

An aerial photograph of a residential street during sunset. The street is lined with brick houses and has several cars parked along the sides. The sky is filled with soft, orange and pink clouds, and the sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene.

DCN

DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK

Britainthinks

Insight & Strategy

Districts Deliver

How local people view their councils

Market Research Report
February 2023

Foreword from the DCN Chairman

It is my privilege to serve as both a councillor and as a council leader: roles that give me an unrivalled vantage point of my community's needs and expectations.

The district council I lead – Breckland, in Norfolk – provides many of the services upon which local people depend. The councillors and officers of Breckland, like those of nearly 200 other district councils, strive for excellence. We seek to build healthier, more prosperous places. We work hard to make our local environment cleaner and greener. We help our communities through crises.

The local feedback we get is mostly very positive and reveals an immense appreciation for our services. Any suggestion that services could disappear – for instance due to budget challenges – prompts widespread concern. People find us approachable and our remit tangible.

When I speak to local people, I get a sense of just how much our services mean to them. One young woman with mental health difficulties had been facing homelessness but we have provided her with accommodation and wraparound support. Now she's getting her life back on track and feels that 'the council cares'.

In short, district councils are understood, appreciated and trusted; their services are valued

Every councillor has plenty of anecdotal evidence of what their council is doing well and what could be improved. However, relatively little national evidence has been available about how residents in shire county areas see their council.

To overcome this gap in knowledge, the District Councils' Network commissioned BritainThinks to conduct a major survey in two-tier areas. Do local people know who we are and what we do? Do they think we understand their needs and are running services well?

This report presents the findings of the research. I'm sure you will agree that it offers encouragement about our communities' views of their local councils. In short, district councils are understood, appreciated and trusted; their services are valued. District councils have the highest levels of satisfaction in two-tier areas. A clear majority of

residents say that district councils bring about pride in their place.

I believe these results are an endorsement of the scale of district councils. We are the most localised principal authorities. Our boundaries are built around easily identifiable market towns, seaside communities, new towns and cathedral cities. We are genuinely local government.

In my view, the fact that we are close to all our residents helps us win trust. It gives us a unique convening power to pull together local people and to channel our collective energy towards moving our places forward.

I also believe this research tells us something important about levelling up. The government has been clear that its 12 levelling up missions are about reducing the disparity in opportunity that we see in too many places; and that the best way to achieve that is by empowering local places to grab hold of their own destiny. That is how we will restore local pride and a sense of community. It is about place leadership by people who know their communities well.

Nearly three times more people say that their district council is best placed to drive change in their areas than national government. A large proportion of people agree their district council understands the local area and has the interests of local people at heart. To me, this says loud and clear that district councils are ideally placed to play a pivotal role in delivering levelling up and to bring our communities with us as we do so.

I find it heartening that our residents know and appreciate the range of services that district councils – and local government as a whole – provide. They understand the wider benefits their council brings. They recognise that district services can keep people healthy. They rightly believe that district council services can support vulnerable people and help high streets.

This is important. So much of the national debate on local government has been dominated by the pressures on adult and children's social care. These services are critical. They are delivered with great dedication and under huge stress by our county and unitary council colleagues. However, with the understandably heavy focus on social care in



Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen
Chairman of the District Councils' Network and Leader of Breckland District Council

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The small scale of districts is our huge strength. The evidence from this exclusive research is that our communities recognise it

recent years, a sense of the broader role of local government may have been lost.

Most district council services are universal. They are visible to every single resident. They are the services which shape places and create prosperity. They can lessen the burden on the NHS and other parts of the public sector. These services are perhaps better understood and appreciated by the local people who use them than by Westminster or Whitehall.

I'm a great believer in the value of local democracy and the benefits that all councils bring to their communities. This research reaffirms that local government in two-tier areas works. Residents recognise the different strengths of district and county councils. I take this as encouragement that all parts of local government should continue working together and finding new ways to deliver better lives for the residents we all serve.

Levelling up our local places is a collective endeavour. The small scale of districts is our huge strength. The evidence from this new research is that our communities recognise it.

I encourage you to take a look and see for yourselves!

