

# **Trust and cohesion in Britain during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic across place, scale and time**

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## Executive Summary

This report documents the changes in political trust and community belonging over the course of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. We synthesise available quantitative evidence from 17 surveys involving nearly a quarter million respondents between December 2019 and October 2020. We documented the percentage of respondents that perceived improving or worsening levels of political trust (i.e., general political trust, trust in national leadership, and COVID-19 related trust) and community belonging (i.e., community connection, perception of unity and division between different groups). We note the following key findings.

### **Trust**

- The measures of political trust displayed curvilinear trajectories over the year. Levels of trust were low following the 2019 General Election, rose during the months of March and April following the UK lockdown, and then gradually fell during the remainder of the year, to the extent that trust in political leadership fell back to pre-COVID levels by October;
- There was a sharp spike in political distrust following Dominic Cummings' trip to Durham during coronavirus lockdown restrictions (May);
- From June onwards, a higher percentage of respondents distrusted than trusted the Government and political leadership.

### **Community Belonging and Division**

- Community connection rose to its highest level during the months of June and July following the easing of coronavirus restrictions;
- People generally feel that their local area is more united than divided. In contrast, people generally feel that the UK is more divided than united. Levels of local unity are considerably more stable than national levels of unity;
- Perceived divisions between the UK and Europe, and between Remainers and Leavers, fell substantially at the beginning of the pandemic, but gradually rose again by October returning to their pre-pandemic levels. The perceived division between Remainers and Leavers was even stronger in October 2020 than it was in December 2019.

## **Implications for policy**

We propose eight implications for policy. Central to these are:

- Well prepared advanced planning is needed to enable government and leadership to act quickly and consistently in the early phases of crisis. This increases its opportunities to capitalise on temporarily heightened trust and social unity for both short- and longer-term objectives;
- Trust and cohesion are vital elements of a well-functioning society. The pandemic's impact may have deepened fractures across different parts of society and it is crucial to address these directly and early to prevent avoidable harms other than direct vulnerability to COVID-19;
- Mitigation strategies in response to coronavirus, and other crises, may be more effective when national strategy can effectively include and embrace the strength of cohesion that is achievable at more local levels;
- National investment to build trust and cohesion and that also focuses and capitalises on local structures is likely to provide the greatest resilience and capacity to emerge strongly from the challenges of the pandemic.

## Introduction

A large body of research in social and political science clearly shows that social cohesion, that is, the extent of connectedness and solidarity amongst groups in society (Manca, 2014), is an important driver of a nation's growth and political stability (Jenson, 1998). Core elements of cohesion are **political trust** and **community belonging** which underpin unity and harmony within a society (Chan et al., 2006). Community belonging and cohesion also provide an important buffer against adversity and promote resilience in difficult times (Hogan, 2020).

Therefore, trust and community belonging will likely be crucial factors in determining the UK's capacity to recover from the coronavirus pandemic. This report draws together recent quantitative evidence on how levels of political trust, community belonging, and division have progressed over the course of the coronavirus pandemic at the national and local level. The evidence provides insight about whether these factors work in synchrony and whether different facets are changing in different ways. Importantly, tracking the changes in trust and cohesion up to the present time provides insight into the strains the pandemic is placing on societal bonds and perhaps where people may look to for secure anchor points in the coming months. These insights also suggest implications for future policy and enquiry.

In the next sections we briefly provide some conceptual and evidential context from the social and political sciences literature on the importance of trust and community belonging in time of crisis. We then turn to the present empirical analysis, starting with a summary of the methodology and data used. The substantive evidence is then presented, which tracks political trust and community belonging covering the period from December 2019 to October 2020. We conclude by summarising the findings and considering implications for policy.

## The Importance of Political Trust in a Time of Crisis

Political trust refers to the confidence people have in their Government, and the extent to which they see their Government as trustworthy, credible, fair, and competent (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Historically, political institutions, and in particular MPs, tend to be distrusted rather than trusted (Full Fact, 2019) and people in the UK typically feel unrepresented by Westminster (Electoral Reform Society, 2019). This can be partially explained by the fact that citizens who do not share a common social identity with the Government (e.g., different party affiliation) tend to trust this Government less (Tyler & Degoe, 1995) so that a significant portion of the population is likely to distrust any contemporaneous government. Political trust has also generally been on the decline for the past decades, which scholars have linked to the resurgence of political scandals and the prominence of cynical messages about politicians in mainstream media (Levi & Stoker, 2001).

However, research has also shown that in periods of crisis people look to their government and political leadership for guidance, and this can, temporarily, increase the usual level of political trust. As a result of this increased trust, people more readily accept all sorts of measures from their leadership, even the most stringent forms restricting their personal freedom. Trust in leadership is an informative indicator of how strongly people feel connected to that leadership. For example, people gravitate towards and endorse leaders that they perceive to be ‘prototypical’ or representative of their in-group (Haslam et al, 2011; Hogg, 2001). Evidence also shows that people prefer a more authoritative and action-focused leadership in time of crisis, much more so than in ‘normal’ times (Hasel, 2013). Indeed, while leaders typically enjoy a honeymoon period in which people allow them to innovate, in order to persuade people to follow new, previously unthinkable norms and rules, it is essential that those leaders are viewed as highly representative and typical of their groups, and therefore that they can be trusted to act in the group’s interests (Abrams et al., 2018). Therefore, the question of how far people trust national political leadership is fundamental to how willingly they will voluntarily comply with its demands.

Particularly relevant for the COVID-19 pandemic is earlier findings that individuals who trust their political institutions are more likely to follow rules and regulations imposed by their government (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Marien & Hooghe, 2011), especially amongst

individuals who do not perceive regulations to be in their own personal interest (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). Recent evidence confirms that political trust is associated with compliance with the different COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines (e.g., Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Devine et al., 2020; Lalot et al., in press). Again, political trust was especially important to motivate compliance amongst people who felt less concerned about the consequences of the pandemic for themselves (Lalot et al., 2020).

When government restrictions create material and other hardships, such as the closure of businesses, loss of income or employment, and restriction of social relationships, they pit direct personal cost against more abstract or delayed public benefit. If deficits of political trust emerge and become consolidated there may be increasingly serious implications for whether people comply with constraints on their actions, relationships and opportunities. A trust deficit therefore has implications beyond the focal actions to do with the spread of the virus and may extend to other areas in which public cooperation and compliance is needed to address further or indirect effects of the pandemic.

Not only is trust liable to be affected by changing external threats or events, but it also has multiple aspects and components, including trust in a wide range of institutions, organisations and businesses. It is also mediated through methods of exchange and validation used by these different systems (Hosking, 2014). To some extent the pandemic, the constraints on social linkage and connection, and the levels of support provided to different sectors of the population may all have served to disrupt or destabilise the wider set of systems on which trust is based. Although this wider set of issues is beyond the scope of the evidence in this report, it seems likely that the specific types of trust we examine here may partly reflect these wider factors.



## Sense of Belonging in a Time of Crisis

Crises affect not only the relationship between people and political leadership, but also relationships amongst people themselves. During crises groups often come together with a unifying ‘Dunkirk spirit’. For example, increases in group solidarity have been observed following natural disasters (Calo-Blanco et al., 2017), financial crunches (Borger, 2013), and mass tragedies (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic groups coalesced to set up food banks, prescription delivery services, and social support groups for the vulnerable (Local Trust, 2020). Over 1 million people answered Matt Hancock’s call for NHS volunteers in March (Guardian, 2020a).

Yet this capacity for crises to highlight common fate (Drury et al., 2016; Muldoon, 2020) and to generate an inspiring or uplifting sense of shared identity across different groups and communities (Segal et al., 2018) is not the end of the story. Importantly, crises can also push communities apart and create or deepen divisions and increase intolerance toward some minority groups. A common tendency is that, faced with threat of one sort or another, social cohesion becomes rivalrous, focussing on intergroup differences as much as within-group solidarity (Abrams, 2010; Abrams & Vasiljevic, 2014). For example, the London 7/7 bombings were found to de-liberalise attitudes towards Muslims across Great Britain (Van de Vyver et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has also seen divisions emerge (or remerge) between communities. Not dissimilar to the early stages of the HIV-AIDS epidemic, as the pandemic developed, news reports began to focus on ‘high risk’ groups that might be ascribed blame or responsibility for the spread of the disease, as notably querying the roles of young people and the BAME community. Other axes of division also developed. Localised lockdowns occurring in the Northern counties of Lancashire and West Yorkshire, among others, during September and October also revived North vs. South debates (Sky News, 2020). Questions have been raised about the level of power that should be issued to devolved governments amid a resurgence of support for Scottish independence (Politico, 2020).

