

Council Tax and Budget Setting
Results of Public Consultation
Cabinet – 29th January 2004

- Aims
- Method
- Results
- Conclusions

Aims

(To fulfil constitutional commitments to consult on budget proposals

PLUS , through qualitative work:

(To test understanding of the Council's financial position and local Council Tax

(To explore participants' perceptions and attitudes to TWBC services and Council Tax

(To test reactions to options for financing services next year and longer term. To test how participants would rank these options

If time allowed:

(To explore understanding of Borough Council responsibilities as opposed to Parish/Town, Police and County functions; or

+ To explore views and preferences for future communications about Council Tax

Methodology

Phase 1

- Focus groups ('workshops')

Phase 2

- Advertisement in free papers with reply slip
- Freephone answer phone
- Leaflet with reply slip (distributed through Council offices and other outlets)
- On-line survey
- Telephone survey (under contract to Synovate)

Health warning: only telephone survey method is 'representative'

Results

- Understanding
- Perceptions and attitudes
- Preferred options

Understanding of the Council's financial position and local Council Tax

Explored with focus groups and telephone surveys

Awareness of amount of Council Tax paid:

- 30% of telephone interviewees said they did not know how much C Tax is
- Average answer from other 70% was in the correct range
- Females and those over 60 were less likely to know (telephone survey)

Awareness of the amount of Tax retained by TWBC:

- 5% of telephone interviewees chose the correct range
- The average response was in the region of 50% (correct answer is <6%)
- Those over 60 and C2DEs were less likely to give an answer to this question

Note: C2DEs are within the social grades classification used by the National Readership Survey, defined as lower middle class, skilled working class and those at lowest level of subsistence

Perceptions of, and attitudes to, TWBC services

Focus group findings

Overall perceptions included:

- Bureaucratic, underfunded, friendly, fair, faceless, efficient, hardworking, caring, unaccountable, listening, honest
- The majority of participants defined the overall level of service received from TWBC as ‘about what you'd expect’
- Average score of 2.36 out of 5
- Number of comments of ‘this is what I thought before the focus group’

Services – Focus Group Exercise

	Quality				Need for expenditure		
	good	satisfactory	poor	don't know	increase	maintain	reduce
Arts and entertainment eg Assembly Hall Theatre, Museums	27	16	0	2	9	29	2
Car Parks and parking fines	9	24	18	1	16	20	3
Community Safety and CCTV, in partnership with others	7	21	13	5	21	20	1
Communications about Borough Services eg Borough News, website, other publicity	17	20	5	4	3	29	8
Environmental Health eg food hygiene and pollution control	11	24	4	7	11	26	0
Grants and support to voluntary bodies and individuals eg Citizens Advice Bureau, Trinity Theatre, sports clubs, home renovation	6	22	5	11	11	18	1
Highways, on behalf of Kent County Council	4	5	37	1	32	11	0
Housing Advice and Benefits	4	11	2	24	1	14	2
Land use planning and Conservation	7	20	10	8	10	24	2
Rubbish collection and Street cleaning (Rubbish collection more highly regarded than Street cleaning)	17	15	15	0	18	23	0
Sports centres and other leisure facilities and activities including parks in Royal Tunbridge Wells	15	21	8	1	10	32	2
Tourist Information and promotion	18	14	9	4	5	30	4
Total:	142	213	126	68	147	276	25

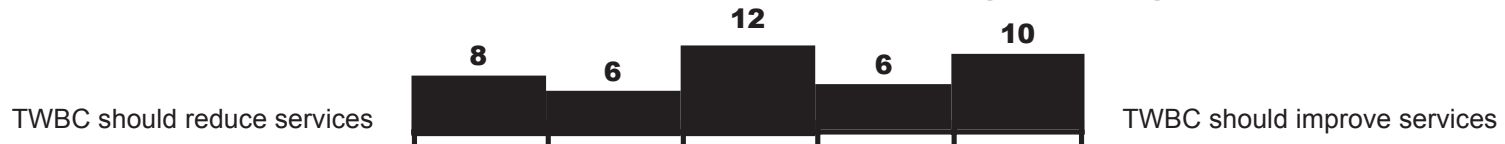
Services (focus groups) continued

- Service quality varied with most being ranked as satisfactory
- More services regarded as 'good' than 'poor'
- Highways, car parks and fines scored lowest
- Arts and entertainment, tourist information and communications scored highest
- Majority felt unable to comment on housing advice and benefits

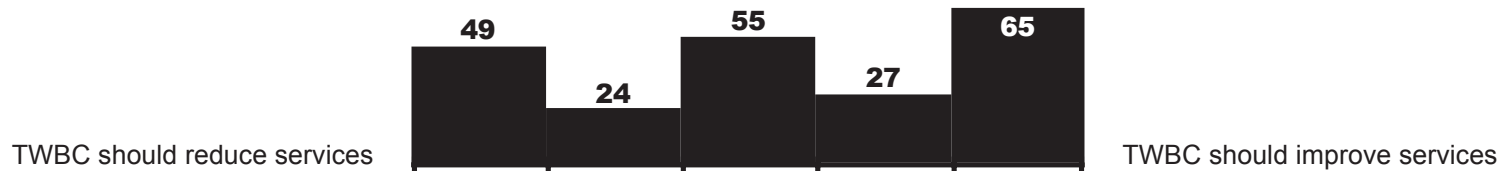
Range of Methods (all except leaflet and freephone)

Majority of residents want services maintained or improved

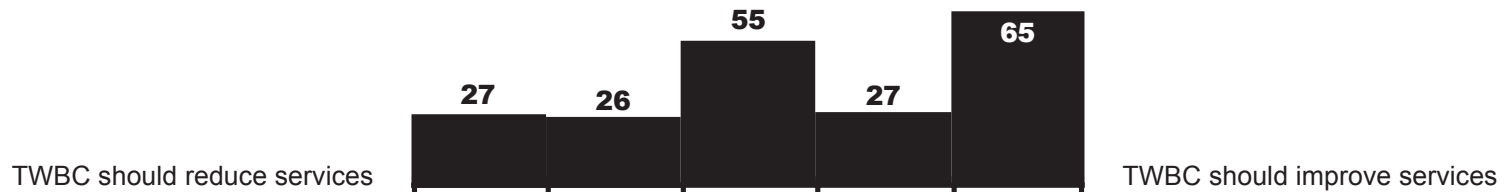
Responses to value statements (website)



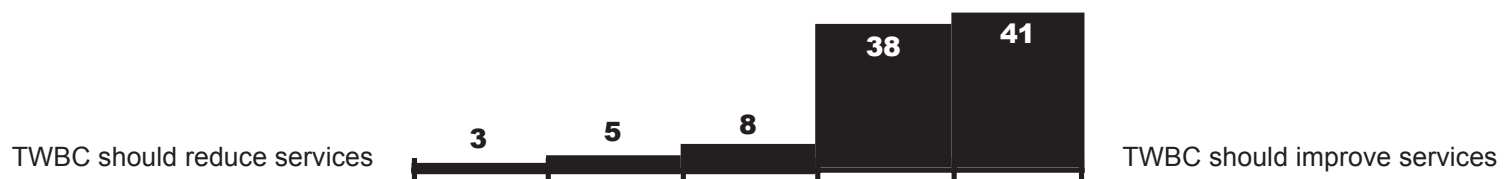
Responses to value statements (leaflet)



Responses to value statements (leaflet minus 24 'suspects')



Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



Focus group participants identified noticeable improvements as:

- Cleanliness of RTW
- Assembly Hall
- Community wardens/policing
- Website
- Borough News
- Green boxes
- Action on abandoned cars

Perceptions of, and attitudes to, Council Tax

Focus group findings

- Minority (23%) think TWBC Council Tax 'lower than average'
- Participants surprised to learn Council Tax income is approx 10% of total TWBC income
- Participants surprised to learn of resultant 'gearing'

