

# Essex Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) research

Charles Wilson, Harry Pearce, Bernard Steen

# Acknowledgements

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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

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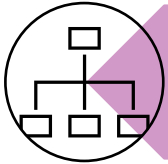
# Research background

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.

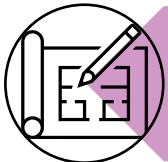
## What is LGR?



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**.

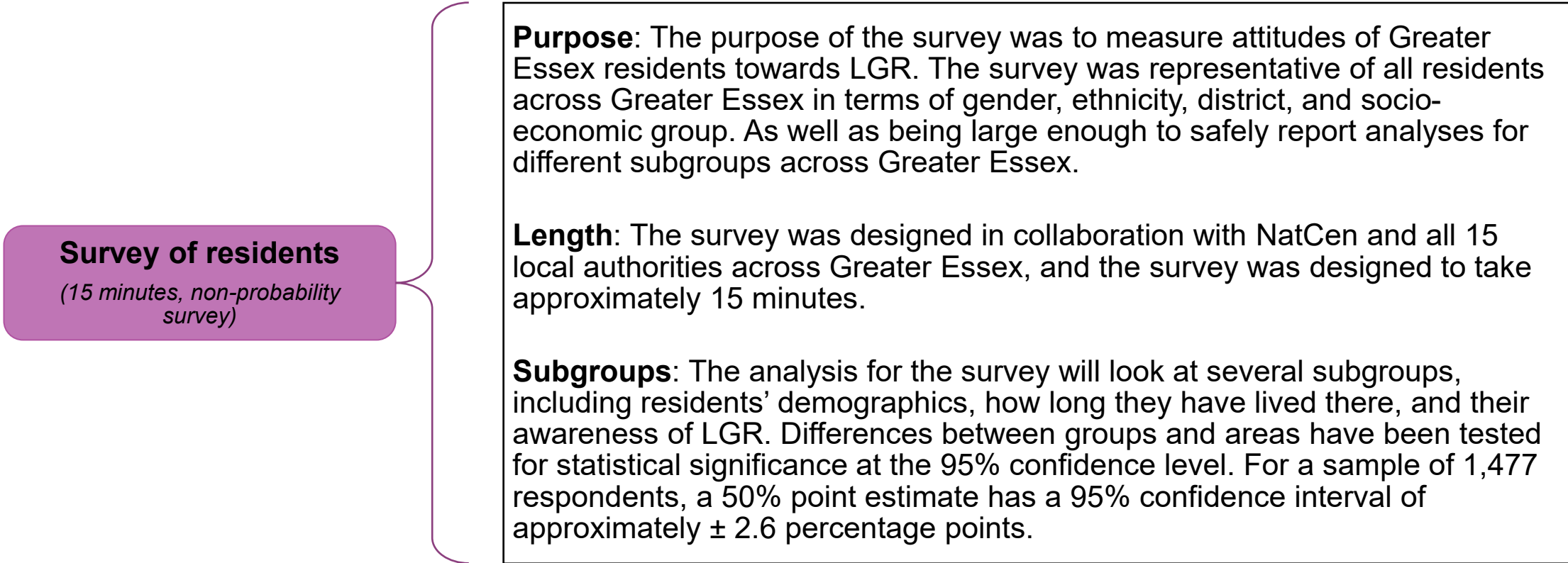


NatCen's research findings will inform the development of business cases which set out different plans for how the new unitary authorities should be arranged.



# Methodological Overview

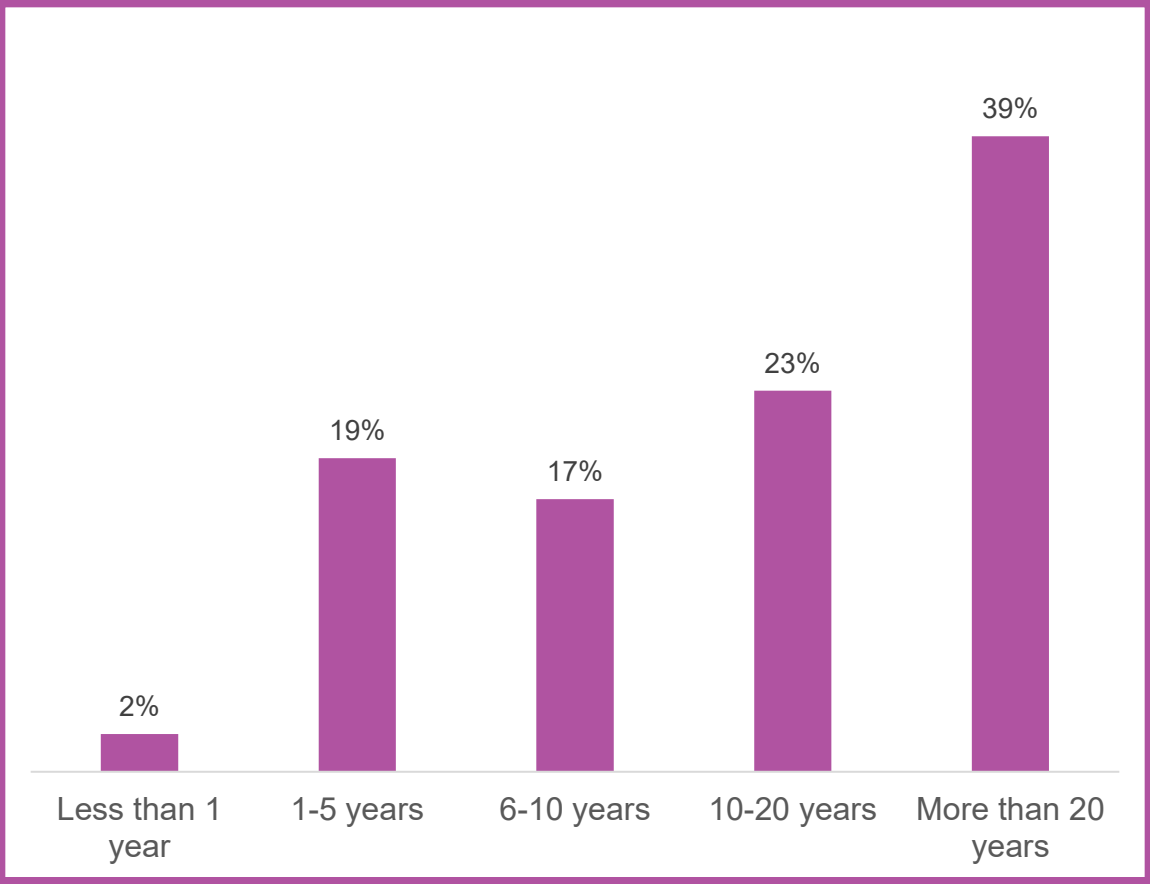
LGR is a complex process, the outcome of which remains uncertain. Nevertheless, whatever form it takes, the effects of LGR will be felt across the county. To ensure a robust and representative understanding of the range of attitudes and experiences across Greater Essex residents, a large-scale survey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



