

COMPLEX
LIFE AND DEATH
DECISIONS GROUP

THE
POLICY
INSTITUTE

KING'S
College
LONDON

Assisted dying

Principles, practice and politics

For more information, contact:
katherine.sleeman@kcl.ac.uk bobby.duffy@kcl.ac.uk

October 2024

Summary

Between 18 and 19 September 2024, the Policy Institute and the Complex Life and Death Decisions (CLADD) group at King's College London, in collaboration with Focaldata, conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,063 adults in England and Wales on issues relating to assisted dying. Among the key findings are:

Two-thirds of the public back the legalisation of assisted dying within this Parliament

- Around two-thirds (63%) of people in England and Wales say they want the current Parliament to make assisted dying legal for terminally ill adults in the next five years. 20% say they do not want this to happen, while a further 17% do not take a side or have an opinion.
- Support is virtually the same when the public are told key details of Lord Falconer's assisted dying bill, which are likely to be the same as a parallel bill being introduced in the House of Commons by MP Kim Leadbeater. 66% back the Lords bill when they know its core provisions.

However, the public have concerns about the risks of assisted dying, even if they are broadly supportive of its legalisation

- Three in five (61%) say they would be concerned about some people being pressured to have an assisted death if the law were changed, including a majority (53%) of those who want the current Parliament to legalise.
- And among supporters of legal assisted dying, 55% say they'd be likely to change their mind and become opponents of the policy, if it turned out someone had been pressured into choosing this option.

- Just under half (48%) of supporters also say they are likely to change their position if someone's choice of an assisted death was motivated by a lack of access to other care.
- Further, 83% of those who support assisted dying cite poor palliative care as an important factor in their support, including 47% who say it's very important.

Despite the desire to see Parliament legalise assisted dying, a considerable minority want to respect MPs' personal views

- While two-thirds (63%) of the public say they want assisted dying to be legalised in this Parliament, less than half (45%) say they want their MP to vote for the law, with 29% saying they'd rather their MP followed their own conscience in any vote on the issue.

Supporters of assisted dying prioritise pain relief and dignity, while opponents worry most about risks to the vulnerable

- 85% of supporters say the fact that assisted dying could give people a less painful or distressing death is a very important reason for their support.
- A similar share (83%) say giving people more dignity at the end of their life is very important for them, while 72% say the same about people being able to choose how and when they die.
- On the other side, 72% of opponents say a very important reason for their position is that vulnerable people could be pressured into an assisted death, and 69% feel this strongly about health professionals saving lives, not assisting in taking them – the top two answers given.

Summary

Most of the public want assisted dying to be available on the NHS...

- Three in five (59%) people say assisted dying should be available on the NHS, if it is legalised, compared with one in five (18%) who think it should not. Support for NHS provision rises even higher, to 80%, among those who want to see assisted dying legalised within this Parliament.
- Seven in 10 (68%) of the public overall trust the NHS to provide assisted dying – although most of this group only trust the health service a fair amount (42%).

...despite being relatively split on the financial impact

- By 32% to 25%, the public are somewhat more likely to believe overall costs to the health service would decrease rather than increase if assisted dying was provided by the NHS. But there is no clear consensus, with 25% also thinking costs would stay about the same, and 18% saying they don't know.
- However, 35% of the public say they'd be more likely to support legalising assisted dying if it reduced overall costs to the NHS. This compares with 23% who say they'd be less likely to support it if it increased costs to the health service.

But the public are most likely to say patients should not have to pay for assisted dying themselves

- 44% say that, if assisted dying were made legal, those seeking an assisted death should not have to pay for it themselves – almost double the 23% who think patients should have to cover their own costs.

- 59% of those who support legalisation within this Parliament feel assisted dying should be free to the patient, compared with 19% who oppose it.

Yet a majority also see a role for the private sector

- 55% of the public support private healthcare companies also providing assisted deaths – almost double the share (24%) who oppose them doing so. But people are more sceptical of such companies receiving public money for these services from the government's healthcare budget, with 37% against this, compared with 28% in favour. Around a third (34%) do not take a side or say they don't know.

People with mental health conditions are perceived to be most at risk from legal assisted dying

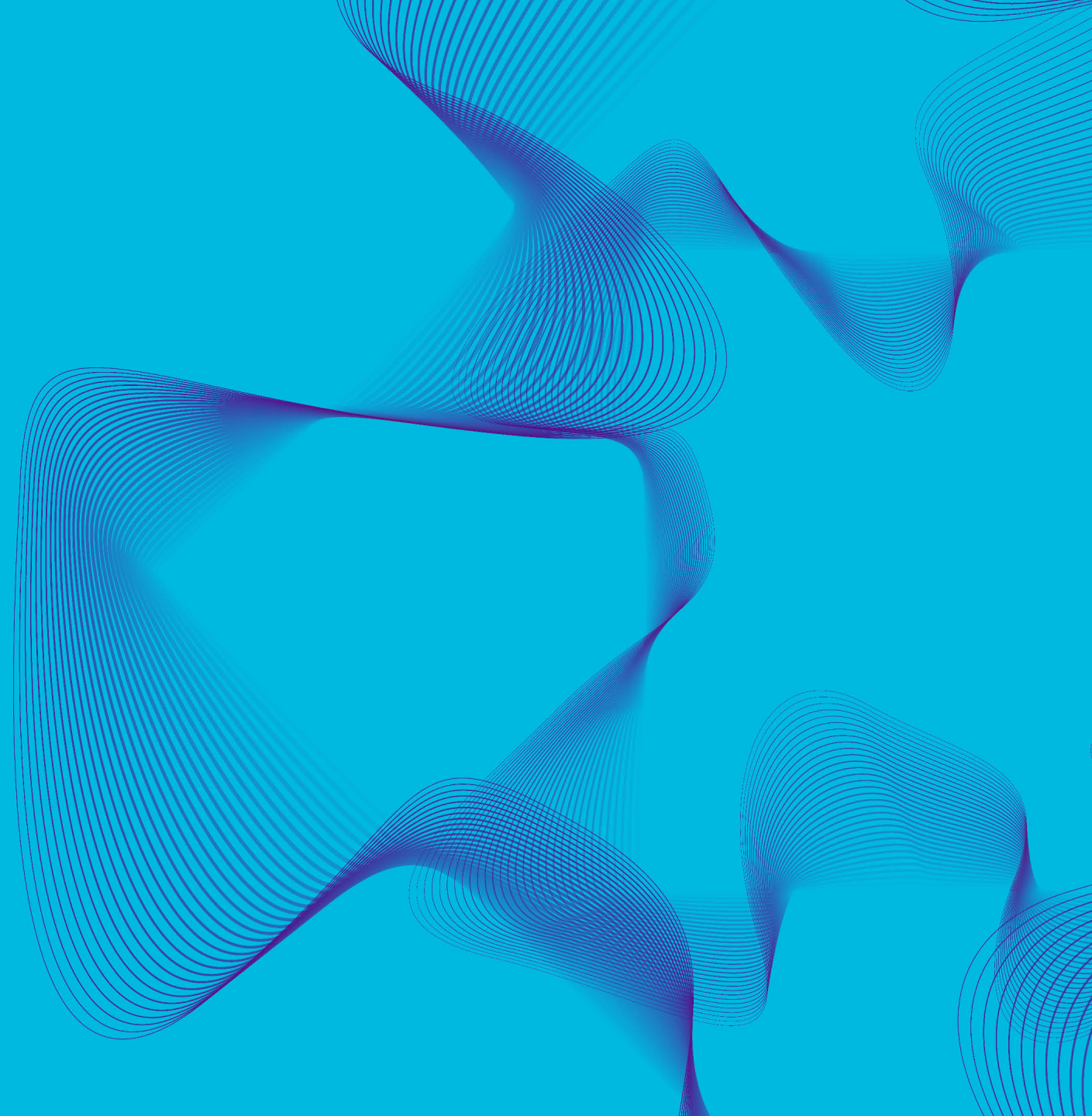
- 43% of the public say people with mental health conditions are most at risk of being pressured to have an assisted death, with older people (34%), those with disabilities (33%), chronic pain or long-term health conditions (33%), or a cognitive impairment (30%) perceived to be next most at risk.

Age and ethnicity are key dividing lines in public opinion on assisted dying

- Younger people are notably less likely to back assisted dying, either in principle or practice. For example, 50% of 18- to 34-year-olds support its legalisation within this Parliament, compared with 68% of those aged 35 and above.
- Similarly, people belonging to ethnic minorities are less likely than white people to support legalisation within the current Parliament (46% vs 66%), as well as less likely to feel assisted dying should be available on the NHS (41% vs 62%) and that it should be free to those who want such a death (28% vs 47%).

The legalisation of assisted dying: two-thirds of the public want it to happen within this Parliament

63% back this change, compared with 20% who oppose it – but support is lower among younger people and ethnic minority groups, and a notable proportion of the public would still rather their MP followed their conscience in any votes

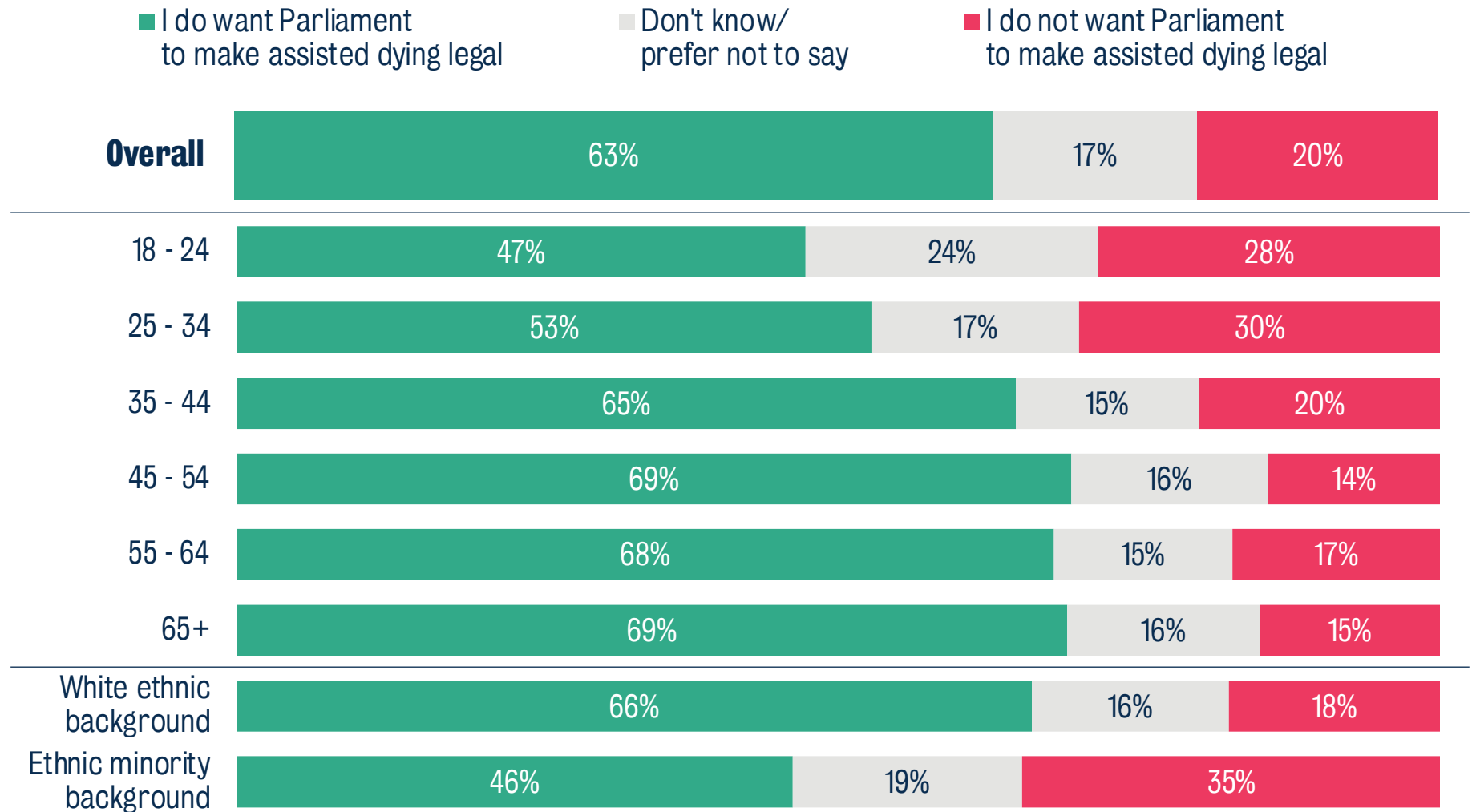


Around two-thirds of the public say they want the current Parliament to make assisted dying legal – though younger people and ethnic minorities are less supportive

50% of those aged 18 to 34 say they support Parliament making assisted dying legal in the next five years, compared with around seven in 10 of older age groups. This may reflect the greater salience of this issue for those at a more advanced stage of life, as well as their higher likelihood of having experienced the death of loved ones.

There is also a large gap in support between white people and those belonging to ethnic minorities, with the latter twice as likely to actively oppose legislation within this Parliament.

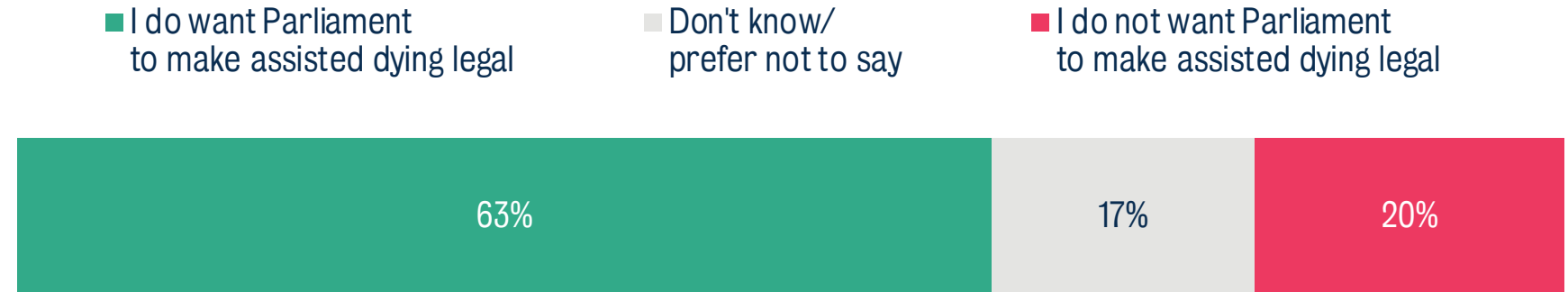
And do you want the current Parliament to make assisted dying legal in England and Wales, in the next five years?



