

# Essex Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) research

Charles Wilson, Harry Pearce

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who took part in this research for their valuable time and contributions.

We are also grateful to the Resident Engagement steering group on behalf of Local Authorities across Greater Essex for their input in the participant briefing materials.

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# Introduction

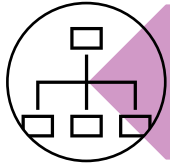
# Research background

Local Government infrastructure in Essex is due to be reorganised. However, the shape and priorities of the new arrangement are yet to be fully determined. To inform these decisions, Essex's existing councils want to understand how residents feel about the general direction of the forthcoming changes.

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) was commissioned to conduct research with residents of Greater Essex, exploring their views on **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)**. This research was co-ordinated by Essex County Council on behalf of the 15 councils across Greater Essex.

This slide deck discusses the insights from the quantitative research; a separate slide deck on qualitative survey findings is available.

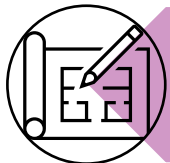
## What is LGR?



Central Government has set out plans to replace Essex's two-tier system of local government with a **single-tier system of unitary authorities**. The goal is to have **simpler council structures**, improving efficiency and capacity.



Currently, there are 15 councils across Greater Essex. These councils will be replaced with a smaller (but still undetermined) number of unitary authorities, which will be **responsible for all local services in the area**.



NatCen's research findings will inform the development of business cases which set out different plans for how the new unitary authorities should be arranged.



# Methodological Overview

LGR is a complex process, the outcome of which remains uncertain. Nevertheless, whatever form it takes, the effects of LGR will be felt across the county. To ensure a robust and representative understanding of the range of attitudes and experiences across Greater Essex residents, a large-scale survey was conducted to complement the in-depth qualitative insight. A total of 1,477 residents in Greater Essex completed the survey.

## Survey of residents

*(15 minutes, non-probability survey)*

**Purpose:** The purpose of the survey was to measure attitudes of Greater Essex residents towards LGR. The survey was representative of all residents across Greater Essex in terms of gender, ethnicity, district, and socio-economic group. As well as being large enough to safely report analyses for different subgroups across Greater Essex.

**Length:** The survey was designed in collaboration with NatCen and all 15 local authorities across Greater Essex, and the survey was designed to take approximately 15 minutes.

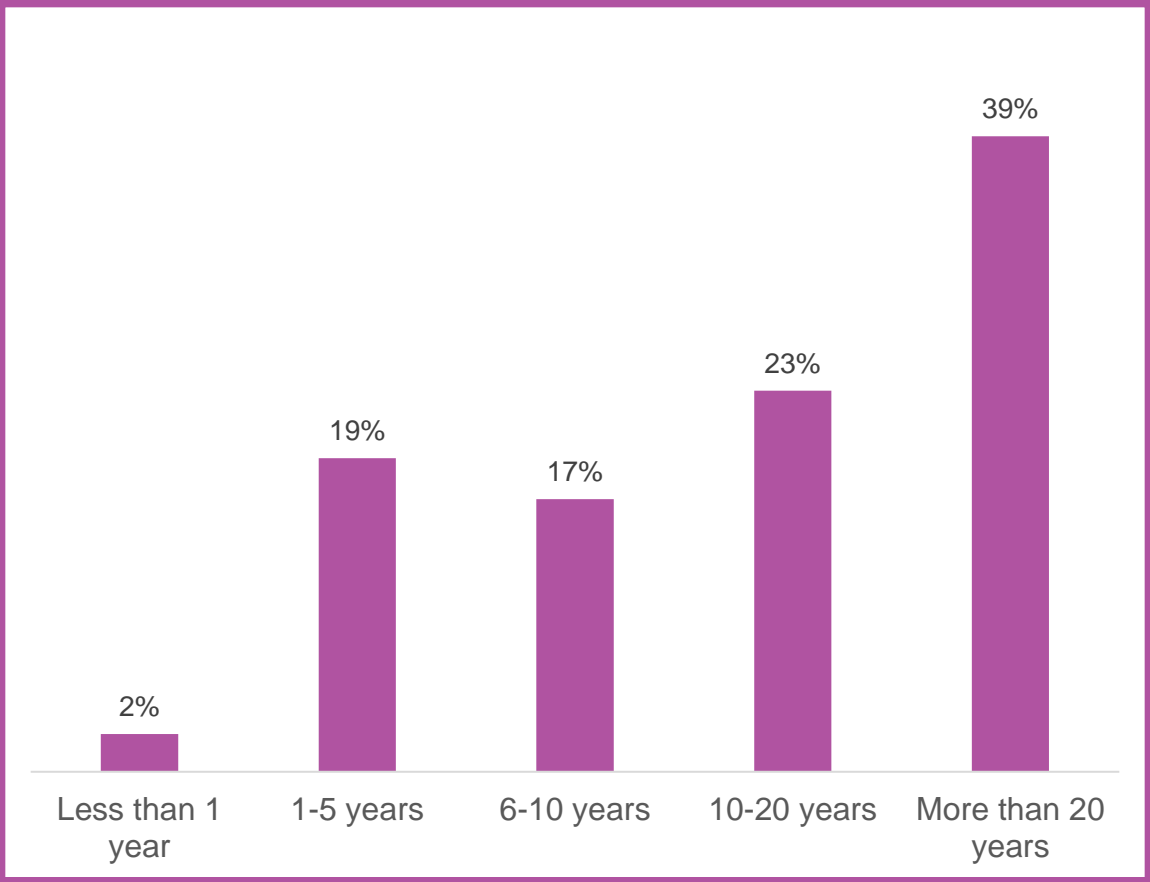
**Subgroups:** The analysis for the survey looked at several subgroups, including residents' demographics, how long they have lived there, and their awareness of LGR. Differences between groups are only reported if they were statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. For a sample of 1,477 respondents, a 50% point estimate has a 95% confidence interval of approximately  $\pm 2.6$  percentage points.

**Interpreting these findings:** The survey was conducted using an opt-in panel (specifically, the Dynata Panel). This means that all participants had signed up to complete surveys in exchange for financial rewards. This approach has some limitations. It is not possible to know with confidence whether the views of the people who opted in are the same or similar to the views of other Essex residents. The findings should therefore be treated with caution. They provide a useful indication of the likely views and perspectives of residents, but should not be interpreted as high-quality estimates of the exact proportion of Essex residents who feel a certain way.

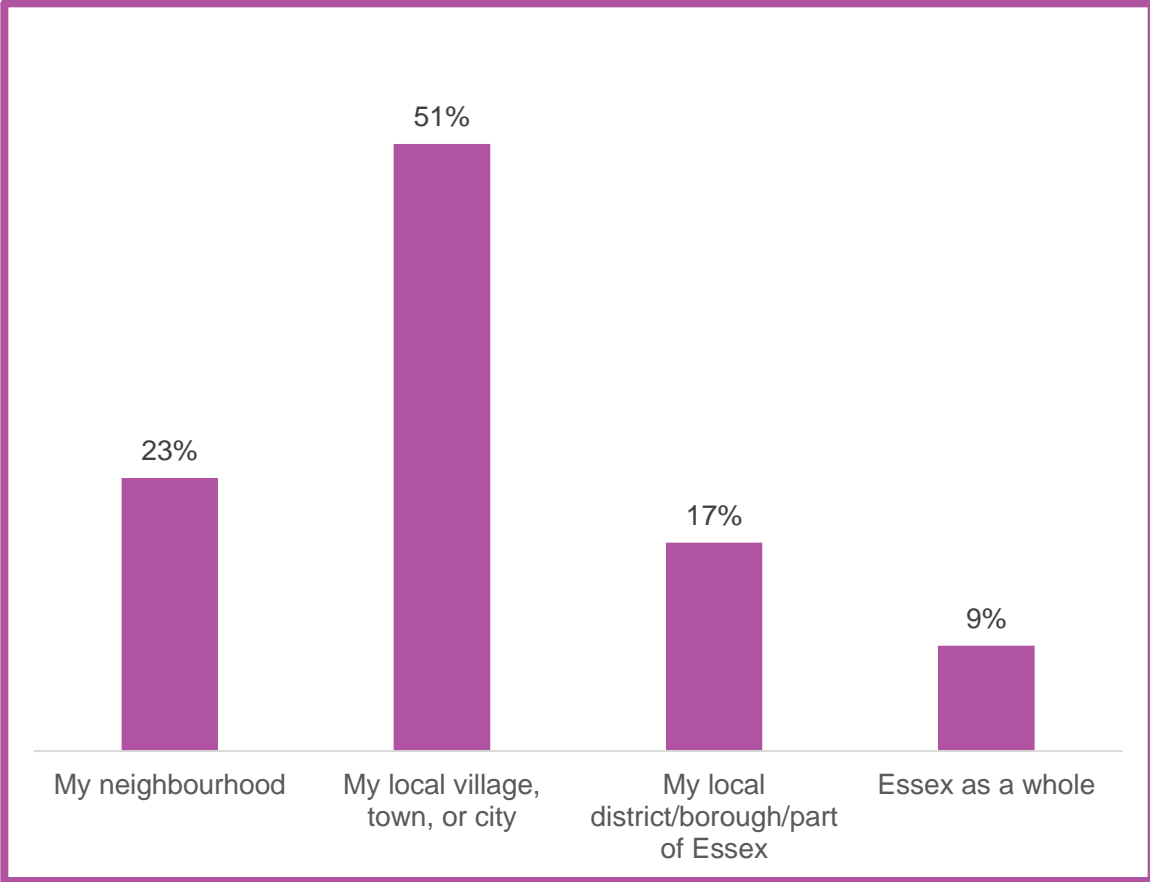
# Residents' perceptions of their local area



