



Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Service User Perspective: Community Engagement

May 2019



Background

We asked Council officers and Members how the Council needs to change to better engage with communities

In our Aligning Levers of Change work we concluded that:

The Council is committed and enthusiastic about engaging with the community and recognises the scale of the challenge

We were told by officers and Members that the Council needed to:

- Improve forward planning of community engagement activity
- Decide when to engage and when not to – and at what levels
- Coordinate community engagement data better– internally and with partners
- Develop whole council briefings – explaining what, why, when etc
- Seek feedback from staff and explain how this has been used
- Use technology better to engage with the community and staff
- Develop ways to engage with harder to reach groups and disparate staff

The Council is acting to implement changes in these areas

We asked the community how the Council needed to change to engage better with communities

Our Service User Perspective review sought to answer the following:

- **Do the needs, experiences and aspirations of local people inform the design and delivery of the Council's community engagement exercises when making service changes to more closely meet their needs?**
 - Are community engagement arrangements designed with the needs, views and aspirations of service users in mind?
 - Are local people satisfied with the quality of the Council's approach to community engagement when making service changes?
 - Are local people able to engage easily with the Council?
 - Does the Council have effective two-way communication with service users?

What we did

- We met groups and individuals to discuss their experiences of engaging with the Council.
 - Faith Group and Community Connectors
 - School Super Ambassadors
 - Citizens Panel / 50 plus forum
 - Vision House Day Centre representatives;
- We surveyed 847 service users;
- We interviewed Council Officers to ask how well they engaged with local people on Active Travel and Home to School transport recently; and
- We interviewed the Leader of the Council to understand his perspective on community engagement.



Summary of findings

We concluded that:

Local people recognise the Council's commitment to community engagement although they are not always able to take part in a way that is effective and impactful

In particular we concluded that:

1. Local people can engage with the Council in many ways but these approaches are not always developed or made available with service users needs in mind?
2. Most people said they were satisfied with the quality of the Councils' approach to community engagement when making service changes although many said they were unable to seek clarity about the question if they needed to.
3. There are some barriers to engagement that potentially limit local participation.
4. Communication with service users tends to be time limited and subject specific.

What we think the Council should do to improve community engagement

- Ensure that community engagement is targeted to capture the views of as many people affected by the service change as possible
- Promote and utilise the support of the Corporate Engagement Team to maximise potential benefits from the engagement
- Evaluate each engagement approach to establish when it is most appropriate to use
- Develop a coordinated approach to community engagement that eliminates the current silo approach practiced in parts of the Council
- Reinforce the importance of genuine community engagement amongst staff at all levels within the Council
- Develop new, innovative and efficient ways of engaging local people by asking them for their ideas and involving them in developing new approaches

And some more ways we think the Council could improve community engagement

- Develop a 'live' approach to community engagement with ongoing dialogue, feedback and communication across the Council – where community engagement is not managed as an isolated event
- Identify local people who because of their roles currently have access to large numbers of people on a daily basis who could potentially work with the Council to help it engage more effectively such as, but not restricted to faith groups
- Share learning from community engagement activity to promote good practice and prevent repeats of poor practice
- Review how the Council can most effectively engage people with protected characteristics to ensure appropriate inclusion in the process and value for money from their involvement
- Improve the timing and transparency of community engagement and the decision making process



Detailed findings

1. Local people can engage with the Council in many ways but these approaches are not always developed or made available with service users needs in mind

What we were told by local people:

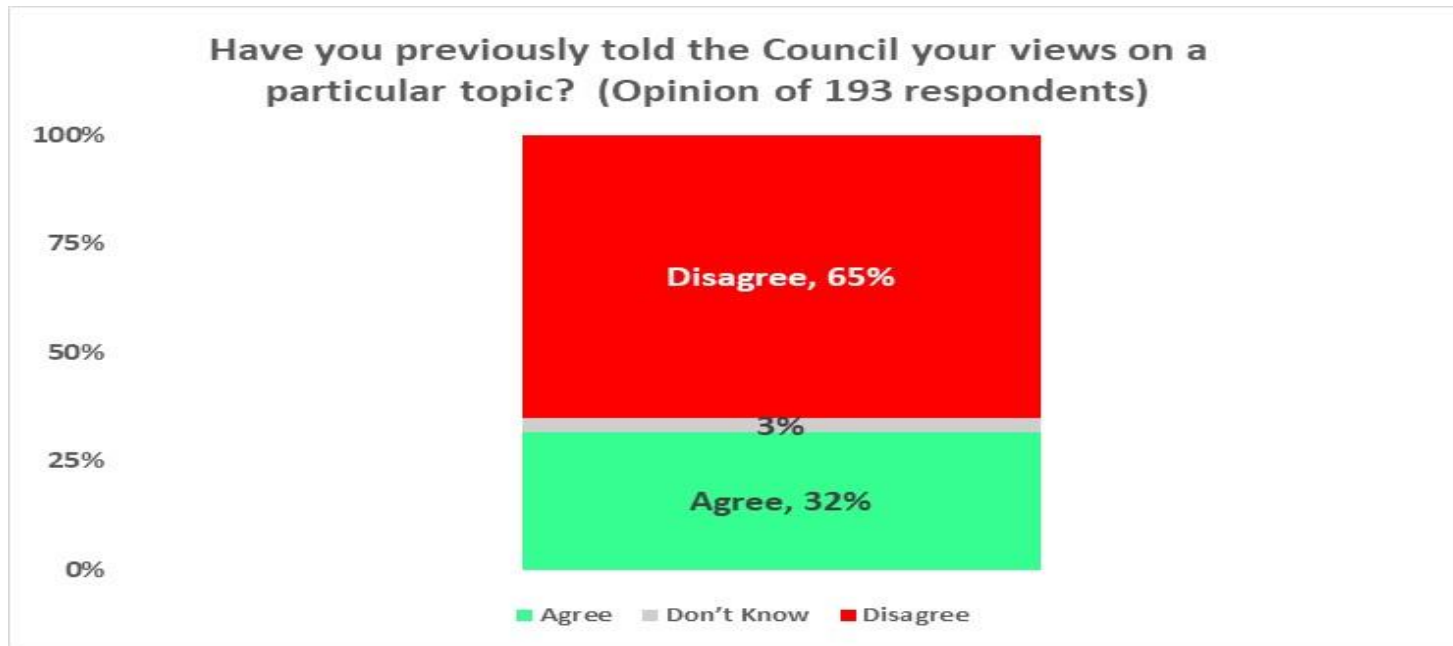
- They can give their views using a range of methods such as online surveys, face to face interaction, roadshow events and drop in events.
- They can access a closed Facebook page but some said this does not allow people to share views amongst themselves.
- The initial Active Travel consultation was described as tokenistic to comply with grant requirements. The subsequent consultation was more thorough – supported by the Corporate Engagement Team.
- One Home to School Transport event was inhibited by road closures.
- Home to School transport review engaged young people but we were told there is scope to build on young people's technology skills to engage more effectively.
- Faith groups engage with the Council but not in a well structured way.
- Councillors sometimes get actively involved and have been effective.

1. Local people can engage with the Council in many ways but these approaches are not always developed or made available with service users needs in mind

Additional reflections from officers:

- Home to School transport consultation exercise was very demanding for staff – lots of opposition and confrontation
- The Council has lessons learned logs, ie post project learning – but these are not well communicated - there is a lack of corporate memory.
- The Council recognises it needs to do better and is developing an Engagement Strategy, focusing on engagement to shape the development of services.
- Lack of awareness throughout the Council of its Engagement Team and what they can offer.

1. Of the 847 people we surveyed, 65% of people (two thirds) said they had not previously given their views to the Council on a particular topic



Some comments from our survey:

“No information is given to people unless you travel to Ebbw Vale or Abertillery”.

“Very difficult to give views when you don't know how to access information of pending agendas / debates”.

“I'm new to the area so unsure exactly what the council does”.

2. Most people said they were satisfied with the quality of the Councils' approach to community engagement when making service changes although many said they were unable to seek clarity about the question if they needed to

What we were told by local people:

- Some positive feedback on the Council engaging well, such as side waste, Youth Service.
- 50 plus forum and young people said they felt well engaged.
- Groups of vulnerable people were very positive about their engagement with the Council – has this been evaluated?
- Faith groups spoke of opportunities to use their contact with local residents as a vehicle or engagement.