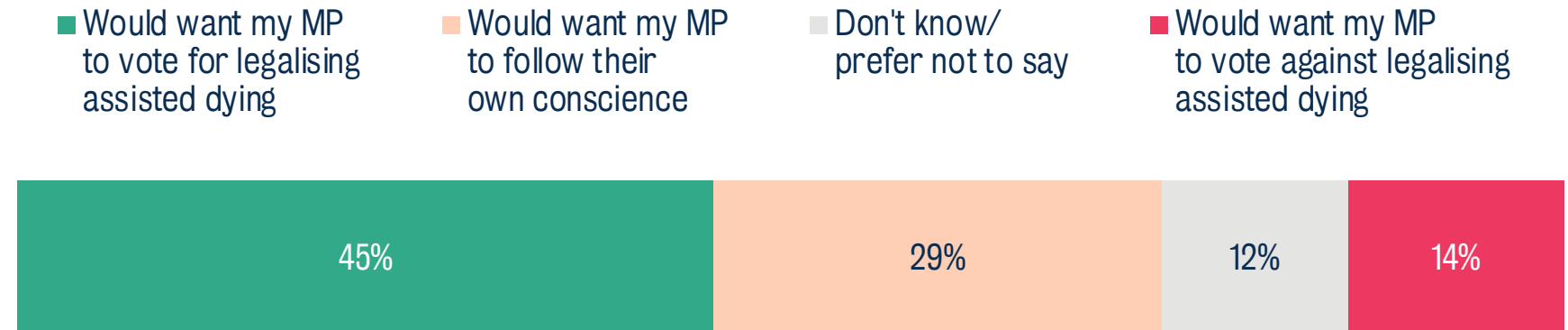
While two-thirds say they want this Parliament to legalise assisted dying, less than half want their MP to actually vote for it

63% of the public say they want this Parliament to legalise assisted dying in the next five years – but only 45% feel their MP should be compelled to make it law, with 29% preferring their MP to follow their own conscience in any vote on the issue.

And do you want the current Parliament to make assisted dying legal in England and Wales, in the next five years?

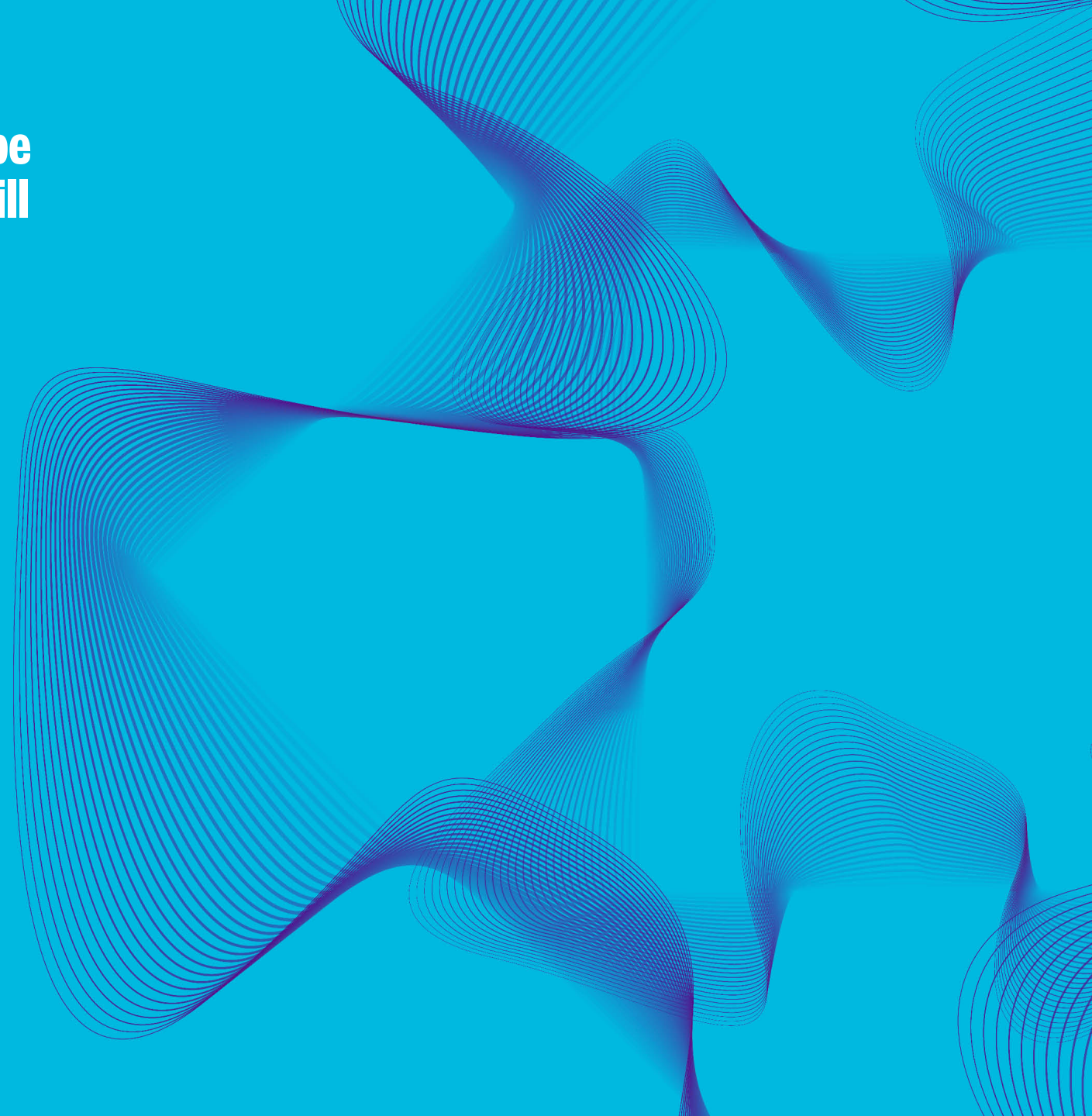


And would you want your MP to vote for or against legislation to make assisted dying legal in England and Wales, or would you want them to follow their own conscience?



When told key details of Lord Falconer's assisted dying bill – which are likely to be very similar to the House of Commons bill – two-thirds also say they want it to become law

The Lords bill would apply only to those who have six months or fewer left to live and have the mental capacity to decide, with their request needing to be approved by two independent doctors and a judge



Two-thirds of the public want to see Lord Falconer's assisted dying bill become law

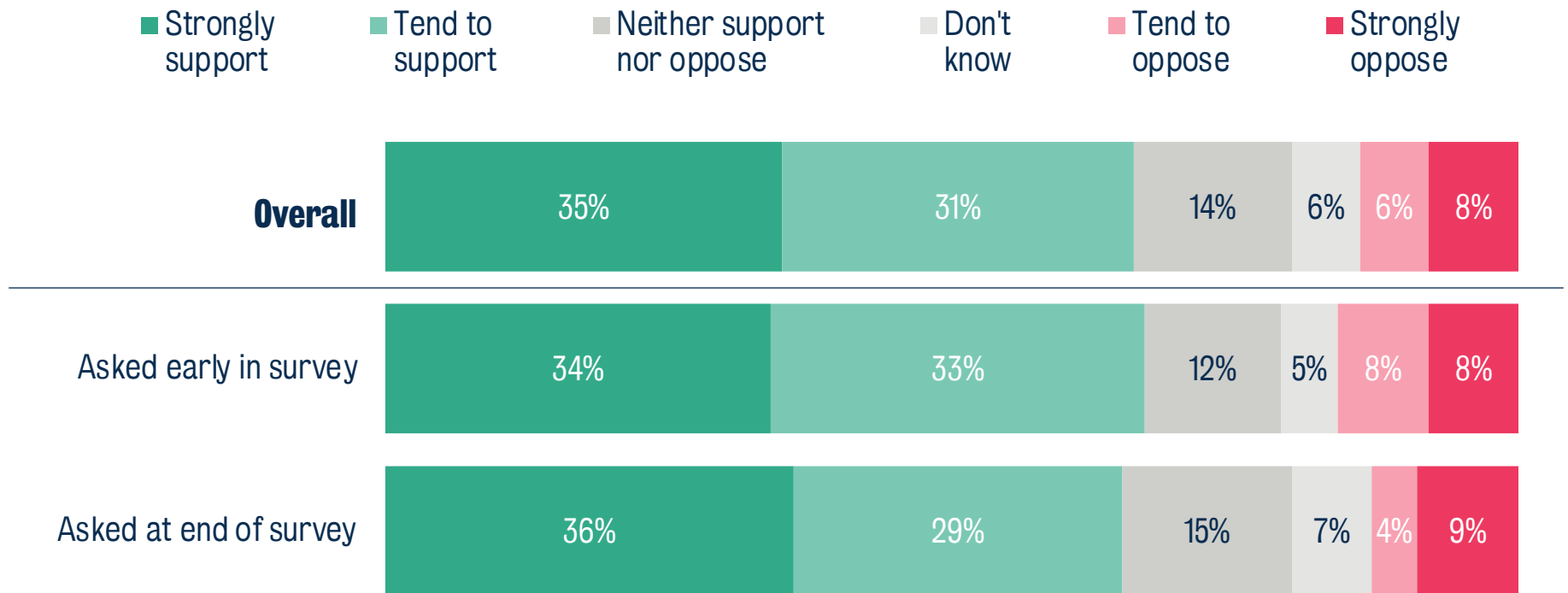
The Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults Bill introduced by Lord Falconer has its second reading in the House of Lords in November. When given the details of the bill – which are likely to be the same as another assisted dying bill, introduced in the Commons by Kim Leadbeater MP – two-thirds (66%) of the public say they'd support it becoming law, with this support almost evenly split between those who strongly favour the bill and those who tend to favour it.

Support barely changes depending on when this question is put to respondents. One possibility was that asking it at the end of the survey, once people had thought more deeply about possible risks or complications, might have made them significantly less inclined to support assisted dying – but this doesn't appear to be the case.

As you may know, a bill is being debated in the House of Lords that would give adults the right to request medical assistance to end their life, if they have six months or fewer left to live and have the mental capacity to decide. The request would need to be approved by two independent doctors and a judge. Individuals would need to self-administer the medication if their request were approved.

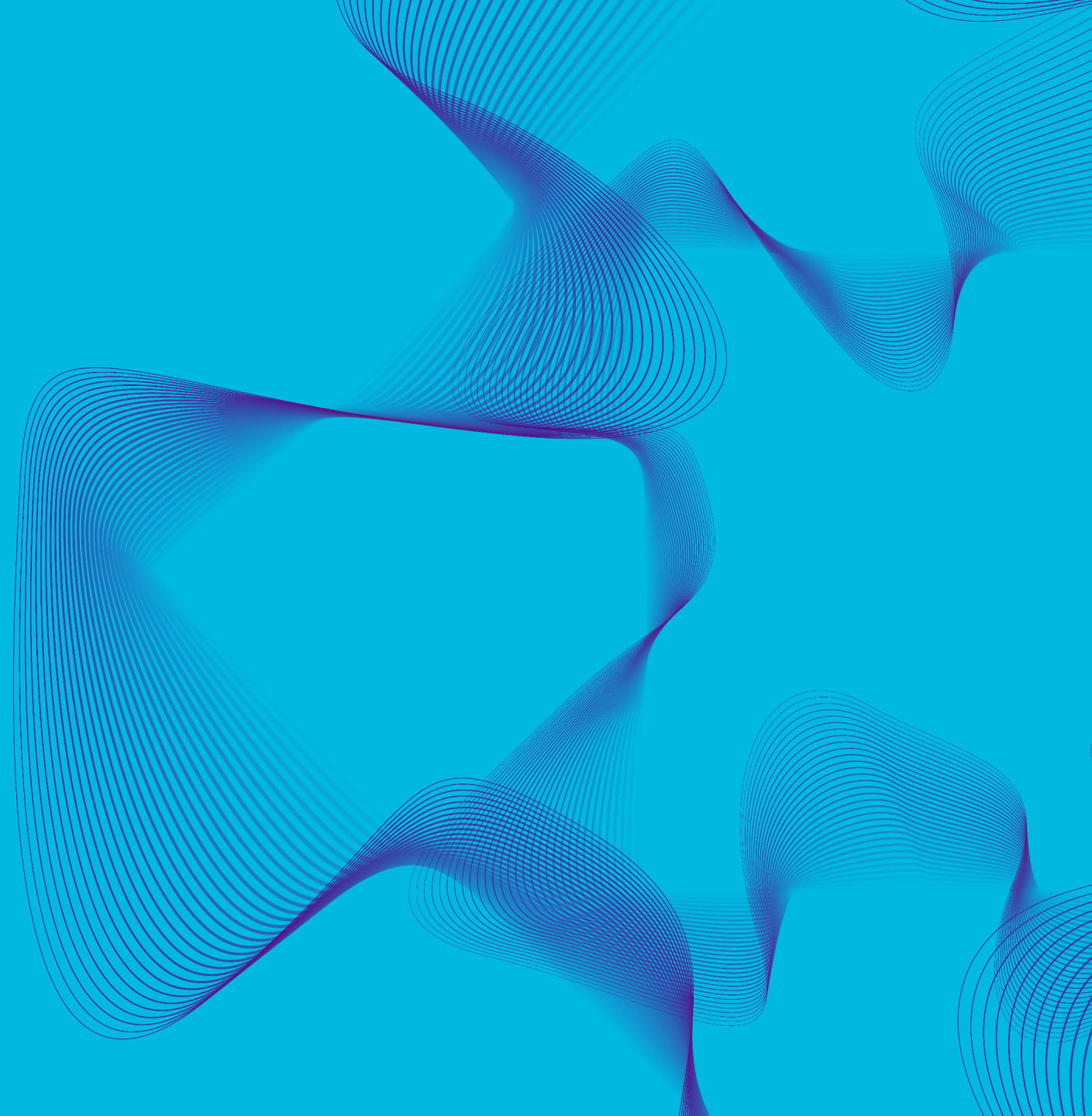
Some argue this would help prevent the suffering of people who are terminally ill, while others argue it could put vulnerable people at risk.

To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose this bill becoming law in England and Wales?



