

# SHIFTING EXPECTATIONS

The future of public services

September 2024

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# 1. Introduction

Public attitudes towards public services in the UK are complex and evolving, informed both by new concerns over service experience and deeper values over how public services should be provided. This report seeks to explore these complexities and potential solutions, using Ipsos data on public attitudes from earlier this year, to delve into the significant challenge of meeting public expectations for public services amidst tight public spending constraints.

The public recognises the importance of public services, but there is a growing sense that these vital services are not meeting their needs. This dissatisfaction is underpinned by economic worries, concerns about inequality, and a perceived decline in the quality and responsiveness of public services (even more so than the private sector). It is further compounded by a widespread and prolonged public mood that the country is heading in the wrong direction and high public distrust of politicians – in fact, the most recent Ipsos Veracity Index recorded the lowest trust score ever. While expectations of improvements have now increased since the election, this just adds to the importance for the government of understanding how these improvements can be delivered.

At the same time, and likely influenced by these factors, there is a lasting public desire for a fairer society that prioritises social responsibility and collective well-being, with a strong social safety net and services tailored to local needs. However, this desire for a more collective approach is complicated by ongoing divisions about

income inequality vs rewarding individual effort. Questions about how to achieve these aspirations also arise, including considerations of universal versus targeted provisions, equity versus efficiency, and progressive versus regressive funding.

The public acknowledges that increased funding is essential; however, they also demand greater efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness. This necessitates systemic reforms within public service organisations, including tackling bureaucracy, addressing staffing and leadership challenges, and fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration.

Furthermore, alternative service delivery models, particularly those involving partnerships between the public, private, and charitable sectors, offer potential for innovation and improvement. It's crucial to recognise, however, that public appetite for these alternative models varies depending on the specific service in question. Similarly, technological advancements also hold this potential for innovation, but their adoption in public services must be approached carefully, ensuring public trust and maintaining a focus on the public good.

We hope you find this report informative and insightful. For more information or to further discuss the findings and implications, please contact me at [Trinh.Tu@ipsos.com](mailto:Trinh.Tu@ipsos.com)

**Trinh Tu, Managing Director  
Public Affairs Ipsos UK**



## 2. Key Takeaways

- 1 There is deep public dissatisfaction with UK public services combined with ongoing economic concerns, amid perceptions of declining quality and responsiveness.
- 2 There is a clear desire for a fairer society with a strong social safety net and locally tailored services. However, funding these aspirations while navigating concerns about wealth redistribution and tax increases presents a complex challenge for the government.
- 3 The public recognises that addressing these challenges requires a dual approach: increased funding and systemic reforms that improve speed, accessibility, efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness.
- 4 Alternative service delivery models, including partnerships with the private and charitable sectors, offer potential for innovation, but there are public concerns over their involvement in certain services. Public trust is paramount, requiring careful consideration and a focus on the public good.
- 5 Technological advancements can improve public services, but the public requires demonstrable reliability and robust data protection.



# 3. Public expectations of government and public services

# The expectation gap in public services has widened over time

It's no secret that the British public is increasingly unhappy with their public services. A striking 70% now believe these services are failing to meet their expectations, a stark increase from the 28% dissatisfaction recorded in 2016\*.

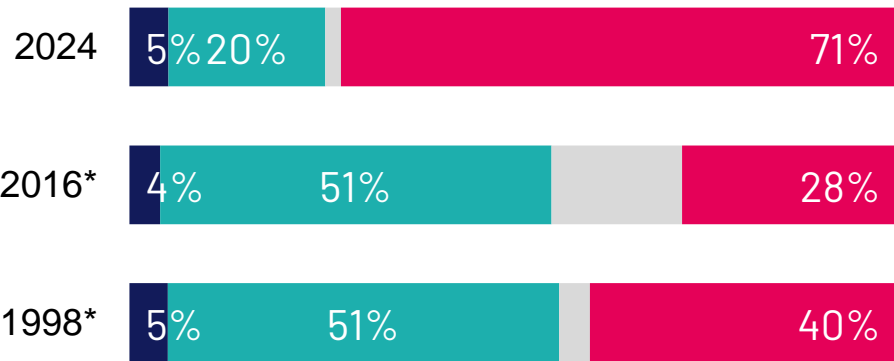
This dissatisfaction – seen across nearly all services – centres around a desire for easily accessible, responsive and timely, well managed public services. However, the current reality falls short of these aspirations. Public services are often perceived as underfunded and bureaucratic, increasingly as unaccountable and less and less as friendly, efficient and helpful.

This decline in public satisfaction is also notable when compared to the private sector. While perceptions of the private sector have also worsened over the last eight years, the trend is much starker in the public sector.

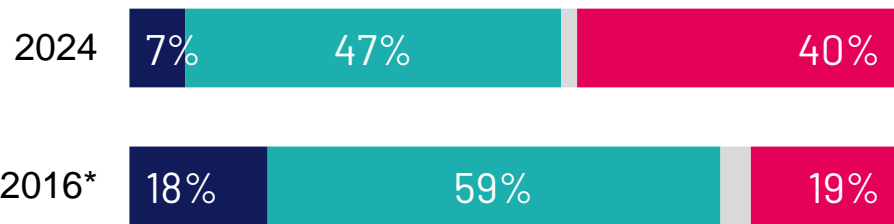
Thinking generally about what you expect of [public services / private sector companies], would you say they are ...

■ Exceeding ■ About what you expect ■ Falling short

## Public services like local councils, schools or hospitals



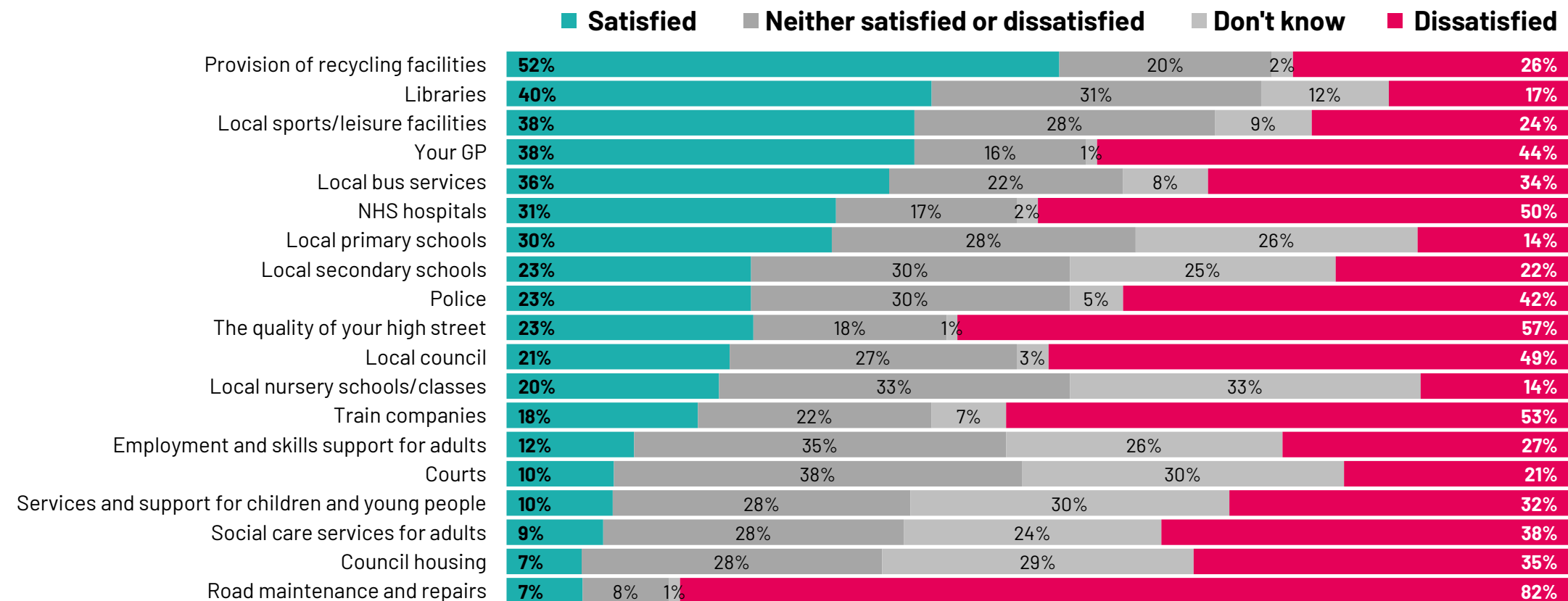
## Private sector companies like shops or banks



