

Community, Connection and Cohesion During COVID-19: Beyond Us and Them Report

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Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a fundamental challenge to our society, economy and ways of living. With the roll-out of the vaccine there is hope on the horizon but recovering and rebuilding from this pandemic will take a collective effort and our combined resources, knowledge, work and compassion. It has exposed the impact of deep socio-economic and regional inequalities and profoundly impacted our social relations. Many have lost loved ones and many more have suffered the loss of education, relationships, work and financial security. Yet we have also strengthened some of the ties that bind us, with neighbours and communities reaching out with acts of kindness and generosity to protect and support those who are the most vulnerable.

In this report we present interim findings from our “Beyond Us and Them” research project. This report presents our evidence, and our forthcoming companion report, *Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas*, draws on the expertise and insights of our research partners to offer best practice examples and policy recommendations to support the dissemination of what we have learned.

Between May and December 2020, we have been investigating the impact of COVID-19 on societal cohesion through monthly surveys involving over 3000 people across two countries and one English county (Scotland, Wales, Kent), in six local areas (Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall, Waltham Forest and Calderdale) in England that had strategically prioritised social cohesion and also among community activists across the UK. We also conducted focus groups and interviews to explore issues in greater depth. Our research asks: How are relationships between individuals, communities and society adapting and reshaping in the face of this pandemic? And how, at regional and community levels, are intergroup relations and integration improving, and/or fragmenting?

Trust is stronger at the local than the national level

We observed that political trust at both a regional and local level has declined steadily and significantly and sits at a low level. However, in the six local areas we have been surveying levels of trust, particularly local trust, have been more resilient than elsewhere, perhaps reflecting the strength of relationships that were developed pre-pandemic via local social cohesion programmes. For example, in December the average level of trust in the UK government’s response to COVID-19 was 10.6% higher in the six local authority areas as compared to other places. Back in June, the level of trust in the UK government’s response was already 6.6% higher in the six local authority areas. Similarly, in December, the average level of trust in local government’s response was 10.4% higher in the six local authority areas.



Areas that invested in social cohesion remained more cohesive than elsewhere

Our previous findings from June 2020 revealed that areas that had previously invested in social cohesion were faring better than elsewhere.¹ Now we can assess whether this held true as the crisis persisted. We found that respondents in the six local authority areas are still showing 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.

Those who engage in volunteering are faring better

People who are volunteering are more protected from some of the worst effects of the pandemic than others. They reported greater connection with family and friends (10.5% higher on average), greater general political trust (10.6% higher), a greater sense of neighbourliness (16.5% higher) and were less likely to perceive their local area as deprived (6.5% lower). They also expressed greater trust in other people (to respect COVID-19 restrictions; 12.2% higher), higher subjective wellbeing (5.3% higher) and greater optimism for the future (5.6% higher). These are results from our December survey but the pattern of change through time is complex and is expanded upon in detail in the body of the report.

Suffering and concern for others

Qualitative evidence from our focus groups and interviews shows that, despite the limits placed on social interaction, people are becoming increasingly aware of the challenges and hardships faced by others. Indeed, the huge levels of social isolation and hardship have evoked deep empathy - and this is a concern that traverses individual, socio-cultural and economic divides.

¹ Abrams, A., 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>

Key questions our findings pose for local and national strategies to recover and rebuild

What can be learned from the six local areas where levels of local trust have proved remarkably resilient? Are there broader lessons that can be learnt to improve political trust and trust more generally, especially our trust in others? And what might be done to improve levels of trust amongst groups that are currently less trusting?

Our six local areas had substantially higher levels of active social engagement than elsewhere, and this is consistent with their achieving enhanced levels of cohesion. Given this appears to have been achieved through modest levels of investment over a short period of time, how might a commitment to cohesion be sustained and expanded across the UK?

Volunteering may support greater psychological resilience in a time of crisis and higher levels of volunteering can contribute towards a more cohesive and resilient local area. How might we support greater active social engagement and volunteering and how might we enhance the benefits of that volunteering for local social cohesion? What can we learn from the experiences of volunteers and activists about the different ways it is possible to foster strong social connections and local trust? What factors enable these to be sustained?

How can we support and strengthen connections between different regions and the four nations of the UK through civil society and regional and local government?

Research shows that social cohesion will play a vital part in tackling some of the immediate and longer-term challenges ahead.² Many people have made huge sacrifices to help others, sacrifices that have in some cases profoundly impacted their own health and wellbeing. These people include the nurses, doctors and hospital porters doing extra shifts, the volunteers in the vaccination centres and food banks, teachers who have against the odds done their best to provide education to young people, the civil society sector which has mobilised to support community responses, and those who have stayed home to save lives. The British public has demonstrated a huge capacity for compassion and forging strong social connections with others. The evidence here shows the importance of place, connections and social purpose in people's responses to and experiences of the pandemic. It will be vital to harness this potential to achieve a kinder, stronger and more cohesive society for the future.

We hope that our findings here and in our further reports will help to shape and influence both national and local policy on social cohesion in the UK. Our forthcoming policy paper, *Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas*, 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.

2 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>

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a fundamental challenge to our society, economy and ways of living. The “Beyond Us and Them” research project 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. Social cohesion is both a process and a state that describes people’s connection to other individuals, groups and communities.³ The central research question we are exploring is: ‘How are relationships between individuals, communities and society adapting and reshaping in the face of this pandemic?’ In particular, we want to learn how, at regional and community levels, intergroup relations and integration are improved and hindered in a time of crisis.

Between May and December 2020, we collected a huge amount of data: 10,580,000 survey data points, as well as conducting 28 focus groups and 120 one-to-one interviews (speaking with 190 people in total). We expect this data and evidence to provide a rich archive of material for years to come so that we can better understand the pandemic and how it has profoundly affected social relations and trust.

Our earlier reports presented findings on differing levels of political and local trust, the experiences of volunteers and keyworkers, and the differences between social cohesion in local areas that had invested in it prior to the pandemic and elsewhere.

In this interim report, we have chosen to focus on developing these themes in order to explore 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 findings spanning May to December 2020. It is part of a series of reports that will build a picture over time. We will continue to present more evidence as we gather new data and these findings may change with time.

National surveys tell us a lot, but they do not concentrate on how the places people live in affect their experiences. This is an important focus for the “Beyond Us and Them” project. As this report shows a more complex picture is emerging.

³ 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>

1.1 Findings to date

Our first report *Beyond Us and Them: Perception of Covid-19 and Social Cohesion*⁴ looked in particular at trust and we continue our exploration of that theme in this report. Levels of political trust are consistently low with trust in your local MP slightly higher than trust in national government. Trust in the government's ability to handle the pandemic fell rapidly after the government's handling of Dominic Cummings' breach of lockdown regulations and has fallen steadily since. However, with regard to levels of local trust - and by that we mean trust in local government and institutions - the picture is more complex. Levels of local trust in the six local authority areas taking part in our research remains mostly above levels elsewhere with some interesting variations in trust between Kent, Scotland and Wales.

We also examine how our trust in each other has fluctuated over the course of the last nine months with a sharp decrease in late summer and a steady increase in the autumn and into December. In the six local authorities, there were overall higher levels of trust in others as compared to elsewhere. We analyse the social and psychological factors influencing levels of trust particularly with regard to levels of neighbourliness, connection to your immediate community and perceptions of local deprivation, indicating that levels of social cohesion can directly impact our trust in each other.

In *The Social Cohesion Investment*,⁵ 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.⁶ Although on some of the measures the local authority areas are returning to the national levels, the results hold for specific measures, in particular for local trust, neighbourliness, positive attitudes towards others and levels of active social engagement. We also see some variations between the findings in Scotland, Wales and Kent.

4 Abrams, A., 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-social-cohesion-july-2020-report>

5 Abrams, A., 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>

6 In our own description and analyses we use the term 'migrant' or 'migrant to the UK'. 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 are currently exploring the measurement validity of possible alternative terminology for future surveys. However, we recognise that the context of use means that the term 'immigrant' can have negative connotations.

In *All in It but not Necessarily Together*,⁷ 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.

We are planning to conduct a thorough analysis of the qualitative data in our final report due at the end of August 2021 but initial analysis has already deepened our understanding of some of the themes picked up by our surveys. It has also drawn attention to how the pandemic has impacted different groups and our feelings towards each other, revealing huge reserves of empathy and concern for others and a deepening awareness of the impact of the pandemic on other groups and communities. At the same time and unsurprisingly, it has shown that many people are really struggling with social isolation and mental health issues. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minority ethnic communities has been well documented but perhaps less visible has been the impact on young people and people with disabilities as described in some of our case studies.

1.2 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*), and has been included as part of a British Academy paper on communities responding to the pandemic. We have also been contributing to relevant APPGs and liaising with government departments. We believe cohesion and integration will remain a key element of recovery plans over the next years. We hope that our findings will continue to provide useful evidence to help build longer-term resilience to crisis, shock and change, and we would welcome feedback and comments on our findings.

Alongside this paper we will soon be publishing *Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas*, a short policy and best practice paper developed with input from the Belong Advisory panel and our research partners - representatives from the six local authority areas and national civil society organisations. It contains best practice examples and recommendations to other local areas and government on strengthening local cohesion and integration.

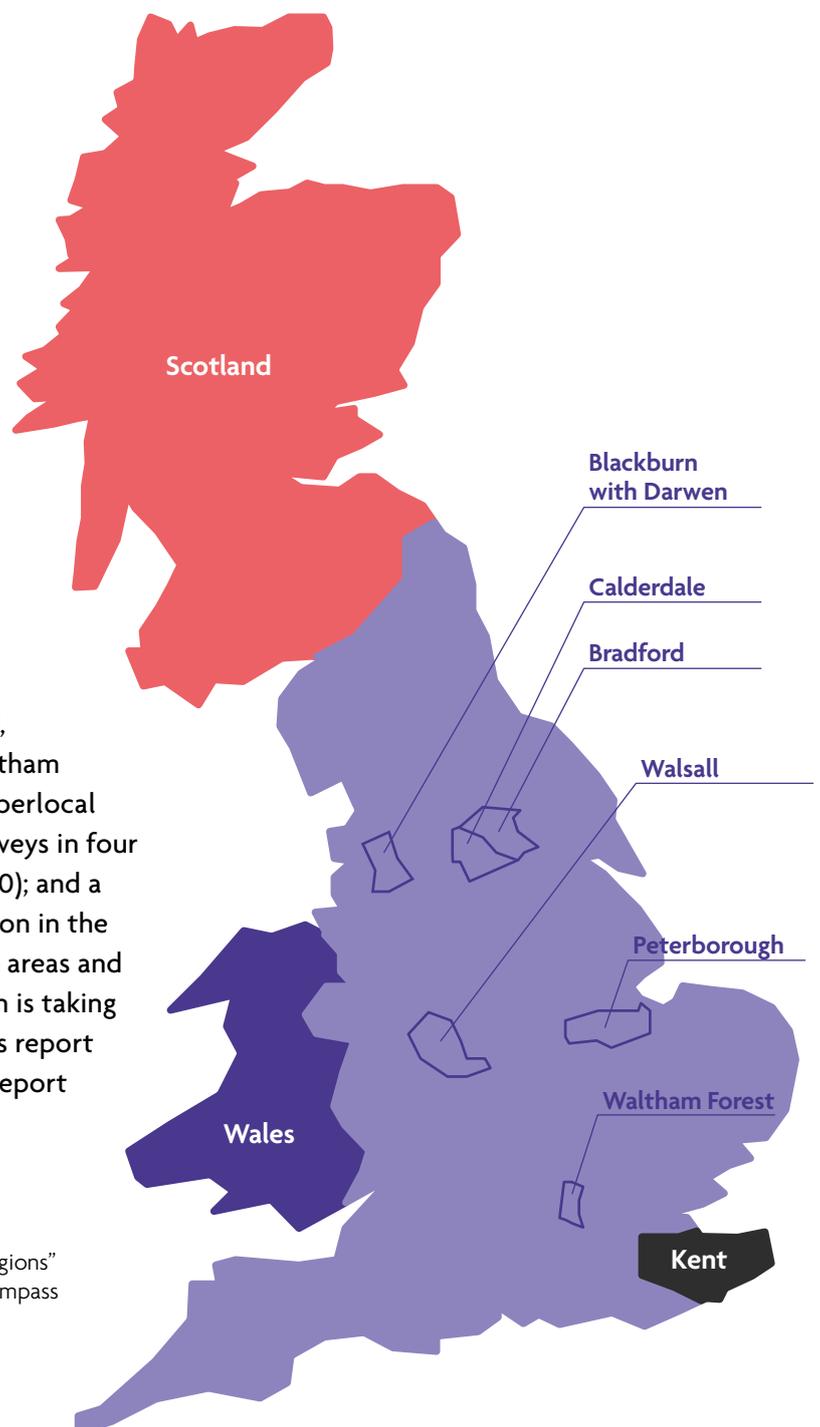
⁷ Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Platts-Dunn, I. (2020). *All in it, but not necessarily together: Divergent experiences of key-worker and volunteer responders to the Covid-19 pandemic*. <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/All-in-it-but-not-necessarily-together.pdf>

1.3 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 and will run until August 2021.

