

Remembering the kindness of strangers

*Division, unity and social connection
during and beyond COVID-19*

A report by British Future on behalf of /together

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British
Future...

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/together is a coalition that everyone is invited to join, from community groups to some of the UK's best-known organisations. Its aim is to bring people together and bridge divides, to help build a kinder, closer and more connected society.

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Foreword

Our society is suffering from one of the biggest shocks of a generation. The COVID-19 pandemic not only cost people their lives and livelihoods: it forced individuals and communities to isolate and retreat from each other. Public spaces where we meet and mix were closed. Clubs, societies and friends stopped meeting; offices, shops, pubs and places of worship fell empty. Even families were separated.

Yet the lockdown and requirement for *physical* distancing did not mean we stayed *socially* distant from each other. Many people reported a new sense of community spirit. We got to know the places where we live, and the people who live there with us, a little better. We found new ways to stay in touch. And we looked for ways help each other.

COVID-19 is far from over but the unity of lockdown is. A full return to 'normal' life is still a long way off, but as it begins there is a risk that old divisions will return too – and that this new sense of community is lost.

On 5th July, the birthday of the NHS, the /together coalition, of which I'm proud to be chair of trustees, brought millions of people together in a shared moment of thanks, as the 'Clap for Carers' was heard again in streets across the UK.

/together believes that moments like these, when we come together to focus on what we have in common, are important. The new Talk/together project aims to find out how we can do more of this. It is a conversation that everyone can be part of – concerning what unites and divides us and how we can help reconnect with each other in a context of real challenge. It hopes to find out how we keep hold of the new community spirit built up during lockdown and help to face and bridge the angry divides of the past.

That is not to say that we must all agree on everything. We are entering a period of deep economic uncertainty, one that will heighten existing inequalities and strain our society further still. Major economic and political decisions lie ahead: opinions as to the best course to take will differ and be strongly held. But we must start to disagree better: recognising and respecting our differences while remembering our common humanity and citizenship, with all the mutual obligations these demand of us.

As well as a national approach, we recognise the particularities of different parts of the UK. I have to pay attention to the contexts of West and North Yorkshire, of rural and urban, of places rich with potential and those for whom the future looks less than bright.

This initial study, of how attitudes to society and social connection changed over the lockdown months from March to June, sets out

what Talk/together has uncovered so far. It seeks to kick-start a much broader and deeper conversation over the next six months across the UK.

The findings will help shape /together's plans for practical actions that bring people together. It will also provide evidence to argue for the changes we need, from government, business, from our institutions – and from us all as individuals – to help build a kinder, closer and more connected society.

The Rt Revd Nick Baines, Bishop of Leeds

Executive summary

COVID-19 has caused unimaginable hardship and suffering. Many of us have lost loved ones, or are struggling with loneliness, uncertainty about the future or the loss of a job.

At the same time the scale of these challenges has also brought us together. There has been an outpouring of neighbourliness; and over 750,000 people signed up as NHS volunteers. The weekly Clap for Carers and the final #ThankYou/together moment brought us together as a nation and within our communities.

Drawing from six online discussions and two nationally representative surveys, this report reflects on these trends, discussing division, unity and social connection during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

The report has been produced by British Future for the /together coalition, a new campaign that anyone can join and which aims to bridge divides and build a kinder and more connected society. The /together coalition launched with ThankYou/together to bring people together on the birthday of the NHS, with 14.3 million people – 28% of Britain’s adult population – taking part in this activity on 5 July 2020. This is being followed by Talk/together, a UK-wide conversation about what unites us, what divides us and what policy change and practical action is needed to bridge social divides.

The main components of Talk/together will take place between July and December 2020 and include an open, online survey; a nationally representative survey later in 2020; and discussions with members of the public and stakeholders across the regions and nations of the UK.

Talk/together also includes this initial piece of research into shifting attitudes during the COVID-19 crisis. This comprised:

- A nationally representative survey of 2,006 GB adults carried out by ICM between 6 March and 9 March 2020.
- A further survey of 2,010 GB adults carried out by ICM between 29 May and 2 June 2020.
- Six online discussion groups with members of the public, conducted between 6 May and 20 May 2020. Ten of the 36 participants in the discussions were asked to complete WhatsApp diaries for a further month between 2 June and 26 June 2020.

Findings: the first weeks of lockdown brought us closer together

In the months before the COVID-19 crisis, the Brexit negotiations dominated media and political debates and the UK felt like a divided society. The first weeks of lockdown brought people

together, within their own communities and at a national level. The divisions of the EU referendum became less salient. In the discussion groups, participants talked about this new-found community spirit, about getting to know neighbours better and acts of kindness from strangers. As well as experiencing neighbourliness themselves, participants in the discussions talked about acts of kindness and community spiritedness that they had read about in the media. Such narratives reinforced a sense of national unity.

Clap for Carers played a significant role in bringing people together, at a local and national level. By the time this weekly round of applause ended on 28 May 2020, it was estimated that nearly seven in ten (69%) of the British population had taken part.¹ Feeling ‘part of something’ was a sentiment that increased during lockdown. In the March 2020 survey, a third of people (34%) said that had felt part of something locally in the last six months; by the May/June 2020 survey this had increased to 41%.

In March 2020, 60% of people agreed that “*the UK had never felt so divided in my lifetime*”, but by May/June 2020 this had dropped to 45%. In Scotland, too, where perceptions of division were higher than elsewhere in Britain, agreement that “*the UK has never felt so divided in my lifetime*” fell from 70% in March to 60% in May/June 2020.

Findings: coming out of lockdown

While the first weeks of lockdown were characterised by a strong sense of unity and an appreciation of community spirit, by mid-May 2020 these feelings had started to dissipate. The perception that some groups were not observing social distancing rules was a new source of division and, as the lockdown rules were lifted, such perceptions grew more intense. It also became more obvious that different sectors of society were experiencing the COVID-19 crisis very differently. Older people, for example, were more vulnerable from a health perspective; but younger people were more at risk from an economic downturn.

There were other sources of division. The divergence of policy between the Westminster government and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales was seen as a source of division for the first time. Public trust in the Government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis fell after the Prime Minister’s adviser Dominic Cummings was seen to break lockdown rules. Participants became notably angrier when describing politicians in the later discussion groups and in their diary entries.

After the first weeks of lockdown, long-standing divisions came to the fore in the discussions, albeit with these views seen through the lens of COVID-19. Brexit was seen as the most divisive issue affecting the UK. Divisions between the rich and poor also concerned participants in all of the discussions, with many people feeling that the COVID-19 crisis would have a disproportionate impact on the poorest in society.

Intergenerational division was also a prominent issue in the discussions. Young people were perceived as less willing to observe lockdown – an observation made by people of all ages. COVID-19 has amplified intergenerational divisions as younger and older experience the health and economic impacts of the crisis differently.

Two issues stood out as both dividing and uniting people: social media and the Black Lives Matter protests. While technology had helped connect people during lockdown, higher levels of digital exclusion among older people was a new aspect of intergenerational division that came to light during this crisis.

By using WhatsApp diaries we were able to ask those who had taken part in the online discussions their views about the Black Lives Matter movement. We found that there was condemnation of the treatment of George Floyd and broad support for action to tackle inequality and racial prejudice in the UK from people of all ethnic groups and ages. But this was contingent support, tempered by concerns about public health and violence on the protests.

Findings: there is still much that unites us

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, those who took part in the discussions were equally confident and clear about what brings them together. As might be expected, support for the NHS was a sentiment that united the country. VE Day celebrations took place while we were conducting this research and it was felt that this event had helped bring people together.

We asked what brings people together in both the discussions and the surveys. Some 67% of people felt that national sporting events brought people together ‘a fair amount’ or a ‘great deal’ in the May/June 2020 survey. Volunteering in the local community was cited by 62% of people as something that brought people together, with 66% believing that local groups and societies did the same.

While the EU referendum has polarised society to some extent, both the survey and the discussions highlighted people’s confidence that we still have much in common. The survey showed people’s friendship groups frequently extend to those who have different political views to their own. In both March 2020 and May/June 2020 surveys, less than four in ten people said “*my friends mostly have similar political views to me.*” (March 37%, May/June 38%).

People were generally confident about relations in their local community. Three-quarters of the public felt that people from different backgrounds generally got on well or very well in their local community (March 75%, May/June 77%). This was significantly more than felt that people got on well or very well across the UK as a whole (March 55%, rising to 61% in the May/June survey).

Younger people and the less wealthy, however, were less likely to say that people get on well together in their local community. In March

2020, 83% of those aged 65 or over said that people of different backgrounds generally got on well in their local communities, compared with 69% of 18-24s. In the same March survey, 58% of those aged 65 or older said they felt certain that their neighbours would help them if they became ill with coronavirus, compared with 24% of 18-24s. An explanation for these differences – and the greater confidence that older people have in their neighbours – may lie in older people’s greater sense of connection to the place where they live.

