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People Powered Public Services: Monitoring UK Opinion

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March 2022

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This report was first published in March 2022
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Outline – Tracking public opinion on public services

This is the second instalment of the Serco Institute's People Powered Public Services series, a longitudinal study in which the Institute tracks sentiment towards public services through repeated, nationally representative surveys carried out by an independent, expert polling organisation. Across **15 types of public services** as well as the **Management of Covid-19** and **Public Services as a Whole,** we will track how 'satisfied' the UK is with the services they are using and analyse key findings through these quarterly reports.

We hope that this will help policymakers to design and deliver better public services, for the benefit of citizens. This research will also inform wider public understanding of how public services are perceived and used, and whether perceptions change according to one-off news events or societal trends.

In this second report, we analyse the statistics taken from a new round of polling, conducted in January 2022, and compare them to our initial baseline data from August 2021, which we covered in our first report. Our objective to examine the British public's sentiment towards public services comes following a further wave of Covid-19, brought about by the Omicron variant of the virus, and during a time of rising living costs and taxes for the populace and a period of uncertainty for the UK Government. The same study in Australia is being carried out in parallel and we will also briefly seek to highlight points of difference between the two countries.

Methodology & Limitations

This study was conducted in the UK by *Kantar* via an internet omnibus survey. 1,049 UK residents aged 16-64 were interviewed, with interviewing conducted by online self-completion between 20-24 January 2022. The sample has been weighted to be representative of the UK population aged 16-64. Where unweighted base figures are less than 100, data has been treated cautiously, due to potential large margins of error. Not all figures and charts will sum to 100% due to rounding.

The quality of the data is reliant on the quality of responses. We anticipate that responses will be based on people's experiences of public services as well as their stance on the policies underpinning them. We also expect that respondents' views will be coloured by economic and socio-political changes in the UK and the implications these will have for individuals' personal circumstances. All these factors are impossible to disentangle from one another. The delivery and policy are inevitably linked, both in practical terms and in the minds of the people who have been surveyed.

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Introduction

Since our last round of polling was conducted in August 2021 (published in October 2021), several far-reaching changes have occurred in the world of British public policy. Most significantly, the Omicron variant of Covid-19 reached the UK in late November, shortly after being identified by scientists in South Africa. This brought about what was referred to as a 'tidal wave' of Covid cases by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in December and early January[1], with Omicron quickly becoming the dominant variant in Britain and daily case numbers peaking at unprecedentedly high levels in early January. This surge was accompanied by a rapid rollout of booster vaccines, reaching a daily peak of nearly one million booster vaccinations[2]: as of 7 February 2022, over 37 million booster doses have been administered in the UK[3]. This vaccination campaign, combined with a sharp decline in Covid cases in January, evidence of Omicron's mildness relative to previous variants, with hospitalisations and deaths remaining far below their January 2021 peak, led to the UK Government relaxing most restrictions in England on 27 January 2022[4].

In addition to a new Covid wave having come and gone, several further developments occurred in the UK which are of relevance to the areas of public services covered by our survey. In the realm of welfare, in October 2021 Chancellor Rishi Sunak ended the £20-a-week uplift to Universal Credit which had formed part of the Government's Covid support package, but raised the National Living Wage to £9.50 an hour from April 2022 and cut the Universal Credit taper rate to allow claimants to take home more of their pay above their work allowance. The Chancellor also announced a £150 billion rise in departmental spending, promising that every Government Department would see a real-terms increase to its budget and dubbing the Conservatives 'the real party of public services'[5]. With the size of the British state at its largest for decades, it would appear a 'new normal' for public services in the UK had been set.

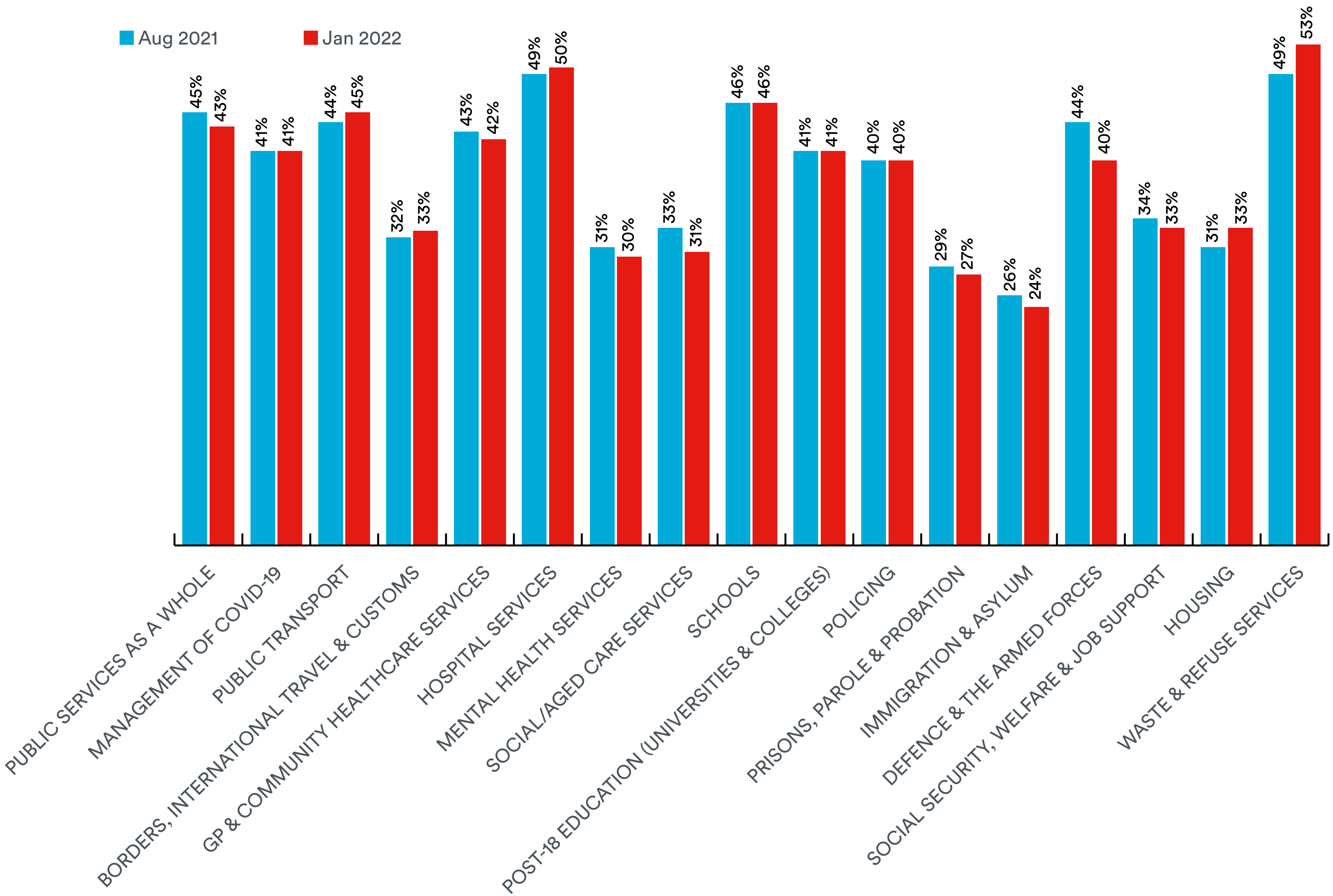
However, since October economic conditions in the UK have grown bleaker. Living costs have spiralled as inflation in the UK is projected to peak at a 30-year high of 7.25% in April 2022, with consumer prices likely to outstrip pay growth. April will also see energy regulator Ofgem's price cap on energy bills rise by 54% to around £2,000 for millions of British households, while a 1.25-percentage-point rise in National Insurance contributions will also kick in that month. While the Chancellor has announced measures to mitigate this, with a £200 energy bill loan to households and a £150 council tax rebate for 28 million households, most families are still poised to see a £350 rise in bills which they will have to pay for without state assistance. This combination of inflation, tax hikes and rising energy bills has led the Bank of England to forecast that real incomes in 2022 will decline by five times the amount they did following the 2008 financial crisis, in the worst blow to living standards since 1990[6]. It is against this backdrop that changes in sentiment towards public services in the UK should be assessed.

UK citizens' perceptions of public services in January 2022 compared to August 2021 are striking for one reason: the congruity and lack of change, despite the trends outlined above In a tempestuous world of skyrocketing energy prices, the threat of war on Europe's eastern border, climate change panic, and a volatile political scene, one thing – at least in the last four months – remains a reassuring constant: the UK public's perceptions of their public services.

What to make of this stolid set of results? In short, they are unsurprising. Public services in the main do not change significantly over the course of only a few months. On the contrary, reform is long, arduous, and takes years. Yes, public services can be subject to momentary crises, for example, national train strikes, NHS winter backlogs, or, more rarely, high-profile prison escapes. Such events feasibly influence respondents' views enough to prompt major changes of opinion over the course of a few months. However, often these are rare, and few events in the preceding four months fall into this category.

Nevertheless, this second instalment of *People Powered Public Services* offers a snapshot of a Britain experiencing major shifts – economically, politically and in terms of policy. Personal circumstances have and will continue to alter considerably as a result of these shifts, and the beginnings of their effects on sentiment towards public services are starting to become apparent. As these continue, it will be essential to monitor how socio-political factors shape public opinion, so as to best ensure public services meet the needs and desires of those who rely on them.

OVERVIEW: CHANGES IN SATISFACTION, AUGUST 2021 - JANUARY 2022



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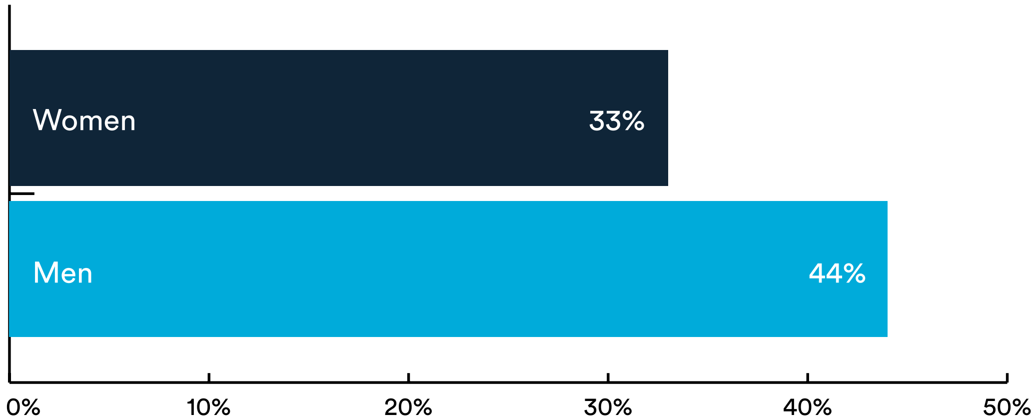
Key trends

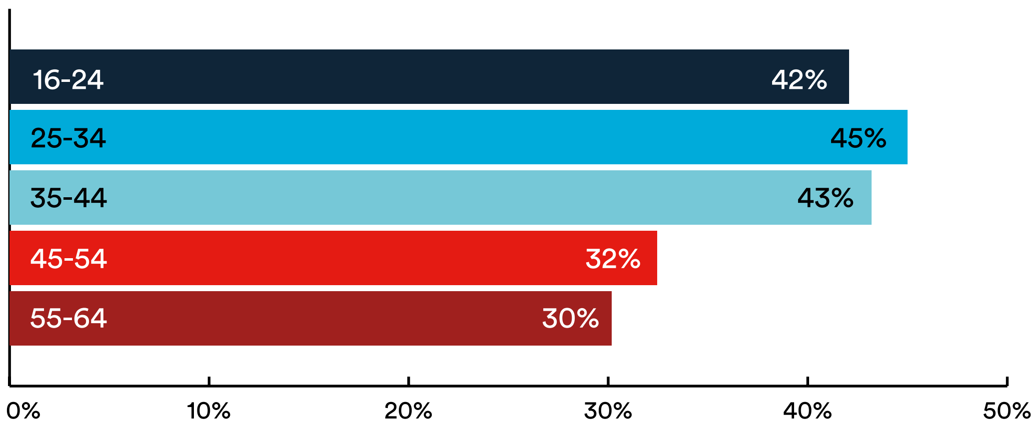
We found that many of the key trends identified in our previous report continued to hold true with this new round of polling, although certain groups of respondents were more likely to report increased levels of satisfaction than others.

