



This Place Matters: reimagining community cohesion in Britain



Policy Lab

citizensUK



More in
Common

July 2025

This Place Matters: reimagining community cohesion in Britain

Welcome to the project

The polling

Dimensions of social connection

The politics of alienation

MRP Analysis: The places where
investment in connection is most needed

The voice from community

Update from the first three Deep-Dives

The evidence for change

What do academics say
about community cohesion?

Welcome to the project

When riots engulfed some parts of England in the summer of 2024, the question of how communities across our country live together in a spirit of tolerance and togetherness, rather than distrust and division captivated the nation's attention.

For decades now, faith groups and charities, local authority leaders and civil society volunteers have sought to bring people together. They have tackled loneliness and social isolation, worked to give people a sense of pride and belonging in their neighbourhoods and told a story of our country that is warm and welcoming to those from other parts of the world.

But clearly intense problems still remain. It is not yet clear whether our political parties in Westminster have been able to learn enough from the experience on the ground to try to put things right.

That's why the This Place Matters project is so important.

Generously supported by Pears Foundation, This Day Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy, This Place Matters brings together three different kinds of expertise to answer the question of how we can best live together today.

That expertise starts with the polling and social research insights of More in Common. For years now, More in Common has been talking directly with the people of the country about how they feel and what they think. For this project, they turn that expertise directly to the question of social connection. How well do people feel they know and can trust their neighbours? What characteristics do high connection communities share with each other? What seems to cause division? And how can we tackle it?

Equipped with these insights, the second This Place Matters partner, Citizens UK, then dives deep into communities across the country to talk to people slowly, carefully and with respect about their own experiences. As the country's largest community coalition and Britain's home of community organising, Citizens UK are able to bring uniquely detailed insights to bear on this most challenging of issues. Throwing new light on the lives of millions as they do so.

Our final partner is the UCL Policy Lab at University College London. One of the Policy Lab's central missions is to bring the powerful ideas of academic research into direct conversation with those facing injustice or exclusion on the front line. For This Place Matters, the Lab operates both as a hub where people can meet to discuss the research being conducted and as a generator of new academic ideas to respond to the issues as they emerge.

In this initial report, we present the first findings from each of these three partners, in the form of a detailed new poll and focus groups from More in Common; a summary of the first community deep dives from Citizens UK; and an overview of recent academic research from UCL Policy Lab.

We hope you enjoy it and that it provides some hope that the challenges that confront us can be overcome.



Dimensions of social connection

‘An island of strangers’

The Prime Minister did speak for some of the public mood when he said the UK risked becoming an ‘island of strangers’. 44 per cent of Britons feel like strangers to those around them, while half feel disconnected.

But while the Prime Minister’s use of the phrase was related specifically to immigration, our research suggests that this is just one part of a wider and deeper sense of alienation, driven in part by failures in integration, but also by people’s day to day economic struggles.

This sense of alienation is not confined to one ethnic group. The communities that feel this disconnect most strongly are Asian Britons- 47 per cent feel like a stranger in this group, more so than white Britons (44 per cent)

“I think there’s a sense of not wanting to do some things, shutting your door and not actually wanting to be involved with what’s going on outside. And that really is not, these are villages (...) But they do lack some of the community spirit that was once there.”

Jayne, Retired HR Director, Cambridgeshire

44% of Britons say they sometimes feel like they are strangers to those around them

Please indicate how well the following describes you:
Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own country



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“Integration, it’s like, yeah, if you do come to the UK, integrate where as a lot of these people don’t want to. They want to stay in their own community. They don’t want to mix with the UK values.”

Dave, builder, Helsby

Economic insecurity and social disconnection

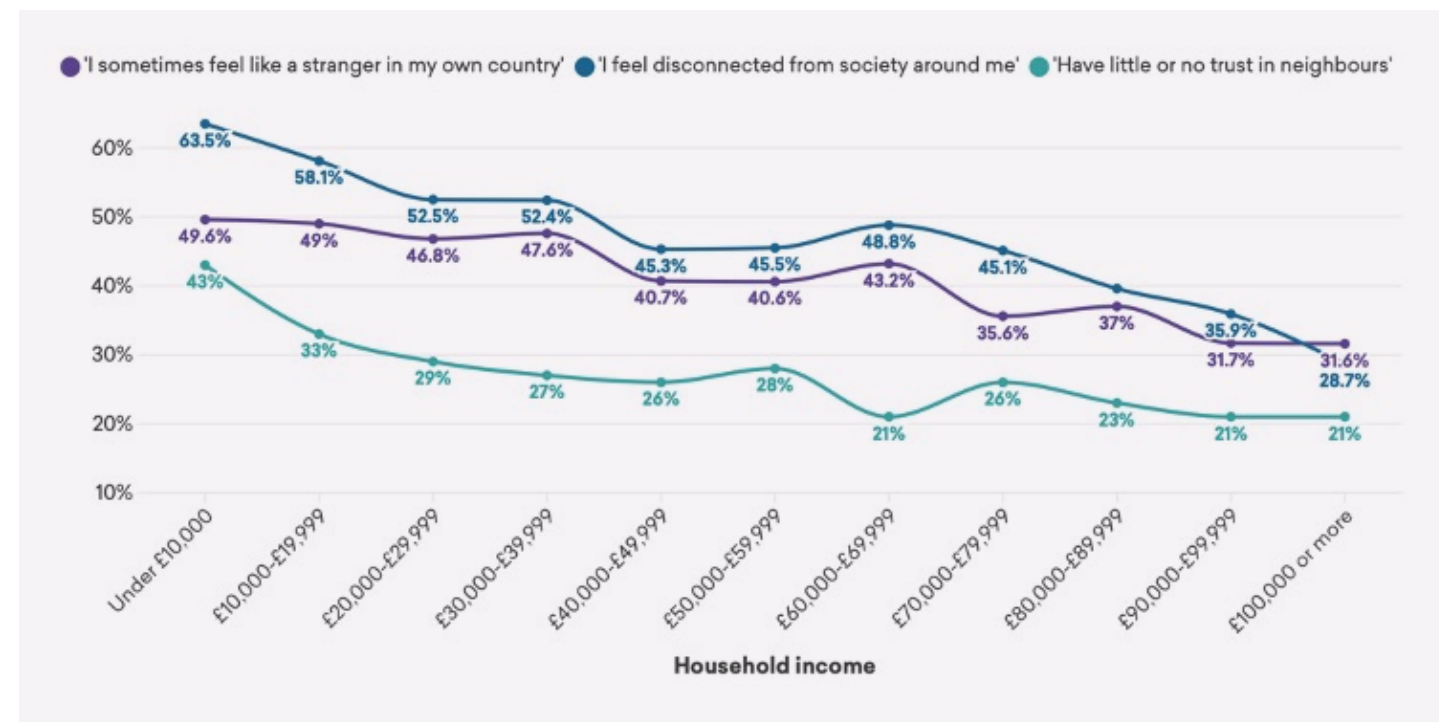
Financial insecurity is one of the strongest predictors of whether Britons feel disconnected from society: two-thirds (67 per cent) of those who say that they struggle to make ends meet feel disconnected, compared to 37 per cent of those who describe themselves as financially comfortable.

In focus groups, Britons of all backgrounds often share how the cost of living has deepened their sense of isolation, making small acts of socialising unaffordable.

“I think it affects the fun things that you want to do, because your money’s all going on your bills and all the boring stuff like food and gas and leccy and petrol so that, come to the end of it, you go, well what have we got money to do for ourselves now?”

Amy, Teacher, Runcorn

Lower income Britons feel less trusting and more disconnected from society



Source: More in Common, April 2025

Younger Britons are less trusting

Younger Britons tend to be less trusting of those around them compared those who are older.

When asked to choose between two opposing statements - “most people can be trusted” or “you can’t be too careful with most people” - nearly half of Britons believe that ‘most people can be trusted’.

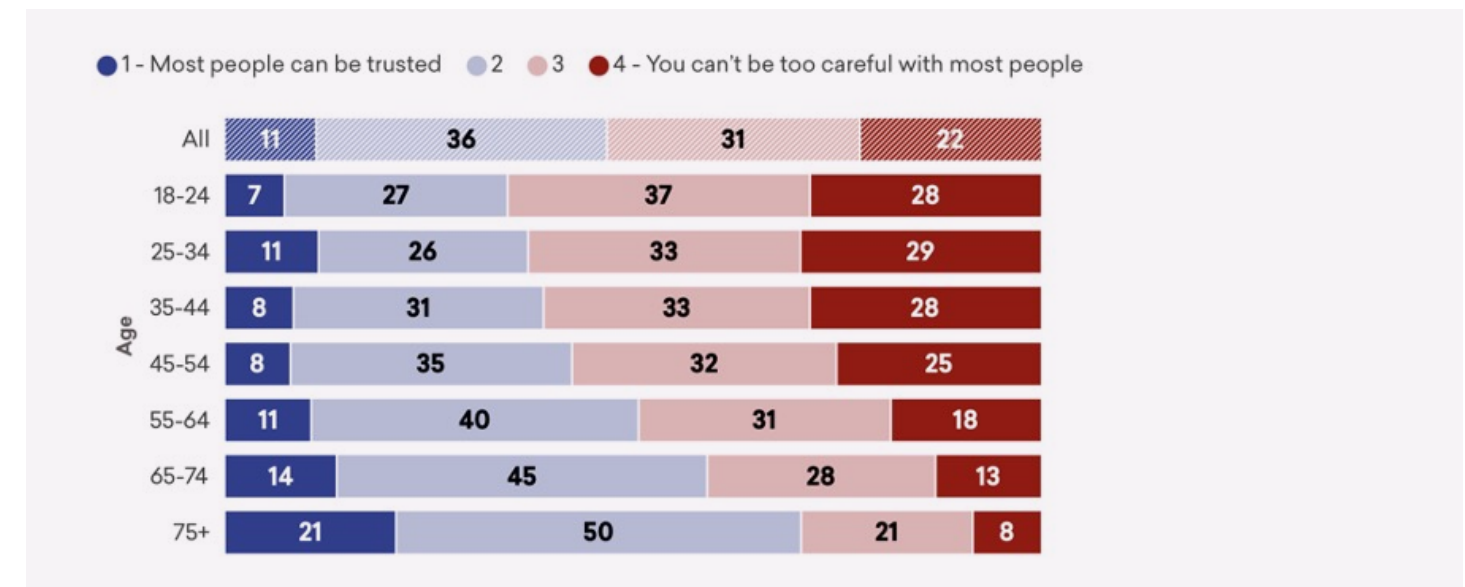
Just over a third (34 per cent) of 18-24 year olds, and four in ten (37 per cent) of 25 - 34 year olds say the same.

