Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology

WILEY

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Conspiracy Theories About Local Political Issues

Karen M. Douglas | Ricky Green | Daniel Toribio-Flórez | Mikey Biddlestone | Dylan De Gourville | Cassidy Rowden

University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Correspondence: Karen M. Douglas (k.douglas@kent.ac.uk)

Received: 12 March 2025 | **Revised:** 21 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 22 October 2025

Funding: This research was supported by the European Research Council Advanced grant 'Consequences of conspiracy theories—CONSPIRACY_FX' number: 101018262.

Keywords: community | conspiracy beliefs | conspiracy theories | normative and non-normative political actions

ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories typically accuse national governments and other powerful groups of secret and malevolent actions. However, conspiracy theories also exist at the level of local politics. In two studies focusing on local community issues in the United Kingdom—the building of a pedestrian plaza in a small seaside town and the establishment of a low emission traffic zone in London—we examined the variables associated with conspiracy beliefs about local political issues. Although the two types of conspiracy beliefs had some unique correlates, common correlates were lower feelings of efficacy about local politics, more anger about the relevant issue, and higher belief in other conspiracy theories. Local political conspiracy beliefs were not associated with intentions to engage in normative or non-normative political actions. We conclude that although conspiracy theories exist in local politics and correlate with a range of psychological factors, they are not necessarily linked to political action.

1 | Introduction

Conspiracy theories propose that actors have coordinated in secret to achieve outcomes that are important to the public interest (Douglas and Sutton 2023; Goertzel 1994). Belief in conspiracy theories seems to have important consequences ranging from vaccine hesitancy to climate denial (for reviews, see Douglas and Sutton 2023; Douglas and Sutton 2025). However, while much of the research to date has focused on conspiracy theories surrounding prominent political events and global issues (e.g., COVID-19, vaccination, election rigging, climate change), conspiracy theories also exist at the level of local politics and concern issues that are important to local communities. It is these conspiracy theories that we turn our attention to in the current research. We report two studies examining the psychological correlates of conspiracy beliefs about two local issues in the United Kingdom. We also explore whether these beliefs are associated with intentions to engage in different forms of political action.

1.1 | Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant events and circumstances as the actions of secret plots by two or more (typically) powerful actors (e.g., Aaronovitch 2010; Byford 2011; Coady 2006; Dentith and Orr 2017; Keeley 1999). The alleged conspiracies are of public interest but are not public knowledge (Douglas and Sutton 2023). When researchers study the correlates and consequences of conspiracy theories, they have typically focused on conspiracy theories about significant social events such as national elections (e.g., Atkinson et al. 2017; Wang and van Prooijen 2023) and the deaths of well-known people (e.g., Butler et al. 1995; Douglas and Sutton 2008) or on circumstances of global interest such as climate change (e.g., Biddlestone et al. 2022; Jolley and Douglas 2014), and the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Douglas 2021; Romer and Jamieson 2020). Other research has focused on more general notions of conspiracy about global elites and governments without reference to specific events but nevertheless

focusing on large-scale events and circumstances of public interest (e.g., Brotherton et al. 2013; Lantian et al. 2016).

However, conspiracy theories also exist at the more local level, concerning events and circumstances of political importance to local communities. Definitions of conspiracy theories emphasise their publicness (Douglas and Sutton 2023), and if an issue is important to the public—as is the case for local political matters—it is understandable that conspiracy theories will arise as they do for national and global issues of interest. Indeed, many conspiracy theories are unique to specific geographic areas, such as conspiracy theories about the division of the former Yugoslavia (Milošević-Dordević et al. 2021), the death of the Polish president in the Smolensk plane crash (see Soral et al. 2018), and the 2018 wildfires in Greece (Gkinopoulos and Mari 2022). Many conspiracy theories exist at an even more local level, concerning local landmarks, historical events, environmental issues, or powerful figures in the community (Räikkä 2009). For example, one conspiracy theory alleges that the town of Bielefeld in Germany does not exist and is instead an optical illusion to distract and mislead the German public (Lloyd 2024). A conspiracy theory in the county of Kent in the United Kingdom supposes that a 'Bermuda Triangle' exists off the coast of Folkestone that swallows up ships in the area (Castle 2020). Another local UK-based conspiracy theory supposes that a secret Satan-worshipping paedophile ring existed around 2014 in the North London area of Hampstead (Golby 2024). Little research has focused on these local political conspiracy theories. Therefore, we turn our focus to them in the current research.

1.2 | Correlates of Conspiracy Beliefs

Research suggests that conspiracy theories appeal to people when important psychological motives are frustrated, including the motives to achieve accuracy and certainty, security and control, and to maintain both individual and group self-esteem (Biddlestone et al. 2025; Douglas et al. 2017). Research also suggests that people adopt conspiracy theories to attempt to satisfy these motives and to cope with difficult situations, although this is a strategy that might not be successful (Albath et al. 2024; Liekefett et al. 2022; Marchlewska et al. 2022). Whilst much of this research has focused on measures that capture conspiracy beliefs about specific large-scale political events and circumstances (e.g., Swami et al. 2017), or a more general tendency to adopt conspiracy explanations (e.g., Lantian et al. 2016; Brotherton et al. 2013), there are reasons to believe that local political conspiracy theories will be associated with similar factors.

Specifically, controversial local issues can arouse anger and frustration, likely because their consequences affect people's immediate social context (Holmes 2004; Fernández-Martínez et al. 2020). Both anger and frustration are two factors associated with conspiracy beliefs about larger-scale political issues (Biddlestone et al. 2025) and might also be associated with conspiracy theories about local issues. Dissatisfaction is also a factor associated with local politics (Lyons and Lowery 1986) and dissatisfaction is associated with conspiracy beliefs about significant political issues (Papaioannou et al. 2024). Dissatisfaction with one's immediate local political context might therefore also be associated with conspiracy theories. Feelings of efficacy are important when it comes to local political matters (McDonnell 2019). Since lower levels of efficacy are often associated with conspiracy beliefs about prominent political matters (Ardèvol-Abreu et al. 2020) they may also be associated with conspiracy theories about people's more immediate social environment. Furthermore, people often have lower trust in officials when it comes to controversial local political matters (Beshi and Kaur 2020). Lower levels of trust are associated with conspiracy beliefs about wider political issues (Einstein and Glick 2015) and it is plausible that they might also relate to beliefs in local conspiracy theories.

Another important aspect of local issues that might link them to conspiracy beliefs relates to social identity. People's most immediate social contexts are particularly important in shaping social identity and group categorization (Hogg et al. 1995). Conspiracy beliefs have been argued to play a critical role in the enhancement of social identities (Douglas et al. 2017), especially insecure social identities (Golec de Zavala et al. 2022). Thus, it is plausible that people who identify strongly (but insecurely) with their local area and feel that the issue is of high personal importance, could more strongly endorse conspiracy theories about the issue. This inflated sense of importance about local issues could also increase susceptibility to conspiracy theories due to the proportionality bias—events perceived as important must have equally important explanations (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). Indeed, people who are more collectively narcissistic about their country (i.e., feeling that their nation is not appreciated by others as much as it should), tend to be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories when their nation is the victim group (Cichocka and Cisłak 2020).

Furthermore, although there are important differences between the two concepts (Trella et al. 2024), it is a common finding that beliefs in general conspiracy theories (e.g., Lantian et al. 2016) are associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories about more specific events and circumstances (Sutton and Douglas 2020). There are therefore good reasons to predict that common correlates of conspiracy beliefs about global events, or about well-known political matters, could also correlate with conspiracy beliefs about more narrow, local political issues.

Conspiracy beliefs about local political issues could also be associated with intentions to engage in political action. Research suggests that conspiracy beliefs are associated with political ideology, and that more extreme political views at both ends of the political spectrum (Imhoff et al. 2022), but more pronounced on the political right (van der Linden et al. 2020) are associated with a tendency to endorse conspiracy theories. Conspiracy beliefs appear to discourage participation in conventional political activities (e.g., Butler et al. 1995; Jolley and Douglas 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014), effects driven by feelings of political powerlessness and disillusionment (Jolley and Douglas 2014). Furthermore, people who tend to endorse conspiracy theories often view the mainstream political system as unresponsive, making them less likely to take part in traditional political activities (Ardèvol-Abreu et al. 2020). Conspiracy theories also seem to be associated with how, as well as whether, people choose to vote. For example, conspiracy beliefs surrounding the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum were associated with both support for leaving

the European Union and people's actual voting behaviour to leave the European Union (Jolley et al. 2022).