People’s perceptions of intergroup inequality or injustice mean that their social identity motivates a desire for system change (Jost et al., 2003). This suggests that we may see increasing public appetite for constitutional reform and the emergence of new axes of solidarity in opposition to other groups or movements (cf., Abrams et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2017).

Leaders of some communities such as Greater Manchester engaged in direct confrontation with central government over the scale and basis of restrictions (Guardian, 2020b), and this might be just one of many vectors along which tensions could become manifest.

The important point here is that we cannot expect that the shared purpose of the national effort to tackle the coronavirus will necessarily persist or that it will eliminate divisions. Indeed, as we show later, there are clear signs of a gradual re-emergence and possibly reinforcement of pre-existing tensions and resource competition between countries and regions. People's sense of belonging and division, at both regional and national levels, is likely to shape future fragmentations and unifications within society, possibly quite rapidly but also with a trajectory that may take some years to result in substantial political and social change (Abrams et al., in press).

## The Present Report

While the scope of the concept of cohesion is huge, the task set for this report was to identify and evaluate what quantitative evidence is available to document changes in political trust and community belonging as the pandemic unfolded throughout 2020. Our intention was to establish, with as high a degree of confidence as possible, how evidence is converging or why it is diverging, and what that evidence might tell us about trust and community belonging going forward.

To that end we track the forms of political trust most consistently measured across different social surveys. These are: trust in government, trust in national political leadership, and trust in the Government's effort to handle the coronavirus. We also sought to locate measures that comparably assessed levels of community belonging and connection, UK unity vs. division, and local unity vs. division. In doing so, we map the evolution of trust and cohesion across stages of the coronavirus pandemic, and comment on the implications that these trajectories may have for the future.

## Methodology

To identify evidence from relevant social surveys we began by contacting as many survey research organisations and research funders as we were able to, and by drawing on the British Academy's extensive network of contacts. We also scanned news reports and other sources to identify all possible candidates that could provide data sources for this review. This search had to be extremely rapid and some organisations that held potentially relevant data were not in a position to release it to us quickly enough for inclusion. However, we believe that the range of sources that we were able to include was reasonably comprehensive so that any data sources that were missed would be unlikely to alter the conclusions of our analysis. Once the data sources had been identified we examined all relevant measures of trust and community belonging that had been measured within the UK spanning the period December 2019 to October 2020. We identified 17 different survey sources with relevant measures (see survey detail in Appendix 1). Across surveys and time, the evidence involves nearly a quarter of a million (240,517) respondents.

The various surveys employed differing methodology and sampling techniques, ranging from longitudinal representative samples to snapshot convenience samples. Different surveys were fielded at different time points and the data collection periods for some surveys spanned more than one week. Before conducting the main analyses, we hence run a feasibility analysis on a small sample of British participants ( $N = 400$ ). This analysis established a set of items measuring trust and cohesion that could meaningfully be compared across surveys. It also established a procedure for scoring these in ways that maximised comparability of estimates of endorsement of each valence of response. All details are reported in Appendix 2 and a full list of the different items used across surveys is available in Appendix 3.

Where possible, for each survey source, we logged data by week of the year. Where data from multiple surveys were available for the same week, scores were aggregated (weighted by sample size). We noted low sample sizes for some weeks within some surveys. So as to avoid the use of potentially unreliable data, data were included in the analyses only when (across all sources) data were available for 100 or more respondents for any given week.

# General Political Trust, Trust in National Political Leadership, and COVID-19 Related Political Trust

## General Political Trust

General political trust here represents the level of trust that respondents generically have in the Government. An example item is “Could you indicate the amount of trust you have in the Government?” The linear and non-linear trends in levels of trust and distrust are shown in Figure 1, below, in which the larger data points represent larger samples, the shaded bands are the 95% confidence intervals, and the best fitting trend lines are shown<sup>1</sup>. Salient external events are also noted above the timeline. Relevant data were available from December 2019 to October 2020. These data show the following:

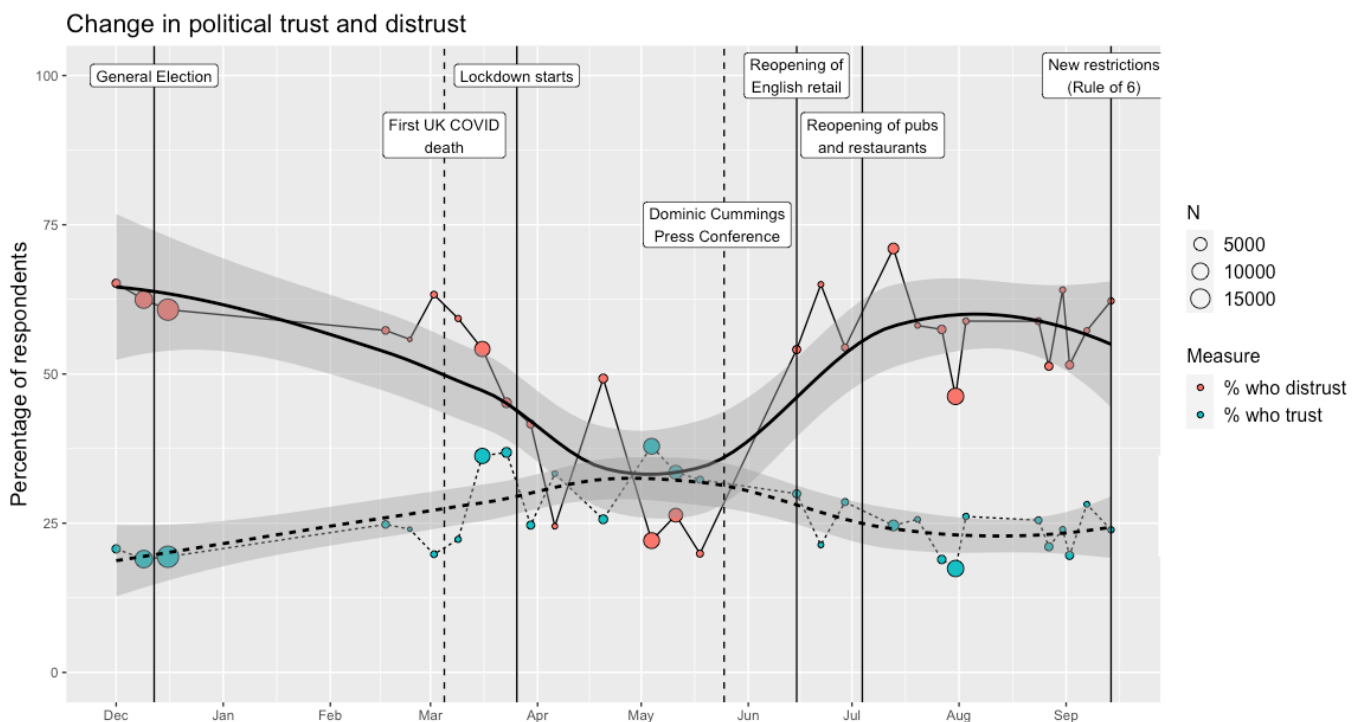
- Levels of general political trust were low immediately following the 2019 General Election, with only 20% of respondents trusting the Government, and a clear majority (60%) indicating distrust in the Government.
- General political trust then increased slightly during the first months of 2020. The Brexit withdrawal agreement had been passed, divisions between Remain and Leave supporters were less relevant, and people were becoming accustomed to the new Government. Levels of trust rose somewhat to approximately 25% in February.
- As lockdown commenced (23<sup>rd</sup> March) there was a further elevation in trust, accompanied by a clear *reduction* of distrust. This fluctuated between 25% and 35% during the initial months of the lockdown. In May, for the first and only time during 2020 the numbers that trusted the government exceeded the numbers that distrusted the government. This, however, did not persist for very long.
- As noted elsewhere (e.g., Fancourt et al., 2020), levels of general political distrust rose sharply after Dominic Cummings’ trip to Durham in the months of May and June, rising to 65% at the end of June.