The public are similarly likely to support the *idea* of assisted dying as they are to support the *reality* of it becoming law

However, a small minority of those who support assisted dying do *not* want to make it legal in the next five years, with a desire for more consideration and discussion the top reason given

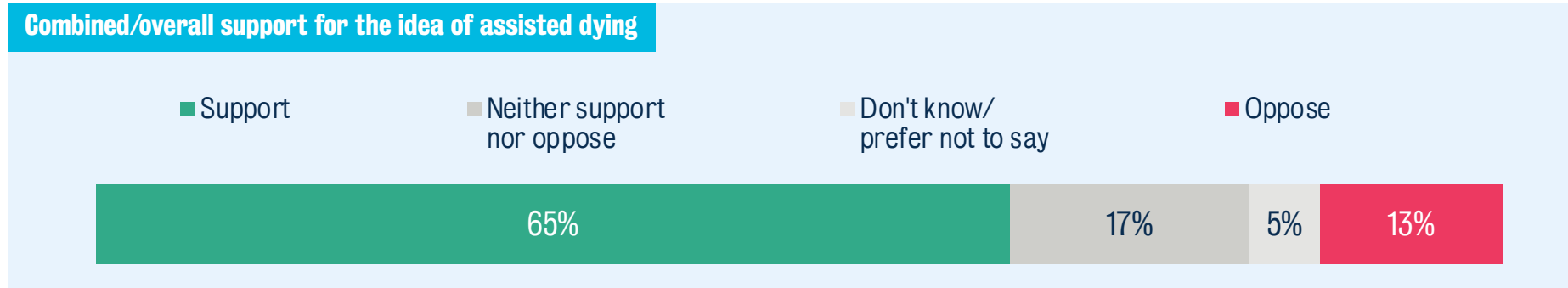


Two-thirds of the public support the idea of people who are terminally ill choosing an assisted death

Overall, 65% of people in England and Wales support the idea of assisted dying for the terminally ill, compared with 13% who are opposed to it.

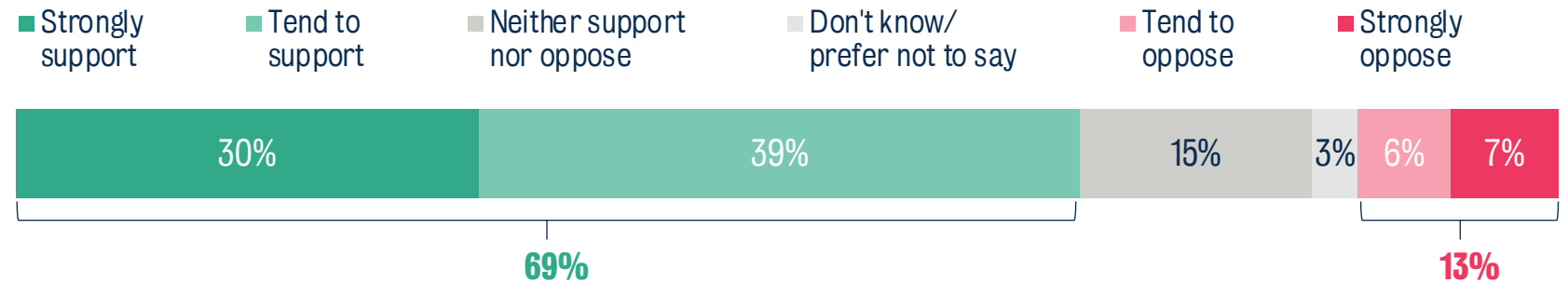
However, support varies somewhat depending on how the question is asked: when half the respondents were given the option of saying they *tend to* or *strongly* support assisted dying, 69% chose at least one of these options. But when the other half were presented with a more definitive scale – ie a binary choice between simply support or oppose (and neither/don't know) – 62% said they support assisted dying.

It is also important to note that, as seen with the question that offers a more detailed response scale, a majority of the public – 63% – do not hold *strong* views for support or opposition.



'Assisted dying' is taken to mean providing lethal drugs to end the life of someone who is terminally ill, at their voluntary request, subject to a set of conditions.

Split sample A To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose the idea that such people should be able to choose an assisted death?



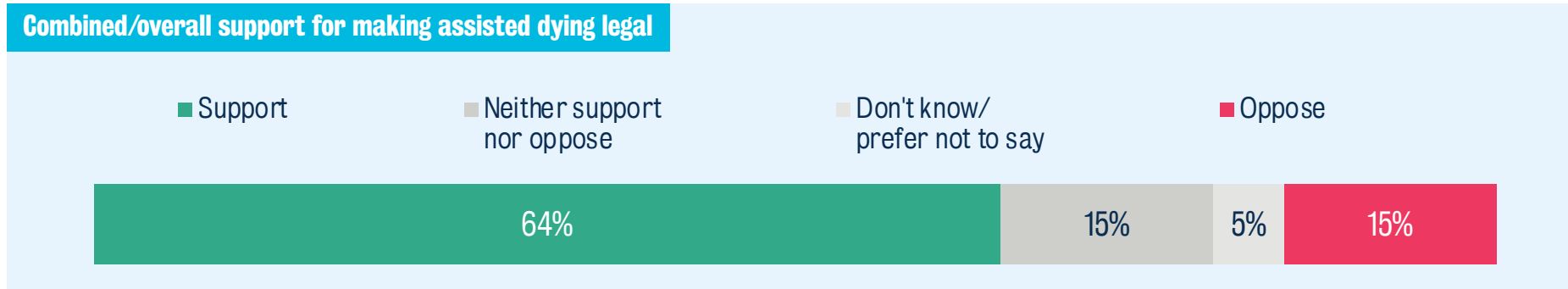
Split sample B Do you support or oppose the idea that such people should be able to choose an assisted death?



Two-thirds also support making assisted dying legal in practice

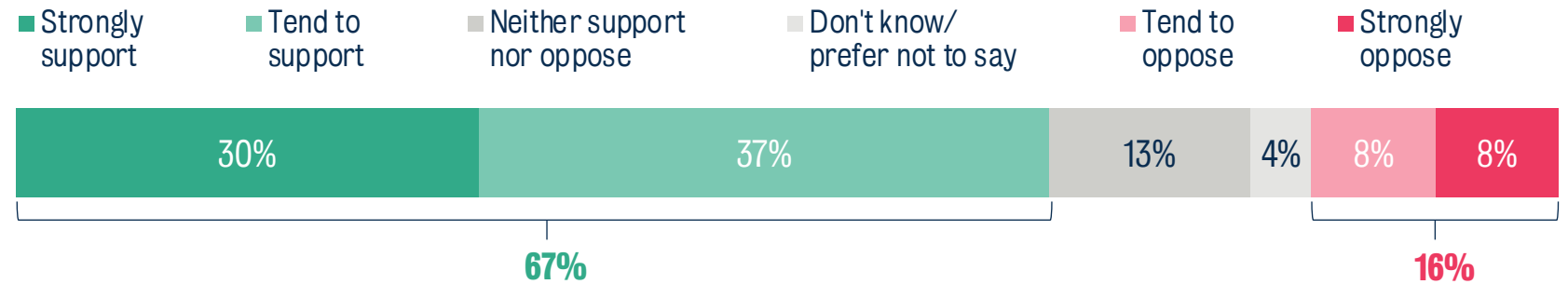
Overall, 64% of the public are in favour of legalising assisted dying – virtually the same as the proportion who support the idea of terminally ill people being able to choose an assisted death.

Again, there is a slight difference in views depending on the options offered to respondents, with support five percentage points higher among those who were given the choice of saying they *tend to* support making assisted dying legal (67% vs 62%).



'Assisted dying' is taken to mean providing lethal drugs to end the life of someone who is terminally ill, at their voluntary request, subject to a set of conditions. Assisted dying is currently illegal in England and Wales...

Split sample A To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose making assisted dying legal?



Split sample B To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose making assisted dying legal?



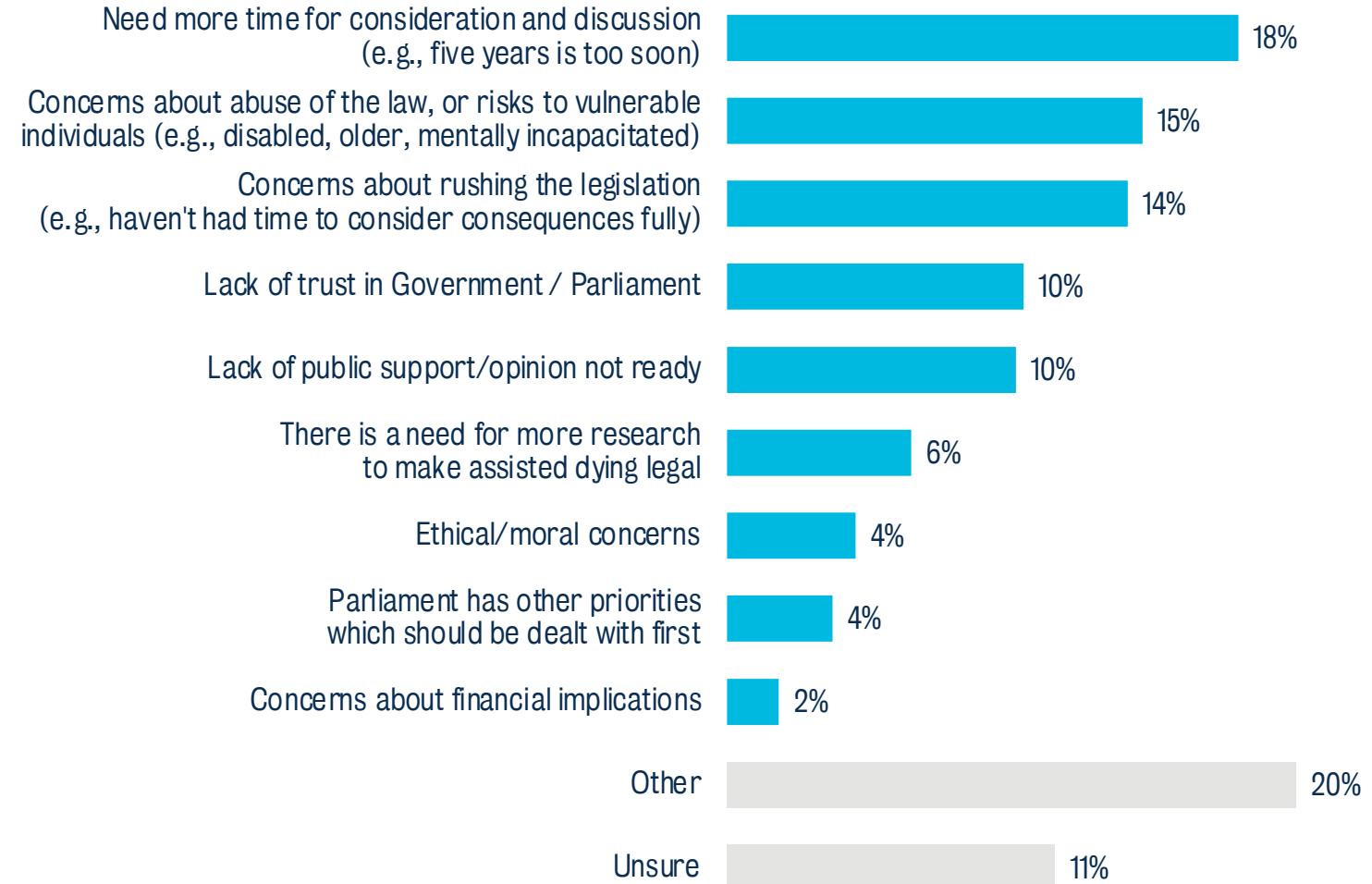
A small minority support assisted dying but don't want to make it legal in the next five years, with a desire for more consideration and discussion the top reason given

10% of people who support legalising assisted dying say they don't want it to become law within this Parliament.

Among this group, around one in five say it's because they need more time for consideration and discussion, while roughly one in seven cite concerns about the law, rushing the legislation, or risks to vulnerable people.

One in 10 say a lack of trust in government/Parliament, or a lack of public support, is key for them.

You said that you support making assisted dying legal in England and Wales, but you don't want the current Parliament to make it legal in the next five years – why is that?

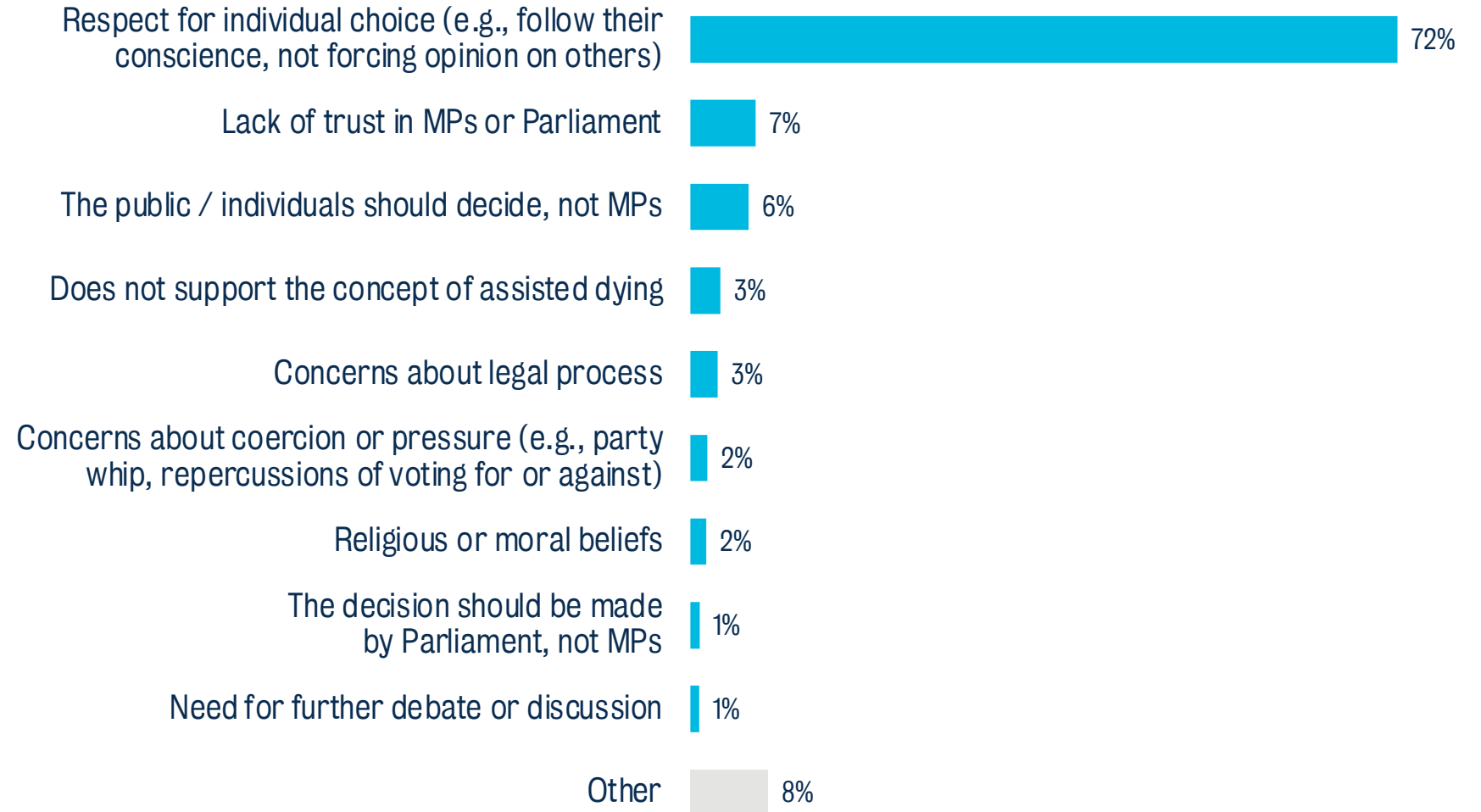


Among those who support the legalisation of assisted dying in this Parliament yet don't want their MP to vote for it, respect for individual choice is the main motivating factor

One in three (33%) people who support the legalisation of assisted dying in the next five years say they don't want their MP to vote in favour of it.

