

Research Report



Council Tax Precept Survey 2020/21

Prepared for: Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service

Prepared by: Sharon Gowland, Research Manager

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Project: 1976

Registered in England No. 2841970

Registered office:

BMG Research

Beech House

Greenfield Crescent

Edgbaston

Birmingham

B15 3BE

UK

Tel: +44 (0) 121 3336006

UK VAT Registration No. 580 6606 32

Birmingham Chamber of Commerce Member No. B4626

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and method

In October 2019, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (DSFRS) commissioned BMG Research to undertake a survey amongst 400 businesses and 400 residents. The purpose of the surveys was to assess the opinions of business decision makers and residents on how DSFRS should approach setting its budget for 2020/21 and on whether the Service is currently deemed to be providing value for money.

The questionnaire for the survey was provided by DSFRS. The contacts for the survey were purchased by BMG Research from a commercial database provider. To ensure the survey was broadly representative, quotas were set by local authority district (LAD), number of employees and broad industry sector for the business survey and local authority district, age and gender for the resident survey. The data has been weighted (adjusted) by these characteristics to correct for any under or over-representation in the final data set.

In total, 395 interviews with businesses and 392 interviews with residents were completed during November and December 2019. Details of the profile of the sample can be found in Appendix 1.

On a sample of c.400 the confidence interval at the 95% level is +/- 4.9%. This means that if a statistic of 50% was observed, we can be 95% confident that the true response among the total population lies between 45.1% and 54.9%.

This report summarises the main findings from both surveys.

2 Survey Findings

2.1 Whether it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its element of the Council Tax charge for 2020/21

Respondents were provided with the following contextual information regarding DSFRS:

“Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority is committed to its ambitious plans to end preventable fire and rescue emergencies across the two counties while addressing the funding cuts passed down by the Government. The service provides 85 local fire stations across Devon and Somerset and employs about 2,000 staff, helping to keep safe a population of 1.7 million. On average, we attend about 16,400 incidents each year, which includes fires, road traffic collisions, flooding and other emergencies. The Authority is seeking feedback about the level of council tax precept for the coming year and how satisfied you are with the service it provides.”

They were then informed of the following:

“Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Authority is considering its Council Tax charges for 2020/21. The current charge is £86.52 a year for a Band ‘D’ property. Over the last few years the Government has reduced the funding provided for the fire and rescue service and this will continue. By 2023, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service need to reduce costs by £8.4 million. The service will need to plan a balanced budget that accommodates this while continuing to support communities.”

Respondents were asked how strongly they agree or disagree that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its Council Tax charge for 2020/21.

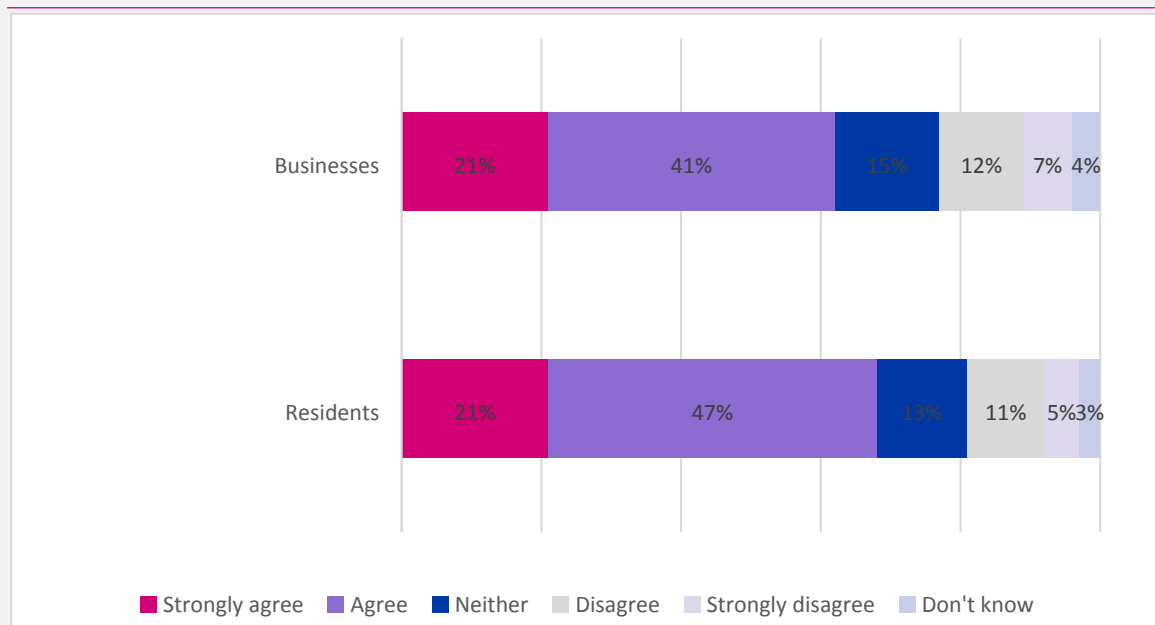
Over three in five (62%) businesses agreed that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its Council Tax charge for 2020/21, while a fifth (19%) disagreed that it is reasonable for them to do so, resulting in a net agreement¹ of +43%.

