Community engagement in Australian local government: A closer look and strategic implications

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Emerging Trends in Local Government Forum
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LG Community Engagement Census:

A snapshot of practice

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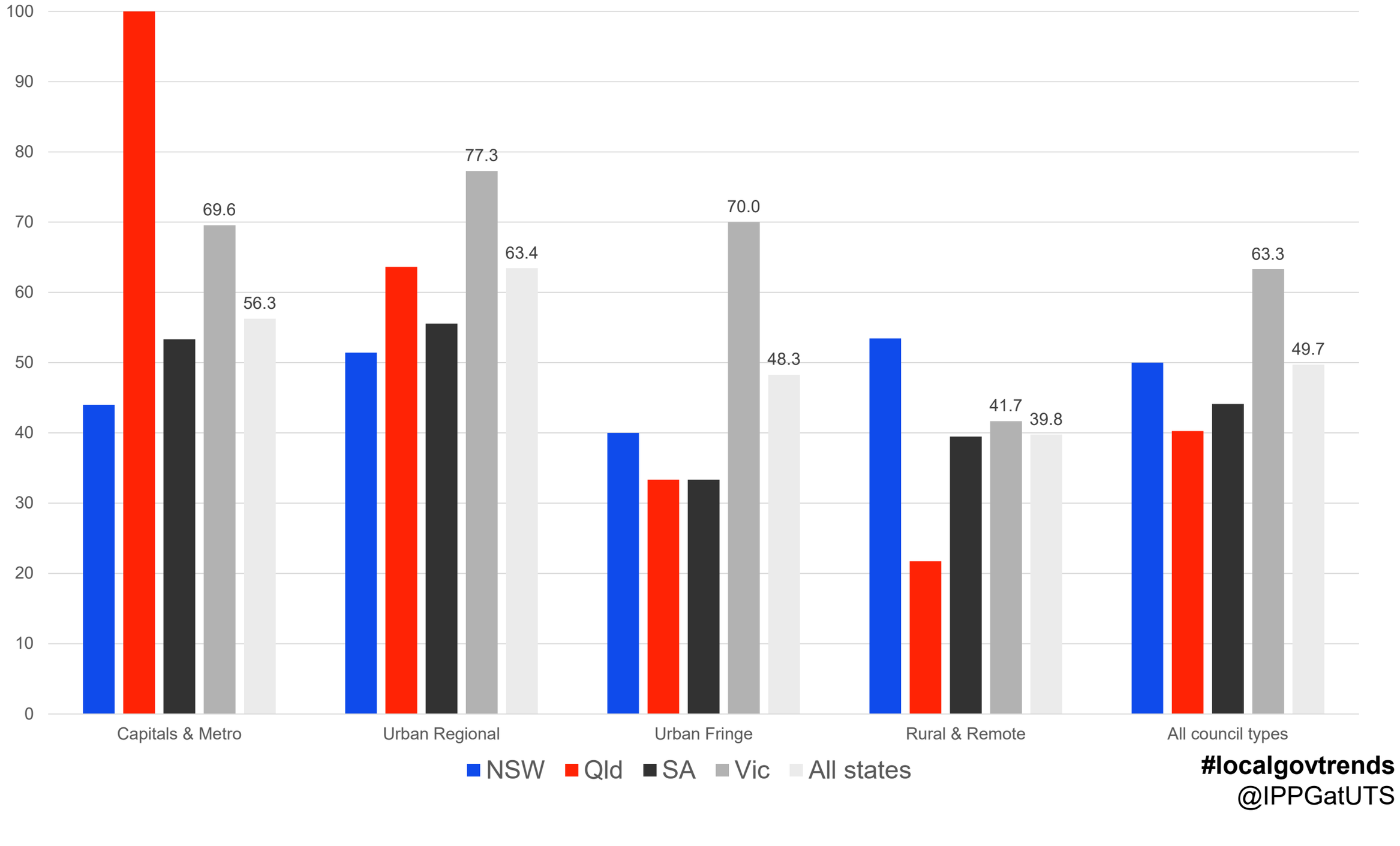
Outline

- Research Overview
- LG CE Census
  - Methodology and responses
  - Findings
    1. How often are councils engaging?
    2. What methods are councils using?
    3. Who is responsible for community engagement inside councils (and how is it positioned)?
    4. What's driving community engagement in local government and what's making it difficult?
  - Conclusion and Discussion
- Very very preliminary findings from the follow on research

Methodology

- Online survey – 352 Local governments – Eastern Seaboard States
  - New South Wales (128)
  - Queensland (77)
  - South Australia (68)
  - Victoria (79)

Response Rate % by council Type and State (Pop = 352, n= 175)



