Findings of the Proposed Empty Homes Strategy Consultation

Cheshire West and Chester Council has undertaken a review of the Empty Homes Strategy. The proposed revised strategy sets out how the Council plans to bring empty private sector homes back into use.

The aim of the Empty Homes Strategy is to unlock the housing potential of long-term empty homes. Our target over the next five years is to bring 1000 empty homes back into use. This is a challenging target, particularly in light of considerable financial pressures and the significant progress we have already made in reducing the number of long-term empty homes across the borough. However, we feel that this target is achievable, having returned over 965 long-term empty homes into use since we published our last strategy in 2016. We have worked with key stakeholders to develop the proposed strategy and have consulted with residents and key stakeholders.

Bringing more homes onto the market will bring numerous benefits to the community, namely providing opportunities for more affordable housing. It will also help to decrease anti-social behaviour, reduce the risk to public health from unsafe structures and finally, help to maintain and improve the housing market.

How the consultation was carried out

The twelve-week consultation period was open from 5th December 2021 until 27th February 2022. Residents and stakeholders were invited to take part by either completing the online survey, requesting a paper copy of the survey, writing to the Council, or by sending comments to the Housing Strategy inbox.

Communication methods to ensure that key stakeholders were made aware of the consultation and given the opportunity to have their say included emails to key stakeholder groups such as empty property owners, private landlords and registered providers, Member Briefings, social media and presence of the consultation on the Council website.

The online survey received 259 responses, although not all respondents answered every question.

Key messages

- The vast majority of respondents agreed with the aim to bring empty homes back into use
- The vast majority of respondents agreed with the objectives and intended outcomes of the proposed strategy
- The vast majority of respondents agreed with the criteria proposed to prioritise which empty homes to target
- The vast majority of respondents agreed with the proposed approach and incentives to help bring empty homes back into use

- The majority of respondents agreed with the proposed use of enforcement when necessary to bring empty homes back into use