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);⁸ 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 (starting December 2020); and a deep-dive qualitative exploration of cohesion in the regions, local authority areas, metropolitan areas and among community activists. Data collection is taking place between May 2020 and July 2021. This report presents our interim findings and our final report will be out in August 2021.



⁸ 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.

Our survey 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. This programme was set up by the UK government as part of its Integrated Communities Strategy in March 2018: 'The Integration Area Programme focuses 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'.⁹ Five local authority areas took part in this programme: Blackburn with Darwen,¹⁰ Bradford,¹¹ Peterborough,¹² Walsall¹³ and Waltham Forest.¹⁴ 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.

Four of the five Integration Areas (Bradford, Blackburn with Darwen, Walsall and Waltham Forest) are research partners in our "Beyond Us and Them" project. Although not an active partner, we are collecting data from the fifth Integration Area, Peterborough.

What do we mean when we say these local authorities have invested in social cohesion? Each local authority adopted a different approach. 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. All of the programmes focused on strengthening intercultural relations and social mixing between groups and communities as key elements of their strategies.

9 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>

10 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>

11 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>

12 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>

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

14 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>

We also have 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).

From December 2020 onwards, the survey is also being distributed to another 4500 people in Greater London Area, Greater Manchester Area, West Midlands Combined Authority, and West of England Combined Authority. The project is being expanded to include an investigation of the interplay of issues of identity and belonging at local, regional and national levels. We are also distributing the survey to an additional 500 Black respondents and 500 Muslim respondents, living in different places in the UK, in order to document the views and experiences of people from these groups, which are often minimised in large-scale surveys.



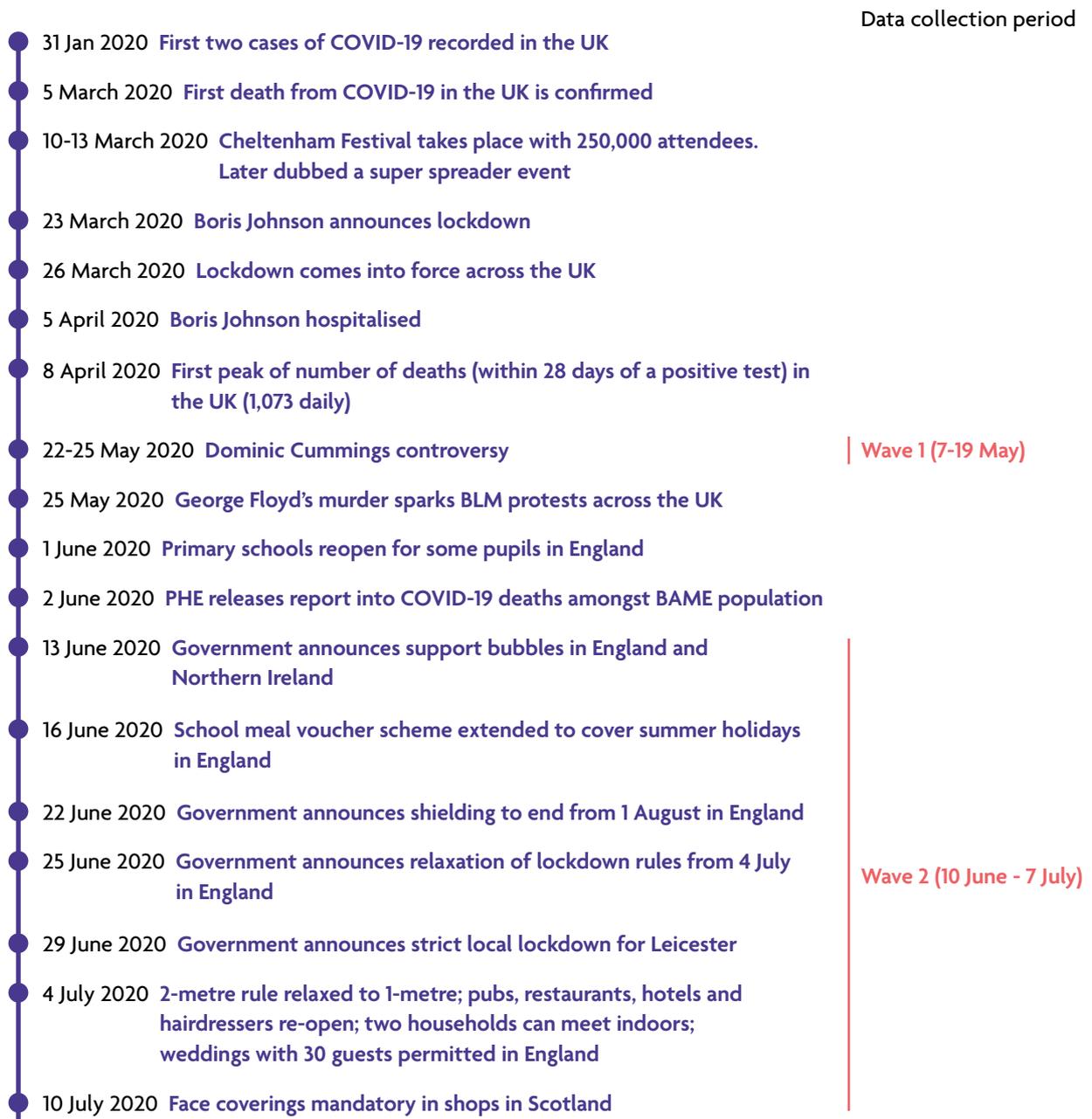
1.4 Overview of data collection

The table below summarises the volume and frequency of data collection from each part of Britain. Within each local authority we survey approximately 200 people each time the survey is fielded. The numbers within each area fluctuates a little (for example in Kent) reflecting the numbers who were recontactable at particular times.

Time	Research	Kent (N)	Scotland (N)	Wales (N)	6 Local Authorities (N)	Community Activists (N)
SURVEYS						
May '20	Wave 1	514	536	529		
June '20	Wave 2	561	603	606	1156	867
July-Aug '20	Wave 3	378	602	339		
Sept '20	Wave 4	370	549	415	1311	697
Oct '20	Wave 5	505	534	497	1350	723
Dec '20	Wave 6	520	504	514	1285	582
INTERVIEWS						
July '20 - Sept '20	Focus groups (round 1)	4	7	5	35	45
Oct '20 - Dec '20	Focus groups (round 2)	8	9	5	22	39
July '20 - Sept '20	Interviews (round 1)	3	4	3	25	19
Sept '20 - Dec '20	Interviews (round 2)	3	5	4	27	27

2. Timeline

It is also important to recognise that we are not just following what happens over time and changing seasons, but that there is continual punctuation by significant events and moments, ranging from floods¹⁵ to sudden announcements of changes in COVID-19 rules for behaviour. These events also happened unevenly across Britain so our evidence has to be interpreted in the context of all these changes. The table below sets out some of the key moments up to December 2020.



¹⁵ See *Floodlist* (2020). <http://floodlist.com/europe/united-kingdom>

-
- 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
- Wave 3 (16 July - 14 Aug)
- Wave 4 (21 Aug - 16 Sept)
- Wave 5 (7-28 Oct)

- 9 Nov 2020 Welsh fire-break ends
- 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
- 30 Dec 2020 Tier 4 measures extended
- 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

Wave 6 (4-19 Dec)

3. Methodology

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.

3.1 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 a professional research partner. 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 1,730 people donated, which meant we were able to raise a total of £8,650 for Age UK, The Anne Frank Trust, Medecins Sans Frontieres, NSPCC, People United, Refugee Action, The Salvation Army, StreetDoctors, StreetGames, Tell Mama and Youth Sport Trust.

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).

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

16 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.

17 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>

3.2 Qualitative research

Over the course of the project, the team has conducted 28 focus groups and 120 one-to-one interviews and has spoken to participants twice – once over the summer period (June/July/August/September 2020) and once roughly six weeks later in the autumn/winter period (October/November/December 2020). 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.

3.3 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.

4. What have we discovered from our monthly surveys?

The research has produced a huge volume of data which will be subject to extended academic analysis. In this report we focus on describing changes over time in three key areas: trust, social cohesion in six local areas that had previously invested in social cohesion programmes, and the different experience of being a volunteer.

4.1 Levels of trust

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 representative - 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.

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.¹⁸ 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. 1 represents that an equal proportion of people felt trusting and distrusting 1/1 ratio). 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.

¹⁸ Tyler, T. R. (2001). Trust and law abidingness: A proactive model of social regulation. *Boston University Law Review*, 81(2), 361-406.

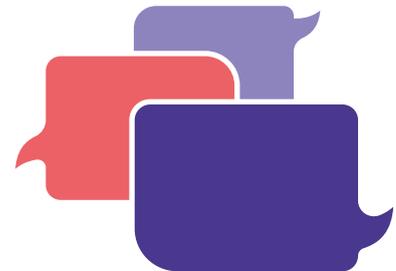
First, it is notable that levels of general political trust (i.e., whether politicians are perceived as trustworthy overall) have been consistently medium to low since May 2020.¹⁹ This low level of trust did change a little, for example being slightly higher at the early stages of the first lockdown (not covered in our present data), but then reducing after Dominic Cummings' trip to Barnard Castle.²⁰ No subsequent events or government actions appear to have raised general political trust from this low level.

The impact of the Dominic Cummings story on people's perception was noticeable in our focus groups discussions. For example, one participant noted:

"The Barnard castle thing with Cummings was a huge mistake. And just kind of let him get away with that. If you're not going to punish the people closest to you for breaking the rules, then what incentive does that give the rest of the country to actually follow and trust him?"

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

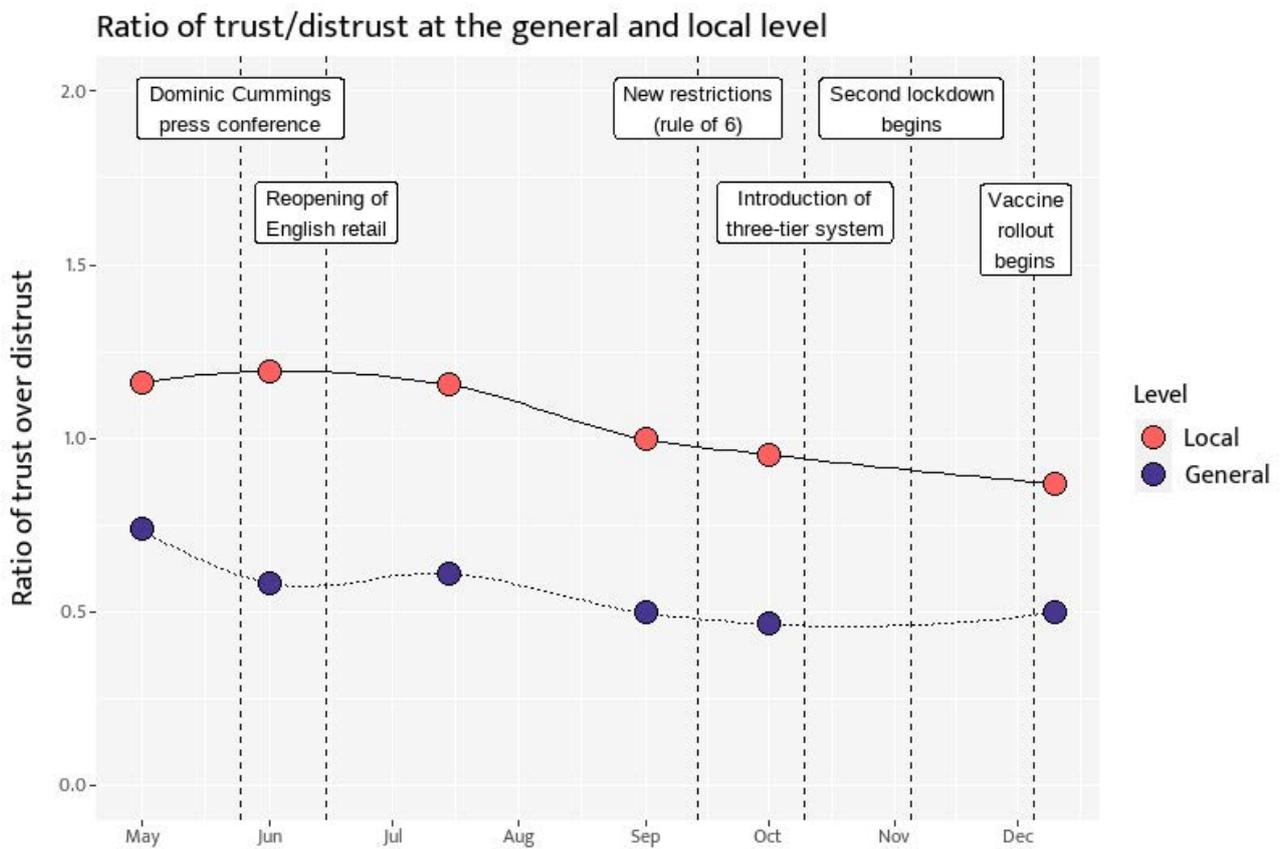
Second, an important finding that persisted over time is that people's trust in their local MPs was consistently higher than their trust in politicians in general. The evidence indicates that there may be something about the local connection, perhaps the fact that the local MP demonstrates sensitivity to what the particular local circumstances are, that gives people greater confidence in local MPs than they have in the government as a whole. However, trust in the local MP is not immune to national events, and even on this measure trust diminished following the Cummings trip.



