

The Social Cohesion Investment: Local areas that invested in social cohesion programmes are faring better in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Social cohesion in times of crisis

Research has consistently observed that social cohesion (the strength of relationship between the individual and the state, and between individuals and their fellow citizens) rises in the aftermath of natural disasters or mass tragedies.¹ However, this sense of “coming together” is often short-lived and comes back to pre-disaster level within a matter of weeks.² But what happened in the UK as the Covid-19 pandemic progressed?

The first stages of the Covid-19 pandemic saw an extraordinary increase in kindness and social connection with people organising spontaneously to support those affected through neighbourhood support groups, reaching out to isolated community members through telephone calls, and the ‘clap for carers’. However, as months pass social tensions appear to be rising again, along with increasing distrust of central government. Minority ethnic and religious communities have been accused of spreading the virus by not taking recommendations seriously,³ as have younger people⁴ – potentially fuelling increased tensions between groups within and across local communities.

As the impact of the pandemic persists, so do the challenges for local authorities. Strong connections, local community knowledge and good relations have already proved important for local test, track and trace systems and to tailor health messages for diverse local groups and communities.⁵ With winter and tighter lockdown rules both imminent, we believe cohesion and integration will remain crucial in helping communities through the next six months and beyond.

The “Beyond Us & Them” research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation aims to track people’s perceptions of social cohesion in different places in the UK. An important feature of the project is that we collect the views of people living in six different local authority areas (five of which are a part of the government Integration Area programme and all of which have invested in social cohesion over the last two years), as well as other places and regions.

This brief report presents headline findings on trust and cohesion from comparisons between these local authority areas versus other places in the UK. These included broadly representative samples from Scotland, Wales and Kent (the most densely populated non-metropolitan county in England).⁶ We found that people in

1 Calo-Blanco, A., Kováčik, J., Mengel, F., & Romero, J. G. (2017). Natural disasters and indicators of social cohesion. *PLoS ONE*, 12(6), e0176885. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176885>; and Hawdon, J., & Ryan, J. (2011). Social relations that generate and sustain solidarity after a mass tragedy. *Social Forces*, 89(4), 1363-1384. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/89.4.1363>

2 Sweet, S. (1998). The effect of a natural disaster on social cohesion: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 16(3), 321-331.

3 BBC News. (2020). *Craig Whittaker: MP defends saying some Muslims not taking covid seriously*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53612230>

4 Reicher, S. (2020). Scapegoating young people for Britain’s rising coronavirus rates is a poor strategy. *The Guardian - Opinion*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/09/scapegoating-young-people-britain-coronavirus-rates>

5 The Guardian – Society (2020). *English Councils with highest Covid rates launch own test and trace systems*. <https://www.the-guardian.com/society/2020/aug/04/english-councils-with-highest-covid-rates-launch-own-test-and-trace-systems>

6 Findings have been controlled for age, gender, income, ethnicity and political orientation (and should be caveated with the observation that each local area has a unique set of characteristics e.g. geography, demographics, socio-economic conditions, infrastructure, etc.), and therefore social cohesion will be influenced by a complex set of factors that cannot always be easily quantified.

the six local authority areas were significantly **less cynical** about both national and local politicians and **more accepting** of government decisions and guidelines. They also reported stronger and better social relationships with other citizens, and warmer feelings towards immigrants compared to other areas. Taken together these findings indicate stronger social cohesion in the six local authority areas, despite the fact that respondents from these areas reported higher levels of concern and were experiencing higher local infection rates.

Why these local authority areas?

A central question for our research is ‘Are local places that prioritise cohesion and integration, and who have invested in local community building and responses, likely to recover more quickly from crisis and develop greater future resilience?’

As part of the Integrated Communities Strategy (March 2018), the UK government set up the Integration Area programme : ‘The Integration Area Programme focusses local and national resource on a common goal to deliver integrated communities, to better understand and tackle the challenges specific to a place, building on existing best practice and local strengths [...]’. Five local authority areas took part in this programme: Blackburn with Darwen,⁷ Bradford,⁸ Peterborough,⁹ Walsall¹⁰ and Waltham Forest.¹¹ During the two years that preceded the outbreak of coronavirus each area had implemented programmes to strengthen social cohesion and integration locally in response to different local integration and cohesion challenges. For example, one area prioritised equality of opportunity, improving community relations, social engagement and activism, and tackling crime, whilst another focused on young people and connecting communities.

