

November 2020

Local Government Association

Covid-19 Public Opinion Research

Final Report

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01 Introduction

Background

- The Local Government Association (LGA) is supporting local authorities in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- This includes policy development to support local authorities as they start to move from the 'response' phase of the pandemic to start to consider recovery.
- To inform this work, the LGA commissioned BritainThinks to conduct qualitative research to understand public opinion and behaviour and the extent to which this has changed as a result of the pandemic.



The research has two core objectives:



1. Understand the extent to which public attitudes and behaviours have changed as a result of Covid-19.

- Understand public views of key themes and identify the extent to which these represent a change in attitudes, priorities and motivations as a result of Covid-19.
- Understand the extent to which behaviours have changed as a result of any potential shifts in attitudes.
- Understand how motivations, behaviours and attitudes may change in the future.

2. Understand how the public defines 'local' following the experience of Covid-19.

- Understand how people feel about their local areas and the extent to which they associate them with feelings of belonging following lockdown restrictions.
- Understand attitudes towards civic participation and collective responsibility, and motivations to act.
- Understand preferences for local decision-making and where responsibilities for protecting local interests lie.

We heard from 50 people living in six locations across England and Wales

1-week long pre-task completed online or on paper

- This stage of the research explored participants' initial views of their local area, experiences of the pandemic, priorities for change and views on civic participation.
- Fieldwork was conducted between the 2nd and 9th of October 2020.

2 hour follow-up focus group or 1 hour telephone interview

- This stage explored views and behaviours reported in the pre-task in greater detail and probed to understand participants' considered views on civic participation.
- Fieldwork was conducted between the 26th October and 5th of November 2020*.



Key findings

- 1.** Perceptions of local areas and feelings of belonging are driven by long-standing factors. For most, these remain unchanged by the pandemic which has instead typically reinforced existing views.
- 2.** The behaviours that have most universally changed as a result of the pandemic are those directly connected to Government restrictions. A strong desire to 'get back to normal' mean that many do not want these behaviours to 'stick' in the future and the idea of the pandemic as an opportunity to do things differently is therefore not intuitive.
- 3.** Beyond this, behaviour change in the local area – in relation to leisure time, shopping, travel and civic participation – is highly varied, with many feeling life hasn't changed much at all. Those who have seen more change are more open to sticking with them in the future, particularly where they are motivated to do so.
- 4.** Many feel engaging in civic participation is out of reach because a lack of knowledge or lack of trust that it will effect genuine change. There is interest in hearing more, particularly in relation to how citizens can a) have a say in consultations, and b) participate online to overcome some of the barriers to getting involved.

02 Perceptions of locality

“I’ve always loved where I live. I don’t think the virus has changed that, I feel no more positive than before.”

(With children aged 11 – 18, Rural)

The perceived 'best' things about local areas focus on long-standing factors that existed before the pandemic

Best things about local areas



The people

This was frequently cited by participants and usually related to having family based in their local area. For a small number, local community groups such as churches were also important.



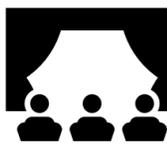
Green & natural spaces

Local parks and woodlands, countryside, coastal areas, and other areas of natural beauty were very commonly raised as positives.



Convenience of local amenities

Some pointed to the convenience of local amenities as a key positive, for example, the distance to shops, pubs, and schools.



Diversity and vibrancy

A minority cited ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as easy access to vibrant entertainment, such as eateries, theatres, and nightlife.

*"My family are all close by and everything else is close by, with access to the airport, train and coach station, plus an untouched countryside."
(With children under 11, Rural)*



A photo from a participant showing local walks and natural spaces as the best thing in their area.

The areas for improvement highlighted also tended to focus on long-standing issues in the area

Worst things about local area



Anti-social behaviour and crime

This was a key issue across the sample, notably including the prevalence of illegal drugs, disturbance at night, gangs of youths, and littering



Traffic and potholes

Many participants complained about local congestion and the pollution generated by it, as well as issues with road maintenance and potholes.



Sense of decline

A significant minority of participants reported a perceived negative decline in their local area over time, for example, changing town centres or gentrification.



Lack of community feel

A small minority actively complained about the lack of community, feeling that people in their local area did not mix.

“Hard drug use and crime associated with it, transport issues with the M65. Groups of youths abusing people and vandalising equipment and the police do nothing.”
(With children under 11, Rural)

“The gentrification... is reducing the vibrancy of the area and the character I grew up knowing.”
(18-39 with no children, Urban)



A participant demonstrates empty shops as the worst thing in their local area

Participants' sense of belonging to their local areas connected to detailed knowledge of the area or proximity to friends and family

- Those who feel they belong to their local area typically do so because:
 - They have lived in the area for a very long time or grown up there.
 - Their friends and family are nearby.
- Others who are relatively new to an area, or feel like they don't know many people don't feel a strong sense of belonging.
 - For some, even living in an area for a long length of time has not translated to a sense of belonging.
- Outside of being familiar with the area or having a network of friends and family nearby, there was little sense of belonging.
 - Very few participants mentioned civic or community participation as an important factor for their sense of belonging and, for those that did, this was often tied to having young children involved in local activities.