# **Residents' perceptions of their local area**

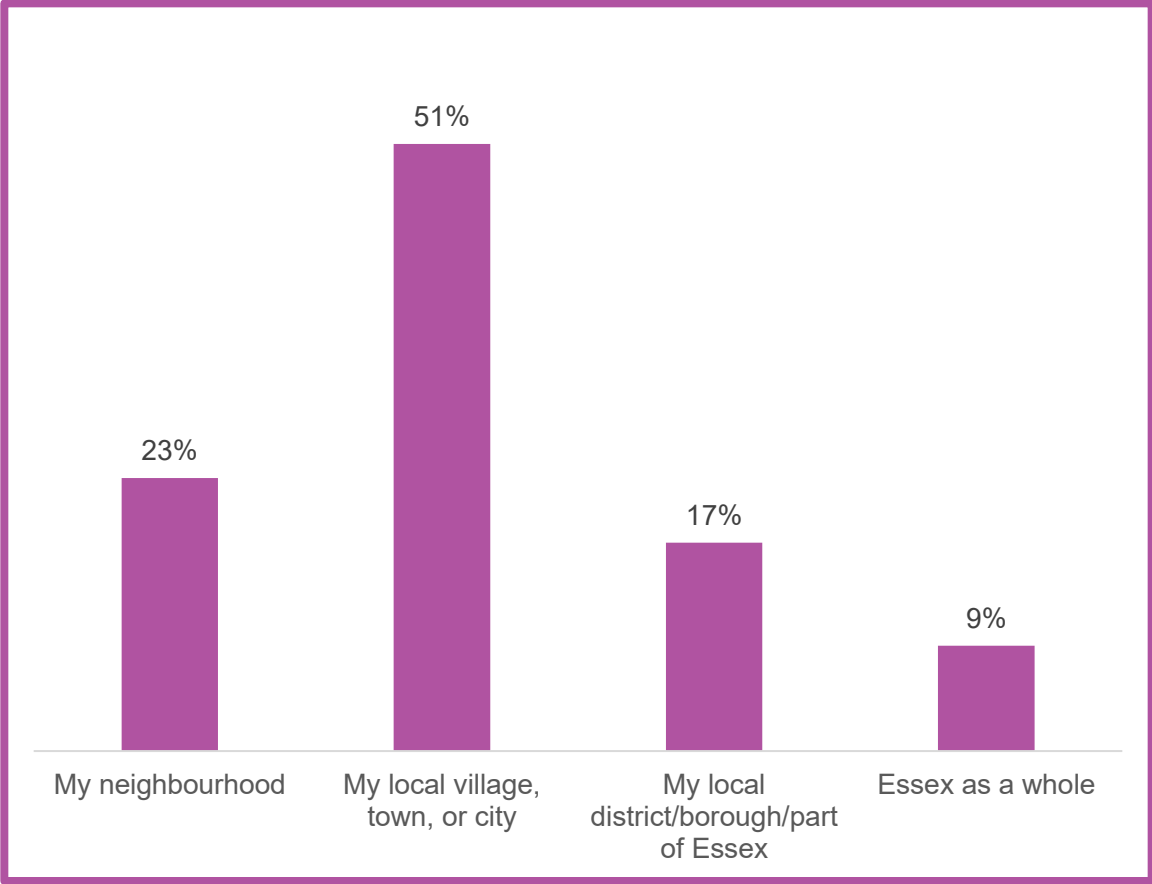


# How long residents have lived in their current area



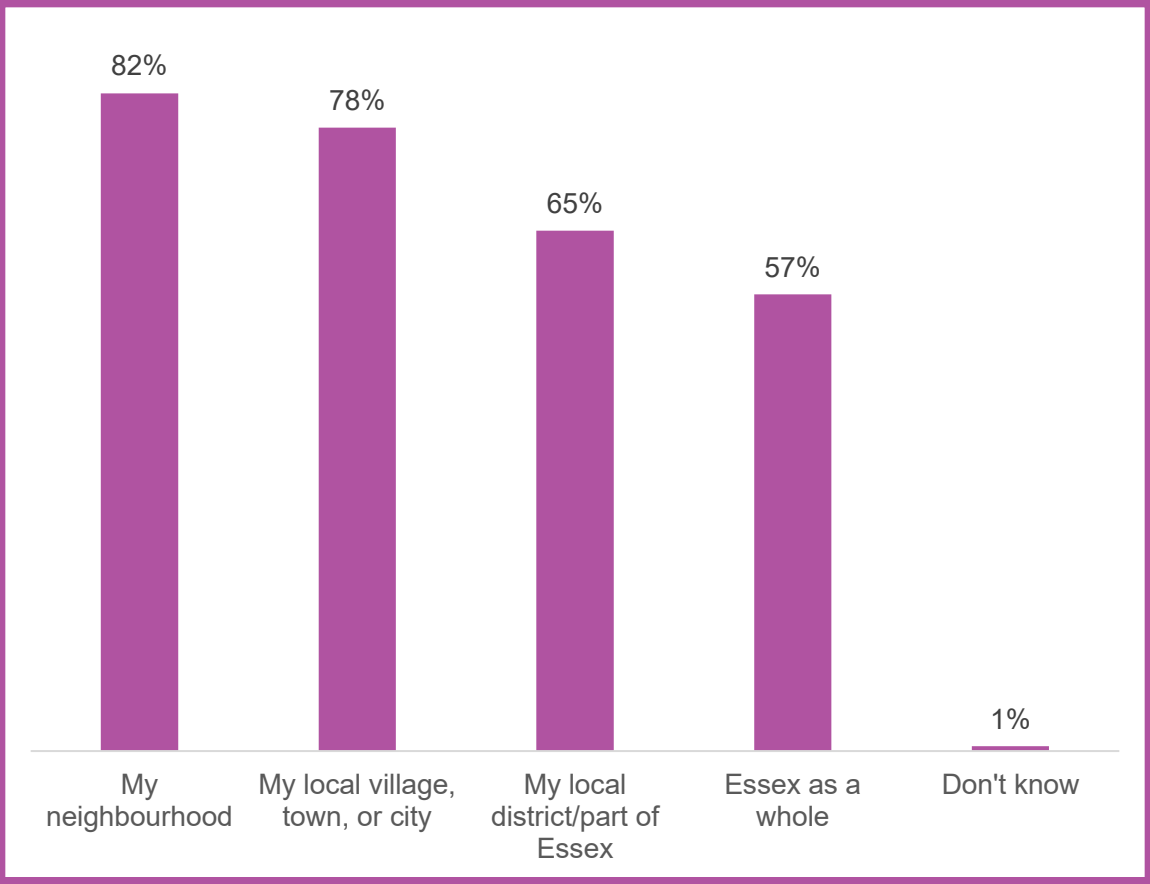
How long have you lived in your current area? This could be in different properties within the same area (n=1477)

