HATE HOPE
CHARITABLE TRUST

HOPEFUL TOWNS

BUILDING BACK RESILIENT
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE COVID-19 RECOVERY

NOVEMBER 2021

HOPEFUL TOWNS

This report has been published as part of HOPE not hate Charitable Trust's Hopeful Towns project.

The project aims to better understand what makes a place confident, optimistic and open, and to help towns across England and Wales to fulfil their potential. We want to address the root causes of hate, to stop divisive narratives from taking hold in the first place. And we want to promote policies which champion the value of towns, and stress that every town matters.

As well as producing research to understand risk and resilience in our towns, we're working with local partners in towns to develop local solutions and will be building a Towns Leadership Network to push for positive change across Britain.

Email us via towns@hopenothate.org.uk to get involved or find out more

phf Paul Hamlyn Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to understand how the coronavirus outbreak has impacted social cohesion and integration. It asks what the post-pandemic environment will look like when it comes to community resilience, and what is needed to ensure that the economic hit imposed by COVID-19 does not exacerbate tensions in communities. Ultimately, it asks how we can 'build back better' when it comes to cohesion, so that the period of hardship which is likely to follow the coronavirus pandemic does not harm resilience.

The COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a period of real economic difficulty for the UK. It has effectively created a 'perfect storm' – exposing weak social infrastructure, accelerating certain types of automation and stretching local authorities, many of which were hit hard by austerity long before the coronavirus. This is not just an economic crisis but one that undermines the resilience of our communities, and puts many at risk of division and rising hate.

Our research has consistently shown how, during economically tough periods, resentments and frustrations can brew, and people look for someone to blame. When people have little hope for their own chances in life, it is much harder for them to show openness and compassion for others. And it easier for opportunists to exploit real fears with hatred. The post-pandemic landscape therefore poses enormous challenges for community resilience.

This is likely to play out across geographic divides. Our research has consistently found that communities with the greatest anxiety about immigration and multiculturalism are also the ones which have suffered through economic decline, have weak civic, social and economic infrastructure, and feel most distant from power.

Some of the key insights from this report are listed below:

- Our polling suggests that, alongside feeling the immediate hit, Britons are anxious about the long term impact of the coronavirus outbreak. More than half (54%) say they are less hopeful for the future as a result of the pandemic, and just 28% are optimistic about a return to pre-pandemic life within a year.

- The vast majority (62%) are concerned that the coronavirus outbreak is exposing great inequality in British society. Just 20% of people say they think Boris Johnson will succeed in 'levelling up' less affluent areas of the country.

- We have identified 52 local authorities where challenges to community tensions are most likely to be exacerbated as a result of economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Each of these 52 areas fulfil three criteria: a significant short term COVID-19 impact, lower long term capacity to recover from economic shocks, and more hostile than average attitudes to migration and multiculturalism among parts of the local population.

- We believe that these are the local authorities where stresses on social cohesion have been amplified most acutely by the economic consequences of the pandemic. This does not mean they will automatically be susceptible to far right overtures, or even that they are the most vulnerable in the country to cohesion issues. But it does mean that these are the areas where COVID-19 has heightened existing risks in the most pronounced way.

- Efforts by central government to 'build back better' within these areas will need to work particularly hard to strengthen the social fabric; they will need to look beyond definitions of 'levelling up' which relate purely to economic infrastructure, and to develop initiatives which strengthen cohesion and community resilience.

- The government has a series of difficult decisions to make in the recovery process, with the country facing large economic shortfalls. But many of these will have direct consequences for community relations.

Our research shows that a move to cut benefits could expand the list of authorities where community relations are at risk by almost 50%, from 52 to 75. We identify 23 council areas – in addition to the 52 – which could be hit especially hard by cuts to Job Seeker's Allowance and Universal Credit. Such a step would create pressure on resources and in turn put community relations under further strain.

- If productivity does not recover during the years after the pandemic, eight further authorities outside our list of 52 could face more acute hardship, taking the number of communities at risk to 60. Again, this could have major knock-on effects for cohesion.

- From our engagement with community leaders and decision-makers in the 52 'at risk' areas, it was clear that recovery support from central government must be geared towards enabling integration and strengthening the social fabric. These is a need for additional support and funding for the third sector, for designated resources for neighbourhood cohesion roles, for a longer term approach to funding, and for greater investment in young people and skills.

- There was a strong sense among the 52 'at risk' areas that austerity had never really 'ended', and that another wave of cuts would leave councils with little or no capacity to strengthen trust and build community relations. Pursuing austerity measures would weaken community resilience across the board, as well as cutting services at a time when the needs of vulnerable communities have become more acute.

Post-COVID efforts to 'level up' or to 'build back better' have tended, so far, to focus on infrastructure, growth and jobs. However, given the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on community relations – and the scale of the forthcoming challenges for community resilience – it is essential that 'building back better' is also focused on strengthening civic and social infrastructure.

APPROACH

Our analysis was compiled between June and October 2021. We have used three forms of research to understand the questions at play:

- Exclusive **nationally representative polling** of 1,512 people across the UK. This was carried out by Focaldata in July 2021, and was weighted by age, gender, region, education, and 2019 General Election vote.[1] It looked at how public opinion has changed during the virus, on questions ranging from political trust to social inequality.

- **Extensive data analysis of lower level authorities**, based on a range of publicly available datasets – as well as on our own geographically modelled attitudinal data, using our Fear and Hope segmentation. This analysis looked to pinpoint areas where the economic repercussions from COVID-19 could be greatest, and where the potential risks for resilience were most acute. This identified 52 council areas where the potential challenges were especially pronounced.

- **Qualitative research** in these 52 authorities. There were two elements here: a) a survey of senior political stakeholders (Leaders and Cabinet Members responsible for cohesion) at all 52 authorities identified and b) digital round tables with stakeholders in three local authority areas (Havering, Luton and Rochdale). Those spoken to included council officers, police, and third sector organisations.

The main sections in this report use these pieces of research to examine three things (with additional input from a number of secondary sources). Section 1 looks at resilience during the pandemic and in its immediate aftermath. It is based on the experiences both of stakeholders in the highest risk areas and on wider public attitudes. Section 2 looks at where the subsequent effects of the virus are likely to be felt, when it comes to cohesion – building primarily on our analysis of local authority data. And Section 3 looks at the steps which national government can take to avoid major cohesion challenges post-pandemic, based on all three research components. We conclude with six core principles for 'building back resilient'.

At the
DIGITAL ROUND-TABLES
we engaged with

37

local stakeholders across

3

local authorities

Via the
ONLINE SURVEY
we engaged with

19

senior councillors across

14

local authorities

1. RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19

WHAT WE MEAN BY RESILIENCE

The coronavirus outbreak had an immediate effect on communities across the UK, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. While some of the consequences of the pandemic were immediate, the longer term costs are just starting to emerge. The UK faces a period of substantial economic downturn, adding to the existing challenges posed by Brexit.

HOPE not hate Charitable Trust has long understood that, in times of economic scarcity, community relationships become more fragile. We have seen, time and time again, how hardship can brew resentments and frustrations. These are often exploited by those who seek to divide, with immigration and growing diversity having become totemic emblems for the grievances which many people feel across Britain. As such, the long term economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic present a direct threat to community resilience.

We use the term resilience to mean:

- the extent to which a place is confident, open and optimistic;
- how much the community there is able to adapt to change or absorb shocks;
- how much agency residents feel, and how much trust there is likely to be for decision-makers, outsiders and each other;
- how positive residents are about racial and cultural difference;
- how able the community is to withstand abrupt demographic shifts or one-off flashpoints, without these events escalating;
- and, correspondingly, how predisposed a place is to welcome migrants, refugees or other new groups.

Low resilience represents the 'dry brushwood', whereby it is easier for a one-off flashpoint to 'take light' – leading to adverse community outcomes. Low resilience does not guarantee that an area will see a rise in hate crimes or in electoral successes for the far-right. But it does mean that the susceptibility for issues to ignite is greater. The less a community is resilient, the greater the risk is that attitudes could – under certain circumstances – spiral in an authoritarian or xenophobic direction.

DEEPENING DIVIDES

From the outset of the pandemic, it was clear that its impacts would not be felt equally across different parts of the population. The coronavirus outbreak has, in many instances, exacerbated and amplified existing inequalities in wealth, race, gender, age, education and geographical location. This applies when it comes to both the exposure to the disease itself, and to the economic impact of lockdown measures.

Mortality rates in the most deprived areas of England were twice those in the least deprived, and it has been well documented[2] that Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) people have been disproportionately affected in terms of health outcomes.[3] Meanwhile, the UK's wealth divide grew thanks to the lockdowns, with rising house and asset prices expanding the gap between Britain's richest and poorest.[4] Cuts to Universal Credit are set to push more than 800,000 people into poverty.[5]

From healthcare and education to housing and work, the needs of many vulnerable groups have therefore become more acute during the period since Match 2020.[6] This presents clear challenges to community resilience – which was already much stronger in some areas than in others.

Moreover, the UK is one of the most regionally unbalanced economies in the industrialised world, and the economic shock of the pandemic is likely to add to the challenges faced by many communities across the country. Widening inequalities have the potential to fuel political polarisation and division – feeding resentments and frustrations, and creating a space for those who seek to divide.

At present there is little to indicate that community resilience will be prioritised in the recovery from COVID-19. Given the prospect of deepening divides, investing in communities for integration and cohesion must be a core part of the effort to 'build back better'.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ROOTS

The centrality of community roots as a foundation for resilience became clear early on in the pandemic. We saw the growth of new and existing

mutual aid groups, grassroots support for people needing help, and an upsurge in volunteering. These things suggested a greater sense of connection.[7]

Indeed, our focus groups and survey data reflected this resurgence of community spirit. Community stakeholders that we spoke to, from the 52 'at risk' authorities which we identify in this report, described the strong and lasting bonds created in some areas, as a result of people pulling together:

> *"Groups that were set up initially for mutual aid have turned into larger...general community groups. And so the original purpose for [them] being set up has definitely changed."*

> *"The pandemic has, in the face of adversity, created a real tangible community that we have not seen...for many years!"*

Nonetheless, the spread of mutual aid groups across the UK also mimics existing socio-economic inequalities. More disadvantaged areas, with lower social capital and less community resilience, were less likely to benefit from community mobilisation of these kinds during the pandemic.

Research from the Bennett Institute has corroborated this, by mapping the geographic spread of mutual aid groups in the UK. It found significant positive correlations between the number of mutual aid groups per 10,000 people and measures of socio-economic advantage (such as gross disposable household income per head and the share of individuals with an undergraduate degree or above).[8].

The role of mutual aid groups and growing community action is, of course, an important and positive outcome. But there remain questions about why some areas were so much more able than others to harness social capital in this way. As some of our stakeholders emphasised, the coronavirus outbreak has exposed major inequalities when it comes to civic engagement and social capital.

Moreover, in many places, existing initiatives to strengthen community resilience were paused or stopped altogether at the outset of the pandemic, as strained resources were moved directly towards frontline service provision. As we heard through our stakeholder engagement:

> *"Activities and events that bring people together haven't happened for the past 18 months and are likely to be slow to resume. Communities have become less cohesive as a consequence."*

The past 18 months have, quite clearly, been a period of immense pressure for councils, during which bandwidth had been reduced. *"It's difficult to [talk about cohesion] as we only seem to have dealt with the pandemic to the detriment of other issues,"* explained one Councillor we spoke to. This was most acute in areas where social infrastructure was weakest to start with, and where already precarious voluntary organisations were feeling the strain of the increased needs of vulnerable groups.

Indeed, many of the discussions we had with stakeholders in our qualitative research centred on the operational response to the pandemic, the performance of the council in making sure this was equitable, and the inequalities exposed by the virus. Issues like community relations had, perhaps understandably, not been top of mind when it came to COVID-19. But it was clear that, as life returned to normal, this was changing.

