

# RESPONSIVE GOVERNMENT SURVEY

A global analysis of civil service  
responsiveness and agility





# INTRODUCTION

**Governments face a daunting task at the best of times, shouldering huge responsibility for developing and implementing policies that impact the whole of society.**

Against a backdrop of growing uncertainty, including ongoing COVID-19 recovery, increased inflation, budgetary pressures, volatility caused by global conflicts, and mass industrial action, governments are being forced to evolve, adapt, and respond.

How have governments responded to these challenges? And, looking forward, how can they unlock opportunity from adversity? These are the key questions that Global Government Forum and PA Consulting investigate in the Responsive Government Survey.

In 2021, the initial survey in this pioneering research project investigated the responsiveness and agility of public and civil services around the world, asking officials to self-assess their confidence in their organisations' contingency plans and adaptability.

The 2021 results, drawn from 873 survey responses, provided unrivalled insight into perceptions of governments' responsiveness in the immediate aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. While public and civil servants had pride and confidence in their departments and their work, the systems and culture of government could often hamper progress. The report suggested that public services around the world excel at learning and responding rapidly to meet evolving citizen and end-user needs – a statement almost three quarters (72 percent) of respondents agree with. However, there were lower scores when it came to certain elements of responsiveness. For example, respondents in most countries stated they were hamstrung by unnecessary bureaucracy.



**The results... provided unrivalled insight into perceptions of governments' responsiveness in the immediate aftermath of the response to the coronavirus pandemic.**



The backdrop to the 2023 report is just as tumultuous as the last. Following on from our first survey, we sought to understand how government responsiveness has changed, and what needs to happen to future-proof public bodies for even greater uncertainty. We expanded our survey to include a wider pool of respondents at varying levels of seniority, gathering the views of 1,796 public and civil servants across nine different countries.

Combined with the insights of subject matter experts, our research uncovers **five key priorities** for governments to ensure they improve their responsiveness in the face of unprecedented change. Our findings also provide a baseline against which to track future progress.

We are grateful to all who participated in the survey and the experts who contributed to the writing of this report.

**Shaun Delaney**, global head of public sector,  
PA Consulting

**Richard Johnstone**, executive editor,  
Global Government Forum



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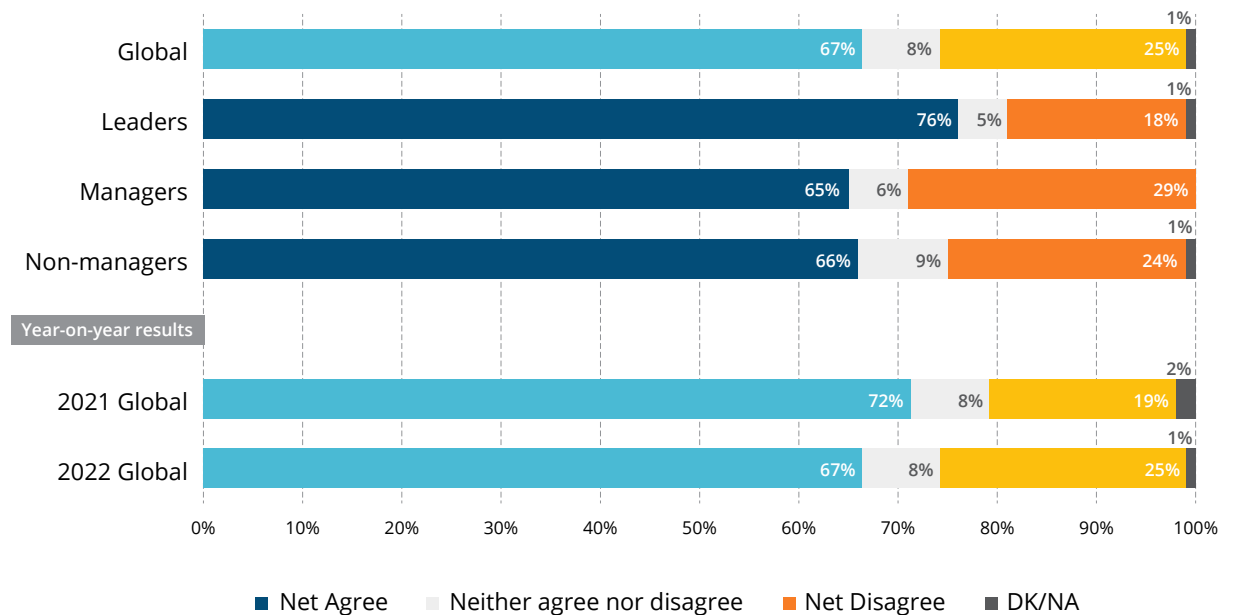
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**We know that change is the new constant – the question now is how to respond.**

Our in-depth, global research into governmental responsiveness explores the extent to which governments have adapted to unforeseen events, drawing on the views of those in civil and public positions. How responsive are governments today, and what do they need to do to successfully navigate an uncertain future?

Our research analyses and compares self-assessment survey responses across global markets (Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), as well as different levels of seniority (leaders, managers, and non-management).

Across all geographies and seniority levels, the findings were stark. Compared to 2021, public and civil servants' confidence in government responsiveness is declining, with fewer officials agreeing that their organisation excels at learning and responding rapidly to change.



*Agreement with the survey statement: 'My organisation excels at learning and responding rapidly to meet evolving citizen and end-user needs'*



Confidence that public services can be improved has also fallen – and there is concern over the impact of electoral politics on delivery. Officials are also less confident in their organisation’s contingency plans in the era of ‘permacrisis’ – an extended period of instability and insecurity.