Agreement was consistent by industry sector, gender and age. However, by LAD, agreement was significantly higher than average amongst businesses in Devon (68%) and significantly lower amongst businesses in Somerset (54%).

Over three in five (68%) residents agreed that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its Council Tax charge for 2020/21, while 16% disagreed, giving a net agreement of +52%.

Agreement was consistent by LAD, gender and age. Those respondents who had used a DSFRS service in the last 12 months were more likely to agree than those who had not (80% cf. 64% who have not used a DSFRS service).

Figure 1: Agreement or disagreement that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its Council Tax charge for 2020/21 (All respondents)



Unweighted sample base: 395 businesses, 392 residents

¹ Net agreement = the proportion who strongly agree/agree minus the proportion who disagree/strongly disagree.

2.2 Level of increase that would be reasonable

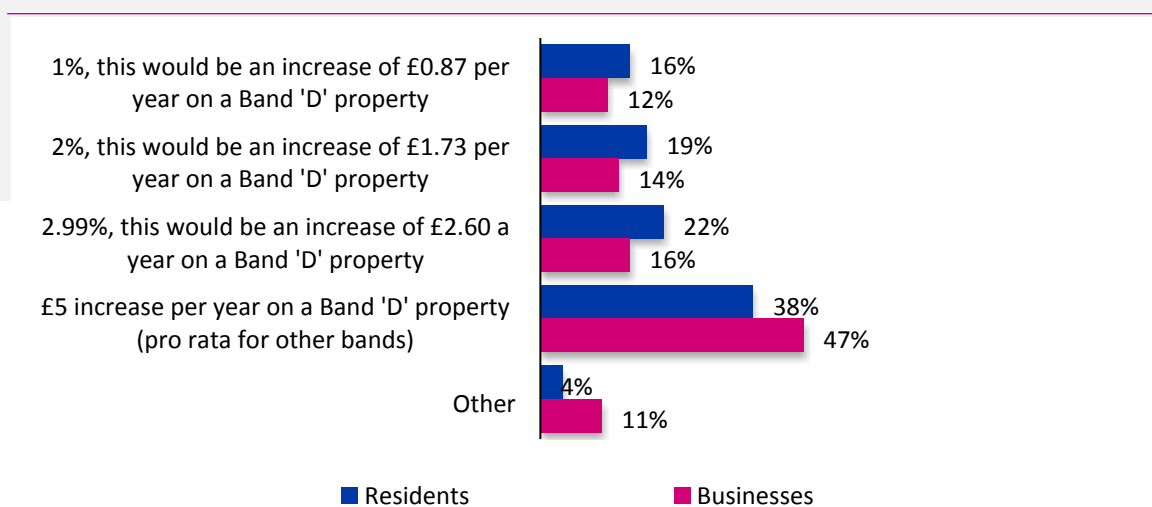
Those respondents who agreed that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its Council Tax Charge for 2020/21 were asked at what level the increase should be;

