



More in
Common

Everyday Levelling Up

More in Common Briefing Paper

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About More in Common

More in Common is an international initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarisation and social division. Our teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across lines of division.

Methodological information

The polling cited in this report was carried out by YouGov, Public First and Kantar. Details of fieldwork and sample size below.

- More in Common–Public First, Fieldwork (17/11/2021 – 23/11/2021), N = 2,046
- Public First, Fieldwork (16/11/2021 – 22/11/2021), N=2,007
- YouGov, Fieldwork (19th November 2021 – 1st December 2021), N =2,2021
- Kantar's Britain Barometer (in collaboration with More in Common, Fieldwork: 13/01/2022-17/01/2022, N = 1,089)

The qualitative research in the report was carried out between August 2021 and January 2022. Participants were screened using the British Seven segmentation survey. Recruitment was carried out by the independent research recruitment agency (CRD) and moderated by More in Common's researchers.

Acknowledgements

More in Common appreciates the valuable input and advice relating to this study that we received from colleagues, experts, friends and partners. For their assistance with many elements of this work, we would like to thank our colleagues and partners: Tim Dixon, Amy Leonard, Tyron Surmon, Jess Porter, Angus Walker, Rachel Wolf, Seb Wride.

Foreword: The stakes for levelling up

While 2019 was the Brexit election, the consequences of the electoral realignment that delivered the Conservatives their 80-seat majority have extended right across the UK's political landscape, changing the direction of domestic policy too. Most notably, this majority built off the back of a 'Red-Wall' of formerly safe Labour seats spurred a new political conversation, about how the Conservatives could turn their one-off vote into a new and permanent voting block. The answer that came back is what is now known as levelling up.

The promise of that policy – both to regenerate and rejuvenate communities that felt neglected and to restore a sense of purpose and prosperity to the UK's former industrial powerhouses – offers a raft of opportunities. Those opportunities go beyond bolstering the electoral popularity of one party, and help turn the focus of both main parties to those who have felt left behind for decades, to restore trust and support for our democracy.

In fact, our conversations with voters have made clear that just as 2019 was a Brexit election, the next one will be squarely about levelling up: something made plain by the fact that seven in ten of the group of voters who most strongly switched to the Conservatives at the last election place levelling up as a top issue for deciding their vote at the next one.

While current Westminster conversation is dominated by whether or not the Prime Minister will survive the fall-out from allegations of lockdown-breaking parties during the pandemic, the central importance of levelling up has not faded.

For the Conservatives, led by Boris Johnson or not, being seen to deliver on levelling up will be a central part of any reset. For the Labour Party, now emboldened by Conservative Party struggles, outlining a credible plan for community regeneration will be central to regaining the trust of those voters who have left them in recent years.

More fundamentally, beyond the fortunes of any single political party, is the importance of delivering on levelling up for people's faith in our political system. Many of the people we have spoken to have a deep-rooted sense that the system simply doesn't work for them – in fact 78 per cent say that system is rigged. Add pandemic fatigue and a growing cost of living crisis to their sense of decades-long neglect and the need to show them that Government can and will improve their lives becomes ever more acute.

What people want from levelling up

What then does that levelling up delivery look like? To try and understand it, over the last six months, More in Common has held regular focus group conversations with dozens of Britons from Stoke and Tyneside to Blackpool and Wakefield to understand what the public thinks about and wants from levelling up. Alongside these conversations, we polled more than 4,000 Britons in partnership with Public First at the close of last year to explore where British public opinion was on the government's central policy agenda.

What we heard back were strong and consistent messages about the need for the levelling policy to deliver on its promise. Almost always, people were proud of the place they call home, but just as frequently, that pride was mixed with a feeling that their community had been neglected, ignored, and forgotten by those in charge - in some cases for a very long time.

For many that feeling of being forgotten and ignored is most visible and felt most strongly in their everyday lives, making it all the more difficult to escape from. They saw it in their struggling high streets, boarded up shops, stretched public services, poor public transport, run-down parks and deteriorating roads.

Contrary to much of the policy and media debate around levelling up, our research finds that for most Britons levelling up is not about how their area measures up against other areas (or indeed how their region compares to other regions) but instead about how they feel about their own area itself – the comparison to elsewhere matters less, if at all.

Instead, for most people, levelling up is about the hyper-local. When we asked people what they wanted from levelling up, they talked about improving the services they use, the high streets they shop in, the parks they walk in, the buses they take. Britons want the focus to be on how well these things are working and about how they make their lives easier or more difficult, better or worse.

If the levelling up rhetoric can be turned into a levelling up reality that delivers for these everyday expectations, then there is both a political prize for the party that can do that, and a real chance for a reset between our politicians and the British people.

This paper does not seek to duplicate the valuable analyses published by Power to Change and the Cares Family, Public First, Onward, Sebastian Payne, Will Jennings, the Centre for Towns and others. The picture that emerges from this analysis is based on More in Common's own country-wide mapping of our values in Britain's Choice, and our development of the seven segments of the British public. Our focus on those people who are normally invisible from debates in politics and civil society allows us to report back what people want from levelling up and give voice to the very people who stand to benefit most from it. Building

on that unique perspective, this paper seeks to show how the design and implementation of levelling up can best meet Britons' expectations.

Section One will focus on the broader context that has shaped and continues to shape the levelling up agenda - both the bleak picture of public opinion at the beginning of 2022, as well as the dynamics of political realignment and voter volatility.

Section Two explores Britain's top line priorities for levelling up and the timeline under which they want to see levelling up delivered.

Section Three will discuss how Britons answer the question 'what is levelling up' as it relates to their own everyday lives and priorities.

This paper is not a detailed policy prescription or manual for handling the complex issues around levelling up and regional inequalities. Others are better placed to provide that. It is, however, an attempt to bring together the very many conversations and surveys we have done, to show where the public are at on levelling up, what their expectations are, and crucially the fundamental importance of levelling up for the long-term future of our country.

Section one: The 2022 context to levelling up

1.1. Public opinion at the start of 2022

The British public enters 2022 facing a cost of living crisis, mounting frustration with political scandals and lockdown breaches, and a growing sense that things are going in the wrong direction.

Even prior to the latest round of Downing Street party allegations, our polling showed not only that trust in the Government had collapsed, but also that increasing numbers of Britons think the entire system is stacked against them. Over the past few months, the number agreeing that the ‘system is rigged towards the rich and powerful’ has risen to 78 per cent, a perception that the scandals of the past few weeks will only have further entrenched.

As a result, much of the sense of solidarity that built up throughout the darkest days of the pandemic has been squandered. Most Britons now think we live in a country where it’s everyone for themselves, and where our differences are harder to manage.

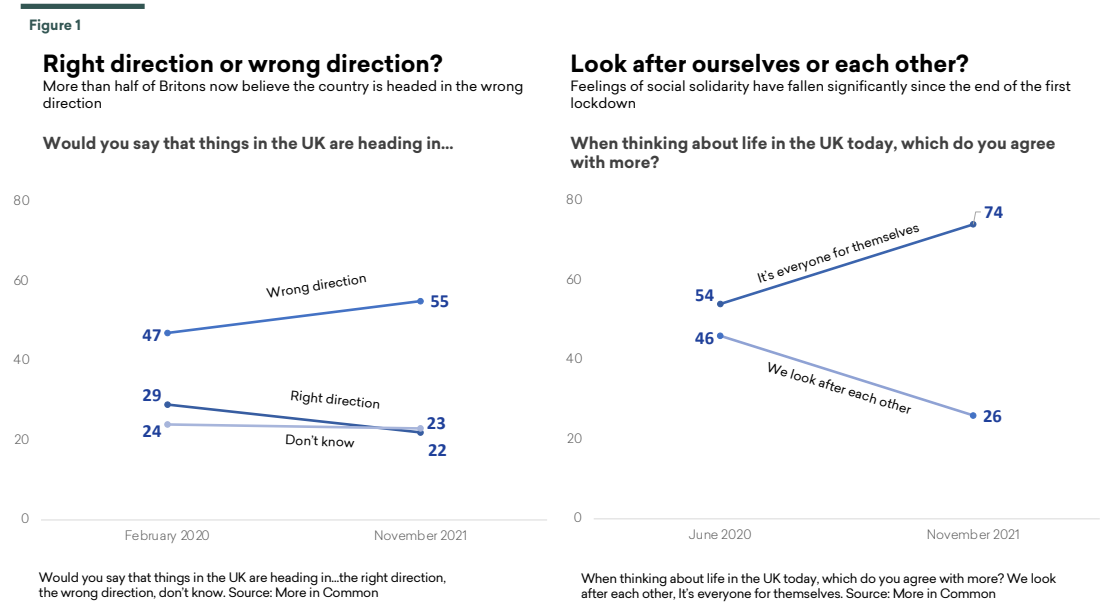
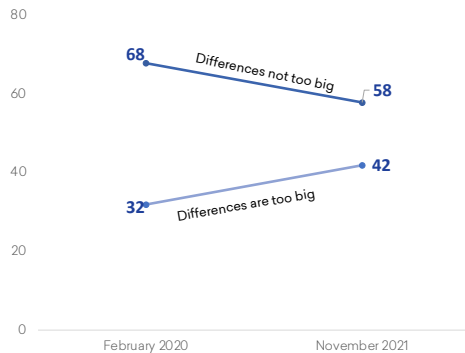