Our survey was developed in partnership with four of these areas. We also collected data from the fifth (Peterborough), and established a partnership with Calderdale Council. Although Calderdale was not one of the formally designated Integration Areas, over the same period, it has explicitly prioritised kindness and resilience (key aspects of social cohesion) in its local strategy, for example, organising community-led responses to devastating local floods in February 2020.

7 Blackburn with Darwen (2019). *Our Community, Our Future – A social integration strategy for Blackburn with Darwen*. <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Blackburn-with-Darwen-Integration-Area-Strategy-Final.pdf>

8 Bradford District (2019). *Stronger Communities Together – A strategy for Bradford District 2018-2023*. <https://bdp.bradford.gov.uk/media/1363/stronger-communities-together-strategy.pdf>

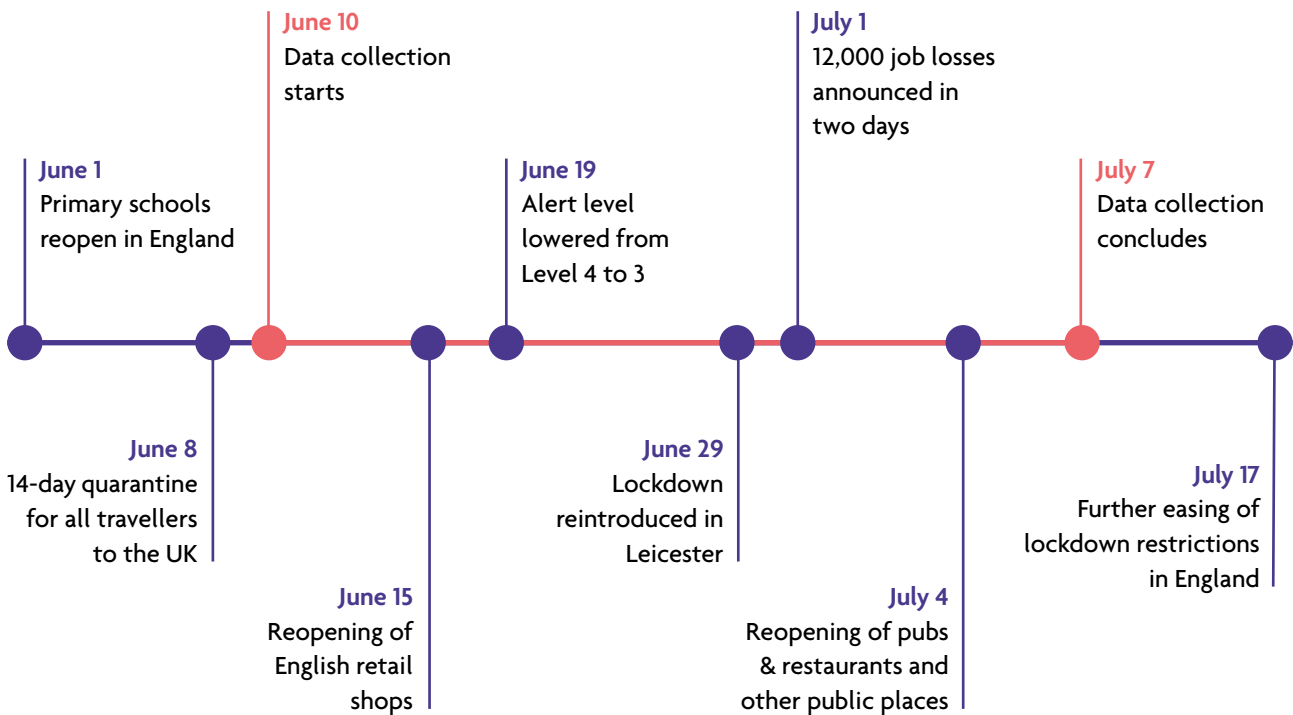
9 Belong (2019). *Belonging Together – A conversation about our communities and future*. <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/BelongingTogether-AConversationAboutOurCommunitiesAndFuture-May2019.pdf>

