

THE NCSTM
The National Citizen SurveyTM

Ashland, MA
Community Livability Report

DRAFT
2016



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The NCS™ is presented by NRC in collaboration with ICMA.

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About

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) report is about the “livability” of Ashland. The phrase “livable community” is used here to evoke a place that is not simply habitable, but that is desirable. It is not only where people do live, but where they want to live.

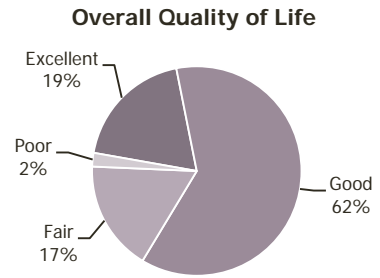
Great communities are partnerships of the government, private sector, community-based organizations and residents, all geographically connected. The NCS captures residents’ opinions within the three pillars of a community (Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation) across eight central facets of community (Safety, Mobility, Natural Environment, Built Environment, Economy, Recreation and Wellness, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement).

The Community Livability Report provides the opinions of a representative sample of 874 residents of the Town of Ashland. The margin of error around any reported percentage is 3% for the entire sample. The full description of methods used to garner these opinions can be found in the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover.



Quality of Life in Ashland

Most residents rated the quality of life in Ashland as excellent or good. This was similar to ratings given in other communities across the nation (see Appendix B of the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover).



Shown below are the eight facets of community. The color of each community facet summarizes how residents rated it across the three sections of the survey that represent the pillars of a community – Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation. When most ratings across the three pillars were higher than the benchmark, the color for that facet is the darkest shade; when most ratings were lower than the benchmark, the color is the lightest shade. A mix of ratings (higher and lower than the benchmark) results in a color between the extremes.

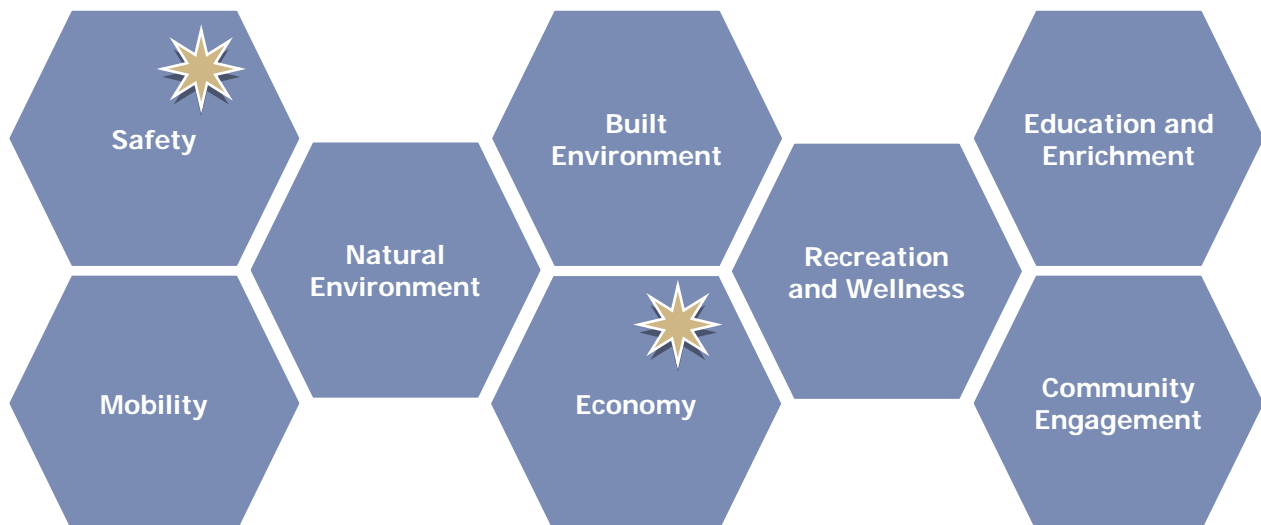
In addition to a summary of ratings, the image below includes one or more stars to indicate which community facets were the most important focus areas for the community. Residents identified Safety and Economy as priorities for the Ashland community in the coming two years. It is noteworthy that Ashland residents gave favorable ratings to both of these facets of community as well as to all other facets of livability. This overview of the key aspects of community quality provides a quick summary of where residents see exceptionally strong performance and where performance offers the greatest opportunity for improvement. Linking quality to importance offers community members and leaders a view into the characteristics of the community that matter most and that seem to be working best.

Details that support these findings are contained in the remainder of this Livability Report, starting with the ratings for Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation and ending with results for Ashland's unique questions.

Legend

- Higher than national benchmark
- Similar to national benchmark
- Lower than national benchmark

- Most important



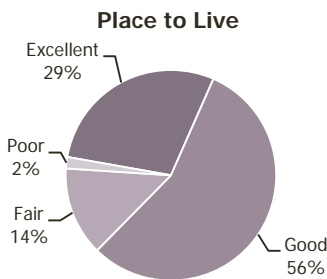
Community Characteristics

What makes a community livable, attractive and a place where people want to be?

Overall quality of community life represents the natural ambience, services and amenities that make for an attractive community. How residents rate their overall quality of life is an indicator of the overall health of a community. In the case of Ashland, 85% rated the Town as an excellent or good place to live. Respondents' ratings of Ashland as a place to live were similar to ratings in other communities across the nation.

In addition to rating the Town as a place to live, respondents rated several aspects of community quality including Ashland as a place to raise children and to retire, their neighborhood as a place to live, the overall image or reputation of Ashland and its overall appearance. About 9 in 10 residents positively rated Ashland as a place to raise children, and about 8 in 10 were pleased with their neighborhood as a place to live. About two-thirds of respondents gave excellent or good ratings to the overall image and overall appearance of Ashland, and about half gave favorable ratings to Ashland as a place to retire. All of these ratings were similar to the benchmark with the exception of Ashland as a place to retire, which was lower.

