Our chance to reconnect
Final report of the Talk/**together** project

/together

British
Future...

AVIVA | Foundation

Final report

Contents

Please note that some images featured in this report were taken before social distancing measures were in place.

Foreword

The Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chair of the /together steering group.

This report reveals a portrait of a country as it begins to emerge from the greatest test our society has faced in living memory. The last 12 months have been extraordinarily difficult. COVID-19 has caused huge hardship and suffering for many of us: the loss of loved ones, financial pressures and struggles with our own physical and mental health. Obliged to stay physically apart, it has felt harder to support those close to us. The pandemic has tested the resilience of our communities, deepening some existing divides and creating new pressures as its impacts have been unevenly experienced.

Yet this period of forced separation has also prompted a new appreciation of social contact with others – family, friends, neighbours and those in our wider community. Millions of us helped out neighbours, our local communities and the NHS. We forged new bonds with those around us, and gained new appreciation of our relationships. Where there has been despair, there has also been hope – and that hope has come from the care we have shown each other, the possibility of stronger, kinder and more loving communities.

Drawing upon the views of nearly 160,000 people shared over the last nine months, this report is the most comprehensive UK-wide consultation ever undertaken about what divides us, what unites us, and what can bring us closer together – and provides us a unique insight into the risks and opportunities that will emerge in the aftermath of COVID-19.

At the start of 2020, before we had even heard of the pandemic, a group of leaders from civil society, faith, culture, sport and business

Credit: World Council of Churches

backgrounds came together to urge that we make the 2020s a decade of reconnection. Their concern was that our society felt more fragmented than any of us would like; that without concerted action our identities would become entrenched and our divides – by class or geography, by politics, age, race or by faith – could come to define us.

That group became **/together**, the steering group of which I have the honour to chair. It is a coalition which aims to bring people together and bridge divides, one which everyone is invited to join: from community groups to some of the UK's best-known organisations. The COVID-19 crisis and its impacts have brought a fresh urgency to the campaign.

The breadth and scale of this **Talk/together** research is an important foundation for the work still to come. It reflects how **/together**

has chosen to do things differently – starting not with our answers to society's challenges, but with a series of questions about what divides and unites us, and what could bring our society together in these difficult times.

We have heard from members of the public in every nation and region of the UK, in dozens of small online discussion groups of seven or eight people and through an online survey that tens of thousands completed. We have heard from those with experience of building connection in local communities: charities, faith groups, local councils and businesses, teachers and academics. Through our partners we have reached out to groups whose voices are often ignored – from people on low incomes to those living with disabilities. Nationally representative research by ICM has helped ratify and cross-check those findings across the population.

This report sets out what people in the UK think about division and unity; about the state of their local community and of our society across the UK as a whole; about issues that were around before COVID-19 and those that have arisen over this difficult last 12 months. It examines people's fears for the future and their hopes for something better, for themselves and their families and for all of us. And it sets out the solutions that they think would help make those hopes a reality.
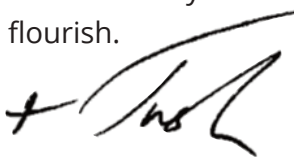
Because we have listened to such a wide range of voices, the picture that emerges is varied and nuanced. There are clear differences in opinion across different groups, but we also found common themes, held by many of the respondents.

The **Talk/together** project reveals a society that has been battered and shaken by recent events and is fearful of divisions to come; but equally one that is heartened by the way in which people and communities have responded. Despite everything, it is a society that feels closer than prior to the pandemic and wants to build on that sense of community in the future.

It is up to us all, as members of that society, to help shape that future. And so, **Talk/together** finds our society at a crossroads. We can allow our differences and divides to harden and grow wider as we struggle to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. Or we can seek to harness the newfound community spirit that did emerge in 2020, to help build a society that is kinder and more connected.

It is my conviction, and that of the **/together** coalition, that we can and will choose the latter path. As a Christian, I follow Jesus' simple call to love our neighbour – if we choose to look after one another and to work together to build kinder communities, my prayer is that we will build a society in which every person can flourish.

The Most Reverend and Right Honourable
Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

Picture: Walsall for All

Executive summary

Executive summary

Humans are social animals, with a need to connect socially with each other. The extraordinary 12 months that we have just gone through – the things that we have missed and those that we have felt supported by – have shown this more strongly than ever. Many of us have become acutely aware of the importance of social connection to our own wellbeing. Such contact between people is essential to the functioning of our society too. Yet that society has, over time, become increasingly divided – by politics, including those of the Brexit referendum; by wealth and power; by age, race or faith; and by geography.

The Talk/together project is the UK's biggest-ever public conversation about what divides and unites us, and what could bring our society together in these difficult times. It has engaged nearly 160,000 people in its discussions. Talk/together was conducted by /Together, a new coalition that invites us all to help build kinder, closer and more connected communities in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Those who took part in Talk/Together have come from all backgrounds and from all parts of the UK. Their numbers include:

• **78,790** people who have given their views through a survey that was open for six months between July 2020 and January 2021. The survey was mostly undertaken online but was also completed in paper form by people who did not have access to the internet.

• **10,485** people who took part in five nationally representative surveys undertaken by ICM in March 2020, May/June 2020, November 2020, December 2020 and January 2021.

• **281** members of the public who took part in 41 guided discussions, held online, which drew people from all parts of the UK. These were held between May 2020 and January 2021.

• **218** people who provided evidence to Talk/Together or took part in one of the 26 stakeholder discussions. These participants came from a wide range of organisations: faith and civil society, local government, business and universities.

• **68,534** people who took part in surveys, online events and other research activities run by /Together's partner organisations.

We asked everyone the same questions: what divides us, what brings us together and how might we encourage more kindness and connectedness? With nearly 160,000 people involved in Talk/Together over a nine-month period of enormous volatility and change, this report is an authoritative portrait of the state of the nation and the society that we aspire to be.

What it uncovers is a society at a crossroads: one that has experienced a remarkable upsurge of community spirit in response to adversity, but where significant divisions still exist. It also found a strong appetite for change: the COVID-19 crisis has forced all of us to look again at the ways in which we interact with each other; it will make many re-evaluate how they relate to others in the longer term. In many ways we can choose what we keep and what we reject. The legacy of COVID-19 could be growing isolation and distance from each other; or it could be a newfound commitment to help each other and to look out for those around us. The divisions of the past could re-emerge or become deeper; or they could also be challenged and bridged by a new appreciation of what we have in common.

Taking the right path will require leadership – from national and local government, business leaders and key insititutions – but it is also up to every one of us as individuals.

COVID-19 has brought us together

The pandemic has brought us together, at a country-wide level and even more so at a local level, with an upsurge in neighbourliness and community spirit. In May 2020, 60% of people agreed that the 'public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides'; just 15% of people disagreed. Much of this sense of togetherness and community spirit still remains now, though not so strongly-felt as it was last spring. In December 2020, our nationally representative survey shows that half of the population (50%) still believe that the response to the pandemic shows that we are more united than divided, while only a quarter (27%) disagree.

Talk/together methodology

Open Survey

78,790 people gave their views through a survey that was open between July 2020 and January 2021. It was mostly undertaken online but was also completed on paper by people without internet access.

Nationally representative research

10,485 people took part in five nationally representative surveys undertaken by ICM in March 2020, May/June 2020, November 2020, December 2020 and January 2021.

Public discussions

281 members of the public took part in 41 online guided discussions which drew people from all parts of the UK. These were held between May 2020 and January 2021.

Stakeholder discusions

218 people provided evidence to Talk/together or took part in one of the 26 stakeholder discussions. Participants came from a wide range of organisations: faith and civil society, local government, business and universities.

Call for evidence

An open call for evidence was launched in July 2020.

Partner activities

68,534 people took part in surveys and discussions run by /Together partner organisations.

How did we come together in 2020?

COVID-19 highlighted our common humanity: Although the impacts of COVID-19 were felt differently across society, the pandemic showed we were all susceptible to illness.

Shared local identities and new connections brought people together: People talked about getting to know their neighbourhoods better or volunteering with a local charity. This fostered shared local identities and new local relationships, sometimes across community divides. This new sense of connectedness with 'place' seemed most marked among people who were now working from home.

People looked out for and helped isolated and vulnerable members of society: Neighbourly acts of kindness brought people together, developing stronger bonds of trust. We were often told that this informal volunteering crossed ethnic and faith divides in mixed neighbourhoods, increasing social contact between people from different backgrounds.

The relief effort crossed social divides: Hundreds of thousands of people offered their time as volunteers, to the NHS and to local charities. Our findings suggest that 12.4 million adults volunteered during the pandemic, of which 4.6 million were first-time volunteers, with 3.8 million of this group

interested in volunteering again[1]. Of this group of new volunteers who want to carry on volunteering, 770,000 are aged between 18 and 24 years old; 360,000 have a disability or long-term illness; and 740,000 live in the poorest fifth of neighbourhoods: all groups of people who were previously less likely to volunteer. Businesses, councils, faith and civil society worked together. In many places the public, not-for-profit and private sectors worked with each other to help those in greatest need. In divided communities, these relief efforts often crossed ethnic and faith divides and are likely to be sustained into the future, leading to higher levels of inter-group contact and more kindness, empathy and trust.

Support for the NHS united us across the UK: The NHS has always been an institution that unites us. This support was manifest in the early weeks of the pandemic through Clap for Carers. By the time that the weekly round of applause ended on 28 May 2020, it was estimated that nearly seven in ten (69%) of the British population had taken part.
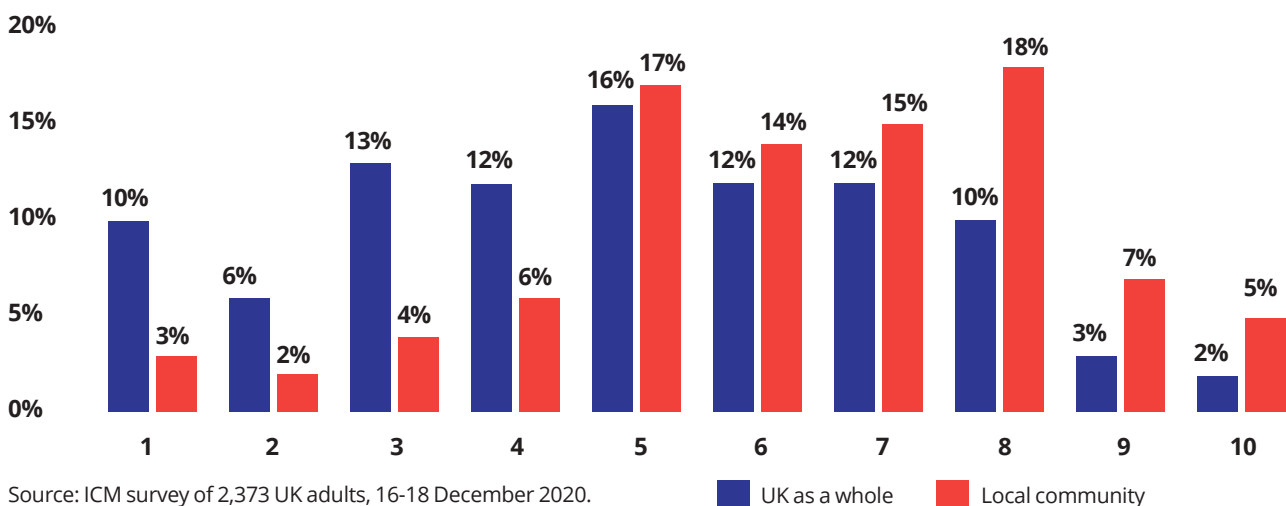
There were unifying national moments: Some 27.1 million people watched Prime Minister Boris Johnson's televised address to the nation on 23 March 2020[2]. Clap for Carers and the VE Day anniversary were also moments that brought people together, locally and nationally. On Sunday 5th July, the birthday of the NHS, some 14.3 million people took part in Thankyou/together, a moment of social connection coordinated by /Together and the NHS, when people came together with neighbours to give thanks to everyone helping us through the COVID-19 crisis.

Support for the Government and the leaders of the devolved administrations was initially very high: In the first weeks of lockdown there was a sense that party-political divides had been set aside in a national effort to respond to the virus. Public health guidance was similar across the four nations of the UK and the furlough scheme was popular.

We talked about our society differently: COVID-19 has changed the way we see and talk about our society, bringing our existing confidence in our local areas to the fore. People have always had more confidence is social relationships in their local communities, as Figure A shows. With Brexit dominating the news in 2019, national discourses about our society did not reflect this local unity. But in 2020 there was extensive media reporting about local relief efforts, the contribution of NHS staff and national moments we have described. People found that they were not as deeply divided as they had come to believe. A shared COVID-19 narrative emerged: one that placed more emphasis on the kindness, equal worth of people, community spirit, strong neighbourhood relationships, local unity and what we have in common. This narrative has now been implanted into our collective memory of 2020, although it may evolve or change with time.

Figure A: On a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided are we at present? (1 = very divided, 10 = very united).

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

■ UK as a whole   ■ Local community

[1] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020. [2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52018502

Current divides and the risks of future division

The sense of togetherness at a national and local level does not mean that our divisions have disappeared. In some cases the pandemic highlighted existing fissures in society while in others it divided us in new ways, both of which may persist as we emerge from the crisis.

Increasing economic inequality and poverty caused by COVID-19: These were the issues that people were most worried about in the discussions. Some 45% of people selected 'divisions between rich and poor' as one of their top three (out of eight) divisions that worried them going forward. As we come out of the pandemic, the future economic impacts of COVID-19 may disproportionly hit poorer people, younger people, disabled people, minority ethnic groups and women. This could increase existing inequalities in society and divisions between cities and towns and north and south. Such inequalities have the potential to exacerbate other divisions and to lead to resentments that heighten inter-group conflict.

Social isolation and loneliness: COVID-19 regulations have increased levels of loneliness, impacting on people's mental health. Some 8% of people felt they had not coped mentally with COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions, with this rate rising to 13% of 18-24 year olds[3].

Digital exclusion: COVID-19 has meant that we have relied far more on the internet to connect with others and access services. Yet a quarter of the UK adult population are internet non-users, or 'limited users' because they have unreliable broadband connections, share devices or lack digital skills.

Social media: While social media has connected people over the last year, some 55% of the public feels that social media drives us apart more than it brings us together, a view held consistently among all sections of society. We found widespread concerns about the impact of social media on the tone and nature of political discourse; about online hatred and 'fake news'; and about social media as a driver of

identity polarisation. A lack of consensus about the boundaries between free speech and intimidation, coupled with weak regulation, means social media risks further dividing us.

Age and generational divides: In 2020 there has been much solidarity across generations, with young people looking out for their older neighbours and older people concerned about the economic impacts of COVID-19 on younger people. But COVID-19 has left older people more vulnerable from a health perspective and more likely to face digital exclusion; and left younger people more likely to experience unemployment, or struggle with loneliness and their mental health.

Attitudes to public health guidance: Just 35% of people were impressed with the UK general public's response to COVID-19, compared with 68% who said they were impressed with their friends and family[4]. We have created a new out-group: those who we feel are not following the rules. Often these may be out-groups with which we already have little social contact – for example people from particular areas, age, faith or ethnic groups – reinforcing existing prejudices. As public health regulations are relaxed this may prompt further division, with some people thinking that this process is taking place too quickly while others become frustrated because restrictions still remain. If there are ethnic disparities in the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine, this could exacerbate social divisions, and potentially endanger people's health.

Changes to patterns of working: A large-scale movement away from office to home working could reduce bridging (inter-group) social contact among some sections of the workforce.

Togetherness has not been evenly felt across all communities: While COVID-19 has brought people together, it has also revealed weaknesses in the social fabric of some communities. While 41% of people felt that the pandemic had made their local community more united, one in eight people (13%) felt that COVID-19 had made their community more divided.

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[3] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020. [4] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults, 13-16 November 2020.

Widening geographic divides: Many people believe that the pandemic has increased divisions between rural and urban areas, between London and the rest of the country and between North and South, economically, socially and politically. Some 49% of people in the North East put the North-South divide as one of the top three issues that worried them most, as did 44% of people in the North West and 50% in Yorkshire and the Humber, compared with 18% of people in London and 18% in the South East. Different lockdown regimes have reinforced public perceptions of economic, social and political divisions and inequalities across the UK's geographies. These are reinforcing anti-elitist and anti-London sentiments, leading to resentment and heightened in-group identification.

Divisions across the four nations of the UK: The divergence of policy between the Westminster Government and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has, for some, reinforced perceptions of national division, although other people supported policy autonomy. In Scotland, the divergence of policy across the UK was often seen through the lens of the independence campaign; those with pro-union views argued for policy convergence, and those who were pro-independence made the case for policy autonomy. The operation of the furlough scheme in Wales and different lockdown regulations between Wales and England has prompted increased debate about Welsh independence and a heightened perception that Wales does not get its fair share of investment to fund transport and to run its public services.

Scotland's independence debate: Some 60% of people who live in Scotland are worried about divisions between those who want independence and those who do not. It is the divide that worries them most, more than divisions between rich and poor or by party politics[5]. Participants in the Talk/together groups looked back to Scotland's 2014 independence referendum, with some people feeling that they had been able to have open discussions where different opinions were respected. Others spoke of a heated debate on social media, family disagreements and lost friendships. The independence debate has the potential to be divisive in future, in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, as people become more emotionally invested in the campaign and see independence or commitment to the Union as an aspect of their social identities and values.

Race, faith and identity: Disparities in mortality and hospitalisation rates between white and ethnic minority citizens received media coverage at much the same time as the Black Lives Matter movement gained prominence in the UK. These protests have resulted in action to tackle race discrimination and prejudice. But responses to the protests also divided the public: younger people, graduates and those from minority ethnic groups were more likely to be strongly supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement. We found that a much larger middle group are supportive of action to address racial injustice but have concerns about the vandalism on the marches, the decision to hold them during the pandemic and worries about a backlash. A minority of people are more vocal in their disagreement with Black Lives Matter, with their opposition focusing on the movement's ideology, contested histories of race and empire, 'cancel culture' and free speech.

In future there is potential for issues such as race and empire, or immigration, to divide us into those who are 'for' or 'against', rather than being a subject on which we can have open conversations that lead to societal consensus, based on commitments to equal opportunity and shared opposition to hate crime, prejudice and discrimination.

We also remain concerned about the prevalence of anti-Muslim prejudice, to which COVID-19 has added new dimensions. This is most widespread in areas where the local non-Muslim population has little contact with Muslims. Prejudice can lead to hate crime, which breeds mistrust and divides communities.

Declining political trust: In November 2020 when we asked whose response to the COVID-19 pandemic had impressed and whose had disappointed, just 24% of people said they were impressed by the response of the UK Government and 17% were impressed by MPs, compared with 80% who were impressed by the NHS. Two-thirds (64%) of people say politicians are untrustworthy because they are motivated by self-interest and only 19% say they understand the needs of ordinary people. Some 83%

[5] Ibid.

of people say that they want politicians from different parties to work together to solve this country's problems[6].

Dissatisfaction with those who hold political office, our democratic system and the nature of political discourse on social media is a cause for concern, reducing voter turnout and participation in constructive and civil political debate. Restoring political trust is crucial if the UK is to heal its divides, as confidence in our politicians, parties and government acts as a vital glue, uniting citizens around a shared confidence in our democratic system.

Low levels of political trust, as well as economic insecurity, are conditions that make it more likely that extremist narratives will take hold. In the last year many people have been exposed to conspiracy theories about the existence, origin and spread of COVID-19 and about vaccines. Online engagement with COVID-19 conspiracy theories risks further increasing the reach of extremist groups.

Gradual identity polarisation: People's work and social lives are structured by generation, so the movement of younger people to bigger cities and away from the countryside and towns risks increasing the age segregation we see in society. Unless action is taken, we believe this risks a trajectory of gradual identity polarisation, driven by:

• Spatial disconnection, where social liberals and social conservatives are decreasingly likely to live and work with each other.

• Political realignment, where our main political parties cease to represent people with a diverse range of social identities. Such a situation incentivises politicians to use narratives or enact policies that appeal to their base, further dividing society.

• High-salience, binary identity conflicts that require a person to be 'for' or 'against' an issue.

• The 'echo chamber' effect, exacerbated by the algorithmic personalisation of social media news feeds.

In such a situation, the space for common ground is hollowed out and reduced, with society splitting into 'us' and 'them' identity tribes.

Brexit

As an inter-group identity conflict, Brexit is likely to gradually receive less prominence, as UK society goes through a process of acceptance and reconciliation. Only a quarter of people (25%) are still emotionally invested in the politics of Brexit. Talk/together's research finds that the primary political identity of 12% of people is still as a Leaver while another 13% of people say their primary political identity is as a Remainer[7] . For 53% of people, their primary political identity now lies elsewhere, for example as a Conservative or Labour supporter; another 21% of people do not identify with any political party or cause. This 74% group includes Leave and Remain voters, social liberals and social conservatives. What unites them is that Brexit is no longer a conflict involving clearly demarcated in-groups and out-groups, or one that invokes particularly strong emotions.

Brexit was, however, a salient issue in the discussions we held in November and December 2020, when the UK-EU trade negotiations featured more prominently in the news. It was also a prominent theme of the discussions we held in Northern Ireland, where people were fearful about its economic impact and that the Irish border might become a flashpoint for violence.

A country at a crossroads

We are a country that is both united and divided, but the experiences of 2020 show that we can come together. The Talk/Together discussions and surveys show that there is an appetite to make things better, with 73% of people saying that they would like our society to be closer and more connected in future. But not everyone is certain that this will happen. A third of people (34%) think COVID-19 will not change the way we interact with each other because things will go back to how they were before the pandemic, while a third feel that new habits of staying apart may become embedded in long-term behaviour. More optimistically, another third of people (32%) believe that COVID-19 will change how we connect with each other, because we have missed face-to-face interaction in 2020 and will want to do more of it in future.

As this country emerges from the pandemic, we stand at a crossroads. We now have a stark choice

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[6] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020. [7] ICM survey of 2,083 UK adults, 27-28 January 2021.
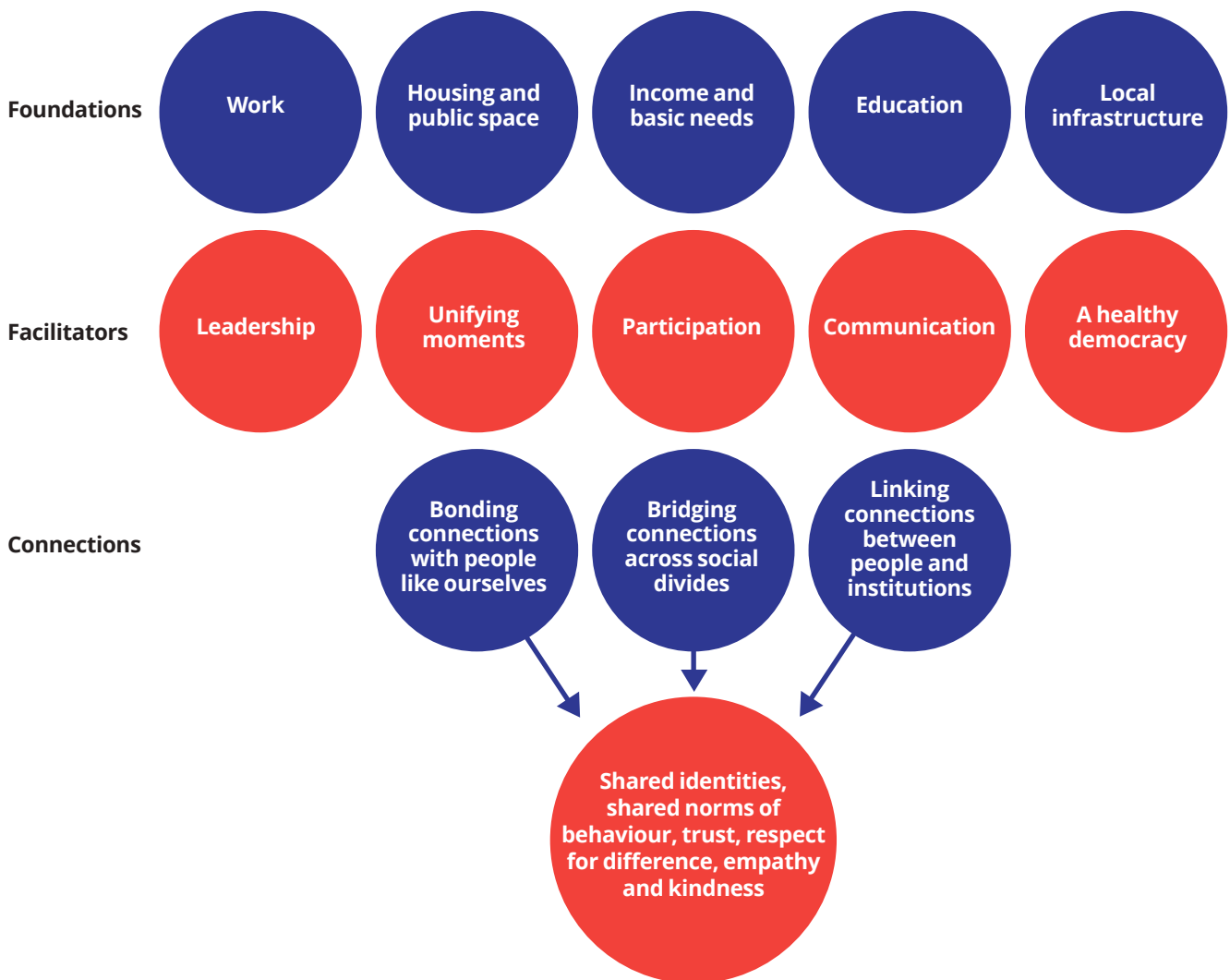
between an increasingly divided society, or one that uses the newfound community spirit of 2020 to build a society that is confident and successful, as well as kind, connected and fair.

Over the last nine months, we have heard from many thousands of people, members of the public as well as experts in their fields. We have asked everyone what helps them connect with other people and what needs to change if we are to heal this country's divides. People have made hundreds of suggestions, in the discussions and through the open survey, for policy change and practical action that would help achieve this aim. Many of these proposals have the aim of increasing confidence in and increasing levels of social contact between 'us' and 'them'. Increasing

inter-group social contact helps to reduce stereotypes and prejudice, as well as developing greater empathy, trust and shared 'more in common' identities.

We have drawn these proposals together. If we are to build a kinder and more connected society, Talk/Together's evidence suggests that we need to put the right foundations in place, and make sure that facilitators are present in all our communities. These foundations and facilitators enable us to form more of the bonding, bridging and linking social connections that we need to break down rigid 'us and them' identification and to develop shared identities, shared norms of behaviour, trust, respect for difference, empathy and kindness (Figure B).

Figure B: Model of foundations, facilitators and connections

Foundations

- Work
- Housing and public space
- Income and basic needs
- Education
- Local infrastructure

Facilitators

- Leadership
- Unifying moments
- Participation
- Communication
- A healthy democracy

Connections

- Bonding connections with people like ourselves
- Bridging connections across social divides
- Linking connections between people and institutions

Shared identities, shared norms of behaviour, trust, respect for difference, empathy and kindness

Foundations

Work, school and college are places where people are most likely to meet and mix with others who are different to themselves. We were told about the difference that community-minded employers and schools made to levels of social contact. The practices of employers and educators can have a big impact on social connection. Our basic needs must be met as poverty limits our ability to socialise and places us under the stresses that can contribute to inter-group conflict.

The layout of public space and the design of housing is important too and we heard how important parks and high streets were to people. Attractive, mixed-use high streets and urban green space encourage social connection. Mixed tenure housing, where buildings are not too high and where people have access to small private gardens and traffic-free public space, are more likely to be happy neighbourhoods with higher levels of social interaction. The design of the built environment can also enable greater inclusion of disabled people. In addition, we need to be able to connect with people outside our immediate neighbourhoods: digital and transport infrastructure both enable such connectivity.

Facilitators

We need to put in place the conditions that encourage social connection. Communication lies at the heart of a connected society. We need a language in common to speak to each other and resolve conflicts where they exist, yet over 900,000 people in this country do not speak English well or at all. We need to be able to read to understand the world around us and make informed choices, yet there are an estimated 9.2 million people in the UK who lack functional literacy. We also need digital skills to access information and keep in touch with each other.

We were told how important it is to encourage positive social contact through participation in activities that bring people together: sport and cultural activities as well as civil society and faith-based social action. National moments –

Remembrance, Saints' Days, the Olympics and Paralympics – also bring us together, conferring a sense of national belonging and enabling the development of shared identities.

Communities also need leadership to organise and sustain these activities. Talk/Together has looked at the scale and nature of neighbourhood leadership and participation and has segmented people into five groups, based on involvement in formal and informal volunteering in 2020.

Creators and Conversationalists make up about 10% of the population. They initiate and take an active role in neighbourhood activities and have strong bridging and linking networks.

Joiners make up another 25% of the population, taking part in neighbourhood activities, but do not usually take organising roles.

Spectators make up about 35% of the population. They tend to know their closest neighbours and be aware of neighbourhood activities, but rarely join in.

A final 30% are the **socially Isolated**, for whom factors such as the character of a neighbourhood, language barriers, disability or time pressures may severely limit their local social interactions. Our survey showed that 26% of people speak to their neighbours less than once a week. Nearly a third of respondents said that people never organise events in their local community and they would not join in if they did.

A healthy democracy is a final facilitator. We need to make people feel that they want to take part in the discussions, consultations, campaigns and elections that form our democratic ecosystem. We need more forums for dialogue and greater public engagement in the policymaking process. All of us need to play a part in upholding respectful political debate, so that we can disagree better.

The changes that people want to see

Over the course of the Talk/Together discussions we heard hundreds of suggestions for action to put in place the foundations, facilitators and connections needed to build a society where we have shared

identities, consensus about the norms of behaviour, respect for difference and higher levels of trust, empathy and kindness. We have grouped these into the ten themes below:

1.National and local leadership that prioritises social connection in all four nations of the UK. There is a need for commitment at all levels of government to make the next ten years a 'Decade of Reconnection', with strategies and funding to enable this objective to be met.

2. Give people more say in decisions that affect them – and learn to disagree better We need to give those whose voices are not heard a greater say in decisions that affect their lives and their futures. There is also a need for a commitment to learn to 'disagree better', stretching from political leaders to individuals engaging with each other on social media, which builds a deeper understanding of shared values and respectful debate between people holding opposing views.

3. Make sure we can communicate with each other No-one should be prevented from connecting with others because they cannot speak English, lack functional literacy or because they don't have the infrastructure or skills to connect online.

4. Re-energise citizenship education Children's understanding of democracy, our political institutions and what it means to be a citizen should be deepened; they should also learn about civil political debate. We should encourage greater civic participation and volunteering among people of all ages, and greater contact between people from different backgrounds.

5. Make sure that building design and the planning system promotes social connection. Our communities need to have places and spaces where people can meet, mix and interact. Communities themselves should be involved in running some of these spaces, including community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and renovated housing.

6. Recognise that the workplace is key to social connection. Workplaces are locations where adults connect with

each other. There is a need to broaden the conversation about social connection to include employers, highlighting the business case for social connection, volunteering and community involvement.

7. Take action to support volunteering. We need to keep the new volunteers who came forward in 2020 and make it easier for people to offer their time to their community.

8. Encourage a culture of hospitality. We need to tackle hate crime, encourage inclusive citizenship and welcome new arrivals who move into our communities from elsewhere in the UK or overseas.

9. The UK's COVID-19 recovery plans should aim to increase participation in sports, cultural, environmental and community activities. The pandemic has raised awareness about our wellbeing and the importance of physical and cultural activity in maintaining it. We need to increase participation in sport, cultural, environmental and community activities, and make sure that the organisations that deliver these activities have a financially secure future.

10. We need a new, country-wide moment that celebrates communities and what we have in common.

Everyone needs to play a part

Talk/Together's findings will help us argue for the policy change and practical action that is needed to build a kinder and more connected future. But it was never our intention for Talk/Together just to be a research project. We wanted to use Talk/Together to start wider conversations about what divides us and what could bring us together. It is through such conversations that action to address social divisions is conceived and delivered.

As we emerge from the worst of the pandemic, the community spirit and togetherness that characterised 2020 needs to be harnessed, to help us recover and to heal this country's divisions for good. The challenge is to make this happen. It is a long-

Picture: The Big Lunch

term programme and that is why voices from faith, culture and civil society came together in January 2020 to urge the Government, institutions and all members of our society to make the next ten years a 'Decade of Reconnection'.

We all need to play our part. National and local leaders need to make healing social divisions a priority, and to commit to a practical agenda to make it happen. But it is not a job for government alone. Every sector – education, business, sport, civic society and faith – can make their own contribution to

bridging social divides. That is why /Together has sought to build such a broad coalition of organisations, working together to build a kinder, closer and more connected society.

Everyone can make a difference in the way they lead their lives. Volunteering or taking time to talk to a neighbour are things that we all can do and which help us to connect. We must all be part of addressing the challenges we face as a society and making this country a better place for us all.

1

Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the start of lockdown, we have been asking the public about what divides society and what could bring people together. These conversations form Talk/together, the biggest-ever consultation on this subject. Involving nearly 160,000 people and running between March 2020 and January 2021, Talk/together is an authoritative analysis of the UK's social fabric at a time when this country has been facing one of its greatest tests ever.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great hardship and suffering. We have heard from people who have lost family members, who are struggling with their own physical and mental health or are facing acute financial pressures. At the same time, participants also told Talk/together about a renewed sense of community spirit and neighbourliness, and the hard work of individuals and many of our institutions to help those in greatest need. Support for the NHS has brought us together as a country. Many of the social connections and much of that community spirit has been sustained throughout this crisis and can help to bridge divides and act as a foundation for a better future.

Our society has always had its divisions: by class, wealth and power, ethnicity and faith, geography and politics. These divisions have never been immutable or static and the last half of the 20th century was characterised by greater prosperity, more educational opportunities and changing attitudes to gender roles, race and sexuality. But social change and political realignment have contributed to increased values-based polarisation across the UK. There is still much common ground between us but, in recent years, people have increasingly seen themselves as belonging to in-groups and out-groups based on their attitudes to issues such membership of the EU, race and immigration. The EU referendum vote both reflected and reinforced these divisions. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, there appeared to be a real risk that these fissures would increase, fracturing our politics, communities and country for the long-term

The COVID-19 pandemic also fractured society in new ways and amplified some existing divisions. There is a risk that the identity conflicts that marked our society before COVID-19 will re-emerge and

economic inequality could reinforce the divides that exist between the north and south, cities and towns and within communities. Scottish elections to be held in May 2021 are already reigniting divisive debates between those for and against independence. The tone and nature of political discourse has the potential to divide us further. Yet the pandemic, and the new connections it has engendered, could also change this trajectory.

So this country now stands at a crossroads. We face a stark choice between an increasingly polarised 'us and them' society, or one that builds on the newfound community spirit of lockdown to bridge these divides and help to shape a society that is confident and successful as well as being kind, connected and fair. Talk/together, our state of the nation report, shows how we could reach these goals.

About /Together

Talk/together has been conducted by /Together, a new coalition that invites us all to help build kinder, closer and more connected communities, at a local and national level, and in the aftermath of COVID-19. It was concerns about social division and polarisation that first brought a number of individuals and organisations together in late 2019. They were concerned that unless action was taken, the divisions exposed by Brexit would become entrenched and further polarise society. /Together was born out of this need.

Its founders and partners represent a range of organisations: the NHS and ITV, the Scouts, Girlguiding, the British Paralympic Association, trade unions and the CBI, as well as small community-based organisations. /Together's steering group, which oversees its direction and evolution, is chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury and includes representatives from the major faiths; from the worlds of culture, the media, sport, business, and civil society.

Those who were involved in setting up /Together spanned the Brexit divides and came from a wide range of backgrounds. What united us were two beliefs. First, we need to find ways to have kinder and more respectful conversations with those who

have different opinions to our own. Free speech and vigorous political discussion are core components of a healthy democracy. But intimidation and the abuse directed at those who have different views is unacceptable and threatens democracy itself. Second, that we need to build a more socially connected society. This is because there is nearly 75 years of evidence[8] to show that positive social contact between people from different backgrounds builds greater trust and empathy and reduces perceptions of threat or prejudice of the 'other'.

/Together's over-arching aim is to help build a kinder and more connected society. It will achieve this by:

• Changing the way we talk about our society, identifying and reminding us of the things that connect us and bring us together.

• Increasing meaningful social contact through participation in activities that bring people together, especially across divides.

• Securing the policy changes and practical action from Government and key institutions needed to increase social connection and heal divides.

• Helping to grow, support and strengthen a wider movement committed to connecting communities and bridging divides, encouraging network effects.

On 1 January 2020 /Together's supporters publicly called for the next ten years to be a 'Decade of Reconnection'[9]. Its first public facing activity was #ThankyouTogether, when 14 million people came outside on 5 July 2020, the NHS's birthday, for a shared round of applause to thank those who had helped them in the last months, and stayed outside to talk and connect with their neighbours[10]. In December 2020, working with the Royal Voluntary Service, NHS Volunteers, Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland, the volunteering platform DoIt and the Jo Cox Foundation, /Together launched #ChristmasTogether. This called on the public to reach out to people who might be facing Christmas alone, or to sign up as a 'check in and chat' volunteer with the NHS or the Royal Voluntary Service. Both of these early initiatives of the campaign engaged and

mobilised members of the public, at scale, to take part in moments of social connection and togetherness, while telling a wider story about the value of bringing people together.

About Talk**/**together

Since the March lockdown, we have been undertaking Talk/together, a UK-wide conversation about what unites us, what divides us and what policy change and practical action is needed to build a kinder, fairer and more connected society. Unlike most campaigns, we have started with questions and a UK-wide conversation rather than setting out the answers at the start. Over the last nine months, nearly 160,000 people have taken part – through online discussions in small groups, an online survey, nationally representative research, by submitting written evidence or through Talk/together's partners. Further detail of Talk/together's methodology can be found in Chapter Three.

This report

This report draws together all the work that was undertaken through Talk/together, including the public discussions and surveys that we conducted in the early weeks of lockdown[11]. The next two chapters further set the scene, providing background information that gives more context to our findings and, in Chapter Two, setting out the case for why social connection matters. Talk/together is a forward-facing project and it aims to set the agenda for future work to bridge social divides and increase social connection. But we believe that you cannot plan for the future without understanding the past and how we reached this current situation. The appendix thus includes a summary of the demographic, social and political changes that have led to our society becoming divided. Chapter Three describes the methodology we used in greater detail and makes the case for ongoing dialogue and public engagement on what divides and unites society.

Chapters Four to Ten comprise the main body of this report, examining what we heard while conducting

[8]Allport, G. (1954) The Nature of Prejudice, Cambridge MA: Addison Wesley. [9]For the text and signatories to the open letter calling for the 2020s to be a 'Decade of reconnection' see http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/news/decade-of-reconnection/ [10]ICM poll of 2,016 GB adults undertaken between 8 and 10 July 2020 and commissioned by British Future. [11]British Future (2020) Remembering the Kindness of Strangers: Division, unity and social connection during and beyond COVID-19, London: British Future.

Talk/together. In Chapter Four we look at what brought us together in 2020, with Chapter Five looking at what divided us in this extraordinary year. We found that some neighbourhoods fared much better than others in 2020 and in Chapter Six we examine what brought people together in communities, looking at factors such as leadership and social networks.

As this country emerges from the pandemic, we stand a crossroads. We now have a stark choice between two versions of the 'new normal'. We could decide to take no action; in Chapter Seven, we map out the issues that will divide us in 2021 and beyond should we take this path. Alternatively, we could use the newfound community spirit of 2020 to bridge the 'us and them' divides in our society. Chapters Eight and Nine draw from what we have heard and chart a path to a society that is fairer, kinder and more connected.

Over the last nine months we have involved nearly 160,000 people. With such a large number of people taking part in the discussions and surveys, Talk/together's state of the nation report provides a robust body of evidence that can be used to argue for the policy change and practical action we need. We also wanted to demonstrate, through Talk/together, that engaging the public and listening to their opinions on key issues can help find solutions to the challenges this country faces.

Our findings will help to determine the priorities and work of /Together moving forward, with people's responses to these questions about sources of division and what could bring us together informing both its future public activations and policy campaigns. Talk/together also aimed to start wider conversations about what divides us and what could bring us together, prompting further action to address social divisions.

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of social connection, but there is a danger that over the next months, our institutions will largely focus on economic recovery, and that policy to strengthen communities will be neglected. By undertaking Talk/together, we hope that this risk will be mitigated; that by starting a conversation about what brings us together, we can build a movement of individuals and organisations that will push this issue up the agenda, nationally and locally.

2
Why social connection matters

Chapter 2: Why social connection matters

What has united those supporting the /Together Coalition is the belief that greater social contact is key to bridging the social divisions of recent years, and to help build a society that is confident and successful as well as being kind and connected. It is worth setting out why social contact will help achieve this aim.

Social contact

We are social animals and every week we connect with a wide range of people across society. These may be:

• **Bonding connections** – with people who we see as having similar qualities to ourselves.

• **Bridging connections** – relationships that span in-group out-group divides across society.

• **Linking connections** – between people and institutions, for example, between MPs and their constituents, or between people and business leaders or council officials. These connections help build political trust and enable people to gain resources or bring about neighbourhood change.

Most of us have an innate tendency to make bonding connections and gravitate to people we see as similar to ourselves. We also have a natural desire to identify as belonging to groups, for example those based on peer groups, football teams, faith groups, political parties, or the locality or country where we live. This confers a sense of security and belonging. But it can also lead to 'us and them' divides, where people strongly identify with their in-group and hold negative views about members of an out-group or see them as a threat, particularly in situations where people are under economic or psycho-social stress. Perception bias may also occur in inter-group conflicts where people experience the same realities in completely different ways[12].

In some parts of the world, where inter-group conflict has spiralled into violence, the peace-building process has involved 'decentring' activities that aim to break down pre-set identities about 'us' and 'them' and rebuild common identities that both sides of the conflict feel they can share.

The EU referendum campaign was a period in our history when some people were strongly emotionally invested in the campaign and saw membership of the EU or a desire to leave it as an aspect of their identities and values. Many of us saw each other as belonging to clearly defined in-groups or out-groups, with these identities usually acquired in the months immediately before or after the 2016 referendum. People varied (and continue to vary) in the strength of their identification with their Brexit in-group and the extent to which they assigned negative qualities to members of the out-group.

Bridging social contact between 'us' and 'them' helps reduce inter-group conflict. It helps to reduce stereotyping and prejudice, as well as developing greater empathy, trust and shared 'more in common' identities[13]. These shared identities help break down the rigid demarcations in people's minds between in-groups and out-groups[14].

Research shows that this positive effect can be achieved through direct social contact between people; indirect social contact (having friends who have friends from the out-group); or contextual contact (knowing that other people have mixed friendship groups)[15]. While direct social contact usually takes place where people live or work in close proximity to each other, contextual social contact does not need to take place in a specific location. Social media now plays an important role in contextual social contact, as we may see other people from different parts of the UK having mixed friendship groups on platforms such as Facebook.

While direct, indirect and contextual social contact all make a difference to our attitudes to those we see as belonging to out-groups, the nature of this social contact is important[16]. It needs to be positive: in situations where there is little social contact between in-groups and out-groups, a single negative interaction can reinforce stereotypes and mistrust, a finding known as the inference ladder theory of prejudice. In places where bonding connections are very strong, for example, tight-knit and relatively closed communities, it can be very difficult to reduce stereotypes and mistrust of out-groups, because

[12]AMHP Engine (2021) Communicating in a Polarised World, London: MHP Engine. [13]Allport, G. (1954) The Nature of Prejudice, Boston MA: Addison-Wesley. [14]Tajfel, H. (1978) Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in Social Psychology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[15]Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al- Ramiah, A., Wagner, A., Vertovec, S. and Hewstone, M. (2014) 'Contextual effect of positive intergroup contact on out-group prejudice' in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 111(11), 3996-4000.
[16]Tajfel, H. (1978) Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in Social Psychology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

bonding links are the dominant form of social interaction[17].

The types of bridging and linking contact that is best at building trust and reducing prejudice are those situations where contact:

• Is more sustained rather than fleeting.

• Is in active situations, involving participation in pursuit of common interests or goals.

• Leads to deeper friendships being formed.

• Is supported by institutions such as Parliament, schools or employers.

• Is between people in situations where they do not face psycho-social or economic stressors, for example, by having a supportive family environment, a secure job and housing.

As we set out later in this report, the scale and nature of social connections have impacted on how communities have responded to the changes brought about by COVID-19. A key theme that our research and public engagement sought to explore was whether social connections during the pandemic had different impacts on bonding contact and bridging contact across the country.

[17]Putnam, R. (2000) Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.
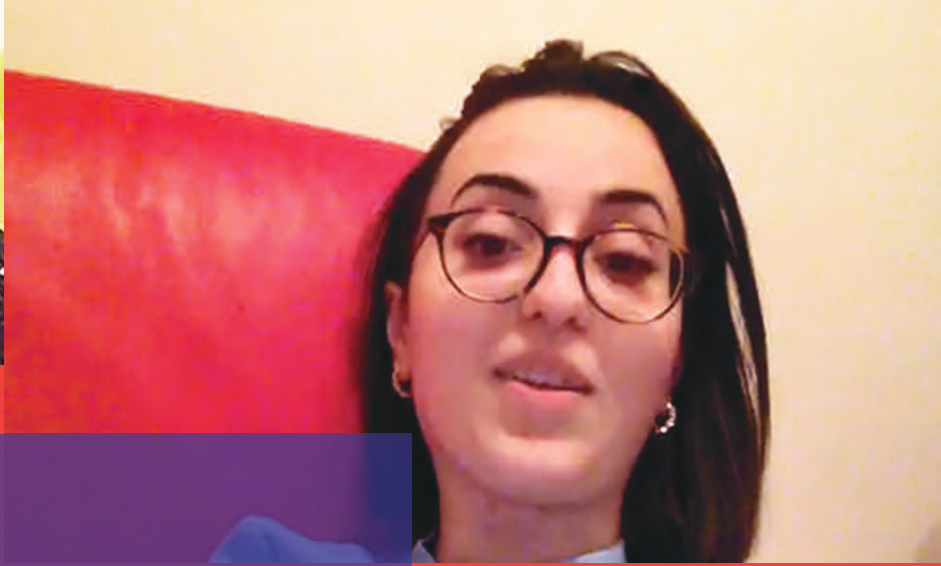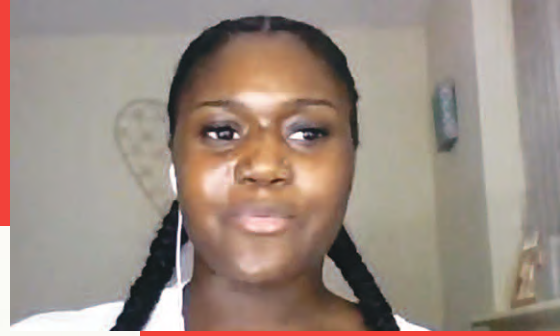
3
Talk/together methodology

Chapter 3: Talk/together Methodology

Talk/together aimed to find out what divides people and what brings them together, as well as engaging people in conversations about the policy changes and practical action that is needed to build a more connected society. Running between March 2020 and January 2021, we wanted to find out whether COVID-19 had helped bring us closer together and to hear people's concerns, their hopes for the future and the changes they want to see in society.

Talk/together was one of the first activities undertaken by the /Together Coalition. At a time of social upheaval, we felt it was important to find out what was taking place in neighbourhoods across the UK so as to have an accurate picture of the state of the nation. We also needed a strong and comprehensive evidence base that /Together, as a coalition, can use to argue for change and to inform its future priorities. It was also our intention that Talk/together should be used to advocate for ongoing public engagement on policy issues, by the Government and other institutions, by demonstrating the value of such work when done well.

But Talk/together was always much more than a research project. It was also intended to be a conversation starter, to engage people in thinking about what brings people together, with the hope that a few of those who took time and gave their views might go on to be involved in practical action.

Talk/together planned to launch publicly in March 2020 with the open survey, our first discussions and a first round of nationally representative polling. With the emergence of COVID-19 the launch was postponed, and we were forced to hold the discussions online, rather than face-to-face. Although the dynamics of online discussions can be different to those that take place in person, moving this component of Talk/together online enabled us to include people from a much wider geographical area, including rural communities. We have, therefore, engaged groups of people who often have less voice in policy debates, for example, those who live outside the UK's biggest cities. We did, however, need to take steps to involve people facing digital exclusion, by making hard copies of the open survey available through a number of civil society organisations in London and West Yorkshire.

What we did

Talk/together had six main components. These were:

• **An online survey,** which was open between July 2020 and January 2021 and received 78,790 responses.

• **Five nationally representative surveys** with a total overall sample of 10,485 people, which were conducted by ICM in March, May/June, November and December 2020 and in January 2021.

• **41 guided discussions with 281 members of the public.** These were held online, drawing people from all parts of the UK and were conducted between May 2020 and January 2021.

• **An open call for evidence** launched in July 2020.

• **26 online discussions** with stakeholders between September 2020 and January 2021. Some 218 people took part in these discussions or submitted evidence.

• **Surveys, online events and other research activities** run by /Together's partner organisations, involving 68,534 people.

The open survey

A key component of Talk/together was an open, online survey, which was eventually filled in by 78,790 people, spanning different backgrounds and demographics across the UK. It comprised 10 questions, which probed:

• Perceptions of national division. Survey participants were asked to score how divided or united the UK as a whole and their local community was, using a 1-10 scale, and were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on division and unity. They were also asked about the types of social division that concerned them, including an open question field.

• Views on what helps people stay connected.

• Experiences of volunteering.

• Views about the policy changes and practical action that would help bridge social divides and build a more connected society, including an open question field.

A full list questions with their responses is given in the appendix. Many of the open survey questions were also asked in the nationally representative surveys.

As it was an online survey, we were concerned that people who had no access to a smartphone or computer could not take part. Hard copies of the survey questions were therefore printed and distributed to users and supporters of a number of civil society organisations in London and West Yorkshire to enable the voices of this group to be heard. These organisations included foodbanks and a project working to increase levels of digital inclusion. The responses we received were then entered manually. Had social distancing requirements not been so strict, we would have worked with more partner organisations to distribute hard copies of the survey.

The survey ran between July 2020 and January 2021 and we received an average of 3,750 responses each week. The length of time that the survey was live meant that we were able to track the public mood from week to week. The survey allowed people to add comments, which were also revealing of people's views and responses to the rapidly changing national situation.

/Together's partner organisations helped to promote the survey to their contacts and supporters, and it was this assistance that enabled us to reach a broad cross-section of society.

The nationally representative surveys

Talk/together undertook five nationally representative surveys in the period between March 2020 and January 2020:

March 2020 baseline survey: a sample of 2,006 GB adults, carried out by ICM between 6 March and 9 March 2020, prior to lockdown.

May-June 2020: a sample of 2,010 GB adults, carried out by ICM between 29 May and 1 June 2020. *Remembering the Kindness of Strangers* , a report written by the Talk/together team about the early

days of lockdown, draws on the results of the first two Talk/together surveys[18].

November 2020: a sample of 2,013 GB adults and was carried out by ICM between 13 and 16 November 2020.

December 2020: a survey of 2,373 UK adults, carried out by ICM between 16-18 December 2020. In addition to the core sample, the survey included booster samples of 60 respondents in Northern Ireland and an additional 252 respondents in Scotland to make an overall Scotland sample of 452. The survey included demographic, social and political variables, enabling us better to understand how these characteristics were associated with division and social connection.

The December 2020 survey asked many of the questions that were included in the open survey, enabling us to compare both sets of results. There were also questions that were common to the previous surveys, enabling us to track changes over the nine months of Talk/together.

January 2021: a survey of 2.083 UK adults carried out by ICM between 27-29 January 2021. This survey asked about people's identification with Leave and Remain as in-groups. We were unable to ask this question in December 2020, as the results would have been distorted by the media coverage of the UK-EU trade negotiations.

Public discussions

Between May 2020 and January 2021, we held 41 guided discussions with 281 members of the public in all the regions and nations of the UK. These interviews enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of what divides us and what brings us together.

The discussions were run online, and we aimed for eight people in each group: four men and four women. Two professional market research recruitment companies were used to find and select participants in these discussions. In nine of the discussions, participants were drawn from a range of places across the UK. In the remaining 32 discussions we selected people from specific

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[18] British Future (2020) *Remembering the Kindness of Strangers: Division, unity and social connection during and beyond COVID-19,* London: British Future.

locations in each region, which were chosen to reflect the UK's diverse geographic, economic and political landscape. We selected people from prosperous and less prosperous areas, from big cities, towns and the countryside, and from places that reflect the different party political and referendum choices of the UK's population. A full list of the locations from which participants were drawn is given in the appendix.