Sam Chapman-Alken

Foreword from BritainThinks



Ben Shimshon
Co-founder and
Managing Partner,
BritainThinks

For many years, BritainThinks wider research has shown that people's sense of agency, control and optimism is greater when they consider their own lives and their local areas, and reduces as they think about broader areas such as their region or their nation.

This important piece of research for the District Councils' Network adds further depth to that insight – showing how people's sense of connection is often strongest with the layer of government that is closest to them and their communities. In areas with two tiers of local authority, it tends to be the district council that is best known and often most positively perceived, with high levels of satisfaction amongst residents, both at the overall level, and when thinking about the specific services their district council delivers.

For those of us who follow national level politics more closely, it's often easy to forget that the decisions that are most consequential, and the services that have the greatest impact on people's daily lives are often the most local. Qualitatively, whilst participants in the focus groups recognised that bigger, more 'strategic' issues may need to be dealt with at the county, regional or national level, this rarely aligned with their view of what was most important to them personally.

The picture of district councils that emerges from this research is of a well-understood, locally focussed and largely effective provider of services that matter to local residents.

Whilst there is always room to improve – and almost a fifth of residents express some dissatisfaction with the performance of their council – this research demonstrates that district councils are working from a strong base, with majorities of residents feeling that they have the interests of local communities at heart, that they deliver services that matter for their community, and that their areas would be worse off without their district council.

The picture that emerges is of a well understood, locally focussed and largely effective provider of services that matter to local residents

Ben Shimshon

Executive Summary

District councils serve 22 million people and are home to 40% of England's businesses. They deliver a wide range of local services in large parts of England. Many of these are statutory, frontline services. Others are value-adding services that provide additional support to residents and businesses. Taken together, district councils regularly touch the lives of every single local resident in their places. This has always been true. But the central role of district councils in local communities became even more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example through their leading role in delivering business support grants and support for people to self-isolate.

Despite this close relationship, relatively little evidence has been available – certainly in recent years – to build up a national picture of how members of the public view their district council. That is why the District Councils' Network (DCN) commissioned BritainThinks, the research and insight company, to explore public perceptions of councils and their services in two-tier areas.

The public sees the value of councils being close to their local community

This research has unearthed valuable new evidence about the importance of district councils and wider local government to local residents, and the impact they have on people's lives.

In the DCN's view, there are some important conclusions to be drawn from this new evidence, which supplement what we understand from our existing knowledge and local experience.

First, universal services that are available to everyone in the local area really matter to local people. Residents attach the highest level of importance to waste collection and street cleaning. These universal services do not have a high profile in the national political discourse. But they are considered essential by a wider range of residents than other critical services, such as social care, which are more often at the top of ministers' minds.

Second, the public sees the value of councils being close to their local community. They identify more closely with district councils, perhaps because they provide many of the most visible, universal

Key findings at a glance:

1 District councils have strong name recognition and awareness among their residents. In two-tier areas many can only name their district council.



59% of residents can correctly name their district council compared to 32% who can name their county council.

4 Residents feel that their district council understands and cares about their local area. They have a high level of trust in their district council's ability to tackle local issues.



66% of residents trust their district council more than other forms of government to help people feel proud of their local area.

2 There is a widely held view that the services delivered by district councils are important for their local area.



More than **70%** of residents consider waste collection, street cleaning, housing and economic development to be important. Waste collection is rated as important by 92% of people.



62% trust their district council more than other forms of government to bring the views of local people into decision making.



57% agree that their district council understands the local area and its communities.

3 District councils enjoy high levels of satisfaction across a range of measures, more so than county councils.



54% of two-tier residents are satisfied with their council, compared to 46% for county councils.



Only **8%** of residents trust national government most to tackle social issues in their area, compared to 62% who trust district councils and 31% who trust county councils.



63% of people describe their district council as high-quality.



Only **16%** trust national government the most to increase local economic prosperity compared to 40% for districts



services. They see that district councils bring their views into local decision making. The benefits of district councils' localised scale in galvanising the support of their communities seems clear.

Third, residents understand the profound impact that local councils can have on their communities. They can see the wider benefits that services provided by district and county councils have on improving their town centres, making local economies thrive, keeping people healthy and reducing the strain on the NHS, and helping the most vulnerable. This is a powerful argument for the importance of local government in delivering better economic, social and health outcomes in communities across England.