Summary of consultation findings

Survey responses

Overall aim of the proposed Empty Homes Strategy

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the aim of bringing empty homes back into use.
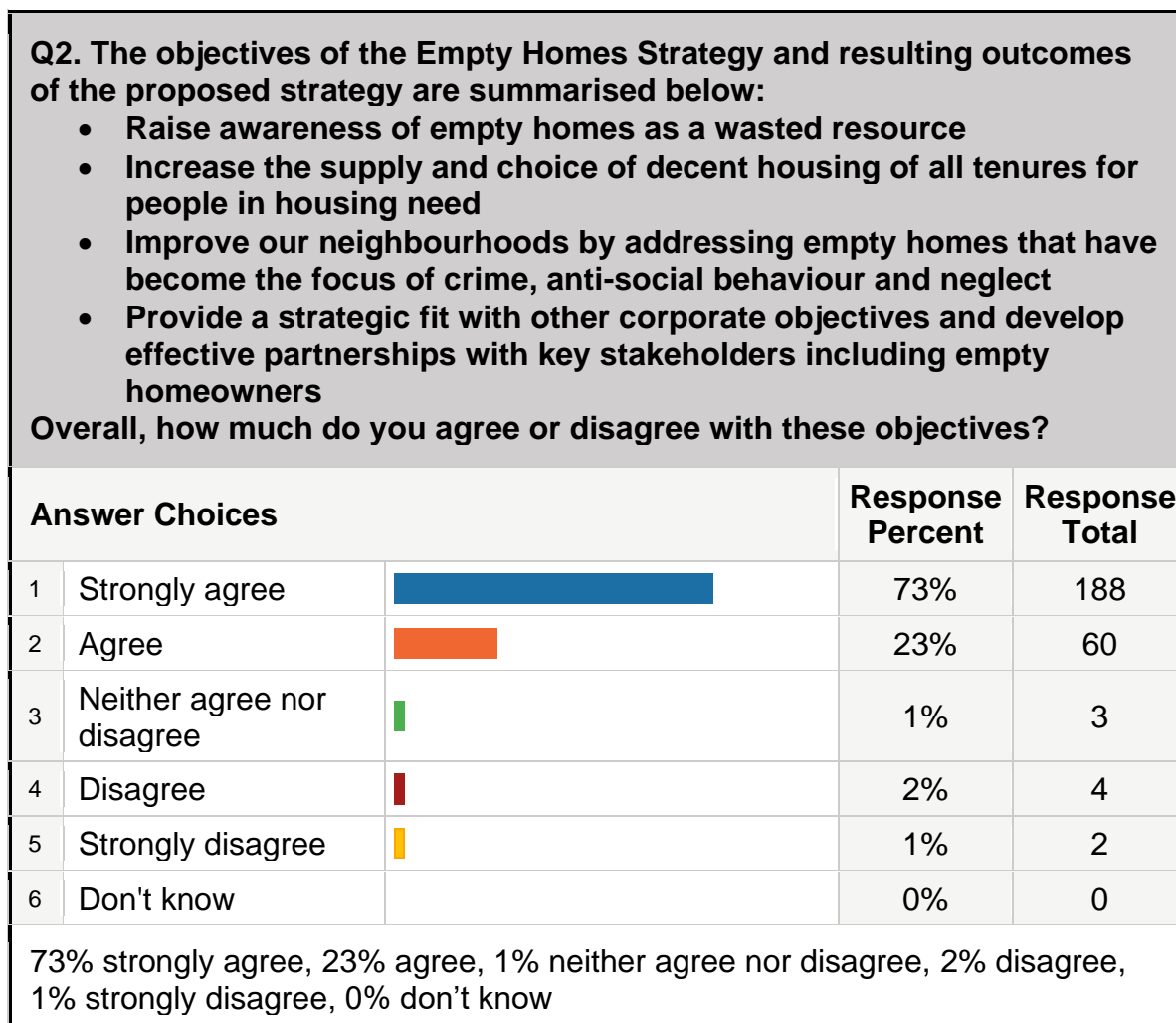
Graph 1

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the aim of bringing empty homes back into use?		Response Percent	Response Total
Answer Choices			
1	Strongly agree	81%	208
2	Agree	16%	42
3	Neither agree nor disagree	1%	2
4	Disagree	1%	3
5	Strongly disagree	1%	2
6	Don't know	0%	0
81% strongly agree, 16% agree, 1% neither agree nor disagree, 1% disagree, 1% strongly disagree			

The results shows that the vast majority of respondents agreed with the aim to bring empty homes back into use, with 97% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing.

Objectives and Outcomes

Question 2 set out the objectives and resulting outcomes of the proposed strategy, and asked how much respondents agreed or disagreed with them.

Graph 2

> **Q2. The objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy and resulting outcomes of the proposed strategy are summarised below:**
> * **Raise awareness of empty homes as a wasted resource**
> * **Increase the supply and choice of decent housing of all tenures for people in housing need**
> * **Improve our neighbourhoods by addressing empty homes that have become the focus of crime, anti-social behaviour and neglect**
> * **Provide a strategic fit with other corporate objectives and develop effective partnerships with key stakeholders including empty homeowners**
>
> **Overall, how much do you agree or disagree with these objectives?**

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		73%	188
2	Agree		23%	60
3	Neither agree nor disagree		1%	3
4	Disagree		2%	4
5	Strongly disagree		1%	2
6	Don't know		0%	0

73% strongly agree, 23% agree, 1% neither agree nor disagree, 2% disagree, 1% strongly disagree, 0% don't know

The results show that the vast majority of respondents agreed with the objectives and intended outcomes of the proposed strategy, with 96% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing.

Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about the objectives. 34 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were:
* Respondents were supportive of the strategy and provided suggestions
* There were some queries regarding wording used in the proposed strategy

Priorities

Question 3a set out the criteria below that the Council proposes to use to prioritise which empty homes to target and attempt to bring back into use, and asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the criteria.

