

November 2020

Local Government Association

Covid-19 Public Opinion Research

Executive Summary

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Background and objectives

- The Local Government Association (LGA) is supporting local authorities in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 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.
- More specifically, the research had 2 core objectives:
 - Understand the extent to which public attitudes and behaviours have changed as a result of Covid-19
 - Understand how the public defines ‘local’ following the experiences of Covid-19, including any changes in attitude toward civic participation.

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*.



We used the following discussion flow for each phase:

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

- **Introduction:** to their local area and understanding their sense of belonging.
- **A day in the life:** now, 6 months ago and 1 year ago.
- **Highs and lows of the pandemic:** on a personal level and for their local area.
- **Understanding the key issues** in the local area and the extent to which importance has changed as a result of coronavirus.
- **Understanding the extent to which participants feel they can make a difference in their local area:** and what motivates participation.

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

- **Warm-up:** understanding the extent to which coronavirus has changed how they feel about their local area.
- **Exploring 'back to normal':** understanding what 'normal' looks like and if there are any positive changes as a result of coronavirus participants would like to 'keep'.
- **Identifying opportunities for change:** what areas are perceived most important to change and the extent to which participants agreed with areas for change identified by the LGA, e.g. the environment, supporting the local economy
- **Considered views on making change:** giving a short presentation showing how change is made in local areas and understanding how that changes participants' views.

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.**
 - Both the perceived 'best' and 'worst' things about local areas are factors and issues that existed pre-pandemic, for example: the people, potholes and anti-social behaviour.
 - Despite an increase in 'community spirit' experienced during lockdown participants feelings toward their area are largely unchanged: those who were positive remained so, likewise those who were negative remained so. Few had developed meaningful, closer relationships with neighbours or felt an increased sense of belonging as a result.
- 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.**
 - Reducing social contact, handwashing and wearing a face-covering were the behaviours that had changed most commonly. They are often perceived negatively, leading to a strong desire to 'return to normal'; inherent in this desire, participants expect (and want) to cease enacting those behaviours.
 - For most, 'returning to normal' – particularly social contact - is the key priority rather than looking for wider opportunities for change. The negative perception of Government restrictions also mean it is difficult for some to think of positive opportunities for change.

Key findings

- 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.**
 - Those who have continued working outside the home or who are retired feel they have experienced less change, compared to those who have transitioned to working from home and consequently stopped commuting.
 - Participants are motivated for change to persist where it has provided a benefit, e.g., the convenience of online shopping. That said, some are doubtful that they will be able to make changes stick in the future, e.g., unsure if they will have the opportunity to retain increased leisure time when a normal schedule resumes.

- 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.**
 - Lack of information about *how* to participate in change and a perceived lack of time to do so are the most common barriers to participation. For others, a lack of trust in Local Authorities means they are unsure what results their participation will yield and therefore are reluctant to participate.
 - There is a desire for information about how to participate in a non time-consuming way and what that participation may achieve.

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.

Thank you

For more information:

Cordelia Hay – chay@britainthinks.com

Lucy Morrell – lmorrell@britainthinks.com

BritainThinks
Somerset House
Strand
London
WC2R 1LA

Allie Jennings – ajennings@britainthinks.com

Rory Jackson – rjackson@britainthinks.com

Ezziddin Yonis – eyonis@britainthinks.com

britainthinks.com