While conspiracy beliefs are associated with lower willingness to engage in conventional politics, they are linked to more radical and extreme actions (Sternisko et al. 2020), violent political intentions (Rottweiler and Gill 2022), support for violence to oppose the government (Uscinski and Parent 2014), protests (Imhoff and Bruder 2014), building occupations (Mari et al. 2022), and acts of vandalism like damaging 5G masts, which were falsely blamed for spreading COVID-19 (Jolley and Paterson 2020). Belief in conspiracy theories is also associated with a greater tendency to engage in minor criminal or fraudulent behaviour, such as paying with cash to avoid taxes (Jolley et al. 2019). Furthermore, people who endorse conspiracy theories tend to act more dishonestly in an economic game and anticipate that others will also act dishonestly (Alper et al. 2024). In the current work, we examined whether belief in conspiracy theories about local political issues echoes these findings—that is, that they will be associated with a lower tendency to engage in normative political actions such as messaging politicians and joining local political meetings but a higher tendency towards non-normative political actions such as engaging in violence and vandalism. However, it is likely that people experience greater feelings of efficacy related to local political action because it is more proximal to their everyday lives and their actions are more likely to make a difference. We therefore have reason to expect that people will feel more empowered to take both normative and non-normative political action based on their conspiracy beliefs about local politics.

1.3 | The Current Research

In two studies, we examined the psychological correlates of conspiracy beliefs about two local political issues in the United Kingdom: the building of a pedestrian plaza in a local seaside town (Study 1), and the low emission traffic zone in London (Study 2). Expected correlates of conspiracy beliefs about these local issues included negative views about the issue, dissatisfaction with information, lower feelings of efficacy, higher feelings of anger, lower trust in institutions, higher levels of collective narcissism, higher levels of general conspiracy beliefs, higher levels of normative political action (e.g., getting involved in local politics), and higher levels of non-normative political action (e.g., vandalism).

Study materials and data are openly available on OSF under the following link: https://osf.io/c52te/?view_only=19e48743b74243bb93c1ad759d6f80aa. All measures and exclusions in the studies are disclosed, as well as the method of determining the sample sizes.

2 | Study 1

Herne Bay is a coastal town in the English county of Kent, approximately 65 miles from London. In June 2023, Kent County Council announced a proposal to convert part of Herne Bay's Central Parade—the main road running along the seafront—into a pedestrianised zone in the form of a 'Spanish-style plaza'. This proposal was put forward as part of an active travel scheme to encourage more cycling and walking, and to create an events space. Despite significant public opposition, the project went ahead, and the plaza was constructed in January 2024. Around 700 residents attended a meeting at the local Kings Hall shortly thereafter. Even more signed a petition demanding that the plaza be removed and the road reopened. Alongside this activity, conspiracy theories emerged on local community Facebook groups accusing the council of accepting bribes and having a hidden agenda in creating the plaza. In July 2024—just months after the road was closed for the plaza—the council agreed to reopen the road and use the plaza only for special events (Burn and Sherratt 2024; Dale 2024).

This study examined the predictors of conspiracy beliefs about the Herne Bay Plaza through a brief survey distributed to residents of Herne Bay. We hypothesised that belief in Herne Bay plaza conspiracy theories would be associated with more negative views about the plaza, greater dissatisfaction with information supplied about the plaza, lower perceived efficacy concerning local politics, higher levels of anger related to information about the plaza, higher intentions to engage in both normative and non-normative political actions relevant to the plaza, lower trust in institutions, higher levels of collective narcissism about Herne Bay (when accounting for secure identification), higher perceived importance of the plaza, and higher general conspiracy beliefs. The study was pre-registered (https://osf.io/8ah7g/?view_only=e24901a5f74048d9a4afe60cdc92a68d).

2.1 | Participants and Design

Four hundred and twenty-four members of the Facebook groups 'Herne Bay Chatters' and 'Herne Bay Residents' Group' participated voluntarily (247 female, 162 male, 15 rather not say, $M_{age} = 56.44$, $SD = 13.33$). The mean for education on a scale from 1 (no formal education) to 5 (postgraduate degree) was in between secondary school and bachelor's degree level ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.75$). Political orientation on a scale from 1 (extreme left) to 7 (extreme right) was slightly left-leaning ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 1.25$). Sensitivity analysis indicated that this sample size enabled us to detect correlations as small as $r = 0.16$ with 90% statistical power, assuming $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-sided). The study design was cross-sectional.

2.2 | Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants completed a series of scales measuring their positivity towards the plaza (e.g., 'I think that the plaza is a positive thing for Herne Bay', three items, 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.96$), their satisfaction with the information they received (e.g., 'I received reliable information about the planning and development of the plaza', three items, 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.96$), their agreement with conspiracy theories about the plaza (e.g., 'Councillors promoted the plaza for their own profit, taking kickbacks from construction and consultancy contracts', six items, 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.91$), political efficacy (e.g., 'People like me can influence council decisions', four items adapted from Ardèvol-Abreu

et al. 2020, 1 = not at all, 7 = very much, $\alpha = 0.63$),[1] anger about the lack of information (e.g., 'I am angry that people did not have access to reliable information, three items, 1 = not at all, 7 = very much, $\alpha = 0.98$), intentions to engage in normative (e.g., Send a complaint to councillors about the plaza', adapted from Imhoff et al. 2021, four items 1 = under no circumstances, 7 = certainly, $\alpha = 0.89$) and non-normative political actions, (e.g., 'Verbally or physically attack people who are in favour of the plaza', adapted from Imhoff et al. 2021, four items, 1 = under no circumstances, 7 = certainly, $\alpha = 0.69$), an ad hoc measure of trust in institutions (e.g., local government, national government, four items, 1 = completely distrust, 7 = completely trust, $\alpha = 0.77$), collective narcissism (e.g., 'Herne Bay deserves special treatment', adapted from de Golec Zavala et al. 2009, 1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.82$), secure identification ('I identify with Herne Bay', adapted from Postmes et al. 2013, 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), perceived importance of the plaza ('How important is the plaza to you?', 1 = very unimportant, 7 = very important), and the single-item conspiracy belief scale which includes a brief preamble followed by the question 'I think that the official version of events given by authorities very often hides the truth' (Lantian et al. 2016).

Participants were also asked to indicate their age, gender, education level, political orientation, and were given the opportunity to say something about the plaza. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

3 | Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in Table 1. At zero-order, beliefs in conspiracy theories about the Herne Bay Plaza were associated with more negative attitudes about the plaza, lower satisfaction with information about the plaza, lower feelings of political efficacy, higher anger about information provided about the plaza, higher intentions to engage in normative and non-normative behaviours, lower trust in institutions, higher collective narcissism, higher secure identification, higher perceived importance of the issue, and higher general conspiracy beliefs. To test our hypotheses regarding the correlates of belief in conspiracy theories about the Herne Bay Plaza, we report partial correlations between all variables (controlling for all other variables).[2] Lower feelings of political efficacy, higher anger about information provided about the plaza, lower trust in institutions, higher collective narcissism (controlling for secure identification), and higher general conspiracy beliefs were all significantly associated with conspiracy beliefs about the Herne Bay Plaza. All other variables were not significantly associated with conspiracy beliefs about the plaza.

3.1 | Exploratory Analyses

Following our pre-registration, we used structural equation modelling (SEM; *lavaan*, version 0.6-19; Rosseel 2012) to further examine the associations between variables. The use of SEM offers key advantages. It reduces measurement error by modelling latent constructs and enables the assessment of potential indirect effects rather than isolated associations. Table 2 summarises model fit indices and estimates of direct, indirect and total effects (for a visual representation of the model, see Supporting Information). The model fit the data well according to standard cutoff values (i.e., CFI ≥ 0.95, RMSEA ≤ 0.06, SRMR ≤ 0.08; Hu and Bentler 1999). The results echoed the partial correlations reported above and further revealed that anger about the lack of information and collective narcissism were indirectly associated with lower trust in local institutions via higher Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy beliefs.