“It is kind of hard to say outside of family and friends. If I don’t know you, I don’t see reasons why I should trust you. I think it’s just people who’ve proven that they care about you and to their actions that they’re trustworthy.”

Layla, waitress, Manchester

Only a third of young Britons think that ‘most people can be trusted’

Which of the following comes closer to your view?



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“It is horrible that people haven’t got their neighbourly community spirit, because they’re frightened of their neighbour. We don’t know who is in our area these days, or if it’s safe for our children as well.”

Mandy, Llanelli

The loss of associational life

10

In focus groups, people often describe their sense that the activities and spaces that enable us to socialise are becoming more scarce.

For some, this shift is driven by technology and social media, which are reshaping how we interact with one another. Others point to the rise of remote working, which has reduced opportunities to build relationships with colleagues. With fewer shared spaces to connect in person, many are worried that technology is not just replacing face-to-face interaction, but also removing the incentives to engage beyond your doorstep.

Some also reflect on how everyday interactions - like being helped by staff while shopping - once made them feel part of a community, and how the loss of those moments has left them feeling more isolated.

“We’re all going to be online soon. There won’t be cities and towns to go around. A lot of pubs that have closed down near me, a lot of shops that have now closed down and charity shops, there’s just nothing to go out into town and no reason to go out there really.”

Rob, Engineer, Coventry

“In terms of communities, it’s very, very easy to do everything on your phone. And it’s very, very easy to then sit in your house and just send a text rather than make a phone call to somebody. So that sense of community that I actually remember when I was a kid, it is going.”

Frances, SEN teacher, Cambridgeshire

“Social media has disconnected us. You used to go around and grab a coffee with your mates. Now you just text them. And if you do go to a restaurant, you don’t talk, you just go on your phone.”

Jamie, builder, Dudley

“You go to a shop and years ago, people help you pack, and you’d have a chat with people and be friendly. Now it’s kind of like if a person’s speaking, it’s weird.”

Deena, Optician, Coventry

The legacy of the pandemic

11

For some, Britain’s social life has never fully recovered from lockdown, which forced many to drop the rituals and activities that brought them together with others, and they haven’t picked them back up since.

Many point to the fact that this pandemic was immediately followed by a cost of living crisis, which has deepened this sense of isolation and made it harder to return to some of the spaces (be it the cinema or the pub) that once enabled people to engage with their communities.

“Lockdown changed a few things. I used to go in the pub and socialise, but after Covid I don’t, I’m less likely to talk to people now.”

Gordon, painter, Dudley

“I think COVID was the big thing (...) the amount of public houses that have closed and other social gatherings because they’re happy to sit at home, they got used to it, it was cheaper.”

Barby, retired, Coventry

“When COVID kicked off, we were all in it together, but then as soon as lockdown finished and people were able to continue with life as it was in 2019, everything just got reverted, but then everything just also got much more expensive.”

Ricky, Software Engineer, Coventry

“Before COVID we all used to have lunch together, but since then we just sit in our cars and eat alone on our break.”

Clive, crane driver, Dudley

“I worked from home for three years during lockdown, and mentally it has really affected me. Because you’re stuck in the house and not seeing people.”

Linzi, bank worker, Merthyr Tydfil

Visible signs of neglect make communities feel ‘left behind’

Hyper-local signs of neglect feed into Britons’ sense of social disconnection.

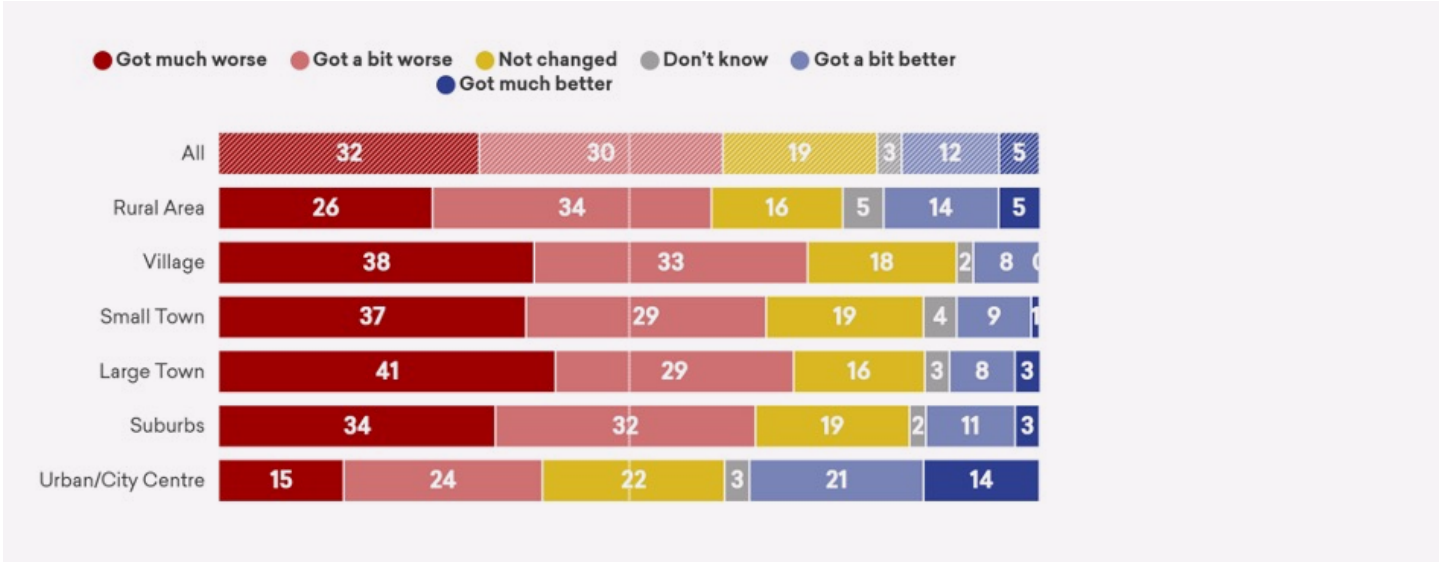
In these communities that feel ‘left behind’, the High Street often emerges as a visible symptom of neglect. 62 per cent say that their local high street has worsened in recent years.

Those living in towns and villages are particularly negative, while those who live in urban areas are far more optimistic about changes on their high street.

In focus groups, the link between the decline of shops and pubs and social alienation is clear.

3 in 5 Britons say their local high street has worsened in recent years

In recent years, would you say your local high street has:



Source: More in Common, June 2025

“You can get something cheaply if you buy it cheaply on the internet, but then if you had popped in to go to town for WHSmith to get it, you’d be paying over 10 times the price. So it doesn’t encourage you then to go in to town and use the shops, but then if you don’t use the shops, they are not going to

stay there. So it just feels a bit broken. It seems like we’ve really lost our direction as to what society should be.”

Jayne, Biomedical Scientist, Coventry

The legacy of the 2024 riots

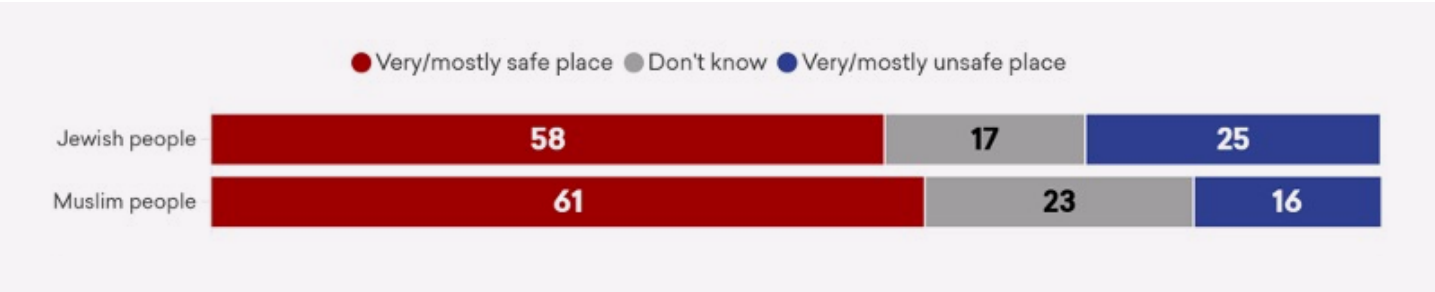
In the aftermath of the 2024 riots, some feel that the Government hadn’t done enough to tackle prejudice and discrimination.

In a focus group in Peterborough, Muslim participants raised deep concerns about rising hate and racism in their city post Southport. They feared community tensions, citing recent incidents of violence and feeling a sense of worry that conflict in India and Pakistan could exacerbate already strained relation

As the Israel-Gaza conflict continues, we also find that, though most Britons do believe that the UK is a safe place for both Muslim and Jewish people, some are anxious. A quarter of people say that, in 2025, the UK is a very or mostly unsafe place for Jewish people, while 16 per cent say the same for those who are Muslim.

Almost a quarter of Britons say that the UK is not safe for Jewish people

Do you think the UK in 2025 is a safe place for...



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“The most worrying thing is the crime rate in terms of the community cohesion. It’s literally falling apart. And there was a violent attack last - was it today or yesterday - on Lincoln Road. I think the girl got attacked, literally was kicked in the head and this was happening broad daylight.”

