

October 2020  
Britain's Choice:  
Common Ground and  
Division in 2020s Britain

# Chapter 11

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# Community Beyond Covid-19



More in  
Common

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# Chapter 11

## Community Beyond Covid-19

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**55 per cent** of people in Britain feel that our concern for each other has improved as a result of Covid-19

**58 per cent** of people reported an increased awareness of the living conditions of others

**78 per cent** of Britons feel that the pandemic has reminded us of our common humanity

**3 in 4** Britons believe that we live in a kind society

**63 per cent** feel they have the ability to change things around them – an increase of 15 percentage points since February

**2x** as many now say we are a society that looks after each other compared to before Covid-19

# Introduction

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The disruption to the lives of British people caused by the coronavirus pandemic is comparable only to the experience of war or a large-scale natural disaster. Its effects will be enduring and its memory carried through generations. Among its most striking effects is the way that it has brought questions about the strength of local community and the way we look after each other as a society to the front of people's minds.



**Prior to this, I had thought people were really becoming more selfish. I don't know but, just in general, people seemed to be out for themselves and not thinking of others and criticising others, being unkind. I'm talking about online, and things that you read in papers – not being welcoming to people who made their lives here from other places, things like that. I think this Covid thing has maybe turned us... I know it's a terrible thing to happen but at least it seems to have been turning the tide a little bit and people are being a bit more thoughtful.**

*Bea, Civic Pragmatist, 52, North East*



The Covid-19 pandemic presented a profound challenge to our society, as well as to Britain's health system and economy – in many ways, it was a test of national character. Could a country that has felt so divided in recent years come together in the face of a common threat, or would frustrations with the demands placed on each of us, from the trivial to the profound, leave society more splintered? Would we retreat into isolation from each other and to some form of tribalism, or would we reach out to help each other and especially those most in need?

As this chapter highlights, those questions are still being answered. Covid-19 showed two sides of British society, allowing us to glimpse two visions of Britain's future. There are reasons for hope: dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the crisis has not undermined a sense of community spirit. After years of frustration with politics and divisions, it seems as if people have begun to look past the failings of governments and systems, and glimpse something larger about becoming a better society.

This chapter highlights perceptions of community life in Britain. Because the first wave of research took place at the beginning of 2020, it provides insights into the impact of the pandemic on issues such as trust, community, and belonging before and after the onset of the coronavirus. In analysing this data, the chapter seeks to reconcile the competing stories that were told as the pandemic silenced streets, filled hospitals, and confined families to their homes – the stories of both heroes and hoarders. It looks at how different segments of the population experience belonging and connection in their local communities, how they see their own capacity to contribute to the community, and how Covid-19 has affected the ways that all of us see our local area. Finally, given the special role played by social media networks in connecting people to each other during the pandemic, it looks at our perception of how social media is affecting our lives and communities, along with whether it is a force for strengthening social bonds or deepening social divisions.

# 11.1 Heroes or hoarders? Two images of Britain

**‘The human response [to Covid-19] has been quite overwhelming. That real sense of community, that I think we had lost up until now... I just desperately hope that there’s elements of that we can hold on to.’**

*Kate, Disengaged Traditionalist, 49, North West*

In the weeks following the onset of Covid-19, Britain felt a surge in social solidarity as people were reminded that, at our best, we come together and support each other.<sup>1</sup> In focus group conversations, people spoke enthusiastically about mutual aid initiatives in their local communities – both people in segments with a strong sense of community engagement, and others from the Disengaged groups with the lowest feelings of being connected to others. Many wondered if society was changing before their eyes. Could the spirit of looking out for each other that people felt in their estate, street, or town lead to enduring connections with other people, in turn creating less isolated communities?

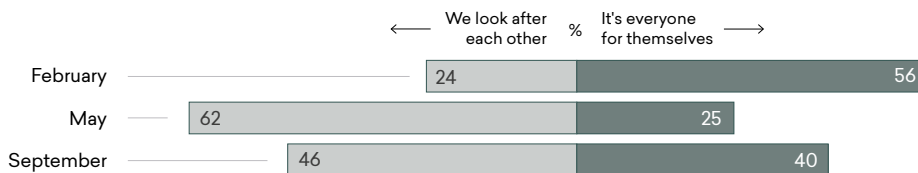
People felt a deep sense of gratitude for those who were working on the frontlines of the NHS and essential services. Almost everyone in the country felt that the pandemic had demonstrated the importance of the NHS and public services, and the deep sense of pride in the NHS as a national institution was demonstrated by the weekly ‘clap for carers’ at 8pm on Thursday evenings across the nation. Key workers put themselves at risk to protect us. From transport workers to doctors and nurses, many had become ill or even lost their lives because of exposure to the virus in their frontline work. More than half of us had been actively involved in thanking them for their life-saving work, almost twice the average among comparable countries.<sup>2</sup> In addition to recognising the heroism of the NHS and essential workers, millions of people went out of their way to go shopping for at-risk neighbours, donate money, volunteer their time to help those most in need, and support local businesses.

Figure 11.1.

## Social solidarity

Twice as many now feel that we look after each other

**Are we a society that cares for each other or not?**



Qu. When thinking about life in the UK in 2020, which do you agree with more?  
Data from February, May, and September 2020.  
Source: More in Common and Britain Talks Climate 2020.

After years of the divisive Brexit debate, many felt surprised by the positive experiences they had in their local communities. There was a remarkably rapid shift in perceptions of Britain as a more caring society. As Figure 11.1 shows, in February, Britons believed by a ratio of more than two to one that in our society 'it's everyone for themselves', rather than being a society where 'we look after each other'. However, by May these attitudes had flipped, with more than twice as many seeing British society as one where we look after each other and not just ourselves.

Shortly afterwards, a political story broke into the headlines that captured public attention and for months afterwards became a point of heated conversation in the focus groups we were conducting. The Prime Minister's most senior aide, Dominic Cummings, was reported to have broken the government's own rules during the lockdown. His role as architect of the Leave campaign for the Brexit referendum in 2016 ensured that many Remain campaign supporters were angered by the story, but these frustrations transcended the fault lines of the Brexit years. The story reawakened feelings already shared by two-thirds of people before the pandemic, that the system in the UK is rigged to serve the interests of the rich and influential rather than the interests of the majority (a view held by a majority of every segment except Backbone Conservatives and Established Liberals). This story seemed to shift the public mood, making people more questioning of public health guidance. The more negative tone of public conversation after this incident seemed to follow a commonly-observed pattern of community responses to natural disasters outlined in a widely-shared US government document, where the public mood shifts from a 'honeymoon' phase, which is centred on the stories of heroes, to a period of disillusionment, where frustrations with responses to the disaster come to the surface.<sup>3</sup>