Figure 2

Managing our differences

Confidence in our ability to manage our differences has fallen over the course of the pandemic

Which do you agree with more?

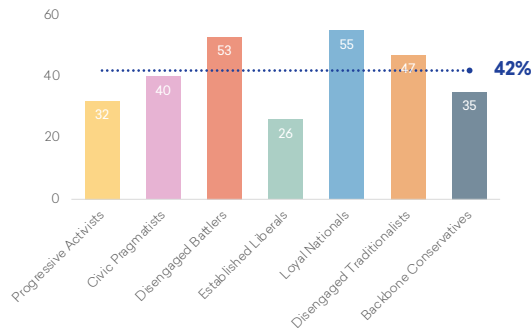


Which of the following statements do you agree with more? The differences between Britons are too big for us to come together. The differences between Britons are not so big that we cannot come together. Source: More in Common

Managing our differences

The segments differ on whether our differences are too big for us to manage

Our differences are too big for us to come together (by segment)



Which of the following statements do you agree with more? The differences between Britons are too big for us to come together. The differences between Britons are not so big that we cannot come together. Source: More in Common

But these feelings of pessimism and gloom are not solely linked to recent scandals. In our focus groups over the past couple of months, we have heard families tell us about their struggles with the rising cost of energy, food, and fuel, parents talk about the difficulty of getting GP appointments for their children, and Universal Credit recipients struggling with the very real impact of seeing the £20 uplift removed.

Taken together, this is leading to a growing perception that British democracy is simply not delivering for people outside of London and the South-East. In fact, nearly six in ten people say that the Government is not doing enough for their area or region, and fewer than one in ten think that the Government is making life better in their community¹. For many, as we shall go on to discuss, this sense of neglect did not start during the pandemic, but rather is something that has been building up over decades. The question then, is whether we are in danger of reaching a breaking point, where enough Britons start to feel like the system doesn't work for them, and instead turn to populist alternatives who promise to tear up the rulebook to deliver for the people.

1.2. The political context for levelling up

Following the Conservatives' landslide victory, it seemed that they had alighted on a cure for the sense of neglect, abandonment and pessimism felt by many in the North and Midlands of England through a promise to 'level up the country'. Our work in recent months shows that not only is delivery of 'levelling up' central to the fortunes of both the Conservative and Labour Party, but also central to convincing the public that Government really does work for them.

¹ Source: Kantar's Britain Barometer, January 2022 (in collaboration with More in Common, Fieldwork: 13th January 2022-17th January 2022, N = 1,089)

Much has been written about the political realignment that led up to the consequential 2019 General Election that delivered Boris Johnson his 80-seat majority – including the recent authoritative account of ‘The British General Election of 2019’². This report is not the space for a detailed commentary on political realignment at the last general election, but More in Common’s analysis of the seven segments of the British public allows us to take a detailed look at how different parts of the British public have changed their votes in recent years.

More in Common worked with data scientists and social psychology researchers to build a model that maps the British population not according to their party, age, income or other demographic factor, but according to their values and core beliefs. Analysing a representative sample of more than 10,000 people in partnership with YouGov and conducting focus group conversations and one-on-one interviews with hundreds of Britons, we identified seven distinct population groups – the ‘British Seven’³.

Progressive Activists (13 per cent of Britons): A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.

Civic Pragmatists (13 per cent of Britons): A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.

Disengaged Battlers (12 per cent of Britons): A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.

Established Liberals (12 per cent of Britons): A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.

Loyal Nationals (17 per cent of Britons): A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

² The British General Election of 2019, Robert Anthony Ford, Tim Bale, William J. Jennings, Paula Surridge, Paperback

³ The British Seven segmentation was applied in ‘Britain Talks Climate’ as part of a collaboration between More in Common, Climate Outreach, the European Climate Foundation (ECF) and YouGov. More information on the segments is available at: britainschoice.uk.

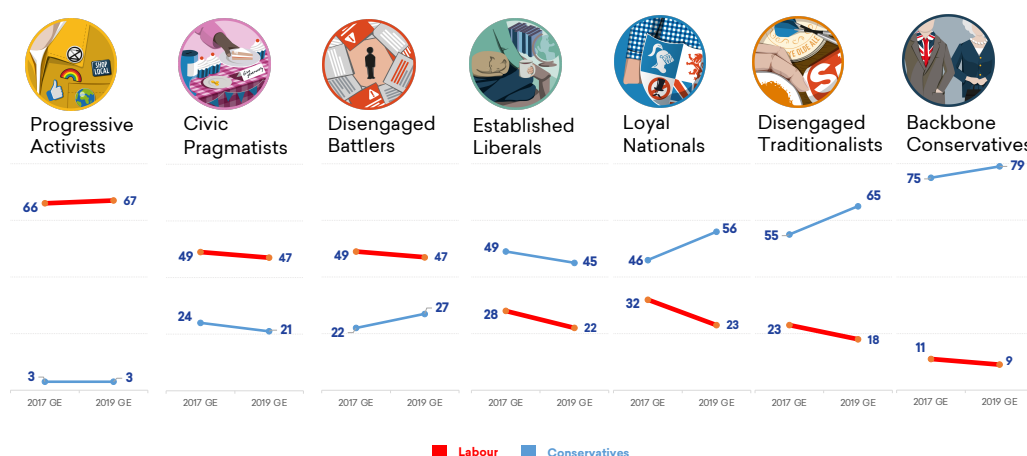
Disengaged Traditionalists (18 per cent of Britons): A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected

Backbone Conservatives (15 per cent of Britons): A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future outside of Europe, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics.

Figure 3

General Elections 2017 v 2019: how the British Seven changed their vote?

How the segments' votes for the Conservatives/Labour changed between the elections



Looking at how the voting patterns of these seven segments have shifted gives a further perspective on the recent realignment of UK politics. In particular, we see the voting coalition that delivered an historic 80-seat majority for the Conservatives was in part built on strengthening the traditional voter base of the Backbone Conservatives, and limiting losses among the largely remain-voting Established Liberals. But far more important was mobilising Disengaged Traditionalists and encouraging Loyal Nationals (particularly in the Red Wall) to make the direct switch from Labour and vote Tory for the first time. That 10 point increase in support for the last two segments delivered Boris Johnson his historic mandate to 'get Brexit done' and 'level up' the country.

In our focus group conversations over the last six months, with Britons across the Red Wall constituencies, people are open about what led many of them to vote Tory for the first time. Chief among those reasons was getting Brexit done, delivering on the will of the public and closing down perceived chaos of the process of leaving. But both across the Red Wall and elsewhere, this was also coupled with a broad sense that the Labour Party, particularly under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, had lost its way.



I voted Conservative, purely on the back, not so much of Brexit for me, but it was just because Boris... I would rather Boris Johnson in charge than Jeremy Corbyn, to be honest. I have been a Labour voter in my youth...but it's not the working man's party it once was...Champagne socialists that's what I call them now.

