



Forces for Change

Exploring public attitudes
towards the British Armed Forces





The Forces for Change survey, conducted between 15-22 September 2025, was completed by 3,000 people, aged 16yrs+ from across the UK. It explores public attitudes towards the British Armed Forces.

66%

of the public want a **stronger military**, and a **stronger industrial base** to support it

The public wants to **prioritise short-term spending** on increasing the size of the Army, missile defence capabilities, cyber and the UK's ability to support sustained conflict

26%

of **16-17-year-olds** would be willing to join the forces full-time or as reservists

Cyber-attacks are considered the biggest threat to the UK by the public

58%

of the public are in favour of the UK remaining a nuclear power over the next 20 years

The armed forces are the UK public's **most trusted** institution

Foreword



The public knows the threats facing the UK have changed. Geopolitical tensions. Fast-changing tech. A significantly increased 'grey-zone' threat.

The nation's defence capabilities are under more pressure, and scrutiny, than at any time since the Cold War.

Our research shows public trust in the British Armed Forces is high, and positive feeling towards them is strong. This clearly indicates people understand and value the forces' vital role.

But the public is raising questions about the forces' ability to respond to threats. Over the last decade, peoples' biggest fears have shifted – from domestic to global threats, from lone wolves to aggressor states.

The armed forces can't combat threats to the UK's security, or sustain a long-term armed conflict, alone. Our forces require the backing of an economy with strong industrial foundations and the engagement and support of the UK population, with a steady supply of willing recruits and reservists.

This survey reveals calls from the public not only to strengthen the military, but for stronger ties between our forces and industry. There's a public desire to know more about defence spending, and an awareness that it could do more to drive economic and industrial growth at home.

There are challenges. Even as defence spending increases, funding gaps will remain, leading to difficult choices to ensure the right strategic balance between developing new capabilities and sustaining readiness to fight.

There's an opportunity to put the UK's considerable financial muscle to better use. With the right strategies, we can improve our military readiness, provide value for money, and increase the pace of the procurement process – while delivering returns for investors and growth for the economy.

The forces have the support of the public; the challenge lies in harnessing that goodwill to encourage more people to contribute to defence efforts, whether in military or civilian roles. Such high levels of public support should also give policy makers license to be bold and invest in the modernisation of industry to support agile, responsive armed forces.”



Ian Hillier
UK Defence Leader, PwC



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01 Executive summary



Source: UK MOD

Our Forces for Change report shows public concern has intensified around the nation's ability to defend itself against cyber-attacks and sustain modern conflict. It comes as the issue of national security continues to climb the agenda, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, amid growing tensions in the transatlantic alliance with the US, and a rising number of high-profile cyber-attacks.

Our research, conducted after the unveiling of the Government's National Security Strategy (NSS), Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and Defence Industrial Strategy (DIS), seeks to understand the UK public's attitudes towards the armed forces and views about the role the forces play in our wider society and in keeping the nation safe.

Defending the nation

As the nature of global conflicts continues to evolve, the public believes the primary role of the armed forces is to defend the UK against threats and attacks from outside, intervening abroad where necessary. The public is attuned to the fact the nation has entered a new era of threat, with this report revealing a notable shift in peoples' fears.

Cyber-attacks, potential nuclear attacks and the threat of conflict involving an aggressor state in the Europe and Atlantic areas, are perceived as the biggest rising threats to the UK, according to our research. This signals a shift away from public fears around terrorism at home and lone-wolf attacks 10 years ago.

These fears come as GCHQ's [National Cyber Security Centre](#) reports a doubling of "nationally significant cyber-attacks" over the last year. Most of these are not visible to the public – indicating the threat is greater than people are aware. People are perhaps more likely to be aware of the long-running debate around the UK's nuclear deterrent, and our research shows 58% are in favour of remaining a nuclear armed power over the next 20 years, compared with 50% in 2016.

Readying and strengthening the forces

In the face of these threats, our report reveals increasing public support for strengthening the armed forces, while maintaining key relationships with NATO, the US, and our European allies. Despite the well-publicised success of the use of autonomy, artificial intelligence (AI) and space-based capabilities by - and in support of - Ukraine, the public prioritises short-term spending on increasing the size of the Army, bolstering missile defence capabilities, cyber and the UK's ability to sustain conflict.

This shows people are aware it's not just about numbers but about building capabilities and critically, the need to move to warfighting readiness. It follows repeated warnings from the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office about issues with readiness and sustainment.

Our research shows the public is largely behind plans agreed at the NATO Hague Summit in June to increase defence spending to 3.5% by 2034 – with only one in ten favouring slowing spending. While 37% support an increase in accelerated spending, there is a need to further understand how far the public might support potentially difficult budgetary choices in the near-term to ensure the forces are ready and able in the event of conflict.

Strengthening the industrial base

Most survey respondents believe the UK's industrial base needs 'strengthening or significant strengthening' to support the armed forces. They want the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to focus on faster defence procurement and entry into service of new equipment, greater support for high tech manufacturing, better exploitation of digital technology and a greater backing of UK small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The Government's strategy, outlined in the DIS, addresses some of these concerns by focusing on industry enhancement, procurement reform, and rapid innovation to fortify the UK's industrial base against emerging threats. Recent initiatives include establishing high-growth clusters, opening innovation centers, and launching new Defence Technical Excellence Colleges to meet the demand for skilled workers.

Successful implementation depends on the MoD and its industry partners, with the newly appointed National Armaments Director who is expected to make the necessary reforms to acquire and support the 'national arsenal' including the ability to scale to support sustained conflict.

Our research was conducted ahead of the recently announced 'Back British' consultation – which seeks to ensure defence spending benefits British businesses and workers, even when contracts go abroad. Our findings show public opinion is split between prioritising UK-made equipment and focusing solely on the best value, underscoring the ongoing debate over economic versus strategic priorities in defence procurement.

But the findings also point to an opportunity for private finance to invest in defence, providing essential capital for advancements in areas such as emerging and disruptive technologies and infrastructure improvements. Attracting private capital would help address public funding gaps, while encouraging a culture of innovation. Notably, the US Army and Germany are introducing venture capital-style acquisition models to accelerate the adoption of emerging technologies for military use, a strategy that could also be relevant for the UK.

Encouraging public involvement

Societal resilience is a core element of NATO's collective defence with each nation needing to be resilient to major shocks. Both the SDR and NSS flag the need for broader public involvement in defence efforts beyond traditional military roles to protect society, drawing on civilian support for critical infrastructure, energy facilities, and utilities.

While raising awareness of UK threats is seen by the public as critical, our research shows people are divided on policies such as building readiness for war, safeguarding infrastructure, and improving cross-sector resilience. Willingness to support defence varies, with 27% of 16-17-year-olds and 24% of 18-34-year-olds open to civilian roles, rather than military service.

With such percentages reflecting significant numbers of the population, our findings indicate the Government needs to better communicate the importance of building our resilience as a society, to respond to major disruptions – such as attacks, disasters, health crises, or infrastructure failures. Finland, Denmark, and other Nordic countries are often praised for their comprehensive approach to national resilience and defence, that is led by greater cross-sector collaboration.



Source: UK MOD



Source: UK MOD

Creating new career pathways

The public acknowledges the significance of the armed forces as an employer; with the widespread belief they make a valuable contribution to the national workforce. While those willing to enlist are in the minority, most young people are open to contributing to defence efforts, whether in military or civilian capabilities.

Some 14% of 16-17-year-olds we surveyed are willing to serve full-time. This suggests a supply of over 200,000 potential recruits, more than enough to offset the current shortfall and boost overall numbers. Similarly, 17% indicate they'd be willing to consider serving in the Reserves and larger percentages point to a preference for various supporting civilian roles.

Our research then raises questions around the forces' ability to convert this interest. Latest [MoD reports](#) show more personnel are leaving than joining, and point to contributing factors such as pay, opportunities outside the forces and the impact of service life on personal life. This highlights the need for an improved recruitment process – that better communicates opportunities and offers a greater focus on career pathways – as well as a need to do more to ease veterans into civilian careers.

Those we surveyed expressed interest in alternative career pathways; such as mandatory but limited military service, with a preference for selective, competitive, and gender-neutral models similar to that of the Scandinavians. There is further interest in 'zig zag' career structures, support for drawing trained personnel into the private sector and further encouraging Reserve service, including annual training opportunities.

Driving better communication

It is clear the public holds the armed forces in high regard. Our survey shows the forces command greater trust than any other UK institution, including the police and the judiciary. Most people feel positive towards the forces, and demonstrate considerable respect for veterans, through calls for greater support for civilian job training and healthcare benefits.

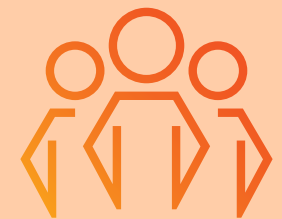
At the same time, most people admit they don't have a good understanding of how the forces contribute to the economy, or what defence money is spent on. And over the last decade, our research shows the public has retained a stubborn desire to know more about what the forces are doing at home and abroad.

While a degree of discretion is to be expected, there is a need for the armed forces and the Government

to be more transparent about the funds needed to keep the country safe and resilient, as well as what people's role in defending the nation might be. At a time when the public purse is under great scrutiny, the forces need not just to communicate information in an appropriate and clear manner, but in a way that emphasises their wider value to society. This should involve keeping pace with trends in social media to reach their target audience.

02 Agenda for action

Looking ahead, there are some key opportunities for the MoD and the armed forces to consider, and address appropriately, to retain the public's trust and support. These include:



Enhancing strength and readiness

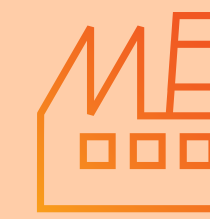
The public recognises the need to support the warfighting readiness and capacity of the armed forces to undertake sustained conflict. Despite the projected increase in defence spending, there will need to be a continued drive to increase efficiency and productivity, particularly using digital technology and AI. Even though this offers some budgetary headroom, it is imperative that the right strategic balance is struck between developing new capabilities and sustaining readiness to fight and ensure credible deterrence. This should be underpinned by a robust approach to integrated business planning to overcome the dangers of short-termism.



Implementing a cross-sector cyber strategy

Cyber threats in the UK are more serious than most realise, with technology driving new types of attacks, including those from state-sponsored actors targeting public and private organisations. All sectors, especially defence, must improve resilience and secure their operations. UK organisations recognise this challenge, with separate [PwC research](#) showing 85% expect cyber budgets to increase over the next 12 months.

Only 51% believe they are “very capable” of addressing a major cyber-attack. The main barrier to implementation is cited as access to necessary skills. Given the gravity of the threat, it demands a more coordinated and coherent approach across all sectors and levels of government.



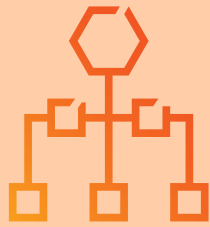
Strengthening the UK's industrial base

A robust and adaptable industrial base is vital to national security. While the DIS has set a course to enhance the UK's defence sector, carrying out such a large-scale transformation is historically challenging. Achieving this will require both cultural and procedural shifts within the MoD, higher productivity across the industry, and flexible export strategies that encourage innovation. New market players – often supported by private investment – are driving innovation and faster results; the MoD must adapt to capitalise on these trends while also ensuring it secures essential skills and reliable supply chains amid stiff competition. As the new National Armaments Director Group develops, it must play a critical role in leading this change. Reinforcing the industrial base will advance defence goals and promote broader economic growth.



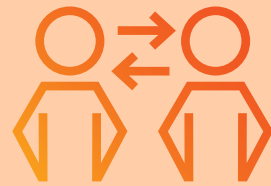
Building resilience and broadening support

The UK Government and allies, including NATO, increasingly see fostering societal resilience as essential in managing and recovering from significant military and non-military disruptions. This was reflected in the NSS and SDR in emphasising the shift to protecting society as a whole and recognising that challenges, such as pandemics and cyber-attacks, require civilian involvement. Our survey shows the public is willing to participate, but clearer goals and requirements are needed to harness this support. Effective coordination across all levels of government – not just the MoD - is vital.



Creating innovative career pathways

Survey feedback shows the public is open to various types of service, both full-time and reservist military roles, as well as civilian, which help develop skills transferable to the private sector. These should build on the employment opportunities, skills and professional development offered by defence. While 14% of 16–17-year-olds and 18% of 18–34-year-olds would consider joining full-time, enlistment remains below 1%. Recruitment, pay, work-life balance, and living standards need improvement, along with offering diverse career paths and alternative engagement models – such as selective, gender-neutral mandatory service seen in Scandinavia – to enhance recruitment and retention.



Improving transparency and communication

Understanding the armed forces' roles and needs interests the public. While confidentiality is sometimes necessary, clear communication improves awareness, sets security priorities, and explains resource requirements. Messages can be adapted for diverse audiences and data analysis can refine communications, while attention to the value proposition can enhance outreach and in turn boost engagement and modern workforce recruitment. According to our survey, raising public awareness of the threats to the UK and how defence can deter them is considered the best way to drive wider societal support.

03 Key findings

Purpose, values and trust

Our findings on the public perceptions of the armed forces shows most people have a positive view of the forces and trust them – more so than any other institution in the UK. The majority agrees the most important role of the forces is to defend the UK from external threats and attacks.

Trust in the armed forces remains high...

Overall, the public recognises the armed forces as the most trusted institution in the UK. While trust in the forces has decreased slightly compared to 2015, this follows a fall in public trust in institutions almost across the board – but the decrease in trust is not as great as in other institutions, such as the judiciary.