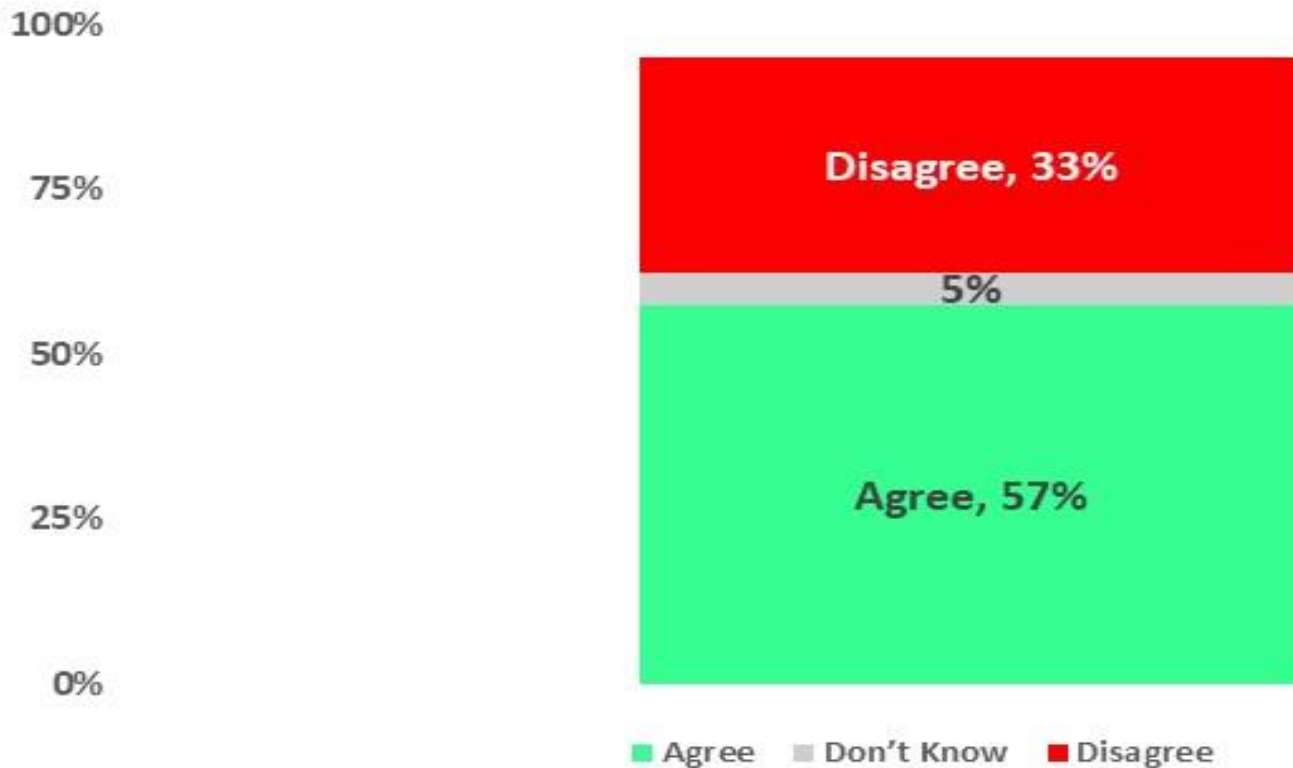
2. Most people said they were satisfied with the quality of the Councils' approach to community engagement when making service changes although many said they were unable to seek clarity about the question if they needed to

What does the survey show?

- Just over half of people said they had sufficient information on the topic they were being asked about
- Nearly everybody understood why the council was seeking their views
- Nearly everybody understood the topic and why the council was asking for their views on it
- A third of people said they were not able to seek clarity about questions if they needed to