By far the top reason given, selected by 72% of this group, is respect for individual choice, and the desire to not force their personal opinion on their MP.

You said that you support the current Parliament making assisted dying legal in England and Wales in the next five years, but you don't want your MP to vote for it – why is that?



Most of the public are aware of the illegality of assisted dying – but misconceptions exist around other areas of medical law

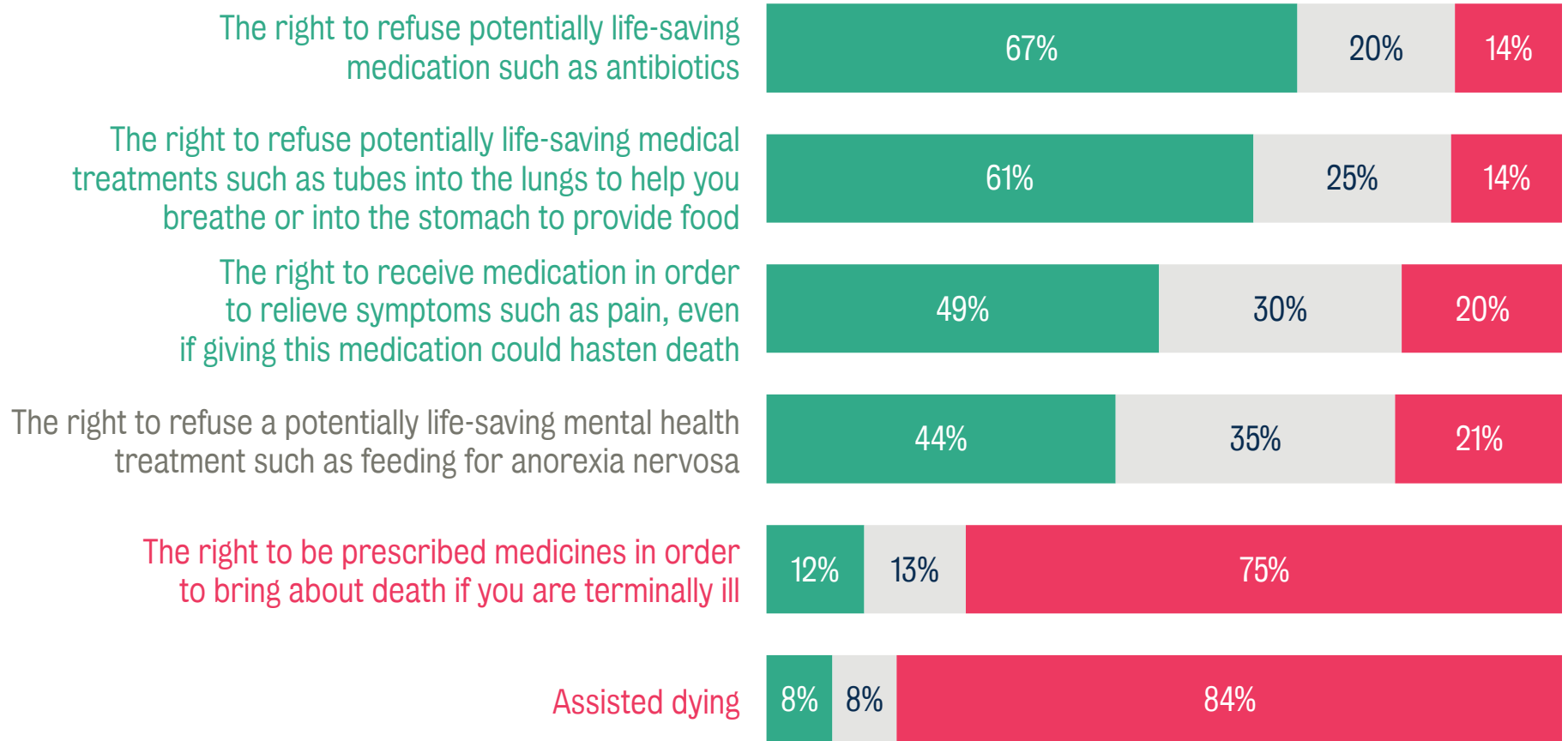
Half the public don't know that it's legal for someone to receive pain-relieving medication, even if it may hasten their death, while a third fail to recognise that it is legal to refuse potentially life-saving drugs.

One in eight people also wrongly believe it's legal to prescribe medicines to bring about the death of someone who is terminally ill, and a smaller proportion – 8% – incorrectly think assisted dying is legal.

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following, if any, are currently legal in England and Wales?

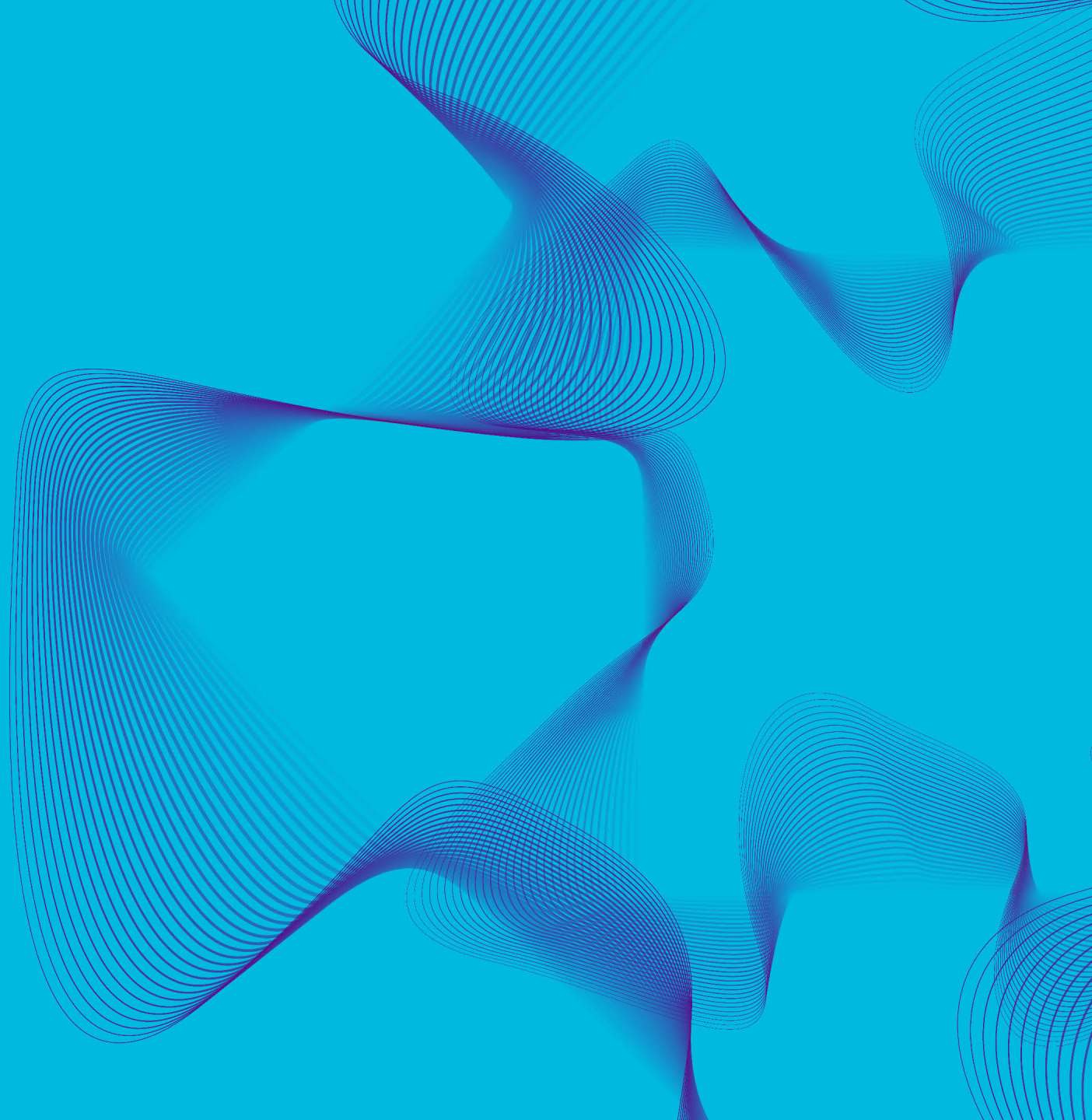
■ Yes, legal in England and Wales ■ Don't know ■ No, not legal in England and Wales

Green items are legal | Grey items depend on specific circumstances | Red items are illegal



Motivations for views on assisted dying: supporters prioritise pain relief and dignity, while opponents worry most about risks to the vulnerable

Nearly half of supporters also say the poor quality of palliative care is a *very* important factor informing their position

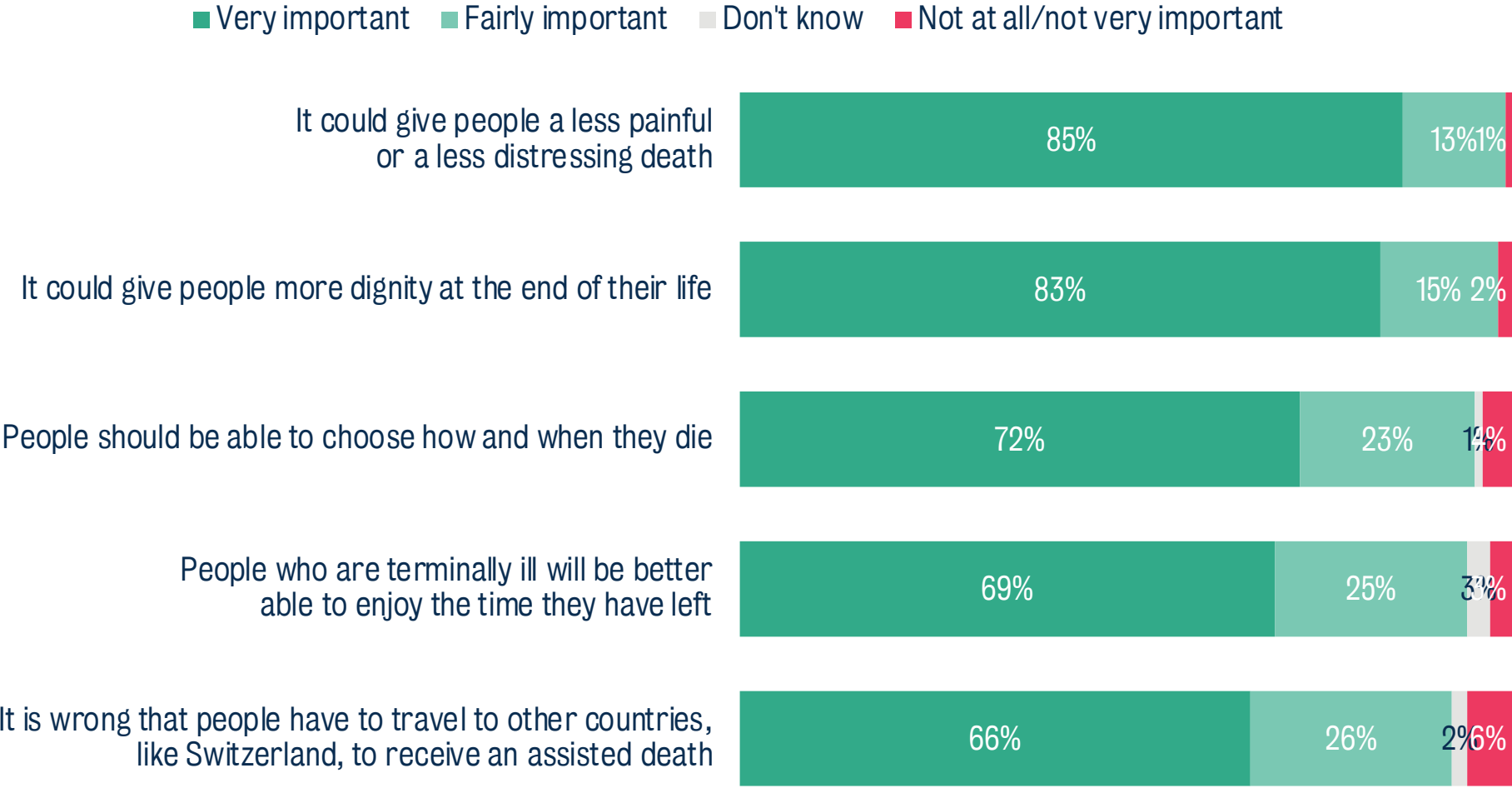


Reducing pain or distress, and giving people more dignity, are the most important motivations for those who support the legalisation of assisted dying...

Virtually everyone who supports making assisted dying legal for terminally ill adults says giving people a less painful or distressing death (99%) and more dignity (98%) are important reasons for their support.

Similarly high proportions cite reasons linked to providing more choice to the terminally ill, as well as our current reliance on countries like Switzerland to carry out assisted deaths.

How important, if at all, are each of the following as reasons you **support** making assisted dying legal for people who are terminally ill in England and Wales?



...and eight in 10 cite poor palliative care as a key factor in their support, while saving the NHS money is less of a consideration

83% say low standards of palliative care are an important reason they support the legalisation of assisted dying, including 47% who say it's a very important reason.

Relatively fewer say saving the NHS money is a consideration for them – although a majority of 62% do still see this as key.

And there are notable differences in views between some groups, with men (67%) more likely than women (58%), and younger people more likely than older people, to say such savings are important for them: for example, 79% of 18- to 24-year-olds say this is important, compared with 53% of those aged 65+.

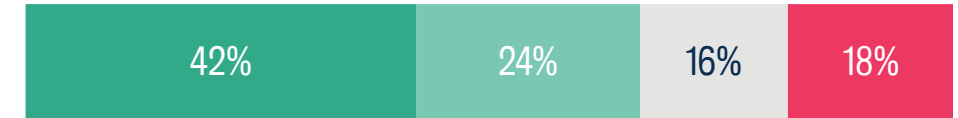
How important, if at all, are each of the following as reasons you **support** making assisted dying legal for people who are terminally ill in England and Wales?