"I have lots of friends and family living (here) which makes me feel very settled and gives me a huge sense of belonging"
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

"In terms of a sense of community, I don't feel any attachment, but in terms of my personal history, it's where I grew up, so I feel tethered in that regard."
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

"I felt a strong sense of belonging when my children were young. Taking them to different clubs meant I was more heavily involved in community activities."
(With children 11-18, Urban)

Despite an initial increase in community spirit during the first national lockdown, participants' feelings towards their local areas appear to have remained largely unchanged

- While there is widespread appreciation for the additional community spirit generated by the pandemic, this has not translated substantively into a greater sense of belonging.
 - Many participants reported a continued feeling of being more familiar with their neighbours as a result of the pandemic, but none of these were felt to have developed into closer relationships or a sense of greater belonging.
- Those who were positive about their local area prior to the pandemic have remained positive.
- Similarly, those who felt more negatively about their local areas have tended not to change their perceptions.
 - For these participants, the long-standing issues with their local areas have continued and have not been reduced by an increase in community spirit.

“(I know) I’ve got good neighbors now. If anything needs to be done, they’ll ask. I felt this way before the pandemic, (it’s) stayed the same really.”
(With children under 11, Rural)

“There’s more loneliness; more litter from facemasks; (still) a lack of decent local shops; lots of pollution from traffic... people are just busy with own lives.”
(With children 11-18, Urban)

03 Attitudinal or behaviour change due to Covid-19

The pandemic has impacted all. However, the changes experienced have been far from universal

- Some participants reported experiencing big changes to the way they live, work and travel.
 - Significant changes include the adjustment to working from home and the implications of that (e.g. no longer commuting, leading to having more free-time before and after work).
 - Others with children faced significant adjustments when homeschooling in the initial national lockdown.
- Others described experiencing relatively little change to their lives as a result of the pandemic, except for reduced social contact with family and friends.
 - These were typically participants who have continued to work out of the home (e.g. electricians, nurses) or older people who are retired.

“Before lockdown I have never worked from home before... getting used to this took some doing, but now I find it second nature. I don't miss the daily commute, or the money spent on travelling expenses either”
(With children 11-18, Urban)

“Things haven't changed that much, work is work. Gardened during furlough, Other than that, not changed too much. I miss going to the pub to see my mates, and can't go out for meals as much, but quite happy at the moment.”
(With children under 11, Rural)

CASE STUDY | Range of change

Stephanie, Children aged 11 – 18, Rural

- Both Stephanie and her husband began working from home since the start of the pandemic.
- They have enjoyed spending greater time with each other and their teenage children, including playing games and cooking together.
- She felt the pandemic has given her greater time to consider the needs of other people, so has started donating to her local foodbank.

"It was so nice having my children home. Often they are always out and about, so it was nice to actually get to talk to them!"

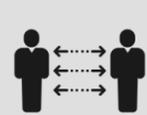
Max, Aged 18 - 39, Rural

- Max is a self-employed electrician who lives alone.
- He returned to work as soon as possible when restrictions were lifted and has not stopped since.
- After the initial 'Stay At Home' period he feels he has not experienced much change as a result of coronavirus, although he now has to wear a mask in his clients' houses.

"Life hasn't really changed for me. I'm still working six days a week trying to do as much as I can to make sure I have enough."

While some behavioural changes as a result of the pandemic have been more wide-reaching, others have varied across our sample

Personal changes experienced by all



Restrictions on social contact: being unable to freely socialise with friends and family was the most salient change for many. All participants, particularly those who lived alone, were finding this difficult to adapt to.



Hygiene and mask wearing: Many reported difficulties adjusting to the mental load of having to remember to enact these behaviours.

Wider changes experienced by some, but not all, participants



Increased time: leading to spending more time with family; leisure activities (e.g. cooking and reading); exploring the local area.



Travel: behaviours have fluctuated over the course of the pandemic including: a reduction in travel and driving at the start of the pandemic and, more recently, a move away from public transport toward private transport.



Shopping: increase in online shopping; increase in shopping with local businesses; moving away from larger, busier supermarkets.



Community spirit: greater familiarity with neighbours; greater awareness of and contribution to local causes.

The behaviours that have changed the most are those that have been mandated by the Government and are specific to the pandemic; rather than those that people have been driven by people's own motivations or 'nudged' into due to the changing context of the pandemic.