Study 1 therefore revealed several correlates of conspiracy beliefs about the Herne Bay Plaza (i.e., lower feelings of political efficacy, higher anger about information provided about the plaza, lower trust in institutions, higher collective narcissism (controlling for secure identification), and higher general conspiracy beliefs), which echo findings on the correlates of conspiracy theories about large-scale political issues. It is interesting to note that other variables that were correlated with the Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy beliefs at zero order (i.e., attitudes about the plaza, satisfaction with information about the plaza, and perceived importance of the issue) were not associated with the conspiracy beliefs once all other variables were controlled for. This potentially suggests that people's opinions about the issue are less relevant to conspiracy beliefs than how they feel towards the actors responsible for the situation and how they managed the information. In addition to feelings of political efficacy, insecure identity, and general conspiracy beliefs, these findings suggest that personal feelings and experiences are perhaps the key correlates of the local political conspiracy beliefs. Exploratory SEM analyses suggest some potential indirect effects between the variables examined in this study.

In terms of political action, Study 1 revealed, contrary to predictions, that conspiracy beliefs about the Herne Bay Plaza were not associated with intentions to engage in either normative or non-normative political actions. Other variables were associated with normative political intentions (more negative attitudes towards the Herne Bay Plaza, greater anger about lack of information and higher perceived importance of the issue) but conspiracy beliefs appeared to play no part in political intentions. In Study 2, we aimed to examine the generalisability of Study 1's findings by focusing on a different local political issue.

4 | Study 2

The Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) is an area of London, UK in which a charge is applied to vehicles that do not comply with an emission-based standard. The ULEZ scheme was announced by Mayor Boris Johnson in 2015 and implemented by the succeeding Mayor Sadiq Khan in 2019. The ULEZ originally covered central London but was expanded in 2021 to cover a larger area, and in 2023 it was further extended to all Greater London. Although having majority support and having been very successful in reducing air pollution, the scheme has been met with opposition from many London residents based on the cost and proposed impact on poorer Londoners who drive older cars. The growth of the zone triggered city-wide protests and since the expansion of the scheme in 2023, many cameras that are used to enforce ULEZ have been vandalised by a vigilante group who call themselves 'bladerunners'. Alongside these protests, conspiracy theories also surfaced that ULEZ was a

TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations (above diagonal) and partial correlations (below diagonal)– Study 1.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Plaza conspiracy beliefs	1	−0.435 (<0.001)	−0.416 (<0.001)	−0.401 (<0.001)	0.571 (<0.001)	0.410 (<0.001)	0.156 (0.001)	−0.439 (<0.001)	0.419 (<0.001)	0.195 (<0.001)	0.301 (<0.001)	0.525 (<0.001)
2. Attitudes	−0.003 (0.946)	1	0.707 (<0.001)	0.384 (<0.001)	−0.695 (<0.001)	−0.599 (<0.001)	−0.126 (0.010)	0.340 (<0.001)	−0.324 (<0.001)	−0.204 (<0.001)	−0.439 (<0.001)	−0.473 (<0.001)
3. Satisfaction with information	0.029 (0.563)	0.449 (<0.001)	1	0.371 (<0.001)	−0.663 (<0.001)	−0.485 (<0.001)	−0.132 (0.007)	0.369 (<0.001)	−0.247 (<0.001)	−0.134 (0.006)	−0.281 (<0.001)	−0.472 (<0.001)
4. Political efficacy	−0.163 (<0.001)	0.108 (0.028)	0.067 (0.173)	1	−0.385 (<0.001)	−0.279 (<0.001)	−0.037 (0.446)	0.338 (<0.001)	−0.217 (<0.001)	−0.092 (0.058)	−0.179 (<0.001)	−0.326 (<0.001)
5. Anger about information	0.247 (<0.001)	−0.173 (<0.001)	−0.300 (<0.001)	−0.040 (0.415)	1	0.712 (<0.001)	0.135 (0.006)	−0.386 (<0.001)	0.425 (<0.001)	0.309 (<0.001)	0.515 (<0.001)	0.565 (<0.001)
6. Normative political action	−0.070 (0.154)	−0.169 (<0.001)	0.038 (0.436)	0.026 (0.600)	0.380 (<0.001)	1	0.247 (<0.001)	−0.332 (<0.001)	0.407 (<0.001)	0.347 (<0.001)	0.573 (<0.001)	0.476 (<0.001)
7. Non-normative political action	0.057 (0.246)	0.024 (0.633)	−0.031 (0.525)	0.071 (0.153)	−0.089 (0.070)	0.207 (<0.001)	1	−0.223 (<0.001)	0.087 (0.074)	0.017 (0.725)	0.094 (0.053)	0.152 (0.002)
8. Trust in institutions	−0.181 (<0.001)	−0.008 (0.879)	0.088 (0.075)	0.147 (0.003)	−0.002 (0.964)	−0.071 (0.151)	−0.143 (0.004)	1	−0.242 (<0.001)	−0.064 (0.186)	−0.173 (<0.001)	−0.394 (<0.001)
9. Collective narcissism	0.219 (<0.001)	−0.039 (0.425)	0.049 (0.319)	−0.021 (0.671)	0.053 (0.287)	0.064 (0.194)	0.004 (0.937)	−0.062 (0.209)	1	0.560 (<0.001)	0.350 (<0.001)	0.337 (<0.001)
10. Secure identification	−0.082 (0.096)	0.060 (0.227)	0.021 (0.677)	0.019 (0.704)	0.029 (0.560)	0.081 (0.102)	−0.050 (0.314)	0.088 (0.075)	0.479 (<0.001)	1	0.396 (<0.001)	0.251 (<0.001)
11. Perceived importance of the issue	−0.004 (0.935)	−0.135 (0.006)	0.142 (0.004)	0.019 (0.706)	0.127 (0.010)	0.280 (<0.001)	−0.024 (0.621)	0.048 (0.335)	−0.003 (0.959)	0.196 (<0.001)	1	0.374 (<0.001)
12. General conspiracy beliefs	0.228 (<0.001)	−0.018 (0.711)	−0.111 (0.024)	−0.040 (0.423)	0.105 (0.032)	0.059 (0.231)	0.026 (0.598)	−0.127 (0.010)	0.001 (0.987)	0.068 (0.171)	0.082 (0.098)	1
M	3.79	2.30	1.86	3.10	5.26	4.43	1.31	2.96	4.06	5.40	4.93	6.38
SD	1.72	2.12	1.64	1.60	2.17	1.95	0.76	1.23	1.20	1.68	2.22	2.54

Note: For non-normative political action, df = 420; for all other variables, df = 422. Exact *p*-values can be found below each correlation.

TABLE 2 | Direct, indirect, and total effects of predictors on trust in institutions and intentions to engage in normative and non-normative political action through Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy beliefs (CBs)—Study 1.

	Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy beliefs				Trust in institutions				Normative political action				Non-normative political action			
Predictors	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***
Attitudes																
Direct effect	−0.01 (0.05)	[−0.10, 0.08]	−0.02	0.801	0.05 (0.05)	[−0.06, 0.15]	0.07	0.392	−0.19 (0.07)	[−0.35, −0.06]	−0.20	0.008	0.00 (0.07)	[−0.13, 0.16]	0.00	0.988
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.02, 0.03]	0.00	0.796	0.00 (0.01)	[−0.01, 0.02]	0.00	0.853	0.00 (0.00)	[−0.01, 0.01]	0.00	0.838
Total effect					0.05 (0.06)	[−0.06, 0.16]	0.08	0.378	−0.19 (0.07)	[−0.34, −0.07]	−0.20	0.007	0.00 (0.07)	[−0.13, 0.16]	0.00	0.998
Satisfaction with information																
Direct effect	−0.02 (0.05)	[−0.11, 0.07]	−0.02	0.709	0.19 (0.08)	[0.02, 0.33]	0.24	0.023	0.07 (0.07)	[−0.07, 0.21]	0.05	0.345	−0.02 (0.05)	[−0.12, 0.06]	−0.04	0.641
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.02, 0.03]	0.01	0.697	0.00 (0.01)	[−0.01, 0.02]	0.00	0.783	0.00 (0.00)	[−0.01, 0.01]	0.00	0.757
Total effect					0.19 (0.08)	[0.02, 0.35]	0.24	0.024	0.07 (0.07)	[−0.07, 0.21]	0.06	0.330	−0.02 (0.05)	[−0.13, 0.06]	−0.05	0.623
Anger about lack of information																
Direct effect	0.22 (0.05)	[0.12, 0.32]	0.35	<0.001	−0.07 (0.06)	[−0.18, 0.06]	−0.12	0.251	0.46 (0.06)	[0.35, 0.57]	0.49	<0.001	−0.01 (0.06)	[−0.12, 0.10]	−0.03	0.837
Indirect effect					−0.06 (0.02)	[−0.09, −0.02]	−0.09	0.003	−0.02 (0.02)	[−0.06, 0.01]	−0.02	0.254	0.02 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.05]	0.04	0.186
Total effect					−0.13 (0.07)	[−0.23, 0.01]	−0.21	0.050	0.44 (0.06)	[0.33, 0.55]	0.47	<0.001	0.00 (0.06)	[−0.11, 0.12]	0.01	0.938
Collective narcissism																
Direct effect	0.37 (0.09)	[0.22, 0.56]	0.31	<0.001	−0.11 (0.09)	[−0.29, 0.06]	−0.09	0.228	0.17 (0.11)	[−0.04, 0.38]	0.09	0.116	0.06 (0.07)	[−0.09, 0.21]	0.07	0.457
Indirect effect					−0.10 (0.03)	[−0.16, −0.04]	−0.08	0.003	−0.04 (0.03)	[−0.11, 0.02]	−0.02	0.265	0.03 (0.02)	[−0.01, 0.07]	0.04	0.179
Total effect					−0.20 (0.09)	[−0.38, −0.03]	−0.17	0.021	0.13 (0.10)	[−0.07, 0.33]	0.07	0.178	0.08 (0.07)	[−0.05, 0.24]	0.11	0.267