- 1%, this would be an increase of £0.87 per year on a Band 'D' property – increasing the total charge to £87.39
- 1.99%, this would be an increase of £1.73 per year on a Band 'D' property – increasing the total charge to £88.25
- 2.99%, this would be an increase of £2.51 a year on a Band 'D' property – increasing the total charge to £89.12
- £5 increase per year on a Band 'D' property (pro rata for other bands) – increasing the total charge to £91.52
- Some other level of increase

The largest proportion of businesses opted for a £5 increase (47%) followed by either a 2.99% increase or a 2% increase (16% and 14% respectively) which was consistent by LAD, industry sector, gender and age.

Consistent with businesses the largest proportion of residents opted for a £5 increase (38%) followed by a 2.99% increase (22%) and a 2% increase (19%). However, there was some variation by LAD. Those in Plymouth were less likely than average to state a £5 increase (23%) but more likely to state a 2.99% increase (34%). Those in Devon were more likely than average to state a 1% increase (23%) and those in Somerset were less likely to mention this (7%).

Figure 2: Level of increase that would be reasonable (Those respondents agreeing that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its Council Tax charge for 2020/21)



Unweighted sample base: 243 businesses, 269 residents

2.3 Reasons for disagreeing that it is reasonable for DSFRS to increase its element of the Council Tax charge for 2020/21

Those respondents who disagreed that it is reasonable for DSFRS to consider increasing its element of the Council Tax charge for 2020/21 (19% of businesses and 16% of residents) were asked why they disagreed. Typical comments made by respondents are highlighted below.

2.3.1 Businesses

“Doesn't make sense to cut funding and then increase taxes. I don't have a problem in the increase if it is passed to DSFRS and not used elsewhere, on silly things like parking, etc.”

“I think we are paying huge amounts on rates already for commercial property.”

“There's other ways to raise money.”

“Expect more stations and fire fighters if council tax increases.”

“Happy for fire and rescue authority to have more money, but not sure where the money goes. It's too much for small businesses already to manage the costs.”

“Council should provide funding, and stop wasting money on irrelevant things like Palm trees from abroad. We have them in this country. They should provide funding for more worthwhile and relevant services.”

“Mis-management of funds, not necessarily the fire and rescue service, unnecessary spending of money when they could be put to better use on the fire and safety instead.”

“They need to be efficient at the job instead of more funding.”

2.3.2 Residents

“Why would they want to charge us more when in return they are giving less service.”

“I think that central government that have made this cut needs to reverse them.”

“I think the government should pay for it.”

“I think the fire and rescue service have received a large spending budget and they tend to waste it on bureaucracy.”

“I can't afford it as a pensioner.”

“My council tax is very expensive now, can't afford to pay anymore.”

“We pay a lot of money at the moment and it's not always efficiently used.”

“They do a very a good job but its everything is just going up.”