10 Walsall for All (2019). *Our vision for integrated and welcoming communities*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ffd8a6_a4bdd91b47eb47f29d4c17e6764be14f.pdf

11 Waltham Forest (2019). *Our Place, A Shared Plan for Connecting Communities in Waltham Forest*. <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Connecting-Communities-Strategy.pdf>

The research

The data presented in this report is part of the Beyond Us and Them June monthly survey. In total, 2,924 respondents completed an on-line questionnaire; data collection ran from 10th June to 7th July 2020. We compared the sense of social cohesion reported by the Integration Area respondents (Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest, as well as Calderdale) versus other respondents coming from places with no specific local integration programme in place (Wales, Scotland, and the county of Kent). We explore whether the six local authority areas may be better equipped to cope with the impact of Covid-19 via higher levels of social cohesion during the Covid-19 pandemic. This brief report conveys some of the headline findings rather than detailed statistical analyses.



Assessing social cohesion

We draw from validated models of social cohesion in the social sciences literature to determine the most relevant indicators of social cohesion.¹² According to most models, social cohesion is manifested at two levels: in the relations between the individual and the state (or power system), and in the relations between the individual and their fellow citizens. With respect to this conceptualisation, we present results pertaining to:

Relations between the individual and the state

- 1) Trust in the government
- 2) Perception of governmental restrictions and decisions as appropriate
- 3) Engagement in social activism (e.g., engaging in a local campaign online, signing a petition, volunteering, donating to a cause)

Relations between the individual and their fellow citizens

- 4) Attitudes towards immigration
- 5) Trust in other people to respect social distancing measures in place
- 6) Density of social relations during lockdown (the quality and quantity of social connections with friends, family and neighbours)

The samples of respondents from the Integration areas differed from the samples from other areas in terms of various demographics, as shown below. Therefore, in the analyses that follow we statistically adjusted for individuals' age, gender, household income, socio-economic status, ethnicity and political orientation. Any differences we report are reliable after adjusting for these characteristics. We applied a statistical threshold of $p < .005$, meaning that there is at least a 199 in 200 probability that the difference would be observed again if we repeated the survey with a new sample at the same time. Because comparison between the respondents from these local authorities and other areas is not completely straightforward, we conducted further methodological and statistical assessments to ensure that the findings are robust and defensible. Further details are summarised in the supplementary technical document [here](#).

¹² Bottoni, G. (2018). A multilevel measurement model of social cohesion. *Social Indicators Research*, 136(3), 835-857. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1470-7>

	Integration Areas	Other places
Age	Mean = 48.5 (<i>SD</i> = 15.0)	Mean = 52.9 (<i>SD</i> = 15.7)
Gender	30% male, 70% female	45% male, 55% female
Income (total household annual)¹³	43% earning up to £30,000, 43% earning £30,000-£60,000, 14% earning more than £60,000	49% earning up to £30,000, 37% earning £30,000-£60,000, 14% earning more than £60,000
Socio-economic status	Mean = 4.46 (<i>SD</i> = 1.27)	Mean = 4.37 (<i>SD</i> = 1.33)
Ethnicity	84% White, 9% Asian (Indian and Pakistani), 3% Black, 2% Mixed	97% White, 2% Asian (mostly Indian), 1% Mixed
Political orientation	43% left-wing, 40% centre, 17% right-wing	32% left-wing, 38% centre, 30% right-wing

¹³ Subjective socio-economic status is measured with the 'status ladder': the respondent places themselves on a ladder with 8 rungs (*min* = 1, *max* = 8), a higher rung indicating a higher status.

