



Consultation on the 2022/23 budget

Final report

Chief Executive's Office
November 2021

BUDGET CONSULTATION: SUMMARY

Essex-wide issues and resident concerns

The National Health service/health care is viewed by participants as **the most important issue facing Essex today**. Participants also see **social care provision** and **crime/community safety** as key issue to be addressed.

This is largely reflected in personal concerns of participants, though road repairs and traffic congestion become far more prevalent.

Commitment priorities

When asked about things that should be prioritised for immediate action, participants identify; Developing Essex infrastructure; Supporting those who care for the sick or vulnerable children; Minimising the amount of waste generated in Essex; Protecting vulnerable children & securing high standard education.

Residents feel accessibility to health services and housing is a key priority, that ECC needs to support local businesses and to tackle the green agenda we need to review our processes.

Spending decisions

Participants are torn between strategies of spending allocation and acknowledge that these are difficult decisions for ECC, but there is a need for a **balanced approach** to ensure all residents are catered for.

Strategies for dealing with financial pressures centre around:

- **Strengthening individual and community capabilities**, in order to prevent long-term public service reliance;
- **Outsourcing services**, though keeping this within ECC powers to ensure value for money and the quality of service delivery remains
- **Increasing council tax**, in order to prevent services from being reduced or stopped. Yet, there is an expectation to see the results tax in terms of it going back into local communities.

BUDGET CONSULTATION: BUSINESS OWNERS / SELF-EMPLOYED SUMMARY

Essex-wide issues and resident concerns

Business owners largely reflect the sentiment of Essex residents that the National Health service/health care is **the most important issue facing Essex today**. Followed by crime / community safety which is seen as a more pressing issue vs. residents. **Social care provision**, the **environment and education** are also top priorities for business owners.

This is largely reflected in personal concerns, though road repairs and traffic congestion become far more prevalent, and public transport features as a higher concern vs. residents

Commitment priorities

When asked about things that should be prioritised for immediate action, business owners largely identify similar priorities to Essex residents; Developing Essex infrastructure; Protecting vulnerable children; Supporting those who care for the sick or vulnerable children; Minimising the amount of waste generated in Essex; though enabling healthier lifestyles and supporting vulnerable families hold more of a focus, and good jobs significantly less so.

When prompted, businesses feel that transport infrastructure and public transport in particular are key considerations when developing Essex's infrastructure.

Spending decisions

Business owners perceptions of spending allocation are in line with Essex residents. Largely torn between strategies of spending allocation with the acceptance that there is a need for a **balanced approach**, but with a slightly stronger focus on individuals and places with the most need.

Strategies for dealing with financial pressures centre around:

- **Strengthening individual and community capabilities**, in order to prevent long-term public service reliance;
- **Outsourcing services**, though keeping this within ECC powers to ensure value for money and the quality of service delivery remains. This is a preferable option for business owners vs. streamlining services;
- **Increasing council tax**, this avenue isn't as accepted by business owners vs. Essex residents as a whole, however it is still recognised as an acceptable option to prevent services from being reduced or stopped, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Consultation Approach

A mixed method approach to explore residents' views on the 2022-23 budget took place during the period of **15th October 2021 to 12th November 2021**.

We invited residents and businesses to have a say on our budget so that their feedback will *guide* budget decisions.

Online survey

- Questions developed with finance colleagues and in consultation with PLT.
- Hosted by Beehive (our residents panel provider) and on ECC's consultation platform for 4 weeks.
- Promoted via the Essex residents panel, ECC's corporate communications and through digital / social media
- Responses received from c.1,228 residents, including 105 who identified as 'self-employed' and/or 'business owners'

Resident Focus groups

- Three focus group discussions with Essex residents undertaken online via MS Teams, each session lasting 90 minutes
- Up to six participants in each group, allowing for deeper discussions and full conversations
- Focus groups session observed by ECC research team members
- Conducted w/c 25th October 2021

*We have seen a more diverse range of participants from across different areas and age groups when compared to 2020. Nonetheless, participants are 'self-selecting' and tend to be slightly older and slightly more engaged than the average. This should be considered as we interpret the findings and draw conclusions.

This underscores the fact that, in undertaking consultation, ECC must invite and consider all responses equally – it cannot design a representative sample of residents with which to engage to the exclusion of others.