Nurun, retail owner, Peterborough

“When there’s something that happens globally, it just impacts us throughout the moment. And then we’ve got this thing with India, Pakistan. I’d love to walk around with a visible flag saying ‘I’m Bangladeshi, leave me out of it!’”

Kiran, team leader, Peterborough

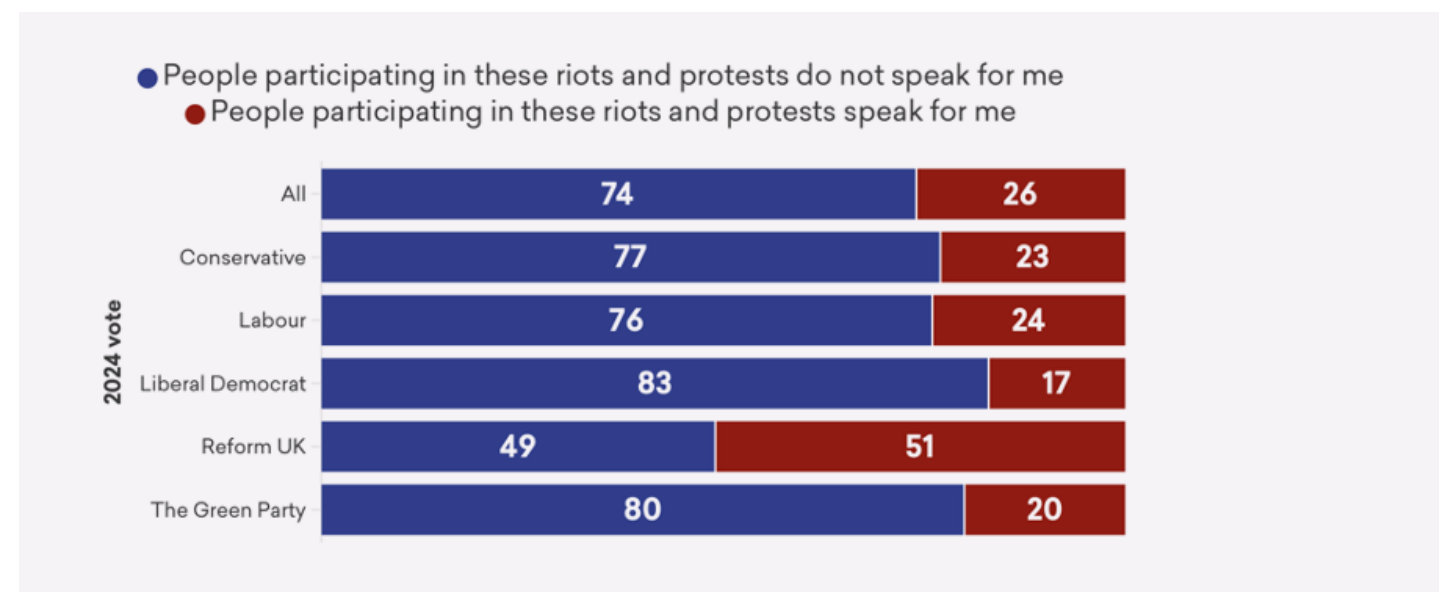
The legacy of the 2024 riots

The government's response to the riots is still a point of tension in conversations with some of the public. For many people, Keir Starmer's firm response is seen as one of his most impressive moments in government.

However, a minority sympathise with some of the rioters' motivations - even though the vast majority even of this group condemn their actions - and feel that the government's response was too heavy-handed, and infringed on freedom of speech.

Three quarters say the rioters did not speak for them

Which come closest to your view?



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“If you would’ve said to me 10 years ago that people would be arrested for saying they think immigration has been a problem and putting stuff on social media and they’d actually have police turn up at their door and saying, “what you mean by this? You’re causing people

offence, you’re causing people upset’, I would laugh you out of the room. I’d be no help. No way. That’s what’s happening in the UK. Not personal attack, nothing like that. Just a statement saying immigration becoming a problem, you can now get a police officer turning up to

your door. So yeah, anyone that can reverse that, the damage that’s been done to the freedom of speech in this country, will get my vote.”

Jack, Sales manager, Basildon

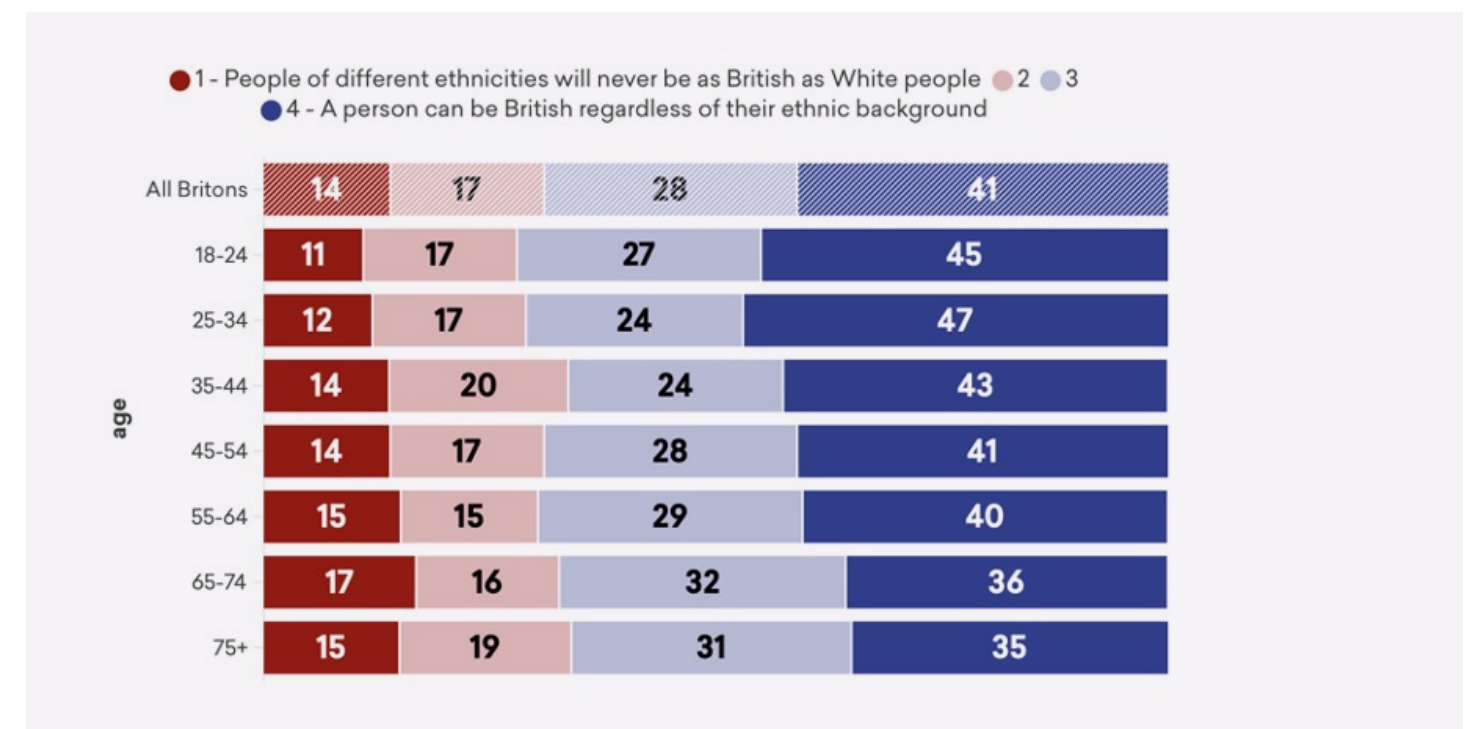
The British identity is inclusive, but some have concerns about multiculturalism

With the caveat that Britons may hold varied views on what is meant by ‘multiculturalism’, overall, the public is split on whether multiculturalism benefits (53 per cent) or harms (47 per cent) our national identity.

Britons do not see being part of an ethnic minority as a barrier to being British - with the overwhelming majority across age and generational groups rejecting the notion that people of different ethnicities will never be as British as white people. In fact, this appears to be becoming a more common belief with each generation.

People don’t see ethnic minorities as any less British than those who are White

Which come closest to your view?



Source: More in Common, April 2025

Many Britons are pessimistic about the country’s future. Barely more than a quarter believe that Britain’s best days are still to come.

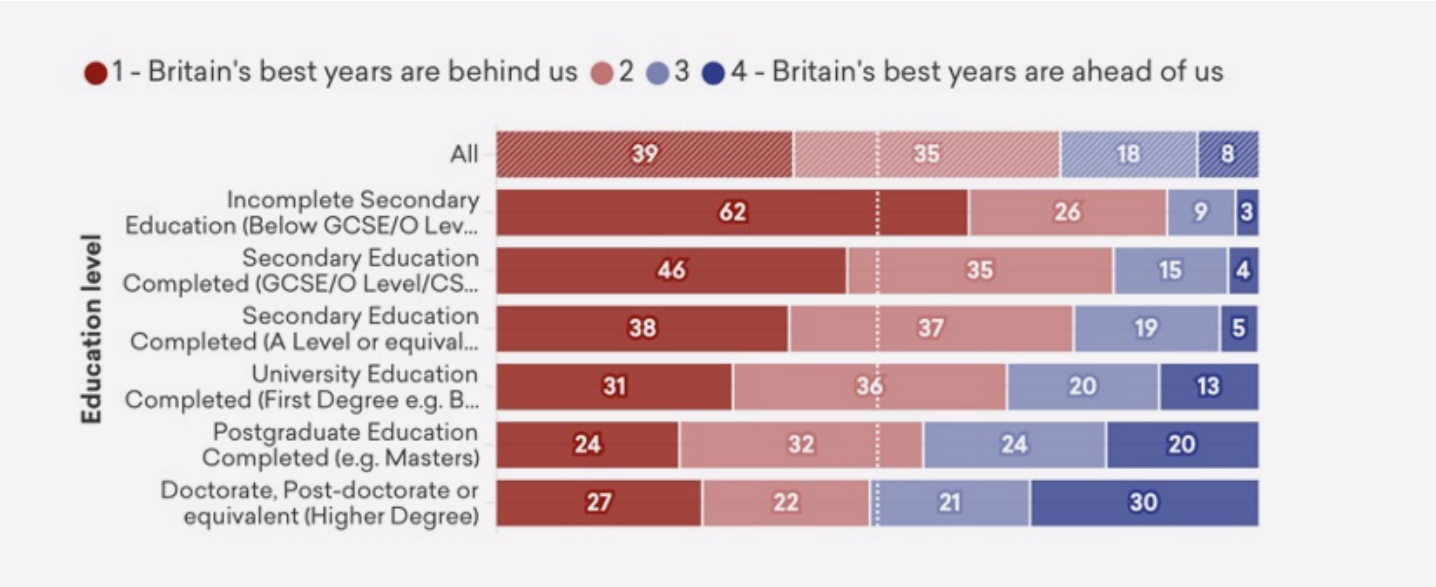
The exception to this trend is among the highly educated—individuals with postgraduate or doctoral degrees are generally more optimistic.