¹⁹ Abrams, A., 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>

²⁰ See also: Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A., & Wright, L. (2020). The Cummings effect: politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet*, 396(10249), 464-465. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31690-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31690-1)

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



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 asked participants to show how much they agreed or disagreed that “the UK Government is taking adequate measures to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic.” As illustrated in Figure 2 below, the level of trust in these measures decreased steadily between May and October 2020 where it reached its lowest value. Trust in the government's handling of the pandemic appears to have reached its lowest level between October and December, by which time the trust/distrust ratio was 0.34 overall (meaning there were three times more people feeling distrust than feeling trust).

Unlike general trust, the COVID-specific measure 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. Places within England also show a decline but one that is less steep. The trust/distrust ratio for December shows the same variation (local authority areas: 0.48, Kent: 0.38, Scotland: 0.21, Wales: 0.18).

The local authority areas and Kent's more stable and higher levels of trust seem likely to be due to the fact that UK government policy affects them more directly than it does people in the devolved administrations, and that these local authorities are working within a nationally (English) established framework. Both the Scottish and Welsh administrations also applied different measures to those in England at various times, with both countries imposing stricter lockdowns.

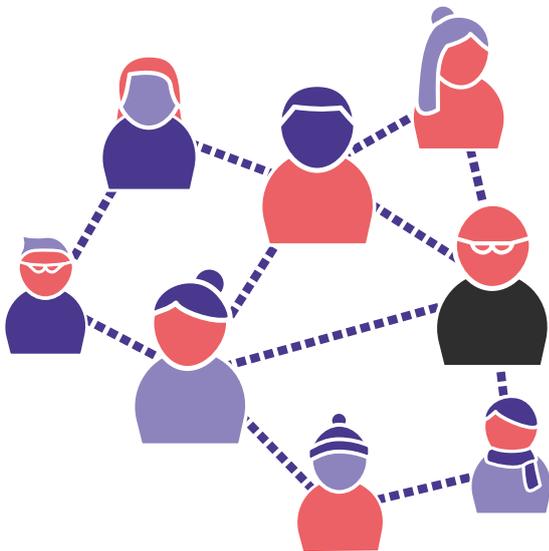
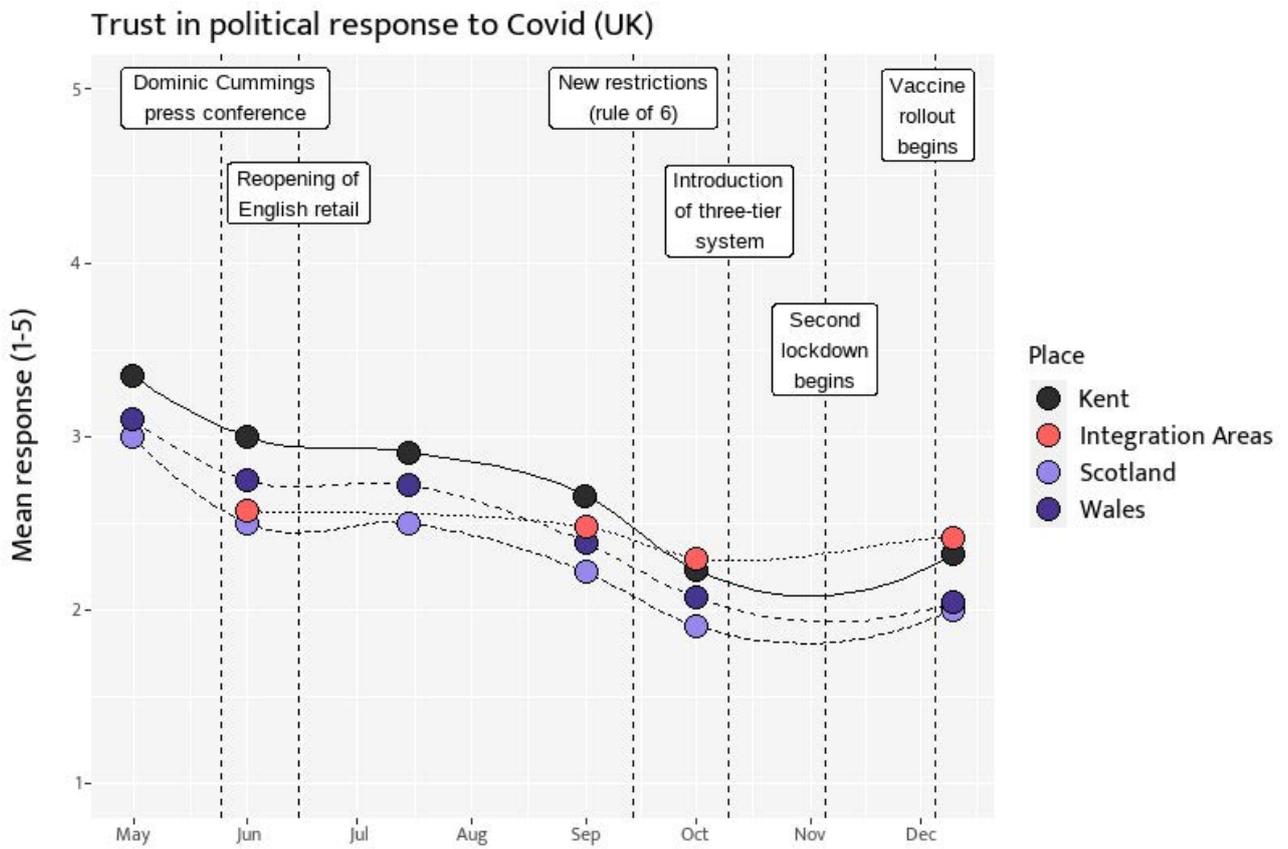


Figure 2. Average level of trust in the UK government's response to COVID-19 from May to December 2020



Trust in the local government handling of the pandemic

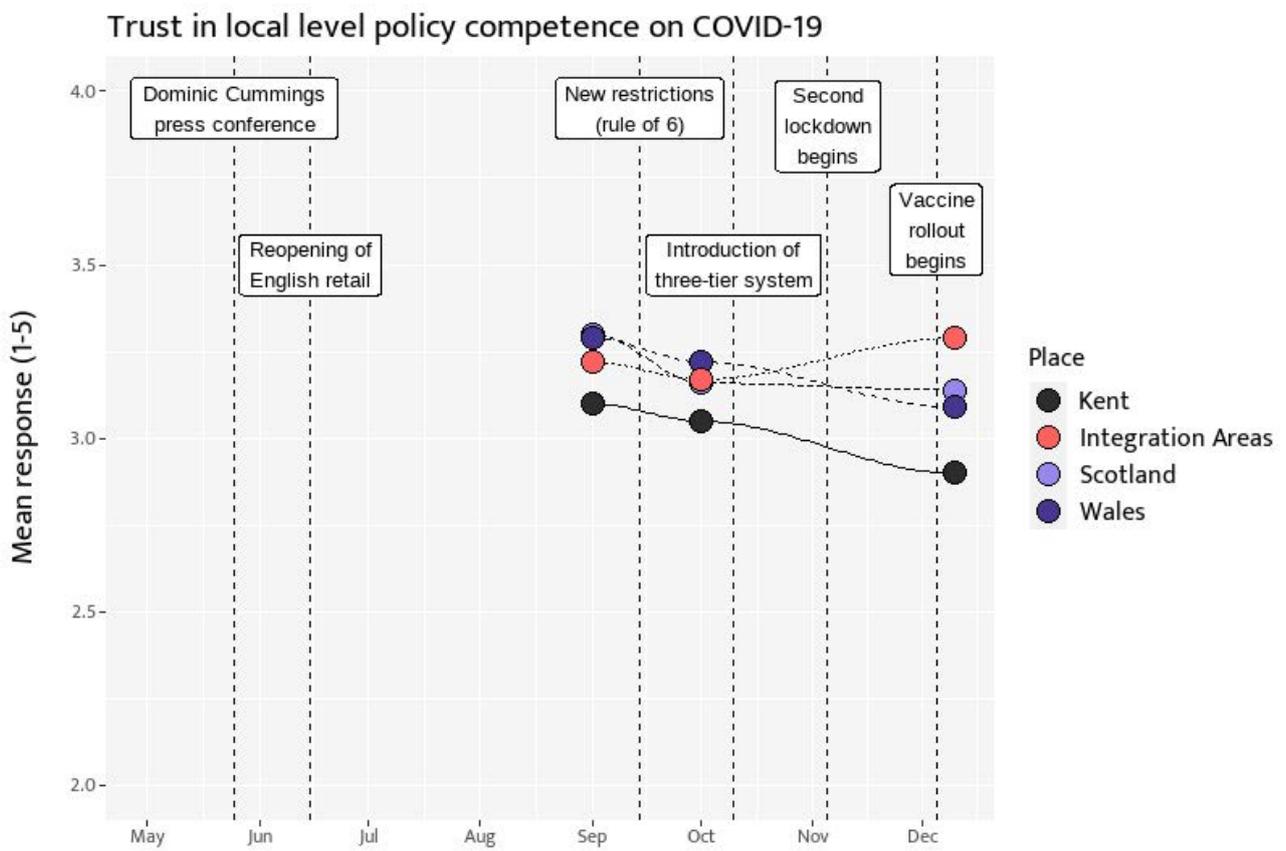
From September onwards we also measured trust at the more specific, local level by asking people how much they agreed or disagreed that “my local council (i.e., town or city or district) is handling the causes and consequences of the pandemic competently”. The evidence from this question makes the distinction between local and UK government even clearer, as shown in Figure 3. Across places, respondents trust their local authority’s response to COVID-19 to a greater extent than that of the UK government. In fact, the average levels of trust in the six local authorities that we surveyed are generally above the scale midpoint (meaning more people feel trusting than do not).

“And for me as [organisation], and sort of leading the work that we’ve done, the council have played such a massive part in that. They’ve been so forthcoming with support, information, both financial and just on the end of the phone. And I just think, you know, they’ve really stepped up to the plate in Walsall, and they’ve done a fantastic job, and they should be applauded for it. Because, you know, I don’t think we’ve ever had such a good relationship with the council as organizations. And that’s because it’s been a two-way working relationship of how to meet the demands of COVID. So I think they’ve been exceptional, to be honest”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

However, as shown in Figure 3, differences between the local authority areas and Kent, Scotland and Wales increased over time, becoming larger in December than in September. It is notable that locally based trust within Kent decreased steadily, whereas trust within the six local authorities increased. It is possible that this reflects the different states of tier restrictions and spread of COVID-19 in these areas but we have not found a clear pattern that would support that idea (for example, there were large differences in infection rates across different parts of Kent and between the six local authorities). A stronger interpretation is that activities engaged in by the local authorities have helped to sustain trust in a way that hasn’t been sustained elsewhere.

Figure 3. Average level of trust in the local government's response to COVID-19 from September to December 2020



Conspiracy theory beliefs

Conspiracy theories involve people's 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).²¹ 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.²² In the context of the pandemic more specifically, conspiracy beliefs are connected with lower compliance with government recommendations, anti-masks attitudes, and vaccine denial.²³

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.

Consistent with other research, in May, a significant proportion of people entertained conspiracy theories, with a mean score of 4.56 on a 7 point scale, as illustrated in Figure 4. This means that, although not strongly endorsing the possibility, a large portion of people held doubts about the official version of events given by the government. Although this level of suspicion continued into June (mean of 4.52), it decreased significantly and reached a low of 3.71 in December, by which time more people rejected these theories. This decreasing trend was observed in all places.