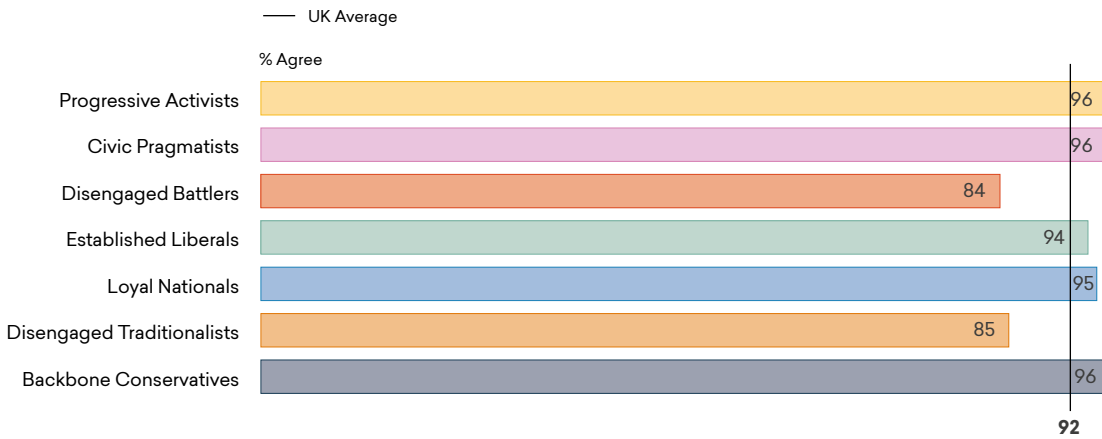
The incident with Dominic Cummings brought to the surface wider conversations about the strength of pro-social versus anti-social behaviour in the community – in essence, whether in a time of crisis we are truly 'all in it together'. In the initial weeks of the pandemic, this centred on the selfishness of hoarding. The lockdown in March had seen supermarkets struggling with shortages of basic goods as worried people stocked up, fearing a lack of future supplies. Over time, conversations about anti-social behaviour shifted to the extent to which people were following the public health guidance, which was evolving from rules around the lockdown to social distancing, wearing masks, and restrictions on socialising.

Figure 11.2.

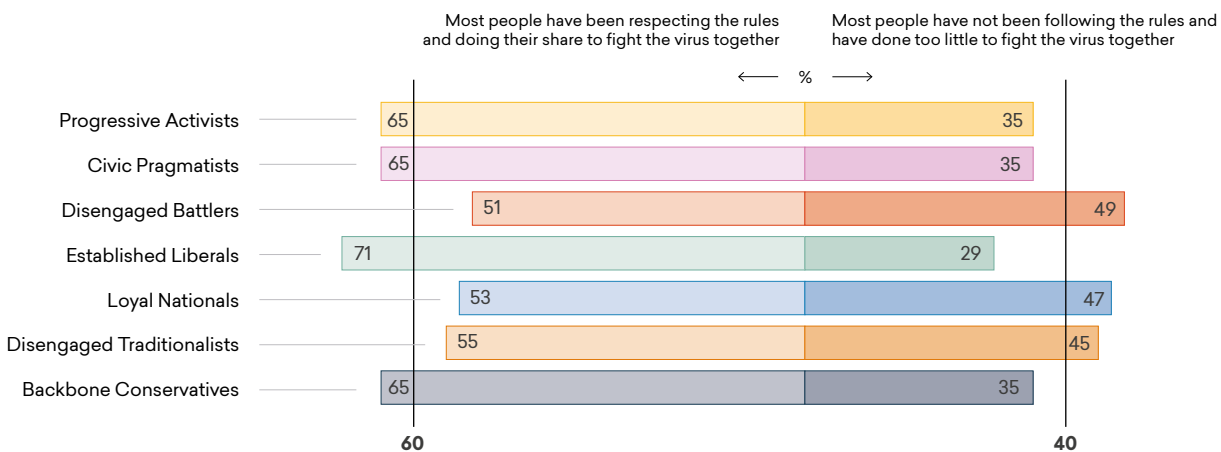
## Who follows the Covid-19 rules?

While nearly all Britons say they followed the health guidelines for the pandemic, many distrust that others have done the same

### I feel that it is my duty as a citizen to follow social distancing and other rules



Qu. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel that it is my duty as a citizen to follow social distancing and other rules. June 2020.



Qu. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel that it is my duty as a citizen to follow social distancing and other rules. June 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

The effect of these public debates is reflected in the surprisingly low public confidence in others' behaviour around Covid-19. As the first stage of lockdown measures was easing in the UK, comparative data suggested that people in the UK were more accepting of Covid-19 guidelines than in other major western democracies. At the same time, 84 per cent felt that the restrictions were 'completely reasonable and proportional', compared to 65 per cent in the United States and 74 per cent in France.<sup>4</sup>

No country reported a higher number of people claiming to follow Covid-19 restrictions than Britain, with 94 per cent saying that at least until then they had followed the rules very closely or somewhat closely.<sup>5</sup> Yet while 60 per cent believed that most people were respecting the rules and doing their bit to fight the virus, 40 per cent felt that most were not following the rules and did too little to fight the virus together. While self-reported behaviour is not completely reliable, the results suggest that people in Britain may have a tendency to exaggerate the negatives in other peoples' behaviour, or misconstrue the irresponsible behaviour of a few as reflecting the attitudes of the many. Focus group conversations suggest that as perceptions that others are not following took hold, it eroded people's support for the rules and their own willingness to comply.

The experience of Covid-19 confirms that there is truth in both images of Britain: the pro-social and the anti-social. In our anxiety and insecurity we hoard; in our better moments we share. We clap for the carers, but when it suits us, we sometimes bend or break rules. But there's reason to believe that we are more neighbourly and community-minded than we give ourselves credit. Images of misbehaviour might be blown out of proportion, but most people want to do what is right.

The enduring shift in perceptions of British society from the pandemic provides reason for hope. It is true that the 'honeymoon' period of society coming together in an intense moment of crisis has been replaced by a period that is more complex and fractious. However, our research in September 2020 showed that, **compared to before the pandemic, almost twice as many people feel that we are a society that looks after each other, rather than being one where it is everyone for themselves.** More people now hold this positive view, by a margin of 46 to 40 per cent. This is a significant change in perception about the character of British society, and it has come about through positive shifts in every segment of society, including the segments most often concerned with anti-social behaviour.

## 11.2 How Britain compares: Care and trust

**'We're very good at pulling together, that British spirit I suppose.'**

*Daniel, Civic Pragmatist, 34, North West*

This section examines evidence comparing Britain's experience to that of other countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. That evidence suggests that Britain is a more kind, caring, and community-oriented nation than it often gives itself credit.