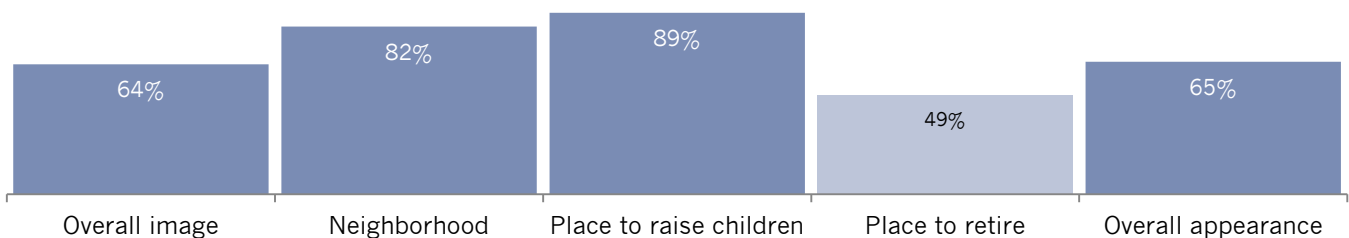
Delving deeper into Community Characteristics, survey respondents rated over 40 features of the community within the eight facets of Community Livability. Nearly all survey respondents gave positive ratings to all aspects of Safety, including the overall feeling of safety in Ashland and the feeling of safety in Ashland's downtown/commercial areas. Ratings for aspects of Natural Environment, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement also tended to be strong and similar to the benchmark, particularly for air quality (90% excellent or good) and K-12 education (87%). Within these three facets, only one aspect, adult educational opportunities, was rated lower than the benchmark. Ratings for Mobility and Economy tended to be more mixed. While some aspects of Mobility were rated positively by a majority of respondents and were similar to the benchmark (including the overall ease of travel in Ashland, ease of travel by car, public parking and traffic flow), other aspects (including the availability of paths and walking trails, ease of walking and ease of travel by bicycle) received ratings lower than seen elsewhere. Within Economy, about half of residents gave positive ratings to the overall economic health of Ashland and the overall quality of business and service establishments, which were similar to ratings given in other communities. However, only about 4 in 10 residents or fewer favorably rated Ashland as a place to work and to visit, shopping opportunities and the vibrancy of Ashland's downtown/commercial areas; these aspects were rated lower than the benchmark.



Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



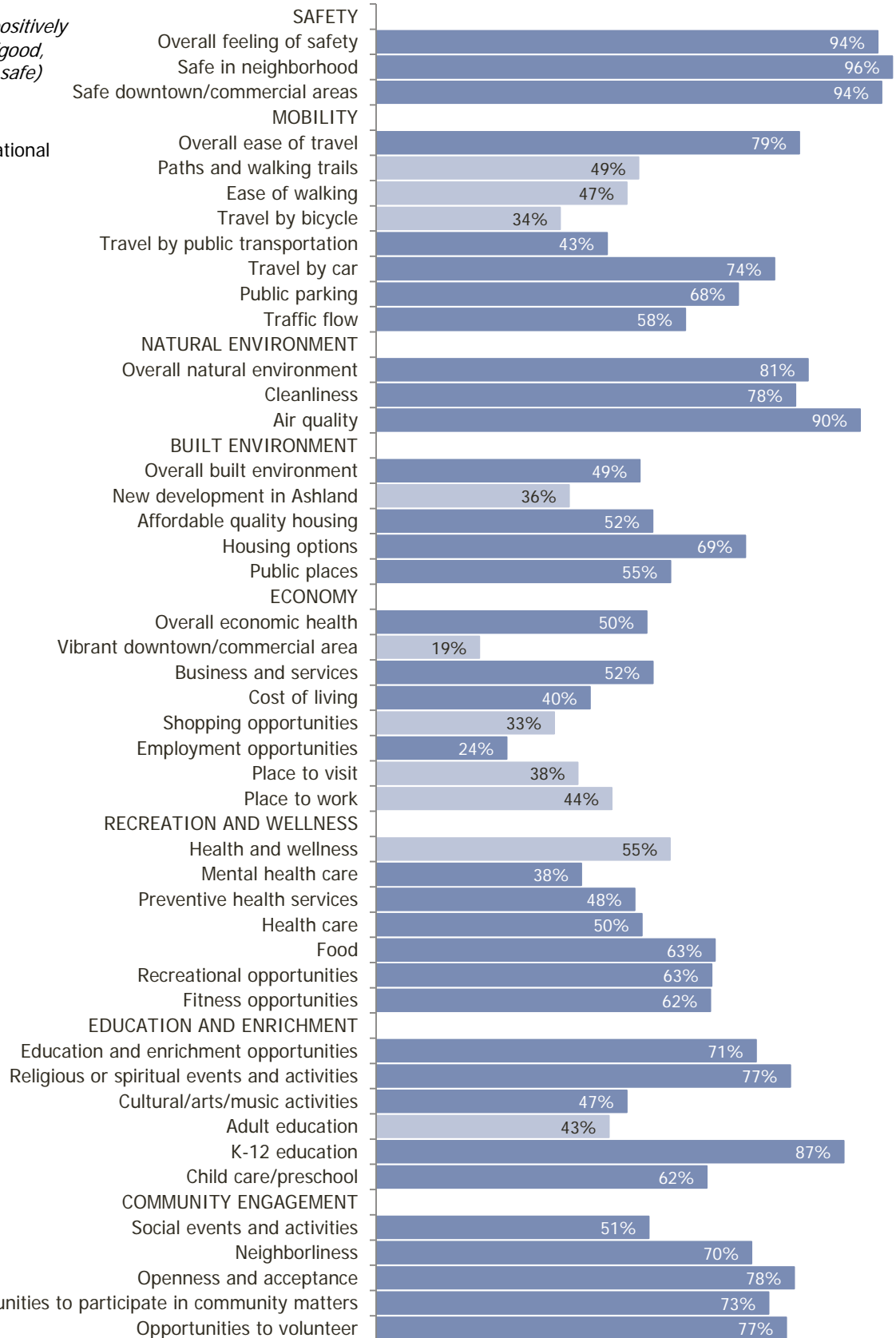
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Figure 1: Aspects of Community Characteristics

*Percent rating positively
(e.g., excellent/good,
very/somewhat safe)*

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



Governance

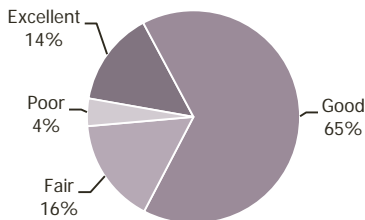
How well does the government of Ashland meet the needs and expectations of its residents?

The overall quality of the services provided by Ashland as well as the manner in which these services are provided are a key component of how residents rate their quality of life. In Ashland, about 8 in 10 residents gave positive ratings to the overall quality of Town services and about half favorably rated the services provided by the Federal Government; these ratings were similar to ratings given elsewhere across the nation.

Survey respondents also rated various aspects of Ashland’s leadership and governance. About 8 in 10 residents gave excellent or good ratings to the overall customer service by Ashland employees, and about 6 in 10 were pleased with the job Ashland government does at welcoming citizen involvement, government acting in the best interest of Ashland, being honest and treating all residents fairly. All general aspects of Governance received ratings that were similar to the benchmark.

Respondents evaluated over 30 individual services and amenities available in Ashland. Nearly all services in Ashland were rated positively by at least a majority of respondents and were rated similar to the benchmark. Ratings were particularly strong within the facet of Safety: about 9 in 10 residents gave excellent or good ratings to fire and ambulance/EMS services as well as to crime prevention and fire prevention. Additionally, crime prevention was rated higher than ratings given elsewhere. Ratings also tended to be strong within Built Environment. About 7 in 10 respondents or more were pleased with storm drainage, sewer services, power utility, utility billing and cable television, and cable television was rated higher than the benchmark. The only aspect of Governance to be rated lower than ratings given in other communities was economic development.