Findings: an appetite for change and ideas to bring people together

We also asked participants what needs to happen in order to build a more united society. People were usually confident in putting forward ideas to help bridge divides and bring people together. Many people felt that COVID-19 had changed the way that people interact with each other. Those who took part in the discussions wanted the new-found community spirit and kindness toward strangers to continue as we recover from the COVID-19 crisis. We were told in one of the groups how important it is to *“remember the kindness of strangers.”*

Some participants felt that we need to find ways to disagree better, with a strong appetite to find ways to have calmer and more respectful political debates.

National moments were felt to bring people together and both the VE Day celebrations and Clap for Carers had been such ‘moments’ during lockdown. Many of those who took part in the discussions suggested an annual day to mark COVID-19, both to remember those who have died, but also to celebrate the country’s community spirit.

Volunteering was also seen as rewarding and an activity that should be supported in the long-term.

Divisions between rich and poor was a dominant theme in all the discussions. People felt that the COVID-19 crisis would disproportionately impact on the lives of poorer people. Some people felt that neighbourliness and community spirit was weaker in areas of high deprivation. It was felt that those in power needed to address wealth divides, but also recognise that more work was needed to bring people together in urban areas with a more transient population.

What next?

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of social connection for our own wellbeing and for society a whole. The first weeks of the crisis brought the country together, across social and political divides. Although longstanding divisions have now resurfaced, there is still a sense that the crisis has made people

closer and engendered a sense of belonging and connection – at a local level and across the regions and nations of the UK.

As we emerge from lockdown, a question that is being posed by both policy makers and the public is whether we can sustain this positive change in how people connect with each other. The discussions we have had with members of the public during lockdown have shown that they are up for the challenge. There was a strong desire among those we met to preserve the collective memories of kindness and community spirit.

Over the next six months Talk/together will be holding discussions with members of the public and expert stakeholders in every nation and region of the UK to develop our ideas. An open, online survey is now live at www.together.org.uk and everyone is invited to share their views. We will find out more about what divides people, what unites them and what their ideas and priorities are for change. At the end of this year we will conduct a third nationally representative survey. We will also support people to submit their own ideas to us by holding an open call for evidence and encouraging people to organise their own discussions.

Our hope is that many thousands of people will be involved in Talk/together and that it provides ideas and evidence to change our society, and the way we relate to each other, for the better.

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the UK with one of its greatest tests. It has caused huge hardship and suffering: many people have lost family members, are struggling with their own physical and mental health or are facing acute financial pressures. We are all having to adapt to a new reality, one which feels very uncertain and unsafe. COVID-19 has shown how much of our everyday lives we take for granted. And it has changed the way that we think about society too.

Much of the recent research finds that people feel the public health crisis and resulting lockdown have brought people closer together. It has made us more grateful for each other, indebted to frontline workers who have kept the country running and appreciative of the many citizens who have stepped up to volunteer and help others. It has reminded people how much they value meeting up with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Many citizens report a renewed sense of community spirit, as well as getting to know their neighbours and neighbourhoods better. One question, as we start to emerge from the pandemic, is whether we can preserve a legacy of this positive change in people's outlook towards each other and the new networks that have evolved.

A second question is whether the divisions that marked our society before COVID-19 will re-emerge. This crisis has come at a time when we were already struggling with rising loneliness, inequality and divisive political debates. In recent years the country has felt very divided. Some 69% of the public said they were angrier about politics and society than prior to the EU referendum². Trust in politicians and our system of government has plummeted. Brexit had created a new polarisation between Leavers and Remainers, but it had also shone a light or amplified long-standing divisions across the UK: by wealth and power, ethnicity and faith, age and geography³.

The divisions exposed by Brexit also came at a time of accelerating social change. Many of the institutions that once united us have lost their hold and we have become a more individualist and fragmented society. Although still one of the world's largest economies, the UK has lost much of its manufacturing base and with it many secure jobs in traditional industries that defined communities. Technology has changed our lives: social media can help us keep in touch but it can also keep people apart. In 2019 some 21% of the adult population – nearly 11 million people – report often or always feeling lonely⁴.

Race relations have improved over the last 50 years, but hate crime, prejudice and inequality are still too prevalent across the UK, as highlighted by recent mass protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

We can be rightly proud of the contribution that migrants have made to the UK, which became more evident still during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet the scale and pace of recent migration has been unsettling to some communities. Public concern about immigration was one of the most important factors influencing EU referendum voting.

While Britain is a largely peaceful country, it can be easy to focus on divisions and forget what we have in common. Although our politics can be divided and toxic, much research shows the public are much more united and positive about their own local communities. The Community Life Survey, covering England, showed that 81% of adults agreed that their local area was a place where people of different backgrounds get on well together⁵.

But even as our society begins, cautiously, to re-open, it will face some major challenges. During the COVID-19 crisis we have been obliged to make significant changes to our behaviour, avoiding social contact. The extent to which these habits remain in place is yet to be seen. Differences of opinion about the pace at which society re-opens could provoke divisions, particularly by age, but also by geography and wealth. A severe recession may bring existing divides back to the surface.

About /together

It was concerns about social division and polarisation that brought a number of individuals and organisations together in late 2019. This initial group was concerned that unless action was taken, the divisions exposed by Brexit would harden and further polarise society.

The group that set up /together included representatives from our major faiths; from the worlds of culture, sport, media, business, trade unions, public sector employers such as the NHS as well as a wide range of civil society organisations. Dozens of separate conversations across the UK eventually led to the formation of /together, a coalition which aims to build a kinder, closer and more connected society. On 1 January 2020 its supporters publicly called for the next ten years to be a ‘Decade of Reconnection’⁶.

Those who were involved in setting up /together spanned Brexit divides and came from a wide range of backgrounds. The initial civil society coalition included those working with young people, with migrants and refugees, on inter-faith relations, inter-generational connection, loneliness, community development, online civility and other areas relevant to healing social divisions. What united this diverse group were two beliefs.

First, that we need to find ways to have kinder and more respectful conversations with those who have different opinions to our own. Free speech and vigorous political discussion are core components

of a healthy democracy. But intimidation and the abuse directed at those who have different views is unacceptable and threatens democracy itself.

Second, that we need to build a more socially connected society. Policy-makers sometimes talk about ‘social capital’ – the social and economic benefits from our social networks and the reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them⁷. Positive social contact between people of different social backgrounds or political views has been shown to reduce prejudice and mistrust, particularly when action is also taken to address inequality and unfairness⁸. Despite the benefits of positive social contact – for individuals and for society as a whole – successive governments and our institutions rarely prioritise social contact as a policy aim and members of the public can sometimes overlook its importance.

/together wants to address these divisions through a high-profile campaign informed by expertise. It aims to:

- Find out what we have in common as communities and as a country and tell this story of our connections and our shared hopes for the future.
- Help connect communities through activities that bring people together; and
- Build a broad coalition of organisations and individuals to call for the policy change and practical action that is needed to help build a kinder, closer and more connected society.

The first activity from /together was ‘Thankyou/together’, working with the NHS to bring people together on the NHS’s birthday (5 July) for a moment of social connection with neighbours and thanks for all those helping us get through COVID-19. Some 14 million people, nearly one in three GB adults (28%), took part in a nationwide applause and toast of thanks.

Most campaigns start with answers, but /together starts with questions. Talk/together is a UK-wide conversation about what unites us, what divides us and what policy change and practical action would make a difference. What we find will inform /together’s future priorities and work over the next ten years as we strive to help build a kinder, closer and more connected society.

2. About Talk/together and this initial research

Talk/together aims to find out what unites and divides people and what could bring us closer together. It seeks to engage people in decisions about the future direction of social policy, finding out their concerns, their hopes for the future and the changes they want to see, as well as the practical action that they feel would help build a kinder and more connected country. In achieving these aims Talk/together seeks to:

- Create an evidence base that can be used to advocate for policy change;
- Document good practice that can be replicated across the UK; and
- Engage those who have less voice in debates about addressing social divisions, social connection and issues such as online civility.

The main components of Talk/together will take place between July and December 2020 and will comprise:

- An open, online survey launched in July 2020 and hosted at www.together.org.uk.
- A nationally representative survey later in 2020.
- Conversations with members of the public in 25 locations across the regions and nations of the UK.
- Stakeholder discussions to hear the views of councils, faith and civil society organisations, business, sport and others who have an interest in healing divides.
- An open call for evidence, for people who want to give us their views or share the work they are doing with a wider audience.
- Partnerships with local organisations, who will conduct their own discussions and other activities, feeding back evidence to Talk/together.
- This initial piece of research into shifting attitudes during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Further information about Talk/together will be posted at www.together.org.uk

About this initial research during lockdown

Talk/together is being conducted in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, one of the UK's greatest tests and a period of great uncertainty and flux. We cannot yet predict the long-term impact of the crisis on social relations. Although the lockdown initially united the country, there is a risk that divisions will re-emerge. To capture people's views, we adapted Talk/together's planned methodology. This work started in March 2020, in order to understand public opinion during this volatile period. We also wanted the research to inform Talk/together's wider public engagement later in 2020.

