

The New Normal Survey

COVID's Lasting Legacy on Local Government

The new normal may look like the old normal...but with some very notable exceptions.

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Introduction

Think back to July 2020. Recall the overwhelming uncertainty and fear that characterized local government decision making. This was the backdrop of our first survey of 500+ local government leaders - The Next Normal Survey.

Now, nearly a year later, conditions have changed enormously. Many local governments across North America are at a critical inflection point: vaccine distribution is scaling, restrictions are easing, and people are making serious, tangible plans for our new normal.

It is because of this critical inflection point that we decided to do a follow up to our first local government survey. Approximately 600 local government officials took our follow up survey. In this report, you will find key results, trends, and analysis gathered from their answers.

If we had to summarize our findings in just one sentence it would be this:
The new normal may look like the old normal for local governments...but with some very notable exceptions.



Profile of Respondents

Five hundred and ninety nine local government officials and staff took The New Normal Survey: COVID's Lasting Legacy on Local Government. While **69%** of respondents represented municipalities, respondents also included county employees, special district staff and utility executives. As before, this follow up survey captured the perceptions of local government leaders from mostly small and midsize communities - a group that is often underrepresented in public discussions, but very representative of most communities across the country.

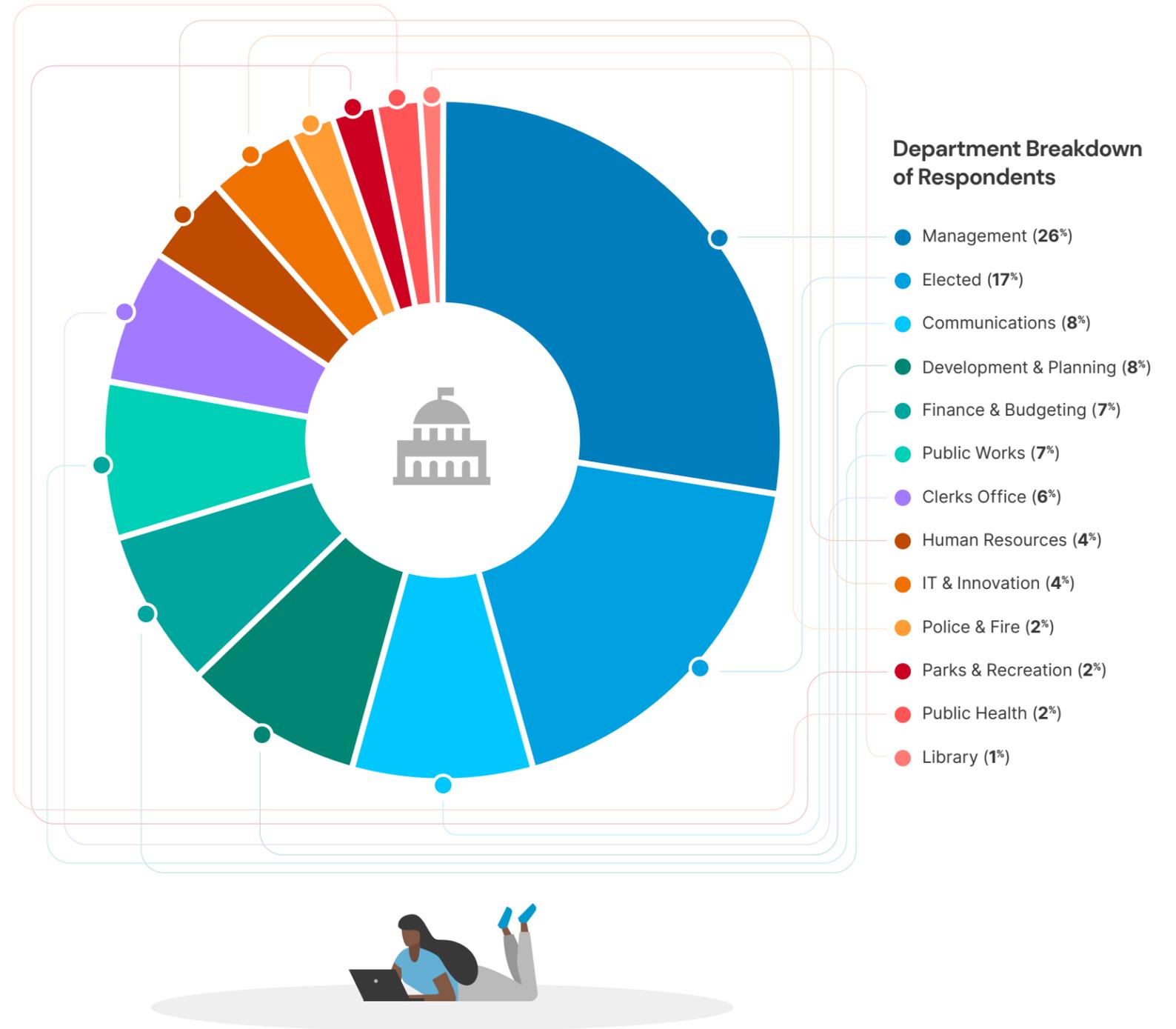
Population Served Breakdown of Respondents