Graph 3

Q3a. The Council is proposing to prioritise empty homes using the set of criteria listed below:
A. Problem properties – overgrown gardens, rodent activity, accumulating rubbish, etc.
B. In disrepair or in a condition that affects the structure of neighbouring properties
C. A hazard to members of the public
D. Homes that have been empty for six months and more
Overall, how much do you agree or disagree that we should prioritise empty homes using these criteria?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		66%	169
2	Agree		27%	69
3	Neither agree nor disagree		3%	7
4	Disagree		3%	8
5	Strongly disagree		2%	4
6	Don`t know		0%	0

66% strongly agree, 27% agree, 3% neither agree nor disagree, 3% disagree, 2% strongly disagree, 0% don't know

The results show that the vast majority ofrespondents agreed with the criteria proposed to prioritise empty homes to target, with 93% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing with them

Question 3b asked respondents to indicate which of the criteria they thought was most important in prioritising bringing empty homes back into use.

Graph 4

Q3b. Which of the criteria listed above do you think is the most important?

	Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
B	In disrepair		33%	85
D	Homes that have been empty for six months and more		24%	60
C	A hazard to members of the public		22%	56
A	Problem properties		21%	54

A. Problem properties – overgrown gardens, rodent activity, accumulating rubbish, etc. – 21% said was the most important
B. In disrepair or in a condition that affects the structure of neighbouring properties – 33% said was the most important
C. A hazard to members of the public – 22% said was the most important
D. Homes that have been empty for six months and more – 24% said was the most important

Homes in disrepair which affect neighbouring properties was deemed to be the most important of the criteria, with 33% of respondents choosing this criterion..

Whilst a slightly smaller number of respondents indicated that empty homes that have been empty for six months or more (24%), hazardous properties (22%), and problem properties (21%) were the most important of the criteria to them.

- Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about the criteria. 44 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were: Public safety should be the priority
- Empty homes can have a negative effect on neighbourhoods
- The length of time a property is empty can be out of the owner's control
- All of the criteria used to prioritise are equally as important

Proposed Approach

Question 4 asked how much respondents agreed or disagreed with the Council's proposed approach to tackling empty homes, which is explained in Section 3 of the proposed strategy, and summarised below:

The approach we will take will continue to combine enforcement activity with new and innovative initiatives, including specialist guidance, loan support and grant assistance.
The Empty Homes Strategy will continue to place a strong emphasis on partnership working, which will include working with empty homeowners as well as housing providers such as registered providers, who provide social housing and private landlords who provide private rented housing.

Graph 5

Q4. Overall, how much do you agree or disagree with this proposed approach?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Strongly agree	56%	143
2	Agree	38%	96
3	Neither agree nor disagree	4%	10
4	Disagree	1%	3
5	Strongly disagree	2%	4
6	Don't know	0%	0
56% strongly agree, 38% agree, 4% neither agree nor disagree, 1% disagree, 2% strongly disagree, 0% don't know			

The majority of respondents agreed with the proposed approach, with 93% of respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing.

- Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about the approach. 28 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were: Empty homes need to go to those in need
- We need to use enforcement action

Incentives for owners of empty homes

On page 11 of the proposed strategy, there are details of a range of incentives we provide to owners of empty homes, to help them bring their empty home back into use, such as:

    A. Empty home grants
    B. Empty home loan
    C. Conversion grant
    D. Decent home loan

In addition, the Council also offers the following schemes:
    E. Landlord accreditation scheme
    F. Leasing Scheme
    G. Empty homes matching service

Question 5 asks respondents how much they agree or disagree with the proposed incentives.

Graph 6

Q5. Overall, how much do you agree or disagree that we should help empty homeowners in this way?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Strongly agree	42%	107
2	Agree	39%	98
3	Neither agree nor disagree	6%	16
4	Disagree	8%	21
5	Strongly disagree	4%	10
6	Don't know	1%	2

42% strongly agree, 39% agree, 6% neither agree nor disagree, 8% disagree, 4% strongly disagree, 1% don't know

81% of respondents either strongly agree or agree with helping empty homeowners in this way.