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KEY FINDINGS

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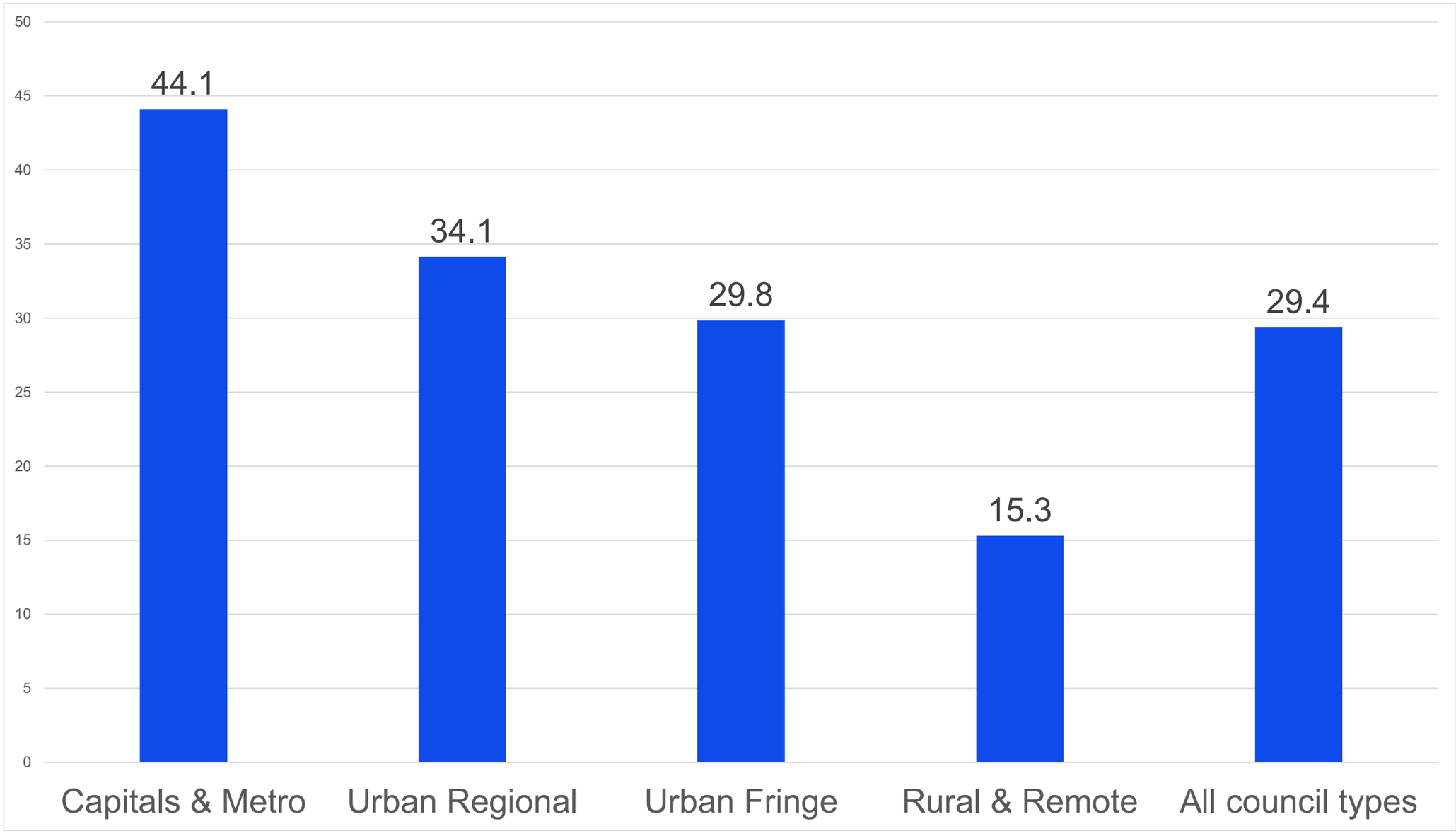
How often are councils engaging?

Mean estimated number of community engagement processes per council type per annum (n=164)