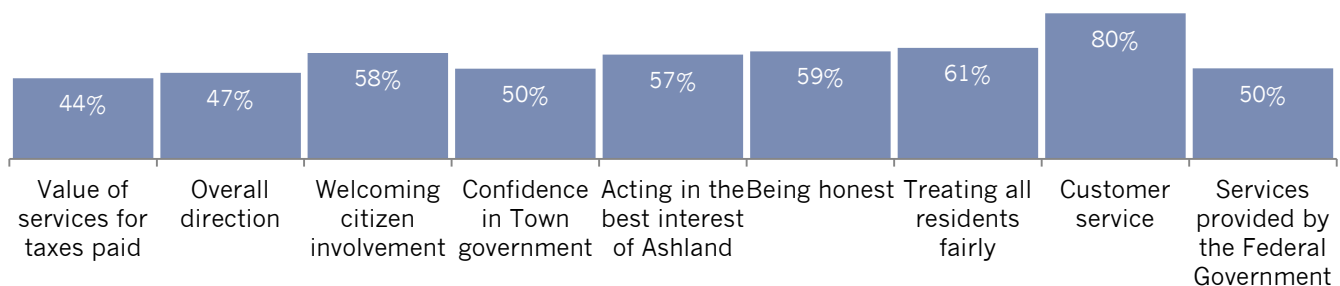
Overall Quality of Town Services



Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



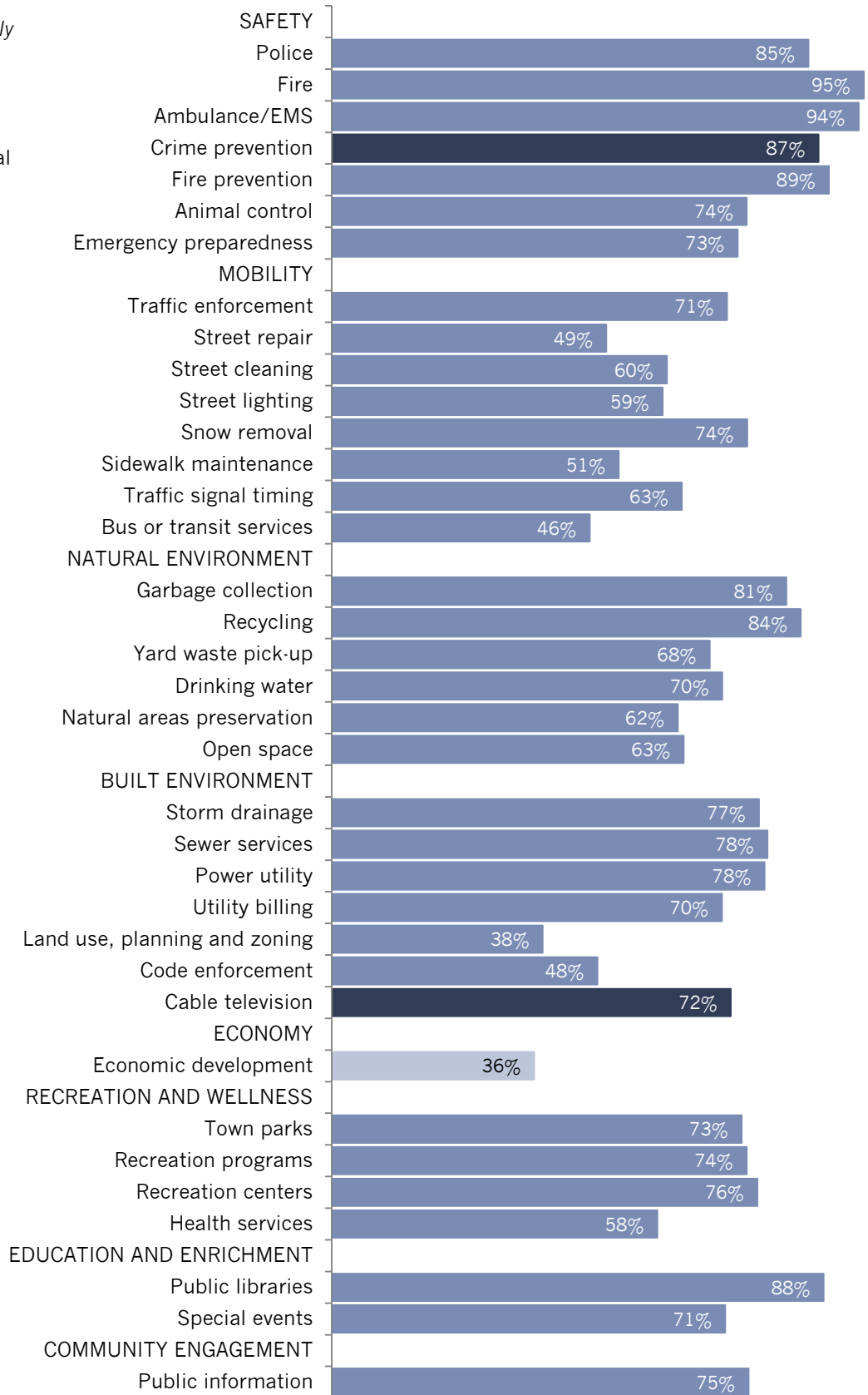
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Figure 2: Aspects of Governance

Percent rating positively
(e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower

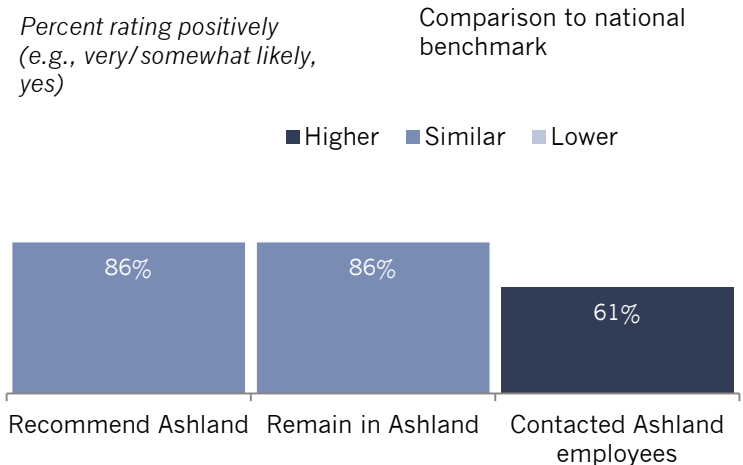
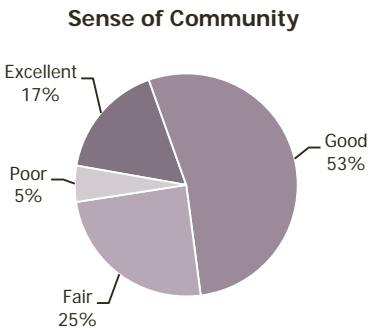


Participation

Are the residents of Ashland connected to the community and each other?

