Public Perceptions of UK and Local Government Communication about COVID-19

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THE COHESION AND INTEGRATION NETWORK

Executive Summary

As the government lifts the last of the restrictions on movement and social mixing, this report shares the Beyond Us and Them project's most recent findings. We have been exploring public perceptions of communications about COVID-19 from the UK government and from local government.[1]

Our research 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 have 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 have also investigated whether these results differ for different regions, nations and local areas of the UK and whether these differences may be related to a stronger sense of identity and local belonging in some places.

Our findings show that both UK and local government communications were perceived on average as **fairly clear and as using understandable language**. However significant differences emerge on other measures:

- Just over half of respondents perceived the **UK government** communications as being **low in honesty and credibility** (51.6%) and as **low in empathy** (50.2%). Only 19.9% of the public attributed high honesty and credibility and high empathy to the UK government communication.
- In contrast a much smaller proportion of respondents perceived **local government** communication as being low in honesty and credibility (35.5%) and low in empathy (38.7%). With more attributing high honesty and credibility (26.3%) and high empathy (24.4%) to local government communication.
- Nearly half of respondents (47.9%) thought UK government communication **did not meet their community's needs**, whilst a notably smaller proportion (35.9%) thought local government communication did not meet those needs. Conversely nearly 6% more thought local government communication met the community's needs (26.0%) than thought UK government communication did so (20.2%).
- UK government communications surpassed local government in only one area: 44.8% viewed government information as **highly accessible and easy to find**, whereas only 23.7% viewed local government information as highly accessible and easy to find.
- **Different regions and nations** of the UK perceived UK and local government communications differently, with respondents in Wales, Scotland, Greater London, Greater Manchester and West of England viewing local government communications more positively. Whereas West Midlands and, on some measures, Kent finding much less difference between the two.
- Those people who strongly **identify** with Britain **or** their local area are more likely to view both UK government and local communications more positively. However, their positive view of local

1 In Scotland and Wales we also examined perceptions of devolved government communications, which are covered in an appendix to this report: *Results for the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales*

communication was more closely related to how strongly they identified with the local area, whereas their positive view of UK government communication was more closely related to how strongly they identified with Britain as a whole.

Many local areas have demonstrated their ability to respond effectively and efficiently to the needs of their local communities, and to tailor and nuance local public health messages. There is already good evidence to suggest that those areas that had already invested in social cohesion were better able to engage with local communities to mitigate the worst impacts of the pandemic.[2] As UK wide restrictions are lifted it is likely that the current wave of COVID-19 infections will peak at different times in different places and affect groups and communities differently. The onus is likely to shift substantially to local government and institutions to communicate local public health information and messages. Our research shows that local government is already perceived as a credible, trusted and empathic source of communication that is responsive to the needs of local communities. However local authorities may need to do more to make local information more accessible and easier to find in order to better support local public health messaging.

Conversely UK government communications whilst perceived as fairly clear and relatively very accessible could be improved to be of greater relevance to different groups and communities and this might also improve public perceptions of the UK government as a credible and empathic source of information.

These results resonate with earlier published findings which showed that trust in local government tends to be considerably greater and more stable than levels of trust in the UK national government. However, as we enter this next wave of the pandemic and place greater reliance on 'personal responsibility' it will be even more important that people can understand which norms and practices are needed in their local situation. Therefore, our findings point to a need for the UK government to better equip local government with up-to-date information and with the resources and capacity to communicate local public health messages clearly and accessibly.

2 Abrams, Lalot, Broadwood & Davies Hayon (2021). *Community, Connection and Cohesion During Covid-19: Beyond Us and Them* Report. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/community-connection-cohesion-report

Introduction

Communication about COVID-19 comes in different forms and from different sources. In the context of our surveys, interviews and focus groups, respondents understood the term communication to refer to COVID-19 relevant information or guidance. We specified that we were asking about communications from different sources and these were either the UK government, local government and/or the relevant devolved administration (e.g. Scottish Parliament). We were interested in exploring whether communications from local and national government are perceived differently and if so, in what ways, and what might be the implications for handling the next stages of the pandemic?

A large body of research supports the idea that government communication plays a key role during crises such as the current COVID-19 pandemic.[3] Effective communication is necessary to engage the public, create trust, empower people, and in turn sustain compliance with health-protection recommendations.[4] Conversely, ineffective communication is likely to create public confusion and misunderstanding. Research suggests that this risks "serious errors in responding to this evolving health threat, leading to disastrous health and social outcomes for the public and prolonging the pandemic."[5]

3 Sanders (2020). British government communication during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic: learning from high reliability organizations. *Church, Communication and Culture*, 5(3), 356-377, https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2020.1824582
Radwan & Mousa (2020). Government Communication Strategies during Coronavirus Pandemic: United Arab Emirates Lessons. *Journal of Health Management*, 22(4), 516–527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0972063420983091

4 Chang (2020). Cross-Country Comparison of Effects of Early Government Communication on Personal Empowerment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Taiwan and the United States. *Health Communication*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1852698

5 Kim & Kreps (2020). An Analysis of Government Communication in the United States During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Recommendations for Effective Government Health Risk Communication. World Medical & Health Policy, 12, 398-412. https://doi.org/10.1002/wmh3.363

The Research

This research project, Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19,[6] examines the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on local communities and societal cohesion across the UK. It is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted by Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network and the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent. This brief report uses data from the latest Beyond Us and Them survey of 9045 people to address the question of how people from different parts of the UK perceive UK government COVID-19 communication relative to communication from their local authorities.

We examine people's perception of whether UK and local government communications are clear, honest, empathic, easily accessible, and addressing their community's needs. We also explore whether these perceptions differ according to experiences in different regions and countries of the UK, comparing the findings in four major metropolitan areas and a non-metropolitan county in England, and in the nations of Scotland and Wales.[7]

Respondents were asked to what extent they regarded communication by the UK government and (separately) by their local government (and in Scotland and Wales, also their devolved administration) as "clear, and in language I could understand", "honest and credible", "showing empathy", "accessible to me, and easy to find", and "corresponding to what my community needed". These were answered using a 5-point scale ranging from *1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = A moderate amount, 4 = A lot, to 5 = Completely*.

Timeline of data collection

Data for this report were collected from 9045 people in these parts of the UK between the 25th of May and the 28th of June 2021. The vaccine rollout was accelerating during May 2021 as the age thresholds for invitations to be vaccinated began to include increasing numbers of young adults. Cases linked to the Delta variant (first identified in India) began to increase rapidly in May, starting in Bolton, and then other localities in the North and Northeast of England. The government continued to follow its roadmap for reopening the economy and further restrictions on indoor hospitality venues were relaxed just prior to the start of data collection. However, full relaxation of all rules, nicknamed 'Freedom Day', which had been planned for the 21st of June, was postponed until the 19th of July in order to allow a larger proportion of the population to be fully vaccinated. The postponement had been widely trailed during the weeks leading up to its formal announcement (14th of June). As data collection was finalised, the number of daily reported cases had risen to 25,000 (similar to levels in late January 2021), but 84.6% of the adult population had received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccination and 62.1% had received both doses.