- As was the case in our August polling data, **women's satisfaction scores were consistently lower than those of men.**



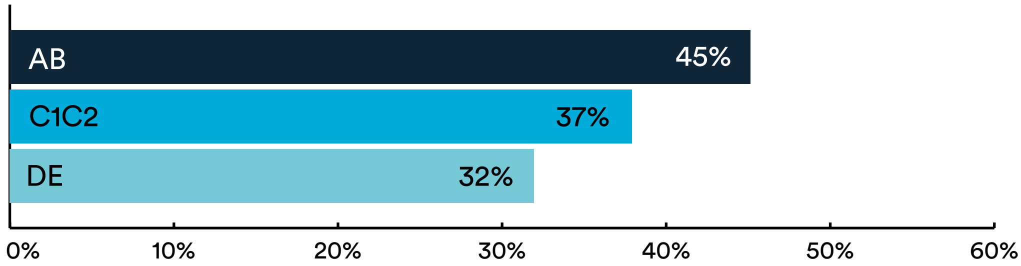
Average net satisfaction across all 17 areas polled

- Also in a continuation of trends we previously identified, the **oldest age cohort (55-64-year-olds) was consistently the most dissatisfied, and the least satisfied, of the age groups.** However, while previously the youngest respondents (aged 16-24) had also reported lower levels of satisfaction, there was evidence members of this age group were catching up to the more satisfied middle bandings.



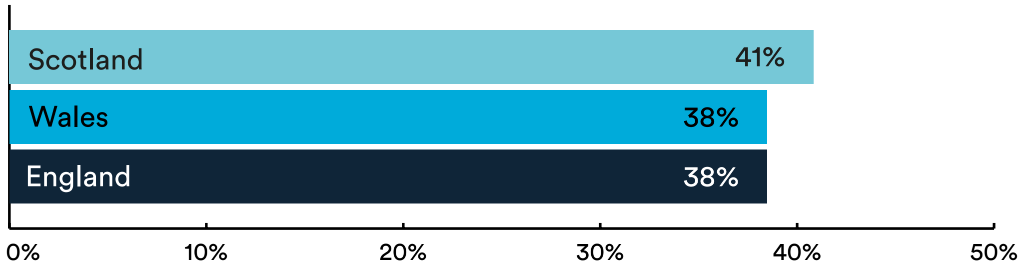
Average net satisfaction across all 17 areas polled

- It remained true that an individual's so-called 'social class'[7] was an indicator of their sentiment towards public services, with people belonging to **'higher' Social Grades more likely to be satisfied with public services.** However, there were signs that the lead in satisfaction enjoyed by these individuals belonging to 'higher' social strata over their counterparts of other socioeconomic backgrounds was narrowing.



Average net satisfaction across all 17 areas polled

- While Wales had, in August, been **the most satisfied of the UK's nations,** by January this position was filled by **Scotland**, where respondents returned satisfaction scores higher than or equal to the UK average in 11 of the 17 polled areas of public services. Nevertheless, the limited number of respondents in some nations means this data should be regarded with caution.



Northern Ireland is not included as the number of respondents was too low.

Average net satisfaction across all 17 areas polled

Other findings

In January this year, 43% of respondents were net satisfied with '**Public Services as a Whole**' versus 21% net dissatisfied. In August, respondents were two points more satisfied overall, a fairly marginal swing. The majority of services recorded similar results, the maximum swing being only 5%. Ten services recorded a swing of only 2% or less.

The service subject to the biggest swing since August may possibly be explained by a notable change in context. Relative to August 2021, travelling abroad in January 2022 was slightly easier; however, perhaps not to the extent that explains why respondents were by January five points more positive about **Borders, International Travel, & Customs** than they were in August 2021. The reason for the swing may because more people have enjoyed the opportunity to have a holiday since August, when international travel restrictions were eased. Now that more citizens have taken a trip abroad, it may be that they are more well-disposed to this category than in August.

Top 3 areas delivering satisfaction
(Net satisfaction / Net dissatisfaction)

1. Waste & Refuse Service (53% / 19%)
2. Hospital Services (50% / 25%)
3. Schools (46% / 18%)

One surprising change is respondents' view of how the Government has managed the pandemic. As in August 2021, 41% of respondents in January this year were net satisfied with **Management of Covid-19.** However, since August net dissatisfaction has increased by four points from 29% to 33%. The UK Government has made much of how the UK has broken the Covid-19 deadlock more quickly than many European counterparts. In addition, the UK Government permitted Christmas to continue without strict restrictions. Instinctively, it could be assumed that these two factors would in fact boost support for the Government's management of Covid-19. The rise in dissatisfaction could be due a small minority of people feeling strongly that the Government should have been more stringent with lockdown measures in reaction to Omicron. Equally, it could be disgruntled people in the hospitality sector who may feel they were 'locked down by stealth' in the normally lucrative month of December, or, indeed, a combination of the two groups.

Perhaps the categories for which there has been no change are of most interest. In the latter half of 2021, there were serious concerns about the potential for a winter crisis in our hospitals, the prospect of which was deemed all the more likely due to existing backlogs resulting from the pandemic. Although there remain well-publicised backlogs in **hospitals**, in January 2022 respondents were 50% net satisfied versus 25% net dissatisfied, very closely aligned with the August 2021 results when 49% were net satisfied versus 24% net dissatisfied. The 'no change' here may indicate that the UK public did not feel that NHS hospitals succumbed to a winter crisis, at least in the chillier months of November and December 2021.

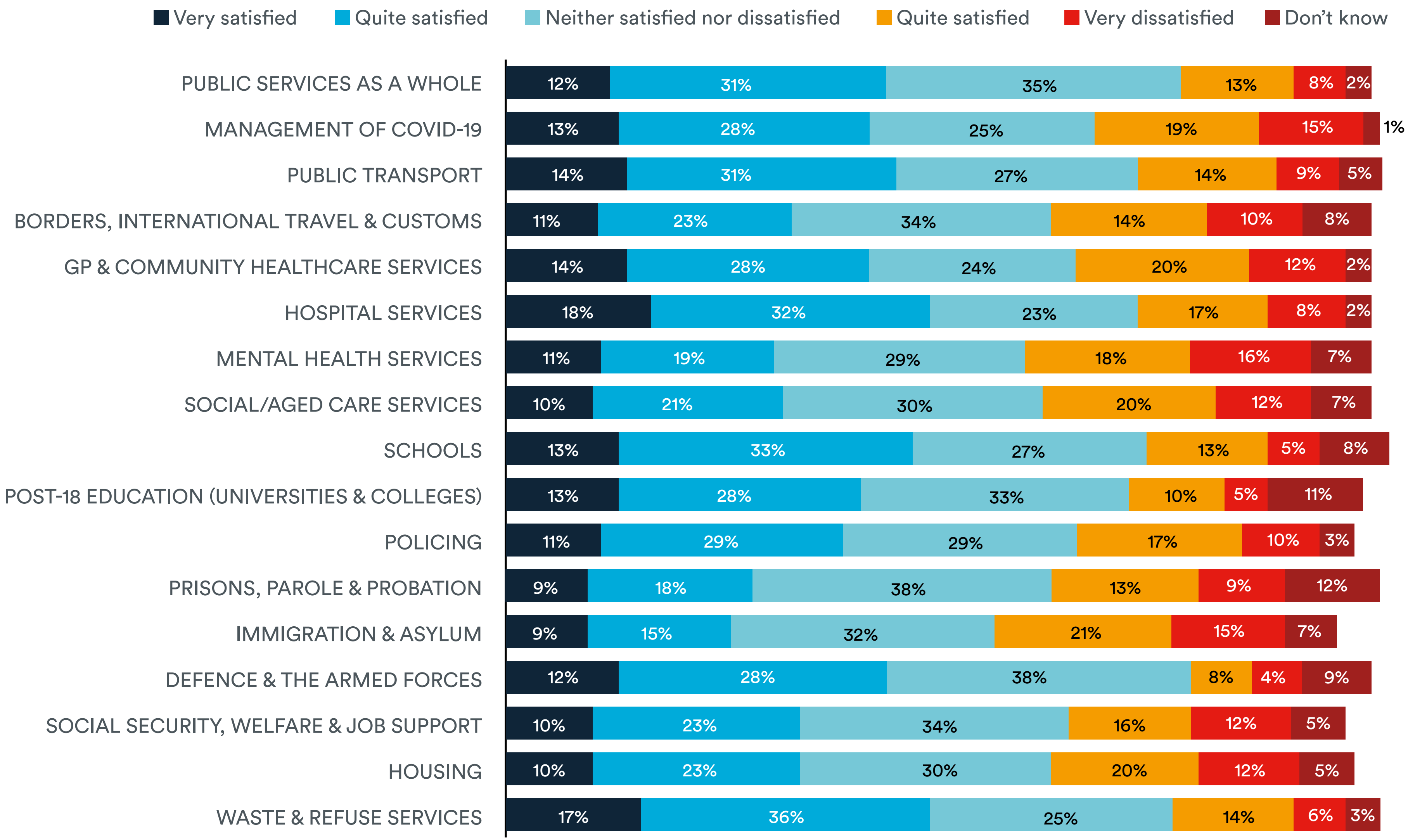
Top 3 areas where more people were dissatisfied than satisfied
(Net satisfaction / Net dissatisfaction)

1. Immigration & Asylum (24% / 36%)
2. Mental Health Services (30% / 34%)
3. Social/Aged Care Services (31% / 32%)

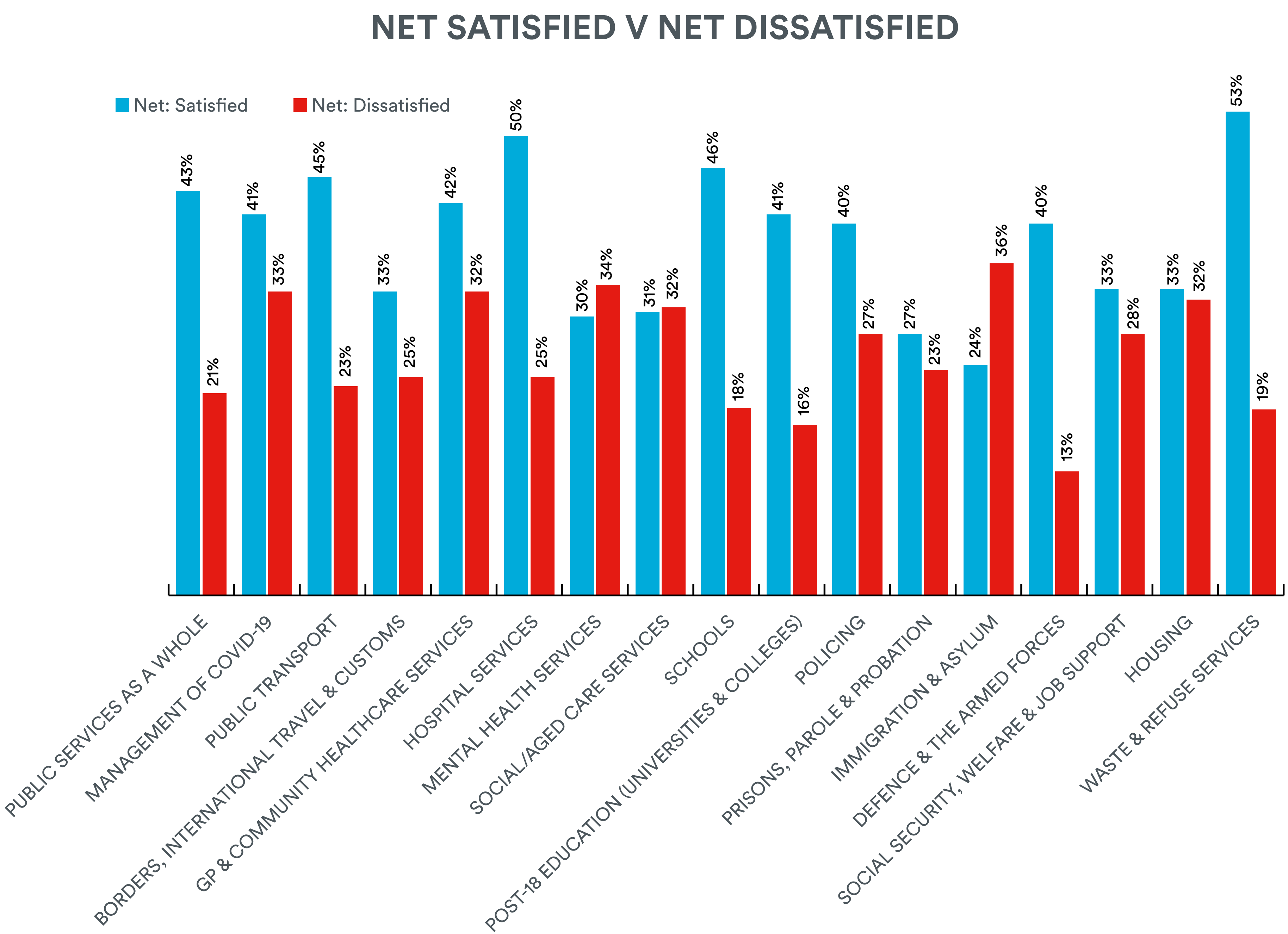
In January 2022, 40% of respondents were net satisfied with **Policing**, versus 27% net dissatisfied, almost exactly the same result as August 2021. Looking ahead, it will be interesting to see whether the Metropolitan Police's recent travails – its intervention in Sue Gray's investigation into alleged gatherings at Downing Street which broke Covid rules, proof of misogyny within its Charing Cross branch, and the well-publicised reports of inappropriate advances from officers towards women – have a negative effect on the broader British public's perception of policing in the UK.