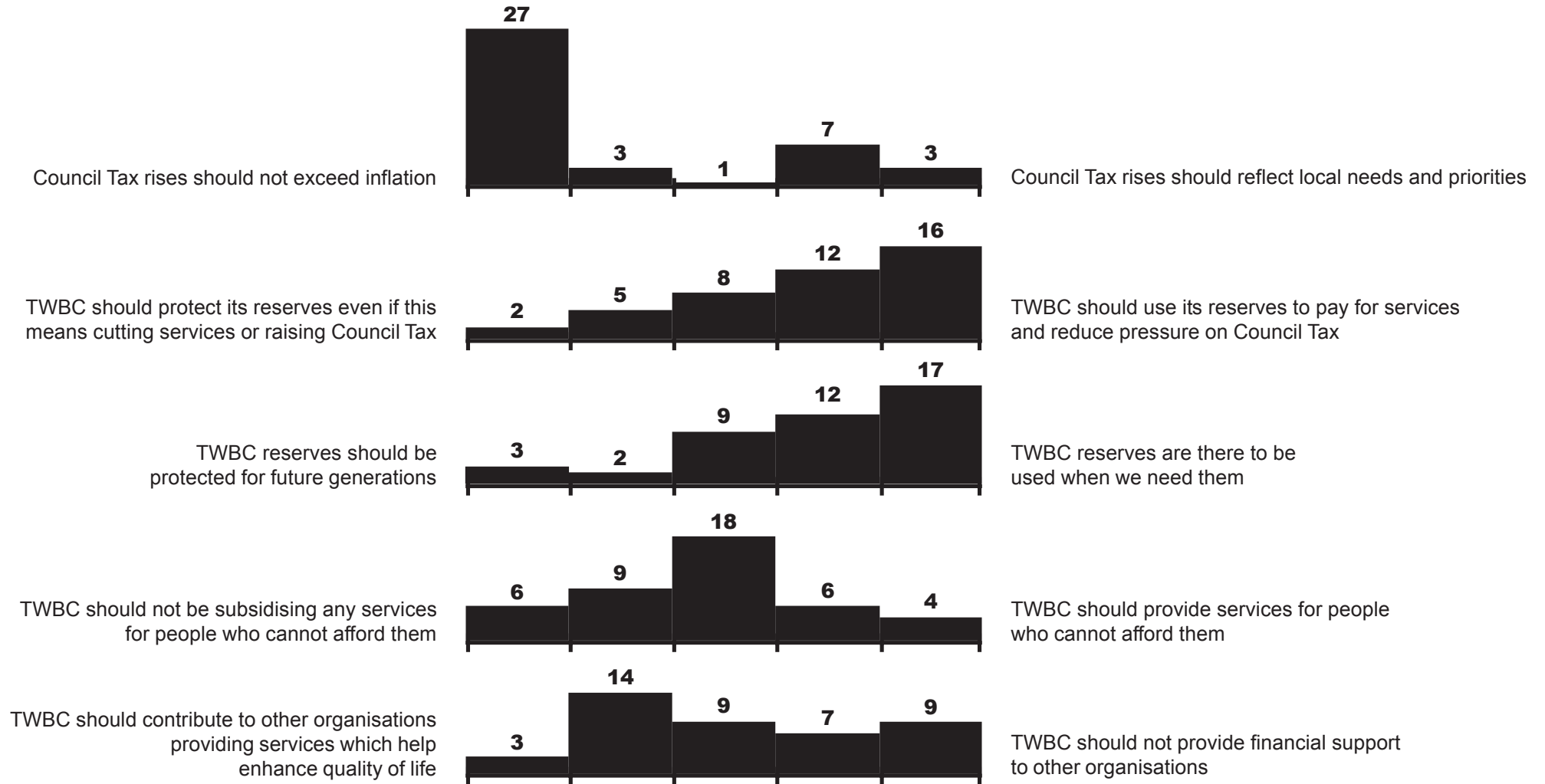
General feedback

- Don't understand why inflationary Council Tax increases might still result in cuts to services
- Many feel TWBC has scope for efficiency savings

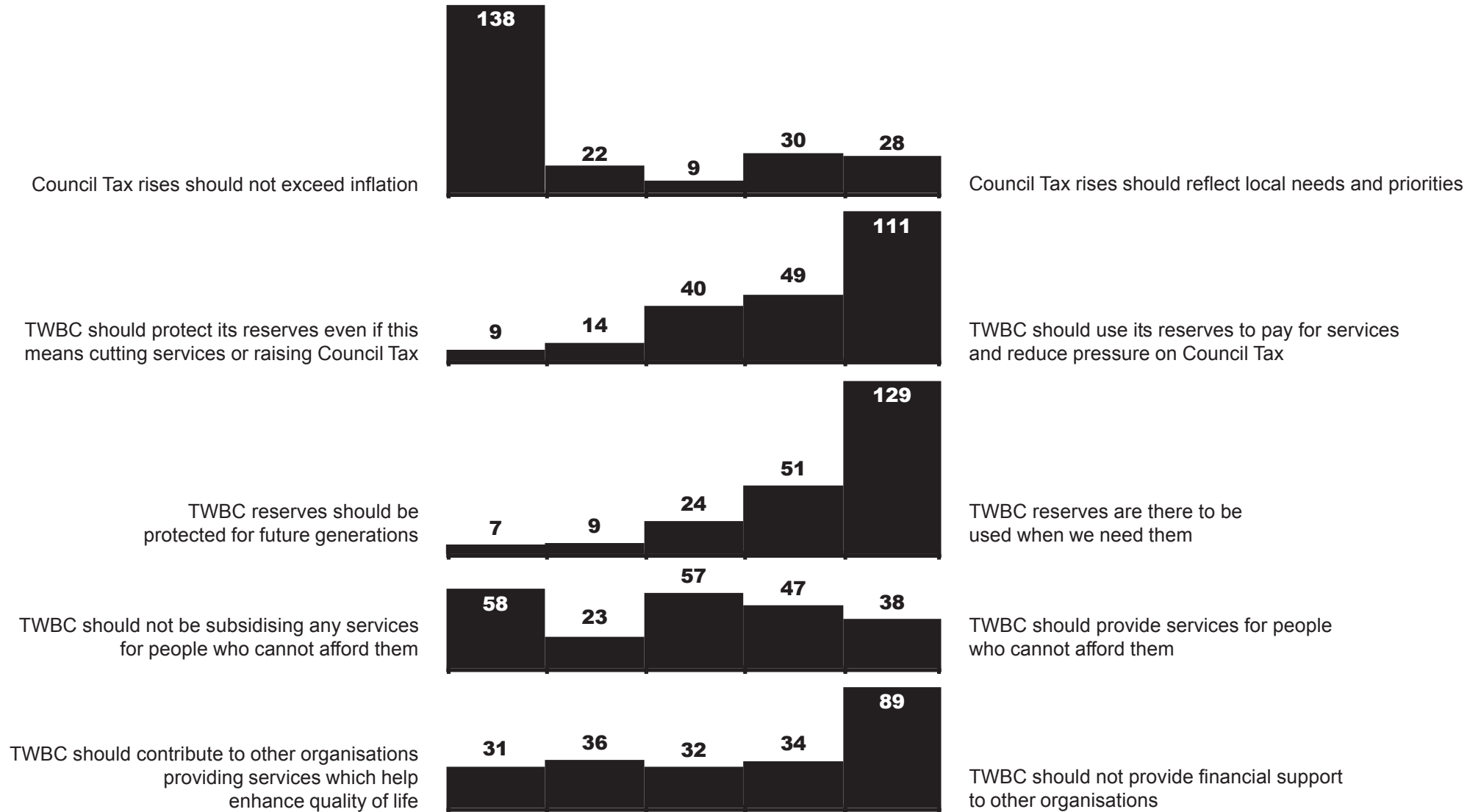
Options for financing services next year and longer term