An engaged community harnesses its most valuable resource, its residents. The connections and trust among residents, government, businesses and other organizations help to create a sense of community, a shared sense of membership, belonging and history. In Ashland, about 7 in 10 survey participants rated the sense of community in the Town as excellent or good, which was similar to ratings given elsewhere. Further, more than 8 in 10 residents indicated that they planned to remain in Ashland for the next five years and would recommend living in Ashland to someone who asked. About 6 in 10 residents had contacted the Town of Ashland in the 12 months prior to the survey, a contact rate which was higher than the benchmark.

The survey included over 30 activities and behaviors for which respondents indicated how often they participated in or performed each, if at all. Rates of Participation across the different facets tended to vary widely. While the majority of participation rates tended to be similar to rates observed in other communities nationwide, quite a few were higher than the benchmark. Nearly all residents reported that they recycled and that they were not under housing cost stress, and more residents in Ashland than elsewhere reported that they did not report a crime to the police, did not observe a code violation, and had attended or watched a local public meeting. On the other hand, fewer than half of residents reported that they had walked or biked instead of driving, participated in religious or spiritual activities in the 12 months prior to the survey or that they worked in Ashland; these rates were lower than seen in communities elsewhere.



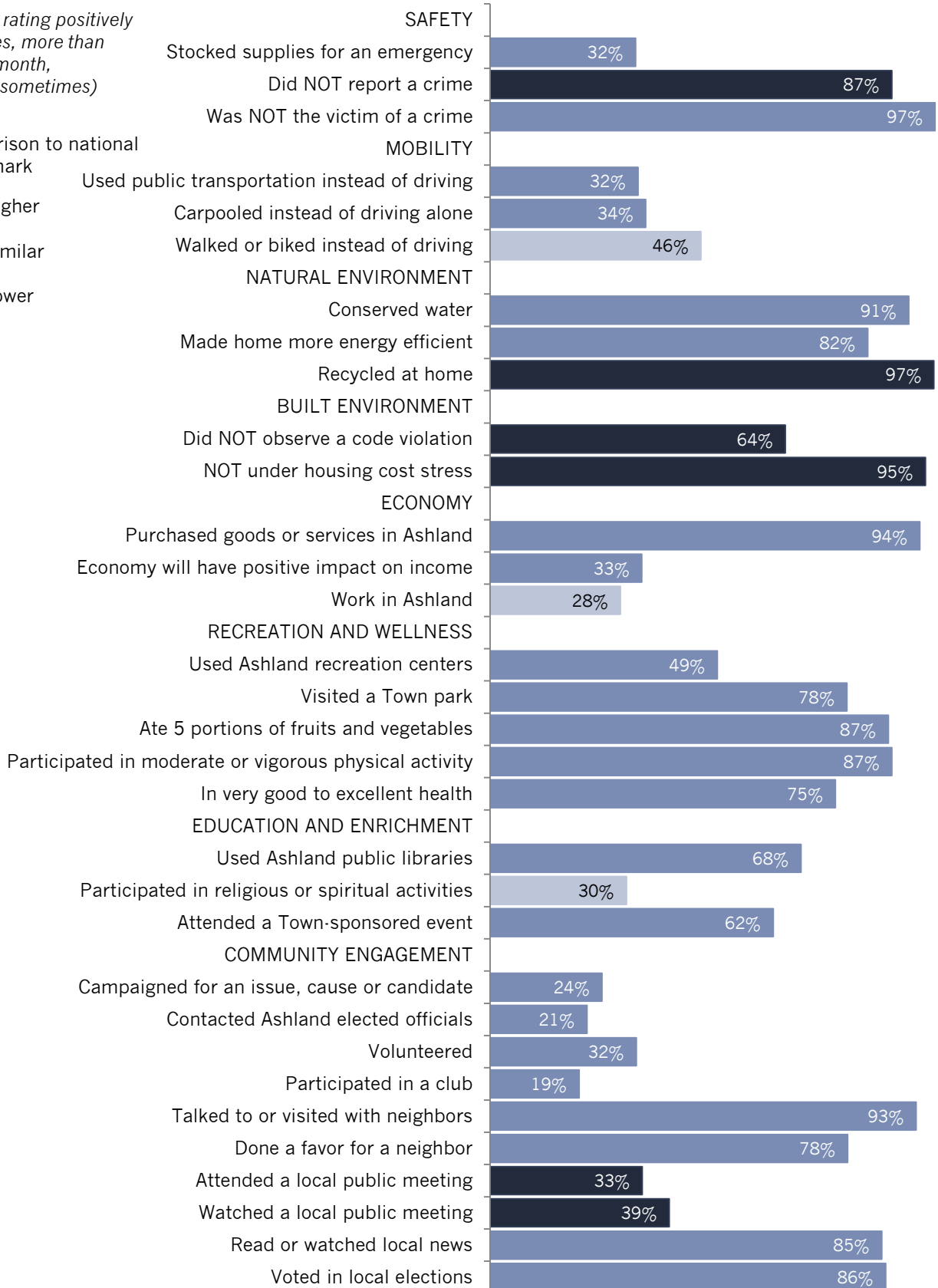
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Figure 3: Aspects of Participation

Percent rating positively
(e.g., yes, more than
once a month,
always/sometimes)

Comparison to national
benchmark

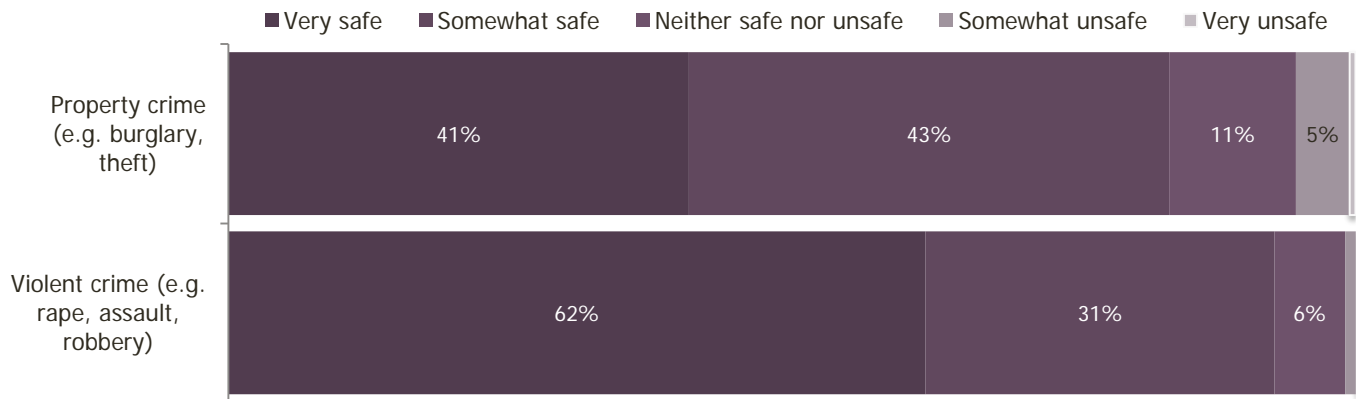
- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



Special Topics

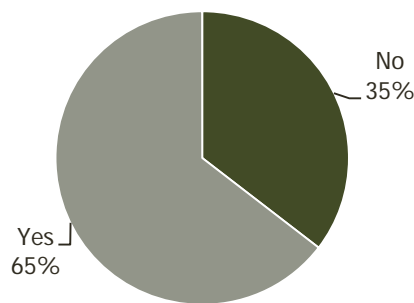
The Town of Ashland included several questions of special interest on The NCS. The first question asked residents to indicate their feelings of safety from property crime and violent crime in Ashland. About 9 in 10 residents felt very or somewhat safe from violent crime, while about 8 in 10 felt safe from property crime. Very few residents reported feeling very unsafe from either type of crime.