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

	Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy beliefs				Trust in institutions				Normative political action				Non-normative political action			
Predictors	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***
General CBs																
Direct effect	0.14 (0.03)	[0.09, 0.20]	0.28	<0.001	−0.09 (0.03)	[−0.15, −0.02]	−0.18	0.007	0.05 (0.04)	[−0.02, 0.12]	0.06	0.172	0.03 (0.03)	[−0.03, 0.09]	0.08	0.374
Indirect effect					−0.04 (0.01)	[−0.06, −0.01]	−0.07	0.002	−0.01 (0.01)	[−0.04, 0.01]	−0.02	0.247	0.01 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.03]	0.03	0.171
Total effect					−0.13 (0.03)	[−0.19, −0.05]	−0.26	<0.001	0.04 (0.03)	[−0.03, 0.10]	0.05	0.301	0.04 (0.03)	[−0.01, 0.10]	0.12	0.177
Perceived importance of the issue																
Direct effect	−0.02 (0.03)	[−0.09, 0.04]	−0.04	0.472	0.00 (0.03)	[−0.06, 0.06]	0.00	0.945	0.21 (0.04)	[0.12, 0.30]	0.23	<0.001	0.02 (0.03)	[−0.04, 0.07]	0.05	0.547
Indirect effect					0.01 (0.01)	[−0.01, 0.03]	0.01	0.472	0.00 (0.01)	[−0.01, 0.01]	0.00	0.628	0.00 (0.00)	[−0.01, 0.00]	0.00	0.588
Total effect					0.01 (0.03)	[−0.05, 0.07]	0.01	0.786	0.21 (0.04)	[0.13, 0.30]	0.24	<0.001	0.01 (0.03)	[−0.04, 0.07]	0.04	0.584
Mediator																
Plaza CBs					−0.25 (0.06)	[−0.36, −0.12]	−0.26	<0.001	−0.10 (0.08)	[−0.27, 0.06]	−0.07	0.229	0.07 (0.05)	[−0.02, 0.18]	0.12	0.156
Covariates																
Secure Local ID	−0.12 (0.04)	[−0.21, −0.04]	−0.16	0.003	0.09 (0.05)	[−0.01, 0.18]	0.12	0.056	0.04 (0.06)	[−0.07, 0.15]	0.03	0.521	−0.04 (0.03)	[−0.11, 0.02]	−0.08	0.214
Model fit indices																
N	424															
$\chi^2(508)$	1080.37															
CFI/TLI	0.95/0.94															
RMSEA/ SRMR	0.05/0.06															

Note: Confidence intervals were estimated using bias-corrected bootstrap procedures with 5000 resamples. Missing data was handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML).
Abbreviations: *β*, standardized regression coefficient; CI, confidence interval; SE, standard error.

deliberate attack on freedoms, a money-making scheme for the Mayor and London authorities rather than a genuine effort to reduce emissions, and other ideas. Observers noticed that ULEZ protestors also carried banners about vaccines, climate change, and COVID-19 related conspiracy theories (e.g., Sachdeva and Evans 2023).

In this study, we therefore extended Study 1 to another community-level issue and examined the factors associated with belief in conspiracy theories about the ULEZ scheme. We included the same variables as in Study 1 but since the ULEZ issue relates to environmental concerns, we also included acceptance of climate change and belief in two environment-focused conspiracy theories related to (a) the concept of 15-min cities (i.e., the idea that a novel urban planning scheme is a ploy by the government to control people's movement), and (b) the belief that climate change is a hoax.

We predicted that belief in conspiracy theories surrounding the planning and implementation of the ULEZ scheme in London would be associated with more negative views about the ULEZ scheme, higher dissatisfaction with information supplied about the ULEZ scheme, lower perceived efficacy concerning local politics, higher levels of anger related to information about the ULEZ scheme, higher intentions to engage in both normative and non-normative political actions relevant to the ULEZ scheme, lower trust in institutions, higher levels of collective narcissism about London (when accounting for secure identification), higher perceived importance of the ULEZ scheme, higher general and other specific conspiracy beliefs, and lower acceptance of climate science. The study was pre-registered (https://osf.io/6avnh/?view_only=b3ed946b8d9b4646b48d0e62f5c504b6).

4.1 | Participants and Design

We used the screening tools on Prolific to recruit participants who lived in London. We recruited 421 participants (205 female, 209 male, 5 other gender, 2 rather not say, *M*age = 39.23, SD = 11.85). Using the same scale as Study 1, the mean level of education was $M = 4.08$ (SD = 0.70) indicating that the sample was on average educated to bachelor's degree level. The mean household income was between £80,000 and £99,999. On the same scale as Study 1, political orientation was slightly left-wing ($M = 3.44$, SD = 1.35). The original sample of 426 was reduced after five participants failed an attention check. Participants were paid a small fee for their participation. As the sample size was close to the sample size of Study 1, we had a similar sensitivity to detect correlations ($r \geq 0.16$, with 90% power, assuming $\alpha = 0.05$).

4.2 | Materials and Procedure

The materials were like those of Study 1 but all references to the Herne Bay Plaza were changed to ULEZ. Participants indicated their positivity towards the ULEZ scheme ($\alpha = 0.97$), satisfaction with information received ($\alpha = 0.90$), conspiracy beliefs specific to ULEZ (e.g., 'The ULEZ scheme is a money-making scheme for the government rather than a genuine effort to reduce emissions', $\alpha = 0.89$), political efficacy ($\alpha = 0.79$),[3] anger about lack of information ($\alpha = 0.95$), normative behaviours (e.g., 'Send a complaint to the Mayor and his team about the ULEZ scheme' $\alpha = 0.87$), non-normative behaviours (e.g., 'Verbally or physically attack people who are in favour of the ULEZ scheme', $\alpha = 0.89$), trust in institutions ($\alpha = 0.85$), collective narcissism, (e.g., 'London deserves special treatment', $\alpha = 0.87$), secure identification 'I identify with London', perceived importance of the ULEZ issue, and the single-item conspiracy belief scale. Participants also reported their age, gender, education level, and political orientation. They were also given an opportunity to say something about the ULEZ scheme. In addition to these questions common with Study 1, we also asked participants to indicate their acceptance of climate science (Lewandowsky et al. 2013; e.g., 'I believe that burning fossil fuels increases atmospheric temperature to some measurable degree', four items, 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree, $\alpha = 0.96$), and to indicate their agreement with two other conspiracy theories ('The concept of 15-minute cities is a government plan to monitor and control people' and 'Climate change is a governmental hoax', 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).[4]

There was an attention check question embedded in the political efficacy scale: 'To show that you are paying attention, please select very much for this question'. At the completion of the study, participants were thanked, debriefed, and paid.