Although a high proportion of respondents agreed with the proposed incentives, a slightly higher number of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed (6%), disagreed or strongly disagreed (12%) than in other questions.

- Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about the incentives. 45 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were: Suggestions for implementing the different options
- Owners of empty homes should be forced to pay for the required works themselves
- Support for the options proposed
- Issues and objections to working with, and creating more private landlords

Choice of Incentives

Question 6 asked respondents to indicate which of the incentives they thought would encourage empty homeowners to bring their home back into use.

Graph 7
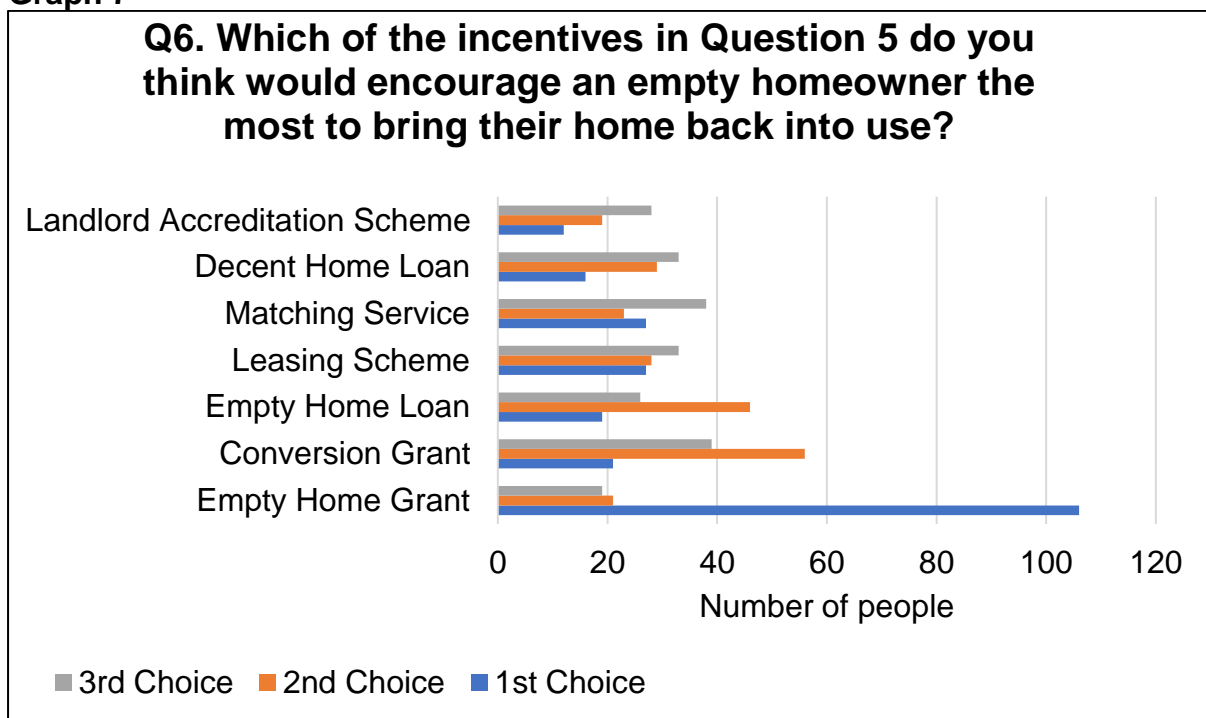
Empty Home Grants were chosen as the first choice incentive most often (46%), followed by Leasing Schemes and Matching Service (both 12%). In total, Empty Homes Grants (22%), Conversion Grants (17%) and Empty Home Loans (14%) were chosen most often as either a first, second or third choice.

