



**Delivery that matters**

The State of the State 2026

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## Methodology

The *State of the State* blends two forms of research. To understand public attitudes, Deloitte and Re:State commissioned Ipsos UK to conduct an online survey of 5,847 UK adults aged 16-75 between 12 and 18 December 2025. Quotas were set to reflect the known profile of the UK adult offline population and a boost sample was achieved in each of the UK nations. In total, 834 responses were achieved in Scotland, 685 in Wales and 515 in Northern Ireland. For the UK figures, results have been weighted back to the correct proportion for each nation. Where responses do not sum to 100 this is due to computer rounding or questions which require multiple answers to be chosen.

Our qualitative research comprises interviews with 118 leaders in government and public services. They include senior civil servants, police chief constables, council chief executives, NHS leaders and elected representatives. This year, we also spoke to a cohort of leaders in major suppliers to government for additional perspectives. The interviews took place between October 2025 and February 2026.

**The views of interviewees quoted in this report are their own and not the views of Deloitte or Re:State.**

# Introduction

## The State of the State

### Welcome to *The State of the State 2026*.

**For more than a decade, this annual report has brought together a survey of the UK public alongside interviews with government and public service leaders. By fusing these two research elements, it provides a view of the state from the people who rely on it and the people who run it.**

This edition has one theme running throughout: delivery. Our survey finds the public doesn't always trust in government's ability to deliver the improvements they want, and our interviews explored why. Officials told us about a system that is too often weighted against its own talent and drive to get things done. But crucially, they know the solutions are in government's gift.

The Prime Minister has already been clear that government should focus on delivery, and especially delivery the public can see. That is entirely right. Taxpayers deserve confidence that their money is being deployed effectively to make things happen, and that's what delivery is all about.

All of this points to a set of recommendations that are anchored in the quest for delivery that matters to the public. Ultimately, now is the time for government to focus on improving the citizen experience of the state.

This year's report also argues that the UK – including our public sector – is in better shape than prevailing sentiment suggests. The UK has enormous strengths and opportunities that we can pursue in our ever-changing world.

Thank you to everyone who took part in our survey and all the exceptional leaders that shared their thinking to inform our research. We hope *The State of the State* continues to bring evidence to debates on public sector reform and celebrates everything that government and public services achieve.



**Rachel Charlton**  
UK Government & Public  
Services Lead, Deloitte



**Charlotte Pickles**  
Chief Executive, Re:State





# The State of the State in brief

## About our report

*The State of the State* provides an annual view of the public sector from the **people who use it** and the **people who run it**.

For this year's report, we polled **5,847 adults** in all nations and regions of the UK. We then interviewed **118 public sector leaders**, including **senior civil servants, elected representatives, police chief constables, military officers, university vice-chancellors, council chief executives** and **NHS officials**. We also spoke to a cohort of government **suppliers**.

This year's *State of the State* finds the public **more worried** about the cost of living, **less satisfied** with public services and in need of **greater confidence** in government's ability to deliver.

Our interviews with public sector leaders described a **system that is too often weighted against its own talent** – and many shared views of how it could better serve the public.

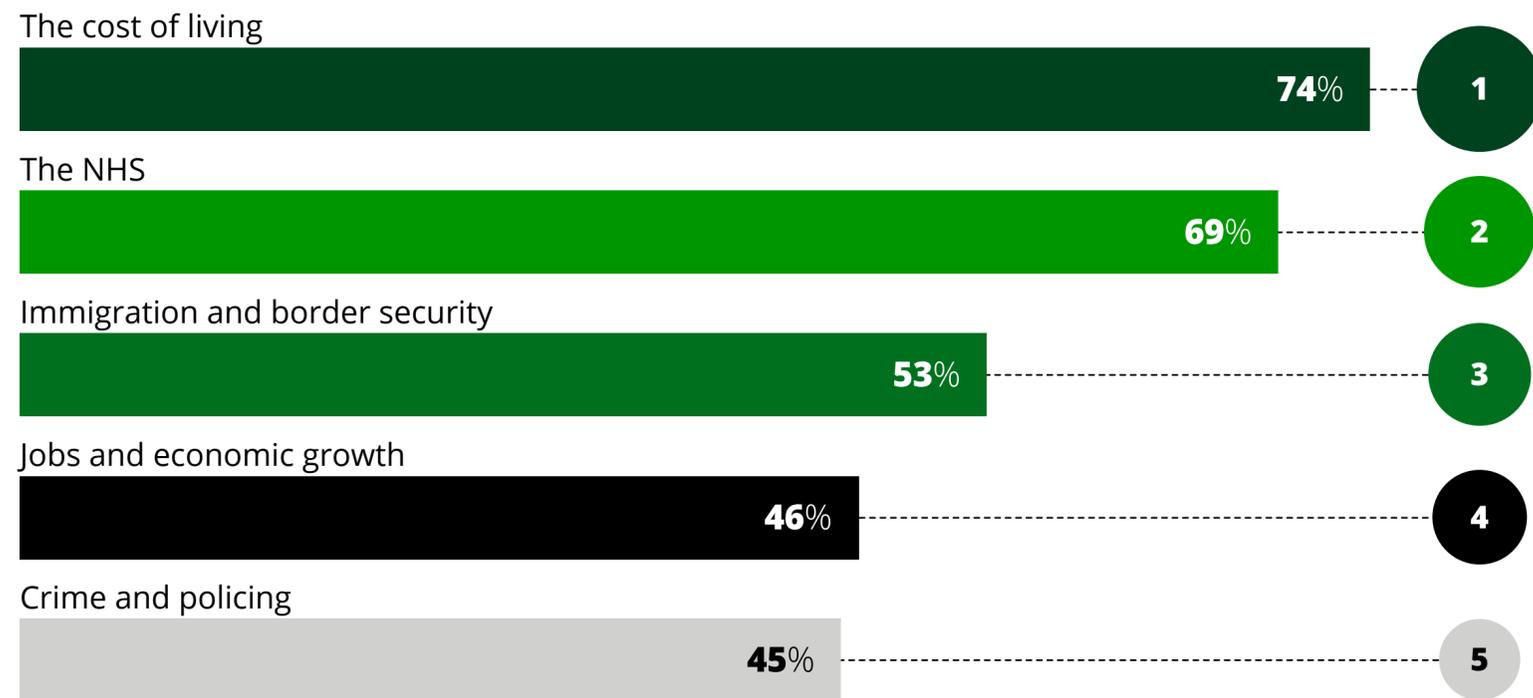
*The State of the State 2026* concludes that **now is the time** for government **improve the citizen experience** of the state – and **build confidence** in its ability to drive change.



# The State of the State in brief

## Concerns have grown about jobs and the cost of living

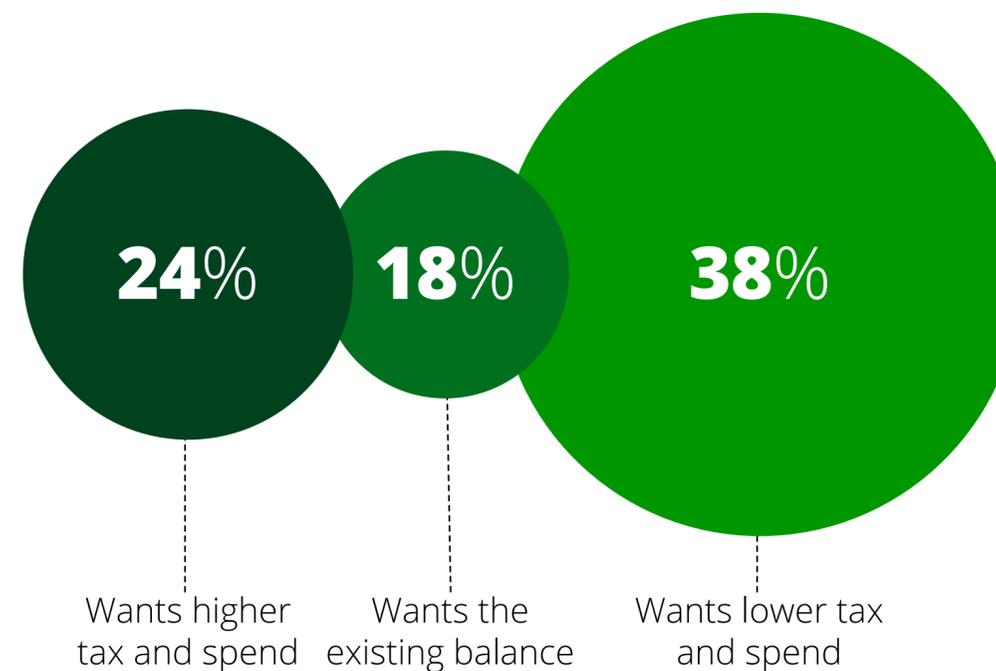
### The public's top five priorities for government



Since our 2023 survey, immigration has gone up as a priority by ten percentage points and climate change has come down by 13.

### The balance of tax and spend

We asked the public if they would prefer **lower taxes and lower public spending**, or **higher taxes and higher public spending**.



### Worries are growing about the cost of living

# 67%

of the public worry that the cost of living is set to get worse. That's twelve percentage points higher than three years ago.

Concern about jobs has grown by the same amount, with

# 47%

worried the job market could get worse in the years ahead.



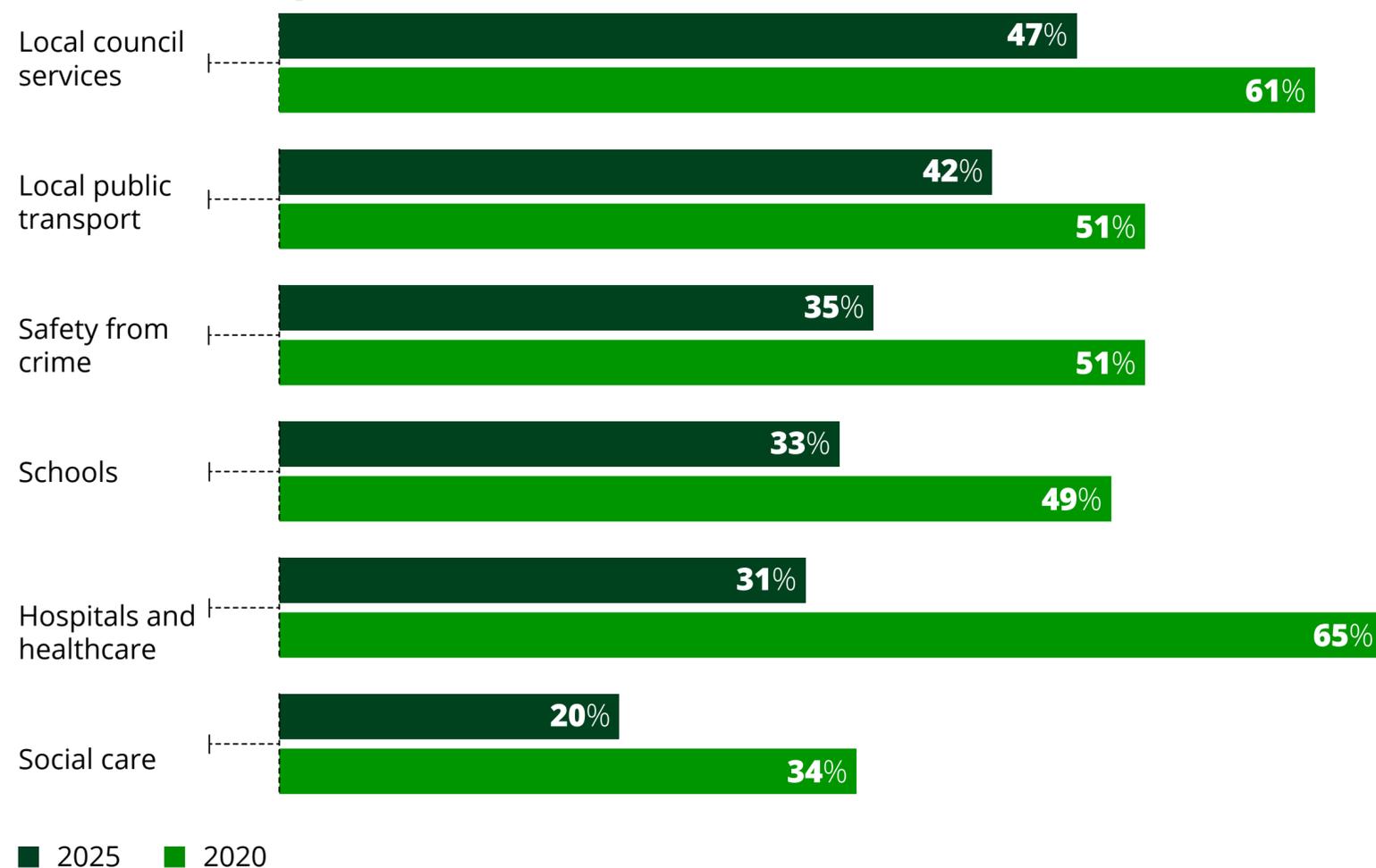
# The State of the State in brief

## Satisfaction with public services has dropped since 2020

### Satisfaction has dropped in public services

Our survey found a **drop in satisfaction in public services** since 2020 and the COVID pandemic. However, people remain **more satisfied than not** in many services.

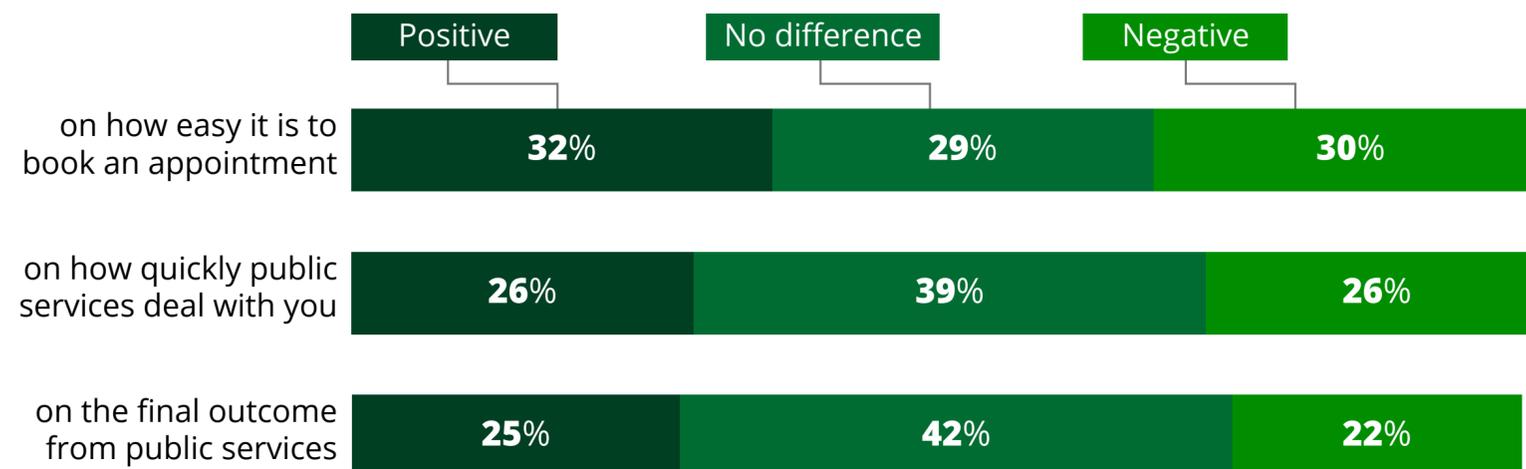
### Satisfied with public services: 2025 vs 2020



### The public priority is on outcomes

Our survey found the public unconvinced that digital technology has had a **positive impact** on public services. It's a reminder that people are focused on **outcomes**, and that online experiences need to be matched with delivery.

### What impact has increased use of digital technology made in public services?



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults

# The State of the State in brief

Leaders shared their views on the issues that matter to them

## In the words of public sector leaders

A series of themes emerged from our interviews with senior figures. Here's just a taster of what they told us.

### Devolution needs to find the balance of accountability

“

**Devolution** is going in the right direction. Integrated settlements give us greater freedom but they're set up to make combined authorities accountable to central government for meeting their targets. We need to get to a place where **accountability shifts**.

- Director of a Combined Authority

### Towards a defence industry superpower

“

The threat is greater than at any time in my working life, so what defence does, matters. It's not just about the MOD and armed forces. Our **security is a national endeavour** we have to go after.

- Military Leader

## Delivery matters

“

Government delivers day-in, day-out. The **debates on delivery** are more about the cycle of develop, consult, announce, lay in parliament, thank you and goodbye.

- Senior Civil Servant

### The NHS is caught between repair and reform

“

The NHS is stuck. **We need to spend more on preventative care** but we're still choosing to spend on elective care. We're in the worst of both worlds.

- Senior NHS Official

### Net zero or not?

“

We'll end up ramping up spending on adaptation because the world is unable or unwilling to address **climate change**. It's too hard or it's too inconvenient.

- Council Chief Executive

“

The UK is in an **amazing position**. We've got a seat on the UN Security Council, one of the most powerful militaries in the world, huge soft power and a pretty stable economy – but you wouldn't believe any of that if you read the news.

- Director of a Government Agency

# The State of the State in brief

Government is making progress on Artificial Intelligence but may need to win people over

## Artificial Intelligence in public services

Our interviews with leading officials found most – but not all – enthusiastic about the future of AI in public services. They told us about myriad AI projects and pilots across the sector, and the growing need for government to make choices about which to scale up. While many see the potential for AI in efficiencies, fewer have a clear view of how it could transform their organisation more profoundly.

“

You **can't make a five-year plan** based on what AI looks like today.

- Director of a Government Supplier

“

There's about a **thousand flowers blooming**. For policymakers, we need to break down the process and figure out where AI can help.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

None of the AI case studies turn out to be as good as the press release, and not a single one will transform government's cost base. There's a **naïve techno-utopianism** in Whitehall.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Government is rising to the Artificial Intelligence challenge **really well**. Most effort is on dealing with textual artefacts which speeds up intellectual pursuits and the **next leap is to get agentic** to tackle working processes. But you're going to need to **deal with legacy** to take advantage of that.

- Director of a Government Supplier

Our survey found the **public see more risk than opportunity** for AI in public services. They see risks that **could erode the inherent humanity** in many local services, but the opportunity to **make a smarter, less bureaucratic state**.

## Top three risks according to the public

Reduced human contact

51%

1

Potential job losses due to automation

50%

2

Over-reliance on technology reducing human oversight

47%

3

## And the top three opportunities

Handling more information for analysing trends etc.

33%

1

Less administrative tasks for staff giving them more time

33%

2

Reduced costs through efficiencies or needing fewer staff

26%

3

Base: 5,847 Online UK adults

# The State of the State in brief

## Six recommendations inspired by our research

### Recommendations

Our research points to six recommendations inspired by our conversations with public sector leaders and informed by our survey of the public.

At the heart of these recommendations is the need to improve the citizen experience of the state, and confidence in its ability to deliver.