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<sup>1</sup> For political trust, a quadratic polynomial line provided significant fit,  $y = 25.69 - 0.57x - 17.52x^2$ ,  $p = .002$ . For political distrust, a quadratic polynomial line also provided significant fit,  $y = 52.34 + 2.83x + 38.05x^2$ ,  $p = .004$ . From May onwards, a linear line provided significant fit for political trust,  $y = 25.79 - 15.23x$ ,  $p = .002$ . For political distrust, both linear,  $y = 51.70 + 41.29x$ ,  $p = .002$ , and quadratic,  $y = 51.70 + 41.29x - 30.92x^2$ ,  $p = .002$ , lines provided significant fit, with the quadratic model providing an overall better fit to the data,  $F(1, 14) = 14.31$ ,  $p = .002$ .

- From that point onwards, levels of general political trust remained relatively stable, with a greater proportion of respondents shifting from neutral categories to distrust. With slight variations, levels of political trust and distrust have now restabilised at the levels evident in February, before COVID-19, with only 23% of respondents indicating they trusted the Government in September.

**Figure 1. Change in political trust and distrust from December 2019 to October 2020**



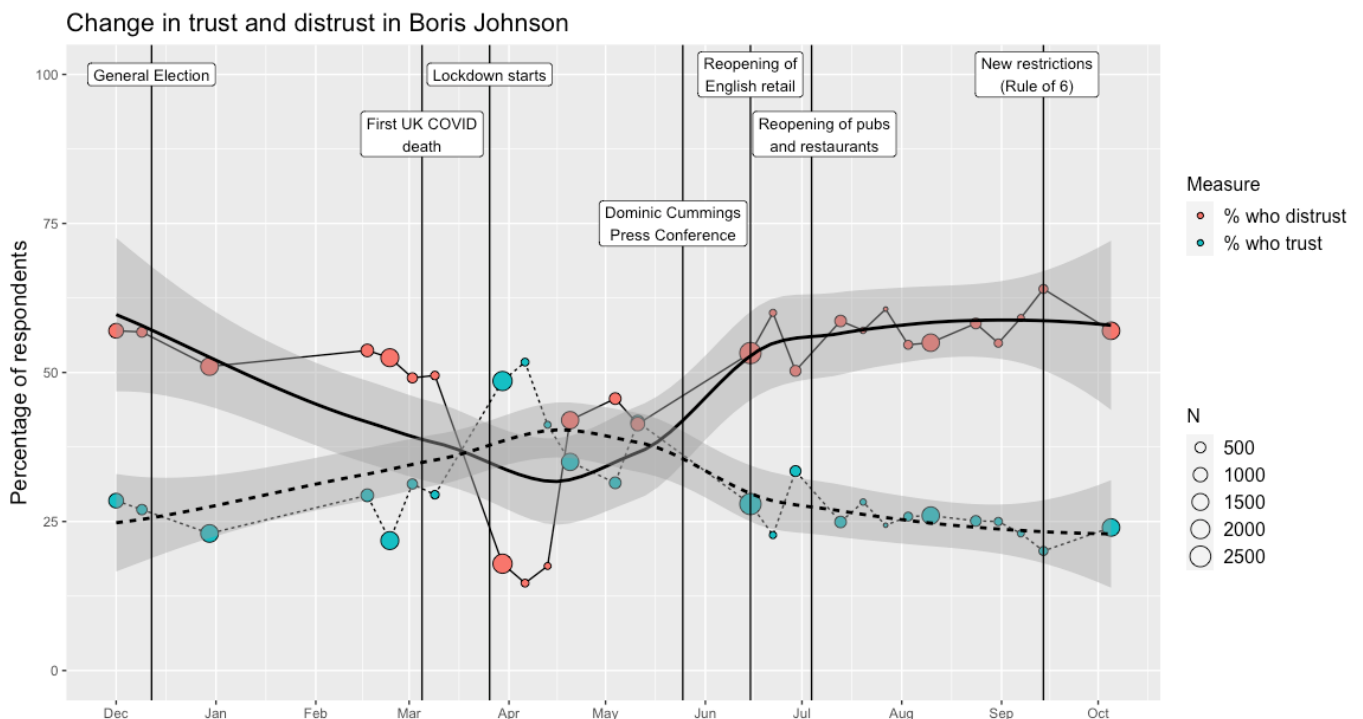
### Trust in National Political Leadership

Survey questions on trust in national political leadership specifically asked about trust in the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. An example item is “How much do you think Boris Johnson is a leader that can be trusted?” (see Figure 2). Relevant data were available from December 2019 to October 2020.

- Levels of trust in Boris Johnson were at a low point following the 2019 General Election, with only 28% of respondents indicating they trusted Boris Johnson at the end of December, and 57% indicating they distrusted him.

- However, following lockdown in March, trust had risen substantially to 49%. Levels of distrust concomitantly had fallen to 14%. This was the only time point during 2020 at which levels of trust surpassed those of distrust.
- From April onwards there was a general decline in trust in Boris Johnson, accompanied by a matching incline in distrust throughout the rest of the year.<sup>2</sup>
- By October, levels of trust in Boris Johnson had reverted to the levels observed at the beginning of the year, with 24% of respondents indicating they trusted Boris Johnson and 57% indicating they distrusted him.

**Figure 2. Change in trust and distrust in Boris Johnson from Dec. 2019 to October 2020**



<sup>2</sup> A quadratic line significantly fit the data for both trust in Boris Johnson,  $y = 29.65 - 12.15x - 21.58x^2$ ,  $p = .004$ , and distrust in Boris Johnson,  $y = 49.67 + 21.35x + 34.16x^2$ ,  $p = .006$ . From May onwards, a linear line provided the best fit for trust,  $y = 26.92 - 14.43x$ ,  $p = .002$ . Both linear,  $y = 55.32 + 15.83x$ ,  $p = .003$ , and quadratic,  $y = 55.32 + 15.83x - 8.45x^2$ ,  $p = .04$ , lines provided significant fit to the data. The quadratic model provided overall better fit,  $F(1, 12) = 5.25$ ,  $p = .04$ .

## COVID-19 Related Trust

COVID-19 related trust concerns the level of trust that respondents have in the Government to handle the coronavirus outbreak. An example item is “To what extent do you think the UK Government is handling the COVID-19 response well or badly?” (see Figure 3). Relevant data were available from March to October 2020. Whereas the measures of general political trust measures implicitly focus on a basket of aspects such as moral probity, benign intent and so forth, these more specific measures of COVID-19 related trust focus on the competence and technical capacity of government. While one might expect the general and specific measures to be closely related it is plausible that judgements of competence might reflect and respond to external events differently.

- The first available measures of COVID-19 related trust in the UK date from March 2020, immediately after the first confirmed COVID-19 death in the country. From that point on there were growing calls to introduce a lockdown.<sup>3</sup>
- Levels of trust were initially high and fluctuated between 48% and a peak of 60% during the first month of lockdown (April). Distrust, even more strongly, reached its lowest point in this period following the introduction of lockdown.
- As with general political trust, measures of COVID-19 related trust revealed a gradual linear fall from May onwards, with small fluctuations but a general downward trend for the rest of the year. By October, levels of COVID-19 related trust had fallen to 25%.<sup>4</sup>
- Levels of distrust showed a linear rise from May onwards,<sup>5</sup> again with some fluctuations, and began to level out from September. Levels of COVID-19 related distrust reached 68% in October. Notably, the fluctuation in distrust is much larger than that of trust, suggesting that people feel more consistent in their level of trust, with distrust being more volatile.