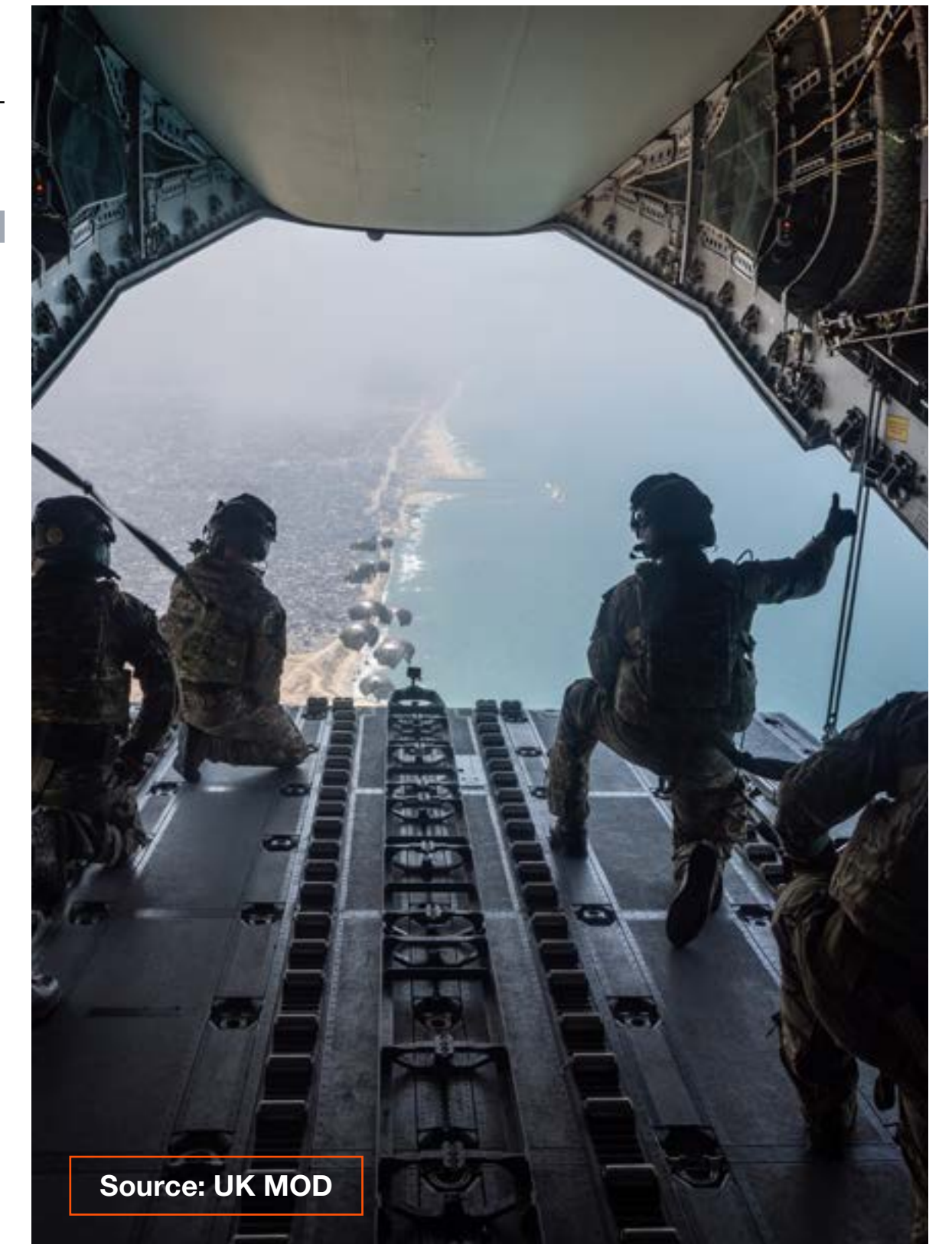
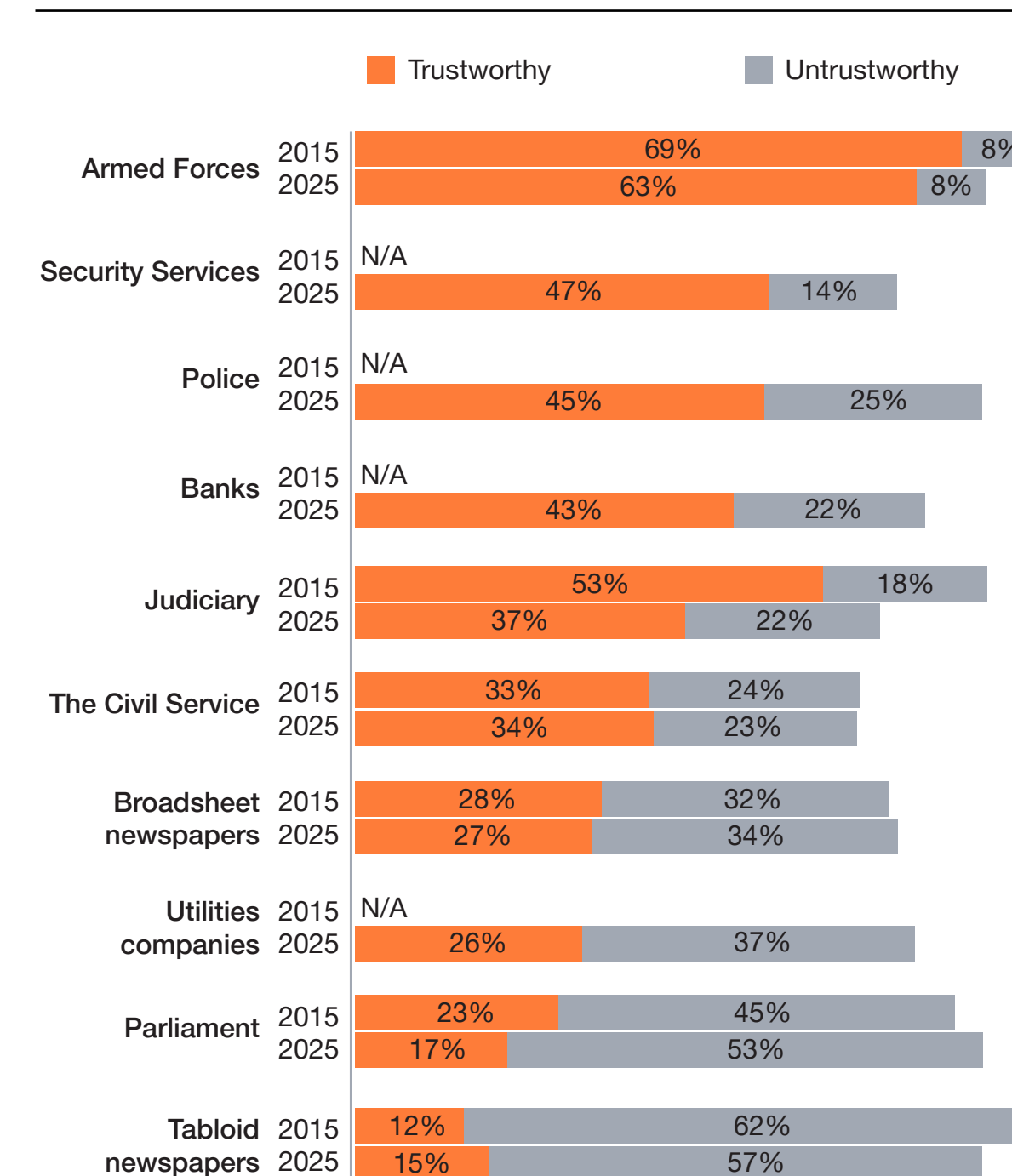
Declining trust in publicly funded institutions is not unique to the UK, with liberal democracies increasingly seen as being slow and cumbersome in response to people’s everyday challenges. In the UK, a series of rolling disruptions over the last decade, including Brexit, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, have significantly challenged traditional institutions.

...they are positively received and valued

Positivity towards the armed forces has remained high over the last decade. There has been a notable 6 percentage point decrease in positive feeling from those aged 35-54 – but this is offset by a 7 percentage point increase in positivity among 18-34-year-olds.

Overall, fewer people – across all age groups and genders – feel negative towards the forces, with negative feelings dropping from 8% to 5% over the same period.

Figure 1: Rate the following British institutions in terms of how much you trust them

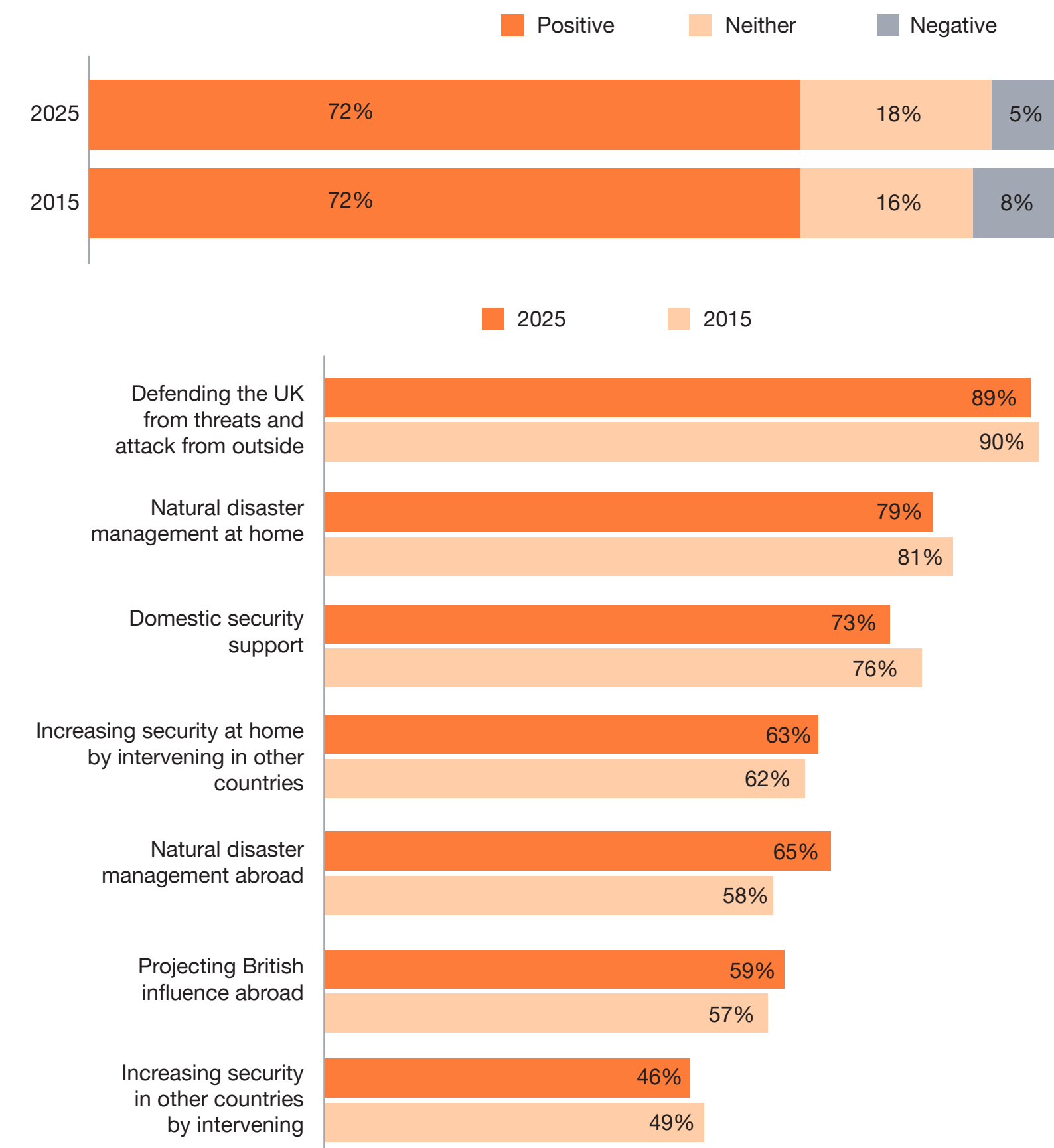


Source: UK MOD

89%

of the public says the key function of the forces is to defend the UK from threats and attack from outside, and 62% supports intervening abroad to increase security at home. This has remained consistent over the last decade, indicating the public understands the value of the forces in keeping the nation safe.

Figure 2: Overall, how would you describe your feelings towards the UK's Armed forces?



Source: UK MOD

Operational priorities

On operational issues such as threat levels, strategic alliances and military strength, our research shows a significant shift in the public’s perception of threat. For the last decade, the public has been calling for a stronger military, and these calls have intensified in the face of changing threats.

The public’s perception of threat has changed...

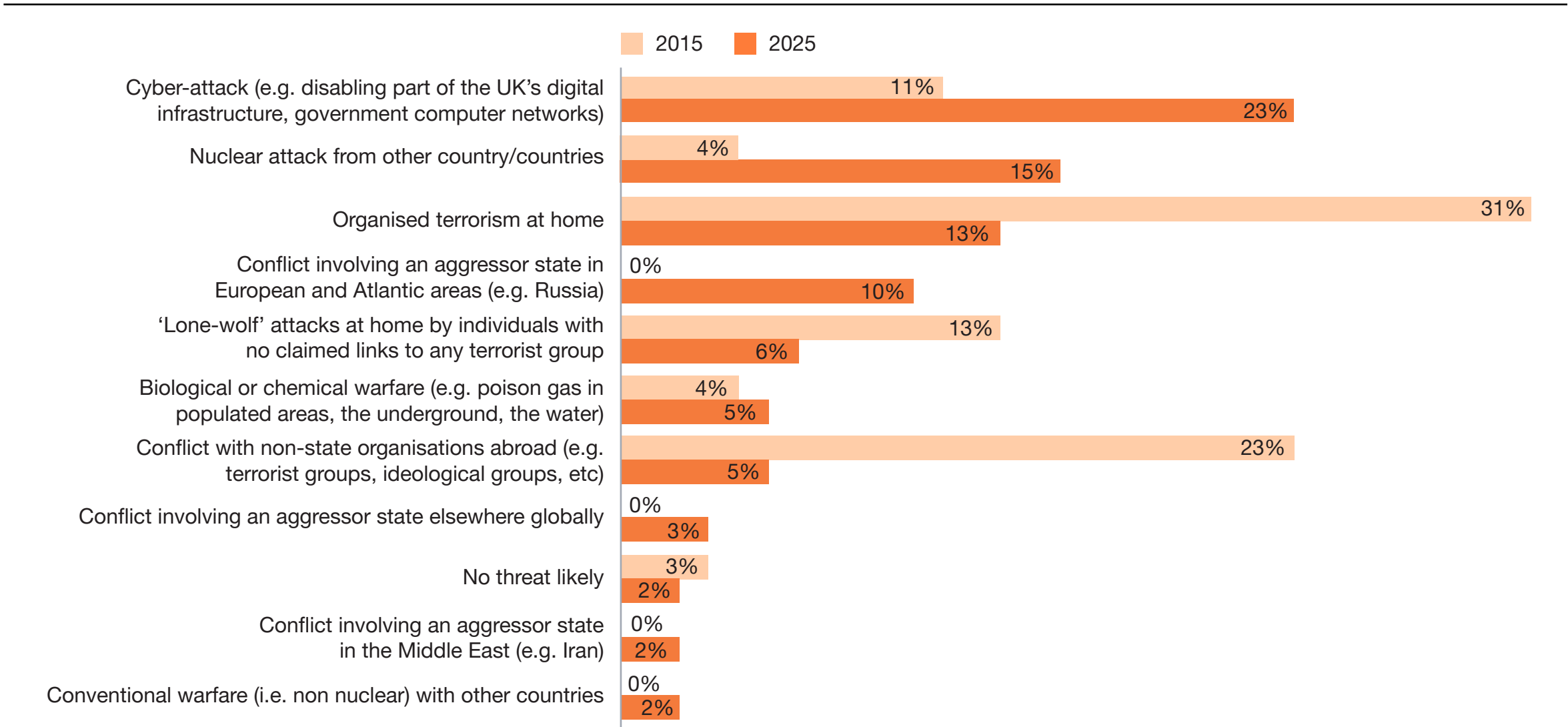
Our research shows a marked shift over the last decade in the public perception of threats to the UK. Concerns around cyber-attacks, nuclear attacks and the threat of conflict involving an aggressor state in the Europe and Atlantic areas have risen steeply. At the same time, while organised terrorism at home and lone-wolf attacks are still feared, they are less of a public concern than a decade ago.