Looking to the future, participants spontaneously voiced a desire to ‘return to normal’ – especially social contact with loved ones

- The top priority for all is being able to see friends and family and socialise in-person.
 - This is the thing that many really focus on when thinking about wanting to ‘return to normal’.
- Beyond socialising with friends and family, resuming leisure activities, events and travel were top priorities.
 - Examples include being able to go to sports matches, events and festivals.
- More widely, participants described wanting to stop feeling that they have a set of (changing) rules to understand and follow.
 - Including not having to remember additional hygiene practices and wearing face coverings.

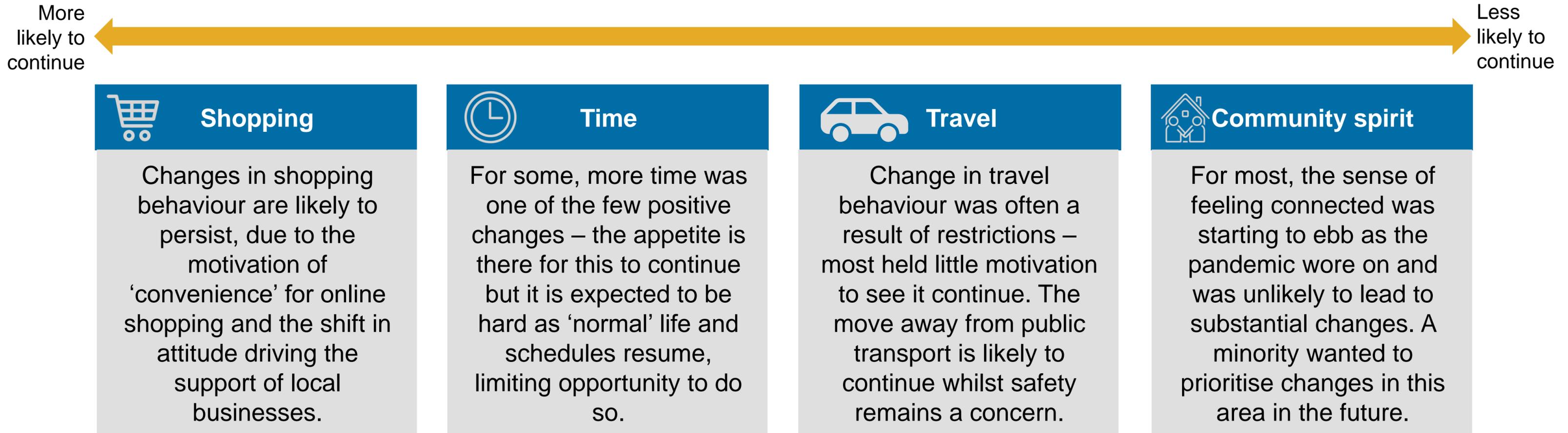
“I want coronavirus to go away so people can feel comfortable with life again. Normality would be happiness. I would see my grandkids again.”
(Vulnerable, Urban)

“I miss crowds at football matches and the atmosphere, and festivals.”
(Children under 11, Rural)

“A sense of freedom. Not having to go to Google every time you want to do something and see if you’re breaking rules...just feeling like I haven’t got a leash around my neck anymore.”
(18-39 with no children, Urban)

Inherent in this desire to return to normal – participants expect their behaviour to ‘return to normal’ too. As the most top of mind changed behaviours are those which have been ‘forced’ on them and are specific to the pandemic.

Beyond initial priorities for returning to 'normal', some new behaviours are viewed as more positive and potentially likely to continue





Reported changes in shopping habits include a shift to online shopping and increased support for local businesses

- Participants reported several changes to shopping habits:
 - **Increased use of online shopping:** driven by the closure of non-essential retail or fear of going into supermarkets. Some report increases in their spending too.
 - **Avoidance of busier supermarkets:** for some, larger supermarkets represented a safety concern due to the behaviour of others.
 - **Increased support for local businesses:** some feel an obligation to support them through the challenges of the pandemic. Others want to support them, but face financial barriers in doing so.

*"I shop less, I don't like being in busy shops, I hate the whole environment now."
(Vulnerable, Rural)*

*"I definitely actively try to support more local businesses, they've been suffering quite a bit, there's an obligation to help them but it's not always the cheapest way, and everyone is suffering on the money front at the moment..."
(18-39 with no children, Rural)*

Looking ahead, participants reported motivation to continue these shifts in their behaviour into the longer term.

- Switching to online shopping is felt to have offered additional convenience and something that most participants wish to continue in the future. While the perceived need to support local businesses is likely to remain in the immediate future, this may decline as lockdown restrictions become a more distant memory.

CASE STUDY | Shopping habits

Jane, Vulnerable Participant, Urban

- Jane has underlying health conditions so has been shielding.
- Her daughter organised a regular food delivery slot from Asda. Jane appreciates the convenience of the food delivery, however, is fairly excited to return to the supermarket herself in the future.
- For her, this is part of being 'tied up' at the moment and she is looking forward to enjoying more freedom in the future.