5 | Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in Table 3. At zero-order, ULEZ conspiracy beliefs were correlated with more negative attitudes towards ULEZ, less satisfaction with information about ULEZ, lower efficacy, higher anger about the information provided, higher intentions to engage in normative and non-normative behaviours, lower trust in institutions, higher perceived importance of the issue, higher generic conspiracy beliefs, higher belief in the 15-min cities conspiracy theory, higher belief in the conspiracy theory that climate change is a hoax, and lower acceptance of climate change. ULEZ conspiracy beliefs were not significantly correlated with collective narcissism or secure identification. To test our hypotheses regarding the correlates of belief in conspiracy theories about ULEZ, we report partial correlations between all variables (controlling for all other variables).[5] More negative attitudes towards ULEZ, lower feelings of political efficacy, higher anger about information provided about ULEZ, higher general conspiracy beliefs, and higher beliefs in 15-min city conspiracy theories were all significantly associated with conspiracy beliefs about ULEZ. All other variables were not significantly associated with conspiracy beliefs about ULEZ.

5.1 | Exploratory Analyses

We tested the same structural equation model fit as in Study 1 to examine whether the identified potential indirect pathways held in the ULEZ context (see Table 4). Model fit indices were not as good as in Study 1 but were still acceptable given the model's complexity (for a visual representation of the model, see Supporting Information). The overall results echoed the

TABLE 3 | Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations (above diagonal) and partial correlations (below diagonal)—Study 2.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. ULEZ conspiracy beliefs	1	−0.750 (<0.001)	−0.568 (<0.001)	−0.538 (<0.001)	0.555 (<0.001)	0.432 (<0.001)	0.259 (<0.001)	−0.427 (<0.001)	0.072 (0.142)	−0.046 (0.346)	0.138 (0.005)	0.571 (<0.001)	0.666 (<0.001)	0.459 (<0.001)	−0.466 (<0.001)
2. Attitudes towards ULEZ	−0.437 (<0.001)	1	0.625 (<0.001)	0.521 (<0.001)	−0.457 (<0.001)	−0.354 (<0.001)	−0.195 (<0.001)	0.517 (<0.001)	0.027 (0.580)	0.107 (0.028)	−0.017 (0.734)	−0.488 (<0.001)	−0.558 (<0.001)	−0.403 (<0.001)	0.542 (<0.001)
3. Satisfaction with information	−0.092 (0.063)	0.220 (<0.001)	1	0.512 (<0.001)	−0.463 (<0.001)	−0.244 (<0.001)	−0.130 (0.008)	0.524 (<0.001)	0.117 (0.017)	0.177 (<0.001)	0.101 (0.039)	−0.489 (<0.001)	−0.405 (<0.001)	−0.258 (<0.001)	0.385 (<0.001)
4. Political efficacy	−0.130 (0.009)	0.071 (0.154)	0.109 (0.028)	1	−0.424 (<0.001)	−0.224 (<0.001)	−0.133 (0.006)	0.443 (<0.001)	0.028 (0.564)	0.152 (0.002)	0.024 (0.621)	−0.484 (<0.001)	−0.422 (<0.001)	−0.245 (<0.001)	0.343 (<0.001)
5. Anger about information	0.119 (0.016)	0.025 (0.620)	−0.223 (<0.001)	−0.121 (0.014)	1	0.476 (<0.001)	0.220 (<0.001)	−0.324 (<0.001)	0.202 (<0.001)	−0.019 (0.691)	0.268 (<0.001)	0.467 (<0.001)	0.477 (<0.001)	0.346 (<0.001)	−0.277 (<0.001)
6. Normative political action	0.087 (0.078)	−0.111 (0.025)	0.001 (0.984)	0.039 (0.429)	0.243 (<0.001)	1	0.413 (<0.001)	−0.088 (0.071)	0.122 (0.012)	−0.012 (0.810)	0.333 (<0.001)	0.350 (<0.001)	0.390 (<0.001)	0.296 (<0.001)	−0.254 (<0.001)
7. Non-normative political action	−0.008 (0.874)	0.066 (0.185)	−0.005 (0.916)	−0.002 (0.964)	−0.066 (0.181)	0.313 (<0.001)	1	−0.041 (0.399)	0.175 (<0.001)	0.018 (0.719)	0.106 (0.029)	0.279 (<0.001)	0.343 (<0.001)	0.443 (<0.001)	−0.303 (<0.001)
8. Trust in institutions	−0.003 (0.951)	0.223 (<0.001)	0.155 (0.002)	0.105 (0.034)	−0.109 (0.028)	0.164 (<0.001)	−0.016 (0.752)	1	0.227 (<0.001)	0.222 (<0.001)	0.043 (0.375)	−0.429 (<0.001)	−0.283 (<0.001)	−0.133 (0.006)	0.269 (<0.001)
9. Collective narcissism	0.003 (0.959)	0.029 (0.565)	0.119 (0.016)	−0.012 (0.805)	0.242 (<0.001)	−0.021 (0.675)	0.081 (0.104)	0.179 (<0.001)	1	0.486 (<0.001)	0.092 (0.059)	0.064 (0.188)	0.169 (<0.001)	0.193 (<0.001)	−0.033 (0.503)
10. Secure identification	0.045 (0.361)	−0.045 (0.360)	0.012 (0.809)	0.072 (0.145)	−0.073 (0.142)	−0.044 (0.376)	−0.005 (0.913)	0.055 (0.266)	0.463 (<0.001)	1	0.119 (0.015)	−0.077 (0.116)	−0.013 (0.783)	−0.020 (0.684)	0.143 (0.003)
11. Perceived importance of the issue	0.077 (0.121)	0.052 (0.299)	0.209 (<0.001)	0.077 (0.122)	0.223 (<0.001)	0.234 (<0.001)	−0.011 (0.830)	−0.006 (0.896)	−0.082 (0.098)	0.097 (0.051)	1	0.075 (0.127)	0.150 (0.002)	0.050 (0.302)	0.035 (0.479)
12. General conspiracy beliefs	0.105 (0.034)	0.085 (0.088)	−0.131 (0.008)	−0.157 (0.001)	0.054 (0.278)	0.090 (0.069)	0.034 (0.498)	−0.207 (<0.001)	0.027 (0.593)	0.005 (0.927)	−0.000 (0.994)	1	0.565 (<0.001)	0.468 (<0.001)	−0.397 (<0.001)
13. 15-min conspiracy belief	0.271 (<0.001)	−0.050 (0.309)	0.012 (0.812)	−0.065 (0.187)	0.039 (0.428)	0.025 (0.617)	0.025 (0.614)	0.016 (0.745)	0.070 (0.160)	0.005 (0.918)	0.084 (0.092)	0.155 (0.002)	1	0.626 (<0.001)	−0.507 (<0.001)
14. Climate change conspiracy belief	0.028 (0.570)	−0.014 (0.773)	0.070 (0.156)	0.100 (0.044)	0.079 (0.111)	−0.075 (0.133)	0.251 (<0.001)	0.101 (0.042)	0.063 (0.203)	−0.030 (0.547)	−0.057 (0.249)	0.172 (<0.001)	0.329 (<0.001)	1	−0.572 (<0.001)
15. Acceptance of climate change	0.035 (0.485)	0.254 (<0.001)	0.056 (0.262)	0.048 (0.332)	0.077 (0.122)	−0.012 (0.805)	−0.063 (0.203)	−0.004 (0.940)	−0.018 (0.711)	0.104 (0.035)	0.047 (0.342)	0.003 (0.956)	−0.084 (0.092)	−0.341 (<0.001)	1
M	4.03	4.60	4.05	3.90	3.72	2.54	1.25	3.50	2.93	4.92	4.26	5.06	3.12	1.94	3.33
SD	1.61	2.05	1.59	1.47	1.75	1.45	0.73	1.22	1.15	1.53	1.58	2.27	1.86	1.57	0.71

Note: df = 419. Exact *p*-values can be found below each correlation.

TABLE 4 | Direct, indirect, and total effects of predictors on trust in institutions and intentions to engage in normative and non-normative political action through ULEZ conspiracy beliefs (CBs)—Study 2.

