

Bracknell Forest Council: Member and Member-Officer Survey

April 2021



Research
Evaluation
Community Engagement
Strategy Development

Executive Summary



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Introduction

- Bracknell Forest Council commissioned Public Perspectives, its independent research and consultation provider, **to administer a survey of Members and Senior Officers, and Officers that have notable contact with Members.**
- The survey is sponsored by a Member-led advisory group on equalities, **with the aim of promoting positive, constructive and effective working relationships amongst Members and between Officers and Members.**
- The survey was conducted from **w/s 22nd March through to w/e 16th April 2021.**
- **The survey involved two related questionnaires – one with Members and one with Officers.** The questionnaires and the process were designed by Council Officers and the Member-led advisory group. **The questionnaires were scripted and administered on-line by Public Perspectives, with follow-up telephone interviews.** An initial e-mail and three reminders were sent to **maximise response. Non-respondents** were also contacted by phone to encourage response and offer to conduct the survey over the phone. In addition, Members and Officers were asked to indicate if they would like to discuss their points in greater detail confidentially over the phone, and consequently a series of in-depth telephone interviews were conducted.

Introduction (contd)

- **Overall, 35 of the 42 Members participated in the process and 52 of the 55 Officers invited participated.** The Members that decided not to participate, and whom we were able to speak with, explained this was due to other priorities or being too busy. Whilst these are good response levels, we do not know what Members that did not respond think about the subject matter.
- This report aims to **present the key points and findings from the process in a balanced, independent and constructive way, reflecting the views and voices of those that participated.** The report is structured consistent with that of the questionnaires.
- **The results are presented for Members and Officers side-by-side and have been analysed by different demographics and backgrounds of respondents,** although only very clear and meaningful differences are presented, especially given the small numbers involved requiring notable differences to stand-out.
- The questionnaire and process included capturing open-ended comments and discussing points, confidentially, in more depth. **Key points from this element of the process have been carefully presented and summarised to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of those that participated.**
- **Results are presented as percentages for clarity,** but please note that the number of respondents is relatively small and this can exaggerate differences when presented as a percentage.
- Note: Text in italics represents direct quotes from participants.

Summary of key findings (1 of 5)

Wellbeing

Most **Members** agree their morale is good (69%), their current workload is manageable (79%) and the council provides adequate support for Members (74%), with half agreeing that Members are supported in their development to treat colleagues fairly and respectfully and just over half (54%) saying their job is not stressful.

Most **Officers** agree their morale is good (75%), their current workload is manageable (59%), the council provides adequate support for Officers (77%), they are supported in their development to treat colleagues fairly and respectfully (89%), with just over half (51%) saying their job is not stressful.

Being treated fairly

Most **Members** agree Members and Officers work well together (68%) and that Officers work well together (58% with no one in disagreement), while views about Members working well together are more polarised with 35% agreeing, 26% disagreeing and 39% in the middle.

Most **Officers** agree Members and Officers work well together (58%) and that Officers work well together (96%), while views about Members working well together are more negative than positive with 27% agreeing, 39% disagreeing and 35% in the middle.

Two-fifths (41%) of **Members** that responded to the survey said bullying frequently takes place between Members, half (52%) said it sometimes takes place and 7% said it never takes place.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of **Officers** said bullying sometimes takes place between Members and Officers, 15% said it frequently takes place and 13% said it never takes place.

Summary of key findings (2 of 5)

Being treated fairly (contd)

Over half of **Members** (55%) said they have not been subjected to or observed anyone being harassed by a Council Member, while 34% said they have.

Over half of **Officers** (55%) said they have not been subjected to or observed anyone being harassed by a Council Member or vice versa, while 31% said they have.

Most **Members** have not experienced an incident of unfair treatment or discrimination by another Member, although some mentioned gender (mainly women), age, religion, disability, pregnancy and race discrimination – and overall about a third of Members that responded to this survey mentioned at least one form of unfair treatment or discrimination.

Similarly, most **Officers** have not experienced an incident of unfair treatment or discrimination by a Member, although some mentioned gender (mainly women), age, pregnancy, religion, race, sexual orientation and marital status – and overall about a third of Officers that responded to this survey mentioned at least one form of unfair treatment or discrimination.

Communication and engagement

Most **Members** agree, or at least do not disagree, that the council provides adequate opportunities for Members to be engaged (50% agree / 35% disagree), considers Members' views (56% agree), are well informed and able to make decisions (54% agree), feel listened to (54% agree) and believe they do not get too much information (53% agree), although with each of these indicators there are some Members that feel there are opportunities for improvement.

About a third (34%) of **Officers** feel the council has prepared them at least quite well for their role interacting with Members and just over a quarter (26%) said they have not been prepared well, although 79% are at least quite confident managing relationships with council Members and just 8% not that confident (all of these did not feel they have been prepared well).

Summary of key findings (3 of 5)

Points for consideration

The following points for consideration are drawn from the findings and comments of Members and Officers that participated in the survey:

This is a nuanced, complex and sensitive subject, which a survey and report such as this cannot unpack or explore all the issues. This said, there is reasonable similarity in the views of Members and Officers surveyed, reinforcing and validating the findings from this survey. It is hoped that the survey and this report will serve to **raise awareness and open up discussion with a view to developing and implementing actions and change to help strengthen Member and Member-Officer working relationships, leading to positive outcomes for the local area, residents and businesses.**

The survey has engaged with Members and Officers presenting mixed, differing and sometimes polarised views about the subject matter. **In general, there are positive working relationships between Members, and Members and Officers. This said, there are examples and evidence of inappropriate and negative behaviour that sometimes becomes bullying and harassment amongst Members and between Members and Officers, exhibited by a minority of Members but experienced by several Members and Officers.**

Some of this could be described as simply *‘the nature of politics’* or being *‘robust’*, but which can also *‘cross the line’*, be considered *‘unprofessional and inappropriate’* and move into perceived *‘bullying’* between Members. It can also sometimes spill over into inappropriate behaviour from Members to Officers, with Officers *‘caught in the ‘crossfire’ of disagreements between Members’* and the *‘frustrations that some Members may have about influencing decision-making or issues being resolved to their satisfaction.’*

Whilst this is not necessarily systemic or widespread nor critical to the performance of the council, it does have a notable impact on the wellbeing, ability to perform and morale of Members and Officers that experience or witness such behaviour, and can detract from the effective management of the council.

Summary of key findings (4 of 5)

Points for consideration (contd)

There is a **perception amongst both Members and Officers that negative, inappropriate or bullying behaviour is ‘not always or sufficiently addressed’, either through self-regulation, informally or formally by the council or Members.**

This is partly due to the weakness of the national Member and Member-Officer standards and protocols. This reduces the capacity to address inappropriate behaviour and does not encourage Officers or Members to raise formal complaints due to a lack of confidence that it will result in a positive outcome and only serve to undermine working relationships and potentially be career limiting for Officers.

Members and Officers said there are **opportunities for further training, development and support to promote ‘professional, respectful, effective, constructive and collaborative’ working relationships between Members, and Members and Officers.**

Some Members and Officers suggested there could be opportunities for **greater representation and involvement of women, younger age groups and minority populations within the Member body to reflect the local area and population demography**, which in turn *‘may help change and challenge’* some of the aforementioned behaviours, some of which are grounded in wider equality and inclusivity issues.

