



Consultation on the 2021/22 budget

Strategy, Insight and Engagement
December 2020

Budget Consultation: resident priorities

The most important issues facing Essex today



The **COVID-19** pandemic, and the impact this has on healthcare services is viewed by participants as the **most important issue facing Essex today**. Participants were also concerned about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on **businesses, jobs** and the **local economy**.

Areas of greatest personal concern

When asked about their own personal situation, participants were most concerned about their **physical and mental health**. Participants also thought that ECC should be prioritising **climate change** and the **local environment** more highly.



Things that need improving in their own local area



When asked about factors that most need improving in their local areas, residents identify:

- road and pavement repairs;
- traffic congestion;
- levels of crime & ASB;
- Health services; and
- Activities and facilities for teenagers.

Things they value most about their communities

When asked about factors that they value most about their local areas, residents identify:

- parks and open spaces;
- community relations;
- shopping facilities; and
- low levels of crime and ASB.



Budget Consultation: resident views



Participants were largely **understanding** of the pressures facing ECC and empathise with decision-makers.

Many perceive that councils have been “**cut to the bone.**” They also recognise the difficulties of **balancing competing views and priorities.**



Some participants see Council Tax rises as inevitable and expected, while some strongly resent tax increases.

The majority of participants were accepting of the need for Council Tax rises, but only because they could not support service reductions or charging for services.



Despite feeling reasonably well informed, **participants crave more information** from ECC, and from local government partners in Essex, on how Council Tax is used.

They feel this would enhance transparency, and accountability.

Approach

Online survey

- Questions developed with finance colleagues and in consultation with PLT
- Hosted on ECC's consultation platform for six weeks
- Promoted via ECC's corporate communications and through digital and social media
- Responses received from c.300 residents*

Resident workshops

- Six 'small group' workshops with Essex residents undertaken online via MS Teams
- Up to six participants in each group, allowing for deeper discussions and full conversations
- Small groups session observed by both Cabinet Members and ECC research team members
- 15th October – 12th November

*We have seen a reasonably good spread of participants this year from across different areas and age groups. Nevertheless, 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 reflects 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.

The report therefore supplements consultation results with data from ECC's 2020 Residents Survey – a survey that is representative of the whole population.

