Kent County Council Budget Consultation 2015: Executive Summary January 2016

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Key Findings: Council Tax and Service Priorities

- KCC has a mandate to increase Council Tax by 1.99%.
- An increase is acceptable to those seeing this as inevitable and required to pay for services.
- A minority would agree to a greater increase to help protect services – but the expense and uncertainty of a referendum was strongly rejected.
- When asked to prioritise, respondents attached the greatest importance to support for the most vulnerable residents, with universal infrastructure services also considered key, while discretionary "quality of life" services were rated as less important.
- Support for the most vulnerable is not necessarily top of mind for the average resident – but this area of activity was prioritised over more universal infrastructure issues when residents were presented with a choice between the two.
- The prioritisation of services this year is in line with 2015/16 budget consultation findings.

Greater communication by KCC to residents about why Council Tax needs to increase and what it pays for is essential to help taxpayers understand these budget challenges. This will give residents a more informed context when they evaluate the difficult decisions KCC has to make to reduce or restrict services in future.

Key findings: Budget Challenge Awareness and Strategic Options

- Residents are not always necessarily well informed about the services KCC provides and what their Council Tax pays for.
- Deliberative participants were surprised by the wide scope of services provided by KCC and dismayed by the enormity of the task facing KCC in addressing the funding gap.
- When given a range of strategic options for closing the gap, respondents preferred positive options which did not involve reducing services.
- There was widespread belief that there was still more opportunity for KCC efficiencies.
- Income generation by KCC was generally supported where it was interpreted as an entrepreneurial, positive approach, rather than introducing charges for “core services”.

Key findings: Budget Challenge Awareness and Strategic Options

- Participants disliked strategic options requiring KCC to make a judgement i.e. “most needy”, “least valued” – There was scepticism around how well this could be done fairly and cost-effectively.
- Means testing is a contentious issue: income alone was considered a blunt criterion which could penalise workers/ savers and those living in rural communities – but there was recognition that if it was not possible for KCC to deliver services to everyone, then those most in need should be prioritised.
- There was some appetite for encouraging residents to take greater responsibility and for not letting those who abuse the system continue to get away with this.
- A range of practical concerns were expressed about how options/principles requiring significant cultural change would be implemented.
- Cost/benefit analysis was seen as an important aspect of the evaluation process with a need to fully understand the relationship between potential savings and the administration costs to be able to judge whether an option is worthwhile investing in.

There was concern that if KCC withdrew some services, this would lead to escalating problems for households with increased demand for statutory services in the long run.

Deliberative: Spontaneous views on spending priorities

- **There was a widespread lack of understanding about which services are provided by KCC (as opposed to District Councils). Key themes were the perception that care standards have fallen, pothole repairs are inadequate, and waste collection/disposal is inefficient.**

- Social care recognised as KCC's responsibility by some participants, but not spontaneously mentioned by many others.
- Considered essential services which protect the vulnerable, particularly the elderly.
- Some participants perceived standards of care have suffered as a result of cuts to frontline services.

- Complaints about highway maintenance top of mind for many participants; some perceived this had deteriorated recently.
- Many perceived that KCC does not spend efficiently or effectively e.g. some roads resurfaced at great expense (e.g. central Maidstone) or traffic calming measures introduced (Tonbridge) whilst potholes on local roads are not repaired adequately, so that the problem recurs (false economising).
- Some complaints about partial street lighting leading to personal safety concerns.

- Waste collection spontaneously discussed in almost all groups at the events; participants were largely unaware that this was not managed by KCC.
- Some complained about inconsistencies in recycling and collection policies.
- Some felt this was an area where efficiencies could be made (e.g. fewer collections, less bins, less waste management companies involved).

**Larger words = more mentions*

Response to proposal to increase Council Tax: Summary

KCC has a mandate to increase Council Tax by 1.99% with the majority of respondents and participants in favour of an increase.