■ Very important ■ Fairly important ■ Don't know ■ Not at all/not very important

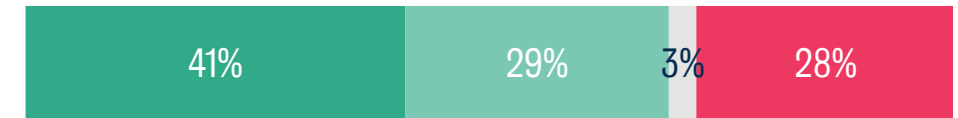
Palliative care, which aims to relieve the suffering of those with a terminal illness, is often not good enough



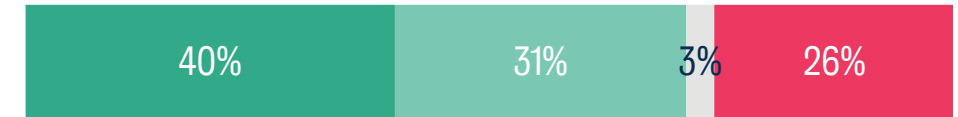
I have personally seen people experience a bad death



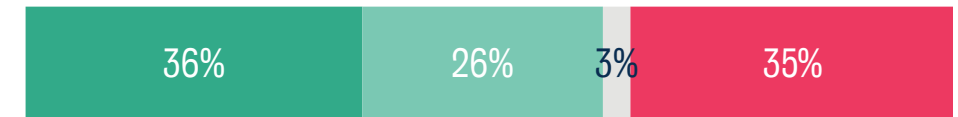
It brings us into line with other countries, like Switzerland, where assisted dying is legal



It could be less burdensome for the individual's family and friends



It could save the NHS money that would otherwise be spent on longer-term care and treatment

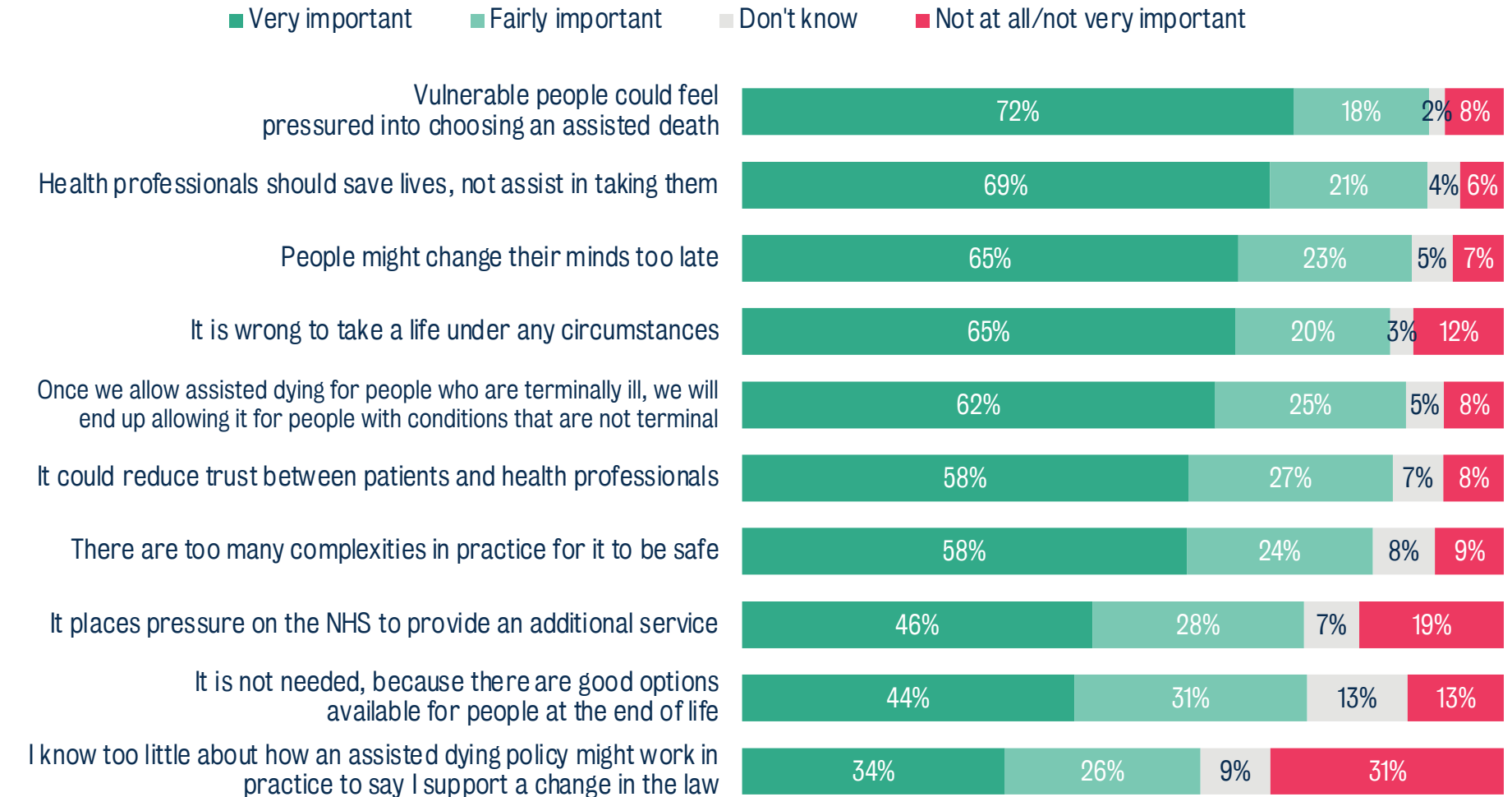


Potential risks to the vulnerable are the biggest considerations for those who oppose assisted dying – but a majority also say they don’t know enough about how it would work in practice to support a change in the law

Majorities say all of the following reasons are important factors in their opposition to assisted dying, but again, concerns about the NHS are relatively less widespread – at least compared to issues around the potential risks that vulnerable people could face, as well as the morality of assisted dying.

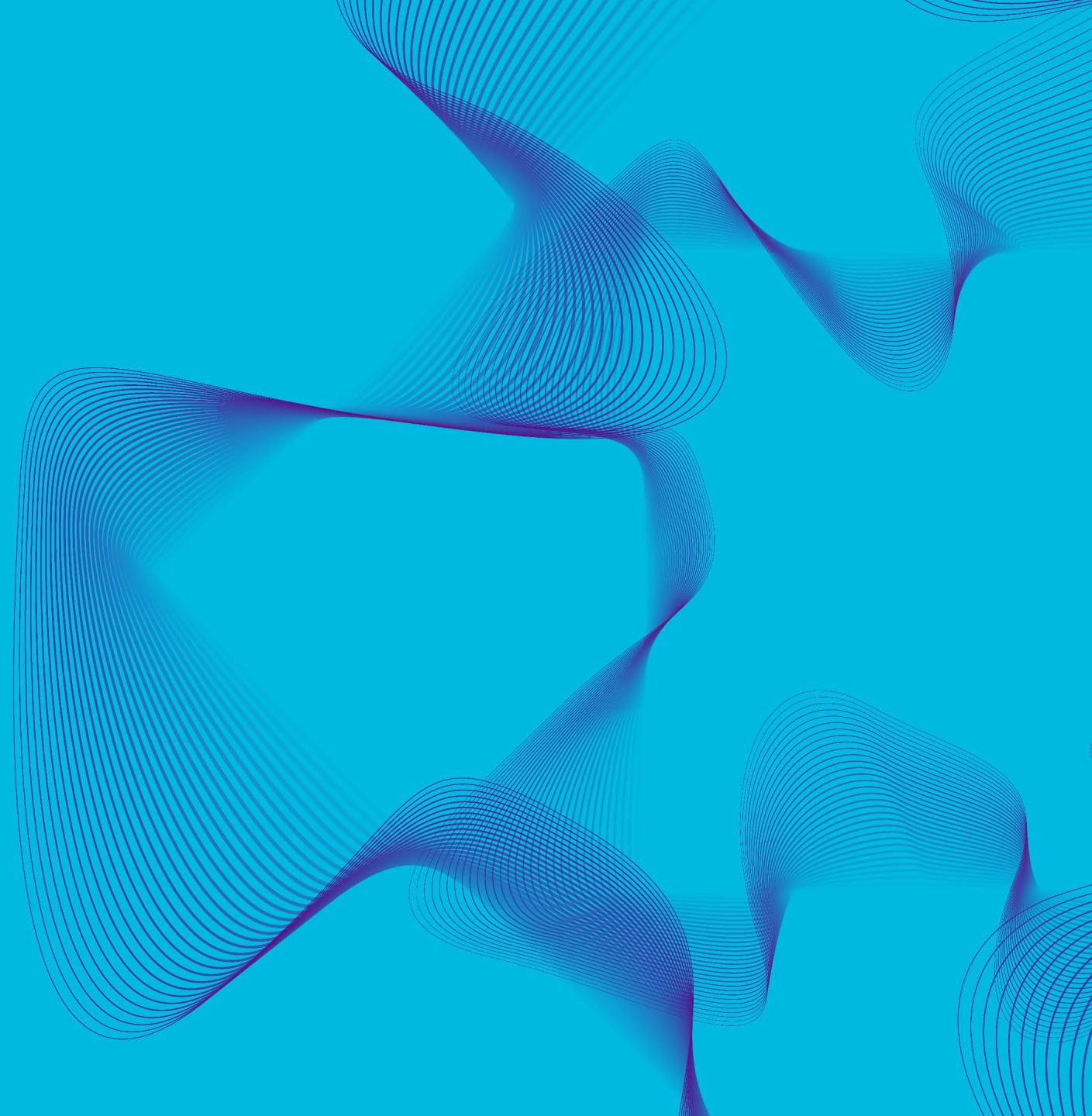
But six in 10 of this group also say they know too little about how assisted dying might work in practice to say they support changing the law.

How important, if at all, are each of the following as reasons you **oppose** making assisted legal dying for people who are terminally ill in England and Wales?



The risks: a majority are concerned about some people being pressured into an assisted death

And most supporters of assisted dying say that if this were to occur, it could lead them to change their position

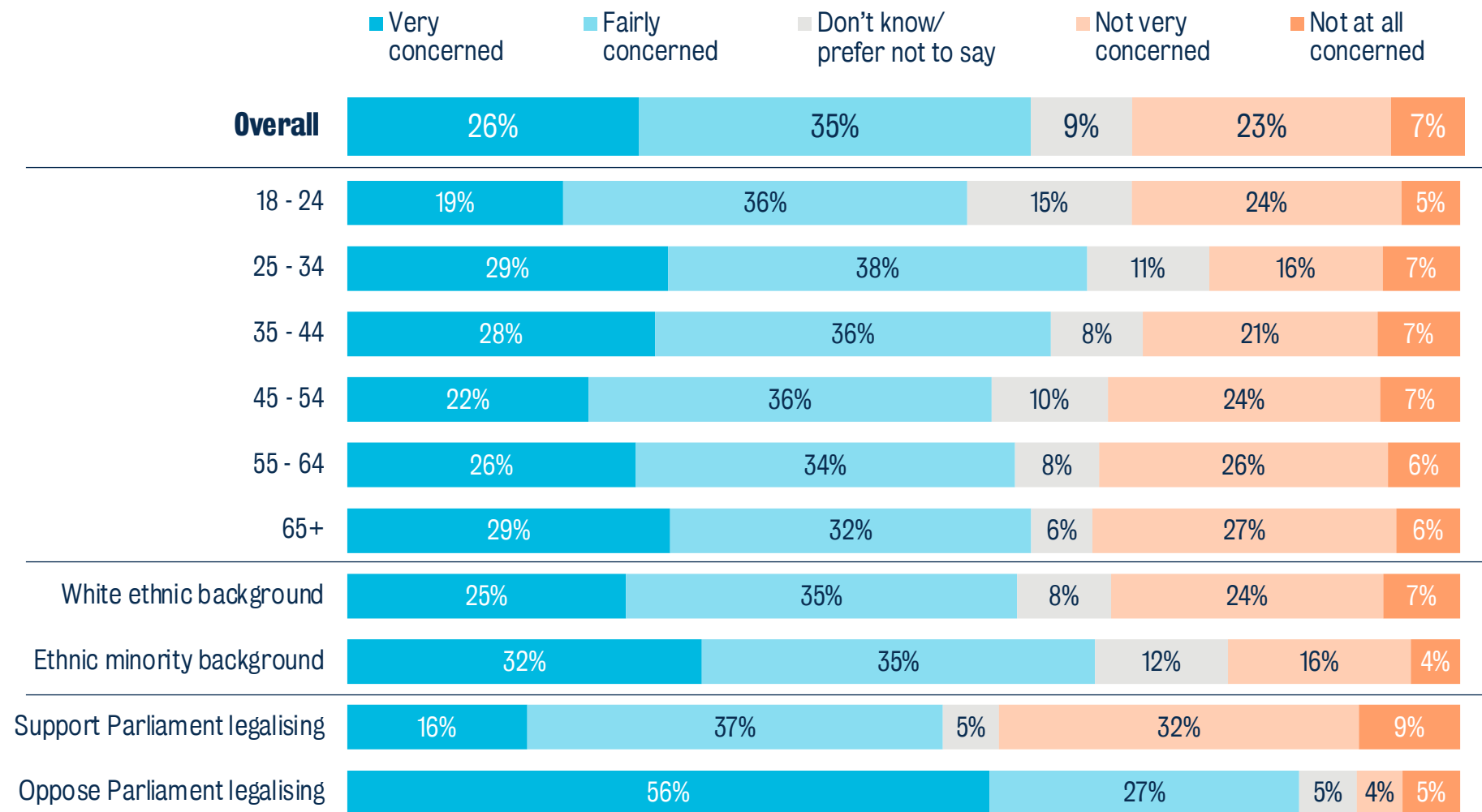


61% of the public say they'd be concerned that some people may feel pressured to have an assisted death – including more than half of those in favour of legalisation within this Parliament

Concern about people being pressured to have an assisted death isn't driven solely by those who oppose assisted dying – a majority (53%) of those in favour of its legalisation within the current Parliament also say they'd be concerned about this risk.

And while older people might be expected to have greater concerns about this danger, 25- to 34-year-olds are in fact the age group most concerned.