Base: 5,875 UK adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates: 25th April - 1st May 2024. \* Trends should be interpreted as indicative only due to changes in methodology.

# Satisfaction with most public services is low with only recycling receiving a positive rating from at least half of the public

Thinking about each of the following, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each?



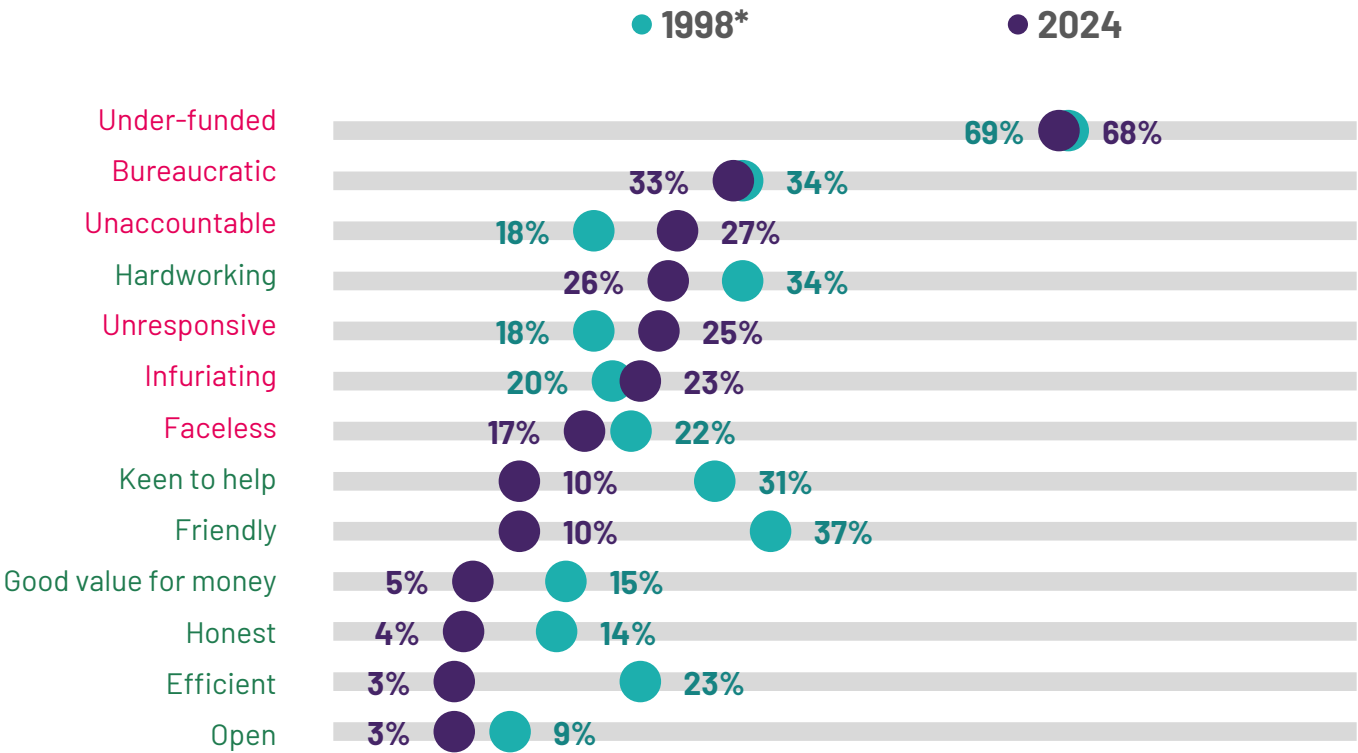
**Base:** 5,875 UK adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates: 25th April - 1st May 2024

# A growing perception of unaccountability and unresponsiveness

Public perceptions of public services have also grown increasingly negative since 1998\*. While under-funding and bureaucracy have long been criticisms levelled at the sector, the public are now more likely to view public services as unaccountable and unresponsive. This is coupled with a decline in positive perceptions of public sector workers, who are now less likely to be seen as hardworking, helpful, friendly or efficient. The public are also less likely to believe that public services offer good value for money.

*Does this point to unrealistically high expectations?*  
While there is some evidence to suggest that the public may expect more from public services than they are willing to fund through taxes – for example, 42% agree with this view, a small increase from 36% in 2006\* – the disparity in satisfaction levels between the public and private sectors suggests that this is not the whole story. The gap in public satisfaction points to deeper, systemic issues within the public sector that require attention.

The following are a selection of words that people have used to describe public services.  
Please select up to 3 words that you think apply