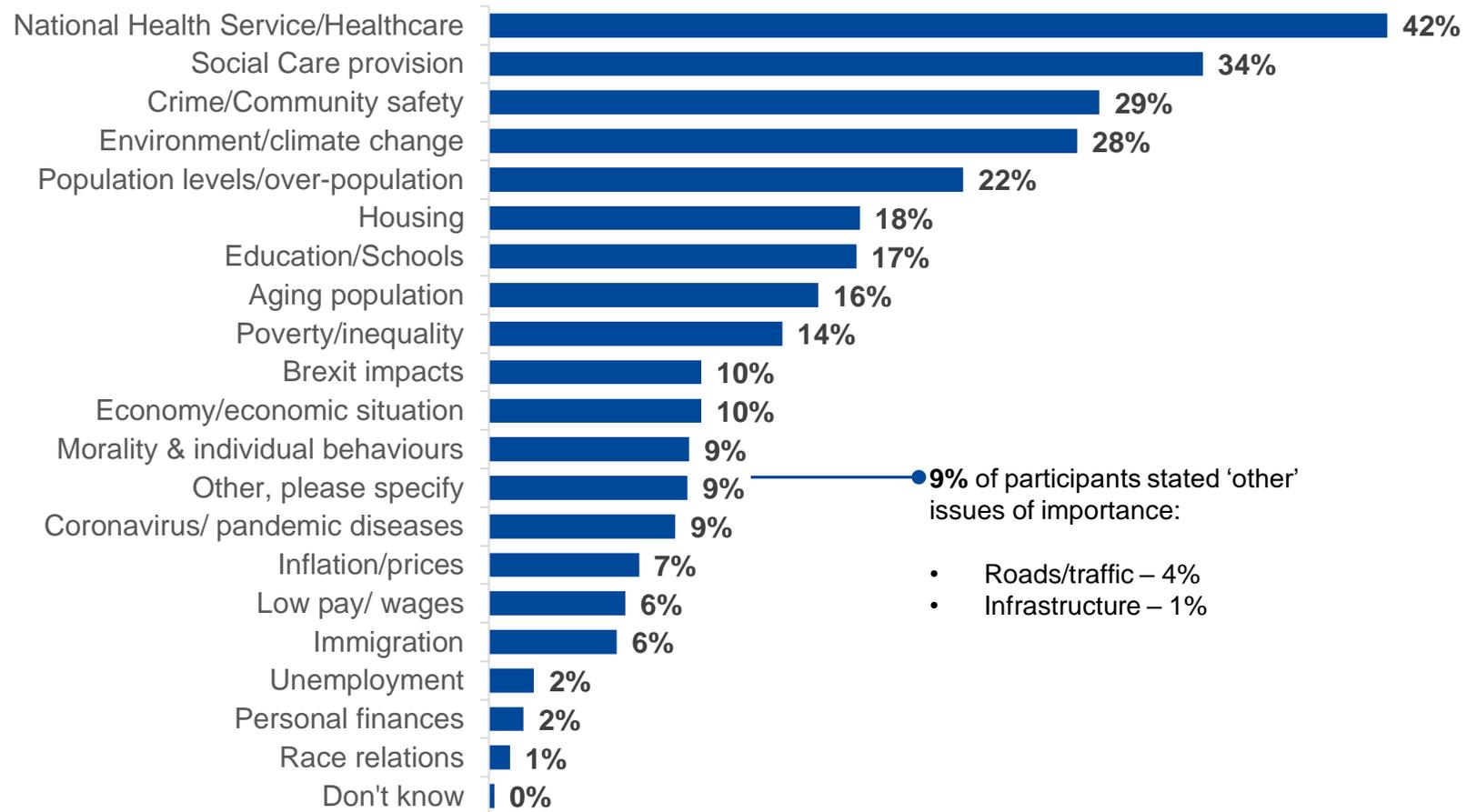
Resident Priorities

RESIDENT PRIORITIES

Residents see pressures on health and social care services as major issues facing Essex

What would you say are the most important issues facing Essex today?

(Max. 3 responses - figures reflect % of respondents who gave each answer)

