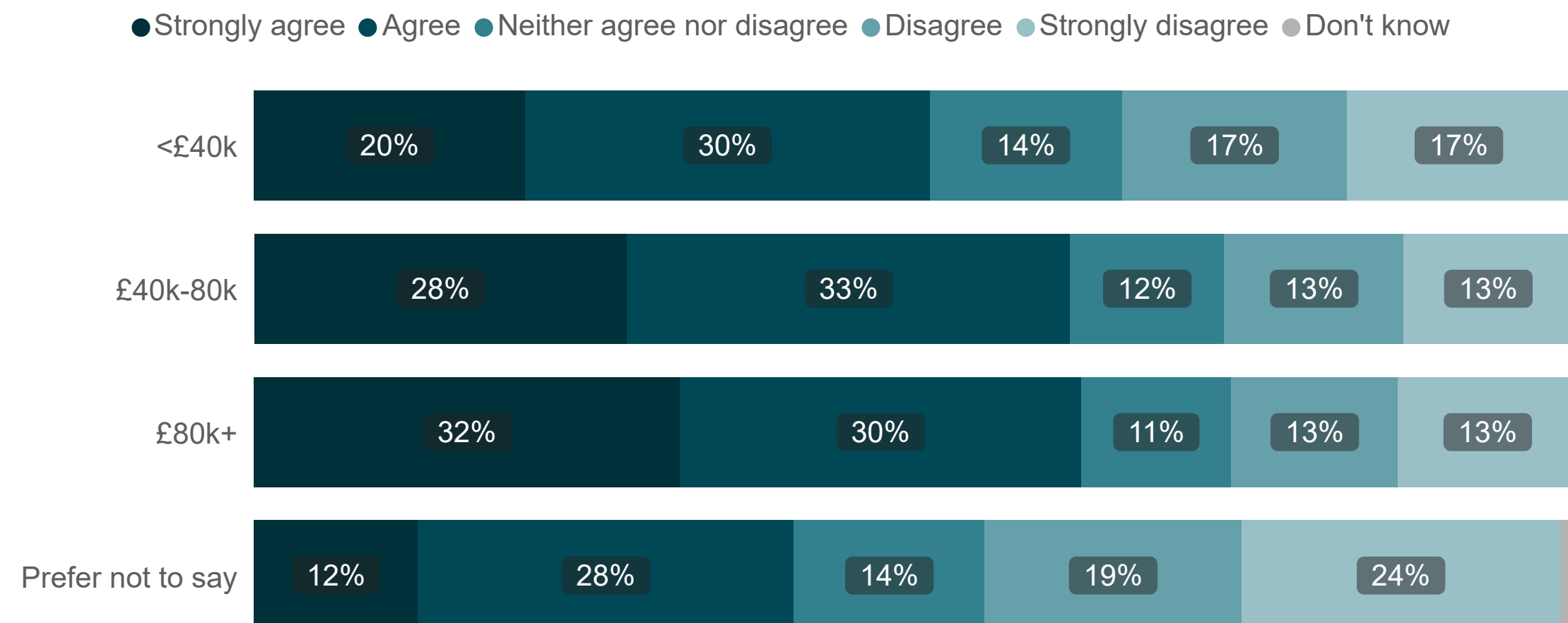
Would you agree to a rise in Council Tax, to put Somerset in line with the national average for a unitary authority, if it led to fewer service cuts and job losses?



Would you agree to a rise in Council Tax, to put Somerset in line with the national average for a unitary authority, if it led to fewer service cuts and job losses? Responses by age



Would you agree to a rise in Council Tax, to put Somerset in line with the national average for a unitary authority, if it led to fewer service cuts and job losses? Responses by household income



Fees and charges

In this section we asked if people would agree with a proposal to introduce new charges for services that are currently free in order to cover costs. Most respondents (51%) either strongly agreed or agreed that we should, with around a third (34%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

We also asked if we should consider increasing fees and charges to cover our rising costs. 50% were in favour, with 31% against.

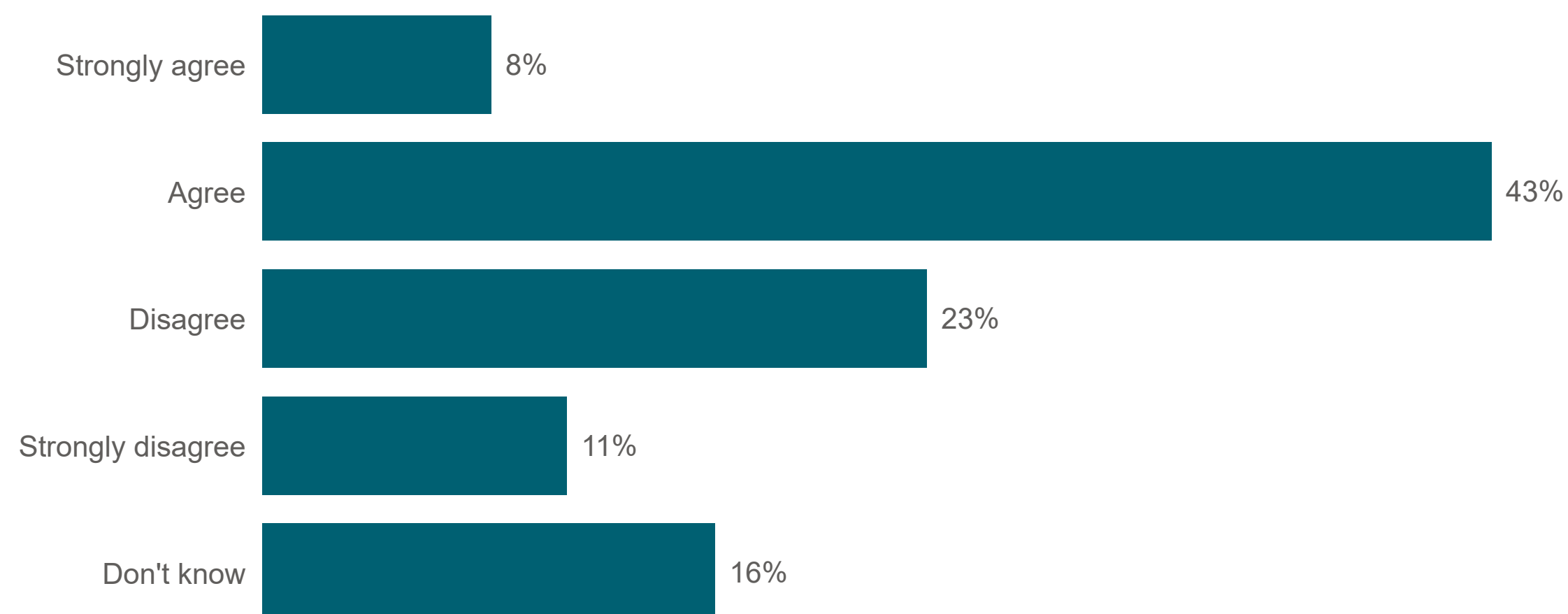
When asked by how much we should raise fees and charges, 5% supported a rise above inflation, 50% in line with inflation, 17% less than inflation, and 19% preferred to see no increase at all.