	ULEZ CBs				Trust in institutions				Normative political action				Non-normative political action			
Predictors	***b*** **(SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b*** **(SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b*** **(SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b*** **(SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***
Attitudes																
Direct effect	−0.50 (0.04)	[−0.59, −0.42]	−0.58	< 0.001	0.20 (0.05)	[0.10, 0.28]	0.33	< 0.001	−0.07 (0.07)	[−0.21, 0.08]	−0.10	0.313	0.01 (0.03)	[−0.06, 0.07]	0.02	0.812
Indirect effect					0.01 (0.04)	[−0.06, 0.09]	0.02	0.765	−0.08 (0.05)	[−0.19, 0.00]	−0.12	0.092	−0.03 (0.02)	[−0.08, 0.01]	−0.10	0.130
Total effect					0.21 (0.04)	[0.13, 0.28]	0.35	< 0.001	−0.16 (0.05)	[−0.27, −0.05]	−0.22	0.004	−0.03 (0.02)	[−0.07, 0.02]	−0.08	0.274
Satisfaction with information																
Direct effect	−0.11 (0.08)	[−0.27, 0.03]	−0.09	0.153	0.22 (0.07)	[0.08, 0.37]	0.25	0.002	0.07 (0.10)	[−0.12, 0.26]	0.06	0.476	0.04 (0.04)	[−0.04, 0.13]	0.08	0.391
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.02, 0.02]	0.00	0.806	−0.02 (0.02)	[−0.06, 0.01]	−0.02	0.298	−0.01 (0.01)	[−0.03, 0.00]	−0.01	0.327
Total effect					0.22 (0.07)	[0.09, 0.36]	0.25	0.001	0.05 (0.10)	[−0.14, 0.24]	0.05	0.598	0.03 (0.04)	[−0.05, 0.12]	0.06	0.472
Anger about lack of information																
Direct effect	0.17 (0.05)	[0.07, 0.27]	0.15	0.001	−0.07 (0.05)	[−0.16, 0.02]	−0.09	0.123	**0.24 (0.07)**	**[0.11, 0.38]**	0.26	< 0.001	0.00 (0.03)	[−0.04, 0.05]	0.01	0.857
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.03, 0.02]	−0.01	0.773	0.03 (0.02)	[0.00, 0.08]	0.03	0.168	0.01 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.03]	0.03	0.183
Total effect					−0.07 (0.05)	[−0.16, 0.01]	−0.10	0.103	0.27 (0.07)	[0.14, 0.40]	0.29	< 0.001	0.02 (0.02)	[−0.03, 0.07]	0.04	0.521
Collective narcissism																
Direct effect	0.14 (0.07)	[0.01, 0.27]	0.09	0.035	0.23 (0.06)	[0.12, 0.35]	0.21	< 0.001	0.08 (0.09)	[−0.10, 0.24]	0.06	0.361	0.12 (0.04)	[0.04, 0.20]	0.20	0.004
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.03, 0.02]	0.00	0.792	0.02 (0.02)	[0.00, 0.07]	0.02	0.225	0.01 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.03]	0.02	0.260
Total effect					0.23 (0.06)	[0.12, 0.35]	0.21	< 0.001	0.10 (0.09)	[−0.07, 0.27]	0.08	0.236	0.13 (0.04)	[0.05, 0.21]	0.21	0.002
General CBs																

(Continues)

TABLE 4 | (Continued)

	ULEZ CBs				Trust in institutions				Normative political action				Non-normative political action			
Predictors	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***	***b* (SE)**	**95% CI**	***β***	***p***
Direct effect	0.16 (0.03)	[0.10, 0.22]	0.20	< 0.001	−0.09 (0.03)	[−0.15, −0.03]	−0.16	0.003	0.06 (0.04)	[−0.01, 0.14]	0.10	0.100	0.05 (0.02)	[0.02, 0.08]	0.18	0.001
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.03, 0.02]	−0.01	0.768	0.03 (0.02)	[0.00, 0.06]	0.04	0.116	0.01 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.03]	0.04	0.149
Total effect					−0.09 (0.03)	[−0.14, −0.04]	−0.17	< 0.001	0.09 (0.04)	[0.02, 0.16]	0.14	0.015	0.06 (0.02)	[0.03, 0.10]	0.21	< 0.001
Perceived importance of the issue																
Direct effect	0.09 (0.04)	[0.01, 0.16]	0.08	0.024	0.04 (0.04)	[−0.03, 0.11]	0.05	0.271	0.23 (0.05)	[0.14, 0.32]	0.24	< 0.001	0.02 (0.02)	[−0.01, 0.05]	0.04	0.304
Indirect effect					0.00 (0.01)	[−0.02, 0.01]	0.00	0.782	0.01 (0.01)	[0.00, 0.04]	0.02	0.194	0.01 (0.00)	[0.00, 0.02]	0.01	0.221
Total effect					0.04 (0.03)	[−0.03, 0.10]	0.05	0.270	0.24 (0.05)	[0.15, 0.33]	0.25	< 0.001	0.02 (0.02)	[−0.01, 0.06]	0.05	0.178
Mediator																
ULEZ CBs					−0.02 (0.08)	[−0.17, 0.13]	−0.03	0.763	0.17 (0.10)	[−0.01, 0.37]	0.20	0.086	0.07 (0.04)	[−0.02, 0.15]	0.17	0.122
Covariates																
Secure local ID	−0.01 (0.04)	[−0.11, 0.07]	−0.01	0.739	0.03 (0.04)	[−0.04, 0.10]	0.04	0.406	−0.05 (0.05)	[−0.15, 0.06]	−0.05	0.343	−0.03 (0.02)	[−0.08, 0.02]	−0.07	0.234
Model fit indices																
N									421							
χ^2 (508)									1458.85							
CFI/TLI									0.92/0.90							
RMSEA/ SRMR									0.07/07							

Note: β = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Confidence intervals were estimated using bias-corrected bootstrap procedures with 5000 resamples. Missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML).

partial correlations reported above but no indirect effects were observed.

Overall, there are therefore some differences in correlates of conspiracy beliefs between the two studies. Specifically, institutional trust and collective narcissism were correlated with Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy beliefs but not those related to ULEZ. On the other hand, ULEZ conspiracy beliefs were correlated with negative attitudes towards ULEZ but Herne Bay Plaza conspiracy theories were not correlated with attitudes towards the plaza. In the SEM models, general conspiracy beliefs were associated with political actions (both normative and non-normative) in Study 2, but this was not the case in Study 1. We discuss the potential reasons for these differences in the General Discussion. Nevertheless, several common correlates of conspiracy beliefs about local political issues were lower feelings of efficacy about local politics, more anger about the relevant issue, and higher belief in other conspiracy theories.

6 | General Discussion

The current research examined the correlates and potential consequences of conspiracy beliefs about local political issues. Focusing on conspiracy theories about the development of a local pedestrian plaza in Herne Bay, UK, and the ULEZ scheme in London, we found that common correlates of conspiracy beliefs were lower feelings of efficacy about local politics, more anger about the relevant issue, and higher belief in other conspiracy theories. These echo correlates of conspiracy beliefs found in previous studies of more well-known global conspiracy theories (e.g., Biddlestone et al. 2025). However, the more local conspiracy beliefs that we studied here do not appear to be associated with intentions to take political action. Neither type of conspiracy belief was associated with intentions to engage in normative or non-normative political action. Therefore, whilst conspiracy beliefs about local issues are associated with common feelings associated with belief in other conspiracy theories, they do not seem to be associated with concrete intentions to act as seems to be the case for conspiracy theories on a more national or global scale (Sternisko et al. 2020).

The correlates of conspiracy beliefs about local political issues that have been identified in the current research further support the idea that conspiracy theories are associated with unmet psychological needs (Douglas et al. 2017). Specifically, anger and low feelings of efficacy are consistently associated with these beliefs. These findings also resonate with recent perspectives on the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and emotions (Pummerer et al. 2025a, 2025b), specifically tailored to epistemic concerns of lacking or not being provided with information relevant to assessing the specific issue or event. However, again it does not seem that these emotional responses to conspiracy theories are predictive of intentions to engage in political action.

Some inconsistencies between the two studies deserve further comment. Specifically, conspiracy theories about the Herne Bay Plaza seemed to be primarily associated with identity concerns (e.g., collective narcissism) and opposition to institutions (e.g., anger about the lack of information, mistrust). On the other hand, conspiracy beliefs related to the ULEZ scheme seem to be more associated with the attitudes that people have about the scheme itself (e.g., more negative feelings about ULEZ), and environmental issues (e.g., 15-min cities conspiracy theory). There is a well-documented relationship between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Biddlestone et al. 2025; Bowes et al. 2023), which was present in Study 1 but not Study 2. This indicates that, at least in the context of smaller, local-level politics (vs. in a capital city like London), a defensive identification with one's residential community is associated with increased sensitivity to people who are perceived to be undermining it (i.e., in the case of Herne Bay, this is local councillors). The significant role in this community context but not in the larger city context may reflect similar work demonstrating that collective narcissism is consistently higher among marginalised groups who genuinely experience disproportionate ignorance towards their group (Marinthe et al. 2024). Perhaps also, the identity of 'Londoner' is more diffused than identifying with a smaller community like Herne Bay. Future research could attempt to examine when both identity-driven and information-driven motives underlie local political conspiracy beliefs.