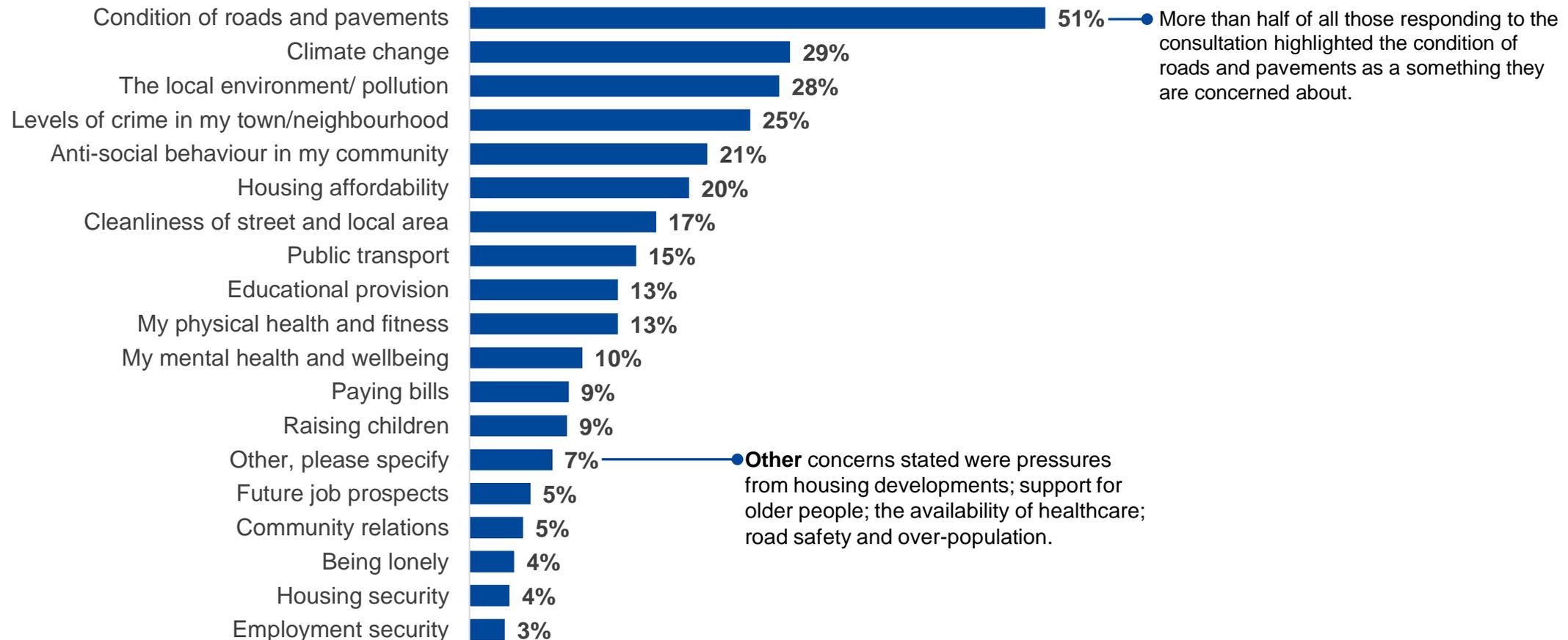


RESIDENT PRIORITIES

In their own lives, residents are most concerned about road repairs, the climate crisis, crime/community safety and housing affordability

Which of the following are you concerned about?

(Max. 3 responses - figures reflect % of respondents who gave each answer)



RESIDENT PRIORITIES

Residents are supportive of our Everyone's Essex commitments see action on infrastructure, support for the sick/vulnerable and environmental issues as immediate priorities

Which of these should the council prioritise for immediate action?

(Max. 3 responses - figures reflect % of respondents who gave each answer)



20 commitments key:

Economy Environment Health Family

RESIDENT PRIORITIES

The focus groups reflected the importance of improving health services, housing, crime and road infrastructure; a focus on alternative and collaborative solutions came through.

Road and pavement repairs

- Quicker, comprehensive resurfacing e.g. not constant patching

A road in my area has been resurfaced three times and the same pothole reopens at the same time every year.

Traffic congestion levels

- More joined-up public transport