**55%** of people in Britain feel that our concern for each other has improved as a result of Covid-19

- Some 55 per cent of people in Britain feel that our concern for each other has improved as a result of Covid-19, substantially more than any other country. Loyal Nationals were the most likely to agree (66 per cent), and Progressive Activists least likely (40 per cent), but only a very small proportion in any of the segments felt that our concern for each other has worsened (Fig 11.3).
- More people in Britain than in any other country surveyed say that the pandemic has shown them that most people in our country care about each other – some 64 per cent (Fig 11.4).<sup>v</sup>
- More people in Britain reported feeling worried about the impact of Covid-19 on ethnic, racial, or religious minorities than in any other country (54 per cent). This reflected public health data findings that people in minority groups were experiencing more serious effects from Covid-19 (Fig 11.5).

<sup>v</sup> The seven countries surveyed were the UK, USA, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and the Netherlands: *The New Normal? (More in Common, 2020)* <<https://www.moreincommon.com/newnormal/>>.

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## 58% of people reported an increased awareness of the living conditions of others

- People became more aware of the circumstances of other people, such as the insecurity of others' work, the limited options of working from home for many, cramped living conditions, and parents' challenges in looking after children while working. Some 58 per cent of people reported an increased awareness of the living conditions of others. Civic Pragmatists had the highest increase in awareness (70 per cent), reflecting the fact that empathy and compassion are dominant characteristics of people in this segment, while the lowest increase was among Disengaged Traditionalists (48 per cent) (Fig 11.6).

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Among all segments, large majorities feel that the pandemic has reminded us of our common humanity. While the differences between the seven countries in the survey were small, Britain was equal highest, at 78 per cent agreement.

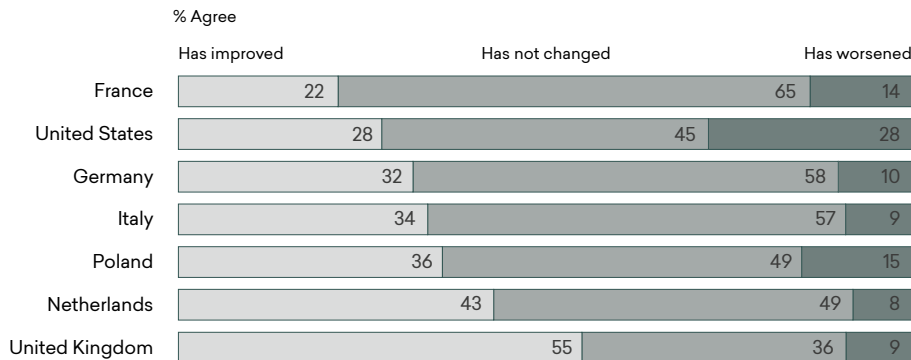
- While the impact of the pandemic was uneven, the serious illness of the Prime Minister underscored its potential to reach anyone, and the fact that the only way to protect the health of us all is to care for every part of the community. Among all segments, large majorities feel that the pandemic has reminded us of our common humanity. While the differences between the seven countries in the survey were small, Britain was equal highest, at 78 per cent agreement (Figure 11.7).
- Although a higher proportion in every country felt that their society had become more divided than united since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Britain had the highest proportion saying it had become more united (26 per cent), while 33 per cent feel that society had become more divided.
- On a range of questions about strategies for economic recovery from Covid-19, people in Britain consistently indicate a greater willingness than those in other countries to make individual sacrifices for the common good. This includes being far more willing to pay higher income taxes to finance economic recovery (46 per cent, compared to an average of 27 per cent among other countries surveyed), being more willing to accept restrictions on freedom of movement to protect others' health (73 per cent), paying higher prices for locally made products to save British jobs (65 per cent), and paying higher taxes on petrol or car ownership to help protect the environment (44 per cent).



Figure 11.3.

## How Covid-19 has changed our concern for each other

More than any other country, Britain feels that we have become more caring

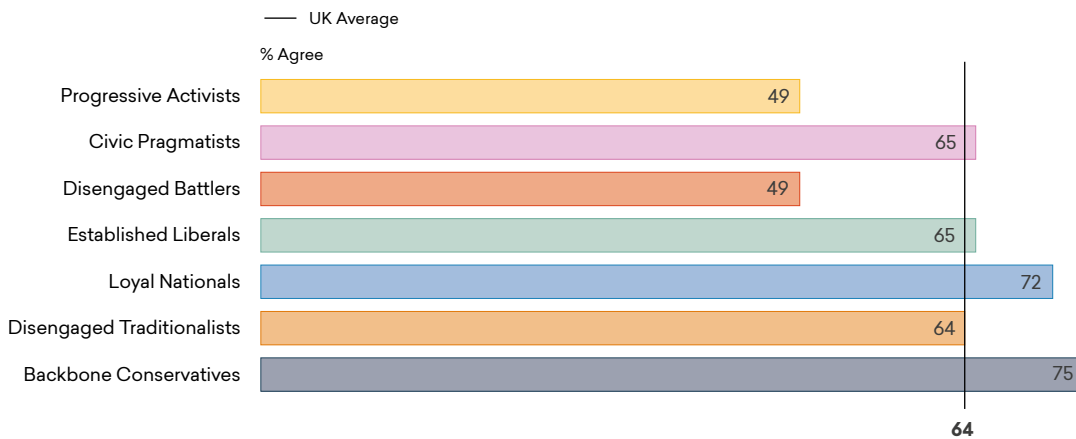


Qu. Since this pandemic began, how have the following things changed in the UK, if at all: People's concern for each other's wellbeing. June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 11.4.

## Care for each other

Covid-19 has convinced two in three people that we care for each other

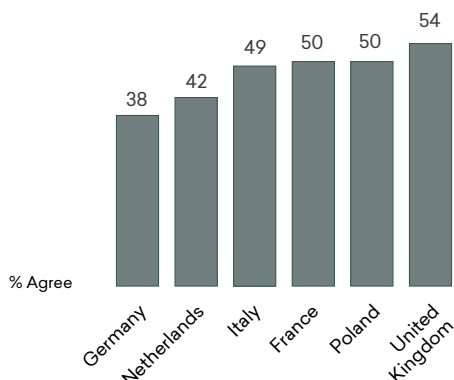


Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The Covid-19 pandemic has shown me that most people in the UK care about each other. June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 11.5.