CHALLENGES FOR RESILIENCE

Despite many communities coming together during COVID-19, there has been a sense among many that Britain is in fact more divided.[9] Research from the University of Essex using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study found that, overall, perceptions of community cohesion fell during the pandemic. This perception was particularly high in the most deprived communities, among certain ethnic minority groups and among those with fewer skills.[10]

This was reflected in our stakeholder research and survey data, where we heard about the day-to-day tensions which the pandemic had caused, among those in insecure and low-paid jobs. One respondent described a specific scenario, where tensions emerged around people coming from outside the borough to work at warehouse distribution centres. These workers were reportedly suspected of carrying the virus by those living in the area.

Meanwhile, misinformation and increased inter-ethnic divisions within communities led to further flashpoints and to the targeting of marginalised groups, who were already disproportionately impacted by the virus. For example, misinformation about marginalised groups breaking COVID-19 restrictions, such as Muslims congregating with families to celebrate during Eid, were exploited by figures seeking to push anti-Muslim hatred.[11]

Issues often emerged in communities where there were very diverse pockets, which had had higher levels of infection. In one instance, a stakeholder told us that a local paper had stoked divisions around this. A different Cabinet Member described an "increase in far right activity and homophobia, transphobia and conspiracy theory activity locally." Others talked about issues around hate crime and the treatment of refugees.

"At one point, the COVID 19 restrictions… differed between the different townships. Asian communities felt stigmatised. The overnight introduction of restrictions before Eid undermined cohesion."

"From my perspective, as a young person, I felt like there's been a rate rise in Islamophobia and racism since the pandemic. And there's also been a rise in East Asian hate [crime]."

Moreover, there was a general sense that the national government response had failed to manage the disproportionate impact of the virus on BAME communities. There was much criticism of central government here, for its 'one-size-fits-all' approach. For example, one council officer described how national guidance was badly translated into different south Asian languages. Other factors, such as the fact that BAME groups often live with elderly relatives, were not felt to have been considered by national policy-makers.

"Certain ethnic groups were left out at the beginning. It was only when the uproar happened in the second lockdown [and the] third lockdown that they focused on black communities."

This was said to have created tensions, harming trust in institutions among certain BAME communities, as well as making it easier for misinformation to spread in less diverse areas. Many communities moved further apart, with even fewer opportunities for common experiences and even less access to shared spaces.

THE GROWTH OF CONSPIRACY THEORY

Support for conspiracy theories tends to increase during volatile and uncertain times, so it is not surprising that the rise of conspiracy has become a prolific issue over the course of the pandemic. When large, world-changing events take place we seek meaning – and intent – behind what is going on. Simple accidents often do not suffice as explanations. Our 2021 State of Hate report found that between 15% and 22% of Brits believe in, or are open to, conspiracy theories about the virus.[12]

While many of the conspiracies at play are harmless and eccentric, they indicate a lack of faith in decision-makers. The uncertainty faced by people living through the coronavirus pandemic, twinned with broader questions of political trust and the prevalence of social media, has opened doors for conspiracy theories. Many of these have been about the pandemic itself, but any conspiracy can be a gateway to more harmful ideas. Once a person buys into one conspiracy, they are more likely to accept others, including those that feature racist tropes.

While the growth of conspiracy theory during the pandemic has largely been seen as an online phenomenon, it has often fed into divisions at a local level. Widely believed conspiracy theories forge an environment where it is easier for rumours about certain groups being 'put first' or 'going to the front of the queue' to gain traction.

In our research, one local officer described how renowned conspiracy theorist David Icke's name had started to appear, graffitied on fences. Others spoke of anti-vaccination theorists becoming more vocal.

"Without [community] groups people have nowhere to turn, they are often more isolated and therefore more vulnerable especially to those promoting hatred."

The point was not that this occurred in every part of the community, but that the lack of trust and contact with others – and the attendant retreat onto social media – represented one side of a double-edged sword. Some communities used tools like Facebook to reach out, but others turned inwards and became sucked into echo chambers. This 'patchiness' in terms of response – with some motivated to civic activism and others drawn into cynicism and conspiracy theory – was reported in several quarters.

Through our survey and round tables, we heard from some that deprived white British communities had been most likely to be drawn to anti-vaccine conspiracies. The explanation for the prevalence of conspiracies in poorer and smaller white townships was largely attributed to a lack of civic infrastructure and lower trust in institutions – alongside a feeling of resentment or loss.

"You talk to an individual in those places and they say, 'We don't trust our councillor, so we'll never go to them, we don't have any relationship with our local church, so we don't go to them'. So who do they go to? They don't go to anyone other than social media, which results in misinformation. And as a result of that, we experienced a higher rate of non-compliance from…predominantly white communities."

According some, there was an age dimension to this, meanwhile, with "low level anti-social behaviour" and "an undercurrent of resentment from young adults".

Other stakeholders described a rise in digital activism during the coronavirus outbreak. While this was largely a positive thing, they said, it came with new risks. Without there being offline outlets for people to discuss things in a productive way, debates became polarised more quickly.

Public trust in politicians and public institutions has long been a challenge, but the rise of conspiracy theory through the course of the coronavirus pandemic presents a clear additional resilience challenge for communities.

ANXIOUS BRITAIN

Our polling suggests that, alongside feeling the immediate hit, Britons are nervously anticipating the long term impact of the coronavirus outbreak. Overall, our research finds that more than half (54%) say they are less hopeful for the future as a result of the pandemic, and just 28% are optimistic about a return to pre-pandemic life within a year. A majority (62%) are concerned that the coronavirus outbreak is exposing inequality in British society.

Understandably, the impact of the coronavirus has increased anxiety among the population. Our polling finds that the majority of Britons are worried about everything from racism and the far right to the decline of the high street and a lack of opportunities for young people.

Shockingly, almost half of Britons (44%) fear that either they or a family member will lose their job in the next year, with women (46%), graduates (50%) and those under 45 (52% of 18-34s and 56% of 35-44s) all more likely to fear unemployment.

The majority (67%) are concerned about the level of poverty in Britain and a lack of opportunities for young people (71%), as well as the decline of the high street (71%). While Labour voters are more likely to be worried about the level of poverty than other voters, there is majority concern across the political spectrum.
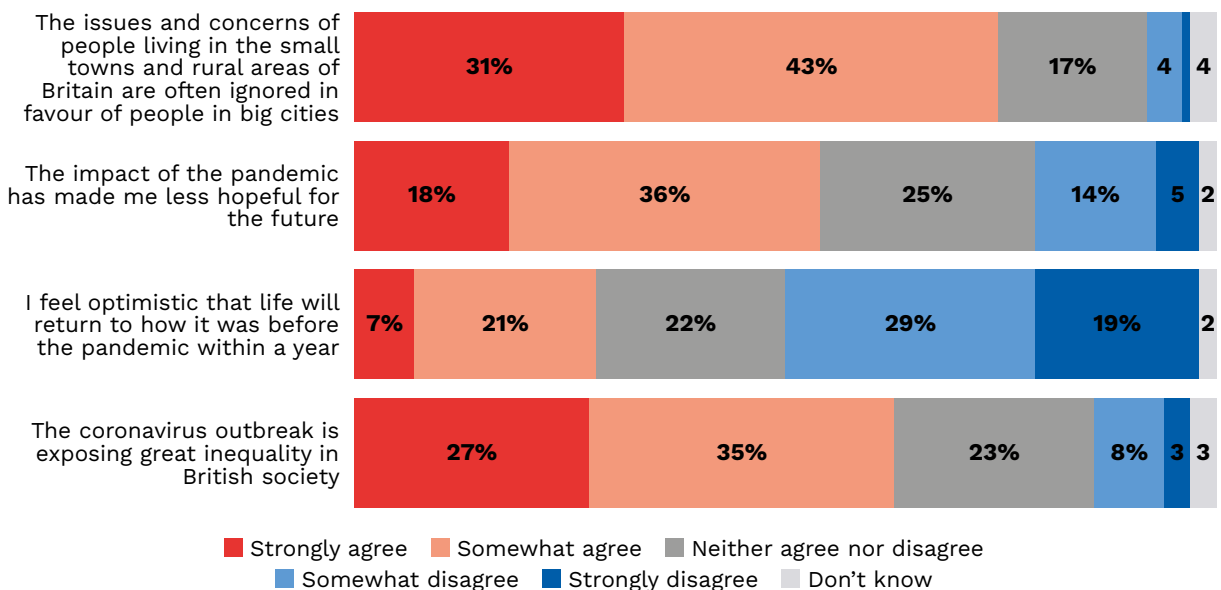
And the British public are not just concerned about the economic impacts of the pandemic, but also about what this could mean for communities. Only 15% say they are not concerned about the dangers of the far right, and 63% are worried about the level of racism in Britain. Young people voice the greatest concern about racism in Britain, but concerns spill across all age groups.

At the same time, many share concerns about the arrivals of immigrants into their community (54%) – a finding which may be closely linked to narratives of scarcity in the post-COVID world.

Immigration is often spoken about as a national issue but, as previous research has shown, it is usually seen through a local lens.[13] Our polling demonstrates this. Whereas most see the benefits of immigration at a national level, many have concerns about rapid demographic changes in their own neighbourhood.

To mitigate this, it is essential that integration is supported at the local level, and that civic infrastructure and public services are able to build bridges and support new populations.

Chart 1) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements (Total %)

Statement	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
The issues and concerns of people living in the small towns and rural areas of Britain are often ignored in favour of people in big cities	31%	43%	17%	4		4
The impact of the pandemic has made me less hopeful for the future	18%	36%	25%	14%	5	2
I feel optimistic that life will return to how it was before the pandemic within a year	7%	21%	22%	29%	19%	2
The coronavirus outbreak is exposing great inequality in British society	27%	35%	23%	8%	3	3

2. GEOGRAPHIES OF RESILIENCE

RESILIENCE IN THE POST-PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

The COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a period of real economic difficulty for the UK, adding to the existing pressures emerging from Brexit. It has effectively created a 'perfect storm' – exposing weak social infrastructure, accelerating certain types of job automation and stretching local authorities, many of which were hit hard by austerity long before the coronavirus. Indeed, the pandemic has already damaged many businesses, costing jobs and putting welfare and health systems under immense additional pressure. Britain's economy shrank by 9.9% in 2020 – the biggest dip for 300 years.[14]

For many communities, economic hardship beckons – creating new vulnerabilities to the divisive and hateful narratives which HOPE not hate seeks to combat. As our research has consistently shown, when people have little hope for their own chances in life, it is much harder for them to show openness and compassion for others.[15] People who feel a strong sense of decline can sometimes look for someone to blame for the loss they feel, or try to assert their dominance as they feel their status slip away. And this makes it is easier for opportunists to exploit fears and stoke divisions.

There is a significant geographical dimension to this. Our previous work has found that communities where anxiety about immigration and multiculturalism is greatest are often those which have suffered most through economic decline. They tend to have weaker civic, social and economic infrastructure, and to feel more distant from power. Specific local phenomena – i.e. 'uncertain industrial futures', 'visible decline' or 'competition for resources' – can also play directly into social attitudes.[16]

Understanding the places most impacted by the virus will help to identify where investment is needed, to improve the civic infrastructure and strengthen the social fabric.

WHERE THE RISKS HAVE INCREASED

Although community resilience is dependent on a myriad of complex, intersecting factors, we understand that when there is less to go around, people are more likely to be suspicious of change and difference, fearing threats to opportunities and resources. Likewise, conspicuous forms of economic decline can lead newer communities to be blamed for feelings of loss and alienation.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on these types of question has developed in unpredictable ways. It is difficult to anticipate the precise intersections between the immediate economic damage wrought by COVID-19 and the longer-term economic fallout. Moreover, it would be crude to see a straight correlation between the economic impact of COVID-19 and resilience, as some communities are more predisposed than others towards anxieties about migration and multiculturalism.

To try and understand these variables in more detail, we have separated out three key factors: the immediate impact of the pandemic, underlying economic resilience, and attitudes to immigration and multiculturalism.