Despite this crisis of confidence, 71 percent of officials say that being able to adapt to significant change is part of their organisation’s long-term strategy. Encouragingly, over half of respondents believe that their organisation can capitalise on opportunities arising from uncertainty. Officials are also confident that they can access the information they need to make decisions in a crisis. There is broad agreement that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has boosted digital government, and that, in an increasingly data-driven world, digital capability is crucial.

The research also found some interesting contrasts. Across the nine nations, respondents in Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) are most in agreement that their organisations excel at responsiveness. And, throughout the report, senior leaders – including secretary generals, vice ministers, permanent secretaries, chief executives, and function heads like chief technology officers or chief financial officers – were consistently more positive about their organisation’s responsiveness than their rank-and-file colleagues.

Our results point to a lack of confidence about what the future holds for governing organisations, and in departments’ ability to handle change. However, with the right strategy and awareness, governments can maximise their adaptability ahead of disruption by embedding responsiveness into the fabric of their organisation.



**Encouragingly, over half of respondents believe that their organisation can capitalise on opportunities arising from uncertainty.**



# KEY PRIORITIES FOR RESPONSIVE GOVERNMENTS

Based on the findings of our survey and the contributions of subject matter experts in a range of high-ranking government and civil service roles, we've identified five key priorities for responsive governments.

In the following sections, we explore the survey data behind each priority and offer tangible steps to help governments and leaders shift the paradigm from reactive to proactive strategies.

## Five key priorities for responsive governments:



RETHINKING  
RESPONSIVENESS



EMBRACING  
POSITIVE  
LEADERSHIP



GOING DEEPER  
WITH DIGITAL  
AND DATA



BUILDING A  
CITIZEN-CENTRIC  
CULTURE



GOVERNING  
THROUGH A  
PERMACRISIS



## RETHINKING RESPONSIVENESS

Despite declining confidence in government responsiveness compared to 2021, the majority of public servants (67 percent) feel that their organisation excels at learning and rapid response. Leaders are more confident than any other group, at 76 percent. And, when it comes to adapting policies and services based on learning, 63 percent of public servants and 71 percent of leaders agree this is true of their organisation. Importantly, this includes learning from both successes and failures, demonstrating a willingness to improve.

While the majority of public servants agree that their organisation excels at being responsive to change, the past year has seen a dip in confidence, highlighting room for improvement. Public servants are less confident about the future preparedness of their organisation or the direction in which it is headed. Only a third of respondents feel there are few barriers to quickly developing policy ideas into implementation plans. Respondents also identify resourcing as a clear

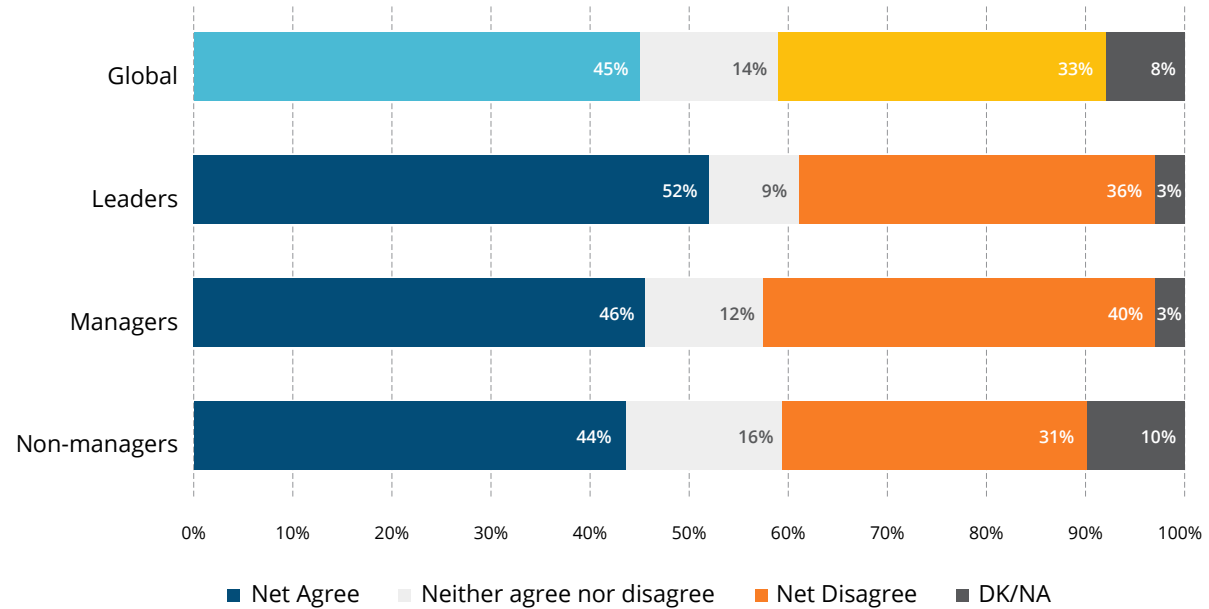
barrier, with less than half of officials (45 percent) saying they can quickly allocate budget and resources to priority initiatives.

When asked what single action they believe the centre of government should undertake to improve their organisation's ability to become more responsive to change, most respondents name addressing funding and resourcing roadblocks. The route to responsiveness lies in overcoming these obstacles.



“Budget constraints will be significant in the coming years,” says Kim Lindskov Knudsen, Denmark-based public sector partner at PA. “Financial reform in the public sector will result in more focus on prioritisation and redistribution of budgets rather than new funding.”

Unnecessary bureaucracy plays a part too, with 58 percent of all respondents agreeing that their organisation is stifled by red tape. The response is even more stark in the UK, where 64 percent are concerned about unnecessary bureaucracy. This perception is similar in the US at 62 percent.