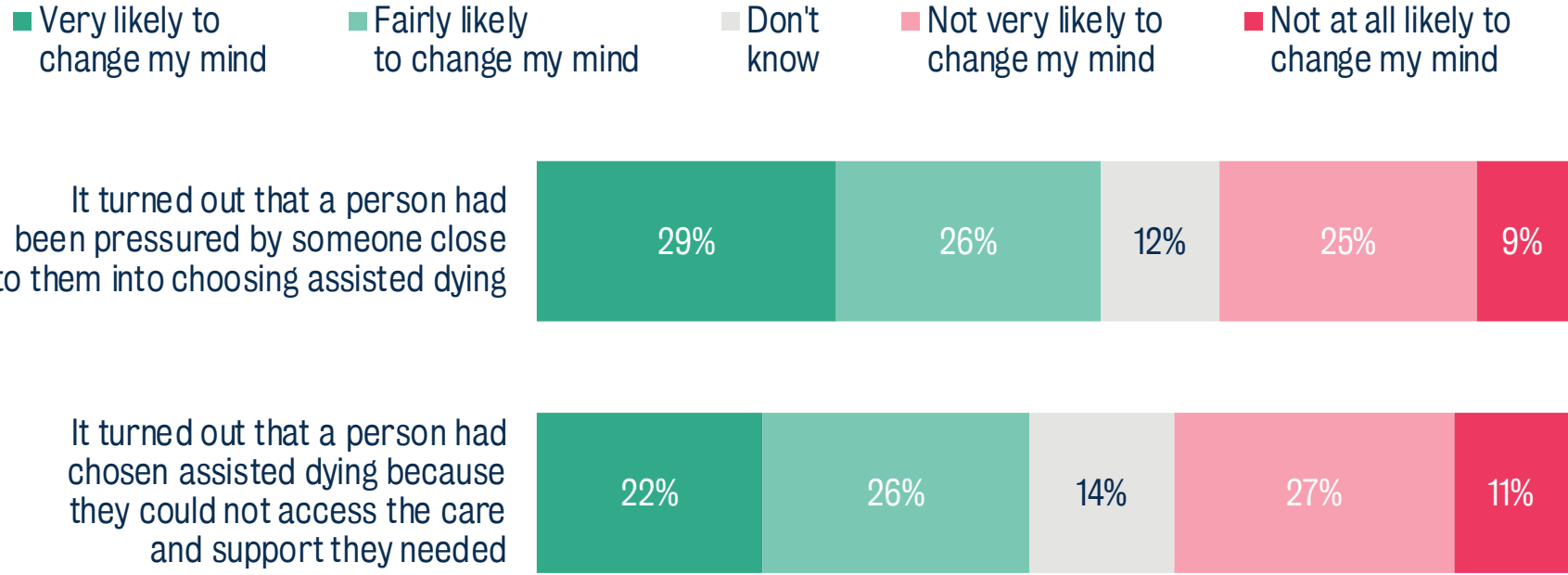
In the event that the law is changed to allow assisted dying in England and Wales, how concerned, if at all, would you be about some people feeling pressured to have an assisted death?



A majority of assisted dying supporters say it's likely they'd change their mind if someone was pressured into having an assisted death

55% of this group say they'd be likely to switch to opposing assisted dying, if it turned out someone had been pressured into choosing this option, while just under half (48%) say they are likely to rethink their position if someone's choice of an assisted death was motivated by a lack of access to other care.

In the event that the law is changed to allow assisted dying in England and Wales, how likely would you be to change your mind to opposing rather than supporting assisted dying if the following occurred?

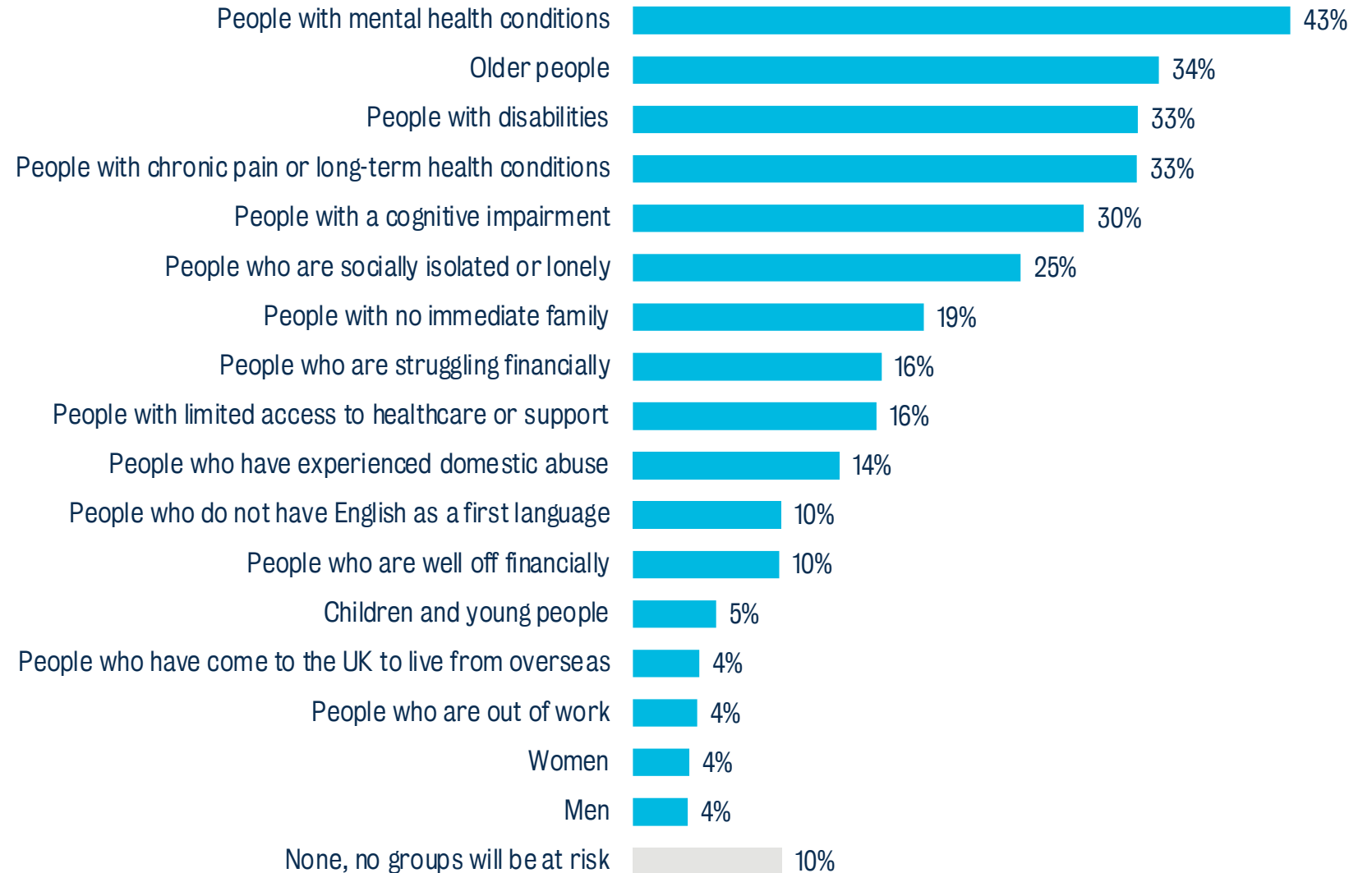


People with mental health conditions are seen as most at risk of being pressured into an assisted death

Older people are next most at risk, in the eyes of the public, followed by people with disabilities.

Though it's not just those facing physical or mental health issues that are perceived to be at risk. A quarter of the public think people who are socially isolated or lonely could be pressured into an assisted death, while between one in five and one in six say the same about those with no immediate family and those facing financial difficulties.

Which, if any, of the following groups do you think are most at risk of being pressured into choosing an assisted death?
Please select no more than five

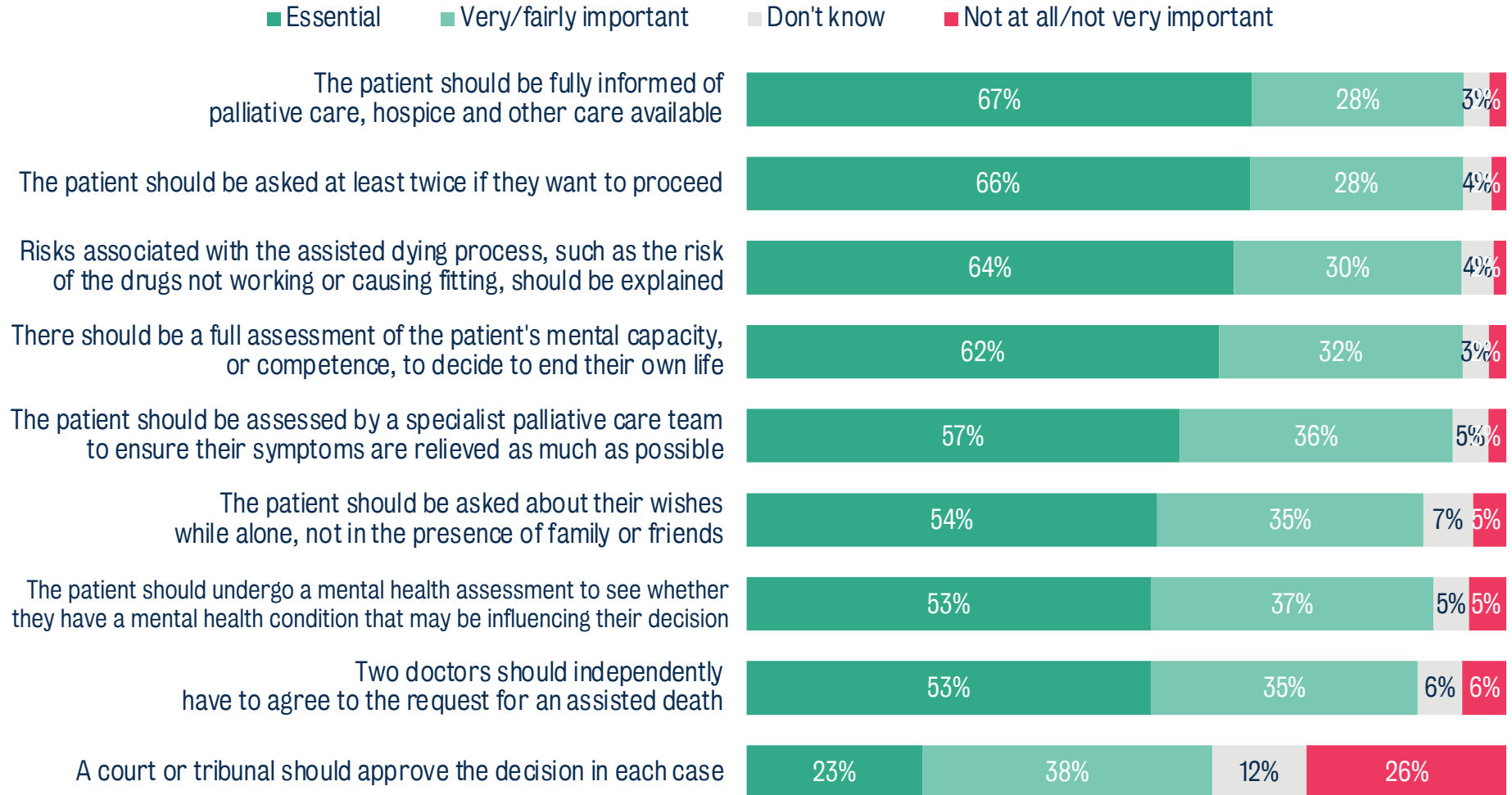


Ensuring potential patients are properly informed, consulted and assessed is seen as essential for minimising risks by most of the public, while far fewer think it's vital to get court approval for each case

Lord Falconer's bill stipulates that any assisted death requires the consent of the High Court, and while most people feel court approval is important, only around a quarter feel it is essential.

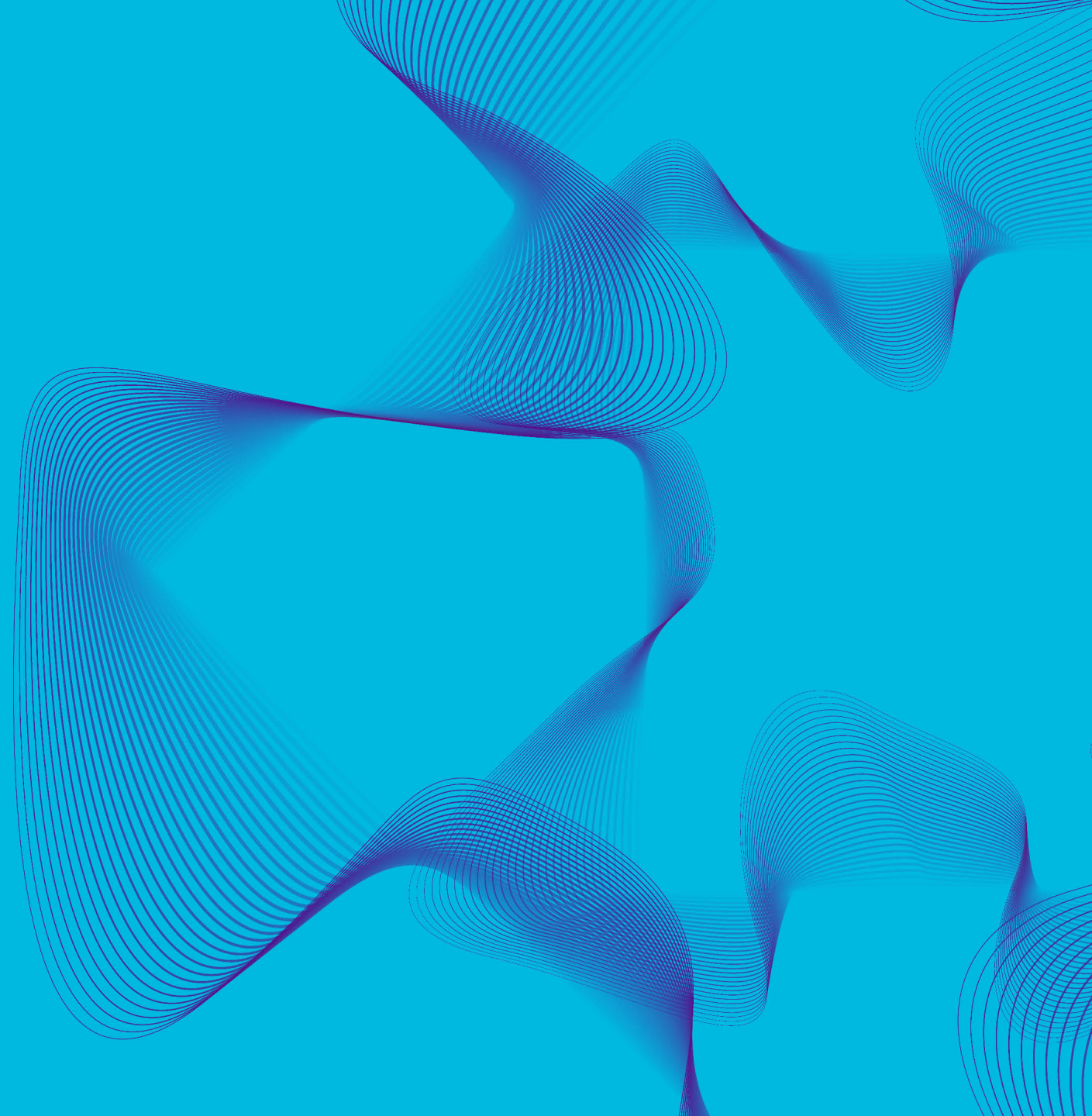
By contrast, other measures are seen as vital by majorities of the public, such as the need to inform patients of other care options and the risks associated with the assisted dying process, as well as asking patients twice if they want to proceed, with around two-thirds seeing these precautions as essential.