- However, the degree to which this was supported varied between responses to the online survey on the KCC website and the face to face random and demographically representative survey.
- Respondents in the online survey on the KCC website were **more supportive** of an increase in Council Tax with over three quarters (76%) in favour, compared to a more even split between the respondents surveyed face to face who were almost evenly split between those favouring some level of increase in Council Tax (51%) and those favouring no increase (49%)*.
- Participants at the beginning of the deliberative events more closely resembled the on-street respondents with 57% in support of an increase and 42% in favour of no increase or a reduction in Council Tax.
- However, this proportion did change as a result of their deliberations so that by the end of the events 68% were in support of an increase and 32% were in favour of no increase or a reduction.
- Although the base size for the deliberative events is small, this movement demonstrates that the better informed residents are of the budget challenges facing KCC and the scope of services it provides, the more supportive they are of an increase in Council Tax.
- It also shows that deliberative event participants by virtue of being more informed moved closer to the position held by those respondents motivated to complete the question on the KCC website, who by definition were respondents who were more aware and interested in this issue than the average Kent resident.

*Unfortunately the online Council Tax question did not capture any information on the nature of respondents answering. It is therefore unclear what proportion of online respondents are KCC staff for example and whether this may have had an impact on the overall results. Although based on small numbers., the deliberative events suggest that staff are more likely to accept an increase in Council Tax than the general public. We would therefore suggest that ,in future, respondents answering the online Council Tax question are asked to give some information about themselves. Being able to identify whether respondents are members of KCC staff would allow further analysis in this area to be conducted.

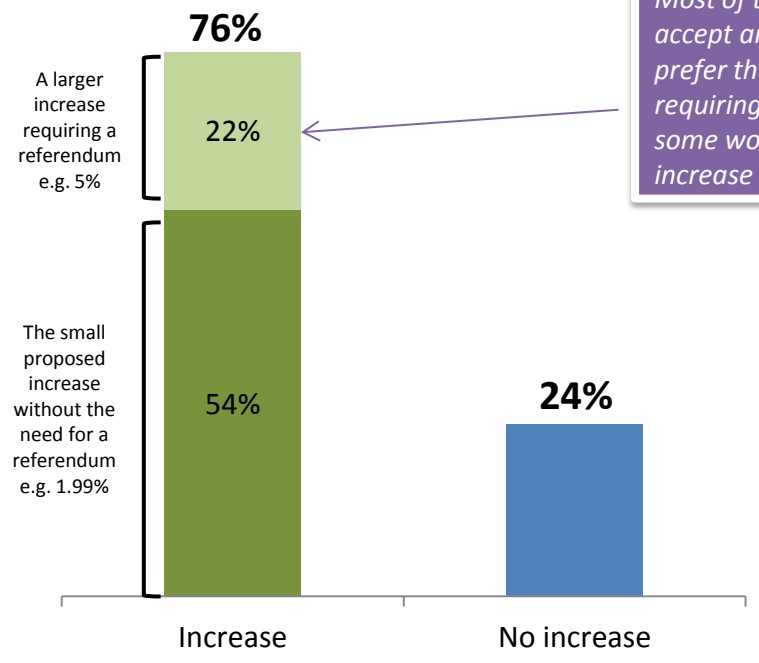
Council Tax: Quantitative data

- **Strong support for an increase in Council Tax in the online consultation.**
- **Views of face to face respondents are more mixed – but just over half would accept an increase.**
- **Differences likely to reflect differing interest in/ knowledge of budget issues/ challenges.**

Significant Findings:

