

Stronger Together

What we know and must do about cohesion

Belong Network

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High Street, Scunthorpe by Stephen McKay

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Foreword

It was an act of horrific violence. On 29 July 2024, three young girls were tragically murdered in Southport by a stranger who had targeted them for their defencelessness and innocence. What followed was a wave of disorder across 35 towns and cities, emanating from an area that had previously been considered quiet and cohesive.

The severity of the anger and confrontations, often directed at authorities and the police, betrayed a deeper fury, greater than the outrage triggered by the events themselves. A sense of frustration, of disconnection and of declining trust in institutions was clearly visible.

In many of the places affected, these tensions had been building for some time. Concerns about economic insecurity, pressure on public services and a feeling among some that change was happening to them rather than with them had contributed to a growing pessimism about the future and distrust of those in charge.

This turned out not to be a one-off.

A pattern has since emerged, most recently evident in Southampton and Belfast. From protests outside hotels housing asylum seekers to rising tensions in local communities, there has been a hardening of attitudes in some places and a growing sense of unease in others: targeted disproportionately at those considered not being of 'us' but of 'them'.

It is important to acknowledge that many people expressing concern about change in their communities do so from a place of genuine anxiety – about economic insecurity, fairness and belonging. But these concerns are increasingly being exploited, reshaped and, at times, weaponised in ways that deepen division and target already vulnerable groups. That line matters and, in too many places, it is being crossed.

Since the riots of 2024, Belong has worked intensively in 14 towns and cities, many directly affected by the violence.

What we found was not widespread extremism or entrenched hatred. Instead, we found communities feeling isolated, overlooked and left behind. We found places that are vulnerable, fractured and primed to respond to the politics of grievance.

These conditions create fertile ground for those who seek to exploit those grievances and stir up division. Where trust is low and connection is weak, it becomes far easier for harmful narratives to take hold.

Our research with local authorities shows that people are not coming together but are pulling apart. From the costs of living and a declining sense of civic pride to the way we live our lives online, social contact and a sense of community is, for too many, on the wane. There are no winners in places with low levels of cohesion. Divisions further exacerbate the economic pressures on places, with businesses reluctant to invest where tensions are or have been high. Civil disruption also impacts the public realm, leaving burnt-out buildings and ripped-up streets in its wake, feeding a negative cycle of declining pride-in-place and trust in neighbours.

At the same time, experiences of racism, anti-Muslim prejudice and antisemitism are becoming more commonplace, and language that many believed belonged to a different time has re-emerged in everyday discourse. Debates about who belongs – and on what terms – are becoming more visible and more contested.

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Some describe this as a shift in the Overton window; others see it as something more fundamental. Either way, the result is the same: individuals and communities feeling hurt, unsettled and, at times, unsafe, while institutions are often left struggling to respond at the pace and scale required.

But there are also reasons to be hopeful.

Across the country, we have seen examples of leadership that is resilient, open and determined, with leaders ready and willing to engage honestly with communities and to take the necessary actions.

The places that are faring best share common characteristics. Their leaders are clear-eyed about the issues, willing to listen, to engage in difficult, frequently uncomfortable conversations and committed to bringing people together.

Despite limited resources, they have worked across services and sectors and with civil society partners to build shared responses. They have prioritised relationships, trust and visibility, ensuring that communities feel heard and that leadership is present and accountable.

Crucially, they have kept cohesion on the agenda. Even small, sustained investments in this work have paid significant dividends, helping to prevent escalation and reduce the risk of disorder when tensions rise.

It is at these times of rapid change and uncertainty that cohesion matters most. But left unattended, cohesion slips down the priority list until the next crisis. Alongside tackling fundamental influencing factors such as economic disadvantage, local and national leaders must commit themselves to winning the contest of ideas on the side of unity and belonging versus othering, exclusion and division. Violence or hostility towards minority groups can never be justified, whatever the pressures communities may be under.

What we know

New polling, building on the State of Us research with British Future in 2025, suggests that things are getting worse and that attitudes are continuing to harden in some areas.

38% of people now think the UK is very divided, against 28% five years ago. Our survey also shows that attitudes to immigration have become more polarised by age, ethnicity, education, social grade, where people live and by party politics over the last year.

And there is increasing apprehension about the future, with nearly two-thirds of people agreeing that large-scale public unrest is likely over the next year.

At the same time, social media is reshaping how people engage with information and with each other. Echo chambers can reinforce grievances and narrow perspectives, allowing misinformation and hostility to spread quickly.

Previous approaches centred primarily on security and enforcement have had limited impact and, at times, unintended consequences.

And there are real costs to inaction. The £500 million-plus cost to the public purse following the 2011 disorder

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and the £28 million policing cost alone in 2024 are a stark reminder of what happens when these issues are left unaddressed.

Place matters. Even in the face of national pressures, people's connection to where they live remains strong. It is in our towns, cities and neighbourhoods that cohesion is built – or lost.

What we must do

Strong local responses that prioritise clear communication, platforming credible voices and visible leadership, can make a real difference. Every place needs to be equipped to respond in this way. We must also be willing to lean in and listen to peoples' grievances and frustrations, giving opportunities for engagement and dialogue – and we must do so openly – ensuring they know their voice matters.