“Asda bring my shopping in a van!.. But I think I will go back, that’s one of the pleasures of life when you’re older – you don’t have to work and can just plod along.”

Michael, Aged 18 - 39, Rural

- Michael had noticed the impact of the pandemic on his local high street – many closed down in March and did not reopen.
- Those that did, he felt a motivation to spend his money there and try to actively support them, e.g. buying comics and coffees.
- However, he claims to find this more difficult to do in the long-term as more businesses seem to be closing.

“You feel obliged to help out the local shops, more than before, you feel more obliged to spend your money with them. I have tried, but most of them are shut now”.



Many have enjoyed greater time to themselves during the pandemic, especially when lockdown restrictions have been greater

- Especially at the height of lockdown, many felt they had more time. This often led to changes in behaviour, including:
 - **Increased ‘family time’:** especially for parents of teenage children, spending time together as a family was unusual and appreciated.
 - **Increased leisure activities:** for example, cooking and reading, that many felt they typically did not have time to do.
 - **Exploring the local area:** Some travelled to new parks and outdoor spaces in the local area as a result of having more time.

“It’s a question of time: I don’t have the time now I’ve gone back to work. For sure I’d like to, I think everyone once they had that time, (during lockdown) they made the most of it, went out, explored the entire area etc.”
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

Looking to the future, while there is the motivation for these behaviours to continue, as ‘normal’ life resumes it will be harder to have the time available to do so.

- While participants described wanting to make an effort for these changes to stay in the longer-term, most felt this would be unlikely in reality. Some reported seeing their capability for this already reduced when restrictions lifted over the summer months (e.g. teenage children going back out with their friends, leading to reduced family time as a result).

CASE STUDY | Greater time

Joanne, Children aged 11 – 18, Rural

- Before coronavirus, Joanne always felt as if she was ‘running around’ attending appointments for herself and her children, and hosting gatherings at her house.
- She has appreciated the calm lockdown gave her – she has started exercising and home cooking.
- She hopes that this will continue, however, is doubtful that it will, as when restrictions lift her husband will want to resume their busy social life again.

“I’ve lost weight and just feel better for it!.. But I know [my husband] as soon as we can have people round again for a cuppa and life starts again, it will all go away.”

Peter, Aged 11 - 39, Rural

- Peter was continuing to work out of home throughout the pandemic, however, he found he had more time at the weekend due to typical leisure activities (e.g. the cinema) being closed.
- Him and his friends used this time to travel to nearby areas, e.g. the Lake District and go on long hikes. Although the weather is getting colder, he feels they will try to continue this (however, they are going less frequently than before).

“I was too busy working to see much of a difference, but me and my mates started going on these really long walks – that was really nice.”



Travel behaviours changed drastically during the initial national lockdown. However, this has already proven to be short-lived

- During the initial lockdown, many reported vastly reducing the amount they travelled, both by car and by public transport.
 - As this was the result of travel restrictions, many noticed a similar change in others' behaviours and a positive impact on local environments connected to this shift.
- As restrictions lifted many resumed previous travel behaviours.
 - Many reported that by the summer months, they felt there were a similar amount of cars on the roads to before the pandemic.
- More recently, some participants have been choosing to drive instead of using public transport (in situations when they would have used public transport previously).
 - This change is driven by a sense that public transport is unclean and an environment where they feel susceptible to the virus.

“There were no cars on my road, that’s great. And we all saw international news; like Venice you could see through the water. I think the world benefitted from all that, but as soon as things went back to normal, kids to school, back to work, everything went back to normal.”
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

The reduction in driving ebbed as soon as soon as the capability to travel returned. By contrast, avoidance of public transport is likely to persist at least as long as safety concerns remain.

CASE STUDY | Travel behaviours

Sally, Aged 40+, Urban

- Sally lives in a city and noticed the decline in cars during lockdown. During this time her local area made efforts to pedestrianise the roads.
- When restrictions lifted, she began to travel again by car in a similar way to pre-pandemic. The reason she had not been driving is because she was following the Government's 'Stay At Home' mandate.
- This time she became frustrated at the changes to the roads – noting it made the traffic much worse.

“It just causes issues! People only cycle when it’s good weather – now the traffic is much worse as a result!”

Cassandra, Aged 18 – 39, Urban

- Cassandra started working from home in March so has no longer been commuting on public transport.
- Her Mother is continuing to work outside of the home and would typically commute on public transport. However, due to safety concerns Cassandra has started driving her Mother to and from work.
- During this time she has noticed a greater number of cars on the road.

“I’ve stopped driving for myself as I don’t need to, but I do drive Mum to work so she doesn’t have to get the bus...It’s much busier now, compared to March!”