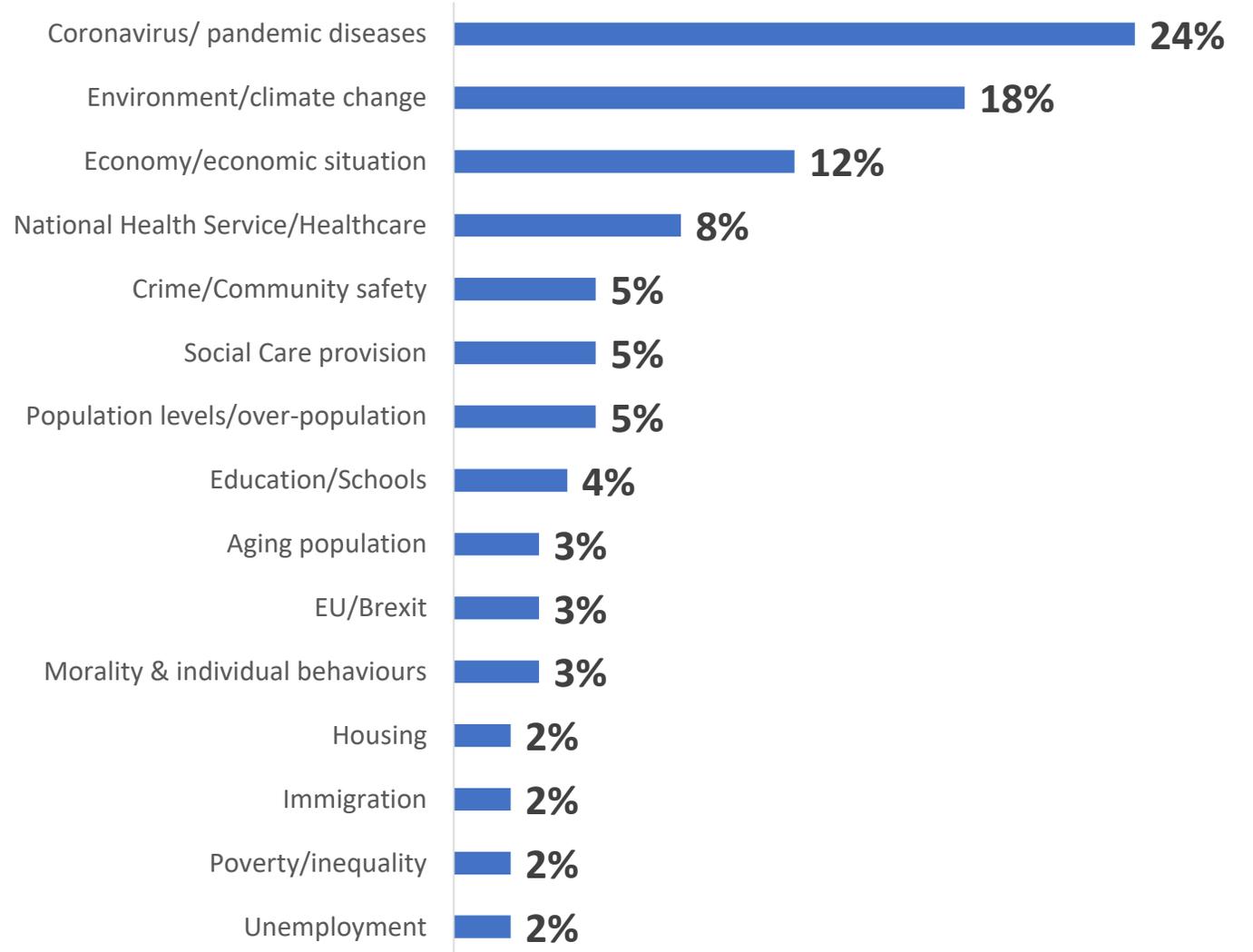
Resident priorities



Perhaps unsurprisingly, most participants identify the COVID-19 pandemic as the most important issue facing Essex today.

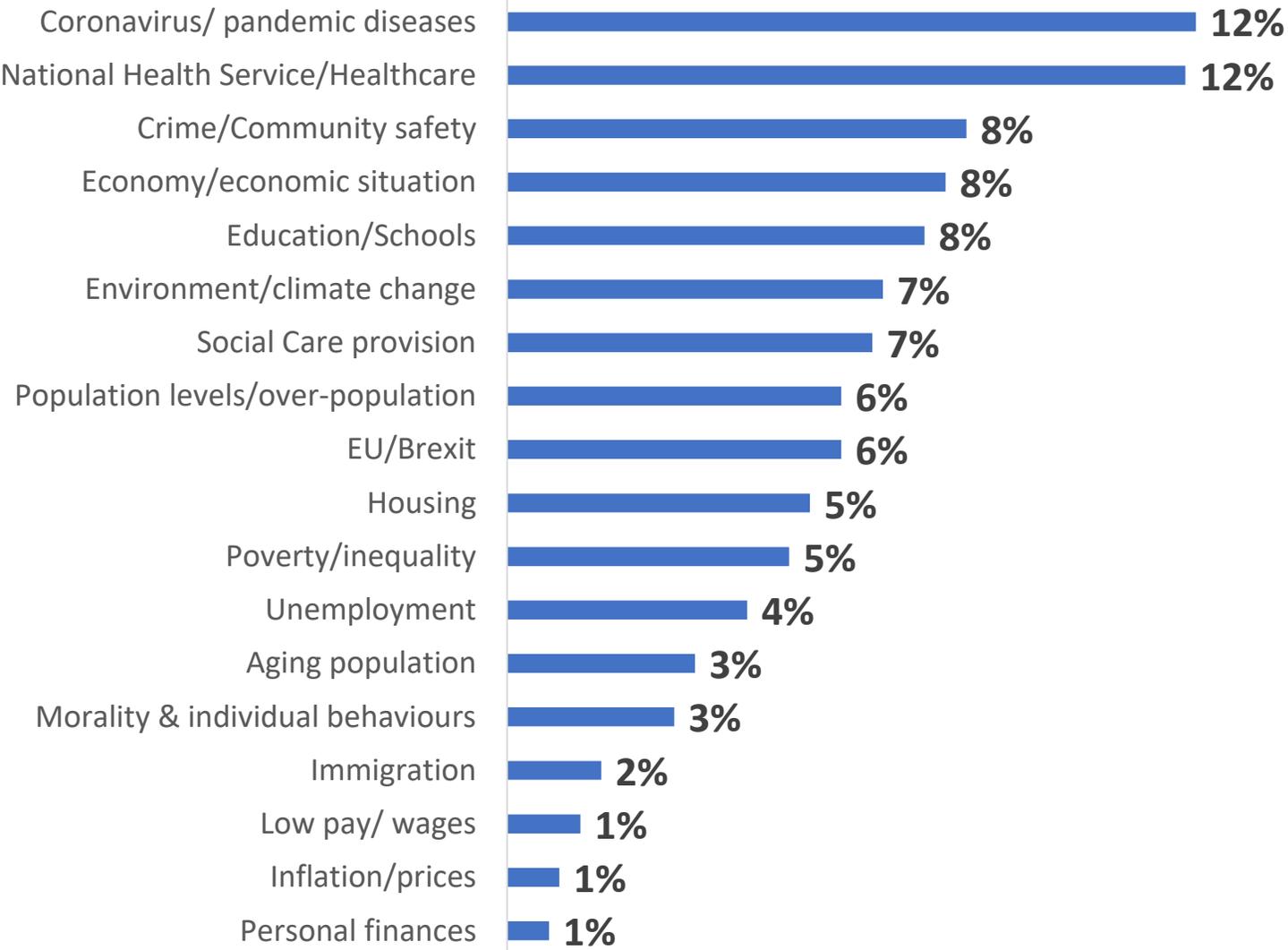
But despite the immediate pressures of the pandemic, many indicate that climate change and the local environment should be prioritised.