Among most other demographic groups and particularly those who haven’t completed university education, there is a sense that Britain’s best years are behind us - reflecting a growing educational gap

“I think really overall we are in a very poor state compared to what we used to be. I mean just due to little things that count (...) Why are children not being fed at school? Why are they going hungry?”

Suzie, customer support manager, Cambridgeshire

People tend to think Britain’s best years are behind us



Source: More in Common, May 2025

The polling

The politics of alienation

Socially disconnected Britons feel ignored by elites

Four in five Britons lean toward the view that politicians don't care about people like them.

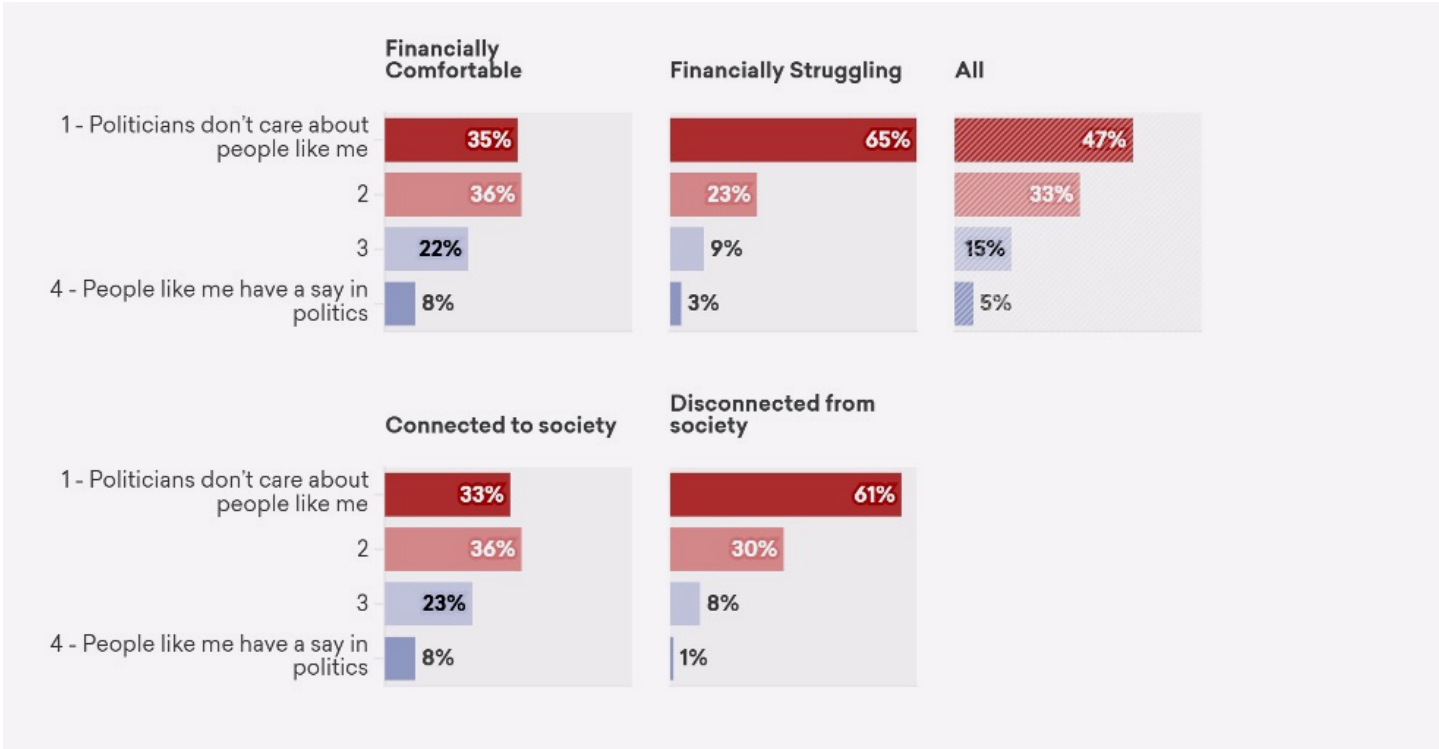
This feeling of neglect is heavily linked to financial insecurity and social disconnect: 88 per cent of those who describe themselves as 'financially struggling' say that politicians don't care about them, alongside 91 per cent of those who feel disconnected from society.

“I think it’s in their DNA really? They don’t give a monkeys about us (...) They don’t care, to be honest, do they? As long as they’re lying in their pockets.”

Suella, retired, Peterborough

Most Britons think politicians do not care about them

Which of the following comes closest to your view?



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“(Politicians) are literally obsessed with how they look, but deep down, they don’t actually really give a shit about people.”

Matt, traffic officer, Manchester

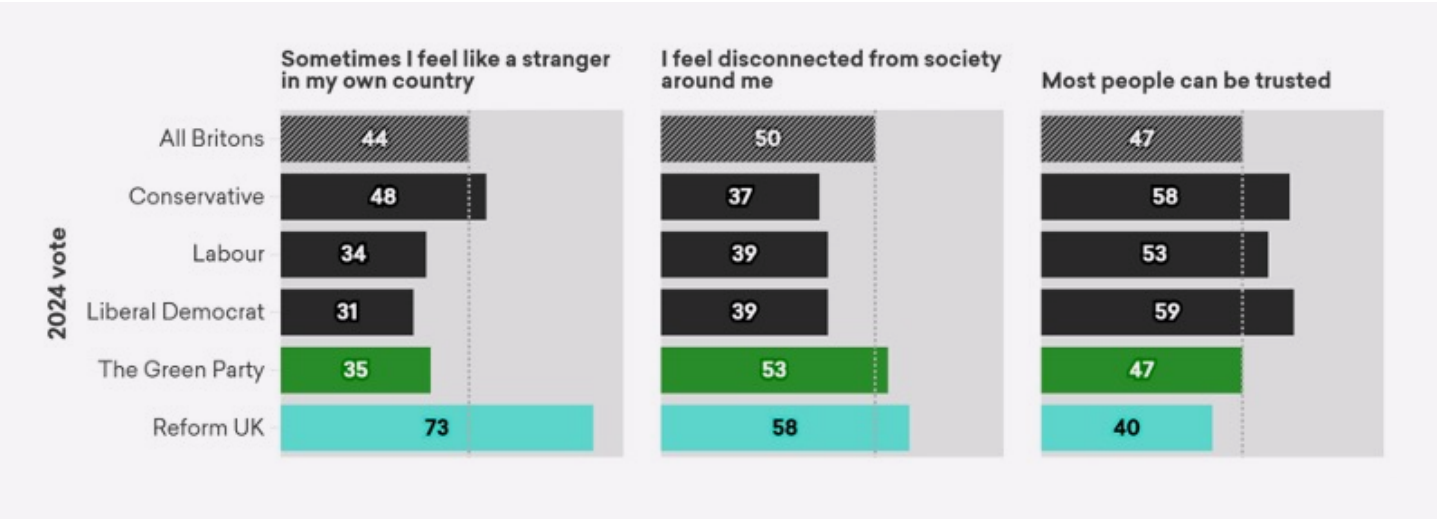
Political implications

Those who most strongly feel disconnected from the people and wider society around them seem to often be shifting away from mainstream parties.

Compared to other voter groups, Reform supporters, Green supporters and non-voters are considerably more likely to feel like “strangers in their own country”, to feel disconnected from society, and are less likely to believe that most people can be trusted than other party supporters.

Reform supporters are more likely than other voter groups to disconnected from society

Proportion who agree with each statement to some extent



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“Very broadly, I think not enough people in society are willing to work together for the greater good. I think we seem to have become quite fragmented, selfish in some cases and the country just seems to be gradually... the general common decency in behaviour of people just seems

to be in decline for possibly various reasons. A lot of that has do with people struggling. I think things have got worse since Covid.”

Nurun, retail owner, Peterborough

Trust in people and faith in politics

Those who express less trust in those around them also tend to be less trusting of institutions and politicians.

Green and Reform voters are outliers in their low trust of people around them, but also report lower trust of politicians, journalists, and the system as a whole.

Reform and Green voters are less trusting than other voter groups

Proportion who agree with each statement to some extent



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“I’ve actually given up on the system, if I’m being totally open and honest with you. Yeah, nothing really changes ever. You go from one bunch of lying so-and-so’s to the next lot it would seem, even locally (...). It’s almost, this is going to sound really extreme, but the country almost needs a coup-d’etat and it

needs somebody to almost come in and say, ‘right, this is what we’re doing and you will conform’ (...) There’s no proper leadership by anybody. Nobody likes any of the candidates. Nobody really trusts any of them.”