# What residents describe as their 'local area'



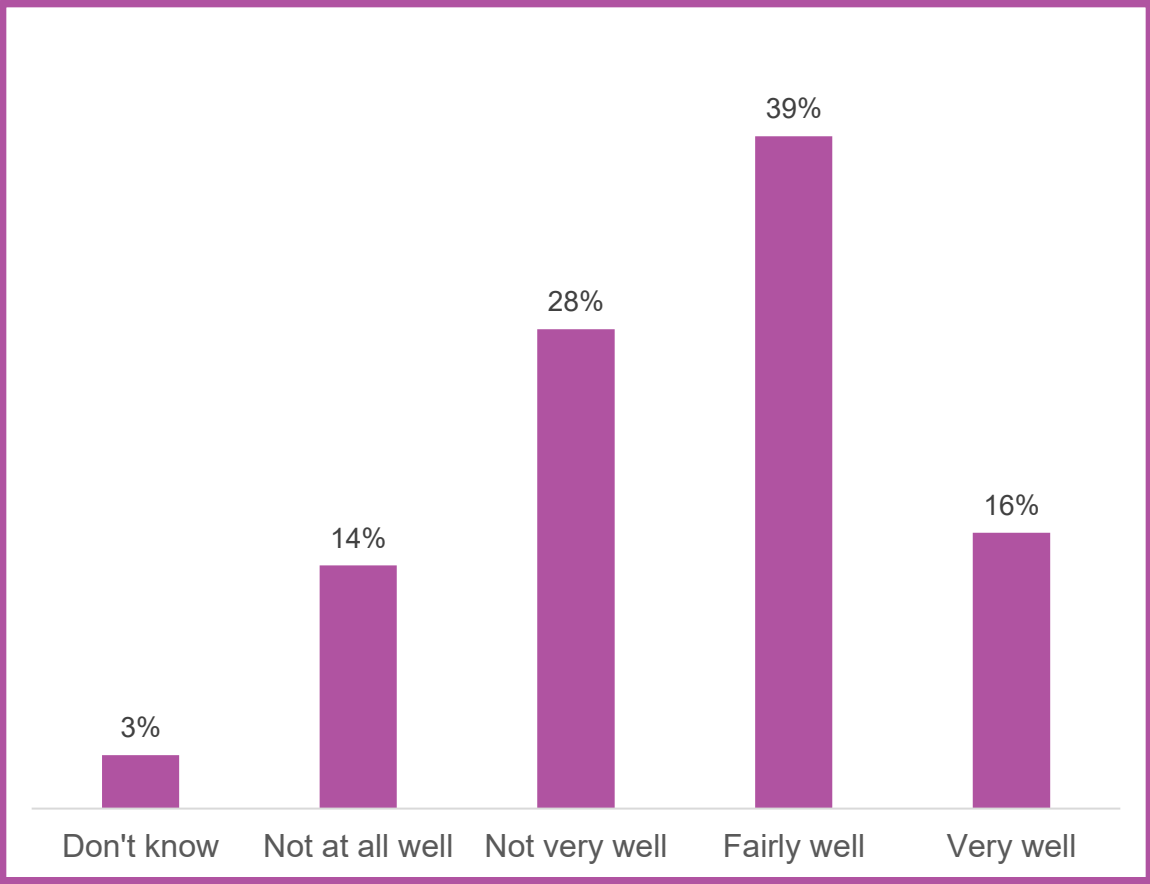
Thinking about where you live, what would you describe as being your 'local area'? (n=1477)

# Residents strongly feel they have a sense of belonging for the following areas



To what extent do you feel you have a sense of belonging for each of the following areas? (n=1477)

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



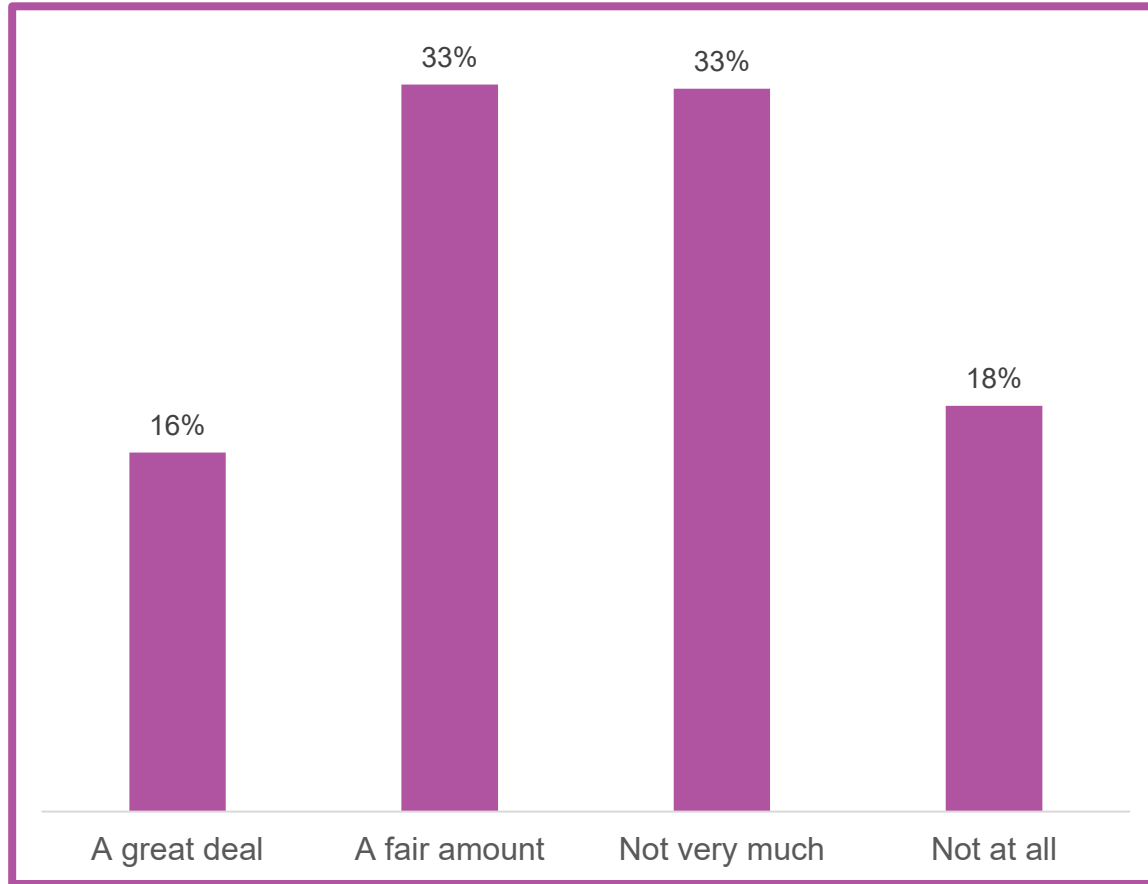
To what extent do you think the council(s) responsible for your area currently understand the needs of your local area? (n=1477)