What is the most important issues facing Essex today?



When asked to identify other important issues facing the county, many point to the impacts of the pandemic on health services and the economy.

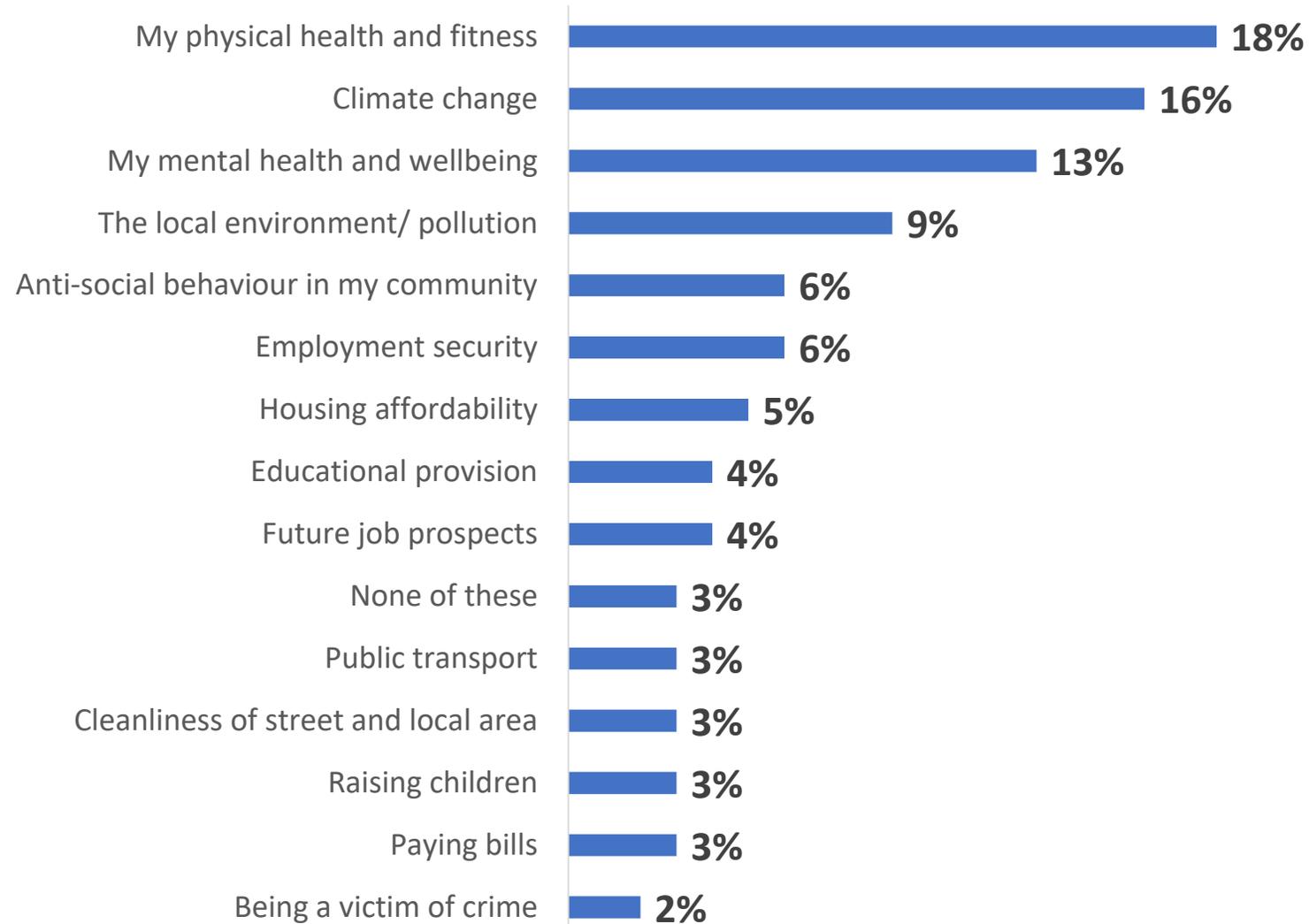
What are the other important issues facing Essex today?



These patterns are broadly mirrored when participants were asked about their own personal concerns.