It was also important that those who took part in the discussions were representative of the region or nation where they lived, in relation to their politics. Screening questions to gauge the views of potential participants were therefore used in the recruitment process. In England and Wales, potential participants were asked about their support for Leave or Remain in the EU referendum. In Scotland people were asked about their support for independence. In Northern Ireland people were asked about their social identity in relation to faith and political tradition. Participants were recruited to give a mix of ages and social grades in each group, and to make sure that the ethnicity of participants reflected the local area.

Eight of the discussion groups were composed of people who had specific demographic characteristics:

• Low-income group comprising people receiving in-work and out-of-work benefits (May 2020).

• Volunteers (May 2020).

• Over 70s: a mixed group people who were over the recommended age for 'shielding' (May 2020).

• 18-24s group (May 2020).

• Mixed geography (May 2020).

• BAME majority (November 2020).

• 18-24 year old non-graduates (November 2020).

• Over 65s (December 2020).

Further information about the demographic and social background of the participants is given in the appendix.

As the discussions took place online, participants required access to a computer or tablet with a webcam, a reliable broadband connection and basic digital skills. Inevitably this excluded people who do not use the internet. Around 10% of the UK's population are estimated to be limited users of the internet, who face barriers which restrict their online engagement[19]. In the Talk/together discussions we met people in this latter category who had unreliable broadband connections, shared a single device with other family members or needed substantial assistance to enable them to use programmes such as Zoom. We took many steps to include this group of people in the discussions. Participants sometimes borrowed devices, and we always phoned them before the discussions to check that they were confident using Zoom. This telephone call was time well-invested, particularly when it came to older participants or those who do not use conferencing platforms at work.

We used a set of common questions to guide each discussion, which generally lasted 90 minutes. Each discussion followed the same format, with participants asked about what is dividing society, what brings people together and the policy changes and practical action they would want to see prioritised. In the online discussions that took place from September 2020, we also included some additional questions relevant to particular locations, or probed issues that had been in the news in the previous week, for example, the announcement of a new England-wide lockdown on 31 October 2020. A full list of questions is given in the appendix. All the discussions were taped and then transcribed. To minimise individual bias there were at least two facilitators in each group, who at the end of each discussion compared their observations and conclusions.

Stakeholder discussions and the open call for evidence

Some 218 people provided evidence to Talk/together or took part in the 26 online stakeholder discussions held between September 2020 and January 2021. We generally held one or two stakeholder meetings in each region or nation of the UK (16 in total). Participants were invited based on our own or

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[19] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blog/new-analysis-ofcom-2020-data

partner contacts and came from a wide range of organisations: faith and civil society, local government, business and universities. The civil society organisations that took part in the stakeholder meetings had a wide range of remits which included community development and volunteering, work with migrants and refugees and broader work on social cohesion, inter-faith and inter-community relations, conflict resolution, hate crime and extremism, intergenerational connection, loneliness and online civility. Discussions lasted about 90 minutes and covered much the same themes as the public discussions.

Talk/together also issued an open call for evidence. The organisations and individuals that replied mostly came from local and regional government, civil society organisations, think tanks and universities. We asked people to provide evidence about social division and what brings people together, as well as the policy changes and practical action they felt should be prioritised. Organisations were also asked to share their work with us, to help us understand and communicate good practice.

All the organisations that took part in the stakeholder discussions or provided evidence are listed in the appendix.

Partner activities

As already noted, Talk/together aimed to be much more than a research project. We wanted to use Talk/together to start conversations, to change the way we talk about social relations and to get people to become involved in building a kinder and more connected society. Partners were invited to organise their own events, surveys and discussions, feeding their findings back to us, and we produced a toolkit to help them.

A number of small, faith-based and civil society organisations held their own online discussions, basing these events on questions in the toolkit. Votes for Schools, a partner organisation that gets young people to vote on topical issues every week, sent out two questions about volunteering. Primary and secondary school students up to the age of 16 were asked if everyone should volunteer, while those in sixth forms and in tertiary education were asked if a volunteering bank holiday would strengthen communities. Some 31,987 young people responded to these questions. A further 10,948 readers of the Sun newspaper responded to four questions about social connection ('I feel I belong to my local community', 'most UK folk have a lot in common',

In addition to these regionally or nationally based meetings, we organised ten discussions which explored specific themes, inviting people with expertise in these areas. The topics of these discussions were:

- How can we bring the generations together in the wake of COVID-19? (October 2020).

- The role of faith organisations in building kinder and more connected communities (October 2020).

- How can we reduce the exclusion and isolation experienced by disabled people? (October 2020).

- How can sport bring people together? (November 2020).

- How can young people be partners in bringing communities together? (November 2020).

- Creating a culture of welcome (for organisations whose work involves welcoming newcomers, whether they have moved from elsewhere in the UK or abroad, held in November 2020).

- How can heritage and the arts bring us together? (November 2020).

- What is the role of business in fostering socially connected communities? (For Norfolk-based organisations in the Norwich Together business alliance, held in December 2020).

- Can we design and plan for social mixing? (For participants working in housing and planning, held in December 2020).

- Race in Britain: can tackling inequality and racism bring people together? (January 2021).

Picture: The Big Lunch

'would you like to see a new community bank holiday?' and 'has COVID-19 made UK citizens more united or divided?'). As well as encouraging people to visit the /Together website, become involved in public activities or take the open survey, we believe that these partner activities also helped start conversations about social connection.

Reflections on Talk/together

The oldest people who took part in Talk/together were in their 90s and the youngest were of primary school age. Participants came from all the regions and nations of the UK and from all social backgrounds. With such a large number of people taking part in the discussions and surveys, Talk/together's state of the nation report provides a robust body of evidence that can be used to argue for policy change and practical action. By combining nationally representative surveys and guided discussions with an open survey and partner activities, we have shown that it is possible to combine academic rigour with high levels of public engagement across a broad cross-section of society, sparking the conversations that lead to practical action.

Over a nine-month period we conducted 67 discussions with members of the public and stakeholders. By the very nature of the subjects they covered – Brexit, the Scottish independence debate, sectarian conflict, immigration and the Black Lives Matter protests – these discussions could have resulted in arguments. Yet we found that people listened to each other and were respectful of others' views, even where they were very different to their own opinions. Those who took part in the discussions almost always observed the norms and boundaries of decent discussion. There were just three incidents of voices being raised in over 100 hours of taped discussions, in heated disagreements about herd immunity, integrated education in Northern Ireland and the Government's record in dealing with the pandemic. In every case, these arguments seemed to reflect the personalities of those involved as much as the subject matter. The discussions we held show that it is possible to disagree with each other in a respectful manner.

Some of those who responded to the open survey were clearly angry about the state of society and the actions of politicians, and some people took the opportunity to express this anger in the open survey. It is was also clear from the survey responses that inter-group identity conflicts about issues such as Brexit, immigration and race are still dividing us. But there were relatively few extreme comments left by those who completed the open survey – less than 1% of the comments fell outside the norms of decency. A further 8% of comments were not constructive in that respondents made statements such as "Stop Brexit" or "Defund the BBC" indicating little engagement with the questions in the survey. However, the overwhelming majority of people who answered the final open question – What would bring people together? – put forward constructive suggestions for policy change and practical action. It was clear that many people gave a lot of thought to the questions they were asked in the open survey and in the discussions, suggesting that there was a desire for change and to build a more connected future.

4

COVID-19 and coming together

Chapter 4: COVID-19 and coming together

Since March 2020, we have been asking people about what divides society and what brings people together. The first weeks of lockdown in March and April 2020 saw an outpouring of neighbourliness, community spirit and goodwill. Over 750,000 people put themselves forward as NHS volunteers[20] and thousands more gave their time to help neighbours or local charities. Our society felt unified, both nationally and locally.

Much of this togetherness and community spirit still remains, though it has waned somewhat since the spring of 2020. In this chapter we look at what brought us together over the last year, what we can learn from this extraordinary time and how it may form a basis for a kinder and more connected future.

Togetherness: trends in 2020

In May 2020, 60% of people agreed that the 'public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides'; just 15% of people disagreed[21] (Table 4.1). Much of this sense of togetherness and community spirit still remains. At the end of 2020, Talk/together's nationally representative survey shows that half of the population (50%) still hold the belief that the response to the pandemic shows that we are more united than divided, compared to 27% who disagree with this view.

Talk/together's open survey has enabled us to track people's perceptions of national and local division and unity from week to week. Completed by 78,790 people between July 2020 and January 2021, it asked people to rate – on a 1 to 10 scale – how divided or united they thought the UK is as a nation, as well as giving a 1-10 rating for the unity or division of their local community (1 being most divided and 10 being most united). Through this we have been able to calculate average weekly national and local unity-division scores, shown in Figure 4.2. Although it is an open (rather than a nationally representative) survey[22], its size and that we have weighted its results enables a fairly accurate snapshot of the public mood.

With an average weekly score of 5.38, perceptions about national unity peaked in the week leading up

Table 4.1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'Overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides.'

	May 2020	November 2020	December 2020
Strongly agree	14%	10%	8%
Tend to agree	45%	39%	41%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%	23%	22%
Tend to disagree	11%	19%	20%
Strongly disagree	4%	6%	7%
Don't know	3%	2%	2%
NET: Agree	60%	49%	50%
NET: Disagree	15%	26%	27%

Sources: ICM surveys conducted on 29-31 May (2,010 respondents); 13-15 November (2,013 respondents); 16-18 Dec (2,373 respondents).
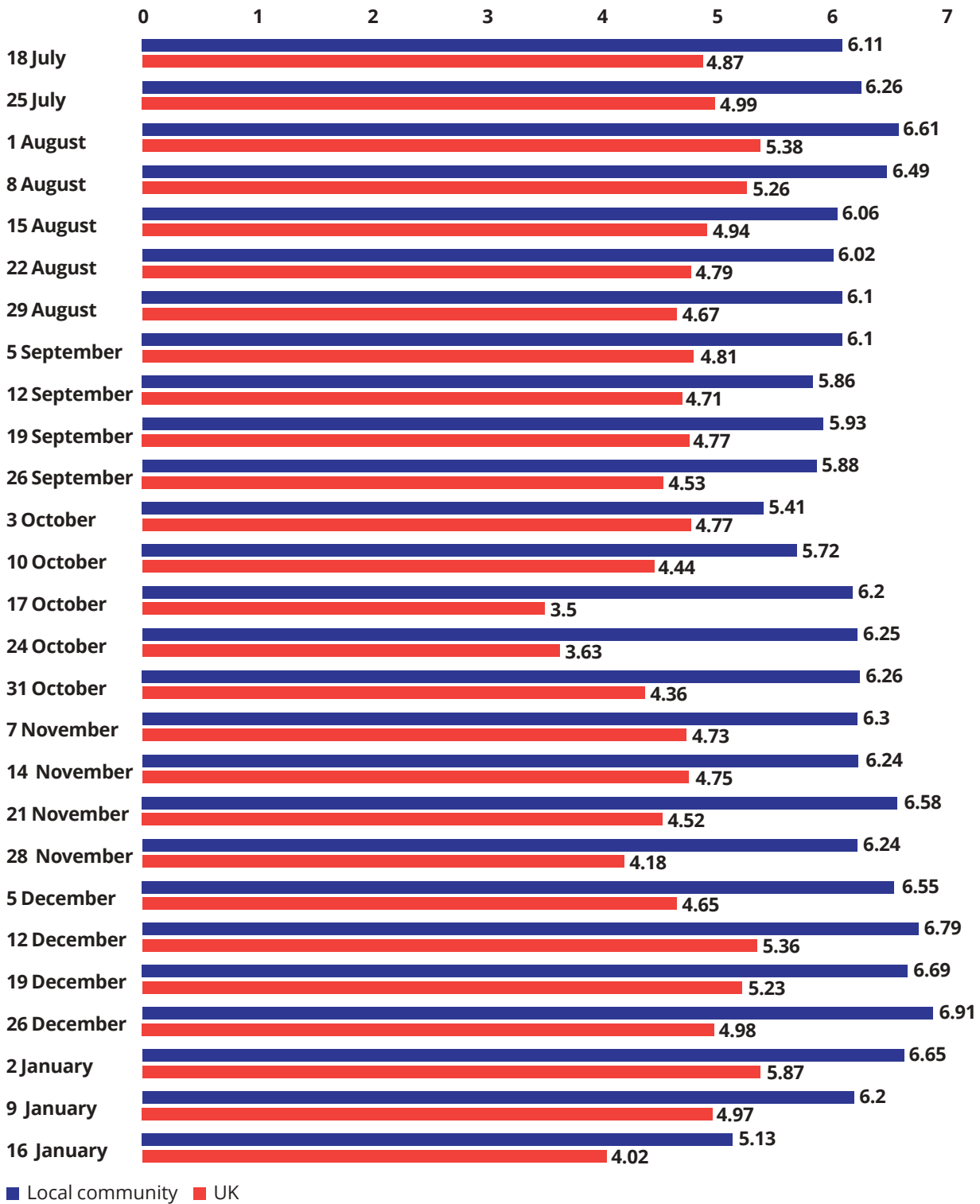
to 1st August 2020, with the score for local unity also at its highest (6.61). It is possible that good weather, a fall in infections, a relaxation of lockdown and the *Eat Out To Help Out* scheme might have engendered a sense of national and local unity. Since then, scores for national unity have been falling, with this rate accelerating in October.

Between the week ending 10 October 2020 and 17 October 2020, perceptions of national unity fell by 21% from 4.44 to 3.50. We examine reasons for these fluctuations in Chapter Five. At the same time the local unity score increased from 5.72 to 6.20. In the face of this national crisis, people may 'hunker down' and place increased value on local connections, which may account for the increase in the perception that local neighbourhoods are united. The highest scores for national and local unity were in the week from 26th December to 2nd January 2021. This was the week after Christmas, as well as being the week that the Oxford-AstraZenica vaccine was approved and the

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[20] https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/03/250000-nhs-volunteers/ [21] ICM survey conducted on 29-31 May (2,010 respondents)
[22] The survey results have been weighted to ensure they are representative by age and region/nation. People living in Scotland tend to perceive their country as being more divided than those elsewhere in UK. Younger people tend to give lower scores for local unity.

Figure 4.2: On a scale of 1 to 10 how divided is your local community/the UK as a whole (average weekly score)

Date	Local community	UK
18 July	6.11	4.87
25 July	6.26	4.99
1 August	6.61	5.38
8 August	6.49	5.26
15 August	6.06	4.94
22 August	6.02	4.79
29 August	6.1	4.67
5 September	6.1	4.81
12 September	5.86	4.71
19 September	5.93	4.77
26 September	5.88	4.53
3 October	5.41	4.77
10 October	5.72	4.44
17 October	6.2	3.5
24 October	6.25	3.63
31 October	6.26	4.36
7 November	6.3	4.73
14 November	6.24	4.75
21 November	6.58	4.52
28 November	6.24	4.18
5 December	6.55	4.65
12 December	6.79	5.36
19 December	6.69	5.23
26 December	6.91	4.98
2 January	6.65	5.87
9 January	6.2	4.97
16 January	5.13	4.02

■ Local community ■ UK

n= 78,790[23]

[23] Survey responses have been weighted to take into account the age of the respondent and the region/nation of residence.

UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement was signed.

Figure 4.2 also shows that people have more confidence in their local community than they do in relations across the UK, though perceptions of division and unity can shift. This finding is also supported in the nationally representative survey, where respondents gave a mean unity-division score of 4.90 for the UK as a whole, compared with 6.32 for their local community[24]. Overall, one in seven people (15%) think that the UK is united (scoring 8-10); three in ten (29%) think it is disunited (scoring 1-3); and just over half (52%) feel ambivalent or neutral with regard to the UK's cohesiveness (scoring 4-7). When we asked about people's local communities, just 8% of respondents believe them to be disunited (scoring 1-3). This local-national difference in perception is almost certainly due to the impact that local social contact has on people's perceptions of togetherness and on levels of trust.

National and local togetherness are both important. There is no doubt that, at times, in 2020 our sense of local and national unity was high.

What brought us together in 2020?

COVID-19 was a shared experience, nationally and locally: From the Blitz to the death of Princess Diana, we know that events or experiences that affect large numbers of people often bring them together. Lockdown affected everyone. With the Prime Minister and Prince Charles both diagnosed with COVID-19, there was a sense that people, whatever their background, risked catching the virus; we were told that Johnson's illness made him seem "a normal person." The sense that COVID-19 was a shared experience was felt more strongly in the spring of 2020 and it waned as the economic and ethnic disparities in its impact began to emerge. Nevertheless, the feeling that COVID-19 affected everyone's lives remained a commonly held view throughout 2020, acting as a social bond.

"I think COVID proves that we're all vulnerable. No matter what religion you are, no matter what age you are. I think that's basically what

it comes down to. I am just hoping something good will come out of COVID-19."
(Participant in public group, Yorkshire and Humber, September 2020).

For many people, their sense of local connection increased: Participants in the discussions talked about getting to know their neighbourhoods better, sometimes speaking to neighbours for the first time, or volunteering for the first time with a local charity. This new sense of local connectedness seemed most marked among people who were now working from home, having previously commuted to another location for their jobs. It brought people together – through social interaction and by developing stronger, shared local identities.

"The lockdown is when I actually first met my neighbours. A lot of the time, I didn't really speak to them. It was a case of when we went outside for the NHS clap, it created that link and then we carried on speaking with them."
(Participant in public group, South West, December 2020).

"I have recently become very disabled by longstanding MS. I've ended up confined to home, with daily carer visits. These, and the concern and help from neighbours, makes me feel very connected to the local community and area."
(Response to open survey).

People looked out for isolated and vulnerable members of society in their local area: These neighbourly acts of kindness and reciprocity brought people together and changed the way we talked about each other, contributing to a stronger sense of local and national unity. People shopped for neighbours who had been forced to self-isolate, or just took time to talk to or connect online with people who might feel isolated or lonely. Neighbourhood WhatsApp and Facebook groups were set up so that people could offer or ask for help. This informal volunteering often crossed ethnic and faith divides in mixed neighbourhoods, increasing levels of bridging social contact.

As the months progressed and the economic and

[24] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 made themselves felt, more and more people talked about their struggles with loneliness and their mental health. Across society, there was a more open conversation about mental health and conscious efforts to reach out and talk to people who might be feeling lonely, anxious or depressed, building bonds of reciprocity and social solidarity.

"I have effectively worked from home all my life. I have the disadvantages and advantages of always being on call. But perhaps I am more used to keeping in touch with people, so we defaulted to what we were doing during Foot and Mouth in 2001 where you just rang people just see how they were. The network was in place and people kept in touch. Not because they might need anything like shopping or anything, but because they may just want to talk."
(Participant in public discussion North West, November 2020. This person was a farmer).

The relief effort crossed social divides: As well as the help that was spontaneously offered to neighbours, family and friends, hundreds of thousands of people offered their time to charities, and to relief efforts coordinated by local authorities and the NHS. Within seven days of lockdown being announced, 6% of adults, amounting to 300,000 people, had already volunteered with a charity and over 750,000 people had signed up as NHS volunteers. The COVID-19 crisis has also been characterised by a new type of volunteering: 'mutual aid' groups of people who came together and agreed to support each other, as well as reaching out to help vulnerable members of their local community.

Thousands of these groups were set up at the end of March 2020 by active local residents. Mapping research suggested that by mid-April 2020 there were over 2,700 such groups across the UK[25]. Most of this number are still active online in January 2021, albeit posting less frequently than in the spring of 2020. These groups tended to operate at a local authority or town level, rather than the hyper-local level of street or estate WhatsApp group. Typically,

mutual aid groups use Facebook posts to disseminate useful information, ask questions, request help or to offer support. Within a specific mutual aid group, followers come from different backgrounds and largely did have not previous personal relationships with each other. This type of organisation appears to have consolidated bridging networks at a local authority or town level.

"I certainly know several people who volunteered for the NHS, people from all walks of life. It could be people that got furloughed and want to pass the time, because they're just sitting at home and not actually working right now. So, a real mixture of young and old people volunteering and people who never thought of doing it before as well."
(Participant in cross-UK group, May 2020).

"It is important to build on the mutual aid groups – ensure they feel supported and empowered to continue to support community cohesion at a local level."
(Response to open survey).

Many people also became involved in raising funds for the NHS and charities such as foodbanks that were supporting vulnerable people. The efforts of Captain Sir Tom Moore and Daribul Choudhury, both aged 100, who walked laps of their gardens for charity, were widely publicised. This fundraising also brought people of different backgrounds together.

A new army of volunteers: Before COVID-19, around 4 in 10 adults (39%) offered their time at least once every month as a formal or informal volunteer[26]. Formal volunteering is time given to an established or formally constituted organisation, for example, a local charity, membership organisation or school governing body. Informal volunteering is an unpaid offer of time to a friend or neighbour. Both play an important role in bringing people together. Both are important; formal volunteering enables thousands of civil society groups to carry out their work, while informal volunteering helps build trust, turning strangers into friends and helping combat loneliness and isolation.

[25] All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration (2020) Social Connection in the COVID-19 Crisis, London: UK Parliament.
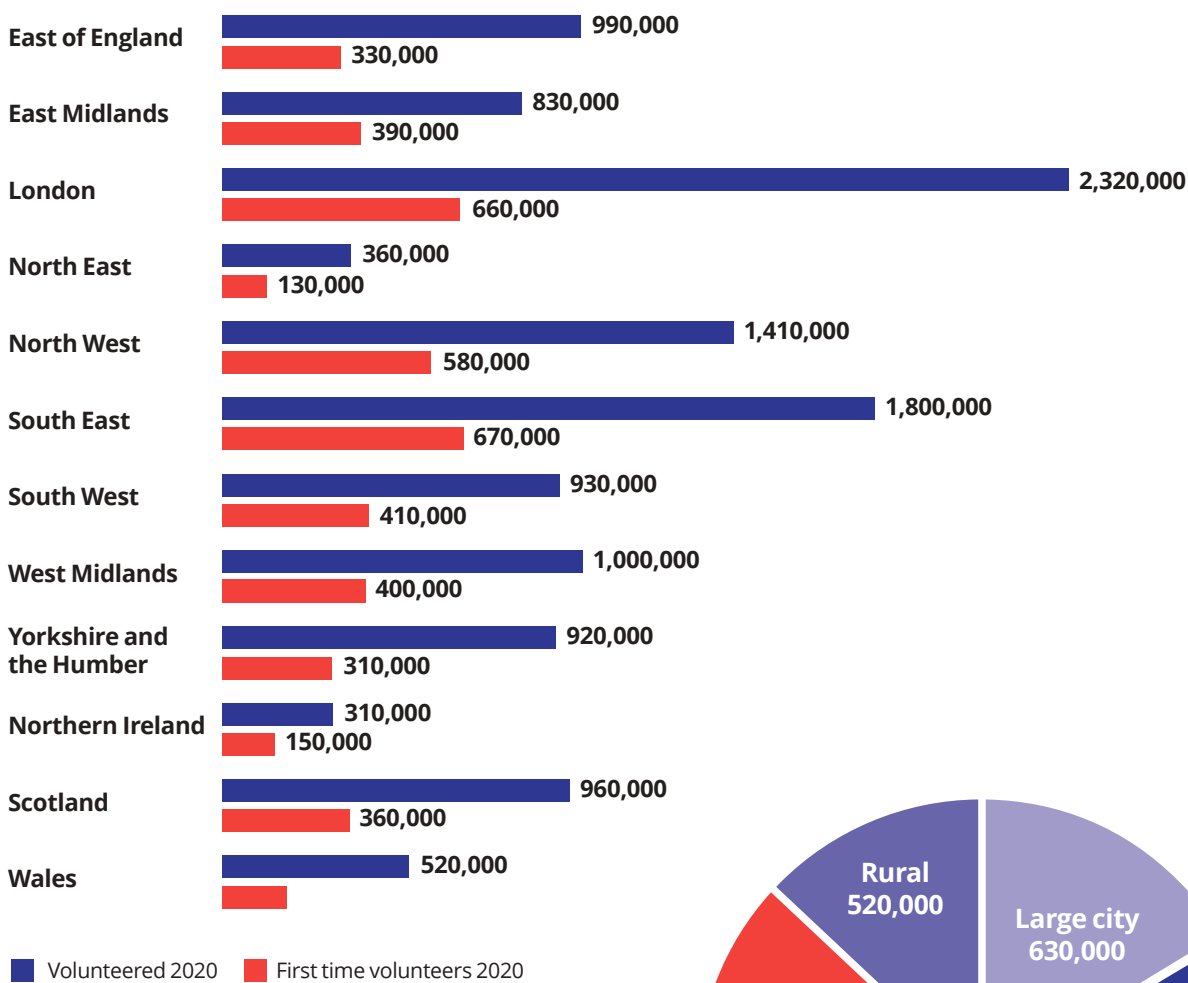[26] The 2019-2020 Community Life Survey for England suggested that of 39% adults took part in formal or informal volunteering at least once a year. Data from the Northern Ireland Communities Omnibus, the Scottish Household Survey and the Sport and Active Lifestyles Survey Wales suggests similar levels of participation in these nations.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 12.4 million adults have volunteered during the pandemic, of which nearly 4.6 million were first-time volunteers, with 3.8 million of this group interested in volunteering again[27]. These new volunteers live in all parts of the UK, in its largest cities to its most rural areas (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). It is significant that many of these new volunteers are from social groups 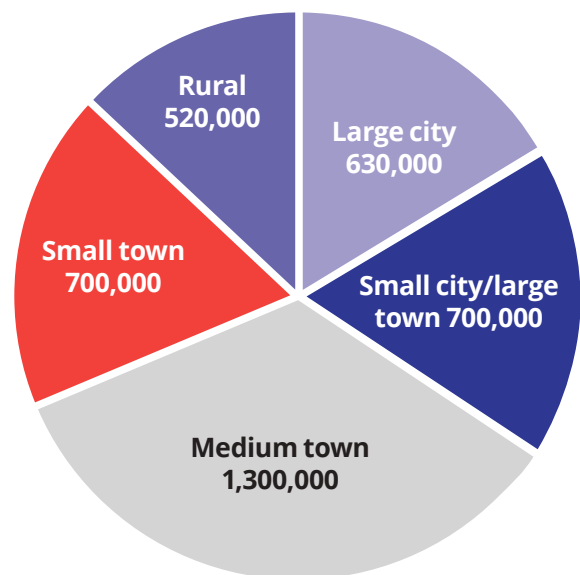who previously were less likely to volunteer, with 770,000 people aged 18-24 and 740,000 people who live in the poorest fifth of neighbourhoods volunteering for the first time in 2020 and interested in volunteering again.

Volunteering brought huge numbers of people directly together in pursuit of common goals and often across identity divides. In the North West, Yorkshire, the Midlands and in Northern Ireland,

Figure 4.3: Volunteers in 2020 by region and nation.

East of England: Volunteered 2020 990,000; First time volunteers 2020 330,000

East Midlands: Volunteered 2020 830,000; First time volunteers 2020 390,000

London: Volunteered 2020 2,320,000; First time volunteers 2020 660,000

North East: Volunteered 2020 360,000; First time volunteers 2020 130,000

North West: Volunteered 2020 1,410,000; First time volunteers 2020 580,000

South East: Volunteered 2020 1,800,000; First time volunteers 2020 670,000

South West: Volunteered 2020 930,000; First time volunteers 2020 410,000

West Midlands: Volunteered 2020 1,000,000; First time volunteers 2020 400,000

Yorkshire and the Humber: Volunteered 2020 920,000; First time volunteers 2020 310,000

Northern Ireland: Volunteered 2020 310,000; First time volunteers 2020 150,000

Scotland: Volunteered 2020 960,000; First time volunteers 2020 360,000

Wales: Volunteered 2020 520,000

■ Volunteered 2020   ■ First time volunteers 2020

Figure 4.4: Numbers by place of residence of people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and are interested in volunteering again.

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

Rural 520,000
Large city 630,000
Small town 700,000
Small city/large town 700,000
Medium town 1,300,000

[27]ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

we were told that these cross-community relief efforts had led to new relationships and collaboration, much of which is likely to survive beyond COVID-19. Importantly, this volunteering has been seen and appreciated by those on different 'sides' and has been incorporated into a shared pandemic narrative of togetherness. In situations that had previously been divided, the stories that we told each other about inter-group volunteering acted as contextual social contact. The positive impact of volunteering on neighbourhoods is further discussed Chapter Six.

"We have come together through COVID, because we're helping each other with everything: food banks, shopping, everybody. And we are still continuing to do so, so it's not all bad."
(Participant in a public discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

Businesses, schools, councils, faith and civil society worked together to support the local community: In many places the public, not-for-profit and private sector worked with each other to help those in greatest need or to support the wider community. Schools used their textile and technology departments to produce personal protective equipment for local hospitals or produced meals for vulnerable people in their kitchens. Some schools opened up their playing fields to the community or set fitness challenges for the local population. Pubs, cafes and restaurants also used their kitchens to produce food for vulnerable people, often working in partnership with local foodbanks and other charities.

Many businesses were also active in their local communities. We heard about businesses that had reached out to their regular customers to check that they were coping. We were told that a number of football clubs had phoned all their season ticket holders. Many businesses made a great effort to retain staff who were not covered by the furlough scheme. We were also told that many employers had made donations to local charities, offered other forms of help or had encouraged their staff to volunteer. Some 63% of people said that they were impressed with local businesses' response to the pandemic, compared with 24% who were impressed

with the UK Government and 36% with the devolved administrations[28].

Perhaps the moment when these new partnerships were most visible was the provision of food to children who risked holiday hunger, initiated by the campaigning of footballer Marcus Rashford in October 2020. This relief effort highlighted the role that institutions were playing to support people, strengthening bonding, bridging and linking networks and supporting a unifying narrative. It is likely that much of this collaboration will survive into 2021 and beyond. We were told that schools will continue to share their facilities with the local community and that many businesses will still encourage their staff to volunteer. In turn, some local businesses may see increased customer loyalty.

"People who have lost their jobs, who are on Universal Credit, are just generally struggling to feed themselves and to feed their families. And there's a lot of businesses who, despite the fact that they're struggling, have stepped in and done what maybe the government should be doing, which is quite nice to see. I think if it wasn't for the community spirit in Hartlepool at the moment, we would have a bigger crisis than we already have."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

"Some football clubs have players phoning up season ticket holders, especially elderly people who may be living alone. And I think that was a great way of keeping in touch with members of the community really."
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

"Communities have come closer together. Everyone wants to support local businesses, especially local shops which have helped out so much and watched out for the older members of the community. Think back two years ago, none of this would have happened."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020).

[28] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults, 13-16 November 2020.

The activities and organisations that connected people before COVID-19 continued to connect them in 2020: Although people could not meet in person throughout much of 2020, we were told that many of the activities and organisations that connected people before the pandemic continued to play this role in 2020, albeit often online. Gardening was an activity that was relatively unaffected by public health regulations and throughout 2020 people continued to tend allotments and community gardens.

Pubs and cafes organised online quiz nights for their regular customers. Clubs and musical ensembles continued to meet online. Religious organisations held online acts of worship, as well as inter-faith events, such as the virtual Ramadan iftars that were held in a number of towns and cities during lockdown. The organisers of many of these communal activities often went out of their way to encourage people to stay connected.

"I sing in a choir, it's a big choir, and we have all sorts of people singing in it, from all over Leeds. We can't meet up now, but we do it on Zoom once a week. And it's very nice, it's a community thing. And we're from all over as well."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

Participants also talked about the social activities that were unable to continue due to COVID-19 restrictions and which they looked forward to resuming in the future, such as eating out, drinking with friends, playing sport and making or listening to live music.

Support for the NHS united us across the UK:
The NHS has always been an institution that unites us at a national level, with surveys showing it is even more popular than the royal family, the armed forces, the BBC and Team GB[29]. In the discussions we were told that the NHS made people proud to be British and was one of the few institutions that united us across the UK. In every discussion, the majority of people praised the work of NHS and social care staff. The nationally representative survey supported this view: some 80% people said they were impressed with the NHS's response to the pandemic; just 6% were disappointed[30].

First held at eight o'clock on 26 March 2020, 'Clap for Carers' was an expression of support for the NHS each week, bringing people together across the UK. By the time that the weekly round of applause ended on 28 May 2020, it was estimated that nearly seven in ten (69%) of the British population has taken part. Clap for Carers did attract criticism by the end for being tokenistic but, for many people, it was an opportunity to have contact with people who lived in their street, albeit at a social distance. As a result of media coverage, Clap for Carers made people feel they were part of something that was positive and bigger than just their streets.

"The clap for the NHS, not necessarily the clapping, but the recognition that the NHS got, I think we could definitely say that it united us. You know, the NHS has done such a brilliant job. They were on the frontline putting their lives at risk and doctors and nurses have sadly passed away as a result of that. And nobody ever thought when they went to study medicine that they would contract the virus that was going to kill them."
(Participant in public discussion, North East/Scotland group, November 2020).

There were unifying national moments: Some 27.1 million people watched Prime Minister Boris Johnson's televised address to the nation on 23 March 2020 [31]. We were told that the daily press briefings brought people together in the first weeks of lockdown. As described above, Clap for Carers was another unifying national moment. The VE Day anniversary also brought people together, with many people describing events that took place over that bank holiday weekend. Media coverage of this event enabled viewers to see people connecting with each other.

"I've lived here in this house for nine years. And it has literally been because of the NHS clap and VE day that I've actually started speaking to my neighbours. We were quite orientated around VE Day and that side of things when we set out the front garden with cakes etcetera etcetera. We all came out and the kids chalked out social distance marks

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[29]British Future (2013) State of the Nation 2013, London: British Future. [30] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults, 13-16 November 2020.
[31]https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52018502

on the path. It was nice to go out and see people and stand talking to somebody for 20 minutes in the front garden."
(Participant in public discussion, South East, October 2020).

Initial political trust: Support for the Government and the leaders of the devolved administrations was initially very high. In the first weeks of lockdown there was a sense that party-political divides had been set aside in a national effort to respond to the virus. Public health guidance was similar across the four nations of the UK, giving a sense that the leaders of the four nations were working together. The furlough scheme also attracted broad public support. The daily news briefings were popular too; people felt that politicians and officials were making an effort to explain the science and the policy decisions. As a consequence, the Government enjoyed high levels of public trust and approval in the first weeks of lockdown. A YouGov survey at the beginning of April 2020 showed that the government had net positive approval ratings (approval minus disapproval) for the first time in almost a decade: some 52% of Britons approved of the Government's record, compared to just half that number (26%) who disapproved[32]. This initial high approval and cross-party unity appeared to engender a stronger sense of national unity in the early weeks of the pandemic.

"I never voted for them, but I think the Chancellor is the best of the lot. He did what he said he would do and the furlough scheme has definitely saved jobs."
(Response to open survey).

We talked about our society differently: As noted above people have always had more confidence about social relationships in their local communities, with most people believing their neighbourhoods are places where people get on well together. With Brexit dominating the news in 2019, national discourses about our society did not reflect this local unity. But in 2020 there was extensive media reporting about local relief efforts, the contribution of NHS staff and the national moments we have described.

These stories have affected how we saw and talked about our society, bringing existing confidence in our local areas to the fore. So people came to believe that we were not as deeply divided as we had assumed.

"As soon as the pandemic happened, someone made a group in the area. And it's got thousands of people in it now that live in the area. Everyone donates stuff to each other. When it was VE Day we had a big street party and everyone came out. We did a garden party. Everyone's just been pulling together."
(Participants in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

Talk/together discussions certainly suggest that a shared COVID-19 narrative has emerged. It is one that places more emphasis on kindness, the equal worth of people, community spirit, strong neighbourhood relationships and what we have in common. This narrative has now been implanted, to a certain extent, in our collective memory of 2020. Some 41% of people agreed that they 'will look back fondly at the way our local community came together in 2020 at such a difficult time'. Agreement with this statement was higher among women than men (44% to 36%), the over 65s (46%), people with school age children (52%), higher income groups (47%), minority ethnic groups (48%), volunteers (59%), people for whom faith plays an important role in their lives (54%), and those with higher levels of social contact with people from a different background (45%). Social contact, the amount of time that people spend in their neighbourhoods and civil society involvement appear to be associated with a more positive collective memory of 2020.

It is too early to predict how this collective narrative will evolve and change. It is possible that the community spirit of 2020 may fade from memory. Alternatively, it could persist as a modern day 'Blitz spirit' that unites us as we move forward.

"I think a positive, that has come out of the last few months, is around the narrative around people who are described as low-skilled workers. These workers are the ones who have kept the country's infrastructure going over the last six months. I think there's now more of an appetite to recognise the key

[32] YouGov asks 'do you approve of the Government's record to date?' each to produce its rolling approval tracker.

role that people play, to keep society functioning and how valuable they are."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

Conclusions

Amid the hardship of 2020, we saw a stronger sense of unity, both locally and nationally. People looked out for family members but many people also volunteered, helping people who they did not previously know. There were 4.7 million first-time volunteers in 2020, the majority of whom want to offer their time again. In the UK's ethnically and religiously diverse cities, this relief effort crossed social divides and was well-publicised on social media. Local businesses were involved. This relief effort led to stronger social bridging and linking social connections and in turn changed the way we talked about our society. As we start to emerge from the pandemic, the challenge is to preserve and build on this legacy of new connections and positive narratives.

A chronology: 2020

31 December 2019: Chinese authorities confirm they were treating dozens of cases of pneumonia with an unknown cause, but within days hospital staff in Wuhan are forbidden to discuss this new disease.

7 January 2020: A coronavirus was identified as the cause of the new illness. It is later named COVID-19, with its genome sequence made publicly available by Chinese scientists on 10 January.

11 January: A 61-year-old man from Wuhan becomes the first reported COVID-19 fatality.

20 January : The first COVID-19 cases outside mainland China are confirmed In Japan, Thailand and South Korea.

31 January: The first UK case of COVID-19 is confirmed.

29 February: The media reports the first COVID-19 case that appears to have been caught within the UK and not through travel overseas

5 March: The first death from COVID-19 in the UK, as the number of cases exceeds 100.

13 March: The Premier League is suspended amid worldwide cancellations of concerts, exhibitions and sporting fixtures

20 March: All cafes, pubs and restaurants are closed except for takeaway services

23 March: In a television address to the nation, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announces a UK-wide lockdown to come into force on 26 March, with the public asked to stay at home except in very limited circumstances. Vulnerable people are asked to 'shield'. Schools and 'non-essential' shops are closed and people are required to work from home where possible.

4 April: Keir Starmer elected as leader of the Labour Party.

6 April: Boris Johnson is admitted to intensive care after his symptoms of COVID-19 worsen.

8 May: VE Day Bank Holiday.

10 May: A new 'Stay Alert' slogan is announced along with an England-wide warning system, marking a divergence of policy between the four home nations of the UK.

12 May: The furlough scheme, which covers a quarter of the UK workforce, is extended to October 2020. By the end of 2020, the cumulative number of jobs that the scheme had protected had reached 9.9 million.

22 May: A joint investigation by the Daily Mirror and the Guardian reveals that Dominic Cummings, a Prime Ministerial Special Adviser, may have broken lockdown rules by travelling to County Durham with his wife who was exhibiting symptoms of the virus.

25 May: George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis is followed by widespread protests across the world. In the UK, Black Lives Matter demonstrations take place on 31 May, which draw attention to policing and inequality, but also the UK's colonial history and its role in slavery. The statue of Bristol slave-trader Edward Colston is toppled on 7 June.

1 June: Primary schools and some non-essential shops re-open as lockdown rules are relaxed in England. Further relaxation of the rules takes place throughout June.

29 June: Following a spike in COVID-19 cases in Leicester, stricter lockdown rules are re-introduced in that city. In the next month, new lockdown measures are introduced in other towns and cities in northern England.

14 July: England follows Scotland and the wearing of face coverings in shops becomes compulsory.

1 August: Local authorities and the police warn of their difficulties establishing social distancing rules on beaches, after thousands of tourists flock to the seaside in the hot weather.

3 August: *The Eat Out To Help Out* initiative offers people a discount on meals throughout August 2020, to help the ailing hospitality sector.

17 August: A-Level and GCSE students in England have their results based on teachers' assessments following uproar over the grades they were earlier awarded.

30 August: the first large-scale anti-lockdown rally in England.

1 September: schools start a staggered re-opening, as reports suggests that children have fallen three months behind in their studies, with the poorest pupils most badly affected.

18 September: The R number rises above one as infection rates rise.

29 September: Global COVID-19 deaths pass one million.

14 October: a new Tier system is introduced in England. There is resistance to putting Greater Manchester into the most restrictive Tier 3, led by the Mayor Andy Burnham.

31 October: England follows Wales and enters a second 'circuit breaker' lockdown, although schools remain open.

9 November: Interim results of the Pfizer-BioNTech phase three vaccine trial are published and show 90% efficacy. A 91-year-old Coventry grandmother becomes the first person to receive this vaccine outside a trial, when the UK starts its vaccination programme on 8 December.

2 December: England's second lockdown ends, with COVID-19 rates falling in most English regions. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine receives regulatory approval in the UK.

8 December: COVID-19 cases start to rise in London.

19 December: London and parts of the South East and the East of England are placed under new Tier Four restrictions as a new variant of COVID-19 spreads rapidly in these regions. Plans for a five-day relaxation of the COVID-19 regulations over Christmas are scrapped completely for people living under Tier Four restrictions, while in the rest of England and Wales, people are allowed to meet up within their support bubbles on Christmas Day.

24 December: after months of negotiations, the UK and EU set out a new trade and cooperation agreement.

30 December: the EU (Future Relations) Act 2020 is passed by Parliament, allowing the UK to leave the transition period with a trade deal. On the same day, the Oxford-AstraZenica vaccine is approved for use in the UK.

5

New and existing divides in 2020

Picture: Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona on Unsplash

Chapter 5: New and existing divides in 2020

The first weeks of lockdown were characterised by an outpouring of community action and a newfound spirit of togetherness as a nation. But by the summer of 2020, the public mood had become increasingly volatile, shifting quickly, even from week-to-week. Many people felt worn down by bad news, socially isolated, confused about public health guidance, angry at politicians and very anxious about the economic impacts of COVID-19. The community spirit of the spring began to fray at the edges.

In this chapter, we look at what divided us in 2020, and why the togetherness and unity that characterised the first weeks of the pandemic began to fade.

New divisions

COVID-19 has divided society in new ways. As we recover from the pandemic there is a risk that some of these divisions will persist or interact and reinforce existing fissures in society.

Perceptions about responsible and irresponsible behaviour: In the nationally representative survey of November 2020, just 35% of respondents were impressed with the UK general public in terms of its response to COVID-19, compared with 68% who said they were impressed with their friends and family[33]. In the public discussions, participants divided society into two groups: those who observed public health guidance and those who did not. Although people believed that the majority of people observed public health rules, in all the public discussions and in open survey responses people talked about a minority who did not comply. Examples were given of neighbours who had broken social distancing regulations, or stockpiled goods in the panic buying of March 2020. Mask-wearing was almost seen as a tribal marker, indicating the side to which you belonged.

In some of our public discussions, named out-groups were also blamed for spreading the virus by not observing social distancing regulations. Often these remarks were indicative of low levels of social contact between members of the out-group and the person who made the comment. The groups accused of flouting COVID-19 regulations included young people, students, Londoners, people from named areas (usually areas with a pre-existing poor reputation), Muslims and South East Asians, although there was always vigorous debate within the group about the accuracy of such claims. Others felt that people were being unfairly singled out for spreading the virus, in a manner that reinforced racism and age discrimination. The decision to introduce a local lockdown in parts of the North West and Yorkshire on 30 July, hours before Eid al-Adha was due to commence, was seen as evidence of this unfairness.

Societal narratives that blame out-groups for the spread of COVID-19 can be perceived by a tiny minority of people as offering licence to commit hate crime. We were concerned to hear from some local authority stakeholders that, during 2020, levels of hate crime had increased in their area, with people of South Asian and South East Asian ethnicity experiencing verbal and online abuse, damage to property and assault. Analysis of police data shows attacks on people of Asian and South Asian ethnicity rising in many parts of the UK. Counter-extremism experts have also warned that far-right extremists have used the pandemic to spread their messages, which risk normalising intolerant and hateful views towards ethnic, racial or religious communities[34] .

"In the last six months we have seen more racist graffiti in the city, and lots more. We have seen more conspiracy theories and fake news, and saying things that we haven't seen before in the city, and we're expecting this to continue. Usually, once things have come to the fore, they are there, so we don't imagine that that's going to go away with the end of lockdown."
(Participant in stakeholder group, East Midlands, November 2020).

Perceptions about the differences in adherence to public health guidance undoubtedly led to a fracturing of national unity and community spirit as the summer months progressed. We were told that "people won't easily forget who did what." There is a risk that if these divisions become embedded in the dominant pandemic narrative, existing prejudices towards out-groups will be reinforced.

[33] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults, 13-16 November 2020. [34]Commission on Countering Extremism (CCE) (2020) COVID-19: How hateful extremists are exploiting the pandemic, London: CCE.

"I think there's a lot of decent people who are doing their best to follow the government's instructions on social distancing. But there's also a lot of people that are being really ignorant. It's like when we've got hot weather, like you've seen pictures in like Cornwall and Devon, where you know where there's been thousands of people on beaches or when Leeds got promoted to the Premiership. The masks are not enforced."
(Participant in public group, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

"I feel like in the media, we are always the target. I feel Muslims always take the blame, it's the burqa, or, you know, the face covering, and now it's big families, Asian families, they're spreading coronavirus. It's creating a lot of hatred and extending a lot of trouble with the right wing."
(Participant in public group, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

Support for the Government's handling of the crisis fell, dividing people by party political lines: As lockdown progressed, the Government approval ratings fell. In November 2020, when we asked whose response to the COVID-19 pandemic had impressed and whose had disappointed, just 24% of people said that they were impressed by the UK Government and 17% were impressed by MPs[35].

A waning of cross-party unity in the face of adversity, confusing public health messages and failures to deliver sufficient tests and protective equipment all appear to have dented trust and support. In the discussions, some people believed that the Government had not told them the truth about COVID-19, views that sometimes bordered on the conspiratorial. Although the daily press briefings about COVID-19 were generally met with approval, there were appeals for greater transparency and for policy decisions to be set out and explained more clearly. In the discussions, Boris Johnson's record and public persona also attracted much criticism,

although views about the Prime Minster divided people along party political lines. There were some robust exchanges between critics of the Government and people who felt that any administration would have struggled to manage the current situation.

Many people wanted politicians to set party-political differences aside and work together to overcome COVID-19. The nationally representative survey supported this view, showing that 83% of people agreed that 'politicians from different parties should work together to solve this country's problems', with this view held fairly equally by supporters of different parties[36, 37]. Just 4% of people disagreed.

Our evidence suggests that levels of political trust fell in 2020. In this regard, the perception that the Prime Minister's adviser Dominic Cummings had broken lockdown rules appeared to be a particularly significant incident that was spontaneously brought up in 26 of the 35 public discussions we held between September 2020 and January 2021[38]. Most people, irrespective of their party-political views, disapproved of Cummings' actions, believing that they damaged the political trust that is needed for broad public compliance with regulations.

"We've gone from standing on our doorsteps on a Thursday, you know, clapping and banging saucepans for the NHS, then to Cummings driving to Barnard Castle and this stupid, ridiculous eye test scenario. From then on, people thought 'well, I didn't want to, so sod you, if they can break the rules, then I can.'"
(Participant in cross-UK public group, October 2020).

Conspiracy theories and opposition to COVID-19 regulations: Overall public support for public health measures remained high[39]. However, opposition of a more ideological nature also grew in 2020, with demonstrations held in most of the UK's major cities. These protests attracted a diverse group of people, including those with libertarian views but also far-left and far-right groups and those who supported conspiracy theories. In the discussions people talked about arguments they had had online and face-to-face with those who strongly opposed public health

[35] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults undertaken between 13 and 16 November 2020. [36] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults undertaken between 16 and 18 December 2020. [37] Conservative GE 2019 voters = 85%; Labour = 84%; Lib Dem = 92%, SNP = 87%. [38] Other research supports the significance of this event. See, for example, Fancourt, D., Steptoe, A. and Wright, L. (2020) 'The Cummings effect: politics, trust and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic' in *The Lancet* Vol 396 (10249): 464-465. [39] YouGov survey of 2,258 adults in England undertaken between 31 October and 1 November suggested that 72% supported the second lockdown.

regulations. Active and ideological opposition to the COVID-19 regulations was expressed by a small number of people who replied to Talk/together's open survey.

People also expressed their concerns about divisive conspiracy theories in all 35 public discussions that we held between September 2020 and January 2021. They talked about arguing with family members and friends who believed that the pandemic was a hoax; that it was created in a Chinese laboratory or that its spread was facilitated by 5G radio waves. In the discussions most people clearly stated that that there was no basis in fact for such views, although there were a small number of people who believed otherwise. There were also two people – in two separate public groups – who voiced their support for QAnon conspiracies[40]. A small number of respondents to the open survey also expressed their support for conspiracy theories.

"This coronavirus exercise is all about a vaccine, a reset of the world's economy, going digital, making us a cashless society and you are complicit in this. The government is being controlled by the rich elites in our society. We see what is going on around the world. Governments are choosing to ignore solid evidence about the spread of this virus and spreading fear into those that are still 'sleeping'. New Normal – Abnormal! Psychological 'nudging' and 'BIT' the Behavioural Government Insight Team!" (Response to open survey).

After the publication of the Pfizer-BioNTech phase three trial results in mid-November 2020, the potentially divisive impacts of vaccines emerged as a theme in the public discussions and in comments in the online survey. Most people in the discussions said that they would have the vaccine, but they described online and face-to-face debate with friends and family who were more hesitant, as well as those who would actively refuse it.

"The vaccine is totally dividing people now. And all those conspiracy theories and the scare mongering going on and nobody knows what to believe, including me. And I, you know, I am quite grounded normally, but it's just so confusing." (Participant in public group, Wales, December 2020).

A recent survey has suggested that one in five UK 16-34-year-olds (19%) thinks that Bill Gates wants a mass vaccination programme so that he can implant microchips into people[41]. Conspiracy theories are more likely take hold where people feel little agency and where levels of political trust and transparency are low. Belief in conspiracies is also associated with greater time spent online and with social isolation. Where people have less face-to-face contact with family and friends it is more likely that conspiracy theories will gain support as the moderating influence of face-to-face discussion among peer groups is reduced.

"With COVID, the truth isn't out there. I think the media don't really show what's actually happening. And what that does is unleashes all this stuff, all this conspiracy stuff on social media. Because people know the news isn't right. But it's opening all of these far-fetched things." (Participant in public group, East of England, October 2020).

Ideology-driven opposition to the COVID-19 regulations and conspiracy theories are dangerous and divisive for a number of reasons. Those that relate to COVID-19 put lives at risk by decreasing support for public health measures and damaging the 5G infrastructure. While support for the regulations is currently strong across all sections of society in the UK, there is a danger that opposition to the regulations might become conflated with inter-group identity conflicts, as it has in the United States. For those that engage with anti-lockdown groups online, there is also a risk that algorithmic recommendations then bring them closer into contact with people expounding violent or far-right views, threatening further long-term division in society.

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[40] See Schaffer, B. (2020) 'QAnon and Conspiracy Beliefs,' London: Institute for Strategy Dialogue. [41] Ipsos MORI survey of 2,244 UK 16-75 year olds carried for King's College London Policy Institute between 20 and 24 November 2020

Longstanding divisions through the lens of COVID-19

COVID-19 also revealed or deepened existing divisions in society as it became apparent that different sections of society were experiencing the COVID-19 crisis very differently.

People are most worried that COVID-19 will increase economic inequality and poverty: This was a dominant theme in every public and stakeholder discussion we had between May 2020 and January 2021. Many people are anxious about their own and their family's job prospects and economic security, and that the pandemic will increase poverty. They are also very worried about the impact of COVID-19 on young people's careers and long-term economic prospects. Some 45% of people selected divisions between the rich and poor as one of their top three (out of eight) issues of concern in the nationally representative survey[42]. If the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 disproportionally fall on places outside London and the South East, there is a risk that this will further increase political mistrust, the North-South divide and the resentment that stems from feeling your community has been left behind.

"My worry about this whole situation is poverty and unemployment, specifically for the youngsters who just left school last year, all the way up to 30 years old, as a whole generation are now in such a dreadful position. Careers seem to be crumbling for them and I am worried that they will become a disaffected group in society. And it's not fair. What chance is there for young people getting houses nowadays and getting mortgages?" (Participant in public group, Scotland, November 2020).

Social isolation and loneliness: In the year before COVID-19 a quarter of the population (25%) met up with family or friends less than once every week, with 18% not even speaking on the phone or online weekly. In the same year, 6% of people reported often or always feeling lonely[43]. The pandemic has drawn attention to loneliness and led to a more open conversation on this issue. In the groups, some people talked about feeling lonely themselves or mentioned people they knew who were isolated.

"I've struggled, I lost my wife to cancer early last year. I have had a really bad time without my friends around me. I don't really know where this will end. I'm finding it difficult and trying to keep optimistic and trying to keep busy and motivated. I don't watch the news anymore. I just can't." (Participant in public discussion, North West, December 2020).