Findings on Social Cohesion

Relations with the state

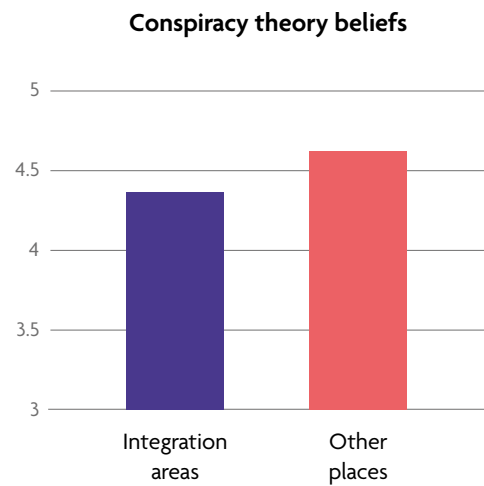
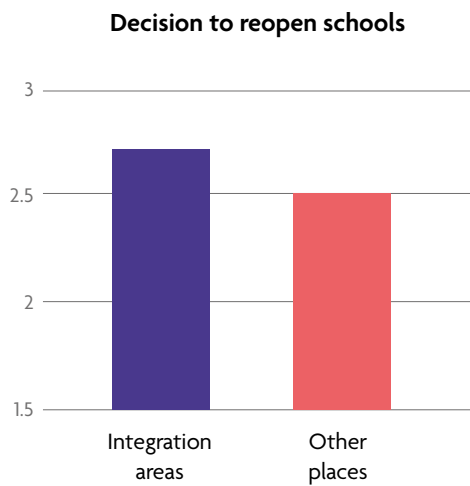
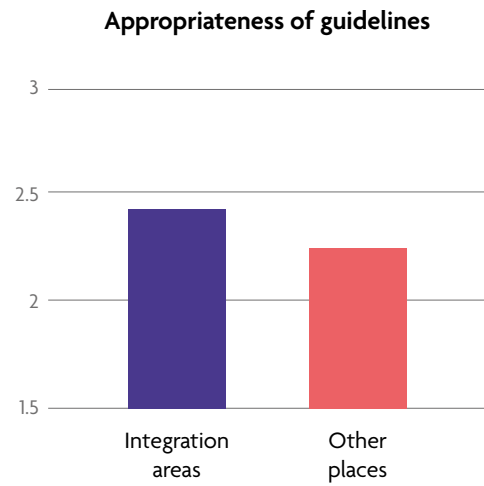
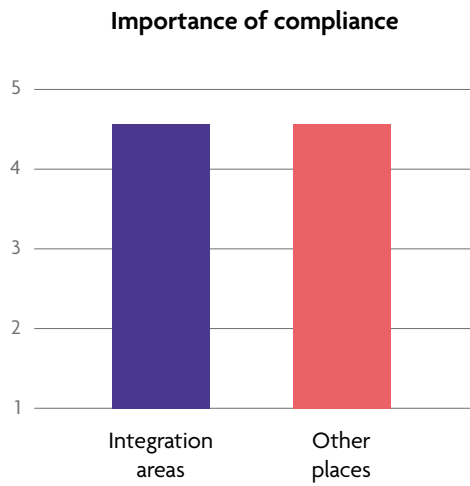
Overall, average political trust did not differ between the local authority areas with investment in social cohesion and those without. Notably, there were no significant differences in the levels of trust respondents placed in their local Members of Parliament. However, respondents in the six local authority areas were less cynical about the political system: they were less likely to agree that politicians “are in politics for their own benefit” (57% agreement in the six local authority areas vs. 64% in other places) or that they “think they don’t need to respect the law as much as normal citizens do” (57% agreement vs. 62%).

There was overall agreement at the same level in the local authorities and other areas on the importance of everyone respecting the current restrictions on behaviour. However, when rating the governmental response to Covid-19, respondents from the local authority areas:

- perceived the **current governmental restrictions** are more appropriate (8% higher on average)
- were more supportive of the **decision to reopen schools** in England on 1st June (8% higher)
- were less likely to report **conspiracy beliefs** (i.e., that the official version of the Covid-19 pandemic given by the authorities hides the truth) than respondents in other areas (7% lower on average)

“I think that [name of council] has done a fantastic job. And it’s the councillors, all the management and all the employees, the foot soldiers. They’ve been out there from day one, with food parcels and guidance, and I don’t think they’ve stopped. they themselves have really run ragged to help the community; and it’s felt that, Yeah, I’m not.. I’ve not felt alone”

(Local Area Focus group participant)



Notes. Importance of compliance, Appropriateness of guidelines, and Decision of reopening schools were rated on 5-point scales (higher scores representing higher agreement). Conspiracy theory beliefs were rated on a 7-point scale (higher scores representing greater conspiracy beliefs).