Conversion Grants

Question 7 asked respondents to say how much they agreed or disagreed with the requirements of a conversion grant.

Graph 8

Q7. A Conversion Grant requires the empty homeowner to house someone in housing need for up to five years. Overall, how much do you agree or disagree with this?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Strongly agree	42%	107
2	Agree	35%	90
3	Neither agree nor disagree	12%	30
4	Disagree	5%	14
5	Strongly disagree	5%	13
6	Don't know	0.3%	1

42% strongly agree, 35% agree, 12% neither agree nor disagree, 6% disagree, 5% strongly disagree, 0.4% don't know

77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the requirement for an empty homeowner to house someone in housing need for up to five years if they receive a conversion grant to help bring the property back into use. However, 12% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about Conversion Grants. 38 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were:
- Supportive of the conditions of the Conversion Grant
- Questions raised over the detail of the conditions
- Suggestions made regarding the conditions
- Comments and concerns regarding how the 5 year timescale affects security of tenure

Enforcement

Question 8 asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the use of enforcement to bring empty homes back into use.

Graph 9

Q8. Overall, how much do you agree or disagree with the use of enforcement to bring empty homes back into use?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Strongly agree	58%	146
2	Agree	26%	67
3	Neither agree nor disagree	6%	15
4	Disagree	4%	11
5	Strongly disagree	5%	13
6	Don't know	1%	2
58% strongly agree, 26% agree, 6% neither agree nor disagree, 4% disagree, 5% strongly disagree, 1% don't know			

84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the use of enforcement to bring empty homes back into use. 9% of respondents disagree and strongly disagree, therefore, there is some resistance to the use of enforcement. This is further explained in the comments made by respondents, summarised below.

- Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about the use of enforcement. 22 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were: Support for enforcement action where necessary
- Disagreement with the Council using enforcement powers
- Need to have tried other measures first

Additional Comments

Question 9 gave the opportunity for respondents to leave any additional comments.

- Respondents were also asked if they had any further comments about the proposed strategy. 42 comments were received and the key messages from these comments were: Support for the proposed strategy
- Suggestions for implementation of the proposed strategy
- Wider housing comments and suggestions

Action taken as a result of the consultation

The response to the consultation suggests strong support for the aims, approach and methods set out in the proposed Strategy to bring empty homes back into use. Some comments imply that respondents were unclear regarding the detail behind the delivery of the strategy, therefore, the wording in the strategy will be revisited to ensure clarity.

Comments also showed a strong desire for empty homes to help address housing need, which is in line with the Council's aims.

Given the strong support for the proposed Empty Homes Strategy, it will be taken to Places Scrutiny Board for approval, and then to Cabinet to request adoption of the strategy.