National government has a critical role: setting direction, providing the infrastructure for action, and ensuring that power and resource are meaningfully devolved so that local areas can respond in ways that reflect their communities.

Strategic authorities must play their part too, using their convening power and systems leadership to align partners and shape shared priorities across wider geographies. As devolution evolves, they could play an increasingly important role in bringing together local authorities, public services, civil society and the private sector, helping to mobilise resources, influence employers and embed cohesion across whole systems.

Civil society is equally vital. In the aftermath of the 2024 riots and beyond, it has often been community organisations and grassroots groups that have stepped forward, challenging misinformation and offering alternatives rooted in trust and lived experience. This contribution needs sustained support.

The Local Government Outcomes Framework has begun to create a clearer basis for measuring progress. But measurement must be matched with accountability, ensuring that all areas engage, not just those already committed.

Now is the time – a clear duty on cohesion would strengthen this work: giving local authorities the mandate, power and responsibility to act, supporting collaboration across sectors and recognising and harnessing the essential role of civil society.

We are stronger together. Cohesion is not a 'nice to have'. It is foundational to our shared future. And without clearer expectations, accountability and sustained focus, we risk losing ground that will be far harder to recover.

Kelly Fowler, Chief Executive, Belong & Professor Ted Cantle CBE

Executive Summary

Belong believes that we are at a critical juncture for social cohesion in the UK. Twenty-five years after the Cattle review, and two years after the disorder of 2024, the tensions and challenges that we continue to see in our communities demonstrate that many of the drivers of division remain unresolved.

In the course of our work with 14 local authorities between 2024 and 2026, we have seen growing pressures on communities, alongside a potent mix of threats and challenges to cohesion and widespread anxiety about the potential for future unrest.

At the same time, there is cause for hope. Across the country, we continue to see strong neighbourhood relationships, committed local leadership and examples of communities coming together to address local challenges. The question is not whether social cohesion can be strengthened, but whether there is sufficient commitment to sustain and scale the approaches that work.

This report draws on Belong's work with local authorities, hundreds of conversations with communities, and stakeholder engagement exercises undertaken between 2024 and 2026. It also draws on new polling evidence to supplement this analysis. It examines some of the key challenges and threats to cohesion, the approaches that appear most effective in responding, and the policy change and evolution needed to secure real change.

Our work has also shown that where local authorities are able to invest in social cohesion over the long term, they are better placed to build resilient communities and respond to periods of heightened tension. Too often, however, this depends on local circumstances or access to specific funding streams, rather than being a consistent national expectation. That is why we are calling for a statutory duty on every local authority to develop and maintain a social cohesion strategy.

Social cohesion is the glue that holds society together. It shapes how people relate to one another, whether they feel they belong, the extent to which they trust institutions and their willingness to work together to address shared challenges.

Belong's work continues to show that cohesive communities are more resilient. They are better able to withstand economic shocks, respond to crises, manage disagreement and adapt to social change. Conversely, where trust is weak and divisions deepen, communities become more vulnerable to unrest, polarisation and conflict.

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Faultlines: current challenges to cohesion in the UK

Our analysis gives us cause for concern. While the challenges that communities face differ from place to place, Belong's work suggests that several common pressures are now impacting social cohesion across much of the UK. These include:

1. The continuing impact of the cost-of-living crisis and economic insecurity
2. Concerns about neighbourhood decline and the loss of civic pride
3. Hardening attitudes towards immigration and asylum
4. The impact of social media, leading to the spread of racism, hate, misinformation and increasingly polarised public debate
5. Low trust in politicians and democratic institutions
6. Reluctance to engage openly with difficult conversations about migration and other sensitive issues

Belong's work also highlights the importance of place. While many of these pressures are national in character, they are experienced differently in different communities. The events of 2024 demonstrated that cohesion challenges can emerge in places with very different demographic profiles and local histories, and not only in the UK's most diverse areas. Every area faces its own cohesion challenges and lines of division. For that reason, social cohesion should not be seen as an issue that affects only diverse urban areas. It is a challenge that is relevant to every local authority.



Effective approaches to building stronger, more resilient communities

While there is cause for concern, Belong has also identified common elements in effective approaches to strengthening social cohesion.

Successful approaches typically:

- Begin locally and build on existing relationships, trust and community assets
- Demonstrate strong local leadership and a shared vision for cohesion
- Take a proactive approach to monitoring tensions and addressing misinformation and disinformation
- Create opportunities for meaningful bridging social contact between people from different backgrounds
- Support and strengthen existing work undertaken by civil society and faith organisations
- Expand opportunities for volunteering and community participation
- Include a strong focus on employment and economic participation

A consistent lesson from Belong's work is that social contact matters. Activities that bring people together through volunteering, culture, sport, education and community action can help build trust, reduce prejudice and strengthen shared identities.

We have also seen the critical contributions made by civil society organisations. Many provide the infrastructure that enables communities to connect, support one another and respond to local challenges, but they are often hampered by short-term funding and capacity constraints. These organisations require greater support to ensure they can play their full role in building stronger, more resilient communities.