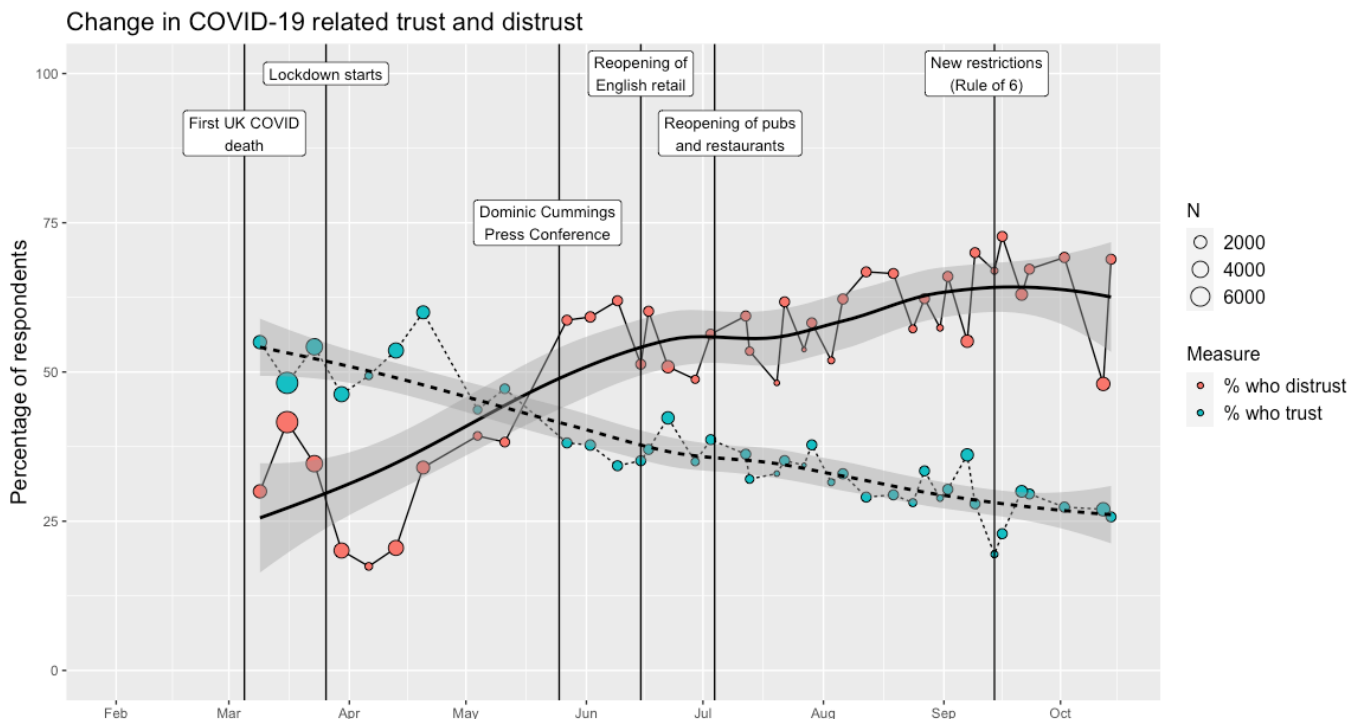
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<sup>3</sup> See for example the petition demanding the implementation of a UK lockdown, which gathered 400,000 signatures in just a few hours (<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/301397>).

<sup>4</sup> Available data suggested no discernible difference in COVID-19 related trust between Northern and Southern regions of England.

<sup>5</sup> A linear line provided the best fit for COVID-19 related trust,  $y = 36.35 - 52.77x$ ,  $p < .001$ . For distrust, a quadratic polynomial line,  $y = 53.25 + 73.22x - 19.73x^2$ ,  $p = .02$ , provided better fit than a linear line,  $y = 53.25 + 73.22x$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 37) = 6.29$ ,  $p = .02$ . From May onwards a linear line provides the best fit for the distrust measures,  $y = 58.52 + 29.54x$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 3. Change in COVID-19 related trust and distrust from March to October 2020**



## Community, Belonging, and Sense of Unity and Division

### Community Belonging (Sense of Connection)

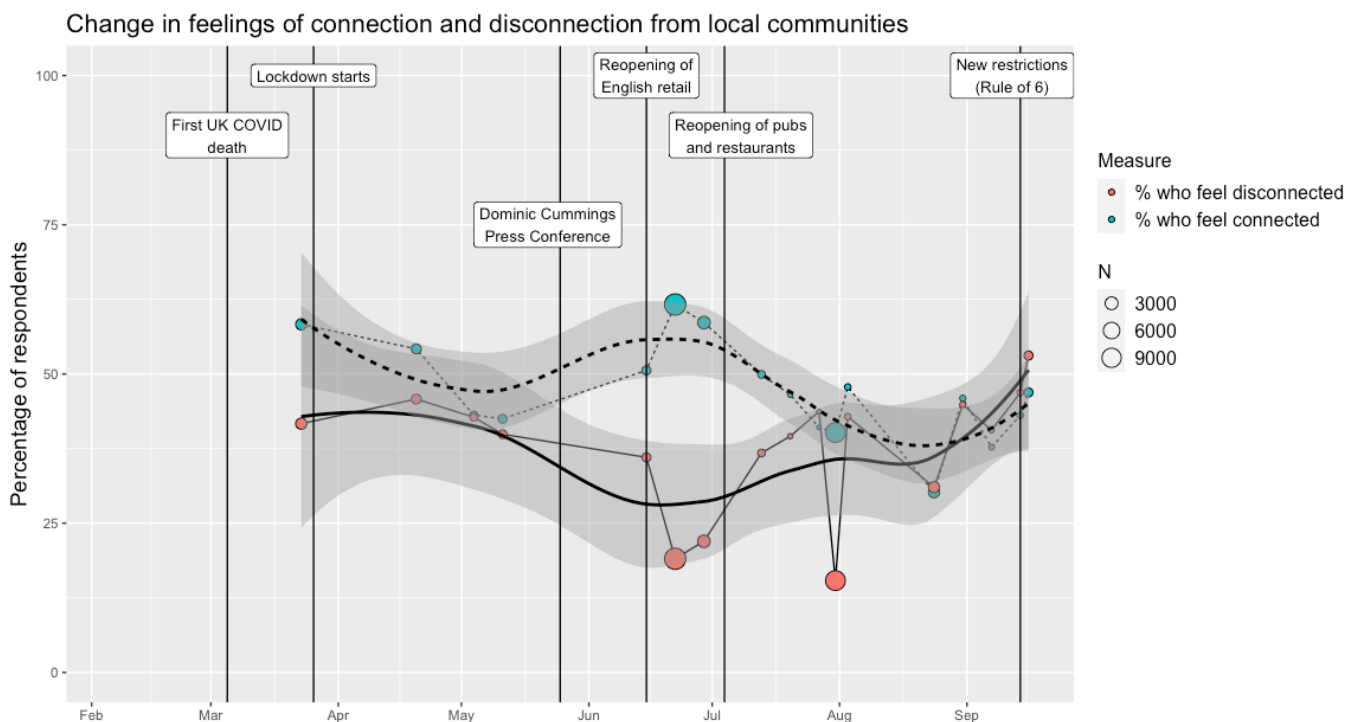
Measures of community belonging broadly concern respondents' sense of connection to their local community. An example item is "How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood?" (see Figure 4). Relevant data were available from late March to October 2020.

- Levels of connection started relatively high in the spring, with 58% of people feeling connected to their community in March (versus 41% disconnected).
- However, sense of community connection progressively decreased during lockdown, having declined by 16% to 42% feeling connected in May (and 40% disconnected).



- Community connection increased again in the summer with the progressive relaxation of rules (e.g., reopening of English retail outlets in June), reaching a peak of 62% feeling connected and a low of 18% feeling disconnected.<sup>6</sup>
- Feelings of connection then started to fall again with 46% feeling connected and 53% feeling disconnected in September.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to earlier in the year, the disparity between feelings of connect and disconnect became much smaller, with only a 7% difference in September versus a 17% difference in March. This indicates a converge between the percentage of people feeling connect and disconnect to their local communities.

**Figure 4. Change in feelings of (dis)connection with local communities from March to October 2020**



<sup>6</sup> A second notable drop in feelings of disconnection is also apparent in August. However, data for this time point are obtained from a measure of 'change' in community belonging, with neutral category representing 'no change.' Additional analysis of the data indicated that 44% of respondents on this survey measure indicated that their sense of belonging had not changed. The higher percentage of respondents falling into this neutral category results in an apparent drop in the number feeling disconnected.

<sup>7</sup> For feelings of connection, a quartic polynomial line,  $y = 46.96 - 16.80x - 2.98x^2 - 1.70x^3 + 18.73x^4$ ,  $p = .008$ , provided significant fit to the data. For feelings of disconnect, a quadratic line,  $y = 37.76 + 3.07x + 23.59x^2$ ,  $p = .02$ , provided significant fit.