Increased community spirit and familiarity with neighbours was experienced by many in the initial lockdown

- Many reported a greater familiarity with their neighbours as a result of the pandemic borne out of a sense that ‘we’re all in this together’,
 - This was best epitomised by clapping for carers and seeing neighbours when completing daily exercise.
- However, this has not translated into developing meaningful relationships. More recently, some have felt more distant from neighbours as a result of social distancing and anti-social behaviour.
 - A common theme was feeling resentment toward other people who participants perceived as flouting the rules on social distancing.
 - For others, social distancing has led to a sense of people avoiding each other when out and about.

“Things haven’t changed that much, things are back to normal, apart from meeting and greeting people. I notice a bit more things around me, notice neighbors a bit more.”
(With children under 11, Rural)

“Social distancing means fewer people stop and chat. Wearing masks now, I don’t recognize people. Now I hope I don’t meet someone I know as won’t be able to talk to them properly.”
(With children 11-18, Urban)

For many this change was shallow and had not translated into behaviour change or driven a fundamental change in attitude:

- Most held little motivation to take action in developing more meaningful relationships with neighbours. In particular, as the pandemic has continued the sense that ‘we are all in this together’ has weakened.



For a minority, a greater awareness of the needs of other people had prompted donations to local organisations

- There was widespread awareness of the increased needs of other people as a result of the pandemic in the sample.
 - This was often driven by narratives in the national media and anecdotal evidence of job losses.
- For a minority, this has changed behaviour and led to donating at local organisations, e.g. food banks and homeless shelters.
- That said, none in our sample had volunteered their time, despite greater awareness of need.

*“The lockdown showed lots of people out there (the) poverty, (people needing) 2 or 3 meals a day and people who’ve lost jobs - I just wanted to give something back and help these families.”
(With children 11-18, Urban)*

Looking forward, those that had started donating had the motivation to continue due to the need of other people remaining:

- In addition to the driving need remaining, many felt the opportunity to enact the behaviour would also persist. They reported it had required little time or effort to donate and therefore doing so could continue.

CASE STUDY | Community Spirit

Gareth, Vulnerable Participant, Rural

- Gareth lives alone and has found the experience of the pandemic incredibly isolating.
- In part, this is because he cannot see his grandchildren.
- In addition, it is because he feels people are more distant when he's out in town and walking his dog. He feels no one stops to talk to him anymore and finds the experience of wearing a mask uncomfortable.

"You can't communicate with anyone, everyone steps away from you in the street, it's isolated everyone. It's destroying the community."

Katie, 18 – 39 no children, Urban

- In March and April Katie noticed an increase in community spirit in her area: offering support to people who were shielding; people greeting each other in the streets; and clapping for carers.
- However, she felt this had not translated into long-lasting change, as she no longer sees this happening in her area. In addition, she feels there is an increase in isolation as the months get colder.

"There was a definite increase in people helping each other out – so many posters with phone numbers, everyone was offering up their time."

04 Opportunities for change going forward

“It probably has created opportunities and it hasn’t. It’s probably created more opportunities but then in the same breath it’s taken away opportunities as well.”

(18-39 with no children, Urban)

Participants found it difficult to see positive opportunities for change at the local level as a result of the pandemic

- As above, when looking to the future, participants focused on wanting to resume social contact with loved ones and ‘return to normal’.
- As a result, it was difficult for participants to spontaneously point to positive opportunities for change as a result of Covid-19.
 - Instead, the desire to return ‘to normal’ was perceived as the key priority, rather than looking for wider opportunities.
 - In the latter groups, this perception was reinforced by news of a second lockdown in England and the introduction of the ‘firebreak’ in Wales.
- For some participants, change at the ‘local’ level was also difficult to imagine.
 - The pandemic is perceived to have had a national impact, so any opportunities for change can seem more relevant at that level, rather than being specific to local areas.

“Just resuming my life as it was before, but not taking it for granted.”
(40+ with no children, Urban)

“To recover, it needs to come from the government, it’s not going to come locally. It’s all well and good saying key workers [but] these zero hour contracts should not be allowed for a start, and that’s a national problem.”
(Vulnerable, Rural)

Spontaneously, key things participants want to improve about their local area are often unrelated to the coronavirus pandemic

- Priorities for change typically focus on the long-standing issues participants identify in their local area, which they typically see as having remained unchanged by the pandemic:

Traffic and potholes

“[There’s] lots of pollution, traffic; there was a child killed by ‘boy racers’ [even] during lockdown”
(With children 11-18, Urban)

Anti-social behaviour

“I’ve had some bother with [youths] coming onto my property – acting stupid. I’m 65, not in fantastic health so I wasn’t going to chase them...”
(Vulnerable, Urban)

A sense of decline

“(We) really need to improve maintenance of buildings (and the) town centers – it’s become run down, it’s like the council don’t care anymore”
(40+ with no children, Rural)

Lack of community feel

“There isn’t as much of a community as there should be. The posh people in the area tend to mix with people outside the area. The younger upwardly mobile population are interested but don’t really participate. Then you have the people who live in the council flats...”
(18-39 with no children, Urban)

When prompted, improving the local economy often stands out as being important

- There was wide recognition of the challenge local businesses are facing, so many agreed this was an area for change.
 - For some, it chimed with existing areas for improvement in their local areas (for example, a sense that the town centre is in decline; or independent, local businesses are losing out to larger chains as a result of gentrification).
- Many felt that a thriving local economy was important for their area.
 - For example, for coastal areas to continue to attract tourists, and for others to make the area an appealing place to live.
- In addition, it is also an area where participants felt empowered to make a (small) difference themselves.
 - They often felt that even a small amount of support or custom would be valued by small businesses.