Belong's experience suggests that investment in social cohesion brings wider benefits. Local authorities that invest in cohesion are often better placed to respond to protests, misinformation and periods of heightened tension. The process of developing a cohesion strategy can itself strengthen partnerships, improve engagement with residents, support cross-departmental working, and embed a stronger and shared understanding of local challenges.



Recommendations

1. Every local authority should have a plan for social cohesion which is developed locally in consultation with residents and stakeholders as part of an explicit social cohesion duty underpinned by a robust national accountability mechanism.
2. As part of the evolving devolution settlement in England, a new framework should set out the respective responsibilities of central government, strategic authorities and local government in relation to social cohesion.
3. The government should increase employment support for those who are economically inactive, extending and scaling up models like Greater Manchester's Working Well.
4. Every Pride in Place Neighbourhood Board should be encouraged to develop a volunteering plan, in partnership with civil society organisations.
5. Sport should be used to build shared and inclusive identities – the UEFA Men's Euros 2028 tournament provides a major opportunity for this.
6. The development of an England-wide strategy to support the economic and social integration of migrants and refugees should be prioritised.
7. The government and funders should invest in building the skills, capacity and confidence to navigate difficult conversations among place-based leaders.
8. Citizenship education in schools should be strengthened with a stronger cross-curricular focus on skills like oracy and critical dialogue that enable young people to navigate disagreement and conflict.
9. Strategic authorities should expand digital literacy programmes which focus on developing critical thinking skills and building resilience to misinformation and disinformation.
10. The government should urgently implement the recommendations set out in the Protecting What Matters strategy, providing a timeline and setting out more detail.

1. Introduction

This summer marks the 25-year anniversary of riots that swept through towns across northern England. In response to the 2001 unrest, the government commissioned the Cantle review of social cohesion.¹ This ground-breaking review set out actions to address the divides witnessed by the inquiry team and strengthen communities. However, its recommendations were only ever implemented in part.

What has followed over the last 25 years fits a familiar pattern. High-profile shock events that have underlined the threats to cohesion have been followed by brief periods of policy attention and action. These have, in turn, given way to longer periods of inertia and policy drift as social cohesion has slipped back down the political agenda. Against this backdrop, it should come as no surprise that unrest flared up again in 2024.

The disorder of 2024 was a wake-up call, exposing a society vulnerable to polarisation, hate crime and unrest. Belong responded by working with partners across the sector to publish *After the Riots*, which set out the foundations of a strategic response, including the need for a cross-departmental national cohesion strategy and a stronger role for local government.²

The subsequent *State of Us* report, published by Belong and British Future in 2025, provided further evidence of the pressures on social cohesion across the UK, including the effects of the cost-of-living crisis, social media-driven tensions, immigration without corresponding investment in integration and declining political trust.³ Since then, the UK has seen a further summer of protests in town centres and outside asylum hotels in at least 134 local authority areas.⁴

Against this backdrop, Belong has worked with local authorities across the UK to help them understand and respond to local tensions and strengthen community cohesion. Between July 2024 and June 2026, we undertook in-depth work in 14 local authorities, seven of which saw unrest in summer 2024. These authorities have taken a proactive approach to building and maintaining community cohesion and resilience despite significant financial pressures. Some received funding for this work through the Community Recovery Fund, while others chose to invest in this work because of the risks they perceived and the long-term benefits they believed it could deliver.

Our work has included evidence reviews, community and stakeholder engagement, the co-production of local cohesion strategies, and bespoke training for councillors, officers and partner organisations. This has enabled us both to understand the challenges that different communities face and to work alongside local authorities in designing and implementing practical responses. Together, these partnerships and cumulative experience have generated valuable insight into the challenges that communities are facing, the approaches that appear most effective in strengthening cohesion and the barriers that local authorities continue to face.

¹ Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: Report of the Independent Review Team*, London: Home Office.

² Riots, Communities and Victims Panel (2013) *After the Riots: The Final Report of the Riots Communities and Victims Panel*, London: Riots, Communities and Victims Panel.

³ Puddle, J., Rutter, J. and Rolfe, H. (2025) *The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK*, London and Manchester, Belong and British Future.

⁴ Belong live monitoring data on asylum protests, 15 June 2026.

This report draws together those insights alongside evidence from focus groups with council officers and findings from a nationally representative survey of 2,999 UK adults undertaken by Focaldata in April 2026. Further information about our research methodology is given in the appendix.

The report addresses four questions:

1. What are the main challenges to social cohesion in different local authority areas?
2. How have local authorities, community organisations and other stakeholders responded to these challenges?
3. What approaches have been most effective in reducing tensions and divisions and strengthening cohesion?
4. What changes in policy or practice would help local authorities respond more effectively?