The changing nature of the public’s fears is not surprising. The rise in concern around cyber-attacks, from 11% in 2015 to 23% this year, arguably stems from the very visible and increasing number of recent attacks on household brands and global corporates. These coincide with a record 204 “nationally significant cyber-attacks” handled by GCHQ’s National Cyber Security

Centre in the last year – more than double the previous year. Given many of these would not have reached the public domain, it points to a cyber threat level higher than the public perceives.

Meanwhile, news coverage of the fractured geopolitical landscape fuels a public wariness of war, nuclear attacks and of conflict spreading. A decade ago, 31% of the public said the biggest threat to the UK was organised terrorism at home – this has fallen back to 13%, to third place. Meanwhile, over the same period, the public’s fear of a nuclear attack has risen from 4% to 15%, to second place. And conflict involving an aggressor state in European and Atlantic areas, which was not polled in previous surveys, is considered the fourth biggest threat.

Figure 3: What type of attack, if any, do you perceive as the biggest threat to the UK in the near future?



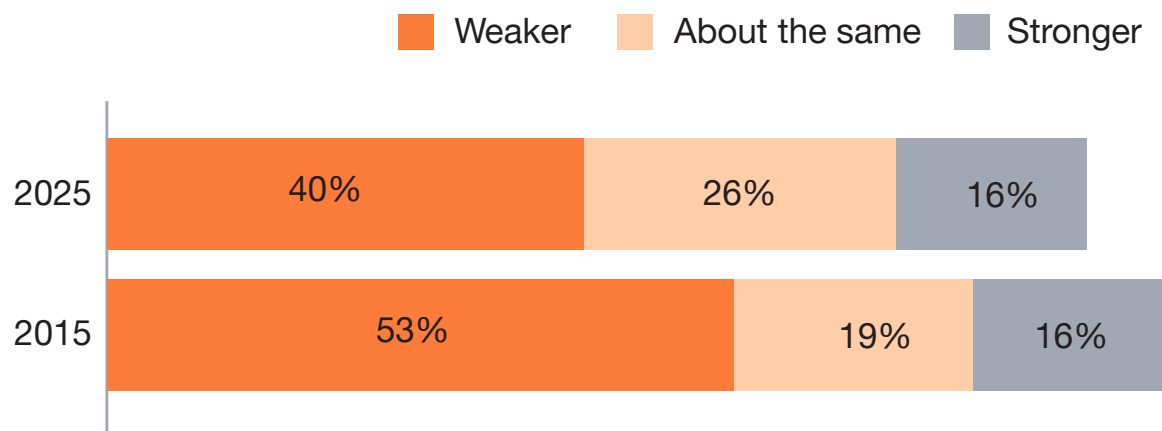
*Conflict involving an aggressor state was not polled in previous surveys



Prompting increasing calls to strengthen the military...

Over the last decade, we have seen a growing public appetite for strong military capabilities, with support for increased military strength climbing from 53% in 2015 to 66% this year. This increase tracks rising Russian aggression and is consistent with the public belief that the forces’ primary role is to defend the UK against threats and attacks from outside, intervening abroad where necessary (Figure 3).

Figure 4: Would you say that Britain’s military in 2025 is stronger, weaker or at about the same level of strength as it was 10 years ago?



It follows too, that the UK’s key international alliances are all considered important by the public – with NATO foremost in military terms. Since 2017, in the wake of Brexit, the UK’s relationship with Europe is the only one that has gained importance with the public. By contrast, the perceived importance of the UK’s relationships with the UN and the Commonwealth have all declined slightly. However, public attitudes regarding individual relationships differ between age groups. For example, 16-17-year-olds see the UK’s relationships with Eastern European countries and China as the most important to our national security, at 61% and 60%, respectively. This runs against the overall view that relationships with the US and France are the most important.

Figure 5: Thinking about the next 10 years, would you like to see Britain’s military strength increase, decrease, or stay the same?

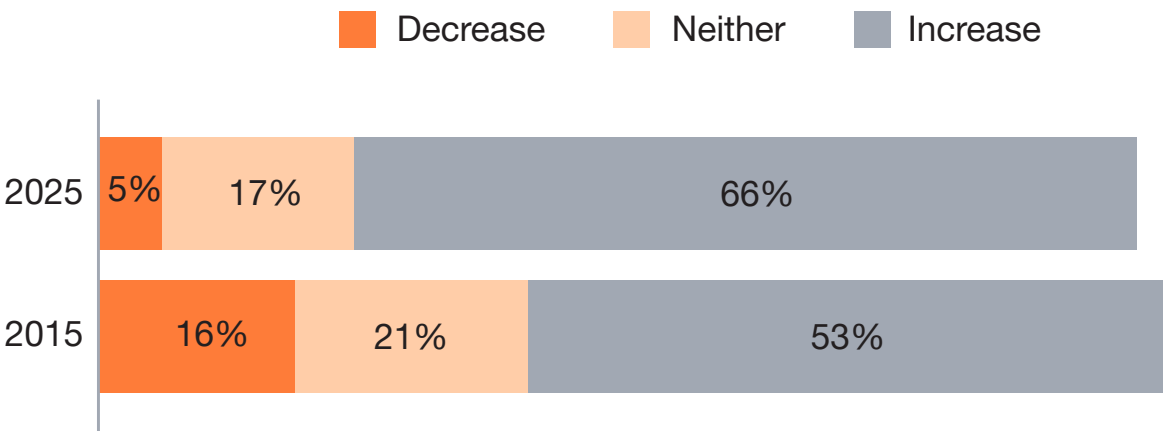


Figure 6: How important, if at all, do you think the UK’s relationship is with the following international alliances to our national security?

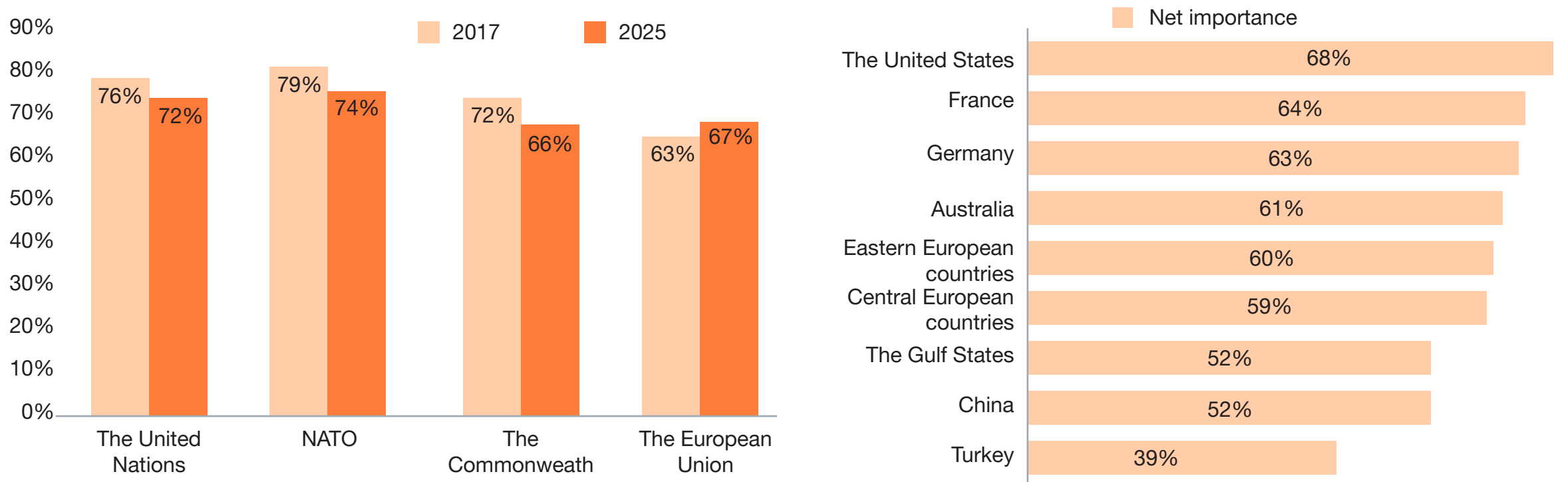
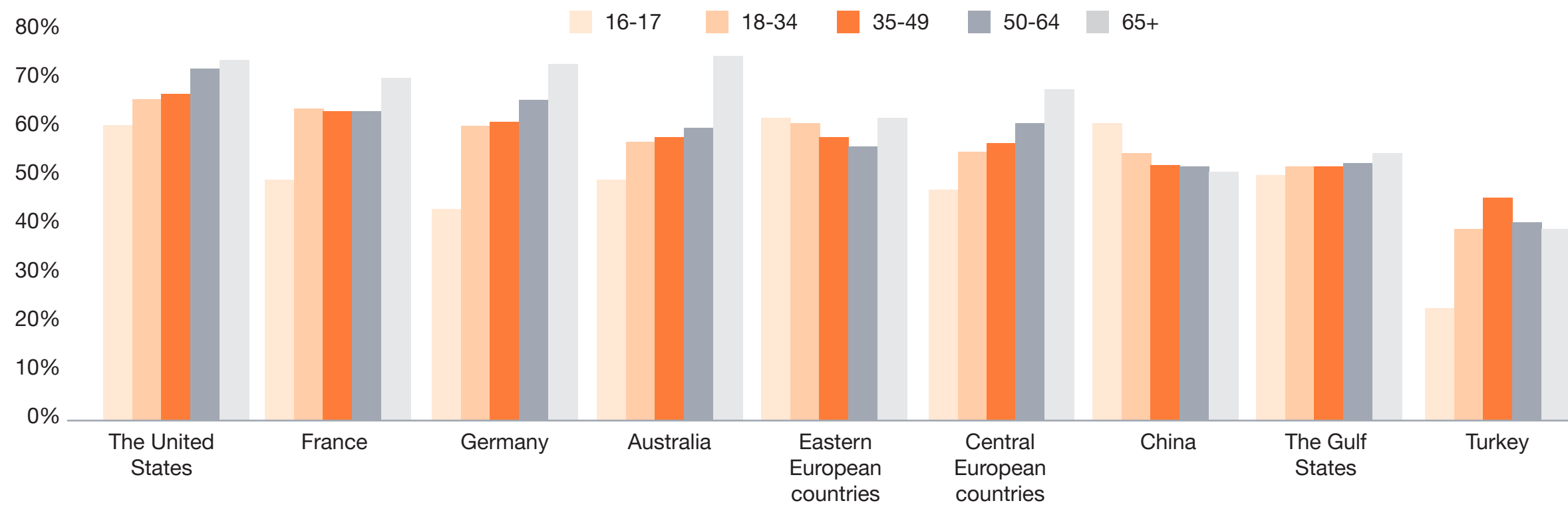


Figure 7: How important, if at all, do you think the UK’s bilateral (or individual) relationships with the following countries are to our national security?



...and growing support for our nuclear defences

In line with rising fear of a nuclear attack, more people agree that a nuclear deterrent contributes to the UK’s safety and stability (Figure 8, up from 48% in 2016 to 54% in 2025). Our research shows support has increased across all regions, including Scotland (see Appendix Figure 1). This is notable given recent debate in Scotland around the potential for nuclear energy to create new, highly-skilled jobs. It’s also worth pointing to the stark difference between male and female support – with 64% of men agreeing that having a nuclear deterrent contributes to the nation’s safety and security, versus 45% of women.

Meanwhile, support for remaining a nuclear armed power over the next 20 years has increased from 50% to 58% over the same period (Figure 9). The younger generation demonstrates the biggest shift towards supporting greater nuclear capabilities.

Figure 8: Do you agree or disagree with the idea that having a nuclear deterrent contributes to the UK’s safety and stability?

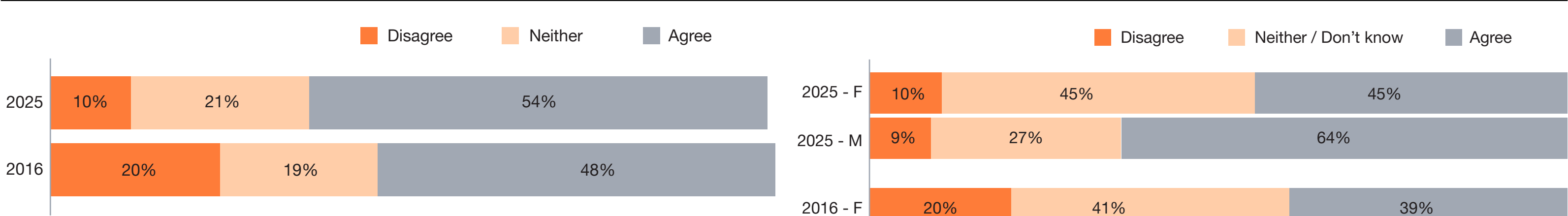
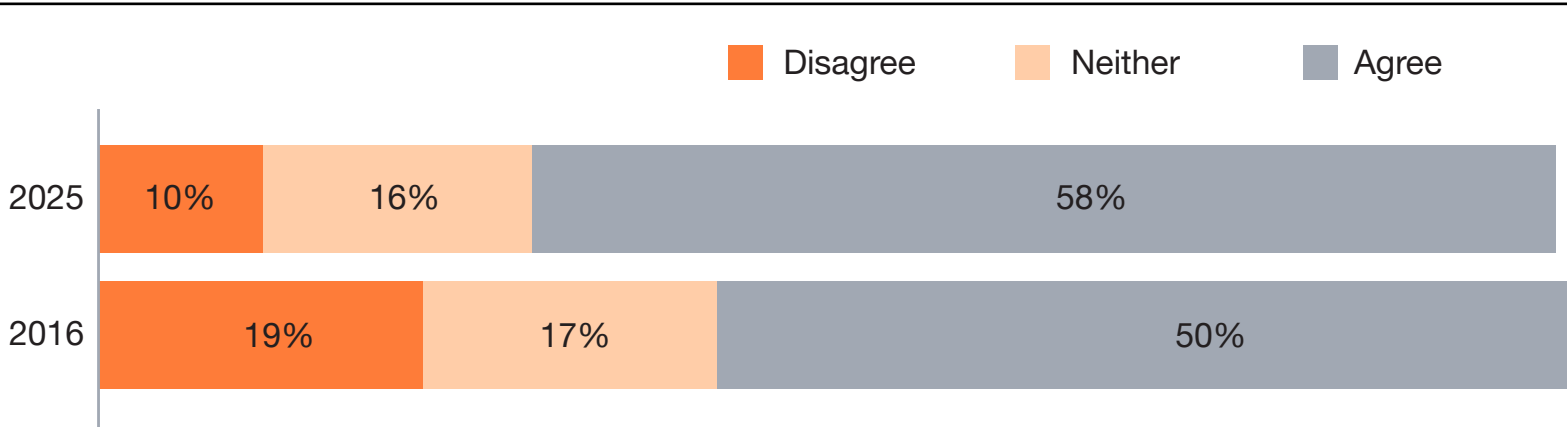


Figure 9: Thinking about the next 20 years, do you agree or disagree that the UK should remain a nuclear armed power?