Summary of key findings (5 of 5)

Points for consideration (contd)

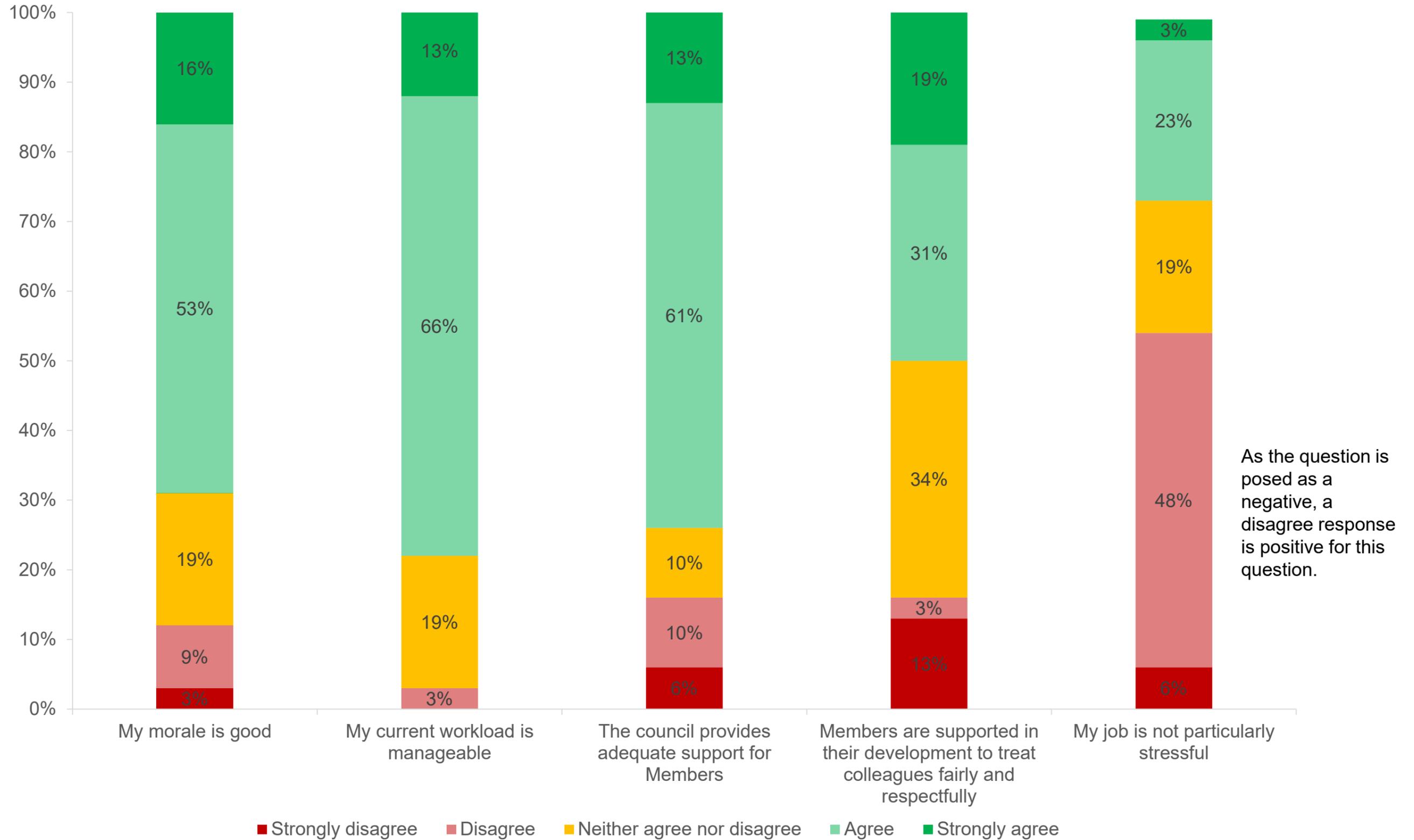
Overall, some Members and Officers indicated there may be an **opportunity for a 're-set' by co-creating amongst Members and Officers a new and local standard and protocol for Member and Member-Officer working relationships** that all Members and Officers are signed-up to, and is accompanied by an appropriate mechanism to address issues.

This local standard and protocol could focus on: roles and responsibilities; behaviour; the balance between operational and strategic decision-making; understanding of Governance arrangements and decision-making processes; expectations around the level of information received to inform decision-making and perform duties as Members; and the consequences of not working within the standards and protocols, ensuring there is consistent application of the standards and protocols and their consequences regardless of position or seniority of the Member or Officer.

The aim of the local standards and protocols would be to strengthen Member and Member-Officer working relationships and help address inappropriate behaviour through self-regulation, informal approaches to address or improve behaviour, or having recourse to more formal procedures where required. This said, **the local standards and protocols should not undermine, and instead promote, 'the crucial role of elected representatives to advocate on behalf of their constituents and appropriately question, challenge or scrutinise information and decision-making'**. The intention is that local standards and protocols will promote professional, respectful, effective, constructive and collaborative working relationships between Members, and Members and Officers, with the **'common aim of achieving positive outcomes for local residents and businesses, and making a difference to the local area.'**



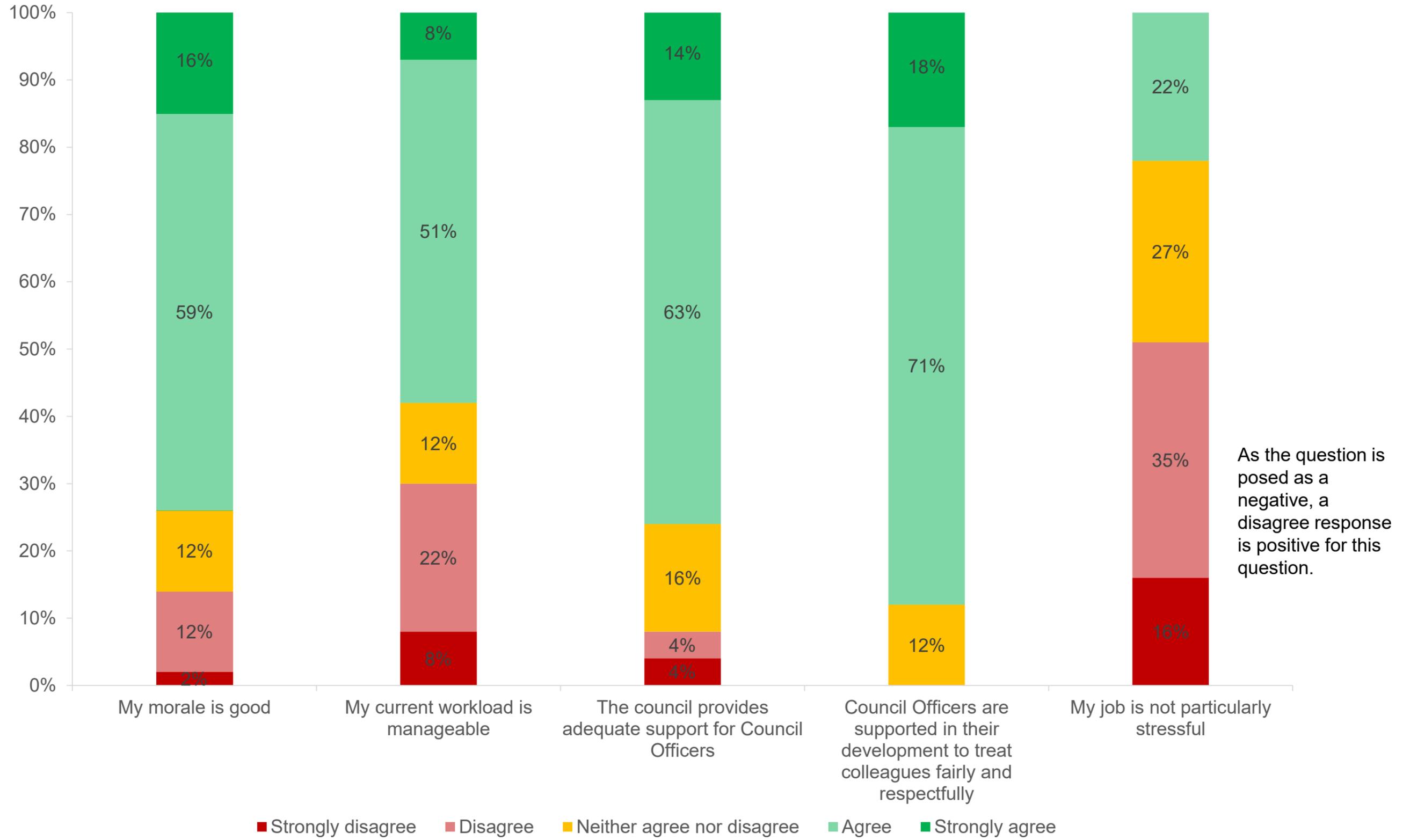
Most Members agree their morale is good (69%), their current workload is manageable (79%) and the council provides adequate support for Members (74%), with half agreeing that Members are supported in their development to treat colleagues fairly and respectfully and just over half (54%) saying their job is not stressful



Question asked: Thinking about your role as a Council Member, how strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Number of respondents: 35.