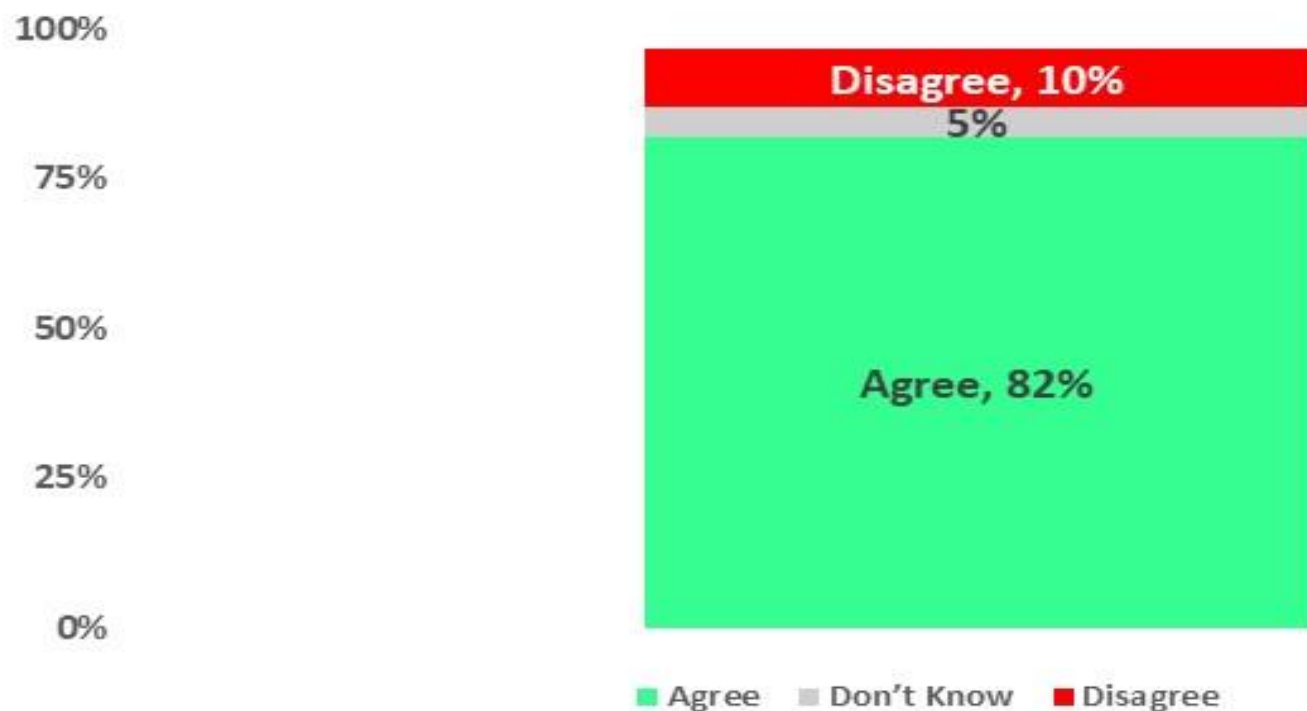
2. Just over half of people said they had sufficient information on the topic they were being asked about

I had sufficient information on the topic? Those people who answered 'yes' in question 1 (Opinion of 61 respondents)



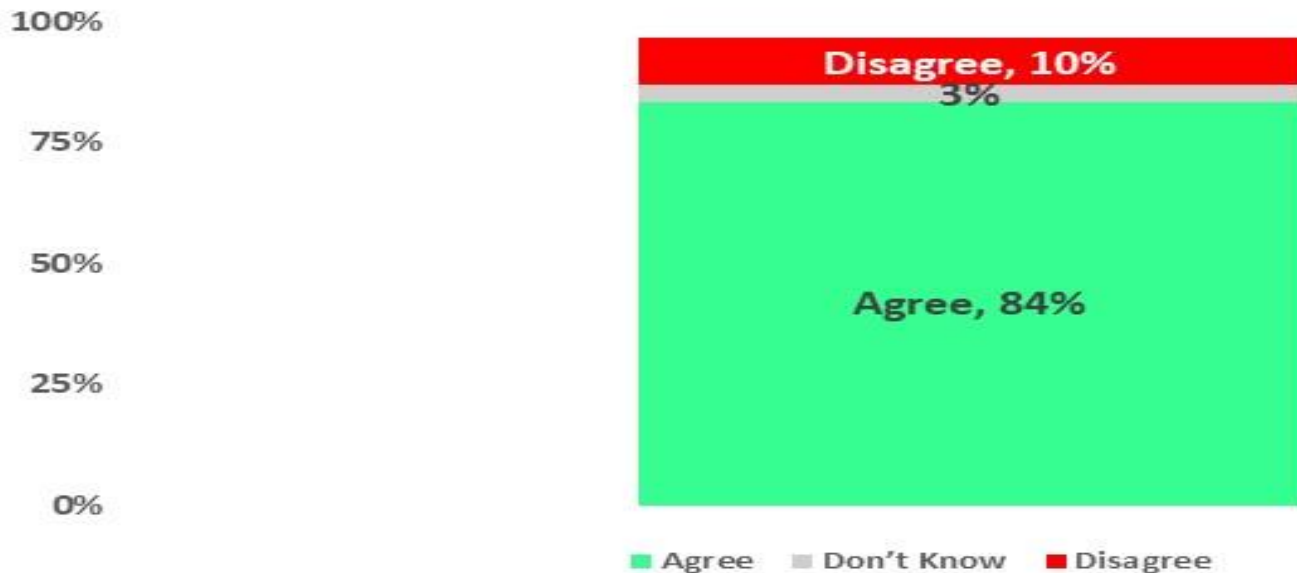
2. Nearly everybody understood why the council was seeking their views