Mike, Loyal National, Blyth

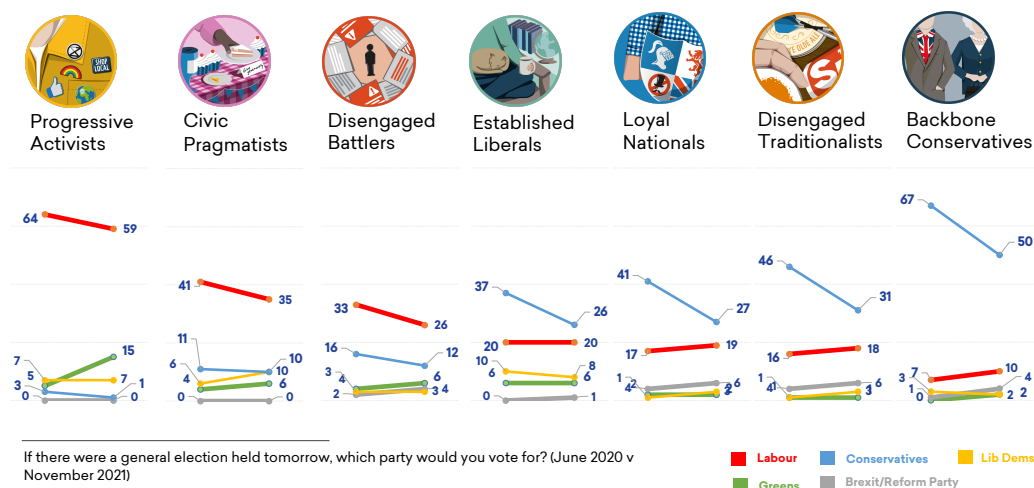
Occurring so soon after the General Election, the pandemic froze those realignment dynamics. In focus group discussions right up until last autumn, and especially across the constituencies that delivered the Government's majority, we found strong personal support for the Prime Minister, and understanding for the difficult hand the government had been dealt in managing the pandemic.

Last autumn, however, that support showed signs of weakening, even before allegations of sleaze and lockdown parties emerged. Cuts to universal credit proved unpopular across our focus groups, while people began to talk more openly about their experiences of the rising cost of living, along with Covid fatigue and frustration at the Government's inability to tackle the Channel crossings. In focus groups since the Patterson scandal and coverage of Downing Street parties, this frustration has become more vocal and has turned to anger, especially towards the Prime Minister.

Figure 4

The segments' changing voting intention

Between June 2020 and November 2021, there have been significant changes in the voting intention of the British seven segments



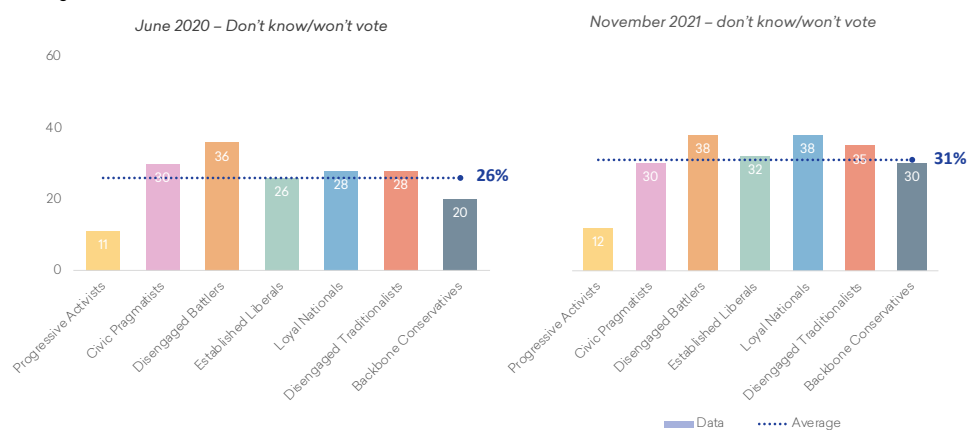
These dynamics are reflected in changing voting intention among the segments. At the end of November (before the Downing Street party stories emerged, but after the Owen Paterson scandal), the voter coalition that delivered the Government's majority had already weakened. Among the four segments that make up the government's majority (Backbone Conservatives, Disengaged Traditionalists, Loyal Nationals and Established Liberals), the government had lost between eleven and seventeen percentage points.

Despite this, these voters were not yet returning to their traditional home in the Labour Party. Instead, what was more significant was the five point increase in 'don't know' or 'would not vote' which was even stronger among Loyal Nationals (10 point increase) and Disengaged Traditionalists (8 point increase).

Figure 5

The space for a populist alternative

Less engaged and low-trust segments are significantly more likely to respond 'don't know' or 'would not vote' on voting intention



If there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for? (June 2020 v November 2021)

This polling is consistent with what we heard first-hand in focus groups across the Red Wall. Life-long Labour voters tired of debates about Brexit and frustrated that their vote was not being respected, broke the habit of a life-time and voted Tory. But they also pointed out that this was not a full blown conversion to Conservatism, and in fact on many economic issues, the views of Loyal Nationals remain closer to those of Progressive Activists than Backbone Conservatives.



Currently, 18,000 student flats are empty, but we've got homeless on the streets. And I just think somewhere along the line, rather than blaming people, we should just start being a bit honest and actually start putting a bit more investment in things. We spend billions on absolute rubbish, and then we say, "Oh, we're underfunding on the NHS, we're underfunding on the schools." And we just don't put enough money in, but we spend money frivolously on other stuff.

– David, Loyal National, Plymouth



I think the Americans are trying to get their hands on the NHS. That's what I've read up. I don't know too much in depth, but I think it would benefit politicians a lot, and their friends, if they can try and privatise it. So don't think they're spending enough on it!

– Jack, Loyal National, Bolton



The rise in social care stinks because, again, it's a North-South divide. I mean, for them to say that for social care that you have to pay, or the first 80,000 off your property goes towards social care. Now, if you live in the North East, where the average house prices are lower that's quite the percentage. You live down in London, that's not even 2% of the value of your home...people in the North will lose a lot more than the people in the South.

- John, Loyal National, Blyth

For people to be willing to make a more permanent shift into the blue column, they wanted to see whether Boris Johnson's Government proved itself both able to deliver Brexit and to regenerate the area these voters lived in. Fast forward to the close of 2021 and these Red Wall voters were far less likely to say that they would vote for the Conservatives again. What is striking is how many now rationalise their 2019 vote purely on the basis of Brexit. But at the same time, there was little sense that the Labour Party was yet doing enough to bring these voters back into the fold.



I actually crossed the box for the Conservative Party because of Brexit and I didn't have much faith in Jeremy Corbyn. And my husband started leaning towards the Conservatives, although we'd never voted Conservative. And I just think my God, I don't want this party and I don't want Labour. And maybe I would think about looking at the independent parties because I've got no faith, whatsoever.

- Josephine, Loyal National, Bolton



The only time I've ever voted Conservative, was to get us out of Brexit. I've always been a Labour supporter. But I can't give my vote to Labour now, because they're just as worse...they don't seem to be going in any direction.

- Alan, Loyal National, Bolton

Since our polling was conducted in late November 2021, Labour has made more progress in converting Tory switchers. However, the 'don't know' and 'would not vote' responses remain consistently high among the group they need to win back the Red Wall – with between 25 per cent and 30 per cent of 2019 Conservative voters responding 'don't know' along with around 15 per cent of 2019 Labour voters on recent polls. Many of these voters instead have become disenchanted with mainstream politicians writ large and are more open to alternatives.

As of yet this has not manifested itself in support for smaller parties, although we do see some bleeding of Progressive Activists from the Labour Party to the Greens. Given the previous success of UKIP and later the Brexit Party in picking up disenchanted voters on the right, it could be seen as surprising that the Reform Party has not yet cut through. This is especially so given that our conversations with Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Traditionalists suggest there is some appetite for a right-wing populist alternative to the Conservatives.