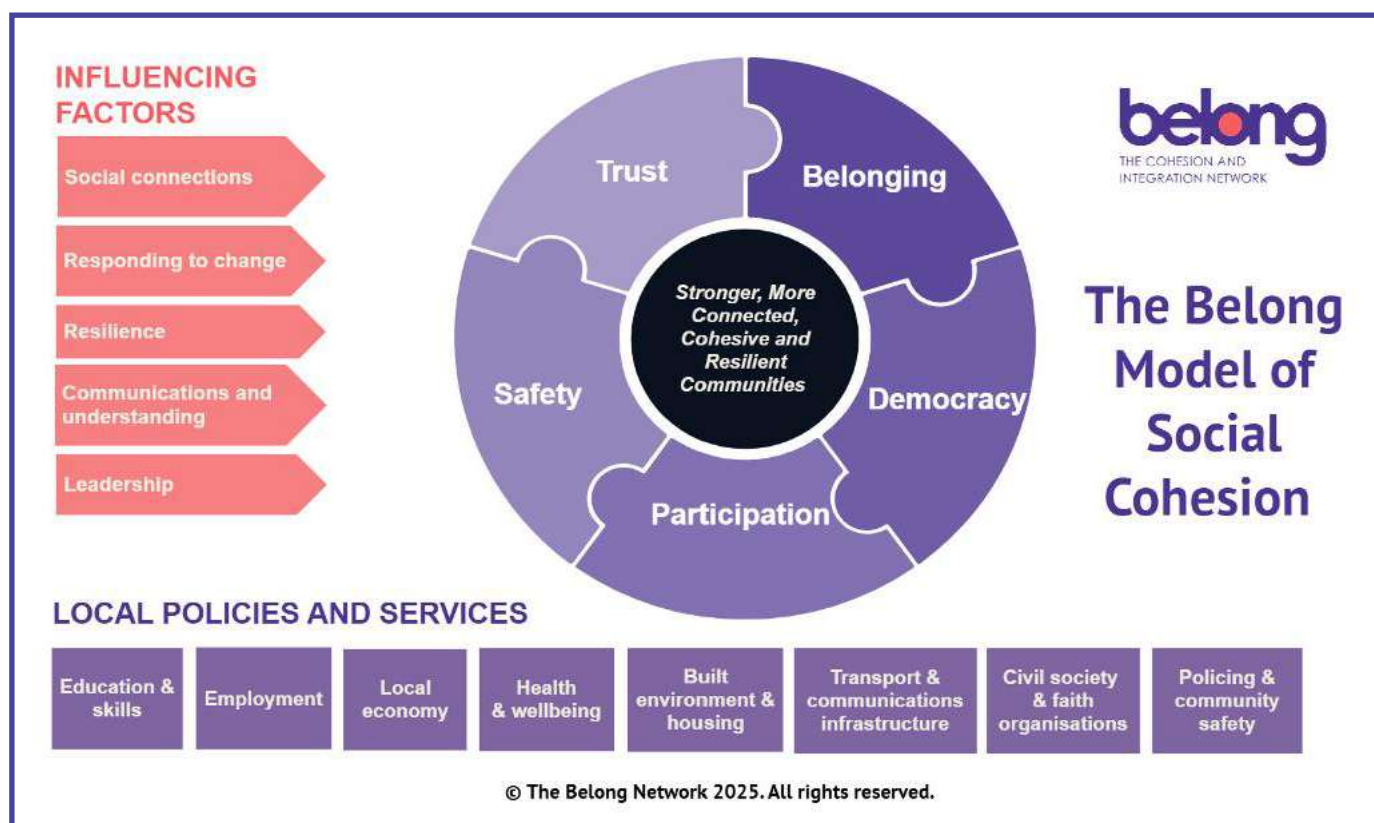
These findings come at a critical moment. The protests of June 2026 underline the costs of neglecting social cohesion, while the experience of local authorities demonstrates that a more preventative approach is both possible and necessary. By drawing together these local insights, this report aims to inform a more consistent and preventative local and national approach, equipping policymakers and practitioners with practical lessons to build stronger, more resilient communities before divisions deepen further.



2. What is social cohesion and why does it matter?

This report focuses on social cohesion. This term first entered the modern policy lexicon in the 1990s in relation to urban regeneration programmes and became firmly established following the publication of the Cantle review in 2001.⁵ Cantle and other writers of this period broadly saw social cohesion as the ‘glue’ that holds society together, enabling communities to respond positively to change and remain resilient in the face of shocks. Although there has never been an official government definition of social cohesion, there is a large academic literature on the subject.⁶ To aid clarity and to help the organisations it works with, Belong has reviewed these studies and developed a model of social cohesion which takes account of the factors that can drive or impede this condition.

What is social cohesion?



⁵ Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: Report of the Independent Review Team*, London: Home Office.

⁶ For a summary see Abrams, D., Davies, B. and Horsham, Z. (2023) *Rapid Review: Measuring Social Cohesion*, Manchester: Belong.

Belong's model groups the key components of social cohesion under five headings. These five components are:

- **Trust and mutual support:** The confidence people have that others will act with honesty, fairness and goodwill, alongside a willingness to support one another.
- **Safety and security:** People's sense of personal safety and security in their daily lives.
- **Belonging and shared identities:** People's sense of inclusion and attachment to both their local communities and the nation. It reflects whether people feel they have a stake in their local area and wider society.
- **Participation:** The extent to which people take part in community and civic life, for example through volunteering and voting.
- **Democratic resilience:** The strength and adaptability of democratic systems to uphold fair processes and withstand challenges. It includes people's confidence that their voices are heard and valued by peers, government and local institutions, and that democratic institutions remain robust and inclusive.

Belong's model also recognises that social cohesion is shaped by wider economic and structural conditions, which we describe as its 'foundations'. These include factors such as employment, housing conditions and the built environment. Alongside these are a range of wider 'influences' which, although not components of social cohesion themselves, shape the context in which cohesion develops. These include social networks, demographic change, local leadership and significant events, whether shock events or moments that bring communities together.