I understood why the council was seeking my views? Those people who answered 'yes' in question 1 (Opinion of 61 respondents)



2. Nearly everybody understood the topic and why the council was asking for their views on it

I had a clear understanding of the topic and why the council were asking my views? Those people who answered 'yes' in question 1 (Opinion of 61 respondents)

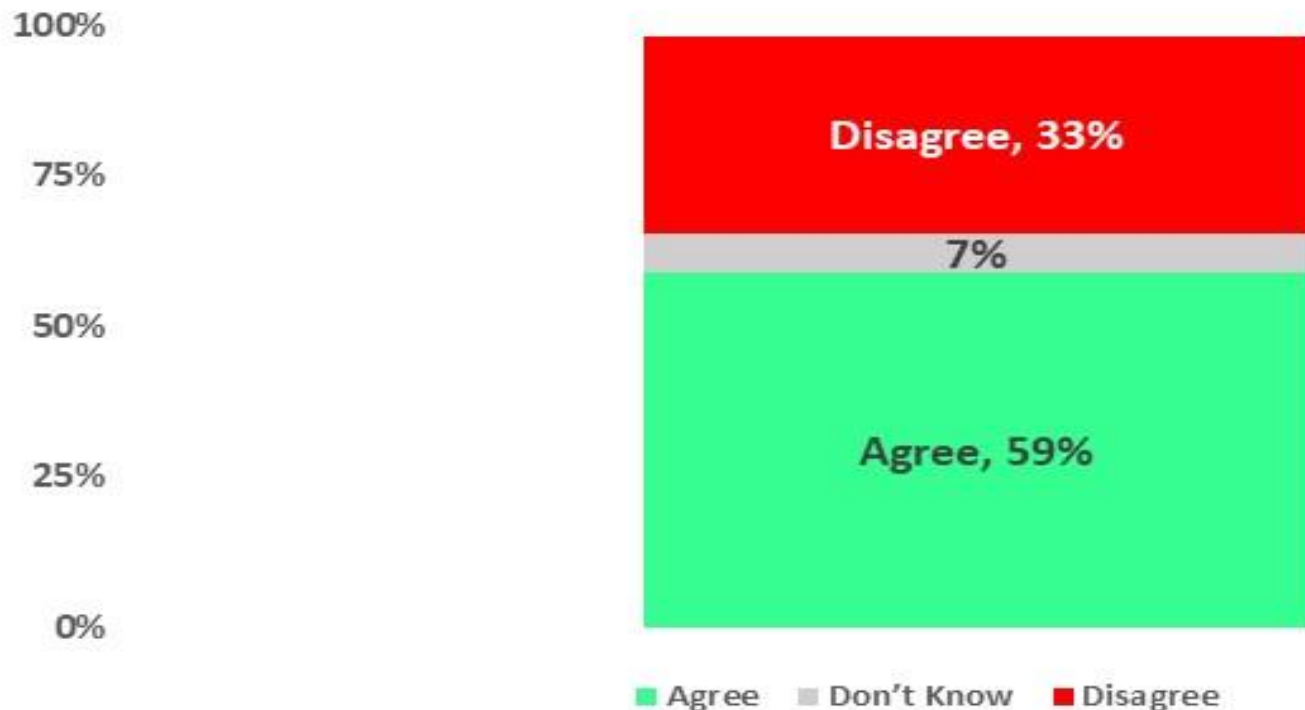


Some comments from our survey:

“They only consult on issues they want our opinion on, there is never an opportunity to air your views on the things that matter to us”.