A) HIGH IMMEDIATE COVID-19 IMPACT

The virus's economic repercussions have not so far indicated a uniform downturn, as other recessions have tended to do. Instead, the economic impact has affected individuals, sectors and parts of the country in highly unpredictable ways. This has been termed a 'hand-shaped' recovery;[17] certain industries have been more impacted than others, in a way that is not in line with past recessions and which could not have been foreseen.

The fortunes of Crawley, situated right next to Gatwick airport, perfectly illustrate this latter point. Crawley's Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) and Universal Credit (UC) claimant count in February 2020 was 2.2% – compared to a UK average of 2.7%. But in the subsequent year this figure increased by 6.7 percentage points, to 8.9%. This uptick is nearly twice the percentage point rise for the UK as a whole (3.8%). Thus, a town which might have assumed it had a fairly steady economy found itself at the extreme sharp end of COVID-19.

Tourist-reliant local authorities have also been hit hard, such as South Lakeland and Eden in the Lake District. Despite traditionally being some way below average when it comes to deprivation,

these districts had the 4th and 10th highest cumulative furlough rates, of nearly 340 English and Welsh council areas.

Early on in the pandemic, the RSA,[18] the Centre for Towns[19] and Tortoise[20] concluded that these sorts of places were liable to be worst hit. The RSA, for example, found "rural areas located in the north and south west of England most at risk of high job losses," with the harshest impacts occurring in "national parks, coastal towns and other tourist hotspots where the economy is geared towards hospitality and retail."

As lockdown restrictions have been lifted, this has changed somewhat. More traditionally deprived sorts of place have begun to see more pronounced challenges – most notably in densely populated parts of London, where the health impact of COVID-19 has been particularly acute.

Table 1

Top 10: Productivity decline by June 2021, relative to Jan 2020 (GVA)	Top 10: Total employments furloughed over time as % of overall population	Top 10: Feb 2020 to Feb 2021 % point rise in JSA/ UC claimants
1. Crawley	1. Crawley	1. Newham
2. Dover	2. Hounslow	2. Haringey
3. Hillingdon	3. Haringey	3. Brent
4. Bolsover	4. South Lakeland	4. Waltham Forest
5. North West Leicestershire	5. Newham	5. Barking and Dagenham
6. Hounslow	6. Tamworth	6. Ealing
7. Uttlesford	7. Brent	7. Crawley
8. Hart	8. Cherwell	8. Hounslow
9. Solihull	9. Ealing	9. Slough
10. Southampton	10. Eden	10. Lewisham

Not all regions or sectors have been affected equally by direct economic impacts of coronavirus restrictions, and it is a diverse set of local authorities which have fared worst.

Table 1 shows the top 10 local authorities for three key COVID-19 impact metrics: Gross Value Added (GVA) decline during the pandemic, furlough scheme usage, and post-COVID increase in UC/JSA claims. These three lists include parts of inner London, commuter towns, settlements near to airports, and tourist destinations. Some of these places would 'expect' to be at the frontline during any economic downturn, but others would certainly not.

B) LOW ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

The pandemic's immediate impact on different types of place is only part of the picture. Many of the badly-hit local authorities described above

start from a relatively strong position, and are better equipped to bounce back. Others may already have started to see a more rapid recovery. For example, successful tourist destinations, having been hit hard in the first instance, may have seen an economic uptick following two summers of 'staycations'. In short, places which were economically resilient to start with could bounce back quite quickly once the immediate crisis is over.

Crawley is a particularly good example. As already set out, the area was exceptionally badly impacted by COVID-19 when it comes to high economic impact. This was due to its reliance on Gatwick airport as a provider of jobs. Yet Crawley is economically resilient in a wider sense. After the 2008 banking crisis, Crawley returned to pre-crash levels of productivity by 2012, and continued to see increases in subsequent years.

By contrast, there were 37 local authorities in England and Wales that took a decade or longer to recover from the 2008 financial crash. Among these are the likes of Gateshead, North Lincolnshire and St Helens. Some have still not returned to 2007 levels of productivity.

The direct impact of coronavirus on these places varies, but there is reason to believe that their more general capacity for bouncing back from a national recession is weaker compared to somewhere like Crawley. Factors which might explain this include low levels of skills and qualifications within their populations, as well as lower numbers of job opportunities to start with. Table 2 shows the top 10 local authorities for post-2008 recovery, proportion with no qualifications and pre-COVID unemployment rates, respectively.

Table 2

Top 10: post-2008 length of recovery in terms or productivity (GVA)	Top 10: 2021 % with no qualifications	Top 10: unemployment estimates pre-COVID (2019)
1. Gateshead	1. Sandwell	1. Birmingham
2. Lancaster	2. Pendle	2. Middlesbrough
3. Wolverhampton	3. Wolverhampton	3. Hartlepool
4. Torbay	4. Leicester	4. South Tyneside
5. Harlow	5. Dudley	5. Nottingham
6. Stevenage	6. Merthyr Tydfil	6. Wolverhampton
7. Croydon	7. Burnley	7. Kingston upon Hull
8. Selby	8. Middlesbrough	8. Sunderland
9. North Lincolnshire	9. Knowsley	9. Bradford
10. St. Helens	10. Broxbourne	10. Newcastle upon Tyne

These places are distinct from those hit hardest by the coronavirus, although there are areas of significant overlap. Many are former industrial heartlands, which have long struggled with deprivation and joblessness.

In short, the immediate economic impact of COVID-19 cannot be understood in isolation. It is vital to also look at places with less inbuilt economic resilience. A moderate post-pandemic downturn in an economically vulnerable authority may cause more harm than a sharper slump in a more resilient area. If an area had low economic resilience to start with *and* was disproportionately hit by COVID-19, then we would infer that the challenges it faces in the coming years are likely to be acute.

C) LESS LIBERAL SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Despite the strong correlation between economic decline and social cohesion, financial hardship alone does not automatically indicate hostile social attitudes. While places facing significant economic pressures are, all things being equal, more vulnerable to hostile narratives about migration and multiculturalism, this is not always the case. Many other factors play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards difference and change. These include connectivity, local identity, opportunities, and historic diversity.[21]

It is important, in identifying the places at risk from cohesion challenges post-COVID-19, that we acknowledge this. Islington, for example, has been hit hard by the pandemic. The borough is in the top 20% of authorities for the fall in GVA and for the rise in benefit claimants. Many local residents live in poverty, and it fulfils two of our three wider economic vulnerability criteria. Yet it is also a very liberal place, for a range of cultural, historic and demographic reasons. It is less likely than many authorities to face post-pandemic community tensions around immigration and race, despite a tough economic outlook thanks to the virus.

Put simply, some local authorities are more predisposed than others to be liberal about migration and multiculturalism. And economic strains on these more liberal places are less likely to translate into hostility towards change or difference. Our research has persistently found this, and it is important to acknowledge.

There remain large numbers of 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns', in terms of how the coronavirus will affect different sorts of place – not least because national government policies for recovery support, debt and spending remain unclear.

Nonetheless, in understanding the impact of the pandemic on community resilience, we can assume that places with a high economic COVID-19 impact, low economic resilience to start with *and* underlying pockets of hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism will face the greatest risks.

DATA METHODOLOGY

Our analysis looks at where these three vulnerabilities are strongest, for all lower level councils across England and Wales. In examining the three criteria, we have used a number of specific metrics:

■ **High COVID impact.** This was attributed on the basis of a local area fulfilling at least one of three things:

● *Being in the top 20% worst affected council areas when it comes to the impact of COVID-19 on the area's GVA.* GVA describes the value of goods and services produced by an area. It is deduced, in this analysis, by modelling how reliant each authority is on the sectors worst-hit by the pandemic.

● *Being in the highest 20% for cumulative proportion of the workforce furloughed.* This was worked out by looking at the total number of employments furloughed between March 2020 and March 2021, as a percentage of an authority area's overall population.

● *Being among the top 20% of English and Welsh authorities for increase in welfare reliance thanks to the virus.* This was based on the percentage point rise in benefit claimants between February 2020 and February 2021.

■ **Low economic resilience.** Again, this was attributed on the basis of a local area fulfilling at least one of three things:

● *GVA not returning to 2007, pre-crash levels until 2013 or later.* This indicates places which were slower than average to return to full productivity following the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent recession.

● *Sitting among the highest 20% of council areas for unemployment estimates, prior to COVID-19.* This was based on figures for the year prior to the pandemic hitting (i.e. January 2019-December 2019).

● *Sitting among the top 20% of councils for the proportion of residents with no qualifications, prior to COVID-19.* This was deduced based on NOMIS figures for the period prior to the pandemic hitting (i.e. the January 2019-December 2019 timespan).

Table 3	High COVID impact	Low economic resilience	Less positive about migration	Number of LAs	Example authorities
Group 1	✔		✔	84	Swindon, Northampton, North Warwickshire, Slough, Crawley, Redditch
Group 2	✔	✔		84	Manchester, Enfield, Hackney, Hounslow, Islington, Lewisham, Newham, Waltham Forest
Group 3		✔	✔	110	Hartlepool, North East Lincolnshire, Tendring, Doncaster, Merthyr Tydfil

■ **Low liberalism in attitudes to immigration and multiculturalism**

● This data comes from our Fear and Hope polling series. Fear and Hope segmented the population into six attitudinal clusters: two liberal groupings, two groupings that were hostile to migration and multiculturalism, and two interim segments. The framework was modelled in 2016 to small geographical units, including local authorities. For the purpose of this report we look at:

– Local authorities which under-index (i.e. are rated below '0.00') for their 'liberalism score'; that is, the combined 2018 score for residents identifying with the two most pro-migrant segments.

The economic methodology for the above is partially informed by that used in the Centre for Progressive Policy's 2020 'Back from the brink' report,[22] as well as in their 'Skill up to level up' analysis.[23]

The impact of COVID-19 remains to be seen, and trying to predict where cohesion and resilience issues might arise is not an exact science. But the above methodology allows us to pinpoint areas which we believe are most likely to see their cohesion challenges become more pronounced thanks to coronavirus.

OUTLIERS AND EXCEPTIONS

Table 3 shows examples of the types of places which fulfil two but not three of the criteria. As the examples demonstrate, these authorities are quite distinct from each other.

Those in Group 1 (which do not fulfil the 'low economic resilience' criteria but do fulfil the other two) tend to be market towns, New Towns and commuter towns. They are well-connected and have fairly dynamic economies compared to some areas, but are not affluent.

Those in Group 2 (which are positive about migration but fulfil both sets of criteria for economic vulnerability) tend to be cosmopolitan, inner-city areas, with very diverse populations. We would infer that they are more likely to have internal economic equality, with tensions emerging around issues like housing and gentrification, than to see a far right threat.