The research discussed in this report comprised:

- A nationally representative baseline survey of 2,006 GB adults carried out by ICM between 6 March and 9 March 2020. The survey questions and a summary of findings is given in the appendix of this report.
- A further nationally representative survey of 2,010 GB adults carried out by ICM between 29 May and 2 June 2020. Many of the March questions were re-surveyed to track shifts in attitudes. The survey questions and a summary of findings are given in the appendix of this report.
- Six online discussion groups with members of the public, conducted between 6 May and 20 May 2020.
- WhatsApp diaries: ten of the 36 participants in the discussions were asked to complete diaries for a further month between 2 June and 26 June 2020.

Those who took part in the online discussions came from England and Scotland and were recruited to be broadly representative of the UK population in relation to gender, ethnicity, social grade and voting behavior in the 2016 EU referendum. Five of the six groups were made up of people who had specific characteristics. The groups, and the shorthand labels used in the text that follows to distinguish them, were:

Group 1 – *General*: a representative mix of GB adults.

Group 2 – *Low-income*: people on low income, whether in work or on out-of-work benefits.

Group 3 – *Volunteers*: people who have volunteered, either formally or informally.

Group 4 – *Over 70s*.

Group 5 – *18-24s*.

Group 6 – *Mixed geography*: A group comprising a mixture of people who lived in cities, towns and rural areas.

Demographic data about the focus group participants and the questions that they were asked is given in the appendix.

Basing the discussion on a guide, participants were asked about social divisions, what unites people and the changes that might help build a kinder and more connected society. The discussions were taped and transcribed and used in our analysis.

This report sets out our findings from this initial analysis.

3. Life during lockdown: what divided and united us

The COVID-19 crisis has been an extraordinary experience. Across the UK there has been a resurgence of community spirit and volunteering and a major effort to look out for each other. Although a sense of unity was strong at the start of lockdown, as the weeks progressed this togetherness began to dissipate. In many ways, the COVID-19 crisis shone a new light on existing social divisions, such as between the young and old or those in secure work and those who were furloughed or laid off.

This chapter explores what divided us and what brought us together during lockdown. It draws on six online discussion groups, followed by WhatsApp diaries kept by a selection of participants, together with nationally representative surveys of GB adults carried out by ICM in March 2020 and between 29 May and 2 June 2020⁹.

The first weeks of lockdown: a unifying experience

“People you wouldn’t normally have spoken to, out on your one-hour walks, people are chatting across roads, they’re just saying hello to people. We’re meeting the same faces, people with their dogs, people who we’ve never seen exist before because of us getting out for that one hour a day. We have a local community Facebook page and it’s been a wealth of information for people who want help with anything.” Participant in Group 3 (Volunteers).

The crisis brought people closer together, engendering a sense of national and local unity. It was a collective experience and we know that shared experiences generally bring people together. In the first weeks of lockdown people felt a strong sense of community spirit. Many millions of people helped out family members and neighbours and over 750,000 people signed up as NHS volunteers. In each of the six online discussion groups, participants talked about this community spirit, getting to know neighbours better and acts of kindness from strangers.

“We live on a street where everyone is retired. And since I took ill, we’ve had numerous people at the door leaving cards, parcels, flowers. So, I just think we have a wonderful neighbourhood. I live in Paisley in Scotland. The town itself is a bit run-down; it’s not the town it used to be. So, if you go into Paisley you tend to think the area is really run down and neglected. But the actual people are wonderful.” Participant in discussion Group 4 (Over-75s).

Participants in the discussions talked about getting to know their neighbours and neighbourhoods better, sometimes for the first time. A sense of greater connectedness with ‘place’ seemed most

marked among people who were now working from home, having previously travelled elsewhere for their jobs.

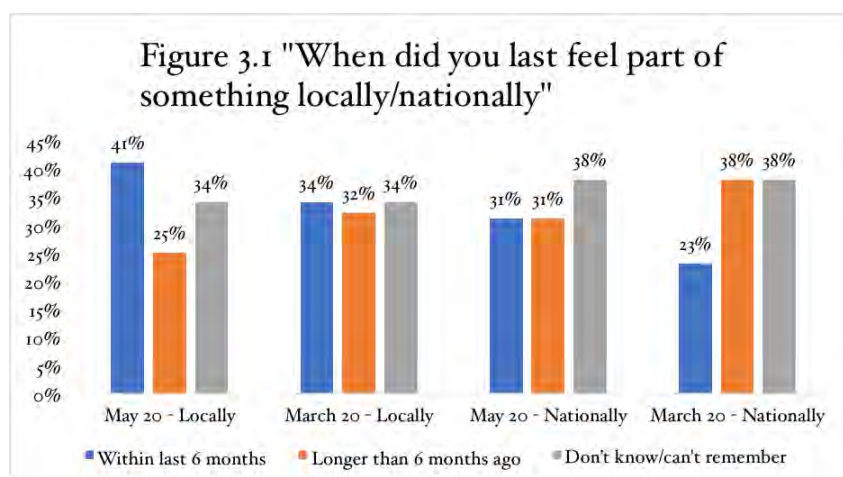
As well as experiencing neighbourliness themselves, participants in the discussions talked about acts of kindness and community spiritedness that they had read about in the media. Such narratives reinforced a sense of national unity.

“Just before lockdown people were quite selfish and did things to benefit themselves, you didn’t see acts of kindness. But now you see [from the television] everyone’s coming together, helping out, sharing stuff; they’re realising that life’s not all about material things.” Participant in discussion Group 2 (Low income).

Clap for Carers also united people. First held at eight o’clock on 26 March 2020, it became a weekly event. By the time that the weekly round of applause ended on 28 May 2020, it was estimated that nearly seven in ten (69%) of the British population had taken part.¹⁰

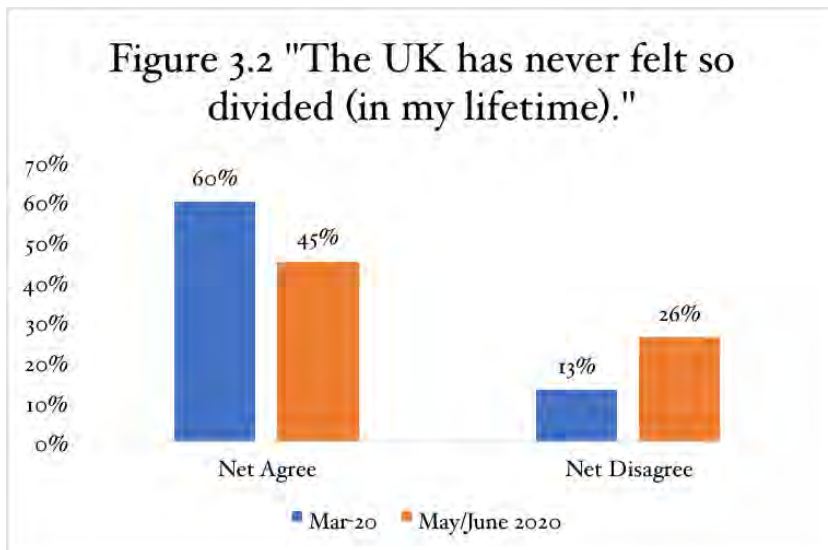
“I love it [Clap for Carers]. I think it brings a real sense of togetherness in the community and the nation as a whole. It covers the majority of key workers who have really made a difference throughout all what’s happened.” Diary entry from 5 June.

Clap for Carers brought people together to participate in a weekly event. We heard from those who took part in the discussions that this weekly act made people feel they were part of something that was positive and larger than just their street. Feeling ‘part of something’ was a sentiment that increased during lockdown at both a local and national level (Figure 3.1).



Sources: ICM survey of 2,006 GB adults, 6-9 March 2020 and ICM survey of 2,010 GB 29 May -2 June 2020

The survey supports the view that the COVID-19 crisis had brought people together as a country and united us. In March 2020, 60% of people agreed that “the UK had never felt so divided in my lifetime”, but by May/June 2020 this had dropped to 45%.