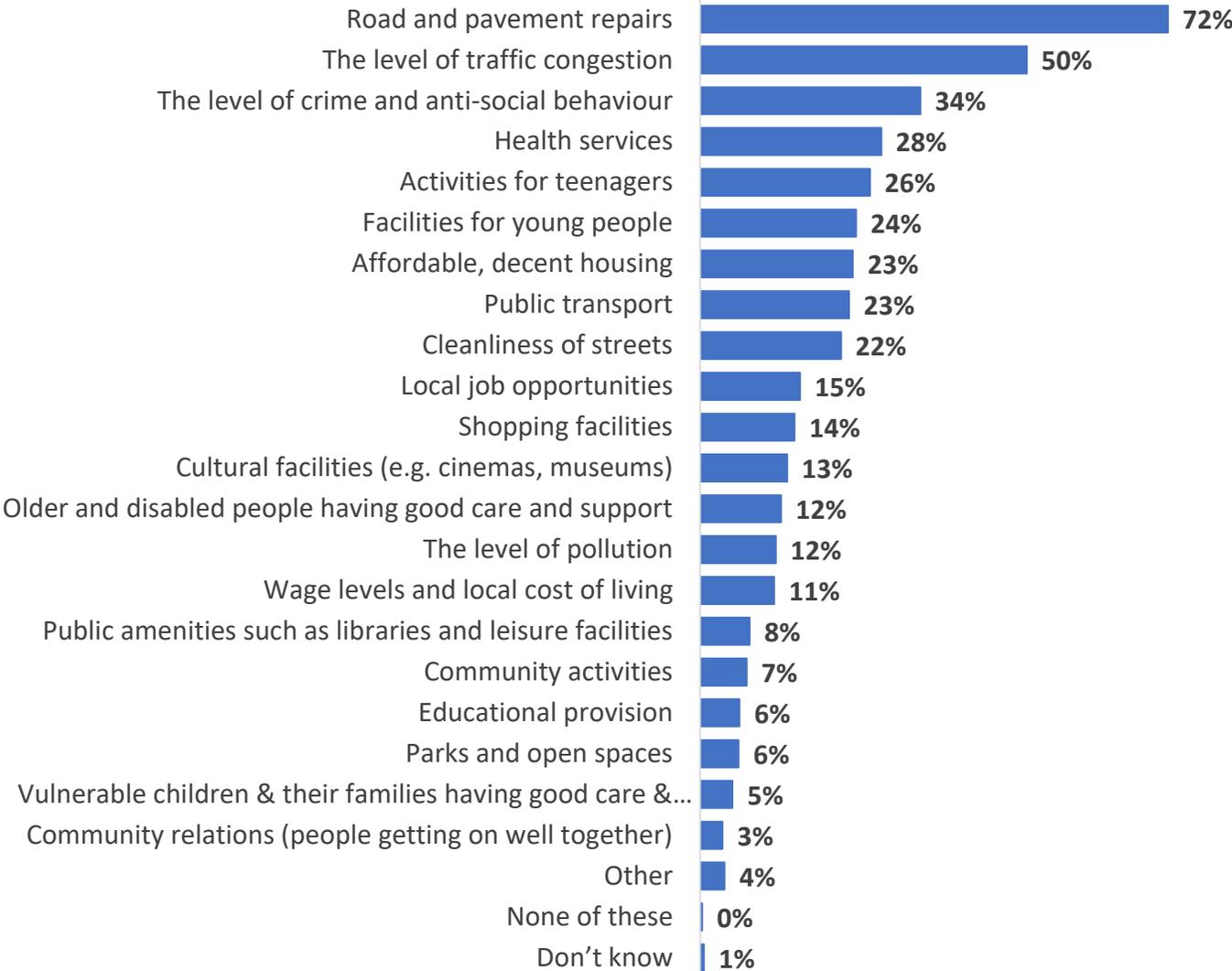
Concerns about physical and mental health, and climate change and the local environment, account for over 50% of residents' responses.

Which of the following are you most concerned about?



When asked about factors that most need improving in their local areas, 72% of residents identify road and pavement repairs and 50% identify traffic congestions as priorities.