To cover our rising costs, should the council increase fees and charges?

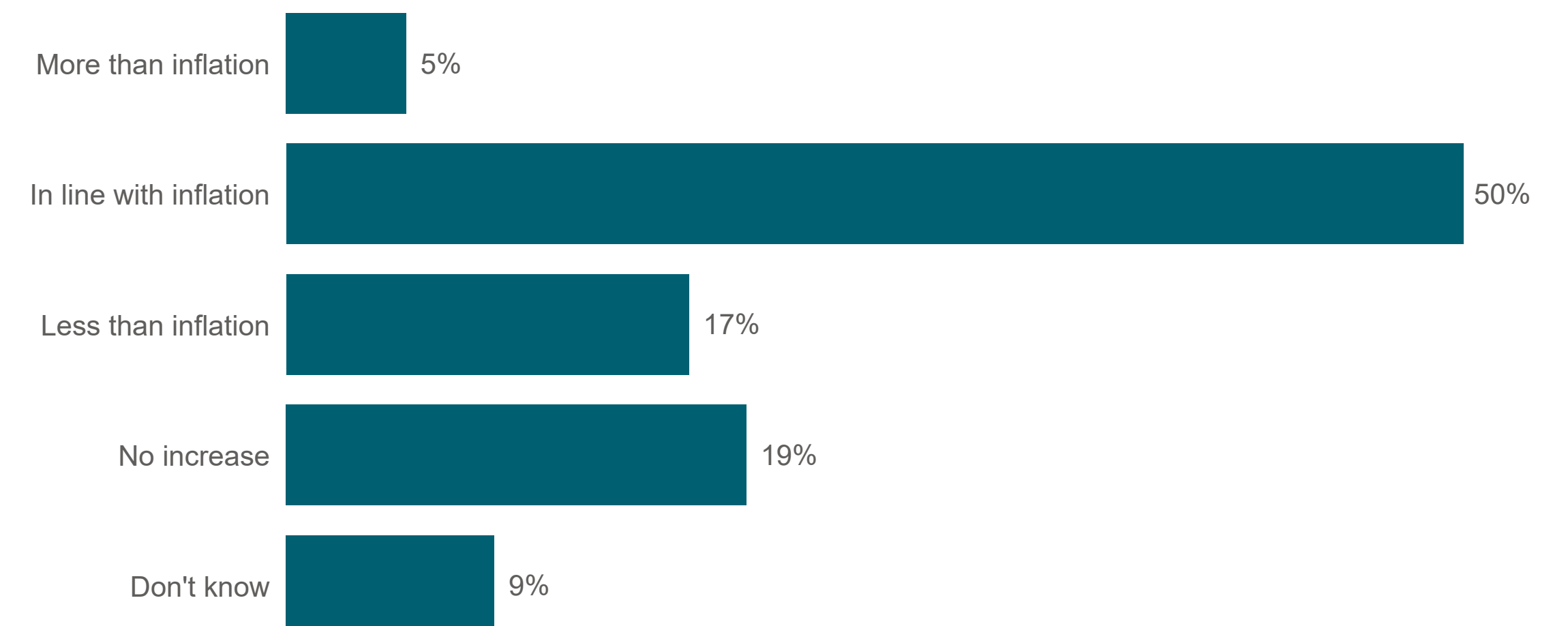
● Yes ● Don't know ● No



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to cover the costs of running some local services by introducing new charges for services that are currently free?



How much should the council increase fees and charges?

