Beyond Us and Them - Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19

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November 2021

Nuffield Foundation

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the following people and organisations without whom this research project would not have been possible:

All of our research participants for taking their time and for generously sharing their thoughts and experiences of the pandemic so far.

The Nuffield Foundation for generously supporting this research, and to Alex Beer for her oversight of the project and for her guidance and feedback.

Our local authority research partners at City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, Walsall Council, Waltham Forest Council and Calderdale Council, our metropolitan area research partners in Greater Manchester, Greater London, West Midlands and West of England and our community research partners at Volunteering Matters, StreetGames, Near Neighbours, Jo Cox Foundation and Spirit of 2012. We are particularly grateful to Zahra Niazi, Shehla Khalid, Claire Tulloch, Charlotte Gough, Hayley Sims, Yvonne Campbell, Sail Suleman, Yvette Fisher, George Burgess, Amber Plumbly, Ceris Anderson, Jessamin Birdsall, Emily Danby, Josh Westerling, Eibhlish Fleming, Jill Rutter, Shaheen Bi, Meg Henry, Victoria Harkness, Samiya Butt, Claire Dhami, Jon Fox, Phyllis Abebreseh, Kat Radlett, Muddassir Shah and Amy Finch for their expertise and support in coordinating the research and for contributing to our Advisory Panel discussions. We would also like to thank Humanists UK, EFL Trust, WEA, Youth Sport Trust, The Linking Network, NCS Trust and Sporting Equals for helping to disseminate our survey.

The University of Kent Advisory Panel for valuable discussion over survey design and content. We are grateful to Profs Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, Roger Giner-Sorolla, and Drs Pascal Burgmer, Aleksandra Cichocka, Nikhil Sengupta, Hannah Swift and Giovanni Travaglino as well as the members of Grouplab in the Centre for the Study of Group Processes.

The Advisory Panel at Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network is made up of representatives from our research partners above. They have supported the survey design and content, and provided invaluable insight on local conditions and initiatives as the pandemic progressed. We are especially grateful to Prof Ted Cantle for his leadership of the Belong Advisory Panel.

The wider project team for working tirelessly to support the research and its coordination. We are especially grateful to Alice Abrams, Zoe Abrams, Jacinta Babaian, Ben Davies, Michelle Dodd, Chloe Farahar, Maria Heering, Isabella Despositos, Alexandra O'Shea, Hilal Özkeçeci, Linus Peitz, Isabella Savin, Benjamin Sobel, Lewis Westwood Flood, at the University of Kent and to Megan Crossley, Alex Fraser, Amy Glendinning, Christine Cox and Anna Balasz at Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network. We would also like to thank Isobel Platts-Dunn, our former co-investigator and co-author on the earlier papers, for all her hard work setting up the project during the early days of the pandemic, and our designer Max Randall who has designed and produced our publications and this report.

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Foreword

In March 2020 it became clear that the emerging COVID-19 pandemic was more than a crisis in public health. The Nuffield Foundation challenged social scientists to help us better understand the wider significance of the crisis. We funded the Beyond Us and Them project as part of this call because of its focus on social connections and their relationship with place. The wealth of longitudinal data it has collected has enabled the tracking of community connections over the course of the pandemic and created a rich body of quantitative and qualitative evidence available for researchers, both now and in the future.

'We're all in this together' was a frequently cited mantra in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, though one that was challenged as disparities in outcomes became so noticeable. This research has helped to move beyond anecdotal observations on the nature and extent of community ties during the crisis to allow us to better understand the features of communities that were better connected and more resilient.

As the pandemic progressed the intrinsic links between social well-being, place and community came to the fore. Whilst the crisis and its associated restrictions on our lives increased community connections for some people, it also exposed fault lines and exacerbated deep-seated inequalities for others. Crucially some groups within communities were hit harder than others, not only in terms of health outcomes, but also economically, socially, and psychologically.

COVID has also shifted our understanding of what a community is and the ways in which people can be and feel included and excluded. This has been seen most obviously in the shift from face-to-face to virtual interactions during lockdowns. This research also lays the groundwork for the Nuffield Foundation's broader interest in better understanding communities in a digitally driven society and how we can make them stronger, more equal, better connected and more resilient.

Encouragingly, this research shows that investment in, and an explicit focus on, social cohesion by local government can help to build trust and more positive relationships between different groups in society and, in turn, help communities to become more resilient. This research, and its recommendations – such as the importance of empowering and engaging local communities in the development, implementation, and delivery of services – is also highly relevant to the government's levelling up agenda.

Tim Gardam
Chief Executive, Nuffield Foundation

Executive Summary

The people of the UK have lived through an extraordinary 18 months. Every area of our economy, our society and our everyday life has been affected. The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic saw many inspiring examples of mutual aid, kindness and unity in the face of this existential threat. As the impact of the pandemic unfolded across the UK, it became evident that the virus exploited vulnerabilities posed by existing inequalities in social and economic conditions and that this contributed to the disproportionate and unequal death toll for some groups and communities. As the initial period of community spirit and unity subsided some old divisions and tensions within UK society have re-emerged and fractures between different groups, communities and regions are once again coming to the fore.

In order to build a kinder, fairer, better connected and more inclusive society, we need to strengthen the ties that bind us and in particular those ties that bridge between different groups, communities, and regions. As others have pointed out, the UK is at a crossroads as we emerge from the pandemic.[1] We have an opportunity to build on the appetite for compassion, social connectedness and community spirit in society that has been revealed during this period. Our findings identify some of the likely levers for doing this and for strengthening resilience to the forces of polarisation, division and segregation.

Our research has asked: *How are relationships between individuals, communities and society adapting and reshaping in the face of this pandemic?* Between May 2020 and June 2021, across different parts of Britain, we collected more than 39,000 responses in a series of 8 on-line surveys. We surveyed people living in different nations of the UK (Scotland, Wales and England), people in six local authority areas within England that have prioritised social cohesion and been supported by extra investment to do so. We also surveyed people who were strongly engaged in community activities. From December 2020 we also surveyed in 4 metropolitan areas and large numbers of Black and Muslim people in order to capture their experiences. We also conducted repeat focus groups and one-to-one interviews in our sample areas over the course of the pandemic, conducting 61 focus groups and 256 one-to-one interviews in all .Our qualitative findings complement the quantitative survey findings and provide a further rich layer of insight into the impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities. These are explored in detail in Chapter 11.

We wanted to understand the effect the pandemic has had on: people's sense of trust in institutions and other people, relations between different groups and levels of discrimination, people's sense of belonging and how actively engaged with their community they are. We have done so with a strong emphasis on the importance of place and how people's experience of the pandemic is associated with the places in which they live.

The following is a summary of some of our key findings with links to the relevant sections in the report.

1 More in Common. 2020. 'Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain', https://www.britainschoice.uk/#our-common-ground; Talk/together. 2021. 'Our chance to reconnect: Final report of the Talk/together project', https://together.org.uk/Our-Chance-to-Reconnect.pdf.

Unity and division

Crisis can galvanise groups and communities to work together. At the same time, crisis can also exacerbate existing divisions and create new ones. Unity and division can coexist and so when we discuss social cohesion we must attend to both the unifying and the dividing forces at work.[2] The COVID-19 pandemic is no different. Indeed, perceptions of unity and division varied according to whether people were asked about the UK as a whole or their local area. Drivers of division identified in the qualitative research included economic and racial inequalities, north versus south tensions and divergence between the governments of the UK and devolved nations.

- **Sense of national unity** – In the early days of the crisis, there was a perception of growing national unity (43%) with only 32% perceiving growing division. But this quickly faded from June 2020 onwards. By June 2021, 64% perceived growing division in the country and only 16% growing unity.
- **Sense of local unity** – By contrast, throughout 2020 more people thought their local area was becoming more united than thought it was becoming more divided and by June 2021 roughly equal numbers perceived growing local unity (26%) as perceived growing local division (22%).
- **Divisions between groups** – Perceptions of division between certain groups - wealthier vs poorer, Scotland vs England, Leavers vs Remainers, younger vs older - all rose sharply between May 2020 (42%) and October 2020 (60%). All remained high thereafter, except division between younger and older people, which fell consistently from (from 51% in October 2020 to 39% in June 2021, others averaging 63%).
- **Division and the media** – A recurring theme in interviews and focus groups discussions was the media's perceived role in promoting narratives of division.

2 Abrams, D. 2010. 'Processes of prejudice: Theory, evidence and intervention'. Equalities and Human Rights Commission. Research Report 56 (118 pp). London, EHRC, https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-56-processes-of-prejudice-theory-evidence-and-intervention.pdf; Abrams, D., & Vasiljevic, M.D. 2014.' How does macroeconomic change affect social identity (and vice versa)?: Insights from the European context'. *Analysis of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 14(1), 1, 311-338. doi: 10.1111/asap.12052.

Trust

Trust is a vital component not just of social cohesion. Trust lies at the heart of a functioning democracy and so declining trust constitutes a significant challenge. Political trust plays a key role in determining people's responses in a time of crisis. We found a different pattern when we examined the specific measure of trust in the government's handling of COVID-19. Comments from interviewees and focus groups indicate that the breach of lockdown regulations by Dominic Cummings played a key role in the downturn in this measure.

Political trust is not a unitary entity and it is therefore important to distinguish how much we trust from whom we trust. We have found a clear distinction between people's trust in their local authority and trust in the UK government. If trust in our systems and institutions is a key facet of social cohesion, the extent to which we trust other individuals is an important element of social capital. Distrust in others reached a peak in late summer of 2020, perhaps coinciding with media reports of a lack of social distancing at protests, in seaside resorts and in national parks in the preceding six weeks. However, interpersonal trust then sprung back in the autumn, increasing steadily into the spring of 2021 and remained high.

- **Trust in national government** - Trust in the UK government's response to the crisis started out high (51% of people in May 2020), but dropped sharply after June 2020, hitting its lowest point in October 2020 (21%) and never recovered to the level of May 2020.
    - In England, trust in the UK government's response revived somewhat during late 2020 and early 2021.
    - In Scotland and Wales, trust in the UK government's response also declined sharply from June to October 2020, but unlike in England, it failed to recover.
- **Trust in local government** – Respondents consistently trusted their local authority's response to COVID-19 more than they did the UK government, remaining at 41% in June 2021. This was true in all places.
- **Trust in other people** – Trust in other people (to abide by COVID-19 restrictions) fell during the summer of 2020 (to 19%), but recovered strongly in autumn 2020 and was still stronger in June 2021 (to 43%) than it had been in May 2020.
- **Conspiracy theories** – A substantial proportion of people entertained conspiracy theories about the pandemic, but the strength of these beliefs reduced significantly in the second half of 2020 and less than a fifth (18%) of respondents accepting them by June 2021.

Identity and belonging

The places people identify with play a large part in how much they are motivated to maintain and improve that place. Conversely, a place that is unable to provide a sense of shared ownership, attributes or traditions to be proud of is unlikely to be one that offers people a positive sense of identity. Therefore, identification can be regarded as a fuel cell for social and emotional investment in a place; the sense of belonging and value that make the lives and fate of others who share that identity close to one's heart. We measured place-based identity, to different places, considering identity at the British level, home nation level, and local level .

The strength of British identity is perhaps, unsurprisingly, highly dependent on the respondents' country. Our findings pose an interesting challenge to the notion of a unified British identity for the whole of the UK with English respondents feeling more decidedly British and Scottish and Welsh respondents feeling much less so.

- **National identities** – Respondents from England consistently express stronger British identity than respondents from Wales and Scotland.
    - Respondents from Scotland and Wales expressed moderate British identity up until June 2020, but it weakened sharply after this.
    - Respondents from Scotland consistently expressed the least strong British identity of all.
- **Neighbourliness** – People's sense of neighbourliness rose sharply in the early months of the pandemic, peaking in June 2020.
    - Neighbourliness then declined during the rest of 2020, but rose back up from December 2020 to March 2021, falling back again afterwards.

Volunteering and social action

Volunteering is one of the most concrete actions people can undertake to demonstrate empathy, support and concern for others in their community and civil society at large. Other research suggests that volunteering has a positive impact not only for society, but also for the volunteer since it provides opportunities for fulfilling experiences, inter-group contact, and a rich and supportive social network.

We investigated the effect of being a volunteer during the period and compared the perceptions of volunteers versus non-volunteers. Our findings point to considerable personal and community-level benefits to volunteering, including deeper, more sustainable psychological resilience in a time of crisis, and that volunteering can contribute to more resilient local places, as shown in the six local areas we surveyed.

- **The experience of volunteers** – Those who engage in volunteering express greater trust in local and national government, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future than non-volunteers.

- **Volunteering and trust** – Higher levels of local political trust were significantly and reliably associated with greater rates of positive social engagement.
    - There is a similar but weaker relationship between helping behaviour (that is, volunteering and donating) and higher levels of national political trust.

The impact of investing in social cohesion

In six local authority areas that have prioritised social cohesion, we found that people had higher levels of political trust, better relations with other people and were more actively engaged in their communities. Five of the six areas were designated Integration Areas supported by the government's Integrated Communities Strategy. The sixth, Calderdale, prioritised 'kindness' and 'resilience' in its strategy, both of which are key elements of social cohesion. We therefore refer to them in the report as the six social cohesion areas. The results from these areas are all the more remarkable because four of them were under a higher level of restrictions for longer than elsewhere, and all six areas experienced higher and more prolonged levels of infection for significant periods during the pandemic.

- **Higher trust in national and local government** – Respondents in the six local authority areas (when asked in June 2021) expressed higher levels of trust in the national government than respondents from other places (+10%), and were more positive towards their local government's response to the pandemic (+4%).
- **Higher levels of volunteering** – The percentage of respondents volunteering in the six areas remained more consistent and twice as high as in other places. Respondents in these areas in June 2021 reported much **greater active social engagement** in general (i.e. volunteering, donating, signing petitions) by a differential of +17.4%.
- **Higher levels of social connection** – Respondents in the six areas (when asked in June 2021) had closer relations with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours than people from other areas (+19%).
- **High levels of neighbourliness** – Respondents in the six areas consistently reported having a stronger sense of neighbourliness than those in other areas.

Deprivation, Discrimination and Intergroup Contact

Some of our most interesting results arose from our investigation into deprivation and discrimination. When we considered public perceptions of disadvantage in combination with people's attitudes towards others some disparities emerge that suggest there is not a straightforward relationship between public perception and actual experiences of discrimination. It is therefore important to listen to those with lived experience of discrimination and to recognise the cumulative effect of multiple discrimination for some groups and communities. Our findings perhaps particularly point to the experiences of younger Black and Muslim women as in need of closer attention.

We also investigated relations between different groups (described here as intergroup relations) more directly too by exploring not just attitudes, but also intergroup contact. We found it was the quality more than the amount of contact that was most strongly linked with more positive intergroup attitudes. This has important implications for initiatives to encourage social mixing. It implies that real investment has to be made to ensure that people from different groups really have the opportunity to get to know each other in a positive and meaningful way in order to foster more positive intergroup attitudes.

- **Perceptions of discrimination** – Respondents perceived all forms of discrimination as becoming increasingly serious between May and June 2020.
    - Discrimination based on race or ethnicity are perceived as the most serious forms of discrimination.
- **Warmth towards different groups** – Asked about their own feelings towards different groups, respondents were consistently warmest towards older people and coldest towards migrants to the UK.
- **Experience of discrimination** - Four fifths of Black respondents (81%) and three quarters of Muslim respondents (73%) reported having experienced some form of discrimination against themselves in the last month, compared with 53% of White respondents.
    - Women were a fifth more likely than men to report having experienced discrimination. Young people (aged 18-24) were almost twice as likely as older people (45+) to report having experienced discrimination.
- Where **intergroup contact** is associated with more positive attitudes towards others, this is 11 times as much linked to the quality of the contact as to the simple quantity of contact.

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Recommendations

We need a long-term strategic plan that seeks to draw on the lessons learnt during the pandemic to build and harness the potential power of communities to aid recovery and ongoing social and economic renewal. We suggest there should be five key strands to that plan. For our Recommendations in full please see Chapter 12.

1. Leadership and narratives that stress interdependence

We need leadership at national, regional and local levels, that prioritises a narrative that stresses the interdependence between different communities, regions and nations. This means acknowledging real differences and disagreements, regional and national autonomy and pride of place, but within the broader context of a strong mutual interdependence.

2. Actively build trust within every community and between communities

Every local authority should establish and sustain a local cohesion strategy appropriate to their local needs and means. This means local government requires the resources to work together with communities, business and public services to develop, implement and realise a shared vision of place. This should include strengthening local social infrastructure and promoting high quality bridging opportunities between local groups.

3. Empower local government to build cohesion, trust and resilience

A relatively small investment of £50 million would enable the success of the Integration Areas programme and learning generated by it, to be shared and put into practice much more widely. To begin with, this extra investment should be focused on those areas which are prioritised for levelling-up, and should be conditional on a local authority using the funding to employ a full-time 'cohesion coordinator'.

4. Support a sustained uplift in volunteering

We must seize this opportunity to put in place policies and practices that will support a permanent increase in the number and breadth of people volunteering in their local communities. The government should work more closely with local government and the volunteering sector to bring forward a comprehensive system of support for a sustained uplift in volunteering that is able to respond to local purpose and develop cross-locality cooperation.

5. Tackle deprivation and discrimination

We need to emerge from this crisis a stronger, fairer and more cohesive society that can adapt and seize opportunities to support the needs of all. To achieve this, we need to establish cooperative relationships across society where people can trust that it is in their and everyone else's interests to tackle and remove fundamental inequalities and deep-rooted discrimination and prejudice of all forms.

Please see Appendix 2 for further detail on how our findings and recommendations relate to each other.

In conclusion, the majority of the British public want to put aside the divisions and polarisation that has marked British society in recent years. People are weary of being at odds with each other and desire greater unity.[3] We now know from our findings that investing in cohesion works in terms of building trust between groups and individuals and between citizens and their local and national institutions. There has never been a more important moment to do so, if we are to emerge from this crisis more united and ready to face the challenges ahead.

3 Together Coalition. 2021. 'Talk / together', https://together.org.uk/talk-together/.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since May 2020 the 'Beyond Us and Them' research project has been exploring how relationships between individuals, communities and society are adapting and reshaping in the face of the pandemic. Social cohesion is both a process and a state that describes people's connection to other individuals, groups and communities. A combination of different elements (trust, relations between different groups, social connectedness, etc.) provide the best conditions for social cohesion to establish and grow. High levels of social cohesion can provide a level of protection against crisis, shock and change and mean that recovery and revival should be stronger and faster (providing that the core elements are attended to and developed over time).[1] We wanted to learn how, at regional and community levels, cohesion, intergroup relations and integration were changing across this extended crisis.

Between May 2020 and June 2021, we collected a huge amount of data: collecting more than 39,000 responses to our on-line surveys, as well as conducting 61 focus groups and 256 one-to-one interviews. We spoke to 305 different people in total and spoke to participants more than once over the course of the research (three times for local authority, regional and community partners, and twice for metropolitan area partners).

In the first phase of our project we surveyed three distinct and politically coherent regions of the UK (Scotland, Wales and Kent). As well as embracing distinct regulatory, geographical and political perspectives, these three areas also served as a comparative backdrop for evidence from samples in six local areas that had invested in social cohesion programmes prior to the pandemic (Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Calderdale, Peterborough Waltham Forest and Walsall), and a further sample from a range of community activist organisations. In the second phase, as regional and national divides became more prominent from December 2020 we broadened our reach to include four metropolitan areas (Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, Greater London and the West of England).

Our approach combined theory-driven and exploratory inquiry. Theories drawn from social psychology, political science, sociology and behavioural economics, along with the measures used in past research were our starting points for examining social unity and fragmentation, social participation and engagement, perceptions of political decision making and leadership, and different aspects of trust and social identity. As the pandemic unfolded, we also introduced measures that picked up themes or events that were emerging either in the public realm or from our qualitative work. Across all of this and in proportion to the resources available we aimed to establish evidence that was robust, quality controlled and checked, sufficiently scaled and comprehensive, and that could answer questions raised both by policy challenges and by academic theories. We sought to share our findings across these realms and through continual consultation with our reference and steering groups.

1 The British Academy. 2019. '*Cohesive societies: Scoping concepts and priorities*'. British Academy: Cohesive Societies. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/285/cohesive-societies-scoping-concepts-amended.pdf.

Taken together this evidence establishes a rich archive of material for years to come through which we can better understand the pandemic, how it has profoundly affected social relations, trust and intergroup relations, and the role that place and people's relation to place has played on social cohesion.

As we describe in more detail below, our research has already shown that strong community connections, local community knowledge and good relations have been vital in helping to tackle the pandemic and mobilise support to help the most vulnerable. We have also presented findings on differing levels of political and local trust; the different experiences of volunteers and keyworkers; the differences between social cohesion in local areas that had invested in it prior to the pandemic and elsewhere; differing levels of community, connection and cohesion across places and time spanning the year 2020; acceptance of COVID-19 vaccine passports; and perception of UK government and local government communication during the pandemic. Based on our findings we have collaborated with our research partners (local authorities and civil society) to produce guidance on the kind of policy and practices that can strengthen social cohesion at a local level.

Various national surveys have been conducted throughout this period to give a general picture of changing attitudes across the UK. However, none have systematically focussed on how people's experiences of the pandemic are associated with the places they live in, and their relationships to others within and between those places. Just as places often have their own geographical characteristics and distinctive topographies, microclimates and weather patterns, we would also argue that many have distinctive social fabrics and climates that have the potential to affect how people respond to societal challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

No single project can capture all of the implications of societal cohesion. We were not able to examine in detail issues such as linguistic inclusion and competence, economic effects of cohesion, its connections with security, crime and justice, or different structures and processes of democratic participation. Nor did we assess the direct role of education in supporting (or being unable) to support cohesion, or indeed the impacts on young people. Nor did we try to map our measures of cohesion to physical health outcomes. All of these are eminently researchable questions that deserve attention. Our focus has been on the nature of social relations, people's sense of connection and trust, and their engagement in mutual support, that is to say, their experience of cohesion across the first 18 months of the pandemic.

In this integrative report, we readdress and extend themes from our earlier work in order to establish the wider picture of the changes that have occurred as the pandemic has unfolded, as local restrictions impacted different localities and communities differently, and as news of the vaccines and roll-out plans were announced. This report presents our findings spanning May 2020 to June 2021.

1.2 Findings to date

Our first report, based on preliminary findings from our second wave survey conducted in June 2020, Beyond Us and Them: Perception of COVID-19 and Social Cohesion,[2] looked in particular at trust, a theme we continue to examine in this report. Levels of political trust were generally low, although people's trust in their local MP was slightly higher than their trust in national government. Trust in the government's ability to manage the pandemic had fallen rapidly after the government's handling of Dominic Cummings' breach of lockdown regulations and it continued to fall after that. However, levels of local trust – trust in local government and institutions – revealed a more complex picture. Levels of local trust in the six local authority areas remained above levels elsewhere albeit with some interesting differences in levels of trust reported in Kent, Scotland and Wales.

1.3 Interim report

In Community, Connection and Cohesion during COVID-19: Beyond Us and Them Report,[3] we presented findings and evidence gathered between May 2020-December 2021. The report showed that, in the six local areas we have been surveying, levels of trust, particularly local trust, had been more resilient than elsewhere, perhaps reflecting the strength of relationships that were developed pre-pandemic via local social cohesion and integration programmes. These areas also showed stronger evidence of cohesion in a variety of forms, including their sense of neighbourliness, levels of active social engagement, and sustained inclusiveness towards other groups including migrants to the UK. Our interim findings also revealed that people who engaged more in volunteering showed signs of greater social and psychological resilience to some of the worst effects of the pandemic. Volunteers reported greater connection with family and friends, greater general political trust, a greater sense of neighbourliness, higher subjective wellbeing and greater optimism for the future.

Our policy paper, Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas,[4] acts as a companion to Community, Connection and Cohesion during COVID-19. It identifies examples of practical programmes and initiatives that have made a difference locally. It sets out policy recommendations developed together with our research partners for a place-based approach that invests in leadership, capacity-building, social integration, cross-sector partnerships and knowledge exchange. As we will build on these for the present report they will be elaborated in a later section.

2 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Platts-Dunn, I. 2020. *Beyond Us and Them: Perception of COVID-19 and Social Cohesion.* https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resource-centre/resources/beyond-us-and-them-perception-of-COVID-19-and-socialcohesion-july-2020-report.

3 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. *Community, Connection and Cohesion: Beyond Us and Them Report.* https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Belong_InterimReport_FINAL-1.pdf.

4 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. *Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas.* https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/beyond-us-and-them-policy-and-practice-for-strengthening-social-cohesion-in-local-areas/.

1.4 Further focussed reports

In All in It but not Necessarily Together,[5] covering findings from our second survey in June 2020, we reported on the divergent experiences of volunteers and keyworkers, with volunteers reporting higher levels of connection, trust, optimism and a perception of their local area as less deprived than a control group who were neither keyworkers or volunteers. We have continued to investigate active social engagement and volunteering, both in the six local authorities and more generally, and the positive impact of volunteering for both volunteers themselves and local social cohesion remains evident. Volunteers report greater connection with their family and friends, greater general political trust, and are less likely to perceive their local area as deprived. They also express greater trust in other people to respect COVID-19 restrictions, a greater sense of neighbourliness, greater optimism for the future and higher subjective well-being.

In The Social Cohesion Investment,[6] using findings from our second-wave survey conducted in June 2020, we showed that in the six local authority areas taking part in our study that had invested in social cohesion prior to the pandemic there were greater levels of trust, neighbourliness, optimism, higher levels of social activism and more positive feelings towards all groups and towards migrants in particular.

In How Accepting is the British Public of COVID-19 Vaccine Passports, and Why?[7], using data collected between March-April 2021, we addressed the question of how much appetite the British public had for vaccination passports and why. We examined people's attitudes to their use and perceptions of their fairness. We also explored possible demographic differences in these attitudes, and whether having received a vaccine makes a difference. One finding of note was that acceptance of the idea of passports was linked to their perceived fairness, but in turn, perceived fairness was rather dependent on whether or not the respondent had already received the vaccine, highlighting the differences in perceptions amongst the more versus less (virally) advantaged sectors of the population.

5 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Platts-Dunn, I. 2020. *All in it, but not necessarily together: Divergent experiences of keyworker and volunteer responders to the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/All-in-it-but-not-necessarily-together.pdf.

6 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., Davies Hayon, K., & Platts-Dunn, I. 2020. *The Social Cohesion Investment: Local areas that invested in social cohesion programmes are faring better in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Social-Cohesion-Investment-Final-2.pdf.

7 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. *How Accepting is the British Public of COVID-19 Vaccine Passports, and Why?* https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Belong_COVID-19PassportsReport_FINAL.pdf.

In Public Perceptions of UK and Local Government Communication about COVID-19,[8] using data collected between May-June 2021, we examined whether respondents from across the UK found communication about COVID-19 honest and credible, empathic, clear, accessible, and whether it met the needs of their community. We focused on perceptions of local government and UK government communications. Our findings indicated that both may need to do more to be able to effectively influence public behaviour as restrictions have lifted and during this third wave of COVID-19. We also investigated whether these results differed for different regions, nations and local areas of the UK and whether these differences may have been related to a stronger sense of identity and local belonging in some places. The report highlighted the importance not only of the clarity and volume of information from different sources, but also trust in its originators, and its relative accessibility.

1.5 Impact to date

As well as informing understanding of how COVID-19 is impacting locally and in neighbourhoods our research is continuing to feed into a wider conversation about recovery efforts.

For example, our work is referenced in the recent Government Office Science paper on Vulnerable Communities (Resilient Britain: Vulnerable Communities), the Bennett Institute Anthology on levelling up,[9] and has been included as part of a British Academy's report on wider societal impacts of the pandemic,[10] as well as being conveyed in meetings with senior civil servants and scientific advisors. We have also been contributing to relevant APPGs and liaising with government departments whilst also feeding back our findings to our network of local authority contacts and community organisations. The forthcoming government prioritisation of levelling up should mean that communities, cohesion and integration will remain a key element of UK recovery plans over the next years. We hope that our findings will continue to provide useful evidence to underpin longer-term resilience to crisis, shock and change, and also point to building stronger platforms for much wider societal benefits. We would welcome feedback and comments on our findings.

8 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. *Public Perceptions of UK and Local Government Communication about COVID-19*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Belong_PublicPerceptions_paper_V5.pdf.

9 Morgan Jones, M. 2021. 'Levelling up in the Covid Decade', in *Bennett Institute for Public Policy. 2021. Levelling Up: An Anthology*, pp. 35-38, https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Levelling_up_An_anthology.pdf.

10 The British Academy. 2020. 'The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19', https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-understanding-the-long-term-societal-impacts-of-covid-19/.

2. Methodology and Approach

2.1 The Beyond Us & Them project

Beyond Us and Them is a research project between Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network and the University of Kent's Centre for the Study of Group Processes looking at the effects of COVID-19 on social cohesion. The project has been generously funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

The project seeks to understand factors that promote or inhibit social cooperation, that mobilise or discourage action in support of others, and that build or undermine the potential for positive relationships between different groups in society in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Understanding the social and psychological processes in responses to the pandemic will support policy to build resilience and recovery in local areas as the crisis proceeds and recedes.

The project has four interconnected components: a longitudinal eight-wave survey in two nations and a large English county (Scotland, Wales and Kent);[11] longitudinal six-wave surveys in six local authority areas that have prioritised social cohesion (Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Calderdale, Peterborough, Walsall, and Waltham Forest), and with community activists in hyperlocal communities across the UK; three-wave surveys in four metropolitan areas (Greater London, Greater Manchester, West of England, and West Midlands; starting December 2020); and a deep-dive qualitative exploration of cohesion in the regions, local authority areas, metropolitan areas and amongst community activists. Data collection took place between May 2020 and July 2021.

This research was developed in active partnership with civil society sector organisations with strong volunteering networks and with five local authority areas, four of which had taken part in the government's Integration Area programme. The Integration Area programme had been created under the UK government's Integrated Communities Strategy in March 2018. The aim of that programme was to '[focus] local and national resources 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'.[12] Five local authority areas took part in this programme: Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest.

Four of the five Integration Areas (Bradford, Blackburn with Darwen, Walsall and Waltham Forest) are research partners in our "Beyond Us and Them" project. We also collected data from the fifth Integration Area, Peterborough although it lacked capacity to engage as an active partner.

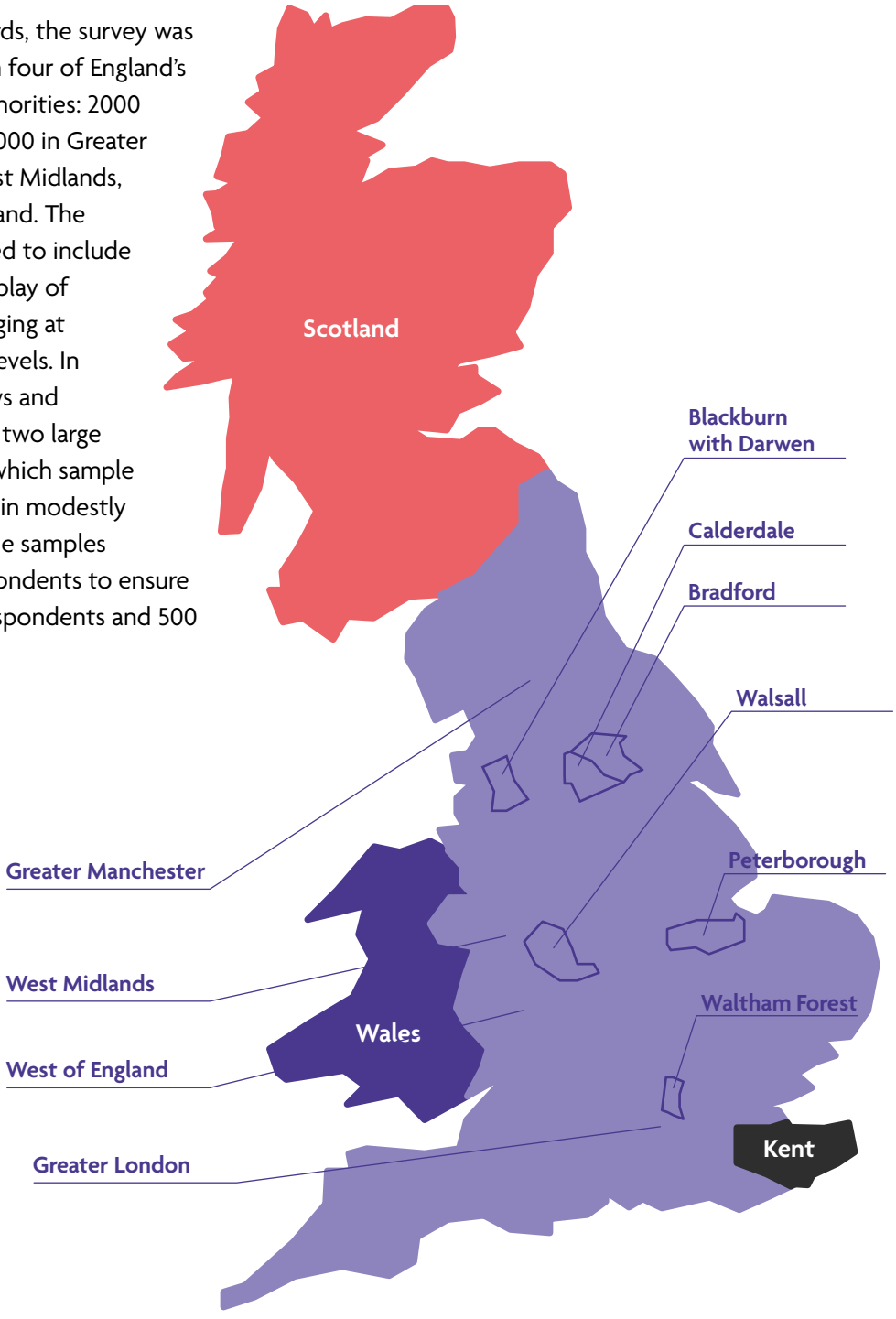
We also established a partnership with Calderdale Council, which, whilst not one of the formally designated Integration Areas, had explicitly prioritised kindness and resilience (key aspects of social cohesion) in its local strategy over the same period (for example, organising community-led responses to devastating local floods in February 2020).

11 For ease, we refer to Scotland, Wales and Kent as "regions" as they are all coherent geographical areas that encompass superordinate rather than local levels of identity.

12 Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government. 2019. *Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper*. https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/integrated-communities-strategy-green-paper; Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government. 2019. *Integrated Communities Action Plan*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-communities-action-plan.

The MHCLG (now DLUHC) areas were defined as 'Integration Areas', but when we examined the implementation of these Integration Area programmes more closely it was clear that in various (different) ways they were also addressing wider aspects of social cohesion and not solely integration between particular groups. Similarly, the work done in Calderdale addressed wider aspects of cohesion. For this reason, and for brevity, throughout this report we refer to 'social cohesion' and 'social cohesion areas' to cover cohesion and the more specific element of integration.

From December 2020 onwards, the survey was also distributed to people in four of England's combined metropolitan authorities: 2000 people in Greater London, 1000 in Greater Manchester, 1000 in the West Midlands, and 500 in the West of England. The project was further expanded to include an investigation of the interplay of issues of identity and belonging at local, regional and national levels. In order to document the views and experiences of people from two large ethnic/religious groups for which sample sizes are generally too small in modestly sized surveys we boosted the samples with Black, and Muslim respondents to ensure we had at least 500 Black respondents and 500 Muslim respondents overall.



What do we mean when we say these local authorities have invested in social cohesion?

During the two years that preceded the outbreak of coronavirus, each area implemented programmes to strengthen social cohesion and integration locally in response to different local integration and cohesion challenges.

Each local authority adopted a different approach. 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. All of the programmes focused on strengthening intercultural relations and social mixing between groups and communities as key elements of their strategies.

For example, Blackburn with Darwen's vision[13] for the borough centres around building a strong, cohesive and prosperous community where individuals are treated fairly and where differences in faith and culture are understood and respected. Events like Blackburn with Darwen's Festival of Making celebrate the borough's creative and industrial heritage, appeal to a broad range of people, and give all sections of the community a platform to share their skills.

The shared approach in Bradford[14] is to make Bradford District a great place for everyone – a place where everyone feels they belong, are understood, feel safe and can participate in civic life. As part of their integration programme, Bradford is delivering an ambassadors' programme, whereby residents who are representative of local people act as community champions and take part in various activities, such as co-designing, implementing and monitoring projects. Bradford has also set up a Citizen Coin scheme, which is aimed at increasing volunteering and participation in communities where active social engagement has traditionally been low. The scheme offers residents the opportunity to exchange time and skills doing social good for citizen coins that can be spent at local retailers.

Peterborough's approach[15] puts working communities at its heart, and focuses on four priority areas as the best way of grasping the opportunities and addressing the challenges that the city's rapid growth has brought. These include: making sure that people in Peterborough benefit from the city's growth, by, for example, developing relevant jobs skills; bringing communities together; investing in young people; and helping citizens improve their language skills.

13 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.

14 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.

15 Peterborough. 2019. *Belonging Together – A conversation about our communities and future*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/BelongingTogether-AConversationAboutOurCommunitiesAndFuture-May2019.pdf.

Walsall's vision[16] is to create integrated, empowered, inclusive communities where people from different backgrounds can come together and celebrate what they have in common. Walsall for All has undertaken a range of different arts and culture programmes as part of its integration strategy, such as ensuring VE Day celebrations were inclusive or connecting schools through art programmes. Through their Walsall Creative Factory, Walsall was able to develop a sense of community where different groups congregated to celebrate each other's festivals. Since the pandemic, this group has been at the frontline of the volunteer response, galvanising its membership to look out for each other and others.

Waltham Forest's approach[17] centres around unlocking the collective power of its local people to build an integrated, supportive, safe community, and to help people feel empowered to act to improve their community. For example, the Connecting Communities programme brought people together from different faith communities to share learnings and best practice around the Covid-19 pandemic.

16 Walsall for All. 2019. *Our vision for integrated and welcoming communities*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/up-loads/2019/04/ffd8a6_a4bdd91b47eb47f29d4c17e6764be14f.pdf.

17 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.

What did these local areas do to increase social cohesion?