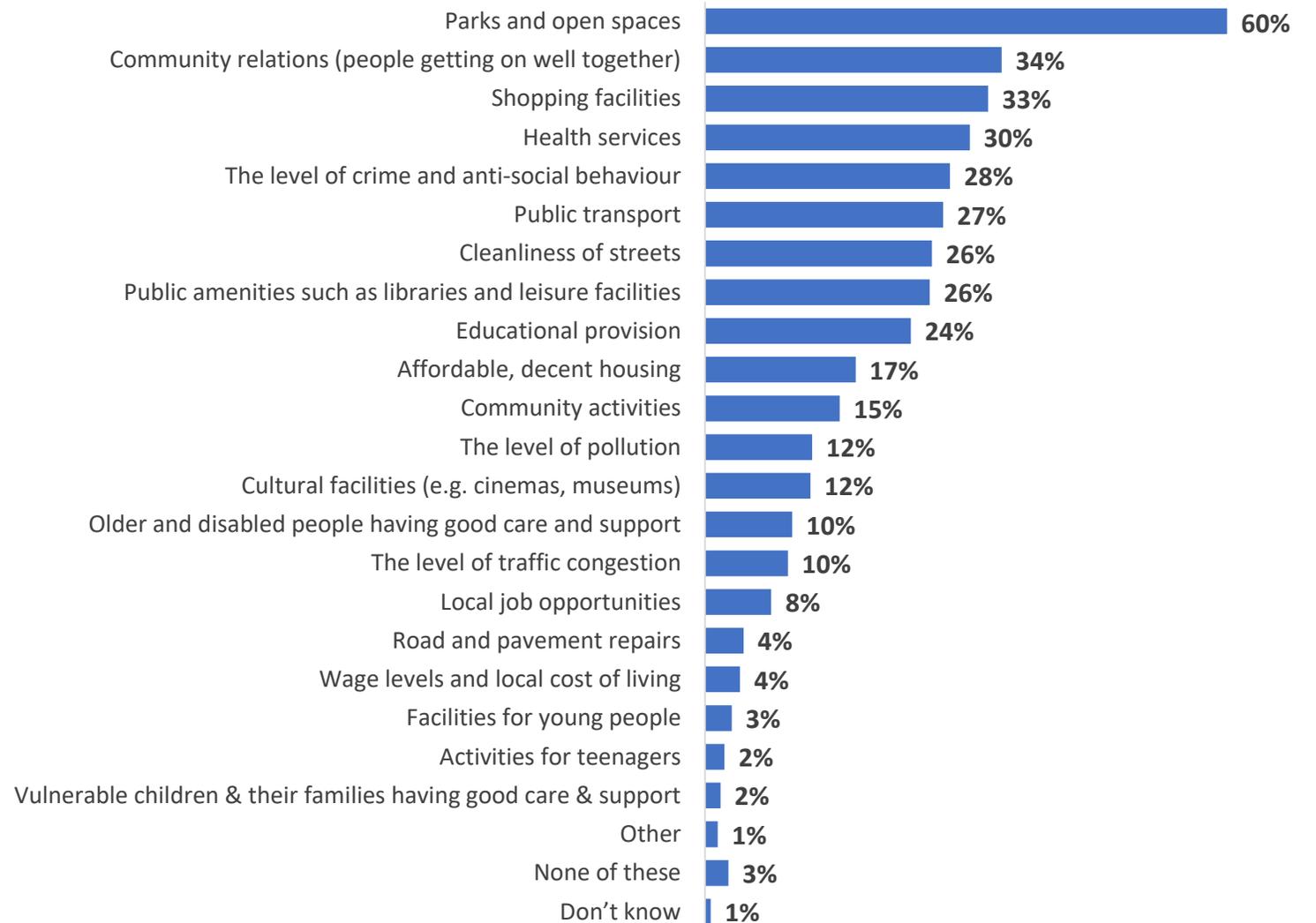
Which, if any, do you think most need improving in your local area?



When asked about what makes their local area a good place to live – the things that residents value most their areas, residents identify:

- parks and open spaces (60%)
- community relations (34%);
- shopping facilities (33%); and
- health services (30%).

What makes your local area a good place to live?





Budget setting and managing resources

Participants were largely understanding of the pressures facing ECC and empathise with decision-makers.

In small group discussions, residents were largely **understanding of the pressures facing ECC**, naming various challenges including COVID-19 and its related impacts, “balancing the books,” the social care crisis and climate change.

Some participants were also cognisant of the difficulty of **balancing the views and priorities** of Essex residents, local government and central government, and empathise with the Council.

They also suggest **that central government funding reductions have** “cut councils to the bone” and are not helping in addressing budget constraints to meet demand for delivering vital services.

This left participants feeling **disheartened** and reluctant to make difficult decisions between raising Council Tax, cutting services or charging for them.

*“I think it’s a very **difficult one for the Council** because I don’t know what their financial position will be after COVID”*
Male, Group 6

*“It’s about trying to get a balance, **give a slice to everyone**. Which is really difficult considering the loss of so much income in business rates etc. So, I think it’s a really tight spot.”*
Male, Group 5

*“I think it just comes back to the issue that the council just **doesn’t get enough money** from central government.”*
Female, Group 6