Most Officers agree their morale is good (75%), their current workload is manageable (59%), the council provides adequate support for Officers (77%), they are supported in their development to treat colleagues fairly and respectfully (89%), with just over half (51%) saying their job is not stressful



Question asked: How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Number of respondents: 52.

Examples and points for consideration

The following examples and points are based on comments raised in the questionnaires and telephone interviews, and are the views and voices of those that participated in the survey:

Members:

- **Being a Member is both a privilege and a demanding, stressful role**, with high workloads and challenging issues on behalf of residents and helping manage the council.
- **The pandemic has placed increasing pressure on Members**, having to deal with its impact (both personally and professionally), supporting residents and businesses, and working virtually. Virtual meetings have placed a spotlight on some negative behaviours.
- **There are opportunities to further Member training and development, for both new and longer-standing Members and non-Executive and Executive Members.** This includes around Member-Officer protocols, understanding roles and responsibilities, striking a balance between operational and strategic decision making, and working within the Council's Governance system.
- **Members are generally supported in their development to treat colleagues fairly and respectfully, although in practice where inappropriate behaviour may occur, there is not always follow-up and redress**, either through self-regulation amongst Members themselves, informally or formally through the complaints process.
- Alongside council-led training and support, **the responsibility for Member development, behaviour and morale also resides with Members themselves and the party groups.**

Officers:

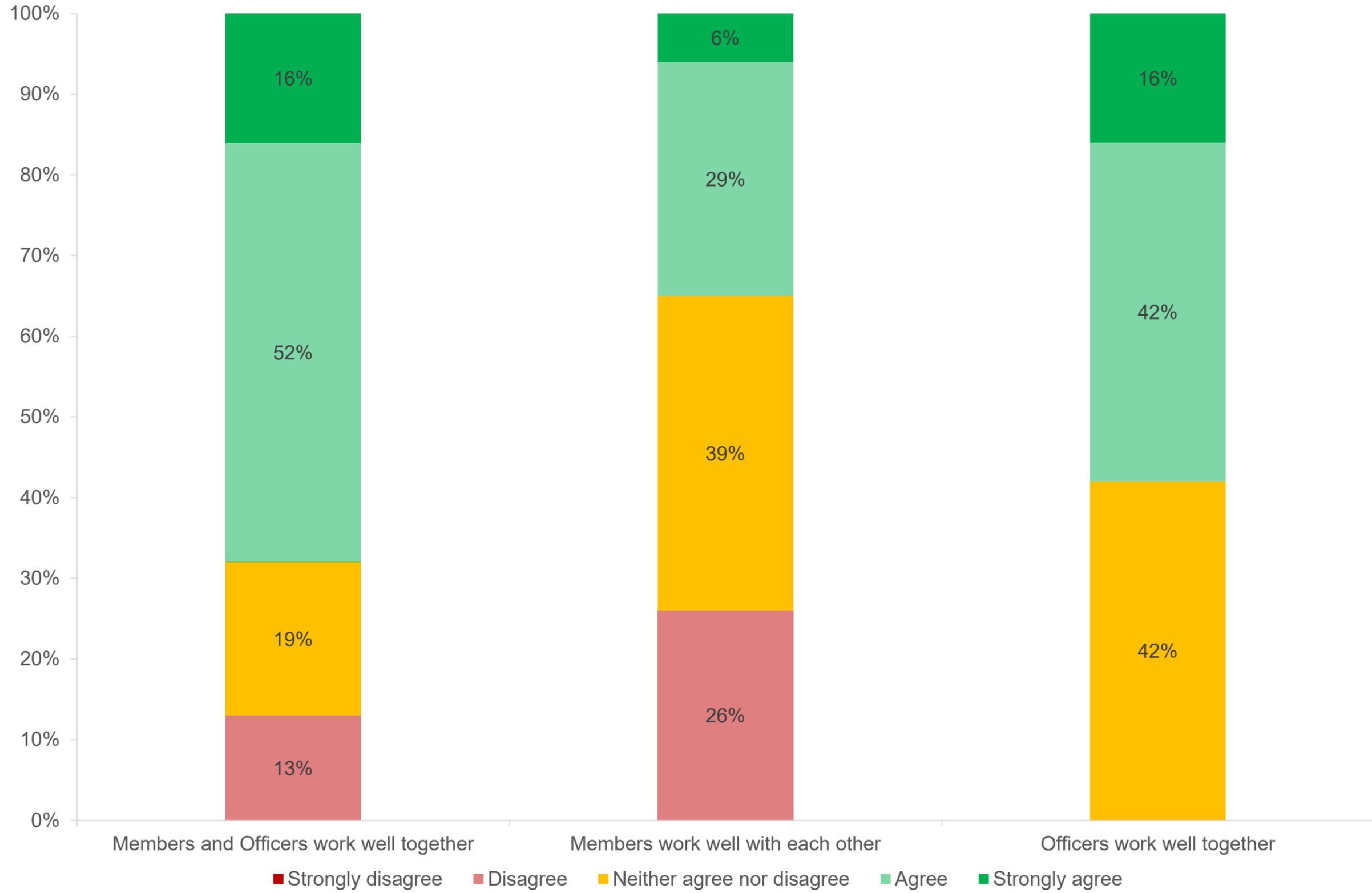
- **Officers have demanding workloads, exacerbated by the pandemic and remote working, placing pressure on wellbeing and morale.** They feel there is increasing support to help manage these challenges and promote wellbeing.
- Whilst Officers tend to feel they are supported to be fair and respectful with each other and Members, some **suggested there may be opportunities for further support and training to work effectively with Members and vice versa.**