It is interesting and perhaps surprising to consider this finding in conjunction with our evidence on political trust, which also showed a decline through time. The overall picture suggests that respondents view the government's competence as independent of its supposed manipulative or conspiratorial intent. Over time, while people's doubts over the government's competence to handle the pandemic increased, they became less suspicious that the official version of events was not transparent. Perhaps this suggests increased confidence in the capacity of science to advise but reduced confidence in ministers' ability to decide.

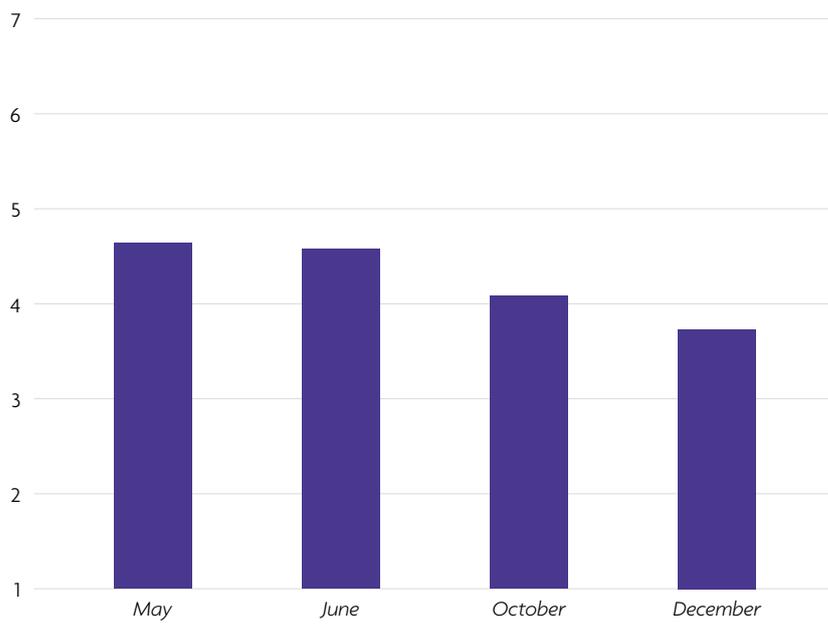
21 Douglas, K. (in press). COVID-19 conspiracy theories. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

22 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>

23 Earnshaw, V. A., Eaton, L. A., Kalichman, S. C., Brousseau, N. M., Hill, 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>



Figure 4. Average endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in May, June, October, and December 2020.



How much do we trust other people?

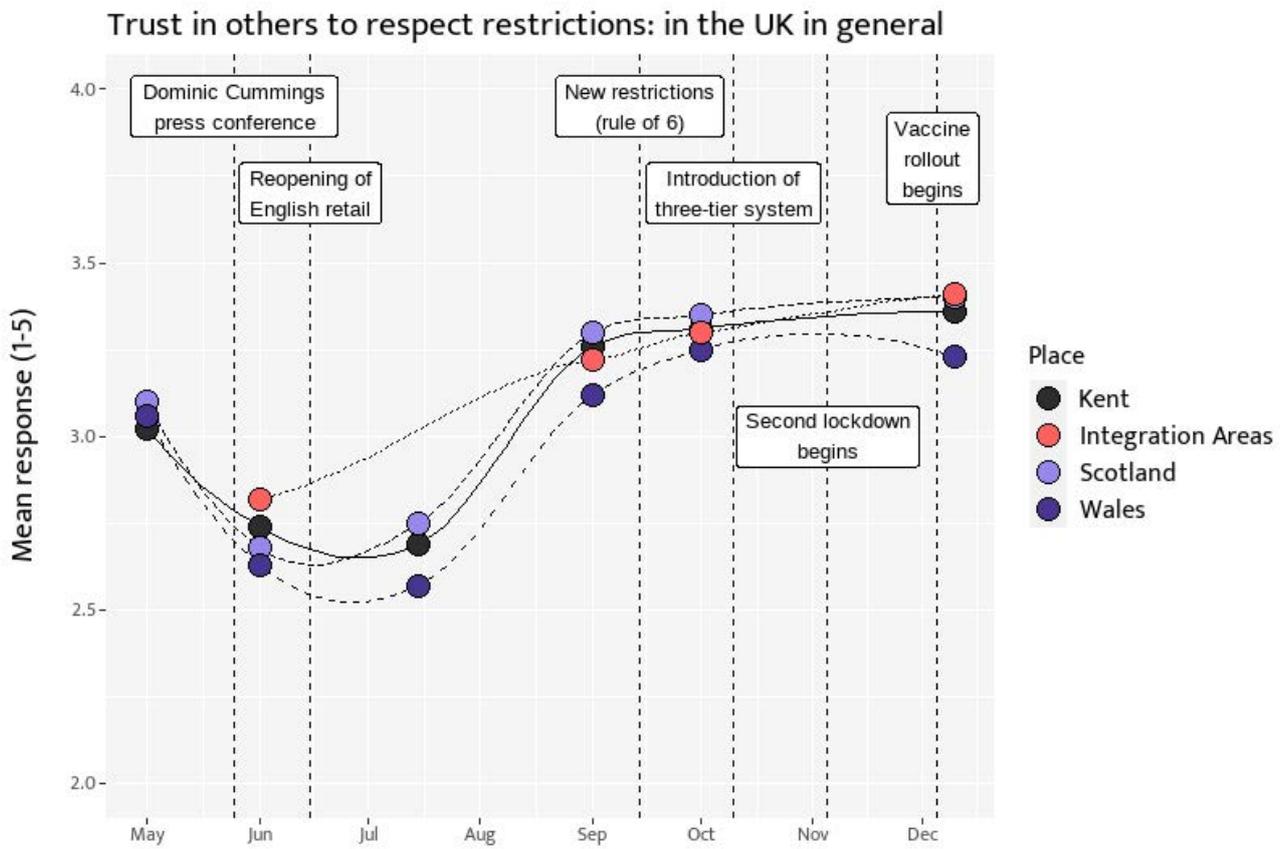
Another important facet of trust is the trust one places in other people, sometimes also considered to be reflective of people's social capital.²⁴ Such interpersonal trust has proved a key element to create and sustain cohesive societies. In the context of the pandemic, we asked respondents how much 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, trust in other people to respect the restrictions in place followed a downward trend, achieving a noticeable level of distrust in late summer. However, trust then sprung back in the autumn, reaching higher levels than in the spring across all of September, October, and December. It is interesting to note that respondents did not start blaming other people when cases started to go up again in late autumn. Instead, their level of trust remained steadily high. When compared with our findings on political trust, this evidence suggests that people perceived that it was the government rather than their fellow citizens that could least be trusted as the second wave started to unfold.

This trend is the same across places, although we also observed that respondents from Wales have been consistently less trusting than those from other places. People in Scotland, on the other hand, regularly report the highest level of trust in others.

²⁴ Abrams, A., 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 to December 2020



Who are the trusting people?

We used the data from December 2020 to identify the personal factors related to greater trust in politicians and in others. We explored the effect of all relevant demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, level of education, income, subjective socioeconomic status, and political orientation), as well as several psychological constructs.

On *political trust*, we found that a combination of demographic and psychological factors accounted for a statistically substantial and reliable component of people's levels of trust. Three demographics were relevant: those feeling higher levels of trust tended to be older, more right-wing, and to perceive themselves as having higher subjective socioeconomic status. This is not so surprising as these sections of the population may feel higher levels of control, be more experienced, and are proportionally better represented by the political orientation of the present government.

Beyond these demographic differences, and slightly more influential, were people's wider social experiences, perceptions and sense of psychological connection. Specifically, people felt higher levels of trust if they had a stronger sense of neighbourliness, identified more strongly with their immediate area (hyperlocal identity), and perceived that area as being relatively less deprived (having a higher standard of living, better job opportunities, and a higher quality of public services such as health and education) compared to other places in the country. This evidence speaks clearly to the important role in individuals' lives of place and social connection as a basis for more general political trust.

Understandably, *trust in other people* is also connected with both demographic and psychological factors. The psychological factors that were reliably linked to trust in other people were the same as those affecting general political trust but along with age, the other demographic factors were slightly different (namely being female and having higher income rather than political orientation and sense of social status). It may be that women are more strongly involved in relationships that involve direct personal trust, but this explanation would require further investigation.

These findings have important implications. Although demographic factors do play a role in the levels of trust reported by people, this is only part of the explanation. People's social situation and their perceptions and psychological connections emerge as having an important role. Unlike demographic characteristics that are relatively fixed, people's situations and their perceptions of their connections with others are much more likely to be responsive to changing national and local circumstances. The evidence here is consistent with the view that investing in social cohesion could be a powerful influence on trust and therefore has a variety of important implications. To the extent that it is possible to support stronger connections between people and their neighbourhoods, and if work is done to address the substantial challenges posed by inequalities between areas that are keenly felt, it is likely that trust, in politicians, local leaders and other individuals, will improve too.

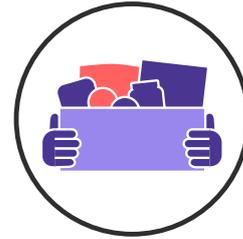
Key predictors of trust in politicians and in others



Sense of neighbourliness



Hyperlocal identification



Perceived relative deprivation

4.2 Does an area that has proactively invested in cohesion experience benefits?

A number of sources of evidence can tell us about the potential role of investment in social cohesion. In this section we firstly revisit trust and then consider other indicators to address the question: 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?

In our previous research report, *The Social Cohesion Investment*, we compared the sense of social cohesion reported by the local authority respondents versus other respondents coming from places with no specific local integration programme in place (Wales, Scotland, and the county of Kent). We 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.²⁵

The Social Cohesion Investment report drew from the June data and found that the local authority areas, overall, showed a greater sense of social cohesion than other places that had not directly invested in social cohesion programmes. We found evidence for this advantage in the forms of greater trust in politicians, greater trust in other people, stronger connections with family and friends during lockdown, more positive attitudes towards migrants, and greater active social engagement.

We are now able to pursue the comparison with more recent data from the later period of 2020. Did the local authority areas maintain their advantage over other places through the autumn and winter?

In the analyses that follow we statistically adjusted for individuals' age, gender, household income, socio-economic status, ethnicity and political orientation. Any differences we report are reliable after adjusting for these characteristics. We begin by briefly revisiting the relevant findings on trust and then consider other measures.

²⁵ Abrams, A., 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>

What is the relationship between place and trust?

Comparisons between the local authority areas on the one hand, and Kent, Scotland and Wales on the other hand, are illustrated in the Figures 2, 3, and 5 above.

The Social Cohesion Investment report showed that respondents in the six local authority areas were less cynical about the political system. This remained true in December. For example they were less likely to agree that politicians at the UK-level “are in politics for their own benefit” (61% agreement in the six local authority areas vs. 65% in other places).

As noted earlier, trust in the UK Government’s handling of COVID-19 did not differ between areas in June but whereas levels declined elsewhere by December they remained stable in the local authorities, resulting in their showing the highest levels (albeit still low in absolute terms) by December.

This locally-rooted trust is even more striking when it comes to trust in the local-level response, which, by December, was clearly higher in the local authority areas compared to Scotland, Wales and Kent.

Finally, trust in other people, which in June was highest among the local authority respondents, increased everywhere in September and October. However, by December the local authorities again showed the highest levels of trust.

Relations with others, immigration attitudes, and active social engagement

Trust is one key factor in social cohesion but other factors play a crucial role too. We have identified four of these that seem among the most important: people’s sense of relation with close others; people’s sense of belonging locally (or neighbourliness); people’s general attitudes towards potential outgroups (particularly migrants); and people’s active social engagement (action to bring about positive change).

Sense of connection with close others

We asked respondents whether, compared to before lockdown, they felt more connected or less connected with their family and with their friends. The scale ranged from 1 - much less connected, to 3 - no change, and 5 - much more connected and results are illustrated in Figure 6.

Our initial public report, “Beyond Us & Them”, revealed that respondents had mostly reported a loss of relationships throughout lockdown.²⁶ This did not occur across all types of relationship. For example, people felt greater loss of connection with colleagues and friends, but relatively little change or a light increase in connection with neighbours and family. However, we also found that in June, the loss of connection was less marked among respondents from the local authority areas than elsewhere.

By December, across respondents from all areas, we have seen an aggravation of connection loss, but it differs from place to place. Respondents in Scotland and Wales reported some improvement over the summer up to September, but then reported a decline in December. In England (Kent and the local authority areas), we observed a more steady decline through the summer and into winter. Overall, by December 2020, respondents from all places had exhibited a similarly reduced level of connection and the local authority areas had lost their relative advantage over the other places.