In one group, a new mother explained how isolated she felt as her family and friends were not able to visit. University students told us that some of their peers were finding it difficult to cope because of the requirements to restrict their social contacts. It was felt that disabled people, in particular, had been forgotten in the current crisis, an issue that was also brought up by some people who filled in the open survey.

"There are an awful lot of disabled people who would rely on public transport, who can't go out now and have to isolate themselves. And I don't think that we think enough about them. We kind of take it for granted that perhaps there's going to be a close-knit family around them. A lot of people don't have that, especially disabled people, especially those with learning disabilities. Sometimes they are well looked after but sometimes they are left to their own devices and without community around them." (Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020. This person was a volunteer for a charity that worked to reduce loneliness).

There has also been much work to reach out to those who might feel isolated, with many of these initiatives involving volunteers. In both the public and stakeholder discussions we heard from people who had organised or taken part in this work. They believed what they were doing did make a difference, but that COVID-19 had still left some people very isolated.

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[42] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 13-16 November 2020. [43] Community Life Survey 2019-2020 figures which apply to England, although similar levels of social contact and loneliness are reported elsewhere in the UK.

Age and generational divisions: COVID-19 has left older people more vulnerable from a health perspective and more likely to face digital exclusion; but younger people more likely to experience unemployment, or struggle with loneliness and their mental health. In the nationally representative survey, we asked people to give a 1 to 10 score to indicate how well they felt they coped mentally with the pandemic and lockdown measures, with 1 being 'not coped well at all', and 10 being 'coped very well'. Some 13% of 18-24 year-olds gave a score of 1-3, compared with 8% of the overall sample[44].

Intergenerational relations were also explored in the discussions and the surveys. There is some evidence that the under 35s are following the guidelines less strictly than those in older age bands[45]. This was reflected in the discussions where some people voiced the opinion that young people were less willing to observe public health guidance – an observation made by people in all age cohorts, although this view was often contested. Others highlighted digital exclusion and the differential economic impacts of COVID-19. It was also clear that during 2020 there has been a lot of solidarity across generations, with young people looking out for their older neighbours, and older people concerned about the economic impacts of COVID-19 on younger people. Some people felt that these factors had brought the generations closer together.

"I think a lot of young people nowadays are under tremendous stress because of unemployment for one thing, I mean, you're looking at all the retail outlets and hospitality outlets that are closing. Those people who've been to university have qualified, but now find themselves unable to get jobs. Older people are going to have to be a bit more tolerant, maybe, of the difficulties that they're facing at the moment and be helpful where we can."
(Participant in public group, North West, December 2020).

Age and generational divides that pre-dated COVID-19 were also discussed in some groups. People debated the extent to which age divisions

were a normal part of life, and as such are natural and unthreatening. As set out in the appendix on how we became divided, identity conflicts were split by age, with younger people more likely to align with socially liberal values while older people tend to be more socially conservative – a trend that was highlighted in the EU referendum[46]. Again, there was no clear consensus about the extent to which the Brexit vote had damaged trust between the generations, or whether this was an issue that had received undue coverage in the media. Most people did agree, however, that greater levels of social contact across the generations was desirable.

"By bridging intergenerational divides and finding things we all share, we also tackle cultural divides, digital divides, language barriers, all sorts of things. And by breaking down stereotypes, naturally educating people, we create a space where people can see that, you know, we've got a lot in common with each other."
Participant in stakeholder group, North West, December 2020).

Digital exclusion: Over the last year many of our social interactions have taken place online. Shopping, booking a COVID-19 test, claiming Universal Credit are also all services that now require us to go online. While for many, the internet has become a vital source of connectivity, others remain unable to fully participate in this online age, either because they cannot afford to access the required technology and infrastructure (primary digital exclusion), or because they lack the skills to navigate the online world (secondary digital exclusion). For these groups digital exclusion exacerbated their social exclusion in 2020.

Ofcom data suggests that approximately 13% of the adult population in the UK – around 1 in 8 people – are internet non-users, a figure that remains almost unchanged since 2014[47]. A further 10% of the UK are limited users, facing barriers which restrict their engagement with online life on a day-to-day basis[48]. In the Talk/together discussions we met people in this second category who had unreliable broadband connections, shared a single device with other family

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[44] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020. [45] Duffy, B. (2020) Compliance or complacence? Attitudes to UK lockdown rules, London: Kings College London. [46] Some 71% of under 25s voted to remain in the EU, while 29% voted to leave. Among the over 65s, 64% voted Leave and 36% voted Remain. [47] Ofcom (2020) Adults' media use and attitudes report 2020, London: Ofcom. [48] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blog/new-analysis-ofcom-2020-data

Picture: Yasmina H on Unsplash

members or needed substantial assistance to enable them to use programmes such as Zoom or to shop online. Older people comprise by far the largest group facing digital exclusion, but low-income groups also experience it because they cannot afford the data or devices to get online. Particularly among young people, these inequalities will be harmful to their future prospects. This issue was raised in the open survey and in the public and stakeholder discussions where it was felt to be a major cause of widening educational inequalities.

"It's increasingly the case that those who aren't digitally skilled, or equipped with their own kit (good broadband etc) are forgotten about and have problems accessing services and information needed."
(Response to open survey).

There are also disparities in digital connectivity within the UK, with many rural areas and Scotland and Northern Ireland receiving substantially poorer broadband coverage[49]. This point was echoed in many of our public discussions, where participants voiced their frustrations at the lack of investment and its impact on their wellbeing, particularly during lockdown. For areas that fall within these 'not-spots', unequal access to online infrastructure can increase political mistrust and feelings that communities are being left behind by an uncaring or London-centric government.

"They've been saying for two years about giving all of Northern Ireland fast broadband [...] that there's investment coming. It never seems to happen."
(Participant in public discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

Race rose up the agenda: The pandemic has had different impacts across different ethnic groups. Most minority ethnic groups have seen higher mortality and hospitalization rates than the white population. The virus has taken a tragic toll on NHS and care workers – and more than seven in ten of those who have died were from ethnic minority backgrounds[50]. The causes of these ethnic disparities are still not fully understood, although deprivation and exposure at work seem to be factors associated with increased morbidity. These ethnic disparities received media coverage at much the same time as the Black Lives Matter movement gained prominence in the UK. Both have changed the nature of the policy and public debate about racism and racial justice in the UK.

George Floyd was killed on 25 May 2020 and the UK's first widespread Black Lives Matter protests occurred on 31 May. While the first demonstrations focussed on policing and racial inequalities, the UK's colonial history and its role in slavery became the subject on subsequent demonstrations and the media coverage that followed it. The statue of Bristol slave-trader Edward Colston was toppled on 7 June, after which much of the media debate turned to the views and actions of historic figures in relation to slavery, Britain's imperial past and racism. Far-right groups then mobilised supporters, supposedly to 'defend' statues and war memorials, with some counter-protests held in turn.

People from all ethnic groups took part in the Black Lives Matter protests. Undoubtedly, this movement has been successful in highlighting racial inequalities in the UK, including the disproportionate number of deaths from COVID-19, increasing their profile in media, political and broader public discussions, in ways that could bring a new urgency to tackle these disparities. But people's views about the Black Lives Matter protests have also divided them in relation to where they stand on the social liberal to social conservative spectrum, in a manner similar to that in which immigration divided people in the recent past.

The Black Lives Matter movement was a salient issue in almost all of the Talk/together discussions and was usually raised early on in the conversation. It was sometimes a difficult subject to discuss; we sensed that some people held back and did not voice their opinions for fear of causing offence. This was often the case if the first person who spoke on this issue strongly voiced their support for Black Lives Matter. At other times, it was a much easier conversation, with people listening and engaging with each other.

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[49] House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2019) An update on rural connectivity, London: UK Parliament.
[50] Health Service Journal, 'Deaths of NHS staff from Covid-19 analysed', 22 April 2020 https://www.hsj.co.uk/exclusive-deaths-of-nhs-staff-from-covid-19-analysed/7027471.article

The role played by 'bridgers' in such groups was important in this respect, with bridging participants diplomatically acknowledging people's concerns, while explaining why they supported the Black Lives Matter movement. Talking about personal experiences of racism encouraged people to listen: a care worker from Liverpool of Nigerian heritage engaged everyone by talking about the verbal abuse she received at work.

"When they see you, they don't want to have anything to do with you. It doesn't tell well, it works on your emotions."
(Participant in public group, North West, December 2020).

About a quarter of people who took part in the discussions – usually younger people, those from minority ethnic groups and city-dwelling professionals – were vocally supportive, and questioned those that were not supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement.

"It's not enough not to be racist, you've got to be anti-racist. And if we're going to be anti racist, going to confront these things, we can't just turn a blind eye. So I personally think that Black Lives Matter is a really admirable campaign."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

Among a much larger middle group – about half of all participants, spanning ethnic groups – we found that there was condemnation of the murder of George Floyd and broad support for action to tackle inequality and racial prejudice in the UK. But this support was tempered with concerns about the Black Lives Matter movement that related to the decision to hold demonstrations during the pandemic, or incidents of vandalism on the demonstrations. The actions of far-right groups, including their use of the 'White Lives Matter' slogan, were also felt to be divisive. Some people said that the Black Lives Matter movement was a difficult issue to talk about with friends and colleagues because they feared that expressing their views would open them up to accusations of racism or cause arguments.

"I think one thing that it's done, unfortunately, is to encourage the extremists to be even more extreme and cement their position. And I guess what it also showed is that being white and not being racist is not enough, because that's just showing indifference to the problem. We need to look at the extreme racist views and Black Lives Matter obviously brought that to the fore, which is a good thing. But quite clearly it strengthens the opposite side as well. They're going to feel, you know, 'I'm going to push back'."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

Some people in the public discussions had given little consideration to the Black Lives Matter movement; it was simply something they did not think about or discuss. A few people were more vocal in their disagreement with Black Lives Matter, with their opposition focusing on the movement's ideology, contested histories of race and empire, or 'cancel culture' and free speech. Opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement was also voiced by a significant number of people who responded to the open survey.

"I think everyone's got the right to have that opinion. Everyone's got the right to say what they are feeling. But I just see people pulling down statues and vandalism. You know that for other reasons these statues are part of British heritage and you can't ignore the past and our history. History is the past and you can't change the past. Tom and Jerry cartoons aren't being broadcast anymore because it's deemed to be racist."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

Surveys conducted in 2020[51] also show this breakdown of around a quarter stating their strong support, half the public voicing qualified support and a further quarter stating their disengagement or opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement. It is mostly those who strongly support or oppose the Black Lives Matter movement who aired their views

[51] See for example Ipsos MORI October 2020 https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/half-britons-support-aims-black-lives-matter-movement

online. In 2020, race and empire became a high-profile issue involving strong emotions and one that had potential to polarise opinion into those 'for' and those 'against'. Yet there is also this middle group: those people who offer qualified support. In future, this middle 50% could disappear as people fracture. Efforts will be needed to maintain the broadest-possible coalition against racism and prejudice. If successful, racial justice could become a subject on which we can have an open conversation and something that at least three-quarters of the population support.

Divergence of COVID-19 regulations between the four home nations: The divergence of policy between the Westminster Government and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has, for some, reinforced perceptions of national division, while for others it was welcomed as Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were in different phases of the pandemic. In Scotland, the divergence of policy across the UK was often seen through the lens of the independence campaign; those with pro-union views argued for policy convergence, and those who were pro-independence made the case for policy autonomy.

"So being up here in Scotland, I've seen different views. It feels quite divided with all the mixed news coming through, especially yesterday with Nicola Sturgeon saying 'stay at home' and then Boris saying 'you can come out'. So we feel pretty divided at the moment. But we're still sticking by that guideline and – I hate to go off on a political tangent – but if everyone got given the same advice then we'd all stick to it rather than this different stuff." (Participant in UK-wide public group, held on 11 May 2020, the day after new regulations were announced in London).

The operation of the furlough scheme in Wales and different lockdown regulations between Wales and England also prompted discussion about Welsh independence. There were a few people who supported Welsh independence in two of the three public discussions that drew their participants from Wales. We were told that Yes Cymru posters were now visible in towns such as Wrexham, not just in the Welsh speaking heartlands where support for Plaid Cymru has been highest. Most did not back independence, but there was a consensus that Wales did not get its fair share of investment to fund transport and to run its public services. COVID-19 had shone a spotlight on this inequality.

Widening geographic divides: A growing North-South rift was a prominent theme that was raised in the open survey and in the discussions. In the nationally representative survey we asked which three types of divisions were people most worried about in the future. Overall, 26% of respondents put the North-South divide as one of their top three. Unsurprisingly, the North-South divide was a much greater issue of concern among those living in the North East (49% put it in the top three), North West (44%) Yorkshire and the Humber (50%) compared with London (18%) the Eastern region (18%) and the South East (18%).

Some 16% of people who responded to the open survey in July 2020 chose the North-South divide as one of the three types of divisions (out of a choice of eight) that made them most concerned. By December 2020, 36% of people put the North-South divide as one of their top three divisions of concern[52]. The survey findings were also supported in Talk/together's discussions, where people in northern England felt more strongly that the pandemic has increased divisions between north and south, economically, socially and politically.

Although unemployment initially increased at a higher rate in some of England's southern towns and cities, this trend has now been reversed, with some forecasts suggesting that COVID-19 will deepen North-South economic inequalities[53]. It has been the poorest families who have fared worst when people have lost their jobs or seen their hours and incomes reduced, and poverty is generally higher in England's northern regions that the south. These economic realities were reflected in the discussions, with people describing the disproportionate economic impact of COVID-19 on northern England's already weaker economies, but also voicing pride in where they lived. There is resistance to negative labels such as 'left behind'.

[52] Survey findings have been weighted for age and region/nation of respondent. [53] IPPR North (2020) The State of the North, Manchester, IPPR North.

"It feels at the minute as if the north-south divide is growing bigger and bigger. And I mean, I think the North East has got massive poverty. At one point I thought I felt that we were getting sort of closer to the south, but I do feel now that with this COVID thing and with Brexit I think we've just sort of started to pull apart again. But I'm proud of the North East, I think it's an amazing area. I think the people are friendly. I've lived in the south for a good eight years of my life. You go to the pub and try and have a conversation, you might as well be talking to a brick wall. You walk into a pub up here and have a conversation with the person next to you, and you can be sat chatting to them for hours."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

Different lockdown regimes have also reinforced other economic, social and political divisions and inequalities across the UK's geographies. In the discussions we held in northern England there was a consensus that its towns and cities had been treated unfairly in the application of COVID-19 regulations when compared with London. Some of those who lived in north Wales felt that the Welsh lockdown of 23 October 2020 was not justified, as there were far fewer COVID-19 cases where they lived. They felt that this decision reflected a Welsh Government that based its decisions on the needs of those who live in south Wales, above those who live in the north.

"Even within Wales, between, say, north and south Wales, there are divisions. Because you've got the Welsh Government based in Cardiff, but a lot of the time north Wales, I think, is neglected. You know, it's kind of like people have felt isolated from the government."
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

In turn this has reinforced perceptions that the voices of those who live outside capital cities are not heard by those in Government, and that there is insufficient investment in infrastructure and public services for those who live in towns and the countryside.

"We live out in a small village, it is quite well catered for with a couple of shops, and the community spirit is really good. But we keep getting things taken away from us and the transport links are absolutely hopeless. My son, who's in the second year of college, can't get free travel now he has turned 16. It's very, very different from what you can get in a city."
(Participant in public group, West Midlands, November 2020).

Togetherness was not evenly felt across all communities: While COVID-19 has brought people together, it has also revealed weaknesses in the social fabric of some communities, an issue that has been highlighted in other research[54]. While 41% of people felt that the pandemic had made their community more united, one in eight people (13%) felt that COVID-19 had made their community more divided. We examine in greater detail why perceptions about unity have not been evenly felt in Chapter Seven.

"In terms of my local community, I don't really find us working together. Maybe in the supermarket keeping two metres apart, but we're not really doing much to help each other. The clapping is the only thing we do as part of a community. Other than that, I don't really know my neighbours. It's not really helping the situation; I don't feel like I know anyone."
(Participant from London, UK-wide group, May 2020).

Brexit: This issue continued to divide us in 2020, although online debate tended to be dominated by those with the strongest views. We found that Brexit became a more salient issue in the discussions we held in November and December 2020, when the UK-EU trade negotiations featured more prominently in the news. It was also a prominent theme of the discussions we held in Northern Ireland, with people fearful about its economic impact and that the Irish border might become a flashpoint for violence.

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[54] Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., Davies Hayon, K. and Platts-Dunn, I. (2020) *The Social Cohesion Investment*, Canterbury: University of Kent and Belong.

However, we believe that the debate about Brexit has become less heated in 2020, with the majority of people no longer seeing themselves as belonging to a clearly demarcated in-group. It is our prediction that this particular inter-group identity conflict will gradually receive less prominence as UK society goes through a process of acceptance and reconciliation. We discuss our findings in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

"I voted to remain. And I know a lot of friends did, a lot of people around me did. However, what's done is done. Now I think we all kind of have that understanding where it's not the result we would have wanted, but it's obviously what's happened."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

Conclusions

While the events of 2020 showed the resilience of our society and increased many people's sense of connection to their local community, it also showed our divides. After an initial period of local and national unity in the spring of 2020, new and old divisions came to the fore. This is not surprising: research shows that communities affected by disasters often go through 'heroic' and 'honeymoon' periods before a 'disillusionment' phase, where the differential impacts of the disaster become clear and people become exhausted[55]. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the togetherness that was felt in early 2020 began to fade.

People's response to the pandemic highlighted examples of connection and togetherness at a local level, but at the same time revealed national-level divisions. Political trust has fallen. COVID-19 has divided us in new ways, and created new 'us' and 'them' identities. It has also highlighted existing fissures in society. There is a clear danger that these divides and inequalities may persist into 2021 and beyond. As we move into a period of recovery and reconstruction, we need to take steps to address these divisions.

[55] Zunin, L. M. and Myers, D. (2000). Training manual for human service workers in major disasters. 2nd Ed. Washington, DC: Center for Mental Health Services.

Picture: James Robinson,
ParaSport Launch, Marjorie
McClure Special School

6 Connection and togetherness in communities

Chapter 6: Connection and togetherness in communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the unity of our society more than its divides, and this is most strongly felt at a community level. Three times as many people feel that the pandemic had made their community more united than felt it had become more divided.

However, this newfound sense of unity and community spirit has not been evenly felt across the UK. The pandemic has shown the resilience of most communities, but it has also highlighted weaknesses in the social fabric of some neighbourhoods. We wanted to find out what made some communities feel connected and united, while others still felt disconnected or divided in 2020, and what might bring people together in such neighbourhoods.

An uneven pattern of connection and togetherness

"In our village we actually looked after each other. We made sure everyone had what they needed. It was actually really nice."
(Participant in cross-UK public discussion, May 2020)

"My community is more divided than anything. There's a lot of selfish people out there; social-distancing is non-existent around here. It doesn't matter if you go out just to get some shopping, you see groups and groups of people just hanging around, and there's nothing being done by the police about it or anything. So, it's more divided than anything around here."
(Participant in cross-UK public discussion, May 2020).

ICM research for Talk/together found 41% of people felt that the pandemic had made their community more united, while one in eight people (13%) felt that COVID-19 had made their community more divided.

Perceptions that the pandemic had made the local community more united were highest among those aged 65-74 (49%) and 75+ (also 49%); among people living in the North West (45%); those with small children aged 5-10 (49%); and those who live in the least-deprived areas (51%).

Fewer people felt that the pandemic had made their community more divided, but those more likely to report a sense of greater local division were the under 35s (22%); people living in London (18%); those who thought that immigration had a negative impact on the UK (19%); non-voters (17%) and those who live in the most deprived 30% of areas in the UK (17%).

We started off each of the public discussions by asking everyone to score – on a 1 to 10 scale – how divided or united they thought the UK is as a nation, as well as their local community (1 being most divided and 10 being most united). People were also asked to explain their score. Around one in eight people in the public discussions felt that the events of 2020 had not made their communities closer and more united, with this sentiment often keenly felt. Among those who gave a low score for their local community, it soon became clear that they were talking about two conditions. Their communities could be:

- **Disconnected:** where most people do not know or speak to each other. These are communities where there are few bonding and bridging networks. Overall levels of trust and empathy are lower in disconnected communities.

- **Divided:** where people living in a particular area identify with an in-group associated with that place – and may have strong bonding networks within their in-group – but have limited social contact with those seen as belonging to out-groups. Levels of trust may be high between members of the in-group, but low towards members of the out-group.

Communities can also be both disconnected and divided.

Inner-city neighbourhoods with high levels of population churn may feel disconnected without being divided. An example of a divided community might include areas within some of the northern mill towns, where there is limited neighbourhood, educational or workplace social contact between the British Pakistani Muslim community and people of white British ethnicity. Bonding networks may be strong within these two groups, but there are fewer bridging networks between them. People are less likely to feel they have shared, 'more in common' identities.

A community that is both disconnected and divided might typically be an urban area where bonding networks are already weak, which then sees the arrival of newcomers through gentrification or immigration. These new arrivals are seen as belonging to an out-group. Parts of London are disconnected and divided, having experienced recent gentrification as well as population change brought about by immigration. This may explain low mean unity-division scores (Figure 6.5) and why more people in London (18%) say that COVID-19 has made their community more divided, compared with 13% of people across the UK.

The Fenland towns that have experienced recent EU migration are also examples of communities that are both disconnected and divided, as the testimony from Lincolnshire below illustrates. Over the last 20 years migrants have moved to this part of England to work in agriculture and food processing, settling in places such as Peterborough, Boston, Spalding and Wisbech, which have previously seen little international migration. Between 2001 and 2011 in Boston, for example, the proportion of the population born outside the UK grew from 3.1% to 15.2%. This was a large movement of people into tight-knit communities in small towns and, in such circumstances, many in the resident community saw migrant workers as an out-group that posed a threat. Bonding links within migrant worker groups were also weak, as people came from different national and linguistic groups, lived in private rental accommodation and many were employed by agencies rather than as permanent staff, so workplaces were less likely to be spaces where people formed relationships within and outside their communities. In the early years of this century, Fenland towns experienced division and disconnection.

"My husband and I moved here from the southeast of England 20 years ago, and we were very much seen as the outsiders. It took an awful long time to break those barriers down in my very local community. Since then, in my local town over the last 15 years, we've had a major influx of Russians, who came to work on the land, then the Portuguese, they've all gone home now. And then the Polish people who bought up an awful lot of properties, and now we have Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians. And there's a lot of infighting and people keeping within their communities. And an undercurrent of constant aggression, houses of multiple occupancy, gangs of workers that are being run by gang masters who are not from the indigenous population. It doesn't feel safe. We have an area of my town which was called West Street. Unfortunately, the locals here now call it East Street, because every other shop is for the eastern communities and you go in there and nobody speaks English. I feel quite unwelcome."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

Some of the migrant workers who arrived in Fenland towns have now settled, bought houses, found permanent work and become British citizens. Their children are attending local schools, with friendships between children leading to greater social contact between migrant and long-term resident parents. In many of the Fenland towns, schools, councils, faith groups and civil society organisations have worked hard to bridge some of the divides and bring people together. Towns such as Boston and Wisbech are less divided than they were ten years ago; nevertheless a degree of disconnection and division still characterises many Fenland towns.

Just under half of people (48%) agreed that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together, with 12% of people disagreeing. People most likely to disagree with this statement included those aged 18-24 (18%), people who live in the North East (27%), people who live in the most deprived 10% of areas (20%), people with little or no social contact with those from a different background (21%), people who feel that immigration has had a negative impact on the UK (27%) and people who did not or could not vote in the 2019 general election[56].

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[56] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

Bringing disconnected and divided communities together

It is important to address disconnection and division. People who live in disconnected communities are much less likely to trust each other or feel that they have a stake in their neighbourhood. Places with strong bonding connections but with weaker bridging connections are likely to be places that experience inter-group conflict. Places where people feel disconnected are much more likely to become divided communities in response to shocks and change.

We were told that neighbourhoods that had the highest levels of social connection – in the form of both bridging and linking connections – tended to fare better in the pandemic. Contact tracing has appeared more successful, especially in marginalised communities, where linking connections were strong and where public health professionals worked closely with faith and civil society groups to reach people who might not otherwise trust officials[57]. People have also been more willing to observe public health guidance where they felt connected with and responsible for their local communities[58]. Places where levels of social connection were strongest often had higher levels of mutual aid. Information shared within social networks has helped people find new employment or training opportunities after they lost their jobs.

"Lots of things made a difference to how people coped this year. The financial level makes a massive difference, the demographics depending on where you were based in the UK. If you've got access to greenery, you've got access to a nice garden, a nice community, a village feel, you've got a good sort of village atmosphere and people know each other and help each other. I think this is why there's this disparity across the country of the way COVID is affecting some regions far worse than others."
(Participant in public discussion, North West, December 2020)

"The upsurge in community responses wasn't uniform across London. Better-off areas – with more established social and community-led infrastructure, connected networks of residents, lower levels of isolation, higher levels of neighbourhood trust, higher levels of local participation, and low population churn – had stronger and more effective community responses."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, London, October 2020).

We discussed what factors are more likely to make communities disconnected or divided in both the public and stakeholder meetings, as well as policy solutions and practical action that might help foster connection and togetherness in those neighbourhoods where bonding, bridging and linking networks are weak. These factors and solutions are summarised in Table 6.1.

In summary, people that took part in the discussions and responded to the open survey felt that we needed an environment that enables social connection and togetherness. Communities need to feel more united and connected. This means addressing and mitigating against factors that make communities disconnected and divided, for example anti-social behaviour or population churn. It also means providing the spaces where people can mix and meet, such as local parks, leisure centres, attractive high streets, mixed workplaces and schools that act as community hubs. How people talk about their local area is important, too: we were told how important it was to tell a story about a village, town or city that helps to foster a sense of identity, belonging and inclusion for all residents.

"My area has never really been much of a community. I live next to the main road anyway. So stuff like street parties we've never really had, because we are on the main road."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

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[57] Kruger, D. (2020) Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant, London: Independent Report to the UK Government by Danny Kruger. [58] Evidence provided by Belong, Cohesion and Integration Network and cited in Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., Davies Hayon K. and Platts-Dunn I. (2020) The Social Cohesion Investment, Canterbury: University of Kent.

Picture: The Great Get Together (image taken prior to COVID-19)

Table 6.1: Addressing the causes of disconnection and division in communities.

Disconnected communities: Problems and solutions	Divided communities: Problems and solutions
CONTEXT AND ENVIRONMENT	
Problem: Population churn caused by immigration or a large student population. **Problem:** Population churn caused by high proportions of private rental accommodation in housing stock, leading to people having a lower sense of having a stake in their neighbourhoods. **Solution:** Work to encourage the social integration of new migrants and newcomers from within the UK. **Solution:** Better management and regulation of private rental housing. **Solution:** Schemes where students can volunteer in the local community.	**Problem:** International or internal migration or gentrification seen as 'incursions.' **Solution:** Work to encourage the social integration of new migrants and newcomers from within the UK.
Problem: Competition for resources **Solution:** National and local solutions to make sure that everyone has equal life chances.	**Problem:** Competition for resources in ways that reinforce 'us and them' narratives and increase inter-group tensions. **Solution:** Public engagement and dialogue to understand why people feel they are being treated unfairly. **Solution:** National and local solutions to make sure that everyone has equal life chances.
Problem: Lack of space and opportunities for bonding and bridging social contact. **Solution:** Shared spaces: parks, community gardens, high streets, libraries and leisure centres.	**Problem:** Lack of shared spaces and opportunities for bridging social contact. **Solution:** Shared spaces: parks, community gardens, high streets, libraries and leisure centres in areas that people from different social groups visit.
Problem: Spatial features that discourage social connection, for example busy roads and tower blocks. **Solution:** Planning and design features that address disconnection, for example, new green space added when high streets and housing estates are regenerated. **Solution:** Design for social connection in future housing developments.	**Problem:** Segregated housing or spatial features that demarcate different groups. **Solution:** Planning and design features that address division, for example 'underpass parks' that link communities separated by a road. Shared spaces in areas that people from different social groups want to visit. **Solution:** Design for social connection in future housing developments.

Table 6.1 contd: Addressing the causes of disconnection and division in communities.

Disconnected communities: Problems and solutions	Divided communities: Problems and solutions
CONTEXT AND ENVIRONMENT	
Problem: Higher levels of crime and anti-social behaviour; hate crime. **Solution:** Police/criminal justice system, council and civil society action to address causes of crime and anti-social behaviour.	**Problem:** Hate crime that increases inter-group conflict. **Solution:** Police/criminal justice system, council and civil society action to contain and reduce hate crime, with community engagement and dialogue to address inter-group tensions.
Problem: Trigger events that damage trust between people, for example, a serious criminal incident. **Solution:** Police, council and civil society action to engage local people in the aftermath of an event. **Solution:** Action to build social connection.	**Problem:** Trigger events that increase inter-group tensions, for example terrorism or high-profile hate crime. **Solution:** Strategies to manage community tensions that may arise from trigger events, for example having unifying media messages and spokespeople who are respected across communities.
Problem: Weak narratives about local belonging. **Solution:** Narrative change: using local media, museum sector and local history curriculum to tell the story of a community that welcomes newcomers and belongs to everyone.	**Problem:** Local narratives that reinforce 'us and them' identities. **Solution:** Narrative change: using local media, museum sector and local history curriculum to tell the story of a community that belongs to everyone.
SOCIAL NETWORKS	
Problem: Fewer bonding and bridging networks. **Solution:** Work to encourage social connection by volunteering and through events such as street parties and neighbourhood clean-ups that encourage people to connect.	**Problem:** Few inter-group bridging social networks. **Solution:** Work to encourage social connection by volunteering and through events such as street parties and neighbourhood clean-ups that encourage people to connect, across inter-group divides.
	Problem: Strongly held in-group identification that casts members of out-groups as a threat. **Solution:** Shared spaces and activities that break down 'them and us' identities.
Problem: Limited opportunities for bonding and bridging social links to be formed in workplaces. **Solution:** Start conversations with local employers about social connection.	**Problem:** Workplace segregation – different groups do different jobs or work for different employers. **Solution:** Work with local employers to raise issues about workplace segregation and increase opportunities for groups of people who are under-represented in some sectors of the local economy.

Table 6.1 contd: Addressing the causes of disconnection and division in communities.

Disconnected communities: Problems and solutions	Divided communities: Problems and solutions
SOCIAL NETWORKS	
Problem: Weak linking networks, with people feeling they are unable to make change. **Solution:** Community campaigning projects, bringing people together to discuss and make change in their local area. **Solution:** Councillors and MPs who use new ways to reach out into communities that have less of a voice.	**Problem:** Different patterns of linking relationships which reinforce inter-group tensions. **Solution:** Community campaigning projects that explicitly aim to bring people of different backgrounds together to campaign for change.
PARTICIPATION	
Problem: Fewer opportunities to take part in inclusive and welcoming cultural, sporting or civil society actions. **Solution:** More opportunities for participation in cultural, sporting or civil society actions.	**Problem:** Segregated cultural, sporting, faith and civil society activities. **Solution:** Commitment to make local activities inclusive and welcoming to all groups. **Solution:** Inter-faith activities.
Problem: Lower levels of civic participation, for example, volunteering and voting. **Solution:** Projects to encourage local volunteering and voter registration.	**Problem:** Levels of civic participation may vary.
COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP	
Problem: Limited community leadership. **Solution:** Projects that recruit and support local community leadership from different sections of the community.	**Problem**: Limited community leadership, or leadership that does not foster bridging networks. **Solution:** Projects that recruit and support local community leadership from different sections of the community.

"Facilities – libraries, parks, allotments, leisure centres, pedestrianised town areas – where people can interact and experience things on an equal level."
Response to open survey).

"Proper community buildings with IT and libraries where young and old could do things together. Take a look at The Hub in Barnard Castle, or old people's centres co-located with youth clubs!"
(Response to open survey).

"You can't solve it all just through relationships and people being together, the narrative is so important. And if one side gets one version of history, the other gets another version of it, and you don't talk about it, you're never going to bridge divides. However much people get on as human beings, that conditioning is still there."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

"Change the rhetoric – TV, social media commentators and local activists need to use language that shows that we have more in common than divides us."
(Response to open survey).

The density and type of social networks is important in bringing disconnected and divided communities together. We were told that communities feel more connected and united where there are bonding and bridging links: where people feel they know others like themselves as well as members of out-groups who they see as different. Linking networks are also important: between people and institutions, for example, or between councillors and their constituents. These connections help build political trust and enable people to gain resources or bring about neighbourhood change.

"People are very cliquey by nature. But things like sport, church, community, food banks, volunteering, that's the only way you're going to meet new people. But people also stick to what they know. It's human nature."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"More chances to meet people of all backgrounds would bring about more understanding where we live."
(Participant in public group, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

"Encourage people to talk more. We almost need to give people permission to communicate with each other. Highlight places where you can sit and talk: chatty cafes, chatty park benches. Promote the fact that people want to talk – it's not being nosey or intrusive. Once the shyness barrier is broken people talk quite easily. Once we start talking, we get closer we are kinder and more understanding."
(Response to open survey).

"When folk first arrive in a new area they should be invited to a welcome party at the local council offices to meet the Mayor and councillors, doctors/NHS staff, police, members of local organisations like the WI, craft clubs, religious leaders, RNLI, chamber of commerce members etc, so that they could be made aware of all the activities and organisations and be given a list of who they can call on for help if needed. These meetings could take place every month and folk who arrive in the community would be sent an invitation to attend."
(Response to open survey).

The intensity of social networking is important: the communities where people come together to participate in common activities and pursue common goals over a period of time tend to be more connected and united.

"I think it helps to live in an active community. I know there are quite a few groups meeting in my area and also there are volunteering opportunities. I think it helps if people care and look after the local area even if it's just keeping streets clean."
(Response to open survey).

"Encouraging all 16-18 year olds to undertake some form of volunteering. Taster sessions for sports groups to encourage participation."
(Response to open survey).

"Volunteering means you go into situations that you wouldn't have gone into and meet people you wouldn't meet. I think it's valuable and underplayed, and it should be easier for people to volunteer and be matched up with places where they are needed."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

Connected and united communities tend to have stronger community leadership. This is the type of leadership that encourages others to join in and create bridging and bonding relationships. Community leadership also forges the linking connections that are needed to gain resources or bring about change. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of community leadership, with many of the local relief efforts – such as the mutual aid and street WhatsApp groups that were organised in 2020 – usually initiated or organised by existing community leaders. Some of these people were faith leaders, councillors, business-owners or were involved in local charities. Others did not have such positions of authority but were members of the public who had strong bridging and linking networks and were able to identify unmet need and opportunities to help people.

"We were quite lucky locally, because we had flyers come through the door where you could sign up for a WhatsApp group. And it turned out that the person that distributed the flyers was one of the councillors who just happened to live on the street nearby. For us, it was about having somebody who was prepared to take on the mantle of being an organiser, encouraging people to ask for help and also encouraging other people to volunteer."
(Participant in discussion, South West, December 2020).

"When you've got all these new people moving in and out, you may not have a basic core group of people to organise things. When you haven't got that it is more difficult to engage with people, there are fewer groups to grab onto or go and talk to."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, London, October 2020).

Leadership, participation and isolation

Bringing disconnected and divided communities together requires leadership and broader community participation. Some people take on leadership roles in their own community; others are willing to join in; while other people remain disconnected or isolated. We asked people, in both the discussions and nationally representative survey, to describe their communities, to talk about the social interactions that they have and the different roles that they play in their local communities. People's approaches to neighbourhood activities, networks and street parties were used as examples to probe involvement in their local community (Tables 6.2 and 6.3).

Table 6.2: Which of these statements best describes your involvement in your local community?

I know some of my neighbours but rarely join in local activities	**37%**
I don't really have many positive interactions with people who live in my neighbourhood	**20%**
I know many people in my neighbourhood and sometimes join in with local activities	**19%**
I know most of my neighbours and I get involved in community activities or posting on the neighbourhood WhatsApp/Facebook group (but I am not the main organiser)	**9%**
I know most of my neighbours and I often take a leading role in organising community activities and the neighbourhood WhatsApp/Facebook group	**4%**
None of these	**12%**

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

Table 6.3: If someone organised a street party where you live, which of these statements best describes your approach to it? Please select one.

I would turn up and take part	34%
No-one would ever organise a street party where I live	21%
I would stay at home	18%
I would help the organiser (setting up, making sandwiches etc)	17%
I would be the person who organised it	3%
I would complain about the noise/litter/ blocked road	1%
Don't know	6%

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

Reviewing what we heard, we believe communities are made up of five groups, who we have termed: Creators, Conversationalists, Joiners, Spectators and the Isolated.

Creators are the community leaders and make up about 3% of the population. They take an active role in creating opportunities for social connection, and have strong bonding, bridging and linking relationships in their area. They are the people who initiate local activities or would organise a street party or petition to get a pedestrian crossing on a busy road. Creators were involved in setting up and supporting mutual aid groups in 2020, with some involved in relief efforts at a local authority or town level, not just in their immediate locality. Some creators may stand for public office or take formal roles as charity trustees. In places where bonding, bridging and linking networks are weakest, some councils and civil society organisations have set up projects to identify and support such creators.

"We organised the shopping for older people. Because we had a street party and I'd devised the spreadsheet for that and I'd got everybody's house numbers and names on it.

We have used it to make a WhatsApp group for about 100 houses. And we've all been taking care of each other over these last seven months or so."
(Participant in public group London, October 2020).

"I started a WhatsApp group for my end of the street (around 20 houses invited, and just over half joined) – this has helped us feel more connected with each other."
(Response to open survey).

"I organised a project called Project Athelstan who was crowned in 925 in my town of Kingston upon Thames and first united England. We linked a boxing club here with one in Kingston upon Hull, who visited and trained together and participated in a range of social and cultural experiences. The idea is to twin towns together to help make each other better and enhance social cohesion and personal well-being, eventually through all types of sports and the arts."
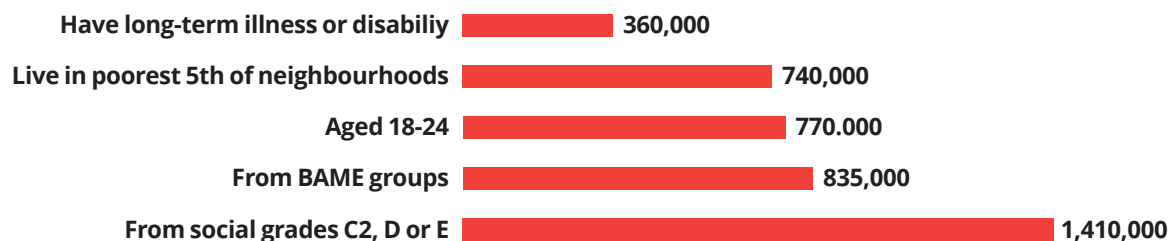(Response to open survey).

Conversationalists take an active role in neighbourhood activities and make up about 7% of the population. They have bonding and bridging relationships in their area, as well as some linking relationships. Conversationalists, for example, will post comments on message boards, volunteer for local organisations and help organise local events. Some might follow the Facebook pages of mutual aid groups. They are active citizens without being leaders. Undoubtedly many more people have taken on 'Conversationalist' roles in 2020, and the challenges are to keep hold of their commitment in future, as well as encouraging Joiners to step up and become Conversationalists.

"I've just tried to help out older neighbours on my street by ringing them, asking if they need anything from the shops and picked up loads of things for my next-door neighbours."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

Figure 6.4: What are the characteristics of the 4 million people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and are interested in volunteering again?

Have long-term illness or disabiliy	360,000
Live in poorest 5th of neighbourhoods	740,000
Aged 18-24	770.000
From BAME groups	835,000
From social grades C2, D or E	1,410,000

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

"Smile and acknowledge whoever you pass on the street, never judge anyone on their appearance, sexuality, colour or beliefs. I volunteer in a centre where we do all of the above and it is the most rewarding place I have ever worked in, we see lives changed, loneliness banished, friendships made, trust built and problems solved, as well as lots of free beverages, biscuits and cakes. Actively love your neighbourhood!"
(Response to open survey).

Joiners make up about 25% of the population. They mostly have bonding relationships in their area. Joiners take part in neighbourhood activities and know many people in the area, although most of the people they know well tend to be of a similar background.

"I have helped three old ladies who have been shielding since March. And to be honest, there's some weeks when I think I could live without it. But once I've done it, and either taken their shopping or done whatever for them, it does give you a sense of goodness."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"I've made friends through the community garden, learned new skills, swapped recipes and received 'free' food I helped to grow."
(Response to open survey).

The community response to COVID-19 has meant that there are now many more Joiners in our communities.

As discussed in Chapter Four, 12.4 million people gave their time in 2020 as informal volunteers helping out neighbours or by offering their time to the NHS or faith and civil society organisations. Of the 12.4 million adults who volunteered in 2020, nearly 4.6 million were new volunteers and 3.8 million are interested in volunteering in future. As Figure 6.4 shows, many of these new volunteers are from social groups who previously were less likely to volunteer, with 770,000 18-24 year-olds and 740,000 people who live in the poorest fifth of neighbourhoods volunteering for the first time in 2020 and interested in volunteering again.

A challenge for policy makers, faith and civil society groups is to keep hold of the commitment of those who offered their time to the relief efforts. We were told how some councils and community organisations were doing this: keeping in touch with volunteers and advertising a variety of roles. At a neighbourhood level, community leaders – Creators and Conversationalists – need to reach out to keep the Joiners involved.

"We worked with the City Council through the pandemic, to mobilise the response to vulnerable people. And we got a huge influx of volunteers coming forward. Most of the people who've never volunteered before, and who were not working and had got time on their hands, wanted to come and help. We are trying very hard to stay in touch with them; we've developed newsletters, we are using LinkedIn and a lot of them are actually continuing with other charities. Going forward

we need to make volunteering more inclusive – that can attract different people to volunteering. We need to match volunteering roles with people's interests and time commitments. We need to make working people, who are busy, understand that the roles don't have to be nine-to-five working at a charity shop."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

Spectators make up about 35% of the population. They have some bonding relationships in their area, usually with their closest neighbours. They are aware of neighbourhood message boards or local activities, but rarely join in. Reticence may prevent people from participating in local activities, and time barriers due to work or caring commitments can also stop people from joining in. If we are to foster more connected and united communities, Spectators need to be encouraged to become Joiners. This will require reaching out to them, keeping them informed and making them feel welcome.

"I like the idea of volunteering. And I probably won't be able to commit to that at the moment because I'm a bit time restricted. But in principle, I would like to give something back when I get that opportunity, even if it's something like my IT skills. I have a neighbour who's a bit cut off now because she doesn't use the internet. Something like that – at the moment I can't do it but maybe in the future."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020).

The isolated make up about 30% of the population. They have few relationships in their local area and do not participate in neighbourhood activities. They may live in a street where few people know each other and there is no tradition of talking to neighbours. There may be fewer shared spaces and opportunities to connect. Others may experience barriers to connection, for example, language barriers, feeling unwelcomed or different, having a disability or time barriers due to work or caring commitments. We heard from a significant number of disabled people

who wanted to take part in community activities but were prevented from doing so because venues were not accessible. If we are to foster more connected and united communities, barriers to connection need to be reduced and civil society leadership needs to encourage people who are isolated to join in with local activities and events.

"I am socially isolated outside of work and the local community programmes run in office hours or are aimed at groups that don't apply to me, so there is nothing for me in the local community."
(Response to open survey).

"I am disabled and socially isolated. My hobby is amateur radio. I rarely speak to people face to face, even less now with this CV19 business! As to parks etc, I just don't feel safe going to them alone now, so stay at home 99% of the time."
(Response to open survey).

"I have no particular desire to feel connected to other people with whom I have nothing in common."
(Response to open survey).

Conclusions

The proportions of Creators, Conversationalists, Joiners, Spectators and the Isolated varies from place to place. In the communities with the highest levels of disconnection, the proportion of Creators, Conversationalists and Joiners is lower. Divided communities may be characterised by fewer Creators and Conversationalists who bridge social divides. If we are to bridge social divides and build a kinder and more connected society, we will need to encourage everyone to step up a rung, or several rungs, on the ladder.
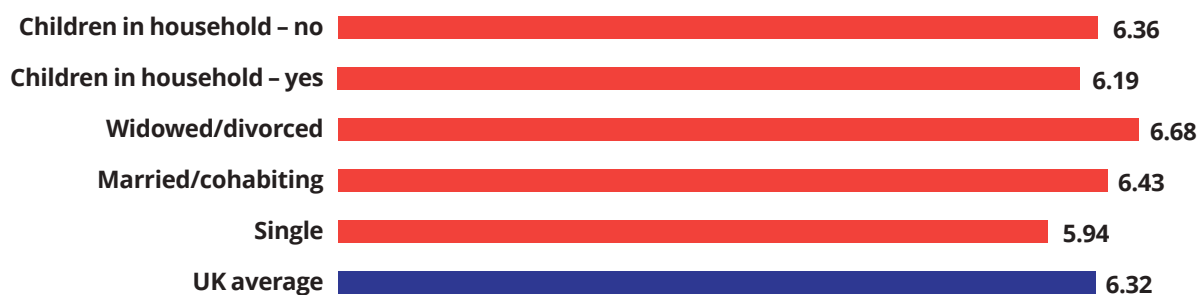
Measuring place-based unity

The nationally representative survey asked respondents to rate – on a 1 to 10 scale – how divided or united they thought the UK is as a nation, as well as their local community (1 being most divided and
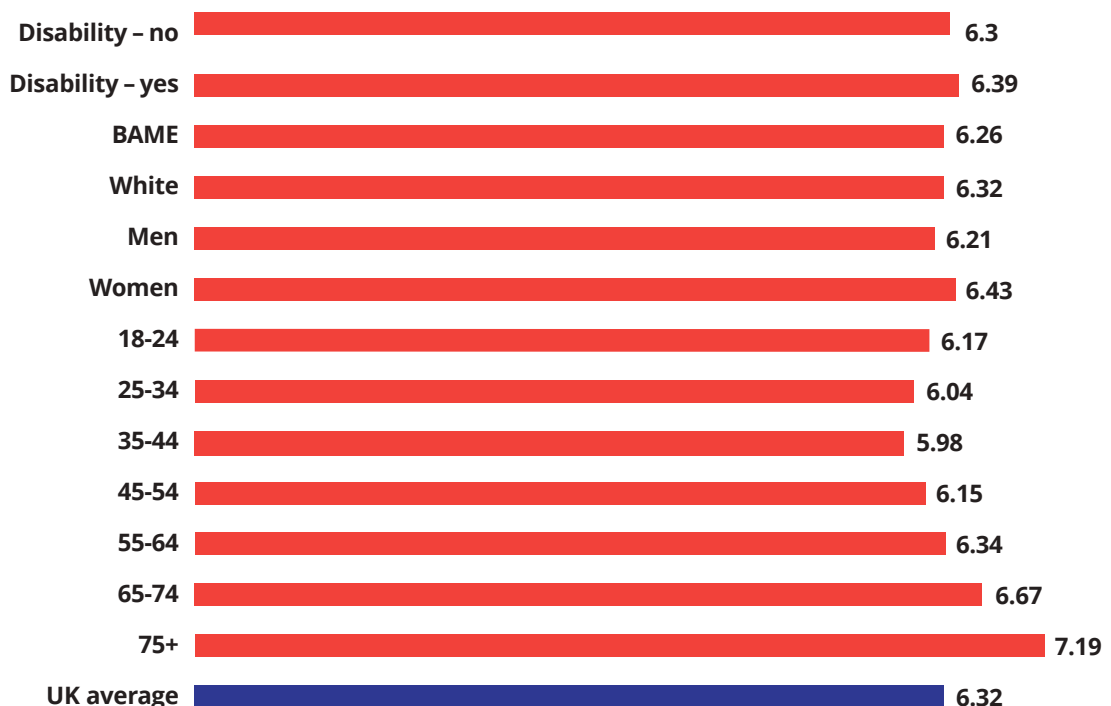
10 being most united). This was used to calculate average (mean) national and local unity-division scores. The score for the UK as a whole is 4.90 (see appendix for breakdown). However, people feel more united at a local level, with the nationally representative survey showing an average local unity-division score of 6.32. But there are differences in the average local unity-division scores. Women (6.43) scored higher than men (6.21) and older people also gave higher local scores, with those aged 75+ scoring 7.19. Mothers and retired people tend to spend more time in their local neighbourhoods, so they may have more opportunities to connect with others .

People who live in Northern Ireland gave the lowest unity-division score for their local community (5.61) with Londoners also scoring low (6.02). People who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods had below-average local unity-division scores while volunteers (6.88) and people for whom faith was important in their lives (6.71) had higher average unity-division scores. Settlement size is also associated with perceptions of local unity or division, with people who live in villages more likely to feel their local community is united, probably because of stronger social bonds.