## Impacts on minority groups

More than any other country, Britons are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on minorities

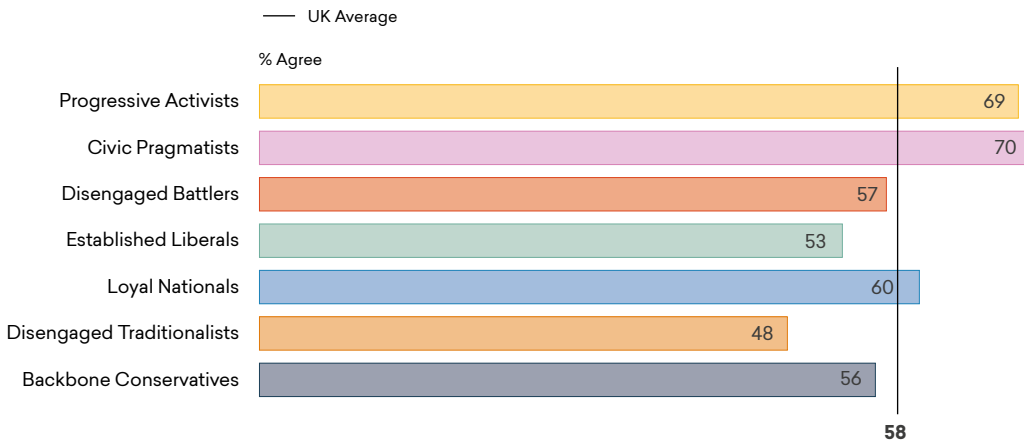


Qu. To what extent are you currently worried or not worried that: Ethnic, racial or religious minorities will suffer more than others from this crisis? June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 11.6.

## More aware of others' living conditions

Covid-19 has strengthened empathy

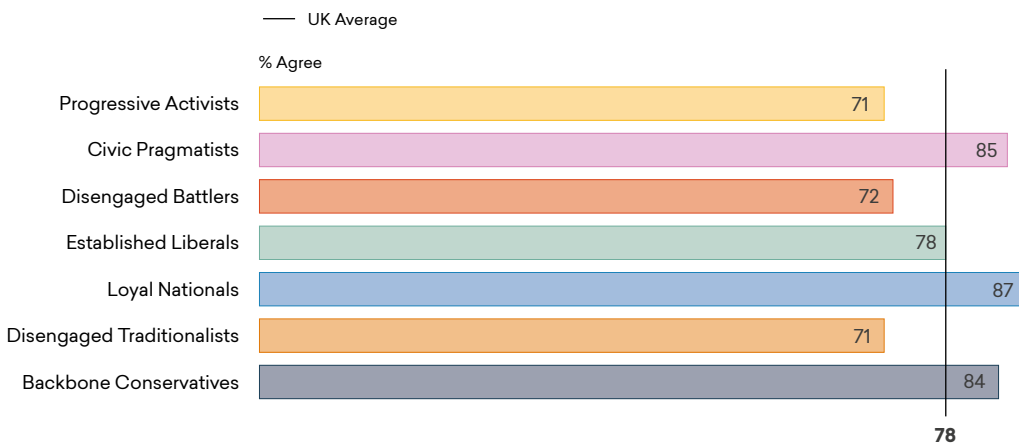


Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: The Covid-19 pandemic has made me more aware of the living conditions of other people in this country. June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 11.7.

## Our common humanity

The pandemic has reminded us of the fundamental humanity of others



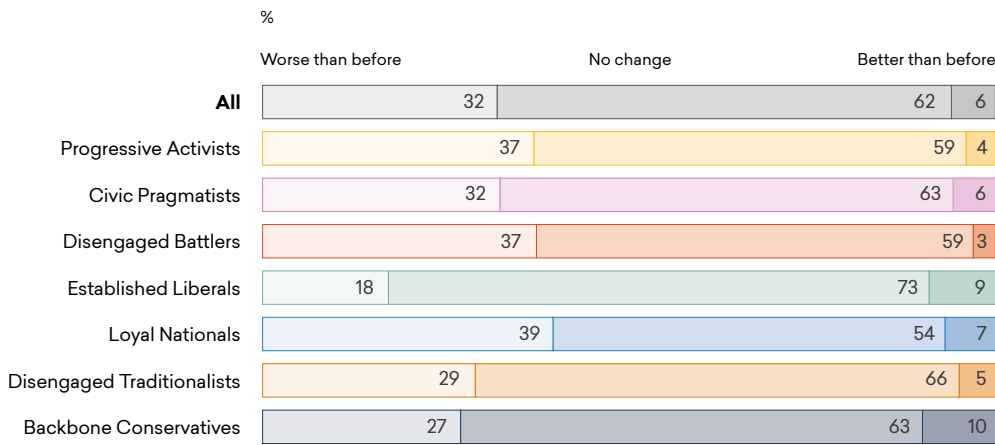
Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: The Covid-19 crisis has reminded us that no matter where we are from, as humans we are fundamentally the same. June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Across Europe, despite the increase in empathy and understanding of others' living conditions, in overall terms more people report a loss of social trust than an increase as a result of Covid-19. The UK experienced an erosion of social trust, but it held up better than average across the countries we surveyed. Some 32 per cent of Britons felt their trust in others was worse than before, compared to 6 per cent saying it was better. The highest loss of trust was reported among Loyal Nationals (39 per cent), Disengaged Battlers, and Progressive Activists (both at 37 per cent).

Figure 11.8.

## The erosion of social trust

The perception that others broke lockdown rules has weakened social trust



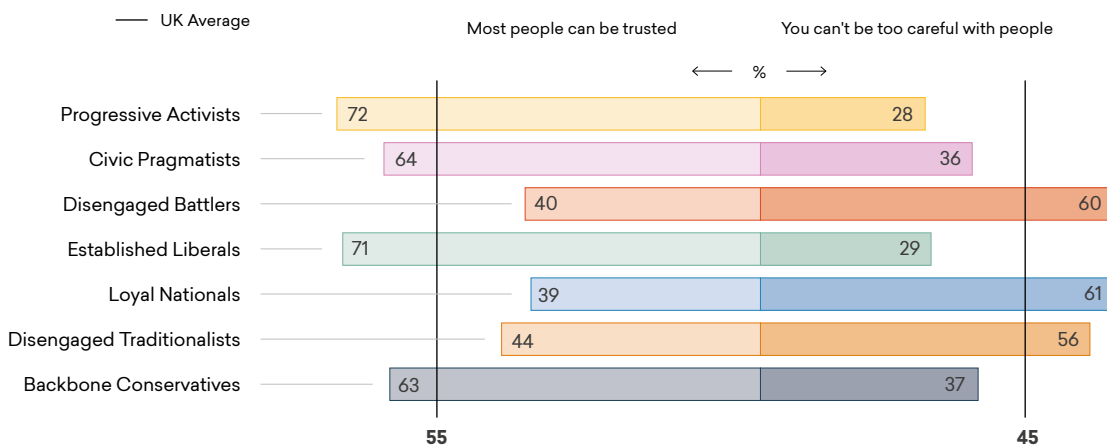
Qu. To what extent are the following aspects of your life different due to the Covid-19 pandemic: Your trust in others. June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

The highest levels of suspicion are found among Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Battlers, and Disengaged Traditionalists (61, 60, and 56 per cent respectively), in sharp contrast to Established Liberals, of whom only 29 per cent believe that you cannot be too careful in your dealings with others.

Figure 11.9.