Fourth, local government in two-tier areas works well. Overall levels of satisfaction are high. While residents do not generally have a clear sense of which type of councils delivers particular services, they know which services have a positive impact

on their lives and their community. On almost all measures, they trust local government more than national government to tackle local issues.

Finally, there is room for improvement. 19% of residents are dissatisfied with the way that their district or county council runs things. The data does not show how far dissatisfaction is driven by factors that are outside the council's control or due to misperception. But it should prompt all councils to redouble their efforts to ensure that their local residents receive – and feel that they receive – high-quality and efficient services.

In summary, the DCN believes that the new evidence gives strong grounds for optimism that local government in two-tier areas is thriving and that district councils have a vital role to play in the county's future as we emerge from the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and strive to deliver the prosperity and opportunities that our communities rightly expect.

Residents understand the profound impact that local councils can have on their communities

Key findings in more detail

Awareness of councils

KEY FINDING 1

Districts councils have by far the strongest name recognition and awareness among their local residents. Many two-tier residents can only name their district council.

RESIDENTS' ABILITY TO IDENTIFY THEIR LOCAL COUNCIL

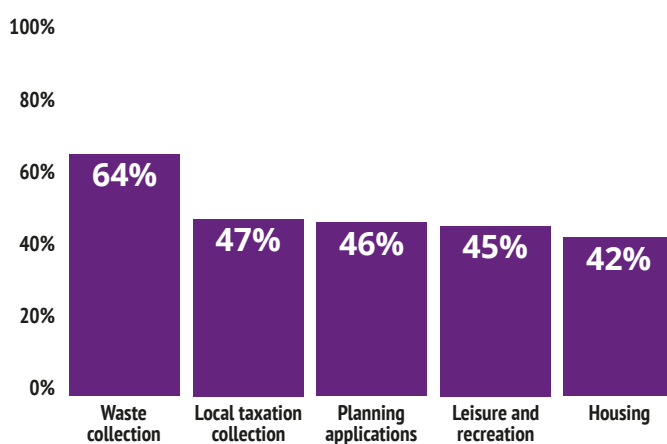
Proportion of two-tier residents correctly identifying their local council



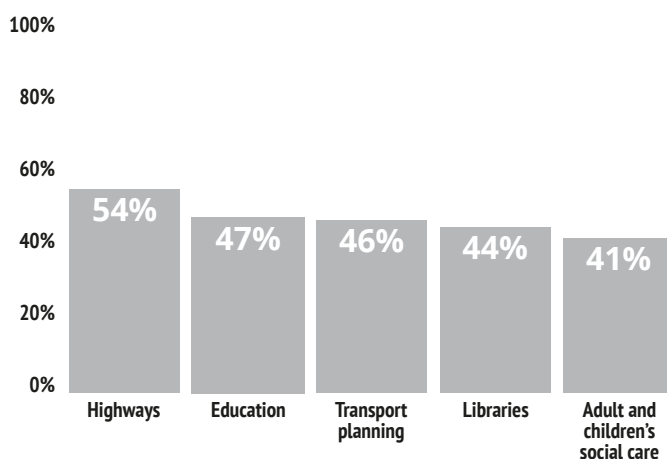
RESIDENTS' ABILITY TO IDENTIFY SPECIFIC COUNCIL SERVICES

Awareness of the specific services provided by district councils and county councils is lower than residents' ability to identify their council. Waste collection is most strongly identified as being a district-run service. Correct identification is between 40% and 50% for most district-run services. The same is true for county-run services.