The mechanisms of this decline are complex but are uncovered in much of our qualitative work. Four out of six of the local authority areas had been placed under local restrictions for a significant amount of time, and participants in these four areas reported having severely limited their in-person social interaction, with some feeling that their relations with others had become impoverished as a result. Many participants were still connecting with others virtually, but some of them said that they were struggling with “Zoom fatigue” and longed for in-person contact.

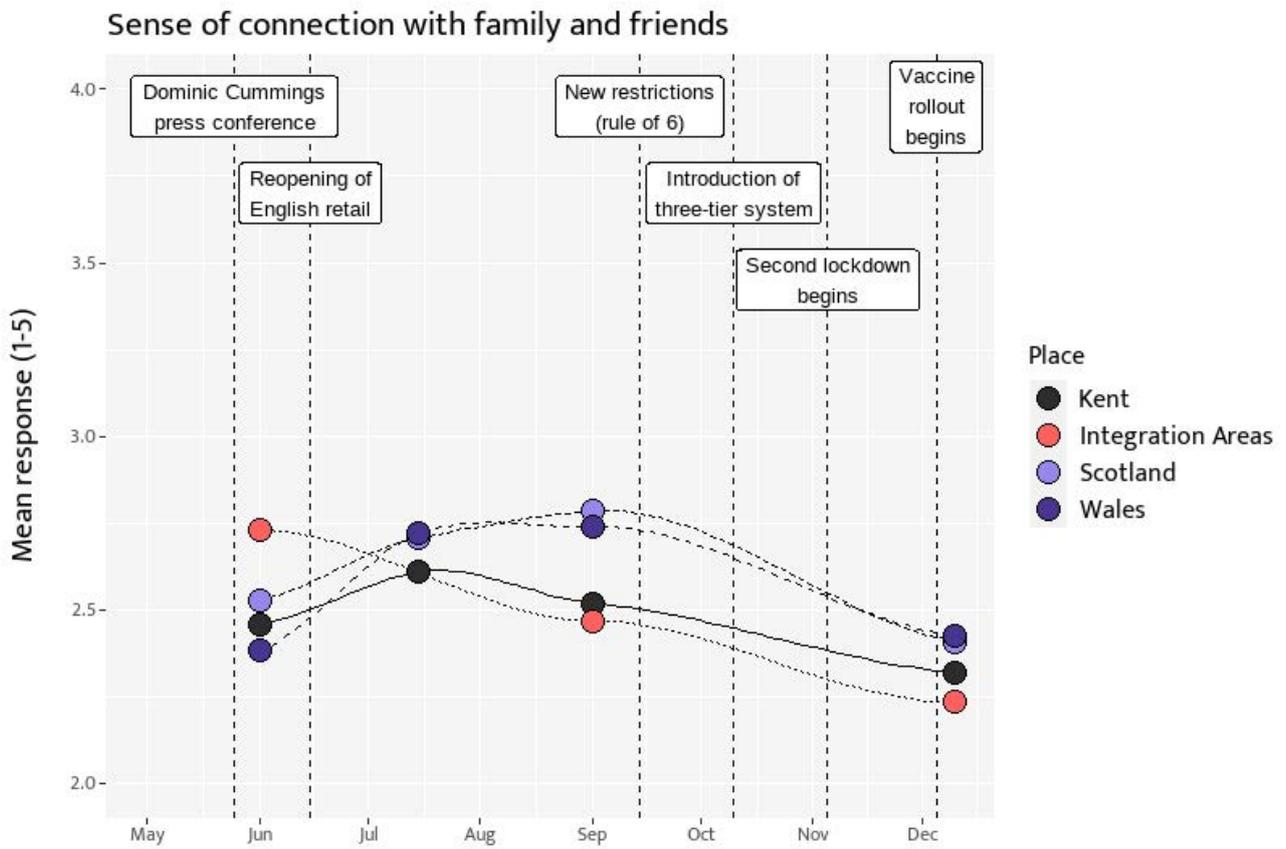
“I think I think it’s very different for us because we had such a small part of being free from lockdown. We haven’t had what the rest of the country have had. I don’t really remember many weeks at all where there was a bit of normality before it went again. I think, I think probably I have closed in quite a bit. If I sense someone is struggling, I will reach out. But the happy mixing that I used to do a lot of has gone. And it kind of makes me feel that a lot more of my interactions are a bit negative, [...] And I think that’s made me close in. And I think I’ve got complete Zoom fatigue”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]



²⁶ Abrams, A., 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 6. Average sense of connection with friends and family from May to December 2020



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 7.

Overall, most respondents reported average to high levels of neighbourliness, with variations across places. Neighbourliness seemed to peak in June before decreasing in the autumn and winter - probably as a result of the return of cold weather and the difficulty of continuing to organise neighbourly activities outside. However, while neighbourliness decreased in Kent, Scotland and Wales, it remained stable in the local authority areas, with only a small decrease in December. By the end of the year, it would appear that respondents in these local authorities had managed to sustain good relations in the local area more strongly than had respondents living in other places.

The focus group discussions provided powerful examples of the role of local neighbourliness in cohesion:

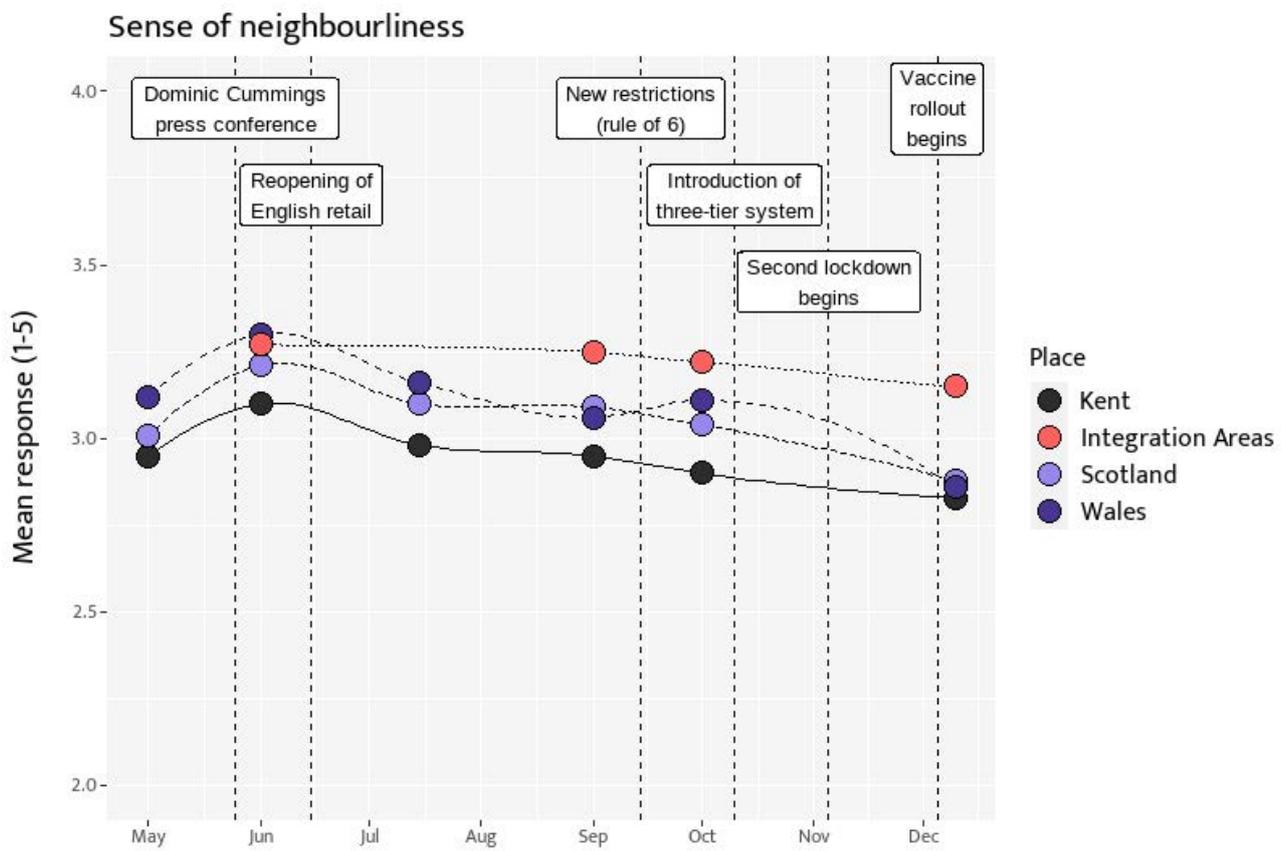
“Lots of neighbours with small children asked if they could walk my dog for me. So I got to know some more people that way, and started going around to neighbours for drinks in the garden, which I've never done before”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

“We've lived in the same house for quite some time and a couple of the neighbouring houses have also lived there for a very long time, but we haven't really spoke that much to be honest. So I've had the field out the front so I've had the kids on the field a lot. And then the neighbours have been coming out and building conversation around mainly what the kids have been doing riding bikes. And that was that was really cool”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

Figure 7. Average sense of neighbourliness from May to December 2020



Attitudes towards migrants to the UK

Positive attitudes towards migrants²⁷ are often considered an important index of social cohesion, since they facilitate good relations between people of different backgrounds and ensure that it is possible to build cohesion beyond people's in-groups. A common and quite basic 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), see Figure 8.

Back in June, we observed that people in the local authority areas expressed more positive attitudes towards migrants (an aggregated index including legal and illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and seasonal workers) compared with respondents from other places. The more positive attitudes persisted.

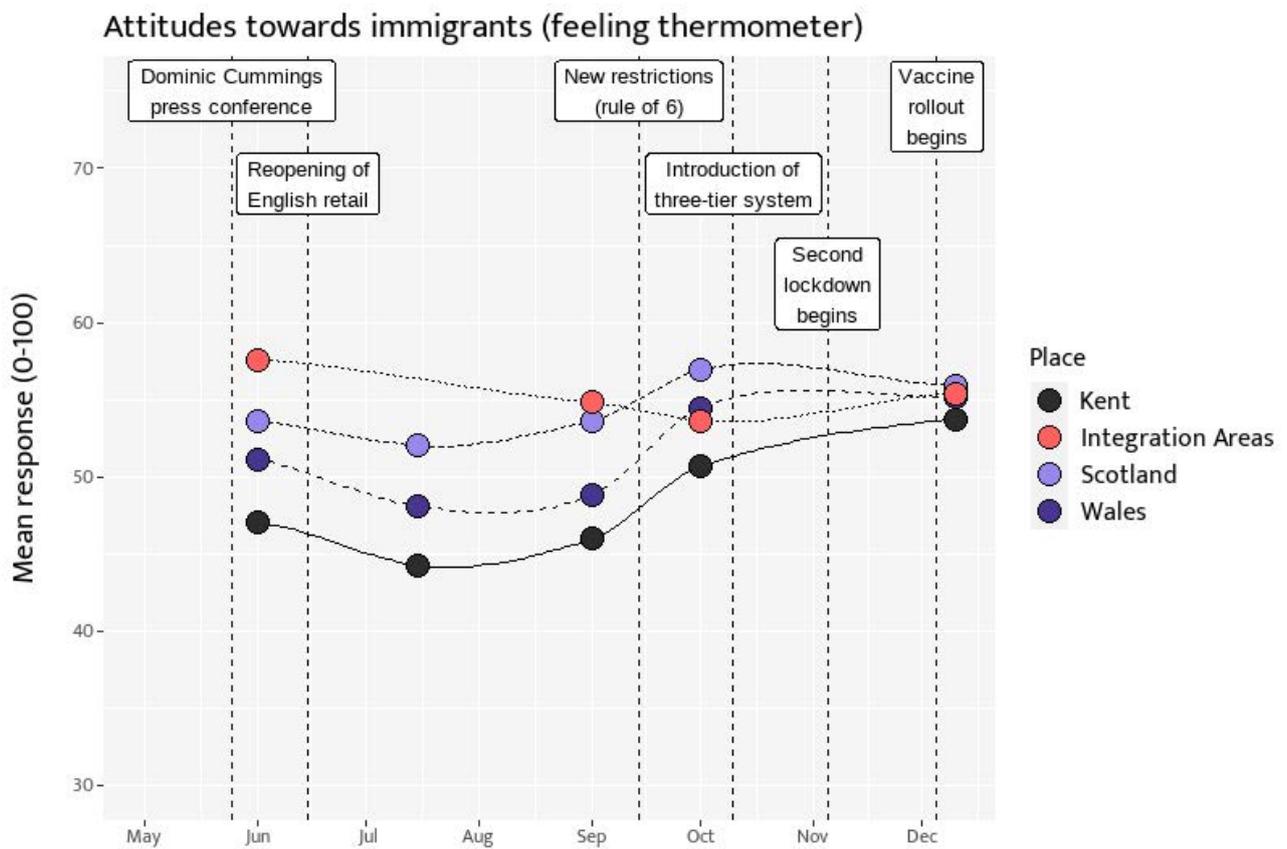
More recently, attitudes toward migrants in the other places became more positive (notably in Kent). In other words, immigration attitudes have improved in most places over the course of 2020 and reached the level attained previously by the local authority areas.