Relations with other people

Respondents in the local authority areas reported stronger and better social relationships than respondents from other places. Specifically, they reported a stronger sense of connection with their family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours during lockdown (7% higher).

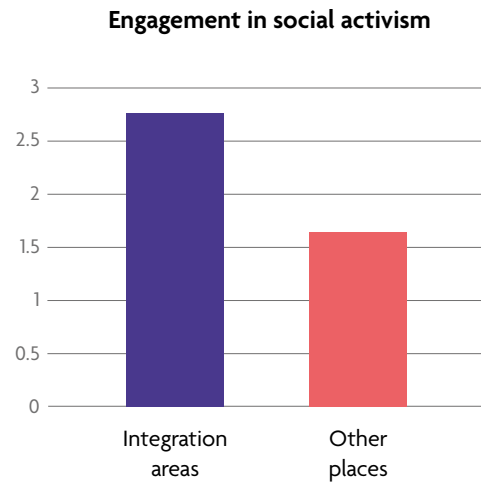
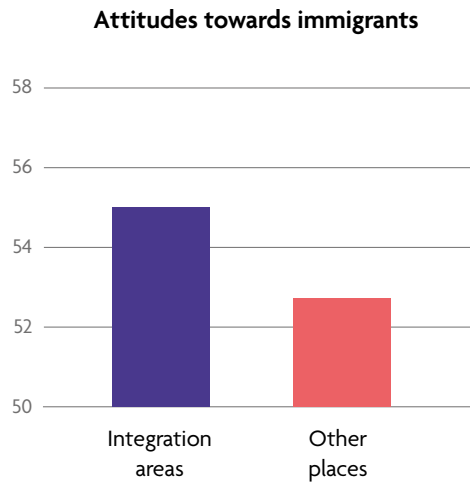
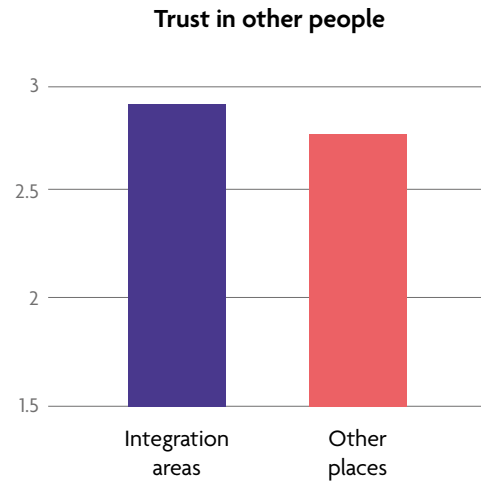
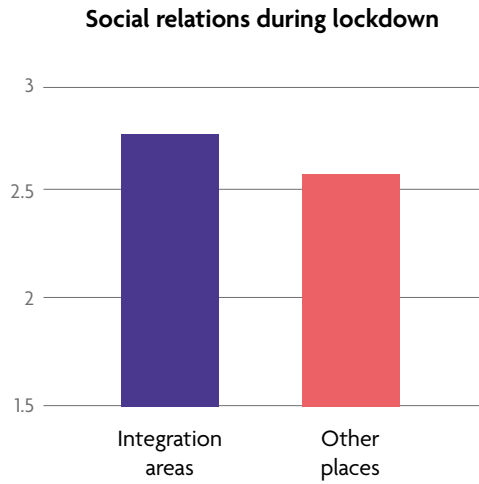
Compared with those from other areas, the local authority respondents also expressed a more positive orientation toward people from different social groups across society, as shown in:

- **greater trust** in all sorts of people to respect the Covid-19 restrictions in place, especially in young people (5% higher)
- more positive **attitudes towards immigrants** in the UK (attitudes expressed towards legal and illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and seasonal workers (4% higher)

Finally, these respondents were substantially more likely to have engaged in different forms of **social activism** during the past month. Most common actions included signing a petition, supporting a social media campaign, boycotting specific products, making a donation, and volunteering (overall 62% higher on average).