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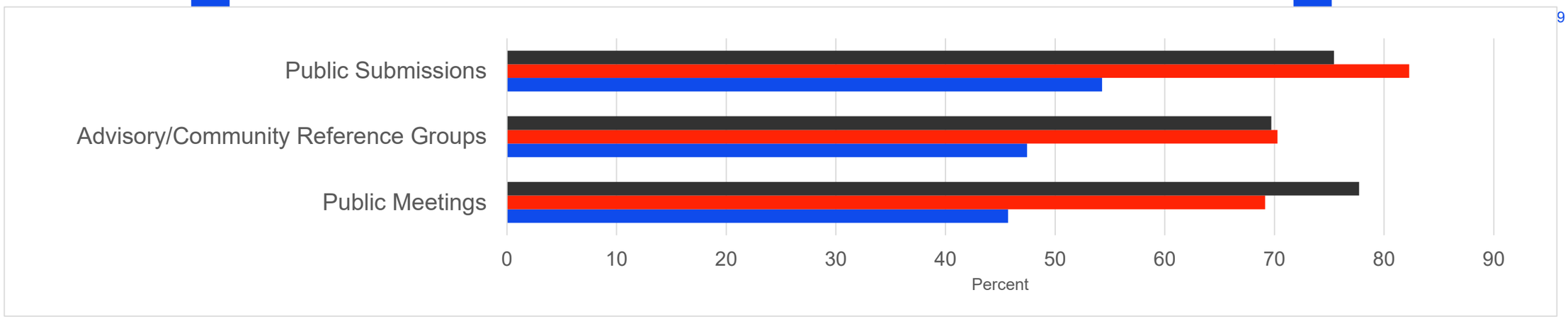
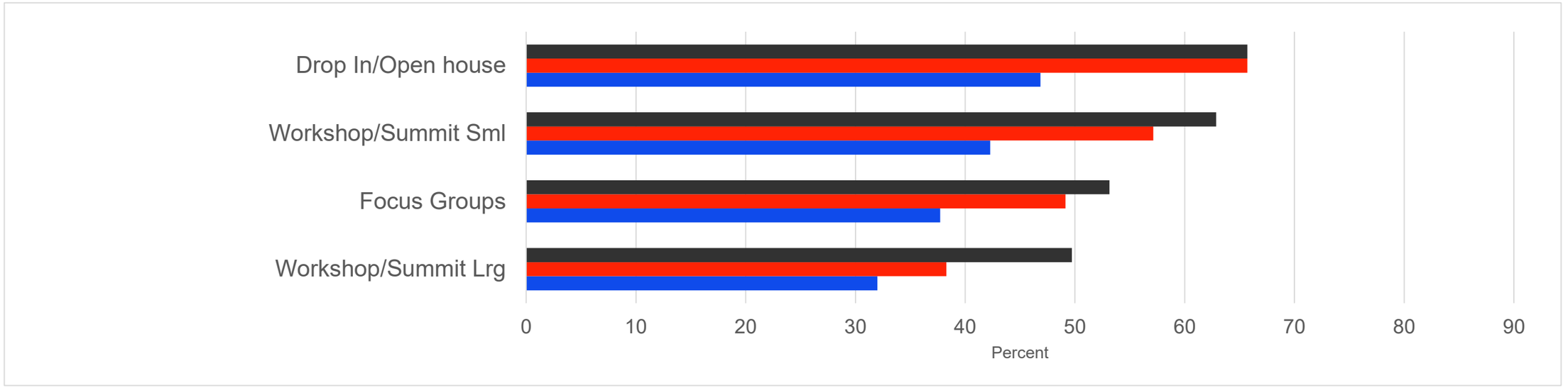
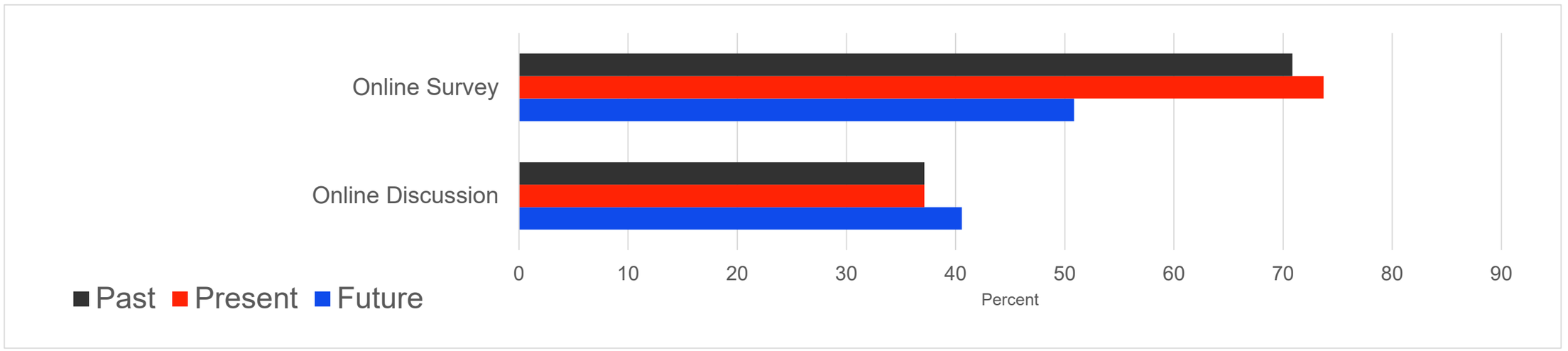
How are councils engaging?