“(To) make a difference to the local area and myself, the most important thing is to support local businesses, because (we need) the money to stay in the local area.”

(Vulnerable, Rural)

“The local store saved us at the beginning and we wouldn’t have had any food if we hadn’t have had the local stores [...] we’re making sure now that we carry on supporting them.”

(With children 11-18, Urban)

The environment and climate change tended to feel too big of an issue for either individuals or local areas to have an impact

- Although agreeing it was an important issue, most struggled to see how the pandemic created an opportunity to improve the environment.
 - The reduction in driving during the first national lockdown in particular was not felt to be feasible to continue in the long-term.
- The perceived scale of the issue also made participants sceptical about their ability to effect meaningful change.
 - While a considerable number felt they had a responsibility to make environmentally-conscious decisions, they felt the impact they could have would be small.
 - Similarly, there was a sense that change in this area should be led at a national rather than local level to be meaningful.

“It’s not an opportunity for change (for the environment), that existed purely as a result of lockdown, which is not a realistic situation to maintain.”

(18-39 with no children, Rural)

“The government play a big part (in taking advantage of these opportunities). Our hands are basically tied, We’ve got to just listen to what they’re saying”.

(With children 11-18, Urban)

05 Civic participation as a means of securing change

“I would love to see the town centre be brought back to how it was and improved further, it could be a lovely little market town. However, when you don’t want to spend your whole life fighting and trying to make change, and you just want to enjoy life, there’s pretty much nothing you can do about it.”

(With children aged 11 – 18, Rural)

Spontaneously, most participants felt they have relatively limited scope to make change in their local area

- Most are unsure about what civic participation is or how to create change in their local areas themselves.
- Therefore, most have not participated in any change locally, beyond small, individual actions. These included:
 - Choosing to shop locally where possible.
 - Being a 'good neighbour', e.g. being polite and not participating in anti-social behaviour.
 - Litter picking.
- A small minority had engaged with more formal routes to participation, e.g. signing petitions.
 - This was often in response to perceived negative changes being introduced in their local area.

"Personally, keep doing what I'm doing. Keep buying locally and support small businesses. I do already do this as I have lived here all my life."
(40+ with no children, Urban)

"Everyone here tries to live life the right way you can, that's all you can do."
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

"If it's something you feel strongly about, the only way you can do it is by doing a petition. Seen lots of people around here that if they want something done, they write to the council or even the government. That's the best way to do it."
(With children 11-18, Urban)

For those who have already participated in their local area, this activity was often driven by personal motivations

Having children

- Joining children's activities was one of the most common ways of participating mentioned:
 - Those with small children in particular mentioned volunteering with groups like their children's sports clubs, or Cubs and Scouts.
 - Some help with their children's schools, for example by serving as school governors or helping with the PTA.

Personal interests

- For others, personal connections were a driver to participate:
 - Meeting new people and getting to know neighbours in local community groups.
 - Some volunteer with animal charities due to their love of animals.
 - One participant is looking to volunteer at the hospice where their mother was cared for.

Reacting to intended change

- Some had been driven to participate more formally with the council. This was often a reaction to intended change which would impact them, e.g. planning meetings, changes to roads.

"We have been to meetings about people who want to build on the field at the back of us. I needed to say I don't want the tall houses at the back of mine!"

(Vulnerable, Urban)

Lack of information and time were the most common reasons cited as preventing participation

- The lack of information about *how* to participate was the most common barrier; this was often underpinned by the assumption that they would be unable to enact change alone.
- Others highlighted a perceived lack of time to get involved.
 - It was often assumed that participation would require either a regular commitment or a substantial effort.
 - Some with children and busy lives already felt stretched with their time and felt unable to take on new responsibilities.
 - Whereas others who were self-employed or on zero-hours contracts felt that in order to feel financially secure, their time was better spent dedicated to work.

“The will is there, it’s knowing what actually needs to be done, what can be done to contribute to it.”
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

“I think we could all play our part, but it’s having the time do to it. Everyone has their own stressful world to live in, so as much as we say we would love to do our bit, it’s not always that easy.”
(Vulnerable, Urban)

Implication for encouraging participation: Highlighting the impact of change from individual contributions and demonstrating the range of ways to get involved will be important.