6 For an overview of the project and previous research reports, see: https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/research-projects/beyond-us-and-them-research-project

7 For results for Scotland and Wales please see the Appendix to the main Report *(Public Perceptions of UK and local government communications about Covid-19) Results for the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales*.

Our findings

Almost 15 months into the pandemic, our research reveals clear differences in people's perceptions of UK government and local government communication about COVID-19 during the past year.

Overall, more people said they had experienced low rather than high quality communication on almost all measures, although average scores tended to be around the middle of the scale. We will focus on respondents who felt that communication was clearly either low (scoring 1 or 2 on the scales) or high (scoring 4 or 5) in conveying particular types or aspects of information.

These differences are illustrated in the figures below. An additional figure showing the mean values for each indicator (adjusted for demographics) can be found in the Appendices.

Both UK and local government communications were perceived on average to be **fairly clear and using understandable language**. Slightly more respondents perceived the clarity of UK government communication to be low (38.1%) than perceived it to be high (34.3%). Significantly fewer judged local government communication to be unclear (30.9%) and a similar number judged it to be very clear (32.2%).

However, the differences in judgements of the UK and local government communication are larger on other measures.

Just over half (51.6%) of respondents regarded UK government communication as **being low in honesty and credibility**, whereas only 35.5% held this view of local government communication. 19.9% attributed high honesty and credibility to UK government communication but more did so to local government communication (26.3%).

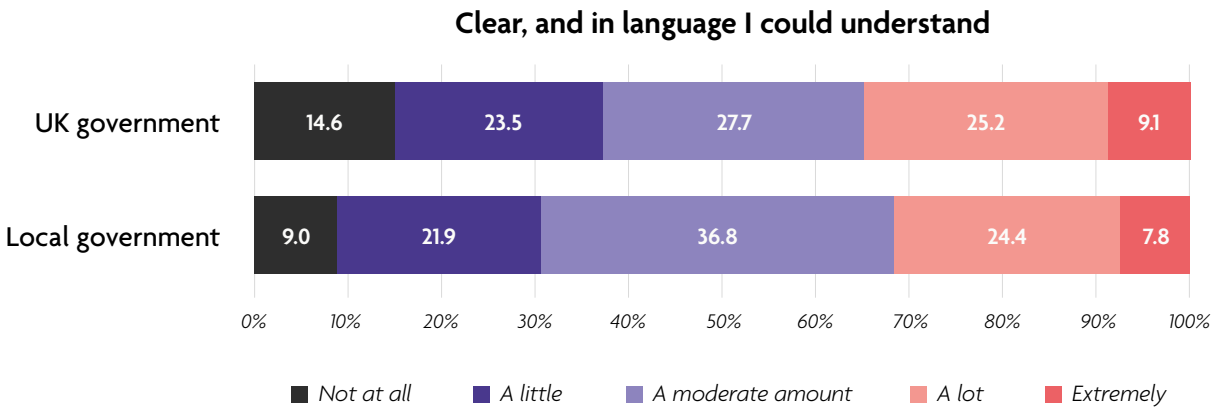
Just over half of respondents (50.2%) also thought that UK government communication **lacked empathy**, and only 19.9% thought its level of empathy was high. By contrast, a smaller proportion thought local government communication was low in empathy (38.7%) and 24.4% perceived it to be high in empathy.

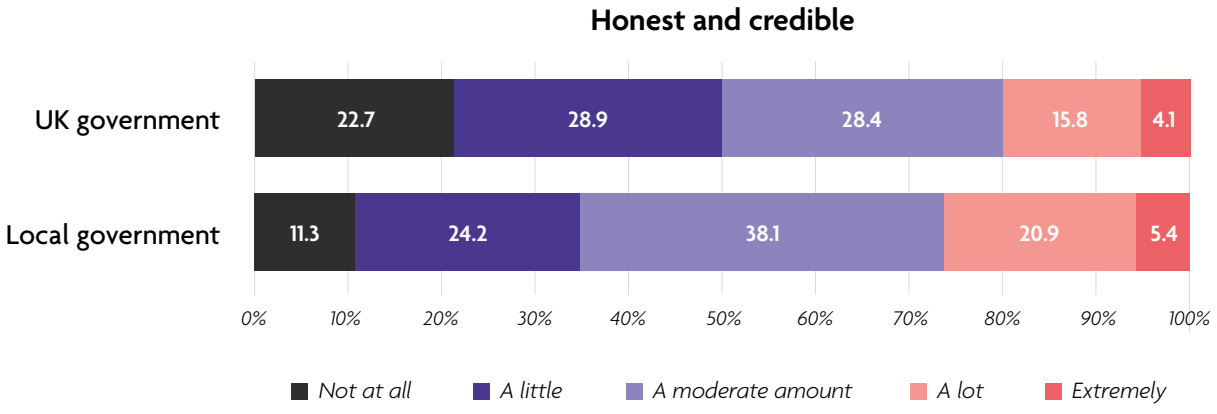
By a similar margin, nearly half of respondents (47.9%) thought UK government communication **did not meet community's needs**, and a notably smaller proportion (35.9%) thought local government communication did not meet those needs. Conversely nearly 6% more thought local government communication met the community's needs (26.0%) than thought UK government communication did so (20.2%).

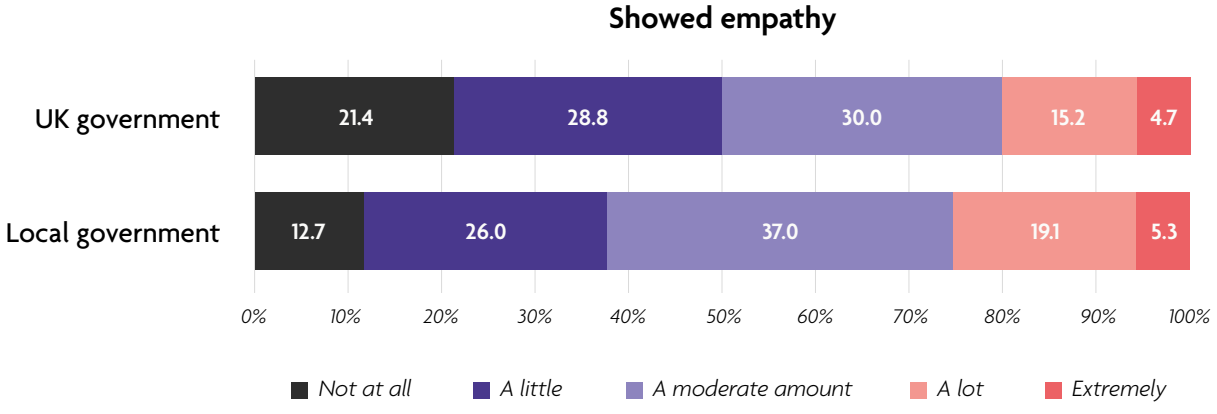
In fact, there was only one area in which the UK government surpassed local government communication. Only 24.7% regarded UK government information as low in accessibility, whereas 44.8% viewed it as **highly accessible and easy to find**. 34.6% found the accessibility of local government communication to be low and only 23.7% 33.1% viewed it as highly accessible.[8]