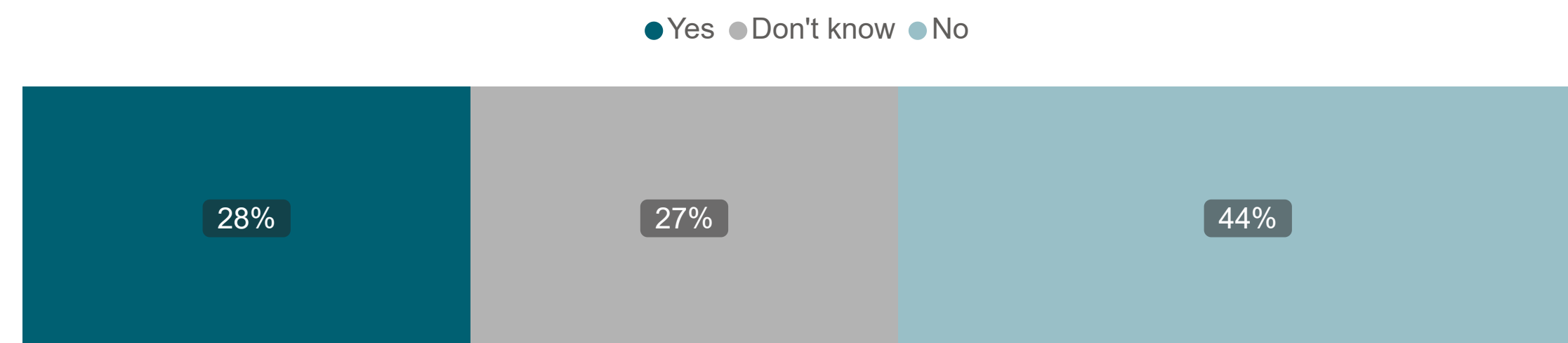


Adults Services

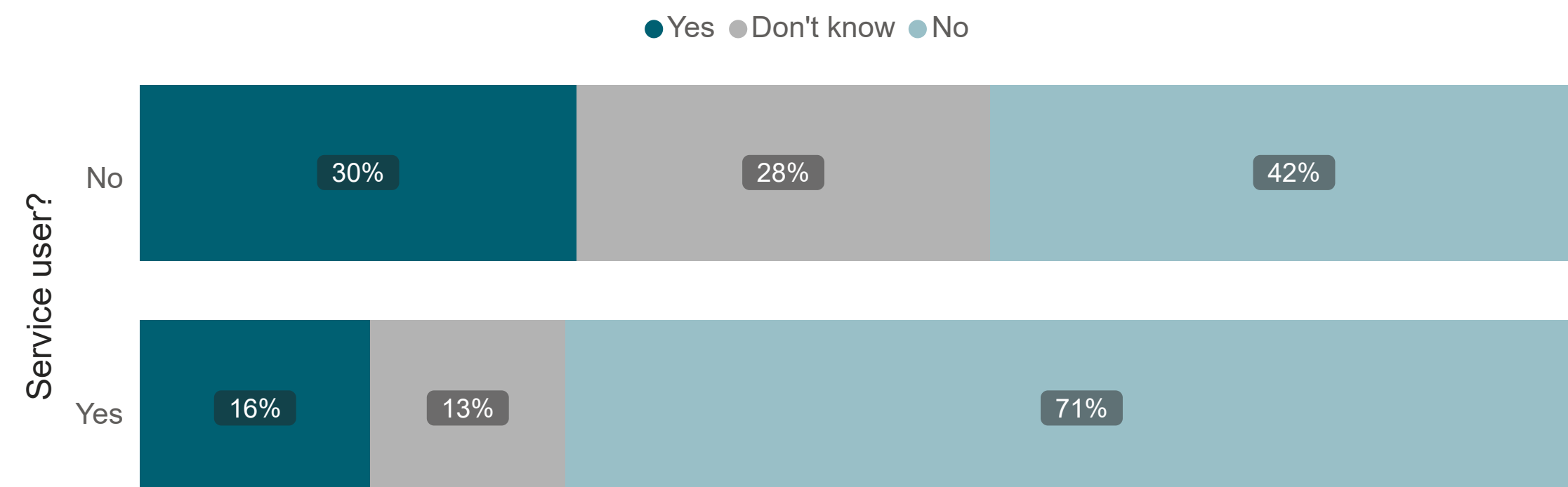
We asked for people's views on whether we should consider making savings to discretionary services within Adults Services. Overall, 28% were in favour, 44% were against.

We were also able to break down the results to show responses from people who either currently use Adults Services or have a family member who does. This shows people with direct experience of Adults Services are more likely to be against making savings in this area.

Do you think we should consider making savings to discretionary services within Adults Services? - all respondents



Do you think we should consider making savings to discretionary services within Adults Services? - by whether a service user



Adults Services

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 28.57% of respondents left a comment, 1,669 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“Not cutting areas but streamlining, looking for better value and not spending money unnecessarily. Need to look at how other councils make savings in this area and copy these if we can. Provide more support for carers to reduce the speed at which people enter care (offer support to stay at home, help family to care for family members). Align transport costs.”

“Reduce levels of Management to increase funds to employ more care workers”

“Adult Services shouldn't need to make savings, the work they provide is essential and the government should recognise this and do more to help.”

“Overall the council needs to modernise and use its budget and spending appropriately, currently there is too much bureaucracy and over spending and not enough efficiency.”

“Spend more on preventative measures to stop future spending. Cutting this now would only make the problem even worse in a few years.”