Being treated fairly



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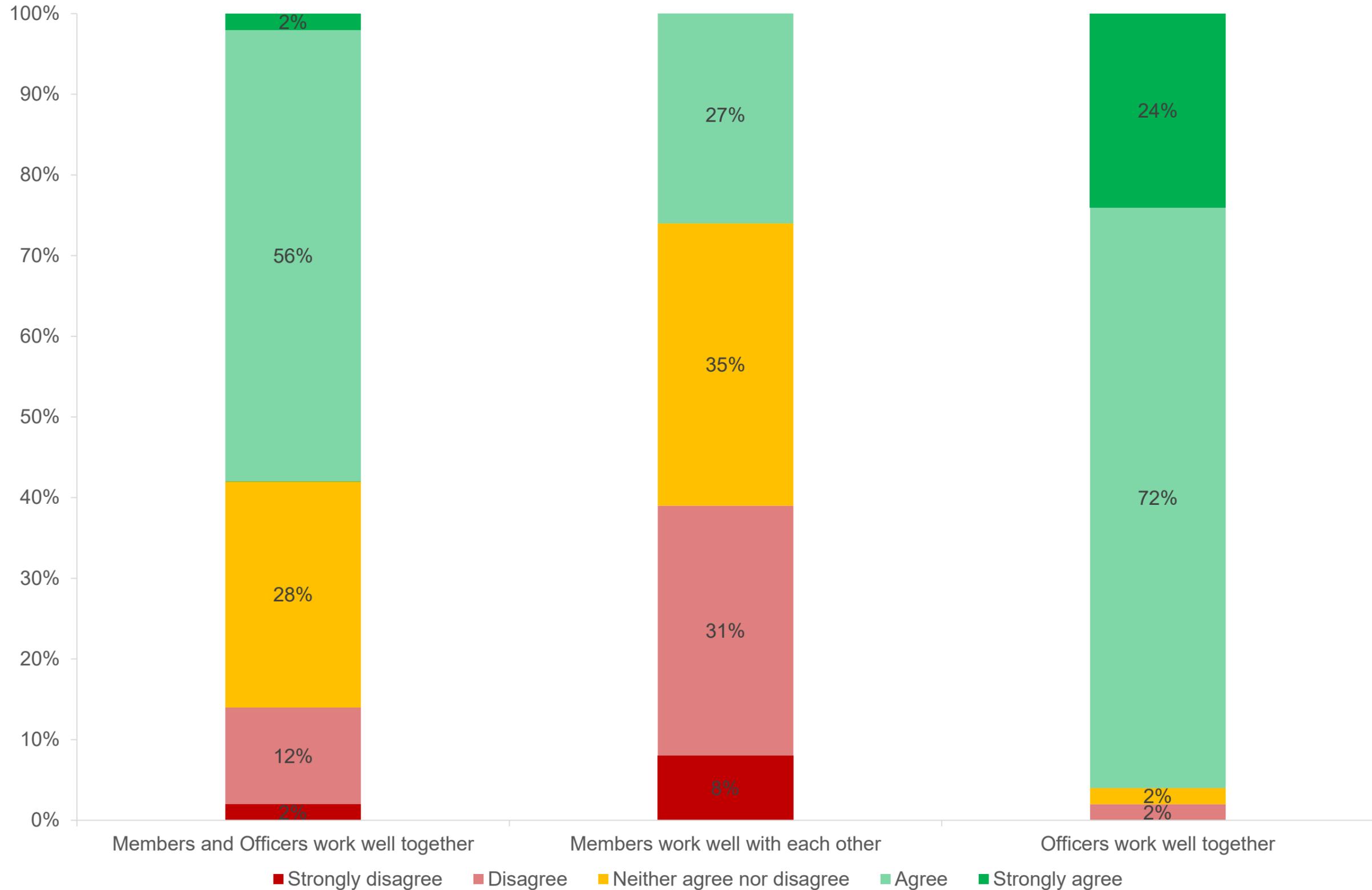
Most Members agree Members and Officers work well together (68%) and that Officers work well together (58% with no one in disagreement), while views about Members working well together are more polarised with 35% agreeing, 26% disagreeing and 39% in the middle



Question asked: How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Number of respondents: 33.

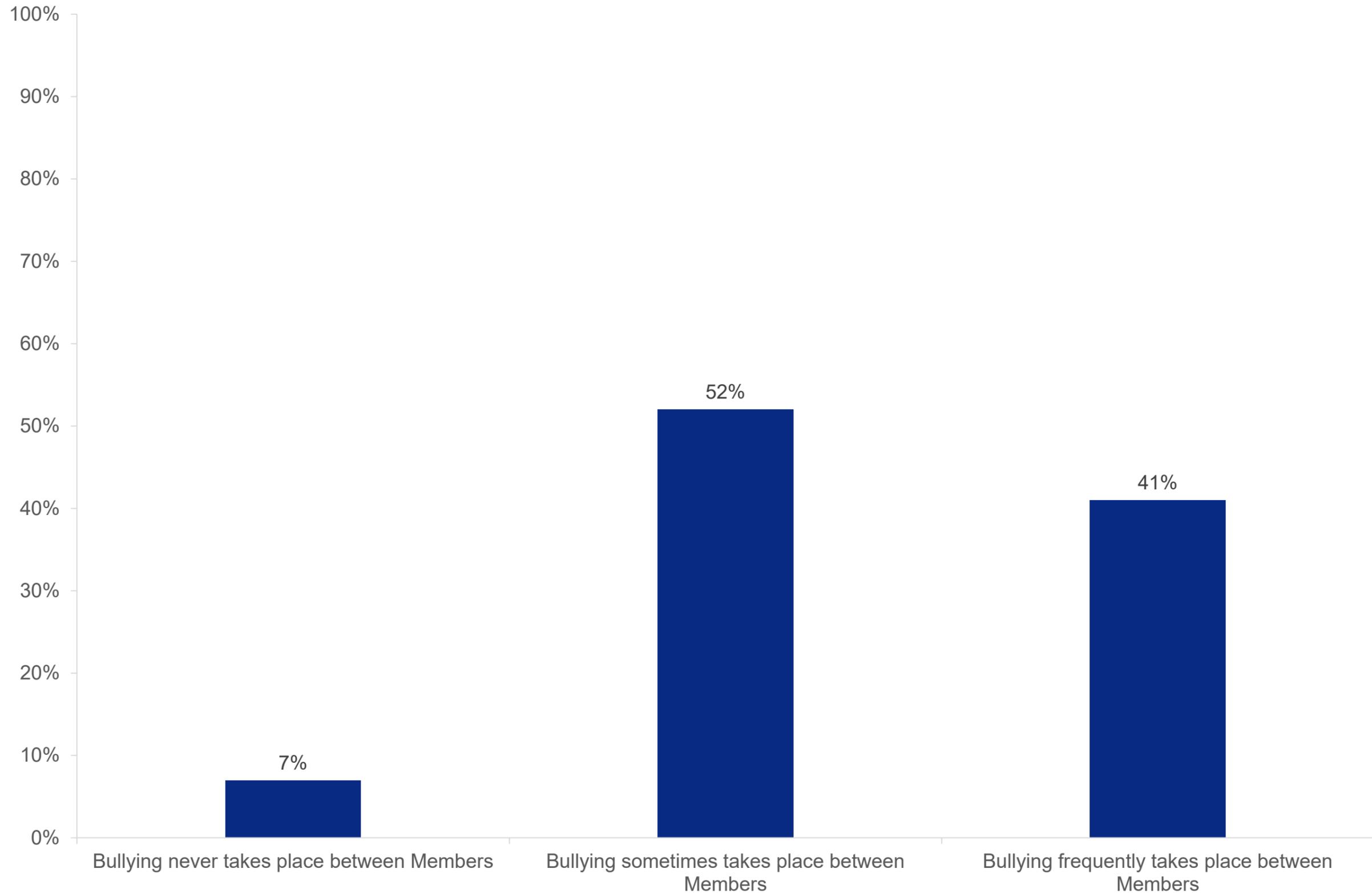
Most Officers agree Members and Officers work well together (58%) and that Officers work well together (96%), while views about Members working well together are more negative than positive with 27% agreeing, 39% disagreeing and 35% in the middle



Question asked: How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Number of respondents: 50.