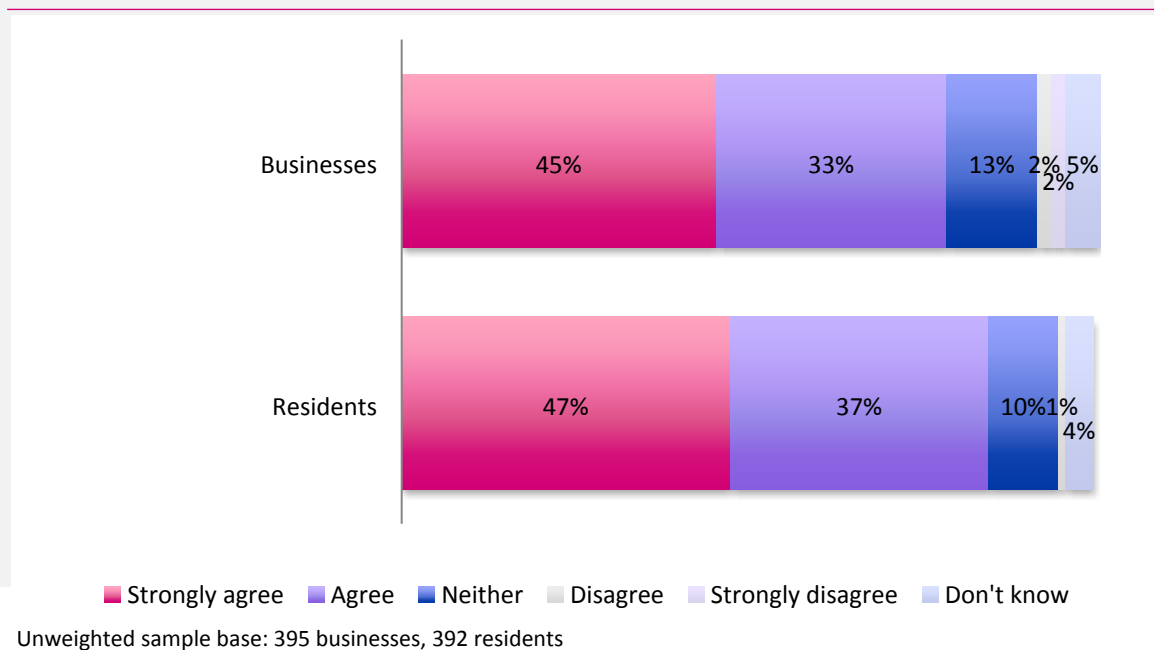
2.4 Agreement or disagreement that DSFRS provides value for money

All respondents were asked if they agree or disagree that DSFRS provides value for money.

Close to four in five (78%) businesses agreed that DSFRS does provide value for money, with only 3% disagreeing, resulting in a net agreement of +75%. Although we have seen a significant decrease in agreement this year from 84%, this is due to an increase in businesses saying neither agree nor disagree rather than an increase in those disagreeing. Those who had not used any DSFRS services in the last 12 months were more likely to say this (15% neither/nor cf. 5% of those who had used DSFRS services). Views were consistent by industry sector, gender and age. Businesses in Somerset were less likely to agree than the average overall (72% cf. 78%).

Views were even more positive among residents, with 84% agreeing that DSFRS does provide value for money and only 2% disagreeing, resulting in a net agreement of +82%. Views were consistent by LAD, gender and age. Residents who had used a DSFRS service in the last 12 months were noticeably more positive about value for money (92% agreed cf. 82% who had not used a DSFRS service).

Figure 3: Agreement or disagreement that DSFRS provides value for money (All respondents)



2.5.2 Residents

"They sit down and do nothing, but do provide value for money when they are working."

"I think there are too many fire stations and too many employees."

"I never see any services provided by them."

"They have too much equipment and have bigger wages. They get too much money and they aren't very good at putting out fires."

2.6 Services used

To contextualise the findings reported above, all respondents were asked if they had used any of ten specific services provided across Devon and Somerset in the last 12 months. Respondents had previously been asked whether they had ever used any of the services.

Overall, one in five (20%) businesses reported using at least one of the services in the last 12 months, most commonly a fire safety audit/check (13%) at a business with businesses in Plymouth significantly more likely than average to mention this (27%).

Similarly, for residents over one in five (22%) reported using at least one of the services in the last 12 months, with a community event being the most common (10%) followed by home fire safety visit (8%).

Residents in Torbay were more likely than average to say they had used a service in the last 12 months (33%).

Table 1 Services used

	Businesses	Residents
Fire safety audit / check in a business	13%	5%
Home fire safety visit / smoke alarm fitting	2%	8%
Community event	3%	10%
Emergency response - house fire	2%	4%
Community use of fire stations	1%	4%
Youth education	1%	5%
Emergency response - road traffic collision	1%	3%
Emergency response - rescue	1%	2%
Emergency response - flooding	1%	2%
Public consultation event for the Safer Together Programme	1%	5%
Other service	1%	2%
I have not used a Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue service	80%	78%
Unweighted sample base: 395 businesses, 392 residents		

2.7 Satisfaction with the service provided by DSFRS

All respondents were asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with the service provided by DSFRS.