“Improved means testing and charges for care for those that can self fund”

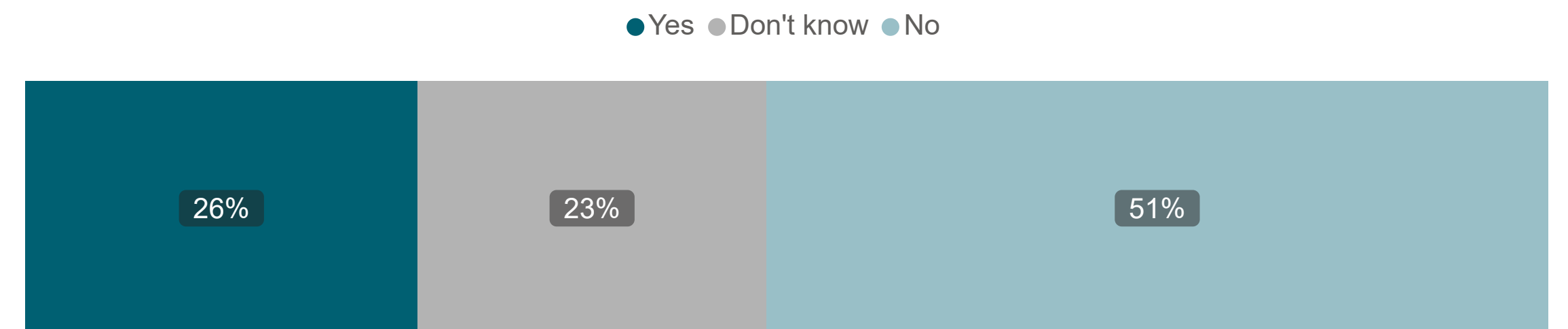
“I think private providers are getting quite rich off the price increases while the council loses out, it's time to change that. maybe the council should stop using private providers and have their own in house service which has a cost model that suits the needs rather than someone else's pockets.”

Children and Family Services

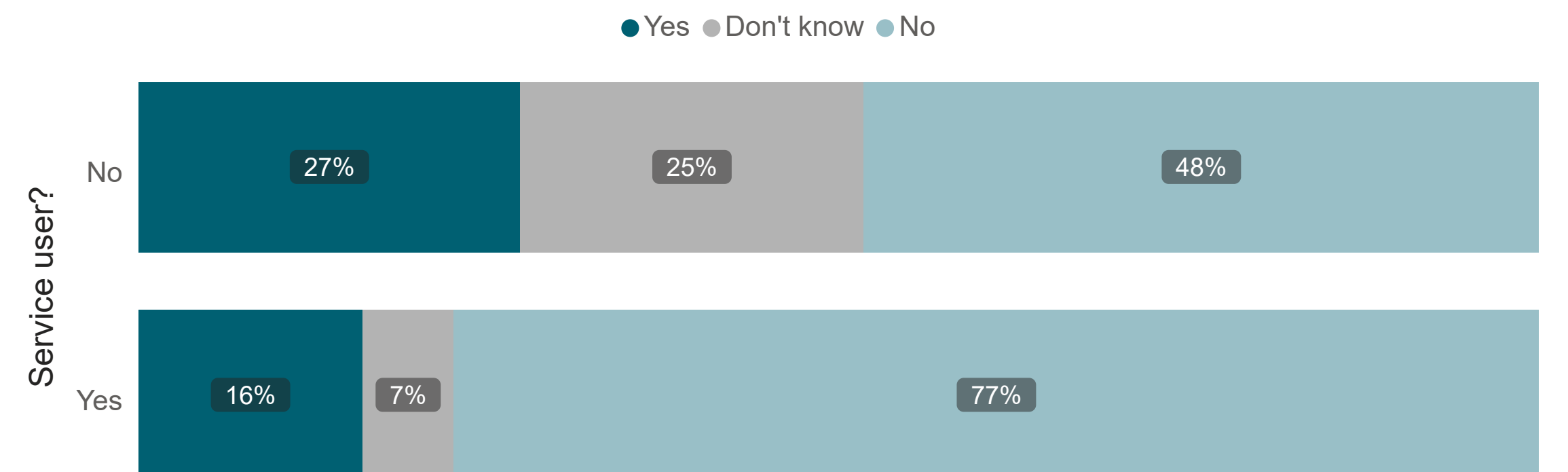
Similarly to Adults Services, overall, 26% of respondents were in favour of the Council looking to make savings to discretionary services within Children's Services, with 51% against.

Again, the results show that people with direct experience of Children's Services were more likely to be against making savings in this area.

Do you think we should consider making savings to discretionary services within Children and Family Services? - all respondents



Do you think we should consider making savings to discretionary services within Children and Family Services? - by whether a service user



Children and Family Services

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 25.42% of respondents left a comment, 1,485 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“Improve provision in alternative settings and reduce wasted costs on transport for pupils in alternative provision e.g. private taxi hire. Regulate costs charged by alternative provision settings for pupils not in state education.”

“There are a lot of children already struggling due to cuts, again this needs more support not less. These children are our future and should be supported”

“I don’t believe there are savings to be made in this sector. In fact, I believe very strongly that teachers are underpaid and underappreciated in our society - investment in children should be our biggest priority, far more so than investing in aged care and the pension.”

“We have lost many early help services and losing more will only increase costs in the long term. Prevention is the key to saving costs and doing what is best for children and young people”

“Reduce the number of managers”

“The obscene amount spent getting SEND children to school. Let the parents get them there like everyone else has to.”

“Stop sending children to school via taxis.”

“By investing in early help and emotion coaching and mental health support for families and young people to reduce the amount of mental health and trauma in children and young people. By following recommendations of the creative health review and supporting more creative wellbeing interventions in schools to allow children and young people to express and process trauma and emotional difficulties. low cost interventions that will save money in long term.”

Community Services

In this section we asked if we should continue to fund discretionary Community Services. Overall, the majority (52%) said 'yes', with 18% responding 'no'.

We also asked people to rate Community Services by how important it is that we continue to fund them. The graph shows the services rated most important at the top, with public toilets, parks and beaches, leisure services and pools, and libraries coming out on top.