<10K	(49%)
10K-25K	(19%)
25K-50K	(16%)
50K-100K	(12%)
100K-500K	(17%)
500K-1M	(2%)
1M-2M	(2%)
>2M	(14%)

Regional Breakdown of Respondents



NW (9%)	MW (31%)	MDATL (10%)
W (8%)	SE (16%)	
SW (17%)	NE (8%)	



COVID-19

won't fundamentally change the work of local government

In July 2020, there were serious discussions about what the future of service delivery in local government would look like, and the responses to our first survey reflected that uncertainty. For example: would entire workflows be automated?

COVID-19 is expected to have a lasting legacy on how local governments deliver services:

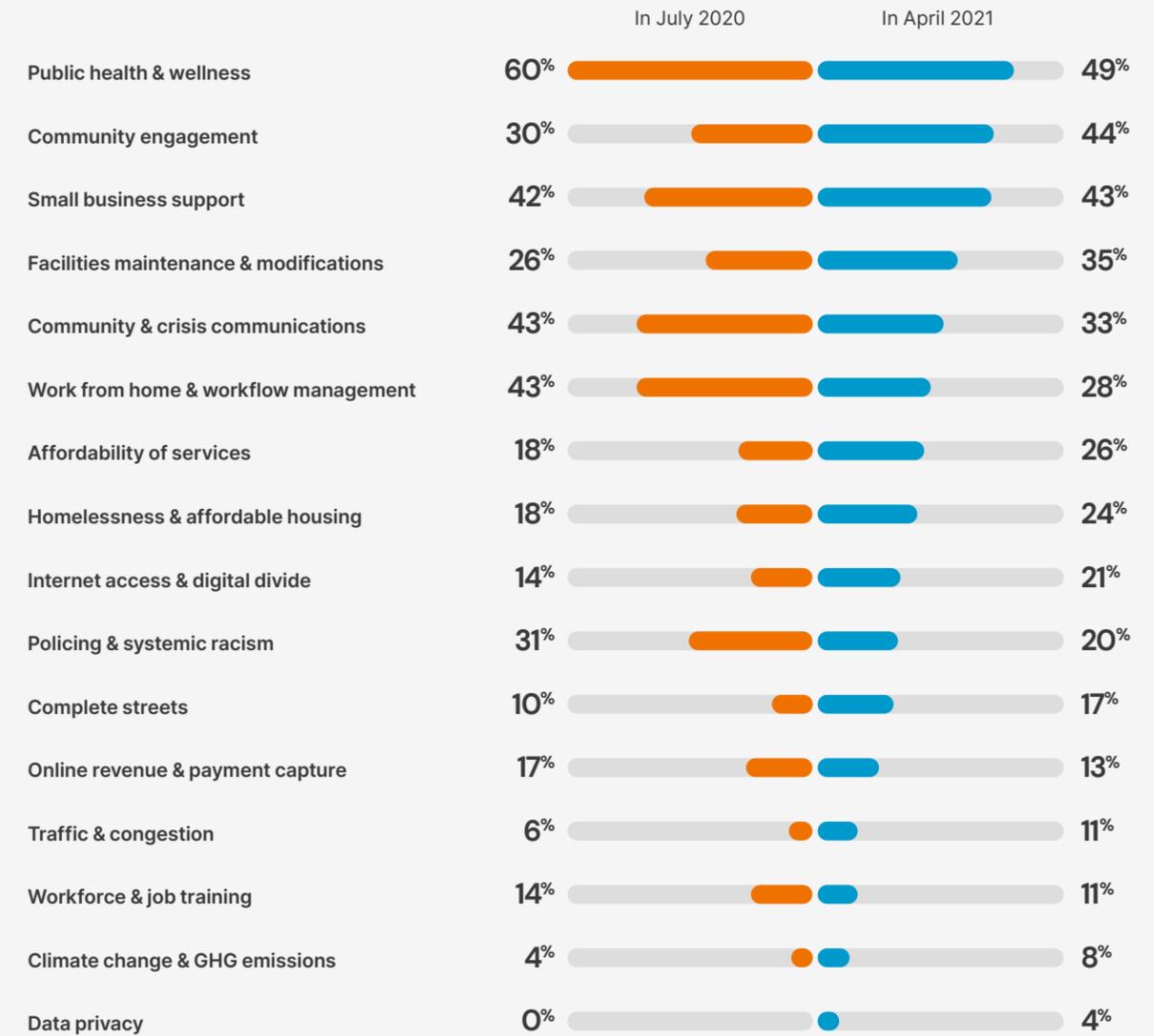
85% of respondents believed that COVID-19 would have a lasting impact on how local governments deliver services.



But now, almost a year later, it is becoming clear that the fundamental, day-to-day work of local government will not change forever.