# How long respondents had lived in their current area



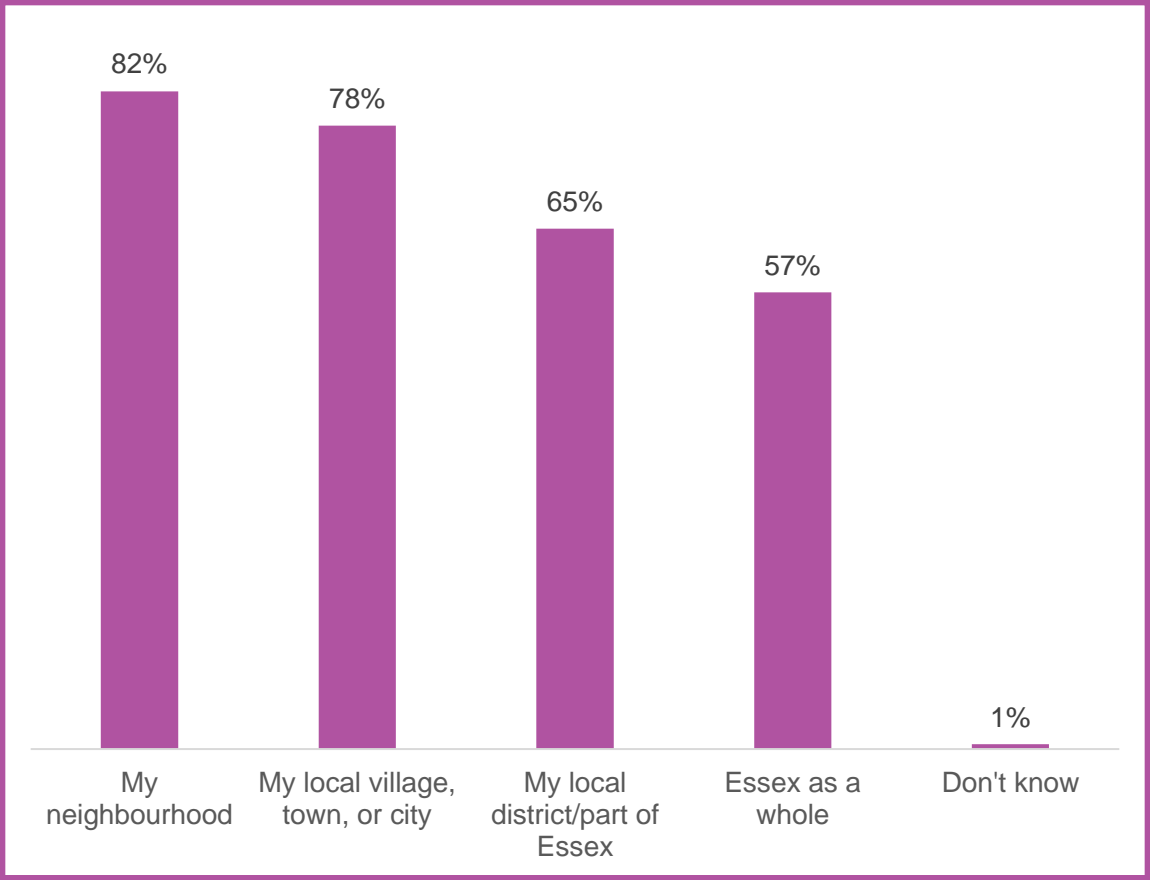
# What respondents described as their 'local area'



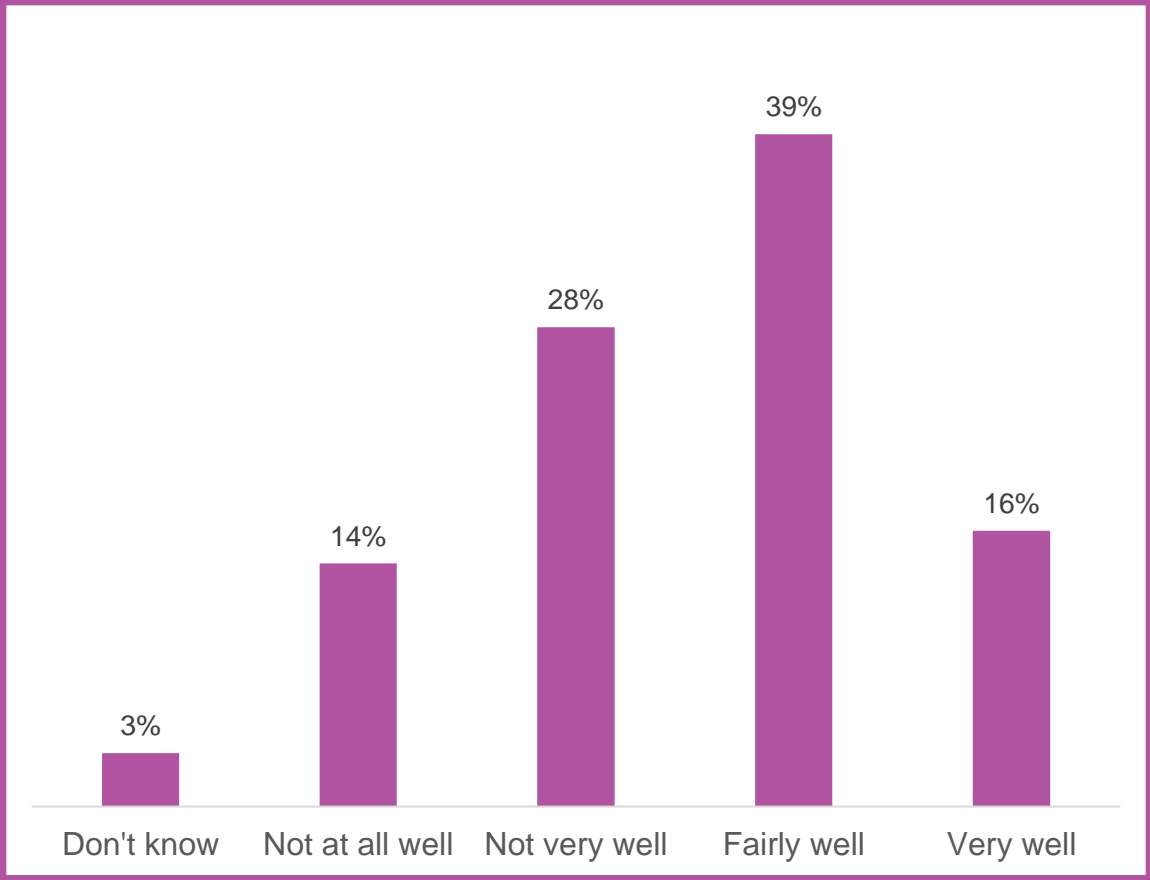
How long have you lived in your current area? This could be in different properties within the same area (n=1477)

Thinking about where you live, what would you describe as being your 'local area'? (n=1477)