However, it seems likely that Reform's failure to gain traction is more a product of having an unknown and uncharismatic leadership, and even more importantly misjudging the public mood on Covid restrictions - where our polling has consistently found that these groups supported strict and clear measures to tackle the spread of the virus.

As the pandemic fades, the risk therefore is that many of the voters who abandoned the Labour Party in 2019 and are now doing the same with the Conservatives in 2022, feel so let down by mainstream politicians that a more credible populist alternative emerges.

From our work across five countries, **we know that the only cure for the threat of populism is to show people that democracy is delivering for them.** In the UK, that means promises to regenerate left-behind communities being kept, neglected parts of the country seeing real investment, and people's everyday lives improving because of what the state does. For the Government that means delivering on levelling up, and for the Opposition it means outlining a proactive, alternative and credible vision to reinvigorate communities that have fallen into decline.

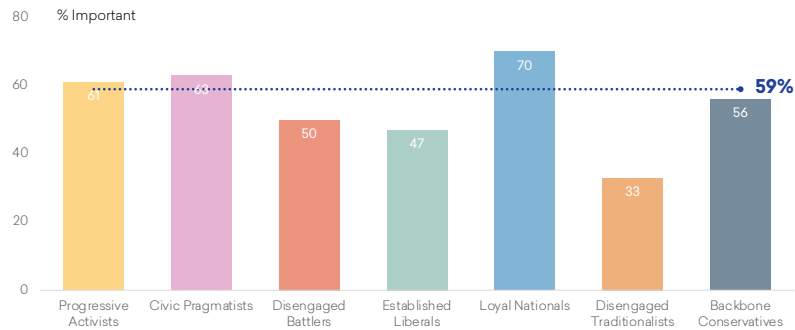
The central role of levelling up in determining the fortunes of the two main political parties, is even more clear when you ask people whether it will determine their vote at the next General Election. **Three in five Britons say that delivering on levelling up will be important to who they vote for.** Further, seven in ten Loyal Nationals (the group who swung most strongly from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019) place levelling up as a top issue when deciding who they will vote for at the next election.

Figure 6

2024: The Levelling up election

Delivering on levelling up will be a key battleground in next general election

Importance of levelling up at next general election



When it comes to the next general election, how important or unimportant, will the Government's ability to deliver on its promise to "level up" the country be to your decision on what party you vote for at the next General election? Very important, Important, neither important nor unimportant, unimportant, very unimportant. Don't know. Source: More in Common, November 2021

The debate around how best to regenerate left-behind communities and reduce regional inequalities has injected new energy and ideas into efforts to tackle these long-standing societal problems. The challenge now is to move this agenda on from debate and discussion to delivery. Alongside the electoral prize for the party that manages it, levelling up has the potential to not only restore trust in British institutions and democracy, but repair the social fabric of our communities and bring Britons closer together.

Section two: Britons' Levelling up expectations

Unlike many Government straplines and slogans 'levelling up' has had remarkable cut-through with the British public. Seven in ten Britons have heard of the policy, and almost half have a clear idea of what it means – something that comes through strongly in our focus groups where people talk confidently about their expectations for the policy. With that strong public awareness comes real pressure to meaningfully deliver levelling up.

The danger for the Government, and those drafting Labour's manifesto, is that there is a mismatch between the public's expectations and the usual prescriptions of academics and policy makers. The people we have spoken to over the past twelve months root what they want from levelling up, not in major infrastructure projects, complicated devolution settlements or cross-regional metrics – but instead in tangible improvements in their everyday lives. For most people, improving their community is about the hyper-local, the park around the corner, potholes on their road, the condition of the nearest high street, rather than what is happening in neighbouring towns or cities – or other towns and cities across the country. A key task for politicians is to make sure that this policy agenda is calibrated to meet those hyper-local expectations that will be central to the success of levelling up.

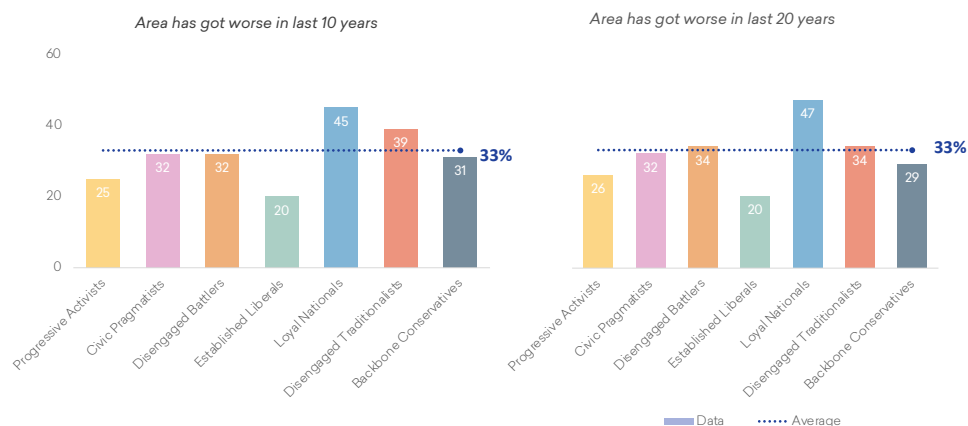
2.1. Timeline – the 'when' of levelling up

While political and media attention may only recently have alighted on the challenges faced by left-behind communities, for people in those communities, feelings of decline and neglect have been a long-standing reality.

Figure 7

Long-standing neglect

Almost one in two Loyal Nationals feel their community declined in the last two decades

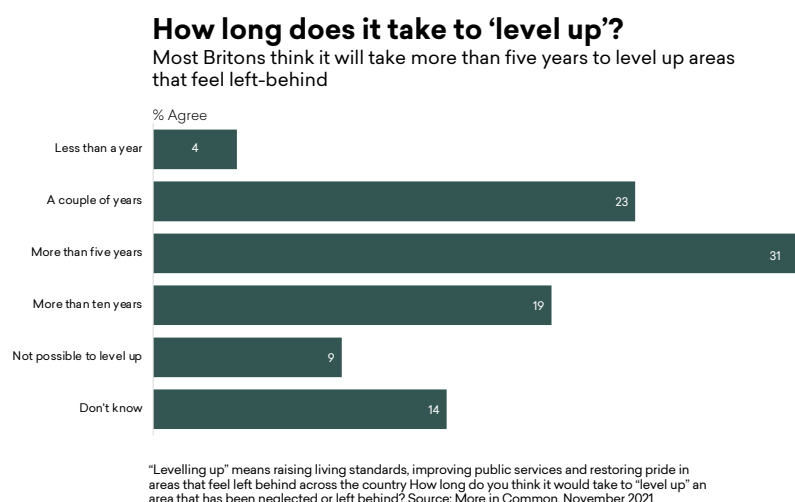


Compared to 10/20 years ago, do you think the town, city or village where you live is a better or worse place to live? If you have not lived in the town long enough to know, answer on the basis of what you have seen and heard. Source: Public First, November 2021

A third of Britons (and 45 per cent of Loyal Nationals and 39 per cent of Disengaged Traditionalists) feel that their area has become a worse place to live in over the last decade. For some going back further heightens this sense of decline, with almost half of Loyal Nationals saying that their area has worsened in the last 20 years.

That long standing feeling of decline is matched with realism about how long it will take to properly tackle these entrenched issues. A majority of Britons (and among all segments) believe that delivering progress on levelling up (by improving public services, raising living standards and restoring pride) will take more than five years at least, and one in five Britons think it will take more than a decade to level up left-behind communities.

Figure 8



That realism should not, however, give politicians cause for complacency. While the public accept that completing the process of levelling up is a multi-year endeavour, they are equally clear that they want to see visible signs of investment and improvement soon. That is particularly true when it comes to the upkeep of the physical environment where they live; people want to see work to clean up parks, spruce up high streets, and tackle anti-social behaviour happening now, not in the next five years. Whether they then put their faith in this Government to tackle deeper structural issues over the longer term, or decide to pass the baton onto the Labour Party, will in large part be determined by whether there are visible signs of improvement in the next few months, or the sense that there is a better and more credible long term plan for improvements to come.