In our policy and practice paper, we examined what these local areas had done to support social cohesion and offered recommendations on ways to increase social cohesion at a local level based on their best practice. Our recommendations are included below. More information on the strategies and approaches taken by each local authority can be found in our policy and practice paper.[18]

1. Encourage local government to act as a co-producer, convenor and enabler
2. Strengthen the voluntary and community sector
3. Encourage cross-sector collaboration and partnership
4. Use arts, sports and cultural activities to reach a common goal and put communities in charge
5. Support local leaders to speak up about and actively promote social cohesion in language accessible to all
6. Proactively tackle the barriers to inclusion of minority and underrepresented groups
7. Encourage active social engagement
8. Proactively support mixing of people from different backgrounds
9. Establish a shared national framework of local social cohesion measures
10. Understand the equalities and cohesion impact of strategy and policy
11. Build competence, capacity, skills and knowledge in the VCS
12. Draw on and support the specialist knowledge and skills of national and local civil society

18 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/beyond-us-and-them-policy-and-practice-for-strengthening-social-cohesion-in-local-areas/.

2.2 Research partners

Our research partners have been involved as key interlocutors in the research. They have supported the dissemination of our quantitative surveys and have been instrumental in recruiting participants for the one-to-one interviews and focus groups. They have also been invited to sit on the project's Advisory Panel and have been consulted on survey and qualitative research questions.

2.3 Surveys and measures

All surveys were conducted online via a phone, tablet or computer. Each survey was distributed through local councils and charities, as well as through professional research partners, Qualtrics Panels/Prolific. All participants were remunerated for their participation.

We offered participants from the local authorities and community volunteer surveys a £5 voucher for completing the survey, and we also offered them the opportunity to donate the money to a charity rather than keep it for themselves. We are immensely grateful that an impressive 2,195 people donated, which meant we were able to raise a total of £10,975 for Age UK, The Anne Frank Trust, Black Minds Matter, Medecins Sans Frontieres, NSPCC, Odd Arts, People United, Refugee Action, The Salvation Army, Save the Children, StreetDoctors, StreetGames, Tell Mama, The Trussell Trust, World Land Trust, and Youth Sport Trust.

Different measures were taken to ensure data quality, including security features embedded in the survey itself (e.g., preventing illegitimate users or 'bots' to enter the survey, preventing repeated participation from a recurring IP address, preventing participation from users outside the UK) as well as internal consistency checks (e.g., attention checks within the questionnaire). We also checked for potential duplicates and incomplete responses, which were deleted before any analysis took place.

In this report, where we refer to a "difference" between time or place or type of measure we are describing a statistically significant effect with a p-value of $< .005$ or lower. We decided to apply a more conservative criterion than the conventional alpha level of $< .05$, given the large sample sizes we were working with, and to ensure that the differences we refer to are not merely statistically significant but also convey real-life relevance. In cases where a difference does not meet this threshold, we say so explicitly.

The surveys included a number of measures targeting key concepts such as views on leadership, sense of connections with others (from one's close family and friends to people in other countries), empathy and compassion for other people, sense of threat and concern over social issues in general and the evolution of COVID-19 in particular, attitudes towards people from various social groups, views of discrimination and stereotyping, perception of unity and divisions in the country, and sense of personal identity at the local and national level. We also assessed a number of personality features (such as personality traits, motivation orientation, and personal values) and detailed demographics (including age, gender, ethnicity, religion, level of income, subjective socio-economic status, employment, household situation, political orientation). The quantitative data sets gathered from these surveys will be made available for analysis by other researchers in the future.

Past theory and research has often considered that social cohesion is manifested at at least 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.[19] With respect to this conceptualisation, we rely on the following indicators of social cohesion: trust in the government, active social engagement, attitudes towards immigration, trust in other people to respect social distancing measures in place, and density of social relations during lockdown (the quality and quantity of social connections with friends, family and neighbours). We used validated, reliable measures drawn from the social science research literature to measure these indicators.[20]

Sampling and Analytic Approach

Because we used more than one route for recruiting our samples we routinely checked to ensure that the sample characteristics were comparable across different routes. We also checked sample characteristics against demographics available from Census information so that we could understand if or whether our samples deviated notably from what we would expect of a representative sample within places. Where possible, and particularly when comparing differences in mean scores between different places we adjusted for demographic differences by treating them as covariates. A detailed example of how this is done in the case of analyses on the Social Cohesion Investment is available in our previous technical report.[21] A summary of the demographic characteristics and comparability with relevant Census data across the different sample types for the project as a whole is available in the technical appendix supplement to this document.[22] When percentage data are reported in this document these are unweighted, i.e. raw percentages. When means are reported they are generally adjusted for covariates that include key demographics. The majority of analyses presented in this report are in the form of time series data or cross-sectional data. Longitudinal analyses are also reported in some of our papers and are also on-going and in preparation for subsequent papers.

19 Chan, J., To, H.-P., & Chan, E. 2006. 'Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research.' *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273-302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1.

20 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.

21 Our previous technical report, Lalot & Abrams, 2020. is available here: https://kar.kent.ac.uk/83389.

22 Technical Appendix: Beyond Us & Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain 2020-2021. https://kar.kent.ac.uk/id/eprint/91684

2.4 Qualitative research

Over the course of the project, the team has conducted 61 focus groups and 256 one-to-one interviews. We have spoken to participants in the Scotland, Wales, Kent, local authority and community samples three times over the course of the research, and we have spoken to participants in our metropolitan area sample twice. In total, our qualitative work has reached 380 different people over the course of the research.

Participants in the focus groups and one-to-one sessions were selected to ensure representativeness in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and class. The focus groups and one-to-one interviews were conducted via Zoom and centred around a series of questions that focus on individual experiences of the pandemic; perceptions of the impact of the pandemic at local and national levels, on different groups in society, and on interpersonal relationships; levels of trust in others; levels of trust in local and national leadership (such as party leaders, MPs, or leaders in the local council); and feelings about the future.

The focus groups and interviews adopted a semi-structured approach that allowed the research team to define key areas of interest for understanding social cohesion, but also built in enough flexibility for the interviewer or participant to pursue interesting themes. The focus groups generally included between 4–10 participants, lasted for between 60–90 minutes, and involved group discussion of key themes and topics, with space provided for debate and interaction between participants. The one-to-one interviews lasted for around 30 minutes and allowed opportunities for participants to explore, in substantive detail and in a closed setting, their thoughts and feelings about the pandemic.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and each transcription was then independently anonymised and cleaned/corrected by a second researcher. These exhaustive steps were applied to ensure that we will be able to make high quality core transcripts available for analysis by other researchers in the future.

The next formal step was to select a few transcripts for initial thematic analysis by the core research team which established the primary coding frame. A set of 10 transcripts was then coded by the wider coding team, adding further codes to incorporate themes missed in the initial frame. Once finalised, the full coding frame was then applied retrospectively and to all further transcripts sampled for analysis. Every coded transcript then underwent verification/correction by an independent coder. Any additions or alterations were agreed through discussion with the original coder. Separate from this process, the interviewers themselves were also asked to draw our attention to particularly informative or interesting illustrative material.

2.5 Ethics and safeguarding

The research was conducted according to strict ethical and safeguarding protocols approved by the relevant Ethics panel at the University of Kent. Participants in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews were provided with an information sheet about the project and were required to sign a consent form before participating in the research. The consent form made clear to participants that they were able to withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason. Participants were advised at the start of the focus groups and one-to-one interviews that the sessions were being recorded but that all discussion would be completely anonymised. During the discussions, the moderator made sure to remind the individuals/group that the forum was a safe space where all viewpoints were welcomed. Where young people under the age of 18 took part in focus groups, parental/guardian consent was obtained and they were given the option of having a parent/guardian present in the Zoom discussion. All participants were sent emails after the session with links to mental health support organisations in case any of the topics covered in the discussion triggered a negative response.

2.6 Overview of data collection

Table 1 below summarises the volume and frequency of data collection from each part of Britain. Within each local authority we surveyed approximately 200 people each time the survey was fielded. The numbers within each area fluctuate a little (for example in the three regions) reflecting the numbers who were recontactable at particular times. Detailed demographics for each place and each time point (including age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and political reparition) are reported in Appendix.

Table 1. Summary of data collection: number of respondents per wave and sample. For focus groups, the number of different focus groups is reported in brackets

Time	Research	3 Regions	6 Local Authorities	Community Activists	4 Metro-politan Areas	Boost sample (Black / Muslim, nonoverlapping)
SURVEYS						
May 20	Wave 1	1579				
June 20	Wave 2	1770	1156	867		
July-Aug 20	Wave 3	1319				
Sept 20	Wave 4	1334	1311	697		
Oct 20	Wave 5	1536	1350	723		
Dec 20	Wave 6	1538	1437	581	3543	273 / 291
March 21	Wave 7	1804	1324	599	4767	229 / 224
June 21	Wave 8	1815	1184	613	4780	307 / 290
INTERVIEWS						
July- Sept 20	Focus groups (1st meeting)	16 (3)	35 (6)	45 (6)		
Oct- Dec 20	Focus groups (2nd meeting)	22 (3)	22 (6)	39 (5)		
April- July 21	Focus groups (3rd meeting)	11 (2)	18 (4)	13 (2)		
April- July 21	Focus groups (1st meeting)				78 (13)	
April- July 21	Focus groups (2nd meeting)				55 (11)	
July- Sept 20	1-to-1 Interviews (1st meeting)	10	25	19		
Sept- Dec 20	1-to-1 Interviews (2nd meeting)	12	27	27		
April- July 21	1-to-1 Interviews (3rd meeting)	6	18	15		
April- July 21	1-to-1 Interviews (1st meeting)				26	
April- July 21	1-to-1 Interviews (2nd meeting)				21	

3. Comprehensive Timeline

It is also important to recognise that we are not just following what happens over time and changing seasons. There is continual punctuation by significant events and moments: developments in Brexit negotiations, the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, sudden announcements of changes in COVID-19 rules and different levels of lockdown restrictions for different areas. These and other events happened unevenly across Britain so our evidence has to be interpreted in the context of all these changes. The timeline below sets out some of the key moments from January 2020 up to July 2021.

Data collection period

- 31 Jan 2020 **First two cases of COVID-19 recorded in the UK**
- 5 March 2020 **First death from COVID-19 in the UK is confirmed**
- 10-13 March 2020 **Cheltenham Festival takes place with 250,000 attendees. Later dubbed a super spreader event**
- 23 March 2020 **Boris Johnson announces lockdown**
- 26 March 2020 **Lockdown comes into force across the UK**
- 5 April 2020 **Boris Johnson hospitalised**
- 8 April 2020 **First peak of number of deaths (within 28 days of a positive test) in the UK (1,073 daily)**
- 22-25 May 2020 **Dominic Cummings controversy** — Wave 1 (7-19 May)
- 25 May 2020 **George Floyd's murder sparks BLM protests across the UK**
- 1 June 2020 **Primary schools reopen for some pupils in England**
- 2 June 2020 **PHE releases report into COVID-19 deaths amongst BAME population**
- 13 June 2020 **Government announces support bubbles in England and Northern Ireland**
- 16 June 2020 **School meal voucher scheme extended to cover summer holidays in England**
- 22 June 2020 **Government announces shielding to end from 1 August in England**
- 25 June 2020 **Government announces relaxation of lockdown rules from 4 July in England** — Wave 2 (10 June - 7 July)
- 29 June 2020 **Government announces strict local lockdown for Leicester**
- 4 July 2020 **2-metre rule relaxed to 1-metre; pubs, restaurants, hotels and hairdressers re-open; two households can meet indoors; weddings with 30 guests permitted in England**

- 10 July 2020 Face coverings mandatory in shops in Scotland
- 24 July 2020 Face coverings mandatory in shops in England
- 25 July 2020 Gyms reopen in England
- 30 July 2020 Local lockdowns announced in Manchester, parts of Lancashire and parts of West Yorkshire; upset as Eid celebrations are cancelled
- 2 Aug 2020 A major incident declared in Greater Manchester
- 4 Aug 2020 Eat out to help out scheme begins and runs until 31st August
- 17 Aug 2020 A-level and GCSE students to be graded based on teacher projections in England
- 22 Aug 2020 Council leaders in the North West of England ask for clarity on local lockdowns
- 14 Sept 2020 Rule of six comes into play; gatherings of more than six people become illegal
- 18 Sept 2020 Parts of North West, West Yorkshire and the Midlands face tougher restrictions
- 24 Sept 2020 Curfew imposed on pubs, bars and restaurants in England
- 4 Oct 2020 Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham warns of "winter of dangerous discontent" in the north of England
- 10 Oct 2020 Leaders in the north criticise financial support
- 14 Oct 2020 COVID-19 Tier system introduced in England; Liverpool placed in Tier 3
- 16 Oct 2020 Lancashire moves into Tier 3
- 20 Oct 2020 Greater Manchester moves into Tier 3 despite disagreement from Mayor and local leaders
- 22 Oct 2020 Ministers accused of giving preferential treatment to London after Rishi Sunak announces support package
- 23 Oct 2020 Wales enters fire-break
- 24 Oct 2020 Parts of South Yorkshire move into Tier 3
- 30 Oct 2020 West Yorkshire (including Bradford) and Nottinghamshire move into Tier 3
- 5 Nov 2020 England's second lockdown begins
- 9 Nov 2020 Welsh fire-break ends

Wave 3 (16 July - 14 Aug)

Wave 4 (21 Aug - 16 Sept)

Wave 5 (7-28 Oct)

- 24 Nov 2020 Christmas bubbles announced; 5-day mixing allowed from 23rd – 27th December
- 2 Dec 2020 Lockdown ends and three-tier system returns in England
- 3 Dec 2020 Pfizer Bio-NTech vaccine approved in the UK
- 16 Dec 2020 London and parts of Kent, Essex and Hertfordshire move into Tier 3
- 19 Dec 2020 Tier 4 announced in London and no Christmas mixing allowed in Tier 4 areas; Christmas bubbles limited to Christmas Day in rest of England, Wales and Scotland; new strain announced; Wales and Scotland go into lockdown with exception of Christmas Day and announce travel bans

Wave 6 (4-19 Dec)

- 30 Dec 2020 Tier 4 measures extended
- 31 Dec 2020 The United Kingdom completes its separation from the EU at 11pm GMT
- 3 Jan 2021 Schools in England reopen despite concerns
- 4 Jan 2021 Boris Johnson announces lockdown from 5 January, including school closures; all schools in Wales move to online learning; national lockdown in mainland Scotland, including school closures. Rollout of AstraZeneca vaccine begins
- 18-19 Jan 2021 UK closes travel corridors to protect against new COVID-19 variants; Highest number of daily death in the UK (1359)
- 22 Jan 2021 Number of UK deaths exceeds 100,000
- 27 Jan 2021 Priti Patel announces that people travelling from "red list" countries will be required to quarantine in government hotels
- 26-29 Jan 2021 Door-to-door testing takes places in Kent ME15 after South African variant of COVID-19 identified in the area
- 27 Jan 2021 First large-scale coronavirus vaccination centre opens in Kent
- 1 Feb 2021 Door-to-door testing is launched in an attempt to contain the spread of a new South African variant of the virus, after cases are found in Hertfordshire, Surrey, Kent, Walsall, Sefton and three London boroughs
- 2 Feb 2021 Captain Sir Tom Moore dies at the age of 100 after contracting COVID-19
- 3 Feb 2021 The number of people receiving a vaccine dose in the UK exceeds 10 million
- 9 Feb 2021 UK residents returning from 33 red list countries will be charged £1,750 to quarantine in government-sanctioned hotels for 10 days

- 14 Feb 2021 Phase 1 of vaccine rollout finished (most vulnerable groups)
- 22 Feb 2021 Boris Johnson publishes roadmap for lifting lockdown
- 24 Feb 2021 Nicola Sturgeon announces planned route out of lockdown for Scotland, with all primary pupils and some secondary students returning to school from 15 March 2021, and four people from two households allowed to meet outdoors from the same date
- 5 Mar 2021 A proposal of 1% pay rise for the NHS workers receives widespread criticism
- 8 Mar 2021 Schools in England reopen for primary and secondary school students; meetings of two people allowed in outdoor public spaces
- 15 Mar 2021 Phase 2 of school return in Scotland. All remaining primary school children are set to return to school full-time, with all secondary pupils returning on a part-time basis
- 20 Mar 2021 More than half of the adult population in the UK have had first dose of vaccine
- 21 Mar 2021 Demonstrators attack police in Bristol during "Kill the Bill" protests against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill
- 27 Mar 2021 Number of UK deaths exceeds 150,000
- 27 Mar 2021 Stay Local restrictions are lifted in Wales
- 29 Mar 2021 Outdoor gatherings of 6 people or 2 households allowed in England. Outdoor sports facilities reopen
- 30 Mar 2021 2021 Northern Ireland riots begin
- 2 Apr 2021 Stay Local will replace the Stay at Home rule in Scotland
- 7 Apr 2021 The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advises that under-30s should be offered an alternative jab to the Oxford–AstraZeneca vaccine due to the evidence linking it to rare blood clots

Wave 7 (11 March - 13 April)

- 12 Apr 2021 Non-essential retail, hairdressers and public buildings reopen in England. Outdoor venues reopen. Self-contained holiday accommodation reopens
- 15 Apr 2021 77 cases of the new Delta variant of the virus are reported in the UK
- 24 Apr 2021 Outdoor gatherings for 6 people from any household are allowed in Wales
- 26 Apr 2021 Non-essential retail, hairdressers and public buildings reopen in Scotland. Outdoor venues reopen. Self-contained holiday accommodation reopens
- 30 Apr 2021 Adults aged 40 and over are invited to book their first COVID-19 vaccination
- 3 May 2021 Wales moves into alert level 3
- 6 May 2021 Elections for local councils and directly elected mayors take place in England. Parliamentary elections take place in Wales and Scotland. Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford retain seats
- 14 May 2021 Boris Johnson warns about the potential delay in the government's planned easing of lockdown restrictions on 21 June due to spread of Delta variant
- 17 May 2021 30 people allowed to mix outdoors in England. Rule of six or two households allowed for indoor gatherings. Indoor venues reopen
- 19 May 2021 Scottish Government launches COVID-19 vaccination status scheme
- 26 May 2021 Dominic Cummings makes a series of allegations regarding the Government's handling of the pandemic
- 31 May 2021 Blackburn with Darwen overtakes Bolton to top UK list of most new COVID-19 cases
- 1 June 2021 Zero daily deaths from the virus are reported in the UK for the first time since the start of the pandemic in March 2020

14 June 2021 **Boris Johnson announces a four-week delay to the final easing of coronavirus restrictions in England due to the spread of the Delta variant**

18 June 2021 **Scottish Government announces new restrictions on travel between Scotland and Manchester and Salford, coming into effect at midnight on 21 June.**

26 June 2021 **Matt Hancock resigns as health secretary after The Sun publishes documents about him breaking social distancing rules**

30 June 2021 **Scottish Government lifts travel restriction on Greater Manchester area**

Wave 8 (25 May - 28 June)

4. Trust

4.1. Levels of trust

Trust is a vital component not just of social cohesion. Trust lies at the heart of a functioning democracy and so declining trust constitutes a significant challenge. We examined several aspects of trust, as this is something that is fundamental for understanding whether or not people feel confident in, and willing to follow, guidelines and rules. First, using measures that are common in many surveys, we examine trust in the government as a whole. Second, we examine trust in people's locally elected parliamentary representatives - their MP. We then look more specifically at people's trust in the government's handling of the pandemic, both at the UK-wide and the local level. We also consider people's acceptance of conspiracy theory beliefs, that is, how much people believe the government might be hiding the truth about the pandemic (i.e., a form of mistrust in the government). We would expect these different aspects of trust to be connected but they are not identical and each gives insight into people's perceptions and expectations, as well as into what might be creating more or less confidence. Finally, we examine levels of trust in other people, more specifically how much respondents trust other people to respect the different COVID-19 restrictions. This last measure informs us of the general climate of trust versus suspicion and denunciation in different communities.

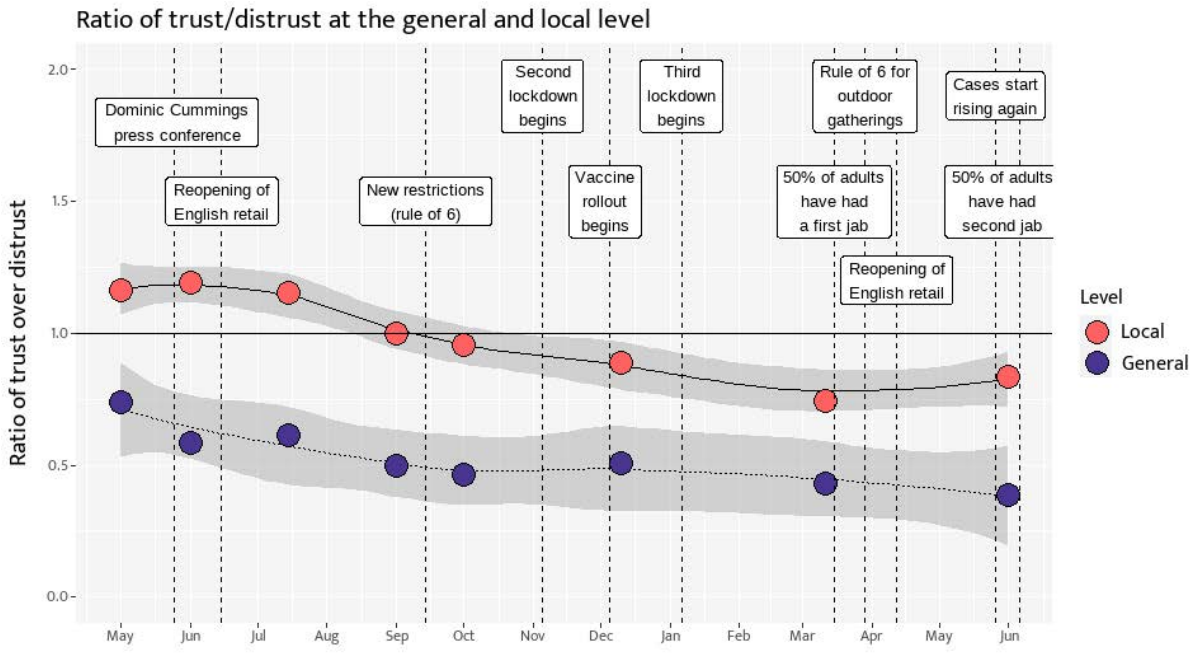
4.2 How much do people trust the government?

General political trust at the UK-wide and local level

Research in political and social sciences highlights that political trust (the level of trust that people have in their government, and how much they perceive the leadership as legitimate, honest, and competent) plays a key role in people's response in times of crisis. Notably, people with higher political trust usually show greater compliance with the rules enacted by the government.[23] Throughout the year, we have measured respondents' sense of trust in the UK government, using the following questions: "Most members of the UK Parliament are honest" (general level of trust in MPs), and "I trust my local member of parliament to represent the interests of all communities across the constituency" (level of trust in local MPs). People answered on a 5-point scale where 1 represents no trust at all, and 5 represents complete trust. We distinguish and compare two categories of respondents: those reporting some or high trust (scoring 4-5) and those reporting some or high distrust (scoring 1-2). Figure 1 below shows the relative proportion of people trusting versus distrusting across time (numbers above 1 indicate that a higher proportion of people felt trust or high trust while numbers below 1 indicate that a higher proportion of people felt distrust or high distrust. A score of 1.0 represents that an equal proportion of people felt trusting and distrusting). Levels of general trust were extremely similar across the different places we surveyed, so here we present the findings aggregated across all places and samples.

23 Tyler, T. R. 2001. 'Trust and law abidingness: A proactive model of social regulation.' *Boston University Law Review*, 81(2), 361-406.

Figure 1. Ratio of political trust and distrust in MPs at the general (UK) level and the local level from May 2020 to June 2021

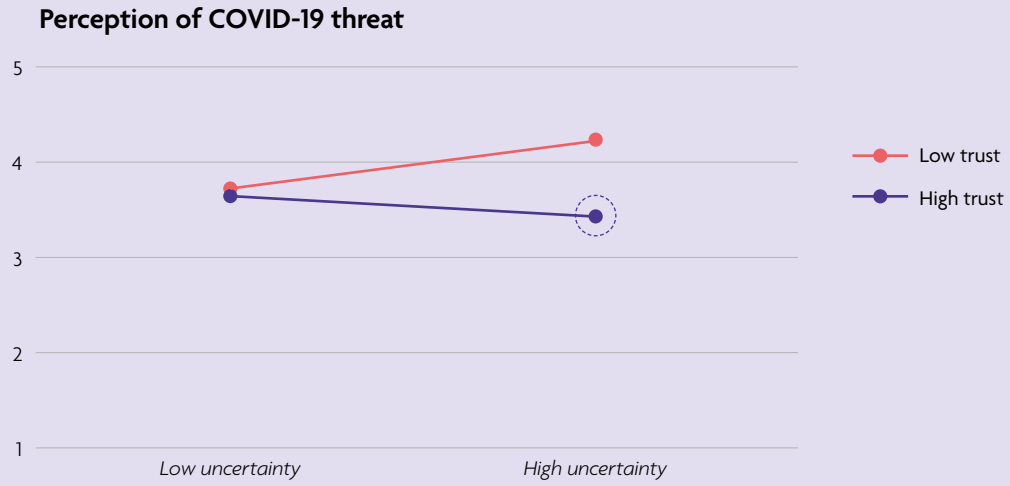


Note. Scores above 1 indicate that a higher proportion of people felt trust or high trust in MPs in general, or in their local MP, while scores below 1 indicate that a higher proportion of people felt distrust or high distrust. A score of 1.0 represents that an equal proportion of people felt trusting and distrusting. To ensure comparability across time, this analysis focused on the places that were consistently surveyed throughout the year, that is, Kent, Scotland, Wales, and the six English local authorities.

It is notable that across the entire year people's distrust in members of parliament in general remained substantially greater than distrust of their local MP. Until August 2020 more people trusted than distrusted their local MP but as restrictions became more relaxed during the summer of 2020 levels of distrust increased and by October 2020 more people distrusted than trusted their local MP, a trend that deepened through the first half of 2021. The findings are important because they show that trust is not a fixed entity - it is malleable over time and context, and it is placed less in the system as a whole than in its key agents or representatives.

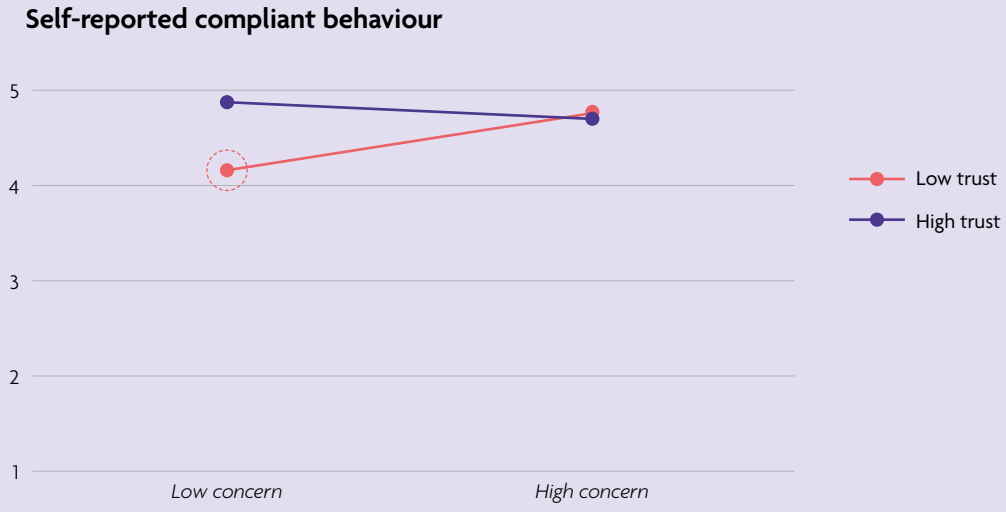
Summary of our findings on political trust

In our first paper to consider the importance of political trust we drew on data from a sample of respondents in Scotland[24] to test a hypothesis about ways that the pandemic might or might not elevate people's sense of threat – their perception of dangers or harm that exists in their environment. A well-known cause of threat is uncertainty about that environment. Some degree of uncertainty about the pandemic is helpful where it may increase people's curiosity or willingness to seek and adhere to advice. However, higher levels of uncertainty are likely to also heighten people's sense of threat, and this in turn may mobilise different responses which may take extreme forms such as aggressive action to eliminate the threat, accentuating divisions and conflicts with groups that are seen as responsible for the danger. An important public policy implication is that managing threat levels is necessary to sustain social cohesion and cooperation. We tested an 'aversion amplification' hypothesis which proposed that uncertainty would be less likely to be linked to heightened perception of threat amongst people who had higher levels of political trust; in other words, that political trust would help to neutralise the more extreme effects of uncertainty. This hypothesis was supported, even after accounting for demographic differences. The research underlined the potential importance of gaining and sustaining political trust through the pandemic and is one reason why we continued that as a focus in our subsequent surveys.



24 Lalot, F., Abrams, D., & Travaglino, G.A. 2021. 'Aversion amplification in the emerging COVID-19 pandemic: The impact of political trust and subjective uncertainty on perceived threat.' *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 31, 213–222. doi:10.1002/casp.2490.

In our second paper on trust,[25] developed as a companion piece to our UK research, we developed our aversion amplification hypothesis to address why people were reluctant to comply with the government's behavioural restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19. Prior research told us that people comply with governmental behavioural guidance about health governmental restrictions for a variety of motives, but notably because they are either concerned about the issue at hand or because they trust their government to advise them to act in their best interests. We therefore examined how people's levels of concern about COVID-19 combined with their levels of political trust to enable us to predict their willingness to comply with governmental restrictions during the pandemic. We conducted a survey amongst Italian and French participants while both countries had imposed full lockdown during 2020, and we were able to follow up a subset of these a week later. We hypothesised that either a high level of concern or a high level of trust should be sufficient to sustain people's compliance, but that the absence of both (distrustful complacency) would reduce compliance significantly. Our results supported this hypothesis. We have tested this hypothesis again on data from the Beyond Us and Them project and have found consistent support for the hypothesis. One implication is that efforts to tackle problems like vaccine hesitancy might consider dual strategies (for example, raising the concern level amongst those who are unconcerned, or finding avenues for trust amongst those who distrust existing sources of guidance).



25 Lalot, F., Heering, M.S., Rullo, M., Travaglino, G.A., & Abrams, D. 2020. 'The dangers of distrustful complacency: Low concern and low political trust combine to undermine compliance with governmental restrictions in the emerging Covid-19 pandemic'. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1368430220967986.

Trust in the UK government handling of the pandemic

While the average levels of both general trust and trust in local MPs showed relative stability over the second half of 2020, we found a different pattern when we examined the specific measure of trust in the government's handling of COVID-19. We measured this form of trust a little less directly by focussing on perceptions of the sufficiency and competence of the government's actions, which might perhaps be closer to a sense of confidence rather than an evaluation of honesty or sincerity.

We asked participants to show how much they agreed or disagreed that "the UK Government is taking adequate measures to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic." Comparing levels of trust aggregated across Kent, Scotland, Wales and the Local Authorities 51% expressed trust in May 2020, and this fell to 21% by October 2020. But as Figure 2 shows, England diverged with Scotland and Wales. In Kent and the Local Authorities trust revived to 27% by December 2020, was at 35% in June 2021. However, in Scotland and Wales, the levels of trust did not recover from October 2020 (14%) and remained at 17% in June 2021.

The comments of interview and focus groups participants often echoed this, expressing a clear sense of a loss of trust in the UK Government's handling of the pandemic over a period of time. The example of Dominic Cummings breaking government guidelines was frequently cited by participants as a key turning point in people's sense of trust in the Government.

> *"With Boris, I'd be honest, there was a [...] point of listening to him until the whole Dominic Cummings incident, and then everything kind of fell off the wall for us. We were like, there was a point of trust was broken, and there was no going back."*
>
> [Regional area focus group participant, November 2020]

When describing lack of confidence in the UK Government's response, other themes emerged. Participants commonly spoke about mixed messages, lack of clarity in communication, and a perception of not being entirely open and upfront. This is echoed in our recent analysis of public perceptions of local and UK government communications. The latter was often associated with the ascription to politicians generally of alternative 'political' motives, and contrasted with the strong sense of trust participants expressed in scientists and medical professionals, who they perceived as not having such agendas.

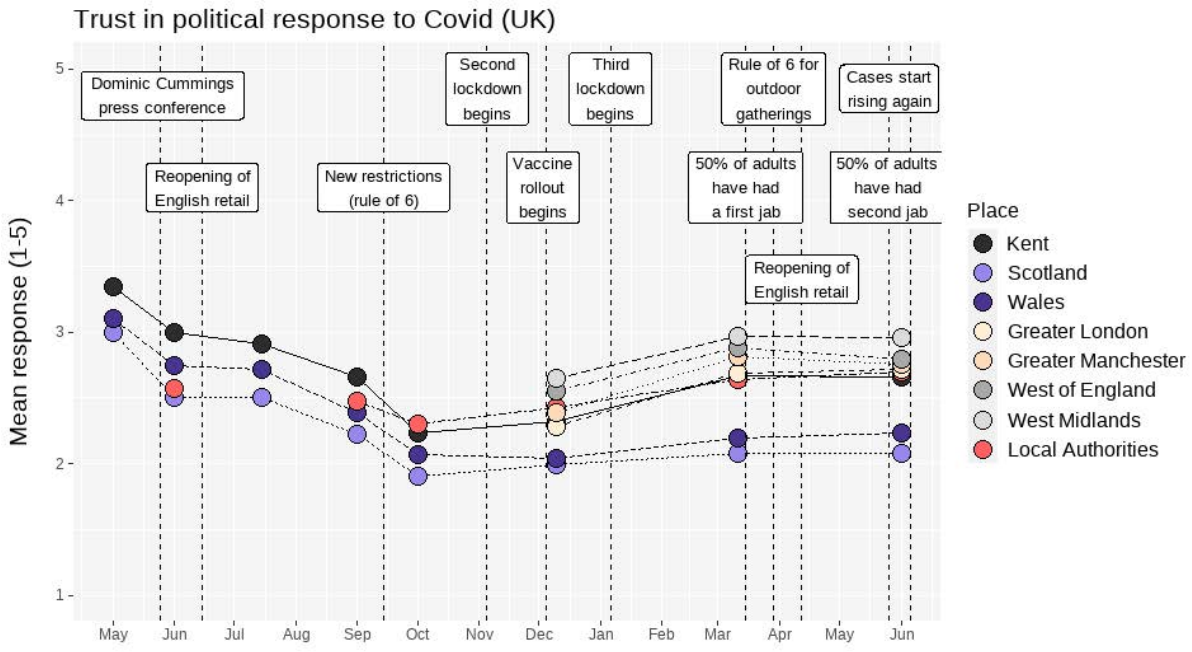
Unlike general trust in MPs, trust in the UK government's actions to tackle COVID-19 showed some important variations between places. Throughout the year, respondents in Scotland systematically reported the lowest trust in the UK national government response. Those in Wales followed an accelerating downward trend too. In contrast, places within England showed a less steep initial decline in trust between May and October and then from December 2020 onwards, their levels of trust increased so that by June 2021, their level of trust had nearly returned to its position of a year earlier.

This meant that by June 2021 we were observing an entrenched distinction between these three nations. Most places in England reported at least moderate trust in the UK government's response to COVID-19, whereas respondents in Scotland and Wales were reporting very low trust.

Discussions amongst the focus group participants in Wales suggest that, as the Welsh Government's approach to the pandemic became more distinctive – most notably through the implementation of a 17-day fire-break in autumn 2020 – people became increasingly conscious of the devolved government's leadership. Though it was not without criticism, this was generally contrasted favourably with the UK Government's response.

These different trends suggest that people in Wales and Scotland were increasingly finding an alternative 'home' for their political trust through the comparisons of the certainty and clarity offered by their devolved administrations relative to the more complex picture across England. For example, Nicola Sturgeon was consistently more likely to be described by participants from across the UK as the political leader who had handled the pandemic best, typically due to perceptions of her having been clearer and more upfront.

Figure 2. Average level of trust in the UK government's response to COVID-19 from May 2020 to June 2021

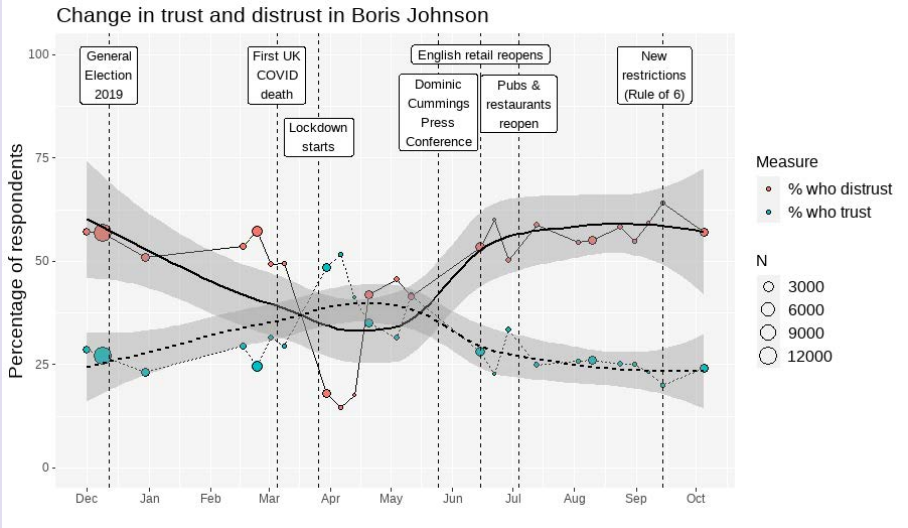


Summary of further findings on political trust

As the project developed the data also served as a key resource for our wider assessment of the transitions in political trust over time. Here we published a paper for the British Academy,[26] which contributed important material for the BA's Covid Decade review. We then developed the work further in a subsequent academic paper.[27] Together with our own data, we analysed data from 18 survey organisations with measures on political trust (general, leadership, and COVID-19-related) spanning the period December 2019-October 2020. We examined the percentage of trust and distrust across time, identifying where significant changes coincide with national events. Levels of political trust were low following the 2019 UK General Election. They rose at the onset of the UK lockdown imposed in March 2020 but showed persistent gradual decline throughout the remainder of the year, falling to pre-COVID levels by October 2020. We concluded that the government's inability to sustain the elevated political trust achieved at the onset of the pandemic was likely to have made management of public confidence and behaviour increasingly challenging. We pointed to the need for strategies to sustain trust levels when handling future crises. It is also useful to note that the broad trends revealed in data from independent survey organisations closely matched our own, and this gives us further confidence that the data obtained through the Beyond Us and Them project are capturing these national level trends as well as being able to show how they differentiate between places and in terms of trust in different political levels (national, local etc). The data in this report also extends six months further into the pandemic than the data from these previous papers.