In the event that assisted dying is made legal in England and Wales, how important, if at all, are each of the following measures for minimising risks to patients?



How assisted dying could work in practice: most want it available on the NHS, and they don't think patients should have to pay for it themselves

Despite assisted dying potentially adding to the burden the NHS faces, seven in 10 people say they would trust it to provide such a service



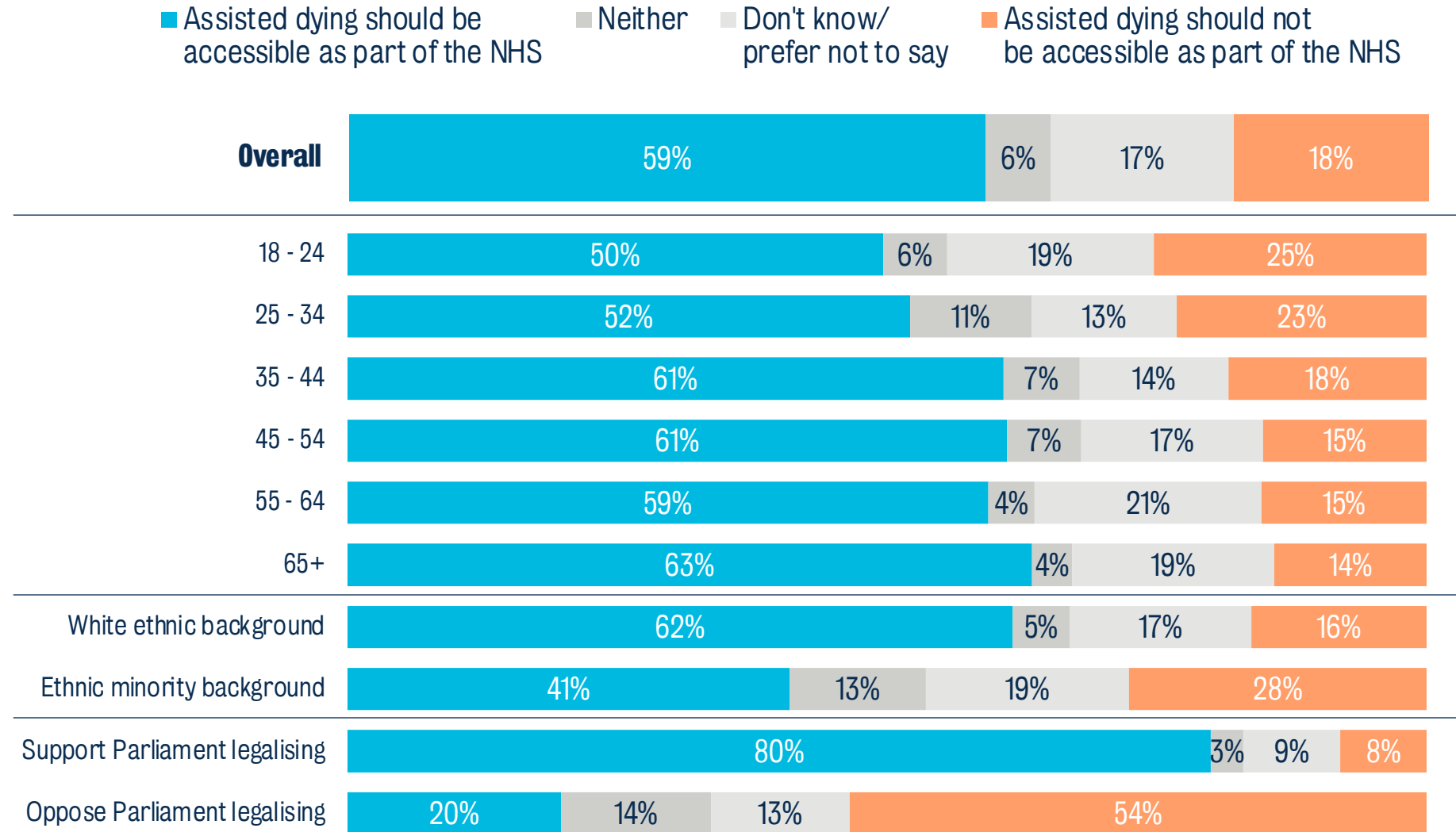
Six in 10 people say assisted dying should be available on the NHS, if it is legalised

This view is even more widespread among those who want to see legalisation within the current Parliament, with eight in 10 saying the NHS should provide this service.

Those under the age of 35 are less likely than older age groups to hold this view – although they are still around twice as likely to agree than disagree that assisted dying should be available through the health service.

Those from ethnic minority backgrounds are also more sceptical than white people of NHS involvement in assisted dying, though again, more agree than disagree that the health service should play this role.

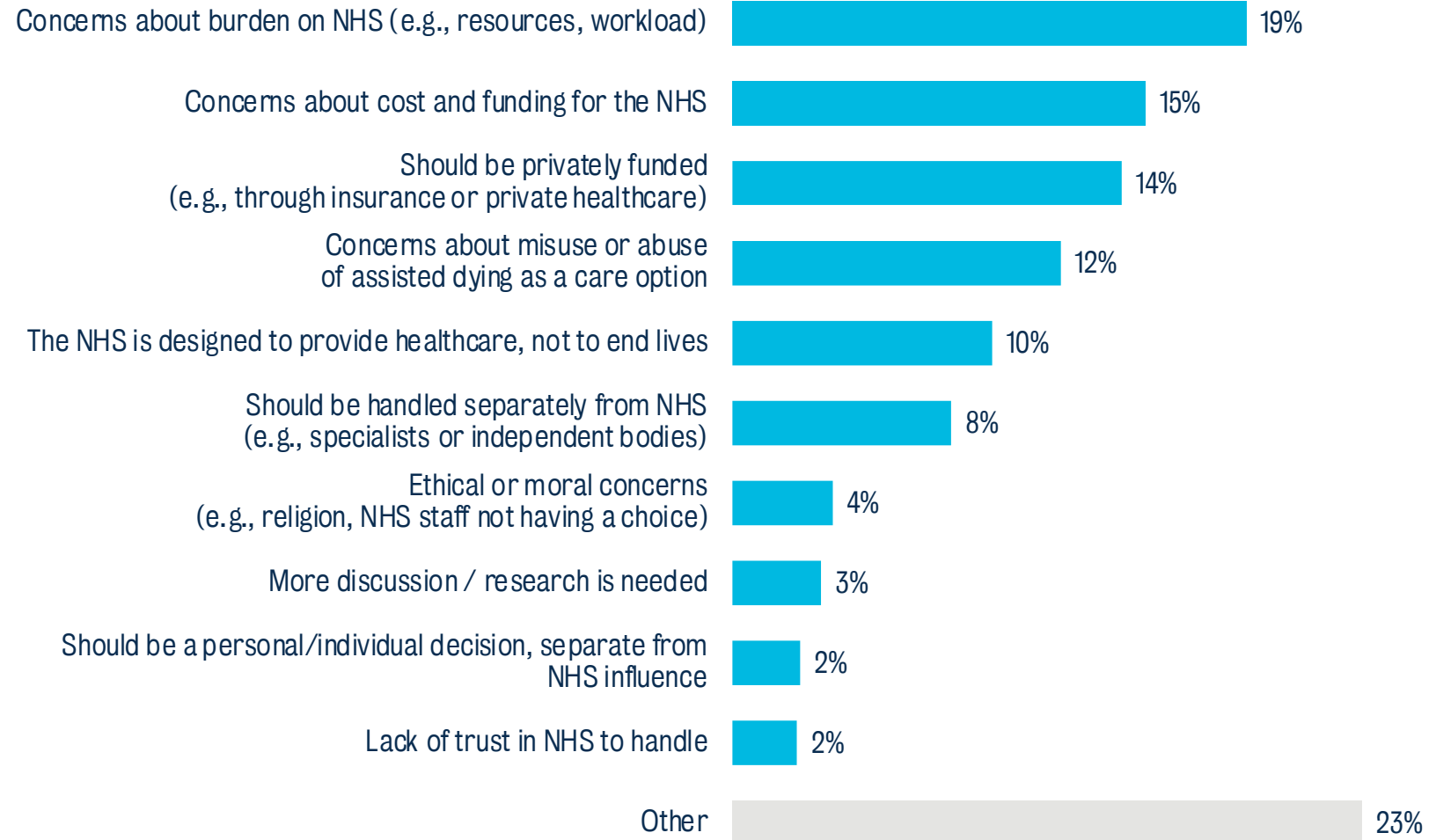
If assisted dying were made legal in England and Wales, which, if either, of these statements would you agree with most?



Concerns about the burden that assisted dying might create are the top reason given for not wanting it to be available on the NHS

One in five (21%) people who support making assisted dying legal say they don't want it to be available on the NHS, with this group's views driven by concerns about the burden it might cause, the costs, and a belief that such a service should be privately funded.

You said that you support making assisted dying legal, but you don't want it to be accessible as part of NHS services – why is that?



Seven in 10 people say they trust the NHS to deliver an assisted dying service

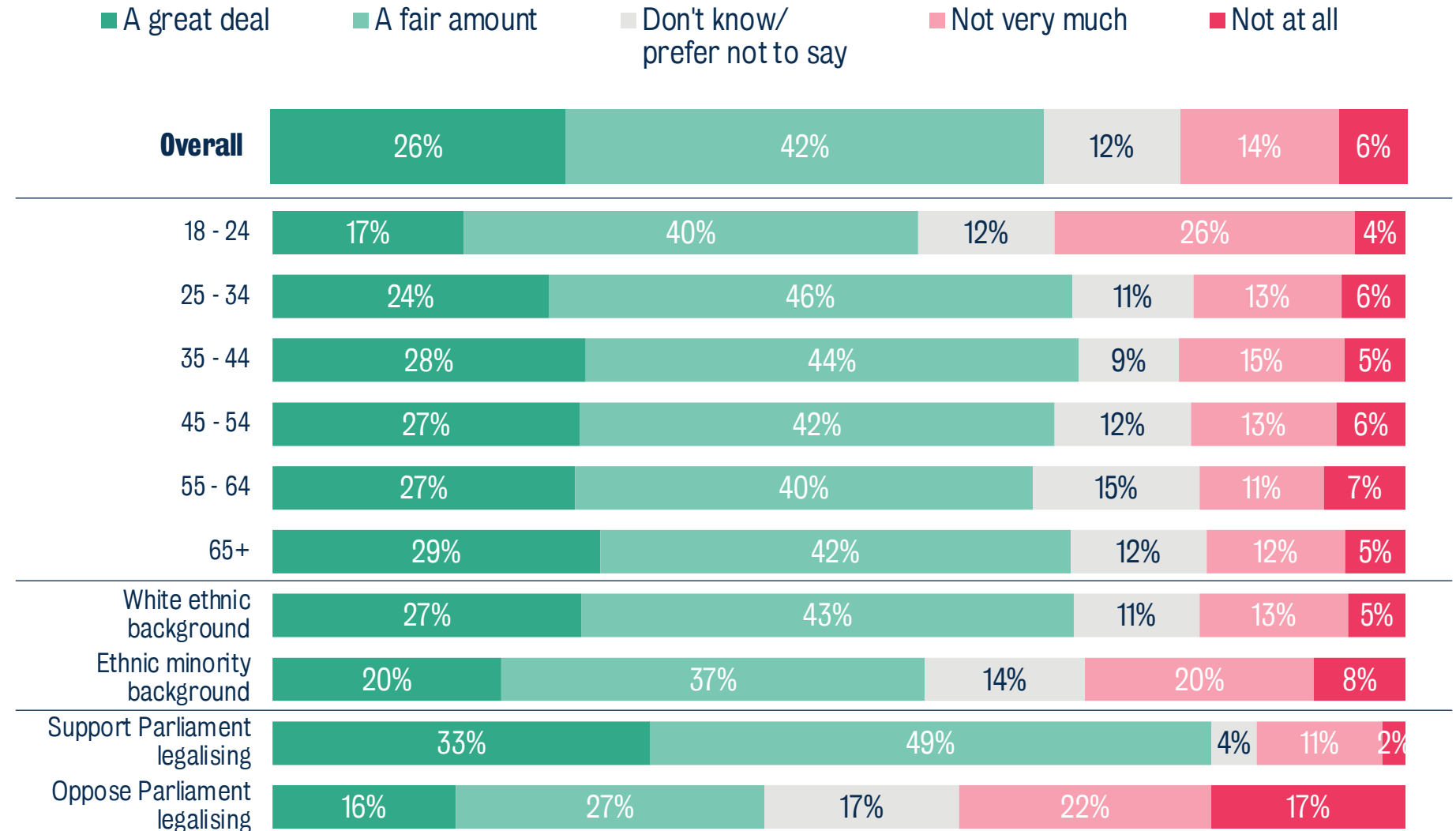
68% of the public trust the NHS to provide assisted dying – although most of this group only trust the health service a fair amount on this issue.

18- to 24-year-olds have the lowest levels of trust in the NHS's ability to deliver such a service. Similarly, ethnic minorities have lower trust than white people (58%* vs 70%).

And those who support legalisation within this Parliament are almost twice as likely as those who oppose it to trust NHS provision of assisted dying (82% vs 44%*).

*Figure differs from chart due to rounding

And still thinking about this scenario in which the law is changed in England and Wales, to what extent, if at all, would you trust the NHS to deliver this service for those who requested an assisted death?



The public are relatively divided on whether providing assisted dying on the NHS would mean higher or lower costs for the health service overall

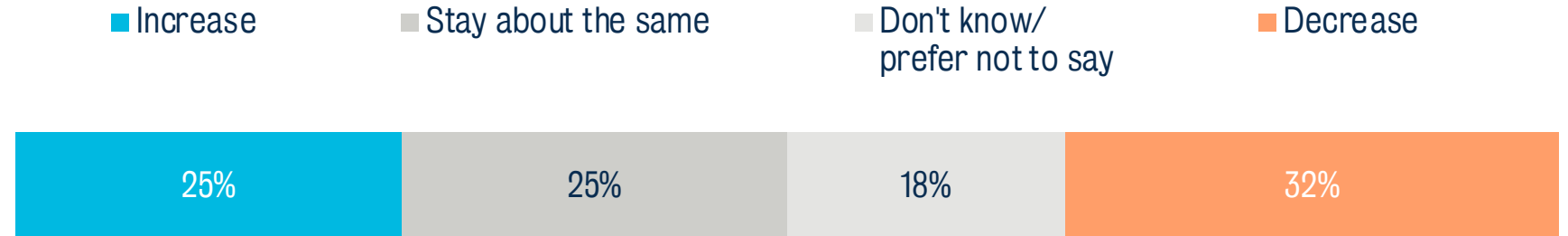
There is some uncertainty around the cost implications of legalising assisted dying, with a [recent review](#) highlighting a scarcity of evidence on this question.