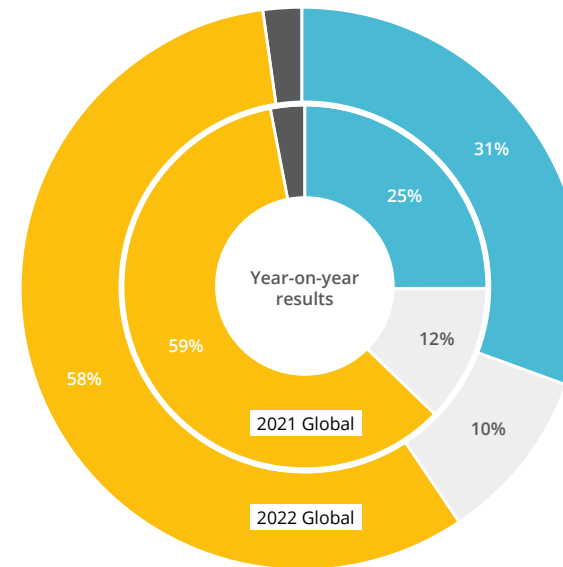
*Agreement with the survey statement: 'We are able to quickly allocate budget and resources to initiatives identified as priorities'*





In the free text section of the survey, one senior public service manager in the Canadian government adds that while there had been a “great response to [the] pandemic,” government was “still not focusing on the right areas.”

More officials in Denmark and Norway agree than disagree that there is little unnecessary bureaucracy, aligning with wider confidence in their organisations’ overall responsiveness. When it comes to agreeing that their organisation excels at learning and responding rapidly to change, Sweden and Denmark come out on top at 84 percent and 81 percent respectively.



■ Net Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Net Disagree ■ DK/NA

Agreement with the survey statement: ‘There is very little unnecessary bureaucracy within this organisation’



In Denmark, the high percentage can be attributed, in part, to the government's well-coordinated response to COVID-19 and a new majority government with an ambitious reform agenda.

Michael Wernick, the Jarislowsky chair of public sector management at the University of Ottawa and former cabinet secretary in the Canadian government, warns that the year-on-year decline in confidence scores was a 'dashboard warning light' for government.

"There seems to be a very clear pattern of slowing of momentum and confidence. It could be a cumulative impact of the wear and tear of pressure on public servants both pre- and post-pandemic."

However, a free text comment from a public servant in the Netherlands highlights that "the measures to save the economy from COVID-19 have proven how quickly we can respond when clear choices are made and responsibility is taken."

### Next steps for responsive governments

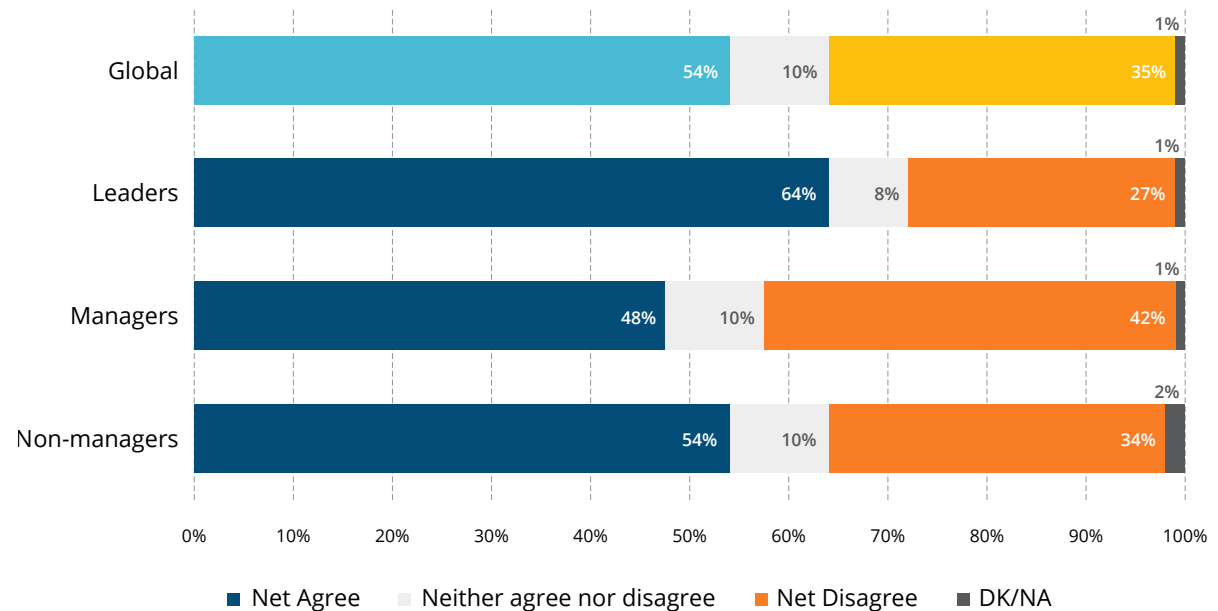
To ensure future readiness, governments need to rethink responsiveness by embedding greater flexibility and forward-thinking.

Rather than reacting to issues as they arise, governments can apply past learning to develop proactive strategies, aided by organisational scenario planning to prepare for events in advance.



## EMBRACING POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

Across many elements of responsiveness, an interesting contrast between leaders and other respondent groups emerges. Leaders feel more positively about their organisation's performance, future, and employee morale than their rank-and-file colleagues. While 63 percent of global civil servants say that their organisation adapts what they do based on what works, this proportion rises to 72 percent of civil service leaders, and more leaders also agree morale is high in their organisation (64 percent) than the overall response score (54 percent). This suggests that leaders need to temper confidence with reality, widening their awareness of staff attitudes, capacity, knowledge, and resources.