One possible explanation is that these attitudes are sensitive to what is salient in the media. Owing to the predominant focus on the pandemic it seems likely that media and government focus on the negative impact of immigration, which culminated in the summer with repeated stories of migrants trying to cross the Channel, subsided to the point where people simply felt relatively less threatened and less concerned about the issue from September onwards. The imminence of Brexit and perhaps even the reduced presence of international tourists may all have lessened people's anxieties about immigration too. One explanation is that the greater stability of attitudes among respondents from the local authority areas suggests they were less affected by these changes or by media coverage. However there may be other reasons for this finding.

This is corroborated by other findings on levels of concern around different social issues. In December, we asked respondents how concerned they were about a list of social issues (from jobs and economic growth to health and social care, education, environmental issues, and immigration issues). Immigration issues were ranked last, with most respondents reporting only "low" concern around it.

²⁷ 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 are currently exploring the measurement validity of possible alternative terminology for future surveys. However, 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. Average levels of positive attitudes towards immigrants on the “feeling thermometer” from June to December 2020



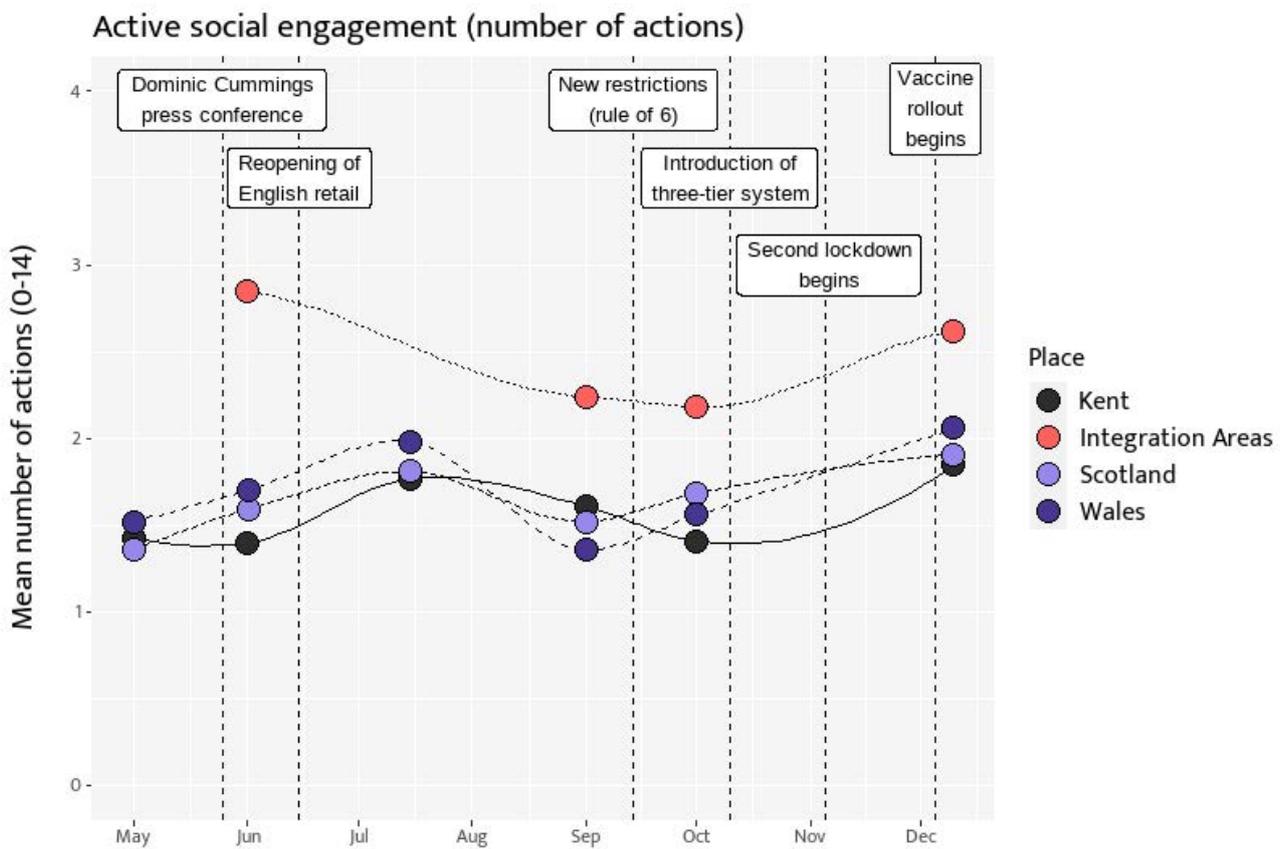
Active social engagement

The final indicator of social cohesion we considered here 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).

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. This finding persisted as illustrated in Figure 9. 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. The figure below shows the average number of different types of action people reported engaging in. Amongst all respondents there is an understandable dip in September and October (coinciding with returns to school and university) and a slight rebound in December but the more dramatic and consistent effect is the overall difference between the local authorities and the other areas.

Figure 9. Active social engagement (number of actions respondents said they have done during the past month) from May to December



In conclusion, the findings over time support the idea of a greater sense of social cohesion in the six local authority areas compared with other areas. As we cannot attribute this difference to the demographic characteristics of the sample, a likely explanation is that the explicit strategy to build cohesion has supported these areas.

The picture has reversed with regards to connections with close others (friends and family). Although the local authority areas reported the highest sense of connection in June, they dropped to the lowest sense of connection in December. However, respondents from the local authority areas maintained a greater sense of neighbourliness through time and continued to display greater engagement in social actions. They also reported greater trust in the government's response to COVID-19, most visibly when it comes to the *local* government's response.

4.3 Being a volunteer in a global pandemic

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 year 2020 and compared the perceptions of volunteers versus non-volunteers. By volunteering, we mean both formal (e.g. food banks) and informal volunteering (based on informal relationships with non-constituted organisations, such as Mutual Aid). Here we present the results from two waves of data collection: June and December.

In June our samples included 997 volunteers and 2361 non-volunteers.²⁸ In December the samples included 1260 volunteers and 2454 non-volunteers. Demographic comparisons showed that volunteers are more likely to be slightly older, to report higher income, higher levels of education, and higher subjective socioeconomic status. There were as many men as women volunteering and political orientation was 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.²⁹ Results are illustrated in Figure 10.

28 Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., & Platts-Dunn, I. (2020). *All in it, but not necessarily together: Divergent experiences of key-worker 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>

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

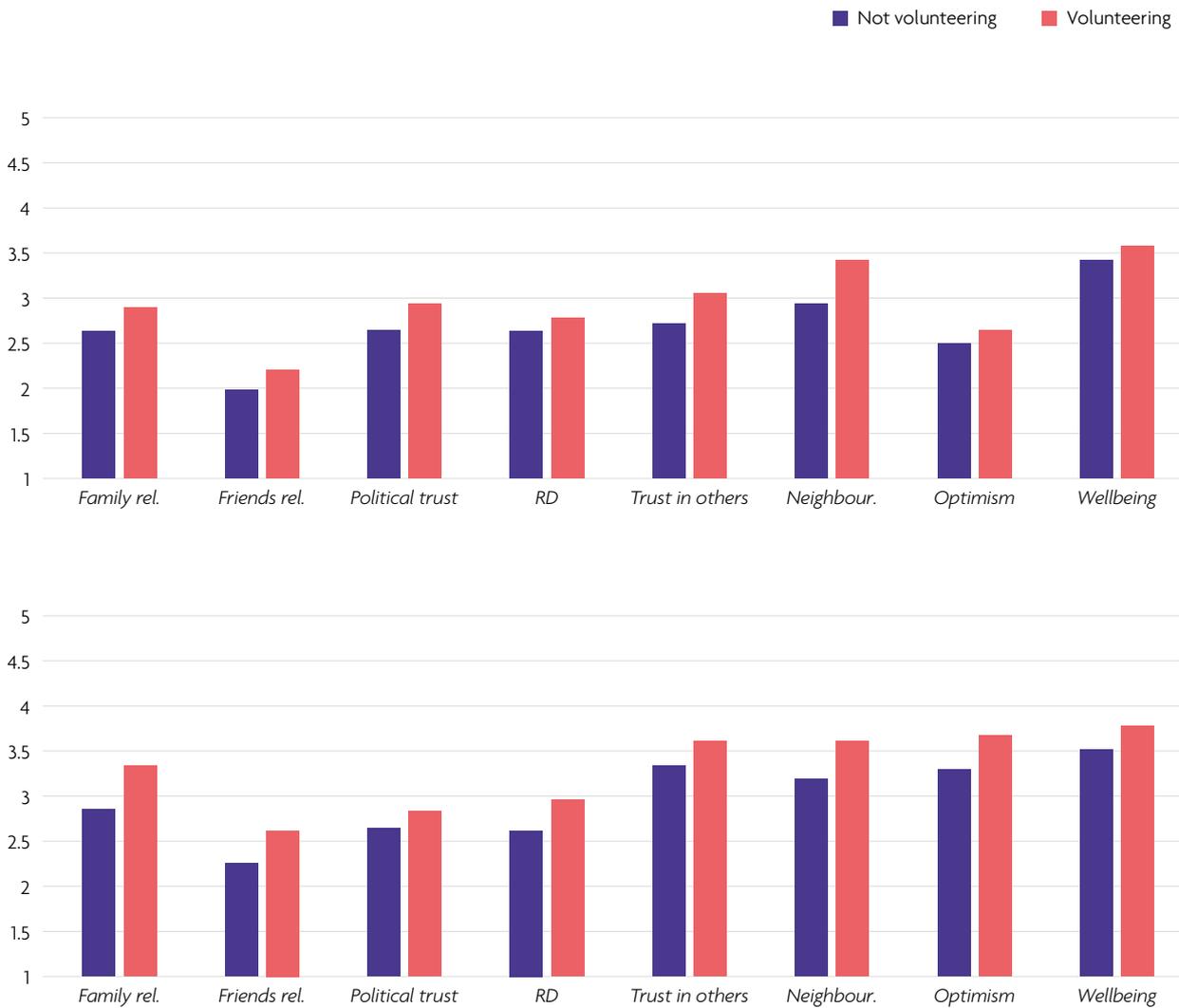
Volunteers reported more positive experiences than non-volunteers on all of the measures we considered. At both time points (June and December), volunteers reported greater connection with their family and friends, greater general political trust, and were less likely to perceive their local area as 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.

We recognise that volunteering and well-being are closely connected, and that each can support the other. However, we find strong evidence consistent with there being a protective effect of volunteering. In addition, volunteering and active social engagement have been key components of social cohesion programmes in the six local authorities. Volunteers not only contribute positively to their local area, they also directly benefit from their investment and seem better equipped to cope with the challenges posed by the ongoing global pandemic. That the differences hold all the way from June to December suggests that the advantages of being a volunteer are that it supports a 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.

“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]

Figure 10. Differences between Volunteers and Non-Volunteers in June (top) and December 2020 (bottom).



From left to right: differences in connection with one’s family, connection with one’s friends, general political trust, perceived relative deprivation of the local area (higher numbers represents a lesser deprivation), trust in others to respect COVID-19 restrictions, sense of neighbourliness, optimism for the future, and subjective wellbeing.

5. What have people told us about their experiences?

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.

Although the focus groups and interviews echoed many of the findings from our surveys we also discovered themes that add new dimensions and richness. This section reflects on these to capture issues relating to the key themes. We first draw on the insights from the focus groups and then provide four case studies from the one-to-one interviews. It should be noted that the observations reported here reflect the notes and interpretations of the research team rather than drawing on representative content coding of the transcripts. The purpose is to provide a sense of how participants accounted for things in their own terms.

5.1 Analysis of focus groups

The focus groups included a mix of people from different age groups, ethnicities, classes, roles, occupations and genders. The diversity of experience that participants brought to the sessions often generated interesting reflections on the pandemic and sometimes led to quite lively debates. In most sessions, participants were keen to share their thoughts on the pandemic and readily contributed to the discussion forums. Participants were generally respectful of each other's views and wanted to hear about other people's experiences, but there were some instances where differences in opinion led to heated disagreement.