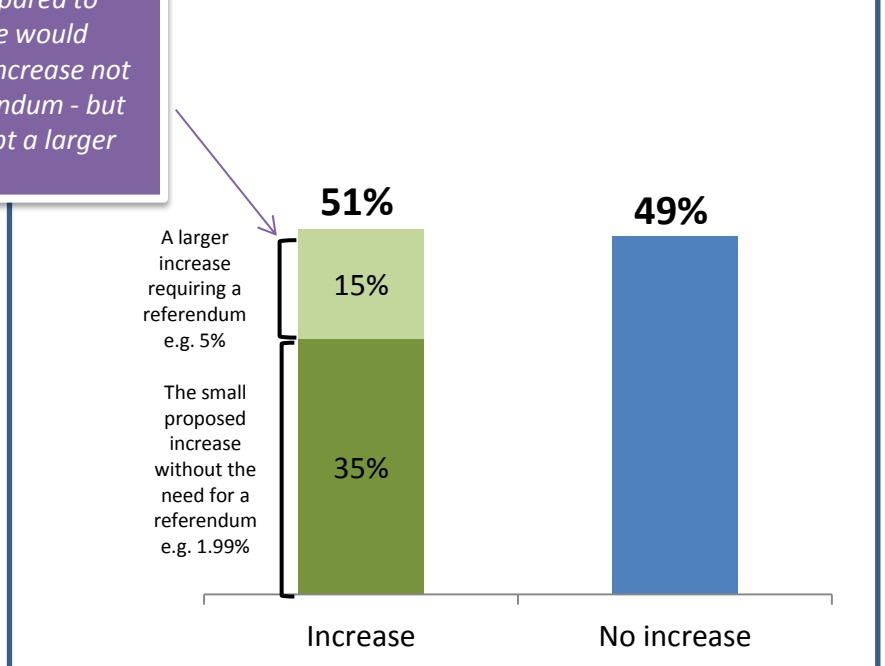
- Those working full time were significantly more likely to accept an increase in Council Tax.
- Those who were retired were also significantly more likely to accept an increase.
- Men were significantly more likely than women to accept a higher increase over 2%.
- See Annex 3 for further detail.

Response to proposal to increase council tax – Online Consultation



Most of those prepared to accept an increase would prefer the lower increase not requiring a referendum - but some would accept a larger increase