Appendix 1
Profile of Respondents

Graph 10

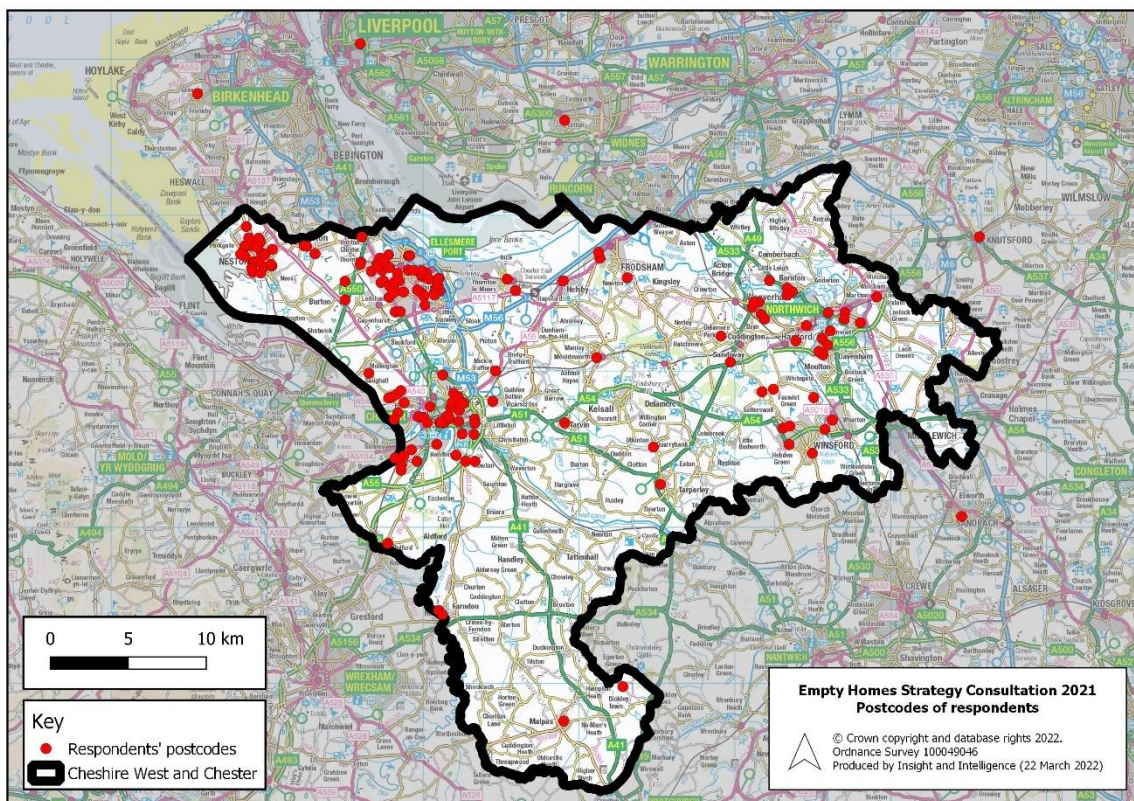| Q10. Are you responding as…?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	A local resident	91%	234
2	A local business	2%	6
3	An employee of Cheshire West and Chester Council	6%	16
4	An elected Member of Cheshire West and Chester Council	1%	3
5	An elected Town or Parish Councillor in Cheshire West and Chester	2%	5
6	A member of a voluntary or community organisation	3%	7

Q10. Are you responding as…?				
7	Other (please state):	■	5%	12

Local residents 91%, local business 2%, CWaC employee 6%, CWaC elected Members 1%, CWaC elected Town or Parish Councillor 2%, members of voluntary or community organisations 3%, other 5%

The vast majority of respondents were local residents (91%). 6% of respondents were Cheshire Wesy and Chester employees and all other groups were represented by less than 5% of the respondents respectively.

Postcode of respondents

The map below shows all of the postcodes given by respondents that could be mapped (181 postcodes). Most respondents were from Chester, Ellesmere Port, Neston, Northwich and Winsford, with others dotted around the borough and five outside of the borough boundary.

Graph 11

14. Q13. Are you…?				
Answer Choices			**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Male		23%	58
2	Female		72%	182
3	Prefer not to say		5%	13
4	Prefer own term (please state):		0%	0
Male 23%, female 72%, prefer not to say 5%, Prefer own term 0%				

The majority of respondents were women with 72%. Men accounted for 23%, with 5% of respondents preferring not to say.

Graph 12

Q14. Which age group do you belong to?				
Answer Choices			**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Under 16 (please provide the name or email address of your parent/guardian/teacher below)		0%	0
2	16 - 24		4%	11
3	25 - 34		11%	26
4	35 - 44		24%	59
5	45 - 54		26%	64
6	55 - 64		19%	48
7	65+		16%	40
Under 16 0%, 16-24 4%, 25-34 11%, 35-44 24%, 45-54 26%, 55-64 19%, 65+ 16%				

The majority of respondents were between 35-44 and 45-54, with 24% and 26% respectively. Respondents between the ages of 35 and 64 accounted for 69%. the lowest number of respondents was in the 16-24 age range, with just 4%. 16% of responses were from those age 65 and over.