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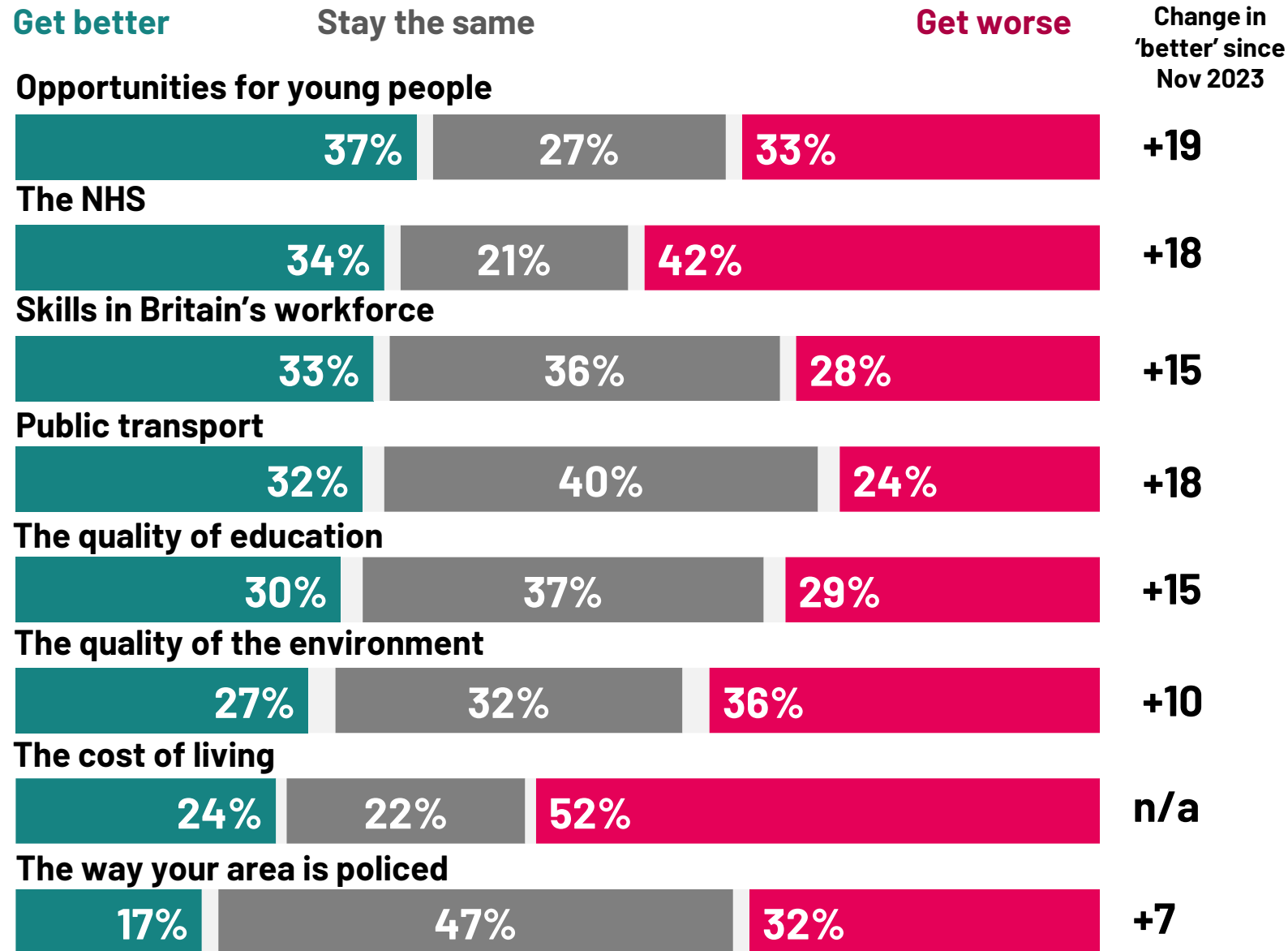
# There has been a boost in expectations since the election, but optimism for public services is still only lukewarm – while the cost of living remains a concern

Since the election of the new Labour government, other Ipsos research has shown a honeymoon period with a boost in expectations that many public services will improve over the next few years.

However, those expecting improvements are still only a minority, with as much if not more pessimism when it comes to the NHS, education, the environment, and policing.

Meanwhile, despite the fall in the rate of inflation over the last couple of years the public is still very worried over the cost of living, which adds to the challenges over how to raise funds.

Thinking about ... over the next few years do you expect it to?



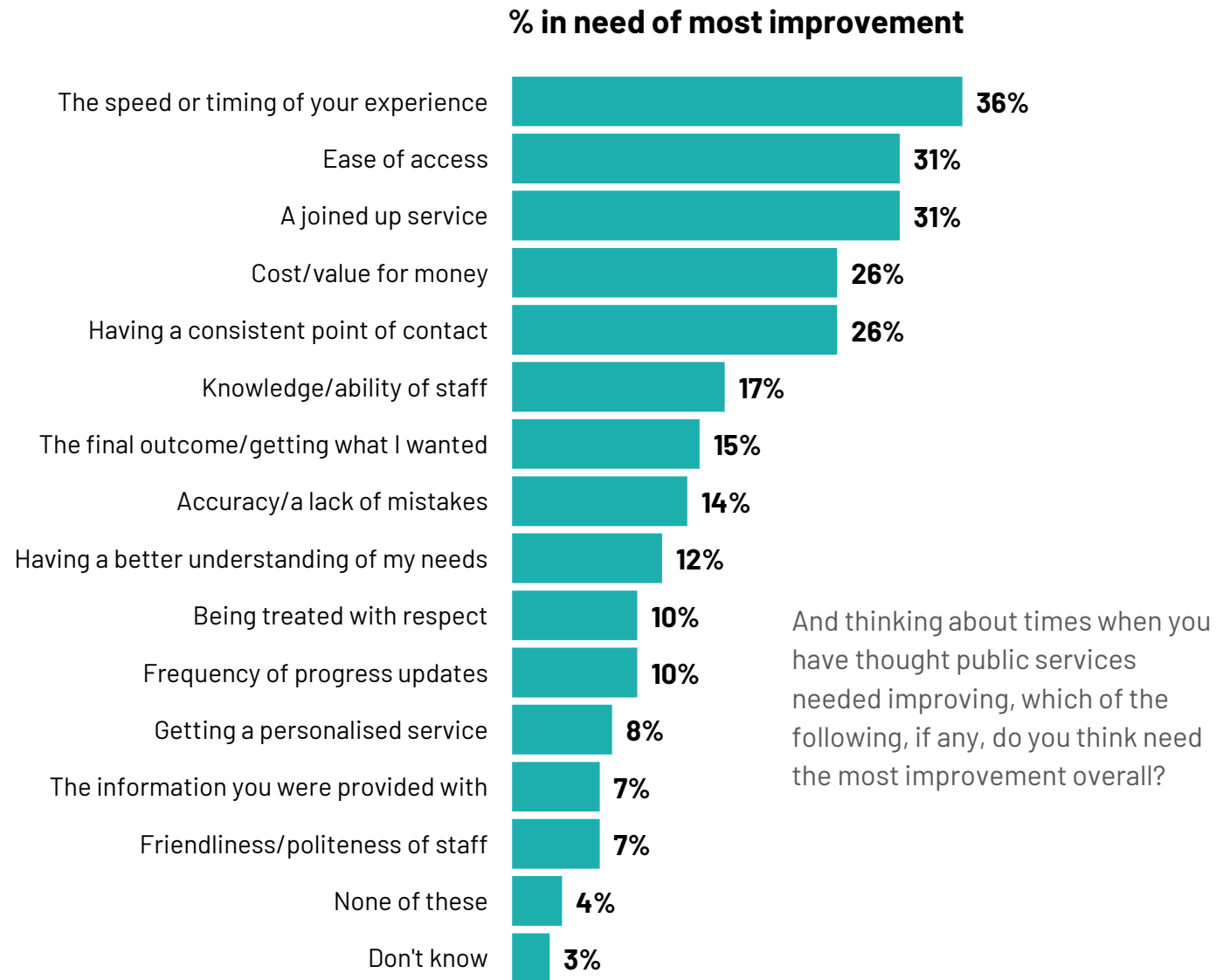
Base: 1,003 British adults 18+, 24-30 July 2024

Source: Ipsos Political Monitor

# The public wants to see tangible improvements to the services they receive

In the short-term, dissatisfaction with public services is related to people feeling that their day-to-day experience falls short of the levels they expect. This means that people's priorities for improvement focus on tangible aspects that make a difference – cutting out delays, and making it easier to access the services people need.

The public also want a more seamless customer experience, with services that are more joined-up, with a consistent point of contact, but that also provide good value for money.



**Base:** 5,875 UK adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates: 25th April – 1st May 2024.

# While some underlying values for public services remain constant, others are more contested

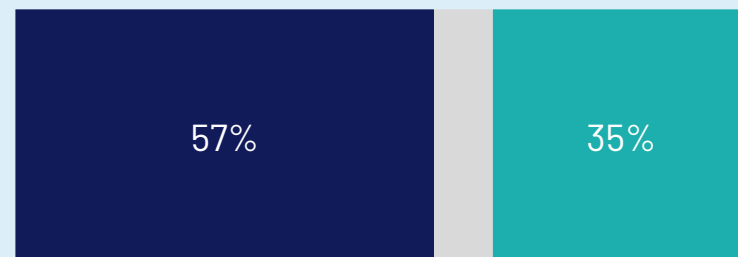
Attitudes towards the state of public services are also built upon a set of underlying principles, some of which are steady over time while others are more contested.