- Majority of residents choose lowest cost option when presented with simple choice
- Taxpayers paying the full amount are most likely to want Council Tax rises kept within inflation
- Focus group participants ruled out lowest cost option from a choice of four presented
- Focus group participants made choice in context of discussions around service quality and Council subsidies/grants
- Most tend to support use of reserves rather than Council Tax increases
- Young people are less likely to support use of reserves
- Most tend to support Council subsidies and grants be given where appropriate
- Those on benefits are more likely to state their support; older people less so
- Slides showing relevant value statement results

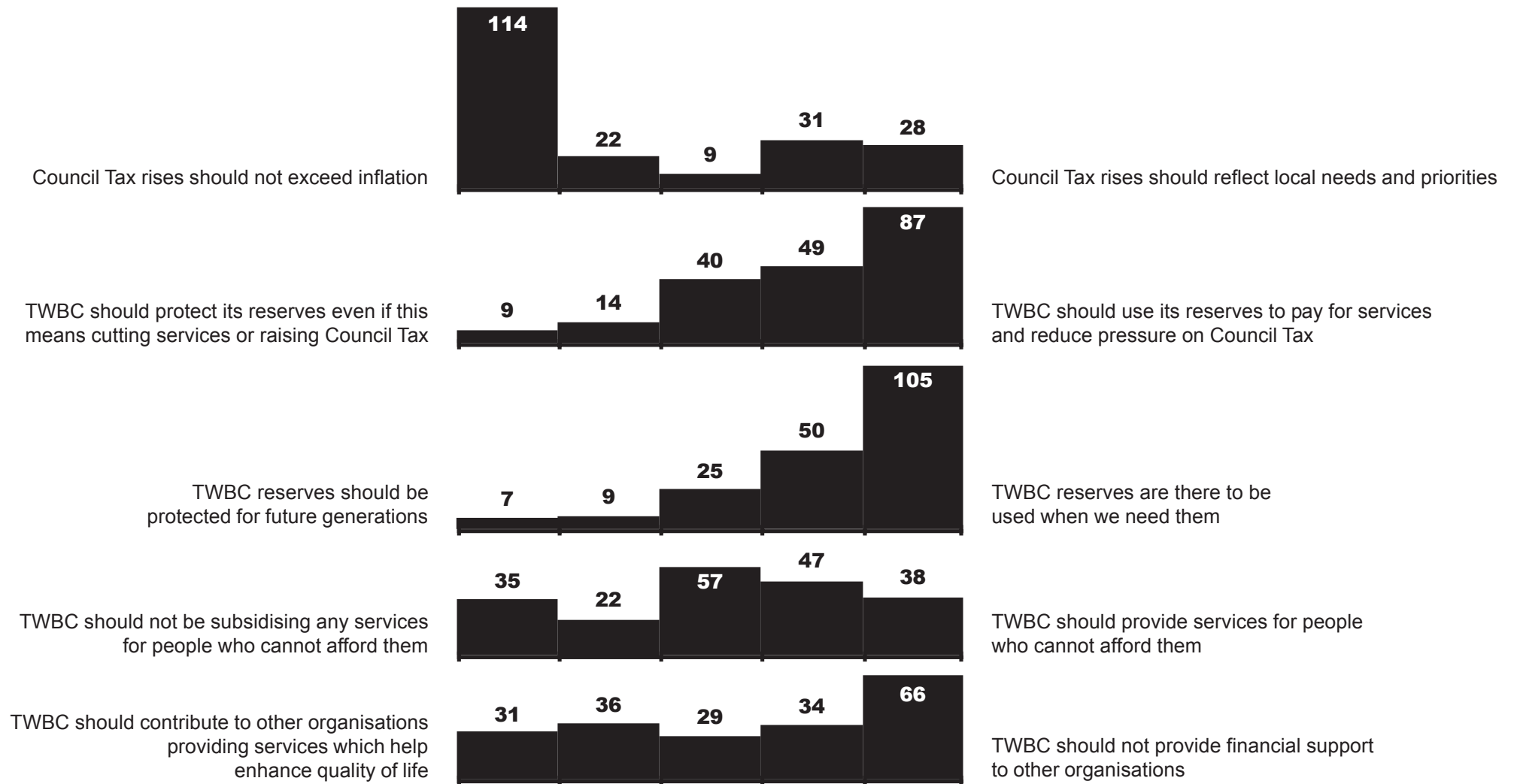
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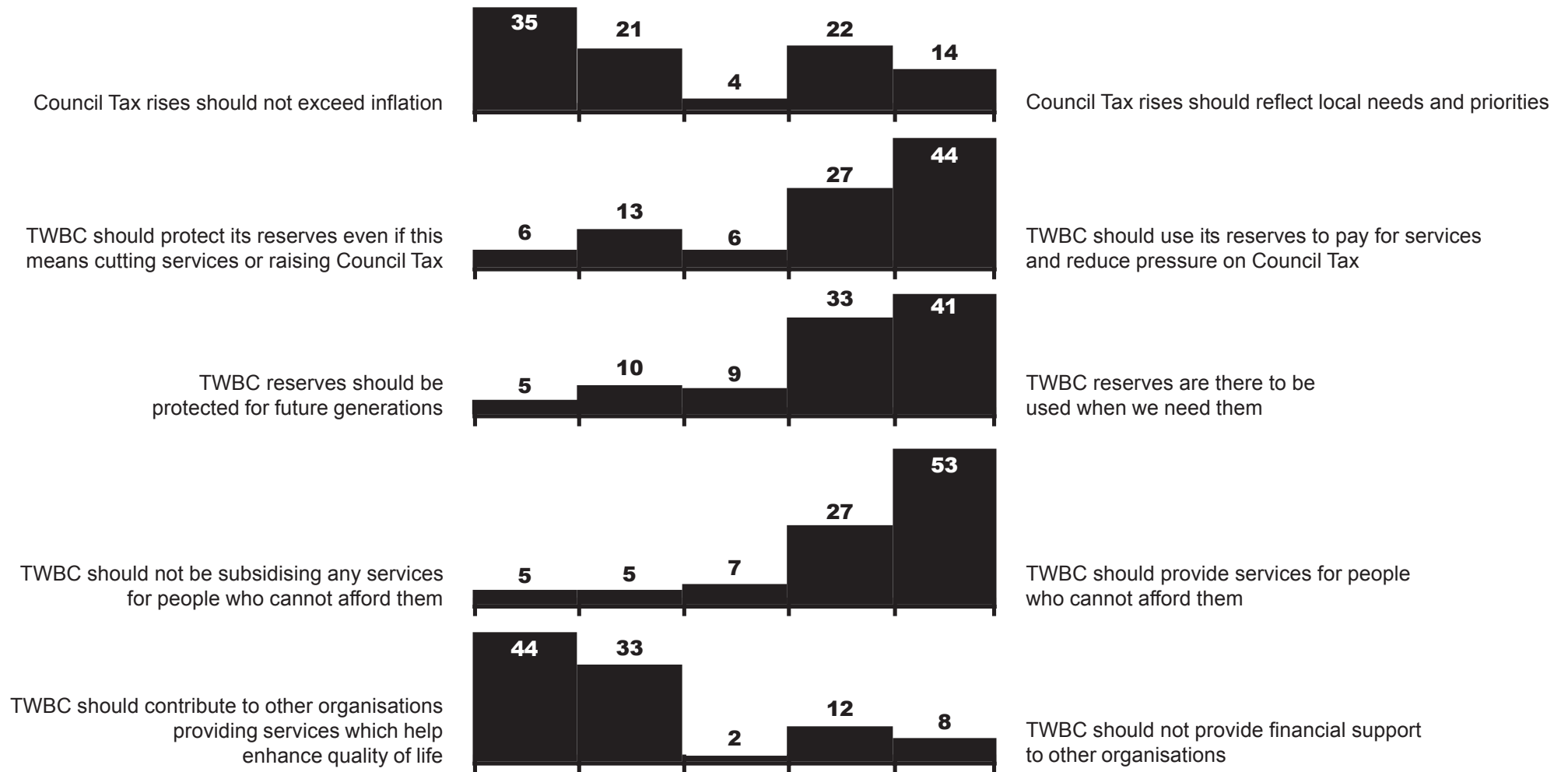
Responses to value statements (leaflet)