## UK and Local Division and Unity

Measures of UK division concern the extent to which respondents feel that the UK is becoming more divided or more united over time. An example item is “To what extent do you think the UK as a whole is becoming more united or divided?” Likewise, measures of local division and unity represent perceptions that the respondents’ local area is becoming more united or more divided (see Figure 5). This shows substantial changes in perceptions of unity and division across the year.

### UK Division and Unity

- A strong perception that the UK was divided was evident following the General Election of 2019, with only 12% of respondents feeling the UK was becoming more united and 66% feeling that the UK was becoming more divided.
- Perceptions of UK division became more evenly distributed between the months of April and May, and for a brief period at the beginning of May the percentage of people perceiving that the UK was becoming more united (42%) was 12% higher than the percentage perceiving the UK as becoming more divided (30%).<sup>8</sup>
- For the remainder of the year, perceptions of growing UK division gradually re-emerged and by September only 15% of respondents perceived growing unity whereas 66% perceived growing divisions.

### Local Division and Unity

- In contrast, levels of *local* division and unity remained relatively stable throughout the year. Perceptions of local division showed only a 10% variation rising from 9% in May to 19% in September. Across this same time period, perceptions of division across the UK as a whole had risen by 36%.<sup>9</sup>

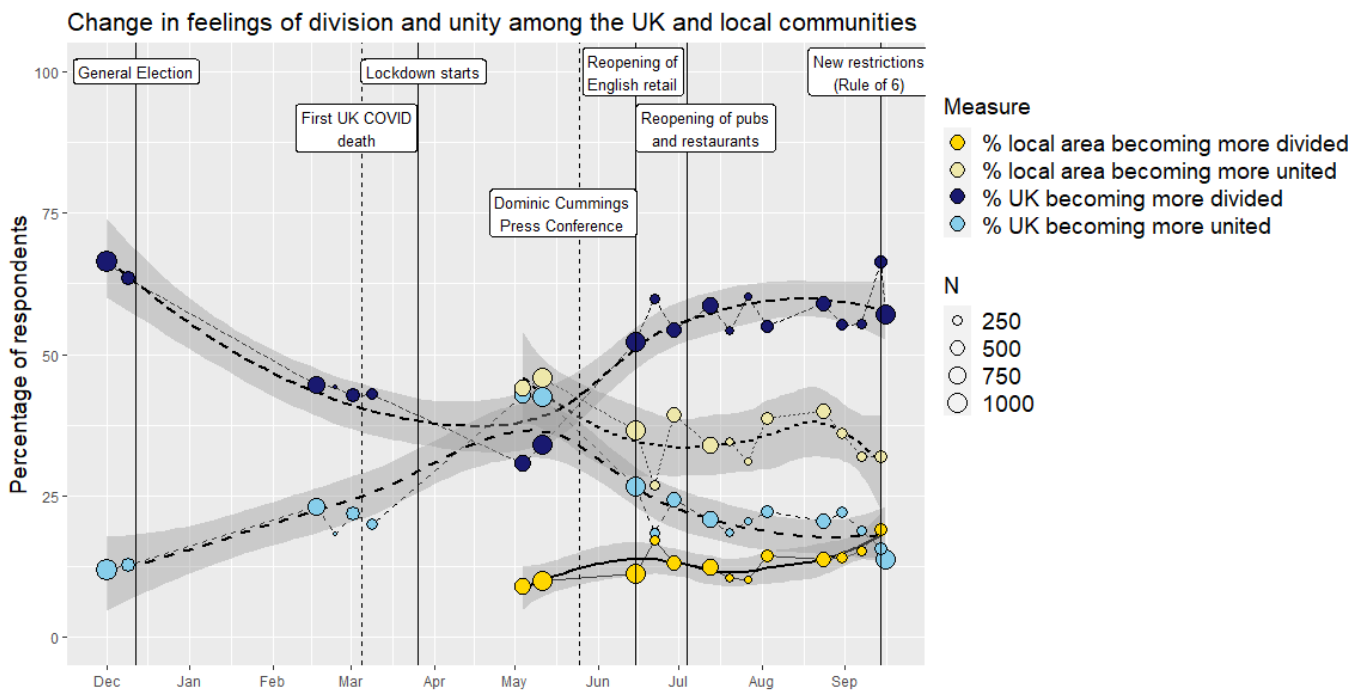
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<sup>8</sup> For perceptions of UK unity, a quartic polynomial line provided significant fit to the data,  $y = 21.76 + 1.72x - 23.98x^2 - 0.78x^3 + 14.69x^4$ ,  $p = .01$ . For perceptions of UK division, a cubic polynomial line provided the best fit,  $y = 52.83 + 10.05x + 30.99x^2 - 17.04x^3$ ,  $p = .009$ . For perceptions of local unity, only a linear line provided marginally significant fit,  $y = 36.20 - 9.33x$ ,  $p = .07$ .

<sup>9</sup> For perceptions of local division, a linear line provided significant fit,  $y = 13.05 - 6.73x$ ,  $p = .02$ . From May onwards, linear, quadratic, cubic and quartic lines all provided significant fit for perceptions of UK unity,  $y = 23.41 - 26.31x + 12.89x^2 - 8.44x^3 - 4.94x^4$ ,  $p = .05$ , with the quartic model providing better overall fit than the linear:  $F(3, 9) = 18.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , quadratic:  $F(2, 9) = 10.05$ ,  $p = .006$ , and cubic models:  $F(1, 9) = 5.13$ ,  $p = .05$ . Linear, quadratic, and cubic lines provided significant fit for perceptions of UK division,  $y = 53.72 + 26.87x - 17.21x^2 + 9.18x^3$ ,  $p = .03$ . The cubic model provided better fit than the linear,  $F(2, 10) = 14.56$ ,  $p = .001$ , and quadratic models,  $F(1, 10) = 6.47$ ,  $p = .03$ .

- Equally notable is that, in contrast to levels of UK unity, the percentage of people perceiving that their local area was more unified was consistently greater than the percentage perceiving it to be divided. From the later part of August through to the beginning of September, levels of local division begin to show small upward trends and unity small downward shifts, but large numbers perceive the levels to be unchanged. Overall then, the picture is that local unity and division is much more stable and generally more balanced in the direction of unity, than is the national picture.

**Figure 5. Change in feelings of division and unity among the UK (in blue) and local communities (in yellow) from December 2019 to October 2020**



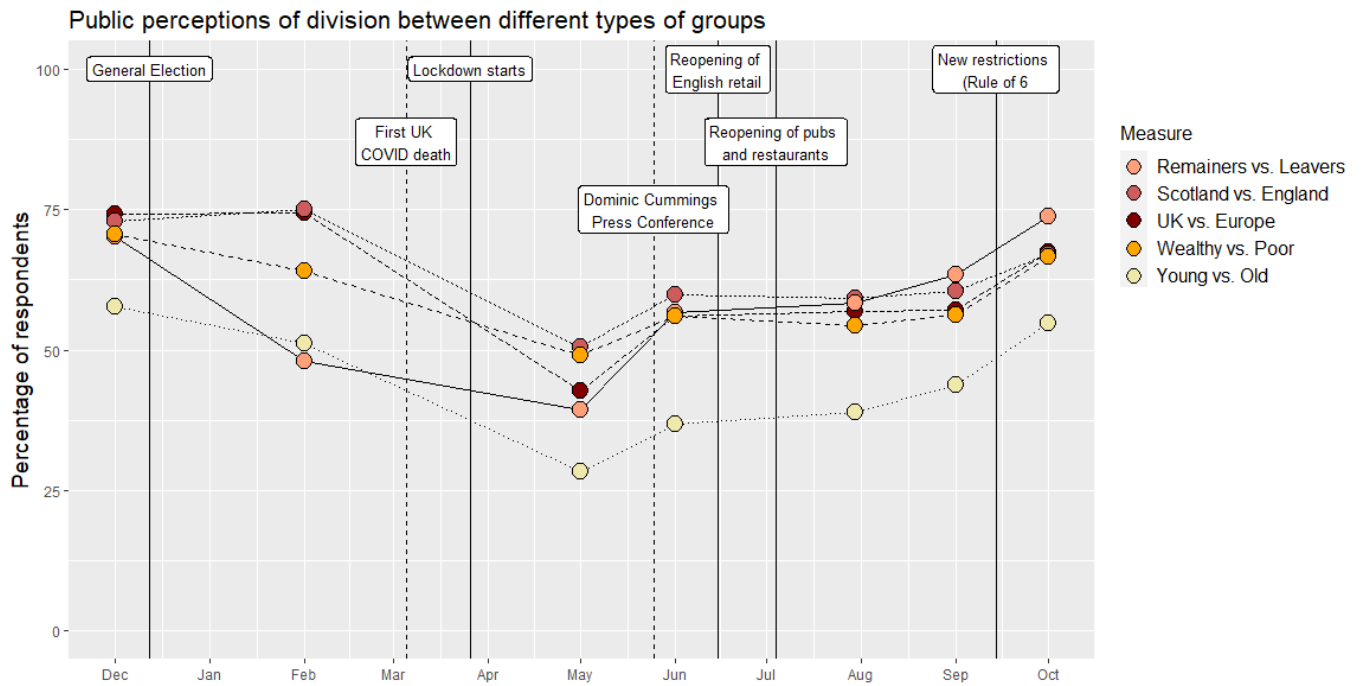
## Division Between Different Types of Groups