# **Awareness and understanding of local government**

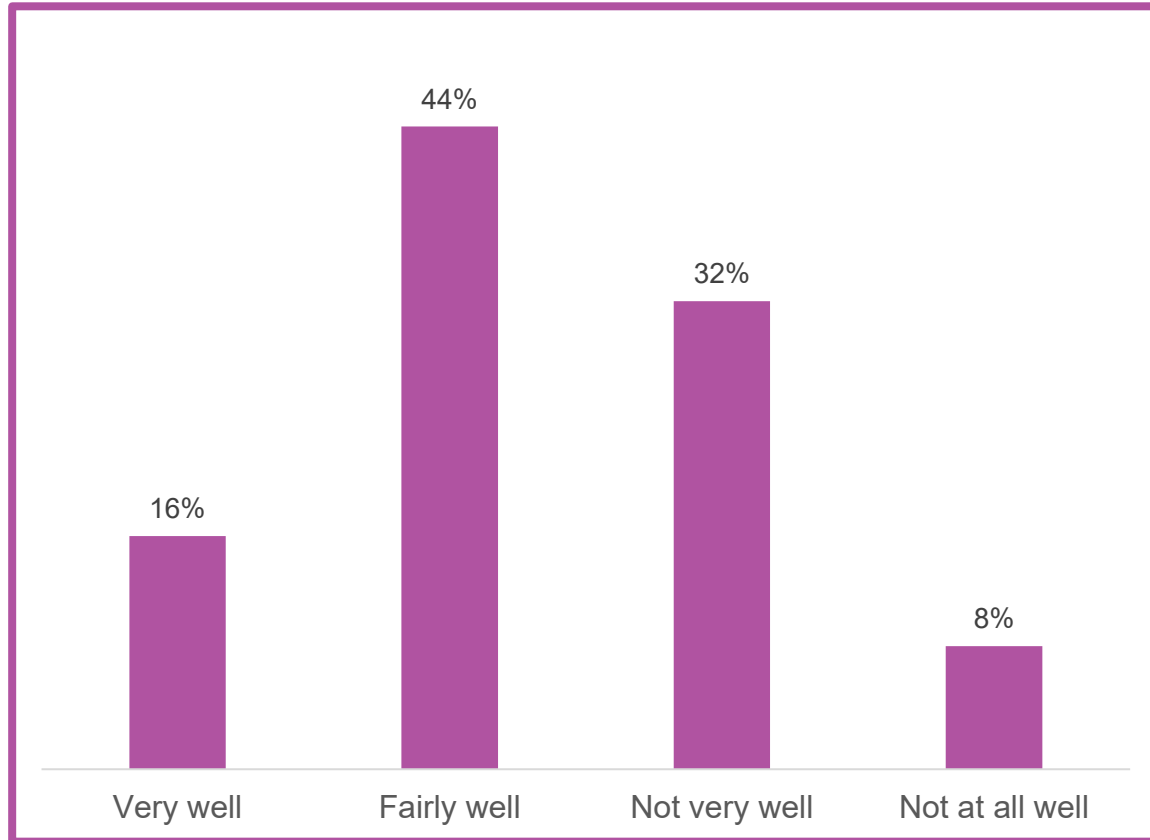


## To what extent were residents already aware of the suggested local government reorganisation?



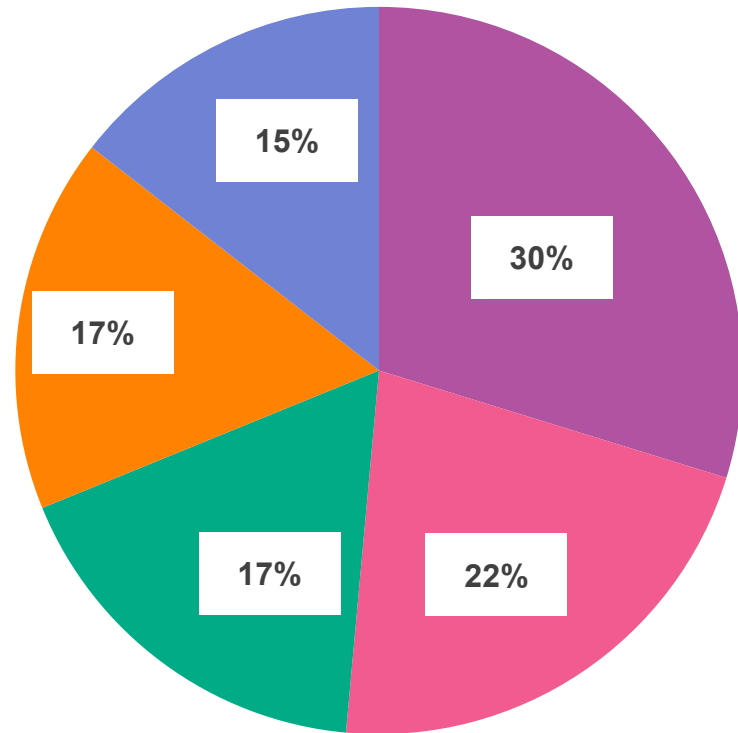
- Older residents were more likely to know a great deal about the suggested changes to local government in Essex: 19% of those aged over 55 and 17% of those aged 35-54, compared to just 11% of 18-34-year-olds.
- Awareness was highest in South Essex, where 26% of residents knew a great deal, 7 to 15 percentage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

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



- 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.

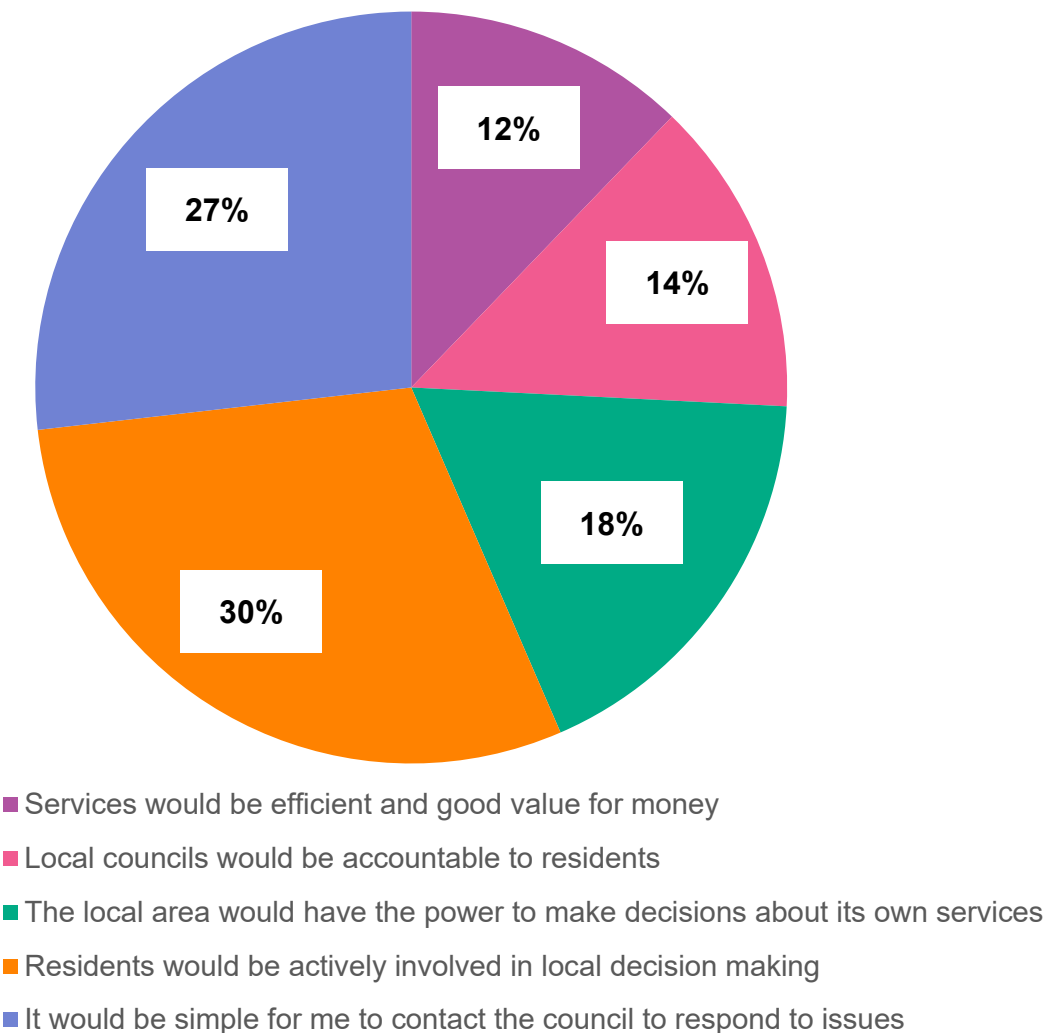
## How residents want their local council to be run (most important):



- 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

- The most prevalent aspect of how residents wanted their local council to be run was having services that were good value for money, with 30% reporting it as the most important aspect.
- Residents wanting efficient and good value services were highest in those aged 55 and older, 33%, compared to only 25% of 18–34-year-olds.