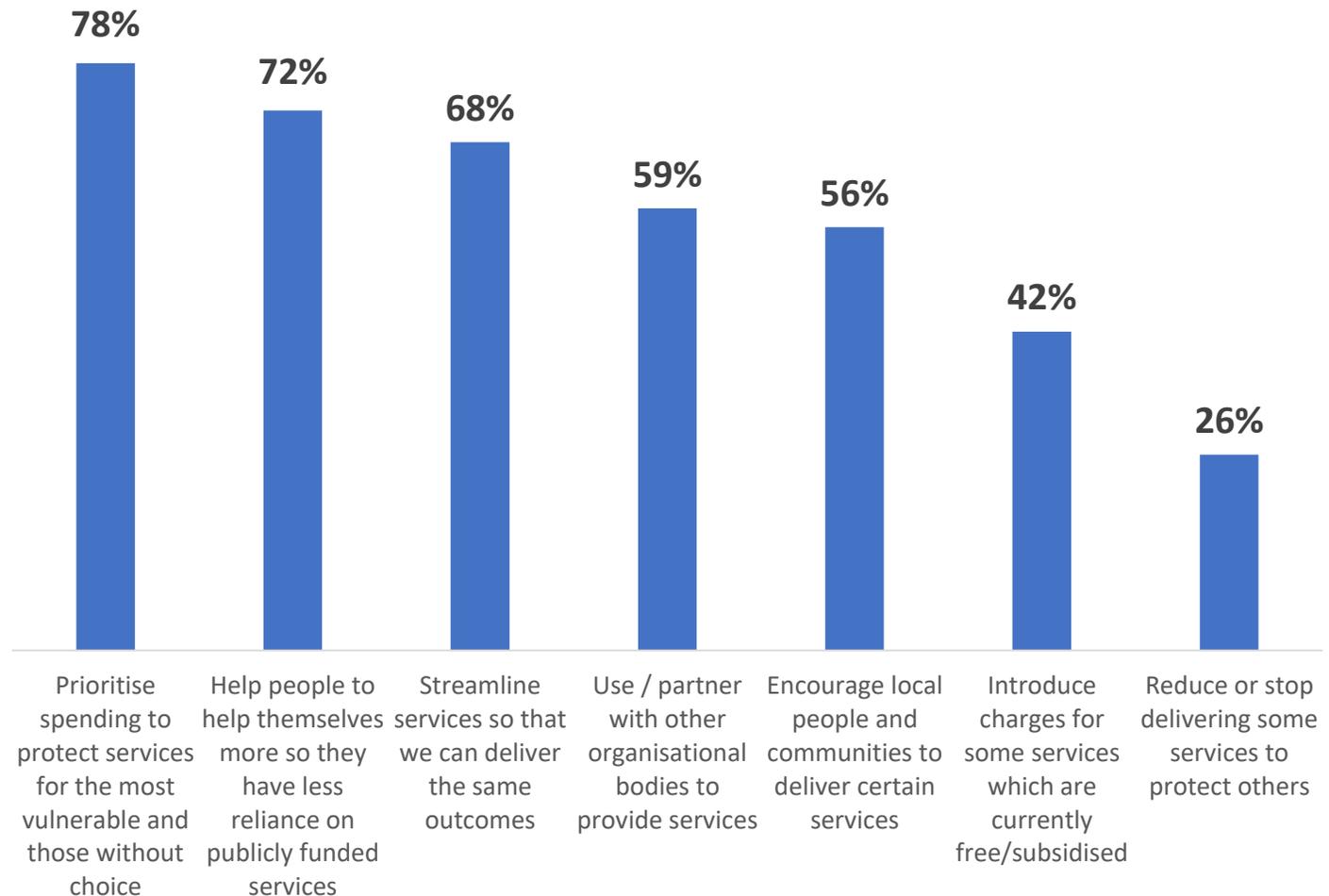
When asked about the different options available to ECC in managing financial pressures, residents would favour a strategy that:

- Prioritises spending on services for vulnerable people
- Reduces demand by encouraging independence
- Streamlines services to secure efficiencies.

Most are sceptical about the value of means-testing and/or outsourcing provision.

When faced with financial pressures, to what extent do you agree/disagree that Essex County Council should...

(% respondents who agree/ strongly agree)



Participants considered options that ECC could employ where budget gaps remain

Service reductions

Overall participants were least keen on reducing or stopping services. The majority **struggled to identify any areas of council activity that could be reduced in scope.**

Most feel that councils have **already been “cut to the bone”** and are sceptical about the prospects for making savings through outsourcing or means-testing.

Residents recognise that some services could be reduced in scope on the basis that people could ‘live without them’ (mentioning libraries, cultural events and highways maintenance), but felt that this would **disproportionately affect quality of lives** – particularly those who are older, lonely or digitally excluded; or **create public safety issues.** They felt the scale of the savings available through reductions to these services did not justify the impact.

“It’s a balance between what is absolutely essential (for example, adult social care) to the cultural things that make life worthwhile, so you’re not just existing, you’re thriving.

Unfortunately, the bits you’re going to charge [or cut] are normally in the thriving list, libraries, cultural events and activities, the things that makes it worth living in Essex as opposed to anywhere else. And that’s the challenge.”

Participants considered options that ECC could employ where budget gaps remain

Charging for services

Participants were **not keen on charging for services** with many are unsure which services could realistically be provided on a chargeable basis.

Participants were most concerned about **those at risk of being 'squeezed out'** from using services because of their ability to pay.

There was also widespread concern amongst participants that charging for services may create financial pressure in the long run due to **unforeseen knock-on effects and perverse incentives** (e.g. charging for waste disposal leading to costly fly-tipping).

Participants were at pains to stress that all financial and non-financial **impacts should be assessed and understood before any approach to charging is adopted.**

"Making sure that you don't take things away from those who are less fortunate." – Female, Group 4

"If they dropped the prices a bit, you would actually encourage more people to avail of those services because it won't be as prohibitive." – Female, Group 4

Participants considered options that ECC could employ where budget gaps remain

Council tax increases

Some participants viewed Council Tax increases as inevitable and expected, while some strongly resented the idea of potential tax increases. Nevertheless, after considering alternatives, **most participants would accept increasing Council Tax** – mainly because they cannot see any way to cut services or charge for them.