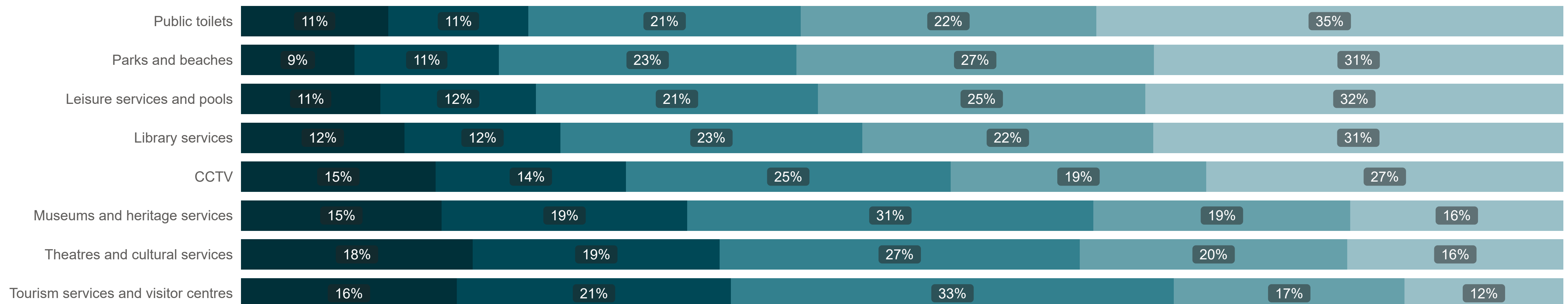
Do you think Somerset Council should continue to fund discretionary Community Services?

● Yes ● Don't know ● No



How important is it to you that Somerset Council funds the following?

● 1 (Least important) ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5 (Most important)



Community Services

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 25.29% of respondents left a comment, 1,477 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“Tell all the various services that you currently support that they are on their own and will have to fund themselves or close. If local businesses want to attract ‘tourists’ then let them pay to support things that tourists expect to find.”

“Reduced opening hours, staffing cuts, closure of selected services dependant on equity of distribution across the county (rural services prioritised as much as towns). Merging of services/staff where possible e.g. museum and library/theatre etc.”

“Higher parking charges in some areas eg for theatres and beaches”

“The Libraries are an absolute godsend for my mental health and my wellbeing. I would be lost without them in my community. The staff are what make a library a warm and welcoming space. Long may they continue.
Swimming pool facilities are not required where I live, there is 2 private pools in the town, why would you need to go to a pool elsewhere with this service so close?”

“Parks and gardens could be done by the Town and Parish councils. There are teams doubling up in some areas which seems crazy. CCTV should be managed by the police not a council.”

“Pass on responsibility locally to parish/town Councils who can budget accordingly with no restrictions on their precept”

“Savings in this sector will have a detrimental impact on the quality of life in Somerset that cannot be reversed. Museums and heritage deserve to be funded and supported even at this time of financial hardship. They cost very little in the overall budget context.”

Highways and public transport

We asked if we should consider making savings to discretionary services within highways and public transport. A clear majority (66%) responded 'no' with just 21% responding 'yes'.

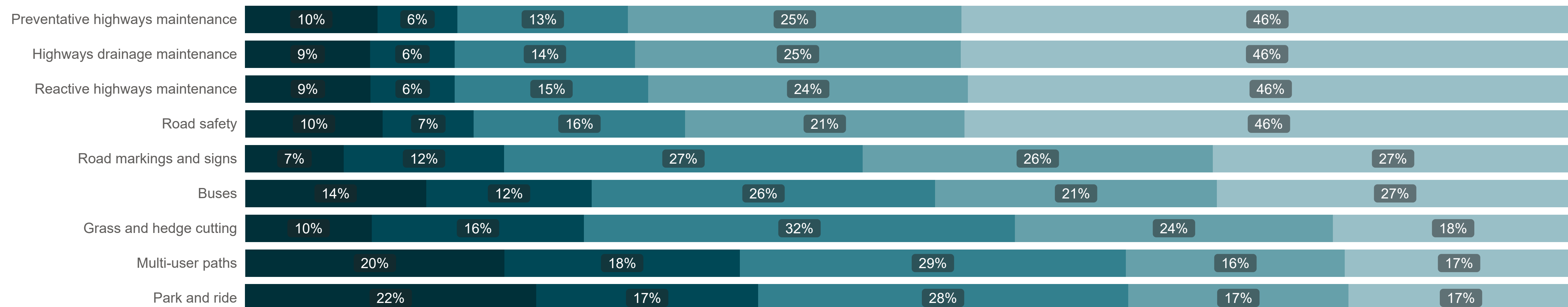
We also asked people to rate services by importance. The graph shows these in order with strong support for highways maintenance services.

Do you think we should consider making savings to discretionary services within highways and public transport?



How important are these services to you?

● 1 (Least important) ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5 (Most important)



Highways and public transport

This section provides data about how satisfied people are with current highways maintenance service levels. More than half (54%) of respondents are either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with current levels, with (18%) satisfied or very satisfied.

We also asked what impact any reductions to highways maintenance would have on respondents and their communities. Big majorities felt this would have a negative impact on both themselves (74%) and their communities (81%).

Both results correspond with the concerns section of the survey, with condition of roads and pavements being the top concern of respondents. People were also concerned about the cleanliness of streets and public transport.

In this section we also asked how often people use buses. 18% of respondents said they currently use buses regularly (at least monthly), while 37% said they never use buses. We know from the free text section that we had many comments about public transport, with many people saying they would use buses if there were more services.