#### **Invest in the citizen experience to build public confidence**

Officials and government suppliers argued that government should elevate the importance of citizen experience and public engagement. They want to see citizen needs represented at the highest levels of decision-making, and greater investment in communications.

#### **Supercharge major programmes with everything government has learned**

Officials told us there is a wealth of knowledge about major projects that government can act on to improve their delivery and rebuild public confidence.

#### **Unleash the changemakers**

Our interviewees were clear that great leadership is key to driving change in the public sector, and that its talented changemakers should be deployed where needed most.

#### **Update the Civil Service workforce offer**

Civil servants told us they'd welcome bold reforms to Whitehall that would change its proposition to employees, including the balance of pay and pensions.

#### **Test, learn and grow the Procurement Act's possibilities**

Government suppliers and officials alike want to start pushing the envelope of the Procurement Act, creating more open relationships between both sides to solve public policy challenges.

#### **Be clear on the ambition for Artificial Intelligence**

Interviewees mostly agreed that AI's impact on the public sector will be profound. Our recommendation is that leaders need to be clear on how bold they want to be as they explore AI's potential.



# The public's view of the public sector



# The public's view of the public sector

*The State of the State* according to the people who use it

## Our exclusive *State of the State* survey by Ipsos UK tracks public attitudes towards government and public services.

This year's survey polled 5,847 adults in every region and nation of the UK, allowing for analysis by geography as well as demographic factors.

This section of *State of the State* sets out eight key insights from the survey as well as major differences between the UK's nations.

### Eight insights

- 1 Satisfaction with public services: the good news and the bad news
- 2 The cost of living, the NHS and immigration top the public's priorities
- 3 Pessimism has grown around jobs and the cost of living
- 4 Public opinion leans towards lower taxes but expects higher taxes
- 5 The public need confidence in delivery
- 6 People don't want AI to take the humanity out of public services
- 7 The public is split on the impact of digital public services
- 8 Tackle climate change, but give us lower bills



# Satisfaction with public services

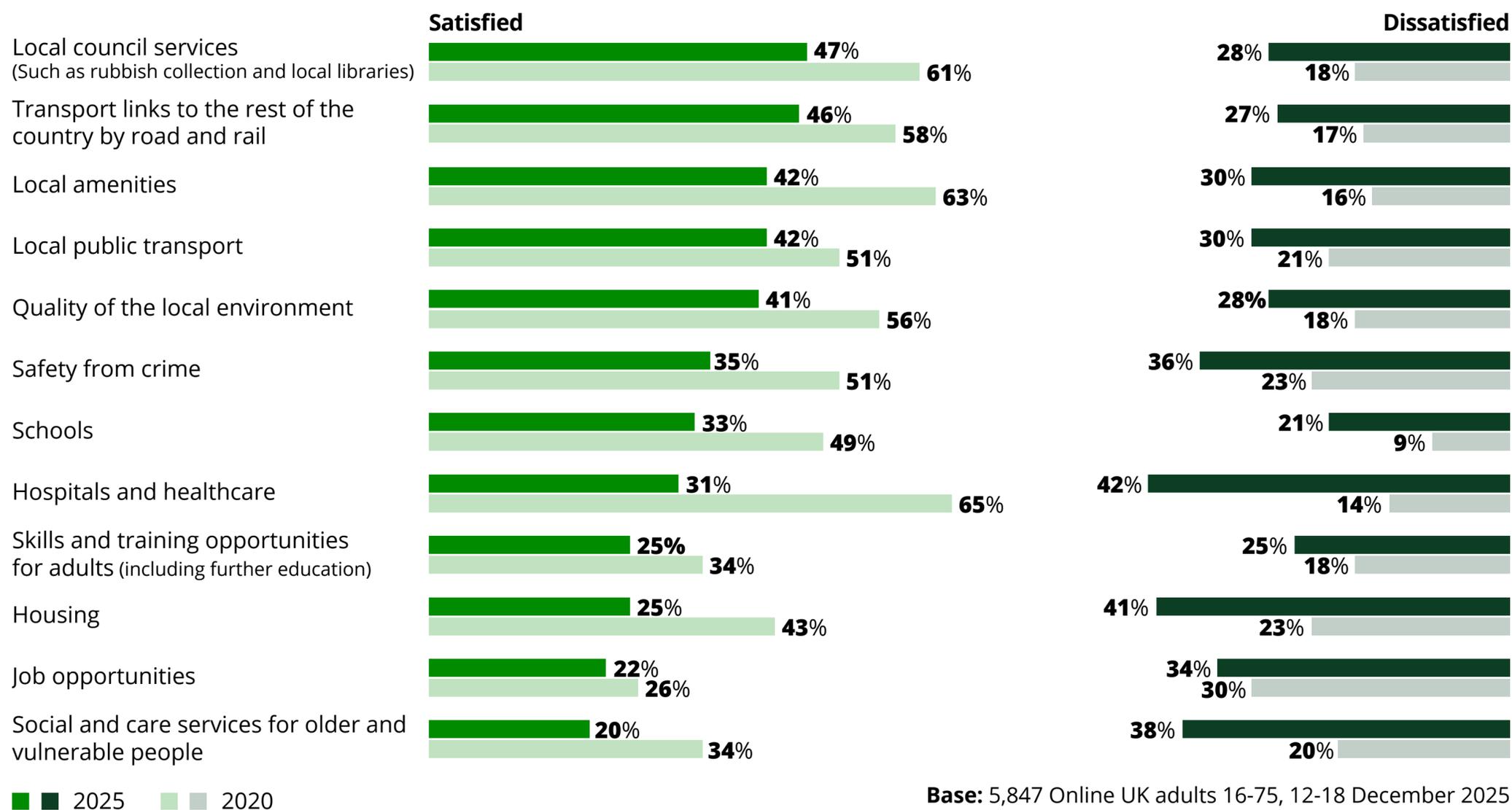
## The good news and the bad news

Our survey asked the public about their satisfaction with public services and local life. Across half of them, the public is more satisfied than not. That's hugely encouraging after a decade and a half of budget constraints, growing demand pressures and crises including the pandemic. There are exceptions though: the public are significantly more dissatisfied than satisfied with healthcare, social care, housing and job opportunities.

We last asked this question in 2020 and our survey finds a significant fall in satisfaction across the board since then – notably in hospitals and healthcare. This is likely a consequence of demand pressures, most notably in the form of waiting lists exacerbated by the pandemic.

Recent months have seen significant progress in reducing NHS waiting lists but it may be some time before that is reflected in these public perceptions.

### Q: Thinking about your local area specifically, to what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following at present?



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Satisfaction with public services

## The good news and the bad news

Satisfaction with local services follows a similar pattern across the UK's nations with a couple of notable exceptions.



### Q: Thinking about your local area specifically, to what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following at present?

Table shows net satisfaction by nation (better minus worse).

	Total	England	Scotland	Wales	N Ireland
Hospitals and healthcare	-11	-11	-8	<b>-16</b>	<b>-38</b>
Local amenities (such as shops, leisure facilities and community centres)	+12	+12	+8	<b>+7</b>	<b>+20</b>
Local council services (such as rubbish collection and local libraries)	+18	+19	<b>+11</b>	<b>+11</b>	<b>+27</b>
Transport links to the rest of the country by road and rail	+18	+20	+21	<b>+2</b>	<b>-2</b>
Quality of the local environment	+13	+12	<b>+18</b>	+17	+10
Local public transport	+12	+12	+14	<b>0</b>	<b>+2</b>
Safety from crime	-1	-3	<b>+6</b>	<b>+11</b>	+3
Schools	+12	+12	+9	+15	+15
Housing	-17	-17	-13	-13	-20
Skills and training opportunities for adults (including further education)	0	+1	<b>-6</b>	0	+3
Social and care services for older and vulnerable people	-18	-18	-17	-20	<b>-23</b>
Job opportunities	-12	-12	-14	-15	<b>-4</b>

**L** **H** Significantly lower or higher than average

Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# The cost of living, the NHS and immigration top the public's priorities

## Immigration has risen ten percentage points since 2023

The cost of living and the NHS continue to top the list of public priorities for improvement and remain the focus of government action. But there have been significant changes over time.

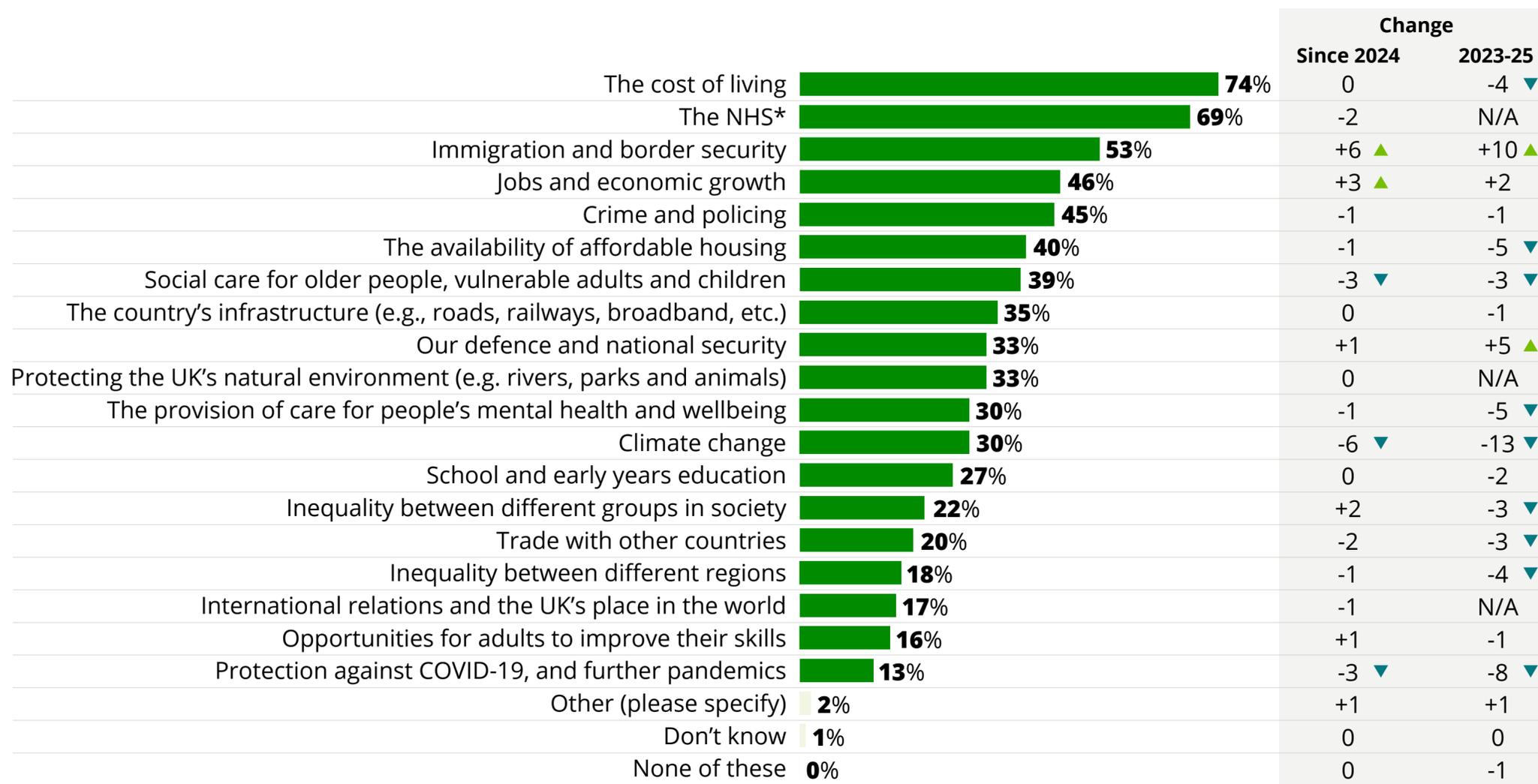
Since our 2023 survey, concerns about immigration have risen ten percentage points to place it third in the list of public concerns. Volatile geopolitics continues to raise worries about the UK's defence. And climate change – once a top five issue – has dropped thirteen percentage points in just a couple of years.

Digging into the data beyond this chart, priorities for improvement change by age. Concerns about immigration, crime and social care increase with age and the NHS tops the list of priorities for the over 55s. Inevitably, jobs and affordable housing are higher on the agenda for younger people.

Please note trends between 2023-5 with a small change should be treated with caution due to the addition of several new codes marked as N/A which may have had an impact on responses.

\* In 2023, this option was 'NHS waiting lists'.

### Q: Which of the following issues, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement in the UK over the next few years or so?



▲▼ Significantly higher/lower change

Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Public remains pessimistic for the UK's outlook

## Public worries centre around jobs and the cost of living

Our survey finds the public more pessimistic than optimistic for the years ahead. Again, the changes over time are worth noting: the proportion of people expecting the cost of living and the job market to get worse has grown by double digits in the past three years.

However, these findings are not as stark as they might seem at first glance. Across many areas, a significant proportion think the current situation will stay the same or improve.

### Q: Thinking about the next few years or so, do you think that each of the following will get better, get worse or stay about the same in the UK?

	Get worse	Stay the same	Get better	DK	Change in % get worse Since 2024	2023-25
The cost of living	67%	17%	10%	6%	+10 ▲	+12 ▲
The NHS*	54%	26%	14%	6%	+9 ▲	N/A
The availability of affordable housing	53%	29%	10%	8%	+7 ▲	0
Immigration and border security	51%	27%	13%	9%	+4 ▲	+4 ▲
Crime and policing	50%	32%	11%	7%	+6 ▲	+3 ▲
Jobs and economic growth	47%	31%	13%	9%	+9 ▲	+12 ▲
Social care for older people, vulnerable adults and children	45%	34%	11%	10%	+2	+1
Climate change	43%	36%	11%	10%	+1	-6 ▼
Inequality between different groups in society	41%	37%	9%	12%	+7 ▲	+4 ▲
The country's infrastructure (e.g., roads, railways, broadband, etc.)	41%	33%	18%	8%	+4 ▲	+1
The provision of care for people's mental health and wellbeing	40%	35%	16%	10%	+3 ▲	+2
Inequality between different regions	38%	40%	10%	12%	+5 ▲	+2
The UK's natural environment (e.g. rivers, parks and animals)	38%	38%	14%	10%	0	N/A
International relations and the UK's place in the world	33%	39%	14%	14%	+4 ▲	N/A
Our defence and national security	30%	39%	19%	13%	0	+6 ▲
School and early years education	27%	46%	15%	12%	+1	-1
Opportunities for adults and people in work to improve their skills	27%	43%	17%	13%	+2	+3 ▲
Trade with other countries	23%	42%	19%	15%	0	0
Protection against COVID-19, and further pandemics	16%	52%	17%	16%	+2	+2

\* In 2023, this option was 'NHS waiting lists'.

▲▼ Significantly higher/lower change

Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Public remains pessimistic for the UK's outlook

## Public worries centre around jobs and the cost of living

Our survey found a consistent sense of pessimism for the future across the UK's nations.

The table to the right shows statistically significant differences between the UK average and attitudes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scotland tends to be more pessimistic for the future in a third all the policy areas in the question, and Wales less pessimistic in four areas as shown in the table.

### Q: Thinking about the next few years or so, do you think that each of the following will get better, get worse or stay about the same in the UK?

Table shows net get better by nation (better minus worse)

	Total	England	Scotland	Wales	N Ireland
The cost of living	-57	-57	-59	-52	-59
Affordable housing	-42	-42	-43	-38	-45
The NHS	-39	-39	-45	-39	-44
Crime and policing	-39	-39	-39	-34	-37
Immigration and border security	-38	-38	-37	-35	-41
Social care	-35	-34	-36	-35	-32
Jobs and economic growth	-34	-34	-30	-35	-26
Inequality between different groups in society	-32	-31	-42	-28	-32
Climate change	-33	-32	-40	-31	-32
Inequality between different regions	-28	-27	-34	-29	-32
Mental health care	-24	-23	-30	-27	-29
The country's infrastructure	-23	-22	-26	-24	-24
Protecting the UK's natural environment	-23	-23	-28	-24	-17
International relations and the UK's place in the world	-20	-19	-25	-22	-14
School and early years education	-12	-12	-15	-13	-9
Our defence and national security	-11	-11	-13	-13	-9
Opportunities for adults to improve their skills	-10	-10	-10	-11	-11
Trade with other countries	-4	-4	-7	-5	+1
Protection against COVID-19/pandemics	+1	+1	*	*	+4

**L** **H** Significantly lower or higher than average

Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Public opinion leans towards lower taxes

But more expect taxes to rise than fall or stay the same

Every year, our survey asks the public if they would prefer higher public spending, even if that means higher taxes, or lower taxes and lower public spending. We then ask what they expect to happen.

This year, we find the largest single block of respondents favouring lower taxes and spending but expecting the opposite. The proportion of those preferring lower tax and spend has gone up by five percentage points in the last year. We also find a gap between preference and expectations, with the largest block of the public expecting higher levels of tax and spending.



## Q: Which of the following, if any, do you think should be UK government policy for the balance between public spending and the levels of taxation and public borrowing in the future?

And which of the following, if any, do you think will be UK government policy for the balance between public spending and tax and/or public borrowing in the future?