Participants set out several **conditions that would make local tax increases more acceptable:**

- where increases are progressive and based on people’s ability to pay – avoiding disproportionate increases hit those in need.
- tax increases must be **clearly and honestly communicated** to inform residents and explain how much is being raised and for what purpose; and
- increases are presented alongside an explanation of the **alternatives that have been considered.**

*“The **least-worst option** - I don't see how you can do the other two. But if it's raised too much, it's going to **push people into poverty.**” – Female, Group 2*

*Probably **the fairest.**” – Male, Group 3*

*“Sometimes people start to **wonder what they're paying for.**” – Male, Group 5*

*“Counter with **accountability, transparency and good messaging.**” – Female, Group 4*

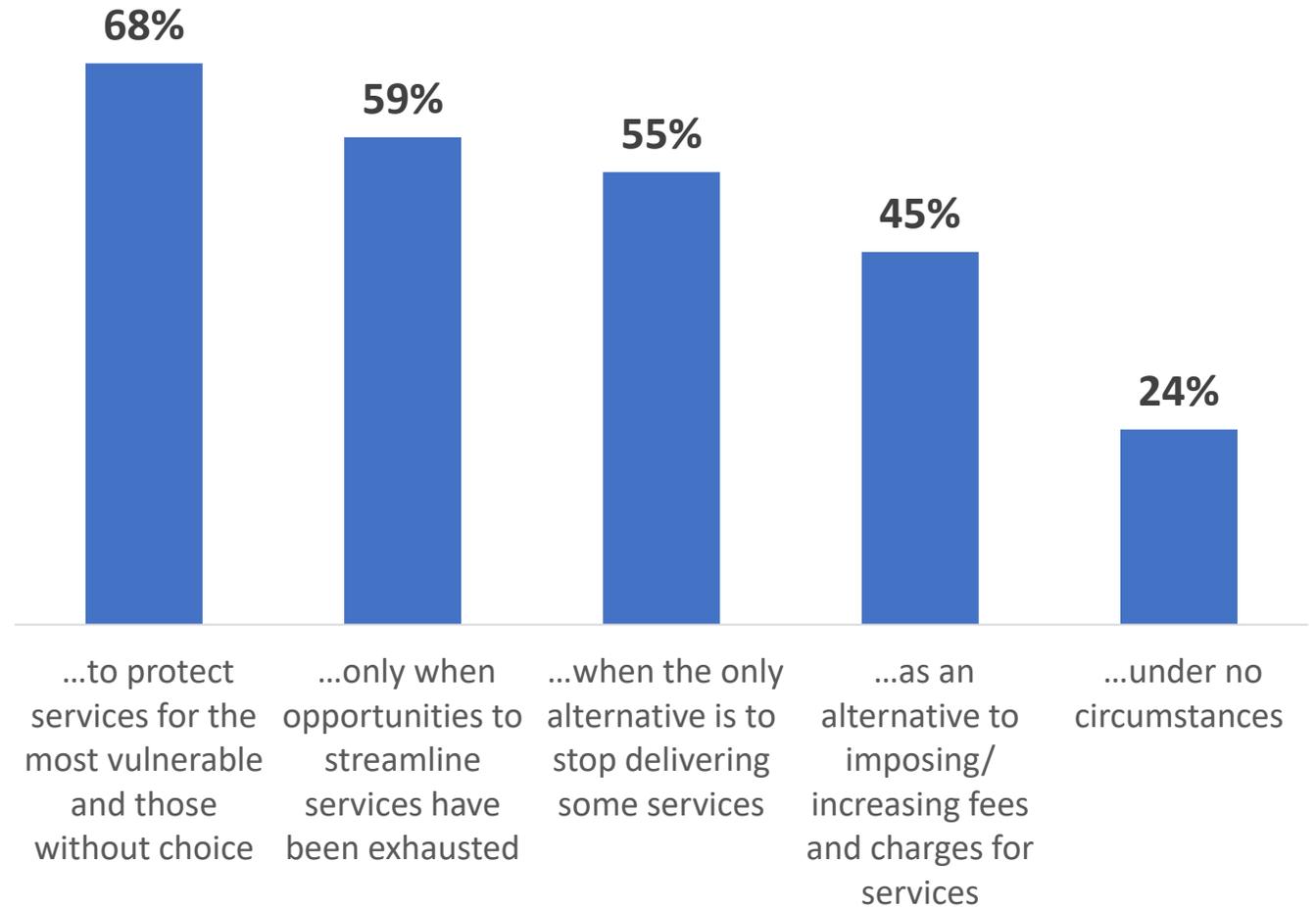
*“If there was a clear, demonstrable **impact on everybody's lives**, then I think we'd all sign up for that. [But] if you're saying that it will keep County Hall running, that's not a very good argument.” – Male, Group 5*

Participants' conditional acceptance of council tax increases is reflected in the survey results.

Nearly seven in ten participants agree that increase in council tax are justified to protect services for the vulnerable, while a majority would accept increases when efficiency opportunities had been exhausted or when the alternative was to stop some services.