Newcastle is a market town. It should be a market town. There used to be fantastic market and stuff, but that's dwindled to nothing as well. So it's a shame, because they really could make something of it, to be honest.

– Sammi, Disengaged Traditionalist, Newcastle-under-Lyme



We used to be one of the best markets, one of the best places to shop in, it used to be the place to go...there's not much in Wakefield now...it's just completely neglected

– Simon, Loyal National, Wakefield

2.2. The metrics – high streets, not spreadsheets

The technocratic debate around levelling up has often focused on two areas – the comparative (and specifically regionally comparative) nature of levelling up and the would-be metrics to evaluate the success of levelling up. But neither of these issues feature among the public's priorities in the polling or focus groups that we've conducted.

What our polling reveals is that most Britons think their area is 'at the national average' both at a general level and in terms of jobs, opportunities, public services and infrastructure. As such, whether people in a community feel neglected isn't about how it measures up to other places, but rather, what people see and experience in their own communities. The same applies to local pride, which isn't something measured relative to pride in other places, but instead based on how local people feel about their own community, heritage and sense of belonging. A policy discussion that focuses more on how best to measure and map regional inequalities risks missing what actually matters to the people who want to see their community improved.

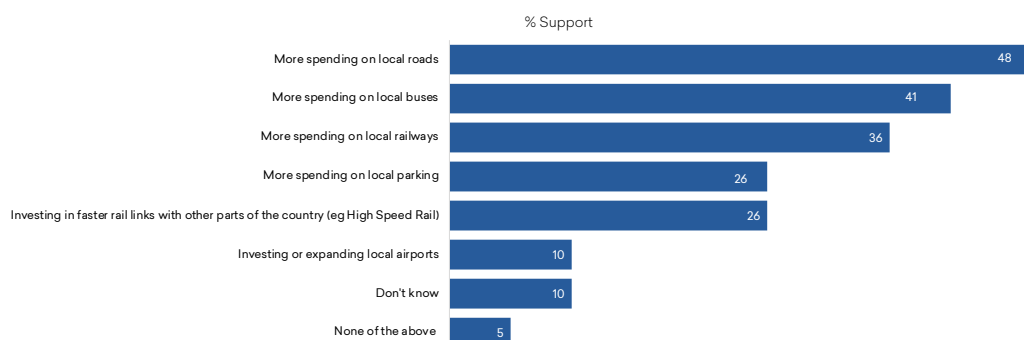
Similarly, while the metrics and mechanics of judging 'successful' levelling up will be poured over by policy experts and civil society campaigners on the release of the white paper, it is important to remember that what matters most to people, or contributes to a feeling that an area is 'on the up' is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to quantify in the Treasury's green book. There is a danger that a discussion dominated by 'What Works Centres' and policy evaluation will miss the urgent need to respond to what makes life better for most Britons in their everyday.

2.3. Hyper-local improvements before big infrastructure projects

Figure 9

Britons' hyper-local transport priorities

Britons want improvements made to local roads, buses and railways



Looking at the following options for policies to "level up" local areas by improving transport links, which would you be MOST supportive of the Government implementing? Please select up to three of the following. Source: Public First, November 2021

When it comes to infrastructure, Britons have a clear preference for local projects over big national programmes, which are often seen to benefit outsiders rather than local communities themselves. Britons are much more likely to want to see more spending on local roads, buses and inter-town links, than on faster rail connections to other parts of the country or expanding airports. In our focus groups, people regularly spoke about prioritising the fixing of potholes at the end of their street – before investing in efforts to help commuters get to London, Manchester or Birmingham, or to help tourists come into their area for a flying visit.



They've not done anything to benefit us, they've done it all to benefit the tourists. They won't fix the roads... Fall down a pothole and you're lost for a week trying to get out

– Sharon, Disengaged Battler, Blackpool

There has been much discussion about the government's decision to scrap plans for the Eastern leg of HS2. But for many communities, the greater blow was the scaling back of promises on local train upgrades in the North – which undermined faith in the Government's genuine commitment to levelling up. Their anger should serve to highlight the extent to which it is local, rather than national, connectivity that matters for people's expectations of levelling up.

The success or failure of levelling up for most Britons will be judged on how it responds to their everyday concerns from cleaner parks to resurfaced streets in the next few months and years, and in visible regeneration in their local communities. High speed train infrastructure may be a worthy policy objective in and of itself, but it is not at the heart of Britons' expectations for what levelling up should mean in their communities.

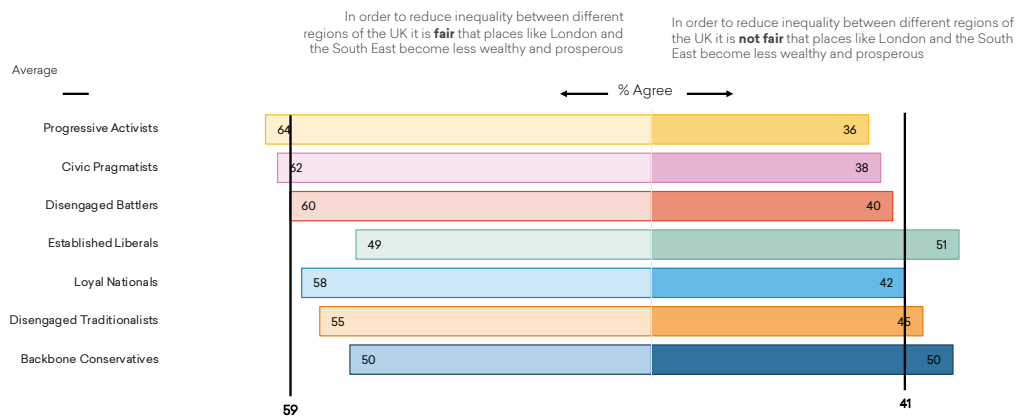
2.4. Levelling down the South to level up the North

In contrast to more ‘Cakeist’ narratives on levelling up, the public expect that levelling up, particularly in the North-East, North West, and Yorkshire, which they see as the priority areas for levelling up, will require some form of levelling down in London and the South-East. **Three in five Britons consider it fair that places like London and the South East become less wealthy and prosperous to reduce inequality between different regions of the UK.**

Figure 9

Does levelling up the North mean levelling down the South?

Most segments think it will be fair if levelling up makes London/South East less wealthy and prosperous



Question: Which do you agree with most? Source: More in Common, November 2021

Actively levelling down parts of the country is unlikely to prove popular in those areas, nor make for good policy. But the fact that a clear majority of the public think that it would be fair to see the South-East and London become less prosperous points to a sense that these areas have had more of their fair share of investment and attention from the Government. With nearly half of the public saying that London is the area the Government cares about most⁴. People believe it is now time to direct that investment elsewhere if there is going to be real progress on levelling up. From our focus group conversations we know that the public are inherently sceptical about a policy that relies on growing the size of the economic pie for everyone, and want to see deliberate choices being made to prioritise their communities.

⁴ Source: Kantar's Britain Barometer, January 2022 (in collaboration with More in Common, Fieldwork: 13th January 2022-17th January 2022, N = 1,089)



I went to London earlier in the year when we could get out and about. Their transport system is fantastic. I mean, you can get on a bus and it's like a quid for a journey. I come back home and it cost me £4.50 to go to three blooming bus stops. It's just ludicrous. There's no intention to level up at all. They're just trying to buy our votes.

– Shirley, Loyal National, Bolton

On another level, it was clear from our conversations that Britons across the Red Wall do not want their areas (often small and medium post-industrial towns) to be re-made in the image and likeness of London and the South East. They want levelling up to be focused on making life better for Northerners, recognising what makes their communities unique, rather than recreating N1 in NE22.

Section three: Delivering Britons' levelling up expectations – who and what?

When it comes to meeting the public's expectations on levelling up, the issues of who should be working to level up the country, and what the priorities for levelling up should be are intertwined. People want to see and feel improvements from levelling up in their everyday lives, and they believe the best people to make decisions on how to do that are people who themselves spend their everyday lives in the same communities.