[1]Boris Johnson warns of Omicron "tidal wave" as he vows faster booster jabs' – Politico.
[2]'COVID-19: Record day for booster jabs with more than 900,000 – as 82,886 new cases reported' – Sky News.
[3]'AstraZeneca vaccine: Did nationalism spoil UK's "gift to the world"?' – BBC News.
[4]'COVID-19: Restrictions eased today as England moves out of Plan B and back to Plan A' – Sky News.
[5]'Budget 2021: key points at a glance' – The Guardian.
[6]'Cost of living crisis to last until 2023, Bank governor warns' – The Times.
[7]Based on the NRS Social Grades system of classification: 'Social Grade' – National Readership Survey.

OVERVIEW



Very satisfied
Quite satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Quite satisfied
Very dissatisfied
Don’t know
PUBLIC SERVICES AS A WHOLE
12% 31% 35% 13% 8% 2%
MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19
13% 28% 25% 19% 15% 1%
PUBLIC TRANSPORT
14% 31% 27% 14% 9% 5%
BORDERS, INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL & CUSTOMS
11% 23% 34% 14% 10% 8%
GP & COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE SERVICES
14% 28% 24% 20% 12% 2%
HOSPITAL SERVICES
18% 32% 23% 17% 8% 2%
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES
11% 19% 29% 18% 16% 7%
SOCIAL/AGED CARE SERVICES
10% 21% 30% 20% 12% 7%
SCHOOLS
13% 33% 27% 13% 5% 8%
POST-18 EDUCATION (UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES)
13% 28% 33% 10% 5% 11%
POLICING
11% 29% 29% 17% 10% 3%
PRISONS, PAROLE & PROBATION
9% 18% 38% 13% 9% 12%
IMMIGRATION & ASYLUM
9% 15% 32% 21% 15% 7%
DEFENCE & THE ARMED FORCES
12% 28% 38% 8% 4% 9%
SOCIAL SECURITY, WELFARE & JOB SUPPORT
10% 23% 34% 16% 12% 5%
HOUSING
10% 23% 30% 20% 12% 5%
WASTE & REFUSE SERVICES
17% 36% 25% 14% 6% 3%



NET SATISFIED V NET DISSATISFIED
Net: Satisfied
Net: Dissatisfied
43%
21%
41%
33%
45%
23%
33%
25%
42%
32%
50%
25%
30%
34%
31%
32%
46%
18%
41%
16%
40%
27%
27%
23%
24%
36%
40%
13%
33%
28%
33%
32%
53%
19%
PUBLIC SERVICES AS A WHOLE
MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19
PUBLIC TRANSPORT
BORDERS, INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL & CUSTOMS
GP & COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE SERVICES
HOSPITAL SERVICES
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES
SOCIAL/AGED CARE SERVICES
SCHOOLS
POST-18 EDUCATION (UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES)
POLICING
PRISONS, PAROLE & PROBATION
IMMIGRATION & ASYLUM
DEFENCE & THE ARMED FORCES
SOCIAL SECURITY, WELFARE & JOB SUPPORT
HOUSING
WASTE & REFUSE SERVICES

The Gender Gap

Our previous report highlighted the notable gap in perceptions that men and women have towards public services. This gap was similarly reflected in the results of this new polling data. In a clear contrast, male respondents delivered a 46% net satisfaction score when asked about *Public Services as a Whole*. This figure is a sizeable seven percentage points higher than the 39% score delivered by female respondents. The previous report questioned whether women's lesser satisfaction could be explained by the fact they face more or more significant barriers when seeking to use public services or whether, given they tend to use services more, this increased exposure led them to hold more negative opinions. These two trains of thought led to the recommendation that efforts should be made to improve service quality and delivery for women. This recommendation holds true given the new data showing the same overarching result as previously.

It is interesting to note, however, that there is a discrepancy in the way that men respond when asked about public services more generally compared with on a more specific level. Men demonstrate a higher net dissatisfaction than women when asked about *Public Services as a Whole* (24% to 18% net dissatisfaction) despite women recording higher net dissatisfaction scores across 10 of the 15 specific public services areas we asked about. This same trend was evident in our last set of data, which may suggest the beginning of a pattern in male respondents. Why is it that men are more negative when assessing the general state of public services, but aren't, overall, as unhappy as women when assessing each specific public service? Is it less experience of the services themselves, or more a case of men of collating their negative views on a more macro level? Across five of the polling areas, it was the case that female respondents outscored males in being 'quite dissatisfied' but, for that same service, male respondents outscored females in being 'very dissatisfied.' Correspondingly, across 10 of the polling areas more men recorded a 'very dissatisfied' response than women. This supports the assertion that men's feeling towards public services tend to be at the more 'extreme' ends of the satisfied-dissatisfied scale as compared to women.

If we take a closer look at the data, male and female respondents differed considerably in their satisfaction levels concerning *Management of Covid-19*. There was an increase in male net satisfaction by 3 percentage points from 45% to 48%, but a decrease in female net satisfaction by 4 percentage points from 38% to 34%. Perhaps this widening of the gap to 14 percentage points is demonstrative of a disapproval of the UK Government taking a less cautious approach to Covid-19 than some other countries; for example, deciding not to order another lockdown over the Christmas period. Research has shown that women have generally taken a more cautious approach to Covid-19[8], in part due to being more health-conscious, and so are perhaps more sensitive to action by the Government: for example, the shortage of lateral flow tests in in December 2021 may have led women to take a dimmer view of this service area[9]. Additionally, this decrease in satisfaction could also be linked to women demonstrating a harsher judgment of some of the rumoured rule-breaking within 10 Downing Street that emerged over the Christmas break. In any case, the gap in perception of service here is significant and growing.

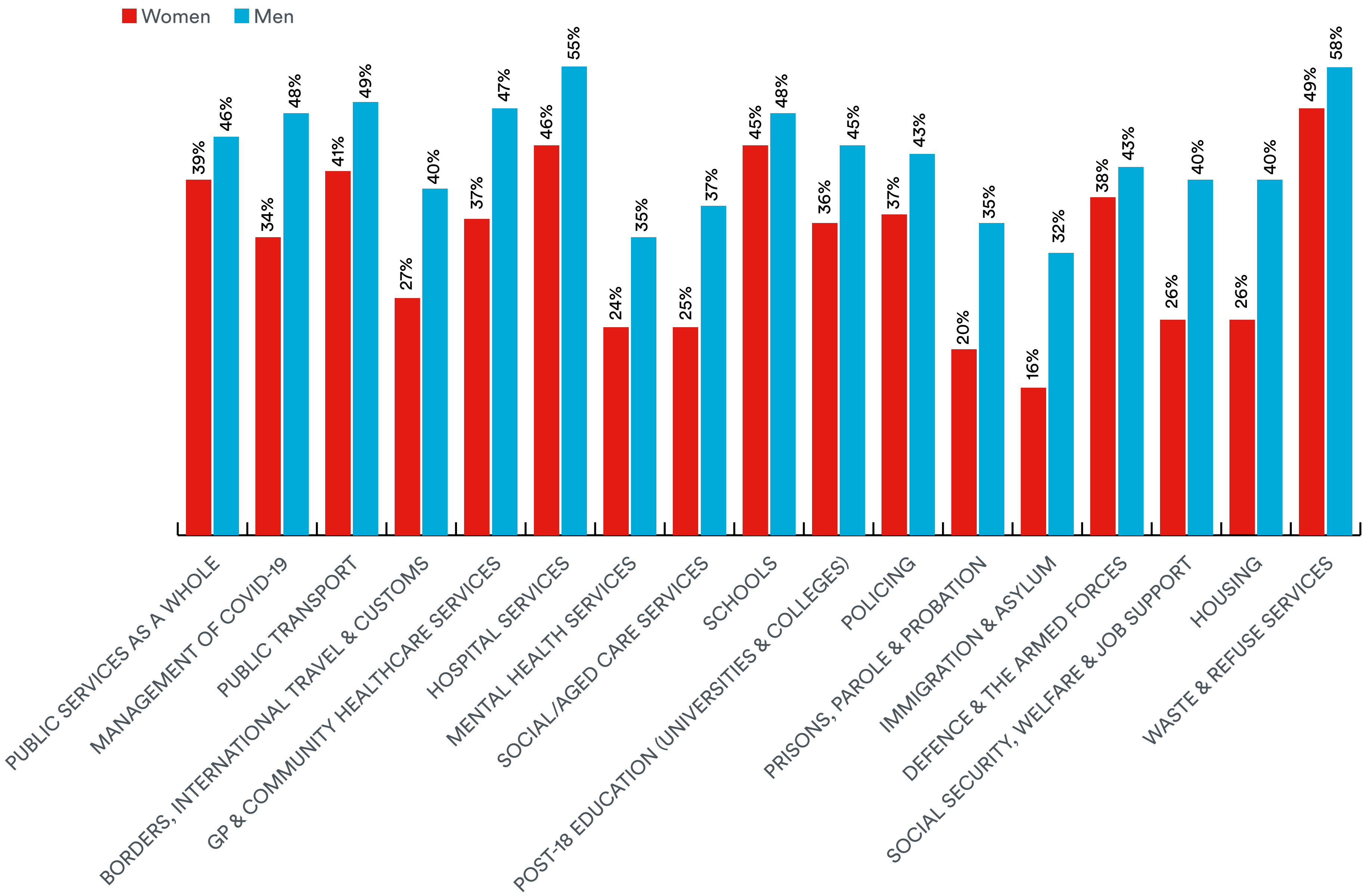
Turning our attention to *Borders, International Travel & Customs,* the net dissatisfaction among women dropped from 31% to 22% whilst net satisfaction increased from 24% to 27%. Men's net satisfaction with this area of service remained consistent at 40%. The last few months of 2021 saw travel restrictions and regulations become much more clear and slightly more relaxed in terms of tests required and the length of quarantine periods. Previous studies have found that, in heterosexual relationships, women are much more likely to plan and book a holiday than men[10]. If this trend holds true and women are more likely to take primary charge of organising holidays, then clear international travel guidance would help explain the improvement of female satisfaction of said services. A decrease in international travel, which has also been the case due to Covid-19, would have a similar effect in that interaction with services would be limited.

Lastly, the only area where men recorded a higher net dissatisfaction (36%) than satisfaction (32%) was *Immigration & Asylum.* There was no difference with the last set of polling data in August 2021. Meanwhile women respondents recorded a decrease in net dissatisfaction from 42% in our last poll to 37% in this wave. However, women continued to remain significantly more likely to be dissatisfied than satisfied, with only 16% of female respondents indicting that they were quite or very satisfied with the current approach. Perceptions of immigration could be linked, in particular, to the number of refugee attempts to cross the channel to the UK that end in tragedy. This is especially possible if the tragedy involves a child. On 25 November, 27 people were reported to have died in a single channel crossing, including a young girl[11]. An increase in negativity sentiment may be a result of hearing about such tragic events and the emotions they invoke, rather than specific perception around government performance in this area. Women are generally more likely to report feeling empathy for and thinking about the suffering of others[12], and so a reduction in tragic events related to immigration could help explain a reduction in dissatisfaction amongst female respondents, compared to the last set of polling data.