After a period in the early 2000s when Britons were split in their preferences between a more social/collectivist society or one that prioritises individual responsibility, the last few years have seen a return to the position where the UK public's ideal society leans towards a more collectivist approach\*. At the same time, the majority also want to continue a universalist ethos for public services whereby they attempt to improve the lives of as many people as possible rather than just those who need most help.

This trend is understandable in light of the UK's recent economic uncertainty and experience of Covid. Stagnant wages and a rising cost of living have created a sense of vulnerability, making a strong social safety net more appealing. There is also a high awareness of inequalities and desire for fairness in public services, a sentiment to which the previous Conservative government's "Levelling Up" policies were at least part responding.

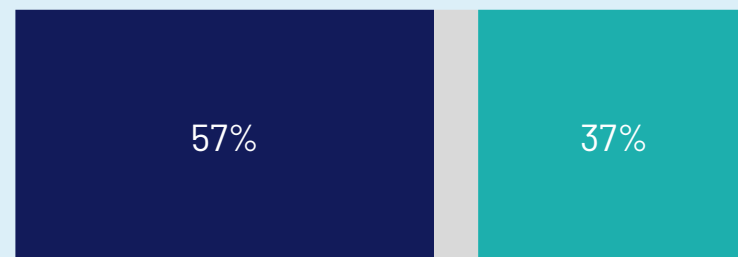
Below is a list of priorities the government could have when planning and delivering public services. For each pair, which comes closest to your opinion? / People have different views about the ideal society, For each of these statements, which comes closest to your ideal?

**Public services should prioritise improving the lives of as many people as possible**



**Public services should prioritise improving the lives of people who most need help**

**A society which emphasises the social and collective provision of welfare**



**A society where individuals are encouraged to look after themselves**

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# While some underlying values for public services remain constant, others are more contested

However, this preference for universalism, fairness and a collective approach to welfare doesn't necessarily translate into complete agreement elsewhere. Public opinion on equality is split, with 48% supporting income equality and 43% advocating for individuals' right to maximise their earnings (not that different to 2006, although slightly more balanced towards equality than the late 1980s\*). And universalism and concerns about regional inequalities do not mean that the public expect services to be exactly the same everywhere – in fact they want them to be tailored to the needs of different local communities.

There are also differing opinions when it comes to principles of funding. While half (49%) still believe that public services should be free at the point of use, even if that means higher costs, a third (35%) think there should be some means testing with those who can afford it paying for some services to cover the costs for those who cannot.

Thus, while dominant views exist, the public's lack of overwhelming consensus on the principles underlying public services presents a tricky balancing act for policymakers. The public wants strong social safety nets and localised services at a time when Labour has signalled that spending on public services is under stress. Adding to the complexity, there is no clear consensus on how to fund these programs, and significant opposing views exist, even if still a minority. Which means that the government and public service leaders will need to engage with the public and the different views within it to bring people along with their plans for reform.

Below is a list of priorities the government could have when planning and delivering public services. For each pair, which comes closest to your opinion? / People have different views about the ideal society, For each of these statements, which comes closest to your ideal?



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# 4. Policy levers



# Addressing the challenges facing public services requires a dual approach

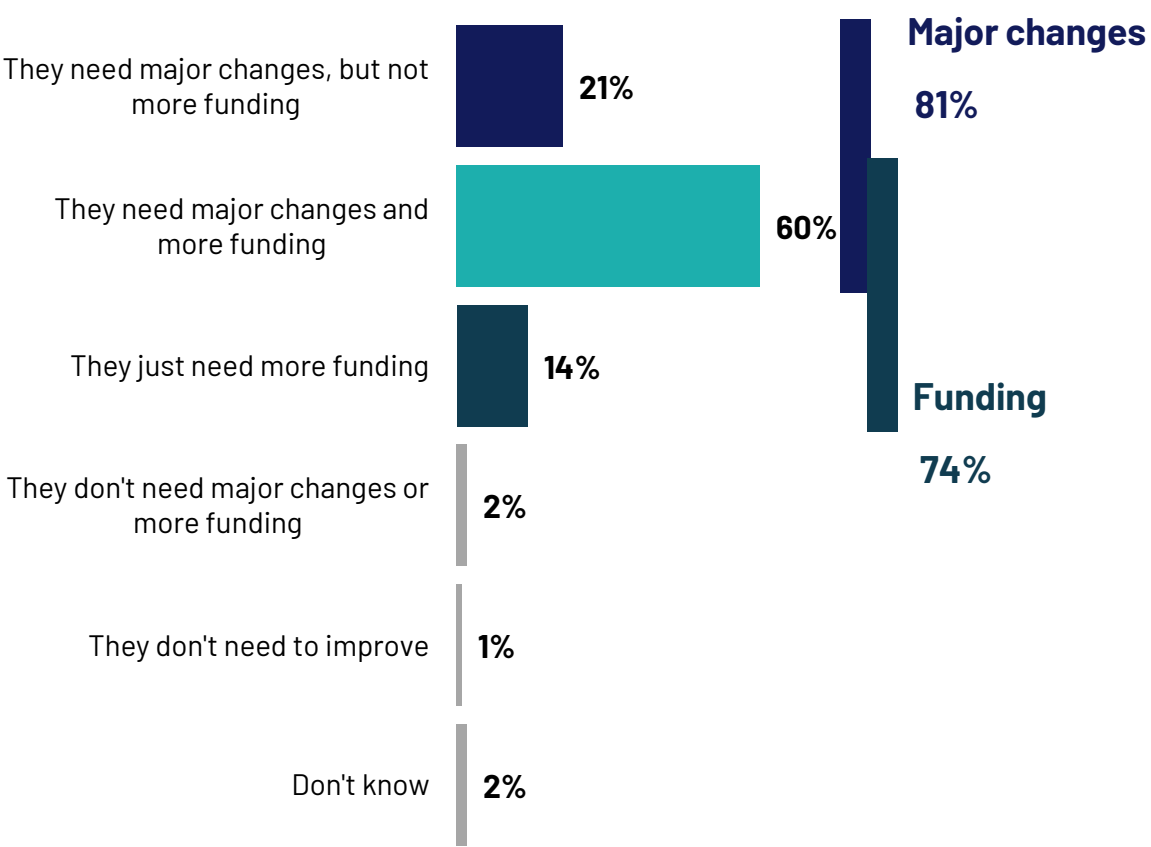
The British public clearly believes that addressing the challenges facing public services requires a dual approach: increased funding **and** significant reform: 60% of the public supports this dual approach, with only a minority believing that either measure alone would be sufficient. This consensus highlights the public's understanding that the issues within public services are complex and require a comprehensive solution.

Funding is of course crucial to the public. They see it as the biggest challenge facing public services, and this sentiment is further reinforced by the 68% of the public who reject the notion that current spending on public services is excessive. This represents a substantial increase from 2009 when only 48% held this view\*, indicating a growing public acceptance of the need for greater investment in these essential services.

However, it's important to understand that

this acceptance of increased spending is not a blank cheque. Public support for tax increases is conditional, with the public wanting to understand how the money will be used and who will be affected. Additionally, while there is support for extra funding for public services, BSA data suggests it is not quite at the peak of 2017-18. This suggests that while Britons recognise the need for investment in public services, they are also concerned about the potential impact of tax increases on their own finances. This is evident in their tax preferences: they show a preference for raising revenue through income tax for high earners (49%), tobacco and alcohol duty (32%), and corporation tax (28%), and are less supportive of raising taxes that have the most impact in terms of generating revenues like VAT, National Insurance and the basic level of Income Tax.