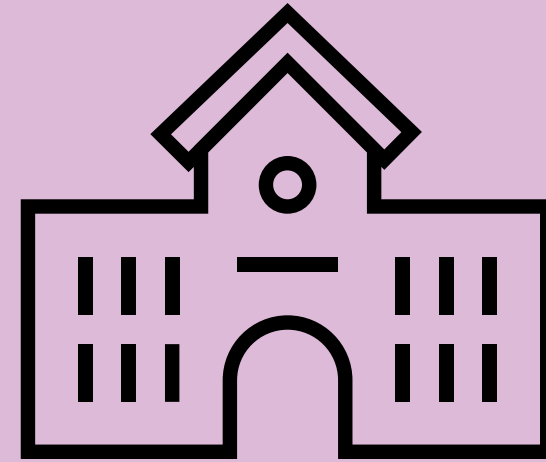
# How residents want their local council to be run (least important):



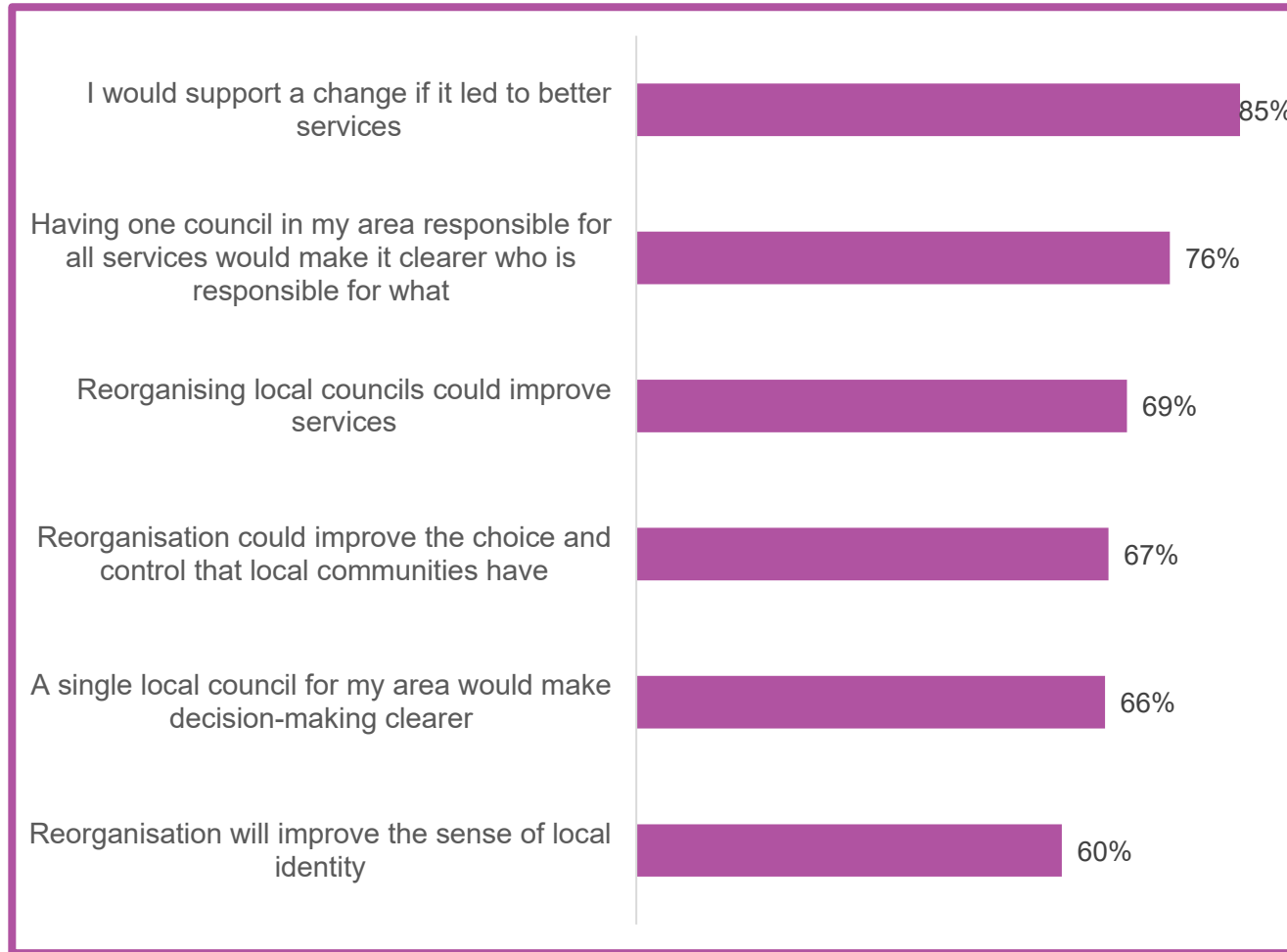
Almost a third of participants, 30%, ranked being actively involved in local decision making as the least important aspect.

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# Views on future LGR

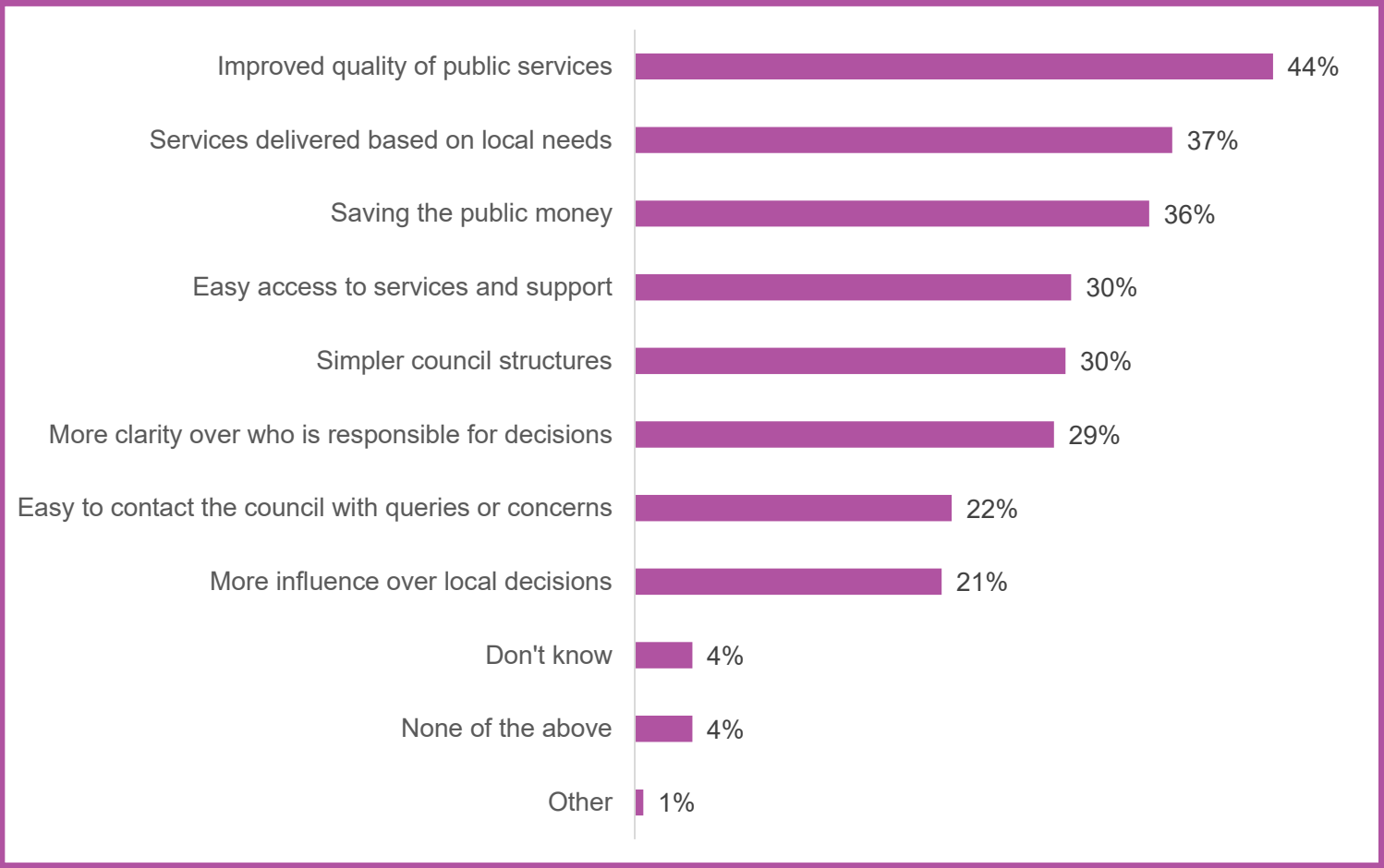


# Residents strongly agree/tend to agree with future local government reorganisation if...



- Overall, most residents tended to agree with the local government reorganisation for every reason asked in the survey, with a majority agreeing with LGR across each topic.
- An overwhelming majority agree with LGR if it led to better services, 85%, followed closely by if it clarified who across the council was responsible for what, 76%.
- Agreement levels were between 1%-9% higher for men than women across all topics, except for LGR improving choice and control, and supporting LGR if it led to better services.
- Similarly, agreement levels were higher in residents who were highly aware of LGR, except for supporting LGR if it led to better services.