2. A third of people said they were not able to seek clarity about questions if they needed to

I was able to seek clarity about the questions if I needed to?
Those people who answered 'yes' in question 1 (Opinion of 61 respondents)



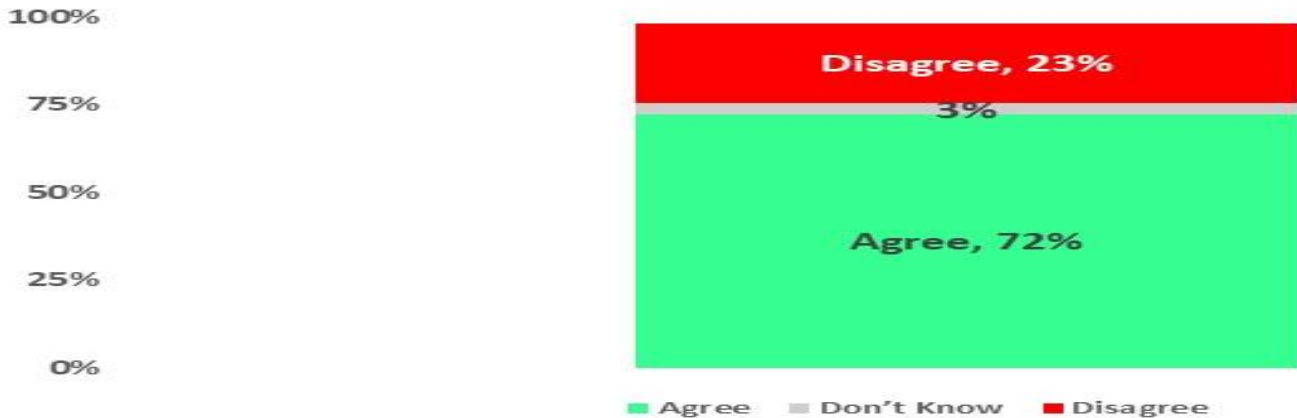
3. There are some barriers to engagement that potentially limit local participation

What we were told by local people and staff:

- Overall, people were able to engage easily with the Council over its proposals for Active Travel and Home to School Transport.
- Literacy in some areas is a potential barrier although the Council has invested in iPads and staff speak to people whenever possible.
- Generally people prefer face to face engagement.
- Mixed views about using IT as a means of engaging – and mixed ability.
- Timing of engagement is sometimes a problem – such as HtS Transport drop-in-events that people said felt rushed.
- Council meetings are generally during the day so it limits access for many working people who might want to observe decision making – and meetings are not recorded or live-streamed.
- Most people said in response our survey the council sought their views in a way that enabled them to participate.

3. Most people said the council sought their views in a way that enabled them to participate

The council sought my views in a way that enabled me to participate? Those people who answered 'yes' in question 1 (Opinion of 61 respondents)



“They should hold regular open meeting instead of popping every nowadays then at Ebbw Vale market with road show they don't speak to people they seem to wait until they are approached like a lot of politicians they think they are above everyone (in a funny way every voter employs them to look after our welfare and not to life better for themselves)”.

“They should have resident user panels so that all points of views could be put forward in the mix when considering something that affects them as councillors seem to get caught up in the local politics and go along with the main proponent”.

4. Communication with service users tends to be time limited and subject specific

What we were told by local people:

- Home to School Transport consultation provided lots of information through social media.
- Local people see engagement as a one off event - no ongoing feedback.
- Unclear how feedback received during engagement not relating to that topic is captured and used by the Council.
- People who participate in consultation rarely receive feedback.
- Some senior council officers found to be reluctant to engage.
- Very few people who responded to our survey believe the Council takes their views into account when making decisions.
- Nearly all local people who responded to our survey said they are willing to give their views to the Council in the future.