Figure 4: Feelings of Safety from Crime in Ashland
Please rate how safe or unsafe you feel from the following in Ashland:



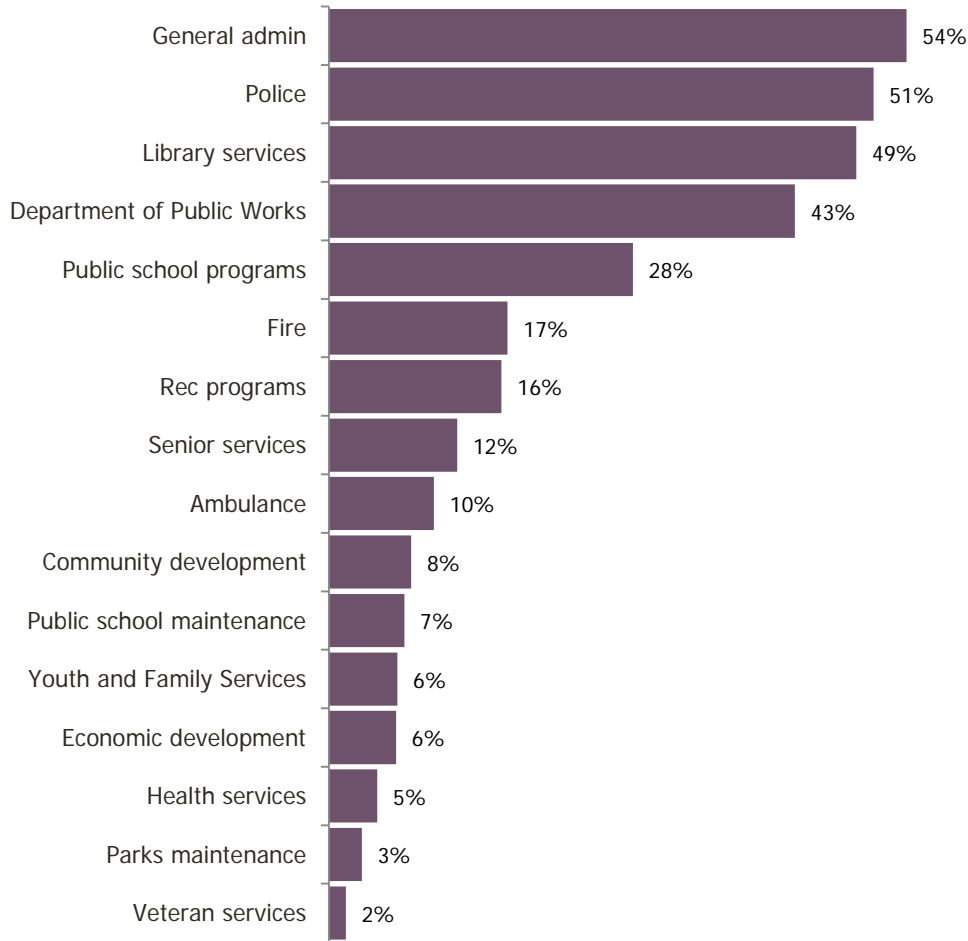
Respondents were next asked whether they had had any contact with a Town employee in the 12 months prior to the survey. About two-thirds of residents reported having contact with a Town employee, while about one-third had not.

Figure 5: Contact with Town of Ashland Employees
Have you had any in-person or phone contact with an employee of the Town of Ashland within the last 12 months (including police, receptionists, planners or any others)?



Residents who indicated in the previous question that they had had contact with a Town Department in the past 12 months were asked with which departments the contact was made. About half of respondents reported having contact with the General Admin, Police, or Library Services departments, about 4 in 10 had contacted the Department of Public Works and about one-quarter had had contact with Public school programs. Only about 5% or less had had contact with the Health services, Parks maintenance, or Veteran services departments.

Figure 6: Contact with Town Departments
Which Town departments have you had contact with in the past 12 months? (Please select all that apply.)



Total may exceed 100% as respondents could select more than one option.

Respondents were then asked to rate the knowledge, responsiveness and courtesy of the Town employee they had most recently had contact with in each department, as well as their overall impression of that employee. Figure 7 through Figure 22 on the following pages show the positive ratings (percent excellent or good) of Town employees by department. Overall, ratings for the overall impression of Town employees was strong, with at least half of respondents rating each aspect of each department as excellent or good. Nearly all residents who had contact with Library, rec program, ambulance, senior service and fire department employees were pleased with their interactions. Meanwhile, Ashland residents were less inclined to rate their interactions with Health service employees as excellent or good compared to other department employees.

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Figure 7: Impression of General Admin Employees

What was your impression of the General Admin employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

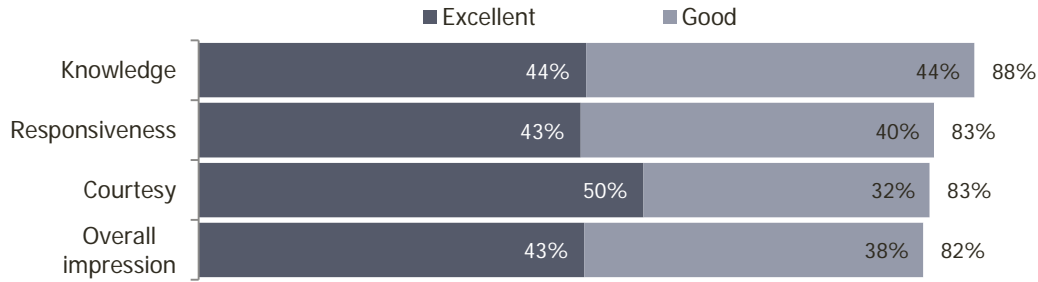


Figure 8: Impression of Library Services Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Library Services employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