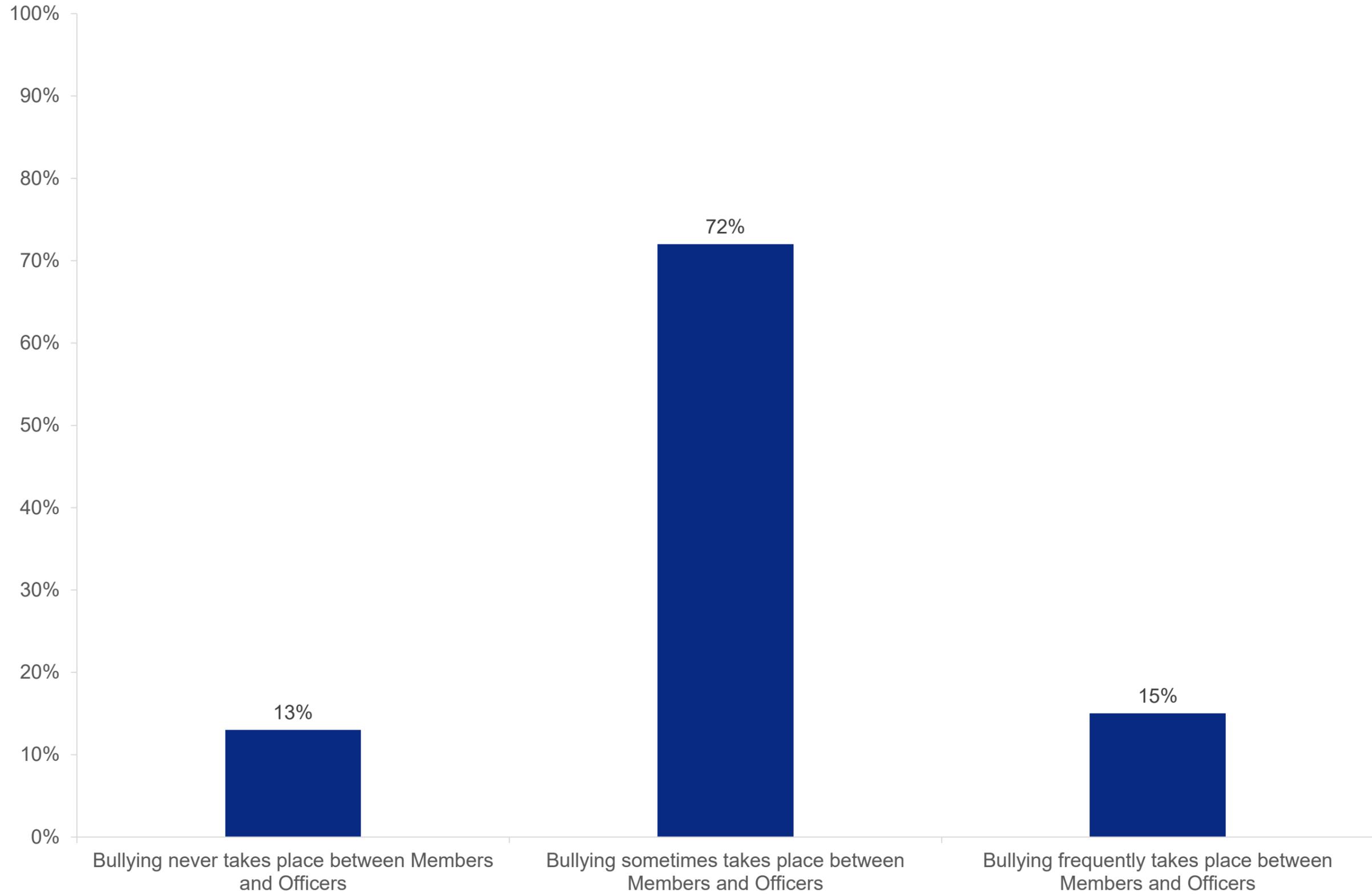
Two-fifths (41%) of Members that responded to the survey said bullying frequently takes place between Members, half (52%) said it sometimes takes place and 7% said it never takes place



Question asked: Based on this definition (ACAS), which of the following best describes your views about bullying between Council Members?

Number of respondents: 31.

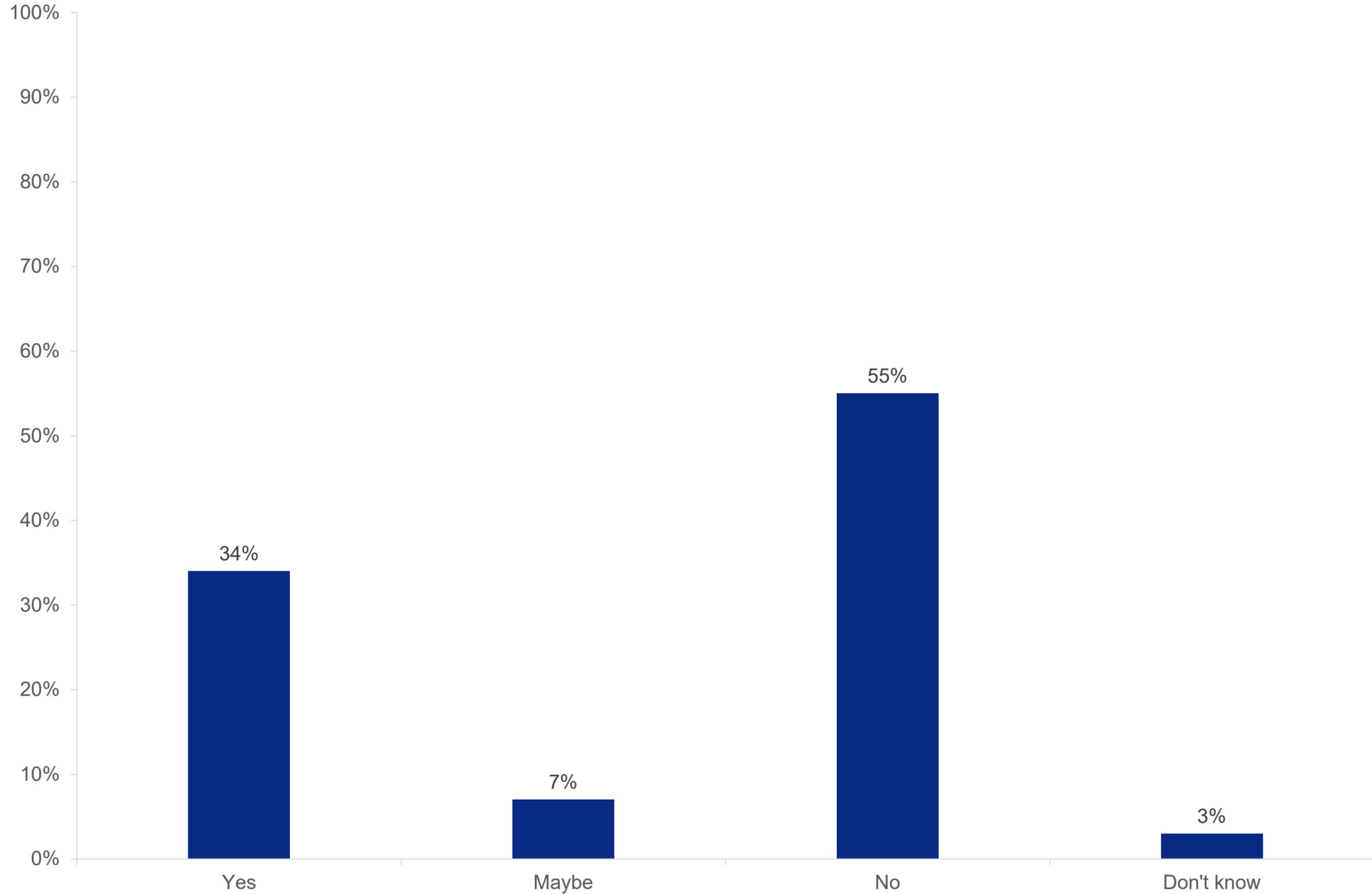
Almost three-quarters (72%) of Officers said bullying sometimes takes place between Members and Officers, 15% said it frequently takes place and 13% said it never takes place



Question asked: Based on this definition (ACAS), which of the following best describes your views about bullying between Council Members and Officers?

Number of respondents: 48.