# Respondents 'fairly strongly' feeling they have a sense of belonging for the following areas



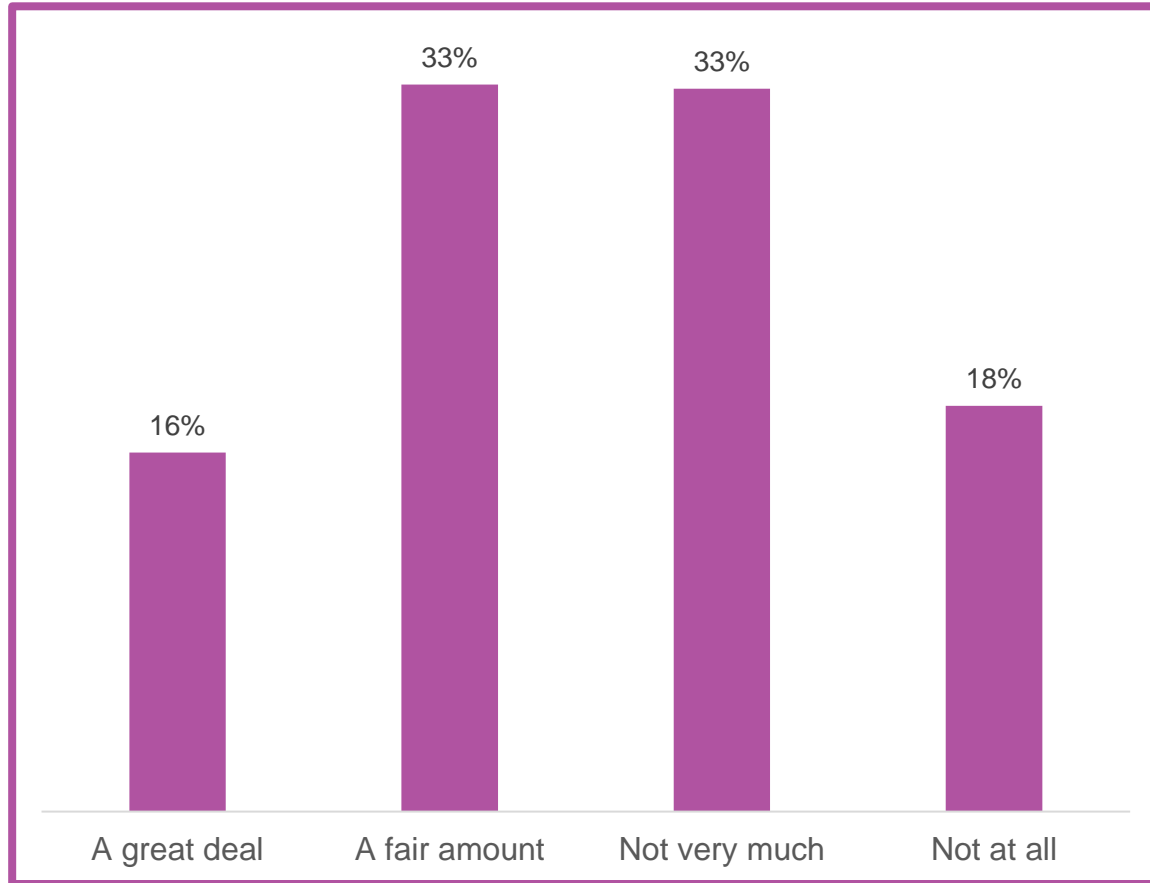
# To what extent did residents think the council understands the needs of their local area?



# Awareness and understanding of local government

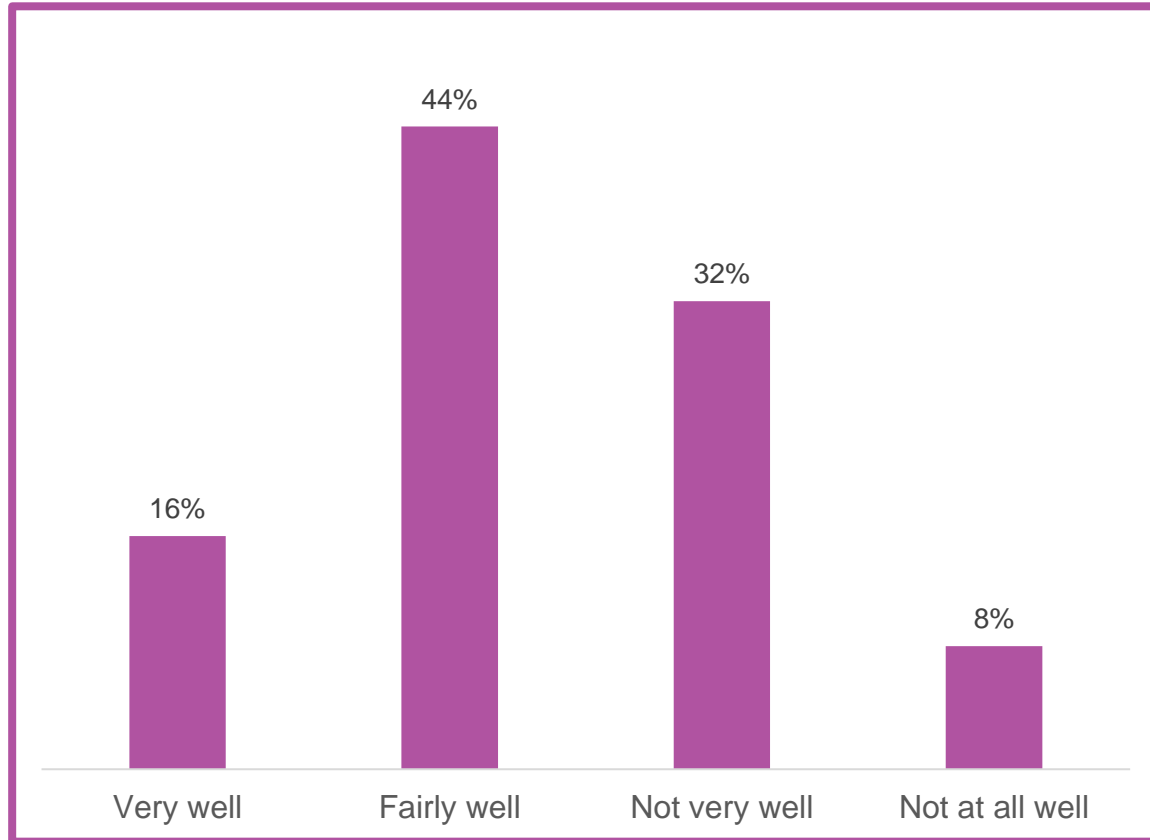


## To what extent did respondents already know about the suggested local government reorganisation?



- Older residents were more likely to know a great deal about the suggested changes to local government in Essex: 19% of those aged over 55 and 17% of those aged 35-54, compared to 11% of 18-34-year-olds.
- Awareness was highest in South Essex, where 26% of respondents knew a great deal, 7 to 15 percentage points higher than other areas.

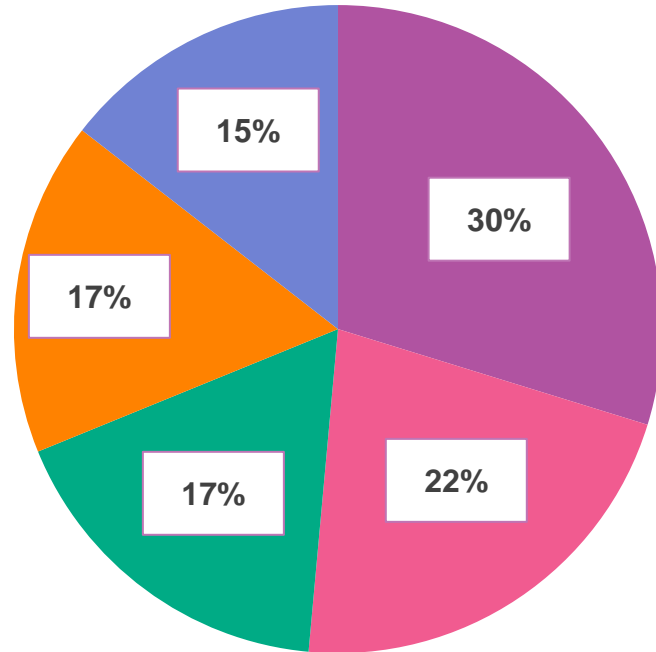
## To what extent do respondents understand how local services are currently delivered?