Gary, sales manager, Bourne

Many disconnected Britons want to ‘let institutions burn’

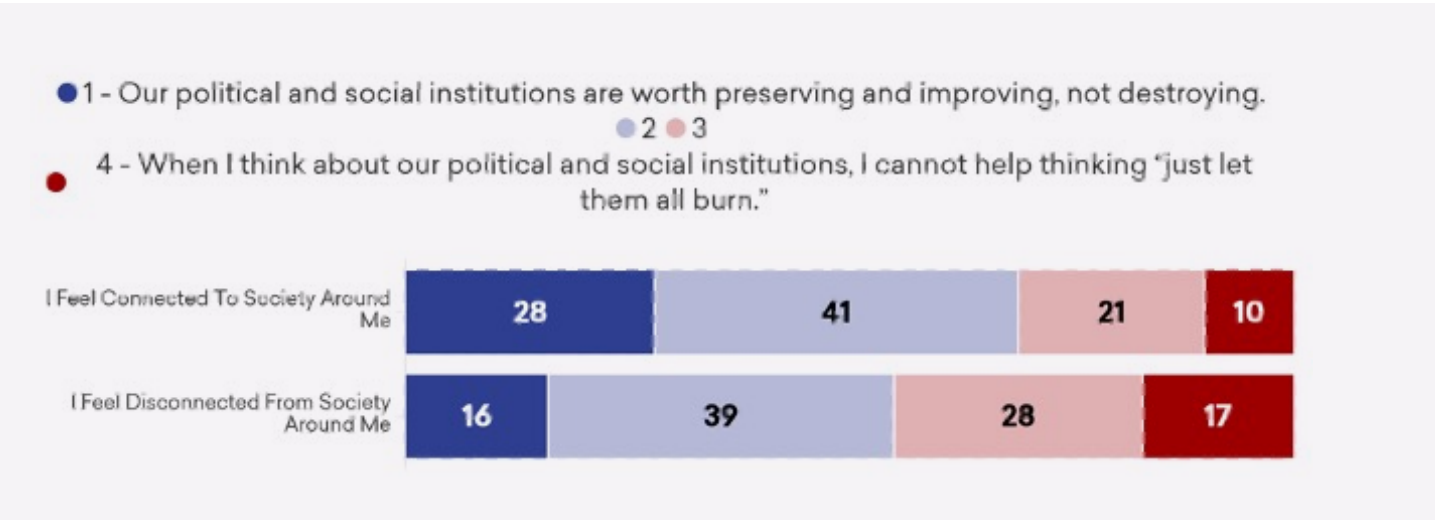
Britons who feel disconnected from society are far more sceptical about our institutions.

While 69 per cent of Britons lean toward the view that ‘our political and social institutions are worth preserving and improving’, this drops to 55 per cent among those who are disconnected from society.

It’s clear that those who feel they don’t have a stake in society tend to think our institutions are fundamentally broken, and some feel that we need to ‘smash it all up and start again from scratch’.

Britons who feel disconnected from society are more likely to think we need to destroy our institutions and start from scratch

Which comes closest to your view?



Source: More in Common, April 2025

“I think we’ll probably have to follow somebody like Trump to smash the whole lot up and start again - as much as it’s caused chaos around the world. But I mean, I think if we just keep doing these little token nicks and tucks - giving a little 10 pence there and a 10 pence here, and a little rise... even the minimum

wage has not risen that much, cos we still can’t afford to live. So we need something I feel, I want to say more radical.”

Jackie, childminder, Thurrock

The polling

MRP Analysis: The places where investment in connection is most needed

The most and least connected constituencies in Britain

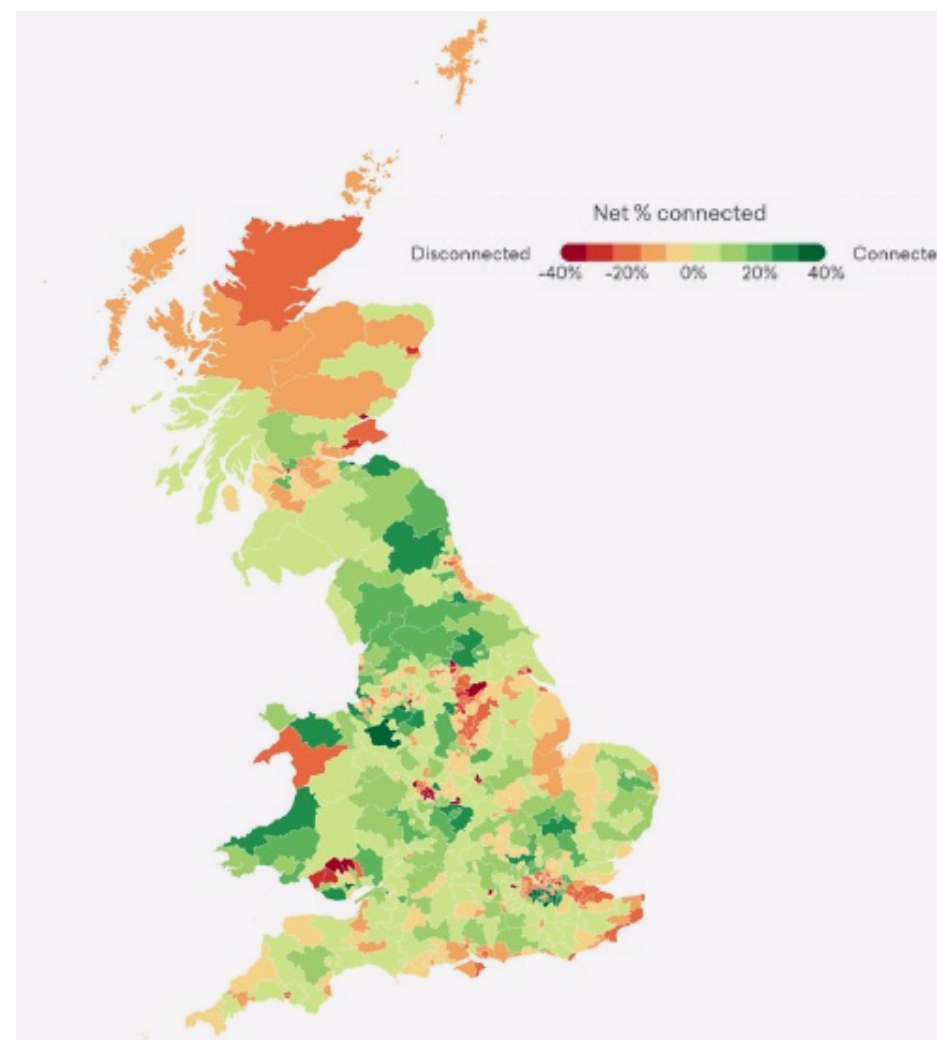
Half of Britons (51 per cent) report feeling disconnected from society around them. Areas like Sheffield and Blackpool, which saw riots last Summer, have some of the lowest reported levels of social connection.

The areas reporting disconnection fall into three broad groups:

- **The left behind former industrial areas (Doncaster, Welsh Valleys, Kent Coast):** Provincial towns and deprived coastal communities that have suffered from deindustrialisation and lack of investment
- **Areas of high ethnic diversity and low integration (Manchester Rusholme, Leicester South)**
Constituencies with large immigrant populations where different communities may live parallel lives with limited interaction.
- **Commuter areas (Reading, West Bromwich)**
Places where many residents travel elsewhere for work, creating communities where people sleep but don't necessarily build deep local roots or engage with neighbours and local institutions.

Which of the following comes closer to your view?

I feel disconnected / connected to society around me



Source: More in Common, June 2025

The “Left behind”

One type of area with low social connection are ‘left behind’ communities.

This refers to areas former industrial towns and coastal communities that have struggled economically since deindustrialisation. These areas often have ageing populations, limited economic opportunities, and feel forgotten by national politics and investment.

Examples: Doncaster, Folkestone, Merthyr Tydfil

“The pits closed, then the town closed. Everything just started closing down. It’s like a set of dominos - everything is a ghost town.”

Julia, telecoms worker

“The miners had a football club. They had a social club. They had a community, now there is nothing.”

Mike, Social Housing Officer

“There used to be more community spirit. And it’s all gone.”

John, Council Worker

“There’s not a lot of empathy. People don’t seem as compassionate.”

Leanne, Celebrant

“A friend of mine was working in the steelworks in Port Talbot. 2200 jobs. What have we got left? We used to ship our coal and steel all over the world.”

Gething, Construction Manager

“It’s because the factory camaraderie has gone. As the factory has gone, the social circle has gone. And with work from home, you don’t have your work colleagues who you go to the pub and chat with.”