3.1. The 'who' of levelling up

Britons want decisions about their local community to be taken locally. Most people are deeply sceptical about the role of the central Government – 62 per cent of the public say that they feel looked down on by civil servants and even more, 76 per cent, by Westminster politicians. For too many people Whitehall decision makers seem out of touch and far removed from their lives. Instead, they want decisions to be taken by people who live alongside them in their communities, who have just as much of a stake in making a success of levelling up than they do.

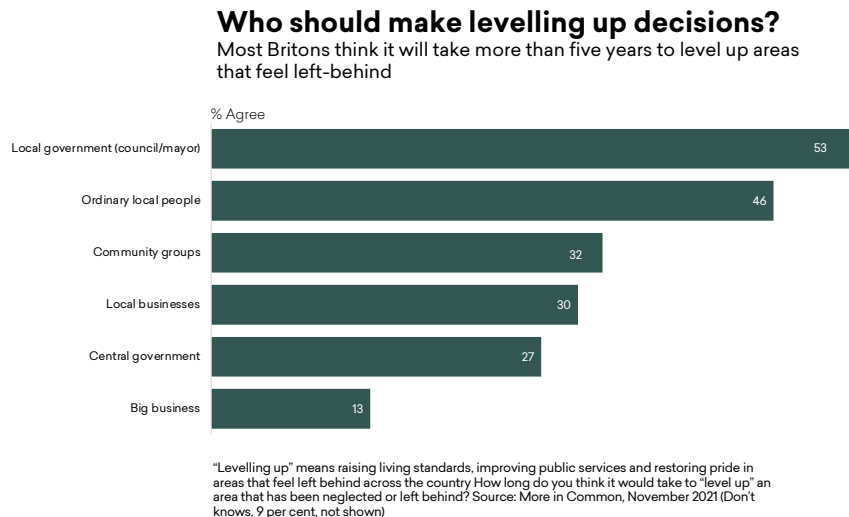
Instead of central control, Britons from across our seven segments think **local government, mayors and ordinary local people are best placed to make decisions on how best to regenerate local communities**. In our focus groups we have found strong support for empowering local councillors to take levelling up decisions.



I just applied today, funnily enough, to join our local parish as a parish councillor, because I think it would be something. Rather than criticise what's going on and what isn't going on, be part of the solution for getting involved and represent the people. Because the people who are currently on the council, you never hear from them.

– Barbara, Loyal National, Leeds

Figure 10



Alongside councillors, Britons also want to see their local MPs having more of a say. Contrary to some discourse which suggests that allowing local representatives influence over the direction of levelling up funding is a form of pork-barrelling, the public have little objection to involving local MPs in decision making and do not see it as improper. Instead, they see it as an opportunity to bridge the gap between them and their representatives, and a way of making MPs more responsive to the needs of their constituents.

In some focus groups, people speak quite openly about investment in the Red Wall being a route for the Conservatives to shore up their newfound support in the area – but they do not see this as a bad thing.

I think the money's more accessible now. If you've got a Tory government and a Labour seat, which we've had on and off a number of years, and everything seems to have been on the slide, whereas all of a sudden now, there seems to be somebody's opened a tap of money somewhere. It can't do any harm, can it?

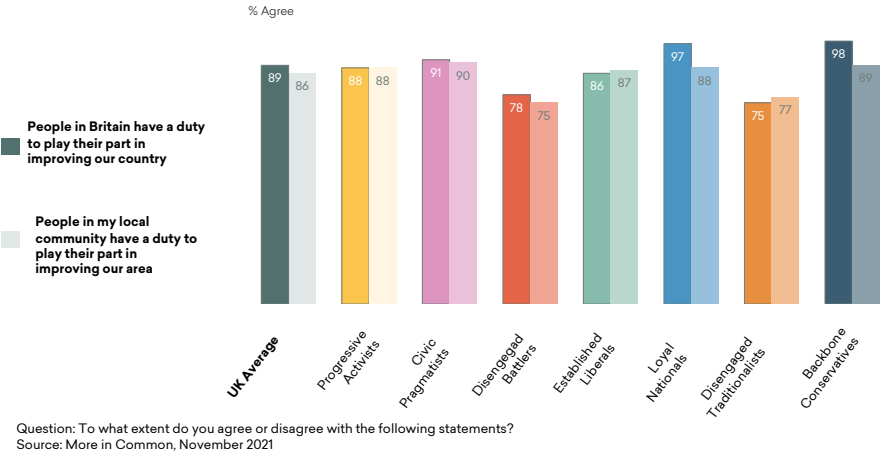
– Lee, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent

Some members of the public also express an interest in exploring new ways of deciding how investment should be spent – with strong support for local votes and referenda on important local issues. Though they are far more interested in the fact that decisions are being made locally, than the precise mechanisms for taking those decisions.

The public are also keen to play their part in levelling up. This is not a ‘big society’ style vision of local people running public institutions like libraries (something they do not have time to do and think is the government’s job) but instead a desire to take part in hyper-local activities that are meaningful for them like picking up litter and cleaning up their local area, supporting local schools and shopping on the high street.

Figure 11

Britons want to do their part
Almost all Britons feel a sense of duty to make their country and communities better places



The sense of people’s personal responsibility to improve their local area has been a recurring theme in focus groups. People want to feel empowered to do their bit, rather than simply receiving a central Government handout. Sitting alongside that, particularly in our conversations with Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Traditionalists, is the sense of responsibility and need to ensure value for money for local investment – and crucially avoiding gimmicky white elephants or initiatives that simply would not work in their communities.

3.2. The “what’ of levelling up

Throughout all of our conversations with the public across the Midlands and North of England, five clear themes emerge about what they want and expect from the levelling up agenda. They are:

- Sprucing up parks and green spaces,
- Regenerating the high street,
- Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour
- Ensuring a level playing field for all young people,
- Restoring a sense of purpose to declining communities.

Meeting these expectations will require more than reprofiling of existing departmental budgets, or rebadging existing promises under a new slogan. Instead, if levelling up is to work and restore trust in Government and democracy, it will require major targeted investment in the meaningful things and places that matter to Britons at the hyper-local level.

a) Parks and green spaces

When asked what gives them pride in their local area, Britons point first to their local parks and green spaces – ahead even of their local history and heritage . This pride in our shared outdoor spaces cuts across all segments – but is strongest for Civic Pragmatists, Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives.

In fact, for people who say their area has become a better place to live in the last ten years – exactly the sort of places the levelling up agenda should be seeking to emulate – parks are given as the top explanation. This suggests that the impact of improving local parks goes beyond the cosmetic, and instead helps to contribute to the feeling that things are ‘on the up’.

Our research finds four key takeaways on what we can learn from parks for the broader levelling up agenda:

Britons want the government to focus on the spaces and services they use frequently – they want delivery of levelling up focused on the everyday. Nine in ten Britons have a park in their local area, two thirds use them at least once a month, and a quarter have used local parks more during the pandemic.

For many Britons the spaces that they want to see improved are those where they spend time with their family. When we speak to people in our focus groups, not being able to take their children to a local park because it is unsafe, vandalised or unclean is a source of real sadness – not least given many of them spent time in the same parks when they were growing up.

Britons want levelling up and regeneration delivered at the most local level possible – in our focus group discussions across the country, participants talked about the park at the end of their street and how it needed to be cleaned up. This

contrasts with the main park in the town or nearby city centre which many said had already been regenerated and was somewhere they'd go for a special trip, rather than part of their everyday life.

Britons are less concerned about how their parks measure up against other parks across the country. Most of us (85 per cent) think our parks are about the same or better than other parks elsewhere – as discussed above, the public expectation for levelling up is less about perceived regional inequalities and much more connected to what Britons experience in their area on an everyday basis.



The park is just completely covered in glass...now and again you see it cleaned up, and then it just gets trashed again. It's not fair, really, because they're trying to sort it, but you can see money's been poured into the big parks like Hanley and stuff, but just not in the little ones. I just think it's a shame because that's where lots of people can actually get to.