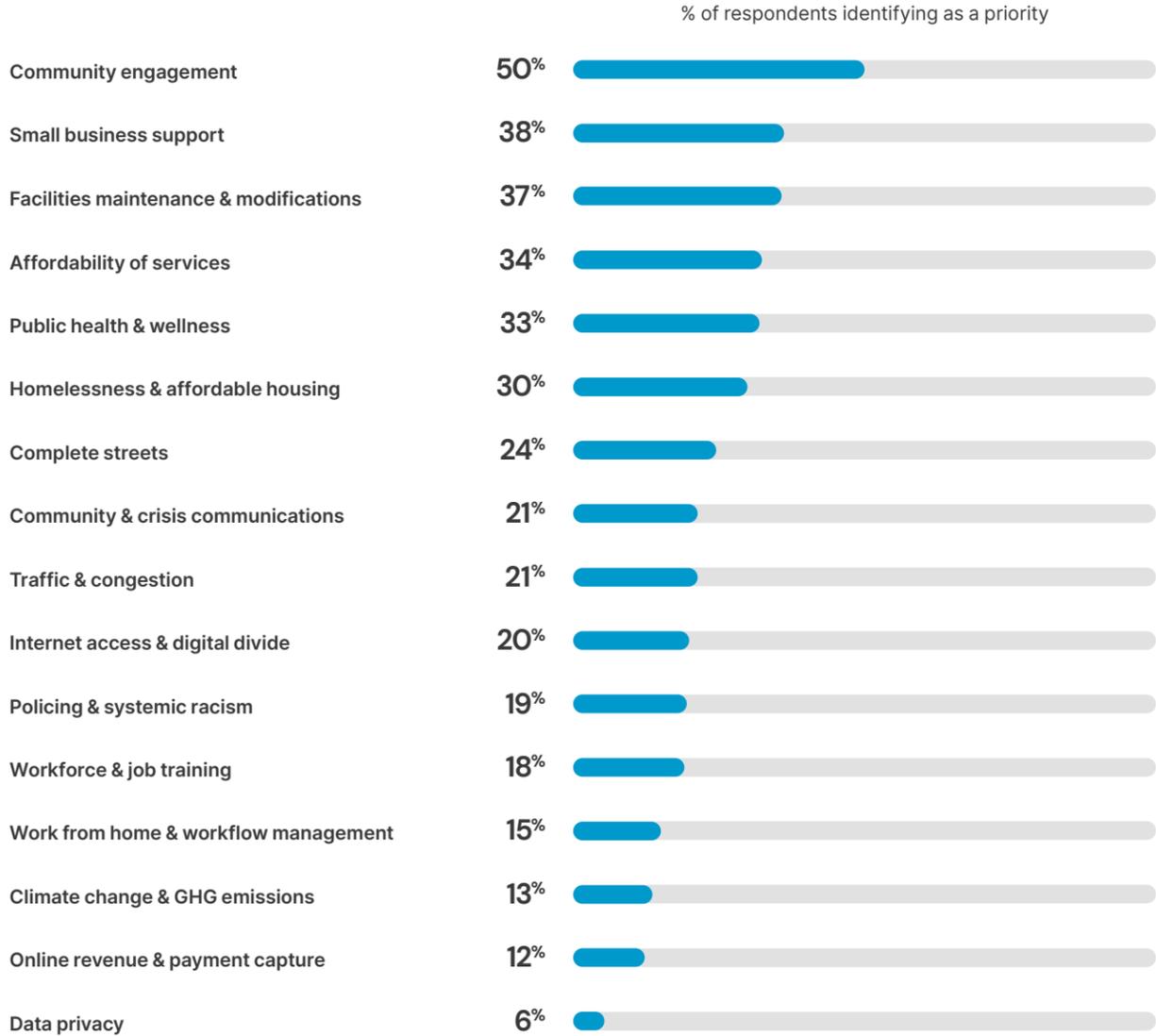
Across all questions asked in the follow up survey, it is clear that the focus on acute crises related to COVID-19 (e.g. public health, crisis communications, enabling work from home) still remain, but are slowly starting to pass. Many of these challenges still remain at the forefront, but there are signals that some priorities are beginning to shift back to the more expected, and normal, work of government.

Top 3-5 issues local government focused on...



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Top 3–5 issues your local government will be focused on in 1 year



Expectations about which changes will be permanent



Respondents are signaling that they expect the more normal priorities of local government to resume within 1 year.



Respondents are less likely to think that some of the changes to local government work will be permanent than they were a year ago. This is an indication that the lasting legacy of COVID-19 of local government work may not be as permanent as local government employees first thought.

COVID-19

was - and wasn't - a game changer for resident engagement

COVID-19 caused the widespread, almost overnight adoption of virtual tools for community engagement:

79% of respondents reported that they adopted technology to engage with community members during COVID-19.