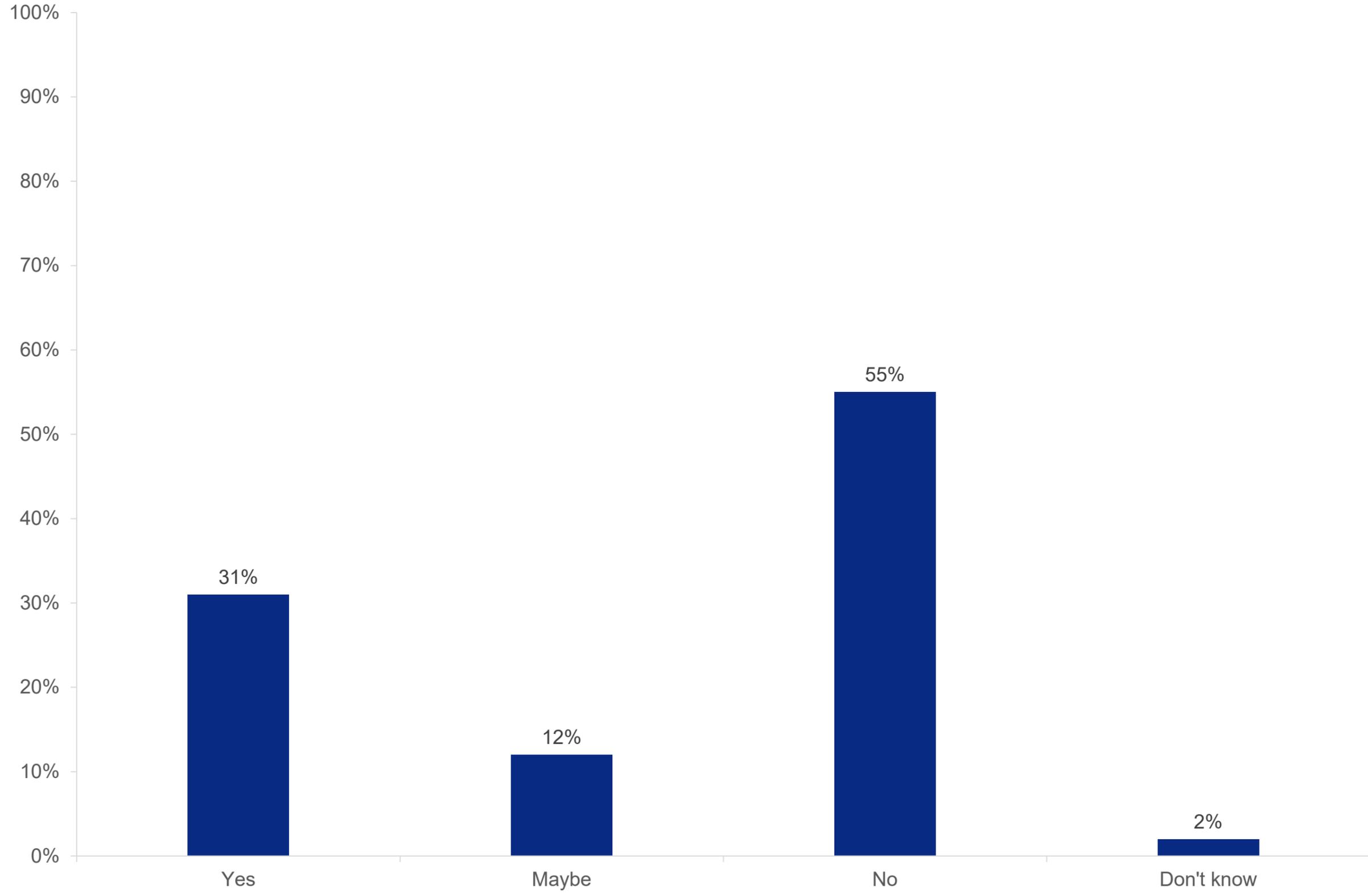
Over half of Members (55%) said they have not been subjected to or observed anyone being harassed by a Council Member, while 34% said they have



Question asked: Have you been subjected to harassment or have you observed anyone else being harassed by a Council Member?

Number of respondents: 31.

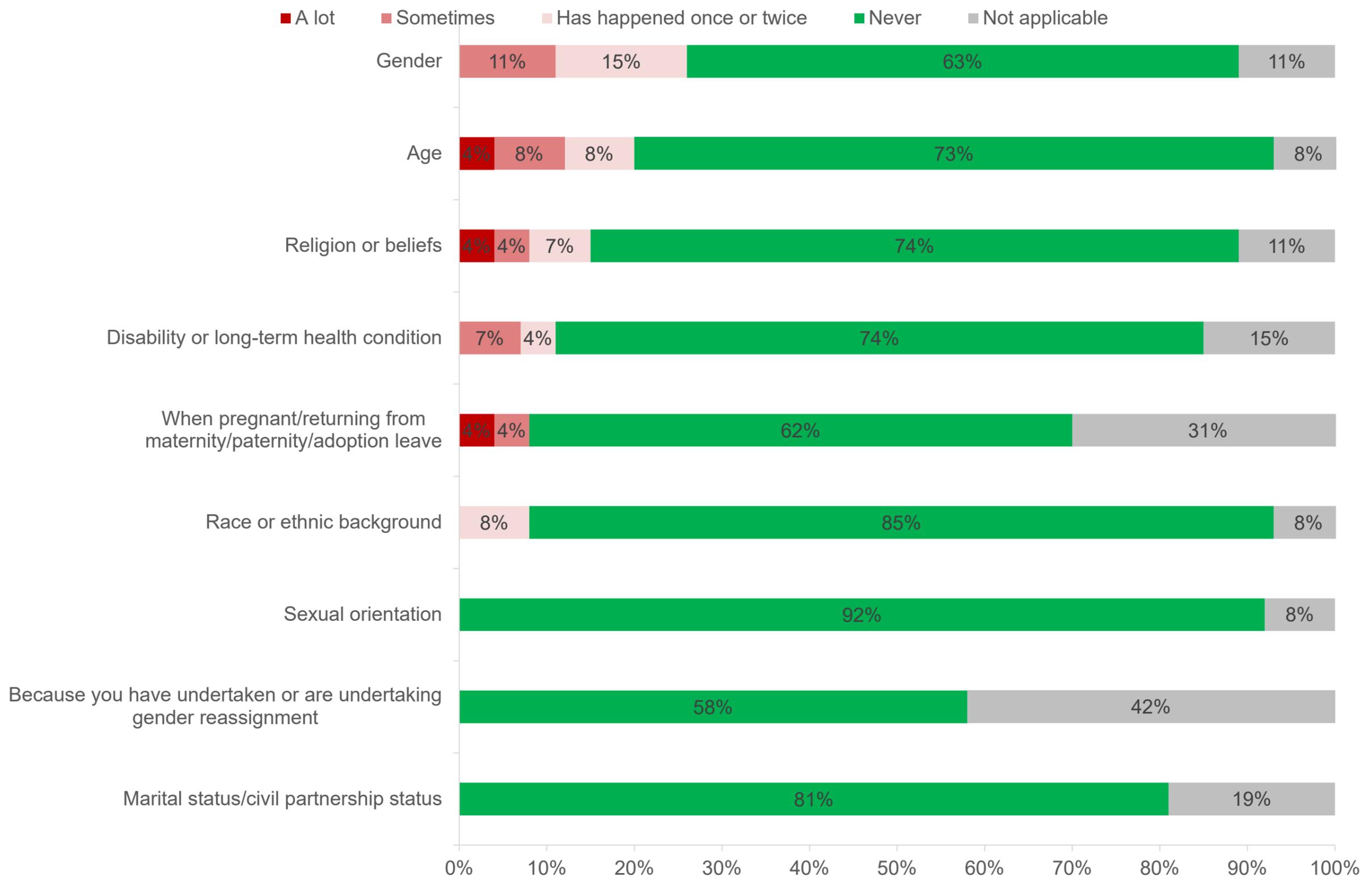
Over half of Officers (55%) said they have not been subjected to or observed anyone being harassed by a Council Member or vice versa, while 31% said they have



Question asked: Have you been subjected to harassment or have you observed anyone else being harassed by a Council Member or vice versa?

Number of respondents: 49.