- New roads to facilitate growing communities.

Colchester has doubled in population and nothing has been done to the roads.

Crime and anti-social behaviour

- Improved street lighting that is on for longer at night
- More outreach workers (wardens, PCSOs).

I don't feel safe in my area. I'm considering moving.

Affordable, decent housing

- More affordable homes for local/young people.
- More long-term support for the vulnerably homed.
- Better insulation/fuel efficiency.

There are amazing examples of housing association 3-bed houses with fuel bills of £120 per year.

Health services

- More local services
- Right services at the right place
- Greater investment in alternatives to GP/hospital-based services.
- Support for those most in need

If people could access health services in their library they would not necessarily have to visit their GP.

Climate

- Do our bits at community & local levels
- Bringing recycling centres closer to the people
- No double standard

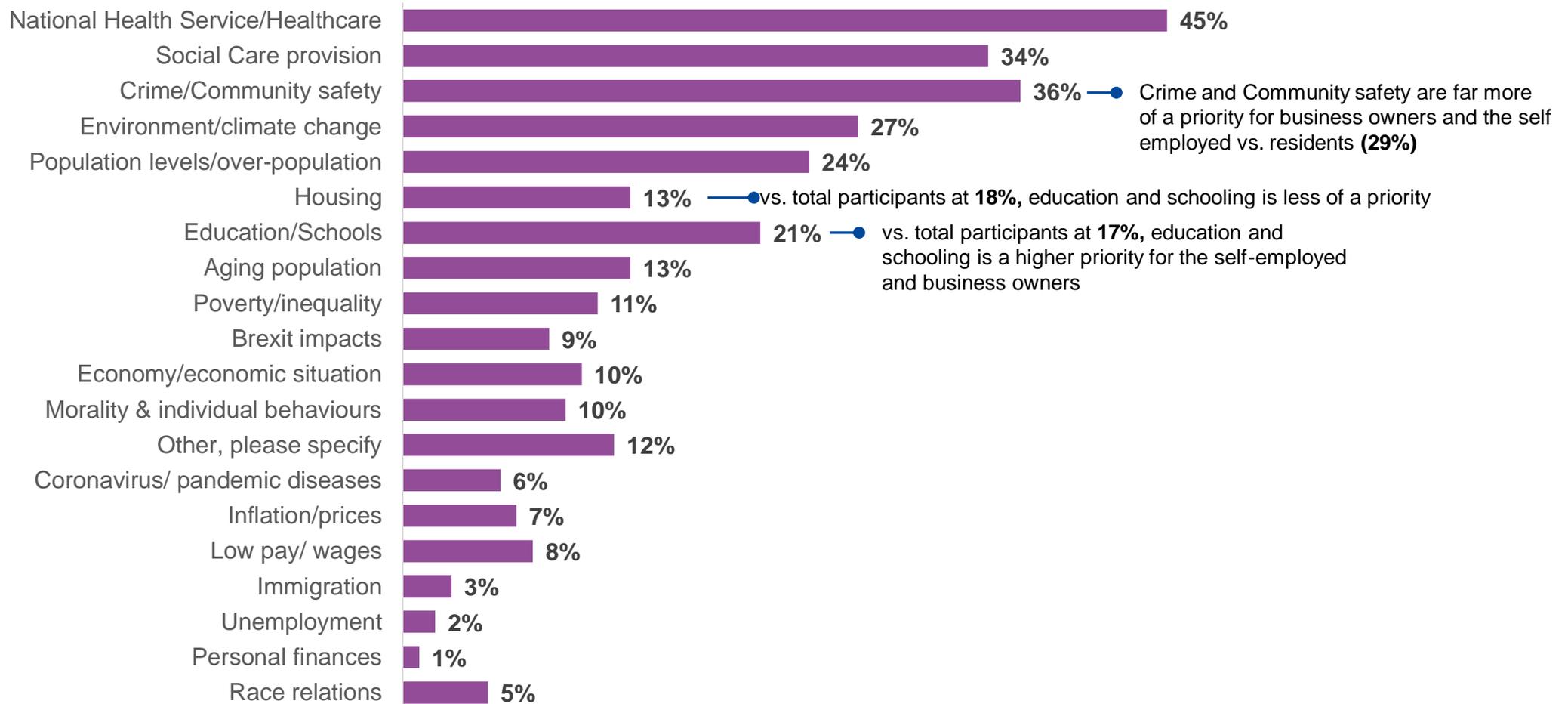
Essex are spending a lot of money on climate change policies but at the same time their pension scheme invests in fossil fuels so it's a bit of a double standard.