- **Traditional methods** – public meetings, public submissions, advisory/community reference groups
- **Contemporary methods** – community summit/workshop (< 30 participants), community summit/workshop (>30 participants), drop in/open house/staffed display, focus groups
- **Online methods** – online discussion forums and online surveys
- **Deliberative methods** – citizen's jury/deliberative panel/forum
- **Emerging methods** – open space/unconference, and participatory budgeting.







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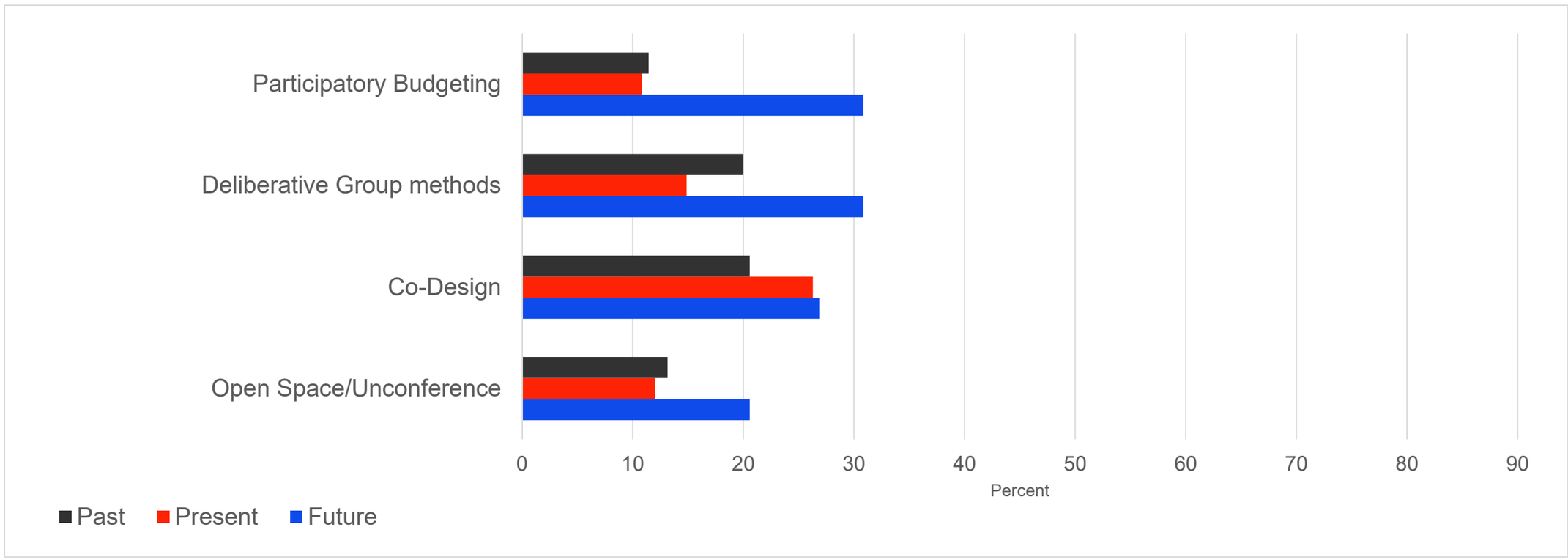