Figure 6.5: Average (mean) local unity-division scores
Family circumstances

Children in household – no	6.36
Children in household – yes	6.19
Widowed/divorced	6.68
Married/cohabiting	6.43
Single	5.94
UK average	6.32

Figure 6.6: Average (mean) local unity-division scores
Demographics

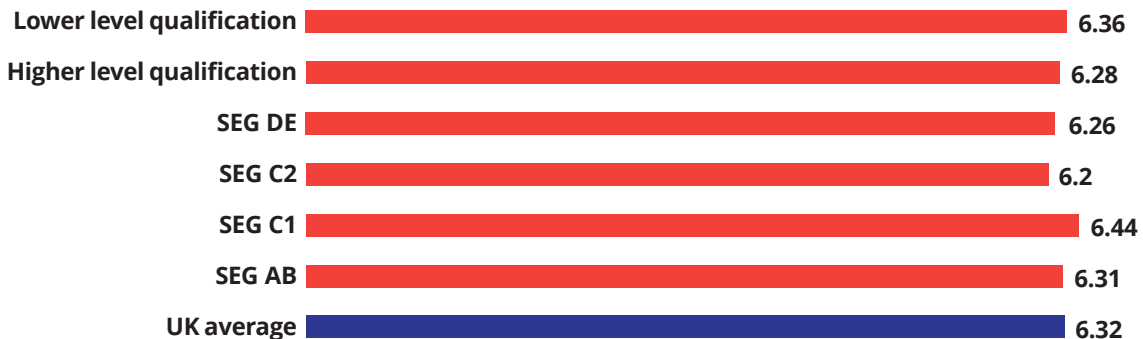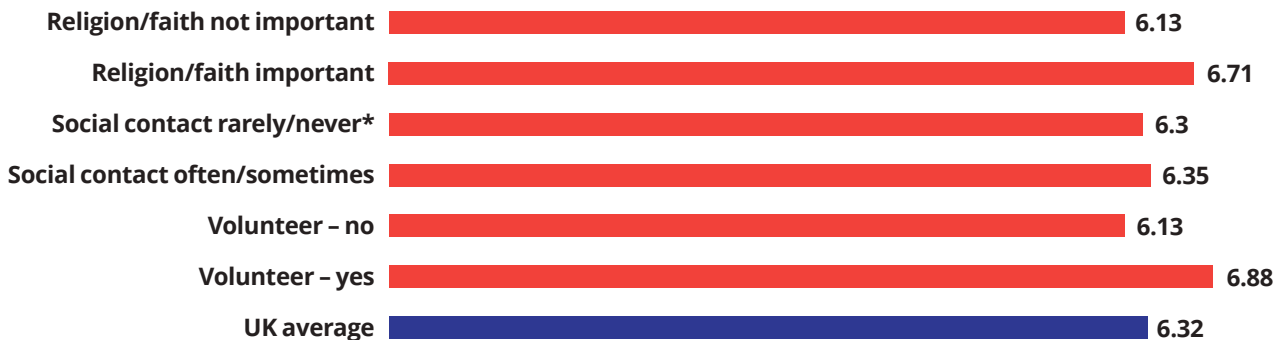|	
Disability – no	6.3
Disability – yes	6.39
BAME	6.26
White	6.32
Men	6.21
Women	6.43
18-24	6.17
25-34	6.04
35-44	5.98
45-54	6.15
55-64	6.34
65-74	6.67
75+	7.19
UK average	6.32

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

Figure 6.7: Average (mean) local unity-division scores
Politics: 2016 EU Referendum vote; General Election 2019 vote; Immigration

	Score
Did not/could not vote EU 2016	5.68
EU 2016 – Remain	6.15
EU 2016 – Leave	6.64
Did not/could not vote GE 2019	5.35
GE 2019 SNP voter	6.74
GE 2019 Lib Dem voter	5.93
GE 2019 Labour voter	6.13
GE 2019 Conservative voter	6.82
Immigration to UK – negative	5.97
Immigration to UK – neutral	6.22
Immigration to UK – positive	6.63
UK average	6.32
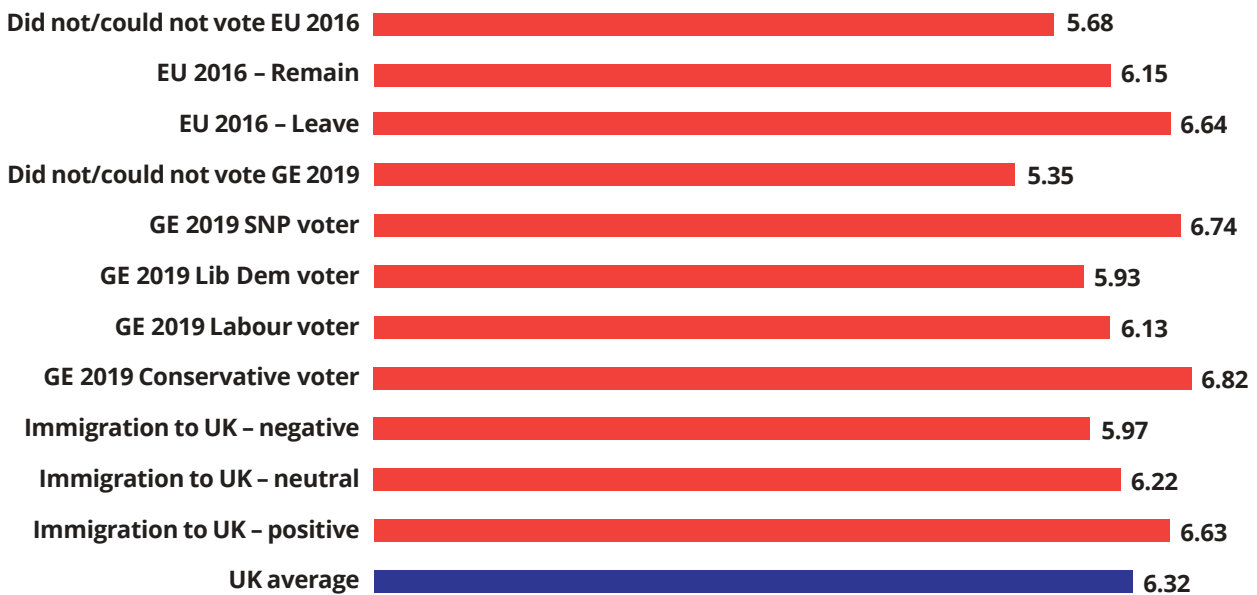
Figure 6.8: Average (mean) local unity-division scores
Education, qualifications and socio-economic grade (SEG)

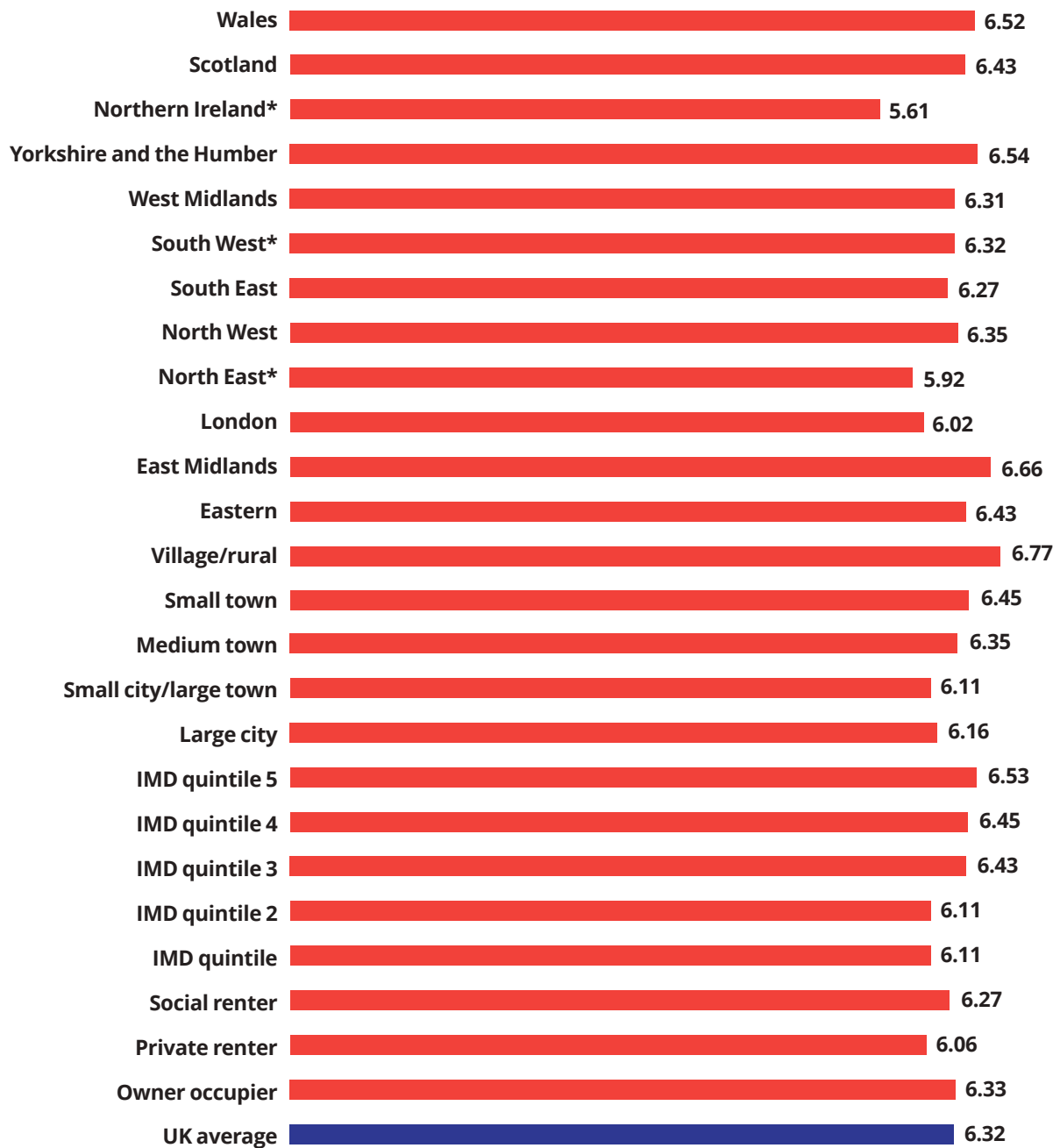|	Score
Lower level qualification	6.36
Higher level qualification	6.28
SEG DE	6.26
SEG C2	6.2
SEG C1	6.44
SEG AB	6.31
UK average	6.32

Figure 6.9: Average (mean) local unity-division scores
Social circumstances: amount of social contact; volunteering; faith

	Score
Religion/faith not important	6.13
Religion/faith important	6.71
Social contact rarely/never*	6.3
Social contact often/sometimes	6.35
Volunteer – no	6.13
Volunteer – yes	6.88
UK average	6.32

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.
* social contact with someone from a different background.

Figure 6.10: Average (mean) local unity-division scores
Where people live, including Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles

Category	Score
Wales	6.52
Scotland	6.43
Northern Ireland*	5.61
Yorkshire and the Humber	6.54
West Midlands	6.31
South West*	6.32
South East	6.27
North West	6.35
North East*	5.92
London	6.02
East Midlands	6.66
Eastern	6.43
Village/rural	6.77
Small town	6.45
Medium town	6.35
Small city/large town	6.11
Large city	6.16
IMD quintile 5	6.53
IMD quintile 4	6.45
IMD quintile 3	6.43
IMD quintile 2	6.11
IMD quintile	6.11
Social renter	6.27
Private renter	6.06
Owner occupier	6.33
UK average	6.32

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.
*small sample size

7
The risk of future divisions

Chapter 7. The risk of future divisions

At the end of 2019, there was a real risk that the fissures exposed or created in 2016 would increase, dividing our society for the long-term. But COVID-19 has changed this trajectory.

As this country emerges from the pandemic, we stand at a crossroads. As a nation we now have a stark choice between two versions of the 'new normal'. We could take no action to address the divisions that characterised society before COVID-19. Alternatively, we could use the newfound community spirit of 2020 to build a society that is confident and successful, as well as kind, connected and fair.

This chapter charts the first road. Drawing from Talk/together evidence, it sets out twelve risks that society faces in 2021 and beyond if we take no action. Some are immediate issues that are already known and being debated, of which the Scottish independence debate has the potential to be a highly divisive inter-group social identity conflict. Others are long-term issues, including what we consider to be one of the biggest challenges ahead: a trajectory towards gradual identity polarisation that entrenches 'us and them' divisions.

A bumpy road out of lockdown

People have mixed expectations about the journey out of lockdown and this could divide people in 2021. A third of people (34%) think that the pandemic will change the way we interact with each other, as we have got used to staying apart and will continue to do so in future. Another third of people (34%) think that COVID-19 will not change the way we interact with each other, because society will return to how it was before the pandemic. A further third (32%) think that because we have missed meeting people during the pandemic, we will want to interact more in future[60]. Such differences of view about the relaxation of social distancing measures were reflected in discussions and suggest that society may become more divided as public health regulations are relaxed.

Some people will think that the process is taking place too quickly, while others become frustrated because restrictions remain in place. Such

differences of views could lead to local tensions, or further reinforce people's perceptions about social groups they believe to be less observant of public health guidance. There is some evidence to suggest that people's views about the easing of lockdown that took place in the summer of 2020 aligned with their political views[61] – so the easing of lockdown could reinforce existing political divisions. Ethnic disparities in the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine could also contribute to tensions and divisions.

"Everybody went a bit mad when we came out of the first lockdown. They wanted to enjoy themselves and social distancing went a bit out the window. You know, the trains were really crowded and people were packed on the beach. And that was when people got a bit more sort of polarised between the people who wanted to follow the rules and the people who kind of thought 'well I've been there, done that, and now I want my summer and my life back'."
(Participant in public discussion, South West, December 2020).

Changes to patterns of workplace inter-group contact

By April 2020 nearly half of us (47%) did some of their work from home, dividing society into those able to work from home and those who could not do so. Those in managerial or professional roles and in sectors such as IT, public administration and financial services were more likely to work from home and enjoyed a renewed connection with their local area. But workplaces and city centres are the spaces where adults meet and mix with people from different backgrounds. Any long-term changes to patterns of working could reduce bridging (inter-group) social contact among some sections of the workforce, an issue that was not lost on some people who took part in the discussions.

"I would have mixed with more people from different backgrounds, because I used to work in an office in the centre of Newcastle. Over

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[60] ICM survey of 2,373 GB adults, December 16-18 2020. [61] Duffy. B. and Allington, D. (2020) *The Trusting, the Dissenting and the Frustrated: how the UK is dividing as lockdown is eased.* London: The Policy Institute Kings College London.

the summer I went back, but I'm at home now, so there isn't the opportunity to mix with new people. Because I'm working from home, I'm more likely just to stick to my own, if that makes sense, my own friends and family and neighbours."

(Participant in public group, North East, November 2020).

The economic impacts of COVID-19

"I think we're going to have a whole generation of people who will repeat the experience of youngsters in the late 70s and early 80s. They never got on the career ladder very quickly, which then meant that they didn't get onto the housing ladder very quickly. Where are the entry level jobs going to be, where's the career progression going to be?"

(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

Over and above all other issues, people were concerned about the future economic impacts of COVID-19, on themselves, their families and their local community. They were worried that unemployment would rise, and that young people would be the group most likely to suffer as a result of an economic downturn. These concerns were felt more acutely outside London and the South East. In the nationally representative surveys we asked people to select which divisions (out of a list of eight) worried them most for the future, with 45% of people selecting 'divisions between rich and poor' (Figure 7.1).

These are real concerns. By October 2020 nearly 600,000 young people, 14.5% of those aged 16-24, were unemployed and looking for work. Unemployment rates were also much higher among minority ethnic groups (22%) and those who previously had insecure work contracts (22%)[62]. Disabled people are another social group who may be at greater risk of unemployment during a recession. With 53% of the accommodation and food services workforce and 48% of the retail and wholesale workforce being female[63], and many of them working part-time, there are risks that an economic downturn could disproportionately affect women. However, gender inequalities were rarely raised as issues of concern in the public and stakeholder discussions, and in the open survey. This may change when the furlough scheme ends and the economic impacts of COVID-19 become apparent.

Figure 7.1 : Looking to the future what divisions in the UK if any worry you most?
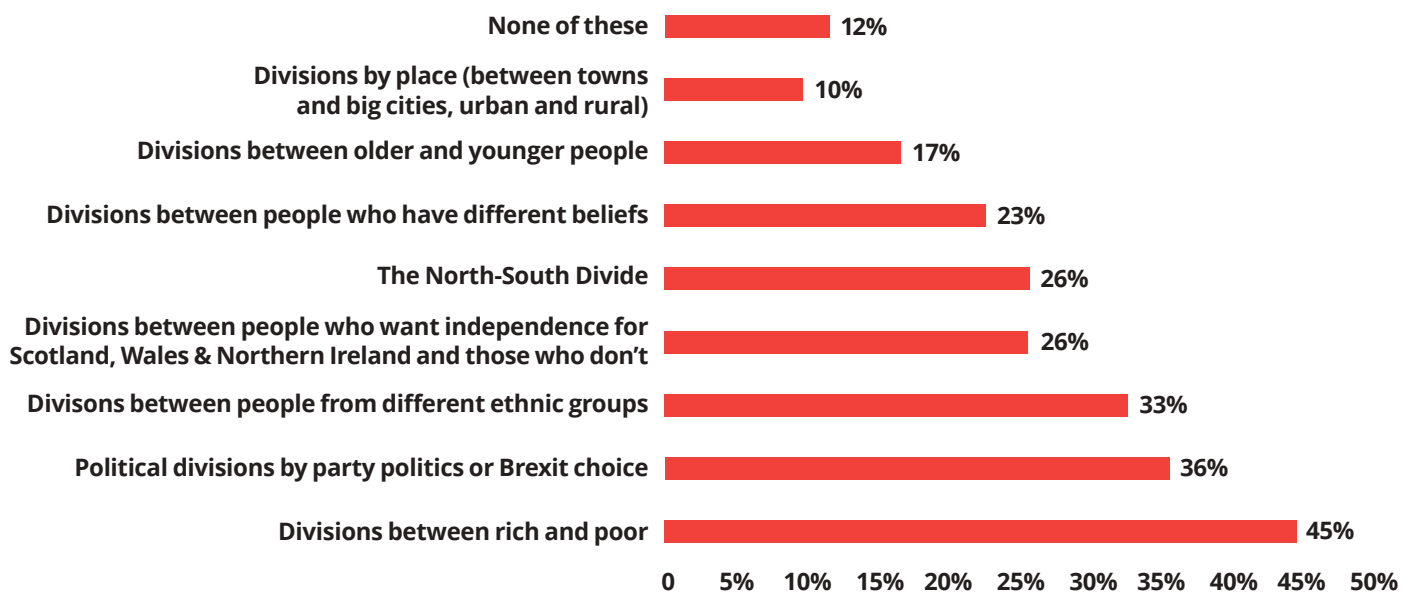
Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

[62] Resolution Foundation model-based calculations, December 2020,   [63] ONS Workforce Jobs by industry Sector data, January 2021.

Poverty places stresses on people and can contribute to the resentment that leads to inter-group conflict. It also limits people's ability to connect with others, making loneliness and social isolation more likely – meeting up with people may require expenditure on travel, entrance fees and food and drink. People were aware of these wider social impacts, raising such concerns in the discussions and in the open survey.

"If you've not got any money, and you can't go out, you are just going to be with like-minded people. I think if you've got money, you can live in a different area, you have the ability to travel, the ability to study, all those kinds of things. You get to meet other cultures, other sorts of people with different values."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"It's hard to be kind when you have no hope or bread. We need excellent schools for everyone, decent housing, good food, public open air swimming pools, access to the countryside and hobbies. Recognition of those people who do normal jobs day in, day out, to keep our community going. Less focus on celebrities. The divide between the haves and the have-nots is so vast now, we need to refocus on what really matters. Education, homes, friends, family, a sense of purpose, a decent welfare state."
(Response to open survey).

Both the discussions and open survey showed people wanted to reduce poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor. There were, however, differences in the priority they attached to this issue and how this should be achieved, with people's party-political affiliations having an impact on their opinions.

Geographic inequalities of wealth and power

As noted in Chapter Five, different lockdown regimes have reinforced public perceptions of economic, social and political divisions and inequalities across the UK's geographies. The perception that policy decisions favour London was widespread across the UK, with people's grievances often focussing on unequal investment in digital and transport infrastructure, or the relative decline of high streets. Crossrail and HS2 were often cited as examples of such inequalities. In every English region – even in the South East – there were perceptions that national policymaking put the interests of the capital above the rest of the UK.

"Everything is London-centric. London counts first, the opinion in London, and forget about the rest of the country. So that is causing a divide, because it is not balanced at all."
(Participant in public group, South East, October 2020).

Antipathy to London-based elites and the Westminster Government were strongly held sentiments among some people. They felt the voices of people who live outside London were not heard. Should the negative economic impacts of COVID-19 be disproportionately experienced by those who live outside London and the South East, this will further exacerbate these divisions. In turn these divisions can lead to increased resentment, a greater reach of populist narratives and heightened in-group identification.

Anti-elitist attitudes can be hard to shift because they appeal to people's emotions. While successive governments have committed to increasing investment outside London, there is a need to show that this is reaching towns and rural areas and not just cities such as Leeds and Manchester, as well as to address inequalities of power and voice across the UK.

"People from ordinary, unprivileged backgrounds having more of a say in how the country is run. Much less control by the elite!"
(Response to open survey).

"Break up the Westminster bubble and the never-ending focus on London."
(Response to open survey).

Scotland's independence debate

Parliamentary elections to be held in May 2021 may chart the path to another referendum on independence. The independence debate has

become more intense over the last year and is proving divisive. Some 60% of respondents from Scotland selected 'divisions between people who want independence and those who do not' as one of one the top three divisions that worried them most, compared with 26% of people across the UK[64]. It is the division that worries people most in Scotland, more so than the division between rich and poor, with 42% of people in Scotland selecting the latter. As can be seen from Figure 7.2, people in Scotland had lower national unity-division scores compared with England, although there was little difference in perceptions about local unity.

Concerns about the break-up of the union appear to split people by social identity groups and by party politics in Scotland and beyond. Some 34% of those who voted Conservative in the 2019 general election selected 'divisions between people who want independence and those who do not' as one of one

the top three divisions that worried them most, compared with 16% of Labour voters, 30% of Liberal Democrats voters and 53% of those who voted for the SNP.

As might be expected, the independence debate was a major theme in the discussions that we held in Scotland. Participants were selected to be representative of the range of public opinion on Scotland's independence. There were people who were strongly pro-independence in all the groups, as well as those who were strong supporters of the Union. There were also people who were undecided or had qualified views. Despite differences of opinion on independence, many people thought that Nicola Sturgeon had performed well in her management of the pandemic. However, some people felt that, as time had gone on, the response to the virus had become too party-political.

Figure 7.2 Thinking about the UK as a whole, on a scale of 1 to 10 how divided or united do you think the UK is at present? (1 = most divided, 10 = most united).
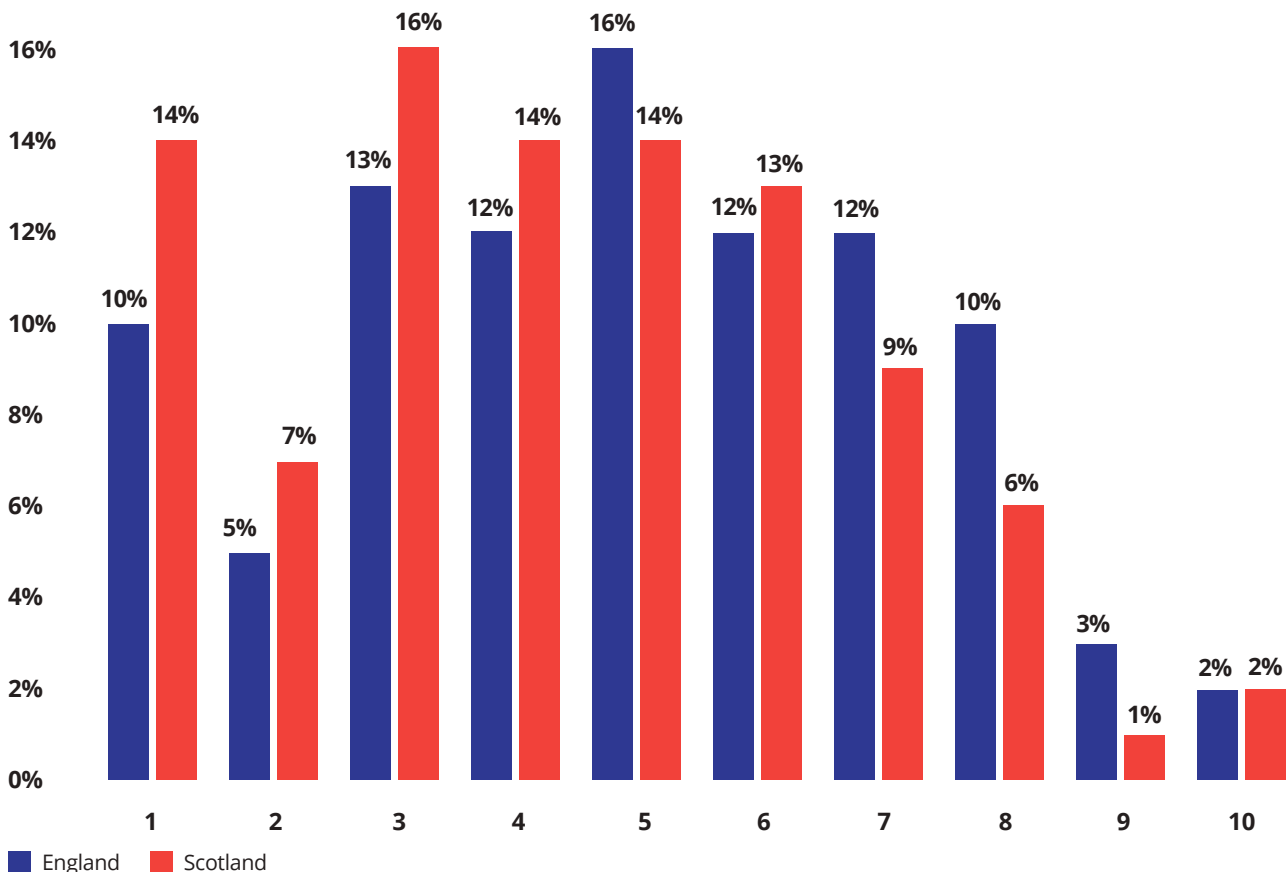
64 Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

In Scotland, the divergence of policy across the UK was often seen through the lens of the independence campaign; those with pro-union views argued for policy convergence, and those who were pro-independence made the case for policy autonomy. There was a debate about the timing of an independence campaign and whether or not to delay it until after the pandemic.

"If we're talking about the UK as a whole, then we're very much divided. I think that the four nations, in terms of what they are doing for COVID, what Scotland is doing, what England is doing, what Wales, what Ireland is doing… We've got different power struggles going on within that. So if it's the UK as a whole, I don't see that we're united at all. But that can also be a good thing because, when it comes to COVID, Scotland is doing better than England at the moment."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

In Scotland, this period has seen a weakening sense of attachment to the UK. The Scots (72%) and the Welsh (77%) had the strongest sense of national belonging, with seven in ten people feeling a sense of belonging in Scotland, compared to 62% of people in England who felt they belonged to England. But 51% of people in Scotland also say they have a sense of belonging to the UK as a whole, although there was a split by party politics. There were also things that united people across the UK as whole, irrespective of people's party politics, particularly support for the NHS, sporting events such as the Olympics, a common language and cultural similarities such as humour.

"I think we all love the NHS. And that's really kind of come home, hasn't it? So, you know, no matter where you are in the UK, you can kind of agree on that."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

We were interested to find out more about Scotland's 2014 independence referendum and its impact on personal relationships and in the wider community.

Some people told us they had been able to have an open discussion about independence, where different opinions were respected. Others had made deliberate decisions not to talk about the independence debate with family, friends or work colleagues. But other participants spoke of a heated social media debate, family disagreements and lost friendships.

"I think there was a lot of interesting conversations in families and among friends. Many, many people had different opinions, but it also brought about a greater interest in politics, among people who hadn't actually looked at politics or thought about it before. There were a lot of good discussions. But when you talk about the media, they came out with ideas that were very divisive. That was a minority, but the majority of people just have normal conversations about it."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"I was fortunate enough that all my friends and family shared the same political views as myself. I think, especially at work, we had to enforce a 'no politics' policy because people were obviously disagreeing with each other and had arguments with friends."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"I remember going out with friends. We had dinner on that night of the referendum and there was a disagreement. And we kind of laughed it off. But there were things that had been said, and I can still remember that it chipped away at the foundation of our friendships."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

Most people's worries about the independence debate focused on the tone and nature of online political discourse. We asked how people could have respectful debates with people who had different views on independence. It was felt that politicians had to take a lead on setting the tone of the campaign, calling out hatred when it came from their own side

Picture: Adam Wilson on Unsplash

and defending opponents who had been attacked. A participant in one of the public discussions had taken part in the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland and she talked about this experience, stating that people had generally been respectful and considerate of each other in these deliberations.

"I've recently been in the Scottish Citizens Assembly. And that's been quite enlightening, just because it was a group of 120 demographically representative people of Scotland. And it was pretty much 50:50 on independence. So that was interesting. We had to write and confirm our behaviour. You know, we were read our instructions and we had to sign to say that we would be respectful."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

In 2014 a number of faith and civil society organisations worked to set up safe spaces for civil political debate. There was a consensus in the stakeholder and public groups that in the current climate there was an urgent need for more of these initiatives that bring people together to talk about independence and the type of country that Scotland wants to become, while respecting different opinions. There was consensus, too, on the need to find ways to be good neighbours should Scotland take the path to independence.

The implications of the Scottish independence debate go further than Scotland. Many participants in Northern Ireland felt that another referendum in Scotland could create pressure for a border poll, which has the potential to be destabilising. In Wales we were told, in the stakeholder and public discussions, that a Scottish referendum could prompt a more heated debate about Welsh independence. As already noted, the independence debate was a theme that was raised in the public discussions in Wales, where two of the three groups contained supporters of the Yes Cymru campaign.

"We are seeing more disagreements between people who want Welsh independence and those who don't. And it's very evident where I live and that is amazing because it's a

Welsh-speaking area. This movement really has gained pace during this period."
(Participant in public group, Wales, December 2020).

In England, we were struck by the number of people who believed that the break-up of the United Kingdom was inevitable. This was a matter of regret for many people, a group that tended to be older, more likely to be Conservative voters, more socially conservative and more emotionally engaged with the notion of the UK as a union. South of the border, some people are also emotionally engaged with the independence debate because they have Scottish family or have lived in Scotland. Others are indifferent and some were supportive of Scottish independence. This latter group tended to be socially liberal and saw Scottish independence as a progressive cause that they believe would help curtail the power of a London-centric UK Government.

"The UK is finished as we know it. Scotland will gain independence, Ireland will be united and the divisions between North and South will then come to the fore. Kingdoms rise and kingdom's fall, we are heading down, and it will be years before things begin to rise."
(Response to open survey, Yorkshire and the Humber).

"I think we'd really be better off in the north of England aligning ourselves up to Scotland and moving away from London."
(Participant in public discussion, North West, December 2020).

Reviewing what we heard, and evidence from other research, we believe that the debate about Scottish independence has the potential to be divisive, in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. People are strongly emotionally invested the campaign and see independence or commitment to the Union as an aspect of their identities and values. In-group and out-group identification is increasing in Scotland. In such a situation it is important that politicians take a lead in setting the tone of the campaign and calling out hatred when it comes from their own side. There is also a real need for more civil society initiatives that provide safe spaces for civil political debate.
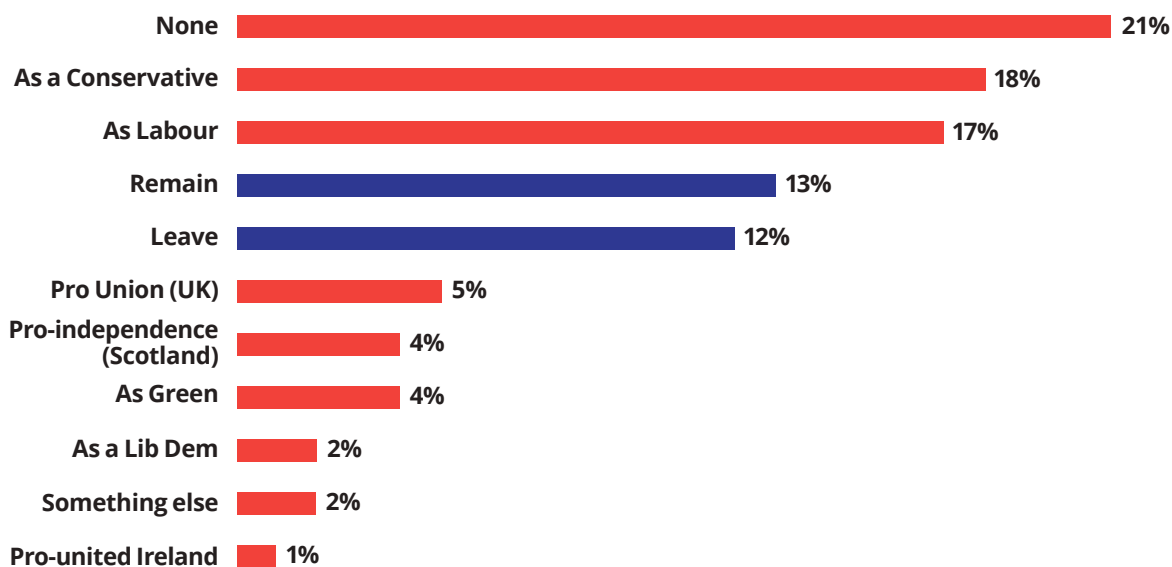
Brexit

As we have set out in the introduction to this report, the UK has seen growing values-based polarisation, with people increasingly identifying as social liberals or social conservatives. Brexit brought this divide to the fore and its result split society fairly equally in half. Nearly five years on, polling shows that most people still hold the same political views as they did in 2016. This is supported by what we heard in the public discussions, where we saw very little evidence of people regretting the choice that they made in 2016. But what we did see in the groups was a weakening of their in-group identification, with attitudes that are more accommodating of different views about the European Union.

The EU referendum campaign was a period in our history when some people were emotionally invested in the campaign and saw membership of the EU or UK sovereignty as an aspect of their identities and values. Many of us saw each other as belonging to clearly defined in-groups or out-groups, identities that were often acquired in the months immediately before or after the 2016 referendum.

We found that Brexit is no longer a divisive inter-group conflict for most people in 2020, though a minority still hold on to political identities framed by their referendum choice. New findings for Talk/together (Figure 7.3) correlate with those of previous studies, including Ford and Sobolewska (2020)[65], Hope not hate (2019)[66] and More in Common (2020)[67], which suggest that about 10-15% of the population are 'Conviction Leavers' who still strongly identify with the Leave campaign and may be anxious that the settlement with the EU does not give the UK its full sovereignty; and another 10-15% are 'Conviction Remainers,' still angry about the conduct of the referendum campaign and its outcome. The primary political identities of Conviction Leavers and Conviction Remainers may often lie with their side of the Brexit debate rather than any political party.

There are still high levels of inter-group conflict between Conviction Leavers and Conviction Remainers, who dislike each other's views and traits, sometimes intensely. The views of Conviction Leavers and Remainers are also the opinions that are most likely to be expressed online, sometimes in ways that

Figure 7.3: How do you primarily identify yourself politically today?

None	21%
As a Conservative	18%
As Labour	17%
Remain	13%
Leave	12%
Pro Union (UK)	5%
Pro-independence (Scotland)	4%
As Green	4%
As a Lib Dem	2%
Something else	2%
Pro-united Ireland	1%

Source: ICM survey of 2,083 UK adults, 27-28 January 2021.

[65] Sobolewska, M. and Ford, R. (2020) Brexitland, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [66] Hope not hate (2018) The new Brexit tribes, London: Hope not hate. [67] Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T. and Kimaram, A. (2020) Britain's choice: common ground and division in 2020s Britain, London: More in Common.

are overtly prejudiced or unpleasant. Such inter-group conflict could also be seen in some responses to the open survey, with comments such as *"Brexit voters of a certain IQ"* and *"Islingtonian Remoaners,"* submitted by a minority of respondents. Comments such as these have an impact on the tone and nature of political discourse and can give the impression that we are a deeply divided society.

However, most people – we believe around 75% of the population – are no longer so emotionally invested in Brexit. In-group identification has ceased to be as strong and the boundaries between in-group and out-group are no longer so demarcated. Other concerns, such as COVID-19 and the economy, have displaced Brexit as a focus of their attention. Some of this 75% group are optimistic about what the future holds, others are ambivalent or more pessimistic, but all have ceased to see Brexit as the most important issue facing this country and believe that the political debate has to move on. This middle 75% encompasses Leave and Remain voters, social liberals and social conservatives, who have different views on identity conflicts but few that are extreme.

In this middle group, people's political concerns and identities now relate more to their UK party politics, rather than Brexit. When we asked with which political party or cause people identified, some 53% of people stated that their primary political identity lay with party politics, for example as a Conservative or Labour supporter, with another 21% of people having no strong political identity (Figure 7.3)[68]. This is a significant change in public opinion, as research undertaken in 2018 and 2019 suggested that Leave or Remain identities were more important to many people than the left-right divides of party politics[69].

There are some geographic differences, with 17% of people living in the East and West Midlands still giving 'Leave' as their primary political identity, compared to 12% of people across the UK. Some 20% of people living in London, 18% of those living in the South East, and 22% of people living in Northern Ireland still cite 'Remain' as their primary political identity, compared with 13% of people across the UK[70]. Although a majority of people in Scotland (62%) voted Remain in 2016, just 11% of people now give

'Remain' as their primary political identity, probably because the independence debate is now a much more salient issue.

People from all three Brexit segments – Conviction Leavers, Conviction Remainers and the majority middle – took part in Talk/together's public discussions. Although Brexit was a theme in all the public discussions held between May 2020 and January 2021, it became a more salient issue during November 2020, when the UK-EU trade negotiations featured more prominently in the news. Brexit was also a more prominent theme in the discussions we held in Northern Ireland, with people fearful about its economic impact and that the Irish border might become a flashpoint for violence.

Some Remain supporters were concerned that the end of free movement would make it more difficult for employers to recruit staff, citing difficulties faced by the health and social care sector. However, immigration generally was not the focus of discussions about Brexit, reflecting the overall fall in salience of immigration as an issue of public concern[71]. Rather, the debate about Brexit tended to focus on the economic impacts of leaving the EU, on sovereignty and the image that the UK projects to the outside world.

Those who had voted Remain in 2016 were usually more vocal in the discussions than those who voted Leave. Occasionally, there were robust differences of opinion between Conviction Leavers and Conviction Remainers, but generally the tone of the discussion was calm, with people able to give their views without provoking arguments. Looking back on these discussions we concluded that it is possible to talk about Brexit with someone who has strongly held convictions that are different to your own, but these more constructive conversations mostly take place face-to-face.

Among the middle segment, Brexit divisions were described in the past tense, as something that had divided us, rather than something that continues to do so. There was a consensus that politics and society needed to move on from the inter-group conflict that the EU referendum vote had caused.

[68] ICM survey of 2,083 UK adults 27-28 January 2021. [69] Evans, G and Schaffner, F. (2019) 'Brexit identity vs party identity' in Brexit and public opinion, London: UK in a Changing Europe. [70] Ibid. [71] Katwala, S., Rutter, J., Ballinger, S., Duffy, B. and Hewlett, K (2020) *The Reset Moment: immigration in the new parliament,* London: British Future and Kings College London Policy Institute.

*"I think that a lot of people have been very angry in the UK for all sorts of different reasons, including Brexit. And I think it's going to be a bit of a process for people to go through and come out the other side.
And then it's like, we all experience different things, grief, anger, frustration, it's always a process of working through whatever is going on with the feelings you have, before you can come to acceptance and move on. And I think, as a nation, we need to go through this."*
(Leave supporter and participant in a public discussion, East of England, October 2020).

Brexit will continue to be a divisive topic online, but our prediction is that this particular inter-group identity conflict will receive less prominence in the next few years. UK society is likely to go through a process of reconciliation. It is more likely that inter-group identity conflicts will focus on other issues, such as debates about free speech, race and empire, displacing Brexit as a highly salient issue that polarises society.

Immigration and integration

Until recently, Europe and immigration were the two issues that divided people by their social identities. From the late 1990s until 2017 immigration rarely fell out of the top five issues of public concern in surveys such as the Ipsos MORI monthly issues tracker. People's anxieties initially centred on refugee protection, as the number of asylum applicants reached a peak in 2003. After 2004, migration from the EU became a focus of public concern, particularly local social and economic impacts of migration from the EU and the perceived failures of local integration.

People's views on immigration often played a decisive role in their voting behaviour in the EU referendum. However, those views are also often more nuanced than the referendum result and a highly polarised online debate might suggest. Opinions expressed on social media largely represent those of 'migration rejectionists' – who want to end or severely reduce migration – and 'migration liberals', a group that considers migration

to be largely positive. The opinions of the silent majority, or 'balancer middle,' who comprise about 60% of the population, are much less likely to be represented online. This is a group of people that sees the pressures and gains of migration and generally supports the principle of refugee protection. They want those who come to the UK to make a contribution to society and want migration to be controlled; but they also want migrants and refugees to be treated compassionately and fairly. For many people, local integration also frames how they see immigration. Where people have meaningful social contact with migrants and refugees, they base their views on these local experiences rather than media debate[72].

Since 2017, immigration has been a much less salient issue in the UK[73]. The attention of the media has been focused on Brexit and more recently on COVID-19. Many people believe that, now the UK has left the EU, the country will be better able to control its borders. A more open debate about immigration since 2016 has made more people aware of the contribution of migrant workers. It is also 15 years since the citizens of eastern European countries started arriving in the UK. In these intervening years, as migrant workers have settled down and learned English, people have got to know their new neighbours.

"I grew up in an area which was very mixed in north west London. The integration took place over time, it was progressive. I don't think there's a magic wand that you can wave to make integration happen. It just takes place over time. Eastern Europeans and the children of Eastern Europeans will be just like me. They will sound English and be English to all intents and purposes, like a black person or an Asian person before them."
(Participant in public group, East Midlands, November 2020).

That immigration is less of an issue of concern was reflected in the open survey and in the public discussions, where immigration was only raised as one of a number of issues. In a few of the public

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[72] Rutter, J. and Carter, R. (2018) National Conversation on Immigration Final Report, London: British Future and Hope not hate.
[73] Katwala, S., Rutter, J., Ballinger, S., Duffy, B. and Hewlett, K (2020) The Reset Moment: immigration in the new parliament, London: British Future and Kings College London Policy Institute

groups it was not mentioned at all. Where people did discuss immigration, it was largely related to concerns about integration, and sometimes to refugees who were crossing the English channel.

"Having seen the issues with integration locally in Thanet (Cliftonville in particular), I feel that people that are placed here (refugees) or who have moved to the country, should have help and support to learn about British culture. British people should also be encouraged to find out about different cultures. The hotels and single rooms in Cliftonville have been used as mass dumping grounds for displaced people. It's not fair on them to be put all together in an already deprived area. It creates an 'us and them' effect and, over the years, I have seen little to support communities to blend. I just so wish everyone could get along."
(Response to open survey).

But attitudes can change back and there are risks that immigration could again become an issue of concern. We believe that a scenario where the numbers of people crossing the English Channel increases and these new arrivals do not integrate into their new communities could result in immigration again becoming a highly salient issue of public concern that divides society.

It was clear in some of the Talk/together discussions how perceptions of the successes or failures of local integration impact on people's views of immigration. The UK's multi-ethnic society, comprising citizens of many faiths and none, is in many places an integration success story. Yet some people who took part in the public and expert stakeholders discussions felt that there was not enough leadership and local action to support the integration of migrants and refugees. We heard of missed opportunities – for example to involve local residents in citizenship ceremonies, a gesture that brings people together and tells a story of welcome and, from the perspective of migrants, their commitment to their new country.

"Do what Australia did when its population was 45% migrant. It recognised each group yet
tried to integrate them and had a national festival like Australia Day. Making citizenship easier here would help integration. Free English lessons are imperative."
(Response to open survey).

We also heard about language barriers that prevented people from getting to know their neighbours. An estimated 900,000 people speak little or no English. In addition we were told about residential segregation, community tensions, hate crime and extremism, all of which prevent different groups of people from trusting each other.

"I'm from inner-city Bradford and our city is divided on racial lines and ethnic lines depending on where you live. So, you have inner-city Bradford which is majority Asian, Muslim, you have the outskirts which tend to be white, you have the new Slovak community coming in and there's tensions between the Asian community and the Slovak community. Any sort of integration was done away years ago in terms of where the populations are. You have, right from when you are young, monocultural schools – so my local schools are 100% Asian. You go to the outskirts and it's 100% white. I know that there is more that unites us than divides us, but with that sort of division it does breed suspicion."
(British Asian participant in cross-UK discussion, May 2020).

Immigration risks again becoming an issue that divides us if we do not give sufficient attention to integration. This will require governments in all four nations of the UK to have strategies to support the integration of migrants and refugees, and a long-term commitment to deliver on their proposals. It will require that integration is seen as an 'everybody' issue, rather than something that is narrowly framed as being about migrants and minorities and their relationship to the host community. Integration strategies should also promote meaningful social contact between people from different backgrounds, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to learn or improve their English, addressing hate crime and creating a culture of hospitality.

A new landscape of inter-group social identity conflicts

Alongside immigration, we risk a broader range of 'culture war' issues receiving prominence and dividing people on the basis of their social identities. Many of these issues were raised by some respondents to the open survey, with dominant themes being identity, race and empire, immigration, free speech/political correctness and perceptions about the independence of the media, particularly the BBC. The terms 'woke', 'wokeness' and 'wokery' were mentioned in 661 responses to the open survey, with 'Mail' and 'Daily Mail' mentioned in 180 responses. People's views in the public discussions were more nuanced and considered than some of the more polarised views expressed in the open survey.

In the previous chapter we have described how debates about race and empire divided people in 2020. Looking forward, they are likely to remain salient and to divide people in 2021 and beyond. We argue in Chapter Five that there is a middle group of public opinion that supports action to address racism and discrimination but has concerns about the ideology and tactics of the Black Lives Matter movement. This middle group could fracture if they are obliged to take sides on issues associated with race and empire, such as a decision to remove a statue. Another situation that may lead to polarisation is if action to address racism and race inequalities is not seen within a broader framework of improving everyone's life chances. It is important to maintain the broadest-possible coalition in opposition to racism and prejudice, and we were told in some of the public and stakeholder discussions that narratives of competing grievance risk dividing society.

"We need to stress our common humanity. I think a lot of people who want to combat racism have gone down the rabbit hole of getting involved in identity politics, in a way that those who really want to divide society must be clapping their hands and laughing about. I think it's understandable that a lot of groups will want to support this group of

disadvantaged people, or that group of disadvantaged people, and so on. But it looks like some people are only interested in one group of disadvantaged people. If you want to talk about human rights, we need to go back to thinking about the universality of human rights. And explain clearly that if you support asylum seekers' rights, that is not at the expense of other people's rights."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, North East, November 2020).

Making sure that race and class disparities are both addressed will reduce the potential for social class to become an inter-group identity conflict as a well as an economic divider. Responses to the Talk/together open survey showed that narratives about social class also have the potential to divide people according to their social identities. While people were very concerned about poverty and the division between rich and poor, the term 'class' was rarely mentioned in most of the public discussions. Only in the North East, in one of the groups in Yorkshire and the Humber and in Northern Ireland, was social class discussed at any length. We probed this in some of the public discussions, with the responses to questions usually focusing on poverty and concerns about unemployment, or the desire for more social mixing across social classes.

Narratives about class in the open survey were different to those in the discussions. 'Class', as a term, was mentioned in 340 of the responses to the survey, with a much larger number of responses describing class divisions without using the term 'class'. In the survey, class was used in four different contexts:

• Comments about 'the ruling class', usually submitted by people who had populist or left-wing sympathies.

• Appeals for more mixing across social classes.

• Appeals for equality of opportunity and action to reduce poverty.

• Views that the political opinions, behaviours and cultural forms of working-class people were not valued in a society dominated by the views and values of a

socially liberal middle class. This was the dominant narrative associated with class in the open survey.

The public discussion groups mixed people by their social grades. In such mixed groups, people may have held back from talking about the social and cultural aspects of class. Nevertheless, substantial numbers of people in the UK believe that their views and values, as working class people, make them second-class citizens, suggesting a risk that social class may become part of the new landscape of social identity conflicts.

"We need more positive news stories. Focus on business. When did anyone say anything positive about factories or their staff, or farm workers or game keepers? It is the same about people who never took A-levels but are nevertheless successful. You are really made to feel a second-class, unworthy person every day on Radio 4, and the BBC constantly talking about universities which I am not against, but there is unequal coverage of the other 50%. I would like positive coverage of the wider sectors not just celebrities, arts, cookery. Those who work in engineering are often looked down upon by the media."
(Response to open survey).

"There are still some regional/county divides between the few who remain with a regional accent (ie in my area a few people who would still count themselves as 'Norfolk' people). Same is true of Cockneys (another cultural entity that is more or less obliterated) and quite a number of other regional or county accents and shared cultures. Those that remain are pretty miserable and feel that they have been culturally and socially sidelined as being not of any interest to the politically correct intelligentsia in the South East. They also tend to be sidelined in jobs and careers for having an accent and being seen as 'backward'."
(Response to open survey).

Free speech versus 'cancel culture' and 'political correctness' is another salient issue that has the

potential to divide and polarise people in future. Again, we were struck by the more nuanced tone of the public discussions compared with some of the responses to the open survey which, as seen below, often characterised a complex debate as being problematic solely because of the views of those with whom they disagreed. People want to defend free speech and believe that political correctness sometimes goes to far, but they are also worried about online hatred. However, there is little space to have these discussions other than on social media. As a consequence there is little societal consensus about the boundaries between free speech and hatred and intimidation. This issue looks likely to divide people in 2021 and beyond.

Responses to the open survey question 'What are the divisions that worry you most?'

"The cultural and ideological divide between a woke, largely metropolitan mindset (often prevalent in policy makers, the media and 'opinion formers') and the traditional values and cultures that prevail in large tracts of UK."

"We need a period of calm after six years of binary debate (from the Scottish independence referendum, to Brexit, to Corbyn's anti-semitism, to the rows over transgender issues etc). There is no ground now for sensible, respected disagreement. We are all forced to move to the binary extremes."

"Make the Daily Mail, Daily Express and Telegraph illegal as they thrive on propagating their little-England Brexit agenda which encourages so much divisive thinking."

Other social identity conflicts, such as transgender rights and the #MeToo movement, received far less prominence among the responses to the open survey and in the public discussions. We asked people's views about transgender rights in the public discussions held in Scotland in November 2020, in the week when J.K. Rowling's comments were the subject of much debate on social media. No-one in any of the three discussions was aware of the controversy surrounding Rowling's comments. This does not diminish the importance of this issue,

but it may indicate that the scale of coverage of transgender rights debates on social media is not reflective of offline public discourse.

Broken politics

"You see the Houses of Parliament and the absolute raucous behaviour that goes on there. They're all yelling at each other, these fully grown adults. And it's just an absolute zoo in the House of Parliament, like the top base where all these top officials are making decisions about the country and they behave like animals. You have the kids who are watching this and they don't learn how to have healthy constructive debates. It looks like absolute chaos."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, October 2020).

We started every online discussion by asking everyone to tell us what is dividing society. Two subjects were mentioned by almost everyone: COVID-19 and politics. As soon as we got deeper into the discussion, it was largely not that differences over policy were seen as divisive, rather a deep-felt dissatisfaction about the way that we do politics.

As described in Chapter Five, perceptions about politicians' responses to the pandemic appear to have dented political trust and support. A waning of cross-party unity in the face of adversity, the Cummings affair, concerns about a lack of transparency, perceptions about nepotism or the favouring of London and failures to deliver sufficient tests and protective equipment are factors that reduced political trust.

"Politicians, when they say something, they should really make sure that what they promise they do, instead of just lies all the time. I think just be honest and tell the truth."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

In November 2020 when we asked whose response to the COVID-19 pandemic had impressed and whose had disappointed, just 24% of people said that they were impressed by the response of the UK Government and 17% were impressed by MPs, compared with 80% who were impressed by the NHS[74]. We note that public approval of the roll-out of the UK vaccination programme, which began in December 2020, is significantly higher than approval of the government's overall handling of the pandemic[75].

Discussion about politicians' response to the pandemic led to a broader debate about the nature of politics. Two-thirds (64%) of people said politicians are untrustworthy because they are motivated by self-interest and only 19% said they understand the needs of ordinary people. There was a strong desire for a less adversarial, less aggressive type of politics and greater cross-party co-operation in relation to issues of national interest. Some 83% of people said that they wanted politicians from different parties to work together to solve this country's problems. Just 4% disagreed[76].

"Politicians and the media should be less aggressive and divisive and ready to blame and point the finger at the opposition. It is OK for leaders to change their mind on the basis of new information or a different circumstance without being accused of a U-turn."
(Response to open survey).

"Cooperative projects in politics, for example in dealing with COVID. Leaders setting good examples."
(Response to open survey)

Many people who took part in the discussions, or who responded to the open survey, felt that media coverage of political debate exacerbated divisions.

"I don't think the media ever take responsibility for bringing people together. It's their job to create divisions that sell newspapers, so they are out to divide. That's one of the reasons that I've tried to ignore the media as much as possible."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

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[74] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults undertaken between 13 and 16 November 2020 [75] https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/01/21/what-do-britons-think-governments-handling-covid-1 [76] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults undertaken between 16 and 19 December 2020.

"Remind people that we might not be in the same boat but we're all in the same sea! We need social media, news articles and TV programmes about good news stories where people come together despite differences in backgrounds, beliefs or views. More time and money should to be spent promoting these stories, as now a lot of time and money is spent sharing stories that divide us."
(Response to open survey).

We did meet and hear from individuals and organisations that have worked hard to change the way we do politics. We have included some case studies of such projects in the regional and national profiles in the appendix. But we are concerned about levels of anger, as well as cynicism and a lack of confidence that the political system can change for the better. These sentiments lead to falling levels of political trust and electoral turnout. Young people and those on low incomes are less likely to trust politicians and political institutions or vote in elections[77]. Levels of political trust vary from place to place across the UK and tend to be lower in Northern Ireland and in the North East, again reflected in electoral turnout.

Restoring political trust is crucial if the UK is to heal its divides, as confidence in our politicians, parties and government acts as a vital glue, uniting citizens around a shared confidence in our democratic system.

Social media

"I think one of the things that's been seen over the last year is an increase in what I call tribalism, in the sense that people have found, through social media or particular sources of news or opinion that they share, they find a group that they know shares the same view. So they'll happily discuss things with them, but it tends to reinforce those views. And there's not so much interaction with people who might differ."
(Participant in public group, Wales, December 2020).

Over the last year, social media has been a lifeline to those forced to isolate during successive lockdowns,

and has also aided the coordination of relief. But we found that public perceptions are balanced with strongly held views that social media is also divisive and can exacerbate loneliness and isolation. The role of social media in dividing society or bringing people together was a dominant theme in all of the public and stakeholder discussions and was also raised by many people who responded to the open survey. Some 55% of people agreed that social media drives us apart more than it brings us together, a view held fairly consistently among all sections of society. The impact of social media on the tone and nature of political discourse, its role in spreading divisive 'fake news' and as a driver of identity polarisation, coupled with a lack of consensus about regulation, means that social media will continue to divide us in the future.

Social media also lays claim to people's time and commitment over other face-to-face and communal activities[78]. Fake news – whether shared deliberately or inadvertently – has become an increasingly salient issue throughout the pandemic and we have previously discussed concerns about the reach of conspiracy theories, most of which rely on social media for their dissemination. It was clear from the discussions that many people frequently encounter fake news through social media and a few people expressed agreement with stories that were clearly untrue. Participants' typical reaction was to ignore or block those who posted such stories, but not to alert others to the content, or to report the article to the social media platform.

"Get a grip on the seriously harmful and prejudiced 'social networking' sites. They are full of biased or fake news and comments from the morally impaired and vehicles for the most cowardly kind of criticism and invective against those who have no way of replying. Make the service providers responsible for the content of their offerings."
(Response to open survey).

For some, anxieties over the prevalence of fake news on their feed had dented their trust in the broader media landscape. They no longer felt sure of which information sources to trust on their feed, and so

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[77] John Smith Centre (2020) The Age Gap: Young People and Trust, Glasgow: John Smith Centre. [78] Ibid.

were increasingly likely to feel that news from all media outlets was untrustworthy.