– Laura, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent



Well, I don't think we need any more bloody roads and train tracks building, because there's enough of them...but maybe building more for the kids in the future and helping them get on with their lives, and better education, and better parks and outside space for them to enjoy. Instead of being scared of going to the park, because they're either going to stand on glass or when they get there and all the equipment's broken.

– Sarah, Disengaged Battler, Blackpool

b) High streets

Half of Britons think their high street has become worse in the last decade. For many, it's the closure and boarding up of shops – from small independent corner shops to big retailers – that most starkly highlights this deterioration alongside the closure of local banks and the rise in anti-social behaviour.

High streets are one of the areas where Britons do think more comparatively in relation to surrounding areas or other high streets across the country. A third of Britons believe that their high street is worse than most other places, compared to only 13 per cent of Britons who hold the same view about parks. Like parks, high streets are important to Britons because we use them – 77 per cent of Britons shop on their high street at least once a month, and 61 per cent shop there almost once a week.

Our polling shows that the British public have a mixed prescription for what they think should be done to regenerate high streets. They want to see a mix of lower business rates, better public transport to get to the high street, empty shops turned into homes and offices, and public services like GPs and schools

relocated to the high street to make it feel busy again. In our focus groups, people express real frustration at the dilapidation of the high street, and the dominance of charity shops and betting stores.

We regularly hear people compare the variety of choices on the high street that they grew up on to the limited range on offer today. That said, most people we have spoken to are realistic – acknowledging the multiple factors driving decline from the rise of online shopping, to out-of-town shopping centres, to unaffordable rents and business rates for small businesses. Here, they want to see more action to level the playing field between local high street shops and online retail giants, and more creativity and ingenuity applied to reimagining high streets.



I do feel sad about the Newcastle town because there's no shops no more. There's nothing to go to Newcastle for – so I feel sad about that.

– Jean, Loyal National, Newcastle-Under-Lyme



I'd say Blackpool's got a lot worse, a lot worse. The town centre is horrific. There's no businesses there any more, there's no choice...unless you're a poundshop, plenty of pound shops!

– Carol, Disengaged Battler, Blackpool



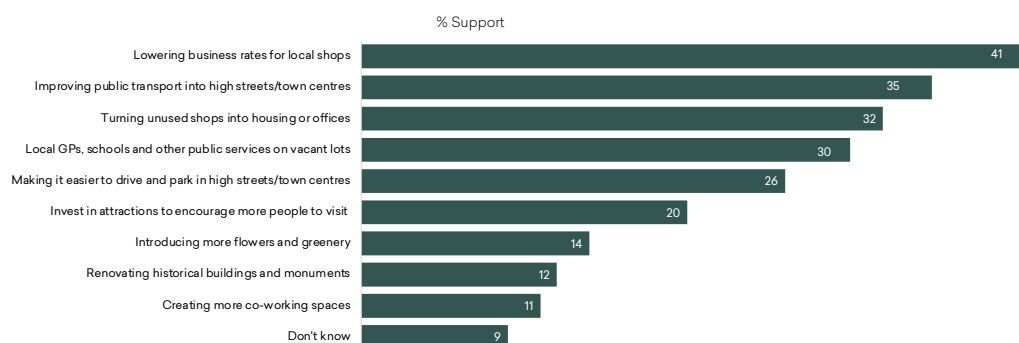
I wouldn't go to the town centre. I can't tell you the last time I did go to the town centre because there's nothing there. Everything's shut down. They're all empty shops. It's terrible. And then, the roads, there's always roadworks going on somewhere. They all seem to be at the same time, but nobody ever works on them.

– Emma, Loyal National, Oldham

Figure 12

How Britons would save their high street

Britons want lower business rates, better public transport and new uses for vacant spaces



Looking at the following options for policies to "level up" local areas by improving the high street, which would you be MOST supportive of the Government implementing? Please select up to three of the following. Source: Public First, November 2021

c) Crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour

A central test for regenerating parks and high streets is making them feel safer to walk in, play in and shop in. More than half of those who feel their area has declined in the last decade point to high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour as the clearest sign of that decline. And the 42 per cent of Britons who describe their local area as 'neglected', give the same importance to tackling drug use in their community, as they do to revitalising run-down high streets.

Much common ground exists across the British seven segments for a balanced approach to tackling crime and anti-social behaviour.

Hard-line interventions command most support – from tougher sentences for fraudsters and those who commit serious crimes to graffiti-cleaning and litter-picking sanctions for those who engage in anti-social behaviour.

Preventative measures such as better discipline in schools and more support for youth clubs hold broad public support.

Measures which provide better support for the vulnerable – such as better access to homeless shelters to stop rough sleeping and work to tackle violence against women – also command significant support.

From our focus groups, we heard many Britons describe tackling crime and anti-social behaviour as a pre-requisite to any levelling up investment. For many, previous efforts to 'spruce up' the local area have failed – as they've been trashed by anti-social behaviour after just a couple of months.



What's the point in making the area look nice if it's just going to end up getting vandalised in a couple of months.

– Ellie, Loyal National, Oldham



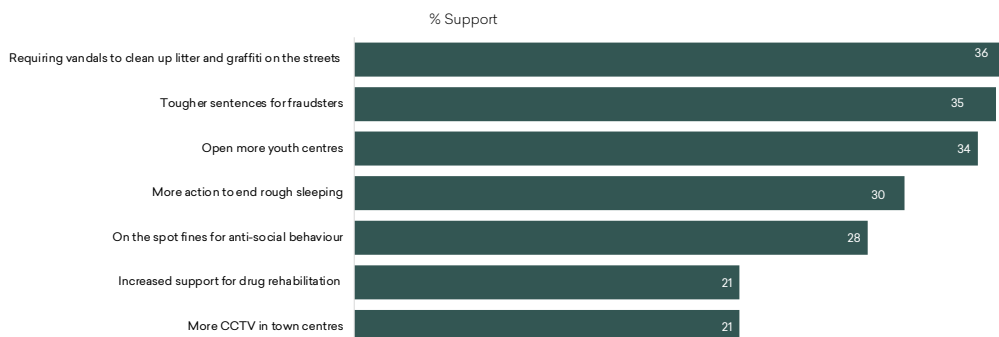
I can't really say I've seen many police around. Now and again you do see a few, but not really.

– Laura, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent

Figure 13

Levelling up and tackling crime and anti-social behaviour

Britons support a range of measures to tackle anti-social behaviour



Looking at the following options for policies to "level up" local areas by tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, which would you be MOST supportive of the Government implementing? Please select up to three of the following. Source: Public First, November 2021

d) A fair start and level playing field for young people

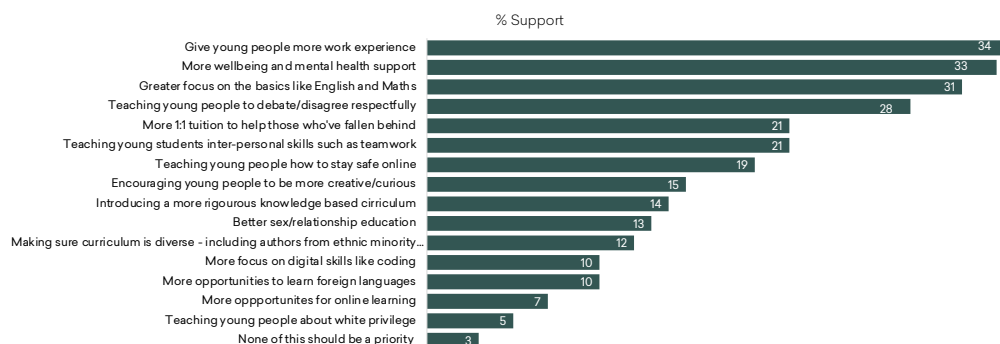
Both our polling and focus groups find that many Britons view levelling up through the lens of what impact it will have on their children and for future generations. People want to feel that young people in their town will be given the opportunity to reach their potential in their education, career, and adult life more generally, and to be able to do so without necessarily having to move.

In the context of education and levelling up, Britons want to see more targeted funding for schools in areas of low educational achievement, smaller class sizes, tougher discipline, and more support for pastoral care and mental health.