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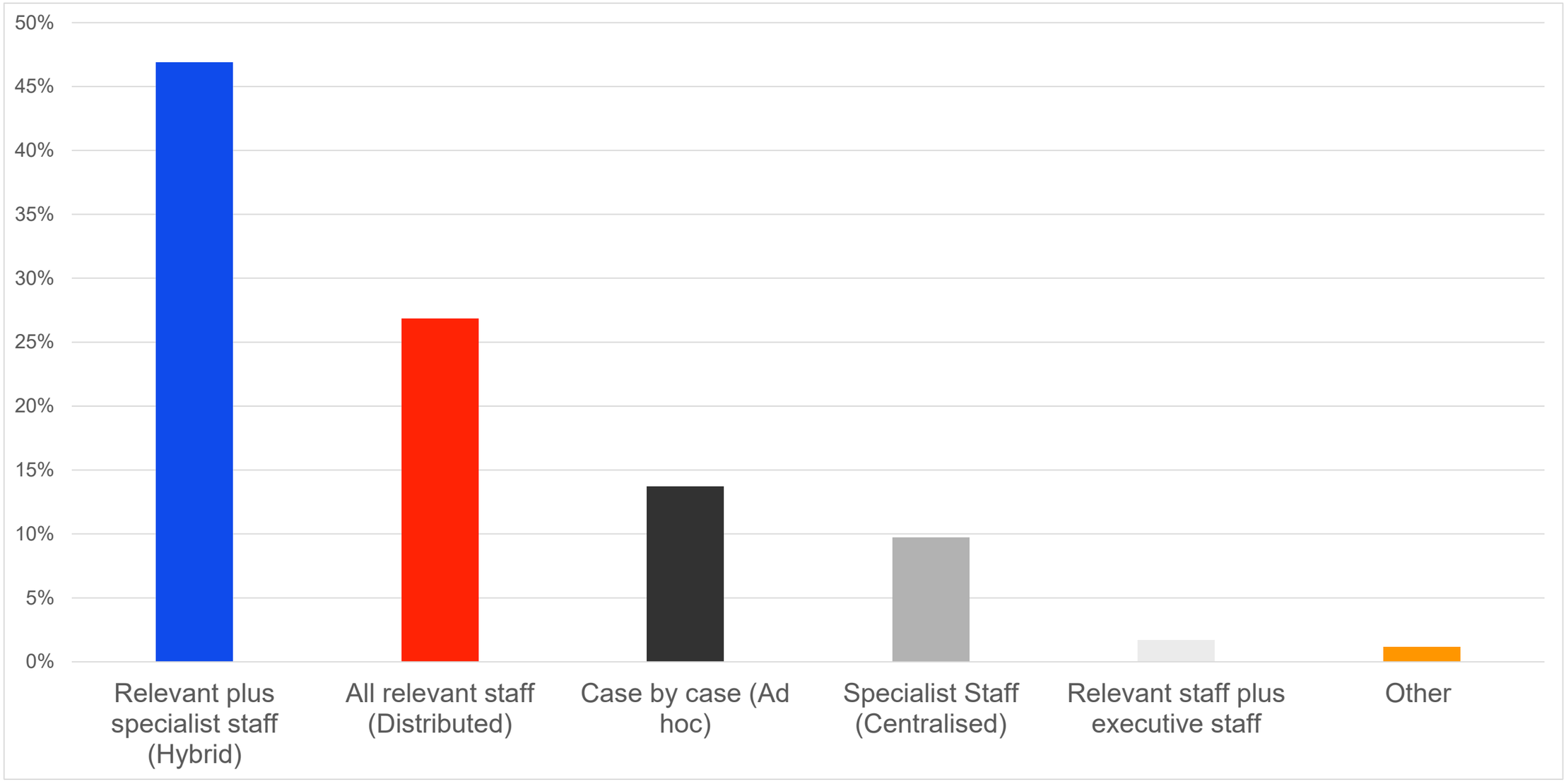