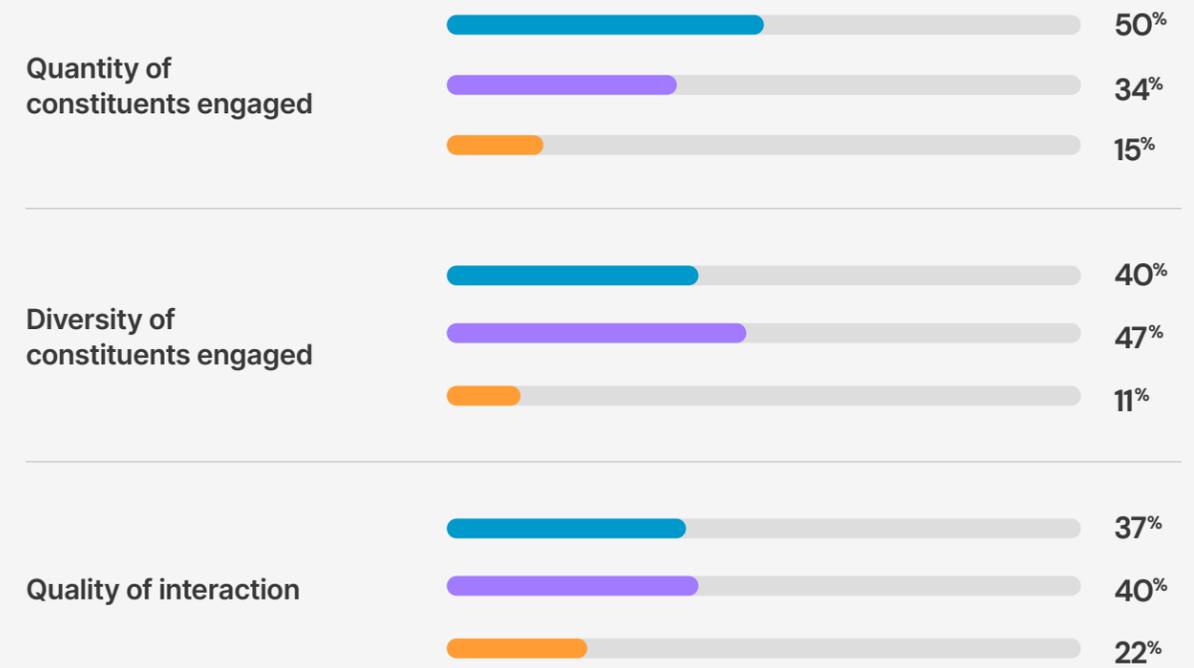


But the lasting legacy of that widespread adoption is less clear. Many respondents reported that the quantity and diversity of community members who were engaged either improved or stayed the same, and the quality of the interaction also improved or stayed the same.

There were some respondents who did say that the online tools made engagement worse along these dimensions, so this was not a universal experience.

How has online constituent engagement changed the following factors?

● They've made them much **better** or somewhat better
 ● Similar to before
 ● They've made them much **worse** or somewhat worse



Furthermore, many respondents expect that council meetings are unlikely to stay virtual once communities open back up: **81%** of respondents reported using technology to enable governing board meetings during COVID-19, but only **53%** think that will be a permanent move.

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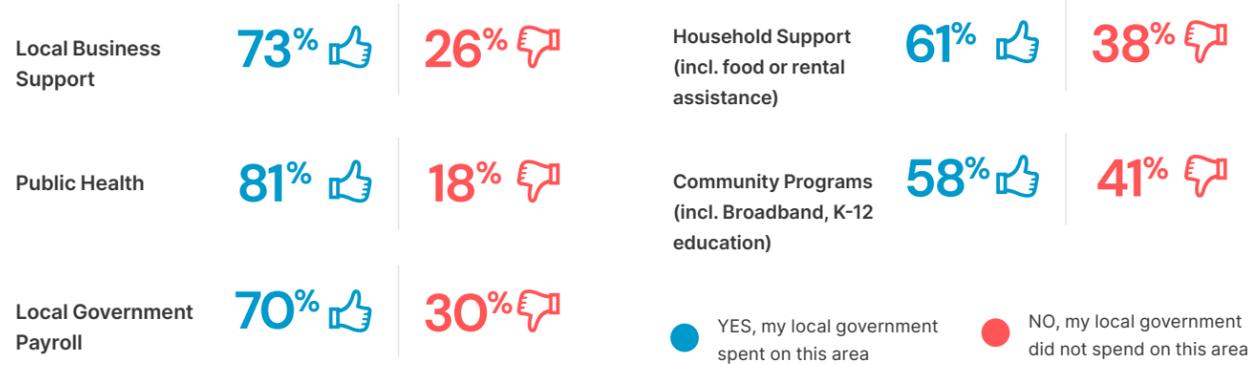
"The federal funding received should be used to increase services to the community in a more equitable manner."

- Counsel, OR

COVID-19

stimulus only stanching the bleeding

Which areas did your local government apply 2020 COVID-19 relief funding to?