Proportion of two-tier residents correctly identifying district council services



Proportion of two-tier residents correctly identifying county council services



Importance of district councils

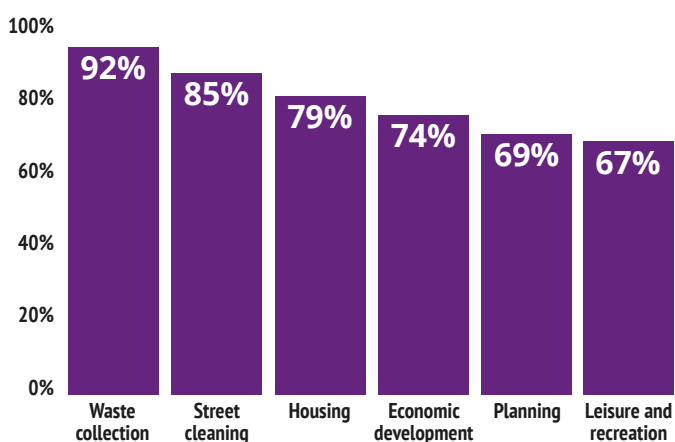
KEY FINDING 2

There is a widely held view that the services delivered by district councils are important for their local area.

IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL SERVICES

A wide range of the services delivered by district councils is seen as being important. Many of these are universal services available to or affecting all local residents.

% of respondents in two-tier areas who consider service area essential or very important



WIDER BENEFITS OF DISTRICT COUNCIL SERVICES

The evidence sheds light on the benefits residents associate with good delivery of district council services. In many cases this is due to the impact services have on the local area. But there is also evidence of the value that residents place on the ability of local services to have a positive impact on society more broadly.

63%
Agree
Services that keep people healthy and well which can ease the strain on the NHS

64%
Agree
A thriving local economy including a town or city centre that has lots of shops and restaurants that are open

59%
Agree
Looking after the look and feel of neighbourhoods so that people feel proud of their local area

56%
Agree
Frontline support for the most vulnerable in communities



Satisfaction with councils

KEY FINDING 3

District councils enjoy high levels of satisfaction across a range of measures, more so than county councils.

OVERALL RESIDENT SATISFACTION WITH COUNCILS

Most residents in two-tier areas are satisfied with their district council. District councils enjoy the highest level of public satisfaction in two-tier areas.

Despite high satisfaction ratings for district councils, the level of dissatisfaction with district councils (19%) and county councils (19%) is not insignificant.

It is possible that lower levels of outright satisfaction with county councils may be due to lower levels of awareness of the services they provide.



	District council	County council
Satisfied	54%	46%
Dissatisfied	19%	19%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	26%	32%
Don't know	1%	3%

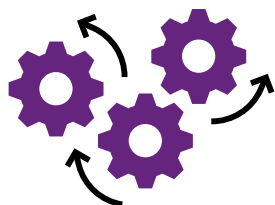
RESIDENTS' VIEWS OF QUALITY

A clear majority of residents describe their district council as high-quality and efficient.



63%

of people described their district council as high quality



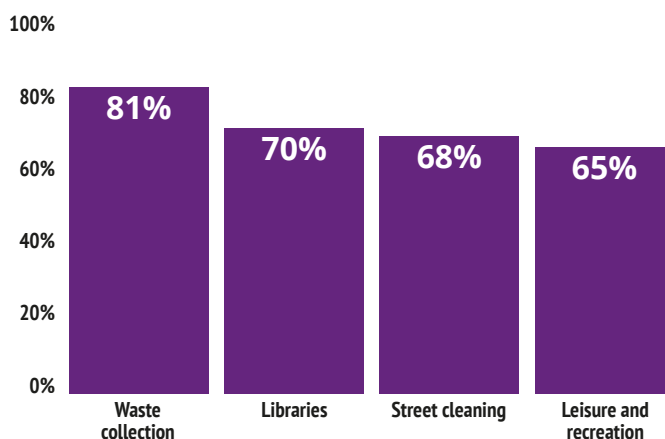
65%

of people described their district council as efficient

RESIDENTS' VIEWS ON SERVICE PERFORMANCE

Satisfaction with the delivery of specific services is also high. Three of the four services with the highest positive ratings in two-tier areas are run by district councils, with waste collection earning the highest satisfaction rating.

% of respondents deeming service area to be very or somewhat well run



RESIDENTS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF COUNCILS ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The polling also offers evidence of the overarching importance of district councils. A majority of residents agree that their district council plays an important role in the local community.