Those in Group 3 (which do not fulfil the COVID impact criteria but do fulfil the other two) tend to be post-industrial towns and other poorly connected areas, with very longstanding economic decline. They are not diverse, as a rule, and are less reliant on tourism, light industry, travel and service industries.
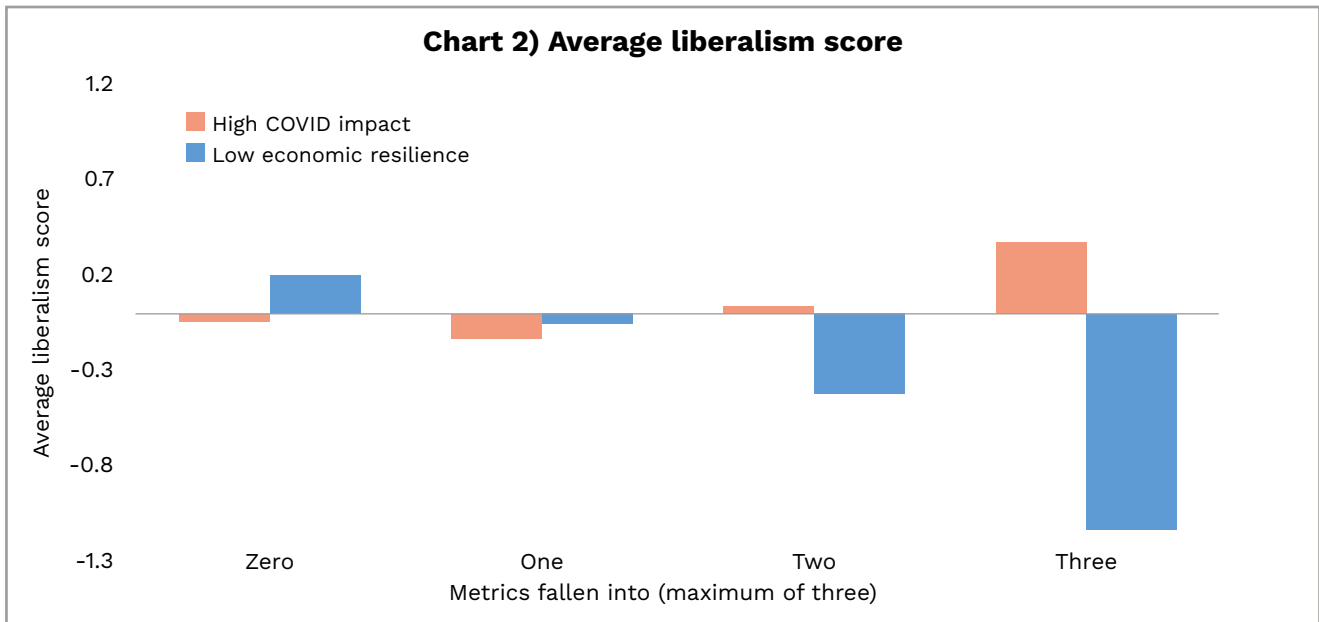
HIGH COVID IMPACT VS LOW RESILIENCE

Local authorities with lower long term economic resilience are not necessarily the same places as those experiencing the most acute economic pain as a direct consequence of the coronavirus. As Figure 1 shows, there are 174 of the former (fulfilling at least one of three low economic resilience criteria) and 144 of the latter (fulfilling at least one of three high COVID impact criteria). But just 84 council areas fall into both categories.

To illustrate this, Chart 2 shows the average strength of hostility to immigration and multiculturalism, based on our Fear and Hope data, in local authorities which fulfil 0, 1, 2 and 3 of our criteria for COVID-19 economic impact. And it also shows the same thing for those which fulfil, respectively, 0, 1, 2 and 3 of our criteria for economic vulnerability.

When it comes to impact of the pandemic (pink), there is no particular pattern. In fact, those who fulfil all three COVID-19 impact criteria on average have a positive liberalism score, indicating places where public attitudes are more pro-migration than the national average.

With economic resilience, by contrast (blue), the pattern is as marked as could be. Places which fulfil none of the three low economic resilience criteria (slow post-2008 recovery, few qualifications and high unemployment) tend to over-index for hostile attitudes. And areas have increasingly liberal attitudes the more of these three criteria they fulfil.

Chart 2) Average liberalism score

Legend:
- High COVID impact
- Low economic resilience

Y-axis: Average liberalism score (1.2, 0.7, 0.2, -0.3, -0.8, -1.3)
X-axis: Metrics fallen into (maximum of three) — Zero, One, Two, Three

This demonstrates that a lot of the places where the coronavirus outbreak has triggered economic instability are more resilient in other ways. We predict that the most pronounced cohesion issues will be likely to occur in economically vulnerable places facing the *additional* impact of COVID-19. Nonetheless, there is also a risk that areas experiencing economic hardship as a direct consequence of COVID-19 begin to face cohesion issues of their own – i.e. that previously liberal places are dragged towards more hostile ways of thinking by the virus.

COMMUNITIES AT RISK

Our analysis, as set out in Figure 1, points to an initial list of 52 authorities where risks have increased. Among the 335 council areas we have looked at, these are the places where coronavirus is likely to have the most significant negative impact on community resilience. Each of these 52 areas fulfil at least one of the criteria for all three elements: a significant short term COVID-19 impact, low long term capacity to recover from economic shocks and less liberal than average attitudes to immigration and multiculturalism.

Figure 1.

Key	
High COVID-19 impact. At least one of:	Impact on GVA – 20% worst affected / Proportion furloughed – 20% worst affected / Claimants rise post-COVID – 20% worst affected
Low economic resilience. At least one of:	Employment rate in 2019 – 20% highest / Proportion with no qualifications in 2019 – 20% highest / Resilience to 2008 crash – GVA still not recovered by 2013
Less positive attitudes to migration and multiculturalism:	Combined Fear and Hope score for 'Mainstream liberal' and 'Confident multicultural' is above '0'

*53 of 335 local authorities unaffected on all three fronts

High COVID impact
144 local authorities

84 local authorities

84 local authorities

52 local authorities

Less liberal attitudes to migration and multiculturalism
190 local authorities

110 local authorities

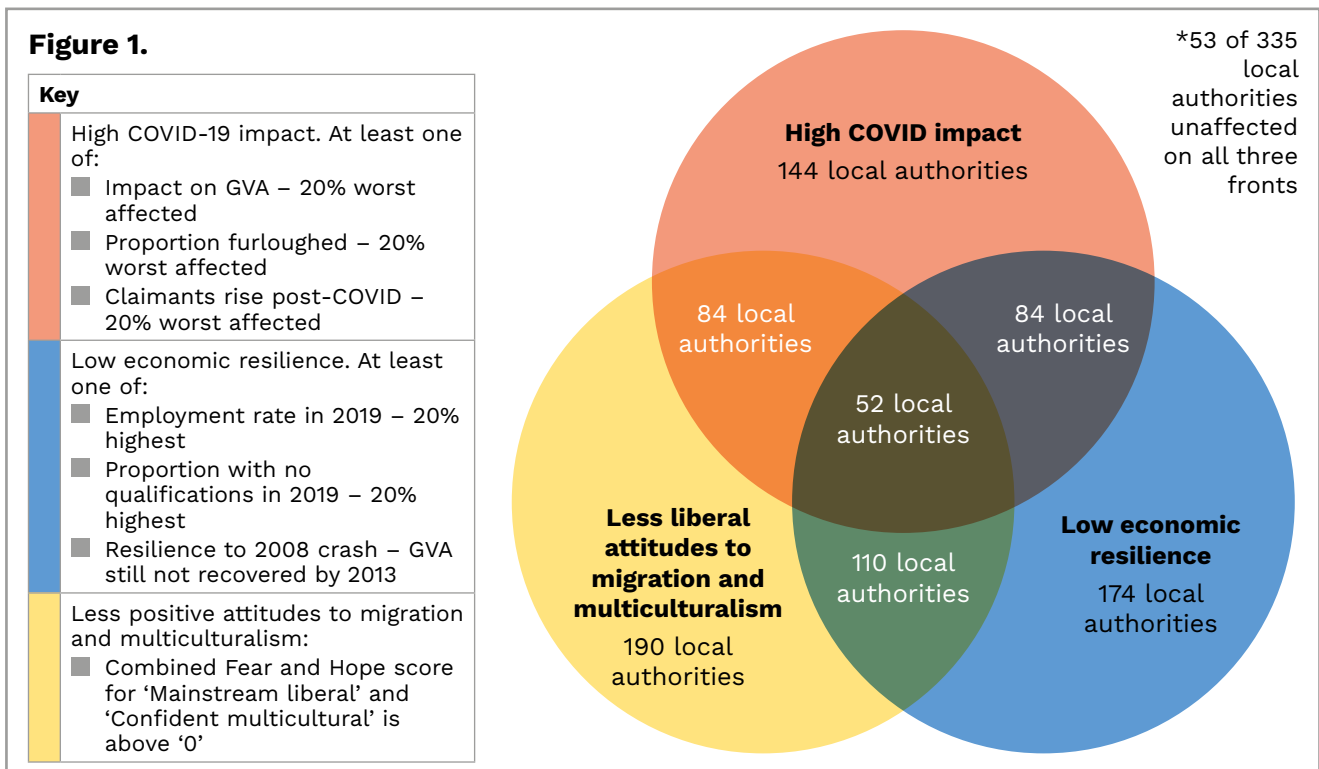Low economic resilience
174 local authorities

Table 4 lists all 52 of these authorities, including the number of economic risk criteria that each one falls into. The table also lists the towns (places with populations above 10,000) within each authority.

Within the group of 52 council areas, 16 fulfil 4 or more of the 6 possible metrics for high COVID-19 impact *and* low economic resilience (as well as having above average migration hostility). These places are: Blackpool, Harlow, Luton, Sandwell, Barking and Dagenham, Bolton, Leicester, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Pendle, Peterborough, Rochdale, Swale, Thanet, Thurrock and Wolverhampton.

We believe that these are the local authorities where stresses on social cohesion will have

been amplified by the economic consequences of the pandemic. This does not mean that they will automatically be susceptible to far right overtures, or even that they are the most vulnerable in the country to cohesion issues. But it does mean that these are the areas where the impact of COVID-19 is most likely to have enlarged these risks.

Efforts by central government to 'build back better' within these areas will need to work particularly hard to strengthen the social fabric; they will need to look beyond definitions of 'levelling up' which relate purely to economic infrastructure, and to develop initiatives which strengthen cohesion and community resilience.

Table 4					
Local authority	**Towns and cities within authority area**	Number of high COVID impact metrics	Number of low resilience metrics	Combined (high impact + low resilience)	Migration liberalism score
Blackpool	Blackpool	2	3	5	Below 0
Harlow	Harlow	2	3	5	Below 0
Luton	Luton	3	2	5	Below 0
Sandwell	Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury, West Bromwich	2	3	5	Below 0
Barking and Dagenham	NA	3	1	4	Below 0
Bolton	Bolton, Farnworth, Horwich, Kearsley, Little Lever, Westhoughton	1	3	4	Below 0
Leicester	Leicester	2	2	4	Below 0
Liverpool	Bootle, Liverpool	1	3	4	Below 0
Middlesbrough	Middlesbrough	1	3	4	Below 0
Pendle	Brierfield, Colne, Nelson	2	2	4	Below 0
Peterborough	Peterborough	1	3	4	Below 0
Rochdale	Heywood, Littleborough, Middleton, Milnrow, Rochdale	1	3	4	Below 0
Swale	Faversham, Minster, Sheerness, Sittingbourne	1	3	4	Below 0
Thanet	Broadstairs, Margate, Ramsgate	1	3	4	Below 0
Thurrock	Aveley, Grays, South Ockendon, Stanford-le-Hope, Tilbury	3	1	4	Below 0
Wolverhampton	Bilston, Wednesfield, Wolverhampton	1	3	4	Below 0
Birmingham	Birmingham, Sutton Coldfield	1	2	3	Below 0
Bradford	Baildon, Bingley, Bradford, HaworthI, lkley, Keighley, Shipley	1	2	3	Below 0
Broxbourne	Cheshunt, Hoddesdon, Waltham Cross	2	1	3	Below 0
Burnley	Burnley	1	2	3	Below 0
Cannock Chase	Cannock, Rugeley	2	1	3	Below 0
Eden	Penrith	2	1	3	Below 0
Gravesham	Gravesend, Northfleet	1	2	3	Below 0
Great Yarmouth	Caister-on-Sea, Gorleston-on-Sea, Great Yarmouth	1	2	3	Below 0
Kingston upon Hull	Kingston upon Hull	1	2	3	Below 0