- 60% of respondents understood at least “fairly well”.
- Residents aged 35-54 were most likely to understand how local services are currently being delivered: 65%, compared to 58% of 18-34-year-olds and 57% of those aged 55 and over
- As with awareness of local government reorganisation, understanding was highest in South Essex, 69%, compared to 55% to 59% in other areas.

# How residents want their local council to be run (most important):

## Most important considerations

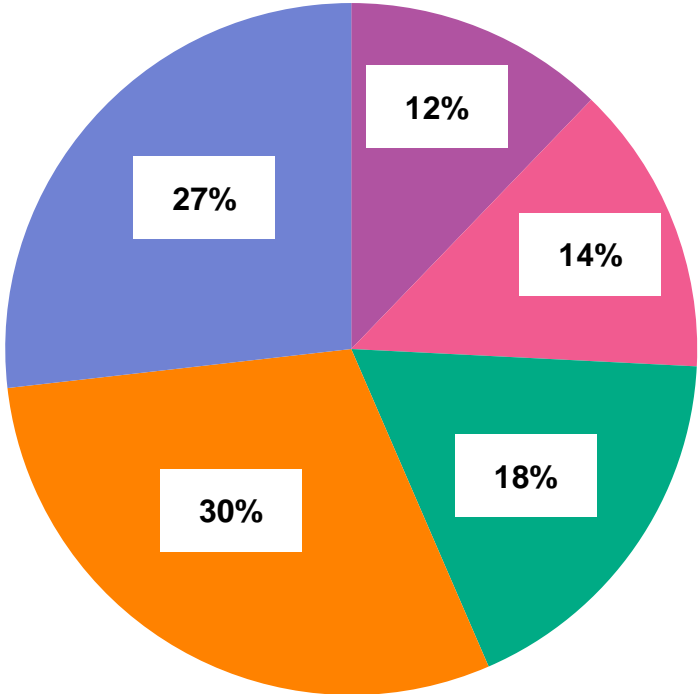


- Services would be efficient and good value for money
- Local councils would be accountable to residents
- The local area would have the power to make decisions about its own services
- Residents would be actively involved in local decision making
- It would be simple for me to contact the council to respond to issues

- Participants were asked to rank a series of options. The option that most people ranked first was having services that were efficient and good value for money (30% ranked this first).
- Participants aged 55 and older were slightly more likely to rank this first (33%) than participants aged 18 to 34 (25%).

# How residents want their local council to be run (least important):

## Least important considerations

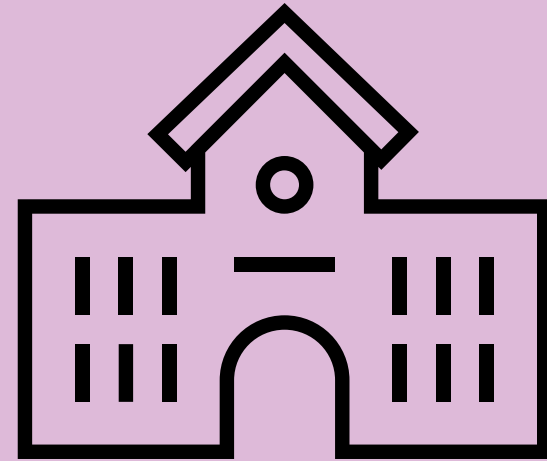


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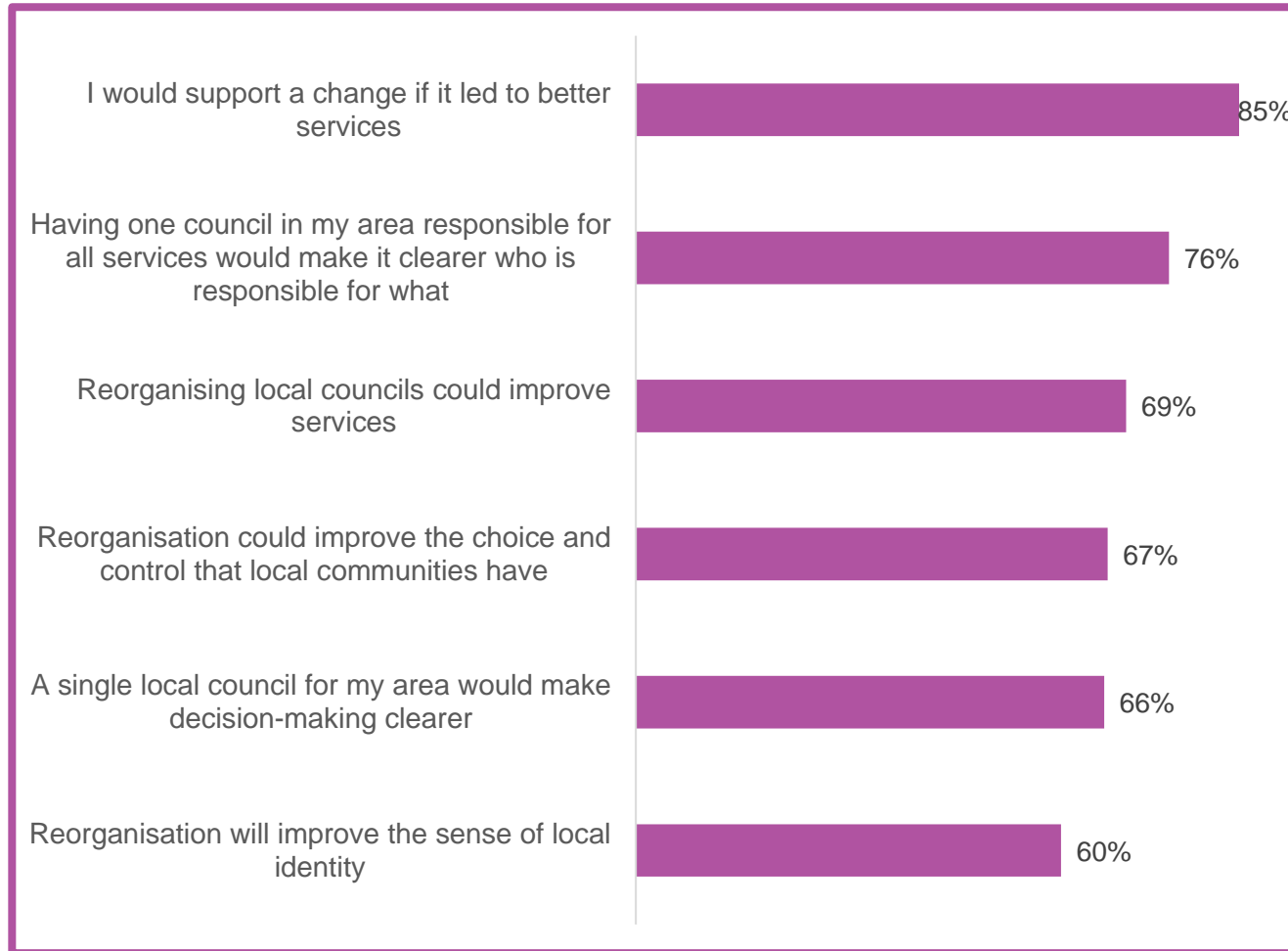
Almost a third of participants, 30%, ranked being actively involved in local decision making as the least important aspect.