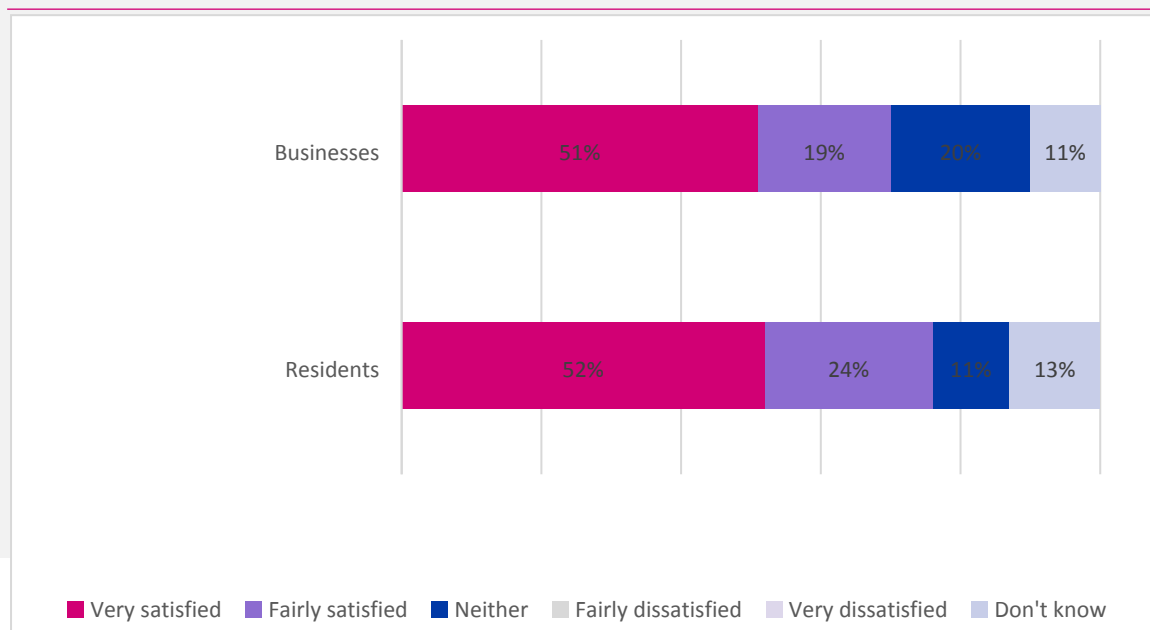
Close to seven in ten (69%) businesses were satisfied with the service provided, and only 1% expressed dissatisfaction, yielding a net level of satisfaction of +68%. Although again this is a significant decrease from the 80% agreement seen previously, this is due to an increase in businesses saying neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (20%).

Levels of satisfaction significantly increased amongst those who had used a DSFRS service in the last 12 months from 65% amongst those who have not used a service to 86%.

Three quarters of residents (75%) were satisfied with the service provided, and less than 0.5% expressed dissatisfaction, yielding a net level of satisfaction of +75%. Although satisfaction has decreased significantly from 83% last year, this is due to an increase of residents stating neither/nor rather than being dissatisfied.

Levels of satisfaction significantly increased amongst those who had used a DSFRS service in the last 12 months from 70% amongst those who have not used a service to 95%.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with the service provided by DSFRS (All respondents)



Unweighted sample base: 395 businesses, 392 residents

Only 3 businesses expressed dissatisfaction, and their reasons for doing so were as follows:

"We're local and they struggle with getting out to us."

"You don't need the checks, waste of time."

"Bad review when reviewed hotel."

Only 3 residents expressed dissatisfaction, and their reason for doing so were as follows:

“They have reduced our volunteers and work hours, the nearest fire station is 6 miles away by the time they get to us we will be burnt and crispy.”

“They waste money and use too much bureaucracy. They waste money on too many new buildings.”

“Keep the smaller stations open, the bigger stations have to go through narrow ways just to get to their destination.”

3 Appendix 1: Profile Information

3.1 Businesses

The following tables outline the unweighted and weighted demographic profiles of the sample.