26 Lalot, F., Davies, B., & Abrams, D. 2020. 'Trust and cohesion in Britain during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic across place, scale and time'. The British Academy. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-trust-cohesion-britain-2020-pandemic-place-scale-time/; Lalot, F., Davies, B., & Abrams, D. 2021. 'What has happened to trust and cohesion since Tier 4 restrictions to the third national lockdown (December 2020 – March 2021)? Further evidnce from national surveys.' The British Academy, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-what-happened-trust-cohesion-tier-4-restrictions-third-national-lockdown/.

27 Davies, B., Lalot, F., Peitz, L., Heering, M.S., Babaian, J., Davies Hayon, K., Broadwood, J., & Abrams, D.. 2021. 'Changes in political trust in Britain during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020: Integrated public opinion evidence and implications'. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communication*, 8(166), https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-021-00850-6.



4.3 Conspiracy theory beliefs

Distrust in the system as a whole, in the form of governments or large organisations, sometimes expresses itself in the form of conspiracy theories. These involve beliefs that events occur as the result of a conspiracy between covert and influential agents, most often political and economic powers. Conspiracy theories have flourished around COVID-19 with many believing that governments have been hiding important aspects of truth about the pandemic. These theories range from denying the impact of the pandemic ("hoax" theories) to believing the virus has been man-made for malicious purposes ("bioweapon" theories).[28] Measuring beliefs in conspiracy theories is important as these beliefs predict people's attitudes and behaviours, such as climate denial, political apathy, prejudice and violence.[29] Conspiracy beliefs about the pandemic are connected with lower compliance with government recommendations, anti-masks attitudes, and vaccine denial.[30]

We tracked people's endorsement of conspiracy theories by asking participants to say how much they believe "the official version of the COVID-19 pandemic given by the authorities hides the truth". The question used a 7-point scale, with 1 for "completely false", 4 for "neither true nor false", and 7 for "completely true". The question was asked in May, June, October and December 2020, and in March and June 2021.

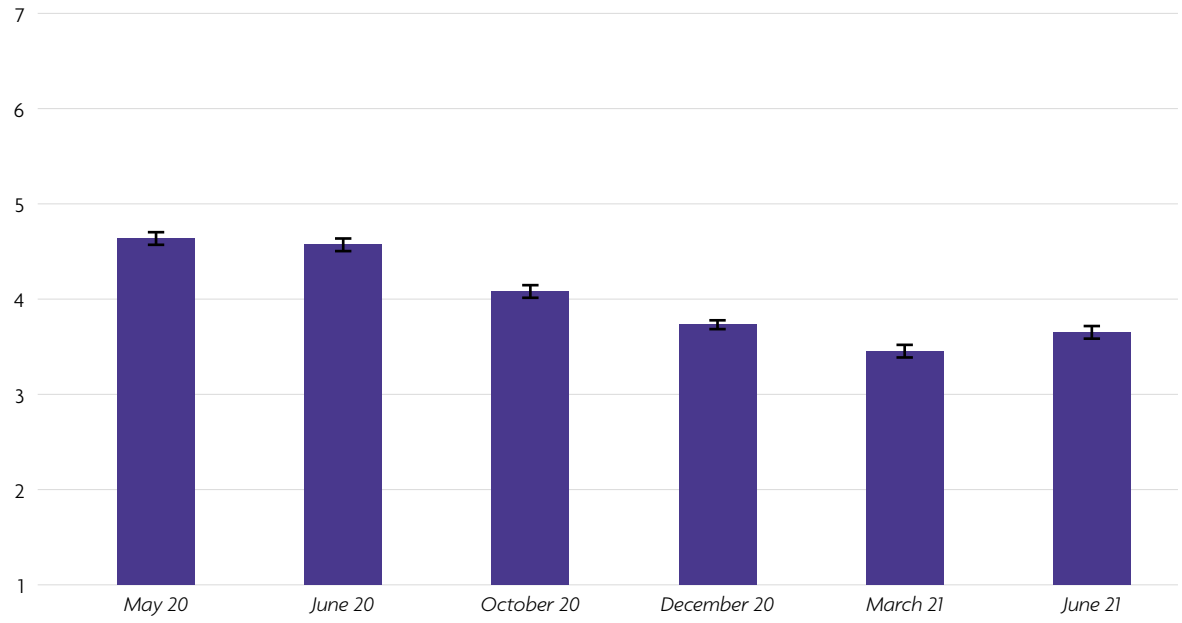
28 Douglas, K. 2021. 'COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories.' *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 24(2), 270-275. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068.

29 Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. 2017. 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories'. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538-542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261.

30 Earnshaw, V.A., Easton, L.A., Kalichman, S.C., Brousseau, N.M., Hil, E.C., & Fox, A.B. 2020. 'COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, health behaviors, and policy support.' *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 10(4), 850-856. https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibaa090.

Consistent with other research, in May 2020, a significant proportion of people entertained conspiracy theories, with a mean score of 4.54 on a 7-point scale, as illustrated in Figure 3. This means that a large proportion of people (32%) held at least some doubts about the official version of events given by the government. Although this level of suspicion continued into June 2020 (mean of 4.49), it decreased significantly to 3.81 in December 2020, by which time more people rejected than accepted these theories. From December 2020 onwards the average level of conspiracy beliefs remained lower and was fairly stable, with a mean of 3.53 in March 2021 and 3.69 in June 2021. with only 18.2% of respondents considering the proposition to be "true" or "completely true".

Figure 3. Average endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in May, June, October, and December 2020, and March and June 2021.



Notes. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. Means were adjusted for demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, social status, religious affiliation, and political orientation), ensuring comparability across waves.

Our qualitative evidence echoes these findings on conspiracy theories. Some respondents entertained conspiracy theory beliefs in the summer of 2020. However, when we spoke to them again in the summer of 2021, the same participants who had voiced suspicions about whether or not the government was telling the 'truth' about the pandemic had gone on to take the vaccination and no longer seemed concerned that they were being misled.

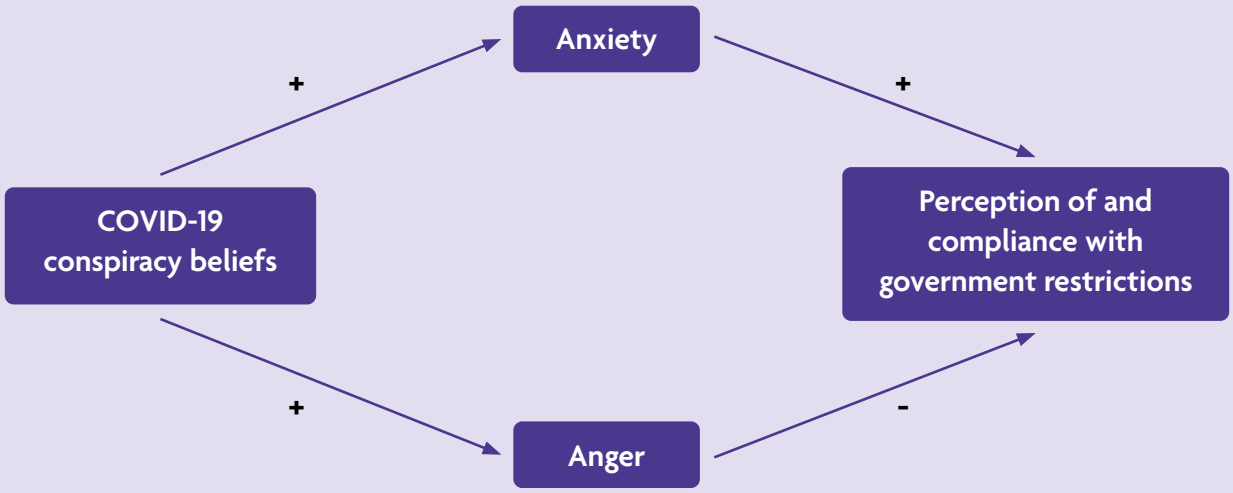
We have also found that the behavioural consequences of conspiracy beliefs could be more complex than anticipated (see below).

Summary of previous findings on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and compliance with restrictions

In our scientific paper "COVID-19 conspiracy theories and compliance with governmental restrictions: The mediating roles of anger, anxiety, and hope", we used data from May 2020 (Wave 1) to investigate the links between people's conspiracy beliefs and their emotional responses, and compliance with governmental restrictions.

Some conspiracy theories downplay the severity of the virus, whereas others augment it. Belief in these different conspiracy theories could therefore have different implications for individuals' perceptions of the danger, their feelings of anxiety or anger and their subsequent behaviour. This implies that some people's conspiracy beliefs may make them feel less anxious and therefore less likely to want to comply with social distancing and health protective measures, whereas other people's conspiracy beliefs might make them more cautious and therefore more likely to comply.

Our research showed that people holding COVID-19 related conspiracy beliefs were more likely to feel angry, probably because they entertained the theory of "COVID-19 as a hoax" in which the government is lying to the population to increase their control over them. The more anger people felt, the less they reported complying with restrictions. However, this was not the entire picture. People holding COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs were also more likely to feel anxiety, probably because they entertained the theory of "COVID-19 as a bioweapon", in which the virus could be much more dangerous than was being presented by the government. The more anxious people felt, the more likely they were to comply with COVID-19 measures.



In sum, this research suggests that there might be multiple, sometimes contradictory behavioural impacts of conspiracy beliefs, and it highlights the importance of taking into account the emotions these beliefs might produce and not just the beliefs themselves.[31]

4.4 Trust in the local government handling of the pandemic

From September 2020 onwards, we also measured trust at the more specific, local, level by asking people how much they agreed or disagreed that "my local council (i.e., town or city or district) is handling the causes and consequences of the pandemic competently". The evidence from this question makes the distinction between local and UK government even clearer, as shown in Figure 4. Across places, respondents consistently trust their local authority's response to COVID-19 to a greater extent than that of the UK government. Average levels of trust in local authorities, both within the six that had invested in cohesion, and in most of the other areas we surveyed are generally above the scale midpoint (meaning more people feel trusting than do not). Indeed, across the respondents from Scotland, Wales and Kent we found that trust in local government remained similar between September 2020 and June 2021 (45% and 41% expressing trust).

31 Peitz, L., Lalot, F., Douglas, K., Sutton, R., & Abrams, D. (2021). 'COVID-19 conspiracy theories and compliance with governmental restrictions: The mediating roles of anger, anxiety, and hope'. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/18344909211046646.

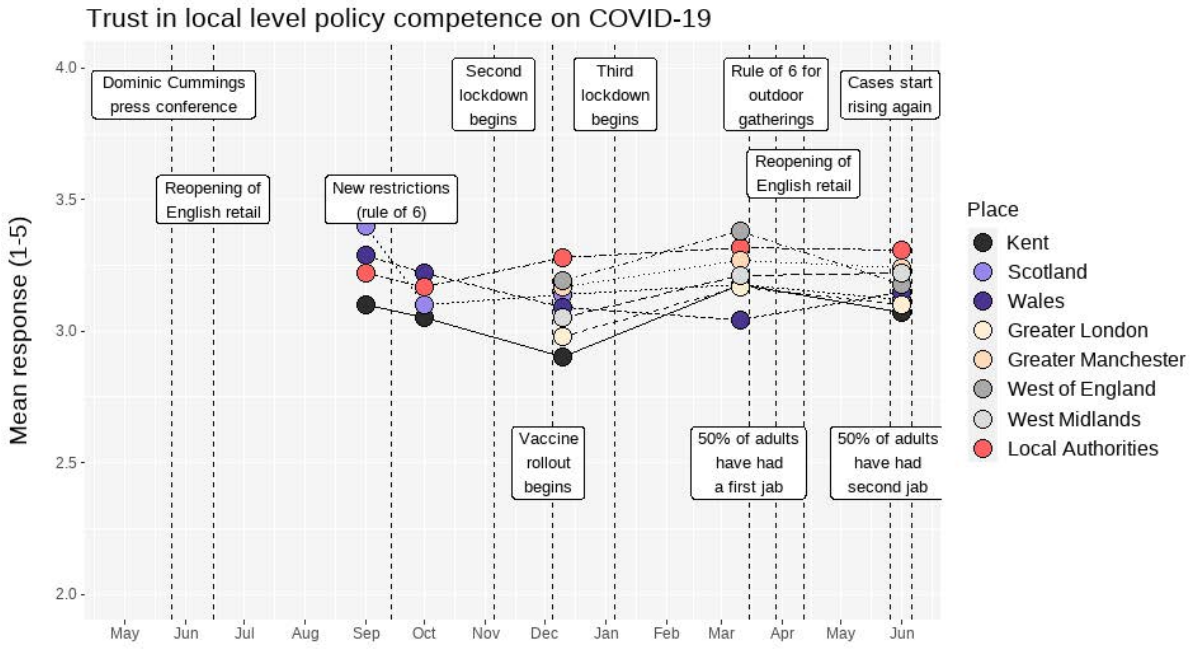
Our qualitative evidence backs this up. Interviewees and focus groups participants were much more likely to speak positively about the role their local council had played in responding to the pandemic than they were about the UK government. Reasons given for this included the view that local government better understood the needs of its area and was both more precise and more locally-specific in its communication. Some comments suggest that local government may also benefit from being seen as somehow less 'political' than the UK government.

However, central to many positive comments about local government was the role which it was seen to have played in leading and coordinating the response to the pandemic in local areas, including working closely with volunteers and local community groups to look after those in most need. This collective local response was typically described in terms that suggested it was a source not just of reassurance, but of pride in place and sense of community.

> *"Yeah, I think the local authority has managed it quite well, in comparison to national government. So the national government's been more reckless and more driven by economic incentives and targets rather than people's well-being. Whereas local government, I know with [name of city] Council, there was a lot of testing happening, a lot of testing being offered, there were people volunteering, you could sign up to as a paid work to be a COVID-19 ambassador, so helping to get people tested, and working in vaccination centers or handing out information as well. And I think seeing that physical presence on the streets or when you're in like, the shopping centers of people handing out masks, or when you're in a park you see people handing out masks and stuff, it's really positive signs."*
>
> [Local authority interview participant, June 2021]

However, as shown in Figure 4, differences between local places changed over time. They first increased between September and December 2020, when variability across places was the largest. It is notable that at this point in time locally based trust within Kent had decreased steadily, whereas trust within the six local authorities had increased. Yet, differences then reduced, and by June 2021 there was a lot of convergence across all places surveyed (not only Kent, Scotland, and Wales, but also the six local authorities and four metropolitan areas). There may be a number of reasons for some of these changes. First, the six local authority areas should have had something of a headstart, and it would seem they were able to sustain their quite positive position across the entire year. In Scotland and Wales, it is plausible that the national governments became pre-eminent as the key players, giving local authorities a relatively less trusted position. Kent's local authorities faced additional strains such as the handling of freight, transport and immigration issues that may have compounded and reduced trust in local authorities' ability to handle the pandemic. By June 2021 it seems likely that more local authorities had developed systems and links with their communities, which might be why there is more convergence in the levels of trust shown across different areas.

Figure 4. Average level of trust in the local government's response to COVID-19 from September 2020 to June 2021



4.5 How much do we trust other people?

Another important facet of trust is the trust one places in other people, sometimes also considered to be reflective of people's social capital.[32] Such interpersonal trust has proved a key element to create and sustain cohesive societies. In the context of the pandemic, we asked respondents how much they trust other people to respect the different restrictions enacted by the government to curb the pandemic. Figure 5 shows our findings about how people have been perceiving "others in the UK in general".

From May until July/August 2020, respondents became decreasingly trustful that other people would respect the restrictions, reaching a noticeable level of distrust in late summer of 2020. After this, trust rebounded during the autumn, and remained at higher levels than in the spring all the way to December 2020. It is perhaps surprising that respondents continued to express trust in other individuals even though COVID-19 cases had started rising again in late autumn. In fact, aggregating across respondents from Kent, Scotland and Wales, although only 19% felt trusting of others in the summer of 2020, trust recovered strongly to 43% by September 2020 and remained at that level in June 2021. When compared with our findings on political trust, this evidence suggests that people were concluding that they could more readily withhold their trust in government than in their fellow citizens as the second wave started to unfold.

Similarly, during 2021, although average levels of interpersonal trust decreased slightly between March and June 2021, it was still much higher than it had been a year earlier, in June 2020. This was despite the fact that cases had started to rise again, in what was considered by some to be the start of the third wave of COVID-19.

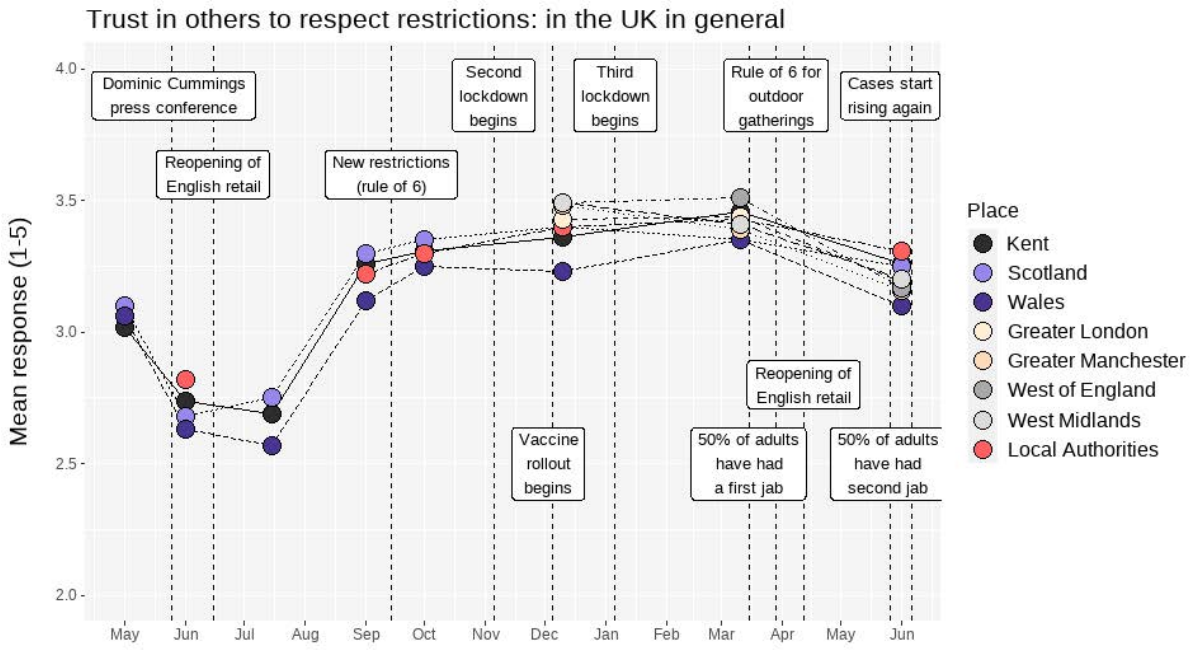
This pattern of changes over time is echoed quite closely across different places, although there are also consistent differences between places. Respondents from Wales report consistently less interpersonal trust than those from other places. People in Scotland, on the other hand, regularly report the highest level of trust in others.

Interview and focus group participants often raised concerns about people not abiding by the rules. But in doing so, they also tended to refer to rule-breaking by people in other places, or to behaviour seen in the media, rather than a description of problems people saw in their own neighbourhood. And when people did discuss rule-breaking, they often attributed it to confusion because of mixed messages from the Government, or to people's lack of understanding of the dangers, or for competing social or personal needs such as young people needing to see other young people. There was therefore a tendency to give those who were breaking the rules the benefit of the doubt.

Mentions of rule-breaking and anxieties about others' behaviour tended to occur more frequently when discussing points in time at which rules were more relaxed or more localised, and therefore less clear cut and more open to interpretation. By contrast, people's recollections of periods of strict national lockdowns rarely, if ever, mentioned rule-breaking.

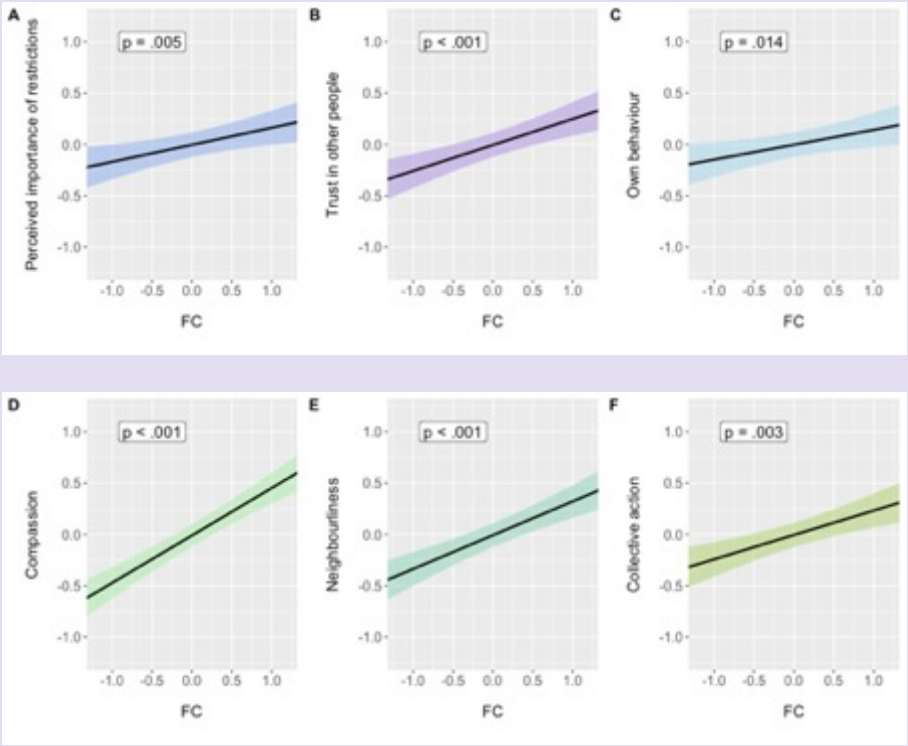
32 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Platts-Dunn, I., 2020. *Beyond Us & Them: Perception of COVID-19 and social cohesion*. July 2020 report. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Research-Project-Report-July-2020-public-1.pdf.

Figure 5. Average trust in other people in the UK to respect the COVID-19 restrictions in place from May 2020 to July 2021



Summary of findings on 'futures consciousness'

In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for people's ability to anticipate the future, so we wanted to assess how 'futures consciousness' - people's capacity for understanding, anticipating, and preparing for the future might be related to their perceptions of and reactions to the pandemic. Our longitudinal analysis over the course of the summer 2020[33] showed that people who had greater futures consciousness were subsequently more likely to express greater satisfaction and engagement with the COVID-19 government restrictions. They also reported higher compassion for others, a stronger sense of neighbourliness, and greater engagement in different forms of social action to address problems arising from the pandemic. This positive engagement also mapped onto benefits for themselves in the form of a more positive sense of wellbeing, lower levels of emotional blunting, and a stronger sense of hope about the future. Those with stronger futures consciousness also subsequently expressed greater concern about societal issues. Given these findings that future consciousness triggers more proactive engagement with the future, it seems likely that interventions that encourage this mindset would be likely to support greater adaptability and resilience in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic.



33 Lalot, F., Abrams, D., Ahvenharju, S., & Minkkinen, M. 2021. 'Being future-conscious during a global crisis: The protective effect of heightened future consciousness in the COVID-19 pandemic.' *Personality and Individual Differences*. 178, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886921002373?via%3Dihub.

5. Intergroup Relationships

Hitherto we have largely focused on differences between places over time. We now turn to the relationships between groups in society over that same time period (the role of place in these relationships will be addressed in a separate report).

5.1 Intergroup relations and social cohesion

People's sense of community cohesion is known to be an important buffer against adversity, helping to promote resilience.[34] During crises, groups often come together in a spirit of unity and cooperation and this was no different in the early days of the pandemic as communities and groups mobilised to set up food deliveries, prescription delivery services, and social support groups for the most vulnerable. Over 1 million people answered Matt Hancock's call for NHS volunteers in March 2020.[35]

Yet this capacity for crises to bring people together across different groups and communities and generate an inspiring sense of togetherness is not the end of the story. Importantly, crises can also push communities apart by creating or deepening divisions and increasing people's intolerance toward some minority groups.[36] Other axes of division also developed. During September and October 2020, localised lockdowns in the Northern counties of Lancashire and West Yorkshire, amongst others, also revived North vs. South debates. Questions were also raised about the level of power that should be issued to devolved governments amid a resurgence of support for Scottish independence.

We tracked levels of UK unity vs. division, and local unity vs. division and mapped the evolution of these intergroup relationships as the pandemic unfolded.

34 Hogan, M. J. 2020. 'Collaborative positive psychology: solidarity, meaning, resilience, wellbeing, and virtue in a time of crisis'. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 32(7-8), 698-712. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2020.1778647.

35 Butler, P. 2020. 'A Million Volunteers to Help NHS and Others during COVID-19 Lockdown'. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/13/a-million-volunteer-to-help-nhs-and-others-during-COVID-19-lockdown.

36 Calo-Blanco, A., Kovářík, 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.

Summary of our previous findings on intergroup relations

In our paper reviewing the intergroup dimensions of COVID-19 (Abrams, Lalot, & Hogg, 2021),[37] we examined social psychological theory and research about how relationships within and between social groups were involved in and being affected by people's responses to the pandemic. Based on theories of uncertainty about self and social identity, subjective group dynamics, leadership, and social cohesion, we proposed that intergroup relationships were having important consequences affecting people's perceptions of their own and others' situation, the way politicians were managing the pandemic, ways that people were influencing and being influenced, and how they were resolving uncertainties about their group-based identities (such as their work identity, their ethnic or gender identity, and their political identity). We argued that the pandemic meant that national or global unity were prone to intergroup fractures and competition through which leaders were able to exploit people's uncertainties to gain short-term credibility, power, or influence for their own groups, and that these processes fuelled polarization between groups and extremism. We argued that a central social and psychological challenge ahead would be finding ways to sustain the superordinate objective of surviving and recovering from the pandemic through mutual cross-group effort.

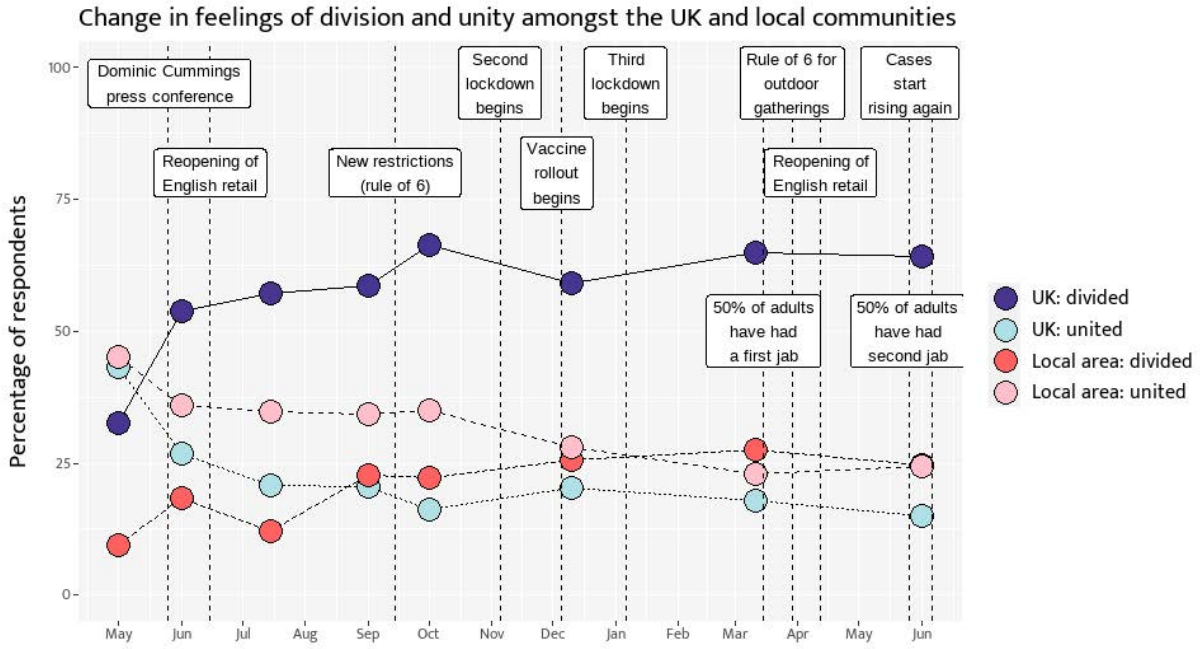
5.2 Perception of unity and division

To examine perceptions of UK unity and division we asked, "To what extent do you think the UK as a whole is becoming more united or divided?" Likewise, to assess local unity and division we asked to what extent respondents' "local area" is becoming more united or more divided.

Figure 6 below shows the percentage of respondents who think that the UK is becoming more divided (dark blue) or more united (light blue), as well as the percentage of respondents who think that their local area is becoming more divided (dark pink) or more united (light pink).

37 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., & Hogg, M.A. 2021. 'Intergroup and intragroup dimensions of Covid019: A social identity perspective on social fragmentation and unity'. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 24(2), 201-209, doi: 10.1177/136843022098344.0.

Figure 6. Change in feelings of division and unity amongst the UK and local communities from May 2020 to June 2021.



Perception of the UK as becoming more divided versus more united

In the early days of the crisis (May 2020) more respondents perceived the UK as becoming more united than respondents who perceived it as becoming more divided. In fact, this was a rather unusual situation, as national level unity had been low immediately following the 2019 general election and subsequent fall out from Brexit. And despite the fact that the pandemic had demanded substantial changes in public behaviour and posed an enduring threat, this period of growing unity was short-lived. As quickly as June 2020, perceptions of growing UK division had re-emerged with more than half of respondents perceiving growing divisions and less than a quarter perceiving growing unity. This trend of growing disunity deepened gradually from June 2020 to June 2021, at which point 64% perceived growing division and only 16% perceived growing unity across the UK.

Some interview and focus group participants expressed concerns about the general sense of division across the country as a whole. More commonly, they referred to and discussed particular factors that they perceived to be drivers of division over the course of the pandemic. These included economic and racial inequalities, North vs South tensions, and divergence between UK and devolved nations governments.

Perception of the local area as becoming more divided versus more united

Perception of the local area as united or divided revealed a quite different picture. Throughout 2020, more respondents thought their local area was becoming more united than thought it was becoming more divided. Even so, the percentage of respondents perceiving growing local division rose gradually from July 2020 onwards. In December 2020, March 2021 and June 2021, perceptions of growing local division and unity were almost equal with roughly 25% of respondents perceiving growing division and 25% perceiving growing unity (the remaining 50% perceiving no change in any direction).

Interview and focus groups participants often observed that people's different economic and housing situations had meant the pandemic was having a harder impact on some in their local area than others. Some also expressed deep concern about the potential for blame-based narratives with racial overtones to divide local communities.

However, on the whole, participants were much more likely to talk optimistically about their local areas and to describe the unifying impacts which the pandemic had had. Central to this were their descriptions of how collective voluntary effort and a general sense of 'helping each other out' had helped bring individuals and different communities together.

> *"[I]t's been really good. And we've seen a real commitment to community cohesion, helping each other out. It's been really good to see everyone coming together to help each other. There's been lots of people going to food banks. So, there's been an increase of that. But there's been a lot of donations we've been giving to food banks as well, and people volunteering at food bank. So that's been really good to see."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, May 2021]

It is notable that the general pattern of local unity also encompasses considerable regional differences. Focussing on responses from June 2021, respondents in Wales and Scotland were one and a half times as likely to perceive growing local unity (30% and 32%, respectively) than growing local division (18% and 22%). Within the West of England, Greater London, and the 6 English Local Authorities the picture was much more balanced, with respondents from only slightly more likely to perceive growing unity than division (29% vs. 26%, 22% vs. 21, and 24% vs. 22%, respectively). On the other hand, respondents from the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, and Kent, were as little as two thirds as likely to perceive growing unity than division (22% vs. 30% , 22% vs 26%, and 17% vs. 25%, respectively). The important message to take away from these findings is that regardless of the average or objective state of local and UK unity and division across Britain they are perceived as different things, and they are perceived differently depending on people's own context and vantage point.

5.3 Perception of divisions between social groups and categories

We presented respondents with pairs of groups (such as younger and older people) and asked, "for each pair of groups listed below (one versus the other), please say how much you think they feel united with each other, or opposed to ("against") each other in any way?" Figure 7 below shows the percentage of respondents, at each point in time, who perceived the pairs of groups as "opposed" or "strongly opposed".

We present here perception of groups that are repeatedly and most visibly considered as sources of intergroup tensions across different political and social groupings, that is: people who voted to Leave the EU versus people who voted to Remain, Scotland versus England, the UK versus Europe, wealthier people versus poorer people, and young people versus older.

In May 2020, more respondents considered each pair of groups as not being opposed than as being opposed. Level of perceived opposition between younger and older people was especially low. We know from other surveys and earlier work that these figures are lower than the average pre-pandemic level, and lower than they had been a few months earlier.[38] So in May 2020, just as with perceptions of national unity, these figures show that the well-documented initial sense of coming-together that is common in the early days of a crisis had embraced a wide array of different group memberships and divisions.

However, as with national unity, this initial softening of differences was short-lived. The percentage of respondents who perceived divisions between each pair of groups all rose sharply between May 2020 (42%) and October 2020 (60%), and remained high thereafter. By July 2021 a majority of respondents perceived that there was division rather than unity between Scotland vs. England (64.4%), wealthier vs. poorer people (67.5%), the UK vs. Europe (68.4%), and people who voted to Leave vs. Remain in the EU (72.8%).

Perception of division between younger and older people followed a similar trend between May and October 2020 (53.1% perceiving division). After that, however, people perceived age division as reducing, so that by June 2021, only 40.9% of respondents still perceived age division rather than unity.

This last finding is particularly interesting for two reasons. First it shows that perceptions of division were not driven by a single common factor and that people were sensitive to the particular type of groups they were being asked to consider. Second, it suggests that intergenerational tensions that have widely been discussed in the media are quite multifaceted. There had been recurring scapegoating of young people accused of not taking the pandemic seriously,[39] and different arguments about whose situation was worse in terms of mental health, some asserting that COVID-19 had been more damaging for the mental health of older generations,[40]

38 Abrams, D., & Lalot, F. 2020. 'What has happened to trust and cohesion since Tier 4 restrictions and the third national lockdown (December 2020 –March 2021)? Further evidence from national surveys'. *The British Academy: COVID-19 and Society: Shaping the COVID-19 Decade*. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3241/COVID-19-decade-what-happened-trust-cohesion-tier-4-CSGP-Kent-March-2021.pdf.

39 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.

40 Heid, A.R., Cartwright, F., Wilson-Genderson, M., & Pruchno, R. 2020. 'Challenges experienced by older people during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic'. The Gerontologist, 61(1), 48-58. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa138.

and others arguing that it had been worse for younger generations.[41] A number of factors could therefore explain the perceived reduction in intergenerational divisions. This may include on the one hand the increased dependency of older people on younger people for support and help, and on the other the perceived reduction in relative vulnerability of older people as more became vaccinated earlier. It is also possible that older and younger people had experienced much more intergenerational social contact and deeper mutual understanding within their family households owing to periods of isolation, quarantine, working from home and sharing childcare.

In keeping with the survey evidence, focus group participants largely rejected the idea that the pandemic had deepened divisions between young and old (see qualitative evidence section for a fuller exploration of this theme). A number of participants described this narrative as a media construction. Indeed, the media's perceived role in promoting divisive narratives – about minority ethnic communities and the pandemic, about intergenerational division and about North-South divides – was a recurring theme in focus groups and interviews.

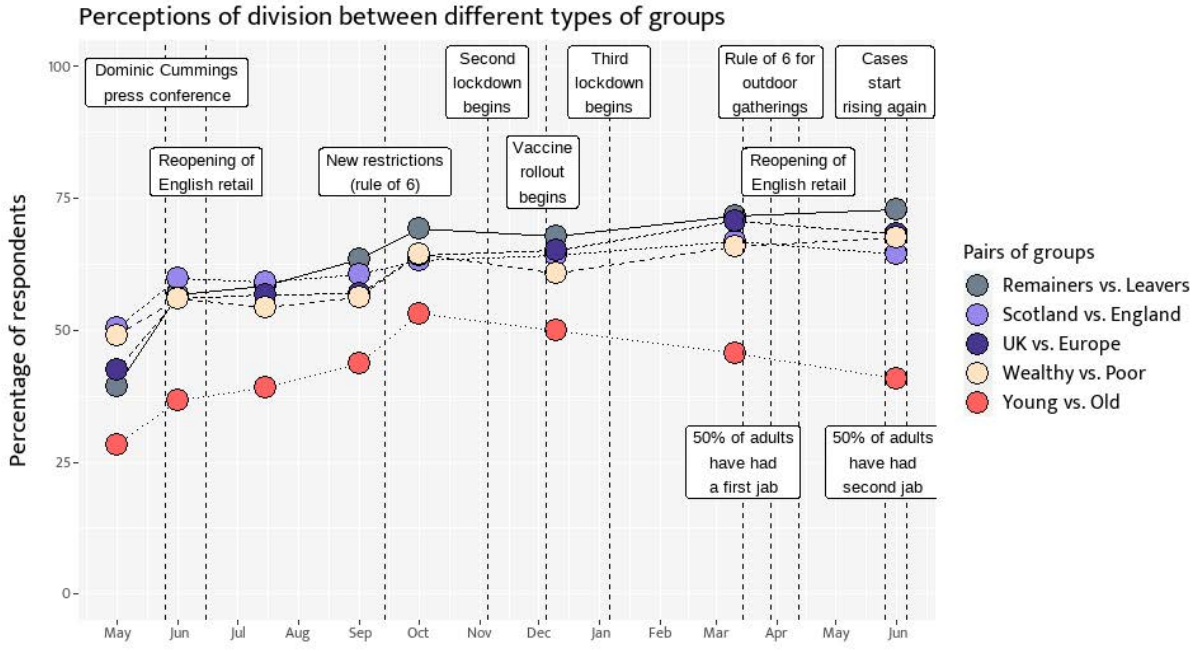
Participants frequently expressed an awareness of how polarised current political discourse could be. In this light, although our interviews and focus groups were not directly asked to discuss Brexit as a topic, a number of people referred to it as an example of heightened levels of division that people would rather avoid.