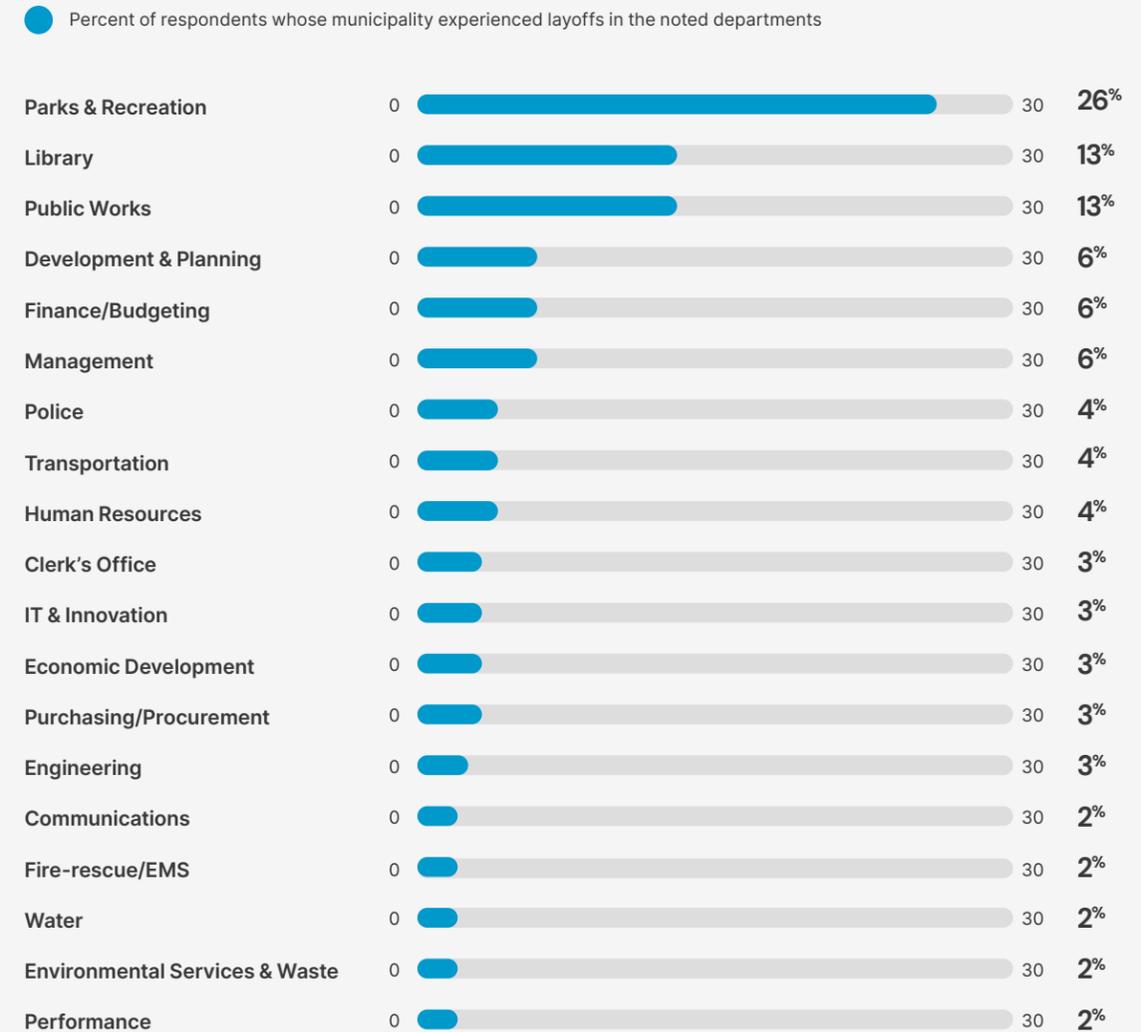


Importantly, it's clear that local governments used the COVID-19 stimulus to cover payroll and retain local government employees. In summer of 2020, only 2% of respondents expected that their organization wouldn't be facing any furloughs, RIFs or layoffs. Now 28% of respondents reported that there were no significant layoffs.

Community programs that many residents, and primarily low-income and minority residents, rely on were hit with closures, budget cuts and layoffs. Survey responses indicated that COVID-19 relief funding didn't do much to help.

Of those departments that did face layoffs, 26% reported that Parks & Recreation departments were impacted (which was the highest for any department), and 13% reported that Libraries were impacted. In addition, household support and community programs like broadband and K-12 education received less funding from the stimulus package than other priorities.

Which departments in your local government experienced layoffs since the pandemic began?



Even though infrastructure was more likely to be mentioned as one of the 3 to 5 top priorities for local governments, facilities maintenance is up 9%, internet access is up 7%, complete streets is up 5% - Public Works Departments were the third most impacted departments in terms of layoffs. Given restrictions on stimulus money being used for long term capital projects and programs, this has implications for deferred maintenance backlogs.



COVID-19

will impact the future of the local government workforce

53% of respondents said that COVID-19 has caused their local government to uncover new leaders and 44% said that COVID-19 has accelerated retirements. These data points - and especially in the context of flexible schedules and work from home (see section above) - suggest that COVID-19 will have a lasting legacy on the makeup of the local government workforce.