Older participants and those with physical impairments pointed to specific barriers preventing their participation

- Physical impairments (e.g. arthritis, knee problems) meant some felt unable to participate fully.
 - The underlying assumption was that participation would require physical activity, which would exclude them.
- Older participants in our sample felt that their time for participating in change had passed and they either lacked the energy to do so or wanted to enjoy their later years.
 - For some, this perception was reinforced by their view that they had been active in change when they were younger and it was now someone else's turn.

"I can't do a lot because of my gammy leg. Apart from picking litter up there's not much I can do. My leg won't allow me to walk miles. I can't go that far. I don't drive."

(Vulnerable, Rural)

"I think at my age now, I don't want to get involved so much as I used to do. I used to be into Guiding and my husband used to do pantomimes. But the age we are now, we're not capable of doing the things we used to do."

(Vulnerable, Urban)

Implication for encouraging participation: Reinforcing the variety of ways to participate (including digitally) is important to make participation feel accessible to all.

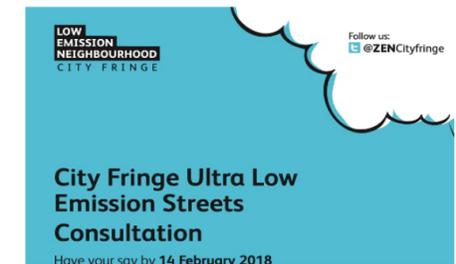
We shared a presentation with participants introducing high-level information on civic participation:

- The presentation covered several key areas about the role of councils, councillors, and consultations:
 - What are councils for?
 - Who are the local councillors?
 - How do councillors represent me?
 - How can I get involved?
- Three case studies were used to highlight how these things can work in practice:
 - Low Traffic Neighbourhoods in Hackney
 - Saving Darlington Library
 - Friends of Alexandra Park, Manchester

Local area focus group

How can I get involved?

- Sometimes councils need to know more about what the residents, local businesses and other organisations think about issues that affect them.
- In these cases they may run a **consultation**:
 - A consultation is any opportunity to give residents a voice before decisions are made or priorities are set.
 - These can include residents' surveys, telephone surveys, face-to-face conversations or community meetings.
 - Consultations may be run about many things, but are often done when the council wants to hear views about matters which may affect you, e.g. school closures; cycle lanes; and regenerating particular areas
- Consultations can help to improve decision making and increase participation in creating change in the local area.



A consultation document prepared by Hackney Council on how to improve walking and cycling in the local area.

Local area focus group

CASE STUDY | Saving Darlington Library

- In 2016 Darlington Borough Council responded to funding cuts from the UK Government by voting to close the town library and move it to the leisure centre.
- The community came together in person and on social media to fight the decision, by protesting and contacting their local councillors; joining forces with local organisations, e.g. the local newspaper; creating a petition; and forming their own organisation 'Friends of Darlington Library'.
- In 2018 the Council overturned their decision, and the library was to remain open. Since then Friends of Darlington Library and the local council have worked together to plan the future local library provision.

Darlington Library - Keep it at Crown Street

Public group · 1.6K members



On balance, participants responded positively to this information

- The information raised awareness of ways of participating and made achieving change feel like more of a possibility:
 - Community groups working with Local Authorities to maintain and improve services.
 - Being able to contact your local councillor to discuss issues.
 - Consultation processes that seek to hear from many individuals in a way that seemed non-time consuming.
- In particular, the case studies and consultation process helped to bring the process of change to life.

"I think it's good in principle, I've met up with local councillors, you can speak to them and talk about things like dog mess. I think they're very good, they give up their time to help."
(Vulnerable audience, Rural)

"Our local council are pretty good [...] I will now contact our councillor personally to see what we can do."
(With children 11-18, Urban)

"It sounds good, like something I would look into [...] It makes it sound like other towns are doing it, so it's possible to do. It plants a seed in your head to think: I could do that."
(Vulnerable, Urban)

While positive overall, several participants were more cynical about the extent to which civic participation leads to real change

- Cynicism was often borne out of negative experiences or attitudes toward Local Government:
 - **That it is acting in their best interests:** some question what their council tax contributions go towards, and that financial interests may supersede views of local communities.
 - **Unsuccessful attempts to influence change in the past:** for example, the construction of unwanted buildings can lead to the assumption that this is the ‘typical’ outcome.
 - **Low familiarity with their local councillors:** many had never met nor heard from their local councillors leading them to question the extent their voices were being represented.

“The theory of it is wonderful [...] but in my experience, if the council have made up their minds, then no matter how much campaigning goes on they take no notice [...] I was a councillor, about 30 years ago for about 5 years [...] I came off it, it was a waste of time. We spent more time thinking about buying a new handle for the kettle than important things.”

(40+ with no children, Rural)

“It’s not made me feel any different, because I feel it doesn’t matter how something is set up, money is the governing power over anything anyway.”