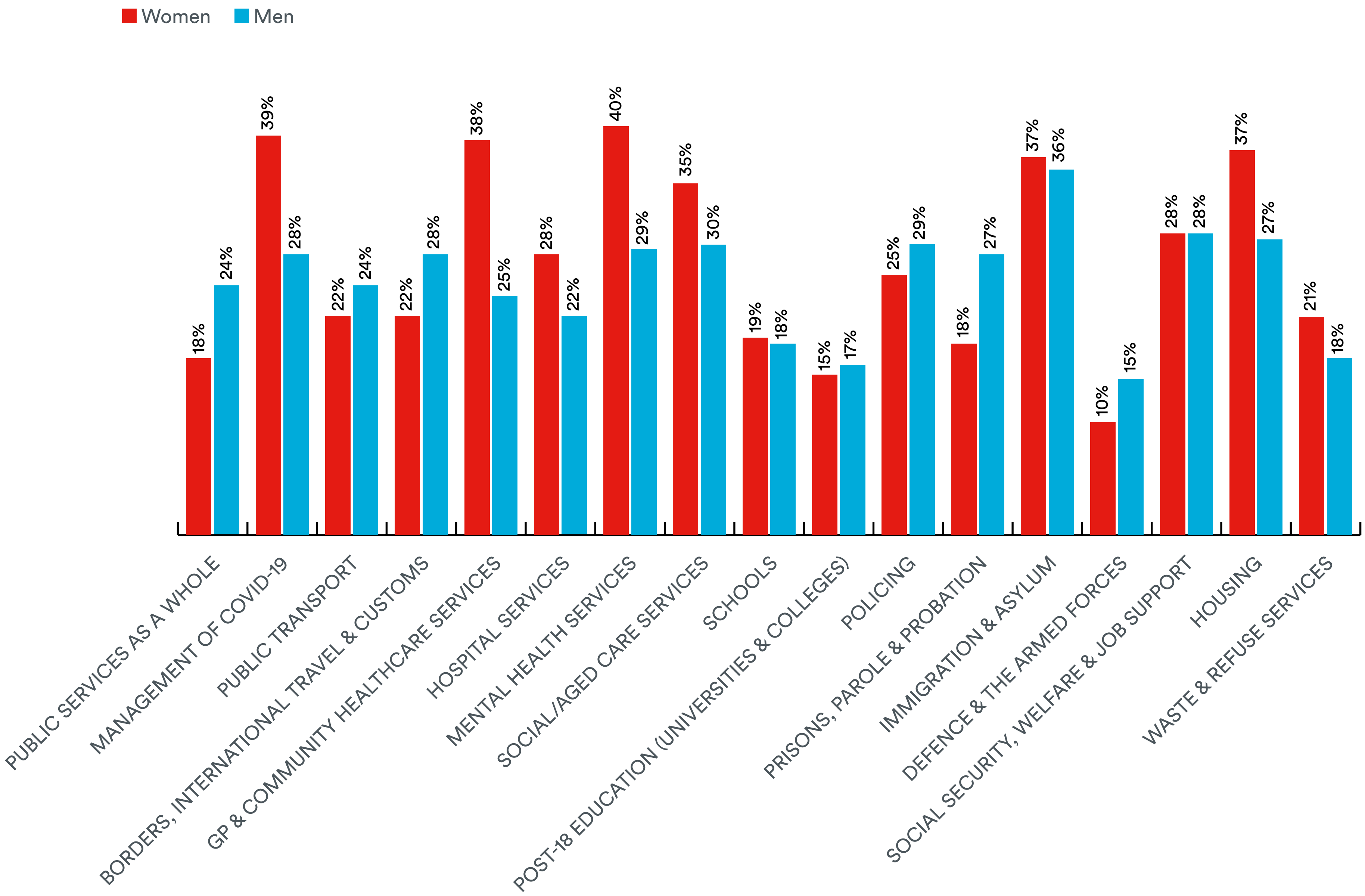
Fundamentally, this data shows that men remain more satisfied overall than women when it comes to their perception of public services. Whilst it is true that men report higher dissatisfaction than women when assessing public services in general this perhaps is due to men feeling more strongly negative about a service, possibly a lack of nuance when expressing a negative view or opinion. In this Covid climate, the decreasing satisfaction and rising dissatisfaction seen amongst female respondents over Covid-19 management is an unfortunate trend perhaps linked to a more cautious, health-conscious and sensitive judgment of the UK Government among women. Overall, despite men being more dissatisfied when asked specifically about *Public Services as a Whole,* women are more dissatisfied than men as pertains to each individual service area. Therefore, supporting our recommendation that efforts should be made to improve service quality and delivery for women.

[8]'Why women are less likely than men to die of covid-19' – The Economist.
[9]'Covid: Three-quarters of London pharmacies out of lateral flow tests as PM urged to "get a grip" on shortage' – Evening Standard.
[10]'Why women book trips more than men do' – Medium; 'Even in 2016 women plan, men pay says survey revealing old-fashioned holiday habits' – Lonely Planet; 'Women decide on holiday but men foot the bill, survey shows' – The Telegraph; 'Women book more holidays – survey' – Travel Daily Media.
[11]'Tragedy at sea claims dozens of lives in deadliest day of Channel crisis' – The Guardian.
[12]'In U.S., women more likely than men to report feeling empathy for those suffering' – Pew Research Center; 'Gender Differences in Emotional Health' – Everyday Health; 'Gender Differences in Emotional Response: Inconsistency between Experience and Expressivity' – PLOS.

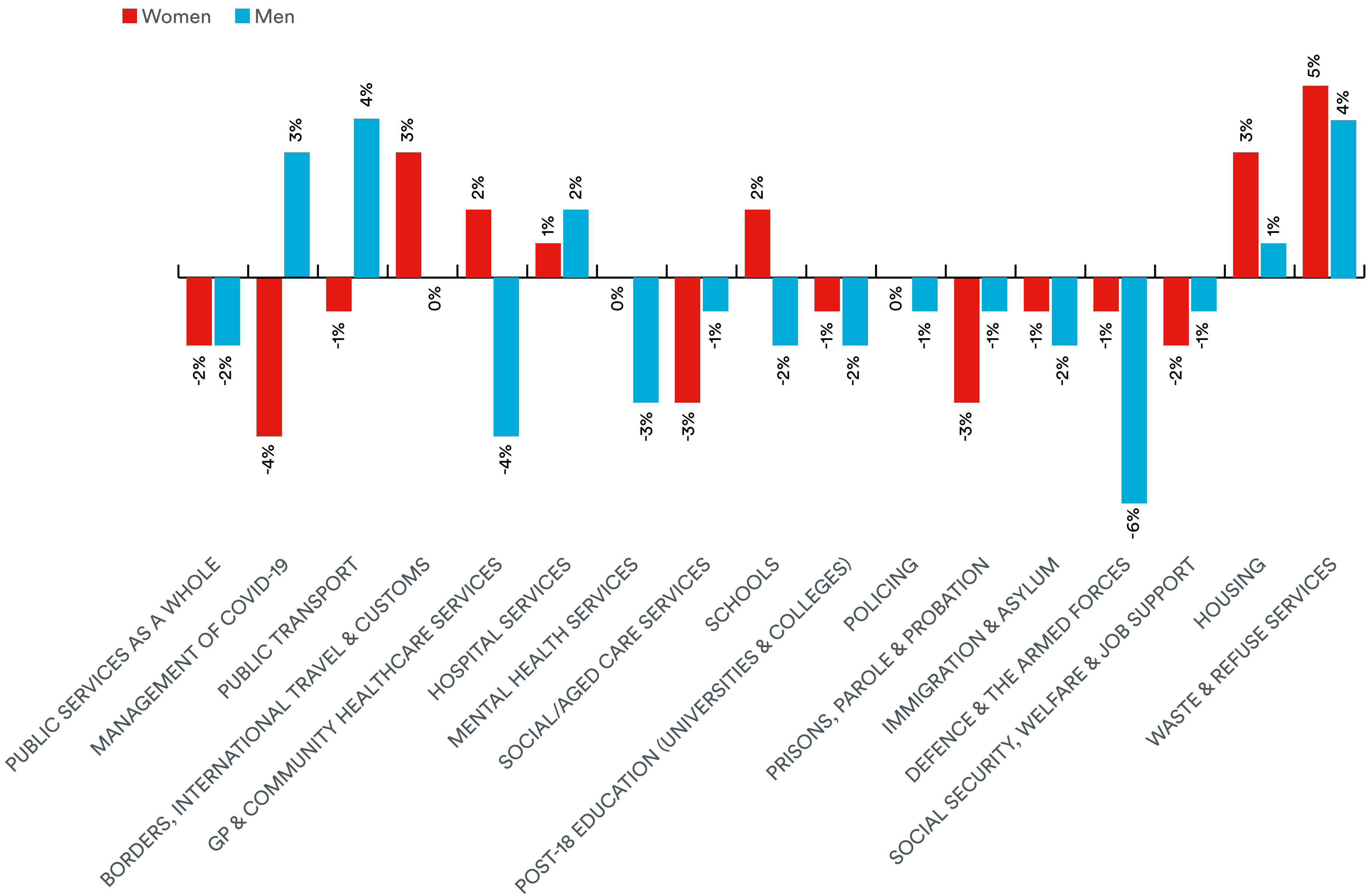
NET SATISFIED: WOMEN V MEN



NET DISSATISFIED: WOMEN V MEN



CHANGED IN SATISFIED: WOMEN V MEN



Age is More than Just a Number

Once again, younger respondents were more satisfied than their older counterparts across almost all surveyed areas of public services. Only in *Waste & Refuse Service* did 55-64-year-old respondents register a net satisfaction score (60%) which was not only higher than that of younger age groups (48% of 16-24-year-olds; 54% of 25-34-year-olds), but also a significant improvement on their satisfaction score for the previous round of polling in August (52%). In fact, *Waste & Refuse Service* was the only area of public services where all five age groups registered increases in satisfaction from August. Sitting councillors may take heart from this vote of confidence months before May's local elections.

In almost all the other 16 polled service categories, however, younger people reported higher levels of satisfaction than older people. In fact, across all 17 surveyed areas of public services, respondents aged 55-64 returned an average (mean) net satisfaction score of just 30%. While this is lower than the corresponding scores for respondents aged 16-24 (42%), 25-34 (45%) and 35-44 (43%), it should be noted that 55-64-year-olds who took our August survey recorded an average net satisfaction score of 31%, just one percentage point higher. Across the 17 surveyed areas, 25-34-year-olds also recorded no change in average satisfaction score (45%), whereas among 35-44-year-olds the average satisfaction score declined from 45% to 43%. In contrast, the average satisfaction score increased between August and January among 16-24-year-olds (38% to 42%).

As seen in our August poll, it remained broadly the case that the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups consistently registered the highest level of satisfaction, with these cohorts comprising the two most satisfied age groups across eight of the 17 surveyed areas. 16-24-year-olds were generally less satisfied than these two middle age bandings. However, whereas in August there had been no instances in which 16-24-year-olds constituted the most satisfied age group, in January respondents aged 16-24 reported the highest levels of satisfaction in four areas of public services, and were the second-most satisfied age cohort in a further four.

In examining dissatisfaction levels, the 55-64 age banding made up the most dissatisfied age group across eight of the 17 polled categories. That said, the number of categories in which there were more dissatisfied respondents aged 55-64 than satisfied stood at eight, one below what it was in the August poll. *Immigration & Asylum* was the only public service with which a majority (53%) of 55-64-year-olds were dissatisfied, outnumbering satisfied members of this age group by 45 percentage points – this dissatisfaction score was, however, down from a 59% net dissatisfaction score in this category in August. Presumably, *Immigration & Asylum's* enduring lack of satisfaction among people in the 55-64 age cohort is due to the continued 'small boats crisis' which has been prominent in the British political discourse since the autumn, and due to immigration-averse views being more commonly held by members of this age group[13].

In terms of changes in satisfaction levels, 16-24-year-olds reported higher levels of satisfaction in 14 of 17 surveyed areas relative to the August polling data. In fact, in six categories – *Public Services as a Whole; Social/Aged Care Services; Post-18 Education (Universities & Colleges); Immigration & Asylum; Defence & the Armed Forces;* and *Social Security, Welfare & Job Support* – the youngest age group was the only cohort to register an increase in satisfaction. By contrast, 35-44-year-olds recorded an increase in satisfaction with just two categories of public services, with no change in satisfaction in another two.