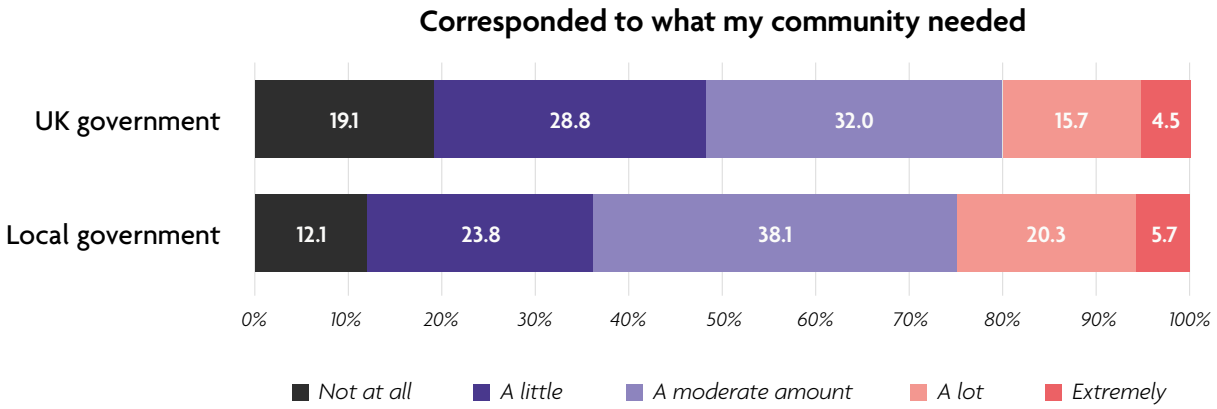
8 All differences were significant at $p < .001$ in a mixed model analysis of variance (UK vs. local government as a repeated measure). Additional analyses also tested for the role of demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, subjective socioeconomic status, and political orientation). Results showed a consistent effect of age, status, and political orientation across indicators of communication, so that older, higher status, and more left-wing respondents perceived greater differences between the UK and local government communication (all effects statistically significant at $p = .001$ or smaller). Other demographics did not affect the perception of government communication.

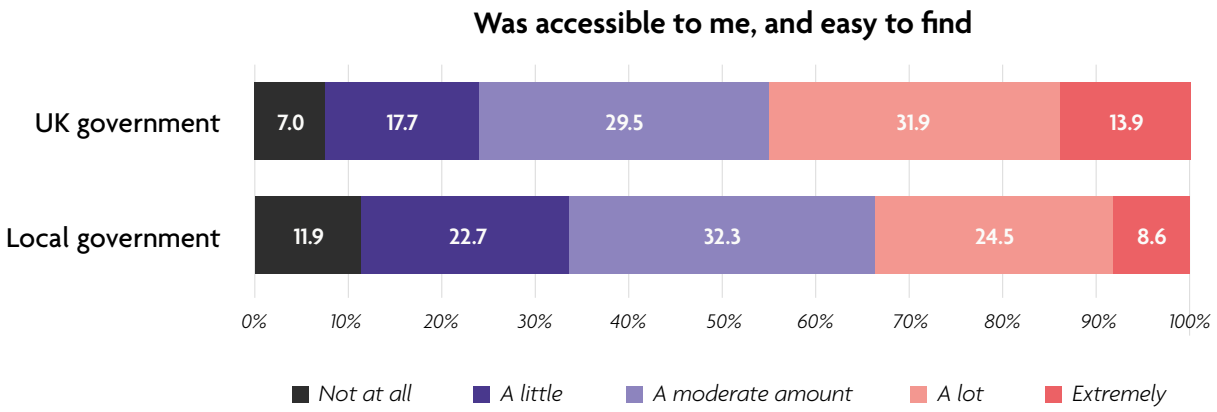
During the past year, I thought that communication about COVID-19 by [the UK / my local] government was...











A huge amount of information has been communicated by the UK government to the public about COVID-19, but the central question is whether that information is being received and understood. The evidence here shows that, despite continual updating through television and other mass media, generally a third of respondents perceive the clarity, honesty, empathy, and value to their community to be low. Moreover, on all of these aspects they find communication from the UK government to be of lower quality than that from local government. However, approximately half believe that UK government has done a good job in making information accessible to them, and more perceive the accessibility of local government information to be low.

This suggests an unfortunate paradox in that the information that is most likely to be perceived as clear, honest, empathic, and valuable (i.e., that from local government) is also least accessible. Conversely the information that is most accessible (i.e., from UK government) is generally perceived to be less trustworthy, less empathic and less focused on community needs.

Differences across places

Taking all respondents together, local communication is seen as being of higher quality, but we also need to ask whether this is a constant perception across all localities or whether it differs between places. If the particular locality makes no difference this would suggest that perceptions are really driven by (dis) satisfaction with UK government communication rather than factors operating at a local level. If, however, perceptions differ between areas, it would suggest that local factors play an important role in affecting the perceived differences in the quality of UK and local communication.

We therefore considered how perceptions varied across the different parts of the UK we surveyed. We were able to compare respondents from **Scotland** (*n = 603*), **Wales** (*n = 601*), and in England the four metropolitan areas of **Greater London** (*n = 2039*), **Greater Manchester** (*n = 1143*), **West of England** (*n = 546*) and **West Midlands** (*n = 1052*), as well as the county of **Kent** (*n = 611*).[9]

As illustrated below, respondents in **Scotland and Wales** were the most likely to offer a low assessment of the quality of UK government communications (between 44% and 64% across different measures). Respondents in Scotland were also the least likely to have low perceptions of the quality of their local government communication (ranging between 25% and 36%).

Scottish and Welsh respondents also rated communication from their national (Scottish/Welsh) government. Both local and Scottish/Welsh government communication were rated as superior to UK government communication on all indicators, and there was very little or no difference between perceptions of local government and Scottish/Welsh government communication. Overall people in Scotland and Wales expressed the largest differences in perception of local (and devolved) versus UK government communication.[10]

There were also differences between different parts of England. Respondents in **Greater London, Greater Manchester, West of England** and **Kent** had lower perceptions of UK government than local government communication (typically by a margin of about 10%, but most markedly when judging honesty and serving their community's needs).

Respondents in the **West Midlands**, on the other hand, barely distinguished between the quality of UK and local government communication. As can be seen in the graphs below, this was not because they were more negative than others about local government communication but because they were less negative about UK government communication, relative to other places.