4. Communication with service users tends to be time limited and subject specific

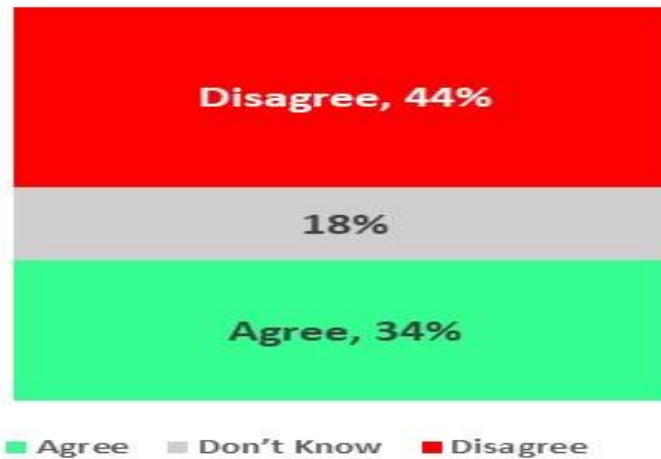
Additional reflections from officers:

- Officers indicate that in providing feedback they use the 10 principles of engagement.
- The Council has changed the way it writes reports by providing all feedback as an appendix and reporting in themes.
- The output from the Active Travel consultation will be a report to Welsh Government that will be a public facing document and will draw inspiration from the Well-being Plan.

4. A third of people believe the Council takes their views into account when making decisions

I believe that the Council will take my views into account when making decisions? Those people who answered 'yes' in question 1 (Opinion of 61 respondents)

100%
75%
50%
25%
0%

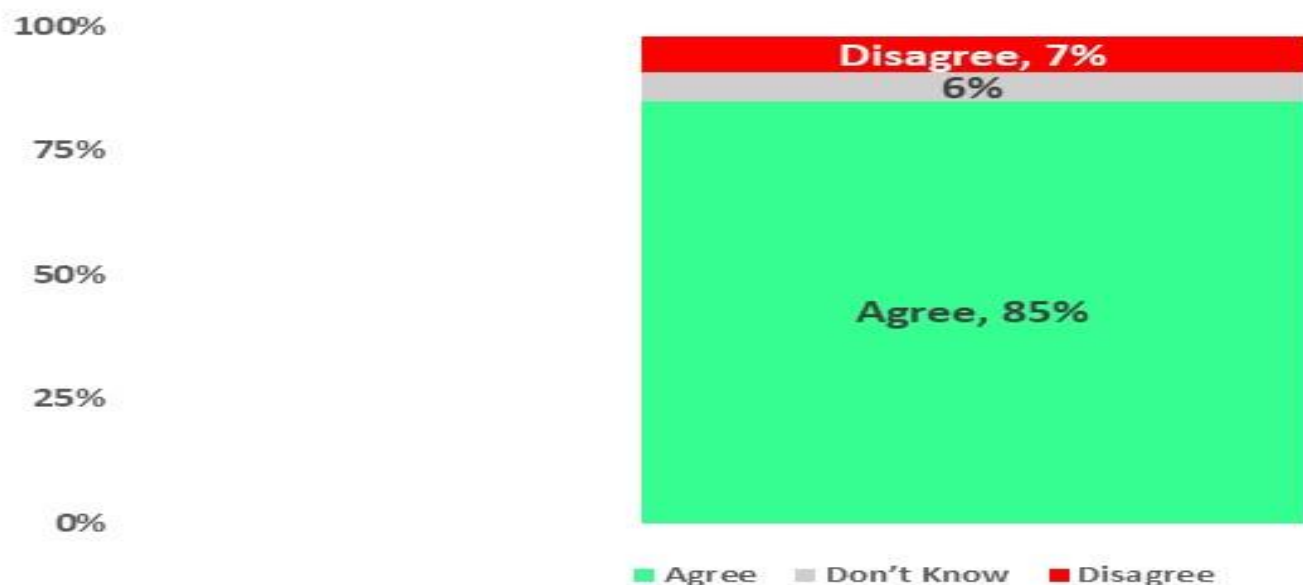


“There is a view that feedback doesn't inform decisions and some believe that the Council (senior management) proceed as they intended anyway. I'd suggest it could be made clearer how decisions have been made in light of the feedback received from staff / service users”.

“Sometimes you get the impression that the council asks for your view but they've already made their mind up regardless of everyone's view”.

4. Nearly all local people said they are willing to give their views to the Council in the future

I am willing to give my views to the Council in the future?
(Opinion of 193 respondents)



“Consultations not frequent enough and the Council does not fulfil on its promises”.

“Poor commitment to services for disabled customers I would like to know before decisions are made about things like disabled parking and access to buildings etc. Including local planning laws etc”.