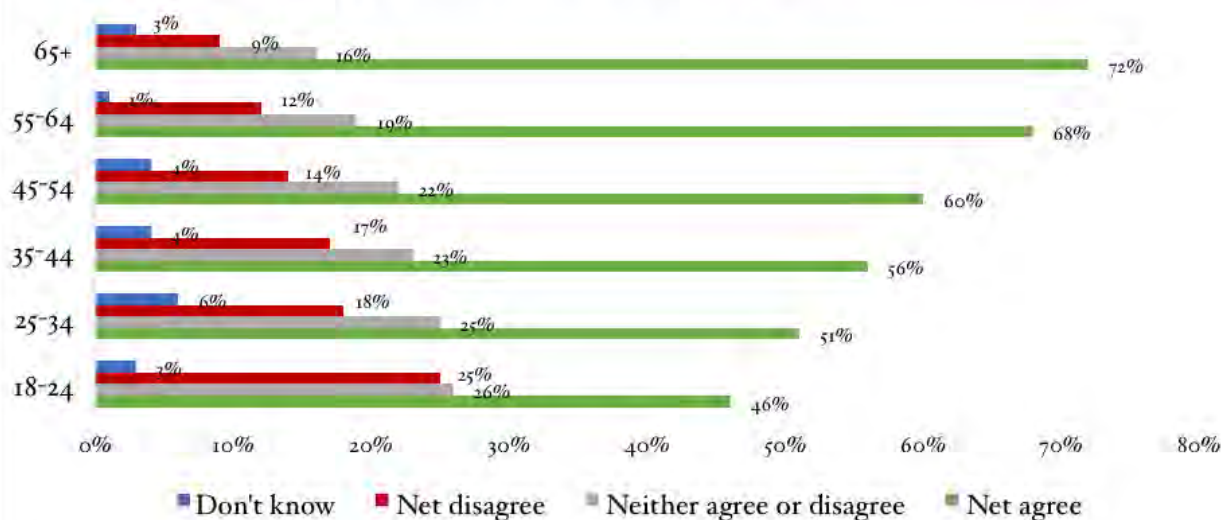
Sources: ICM survey of 2,006 GB adults, 6-9 March 2020 and ICM survey of 2,010 GB 29 May-2 June 2020

In Scotland, too, where perceptions of division were higher than elsewhere in Britain in March, this had dropped by May/June. In March some 70% of people in Scotland agreed that “the UK has never felt so divided in my lifetime”, compared to 59% in England. By May/June 2020 this figure had fallen to 60%.

In May/June 2020 some 60% of people agreed that “Overall, the public’s response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than it divides.” Just 15% of people disagreed with this statement and the sentiment was equally felt in all parts of Britain.

While older age cohorts have previously felt the divisions of Brexit more strongly, the perception that the UK was less divided was most strongly felt by the over 65s, with 72% of this group agreeing that “Overall, the public’s response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than it divides”, compared with 46% of 18-24 year olds.

Figure 3.3 "Overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides."



Source: ICM survey of 2,010 GB adults 29 May-2 June 2020

It is important to note that in the early weeks of lockdown, other divisions were still salient. Participants in the first online discussion groups were still concerned about Brexit and other social divides – it is just that they were concerned about them less, while feeling the country had come together under lockdown.

As Britain starts to emerge from the pandemic, it will be important to find ways to harness the collective memories of kindness and community spirit and to build on the goodwill of volunteers.

4. Coming out of lockdown: longstanding divisions through the lens of COVID-19

“We are a little less together than we were. During the height of lockdown I felt there was a real community ‘in this together’ spirit, which probably peaked at VE Day. Then as lockdown eased, different people were at different levels and saw the easing differently. But then the Cummings situation kind of brought everyone back together again. Today I would say we are at very early days of how things were before lockdown, albeit a little bit more community spirit than before: talking to neighbours in street, and on WhatsApp etc.” Diary entry from 2 June (33-year-old white male participant, East of England).

The first weeks of lockdown were characterised by a strong sense of national and local unity and an appreciation of the kindness of others and community spirit. By mid-May 2020, this unity had started to dissipate. The perception that some groups of people were not observing social distancing rules was a major source of division. Participants in all the online discussions divided people into two groups: those who observed lockdown rules and those who did not. Londoners and those who lived in city centres were sometimes seen, by others, as not respecting social distancing guidelines.

As the lockdown rules were lifted such perceptions grew more intense. It also became more obvious that different sectors of society were experiencing the COVID-19 crisis very differently. Older people, for example, were more vulnerable from a health perspective; but younger people were more at risk from an economic downturn. New fractures emerged; we were also divided by the type of work we did, with some of us able to work safely from home while others had no choice but to risk exposure to the virus in their workplace.

But there were other sources of division. The divergence of policy between the Westminster Government and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales was seen as a source of division for the first time.

“Had it been this time last week, I would have probably thought that it was the most together that we have been in a long time, because everybody was in lockdown and had the same restricted lifestyle. But now, after last night and the different countries of the United Kingdom going their different ways... Plus behaviour as well, behaviour in the last half of the week – where the weather has been nice – people have been going outside. People have started to fracture from that togetherness that we had in the first five weeks of the lockdown.” Participant in discussion Group 3 (Volunteers).

The perception that the Prime Minister's adviser Dominic Cummings had broken lockdown rules was a highly salient issue that appeared to damage trust in politicians. It was not, however, as divisive an incident as might be thought. Most people, irrespective of their political views, appeared to disapprove of Cummings' action.

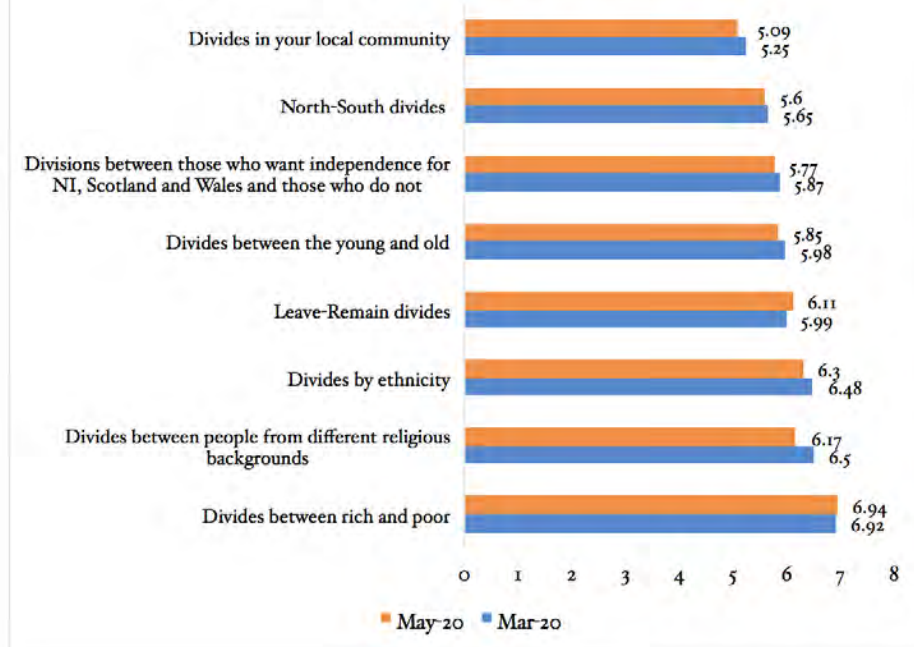
While the Government enjoyed high levels of trust in the early days of lockdown, much polling suggests that trust in the Government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the Prime Minister's own approval ratings dropped after this event¹¹. Participants became notably angrier when describing politicians in the later discussion groups and their diary entries. They also placed much more emphasis on the divisions caused by the EU referendum.

"I think politics is the main thing that divides us really. Just people's different opinions and what party they vote for and if they voted to Remain or Leave in the Brexit poll. Since COVID came along I think most people have probably forgotten about Brexit, it's not on anyone's agenda at the moment is it? But I think that's probably been the biggest thing." Participant in discussion Group 6 (Mixed geography).

After the first weeks of lockdown, long-standing divisions came to the fore in the discussions, albeit with these views seen through the lens of COVID-19. The top issues of concern remained similar to those found in March 2020. When asked what divides people, the first issue that was mentioned by discussion group participants was Brexit.

Divisions between the rich and poor also concerned participants in all of the discussions, with many people feeling that the COVID-19 crisis would have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable in society. The ICM survey supports the high salience of wealth divides as an issue of public concern, both before and during lockdown (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 On a scale of 1 to 10 how worried, if at all, do you think we as a society should be about the following social divides?



Sources: ICM survey of 2,006 GB adults, 6-9 March 2020 and ICM survey of 2,010 GB adults 29 May-2 June 2020.

Immigration has been a divisive issue in the UK and was a factor in voters' choices in the 2016 EU referendum. Previous research by British Future and others, as well as these online discussions, show a small reduction in concerns about immigration and ethnic division in the UK since lockdown began¹². The role played by migrant and minority ethnic workers during the crisis, as NHS and social care staff and other types of key workers, has likely made more people appreciate the contribution of this group.