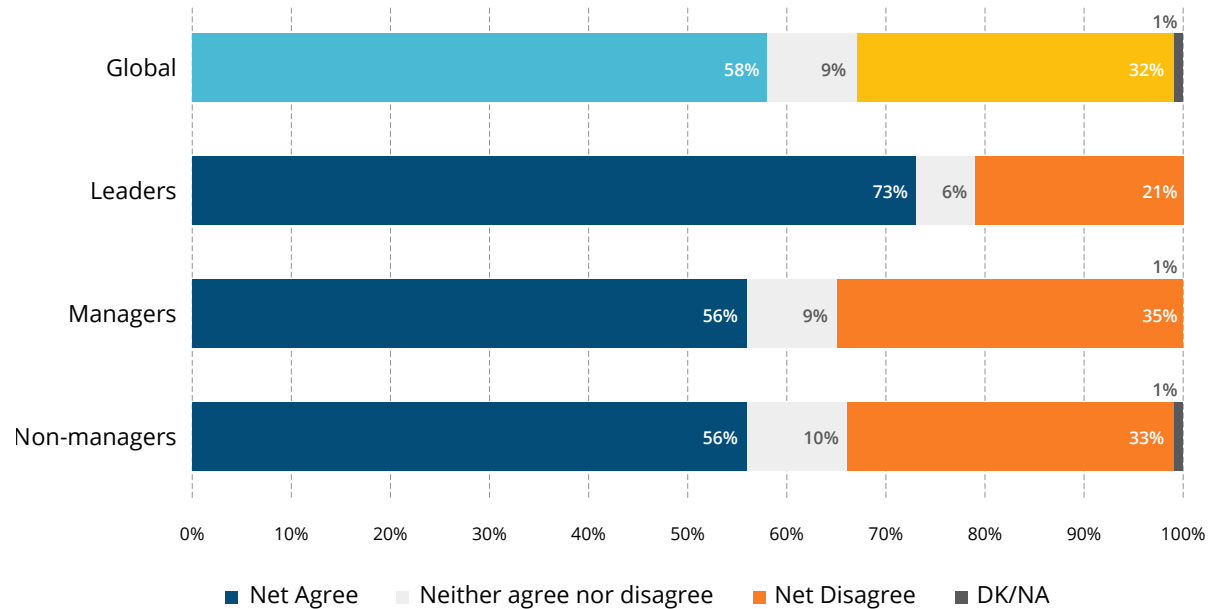


Agreement with the survey statement: 'Employee morale is high in this organisation'



Leaders are also more positive about how they perceive themselves to be performing. For example, 56 percent of managers and non-managers agree that leaders are open to doing things in new ways to deliver better public services. This rises to 73 percent of leaders, suggesting that leaders could do more to communicate and demonstrate their openness.

Positive, bold leaders have a pivotal role to play in building governmental responsiveness through culture change. In practice, this means injecting confidence across public sector organisations by setting a clear purpose for teams that aligns with overall organisational aims.



Agreement with the survey statement: 'Leaders in our organisation are open to doing things in new ways to deliver better public services'



Leaders need to show that government projects and initiatives address the challenges that citizens – including their employees – currently face. This purposeful leadership was a major factor in the rapid pandemic response, fuelled by collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and agility.

Many public servants responding to the survey also call for bold leadership. One respondent from the US says transformational leadership is needed to provide an “empowering vision for people to have opportunities beyond the hamster wheel” of day-to-day duties. Another US respondent urges organisational leaders to better understand the workflow of their organisation.

Professor Alexander Evans, who teaches public policy at the London School

of Economics and is a former strategy director at the UK Cabinet Office, upholds that leaders are best placed to understand the bigger picture in organisations.

“If you’re sitting on the board or on the executive committee, you’re much more sighted on the scale of the challenges – but also the potential actions that can remedy them.”

Anders Persson, Sweden-based public sector digitalisation expert at PA, points out that leaders can be detached from the actual capabilities of their organisations.

“Given the high discrepancy between staff and leaders in most dimensions from resources to strategy, leaders need to step up. In Sweden, better digital leadership is a key focus for development.”

## Next steps for responsive governments

By sharing insights with colleagues at all levels, those in senior positions can become an inspirational force within and beyond their organisations. Through purposeful, positive leadership, they can empower team members to think differently rather than simply churning out policy based on accepted norms.

This new way to lead will build morale, strengthen team resilience, and support the improvement of public services.

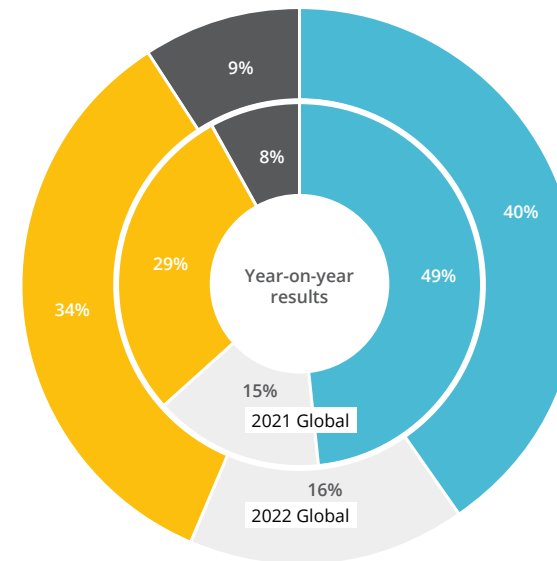


## GOING DEEPER WITH DIGITAL AND DATA

Digital services and more effective use of data are key to providing responsive government, and while digitalisation is the new norm, confidence that technology is being used to drive the best policy solutions has fallen. Just two in five leaders (40 percent) agree that digital technologies are fully embedded in policy making and service design.