Only a quarter of participants suggest that ECC should not increase council tax under any circumstances.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
ECC should consider increases in council tax...**
(% respondents who agree/ strongly agree)

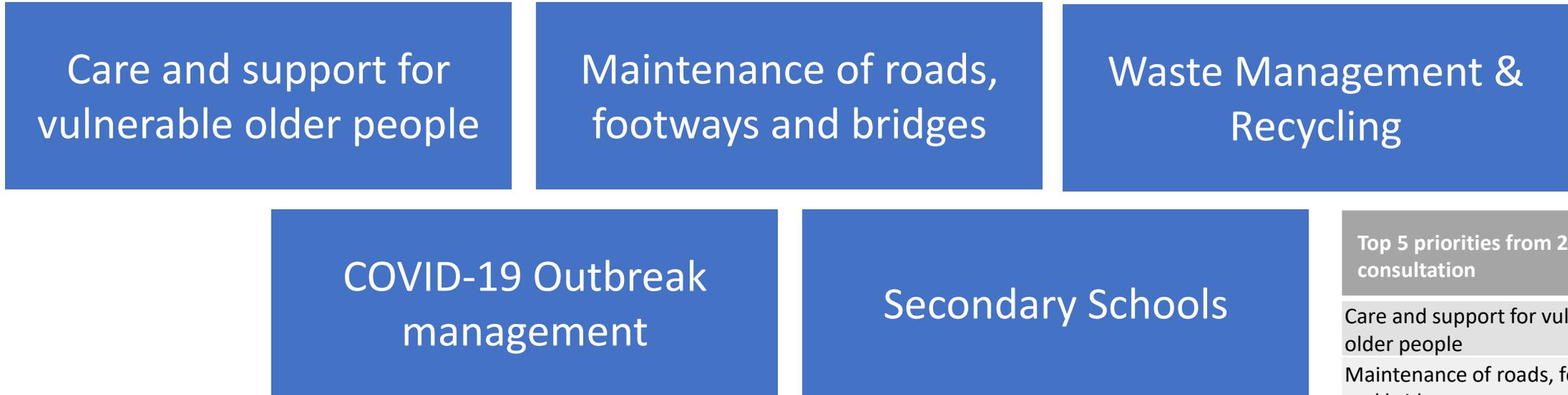


Service priorities



Top five service priorities

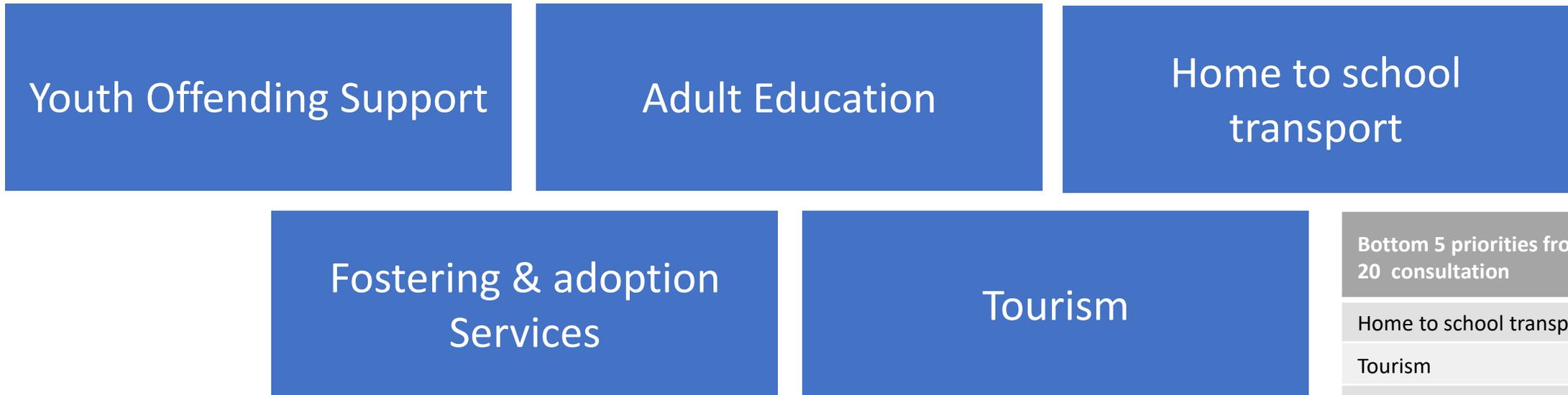
Which, if any, of the following should be prioritised as we set Essex County Council's budget for next year?



- Top 5 priorities from 2019-20 consultation
- Care and support for vulnerable older people
 - Maintenance of roads, footways and bridges
 - Children’s mental health services
 - Care and support for people with mental health needs
 - Child protection services

Lowest priority services

Which, if any, of the following should be prioritised as we set Essex County Council's budget for next year?



- Bottom 5 priorities from 2019-20 consultation
- Home to school transport
 - Tourism
 - Adult Education
 - Obesity programmes
 - Smoking Cessation

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