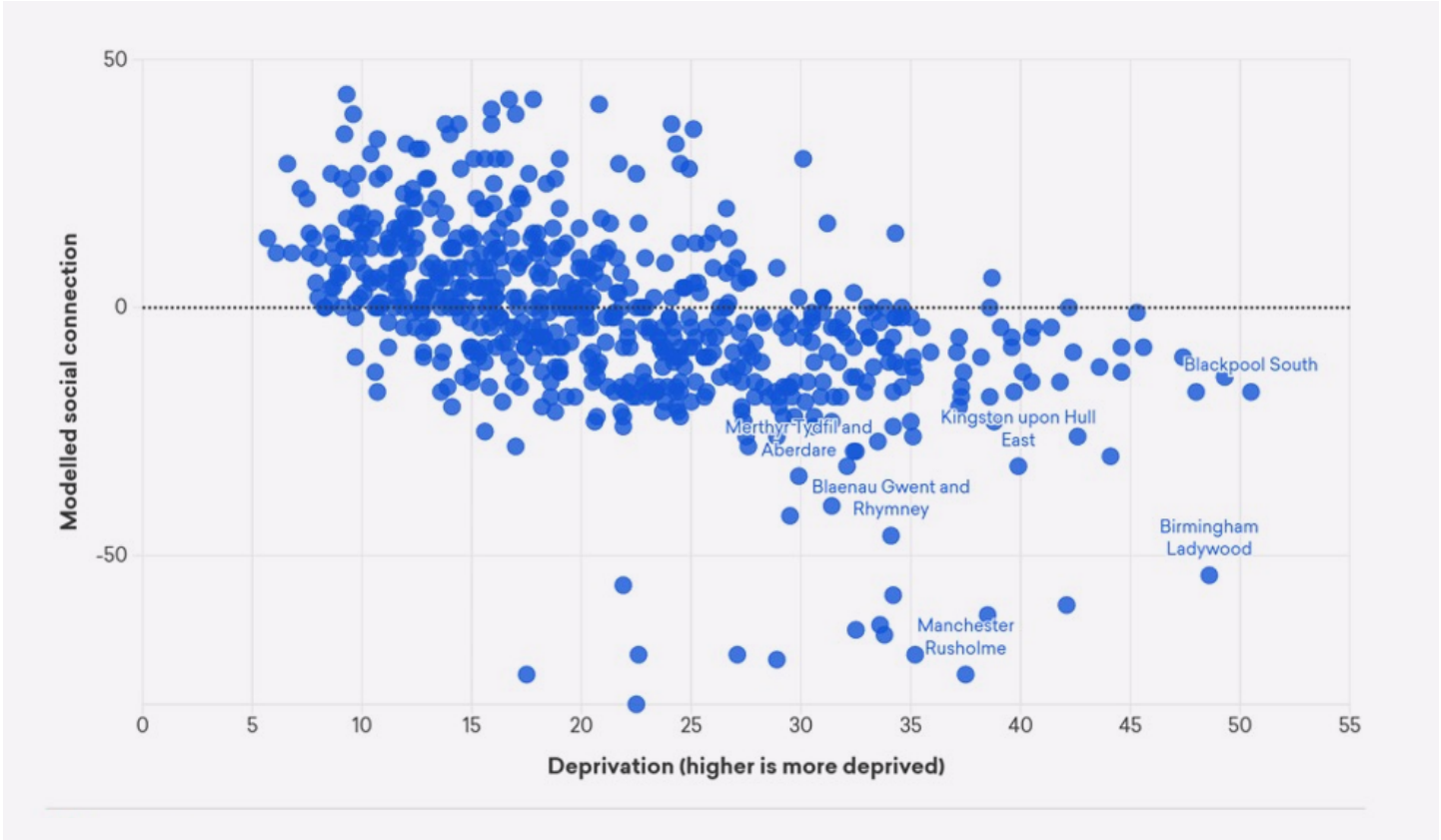
Julia, Telecomms worker

The relationship between deprivation and social connection

There is a strong correlation between deprivation and social disconnection.

Across the different types of areas that report high levels of disconnection, a common thread is that they tend to be more deprived.

More deprived areas tend to have lower reported social connection



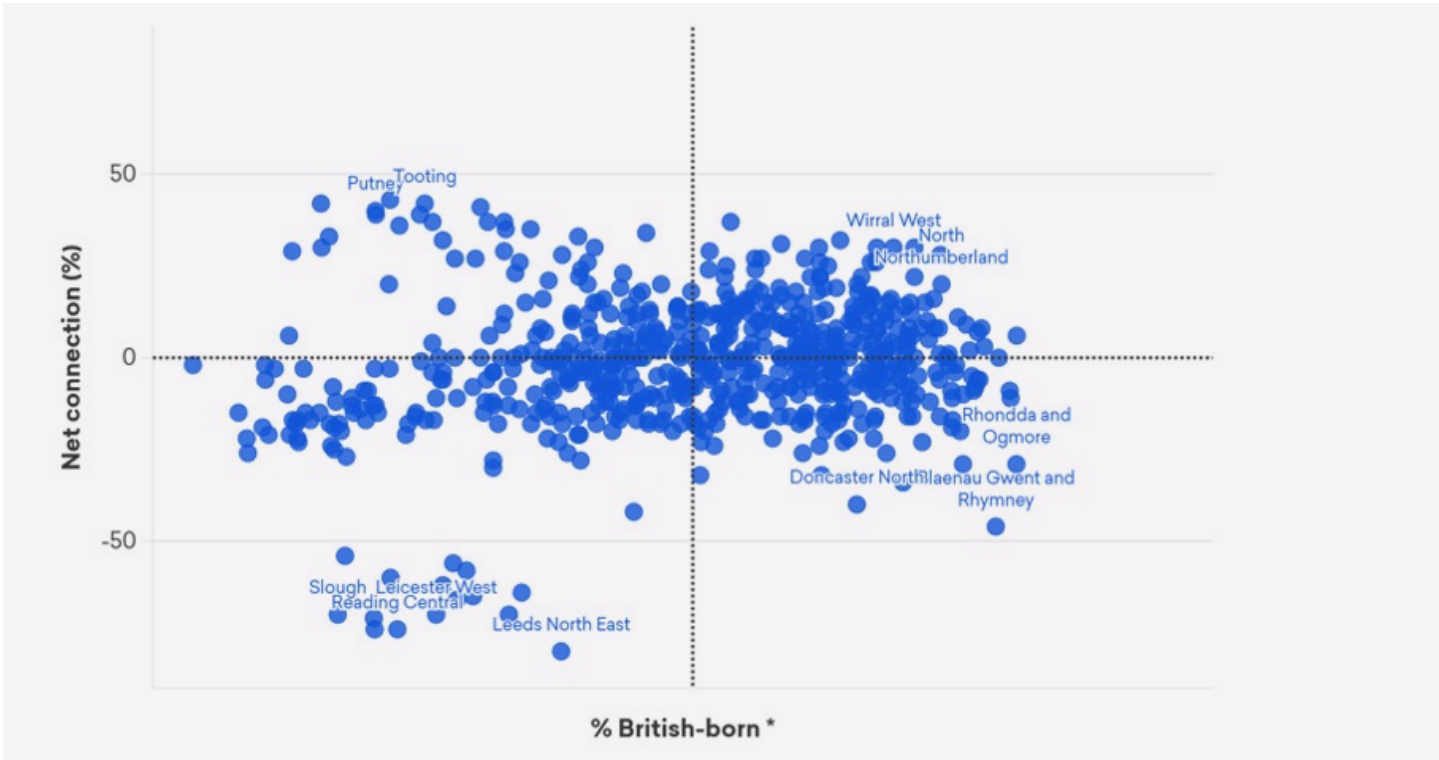
Source: More in Common, 2025 - Deprivation scores from MySociety Composite UK IMD

The relationship between immigration and social connection

When comparing levels of immigration and reported levels of cohesion, there is no strong relationship between the two - instead there are parts of Britain in all four quadrants:

- Those which have received high levels of immigration and where cohesion is stronger: such as Putney and Tooting
- Those which have received high levels immigration where cohesion faces challenges: such as parts of Leeds, Leicester and Slough
- Those which have not received much immigration but where cohesion isn't working: such as Doncaster and the Welsh Valleys
- Those which have not received much immigration and where cohesion is working: such as Northumberland and the Wirral

There is no direct relationship between immigration and social cohesion



* Logit transformed

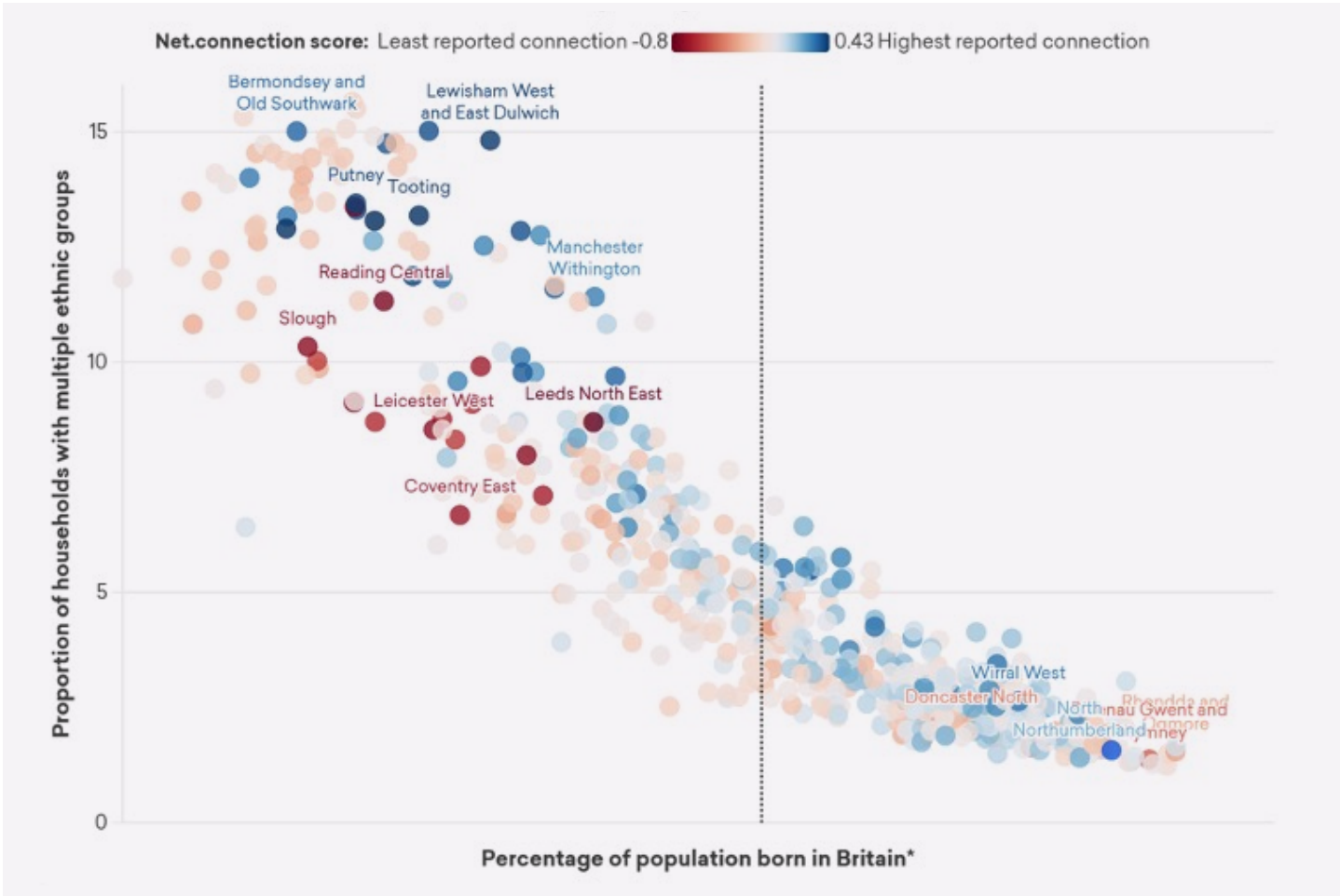
“Certainly when I come out and see a neighbour, and they say hello and I feel part of that community. When I come out into the street. I feel comfortable. I walk out and