		Change since 2024
UK <b>should aim for higher levels</b> of public spending than at present, even if that means higher levels of tax and/or higher public borrowing	24%	-3
UK <b>will have higher levels</b> of public spending than at present, as well as higher levels of tax and/or higher levels of public borrowing	44%	-2
UK <b>should aim for the same level</b> of public spending that it currently has	18%	-4
UK <b>will have the same level</b> of public spending that it currently has	22%	-1
UK <b>should aim for lower taxes</b> and/or lower public borrowing than at present, even if that means lower levels of public spending	38%	+5
UK <b>will have lower</b> taxes and/or lower public borrowing than at present, as well as lower levels of public spending	12%	0
Don't know	16%	+2
Don't know	18%	+1

Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Public opinion leans towards lower taxes

But more expect taxes to rise than fall or stay the same

## Tax and spend across the nations

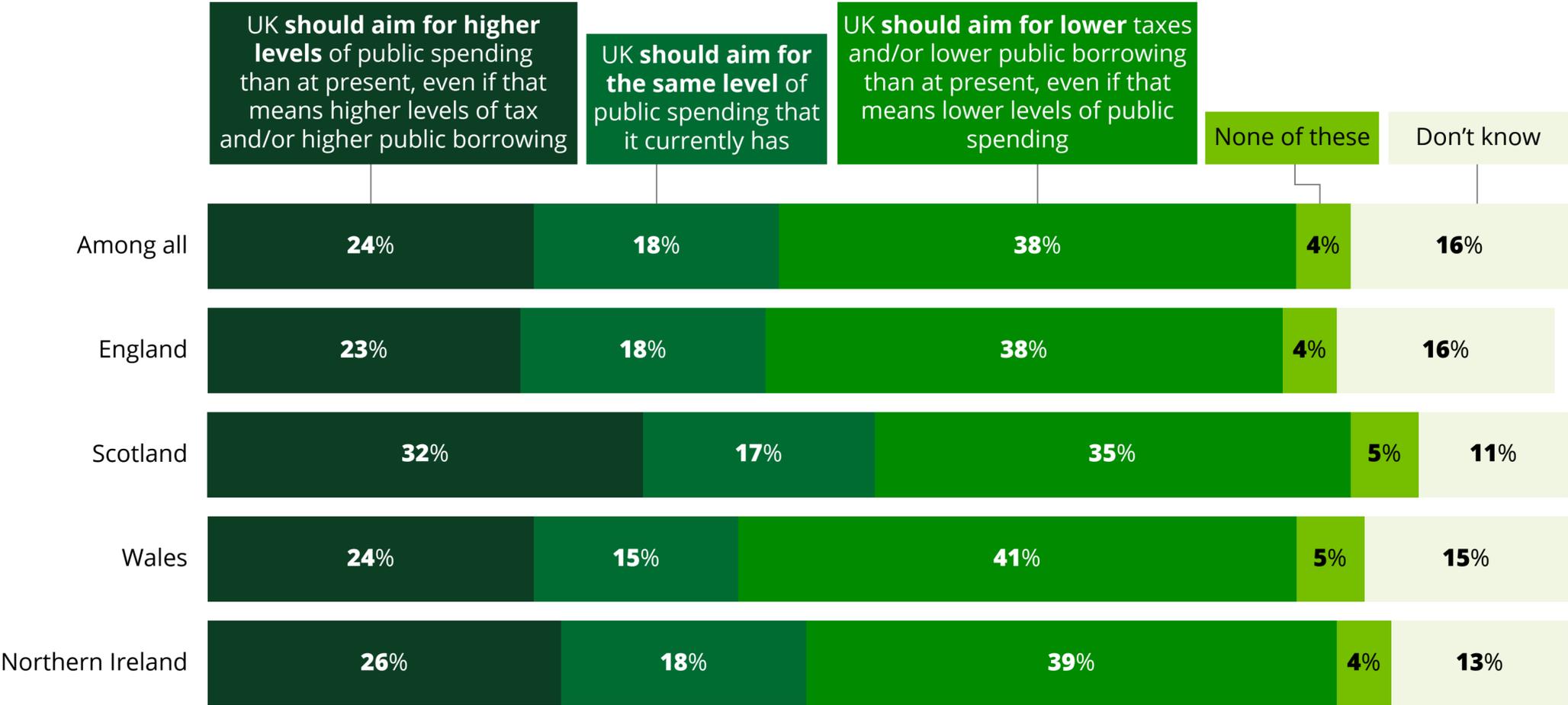
Our survey found significant differences in views on tax and spend by nation of the UK.

Scotland is notably split on the preferred balance while England and Wales lean more towards lower taxes. Wales is now the UK's most keen nation on a lower tax environment.

However, there are complexities around this question as the Scottish Government now sets its own income tax rates. Please see page 70 for more detail and the views of the Scottish public.

Digging into the data under this chart, all age groups are leaning towards lower taxes and spending but with over 55s a little more favourable to higher spending than other age groups.

## Q: Which of the following, if any, do you think should be UK government policy for the balance between public spending and the levels of taxation and public borrowing in the future?



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# The public want confidence in delivery

## Delivery of outcomes and major projects are government's least trusted capabilities

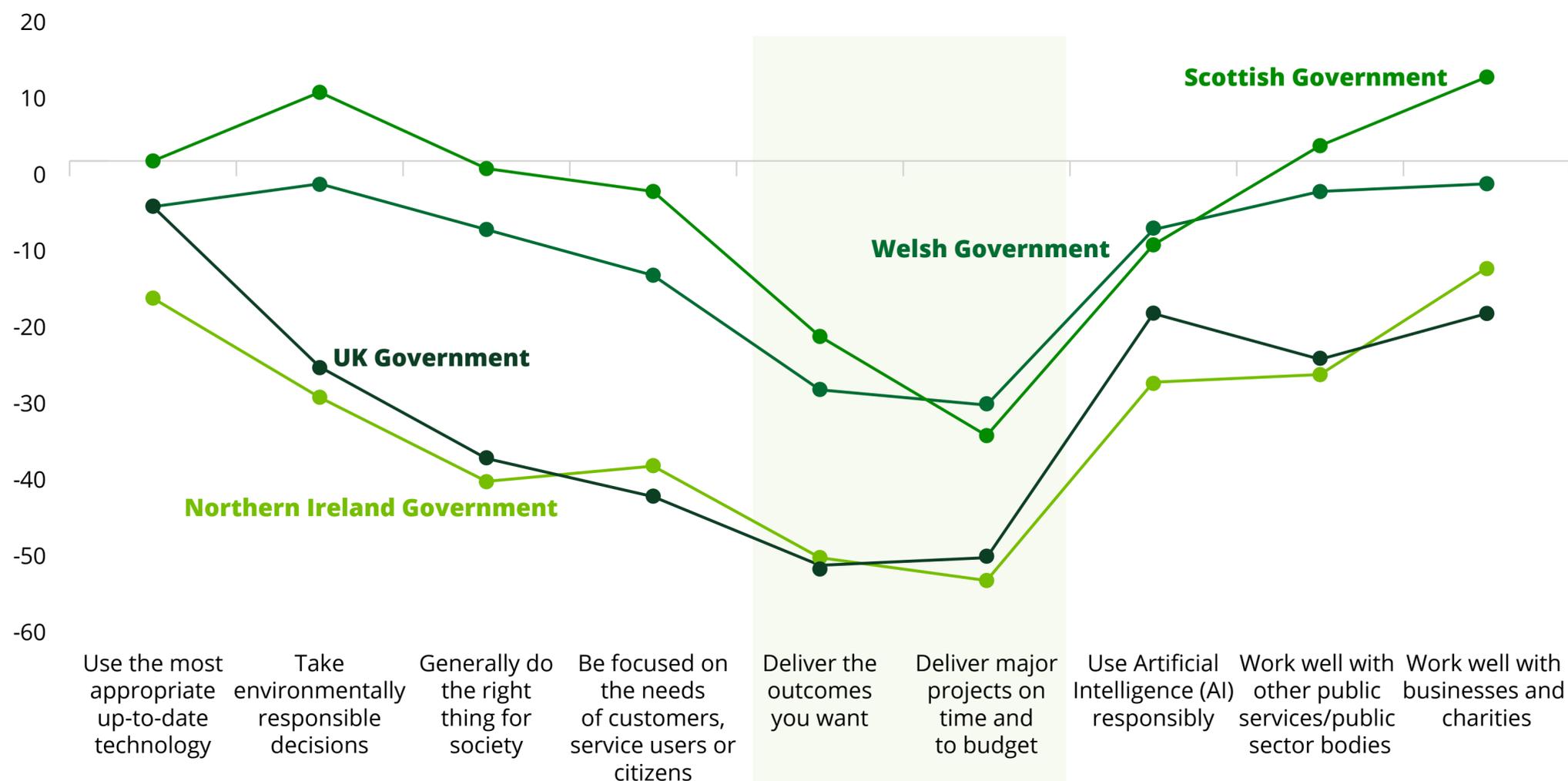
Our *State of the State* survey asked how much the public trusts government across nine capabilities.

We found that using technology, taking environmentally responsible decisions, and working well with others are seen as the public sector's relative strengths.

However, as in previous years, delivery – especially delivery of major programmes – is the least trusted part of what government does.

### Q: To what extent, if at all, do you trust .... to...?

Chart shows % net trust (great deal/fair amount minus not very much/not at all)



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# People don't want AI to take the humanity out of public services

But the public sees the opportunity for a smarter, less bureaucratic state

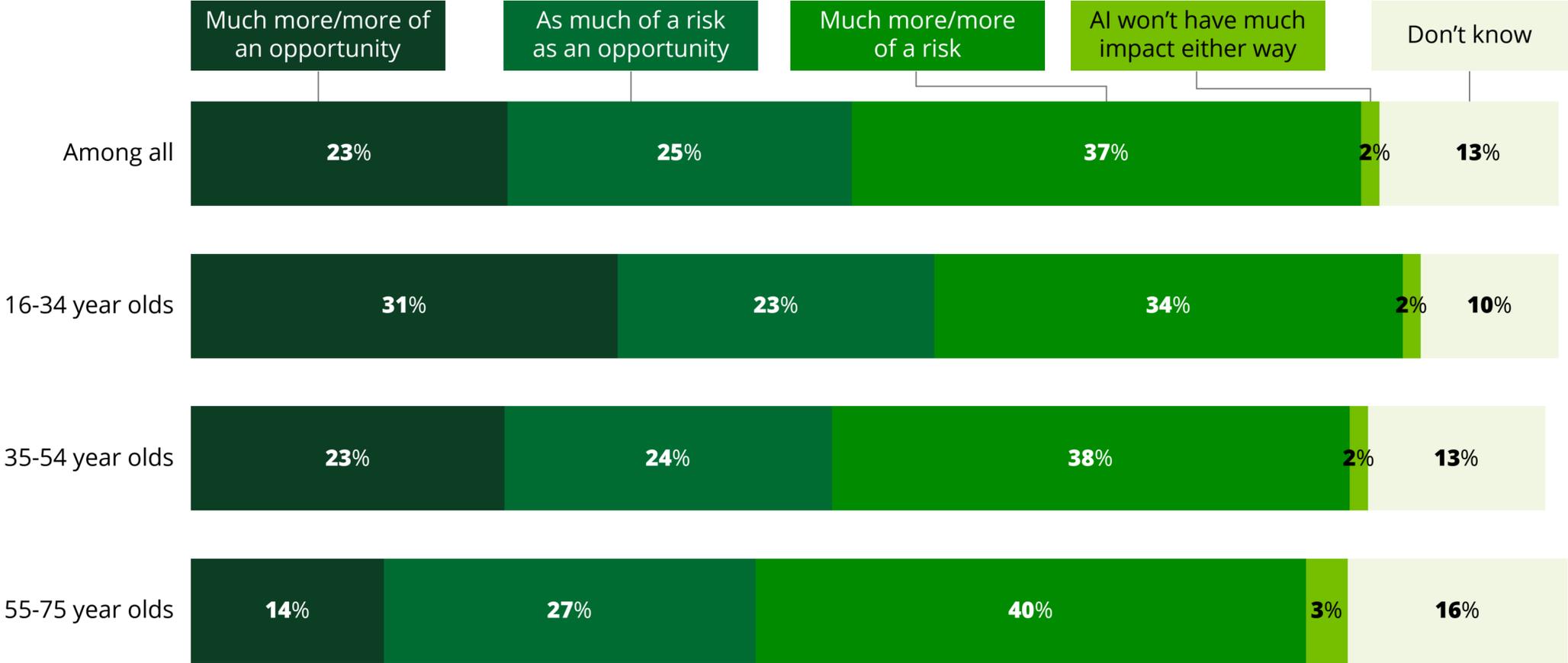
This year's survey asked the public about their attitudes to the use of AI in public services.

On balance, more see its use as a risk than an opportunity, perhaps reflecting the low levels of trust in the public sector to use AI effectively shown in the previous chart.

Government clearly needs to make sure the public are engaged in how and why AI will be used to ease their concerns. It's notable that very few respondents to this question feel that AI will not have much impact.

Digging into the data underneath this chart, concerns about the use of AI increases with age and women are more likely to see AI as a risk than men.

## Q: Thinking now about the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in public services, on balance do you see AI as more of an opportunity or a risk for improving the delivery of public services?



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# People don't want AI to take the humanity out of public services

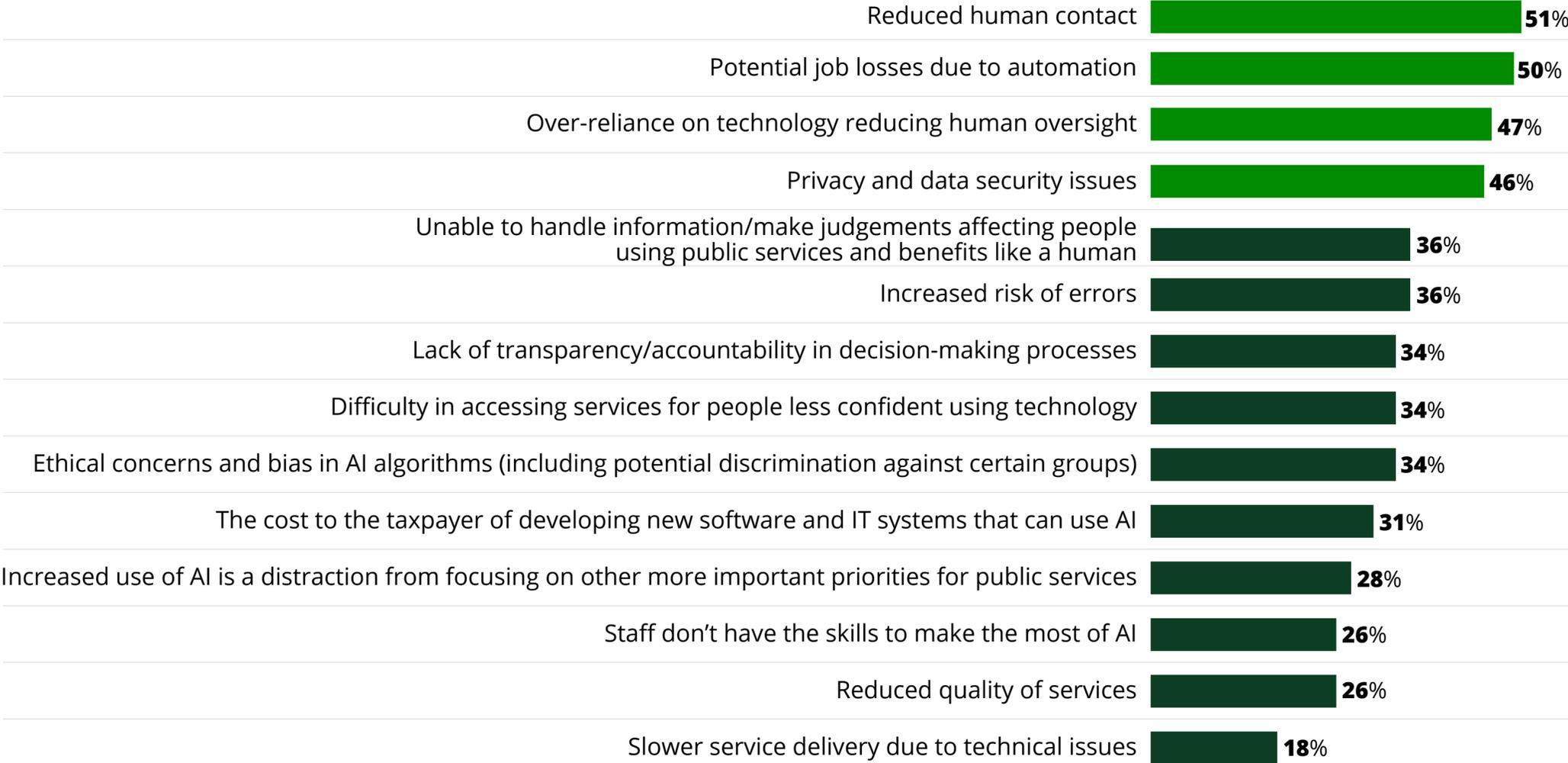
## But the public sees the opportunity for a smarter, less bureaucratic state

Our survey asked the public to name the biggest risks they see for AI in public services.

There is a consistent theme across the most common responses: concerns about a loss of human judgement, whether through direct contact or the influence of technology.

Ethical concerns – often debated in the public sector – are relatively low on the list of risks as seen by the public.

### Q: Which of the following do you consider to be the biggest risks associated with using AI in public services?



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

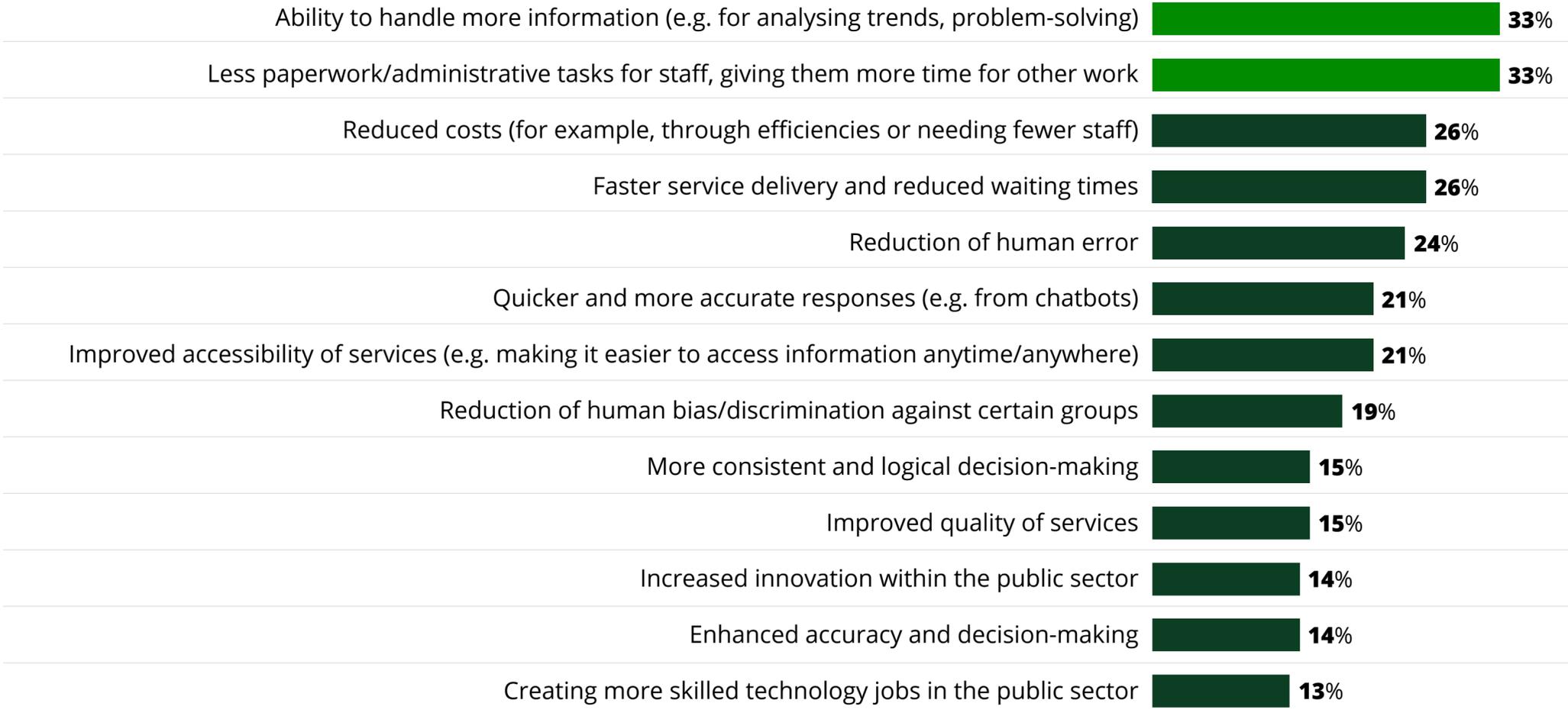
# People don't want AI to take the humanity out of public services

## But the public sees the opportunity for a smarter, less bureaucratic state

We also asked the public about the opportunities for AI in public services. They see its analytical abilities and the possibilities to ease the sector's administrative burden to be the most significant.