“Even though COVID is a bad thing, it’s helped people realise that everyone is a part of the UK, whoever lives here and has been working here and been helping.” Participant in discussion Group 5 (18-24s).

As can be seen from Figure 4.1, worries about ethnic and faith divisions also ranked high among people’s concerns. Prejudice and stereotyping of ethnic and faith groups are still too prevalent in the UK, particularly towards Muslims: 2018 research by Hope not Hate suggested that three quarters of the UK public see Muslims as an homogenous group whose values and lifestyles are incompatible with the British way of life, while just 10% of the public feel that Muslims are similar to themselves. Half of white British respondents (51%) in the same Hope not Hate survey said that they did not know anyone who was Muslim¹³. The Black Lives Matter movement has drawn attention to prejudice and ethnic inequality.

Intergenerational division was also a prominent issue in all the discussions. Young people were perceived as less willing to observe lockdown – an observation made by people in all age cohorts. COVID-19 has amplified intergenerational divisions as younger and older experience the health and economic impacts of the crisis differently. The use of technology also divided the old and young, even though there was much work by business and civil society organisations to combat digital exclusion¹⁴.

“Technology is a big one. When I speak to my grandma and grandad about it, they just seem so against it. Even though my nana has got Facebook and Instagram and stuff like that she’s still so against it, and even if I just check my phone when I’m around theirs she’s really against it. I feel like, as a generation, they just don’t understand the positives as much as they do the negatives.” Participant in discussion Group 5 (18-24s).

Participants in the online discussions also highlighted geographic divides: between North and South and between prosperous cities and less prosperous towns. Some people felt that cities were particularly divided and that community spirit was much weaker in large and high transience metropolitan areas where people did not know each other.

“My community is more divided than anything. There’s a lot of selfish people out there; social distancing is non-existent around here. It doesn’t matter if you go out just to get some shopping, you see groups of people just hanging around, and there’s nothing being done by the police about it or anything.” Participant in discussion Group 2 (Low income).

All the six online discussions included participants from Scotland, who appeared to be an equal mix of those who supported Scottish independence and those who did not. The differences in rules between the different nations of the UK was a theme of all the discussions. All of these participants also talked about Scotland’s particular divisions, sometimes within the same families. The March and May/June ICM surveys also showed that perceptions of division were higher in Scotland than in England and Wales. With another independence referendum being predicted, Scottish participants strongly felt that people needed to find ways to have more civil discussions on this issue – online and face-to-face.

“We have division in Scotland between independence and wanting to stay a part of the country. That’s a much worse division than absolutely anything else. That’s really divided families, it’s been awful. There’s no doubt that the government has been London-centric. To me that was evident, particularly, in attitudes toward public transport. All they were ever thinking of was the tubes and the buses in London.... So, London takes priority. But at least Scotland has got its own little government to look after itself to a certain extent.” Participant in discussion Group 4 (Over-70s).

Technology and Black Lives Matter both divide and unite

Two issues stood out as both dividing and uniting people: social media and the Black Lives Matter protests. As noted above, higher levels of digital exclusion among older people was a new aspect of intergenerational division that came to light during this crisis. Many people supported older friends and family members to use social media for the first time. There were also many inspiring initiatives run by civil society and faith organisations that supported older people to use social media¹⁵. While IT played a crucial role in keeping people in touch, the same social media also provided a platform for hatred, prejudice and damaging conspiracy theories. Those who took part in the online discussions were well aware of these tensions.

“[Before] you can see young people were so about social media and the older generation wasn’t so much. And now it seems like everyone is forced to know technology and use social media, so in that aspect technology and social media has brought communities and different generations together.” Participant in discussion Group 1 (General).

The Black Lives Matter movement also divided and united people. George Floyd was killed on 25 May 2020 and the UK’s first widespread Black Lives Matter protests occurred on 31 May. While the first demonstrations focused on policing and inequality, the UK’s colonial history and its role in slavery became the subject on subsequent demonstrations. The statue of Bristol slave-trader Edward Colston was toppled on 7 June, after which much of the media debate turned to the views and actions of historic figures in relation to slavery, Britain’s imperial past and racism. Far-right groups then mobilised supporters, supposedly to ‘defend statues and war memorials’¹⁶.

People from all ethnic groups took part in the Black Lives Matter protests, which have been successful in highlighting long-standing racial inequalities in the UK, including the disproportionate death rate of BME groups from COVID-19. By using WhatsApp diaries we were able to ask those who had taken part in the online discussions their views about the Black Lives Matter movement. We found that there was condemnation of the treatment of George Floyd and broad support for action to tackle inequality and racial prejudice in the UK from people of all ethnic groups and ages. But this was contingent support, tempered by concerns about public health and vandalism and violence on protests. The actions of far-right groups, including their use of the ‘White Lives Matter’ slogan, were also felt to be divisive.

“You only have to look at social media, you have people putting ‘white lives matter’ then people putting black lives matter. For me I understand that Black Lives is just being said to bring attention to what is actually happening, globally. However, people are misunderstanding the meaning of the movement and simply thinking that it means ONLY Black Lives Matter. I think the war memorials being defaced caused huge tensions and divides too.” Diary entry from 23 June (28-year-old, mixed-race, male participant, Yorkshire).

5. There is still much that unites us

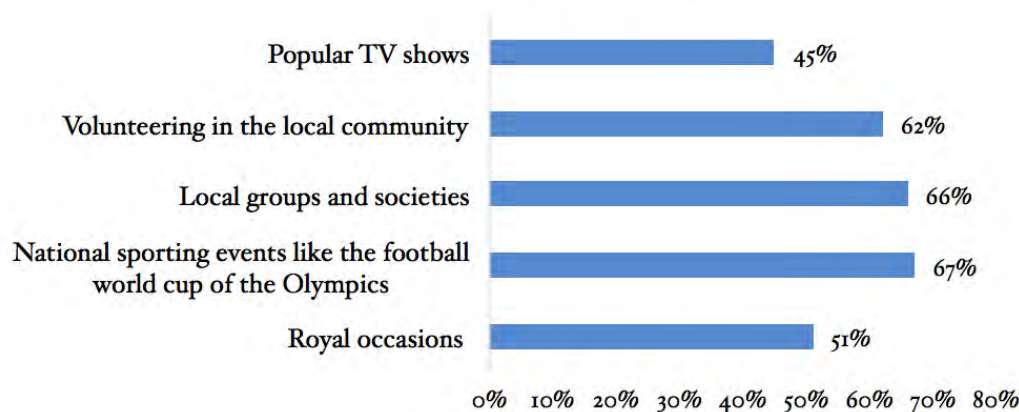
“Trying to bring communities together is a very good thing, because – even before COVID-19 – with knife crime around this country, that was part of the reason driving the breakdown of communities..... Unity makes you feel proud, makes you feel stronger, makes you feel loved. It’s a great positive energy and when everyone’s together you can feel like you can all take on the world, there’s nothing too big. And obviously when you’re together and someone needs support, you pick everyone up. That’s what it’s about – when they’re down you pick them up and when you’re down they pick you up.” Participant in discussion Group 2 (Low income).

Through the online discussions and two surveys we have been able to build a clear picture of what has divided people during the COVID-19 crisis. While the first weeks of lockdown brought the country together, as the time progressed, concern about long-standing divisions emerged, often filtered through the lens of COVID-19. Amid this extraordinary event, people are equally confident and clear about what brings them together and what they have in common.

As might be expected, support for the NHS was a sentiment that united the country. Sport was also an activity that was felt to bring people together, a finding supported in the ICM survey (Figure 5.1).

“I believe, even though I’m not massively a sports fan myself, that as soon as England are being represented in any kind of sport, suddenly it’s not ‘you’re a scouser, it’s ‘we’re all English aren’t we’. Although I’m not necessarily a massive sports fan I do feel like it brings everyone together.” Participant, discussion Group 1 (General).

Figure 5.1: "For each of the following, please tell us to what extent, if at all, you think they help bring people together" (Percentage of respondents citing 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal'.)



Sources: ICM survey of 2,010 GB adults 29 May-2 June 2020.

VE Day celebrations took place during the period when we were conducting the discussion groups. Many people appeared to have taken part in these events and found ways to do so safely. Although younger people did take part, the initiative for organising socially distanced, street-level commemorations was largely taken by older generations. There was broadly positive feedback that this event had helped bring people together.

“My dad and my step-mum did organise something. I stayed inside and only popped outside for a drink, but there were quite a few people just pottering around outside with chairs enjoying the sun and having a beer. I thought it was great. When the whole street comes together it puts a bit of a bounce in your step.” Participant in discussion Group 5 (18-24s).

The online discussions and ICM survey (Figure 5.1) also supported the view that volunteering had brought people together, by offering time to civil society and faith-based organisations, by helping vulnerable neighbours and family members or through fundraising and charitable giving.