“... I was volunteering with a mutual aid group. So I was actually going out during the lockdown and meeting neighbours who I had never met before, and connecting with other neighbours who were volunteering. And so we were delivering food to those who couldn't go out or in need, and then also picking up prescriptions for other neighboursSo I had some time because I was working at home. But then I was also a parent who had two three-year-olds at home whilst trying to work as well and it was pretty hellish. ... going out to help other people helped me because it ... gave me a bit of space, and also perspective as well, I was very conscious about other groups of people having a very different experience of lockdown to me.”

(Local Area Focus group participant)



Notes. Social relations and trust in other people were rated on 5-point scales (higher scores representing greater relations, neighbourliness, and trust). Attitudes towards immigrants were measured on a 100-point 'feeling thermometer' (higher scores representing more favourable attitudes). Engagement in social activism represents the number of different actions people reported having engaged in during the past month (0 up to 13).

Conclusions

Taken together, these findings clearly portray a greater sense of social cohesion in the six local authority areas compared with other areas. As we cannot attribute this difference to the demographic characteristics of the sample, a likely explanation is that the explicit strategy to build cohesion has supported these areas. The results are perhaps more remarkable because the same respondents **also reported greater concern** regarding the consequences of the pandemic for themselves, close friends and family and in their local area. They also perceived (and official figures show this is accurate) that **rates of infection** were comparatively higher in their local area.

It is worth noting that trust levels prior to the pandemic (from 2016-2019) were declining significantly across the country and were lower among 'Leave' than 'Remain' areas. This indicates that, prior to the pandemic, trust levels were likely to be lower overall in the local authority areas than in other areas.¹⁴ To find higher levels of trust in these areas is therefore quite important and not readily attributable to pre-existing differences. Specific problems with social cohesion and integration would have contributed to these local authorities' interest in being part of the Integration Area Programme and this, together with an appetite in local leadership for tackling these problems, would have been a criterion for why government invested in those areas.¹⁵

Although the immediate shock of the Covid-19 crisis has abated, the risk of infection continues and is now rising again. Blame and anger are being expressed more frequently towards particular groups and previous divisions have begun to reassert themselves – a common next stage in disaster scenarios.¹⁶ However, people from the six local areas engaged in the 'Beyond Us and Them' research project are reporting higher levels of trust and social connection, and a markedly higher level of social activism than other areas. The evidence from natural disasters and crisis situations is that communities that are more connected and more resilient are often quicker to recover.¹⁷ Of course, as the six areas cope with local lockdowns and the impact of the pandemic on their local economies and communities they will continue to face considerable challenges. But for the moment the investment in social cohesion in the preceding period seems to be paying off, with **stronger, more connected communities** in these areas that are more **welcoming and open** towards others, factors that may be vital in their rebuild and recovery efforts.

¹⁴ Among the local authorities, all but one were Leave supporting to varying degrees (see supplementary technical document here for more details).

¹⁵ HM Government. (2019). Integrated Communities Action Plan.

¹⁶ Jones, L. (2020). What Earthquakes can teach us about the Coronavirus pandemic. *Opinion Los Angeles Times*.
<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-05-03/big-ones-pandemic-coronavirus>

¹⁷ Aldrich, D. P. (2012). *Building Resilience – Social Capital in Post-disaster Recovery*. The University of Chicago Press.
<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/B/bo13601684.html>

What's next?

The research will tell us not just about how people are responding to the pandemic but also about ways in which individuals and communities may gain strength and resilience in relation to wider challenges and changes that may lie ahead.

We have just completed the second round of data collection (August-September) from the local authority samples and other areas. All respondents will have the opportunity to participate in two more rounds in October then again in November, enabling us to track cohesion and resilience over that period. This will enable us to understand more about how the unique characteristics of local places affect the findings.

To obtain a more nuanced insight into how people are experiencing the pandemic in different areas we have also completed a larger number of focus groups and one-to-one interviews (online) involving people from the local authority areas and other places, and will be conducting the second round of these during October and November. Findings from these discussions will complement the results from the surveys.

Acknowledgements

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For more information, visit the webpages dedicated to the project on the **Belong** website, **Nuffield Foundation** website, and the **University of Kent** website.