A key cause for this perceived lack of utilisation appears to be financial – only 42 percent of senior civil and public service figures agree that funding is available for long-term investment in digital transformation.

A further factor is knowledge. Just over half of respondents say their leaders have sufficient digital understanding.



■ Net Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Net Disagree ■ DK/NA

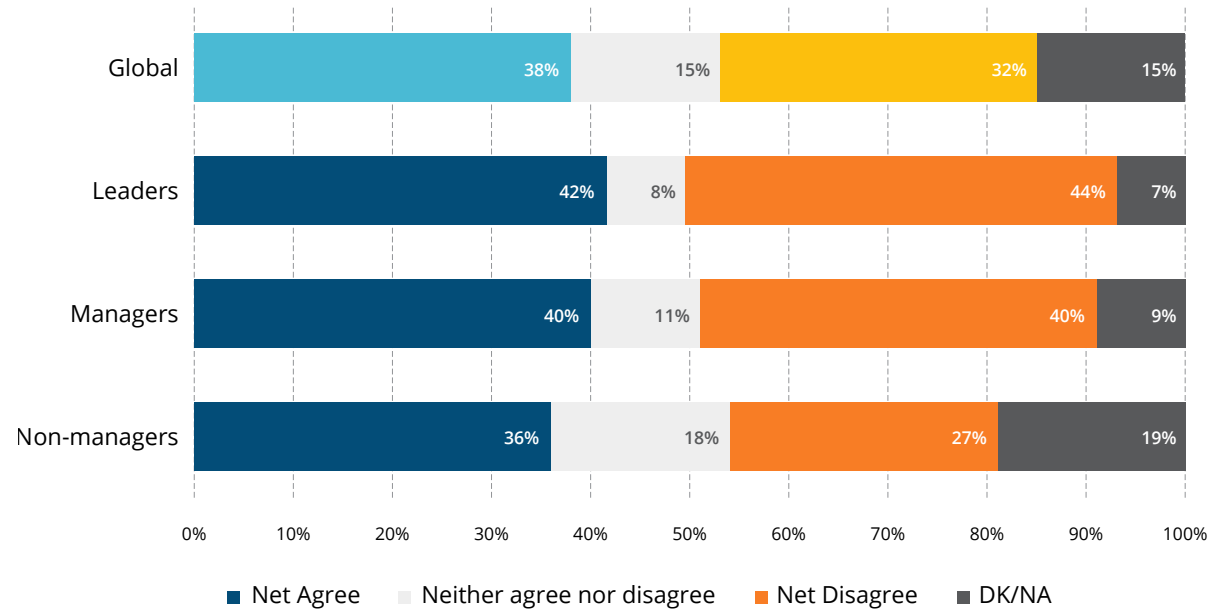
*Agreement with the survey statement: 'Digital technologies are fully embedded in policy making and service design processes from the outset'*



While leaders themselves are more confident about their understanding (55 percent), senior managers and managers have less faith in their bosses (49 percent).

Less than half of respondents from the US, the UK, and the Netherlands have confidence in their leaders' digital understanding. There is most confidence in leaders' digital understanding in Denmark (70 percent), with majorities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, and Norway.

Public sector expert Kim Lindskov Knudsen explains that Denmark has been at the forefront of digitalisation for several years. However, organisational constraints are impacting progress.



*Agreement with the survey statement: 'Funding is available to make the long-term investment in digital transformation that is needed'*



“Exploiting the potential of digital and new technology demands a profound change in our administrative approaches and service delivery models. We are entering a more radical need for change driven by, for example, AI support for decision making in diagnostics, and telemedicine as a new way of delivering health services.”

Grete Kvernland-Berg, public sector expert and head of PA in Norway, explains that infrastructure is key.

“In Norway, the first choice is digital. We have a single sign on system and that’s a very important part of the

infrastructure. Using my bank ID, I can log in to all public services, applications, tax papers, everything. This code gives me access to my health page, my government health page, and it gives me access to telehealth as well. So, it’s fairly easy to introduce digital citizen services. The single sign on is run by a private provider in Norway, but it’s owned and sourced by the government.”

Although funding and understanding pose concerns for digital transformation, governments have embraced digitalisation and improved their responsiveness as a result. COVID-19 supercharged the need

to provide digital services, including vaccination bookings, booster reminders, and mobile COVID-19 passes. This is reflected in the survey results, with over half of civil and public servants across the nine countries saying that the response to COVID-19 made government more flexible and responsive. In particular, two thirds of officials agree the pandemic accelerated progress in digital capabilities – in contrast to areas like the time taken to implement new policies or ideas, where only around one third (37 percent) of respondents say it made a difference.





Post-pandemic digital transformation is particularly notable in Nordic countries, with 80 percent of respondents in Sweden saying that the response to the pandemic has quickened digital capability development, and 73 percent saying the same in Norway. However, one public service manager from Sweden identifies a need to change the laws and regulations that currently prevent their organisation from being responsive to customers – with information-sharing a prime example.

In all countries bar the US, over half of all respondents say that the pandemic response has improved digital capabilities. The US percentage is considerably lower at 43 percent.

## Next steps for responsive governments

To maintain momentum and bring people on board, governments globally need to strengthen digital infrastructure and services.