A more common concern expressed by participants was the growing gap between rich and poor, and the fear that the pandemic would only serve to widen this.

> *"Yeah, I just feel like there's a more, there's a wider gap now between what used to be the middle class and the, what used to be the sort of working class, there's a wider gap now. … You had the whole fuss with the, the GCSE grades and A-level grades of about where you lived depended on what grades you got. Um so you had that social disparity there, then you've got the, those who are rich are just gonna make money off this pandemic, and those that are poor are just going to get poorer because they're getting made redundant."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, September 2020]

41 Vahia, I.V., Jeste, D.V., & Reynolds, C.F Reynolds. 2020. 'Older Adults and the Mental Health Effects of COVID-19'. *JAMA*, 324(22), 2253-2254. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.21753.

Figure 7. Percentage of respondents who consider each pair of groups to be opposed or strongly opposed to each other, from May 2020 to June 2021.

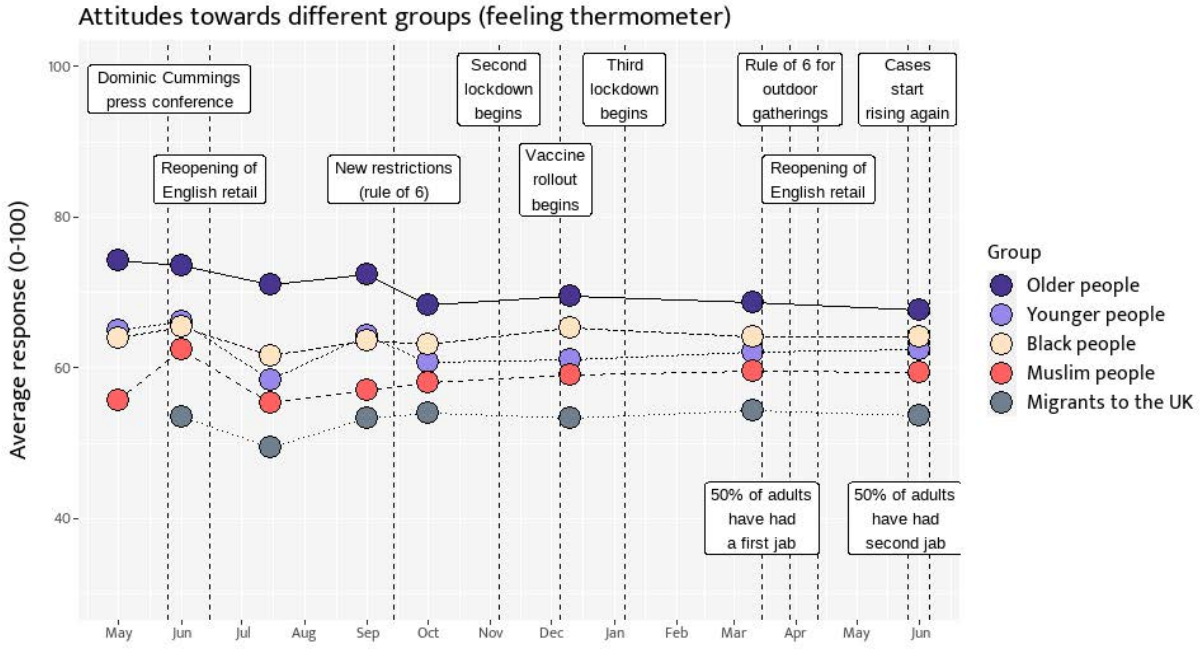


5.4 Feelings towards social groups

Positive attitudes and emotions towards people from other social groups are often considered an important index of social cohesion and the potential for future cohesion, since they facilitate good relations between people of different backgrounds. A common and quite straightforward way to measure such attitudes is through a "feeling thermometer" where respondents indicate how cold or warm they feel towards a specific group, on a thermometer ranging from 0° (extremely cold) to 100° (extremely warm). Figure 8 below shows changes over time in people's attitudes towards young people, older people, Black people, Muslim people, and migrants to the UK (the latter being an aggregated index including legal and illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and seasonal workers).[42] It is interesting to consider both people's overall expressions of warmth, and the differences in their feelings of warmth toward different groups. Figure 8 shows, for example, most people express some degree of warmth (scores over 50) towards most groups. Indeed, the overall average temperature appears fairly constant over time. However, there are also large differences in feelings towards different groups and some fluctuations particularly between the spring and autumn of 2020.

42 The term 'immigrant' is used in some individual questions within our surveys because these items are drawn from long running surveys from past research and because our measures also distinguish different types of migrant including those seeking asylum, whereas they do not refer to people who emigrate from the UK to other countries. We recognise that the context of use means that the term 'immigrant' can have negative connotations and therefore in our own description and analyses we use the term 'migrant' or 'migrant to the UK'.

Figure 8. Attitudes towards various groups through the "feeling thermometer" measure from May 2020 to July 2021.



Note. Means were adjusted for demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, social status, religious affiliation, and political orientation), ensuring comparability across waves.

Respondents are consistently warmer towards older people than any other group, although this warmth drops markedly between August and October 2020, then remaining quite constant after that. The initially very high warmth towards older people during the early months of the pandemic might reflect the intense media focus on their being at higher risk than others and on the restrictions in care homes that were increasing their isolation and loneliness. It is quite typical for sympathetic (warm) attitudes to be expressed towards stereotypically dependent groups,[43] and it is well established in social attitudes in the UK.[44] Similarly, warmth towards young people is consistently lower than towards older people, a difference that was accentuated in July 2021 which coincides with news reports accusing young people of not adhering to restrictions. Nonetheless, our qualitative evidence revealed that interviewees did express a lot of sympathy for how the pandemic was affecting younger people in particular.

Warmth of feeling towards Black people peaked in June 2020 possibly reflecting the issue of racism being brought to wider public attention by the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd. It dipped in July, perhaps reflecting adverse media reports criticising BLM protests for non-adherence to restrictions, but recovered again and remained fairly consistent over the course of the year.

Our surveys revealed that Muslim people remain one of the groups towards whom people have the least favourable attitudes. Only migrants to the UK elicited cooler feelings, reflecting pre-pandemic narratives on immigration and suggesting that perceptions of cultural (symbolic) and economic (material) threat remain as likely drivers of differences in levels of prejudice toward different groups.[45]

Two things stand out in these data, one being that levels of prejudice did not shift much overall across the entire year, and the other is that the differences in feelings of warmth towards each group and category remained relatively stable, so that their rank compared to other groups did not change. Nonetheless, this type of measure is only one aspect of prejudice and other facets help to reveal a more complex picture, as we discuss next.

43 Fiske, S. et al. 2002. 'A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6), 878-902, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.878.

44 Abrams, D., & Houston, D. 2006. 'Equality, Diversity and Prejudice in Britain Results from 2005 National Survey', *Report for the Cabinet Office Equalities Review October 2006*, https://kar.kent.ac.uk/4106/1/Abrams_KentEquality_Oct_2006.pdf; Abrams, D., Houston, D., & Swift, H. 2018. 'Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain', *Equality and Human Rights Commission Report* 119.

45 Abrams, D., Houston, D., & Swift, H. 2018. 'Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain', *Equality and Human Rights Commission Report* Research Report 119, https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/developing-national-barometer-prejudice-and-discrimination-britain.

6. Deprivation, Discrimination and Intergroup Contact

The following sections examine people's perceptions of deprivation and experiences of discrimination, as well as the implications of intergroup contact. We consider changes over time, and also focus more specifically on the situation of Black and Muslim people. We will report on differences between places in a different, forthcoming report.

6.1 Which groups are perceived as most deprived?

In the March/April 2021 survey, we ask respondents to indicate which 3 groups they believe were currently most deprived (i.e. relatively disadvantaged) in the UK. Specifically, we asked: "Sometimes particular groups are more deprived than other groups, for example due to their age, sex, ethnicity, religion, but also occupation, education, or place where they live. When you think about the people in the place where you live, which group(s) would you say are the most deprived, compared with others? Please select up to 3 groups from the list below". We provided a list of 31 different groups (e.g., women, transgender people, Muslim people...) and also the option to indicate yet a different group. Respondents selected the 3 groups (in no specific order) they believed were the most disadvantaged.

Table 2 below shows the 20 first groups in decreasing frequency of mention by respondents. Two groups were cited most frequently by almost a third of all respondents: homeless people, and people with low income. They were followed by refugees and asylum seekers (considered together), cited by 20% of respondents, and then people with a mental health condition or disability. Black people were the ethnic minority most perceived as suffering deprivation (16% of respondents), while Muslim people only ranked 14th (selected by 6.5% of respondents).

Both younger and older people also figured prominently, considered as most relatively deprived by 13% and 16% of respondents, respectively. However, a very small percentage of respondents (2.4%) selected both young and old people, suggesting that if age discrimination is perceived as creating significant disadvantage in the UK, there is not necessarily consensus about which age group is the most deprived.

Table 2. Groups perceived as most deprived in descending percentage of nominations as being in the 'top three groups'.

	Group	% of respondents
1	Homeless people	32.42
2	People with low income	31.86
3	Refugees and asylum seekers	19.94
4	People with a mental health condition or disability	18.30
5	Black, African, Caribbean or Black British people	16.39
6	Older people	15.67
7	Young people	13.43
8	People with a physical health condition or disability	12.59
9	Gypsy, Roma or Traveller people	10.95
10	Children	10.38
11	Migrants to the UK (including seasonal workers)	9.22
12	Asian or Asian British people (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese or other background)	9.19
13	Transgender people	7.03
14	Muslim people	6.50
15	Women	6.01
16	Lesbian, gay and bisexual people	5.00
17	White or White British people	4.07
18	Non-binary people	1.48
19	Jewish people	0.81
20	Sikh people	0.34

When we consider these results in combination with people's own attitudes towards members of different social groups (Figure 8, described earlier) an interesting convergence appears. Those groups that are perceived as more deprived tend to be groups that attract warmer feelings (relative to other groups), but some interesting differences also emerge and just because someone perceives a group to be disadvantaged, this does not imply that they will also have feelings of sympathy or warmth towards that group. For example, whilst people recognise that refugees and asylum seekers suffer a great deal of deprivation their feelings towards them are cooler (the feeling thermometer measure about migrants includes refugees and asylum seekers) perhaps reflecting the harder sentiments towards immigration that was a feature of pre-pandemic narratives and particularly reflected in the Brexit referendum.

6.2 Discrimination

Discrimination "refers to unjustifiable negative behaviour towards a group or its members, where behaviour is adjudged to include both actions towards, and judgements/decisions about, group members." Importantly, discrimination is directed towards certain people "not because of any particular deservingness or reciprocity, but simply because they happen to be members of a given category".[46]

Social psychologists distinguish between discrimination and the neighbouring concepts of prejudice (negative attitude toward a group and its individual members) and stereotypes (over-generalised beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people).

Discrimination has important social implications, leading notably to experience of social rejection and exclusion which in turn triggers disadvantages in employment, education and health care. Discrimination takes a toll on people's mental well-being, including increased anxiety, increased depressive symptoms and even negative health outcomes.[34]

There are many group characteristics that are associated with discrimination, including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.[47]

46 Al Ramiah, A., Hewstone, M., Dovidio, J.F., & Penner, L.A. 2010. 'The social psychology of discrimination: Theory, measurement, and consequences'. In H. Russell, L. Bond, & F. McGinnity (eds.), *Making equality count: Irish and international approaches to measuring discrimination* (pp. 84-112). Dublin, Ireland: Liffey Press.

47 See the list of protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics.

6.3 Perceived discrimination through time

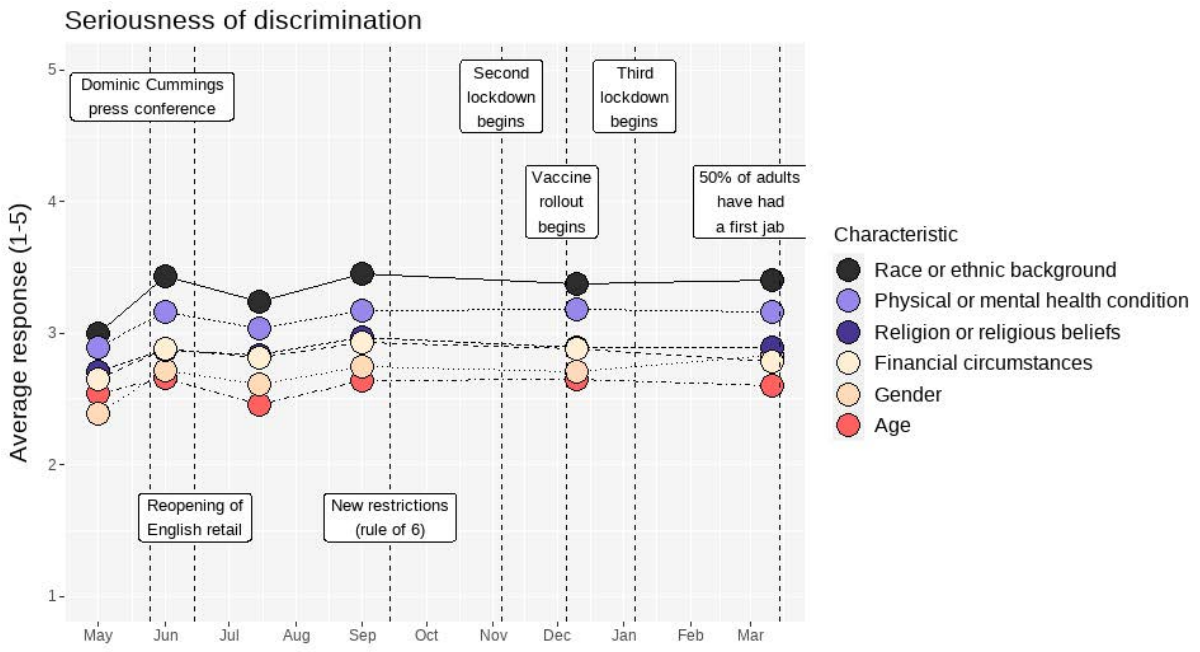
To explore more directly how much they believe discrimination towards different groups matters, we used a measure from the EHRC benchmark survey of prejudice in Britain. This asks "how serious do you think the issue of discrimination against people is, because of" different characteristics (people's gender, age, race or ethnic background, religion or religious beliefs, presence of a physical or mental health condition, and financial circumstances), with answers ranging from 1 = Not at all serious to 5 = Extremely serious.

For most characteristics, average scores were around or below the scale midpoint, indicating perceptions that discrimination was "slightly" or "somewhat" serious. Overall, responses were quite stable through time except for an increase in perceived seriousness of all forms of discrimination between May and June 2020. We know from other measures in our surveys that May 2020 was a time of increased unity and trust between groups. This global feeling of togetherness may therefore have suppressed perceptions of discrimination as a salient issue. The "increase" in June 2020 may then have reflected greater public awareness that the pandemic was deepening existing inequalities and in particular through its impact on ethnic minorities.

Differences in the relative seriousness of discrimination against each characteristic were maintained through time. Discrimination based on race or ethnic background was consistently rated as the most serious form with average scores around 3.5, but showing and sustaining an understandably larger increase than others following the murder of George Floyd on the 25th May 2020. It was followed by discrimination based on physical or mental health condition with average scores around or above the scale midpoint (3.0). Other forms of discrimination consistently scored below the scale midpoint, in order: based on religion or religious beliefs, on financial circumstances, on gender, and finally on age. This last finding deserves some attention. Even though respondents regarded age-based deprivation to be common, and even though they held warm feelings towards older people, they were relatively disinclined to consider age discrimination to be a serious issue. It is likely that this reflects the complexity and bi-directional nature of age discrimination, as well as people's perception that they themselves hold positive feelings toward (particularly) older people.[48]

48 Bratt, A., Gralberg, I., Svensson, I., & Rusner, M. 2020. 'Gaining the courage to see and accept oneself: Group-based compassion-focussed therapy as experienced by adolescent girls', *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 24(5), 909-21, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104520931583; Swift, H.J., Abrams, D., Lamont, R.A., & Drury, L. 2017. 'The Risks of Ageism Model: How Ageism and Negative Attitudes Towards Age Can Be a Barrier to Active Ageing', *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 11(1), 195-231, https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12031.

Figure 9. Perceived seriousness of discrimination because of different characteristics, from May 2020 to March/April 2021.



Notes. Scores are adjusted means, controlling for respondents' age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, subjective socioeconomic status, and political orientation.

6.4 Experience of Black and Muslim people in England

The following analyses focus on respondents from the 4 metropolitan areas (Greater London, Greater Manchester, West of England, and West Midlands) given that they tend to represent the areas with greater social diversity and greatest representation of both Black people and Muslim people. All analyses controlled for demographic factors including respondents' ethnicity and religious affiliation. Given both media and government attention to the particular vulnerabilties of minority groups as well as the intense focus on racism in particular we chose to examine the attitudes and experiences involving the largest ethnic and religious minority categories in the UK, namely Black people and Muslim people. We are aware that there is much diversity within each category and that not all members of any externally designated category would necessarily identify with or accept that as their primary group membership. Within the scope of this report, we focus on intergroup attitudes, leaving other areas of evidence for future analysis and reports.

6.5 General attitudes towards Black people and Muslim people

General attitudes towards Black people and Muslim people were measured using the feeling thermometer at two timepoints in the metropolitan areas: in December 2020 (Wave 6) and June 2021 (Wave 8), and were described earlier. In the analysis that follows we examine feelings by respondents who self-described as White, Black or Muslim towards each of those three categories, and we statistically controlled for other demographic factors such as age, gender and socioeconomic level.

As a reminder, scores on the thermometer range from 0 (very cold feelings) to 100 (very warm feelings) with 50 representing "neither warm nor cold feelings". Mean scores observed at both waves are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Feeling thermometer: General attitudes expressed by White, Black and Muslim respondents towards White, Black, and Muslim people, in Wave 6 (December 2020; N = 7542) and Wave 8 (June 2021; N = 7589).

		Wave 6			Wave 8		
	Respondent:	White (*N* = 6516)	Black (*N* = 506)	Muslim (*N* = 520)	White (*N* = 6399)	Black (*N* = 589)	Muslim (*N* = 601)
Attitudes towards...	White	64.7	60.9	63.2	67.3	58.5	62.9
	Black	63.6	79.2	73.1	62.3	79.8	69.6
	Muslim	57.5	62.5	78.3	57.4	63.6	77.8

We found similar patterns of attitudes at both time points. The first thing to note is that all average scores were above 50, meaning positive sentiment prevailed between all groups. Warmth towards other groups ranged from 57 to 73, but White, Black and Muslim people each expressed significantly more warmth towards their own group than towards either of the others. Black and Muslim respondents showed much stronger warmth towards their own group (close to 80) than did White respondents. One explanation for this is the considerable heterogeneity of the category 'White' as well as its larger size, both of which militate against a uniform attitude.

It is also important again to note that there is not always a strong connection between feeling thermometer scores and discrimination. For example, majority group members have more power and opportunity to discriminate against minority members. Moreover, differences in feelings towards in-groups and outgroups may reflect loyalty or positive group identity not necessarily antipathy towards an outgroup.

6.6 The experience of discrimination of Black people and Muslim people

We asked respondents about their own experience of discrimination on the basis of various characteristics in March/April 2021 (Wave 7). Focusing on the 4 metropolitan areas and including our boost sample of Black and Muslim people, the analyses included 4684 respondents (3803 White, 471 Black, and 410 Muslim respondents, none of whom identified with more than one category (e.g., Black and Muslim)).

We asked: "In the past month, how often has anyone shown prejudice against/treated you unfairly because of each of the following? - your age, your gender, your race or ethnic background, your religion or religious beliefs, any physical or mental health condition, impairment or illness you may have, your sexual orientation, your financial circumstances, your accent (way you speak), the type of work you do, where you live), from 1 = Not in the last month, to 5 = Almost all the time."

Given the short time interval as well as constraints on contact arising from social distancing and other COVID-19 restrictions on behaviour and movement, we expected low rates of self-reported experiences of discrimination overall. Therefore it seemed appropriate to use a high sensitivity threshold of whether respondents had experienced at least one episode of discrimination during the past month, versus no episode. Yet given these circumstances it is surprising and concerning that 56% reported at least one such experience.

Furthermore, we found important and large differences between groups. Amongst White respondents, 52.8% reported at least one experience of discrimination. However, amongst Muslim respondents, 73.4% did so, and amongst Black respondents four fifths (81.0%) did so.

Although respondents had neither expressed negative feelings to different age groups and did not consider either age or gender discrimination to be particularly serious, both age and gender feature in people's direct experiences of discrimination. Amongst White respondents, women were a fifth more likely than men to report having experienced some form of discrimination (62.0% and 50.2%, respectively) and a similar difference also existed amongst Muslim respondents, so that Muslim women reported greater rates of discrimination than Muslim men (77.3% versus 67.1%). Amongst Black respondents, however, percentages were similarly high across gender (Black men: 81.4%, Black women: 80.8%), probably because of a 'ceiling effect'., i.e. little room for further difference.

Younger respondents were more likely to have experienced some form of discrimination during the past month. 78.3% of the 18-24-year-olds reported at least one experience of discrimination, while 65.9% of the 25-44-year-olds and 44.6% of the 45-year-olds and older did so. This age trend was similar amongst Muslim respondents. Amongst Muslim respondents, rates were 80.1% for the 18-24, 71.5% for the 25-44, and 62.5% for the 45-year-olds and older. Amongst Black respondents, differences were smaller and higher overall at 84.3% for the 18-24-year-olds and 84.4% for the 25-44-year-olds, dropping to 70.1% for the 45-year-olds and older.

This effect also added to that of gender and Black/Muslim membership, so that younger Black and Muslim respondents were more likely to report having experienced discrimination, especially if they were also female.[49]

49 These effects were additive, as shown by significant main effects when entered simultaneously in a general linear model, but not interactive. Indeed, no significant interactions between the different characteristics emerged from the statistical analyses.

In sum, this evidence shows that whereas three quarters of Muslim and four fifths of Black respondents reported having experienced discrimination in the past month, a half of White respondents did so. These figures speak for themselves. However, there is also a discrepancy with other evidence that respondents in general expressed more favourable attitudes towards Black people than towards Muslim people and regarded discrimination based on race as being more serious than discrimination based on religious affiliation.

A further important insight is that discrimination towards Muslim or Black people is not necessarily directed only at their religion or ethnicity. There is an accumulator effect of different personal characteristics whereby individuals with more key characteristics are more likely to be subjected to discrimination. This echoes recent findings on the role of intersectionality,[50] and is demonstrated by our evidence that it is younger Muslim women and younger Black women who most frequently reported experiencing discrimination.

6.7 Intergroup contact between Black, Muslim, and White people

Lastly, we investigated intergroup contact between Black, Muslim, and White people. It has been long proposed in social psychology that contact between members of different groups (under certain conditions) can work to reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict.[51]

In March/April 2021 (Wave 7), we assessed the quality and quantity of contact between Black, Muslim, and White respondents. To conserve space in the surveys, respondents were randomly allocated to answer a set of questions regarding one specific group (other groups such as young people, older people, people with a disability, and migrants to the UK, were also considered). The random allocation was implemented whist ensuring that no Black or Muslim respondent was asked about their own group. Black and Muslim respondents were additionally asked about their contact with White people.

Researchers have highlighted the importance of both *quality* and *quantity* of intergroup contact.[52] Quality is most often measured by assessing how "friendly" or "positive" the contact with members of another group is, while quantity is assessed by measuring how many people from the other group ('outgroup') the person knows, at least as acquaintances. We used those very questions in our research. Quality was assessed with two items and scores ranged from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Quantity was assessed with a single item asking how many people from the outgroup the respondent knew, from 0 = No acquaintances to 10 = 10 or more acquaintances. Results are reported in Table 4.

50 Weldon, S. 2008. 'Intersectionality'. In G. Goertz & A. Mazur (eds.), *Politics, Gender, and Concepts: Theory and Methodology* (pp. 193-218). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511755910.009.

51 Allport, G. W. 1954. *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge/Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

52 Hässler, T., Ullrich, J., & Ugarte, L.M. et al. 2020. 'A large-scale test of the link between intergroup contact and support for social change'. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4, 380–386. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0815-z.

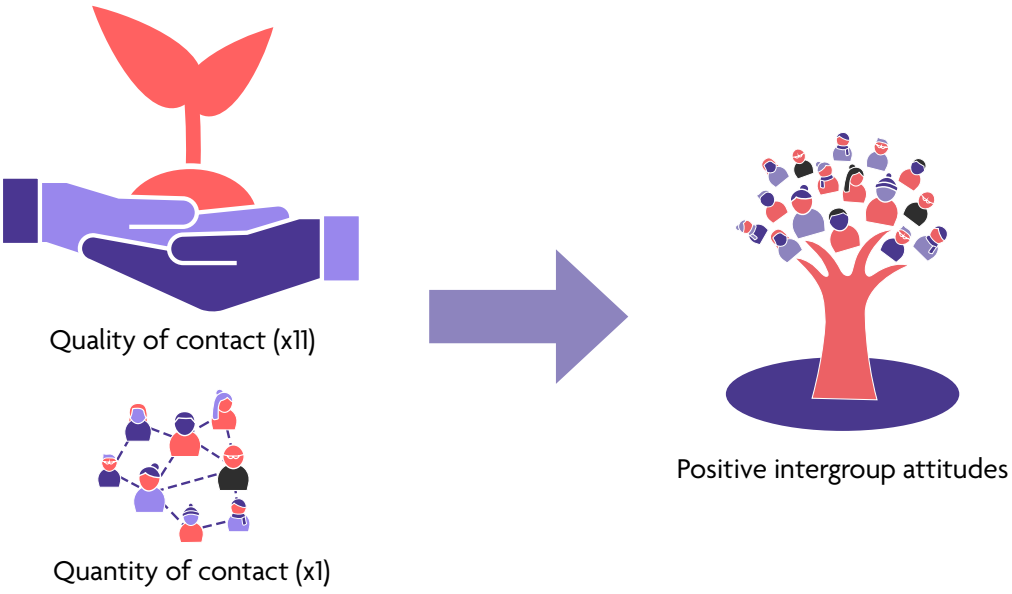
Table 4. Mean scores of quality and quantity of contact with outgroup members who are Black , Muslim, or White people.

Outgroup contact with...	Quality of contact (1-5)	Quantity of contact (0-10)
Black people	4.03	5.13
Muslim people	3.89	4.31
White people	3.83	8.19

Overall, respondents mostly assessed intergroup contact as positive, with mean scores around 3.9 to 4 on the 5-point scale. Quality of non-Black people's contact with Black people and non-Muslim people's contact with Muslim people was similar, whereas quality of non-White people's contact with White people was slightly less positive. Non-Black respondents reported knowing a greater number of Black people (5.13 on average) than non-Muslims did of Muslim people (4.31). As could be expected merely due to their larger number in the country, Black and Muslim respondents reported knowing a larger number of White people (8.19).

In line with previous national and international findings on the positive effect of intergroup contact, people who reported higher quality and quantity of contact with a particular outgroup also expressed more positive attitudes towards the group -- a causal relationship that is quite well established in the research literature -- with respect to both Black people and Muslim people. In the cases of attitudes both towards Black people and towards Muslims, the intergroup contact of others with members of those groups explained around 36% of the variance in positive attitudes towards the group. Quality of contact played a much bigger role than quantity of contact (with standardised coefficients 11 times as large).

The similarity of mechanisms is noteworthy: respondents' friendly and positive contact with Black or with Muslim people is associated with more positive attitude towards those groups. To a lesser extent it is also the case that a greater amount of contact is associated with positive attitudes. A first implication of the findings, coinciding with much of the intergroup contact literature, is that positive intergroup contact should be encouraged in order to foster more positive intergroup attitudes, and that it is particularly important to ensure that the contact is friendly and positive.



However, our data also point to there being other reasons for differences between people's attitudes towards Black and towards Muslim people. The quality and quantity of contact with members of these two groups can explain a difference of 2.3 points on the 100-point feeling thermometer. But we observed on average a difference of 6.5 points. Aside from the effects of contact, it seems plausible that the more negative attitudes towards Muslim people might reflect the greater salience of Black Lives Matter, or possibly the perception of greater threat from Muslim people, given that threat and contact may iteratively affect one another.[53]

Has the pandemic resulted in changes in levels of discrimination against Black and Muslim people? Given the levels of intergroup tension following Brexit toward the end of 2019 we think there was likely to have been a reduction in most forms of conflict and prejudice, and that this would have been sustained by the early phases of the pandemic. However, it remains clear that Black and Muslim people continue to experience substantial levels of discrimination and that these risks are higher for younger people and for women. It is quite possible that these levels, and intergroup tensions more generally, will increase further as the UK enters the choppier economic waters arising from both complications of Brexit and the costs of tackling the health burdens posed by the pandemic. In any event, there is still quite some way to go to create a society that achieves equality of treatment and inclusion across ethnicity, religion and other protected characteristics.

53 Abrams, D., & Eller, A.D. 2017. 'A temporally integrated model of intergroup contact and threat (TIMCAT)'. In L. Vezzali and S. Stathi, (eds), *Intergroup contact theory: Recent developments and future directions*. London: Routledge, pp. 72-91.

7. Identity and Belonging

7.1 Identification with place, region, nation and Britishness

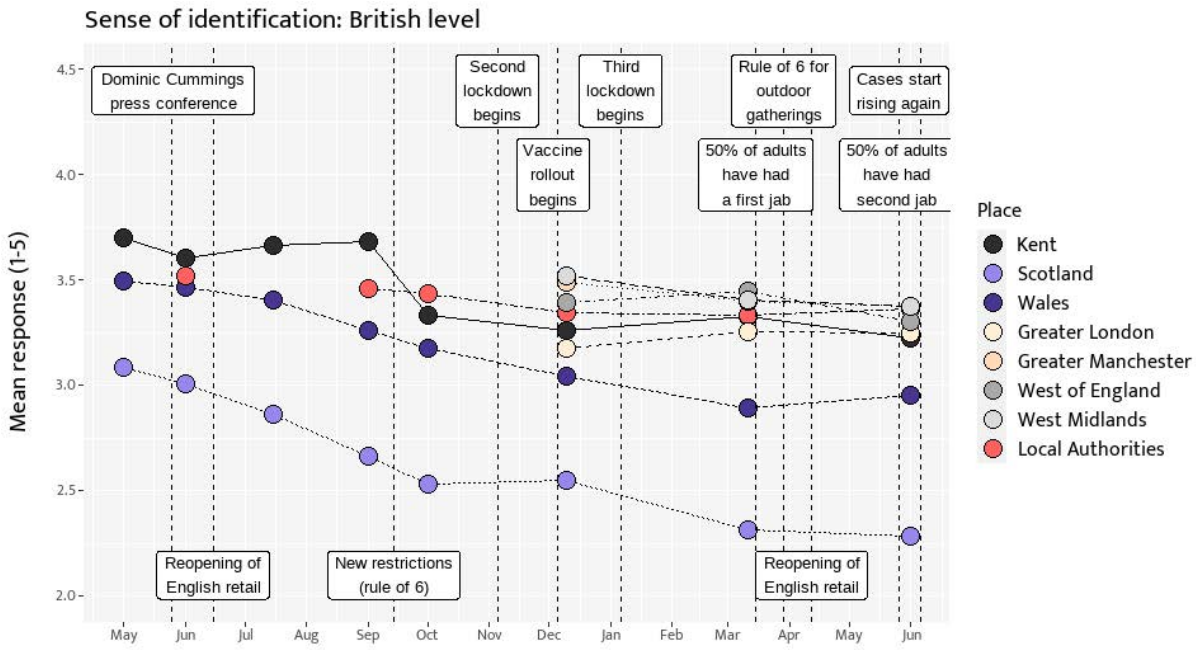
The places people identify with play a large part in how much they are motivated to maintain and improve that place. Conversely, a place that is unable to provide a sense of shared ownership, attributes or traditions to be proud of is unlikely to be one that offers people a positive sense of identity. Therefore, identification can be regarded as a fuel cell for social and emotional investment in a place; the sense of belonging and value that make the lives and fate of others who share that identity close to one's heart. However, such identities can also readily be mobilised as forces of opposition and rivalry with other groups. It is vital to understand whether strength of identity with different groups is likely to be supporting or hindering other aspects of cohesion.

We measured place-based identity, that is, how much respondents "feel personally connected" and "feel like they belong" to different places. We considered identity at the British level (i.e. feeling connected to the UK), home nation level (feeling connected to England, Scotland or Wales), and local level (feeling connected to the local area). Measures of British and home nation identity were included in each wave of data collection, and the measure of local identity was included from September 2020 onwards. Figures 11, 12 and 13 show the changes in identity at these different levels across the different places.

First, the strength of **British identity** is highly dependent on respondents' country: respondents from England express higher British identity than respondents from Wales, and respondents from Scotland express the lowest British identity of all. In Scotland and Wales, identification as British followed a downward trend throughout the entire period of data collection. In May and June 2020, Scottish respondents expressed moderate British identity (very close to the midpoint of the scale, i.e. 3). In June 2021, this had weakened substantially (average of 2.29). The trend was the same for Welsh respondents although starting at a higher level, identification as British reduced from moderately strong in May 2020 (average of 3.49) to moderate in June 2021 (average of 2.96).

Within England, there were also some differences between places, although these reduced through time. Data from Kent revealed a drop in the strength of British identity in the autumn (from September to October 2020) which stabilised throughout 2021. Important differences, notably between the West Midlands who in December 2020 expressed the highest level of British identity (average of 3.52) and Greater London who expressed the lowest (average of 3.18), reduced markedly in the following periods so that by June 2021 all the levels of British identification in all English places were between 3.22 and 3.40.

Figure 10. Sense of British identity from May 2020 to June 2021.



Turning to **home nation** (that is, at the English / Scottish / Welsh level), the picture is quite different. First, respondents from Scotland and Wales identify more strongly with their country (scores averaging higher than 4 out of 5) than as British. These national identities were particularly strong during the summer of 2020 and then reduced to lower (albeit still quite positive) levels in October 2020. From then onwards, levels of Scottish identification remained stable with just a small decrease, and by June 2021 the average level of identification with Scotland was 3.45. Meanwhile, in Wales, people's identification with Wales continued to decrease throughout the year, with an average score of 3.16 in June 2021.

Within the English samples, and in contrast with those in Scotland and Wales, levels of national (English) and British identity were very much aligned, suggesting that respondents felt just as much British as English. Data on English identification in Kent, covering the entire time period, showed a similar drop in levels in October 2020 (although of a lesser magnitude) as were observed for national identities in Scotland and Wales. After October 2020 English identification remained fairly stable.

Levels of English identity in different English places quite closely followed the pattern of British identity, although differences were more marked. Identification as English was strongest in the West Midlands (and was as strong as Scottish identity for Scottish respondents from December 2020 onwards), followed by Greater Manchester and the West of England. Perhaps reflecting its greater ethnic and cultural diversity, respondents from Greater London expressed the lowest levels of identification with England with scores just above the scale midpoint (i.e. moderate sense of identity at best).

Figure 11. Sense of regional identity from May 2020 to June 2021.

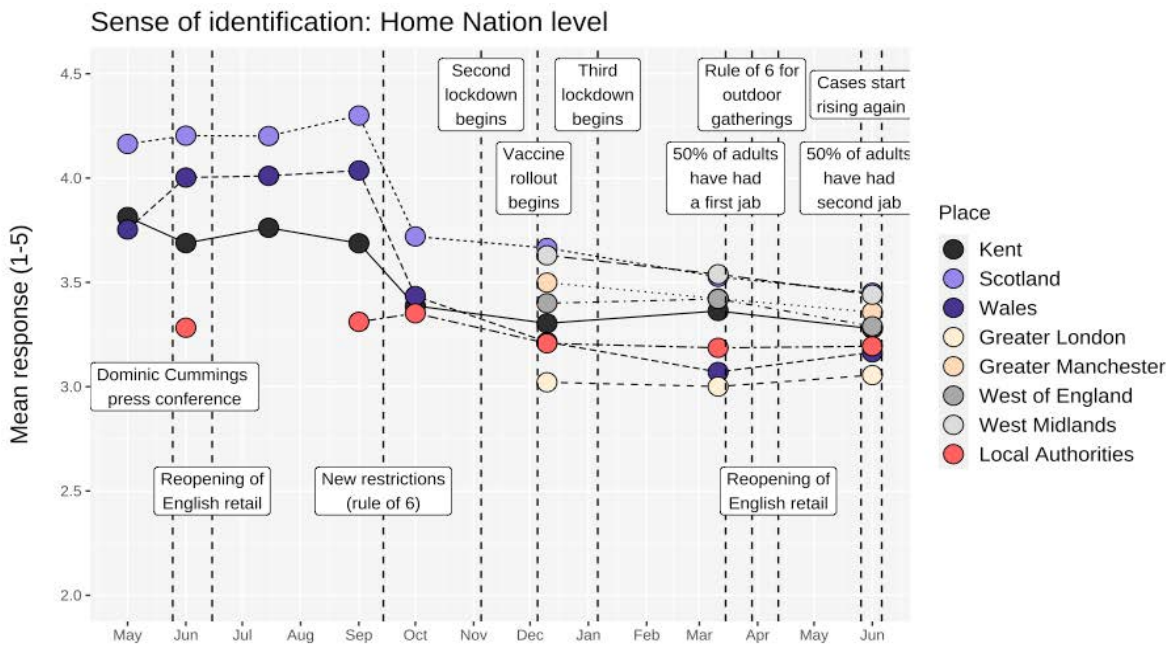
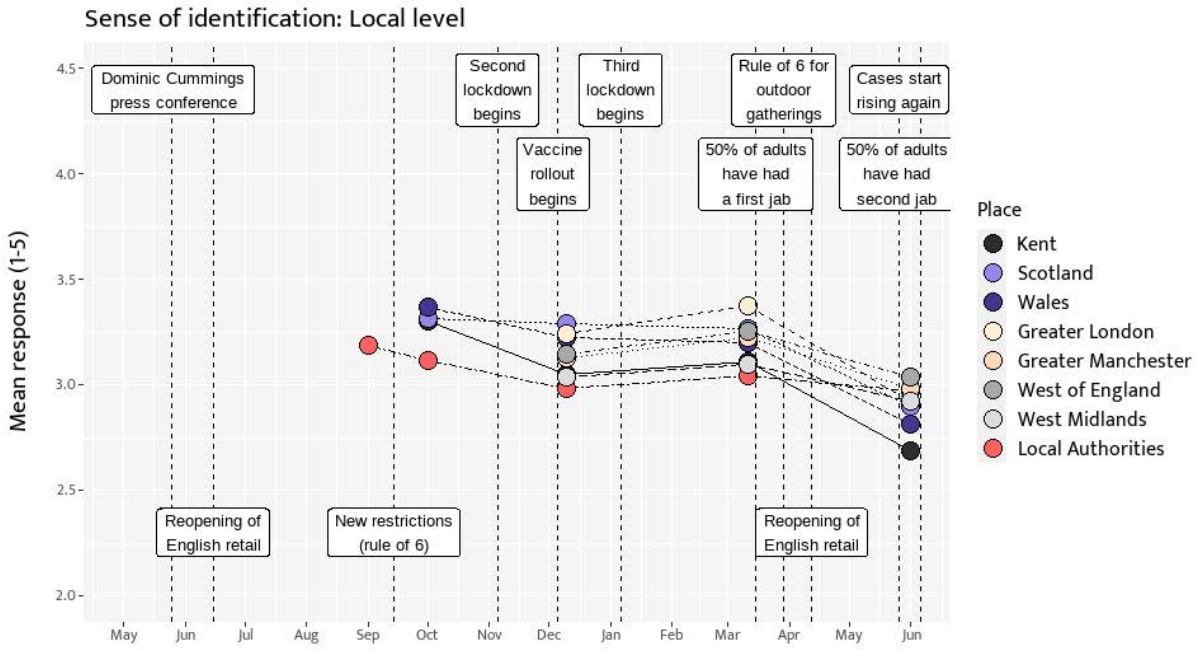


Figure 13 shows the strength of identification with people's local area. Here, a couple of things are quite noticeable. One is that within the 6 local authority areas levels of local identity remain quite consistent between September 2020 and June 2021. This suggests that factors that created meaningful bonds and links within those places (which we contend had preceded the pandemic) continued to sustain a motivational hold. In other places there tended to be a gradual reduction in levels of identification with the local area, most evident in Wales and in Kent. This might suggest that a possible (but not measured) boost in localism that emerged following the first lockdown in 2020 gradually diminished as more people returned to work (away from home), travelled and turned their attention outwards.