BUSINESS PRIORITIES

Education and crime/community safety seen as more prevalent issues for business owners and the self-employed

Business Owners and Self-employed combined (base size = 105)

What would you say are the most important issues facing Essex today?
(Max. 3 responses - figures reflect % of respondents who gave each answer)



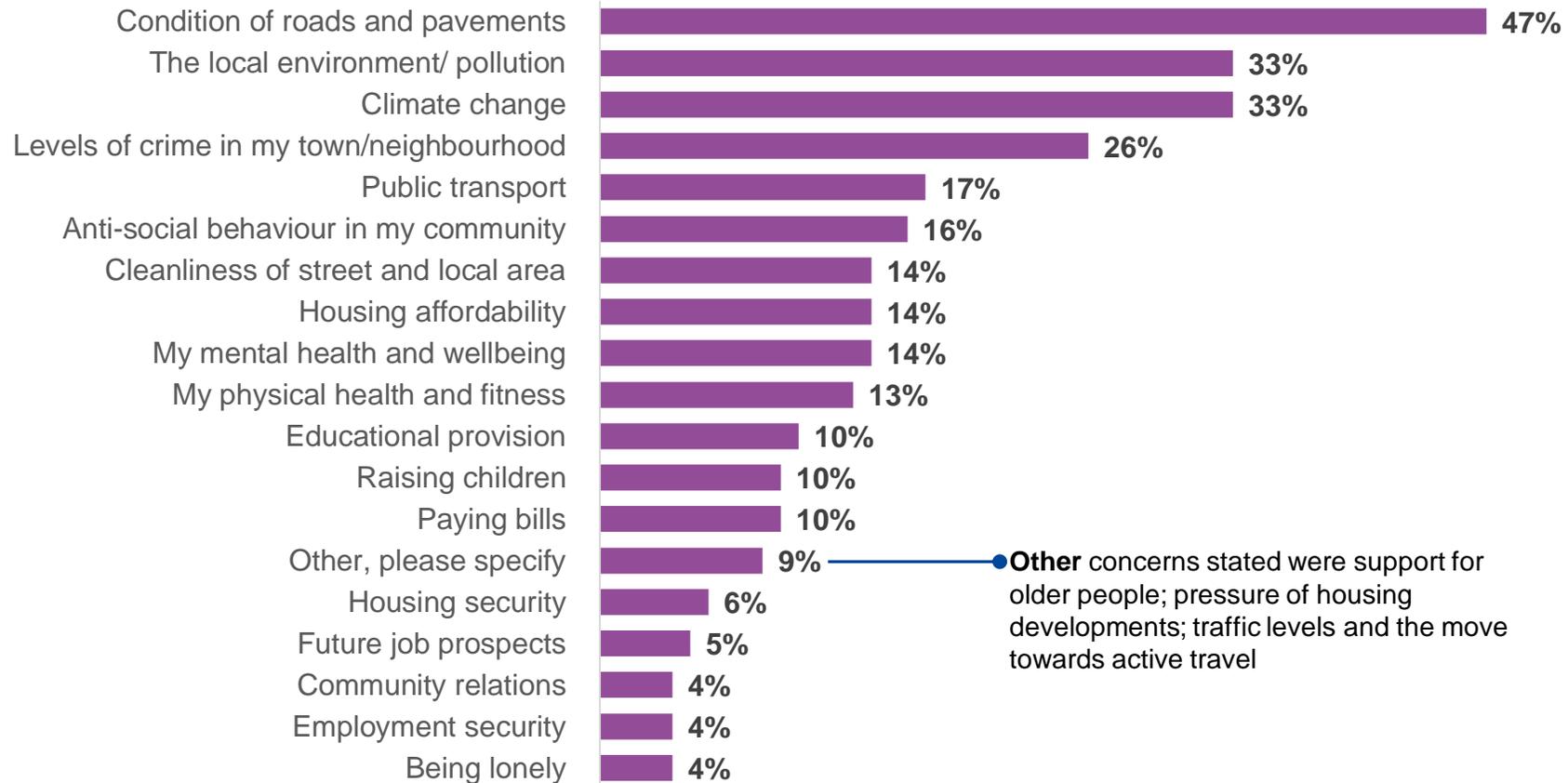
BUSINESS PRIORITIES

Business owners and the self-employed concerns are largely in line with other residents, though public transport and environmental concerns feature more strongly

Business Owners and
Self-employed
combined
(base size = 105)

Which of the following are you concerned about?

(Max. 3 responses - figures reflect % of respondents who gave each answer)



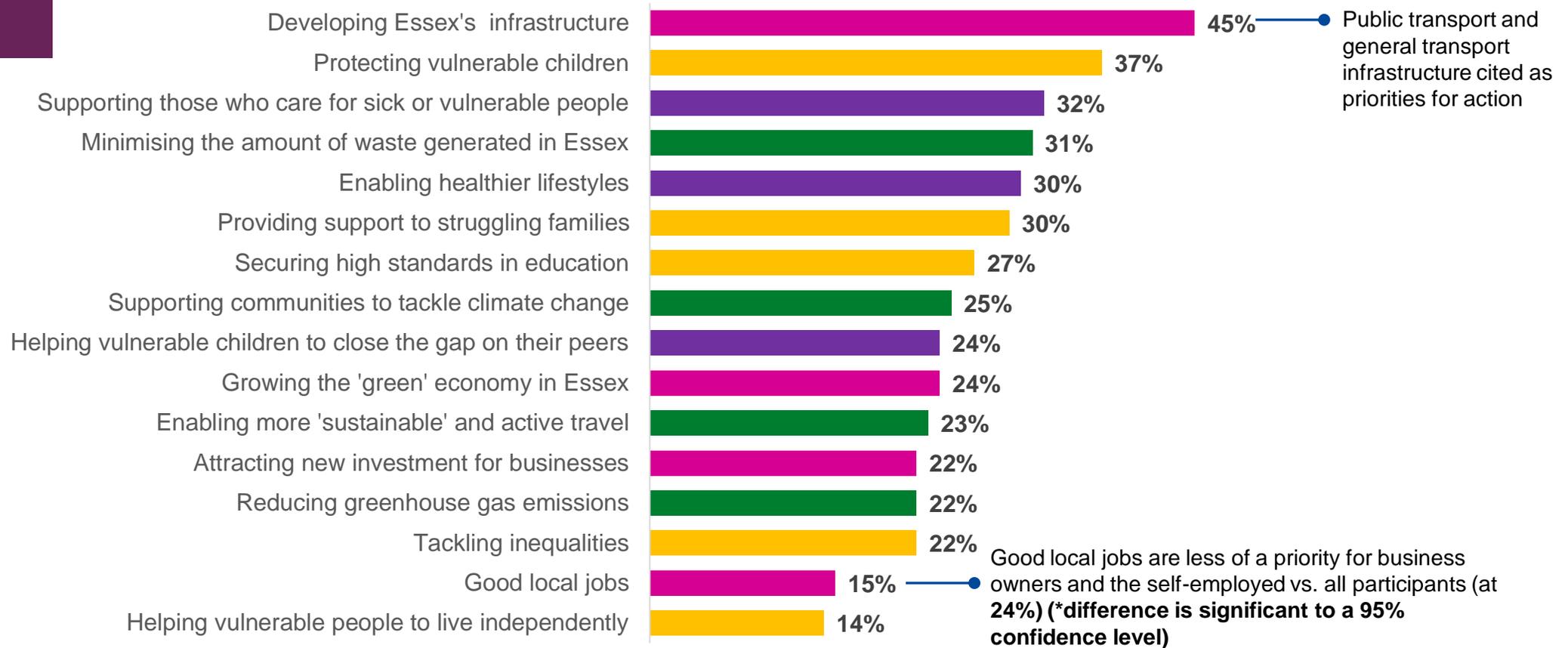
BUSINESS PRIORITIES

Business owners and the self-employed see action on developing infrastructure as a strong priority, particularly the transport infrastructure

Business Owners and Self-employed combined (base size = 105)

Which of these should the council prioritise for immediate action?

(Max. 3 responses - figures reflect % of respondents who gave each answer)



20 commitments key:

Economy Environment Health Family



Budget setting and managing resources

SPENDING ALLOCATIONS

Opinions on how to prioritise spending is polarising for most scenarios

Residents generally want ECC to balance long-term and short-term need. They want to find the middle ground between serving the needs of people/places facing greatest difficulty with the priorities of the county as a whole.

Residents also have a clear appetite to see spending decisions taken as close to local communities as possible.