If my district council stopped running things there would be a significantly negative impact on the local community and economy



The services my district council provides have a positive impact on me and my local area



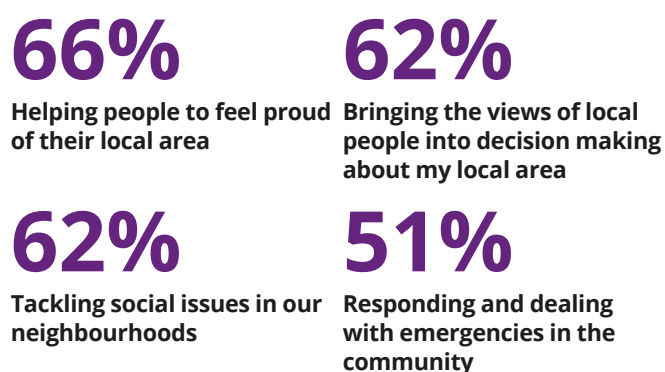
Trust in councils

KEY FINDING 4

Residents feel that their district council understands and cares about their local area. They have a high level of trust in their district council's ability to tackle local issues.

RESIDENT TRUST IN DISTRICT COUNCILS TO TACKLE ISSUES*

When asked which tier of government they most trust to tackle the biggest local issues, respondents opted strongly for district councils.



* Trust in district councils more than other forms of government

COUNCILS' UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

The evidence shows that residents believe district councils understand their local area and local people's interests. There is a greater sense that district councils understand and care about residents than county councils or national government, both of which operate on a larger scale and are more remote from local places. This may explain why residents have a high level of trust in district councils. It also suggests that the size of district councils and their proximity to residents is significant.

My council understands the local area and its communities

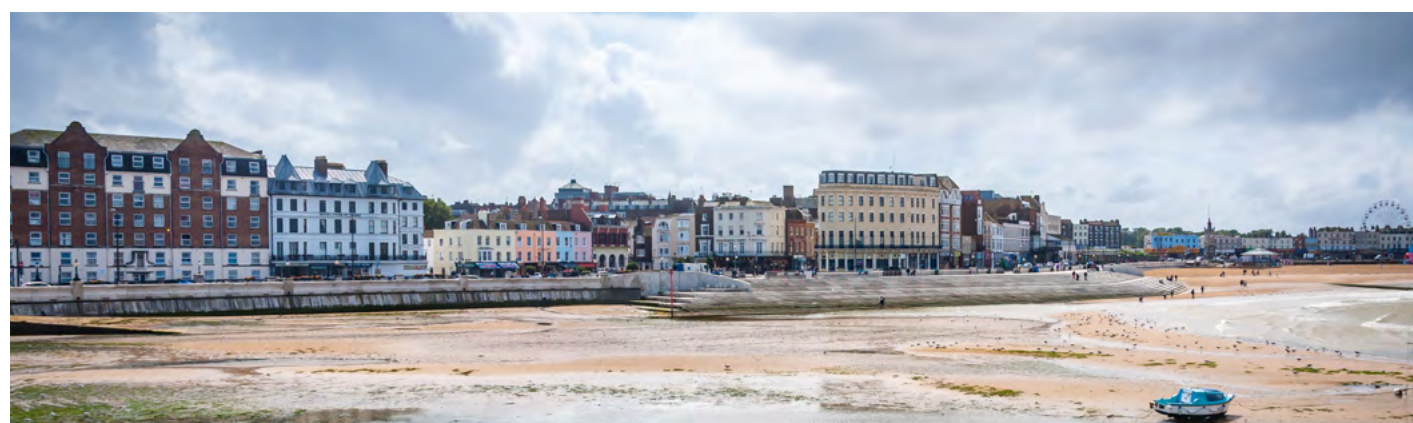
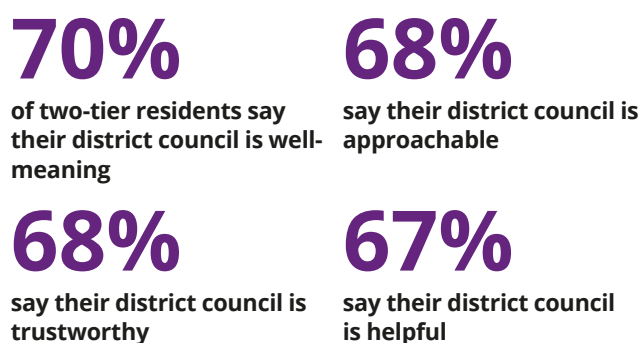


My council has the interests of local people at heart



ATTRIBUTES OF DISTRICT COUNCILS

A large majority of district council residents endorse the use of terms such as 'well-meaning', 'trustworthy', and 'approachable' to describe their council.