Again, there is a strong sense the public want AI to free up staff time from administration to spend more time with the public or on other fundamentally human tasks.

### Q: Which of the following do you consider to be the biggest opportunities associated with using AI in public services?



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# The public is split on the impact of digital on public services

A significant minority say digital has made 'no difference'

Our survey asked the public about attitudes to digital technology in public services.

It found the public broadly split on whether the use of digital has been positive or negative. It also highlighted a significant minority say they have not seen any difference after decades of increasing digitisation.

Our assessment draws two conclusions about this result. First, the public sector needs to focus on making sure its online and digital experiences are as good as the best experiences from any sector. Second, digital experiences need to be backed by outcomes.

**Q: Thinking about your experiences of using public services, do you think the increased use of digital technology has had a positive or negative impact on each of the following, or hasn't made any difference?**



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Tackle climate change, but give us lower bills

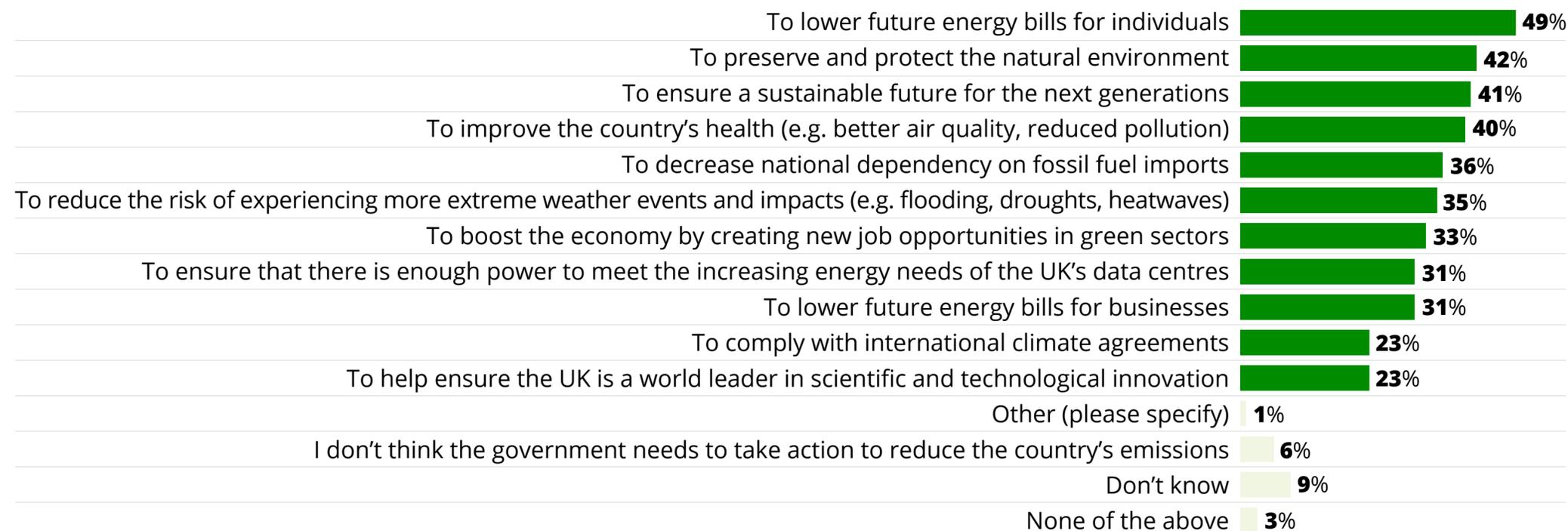
## Public more focused on immediate and personal impact than an economic vision

Recent years have seen public interest in climate change seem to wane. In this year's survey, we wanted to explore what the public want government to focus on when it comes to the UK's energy supply, the economy and the climate.

We found the public prioritise their household energy bills, protecting the environment, sustainability for future generations and the nation's health. In other words, they are more interested in the personal impact of government policy than wider economic and security concerns.

**Q: As you may know, the Government has a commitment to increase the use of clean energy and to take action on climate change and reduce carbon emissions.**

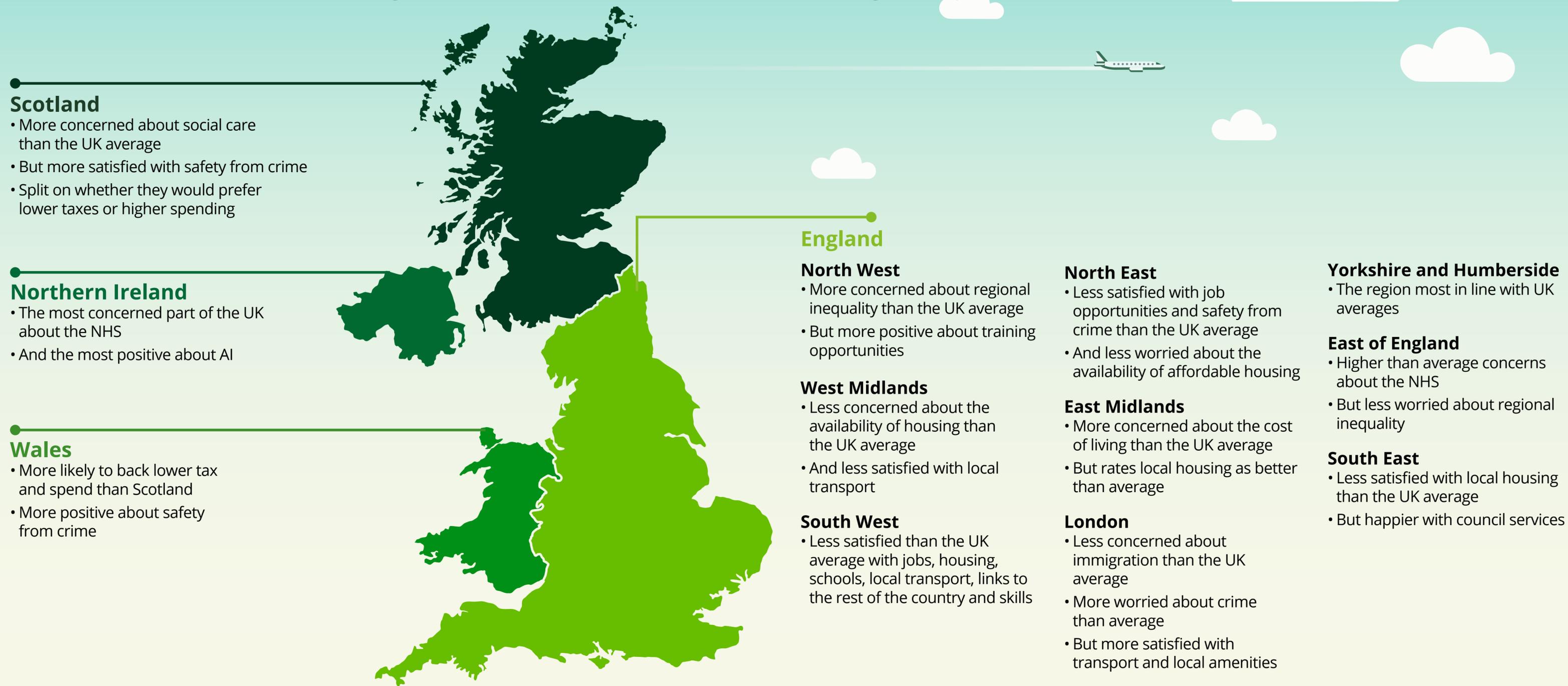
This involves taking into account considerations around the UK's energy supply, the economy, and the climate. Which of the following, if any, do you think are the most important issues for government to consider when making decisions about its policies in this area? Please select all that apply.



Base: 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# A United Kingdom of nations and regions

How the nations and regions differ from the UK average



# Insight from public sector leaders



# Ten insights from public sector leaders

The *State of the State* in the words of the people who run it

**For more than a decade, our *State of the State* reports have provided a view of the public sector from the people who run it.**

This year, we interviewed more than 100 public sector leaders including politicians, senior civil servants, military leaders, police chief constables, council chief executives and NHS officials.

This section of *State of the State* shares ten insights from those conversations.

## Ten insights

- 1** Never underestimate the UK
- 2** Delivery matters
- 3** The NHS is caught between repair and reform
- 4** Devolution needs to find the balance of accountability
- 5** AI innovation is seeing a thousand flowers bloom
- 6** Financial pressures could redefine the higher education landscape
- 7** Government's talent is gridlocked
- 8** Police reform is set to redraw the thin blue line
- 9** Has net zero gone quiet?
- 10** Towards a defence industrial superpower

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“

The UK is in an amazing position. We've got a seat on the UN Security Council, one of the most powerful militaries in the world, huge soft power and a pretty stable economy – but you wouldn't believe any of that if you read the news.

**Director of a Government Agency**



# Never underestimate the UK

The UK has more to be positive about than prevailing sentiment suggests

**Debates on the UK's challenges, whether on the economy, public services or anything else, always begin with what needs fixing. They rarely recognise the country's relative prosperity, security and quality of life.**

**Despite its challenges, the UK remains the seventh largest economy in the world. It is recognised as a global centre for financial services, science and creative industries. And our military, soft power and universal healthcare are sources of national pride and international envy.**

In our interviews, senior officials told us:

- Current debates on delivery don't recognise how well the public sector delivers services at scale, every day
- Public sector successes rarely seem to make the news
- There are opportunities that the UK is well-placed to seize including digital public services, international alliances, education, security, artificial intelligence and trade

“

There's **a lot of opportunity in the world**. No foreign ministry is really going after it, and when ours is done on its reforms, the Foreign Office will be ahead of the game. It's all to play for.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**Government has done so much good digital stuff** in the UK. And the revamped digital centre is really good, especially with a delivery unit in the Government Digital Service.

- Director, Supplier to Government

“

**Delivery in terms of the bread and butter of government is actually very good.**

Look at what councils get done. Think about the scale and complexity of what the state does.

- Director of Government Supplier

# Never underestimate the UK

The UK has more to be positive about than prevailing sentiment suggests

“

We should stop talking about what we haven't got and **start talking about what we can do.**

- Policing Leader

“

**Government can't do right for doing wrong** as far as the press is concerned. It's hard to be operating in such a combative climate.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

There's a **level of excitement about the possibilities for AI** in policing. To unlock it we need a proper reform programme and in the new Home Office leadership, I think we have that.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The UK feels like we're in a moment of **waiting for something** to make things better.

- Non-Executive

“

On Ukraine, **Europe has done very well with the Prime Minister**, Macron, Tusk, Scholz, Meloni and others. They've stopped a set of risks materialising and an awful set of things could have happened but didn't – and they'll get no recognition for that.

- Senior Diplomat



# Delivery matters

The public sector already delivers – but project execution needs sharpening

**After coming to power in July 2024, the UK Government published a series of ambitious plans. But within months, the prime minister and members of his cabinet has begun to express frustration about the pace of delivery.**

Our interviews explored delivery in Whitehall, the devolved administrations and the wider sector. The most common barriers to progress mentioned by officials were:

- Ministerial ambition is energising, but can be greater than government resources
- Changes in priorities and ministers can slow progress
- Accountability can be unclear leading to delays in decision-making

In addition, government suppliers argued that:

- Ministerial announcements should routinely be accompanied with a delivery plan to build public and business confidence – they need to be achievable

“

The problem with decision-making in government is that advice is sent up, and questions come down, then it goes to the Treasury who send advice up and get questions down. **No-one feels empowered to make a judgement call** and take the accountability for it.

- Non-Executive

“

The intent is there but the **execution skills** are spread too thin.

- Director of a Government Supplier

“

The **missions have been forgotten** and we never really gave them a go. Could we have just worked on them a bit longer?

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**Government delivers day-in, day-out.** The debates on delivery are more about the cycle of develop, consult, announce, lay in parliament, thank you and goodbye.

Most people in Whitehall are basically academics but **we suddenly expect them to be delivery people**, making Gantt charts and executing programmes.

- Senior Civil Servant

# Delivery matters

The public sector already delivers – but project execution needs sharpening

“ Government is good at policy, legislation and launching initiatives. My last team was great but **saw their objective as delivering legislation** – not an outcome.  
- Senior Civil Servant, Scotland

“ There’s a gap between **ambition** and **resources**. My advice to build trust in delivery is to close that gap.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“ Progress on 1.5 million homes is slow because **we don’t have enough people**. Not enough planners, not enough building control officers. We didn’t have enough for the existing workload, let alone 1.5 million new homes.  
- Senior Civil Servant



# The NHS is caught between repair and reform

Ten-Year plan and Casey Commission are more vital than ever

## The UK Government's Ten-Year Plan for the NHS sets out an ambitious programme of reform, shifting the health service towards prevention and community care, underpinned by better use of technology.

In our interviews, officials in health and social care told us:

- The UK's health system has become fundamentally unaffordable, and change via the Ten-Year plan is more vital than ever
- The NHS is stuck between the Ten-Year plan policy to spend more on prevention and its current spending on elective care
- Dame Louise Casey's Commission is highly anticipated as reform in social care equally crucial
- Health should pervade wider government policy to support better public health and prevention

These pressures and the need for reform are mirrored across the devolved administrations which have their own plans in place.

“

Our population's **expectations are no longer aligned to affordability of the health service**. And they're pretty poor when it comes to looking after their own health.

- Senior NHS Official

“

Personally, I'd say to people, **if you aren't an emergency, you will not be seen in A&E**. If you want to sit there for three days, so be it.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The day after the election, **the health secretary said the NHS was broken**. That had an enormous impact in the department and NHS England who were the only people in the country who hadn't already realised it. The disconnection between the centre and public experience was profound.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**The NHS is stuck.**

We need to spend more on preventative care but we're still choosing to spend on elective care. We're in the worst of both worlds.

- Senior NHS Official

# The NHS is caught between repair and reform

Ten-Year plan and Casey Commission are more vital than ever

“

**Health gets forgotten by the rest of the system.**

Where are the health policies in housing, so new homes have triple-glazing and smart home features to help monitoring older people?

- Health Leader, Scotland

“

Our core performance is poor and **we can't outrun the longer turn trends** on morbidity and demography.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The public use technology to operationalise their lives and we need to catch up with them. That's **how we'll drive the changes need in the Ten-Year Plan**, by allowing the impetus from the public to shape what we do.

- Healthcare Leader

“

If Louise Casey can present what **a cross-party answer for social care** can look like, if you get to the next election and everyone agrees with it, **then you have a plan.**

It's always politics that has unravelled plans for social care.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**The NHS takes frail people and makes them more frail by putting them in a hospital bed for ten days.**

If you let domiciliary care staff take basic readings from frail people they see at home every day, like temperature, and that fed into a system that could alert changes, it might stop old ladies getting urinary tract infections and being admitted to hospital.

- Senior Civil Servant



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“

Most regions of the UK are not net contributors to the UK economy – they spend more on public services than the revenue they raise. Personally, I think that’s an emergency.

**Director of a Combined Authority**



# Devolution needs to find the balance of accountability

Mayors should ultimately be answerable to the electorate

## Leaders across England’s public sector back the continued shift to mayoral authorities. It’s a policy that has crossed political boundaries and changes of administration.

Our interviews provide advice to government from within the sector on how to take English devolution forward. They also shone a spotlight on urgent issues facing councils and especially the state of special educational needs provision.

Officials told us:

- Their aspiration for devolution is that the balance of accountability for mayoral authorities tips towards the ballot box, and away from meeting central government targets
- Some officials see the potential for combined authorities in joining up public services but are more focused on their potential to drive growth
- Amid re-organisation, councils continue to face substantial challenges around special educational needs and social care

“

The big opportunity in devolution isn’t in the pound signs and growth. This is our **opportunity to integrate public services as a system**, skills, business, blue light services, and we’ll have the soft, convening power of a mayor.

- Council director

“

I’m excited about the devo deal. It’s going to get us **out of our boundaries** and give us a **single regional voice**.

- Council chief executive

“

The combined authority is about 300 people but some of our local authorities are tens of thousands, so we need to leverage our partnerships. We need to employ a **really small number of really good people** and remember we’re not a local authority.

- Director at a combined authority

“

**Devolution is going in the right direction.** Integrated settlements give us greater freedom but they’re set up to make combined authorities accountable to central government for meeting their targets.

**We need to get to a place where accountability shifts.**

- Director at a Combined Authority

# Devolution needs to find the balance of accountability

Mayors should ultimately be answerable to the electorate

“

Adult social care, children’s social care and SEND are **crippling local government**. People don’t realise that 80 per cent of their council tax is spent on them which support three to four per cent of the population.

- Council chief executive

“

**All the things we’re trying to deliver growth aren’t delivering much**. We’re on a hamster wheel. We need a step change in what we do.

- Director at a combined authority

“

**What keeps local government awake at night is special educational needs**. The Budget came with a seismic shift that will move it to central government in two years’ time. But what happens in the meantime? Government is going to have to write off the debt but the Office for Budget Responsibility was clear it doesn’t have a plan.

- Local government leader

“

Local government reorganisation has the potential to create a decade of disruption and division. **Get it right, and it gives us simpler, more effective and resilient local government**. But you need to get to the right answer and not be swayed by local politics.

- Council chief executive



# Innovation is seeing a thousand AI flowers bloom (but many in thin soil)

Some will be worth growing and harvesting

**Government and public services in all nations of the UK are making impressive progress towards exploring the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Importantly, ministers have allowed public bodies to explore AI themselves, devolving innovation across the sector.**

Our interviews found

- Myriad AI projects and trials are underway using generative and other forms of AI. The next stage for government is to scale up the ones that deliver material benefits
- Officials agree that legacy systems and data issues are holding government back from exploiting AI, but that getting the right people and leadership in place is just as important as the technology
- A substantial number of interviewees are using their own personal AI accounts at work, suggesting their needs are not met by internal platforms

“  
DSIT has become **very forward thinking** and is moving faster than the rest of government.  
- Director of a software supplier

“  
As a council, we exploit about five to ten percent of what AI can do. The question is **how we shift the dial** to 15, 20, 30 per cent. And it's not the tech that's the issue, it's always **the people and the culture**.  
- Council Chief Executive

“  
None of the AI case studies turn out to be as good as the press release, and not a single one will transform government's cost base. There's a **naïve techno-utopianism** in Whitehall.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“  
On Artificial Intelligence, there's about a **thousand flowers blooming**.

For policymakers, we need to break down the process and figure out where AI can help.

- Senior Civil Servant

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“

Government is rising to the Artificial Intelligence challenge really well. Most effort is on AI that deals with textual artefacts which speeds up intellectual pursuits.