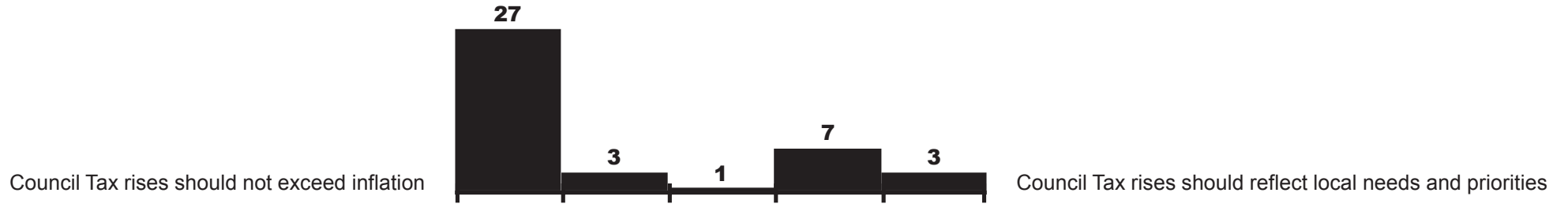
Responses to value statements (leaflet minus 24 'suspects')



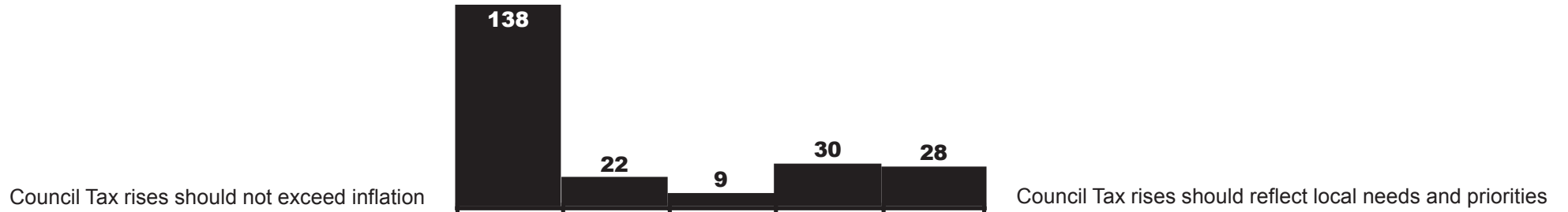
Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



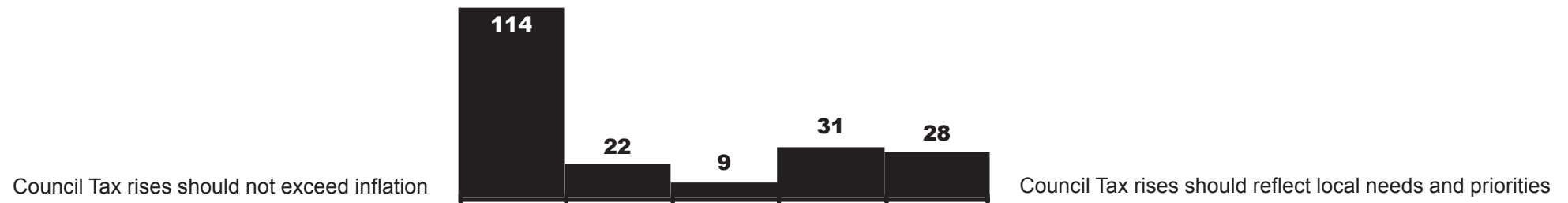
Responses to value statements (website)



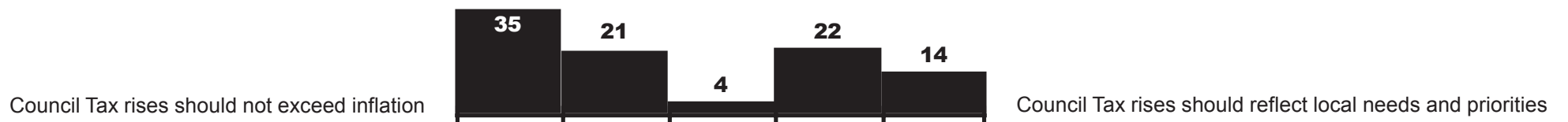
Responses to value statements (leaflet)



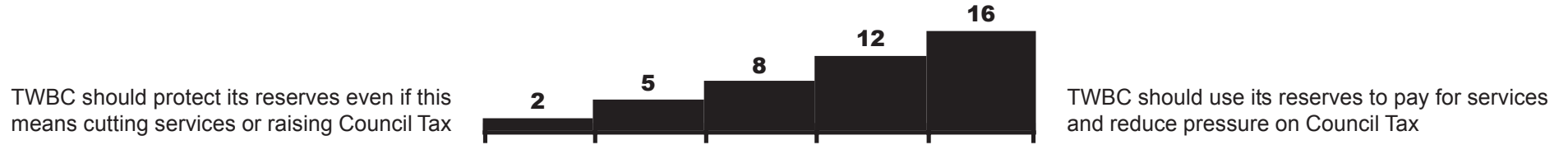
Responses to value statements (leaflet minus 24 'suspects')



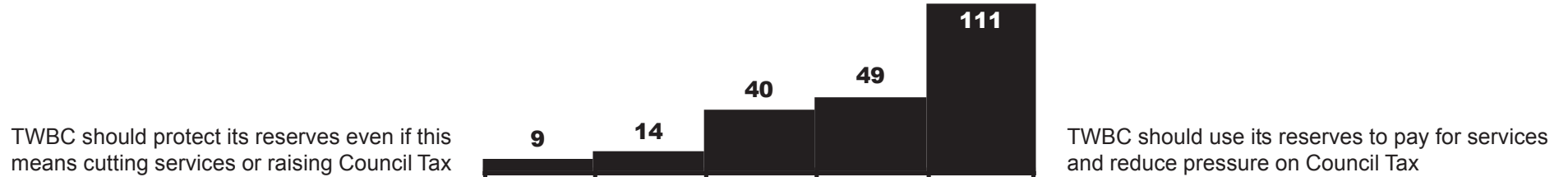
Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



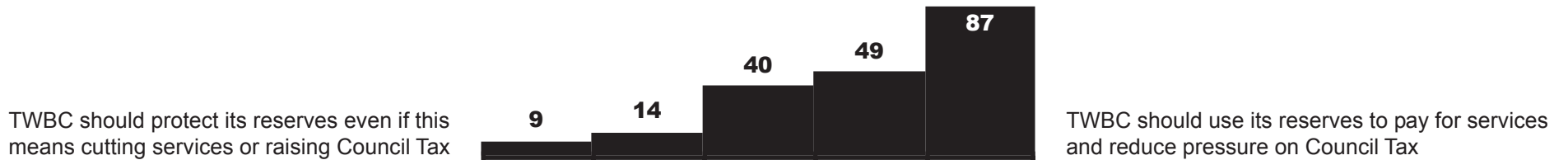
Responses to value statements (website)