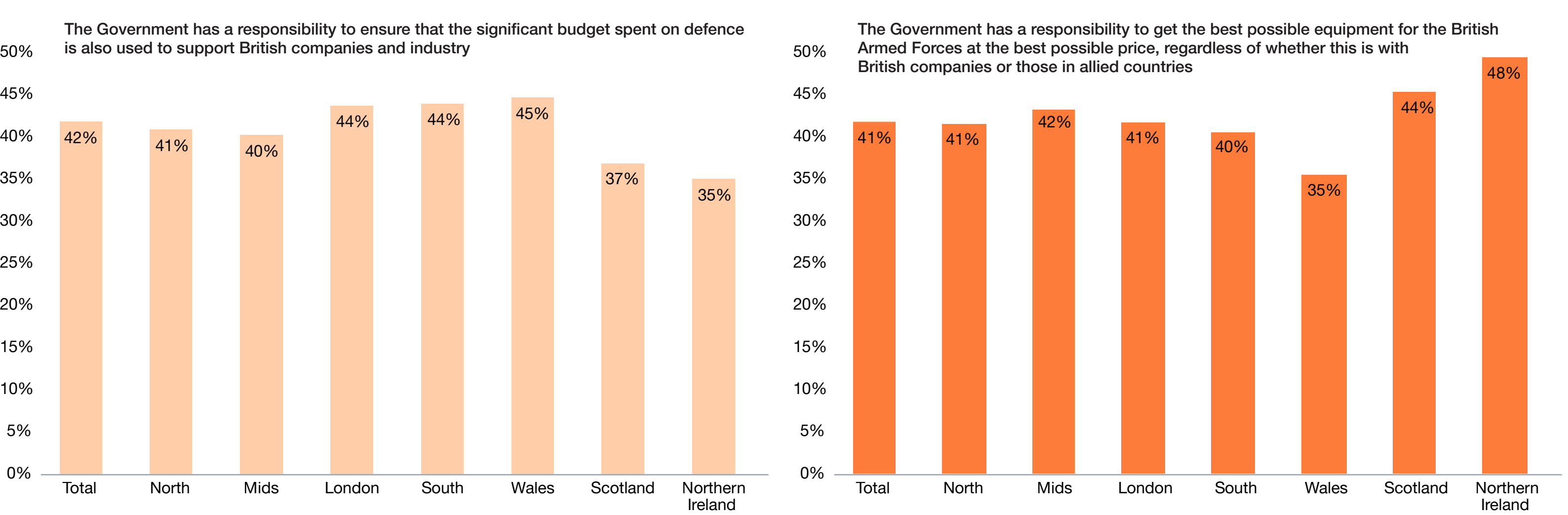
Defence and the UK economy

While the public is divided on the role of defence spending in the wider economy and any duty to ‘buy British’, the majority thinks the UK’s industrial base needs strengthening if it is to adequately support the forces.

The public is divided on whether to 'buy British'...

The public is split on whether the Government has a responsibility to ensure budget spend on defence supports British companies (42%) or simply gets the best possible equipment at the best price, regardless of the origin (41%). Older generations are more likely to favour spending that supports British companies and industry. Meanwhile, survey respondents in Scotland and Northern Ireland are more inclined to think the forces should source the best equipment at the best price.

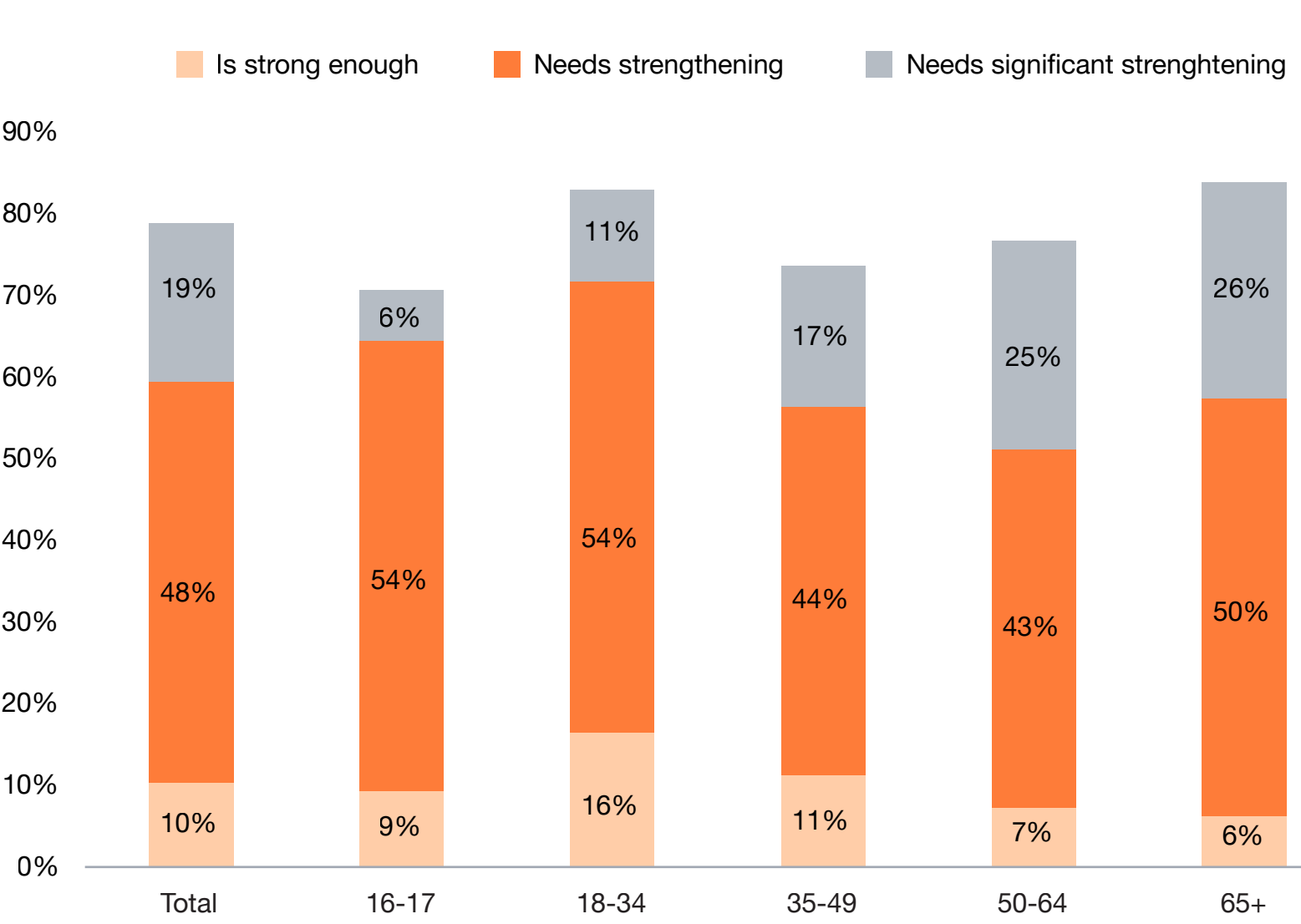
Figure 10: Thinking about the money the Government spends on defence equipment and how that may interact with the rest of the UK economy, which of the statements below best describes your view?



But united on the need for a stronger industrial base...

Despite being divided on any duty to ‘buy British’, the public is largely united (67%) in agreeing the UK’s industrial base needs ‘strengthening’, or ‘significant strengthening’, to support the forces. This demonstrates an understanding that a robust industrial base ensures a consistent supply of weapons, vehicles, technology, and other necessary resources, enabling the military to function effectively, respond to threats and to be able to scale to support conflict.

Figure 11: Do you think that the UK industrial base is strong enough or needs strengthening to support the UK’s Armed forces including during conflict?



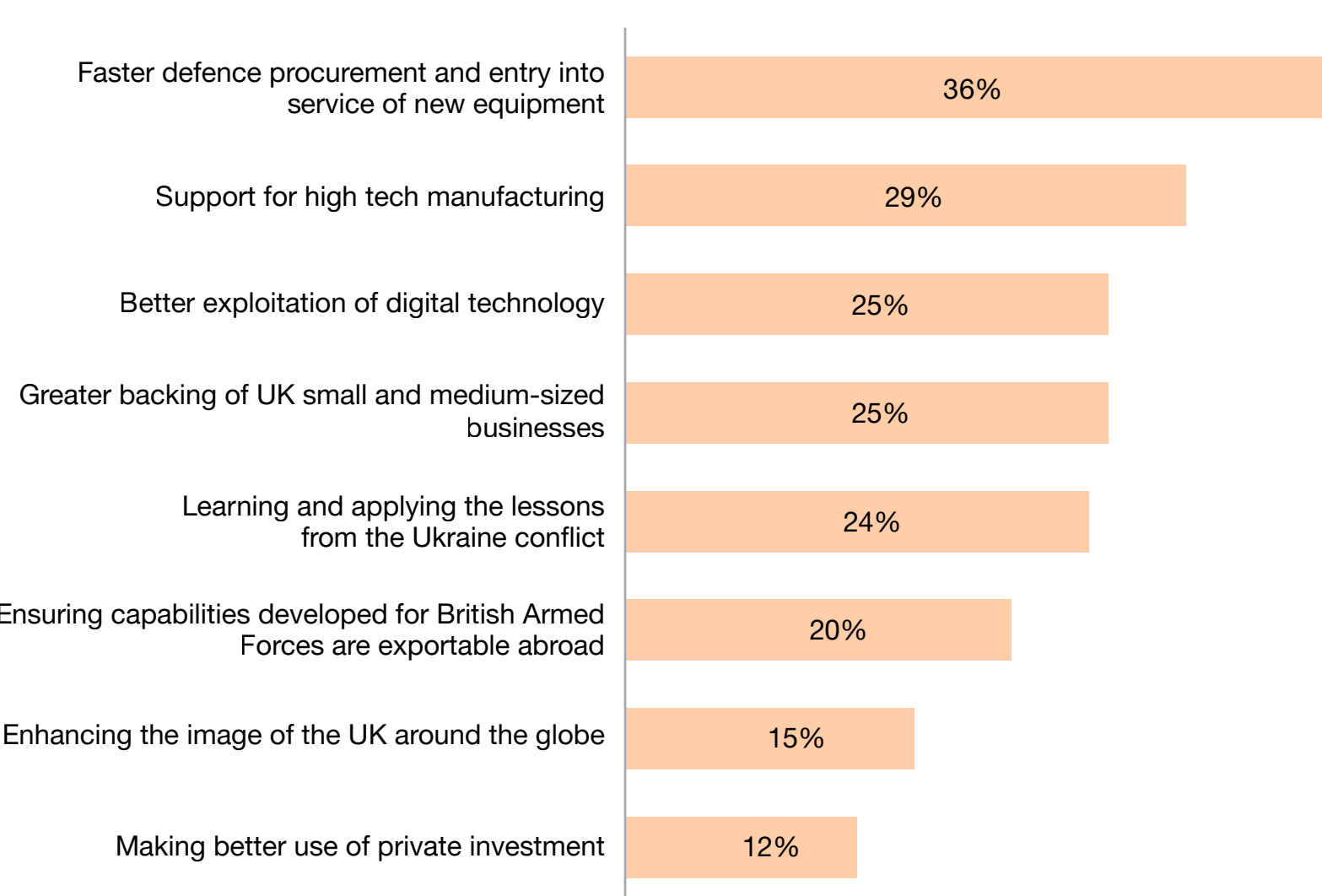
Pointing to opportunities for procurement, tech and SMEs

Looking at the actions the MoD could take to drive industry, and in turn create jobs and power economic growth, the public would like it to prioritise faster defence procurement and entry into service of new equipment (36%). This may reflect some of the more damaging news headlines around the MoD’s procurement performance and programme delivery issues, as well as a public recognition of the opportunities to modernise the forces’ approach.

Alongside a focus on speeding up procurement, the public favours support for high tech manufacturing, the better exploitation of digital technology and the greater backing of UK SMEs. Although the public deemed it less important to ensure capabilities developed for the forces are exportable abroad, it is critical in ensuring that the UK industrial base has the size and skills to support the forces competitively and can scale to support conflict. Similarly, while making better use of private investment is not considered important by the public, new entrants backed by investors are offering different business models that use new technologies to deliver rapidly to defence forces.



Figure 12: The Strategic Defence Review emphasises the need for defence to embrace innovation and be an engine for growth driving jobs and prosperity in the UK. Which of the following, if any, do you believe are the most important for the MoD to do to enable this?