In order to explore the potential meanings of national unity of disunity, it is possible to consider divisions between different types of groups. The following analysis draws on comparative evidence of divisions between different groups collected via the Nuffield Foundation funded project ‘Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19.’ Specifically, we chart the levels of perceived division between the UK and Europe, between Scotland and England, between Remainers and Leavers, between the wealthy and the poor, and between young and old across the period spanning December 2019 to October 2020 (see Figure 6).

- Across all group comparisons, most pairs of groups were perceived as significantly divided in December 2019, right before the General Election (most notably: UK vs. Europe, Scotland vs. England, and Remainers vs. Leavers).
- The percentage of respondents that perceived growing division dropped substantially by May 2020. This drop was most pronounced for the perceived division between the UK and Europe which dropped from 74% in February to 42% in May. Perceived divisions between Scotland and England also reduced substantially, from 75% to 50% in the same period. This perhaps reflected a sense that Brexit was indeed ‘done’ and that the direct political divisions surrounding that issue were no longer so keenly felt or experienced.
- However, the evidence does not suggest that these divisions had abated more than briefly. Consistent across all group comparisons, between May and October we observed a gradual increase in the percentage of people that perceived growing divisions between groups. This upward trend was most notable for the percentage that perceived growing division between Remainers and Leavers which by October had reached 73%. This is an even higher percentage than seen at the 2019 General Election (70%) and coincided with renewed media focus on Brexit in October, including the controversial Internal Market Bill.

Although the re-emergence of Brexit related divisions is perhaps unsurprising, it is notable that other divisions, not particularly linked to Brexit, also resurfaced and have a trajectory of increasing. Although the rates of increase are far from exponential, it should be noted with some concern that there is a slight acceleration in the slopes from September to October in perceived divisions between the wealthy and poor and young and old, both of which are critical divides to bridge in order to sustain wider social cohesion.

**Figure 6. Change in perception of divisions between pairs of groups from December 2019 to October 2020**



## Conclusion and Implications

### Political Trust

The data presented in this report highlight several implications of the coronavirus pandemic for levels of trust and belonging within the UK. In line with previous research measures of trust taken pre-COVID indicate that general political trust in the UK was generally very low, perhaps rather entrenched through the years of the EU referendum and subsequent Brexit. However, also in line with past research and theory on trust in response to crises, all measures of trust revealed substantial rises at the onset of the UK's lockdown response to the pandemic. Across measures, levels of trust remained high for the month period following lockdown. However, they then revealed gradual decline for the remainder of the year. Although the wider perils from this pandemic have yet to reveal themselves, the initial trust dividend that may have facilitated collective resilience through the first lockdown appears to have all but evaporated. Confirmation of predictions derived from past theory and research offers a small scientific consolation for the ensuing challenge that the initial crisis-induced trust that people placed in the Government to manage this national crisis has been short lived. It is quite doubtful that further crisis will necessarily generate the same level of trust as people reflect on their disappointment from the first time around.

Beyond the immediate problem of re-securing trust, the short time span of this enhanced trust has longer term implications for the design and implementation of governmental responses to crisis events. Clearly there is likely to be a narrow window in which there is an excellent opportunity to capitalise on elevated public trust but this needs to be seized quickly and with a well-prepared plan of action. Because we know that trust is predictive of compliance with Government guidelines and restrictions (including those relating to coronavirus) the question is whether that trust could have been better entrained and used, and whether there are specific ways in which that might be achieved in the event of a future pandemic or other crisis.

Alternatively, an argument could be made that, given the similar patterns across different types of measures of trust, the short term peak of crisis-induced trust is an inevitable phenomenon that is well beyond any political or policy leverage. For example, initial rises in trust may simply reflect people's natural desire for certainty and structure during crises, and as things being clearer or more predictable their need to trust authority wanes. But even if this

was the case the importance of effective government action in responding to these needs and motivations remains clear. Consider the counterfactual of a much more laissez faire approach during April which might have resulted in a much more rapid loss of trust and then further difficulties in securing and coordinating public cooperation in the months that followed.

A further alternative interpretation is that trust is extremely responsive to particular events or information. For example, it is plausible that the declines in trust observed in this research were a reaction to highly salient episodes during the Government's handling of the virus. The most obvious example of this is that levels of political distrust increased sharply on or shortly after the 25<sup>th</sup> May, which coincides with the press conference given by Dominic Cummings in response to his trip to Durham in which he was widely viewed as having broken the COVID-19 lockdown rules (see also Fancourt et al., 2020, on confidence between April and June). Although it is difficult to concretely relate the drop in trust to this episode, such an effect does point to the very significant consequences when leaders breach not just legal but moral contracts with their groups (Abrams et al., 2014). Research on leadership generally shows that, people are more responsive to and more supportive of leaders that they perceive to be representative of the group (e.g., the country), embodying its values and interests. Events and behaviours that establish a 'one rule for them, one rule for us' narrative therefore inevitably present a barrier to hamper trust in Government.

A challenge during crises is that although the public may look to its political leaders for greater certainty and decisiveness, the political decision-making process itself needs to remain flexible, open to new information, and responsive to changing circumstances. The question then is how a system (or government) that, even temporarily, needs to ask for a high degree of compliance and uniformity among its population can retain flexibility and diversity of thinking in its leadership. There is clearly a need to develop strategies to navigate these types of issues as a part of any efforts to manage a sustained crisis.

**Policy implications:** A part of any efforts to manage a sustained crisis,

- Planning should assume that the window for highly elevated trust arising from a crisis may be brief, and thus there need to be rapid and clear plans to capitalise on that trust for both short- and longer-term objectives;

- During crisis it is essential that leadership exemplifies those things it demands of the population – to lead by example;
- Planning should address the best ways to balance the necessary flexibility needed for appropriate high-level policy determination with the clarity and consistency needed for effective policy implementation.

## Community Belonging

The evidence on community belonging and division also has implications for how the immediate and longer-term aspects of this pandemic might be addressed. For example, we observed increases in the levels of both community belonging and UK unity during the height of the pandemic. To an extent, these increases in social unity coincide with the increases of political trust, and more directly with a strong convergence in people's circumstances in the general national lockdown and effort to combat coronavirus. So it is fairly clear that a strong sense of both national and local unity may well be a highly effective component of managing an effective national response to the virus. However, it also appears that this state may be difficult to sustain. First, perhaps reflecting the greater continuity and stability of the more local environment, we find that perceptions of local division and unity remained much more stable over the course of the pandemic than perceptions of UK division. Second, whereas levels of UK unity showed a linear decline following its brief spike in the middle of the year, levels of local unity remained high and stable. What are the implications of this?

If people generally perceive their local communities as being relatively united, but see the UK as a whole as being prone to becoming increasingly divided, it seems likely that they would more readily turn to their local area for guidance and leadership. This is because it is likely that people will perceive more localised sources as offering greater and more trustworthy certainty. Large groups naturally have a tendency to fragment (cf., Brewer, 2003; Dunbar, 1998) so one conclusion from this is that it would be wise to work with the grain of people's propensity to adhere more closely to local than national identity. Given the impact that cohesion has for both group level decision making and community resilience, these trends are consistent with an inference that effective approaches to crisis management will necessarily involve the active involvement of relatively local institutions, where cohesion is higher. In so far as any national level strategies to respond to the crisis may depend on trust and cohesion, it seems



clear that there should be a high degree of endorsement from and coordination with more local levels for successful implementation.