The public are somewhat more likely to believe overall NHS costs would decrease rather than increase if it provided an assisted dying service – but there is no clear consensus.

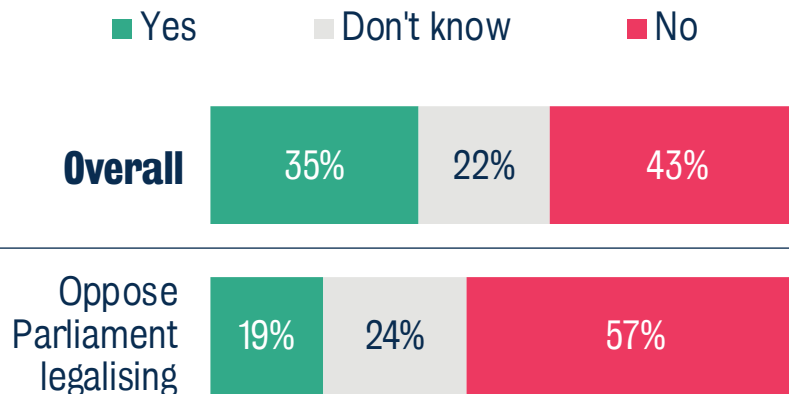
35% of the public say they'd be more likely to support legalising assisted dying if it reduced costs to the NHS. This compares with 23% who say they'd be *less* likely to support it if it *increased* costs.

Around a fifth of both supporters and opponents of legalisation within this Parliament say they would change their mind on legalisation if it led to higher or lower NHS costs.

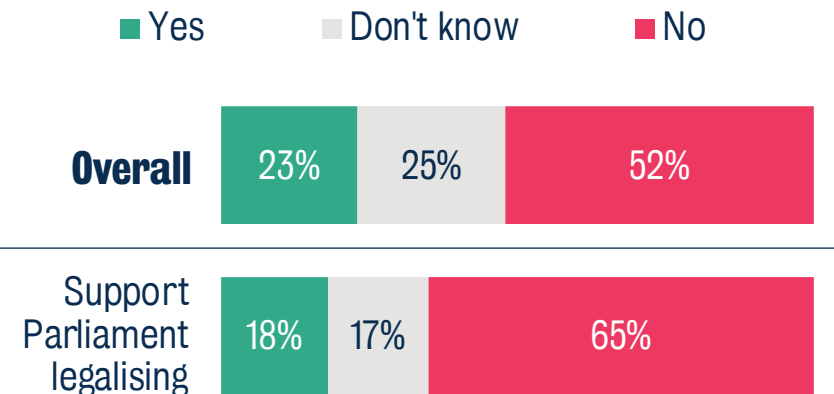
And do you think that, if assisted dying was provided by the NHS, overall costs to the NHS would increase, decrease or stay about the same?



If it was the case that assisted dying **decreased** costs to the NHS, would that make you **more** likely to support changing the law and requiring the NHS to provide assisted dying?



If it was the case that assisted dying **increased** costs to the NHS, would that make you **less** likely to support changing the law and requiring the NHS to provide assisted dying?



A majority say private healthcare companies should also be able to provide assisted dying services, if they are made legal – but they are less certain about such companies receiving public money

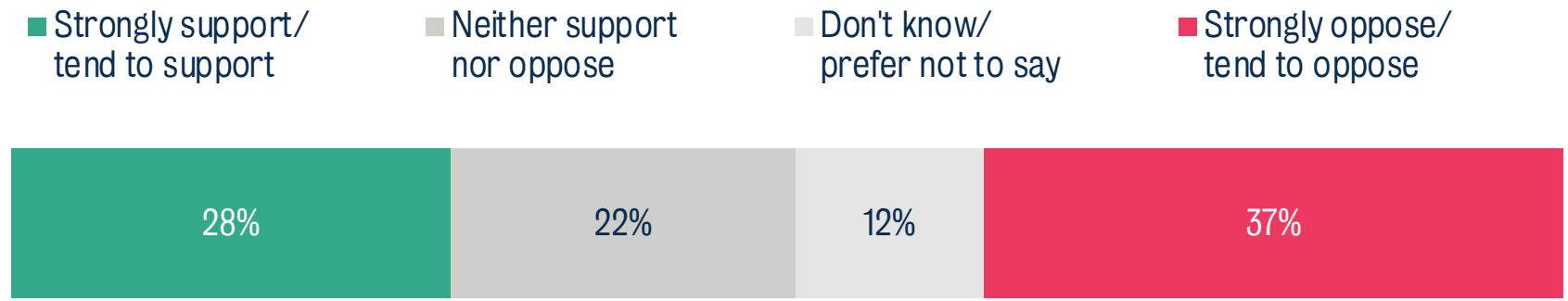
55% of the public support private providers also delivering assisted deaths – almost double the share who oppose them doing so.

Yet people are more sceptical of such companies receiving public money for these services, with 37% against this, compared with 28% in favour.

In your opinion, if assisted dying is made legal in England and Wales, should private healthcare companies also be able to provide this service to those who are eligible?



And if private healthcare companies were able to provide this service, would you support or oppose those private companies being paid by public money, that is, from the government's healthcare budget?



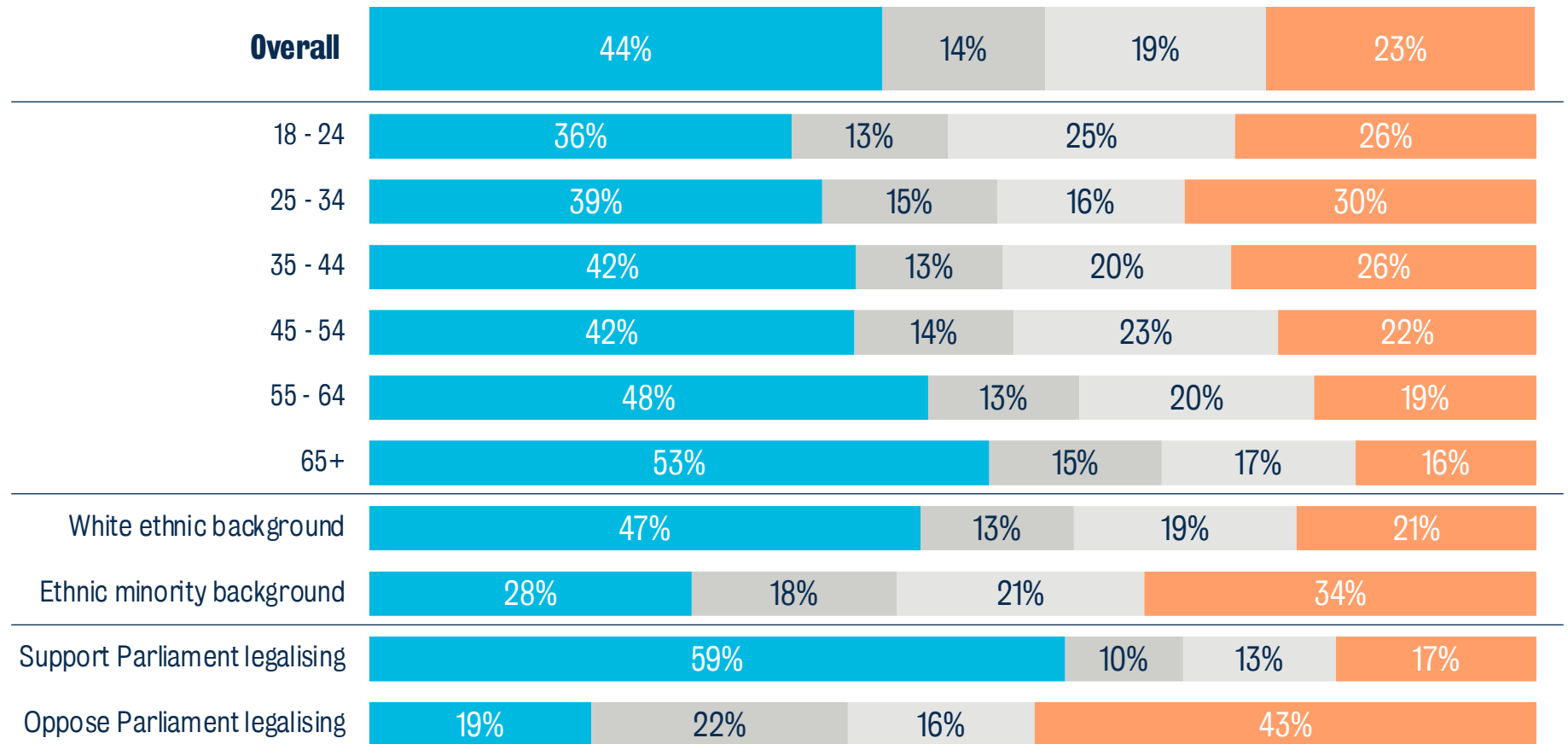
The public are most likely to say those seeking an assisted death should not have to pay for it themselves – although under half hold that view

Support for the view that patients should not have to pay rises with age, with those aged 65+ the only age group where a majority hold this opinion.

Views on this question also differ significantly by ethnicity, and there is a clear divide depending on people's position on the current Parliament legalising within the next five years, with those who oppose it much more likely to say people should pay for an assisted death themselves.

If assisted dying were made legal in England and Wales, which, if either, of the following would you like to apply?

■ Those seeking an assisted death should not have to pay for it themselves
 ■ Neither
 ■ Don't know
 ■ Those seeking an assisted death should have to pay for it themselves

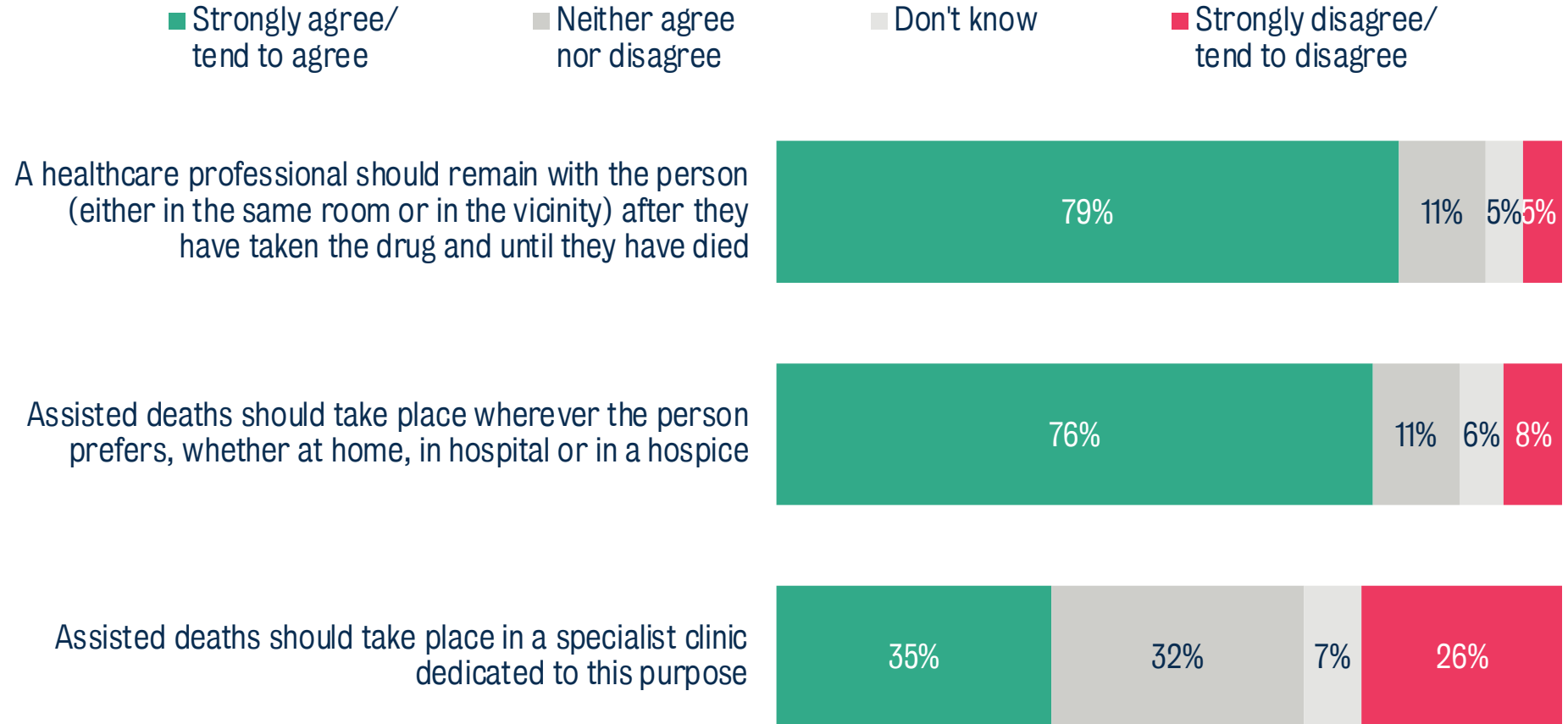


A large majority think a healthcare professional should remain with the person until they have died, and that we should respect patients' preferences for where their assisted death takes place

76% say assisted deaths should be performed wherever the person prefers, compared with 35% who think they should take place in dedicated clinics.

And the vast majority of the public agree that a healthcare professional should stay with the patient until they have died.

And still thinking about this scenario where assisted dying were made legal in England and Wales, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Survey details

Fieldwork was conducted via Focldata's in-house platform, with API integration to an online panel network. Data collection took place between 18 and 19 September 2024, with a total of 2,063 respondents from a nationally representative group of those aged 18+ in England and Wales completing the survey. Data was weighted by age, gender, region, ethnicity and education status.

Connect with us

 [@policyatkings](https://twitter.com/policyatkings)  kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute

 kcl.ac.uk/research/complex-life-and-death-decisions-group

Prof Bobby Duffy

Director,
the Policy Institute,
King's College London

Suzanne Hall

Director of Engagement,
the Policy Institute,
King's College London

Prof Alex Ruck Keene KC (Hon)

Barrister at 39 Essex Chambers,
and Professor of Practice at the
Dickson Poon School of Law,
King's College London

Prof Gareth Owen

Professor of Psychological
Medicine, Ethics and Law,
King's College London

George May

Head of Communications,
the Policy Institute,
King's College London

Prof Katherine Sleeman

Laing Galazka Chair in Palliative
Care, Cicely Saunders
Institute, King's College London