## Trust in others

A slight majority thinks you cannot be too careful with others, with substantial variation among the segments



Qu. Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

# The Disengaged segments during Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the unique way in which people in the two Disengaged population segments perceive moments of shared crisis and community spirit. Both groups shared in the common experience of Covid-19, but generally had the lowest levels of solidarity, gratitude, and trust. They are around three times as likely to reject the idea that they had a duty to follow social distancing rules, and almost three times as likely as the rest of the population to say they will not take a vaccine for Covid-19, even if a safe and effective vaccine is developed.

Although they share a disengagement that is a running theme in this report, these two segments view society from very different standpoints.

- Disengaged Battlers feel more precarious, fearing the financial effects of the pandemic more than any other group, with almost half saying that they are anxious about losing their job. They also feel more disconnected from their local communities and others, adding to that sense of vulnerability. They are more likely to view the impacts of an event like Covid-19 in society-wide terms, conscious of the gaps between the haves and have-nots in society, and are more critical of the government's conduct.
- Disengaged Traditionalists are more economically secure, with many saying in interviews that the pandemic has made little material impact upon their finances. They are more likely to view the impacts of an event like Covid-19 through the lens of individuals and their behaviour, and place a lot of emphasis for the need for rules and enforcement.

These two segments both tend to be less positive about the impacts of Covid-19, and more suspicious of the actions of government, other people, or both. For example, almost half of both groups feel that most people had not followed the public health guidelines to control the pandemic. In focus group conversations, both groups criticised the anti-social behaviour of other parts of society, singling younger people out for criticism for not following the guidelines. In the Disengaged Battlers' focus group, there was agreement with one participant's criticism that young people think they won't be affected by the disease: 'When you are young, you don't think you're going to get ill.'

Both segments also expressed frustration that public health rules were not being applied fairly and consistently, but in slightly different ways:

- Disengaged Battlers talked about how it seemed to be one rule for the ordinary people and another rule for the elite – not only wealthy people going to their second homes, but members of the government breaking lockdown rules. In conversations with both segments, the Dominic Cummings incident of May 2020 prompted considerable discussion, with one Disengaged Battler asking 'how can you ever believe whatever they say again when they've done things like that? How can you have trust?'
- Disengaged Traditionalists talked about others' behaviour and the need for tougher measures to enforce the rules, rather than what one described as 'this wishy-washy approach of, yeah, you can follow the rules if you want to follow the rules, but you don't have to. It's up to you. It should be precise: "you have to follow the rule".' They likewise expressed concern about people taking advantage of the government's furlough wage subsidy scheme because they are lazy and have a poor work ethic. They feel that the pandemic has brought our society closer together, but as one participant said with a twist, 'in the 60s and 70s you didn't need a pandemic to do it. People would naturally care about their next-door neighbours'.

## 11.3 Local community

**‘I think certainly where I am again, I think we’re actually being friendlier with each other. Although we’re staying socially distant, two metres away from everybody, I think we’re saying, “how are you doing? Are you okay?” with people that you maybe would have walked past in the street before. So, I think it’s helped in a strange way. I would like to hope that once things go back to some kind of normality, that continues and you do continue to speak to your neighbours and you do ask how people are. It would be nice if we got that from this.’**

*Jim, Loyal National, 38, Scotland*

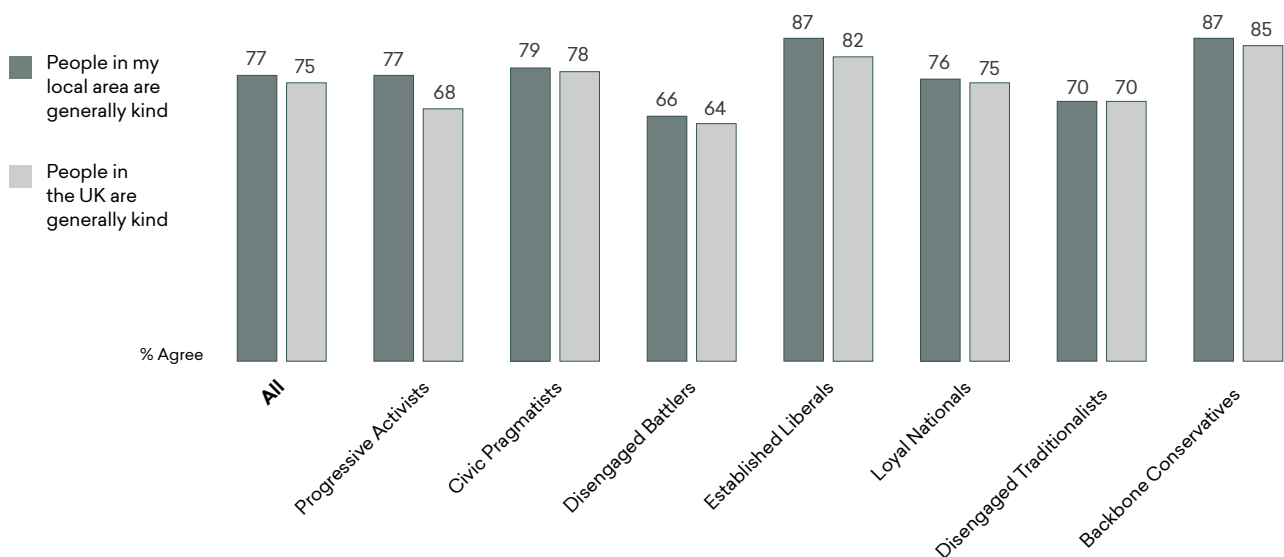
While Covid-19 presented Britain with two different images of itself, in their local areas most people say they encounter the positive image of a caring community. This section examines perceptions of local community, people’s sense of belonging to that community, and the extent to which people feel that they can make a difference within it.

Figure 11.10.

### Perceptions of local community

Overwhelmingly, people believe they are surrounded by kind people

#### Kindness in the UK



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following? February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Three-quarters of Britons believe that we live in a kind society, on both the local and national levels, with slightly more positive views about the kindness of people in their local community. The Disengaged segments are lowest in their perception of kindness around them, although around two-thirds of both segments agree. The highest level of agreement is among Backbone Conservatives and Established Liberals, with over 80 per cent agreement for both local and national levels of society.

However, this consensus on the kindness of others does not necessarily translate into feeling part of a community. People can form communities over vast distances, and come together around any number of common interests or identities. But Covid-19 reinforced the way in which local community is uniquely important in a time of crisis, especially for those most in need.

The importance of community is widely recognised, and a majority (57 per cent) of people in Britain say that they feel as though they are part of a community of people who understand, care for, and look after each other. On this issue, the Disengaged Battlers are by far the least likely to feel connected to those around them, with fewer than one in three in agreement. This might reflect a number of factors, including economic insecurity, being younger, and having fewer family and social connections in their area.