Much research shows the key role of social capital in building cohesive communities. **Bonding social capital** comprises the relationships between people who share similar characteristics. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of these networks in times of crisis, providing practical support and mutual aid. **Bridging social capital** refers to relationships between people from different backgrounds. These inter-group relations can reduce conflict, stereotyping, perceptions of threat and prejudice.⁷ **Linking social capital** is the relationships between people and institutions, for example, between councillors and their constituents. These connections help build political and institutional trust and enable people to gain resources or bring about neighbourhood change.

Why does social cohesion matter?

Belong's core mission is to build a stronger, more cohesive society. We believe that this is not an optional extra, but a necessary pre-condition of place building – creating places where people want to live, work and invest. Cohesive communities are safer, more resilient and better able to support the health, wellbeing and prosperity of the people who live in them. They also provide the confidence and stability that encourage

⁷ Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al-Ramiah, A., Wagner, A., Vertovec, S. and Hewstone, M. (2014) Contextual Effect of Positive Intergroup Contact on Out-group Prejudice, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(11), 3996-4000.

investment, strengthen civic pride and sustain long-term commitment to local places.

There are significant costs if social cohesion is neglected. The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee estimated that the additional policing costs from the 2024 riots amounted to £28 million, with officers removed from their usual duties to maintain order.⁸ The final bill for the 2011 riots was estimated at around £500 million, in addition to significant wider economic implications such as an estimated £520 million lost through reduced tourism the following year.⁹ By contrast, we know that investments amounting to a small fraction of these costs in social cohesion programmes can generate significant benefits for the resilience and cohesion of local areas.¹⁰

Investment in stronger communities can also reduce longer-term demands on policing and the criminal justice system. Research shows that communities with stronger bonding, bridging and linking social capital are associated with lower levels of crime.¹¹ Strong social relationships reinforce pro-social norms of behaviour and enable residents to exercise the informal social control that discourages crime and anti-social behaviour.

The benefits of social cohesion extend well beyond public safety. Belong's research during the COVID-19 pandemic clearly showed that cohesive communities are also resilient communities.¹² Places that invested in social cohesion had higher levels of inter-personal and institutional trust and were better able to mobilise volunteers during the pandemic. Another study showed that investment in community infrastructure and cohesion enabled local authorities and their partners to identify vulnerable residents more easily, share information and provide mutual support during periods of crisis.¹³

As the UK continues to face a range of threats, from extreme weather events and public health emergencies to economic shocks, cyberwarfare and terrorism, social cohesion will become an increasingly important component of community resilience. This relationship is now increasingly recognised by Local Resilience Forums.

Social cohesion also delivers wider benefits for health, wellbeing and economic prosperity. There is a growing body of international evidence that highlights the benefits of social connection for health and wellbeing. Loneliness and social isolation are recognised risk factors for depression, heart disease, stroke and dementia. Public Health England calculated that every £1 invested in tackling loneliness among older people saves society £1.26.¹⁴

Strong social relationships also contribute to economic opportunity. Bonding and bridging social capital help people to find jobs and support their career progression, while cohesive communities may be more likely to

⁸ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2025) Police Response to the 2024 Summer Disorder, London: UK Parliament.

⁹ Riots, Communities and Victims Panel (2013) *After the Riots The Final Report of the Riots Communities and Victims Panel*, London: Riots, Communities and Victims Panel.

¹⁰ Abrams, D., Broadwood, J., Lalot, F., Davies Hayon, K. and Dixon, A. (2021) *Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19*, London: Nuffield Foundation, University of Kent, The Belong Network.

¹¹ Lesiak, M. and Couuts, A. (2025) *Social Capital 2025: The Case for Strengthening Social Bonds to Prevent Crime*, London: Demos, Local Trust and the 3NI.

¹² Abrams, D., Broadwood, J., Lalot, F., Davies Hayon, K. and Dixon, A. (2021) *Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19*, London: Nuffield Foundation, University of Kent, The Belong Network.

¹³ Oakley, D. (2024) *Building Resilient Communities: The Case for Social Cohesion*, London: Protection Approaches.

¹⁴ Public Health England. (2017). PHE highlights 8 ways for local areas to prevent mental ill health. GOV.UK

attract external investment and retain skilled workers. The role that social capital plays in economic growth has been recognised by successive governments, most recently in the 2021 Levelling Up White Paper and the 2025 Pride in Place Strategy.

Social cohesion is therefore not a peripheral concern but a foundational condition for safe, resilient and thriving places. In 2026, the question is not whether government can afford to invest in stronger communities, but whether it can afford not to.

The policy and institutional context

Because social cohesion influences so many aspects of public life, responsibility for strengthening it is spread across different levels of government and a wide range of policy areas. The following section outlines the current policy and institutional landscape across the UK, as understanding this policy and institutional landscape helps explain both the progress that has been made and the gaps that this report seeks to address.

Responsibility for social cohesion policy differs across the UK. In England, policy is led by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), with ministerial responsibility held by a junior minister. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, responsibility for community and cohesion policy reflects the division between devolved and reserved powers.