The **next leap is to get agentic to tackle working processes**, but you're going to need to deal with legacy to take advantage of that.

- Director of government software supplier

“

I pay £20 for **my own ChatGPT account and I use it all the time**. My boss doesn't like it, but are we supposed to trade in laptops for typewriters?"

- Director at a combined authority



# How public sector leaders see a future with artificial intelligence

Many see a role for AI in efficiencies but are less sighted on transformative uses

**We asked interviewees how they saw AI developing over the years ahead. Their answers spanned a range of possibilities as set out here with some select quotes.**

**It's notable that most officials see a clear role for AI in efficiencies and advanced knowledge management but are less specific when talking about more transformative change.**



The department has a 30-strong correspondence team. You'd think we could get AI to read our reports and speeches and then use that to draft responses.

**AI is going to be a big part of how we get 20 per cent smaller.**

If AI can take 80 per cent of the grunt work out the job, people will be able to do more.

**AI could take the drudge out of commercial.**

The problems we have with building prosecution files would be obsolete as long as there's a functioning criminal justice system to plug into it.

**A huge amount of what social workers do is pass information around – well surely there's a role there for AI.**

The gamechanger will be applying AI to cut the workload of the frontline teaching profession.

The power for AI in my team would be a small language model where we feed in everything so we can ask questions like an encyclopaedia.

The next stage is agentic and getting AI in the back-end, then we'll see the transformative results.

We could be using AI in major programme delivery for dependency management, knowledge management, the what-ifs and the predictions.

AI could deliver fantastic citizen experience, but government won't want to make thousands of civil servants redundant.

**AI will take us to place where we're better able to predict and prevent and hyper-personalise care.**

**The defensive stuff for policing is efficiencies. The offensive stuff, that's when we develop virtual officers to be listening to 999 calls to be getting us ahead on the response.**

**AI needs to be focused on making routine things quicker and cheaper.**

**Agentic AI will transform casework.**

**Is there a more powerful version of remote learning in higher education based on AI?**

If you're a ship with multiple threats coming at you, AI will tell you what arms everything is carrying and recommend actions in a split second.

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“

Society's offer to an 18-year-old with A levels is this: here's a £50k loan for you to spend on a degree and you won't have to pay it back until your earnings reach a decent threshold. It's a good offer.

But if you're an 18-year-old without a level three qualification, the offer is: get a job. How is that fair?

**Further Education Leader**



# Financial pressures could redefine the higher education landscape

But universities remain key to the UK's competitive advantage

**Higher education is a UK success story, with eleven of our universities consistently ranked in the global top 100. But against a backdrop of financial strain, the sector has entered a period of change that could redefine the higher education landscape.**

In our interviews, officials told us:

- Higher Education is going through a period of profound change, with financial pressures triggering consolidation and pressure from students driving change in provision
- Officials also argued the government needs to continue focusing on adult skills which are especially vital to tackling economic inactivity

Interviewees in Scotland were particularly passionate about higher education as part of the country's international profile.

“

The UK has to get serious and ask: **shouldn't we make higher education our global calling card?**

- Higher Education Leader

“

Universities value the uplift in fees. What **we ultimately need is for government to rethink the balance between who pays and who benefits** from higher education. Right now, the balance is tipped towards students but it's not like that in other OECD countries.

- Higher Education Leader

“

The UK can't compete with the US and China on industrial strategy – our growth needs to come from innovation and creativity. **Think about the top end of the supply chain.** We have some of the best universities in the world and we need to be thinking about research and development and supporting spin-outs.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Higher education needs to grapple with questions like what skills they should be delivering, what students want, how to deal with cost of living pressures and how to respond to the increase in mental health issues.

**I expect the sector will look quite different in a few years.**

- Higher Education Leader

# Financial pressures could redefine the higher education landscape

But universities remain key to the UK's competitive advantage

“

Our higher education for domestic students is effectively subsidised by international students. But **we don't make this country attractive to international students**, do we?

- Higher Education Leader

“

There's a **short-termism in higher education's financial management**, and a lack of capability to envision for the future.

- Higher Education Leader

“

**Government has got to think about how to shape the higher education market nationally but the consumers are 17 year-olds** and you have to respond to their choices?

- Higher Education Leader

“

The skills agenda feels more grounded and reactive to the economy than ever before, but **the big gap is adult skills**. People need to stay relevant but the country's capacity to deliver skills to people in work is severely limited. **Ministers get that** but just **can't find the money to invest**.

- Further Education Leader



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“

If you **get something right** in the public sector, you might get a footnote in a press release.

If you **get something wrong**, you get a Public Accounts Committee hearing and a National Audit Office report.

**Senior Civil Servant**



# Government's talent is gridlocked

But moving Whitehall out of London is reaping rewards

## The UK has no shortage of talented, committed, high performing civil servants in Whitehall and the devolved administrations.

But some told us they operate in a system weighted against standout performance. Government is a highly scrutinised environment in which mistakes have political consequences, and that encourages many civil servants to avoid risk and visibility. The result is a gridlock of talent.

In our interviews, officials told us:

- Fundamental reform would be welcome by many civil servants, especially to their employment model
- Officials believe the Civil Service in Whitehall should be smaller, having grown substantially since 2016
- Moving thousands of civil servants out of London has improved career progression and is allowing for better relationships with the wider public sector including strategic authorities, which is crucial for effective devolution

“

Civil servants are actually quite good, **it's the system** they're in that means they don't realise their potential.

- **Military Leader**

“

The Civil Service feels like a **risk and responsibility** aggregating machine.

- **Police and Crime Commissioner**

“

Delivery in government brings exposure. It's **safer to just move** on to the next strategy.

- **Senior Civil Servant**

“

I respect individual civil servants but **the system needs to change**. We deal with junior people who can't make decisions and send everything up the chain where it all gets lost in translation. They're stopping progress.

- **Non-Executive**

“

Government has got **lots of good people stuck in the system** and they can't get anything done.

- **Senior Civil Servant**

# Government's talent is gridlocked

But moving Whitehall out of London is reaping rewards

“

I've been a **civil servant outside of London** for ten years and it feels like night and day. Now we don't feel excluded.

**You can build a career.**

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Ideally we would have a **more deliberate role-creating strategy** because right now it's 'whatever job ends up there is fine'.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Our **relationship with mayoral and strategic authorities** is demonstrably different thanks to Darlington.

- Senior Civil Servant



# Police reform is set to redraw the thin blue line

As long as investment, political energy and wider justice reforms continue

## Over the last 18 months, ministers and officials have been talking to police leaders in England about far-reaching reforms.

In our interviews, senior police figures told us:

- They are enthusiastic for the bold reforms set out by the Home Secretary but concerned that sufficient funding is made available for their delivery
- There has been a longstanding underinvestment in police leadership that needs to be addressed
- The proposed consolidation of police forces in England should learn from the experience in Scotland where multiple forces were merged into one
- Online police visibility is an unresolved issue given the levels of hate crime across social media

Interviews across the justice system also brought into focus the need for end-to-end, joined-up justice reform.

“  
The **military invest in finding and developing leaders** but in policing, that investment is pitiful.  
- Policing Leader

“  
When it comes to digital and AI, we're **Ceefax**.  
- Policing Leader

“  
The **Home Office will be driving policing reforms against a backdrop of no money**. And if there's a change of government in 2029, there's a danger it all gets left in the air.  
- Police and Crime Commissioner

“  
The key challenge right now in **probation** is recruitment and changes to the rules on foreign nationals won't help.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“  
An enabling **national centre** and a small number of **regional forces**, say in the mid to high teens, would get us serious about productivity, efficiency, scale and taking out duplication while still allowing us to be hyper-local in terms of **frontline policing**.  
- Policing Leader

# Police reform is set to redraw the thin blue line

As long as investment, political energy and wider justice reforms continue

“

England’s police forces are looking at places like **Denmark** to think about national policing structures but there’s a nation 190 miles away that has done it: Scotland.

- Policing Leader

“

On Artificial Intelligence, we’ll be getting into more offensive and defensive uses as time goes on. The defensive stuff, that’s the efficiencies. The offensive stuff, that’s when we **develop virtual officers to be listening to 999** calls to be getting us ahead on the response.

- Policing Leader

“

We shouldn’t be the thought police but **hate crime has moved online and we ignore that at our peril.**

We need to have a presence by being visible online but we haven’t figured that out yet.

- Policing Leader

“

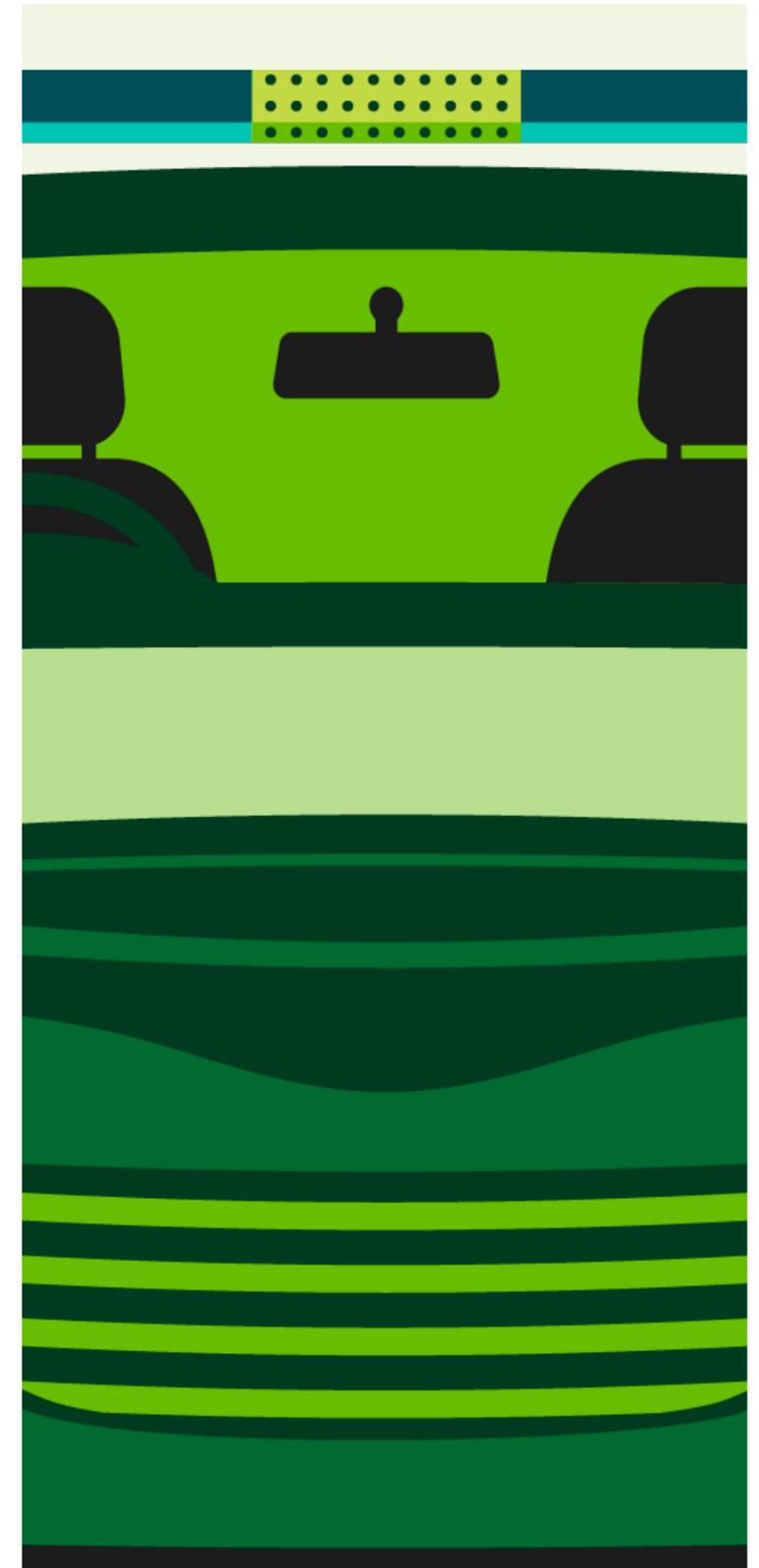
The problem in policing is that you have **senior officers** in random bits of the force **that don’t get technology.**

- Policing Leader

“

We’re rolling out Justice Transcribe and it could **revolutionise** how probation handles casework.

- Senior Civil Servant

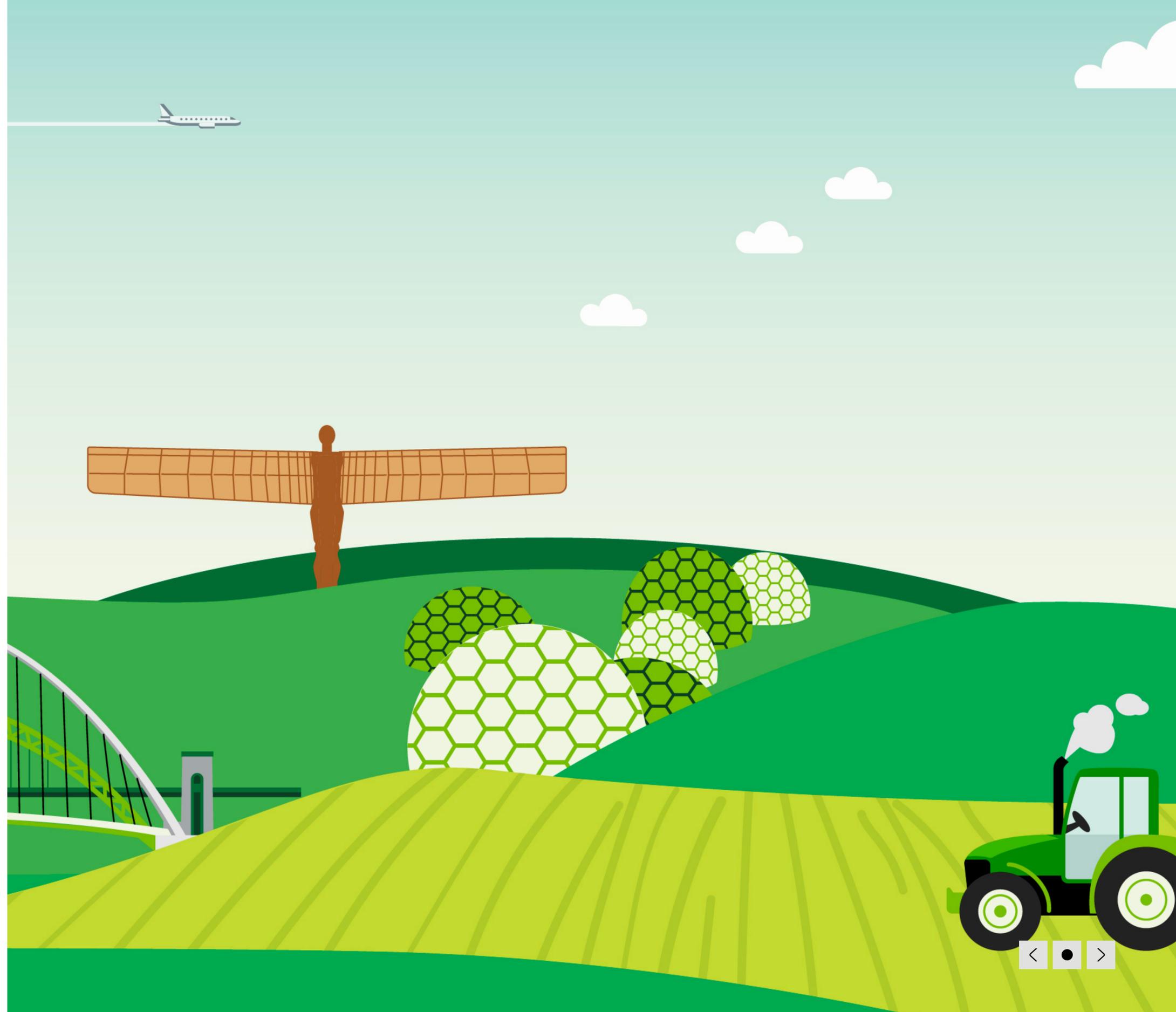


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“

Don't forget that we've created this public sector, so we can fix it. We made up planning laws. We can change them.

**Senior Civil Servant**



# Has net zero gone quiet?

Officials laud progress in DESNZ but want to see more collaboration

## The UK Government and devolved administrations continue to strive towards a net zero economy.

In our interviews, senior officials told us:

- The net zero agenda feels alive in government, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) is making energetic progress – but some say it's too quiet in other departments
- Some are concerned that departments need to join up and collaborate more effectively
- Some officials have begun to think more pragmatically about the net zero agenda

Suppliers to government added:

- As large companies, their commitment to climate issues remains steady and part of their wider social responsibility

“

We'll end up **ramping up spending on adaptation** because the world is unable or unwilling to address climate change, it's too hard or it's too inconvenient.

- Council Chief Executive

“

**Clean energy is a straight cost, not an economic opportunity.** The argument is that if we get energy transition right, we'll be able to export it to the world. But what? We're not manufacturing wind turbines to sell to China.

- Non-Executive

“

**DESNZ feels like it has a spring in its step.** It helps to have the same secretary of state, who knows his brief and cares about it, and it helps that **it's a mission.**

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**Net zero feels alive but we're so bad at joining up across departments.** Net zero sits in DESNZ but it's central to building 1.5 million homes, and that sits in MHCLG. We need to be in synch but all departments have their own culture and their own ministers with their own priorities. Then we have to compete for funding. None of this helps collaboration.

- Senior Civil Servant

# Has net zero gone quiet?

Officials laud progress in DESNZ

“ On net zero, we’re **focusing our energy on where we can have an impact**, like on waste and transport. Let’s put our energy where we have a legitimate role. There’s no point talking about areas where we have no influence.  
- Council Chief Executive

“ We’re **pretending we can afford to retrofit properties**, but we can’t.  
- Local Government Leader

“ **Government can’t inspect every home and tell them to change their boiler** to a heat pump. And our fuel poverty support is based on replacing gas boilers, as replacing them with heat pumps would be too expensive.  
- Senior Civil Servant, Scotland

“ I **never hear anything on net zero**. I only read about it in the papers.  
- Senior Civil Servant



# Towards a defence industrial superpower

Investor confidence will be key

**At last year's Budget, Chancellor Rachel Reeves set out a striking ambition: for the UK to become a defence industrial superpower. She was clear that building the UK's defences – in response to geopolitical volatility and security threats – needs to go beyond the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces. And, as shown in the Defence Industrial Strategy, it needs to cross government and it needs to engage industry.**

In our interviews, senior officials told us:

- Historic underinvestment in defence, in favour of health and welfare, has left the UK's military smaller than today's threats require – so investment and prioritisation is now essential

- Technology has changed warfighting and the UK needs to accelerate its cutting-edge defence capabilities. More agile and effective procurement is a pre-requisite for that
- More needs to be done to build investor confidence in the sector by providing clear and unambiguous demand signals to suppliers
- In spite of challenges, the UK remains one of the world's most significant military powers

“  
The threat is greater than at any time in my working life, so what defence does, matters. It's not just about the MOD and armed forces, **our security is a national endeavour** we have to go after.  
- Defence Leader

“  
The **strategic defence review was a good document** but wasn't resourced. Now we're going to find out which half we're going to deliver because **ultimately there's a gap between ambition and resource.**  
- Senior Civil Servant

“  
For 30 years, defence procurement has been based on cost and specs, not time. Now, **time is of the essence so we need to speed up delivery and better manage risk.** Both the MOD and industry need to change. We need partnerships solving the problems, not transactional relationships.  
- Defence Leader

“  
**The UK is highly regarded** for the stance we're taking on Ukraine, the strength of our **defence industry,** our **bi-lateral relationships.**

All of that gives us traction with the EU on defence.