Value of local government

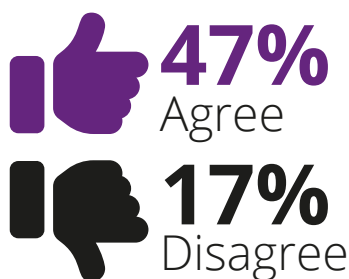
KEY FINDING 5

Local government is more trusted than national government to tackle local issues

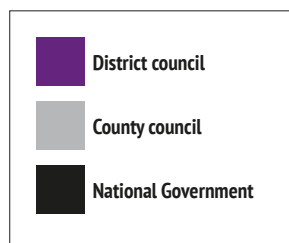
TRUST IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF GOVERNMENT TO DELIVER CHANGE

Local residents have significantly greater trust in local government than central government to tackle the local issues that matter to them. The only exception is helping people in relation to the cost of living, where national government is more trusted.

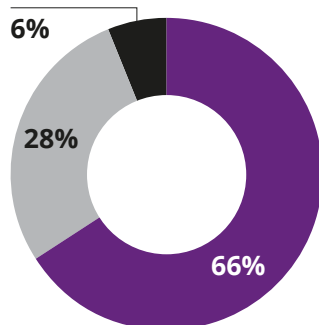
My district council is more effective than national government at bringing about change in my local area



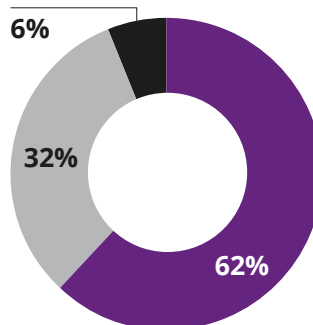
TRUST IN COUNCILS TO TACKLE ISSUES



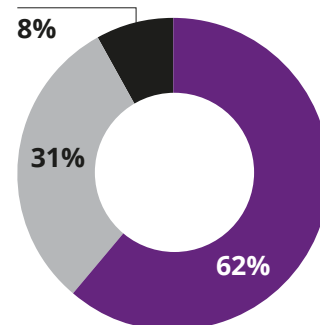
Helping people to feel proud of their local area



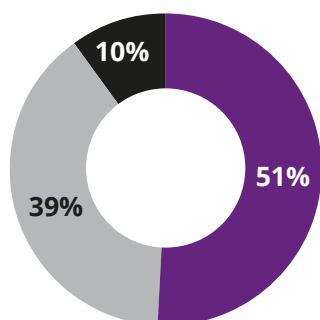
Bringing the views of local people into decision making about my local area



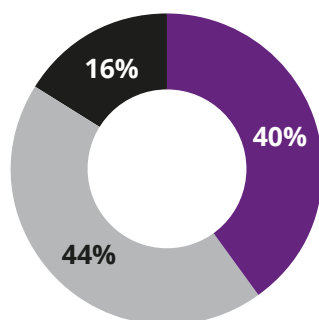
Tackling social issues in our neighbourhood



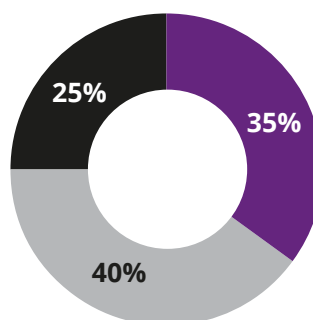
Responding and dealing with emergencies in the community



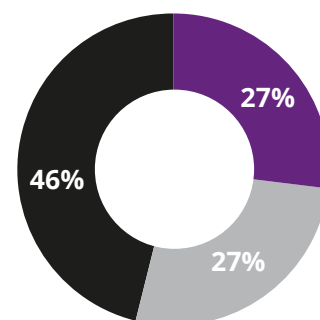
Increasing economic prosperity in my local area



Improving the environment



Helping people in relation to the rising cost of living





Insights

This report sets out the detail of the research and its findings. All of the data featured comes directly from the polling conducted by BritainThinks. In the DCN's view there are significant insights and conclusions to be drawn from this new evidence.