Table 2 – Local authority district

Local authority district	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
Torbay	11	45	6	22
Plymouth	13	52	8	31
Devon	46	180	53	208
Somerset	30	118	34	134

Table 3 – Industry sector

Industry Sector	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
A to F	25	97	23	93
G to N, R + S	75	298	77	302

NB: **A to F** includes the following sectors: A: Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; B Mining and Quarrying; C Manufacturing; D Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply; E Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities; F Construction.

G to N, R and S includes the following sectors: G Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; H Transportation and storage; I Accommodation and food service activities; J Information and communication; K Financial and insurance activities; L Real estate activities; M Professional, scientific and technical activities; N Administrative and support service activities; R Arts, entertainment and recreation; S Other service activities

Table 4 – Job title

Industry Sector	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
Owner/proprietor/managing director	31	124	30	119
Director	31	122	33	131
Manager/assistant manager	20	80	20	77
Other	17	67	17	64
Prefer not to say	1	2	<0.5%	1

Table 5 – Gender

Gender	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
Male	66	262	67	266
Female	34	133	33	129

Table 6 – Age

Age	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
16 – 24 years	2	5	2	9
25 – 34 years	11	43	11	44
35 – 44 years	19	77	18	72
45 – 54 years	25	100	25	99
55– 64 years	30	117	30	118
65+	11	44	12	47
Prefer not to say	2	6	1	6

Table 7 – Ethnic Origin

Ethnic Origin	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
White	97	382	97	384
Asian/Asian British	1	3	<0.5	1
Mixed/Other	1	4	1	4
Prefer not to say	2	6	1	6

3.2 Residents

The following tables outline the unweighted demographic profile of the sample of residents.

Table 8 – Local authority district

Local authority district	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
Torbay	23	92	8	30
Plymouth	26	100	15	58
Devon	26	100	46	179
Somerset	26	100	32	124

Table 9 – Age

Age	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
16 – 24 years	1	4	3	10
25 – 34 years	7	26	11	44
35 – 44 years	11	45	22	85
45 – 54 years	12	47	12	46
55– 64 years	22	86	20	79
65+	44	173	29	112
Prefer not to say	3	11	4	15

Table 10 – Gender

Gender	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
Male	51	200	48	190
Female	49	191	52	202

Table 11 – Ethnic Origin

Ethnic Origin	Unweighted		Weighted	
	%	Number	%	Number
White	93	366	94	368
Asian/Asian British	1	2	<0.5	2
Mixed	<0.5	1	<0.5	2
Prefer not to say	6	23	5	20

4 Appendix 2: Call outcomes

The following tables show a breakdown of call outcomes.

4.1 Businesses

	Outcome	Contacts	% of total	% of sub total
In scope	Complete	395	3%	6%
	Refusal	415	4%	6%
	Respondent busy	5878	52%	88%
	Sub-total	6688	59%	100%
	Outcome			% of out of scope
Out of scope	Unobtainable (modem, fax etc)	628	6%	13%
	Ineligible	185	2%	4%
	No contact made	3864	34%	83%
	Sub-total	4677	41%	100%
	Total	11,365		

4.2 Residents

	Outcome	Contacts	% of total	% of sub total
In scope	Complete	392	1%	7%
	Refusal	160	1%	3%
	Respondent busy	5278	17%	91%
	Sub-total	5830	19%	100%
	Outcome			% of out of scope
Out of scope	Unobtainable (modem, fax etc)	2931	10%	12%
	Ineligible	395	1%	2%
	No contact made	21402	70%	87%
	Sub-total	24728	81%	100%
	Total	30,558		

Appendix: Statement of Terms

Compliance with International Standards

BMG complies with the International Standard for Quality Management Systems requirements (ISO 9001:2015) and the International Standard for Market, opinion and social research service requirements (ISO 20252:2012) and The International Standard for Information Security Management (ISO 27001:2013).

Interpretation and publication of results

The interpretation of the results as reported in this document pertain to the research problem and are supported by the empirical findings of this research project and, where applicable, by other data. These interpretations and recommendations are based on empirical findings and are distinguishable from personal views and opinions.

BMG will not publish any part of these results without the written and informed consent of the client.

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