What's your opinion on how to improve public services?



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# Beyond funding, the public identifies several key areas requiring attention

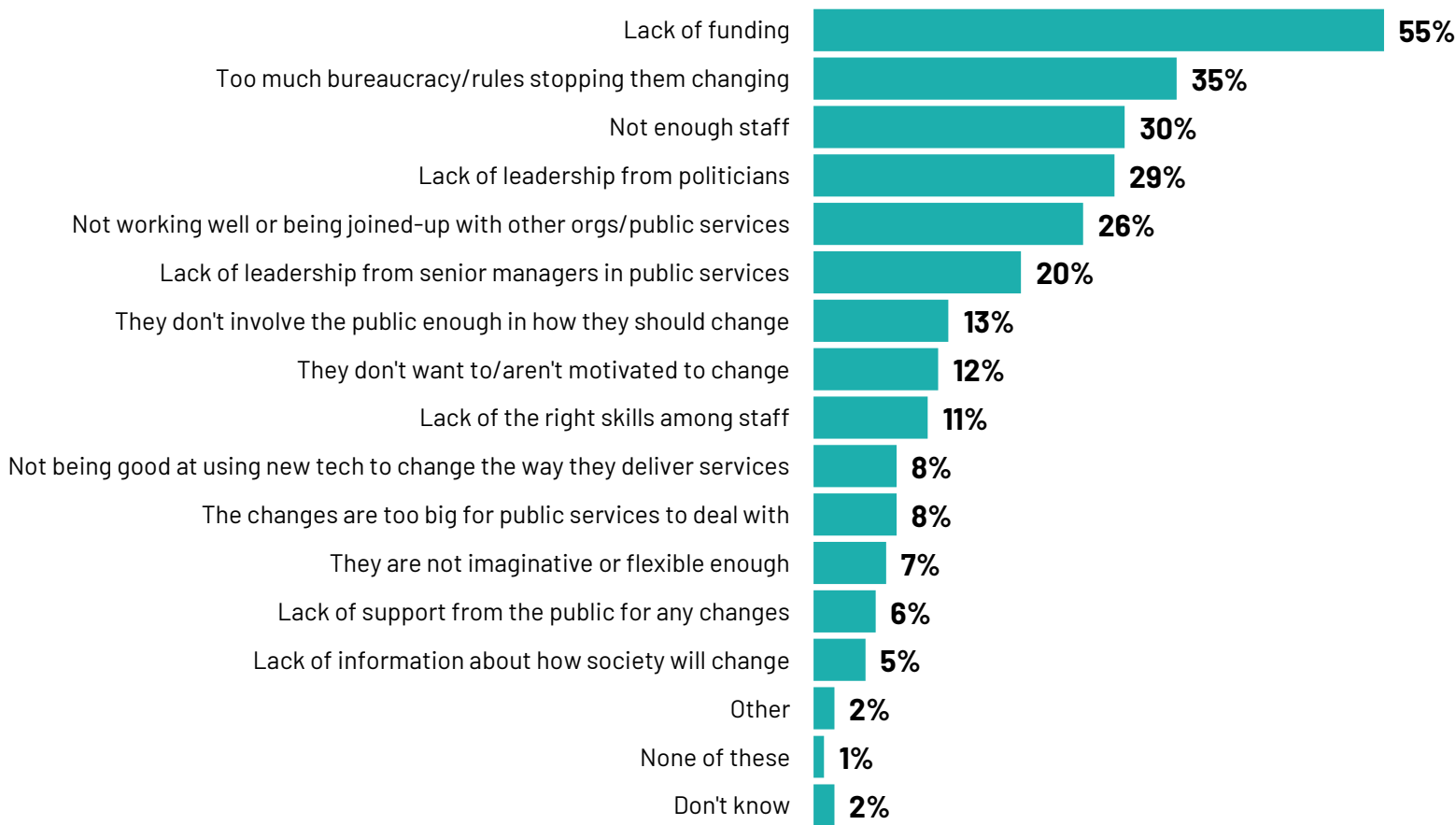
## Systemic issues:

- Streamlining processes and reducing red tape.
- Addressing staff shortages, particularly in critical areas, and ensuring staff possess the right skills.
- Strong and effective leadership, both from politicians and within public service organisations, to drive change.
- Improved coordination and collaboration between different public service organisations to achieve more seamless and effective service delivery.

## Adapting to change:

- Public support for change hinges on involvement in shaping implementation (though there are challenges around this, discussed in section 3).
- Fostering a culture of innovation and a willingness to adopt new approaches within public service organisations.
- Public services need to leverage new technologies to enhance service delivery but must balance this with public unease about data security and reliability (see page 18).
- While change is necessary, managing public expectations regarding the pace and scale and pace of change is crucial.

Which two or three, if any, of the following do you think are the biggest challenges facing public services overall in being able to respond to any future changes to society?



Base: 5,875 UK adults, age 16+ , interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel, Fieldwork dates: 25th April - 1st May 2024.

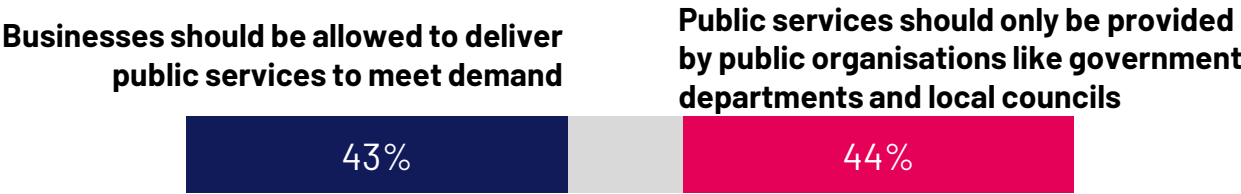
# The public is divided on allowing businesses to deliver public services

Another possible solution is to explore alternative service delivery models. In particular, the private sector and charitable organisations could play a valuable role in easing the strain on public services and addressing the public's desire for reform.