6.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

Other future directions and limitations of the current work need to be discussed. Specifically, both studies were correlational, allowing no opportunity for us to make causal inferences about the effects of variables, such as anger and efficacy, on conspiracy beliefs. Indeed, the relationship between these variables could be reciprocal (e.g., Liekefett et al. 2022) and longitudinal or experimental research designs would be required to determine causal effects. Indeed, future research should attempt such designs to determine, for example, if emotions drive conspiracy beliefs at the level of local politics, or if instead local conspiracy beliefs drive anger (or both).

Furthermore, the samples included in the current research were self-selected. It could be the case that only participants who were particularly invested in each issue responded to our study invitations which might artificially inflate conspiracy beliefs and affect the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and the other variables of interest. Future research could attempt to counteract the potential consequences of self-selection. Furthermore, in Study 1, two of the scales (political efficacy and non-normative political action) were less reliable than desired. Although neither scale was problematic in Study 2, the results using these measures should be treated with some caution. Finally, the current research only examined the relationships between conspiracy beliefs, common correlates, and political intentions across two local issues. Further research could establish which associations are consistent across a broader range of local political issues.

6.2 | Conclusions

Most of the research on the psychology of conspiracy theories has focused on the correlates and consequences of large-scale, global, and well-known conspiracy beliefs. In the current research, we focused on smaller-scale, local political conspiracy theories unique to specific geographic regions of the UK. We found similar correlates as found in previous research on

conspiracy beliefs, but no evidence of relationships between local political conspiracy beliefs and either normative or non-normative political action. The current research highlights the importance of examining conspiracy beliefs at the more local level. Future research should further examine the correlates and potential consequences of conspiracy theories in local politics using different research designs, sampling methods, and other local political issues outside the UK.

Ethics Statement

Both studies were approved by the Ethics Committee at the University of Kent. For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any author-accepted manuscript version arising from this submission.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in osf at https://osf.io/c52te/?view_only=19e48743b74243bb93c1ad759d6f80aa.

Endnotes

[1] We removed one of the items in the efficacy scale ('I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues we are facing locally') since reliability was $\alpha = 0.50$ if it was included.

[2] This deviation from the pre-registration was made on the advice of a reviewer.

[3] For consistency, we removed the same item as in Study 1 (reliability including the item was $\alpha = 0.67$).

[4] We also asked participants to indicate how often they had shared any of the ULEZ conspiracy theories with others (e.g., on their social media accounts or in conversations; 1 = ever, 7 = very frequently), and how likely they would do so in the future (1 = under no circumstances, 7 = certainly). We also asked participants 'How important is the issue of the ULEZ scheme to you?' (1 = very unimportant, 7 = very important), 'How much does the ULEZ scheme affect you personally?' (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), 'How often do you pay the ULEZ charge' (1 = never, 6 = very frequently). We also asked participants to indicate the distance they live from central London (in miles), their main mode of transport, and whether they have any respiratory issues such as asthma. We did not pre-register any hypotheses including these variables and intend to include them in a separate investigation, alongside the comments participants left about the ULEZ scheme.

[5] As in Study 1, this deviation from the pre-registration was made on the advice of a reviewer.

References

Aaronovitch, D. 2010. *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory Has Shaped Modern History*. Vintage.

Albath, E. A., R. Greifeneder, K. M. Douglas, et al. 2024. "Does Lower Psychological Need Satisfaction Foster Conspiracy Belief? Longitudinal Effects Over 3 Years in New Zealand." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672241292841.

Alper, S., D. Toribio-Flórez, V. Capraro, and K. M. Douglas. 2024. "Stronger Conspiracy Beliefs Are Associated With a Stronger Tendency to Act Dishonestly and an Overestimation of Others' Dishonesty." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 16, no. 8: 963–974. https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506241302878.

Ardèvol-Abreu, A., H. Gil de Zúñiga, and E. Gámez. 2020. "The Influence of Conspiracy Beliefs on Conventional and Unconventional Forms of Political Participation: The Mediating Role of Political Efficacy." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, no. 2: 549–569. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12366.

Atkinson, M. D., D. de Witt, and J. E. Uscinski. 2017. "Conspiracy Theories in the 2016 Election." In *Conventional Wisdom, Parties, and Broken Barriers in the 2016 Election*, edited by J. C. Luca, C. J. Galdieri, and T. S. Sisco, 163–180. Lexington Books.

Beshi, T. D., and R. Kaur. 2020. "Public Trust in Local Government: Explaining the Role of Good Governance Practices." *Public Organization Review* 20, no. 2: 337–350. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-019-00444-6.

Biddlestone, M., F. Azevedo, and S. van der Linden. 2022. "Climate of Conspiracy: A Metaanalysis of the Consequences of Belief in Conspiracy Theories About Climate Change." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46: 101390. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101390.

Biddlestone, M., R. Green, K. M. Douglas, F. Azevedo, R. M. Sutton, and A. Cichocka. 2025. "Reasons to Believe: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analytic Synthesis of the Motives Associated With Conspiracy Beliefs." *Psychological Bulletin* 151, no. 1: 48–87. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000463.

Bowes, S. M., T. H. Costello, and A. Tasimi. 2023. "The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates." *Psychological Bulletin* 149, no. 5–6: 259–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392.

Brotherton, R., C. C. French, and A. D. Pickering. 2013. "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4: 279. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279.

Burn, J., and Z. Sherratt. 2024. "Controversial Pedestrian and Cycle Zone is Scrapped." https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3ge1genqdwo.

Butler, L. D., C. Koopman, and P. G. Zimbardo. 1995. "The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film 'JFK': Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioral Intentions." *Political Psychology* 16, no. 2: 237–257. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791831.

Byford, J. 2011. *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Castle, L. 2020. "The Kent Conspiracy Theories and Urban Legends You Didn't Know Existed." https://www.kentonline.co.uk/maidstone/news/conspiracy-theories-and-legends-of-kent-228968/.

Cichocka, A., and A. Cisłak. 2020. "Nationalism as Collective Narcissism." *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34: 69–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.12.013.

Coady, D. 2006. *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*. Ashgate.

Dale, B. 2024. "Herne Bay Road Plans Revised to Remove Plaza." https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cw4d2p8yyz3o.

de Golec Zavala, A., A. Cichocka, R. Eidelson, and N. Jayawickreme. 2009. "Collective Narcissism and Its Social Consequences." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 6: 1074–1096. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016904.

Dentith, M. R., and M. Orr. 2017. "Secrecy and Conspiracy." *Episteme* 14: 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2017.9.

Douglas, K. M. 2021. "COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 2: 270–275. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068.

Douglas, K. M., and R. M. Sutton. 2008. "The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana." *Journal of Social Psychology* 148, no. 2: 210–222. https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.148.2.210-222.

Douglas, K. M., and R. M. Sutton. 2023. "What Are Conspiracy Theories? A Definitional Approach to Their Correlates, Consequences, and Communication." *Annual Review of Psychology* 74: 271–298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329.

Douglas, K. M., and R. M. Sutton. 2025. "The Social Psychology of Conspiracy Theori3es: Key Insights and Future Challenges." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 71: 1–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2024.10.004.

Douglas, K. M., R. M. Sutton, and A. Cichocka. 2017. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6: 538–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261.

Einstein, K. L., and D. M. Glick. 2015. "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Political Behavior* 37, no. 3: 679–701. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9287-z.

Fernández-Martínez, J. L., P. García-Espín, and M. Jiménez-Sánchez. 2020. "Participatory Frustration: The Unintended Cultural Effect of Local Democratic Innovations." *Administration and Society* 52, no. 5: 718–748. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399719833628.

Gkinopoulos, T., and S. Mari. 2022. "How Exposure to Real Conspiracy Theories Motivates Collective Action and Political Engagement? The Moderating Role of Primed Victimhood and Underlying Emotional Mechanisms in the Case of 2018 Bushfire in Attica." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 53, no. 1: 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12923.

Goertzel, T. 1994. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 15, no. 4: 731–742. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791630.