Within all areas, the accessibility of local government communication was perceived as lower than that of UK government communication, typically by a margin of at least 10%. However, it is notable that a higher

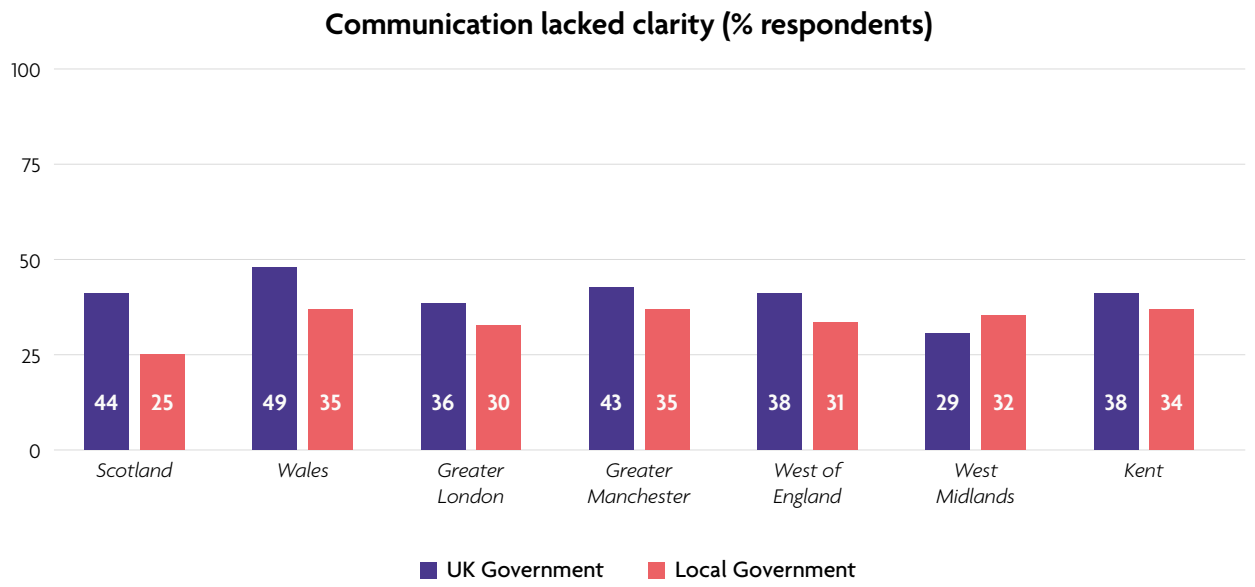
9 All analyses comparing places were adjusted for demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, subjective socioeconomic status, and political orientation) so that any difference in perceptions of communication cannot be explained by different demographics between samples.

10 Abrams, Broadwood, Lalot, Davies Hayon (2021) *Public Perceptions of UK and local government communications about Covid-19, Appendix to the main report: Results for the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales*

proportion found local government communication hard to access in Wales and in Kent (41%), and a lower proportion in Greater London (33%) than elsewhere. This suggests that the Greater London authorities were more successful in their communications than other local areas. The proportion reporting low accessibility of local government communication varied by 8% across places. The range for low accessibility of UK government communication was similar (10%). Strikingly, Kent reported both the highest inaccessibility of local communication (41%) and lowest inaccessibility of UK government communication (21%). In contrast, Scotland had the highest proportion reporting low UK government accessibility (31%) and the smallest difference between that and the inaccessibility of local government communication (6% greater).

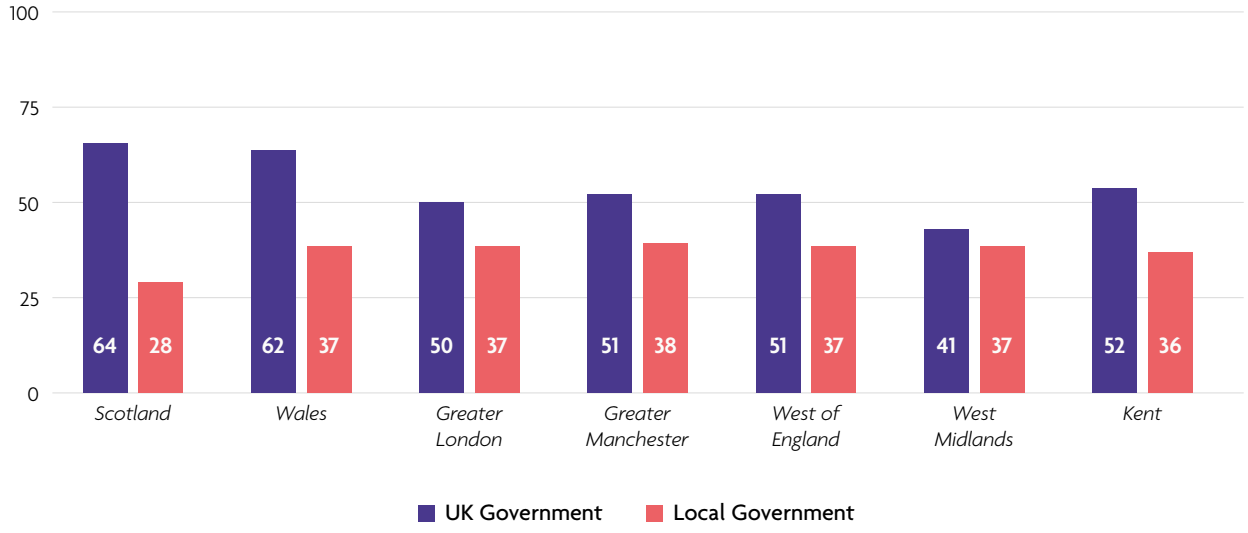
Finally, we note that when we explore at a finer level of detail within the different metropolitan areas we find similar results for people living in different local authorities within each of these areas, so that differences between the metropolitan areas were generally larger than those within each area.[11]

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).