- Senior Diplomat

# Towards a defence industrial superpower

## Investor confidence will be key

“

We bought a military vehicle and now it's got problems, but **we bought it because we were told to buy British**. If we'd have bought one off the shelf it would be up and running by now.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

We're still not seeing boards and shareholders saying they want to put capital into defence. **The investor community doesn't have enough confidence** in the defence market.

- Defence Leader

“

The **US has always said 'we'll worry about China, you worry about Russia'**. And the Eastern European members of NATO said for years that we were taking our eyes off the ball.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Russia and China moved fast on tech and **we're playing catch-up**. Our politicians know that.

- Defence Leader



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“

As Jean-Claude Juncker once said, ‘politicians **know what needs doing**, they just don’t know **how to get re-elected** if they do it’.

Senior Diplomat



# Conclusions and recommendations



# Recommendations

Inspired by our interviews with public sector leaders

## Our interviews with more than 100 public sector leaders surfaced some bold ideas for reform.

Many interviewees shared their suggestions for a more effective state that have inspired these six recommendations.

Six recommendations

1	Invest in the citizen experience to build confidence	4	Update the Civil Service workforce offer
2	Supercharge major initiatives with everything government has learned	5	Test, learn and grow the Procurement Act's possibilities
3	Unleash the changemakers	6	Be clear on the ambition for Artificial Intelligence



# Invest in the citizen experience to build confidence

Make sure the citizen experience is represented at senior levels

**Many officials and government suppliers argued that government need to invest more in the citizen experience and in public engagement. They want to see customer and citizen needs represented at the highest levels of decision-making to drive delivery that matters to the public – and to build confidence.**

Recommendations inspired by our interviews are:

- Government departments and agencies should elevate the importance of citizen experience within their structures, decision-making and governance
- Citizen experience should focus on outcomes and not solely on digital processes so that citizen expectations are matched with reality

- Government should invest in communications to engage the public around issues like the sector's use of AI and why it is pursuing policies such as net zero – communications is too often seen as a cost to be cut

“ It's not about delivery, it's about **visible delivery the public can see**. It's not just more GP appointments, it's making sure the public feel that.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“ We've **not seen any real progress for citizens** yet when you think about GP services, the NHS, policing.  
- Director of a Government Supplier

“ Trust in policing isn't about whether a crime is solved. It's **about how you're treated**.  
- Police & Crime Commissioner

“ The **gap** between the consumer experience and the **citizen experience** is widening.

- Director of a Government Supplier

# Supercharge major initiatives with everything government has learned

Government knows why major programmes can falter

**Our survey has found the public has limited trust in government's ability to deliver major initiatives and improve their lives. It's a trend that worries officials and politicians alike – the public deserve confidence in a sector they rely on as citizens, fund as taxpayers and hold to account as voters.**

Recommendations inspired by our interviews are:

- Government announcements about new programmes should only be made when delivery plans are in place
  - an ambition is not enough
- There is a wealth of understanding about why major projects in government fail – government can better use that knowledge to boost chances of success

“

That announcement was **a dream without a plan**. No budget other than seed money. No definitions.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**Front-end loading of major projects is missing in government**. There isn't sufficient pre-work to agree outcomes, align stakeholders and do the technical work needed to get certainty around cost, scope and schedule.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

There's **too many layers of approval** but you'll never get anyone saying they don't need a say. Ministers want progress and no-one has broad enough shoulders to say 'no, minister'.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**Review teams can lack fundamental skills** and the quality of their assurance is subject to the goodwill of the team leader.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Government has **too many gifted amateurs** running major projects, and we wonder why they fail.

- Senior Civil Servant

# Unleash the changemakers

Change in government and public services is all about leadership

**Many officials interviewed for *State of the State* talked about the importance of leadership in the public sector. Some observed there is an over-reliance on a limited number of leaders who are experienced in managing change and driving delivery.**

Recommendations inspired by our interviews are:

- Succession in the public sector often means one leader is replaced by another from a similar background, often delivering similar results – and that’s fine unless government needs a fundamentally different outcome
- Leadership is especially key to making progress with technology as its implementation often relies on changing culture
- Changemakers need to be appointed at the right level – more Chief Information Officers (CIOs) at executive level could help government accelerate progress with data and technology

“  
We’re **too reliant on some individuals** that drive change  
- Senior Civil Servant

“  
Places for Growth has been a huge success but feels fragile. It **relies on a small number of leaders** outside London.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“  
The difference between green-rated projects and red-rated projects is **leadership**.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“  
There are two critical factors in change: one is **leadership** and the other is data-led technology  
- Policing Leader

“  
If you **want different**, you need to **appoint different**. Don’t put the same type of person in a role and say you want to **rewire the state**.  
- Senior Civil Servant

# Update the Civil Service workforce offer

Officials want to explore reforms that change the career model

## Civil servants across each of the UK's administrations told us they favoured bold reform of the system they operate in.

Many argued that the most profound change would be driven by rethinking the career and employment offer attached to joining the Civil Service as well as other parts of the sector.

Recommendations inspired by our interviews are:

- Reconsidering the balance of pay and pension to put greater weight on salaries
- Rethinking the current model of a Civil Service in which people work across different policy areas over a life-long career
- Considering how more political appointees might be introduced into the system so that ministerial agendas are installed in the Civil Service

“

We're **living with the administrative structure of 30 years ago**, and structures degrade over time. It's little wonder that ministers will pull a lever and nothing happens.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Permanent secretaries and directors general should be **political appointments**. Their pay should be higher and performance-related.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

It doesn't feel like there's any civil service reform right now. There's **an opportunity for big, gnarly changes**, like to performance management, our employment model, and a different trade-off between pay and pension.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The bit of the Civil Service with mandarins is very small but the whole of government is designed around it.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The Civil Service is based on building a pool of people to work on anything for decades, but the **world has changed**. We need to bring people in with deep expertise and accept that they'll only work here for a few years. Instead, we're trying to think how to attract people with digital skills for an entire career. We have to be more permeable, and we should think about **changing the proposition**.

- Senior Civil Servant

---

“

If ministers called us, if officials called us, and they asked for help – we’d show up at 9am.

**Director of a Government Supplier**



# Test, learn and grow the Procurement Act's possibilities

Suppliers and officials want to push the envelope and innovate

## For this year's *State of the State*, we interviewed leaders in major suppliers to government as well as public sector officials.

Both suppliers and officials agreed that government's commercial abilities had greatly improved over the last decade. They also agree that the Procurement Act could continue that direction of travel – but its potential is yet to be realised.

Recommendations inspired by our interviews are:

- Suppliers should be engaged more holistically to explore answers to public sector problems
- Government should test out the possibilities of the procurement act to start exploiting its potential in market-shaping and innovation
- Tech procurement should be reviewed to make sure it can support government's ambitions around digital and AI. That includes making sure procurement considers running costs as well as the up-front investment

“

Procurement disaggregates the buying of new tech from the implementation. **They buy the tech first based on that up-front price but that's not the cost of implementation** or run costs.

- Director of a Government Supplier

“

We **have some time to go before changes out of the procurement act are felt**. It requires procurers to use the flexibilities, and that requires cultural change.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

**Government is intellectual, not commercial**. It needs ex-operations people working on contract design – people who have experience of delivering.

- Chief Executive of a Government Supplier

“

Government relationships with suppliers are **too fragmented** when you want them to **work holistically**.

What suppliers need is to meet people from, say, crime and education together in a room because then you can start explore the threads that connect them.

- Director of a Supplier to Government

# Be clear on the ambition for Artificial Intelligence

Clarity matters when it comes to AI

## Artificial intelligence was a theme in all our *State of the State* research conversations.

Recommendations inspired by our discussions are:

- Government and public service leaders need to be clear on how bold they want to be with AI in their organisations. Being bold is not essential – but clarity is – because AI can require organisational change that goes beyond technology implementation
- Leaders need to accept that AI continues to develop at pace, so plans need to be adaptable
- Public bodies need to understand why their people are paying for access to external platforms – in part to understand what they need and in part to mitigate risks
- As observed in previous *State of the State* reports, government will need to sustain its investment in its data and legacy systems to realise the benefits of AI

“

We need the ability to **scale and operationalise the potential of AI** but before we do that we need to build the data pools.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The **pace of change with AI is scary and exciting**. We were talking in January about what agentic AI could do and it had completely changed by June.

- Agency Chief Executive

“

The issue with AI is **how we prepare the world** and what we do in legislation.

- Policing Leader

“

You **can't make a five-year plan** based on what AI looks like today.

- Director of a Government Supplier

“

Government is grappling with technology at one of the **hardest points** in its history. There's artificial intelligence, machine learning and now agentic coming down the line at an incredible pace.

- Director of a Government Supplier



# The State of the State

## Scotland



# Scotland

## The State of the State 2026

**Scotland's government and public services face the same issues as the rest of the UK: uninspiring economic growth, constrained public finances and pressurised public services. They are striving to fix the same underlying problems around sluggish delivery, gridlocked talent and legacy IT. And like the rest of the UK, Scotland has an abundance of reasons for optimism if it can seize these opportunities and recognise its proper potential.**

Since 2012, *the State of the State* has commentated on Scotland's unique public policy and public opinion. It has put a spotlight on the maturing of our devolution, illustrating how 27 years of our own Parliament and Government has allowed Scotland to chart its own course in many areas.

This year's survey once again underlines the unique perspectives of the Scottish public. We're more satisfied with safety from crime and more worried about the future of the NHS. More trusting of our devolved government than other nations are of theirs. And more likely to want government to prioritise social care than the rest of the UK.

Our interviews with public sector leaders also illustrate the Scottish difference. They told us about the immediate challenges they face, largely rooted in too little budget and too much demand, but what struck me this year was their zeal for change.

Whether they lead in the NHS, Scottish Government, a council or a university, they want to see Scotland seize its opportunities – for a more efficient and tech-driven public sector; for a greener, more inclusive economy; and as a confident player on the world stage.



**Lesley Smillie**  
Government & Public  
Services Lead for Scotland,  
Deloitte

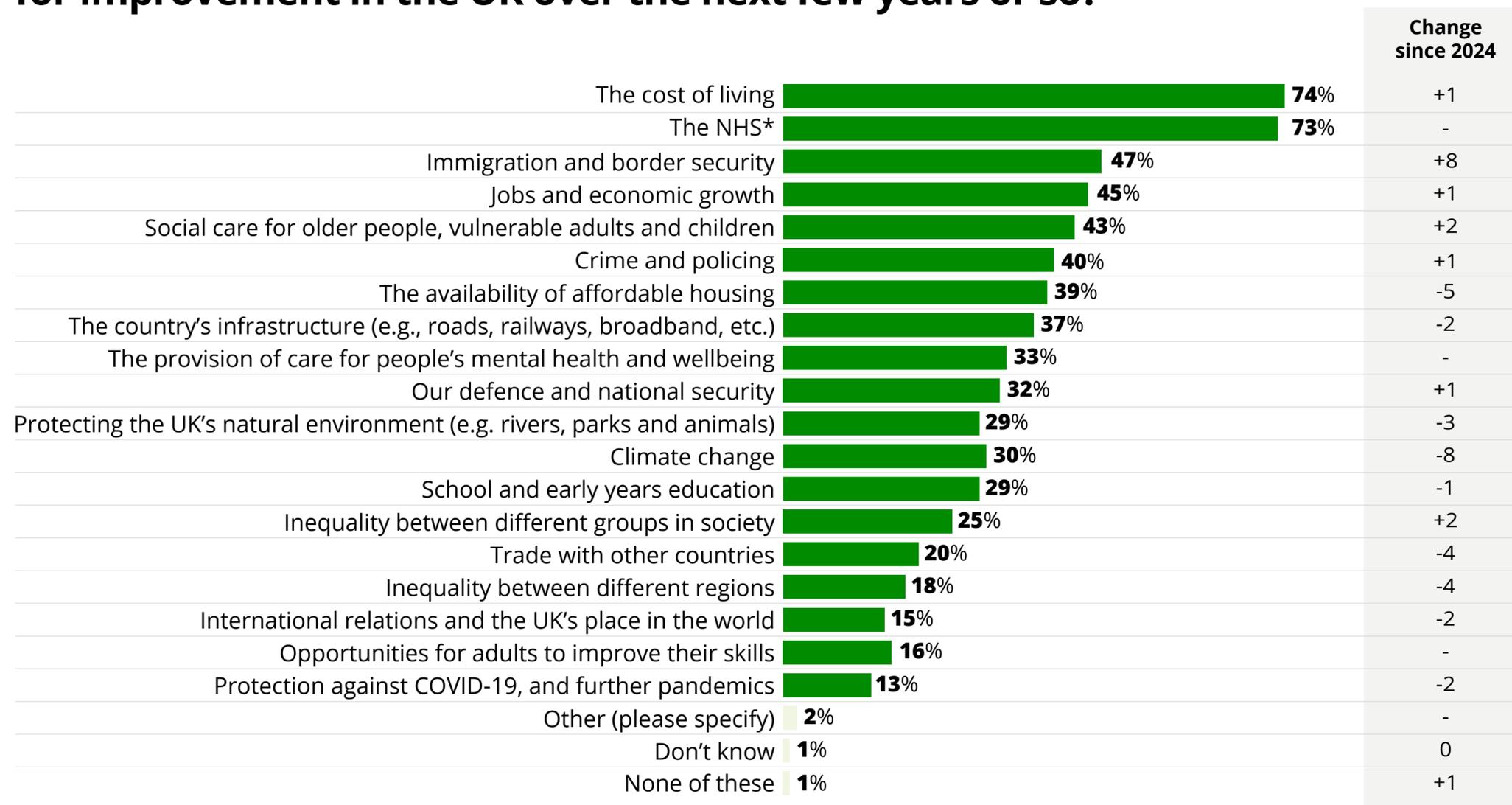
# Immigration is up and climate change down in the Scottish public's priorities

## The State of the State 2026

Our annual question on the public's priorities finds some shifts in Scotland. **Concerns about immigration** have gone up eight percentage points since our last survey, and **concerns about climate change** down by the same amount.

The top three priorities are consistent across the UK's nations. However, crime is higher on the agenda in England and social care is more of a priority in Scotland.

### Q: Which of the following issues, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement in the UK over the next few years or so?



\* In 2023, this option was 'NHS waiting lists'.

Base: 843 of 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Satisfaction with Scotland's public services

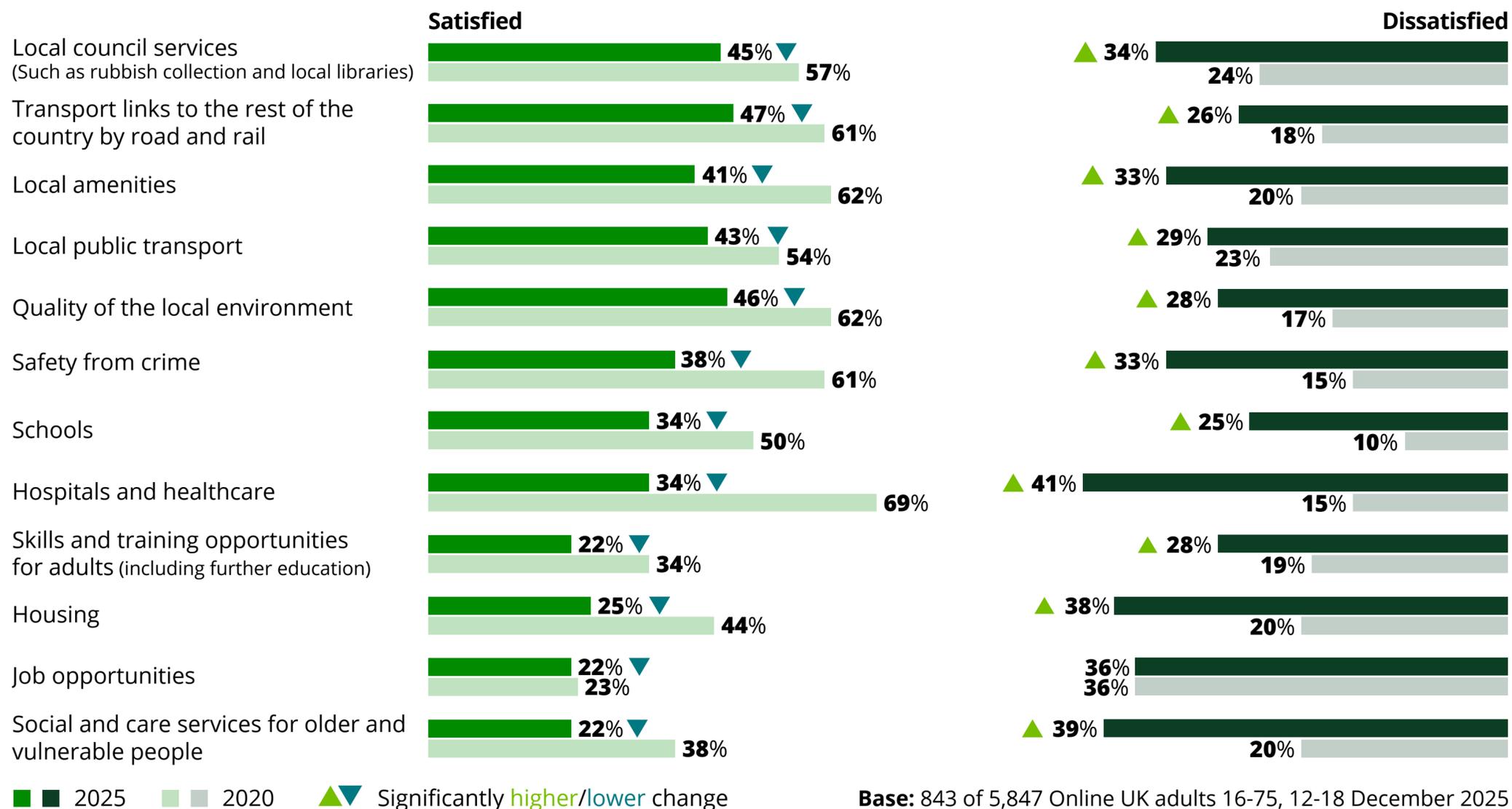
## The State of the State 2026

The chart to the right shows satisfaction in Scotland's public services. As in the UK figures, more people are satisfied than not about a range of local services, with some critical exceptions.