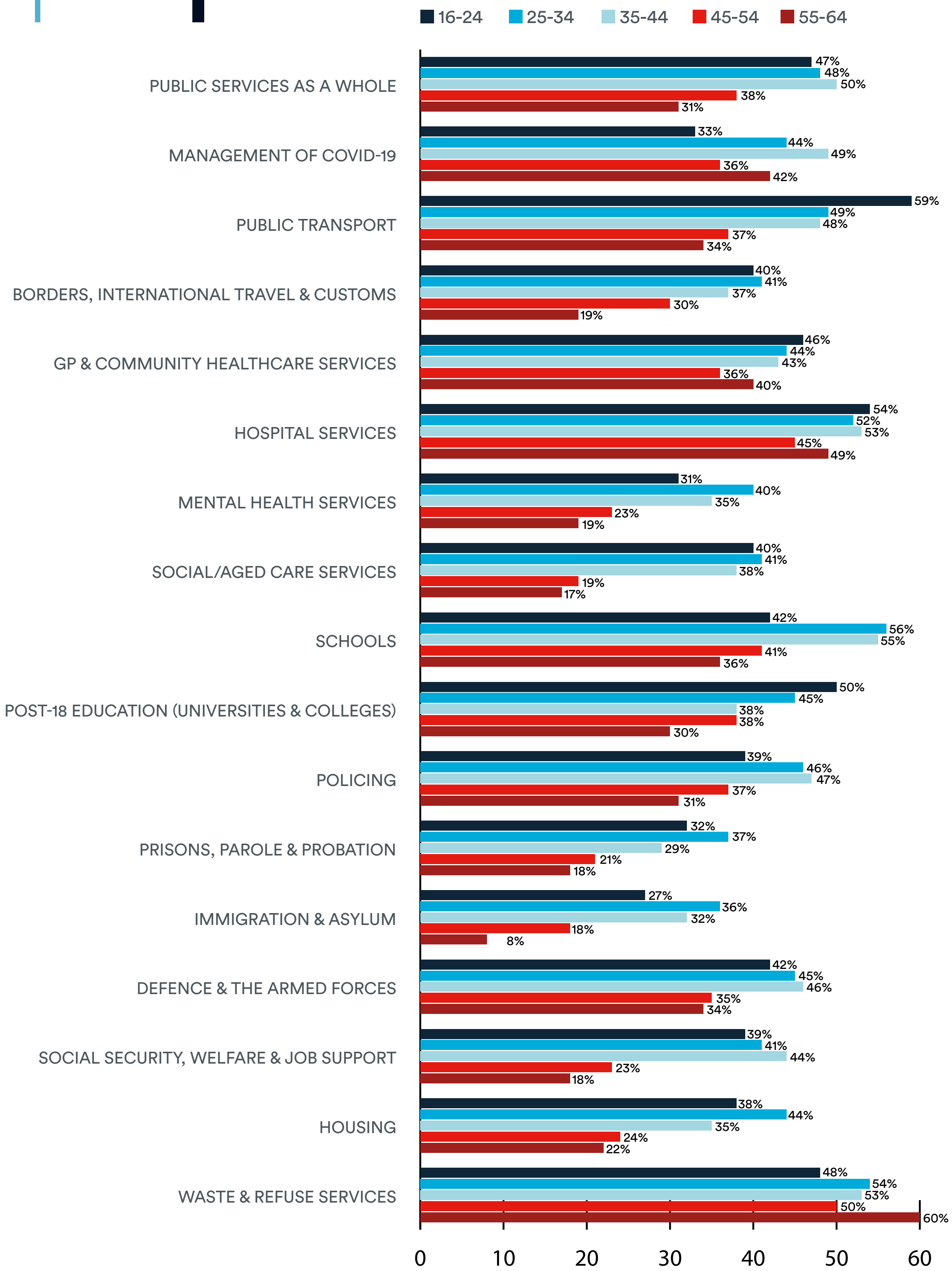
Some services saw a significant rise in satisfaction among 16-24-year-olds. *Public Transport,* for instance, saw a 13-point rise in satisfaction among the 16-24 age banding, from 46% in August to nearly six in 10 (59%) in January: this new satisfaction score was 25 percentage points above the least satisfied age group (55-64-year-olds, at 34%). One may surmise that this is due to the youngest age group continuing to enjoy discounted travel fares: members of this age group would, for instance, be eligible to hold railcards and enjoy one-third off rail tickets and Transport for London services. Similarly, in November 2021 the Scottish Government announced that bus travel would become free for under-22s from 31 January 2022[14], which may conceivably have led to an increase in satisfaction with public transport services among that age group in Scotland.

Perhaps the elevated satisfaction levels among our survey's youngest respondents reflect their lesser need to rely on many public services which have come under greater strain following the Omicron variant's arrival in Britain: 16-24-year-olds were, for instance, the only age group to register an improvement in satisfaction with *Social/Aged Care Services,* which they are much less likely to need for themselves. As such, they are less likely to have been impacted by staffing shortages in the social care sector brought about by the Omicron wave in late 2021 and early 2022[15]. Furthermore, as this age group is less likely to be in work, they are presumably less affected by the cost of living crisis than other age groups: 40% of Britons aged 16-24 were not in work or looking for work in the last quarter of 2021[16]. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that they made up the only age banding amongst whom satisfaction with *Social Security, Welfare & Job Support* increased between August and January.

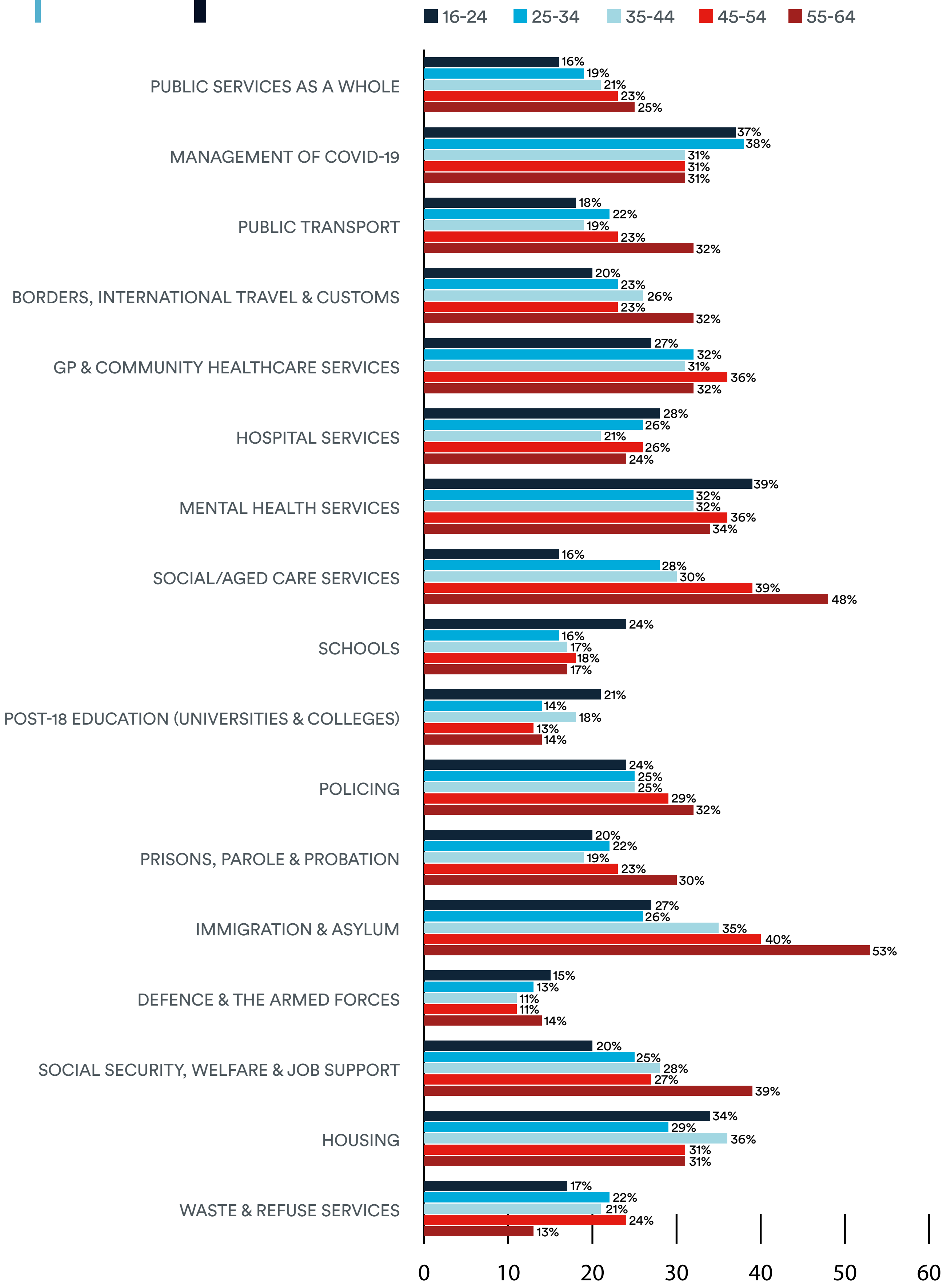
Overall, therefore, it remained the case that people belonging to the 25-34 and 35-44 age cohorts were generally the most likely to be satisfied with public services, returning average satisfaction scores (across all 17 polled areas) of 45% and 43% respectively. Once again, the 55-64 age banding was consistently the least satisfied, with an average satisfaction score of 30%, one point down from August. Our survey continued to indicate that people become increasingly satisfied as they approach middle age, before becoming increasingly dissatisfied once again as they age past middle age in a 'bell curve' of satisfaction. However, the data appeared to show a narrowing gap between the youngest age group and two next oldest ones: whereas in August 16-24-year-olds had registered an average satisfaction score of 38%, by January this had increased to 42%. It may be the case, therefore, that falling real earnings, combined with higher inflation, energy bills and, soon, taxes, are squeezing not just the cost of living, but the satisfaction of working people with public services.

[13] 'Anti-immigration attitudes are disappearing among younger generations in Britain' – UK in a Changing Europe.
[14] 'Free bus travel for under 22s' – Scottish Government.
[15] 'Social care services refusing new clients amid Omicron Covid variant staff shortages' – ITV News.
[16] 'Youth unemployment statistics' – House of Commons Library.

AGE GROUPS: SATISFIED



AGE GROUPS: DISSATISFIED



What is to be Made of ‘Social Grade’?

To assess how an individual’s socioeconomic background may have influenced their satisfaction with public services, we once again used the *NRS Social Grades* system of demographic classification, a system used by market researchers and pundits for over 50 years which groups individuals together based on the occupation of their household’s primary earner into six standard social grades. Respondents were divided into three socioeconomic groupings, each made up of two NRS Social Grades:

1. **AB** – Senior and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional workers
2. **C1C2** – Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial roles, and skilled manual workers
3. **DE** – Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and casual workers and the unemployed

As in our previous poll, respondents belonging to the AB social grades were consistently more likely to be satisfied: across all 17 areas of public services we polled, the AB grouping gave higher satisfaction scores than the C1C2 and DE social grades. Furthermore, of the three social groupings the DE group reported the lowest levels of satisfaction across all 17 surveyed areas, although in two instances – *Defence & the Armed Forces* and *Social Security, Welfare & Job Support* – only one percentage point separated the satisfaction scores of the C1C2 and DE bandings. Overall, then, it remained the case that those belonging to the AB grouping were more satisfied than members of other social grades.

However, a closer examination of how things had shifted since August made clear the gap had narrowed. In our previous survey, the AB group had a (mean) average satisfaction score of 51% across all 17 service categories, but by January this had fallen six percentage points to 45%. In the same period, the DE banding’s average net satisfaction rose by three points, from 29% to 32%, while the C1C2 group’s average satisfaction score increased two points from 35% to 37%.

In fact, while the DE group saw a decline in satisfaction in only one service category – *Hospital Services* – and the C1C2 group reported lower satisfaction compared to August in six polled areas, AB respondents were less satisfied with all 17 service categories we asked about than they had been five months prior. Declines in satisfaction scores among members of the ‘highest’ social grouping averaged out at six points, but the fall was especially noticeable with respect to *Prisons, Parole & Probation*, where satisfaction fell by 11 points between August and January, and *Management of Covid-19,* where satisfaction fell by 10 points. By contrast, among members of the C1C2 grouping satisfaction increased in nine polled areas, while the DE group saw satisfaction increase in 15 of the 17 service categories. Satisfaction levels among the social classes appeared, therefore, to have converged somewhat in late 2021 and early 2022.