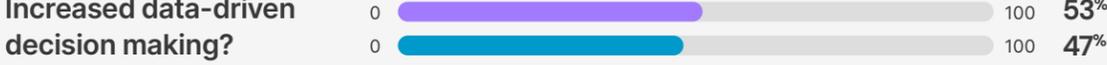
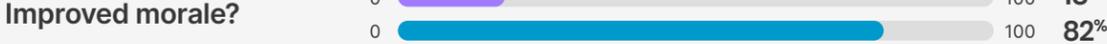
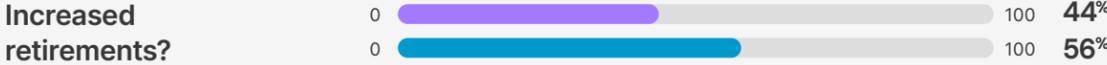
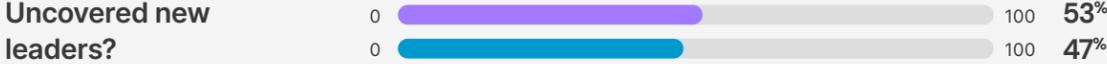
“Many of our leaders are excited to get back to the way “things used to be.” Many of the younger workers want WFH to be more permanent. I expect there will be a conflict there. Leaders seem to be reluctant to update remote/flexible work policies. Employees will demand it.”

- Director, MD



Do you think recent events have changed team dynamics in your local government? Specifically...

Yes No



COVID-19

may change local government travel forever

Unsurprisingly, **80%** of respondents reported that they're traveling a lot less because of COVID-19. More surprisingly, however, is that **37%** of respondents believe that trend - less travel for their work in local government - is likely to be permanent.

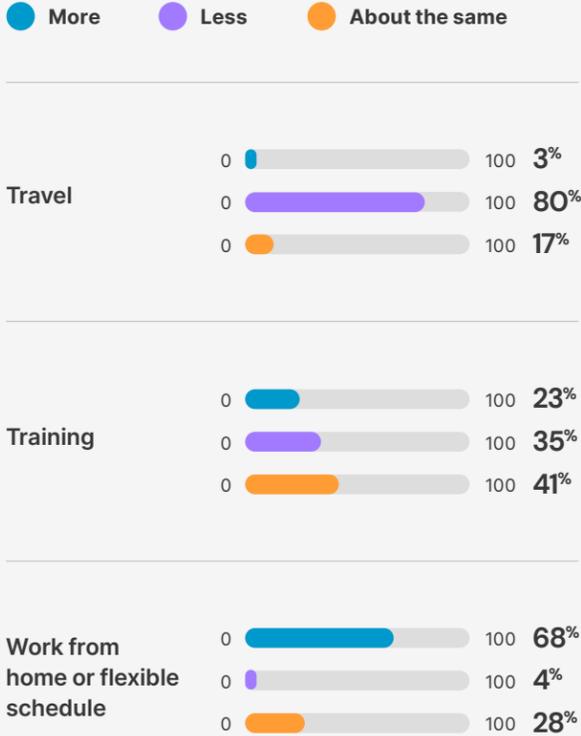


"I hope that the flexibility to work from home at times continues, and trainings continue to be streamed (at least some)."

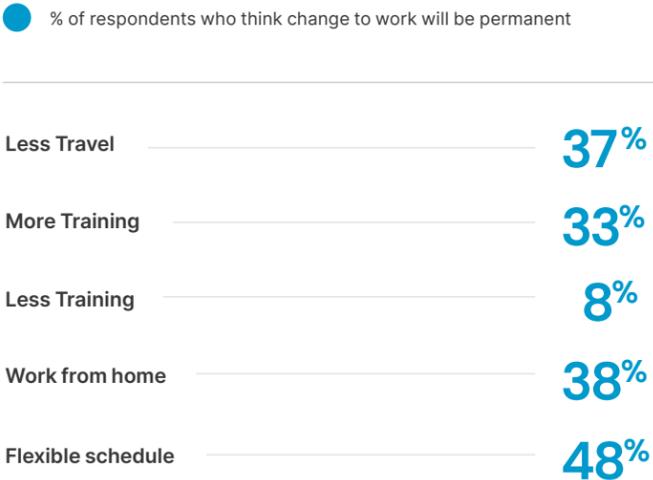
- Town Clerk, CO



How has your work changed as a result of this pandemic?



Which of the following possible changes to your work do you expect to be permanent?



Interestingly, **33%** expect that a shift to more training will be permanent, along with **38%** who think that the shift to work from home will be permanent and **48%** who think flexible schedules are here to stay for their local government.

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COVID-19 technology adoption will be permanent

The use of software and technology by local governments is clearly here to stay: **79%** of respondents reported that they are using more technology due to COVID-19, and **72%** reported that they expect that change to be permanent.

Do you expect the software and technology adoption made during the pandemic to be permanent?