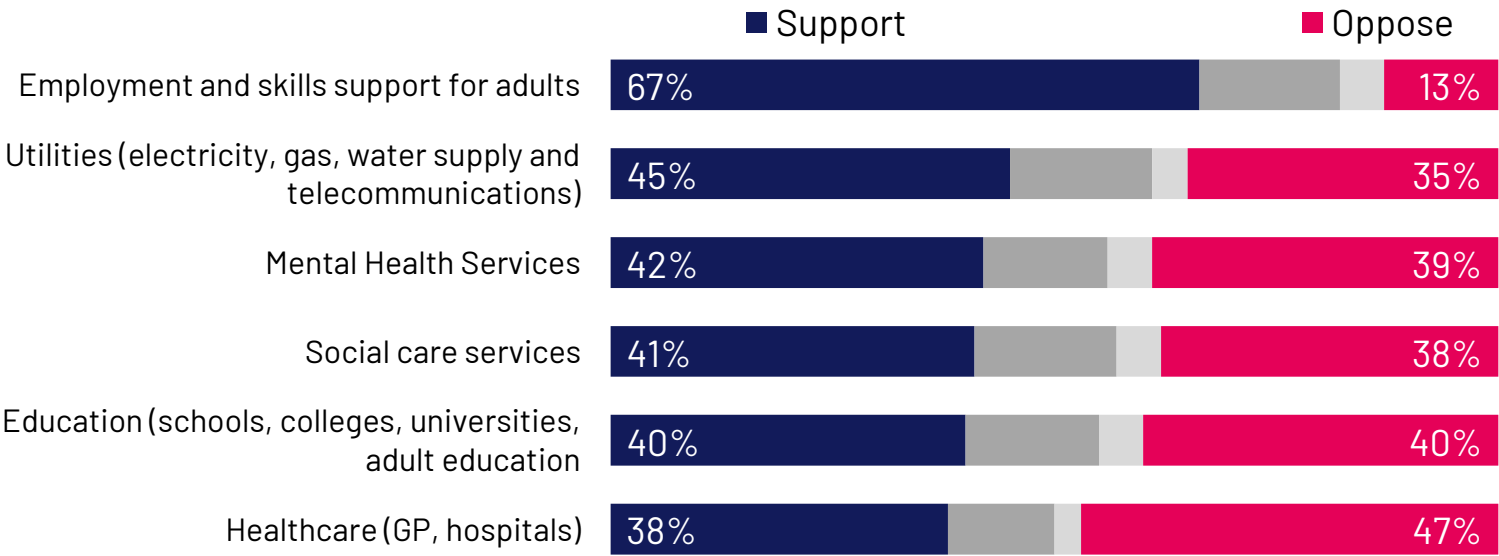
Public opinion on this issue is complex, revealing a desire for carefully considered solutions rather than a complete shift to either purely public or private sector provision. When asked directly about the involvement of private businesses in delivering public services, the public is almost evenly divided.

However, public support for greater private sector involvement is sensitive to the service in question. For example, there is strong public support for businesses providing employment and skills support for adults - this is an area where there's a history of private sector involvement. There is significantly less public support for private sector involvement in other services, such as utilities (currently provided by businesses) but especially for mental health, social care, education and healthcare.

Below is a list of priorities the government could have when planning and delivering public services. For each pair, which comes closest to your opinion?



Do you support or oppose businesses being allowed to deliver each of the following services?



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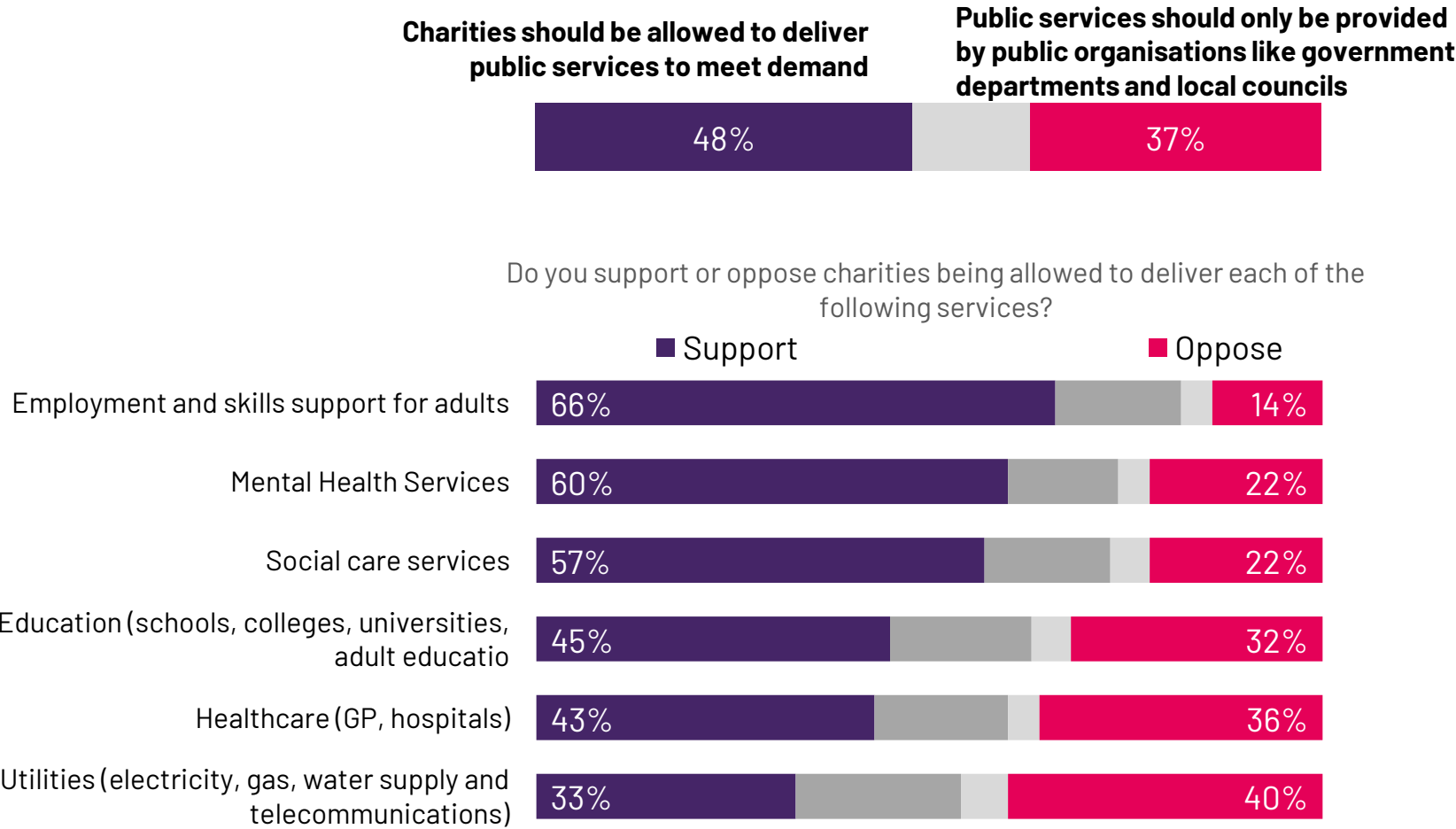


# The public is more open to charities delivering public services

However, there is a greater openness to charities playing a role, likely stemming from the perception that charities are more trustworthy and dedicated to the public good than for-profit businesses. This trust is evident in the public's greater support for charities delivering services than businesses, for example, in mental health and social care, while being less convinced they have the expertise to run utilities.

These findings suggest that a hybrid model, where the public, private, and charitable sectors collaborate to deliver services, could offer a promising path forward. For example, the private sector's expertise in technology, project management and infrastructure could be leveraged to improve the efficiency of service delivery. At the same time, charities could focus on providing personalised, human-centred care, particularly in areas like mental health and social care where public trust is paramount.

Below is a list of priorities the government could have when planning and delivering public services. For each pair, which comes closest to your opinion?