Local authority	Towns and cities within authority area	Number of high COVID impact metrics	Number of low resilience metrics	Combined (high impact + low resilience)	Migration liberalism score
Oldham	Chadderton, Failsworth, Lees, Oldham, Royton, Shaw, Uppermill	1	2	3	Below 0
Salford	Eccles, Irlam, Salford, Swinton, Walkden	2	1	3	Below 0
Southend-on-Sea	Southend-on-Sea	1	2	3	Below 0
St. Helens	Haydock, Newton-le-Willows, Rainford, St Helens	1	2	3	Below 0
Tamworth	Tamworth	2	1	3	Below 0
Walsall	Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston, Walsall, Willenhall	1	2	3	Below 0
Adur	Shoreham-by-Sea, Southwick	1	1	2	Below 0
Basildon	Basildon, Billericay, Wickford	1	1	2	Below 0
Braintree	Braintree, Halstead, Witham	1	1	2	Below 0
Dover	Dover, Deal	1	1	2	Below 0
East Suffolk	Beccles, Felixtowe, Kesgrave, Lowestoft, Woodbridge	1	1	2	Below 0
Folkestone and Hythe	Folkestone, Hythe, New Romney	1	1	2	Below 0
Gloucester	Gloucester	1	1	2	Below 0
Halton	Runcorn, Widnes	1	1	2	Below 0
Hastings	Hastings	1	1	2	Below 0
Havant	Emsworth, Havant, South Hayling	1	1	2	Below 0
Havering	NA	1	1	2	Below 0
Isle of Anglesey		1	1	2	Below 0
Kettering*	Desborough, Kettering	1	1	2	Below 0
Knowsley	Kirkby, Prescot	1	1	2	Below 0
Mendip	Frome, Glastonbury, Shepton Mallet, Street, Wells	1	1	2	Below 0
Newark and Sherwood	New Ollerton, Newark-on-Trent	1	1	2	Below 0
Scarborough	Scarborough, Whitby	1	1	2	Below 0
Selby	Selby	1	1	2	Below 0
Tameside	Ashton-under-Lyne, Denton, Droylsden, Dukinfield, Hyde, Mossley, Stalybridge	1	1	2	Below 0
Torbay	Brixham, Paignton, Torquay	1	1	2	Below 0
Wyre Forest	Bewdley, Kidderminster, Stourport-on-Severn	1	1	2	Below 0

52 higher risk local authorities

Figure2.

144 towns in higher risk authorities
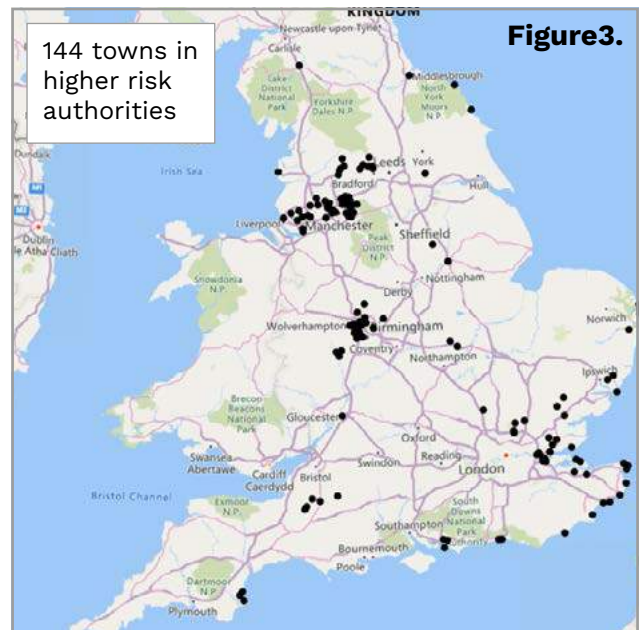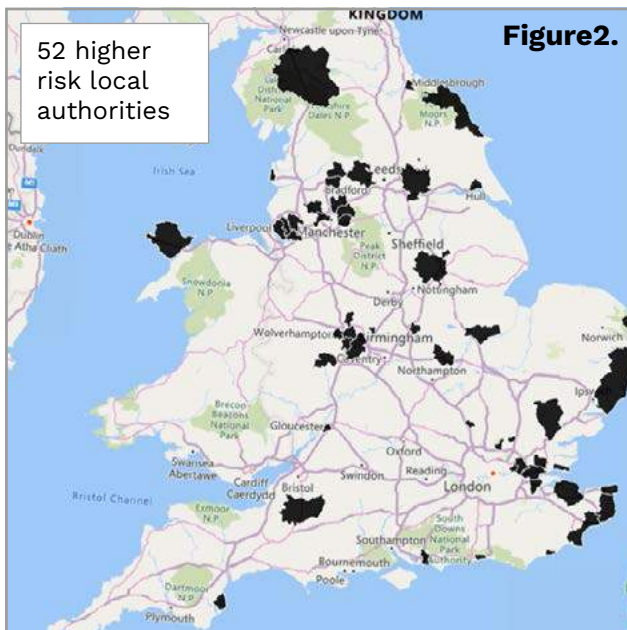
Figure3.

TYPES OF PLACE

Figures 2 and 3 map, respectively, the 52 council areas and the 144 towns which fit within these council areas. If we look at our list of 52 authorities, they initially seem quite disparate. There is significant variation in terms of diversity, urbanity, size, and political control. Overall, only seven of our local authorities could be described as sitting within the 'Red Wall': Blackpool, Bolton, Burnley, Middlesbrough, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

Scraping the surface, however, we find a spectrum, between two types of place. Authorities like Oldham or Barking are at one end, and places like Mendip or Havant are at the other. A number of other authorities – Harlow, Middlesbrough or Swale, for example – sit somewhere in between.

The first of these types of place is diverse, densely populated and has pockets of acute deprivation. Included within this are the authorities representing several of the UK's largest cities – Leicester, Birmingham and Wolverhampton – as well as a number of slightly smaller places, with relatively large BAME and migrant populations, such as Luton and Rochdale.

Many people living in these authorities are reliant on precarious, low-paid manual work, and saw job losses when the pandemic hit. Rather than being the shrinking and ageing places sometimes termed 'left behind', they are relatively well-connected, and are reliant on logistics and service industries, as well as on airports or nearby cities. Several have had high profile cohesion issues in the past, and there are also a number of New Towns. These local authorities are mostly Labour controlled.

The second group are much less urban in character and much less diverse. They might not be thought of as deprived in a conventional sense, though nor are they affluent. They are places which were particularly affected, at the outbreak of coronavirus, as a result of their reliance on tourism, with many being seaside resorts (Great Yarmouth and Scarborough) or beauty spots and national parks (Eden or Anglesey). Others, such as Gloucester and Kettering, rely upon forms of light industry which shut down during lockdown.
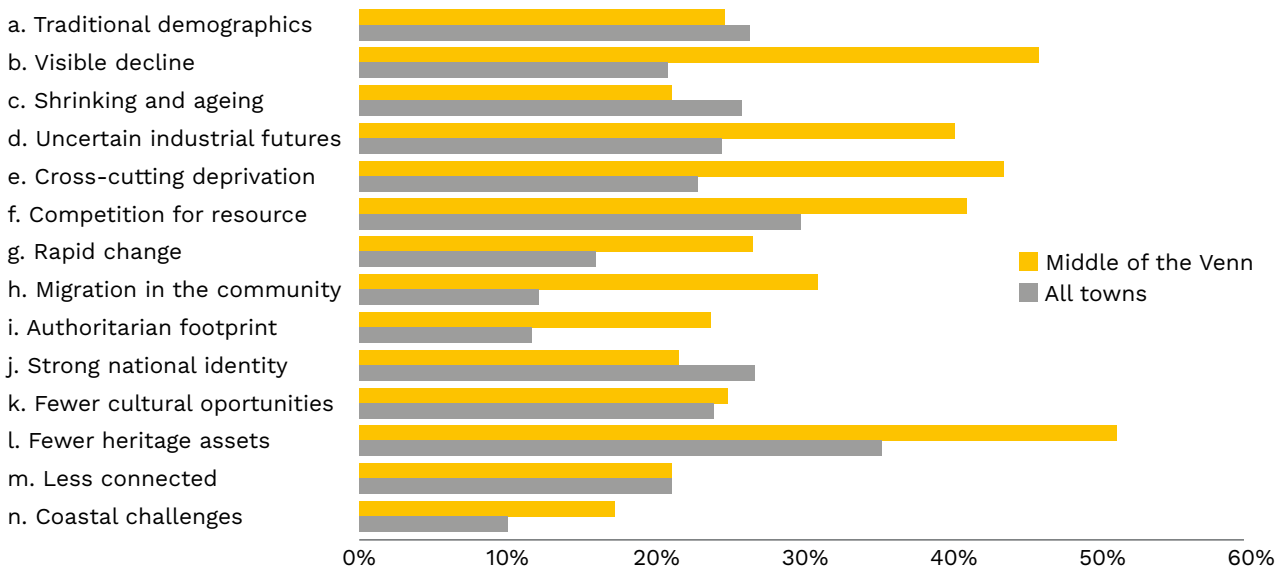
These places often have a lower skills base than the national average, and a lower level of economic resilience, hence they may be less able to bounce back from a major economic hit. But they are also less likely to have experienced major issues around acute poverty or unemployment prior to the coronavirus outbreak. Local attitudes in these areas, which are mostly Tory-controlled, are often socially conservative, though there is little history of high-profile cohesion challenges.

The 144 towns within the 52 authorities are, as a rule, bigger than the typical town in England and Wales – with an average population of 47,000 compared to 38,000 for towns nationally. Very few are in Wales, the south west or the north east.

Chart 3 looks at resilience challenges faced by these towns, and how they compare with English and Welsh towns overall. It is based on 14 factors which can increase the risk of tensions in an area, as set out in our 2020 report, Understanding Community Resilience in our Towns.[24]

The chart shows how the 144 towns in 'high risk' authorities compare with all 862 towns in England and Wales, in terms of the percentage which fall into each of the 14 clusters.

Chart 3) High risk areas compared to all towns

a. Traditional demographics
b. Visible decline
c. Shrinking and ageing
d. Uncertain industrial futures
e. Cross-cutting deprivation
f. Competition for resource
g. Rapid change
h. Migration in the community
i. Authoritarian footprint
j. Strong national identity
k. Fewer cultural oportunities
l. Fewer heritage assets
m. Less connected
n. Coastal challenges

Legend: Middle of the Venn, All towns

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

Towns within our 52 authorities are more likely to have visible decline, industries at risk, weaker local identities and cross-cutting deprivation. Others may be struggling to accommodate diversity, as a result of rapid demographic change and squeezed resources.

Table 5 outlines some examples of the resilience challenges faced by towns among our 52 authorities, as well as what support could be offered.

FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

When we spoke to stakeholders across our 52 authorities, the looming economic challenges resulting from COVID-19 were acknowledged by all. Everyone we spoke to was extremely anxious about the economic outlook for their area. And in the majority of cases it was believed that the economic hit would have a knock-on effect for cohesion, making it harder to foster community resilience.