Considering how Essex County Council allocates spending, do you feel...



SPENDING ALLOCATIONS

Polarising opinions is consistent amongst business owners and the self-employed

In line with Essex residents as a whole, generally business owners want ECC to find the middle ground in most scenarios. However, business owners do have more of a preference to see spending prioritised for those with the greatest need vs. Essex residents as a whole

Businesses also have a clear appetite to see spending decisions taken as close to local communities as possible.

Business Owners and Self-employed combined (base size = 105)

Considering how Essex County Council allocates spending, do you feel...



SPENDING ALLOCATION: RESIDENTS RECOGNISE THE CHALLENGE

Residents understand the huge pressure that ECC faces in weighing different needs and priorities and making difficult choices around how to allocate spending

During the small group discussions, participants were asked to make a series of choices around council spending.

Many strong opinions were held. However, the common ground was that **balancing priorities to maximise resources was an almost impossible task** and there was an element of the need to 'try and do everything'.

This led to an understanding that this resulted in a **huge pressure on delivering every day services and long term investment**. As well as the acknowledgement that the **council could not provide all the services** required by the residents.

This makes the decision of how to prioritise difficult.

Shouldn't there be a little bit [of funding] for everybody? But then, there needs to be some focus on those that really need it. But then, how can there be something for everybody?

ECC should prioritise services that benefit the majority



ECC should prioritise services that focus on those with greatest need

I certainly couldn't choose between them. If a vulnerable person has a huge need, they should be prioritised. But if we want to move people to be healthier, more climate aware, you have to look at the majority.

Meeting the needs of people today is sometimes just fixing the symptoms of a problem. If you're looking more long-term then you are going to be fixing those problems.

ECC should prioritise spending to meet people's needs today



ECC should spend on projects that increase opportunities long-term

It's difficult to split between the two; you have to meet some of the needs of today - there are responsibilities. But the County Council need to be looking to the future, they need to have that vision and horizon scanning

DEALING WITH FINANCIAL PRESSURES

Encouraging independence and prioritising services for the most vulnerable are considered most important when ECC faces financial pressure

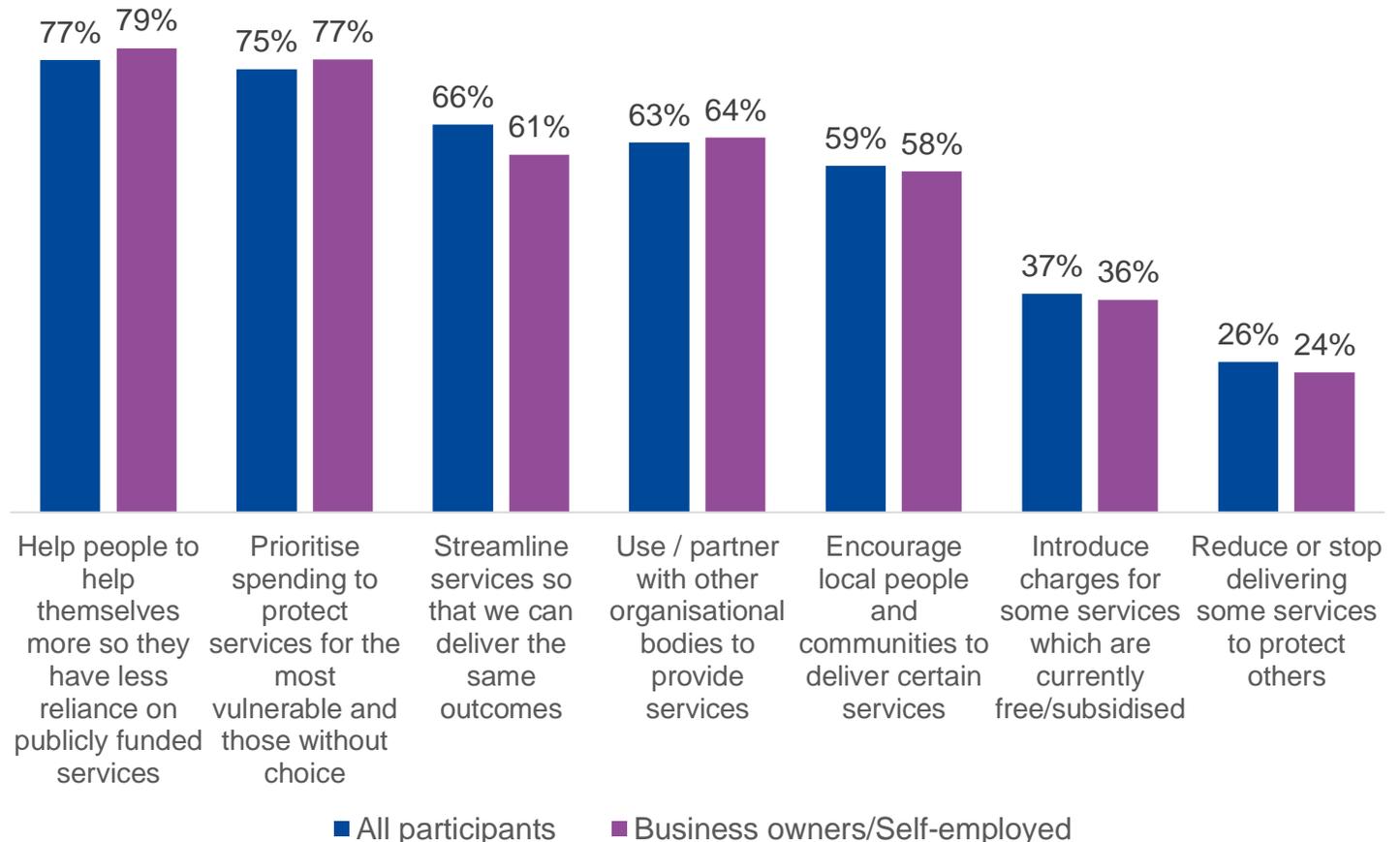
When faced with financial pressure, residents are most supportive of moves to:

- strengthen independence - reducing the need for individuals/ families/ communities to rely on public-funded support; and
- prioritise resources for the vulnerable.

But residents are also supportive of moves to streamline services, work with partner organisations/third parties and encourage local people/communities to play a greater role. Businesses reflect these perceptions with slightly lower support for streamlining services.

Residents are generally less supportive of strategies that involve the introduction of new charges for services that are currently free at the point of use. They are least supportive of moves to stop delivering services entirely.

How strongly do you agree or disagree that Essex County Council should do each of the following when faced with financial pressure? (% agree strongly / slightly)



DEALING WITH FINANCIAL PRESSURE: STRENGTHENING CAPABILITIES

Early interventions, excellent education, upscaling skills, empowering local communities & engagement in decisions on innovations are core to strengthening capabilities.

There was broad agreement in relation to strengthening of individual and community capabilities. The view was that local communities need to be empowered to help work towards meeting the needs of local communities and being part of the decisions to re-imagine how infrastructure currently works

More so, earlier intervention to prevent people from needing services in the long run, such as education at a younger age around preparing for older age, education in modern life skills for all, diet and physical activity at a younger age as a longer term preventative measure.

Participants saw this as a long term goal and agreed this could be achieved by engaging local communities, rebuilding and renewing infrastructure to meet the needs of local communities

“If you don’t sort out the aging infrastructure, you’re not going to be able to support anything you’re trying to develop”

“Educating the young and old in life skills...pensions...credit cards. It’s a shame these things aren’t taught in school. We need to reach out and help people”

“This needs to be led by proper research; it’s out there and it says if you’re funding more into these services then down the line, you’re going to have lower costs”

DEALING WITH FINANCIAL PRESSURES: DELIVERING THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

A majority of participants (66%) support partnering with other organisations to deliver services (e.g., through outsourcing or strategic partnership arrangements). Residents are most supportive where ECC partners with local NGOs with the skills required to provide excellent services.

But deeper discussions with participants highlighted a consistent desire to see the evidence that these partnerships delivered high quality services and good value for money.

In the absence of this evidence, many tend to be sceptical about whether quality was being secured and value for money was being achieved.

Even where services are delegated, residents continue to want ECC to take responsibility for results. They want ECC to monitor and measure partners' performance against clear criteria.

“It does make sense. But you have to go through the whole commissioning process in a way that means that we as taxpayers get good value for money, and we also get a good service from it”

“You have to make sure they deliver the same level of service or better. There have to be mechanisms in place to ensure they’re delivering what they should be doing.”

“I’m concerned that once it gets handed over, the county council wouldn’t have responsibility for it, and therefore wouldn’t manage how it was happening within our community.”

DEALING WITH FINANCIAL PRESSURES: RATIONALISING SERVICES

In dealing with financial pressures, participants were least supportive of moves to stop providing some services, even when this helps to protect others – (only 24% agreed with this approach).

Although, they are aware of the constraints and pressure facing councils, they argued that every service “is important to a certain group of people” and where certain service(s) are reduced, some groups of people will be greatly affected.

Participants highlighted the difficulty of balancing the perspectives and priorities of different residents and communities and sympathised with decision-makers.

Respondent recognised that while it would be necessary to reduce/constrain spending in some areas, the impact could be devastating on certain groups. They stressed that decisions to reduce/remove services need to be fully justified and taken following efforts to understand and mitigate the impacts on those affected.

“On the cut to the services, I don’t know where you could start, whatever you do will hurt so many people”

“Shouldn’t there be a little bit [of funding] for everybody? But then, there needs to be some focus on those that really need it. But then, how can there be something for everybody?”