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# Views on future LGR

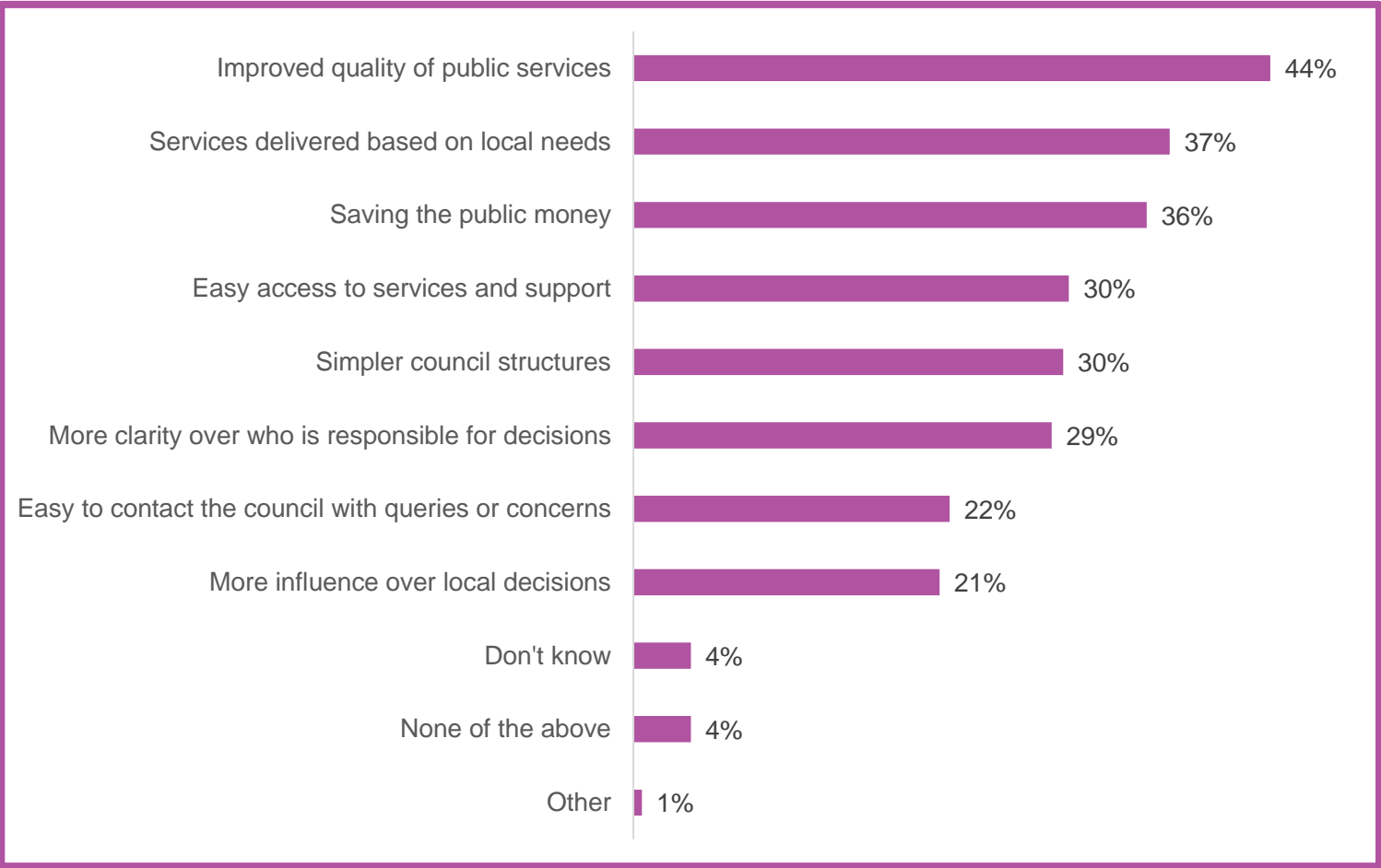


# Respondents strongly agreed/tended to agree with future Local Government Reorganisation if...



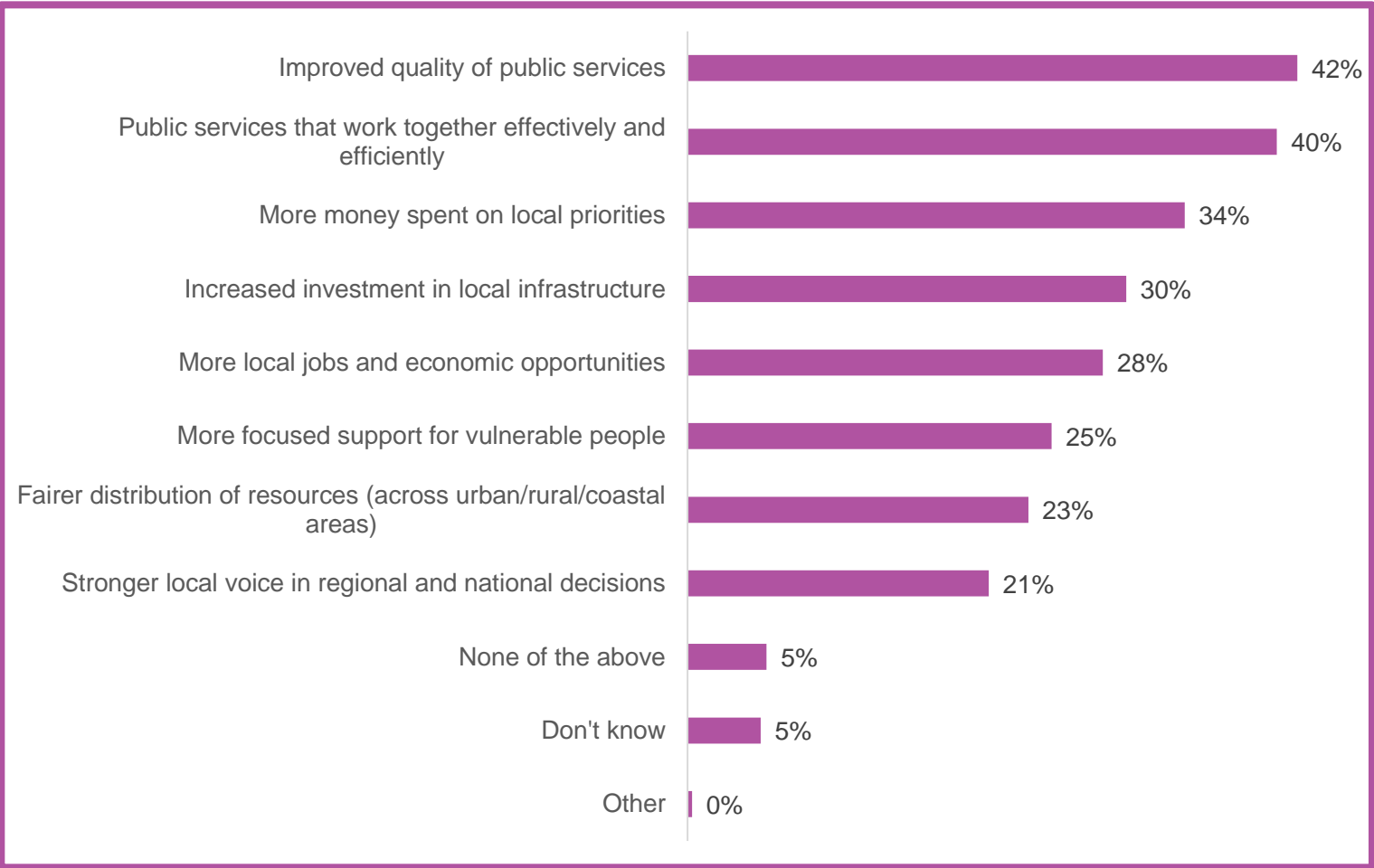
- Overall, most respondents tended to agree with the local government reorganisation for every reason asked in the survey, with a majority agreeing with LGR across each topic.
- The largest majority would agree with LGR if it led to better services, 85%, followed by if it clarified who across the council was responsible for what, 76%.
- Agreements levels were higher amongst residents who were highly aware of LGR, except for supporting LGR if it led to better services.