“As a nation I think we’re very charitable – we go out and we look out for people who are in need. In the Muslim community at the moment we are raising thousands and thousands... This is a time when we give a lot to charity whether it’s local or abroad, and this year a lot of the focus has been families and the elderly and people who have been struggling with the Covid-19 situation.” Participant in discussion Group 6 (Mixed geography).

Research tends to categorise volunteering as formal or informal, although there is some overlap between the two types of action. Formal volunteering is time given to an established or formally constituted organisation, for example, a local charity, membership organisation or school governing body. Informal volunteering often comprises an offer of help to a neighbour. Both play an important role in bringing people together, although public policy has mostly focused on increasing levels of formal volunteering.

Informal volunteering can also help build relationships of trust in high-churn neighbourhoods, turning strangers into friends and helping combat loneliness and isolation. As we have seen, the actions of informal volunteers were also a lifeline to isolated and vulnerable people in the current COVID-19 crisis.

“The extent of my volunteering has been – just during this coronavirus – as simple as helping my neighbour with their shopping. It does make you think for the future; it’s so nice to do something for someone else. So, when this is all over, I’ll be thinking of volunteering again.” Participant in discussion Group 3 (Volunteers).

A challenge facing government and civil society is finding ways to harness the goodwill of those who came forward to volunteer in the COVID-19 crisis for the long-term.

Common ground and confidence in local social relations

In the months after the 2016 EU referendum it could sometimes feel that we were two nations: *“One which was metropolitan, global in outlook, liberal and more plural in its sense of identity, and one that is socially conservative, more negative about the EU and immigration, more nostalgic for the past and [in England] more English in its identity”*¹⁷.

While there is a degree of polarisation in the UK, as described by Will Jennings in the above quote, there is still much common ground between people¹⁸.

This common ground was evident in the ICM surveys and group discussions for this research. In the UK people’s friendship groups frequently extend to those who have different political views to their own. In both March and May/June surveys, less than four in ten people said that *“my friends mostly have similar political views to me.”* (March 37%, May/June 38%).

In the discussions, some participants felt that we place too much emphasis on our differences, a tendency that can be amplified by the media. About two-thirds of people agreed with the statement *“As a society, we tend to dwell on our differences rather than what we have in common,”* (March 70%, May/June 61%). There was further evidence of this common ground in the ICM surveys, with people from different backgrounds and with different political beliefs giving similar responses to questions. For example, we asked: *“at this time, how important, if at all, do you think it is for people to have the opportunity to meet and interact with people who are different from themselves?”* In both March and May/June surveys, more than 80% of people agreed that it was important or very important to have such opportunities, with responses broadly consistent across social and political divides.

Across March and May/June ICM surveys, two-thirds of people felt local groups and societies brought people together (March 65%, May/June 66%). A similar proportion felt volunteering did the same (March 65%, May/June 62%). Again, there was broad agreement about the importance of local groups and volunteering in bringing together people from different social groups and with different political beliefs.

While people are often concerned about divisions across the UK as a whole, they are generally much more confident about relations in their local community. Three-quarters of the public felt that people from different backgrounds generally got on well or very well in their local community (March 75%, May/June 77%). This was significantly more than felt that people got on well or very well across the UK as whole (March 55%, rising to 61% in May/June). This finding is supported in much other research: the most recent Community Life Survey, covering England, suggests that 82% of people agree that their area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together¹⁹.

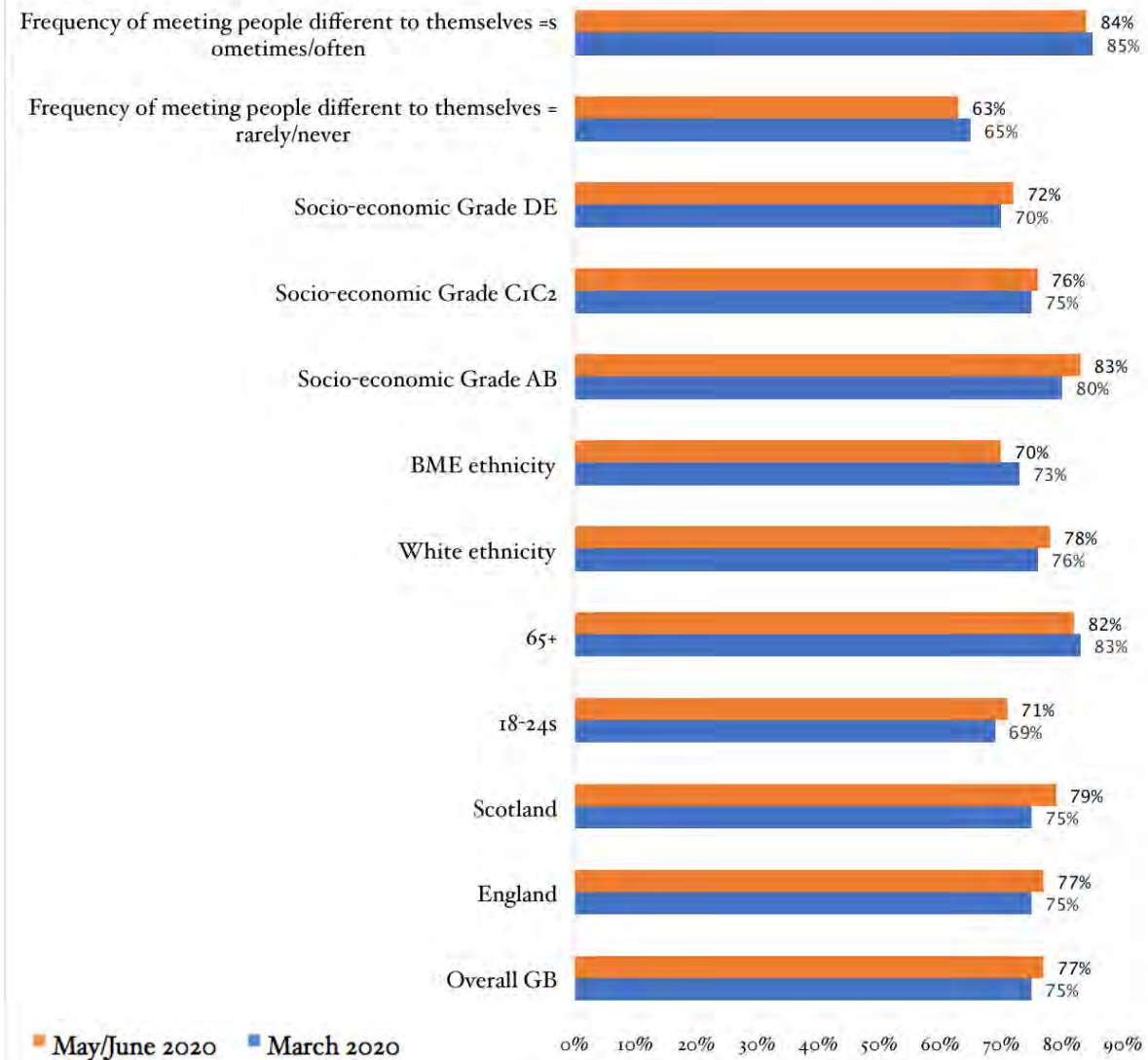
The above evidence also shows that people who live in rural or less deprived areas, as well as older respondents, are more likely to say that people get on well in their local community. In the survey conducted in March 2020, 83% of those aged 65 or over said that people of different backgrounds generally got on well with each other in their local communities, compared with 69% of 18-24s. In the same March 2020 survey, 58% of those aged 65 or older said they felt certain that their neighbours would help them if they became ill with coronavirus, compared with 24% of 18-24s. An explanation for these differences – and the greater confidence that older people have in their neighbours – may lie in their greater sense of connection to the place where they live. Retired people tend to spend more hours of the day in their local area. They are also more likely to be owner-occupiers. Both of these are factors which make it more likely that people will know their neighbours and feel a sense of connection to the place where they live.

As can be seen in Figure 5.2 below, confidence in social relations in local communities is generally high. But there are some differences. As well as younger people, those in lower social grades and those with lower levels of social contact with people who are different to themselves are less confident about social relations in their local communities. We know from other research that levels of mutual trust, togetherness and belonging^{20 21} are lower in some localities, particularly those where there are:

- Higher levels of deprivation;
- Higher levels of population churn, limiting people's ability to get to know their neighbours;
- Fewer community assets where people of different backgrounds can meet and mix, for example, parks, pubs, libraries and leisure centres²²;
- Higher levels of social isolation;
- Proportionally fewer graduates among the local population;
- Large wealth gaps or ethnic divides in the form of residential or institutional segregation; and
- Lower levels of civil participation, for example, through volunteering.

If we are to build a kinder and more connected country, reducing long-standing social divides and hatred, then increasing the levels of direct, indirect and contextual social contact between people of different backgrounds must be a priority. The policy change and practical actions that will achieve this need to take place in all neighbourhoods, including those that feel left behind, tense or divided.