“I certainly couldn’t choose between them. If a vulnerable person has a huge need, they should be prioritised. But if we want to move people to be healthier, more climate aware, you have to look at the majority”

COUNCIL TAX

The majority will accept council tax increases when these are required to avoid service closures and to protect services for vulnerable people

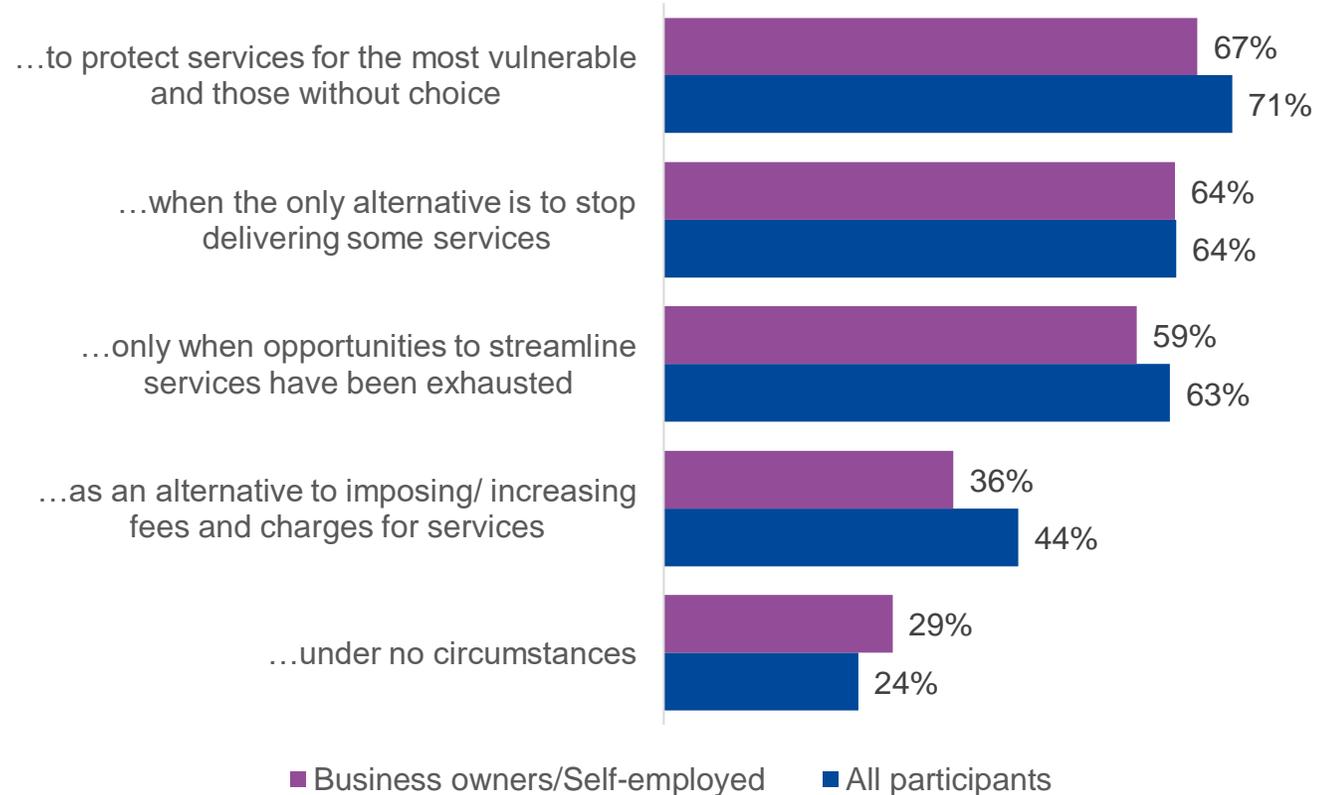
The majority of participants agreed that ECC should consider increases in council tax where these would protect services for the most vulnerable people.

But the majority also indicated that increases in council tax should not be taken lightly. This should be considered only where opportunities to secure efficiencies from streamlined services have been exhausted (63%), or where the alternative would be to stop delivering some services (64%).

Residents were fairly evenly split on whether ECC should increase council tax as an alternative to increasing fees and charges for those who use particular services – though business owners were less likely to agree with this option.

Only a minority of residents (24%) agreed that ECC should avoid council tax increases in all circumstances. This sentiment was most strongly felt by business owners / the self-employed.

ECC should consider increases in council tax... (% agree strongly / slightly)



DEALING WITH FINANCIAL PRESSURES: COUNCIL TAX

Although participants were happy to accept council tax increases in certain circumstances, deeper discussion have revealed residents' appetite for:

- clear communications and transparency around the case for raising council tax and the use that will be made of the revenues. This was identified as fundamental to participants being comfortable with any tax increases;
- Locally-focused spending. Participants suggested that, if increased tax revenues were hypothecated or ring-fenced for specific local investments, then tax increases are more likely to be viewed favourably; and
- Green investment. Participants suggested that, to the extent that increased tax revenues were focused on 'green projects' designed to tackle the climate crisis, they are more likely to be supported by residents and taxpayers.

"I don't want to know what you're doing with my money; I want to know what my money has done. What are you achieving with it? As a council taxpayer I want outcomes."

"Whatever decision they make about council tax and the way that they spend their money, the communication has got to be good."

"If we raised council tax by X percent and your parish council would get this much more money, would you be willing?" A surprising number will say yes.

"We're tiny; I can see that most of the money we pay in council tax doesn't go to our parish. I'd like to see more spent on schools and adult social care."

"There are little things the council can achieve to at least have green areas, have policies which allow as much recycling and repurposing of products or waste as possible."

"If a council is doing something with a community building, whereby they've got solar panels and they can bring electricity into the wider area or create money from selling it, that's a good thing for the community to have."

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