Social media has also changed the tone and nature of political discourse. The character limitations of Twitter do not allow for nuance. There was widespread awareness that people behave differently when protected by online anonymity compared to face-to-face interaction, expressed through incivility, trolling and harassment. This in turn discourages people from engaging in political debate, leading to those with the loudest and most polarising voices dominating political discourse[79]. A significant number of people who took part in the discussions told us that disrespectful or hateful comments on their own social media feeds had led to them leaving platforms such as Twitter and Facebook or disengaging from any political debate.

"We have two separate narratives that don't really work together. You know, we have a lot of 'be kind'. Yet people seem to really go from nought to 100 on social media, there's no listening. There's no kind of time before it just becomes very, very angry and anguished which only leads to problems. I tend to avoid any kind of local commentary whatsoever and getting involved in anything like that, because it just takes one wrong word and immediately it switches into something quite abusive, especially at the moment when people are in lockdown."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

Online political debate is also dominated by relatively few voices[80]. Those with stronger views at either end of the spectrum are most likely to share their opinions, which are reinforced though the 'echo chamber' effect [81]. Algorithms also play a role in mediating our interaction on social media, with news feeds becoming individualised, matching social media users with the content they are most likely to find engaging, be that commercial or political. Those with socially liberal or socially conservative views tend to follow people with similar opinions and are fed stories that align with their values. Undoubtedly

this has increased identity polarisation. Yet other than through the school curriculum there is little consensus as to how policy makers – and society – should respond to this trend. In particular there is little societal consensus about the boundaries between free speech and intimidation.

"If there is one thing that saddens me it's that, as a society, we are becoming less tolerant of each other's viewpoints. I believe we need to get back to a situation where neither person gets to bully another. The best way to do this is to educate young people to listen to others and consider what they say, to not judge but challenge in a polite respectful way, not simply shout the other person down. If we can do this our society will be kinder, more open and progressive."
(Response to open survey).

Hatred and extremism

Many people are anxious about growing extremism. People who took part in Talk/together discussions or responded to the open survey believed that extremism divides society. The narratives used by extremists normalise intolerance to out-groups such as Jews and Muslims, as well as inciting hate crime and violence. The messages used by hateful extremists – Far Right, Far Left, nationalist, Islamist and other forms of religious extremism – damage trust between different groups of people and lead to disconnection and inter-group divisions in communities. Hateful extremism undermines our democracy and our shared values such as free speech.

"The ethnic and religious divides need action on both sides – I do feel some people are more interested in remaining separate instead of integrating. The pandemic has helped bridge these gaps, with people helping each other, but we are also seeing greater extremism."
(Response to open survey).

In 2020 we have seen the increased reach of conspiracy theories, some of which are associated

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[79] Lewandowsky, S. and Smillie, L. (2020) *Technology and Democracy,* Brussels, European Commission. [80] Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T. and Kimaram, A. (2020) *Britain's choice: common ground and division in 2020s Britain,* London: More in Common. [81] Krasodomski-Jones. A (2017) *Talking to ourselves? Political debate online and the echo chamber effect,* London: Demos.

with the pandemic, but many of which use anti-establishment and anti-minority narratives. Such conspiracy theories are not specific to any one ideology, but are used by the Far Right, Far Left, Islamists and other extremists to further their aims. Hateful extremists have used the pandemic to engage in disinformation and fake news about minority groups, which has been spread by their sympathisers to incite hatred, justify violence and to divide communities.

COVID-19 has provided a fertile breeding ground for extremist ideas to spread. The scale of extremist content online is great. Online engagement with a COVID-19 conspiracy theory can result in more of this content being fed to someone through the algorithms used to individualise newsfeeds on platforms such as Facebook. People are also spending more time online, increasing their exposure to such content. Polarising narratives used by extremists have particular appeal to those who feel they have little control over their lives and have little trust of our democratic institutions.

"We are seeing young people kind of sucked into the far-right narratives, partly because they're at home on their computers all the time. They're hearing the same things and it's not being countered by anything they're hearing at school or from their friends, not having those contacts as much."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

Extremists of all ideological persuasions are already capitalising on the economic impacts of COVID-19 to spread their messages and create mistrust in the UK. In the medium and long-term, low political trust, a low sense of agency, poverty and economic inequalities, highly salient inter-group identity conflicts on issues such as free speech, race and faith, all provide the conditions that allow extremist narratives and organisations to flourish.

We also remain concerned about the prevalence of anti-Muslim prejudice in the UK, which is most widespread in areas where the local population has little direct, indirect or contextual contact with Muslims.

A small number of people who responded to the open survey did express overtly prejudiced or hateful views about Muslims. This prejudice increases the appeal of extremist narratives, leads to hate crime, breeds mistrust and divides communities. The police, councils and civil society organisations must make sure that their anti-prejudice strategies reach the people they need to target, not just an activist audience that already condemns hate crime. Strategies to contain and reduce hate crime need to reach the broad majority of people so as to strengthen social norms about decent behaviour. Strategies to reduce and contain hate crime also need to reach those at risk of supporting extremist organisations or supporting the narratives that they use, to contain and isolate the most extreme.

"I think there are very different challenges on race when you're trying to mobilise your support, or when you're trying to get to the absolute other end and contain something very dangerous. Reaching the middle is different from both of those things."
Participant in stakeholder discussion on race, January 2021).

Gradual identity polarisation

With fewer career opportunities in towns and rural areas, we risk further age- and place-based identity polarisation, as younger people, often more socially liberal, move to the biggest cities for education and for work. Our work and social lives are also structured by generation, so the movement of younger people to bigger cities and away from the countryside and towns risks increasing the age segregation we see in society. Identity polarisation could be further widened if the two main political parties cease to represent people with a diverse range of social identities. In such a situation the middle ground is hollowed out and we become an increasingly polarised society. Among some of the open survey responses and in some of the discussions that we held outside London, there was an appreciation of the risk of such gradual identity polarisation by the public and stakeholders alike.

"I think we are polarised – between city and country and rural. When I'm visiting in Lancashire the views I hear when I speak to people back home are vastly different from the views of people I work with in Birmingham. I think social media has played a huge part in this through the echo chamber, polarisation where you only hear views of people who agree with you."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

We were also surprised about the extent to which members of the public talk about polarisation and 'culture wars', terms that we did not expect to be part of their everyday lexicon. While identity polarisation was evident in some of the replies to the online survey, we did not expect people to self-identify as social liberals or social conservatives to the extent that they did in some of the discussions and in the survey.

"I think there's a lot of underlying divisions on many aspects, which divide people into progressives or conservatives. It's there with race relations in that way, or to deal with environmental matters, or to deal with income distribution in a more equitable way or a more conservative way. I think that the polarisation of politics, which we've seen on the other side of the Atlantic, is waiting to happen here."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

There is a risk that our society is on a trajectory towards gradual identity polarisation, driven by:

- Spatial disconnection, where social liberals and social conservatives are decreasingly likely to live and work with each other.

- Political realignment, where our main political parties cease to represent people with a diverse range of social identities. Such a situation incentivises politicians to use narratives or enact policies that appeal to their base, further dividing society.

- High-salience, binary identity conflicts that require a person to be 'for' or 'against' an issue.

- The 'echo chamber' effect and the algorithmic personalisation of social media news feeds.

We are still a society where two thirds of people (64%) agree that despite differences in our views and backgrounds most people have a lot in common. Just 12% of adults disagree with this statement, although 18-24 year olds (22%) and those with the most negative views on immigration (25%)[82] are more likely to disagree[83].

Britain is not the United States, with society split into two polarised camps between which there is little contact or understanding. Most people in the UK can still find some common ground with those with whom they disagree, even if social media debates might look rather different to the real world. But that is no excuse for complacency: with the above trends unchecked, the space for such common ground is reduced and society could increasingly split into 'us and them' identity tribes. We believe that this is one of the greatest long-term risks, if we choose to take no action to bridge social divides and build a kinder and more connected society.

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[82] Those who score 1-3 in the survey question 'on a scale of 1 to 10 has immigration had a negative or positive impact on the UK including your local community (1 = most negative, 10 = most positive). [83] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

Picture: The Big Lunch

8

Beyond us and them: the road to a more united society

Chapter 8. Beyond us and them: the road to a more united society

Talk/together has found that we are a society that is both connected and united, as well as disconnected and divided. The pandemic has brought people together, sometimes across community divides. In 2020, new relationships have been forged and four million people who volunteered for the first time want to volunteer again. Yet at the same time COVID-19 has divided us in new ways and has highlighted existing inequalities, fissures and isolation in our communities.

As society emerges from the pandemic, we have a choice. We may choose to do nothing. This will mean that the disconnection and divisions that we have previously described will persist. The inequalities and inter-group identity conflicts that have characterised recent years will reassert themselves as we take the road to an increasingly divided society where loneliness is endemic.

But there is a different route: one that uses the community spirit and unity of 2020 as a foundation to build a society that is confident and successful, as well as kind, connected and fair. This chapter looks at people's visions for the future and how we might proceed along this second, more positive, route – using the legacy of 2020 to build a kinder and more connected society.

Visions for the future

This is the direction that most people want us to take, even if they are not confident that it is how we will proceed. In almost every discussion we were told that the pandemic was an opportunity to rethink what we value and to change society for the better.

"We could take this as a chance to rebuild ourselves. We should make positives out of something that's been so negative."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

"It would be nice, when things get better, if communities continue to be helping each other as much as they can, like this year. I hope this will happen, but I am not sure."
(Participant in public discussion, East of England, October 2020).

Some 73% people said that they would like our society to be closer and more connected in future. But not everyone is certain that this will happen. A third of people (34%) think COVID-19 will not change the way we interact with each other because things will go back to how they were before the pandemic. More optimistically, another third of people (32%) believe that COVID-19 will change how we connect with each other because we have missed face-to-face interaction in 2020 and will want to do more of it in future.

The survey's findings were reflected in our discussions. The COVID-19 crisis has forced some of us to change the ways in which we interact with each other; and it may make many people re-evaluate how they relate to others in the longer term. We were told of a society where significant divisions exist and where there is an appetite for that to change – but we also found uncertainly as to whether this will happen. People want the volunteering effort to continue but struggle to see how this will be achieved in practice, now people are returning to work. We found that there is a public appetite to see society come together across our divides, but a lack of confidence in politicians to address rather than aggravate these differences.

The desire to use the positives that came out of 2020 to build a better future was voiced by some of those who responded to the open survey. We asked people who took part in the public discussions to describe how they would like society to be in future (Figure 8.3). These ideals varied, as we would expect, but there were some common themes in the open survey and discussions. Most people wanted a society that is less divided. Many people also want a society that is:

- Kind and caring.
- Connected.
- Tolerant and respectful of difference.
- Fair and equal.
- Confident, prosperous, successful and forward-looking.
- Open, honest and transparent.

The pandemic has caused some to reassess their lifestyles and what is important to them. Some people want a society that places greater worth on non-material relationships and experiences. There was also a desire for less stigma to be attached to

mental ill-health. Fairness was another central theme, with a desire for a society that affords greater value to the contribution of low- and medium-skilled key workers. People wanted society to be confident, prosperous and successful. With the discussions also focussing on the tone of political discourse and the performance of the Government, there was a strong desire to do politics differently.

"The pandemic has proved that people want to help each other. Let's provide more simple, easy and happy ways to support our communities in future. I love to bake for my local charities and miss that so much at the current time. It isn't the money you spend in these activities, it is the time, effort and thought which helps to bring people together."
(Response to open survey).

"I don't think we'll ever be the same again. I think it's a time to reflect on everybody in society and their worth, and that sometimes it should be us who are reaching out to people. I think that it could be a good time to capitalise on people's good natures, as in normal times we're all too reticent and insular."
(Participant in over-70s discussion group, May 2020).

"There's definitely a chance for a reset for the country. We've all mentioned jobs being lost – I think it's definitely a chance to reset there. Those jobs need to be replaced and we need to get back to innovating and making things. And I think we just need to become a bit kinder. I think that before COVID, we were quite angry. And I just think we need to have a sort of reset on that as well, we just need to be a bit kinder to ourselves."
(Participant in public group, West Midlands, November 2020).

What will bring us together?

A path to a more connected society needs action to address many of the trends outlined in Chapter Seven. Talk/together participants told us that this requires:
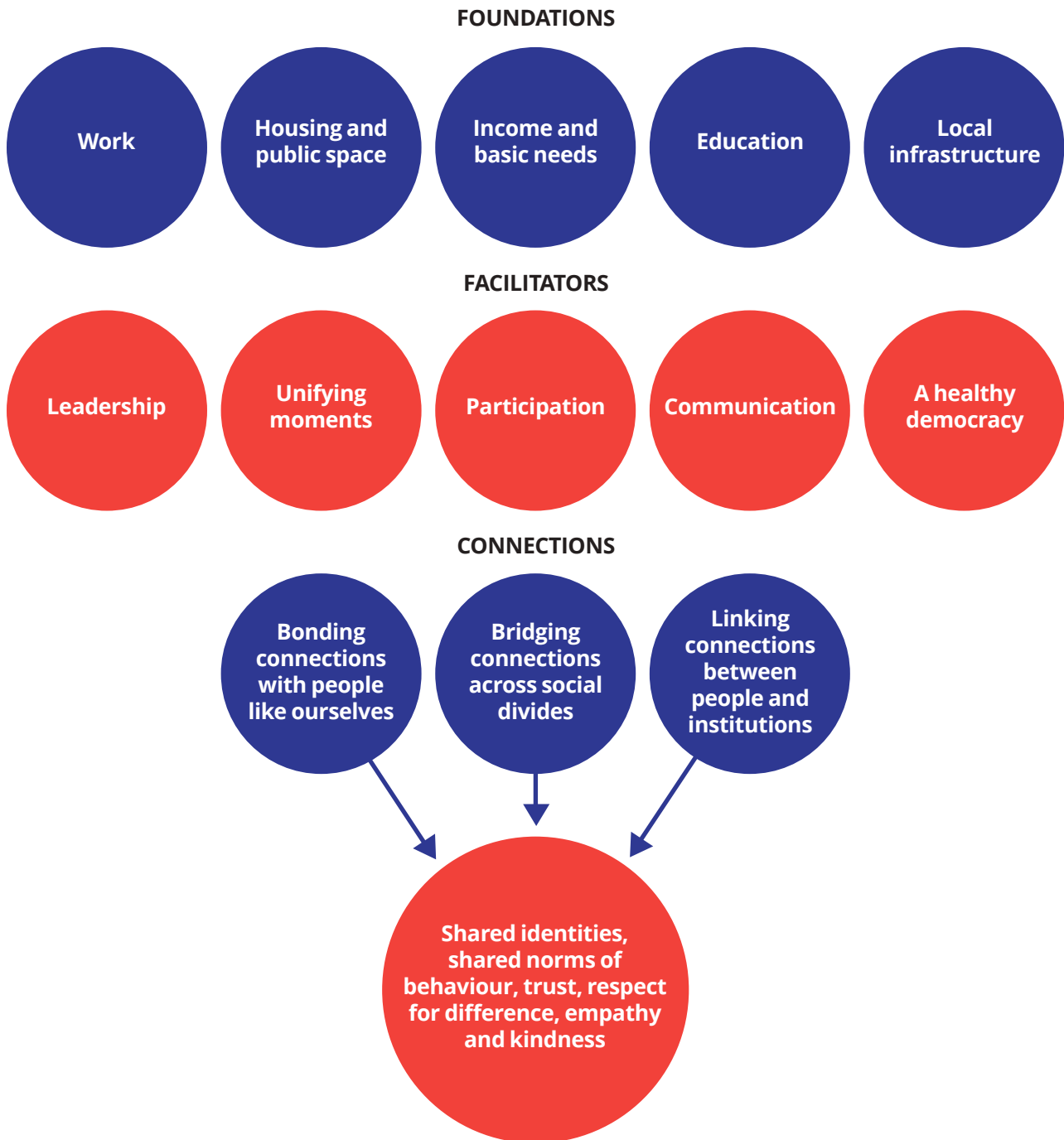
- Action to improve everyone's life chances, irrespective of their backgrounds.

- Thriving local and regional economies in all parts of the UK.

- Increasing the levels of bonding, bridging and linking social contact, so as to build greater empathy, trust and shared 'more in common' identities.

- Increased participation in activities that bring people together.

- More communities where people of all backgrounds feel welcome, safe and secure.

- A stronger societal consensus on the boundaries between free speech and intimidation.

- Greater public participation in political and civic life by voting, campaigning, taking part in consultations and political debate.

Over the last nine months, we have heard from many thousands of people: members of the public as well as experts in their fields. In the discussions and through the open survey, people have made hundreds of suggestions for policy change and practical action that would help secure these changes. Building on the ideas discussed in Chapters Four and Seven, we have drawn these proposals together in a framework for bringing the country together. This involves putting the right foundations in place and making sure that facilitators are present in all of our communities. These foundations and facilitators enable us to form more of the bonding, bridging and linking social connections that bring us together and help break down rigid 'us and them' identification. They help us to develop shared identities, shared norms of behaviour, trust, respect for difference, empathy and kindness (Figure 8.1).

Foundation: work

"I think people forget the role of business as a vehicle to talk to large parts of the community. Where you've got a workforce of 500 people, that's a lot of people and a lot of impact. We've had a four-year relationship with one charity and have achieved so much more in those four years. And I think the staff

Figure 8.1: Model of foundations, facilitators and connections

FOUNDATIONS

- Work
- Housing and public space
- Income and basic needs
- Education
- Local infrastructure

FACILITATORS

- Leadership
- Unifying moments
- Participation
- Communication
- A healthy democracy

CONNECTIONS

- Bonding connections with people like ourselves
- Bridging connections across social divides
- Linking connections between people and institutions

↓

Shared identities, shared norms of behaviour, trust, respect for difference, empathy and kindness

probably got more out of it than with a 'charity of the year' that continually changes. It does open up people's eyes to issues like poverty and disability."
(Participant in stakeholder meeting on the role of business in fostering socially connected communities, December 2020).

Workplaces are also one of the most important places where adults mix and meet with people from different backgrounds to themselves. Workplaces are often more diverse than other places where we interact with others, such as neighbourhoods; they can break the natural tendency to mix with others similar to ourselves; and because we need to cooperate with colleagues on shared projects, they offer meaningful opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds. But the type of work that people do and workplace practices also impact on social connection, as does the role that employers play in their local communities.

As already noted, we are concerned about growing levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, those from minority ethnic communities and among those living in places such as the North East and Northern Ireland, where unemployment was already high. Action to address unemployment is a core foundation of a connected society.

The type of work that people do impacts on their levels of social contact with others. Many administrative and technical jobs, or those in hospitality and social care, involve meaningful social contact with other workers, customers or service users. However, food processing, packing and distribution and logistics are industrial sectors that lack such social contact. This cannot be changed. But some things could be addressed, including:

• Recruitment practices to help make sure that a workforce has broadly the same demographic profile as the area in which the business is based.

• A culture of welcome and induction for staff who are new to the area.

• Ending practices that hinder social connection, for example the unnecessary use of agency staff[84], or organising shifts by linguistic group in factories that employ large numbers of migrant workers.

• The provision of pleasant and hospitable breakout areas and canteens. Some 32% of people agreed that their lunch-breaks were times when they mixed or interacted with people from different backgrounds to themselves. Staff social clubs are another opportunity for social mixing; these are typically initiated and run by employees, but usually with the support of the employers.

• Employers' support for workplace-based English language, literacy or digital skills training, for example by encouraging staff to attend and providing teaching space.

• Opportunities for staff to become involved in their local communities.

We saw thousands of local businesses taking part in the relief effort described in Chapter Four, with many of them encouraging staff to volunteer. It is hoped that this commitment will continue into 2020 and beyond.

While conducting Talk/together we learned of many examples of employers who have taken an active role in supporting social connection through the above activities. We have included some of these examples in the regional and national summaries in the appendix of this report. Those who have been involved in such work may well reap benefits, for example in the recruitment and retention of staff, workforce motivation and productivity and customer loyalty. Some 63% of people said that they were impressed with local businesses' response to the pandemic[85], with this approval likely to translate into greater commitments to 'shop local' in the future. Despite the important role that employers can play in encouraging social connection, there has been little national debate about the business case for social connection. There is a clear need to involve employers more in this conversation.

"With work, family commitments plus an older and older retirement age, businesses should be compensated and encouraged to let staff of all ages have some time off so they can commit to volunteering."
(Response to open survey).

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[84] Taylor, M. (2017) Good Work: the Taylor review of Modern Work Practices, London: The Stationery Office. [85] ICM survey of 2,013 GB adults, 13-16 November 2020.

Foundation: basic needs

People's basic income and housing needs must be met, as poverty and poor housing place stresses on people and can contribute to the resentment that leads to inter-group conflict. People who live in poor-quality rental accommodation are less likely to put down roots in their neighbourhoods or feel they have a stake in their local communities. Poverty also limits people's ability to connect with others, making loneliness and social isolation more likely: meeting up with people may require expenditure on refreshments, entrance fees and travel. As discussed in the previous chapter, Talk/together's discussions and open survey showed a strong public desire to reduce poverty and the gap between the rich and poor, although there were differences of opinion about how this should be achieved.

"Make sure everyone feels secure. People who feel secure, have their basic needs met, and don't feel threatened tend to be more open, kinder, willing to help."
(Response to open survey).

Foundation: Public space and housing

"Houses all face inwards these days, back gardens are large, enclosed and exclusive. You need to build homes that are outward facing where you can see and greet neighbours. We also need far more community spaces for people to meet up but it appears these types of places are disappearing or being turned into commercialised spaces for profit, not community."
(Response to open survey).

The places where people live and the features of the built and natural environment in our neighbourhoods have a major impact on social connectivity.

Some 56% of adults[86] speak to their neighbours at least once a week, so the people we live close to impact on the bridging social connections that we need in order to build trust and empathy across

social divides. There has been a heated debate about residential segregation in the UK, dominated by concerns about faith and ethnic divides. Yet the biggest divide in housing is created by differences in income and wealth[87]. This would not matter so much if schools and workplaces were mixed by faith and ethnicity, but in many cases residential segregation further compounds segregation in education and employment.

Understanding why these patterns of residential segregation arise is key to building a more connected society. Both income and the supply of housing determine where people live. We heard how important it was for new housing developments to comprise a mix of tenures and always to include affordable accommodation. The migrants and minority ethnic groups who cluster together tend to be those who rely on other members of their ethnic or national group for work or housing. The answer to this type of segregation is to lessen the dependency of new migrants on their peers by promoting English language skills and integration.

"I would make sure there is a mix of high-end properties and affordable homes, so that you get a mix of t society coming together in a locality. I think what's happening now is that when you have a lot of new developments there is a desire to build the more expensive houses. And then obviously you get more affluent people living there and the less affluent are driven away. I think that's what's causing the divide and a lot of the problems in society."
(Participant in public group, East of England, October 2020).

The characteristics of our housing and surrounding environment also impact on social connection. There is a strong body of research that shows that certain features can encourage social connection:

• 'Gentle' density: terraced housing, or flats that are no more than seven stories high, with access to private garden space and public space[88].

• Access to greenery: front gardens, street trees and greenery, attractive public squares and pocket parks

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86 ICM Survey of 2,373 GB adults, 16-18 December 2020. 87 Dorling, D. (2014) 'Class Segregation' in Lloyd, C., Shuttleworth, I. And Wong, D. *Social-Spatial Segregation: Concepts, Processes and Outcomes,* Bristol: Policy Press. 88 See for example, Create Streets (2020) *Terraced Friendships*, London: Create Streets.

encourage more neighbourliness and connectivity than a large park far from home.

- Mixed-use high streets that are attractive and characterful, providing a sense of pride and belonging.

- Services and retail outlets within a 15-minute walk to reduce our dependency on cars.

- Features that promote the inclusion of disabled people, in housing design but also in the layout of the built environment, for example the positioning of parking and street furniture[89].

- Mixed-use community facilities, for example a library that functions as a meeting and co-working space or which offers after-school childcare[90]. These facilities can be community owned and managed, with increasing numbers of community land trusts in the UK. These are membership organisations that manage land and property on behalf of a local community, while renovating and providing affordable housing, community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets[91].

People mix and meet in places that are beautiful and secure. As noted in Chapter Six, we found that the public instinctively knows what features of the built and natural environment support connectivity, for example local green space and attractive high streets. However, people did not believe that large development companies prioritised these features. Many people are worried about the decline of their local high street. We were also told about planning disputes that pitted in-groups and out-groups against each other, such as the conflict between nimbyism and the need to build more affordable housing. Many people were also worried that COVID-19 would lead to further decline in our high streets, with a real risk that many places would lose the cafes and pubs where people meet up and socialise.

More positively, we heard from members of the public who had become involved in the work to improve the quality of their local environment. We heard from people who had taken part in neighbourhood clean ups; who were involved in schemes to restore derelict land; or who were active in tenants' and residents' organisations. We heard

about the resolution of a planning dispute about a new affordable housing development, where the involvement of local people through extensive consultation and a citizens' assembly had led to agreement to proceed with the development. One participant in a discussion that we held in the North East talked about his involvement in a community land trust. Here a group made up of local residents were about to take ownership of some empty properties in an area of decline, with the intention of renovating them for rent, while providing training to build skills for young people.

"We have set up a community land trust and we haven't had big grants to do that. We're about to refurbish five houses with the money we've raised ourselves, purely through local community efforts. We might be actually letting these houses at a decent and affordable rent sometime in the middle of next year and the lead for this came from the community itself, in an area which has a lot of disadvantage."
(Participant in stakeholder group, North East).

Housing and high streets are high-priority policy areas for government in all four nations of the UK, all of which have ambitious targets for housebuilding. It is likely that there will be changes to planning legislation in England after the publication of a white paper in 2020[92]. In future, local authorities will be encouraged to draw up design codes that will set the rules for new developments. The use of design codes dates back hundreds of years – to the Rebuilding of London Acts of 1667 and 1670 – and in the more recent past the public has sometimes been involved in their production, or the production of neighbourhood plans of which design codes may form a component. Today the desire to increase the use of design codes is an opportunity to design social connection into new housing and to involve the public in the process.

Housing associations and social landlords can also play an important role in supporting connection. As noted above, new housing can be designed so that it encourages social connection. This is taking place

[89] House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2017) *Building for Equality: Disability and the Built Environment,* London: UK Parliament. [90] Gehl, J. (2010) Cities for People, Washington DC: Island Press. [91] Rosenberg, J. (2021) Trusting Communities, London: Create Streets. [92] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (2020) *Planning for the Future,* London: MHCLG.

and the greater use of design codes will encourage more housing associations to do so. Many housing associations recognise that people are more likely to be responsible tenants and residents if they feel part of and responsible for their local communities. These organisations encourage people to become involved in tenants' and residents' associations, often working with these groups to put on events such as Big Lunches or family fun days. Some of the larger housing associations also run programmes to support the social inclusion of their tenants, including work to encourage volunteering.

The Future High Streets Fund is providing £831 million to fund the recovery of 72 high streets. This comes on top of the Future Towns Fund, covering 100 English towns. This money can be used to improve transport into town centres or convert empty retail units into new homes and workplaces. There are similar schemes in Scotland and Wales. Some community land trusts have taken over empty retail space, turning it into community hubs, or co-working or pop-up retail space. While many would argue that funding is insufficient and that the Government has not addressed the question of business rates for high street retailers, the future of high streets is a high priority for government in the wake of the pandemic.

"Secure, affordable housing is needed, including to rent as well as to buy. People could build a stable life within their community, instead of the current setup that sees many people forced away from family, support networks and communities. People can't commit to their community and neighbourhood, including volunteering, because they're not allowed housing stability and so are forced into transient lives with little connection to where they live."
(Response to open survey).

Foundation: local infrastructure

We also need to be able to connect with people outside our immediate neighbourhoods. Digital and transport infrastructure both enable such

connectivity. As noted in Chapter Five, COVID-19 has highlighted primary and secondary digital exclusion, including among the large numbers of households where people are forced to share laptops or tablets, or do not possess them at all. While progress towards universal internet coverage is improving, Ofcom data from 2019 found that 11% of rural households still do not receive the 10Mbps internet service deemed to be the bare minimum to cover a modern family's digital needs[93]. Unequal digital access was an issue raised in the open survey and in the discussion groups that drew people from rural areas, reinforcing 'us and them' identities and views that rural and town communities are being left behind by a London-centric government.

"As soon as you get west of Wrexham things drop off. My friend who is in farming, his phone signal and the internet is bad, and he is only five minutes from a village and a main thoroughfare, but the signal isn't there."
(Participant in public group, Wales, December 2020).

We believe that transport infrastructure also makes a difference to social connection, in terms of whom we see as 'us' and 'them'. People meet and talk to others on public transport. We were told about initiatives such as 'Chatty Buses' where volunteers encourage people to talk to each other while traveling. Without adequate public transport people's ability to visit other areas is also limited.

In a few of the discussions people talked about areas that had poor transport links and were "cut off", "insular" or felt unwelcoming to outsiders. Research has also looked at the impact of transport links on patterns of in-group identification, for example in the writing of the anthropologist Sandra Wallman about 'open' and 'closed' communities[94] . Features of open communities include good transport links in and out of the area, a mixed economy and high levels of linking and bridging social networks. In contrast, closed communities are characterised by poor transport links, reliance on one particular industry and weaker bridging and linking networks. In closed communities, Wallman found that in-group identification was much stronger than in open communities, which tended to have more fluid and inclusive understandings of 'us' and 'them'.

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[93] House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2019) *An update on rural connectivity*, London: UK Parliament.
[94] Wallman, S. (2011) *The capability of places: methods for modelling the community response to intrusion and change*, London: Pluto Press.

"The internet and social media have together put us in little bubbles, and with the reliance on private transport our bubble covers more of our lives than ever. Two things are needed: to give people a reason to mix, and a means to do it. This means places to mix, and the transport infrastructure available to do it. How is a city-dweller with no car supposed to visit a rural village?"
(Response to open survey).

Foundation: education and youth organisations

"In terms of education, integrated education is important. But it's not just about bringing kids together from different backgrounds. It's also about tackling issues head on, and actually talking about difficult issues, which is something that's not necessarily happened in society to a very large degree. So obviously, integrated education isn't just one thing that we believe should happen as part of the reconciliation process. You need to have people engaging, respectfully, and then you're likely to build relationships."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

The education and youth sectors are in a strong position to increase social connection. Schools and youth organisations can be places where children form friendships across ethnic, faith and class divides, equipping them for life in a diverse and complex society.

Children also learn about the shared values that underpin society: what it means to be a citizen, democracy, our political institutions, respect for others and civil political debate. This process can reinforce the values and norms of wider society; and what children learn in school can influence their parents.

Furthermore, schools and colleges can act as hubs that bring people together and strengthen communities. Local residents may use a school's

facilities, such as gyms, playing fields, meeting rooms or performance space. As well teaching children, schools may also provide or host services that are used by the local community, such as youth clubs, out-of-school care, family support services and adult education.

Many people see schools and youth organisations as social connection success stories, a view that was articulated in the survey and the discussions with the public and experts alike. Parents sometimes told us that children from different backgrounds generally got on well in their local school. They also talked about their children's schoolwork and extra-curricular activities, explaining how this prepared them for life in a diverse society. But there was a strong desire for schools to do more to foster greater connectedness. In the open survey, we asked everyone in their own words to tell us what they thought would help bring people together and build a kinder, closer country. Some 61,879 people replied to this open field question. When we analysed the survey responses to understand the themes they were raising, some of the most common suggestions for policy change or practical action were those that related to young people, schools and education.

"We need decent amounts of time in all schools for personal, social and environmental education that includes action in the community. Involving parents in this at appropriate times would further improve the benefits."
(Response to open survey).

The desire for schools to do more to encourage children to mix with those from different backgrounds was a theme raised in many of the discussions and in the open survey. In the nationally representative survey we asked people to select three policy changes (from a list of seven) that would most help bring people together. Increasing children's contact with those from different backgrounds was the most popular policy suggestion, with 57% of respondents ranking this in their top three choices (Figure 8.2). That figure rose to 69% in Northern Ireland, where education is divided by tradition: most children attend either Roman Catholic or 'Controlled' Schools, with just 7% of pupils attending integrated
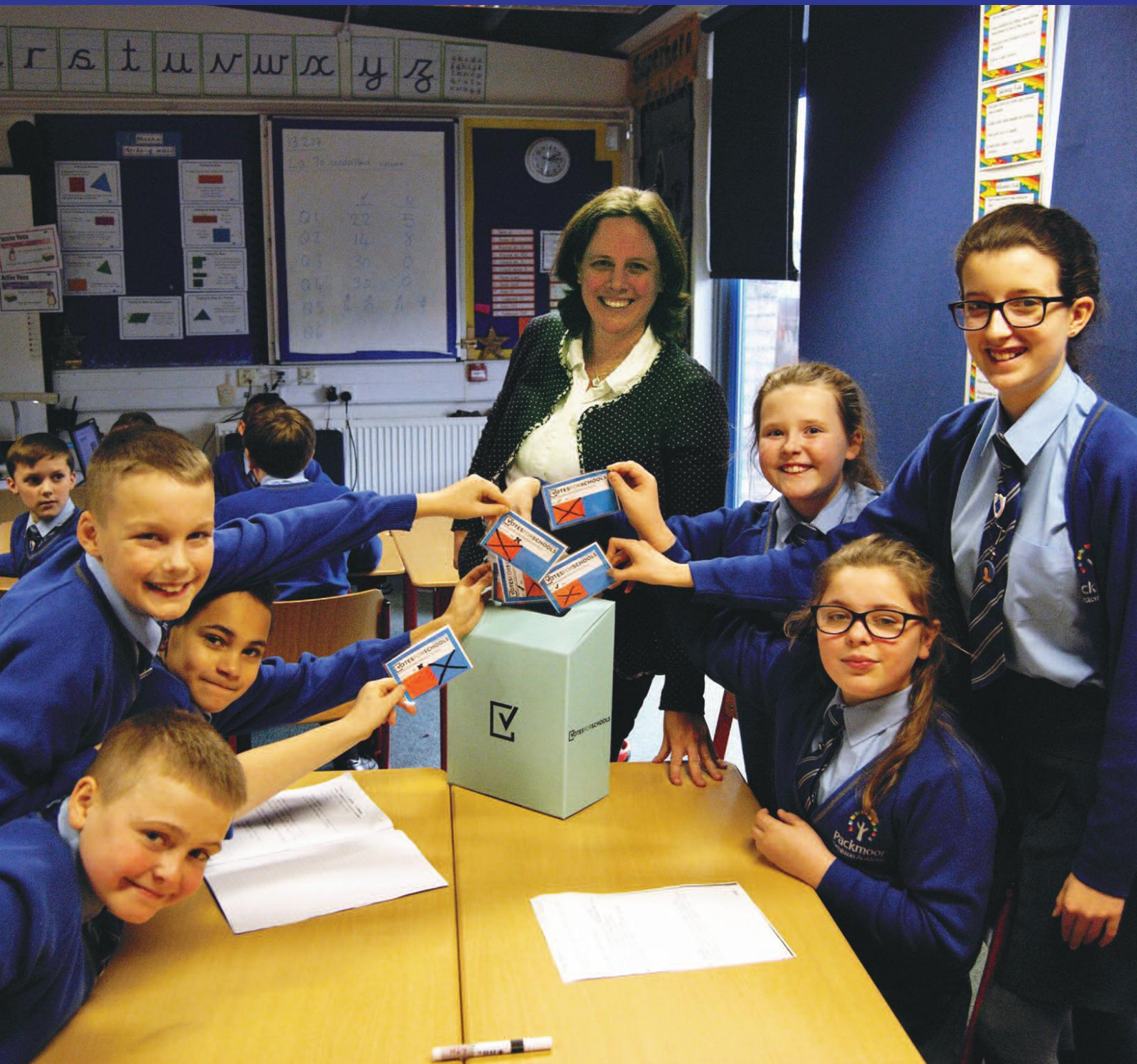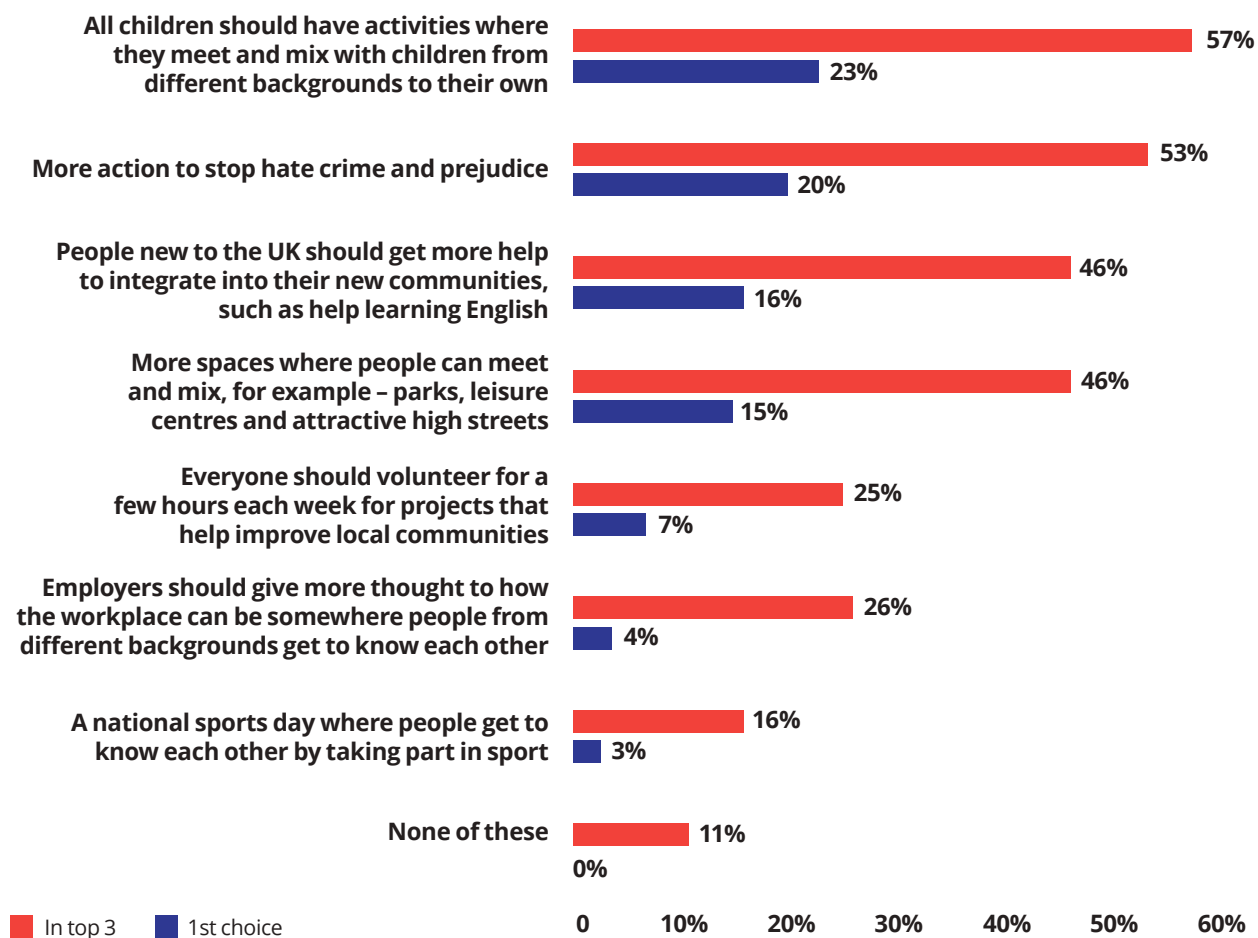
Picture: Votes for Schools

schools. In the discussions in Northern Ireland there was a consensus that its education system should offer more opportunities to bring young people together across sectarian divides.

Segregated education was also a theme that was brought up in the discussions we held in Scotland and in some parts of England, where recent research has shown high levels of educational segregation by social class, faith and ethnicity[95]. Where such divisions exist, it was felt that it should be mandatory for children to engage in activities that deepen their level of meaningful contact with children from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds. We learned of examples of this taking place, such as linking classes with those of other schools where the intake is different, and children doing joint projects or volunteering. Twinned schools might share some of

their facilities, such as playing fields or performing arts spaces. Some schools also share some of their sixth form teaching. Scotland has a few 'Joint Campus' schools, where faith and non-denominational (usually Roman Catholic) schools are based on the same campus, with pupils taught separately for some subjects, but coming together to eat, at break times and for sport.

Schools provide a foundation for a socially connected society, through the subjects they teach and the values that they instil in children. Involvement in youth organisations such as the Scouts and Girlguiding reinforces these values. Such movements support young people's personal development and enable them to make a positive contribution to society. Scouting and Girlguiding activities strengthen values such as cooperation, integrity, respect and care for others.

Figure 8.2: Which ideas would help bring people together in this country

Idea	In top 3	1st choice
All children should have activities where they meet and mix with children from different backgrounds to their own	57%	23%
More action to stop hate crime and prejudice	53%	20%
People new to the UK should get more help to integrate into their new communities, such as help learning English	46%	16%
More spaces where people can meet and mix, for example – parks, leisure centres and attractive high streets	46%	15%
Everyone should volunteer for a few hours each week for projects that help improve local communities	25%	7%
Employers should give more thought to how the workplace can be somewhere people from different backgrounds get to know each other	26%	4%
A national sports day where people get to know each other by taking part in sport	16%	3%
None of these	11%	0%

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

[95] The Challenge (2017) *Understanding School Segregation,* London: The Challenge with IcoCo and SchoolDash.

In the discussions and open survey some people voiced a desire for schools to do more to deepen children's understanding of democracy, our political institutions, respect for others and civil political debate. Many schools do this through their citizenship education programmes.

In England and Northern Ireland, citizenship education forms a compulsory part of the National Curriculum. In England, citizenship education is a non-statutory programme of study in primary schools and a compulsory part of the National Curriculum in secondary schools for children aged 11-16 (Key Stage Three and Four). It is often taught as a discrete subject, or in combination with Personal, Social and Health Education. Schools that have academy status can opt out of some or all of the citizenship programme of study and many do.

In Northern Ireland, education for citizenship and mutual understanding is embedded in many school subjects, through involvement in school councils and in extra-curricular activities, with children also receiving some discrete citizenship teaching. This is seen as playing a part in building a sustainable peace.

In Scotland, citizenship is delivered as a cross-curricular theme alongside Modern Studies, which is taught as a discrete subject and leads to Nationals, Highers and Scottish Baccalaureate qualifications. In Wales it is a non-statutory and cross-curricular subject.

Citizenship education in England is a postcode lottery. There is excellent practice in some schools, while in others it is an area of study that needs to be re-energised. In doing this, there is much inspiring practice to draw upon and we heard about some of this while we were conducting Talk/together. We were told how schools were teaching children about some of the big issues that face society, of visits to parliament, support for Youth Assemblies and schools that encouraged civil political debate by having their own radio station. We also heard about schools that encouraged volunteering, through work experience, in citizenship education or by supporting children's involvement in youth organisations such as the Scouts, Girlguiding, National Citizen Service and the Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

"Through Girlguiding, both girls and volunteers tell us they have the opportunity to make new friends and connect to others in their local communities, and on a national and even international level as part of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. Our youth and volunteering offer can contribute to reducing loneliness, improving wellbeing and boosting employability skills. We support young people to make a positive contribution to their communities and the wider world. We believe this is an enriching experience which enables people to become active participants in their communities and wider."
(Evidence submitted by Girlguiding UK).

Facilitator: communication

Communication lies at the heart of a connected, fair and kind society. We need a language in common to speak to each other and to resolve conflicts where they exist. We need to be able to read to understand the world around us and make informed political choices. We need digital infrastructure and skills to access services and information and to keep in touch with each other. But Talk/together also found that across the UK, social connection is being held back because we cannot communicate with each other.

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the UK's digital divide. For much of the population over the last year, social interactions have taken place online. The services and information that we have needed to get us through the pandemic increasingly require us to use the internet. But Ofcom data suggests that approximately 13% of the adult population in the UK – around 1 in 8 – are internet non-users[96], either because they cannot afford or cannot access the required technology and infrastructure (primary digital exclusion), or because they lack the skills to navigate the online world (secondary digital exclusion). A further 10% of the UK public are limited users, facing barriers which restrict their engagement with online life on a day-to-day basis, for example having to share devices with other family members[97]. There are also disparities in digital connectivity within the UK, with many rural areas and

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[96] Ofcom (2020) Adults' media use and attitudes report 2020, London: Ofcom.
[97] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blog/new-analysis-ofcom-2020-data

Picture: The Scout Association

much of Scotland and Northern Ireland receiving substantially poorer broadband coverage. Older people and people on low incomes are also more likely to face digital exclusion.

"There's much more to be done, and it's a combination of three things: it's a lack of kit, it's a lack of money to buy the kit, and it's a lack of know-how and access to training to learn how to use the kit."
(Participant in stakeholder group on disability, October 2020).

The proportion of people facing digital exclusion has gradually reduced. This is partly due to the work of hundreds of civil society projects which are distributing new or refurbished devices and providing training and support. Some of these project help bridge intergenerational divides and promote social contact, with younger volunteers acting as 'digital champions,' offering support to older people in environments that foster new friendships across generations. We have included examples of such projects in the appendix. At a government level there are cross-departmental strategies that aim to increase internet connectivity, improve digital skills, put computers in libraries and make sure that children have access to laptops.

Many people would argue, however, that progress is too slow. Moreover, many of those who face digital exclusion are excluded from society for other reasons, for example because they lack functional literacy or cannot speak English, because they are poor, or because they are disabled, older or isolated. There is a need to reach this group of people who face multiple exclusions. With digital inclusion the focus of more attention as a result of the pandemic, now may be an opportune moment to push forward on policy. Some of the 4 million people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and want to volunteer again are a resource that could be enlisted as digital champions to help everyone get online.

Fluency in English is also foundational to a well-connected society, but more than 900,000 people in the UK do not speak English well or at all. Speaking English helps migrants find work and enables them

to take part in community life. It reduces the risk of loneliness and poor mental health. Poor English contributes to residential segregation, as those who cannot speak the language are dependent on their co-national or co-ethnic group for work or to interpret in everyday situations. Language barriers can also increase misunderstandings and tensions between new arrivals and long-settled residents.

Having a language in common underpins the two-way process of integration, helping communities manage immigration. We believe that getting integration right locally is key to securing the public support for the immigration that employers need, as well as for refugee protection. In the nationally representative survey, we asked people to select the three best policies that would help bring people together: some 45% of people put 'help for migrants to integrate into their new communities, such as learning English,' in their top three choices[98]. People from all social grades, white and BAME groups,all placed equal importance on integration and learning English[99].

"Language is really key. I used to work as a community nurse and the amount of times that someone would become very, very unwell, but they didn't speak any English. And we had a number of very serious incidents, where family translated, but translated incorrectly. I know that doesn't often happen, but I'm surprised how people can get by when their language skills are so low. There are lots of charities that try and do a lot. But I just think language is key to integration. Without being able to speak the language, I think it's so hard to become integrated and it's isolating for someone."
(Participant in public discussion, East of England, October 2020).

Migrants can be encouraged to learn English but many face substantial barriers that prevent them from doing this. Some of the civil society organisations that took part in the Talk/together discussions told us that there were no courses in the areas where they worked, or that there were long

[98] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults carried out for Talk/together between 16 and 18 December 2020. [99] Some 48% of those in social grades A,B and C1 put *'people new to the UK should get more help to integrate into their new communities, such as help to learn English'* in their top three policy choices in the December 2020 nationally representative survey. C2DE = 43%, white ethnicity = 45%, BAME = 48%.

waiting lists. Most classes are held in further or adult education colleges and scheduled in the daytime, making them difficult to attend for those who work. In England and Northern Ireland, further education fee regulations prevent asylum-seekers and newly arrived family migrants from studying on free or co-funded courses.

Governments in all four nations of the UK must make sure that there is sufficient formal provision that is affordable to those on low incomes, including asylum-seekers. There are hundreds of faith and civil society initiatives that run conversation clubs to help people practice their English and reduce social isolation. The new volunteers of 2020 are a human resource that could be enlisted to increase the numbers of conversation clubs.

But it is not only new migrants who struggle with English, with an estimated 18% of the UK's adult population having poor literacy skills[100]. This means 9.2 million people may struggle to fill in an online job application, understand a train timetable or read a bedtime story. People who lack functional literacy are more likely to be unemployed or isolated. They are more likely to believe damaging or divisive fake news[101] and less likely to vote or to volunteer in their communities[102]. The Government has prioritised literacy in schools, which is welcome. But we were told that far more effort is needed to address illiteracy in the adult population.

"I think linking people who are differently advantaged/disadvantaged would be a good thing. Befriending of kids with no grandparents with elderly without family would be a good place to start. More projects concerned with language and literacy, skills like learning to ride a bike, swim, mend clothes, recycle properly. 'Each one, teach one' works well."
(Response to open survey).

Facilitator: participation

"I think we need to get ourselves to a point where we can listen through the anger, and where we can start to hear the unmet needs of the tribes that we now seem to be falling into, in the UK. That can be done and there are ways, at a local level, of trying to open up communication, and trying to offer opportunities where people who view themselves to be polar opposites can come together to work on common interests, and in ways that we enforce the commonality of needs that we all share. This needs to be done but the Government tends to always find it incredibly challenging."
(Participant in stakeholder group, North East, November 2020).

Participation, rather than disengagement and isolation, helps develop trust, empathy and the shared identities that we need to bridge social divides and build a kinder and more connected society. Taking an active part in sporting, cultural, environmental activities or civic life brings people together in pursuit of common goals or interests. It is a direct, more intense and often more sustained form of social networking.

"I am part of a local running club, and find that this environment brings together people from a range of backgrounds, week after week to a common goal. I strongly believe in the power of sport, and the outdoors, to bring people together."
(Response to open survey).

Being an active citizen, for example by volunteering, is empowering and enables people to feel they have a stake in a community that they have helped to shape. Active citizenship also means participating in democracy: by voting, supporting campaigns, engaging in debate or standing for office. However, some groups of people are less likely to be active citizens than others. For example, just 47% of 18-24 year-olds voted in the 2019 general election compared with 67% across all age groups[103]. Before COVID-19, levels of formal volunteering were lower among younger people, those without higher-level qualifications, low-income groups and people who live in the most deprived areas.

[100] OECD Survey of Adult Skills, 2015. [101]Roozenbeek, J., Schneider, C., Dryhurst, S., Kerr, J., Freeman, A., Recchie, G., van der Bles, A. and van der Linden, S. (2020) 'Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world' in *Royal Society Open Science* 7: 201199. [102] OECD (2013) *Survey of Adult Skills 2013, England and Northern Ireland Note,* Paris: OECD. [103] Ipsos MORI estimates from exit polls.

There are many initiatives that aim to increase participation in community and civic life – they aim to move people further up the ladder of connection that we describe in Chapter Six. Some are central or local government initiatives, such as council-coordinated projects to encourage more volunteering, or initiatives to get more people to take part in sport. Others are run by civil society organisations, some of which are partners of /Together: we have described some of these initiatives in the appendix. They include projects to increase and sustain volunteering and political participation. Such programmes, where successful, need to be extended.

Facilitator: leadership

"Government, community leaders, people in positions of power, instead of trying to give people reasons to go their separate ways, just try and emphasise things that people have in common."
(Participant in public group, London, October 2020).

While social connection is something most people support, warm words are not enough if we are to build a kinder and more connected society. We asked people whose responsibility it was to heal social divides and bring people together. In every discussion we were told that everyone needed to play a part, but there was a real need for leadership from the very top of Government. This desire for responsible leadership related to the language that politicians use, which people often saw as divisive. People voiced a strong desire for the government and politicians to use less divisive language.

Social connection is relevant to the remit of many government departments but suffers from being no-one's top priority. The same is true at a regional and local level, where councils have a key role in coordinating work to encourage social connection. There are, of course, examples where national and local leadership has led to positive changes. Loneliness is now on the policy agenda in all parts of the UK. England's 'Integrated Communities Action Plan'[104] has made a difference to community relations in the areas that have been supported[105]. The Welsh Government is supporting community

cohesion officers and a programme of work in every local authority in Wales. The Shared Housing Programme in Northern Ireland is building social housing in shared neighbourhoods and supporting programmes that enable tenants to live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice and hate. Kindness, as a positive value, has been incorporated into the Scottish National Performance Framework and we were told that this has "given permission for people to talk about kindness in public and Government places." These steps should be welcomed and make a difference, but we were told – often emphatically – that national and local leadership and a sustained plan of action is needed if we are to become a more connected society.

Leadership is also needed at a neighbourhood level. As discussed in Chapters Four and Six, some of the COVID-19 relief efforts, such as mutual aid and street WhatsApp groups that were organised in 2020, were usually initiated or organised by existing community leaders. Some of these people were faith leaders, councillors, business owners or people involved in local charities. Others did not have such positions of authority but were members of the public who had strong bridging and linking networks and were able to identify unmet need and opportunities to help people. These are the people we have described as 'Creators' and 'Conversationalists' in Chapter Six and who comprise about 10% of the population. Other publications have sometimes called them Changemakers. Neighbourhoods with fewer of these leaders tend to see lower levels of social connection and community action.