Golby, J. 2024. "Accused: The Hampstead Paedophile Hoax: TV That Will Make Your Eyes Pop More by the Minute." https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/mar/09/accused-the-hampstead-paedophile-hoax-an-eye-popping-cautionary-tale.

Golec de Zavala, A., K. Bierwiaczonek, and P. Ciesielski. 2022. "An Interpretation of Meta-Analytical Evidence for the Link Between Collective Narcissism and Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47: 101360. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101360.

Hogg, M. A., D. J. Terry, and K. M. White. 1995. "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory With Social Identity Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58: 255–269. https://doi.org/10.2307/2787127.

Holmes, M. 2004. "Introduction: The Importance of Being Angry: Anger in Political Life." *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 2: 123–132. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431004041747.

Hu, L., and P. M. Bentler. 1999. "Cutoff Criteria for Fit Indexes in Covariance Structure Analysis: Conventional Criteria Versus New Alternatives." *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 6, no. 1: 1–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705519909540118.

Imhoff, R., and M. Bruder. 2014. "Speaking (Un–)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude." *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1: 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930.

Imhoff, R., L. Dieterle, and P. Lamberty. 2021. "Resolving the Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview and Political Activism: Belief in Secret Plots Decreases Normative but Increases Nonnormative Political Engagement." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 12, no. 1: 71–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619896491.

Imhoff, R., F. Zimmer, O. Klein, et al. 2022. "Conspiracy Mentality and Political Orientation Across 26 Countries." *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, no. 3: 392–403. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01258-7.

Jolley, D., and K. M. Douglas. 2014. "The Social Consequences of Conspiracism: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and to Reduce One's Carbon Footprint." *British Journal of Psychology* 105, no. 1: 35–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018.

Jolley, D., K. M. Douglas, A. C. Leite, and T. Schrader. 2019. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Intentions to Engage in Everyday Crime." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 58, no. 3: 534–549. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12311.

Jolley, D., K. M. Douglas, M. Marchlewska, A. Cichocka, and R. M. Sutton. 2022. "Examining the Links Between Conspiracy Beliefs and the EU "Brexit" Referendum Vote in the UK: Evidence From a Two-Wave Survey." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 52, no. 1: 30–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12829.

Jolley, D., and J. L. Paterson. 2020. "Pylons Ablaze: Examining the Role of 5G COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs and Support for Violence." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, no. 3: 628–640. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12394.

Keeley, B. L. 1999. "Of Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Philosophy* 96: 109–126. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1084585.

Lantian, A., D. Muller, C. Nurra, and K. M. Douglas. 2016. "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Validation of a French and English Single-Item Scale." *International Review of Social Psychology* 29, no. 1: 1–14. https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.8.

Leman, P., and M. Cinnirella. 2007. "A Major Event has a Major Cause: Evidence for the Role of Heuristics In Reasoning about Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological Review* 9, no. 2: 18–28. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsspr.2007.9.2.18.

Lewandowsky, S., K. Oberauer, and G. E. Gignac. 2013. "NASA Faked the Moon Landing—Therefore, (Climate) Science Is a Hoax: An Anatomy of the Motivated Rejection of Science." *Psychological Science* 24, no. 5: 622–633. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612457686.

Liekefett, L., O. Christ, and J. C. Becker. 2022. "Can Conspiracy Beliefs Be Beneficial? Longitudinal Linkages Between Conspiracy Beliefs, Anxiety, Uncertainty Aversion, and Existential Threat." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 49, no. 2: 167–179. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211060965.

Lloyd, A. 2024. "This German City Doesn't Exist, According to a Decades-Long Conspiracy Theory." https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/does-bielefeld-germany-exist-conspiracy.

Lyons, W. E., and D. Lowery. 1986. "The Organization of Political Space and Citizen Responses to Dissatisfaction in Urban Communities. An Integrative Model." *Journal of Politics* 48, no. 2: 321–346. https://doi.org/10.2307/2131096.

Marchlewska, M., R. Green, A. Cichocka, Z. Molenda, and K. M. Douglas. 2022. "From Bad to Worse: Avoidance Coping With Stress Increases Conspiracy Beliefs." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 61, no. 2: 532–549. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12494.

Mari, S., H. Gil de Zúñiga, A. Suerdem, et al. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use." *Political Psychology* 43, no. 2: 277–296. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12754.

Marinthe, G., A. Cislak, S. Stronge, et al. 2024. "Yes, We Can (But for Different Reasons): Collective Narcissism Is Linked to Different Values but Similar Pro-Ingroup Collective Action Tendencies Among Disadvantaged and Advantaged Ethnic Groups." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64, no. 1: e12790. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12790.

McDonnell, J. 2019. "Municipality Size, Political Efficacy and Political Participation: A Systematic Review." *Local Government Studies* 46, no. 3: 331–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2019.1600510.

Milošević-Dordević, J., I. Žeželj, and Ž. Durić. 2021. "Beyond General Political Attitudes. Conspiracy Mentality as a Global Belief System Predicts Endorsement of International and Local Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 9, no. 1: 144–158.

Papaioannou, K., M. Pantazi, and J.-W. van Prooijen. 2024. "Rejection of the Status Quo: Conspiracy Theories and Preference for Alternative Political Systems." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 63, no. 4: 2077–2099. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12754.

Postmes, T., S. A. Haslam, and L. Jans. 2013. "A Single-Item Measure of Social Identification: Reliability, Validity, and Utility." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 52, no. 4: 597–617. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12006.

Pummerer, L., T. Gkinopoulos, K. M. Douglas, D. Jolley, and K. Sassenberg. 2025a. "The Appraisal Model of Conspiracy Theories (AMCT): Applying Appraisal Theories to Understand Emotional and Behavioral Reactions to Conspiracy Theories." *Psychological Inquiry* 35, no. 3–4: 159–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2024.2442906.

Pummerer, L., T. Gkinopoulos, K. M. Douglas, D. Jolley, and K. Sassenberg. 2025b. "The Appraisal Model of Conspiracy Theories (AMCT): Highlighting Core Concepts and Potential Extensions." *Psychological Inquiry* 35, no. 3–4: 233–242. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2025.2454118.

Räikkä, J. 2009. "On Political Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2: 15–201.

Romer, D., and K. H. Jamieson. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories as Barriers to Controlling the Spread of COVID-19 in the U.S." *Social Science & Medicine* 263: 113356. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113356.

Rosseel, Y. 2012. "Lavaan: An R Package for Structural Equation Modeling." *Journal of Statistical Software* 48, no. 2: 1–36. https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v048.i02.

Rottweiler, B., and P. Gill. 2022. "Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-Efficacy, Self-Control and Law-Related Morality." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 7: 1485–1504. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288.

Sachdeva, M., and H. Evans. 2023. "Camera Attacks and Conspiracy Theories: How Ulez Became a Vigilante Battleground." https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/ulez-expansion-protests-sadiq-khan-criticism-b2401061.html.

Soral, W., A. Cichocka, M. Bilewicz, and M. Marchlewska. 2018. "The Collective Conspiracy Mentality in Poland." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, edited by J. E. Uscinski. Oxford University Press.

Sternisko, A., A. Cichocka, and J. J. Van Bavel. 2020. "The Dark Side of Social Movements: Social Identity, Non-Conformity, and the Lure of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35: 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.02.007.

Sutton, R. M., and K. M. Douglas. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories and the Conspiracy Mindset: Implications for Political Ideology." *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34: 118–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.02.015.

Swami, V., D. Barron, L. Weis, M. Voracek, S. Stieger, and A. Furnham. 2017. "An Examination of the Factorial and Convergent Validity of Four Measures of Conspiracist Ideation, With Recommendations for Researchers." *PLoS One* 12, no. 2: e0172617. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172617.

Trella, C., R. M. Sutton, and K. M. Douglas. 2024. "Semantic and Causal Relations Between the Conspiracy Mentality and Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 232, no. 1: 7–17. https://doi.org/10.1027/2151-2604/a000545.

Uscinski, J. E., and J. M. Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford University Press.

van der Linden, S., C. Panagopoulos, F. Azevedo, and J. T. Jost. 2020. "The Paranoid Style of American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking." *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1: 23–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12681.

Wang, H., and J.-W. van Prooijen. 2023. "Stole Elections: How Conspiracy Beliefs During the 2020 American Presidential Elections Changed Over Time." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 37, no. 2: 277–289. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3996.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** casp70198-sup-0001-Supinfo.docx.