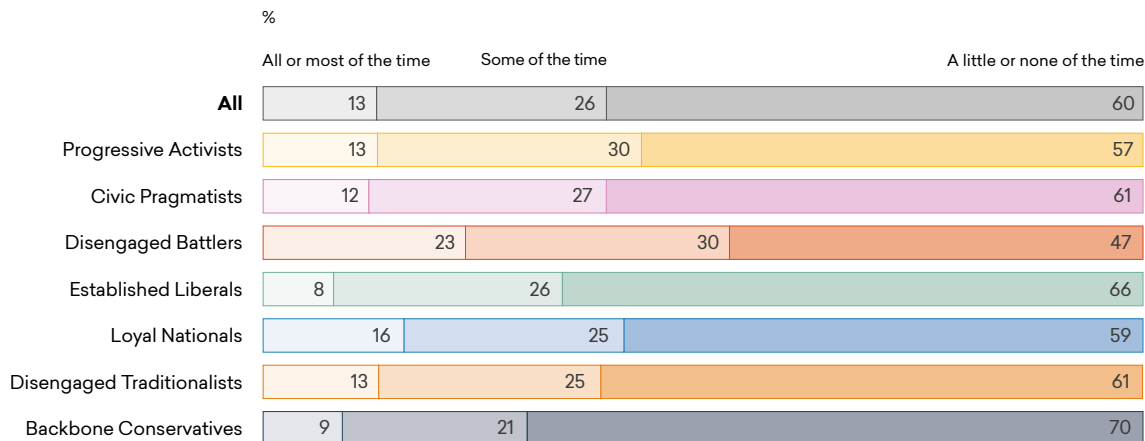
Another measure of people's connection to community is their experience of loneliness, an issue that has been more prominent in British life since the report of the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission prompted the UK Government to establish a Minister for Loneliness in 2018.<sup>6</sup> The incidence of loneliness varies significantly between different population segments.

- Overall, one in seven people feel lonely all or most of the time, and two in five people feel lonely some of the time.
- Among the segments, Disengaged Battlers are more likely to report loneliness, with 53 per cent in this segment saying that they feel lonely some, most, or all of the time, and 23 per cent feeling lonely all or most of the time.
- Loyal Nationals are the only other segment where more members than average usually feel lonely. However, they do not report higher than average feelings of anxiety.
- Although the problem of loneliness is often linked to the circumstances of elderly people (with Age UK research identifying 1.4 million chronically lonely elderly people in the country),<sup>7</sup> our data found more young people than elderly saying that they feel they are facing life's challenges alone (35 per cent versus 25 per cent).
- While Disengaged Battlers are far more likely to frequently feel anxious, they are closely followed by Progressive Activists, Loyal Nationals, and Civic Pragmatists, who are all above average for feeling anxiety.
- Throughout the pandemic, Disengaged Battlers were more likely to say that they have felt mainly on their own, while Established Liberals and Backbone Conservatives were far more likely to say that they feel the support and care of others.

Figure 11.11.

## Loneliness

One in seven people often feel lonely most of the time

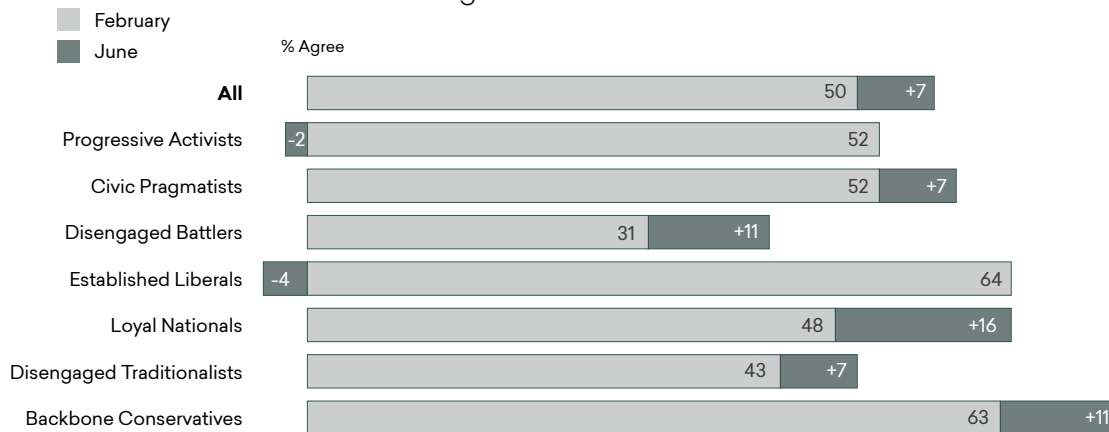


Qu. In general, how often do you feel: Lonely? February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 11.12.

## Covid-19 and community

Since Covid-19, a sense of community has increased among most of the segments



Qu. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am part of a community - people that understand, care for, and help each other. February and June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

One of the positive effects of Covid-19 shown in Figure 11.12 is that the pandemic has seen significantly more people across Britain now feeling that they are part of a community where ‘people understand, care for, and help each other’. This question was asked in February and again in June 2020. A larger number of people still feel that it is important to be part of a caring community, but the gap between those who feel it is important (67 per cent) and those who feel that they are part of such a community has almost halved since the onset of the pandemic.

Among the segments, the pandemic had the most positive effects on the connectedness of Loyal Nationals, Backbone Conservatives, and Disengaged Battlers. The only group that reported a small weakening of feeling part of a community was the Progressive Activists.

Another positive impact of Covid-19 is reflected in the fact that 53 per cent say that the pandemic has revealed the best of human nature, with just 28 per cent saying it has revealed the worst. In five of the seven segments, a majority feel that the Covid-19 response has revealed our capacity to be caring and compassionate. Even among the two segments with the least agreement, Progressive Activists and Disengaged Battlers, 40 and 45 per cent respectively agreed.

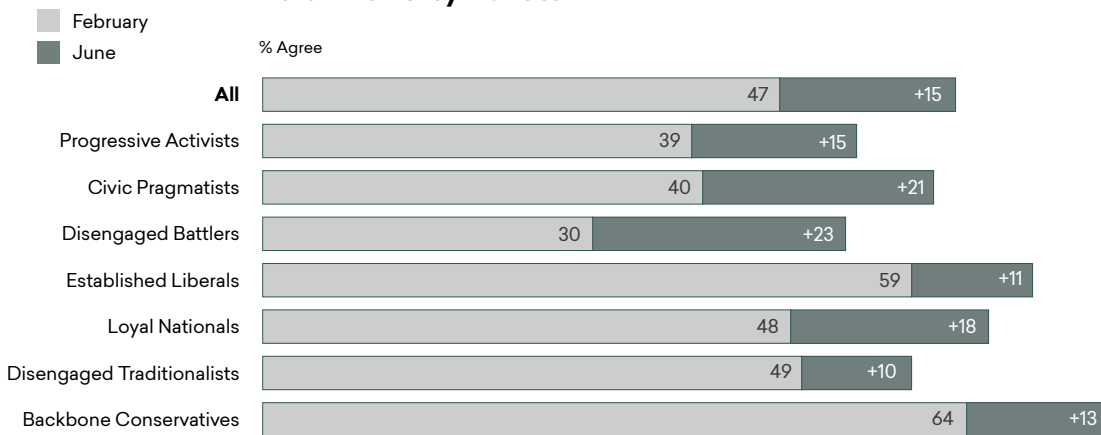
Slight majorities in all segments except Disengaged Battlers also say that they felt the support and care of others during the Covid-19 crisis. Sixty per cent of Britons on average felt this way, with Established Liberals feeling it most of all (72 per cent) and Disengaged Battlers the least (47 per cent).