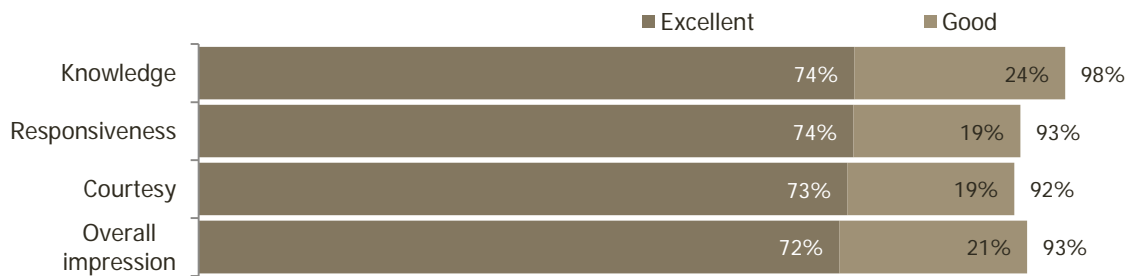


Figure 9: Impression of Rec Programs Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Rec Programs employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

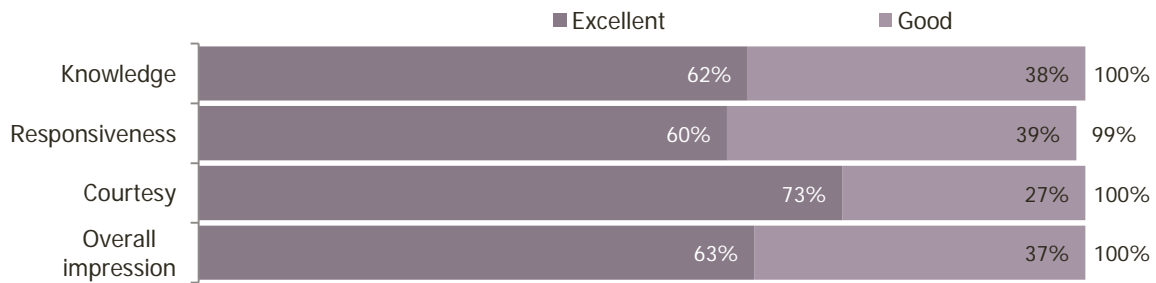
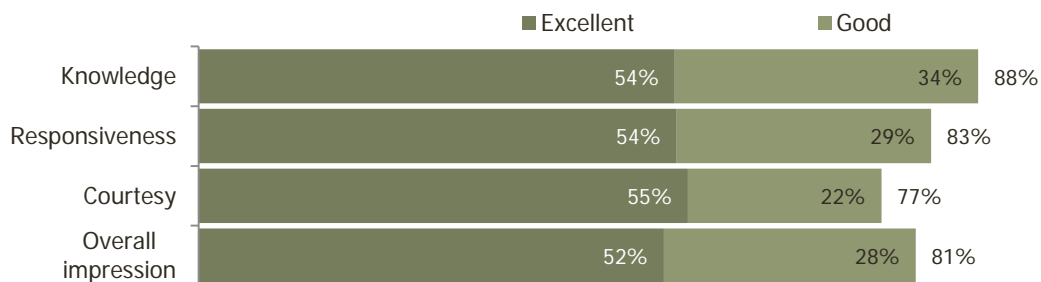


Figure 10: Impression of Police Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Police employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)



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Figure 11: Impression of Community Development Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Community Development employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

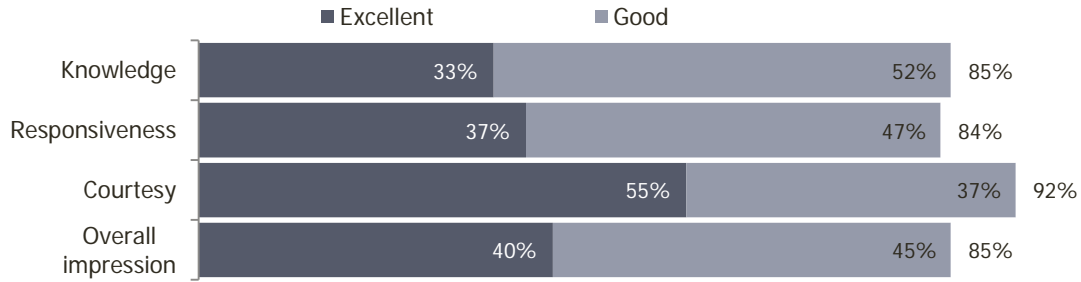


Figure 12: Impression of Ambulance Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Ambulance employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

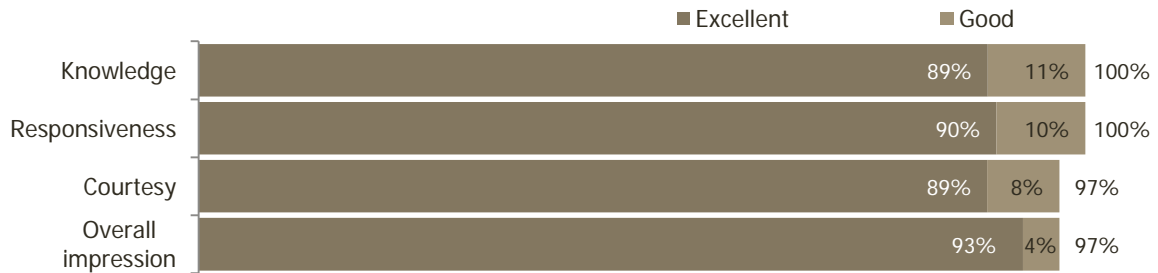


Figure 13: Impression of Health Services Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Health services employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)



Figure 14: Impression of Senior Services Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Senior services employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)



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Figure 15: Impression of Public School Maintenance Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Public school maintenance employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

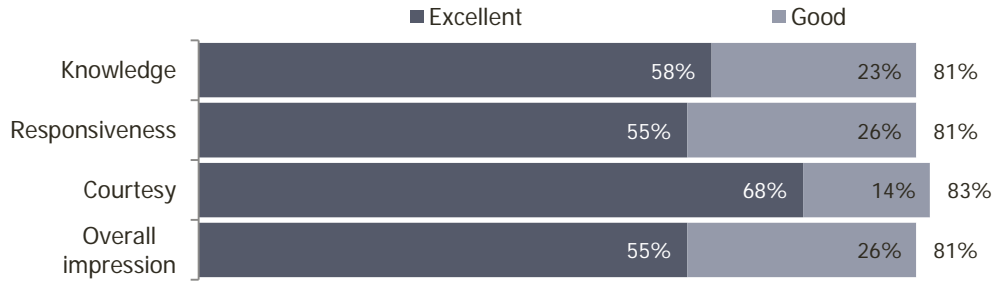


Figure 16: Impression of Department of Public Works Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Department of Public Works employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