Figure 12. Sense of local identity from September 2020 to June 2021.



7.2 Sense of neighbourliness

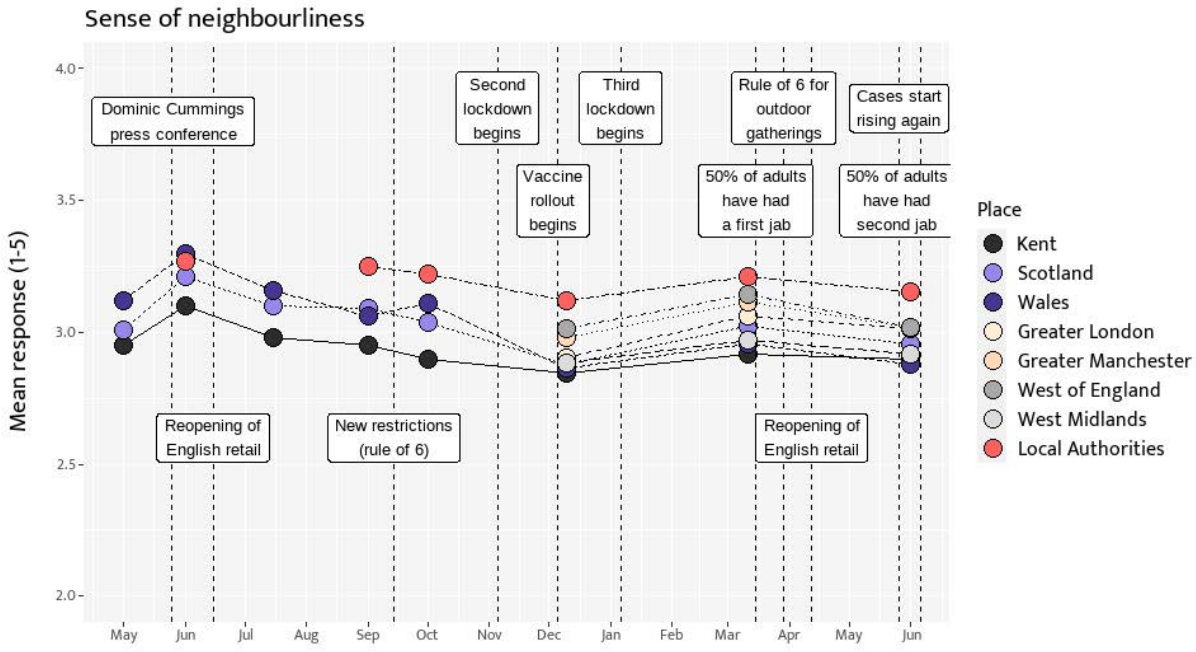
Neighbourliness, or the sense of good relations in one's local area, is another important aspect of social cohesion. We asked participants how much they feel they belong in their neighbourhood, how much they trust people in their neighbourhood, and how much they feel a personal responsibility to try to improve their neighbourhood. Results are shown in Figure 10.

Overall, most respondents reported average to high levels of neighbourliness, with variations across places. In general, neighbourliness peaked in June 2020 before decreasing in the autumn and winter of 2020 – probably as a result of the return of cold weather and the difficulty of continuing to organise neighbourly activities outside. It then increased again in the spring 2021 before declining again in June 2021.

These changes were not the same across places. For example, the West of England and Greater Manchester showed the most marked increase then decrease from December 2020 to June 2021, while neither the West Midlands or Kent showed variation across this period.

In addition, sense of neighbourliness remained consistently high in the local authority areas, with only a small decrease in December 2020 which then picked up again. By the time of our most recent data collection (June 2021), the six local authorities areas had sustained with a clearly higher sense of neighbourliness than other places, which had converged around a moderate sense of neighbourliness (close to the scale midpoint).

Figure 13. Average sense of neighbourliness from May 2020 to June 2021.



Interviewees and focus groups were on the whole extremely positive about the impact that the pandemic had had on their sense of neighbourliness and their relationships with their neighbours. Participants described speaking more to their neighbours, having longer, more meaningful interactions and speaking to neighbours they had not spoken to before.

Reasons given for this included the fact they had more time, were at home more and had fewer things to do. However, comments also implied a strong desire to 'look out for one another' and to seek togetherness in a very difficult time. Acts of informal volunteering (e.g. shopping for one another) were frequently referred to, as was the Thursday night 'clap for carers', which clearly served as an important communal moment for many.

> *"And I know my neighbours better than I did 18 months ago, which is good, because they're nice people. But everyone, unless your life is different - everyone's always busy. You know, everyone's working just to pay the bill. So, you don't have time to just lean on the, on the shovel in the garden and lean over the fence and chat for half an hour because there's always something else to do. The last year or so there hasn't been anything else to do."*
>
> [Regional area interview participant, August 2020]

> *"Because before that, you wouldn't even know who your neighbour was. And now, you know, you're checking in on your neighbours, and you're seeing if they're okay, especially the elderly ones. Just to see if everyone is okay, if they need anything. So, there's a bit more community togetherness, I think."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, May 2021]

It is notable that these descriptions of enhanced neighbourliness are most often about the periods of strictest lockdown. This may explain the rise in people's sense of neighbourliness up to June 2020 and from December 2020 to March 2021 that we can see in the survey responses.

8. Active Social Engagement

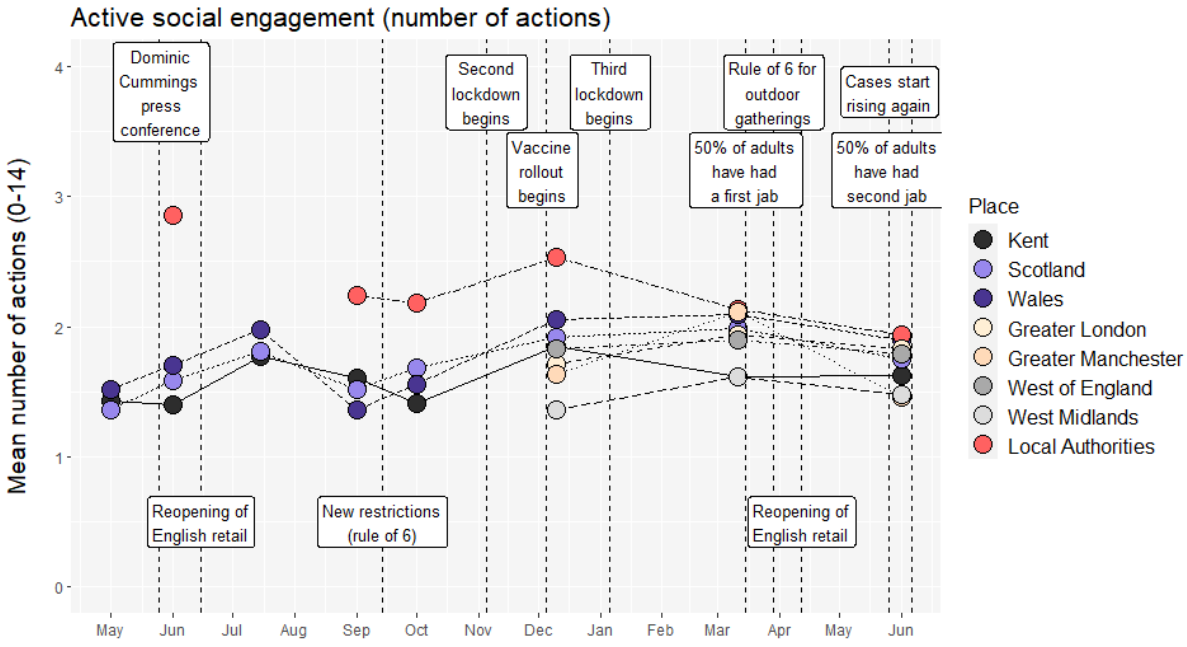
8.1 Active social engagement

The final indicator of social cohesion we considered is engagement in social actions, that is, how much people participate and engage in actions aiming to improve the conditions of their local area and society in general (e.g., engaging in a local campaign online, signing a petition, volunteering, donating to a cause). As such active social engagement is very beneficial in supporting social cohesion and trust in others in particular, and can be a key indicator of people's connection and belonging to a community, whether that is a neighbourhood and / or a group of people. Figure 14 below shows the average number of different types of action people reported engaging in.

One of the most striking results from The Social Cohesion Investment report was that, in June, respondents from the local authority areas were much more likely to engage in such activities than respondents from other places. As illustrated in Figure 14, this finding persisted. The local authority areas maintained substantially higher levels of active social engagement than other areas in September, October and December. Across this period, people's most common forms of active social engagement were signing a petition, supporting a social media campaign, boycotting specific products, making a donation, and volunteering.

However, active social engagement seemed to drop from December 2020 onwards in the six local authorities. Descriptively, they still reported the highest active social engagement of all places surveyed, but with a much smaller gap. In March and June 2021, for example, active social engagement there was fairly similar to that observed amongst respondents from Greater Manchester or Wales.

Figure 14. Active social engagement (number of actions respondents said they have done during the past month) from May 2020 to June 2021.



Closer inspection of the sorts of actions people engaged in revealed different patterns. We looked specifically into "signing a petition" and "volunteering" which were amongst the most common forms of social engagement reported. Petition signing is a relatively low-cost action and is often considered as a political, non-institutionalised form of social action, aiming to influence the government or some authorities in a given direction. Volunteering, on the other hand, is a high-cost action requiring one to devote their time and resources for a cause (i.e. a "helping" action). Volunteering then is perhaps a stronger indicator of local cohesion. Here we have combined our measures to include both formal volunteering (i.e. through an official charity or organisation) and informal volunteering (i.e. personally or through an informal organisation such as mutual aid group).

Figure 15 shows that the percentage of respondents from the 6 local authorities who signed a petition decreased slightly throughout 2021, whereas percentages of respondents from other places tended to increase. In contrast, the percentage of respondents from the 6 local authorities who volunteered remained quite stable and significantly higher than that of any other places surveyed (see Figure 16). In June 2020 23% of Local Authority and only 8% of respondents from Kent, Wales and Scotland were volunteering. In June 2021 both had reduced, but the level was still more than twice as high in the Local Authorities (17.4% and 5%, respectively). Similarly, the levels in Metropolitan areas were lower in June 2021 (7%). Hence, it seems that the drop in the overall number of actions reported is mostly due to a reduction of smaller, low-cost, social actions, whereas engagement in high-cost interpersonal actions such as volunteering persisted.

Figure 15. Percentage of respondents who reported signing a petition during the past month from May 2020 to July 2021.

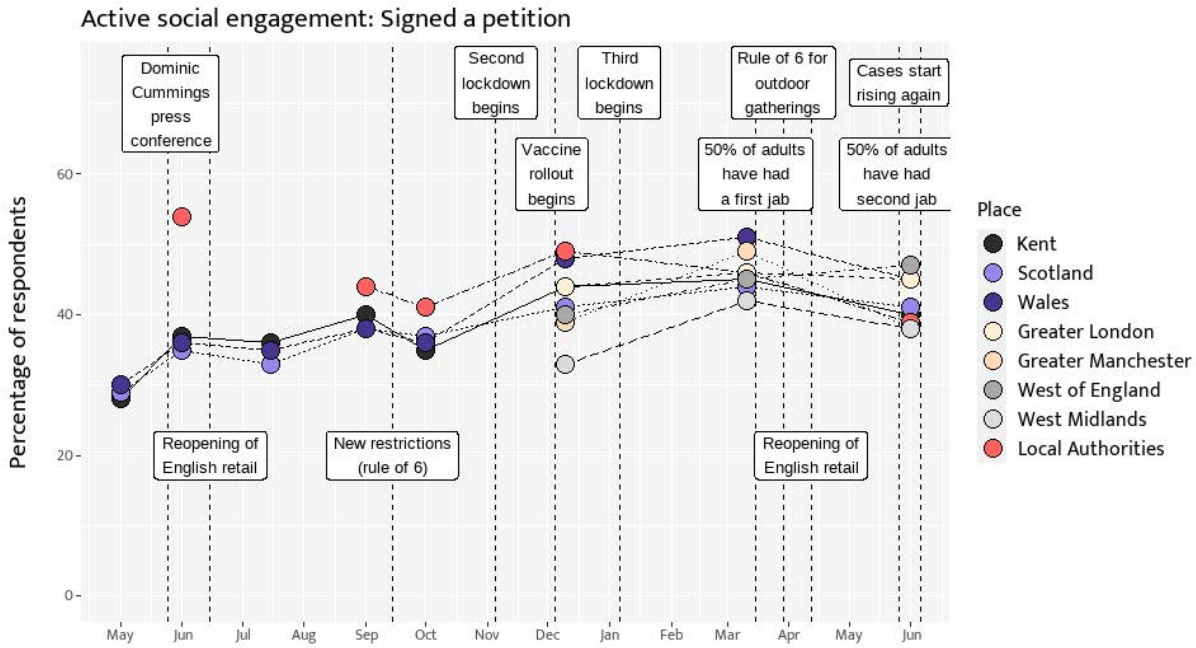
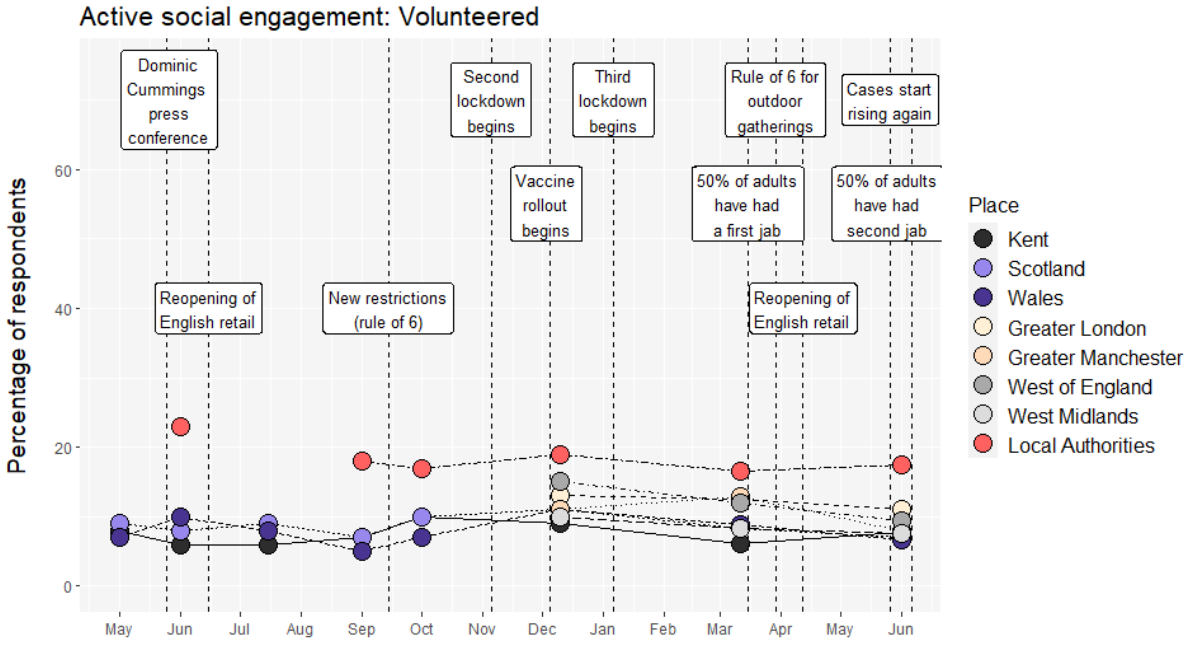


Figure 16. Percentage of respondents who reported volunteering during the past month from May 2020 to July 2021.



8.2 Active social engagement and trust

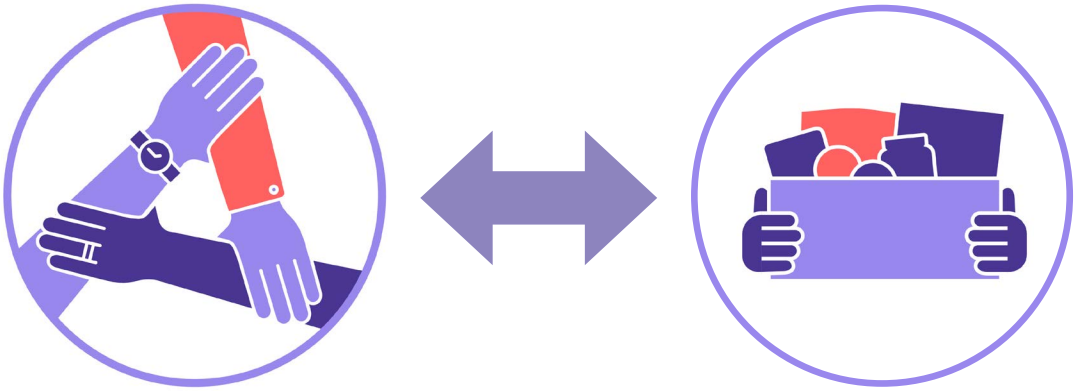
From a social cohesion perspective, active social engagement is very beneficial for the community and should be encouraged. However, given the voluntary nature of this behaviour, it might be difficult to know exactly how to facilitate its emergence. A potential vehicle is by building trust because people are more likely to collaborate and work together when they trust each other, and the system in which they interact.

We therefore examined the connection between active social engagement and political trust, based on the idea that people who feel greater trust in the authorities (who, amongst other things, can be perceived as responsible for organising the basic aspects of collaboration in society) would be more inclined to commit to active social engagement.

We distinguished between local political trust and national political trust (see "General political trust at the UK-wide and local level" and Figure 1 above) and tested the relationship between both of these and an aggregated index of "volunteering" and "donating" to represent positive forms of social engagement.

We examined these connections at two time points: **Wave 2** (June 2020) and **Wave 7** (March/April 2021). These were chosen because they were roughly one year apart and were comparable in terms of the general social situation as both happened during a period of national lockdown. Analyses at Wave 2 included 3791 respondents, analyses at Wave 7 included 8988 respondents. In all analyses we controlled for respondents' age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, subjective social status and political orientation.

We found that higher levels of local political trust were significantly and reliably associated with greater rates of positive social engagement, at both time points. That is, people who report higher trust in their local government are also more likely to have volunteered or made a donation during the past month. There was a similar albeit smaller relationship between helping behaviour (that is, volunteering and donating) and national political trust.[54]



Political Trust

Social Engagement

8.3 The experience of volunteers

Research suggests that volunteering has a positive impact not only for society but also for the volunteer since it provides opportunities for fulfilling experiences, inter-group contact, and a rich and supportive social network. We investigated the effect of being a volunteer during the year 2020 and compared the perceptions of volunteers versus non-volunteers. By volunteering, we refer to both formal (e.g. food banks) and informal volunteering (based on informal relationships with non-constituted organisations, such as Mutual Aid).

54 Specifically, we ran a Generalised Linear Model (Negative binomial distribution with log link) testing the effect of local political trust and national political trust (both continuous), age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, subjective social status and political orientation, on the summed score of whether respondents (1) had volunteered and (2) had helped during the past month (i.e., scores of 0 vs. 1 vs. 2). At Wave 2, the analysis yielded a significant and positive effect of *local* political trust, Wald's $\chi 2(1) = 15.74$, $p < .001$, while the effect of *national* political trust was not significant, Wald's $\chi 2(1) = 3.28$, $p = .070$. At Wave 7, both forms of trust had a similar positive effect on helping behaviour; local trust: Wald's $\chi 2(1) = 11.85$, $p = .001$; national trust: Wald's $\chi 2(1) = 13.95$, $p < .001$.

Summary of Previous Findings Comparing Volunteers and Non-Volunteers in this Survey Series

In our previous report we presented results from two waves of data collection: June 2020 and December 2020. We then found that volunteers reported more positive experiences than non-volunteers on all of the measures we considered. At both time points (June and December), volunteers reported greater connection with their family and friends, greater general political trust, and were less likely to perceive their local area as deprived. They also expressed greater trust in other people to respect COVID-19 restrictions and had a greater sense of neighbourliness. Finally, volunteers reported greater optimism for the future and higher subjective well-being.

Figure 17. Differences between Volunteers and Non-Volunteers in June (top) and December 2020 (bottom).

New findings

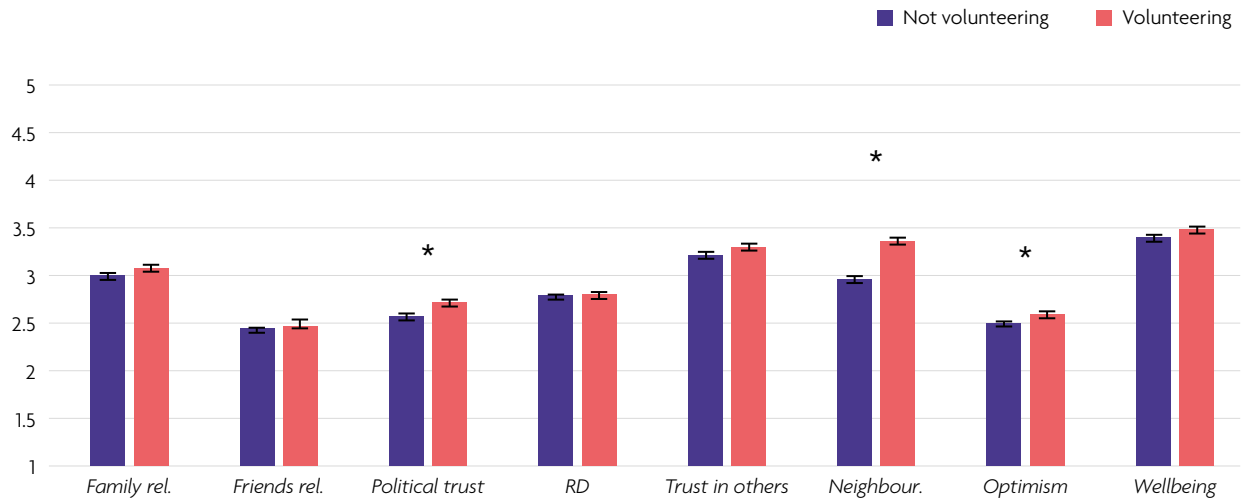
We tested again for differences between the experience of volunteers and non-volunteers in June 2021.

In June 2021 our samples included 964 volunteers and 6,937 non-volunteers. Demographic comparisons showed that volunteers are more likely to be female, to report higher income, higher levels of education, and higher subjective socioeconomic status. Age, ethnicity, and religious affiliation were not related to volunteering. The comparisons below were adjusted for differences in demographics, which means we are confident that any differences cannot be attributed to underlying demographic differences.[55] Results are illustrated in Figure 17.

Some of the differences we had observed in June and December 2020 had disappeared by June 2021. Notably, volunteers were no longer more likely than non-volunteers to report greater connection with their family nor with their friends; they were also just as likely to perceive their local area as deprived. They expressed a similar level of trust in other people to respect COVID-19 restrictions and similar levels of subjective well-being as non-volunteers.

However, some of the differences persisted. Volunteers continued to express greater general political trust, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future, than non-volunteers.

Figure 18. Differences between Volunteers and Non-Volunteers in June 2021



Note. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. Asterisks represent significant differences between volunteers and non-volunteers.

55 All differences described below were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

In sum, the findings suggested that the advantages of being a volunteer are that it supports deeper, more sustainable psychological resilience in a time of crisis and that a higher level of volunteering contributes to a more cohesive and resilient local area - as seen in consistent results from June to December. The most recent findings suggest that non-volunteers began to "catch-up" as the worst of the crisis faded, and understandably this seems to involve achieving greater connection with close others as restrictions on social distancing reduced. Nonetheless, volunteers maintain a more positive form of engagement with others in society in general, as shown in sustained political trust and greater sense of neighbourliness.

These findings were echoed in the comments of interviewees and focus groups participants. Those involved in volunteering, community groups or social action talked of how this had given them a sense of connection with others, a sense of purpose, or just 'a reason to get out' that had been extremely important for them over the course of the pandemic. Furthermore, when participants talked about the collective voluntary effort that had taken place in their communities, a recurring theme in these discussions was the sense of pride in place and pride in their community that taking part in or witnessing this effort had given them.

> *"Yeah, I've been helping out at a food bank over the last few months. And I've met lots of new people there that I didn't know before. [...] So we've become quite friendly now. So that's really nice. And we get to see the same homeless people every week and talk to them. So that's been really good, making me feel more positive about contributing in some way to helping out people."*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

> *"I mean, the community people are doing really well in terms of food parcels and things. I helped one of our charities the other day deliver some food, and they've been getting a lot of people donate food, which is really good. And we've seen that community gathering together. "*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, September 2020]

9. The Social Cohesion Investment

A unique feature of this research 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 allows for direct comparison across places.

9.1 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,[56] Bradford,[57] Peterborough,[58] Walsall[59] and Waltham Forest.[60] 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.

56 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

57 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

58 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

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

60 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

9.2 Assessing social cohesion

We now return to some of the measures reported earlier and draw on validated models of social cohesion in the social sciences literature to determine the most relevant indicators of social cohesion.[61] 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:

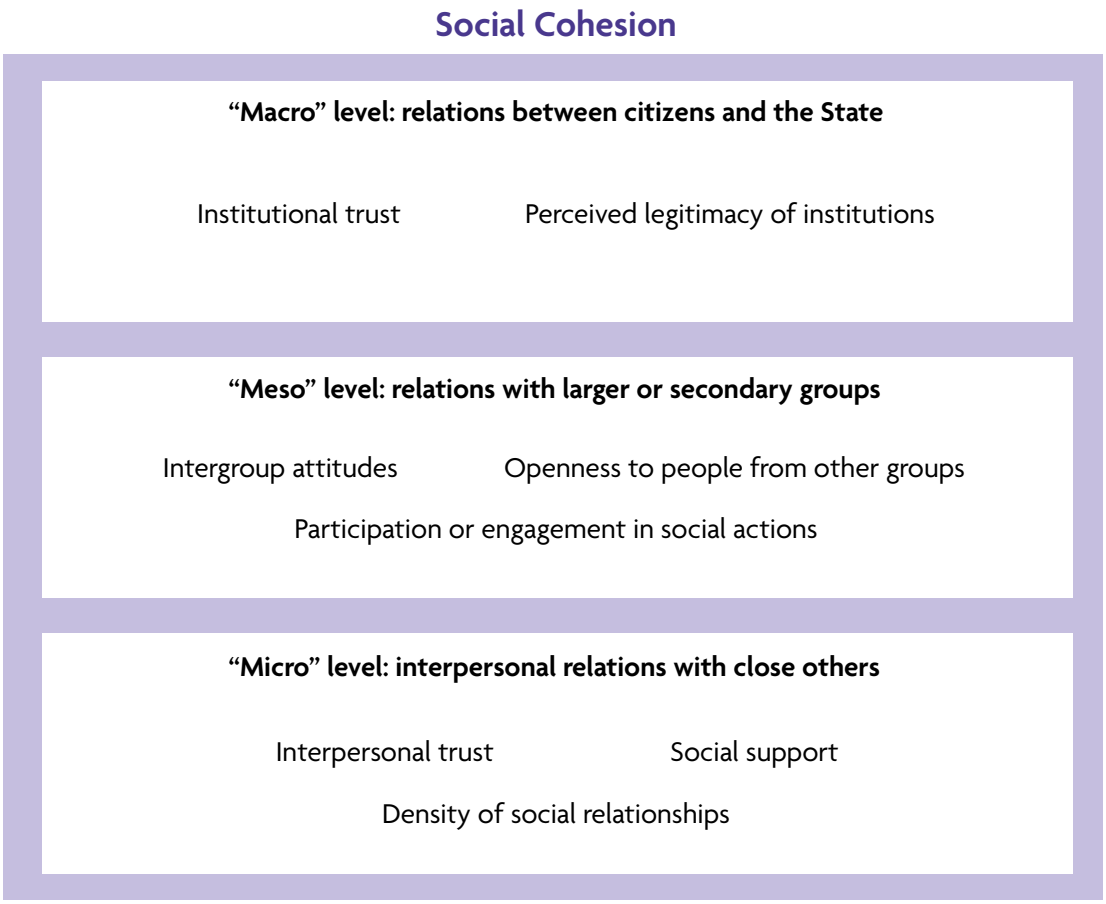
Relations between the individual and the state

1) Trust in the government
2) Perception of governmental restrictions and decisions as appropriate
3) Active social engagement (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 (the quality and quantity of social connections with friends, family and neighbours)

61 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.



In all analyses 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.

9.3 Summary of previous findings on social cohesion investment in this survey series

In our previous report The Social Cohesion Investment, we used data from the June 2020 survey and explored 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.

Relations with the state

Overall, average political trust and trust in local MPs did not differ between the local authority areas with investment in social cohesion and those without. 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 as more appropriate (8% higher on average)
- were more supportive of the decision to reopen schools in England on 1st June (8% higher)

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 migrants to the UK (attitudes expressed towards legal and illegal migrants, 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).

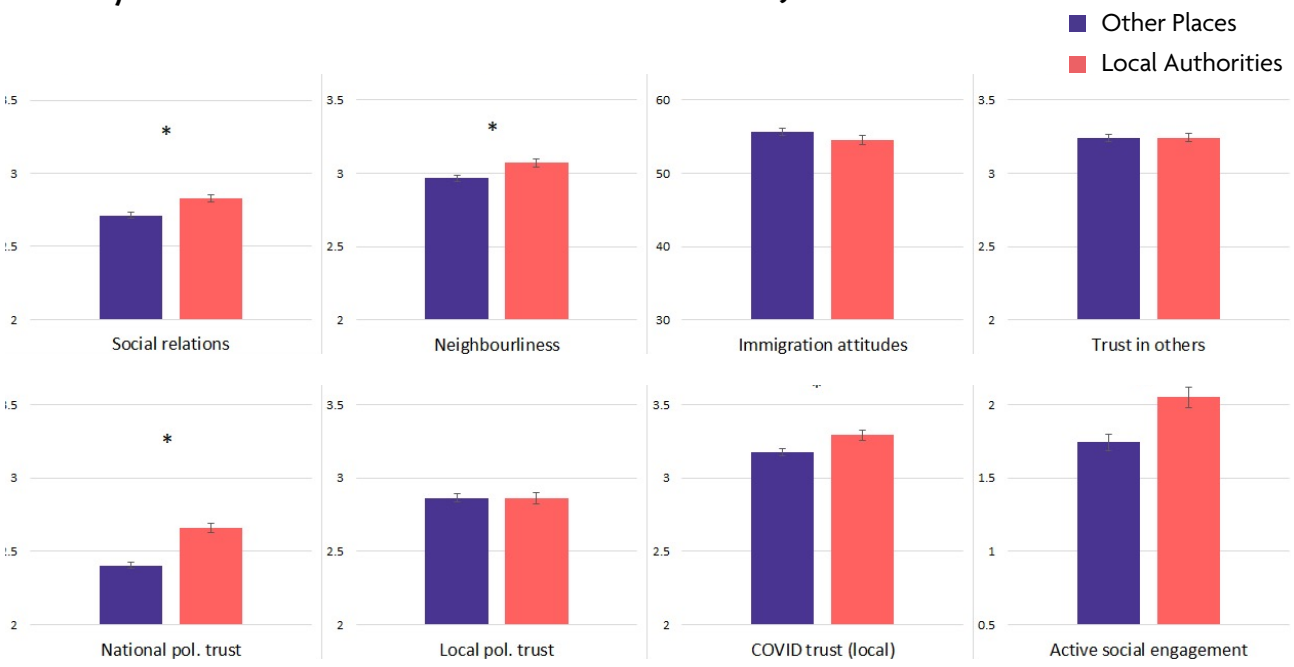
9.4 New findings

For consistency of comparison we examined data from the June 2021 survey to conduct a further test of whether respondents from the 6 Local Authorities reported a higher sense of social cohesion than respondents coming from places with no specific local integration programme in place (that is, Wales, Scotland, and the county of Kent).

In June 2021 we had access to 1184 respondents from the local authorities, and 1815 respondents from the three "control" regions (hereafter, "other places"). Results are illustrated in Figure 18.

Relations with other people: respondents from the 6 Local Authorities continued to report closer social relations with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours (+18.8%), as well as a stronger sense of neighbourliness overall (+3.6%), than respondents from other places. On the other hand, there were no differences in their attitudes towards migrants to the UK, nor in their trust in other people to respect COVID-19 restrictions. The latter seems to be due to other places catching up and reporting increased trust in other people through time, whereas trust expressed by respondents from the Local Authorities did not vary much throughout the year (see Figure 5).

Figure 19. Differences in indices of social cohesion (top: Relations with other people; bottom: Relations with the State) between the 6 Local Authorities and 3 Other Places in June 2021.



Notes. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. Asterisks represent significant differences between Local Authorities and Other Places.

Relations with the State: results showed that respondents from the 6 Local Authorities expressed higher national political trust (i.e., in the UK government) than respondents from other places (+10.3%). In contrast, they had a similar level of trust in their local government, although they were slightly more positive towards their local government's response to COVID-19, specifically (+3.7%). Strikingly, respondents from the 6 Local Authorities reported much more active social engagement (i.e. having engaged in actions such as volunteering, donating, signing petitions, etc.; +17.4%) - a finding that had already emerged from our analyses on previous data.

This more positive perception of handling of the pandemic by the local government was also apparent through a different lens described in our previous report Public Perceptions of UK and Local Government Communication about COVID-19.

9.5 Summary of previous findings on public perceptions of government communications

Our research in June 2021 examined whether over 9000 respondents from across the UK found communication about COVID-19 honest and credible, empathic, clear, accessible, and whether it met the needs of their community. We focused on perceptions of local government and UK government and the results indicate that both may need to do more to be able to effectively influence public behaviour as restrictions have lifted and during this third wave of COVID-19.

We found that UK government communication was perceived as fairly clear and as highly accessible, but also as lacking honesty and credibility, lacking empathy, and as not meeting the community's needs. By contrast, local government communication was perceived more positively.

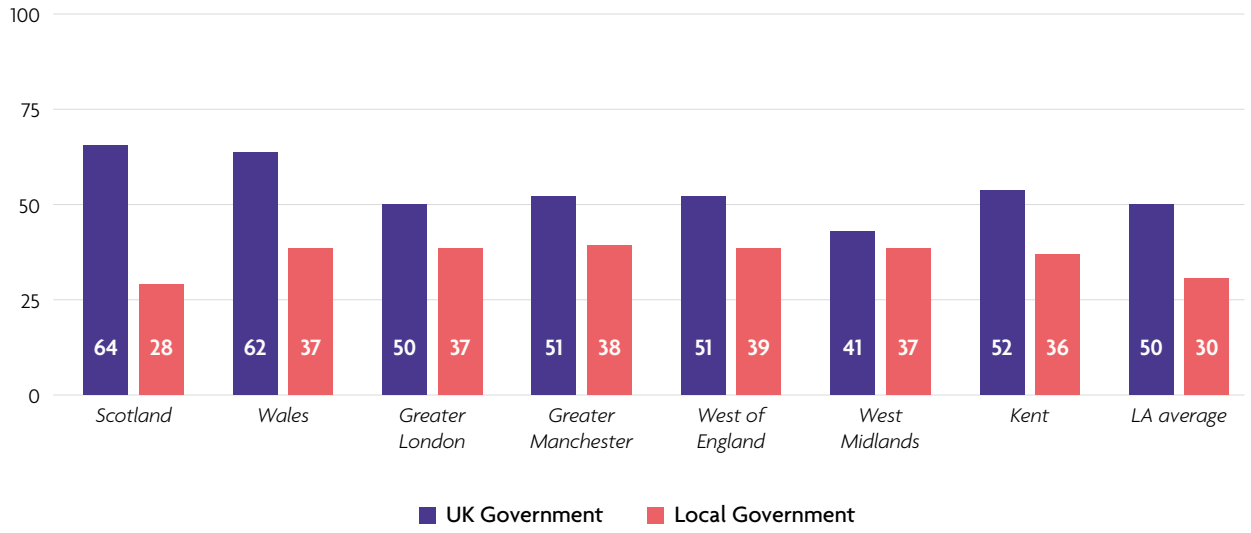
We also observed differences between places. Respondents in Wales, Scotland, Greater London, Greater Manchester and the West of England viewed local government communications more positively than national government communication. However, respondents in the West Midlands and, on some measures, those in Kent reported much less difference between the two.