Figure 5.2: "How well, if at all do you think people from different backgrounds get on in your local community." (Percentage stating 'well' or 'very well')



Sources: ICM survey of 2,006 GB adults, 6-9 March 2020 and ICM survey of 2,010 GB adults, 29 May-2 June 2020.

Social contact as a way to build trust and bridge divides

The March and May/June ICM surveys also asked: "How well do people from different backgrounds get on in the UK as a whole?", with 61% of people agreeing that people from different backgrounds get on well or very well. Among those who sometimes or often met people from different backgrounds to themselves, 67% agreed that people from different backgrounds generally get on well across the UK. This fell to 50% among those who rarely or never met people from different backgrounds to their own.

Positive social contact, between people from different social backgrounds or with different political views, helps to reduce prejudice and mistrust²³. Research has shown that this positive effect can be achieved through direct social contact, indirect social contact (having friends who have friends from a different social group) or contextual contact (knowing that other people have mixed friendship groups)²⁴. Social media now plays an important role in contextual social contact, as we may see other people with mixed friendship groups on platforms such as Facebook.

All three forms of social contact make a difference to people's attitudes to those from different social groups to their own, by dispelling anxiety and mistrust and increasing empathy towards the 'other'²⁵. Contact does, however, have to be positive: in the absence of much social contact across the divides, a single negative interaction can reinforce stereotypes and mistrust.

The types of contact that are best at building trust and reducing prejudice are those situations where (i) people are of equal status, where they cooperate in pursuit of common interests or goals; (ii) where contact is supported by institutions such as schools or employers; and/or (iii) where social contact leads to friendships across social divides. Increasing people's levels of positive social contact across social divides, directly but also through the stories that we see on TV, in the papers or on social media, can help bring people closer together.

An appetite for change and ideas to bring people together

As well as asking what brings us together, we asked those who took part in the discussions what needs to happen in order to build a more united society. Many participants were confident in putting forward ideas to help bridge divides and bring people together.

Some participants felt that we need to find ways to disagree better. They were concerned that people found it difficult to discuss issues such as Brexit or Scottish independence without getting into arguments with family, friends and work colleagues. Social media had amplified political divisions and changed the tone of the debate. There was a strong appetite to find ways to have calmer and more respectful political debates.

"I don't think it matters if everybody agrees on everything; I think it's a matter of respecting other people's opinions." Participant in discussion Group 4 (Over 70s).

Some felt that COVID-19 had changed the way that people interact with each other. Participants wanted this neighbourliness and kindness to strangers to continue as we recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

“I think it’s taken this for us to realise, and I’m not saying everyone will, but I think there’ll be a portion of people that realise how actually we can do this all the time and it’s actually nice to be nice.” Participant in discussion Group 1 (General).

National moments were felt to bring people together and both the VE Day celebrations and Clap for Carers had been such ‘moments’ during lockdown. Many of those who took part in the discussions suggested an annual day to mark COVID-19, both to remember those who have died, but also to celebrate the country’s community spirit.

“I think there should be a day to celebrate life, to remember – obviously – those who have unfortunately passed but also celebrate those who helped, and I think it’s a day for individual communities to come together and have an event.” Participant in discussion Group 1 (General).

Many people had offered their time as volunteers during the COVID-19 crisis, some for the first time. Much of this volunteering was informal – helping neighbours – although some people were helping civil society organisations. Volunteering was seen as rewarding and an activity that should be supported in the long-term.

Divisions between rich and poor was a dominant theme in all the discussions, with the ICM surveys also finding that this divide was the issue that worried people most of all. People felt that the COVID-19 crisis would disproportionately impact on the lives of poorer people. Some people felt that neighbourliness and community spirit was weaker in areas of high deprivation, explaining that community events and Clap for Carers *“did not really work in our area.”* As well as poverty, population churn and fear of crime were also challenges that made community building more difficult in some urban areas. It was felt that those in power needed to address wealth divides, but also recognise that more work was needed to bring people together in urban areas with a more transient population.

6. Legacy and lessons from the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of social connection for our own wellbeing and for society as a whole. The first weeks of the crisis brought the country together, across social and political divides. Although longstanding divisions have now resurfaced, there is still a sense that the crisis has made people closer and engendered a sense of belonging and connection – at local level and across the regions and nations of the UK. Among the people who took part in the discussions, there was a strong sense that it was important to preserve this new-found sense of neighbourliness and connection to people and places.

Many challenges lie ahead, and we cannot yet predict the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social relations. There is a risk that community tensions could stoke divisions, including once some restrictions start to be lifted. Intergenerational relations will be tested if the economic impacts of the crisis disproportionately fall on younger people, while the health impacts mostly fall on older generations. Many businesses made a great effort to support their workforces and customers during the crisis, but trust in business might well be dented if employers start making large-scale redundancies.

COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic groups in the UK, with those dying or falling seriously ill more likely to come from these communities. While there is broad support to reduce ethnic inequalities in the UK, it is uncertain how new debates about race, equality and identity will develop. There is potential for the Black Lives Matter Movement to lead to real change for the better but there is also a risk that some of its campaign tactics could be divisive. Brexit negotiations will hit the headlines again in the autumn and this, too, is likely to highlight our divisions, as will renewed calls for Scotland's independence.

That we are living in a period of volatility is something about which most of us agree. As we emerge from lockdown, a question that is being posed by both policy makers and the public is 'what next?'. It is to be welcomed that the Prime Minister has asked the MP Danny Kruger to develop proposals to harness the goodwill of volunteers and civil and faith-based organisations as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis. It is hoped that this review will generate ideas that can be taken up to help build a more connected and united society.

Healing the divisions in this country will take many years. This is why, on 1 January 2020, British Future joined other members and supporters of the /together coalition to call for the next ten years to be a 'Decade of Reconnection'. This is a challenge in which all of us need to play our part. Our leaders, whatever their political views, need to make healing social divides a priority, and to commit to a practical agenda to make it happen. Building a kinder and

more socially connected society is not a job for government alone. Every sector – education, business, sport, civil society and faith – can make their own contribution to bridging social divides. It is also a challenge for all of us: becoming a volunteer or taking time to talk to a neighbour are things that we can all do to help build a more connected society.

The discussions we have had with members of the public during lockdown have shown that they are up for the challenge.

Over the next six months Talk/together will be holding discussions with members of the public and expert stakeholders in every nation and region of the UK to develop our ideas. We will find out more about what divides people, what unites them and what their ideas and priorities are for change. The Talk/together online survey is now live at www.together.org.uk and at the end of this year we will conduct a third nationally representative survey. We will also support people to submit their own ideas to us by holding an open call for evidence, encouraging people to organise their own discussions.

Our hope is that many thousands of people will be involved in Talk/together and that it provides ideas and evidence to change our society, and the way we relate to each other, for the better.

Appendixes

I. Results of the nationally representative surveys

As part of this initial research for Talk/together, British Future commissioned two nationally representative surveys from ICM. The first comprised 2,006 GB adults and was carried out between 6 March and 9 March 2020. The second survey comprised 2,010 GB adults and was carried out between 29 May and 2 June 2020. The results of the two surveys are set out below, with the later May/June 2020 results given in brackets.

I. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
As a society, we just don't meet and talk with each other like we used to. (Only asked in March 2020)	28%	47%	15%	6%	2%	2%
As a society, we tend to dwell on our differences rather than what we have in common.	20% (15%)	50% (46%)	22% (27%)	5% (6%)	1% (1%)	3% (4%)
As a society, we have lost the ability to discuss politics without getting angry and abusive.	23% (21%)	43% (41%)	21% (24%)	8% (8%)	2% (2%)	3% (4%)
The UK has never felt so divided (in my lifetime).	25% (17%)	35% (29%)	23% (24%)	10% (18%)	2% (7%)	4% (5%)
Connecting with people online is great, but it is no substitute for interacting with people face-to-face in the real world.	42% (40%)	39% (35%)	14% (16%)	4% (5%)	1% (2%)	1% (2%)
I feel certain that my neighbours would help me if I became ill with the coronavirus.	12% (17%)	27% (32%)	24% (22%)	17% (11%)	14% (9%)	6% (8%)
Overall, the public's response to the coronavirus crisis has shown the unity of our society more than its divides. (Only asked in May/June 2020)	(14%)	(45%)	(21%)	(11%)	(4%)	(3%)

2. How well, if at all, do you think that people from different backgrounds get on?

	Very well	Quite well	Not very well	Not at all well	Don't know
In your local community	22% (25%)	53% (52%)	14% (10%)	3% (3%)	7% (10%)
At a national level	8% (9%)	47% (52%)	34% (26%)	6% (5%)	5% (8%)

3. At this time how important, if at all, do you think it is for people to have the opportunity to meet and interact with people who are different from themselves? By different we mean in terms of background (race, religion, class, education etc) and/or in terms of views (eg political, religious) and/or experiences (eg life stage).