These results differ from the UK average in three ways: satisfaction is **higher in Scotland's safety from crime**, but lower when it comes to adult skills and council services.

The chart also shows changes since we last asked this survey question in 2020. It shows a reduction across the board, and especially in hospitals and healthcare.

### Q: Thinking about your local area specifically, to what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following at present?



# Opinion is split on Scotland's own tax and spending

## The State of the State 2026

The chart on page 18 shows public attitudes to tax and spending across the UK, and on page 19 we compare views across the UK's nations.

However, as Scotland now sets its own income tax rates, we **additionally asked the Scottish public for their views on the balance of Scottish taxes and spending specifically**. We provided a short explainer before asking the question, as below.

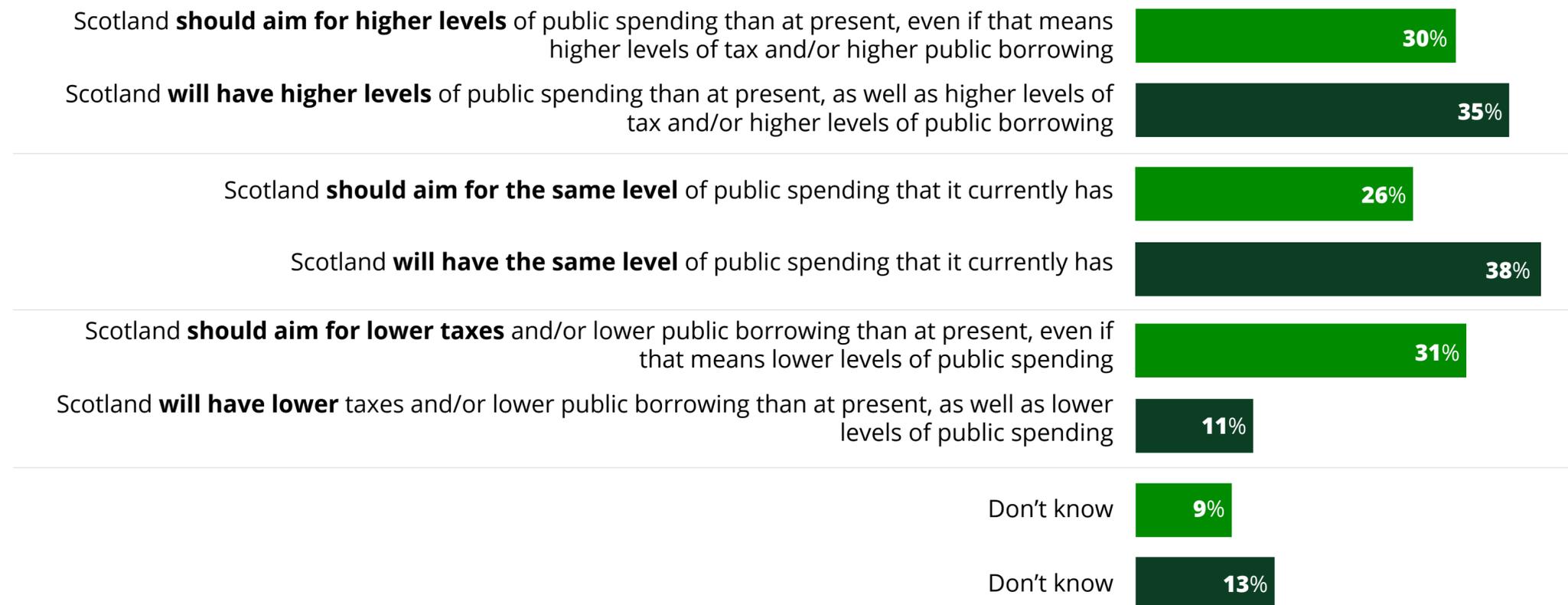
As the chart shows, opinion is broadly split across preferences but there is little expectation that taxes will come down.

### Our explainer before this question

As you may know, while most revenue the Scottish government receives comes from funding from the UK Government via the Block Grant, the Scottish government also has some powers to raise taxes, for example setting non-domestic (business) rates and the rates and bands for income tax (for non-savings and non-dividend income) for Scottish taxpayers. The Scottish government decides how much money to spend in certain devolved policy areas such as health, education, policing, some social security benefits and local economic development.

### Q: Which of the following, if any, do you think should be the Scottish Government's policy for the balance between public spending and the levels of taxation and public borrowing in the future?

And which of the following, if any, do you think will be the Scottish Government's policy for the balance between public spending and tax and/or public borrowing in the future?



Base: 843 of 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# In the words of Scotland's public sector leaders

The State of the State 2026

**Our interviews with senior officials in Scotland's public sector chimed with many of those across the UK. Officials shared their concerns about the public finances, the need for health and social care reform, and progress towards net zero. However, some important differences emerged.**

Inevitably, the Scottish Parliamentary elections were front of mind for many officials. Politics aside, some see the next government as one that could herald a new era of devolution – depending on how much it wants to diverge from the rest of the UK.

What stands out among the interviews in Scotland was the zeal for reform. A decade after Police Scotland was formed from eight forces, some argued that greater convergence is needed across other elements of Scotland's public sector.

And a decade after city deals began to be established, some argue that a regional approach in Scotland would benefit public services more widely. Several interviewees called for greater investment in technology rather than growing the workforce and for prevention rather than mitigating decline. There is a palpable appetite for profound reform among Scotland's public sector leaders, and for the Scottish Government to drive it.

“

Scotland has £120 for every £100 in England for public services and that means we've avoided hard choices. **We can be amazing** but we're too comfortable and too addicted to blaming Westminster.

- Council Chief Executive

“

**Why do an ERP once for every public body?** Why not across the sector?

- Policing Leader

“

All too often, **government spends most managing the impact of decline.**

- Director of a Regional Agency

“

Scotland should **radically redesign** its state **along regional lines.**

- Council Chief Executive

“

The **Scottish Government** has the chance to change but that's a decision.

After 25 years of devolution, it could do things **really differently** to the rest of the UK.

- Senior Civil Servant

# In the words of Scotland's public sector leaders

## The State of the State 2026

“

We're lagging England on investment in technology. Instead, **we employ more people, and we're at the end of the road on the impact** of doing that.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The Scottish Government tries to alienate as few people as possible. Then when you layer on ecological concerns and the views of residents, and **the balance is against getting things done.**

- Council Chief Executive

“

The actions we need to take to deliver net zero could destroy some businesses. What **we need to do is figure out what our country will look like** in 20 years' time

- Senior Civil Servant

“

We cast **envious glances at mayoral authorities** south of the border for their powers.

- Director of Non-Departmental Public Body

“

Our number of 80-year-olds is going to double in the next ten years and that means **a tidal wave of additional demand.**

- Council Chief Executive

“

The public sector wants to be more **effective and efficient**, with more self-serve but **we need a co-ordinated approach from government.**

- Policing Leader



# The State of the State

## Wales



# Wales

## The State of the State 2026

**This year could see the biggest change in Welsh Government since the Senedd's establishment in 1999. The increase from 60 to 96 parliamentarians is intended to provide greater capacity for legislation and scrutiny as the Welsh Government's responsibilities continue to grow. And the change to the D'Hondt formula of proportional representation, alongside new constituencies, could well affect electoral outcomes.**

For the past decade, *The State of the State* has commented on the progress of devolution in Wales. In the 28 years since the Senedd was formed, the Welsh approach has been one of measured growth in the devolved government's powers.

This year could see that change. Changes to our Parliament's size and electoral system could herald a new approach to devolution as new voices come into our national politics. The increase in number of parliamentary seats guarantees that, irrespective of the overall outcome.

Our survey once again finds some unique perspectives among the Welsh public compared to other nations of the UK. We're a less pessimistic bunch than our neighbours, happier with our local environment and less worried about crime.

Those unique perspectives also came to light in our interviews with public sector leaders. I was struck by their willingness for Wales to chart its own course on issues that matter to them and the public they serve. I was also impressed by their focus on reforming public services – and especially their interest in Artificial Intelligence. All of that points to a huge amount to be optimistic about in the year ahead.



**Ian Howse**  
Senior Partner,  
Cardiff

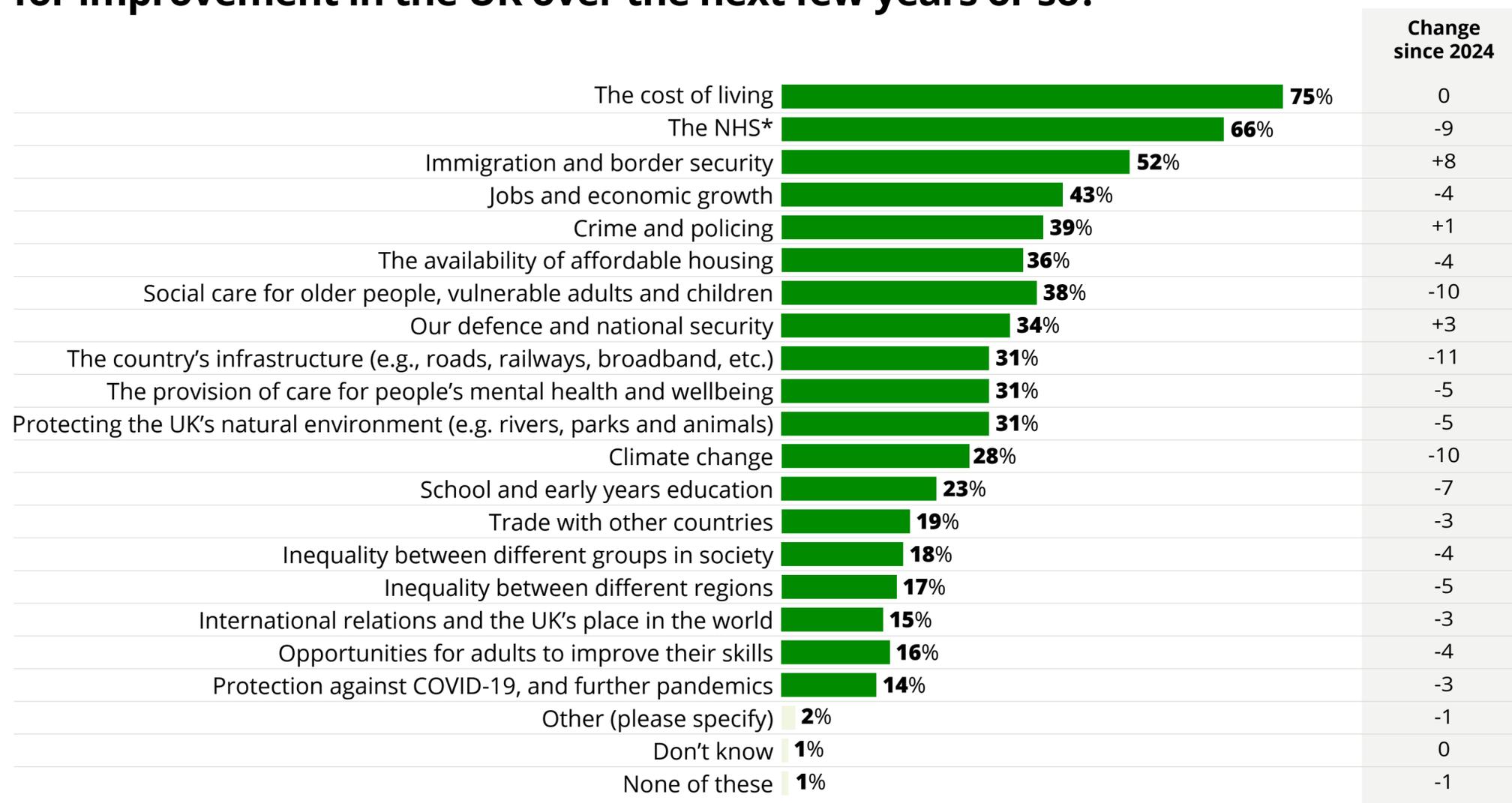
# Immigration is up and climate change down in the Welsh public's priorities

## The State of the State 2026

Our annual question on the public's priorities finds some shifts in Wales. **Concerns about immigration** have gone up eight percentage points since our last survey, and **concerns about climate change** down by ten.

On the chart opposite, changes of more than seven percentage points are statistically significant.

### Q: Which of the following issues, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement in the UK over the next few years or so?



\* In 2023, this option was 'NHS waiting lists'.

Base: 685 of 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Satisfaction with Welsh public services

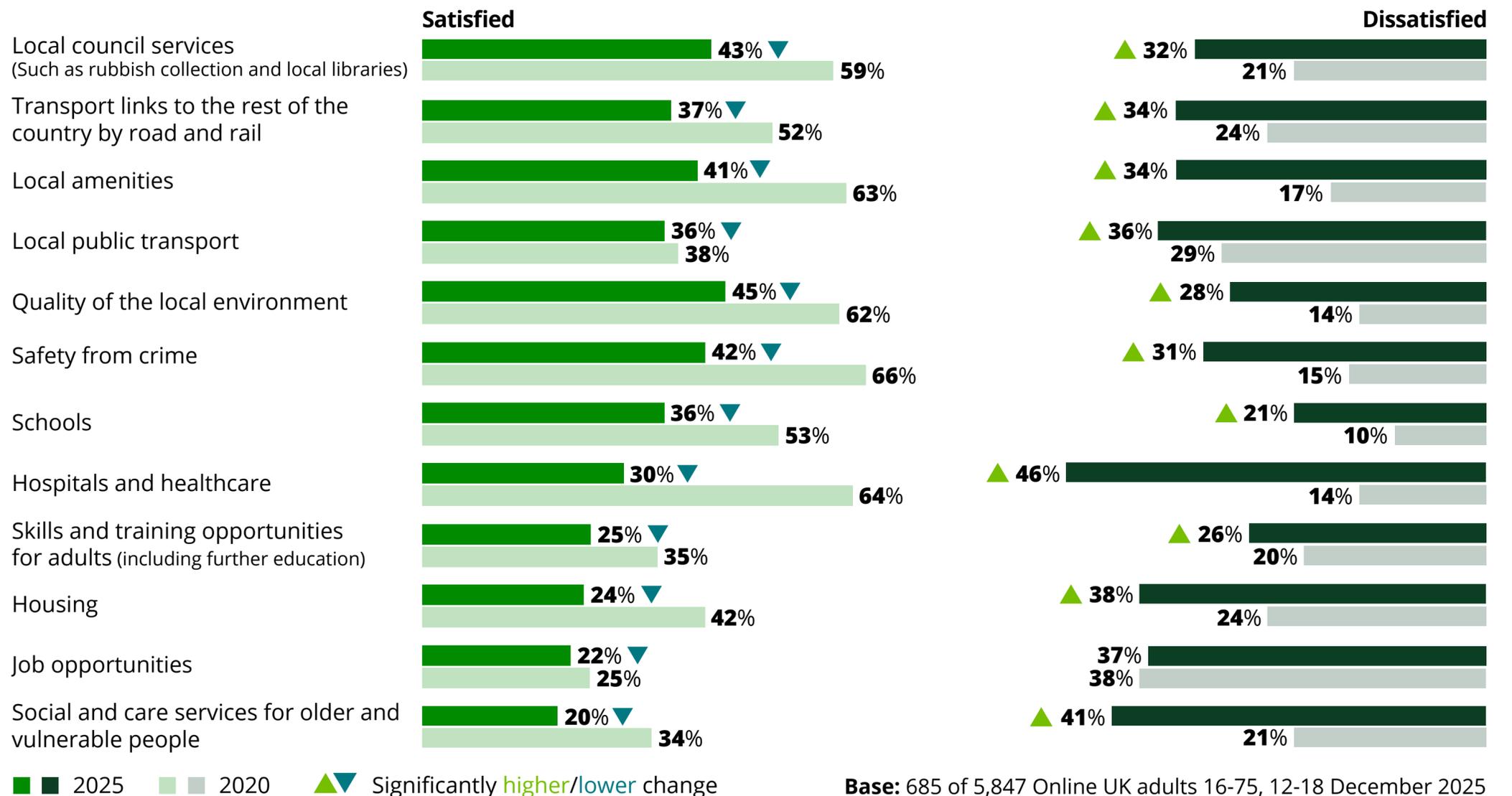
## The State of the State 2026

The chart to the right shows satisfaction in public services in Wales.

These results differ from the UK average in three ways: satisfaction is **higher in Wales for its levels of safety from crime**, but lower when it comes to **transport links, hospitals, council services and local amenities**.

It also shows changes in satisfaction since we last asked this question in 2020. As you can see, satisfaction has fallen across the board but especially in health and social care.

### Q: Thinking about your local area specifically, to what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following at present?



# In the words of Wales's public sector leaders

## The State of the State 2026

**Government and public services in Wales face the same challenges as other nations of the UK: elusive economic growth, budget constraints and excessive demand on health and care. They are also eyeing many of the same opportunities to attract investment and exploit the possibilities of technology across the public sector.**

What stood out in our interviews with officials in Wales is the anticipation of change after the Senedd election. Whichever party or parties form the next Welsh Government, many officials expect a period of adjustment. Some ask whether the Welsh Government has the capacity to cover the growing breadth of its responsibilities.

There was a sense of pride among the officials we interviewed about the unique direction of Welsh policy – not least the bold decision to end the market in children's social care for profit-making companies. Several talked about a greater emphasis on community as one of Wales's strengths. And many are looking at the potential of new technologies – especially Artificial Intelligence – as the basis of public sector reform.

“

The state is in retreat, demand is growing, and we could create a chasm people could fall into. **The answer has got to be the re-emergence of communities.** That's happening in some parts of Wales, but not enough.

- Council Chief Executive

“

Welsh government is **the size of a single Whitehall department** but it **covers the breadth of devolved matters.** They are brilliant people but they are stretched.

- Agency Chief Executive

“

The problem in Wales is **short-term thinking and budgets for one term** at the most. People used to think decades ahead. That's how the industrial revolution happened.

- Parliamentarian

“

The Senedd election means the **top level of government** in Wales could look **different for the first time since devolution** and that will wash through all levels of public services.

- Council chief executive

# In the words of Wales's public sector leaders

## The State of the State 2026

“

Wales is **ranked second in the world for recycling** and I don't think we shout enough about that.

- Council Chief Executive

“

Wales needs **new thinking and action**, whoever in government.

- Parliamentarian

“

**We do ourselves no favours.** There's regulation, bureaucracy, the 182 days rule for holiday lets, 20 mph speed limits, tourism tax, so many yellow lines you can't park. All of that is killing retail and tourism.

- Parliamentarian

“

**Community cohesion challenges** have become part of our core business.

- Local Government Leader

“

The pace of change with AI is scary and exciting. We were talking in January about what agentic AI can do and it had **completely changed by June**. It's the dark arts.

- Chief Executive of Non-Departmental Public Body

“

Wales **is retreating from the social care market** as no-one can accept people should make a profit from children who need care and attention.