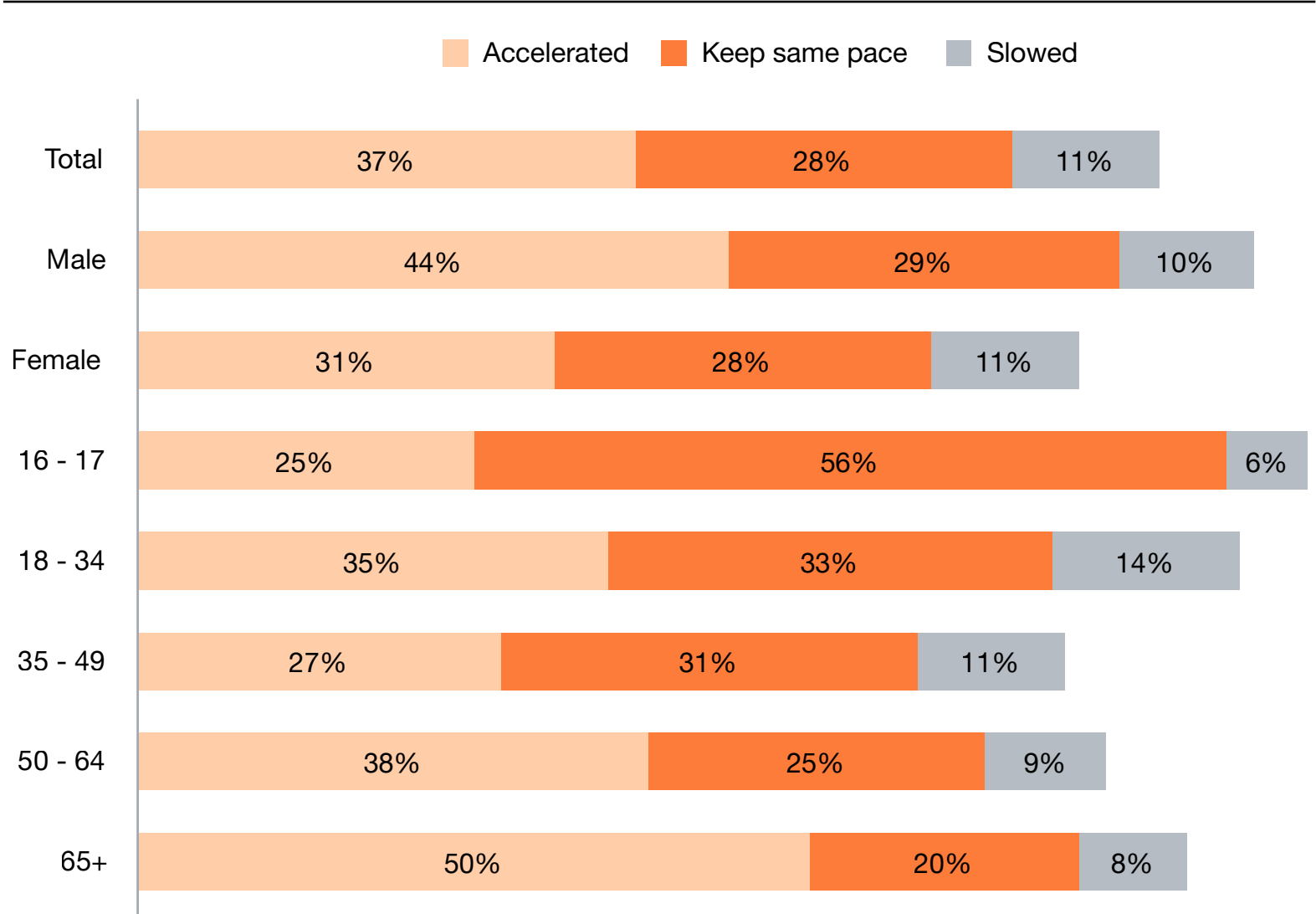
Defence spending

Public awareness of how the forces contribute to the wider economy, how much is spent on the forces and what the forces spend their money on is somewhat weak, and most people would like to know more. Despite this, more than a third support an acceleration of defence spending and the majority want the MoD to prioritise increasing the size of the Army.

The public supports spending increases...

In response to the changing nature of perceived threats, more than a third (37%) think the Government should accelerate its commitment to increase defence spending to 2.6% in 2027 and to 3.5% in 2034. Only 11% think the commitment should be slowed, while 28% believe it should stay at the same pace (Figure 13). While the planned increase in defence spending is to be offset by lower spending on overseas aid and efficiency savings across government, it is not clear how further increases would be funded – indicating a need to understand public appetite for tough choices elsewhere. Other research, for example by the [British Foreign Policy Group](#), has found support for increased spending deteriorates when trade-offs are introduced – for example, 60% oppose increasing defence spending if it means making cuts to the NHS.

Figure 13: The Government has committed to increase defence spending to 2.6% in 2027 and to 3.5% in 2034, the latter to meet its new NATO target. Should this be accelerated or slowed?



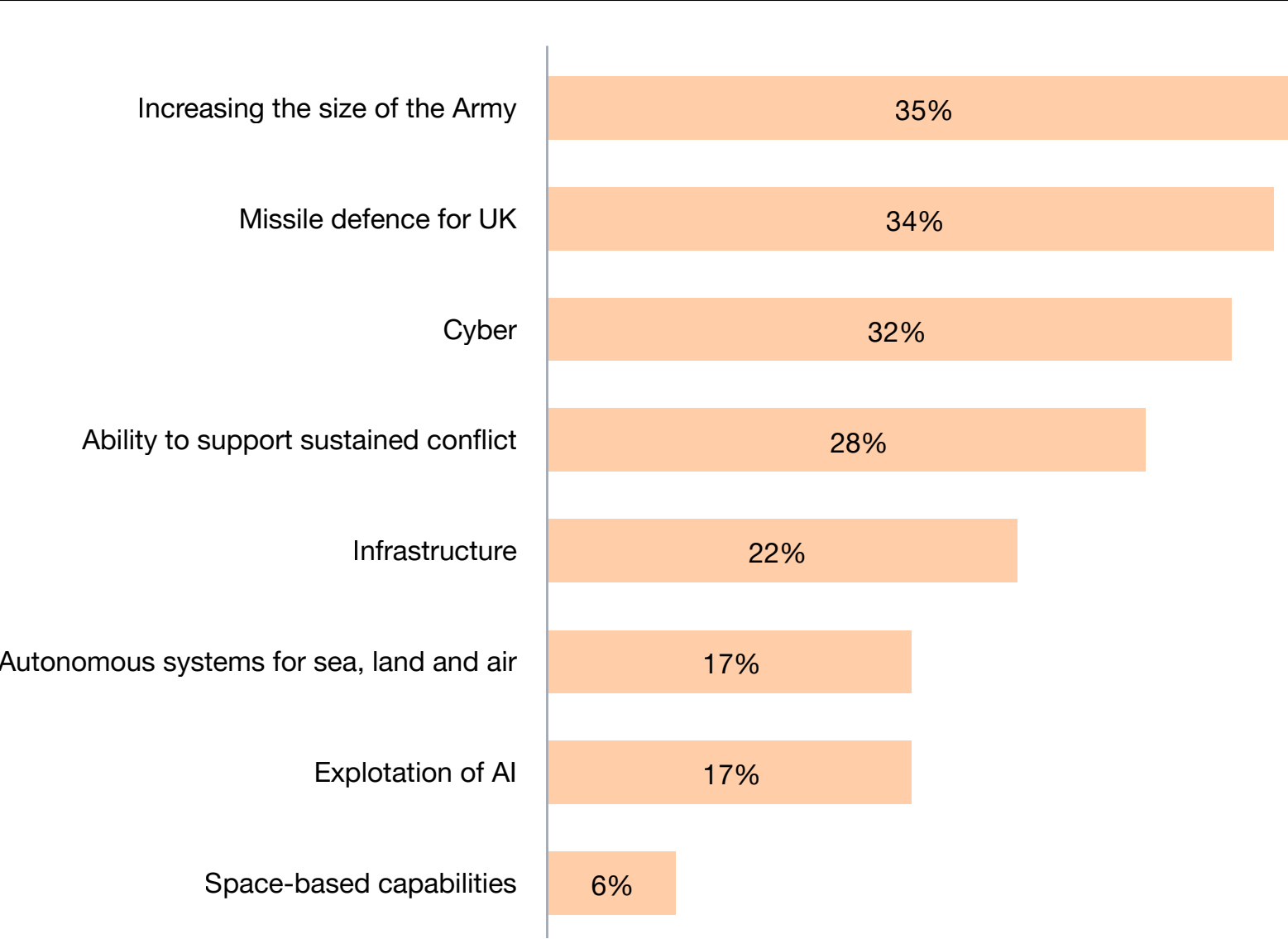
And they’d prioritise boosting the size of the Army...

The SDR and the Government have identified the need for Defence to invest in and exploit innovation, autonomy, AI and digital technology to enhance the effectiveness of all three Services during this parliament. The SDR outlined several major capital programmes including missile defence of UK and recommended an increase in the force size of only the regular army to 76,000. The public favours prioritising spending over the next five years on increasing the size of the Army (35%), on missile defence for the UK (34%), cyber (32%) and the ability to support sustained conflict (28%).

Autonomy, AI and space-based capabilities were viewed as less of a priority, despite their success by, and in support of, Ukraine.

The public’s spending preferences again reflect the shift seen in the level of threats – underlining the rise of cyber and nuclear threats, along with conflict, in the public’s consciousness. It also demonstrates the public understands it is not just about numbers, but about being ready for warfighting. This will almost certainly involve some hard choices around spending priorities in the near-term.

Figure 14: In your opinion, which of the following areas, if any, do you believe should be prioritised for increased defence spending in the next five years?



Workforce and productivity

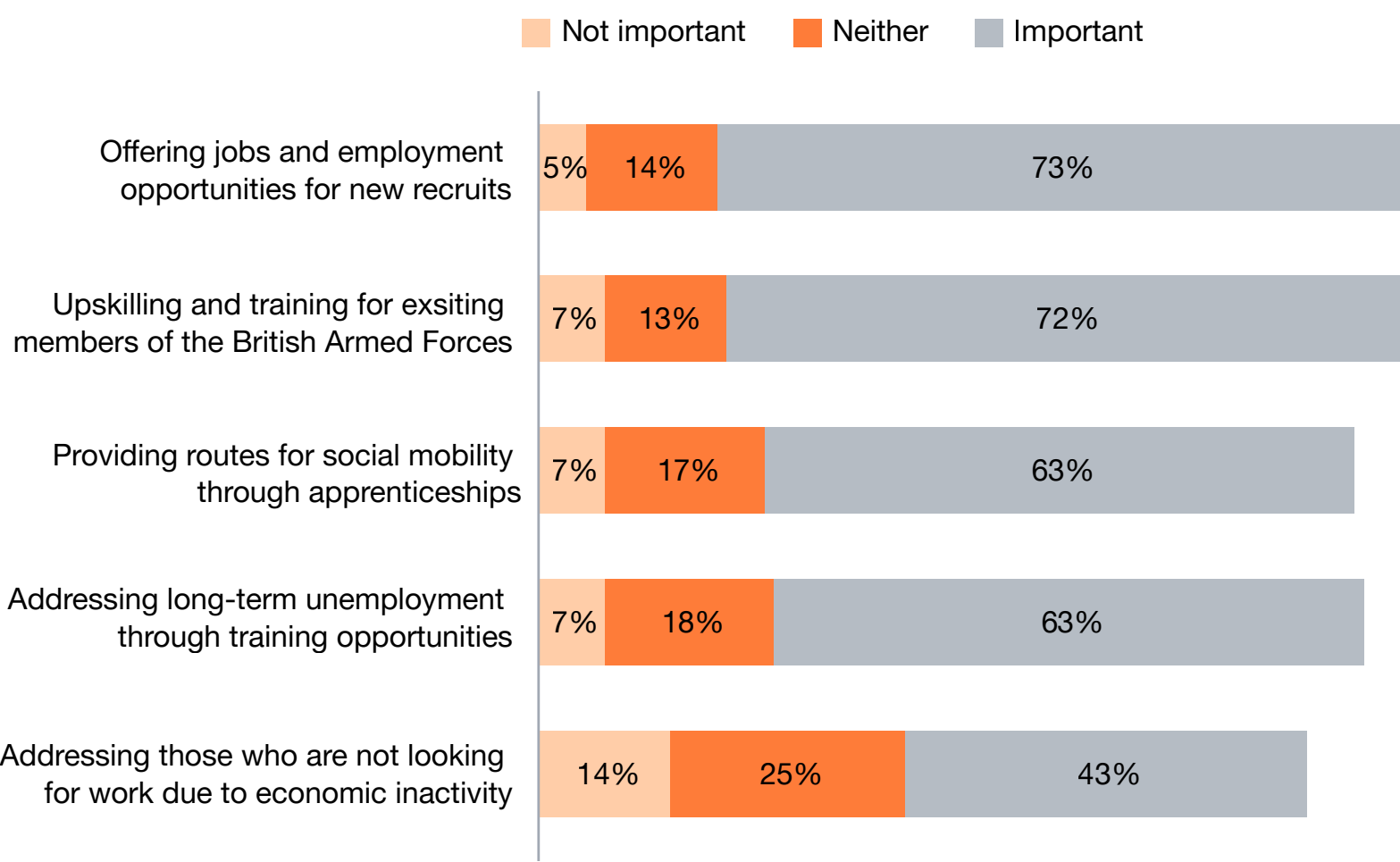
Most people believe the armed forces make a positive contribution to the UK workforce but are divided on what role they would be willing to take personally in protecting the country.

The public recognises the importance of the forces as an employer...

The public believes the most important contribution the forces make in support of the UK’s productivity and workforce is in offering jobs and employment opportunities to new recruits (73%). Upskilling and training existing members of the forces is seen almost equally as important (72%).

Overall, 43% say the forces have a strong role to play in addressing economic inactivity in the UK. With the average length of service around 10-15 years, the forces provide a steady stream of trained professionals into the private sector. However, our research shows the public believes more could be done to ease veterans’ transition into civilian jobs and in offering alternative career pathways (Figure 15).

Figure 15: How important, if at all, do you think the UK's armed forces contributions are in supporting the UK’s productivity and its workforce in each of the following ways?



But they are divided on what career and training would appeal...

There is widespread support for the armed forces and recognition of their contribution to society as an employer. The numbers interested in joining are significant, with 14% of 16-17-year-olds and 18% of 18-34-year-olds willing to join full-time, and 17% and 23% (respectively) as reservists. We look at this cohort in greater detail on page 20.

The younger age groups, express a mixed preference for civilian service for a limited period, contributing to national defence and security without military duties, the creation of ‘zig-zag’ careers and more incentives to retain veterans by better engaging them in the Reserves.

Those older than 55 show more support for a Scandinavian model of conscription and mandatory military service. Overall, policies that centre around retaining former soldiers are most favoured by the public. The gap between those willing to serve and those enlisted raises questions around the recruitment process and the roles on offer.