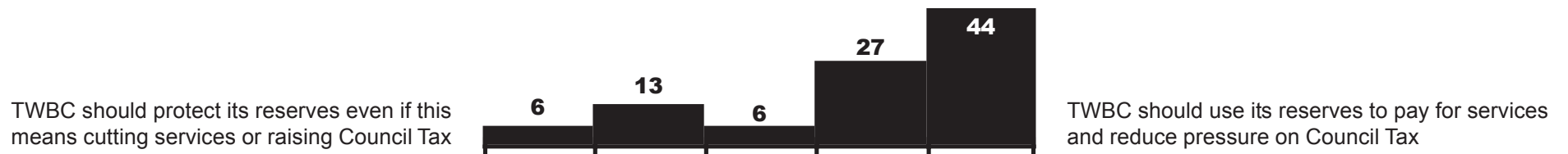
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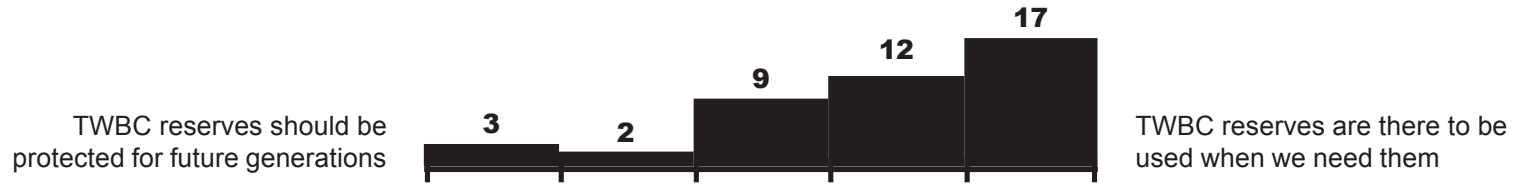
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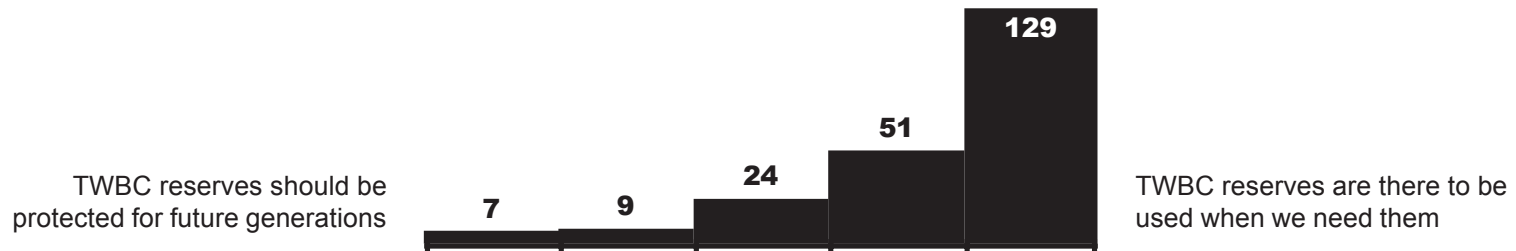
Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



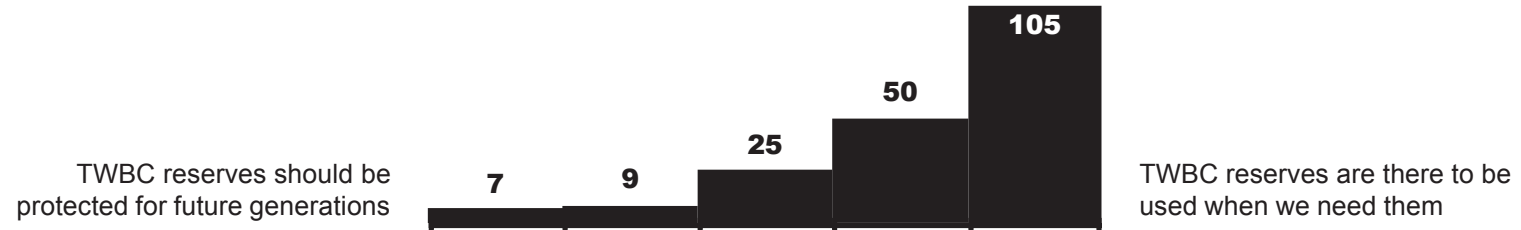
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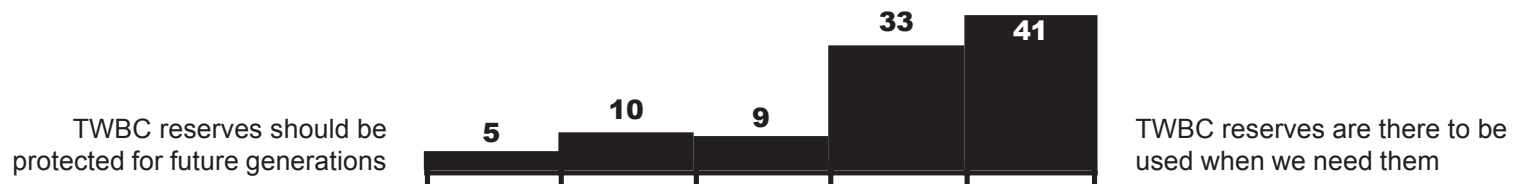
Responses to value statements (leaflet)



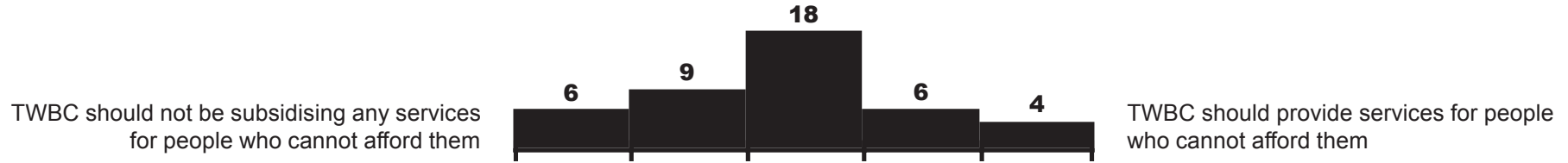
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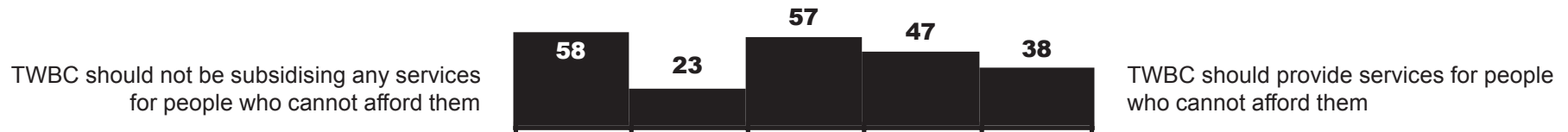
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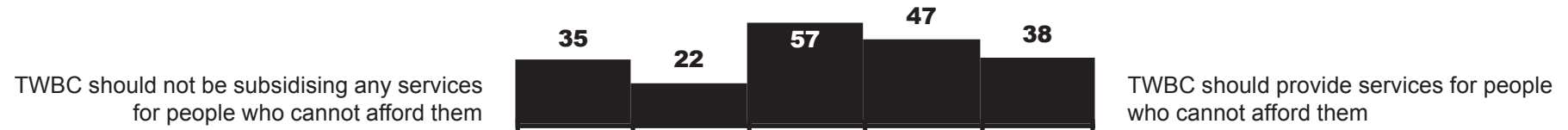
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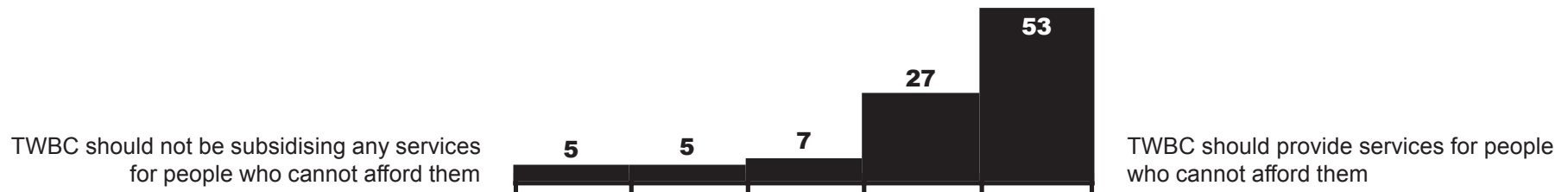
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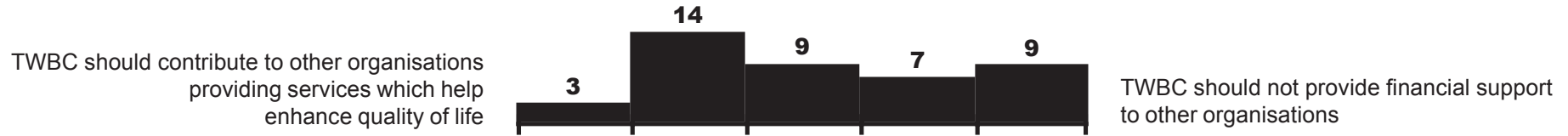
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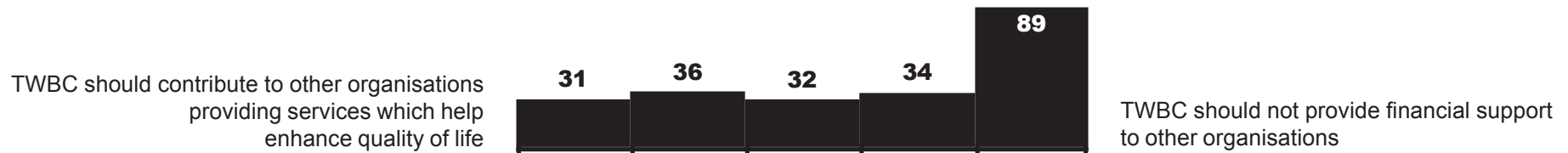
Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