Figure 11.13.

## Covid-19 and personal agency

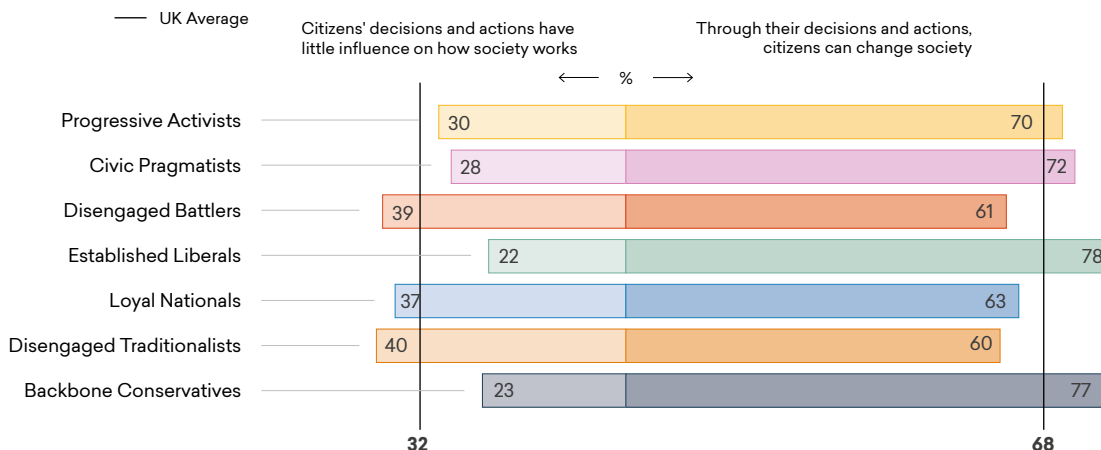
Since the pandemic, all segments have seen an increased sense of personal agency within their local communities and feel that their decisions can impact wider society

### People in our area are able to find ways to improve things around here when they want to



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: People in our area are able to find ways to improve things around here when they want to. February and June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

### Citizens' influence on society



Qu. Which of the statements do you agree with more? June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.



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47% of people felt that they had the ability to change things around them

After the onset of the pandemic, this grew to 63%

A further positive effect of Covid-19 is the striking increase in people's sense of agency within their local community. In March, only 47 per cent of people felt that they had the ability to change things around them. After the onset of the pandemic, this grew to 63 per cent, or almost two-thirds of the population. The increase of 16 percentage points was most dramatic among the two Disengaged segments.

Overall, two-thirds of Britons feel that through their actions, citizens can change society. This view is held strongly across all segments, with Backbone Conservatives and Established Liberals being most confident of this. Both of these segments report feeling very secure in their local area and do not perceive many threats, which might contribute to their confidence. In contrast, the Disengaged segments, along with Loyal Nationals, have less confidence that citizens can change things. These three segments are also above average in feeling that the area they live in has been neglected for a long time, undermining that sense of agency in their local community.

These characteristics of the two Disengaged segments and the Loyal Nationals have a great deal in common with 'left behind groups' that have received significant attention in recent years. New research by Local Trust found that 42 per cent of people in 'left behind' communities feel as though their area gets less resources than others, with only 4 per cent feeling they receive greater resources than elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Particular complaints were a lack of basic community infrastructure, such as places to meet, leisure and sports facilities, cultural facilities, and parks. Such factors may also apply to the three segments reporting these feelings of local neglect. Given that Loyal Nationals are concentrated in the North East, Yorkshire, and in Wales - all post-industrial regions that have been disproportionately affected by public spending cuts - these concerns are most likely well founded. This may also be the case among Disengaged Traditionalists, who are overrepresented in the English Midlands, a place shaped by the decline of heavy industry and issues such as intergenerational unemployment in some areas.



## In their own words – feelings around community and Covid-19



'I think what we're starting to see is really cool. I think people really are showing that they do care about each other. I've seen lots of mutual aid initiatives and stuff being set up in my area. There is the clapping for the NHS thing which I was surprised happens here... People put their messages on the WhatsApp group to say I'm self-isolating I need someone to do my shopping for me and people will just do it. It's really cool and I'm hoping that this kind of community spirit is going to continue after lockdown and that people are going to continue to look after each other.'

*Nick, Progressive Activist, 34, London*



'I think I feel a bit mixed really. We've had all the panic buying, I guess, and everybody really panicking and doing things for themselves. But then we've also got the NHS and healthcare workers that everyone is rallying behind. So, I think it's mixed and probably depends a little bit on area as well, I suppose.'

*Fran, Disengaged Battler, 30, Wales*



'I think I've learnt that a greater proportion of people are basically less selfish than I thought, those people are just from reading in papers and whatever, surveys saying only a tiny amount of people want lockdown to end for example. No one likes it but I think that those people are basically saying we don't like it but we accept it's a necessary evil that we've got to endure at the moment. I think that's quite an admirable quality in people to be able to see things like that. I've been pleased that I think that it's only a very small minority who've been trying to take advantage of things.'

*Declan, Established Liberal, 27, West Midlands*



'I think this crisis is pulling people together. I think it's actually changed them in a positive way. People are more community spirited. Like I moved back here, from abroad, eighteen months ago and, up to then, other than my immediate neighbours, I've hardly met anyone but, in the past month, I've become acquainted with various people who have volunteered to do my shopping for me. I actually speak to shop keepers and stuff like that. Yeah, people communicate more, as a community, more than they used to, I think.'

*Tony, Backbone Conservative, 62, Yorkshire and the Humber*

## 11.4 Social media

Covid highlighted the critical role social media plays in our lives and communities (Fig. 11.14). Has it contributed to a greater sense of connection? Or has it contributed to our isolation into likeminded bubbles, disgusted with each other, while also adding to the loneliness and social exclusion of the disengaged? This is a dilemma facing our society, and western societies more broadly.

