

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

Executive Summary

A Beyond Us and Them Research Project Report
November 2021



Executive Summary

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

In order to build a kinder, fairer, better connected and more inclusive society, we need to strengthen the ties that bind us and in particular those ties that bridge between different groups, communities, and regions. As others have pointed out, the UK is at a crossroads as we emerge from the pandemic.¹ We have an opportunity to build on the appetite for compassion, social connectedness and community spirit in society that has been revealed during this period. Some of the likely levers for doing this and for strengthening resilience to the forces of polarisation, division and segregation within our society are identified in our latest report (*Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion During Eighteen Months of COVID-19*).

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

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

The following is a summary of some of our key findings.

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

Unity and division

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

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

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

Trust

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

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

Trust in national government

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

Identity and belonging

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

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

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

Volunteering and social action

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

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

- The experience of volunteers – Those who engage in volunteering express greater trust in local and national government, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future than non-volunteers.
- Volunteering and trust – Higher levels of local political trust were significantly and reliably associated with greater rates of positive social engagement.
 - There is a similar but weaker relationship between helping behaviour (that is, volunteering and donating) and higher levels of national political trust.

The impact of investing in social cohesion

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

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

Deprivation, Discrimination and Intergroup Contact

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

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

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

Recommendations

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

1. Leadership and narratives that stress interdependence

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

2. Actively build trust within every community and between communities

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

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

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

4. Support a sustained uplift in volunteering

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

5. Tackle deprivation and discrimination

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

Please see the table below for further detail on how our findings and recommendations relate to each other.

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

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

Recommendations and Examples of Underpinning Evidence

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

Recommendation 1: Leadership and narratives that stress interdependence

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

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

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

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

Recommendation 2: Actively build trust within every community and between communities

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

This should include:

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

Trust in local government held up more strongly than trust in national government, but not as strongly as trust in other people. Trust was higher in the areas that had prioritised cohesion and among volunteers. This suggests we need to build trust from the ground-up. For example:

- **Trust in the UK government's response** to the crisis started out high (51% of people in May 2020), but dropped sharply after June 2020, hitting its lowest point in October 2020 (21%) and never recovered to the level of May 2020.
- **Trust in local government** – Respondents consistently trusted their local authority's response to COVID-19 more than they did the UK government, remaining at 41% in June 2021. This was true in all places.
- **Trust in other people** – Trust in other people (to abide by COVID-19 restrictions) fell during the summer of 2020 (to 19%), but recovered strongly in autumn 2020 and was still stronger in June 2021 (43%) than it had been in May 2020.

In six local authority areas that have prioritised social cohesion, we found that people had higher levels of political trust.

- **Higher trust in national and local government** – Respondents in the six local authority areas (when asked in June 2021) expressed higher levels of trust in the national government than respondents from other places (+10%), and were more positive towards their local government's response to the pandemic (+4%).
- **Feelings of warmth towards other groups** – In the local areas feelings of warmth towards migrants to the UK were higher than elsewhere in June 2020 and were maintained at this level in June 2021.

Volunteering is associated with higher levels of trust both in local institutions and in each other – see the findings below.

Recommendation 3: Empower local government to build cohesion, trust and resilience

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

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

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

The six local areas that have prioritised social cohesion remained more resilient when the crisis struck and maintained higher levels of trust, neighbourliness, social connection and strikingly higher levels of volunteering. There is much that can be learnt from them. For example:

- **Higher trust in national and local government** – see above
- **Higher levels of volunteering** – The percentage of respondents volunteering in the six areas remained more consistent and twice as high as in other places. Respondents in these areas in June 2021 reported much **greater active social engagement** in general (i.e. volunteering, donating, signing petitions) by a differential of +17.4%.
- **Higher levels of social connection** – Respondents in the six areas (when asked in June 2021) had closer relations with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours than people from other areas (+19%).
- **High levels of neighbourliness** – Respondents in the six areas consistently reported having a stronger sense of neighbourliness than those in other areas.
- **Higher levels of subjective well-being** – Respondents in these areas (even after accounting for demographic differences) were more likely to perceive themselves as being financially better off than others and consistently experienced higher levels of subjective well-being than respondents in other places.

Recommendation 4: Support a sustained uplift in volunteering

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

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

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

Volunteers express higher levels of political trust, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future, and volunteering (formal and informal) played an essential role in sustaining local community support networks. In local areas which have prioritised social cohesion respondents were much more likely to volunteer. For example:

- **The experience of volunteers** – those who engage in volunteering express greater trust in local and national government, greater sense of neighbourliness, and greater optimism for the future, than non-volunteers.
- **Volunteering and trust** – Higher levels of local political trust were significantly and reliably associated with greater rates of positive social engagement.
 - There is a similar but weaker relationship between helping behaviour (that is, volunteering and donating) and higher levels of national political trust.

Recommendation 5: Tackle deprivation and discrimination

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

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

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

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

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

The Centre for the Study of Group Processes (CSGP) is based in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. Founded by its director, Professor Dominic Abrams in 1990, CSGP is at the heart of the School's excellent international reputation for experimental and applied social psychological research on groups and intergroup relations. Its research includes topics such as prejudice across the lifespan, collective action, social influence, leadership, group decision making, and community and political psychology.

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