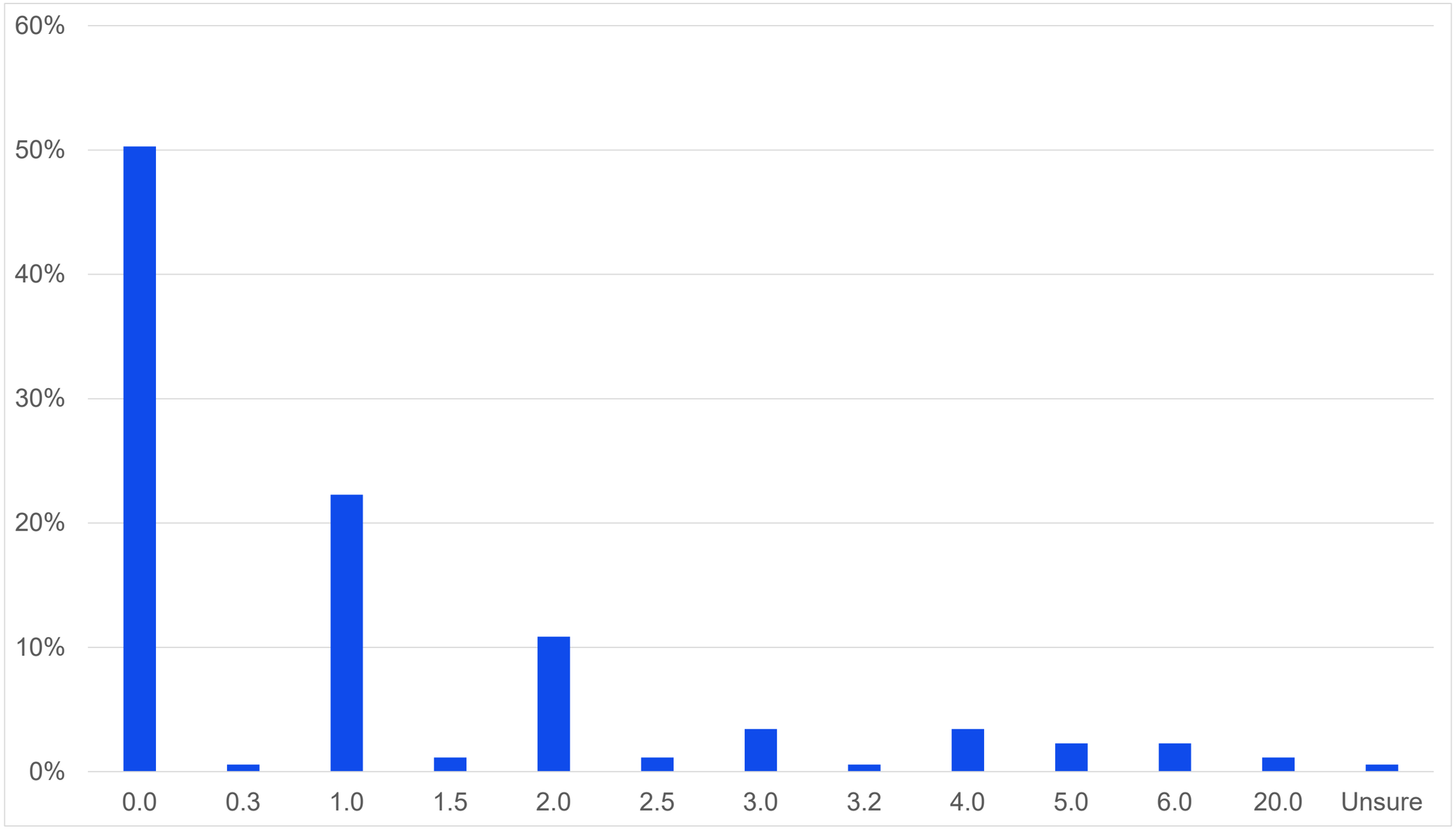
Who is designing and delivering local government community engagement processes?