Response to proposal to increase council tax – Face to Face Survey

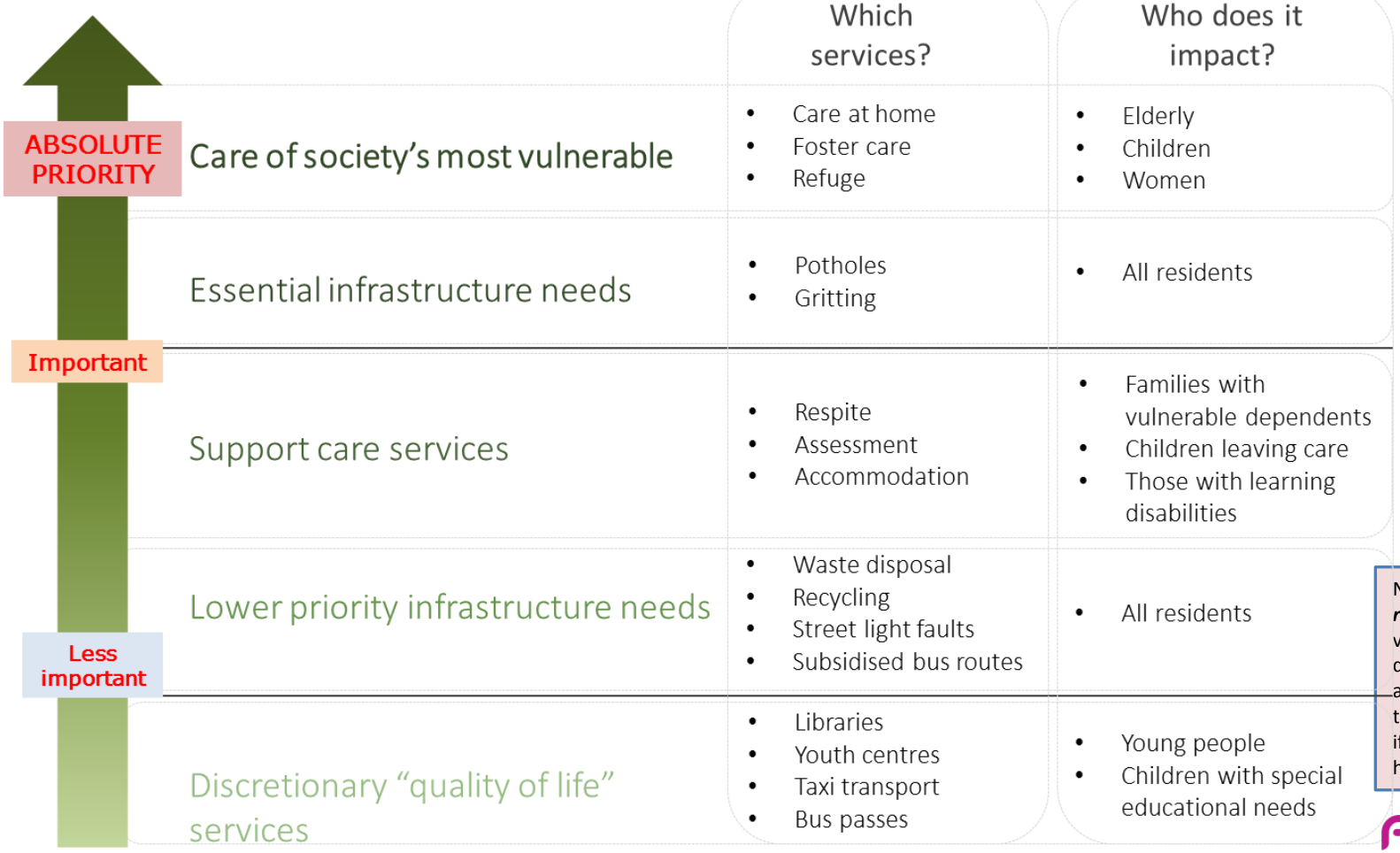


Bases: Face to face survey = 757 respondents, Online consultation = 1693 respondents.

Question: KCC is proposing a small increase in Council Tax to contribute towards the additional spending demands being placed on council services and to provide some protection for local services from the savings that would otherwise need to be found…How much Council Tax would you be willing to pay towards the financial challenge the authority faces next year?. Illustrations of the equivalent monetary increase per week and per year were given. The "No increase" option was framed as "No increase and make equivalent cuts to and make equivalent cuts to services (of around £11m per year) on top of the estimated £80m already needed to balance the budget

"Max Diff" exercise: Summary

- **Highest priority placed on services to protect the most vulnerable**
- **Essential infrastructure activity (with universal impact) next most important**
- **Discretionary "Quality of life" services least important**