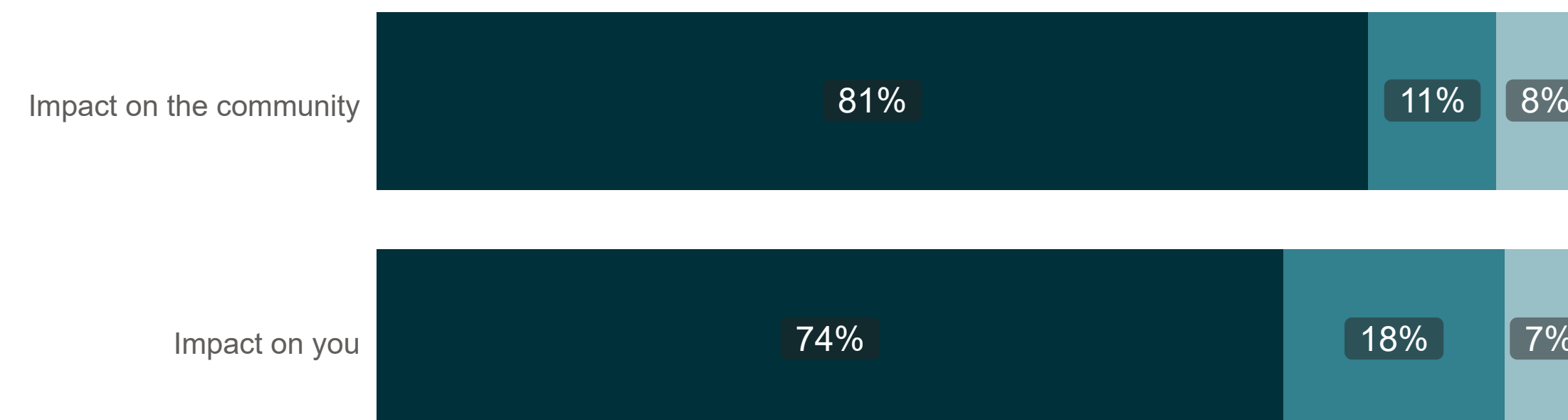
How satisfied are you with current highway maintenance service levels?

● Very Dissatisfied ● Dissatisfied ● Neither satisfied/nor dissatisfied ● Satisfied ● Very satisfied

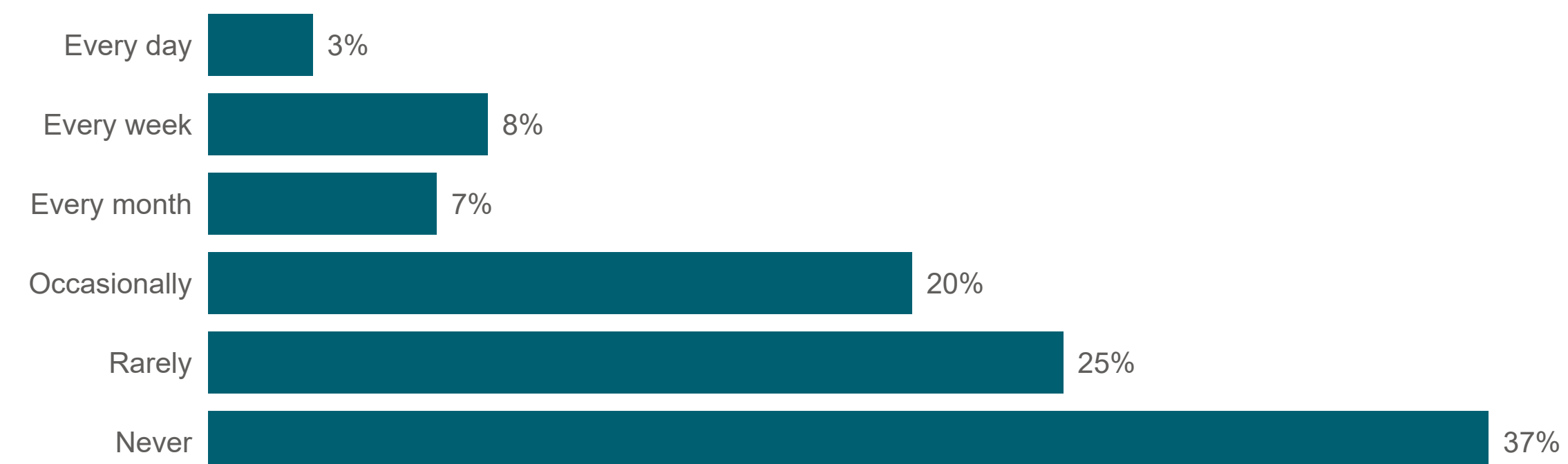


What impact do you think reducing highways maintenance would have on you and your community?

● Negative impact ● Little/ no impact ● Positive impact



How often do you use public buses in Somerset?



Highways and public transport

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 31.60% of respondents left a comment, 1,846 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“Charge more for the Park and Ride. Public transport is dire at the moment. Towns like Yeovil are completely disconnected from Taunton and Ilminster. We need to keep the climate agenda front and foremost and improve the quality of public transport, not diminish it. Let towns manage their own road budgets.”

“I don’t use the bus as its too expensive and infrequent but we are a rural area and we need more buses that are affordable not less especially for the you g and elderly”

“I really want to be able to use the buses more, but can’t rely on them, and can’t easily get to where I need to go on them. Improving bus provision would save money in other areas.”

“Please, please don’t cut bus services, we are a rural county and need to enhance the bus services to reduce single-occupancy car use.”

“By being more proactive rather than having to repair when there is a problem, improve drainage as this has a massive impact on local people particularly.”

“Reduce size of busses. Use of mini busses. Make service more on call.”

“Should bus passes be free? What if you asked for a voluntary contribution to a bus pass?”