This means:

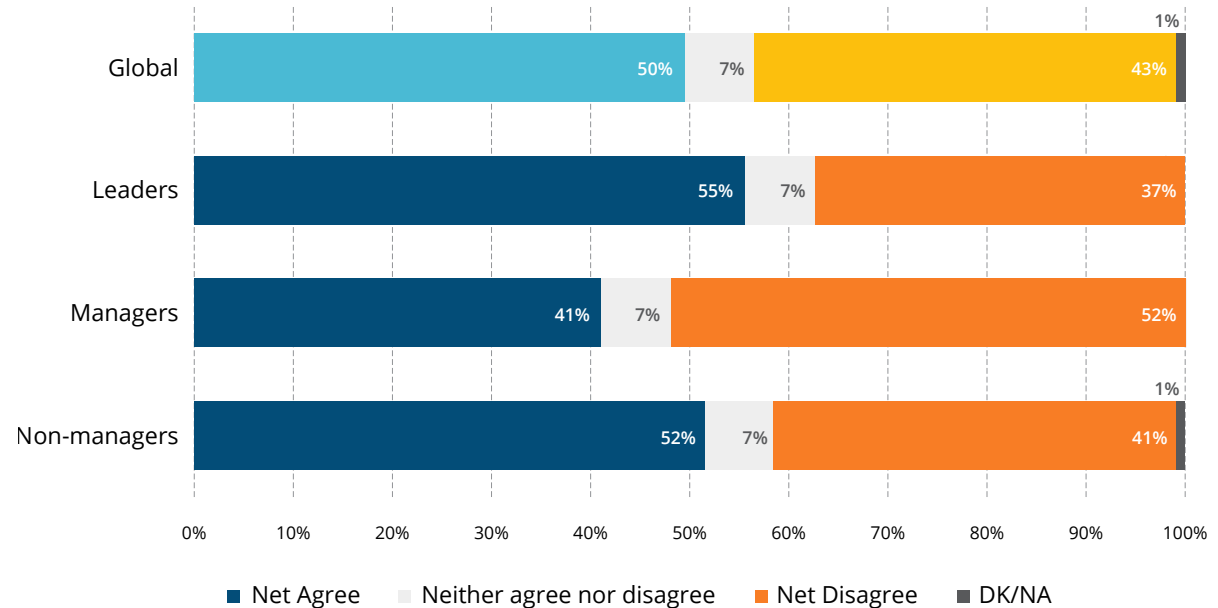
- Further integrating digital and data utilisation while ensuring those with lower digital literacy are not left behind – one leader in the Canadian public service calls for faster transition to digital solutions and accelerated support for online service provision
- Exploring innovative techniques and systems to revolutionise services, such as AI and machine learning
- Conducting pilot studies and representative test groups to assess feasibility, e.g. app-based solutions and new digital pathways for government services
- Improving access to funding to support digital transformation, which, according to the majority of senior-level officials, is currently not available
- Upskilling personnel at all levels to use technology effectively, in addition to understanding digital transformation.



## BUILDING A CITIZEN-CENTRIC CULTURE

Across the board, confidence that public services can be improved has dropped. This is due to a combination of factors, including the continual turnover of politicians, changing political dynamics, and the resulting lack of understanding around the need for long-term policy and service design. When asked if the need for long-term planning of policy and service design is well understood at ministerial level – and not impacted by election cycles – more officials disagree (40 percent) than agree (34 percent).

Staff shortages present a further obstacle to meeting citizens' needs.

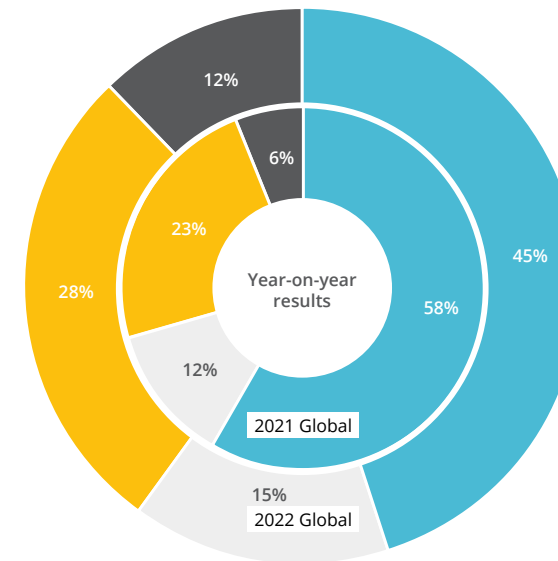


*Agreement with the survey statement: 'We have the necessary people resources to operate in an effective way'*



While a slim majority of leaders say they have the people they need for effective delivery, almost the same percentage of senior managers say they do not. Interestingly, the percentage point difference for frontline non-managers, who might feel most frustrated by the lack of staff, is positive – 52 percent agree.

Inadequate procedures have also led to reduced confidence in the ability to improve public services. The proportion of officials who believe their organisation has a cyclical improvement process that integrates citizen and end-user feedback has fallen from 58 percent in 2021 to 45 percent. This is the biggest overall decline of any category, hinting at a wide underutilisation of user feedback.



■ Net Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Net Disagree ■ DK/NA

*Agreement with the survey statement: 'We have a cyclical process for improving services, which integrates citizen and end-user feedback'*



The same proportion of public and civil servants agree that their organisation has the necessary cyclical processes to support improvement, and only around a third of respondents say their organisation considers wholesale system change for streamlined administration. Here, leaders' views match the overall response, demonstrating a consensus.

Only in one country – Denmark – do the majority of officials agree that wholesale system change is considered within their organisation. Confidence in ministerial understanding of the need for long-term policy and service design is also highest in Denmark. The lowest confidence

in ministerial understanding is in the Netherlands (21 percent) and, reflecting wider findings, the UK (23 percent).

“The view that political leadership in Denmark is better is to be expected. They have long term strategies that cross elections and are carried through over into the next government,” explains Anders Persson, public sector digitalisation expert. “There is less hierarchy, more understanding of where agencies are moving, and more communication. When only certain staff know this, change management will be tricky.”