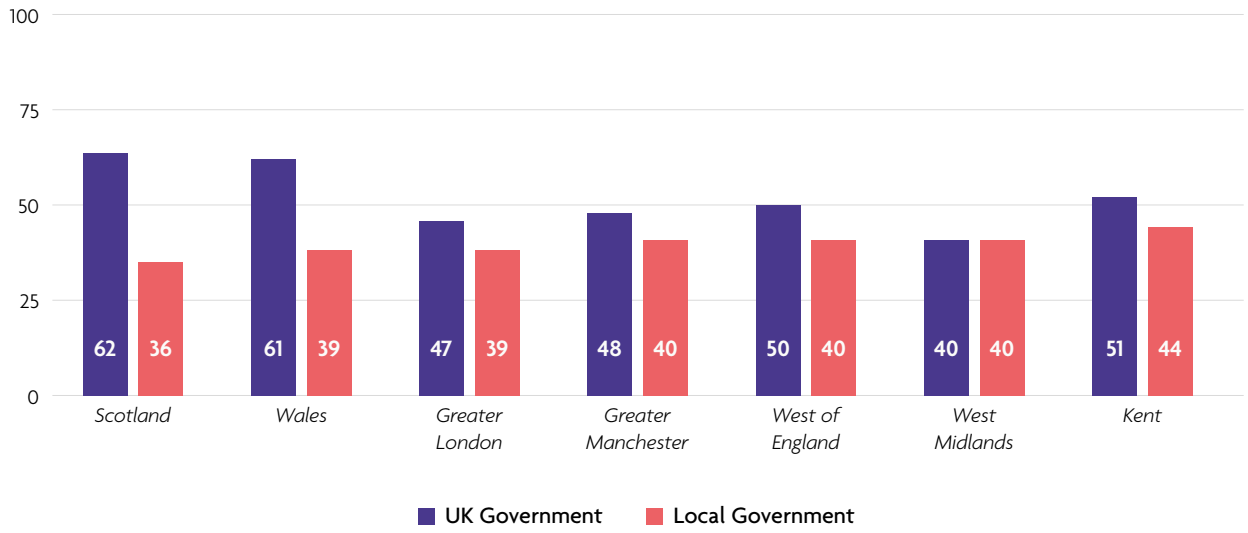


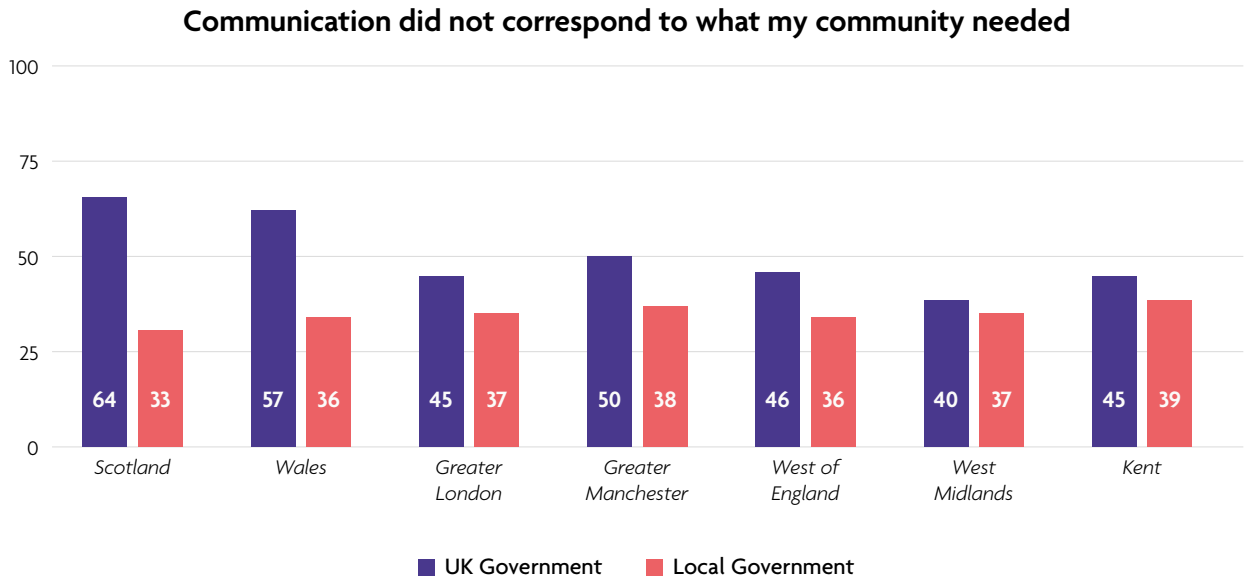
11 Our sample also included 1184 respondents from six local authorities that had prioritised social cohesion and integration. It is beyond the scope of this report to present their results in detail, but it is worth noting that overall, respondents from the Cohesion and Integration local authorities rated communication by their local government very positively. This positive view led them to show the greatest difference between UK and local government of all the English areas surveyed, with difference rates very similar to that of Wales (differences ranging 11-20 percentage points).

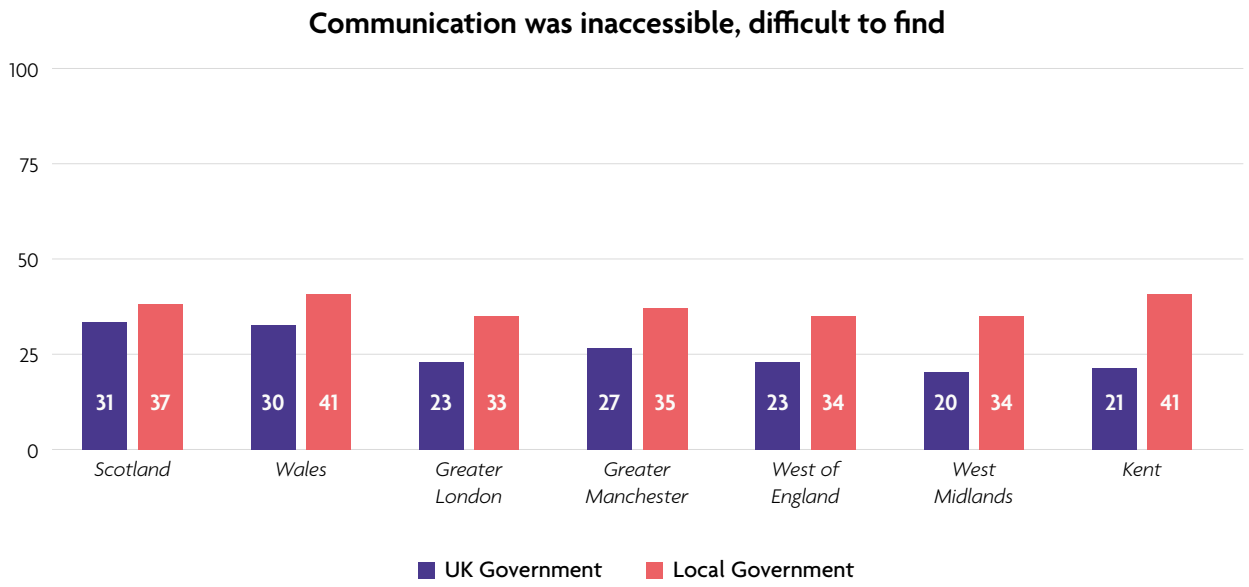
Communication lacked honesty and credibility (% respondents)



Communication lacked empathy



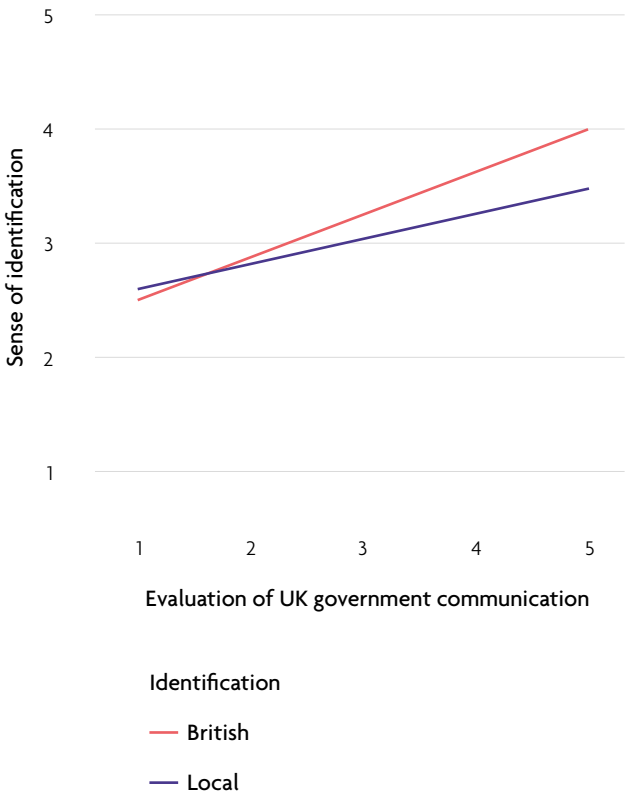

Communication did not correspond to what my community needed
100
75
50
25
0
64
33
57
36
45
37
50
38
46
36
40
37
45
39
Scotland
Wales
Greater London
Greater Manchester
West of England
West Midlands
Kent
UK Government
Local Government