“Ask Parish Councils to contribute financially towards the upkeep of their communities in terms of highway/sign/line/ maintenance and road safety”

Waste Services

Overall respondents were supportive of waste services, and as noted earlier, a very large proportion of respondents (4,840 people) said they had used recycling centres in the past 12 months.

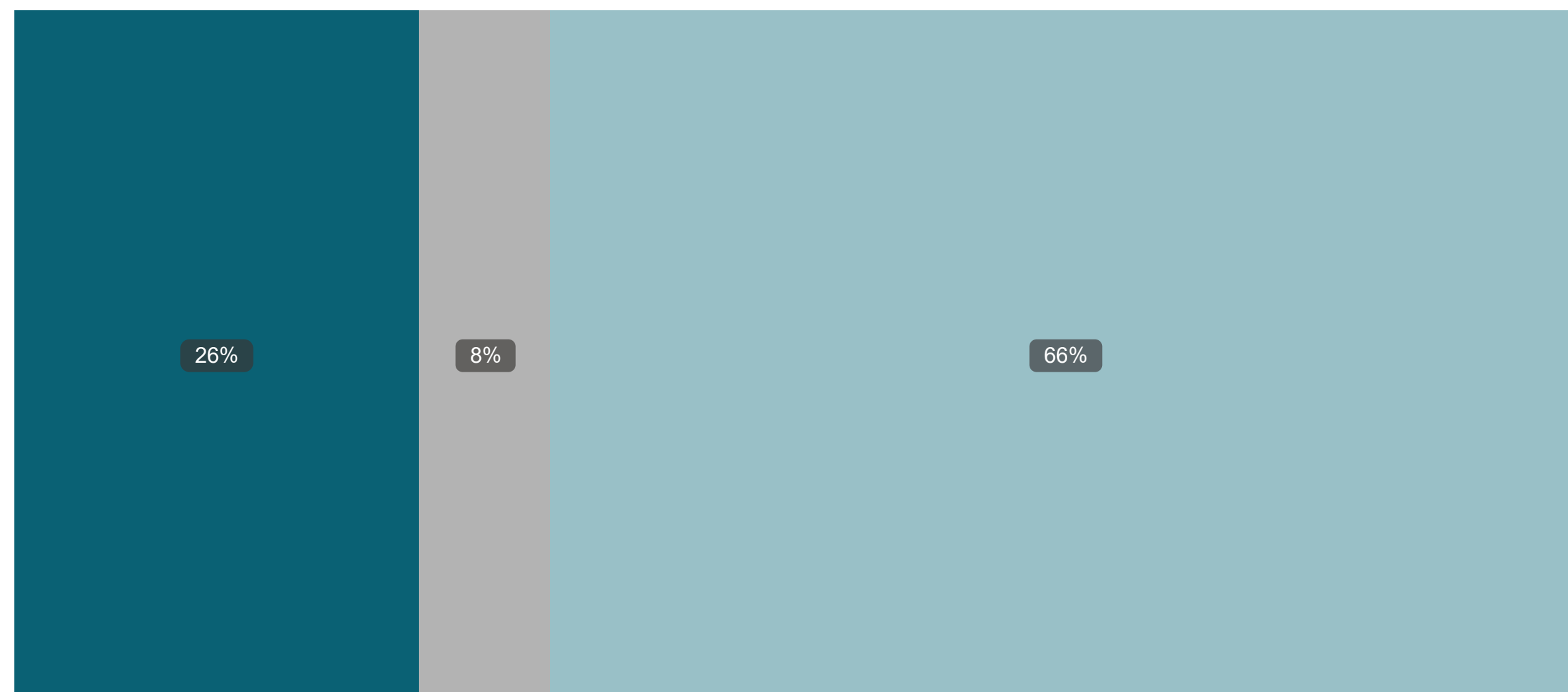
When asked if we should consider making savings to waste services, 66% voted 'no'.

A large majority (79%) were against any proposal to reduce the number of household waste recycling centres. However, there was more support for a proposal to reduce opening hours, with 48% in favour and 43% against.

Overall, there was strong support (67%) for a proposal to introduce a permit system so only Somerset residents can use Somerset recycling centres.

Do you think we should consider making savings to waste services?

● Yes ● Don't know ● No



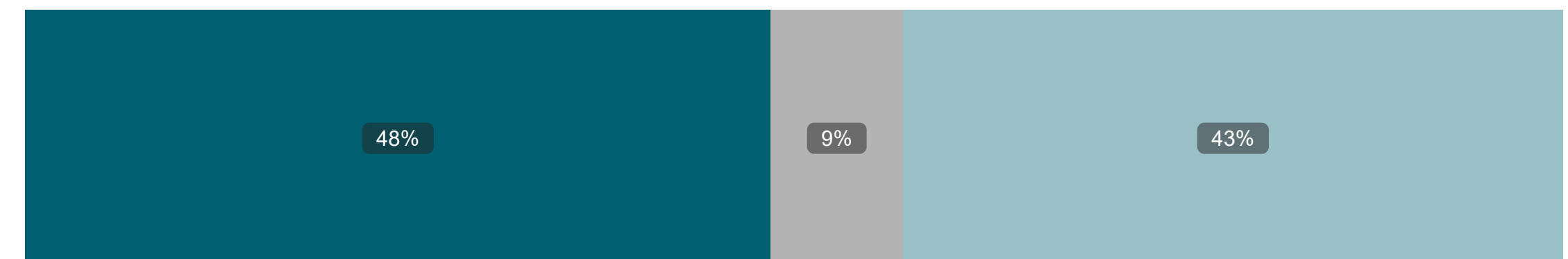
Would you support a proposal to reduce the number of household waste recycling centres?