Social cohesion is also relevant to the work of a broader range of UK Government departments. These include the Home Office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Cabinet Office, which supports the Prime Minister, oversees equalities policy and coordinates cross-government responses during national emergencies.

Across the UK, community and cohesion policy is delivered through a range of related policy areas and action to address economic and structural barriers to social cohesion, for example employability programmes and action on crime and anti-social behaviour. However, the policy and institutional arrangements differ between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Devolved governments lead on policy areas such as community development, neighbourhood regeneration, and interventions to reduce poverty and inequality, alongside devolution policy in relation to public engagement in decision-making. Reserved or England-specific policy areas include civil contingencies strategy to increase resilience to shock events, social and economic integration programmes for migrants and refugees, and counter-extremism policy. Conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding remain a distinct policy area specific to Northern Ireland.

The Welsh Government published its first community cohesion strategy in 2009 followed by action plans in 2014-16 and 2016-17. Today, eight regional social cohesion coordinators work across groups of local authorities to deliver this strategy. This approach means that every Welsh local authority has put in place local plans of action. In this respect, it has a more consistent approach than England.

The UK Government is currently prioritising social cohesion through the Pride in Place programme and the commitments set out in the Protecting What Matters strategy. Further detail on each is given below.

A timeline of key national policy developments on community and cohesion since 2001, including the commitments made in the 2026 Protecting What Matters strategy, is provided in the appendix.

Community Recovery Fund

Some £15 million of government funding was provided to local authorities affected by the 2024 riots through the Community Recovery Fund. Each local authority received £600,000 except for Sefton (where the Southport murders took place), which received a larger grant. The fund's aims were to repair physical damage, improve security and build cohesive communities, although councils were given flexibility in how they spent this money.

Funding was received by nine of the 14 areas where Belong has worked. Funding has been spent on a wide range of activities, including developing social cohesion strategies, running campaigns to address hate crime, training community mediators and running activities to bring people together through volunteering and sport. The funding has provided an incentive for councils to put social cohesion on the agenda. One lesson that can be drawn from the Community Recovery Fund is that local authorities can achieve a lot with a relatively small amount of funding.

Pride in Place

The Pride in Place programme now lies at the heart of the UK Government's social cohesion strategy. It aims to create thriving places, build stronger communities and empower people to have more control over decision-making and community assets.

The main Pride in Place programme will provide £20 million of funding over a ten-year period to each of 284 neighbourhoods in 177 local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales, with corresponding funding made available in Northern Ireland. There is also a smaller, subsidiary initiative – the Pride in Place Impact Fund – which will provide £1.5 million over two years for projects that aim to increase civic pride. This fund mostly covers capital spending and is being made available to 95 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales.

Pride in Place areas have been announced in three phases (Table 1) and different selection criteria have been used to determine which areas receive funding. These criteria obviously mean that many seemingly needy areas – in terms of social cohesion – miss out on funding.

Table 1: Pride in Place programme roll out

Phase	Number of	Ratio of capital to revenue funding	Funding criteria in England
Phase 1	75	75%:25%	Possession of Level 3 qualifications Healthy life expectancy Median gross weekly pay Gross value added per hour
Phase 2	169	75%:25%	Ranking of neighbourhoods and selection based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation and Community Needs Index scores, the latter combining indicators that relate to civic assets, social connectedness and active and engaged populations
Phase 3	40	67%:37%	As above

Source: MHCLG *Pride in Place prospectus*

Areas that receive Pride in Place funding are obliged to form a Neighbourhood Board, which should involve the local community in developing a Pride in Place Plan. In deciding how to allocate their budget, Neighbourhood Boards have been afforded considerable flexibility. To guide their spending and to reduce lengthy approval processes, MHCLG has published a list of pre-approved interventions which Neighbourhood Boards and their parent local authorities can implement without prior approval. For the Stronger Communities dimension of Pride in Place, these pre-approved activities include:

- Co-designing cohesion action plans
- Projects that bring people from different social groups together and build relationships within and between communities, such as mentoring and buddying schemes, town-hall discussions on local issues and other means of creating productive dialogue
- Projects that build capacity, capability and awareness in communities, such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision, hate crime awareness and tackling local misinformation and disinformation
- Impactful volunteering and social action projects to develop social capital
- Investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society, youth and community groups

Despite its prominence within the government's cohesion agenda, Pride in Place remains at an early stage of implementation. Crucially, the programme is limited to 284 neighbourhoods, yet in most local authorities there are many more localities that would benefit from such funding.

Protecting What Matters

In early 2026, the UK Government published *Protecting What Matters*, its national social cohesion strategy.¹⁵ In a volatile world, an underlying principle of *Protecting What Matters* is that cohesive communities are more resilient to shock events and change. It makes 90 wide-ranging commitments which aim to create a more cohesive and resilient country. It is important because it is a cross-government strategy and recognises that action is needed in many areas. Its pledges aim to address neighbourhood decline and give people a greater say in their communities, reduce hate crime, extremism and online harms, improve the integration of migrants and refugees, and promote shared spaces and shared values. A more detailed description of *Protecting What Matters* is given in the appendix.