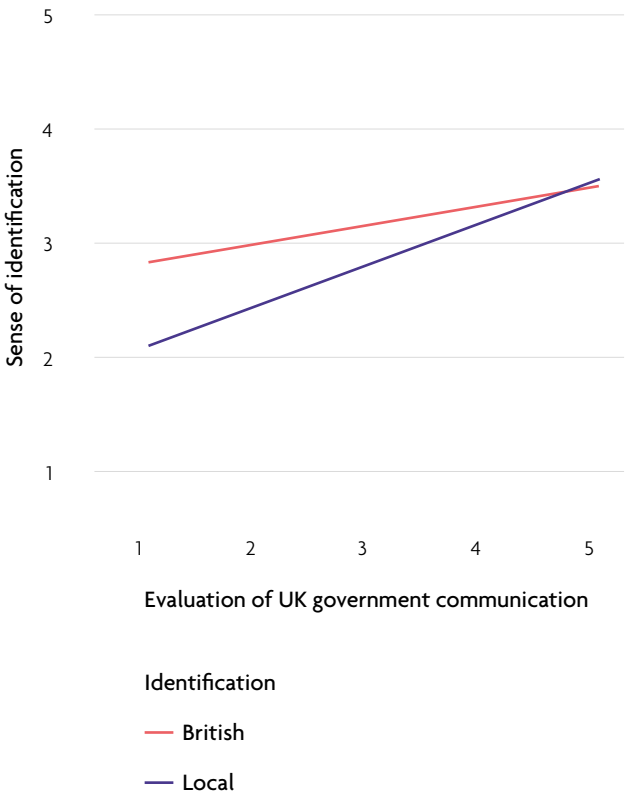

Communication was inaccessible, difficult to find
100
75
50
25
0
31
37
30
41
23
33
27
35
23
34
20
34
21
41
Scotland
Wales
Greater London
Greater Manchester
West of England
West Midlands
Kent
UK Government
Local Government

The role of place-based identity

We now turn to examine the link between people's perceptions of communication and their **place-based identity**, that is, how much respondents "feel personally connected" and "feel like they belong" to their local area (*local identity*) and to Britain (*British identity*).

As illustrated in the figures below, evaluation of both UK government communication and local government **communication** were **related to both levels of identity**. That is to say, people who identify more strongly with either Britain or their local area regard both sources of communication more positively. However, positive perceptions of UK government communication are more strongly linked to whether they identify with Britain than with whether they identify with their local area. In contrast, negative perceptions of local communication are more strongly linked to whether people don't identify with the local area than whether they don't identify with Britain. Another way to look at this is that people who identify strongly with Britain or their local area are likely to view local communication most positively, whereas whether people identify with their local area has less bearing than their identification with Britain on whether they view UK government communication positively.





Conclusions

This analysis of perceptions of communication from the UK government and from local government reveals that despite relatively small differences in the clarity of UK government and local government communication, people largely perceive local communications as embodying greater honesty, credibility and empathy. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that they also perceive locally based communication to be more directly relevant to the needs of their own communities. Indeed, these results resonate with our recently published findings from earlier in the pandemic revealing that trust in local government and local MPs tend to be considerably stronger and more stable than trust in the UK national government or its handling of the pandemic.[12] Other research funded by the Nuffield Foundation[13] has found that *'the government needs to be more transparent about the data and analysis underpinning public health decisions and to act quickly to correct inaccurate statements'*.

The role of local areas and places is also revealed by our discovery of significant variation in the differences between these local/UK perceptions, depending on where people are living. An important finding is that very substantially higher numbers of people from Scotland, Wales (devolved administrations) and then Greater Manchester (relative to other areas) perceive that the UK government's communication does not correspond to the needs of their communities. This might suggest there are larger differences in people's sense of disconnection from UK government than from local government and perhaps speaks to the acute need to make 'levelling up' mean something to people in those areas.

One reason that people may feel less trusting of UK government communications is that arguments around these may be more visible and perhaps more obviously politicised. National media tend to focus more on these UK level rather than local debates. However, it can equally be argued that there are discussions, debates and arguments at local level, perhaps more visible in local press and social media. So it seems likely to be the differences in the UK government versus local government responsiveness to persuasive evidence and local context that make the difference. The finding that there are differences between different areas suggests that these local factors matter.

These findings cannot be taken simply as a message that 'local is better'. Indeed, an important and very consistent finding is that, regardless of where they were living, people found the information and guidance from their local authorities less accessible or easy to find than that from the UK government. This suggests that people perceive that the impressive and continual updating of both national and local statistics emanating from the Office of National Statistics and the NHS are clear, but it also reveals a very important gap that needs to be addressed. Local areas may have struggled to locate and publicise relevant local information and not been able to make it available to all those who are seeking it. This points to a need to better equip local authorities with the systems, staffing and skills needed to collect and convey

12 Abrams, Lalot, Broadwood & Davies Hayon (2021). *Community, Connection and Cohesion During Covid-19: Beyond Us and Them* Report. https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/community-connection-cohesion-report/

13 The Full Fact Report 2021 *Fighting a pandemic needs good information*. https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/full-fact-report-2021.pdf

public health evidence and advice in a timely way. There are strong economic and health reasons to pursue this. If people can receive information they need on COVID-related issues from trusted local sources and intermediaries they may be more likely to act appropriately on the basis of that information.

The UK is moving into a new phase of managing the virus, as a third wave develops, albeit with the considerable (but not complete) protection afforded by vaccines. It is likely that infection rates, hospital admissions and deaths will surge in different places according to local infection rates.

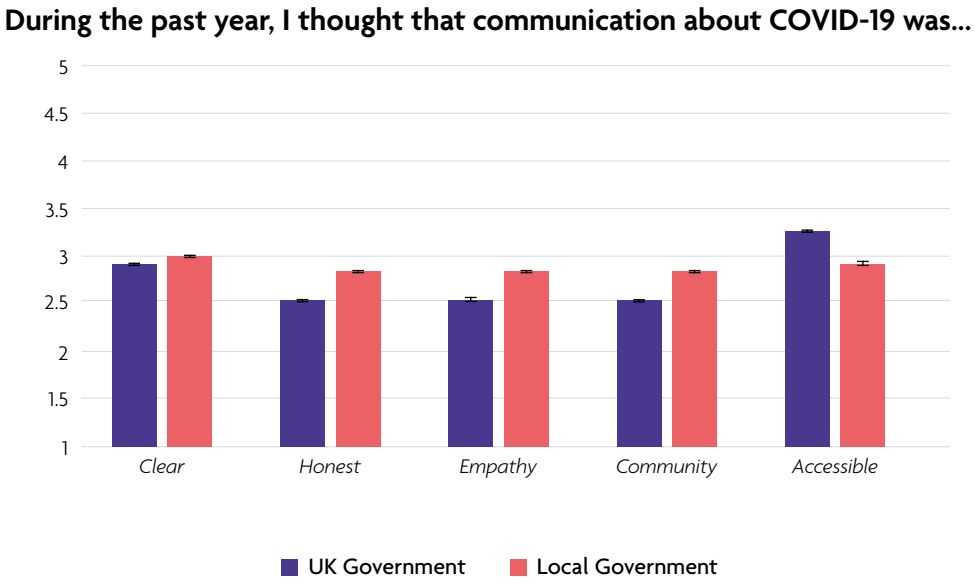
The UK government's entreaty to the British public to take individual responsibility for managing infection risk can only be helpful if the public are confident about what that risk is and what behaviour they need to follow. In the absence of legal restrictions this means that the only vehicle for influence is effective communication and the establishment of clear norms. It is therefore critical that communication is seen to be not merely clear but also trustworthy, empathic to their concerns and adjusted to the needs of their group / community. And it needs to be readily accessible.