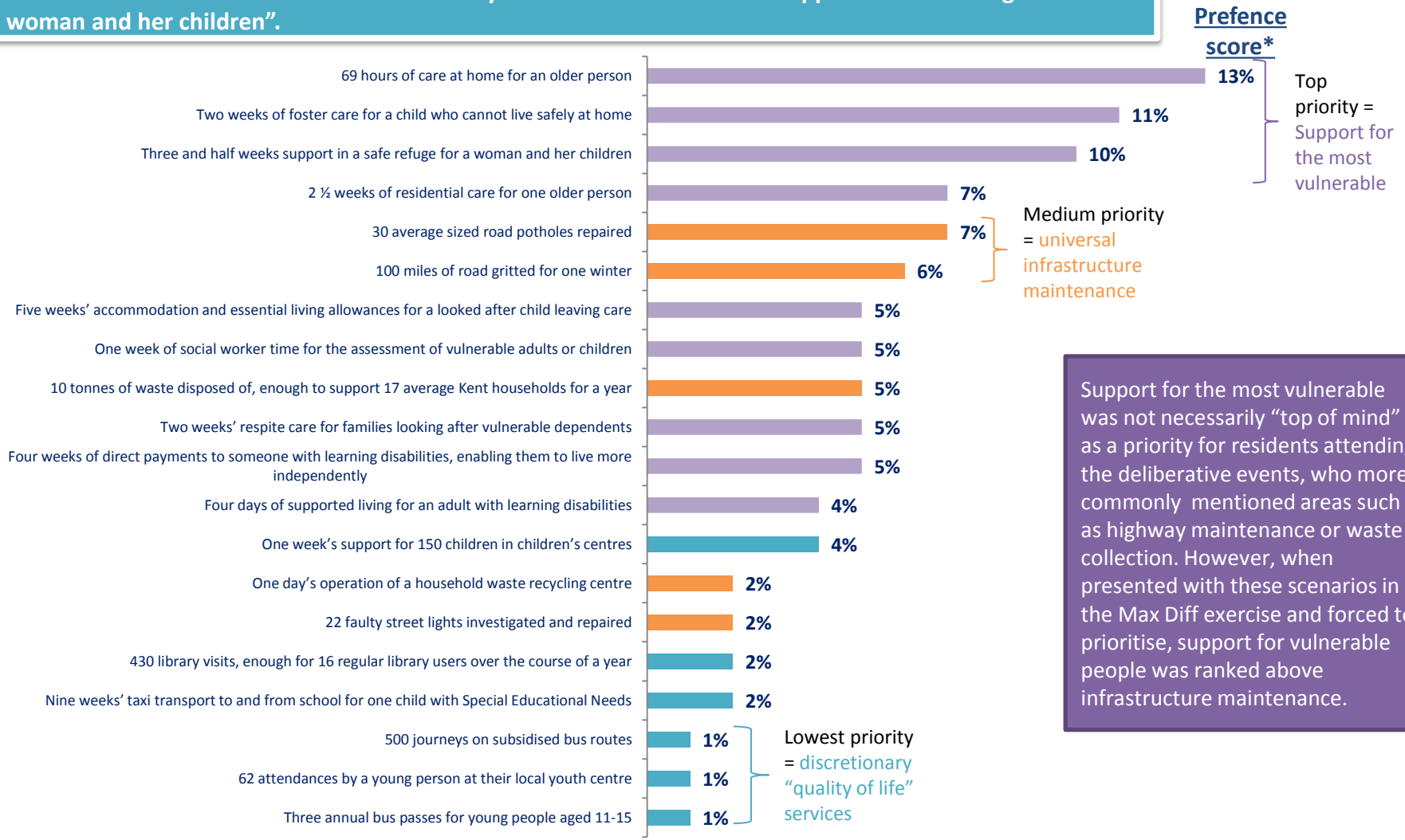


	Which services?	Who does it impact?
Care of society's most vulnerable	• Care at home • Foster care • Refuge	• Elderly • Children • Women
Essential infrastructure needs	• Potholes • Gritting	• All residents
Support care services	• Respite • Assessment • Accommodation	• Families with vulnerable dependents • Children leaving care • Those with learning disabilities
Lower priority infrastructure needs	• Waste disposal • Recycling • Street light faults • Subsidised bus routes	• All residents
Discretionary "quality of life" services	• Libraries • Youth centres • Taxi transport • Bus passes	• Young people • Children with special educational needs

Note the ranking is ***relative*** – residents do value discretionary/ quality of life services and would prefer them to be protected if a choice did not have to be made.

"Max Diff" exercise: Detail

The top ranked service area tested is "69 hours of care at home for an older person", followed by "2 weeks of foster care for a child who cannot live safely at home" and "3.5 weeks support in a safe refuge for a woman and her children".