I feel safe. So my community feels like home to me. I do feel connected.”
Latoya, Counsellor, East Dulwich

The relationship between integration and social connection

Social connection depends on strong integration. Overall, we find that feelings of connectedness are higher in high-immigration areas where there are higher rates of multi-ethnic households - a good proxy for multi-ethnic integration. For example, compare Lewisham West and East Dulwich with Coventry East - both have similar numbers of immigrants; however, in Lewisham West and East Dulwich, there is a higher rate of inter-ethnic mixing, and feelings of connectedness are significantly higher.

In more ethnically diverse areas, feelings of connection are higher where there are more households with multiple ethnic groups



* Logit transformed

“Yeah, I think whether it’s just small stuff, like when I go to work or go out with my friends, I speak to my friends all the time as well as my family, and even my neighbors, just saying hi.

I feel comfortable with my space, essentially. So yeah, I would say, we’re connected.”
Alex, Construction worker, East Dulwich

Integration

It is important for the public that people who come to the UK contribute to its social fabric- by obeying the law, respecting British institutions, and learning English. Many even support revoking migrant's visas if they fail to properly integrate into British society (70 per cent).

For many, failures in integration are making it impossible to build a cohesive society and eroding British values.

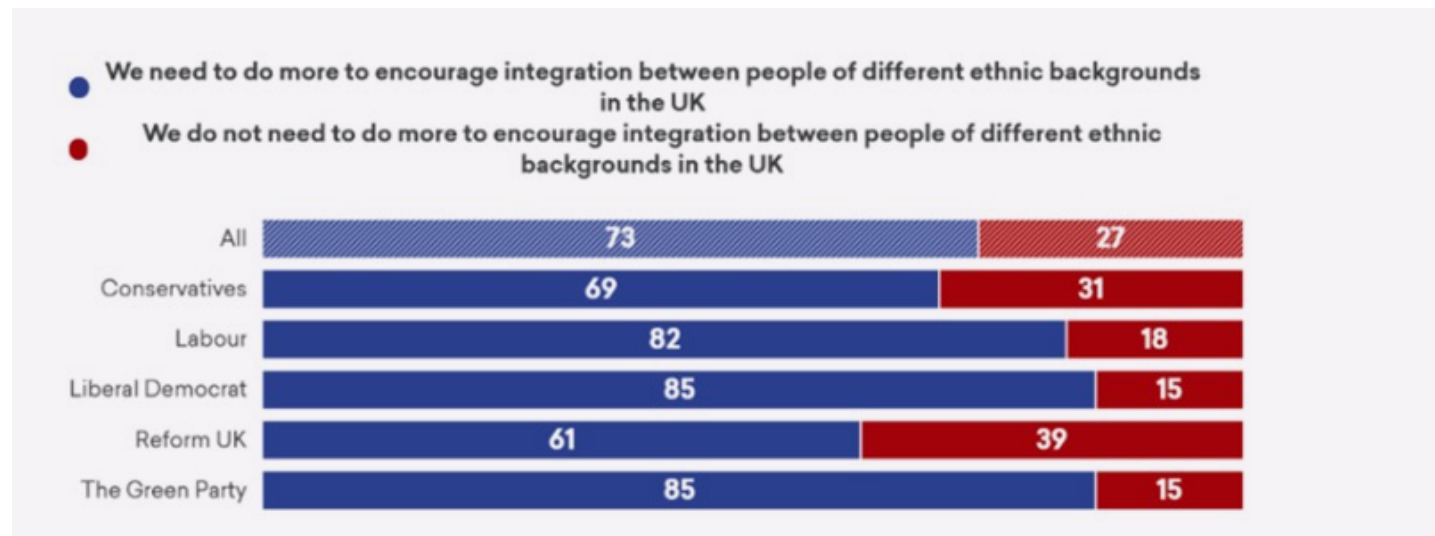
However, few Britons believe that the responsibility for integration lies solely with newcomers: three quarters think that integration is everyone's responsibility, not just those from minority ethnic communities. The public have high expectations of the government when it comes to providing the services and resources to help communities to integrate.

“We’ve got such a multicultural country now and people don’t really understand the different cultures unless you have friends, families, whatever it might be, you don’t fully understand it. And I think people are so scared of upsetting and saying the wrong thing. And so then it is almost easier to just stay in these silos.”

Leanne, charity manager, Blythe

The public want more to be done to encourage integration

Which of the following comes closer to your view?



The voice from community

Update from the first three Deep-Dives

Citizens UK are organising local listening exercises in six places that experienced recent unrest.

Working through trusted relationships with local communities, we are bringing together a range of voices to explore:

- What causes or entrenches division?
- What brings people together in their communities?
- What policy and practice measures might enable more cohesive communities?

These local listening exercises form part of ongoing local community organising activity and surface insights that support our analysis and recommendations for national change.

To date, conversations have happened in: Sunderland, Leeds and Newcastle. Further listening events are planned for July in Birmingham, Liverpool and Bradford.

Deep dive 1

Sunderland

Hosted by Sunderland Bangladesh International Centre. June 2025.

Background

In August 2024, riots broke out across Sunderland city centre and surrounding areas with disorder taking place over two evenings, following the response to the murders in Southport. Sunderland has long been a target of far-right activists and politicians, who have come to the city under the guise of protecting women and girls.

Insights into causes of the riots

The participants identified interconnected causes including poverty C inequality;

scapegoating of refugees C migrants; engrained racist attitudes across Britain and poor quality education about history and politics. Members also compared the city to

Newcastle, where civil society is more connected and better resourced, and therefore better able to respond to threat.

Suggestions to help prevent division:

- **Spreading the benefit of development:** Ensure regeneration and investment in cities benefits local communities and those outside city centres.
- **Local services that are respectful and accountable:** Involve local people in shaping services and decision making, with real accountability.
- **Role of schools:** Ensure schools engage children in citizenship and the political system, and educate children on immigration, racism, and inclusion; support education institutions to better respond to emotional needs.
- **Balance the story of the role migrants play:** Public figures communicating the economic, social and cultural benefits of immigration.

“I felt it was coming, I’m not surprised... it had to happen in Sunderland, if you get what I mean... over 40 plus years going through racism and no respect to the population of Sunderland. We’re the first city... for any kind of far-right protests.”

“It’s caused by alienation. People feel they are outside the system. And once they’re outside the system, they are susceptible because they need somebody to blame.”

“I appreciate it is about looking at giving somebody to blame. But the fact that it was so easy to blame black and brown people suggests that there’s a massive amount of underlying racism.”

“I think the education side of things, we’re not taught to critically think, we’re not taught about policy.”



Deep dive 2

Harehills, Leeds

Hosted by Roma Roots CIC. May 2025.

Background

In July 2024, riots broke out in Harehills, Leeds, following interactions between social services and the Roma community. The more detailed picture of the context and causes of the riots were missing in the media reporting, with the voices of Roma people largely unheard.

Insights into causes of the unrest

Participants discussed that the riots arose out of deep-rooted mistrust of authority, poor communication and systemic racism in policing, schools and children’s social care.

“There was a situation in which our kids were beaten up in the park and the police said: ‘Keep your children in the house. You came and took over our country!’”

“My son was on the school bus and he was laughing when another student accused him of laughing at her.

My son said: “We are not laughing at you.” That student had a sharpener...with the blade in. She cut him with that on his face.

My son was excluded for that for 5 days.”

Suggestions to help prevent division:

- **Engage and develop local leadership:** in more isolated communities, there are local leaders and local institutions that can help bridge and foster cohesion.
- **Listening and dialogue:** Encourage people to express opinions to help build understanding and accountability.
- **Tackle discrimination:** Take seriously the difficult experiences of minority communities who experience racism from people and services.

“We are trying to adapt and respect the English authorities but we do not receive any respect in return. They think that all the immigrants have bad intentions.”

“After the riots a meeting took place between police and the community. The interpreter was not translating properly. The police said that there is going to be more communication but nothing was done.”

Deep dive 3

Newcastle

Hosted by West End Refugee Service. June 2025.

Background

In August 2024, disorder was threatened twice in Newcastle. First, on the Wednesday evening in the West End of Newcastle, one of the most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in the city, which also experiences high levels of multiple-deprivation.

Second, in the city centre, on the following Saturday. But in both cases, despite the poverty and economic disadvantage, civil society got organised and prevented disorder and violence from breaking out.

Insights into causes of the unrest

Participants identified similar socio-economic drivers for the risk of racial tension and disorder in Newcastle as in Sunderland. They noted that despite the lack of rioting, there was a notable increase in violent racist incidents, anxiety and fear at this time.

“A lot of people, both from immigrant backgrounds and white British backgrounds are struggling... and no one’s listening.”

“Somewhere along the line, nationally, we have we have we’ve seen it coming but we’ve not been brave enough or strong enough to...provide a language and a story about our national commonality... I think the lack of doing that has been a problem for years and years and years and particularly since austerity... you knew that this was going to happen.”