Figure 16: Which of the following would you personally consider doing to contribute to defence as a national endeavour?

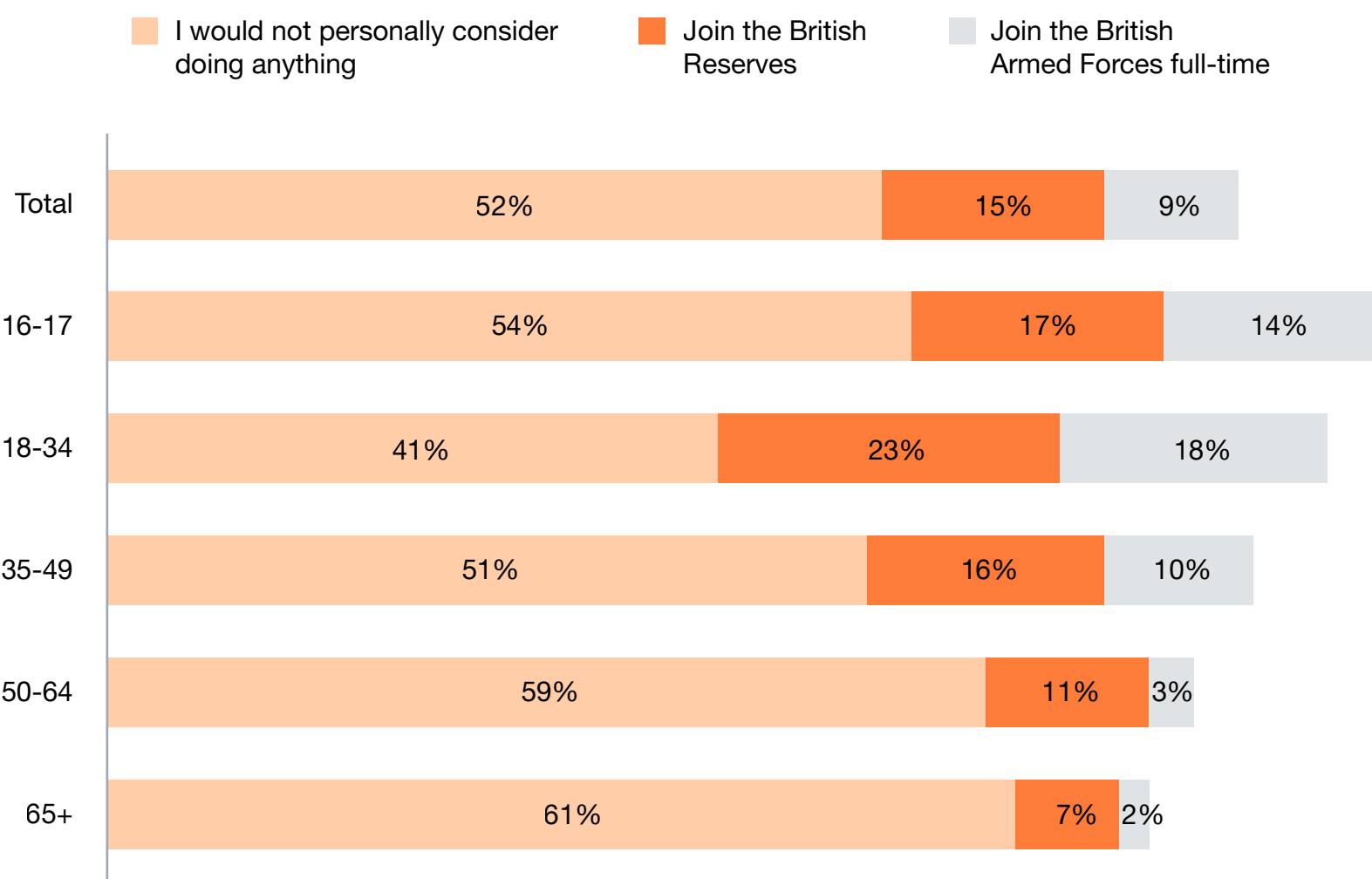
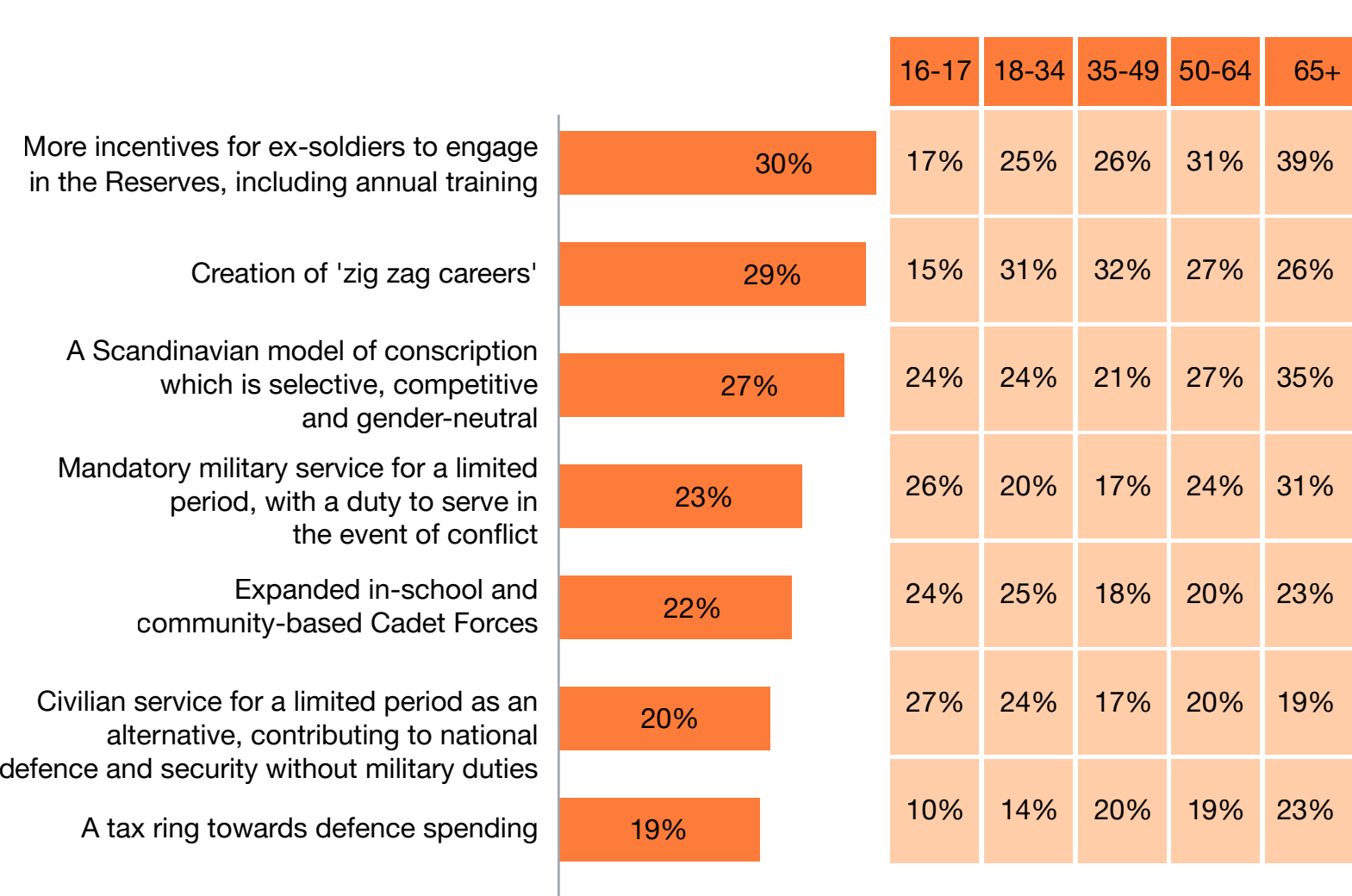


Figure 17: Which of the following policies, if any, would you most support as part of a wider UK society contributing to defence as a national endeavour?



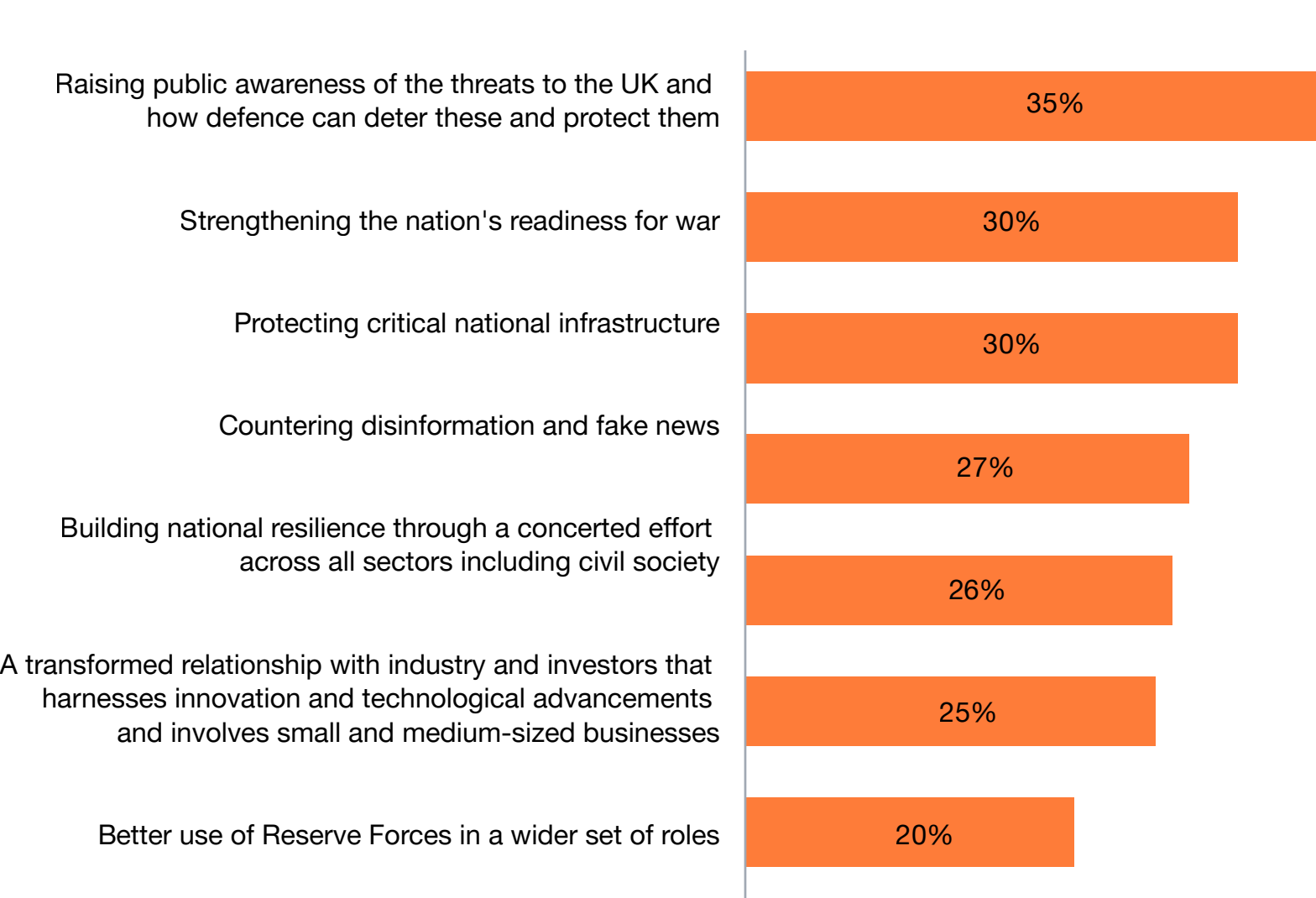
And say the MoD could do more to drive engagement

In the wake of the pandemic and the changing security situation in Europe, concerns have risen around the need to increase military strength and improve civilian resilience in the face of emergencies – including in a state of war.

Both the NSS and the SDR have identified the need for the wider UK society to help support defence and play a greater part in protecting society as well as the country. It is a wider remit than defence and requires a series of roles linked to national and societal resilience. This could include partnerships to support different regions and communities, making better use of veterans’ skills, as well as broadening the country’s skills base. Examples could include a greater focus from industry on diversifying supply chains, strengthening infrastructure and supporting SMEs, and from the forces by expanding cadet forces and bolstering efforts to recruit Reserves. Our research shows only 26% of the public believe building national resilience through a concerted effort across all sectors, including civil society, is important – pointing to a need to encourage greater cross-sector engagement.

To better engage and encourage the public in supporting defence as a national endeavour, the public believes raising awareness of the threats the UK faces is paramount. They also point to the need for industry to play a greater role in strengthening the nation’s readiness for war and protecting critical national infrastructure.

Figure 18: Both the NSS and the SDR have identified the need for the wider UK society to help support defence, treating it as a national endeavour. Which of the following, if any, do you believe are the most important to encourage this support?



The next generation of recruits need to be engaged...