Discussion was guided by the moderator's questions, but participants were given space to pursue topics they felt needed to be covered. Common topics of discussion included social inequalities and the plight of others; increased levels of social engagement and neighbourliness; changing levels of trust in others; and higher levels of trust in local government. The tone of the focus groups changed quite significantly between the summer period (Time 1) and the autumn/winter period (Time 2), with participants expressing heightened levels of concern about the months ahead and a generalised sense of fatigue and low morale. Below is an account of some of the key themes that have emerged across the focus groups as well as some reflections on some of the changes we've witnessed at the different time points in the research. This is followed by the four case studies from the one-to-one interviews that highlight different individuals' experiences of the pandemic.

Level of trust in government and in other people

Trust in others and in those in power was addressed in all of the focus group sessions. Many participants reported increasingly noticing non-compliance with the rules in their local area and linked this either to confusion around localised rules, or to a sense of fatigue with restrictions. While, on the one hand, this might seem to contradict our survey evidence that trust in others has increased since the summer, on the other, it may reflect greater levels of vigilance or concern. Indeed, comments, such as those below, seemed less indicative of low levels of trust in others than of confusion around government messaging and general fatigue with restrictions. It should be noted that many of the areas where we conducted qualitative research had been under strict restrictions for significantly longer than other parts of the country, and non-compliance would therefore have been more noticeable by virtue of contrast with background behaviour.

“And then when they brought in new restrictions, I just think they were really confusing. And so I think a lot of people, um, I think it was just unclear. And, and maybe that’s because they were also really complicated in some ways. [...] And actually, like for us, it was only about five streets away that it had changed. And so it was also unclear, like where’s the line?”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

In the autumn period, and before the second national lockdowns even began, participants seemed demoralised and wondered how much longer it would be bearable for people to maintain social distancing rules and abide by restrictions on seeing loved ones.

“I’d just like to say I think people are really tired. And we’re not even in a local second lockdown. I think people are totally confused about what they’re meant to do, what they’re not meant to do, because it’s so ridiculous, and it changes every week. Secondly, I think, you know, we’re just exhausted and the lack of human connection and contact, there’s only so long you can go and I think it’s just very difficult to maintain. And I mean I’m lucky because I’ve got a family and I’ve got a house and a garden. [...] But like [participant] said, you know, if you live in a high-rise flat with three kids, it must be a complete and utter nightmare. But even so, you know, you can’t hug your mum, you can’t go and see your sister. You know, it’s really, really hard”

[Community Partner Focus Group Participant]

As with the survey research, levels of trust in those in power fluctuated depending on when the focus groups and one-to-ones were conducted. Generally, trust in UK government decreased, particularly following Dominic Cummings' breach of the government's guidelines. Many participants reported viewing this event as unfair and cited it as a pivotal moment for them losing faith in the government's approach. Another key moment that impacted levels of trust in government was the announcement of local lockdowns in the north of England the night before Eid. Many participants felt that the timing of the announcement was insensitive, had led to heightened community tensions and prejudice towards the Muslim community, and had destabilised trust between government and minority ethnic groups.

“Obviously, that was devastating for our Muslim communities in terms of, you know, just being told two hours before that you can't celebrate with your family and friends is just devastating. But also, I really noticed in [local area] that that led to a massive backlash against the Muslim community. So when Boris Johnson said, you know, we've bought in this local lockdown, because people aren't obeying the rules around social distancing, it didn't take long for lots of people to substitute the word Muslim for the word people. [...] And, you know, my Muslim friends were telling me that they went on social media afterwards and were just seeing message after message of blame and hate directed at them”

[Community Partner Focus Group Participant]

Local trust

Trust in UK government remained low across the second round of focus groups and interviews, with many participants stating that they felt that those in power had either been untrustworthy, or had not provided trustworthy information about the pandemic. By contrast, participants often expressed high levels of trust in the information being provided by medical and scientific experts and in their local leaders. In fact, many participants praised the work done by local councils and elected members to communicate local rules and to support both local organisations and local residents.

“I couldn't possibly wish for better or more support from our local council than we get. I feel like when information is put out nationally, they seem to digest it quite quickly, and then try and, you know, feed it back into the community to tell us about what that means for us in Calderdale. [...] And I just think we're lucky. Calderdale Council are a cut above the rest. And I think they are a trustworthy bunch, whatever the colour on the door, you know. So I think it's the actual individuals rather than they represent Labour or Lib Dem or the Conservatives”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

Relations with others

Participants in the first round of focus groups were keenly aware of the differential impact of the pandemic on different groups in society, and of existing societal inequalities that had been exacerbated as a result of COVID-19 and the national and local lockdowns that took place between the spring and the summer of 2020. In particular, participants in these sessions expressed an awareness of health inequalities and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people from minority ethnic backgrounds, on people with disabilities, or on those with long-term health complications.

“Public Health England have made it very clear in their research that people from a BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] background are a lot higher risk. And it’s not just on the health aspect. We look at the occupations that they’re doing, if they’re a taxi driver, they work in the night-time economy, if they’re putting themselves in places where there’s delivery drivers. The majority of those will come from a BAME background”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

They also expressed concern about the financial repercussions of the pandemic and the planned end of the furlough scheme in October (which was subsequently extended to 2021). Many participants felt that those on lower incomes and in socio-economically deprived areas were being hit particularly hard not just by job losses, but also by further cuts to public services and cramped living spaces with limited access to green space.

“Really, I think there’s a massive difference, especially between people that might have a garden and lots of space to someone in a flat without any outdoor space and also, places that are overcrowded, you know, when, especially when they don’t have outdoor space, I think it must, must be extremely difficult for them”

[Community Partner Focus Group Participant]

In the autumn/winter focus groups, participants were increasingly worried about the impact of the continuing restrictions and further lockdowns on those with mental health difficulties, with many stating that they felt the mental health repercussions of the pandemic would be deep and long-lasting. The mood in the sessions was often quite low and many participants expressed concern about how they would cope with the winter months ahead.

“I’ve been really really nervous about winter to be absolutely frank. So, cause, I know what I’m like. I don’t think I have SAD, but I think I have a version of it. So when the sun goes, when it gets dark early, it stays dark until quite late into the morning, you know like this afternoon is wet and is just grey, you know, it really affects my mood, and I just worry and I’ve been worried for a while as to how we’re all going to cope with if a lockdown happens, even if it’s just for two weeks or three weeks, especially if it’s then compounded with, you know, financial worries and stuff, the lead up to Christmas”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

One participant expressed concern about increased levels of suicide and another participant spoke openly about attempting to take her own life in the summer of 2020. This was a difficult and upsetting admission for the moderator and participants to hear, but led to a very supportive focus group discussion where other participants disclosed details about their own mental health challenges too.

“And, you know, the impact on so many people who either lose jobs or reduced income or whatever and I think many people’s mental well-being is...utterly. [...] You know, I think this meltdown over the next three, four months, it’ll take us 20 years to even get back to where we are now, if ever, so I just feel – sorry, doom and gloom – but I do feel really, you know, I think we’re going to lose lives, not from COVID, but from suicide, I think we’re going to...the mental health bill is going to be huge”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

The elderly and the shielding were viewed as being particularly badly impacted by the continuation of the pandemic, both because of their risk of contracting the virus, but also because of loneliness and social isolation. Interestingly, participants in the autumn/winter period also expressed concerns about children and young people's futures, and about the impact of restrictions on their ability to socially interact, complete their studies, and pursue "normal" activities for people of their age. This could be because, at the time of the second round of focus groups, there had been extensive media coverage of disruption to young people's education and students facing lockdowns in halls. These sessions also included A-level and university student participants, which seemed to generate empathy and understanding across generational divides.

"I kind of have started now really just to feel particularly sorry for kind of, like, teenagers and young adults because [...] I just don't know how they're going to, kind of, launch their lives. I don't know how they're going to form proper relationships, I don't know how they're going to maintain friendships, I don't know how they're going to find jobs, I don't know how they're going to, kind of, pick up all these skills, and I don't think there's very much we can do about it. I just am worried we're going to have a bit of a lost generation really"

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

Active Social Engagement

A number of participants in the summer focus groups spoke positively about the mutual aid and volunteering schemes that had cropped up in their neighbourhoods over the course of the pandemic or that they had set up themselves. For instance, one participant spoke about setting up a socially distanced space in their garden for people who were struggling to meet and have a coffee. Another participant helped out at a food bank, while another participant collected shopping for people in their neighbourhood. This had helped them to expand their social contacts and feel more optimistic about the future, which supports our survey findings on the importance of supporting ways for people to volunteer and feel socially engaged.

"We've set up a little socially distanced coffee set up in our garden, I've got a big garden [...] We have had them come into our garden and serve them a cup of tea with somebody else who's also not coping very well and they've created, they've had, they've been able to bubble safely in our garden and get to know each other"

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

In the second round of focus groups, participants reported that they had continued to engage in positive social actions by volunteering and supporting those in need in their communities. However, some participants expressed serious concerns about the impact of funding, short-term planning and localised restrictions on their ability to continue to provide services that had been set up during lockdown. Some keyworkers and community leaders reported feeling stressed, fatigued and concerned about staff and volunteers, particularly as the numbers of service users at their organisations increased.

“I think from a personal point of view, you know, the amount of stress that we’re putting on ourselves and stuff as well, you know, that, um, it is an enormous responsibility. [...] As a centre manager, I feel really very responsible for my staff”

[Local Area Focus Group Participant]

5.2 Four case studies

This section of the report provides examples of individual journeys from the one-to-one interviews with participants recruited via our local authority and community partners. As with the focus groups, participants were often excited to be part of the research project and keen to share their varied experiences of the pandemic. The intimate nature of the one-to-one interviews allowed the interviewer and interviewee to get to know each other and to build a rapport. Though the tone of the second round of one-to-one interviews echoed the bleaker tone of the second round of focus groups, many participants told us that they had enjoyed taking part in the project. Some participants thanked us for taking the time to really listen to and acknowledge the reality of their lived experiences of the pandemic.

Case Study One: Being a Volunteer in the Local Community

Jane is a white British woman who works for a charity organisation in Greater Manchester. In March, Jane was redeployed and started collaborating with the local council to contribute to a local response hub supporting residents in need in lots of different ways. Despite feeling that her area had been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, Jane spoke optimistically about the collaborative work she had done with the council to ensure that residents were supported and that their needs were being met. She was impressed with the way the council had brought together different organisations to offer a joined-up approach to tackling the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and felt that this was one of the positive outcomes of the crisis.

“[...] there was a really there was a massive realisation at the beginning of this, that actually, the more the more that we work together, the better impact we have for the resident”

Jane was not critical of the national government, but felt that there was a deeper understanding of local needs and cohesion challenges at the local level.

“I think that’s where the local - the local sort of authority clearly have a better understanding of their residents than they do nationally because they do cause because they are local to that - to that resident, aren’t they and you know, they’re bound to have that understanding. Whereas, nationally, you’ve got to look after the whole country. And then that’s why we have local and national government, isn’t it really?”

When we spoke to Jane again in the winter, she was still working for the charity and felt that processes were running more smoothly and efficiently than at the height of the first lockdown. Jane felt that the restrictions were too relaxed for her area and that levels of compliance with the rules had decreased significantly. Despite this, she felt optimistic about the future and expressed a view that the crisis had increased neighbourliness and cohesion in her area.

“[...] we both think that COVID has brought people together in a strange way really because people have sort of offered to do things for their neighbours and other people that have never offered before. You know, even basic things like going picking up a prescription or doing their shopping”

Case Study Two: Shielding for Months because of Health Vulnerability

Danielle is a white British woman living in Calderdale. Danielle lives alone and has been shielding since March because of a serious chronic illness. In the summer, Danielle had barely left her house and felt very anxious about going outside to do her shopping. She had been able to maintain socially distanced contact with her daughters and wanted to spend time with her grandchildren but was wary of the possible risk of transmission.

“I want to see them. I want to be with them. But I’m also frightened of going in the house. Because it’s small space, I’m frightened of the people that they’re in contact with”

Danielle got on well with people in her immediate neighbourhood, but was concerned that she was hearing openly racist and divisive comments from some people in the community blaming minority ethnic groups. Danielle was deeply upset by this, but also felt that her community was resilient enough to withstand any potential divisions and pointed to its ability to come together in previous crises.

“We’ve had a lot of floods in [name of borough] and the Asian community were absolutely fantastic. They turned up with food. They helped people clean out their houses. They were absolutely fantastic. And I think that brought people more together than the COVID has in terms of, you know, the Asian community and, and the white part of the community”

When we spoke to Danielle in the autumn/winter period, she was really happy to speak to us again and told us that she was grateful to have the opportunity to tell someone about her experiences, comparing the one-to-one interview to a therapy session. Danielle had only left the house a couple more times. She felt really anxious about going outside and stated that she found it difficult to assess how safe it was.