84% Permitting

71% Asset management

90% Forms

83% Community engagement

81% Citizen request

87% Payment

54% Governing board meetings

69% Remote work

● % respondents that said yes

70% of respondents reported they expect the use of software and technology will be used to streamline public service delivery in the future across a wide range of challenges moving forward.



"Government has been so slow to go all-digital, and the pandemic fast-tracked those efforts. This is great! A digital-first focus will only enhance efficiencies and improve service."

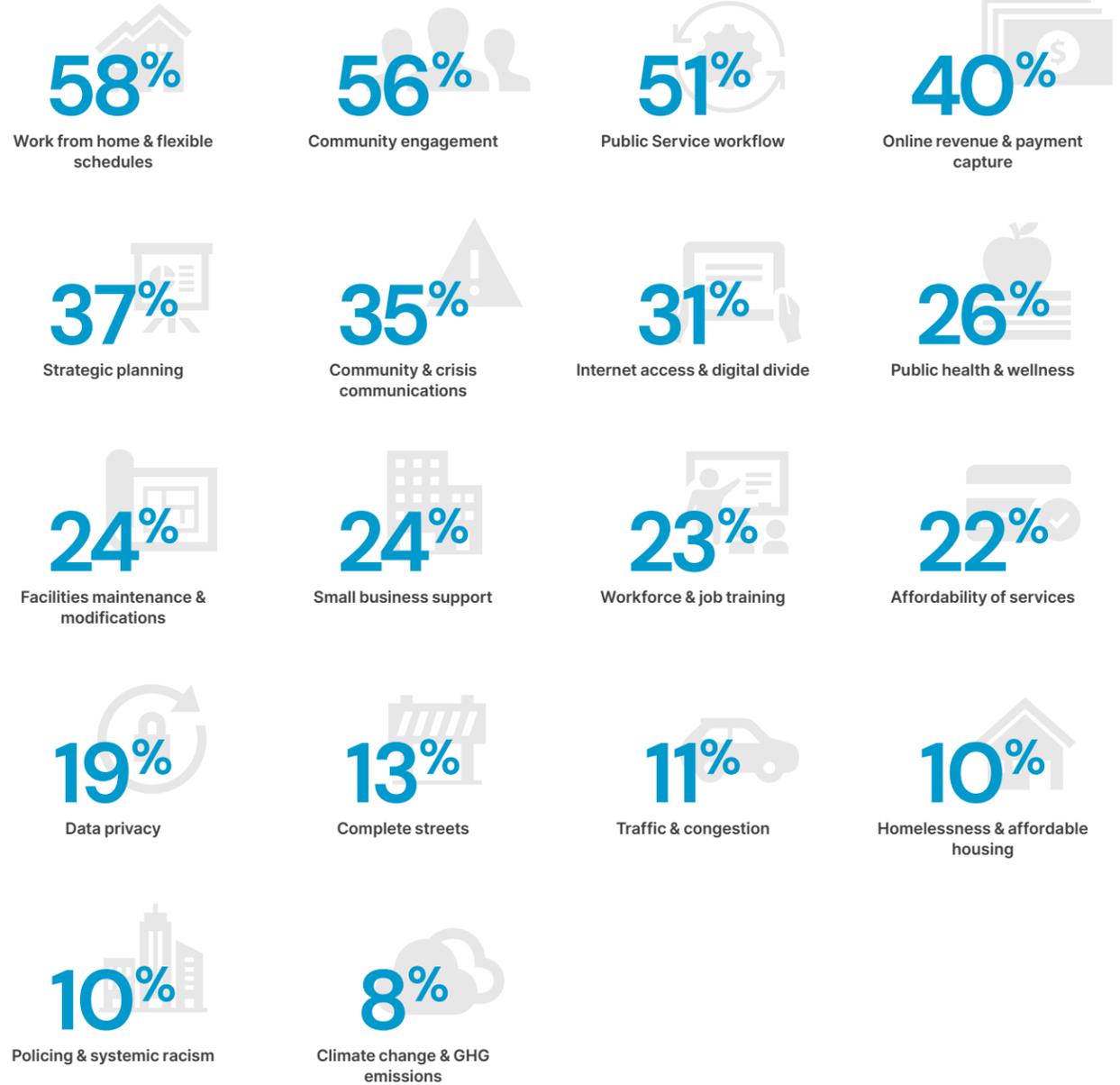
- Community Engagement Coordinator, WI



81% of respondents reported using technology to enable governing board meetings during COVID-19, but only **53%** think that will be a permanent move.