Chart 4) Concerns about post-pandemic cohesion
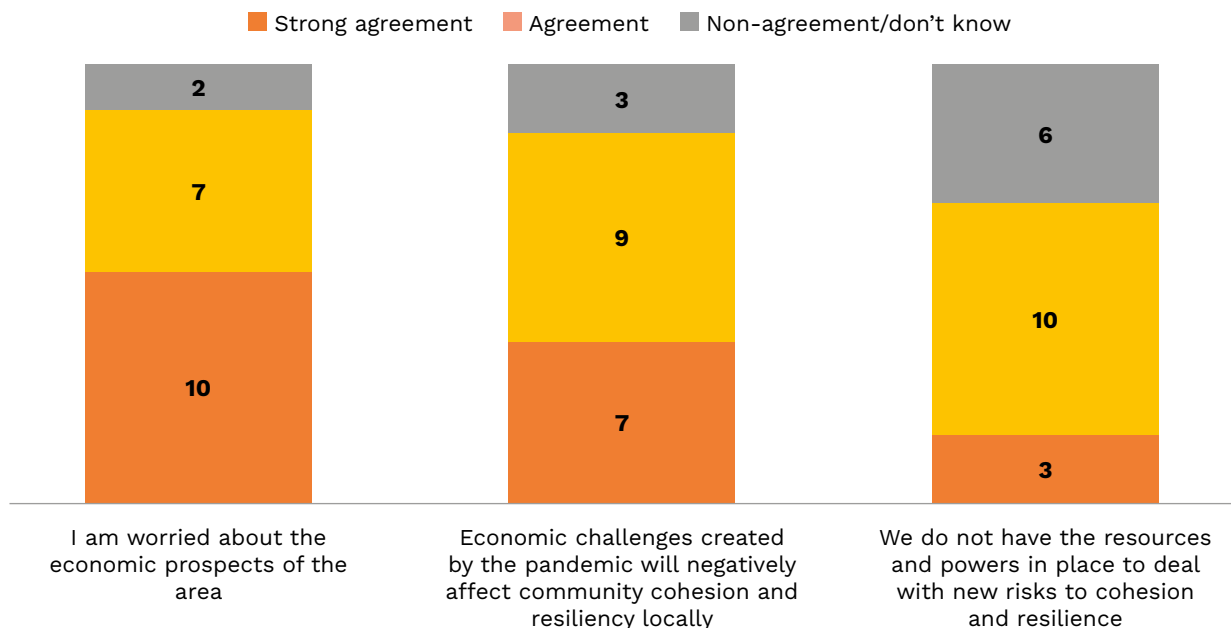### (from our qualitative survey of senior councillors)

Legend: Strong agreement, Agreement, Non-agreement/don't know

	Strong agreement	Agreement	Non-agreement/don't know
I am worried about the economic prospects of the area	10	7	2
Economic challenges created by the pandemic will negatively affect community cohesion and resiliency locally	7	9	3
We do not have the resources and powers in place to deal with new risks to cohesion and resilience	3	10	6

Table 5		
Challenge for community resilience	**Examples of affected towns within the 52 authorities**	**Potential support**
Visible decline – closing pubs, low qualify living environments and conspicuous crime and social problems	Bolton, Great Yarmouth, Rochdale	Support for high streets, potentially moving away from retail and towards town centres as shared spaces
Uncertain industrial futures – wage stagnation, risk of automation and recent (post-2000) industrial decline	Braintree, Newark, Gloucester	Investment in skilled jobs and training for young people, to mitigate automation and provide employment
Cross-cutting deprivation – poverty and deprivation in relation to income, health and education	Folkestone, Rowley Regis, Bootle	Targeted social policies, providing community support for families and investing in the third sector locally
Competition for resources – struggles to access housing, jobs and services, alongside rising populations and feelings of economic anxiety	Luton, Peterborough, Sittingbourne	Engagement pojects, based on partnerships with community leaders and on strategies which create contact between groups
Rapid change – demographic change, forecast to continue, alongside population growth, in towns on the edge of big cities	Oldham, Gravesend, Walsall	Long term, funded positions for cohesion officers or neighbourhood teams, to support change
Migration in the community – very concentrated African, East European and South Asian migration alongside high asylum dispersal	Middlesbrough, Wolverhampton, Rochdale	More tailored services, which recognise the specific needs of certain communities, as exposed by COVID (e.g. multi-generational housing)
Authoritarian footprint – historic successes (and/ or grass roots support) for the far right or the populist right	Burnley, Grays, Scarborough	Targeted support, to identify far right extremism and reduce susceptibility to conspiracy theories
Fewer heritage assets – cheaper housing and an absence of assets conferring status (city status, football club, Medieval history etc)	Harlow, Havant, Shoreham	Investment in community pubs, libraries arts festivals and other local assets which build a stronger sense of place

This included stakeholders with broadly positive experiences of community relations during coronavirus itself. One councillor reported "no issues" during the pandemic – with *"communities having come together brilliantly during the pandemic"* – but nevertheless anticipated that cohesion after the pandemic would be worse than that before. Trust was seen as a major factor here, with another councillor stating that their community would *"quite rightly feel that they have been let down."*

Stakeholders described a high rate of people working locally in "the physical labour force, people in warehouse jobs, people in the retail sector, in other low-skilled jobs." Many had already lost their jobs – or else risked becoming redundant if businesses did not quickly recover.

> *"As financial instability increases people will look for someone to blame, this is often marginalised and minority groups.*

> *Our biggest challenge is far right activity and hate crime."*

Others described a large, working-age population who could not work, alongside low education and skills attainment and a rapid increase in the diversity of the area. The strong sense in many cases was that COVID-19 had amplified these challenges and that the added pressure could feed resentment and discrimination. As one respondent put it, *"people struggling financially tend to have a lower tolerance threshold."*

> *"People are being laid off and furloughed and businesses [have been] failing. This has put a huge strain on everyone and adds to the stress and pressure. It can then manifest in people being less sympathetic and empathetic to others. Resentment can build and community cohesion starts to fall apart. [It is] very easy then for those who want to promote hatred and division to get*

a hold. We have seen an increase in far right material and literature in the city."

Our conversations also drew on past experiences of austerity – with many feeling that they were still living with the consequence of post-2008 austerity measures. Austerity was regarded by many to have continued, largely unbroken, and there was a sense among politicians, officers and community activists alike, that services like mental health and domestic violence had been overwhelmed during the lockdowns.

It is worth noting that one of our criteria for low economic resilience was the time which council areas took to recover from the financial crash. 14 of the places within our list of 52 only returned to 2007 levels of economic productivity a decade later, and a further 23 took longer than that. Hence, for most of the places we talked to, the fallout from the 2008 crisis was still very much ongoing at the local level.

"After 10 years of austerity our local authority was struggling financially anyway before the pandemic... This local authority desperately requires more financial help and assistance from central government."

We also heard how councils had cut ostensibly 'less essential' services during the early 2010s,

but that it was only later on that it became clear quite how important these services were in strengthening community relations. Many feared what a return to austerity could mean for the areas they live and work in.

Others remarked that the work carried out by the voluntary sector throughout the pandemic had left these organisations in a particularly vulnerable position, due to 'burn out', whilst also facing an increase in demand, thanks to the numbers of people needing their support.

"There's going to be this over reliance on charities and the voluntary sector. And the voluntary sector is not adequately funded."

Across the responses, two anxieties which came up most frequently were about skills and opportunities for young people on the one hand, and potential further funding reductions for community projects and the third sector on the other. It was felt that both of these elements risked feeding directly, under certain circumstances, into major new tensions.

Generally speaking, charities and voluntary organisations were regarded as a vital force for good in fostering community resilience, but one which was too often overlooked and under-funded.

LEVELLING UP EXPECTATIONS WITH REALITIES

As this report sets out, recovery from COVID-19 will likely follow the pattern of existing geographic inequalities. Indeed, our poll finds that most Britons (74%) – including 67% of Londoners – feel that the issues and concerns of people living in the small towns and rural areas of Britain are often ignored in favour of people in big cities.

Since the 2019 election, the promise to 'level up' opportunities across all parts of the UK has become a key mantra, alongside the Government's promise to 'build back better' from the pandemic. While the Levelling Up Fund promises to invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK it has largely remained unclear where investment will be concentrated and how the effects of 'levelling up' will be felt.

Our poll suggests a high degree of cynicism about the Government's ability to 'level up'. Overall, just 20% of people say they think Boris

Johnson will succeed in 'levelling up' less affluent areas of the country. And, although this is a politically divisive question, with Labour voters most cynical about these efforts, those who voted Conservative in 2019 are also split when it comes to their expectations of levelling up. Despite 'levelling up' being a core part of the Conservatives' 2019 manifesto, often considered a reason behind the 'Red Wall' political shift, around a third say they do not expect levelling up to succeed (34%) while another third remain unsure (28%).

When asked what people think the Government needs to do in order to fulfil its 'levelling up' pledge, housing, health and social care and investment in places outside of big cities were all cited, among both Labour and Conservative voters.

And while 42% felt that 'levelling up' would mean bringing more wealth to less affluent areas whilst not affecting wealthier areas, more

Chart 5) Do you think Boris Johnson will succeed in 'levelling up' less affluent areas of the UK?

	No	Yes	Don't know
Total	59%	20%	21%
Conservative	34%	38%	28%
Labour	73%	13%	13%
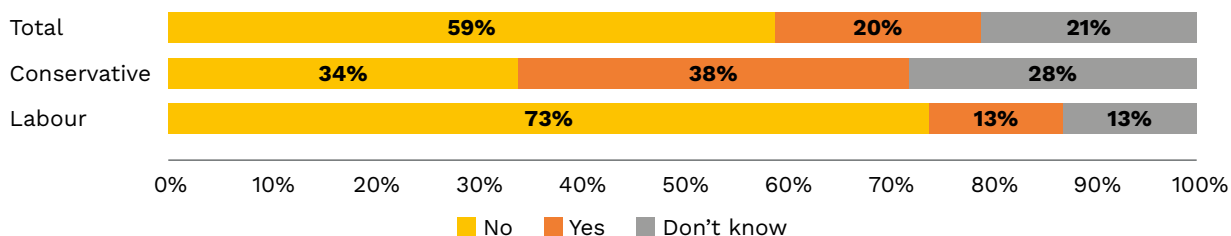
Chart 6) The Government has pledged to 'level up' the United Kingdom. By levelling up, does the Government mean....

Category	Percentage
Bringing more wealth to less affluent areas whilst not affecting wealthier areas	42%
Re-distributing wealth from more affluent areas to less affluent areas	26%
Something else	10%
Don't know	22%
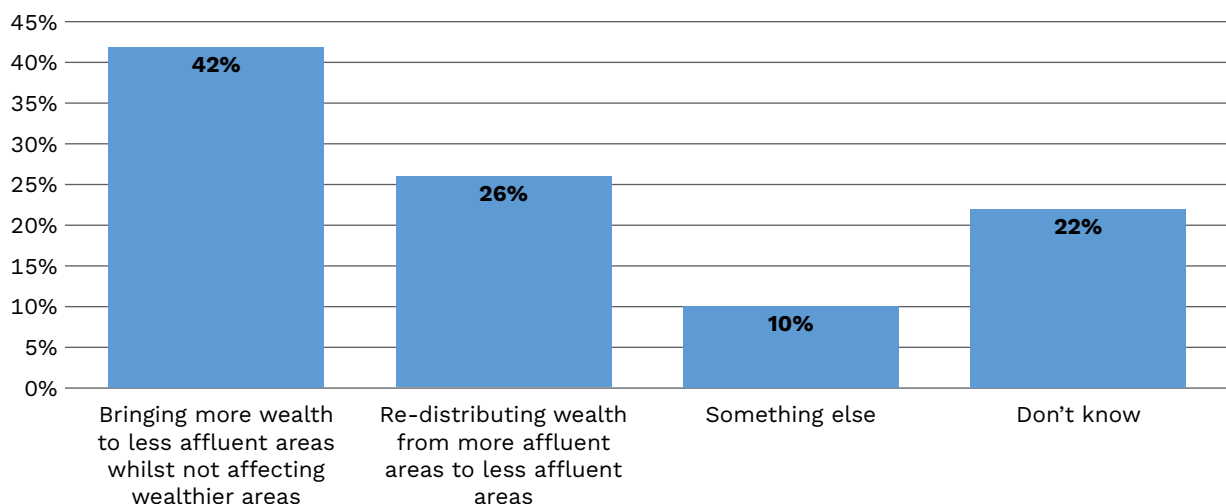
than a quarter (26%) thought that levelling up would mean re-distributing wealth from more affluent areas to less affluent ones.

Our polling suggests that the Conservatives could struggle to implement 'levelling up' in a way that meets expectations, especially if the UK re-enters a period of austerity as a result of the economic implications of the pandemic.

Our survey and round table research found a mixed understanding of what 'levelling up' entailed. While Conservative members were generally more encouraged by the agenda, as "a hand-up not a hand-out," we also heard other Tory councillors dismiss the agenda as "meaningless jargon." Labour members were more cynical about the term, describing it either as meaningless or as a form of 'pork barrel politics' (i.e. a form of politics diverting money to areas to win votes). But others were more circumspect. "It means little at the moment," explained one, from a Labour-run authority. "But we would like it to mean everyone gets an equal opportunity and resources in life."