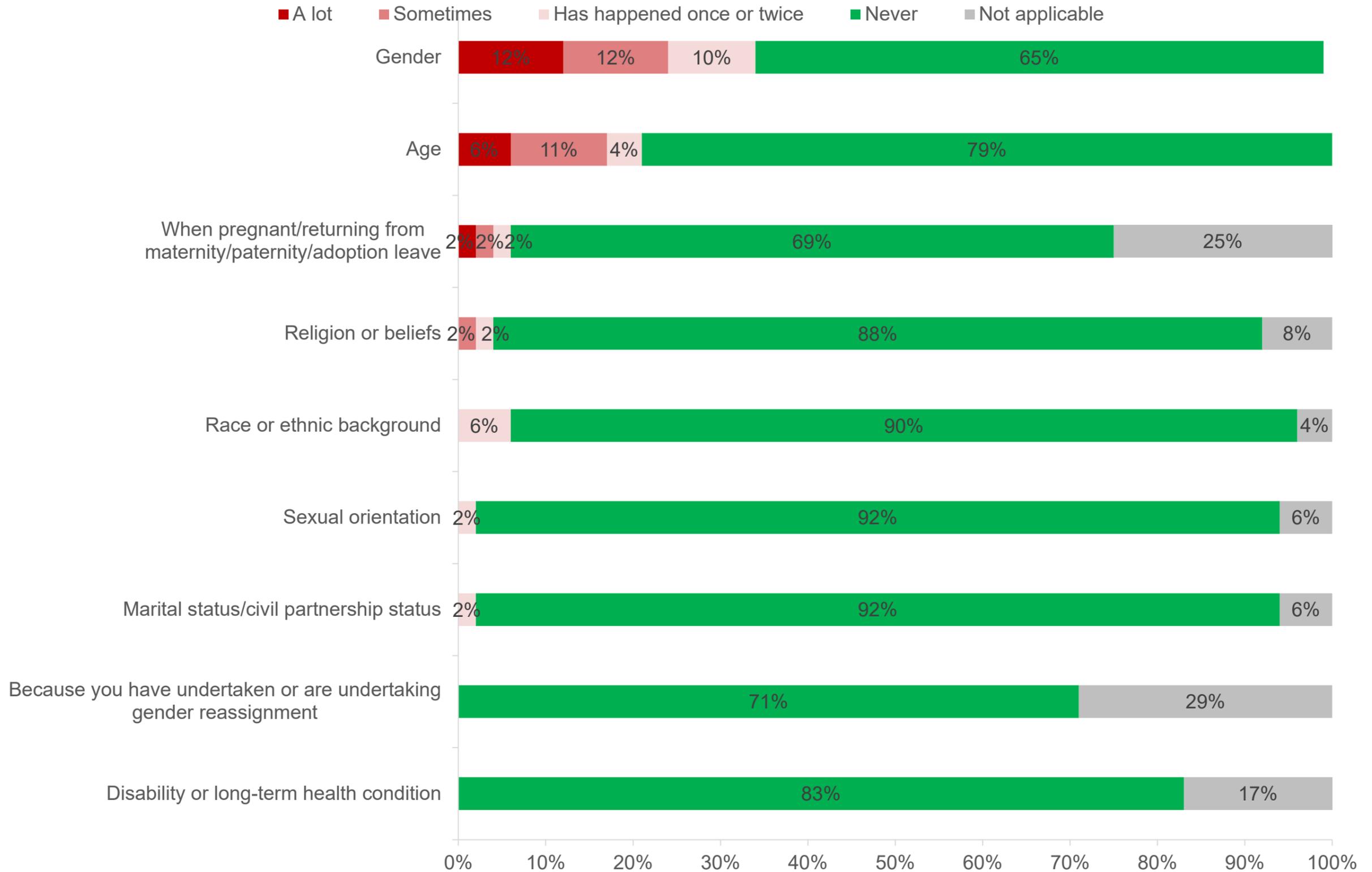
Most Members have not experienced an incident of unfair treatment or discrimination by another Member, although some mentioned gender (mainly women), age, religion, disability, pregnancy and race discrimination – and overall about a third of Members that responded to this survey mentioned at least one form of unfair treatment or discrimination



Question asked: Since you have been an elected Member, how frequently (if at all) do you feel you have personally experienced an incident of unfair treatment or discrimination by a Bracknell Forest Council Member because of the following?

Number of respondents: 31.

Most Officers have not experienced an incident of unfair treatment or discrimination by a Member, although some mentioned gender (mainly women), age, pregnancy, religion, race, sexual orientation and marital status – and overall about a third of Officers that responded to this survey mentioned at least one form of unfair treatment or discrimination



Question asked: How frequently (if at all) do you feel you have personally experienced an incident of unfair treatment or discrimination by a Bracknell Forest Council Member because of the following?

Number of respondents: 49.

Examples and points for consideration

The following examples and points are based on comments raised in the questionnaires and telephone interviews, and are the views and voices of those that participated in the survey:

Members:

- **Members generally work well together on a day-to-day and practical basis**, including on task and finish working groups.
- However, there are **examples of inappropriate behaviour, exhibited by a minority of Members, which can have a notable impact on the experience of some Members**, their wellbeing and their ability to perform their role effectively.
- There are *'groups within the Group'*, resulting in an *'us and them'* situation. Some of this manifests itself in inappropriate behaviour – some of which could be described as **simply *'the nature of politics'* or being *'robust'*, but which can also *'cross the line'*, be considered *'unprofessional and inappropriate'* and move into perceived *'bullying'* between **Members** (and sometimes spill over into inappropriate behaviour from Members to Officers, with Officers caught in the *'crossfire'* of disagreements between Members). This can vary from shouting down or undermining Members during meetings, inappropriate language including swearing or non-inclusive language (often towards women), or more targeted and personal behaviours against particular Members – either in council, public or private settings.**
- **There may be opportunities for greater challenge and redress of inappropriate behaviours** – either via self-regulation amongst the Members themselves, informal approaches to address or improve behaviour, or formal procedures.
- **There may be opportunities for greater representation and involvement** of women, younger age groups and minority populations within the Member body to reflect the local area and population demography, which in turn *'may help change and challenge'* some of the aforementioned issues.

Examples and points for consideration (contd)

Officers:

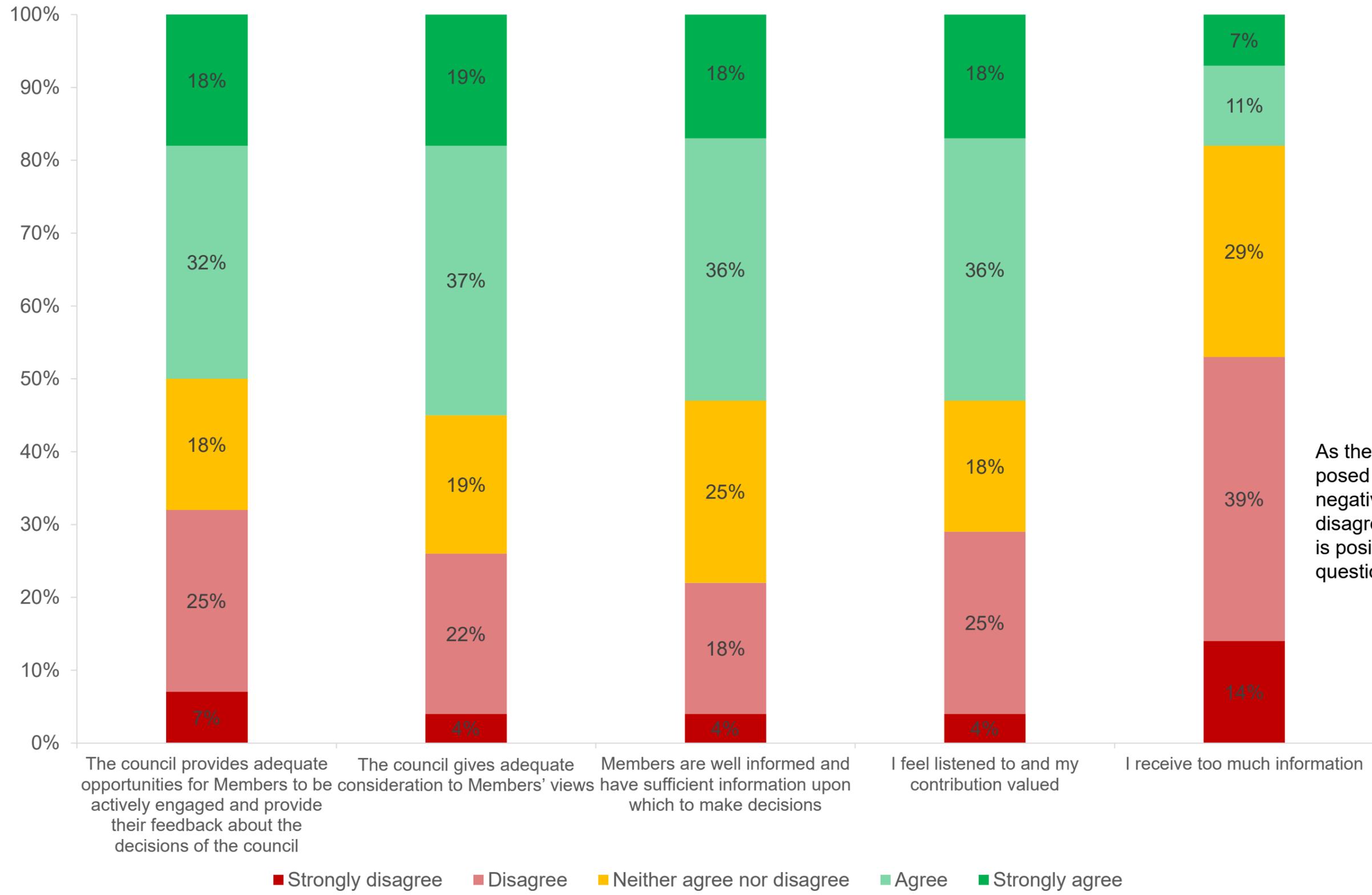
- **Member-Officer relationships are generally positive and strong, although there are opportunities to strengthen relationships and work more collaboratively**, especially between non-Executive Members and Officers, and ensure there is awareness of respective roles and responsibilities and dealings are professional, respectful and civil.
- **There are examples of a minority of Members adopting negative or inappropriate behaviours with Officers that are perceived as bullying or harassment, and which can place unnecessary pressure on Officers, affecting wellbeing, morale and performance.** This can include: excessive questioning and/or time demands on Officers that undermines their abilities and leads to them questioning themselves; disregarding professional advice; inappropriate language or unprofessional or overly aggressive behaviour; occasional misogynistic or non-inclusive language and behaviour towards women (sometimes dismissed as *'banter'*); sometimes less respectful to younger staff or women including referring to male Officers over female Officers for advice/opinion; or undermining or briefing against Officers in private or public settings.
- Some Officers said that these behaviours, when raised or witnessed, **are not always adequately addressed**, or addressed at all, either by the council or Members.
- There is acknowledgement that this behaviour can stem from *'frustration of Members feeling like they are not able to influence decisions or resolve issues to their satisfaction'*, **'crossing the line from being representatives and advocates into rude and bullying behaviour'**, and also that Officers can sometimes **'get caught in the 'crossfire' between Member disagreements'**.
- At the same time, some Officers also suggested there could **be opportunities for 'Officers to be more respectful to Members, understanding of their roles and promote collaborative and effective working relationships'**.