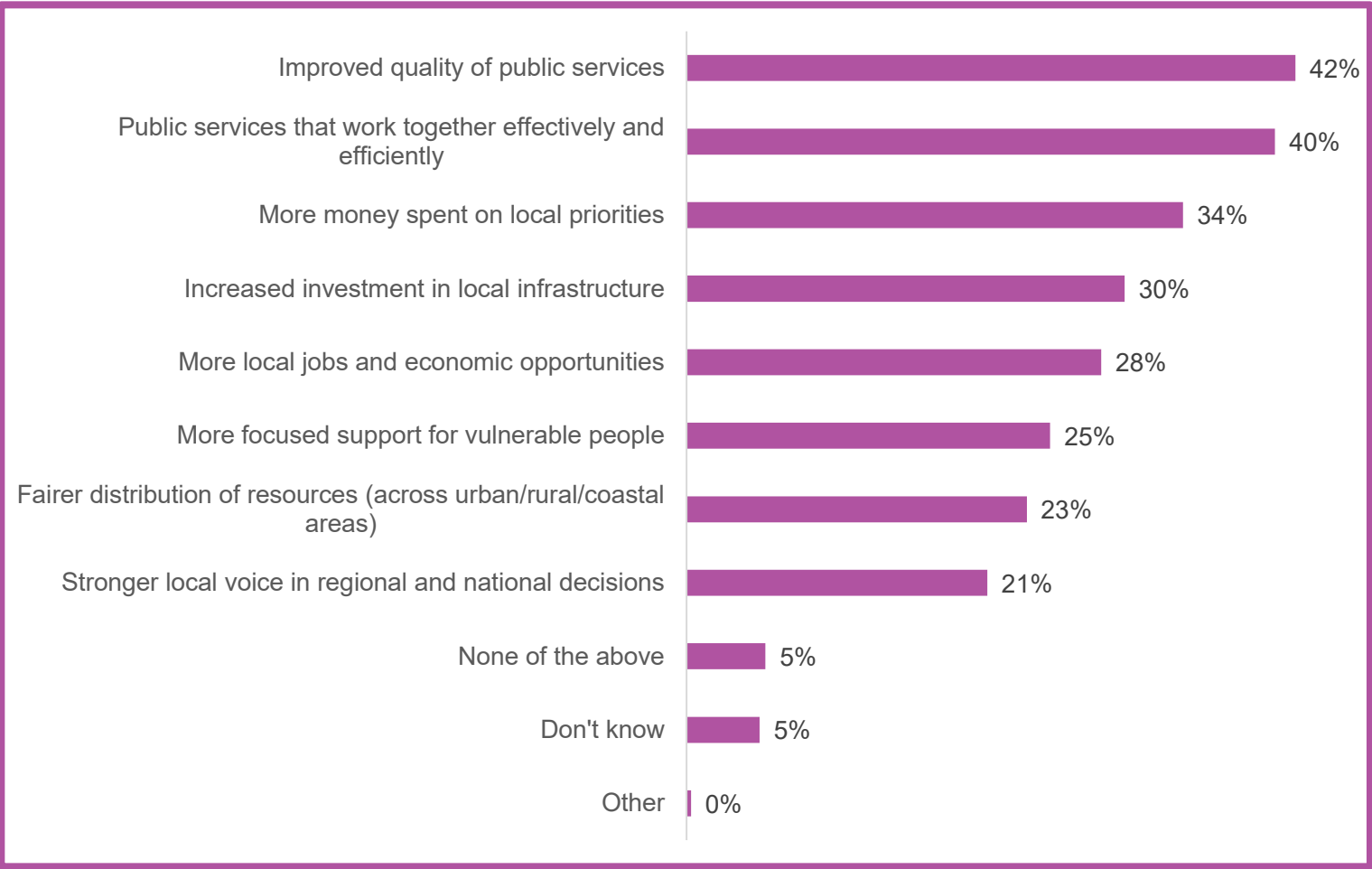
# What residents perceive to be the main benefits of local government reorganisation for them and their families:



- The main perceived benefits of LGR for residents included an improved quality of public services, 44%, and services delivered based on local need, 37%.
- The perceived benefit of improvements to public services was the highest among those with a great existing knowledge of LGR, 52%, and those who felt they could influence decision making to a great deal, 56%.
- 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%.