When asked explicitly to define what they wanted the term to mean, a number of responses came through. Many of these were about regional inequality and the funding imbalances between north and south.

"Reducing economic, educational and employment disparities and increasing community wealth building; investing in mainstream business and SME's, CIC's and social enterprise; stimulating the local economy," wrote one.

One person, whilst sceptical about the government's ability to come good on the slogan, stated that 'levelling up' should be "about wholesale reform of service delivery and adequate funding from central government," although they emphasised that, "even with all that we will be lucky to 'level up' to average outcomes."

While resource allocation was clearly a part of this, many of the lengthier responses focused on elements of the wider social fabric. These included definitions of 'levelling up' based on finding opportunities for young people, creating equalities between different groups and breaking cycles of deprivation.

Overall, it remains to be seen if the Conservatives' levelling up agenda will be able to achieve the changes communities across the country are calling for. But it is clear that for local authorities in areas at risk from cohesion challenges – as well as for the wider public – an approach that favours putting people and communities first is key.

Chart 7) Which of the following do you expect the Government to achieve in order to fulfil the 'levelling up' pledge?
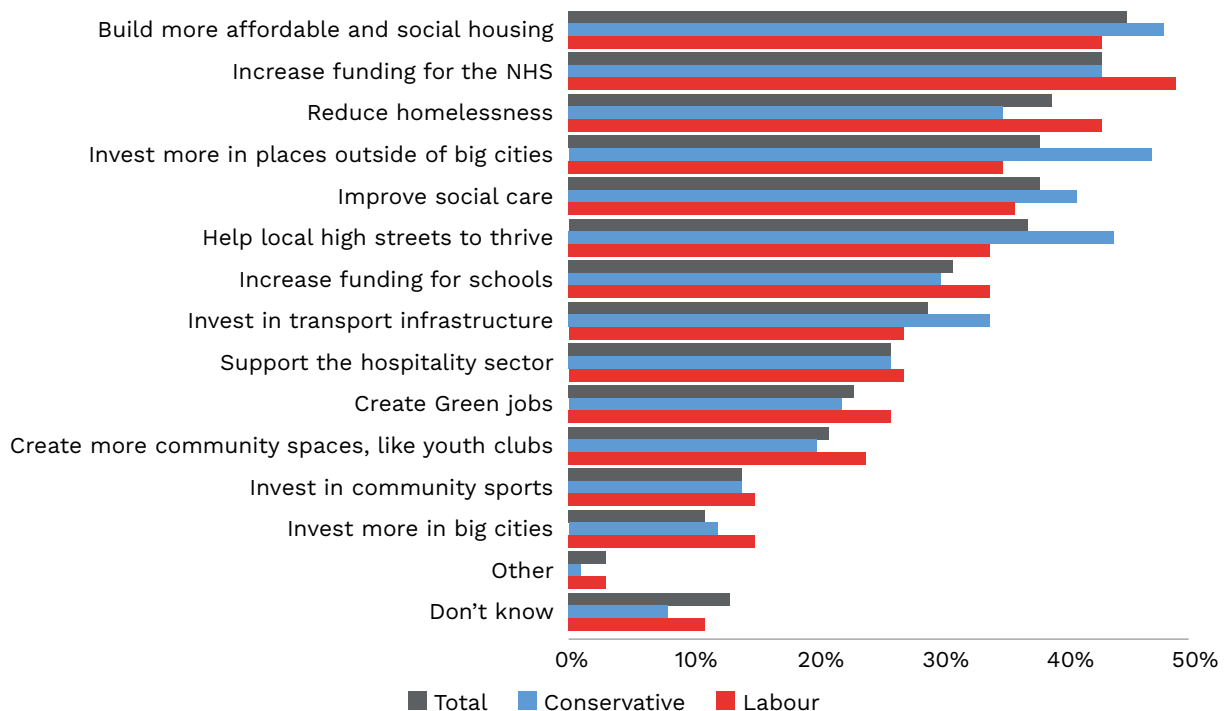
3. HOW TO BUILD BACK RESILIENT

During the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, 'Build back better' has become a mantra for the Government's 'levelling up' plans. Loosely set out as significant investment in infrastructure, skills and innovation,[25] building back better is a hugely ambitious aim. But given the scale of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy, and the impact on communities, there is a challenge in ensuring that building back really is 'better'.

Already, many communities are divided, and many people have been struggling. In the recovery process, the Government will have to face up to some very difficult choices about how they respond, with each decision carrying major consequences for places and people.

Moreover, if the wrong decisions are taken, there is the potential to not just fail in 'building back better', but for many to suffer even more.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our list of 52 authorities provides a baseline of the areas where, we would predict, cohesion challenges are likely to have been amplified by the pandemic – all other things being equal. However, certain policy decisions could enflame this in specific ways. This could result in some of the 52 councils being hit especially hard. And it could also lead to the list of local authorities 'at risk' expanding beyond the 52.

Our analysis finds that the impact of major cuts to welfare benefits and a downturn in productivity are two outcomes that would mean many more communities are put at risk.

A) MAJOR CUTS TO WELFARE

With the country facing large economic shortfalls, one government policy might be to make further cuts to the welfare system in the coming years, in order to reduce the national debt. Already, the government has planned to cut Universal Credit and working tax credits, dropping the £20 boost in a move that it is estimated will push 84,0000 people into poverty.[26]

Table 6 shows the areas within our 52 authorities which would we worst impacted by a crackdown on the welfare system. It also highlights how a move to cut benefits could expand the list of authorities where community relations are at risk from 52 to 75 – listing the authorities that could be dragged into the highest risk grouping were this to occur.

As the table shows, were the government to focus on benefit cuts as the route to 'balancing the books', many of the industrial and post-industrial places on our list could experience particularly acute hardship – with a knock-on effect for cohesion and resilience. The 19 places hit hardest include Barking and Dagenham, Bradford, Portsmouth and Sandwell.

Table 6			
Category	Number	Areas	Criteria
Worst hit within our 52 authorities	19	Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Blackpool, Bolton, Bradford, Burnley, Gravesham, Harlow, Kingston upon Hull, Leicester, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Peterborough, Rochdale, Salford, Sandwell, Thanet, Walsall, Wolverhampton	■ Top 20% of councils for rise in number of claimants as a result of the virus and ■ Top 20% of councils for rise unemployment rate pre-pandemic
Outside the 52 but could also struggle	23	Bexley, Blackburn with Darwen, Boston, Calderdale, Coventry, Derby, Doncaster, Dudley, Eastbourne, Hyndburn, Ipswich, Kirklees, Medway, Newport, Northampton, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Rotherham, Slough, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Tendring, Wellingborough*	■ Next 20% of councils for rise in the number of claimants as a result of the virus and ■ Next 20% of councils for unemployment rate pre-pandemic ■ Migration liberalism below 0

*Now part of North Northamptonshire

Other areas which could see their economic challenges harden significantly – among those which are currently outside our list of the 52 highest risk areas – include post-industrial towns like Stoke and Doncaster, as well as several deprived places in the South and the South East.

B) VERY LOW PRODUCTIVITY

A second potential scenario involves a significant downturn in the UK's productivity, with a sluggish economy and many sectors taking significantly longer than expected to bounce back. If this were to happen it could mean fewer jobs and lower pay in many communities.

The impact of coronavirus on productivity was immediate, but while there were sharp recoveries following the lifting of lockdown measures, the longer term implications could add to existing issues. The UK's productivity has seen sluggish growth since the 2008 crash. Moreover, low productivity has been used as a justification for welfare cuts, and to cut 'low skilled' immigration. However, these measures are not in any way a solution to increasing productivity – as is so apparent given the current shortage of truck drivers – harming supply chains and in-turn further damaging the UK's productivity across a multitude of sectors and services.[27]

A failure to address productivity challenges would again be likely to have a knock-on effect for community relations. Table 7 shows the areas within our 52 authorities which could be worst impacted by very low productivity. Again, it also shows the places outside of the list of 52 which could be dragged into the highest risk grouping were this to transpire.

12 of the areas among our 52 would be especially badly hit by this eventuality. Many of these are market towns or settlements reliant on light industry. These are local authorities where GVA (the measure we are using for productivity) did not recover until after 2013, following the 2008

financial crisis, and where productivity has been forecast to fall in an especially pronounced way thanks to COVID-19.

Meanwhile, were productivity to be very slow for the country as a whole during the years after the pandemic, eight further authorities outside our list of 52 could face more acute hardship – with knock-ons for cohesion. This includes towns like Swindon and Northampton.

The government's ambition to 'build back better', to rebuild a more equal, fairer society and open up opportunities for all in the recovery from COVID-19, has become a central pledge within the 'levelling up' agenda.

Nonetheless, as our research sets out, a failure to 'build back' in the right way could lead to a widespread weakening of community resilience, with tensions rising to the surface and a swell of support for the far-right. Rather than a fairer more equal society, we could see a society that is more divided and more unequal.

MITIGATING RISKS FOR COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

It was clear from our research that most councils felt additional resources were needed, particularly when it came to strengthening communities. There was deep concern about the prospect of further austerity policies.

Whilst it was clear that funding support would generally help to strengthen cohesion during a period of economic hardship after the pandemic, there were several more specific points which came through.

1. DESIGNATED COHESION FUNDING

In both our survey and round tables, there was a strong case made for designated funding for cohesion. Most talked about the need for long term 'point people' and officer roles, who could oversee and coordinate community cohesion. One respondent, at a Tory-held authority in South East, called for "More securely-funded officers

Table 7			
Category	**Number**	**Areas**	**Criteria**
Worst hit within our 52 authorities	12	Sandwell, Cannock Chase, Tamworth, Thurrock, Swale, St. Helens, Folkestone and Hythe, Luton, Eden, East Suffolk, Isle of Anglesey, Selby	■ Top 20% of authorities for projected GVA decline thanks to COVID and ■ Places where GVA did not return to 2007 levels until after 2013
Outside the 52 but could also struggle	8	Welling-borough,* Crawley, Swindon, Northampton, Staffordshire Moorlands, Hinckley and Bosworth, North West Leicestershire, Ryedale	■ Next 20% of authorities for projected GVA decline thanks to COVID (but not in the top 20% of areas) and ■ Places where GVA did not return to 2007 levels until 2012 or 2013 and ■ Migration liberalism below 0

Now part of North Northamptonshire

to work in the community to increase resilience." Another, at a Labour-held authority in the North West, stated that "The Government made a huge mistake removing the community cohesion funding that was in place previously."

Indeed, research from the University of Kent has shown the impact of investing in cohesion, with areas that had higher rates of volunteering, experiencing higher levels of optimism, wellbeing and trust in local government.[28]

> "[We need] dedicated PREVENT officers and funding for local groups to combat activity directly within the community at grass roots level."

> "There used to be neighbourhood teams. They were all kind of caught in the first wave of the post-recession savings. But the neighbourhood teams played a vital role in being able to address things very, very early on. I know some local authorities still have that by tends to be the large cities because they are so big."

Respondents also called for 'equalities teams' to work in communities, and stressed the need for "dedicated" funding to "help the public sector mitigate the impact of new arrivals."

There was a general sense that many cohesion services, which had once been in place but later suffered funding cuts, were now sorely missed, and that there was not a great deal more to cut in these sorts of areas, even if you wanted to. Cohesion had often, by the time the pandemic hit, come to mean wider services, like community enforcement, rather than funding being explicitly ear-marked for neighbourhood projects and community support roles.

Designated cohesion funding was therefore seen as an essential building block for fostering resilient communities.

2. PROTECTING COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

The essential role of community and voluntary organisations throughout the pandemic was evidenced in the initial emergency response, in which third sector and faith organisations had 'stepped up' in essential ways to support vulnerable people. In our research we heard about how existing organisations not only ~served key community functions at the peak of lockdown, but also about how the public health role they adopted had created new channels of communication and sustained higher levels of trust.