Across the UK there is a number of councils, faith and civil society initiatives that are working to strengthen neighbourhood leadership, some of which are described in the appendix. Some of these projects offer training and support to emerging community leaders, supporting them to make change in the places where they live. Other projects aim to develop people's skills by focusing on a specific event or campaign, with emerging community leaders supported to organise for this event or campaign in their local area. For example the Big Lunch and the Great Get Together both use their events to support emerging community leadership.

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[104] Ministry of Housing, Communit (2019) The Integrated Communities Strategy Action Plan, London: MHCLG [105] Abrams, D., Lalot, F., Broadwood, J., Davies Hayon, K. and Platts-Dunn, I. (2020) *The Social Cohesion Investment,* Canterbury: University of Kent and Belong.

"I didn't start the group in my area, my neighbour did – she's retired. She used to be a teacher and she's such a lovely lady, but she's the one who organised everything: sending around the links for the community groups, whenever there's a shop delivery coming in she'll message and see if anybody needs anything and say 'I've got a slot at this time, you can get things through me'."
(Participant in cross-UK group, May 2020).

Facilitator: moments

National, regional and local moments can help build the trust, shared identities and empathy that is needed to bridge divides and bring us together. These national and regional moments – because they are common experiences – help build shared identities. They can also show 'contextual' social contact, where people see others connecting across social divides. In turn, this helps us to feel more empathy and trust towards people outside our immediate circle of contacts. Most national, regional, city or town-wide moments require hundreds or sometimes thousands of volunteers in their delivery. This volunteering brings people in contact with each other and can sometimes lead to sustained relationships and further social action.

We saw examples of national moments last year, when people took time out and marked the VE Day anniversary. It is thought that nearly seven in ten people (69%) took part in the weekly Clap for Carers[106]. We were told, time and time again, how these two initiatives had brought people together. Some 67% of respondents in the nationally representative survey, undertaken in May 2020, felt that national sporting events such as the football World Cup or the Olympics bring people together a great deal or a fair amount[107]. In the discussions we were told that Remembrance Day, royal weddings, national Saints' Days, sporting events and festivals such as the Eisteddfod were connection-building moments.

An inclusive form of national identity – as a tie that binds us together – is expressed through our support for national institutions such as the NHS and participation in national moments such as the Olympics and Remembrance. These bring together social conservatives and social liberals, although they may understand and participate in these events in different ways.

"The most British I felt was the 2012 Olympics. You know we talk about unfriendly Londoners, but when it was the Olympics, you had all the volunteers, you had people come in to visit the country. Suddenly people were talking to each other, not just around the Stratford area where the events were, it was all around London. It was people helping tourists and people talking to each other."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020).

These moments need not take place across the UK as a whole. Events that bring people together across a town, city or region can also help build shared identities and social connections outside our immediate circle of contacts. We were told that events such as Lambeth Country Show, St Georges Day Gravesend, the Leicester Carnival, Cities of Culture and free music festivals bring diverse groups of people together. In Northern Ireland, a place where many 'moments' divide communities, we heard how arts festivals had brought people together across sectarian divides to enjoy themselves. Free concerts, performing arts festivals, Derry City of Culture 2013 and the Belfast Mela were described as such examples.

"My daughter is in the school choir, and there's an event where all choirs in Northern Ireland get together. She did this last year. And you know, it was beautiful. Every child from every denomination, Catholic, Protestant, whatever religion, took part. It was lovely, they sang together, they danced together, they played their instruments together."
(Participant in public discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

The French have Bastille Day and the Canadians have Canada Day on 1 July, celebrated with parades, barbecues, concerts and ceremonies to welcome new citizens. Both events unite these countries and bring people of many different backgrounds

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[106] YouGov survey of 1,664 GB adults carried out between 28 and 29 May 2020.
[107] ICM survey of 2,010 GB adults carried out for Together between 29 May and 1 June 2020.

Picture: Eleni Koureas on Unsplash

together. Yet the UK is unusual among the world's countries in having no national day to celebrate our shared heritage. This is a missed opportunity.

Suggestions to hold a national day have been put forward in this country, including suggestions for a national Neighbours Day[108] to mark the power of community. What has been missing has been the public's voice in these proposals. We asked people if there should be a bank holiday to mark what we have in common and bring communities together. There was broad support for this proposal and very little opposition, which mostly focussed on doubts that such an event would take place in their area. Two-thirds of people (66%) expressed support for the idea of a 'Neighbours Day' to bring communities together and celebrate what we have in common, with 21% saying they would definitely take part and a further 45% stating 'yes – maybe'[109]. In our discussions on this topic, people sometimes became quite animated, making suggestions about the types of activities that should take place on such a day. Some people wanted to use the day to raise money for charities and a few people proposed community sports or arts events. Street parties and food featured in almost all the suggestions. The challenge in delivering a Neighbours Day is to make sure that it takes place in neighbourhoods that are divided or where social connection is weaker.

"Everyone could just bring some sort of food or a dish and then people could share and eat and talk. And it can be in a mutual area, so it doesn't have to be someone's backyard. It could be a common shared space where everybody can feel safe and comfortable." (Participant in cross-UK public discussion, October 2020).

Facilitator: a healthy democracy

"Politicians should learn not to be so divisive and work together more. There is a great deal of political disagreement, but more respect

should be shown for different ideas." (Response to open survey).

We have included a healthy democracy as a final facilitator of the bridging and linking social connections that are needed in order to build trust, respect for difference, empathy and kindness. We have previously described concerns about plummeting political trust and the divisive nature of political discourse. Of all the responses to the open survey question 'In your own words, what do you think would help bring people together and build a kinder, closer country?' the greatest number (over 8,600 in total) focussed on the nature of political discourse and the democratic system. The public see restoring political trust and encouraging respectful debate as a key component in healing this country's divides.

"Cooperative projects in politics, for example in dealing with COVID. Leaders setting good examples."

"Strong leadership without party politics getting in the way – we all share this planet, and we need to care for it and each other."

"Kinder words in politics. More citizens' assemblies - but not just run by the 'same old' local people who shout loudest."

"More space for actual debate and learning to use language that regular people will understand. Encouraging and financially assisting people, and especially women, from different backgrounds into politics at all levels."

"Having a fair political system so everyone feels that they have had their say. A less confrontational political system. Real local democracy and do away with party politics at local government level. Focus on individuals and communities."

Political trust has been the source of much media and academic commentary. It is generally seen as citizens' faith in politicians or political institutions to

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[108] Kruger, D. (2020) Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant, London: Independent Report to the UK Government by Danny Kruger. [109] Yes – definitely take part = 21%, yes, maybe take part = 45%, no = 24%, don't know = 11%. A majority of people of all backgrounds supported such a neighbours' day, including BAME respondents (72% saying they would take part), 18-24 year-olds (69%), those living in the 10% most deprived areas (60%), those in social grades D and E (58%) private renters (65%) those living in Northern Ireland (74%) and Scotland (64% said they would take part). From ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults carried out for Talk/together between 16 and 18 December 2020.

operate with credibility, fairness, competence and transparency. It is, fundamentally, a relationship based on confidence in the political system to represent the electorate's best interests, particularly during situations of uncertainty or vulnerability. Political trust is hence an important pre-requisite for building legitimacy in our democracy. Political trust is needed if people are to continue to comply with laws and regulations, as we saw so clearly in 2020. It is also relevant to social connection and togetherness. A democracy with healthy levels of political trust enables more common ground, unifying society around a shared system where differences can be debated and compromises reached. By contrast, high degrees of mistrust can open or exacerbate social divides.

In the Talk/together discussions we found that many people are not confident that trust can be restored, nor that the way in which we do politics can change for the better. There was a belief that it is not in the interests of those who hold power to change the system. Others felt that change is possible but that this change will require:

• Greater voter registration and participation in elections, looking at how this might be increased among groups less likely to take part.

• Encouraging greater gender, ethnic and class diversity among people who stand for public office.

• Public participation in campaigns for change.

• Increased connection between political parties and voters outside of elections.

• Giving the public a greater voice in decision-making.

• Devolution of decision-making powers to bodies that are closer to local communities.

• Measures to increase transparency and accountability in ways that are meaningful to the public.

• Political leaders and wider society promoting civil and truthful political debate that respects differences of opinion.

• More space for dialogue in situations of tension or political conflict.

During the course of conducting Talk/together we heard from many organisations that were working to improve the way that we do politics and we have included examples of their work in the appendix. They included campaigns to encourage voter registration among groups less likely to register or turn out at elections. There are many initiatives that train and support community campaigners, the most well-known of which is CitizensUK. Others are working to encourage civil and kinder political debate, although much of this work has focused on schools. Some faith and civil society organisations facilitate dialogue to prevent or resolve conflicts, with the aim of building peace and breaking the cycle of violence. We also heard about projects that had created safe spaces to discuss divisive political issues, including Brexit and Scottish independence. Where effective, this work needs to be extended. There is a particular urgency to create more opportunities for respectful debate and dialogue in Scotland, with impending parliamentary elections in May 2021 that may chart a path to a second independence referendum.

The above are mostly grassroots initiatives. Some in government and in parliament are rethinking how these institutions engage with citizens and promote civil political debate. We have seen the increased use of citizens' assemblies to inform policymaking, such as the Climate Assembly UK, which fed its decisions into six parliamentary select committees. It is welcome that the UK Government has committed to a Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission to consider the relationship between the Government and its citizens. It is also welcome that the Citizens Convention on UK Democracy will engage the public, through a citizens' assembly and wider consultation about the questions that the Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission will consider. It is through such engagement that the process of healing can begin.

Figure 8.3: In one word how would you like our society to be in future? (most frequently used words are largest).

9
The changes that people want

Chapter 9. The changes that people want

COVID-19 has presented the UK with one of its greatest tests. The pandemic has not only cost people their lives and livelihoods: it has forced us to isolate and retreat from each other. Yet physical distancing did not mean we stayed socially distant from each other. In 2020 we found new ways to keep in touch and there was an outpouring of neighbourliness and community spirit.

Although some of this togetherness has faded as people have returned to work, it has not disappeared. There is a collective memory of this community spirit and new relationships have been forged. Some 4 million people[110] volunteered for the first time in 2020 and want to offer their time again. This group of people is a resource that could be harnessed to strengthen communities.

As we emerge from the worst of the pandemic, the challenge is to turn the spirit of 2020 into action that will help rebuild this country after COVID-19 in a way that breaks down 'us' and 'them' identities and enables us to be more connected. Over the last nine months, we have heard from many thousands of people, members of the public as well as experts in their fields. People have made hundreds of suggestions for policy change and practical action that would help achieve this aim. We have drawn these proposals together in a ten-point action plan, which puts in place the foundations, facilitators and connections that we have described in the previous chapters. In deciding what to include in the action plan, we have used four tests:

- **Salience and popularity:** Did significant numbers of people – both the public and expert stakeholders - think this policy change or practical action was important and would make a difference to social connection?

- **Evidence:** Was there evidence that this policy change or practical action would make a positive difference to social connection?

- **Deliverability:** Is this policy change or action deliverable in the current context?

- **Ability to secure cross-party consensus:** Is this policy change capable of securing broad support across parties?

Here are Talk/together's ten ideas for change.

1. National and local leadership that prioritises social connection in all four nations of the UK

"It's everyone's responsibility, but I do think you need to have a plan and a roadmap ... while we can all be helping each other out, what is needed is some sort of roadmap to get you from this base to the next base." (Participant in public discussion, South West, December 2020).

We asked people whose responsibility it is to heal social divides and bring people together. In every discussion we were told that everyone – individuals, institutions and Government – needs to play a part, but that there is a real need for leadership from the very top. While social connection is something that most policymakers support, we were told that warm words need to be underpinned by a sustained policy agenda. We heard that social connection is relevant to the remit of many government and council departments yet it suffers from being seen as no single department's priority.

There are, of course, examples where national and local leadership have led to positive changes; we have described some of them in chapters seven and eight and in the appendix. These successes are welcome, but they must be extended, so that they are no longer exceptions but the norm.

While COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of community and social connection, there is a risk that these areas of policy are neglected in 2021 as the Government focuses on vaccine delivery and economic recovery. Over the last nine months Talk/together heard from members of the public, councillors and their officials, employers, as well as faith and charity leaders. We were told – sometimes emphatically – that leadership and a plan is needed if we are to build resilient and connected communities. We need clear, cross-departmental leadership from the very top of politics. Some of the ideas that were

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[110] Calculated from Together's December 2020 survey. See discussion in Chapter Five.

raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help achieve this, include:

- A commitment by the governments in all four nations of the UK to make the next ten years a 'Decade of Reconnection', with cabinet ministers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland appointed to lead it.

- Councils, combined authorities and government departments should have increasing social connection as a policy objective, with strategies and funding put in place.

"Nobody has thought about what is needed in Northern Ireland to build a sustainable peace. Nobody has really thought holistically how we do that and here's how we fund each part of that. It's more like if somebody thinks they have a good idea, let's just do it. So what you have is groups competing against each other for the same pot of money, with different agendas and methods. What you need to build peace is a road map, a systemic strategy, government drive and a vision."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

2. Change the way we all engage in politics

"The government needs to walk in our shoes for once. They're not going to learn unless they do that. But they're never going to learn because they don't want to know, and they don't because they're a different breed. We need a different diversity of people in government."
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

The events of the last year have highlighted our broken politics. Failures to deliver on commitments, the adversarial nature of party politics and perceptions of an out-of-touch political class have damaged trust in politicians and our democratic institutions. The nature of online political discourse has also made many people wary about engaging in political debate. Anger directed towards the political class and plummeting trust in politics and politicians over the last nine months are issues that now greatly concern us. We heard in the strongest terms that action to restore political trust, and to change the tone and nature of political discourse, must be a priority.

While conducting Talk/together, we heard from individuals and organisations that are working hard to change the way we do politics. There is a need to learn from their experiences and extend this work. We were told that we need to do more to give those whose voices are not heard a greater say in decisions that affect their lives and their futures. There is also a need for a commitment to learn to 'disagree better', stretching from political leaders to individuals engaging with each other on social media, which builds a deeper understanding of shared values and respectful debate between people holding opposing views. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help achieve this, include:

- Work by the Government, educators, social media companies and others to build a stronger societal consensus on the boundaries between free speech and hatred and intimidation.

- A code of conduct to uphold respectful political debate that covers all those seeking or holding office or holding positions in political parties. This should reinforce the obligation of those who hold office to lead by example.

- More action by social media companies to address online intimidation and take down hate speech.

- A ring-fenced fund to support grassroots initiatives that strengthen our democratic values and provide safe spaces for civil political debate and dialogue. Given the independence debate there is a particular urgency to support more of these initiatives in Scotland.

- A national conversation on what kind of society we are seeking to build and how we can deal with the challenges we will face going forward. It must consider political and constitutional questions and

seek to find consensus about the type of politics that we want in future, and should feed into the planned Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission.

"We will be continuing a project that we have been doing for the last few years called Birmingham Conversations. It provides a space for people to meet up and talk about some of the challenges we are seeing in society and in this city. We have deliberately made sure that we had people in the room who might disagree with each other, or were from different political persuasions, from different sectors of society, from different religious backgrounds. We have created an environment, over a long period of time, where people could start to explore difficult issues and questions, even when we disagree."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

3. Make sure we can communicate with each other

"I'm speaking about my experience here. When I came here, I worked in a factory, the Polish spoke Polish, the Romanians spoke Romanian, and I didn't learn a word in English. When you speak English, even if it's basic English, you know, you can socialise – if you can't, there is a barrier and you can't make friends."
(Participant in a public discussion, South East, October 2020).

Communication lies at the heart of a connected society. We need a language in common to speak to each other and resolve conflicts where they exist. We need to be able to read to understand the world around us and make informed political choices. We need digital infrastructure and skills to access services and information and keep in touch with each other. But COVID-19 has highlighted this country's digital divide. Other people who have struggled during the pandemic include the estimated

900,000[111] people across the UK who cannot speak English well or at all and the 9.2 million people (18% of the UK's adult population) who have poor literacy skills[112]. No one should be prevented from connecting with others because they cannot speak English, lack functional literacy or because they don't have the infrastructure or skills to connect online. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help achieve this, include:

- A target of achieving universal digital inclusion and university fluency in spoken and written English by 2030. All four home nations should publish strategies that set out how they will achieve this goal, and how they will encourage more collaboration between government, business, colleges and the charity sector to deliver it.

- Civil society and faith organisations should work with colleges and the government to set up more schemes where volunteers support those who lack digital skills and confidence or have difficulties speaking, reading or writing in English. Such projects could use the time of some of the 4 million people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and want to volunteer again.

- Programmes that target the poorest in society to increase digital inclusion or to improve people's spoken and written English must receive sufficient government funding.

- There should be a clear expectation that employers should support workplace-based English language, literacy and digital skills training, by making space available for classes and conversation clubs and encouraging their staff to attend.

"There is too much of a divide between people or families who have unlimited and appropriate access to the digital world, with fit for purpose devices, skills and fast unlimited broadband, and those who don't. In today's world everyone needs to be online. Older people living on their own should be helped in a practical way to make use of digital technology."
(Response to open survey).

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[111] Foster, D. and Bolton, P. (2018) Adult ESOL in England, London: House of Commons Library. [112] OECD Survey of Adult Skills, 2015.

4. Re-energise citizenship education

"I'd love to see consistent political education, good political education. Not just talking about what the different parties stand for but teaching children how to have difficult debates about difficult issues."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

Nurseries, schools, colleges and youth organisations can be places where children form friendships across ethnic, faith and class divides, equipping them for life in a diverse and complex society.

It is through education and involvement in youth organisations such as the Scouts and Girlguiding that children learn about the shared values that underpin society: what it means to be a citizen, democracy, our political institutions, respect for others and civil political debate. This process can reinforce the values and norms of wider society – and what children learn in school can also influence their parents.

Many people see schools and youth organisations as social connection success stories, a view that was expressed in the open survey and in discussions with both the public and experts. But it was also felt that schools could to more to encourage social mixing, particularly in areas where there are high levels of educational segregation by social class, faith and ethnicity. There was also a strong desire for schools and youth organisations to encourage more intergenerational mixing, through volunteering, oral history projects or initiatives to link school students with care home residents.

There was a desire for schools to do more to encourage children to volunteer in their local communities and to learn about democracy, our political institutions and about civil political debate. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help re-energise citizenship education, include:

- A statutory citizenship education or Modern Studies programme for all children in all four nations of the UK, where children learn about civil political

debate and deepen their understanding of our shared values, what it means to be a citizen, democracy, our political institutions and respect for others. Young people should be involved in the process of reviewing and re-energising citizenship education.

- There should be an expectation that all children should volunteer during their school career, as part of their work experience, through citizenship education or through their involvement in youth movements such as the Scouts, Girlguiding or the Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

- All children should engage in activities that deepen their level of contact with people from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds, through activities such as school twinning, sharing facilities or teaching, or by volunteering together.

"I personally do volunteering as part of my youth club and I believe that it would benefit everyone because you make loads of friends, you can take your mind off problems and it gives you a great feeling knowing that you've helped someone."
(Secondary school student, through Vote for Schools partnership).

"There should be more contact between care homes and schools to foster greater understanding between the generations."
(Response to open survey).

5. Make sure that building design and the planning system promotes social connection

"[We should] be providing places where communities can meet safely and not just pubs. Open spaces with cafes, children's and adults' facilities, and build these into new estates and new housing developments. Have schools, shops, leisure facilities on a small scale attached to a community rather than

Picture: The Linking Network

people travelling to large towns or soulless out-of-town shopping complexes. Revive the local high street."
(Response to open survey).

The places where people live and the features of the built and natural environment in our neighbourhoods have a major impact on social connectivity. We heard how features such as 'gentle' density, access to local green space and '15-minute neighbourhoods,' where services were within walking distance, all improved connectivity. The built environment can also be designed to encourage the inclusion of disabled people. We also learned of many successful initiatives to involve people in the planning system, including residents' and tenants' associations and community land trusts.

Housing and high streets are high priority policy areas for government in all four nations of the UK. The pandemic has focused attention on the decline of local high streets. It is likely that there will be changes to planning regulations in England, leading to the increased use of design codes to set the rules for new housing developments. This is an opportunity to design social connection into new buildings. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help the planning system and building design promote social connection, include:

- Government, councils, developers and housing associations should adopt the principle of involving the public in planning and managing the built and natural environment. This should be achieved through people's participation in drawing up design codes and neighbourhood plans, and their involvement in residents' and tenants' associations and community land trusts.

- Increasing the number of business, government and philanthropic partnerships to secure greater investment in shared spaces such as high streets, multi-use community buildings, libraries, sports and arts centres, parks and green spaces.

- Embedding design features that encourage social connection in the planning system and through design codes that set the rules for new developments, involving the public in this process.

- A programme to increase the numbers of community land trusts that manage land and property on behalf of a local community, while renovating and providing affordable housing, green space, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets.

"I feel that many people around the country don't feel they have any ability to shape the future of their local area. And very often they feel neglected or they feel under attack. This can stoke up cultural divisions between people in our country. They feel that those in power aren't really interested in involving them or listening to them or giving them any kind of agency. Often community land trusts start in these areas and by being involved in a community land trust people have realised they can change things."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion on the built environment, December 2020).

6. Involve employers in the conversation about social connection

"Employers should activity be encouraged to promote and support volunteering for every employee. And employees should be allowed to shadow other positions in different departments for one day, in the hope of creating a better understanding of other people."
(Response to open survey).

Workplaces are also one of the most important places where adults meet and mix with people from different backgrounds to themselves. But the type of work that people do and workplace practices also impact on social connection, as does the role played by employers in their local communities. In 2020 we saw many more employers encouraging their staff to volunteer or support the relief effort in their local communities, with such initiatives shown to increase the recruitment and retention of staff, productivity and customer loyalty. Despite the important role that

employers can play in encouraging social connection, there has been little national debate about the business case for social connection. There is a clear need to involve employers in this conversation. Some of the ideas for achieving this, that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, include:

• A high-profile national campaign that highlights the business case for social connection, volunteering and community involvement, which is led by business ambassadors.

• Employers should develop long-term relationships with local charities, sports and arts organisations, schools and hospitals and encourage their staff to volunteer with them on a one-off or regular basis.

• The public procurement process should be used to incentivise more businesses to be involved in their local communities. Organisations bidding for such contracts should be required to provide information about involvement in their local communities.

"We got our staff cafe to prepare 50 free meals every day, and that was funded by the business and we drove them and delivered them to a foodbank. And we have volunteers at the end of the week, almost in tears because they knew the difference this was making to families. We have diversity and inclusion training that we're running at the moment, to get people a bit more clued up about Black Lives Matter and social mobility. We do a lot of STEM educational programs with children to try and encourage them to take science and get STEM jobs."
(Participant in public group, West Midlands, November 2020).

7. Take action to support volunteering

"I did a lot of volunteering because at the beginning of lockdown I was able to work from home. I was able to split my time from

working from home and doing volunteering at a local food bank, helping manage the Facebook pages. And it's something I'm going to carry on. You know, it's not because of COVID, it's just something I find extremely rewarding because now I'm helping."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

Volunteering underpins connected communities. Informal volunteering – offering your time to help a friend or neighbour – builds trust between people, turns strangers into friends and helps combat loneliness and isolation. Nearly three-quarters of registered charities (73%) in England and Wales have an annual income of less than £100,000[113] and the majority are run by volunteers. Their contribution helps run foodbanks, community centres, tenants' associations, conservation projects, youth groups, sports clubs and cultural organisations. Volunteers also offer their time to public organisations as school governors, hospital visitors and museum guides. Volunteering brings people together in pursuit of common goals and often across identity divides, helping build a more connected society.

Before COVID-19, around 4 in 10 adults (39%) offered their time at least once every month as a formal or informal volunteer[114]. Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 12.4 million adults have volunteered during the pandemic, of which 4.6 million were first-time volunteers. Some 3.8 million of this group say they are interested in volunteering again[115]. Moreover, many of these new volunteers are from social groups that previously were less likely to volunteer, with their numbers including 770,000 people aged 18-24. We were told how important is was to keep hold of the commitment of 2020's new volunteers, making it easier for them and others to offer their time to their community. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help support volunteering, include:

• A 'volunteer passport scheme' providing a record of a person's identity, their criminal record checks and training they have undertaken. This would reduce

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[113] Charity Commission statistics, 30 September 2020. Data from Northern Ireland and Scotland is similar. [114] The 2019-2020 Community Life Survey for England suggested that of 39% adults took part in formal or informal volunteering at least once a year. Data from the Northern Ireland Communities Omnibus, the Scottish Household Survey and the Sport and Active Lifestyles Survey Wales suggests similar levels of participation in these nations. [115] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-18 December 2020.

bureaucracy and delays in placing volunteers, as well as enabling people to grow their skills and to build up a record of volunteering that they could use when applying for jobs.

- An ongoing government funding stream for organisations that use volunteers, to cover travel expenses, training and the support and supervision volunteers.

- Community champion schemes where volunteers encourage their peer groups to offer their time to community projects, or as school or NHS volunteers.

- Including information about volunteering in the pension pack that is sent out to people in their sixties and in the Life in the UK handbook for those applying for British citizenship.

"Have an incentivised national programme of community caring and volunteering delivered through local authorities (litter picking, park cleaning, visiting elderly and isolated people) which positively encourages people from different backgrounds to mix and mingle socially, to each appreciate the others' cultural and other perspectives in an action that collectively benefits their combined community. Incentives could be tax breaks, reward vouchers, access to local authority amenities at discount."
(Response to open survey).

8. Encourage a culture of hospitality

"I think integration needs to involve the basic stuff – involve them more, if you are having a barbecue, invite them."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

In the year before COVID-19, over 840,000 people moved into a new local authority area, from elsewhere in the UK or overseas[116]. Their numbers include people moving for work, to study or for family reasons, or because they were buying or renting a new home. Those who move to the UK from overseas

include people moving to work or study in the UK, to join family or seek safety as a refugee. Many of those who move are made to feel welcome in their new homes, but this is not always the case. We heard from many people who were concerned that hate crime had increased during the pandemic. There were also concerns that those who speak little English were at much greater risk of social isolation and loneliness.

Many people who took part in the public and stakeholder discussions felt that there was not enough leadership and local action to support the integration of migrants and refugees. We heard of missed opportunities, for example using the process of acquiring British citizenship to encourage integration by holding citizenship ceremonies that involve local residents as a gesture of welcome that brings communities together. We were also given many examples where the failure of local integration had contributed to inter-group tensions.

We were also told about many projects that were successfully welcoming people into their new homes, whether they had moved from elsewhere in the UK or from overseas. These included simple initiatives such as school coffee mornings for new parents, programmes to welcome families of those serving in the armed forces to their new homes and projects to welcome newcomers into rural communities. We also heard from organisations that helped refugees and migrants to integrate and become part of their new communities, providing them with advice, organising English language classes and conversation clubs and running activities that bring together new arrivals and local residents. Overall, we feel that everyone in society – government, institutions and individuals – needs to do more to build a culture of hospitality, breaking down barriers between 'us and them'. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help foster a culture of hospitality, include:

- Governments in all four nations of the UK should draw up and implement strategies to support the integration of migrants and refugees.

- The acquisition of British citizenship should be seen as a positive decision that the Government welcomes and wants to encourage. Councils should hold

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[116] ONS estimate of internal and international migration inflows June 2018-2019 = 842,000.

Picture: The Scout Association

citizenship ceremonies that involve local residents as well as new citizens.

• A new volunteer-led programme of work to welcome those who move into communities from elsewhere in the UK or overseas, or those feeling isolated. The delivery of this work should involve organisations that work with groups such as the armed forces and their families, refugees, migrants and students, as well as schools, universities and employers.

• All councils should draw up their own strategies to support the integration of migrants and refugees, and of armed forces families. The public, local employers, schools and colleges, faith and civil society should be involved in producing these strategies and delivering their recommendations.

• Councils and the police need to make sure that they have effective anti-prejudice strategies that reinforce norms of behaviour among those who can easily provide the 'oxygen' of tacit support to perpetrators of hate crime.

"By meeting migrant workers and getting to know them, you will actually appreciate that they aren't that different from everyone else. But it takes two to tango, so they must be willing to mix with us as much as we must be willing to welcome them."
(Participant on public discussion, East of England, October 2020).

9. Support third sector organisations to increase participation in sports, cultural, environmental and community activities as part of the UK's COVID-19 recovery plans

"We're able to bring people in who are experiencing mental ill-health, and we are using culture to develop new friendships. Art gives people a sense of confidence and

they learn new skills. It's amazing what some people have gone through when they come to us with severe mental illness. Sometimes they can't even talk to start with, but you see people change and become more confident. That's the power of arts and creativity, it can really help and it's not particularly expensive."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, London, October 2020).

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of social contact and prompted a more open conversation about wellbeing and the importance of physical and cultural activity in maintaining it. Yet there is a danger that over the next three years, policy to increase social connection and participation in sport, cultural, environmental and community activities will be neglected, as the Government focuses its attention on economic recovery. We were told that there is also a risk that many of the grassroots organisations involved in sport, culture, conservation or community development will close, as the pandemic has restricted their fundraising. It is important to increase participation in such activities, and make sure that the organisations that deliver them have a financially secure future. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, that would help achieve this, include:

• The Government should publish an annual strategy to explain how it will increase participation in sports, cultural, environmental and community activities among groups that are less likely to take part.

• The Government must take action to secure the future of community sporting, cultural and community organisations that are facing financial insecurity due the impacts of COVID-19 on their income.

"We have a lot more in common than we are different. Activities that promote commonality without conflict or tribalism, such as football or cricket, should be used to get to know your local community."
(Response to open survey).

10. A new, country-wide moment that celebrates communities and what we have in common

"The day would just sort of reinforce what's happened and what's gone on in the last few months. So it would be something good to keep that going."
(Participant in a public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

The VE Day anniversary and Clap for Carers were country-wide 'moments' last year and we heard how these events brought people together at a neighbourhood level and across the UK. These events showed that social connection does not only take place at a neighbourhood level, but across towns and cities and across regions and nations. These moments – because they are common experiences – help build shared identities, as well as showing 'contextual' social contact, where we see other people in society connecting across social divides. In turn, this helps us to feel more empathy and trust towards people outside our immediate circle of contacts.

Most national, regional, city or town-wide moments require hundreds or sometimes thousands of volunteers in their delivery. We were told how the volunteering that is involved in putting on events can lead to sustained relationships and initiate further social action. A new national moment that celebrates communities and what we have in common would bring us together across the UK by marking the community spirit of 2020. It could also encourage volunteering and build local relationships. Some of the ideas that were raised in the public and stakeholder meetings and surveys, regarding a new national moment, include:

• A new bank holiday to bring communities together. The Government should involve the public in choosing this day and its name, as well as crowdsourcing ideas to make this bank holiday a celebration of community spirit and what we have in common.

"Have a day centred around communities. Even though what we've gone through with COVID has broken down a lot of barriers, I think you still have some areas where people don't know and don't interact with the people that live nearby. So, if you had a national initiative to start things off, you would have an icebreaker. You could do an event, because it's something that everybody else is doing, rather than being an outlier and trying to start something yourself. And if that gets going, then you'd hope it would carry on."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

10

Conclusion: everyone needs to play a part

Picture: The Linking Network

Chapter 10. Everyone needs to play a part

Over the last year we have been asking people who live in this country what divides us, what brings us together and how we might encourage more kindness and connectedness. The oldest people who took part in Talk/together were in their 90s and the youngest were of primary school age. Participants came from all the regions and nations of the UK and from all social backgrounds. With nearly 160,000 people involved in Talk/Together, over a nine-month period of enormous volatility and change, our report offers an authoritative picture of the state of the country and the society that we aspire to be.

Most people gave a great deal of thought to the questions they were asked and the answers they gave in response. Many people put forward constructive suggestions for policy change and the practical action that is needed to build a socially connected and kinder society. There was usually a remarkable degree of consensus between the public and the expert stakeholders when it came to these ideas.

By the very nature of the subjects we covered – Brexit, the Scottish independence debate, sectarian conflict, immigration and the Black Lives Matter protests – the discussions could have resulted in arguments. Yet we found that people listened to each other and were respectful of other people's views, even where they were very different to their own opinions.

These discussions show that it is possible to disagree with each other in a respectful manner. It is through such dialogue that we resolve the conflicts that are dividing our society.

What Talk/together uncovers is a society at a crossroads: one where significant divisions do exist,

but also where there is an appetite for that to change and a recent experience of what it feels like to be more connected. In the future, divisions could re-emerge or become deeper; or they could be bridged by a new appreciation of what we have in common. The legacy of COVID-19 could be one of growing isolation and distance from each other; or it could be a commitment to use the community spirit of 2020 as a foundation on which to build a better future.

As a society we now have a stark choice between an increasingly polarised society or one that builds on the positives of 2020 to bring people together to help break down rigid 'us and them' divides. If we are to take that second path towards a more connected society, all of us need to take part in this process. We need leadership from the top of government and locally. It is a long-term project and that is why we have called for the Government, institutions and all of us to make the next ten years a 'Decade of Reconnection' – with a programme of policy change and practical action to bring this country together and to heal social divides. We hope that the insights of Talk/together will help inform this work.

Every sector – education, business, sport, civic society and faith – can make their own contribution to bridging social divides. The /Together coalition brings together leading voices from across these different sectors and its future work will seek to change policy and engage the public in actions that help promote connection. It is also up to every one of us as individuals, through actions such as volunteering or just taking time to talk to a neighbour. We must all be part of these new efforts to address the challenges we face as a society and to make this country a better place for us all.

Final report

Appendices:
I. England regional summaries

East of England

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 6,236,000

The East of England is a diverse region that encompasses London's Home Counties, Thames Estuary towns such as Basildon, university cities such as Cambridge and Norwich, and much of the Fens, the UK's food-producing heartland. There are stark inequalities in this region. Cambridge is a seat of learning with thriving IT and bioscience sectors; while in Peterborough over a third of adults (32.6%) do not have GCSE-level qualifications. The agricultural region of the Fens has seen large-scale migration from the EU, with many of the new arrivals working in farming and food processing. Rapid population change in small Fenland towns led to growing public concern, reflected in voting patterns in the EU referendum. The vote in the Home Counties and university cities swung to Remain, while there was strong support for Leave in the Fens and in Essex.

Talk/together in the East of England

Some 5,169 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the East of England. The public discussions drew their participants from Essex and Hertfordshire, Peterborough and Norfolk. Both the public and stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 26 October 2020, at a time when footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign on free school meals had been in the news and the new Tier system had just been introduced, with resistance to putting Greater Manchester into the most restrictive Tier 3.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 51% of people in the East of England agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 22% disagreed. (UK = 53% agreed)[117].

What divides people?

COVID-19, food poverty, housing, Brexit and race and immigration were central themes of Talk/together discussions in the East of England. As in many other parts of the UK, people felt that society was divided at a national level but that local communities were united.

People's greatest concern was that the pandemic would increase the gap between rich and poor. In both the public and stakeholder discussions people talked about Marcus Rashford's campaign to extend free school meals to cover school holidays. Many people took hope from the swell of support shown by local councils and businesses who had offered to fund free meals. They felt that these offers had highlighted solidarity within communities.

Conversations about food poverty then fed into wider debates around wealth disparities and housing in the East of England. We decided to explore this subject in greater depth, as housing is a topical issue in this region. In parts of Hertfordshire and Cambridge, house prices are among the highest in the UK. There are plans for new housing developments around Cambridge and Bedford and a new garden town in Essex. Whether or not to build on the Green Belt remains a subject of heated debate. The design of new housing can also affect our levels of social connection.

There was praise for Stevenage's town centre regeneration plans, where seating and green space are encouraging people to meet and mix. Empty retail space has also been converted into residential property to halt the town centre decline. But people also spoke about blocks of flats that lacked communal space for neighbours to interact, leading elderly residents to become isolated throughout the pandemic. Similarly, new affordable housing was seen to be concentrated in locations that lacked schools, green space and community assets.

"I'm involved in a number of community groups in Hertfordshire. Although there is a lot of division in all sorts of political aspects, on a community level, where I live, people are pulling together. There's lots of people helping each other. There are lots of community groups supporting more vulnerable people. So, I don't see a great divide in my locality." (Participant in public discussion, East of England, October 2020).

"These housing estates are going up and there's no infrastructure behind them. There are no community centres or not even a

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[117] Aggregated results from 5,5,47 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

central park, or anything. I mean, in Norwich, you see these housing estates going up, the only thing you really see next to them is a Hungry Horse. You are just making a society that drives everywhere by doing this."
(Participant in public discussion, East of England, October 2020).

What brings people together?

Those who took part in the public discussions, as well as people who responded to the open survey, had clear ideas about the things that bring people together, including sport and other common interests, arts, fundraising for charities and volunteering. There were many volunteers in the discussions, including an NHS blood biker, a volunteer in an NHS mental health clinic and someone who welcomed and supported military families.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 20% of the adult population of the East of England – some 990,000 people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[118]. Of this number, 330,000 were first-time volunteers.

Discussing how housing could bring people together, more mixed tenure and affordable housing was a popular suggestion, noting its potential to bridge generational and class divides. The divisions that can be caused by plans for new housing – 'nimbyism' – could be avoided by better community consultation at the planning stage. Others raised the need for better access to green space and outdoor seating areas – with such facilities offering opportunities for safe meeting space amid the pandemic.

"Part of the school curriculum should be for each child to be involved in their local community on a weekly basis, eg. litter picking, linking with local care homes etc. so this kind of interaction becomes intrinsic into our psyche and reduces the chances of feelings of disconnection as we grow up."
(Response to open survey).

"Members of the community band together for major events such as Remembrance Day,

this year we knitted and crocheted poppies. At Christmas time we donate presents en-masse for those in care homes or who live alone and families that are struggling. We also donate food parcels and get them delivered to those in need. Throughout the lockdown, residents and businesses donated food and time to prepare a meal every Wednesday and then delivered it."
(Response to open survey).

"More space for actual debate using language that regular people will understand. Encouraging/ financially assisting people and especially women from different backgrounds into politics at all levels. Elections using proportional representation."
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in the East of England – a selection

The Norwich Together Alliance has been coordinated by Aviva, the insurance company, which has its headquarters in the city[119]. It links businesses with local charities and social enterprises, so they can work more effectively together. In the last year, the Norwich Together Alliance has brought the business and not-for-profit sector together to tackle loneliness and to help with COVID-19 relief.

The Rural Coffee Caravan connects people with each other, preventing loneliness and isolation. It tours villages in Suffolk, providing a space to meet for cake and coffee and acts as a mobile information centre.

All Saints with St Peter church, in Luton, is part of the Places of Welcome network, set up by Near Neighbours. People can go to Places of Welcome for refreshments, a friendly face and a conversation if and when they need it. With 200 such locations across the UK, Places of Welcome are located in a variety of venues including churches, mosques, temples, community centres and libraries. Near Neighbours also runs its Real People Honest Talk programme in Luton, which offers safe spaces where people can come together to talk about and resolve the difficult issues that divide communities.

[118] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults 16-19 December 2020. [119] Aviva is also a core funder of /Together.

East Midlands

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 4,836,000

The diverse geography of the East Midlands spans former coalfields, the agricultural region of the Fens, Northamptonshire and three major cities. The demography of one of these cities, Leicester, is unusual in that no one ethnic group is in the majority, although people of white British (45%) and British Indian (28%) ethnicities are the two largest ethnic groups. The Lincolnshire Fens has seen large-scale migration from the EU, with many of the new arrivals working in farming and food processing. Rapid population change in small Fenland towns led to growing public concern, reflected in voting patterns in the EU referendum.

Talk/together in the East Midlands

Some 4,374 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the East Midlands. The public discussions drew their participants from Derby, Leicester, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Nottingham, and included a group with 18-24 year old non-graduates. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 23 November 2020, during England's second lockdown.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 56% of people in the East Midlands agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 21% disagreed. (UK = 53% agreed)[120].

What divides people?

COVID-19, Brexit, race and immigration and broken politics were central themes of Talk/together discussions in the East Midlands. Similar to the discussions in many other parts of the UK, people felt that society was divided at a national level, but local communities were united.

People were fearful about the economic impacts of COVID-19, particularly on young people. The negative impact of the virus on mental health was another common theme.

The public groups included people from Leicester, a city that was put into a local lockdown at the end of July 2020 and had not seen much relaxation of the rules since then. People felt that their city had been forgotten by national policy-makers and its city centre felt empty. We were also told how COVID-19 had increased inter-ethnic tensions in the city, after outbreaks in the Asian-owned clothing factories had spread into the surrounding areas. Many of Leicester's Asian residents felt they were now being blamed for the lockdown.

The integration of migrants and refugees was also a central theme of the public and stakeholder discussions. Some of the Lincolnshire participants felt that their communities were now less divided than they were ten years ago, as migrant workers in the Fenland towns had settled down, learned English, started families and become part of the local community, although this was not a universal view.

Participants from Derby, Leicester and Nottingham had concerns about residential segregation, but believed that integration had taken place over time, with people from Leicester seeing migration as an integral part of the city's past and present. We were also surprised at the extent to which people talked about identity polarisation and 'culture wars', terms that we did not expect to be part of people's everyday lexicon. While identity polarisation was evident in some of the replies to the online survey, we did not expect people to self-identify as social liberals or social conservatives to the extent that they did in some of the discussions and in the survey.

"People are choosing sides on every issue. Mask/non-mask, Brexit or Remain, lockdown or no lockdown. And I think it's a need to belong to a tribe. I think people are feeling very disconnected at the moment. And being able to take a side over something gives a sense of control and some sense of meaning."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

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[120] Aggregated results from 5,5,47 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

"Universities must not become left wing social justice echo chambers. Bad ideas need to be beaten and universities must be places where you debate contentious issues."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

What brings people together?

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 21% of the adult population of the East Midlands – some 830,000 people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers in 2020, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[121]. Of this number, some 390,000 were first-time volunteers.

While COVID-19 had divided people, it had also brought communities together. In the public discussions we were told about relief efforts that had crossed ethnic and faith divides, involving churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. These relationships are likely to persist after the pandemic. There was also an appreciation of the role that local businesses had played during the pandemic, encouraging staff to volunteer and providing donations to foodbanks.

We were also told how people had organised local support, setting up WhatsApp and Facebook groups and leafleting people who may not be online. Eight months on, much of this informal support was still taking place and people were looking out for isolated or vulnerable neighbours.

There was an appeal for schools to do more to bridge social divides, for example by encouraging children to volunteer and by teaching them about parliament and how to have respectful political debates. Those who took part in the public discussions and responded to the open survey also made many suggestions about ways to restore political trust. Humour and support for the NHS united people across the UK. Many people also talked about the power of sport to bring communities together, with Leicester participants telling us how winning the Premier League in 2016 had united people of all backgrounds across the city.

"Some of the church organisations, other religious organisations, the Council of mosques, the gurdwara, they all responded. The Sikh community is quite famous for its charity work and they kicked into action, straightaway."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

"Try to think about the other guy – put yourself in his shoes."
(Response to open survey).

"More community activities where people help with local projects, especially those which bring people with different cultures and beliefs together, as this would help integration and understanding. Making people volunteer for four hours a month for these projects."
(Response to open survey).

"I think that there needs to be more diversity in Parliament, so that there's a voice for people of all backgrounds. If you've got a voice only from people who come from the same background, then it's only going to produce one viewpoint. Whereas, you know, our nation is made up of so many different types of people. We need a voice for all kinds of people."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

"What would it take to bring Leicester together? For the Foxes to win the League or the Cup."
(Participant in public discussion, East Midlands, November 2020).

Initiatives to bring people together in the East Midlands – a selection

Derby City Council has pioneered a 'Local Area Coordination' model of working in local communities. Each ward has a local area coordinator whose role is to find out what is happening, engage with the public, build on the existing strengths of communities and make sure that nobody falls through the net, making sure that people get one-to-one support if needed.

Groundwork Northamptonshire has been managing and growing the Green Patch, a community garden in Kettering. Transformed from waste ground, this shared green space now includes an orchard, cultivated beds, wildlife and play areas. It is used by schools and community groups and offers alternative education provision for those excluded from school, after-school learning and volunteering opportunities.

The St Philip's Centre, Leicester, works to help people from different backgrounds live well together, working with faith groups, schools, business, councils and civil society to achieve its aims. One of the projects it hosts is the Leicester Schools Linking Project which gives students the opportunity to explore and celebrate their own identities and the identities of their peers in different schools across the city and the county.

Tricky To Talk Hubs are relaxed informal spaces where people can talk to others who may be experiencing mental health difficulties and share experiences. There is also the opportunity to ask questions to a mental health professional who joins the second half of the session. The project has been set up by Nottingham Forest Football Club and Nottingham Forest Community Trust to encourage fans to talk more openly about their mental health, following the loss of two fans who took their own lives.

Community Links, part of YMCA Lincolnshire, has been funded by West Lindsey Council to strengthen communities housed in former Ministry of Defence accommodation. When RAF bases in this part of the Fens were closed down, their housing was sold off to private landlords. Lacking a long history and community facilities, these settlements became the home to many migrant workers, and soon became run down. Community Links has supported local residents to renovate a village hall and improve these isolated villages.

London

Background

Estimated population 2019 = 8,962,000

London is a thriving, confident and tolerant city with a long history of welcoming newcomers, from elsewhere in the UK and overseas. Some 35% of London's population was born overseas, and its schools are an integration success story. In 2019, some 50,369 people attended ceremonies in London granting them British citizenship. But at the same time, London can also feel like a divided and disconnected city:

• There are huge wealth and income divides in London, which encompasses some of the UK's wealthiest local authority wards as well as some of the poorest.

• London has a very mobile population, with thousands of people moving in and out of the city each year as well as moving within the Greater London area. Such high levels of population churn mean that many people do not know their neighbours or put down roots in their community.

• Some 320,000 Londoners could not speak English well or at all, at the time of the 2011 Census.

• There are social identity divides across London, between the cosmopolitan inner city and London's more conservative suburbs. This social division was highlighted in the EU referendum: some 69.7% of the votes cast in Havering were for Leave, while 78.6% of the votes in Lambeth were for Remain.

Talk/together in London

• Some 7,518 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in Greater London. The public discussions drew their participants from north and south London, mixing those from inner city local authorities with those from the suburbs. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 5 October 2020. Londoners and representatives of London organisations also took part in many of the cross-UK discussions for stakeholders and members of the public.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 52% of people in London agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 20% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[122].

Some 59% of Londoners agreed that their 'local area is a place where people of different backgrounds get on well together', compared with 48% of people across the UK[123].

Some 33% of Londoners speak to their neighbours less than once a week, compared with 26% of people across the UK who gave this answer[124].

What divides people?

Many of the issues that were raised elsewhere in the UK were brought up in the survey responses from London and in the discussions that took place in the capital. The UK's exit from the EU featured heavily across the discussions, casting forward to the end of the transition period in January. Many expressed an ongoing sense of division that had yet to heal since the referendum, while others added that the conditions brought about by COVID-19 had made it harder for those on both sides of the argument to come together again. There was a sense that, with the pandemic having reduced face-to-face discussion, conversations around the issue were being held in online spaces, where respectful dialogue was more likely to be shut down, or to spiral into aggression and name-calling.

Perceptions of Black Lives Matter were also split. Most participants showed a sense of pride in the diversity of their city and felt that the demonstrations of the summer of 2020 had brought new energy to combatting discrimination and prejudice. However, views on the protests drew attention to generational divides, with some people concerned about the risks of holding demonstrations during a pandemic.

Intergenerational division was an issue that was also raised in the public and stakeholder meetings alike. London's population is comparatively young: the median age in London is 35.6 years, compared with 40.3 across the UK. People's social lives, workplaces and housing are segregated by age in London, often

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[122] Aggregated results from 5,5,47 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.
[123] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-19 December 2020. [124] Ibid.

more so than in other parts of the UK. Many people were concerned that young Londoners would never afford to own their own homes and would therefore be unable to put down roots, further increasing age segregation in London.

Some 50% of people in Yorkshire and the Humber selected the North-South divide as one of the top three issues that worried them most, as did 44% of people in the North West. This compared with 18% of people in London. With COVID-19 highlighting North-South divides, we asked how people from outside the capital see London. Words that were used included "affluent", "greedy", "over-populated", "fast-paced", "cosmopolitan" and "unfriendly". But there was little appreciation in the London discussions that social identity divides and inequalities of wealth and power between London and the rest of the UK could lead to resentment and mistrust. London's relationship with those who live outside its boundaries is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed if we are to come together as a country.

"I think we're very divided as a nation at the moment. Obviously, things like COVID haven't helped in the midst of Brexit coming up at the end of the year. I mean, no one's actually getting out and about and seeing each other, having conversations and being able to get united together. And in one aspect, you've got people who are behind computer screens, feeling like they're saying whatever they want to say and getting away with it. But on the other side, you've got some people saying that we live in a very PC culture where you can't openly express your opinions just in case you offend somebody, then that causes issues. I just don't think conversations are being had."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020).

"I live in north-west London, and I haven't seen any sort of a community feel around the area. I generally tend to just see people literally keeping themselves to themselves, doing their own thing, no conversations being had. I haven't seen any

rise in antisocial behaviour, but I haven't seen much community spirit."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020).

"The inequality has been going on for so long. I was pleased that people were finally doing something to make people aware of it. But I'm not really sure what will happen from the Black Lives Matter marches. We'll have to wait and see what happens in terms of policies and laws and things. But I think, it did bring people together for a short time, but then it also ended up just making other groups who are against it more prominent."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in London are similar to the rest of the UK. Common circumstances, shared activities and shared identities bring people together. Londoners have a strong sense of identity, which unites people from different backgrounds in this city. In the public discussions, many people expressed more pride in being a Londoner than they did in being British.

In 2020, neighbourly acts of kindness and the relief effort brought communities together in London. Higher proportions of Londoners are working from home than elsewhere in the UK, a trend that can foster local connectedness. But the strength of the community spirit that was manifest in 2020 varied across the city.

People who lived in in areas with a high proportion of private rental property often talked about less community spirit and a lower turnout during the weekly Clap for Carers. Far from a lack of desire for more residents to come together in these high-churn areas, they rather lacked community leaders. In one of the public discussions, people suggested a need for leaders with roots in the area who could start the momentum for initiatives and help to overcome people's initial reticence. We were told *"it only takes one or two to get out there and initiate something [...]*

to knock on doors or put flyers out and say right, let's do something." Some 36% of people living in London agreed that 'people don't organise events in my community, but I'd join in if they did'. This desire was reflected in the public discussions and in the open survey, where people put forward many ideas to connect Londoners with each other.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 33% of adults in London, equating to 2,320,000 people, offered their time as formal or informal volunteers, compared with 23% of people across the UK. Of this number, 660,000 Londoners were first-time volunteers, with many wanting to volunteer again.

There is a real desire among many Londoners to reconnect in a city that can feel disconnected. Responses from people in London to the question 'What could bring people together?' included the following:

"Street parties so that we can meet neighbours, offer help, organise keeping our streets free of litter, trim hedges, window boxes and volunteer generally."
(Response to open survey).

"Learn how to disagree with each other productively, how to listen to other points of view with an open mind, understanding that multiple different viewpoints can co-exist and actually make us stronger, and that it's not about 'us and them."
(Response to open survey).

"Just get to know people who have a different background from you, or ethnicity... because if you don't, people tend to be scared of what they don't know. If you go to a mother and toddler group you've both got small children, you're both doing the same thing. And that reduces the divide because you're no longer different, you're the same."
(Participant in public discussion, London, October 2020),

Initiatives to bring people together in London – a selection

In 2016 the Mayor of London appointed a deputy mayor for social integration and social inclusion. The Deputy Mayor has taken forward a programme of work to promote shared experiences, to support Londoners to be active citizens and to address barriers that prevent Londoners from taking part in the life of their city. The deputy mayor's work includes the London Family Fund which supports projects that bring families together to build relationships and extend their social networks[125].

Many of London's housing associations encourage their tenants to be active citizens. Peabody has over 1,000 volunteers whose time is recognised through an annual awards ceremony. It also has an employee volunteer programme – the Peabody Promise – which gives staff 14 hours' paid time off a year to help with community projects.

There is a lot of work taking place to increase digital inclusion. Catbytes is one such project that uses volunteers to refurbish second-hand devices. It has partnered with local schools and community organisations such as AgeUK to target those most at risk of digital exclusion, who can borrow a computer on a rolling 30-day basis. Alongside this, the enterprise runs 'Techy Tea Club', a weekly social event that partners volunteers with 'students' who receive tailored assistance with digital skills. Meanwhile, chats over tea and biscuits encourage a welcoming space for social contact – often fostering new friendships between younger volunteers and older students.