● Yes ● Don't know ● No



Would you support a proposal to reduce opening hours at household recycling centres?

● Yes ● Don't know ● No



Would you support a proposal to introduce a permit to restrict waste collected at our recycling centres to Somerset residents only?

● Yes ● Don't know ● No



Waste Services

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 33.44% of respondents left a comment, 1,953 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“Very tough to do anything much as the cost of dealing with fly tipping will likely outweigh any savings.”

“Charge non-residents Charge for items that incur larger fees to dispose of, maybe have a sliding scale of charges for large items.”

“Recycling collections every 2 weeks rather than every week, non recyclable collection every 3 weeks rather than every 2.”

“Reduce hours open. Do not charge for the larger recycling centres, as risk of more fly tipping. Maybe bring back in shops in the recycling centres to sell goods, like was previously done and is still done in Devon county. This could be a money maker for the council?”

“I’m surprised that recycling centres aren’t permit controlled. They are in many other areas. The current service isn’t stopping people from fly tipping, it’s a real problem in the rural areas”

“Any attempt to reduce access to recycling centres or introduce charges will only lead to more fly tipping. The only options for savings are by reducing household recycling and simplifying all the different collections but this would not be good for the environment.”

“Higher charges for fly tipping”

“Bring the service ‘in house’ with Council employee’s running the sites, you cannot sub contract a service and save money.”

Generating additional income

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 44.22% of respondents left a comment, 2,583 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“Cut top salary jobs. No need to have such highly paid positions”

“A tourist tax. They do this on the continent. It is accepted there. It will help pay for some of the services they use, and the high standard we try to have.”

“Look at venues with the potential to become hire facilities as well. Hiring out a cost per hour office space/rooms for people who may need somewhere to work from in this hybrid era. Can Council property assets have the potential to take in another service such as a library and this then allows the building to be closed.”

“sell the land and properties you do not use. stop wasting money on needless things, look at what you actually spend, be more resourceful with people, time and costs”

“Central Government need to fund local councils properly. Keep Social care separate from other services as its always the most costly and other services suffer. Adult and children’s social care and mental health should be a completely separate entity from local Councils.”

“Bring care workers back under county control to avoid high agency fees”

“It’s not so much as generating more income but using the income and resources more effectively and efficiently.”

“Continued/increased recovery of unpaid debts, particularly council tax”

“Increase the Council tax above the rate of 4.99% WITH agreement from central government if they are unable to fund services properly.”

“There is as wealth of knowledge amongst council employees. Could some of this be utilised in offering Training and information to local private sector for a fee?”

“Ask for voluntary donations at places such as the recycling centre and the library”

“Higher Council Tax on Air BNB, second home, holiday lets and second homes.”

“Do not waste money on a massive refurbishment of the theatre in Yeovil, it can be done up much cheaper than was planned.”

“Have more events in Vivary park (and our green spaces) to bring in tourism - advertising more widely. Bringing people from outside the area. Creating a town centre festival to draw people in.”

Further comments

We asked: Where could we make savings within this area?

This was a free text section where 31.69% of respondents left a comment, 1,851 comments in total.

Here is a sample of responses across different themes:

“All councils need to operate as a business with adequate structure in place to prevent wasted time and money. They need to stop using inefficient contractors just because they are cheaper - this often results in works having to be redone in a short period of time, so not cost effective.”

“Use local litter groups to help you - a call for action would be great - we can help make our towns a better place. The state of verges on main roads are dreadful. And stop cutting grass before litter is collected. Every year I complain and am told it is collected first only to see verges covered in shredded litter.”

“Do the salaries of Somerset Council employees really reflect the effectiveness of their positions? i.e. how many are high earners? Is this essential when services are having to be cut instead?”

“Its unfair to keep putting up the council tax especially on young families and single people and cutting back on services. It is so unfair on those that work who have next to nothing left after paying their bills.”

“I don't think you should have made yourselves a unitary council, I feel this was somewhat short sighted”

“I encourage the Council to challenge Westminster and to not be afraid to make its case publicly. If Somerset Councillors stand up and expose the double standards and hypocrisy of central government they can demonstrate leadership in the sector, bringing other Councils along to demand a fair deal from the tax revenue in the UK”

Feedback provided via social media

We have captured feedback gathered via social media channels, this includes; Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, Nextdoor and Instagram

In total we received 353 comments directly on posts about the budget consultation and have split these into the following categories:

- 37** - Expressed views that staff salaries / pensions / redundancy payouts should be reduced
- 33** - Expressed views that the financial situation Somerset is facing is due to mismanagement
- 14** - Suggested council is wasting money / not being efficient in the ways it spends money
- 14** - Expressed views that unitary negatively impacted finances
- 12** - Expressed frustration about paying more for fewer services
- 83 - Other
- 165 - Not relevant - political, not service related or just ongoing discussion from other comments etc

Feedback provided via email

We also received 17 emails relating to the budget consultation and have split these into the following categories:

- 7** - Expressed concerns about fly tipping if recycling sites were closed
- 5** - Expressed views that savings could be made by looking at specific schemes and services e.g. Octagon / Yeovil Refresh / Highways works
- 3** - Expressed concerns about the impacts of closing public toilets
- 3** - Expressed concerns about the negative impact on health and wellbeing if the Yeovil Athletics Track is closed
- 2** - Expressed concerns about the impact on parks if no longer locked in the evening
- 1** - Expressed frustration about paying more for less services
- 1** - Expressed views/concerns that they either won't or can't pay for higher council tax
- 1** - Feedback on rural public transport
- 1** - Expressed concern over library closures



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