The evidence here also points to other areas of concern. We see growing signs of division between different sectors of society. Not just the re-emergence of questions about the UK's connection to Europe, but of national divisions within the UK itself, of divisions of inequality and of intergenerational division. It is quite likely that the different approaches to tackling the coronavirus across Europe and between devolved administrations within the UK have been partly responsible for the former, but the latter seem more likely to reflect perceptions of how the various behavioural restrictions and lockdown levels have affected people unequally. As the current short to medium term prospects include massive rises in unemployment, declining in-work income, and enormous pressures on local services it seems quite possible that these other types of division may become increasingly visible and important. So a key question is whether the capacity for local areas to establish and sustain cohesion might provide some kind of amelioration or mitigation for such effects.

**Policy implications:**

- Given the greater stability and strength of locally based connection, nationally based strategies to deal with crisis and mitigate its effects are likely to have greater success if implemented at the local level and by local agents and institutions;
- A further implication is that policy space is also needed for more bespoke localised strategies that directly address distinctive needs and interests of particular sub-populations;
- Given the re-emergence of longer standing divisions after the initial responses to crisis, it will be necessary to quickly develop policies to prevent such divisions becoming more extreme as other strains are placed on society;
- The longer term impacts of the pandemic also implicate a wider set of conflicts and divisions that pose significant threats to cohesion invoking a range of intergroup tensions, such as inter-regional, socio economic status and intergenerational, as well as other axes of inequality. It is important to attend to these earlier rather than later in order to avoid potential harms and costs in multiple domains (e.g. justice, crime and security, health, political stability).

## Concluding Remarks

Overall, the trends in trust and cohesion observed in this report are consistent with those that might have been anticipated from a wider body of theory and research. Thus, following a national crisis we would expect to see an immediate and steep incline in trust, unity, and cohesion and we would also expect to see these gradually revert of some kind of resting point similar to pre-crisis levels. However, in the present case it is important to reflect that the ‘pre-crisis’ levels were already far from optimal because they were at the culmination of an extremely rancorous period in the UK’s political and economic history, namely a decade of austerity followed by Brexit. Thus, we should question whether the pre-crisis levels are in any way acceptable or satisfactory, and we should view with considerable concern the prospect that trust and cohesion may actually be on a trajectory to become even worse than the pre-crisis levels.

Looking ahead, some of the most immediate challenges would be distribution of vaccination, and dealing with employment, housing, health and education. It is inevitable that government and local authorities will need to communicate regularly with the population in order to manage these areas effectively, given the rapid rate of change. Effective communication is likely to be achievable only if: people have sufficient trust in the political system as a whole and leadership in particular; and people feel well connected to local agents with whom they are most likely to interact and turn to for support and guidance.

- **Efforts to build trust and cohesion and capitalise on local structures are likely to provide the greatest resilience and capacity to emerge strongly from the challenges of the pandemic.**

To conclude on a positive note, the upswing in trust and cohesion demonstrates what is possible and what we can aspire to. Regardless of the impact of particular events across this period, the opportunity remains open for policy to address and make better use of strategies to build social cohesion at multiple levels, from national to hyperlocal, in its efforts to respond to the difficult years ahead.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. List of Surveys

Survey	Provider/Funding Body	Time Points	Sample Type	Total N
<b>British Election Study</b>	University of Manchester/University of Oxford. Funded by ESRC	One wave study spanning 13 - 23 December 2019	UK Representative	N = 30,888
<b>Centre for Longitudinal Studies</b>	Funded by ESRC	Wave 1 of a longitudinal cohort study spanning 4 - 26 May	UK Representative	N = 16,784
<b>ComRes</b>	Independent Organisation	Snapshot Political Tracker conducted in May, July, August, and September with an additional snapshot coronavirus poll conducted in October	UK Representative	Approx. 2,000 respondents per snapshot poll
<b>COVID-19 Psychological Research Consortium Study</b>	Universities of Sheffield, Liverpool, Royal Holloway and University College London. Funded by ESRC	Three wave longitudinal study with waves occurring in March, April and July	UK Representative	Wave 1: 2,024 Wave 2: 1,399 Wave 3: 1,166
<b>COVIDistress Survey</b>	International research consortium with researchers from 50+ universities. Lead by Aarhus University	Single period of data collection from 30 March - 20 April	Snowball/Convenience sample	N = 1,289
<b>Demos</b>	Independent Charity	Single time point of data collection from 31 July - 7 August	UK Representative	N = 10,000
<b>Imperial College London YouGov COVID-19 Behaviour Tracker</b>	Partnership between Imperial College London and YouGov	Weekly survey beginning 1 April - Current	UK Representative	Approx. 1,000 respondents per week
<b>IPSOS MORI</b>	Independent Organisation	Monthly snapshot political monitor occurring in March, June, August, and September	UK Representative	Approximately 1000 respondents per survey

<b>Measuring Worldwide COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs</b>	Consortium of 12 international institutions	Continuous snowball sampling from 20 March - 7 April. Additional representative sample collected via Prolific from 28 - 29 March	Snowball/Convenience sample and UK representative (Prolific sample)	N = 11,270 (1000 for Prolific sample)
<b>NatCen</b>	Independent Organisation	Snapshot survey with data collected from 2 - 26 July	UK Representative	N = 2,141
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	Partnership between Belong Network and University of Kent. Funded by Nuffield Foundation	Four wave longitudinal survey with waves occurring in May, June, July, and August/September	Panel sampling from Kent, Scotland and Wales	Wave 1: 1,578 Wave 2: 1,768 Wave 3: 1,319 Wave 4: 1,334
<b>Social Fabric</b>	Independent Think-Tank. Data collected by Hanbury Strategy. Funded via donation and sponsors	Snapshot poll occurring between 28 - 31 August	UK Representative	N = 1,493
<b>Survation</b>	Independent Organisation	Snapshot polls conducted in April, May, June, July, August and September	UK Representative	Approx. 1,000 respondents per survey
<b>UoK Survey</b>	Research conducted by University of Kent (CSGP)	Two wave longitudinal survey with waves occurring in December 2019 and February 2020	Panel sampling from Kent, Scotland and Wales	Wave 1: 1,558 Wave 2: 1,631
<b>Understanding Society</b>	Household longitudinal study based at University of Essex. Funded by ESRC	Wave 3 of a longitudinal survey conducted from 25 June - 1 July	UK Representative	N = 13,801
<b>Wellcome COVID Monitor</b>	Data collection provided by NatCen	Snapshot survey with data collected between 30 March - 26 April	UK Representative	N = 2,645
<b>YouGov</b>	Independent Organisation	Various snapshot surveys and poll trackers conducted from December 2019 - current	UK Representative	Approx. 1,600 - 2,000 respondents per poll



## Appendix 2. Feasibility Analysis

Inevitably, different surveys have employed different operationalisations of particular constructs (e.g., measures of trust). These variations include different question items and different scale anchoring. For example, some political trust items measure ‘trust in MPs’ whereas others measure ‘trust in government.’ Some surveys utilise Likert scales ranging from 1-5, whilst others utilise scales ranging from 1-7, 1-4, or 0-10. The first task was therefore to establish whether, for any particular construct (e.g., political trust) these different question wordings, and different response formats can be regarded as sharing a common meaning and can be compared statistically.

We conducted a small-scale survey of respondents in Britain. The sample was not intended to be fully representative but we ensured that it approximately matched Britain’s demographics in terms of country, gender and ethnicity ( $N = 400$ ; 200 male and 200 female, 88% residing in England, 7% in Scotland and 5% in Wales; 88% White British). Younger people were over-represented but the sample still included a wide age range ( $M$  age = 36.22,  $SD = 13.48$ , range 18-82). We asked respondents to respond to all of the different survey items used for subsequent analysis covered in this report. 200 of the respondents were presented with these items and requiring responses using a 5-point scale. The other 200 respondents were presented with the same questions but with the response options used by the original surveys from which they were drawn.

With data from participants who completed the 5-point scale version, exploratory factor analyses enabled us to identify items that did not fit consistently with the relevant construct (and thus could not be treated as sharing the same meaning as items in other surveys). Once these had been removed from the overall analysis, confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the remaining items were significantly associated with the relevant underlying construct. This established which sets of survey items, despite using different wordings, could be treated as semantically equivalent, and thus would be suitable for comparisons between surveys.