Local areas and local government are in a stronger position to influence behaviour because they are likely to be regarded as trusted and credible. But this strength of being trusted communicators can only be capitalised upon if they have the resources to increase their ability to make crucial information more widely accessible and easier to find. The UK government is likely to be able to assist in this process through closer and more systematic articulation with information providers at local levels. Both local and national government will need to improve and coordinate their communications better in order to support the public to manage the virus and keep each other safe.

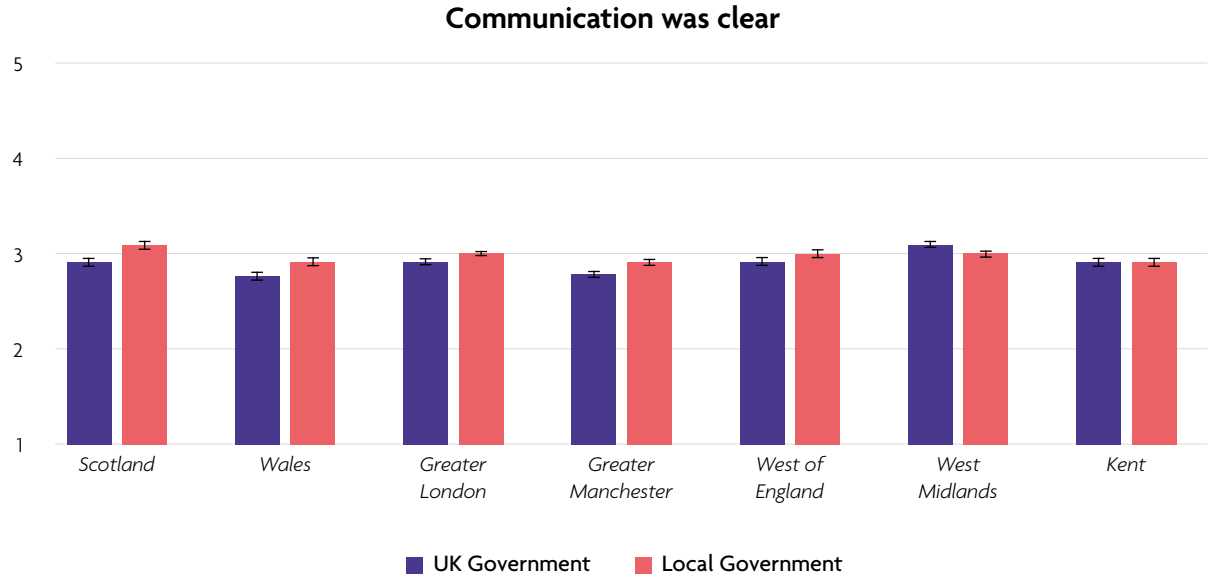
Appendices

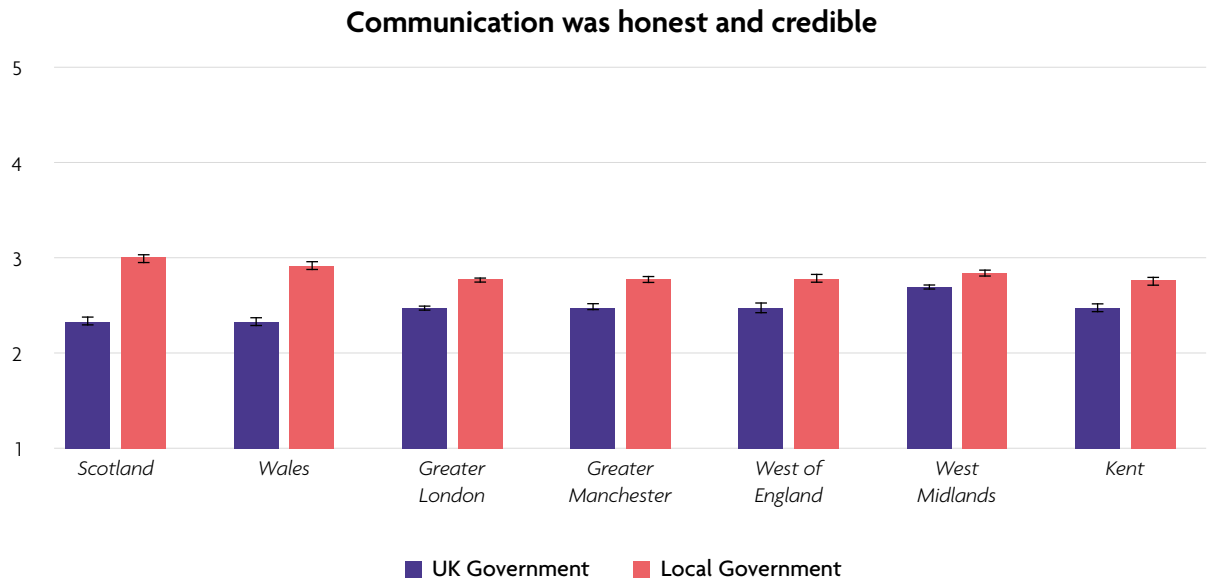
For all graphs below: Higher scores represent more positive evaluations. Error bars show standard errors of the mean. All scores were adjusted for demographics.

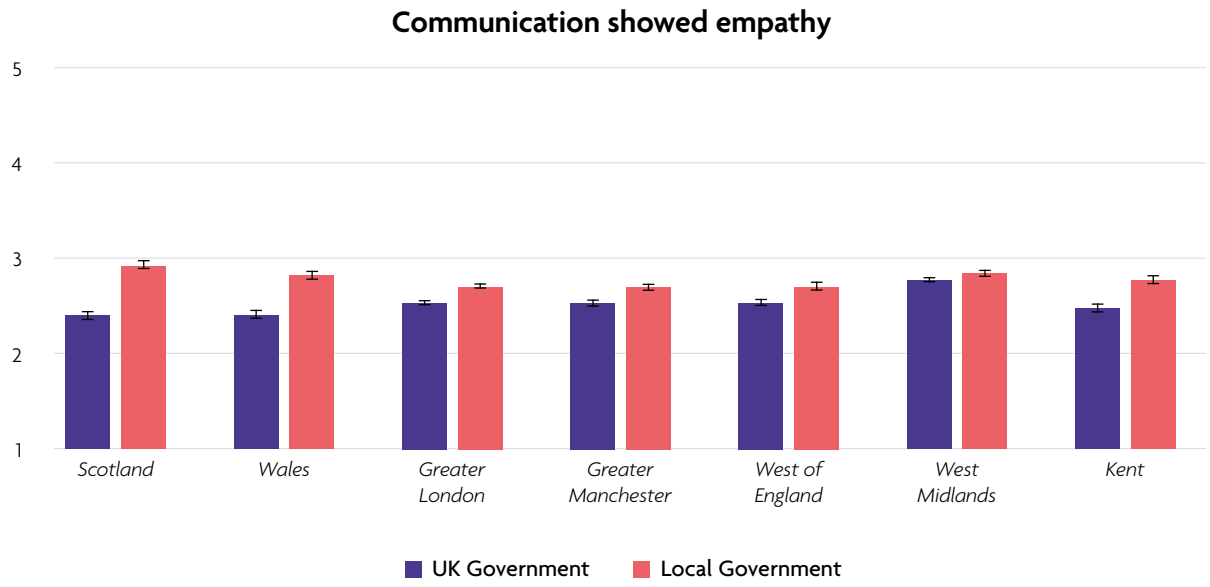
Mean values of evaluation of the UK and local government communication overall (*N = 9045*)