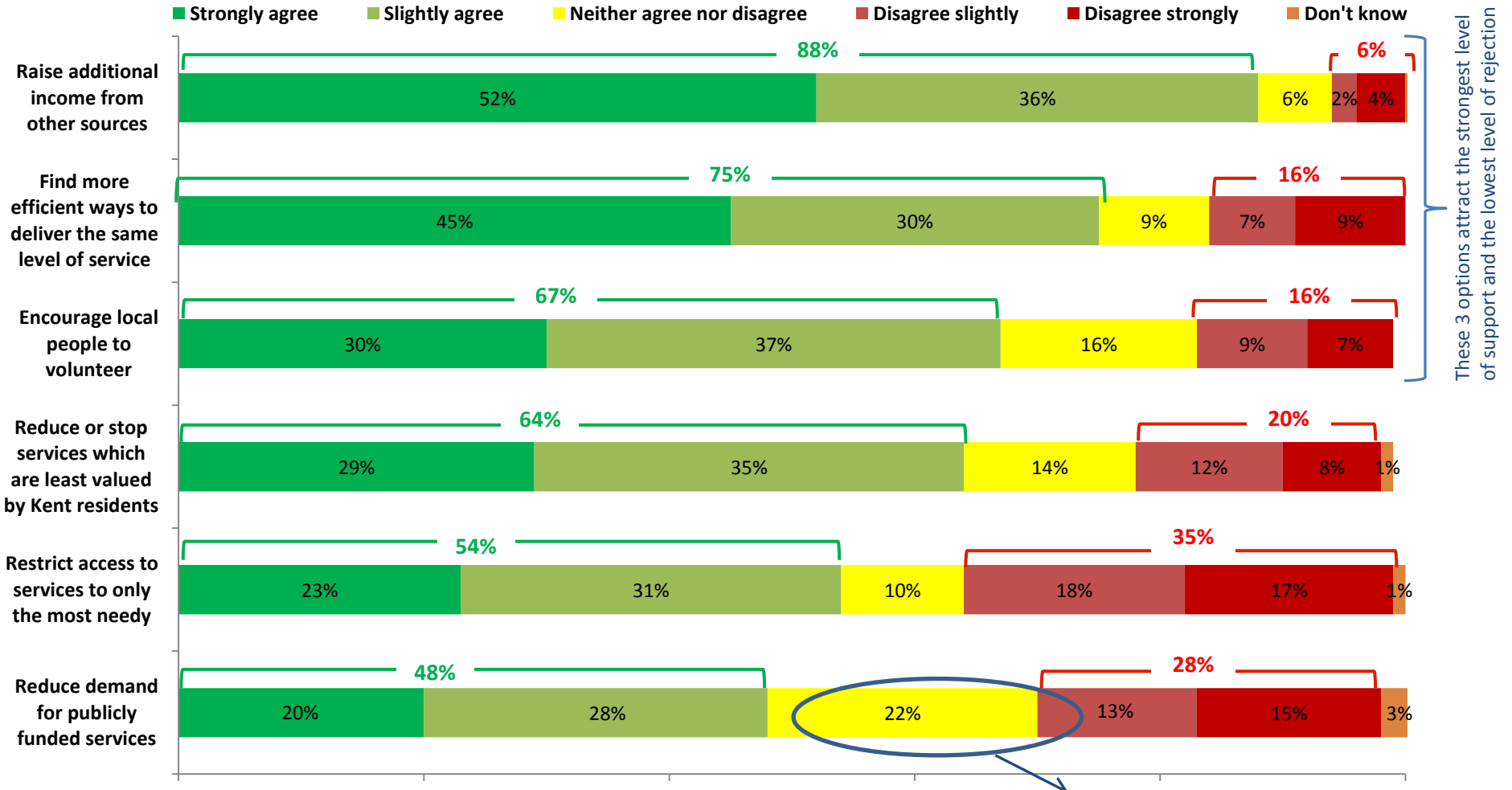


Support for the most vulnerable was not necessarily "top of mind" as a priority for residents attending the deliberative events, who more commonly mentioned areas such as highway maintenance or waste collection. However, when presented with these scenarios in the Max Diff exercise and forced to prioritise, support for vulnerable people was ranked above infrastructure maintenance.

Combined results from face to face and online surveys - Base = 1,955 respondents. (Little difference between on-street and online results. For comparison see Annex 6).
From Q3: You will now see a series of screens that list key services and what £1,000 of council spending buys. Please think about your household's circumstances and tell us which of these services are most and least important to you. *Preference score = a statistical index figure showing the overall level of preference given to each item across all respondents completing the survey.

Online response to Strategic Policy Options

- **Respondents favoured positive, pro-active approaches felt not to threaten service delivery.**