Kim Lindskov Knudsen explains that since the 1990s, Denmark has experienced relatively strong

coordination across local, regional, and federal government bodies despite various government changes.

“This has created more coherent development over many years and supported a culture of cooperation on integrated service delivery to the public. This is well reflected in digital cross-government channels delivering services that are in unified approach.”

Despite regional differences, the research suggests that governments have not taken advantage of citizen or end-user input to inform developments and lack appropriate processes to support improvement. Herein lies the problem – but also the solution.



Respondents agree there should be a greater focus on citizens when designing and delivering services. One respondent from Canada names timely responses to client feedback as the single action that the central government should undertake to improve responsiveness, while a senior manager in New Zealand's Ministry of Social Development wants their organisation to align decision-making to community-led responses.

Positive leadership has a part to play too in helping to highlight success and countering the mostly negative feedback public servants often hear from conventional and social media.

### Next steps for responsive governments

Only through a citizen-centric culture can system-wide change be achieved and the necessary improvements be made. Processes need to be citizen-centred and developed iteratively based on ongoing feedback. Understanding requirements will support effective policy decisions and ease implementation. Leaders occupy a central role in helping civil servants to constantly improve public services. This can be achieved through use of robust measurement metrics, providing a benchmark for progress – much like the data set out in this report.

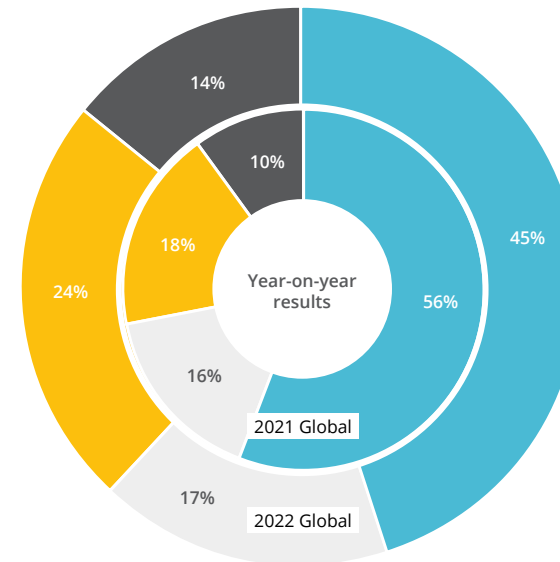
Internal systems and services should be designed with user input, testing, and redesign. By creating a citizen-centric culture that analyses user feedback to guide improvement, governments can transcend the limitations of electoral politics and make processes better for all users. Process improvement will contribute to alleviating staff shortages. Robust systems reduce administration, enabling employees to focus on what really matters – the user experience. The result? Whole system change.



## GOVERNING THROUGH A PERMACRISIS

In periods of intense uncertainty and instability, governments need to support citizens through robust services that can withstand and evolve alongside continuous change. Given the impact of recent and ongoing events in global socio-economies – namely the pandemic recovery and economic crisis sparked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the increase in industrial unrest – concern over future preparedness is to be expected.

The proportion of officials who have high confidence that their organisation has robust contingency plans that align with strategy development has fallen since 2021, from 56 percent to 45 percent. Confidence in contingency is highest in the Nordics.



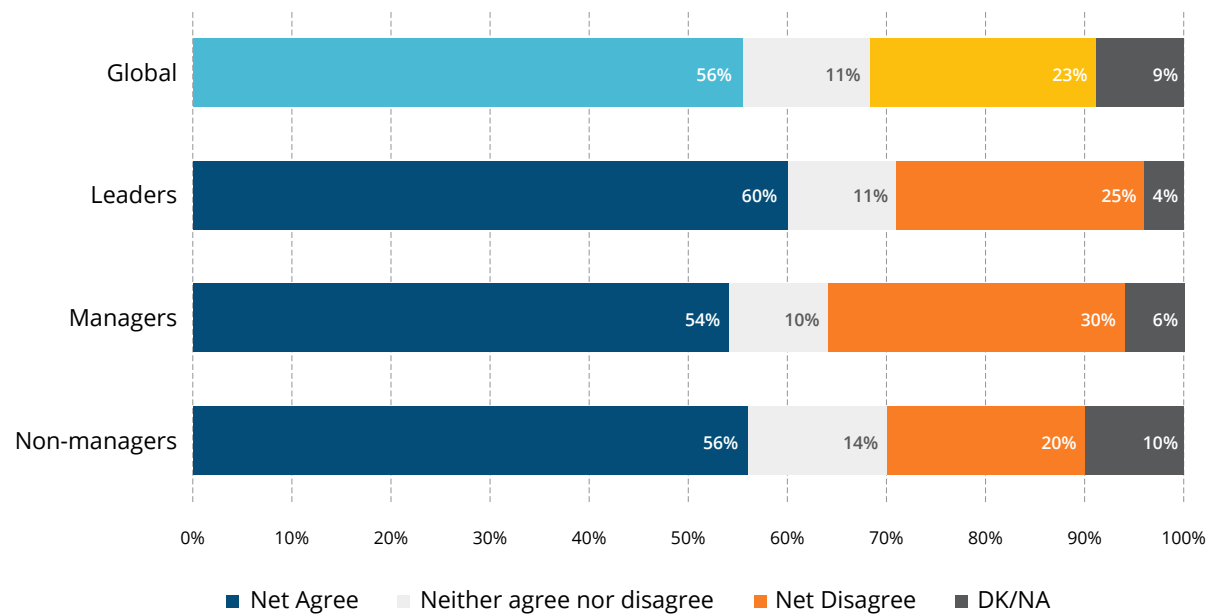
■ Net Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Net Disagree ■ DK/NA

*Agreement with the survey statement: ‘We have high confidence in our contingency plans across this organisation and are confident that they are aligned with our strategy development’*



Across seniorities, 56 percent of respondents in Norway are confident about their organisation's contingency plans, as are 52 percent in Denmark. The agreement score is also high in Australia, at 55 percent.