Internal responsibility for planning and delivery of community engagement (n=175)



Estimated number of dedicated community engagement staff per local government (n=175)



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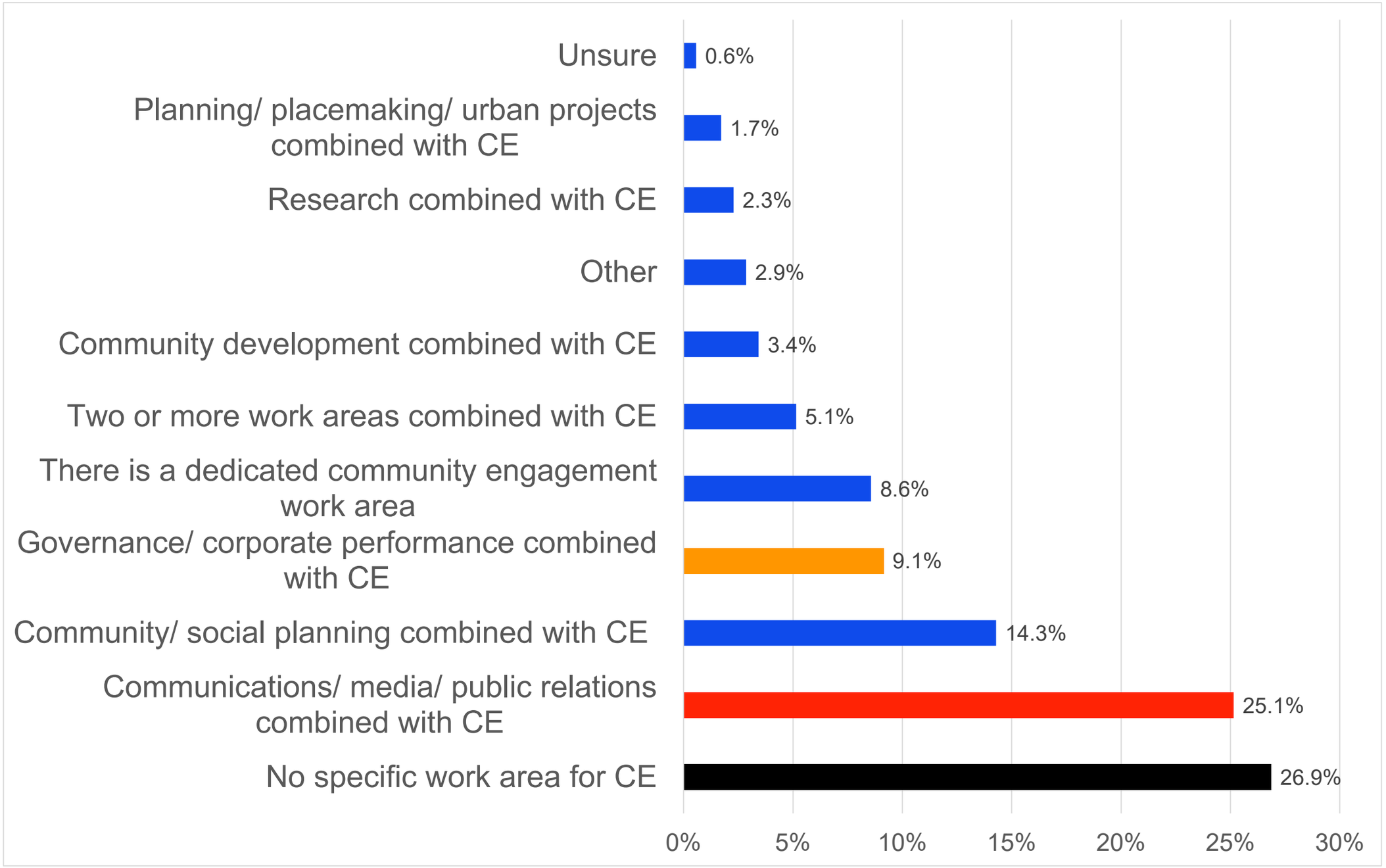
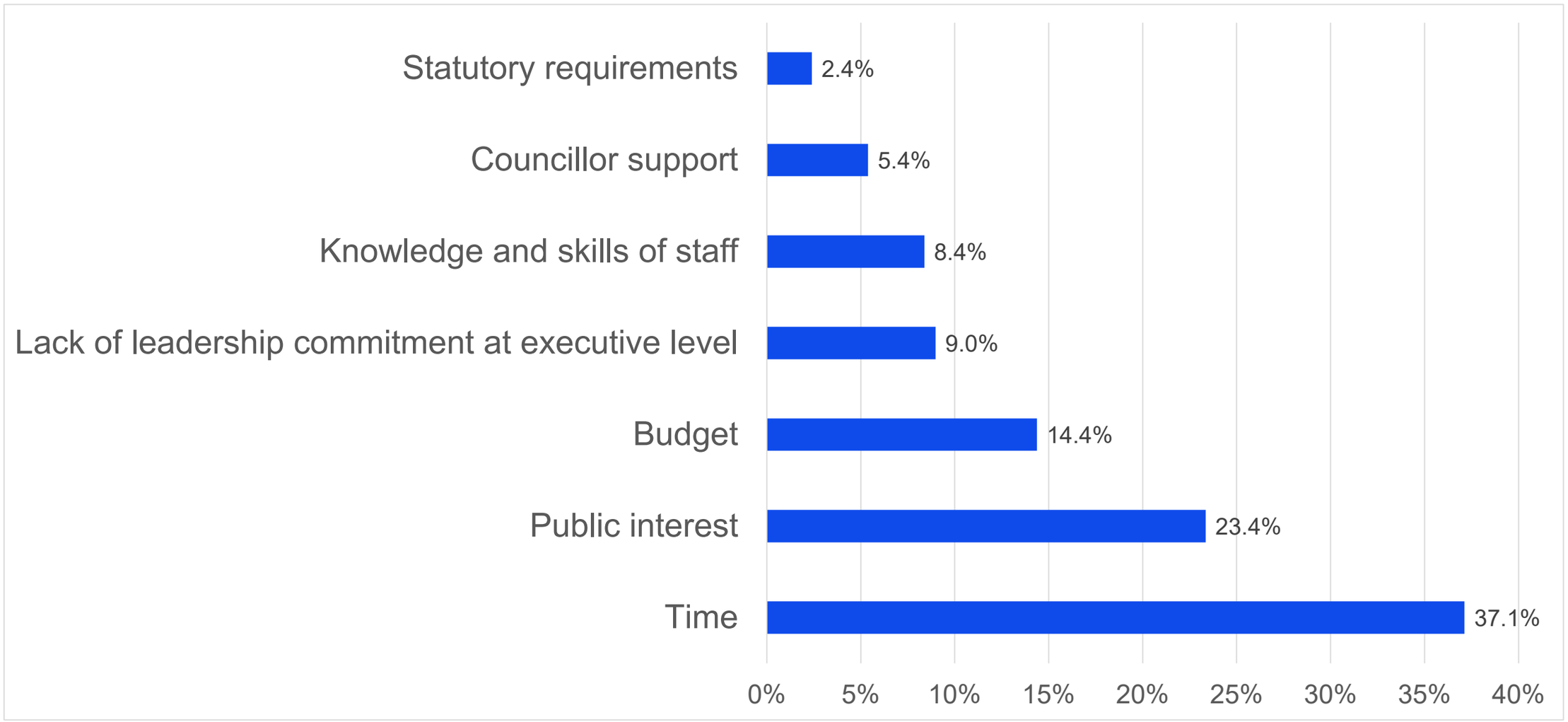
Organisational position of community engagement (n=175)



What are the challenges in delivering community engagement for councils?