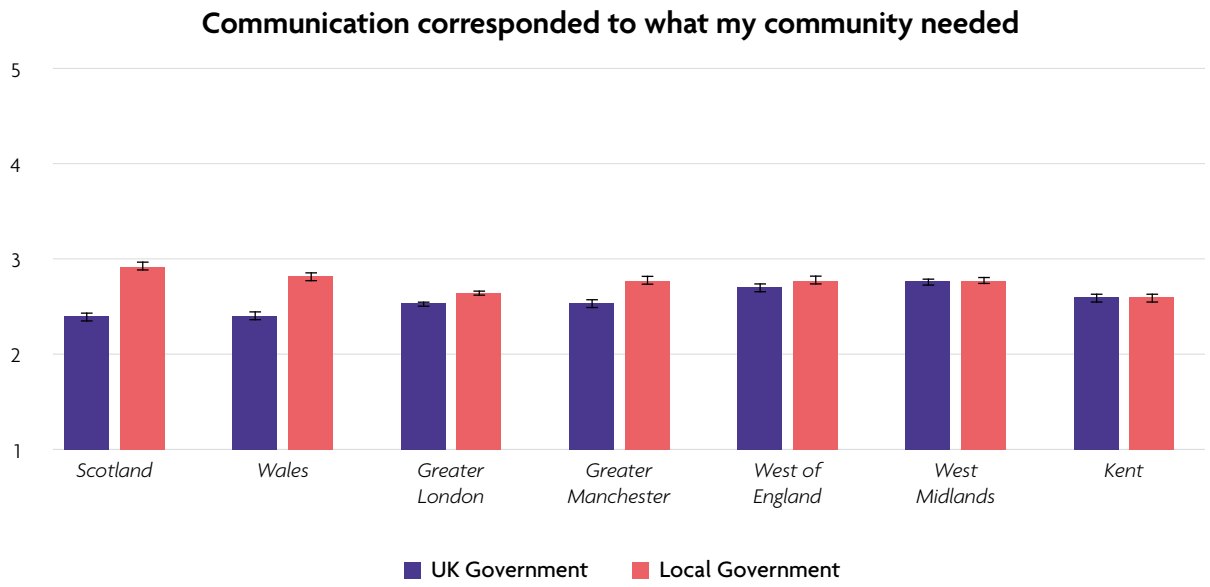


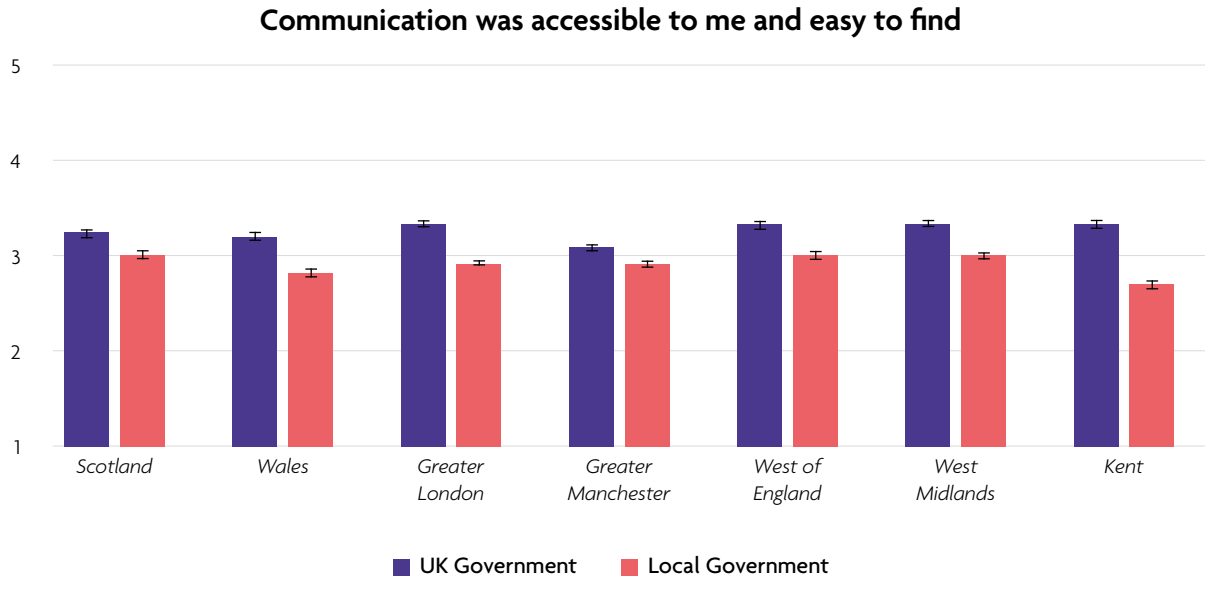
Mean values of evaluation of the UK and local government communication across places




Communication was honest and credible
5
4
3
2
1
Scotland
Wales
Greater London
Greater Manchester
West of England
West Midlands
Kent
UK Government
Local Government


Communication showed empathy
5
4
3
2
1
Scotland
Wales
Greater London
Greater Manchester
West of England
West Midlands
Kent
UK Government
Local Government


Communication corresponded to what my community needed
5
4
3
2
1
Scotland
Wales
Greater London
Greater Manchester
West of England
West Midlands
Kent
UK Government
Local Government


Communication was accessible to me and easy to find
5
4
3
2
1
Scotland
Wales
Greater London
Greater Manchester
West of England
West Midlands
Kent
UK Government
Local Government

Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network is a charity and membership organisation with the vision of a more integrated and less divided society. Belong connects, supports and mobilises people and organisations across sectors and neighbourhoods via its digital platform, events, training programmes and resources to improve the practice and policy of integration and cohesion.

The Centre for the Study of Group Processes (CSGP) was established in 1990 and is part of the School of Psychology at the **University of Kent**. It is an internationally respected centre for social psychological research into relationships within and between different social groups. The Centre includes a thriving international research community, involving twelve tenured academic staff, as well as its research fellows and PhD students. The Centre attracts visits and research collaborations from major international researchers, many of whom have formal affiliations with the Centre.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.