A look at dissatisfaction levels seemed to further confirm the direction of travel. The DE social grades indicated the highest, or joint highest, levels of dissatisfaction in 12 of the 17 polled areas. This is an increase from August, where DE respondents reported the highest, or joint highest, levels of dissatisfaction across 10 areas. Whereas the C1C2 banding had accounted for the most or joint most dissatisfied socioeconomic group of respondents across nine service categories in August, by January this had gone down to six. Furthermore, while AB respondents had returned the lowest, or joint lowest, dissatisfaction scores across 16 of 17 polled areas of public services in our previous round of polling, by this round that number had gone down to 12, meaning by January there were four fewer surveyed public service categories where those belonging to the AB social strata were the least dissatisfied group of respondents. Furthermore, in January AB respondents were the group most dissatisfied with *Public Transport* (24%) and tied with the DE group for most dissatisfied with *Immigration & Asylum* (38%) – in August, there had been no instances where the AB banding recorded the highest level of dissatisfaction.

What could explain this trend of decreasing satisfaction among those belonging to the AB social grades and, conversely, increasing satisfaction among those in the DE group? In some instances, this is likely to reflect the condition of the British economy. Since our previous round of polling, the pandemic-era Universal Credit uplift has been ended, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer has also announced a number of tax increases, including rises to National Insurance and income tax, which will mainly impact higher- and middle-earning Britons, while also raising the National Living Wage and amending the Universal Credit taper rate to allow families on the benefit to take home a greater share of their pay. These measures will, the Resolution Foundation estimates, deliver by the mid-2020s an income boost in the amount of 2.8% to lower-income households, but a 2% income reduction for middle-earning households and a 3.1% reduction for high-earning households[17]. This context may go some way towards explaining why satisfaction with *Social Security, Welfare & Job Support* rose by six percentage points between August and January among people in the DE social bracket, but fell by three points and by five points among those in the C1C2 and AB bandings respectively.

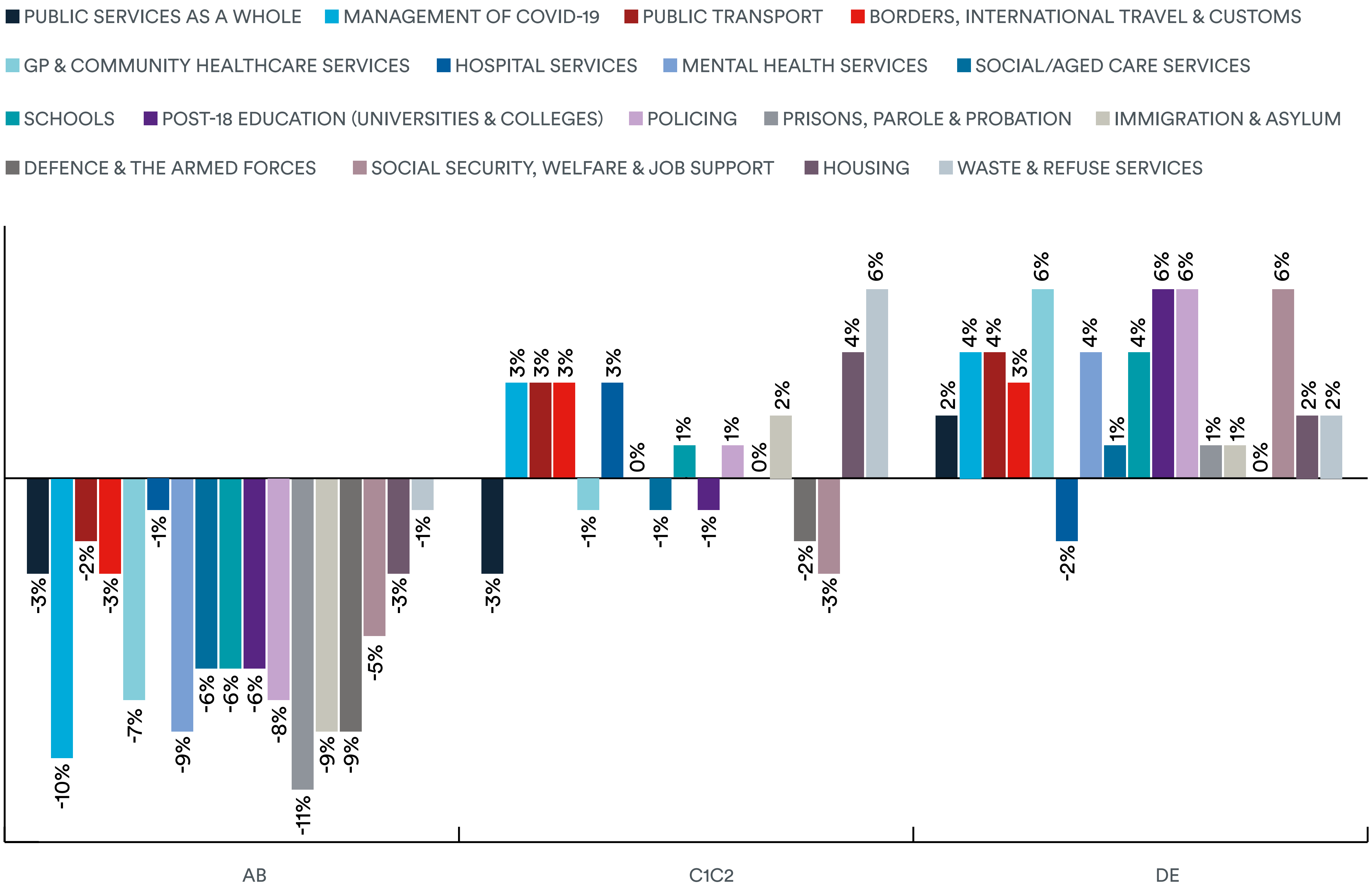
On a somewhat related note, the steep 10-point decline in AB respondents' satisfaction with *Management of Covid-19,* despite the increased satisfaction of the other two groupings in this service category, may be attributable to the UK Government's decision not to introduce a lockdown to suppress the spread of the Omicron variant in December. Presumably, working people belonging to the AB social grades are more likely to be able to work from home and as such would see less of an impact to their incomes and livelihoods during a Covid lockdown, leading them to view the Government's less cautious policy towards Omicron in a more negative light than those less able to work remotely in the other social strata. Alternatively, the opposite may be true: perhaps AB respondents disapproved of the Government's decision to introduce any restrictions at all in early December, while the C1C2 and DE social brackets' improved satisfaction with the UK's Covid strategy reflected the Government's decision not to bring in a lockdown which may have impacted their livelihoods. Fundamentally, what this shift shows, however, is that the continued narrowing of the differential between levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction amongst different social groups. Changing economic and social conditions in the UK appear, therefore, to have brought about an increase in satisfaction levels among those belonging to the DE social grades and a contemporaneous fall in satisfaction among those in the AB cohort. However, this represents only a narrowing of the gap: in our January survey, it remained true that the higher up an individual was on the system of *NRS Social Grades,* the more satisfied they were likely to be with public services.

[17] 'The Boris Budget' – Resolution Foundation.

NRS SOCIAL CLASS: SATISFIED

NRS SOCIAL CLASS: DISSATISFIED

NRS SOCIAL CLASS: CHANGE OF SATISFIED



Notions of the Nations

As in our earlier poll, sentiment varied significantly between the UK's nations across a range of different public services. Given that many of the services asked about in our poll are delivered by devolved institutions and agencies, the data presented here may provide an ongoing commentary on how well the UK's devolved governments are regarded in their delivery of public services.

Once again, small sample sizes restricted our analysis in a small number of areas: as data regarding Scotland and Wales was drawn from small bases of under 100 individuals each (i.e. fewer than 100 people's responses were recorded in each nation prior to the data being weighted to be made nationally representative), the inferences we have made using the Scottish and Welsh survey data should be treated with some caution. The weighted sample size of Northern Irish respondents stood at the minimum base of 30: given this, we feel it would not be possible to draw accurate conclusions from this survey data on the state of opinion in Northern Ireland.

Generally, satisfaction with public services rose most sharply in Scotland, where 10 of the 17 polled areas of public services, including *Public Services as a Whole,* saw increases in satisfaction, while six saw decreased satisfaction levels. In Wales, respondents returned improved satisfaction scores for five surveyed areas and reported lower satisfaction for 12 service areas, though many of these only by a small number of percentage points. Survey takers in England delivered a much more mixed bag of results: satisfaction scores improved in six surveyed service categories, declined in eight others, and remained the same in three further categories.

Perhaps the most radical departure from our previous survey was the significant upswing in public satisfaction among Scottish respondents with public services: over half (54%) of Scots were satisfied with *Public Services as a Whole*, a rise of 18 percentage points from August 2021. In fact, Scottish net satisfaction with *Public Services as a Whole* was 38 percentage points higher than net dissatisfaction. Across the 17 polled public services in our survey, Scots returned a mean average satisfaction score of 41%, higher than the corresponding figures for England and Wales (both 38%). In seven of the 17 areas of public services we asked about, Scotland's satisfaction score was the highest of the nations, and was tied for joint highest in a further three areas: only in three of the 17 areas *(Mental Health Services; Social/Aged Care Services; Immigration & Asylum)* did dissatisfied Scottish respondents outnumber satisfied ones. Survey takers in Scotland furthermore returned satisfaction scores higher than or equal to the UK average in 11 of the 17 polled areas, with net satisfaction scores generally above the UK average by a mean of three points. This is in sharp contrast to our previous poll, where Scotland's satisfaction scores were lower than the UK average in 10 of the 17 surveyed areas. Wales, on the other hand, deemed the most satisfied of the nations based on our August 2021 data, seemed much less so by January 2022: Welsh respondents recorded satisfaction scores below the UK average in eight of the 17 surveyed areas of public services, up from four areas in August.

One area in which opinion across the nations remained unchanged, however, was *Management of Covid-19*. As before, Wales recorded the highest satisfaction score, 50%, in this category (down from 52% in August): this was 10 points above England's score, 11 points above Scotland's, and nine points above the UK average. The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have consistently set different, often more cautious policies to manage the pandemic than the UK Government, with Scottish and Welsh ministers introducing Covid restrictions more quickly and more readily than their counterparts at Westminster, whilst being slower and more cautious to ease them. From 27 December 2021, for instance, the Welsh Government under Labour First Minister Mark Drakeford closed nightclubs in response to the rising Omicron variant, while nightclubs in England remained open through to New Year's Eve[18]. Wales' higher satisfaction score with regard to *Management of Covid-19* may be interpreted as an endorsement of the Cardiff Bay administration's public health policies during the pandemic: this would seemingly be reinforced by an ITV Wales poll showing that 60% of respondents preferred Wales' Covid strategy to England's[19].

One key trend we identified in our previous report was that Scots appeared to return higher dissatisfaction scores for those services delivered by the UK Government. This appeared to be less the case by January 2022: notably, *Defence & the Armed Forces* had risen significantly in the estimation of Scottish respondents, from 35% to 46%. In August, Scots had returned satisfaction scores below the UK average across all four of the public services – *Borders, International Travel & Customs; Immigration & Asylum; Social Security, Welfare & Job Support* and *Defence & the Armed Forces* – which mostly fell under Westminster's rather than Holyrood's remit. However, by January only *Immigration & Asylum* had a lower net satisfaction score in Scotland (21%) than in the UK as a whole (26%). This may initially seem surprising, especially given a recent poll which found that the UK Government's net favourability rating had dropped to -50 among Scots and that support for independence had risen to 46%, neck-on-neck with support for the Union at 46%[20].