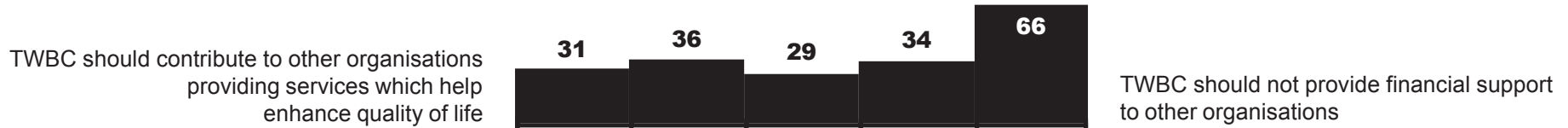
Responses to value statements (website)



Responses to value statements (leaflet)



Responses to value statements (leaflet minus 24 'suspects')



Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



Totals

	Option 1 (up by £18 pa)	Option 2 (up by £2 pa)	Option 3 (up by £5 pa)	No option given	Grand total
Advert	9	34	4	1	48
Freephone	12	27	5	0	44
Leaflet	45	116 or 92 *	42	19	222 or 198 *
Scrutiny	7	2	5	1	15
Website	9	25	9	0	43
TOTAL	82	204 or 180 *	65	21	372 or 348 *
Percentage	22% (or 24%*)	55% (or 52%*)	17% (or 18%*)	6% (or 6%*)	

* there is a question over whether there may have been some abuse of this method

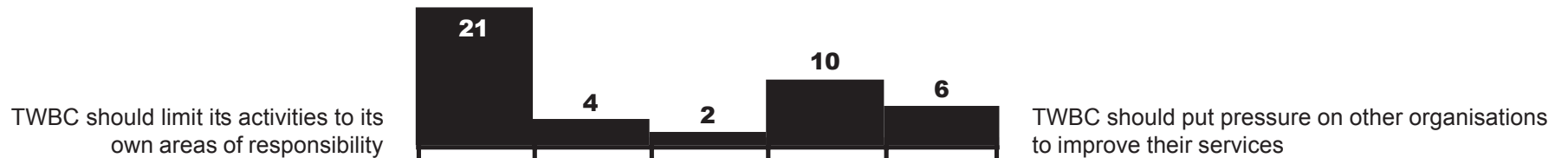
Phase 1: Focus Group results previously reported

Option 1 (up by £18 pa)	Option 2 (up by £2 pa)	Option 3 (up by £2 pa combined with different reserve picture - subsequently deleted)	Option 4 (up by £5 pa - became Option 3 in phase 2 consultation)
12	11	7	11

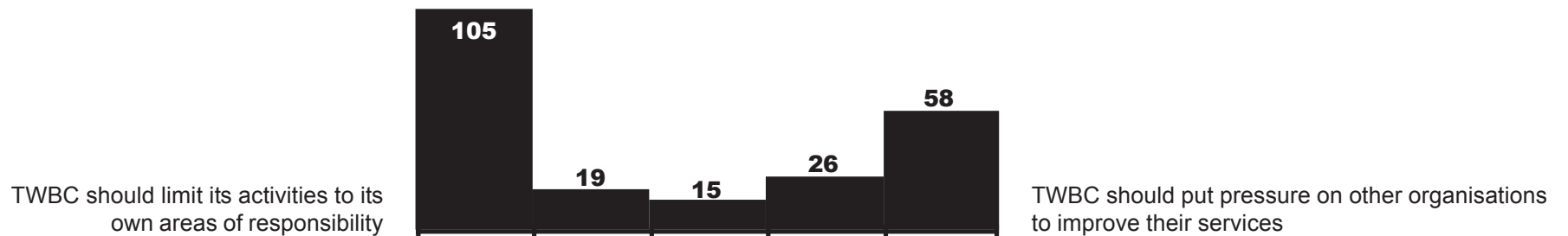
Other

Support of TWBC using its powers/position to influence other service providers

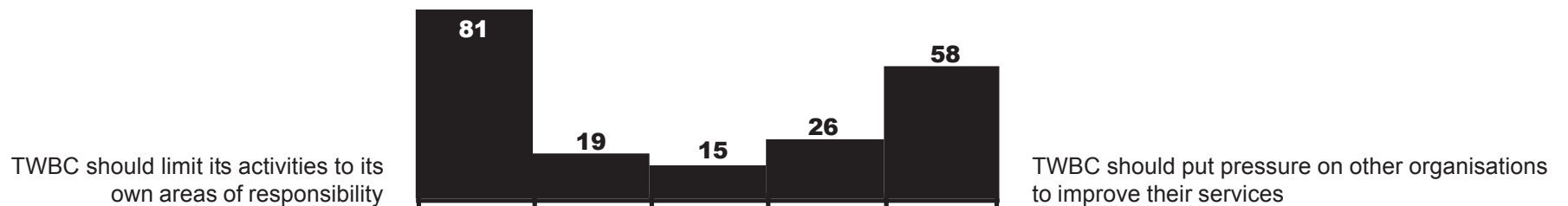
Responses to value statements (website)



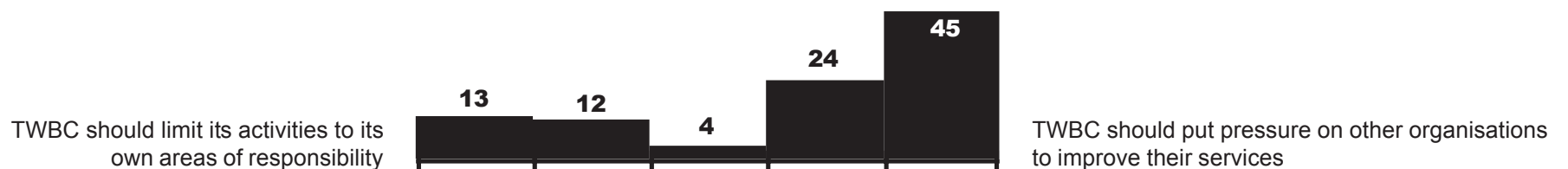
Responses to value statements (leaflet)



Responses to value statements (leaflet minus 24 'suspects')



Responses to value statements (%) (phone)



Other feedback

- Focus group work highlighted that confusion remains about responsibilities for local services ie County, Borough, Parish/Town

Individual comments include:

- Concerns for pensioners
- Arguments for council tax increases to be restricted
- Arguments for council tax to be index linked
- Arguments for change to local income tax
- Concern about perceived extravagances/wastages
- Issues about specific services/areas
- About the consultation initiative

Conclusions

Awareness

- Residents are not aware of how little of the Council Tax is retained for use by the Borough Council
- Nor do they know that TWBC's income framework creates a gearing effect on Council Tax
- Residents are unaware of, or insufficiently satisfied with, recent efficiency savings