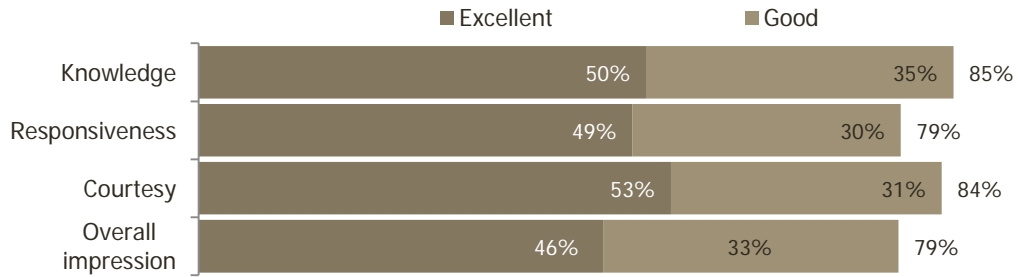


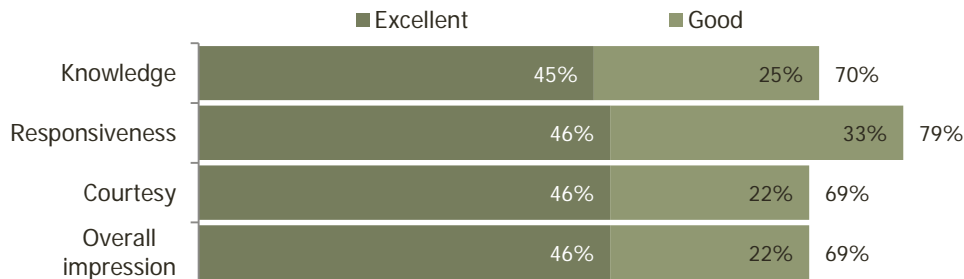
Figure 17: Impression of Fire Department Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Fire Department employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)



Figure 18: Impression of Youth and Family Services Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Youth and Family Services employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)



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Figure 19: Impression of Parks Maintenance Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Parks Maintenance employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

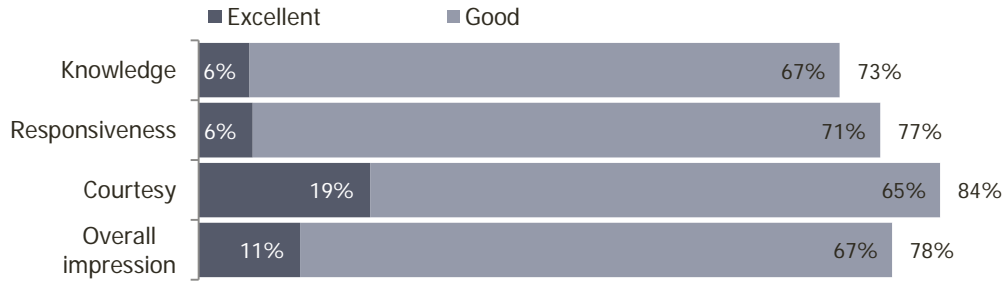


Figure 20: Impression of Economic Development Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Economic development employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

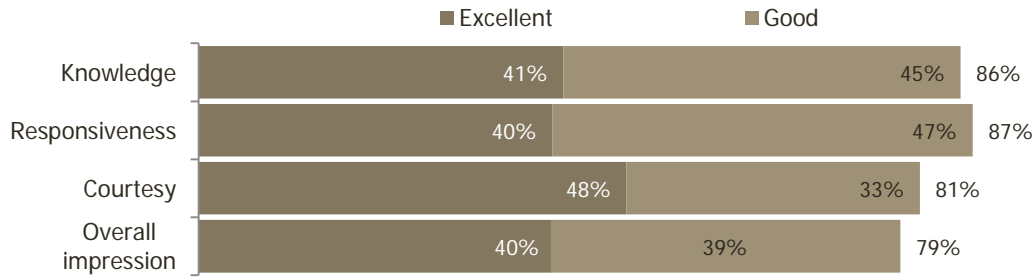


Figure 21: Impression of Public School Programs Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Public school programs employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

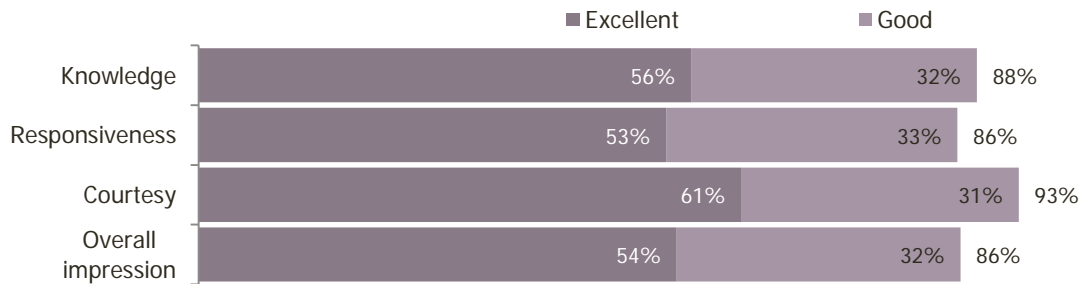
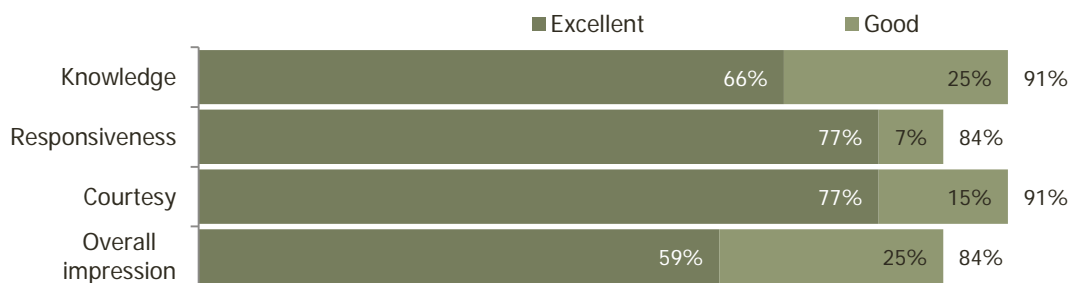


Figure 22: Impression of Veteran Services Employee(s)

What was your impression of the Veteran services employee(s) of the Town of Ashland in your most recent contact? (Rate each characteristic below.)