	Very important	Quite important	Not very important	Not at all important	Don't know
	43% (39%)	39% (41%)	10% (10%)	3% (4%)	5% (7%)

4. How often, if at all, would you say you have the opportunity to meet and interact with people who are different from you?

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know
	32% (27%)	43% (41%)	21% (22%)	2% (5%)	2% (5%)

In May/June 2020 this question was prefaced with “Thinking beyond the current context of lockdown and social distancing and thinking about your usual behaviour and activities.”

5. What, if anything, is the main thing stopping you from meeting and interacting with people who are different from you? Please choose the option that most applies to you.

Nothing is stopping me	41% (44%)
I don't know of any opportunities near me where I could meet and interact with people who are different to me	22% (21%)
I'm worried that I'd be too shy or embarrassed	9% (9%)
I don't have time	11% (7%)
I don't want to meet and interact with people who are different from me	4% (6%)
I'm worried that we wouldn't get along	5% (5%)
Other	4% (3%)
Don't know	4% (7%)

In May/June 2020 this question was prefaced with "Thinking beyond the current context of lockdown and social distancing and thinking about your usual behaviour and activities."

6. For each of the following statements, please tell us whether this applies to your or not.

	Yes	No	Don't know
My friends are mostly from the same ethnic group as me	73% (72%)	22% (22%)	5% (6%)
My friends are mostly the same age as me	57% (57%)	39% (37%)	5% (5%)
My friends have mostly reached the same level of education as me	52% (53%)	35% (32%)	13% (14%)
My friends mostly have similar political views to me	37% (38%)	33% (32%)	30% (30%)
My friends mostly have similar religious beliefs (or views on religion) to me	45% (44%)	29% (29%)	26% (27%)

7. How worried, if at all, do you think we as a society should be about the following divides? Please answer on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not at all worried and 10 is very worried.

	Net 1-3 (less worried)	Net 4-7	Net 8-10 (more worried)	Mean score	Don't know
Divides between rich and poor	10% (9%)	41% (40%)	44% (44%)	6.92 (6.94)	4% (7%)
North-South divide	21% (19%)	47% (49%)	23% (21%)	5.65 (5.6)	9% (11%)
Referendum divides between 'Leavers' and 'Remainers'	16% (15%)	49% (47%)	28% (30%)	5.99 (6.11)	7% (8%)
Divides between the young and the old	16% (16%)	52% (50%)	26% (25%)	5.98 (5.85)	6% (8%)
Divides by ethnicity	10% (13%)	50% (48%)	33% (31%)	6.48 (6.3)	6% (8%)
Divides between people from different religious backgrounds	12% (13%)	47% (49%)	35% (30%)	6.5 (6.17)	7% (8%)
Divides between those who would like independence for Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland and those who would not	17% (18%)	49% (46%)	24% (25%)	5.87 (5.77)	10% (11%)
Divides in your local community	23% (25%)	52% (49%)	17% (16%)	5.25 (5.09)	8% (9%)

8. For each of the following, please tell us to what extent, if at all, you think they help bring people together.

	A great deal	A fair amount	Only a bit	Not at all	Don't know
Royal occasions (e.g. royal weddings)	16% (18%)	31% (33%)	28% (26%)	18% (15%)	8% (8%)
National sports events like the football World Cup or the Olympics	30% (29%)	37% (38%)	18% (18%)	7% (7%)	7% (8%)
Local groups and societies	21% (19%)	43% (46%)	22% (21%)	5% (5%)	8% (8%)
Volunteering in the local community	25% (22%)	40% (40%)	21% (23%)	6% (6%)	9% (9%)
Popular TV shows	13% (13%)	29% (32%)	31% (30%)	18% (16%)	9% (10%)

9. When did you last feel you were part of something.....?

	Within the last month	Longer than a month ago, but within the last three months	Longer than three months ago, but within the last six months	Longer than six months ago, but within the last year	Longer than a year ago, but within the last three years	Longer than three years ago	Don't know
In your local community	17% (22%)	7% (9%)	9% (9%)	10% (9%)	7% (5%)	15% (11%)	34% (34%)
At a national level	7% (17%)	7% (6%)	9% (8%)	12% (9%)	10% (8%)	17% (14%)	38% (38%)

II: Guided discussions

In addition to the two nationally representative surveys, we conducted six online discussions during lockdown. The aim of this aspect of the research was to gain insights that would help to shape our later Talk/together engagement across the nations and regions of the UK. Some 36 people took part in six guided discussions held between 6 and 20 May 2020. Later, ten of the 36 participants in the discussions were asked to complete WhatsApp diaries for a further month between 2 June and 26 June 2020. Those who took part in the online discussions came from England and Scotland and were recruited to be broadly representative of the UK population in relation to gender, ethnicity, social grade and voting behavior in the 2016 EU referendum. Five of the six groups were made up of people who had specific characteristics, set out below.

Group 1 – *General*: representative mix of GB adults

Group 2 – *Low-income*: people on low income, whether in work or on out-of-work benefits

Group 3 – *Volunteers*: people who have volunteered, either formally or informally.

Group 4 – *Over 70s*

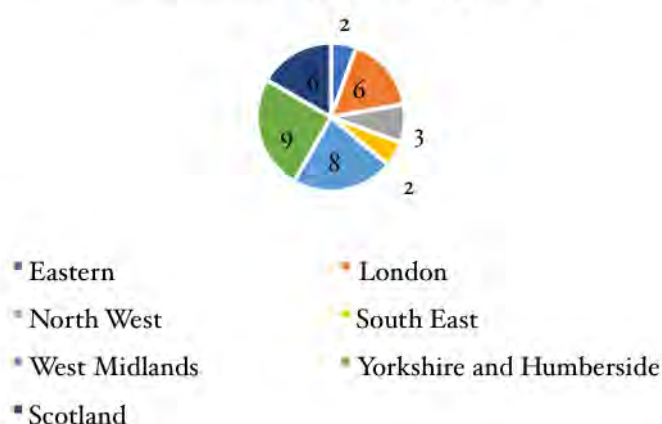
Group 5 – *18-24s*

Group 6 – *Mixed geography*: A group comprising a mixture of those who lived in cities, towns and rural areas.

The groups comprised 18 men and 18 women and were aged between 18 and 79. Eight of the 36 participants were from minority ethnic groups. The social grades of the participants were A (2), B (11), C1 (8), C2 (10), D (2) and E (3). Their place of residence is given in Figure A.1 below.

Some 19 of the participants had voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum and 17 had voted for Remain. The groups were balanced in that there was usually an equal number of Leave and Remain voters in each, although one group had a ratio of four Leave voters to two Remain voters. The recruiters also made sure that there was a balance of strength of opinion about the EU referendum. (“On a scale of 1-10 how strongly do you identify with Leave or Remain when it comes to Brexit, with 1 being most strongly Leave and 10 being most strongly Remain” was asked as a screening question).

Figure A.1 Place of residence of discussion participants



Discussion questions

The following questions were asked to those who took part in the discussions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 how divided or united do you think your local community is at present? (1 is very divided and 10 is very united)
2. And what about the UK as a whole? (1 is very divided and 10 is very united).

Please explain why you gave this score

3. What type of social division causes you most concern, or is most harmful?
4. In general, do you think that society is more divided now than in the past? Why?
5. What impact has Coronavirus had on this?
 - How has it affected society in terms of division or unity? And how is that different locally and nationally?
 - In what ways has it changed your attitudes or actions towards others and the community? What have you done differently if anything? Or what help have you received and what has that meant to you?
 - What networks and groups have you used or joined while you have been in lockdown? E.g. via Facebook or WhatsApp or anything else? Who have you been in contact with? And what has that meant to you?
6. What kind of things bring us together – in our local communities and nationally? Are these different and why?
7. What does the phrase “bring us together” mean? How does it make you feel?
8. In the last couple of weeks volunteering has been in the news – 750,000 people have signed up to be NHS volunteers. Did any of you volunteer? Can you tell us a bit about it? What do you think about volunteering more generally? Could this be a could way of uniting people?
9. If there was one thing we could do to unite people across our society, what would that be? ?

Notes and references

1. YouGov survey of 1,6664 GB adults carried out on 28 and 29 May 2020.
2. Edelman Trust Barometer 2019.
3. See, for example, Jennings, W. and Stoker, G. (2016) 'The bifurcation of politics: two Englands' in *Political Quarterly* 1-22.
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9. Unless otherwise specified, all survey data in this chapter are drawn from this ICM survey of 2,010 GB adults carried out by ICM between 29 May and 2 June 2020
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British Future...

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, opportunity and identity, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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