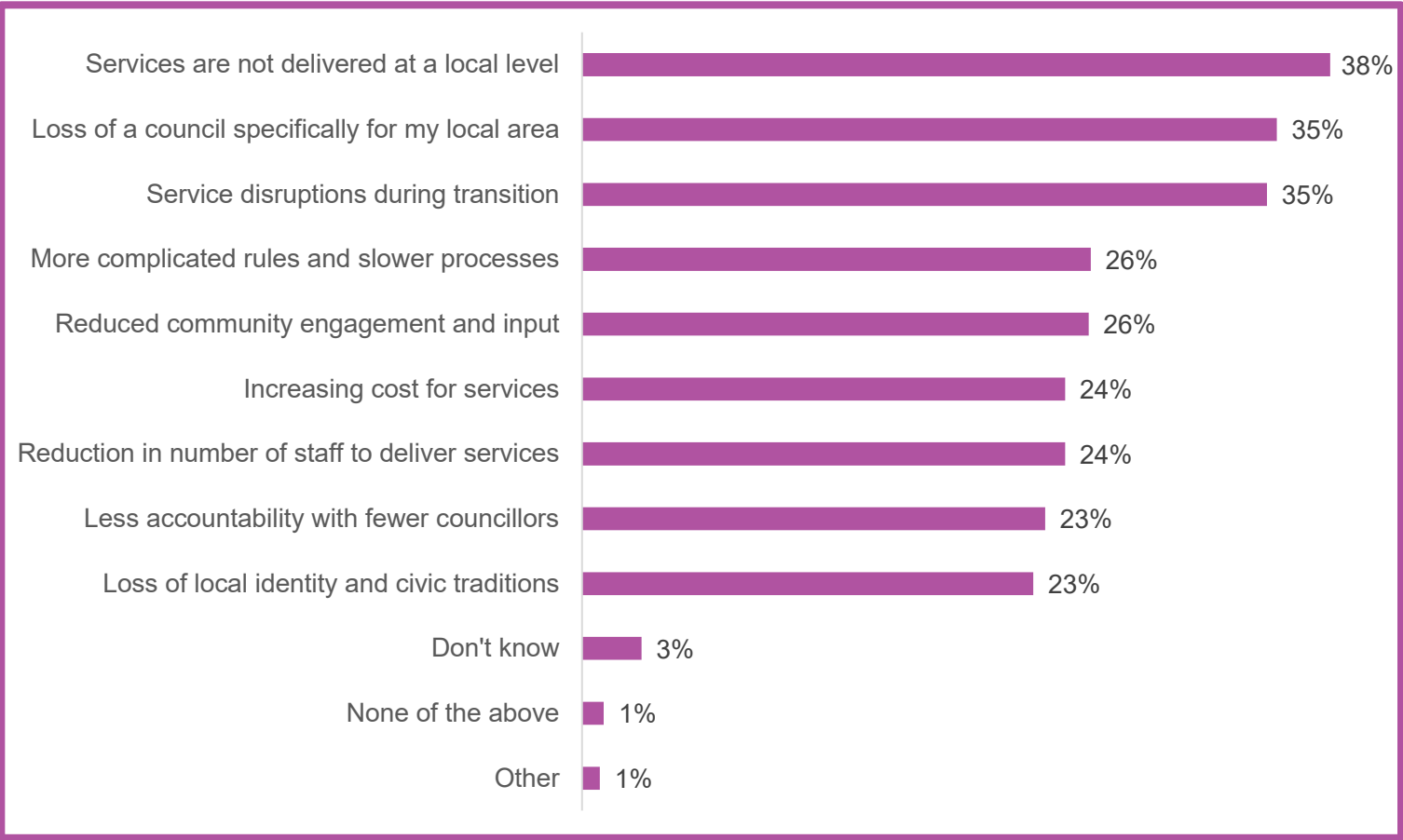


# What residents perceive to be the main benefits of local government reorganisation for the wider community:



- As seen previously, the improved quality of public services was the main perceived benefit for the wider community, 42%. This perceived benefit was also more prominent in younger people, 45%, and in males, 45%.
- 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%.

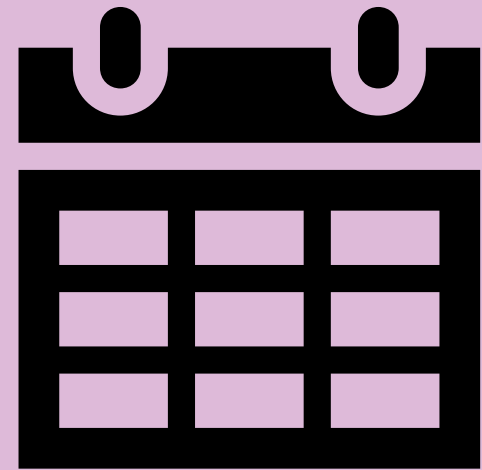
# What residents perceive to be the main risks of local government reorganisation:



- Residents viewed services not being delivered at a local level, 38%, as the main risk of LGR. 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



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



- Residents overwhelmingly 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.

# Resident's highest priorities for how local councils should work:

## 1st. Ensuring public funds are spent efficiently and prioritised

- 52% of residents reported efficient and prioritised spending as a top three priority.
- A higher priority for older people than for younger people, with 57% of people aged 55 and above ranking it as a top three priority compared to 50% of those aged 18 to 34.
- Also, a key priority for those in Mid Essex, 57%, compared to West Essex, 47%.

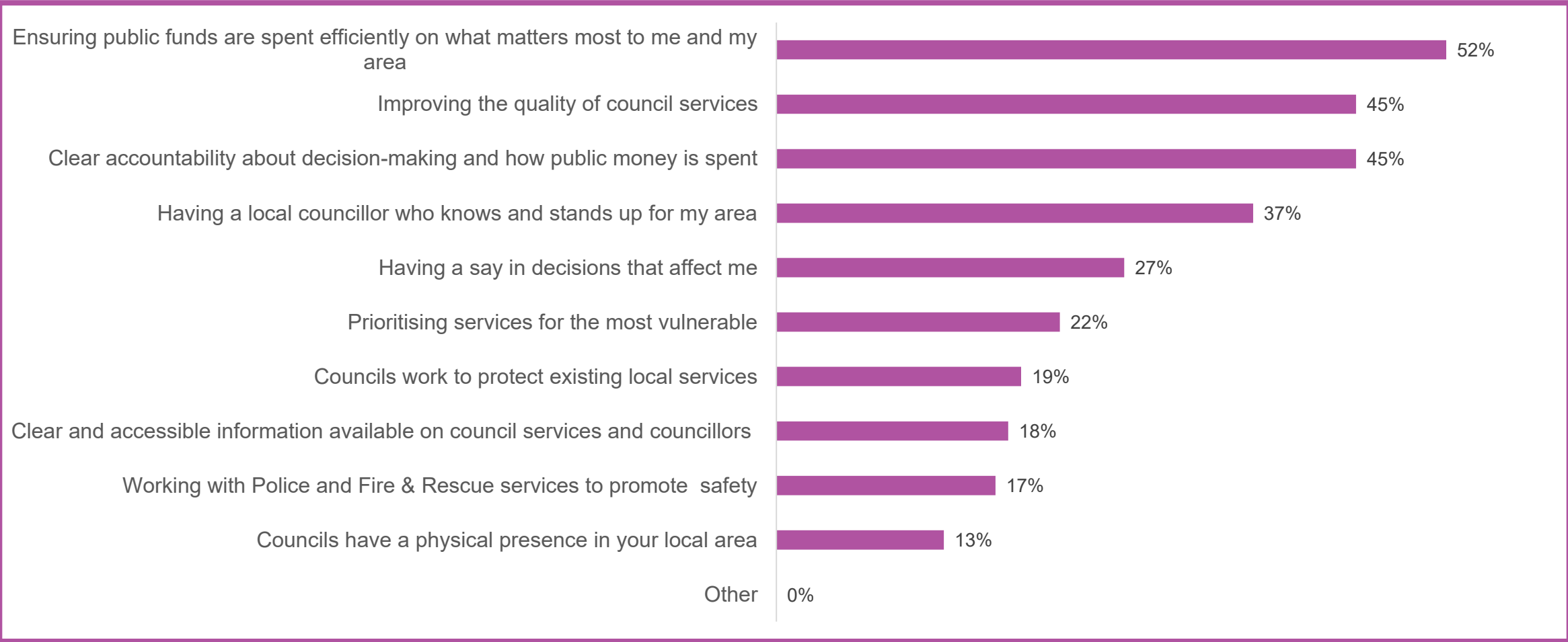
## 2nd. Improving the quality of council services

- 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

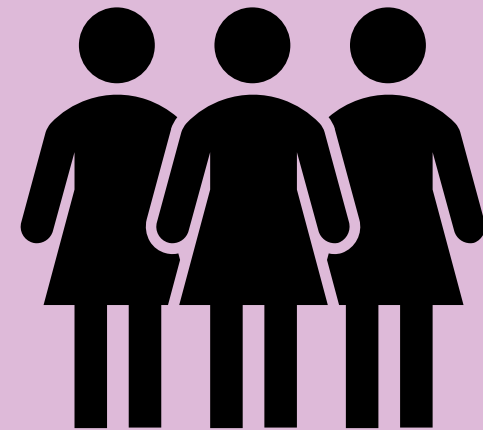
- Overall, 45% of residents ranked clear accountability in their top three priorities.
- It was also noticeably higher priority for those who had lived in Greater Essex for more than 20 years, 48%, compared to those who had lived there for 6 to 10 years, 38%.

# Resident’s highest priorities for how local councils should work:



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# **Civic engagement and decision making**



## Previous civic engagement from residents:



### **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



# Resident's largest motivations for previous civic engagement:

Participants were asked to rank 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.