**Communication and
Engagement**



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Most Members agree, or at least do not disagree, that the council provides adequate opportunities for Members to be engaged (50% agree), considers Members' views (56%), are well informed and able to make decisions (54%), feel listened to (54%) and believe they do not get too much information (53%), although with each of these indicators there are some Members that feel there are opportunities for improvement

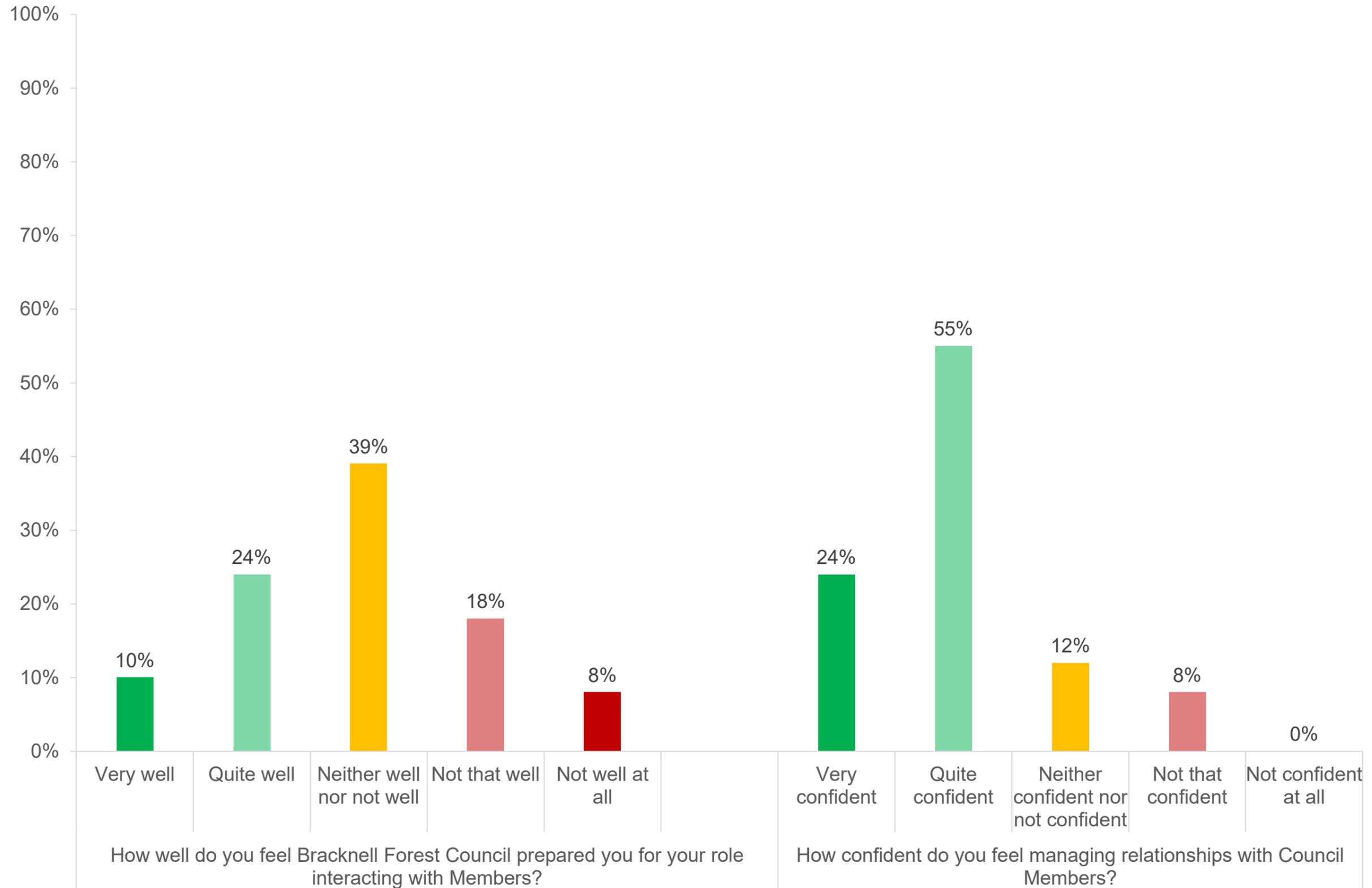


As the question is posed as a negative, a disagree response is positive for this question.

Question asked: Thinking about your role as a Council Member, how strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Number of respondents: 31.

About a third (34%) of Officers feel the council has prepared them at least quite well for their role interacting with Members and just over a quarter (26%) said they have not been prepared well, although 79% are at least quite confident managing relationships with council Members and just 8% not that confident (all of these did not feel they have been prepared well)



Number of respondents: 49.

Examples and points for consideration

The following examples and points are based on comments raised in the questionnaires and telephone interviews, and are the views and voices of those that participated in the survey:

Members:

- **Members generally feel that they are engaged, informed, listened to and able to contribute to decision-making, although there are opportunities for improvement**, including encouraging more debate and discussions in Council Meetings and other settings to influence policy and practice, and involve non-Executive, new and less engaged Members to get involved.
- There can sometimes be frustration when Members are not able to access the information they feel they require or have asked for, or able to influence decisions or resolve issues to their satisfaction – **this frustration can sometimes spill over into inappropriate behaviour with other Members or Officers.**
- **There may be opportunities to improve Member-Officer protocols around engagement, information and decision-making**, including roles, responsibilities and behaviour; taking on professional Officer opinion; the balance between operational and strategic decision-making; expectations around access to information and influencing decision-making, whilst appreciating the role of Members as elected representatives.

Officers:

- **There may be opportunities for further training, development and support for Officers** to promote more confident, effective and collaborative working relationships with Members.
- Whilst there is often support for Officers in working with Members from amongst their team and managers, **where issues do exist they are not always addressed or challenged at a council/corporate level.**