Figure 14

Levelling up and education priorities

Britons' think schools should focus on supporting young people with work experience, mental health support and the basics like English and Maths.



You say you support the following measures to help better prepare children and young people for adult life. Which of the following measures should be prioritised? Select top 3. Source: More in Common, November 2021

There is broad agreement on the mix of interventions in the classroom that can ensure a more level playing field. Britons want to see a greater focus on the basics such as standards in English and Maths, and want classrooms to be spaces where young people can discuss and disagree respectfully. They also want more work experience opportunities for young people and better mental health and wellbeing support.

Beyond the classroom, a key intervention that commands support is opening more youth centres to stop young people turning to crime. To help with this the public want to see funding directed to town halls so they can be used as spaces for youth clubs and sports clubs to hire. For many Britons, making sure that young people have things to do outside of school is key to bringing anti-social behaviour under control, making communities feel safer, and giving better opportunities to young people.



There's no youth groups or anything like that any more, so there's no support in that respect. And I think that was quite important. I remember, as a child, going to those sort of things and thinking there was a wide mix of people that went to those and got extra support that were separate from schools, from parents. And I think that's the roles that have gone, isn't it really? These individuals who work alongside, who can identify stuff and then refer into appropriate services should they need to. It seems to have gone completely, doesn't it?

– Beth, Loyal National, Stoke-on-Trent



Yeah, it's a real shame that they don't have youth clubs now. Because it does keep the kids off the streets, and getting into trouble, and hanging around on these little parks where they're causing all this smashed glass...and potentially ending up becoming part of the drug problem and stuff.

– Sammi, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent

Beyond school, a key challenge for the levelling up agenda is in making sure that young people have fair access to job opportunities. When we asked people in focus groups whether they would advise a young person to try and build their career in their local area, they said that while they'd like for them to be able to stay in their town, that was just not possible now unlike 20 or 30 years ago. Many of the people we spoke to assume that when people move away to university, they will not return. Most Britons are realists here – they don't expect that a young person should never have to move to enhance their future prospects, almost one in two Britons (48 per cent) consider that to be unrealistic – but they don't want having to move away to be the norm. Instead, they want to see more support for work-focused education and job opportunities within the local area. When asked about measures to improve their local area, better quality vocational opportunities through FE colleges and apprenticeships is the third most popular suggestion after better policing and lower business rates.



I'd tell a young person to go and get experience elsewhere...because I think a lot of things are limited locally, unfortunately. I think things like the regeneration down at the station and those kind of things will help in the long run, but I think if I'd gone back and made different choices, I probably would have moved out of the area before now.

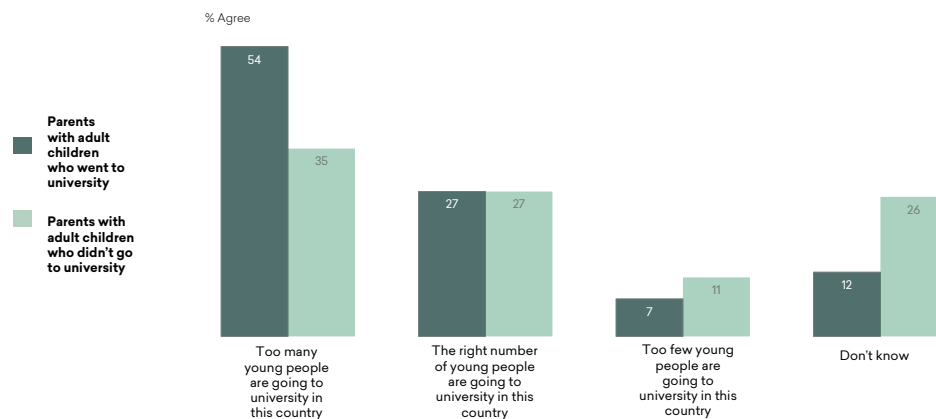
– *Beth, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke-on-Trent*

Britons are torn on the role of universities in levelling up – evenly divided between those who think we send too many young people to university and those who think we send the right number. Interestingly, parents whose adult children have gone to university are significantly more likely to believe that we send too many young people to university, than those whose children have not attended university. Almost half of this group support better investment in vocational opportunities like colleges and apprenticeships as an alternative.

Figure 15

University numbers – too many, too few or right amount?

Parents whose children have gone to university are much more likely to think we send too many young people to university



e) Restoring purpose to left-behind places

Our focus groups across left-behind areas have found that in former mining or post-industrial communities a key hope for levelling up is that it restores a sense of purpose to their community. No one we have spoken to thinks that levelling up should be about hand-outs. Instead, reflecting the fact that many of the areas we are talking about used to power the country, people want to have a renewed stake in our national success. This was particularly evident in Stoke where people contrasted the current low-skilled, low-paid logistics jobs at Amazon with the highly skilled, highly-purposeful pottery jobs that used to supply the country.

These dynamics are also reflected in the polling where support for economic interventions is strongest when it is tied to those areas where industry has declined – particularly among Loyal Nationals. There is no doubt that Britons see green jobs and investment as an opportunity – with Ben Houchen's work in Tees Valley a potential model to replicate. More broadly, in the public's mind at least, there is a real opportunity to bring together both levelling up and Britain's transition to net zero.



I think we've got forgotten a bit round here...I think that's probably because we're a historically industrial area in terms of the pottery. And I think we've missed out a little bit on funds and stuff.

– Jean, Loyal National, Stoke-on-Trent

Restoring a sense of purpose, and of 'being on the up', will be key to the success of levelling up. We saw the impact of this most recently in a focus group in West Yorkshire towns surrounding Leeds. Here, local residents talked with real pride about the transformations in their city and the wider area over the past few years – and in particular the transformation of the city centre and how it had opened opportunities not just in the city, but the places where they live as well. Of course, Leeds is a major city with a booming financial services sector, but there are undoubtedly lessons to be learnt from how both the sense of 'being on the up' and the actual physical transformation of place has made people feel and believe that the area has improved.



In Leeds there's so much roadworks going on at the moment...we've got so much industry and financial things coming to Leeds. I think Google's come to Leeds, Sky's come to Leeds. Other people are following suit, because Leeds is so much cheaper to buy property here than London and to rent and things like that and it's only a few hours away on the train. And they've got CityFibre in, and then they're just concentrating on infrastructure all the time here

– Derek, Loyal National, Leeds

Conclusion

For too many communities across Britain, the experience of recent decades has not been one of sharing in a story of national success, but instead of one of ongoing neglect and decline. As a consequence Britons in these communities, whether in Blackpool, Bradford or Blyth, have increasingly begun to lose faith that our political system is truly committed to delivering for them.

Levelling up offers a unique, and arguably the only, opportunity to change that perception. But it will only do so if delivery lives up to the promise.

Our conversations with the British public show that they have both high expectations for levelling up, and a clear vision for what it should look like in their community

As on so many issues Britons are balancers when it comes to levelling up. They know that there is no magic wand that can turn a town around overnight. And they are not nostalgists harking back to a former era of mass industrialisation. Instead, they want to see Government investing in the things that will make their every day lives better – in the short term that means improving the local environment, in the longer term ensuring that we have a truly level playing field for jobs and opportunities in adult life.

Our polling and focus groups show quite clearly that is the test voters, and swing voters in particular, will be applying when they decide who to vote for at the next election. Have the Conservatives actually done enough to move levelling up from rhetoric to reality? Have the Labour Party set out a more compelling plan of their own for what community regeneration looks like?

But, levelling up is about far more than one election or resetting the prospects of one politician or another. It is about showing that our democracy and political system can and does deliver for the whole country. That the benefits of growth go beyond a graduate class in our major cities. That every community in our country has a part to play in the next chapter of our history.

Showing these things is even more important than before as we enter 2022. With a cost-of-living crisis starting to bite and pandemic fatigue wearing thin, Government needs to do even more to show that it is delivering for ordinary people. As this research shows, when it comes to levelling up, that means avoiding the grand schemes and technical prescriptions that so often appeal to policy experts and civil society, and instead having a laser-like focus on ensuring that people see and feel real improvements in their every day.