A second question is whether the scoring methodology would influence response distributions (e.g., the proportion of respondents judged to be in agreement with a particular attitude). We assessed feasibility of comparison across different response formats. Because a 5-point scale was the format used most commonly across surveys, we used the distributions of responses from the half of the sample that answered using 5-point scales as our reference format. For these 1-5 Likert scale measures (e.g., scored from 1 = most negative to 5 = most positive), we classified scores falling within 1-2 as the negative scale end (e.g., distrust or



disconnected) and scores falling within 4-5 as the positive end (e.g., trust or connected). Scores of 3 were classified as neutral. We could then compare what cut-off points or decision criteria would need to be applied to the alternative response formats in order to achieve the same percentages of respondents that would be classified as negative, neutral, or positive. We also checked whether the *proportions* of negative to positive respondents was affected by the scaling. Optimally, any transformation of scoring should achieve both similar percentages (e.g., 40% positive, 40% negative) and similar proportions (1:1 in this case). However, depending on the number of neutral responses there will always be some departures on at least one of these two criteria.

The analysis showed that the proportions of positive to negative responses on 7-point measures were most similar to the 5-point reference scales when scores of 3-5 were classified as neutral (equivalent to 3 on the 5-point scale). However, this over-excluded the actual percentages that were positive or negative. Therefore, we decided it would be more appropriate to treat 4 as the neutral category on the 7-point scale. Where 11-point scales were used, both the proportions and the percentages indicated that greatest equivalence to the 5-point scaling would involve treating the range 4-6 as neutral.

When scales only presented binary response options or had no neutral mid-point (e.g., 4-point scales), the proportions and percentages present an identical picture. We expected the absence of a neutral category to lead to small inflations in both positive and negative categories. Comparisons between the 5-point scale and original binary versions did reveal small inflations, but also confirmed that the proportion of respondents falling into positive vs. negative categories on the binary response options was broadly consistent with that derived from the 5-point scales. Consequently, for all measures included in this report, we used these positive / neutral / negative bands. This minimised the risk that the evidence from different response scales would materially inflate or deflate the number of respondents falling into different categories. However, it should be noted that even after these adjustments, the different response formats do affect the response distributions, so some of the variability in evidence may be attributable to that source.

In sum, the feasibility analysis established a set of items measuring trust and cohesion that could meaningfully be compared across surveys. It also established a procedure for scoring these in ways that maximised comparability of estimates of endorsement of each valence of response.

### Appendix 3. Measure items and scale anchors

#### Political Trust

Survey	Measure
<b>British Election Study</b>	How much trust do you have in Members of Parliament in general? (1 = No trust, 7 = A great deal of trust)
<b>Centre for Longitudinal Studies</b>	How trusting are you that British Governments, of any party, place the needs of the nation above the needs of their own political party? (0 = Not at all trusting, 10 = Extremely Trusting)
<b>COVID-19 Psychological Research Consortium Study</b>	Could you indicate how much trust you have in the following institutions? - The Government (1 = Completely trust, 3 = Trust moderately, 5 = Do not trust at all)
<b>COVIDistress Survey</b>	How much you personally trust each of the institutions below? - [Country's] Parliament/Government (0 = Do not trust at all, 10 = Complete trust)
<b>Demos</b>	For each of the following, do you think they have changed for the better or worse during the coronavirus pandemic, or have they not changed for you personally/in your personal experience? - Trust in the government (1 = Much better, 3 = No change, 5 = Much worse)
<b>Imperial College London YouGov COVID-19 Behaviour Tracker</b>	The Government of your country is: (1 = Not at all trustworthy, 5 = Completely trustworthy)
<b>Measuring Worldwide COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs</b>	How much do you trust your country's government to take care of its citizens? (1 = Strongly distrust, 3 = Neither trust nor distrust, 5 = Strongly trust)
<b>NatCen</b>	How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party? (1=Just about always, 2 = Most of the time, 3 = Only some of the time, 4 = Almost never)
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	Aggregate score of 3 items: Politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community (R), Most members of the UK Parliament are honest, I trust my local member of parliament to represent the interests of all communities across the constituency (1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)
<b>UoK Survey</b>	Aggregate score of 2 items: British politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community (R), and Most members of the UK parliament are honest (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Neither agree nor disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)

## Trust in Boris Johnson

Survey	Measure
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	Please say what you think of Boris Johnson (Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party). How much do you think he is a leader who can be trusted? (1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)
<b>UoK Survey</b>	Please indicate what you think of Boris Johnson (leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons). Do you think this is a leader who can be trusted? (1 = Not at all, 7 = Absolutely)
<b>YouGov</b>	Thinking about Boris Johnson, do you think he is trustworthy or untrustworthy? (1 = Trustworthy, 2 = Untrustworthy)

## COVID-19 Related Trust

Survey	Measure
<b>ComRes</b>	To what extent do you think that the UK government is handling the COVID-19 response well or badly? (1 = Very well, 3 = Neither well nor badly, 5 = Very badly)
<b>COVIDistress Survey</b>	How much you personally trust each of the institutions below? - [Country's] Government's effort to handle Coronavirus (0 = Do not trust at all, 10 = Complete trust)
<b>Imperial College London YouGov Covid 19 Behaviour Tracker</b>	How well or badly do you think the Government are handling the issue of the Coronavirus (COVID-19)? (1 = Very well, 2 = Somewhat well, 3 = Somewhat badly, 4 = Very badly)
<b>Measuring Worldwide COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs</b>	How factually truthful do you think your country's government has been about the coronavirus outbreak? (1 = Very untruthful, 3 = Neither truthful nor untruthful, 5 = Very truthful)
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	Aggregate score of 2 items: The government is not competent to handle the pandemic (R), and I believe the UK Government is taking adequate measures to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic (1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)
<b>Survation</b>	How much do you trust the following to provide you with information about COVID-19? - UK Government (0 = Do not trust at all, 10 = Completely trust)
<b>Wellcome COVID Monitor</b>	To what extent do you trust information about coronavirus from each of the following sources? - The UK Government (1 = Completely, 3 = Somewhat, 5 = Not at all)
<b>YouGov</b>	How well or badly do you think the UK Government are handling the issue of the Coronavirus (COVID-19)? (1 = Very well, 2 = Fairly well, 3 = Fairly badly, 4 = Very badly)

## Community Belonging

Survey	Measure
<b>COVID-19 Psychological Research Consortium Study</b>	How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood? (1 = Not at all, 2 = Slightly, 3 = Moderately, 4 = Very strongly)
<b>Demos</b>	For each of the following, do you think they have changed for the better or worse during the coronavirus pandemic, or have they not changed for you personally/in your personal experience? - Relationships between people in local communities (1 = Much better, 3 = No change, 5 = Much worse)
<b>Imperial College London YouGov Covid 19 Behaviour Tracker</b>	How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community? Would you say it is... (1 = Very strong, 2 = Somewhat strong, 3 = Somewhat weak, 4 = Very weak)
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	Aggregate of 3 items: How much do you feel that you belong to your local area?, How much do you enjoy spending time with other people in your local area?, How much do you feel a responsibility to try to improve your local area? (1 = Not at all, 3 = A moderate amount, 5 = Very) much so
<b>Social Fabric</b>	Slider scale: 0: I feel more connected to my community than I did one month ago. 100: I feel less connected to my community than I did one month ago
<b>Understanding Society</b>	Aggregate score of 2 items: I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood and I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood (1 = Strongly agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree)

## UK Division/Unity

Survey	Measure
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	To what extent do you think the members of each group listed below are becoming more united or more divided amongst themselves during the current crisis? - The UK as a whole (1 = Much more divided, 3 = No change, 5 = Much more united)
<b>UoK Survey</b>	To what extent do you think the members of each group listed below are becoming more united or more divided amongst themselves? - The UK as a whole (1 = Much more divided, 7 = Much more united)

## Local Division/Unity

Survey	Measure
<b>Social Cohesion in the Context of COVID-19</b>	To what extent do you think the members of each group listed below are becoming more united or more divided amongst themselves during the current crisis? - People in your local area (1 = Much more divided, 3 = No change, 5 = Much more united)