# What respondents perceived to be the main benefits of Local Government Reorganisation for them and their families:



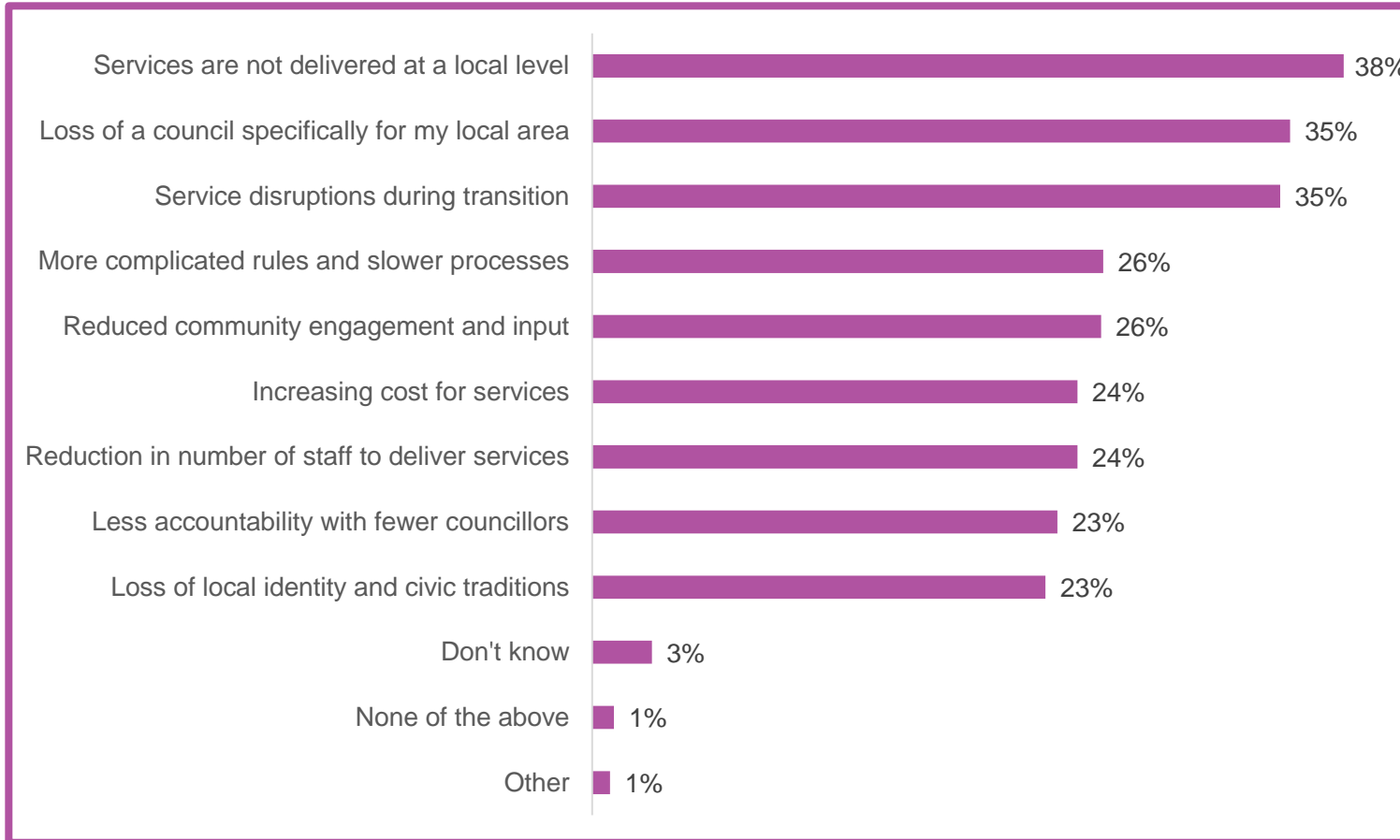
- The most commonly perceived benefits of LGR for residents were an improved quality of public services, 44%, services delivered based on local need, 37%, and saving the public money, 36%.
- Those with a “great deal” of existing knowledge of LGR, and those who felt they could influence decision making a “great deal”, were more likely to perceive improved quality of public services as a benefit of LGR (52% and 56% respectively).
- The perceived benefit of services being delivered based on local needs was higher among those aged 55 years and over compared with 18-24-year-olds, 41% vs 34%.

# What respondents perceived to be the main benefits of Local Government Reorganisation for the wider community:



- As seen previously, the improved quality of public services was the main perceived benefit for the wider community, 42%.
- This was followed closely by the perceived benefit of public services working together effectively and efficiently, 40%. This was more prominent in residents who had lived in Greater Essex for 1 to 5 years, 45%, compared to those who lived there for more than 20 years, 37%.

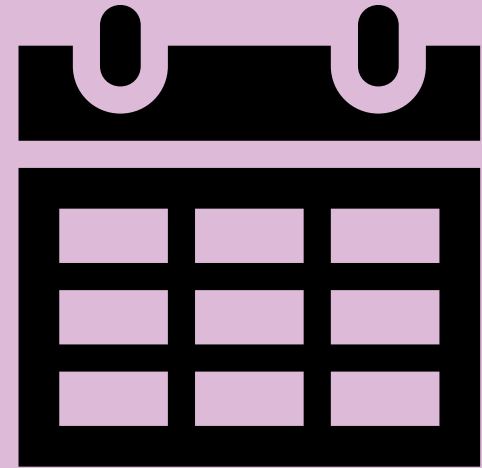
# What respondents perceived to be the main risks of local government reorganisation:



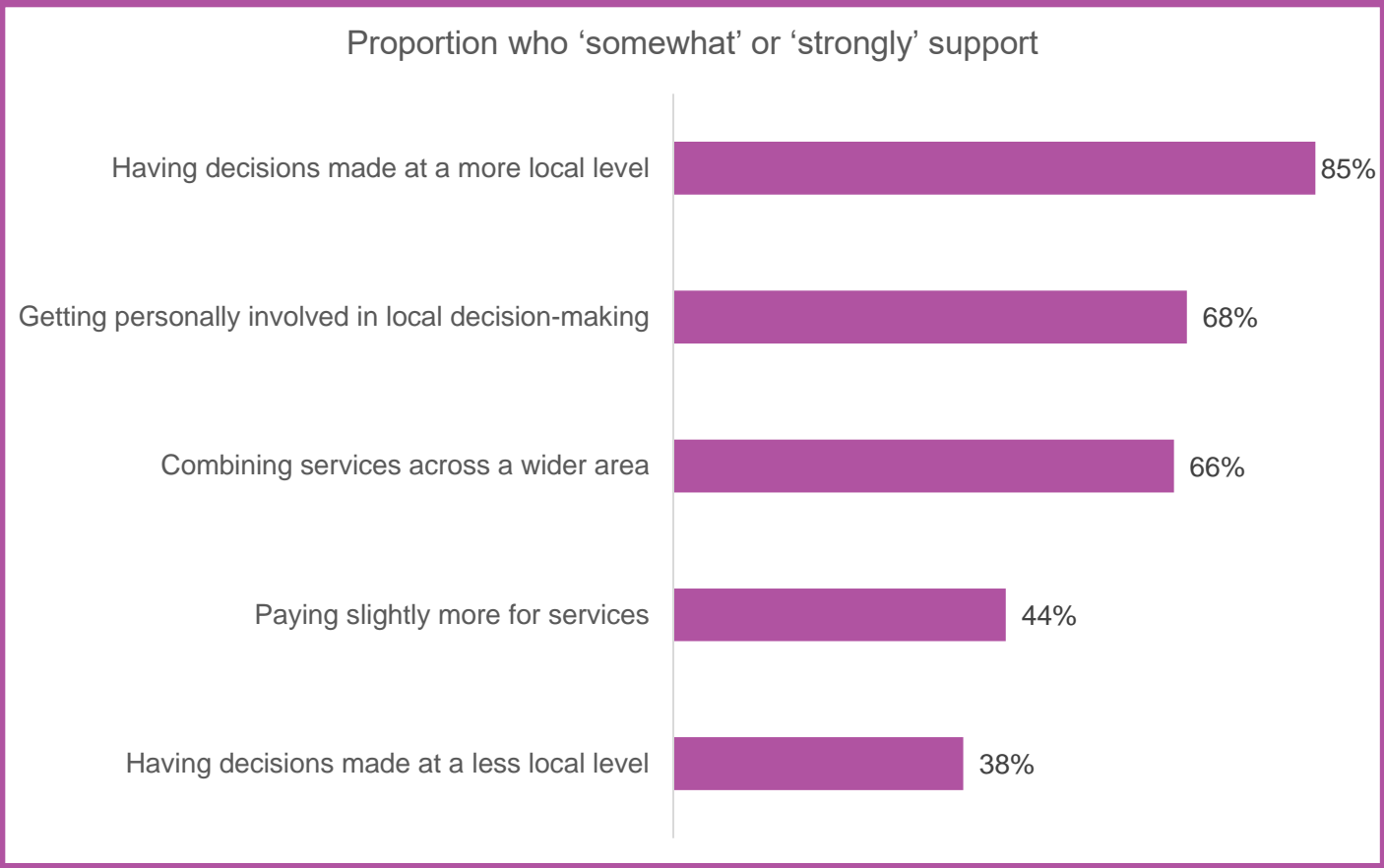
- Residents viewed services not being delivered at a local level, as the main risk of LGR, 38%. This was followed by the loss of a council for their local area, 35%, and a risk of service disruption during transition, also 35%.
- The proportion who perceived a risk of services not being delivered at a local level increased with age, from 32% up to 42% of those aged 55 and older.
- Similarly, the proportion who perceived risk of loss of a council for their local area increased with age, from 32% up to 42% of those aged 55 and older.