Respondents from the 6 Local Authorities showed a similar perception of communication by the UK government to that of other English localities. However, they rated communication by their local government very positively.

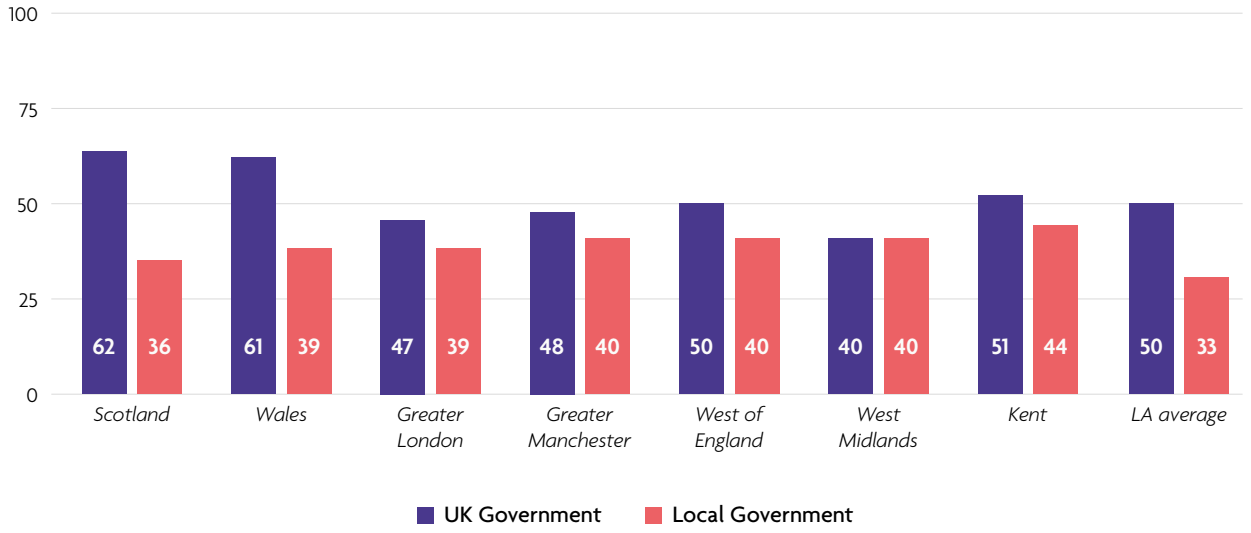
Together with those in Scotland, respondents from the 6 Local Authorities were the most positive about their local government communication. This positive view led them to show the greatest difference between UK and local government of all the English areas surveyed.

The figures below show the percentage of respondents within each place (sample) who regarded the communication quality as low (scoring 1 or 2 on the scale).

Communication lacked honesty and credibility (% respondents)



Communication lacked empathy



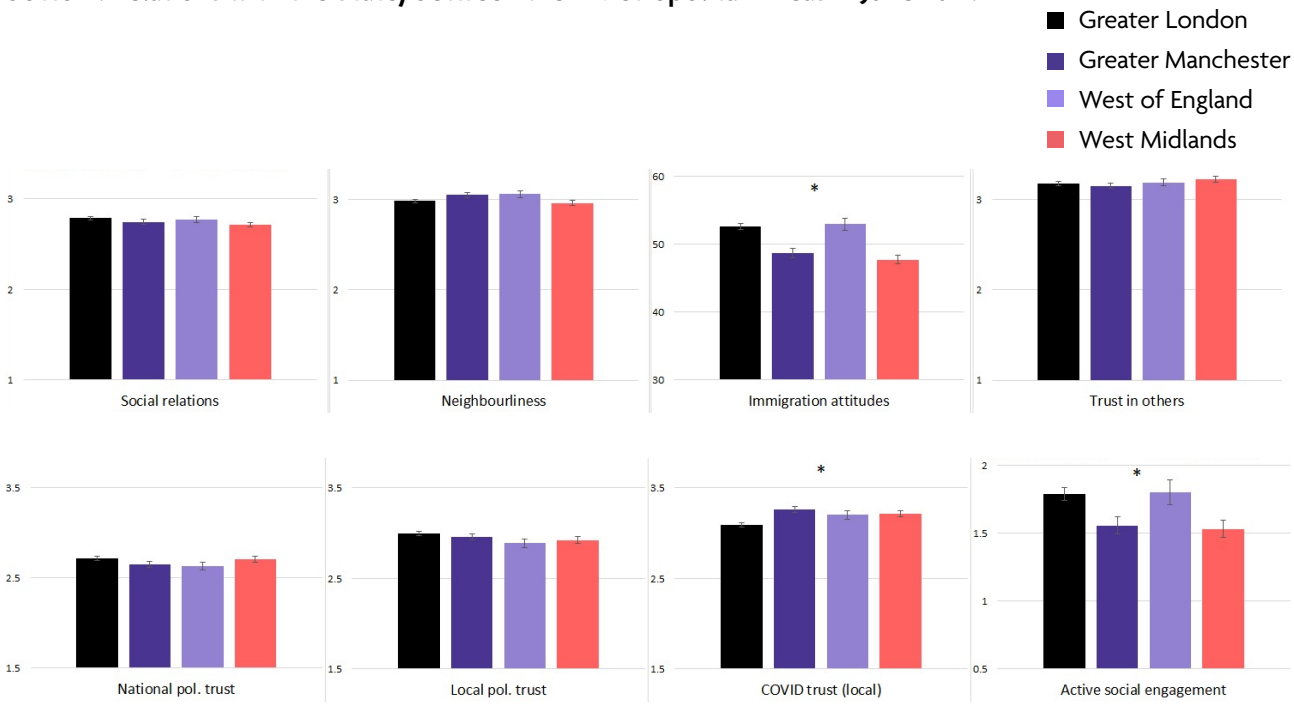
9.6 Comparison between the four metropolitan areas

We also used data from the June 2021 survey to investigate differences in the indicators of social cohesion between the four metropolitan areas. We had access to 4780 respondents (Greater London: 2039, Greater Manchester: 1143, the West Midlands: 1052, and the West of England: 546). Results are illustrated in Figure 20.

Overall, we found more similarities than differences between the 4 metropolitan areas. In terms of relations with other people, respondents from the metropolitan areas reported similar (and slightly negative) levels of social relations with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours (average of 2.76 on a 5-point scale), as well as a similar (and moderate) sense of neighbourliness (average of 3.00 on a 5-point scale). They also reported a similar and mostly positive level of trust in other people to respect COVID-19 restrictions (average of 3.18 on a 5-point scale).

On the other hand, attitudes towards migrants to the UK varied between places. Respondents from Greater London and the West of England reported more positive attitudes (both showing an average of 53 on the 100-point feeling thermometer measure) compared with respondents from Greater Manchester and the West Midlands (average of 49 and 48 points, respectively) – representing a difference of +9.5% between the two pairs.

Figure 20. Differences in indices of social cohesion (top: Relations with other people; bottom: Relations with the State) between the 4 Metropolitan Areas in June 2021.



Note. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. Asterisks represent significant differences between Metropolitan Authorities.

Relations with the State: In all four metropolitan areas, respondents' trust in the UK government (national trust) was lower than their trust in the local government (local trust) – see previous results and Figure 1 above, and these levels of trust were similar across places. However, trust in the local government's response to COVID-19 differed between places. Respondents generally showed more trust than distrust, and local trust was highest in Greater Manchester while levels were lowest in Greater London, with a difference of 5.4% compared with Greater Manchester. Levels of local trust in the West of England and the West Midlands fell between these two.

Finally, differences also emerged in people's levels of active social engagement. Respondents from Greater London and the West of England reported more active social engagement than respondents from Greater Manchester and the West Midlands (a 16.3% difference between the two pairs).

In sum, the four metropolitan areas showed much similarity with no significant differences emerging on 5 out of 8 social cohesion indicators. Where differences emerged, they were mostly between Greater London and the West of England on the one hand, versus Greater Manchester and the West Midlands on the other hand. But no place overall was distinguished by either a markedly higher, nor lower, reported level of social cohesion. This may be because each metropolitan area includes more localised differences that are quite substantial or it may be that they are so heterogeneous that none form a particularly powerful (or weak) basis for cohesion.

In addition, comparisons between the metropolitan areas and the other sample sites that we surveyed in England reveal much similarity with Kent. It really seems to be the Local Authorities that distinguish themselves from others, whereas all other English sample sites showing remarkably similar responses through time (for details, refer back to Figures 2, 4, 5, 10, 14, 15, and 16).

10. Perceived Deprivation and Wellbeing

10.1 Personal relative deprivation

Personal relative deprivation is the sense of being disadvantaged in comparison with other individuals within one's group or situation. We measured personal relative deprivation with one item, asking respondents, "Comparing your own standard of living and how much money you have with that of most other people in [your local area] who are your age, do you think you have..." with responses ranging from 1 = Much less, 3 = About the same, 5 = Much more.

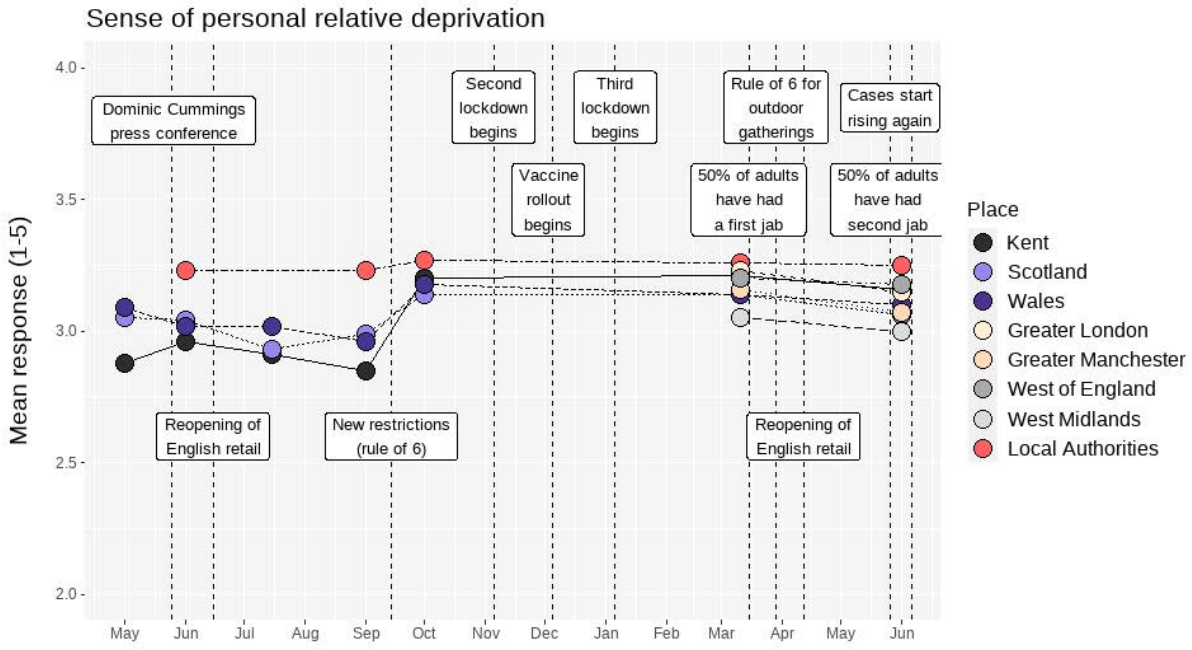
Results are illustrated in Figure 19. Across most timepoints and most places, people on average think they have slightly more than comparable others, reflecting a well-known bias of personal optimism.

In the summer 2020, most respondents from Kent, Scotland and Wales saw themselves as similar or slightly financially less well off than other people. In contrast, respondents from the 6 local authorities were much more likely to perceive themselves as financially better off than other people. There was a sharp increase, however, between September and October 2020, where personal perceptions in Kent, Scotland and Wales rose to the level of the 6 local authorities.

From then onwards, perceptions remained quite stable across the end of the year until June 2021. The inclusion of additional places from March/April 2021 highlighted other differences across places. In June 2021, respondents from the 6 local authorities reported the greatest sense of personal advantage (average score of 3.25) followed by those in the West of England (3.18), Kent (3.16), Greater London (3.15), Wales (3.10), Greater Manchester (3.07), Scotland (3.06) and finally the West Midlands (3.00) whose average score was exactly at the scale midpoint.

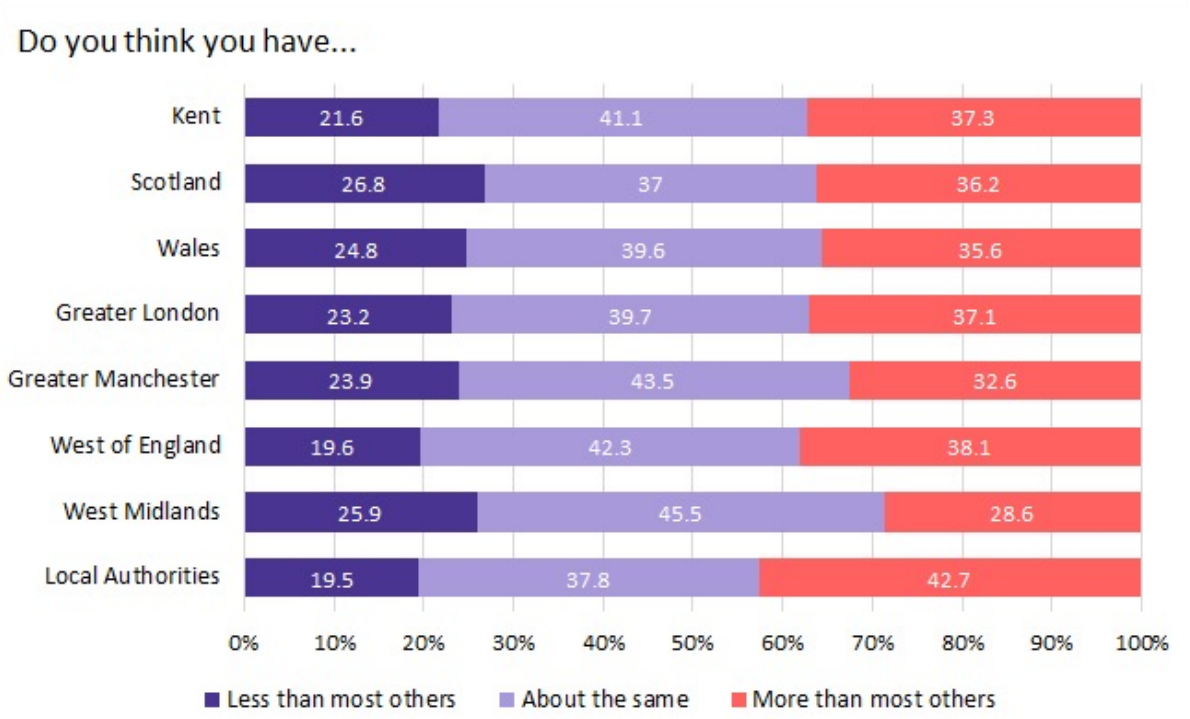
We also explored variations linked to individual characteristics. As might be expected, people's sense of personal deprivation was related to their actual level of income and subjective socioeconomic status (which together explained up to 33% of variance in personal deprivation). However, it was not related to their gender, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, level of education, nor their political orientation. Therefore, a considerable part of people's perception of their own relative advantage or deprivation seems to be associated with aspects of their situation that are not reduceable to their demographic characteristics.

Figure 21. Sense of personal relative deprivation or advantage from May 2020 to June 2021.



Note. Higher scores (above 3) represent a greater sense of personal advantage, while lower scores (below 3) represent a greater sense of personal deprivation.

From Wave 8 data: percentage of respondents who think they have less, about the same, or *more* than "most other people in Britain who are your age".



10.2 Wellbeing

Subjective well-being is often considered as an outcome of social cohesion. It reflects the potential benefit for the individual of living in a more cohesive society.[62] Indeed, research has consistently found that increases in social cohesion are related to increases in subjective well-being.[63]

In our surveys we measured subjective well-being with two questions most often used in large opinion surveys: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?", and "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?" (higher scores indicating higher well-being).

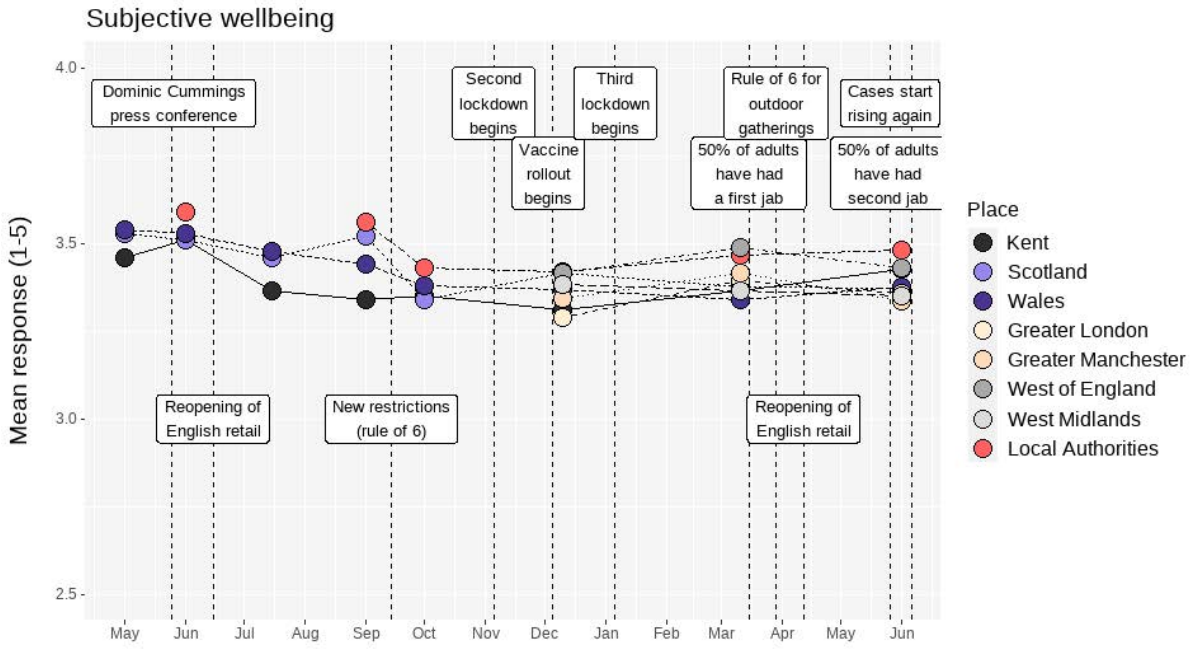
62 Chuang, Y.-C., Chuang, Y., & Yang, T.H. 2013. 'Social cohesion matters in health'. International Journal for Equity in Health, 12(1), 87. https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-9276-12-87.

63 Delhey, J., & Dragolov. G. 2016. 'Happier together. Social cohesion and subjective well-being in Europe'. *International Journal of Psychology*, 51(3), 163-176. https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12149.
Klein, C. 2013. 'Social capital or social cohesion: What matters For subjective well-being?' *Social Indicators Research*, 110(3), 891-911. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9963-x.

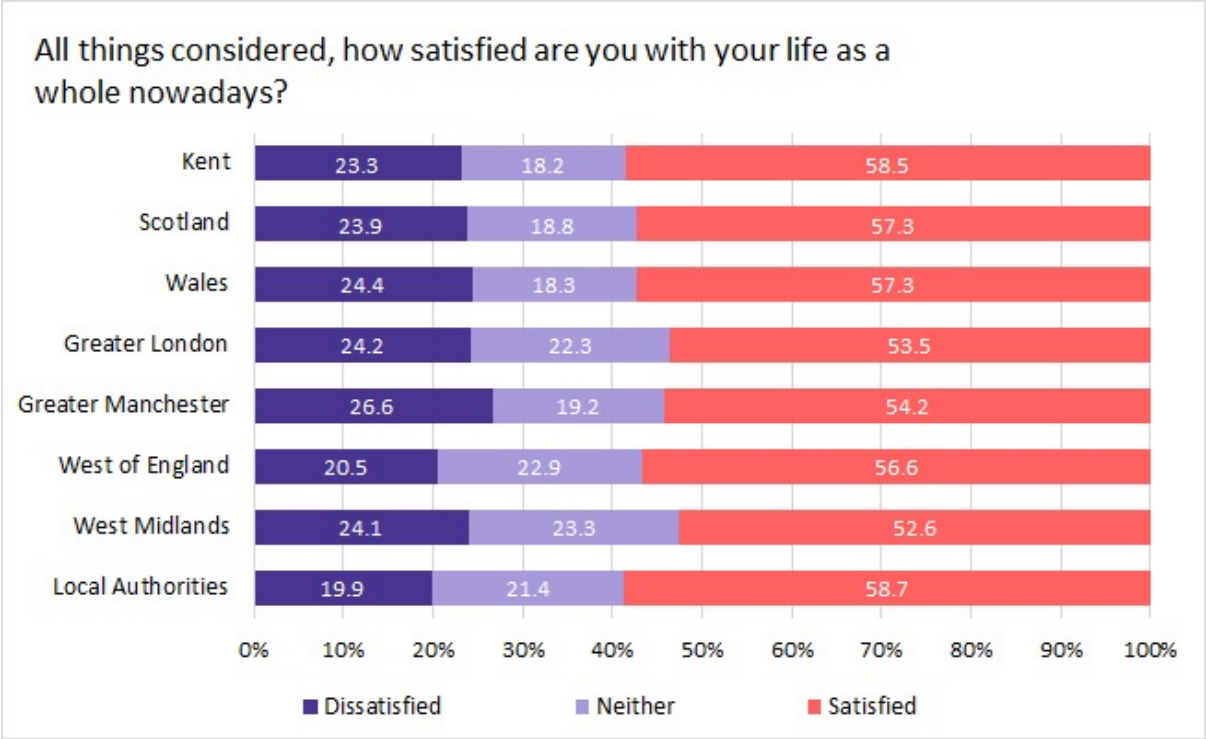
Overall, most respondents reported on average at least a moderate level of well-being. Results, illustrated in Figure 22, revealed some differences across time and places. Seasonal variations were visible, with well-being decreasing slightly during the autumn and winter of 2020 to reach its lowest level in December 2020. At that time the Alpha variant of the coronavirus (first called the English or Kent variant) was identified and was leading to a sharp increase in new cases, the rapid imposition of new Tier restrictions and the cancellation of Christmas celebrations in many places in the country. Well-being then increased slightly throughout 2021 and by June 2021 all our samples indicated mean scores above the scale midpoint, between 3.34 (Greater Manchester) and 3.48 (Local Authorities).

With respect to the Social Cohesion Investment findings, it is particularly noteworthy that respondents from the 6 Local Authorities tend to report the highest level of well-being at all measurement periods (except in March/April 2021 when respondents from the West of England surpassed them).

Figure 22. Subjective wellbeing from May 2020 to June 2021.



From Wave 8: percentage of respondents who said they were dissatisfied, satisfied or neither satisfied or dissatisfied "with their life as a whole nowadays".



For both personal feelings of deprivation and for subjective well-being, it appears that the local authorities had somehow sustained a more positive outlook in the early stages of the pandemic, when others tended to feel gloomier and more disadvantaged. By October 2020 people in other places had become more positive and showed levels of perceived deprivation and well-being that were more similar to those in the local authorities. However, there were also some fairly consistent differences between places with respondents from the 6 Local Authorities and from the West of England reporting higher well-being and less deprivation, and those in the West Midlands and Greater Manchester reporting lower well-being and more deprivation than other places. Given that these differences are not attributable to respondents' demographic characteristics they suggest that the places themselves have qualities that might be contributing to perceptions of personal deprivation and well-being.

11. Qualitative Analysis

Alongside the quantitative surveys, the project team has been collecting people's views and experiences of the pandemic through focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Conversations with participants in these sessions have enriched the findings from the quantitative survey data and have provided detailed insights into the ways that people from across the UK have felt at different stages of the pandemic.

This section reflects on these conversations. We first provide a thematic analysis based on Nvivo data coding of a sample of 35 focus groups and 23 one-to-one interviews. We then track changes in participants' views and experiences over time through a focus on one regional focus group (Wales), one local focus group (Blackburn with Darwen) and one metropolitan focus group (Greater Manchester). We conclude this section with two in-depth case studies from the one-to-one interviews.

11.1 Political trust

Trust in national government

Questions of trust in government and political leaders were raised in every focus group and one-to-one interview. Echoing the survey results, participants often expressed a clear sense of a loss of trust in the UK government over time. A number of clear themes emerged when participants described this loss of trust.

Most common amongst these was 'saying one thing and doing another', with the examples of Dominic Cummings and Matt Hancock amongst those given. The example of Dominic Cummings breaking Government guidelines appears to have had a powerful salience. A number of participants explicitly referenced this as a turning point for their personal sense of trust in the Government and those in power, and this incident was still being commonly referred to even in spring and summer of 2021.

> *"[W]hen Dominic Cummings...blatantly broke the rules which he helped to set up...that just destroyed confidence in the government."*
>
> [Local authority interview participant, August 2020]

The announcement of local lockdowns in the north of England the night before Eid was also mentioned by some participants as a point of lost trust. Other commonly-cited reasons for loss of trust in political leadership included lack of clarity, confusion or mixed messages (see our findings on public perceptions of local and national government communications,)[64] a lack of full transparency and honesty, and an often-expressed sense that political leaders always had 'agendas' and or alternative motives.

64 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. *Public Perceptions of UK and Local Government Communication about COVID-19*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Belong_PublicPerceptions_paper_V5.pdf.

The sense of political leaders having agendas or alternative motivations was sometimes explicitly juxtaposed with scientists and medical professionals, who participants consistently identified as those they trusted most. By contrast, scientists and doctors were seen as not having an agenda and being straightforwardly motivated by public health and well-being.

> *"I want to know the facts. And I don't want it flannelled. So to me, completely, politics out of it, regardless of whoever's going to say something, there's an agenda behind it. I just want to know, what are the medical facts? What do I need to keep safe, and keep my family safe? And yeah, the person I trust the most to do that is the doctor, or the GP or the consultant."*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

When political leaders' handling of the pandemic was mentioned in a positive light, this was associated with opposing perceptions of clarity, transparency and being upfront (e.g. explaining their reasons), 'sticking to their word', and admitting difficulty and uncertainty ('being treated like an adult'). Nicola Sturgeon was the political leader most often described in these terms, including by non-Scottish participants.

> *"Being treated like an adult rather than, you know, everything being about presentation, I think that that to me was, is important."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, August 2020]

Balanced against this, it remained a commonly-held view that the UK Government had not done a bad job in the circumstances. The success of the vaccine rollout was often noted and participants, including those with least trust in the Government, recognised the unprecedented nature of the challenge, the complexities involved and expressed empathy with political leaders on a human level.

Trust and polarised opinion

It was also notable that in talking about their levels of trust and perceptions of how different political leaders had handled the pandemic, participants were often conscious of, and noted, their own biases. Statements would quite often be prefaced by words to the effect of "I'm not a supporter of X, so..." or rounded-off with words to the effect of "...but that's just my view." A number of participants described opinions 'within their bubble', conscious that those outside their bubble may see things differently, and at times there was explicit recognition of how polarised opinion can shape perceptions and trust.

> *"I think people tend to view the government through their own sort of tribal loyalties in a way. So, you know, some people will say, Oh, it's all the Prime Minister's fault, and he's totally incompetent and they've made a complete mess of everything. And other people, perhaps will will give them the benefit of the doubt and think, well, yeah, it was it was really bad last year, but the vaccination program has been pretty good."*
>
> [Community partner focus group, July 2021]

Trust in local government

Participants were much more likely to speak positively about the role their local councils had played over the course of the pandemic, though not all felt this way. Participants often praised their council for the way they had communicated local rules and coordinated for local needs, particularly the way in which they had worked closely with community groups and the local voluntary sector. There was a strong sense of this being not just of practical value, but also a source of enhanced sense of community, belonging and pride in place.

> *"And working together as a collective, and being in it together and stronger when we working together, not just politically working together, but with the public, private and voluntary sector, to be able to support and deliver the needs and aspirations of the community, supporting community. And I think that's what local leaders and ward members and councillors in the cabinet and in the executive locally are able to do better, better translate, better understand."*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, October 2020]

Other reasons given for expressions of trust in local government, included the simple sense that they understood the local area and its needs in a way which national government could not, that their communication about the pandemic was therefore more relevant and specific, and even that, as one participant expressed it, local leaders are more trustworthy because 'you'd know if they were telling porkies'.[65]

> *"And because you've got that sort of local connection that local knowledge so that's why I say a locally leader because I'd be able to, be able to sort of know if they're telling those little porkies or not."*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

A majority of participants in one focus group reported that they had used their local council's website as the most trusted source of information, especially in terms of the rules that applied to their local area.

> *"[...] when I've gone to try and find information, I have gone on Blackburn Council's website to find out my local information rather than the government's website, you know, gov.uk, because there's so many there was so it was so fragmented."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, October 2020]

Local government may also have partly benefited from being seen as having less of a political agenda, with at least one participant suggesting that they trusted their local council more because there are less 'party politics games'.

65 This echoes findings from our recent paper: Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. *Public Perceptions of UK and Local Government Communication about COVID-19*. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Belong_PublicPerceptions_paper_V5.pdf.

Trust and perceptions of inequality

Interestingly, a number of participants also linked lack of trust in the government to perceptions or experiences of injustice or inequality, whether racial inequality or socio-economic inequality. One participant, though describing themselves as 'privileged', noticed this effect in others' reactions to perceived pro-London bias.

> *"I felt incredibly angry in a way I haven't for a lot of years, really aggrieved about decisions constantly being made for London. And that's whether we, that's whether we got locked down too late, or earlier on, all the thing about, basically, it just was really clear that decisions were not made for here...But what's really interesting on that I did notice people I'd spoken to who have, who have had less privilege than me, are actually more used to that type of disadvantage. And were almost less angry. I know, this sounds strange, but they, they were almost like, Oh, yeah, this again."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, April 2021]

This sense played into conversations about vaccine take-up, with recognition that more marginalised groups could be affected, not so much by conspiracy theories, as a more generalised lack of trust. More generally, participants' comments suggested that government actions that were seen as failing to recognise or help those in most need – the initial reaction to Marcus Rashford's campaign for free school meals was cited – were corrosive of trust in the Government and its response to the pandemic.

> *"Because the children at the end of the day are suffering and I don't really know if that's being considered by the government, it, it seems to me that they're being ignored. Because you get all this Eat Out Help schemes, which obviously the businesses do need them. But what about the people that are not even able to eat? What help are they getting?"*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, Sept 2020]

11.2 Trust in others

In contrast to views on political leaders, relatively few participants made statements which expressed a direct lack of trust in their community and those around them. In a sample of 35 different focus groups sessions and 23 different one-to-one interviews, there were 47 references to increased trust in others (e.g. reporting of rule-abiding behaviour) against 23 references to decreased trust in others (e.g. reporting of rule-breaking behaviour).

In interviews and focus groups conducted in the summer of 2020, participants did raise concerns about people breaking the rules. Perceptions of why people were rule-breaking ranged from not understanding the dangers, to confusion and the mixed messages put out by the Government - of which Eat Out to Help Out was mentioned as one example. As such, even though people breaking the rules was clearly a source of real anxiety to some, participants were generally inclined to give people who were breaking rules the benefit of the doubt. Young people were one group they seemed more inclined to be lenient towards.

Later on in 2020, as cases rose and lockdowns (local and national) continued to impact, participants were more likely to describe generally high levels of compliance, although there were concerns about the potential for lockdown fatigue.

> *"In terms of the numbers across the country, Wales-wide and UK-wide, I think you can kind of see the evidence that the cases have gone down. And the local people are taking it seriously about wearing masks, being careful, socially distancing. So, I would say all the right things have happened."*
>
> [Regional focus group participant, November 2020]

> *"There seems to be more of an awareness that, whilst COVID-19 may not impact on younger people as much, some of them may be asymptomatic or get a slighter impact to the, to the pandemic, that the awareness is much more now around, you know, you're not wearing this mask, you're not doing these instructions for yourself. You're doing it for your relations and your family."*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, October 2020]

Again, in 2021 as lockdown rules began to be relaxed, some participants continued to express anxiety about the speed of opening up and people's choices. By contrast, when describing the strictest periods of lockdown, people tended to describe an enhanced sense of community spirit (typically in relation to spring 2020 lockdowns) or spoke about how tough it was (typically in relation to the winter 2020/21 lockdowns), but rule-breaking was rarely, if ever, mentioned. If anything, there is a sense of greater trust arising from the extremity of the situation and a common experience of it.

> *"I think the community spirit was really well, because they've got all food banks out, they've got together and delivered food, so local mosques, churches and temples got together and started delivering food to the elderly, for those that were sort of like finding it hard with the pinch of not having an income. So that was really good, just so you saw this community spirit. I think a lot of people did adhere to the social distancing and being in lockdown. So that was really good to see as well. Especially because it's such a multi diverse community as well. Everyone did respect it."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, September 2020]

11.3 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

Conspiracy Theories

In line with our quantitative findings, conspiracy theory beliefs fluctuated over the course of our research, with a higher number of participants entertaining conspiracy beliefs in the summer of 2020 than at any other time in the data collection period. At this time, some participants expressed doubts about the government's version of events or reported hearing other people articulate distrust in the veracity of the virus. The reasons for this distrust ranged from feeling the pandemic was a form of governmental control to not knowing anyone who had contracted COVID-19 or feeling the virus was as harmful as the common cold.

> *"They don't trust the government so much as they did before. They don't believe in COVID-19 as much as they did before. Yes, and the reason for this, because a lot of people they don't know anyone who had or has COVID-19. And it makes them feel them feel that someone is cheating on them."* [Community Partner]

> *"But yeah, I struggle to take it serious man. Like, yeah, I understand there are deaths or whatnot. But if you look at the stats and statistics and whatnot, there are more deaths from other illnesses than COVID-19. Like, you know what I'm saying? I see this, there's a guy that posts a bunch of, um, he's very anti COVID-19 in a way in like, in like days, he will show stats about other illnesses versus COVID-19. And how COVID-19 is a common a common illness, a common cold sorry."* [Community Partner]

For the most part, conspiracy theory beliefs decreased over time. Some of the participants who had articulated an earlier disbelief in COVID-19 went on to refute their earlier claims in later focus group sessions. A handful of participants continued to feel that the harmfulness of the virus was being overstated.

Vaccine hesitancy

Overall, support for the vaccination programme was high amongst our sample, with a number of participants working as volunteers at vaccination centres. However, some participants expressed concerns about the vaccine or were hesitant to take it. Most commonly, this hesitancy stemmed from concerns that the vaccine had been approved too quickly or had not undergone long-term trials, rather than from a deeper-rooted belief in conspiracy theories. For a lot of participants, weariness with lockdown superseded their reluctance to take the vaccine, even if it hadn't necessarily alleviated all of their concerns.

> *"I also have a couple of friends who are medics, and they're gonna they also didn't get the vaccine because they said that they didn't know was the long side effects. Yes. Because of the way it works. Yes, it is. So you don't know what is it? How it's gonna affect you in long term? Yes, short term, it will protect yourself, but what it's gonna do to you later. So we're gonna look at every scenario, that probably we'll wait."*
>
> [Regional focus group participant, June 2021]

> *"I haven't had the vaccination myself yet. And I think sort of like really now I'm wanting to wait a little bit to see if a longer term effects. I think we're getting the vaccine you have to sort of wait. I think there's risks to getting the vaccine but there's also risks to not getting the vaccine."*
>
> [Regional focus group participant, June 2021]

> *"I've gone from really cautious about this vaccination, because I just feel like yeah okay they so say, had to follow regulation, you know, and get the vaccinations approved, but at the same time it's been approved so quickly, do we know enough about it? And so I was kind of fearful of having it done. But now I'm still a bit fearful of it, but also just give me the damn vaccine let's get this done, get them all vaccinated so we can all get our lives back and not have to worry about, you know, passing it on to people and stuff."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, March 2021]

Some participants observed that those who had experienced past or historical experiences of oppression may be more likely to mistrust the vaccine, not because they entertained conspiracy theories, but because they found it difficult to trust those in power.

> *"But a young Libyan woman that we work with a lot, she, I said to her, oh, yeah, I've just had my vaccine. And she said, Oh, really? How come? And she asked me like, oh, why would you have that. And, as in, it was an unusual decision for me to want to have it. And we actually just discussed it for a long time. And it was, she didn't have conspiracy theories at all, she was, it was just linked to the high level distrust, from experiences she had in this country. She was like, really surprised that I was trusting in this new thing."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, April 2021]

11.4 Intergroup relations

Participants showed a high level of awareness of the different ways in which the pandemic might be unifying or dividing us, and the impact it was having on relations between different groups in society. Many expressed concerns about specific sources of division (discussed below) and some expressed broader concerns about the extent of division in society as a whole. In this, participants often blamed the media for, as they saw it, promoting divisive narratives. However, participants were generally positive about the strength of community ties they had witnessed in their local area, and many expressed optimism, or at least hope, that the pandemic could prove to be more of a unifier than a divider.

National and local divisions

Participants sometimes noted what they perceived to be high levels of division in the country or society as a whole. Though there were no discussions about Brexit in any of the focus groups, a number of participants mentioned Brexit as a reference point for undesirable levels of division. For example, when discussing potential conflict over vaccination:

> *"[I]t will become this awful Brexit discussion where no one can talk about it because it's too uncomfortable."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, May 2021]

In a sample of 35 focus group sessions and 23 one-to-one interviews Brexit was referred to unprompted on 18 occasions, as was Donald Trump on 9 occasions, as a number of interviewees noted how the pandemic had deepened divisions in the US. There was also widespread recognition of divisions caused by economic and racial inequality, and the potential for these divisions to widen.

> *"Yeah. So in terms of social cohesion? I'm not. I'm not sure, um, how cohesive it will be, because you have so many, so many people now, sort of like you have the Black Lives Matter, you have different parts of the society rightly so asking for attention. So how cohesive is society? Because you have the far right becoming more far right."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, September 2020]

Despite this, many participants expressed a strong desire for a greater sense of unity, and the hope that COVID-19 could and should be a unifier.

When people spoke about their local communities, they generally struck a more positive tone. There was recognition and concern that blame-based narratives, and particularly those with racial dimensions, had the potential to divide communities.

> *"But this does not help about the blame culture or against certain [communities] try to use that saying, that's the cause of it. That's the reason. And again, it's going to escalate tensions amongst communities. And that's what, we don't need that. Because we're all trying to do our best, play our part, play our role."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, May 2020]

But when speaking about their own experiences and their own communities, participants were more likely to be positive. A number of participants highlighted the positive impact that the pandemic had had on local social cohesion (see below on active social engagement).