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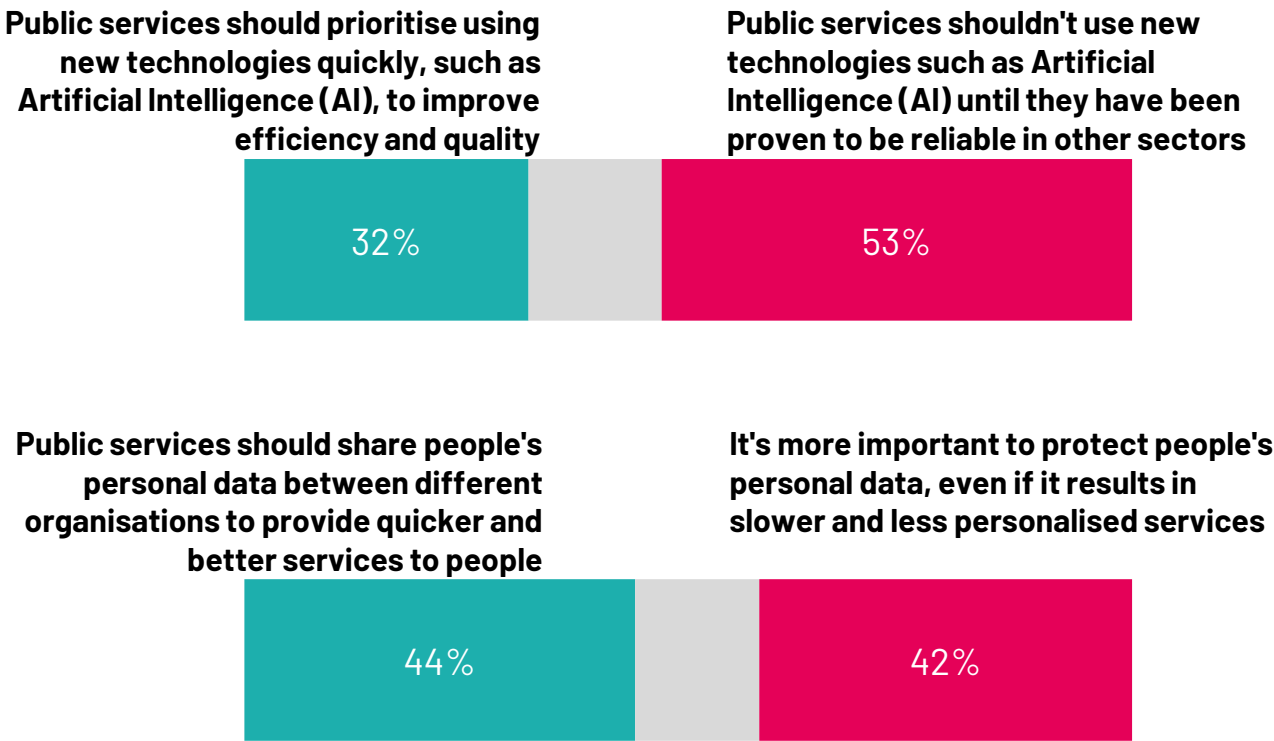


# The public is cautious about technological solutions

One of the criticisms aimed at public services is not being good at using new technology to change the way they deliver public services. At the same time, while technological advancements like AI and data sharing hold immense potential for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of public services, the public remains cautious about embracing these technologies without sufficient assurance of their reliability and data security. This cautious approach is evident in the public's views on both AI and data sharing.

These findings reveal a complex relationship between public desire for improved services and the anxieties surrounding new technologies. As with private sector and charitable involvement in service delivery, the public's views change depending on the exact use case. The public welcomes innovation, but not at the cost of reliability and security. For these technologies to succeed in public services, building trust through demonstrable reliability and robust data protection is crucial. This is discussed in detail in our forthcoming report "Public Trust in AI".

Below is a list of priorities the government could have when planning and delivering public services. For each pair, which comes closest to your opinion?



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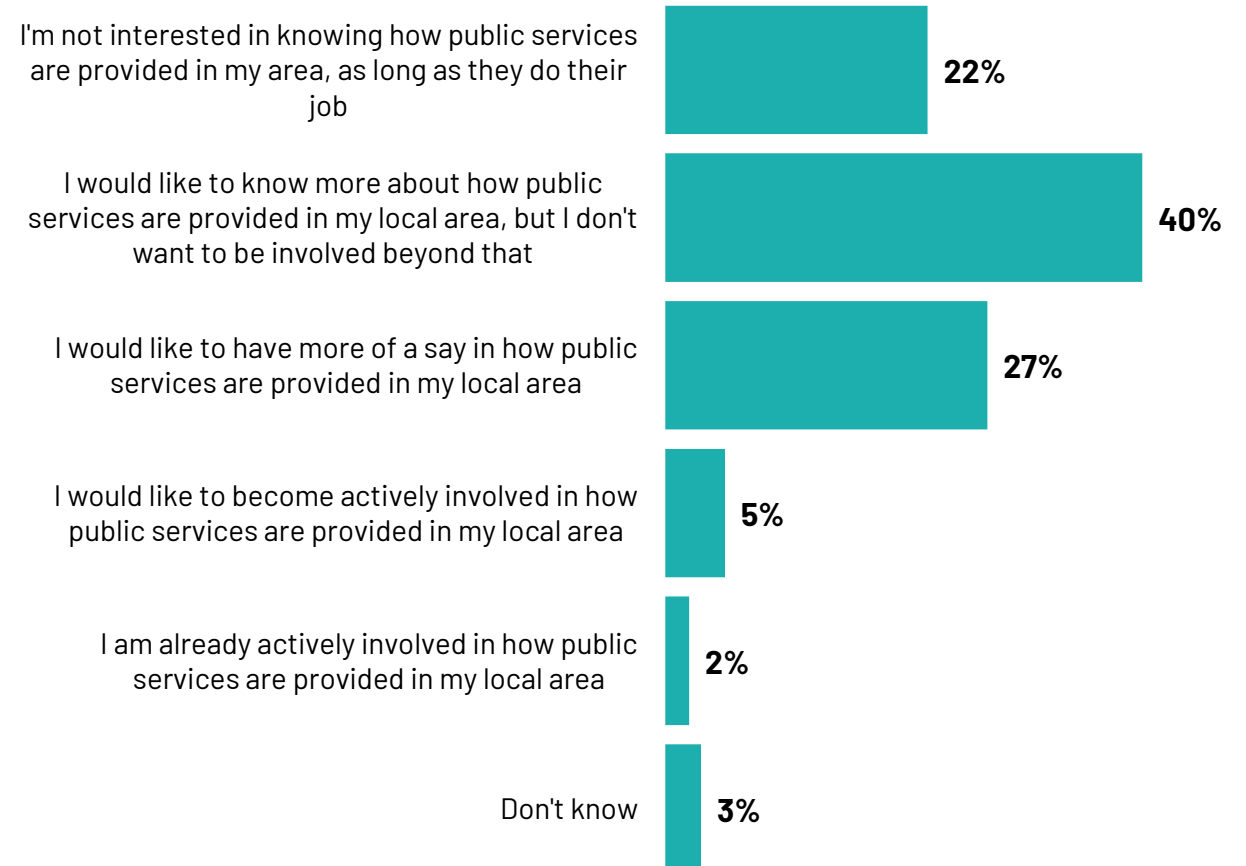
# 5. Public involvement in shaping services

# Engaging and communicating with the public is key – but public appetite for hands-on involvement shouldn't be over-estimated

Improving communications from public services is also key to improving public satisfaction. Four-in-ten would like to know more about how public services are provided in their local area. But appetite for direct, hands-on involvement is more limited. Just over a quarter (27%) desire more of a say over how services are provided (particularly those who are more critical of the current state of public services), but only a small fraction (5%) want to be actively involved in shaping services.

This presents a challenge for policymakers. While there is a clear public desire for services tailored to the needs of local communities and for better information provision around that, and where there are many examples of how more participative techniques can build an important dialogue between government and citizens over how to approach some of the more complex challenges facing public services, not everyone is enthusiastic for active participation in the design process. This suggests that a balanced approach is needed – one that keeps the public informed about changes to service provision, provides clear channels for feedback, and explores different methods for enabling more thoughtful public input for different groups so that all views can be represented.