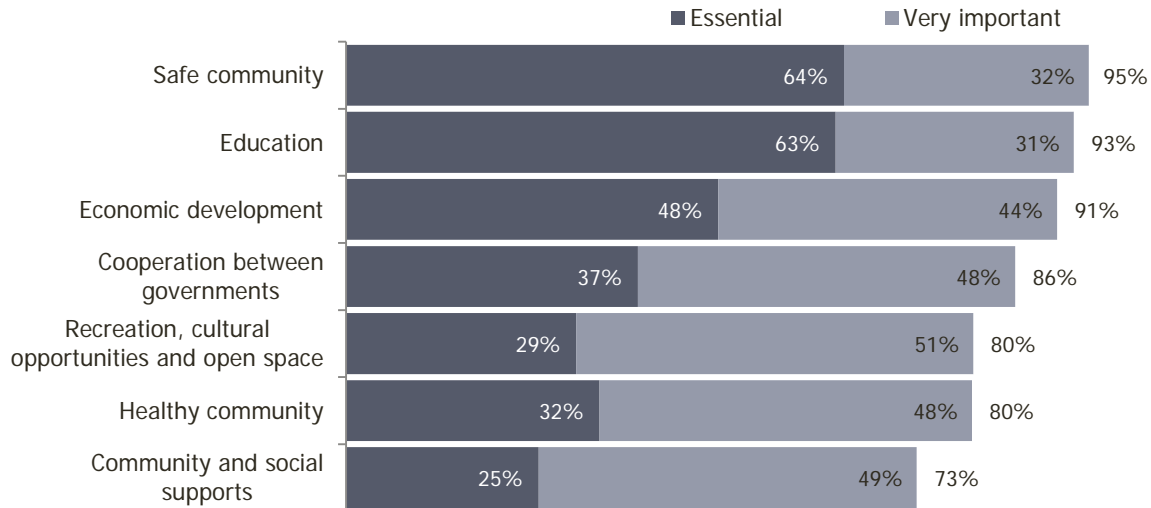


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The next special-interest question asked residents to indicate how important they thought each of seven strategic planning areas were to the overall quality of life in Ashland. At least 9 in 10 residents thought that a safe community, education and economic development were essential or very important to the quality of life in the Town. It is noteworthy that at least 7 in 10 residents rated all listed strategic planning areas as essential or very important.

Figure 23: Importance of Strategic Planning Areas

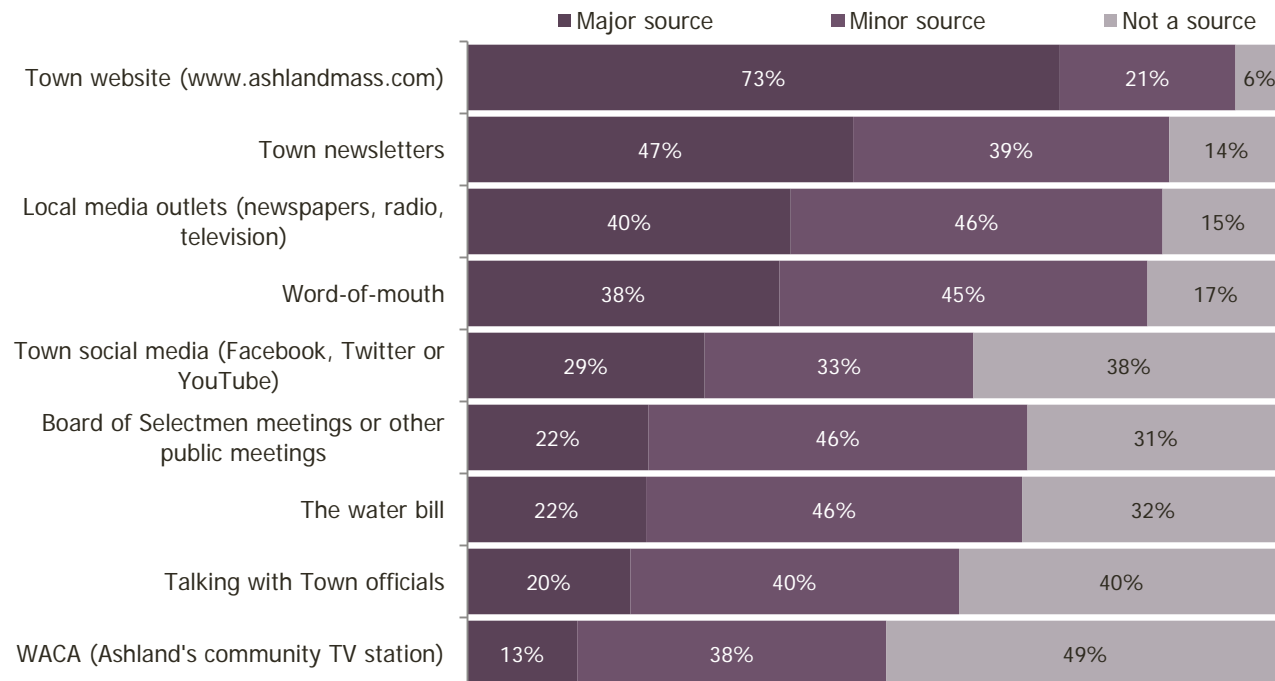
Please rate how important, if at all, each of the following strategic planning areas are to the overall quality of life in the Town:



The following special-interest question asked residents to rate how much of a source they considered each of a list of possible sources of information to be for informing themselves about the Town. Almost all residents indicated that they used the Town website as a major or minor source of information, and at least 8 in 10 considered Town newsletters, local media outlets and word-of-mouth to be at least minor sources.

Figure 24: Sources of Information About the Town

Please indicate how much of a source, if at all, you consider each of the following to be for obtaining information about the Town government and its activities, events and services:



Conclusions

Life is good in Ashland.

Most residents rated their quality of life positively and think Ashland is an excellent or good place to live. Most survey participants gave positive ratings for their neighborhood as a place to live and Ashland as a place to raise children, and about two-thirds favorably rated the overall appearance and overall image of the Town. More than 8 in 10 survey participants plan on remaining in Ashland for the next five years and would recommend living in Ashland to others.

Safety is important to residents and received high ratings.

Safety was identified as an important area of focus in the coming years, and many aspects of Safety were rated positively by a majority of residents. Nearly all survey respondents gave positive ratings to the overall feeling of safety in Ashland and the feeling of safety in Ashland's downtown/commercial areas, as well as to fire services, ambulance/EMS services, crime prevention and fire prevention. Furthermore, crime prevention and the proportion of residents who had not reported a crime to the police were both rated higher than communities elsewhere. When asked to indicate their feelings of safety from property crime and violent crime in Ashland, very few residents reported feeling unsafe.

Economy is also a priority to residents and a potential focus area for the Town.

Residents also identified Economy as an important area of focus in the next two years. About half of residents gave positive ratings to the overall economic health of Ashland and the overall quality of business and service establishments, which were similar to ratings given in other communities. However, only about 4 in 10 residents or fewer favorably rated Ashland as a place to work and to visit, shopping opportunities, the vibrancy of Ashland's downtown/commercial areas and economic development, and these aspects were rated lower than the benchmark. When asked to indicate how important they thought each of seven strategic planning areas were to the overall quality of life in Ashland, about 9 in 10 residents felt that economic development was an essential or very important planning area.

Residents have a high rate of contact with Town employees and tend to rate those interactions favorably.

About 6 in 10 residents had contacted the Town of Ashland in the 12 months prior to the survey, a contact rate which was higher than the benchmark. Of the residents who had had contact with a Town employee, about half of respondents had contacted the General Admin, Police, or Library Services departments, about 4 in 10 had contacted the Department of Public Works and about one-quarter had had contact with Public school programs. Further, overall impression of Town employees generally received positive ratings within each department, some receiving favorable ratings from nearly all residents who had reported contacting the department. When respondents were asked to rate the knowledge, responsiveness and courtesy of the Town employee they had most recently had contact with in each department, these ratings across most Town departments also tended to be positive.