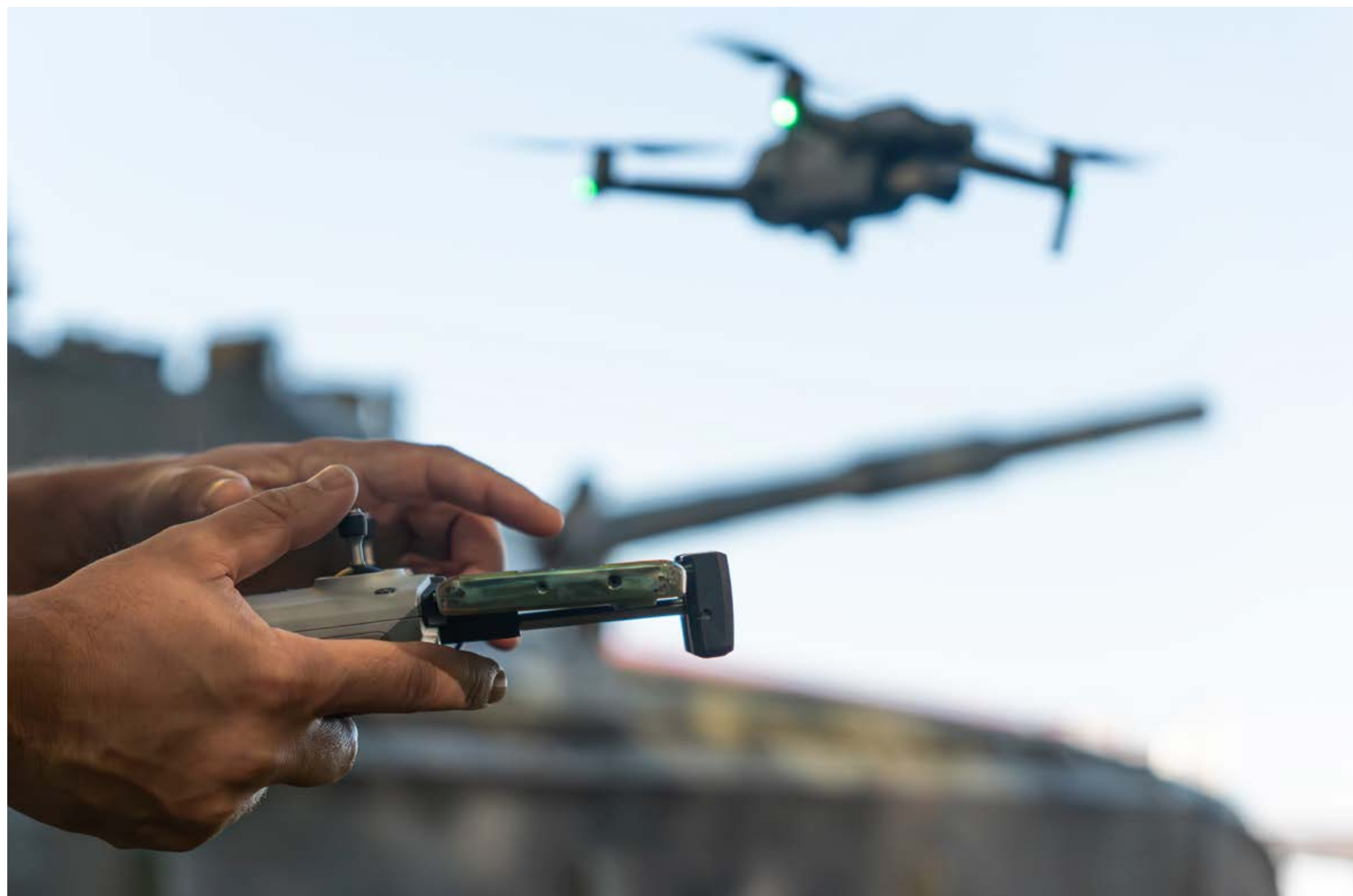
Some 14% of 16-17-year-olds are prepared to join the forces full-time, and 17% the Reserves, and there is further interest in non-traditional pathways in defence (Figure 16).

With 1.632m 16-17-year-olds in the UK, according to latest [ONS figures](#), this points to significant numbers of potential full-time recruits and reservists. Even with wastage, these numbers would vastly outstrip the total 17,360 recruited into the forces and the Reserves – across all ages – in the year to the 1 July 2025, as reported in [official data](#).

Our research finds 27% of this cohort supports time-limited civilian service without military duties, and 24% favour a Scandinavian-style, selective, gender-neutral model. Meanwhile mandatory service draws 26% support, significantly higher than the support shown for full-time (Figure 17).

The 18-34-year-old age group are slightly more inclined towards military careers, with 18% open to joining full-time and 23% open to joining the Reserves. This group is similarly interested in alternative pathways, particularly in the creation of ‘zig-zag’ careers.

The findings indicate shorter selective careers, focused on specialities, might be more attractive to the next generation than standard full-time service. It also raises questions over the military’s ability to convert interest into roles for those showing willing – pointing to a need to improve the speed and efficiency of the recruitment process, improving overall communications, and focusing on offering flexible, time-bound, and skills-focused options that translate into civilian careers.



... while veterans' skills need to be retained

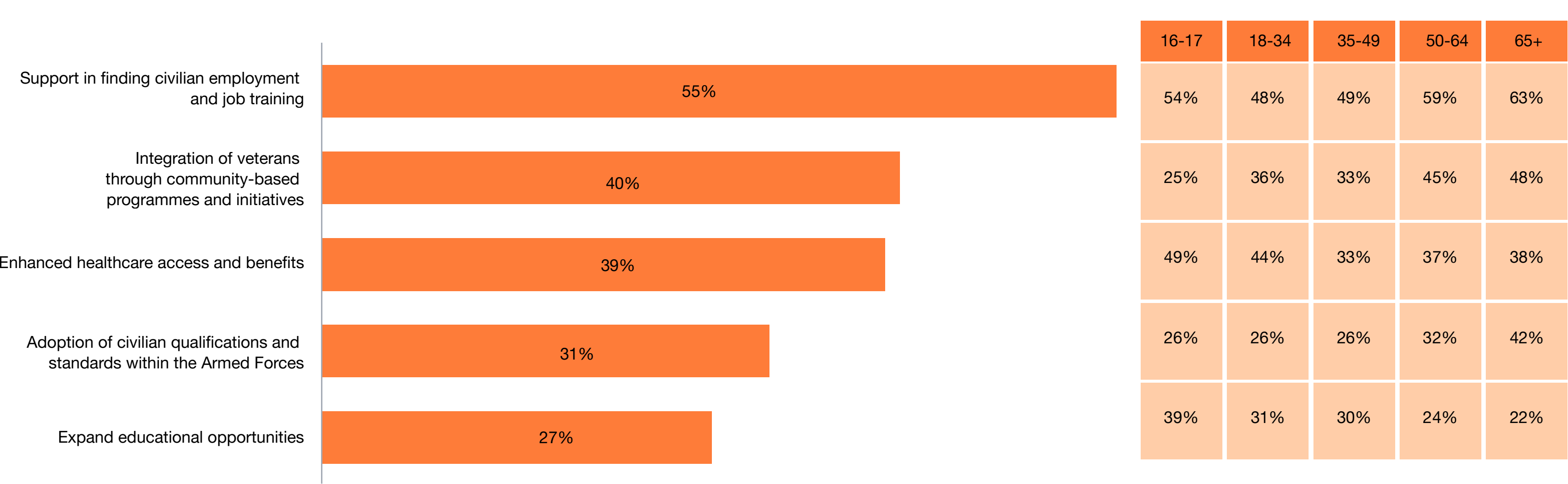
Across the UK, 86% of veterans feel they have transferable skills for civilian roles, according to [official research](#). Yet more than half (53%) say they have, at some point, taken a job at a lower experience or skill level than their last role in the forces, most commonly because there were no other jobs available and employers did not recognise their transferable military skills.

Our research underlines the need for the forces to do more to ease veterans into civilian careers, by adapting qualifications to be better understood by the private sector and improving onward career support. There is public support for this, with 72% pointing to the importance of upskilling and training existing members of the forces (Figure 15).

Meanwhile, 55% agree that offering support for veterans in finding civilian employment and job training would help them lead successful civilian lives. There is a greater awareness among those aged 65+, who also show the strongest support for the adoption of civilian qualifications and standards within the forces.

More broadly, retaining veterans in the Reserves is seen as the most important policy the military could pursue in its efforts to support UK society with 30% of the public’s backing (Figure 17). The creation of ‘zig-zag’ careers, in support of transferrable skills and qualifications, garners similar public approval, with 29%. Veterans have a critical role to play in linking the Reserves to wider society, as well as contributing to improved societal resilience.

Figure 19: Which of the following options, if any, do you believe would best enable veterans to be successful in civilian life?



Transparency and communication

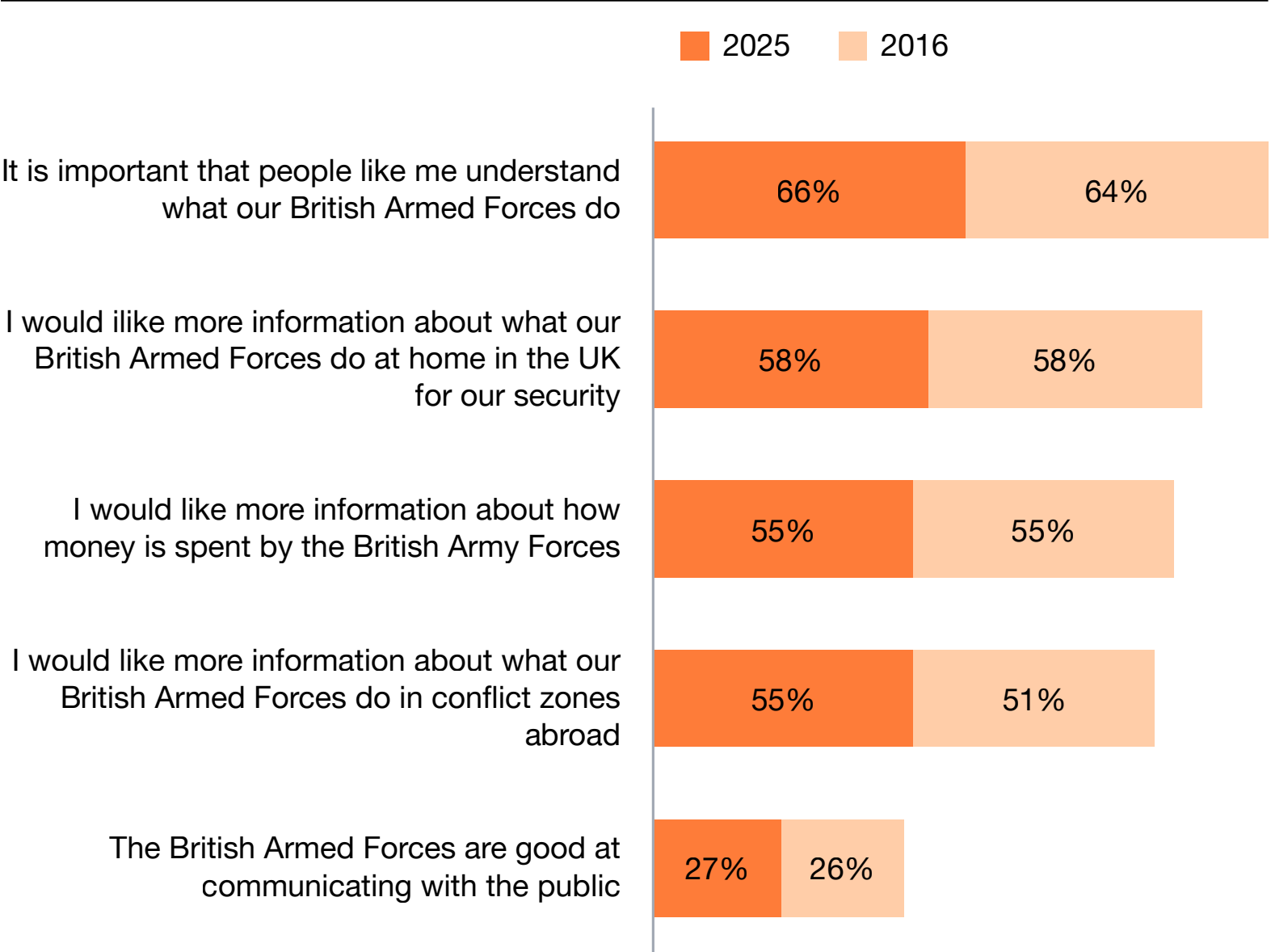
Over the last decade, it is clear the armed forces have not done enough to improve the way they communicate with the public. Only 27% of our survey respondents think the forces are good at communicating with the public – an increase of just 1 percentage point from the first time we asked in 2016.

Most people agree “it’s important for people like me” to understand what the forces are doing, both home and abroad, and it’s clear they want to know more. Some 58% say they want more information about how the forces are keeping the nation safe, and 55% want to know more about how money is spent by the forces.

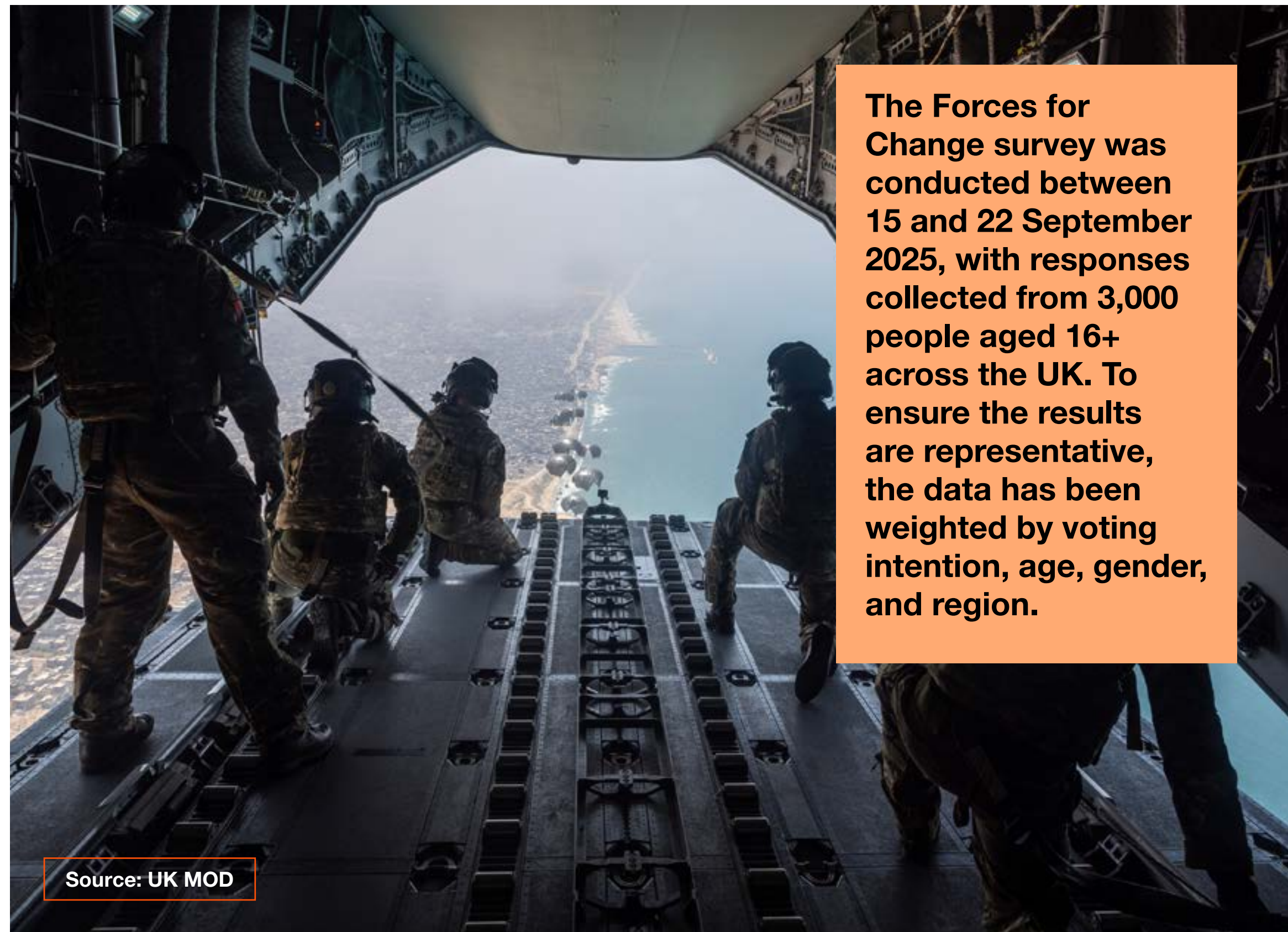
Meanwhile, only 29% of the public say they have a good or excellent awareness of the contribution the forces make to the wider economy (Appendix Figure 2). Younger adults, aged 18-34, are the most confident, and believe they have greater awareness of how much money is spent on the forces and the purpose of that spending (Appendix Figure 3).