- Local Government Leader



# The State of the State

## Northern Ireland



# Northern Ireland

## The State of the State 2026

**The restoration of Northern Ireland's Executive in 2024 was welcomed across the public sector. It marked a return of accountability and decision-making rooted in democratic legitimacy that are the hallmarks of devolution. But just two years later, the spotlight has returned to the challenges facing Northern Ireland's public services.**

**This year's *State of the State* explores those challenges amid cross-party desire to reform local services.**

**Our interviews put a spotlight on the big issues facing Northern Ireland's public sector – from the need for leadership to the pace of reform.**

---

For the past decade, *The State of the State* has reported on Northern Ireland's government and public services. Looking back, it has been a rollercoaster: from the spotlight that came with Brexit to the collapse and return of the Executive, there has been no shortage of events to commentate on.

This year, our survey once again finds the Northern Ireland public differs from the rest of the UK in some notable ways. We're more likely to say we're satisfied with local amenities, education and our local council. But we're less satisfied with healthcare – that's a big issue for Northern Ireland that government continues to work on.

What strikes me in this year's report is a sense that Northern Ireland's public want to see change, and our public sector leaders want to deliver it. And as you can see from our interviews, officials and politicians alike have clarity on what the sector can reform to better serve the public. That is a positive sign and just one reason I'm optimistic for Northern Ireland's future.



**Marie Doyle**  
Senior Partner,  
Belfast

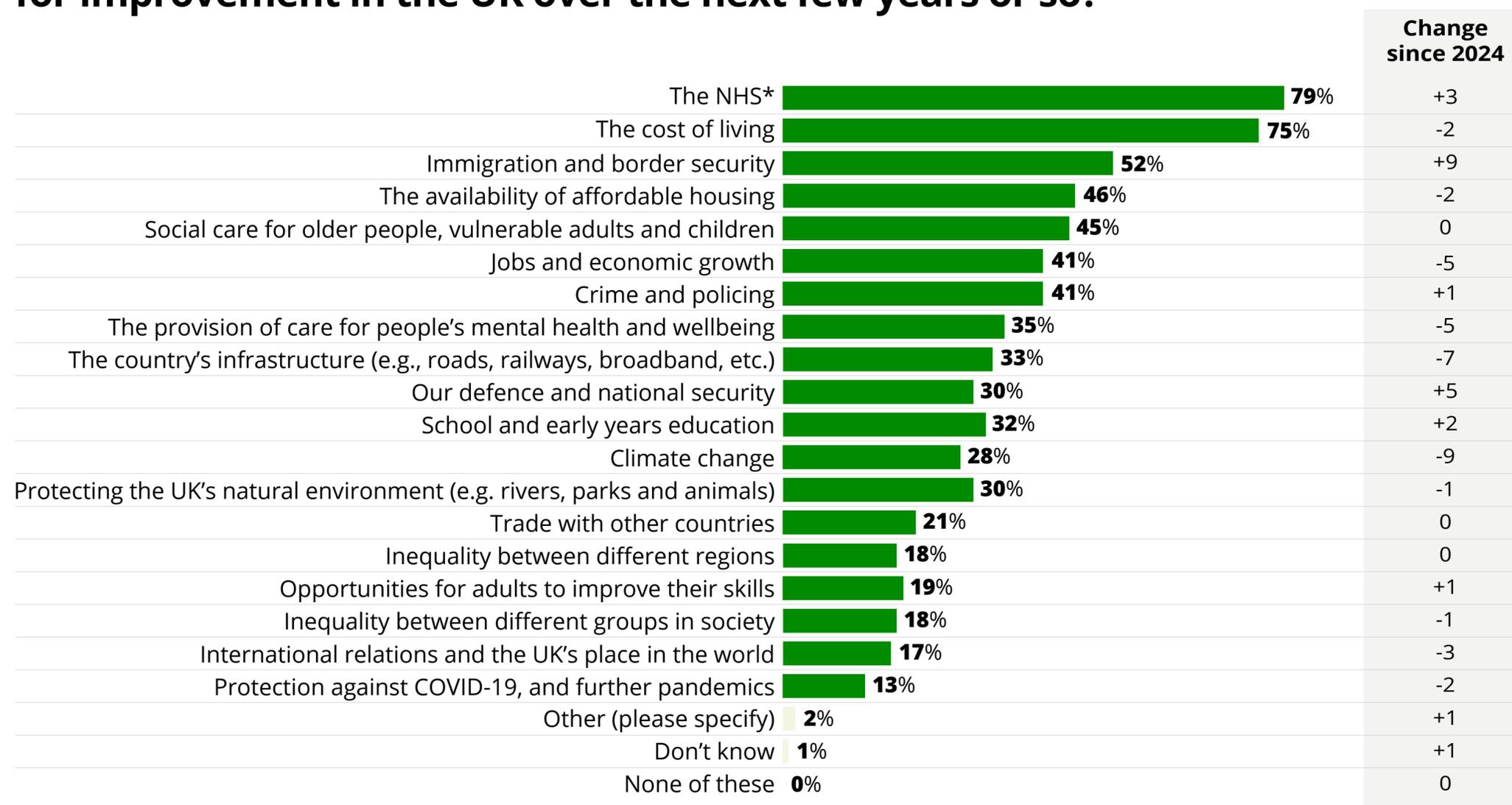
# Immigration and defence move up Northern Ireland's priorities

## The State of the State 2026

Our annual question on the public's priorities finds some shifts in Northern Ireland. **Concerns about immigration** have gone up nine percentage points since our last survey, and climate change has slipped by seven points, the same amount.

Northern Ireland's top two priorities – the NHS and the cost of living – has changed marginally and switched places this year.

### Q: Which of the following issues, if any, do you think should be the top priorities for improvement in the UK over the next few years or so?



\* In 2023, this option was 'NHS waiting lists'.

Base: 515 of 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Satisfaction with Northern Ireland's public services

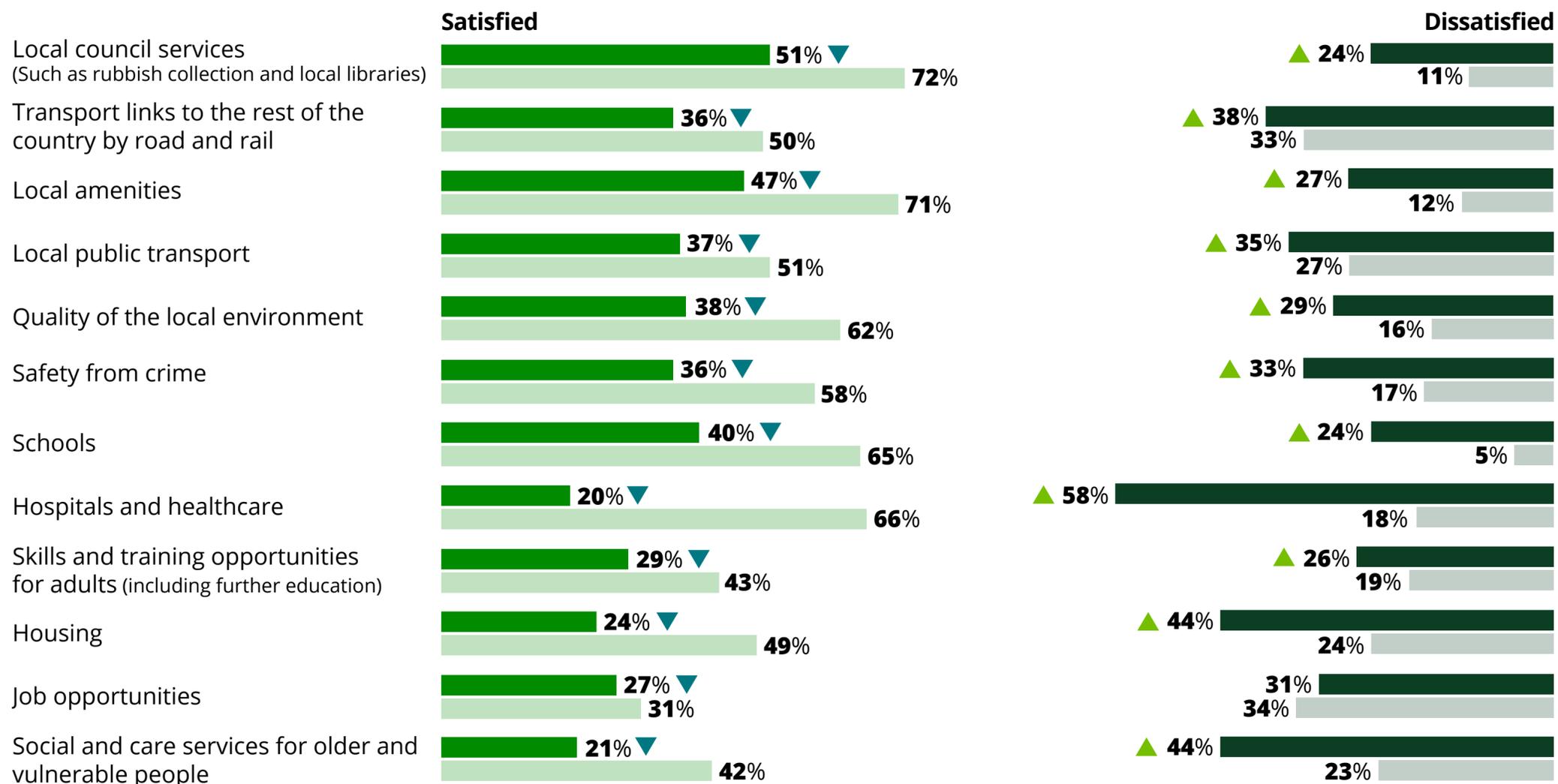
## The State of the State 2026

The chart to the right shows satisfaction in public services in Northern Ireland.

Across some services, the public are more satisfied than not. However, people in Northern Ireland are more dissatisfied with hospitals, transport and social care than the rest of the UK.

The chart also shows changes in satisfaction since we last asked this question in 2020. As you can see, it has dropped nearly across the board.

### Q: Thinking about your local area specifically, to what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following at present?



■ 2025 ■ 2020 ▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change

Base: 515 of 5,847 Online UK adults 16-75, 12-18 December 2025

# Strong leadership is a must

## The State of the State 2026

**Interviewees across Stormont, the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and local services were consistently clear about the importance of decisive leadership. Many were concerned about the impact of excessive criticism on the progress of reform and the sector's risk appetite.**

The Executive's restoration in February 2024 was welcomed by all. But some interviewees told us that the 2027 elections have already started to loom large on the horizon, bringing with it a shorter-term focus among Northern Ireland's politicians.

Others talked about a variety of issues facing NICS including low morale, skills gaps, workforce planning and recruitment. They argued that open criticism affects morale but acknowledged that new funding for leadership development is positive.

Some mentioned the recent transition of four permanent secretaries both as a problem – a loss of experience – and an opportunity for fresh leadership.

Despite all these issues, interviewees shared an unshakeable belief in the Executive and NICS's potential to improve public service delivery.

“

It's depressing when survival of the institutions is considered success.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

Performance of civil servants is variable and the robustness of performance management procedures is not clear.

- Elected Representative

“

The constant criticism is like a dripping tap; it has a corrosive effect on morale.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

The Public Accounts Committee and the NI Audit Office are set up to beat up civil servants. Things need to be done differently.

- Elected Representative

“

There is a lack of energy and things move too slowly.

- Public Sector Board Member

“

**I wouldn't encourage my own children to work within the public sector.**

**- Senior Civil Servant**

# Strategic communication needs to improve

The State of the State 2026

**Our interviewees had no shortage of public sector success stories to share, but recognised they rarely land in the public consciousness. Many argued that the public sector's communications should be improved, while others said that the nature of news tend to emphasis negative stories.**

These successes include Health Trusts reducing wait times and increasing capacity for appointments, DfI hitting major planning targets, the success of NI Screen in attracting global productions, Universal Credit migration and the opening of Belfast Grand Central Station.

Effective communication is clearly a difficult issue and requires attention in terms of transparency and honesty over what is, and what is not, being delivered. However, there is a belief that meaningful strategic and operational communications can, and should be, significantly improved.

“

The Executive is really poor at telling its story.

- Elected Representative

“

The media don't want to know about good news stories. It focuses on negativity around government.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

What the Executive is doing is impressive but it just isn't visible.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

All governments have challenges and some people believe that non-delivery is an existential threat to democracy.

- Elected Representative

“

Insiders say that things are being done, but the external perception is that very little is being done.

- Arms-Length Body Chief Executive

“

There are pockets of good things, but government need to do **more than communicate** – it needs to be very clear what, and how, initiatives are being implemented and what difference they will make.

- Umbrella Body Chief Executive

# Financial situation is driving reform, but not fast enough

The State of the State 2026

**One theme stood out across our interviews: that Northern Ireland's public spending is unsustainable – especially when it comes to health and education. Reforming public services is seen as essential, and urgent, to make local services affordable and avoid compounding costs.**

Several interviewees argued that HM Treasury interventions may have affected fiscal management behaviours. Historically, departmental overspends would have been considered unacceptable and pay parity is now a real financial pressure.

Most interviewees told us there is little political appetite for revenue-raising measures that would require multiple ministers or the entire Executive to back.

Beyond the public sector, businesses told us they would like to see more certainty in fiscal planning, alongside a longer-term economic plan for Northern Ireland.

Overall, interviews highlighted the need to accelerate the pace of transformation and manage the expectations of the public over what can and will be delivered.

“

Are we now budgeting by credit card?

- Senior Civil Servant

“

We cannot continue to subsidise public services to people who can afford to pay for them.

- Elected Representative

“

Civil Servants believe they can deliver transformation. The problem is it hits a wall when you try to get it through the system.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

A demographic timebomb is going to hit us.

- Arms-Length Body Chief Executive

“

I'm optimistic over getting a three-year budget, but really disappointed at the lack of imagination in that budget.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

“

There is a great will to deliver change but **not a great will to accept change.**

- Arms-Length Body Chief Executive

# AI seen as an opportunity rather than risk

The State of the State 2026

**Our interviewees believe in the potential that AI has to improve and transform public services in Northern Ireland. Some spoke about successful use cases and an appetite to scale them.**

Officials told us that the appointment of a government Chief Scientific and Technology Officer was an important step. They went on to talk about the next challenges that include skills gaps, poor base data, infrastructure limitations, and some internal scepticism.

Nevertheless, interviewees were hugely enthusiastic about draft research, innovation and AI strategies currently out for consultation. They were also upbeat about the Office of AI and Digital, and its potential to boost public sector efficiency. Some argued that staffing it with experts is needed to maximise its performance. There was also a strong consensus on the need for human oversight and ethical safeguards, prompting questions about the necessity for greater regulation in this evolving technological landscape.

“

It doesn't feel as if the NI Civil Service is geared up to maximise the use of AI yet.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

AI is built on the foundation of data, so we need good data governance.

- Public Body Chief Executive

“

The old adage of rubbish in, rubbish out still applies.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

There is no stopping AI – either be with it or be left behind.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

“

We need people to understand the way that technology is evolving.

- Arms-Length Body Chief Executive

“

If you use AI wisely and well, **you will get results.** If you don't, you won't.

- Senior Civil Servant

# Is Net Zero still seen as important?

## The State of the State 2026

**Many interviewees told us about excellent local work on green initiatives. But some went on to argue that day-to-day pressures were taking priority over net zero and that legislative targets were seen as challenging. Others suggested that linking net zero and cost efficiencies could help make progress.**

Some of the green initiatives cited in our interviews were impressive, including the development of sectoral plans, the installation of solar panels on hospitals and the increased use of electric cars in fleets. But overall, interviewees were cautious about progress towards net zero.

One of the suggestions that came up in interviewees was for net zero to be bound into any initiatives that could ease cost pressures, especially in healthcare.

Some of the business figures we interviewed want to see a more comprehensive and detailed energy transition plan, and some argued that current targets are too aggressive. In the public sector, several interviewees pointed to the private sector as a driver for change. They told us that some companies are moving faster than government to seize the commercial and reputational advantages of net zero action.

“ There is a feeling that the Net Zero battle is lost.  
- Umbrella Body Chief Executive

“ People weren't aware of all the requirements and consequences when the Climate Act (NI) was agreed.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“ The geopolitical plates have shifted in terms of climate change.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“ In passing the legislation, we have given ourselves a stick to beat ourselves with.  
- Elected Representative

“ If I did a pie chart of the questions I get, I don't think I've been asked a single climate related question in the last year.  
- Senior Civil Servant

“ We have **aspirations rather than plans.**  
- Arms-Length Body Chief Executive

# Questions around the PfG and the ISNI

## The State of the State 2026

### Both the Programme for Government (PfG) and draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) were front of mind for many interviewees.

They universally welcomed agreement of the PfG but some questioned whether it is too broad. Others wanted to see more transparent reporting on progress. Several were enthusiastic about the creation of a Delivery Unit and suggested that clear terms of reference could help it succeed.

A number of interviewees told us they were concerned about the delay in publishing the ISNI. While a number of reasons came up – ranging from affordability to political agreement – there seems to be confusion about what needs to happen for the strategy to be released. Several interviewees emphasised the critical need for an agreed 30-year capital investment programme to address Northern Ireland’s substantial infrastructure needs.

“

The Programme for Government is not a coherent plan for government.

- Elected Representative

“

There has been less emphasis on the delivery of the Programme for Government than there was previously.

- Senior Civil Servant

“

I have little faith in the Programme for Government and am focusing on departmental priorities.

- Elected Representative

“

If you’ve got targets, you need to be reporting on them and allowing challenge and scrutiny. That has not happened.

- 3rd Sector Chief Executive

“

There is a sense we are underachieving against our potential. When everything is a priority, nothing is.

- Public Body Chair

“

I do not understand why the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland has not been published **nearly two years after the Executive returned.**

- Senior Civil Servant

# Community and voluntary sector really feeling the strain

The State of the State 2026

**Interviewees in the Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) and those that work with them in the public sector, raised serious concerns about the sector's financial pressures. Voluntary groups are an essential part of civic life and practical support in Northern Ireland – but that importance is rarely reflected in policy or funding.**

Some interviewees told us that while collaboration between the CVS and government can be strong – for example with the Department for the Economy (DfE) – it's inconsistent across departments. They were also concerned about the impact of an impending 65 per cent real-terms cut to economic inactivity projects from the Local Growth Fund. Current rules also weight funding in favour of capital projects which further exacerbates pressure on the sector.

Overall, interviewees called for a re-examination of the relationship between the public and voluntary sectors to make sure they are collaborating effectively and providing value for money.

“

We all need to be on the bus, facing the right way.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

“

There is an emotional rollercoaster of funding.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

“

We were able to tell a Minister more than their own officials were able to find out.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

“

It's not even a cliff edge anymore. There's no cliff. We are in the water already.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

“

Every time the public and private sector are mentioned, **include the third sector**. Three sectors need to be involved to make the economy work.

- Voluntary Sector Chief Executive

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