> *"[I]t's been really good. And we've seen a real commitment to community cohesion, helping each other out. It's been really good to see everyone coming together to help each other. There's been lots of people going to food banks. So, there's been an increase of that. But there's been a lot of donations we've been giving to food banks as well, and people volunteering at food bank. So that's been really good to see."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, May 2021]

One person explicitly contrasted what they perceived to be a sense of fracture and carelessness at a national level with the importance placed on cohesion at a local level, and the resulting strength of community relations that had been shown in the wake of the Manchester Arena attack.

> *"The arena attack in Manchester, there was, there was, I think, a really positive community response to that, that localized crisis and the people were quick to come together. There were, there was so much quick action in response to that, and that was probably because of a decade's work or more of kind of community relations and working together, different groups coming together and not preparing for a terrorist attack, but trying to create a cohesive city and a lot of like intercultural work and things like that. That's what, that's what aided people's response there."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, April 2020]

North-South divides

Participants in northern areas of England were very aware of perceived North-South divides and raised this issue on a number of occasions. There was acute awareness that, especially in 2020, the pandemic and local lockdowns had impacted differentially on much of the North. Some participants expressed strong resentment at the way in which they felt the North had been treated. And this was sometimes mixed in with a sense that minority ethnic communities in particular in some parts of the North had been treated unfairly and received disproportionate media attention.

> *"I think there was absolutely a point in this where the North was being punished for Andy Burnham questioning the tier system. And the fact that the economy in the North was being really adversely affected. And there was also, you know, they even brought in restrictions like that, you know, the night before Eid. And there was a real sense amongst northern communities here that there was, there was an agenda to put us in our place. Because, you know, the northern powerhouse was starting to question government policy."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, April 2021]

> *"I'm very concerned about some of the media platform portraying of towns and cities like Blackburn and Darwen, Leicester, Bradford, some of the Northwest and some of West Yorkshire is quite unacceptable the way they are reporting."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, October 2020]

However, there was also a definite view amongst some participants that perceived North-South divides were being overplayed and driven by sensationalist media narratives. Participants also expressed real concern over the potential for such narratives to exacerbate a wider sense of division and polarisation.

> *"...[A]bout the north south divide. Now, part of me thinks a lot of that is press driven, media driven. Because they like a bit of conflict in some way or not at all. So sells papers, and makes people in the news."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, October 2020]

> *"I think we're likely to see a bit of a north-south thing happening again. Everyone's politically different, and I don't want to get too political, but what's happening in Manchester at the moment, seems very divisive. Let's take back the North. And it just seems to set us back years from getting that inclusion of the country it seems everyone's all of a sudden baying for a wall to be put up in the midlands, and as a Midlander, I don't know which side I'd end up on, where would you put me? But I can just see a divisiveness creeping in and that worries me nationally."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, October 2020]

Intergenerational divides

All of our focus groups discussed how the pandemic had impacted on relations between younger and older generations. In these discussions, there was a recognition that the pandemic had created the conditions under which real tensions between young and old could arise, and that some real fears and resentments existed.

However, with few exceptions, most focus group participants pushed back against the idea that there were deep divides between young and old. Rather, participants' comments suggested that the reality has been both much more complex and much more positive than what were often perceived as largely media-led narratives of intergenerational division.

> *Moderator: "Do you think older and younger people have different views of each other now?"*
>
> *Participant: "I don't think so. I think the press would like to have you think that that's the case. But from my experience, I can't say that anybody notices anything any different, like I said. But you know, the press obviously wants to divide people up and they want they want that battle because it sells papers sells, you know, clicks or whatever. But as far as the press is concerned, yes. They want to create that generational battle, but I don't think [so] on a personal level."*
>
> [Local area focus group, October 2020]

On the contrary, participants noted that older people were often highly sympathetic to young people's position, less inclined to blame them for not always socially distancing, and, especially when it came to family members, often more worried about the impact of lockdowns on young people than the risks they themselves faced.

> *"So some older people are saying, well come on young people now, let's be responsible. But then some old people are saying, come on, what would you be doing at that age?"*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

> *"I'm just getting a sense that some older people are saying things like, they don't want young people's chances in life to be sacrificed for their sake."*
>
> [Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

Quite a few participants chose instead to highlight instances of young people volunteering to help older people, for instance by delivering shopping to them. Others noted how the pandemic had brought different generations within families closer together, both as a result of being locked down together and as a result of greater connection through videoconferencing.

"I think I was thinking partly of the, the ageism that we experienced to some degree during the Brexit years, you know, younger people perhaps blaming certain older people for voting in a particular way. And I think, I think the COVID-19 crisis has given an opportunity for everyone to value human life. And, you know, I don't think we've heard anyone complaining about the fact that, you know, the national effort has been concentrated in trying to save the lives of predominantly older people. You know, so, and I also think it's brought families together...I think it's probably been an opportunity for families to come together and for younger and older people to, to get on with each other."

[Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

"But I would say that we've had some really good responses from young people in [city name] putting their hand up to volunteer... So, it's been an interesting picture in [city name] and it pleases me to see young people from different communities coming together to support other communities like the elderly. I think it's important."

Minority ethnic communities

The social division that participants raised most often and were most concerned about, was the sense that minority ethnic communities had over the course of the pandemic too often been the target of blame and stigma.

There was a strong feeling from some participants, especially but not only amongst minority ethnic participants, that media narratives around localised outbreaks, rule-breaking and vaccine hesitancy had been excessively dominated, explicitly or implicitly, by mention of minority ethnic communities. This was felt keenly when local lockdowns were being discussed and applied in 2020, and then again in 2021 with the emergence of the Delta variant.

"I know the media has put in, whenever they talk about the second wave coming through, they'll show a Muslim or BAME person attached to that photo. So, you subliminally already feeding the information that these other people that's causing the second wave to come. But everybody is breaking - So people in the pub, they're not socially distancing people down the beach are not socially distancing. But these pictures are not shown when they talk about the second wave."

[Community partner interview participant, July 2020]

"We're still in a blame culture. You know, in last couple of weeks with the variant, South Asian communities and the Indian community, I've been singled out by certain individuals and certain communities. And again, we, you know, like [other participant] said, we all played our part, we're cautious. You know, we all love our families, we all care about each other. And that's why we made sacrifices together."

[Metropolitan area focus group participant, May 2021]

There was recognition that such racist narratives were widespread within communities, though participants tended to place a lot of the blame for this at the feet of the media.

> *"I worry deeply that there is starting to be racial mis-feeling, because because always, the certain areas where, just the same areas come up, and all I hear from people is, 'oh, it's that postcode again'. And it worries me that that, that people are gonna start getting a bit, but not just that."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, May 2021]

Participants expressed a high level of concern over this kind of divisiveness and the impact on community relations. However, there was also a sense that racial divisions and inequalities were less easily resolved than other forms of division.

> *"I think that when when COVID-19 broke, you know, I think for once our colours, our, you know, bank balances, and all of those didn't matter. Because we're all fighting this unseen attacker, and we've kind of all since closing, and it was not about it didn't matter, creed, colour, language. Unfortunately for the world, George Floyd happened. And I think that the lines that were covered up, because they were not really sealed properly. I think they just started to show up, you know, and so we're in a very funny place now."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant]

Other divides

Among other forms of social division, economic inequalities and the gap between rich and poor was frequently mentioned by many participants. Participants noted that these inequalities had left some more exposed to the pandemic than others, and those who raised this generally felt that the pandemic and the economic fallout from it were likely, if anything, to further entrench economic inequalities.

Some participants also mentioned societal and interpersonal tensions around the issues of vaccine take-up and social distancing. It was suggested that should social distancing restrictions have to be maintained, vaccine hesitancy could become a source of resentment and tension. Others spoke of falling out with friends over differing attitudes towards the pandemic and vaccination.

> *"And there's been a few occasions where he's done things that I really don't feel that he should be doing in line with current guidelines and restrictions. And our friendship has sadly deteriorated because of our polar opposites in difference of support and belief for the particular circumstances. He's very much a believer behind a lot of the conspiracies and unproven facts behind it. So that made it very hard to to continue our relationship as a friend."*
>
> [Local area group participant, June 2021]

11.5 Identity and belonging

Neighbourliness

There was a very strong sense from participants that the pandemic had brought about a real uplift in people's sense of neighbourliness and their connection with their neighbours. In a sample of 35 different focus groups sessions and 23 different one-to-one interviews, a sense of increased neighbourliness was mentioned 101 times. By contrast there were 14 mentions of negative impacts on neighbourliness and 16 suggesting no real change. Participants spoke enthusiastically about this, and it was clear that this greater sense of neighbourliness was one aspect of their experience of the pandemic that they had valued.

A large number of participants reported that they had simply talked more to their neighbours than they would have before. People also talked of speaking to a wider pool of people on their street than they would have normally, and of having longer, more meaningful conversations.

> *"Our neighbour across the road, she lost her mum. I've never really spoken to them, like apart from hello and hi, and not really spoken to them. So, but because I've lost my mom recently as well, I sort of really connected. So, that was really nice just to speak to her and offer my sympathies and stuff. And we saw the funeral and everything. And I wouldn't have got to see that if I was at work. I wouldn't have even known that she'd passed away."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, July 2020]

Another participant described how the pandemic had helped renew a friendship with one set of neighbours, which had weakened since their children had grown up. People ascribed this increase in neighbourliness to a variety of factors, but it was clear that having more time, being at home much more, and having less 'other things to do', were important factors.

> *"So, we didn't ever really see neighbours other than just to nod to them. But now we've been able to chat through the fence or over the fence or out on the doorstep, and we've kept the two or three metres apart. But we've had a lot more chance to catch up with people and just get to know them which we would never, never have done. Not for any reason of neglect."*
>
> [Regional area interview participant, August 2020]

As such, these observations were more often associated with the strictest periods of lockdown. People sometimes spoke about these periods in quite idealised terms, for instance as one participant described, as if they had temporarily brought a return to a time when life was slower and more community-centred.

> *"And when we were in full lockdown, you kind of I think we had a bit of a glimpse of what life was like, maybe sort of 60, 70, 80 years ago, where you didn't drive an hour to go to work, you worked in your local community, and and I met people that I might never have met, even though they live just down the road."*
>
> [Regional area focus group participant, July 2021]

At the same time, a number of participants mentioned messaging and the formation of community WhatsApp groups, as ways in which streets and neighbourhoods had gained a greater sense of connection, and through which people had been able to maintain connections and relationships during lockdown.

Two other important factors which participants associated with increased neighbourliness were the way in which the community had 'rallied around' to help each other out during the worst of the pandemic, and the 'clap for carers' which took place each Thursday during the first national lockdown.

When speaking about increased neighbourliness and community spirit, participants often referred to the work of community groups, voluntary groups and even local government (i.e. more formal volunteering and support networks), but more often still they mentioned much more informal support and volunteering - simple acts of neighbours helping each other out.

> *"I always say to neighbours, listen, you know, I'm going to go out, I've got a car, you know, I'm going to go shopping, so if you need anything, we've exchanged numbers that we'd not done before as well, and things like that. And I'll drop stuff off to them."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, April 2020]

The 'clap for carers', or 'clap for the NHS' as many people referred to it, were just as frequently mentioned. It was clear from these conversations that this was an important and meaningful event for many people, not just as a means of expressing appreciation to carers and frontline workers, but as a means of bringing people together, of creating a moment for connection and a much stronger sense of togetherness.

> *"With the [clap for] NHS, we've seen neighbours that we hadn't seen because of people working coming in and doing their sort of, sort of home lives. We didn't really see them, but on Thursday evenings around 10 to 8, everybody was out sort of, you know, talking and chatting before the eight o'clock, and then everybody [...] stayed out and have probably a chat, see how people are doing in social life."*
>
> [Community partner focus groups participant, August 2020]

11.6 Active social engagement

Participants mentioned a wide variety of social actions they had been involved in during the pandemic. These ranged from the most informal (like helping family, friends or neighbours with shopping) to work with community groups, to political action (for instance one participant talked about their involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement). In a sample of 35 different focus groups sessions and 23 different one-to-one interviews, there were 41 references to social action (33 group social action and 8 individual social action), 44 references to formal volunteering and 22 references to informal volunteering.

The work with community groups that some participants described was often pandemic-related, and included food banks and work to promote vaccine take-up.

> *"[W]e prepared a video from the temple to encourage people, and we put it on our website. We've sent it by WhatsApp, we sent it by email. To encourage any people in the community who are not who haven't taken vaccinations so far, to encourage them to take the vaccination."*
>
> [Metropolitan area focus group participant, May 2021]

Active social engagement and individual well-being

In the course of discussing volunteering and social action, participants often noted the positive impacts this activity had. This included the positive impact it had on them personally and their ability to get through the pandemic. One participant spoke of how important getting involved in a community project and going on joint walks had been to them. Another spoke of how social action had helped give them a sense of purpose during the pandemic.

> *"And that's why sometimes we enrolled in this like community project and go for the walk. That helps a bit because it can be very effecting very mentally, emotionally, mentally. The news and people dying and people getting ill and you see by yourself and you eye witness it, and that puts you down as well. And we're going for the walk and keeping your minds stimulated and healthy."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, June 2021]

> *"I also got very, very involved with the BAME network within my [workplace], coming up to the Black History Month. So, I did a lot of that, you know, that kind of gave me something to do. And I was like with a vengeance. Because it was something to do. It was, it just took the monotony out of things."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, November 2020]

The pandemic as a catalyst for active social engagement

The pandemic clearly caused difficulties for many local community groups. Some of those involved in such groups noted how it had meant that they had to stop delivering some services, and how not being able to meet in person went against the spirit of their work.

However, it was equally clear from participant discussions that the pandemic, particularly in its early stages, had acted as a catalyst for both the setting-up of community groups and the bringing together of different community groups, in a way that would not necessarily have happened otherwise. In this, a number of participants noted how videoconferencing had been an enabler of communication within and between community groups; one that, while unable to replace face-to-face contact, had in other ways enabled new contacts and strengthened existing ones.

> *"And so, you know, a lot of this has come in the back of COVID-19, where there was an approach to make sure that no community was missed. So, it became like a massive Community Association, where we kind of engaged regularly and kind of just to make sure that needs are met. From the community level upwards."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, November 2020]

> *"[I] think the community spirit was really [good], because they've got all food banks out, they've got together and delivered food. So, local mosques, churches and temples got together and started delivering food to the elderly."*
>
> [Community partner interview participant, July 2020

Active social engagement and community well-being

In this light, a wide range of different participants expressed the belief that a collective volunteer effort during the course of the pandemic had been extremely positive for social cohesion in their local area.

> *"I know there have been a few community initiatives to support more vulnerable groups during lockdown. For example, there's been a Muslim mosque-led initiative for visiting people regardless of faith, to visit to people who were self-isolating, who struggled with, you know, food, etc. You know, there's been food parcels being organised just around the corner from myself, which is [name of street] community centre. And there's been some a few initiatives of giving masks away and educating people."*
>
> [Local area focus group participant, August 2020]

In addition to this, in many statements there was a clear sense of pride in place engendered by voluntary action and the community coming together. A number of participants mentioned volunteering and social engagement when explaining why they thought their area had coped with the pandemic better than others.

"We've had a lot of volunteer COVID-19 volunteer forces come out, lots of volunteers came forward to do shopping for people shielding or you know in isolation. And it just seemed, whilst we had the, the challenges one hand with shopping and queues and social distancing, it didn't come across certainly, to me as, as challenged as some of the other areas."

[Community partner focus group participant, August 2020]

11.7 Focus group case studies

We wanted to look in more detail at a number of the focus groups to draw out the various ways in which place and place-based identity may have shaped individual and community experiences of the pandemic, and to see how the shared understanding of these groups changed over time. We have chosen here to look at three focus groups: Wales, Blackburn with Darwen and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority area. We chose Wales because it is a devolved nation with distinctive national management of the pandemic, Blackburn with Darwen because it is a local authority area which experienced much longer periods of lockdown than most, and Greater Manchester because it is metropolitan area with a strong sense of its own identity.

Wales

The Wales focus group consisted of eight people (four women, three men and one non-binary person), with age ranges from 18-25 to 56-65. All identified as White British or White Welsh. Four lived in North Wales and four lived in South Wales. Their occupations included retail manager, local government officer, postwoman, teaching assistant, housewife, guest house owner and substance misuse worker. The group met via Zoom in September 2020, November 2020 and again in July 2021.

When the Wales focus group met for the first time in September 2020, different local lockdowns were still in force across Wales. Perhaps partly in reflection of this, participants' discussions tended to focus on the differences within and between different parts of Wales. Participants often expressed a clear sense of 'how their area was doing' in terms of the differences in COVID-19 case numbers and the various levels of restrictions in force.

Those in areas with low case numbers had an initial tendency to attribute this to people in other areas being 'less rule-abiding'. However, there was a recognition across the group that socio-economic factors (e.g. class and occupation) played an important underlying role in these differences. In this group, discussions of how the pandemic may have impacted differentially on different groups tended to be more heavily focused on questions of socio-economic status, sector and occupation.

"And I think that might be one of the things that's happening in Monmouthshire that more people are office based, so they're able to stay at home. Whereas in perhaps some of the Valleys towns, people are more, you know, factory workers, delivery drivers, teachers, nurses, those kind of things. So, they have to go out. So, I think there is a bit of an impact, depending on kind of what the community or the businesses there are in that area."

[Wales focus group participant, September 2020]

When the Wales focus group next met in November 2020, Wales had just come out of a 17 day 'fire-break' lockdown, and local lockdowns were no more, with all areas of Wales now under the same set of rules. This nationally distinctive approach may have catalysed a sharper sense of the pandemic response being led by the Welsh Government, and this certainly appears to be reflected in participants' comments. For instance, the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, was not mentioned at all in the September focus groups, but was mentioned 17 times in the November focus group.

Within the focus group, the fire-break policy had a mixed response, and was even seen by some as having been divisive. However, it may well have served to sharpen the contrast with the UK government, in comparison to which participants generally viewed the Welsh Government's response favourably. This sharper sense of national political leadership, though, came with some notable tensions. Welsh Government policy in relation to the fire-break and rules around Christmas both gave rise to concerns about the border and identity. At one point, two participants had a sharp disagreement over whether England and Wales should be referred to as different countries.

Notably, unlike in other focus groups, there was little recognition amongst the Wales group of the role of local government in responding to the pandemic; respondents reported being largely unaware of local government activity in this sense. It could be that the prominent role played by the Welsh Government reduced the salience of local government as a coordinator of a local response and a point of contrast with the UK Government.[66]

Tourism was also a common feature of the conversation in the Wales focus group. A number of participants lived in areas in which the local economy is heavily reliant on tourism. These participants expressed anxiety about the economic impact of COVID-19 on the tourism trade, but there was also considerable anxiety about the impact tourists had on local infection rates, about the prevalence of unsafe and unruly behaviour amongst holidaymakers and a sense of intrusion on the community spirit and neighbourliness that existed during lockdown.

> *"There's been a real effort in the community to kind of do community stuff. So people are still litter picking, people are still we've got like a plant table, where people are taking spare plants and putting them in central places that you can go to help yourself and I really like that. But we are also seeing those things being vandalized by tourists and stuff, you know, with stuff being set on fire and, and that's really heart-breaking."*
>
> [Wales focus group participant, July 2021]

66 This links to the findings from our recent report: Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. 'Public Perceptions of UK and Government Communication about Covid-19', https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Belong_PublicPerceptions_paper_V5.pdf.

Blackburn with Darwen

The Blackburn with Darwen focus group consisted of seven participants (four women and three men) aged between 30 and 55. Their ethnic backgrounds were White British (3), British Asian, Indian, Polish and Arabic. Their occupations included finance sector worker, engineer, business development director, photographer and community ambassador. The group met via Zoom in August 2020, October 2020 and June 2021.

Blackburn with Darwen was one of the areas in the UK that suffered under more severe lockdown restrictions for the longest. This obviously shaped the Blackburn group's experience of the pandemic and cropped up regularly in their conversations. Throughout, respondents were very conscious of the fact that their area was being and had been affected disproportionately in terms of rates of infection and the restrictions imposed.

When the Blackburn group first met in August 2020, most participants had been in a localised lockdown for several weeks. Participants were mindful of the fact that in other parts of the country, for instance London, life was now carrying on in much more normal fashion. Comments suggested nervousness and anxiety about what lay in store in the months ahead – for instance what would happen when schools went back – the impact on people's emotional and economic well-being, and some concerns over continuing non-compliance with social distancing rules.

By the time the group met in October 2020 – just a few days after Lancashire had been one of the first areas to be placed under new Tier 3 restrictions – comments suggested a mood of grim resignation. Though participants expressed a weariness at having been in lockdown for so long, there was an awareness that case numbers were still high and acceptance of the fact that strict measures were necessary and might continue to be for some time.

> *"I'm in a ward that has been in lockdown since... I think we had three weeks in July where we can actually meet people in gardens. But since then, we've just not been able to meet anybody in our gardens and then briefly for about three days last week we could actually do it and then were put back into lockdown even more, so erm, it's been you know, it's been obviously difficult but you know I think most people around here have obeyed the rules."*
>
> [Blackburn with Darwen focus group participant, October 2020]

By the time the group met again in June 2021, the Delta variant was now spreading rapidly and Blackburn had just replaced Bolton as the area with the highest rates in the country. Comments expressed mixed feelings – a greater sense of hope, but some real ongoing anxieties about whether things would ever get back to normal, and a consolidated sense of having been hit harder and longer than almost anywhere else.

The Blackburn group tended to talk in relatively localised, rather than regionalised, terms about the pandemic and the response to it. Although the North-South divide was discussed, participants in this group were not especially engaged by this debate. Most of the group members were unimpressed by and distrustful of the UK government's leadership on the pandemic. However, by contrast, participants in this group expressed

strong appreciation for the role which their local council had played in responding to the pandemic, and most of the group said that Blackburn with Darwen Council's website was their most trusted source of information. This and the wider community response was a source of pride in the area and how it had come through the difficulties it had faced.

Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester focus group consisted of four people (three women and one man) from the combined authority area, with ages ranging from 37 to 69. Their ethnic backgrounds were White British (2), Indian and Bangladeshi. Their occupations were community engagement officer, the chief executive of a local charity, a deputy headteacher, and president of a Hindu religious society. They met for the first time in April 2021 and again at the end of May 2021.

This group, like the Blackburn group, were also very conscious of the fact that their area had been hit harder than most by the pandemic. A couple of participants explained this through reference to other inequalities the area suffered from – economic, racial and health inequalities – and through which they believed the pandemic had played out. They also noted that the area had been in lockdown since October and for much longer than other parts of the country (London was mentioned by way of contrast).

At the same time, members of this group were generally positive about the way their local area had handled the pandemic. Despite the adversities described, it was felt that their area had, all things considered, coped well. One group member even suggested that the diversity and creativity of the city, and its experience of facing up to challenges and adversity, had lent the area greater resilience.

> *"it's quite creative and innovative. It's got sports, it's really diverse. And I think all those things help its problem solving and resilience. I know that's quite a, that's, that's just my feeling... and people are used to challenge that's what I find quite interesting as well. People are used to knock backs and used to picking themselves up."*
>
> [Greater Manchester focus group participant, April 2021]

In keeping with this, participants in this group expressed quite a strong sense of regional identity. Several members of this group raised the question of a North-South divide and there was resentment, sometimes passionate resentment, at the way in which they felt the North had been discriminated against by an (in their view) London-based, Southern-centric UK Government. In this light, the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham's resistance to the Government's tier-based system was mentioned on a number of occasions. There was a sense that this may have served to catalyse a greater sense of local and regional identity in relation to the pandemic.

However, this localised identity was at the same time complex. Members of the group expressed at different times a supra-regional identity ('the North'), a regional identity ('the Northwest'), a metropolitan or city-based identity and a more localised borough or town-based identity, when talking about 'their area'.

By the time the group met in May, participants were expressing a range of mixed feelings, which seemed to partly depend on which parts of the combined authority people lived in. On the one hand, there was optimism and hope at the vaccine rollout and rules being relaxed, albeit still with a large dose of uncertainty. On the other hand, the area was once again finding itself close to the eye of the storm when it came to outbreaks of the Delta variant, the blame-based narratives that accompanied this, for some areas localised travel restrictions, and restrictions on travel to Scotland.

This group also expressed strong concerns about the future, and in particular the longer-term economic impact on some local areas. This included the impact that future rounds of austerity might have on local services and funding for VCS groups, and the impact on some small towns in the combined authority area.

> *"I actually live in [name of town], which is one of the places which has really invested in community cohesion, but just being in an old mill town, where we don't have mills anymore. Um I feel really saddened when I walk around the town here. And this is a town that, it was already struggling. And COVID-19 has absolutely decimated the town centre, the economy there, and I really struggle to see how it's going to, how the, the, the identity of the town is going to ever sort of bounce back. And I think that this has kind of been what was, it's almost like the nail in the coffin unless there is a really dramatic turnaround in terms of investment for the town and in addressing, you know, the real economic inequalities, that there are in the town, and it's hard to see how, it's hard to see how young people growing up here are going to feel that they, that it's a place where they're, where they want to live, where they want to stay, where they can, you know, they, they can, you know, have it, have a future."*
>
> [Greater Manchester focus group participant, April 2021]

11.8 Individual case studies

This section of the report provides a couple of examples of individual journeys from the one-to-one interviews we conducted. We have included these (names changed) in order to bring to life some of the individual stories and lived realities which sit behind the themes and issues explored in this report.

Case study one: life as a Black mental health nurse during the pandemic

Helen is a mental health nurse, and a mother of three teenage daughters. She lives in a rural area in the southeast of England and is the Secretary of the local Nigerian Community Association. Her job and her community work meant that in a number of different ways she had found herself at the frontline of responding to the pandemic.

When we first spoke to her in September 2020, she talked about her work with the community association. In this role, she had been approached by the council as part of a concerted effort to make sure that all communities were being reached with the 'stay at home' message.

The role of the community association developed further and they found themselves working to identify needs specific to their community, delivering food and medicine and working to ensure children had access to laptops or tablets they needed to continue their schooling. One side effect of this effort, was that it had acted as a catalyst in bringing different community groups into closer contact with one another.

> *"So we have the Lithuanian community in [Name of City], the, I don't know, the Romanian committee. So, we've got all of those. And at different times, they've been just different kinds of engagement at some level. So, if they were celebrating something within the community, they would send an invite. And then every year during Black History Month, which we've just started, there'll be some kind of [invite]."*

The nature of Helen's nursing role had shifted from being out in the community and face-to-face to being primarily online. When we spoke to Helen in November, this was something she was not enjoying, and she also expressed real fears about the impact on the young people that she worked with.

> *"I really worry for the young people I'm working with, because I think that by the end of all of this, although their physical health might be fantastic. I think the damage to the mental health is likely to be massive."*

As a mental health professional, she was very aware of, and insightful about, the impact the pandemic was having on families and individuals. In addition to everything else she was doing, she found herself working to support friends who were working in physical health at the height of the pandemic.

> *"I've got friends work in physical health and you know, working in the front line and needing me to do some kind of therapeutic work for them on the side...not that [they] would name it that, but they needed it, you know, to come back from basically what would be a war front and just offload on someone and I had to do that in spite of what I'm doing."*

She also talked about the coping strategies she employed, including a daily walk with her husband, when he got home from work.

> *"[W]e have our one hour walk every day, which we've planned, you know, and that's when we do our talking. And, and even our fears, because we're not at home, we're not going to project onto the children, we can express, whatever. That's kind of good for us as well, because we need that for our mental health."*

Alongside all this, Helen had found time to engage in social activism. She felt keenly aware of the disproportionate toll the pandemic had taken on people from minority ethnic backgrounds. This caused her to get involved in the BAME Network in her workplace and to lead events to mark Black History Month. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, she had got involved in the Black Lives Matter movement and had attended meetings and a protest, despite admitting:

"I'll be honest. I'm not really a protest kind of person, I believe in change at a strategic level…Just because somebody acknowledges that you're making noise, does not mean that they will give you what you want."

In May, though double-jabbed, Helen was still exercising a lot of caution. Though her husband was keen to, she didn't yet feel ready to go to pubs or restaurants, something that she had previously enjoyed doing. But she saw this very much as a temporary necessity. As a self-described 'glass half full person', she remained on the whole upbeat about the future and she repeatedly expressed a hope that the pandemic would prove to be a catalyst for social change.

"[I]f we came out of this and all we can do is just dive back to what we used to do, then it would just be so sad…I think that there's so many lessons that we as individuals have learned or can learn…[F]or me, as a Black person, the Black Lives Matter, really, really showcased a lot of discrepancies and, you know, inequalities and to just sweep everything under the carpet once we get back to normal, we're just, it would be a travesty."

"One of the things that this has highlighted is the disparity and inequality in our communities. And the fact that…for me, we, the government cannot go back to put its head in the sand and acting like, we don't have a problem because we do."

Case study two: living with physical disabilities during a pandemic

Nick is a white British disabled man from Walsall. He was aware that he was at greater risk from COVID-19 because of his physical disabilities and so deliberately took a more cautious approach throughout the pandemic. Nick lives with his partner, but had also been looking after the son of a friend who was clinically extremely vulnerable.

Nick was chatty and optimistic in our first conversation in August 2020. He said he had been able to remain connected with others, as initiatives he had set up or was heavily involved in, such as an LGBT Christian group and a British Sign Language worship group, had been able to move online. This had allowed him to maintain existing connections and to make new ones, and had also helped bring deaf and hearing people together in worship.

"[…] there's been more people reaching, joining us online who wouldn't be able to come in person. That has been quite amazing actually. You know, it could be either friends who've moved away and or just new people found out about us through Facebook and so they can join on Zoom. And that's been quite amazing. And reaching new deaf people as well so we're deaf and hearing people that come together."

Nick felt that disabled people were particularly at risk and were one of the groups that had been most affected by the pandemic. He spoke about high levels of fear in the disabled community that people with underlying health conditions wouldn't be resuscitated if they were to become unwell. He also talked about people he knew who could not wear a mask for health reasons and were now afraid to go shopping because of the hostility they had faced for not wearing a mask.

> *"[S]ome people can't wear masks because it upsets [them] you know, [it's] emotionally, physically difficult. And they are being jumped on by people who think that they won't wear masks. Yeah, it's been, [there's] been a lot of that going on. I have had friends who are scared, who won't go shopping now, because they can't wear a mask. But they have had so many awful experiences from people."*

When we spoke to Nick in October 2020, he remained chatty and engaged, but seemed lower in mood. He said he felt fragile and more anxious because of the combined threat from COVID-19 and other viruses. The tone of the conversation was much more subdued, particularly after Nick revealed that he had very recently lost a close friend. He felt pessimistic about the future, stating that things would get worse before they could improve.

> *"I just don't want to leave the house. It feels more threatening than last time. Yeah, the weather's changing, colds are doing the rounds, waiting for a flu jab. With the kids back at school, and some people are just acting around as if everything's all hunky dory, normal. And some people aren't distancing and just ignore it [...] I do think it's going to get worse. And that sounds like a right pessimist. But it's gonna get a lot worse before it gets better, because we've got the winter ahead of us."*

When we interviewed Nick again in May 2021, it was clear that he was still going through a hard time. His health had been poor and he was in more pain than usual. In addition, he said that COVID-19 had hit his area hard over the preceding six months; he knew people who had died from COVID-19 and a lot of other people who had had it. A lot of people he knew were struggling with their mental health.

For Nick, one positive which had arisen from all this, and which had clearly been extremely important in helping him to cope, was that online communication had enabled him in some ways to feel more connected than he had before. This was partly because these means of connecting were less susceptible to his disabilities.

> *"I have been better connected now than ever. Zoom has enabled so much. Oh my goodness, I've made some really good friends who I have never met in person yet. It's been brilliant in that regard. And I've been able to do way more because of not having to worry about will I be well enough to drive there, will I be well enough to drive back. Will my meds have dropped out by the time the meeting's finished et cetera."*

However, Nick made the point on a number of occasions that for those who are not online or do not find online communication easy, the experience of the pandemic had been so much worse.

> *"I do worry about people who have fallen through those cracks, who've been missed. Also the ones who aren't online and the isolation, the very real isolation that many people must be feeling."*

Here we identify six key lessons and recommendations that follow from the evidence we have gathered. These address: the value of harnessing power in communities; building greater unity; empowering local government; actively building community cohesion; enhancing volunteering, and; tackling discrimination and disadvantage.

There is still much uncertainty ahead. Although the vaccine programme has substantially weakened the link between infection and severe illness we are not certain how long vaccines will protect against COVID-19, and whether new mutations of the virus will appear. It is likely that we will need to manage a certain level of COVID-19 infection in the population for the foreseeable future. Other challenges are also coming to the fore and the UK is facing an uncertain winter in which labour shortages threaten production and supply chains including fuel, pharmaceuticals, and food.

Our social relations therefore continue to be profoundly affected. As we emerge into this next stage of 'learning to live with the virus' our every interaction at work, in our neighbourhoods, with our families, friends and wider networks requires a daily consideration of risk, both to ourselves, and to others.

Our findings identify some of the likely levers for building resilience to polarisation, divisions and segregation. These same issues are central to any efforts to address inequality. These will be important for us to emerge from the crisis more united and less divided, ready to face together the considerable challenges of building a greener, rebalanced, more equal and inclusive British economy and society.

12. What have we learnt?

12.1 Harness the power in communities

The outpouring of compassion and people organising to help others was much in evidence in the early days of the pandemic. Our findings indicate an increased sense of neighbourliness during periods of strict lockdown, increased social engagement and a strong sense of national and local unity in the first few months of the crisis. They demonstrate a huge capacity in British society for kindness and an ability to forge strong and meaningful social connections. More than that, we can see that when tested, and with conducive conditions, British people are able to come together with others in order to support those who are most vulnerable.

Our contention, that local communities need greater capacity and scope for local people's participation, is echoed by others' calls to 'design and deliver the kind of neighbourhood they want to be part of'.[67] In order to build those neighbourhoods we need to strengthen the ties that bind us, especially those ties that bridge between different groups and communities, and across regions and nations of the UK. The UK is approaching a strategic crossroads, as we emerge from the pandemic; building resilience locally and nationally will enable us to meet future challenges and crisis in a time of rapid change.[68]

What is needed now is a long-term strategic plan which seeks to draw on the lessons learnt during the pandemic to build and harness the potential power of communities to aid recovery and social and economic renewal. We suggest 5 key strands for that programme below:

12.2 Build greater unity

Strengthening the power in communities will be essential to build resilience against the division and polarisation that is re-emerging. **In June 2021 64% thought the UK was growing more divided, and only 16% thought it was growing more united**. Drivers of division as identified through focus groups included economic and racial inequalities, north versus south tensions and divergence between the governments of the UK and devolved nations. When we looked at how people identified as British, English, Scottish or Welsh differences became even more marked.

However, the picture is significantly different at a local level where overall respondents perceived more unity and less division.

We need to address the social cohesion of the UK at both a regional and national level or risk our society becoming further fractured and divided.

67 Kruger, D., 2020. 'Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant'. https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf.

68 More in Common. 2020. 'Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain',https://www.britainschoice.uk; Talk/together. 2021. 'Our chance to reconnect: Final report of the Talk/together project', https://together.org.uk/Our-Chance-to-Reconnect.pdf.

We need a new narrative that prioritises the interdependence between different communities, regions and nations. This means leadership at local, regional and national levels:

- **Acknowledging real differences and disagreements, regional and national autonomy and pride of place, whilst also focussing on the broader context of a strong mutual interdependence.**
- **Stressing that everyone has a part to play in building a fairer, inclusive and more integrated British society and emphasising civility, cooperation, and shared purpose**

12.3 Actively build trust and cohesion in every community

Trust plays a vital role in social cohesion. Both trust in national and local institutions and in each other. We can see that trust in the UK government declined sharply over the period of the pandemic, though in 2021 it recovered somewhat in England. In contrast, trust in local government declined less and people's trust in one another has remained strong. Most marked are the significantly higher levels of trust in the six social cohesion areas. In June 2021, respondents from the six local authorities reported higher national trust (UK government) (+10.3%) and were more positive about their local government's response to Covid-19 (+3.7%). Trust is the essential glue that helps different groups and communities to both bond and bridge across differences.

Our findings suggest that trust might be usefully developed in two directions: Trust in local government and local institutions and services and trust between different groups and communities.

In the six social cohesion areas local government and institutions had reimagined their role and saw themselves as co-producers and enablers of local community. They played a critical role in ensuring the social infrastructure was in place to strengthen trust both within and between different groups and communities, providing a means for meaningful engagement with underserved and underrepresented communities and groups.

Trust between different groups can be supported by building social cohesion into procurement and commissioning processes and supporting bridging programmes more widely. As well as building trust between groups these programmes also play an important role in reducing prejudice and promoting greater understanding and empathy between groups. Our findings indicate that **the *quality* of intergroup contact is 11 times more important than the *quantity***. Programmes should focus on providing high quality opportunities for intergroup contact as these findings reinforce the research that suggests this is more impactful than high quantity lower quality contact.

There are many excellent examples of how to do this from the existing Integration Area programme and more widely (see the work of Near Neighbours, Jo Cox Foundation, National Citizens Service, DLUHC Faith, Race and Hate Crime Programme[69] delivery organisations, The Linking Network and many others). These programmes are already successfully bridging between diverse groups together in formal and informal educational settings and in the community.

69 For specific examples, see: Tyrell, N., Broadwood, J. & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. 'Together, we can achieve unity', https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Together-we-can-achieve-Unity-Final-Final.pdf.

Local government requires the staff, mechanisms, commitment and resources to work alongside communities, groups, business, education, housing, health and civil society sectors to develop, implement and realise a shared vision of place.

Every local authority should establish and sustain a local cohesion strategy appropriate to their local needs and means.

This should include:

- **Strengthening local social infrastructure particularly through engagement with under-represented and under-served groups and communities**
- **Promoting opportunities for positive shared experiences and high-quality connections between people from different backgrounds.**
- **Drawing on well-established research evidence, and the application of leadership and good practice from local and national schemes, civil society organisations, education and the workplace.**

12.4 Empower local government to build social cohesion, local trust and resilience to division, disconnection and tensions

The six local areas that have taken part in our research project remained more resilient when the crisis struck and maintained higher levels of trust in others, neighbourliness, social connections and strikingly higher levels of volunteering than elsewhere (+17.5% more volunteering in June 2021). There is much that can be learnt from them. They have already embraced a philosophy and approach that has put local communities in the driving seat of creating more empowered, connected and kinder local places.[70]

Approaches to social cohesion need to include an emphasis on high quality social mixing and tackling barriers to the inclusion of underrepresented groups and minority communities (including proactively addressing hate crime, discrimination and prejudice).