Previous research has found that residents in two-tier areas are well informed about their district councils and satisfied with their services. That research mostly dates back to the start of the 21st century¹. In the intervening years, much has changed. Councils now operate in a much tighter funding environment. Demand for local services has evolved and, in some cases, significantly increased. Councils have been on the frontline in dealing with a succession of national emergencies, especially the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of the war in Ukraine. The steep rise in inflation over the past year has created additional pressures.

What is striking about this new research is that local residents continue to value their district councils

and identify with them. This is despite the many challenges that local communities have faced, or perhaps because of the way district councils and wider local government have stepped up and adapted. District councils remain relevant to their lives and deliver things that matter to them.

The evidence shows vividly that universal services, available to everyone in the local area, are the most valued: waste collection, street cleaning, leisure and recreation, libraries. They make places what they are. These services do not typically have a high profile in the national debate. But they matter to local people.

Adult social care and children's services are under huge and growing pressure. They preoccupy the minds of ministers and decision makers in Whitehall. These are vital issues to tackle for the future of our communities and the country. But this research serves as a reminder that they only affect a minority of local people. There is an array

Universal services, available to everyone in the local area, are the most valued

¹ See for example: Ipsos/Local Government Association "Reputation of Local Government" (2008) https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/publication/1970-01/sri_localgovt_the_reputation_of_local_government_092008.pdf and National Centre for Social Research / DETR (1999)

of visible frontline services – provided by county councils as well as districts – that affect all local people and matter to them. In the minds of the public, local government's wide and varied remit is appreciated. The services that shape places, offer opportunity for local people and improve the local environment have the broadest local affection.

The research also offers new evidence that the public sees the value of local democracy. Residents recognise and trust the most visible and most accessible bodies. They see the value of highly local councils and the positive impact they have on their places, economies and lives. 62% of residents trust district councils most to bring the views of local people into decision making. 66% trust districts most to help people feel proud of their local area. Residents recognise that districts have the capacity to deliver on what matters to them.

The evidence suggests residents have a good sense of the wider value that local services deliver. They value services such as waste collection, street cleaning, leisure centres for the direct benefit they provide. But they can see the wider benefits: improving the environment of their town centres and local places, making local economies thrive, reducing the strain on the NHS, and helping the most vulnerable. This is a powerful argument for the importance of local government in delivering better economic, social and health outcomes in communities across England.

The evidence points clearly to the enduring value of district councils. But it also suggests that local government in two-tier areas continues to work well as a whole. District and county councils know that

their services are complementary. They regularly work in partnership to deliver better services and outcomes for the residents they share, blending the local and the strategic. Residents are satisfied with the services they receive overall from councils in two-tier areas.

This is not to say that everything is perfect. The evidence reveals areas where residents are not as satisfied as councils would hope and expect. 19% of two-tier residents are dissatisfied with the way their district council and county council run things. District councils enjoy clear net positive ratings for efficiency (65%), quality (63%) and value for money (59%) but there are still significant numbers of residents who give a negative rating on these measures. The reasons for dissatisfaction may be complicated and, in some cases, outside the control of local councils. But it is important that we listen to what our residents say.

What shines through most strongly is the trust that residents have in local councils. It is abundantly clear that local residents look to councils rather than national government to deliver on local needs. The government is rightly seeking to extend devolution to shire county areas to put local communities in charge of their own destiny and empower them to promote opportunity. This research gives good reason for ministers to trust local councils to deliver change.

Local government in two-tier areas works. Residents trust and value their district councils. Levelling up the country, driving economic renewal and tackling inequality should be a locally led mission.