> "More financial resource is key. We have some fantastic partners, particularly in the third sector...and they could do more if they had more money. These groups are on the

> frontline of supporting new and existing communities – and crucial to bringing them together."

Nonetheless, we heard how many of these organisations had struggled to maintain this level of activity, and were concerned about the sustainability of their funding as the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak takes hold. Moreover, the needs of the vulnerable communities they serve had in many cases become more acute.

We also heard from community organisations who felt they were "listened to but not really listened to," with the "professionals know best" mentality often pervading. Community partners "should be seen as equal players," one stated, not simply as providers of services like food banks which the council cannot afford to do.

The third sector was felt, therefore, both to have strengthened in key ways during the virus, and to have proved its mettle during a national crisis. It was seen as a key asset in sustaining community resilience during straitened times.

3. LONGER-TERM FUNDING STREAMS

Among the survey respondents there was a fairly even spread, between those who had applied successfully for central government pots of money like the towns fund, those who had applied but not been successful, and those who did not know.

However, there was a clear desire, among all of those we spoke to, for what one Cabinet Member called "long term funding for grass roots work." Others demanded a "more coherent strategy at [the] national level" to help councils deliver cohesion more consistently and sustainably. The changeable and piecemeal nature of funding opportunities was seen by some as a factor which undermined coherent efforts to strengthen the social fabric.

> "More sustainable funding would enable more long term projects and education. Applying for, administering and monitoring short term funding demands is inefficient use of staff time and resources that can be better spent elsewhere. [It] does not deliver effective projects and services. Long term funding could help us sustain our community groups and organisations as these are vital. Three year (or more) funding for posts in the Local Authority to invest in Hate Crime Education [would help with] maintaining and building cohesion and resilience in our city."

This linked to the issue of having council personnel in position for longer contracts, so that

lasting community relations could be built and trust could be fostered.

Devolution was also touched upon as part of this. It was mentioned as a way of enabling more responsive approaches to community issues. "Give us as a borough council more control and input into local education needs," suggested one respondent. What came through here was a desire for continuity and an element of control, in terms of how easily councils were able to make long term strategic choices around cohesion questions.

4. INVESTING IN SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES

One of the reasons that the 52 councils met our criteria was that many had lower levels of skills. 31 were among the highest fifth of UK authorities, when it came to the proportion with no formal qualifications. In Sandwell and Pendle, for example, more than a fifth of residents had no formal qualifications.

Lower levels of skills feeds into the cohesion risk for two reasons – firstly because it means the local economy may be less resilient, and secondly because lower educational attainment correlates strongly with hostility to migration and multiculturalism.

This very much came through, both within our survey and across the three round tables. Skills and opportunities were raised a number of times, as a central question in terms of how the area might avoid cohesion risks emerging.

"I think the biggest challenge we've had for a lot of people in the town is the quality of jobs. You can find menial work...and thankfully people do like to work... But for our town to start being more equitable better jobs [are needed]... Most young people, once they get through the school system, are looking to leave. Not because

they don't like the town but because the jobs aren't there."

"We're seeing 13 to 17 year-old white boys getting into for right wing activity or being exposed to extreme right-wing messaging."

In one authority a community stakeholder described a potentially toxic situation, whereby employers within the borough recruited from the neighbouring local authority – which was more affluent and had higher attainment levels – when looking for more skilled job roles. Such a situation seems tailor-made to foster resentment and reduce community resilience.

Others talked more generally about the breadth of experiences that young people have, suggesting programmes which "take people from one part of the borough to another part, sponsored," as well as those which "create" links between different areas, [which] take people on a trip to expose them to new environments [and which] give people completely different experiences." 'Training' initiatives of this kind were reported from a number of years before, and it was suggested that parts of the transport budget could be used on these sorts of programmes.

BUILDING BACK BETTER

In our nationally representative poll, when asked about economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, it is notable that the majority of Britons favour investment in health and social care over greater economic investment or investment in infrastructure. While this may seem like a clear choice given the immediate health impact of the coronavirus outbreak, it also suggests that most people prefer a recovery that centres people rather than growth.

While one in five (21%) say they favour reducing taxation in order to stimulate the economy, more people favour initiatives that support local economies; this often refers to everyday experiences of the economy rather than macro-level investment or large scale infrastructure projects. 23% want to see extra support to help struggling high streets, while 21% want to see more opportunities for young people, such as traineeships. One in five want to see additional support for small businesses (21%) and greater efforts to address inequality in society (21%).

Education is also a priority for many in the recovery process, as 19% say they would like to see more funding for schools and colleges and 18% say they want to see measures to increase youth employment and training.

What is clear is that people do not want a return to austerity measures as a means to reduce the public debt – just 12% of people felt that this was something the Government should prioritise in order to support the recovery.

Older groups were more likely to favour support for health and social care, while younger groups were more likely to want funding to prioritise small business recovery, reduce inequality and invest in community spaces. But all age groups wanted to see investment in education and supported opportunities for young people.

Interestingly, there was not a huge degree of variation in the preferences of Labour and Conservative voters (based on 2019 election vote) in terms of where they want spending prioritised. Both sets of voters opt for increased

Chart 8) The coronavirus outbreak has had a significant economic impact on Britain. Which of the following do you feel are most important issues for the Government to prioritise in order to help the recovery? (choose 3)
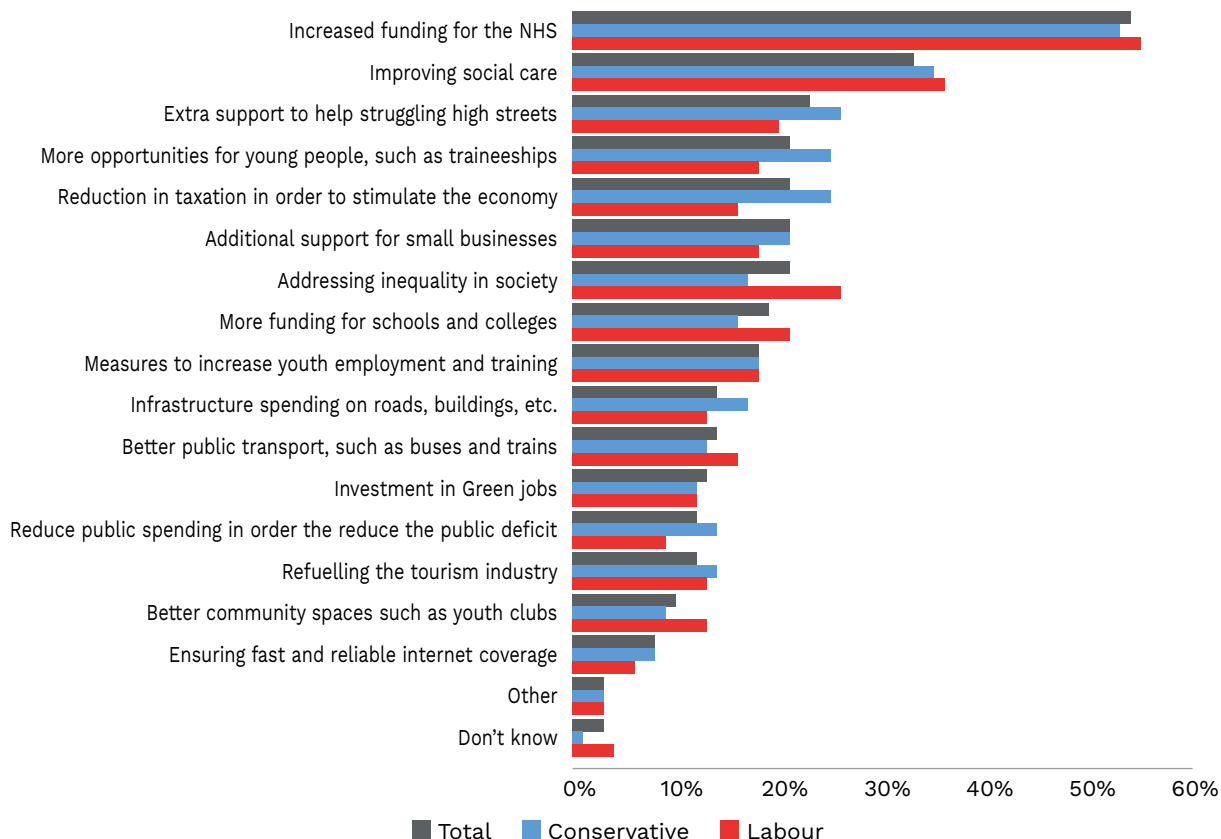
funding for the NHS and improved social care over other issues. While Labour voters are more likely to say they want inequality addressed and more opportunities for young people, there is a consensus against a return to austerity measures among both groups.

CONCLUSION: SIX PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING BACK RESILIENT

Post-COVID efforts to 'level up' or to 'build back better' have tended, so far, to focus on infrastructure, growth and jobs. But these initiatives must also be geared towards enabling integration, improving civil infrastructure and strengthening the social fabric.

Given the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on community relations, and the scale of the forthcoming challenges for community resilience, it is essential that building back better is also building back resilient.

1.   A FOCUS ON PLACE AND PEOPLE

A serious drive to improve resilience for all communities must acknowledge the place-based divides which drive social unrest – addressing these challenges as they exist at the local level. This means decision-makers looking at towns, cities and neighbourhoods as individual places, and seeking to understand their specific situation. People's everyday experiences of resilience challenges must come first.

2.   INVESTING IN INTEGRATION

Strengthening communities requires resources, and in particular a clear focus on the putting in place individuals and teams whose primary job is to foster integration. Through designated funding, councils can close the gap between the areas where strong social capital is already in place and those where it is not. This is likely to bring wider dividends as people within communities become more resilient, trusting, optimistic and open.

3.   GIVING COMMUNITIES VOICE

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated and emphasised challenges for public trust. But it is likely these feelings of detachment could be exacerbated as the economic impact takes hold. To rebuild trust, it is essential that communities are given a voice, using approaches that support community engagement, enabling empowerment and ownership.

4.   PLANNING FOR CHANGE

To successfully 'level up', the government must guarantee that demographic change is well managed. This means ensuring that economic growth is accompanied by investment in infrastructure, to accommodate population increases and growing diversity. Failure to do so can facilitate into community tensions. This applies to housing, GP places, community facilities, school funding and a host of other local issues. Targeted national spending on community facilities and revisions to national funding formulas could help to provide the support needed.

5.   CONNECTING PLACES, SHARING SOLUTIONS

Many places across England and Wales face similar challenges to each other when it comes to resilience and cohesion. In some places, narratives of decline have taken hold. Others have seen rapid demographic change. Elsewhere there are public realm issues. These types of challenge can lead to local tensions, rising hate crime, or the unwanted attentions of the far right.

A more joined-up approach between areas is essential, using mechanisms such as our Hopeful Towns network, so it is easier to share good ideas and scale up best practice.

6.   LEADING FOR RESILIENT GROWTH

'Levelling up' cannot just be about economic growth. It must also ensure that communities can live well together, and that those living in a place have a decent standard of living. 'Lump of labour' rhetoric around migration at the national level is fundamentally at odds with the policies most likely to address regional inequality or to reduce deprivation in English and Welsh towns. Likewise, if the government is serious about cutting regional inequality it must ensure that 'hostile environment' policies become a thing of the past.

ENDNOTES

1   Survey conducted using an online interview administered by Focaldata. Focaldata collected data from a representative sample of 1,512 respondents between 20th and 21st July 2021 using its proprietary data collection platform Focaldata Core, which plugs into a global network of panels and uses machine learning to automatically detect and screen out inconsistent and disengaged respondents. Users fill out the surveys in real-time across mobile, desktop, and tablet devices on the Focaldata platform.

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HOPE

HATE

CHARITABLE

TRUST