Budget setting

- Given a simple choice a majority of residents will choose the lowest Council Tax option
- However residents are more likely to choose other options when Council Tax is related to choices about service quality and choices about grants and subsidies
- Residents favour use of reserves over Council Tax increases
- Arguably they might expect reserves to fund enhancements, not just maintenance
- Residents want to see evidence of efficiency

Lobbying

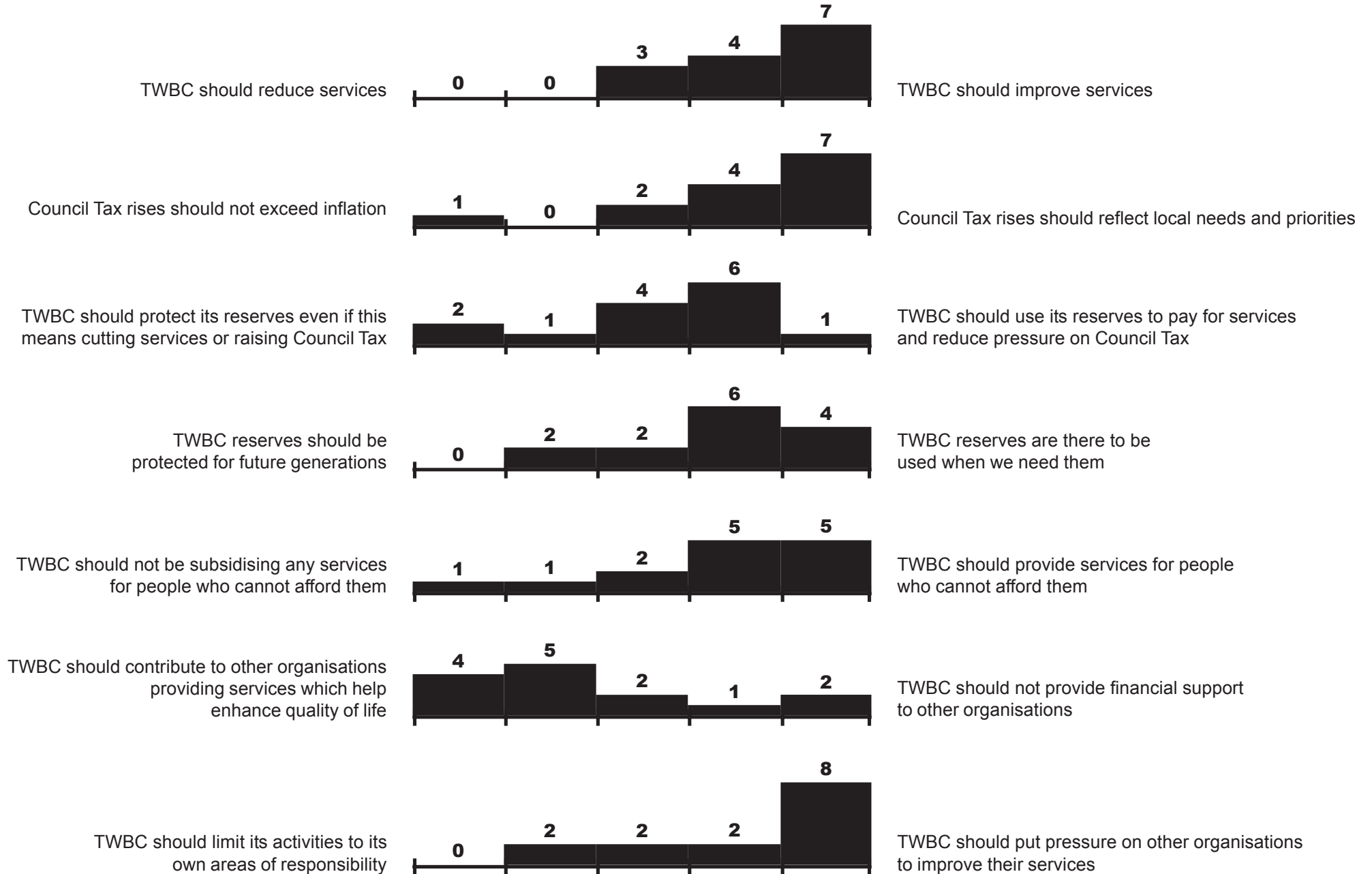
- Residents would like to see TWBC influence provision by others

Methodology

- The type of consultation method affects the financial choices made
- Self selecting methods elicited relatively low levels of response
- Qualitative methods offer scope for public engagement

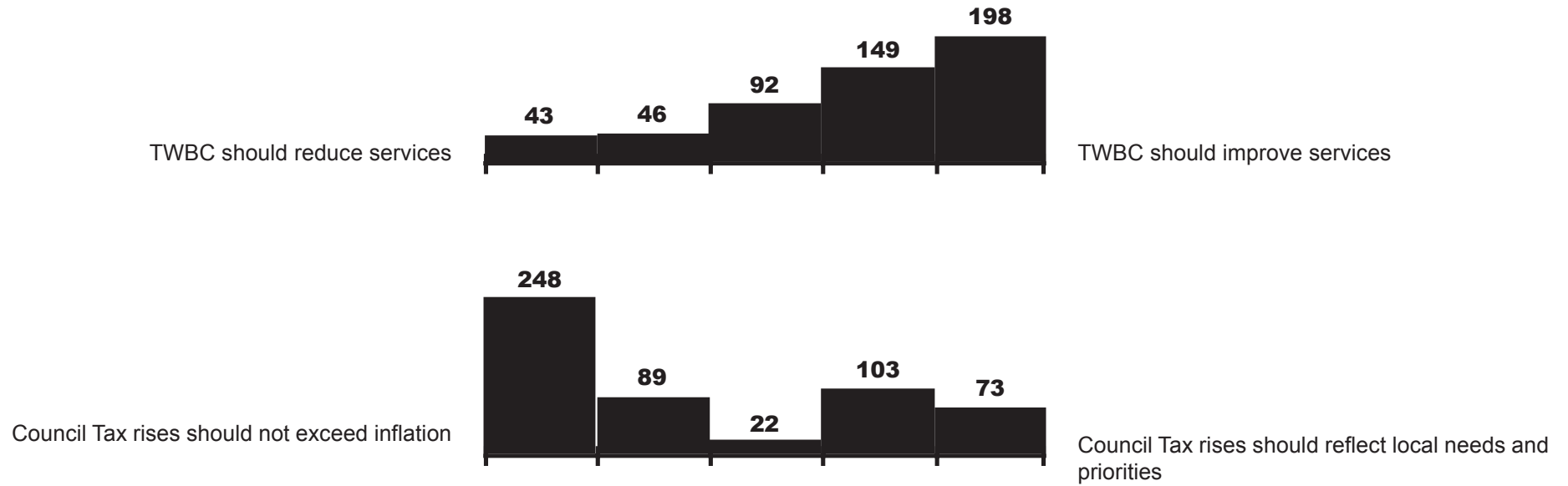
Method	Vote on budget options?	Value statements?	Other	Relative quality of engagement	Number of participants	Feedback on method	Potential for method to be abused
Phase 1							
Focus Groups / Workshops	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Exercises on awareness · Council finances & services · Some profiling of participants 	Highest	44	Positive - participants said they found it informative & enjoyable	Low - invitation only
Phase 2							
Newspaper ad with reply slip	✓	X	(postcode requested)	Lowest	48	Some criticisms: leading, waste of time / money	Can't restrict to residents but otherwise low
Freephone number	✓	X	Scope to leave message	Low	44	None	Can't restrict to residents but likelihood of duplication low
Leaflet with reply slip	✓	✓	(postcode requested)	Low	219	Some criticisms: leading, waste of time / money	Highest - some abuse suspected
On-line survey (ie via website)	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Some profiling of participants 	Low - Medium	43	None	Can't restrict to residents or rule out duplication
Telephone survey	X	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Profiling of participants 	Low - Medium	300	Method seen by some as intrusive	Low - invitation only

Responses to value statements (Scrutiny Committee Working Party)