Although overall confidence in contingency may have dropped, change awareness is high and there is appetite to explore new opportunities arising from uncertainty. Nearly three quarters of public servants (71 percent) agree that being able to adapt to significant change is part of their organisation's long-term strategy, and over half think their organisation can capitalise on emerging opportunities.



*Agreement with the survey statement: 'We have, or are able to quickly source, the required data, information and intelligence for our decision-making'*



In line with survey-wide trends, there is greater confidence among leaders in their organisation's ability to respond to uncertainty.

While 56 percent of respondents say they can quickly source the required data, information, and intelligence for decision-making in a crisis, our broader research indicates that this may neglect citizen feedback. It is vital to understand how new obstacles shape user needs and requirements – as shown, cyclical improvement processes hold the key to iterative improvement and data-driven decisions.

Respondents particularly highlight the need for better cross-agency coordination in a crisis. An official in Canada calls for the creation of a "better communication channel between government organisations" and highlighting that "one organisation's work can be hindered by another's lack of response."

A respondent from the Norwegian government says collaboration needs to go further still, with increased coordination between government and emergency response agencies. This could be achieved through training that aimed to build a better understanding of each other's roles, capacity and resources.

The multi-headed nature of the crises facing governments now will require a different response, Michael Wernick says.

"The public sector has been very good at responding to disruptions, but over the last two years more organisations have been hit simultaneously. Now everybody feels the stress across the system, whereas it was much more episodic in the past."

According to Alexander Evans, "there is, if not a permacrisis, then at least a 'permachallenge' in government."

## Next steps for responsive governments

To effectively prepare and plan for the era of permacrisis, decision-making needs to utilise data alongside user feedback to support continuous improvement.

Government leaders need to lead by example, championing effective communication and collaboration and embedding a change mindset – one that embraces uncertainty as a breeding ground for new solutions, and ensures everyone understands organisational objectives and aims.





# CONCLUSION

A year of navigating choppy economic waters – and fully absorbing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – has led to a crisis in confidence in government responsiveness. The decline in a host of survey scores, from adaptive long-term strategy to contingency plans, show that officials are feeling the pressure.

Across geographies and seniority levels, officials face the same limitations. These barriers include a lack of funding and resources, unnecessary bureaucracy, concerns over ministerial and staff understanding, workforce shortages, and inadequate improvement mechanisms. But within each of these challenges lies the solution.

Governments can improve their responsiveness and adaptability through actionable, data-based strategies. Taken together, our five priorities have the power

to transform traditionally sluggish services into proactive, positive, digitally enabled, citizen-centric, and future-ready solutions. The benefits are clear – less pressure on officials, greater efficiency, better understanding of user needs, increased awareness of likely scenarios, and, ultimately, a higher quality experience for citizens.

Across all priorities, leaders are the key ingredient. Confidence is contagious, and those in leadership positions are best placed to build positive, confident, forward-looking teams.

As governments across the world step into uncharted territory, it is time to embrace uncertainty.



**The benefits are clear – less pressure on officials, greater efficiency, better understanding of user needs, increased awareness of likely scenarios, and, ultimately, a higher quality experience for citizens.**



# METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research for this report took place over two phases between 26 May and 13 September 2022.

We received a total of 1,796 responses from participants with a detailed understanding of the drivers of organisational performance and responsiveness. Respondents were incentivised to take part by a charity donation pledge – *Global Government Forum* (GGF) has donated £7,179 to UNICEF as a result.

Respondents completed an online self-assessment questionnaire of 45 statements and four overarching declarations. Some statements were repeated from the previous survey to allow a like-for-like comparison. Statements were grouped into the following categories:

- Overall responsiveness
- People and leadership
- Digital, data, and technology
- Policy design and service delivery
- Uncertainty and volatility.

Respondents to the survey were grouped into leaders, managers, and non-managers. For the purposes of this report, 'leaders' are broadly equivalent to the UK's

Senior Civil Service (SCS), encompassing the top five government grades by seniority. 'Managers' include mid-tier managers, as well as senior managers reporting directly to a head or director of a departmental unit. 'Non-management' includes senior advisors, analysts, science and engineering professionals, inspectors, examiners, policy officers, case managers, and specialist and technical staff.

The results of the survey were augmented with qualitative insights from subject matter experts to inform the development of the five priorities.

Thank you to all of the civil servants who took part in the survey.

We will begin to gather data for the 2024 Responsive Government Index in May 2023. Please contact [chris.punch@globalgovernmentforum.com](mailto:chris.punch@globalgovernmentforum.com) if you would like to take part.

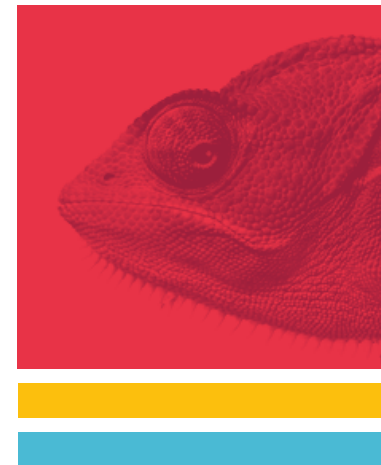
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# FURTHER INFORMATION

Full survey tables and further information can be found at [rgs.globalgovernmentforum.com](https://rgs.globalgovernmentforum.com)

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