The best schemes are co-produced between local government and local communities and engage widely across all sectors to deliver on outcomes that benefit local people.[71] Investing in social integration and cohesion fosters a sense of pride in place and will provide resilience to further crisis, challenges and community tensions. It also brings benefits for both individual and community wellbeing.

The levelling up agenda is in part aiming to achieve a rebalancing of the economy towards those areas of the country and communities which have been overlooked and underserved for decades. The focus on repairing and renewing physical infrastructure is important. However, it will be much less effective unless there is an investment in renewing and repairing social infrastructure as well.

70 Broadwood, J., Abrams, D., Lalot, F. & Davies Hayon, K. 2020. 'Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Local Areas'. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Belong-Policy-Paper-March-2021.pdf.

71 For examples, see: Broadwood, J., Abrams, D., Lalot, F. & Davies Hayon, K. 2020. 'Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Social Cohesion in Local Areas'. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Belong-Policy-Paper-March-2021.pdf.

We would urge DLUHC to build on the success of the Integration Area Programme, a relatively inexpensive programme, by investing more widely in strengthening social cohesion at a local level.

Funding of £50 million in England (and compatible levels in other UK countries) is required to build on the successes of, and learning enabled by, the Integration Areas programme by enabling more local areas to reap the benefits of targeted investment in social cohesion and social infrastructure.

This should include a national framework of local cohesion measures and indicators to support local area efforts to strengthen cohesion; encouraging local places to take the lead in shaping and tailoring place-based solutions.

Investment should initially be focused on those areas prioritised for levelling up and should include a local authority cohesion coordinator programme to underpin its wider application.

12.5 Support a sustained uplift in volunteering

Our research found that in local areas with targeted programmes to improve social cohesion respondents were twice as likely to volunteer as elsewhere in the country.

Volunteering (both informal and formal volunteering) has played an essential role in sustaining local community support networks during the Covid-19 pandemic, complementing the support offered by local services.

12.4 million adults volunteered during the pandemic, of which 4.6 million were first time volunteers, with 3.8 million of this group interested in volunteering again.[72] However, rates of increased volunteering were not distributed evenly across different localities and regions with some areas experiencing much higher levels of volunteering than others.[73]

The individual benefits of volunteering are substantial. As we have demonstrated in our early findings those who volunteered during the early days of the pandemic maintained closer social connections, perceived their local area as being less deprived, sustained higher trust in politicians and higher levels of optimism than those who did not volunteer.[74] However there are many different forms of volunteering, both informal and formal, from running charity shops, to volunteering on helplines, to helping neighbours with shopping, to coaching at a sports club, or doing a shift a week at the local foodbank. We need to learn more about the relationship between all forms of volunteering and social cohesion and integration, and the kind of volunteering that might be best at fostering social connections between different groups and communities, and the wider community.

During this pandemic, people have reevaluated their relationships with their neighbourhoods and locality and many have deepened their sense of local community.

72 Together Coalition. 2021. 'Talk / together', https://together.org.uk/talk-together/.

73 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J. & Davies Hayon, K. 2021. 'Community, Connection and Cohesion during Covid-19: Beyond Us and Them Report', https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/community-connection-cohesion-report/.

74 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Platts-Dunn, I. 2020. 'All in it but not necessarily together: Divergent experiences of keyworker and volunteer responders to the Covid-19 pandemic', https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/all-in-it-but-not-necessarily-together-divergent-experiences-of-keyworker-and-volunteer-responders-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/.

As already noted by others,[75] there is a vital opportunity to put in place policies and practices that will support a permanent increase in the number and breadth of people volunteering in their local communities. To achieve this:

The government should work more closely with local government and the volunteering sector to bring forward a comprehensive system of support for a sustained uplift in volunteering that is able to respond to local purpose and develop cross-locality cooperation.

This must include removing the barriers to volunteering and recognising and rewarding active social engagement amongst residents, for instance through volunteer rewards schemes like Bradford Council's Citizen Coin programme.

It should also involve strengthening the local voluntary and community sector in areas where it is underdeveloped so that the uplift in active social engagement and civic participation is encouraged and maintained.

12.6 Tackle deprivation and discrimination

Inequalities between socio-economic groups and regions have been revealed, and in most cases, exacerbated by COVID-19. Living in more deprived areas, working in high-risk occupations or insecure employment, and living in overcrowded conditions has placed some groups and minority ethnic communities at much higher risk of contracting the virus than others. Inequalities directly affect segregation in housing and education and some workplaces and can result in a lack of intergroup contact.

This can result in cohesion challenges at a local level including misinformation and rumours spreading about a particular group or community; geographical divides and divisions within areas; and insular hyperlocal groups unwilling to mix. Enabling people from different groups to connect through positive shared experiences can be a powerful vehicle for countering prejudice, working towards greater equality, and establishing greater trust.

Our research has also demonstrated that public perceptions of discrimination are not necessarily reliable indicators of actual discrimination. It is therefore important to listen to those with lived experience of discrimination and to recognise the cumulative effect of multiple discrimination for some groups and communities.

We need to emerge from this crisis a stronger, fairer and more cohesive society that can more agilely adapt and seize opportunities to support the needs of all. Tackling deprivation and discrimination requires people to address the ways these arise in particular contexts as well as institutionally.

National government, local government, civil society and business will need to work together to provide locally tailored solutions that are responsive to the specifics of place.

75 Kruger, D. 2020. 'Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant', https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%202.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf; Tanner, W., O'Shaughnessy, J. & Krasniqi, F. 2021. 'Policies of belonging: levelling up communities by giving citizens and their communities the power and resources to shape their places and to meet the needs of their members'. *Onward*, https://www.ukonward.com/reports/policies-of-belonging/.

This includes:

- **Proactively tackling the social and physical barriers to inclusion of minority communities and under-represented groups, including the extent to which they feel represented by elected representatives and in the leadership positions of statutory agencies.**
- **Systematically evaluating the equalities and cohesion impact of strategy and policy at national and local levels, and addressing their effects on residents lived experiences, their perception of the place they live and of other groups and communities.**
- **Encouraging and supporting civil society and business, as well as all tiers of government, to ensure that contacts between members of different social groups can happen in ways that are known to promote better intergroup relationships and reduce prejudice.**

12.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, local social cohesion, reflected for example in levels of local trust, intergroup relations, hate crime and prejudice, can be profoundly affected by national and international actors and events. Decisions taken in Westminster, the Senedd and Holyrood can directly impact social cohesion locally and regionally and in particular narratives of 'us and them'.

Recent reports (e.g. Levelling Up Our Communities) rightly highlight the essential role that communities have played in mobilising to support others during the pandemic, and the need to unleash that power in communities in order that local people can have greater say in local decision-making and can play a key role in shaping and delivering their local area. Constructive forms of cohesion need to avoid pitting one group's pride, status or well-being against that of others. Just as individuals are protected and strengthened by being part of a supportive community, so communities are likely to be better protected if they are better connected with and concerned for one another. Responsibility for this lies at all levels of government and should not be left to the latest emergency, or chance.

The majority of the British public want to put aside the divisions and polarisation that has marked British society in recent years. People are weary of being at odds with each other and desire greater unity.[76] We now know from our findings that investing in cohesion works in terms of building trust between groups and individuals and between citizens and their local and national institutions. There has never been a more important moment to do so.

76 Together Coalition. 2021. 'Talk / together', https://together.org.uk/talk-together/.

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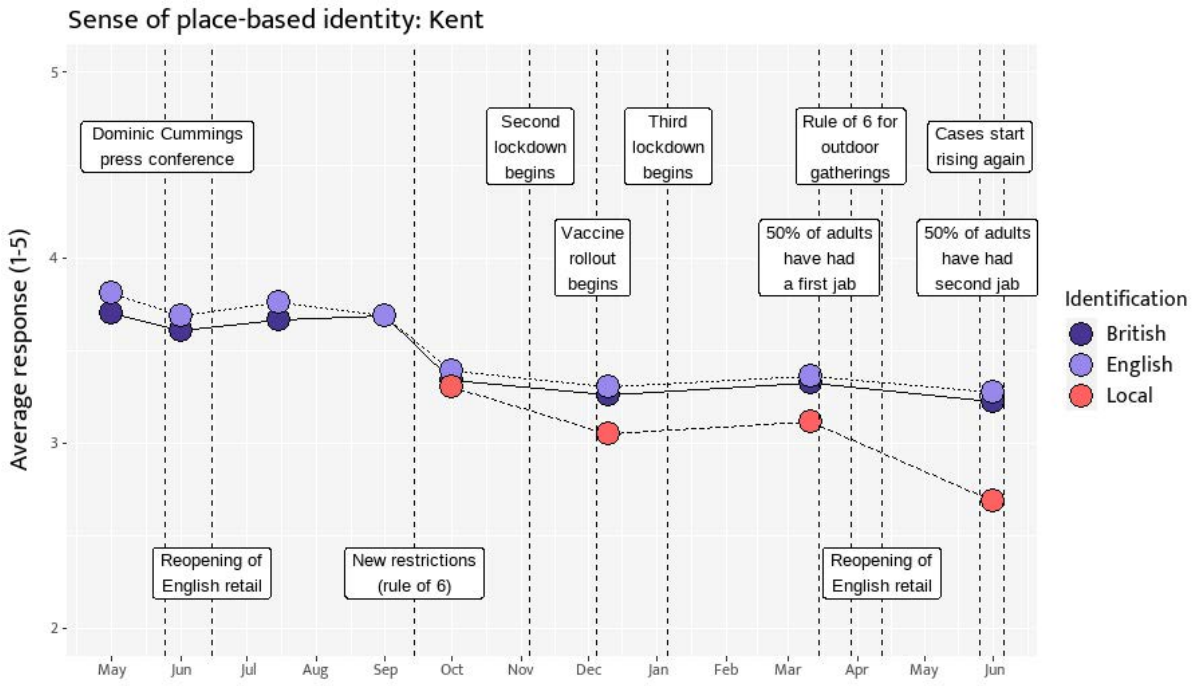
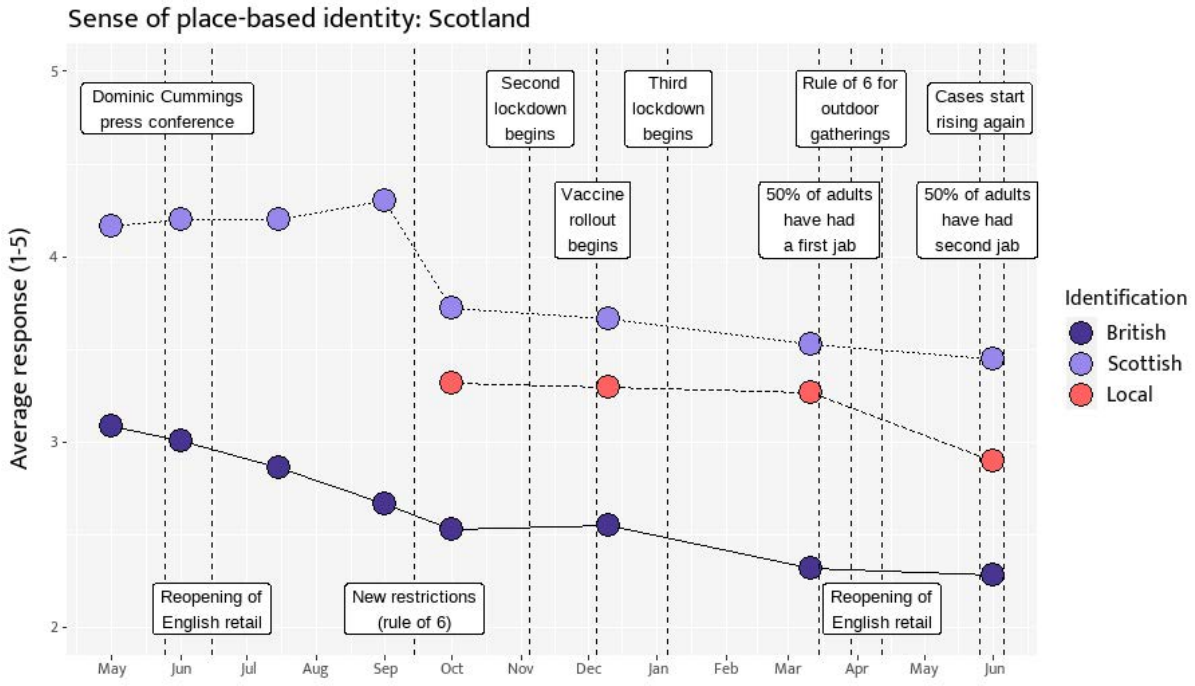
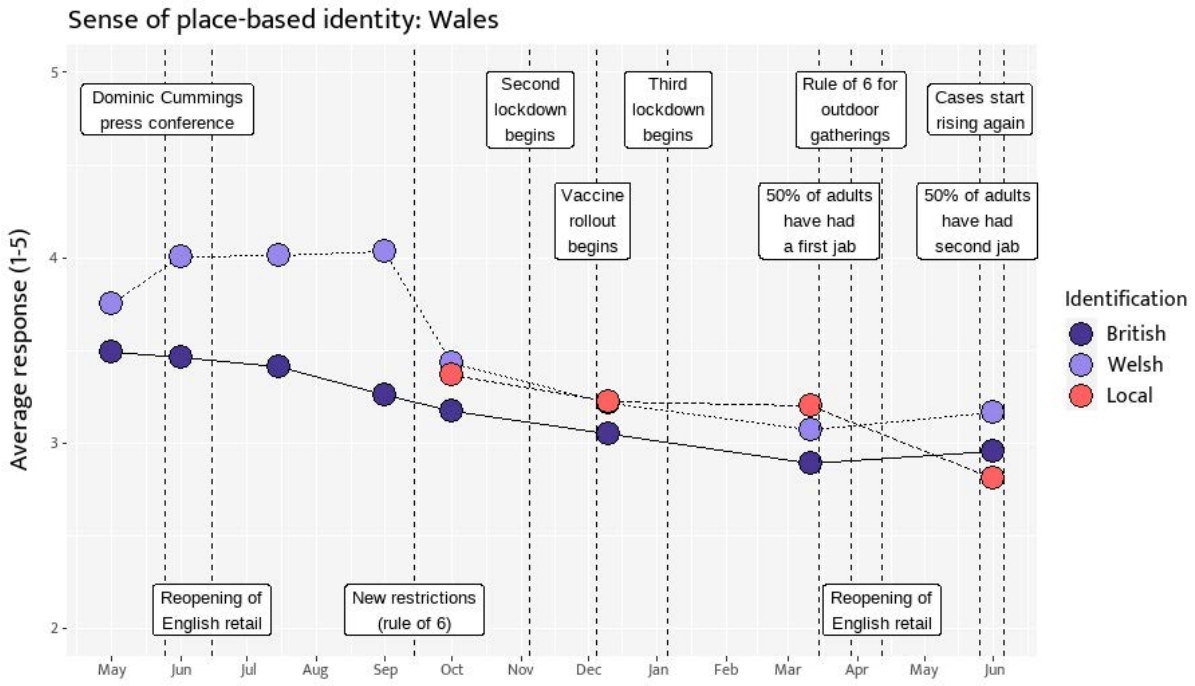
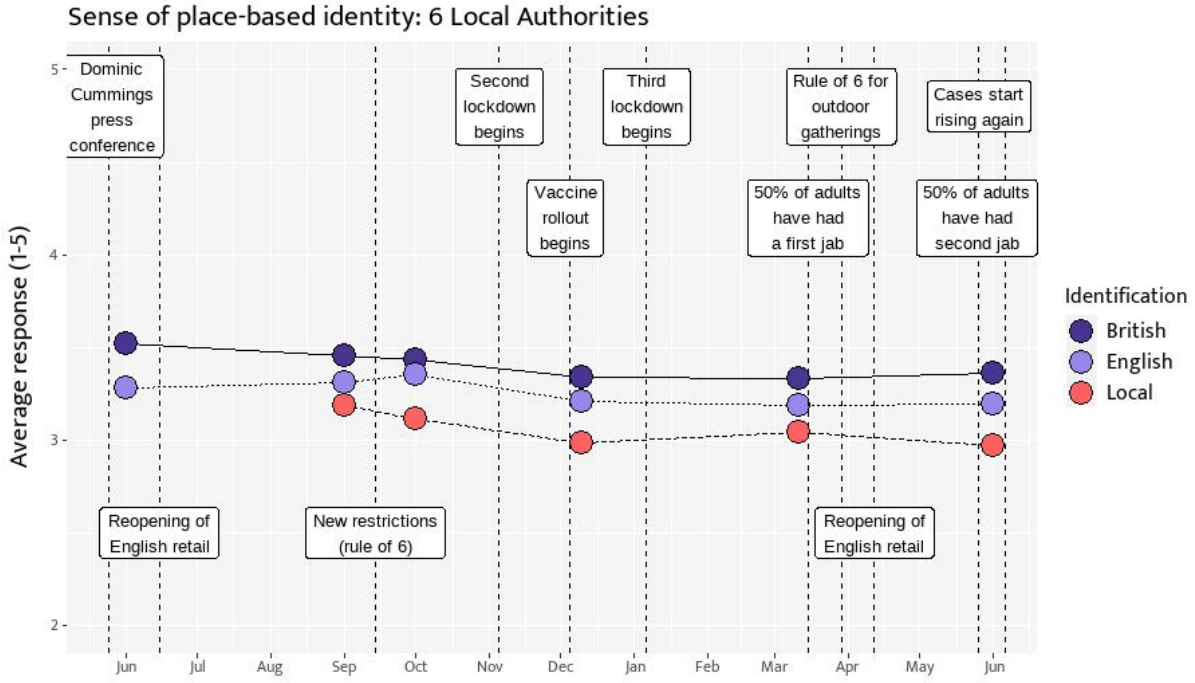
Appendices

Appendix 1: Place-based identity: Identification at the local, regional, and national level, for each sample

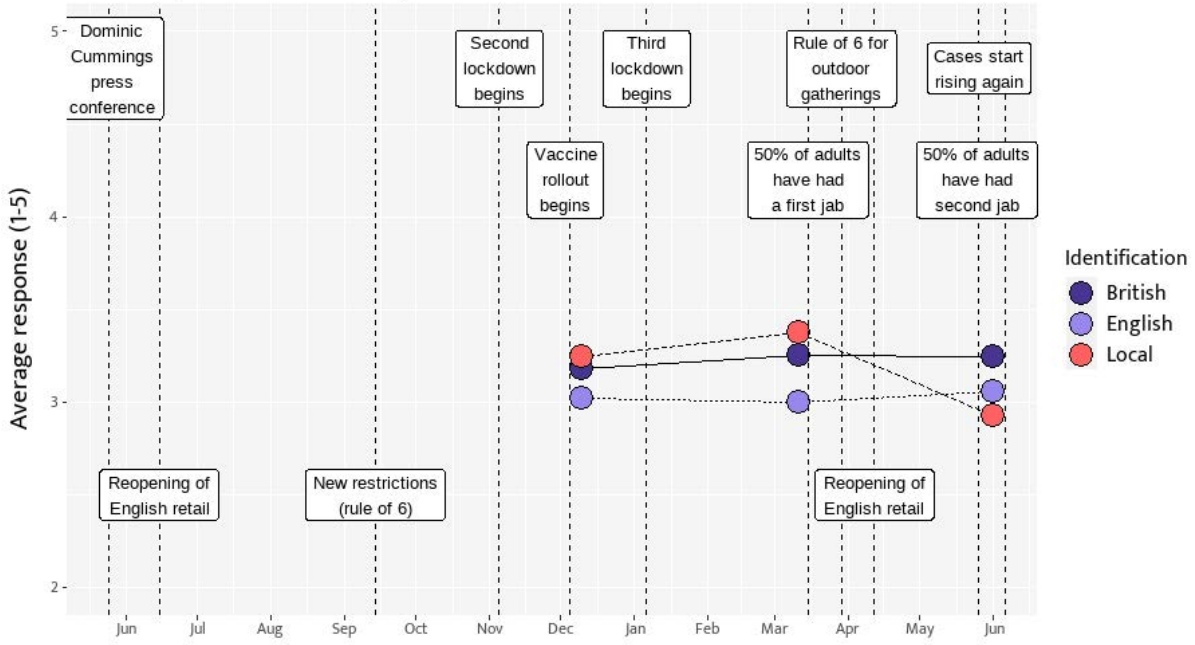




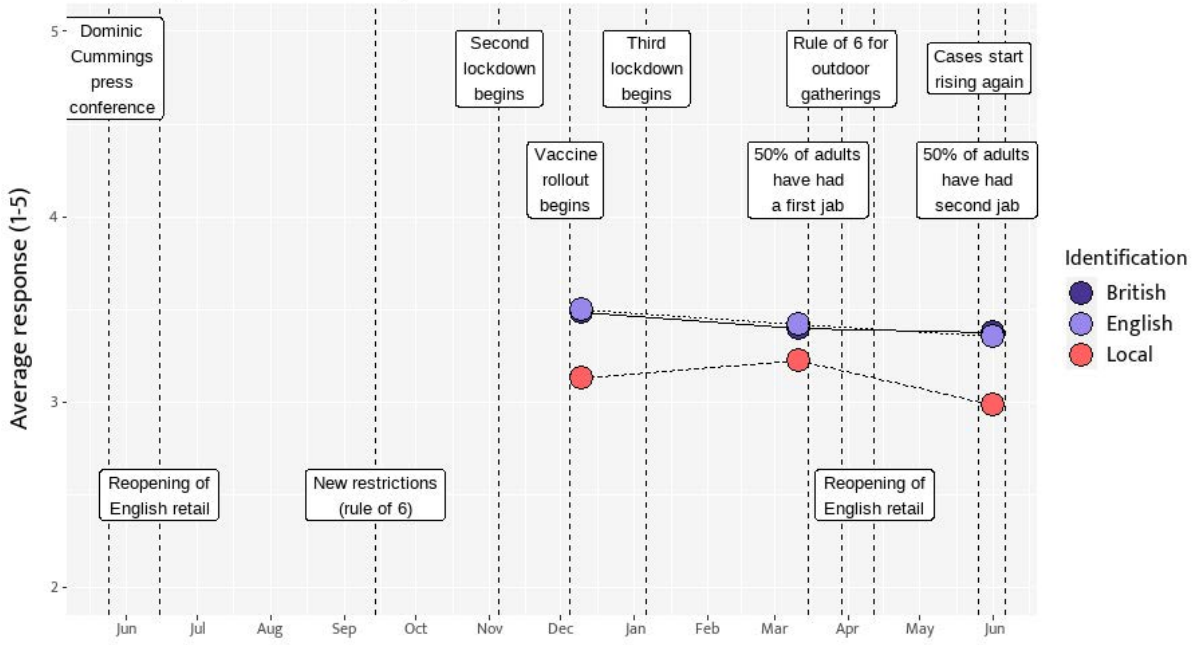

Sense of place-based identity: Wales
Average response (1-5)
5
4
3
2
Dominic Cummings press conference
Second lockdown begins
Third lockdown begins
Rule of 6 for outdoor gatherings
Cases start rising again
Vaccine rollout begins
50% of adults have had a first jab
50% of adults have had second jab
Reopening of English retail
New restrictions (rule of 6)
Reopening of English retail
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Identification
British
Welsh
Local

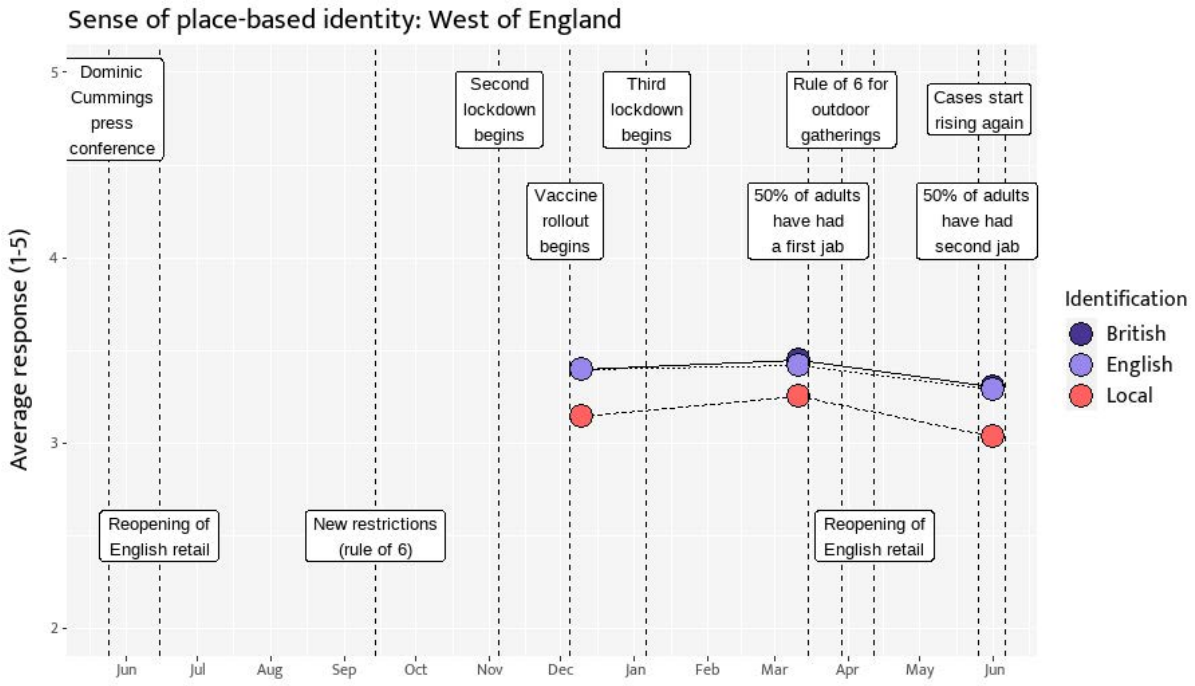

Sense of place-based identity: 6 Local Authorities
Average response (1-5)
5
4
3
2
Dominic Cummings press conference
Second lockdown begins
Third lockdown begins
Rule of 6 for outdoor gatherings
Cases start rising again
Vaccine rollout begins
50% of adults have had a first jab
50% of adults have had second jab
Reopening of English retail
New restrictions (rule of 6)
Reopening of English retail
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Identification
British
English
Local

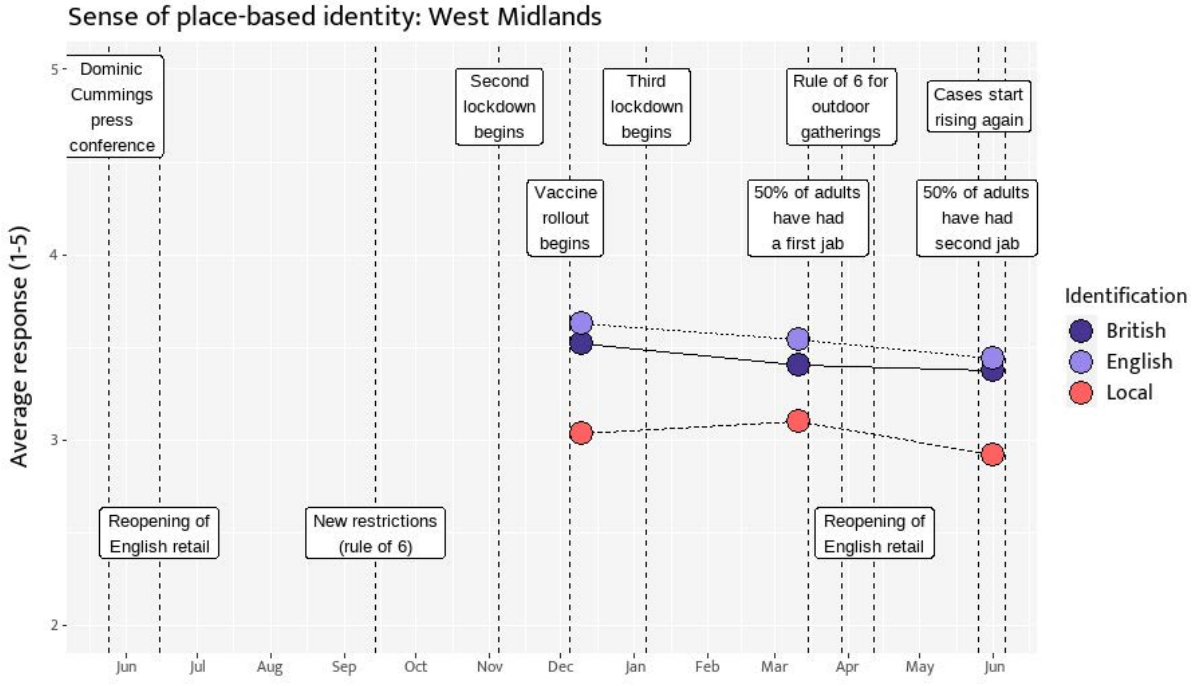
Sense of place-based identity: Greater London



Sense of place-based identity: Greater Manchester




Sense of place-based identity: West of England
Average response (1-5)
5
4
3
2
Dominic Cummings press conference
Second lockdown begins
Third lockdown begins
Rule of 6 for outdoor gatherings
Cases start rising again
Vaccine rollout begins
50% of adults have had a first jab
50% of adults have had second jab
Reopening of English retail
New restrictions (rule of 6)
Reopening of English retail
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Identification
British
English
Local


Sense of place-based identity: West Midlands
Average response (1-5)
5
4
3
2
Dominic Cummings press conference
Second lockdown begins
Third lockdown begins
Rule of 6 for outdoor gatherings
Cases start rising again
Vaccine rollout begins
50% of adults have had a first jab
50% of adults have had second jab
Reopening of English retail
New restrictions (rule of 6)
Reopening of English retail
Jun
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Mar
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Identification
British
English
Local

Appendix 2: Recommendations and Examples of Underpinning Evidence

Recommendations and Examples of Underpinning Evidence

We need a long-term strategic plan which seeks to draw on the lessons learnt during the pandemic to build and harness the potential power of communities to aid recovery and ongoing social and economic renewal. We suggest there should be five key strands to that plan.

Recommendation 1: Leadership and narratives that stress interdependence

We need a new narrative that prioritises the interdependence between different communities, regions and nations. This means leadership at local, regional and national levels:

- **Acknowledging real differences and disagreements, regional and national autonomy and pride of place, whilst also focussing on the broader context of a strong mutual interdependence.**
- **Stressing that everyone has a part to play in building a fairer, inclusive and more integrated British society and emphasising civility, cooperation, and shared purpose**

Our findings have shown a country in which people have felt a greater sense of unity and coming together at a local level, but a sense of heightened division at a national level. At the same time our identities appear to be becoming more disparate and complex. For example:

- National identities - Respondents from England consistently express higher British identity than respondents from Wales and Scotland;
  - Respondents from Scotland and Wales expressed moderate British identity up until June 2020, but it weakened sharply after this.
  - Respondents from Scotland consistently expressed the lowest British identity of all.
- Sense of national unity - In the early days of the crisis, there was a perception of growing national unity (43%) with only 32% perceiving growing divisions. But this quickly faded from June 2020 onwards. By June 2021, 64% perceived growing division in the country and only 16% growing unity.
- Sense of local unity – By contrast, throughout 2020 more people thought their local area was becoming more united than thought it was becoming more divided and by June 2021 roughly equal numbers perceived growing local unity (26%) as perceived growing local division (22%)
- Divisions between groups – Perceptions of divisions between particular groups all rose sharply from May 2020. These included:
  - Wealthier vs poorer - rose from 49% of people perceiving divisions in May 2020 to 67% in June 2021
  - Leavers vs Remainers – rose from 39% in May 2020 to 67% in June 2021
  - Scotland vs England – rose from 51% in May 2020 to 64% in June 2021
  - By contrast, throughout 2020 more people thought their local area was becoming more united than thought it was becoming more divided and by June 2021 roughly equal numbers perceived growing local unity (26%) as perceived growing local division (22%).
- **Division and the media** - A recurring theme in interviews and focus groups discussions was the media's perceived role in promoting narratives of division.

Recommendation 2: Actively build trust within every community and between communities	
Every local authority should establish and sustain a local cohesion strategy appropriate to their local needs and means. **This should include:** • **Strengthening local social infrastructure particularly through engagement with under-represented and under-served groups and communities** • **Promoting opportunities for positive shared experiences and high-quality connections between people from different backgrounds.** • **Drawing on well-established research evidence, and the application of leadership and good practice from local and national schemes, civil society organisations, education and the workplace.**	Trust in local government held up more strongly than trust in national government, but not as strongly as trust in other people. Trust was higher in the areas that had prioritised cohesion and among volunteers. This suggests we need to build trust from the ground-up. For example: • **Trust in the UK government's response** to the crisis started out high (51% of people in May 2020), but dropped sharply after June 2020, hitting its lowest point in October 2020 (21%) and never recovered to the level of May 2020. • **Trust in local government** - Respondents consistently trusted their local authority's response to COVID-19 more than they did the UK government, remaining at 41% in June 2021. This was true in all places. • **Trust in other people** – Trust in other people (to abide by COVID-19 restrictions) fell during the summer of 2020 (to 19%), but recovered strongly in autumn 2020 and was still stronger in June 2021 (43%) than it had been in May 2020. In six local authority areas that have prioritised social cohesion, we found that people had higher levels of political trust. • **Higher trust in national and local government** - Respondents in the six local authority areas (when asked in June 2021) expressed higher levels of trust in the national government than respondents from other places (+10%), and were more positive towards their local government's response to the pandemic (+4%). • **Feelings of warmth towards other groups** - In the local areas feelings of warmth towards migrants to the UK were higher than elsewhere in June 2020 and were maintained at this level in June 2021. Volunteering is associated with higher levels of trust both in local institutions and in each other – see the findings below.

Recommendation 3: Empower local government to build cohesion, trust and resilience	
Funding of £50 million in England (and compatible levels in other UK countries) is required to build on the successes of, and learning enabled by, the Integration Areas programme by enabling more local areas to reap the benefits of targeted investment in social cohesion and social infrastructure. **This should include a national framework of local cohesion measures and indicators to support local area efforts to strengthen cohesion; encouraging local places to take the lead in shaping and tailoring place-based solutions.** **Investment should initially be focused on those areas prioritised for levelling up and should include a local authority cohesion coordinator programme to underpin its wider application.**	The six local areas that have prioritised social cohesion remained more resilient when the crisis struck and maintained higher levels of trust, neighbourliness, social connection and strikingly higher levels of volunteering. There is much that can be learnt from them. For example: • **Higher trust in national and local government** – see above • **Higher levels of volunteering** - The percentage of respondents volunteering in the six areas remained more consistent and twice as high as in other places. Respondents in these areas in June 2021 reported much **greater active social engagement** in general (i.e. volunteering, donating, signing petitions) by a differential of +17.4%. • **Higher levels of social connection** - Respondents in the six areas (when asked in June 2021) had closer relations with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours than people from other areas (+19%). • **High levels of neighbourliness** – Respondents in the six areas consistently reported having a stronger sense of neighbourliness than those in other areas. • **Higher levels of subjective well-being** – Respondents in these areas (even after accounting for demographic differences) were more likely to perceive themselves as being financially better off than others and consistently experienced higher levels of subjective well-being than respondents in other places.

Recommendation 4: Support a sustained uplift in volunteering	
The government should work more closely with local government and the volunteering sector to bring forward a comprehensive system of support for a sustained uplift in volunteering that is able to respond to local purpose and develop cross-locality cooperation. **This must include removing the barriers to volunteering and recognising and rewarding active social engagement amongst residents, for instance through volunteer rewards schemes like Bradford Council's Citizen Coin programme.** **It should also involve strengthening the local voluntary and community sector in areas where it is underdeveloped so that the uplift in active social engagement and civic participation is encouraged and maintained.**	Volunteers express higher levels of political trust, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future, and volunteering (formal and informal) played an essential role in sustaining local community support networks. In local areas which have prioritised social cohesion respondents were much more likely to volunteer. For example: • **The experience of volunteers** - those who engage in volunteering express greater trust in local and national government, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future, than non-volunteers. • **Volunteering and trust** - Higher levels of local political trust were significantly and reliably associated with greater rates of positive social engagement. - There is a similar but weaker relationship between helping behaviour (that is, volunteering and donating) and higher levels of national political trust.

Recommendation 5: Tackle deprivation and discrimination

National government, local government, civil society and business will need to work together to provide locally tailored solutions that are responsive to the specifics of place. This includes:

- **Proactively tackling the social and physical barriers to inclusion of minority communities and under-represented groups, including the extent to which they feel represented by elected representatives and in the leadership positions of statutory agencies.**
- **Systematically evaluating the equalities and cohesion impact of strategy and policy at national and local levels, and addressing their effects on residents lived experiences, their perception of the place they live and of other groups and communities.**
- **Civil society and business, as well as all tiers of government, should be encouraged and supported to ensure that contacts between members of different social groups can happen in ways that are known to promote better intergroup relationships and reduce prejudice.**

Many people continue to experience discrimination, despite heightened awareness of inequality, and people's perceptions of the seriousness of discrimination and deprivation are not necessarily reliable indicators of actual discrimination. Our findings support this, for example:

- **Perceptions of deprivation** - The groups respondents perceived as suffering the highest levels of deprivation based on key characteristics are homeless people and those on low incomes.
  - Asylum seekers and refugees and Black people are perceived as suffering higher levels of deprivation than Muslim people.
- **Perceptions of discrimination** - Respondents perceived all forms of discrimination as becoming increasingly serious between May and June 2020.
  - Discrimination based on race or ethnicity are perceived as the most serious forms of discrimination.
- **Warmth towards different groups** - Asked about their own feelings towards different groups, respondents were consistently warmest towards older people and coldest towards migrants to the UK.
- **Experience of discrimination** - Four fifths of Black respondents (81%) and three quarters of Muslim respondents (73%) reported having experienced some form of discrimination against themselves in the last month, compared with 53% of White respondents.
  - Women were a fifth more likely than men to report having experienced discrimination. Young people (aged 18-24) were almost twice more likely than older people (45+) to report having experienced discrimination.
- Where **intergroup contact** is associated with more positive attitudes towards others, this is 11 times as much linked to the **quality** of the contact as to the simple **quantity** of contact.