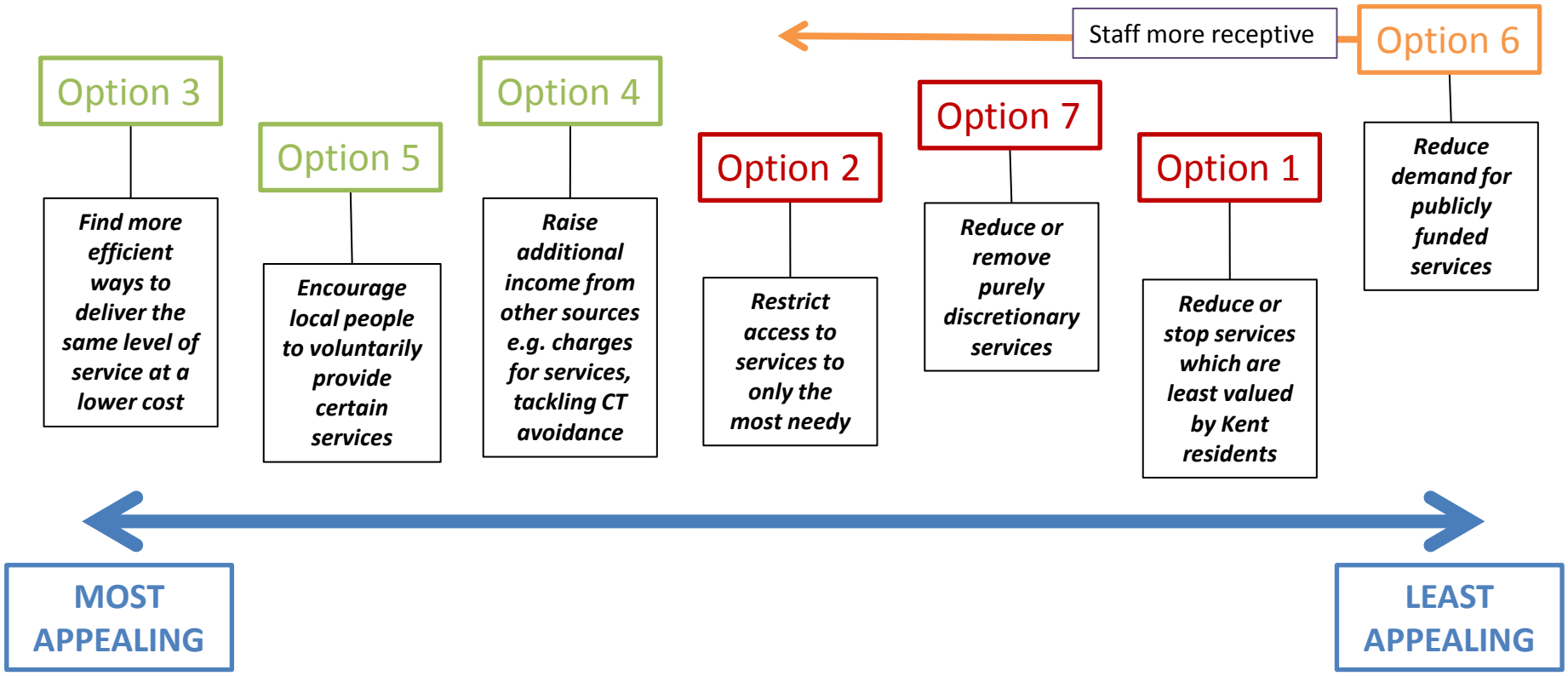
Base: 1147 – 1155

From Q4. Keeping in mind the growing demands for services and a need to balance the budget, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following actions KCC could potentially take?

Strong proportion of "neither/ nor" responses. Reflects qualitative findings that residents may struggle to understand how this option might work in practice.

Deliberative response to Strategic Policy Options: overview

- **Consistent: Strongest appeal = options that do not threaten to reduce existing services; positive, proactive alternatives**
- **Participants were reluctant to endorse options cutting essential frontline services / involving means testing**



Methodology: Group exercise to work together to map these options on a spectrum from least appealing to most appealing. Group discusses each in turn and works to come to a consensus. Diagram reflects general view across all groups. In some cases, respondents found identifying a distinct order quite difficult.

Deliberative Response to 3 Broad Principles: Overview

- **Unenthusiastic response consistent with views on strategic options.**

Penalising people who abuse the services by fining them or withdrawing Council services from them *e.g. fines for traffic violations, withdrawal of services for those in arrears on Council Tax, fines for those who don't recycle waste correctly.*

Better targeting of current universal services so that they are provided only to those most in need *e.g. young person's travel card means tested by parental income, families to make financial contribution towards cost of care services for relatives (including looked after children). getting children to school, etc. In these cases services would no longer be available.*

Stop providing services which the council is not obliged by law to provide e.g. support for those not meeting the criteria for care intervention, subsidised bus routes, community wardens, etc.

PREFERRED = LEAST UNAPPEALING

LESS PREFERRED = MOST UNAPPEALING