“I find it very difficult to work out how safe it is outside. You know, sort of all the news and everything you sort of get a feeling that it’s everywhere. But when you actually look at figures and things sometimes it isn’t. So I feel very confused and well felt very confused about it, which has affected me going out”

Case Study Three: Living with Physical Disabilities during a Pandemic

Nick is a white British disabled man from Walsall who has been shielding over the course of the pandemic because of his physical disabilities. Nick lives with his partner, but had also been looking after the son of a friend who was very high risk. Nick was chatty and optimistic in our first conversation. He said he had been able to remain connected with others via online initiatives he had set up, such as an LGBT Christian group and a British Sign Language worship group. He felt that online technologies like Zoom had allowed him to maintain connections with others and also to make new connections that he might not otherwise have made.

"[...] 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 initially felt sympathy for the government having to deal with such an unprecedented situation but lost faith in their approach after Dominic Cummings broke the lockdown rules.

"Does the government know what it's doing? I don't think they do and then when Dominic Cummings, all that, he blatantly broke the rules which he helped to set up. And that just destroyed confidence in the government. Especially as this was all the, you know, Brexit means Brexit, freedom from people who aren't elected. I don't support Brexit. And then we've got this person who wasn't elected, who was deeply involved in making the decisions, breaking the rules himself. It's just double standards all over the place"

Nick felt that disabled people were particularly at risk and 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.

When we spoke to Nick again in the autumn, 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"

Case Study 4: A Young Person's Experience

Saleha is a young British Asian woman from Bradford who was in her final year of school when COVID-19 hit. Saleha's A-levels had been cancelled, which had caused her a lot of emotional stress.

"Well, because of COVID, I couldn't really sit my A-level exams so it was quite stressful waiting for my results in August. And the results were also messed up so it's really had an impact on me emotionally as well"

Saleha felt conflicted about being stuck at home and not being able to see friends and was critical of the government's handling of the pandemic in schools. Saleha felt that her own area had managed the crisis well, but that her community had suffered because restrictions on mixing had prevented extended families from meeting as much as they usually would.

When we spoke to Saleha a second time, she had left her hometown of Bradford to go to university in Newcastle where she was locked down in her student hall flat with three other people. Saleha was positive about the experience, but stated that she felt young people and university students in particular had been unfairly blamed for outbreaks over the course of the pandemic.

"So I think that university students have been poorly treated because there was that campaign about the 'eat out to help out'. And we were getting blamed for actually going out and going to the shops to get food. But the government asked us to do that in the first place. So we were always like the ones that were getting in trouble for stuff"

She was hopeful that she would be able to go home for Christmas but worried that restrictions might change again and that she would be stuck in her halls.

"But sometimes, like you always have that doubt that if it doesn't get better, we'll be stuck in this accommodation for a bit longer. We won't be able to see our family back at home. Yeah, that kind of worries me"

5.3 Summary

Though not completely insulated from anxieties about the short- and longer-term consequences of the pandemic, participants in the first round of focus groups and one-to-ones articulated a higher degree of optimism about the future and about the impact of the pandemic on local communities. Participants voiced concerns about the vulnerable becoming ill and the economy taking a severe hit, but many of them remained optimistic about the UK's ability to recover and were positive about their local area's resilience, recounting stories of the volunteering, mutual aid and befriending schemes they had noticed in their communities or were participating in themselves.

For the most part, the second wave of focus groups and one-to-one interviews took place after the summer ended and as localised restrictions began to be introduced more widely. Participants in these sessions reported concerns about the winter months ahead as well as a generalised sense of fatigue and low morale. Many of them also reported noticing increasing instances of non-compliance with rules and expressed distrust in the UK government. More positively, many participants continued to place a high degree of trust in their local councils and to express gratitude for the information being provided locally and for the support being offered to volunteering and community organisations.

The qualitative data has identified some themes not reflected in the quantitative research, in particular around levels of social isolation and loneliness. The impact of COVID-19 on minority ethnic communities has been necessarily highlighted, but what is perhaps less discussed is the devastating impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing³⁰ and those with disabilities. As our research participants poignantly illustrate in their conversations with us, some people and particular groups are really suffering. However, what is heartening is the deep empathy and concern for others expressed by many interviewees, a concern that traverses individual, socio-cultural and economic divides. This suggests that, despite limited opportunities for social mixing in-person, people are becoming increasingly aware of the challenges and hardships faced by others in society and of deep-rooted structural inequalities.

³⁰ The Prince's Trust (2021). *Youth Index 2021*.

<https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2021>

6. What have we learned so far?

6.1 Central findings

There is still much uncertainty and significant challenges ahead for individuals and communities. The rolling out of vaccines will quickly reduce the death rate from COVID-19 but will not bring national or international herd immunity very quickly and so non-pharmaceutical measures for infection control, such as restrictions on movement and contact, will remain necessary for a considerable period. 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 communities at much higher risk of contracting the virus than others.³¹ For many, though, it is the social and personal costs that loom largest -- education, work, relationships and economic survival. These are all areas in which cohesion can play a role.

Our findings on political trust are similar to other studies.³² Trust in national government is at an historic low, with trust in local MPs slightly higher. Yet we also observed that levels of local trust in our six local areas have remained stronger than elsewhere, perhaps reflecting the strength of relationships that were developed pre-pandemic via local social cohesion programmes. These relationships could then be relied on as communities mobilised to support and protect the vulnerable, further strengthening and deepening those connections. Acknowledgement and gratitude towards the local council for all it was doing for local communities was a strong and recurring theme in our focus group and one-to-one interviews.

Areas that have proactively invested in social cohesion are still faring better compared to elsewhere in other ways too, including their sense of neighbourliness, people's active social engagement and sustained inclusiveness towards other groups including migrants. These results are all the more remarkable because four of the areas have been in a higher level of restrictions for longer than other areas, and all six areas have experienced higher and more prolonged levels of infection for significant periods during the pandemic. We will examine more complex and multilayered aspects of intergroup relations in a future report as this is a further crucial area in which cohesion is expressed and has been a key element of local area integration programmes.

31 Michael Marmot et al. (2020). *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On*.
<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

32 For example: Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A., & Wright, L. (2020). The Cummings effect: politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet*, 396(10249), 464-465. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31690-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31690-1).
YouGov. (2020). COVID-19: government handling and confidence in health authorities.
<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/03/17/perception-government-handling-covid-19>

Social cohesion can be thought of as both a state and a process, like a garden where it is a combination of elements (local trust, social mixing, social connectedness etc.) that provides the best conditions for social cohesion to flourish. Some of these elements may be depleted by crisis, but the previous high levels of trust and social connectedness mean that the garden can recover and revive more quickly, providing all the elements are well maintained and attended to over time.

Our findings point to several of the social and psychological factors that may be particularly important in the context of the pandemic.

People who are engaged in volunteering are more protected from some of the worst effects of the pandemic than others. Our findings show 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. They reported greater optimism for the future and higher subjective wellbeing.

The connection between volunteering and wellbeing and the virtuous circle of doing good to feel good is well documented. However, our six local areas sustained substantially higher levels of active social engagement than elsewhere, and this is consistent with their achieving enhanced levels of cohesion. Volunteering may support greater psychological resilience in a time of crisis and higher levels of volunteering can contribute towards a more cohesive and resilient local area.

Our findings raise some key questions to focus on that may support recovery efforts:

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. Many factors might contribute to political trust in government and in political processes but our findings raise the question of what it is about how the six local authority areas operate that may be enabling their levels of local trust to have remained more resilient to external pressures. Is there something we can learn from their approach?

If we accept the inference that local authority areas that have invested in social cohesion are better equipped to cope with what are often more difficult external conditions (such as longer lockdowns, higher tiers and infection rates) then there may be much to learn from understanding the means by which they have fostered strong social connections and local trust. Can they sustain it and what can others learn from their experience? We have drawn on the expertise and insight of our research partners to produce a short forthcoming policy paper with best practice examples to support the dissemination of some of that knowledge.

Are people in some situations responding differently to the trials and the pressures of the pandemic? Our findings show that one group in particular - those who are volunteering - are less likely to experience some of the worst effects and this seems a likely benefit of their active social engagement in support of their local neighbourhood and for the good of society. Whether people volunteer because they are already more socially and psychologically resilient, or whether their volunteering makes them so, the implication is the same - that supporting people's engagement in positive social action is likely to promote individual and community well-being. What kind of support and local/national infrastructure do volunteers need to encourage that first engagement and then sustain and deepen that engagement over time? Again, in our forthcoming policy paper, our research partners have insight and expertise to offer on encouraging active social engagement at a local level in a way that also strengthens social cohesion.

6.2 How much does social cohesion matter for handling the pandemic?

We believe social cohesion will play a vital part in tackling some of the immediate and longer term challenges ahead:

Willingness to receive a vaccine is currently quite high, with our own and other surveys suggesting that up to 85% of people are willing to be vaccinated. However, it remains likely that some individuals and some groups within communities face both higher risk of infection and may be less fully reached by vaccination efforts. Willingness to be vaccinated correlates with levels of trust. Evidence suggests that some people from ethnic minorities are less willing to be vaccinated than others,³³ and this points to a need for increased levels of trust between ethnic minority groups and communities and government. Developing strong relationships with trusted local interlocutors who share the culture and language of less trusting groups and communities and who can do that bridging work between local communities and local government is an approach that has worked well in the six local authority areas, and is a key element of the work of our civil society research partners. But a more cohesive place should be one in which there are not substantial disparities of trust felt by different subgroups, making it less likely that any particular group will disconnect from the wider norms and values of the community as a whole.

Some of the fragilities in relations between the four nations of the UK and between central government and the regions have been exposed by the pandemic. Both Scotland and Wales have, at times, taken different decisions about when and what kind of measures to introduce in order to control the spread of the virus to those favoured by the UK government and gained higher approval ratings for their first ministers. The government made a strong commitment to the “levelling up” agenda as a key part of their election manifesto in December 2019, promising to redress the inequality between the regions of England and London and the south-east. However, this was tested last autumn as some regions objected to the different financial settlements being agreed under the tiered lockdown system as unfair and made without the input from regional leadership. These indicate that regional and national divisions are becoming more salient and, as the impacts of Brexit are felt on different local industries and areas, are likely to become even more so. In the face of these tendencies towards regional division and competition, how can we support and strengthen connections between different regions and the four nations of the UK through civil society and regional and local government?

³³ Royal Society for Public Health (2020). *New poll finds BAME groups less likely to want COVID vaccine*.
<https://www.rsph.org.uk/about-us/news/new-poll-finds-bame-groups-less-likely-to-want-covid-vaccine.html>

The pandemic has exposed fundamental inequalities and has disproportionately impacted particular groups and communities including some ethnic minority communities. These inequalities are inextricably linked to cohesion. Inequalities directly affect segregation in housing, education and some workplaces and the resulting intergroup antipathy can result in cohesion challenges at local, regional and national levels, including misinformation and rumours spreading about a particular group or community; geographical divides and divisions within areas where there is no mixing between groups; and insular hyperlocal groups unwilling to mix. These inequalities will need to be addressed in conjunction with building social cohesion if we are to emerge a stronger and fairer society.

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.³⁴ The outpouring of compassion and people organising to help others that was much in evidence in the early days of the pandemic demonstrates a huge capacity in British society for kindness and an ability to forge strong and meaningful social connections. How we capture and channel the British public's appetite for unity, kindness and greater trust and connectedness may well be one of the defining challenges of coming years.

6.3 What's next for this research and for policy?

The next steps for the current research are its expansion to explore what's happening at the level of metropolitan combined authorities and what role cohesion plays in the social and economic challenges ahead across different parts of the UK. We will explore the interplay of identity and belonging at local, regional and national levels, and undertake more extensive analysis of volunteering, both in terms of what sustains it and what it sustains. We will also be able to pay closer attention to the experiences of ethnic minorities and will return to the dynamics of trust at different levels.

In the meantime, we have already learnt much that helps us understand ways to develop and strengthen policy. Fundamental to any policy in this area is an understanding that place matters. Developing a shared vision about their locality which says this place is a good place to live, work, raise your family and grow older in has been a key characteristic of the six local authority areas surveyed. Key elements of this shared vision include diverse local leadership, tackling barriers to inclusion of minority communities and underrepresented groups, embedding social mixing, and promoting trust and active social engagement. In our forthcoming policy report, *Beyond Us and Them: Policy and Practice for Strengthening Cohesion in Local Areas*, we explain how, enacted at national and local levels, these elements, together with investment in capacity-building, cross-sector partnerships and knowledge exchange, can be the basis on which to build cohesion.

³⁴ More in Common (2020). *Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain*.
<https://www.britainschoice.uk/#our-common-ground>