Graph 13

Q15. Do you have a long-term illness, health issue or disability that limits your daily activities or the work you can do?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	Yes	21%	52
2	No	72%	181
3	Prefer not to say	7%	17
Yes 21%, No 73%, Prefer not to say 7%			

The majority of respondents stated they did nothave a long-term illness, health issue or disability with 72%. 21% said that they did, and 7% said they preferred not to say.

Graph 15

	Q17. Which of these groups do you consider yourself to belong to?			
	Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1	White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British		94%	232
2	White - Irish		2%	5
3	White - Any other White background (please write in box below)		2%	5
4	Black or Black British - Caribbean		0%	0
5	Black or Black British - African		0%	0
6	Black or Black British - Any other Black background (please write in the box below)		0%	0
7	Asian or Asian British - Indian		0.4%	1
8	Asian or Asian British - Pakistani		0%	0
9	Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi		0%	0
10	Asian or Asian British - Chinese		0.4%	1
11	Asian or Asian British - Any other Asian background (please write in the box below)		0.4%	1
12	Mixed - White and Black Caribbean		0%	0
13	Mixed - White and Black African		0%	0
14	Mixed - White and Asian		0.4%	1
15	Mixed - Any other Mixed background (please write in the box below)		0%	0
16	Other ethnic group - Arab		0%	0

	Q17. Which of these groups do you consider yourself to belong to?			
17	Other ethnic group - Other ethnic group (please write in the box below)		0%	0
18	Travelling community - Gypsy/Roma		0%	0
19	Travelling community - Traveller of Irish descent		0%	0
20	Travelling community - Other member of the Travelling community (please write in the box below)		0%	0
21	Other (please specify):		0.8%	2

White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British 94%, White – Irish 2%, White - Any other White background 2%, Black or Black British – Caribbean 0%, Black or Black British – African 0%, Black or Black British - Any other Black background 0%, Asian or Asian British – Indian 0.4%, Asian or Asian British – Pakistani 0%, Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi 0%, Asian or Asian British – Chinese 0.4%, Asian or Asian British - Any other Asian background 0.4%, Mixed - White and Black Caribbean 0%, Mixed - White and Black African 0%, Mixed - White and Asian 0.4%, Mixed - Any other Mixed background 0%, Other ethnic group – Arab 0%, Other ethnic group - Other ethnic group 0%, Travelling community - Gypsy/Roma 0%, Travelling community - Traveller of Irish descent 0%, Travelling community - Other member of the Travelling community 0%, Other 0.8%

The vast majority of respondents (94%) identified as 'White British', and a small number identified as White Irish (2%) or other White background (2%).

Graph 16

Q18. Which of these best describes your religious belief/faith?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1 Buddhist		0.4%	1
2 Christian		48%	114
3 Hindu		0.8%	2
4 Jewish		0%	0
5 Muslim		0%	0
6 Sikh		0%	0
7 None		41%	99
8 Prefer not to say		9%	22
9 Other (please specify):		0.4%	1
Buddhist 0.4%, Christian 48%, Hindu 0.8%, Jewish 0%, Muslim 0%, Sikh 0%, None 41%, Prefer not to say 9%, Other 0.4%			

Most respondents said that they were Christian with 48%, followed by None at 41%. one respondent said they were Buddhist, and two stated that they were Hindu.

Graph 17

Q19. Which of these best describes your sexual orientation?			
Answer Choices		**Response Percent**	**Response Total**
1 Heterosexual/Straight		86%	202
2 Bisexual		2%	4
3 Gay/Lesbian		2%	4
4 Prefer not to say		10%	24
5 Prefer to use own term (please specify):		1%	2
Heterosexual/Straight 86%, Bisexual 2%, Gay/Lesbian 2%, Prefer not to say 10%, Prefer to use own term 1%			

The majority of respondents identified as Heterosexual/Straight with 86%. The next highest response was Prefer not to say with 10%.