(Vulnerable, Rural)

Moving forwards, the majority called for more information and simple opportunities to be involved

- Many participants felt councils should do more to inform them about consultations and how they can get involved locally.
- In particular, the following areas stood out as priorities for consultation:
 - Issues relating to housing and affordable housing / new builds.
 - Changes to road layouts and pedestrianisation.
 - Closures that may impact local businesses, e.g. market closures.
 - Closures to other services, e.g. hospitals or libraries.
- Participating online was viewed as a simple and easy way to participate in change:
 - There is a desire for websites or other online tools where individuals can find out about ongoing consultations and issues in their area. One participant highlighted the existence of websites such as Nextdoor.co.uk, which are helpful for these purposes.
 - However, some highlighted the difficulties this could pose to elderly or disadvantaged individuals without online access.

"It's up to the council to make us aware of how we can affect decisions, if we're asked we're obliged to respond. If you're engaged, it's a lot more natural to engage back. I think the onus is on the council to engage with us a lot more."

(18-39 with no children, Rural)

"I think, if there was a website you could find out all the local issues that are going on. I don't know if it already exists, that's the whole problem. If I wanted to know what's going on, what the local council is doing or voting on, where do I get that information?"

(Vulnerable audience, Urban)

06 Implications

Recap: Key findings

- 1.** Perceptions of local areas and feelings of belonging are driven by long-standing factors. For most, these remain unchanged by the pandemic which has instead typically reinforced existing views.
- 2.** The behaviours that have most universally changed as a result of the pandemic are those directly connected to Government restrictions. A strong desire to 'get back to normal' mean that many do not want these behaviours to 'stick' in the future and the idea of the pandemic as an opportunity to do things differently is therefore not intuitive.
- 3.** Beyond this, behaviour change in the local area – in relation to leisure time, shopping, travel and civic participation – is highly varied, with many feeling life hasn't changed much at all. Those who have seen more change are more open to sticking with them in the future, particularly where they are motivated to do so.
- 4.** Many feel engaging in civic participation is out of reach because a lack of knowledge or lack of trust that it will effect genuine change. There is interest in hearing more, particularly in relation to how citizens can a) have a say in consultations, and b) participate online to overcome some of the barriers to getting involved.

Implications of these research findings for councils

1. Behaviour change has been uneven, with the only universal changes being highly time specific and driven by restrictions.

This means that not everyone feels this is a moment for change and the concept of recovery and the opportunity to build back better is not intuitive. The case for change needs to be made to the public and must be sensitive to their desire to 'get back to normal' (e.g. focusing on making normal better rather than on maintaining new behaviours post-Covid).

2. The local issues citizens tend to care most about are long-standing and can feel unconnected to Covid-19.

The local issues the public most engage with relate to issues like anti-social behaviour and traffic problems. For many, these don't feel connected to Covid-19, but rather are long-standing issues which they feel have been forgotten. However, many do report increased engagement in supporting the local economy, which they do link to Covid-19.

3. The biggest barriers to civic participation are a lack of knowledge, time and motivation – particularly when there's nothing to react against.

Councils need to communicate possible routes to participation, with easy access points (on and offline), and use case studies to demonstrate that even small time commitments can affect meaningful change. Motivational barriers may be further overcome by focusing on or demonstrating a connection between civic participation and the issues the public cares most about.

Britainthinks

Insight & Strategy

Thank you

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Appendix

Each location had a balanced sample of participants, to ensure representation of difference experiences

Table 1: Overall sample

Criteria	Quota	Number in sample
Demographics	Gender	Equal split between Male/Female (overall and in each location)
	SEG	Equal split between ABC1/C2DE (overall and in each location)
	Ethnicity	Including 7 BAME
Household composition	Younger (18 – 39), no children at home	10 (min. 1 per location)
	Have children aged <11 living at home	10 (min. 1 per location)
	Have children aged 11-18 living at home	10 (min. 1 per location)
	Older (aged 40+), no children at home	10 (min. 1 per location)
Working status	Working outside of home	11 (min. 1 per location)
	Working from home	11 (min. 1 per location)
	Self-employed	6 (min. 1 per location)
	Precarious work (e.g. 0 hours contract)	6 (min. 1 per location)
	1 unemployed	6 (min. 1 per location)
Council engagement	Experience of social care	6 (min. 1 per location)
	Lives in local authority housing	6 (min. 1 per location)
	Regularly uses public transport	9 (min. 1/2; rural/urban)
Shielding	Shielded during lockdown	6 (min. 1 per location)
Vulnerability	See Table 2	10 (min 1 per location)

Among the 50 participants we spoke to, we included a total of 10 participants who were potentially vulnerable and would have specific experiences of their local areas and the pandemic.

Table 2: Potentially vulnerable audiences

Criteria	Number of vulnerable audience participants for whom this applied
Physical or sensory disability	7
Mental health	5
Internet excluded	4
Over 75	3