Residents recognise and trust the most visible and most accessible bodies

Methodology



2 x online, 90-minute qualitative focus groups

- 7 participants in each group
- Groups were split by age. Each had a mix of Socio Economic Group and gender
- Participants came from different locations across England
- Conducted 24th November 2022

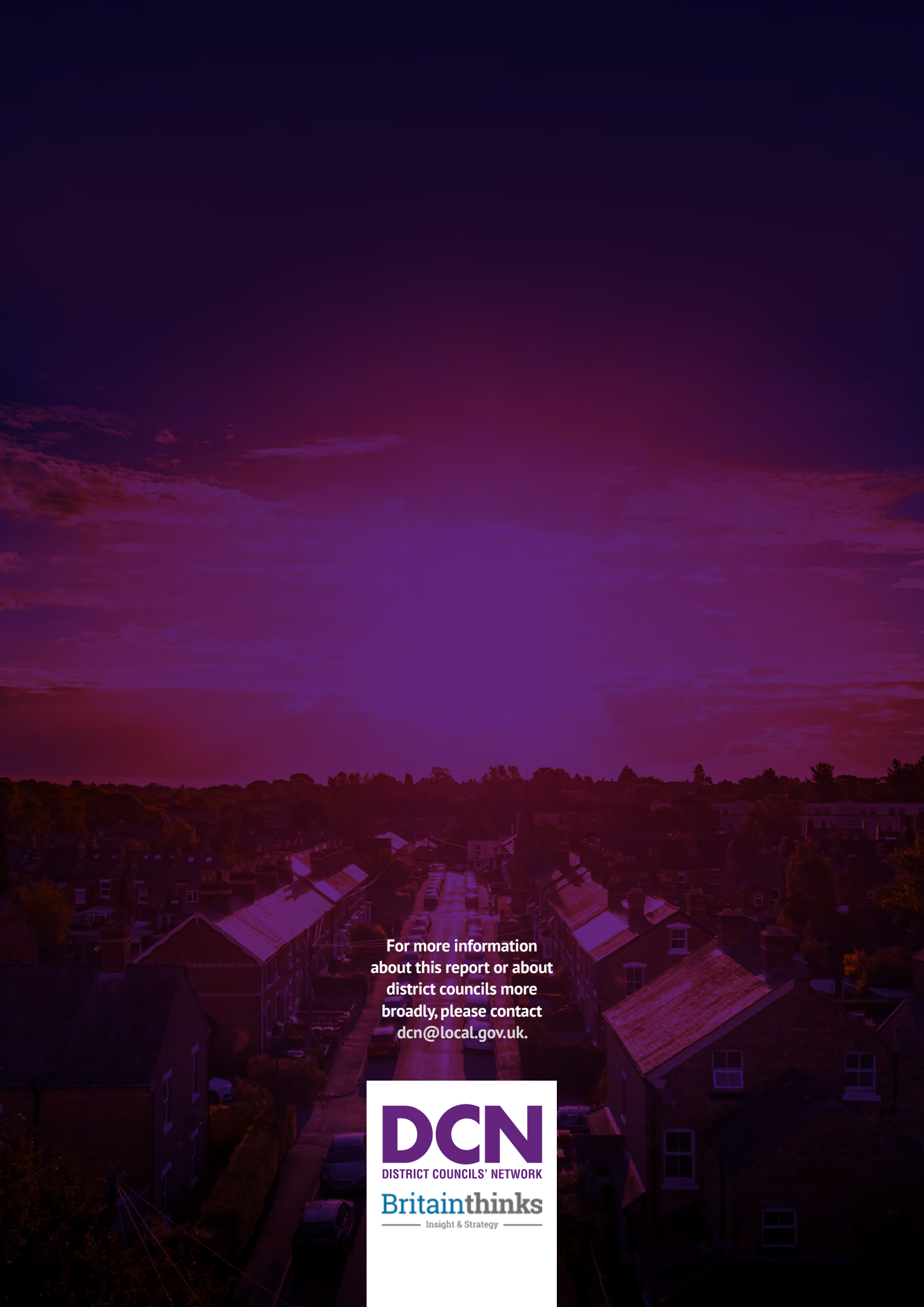


15-minute online survey

- Survey conducted with 1,005 people, in two-tier areas across England
- Data weighted to be representative of the population in England
- Sample gives a margin for error of 3% at a 95% confidence level
- Survey in field 8th to 20th December 2022

Data Report

BritainThinks has published a data report containing more detailed charts and data from the quantitative survey. Please follow this link to read the data report.



For more information
about this report or about
district councils more
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DCN
DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK
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