Get Out and Get Active, a programme run by Disability Rights UK, brings disabled and non-disabled people together to try new activities and enjoy being physically active.

Xenia connects women learning English with women who speak fluent English, to share and learn together. It also helps other groups of volunteers elsewhere in the UK set up similar conversation and shared learning clubs.

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[125] Mayor of London (2018) *All of Us: The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration,* London: Greater London Authority.

North East

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 2,670,000

Talk/together in the North East

Some 2,370 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the North East. The public discussions drew their participants from County Durham, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland. A further public discussion drew half its participants from Berwick-upon-Tweed and half from Eyemouth, across the border in Scotland. These discussions, and those with local stakeholders, took place in the week beginning 2 November 2020, immediately after England's second lockdown was announced.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 48% of people in the North East agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while 26% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[126].

What divides people?

The impact of COVID-19 on the North East was the dominant theme that was raised in the public discussions and in the responses to the open survey. While people felt that the Brexit debate had been divisive, it had now been over-shadowed by COVID-19. People were concerned about mental ill-health and loneliness, with older people and those with disabilities most vulnerable to isolation.

Many people were anxious about their jobs and feared unemployment would increase in the North East, widening the North-South divide. These are very real worries: the level of unemployment in the North East at the end of 2020 was 8% for men, the highest of any English region. We were told that the economy in the North East was more fragile, with the region more reliant on public sector employment that had been affected by spending cuts over the last 10 years. In the discussions and in responses to the open survey, the decline of the high street was also raised as evidence of the North East's weak economy.

The North-South divide was a salient issue in all the public discussions in the North East. In contrast to many other parts of the UK, people who took part in the North East groups talked a lot about class divides in the UK. As well economic inequalities and a lack of investment in the North East, some people felt that the views and voice of working class people were not valued in a London-centric society.

The Scottish independence debate was also raised in all of the public discussions in the North East, with many people worried that Scottish elections, to be held in May 2021, may chart the path to independence.

An overarching sentiment was the lack of trust that people had in politicians, evident in all the discussions we held in the North East and in the open survey responses. This feeling seemed stronger in the North East discussions than in any other place apart from Northern Ireland, and is reflected in low political turnout at elections. Restoring political trust is crucial if the UK is to heal its divides, as confidence in our politicians, parties and government acts as a vital glue, uniting citizens around a shared confidence in our democratic system.

"It's like they've drawn a wedge between every country in the UK. I mean, we've got different rules for England and Scotland. And obviously, our being in Berwick or just north of the border, you're really affected by that. But COVID is dividing people in other ways, other than the different rules between the four nations."
(Participant in public discussion, Berwick-Eyemouth group, November 2020).

"I think a lot of politicians are just completely out of touch with reality. I don't think they really understand what poverty means. I don't think they've spent enough time in the North East to see what's going on, to see the mental health crisis, to see how children are struggling in school as well."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, November 2020).

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[126] Aggregated results from 5,547 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in the North East are similar to the rest of the UK. We were told that support for national institutions such the NHS and the monarchy, sport and common interests and national moments all brought people together.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 17% of the adult population of the North East – some 360,000 people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[127]. Of this number, 130,000 were first-time volunteers.

Participants in the public discussions placed a lot of emphasis on the need to stimulate the North East's economy as an important way to address social division, mentioning the need for continued investment – including in the proposed Teesside free port. It was also felt that sport was good at bringing people together, with the good work of football clubs in communities being mentioned.

We asked how political trust might be restored, with many people suggesting better political education in schools, so that children may learn how they can influence decisions that affect their future.

"In Whitley Bay a new Facebook site was put up and you could join if you had free time, if you wanted to help walk people's dogs, shop, whatever. So there was a list compiled of helpers. And then there was the list of those who would be classed as more vulnerable, who weren't able to get out or have family or friends to support them. And from what I can see the Facebook site is still alive and active."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, May 2020).

"There have been more people coming together than I've ever seen in my lifetime, which has made a positive out of a negative situation. There's been a lot more communication in the local community, there's been a lot more help, there's been a lot

more support, and maybe without COVID that may not have happened."
(Participant in public discussion, North East, May 2020).

Responses to the open survey question 'what could bring us together?'

"Community engagement. Giving everyone an equal voice. Mix the social classes. Decrease the gap between rich and poor. Enable people to value themselves."
(Response to open survey).

"Emphasise our similarities, look for what we have in common rather than our differences. Stop trolling and hateful views on social media and the internet."
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in the North East – a selection

Newcastle University Student's Union runs the Go Volunteer Scheme, where the university's 28,000 students are encouraged to volunteer in their local community and more widely. Projects on offer include NUSU Into Schools, a student-led outreach project that goes into schools to raise aspirations and encourages children to think about higher education.

Foundation of Light is the community charity of Sunderland AFC, which works with thousands of children and adults every year, improving lives through the power of football. Its Back in the Game employability programme supports jobseekers across the North East by raising skills and confidence while assisting them through the job application process. The course consists of a mixture of classroom, practical and physical activities which help participants' employment prospects.

In Darlington, children from Corporation Road Primary School attended a citizenship ceremony and welcomed the new citizens. The students gave a presentation about the history of Darlington and local culture, including the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage, and sang the National Anthem.

Middlesbrough Community Land Trust has been set up by a group of local residents living in the Gresham

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[127] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults 16-19 December 2020.

and Middlehaven area. They are renovating two empty corner shops, which will become four flats. The Community Land Trust is also working with local residents to produce a community-owned plan for the area, which will guide further investment.

Stockton-on-Tees council is showing ways that local authorities can work with business and the public to bring people back into town centres and high streets. Its plan has been based on public consultation and will open up the town centre to the Tees, replacing a near empty shopping centre with a riverside park, greenery, offices and leisure space.

North West

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 7,341,000

Bounded to the east by the Pennines, the North West is the third most populous region in England. Its diverse geographies include two cities – Liverpool and Manchester – industrial towns, seaside resorts and rural areas. While the North West has lost some of its manufacturing base, there are still thriving pharmaceutical and aerospace industries in the area. Manchester, similar to London, is a city of large wealth divides.

Some 9.5% of the population of the North West was born outside the UK and the region has a large Muslim population. Although many people are well integrated into their communities, many of the North West's conurbations have high levels of residential segregation, with minority ethnic and migrant groups highly clustered in particular areas, reducing opportunities for social contact in neighbourhoods and through schooling.

Talk/together in the North West

Some 6,180 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the North West. The public discussions drew their participants from Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Liverpool and Warrington and included a group made up of people aged 65 years and over. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 1 December 2020 as England's second lockdown ended.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 52% of people in the North West agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 22% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[128].

What divides people?

COVID-19, the North-South divide, Brexit and community relations were dominant themes in the discussions. Brexit was a much more prominent issue in the groups than in previous weeks because the UK-EU trade negotiations were in the news.

People talked about how COVID-19 had divided people, with out-groups – young people, students, people who live in particular areas and Muslims – blamed by some people for what they saw as irresponsible behaviour. Concerns were expressed that the far-right is exploiting such views to gain support. In both the public and stakeholder discussions, people were also concerned about conspiracy theories associated with COVID-19. We were told that there were anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests in Liverpool almost every weekend and that arguments about COVID-19 had split friendship groups.

As in other parts of the UK, people were also concerned about the economic impact of COVID-19 on young people and on people's mental health. There were appeals for more mental health support in all the public discussions, which were characterised by people's willingness to share their own struggles. There was also debate about the impacts of working from home: whether this freed people's time to become involved in their local communities, or whether it would reduce social mixing because people were not meeting face-to-face or in town centres.

The integration of migrant and minority ethnic groups was another theme that was brought up in the discussions, which focussed on language barriers, residential and social segregation. Two of the public discussions included people who had come to the UK as migrants and they were able to share their perspectives on integrating into their local communities. There was a consensus that a two-way process of integration helped communities manage the impacts of migration.

Political trust was low and there was a widely-held view that Government policy favoured London. In all of the discussions participants agreed that COVID-19 had increased North-South divides, with people voicing their anger and frustration about the application of public health regulations, a London-Centric media, lack of investment in broadband and transport infrastructure. The HS2 and Crossrail

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[128] Aggregated results from 5,547 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

projects were cited as examples of this unfairness. We were surprised by the strength of feeling on the North-South divide, which was also reflected in comments in the open survey. Some 44% of people who live in the North West cited the North-South divide as one of their top three divisions (out of eight) that worried them going forward, compared with 18% of people in London and 26% of people across the UK[129].

"The way politicians behave is atrocious, in this crisis they should be working together for the greater good rather than scoring points, this is an appalling example to set which then just causes everyone to think this intolerance is acceptable!"
(Response to open survey).

"One thing that really jumps out to me when I've been into London is the money that's been spent on that Crossrail system – at least £15 billion. And these figures get chucked around by government as if they're water. And if you spent that sort of money in the North West, the effect would be incredible. Just on the railways alone that would make a massive difference."
(Participant in public discussion, North West, December 2020).

"There are divisions between the classes. This is partly about money but also about how we act and speak."
(Response to open survey).

"I'm British about 12 years now, but I am not feeling I am accepted by society as being British."
(Participant in public discussion, North West, November 2020)

What brings people together?

COVID-19 has brought communities closer as well as dividing people. While it was not a universally held view of people who took part in the discussions, most people did feel that the relief effort had brought their local community together. In the public discussions we were told about relief efforts involving churches and mosques that had crossed ethnic and faith divides. There was an appreciation of the role that local businesses had played during the pandemic too, encouraging staff to volunteer and providing donations to foodbanks.

We were also told about how people had organised local support: setting up WhatsApp and Facebook groups; leafleting people who may not be online; calling people who might feel isolated and shopping for vulnerable neighbours.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 1,410,000 people in the North West – or 24% of the adult population – volunteered during 2020, offering their time to the NHS or charities, or informally volunteering through their support for neighbours. Of those that volunteered their time in 2020, some 580,000 were first time volunteers, many of whom said they wanted to give their time again[130].

Sport was felt to be important in bringing communities together, through support for national teams, but also through participation at a local level. Those who took part in the public discussions and others who responded to the open survey also made many suggestions about ways to build confidence in the political system. Many people felt that footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign was a positive example of how people can secure policy change and that he was a positive political role model for young people.

Responses to the question 'What could bring people together?'

"Have better facilities and funding for things like local sports clubs and community centres, a re-invention of the high street to make it somewhere people have a reason to visit and to linger."
(Participant in public discussion, North West, December 2020).

"Stronger links between age groups. For example, a school adopting its local elderly care home. Possibly: Primary – sending Xmas cards, choir visits, reading together. Secondary schools – put on a Christmas dinner with carols. Young people are our country's building blocks, let's give them the

[129] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-19 December 2020. [130] Ibid.

right values. People making the effort to chat to a stranger – might be the only contact that person gets all day."
(Response to open survey).

"The ability to talk openly and freely about your thoughts, feelings and emotions that are generally open to criticism. People no longer share their true self for fear they will be attacked or scrutinised. Open conversation promotes education and insight. Matters like race, religion, sexuality and politics are no longer discussed as people are overly attacked for their opinion. We're silently divided. Celebrate everyone – that includes all genders, sexual identities, races or religions. My answer is to promote open and free conversation. Also, if you are going to celebrate one special characteristic, level the playing field and celebrate all, not just the ones that seem more okay to celebrate, like your colour or sexual identity."
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in the North West – a selection

#WeStandTogether became a registered charity following the Manchester Arena attack in May 2017. It undertakes community dialogue and work to build resilience to hate crime and extremism. It is working with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to take forward work to promote social cohesion.

Blackburn with Darwen is a government integration action area. *Our Community, Our Future,* its integration strategy, sets out a range of initiatives to increase social contact between people of different backgrounds in the area.

Street Games is a London and Manchester-based charity that works to harness the power of sport to create positive change in the lives of disadvantaged young people across the UK. Sport teaches key skills such as teamwork, encourages volunteering and brings people together, breaking down barriers. Through its Doorstep Sports initiatives, it has worked with local youth organisations to provide opportunities for young people to be involved in sport.

The Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation, based in Warrington, works to prevent, resolve and respond to conflict. It works with children and adults in the North West and wider area, and provides training and teaching resources on peace-building, dialogue and conflict resolution.

ACTion with Communities in Cumbria works with people, communities and businesses across the county to encourage random and planned acts of kindness throughout the year. This culminates with Kind Cumbria Day on 13 November – a celebration of kindness.

Liverpool Cares – part of the Cares Family – tackles loneliness and isolation in Liverpool by bringing older people and younger people together.

South East

Background

Estimated population 2019 = 9,180,000

There is not a strong regional identity in England's most populous region, with the diverse geographies of the South East encompassing the Home Counties, university cities, Kentish estuary towns, fertile countryside, the South Downs and New Forest national parks, as well as a continuously built-up area that stretches from Southampton to Seaford. In the EU referendum, the council area that had the highest Leave vote was Gravesham (65.4%), while Oxford had the highest vote for Remain (70.3%). Some 13.1% of the population of the South East is estimated to have been born outside the UK (UK 13.8%)[131].

Talk/together in the South East

Some 12,086 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the South East. The public discussions drew their participants from Kent, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Portsmouth. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 19 October 2020, after England's new Tier system had been announced.

Findings from the nationally representative surveys Some 54% of people in the South East agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 22% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[132].

What divides people?

COVID-19 was top of people's minds and there was a strong sense that the COVID-19 crisis had both divided and united people. Many people felt confused by scientific evidence and the Government's response to the pandemic. People's resilience had been tested and they talked about falling out with family and friends about these issues. At the same time, the support that neighbours were giving to each other had brought people together, as had the activities of local charities to support vulnerable families. Many people also talked about their local community's response to footballer Marcus Rashford's call to provide holiday meals to children from low-income families. Pubs, cafés and other local businesses had stepped in to provide holiday food and this had engendered a sense of local togetherness.

Brexit was a salient issue in the discussions. This was not surprising, given its salience in the news during the previous weeks. Some of the Folkestone participants feared traffic jams would block Kent's roads once the Brexit transition period was over.

Immigration was also an issue that was raised early in the discussion, with reference to migrants who were crossing the English Channel. While social media coverage of this issue is very polarised, talking to people in greater detail reveals a more complex set of reactions. Those who took part in the discussions were sympathetic to the plight of refugees and knew that many of those crossing the Channel had fled war and persecution from countries such as Iran and Syria. There was an acknowledgement that people who get into tiny boats must be desperate.

This compassion is matched with concerns that the Government was unable to control the UK's borders and perceptions that people were crossing Europe to take advantage of the UK's benefits system. No-one knew that asylum-seekers are barred from working in the UK. Concerns were also voiced that new arrivals often did not integrate into their new communities, because they were not working or spoke little English. Some people also felt that any discussion about immigration was shut down, or feared expressing their opinions in case they were accused of racism. A few people in the groups had met refugees and there were participants who were migrants themselves or had lived in other countries. There was a consensus that integration – social mixing and being able to speak a common language – helped dispel misconceptions about new arrivals and encouraged good community relations.

"People are at each other's throats. Everyone's got different views of what's going on currently. What's going on with Brexit? What's going on with COVID? What's going on with feeding kids? Everyone who I've thought was along the same sort of wavelength as myself has completely different views. And it's had

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[131] Annual Population Survey, June 2020 estimate. [132] Aggregated results from 5,547 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

a major impact on friendships and relationships with people."
(Participant in public discussion, South East, October 2020).

"I think our biggest division down here in the South East would be border control. All the boats come in and the old barracks has been turned into temporary housing for these migrants. And let's just say it's an uneasy time down here."
(Participant in public discussion, South East, October 2020).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in the South East are similar to the rest of the UK. Many of those who took part in the public discussions saw national and local moments as important opportunities to bring people of different backgrounds together. They described examples such as VE Day and Clap for Carers, but also local events such as Banbury Fair, the Milton Keynes marathon weekend and a Nepalese festival in Folkestone to mark the contribution of the Gurkhas.

Participants in the public discussions also saw informal and formal volunteering as important in bringing people together. The public discussion groups in the South East included many people who had given their time as volunteers, either to help out during lockdown or as a longer-term commitment. Participants in the discussions included charity fundraisers and trustees, people who worked with the homeless or in foodbanks, volunteer blood bikers and people who had helped out vulnerable neighbours. There were also school governors and a councillor in the public discussion groups. For many of these volunteers, offering their time had enabled them to meet new friends and had brought them into contact with people from different backgrounds. One of the participants in the public discussion, a migrant worker from India, talked about his experience as a volunteer and how it had helped him integrate into his local community.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 25% of adults in the South East – some

1,810,000 people – offered their time as informal or formal volunteers. Of those, 670,000 were first time volunteers, many of whom are interested in volunteering again[133].

"I came out and cooked something and helped the homeless people. And that's really working well. And I do go as a volunteer, and it really helped me to integrate, to meet people and listen to them. And sometimes it helps me to think back. I could be crazy busy with work and with the family. But these kind of little chats with the homeless people made me come back to the ground."
(Participant in public discussion, South East, October 2020).

"Have more events to produce a feeling of pride in not only our local communities but in the country, such as more celebration days where we are encouraged to get together, as on VE Day."
(Participant in public discussion, South East, October 2020).

"Encouraging community participation across social, cultural and economic groups. Making people take responsibility for their own area, for example street cleans, volunteering, befriending, community problem solving. The activities taking place in schools to introduce children to the concepts of different backgrounds could be carried on, in a fashion, in society in general. For example, workplaces holding cultural events, societies asking communities to bring their ideas together to solve a problem, actively encouraging people from different backgrounds to contribute freely. People new to an area or the country could be introduced to local community groups, social groups, classes and so on."
(Response to open survey).

"Children from an early age mixing and interacting with older people on a regular basis."
(Response to open survey).

[133] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults 16-19 December 2020.

Initiatives to bring people together in the South East – a selection

The design of some new housing developments has considered social connection, for example a street of new homes for affordable rent in Chatham built by Medway Council in partnership with MHS Homes.

Unipart, the car-part supply and logistics company based in Oxford, has a proud record of staff engagement and support for its community work. Staff have given thousands of volunteer hours and its Unipart Inspires scheme provides work experience and training for those at risk of unemployment, including armed forces veterans.

Kent Equality Cohesion Council and Cohesion Plus organise lively St George's Day parades in Dartford and Gravesham. These events involve children and parents in local schools, Morris dancers, brass bands and bhangra troupes in a shared Saint's day festival that represents modern Britain.

Brighton Table Tennis Club is one of many clubs across the country using sports to bring refugees and locals together. Since it began in 2007, the club has welcomed hundreds from all walks of life, including the elderly, adults with learning disabilities, children in care and refugees and asylum-seekers. For its work with refugees, Brighton Table Tennis Club was awarded 'Club of Sanctuary' Status in 2016 by City of Sanctuary, a nationwide movement which recognises cities, schools and local groups welcoming refugees.

South West

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 5,625,000

The South West is England's most rural region, although it includes the cities of Bath, Bristol, Exeter and Plymouth, and the Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole conurbation. It is a region of gaps in income and of wealth gaps: although the South West is the second-wealthiest region in the UK[134], Cornwall, with an economy that relies heavily on tourism and mining, is one of the poorest parts of western Europe.

Talk/together in the South West

Some 9,184 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the South West. The public discussions drew their participants from the Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole area, Bristol, Plymouth and Somerset. These, and the stakeholder discussions, took place in the week beginning 14 December 2020, soon after the vaccine programme started.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 53% of people in the South West agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 23% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[135].

What divides people?

COVID-19, Brexit, the Black Lives Matter protests and the impact of social media on social relations were prominent themes in the discussions held in the South West.

Most of the participants in the public discussions felt that COVID-19 had both divided and united communities. While most people believed that the relief effort and moments such as Clap for Carers had brought people together, this was not a universal view. A few people talked about crime and anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhoods, which they felt had worsened during lockdown.

Brexit was a salient theme in the public discussions, against a backdrop of tense UK-EU negotiations throughout December. All our public discussion groups in England and Wales comprised a balance of Leave and Remain voters, including those who strongly identified with a particular side as well as those for whom Brexit was no longer an issue that invoked such strong emotions. In the South West, many people confessed to having little or no interaction with others who voted a different way to themselves, either online or by refraining from discussing the issue face-to-face.

Participants in the public and stakeholder discussions talked about generational differences in the Brexit vote, and in attitudes over race and British history. It was clear that the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston remained a topical issue in Bristol, with similar debates about legacies of empire elsewhere in the South West. While some participants shared how the Black Lives Matter protests had inspired more debate among younger people about contemporary and historic racism, it was widely felt that a broader and more open dialogue was needed on these issues between different age groups. Younger and older participants alike shared a desire for a national conversation on race but expressed feeling shut-down by others with opposing views, leading them to avoid breaching the conversation with neighbours, friends or relatives.

"I think the issue [Black Lives Matter] is avoided, kind of like talking about religion used to be. Everybody's opinions are very strong. Everybody is desperate to voice them. And, unfortunately, we seem to have lost a little bit of tolerance and forbearance of other people. Our opinion is right, which automatically makes anyone else's wrong." (Participant in public discussion, South West, December 2020).

"Do something for the people living alone. Not just the elderly, but all the people in the middle who've been forgotten about and left to get on with it. Those of us with no family, no bubble, no car, suddenly stuck working from

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[134] By median household wealth, from the ONS Wealth and Assets Survey.
[135] Aggregated results from 5,547 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

home. I am surrounded by couples and families. There is nothing here to connect to as a single, white, middle-aged woman who works full time and has been stuck working from home for 9 months now – they've closed our office permanently. Volunteering and local activities aren't much fun by yourself, and people generally are with their friends and families and do not welcome strangers."
(Response to open survey).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in the South West are similar to the rest of the UK. The COVID-19 relief efforts had brought neighbours and communities closer. Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 20% of the adult population of the South West – 930,000 people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers in 2020, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[136]. Some 410,000 of these were first-time volunteers[137], many of whom said they wanted to volunteer again.

Participants in the public discussions also talked about the things that brought people together across the UK. These included shared values such as tolerance and openness, humour and self-deprecation; and support for institutions such as the NHS, the monarchy and football teams, as well as shared national moments.

In many parts of the UK, people have argued that social media divides people more than it brings them together. In the South West, social media was seen in a more positive light with regard to local relief efforts. Participants felt that online platforms had been crucial in bringing communities together during successive lockdowns, at a time when people were physically separated. They felt that local food banks, mutual aid and WhatsApp groups and community pages set up via Facebook had strengthened feelings of belonging in their area. The potential to act as a linking tool within communities was seen, by many, as a new and empowering way to inspire civic action, both during the crisis and into the future.

Views about the benefits of digital connectivity were balanced against concerns for those in the community who risked exclusion from such online interaction. The South West has the highest proportion of over 65s of any English region; meanwhile Ofcom data shows that 30% of 65-74s and 51% of over 75s are internet non-users[138]. Several voiced worries that their elderly neighbours were being left behind by this digitisation of neighbourly contact and public services. While online efforts to organise and respond to the crisis were seen as valuable, people believed that such relief initiatives should be supplemented by more conventional door-knocking and telephone calls to avoid excluding those without the skills and confidence to go online.

"Not only do we have live communities, we also have online communities, and certainly, my connections are mostly online rather than in person, particularly through my LGBT choir and community. So, it's not just about real life, our connections are through online communities as well."
(Participant in public discussion, South West, December 2020).

"All these nice things have happened, groups have come together. You know, in our area people cook an extra cottage pie. And they say, does anyone need a meal? I think we need to remind people that people are doing really nice, selfless things. Stories like that should be on the news so we can be reminded that things are not always so bad."
(Participant in public discussion, South West, December 2020).

Responses to the open survey question 'What could help bring us together?'

"Remove anonymity from social media platforms."
(Response to open survey).

"Remove traffic from town centres, more pedestrianised areas, more open spaces, parks and leisure facilities."
(Response to open survey).

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[136] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-19 December 2020. [137] Ibid.
[138] Ofcom (2020) *Adults' media use and attitudes report 2020,* London: Ofcom.

Initiatives to bring people together in the South West – a selection

Following the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020, the Mayor of Bristol has set up the independent Bristol History Commission to enable an open conversation and a deeper understanding about Bristol's past, including the city's links with slavery. Chaired by Professor Tim Cole, it is hoped that the commission will help people from all backgrounds understand how Bristol became the city it is today.

Independents for Frome is a group of local residents who are part of the Flatpack Democracy Movement. They aim to take party politics out of local government and won all the seats on the town council in 2015. Their aim is to work together cooperatively to address local issues. Since its election, the new town council has delivered services to meet the community's needs, which include the restoration of the Cheese and Grain building, a member-owned arts and community venue.

The Eden Project came up with the idea for the Big Lunch in 2009. On one day each year, in all parts of the UK, millions of people come together for a meal. The Big Lunch provides a platform on which other things can grow, from friendship and conversations to tackling bigger issues that may affect a street or a neighbourhood.

Part of a national network, Swindon City of Sanctuary is an active group of volunteers who support asylum-seekers and refugees, helping them to become part of their new communities. In 2020, this City of Sanctuary group set up an online befriending service for refugees who were feeling isolated. The group also put together daily activity boxes for newly arrived, asylum-seeking children who were unable to attend school.

West Midlands

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 5,934,000

The diverse geographies of the West Midlands comprise four major conurbations: Birmingham, Coventry, Stoke-on-Trent and Wolverhampton, encompassing both industrial and market towns and rural areas, with Herefordshire one of the most sparsely populated parts of England. Over the last 60 years the region has lost many of the key industries that provided employment and defined communities, such as mining, steel and motor manufacture, as well as smaller industries such as carpet manufacturing and leather.

The West Midlands is the English region with the second highest proportion of people from minority ethnic groups. Some 12.6% of the population of the West Midlands is estimated to have been born outside the UK, of which a third (33%) are from EU countries. Some of this group have settled in and around the Vale of Evesham.

Talk/together in the West Midlands

Some 6,618 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the West Midlands. The public discussions drew their participants from Birmingham, Coventry, Stoke-on-Trent, Wolverhampton and Worcestershire. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 16 November 2020, soon after the results of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine trial were published.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 53% of people in the West Midlands agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 15% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[139].

What divides people?

Fears about the impact of COVID-19 on the economy dominated all the public discussions in the West Midlands. People were concerned about growing unemployment, particularly among young people.

In all of the discussions there were fears that the decline in opportunities for this age group could entrench generational divides over the longer term. Many people were anxious that the impact of the pandemic on the retail and hospitality industries would disproportionally harm the prospects of younger generations, whose first jobs were often in these sectors. Others shared stories of children whose apprenticeships were under threat, or of new graduates and A-level students whose prospects were now limited. Seen against a backdrop of rising house prices, people of all generations expressed sympathy that the current generation were facing a harder life than their parents. Several stressed the need for government investment to help create and protect entry-level jobs.

COVID-19 has also provided a fertile breeding ground for extremist ideas to spread, a concern expressed in the stakeholder discussion and the public groups. People are spending more time online, increasing their exposure to conspiracy theories and other extremist content. Extremist narratives that seek to blame and divide can prove attractive to people whose livelihoods have been affected by COVID-19.

Social contact between people from different backgrounds was another theme that was discussed. While people who lived in the West Midlands' three big cities – Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton – had friends and work colleagues from different ethnic groups, the participants in the public discussions who were from Worcestershire and Stoke-on-Trent did not have such high levels of everyday social contact with people from different ethnic and faith groups. Migrant workers in Worcestershire and Herefordshire's horticulture industry were felt to live separate lives. One Worcestershire participant stated, "I've witnessed a lot of anger to Eastern Europeans."

Many participants in the West Midlands public discussions voiced their frustration and anger at politicians. People felt that politicians were motivated by self-interest and there was a strong desire for a less adversarial and aggressive type of politics. People wanted greater cross-party co-operation in relation to issues of national interest such as COVID-19. Many

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[139] Aggregated results from 5,547 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

also wanted schools to do more to teach children about how to have respectful discussions with those who have different political views.

"I think the divide between age groups is growing; I'm quite worried about that, especially with my daughter. She's 14 and worried about what sort of job she's going to be able to get."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

"Social media hypes up our differences. You've almost created a parallel universe with some people spending their whole lives online."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

"I think politicians have to put themselves in our shoes. Not all of them are very wealthy, but we've got some very wealthy politicians who go home to their million-pound flats in London or their country estate at the weekends and don't have a care in the world about money, or jobs, or things like that. I just think they need to engage a lot more with Joe Public and think about how people are feeling if they've lost their job or they can't get a job."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

"You'll get extremists of all types coming along and saying 'we'll change everything, we have got answers, we can show the establishment'. When people have lost their jobs, these kind of messages have appeal."
(Participant in stakeholder meeting, West Midlands, November 2020).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in the West Midlands are similar to the rest of the UK. COVID-19 has also brought communities together. Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 21% of the adult population of the West Midlands – 1 million people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers in 2020, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[140]. Some 400,000 of this number were first time volunteers[141], many of whom said they would be interested in volunteering again.

The cities and large towns of the West Midlands are among the most ethnically diverse conurbations in the UK. Over 300,000 Muslims now live in Birmingham, with their numbers concentrated in inner-city wards. In the public discussions we asked how people from different ethnic and faith backgrounds get on with each other in the West Midlands. We heard concerns about hate crime and residential segregation. But we were also told a story of integration slowly happening across generations in the region. People felt that their cities now were different places to the past, with fewer inter-ethnic tensions. They spoke about the urban West Midlands as a series of integrated cities where they saw "different cultures mixing and gelling together on a daily basis."

Schools and workplaces were seen as places where people of different backgrounds mixed with each other. We heard stories of inter-ethnic friendships made at work. Offices had celebrated Eid and Diwali, as well as Christmas. The COVID-19 relief efforts had often been led by different faith communities working together. In ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, local relief efforts had brought people of different backgrounds together, and it was expected that many of these new relationships would survive once public health restrictions were eased.

Sport was seen as uniting people across the UK. Many people also talked about the power of national moments, such as national sporting events, Remembrance and Clap for Carers, to bring people of different backgrounds together. Support for national institutions such as the NHS and the monarchy was similarly felt to do the same.

"Across the community, regardless of race, everyone has got together and helped each other out, asking their neighbour if they've got food or need anything from the shop."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

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[140] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-19 December 2020. [141] Ibid.

"I've been in my house for four years. Now I've spoken more to my neighbours during this last six to seven months than I did in the last four years. I've got to know them, they've got to know me, I've actually found out that I've got a lot of shared interests with one person living next door to me, which is just unbelievable. And now we can have a conversation for about an hour, whereas before it was just a quick hello."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

"One of my suggestions is to cook something or exchange a food item with your neighbour. And it can be like a domino effect as you can keep passing the food down the road. It gives you an idea of what they eat, what they enjoy and a bit of insight into their family life."
(Participant in public discussion, West Midlands, November 2020).

Responses to the open survey question 'What could bring us together?'

"More projects to improve and enhance the local environment, involving as many different groups as possible."
(Response to open survey).

"More tolerance of people's differences. Just because you have an opinion doesn't make you right!"
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in the West Midlands – a selection

Walsall is a member of The Linking Network, a national partnership of local authorities and organisations that link children from different backgrounds through school twinning. Walsall Council, Walsall FC and the New Art Gallery are lead delivery partners in Walsall's programme, with children using the club and gallery as "neutral venues" to meet up and take part in social, educational and recreational activities together. Walsall is also one of the Government's five key integrated area partners, with cohesion work in this area led by Walsall For All, a partnership between the council and other public services, business, faith groups and civil society.

Totally Stoked is an initiative that links charities in Stoke-on-Trent with individuals and organisations that can donate talent, time and resources. It is run by Voluntary Action Stoke-on-Trent, which also supports small charities in the area.

The Feast is a faith-based charity in Birmingham, working to bring together young Christians and Muslims to form real friendships that move them to be change-makers and peace-makers among their local and wider communities.

Gen2Gen is an ICT support project that brings Coventry University Students together with the local community to help them get online with their digital devices and explore the web.

Growers United FC uses football to bring people of different backgrounds together in the Vale of Evesham. Its players and supporters come from many different backgrounds, including long-settled local residents and migrant workers from the EU. The football club raises money for local charities. By bringing together local growers and businesses, Growers United FC also promotes horticulture as a career, as well as encouraging healthy lifestyles through exercise and enjoyment of locally-grown fruit and vegetables.

Yorkshire and the Humber

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 5,503,000

The diverse geographies of Yorkshire and the Humber include four cities – Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield and Hull – as well as former mill towns in West Yorkshire, coalfield communities and seaside towns. There are two national parks in the region. Over the last 60 years the region has lost many of the key industries that provided employment that defined communities: mining, steel, textiles and fishing. Yorkshire and the Humber is also characterised by poor transport links; large conurbations such as Grimsby and Scunthorpe are particularly badly served by rail and road.

Nearly 350,000 Muslims live in the region. Although many people are well integrated into their communities, many towns and cities in Yorkshire and the Humber have high levels of residential segregation, with minority ethnic and migrant groups highly clustered in particular areas, reducing opportunities for social contact in neighbourhoods and through schooling. Partly in response to this issue, organisations in Yorkshire and the Humber have taken the lead in developing programmes of work to bring people of different backgrounds together and promote integration. Initiatives such as the Linking Network, which links school classes together, have now been rolled out across the UK.

Talk/together in Yorkshire and the Humber

Some 5,033 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in the Yorkshire and the Humber region. The public discussions drew their participants from Hull, Kirklees, Leeds, North Yorkshire and Rotherham. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the weeks beginning 21 and 28 September 2020, as infection rates started to rise again.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 51% of people in Yorkshire and the Humber agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 20% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[142].

What divides people?

Many of the issues that were raised elsewhere in the UK were brought up in the survey responses and in the discussions that took place in Yorkshire and the Humber. Brexit, immigration, integration and the power of the media and social platforms to talk up divisions and spread hatred were key themes that were raised in the discussions in the region.

We were told that COVID-19 has divided communities in new ways, as well as highlighting existing divisions. In both the public and stakeholder discussions, concern was expressed over the impact of conspiracy theories about the origin and spread of COVID-19 and the vaccine (there were people who supported such ideas in two of the three public discussions). Many people were also worried about the economic impacts of COVID-19 in the region, with concerns that this would increase the North-South divide. It was felt that the communities likely to be hardest hit in the pandemic were already the poorest in the region. More positively, it was felt that there had been greater recognition of the contribution of low-paid key workers, such as supermarket staff and delivery drivers.

People voiced concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on high streets, where people from different backgrounds can meet and mix.

While people felt most of their neighbours were acting responsibly, there was also some apportioning of blame for the spread of the virus to out-groups: young people, students, Londoners, people who lived in certain parts of town and, occasionally, ethnic and faith minority groups. But this view was debated openly, as most people were also conscious that it is easy to form stereotypes and blame whole groups for the actions of a well-publicised few. People felt there was a risk that people were being unfairly singled out for spreading the virus, in a manner that caused mistrust and reinforced racism and age stereotypes. The decision to introduce a local lockdown in parts of the North West and Yorkshire on 30 July, hours before Eid al-Adha was due to commence, was seen as evidence of this unfairness.

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[142] Aggregated results from 5,5,47 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

"My local community is very close but the country is torn apart. You can only get impressions from the news. But your local community, you see people every day, you see and you know that they're there to help you if you need them."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

"The biggest division for me would be work. And I haven't been to a work building since March, and now I have just been told that we're not going back till next April. The group of people that I used to associate with is now gone."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

"The thing I've noticed about COVID is some of the lower-paid jobs have been really important this year, and they probably need to be recognised, paid better than they are. And they are the ones that have gone out every day and gone to work and carried on."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

"There is somebody I've met over a year ago now and he seems very sensible when you're talking to him, but on Facebook all he does is talk about conspiracy theories. COVID-19 is a total fabrication, according to him. Every day he puts up something totally ridiculous on Facebook. And I've just tried to ignore it and I don't want to unfriend him. But when he did put something up this week I said, 'no thanks, that's not for me'."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in Yorkshire and the Humber are similar to the rest of the UK. We were told that support for national institutions such the NHS and the monarchy, sport and common interests and national moments all brought people together.

While COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities and divides, many people also believed that it had brought people together. The relief effort had crossed social divides, with mosques and churches working together to run foodbanks or reach out to people who risked loneliness and isolation. Many of these new relationships will be sustained going forward.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 21% of the adult population of Yorkshire and the Humber – equating to 920,000 people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers in 2020, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[143]. Some 310,000 of this number were first time volunteers , many of whom said they would be interested in volunteering again.

In the public discussions and among those who responded to the open survey, people made arguments for more opportunities for social contact across ethnic and faith divides in the region, and for this to take place in Yorkshire's towns and villages, not just its largest cities.

Schools and workplaces were felt to be the most important sites of inter-group social contact. Shared circumstances, such as working for the same company or being a parent, were felt to bring people together. We were also told of many successful initiatives that had broken down ethnic, faith, class and social identity divides. These included street parties, volunteering, charity fundraising, sport and public concerts. Participants in the public discussions from Hull talked about Hull City of Culture 2017, which they felt had brought the city together. We were told *"it made us proud, there was something going on every day and stuff for everyone."* There was some debate about the inclusiveness of a Yorkshire regional identity and whether events such as Yorkshire Day – held on 1 August every year – was an initiative that fostered a sense of belonging and a shared identity.

"I've never really been hung up on English or British, I just see myself as Yorkshire really. Yorkshire folk are very sociable. Whatever part of the county you are from or wherever

[143] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-19 December 2020. [144] Ibid.

you are born, we have the mentality that we will talk to each other. Whether you are on the bus or you ask someone the time, the next thing you know you're having a cup of tea with them."
(Participant in public discussion, Yorkshire and the Humber, September 2020).

Responses to the open survey question 'What would bring us together?'

"Stop being dependent on social media and have real conversations with people. Be prepared to set an example to others by the way you live."
(Response to open survey).

"Community centres and village halls holding more regular events for all age groups. Early education in schools about the importance of caring for others."
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in Yorkshire and the Humber – a selection

Bradford Council is one of the Government's integration action areas. The council and partner organisations are supporting many initiatives that are successfully bringing people from different backgrounds together, and for reasons of space we can mention only two. The Believing in Bradford community leadership scheme aims to help a new generation of residents engage with each other and develop initiatives that benefit all sectors of society. Horton Community Farm is an urban green space located in the ethnically mixed Great Horton area of Bradford. People from many different backgrounds volunteer at the farm, growing food and undertaking conservation projects.

More in Common Batley and Spen is a group of volunteers who came together after the murder of local MP Jo Cox in 2016. Through projects such as the Batley Iftar, the Great Rugby League Get Together and Mince Pie Moments, the organisation is bringing together people from different ethnic, faith and class backgrounds in West Yorkshire.
East Marsh United is a community group of local residents from the historic East Marsh area of Grimsby. Its work started in 2017 in response to crime, anti-social behaviour and the risk of a spiral of decline. Every Saturday morning, volunteers go out and clean one East Marsh street at a time – weeding, sweeping, litter-picking and disposing of the waste. This dynamic community organisation has been successful in bringing local residents together to improve an area that they are proud to call home.

Chilypep is a Sheffield-based organisation that works with young people, encouraging them to play an active part in the decisions that affect their lives. It has provided training and advice for thousands of young people in South Yorkshire, encouraging them to set up or take part in campaigns to improve their local areas.

The Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust is a small charity that cares for the people, landscapes and wildlife of the Yorkshire Dales. Its People and the Dales project provided opportunities for people from urban areas to experience the Yorkshire Dales countryside, often for the first time.

II. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales summaries

Northern Ireland

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 1,894,000

Northern Ireland's divisions are well documented. The last years of the 20th century saw a conflict that killed more than 3,500 people. The Good Friday Agreement brought an end to violence, but the social divisions still remain. Education is divided by tradition: most children attend either Roman Catholic or 'Controlled' Schools, with just 7% of the school population enrolled in integrated education. There are also high levels of residential segregation. This is most marked in public housing, where so-called 'peace walls' still demarcate and divide some communities.

Northern Ireland was founded 100 years ago after the partition of Ireland. This centenary year will be marked differently in a place where histories are not always shared.

Talk/together in Northern Ireland

Some 534 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in Northern Ireland. The public discussions drew their participants from Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Strabane, Mid and East Antrim and Newry, Mourne and Down. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 12 October 2020 at a time when COVID-19 cases were rising rapidly and in the same week as a new lockdown. People and organisations from Northern Ireland also took part in many of the cross-UK discussions for members of the public and for stakeholders.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 57% of people in Northern Ireland agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 20% disagreed. (UK = 53% agreed)[145].

What divides people?

COVID-19, sectarian politics, Brexit uncertainty and economic worries dominated the discussions that Talk/Together held in Northern Ireland. Brexit was a very salient issue in all of the discussions, with people fearful about its economic impact and that the Irish border might become a flashpoint for violence.

As elsewhere, people were concerned about the mental health impacts of COVID-19 and growing economic inequality. The view that some groups of people were not following public health guidance was just as prevalent in Northern Ireland as it was in Talk/together discussions in other parts of the UK. There was also a view that some politicians were now exploiting the crisis for their own ends.

A constant narrative in all the discussions and in the open survey was of a broken political system. There was very little trust in politicians, which is reflected in lower turnout at elections in Northern Ireland (61.8% in the 2019 general election, compared with 67.3% across the UK). Among the people that took part in the discussions or made their views known through the open survey, there was a near-universal view that political opportunism and rhetoric stoked division in Northern Ireland. We heard that the assumption that people would cast their vote based on their social identity encouraged complacency among politicians and reduced political accountability, which in turn led to failures in the delivery of public services.

We also spent some time discussing how politics might change for the better. Here there was a mix of views. Some people felt very pessimistic and that political divides were so entrenched that they would never change. Higher levels of emigration – among graduates, young people who attended integrated schools and the children of mixed marriages – meant those who could push for better politics had often left Northern Ireland. Other people were more optimistic. They felt that there was social contact across community divides both in the workplace and in an expanded higher education sector. Many people also said that the next generation of young people wanted a "normal future" and would eventually vote out those who exploited identity divides to stay in power.

"People don't vote for who they really want to vote for here. They vote to keep out the opposition. If you can rely on the pull of

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[145] Aggregated results from 5,547 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

identity to secure your votes, you don't have to deliver."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

"We need good leadership from people in power. The example shown by politicians is nothing short of a disgrace. When young people see this type of behaviour in Parliament by our so-called leaders, how can you expect ordinary people to promote unity and togetherness in their lives?"
(Response to open survey).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in Northern Ireland are similar to the rest of the UK. We were told that support for the NHS, sport, music and other common interests bring people together, locally and across Northern Ireland's divides.

The week when Talk/together held its Northern Ireland discussions coincided with increased levels of lockdown in the country, and the impact of COVID-19 was a dominant issue in the discussions. Many people felt that the spring lockdown had brought people together. They pointed to relief efforts that crossed community divides, as well as the efforts of members of the public to look out for elderly neighbours from a different tradition to themselves. Many people felt that these grassroots relationships which had been built in 2020 would be sustained in 2021 and beyond.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 22% of the adult population of Northern Ireland – equating to 310,000 people – offered their time as formal or informal volunteers in 2020, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[146].

In all Talk/together discussions, we have asked what changes would help bridge divides and enable people from different background to live well together. In Northern Ireland, three themes dominated. First, people felt that sectarian politics needed to be fixed. Second, most people wanted to

find ways to disagree better. They felt that social media had amplified divisions. Differences of political opinion are the currency of a healthy democracy, but people had to find ways of having a civil debate.

Third, there was a plea for a more integrated education system that did not separate children from a very young age. One participant told us that, as a teenager, he was beaten up by a gang of schoolchildren because his school uniform identified him as "belonging to the other side." He suggested that all Northern Ireland's school children should wear the same uniform to avoid such visible labels of difference. Others talked about taking long detours on their walk home from school to avoid passing through certain areas. At present, just 7% of Northern Ireland's schoolchildren attend integrated schools. There was a view that more of these schools were needed, alongside other opportunities – including through sport and music – to bring young people together across Northern Ireland's divides.

"With COVID, yes, I've seen it myself, people from one community helping another, doing shopping. There's been loads going on and the communities are mixing together."
(Participant in public discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

"The only way to sort this country is to have a look at the education system. We need more integrated education in this country. No more Protestant state schools or Catholic schools. We need people from both communities mixing at a very young age."
(Participant in public discussion, Northern Ireland, October 2020).

"A mutual respect of one another's views and politics, a recognition that violence to obtain political goals cannot be justified."
(Response to open survey).

"I think the media plays a big part in how people view others, often focusing on the differences and divisions within different groups of people in this country. A more

146 ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults 16-19 December 2020.

positive approach could possibly change people's mentalities, showing the unity rather than conflict."
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in Northern Ireland – a selection

Funding has been made available by the EU's PEACE programmes to promote shared education, create shared spaces and services and build positive relations at a local level. This funding has supported faith- and civil society-led dialogue and peace-building, with the learning from these initiatives used by organisations elsewhere in the UK and internationally. We cannot do justice to this work in this report, but Community Dialogue's website[147] provides many resources that draw from work that has taken place in Northern Ireland.

Co-operation Ireland is an all-island peace-building organisation. It works to address legacies of the conflict and facilitate contact and collaboration between people from different backgrounds across the island of Ireland.

Northern Ireland Alternatives is a restorative justice programme that aims to promote and develop non-violent community responses to the issues of low-level crime and anti-social behaviour. It provides many opportunities for young people to participate more fully in their communities.

Youth Action Northern Ireland has set up a youth network for peace, which is working to build meaningful, sustained contact between young people of different backgrounds.

[147] https://www.communitydialogue.org/

Scotland

Background

Estimated population 2019 = 5,463,000.

Scotland's diverse geographies include large cities, hundreds of towns and some of the most sparsely populated rural areas in the UK. Until recently, Scotland's population had been decreasing, as people left rural areas and towns for cities. Some 9.7% of Scotland's population was born overseas, including migrant workers from the EU and beyond, international students in Scotland's universities and asylum-seekers and refugees. In 2019, some 4,460 adults attended ceremonies in Scottish town halls after being granted British citizenship.

In the 2016 referendum, 62% of people in Scotland cast their votes in favour of Remain, while Leave won the majority of votes in England and Wales. This has become a key factor in the current independence debate. Scottish society experiences many of the disconnections and divides of other parts of the UK, but three issues are prominent in Scotland: the independence debate, sectarianism and rural isolation.

Talk/together in Scotland

Some 5,501 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in Scotland. The public discussions drew their participants from Edinburgh, Glasgow, the Highlands, Perth and Kinross, Scottish Borders and South Lanarkshire, and were selected to represent a range of opinions on Scottish independence. A further public discussion drew half its participants from Eyemouth and half from Berwick-upon-Tweed. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 9 November 2020, when the results of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine trial were published, and the atmosphere in the online groups was a good deal more buoyant than the previous week's discussions. People from Scotland and Scottish organisations also took part in many of the cross-UK discussions for members of the public and for stakeholders.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 55% of people in Scotland agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 20% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[148] .

Has the coronavirus pandemic made your local community more united or more divided?

	Scotland (n=452)	England (n=1,764)	UK (n=2,373)
NET: More united	45%	41%	41%
No difference	36%	37%	37%
NET: More divided	11%	13%	13%
Don't know	8%	8%	9%

'My local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together'

	Scotland (n=452)	England (n=1,764)	UK (n=2,373)
NET: Agree	53%	48%	48%
Neither agree nor disagree	30%	33%	33%
NET: Disagree	13%	15%	14%

'I feel I belong to Scotland/Wales/England'

	Scotland (n=452)	England (n=1,764)	UK (n=2,373)
NET: Agree	72%	62%	63%
Neither agree nor disagree	17%	22%	21%
NET: Disagree	11%	15%	15%
Don't Know	–	1%	1%

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[148] Aggregated results from 5,5,47 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

'I feel I belong to the UK as a whole'

	Scotland (n=452)	England (n=1,764)	UK (n=2,373)
NET: Agree	51%	61%	60%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%	23%	23%
NET: Disagree	28%	14%	15%
Don't Know	1%	1%	1%

What divides people?

Many of the issues that were raised elsewhere in the UK were brought up in the survey responses and in the discussions that took place in Scotland. Brexit had caused divisions within Scotland and between Scotland and England. People were worried about the economic impacts of COVID-19 and that this would increase the gap between the rich and the poor. The divergence of policy between the Westminster and Holyrood Governments was often seen through the lens of the independence campaign; those with pro-union views argued for policy convergence, and those who were pro-independence made the case for policy autonomy.

As might be expected, Scottish independence was a major theme in the discussions. People looked back to the 2014 referendum, with some people feeling that they had been able to have an open discussion with family and friends where different opinions were respected. Other participants told us that they had fallen out with friends and family or made the decision to avoid discussion on this subject.

The Black Lives Matter protests were another issue that had divided people in Scotland, as they had elsewhere in the UK. Younger people, graduates and those from minority ethnic groups were more likely to be strongly supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement. In Scotland there is a much larger middle group who are supportive of action to address racial injustice but have concerns about the decision to hold demonstrations during the pandemic and about a backlash to the movement. Similar to other parts of the UK, we also found that a minority of people are more vocal in their disagreement with Black Lives Matter, with their opposition focusing on the

movement's ideology, contested histories of race and empire, 'cancel culture' and free speech. We were also told about anti-Muslim prejudice in Scotland, to which COVID-19 has added new dimensions. This is most widespread in areas where the local population has little contact with Muslims.

Sectarianism was an issue raised by participants who lived or had links to the central belt of Scotland. Participants talked about feeling unsafe in some areas, particularly when the 'Old Firm' was playing. Orange Order marches on 12 July are also a focus of division. There was a debate about the extent to which religious sectarianism had a direct effect on people's lives, outside the days that Rangers and Celtic were playing each other. It was felt that the biggest impact of this division was in education, with children from Roman Catholic and Protestant families attending different schools. Divides and prejudice were perpetuated because of limited social mixing at school. Efforts to address sectarianism and segregated education have been vexed and sometimes met with opposition.

The discussions also explored the social divisions that participants felt were different in Scotland. Some 75% of Scotland's land mass is predominantly rural, with low population density and small settlements that are often remote from towns and cities. In comparison, England's rural communities are less remote and closer to conurbations. Young people have moved away from Scotland's remote rural areas, to study or to find work, and many never return. This population movement threatens the viability of services and businesses, with villages losing their pubs and schools.

There was some anger in the discussions about perceived under-investment in rural services, an issue that has also been voiced south of the border. Farming and rural tourism underpin other parts of the economy, and it was felt that this was not recognised. We heard about non-existent public transport, housing shortages and poor broadband connections, which made it almost impossible to work from home. Participants also told us about loneliness and isolation in the countryside, an issue felt most acutely among young people and the elderly. The public groups talked about social

relations in rural areas as well, with participants debating whether there were stronger social bonds in villages, or whether tight-knit communities could be suspicious of outsiders.

"There's a real economic kind of sting in the tail at the end of this COVID business. We're probably going to see tax increases, more job losses, and that's going to lead to greater divides. We have also got the independence debate and Brexit to deal with, so I think dark times ahead, there's going to be a bigger poverty gap."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"I'm from Glasgow and there's still a huge sectarian problem. There's a massive division there straightaway, which is cultural, which is inherent, which is something that you can't get away from if you live in Glasgow. We have separate schools for Catholics and for other religions and I think that shows a divide straight away, that we are willing to divide our schools, never mind our politics."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"Some places in the north of Scotland don't even have broadband, they can't get a signal. So they're totally cut off. There's new iPhones and the 5G and things like that, which we don't have at the moment. It seems to be the bigger cities that seem to benefit from it."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in Scotland are similar to the rest of the UK. Scotland, like England, is a society that is more connected and united at a local level. Common circumstances, shared activities and shared identities bring people together.

In 2020, neighbourly acts of kindness and the relief effort brought communities together in Scotland.

People who live in Scotland have a strong national identity which has gradually become more inclusive of minority groups. Scottishness and Scottish moments, such as Hogmanay and Burns Night, unify society. Support for the NHS, a common language and a shared sense of humour were felt to unite people across the UK.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 22% of the adult population of Scotland – equating to 960,000 people – volunteered in 2020, of which 360,000 were first time volunteers, with 310,000 interested in volunteering again.

We asked participants in the discussions how people could have respectful debates with others who had different views on independence. It was felt that politicians had to take responsibility to call out hatred. There was an appeal for a more respectful debate on social media, and a view that schools could do more to teach children about online civility. In 2014, some faith and civil society organisations set up safe spaces for civil political debate. There was a consensus in the stakeholder and public groups that, in the current climate, there was an urgent need for more initiatives that brought people together for respectful debate about independence and the type of nation that people want Scotland to be. There was agreement, too, on the need to find ways to be good neighbours with England, Northern Ireland and Wales, should Scotland take the path to independence.