With the total impact of defence spending extending well beyond the direct financial value and immediate GDP-multiplication, to include wider economic, employment, and innovation benefits, these findings point to an ongoing, prolonged need for the Government and the forces to enhance the way in which they communicate what they do, how they spend their money and the economic and societal value that brings.

Figure 20: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about the level of communication from the leaders of the British Armed Forces.



04 Appendix and methodology



Participants completed a 15-minute online quantitative survey consisting of 25 questions, alongside a set of demographic questions. Some questions were multiple choice and therefore figures may not sum to 100%.

The survey was carried out by Opinium, a member of the British Polling Council. It explored five key themes:

Feelings and trust towards the British Armed Forces

Perceived strength of the British Armed Forces within NATO

Productivity, workforce skills, and wider societal support for Defence

Industry strength and innovation

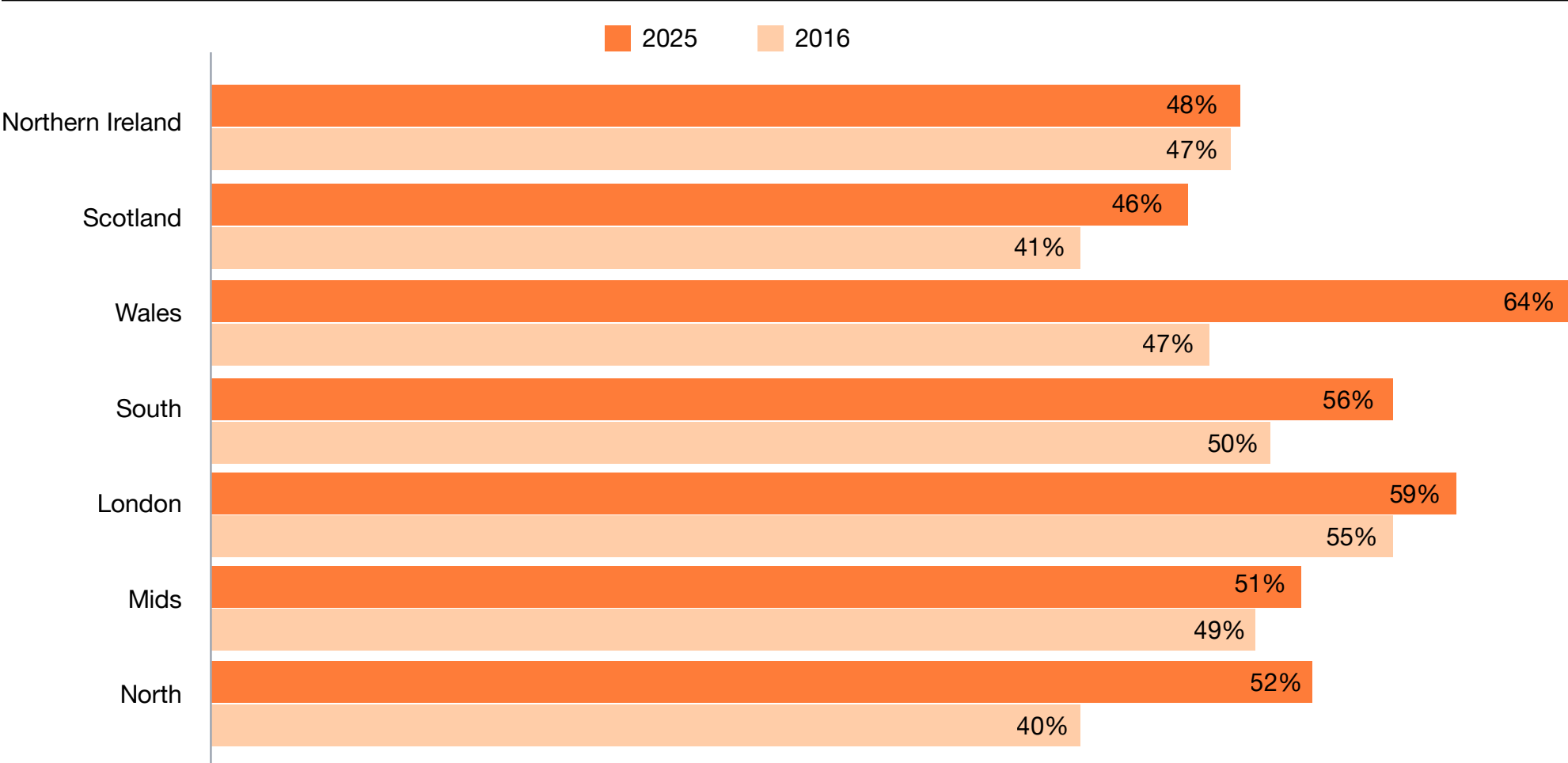
Spending and value for money of the UK Armed forces

Where possible, findings from the 2025 survey have been compared to previous iterations of the research:

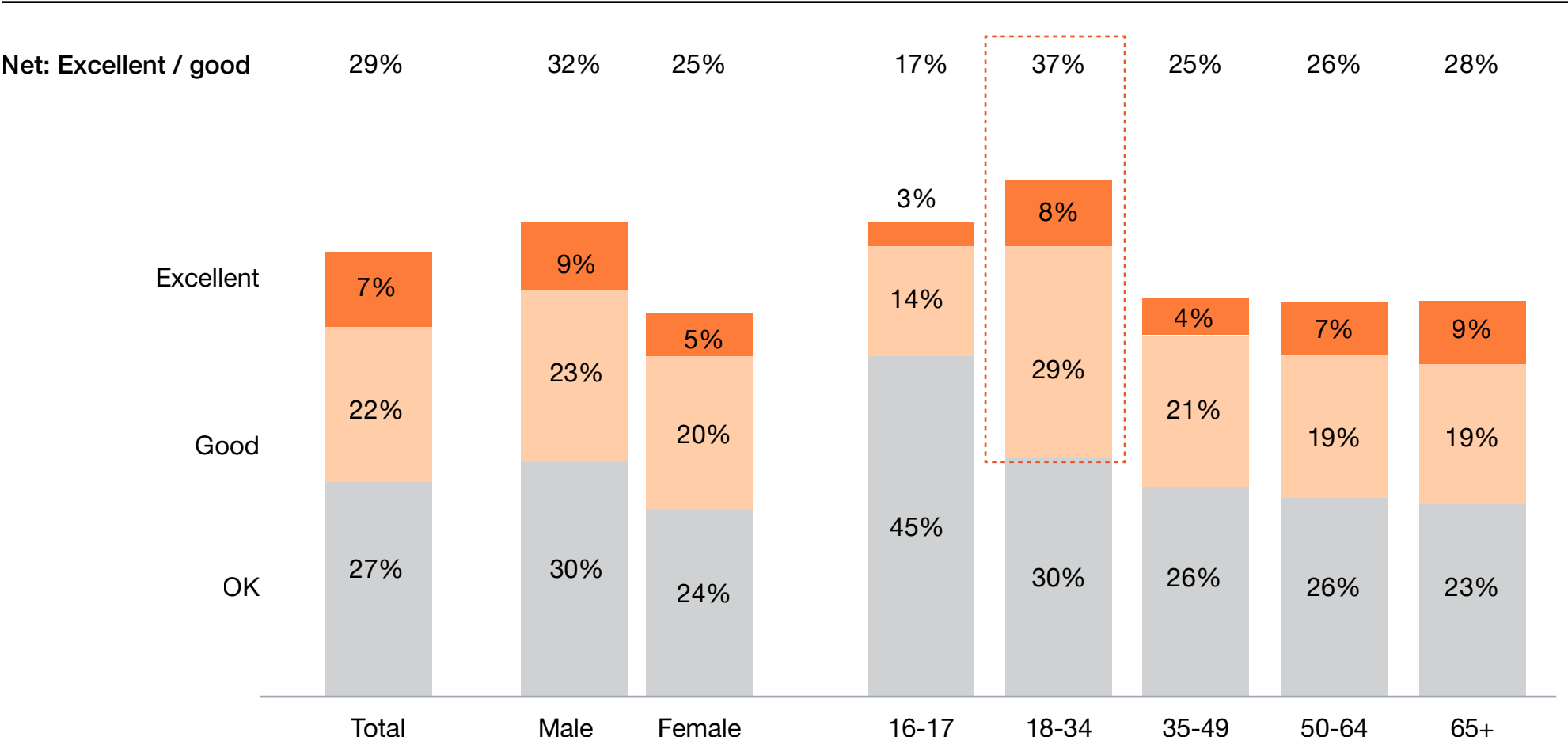
- 2015: 2,007 UK adults
- 2016: 2,003 UK adults
- 2017: 2,005 UK adults
- 2025: 3,000 UK adults

Comparisons have been made only where identical questions and response options were used. In some cases, additional response options were introduced in 2025; these instances are clearly identified in the report. When comparing data across years, 2015 has been used as the primary reference point, followed by 2016 and 2017 where appropriate.

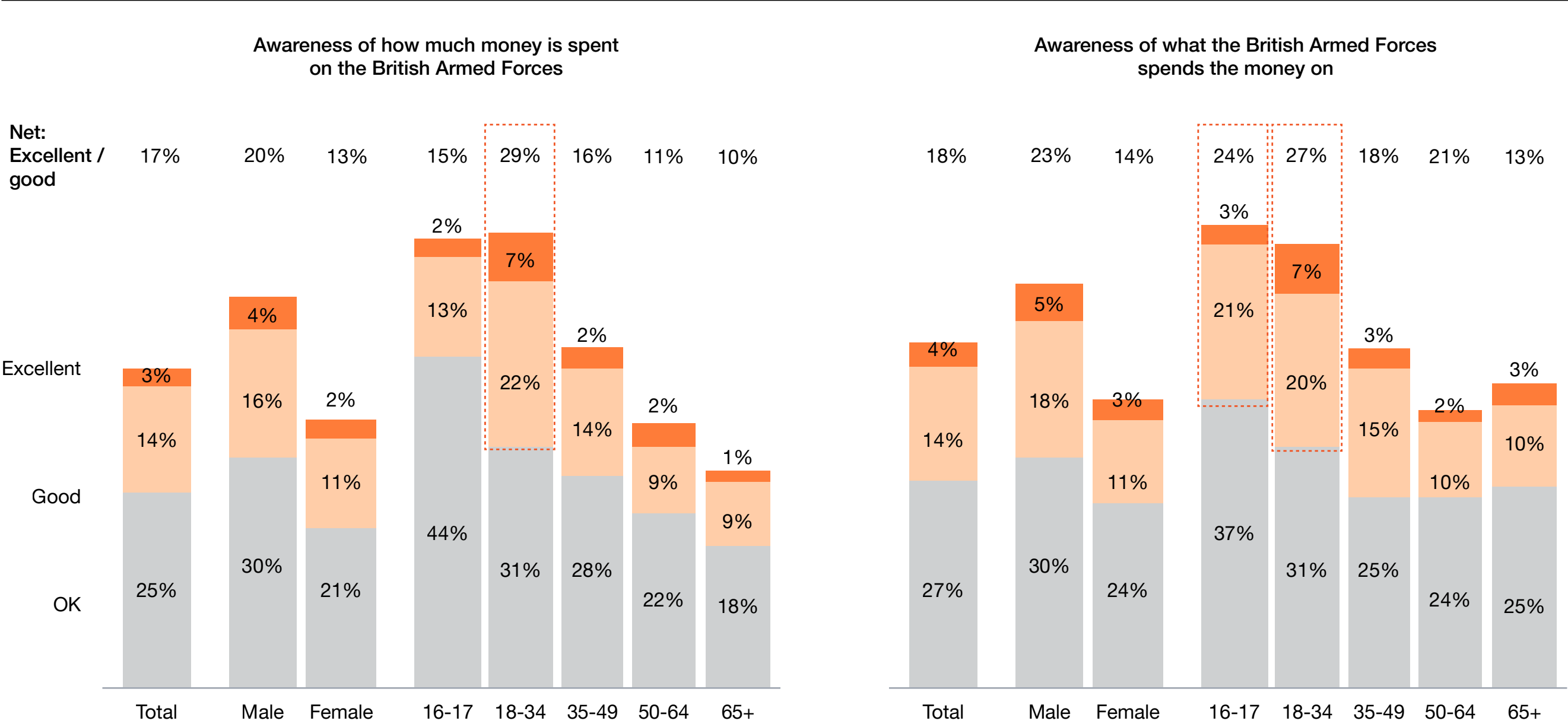
Appendix Figure 1: Do you agree or disagree with the idea that having a nuclear deterrent contributes to the UK's safety and stability? (Regional results)



Appendix Figure 2: Please rate your own awareness of what the armed forces contribute to the economy



Appendix Figure 3: Please rate your own awareness of each of the following points: how much money is spent on the UK's armed forces? What the UK armed forces spends that money on?



Contacts



Ian Hillier
UK Defence Leader, PwC UK
ian.j.hillier@pwc.com
+44 7595 849741



Rachel Taylor
Leader of Industry for Government
and Health Industries, PwC UK
rachel.z.taylor@pwc.com
+44 7841 783022



Conor O'Hagan
Aerospace & Defence Consulting
Leader, PwC UK
conor.ohagan@pwc.com
+44 7483 148229



Cara Haffey
Leader of Industry for Industrials
& Services, PwC UK
cara.haffey@pwc.com
+44 7809 551517

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