Just as the Covid-19 pandemic has made people re-evaluate their connection to their local community, it has also underscored the role that social media can play in connecting people to each other. Across the UK, in the weeks after the lockdown was announced on March 23, neighbourhoods connected through Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms to get in touch, organise volunteering efforts, and establish a way to check in on each other in the uncertain period ahead.

*Moderator*

*Would you say you have learned anything about British society as a result of the current crisis?*

**'I think sticking together [and] keeping in contact. Obviously I talk on my laptop to family [and] on the phone. I've seen on social media, people are keeping each other aware. People have been communicating more I think. It is harder, especially [being on] technology more, but then on the plus side it's helped people communicate, with webcam as well.'**

*Greg, Disengaged Battler, 19, South West*

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While this reflected the positive potential of social media as a connector, it also plays a role as a disruptor in society more generally. As Chapter 5 noted, when asked about the factors that cause division in the UK, social media is the second-most cited cause. The internet provides a platform in which conflict and extremism can be normalised. Even before the pandemic broke out, just under three-quarters of people felt that social media over-represents the most extreme voices, and with the exception of the Disengaged segments (who are more unsure), in every segment at least six times as many hold this concern than do not.

**'I think the internet has a lot to answer, social media has a lot to answer... There are so many people giving opinions that aren't necessarily valued or valuable. And they can remain anonymous. So, I think we've lost a genuine opportunity to make relationships and see each other face to face rather than calling it from afar.'**

*William, Disengaged Battler, 76, North West*

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- The pervasive role of devices in our lives is reflected in the finding that 54 per cent of Britons feel that they spend too much time on their smartphone or other devices. Notably, two-thirds of Progressive Activists feel this more than any other population segment.
- Britain is evenly split (42 to 43 per cent) on whether the benefits of social media outweigh the negatives, although Progressive Activists are rather more likely to agree that there are more benefits than other segments, at 54 to 35 per cent.
- Asked whether social media has made differences of opinion with friends or family more difficult, some 43 per cent of the population agrees.
- One-third feel that social media has a significant negative impact on them.

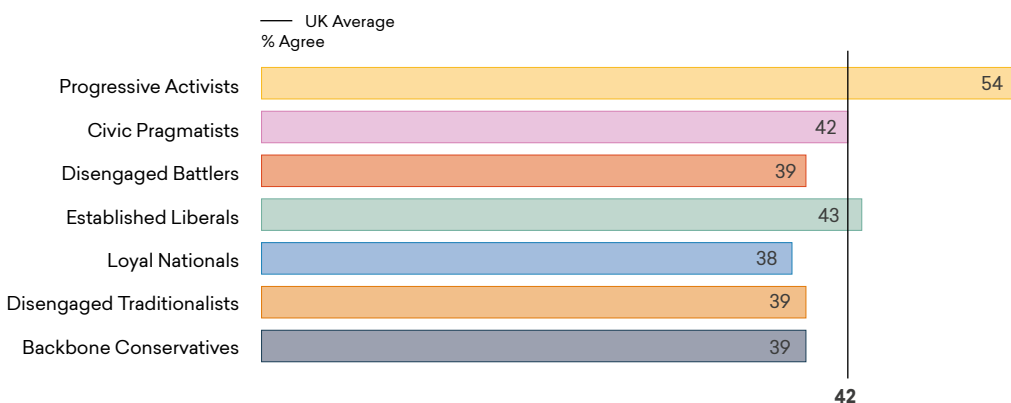
**57%** agree that 'one of the best things about the Internet is that it allows ordinary people to speak their mind on the news of the day'

- On the other hand, people also see the advantages of social media in opening up conversation. Fifty-seven per cent, and majorities in every segment, agree that 'one of the best things about the Internet is that it allows ordinary people to speak their mind on the news of the day'.
- Some 59 per cent feel that social media has led them to question everything that they see online and in the media, with Progressive Activists agreeing most emphatically (70 per cent).
- One consequence of this is that there is a consensus around the need for the government to better regulate social media companies, with 76 per cent in agreement. The strongest agreement is seen among Loyal Nationals (85 per cent), Civic Pragmatists (82 per cent), and Backbone Conservatives (81 per cent).

**Figure 11.14. Social media**

Segments vary in their attitudes towards social media and how much they trust it

**The benefits of social media outweigh the negatives**



Qu. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The benefits of social media outweigh the negatives. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

## 11.5 Key takeaways

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way that people across Britain think about each other and their local community. The years of divisiveness over Brexit had left us feeling pessimistic about the society we were becoming. Covid-19 made us question some of those assumptions, as we saw so much community spirit, voluntary help, and heroic sacrifice around us.

Since the Brexit years, people have been watching two stories about Britain play out. One involves people coming together, and doing their bit to help each other in big and small ways. The other involves people looking out only for themselves and showing little respect for the needs of others. Both are true stories, but the evidence shows that the first of those stories is far more common. Cross-country comparisons also show that, on many comparative measures, the community response has been stronger in Britain than elsewhere - a reason for pride.

While the pandemic has had negative as well as positive effects on social trust, as a society we have a high level of confidence in the kindness of others. As a result of the pandemic we have become more concerned for each other and more aware of others' living conditions.

For tens of millions of people in the UK, loneliness and disconnection are part of their daily life experience. While many people have felt alone in facing the pandemic, millions have felt more connected to their local communities than than before, and their sense of community power has strengthened. Positive experiences of community have not been limited to better-off areas or segments of the population. **Some of the largest changes in feeling able to improve our local community have occurred among population segments that are least connected to others**, and more likely to feel that they face the world alone from day to day.

Another positive dimension of this stronger experience of connection is the role played by technology. As the focus of our lives has shifted from offline to online, there have been concerns that technology has made us more disconnected from our local communities. But through Facebook, Whatsapp, and other means, technology has played a role in connecting us at a local level. Overwhelmingly, people see social media as a driver of division and disinformation, but the pandemic pointed to how it could play a more positive role.

# Endnotes

- 1 Our work corroborates findings by others, such as: Jill Rutter and Steve Ballinger, *Remembering the Kindness of Strangers: Division, Unity and Social Connection during and beyond COVID-19*, 2020 <<http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RememberingTheKindnessOfStrangersReport.pdf>>.
- 2 *The New Normal?*
- 3 'Phases of Disaster' <<https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/recovering-disasters/phases-disaster>>.
- 4 *The New Normal?*
- 5 *The New Normal?*
- 6 Kate Jopling, *Jo Cox Loneliness Start a Conversation: Combating Loneliness One Conversation at a Time*, 2017 <[https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness\\_commission](https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness_commission)>.
- 7 *All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life* (Age UK, 2018) <[https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report\\_final\\_2409.pdf](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf)>.
- 8 "Left behind" Areas Missing out on Community Facilities and Places to Meet' (Local Trust, 2020) <<https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/news/left-behind-areas-missing-out-on-community-facilities-and-places-to-meet/>>.