Highest ranked difficulties in delivering community engagement (n=167)



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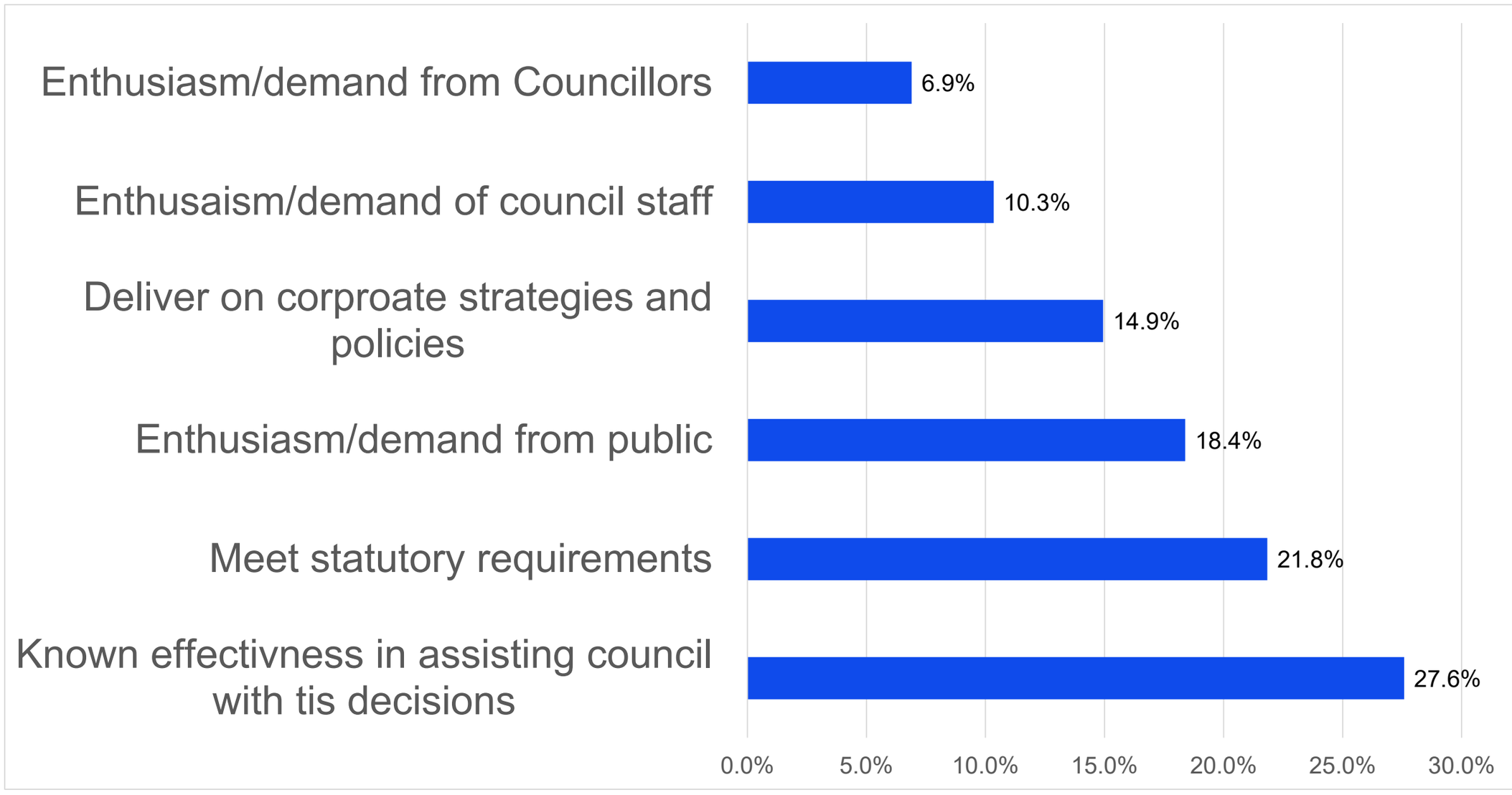
What's driving community engagement by councils?

Highest ranked driver for community engagement practice in local government (n=174)



Summary

- Number of processes vary by council type
- Traditional, contemporary and online methods dominate
- Strong intent to use deliberative and emerging methods in the future
- The number one driver for use is ‘known effectiveness for assisting in decisions”
- The number one challenge is the time required.
- Understanding and profile of community engagement within councils varies widely – there is significant coupling of the community engagement function with communications, media and/or public relations

Next Phase - Exploration

Methodology

- 20 Semi-structured interviews
  - 8 Victorian councils - (2 each of Metro, Fringe, Regional, Rural)
  - Mix of staff – Executive, Management, Middle Management, Staff

Very very very very very very preliminary findings

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How LGs conceptualise engagement

Haus and Sweeting (2006) – Local Democracy – 4 types

1. Representative
2. Network – partnering, PPPs
3. User/Market > private sector values - “customer”

MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND/OR MANAGING RISK

4. Participatory > collaborative, deliberative, participatory – “citizen”

DEMOCRACY

Other themes

Leadership – Councillors, Executive, Managers, Staff

Consistency – “If it’s done well…”

Resourcing and capabilities

Increasing prevalence of online platforms