Which of the following statements come closest to your attitude on public services in your area?



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# 6. Conclusions



# What does this mean for the new government?

Meeting public expectations for public services presents a significant challenge for the new Labour government. The public desires a strong social safety net and increased investment in public services. However, they are also wary of tax increases that affect them personally, even though a large majority expect tax increases.

Adding to the complexity, many of the changes that Labour wish to make are long-term; they talk about “a decade of renewal”. As we have learnt from the “Levelling Up” policy, although the public might say they understand that addressing such issues takes a long time, in practice, their patience is more time-bound. The government will need to manage these expectations carefully if it is to maintain public support for its agenda.

In summary, the government needs to resolve a number of tensions to deliver on its promise to improve public services. These include:

- Balancing the desire for increased spending on public services with the reluctance to pay higher personal taxes.

- Balancing the desire for locally tailored services with the need for efficiency and standardisation and common minimum standards.
- Improving public sector communications about local services and engaging with the public to give them a voice into how to deal with these complex challenges, but taking a balanced approach given the lack of appetite for too much hands-on involvement.
- Balancing the desire to make the most of technological advancements with the need to ensure reliability, security, and public trust.

The government can start to address these tensions by:

- Making improvements to people’s direct experiences of public services, particularly over speed and ease of access.
- Being honest with the public about the difficult choices involved in delivering public services. For example, being upfront about the fact that lower taxes (particularly those that raise the most

revenue) and higher spending on public services are often at odds. This could involve transparently communicating the potential trade-offs of different funding models.

- Exploring ways to involve the private and charitable sectors in delivering public services while being sensitive to the public’s red-lines. Rather than presenting this as a cost-saving measure, the focus should be on how these partnerships can improve service quality, innovation, and accessibility for users.
- Investing in technology in a way that protects privacy and security and builds public trust. This requires clear communication about the benefits of new technologies, robust data protection measures, and opportunities for public consultation and feedback on technology implementation in public services.

# ABOUT IPSOS

Ipsos is the leader in social research, evaluation and strategy. Our Public Affairs experts bridge the gap between government and the public, providing robust research and analysis, directly supporting policy development.

We cover broad issues that shape the delivery of public services in modern society and how to engage the public in the policy-making process.

We are a team of more than 300 social research, evaluation and policy specialists, each offering expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges.

This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, ensures that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities, driving better policy and practice.

The challenges facing the UK, and the ambition of the new Government demands a broad research and evidence toolkit. Beyond data collection, we pride ourselves in our ability to translate insights into actions. Overleaf, we provide an overview of the essential tools for maximizing mission impact.

# How can research and evidence support public service reform?

## Deliberative Research

Deliberative research, dialogue and public engagement **bring the public voice into decision making.**

From Citizens Assemblies, to Public Dialogue, deliberation and public engagement are critical tools for finding solutions to complex knotty problems that involve informed trade-offs and require people-centred change.

**Contact:**  
[Michelle Mackie](#)

## Strategy and Advisory

We support policy makers to **develop strategies and policies that deliver for citizens.**

Our team of former Civil Servants work with policymakers to co-design strategies and policies, bringing to bear Ipsos' deep understanding of 'what works' and citizens experience on policy.

**Contact:**  
[Nathan Bransden](#)

## Behavioural Science

The application of behavioural science helps **create positive individual, organisational and societal change.**

Our research and consultancy helps define, diagnose, design and evaluate the opportunities for behaviour change interventions that will help achieve new policy aims.

**Contact:**  
[Steven Ginnis](#)

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Policy and programme evaluation helps **demonstrate impact and identify opportunities for learning** and should be a key part of any new programme delivery.

As the leading provider of evaluation services to UK central government and agencies, we support clients with economic, process and impact evaluations.

**Contact:**  
[Chris Hale](#)

## Communications Research

Effective public communications are a critical tool for driving positive social change.

Our dedicated communications research specialists help public sector organisations with their strategic planning, testing, monitoring and evaluation, assisting them in their work to **inform and engage the public successfully.**

**Contact:**  
[Bridget Williams](#)

## Trends and Foresight

Foresight done right, and activated, is empowering. It helps **focus attention on what can be changed now for a better tomorrow.**

Our Trends and Foresight experts integrate data, insight and frameworks to understand macro forces, shifts in society, markets, and people, and signals of the future.

**Contact:**  
[Michael Clemence](#)



# Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel

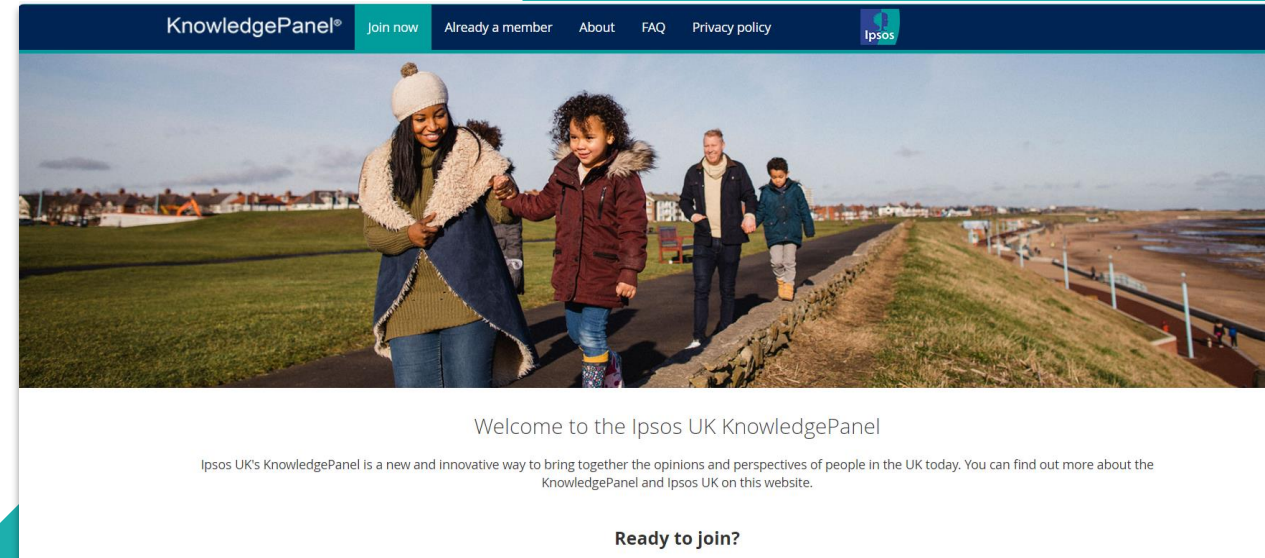
The research for this report was conducted using the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel. As the UK's largest online random probability panel, it provides a robust and representative sample of the population.

The panel consists of over 25,000 members, recruited using random probability address-based sampling, considered the gold standard in UK survey research. This approach ensures that every household in the UK has an equal chance of being selected to participate, minimizing bias and ensuring the panel accurately reflects the diverse UK population.

To maintain the panel's integrity and inclusivity, Ipsos provides tablets, internet access, and technical support to digitally excluded households,

allowing them to participate fully in online research. This eliminates differential mode bias and maximizes the potential of online research to deliver comprehensive insights into UK public opinion.

The findings presented in this report are based on responses from a nationally representative sample of 5,875 UK adults aged 16+ drawn from the Ipsos UK Knowledge Panel, surveyed between 25 April – 1 May 2024. Data are weighted to match the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.



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