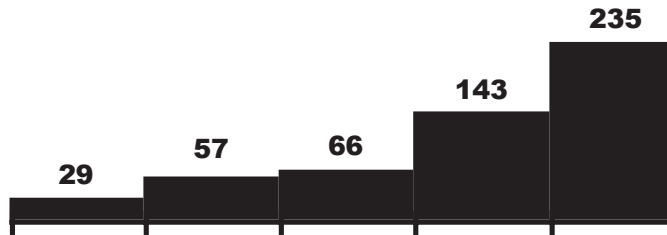
Note: 1 non-return on value sets 3 – 7 ; respondent marked 'Depends'

Total (minus suspects)



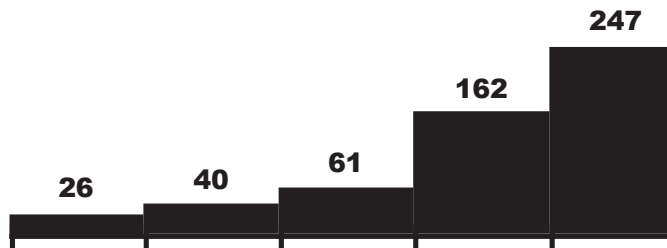
Total (minus suspects)

TWBC should protect its reserves even if this means cutting services or raising Council Tax



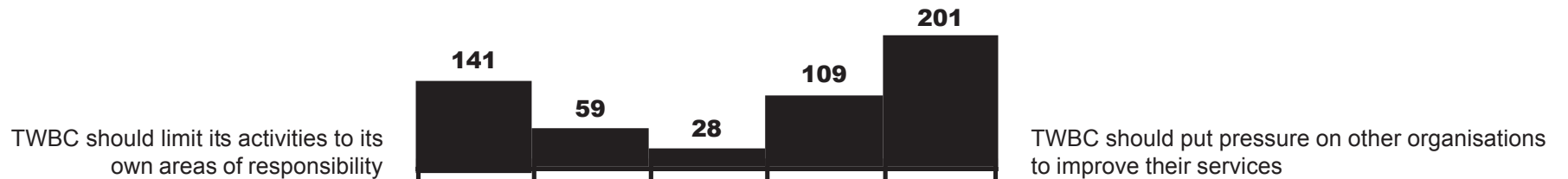
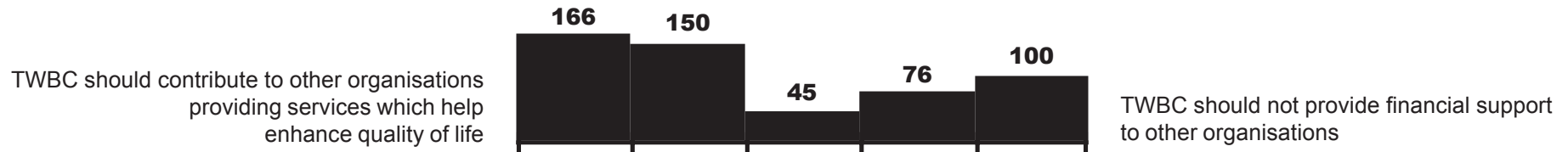
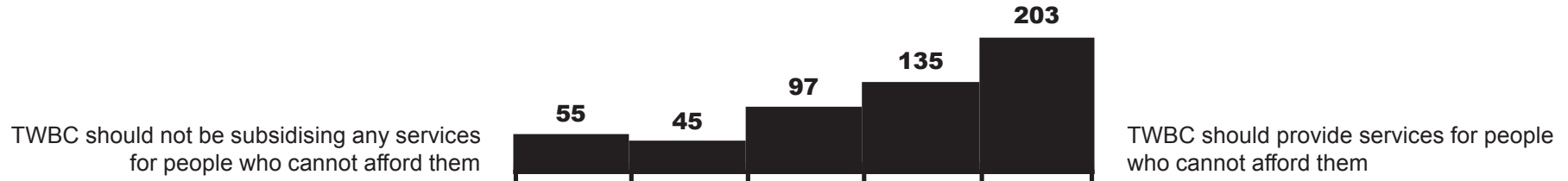
TWBC should use its reserves to pay for services and reduce pressure on Council Tax

TWBC reserves should be protected for future generations

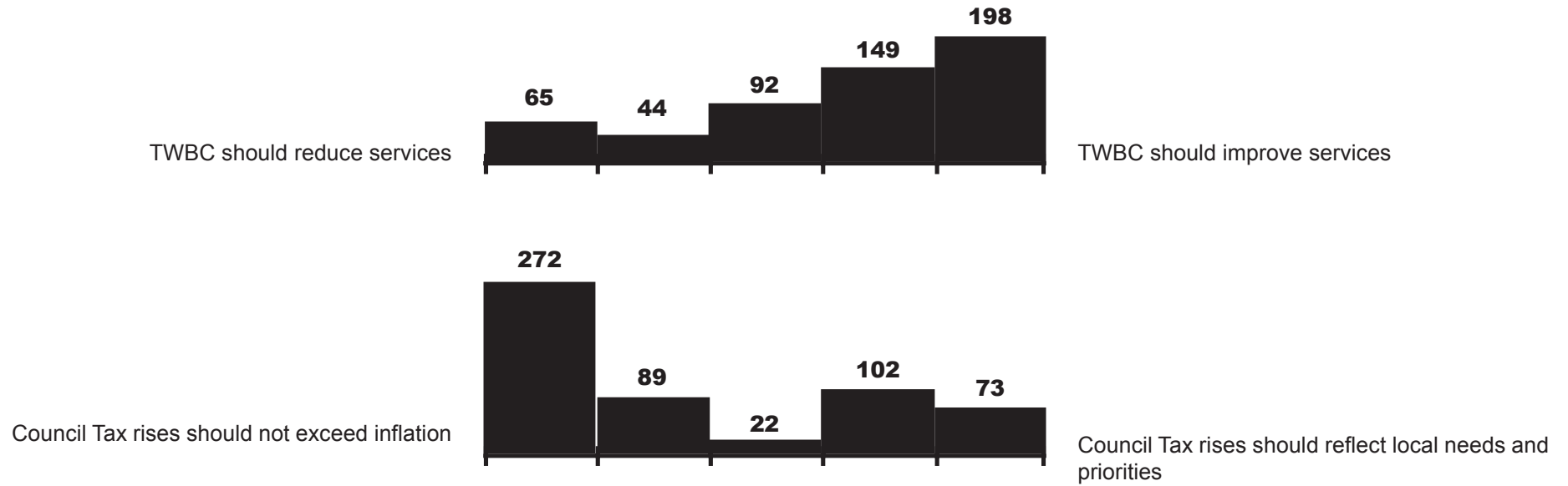


TWBC reserves are there to be used when we need them

Total (minus suspects)

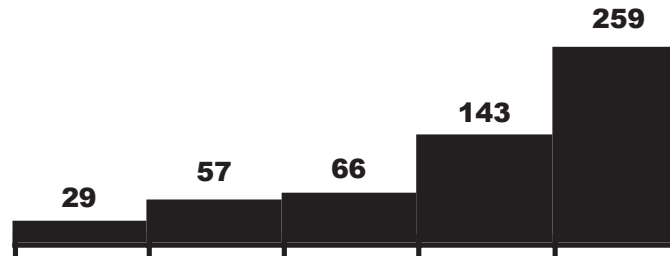


Total



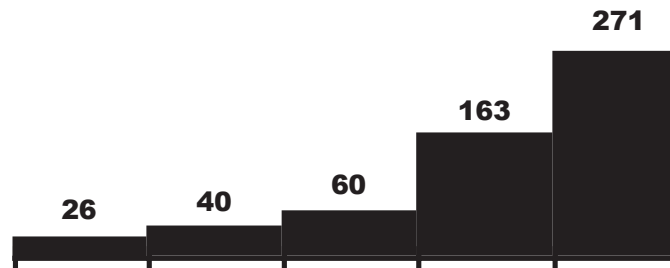
Total

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