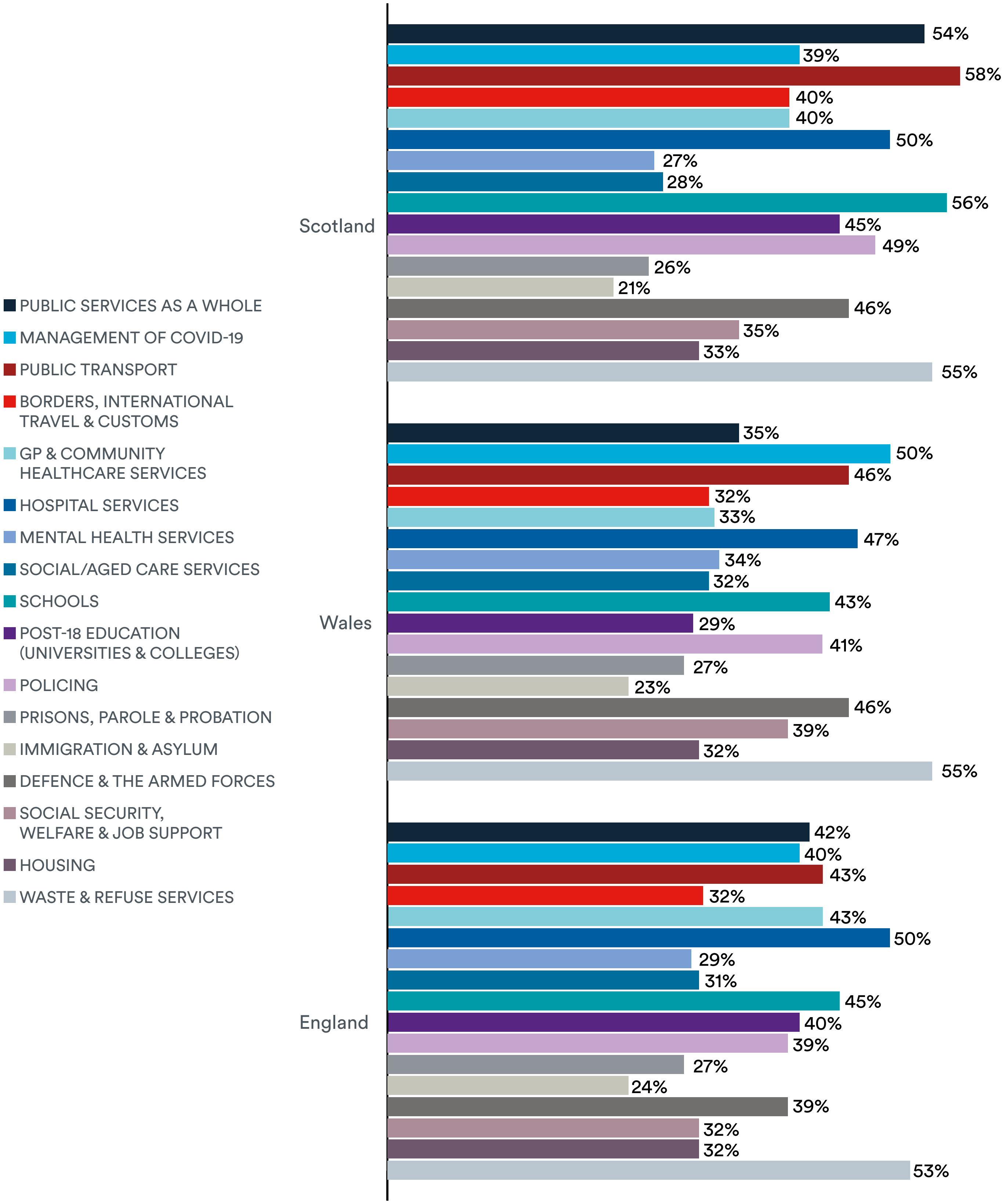
Perhaps an explanation for this lies in changing external circumstances: for instance, the escalating threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine may have stoked public support in Scotland for the British Armed Forces in late January. Similarly, while Scottish ministers retain the prerogative to set policy as regards Covid travel restrictions, in practice they have in recent months often followed the UK Government's lead, and so liberalisation of travel requirements into England and Scotland in January may have been popular among Scots and boosted their opinion of *Borders, International Travel & Customs* from a satisfaction score of 25% in August to 40% in January.

With other, devolved public services, however, Scots also proved considerably more satisfied than they had been in August: 58%, for instance, were satisfied with *Public Transport,* up 21 points from August and 47 points higher than the number of dissatisfied Scots (11%). Perhaps this is due to recent measures announced by the Scottish Government, such as free bus travel for passengers under 22[22], to expand the use of public transport in Scotland.

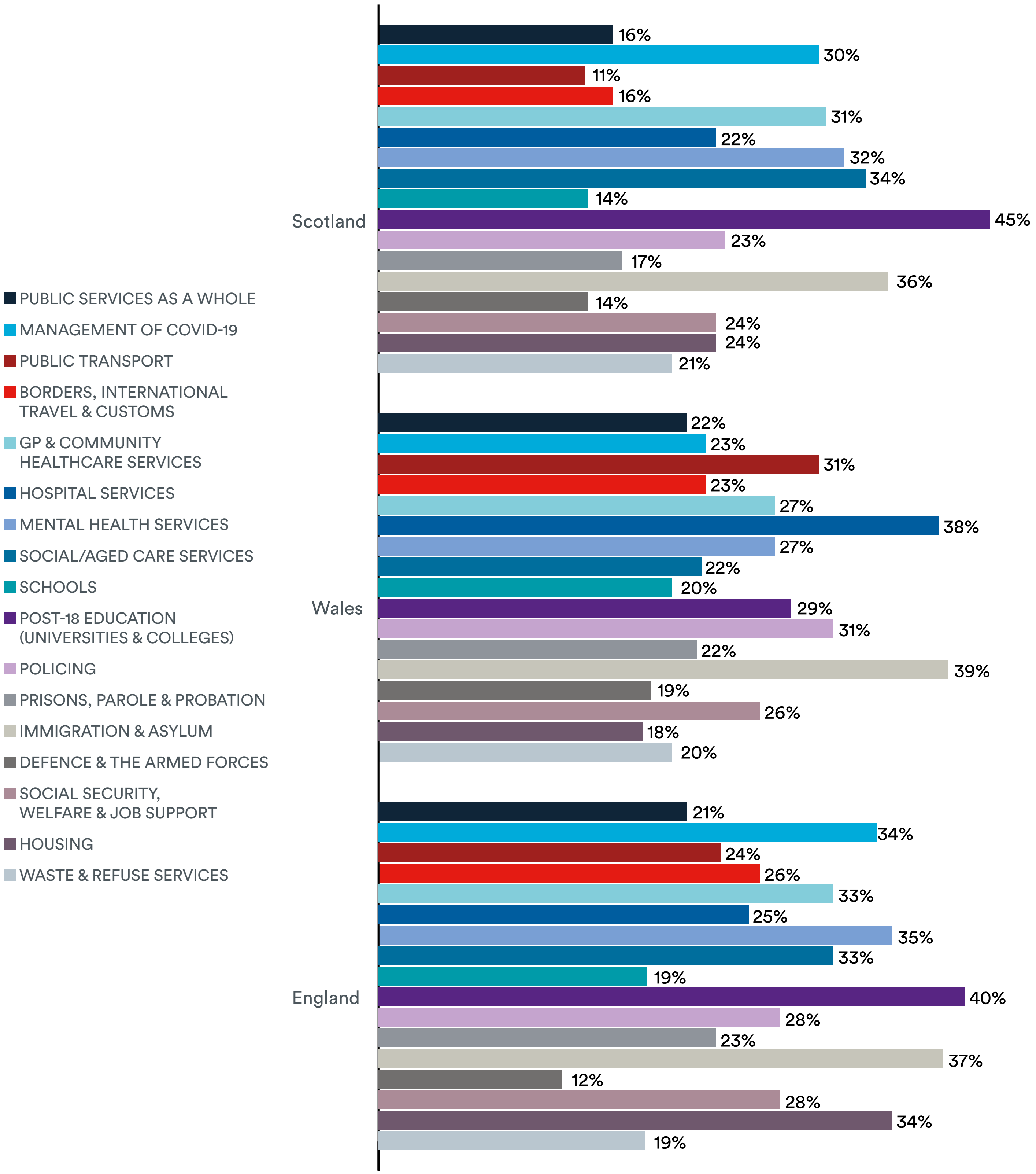
Without polling into respondents' motivations, we cannot comment authoritatively on the reasons why satisfaction with public services appears to have risen so markedly in Scotland, nor why satisfaction appears to have declined in Wales during the same period. Nevertheless, the patterns in public opinion evident in the UK's nations will, when tracked over time, offer ongoing insights into the performance and delivery of public services by the devolved administrations and also by the central Westminster Government. With significant fluctuations in satisfaction already visible, it will be interesting to examine in future instalments of this series whether additional patterns emerge and if current trends in public sentiment continue on their present trajectory.

[18] 'Nightclubs fear "lockdown by steal" will kill vital NYE business' – The Guardian.
[19] 'More than half "in favour of vaccine passports" in Wales, poll shows' – ITV News.
[20] 'Scottish independence support rises as voters turn against Boris Johnson, poll finds' – Daily Record.
[21] 'Scottish Government expected to scrap Covid tests for travellers after UK Government's announcement for England' – The Scotsman.
[22] 'Free bus travel for under 22s' – Scottish Government.

UK NATIONS: SATISFIED



UK NATIONS: DISSATISFIED



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Lessons from Australia

This report's sister, *People Powered Public Services: Monitoring Australian Opinion*, identifies clear distinctions between the way residents of the UK and of Australia perceive public services in their respective countries. Most obviously, 47% of Australians were satisfied with *Public Services as a Whole,* four points above the corresponding proportion in the UK: in August, the net satisfaction scores for this category had been 46% in Australia and 45% in the UK. As such, the gap between satisfied Australians and Britons had demonstrably widened between August 2021 and January 2022. A further analysis of the Australian data reveals, on comparing it with the UK statistics, that Australians remained more satisfied with public services than British respondents, much as they had been in August.

Of the 17 polled areas of public services, Australia's net satisfaction scores were higher than Britain's on 15 occasions. The only exceptions were *Management of Covid-19* (41% satisfied in the UK; 38% in Australia) and *Waste & Refuse Service* (53% satisfied in the UK; 52% in Australia). Furthermore, Australia's (mean) average net satisfaction score across all surveyed service categories was, at 43%, five points above that of the UK (38%). Once again, this five-point margin was wider than what it had been in August, when Australia's average satisfaction score stood at 42% and the UK's stood at 39%.

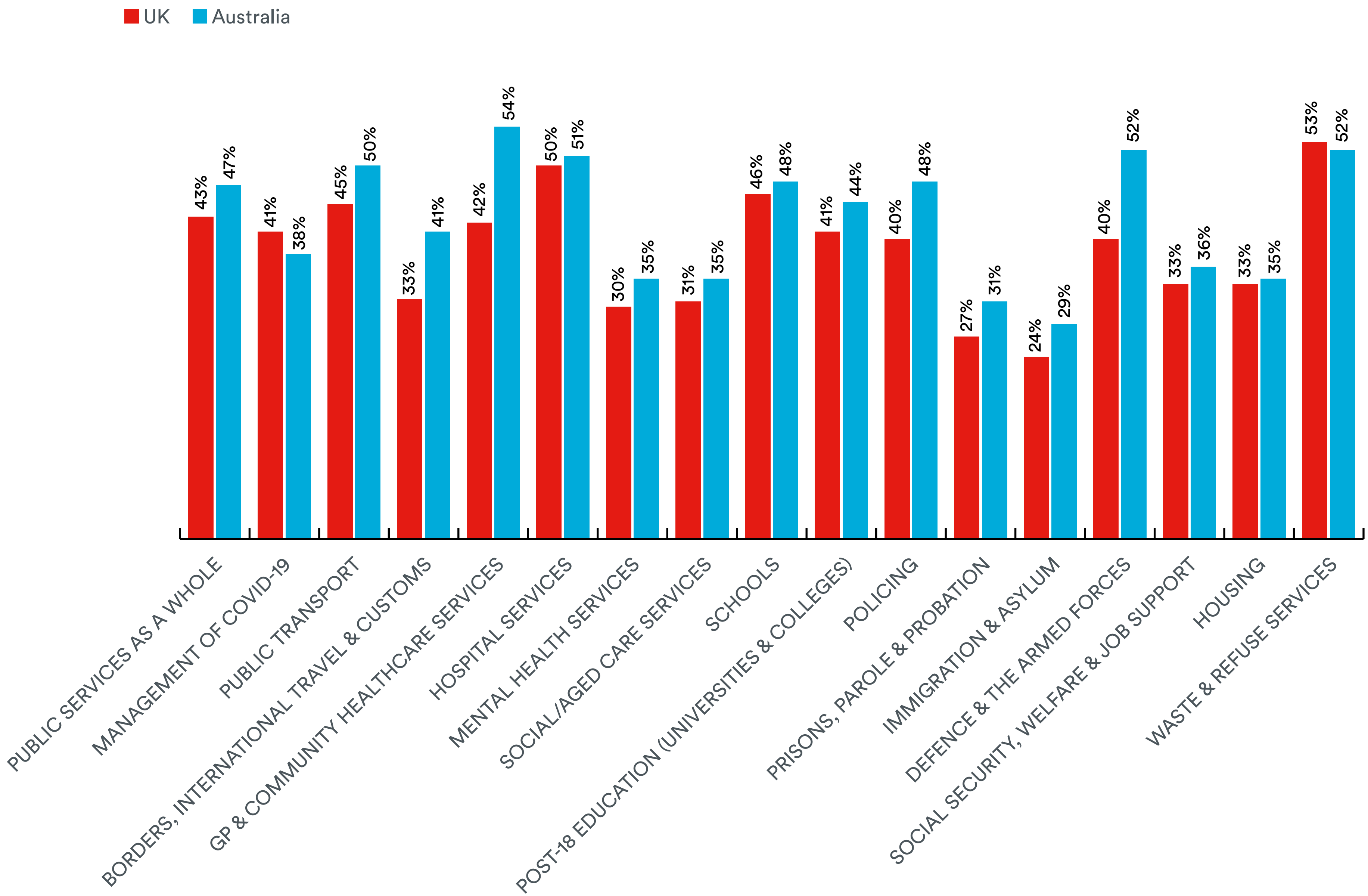
The largest discrepancies between the UK and Australia with respect to satisfaction scores were to be found in *GP & Community Healthcare Services,* where Australia's satisfaction score stood 12 points higher than the UK's (54% v. 42%), and *Defence & the Armed Forces,* where once again a 12-point margin separated satisfied Australians (52%) from satisfied Britons (40%). Other service areas with a notable difference in satisfaction levels between the two countries included *Borders, International Travel & Customs* (33% satisfied in the UK; 41% satisfied in Australia) and *Policing* (40% satisfied in the UK; 48% satisfied in Australia).