Protecting What Matters is to be welcomed, but the challenge is to develop the detail and turn commitments into real change. *Protecting What Matters* is essentially a central government strategy and, while the strategy commits to working with devolved governments where responsibilities intersect, there is limited articulation of the role of local partners, whether they are councils, colleges or civil society. Social cohesion is not something that can be delivered by central or devolved government alone – it depends on a genuine partnership between national and local institutions, with the latter needing funding and support to deliver.

The Local Government Outcome Framework (LGOFF) indicators

Introduced by the government in 2025 and updated in February 2026, the LGOFF applies in England and sets 15 national priority outcomes across key council services such as housing, social care and economic regeneration. The government will assess the quality of council services against a series of LGOFF indicators. Within the LGOFF, the ‘Neighbourhoods’ priority area (Priority 12) is most closely aligned with social cohesion. This means there are mechanisms to hold local authorities to account on social cohesion. Indicators in this area mostly derive from the government’s Community and Engagement Survey and include:

- Percentage of people who agree that adults in their communities can be trusted
- Percentage of people who agree that they can influence decisions in their local area
- Percentage of people who agree that they are satisfied with their local area as a place to live
- Percentage of people who agree that people of different backgrounds get on well together in their local area
- Percentage of people experiencing loneliness¹⁶
- Percentage of people who engaged in any informal or formal volunteering in last 12 months

¹⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (2026) *Protecting What Matters: Towards a More Confident, Cohesive and Resilient United Kingdom*, London: MHCLG.

¹⁶ Composite Loneliness Indicator

LGO data from the 13 English local authorities where Belong has been working is presented in Table 2. It shows that, across a number of indicators, several areas score below the England average. For example, there are significantly lower than average levels of inter-personal trust in Leicester, Manchester and Redbridge, while every local authority bar Sefton scores lower on the civic pride measurement of satisfaction with their local area as a place to live.

Going forward, council discussions about social cohesion in England are increasingly likely to be influenced by LGO Neighbourhood indicators. It would be possible to use this reporting obligation to increase the accountability of local authorities on social cohesion.

Table 2: Local Government Outcome Framework indicators, by local authority

	% of people who agree adults in their communities can be trusted	% of people who agree they can influence decisions in their local area	% of people who agree they are satisfied with their local area as a place to live	% of people who agree people from different backgrounds get on well with each other in their local area	% of people experiencing loneliness	% of people who engaged in any informal or formal volunteering in last 12 months
England	40%	24%	73%	81%	9%	54%
Bolton	33%	24%	63%	75%	12%	55%
Bradford	33%	26%	63%	73%	11%	53%
Calderdale	42%	21%	70%	77%	10%	59%
Hartlepool	37%	15%	62%	75%	11%	58%
Leicester	29%	31%	66%	80%	12%	44%
Liverpool	37%	24%	70%	79%	12%	48%
Manchester	26%	29%	62%	76%	11%	51%
Middlesbrough	31%	23%	55%	71%	11%	50%
Redbridge	26%	30%	63%	77%	11%	55%
Rushmoor	32%	18%	58%	77%	13%	49%
Sefton	38%	17%	73%	77%	10%	52%
Sunderland	29%	23%	65%	72%	9%	47%
Tamworth	34%	15%	67%	75%	7%	48%

Source: MHCLG Pride in Place prospectus

3. Faultlines in society: insights from communities

In our work with 14 different local authorities over the last 18 months, Belong has facilitated numerous community conversations and consultations and has engaged in lengthy discussions with council officers, elected members and local stakeholders. Drawing on these experiences, this section examines the main factors shaping social cohesion across different places and identifies the themes that have emerged consistently from our work.

In the course of this work, Belong has examined the challenges and barriers to social cohesion across a wide range of local authorities. Each place is different, and the causes and profile of social cohesion challenges vary accordingly. Some are highly localised, reflecting a community's history, demographics or recent events. Others apply more generally but still manifest and play out in different ways in different places, requiring place-specific responses.

However, a number of common themes have emerged consistently across almost all the places in which we have worked. These themes are powerful factors that are shaping, and often exacerbating, cohesion challenges in many places across the UK. They are:

1. **The cost-of-living crisis continues to exert a strain:** Financial hardship is creating a widespread sense of unfairness, which increases grievances, especially against out-groups and in relation to access to public goods and services. At the same time, it is limiting people's ability to spend time socialising and connecting with others 'in real life' – people 'cannot afford' to mix in the ways they once did.
2. **Neighbourhood decline is a recurring concern:** The sense that a neighbourhood is 'going downhill' is common to many different places. This is playing a significant role in undercutting civic pride and communities' sense of confidence and togetherness.
3. **Attitudes to immigration have hardened:** Conversations with communities suggest high levels of concern about the asylum system, control over Channel migration, the integrity of the immigration system generally, and pressures on housing and public services. This climate of opinion creates serious challenges for work to foster social cohesion, changing views about who belongs and stoking negative feelings towards out-groups.
4. **Social media is changing the public debate and stoking tensions:** Local media is profoundly reshaping the nature of public debate through the prevalence of misinformation/disinformation, and because of its tendency to amplify emotive and adversarial content and reduce space for nuance. In turn this reinforces prejudice, amplifies racist narratives deepens divisions, creates new in-groups and out-groups, and accelerates the emergence and escalation of community tensions, undermining social cohesion.
5. **Trust in politicians and democratic institutions is very low:** Falling political trust in both national and local government is a common theme in community conversations. Scandals, delivery failures and the widespread perception that people's voices are not listened to are all corrosive of public trust in politics and are creating feelings of pessimism and cynicism about democratic institutions.