Anticipated future software and technology projects

● % of respondents that said yes





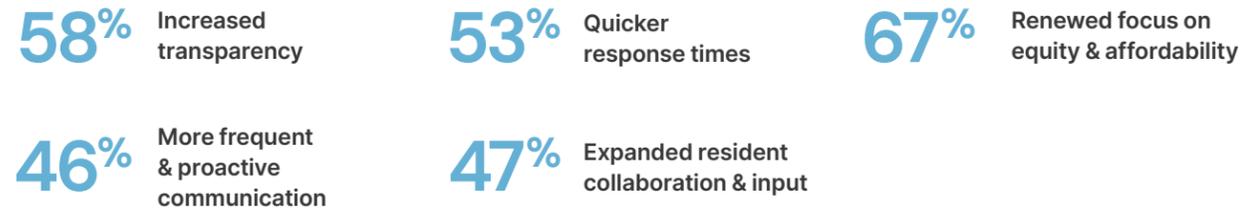
"Citizens want access 24-7."
- Town Manager, VT

COVID-19

has increased expectations of local government

Local governments have significantly increased their use of technology to meet the challenges posed by COVID-19. But from the survey results, it seems that greater expectations are coming along with the widespread adoption of new technologies. For example, when we asked in July 2020, **38%** of respondents reported they expect residents will demand quicker response times from their local government moving forward. When we asked the same question in April 2021, the percentage was **53%**...a **15%** increase.

Moving forward, local government respondents expect residents will demand...

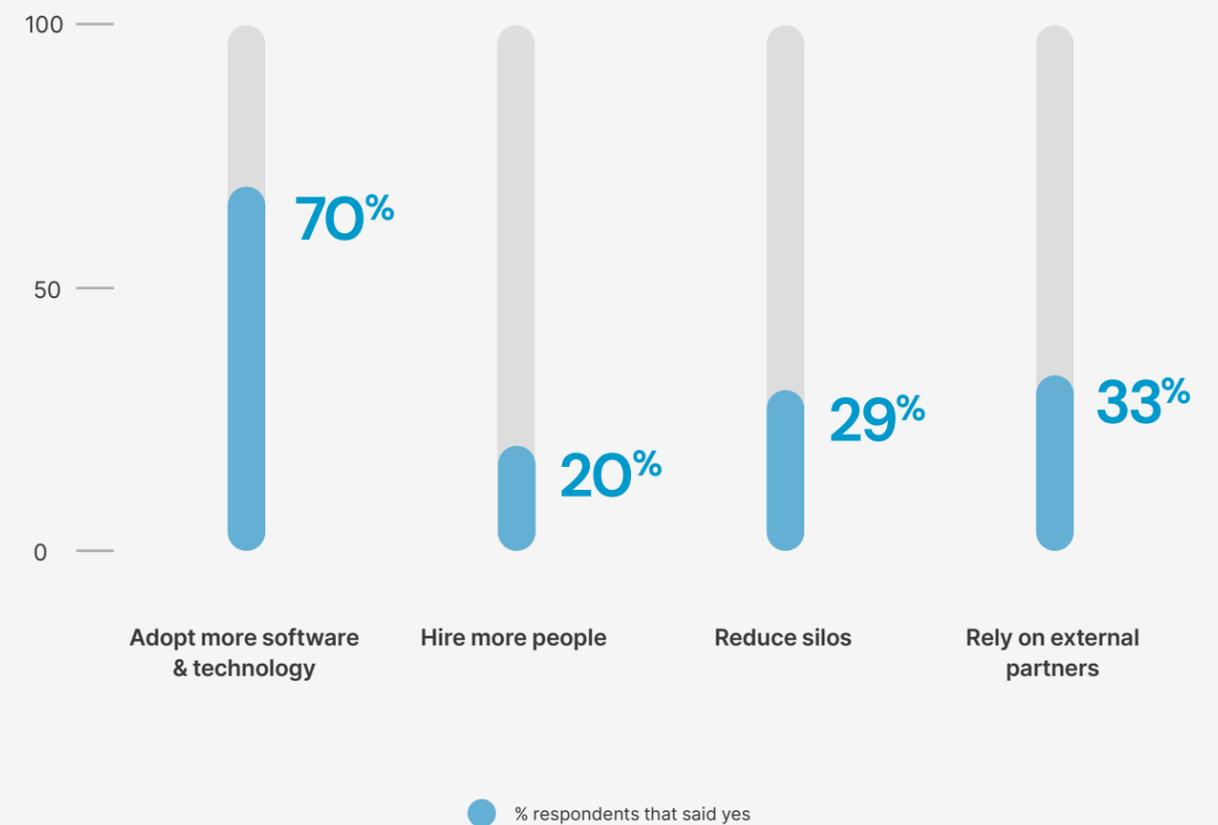


● % respondents that said yes

To meet these needs, local governments will take a variety of approaches. Not only did **70%** of respondents report that they'll adopt even more software and technology to streamline service delivery in the future, but **33%** said they would rely more on external partners and **29%** said they were trying to reduce silos.

How do you think your organization

will streamline public service delivery in the future?



Conclusion

It's clear that local government and public service delivery will look a lot different because of COVID-19. While there are still many challenges ahead as local government organizations adjust to the new normal, there are early signs that local governments will come out of this stronger, smarter, and more sustainable.

Continue the Conversation

Share your takeaways from this report. What surprised you? What's consistent with what you're seeing in your organization? Tag us on Twitter and let's continue the conversation!

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