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# Priorities for future local government



# Respondents' support for different options if it meant improving the delivery of local services



- Most residents support having decisions made at a local level (85%), as well as being personally involved with this decision-making (68%).
- However, as seen previously, residents are less open to paying more for improving services, with less than half (44%), supporting this option. Similarly, only 38%, were in favour of improved local services if it meant they would not be delivered at a local level.

# Respondents' highest priorities for how local councils should work:

## 1st. Ensuring public funds are spent efficiently on what matters most

- 52% of residents reported that ensuring public funds were spent efficiently on what matters most to them and their area was in their top three priorities
- 57% of over 55s put this in their top three priorities, compared to 50% of those aged 18 to 34
- It was also a key priority for those in Mid Essex (57%), compared to West Essex (47%).

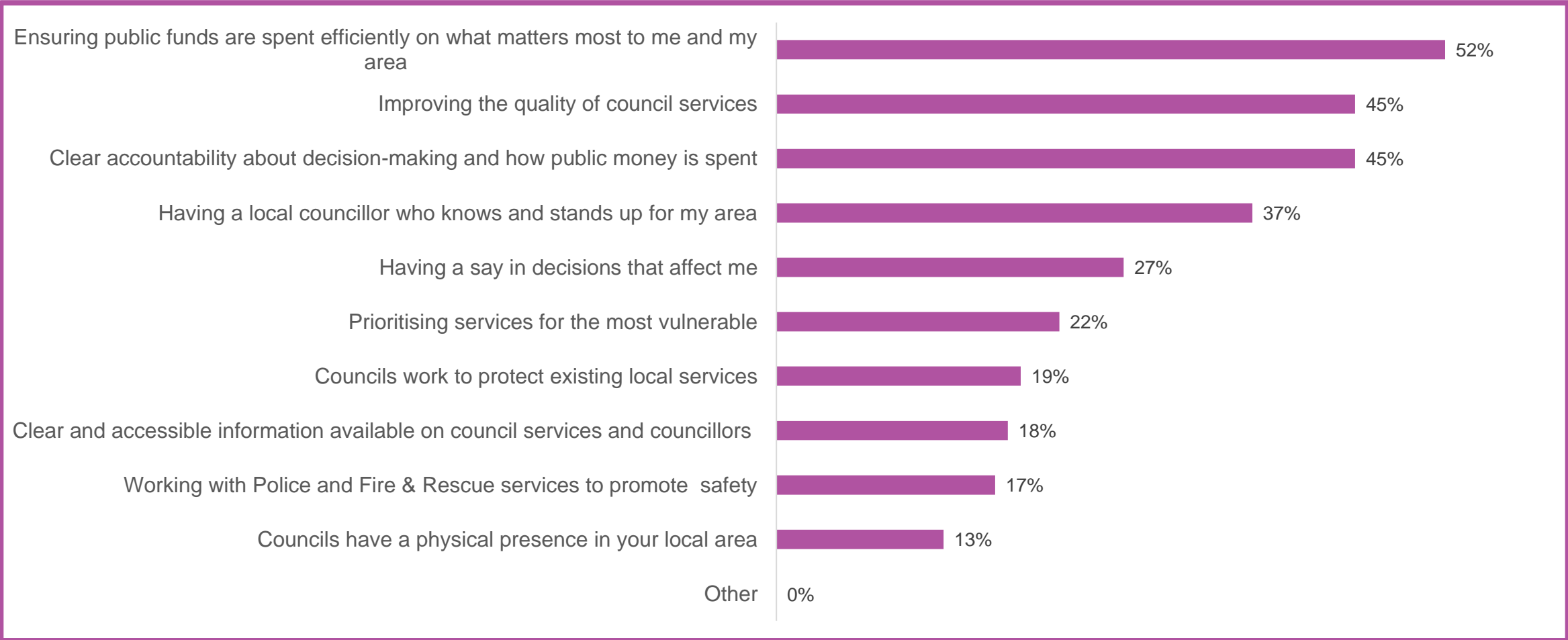
## 2nd. Improving the quality of council services

- Improving the quality of services was ranked as a top three priority by 45% of residents.
- Improving the quality of services was of considerably higher priority for those in West Essex, with 54% reporting it as a top three priority. This is compared to 42% in South Essex and 43% in Mid Essex.

## 3rd. Clear accountability about when, how, and who is making decisions on how public money is spent

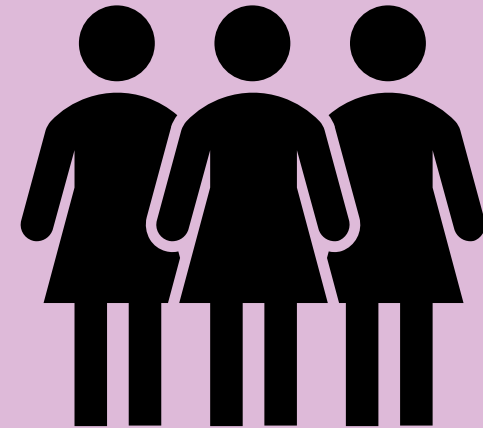
- Overall, 45% of residents ranked clear accountability in their top three priorities.
- It was also noticeably higher priority for those who had lived in Greater Essex for more than 20 years, 48%, compared to those who had lived there for 6 to 10 years, 38%.

# Respondents' highest priorities for how local councils should work:



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# **Civic engagement and decision making**



# Previous civic engagement amongst respondents':



## Voted in a council election

82% of residents have voted in a council election



## Responded to a survey or consultation

56% of residents had completed a survey or consultation



## Contacted a councillor

38% of residents have previously contacted a councillor



## Taken part in a community group or campaign

38% of residents have taken part in a community group or campaign



## Attended a council meeting

25% of residents have previously attended a council meeting either online or in person

# Respondents' largest motivations for previous civic engagement:

Participants were asked to choose what factors they considered as motivations for their previous civic engagement.

## 1. Felt it was their civic duty

- Overall, 35% of Greater Essex Residents were motivated to engage with their local council because they felt it was their civic duty.
- This motivation was less common in women than men, with 31% of women feeling motivated because of civic duty compared to 38% of men.

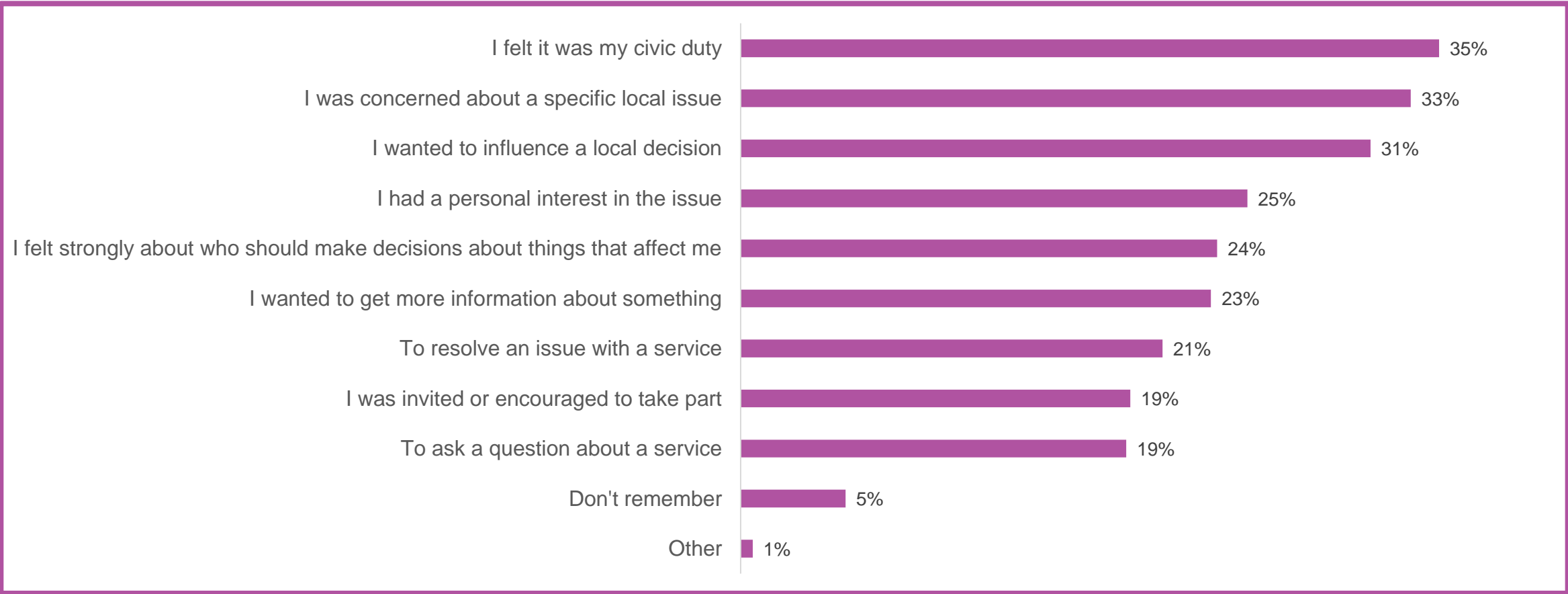
## 2. Concern about a specific local issue

- Overall, 33% of Greater Essex residents had engaged due to concern for a specific local issue.
- This was notably higher for residents aged 55 and older, with 40% of these residents reporting so. This is compared to 23% of those aged 18-34.