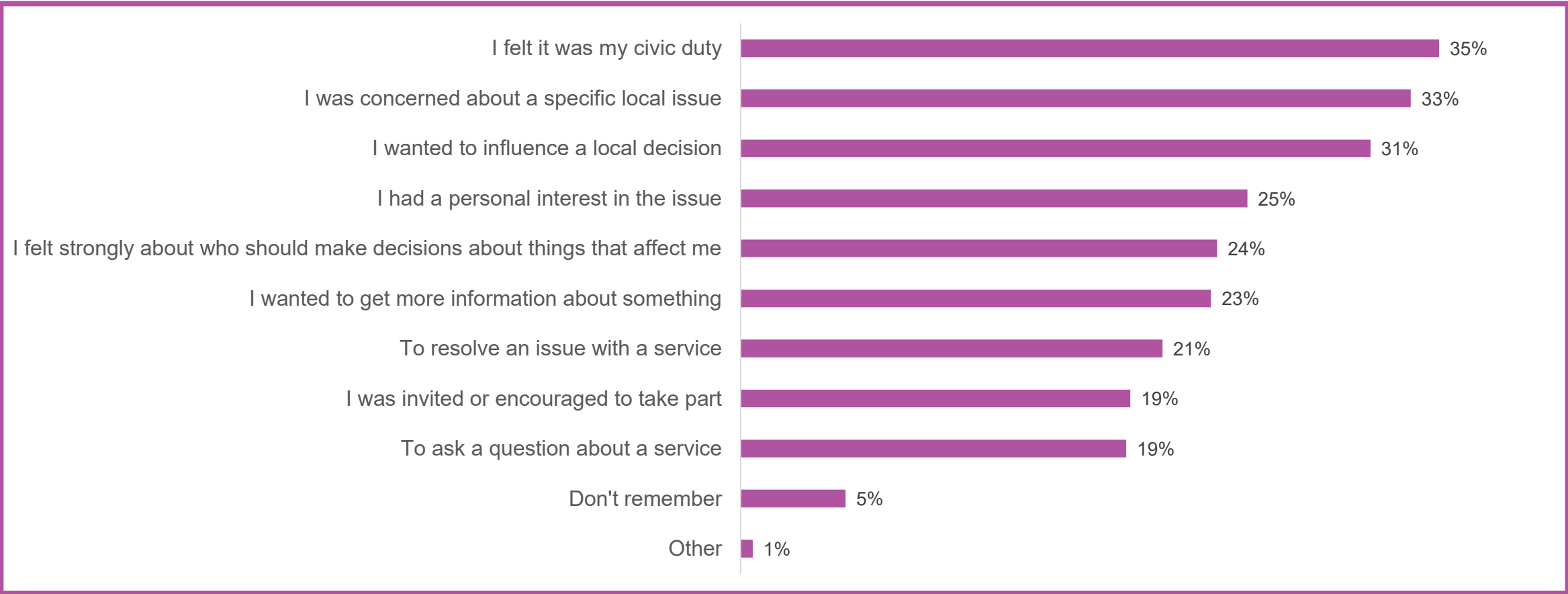
## 2. Concern about a specific local issue

- 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.

# Resident’s largest motivations for previous civic engagement:

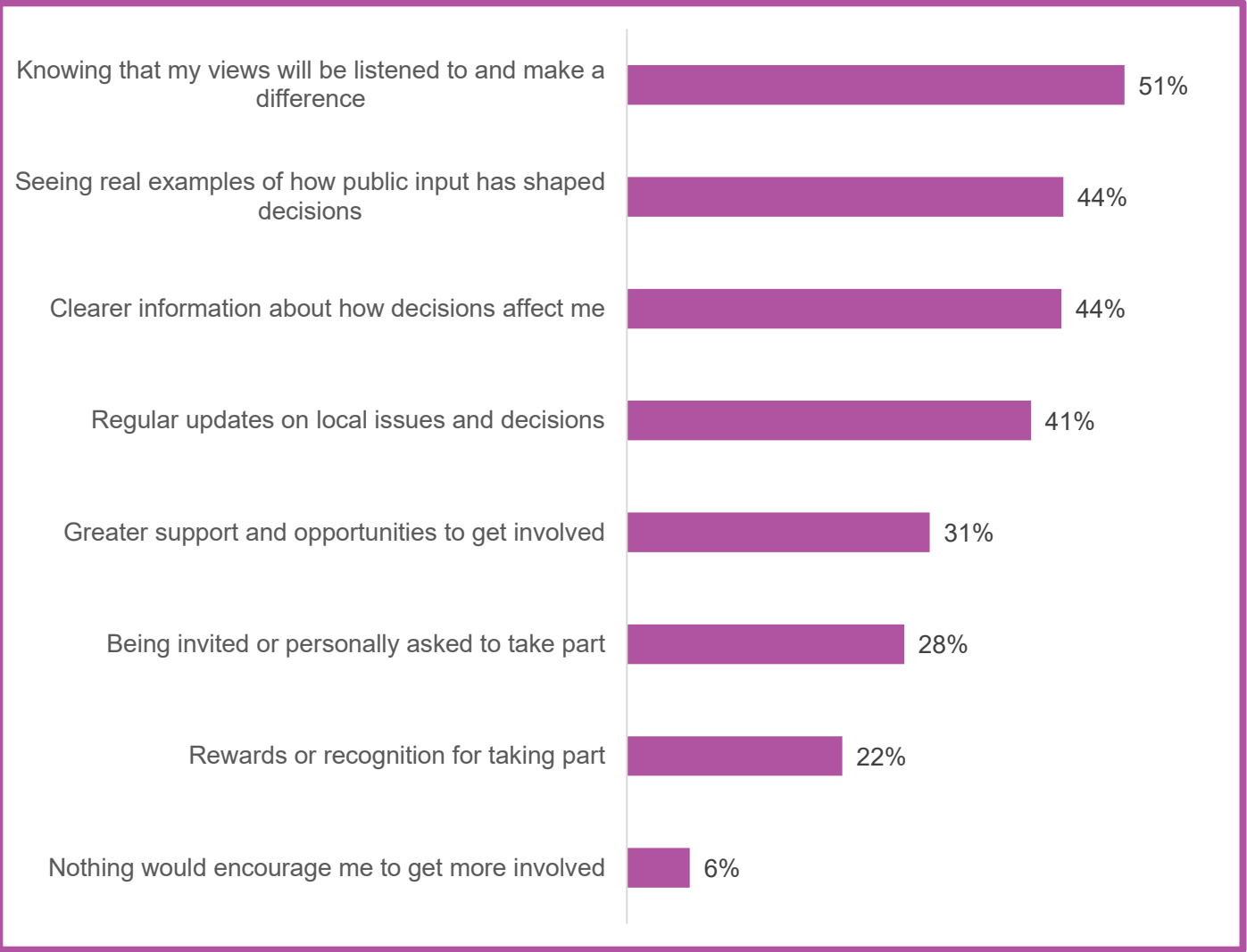


# Resident's interest in future local decision making:



- The most common interest that residents had in future 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.

# Residents' motivations for involvement in future decision making:



- Residents' strongest motivations for being involved in future decision making focused on seeing their views being listened to, 51%, and seeing how public input has shaped decisions, 44%.
- Younger residents 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.
- Some residents, 6%, reported that nothing would motivate them to get more involved; this proportion was 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 an overwhelming majority 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 42% for the wider community).

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

- The most prevalent aspect of how residents wanted their local council to be run was having services that were good value for money, with 30% reporting it as the most important aspect.
- Over half of residents (52%) prioritise ensuring public funds are spent efficiently, followed by improving service quality (45%) and clear accountability (45%), with older residents and long-term residents showing higher priority for these areas.
- 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 want 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 38.3% support improvements if it means decisions are made at a less local level, highlighting the tension between service enhancement and local control.

## Civic engagement patterns:

- High existing civic engagement exists, 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, 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](mailto:LGRresearch@natcen.ac.uk)

35 Northampton Square,  
London,  
EC1V 0AX

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