People discussed how Scottish society should address sectarianism. Clearly football clubs have a key role to play. In many schools in central Scotland, children explore sectarianism as part of the curriculum and are helped to understand and respond to this form of prejudice. There are some successful school linking programmes where classes of children from different faith backgrounds meet for shared activities. Scotland also has a growing number of 'Joint Campus' schools where faith and non-denominational schools are based on the same campus, with pupils taught separately for some subjects but coming together to eat, at break times and for sport. The challenge is to make sure that such social contact in schools leads to diverse friendship groups and a reduction of prejudice.

"I live on the outskirts of Glasgow and COVID has really brought the local community together. People have rallied round, there's been notes through people's doors. That's COVID, it's not any other kind of political thing. People are looking after each other. I've seen where people are making sure that their neighbours are getting food parcels, getting deliveries or that kind of thing."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"People who have got dogs seem to meet a lot of people. My son had a dog and when I used to take it for walks. I couldn't believe the amount of people that started speaking to you just because you had a dog. If you have a dog, conversations just seem to happen."
(Participant in public discussion, Scotland, November 2020).

"Some sort of mandatory community service, for a few hours a month, for 16-20 year-olds. Less time spent on social media and more time in the real world."
(Response to open survey, Scotland).

Initiatives to bring people together in Scotland – a selection

Scottish politicians from all the main parties have reached out to welcome refugees, with Scottish local authorities being the first to offer sanctuary to Syrian refugees who arrived through the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Programme. The Scottish Government has also put in place the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. This leadership is reflected in warmer public attitudes to refugees in Scotland, compared with elsewhere in the UK[149].

Glasgow City Council has worked with a number of partners to increase volunteering in the city, encouraging people to run sport and arts activities, govern and raise funds for charities, support NHS and social care services, enhance the environment and mentor and support vulnerable children. Volunteer Glasgow, one of the partner organisations, runs a centre and hosts a platform to match volunteering opportunities with people who can offer their time.

Coordinated by the Scottish Community Alliance in 2014, The Big Vote took the independence debate away from the politicians, out of the TV studios and put it into the hands of local people. Meetings were organised across Scotland where communities could talk about some of the big questions they had about Scotland's future.

Men's Sheds help address loneliness and isolation and respond to men's need for camaraderie, providing opportunities to work together in a way that contributes meaning to their lives. With 188 men's sheds across Scotland, involving 10,000 men, the Scottish Men's Sheds Association helps new and existing groups set up and run a Men's Shed in their local town or community.

Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland's Kindness Volunteering Programme is one of the largest volunteering initiatives to be developed in response to COVID-19. Volunteer 'kindness callers' make regular friendly calls to people who have said they feel anxious, isolated and lonely, supporting them to live life to the full. Digital Kindness Volunteers are also encouraged to share vital information over their social media feeds to help support people's wellbeing and share positive stories. The charity's volunteers are key to providing lifeline support to over 17,000 vulnerable people and their families. Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland also uses many hundreds of volunteers in other roles: as drivers, in fundraising and retail and to help people in their rehabilitation or management of their illness.

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[149] Rutter, J. and Carter, R. (2018) *National Conversation on Immigration Final Report,* London: British Future and Hope not hate.

Wales

Background
Estimated population 2019 = 3,153,000

The diverse geographies of Wales span three port cities – Cardiff, Newport and Swansea – as well as industrial South Wales, market and seaside towns and rural areas. Mining in the South Wales coalfield led to the urbanisation of the South Wales valleys in the 19th century. But, over the last 60 years, the key industries which provided employment that defined Welsh industrial communities have been largely lost, and some towns have struggled to adapt to deindustrialisation.

Some 6.7% of Wales' population was born outside the UK, with nearly 40% of this group born in EU countries. Some 15% of the population of Wales is bilingual and speaks, reads and writes Welsh fluently, often as a first language. Some 33% of people understand spoken Welsh[150]. Welsh speakers are most likely to live in rural North and West Wales. There are 378 Welsh-medium schools in Wales and 30 'dual stream' schools, which use both languages in education. A further 37 schools have adopted other types of bilingualism, although most schools (975 in total) are English-medium.

Talk/together in Wales

Some 3,240 responses to the open survey were received from people who live in Wales. The public discussions drew their participants from Cardiff, Ceredigion, Swansea and Wrexham. These and the stakeholder discussions took place in the week beginning 7 December 2020. People from Wales and Welsh organisations also took part in many of the cross-UK discussions for members of the public and stakeholders.

Findings from the Talk/together nationally representative surveys

Some 53% of people in Wales agreed that 'overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides,' while just 23% disagreed (UK = 53% agreed)[151].

While it only contained a small Welsh sample, the December nationally representative survey suggests that people in Wales feel a stronger sense of both British and Welsh identity. Most (but not all people) in the public discussions said they felt Welsh and British.

What divides people?

COVID-19 was the dominant theme in the public discussions, when participants were asked about what is dividing society. People were concerned about divisive conspiracy theories and people who were not observing lockdown. They were also anxious about the impact of the pandemic on the Welsh economy, particularly in parts of the country where tourism provided many jobs.

The divergence of policy between the Westminster Government and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has reinforced perceptions of national division and the fragility of the United Kingdom as a union. In the public discussions people debated First Minister Mark Drakeford's handling of the pandemic and communication with the public, comparing it with that of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The operation of the furlough scheme in Wales reinforced a dominant perception that the Welsh Government does not get its fair share of investment to fund transport and to run its public services.

	UK	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
I feel I belong to the UK as a whole	60%	61%	39%	51%	69%
I feel I belong to England/Scotland/ Wales/Northern Ireland	63%	62%	66%	72%	77%

Source: ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults, 16-19 December 2020.

[150] Annual Population Survey, June 2020. [151] Aggregated results from 5,5,47 respondents to the ICM surveys undertaken in May/June 2020, November 2020 and December 2020.

This in turn led to a debate about Welsh independence. There were people who supported independence in two of the three public discussions that drew their participants from Wales. We were told that Yes Cymru posters were now visible in towns such as Wrexham, not just in the Welsh-speaking heartlands where support for Plaid Cymru has been highest. Although the majority of people in all the discussion groups did not support this movement, people had little trust in the Westminster government, nor in politicians generally, feeling that policy decisions always favoured London.

People who came from central and north Wales also felt that there were inequalities within Wales, in relation to investment in services and infrastructure, and people's voice in decision-making. A higher proportion of people in Wales live in rural areas than in England or Scotland and the public and stakeholder discussions discussed rural-urban divides. There was a consensus that rural communities and small towns were closer and more tightly knit than in urban areas. But frustrations were also voiced about a lack of investment in public services and poor transport and digital connectivity. Unequal access to online infrastructure can increase political mistrust and feelings that communities are being left behind by Cardiff- or London-centric governments.

In the stakeholder discussions a number of people talked about prejudice towards Gypsies and Travellers, and that these groups lived lives that were often separate from the local community. This issue was also raised by stakeholders in some parts of England and, in all cases, it was felt that little was being done to break down mistrust and barriers between Gypsy and Traveller communities and other local residents.

"Speaking from my own perspective, I think a lot of people, including myself, took pride in being part of the European Union. I consider myself Welsh and European. Now that we've lost that link, because of Brexit, I think that's part of the reason why the independence movement has gained more pace."
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

"The country needs financial help, let alone the basic needs that aren't being addressed. People are going to food banks. People are getting fuel vouchers. We're in temporary housing with no way to get an address. So how can people work their way up?"
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

"We've also had a lot of anti-Traveller and Gypsy views online. Travellers have recently moved from England and there has been a social media response to that."
(Participant in stakeholder discussion, Wales, December 2020).

What brings people together?

Many of the conditions and activities that bring people together in Wales are similar to the rest of the UK. We were told that support for the NHS, sport (particularly rugby), music and other common interests bring people together, locally and across divides.

Although the pandemic had caused great suffering and hardship, most people who took part in the discussions felt that it had brought people together. People talked about the community response to COVID-19 and how they had contacted people who might be isolated; community and business support for foodbanks; and their own experiences of volunteering.

Talk/together's nationally representative survey suggests that 520,000 people in Wales (21% of the adult population) offered their time as volunteers in 2020, either helping their neighbours or giving their time to a charity or as an NHS volunteer[152]. Some 180,000 of them were first-time volunteers[153], many of whom said they would be interested in volunteering again.

The role of the Welsh language and culture in dividing or bringing people together was a subject that was further explored in the public discussions, all of which included people who spoke Welsh as their first language. It was felt that sport, music, food, humour and national moments such as the Eisteddfod were expressions of Welsh culture that brought people of

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[152] ICM survey of 2,373 UK adults 16-19 December 2020. [153] Ibid.

different backgrounds together, regardless of their ethnic origins. We were also told that attitudes to people who did not speak the language had changed in Welsh-speaking areas, with newcomers made to feel welcome and now encouraged to learn Welsh. Participants spoke about school twinning programmes, linking children in Welsh- and English-medium schools with each other, enabling them to meet up and share activities.

"A lot of sixth formers have volunteered from the start. They would do free meals for key workers and stuff like that, and they would deliver prescriptions and shopping for people who could not get out."
Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

"Welsh is not an easy language to learn, but people who make an effort are welcomed into the community. Maybe 25 years ago there was a bit of 'them and us', but I think things have changed quite a lot in the last few years. Our local schools, if you went back a couple years, they probably branded themselves as being Welsh schools, but nowadays they're more bilingual. If you're actually making an effort to speak the language, have a little bit of a conversation, you know, start conversations about where are you from, what you're doing, it's fine."
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

"We are very proud, especially with rugby, and we're quite aggressive with our sports. So I'd call myself Welsh [and] sort of British. It's because of our identity, the uniqueness of the country with its own language; you've got a dragon on the flag and the Eisteddfod that no other country has. I think of food as well, we have quite unique food, like rarebits and especially Welsh cakes, I have a massive love for Welsh cakes."
(Participant in public discussion, Wales, December 2020).

Responses to the open survey question 'What could bring us together?'

"Meet the neighbours. Know their names. Know who they are."
(Response to open survey).

"More community initiatives. Local councils should be given money to help put on events to help engage people of all ages. We need to give people hope and a sense of purpose and more government spending on community education to help people feel less disenfranchised. Maybe using resources like local schools in the evenings to run cooking classes etc where different age groups could mentor each other."
(Response to open survey).

Initiatives to bring people together in Wales – a selection

The Welsh Government has offered its support to the City of Sanctuary movement by naming Wales a nation of sanctuary. There are over 30 refugee community sponsorship groups in Wales, where small charities or groups of people 'sponsor' refugees, helping them find work and integrate into their local communities. It gives local communities involvement in the resettlement of refugees, breaking down barriers between 'them' and 'us'. Research shows that sponsored refugees – who in the UK are mostly from Syria – tend to be better integrated than spontaneous asylum arrivals, because they have a support group from the moment they arrive.

The Welsh Government has funded the posts of social cohesion officers who are based in all local authorities. Their role is to identify and respond to community tensions and work with partner organisations to bring communities together. One of the issues that social cohesion officers have addressed is the Home Office decision to house asylum-seekers at Penally Barracks in Pembrokeshire, without consultation with the local council. This policy has been the focus of much online debate among local residents, with protests outside the camp that drew far-right supporters from outside the

area. Local staff have diffused many of these tensions by leafleting and openly engaging with the local community to address questions about the camp and its residents. Some local residents have offered their support to asylum-seekers.

Volunteering Matters Cymru hosts a project called Rural Wisdom, which is also working in Scotland. It provides a space for older people living in rural areas to come together, make their voices heard on issues that matter to them and to campaign for change, for example, to improve rural transport.

The GRAFT garden project, near the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea, grew out of Now the Hero, a city-wide public theatre performance that was part of 14-18 NOW, the art programme to mark the centenary of the First World War. Now the Hero drew its inspiration from Swansea's Brangwyn Panels: murals that were commissioned to show a collective memory of the era of the First World War. A vegetable garden featured in the panels and the GRAFT garden was set up to grow vegetables to make soup, which formed part of the performance. The garden was built by volunteers from community groups, with old and young working together to learn new skills. It continues to be the focus of community activities and grows vegetables for local foodbanks.

III. The nationally representative surveys

Talk/together conducted five nationally representative surveys in the period between March 2020 and January 2021, interviewing 10,485 people in total. Some of the questions that were common to three or four of the surveys enabled us to track changes over the nine months of Talk/together.

March 2020 baseline survey

The first Talk/together survey was a nationally representative sample of 2,006 GB adults and was carried out by ICM between 6 March and 9 March 2020.

May-June 2020

The second Talk/together survey was a sample of 2,010 GB adults and was carried out by ICM between 29 May and 1 June 2020. *Remembering the Kindness of Strangers*[154], a report written by the Talk/together team about the early days of lockdown, draws on the results of the first two Talk/together surveys. Relevant findings from the first two surveys are also set out in this report and given below.

November 2020

The third Talk/together survey was a nationally representative sample of 2,013 GB adults and was carried out by ICM between 13 and 16 November 2020. Its findings are given below. All figures are rounded up to the nearest whole number.

1. To what extend do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Net agree	Net disagree
Overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides.	10%	39%	23%	19%	6%	2%	49%	26%
Where I live, neighbours and the local community have helped us all to get through the COVID-19 pandemic.	13%	34%	26%	14%	7%	4%	47%	21%
Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we will still find ways to share the true spirit of Christmas with friends, family, and neighbours this year.	19%	42%	22%	7%	3%	6%	61%	11%

[154] British Future (2020) *'Remembering the Kindness of Strangers: Division, unity and social connection during and beyond COVID-19'*, London: British Future.

2. As Britain has dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic over the course of this year, whose response has impressed you and whose has disappointed you?

	Very impressed	Quite impressed	Neither impressed nor disappointed	Quite disappointed	Very disappointed	Don't know	Net Impressed	Net disappointed
The UK Government	5%	19%	24%	23%	27%	2%	24%	50%
Devolved governments in Scotland and Wales	9%	27%	35%	11%	7%	12%	36%	18%
My neighbours and local community	15%	38%	32%	8%	4%	4%	53%	12%
My friends and family	27%	41%	24%	4%	1%	2%	68%	5%
The NHS	56%	25%	12%	4%	2%	1%	80%	6%
National businesses	7%	37%	39%	9%	2%	6%	44%	11%
Local businesses	17%	46%	27%	4%	1%	5%	63%	6%
MPs	2%	13%	29%	28%	23%	3%	17%	51%
The UK general public	6%	29%	31%	24%	8%	2%	35%	32%

December 2020

The December Talk/together survey was carried out by ICM between 16 and 18 December 2020, with a sample of 2,373 UK adults. This includes a booster sample of 60 interviews in Northern Ireland and 252 interviews in Scotland to make an overall Scotland sample of 452.

The survey asked many of the questions that were included in the open survey, enabling us to compare both sets of results. There were also questions that

were common to three of the surveys, enabling us to track changes over a period of time. We were able to merge data from the May 2020, November 2020 and December 2020 surveys to produce a sufficiently large sample size to report findings at an English regional level without the need for additional boosts. We chose questions where there had been little or no shift in results when we aggregated the data.

The survey findings were analysed by gender, age band, social grade, level of education, household

income, ethnic group (white/BAME), household composition, housing tenure, region/nation of residence in UK, settlement type (large city, small city/large town, medium town, small town, rural), Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles, 2019 General Election and EU Referendum voting, levels of social contact with out-groups, importance of faith/religion to respondents and attitudes to immigration. Detailed breakdowns of the survey results are available on request.

The results of the December survey are given below, with findings from the May and November survey added where relevant as a comparison.

1. Thinking about the UK as a whole, on a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided do you think the UK is at present?

2. And now just thinking about your local community, on a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided do you think it is at present?

	UK as a whole (Q1)	Local community (Q2) %
1 = Very divided	10%	3%
2	6%	2%
3	13%	4%
4	12%	6%
5	16%	17%
6	12%	14%
7	12%	15%
8	10%	18%
9	3%	7%
10 = Very united	2%	5%
Don't know	4%	9%
Mean score	4.9%	6.3%
NET: 1-3	15%	8%
NET: 4-7	52%	53%
NET: 8-10	29%	29%

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides.

Base: All respondents: 29-31 May (2,010); 13-15 November (2,013); 16-18 Dec (2,373)

	May 2020	November 2020	December 2020
Strongly agree	14%	10%	8%
Tend to agree	45%	39%	41%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%	23%	22%
Tend to disagree	11%	19%	20%
Strongly disagree	4%	6%	7%
Don't know	3%	2%	2%
NET: Agree	60%	49%	50%
NET: Disagree	15%	26%	27%

4. Has the coronavirus pandemic made your local community more united or more divided?

Much more united	10%
Somewhat more united	32%
No difference	37%
Somewhat more divided	9%
Much more divided	4%
Don't know	9%
NET: More united	41%
NET: More divided	13%

5. Have you offered your time as a volunteer during the coronavirus pandemic? This could include informal volunteering, such as doing shopping for a neighbour, as well as formal volunteering through a local or national organisation.

Yes, I volunteered before the coronavirus pandemic and continued to do so during lockdown	15%
Yes, I volunteered for the first time during the coronavirus pandemic	9%
No	77%
NET: YES, I have volunteered	23%

6. Would you be interested in volunteering again?

Base: All who have volunteered for the first time during the coronavirus pandemic (197).

Very interested	34%
Fairly interested	51%
Not very interested	7%
Not at all interested	0%
Don't know	8%
NET: Interested	85%
NET: Not interested	7%

7. Looking toward the future, what divisions in the UK, if any, worry you most? Please choose up to three.

Divisions between rich and poor	45%
Political divisions by party politics or by Brexit choice	36%
Divisions between people from different ethnic groups	33%
Divisions between those who want independence for Scotland, Wales, England or Northern Ireland and those who do not	26%
The North-South divide	26%
Divisions between people who have different religious beliefs	23%
Divisions between older and younger people	17%
Divisions by place (between towns and big cities, urban and rural)	10%
None of these	12%

8. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with these statements.

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Net agree	Net disagree
Social media drives us apart more than it brings us together	20%	35%	29%	11%	3%	3%	55%	13%
I find it easy to discuss politics with people who have different views to me	8%	33%	34%	19%	5%	2%	41%	24%
I would like politicians from different parties to work together to solve this country's problems	43%	40%	12%	3%	1%	1%	83%	4%
Most politicians are untrustworthy because they are motivated by self-interest	25%	38%	22%	10%	2%	2%	64%	13%
Most politicians understand the needs of ordinary people	4%	15%	21%	32%	26%	2%	19%	58%
I feel I belong to England/Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland	29%	34%	21%	10%	4%	1%	63%	15%
I feel I belong to the UK as a whole	23%	37%	23%	11%	5%	1%	60%	15%

9. Thinking beyond the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, how often, if at all, would you say you normally have the opportunity to meet and interact with people who are different from you? By 'different', we mean in terms of background (race, religion, class, education, etc.) and/or in terms of views e.g. political, religious) and/or experiences (e.g. life stage).

(This question was used as a variable in the survey analysis, as we were interested to see if levels of social contact made a difference to people's perceptions about division or togetherness, or their reported behaviour). Base: All respondents: 6-8 March (2,006); 2-31 May (2,010); 16-18 Dec (2,373)

	March 2020	May 2020	December 2020
Often	32%	27%	23%
Sometimes	43%	41%	43%
Rarely	21%	22%	25%
Never	2%	5%	4%
Don't know	2%	5%	5%
NET: Often/ Sometimes	75%	68%	67%
NET: Rarely/Never	23%	27%	28%

10. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with these statements.

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Net agree	Net disagree
My lunchbreak at work is (or was) a time when I mix and interact with people from different backgrounds to my own	8%	24%	30%	17%	14%	7%	32%	30%
The local pub/café in the place where I live is somewhere that people from different backgrounds mix and interact	8%	29%	30%	16%	8%	10%	37%	24%
My local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	9%	39%	33%	11%	4%	5%	48%	14%
I would like our society to be closer and more connected in the future	22%	50%	21%	3%	2%	2%	73%	5%
I will look back fondly at the way our local community came together in 2020 at such a difficult time	9%	32%	34%	16%	7%	3%	40%	23%
Despite differences in our views and backgrounds, I feel that most people have a lot in common	12%	51%	23%	9%	3%	1%	64%	12%

11. Which one of the following three statements comes closest to your view?

The COVID pandemic will change the way we interact in our society because we have got used to staying apart and it will be more like this from now on	34%
The COVID pandemic will change the way we interact in our society, because we have missed meeting and interacting in-person with other people and will want to do more of it from now on	32%
The COVID pandemic will not change the way we interact in our society because things will go back to how they were before	34%

12. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Net agree	Net disagree
I speak to my neighbours at least one a week	21%	35%	16%	15%	11%	1%	56%	26%
I say hello to my neighbours in the street but seldom much more than that	13%	44%	18%	18%	5%	1%	57%	24%
I'm often the one to organise an event in our neighbourhood/community	3%	9%	16%	26%	45%	1%	12%	71%
I will usually join in an event in my local neighbourhood/ community if someone has organised something	8%	29%	30%	19%	13%	2%	37%	32%
People don't organise events in my local neighbourhood/ community but I'd join in if they did	7%	27%	33%	19%	10%	3%	34%	30%
People don't organise events in my local neighbourhood/community and I wouldn't join in if they did	10%	21%	31%	25%	11%	3%	31%	36%

13. Which of these statements best describes your involvement in your local community?

I know some of my neighbours but rarely join in local activities	37%
I don't really have many positive interactions with people who live in my neighbourhood	20%
I know many people in my neighbourhood and sometimes join in with local activities	19%
I know most of my neighbours and I get involved in community activities or posting on the neighbourhood WhatsApp/Facebook group (but I am not the main organiser)	9%
I know most of my neighbours and I often take a leading role in organising community activities and the neighbourhood WhatsApp/Facebook group	4%
None of these	12%

14. If someone organised a street party where you live, which of these statements best describes your approach to it? Please select one.

I would turn up and take part	34%
No-one would ever organise a street party where I live	21%
I would stay at home	18%
I would help the organiser (setting up, making sandwiches etc)	17%
I would be the person who organised it	3%
I would complain about the noise/litter/blocked road	1%
Don't know	6%

15. Below are some ideas to help bring people together in this country. Which three (in rank order) do you think would most help bring people together?

All school children should have activities where they meet and mix with children from different backgrounds to their own	23%
More action to stop hate crime and prejudice	20%
People new to the UK should get more help to integrate into their new communities, such as help to learn English	16%
More spaces where people can meet and mix, for example parks, leisure centres, community centres and attractive high streets	15%
Everyone should volunteer a few hours each year to projects that help improve local communities	7%
Employers should give more thought to how the workplace can be somewhere people from different backgrounds can get to know each other	4%
A national sports day where people get to know others through taking part in sport	3%
None of these	0%

16. If there was a 'Neighbours Day' created to bring communities together and celebrate what we have in common, would you take part in local activities on the day?

Yes – definitely	21%
Yes - maybe	45%
No	24%
Don't know	11%
Net: Yes	66%

17. How well do you feel you've been able to cope mentally with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions? Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 'not coped well at all' and 10 'coped very well'?

1 = Not coped well at all	1%
2	2%
3	5%
4	7%
5	9%
6	9%
7	14%
8	19%
9	13%
10 = Coped very well	19%
Don't know	2%
Mean score	7.2%
NET: 1-3	8%
NET: 4-7	38%
NET: 8-10	51%

18. How important is religion or faith in your life? (This question was used as a variable in the survey analysis, as we were interested to see if religion or faith made a difference to people's perceptions about division or togetherness, or to their reported behaviour).

Very important	14%
Somewhat important	17%
Not too important	20%
Not at all important	40%
Don't know	2%
NET: Important	31%
NET: Unimportant	67%

19. On a scale of 1-10, do you feel that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on the UK, including your local community? (1 is 'very negative', 10 is 'very positive'). (This question was used as a variable in the survey analysis).

1 = Very negative	**8%**
2	**3%**
3	**6%**
4	**7%**
5	**16%**
6	**11%**
7	**14%**
8	**14%**
9	**7%**
10 = Very positive	**7%**
Mean score	**5.9%**
NET: 1-3	**18%**
NET: 4-7	**48%**
NET: 8-10	**28%**

January 2021

The fifth Talk/together survey was carried out by ICM between 27 and 28 January 2020, with a sample of 2,083 UK adults. This survey asked about people's political identities, including their identification with Leave and Remain as in-groups. We were unable to ask this question in December 2020, as the results would have been distorted by the media coverage of the UK-EU trade negotiations.

Some people strongly identify for a political party or cause, while others have no such political identity, or previously held a strong identity that is now less strongly felt. If you were asked to state how you primarily identify yourself politically today, which one of the following would you be most likely to say?

I primarily identity as a Conservative	**18%**
I primarily identity as Labour	**17%**
I primarily identity as Green	**4%**
I primarily identity a Lib Dem	**2%**
I primarily identity as a Leaver	**12%**
I primarily identity as a Remainer	**13%**
I primarily identity as being pro-independence (England/Scotland/Wales)	**4%**
I primarily identity as being pro a united Ireland	**1%**
I primarily identity as being pro union (UK)	**5%**
I primarily identify as something else	**2%**
I don't primarily identify with any of the above	**21%**

IV. The open survey

The open survey was hosted on /Together's website (www.together.org.uk) between 11 July 2020 and 12 January 2021 and received 78,790 responses. Partner organisations also distributed the survey. The survey comprised 10 questions of which two allowed open field responses. We also gave people the option of providing demographic and political data, including gender, age band, region/nation of residence in UK, voting in the 2019 General Election and voting in the 2016 EU referendum. The inclusion of demographic questions meant that we were able to weight the open survey findings to be more nationally representative when we calculated the average (mean) national and local unity scores given in Chapter Four.

Open survey findings

1. Has coronavirus made the UK as a whole more united or more divided?

Much more united	5%
Somewhat more united	42%
No difference	18%
Somewhat more divided	24%
Much more divided	10%

2. Did you offer your time as a volunteer during the crisis?

Yes, I volunteered before the coronavirus crisis and continued to do during lockdown	21%
Yes, I volunteered for the first time during lockdown	8%
No	54%

3. How united or divided do you think we are? Thinking about the UK as a whole, on a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided do you think the UK is at present? (1 is very divided and 10 is very united).
4. And now just thinking about your local community, on a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided do you think it is at present? (1 is very divided and 10 is very united).

Score	3. UK as a whole: percentage giving this score	4. Local community: percentage giving this score
1	6%	2%
2	7%	3%
3	17%	6%
4	14%	8%
5	17%	16%
6	14%	13%
7	15%	17%
8	8%	21%
9	1%	10%
10	1%	4%
Mean	4.8	6.3

5. What types of division make you feel most concerned? Please choose up to three.

Divisions between rich and poor	**68%**
Divisions between people from different ethnic groups	**35%**
Divisions between older and younger people	**18%**
Divisions between people who have different religious beliefs	**19%**
Political divisions – by party politics or EU referendum choice	**59%**
Divisions between those who want independence for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland and those who do not	**24%**
The North-South divide	**30%**
Divisions by place (between towns and big cities, urban and rural)	**16%**
Other	**8%**

6. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with these statements

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Despite differences in our views and backgrounds, I feel that most people have a lot in common	**13%**	**54%**	**17%**	**12%**	**3%**	**1%**
I find it easy to discuss politics with people who have different views to me	**4%**	**29%**	**27%**	**30%**	**9%**	**1%**
Social media drives us apart more than it brings us together	**26%**	**36%**	**24%**	**10%**	**2%**	**2%**
My local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	**8%**	**46%**	**31%**	**10%**	**3%**	**2%**
I feel I belong in my local community	**16%**	**48%**	**24%**	**8%**	**3%**	**1%**
I feel I belong to my nation (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or UK as a whole)	**21%**	**37%**	**20%**	**12%**	**9%**	**1%**

7. Other than going to work, school or college, what helps you feel more connected to other people, locally and nationally? Please choose up to three.

Chatting to my neighbours and people in the high street, pub, cafe or local amenities like the park	**74%**
Attending a place of worship	**17%**
Helping my neighbours in the coronavirus crisis	**22%**
Volunteering	**27%**
Meeting up with people through common interests like sports and hobbies	**51%**
Being in contact with people through social media	**29%**
National events such as VE Day, Remembrance Day or a national saint's day	**13%**
Supporting our team at sporting events, either locally or nationally.	**9%**
Other – please tell us about it	**11%**

8. Below are some ideas to bring people together in this country. Please indicate which three ideas you think would be most successful in doing this.

All school children should have activities where they meet and mix with children from different backgrounds to their own.	**66%**
More action to stop hate crime and prejudice.	**56%**
People new to the UK should get more help to integrate into their new communities, such as help to learn English.	**53%**
More spaces where people can meet and mix, for example parks, leisure centres, community centres and attractive high streets.	**41%**
Everyone should volunteer a few hours each year to projects that help improve local communities	**32%**
Employers should give more thought to how the workplace can be somewhere people from different backgrounds can get to know each other.	**18%**
A national sports day where people get to know others through taking part.	**4%**
None	**3%**
Other – please specify	**10%**

9. If there were a bank holiday created to bring communities together and celebrate what we have in common, would you take part in local activities on the day?

Yes	50%
No	14%
Don't know	35%

10. And now, in your own words, what do you think would help bring people together and build a kinder, closer country?

Some 61,879 answers were received to this open question. We have cited many of the responses in the body of this report.

V. Context: How we became divided

Society has always been made up of people who have different sets of values and beliefs. We may hold views about how the Government should manage the economy that place us on the left, centre or right of the political spectrum. Our social values divide us too, and we sit at different points in the social liberal-social conservative spectrum. Social liberals tend to put greater emphasis on qualities such as individual rights and care for the vulnerable, while social conservatives tend to put greater emphasis on qualities such as group loyalty and respect for authority and tradition[154].

Others have written about these social divides in much more detail, but some understanding of how we became divided is needed if we want to bridge divides and work towards a kinder and more connected future.

Differences in these social values are manifest when considering issues such as Brexit, immigration, race and empire. These issues have become the focus for identity conflicts between social liberals and social conservatives, when people start to identify as belonging to a demarcated in-group, while ascribing negative characteristics to the out-group.

The vote that was cast on 23 June 2016 was the outcome of economic, social and demographic changes over many years. Most people in the UK do not – yet – belong to demarcated liberal or conservative tribes. It is also important to acknowledge that attitudes and social norms that relate to race have changed right across society[155]. But issues that require us to pick a side, such as the EU referendum, are inevitably polarising.

There have also been a number of social and demographic changes that have increased this identity-based, inter-group conflict, or have limited the space for bridging social connections and the development of shared identities. These include:

The expansion of higher education: From the 1950s onwards, the UK university system expanded, changing from an elite system to a mass system. Higher education participation stood at 14% in 1970; by 2016 it reached 50%. Universities have a distinct culture and produce graduates who are more likely to espouse socially liberal values and are more comfortable with globalisation and immigration. The growth of higher education also led to demographic changes in the age composition of the UK's towns and smaller cities, with young people moving away to go to university and not returning home. Over the last 40 years, the demographic profile of many of the UK's towns and cities has aged while our biggest cities have got younger, limiting opportunities for social connection.

Immigration: While immigration has taken place throughout our history, the numbers of people migrating to the UK grew after the Second World War, then increased substantially from the 1990s. At the time of the 1991 census, 6.7% of the UK population had been born overseas; by 2011 it was 12.7%. A white British child who went to school before 1990 was less likely to have friends who were from a different ethnic background to themselves than someone whose schooling took place after that date. Since positive social contact with out-groups is a major factor in determining how in-groups see out-groups, we have seen generational as well as educational differences in people's attitudes to immigration, due to different levels of social contact. Among older generations, the scale and pace of population change and failure to encourage local integration are issues that are more likely to be seen as threats. In the UK, immigration rose as an issue of public concern and became the dominant identity conflict in the early years of the 20th century[156].

Divisions by geography: The above changes have led to a gradual divergence of circumstances and experiences in the UK. Younger and more socially liberal graduates have become clustered in the UK's biggest cities, while our towns and smaller cities have populations which tend to be older and more socially conservative. In their seminal paper the political scientists, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker write about 'Two Englands': one that is *"global in outlook, relatively positive about the EU, pro-immigration, comfortable with more rights and respect for women, ethnic communities and gays and lesbians and generally future-oriented,"* and another England that is *"is inward looking, relatively negative about the EU*

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154 Haidt, J. (2013) *The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion,* London: Penguin
155 Ballinger, S. (ed) (2018) *Many Rivers Crossed: British attitudes to race and immigration 50 years since 'Rivers of Blood,* London: British Future.
156 Rutter, J. and Carter, R. (2018) National Conversation on Immigration Final Report, London: British Future and Hope not hate.

and immigration, worried by the emergence of new rights for 'minorities' and prone to embracing nostalgia.'[157] The journalist David Goodhart writes about the clustering of 'anywheres' (social liberals) and 'somewheres' (social conservatives) in different parts of the UK[158].

Because those with different values tend to live in different places, they are less likely to meet and speak to each other in ways that enable trust, understanding and the accommodation of different opinions. A number of other changes have had an impact on inter-group conflict.

Changes to the party-political landscape: Traditional left-right differences still define our politics, particularly on economic issues. But our class-based political attachments have weakened since the 1990s at the same time as our social identities have played a greater role in determining the parties that we support. The identity divisions of the Brexit vote were reinforced in the 2019 general election, when social liberals tended to offer their support to Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and the SNP, while social conservatives tended to support the Conservatives with their Get Brexit Done slogan. One future scenario is that party politics could in future become more aligned with people's social identities, mirroring trends seen in the United States. An alternative scenario, and one that is informed by the social and demographic composition of marginal constituencies, is that the main political parties attempt to appeal to voters across the identity divides.

Weakening of local ties: The last 50 years have seen substantial deindustrialisation across the UK, with manufacturing moving overseas and the loss of jobs in iconic industries that came to define our towns and cities. Today's jobs are far more likely to be in financial and professional services or IT and require a graduate qualification; or are low-paid and often insecure work in retail or distribution. A 'job for life' is now the exception rather than the norm, with many people changing their jobs frequently or working as freelancers.

Many of the institutions that once brought us together no longer have such an influence or large membership. As factories closed, so did many of the working men's clubs, trade union branches, chapels and with them the networks and the political and cultural life that brought people together in the UK's industrial towns and cities. These were often institutions where there was social mixing between people with different views and values. The demise of the local pub symbolises the loss of this common space. Turnover has been stable since 2008 and the numbers of jobs in pubs and bars had increased. At the same time 11,000 pubs have closed: nearly a quarter of the 50,000 that were open in 2008. It is often the smaller pubs, in towns and villages, that have disappeared as the larger chains consolidate their business[159].

The way that we engage with politics has also weakened our local ties with political parties. Online activism has displaced face-to-face campaigning. Political parties increasingly target their resources at swing voters in marginal seats. Voters outside these seats may have very little contact with party activists or those who hold political office.

We also move within the UK much more than we did in previous times, partly due to changes in patterns of housing tenure. In 2017, 20% of housing stock was privately rented, up from 12% in 2003.[160] Once the preserve of students, one in five families with children now live in private rental accommodation, some among this number moving home frequently, making them less able to put down roots in their neighbourhoods.

These social changes have acted to reduce the space for social contact. They have weakened our local ties and with them the shared identities that they bring.

The advent of social media: Adults who use the internet spent, on average, 3 hours 15 minutes a day online in September 2018, much of this time on social media platforms[161]. The pandemic appears to have increased the time we spend online still further[162]. We are more likely now to connect with friends and family through digital platforms than we are face-to-face. This has been beneficial when COVID-19 regulations have prevented us from

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[157] Jennings, W. and Stoker, G. (2016) 'The bifurcation of politics: two Englands' in *The Political Quarterly:* 1-22.
[158] Goodhart, D. (2017) *The populist revolt and the future of politics,* London: C. Hurst. [159] Office for National Statistics (2018) *Economies of Ale,* London: ONS. [160] Whitehead, C. (2018) 'Housing policy and the changing tenure mix' in *National Institute Economic Review* 245 (1).
[161] Ofcom (2020) *Online nation*, London: Ofcom. [162] Ofcom (2020) *Adults' media use and attitudes report 2020,* London: Ofcom.

meeting in person. Social media enables us to share news and information about the communal activities that bring us together. Yet the dominant role that social media plays in our lives has also exacerbated loneliness and isolation[163]. Social media also lays claim to people's time and commitment over other face-to-face and communal activities[164].

Social media has changed the nature of political discourse. Fake news and online hatred and intimidation create mistrust and divide us. Online political debate is also dominated by relatively few voices[165]. Algorithms, too, play a role in mediating our interaction on social media, with our news feeds becoming individualised as we are matched with content that we are most likely to find engaging. Undoubtedly this has increased identity polarisation.

[163] Hertz, N. (2020) *The lonely century: coming together in a world that is pulling apart,* London: Sceptre Books. [164] Ibid.
[165] Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T. and Kimaram, A. (2020) *Britain's choice: common ground and division in 2020s Britain*, London: More in Common.

VI. About the public discussion groups

Participants in the Talk/together discussions came from these local authorities:

Plymouth	South Lanarkshire	Cheshire East	Leicestershire
Bournemouth	Scottish Borders	Cheshire West	Lincolnshire
Christchurch Poole	Perth and Kinross	Leeds	Northamptonshire
Bristol	Highlands	Hull	Norfolk
Somerset	Hartlepool	North Yorkshire	Essex
Cardiff	Northumberland	Rotherham	Hertfordshire
Swansea	Durham	Kirklees	Peterborough
Ceredigion	Newcastle	Birmingham	Milton Keynes
Wrexham	Middlesbrough	Wolverhampton	Oxfordshire
Newry, Mourne and Down	North Tyneside	Coventry	Kent
Belfast	Cumbria	Stoke-on-Trent	Portsmouth
Derry and Strabane	Greater Manchester	Worcestershire	Greater London
Mid and East Antrim	Liverpool	Nottingham	
Edinburgh	Warrington	Derby	
Glasgow	Lancashire	Leicester	

The public discussion groups

Between May 2020 and January 2021 we held 41 guided discussions with 274 members of the public in all the regions and nations of the UK. We selected people from specific locations in each region (see above table), as well as holding nine discussions where participants were drawn from a range of places across the UK. The locations from which participants came reflected the UK's diverse geographic, economic and political landscape. We selected people from prosperous and less prosperous areas, from big cities, towns and the countryside, and from places that reflect the different party political and referendum choices of the UK's population. Within each discussion group, participants came from a range of locations.

The discussions were run online, and we aimed for eight people in each group: four men and four women. Participants were recruited to give a mix of ages and social grades in each group, and to make sure that the ethnicity of participants reflected the local area. Eight of the discussion groups were composed of people who had specific demographic characteristics: These groups, and the shorthand labels used in the text that follows to distinguish them, were:

• **Low-income group:** a mixed age group of people on low incomes, whether in work or on out-of-work benefits, with the discussion taking place in May 2020.

• **Volunteers:** a mixed group of people who were volunteers, either formally or informally, with this discussion taking place in May 2020.

• **Over 70s:** a mixed group people who were over the recommended age for 'shielding', with this discussion taking place in May 2020.

• **18-24s group 1:** a mixed group of people within this age band and recruited from all over the UK. This discussion took place in May 2020.

• **Mixed geography:** a group comprising a mixture of people who lived in cities, towns and rural areas, with this discussion taking place in May 2020.

• **BAME majority:** a group recruited from Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton where six of the eight participants were from black and minority ethnic groups. This discussion was held in November 2020.

• **18-24s group 2 (non-graduates):** this group was recruited from Nottingham, with the discussion taking place in November 2020.

• **Over 65s:** this group was recruited from Greater Manchester with the discussion taking place in December 2020.

Demographic and social background of the participants

Some 281 people took part in the public discussions. Further information about the background of the participants is given below.

• 133 male (47%), 146 female (52%) and two transgender participants (1%) took part in the discussions.

• Some 81% of the participants were white British/English/Irish/Scottish or Welsh ethnicity, 3% were white other, 13% were from BAME groups and 3% were of mixed ethnicity. This is broadly the same as the ethnic composition of the overall UK population.

• 30% of the participants lived in large cities (population over 500,000)

• 32% of the participants lived in small cities/large towns (population 100,000-500,000)

• 21% of the participants lived in medium towns (population 15,000-100,000)

• 9% of the participants lived in small towns (population 2,000-15,000)

• 9% of the participants lived in rural areas (settlement size of under 2,000)

Figure A: Age profile of participants in the public discussions
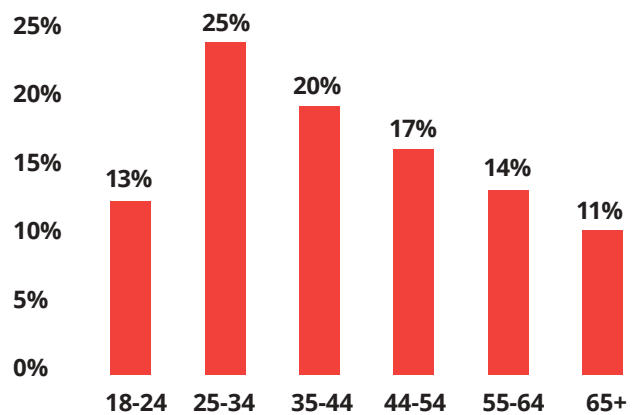
Political views of the participants

As it was important that the participants in the discussions had a mix of political views, we used screening questions about political views in the recruitment process. These questions were:

England and Wales – "On a scale of 1-10, how strongly do you identify with Leave or Remain when it comes to Brexit, with 1 being most strongly Leave and 10 being most strongly Remain." We aimed for four Leave and four Remain supporters in each group, but also a range of views, not just people who strongly supported one side or another in the EU referendum.

Social grade profile of citizens' panel participants

Social grade	Description	Representation in UK population	Representation in public discussions
A	Higher managerial, administrative or professional, for example doctor or company director	4%	4%
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional, for example a teacher or software engineer	23%	25%
C1	Supervisory, clerical or junior managerial, administrative or professional, for example a qualified care worker or office administrator	28%	32%
C2	Skilled manual workers, for example a plumber or electrician	20%	27%
D	Semi-skilled or unskilled workers, for example food production line operative or supermarket cashier	15%	9%
E	Casual or lowest grade workers and those who depend on welfare state for their main income such as state pensioners and casual agricultural workers	10%	3%

Some 41% of the participants voted Leave in 2016, 41% voted Remain and 18% could not or did not vote in the EU referendum.

Northern Ireland – "Do you see yourself as: part of the Protestant and/or Unionist community, or part of the Roman Catholic and/or Nationalist community." There was a ratio of 10 Protestant/Unionists to 9 Catholics/Nationalists in the three discussion groups, to reflect the population of Northern Ireland.

Scotland – "Should Scotland be an independent country?" In the three groups, 9 people supported independence, 10 did not and 3 were unsure.

Questions used in the discussions

We used a set of common questions to guide each discussion, which generally lasted 90 minutes. Ten of the 36 participants in the discussions that took place in May 2020 were also asked to complete diaries for a further month until the end of June 2020. This group was asked questions about issues that had been in the news, with their answers sent back by WhatsApp or as an SMS message.

In the online discussions that took place from September 2020, we also included some additional questions relevant to particular locations, or to probe issues that had been in the news in the previous week.

General perceptions about division

"On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is very divided and 10 is very united, how divided do you think the UK is at present?" (1 is very divided and 10 is not at all divided). Please can you give your score and the reason you chose that number.

"On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is very divided and 10 is very united, how divided do you think your local community is at present?" (1 is very divided and 10 is not at all divided).

Are we more divided now than in the past? What has been the impact of the Coronavirus?

Are there types of social division in the [region/ nation] which are different to the rest of the UK?

What about the Black Lives Matter protests: did they unite people of different races, perhaps focusing

people's minds on the racism that divides us? Or do you think that they divided people? Or both?

Looking forward to next year, when we have a vaccine, what types of social divisions worry you most and why?

1. COVID in our communities

I now want to ask a few more questions about your local communities. How well do you think your neighbourhood has coped over the last eight months?

When the Prime Minister called the first lockdown on 23 March this year, how did people in your neighbourhood respond in relation to supporting each other?

Were there people that organised this support? Did most people join in and do their bit?

Did anyone in the group offer their time as a volunteer? Was this the first time you were a volunteer? Did volunteering bring people from different backgrounds together?

What about Clap for Carers? Did that play a part in bringing people together?

Do you think that lockdown and the crisis has resulted in more discussions about mental health? Is this a good thing? Will this carry on going forward?

What factors have helped people and the neighbourhoods they live in cope with this virus? What factors have made it more difficult to cope?

Have the social connections we have in our neighbourhoods and towns/cities helped us to cope?

More broadly, what do you see as the benefits of being socially connected where you live?

How can we keep hold of the community spirit that came out of the coronavirus crisis?

In one word – how do you feel about the state of the UK at the moment – in relation to divisions and togetherness?

And again in one word – how would you like our society to be in the future?

2. What brings us together and unites us?

What helps bridge some of the social divides we have talked about and brings us together, both in our local communities and across the country?

What is the role of national events such as Remembrance Day and royal weddings, or sporting events?

Whose responsibility is it to heal social divisions and bring people together?

We all have different political views. How can we be better at disagreeing with each other?

What should politicians do to address division? How can we make the political system better?

How can social media become a force for good, rather than something that divides us?

What do you think business and employers should be doing to bridge social divides and bring people together?

And councils? What about schools and colleges?

3. Being British, English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish

What does being English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish or British mean to you?

What aspects of being British might unite us, irrespective of where we are from or our backgrounds?

Do you think it is important that there are things that unite us as people who live in the same country?

A suggestion that was recently in the news is that we hold a Neighbours Day in this country to bring people together and mark the community spirit of lockdown. What do you think about this idea? What type of activities should take place on such a day?

4. Conclusion - Priorities for change

If there was one thing that should be done to help heal this country's divisions and unite us, what would that be?

Additional themes

We included a number of additional questions in the public discussions so we could examine issues that had been in the news in the previous week, or those that were relevant to specific locations. These additional themes are set out below.

Region/nation	Dates of discussions	Additional themes
Cross-UK groups (diary questions)	May 2020 with diary questions sent out from 2-26 June	Has the UK become more united or divided since the discussion? (This was asked on 2 and 26 June 2020). Perceptions about Clap for Carers. Perceptions about the Black Lives Matter protests.
East of England	Week of 26 October 2020	Housing and the built environment. Immigration and integration.
East Midlands	Week of 23 November 2020	Collective memory of the COVID-19 crisis. Immigration and integration. Age divides and intergenerational relations.
Greater London	Week of 5 October 2020	Perceptions of the North-South divide. Housing and the built environment. Gentrification.
North East	Week of 2 November 2020	Impact of the second lockdown announcement. Perceptions of the North-South divide. The inclusion of disabled people.
North West	Week of 1 December 2020	Perceptions of the North-South divide. Age divides and intergenerational relations. Views about mental health.
South East	Week of 19 October 2020	Immigration and integration, including responses to the drowning of migrants who had tried to cross the Channel from France.
South West	Week of 15 December 2020	Rural-urban differences and divides. Hospitality sector and high streets. Wealth divides in the region.
West Midlands	Week of 16 November 2020	Inter-ethnic relations. Young people.
Yorkshire and the Humber	Weeks of 21 and 28 September 2020	Wealth divides in the region. Immigration and integration. Inter-faith and community relationships, including the impact of residential segregation.
Northern Ireland	Week of 12 October 2020	Community relations, including perceptions of change over time. Impact of leaving the EU on Northern Ireland.
Scotland	Week of 9 November 2020	The Scottish independence debate. Impact of new lockdown measures. Transgender rights.
Wales	Week of 8 December 2020	Inclusive Welsh identities. Rural-urban differences and divides.
Mixed North East England / Scotland group	Week of 2 November 2020	Rural-urban differences and divides. The Scottish independence debate. Impact of living close to a border. The reception of newcomers.
Cross-UK groups 7 and 8	Weeks of 19 and 26 October	Reflection about activities that made people feel more connected or united.
Cross-UK group	January 2021	Views about 2021. Brexit identities.

VII. Organisations that took part in Talk/Together

The following organisations attended Talk/Together discussions, provided written evidence or contributed by running partnership activities.

38 Degrees
3SG Bath and North East Somerset
Age UK Cheshire
Age UK Norwich
A Living Tradition
All Hallows Church Leeds
Archbishop of Canterbury's Housing Commission
Artichoke Trust
Arts Network
Assist Teignbridge
Association of Retirement Community Organisations (ARCO)
Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham (AVOW)
Avaaz
Aviva
BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Neasden
Basildon Council
Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network
Better Together Norfolk
b:friend, Doncaster
Birmingham Settlement
BRAP
Bradford Council
Brent Multifaith Forum
Brent Sikh Centre
Bridges for Communities
Bristol City Council
British Paralympic Association
British Property Federation
British Youth Council
Business in the Community
Cardiff Council
Carmarthenshire Council
Charisma
Chilypep
Churches Together in Cornwall
Ceredigion Council
City of Sanctuary
Cohesion Advisory Group, Sheffield
Cohesion Plus
Community
Community Action Bedfordshire
Community Action Network

Community Barnet
Community Links Bromley
Community Works Brighton and Hove
Create Streets
Derby City Council
Devon County Council
Diocese of Birmingham
Diocese of Leeds
Doncaster Conversation Club
East of England Local Government Association
Eden Project
Enfield Voluntary Action
Faiths United
Fenland Council
First Group / KonectBus
Friend in Deed
Football Beyond Borders
Girlguiding
Gloucestershire Federation of Women's Institutes
Good Faith Partnership
Good Neighbours Coventry
Good Gym
Grampian Region Equality Council
Greater London Authority
Groundwork
Hanson Lane Opportunity Centre
Haringey Council
HOPE Coventry
Housing Associations Charitable Trust
Hull CVS
Independent Age
Integrated Education Fund
Interfaith Contact Group Brighton and Hove
Jo Cox Foundation
Just Lincolnshire
Kent Equality Cohesion Council
Leeds Interfaith Forum
Leeds Trinity University
Leicester School Linking Project
Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network
Linking Network
Liverpool City Council
London School of Economics
Luton Council
Manchester Cares
Mayor of London
Mediation Sheffield

Mendip District Council
MG Alba
Middlesbrough Asylum Project
MiFriendly Cities
Migration Policy and Practice
Migration Yorkshire
More in Common Batley and Spen
National Community Land Trust Network
Near Neighbours
Nechells POD
Neighbourly Lab
Newham Council
Nisa Nashim
Norfolk County Council
North Yorkshire Council
Northern Ireland Alternatives
Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
Norwich Business Improvement District
Norwich City Council
Norwich Supporters Club
Norwich Together Alliance
Nutkhut
One Knowsley
Ostro Fayre Share Foundation
Peterborough CVS
Porchlight
Refugee Action Colchester
Royal Town Planning Institute
Runnymede Trust
St George's Church Leeds
St Philip's Centre, Leicester
Scottish Community Alliance
Scottish Men's Shed Association
Scottish Women's Institutes
Scouts
Sedgemoor District Council
Sheffield City of Sanctuary
Somerset County Council
Somerset Rural Communities Council
South Bank Community Land Trust
South West TUC
South Yorkshire Community Foundation

Swansea Interfaith Forum
Swindon City of Sanctuary
Teignbridge CVS
The Cares Family
The Feast
The Good Deeds Project
The Jarrold Group
The Reader
The Roots Programme
The Sleep Charity
The Sun
Toast Love Coffee
Together for Peace
Together We Thrive
Totally Stoked
Transformation Cornwall
United for All Ages
University of Bristol
University of Durham
University of Kent
University of Glasgow
Votes for Schools
Voluntary Action Leicestershire
Voluntary Action Staffordshire
Voluntary Action Swindon
Voluntary Arts
Volunteer Centre Newcastle
Volunteering Matters
WeKommune
Wellsprings, Leeds
We Stand Together
West of England Centre for Inclusive Living
Who is Your Neighbour
Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council
Wolverhampton for Everyone
Wrexham Council
Young Citizens
Young Vic
Youth Focus North East
Youth Leads
Youth Sports Trust

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IX. Acknowledgements

X. About the authors

This report is published by /Together, a coalition that everyone is invited to join, from community groups to some of the UK's best-known organisations, whose aim is to bring people together and bridge divides, to help build kinder, closer and more connected communities in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Talk/together was coordinated and delivered by British Future for the Together Coalition. Jill Rutter and Jake Puddle led the day-to-day delivery of the project and drafted this report. Steve Ballinger, British Future's Director of Communications, managed the surveys, edited the report and coordinated launch activities, with launch events coordinated by Lucy Buckerfield. Louise Hickmott provided administrative support. Overall management of Talk/together was the responsibility of Sunder Katwala, British Future's Director.

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity, engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, identity and race. These debates, from EU migration and refugee protection to integration and combating prejudice, can seem noisy and polarised. British Future has developed a unique, in-depth understanding of public attitudes, uncovering the common ground on which people can agree, including through large-scale public engagement projects such as the National Conversation on Immigration. Our long-term aim is a country where we are no longer 'Them and Us' but rather a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all. British Future is a founding member of the /Together Coalition.