## 3. To influence a local decision

- The proportion of those engaging with the local council to influence a decision was consistent across the majority of subgroups, with 31% of all Greater Essex residents engaging for this reason.
- However, it was higher for homeowners compared to renters, with 34% and 25% engaging in this way, respectively.

# Respondents' largest motivations for previous civic engagement:

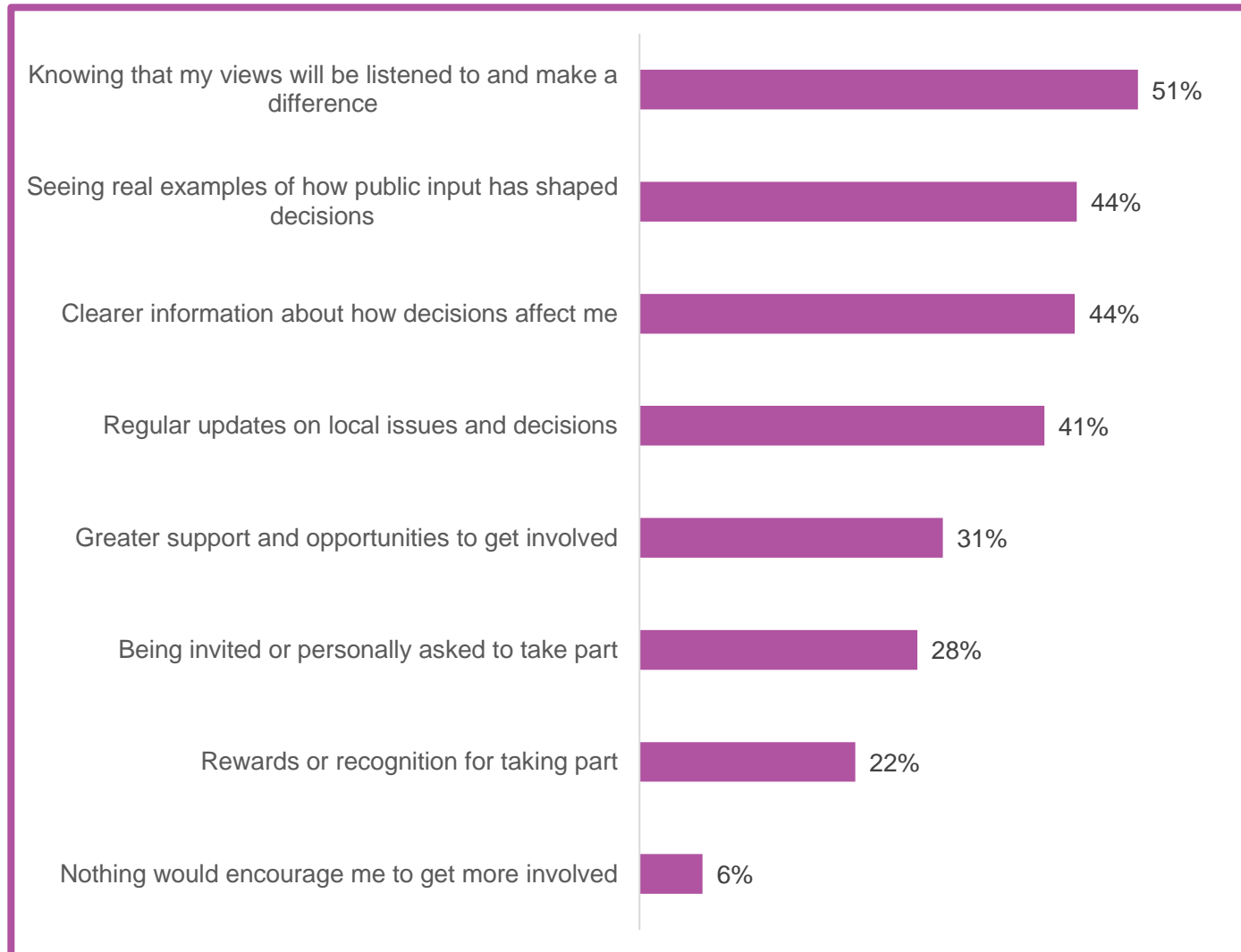


## Respondents' interest in future local decision making:



- The most common ways in which residents were interested in getting more involved in local decision making was through voting in local elections, 53%, or through giving feedback on local services, 42%. Interest through voting was highest among those aged 55 and older, 60%. However, giving feedback on local services was highest among those aged 18 to 34 years, 51%.
- The proportion of residents interested in either local election voting or giving feedback on local services was highest among homeowners.
- A small proportion of residents, 6%, were interested in becoming a councillor, and a similar proportion, 7%, had no interest in any future involvement.

# Respondents' motivations for involvement in future decision making:



- Residents' strongest motivations for being involved in future decision making focused on knowing their views would be listened to (51%), seeing how public input has shaped decisions (44%), and having clearer information about decisions that affect them (44%).
- Younger residents (18 -34) were most likely to say that having their views listened to was the strongest motivation for future decision-making, with 59% selecting it, compared to 48% of 35-54-year-olds and 48% of those aged 55 and over.
- Overall, 6% of residents reported that nothing would motivate them to get more involved; proportions were highest among those aged 55 and over, 10%, and those who had lived in Greater Essex for over 20 years, 10%

# Conclusions

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# Key takeaways for local authorities

## **Awareness and attitudes to local government reorganisation (LGR):**

- Awareness of suggested changes to local government in Essex was generally low, with older residents (19%) being more likely to know a great deal about the proposals and awareness being highest in South Essex (26%).
- Overall, most residents tended to agree with local government reorganisation for every reason asked in the survey, with most agreeing with LGR if it led to better services (85%).
- The main perceived benefits of LGR for residents and the wider community included an improved quality of public services (44% for residents and their families, and 42% for the wider community).

## **Service priorities and financial considerations:**

- Services being efficient and good value for money was the highest ranked consideration for how residents wanted their council to be run, with 30% reporting it as the most important aspect.
- Ensuring public funds are spent efficiently (52%), improving service quality, and clear accountability (both 45%) were the highest priorities for residents when it came to how councils should work.
- However, cost remains a barrier to service improvements, with less than half (44%) willing to pay more for improved services.

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# Key takeaways for local authorities

## Local decision-making and participation:

- Residents overwhelmingly support having decisions made at a more local level (85%) and wanted to be personally involved in local decision-making if it led to improved services (68%). However, only a third of respondents saw active involvement in local decision-making as a priority. This suggests participation is seen less as a goal in itself and more as a means to improving services.
- Only 38% supported having decisions made at a less local level if that meant improving the delivery of services, highlighting the tension between service enhancement and local control.

## Civic engagement patterns:

- High existing civic engagement exists among participants, with most residents (82%) having voted in council elections. The strongest motivations for previous civic engagement were feeling it was their civic duty (35%).
- For future engagement, residents prefer voting in local elections (53%) and giving feedback on services (42%), with older residents preferring voting and younger residents preferring giving feedback.
- Impact visibility is crucial for motivation for civic engagement, with half of residents (51%) saying they would engage more if they knew their views would be listened to and make a difference, and 44% wanting to see real examples of how public input has shaped decisions.

**Contact us:**  
LGRresearch@natcen.ac.uk

35 Northampton Square,  
London,  
EC1V 0AX

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