Suggestions to help prevent division:

- **Investment:** particularly focused on areas of disadvantage, to break cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement, and help build opportunity.
- **Devolution and decision making:** Bring power and agency closer to communities.
- **Create a national narrative:** tell the story of communities coming together in unity and against division such as what happened in Newcastle and elsewhere, rather than the story of blame and division.

“There was also a discussion, however, about the protective factors that mitigated the scale of disorder seen elsewhere.”

“I think in places like Sunderland, infrastructure is less well supported. So those mechanisms that dispelled the riots here in Newcastle didn’t quite exist in those places.

I mean, years of underfunding.”

“I would say that the West Ends are a forgotten part of the city and it’s the people of the West End that made the difference, not politicians.”





The evidence for change

What do academics say about community cohesion?

In recent decades, the question of how complex modern societies can maintain and promote community cohesion has become increasingly important in academic research. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists and others have all developed sophisticated theoretical accounts of the preconditions of a sense of connection, socially-oriented behaviour and a broad sense of solidarity and belonging. Social scientists have also put many of these theories to the test, either by mapping and observing real societies over time or by conducting experiments, either in the lab or in the community at large.

Here we outline the major developments in scholarship in this field, in the hope that it provides a way of thinking about the pressing challenges that are ahead here in the UK.

Of all the prominent accounts of this question, none has captured more attention than social capital theory. Famously popularized by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, it suggests that social relationships are vital as they facilitate trust, cooperation and collective action without which it is impossible for either individuals or society at large to thrive (Putnam, 2001). The essential idea is that societies which are rich in social relationships prosper in other ways. I will likely lead a safer, more prosperous and more fulfilling life when I am in regular contact with others, than if I live in a society characterized by loneliness, distrust and isolation.

Scholars argue, of course, about how we can best grow this social capital given its apparent importance. Early criticisms of Putnam suggested that he prioritized so-called "bonding" relationships, where people connect with those who are most like themselves, rather than "bridging" relationships, where people meet and form connections with those from different backgrounds, ethnicities, religions and social classes (Claridge, 2018). The sources of social capital are widely expected to differ depending on whether it is bridging or bonding that is being

developed. Research on bridging relationships, has in particular focused on the role played by shared community spaces, like local pubs, parks and community centres -- commonly referred to as "social infrastructure" -- where people might meet and mingle across social difference. Much scholarship has also focused on the ways in which social capital can erode. High levels of economic inequality are seen, for instance, to drive a wedge between different socioeconomic groups (Xu, Marandola, 2023). At the same time, social polarization, perhaps prompted by unregulated social media, is also seen to disconnect groups, fraying the bonds which might otherwise keep people of different backgrounds in shared social situations (Hertz, 2001).

In response to these anxieties, scholars have spent significant time exploring ways to maintain bridging connections in difficult times. Some have developed the idea of "contact theory", which purports to show that direct intergroup interactions can reduce prejudice, improve relationships between communities, and foster mutual understanding. Certain conditions have to be met, however, to achieve this beneficial outcome, such as maintaining clear norms of equal treatment and attitudes between members of different groups, enabling ongoing cooperation rather than competition, finding active support from well-respected external authorities and working towards shared goals (Allport, 1954).

Contact theory has been seen to be helpful even in some of the most difficult of social tensions. In one study in India, adolescent boys from Hindu and Muslim communities were brought together in camps for several weeks (Linos, Macours, Rey-Biel, 2025). These camps were found to significantly reduce prejudice and increase the willingness to interact across communities. Remarkably, these connections lasted long after the initial period and appear also to have increased people's subjective happiness. Another pressing example of contact theory was

the move to mixed schooling in the formerly sectarian communities in Glasgow and Northern Ireland. This intervention was grounded in the needs of a place, its specific challenge and the need for an ordinary, everyday way to diffuse the longstanding anger between two religious groups.

Crucially, as is evident from the work of bodies like Citizens UK, contact theory also speaks to the work of thousands of community-led charities across the country. As explained by community leaders in Liverpool, they aim to “bring people together to show our commonality”, by “ensuring that the voices of all communities are heard, valued and empowered to drive lasting change”.

Citizens UK’s work in local communities brings us to a further central idea in academic research around community cohesion: the notion that the experiences of everyday life matter more than anything on a larger or more abstract scale.

In the early 1970s, the American sociologist, Mark Granovetter, developed the theory of “weak ties”. It suggested that the very ordinary and often overlooked interactions we have on an everyday basis -- such as with neighbours or colleagues or people we occasionally pass on the street – often matter more, or at least as much, as our most intimate or treasured relationships, such as with family and close friends (Granovetter, 1973). Granovetter set out to show that the people with whom we have these “weak ties” influence the economic opportunities that come our way, shape our leisure time and our sense of fulfilment and may also determine how much a sense of belonging we feel in our communities too. Later research has added to this, showing that while the quantity of these interactions matters, the *quality* of everyday weak ties is even more important in reducing prejudice and division (Lowe, 2025).

In more recent years, the political philosopher, Danielle Allen, has deepened this thinking further. In seminal work on what is required to keep democratic societies free and stable, Allen has insisted that we need to be more ambitious

in our approach to social cohesion. Seeking mere coexistence or tolerance across difference is not enough to maintain the kinds of mutual sacrifices that any democratic society requires, she argues (Allen, 2004). Instead, we need to build mutual respect, even friendship, between citizens of radically different backgrounds. This can only be achieved, she contends, by granting far more power and agency to ordinary citizens, empowering them to forge new relationships across ethnic and social divides. The top-down bureaucratic structures of many modern societies render citizens passive and divided. Power-sharing is the precondition for people learning how to work together effectively, and to disagree well when they cannot.

UCL Policy Lab’s own Marc Stears has also contributed to this academic field. In his book *Out of the Ordinary*, Stears argues that politicians and policymakers display a tendency to overlook the everyday and prioritize the grandiose or the spectacular, hoping to discover a one-shot solution to the challenge of building social capital (Stears, 2021). Stears draws instead on a host of scholars -- including the psychologist Adam Phillips, the sociologist Andrew Abbott and the literary critic Marilynne Robinson -- to suggest that it is the overlooked, so-called “unforbidden” elements of everyday life that do the most to provide the tenor of social relations. Policymakers are thus urged to examine what can be done to create genuinely warm, bridging interactions in resolutely ordinary settings -- on the bus, at the school gate, at the park, in the launderette – rather than to look for special occasions or national statements of value or principle.

The need to intervene at the ground level is also reflected in the empirical analysis of real-world case studies. Northern Ireland’s Shared Education Programme is a powerful example, helping bridge religious divides by embedding intergroup contact into schools (Reimer et al. 2022). In rigorous research, this initiative was found to durably improve outgroup attitudes and increase trust and empathy. The main reason behind its success: that it “was built into everyday life”, enabling prolonged reciprocal

contact between Protestant and Catholic students.

The role of ordinary relationships in building cohesion goes beyond religious and cultural divides and might work in digital spaces as well as physical ones. A recent study by the Behavioural Insights Team, the RSA, Meta and Neighbourly Lab, based on Facebook data, found that cross-class friendships online enhanced upward mobility and mutual trust between socioeconomic groups (Harris, et al., 2025). Notably, the study identified everyday settings – like workplaces and hobby groups – as the most effective environments for fostering these cross-class friendships.

This idea – that cohesion emerges through connections forged in everyday life – is further reinforced by research on social infrastructure. As mentioned above, maintaining strong and resilient social infrastructure is widely regarded as one of the most impactful interventions to drive community cohesion. Social infrastructure has been found to facilitate regular interactions between diverse community members, fostering meaningful relationships of trust and reciprocity between groups who might not otherwise interact (Klinenberg, 2018).

A study on multi-faith football clubs in Iraq found that players from different religious backgrounds became significantly less prejudiced after participating in shared teams (Mousa, 2020). In the UK, football clubs have also been shown to foster these kinds of everyday relationships by creating powerful bridging narratives around local identity. Around 70% of fans who attend live matches reported feeling a stronger connection with someone who supports the same club (Puddle, 2024).

Whether it is a pub, a park, or a community centre, research also shows that the impact of social infrastructure depends on *how* it has been developed. Local input, leadership, and agency significantly enhance the impact of social infrastructure (Heksteth, 2023). When communities are involved in shaping these spaces, they are more likely to use them in ways

that build new bonds across social, ethnic, and class divides. In sum, the literature indicates that cohesion strategies must go beyond top-down approaches. Instead, they must partner with and empower those already working on the ground to reinforce everyday ties.

Ultimately, the inherent everydayness of the determinants of community cohesion means that it can never be a fixed condition. It is rather an emergent feature that needs to be continually nurtured and sustained by ordinary citizens. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity: while cohesion can worsen, there is never a point of no return when it can no longer be recovered. By investing in everyday ties and empowering local community leaders, policymakers and civil society leaders can always mend and strengthen community cohesion.

Respecting and valuing home-grown local organisations and networks has the power to address the challenges of how we properly scale our response to community tension and isolation. By placing ourselves on the side of those who are trusted and respected, we see the capacity to build on what works within communities, people who are working to get by and get along.

As we move forward, we will work to understand this more deeply and develop a tangible and cutting-edge set of indicators – the Basket of Community Cohesion Indicators – which will help build better connections. With that, we will provide a clear picture of the steps that the government, civil society, and communities can take as we work to care for the places, we call home.

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Policy Lab

About the Policy Lab

In the coming months, we'll be building on these themes together. Crucially, this work requires genuine collaboration across organisations and communities. If you have a question, idea, or comment, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

We look forward to building This Place Matters together.

The UCL Policy Lab brings together ideas, individuals, and institutions in a collaborative method to understand and tackle the challenges facing communities in the UK and around the world. With diverse networks in politics, research, and communities, the Policy Lab facilitates dialogue between those addressing complex societal challenges.

If you have an idea or a challenge you're seeking to explore, get in touch with the team at policylab@ucl.ac.uk

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