With regard to dissatisfaction, British dissatisfaction scores were higher than Australian ones for 15 of the 17 polled areas. With one service, Housing, UK and Australian respondents were equally dissatisfied (both 32%) and it was only for *Management of Covid-19* that Australian respondents returned a higher dissatisfaction score (34%) than their British counterparts, and only by one percentage point. To reinforce this, the UK's average dissatisfaction score across the 17 categories was, at 26%, five points higher than the corresponding figure for Australia.

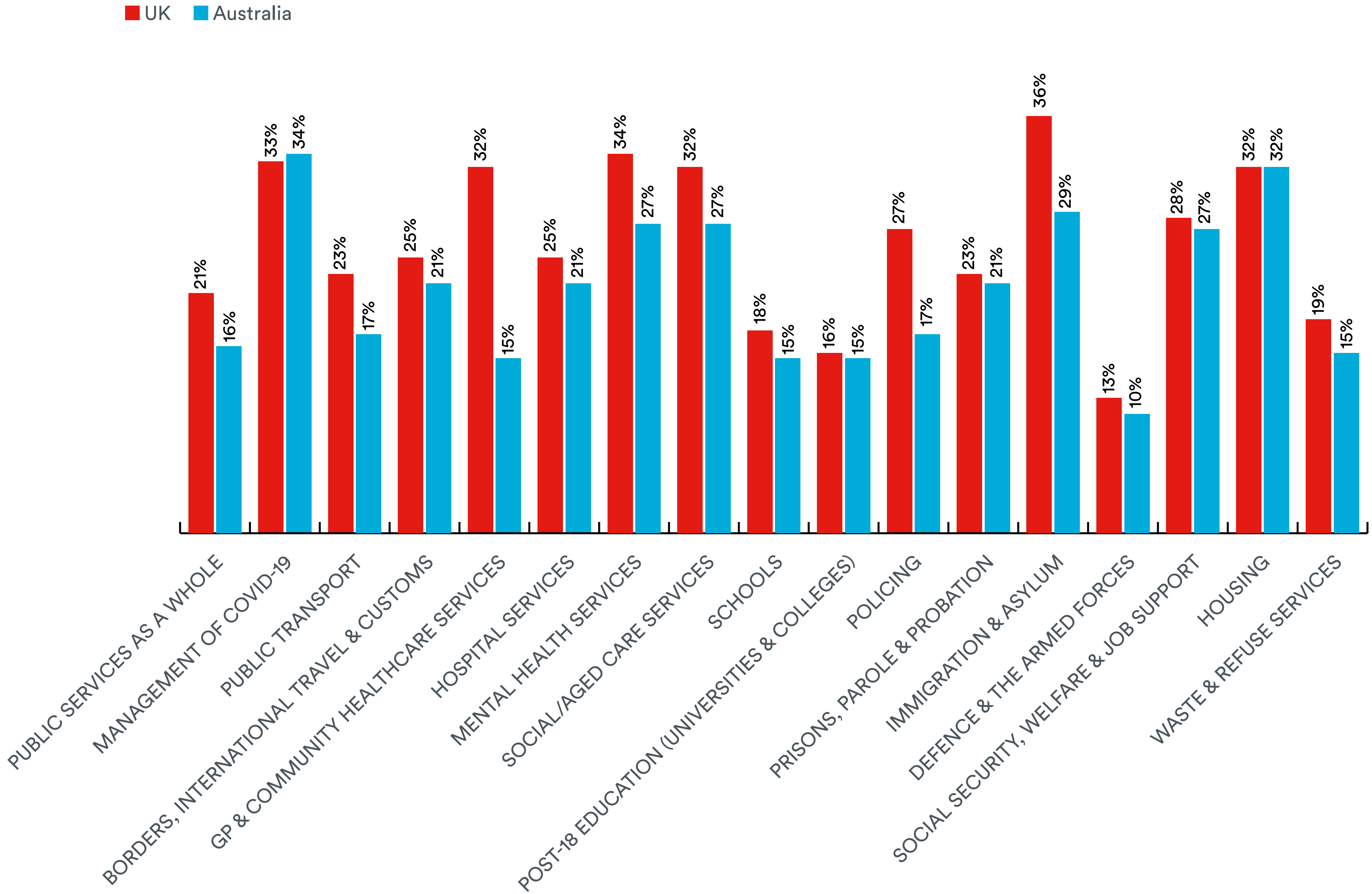
The widest gaps between the UK and Australia's dissatisfaction scores were in regard to *GP & Community Healthcare Services,* where a 17-point gap separated the UK's dissatisfaction score (32%) from Australia's (15%), and *Policing,* where dissatisfaction in the UK (27%) stood 10 points higher than in Australia (17%).

Australians' higher levels of satisfaction and lower levels of dissatisfaction do not necessarily mean that public services in Australia are of a higher quality than in the UK. Australians could, for instance, have different expectations of their government services, or are better-disposed towards them because of a more easy-going national psyche. However, the trend of a growing gap in the levels of satisfaction should encourage UK policymakers to explore in more detail why Australian citizens seemingly harbour more positive feelings towards the services their government(s) deliver than their UK counterparts.

NET SATISFIED: UK V AUSTRALIA



NET DISSATISFIED: UK V AUSTRALIA



Conclusion – The story continued

The second instalment in *People Powered Public Services* comes at a dramatic time for British public policy and services, with an escalating cost of living crisis, record NHS waiting lists set to grow still further and an uncertain period ahead for the current administration. With all this and more at the forefront of public discourse, it is inevitable that the emergent trends our report identifies as to the country's mood towards public services are being shaped in large part by factors well beyond people's direct experience of a public service.

Overall, UK residents appeared to register little change in satisfaction levels: satisfaction with *Public Services as a Whole* stood, at 43%, just two points below what it had been previously. Given tightening economic conditions in the UK since we last undertook polling of the British public, this can be seen as an endorsement of the resilience of Britain's public services. However, this likely also reflects that conditions on the ground for public services simply do not change enough in the space of just a few months for there to be seismic shifts in people's reported levels of satisfaction. We will need to continue to monitor sentiment in future waves to see if this emerging downward shift becomes a consistent trend.

Patterns identified in our previous report broadly appeared to also hold true with this round of polling: older respondents were less satisfied than younger ones; men were generally more satisfied than women; and people from the AB Social Grades were more satisfied than respondents from other social strata.

However, the wind seemed to be at the back of 16-24-year-olds, Scottish residents, and those belonging to the DE social grades: these groups indicated improved satisfaction levels relative to our survey data from August 2021. By contrast, those respondents in the 35-44 age range, living in Wales and belonging to the AB socioeconomic cohort recorded declines in satisfaction.

Across all 17 polled areas of public services, men and women returned identical (mean) average net satisfaction scores – 44% and 33% respectively – to August, and once again men were more satisfied than women in all polled service categories. However, while men's satisfaction declined in 11 of the 17 public service areas, women's satisfaction declined in just nine, suggesting that men maintained a smaller lead in satisfaction over women by January.

Our polling can only track changes in sentiment over time – we therefore are unable to definitively comment on people's reasons for growing more or less satisfied with a particular public service. What we can do is suggest theories for the trends we observe, identifying how circumstances in relation to public policy and services have shifted in recent months and how these may plausibly have impacted opinion as a result.

The most obvious explanation for the above mentioned trends is that times have grown leaner for the UK: since August, real-terms pay packets have shrunk and bills and prices have risen. Our previous report posited that those more likely to have fewer choices when it comes to their use of public services were also less likely to be satisfied: now, it appears to be the case that those groups with greater support to cope with declining real incomes across the country were more likely to be satisfied. For instance, 16-24-year-olds, the age group least likely to be in work, were also the only age banding to record a higher (mean) average net satisfaction score across the 17 polled areas in January than in August.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 situation has, presumably, greatly influenced the state of opinion in the UK. As noted in the overview, this is likely to have in some cases led to increased approval among the public: for instance, in *Borders, International Travel & Customs,* satisfied respondents by January outnumbered dissatisfied ones by eight percentage points (33% net satisfied, 25% net dissatisfied), whereas in August this 'satisfaction gap' had been just three points (32% net satisfied, 29% net dissatisfied). This is likely to be a consequence of loosened Covid travel restrictions, such as the UK Government's scrapping of pre-departure tests, which took effect for double- and triple-jabbed travellers re-entering the UK in early January[23]; furthermore, as mentioned previously, many respondents are simply more likely to have taken a holiday since August and are consequently better-disposed towards this service category and the associated rules.

In other cases, however, Covid is likely to have had a deleterious effect on people's sentiments. For instance, the social care sector was hit by well-publicised staff absences in late 2021 and early 2022 due to the Omicron wave, with two-thirds of home care providers unable to take new clients and nearly half of care homes closed to new residents[24]: this may explain why net dissatisfaction with *Social/Aged Care Services* had risen by two points to 32%. Whereas there had in August been more satisfied (33%) than dissatisfied (30%) respondents for this public service, by January there were marginally more dissatisfied respondents (32%) than satisfied ones (31%). However, there is additionally the possibility that non-Covid factors are also at play here, as respondents may have indicated decreased satisfaction and increased dissatisfaction with *Social/Aged Care*

Services due to their opposition to the impending hikes to taxes, including National Insurance and dividend earnings, which were announced by the Chancellor to fund social care reform.

In still other cases, Covid appears to have had little to no impact on public opinion. Net satisfaction with *Hospital Services,* for instance, stood at 50% in January, roughly where it was in August (49%) despite record waiting times for elective care at NHS hospitals, an issue which Health Secretary Sajid Javid acknowledged in early February was unlikely to be resolved before 2024[25].

It bears repeating that public services on the ground, and the experience of using public services, cannot in just a few months meaningfully change beyond fleeting crises such as industrial action. The Chancellor's plan, announced back in October, to grow departmental spending by 3.8% in real terms will not yet have resulted in significantly improved government services[26]. However, an economic outlook which has grown gloomier for millions of Britons, combined with some Covid-induced short-term labour shortages, is unlikely to have had no impact on popular sentiment towards public services.

With taxes and living costs scheduled to rise still further before we next undertake fieldwork, it may be the case that more people in the UK are driven to avail themselves of the public services provided to them. We hope the insights that our research uncovers will help shape discourse and raise awareness of the continued need to ensure that public services, now more relied upon than ever, continue to be centred around the needs and wants of citizens.

[23] 'COVID-19: Pre-departure tests scrapped for travellers entering the UK' – Sky News.
[24] 'Care services struggle with Omicron staff-sickness spike' – BBC News.
[25] 'Record NHS waiting lists will not fall until March 2024, Sajid Javid admits' – ITV News.
[26] 'Budget 2021: key points at a glance' – The Guardian.

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