6. **The difficulties of ‘difficult’ conversations:** Local leaders are often struggling with or avoiding open discussions on sensitive issues associated with race, hate, migration and culture. This aversion follows understandable fears about inflaming tensions or being seen as ‘taking sides’. However, we need to have more healthy conversations about sensitive issues, including discussing and confronting harmful behaviour. Reluctance to do so fails to address problems and strengthen relationships.

Our analysis gives us major cause for concern. The tensions we witnessed and responded to in 2024 and documented in the 2025 The State of Us report show many signs of worsening. Social cohesion – the glue that holds society together – feels very fragile in many places. The public agrees with this assessment: in our survey, 62% of people felt that large-scale civil unrest was very likely over the next year. Below, we discuss each of these six themes in more detail.

The cost-of-living crisis continues to exert a strain

The cost-of-living crisis and pressures on housing and public services continue to exert significant strains on households. More than four in ten people (41%) in our 2026 survey were finding it difficult or very difficult to manage on their current income, up from 32% in the research we undertook in 2025.¹⁷ People who are aged 35-54, are of black ethnicity, live in social or private rental accommodation, are in lower socio-economic grades or live in the most deprived areas were more likely to report they were struggling. In Sunderland we were told:

“A lot of things need to change so that the normal people of society can afford to start living normally again.”

“If people could afford to live without struggling there wouldn’t be so much hate towards both people on benefits and immigrants. Working people see money being given away.” [Youth and community workers comments, Sunderland, July 2025]

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on people’s lives was also the most prominent theme in responses to an open question in Belong’s 2026 survey, with 25% of all responses identifying this issue as one that needed action if divides were to be reduced.

Financial hardship can prevent people from going out and taking part in the activities that bring people of different backgrounds together. Poverty and inequality can also increase people’s views that society is unfair, damaging their trust in democratic institutions.¹⁸ It can also increase grievances against out-groups in relation to perceptions about unfair access to public goods and services. In the face of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the Khan review¹⁹ stated:

“There is a risk that where our poorest feel left behind, some become increasingly disillusioned with a democratic system which they feel is not supporting them.”

¹⁷ Focaldata survey of 2,243 UK adults undertaken 7-14 April 2025 and cited in Puddle, J., Rutter, J. and Rolfe, H. (2025) *The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK*, Manchester and London, Belong and British Future.

¹⁸ Carnegie UK Trust and Ipsos (2024) *Life in the UK 2024*, Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust.

¹⁹ Khan, Dame S. (2024) *The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience*, London: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Neighbourhood decline is a recurring concern

Neighbourhood decline emerged as one of the most consistent themes in Belong's work, featuring in community conversations in 13 of the 14 local authorities where we have worked. Residents frequently described high street vacancies, neglected public spaces, anti-social behaviour and a lack of investment as visible signs that their communities were being left behind.

These concerns were reflected in Belong's national survey. Although more people viewed their local community as united than divided (Figure 2), a sizeable minority expressed much more negative views. Just over one in seven people (15%) gave the lowest scores (1-3), similar to the 13% recorded in our 2025 survey. Analysis of both surveys shows that these respondents were disproportionately likely to live in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods, as measured by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. More broadly, only 26% of respondents felt that their local area had improved, compared with 32% who believed it had declined and 39% who felt it had remained unchanged.

Figure 2: Perceptions of division or unity at national and local levels

On a scale of 1-10 how united or divided is the UK/my local community at present? (1 = divided, 10 = united)



Source: Focaldata survey of 2,999 UK adults undertaken 8-14 April 2026.

Belong's work suggests that perceptions that an area is 'going downhill' can have a profound impact on community confidence and cohesion. Conversely, civic pride helps to foster the shared identities and community action that bring people together. Civic pride and neighbourhood decline both featured in Belong's public conversations and in responses to the survey's open questions. Participants consistently identified practical improvements to the local environment, including investment in high streets and green spaces and action to tackle litter and fly-tipping, as important steps towards building stronger and less divided communities.

“Tidy up and provide more litter bins to keep areas clean. Buildings need to be spruced up.” [Street conversation, Leicester, February 2026]

“Improve the environment as community led efforts can make huge differences in litter and tree planting.” [Open field responses to survey]

These concerns were most acute in deprived neighbourhoods characterised by lower levels of trust and higher levels of population churn. Examples include Highfields (Leicester), Hulme (Manchester), Gresham (Middlesbrough), Little Ilford (Redbridge) and Pallion (Sunderland). These neighbourhoods typically contain older housing, large private rented sectors and more transient populations, including students, migrant workers and people seeking asylum. Survey comments often linked neighbourhood decline with rapid demographic change, particularly where respondents perceived overcrowding or poorly maintained private rented accommodation.

“Helping communities to become communities, but so many people are now piling into HMOs in some places, no one can keep track of who is living where.” [Open field responses to survey]

Much of the disorder in 2024 developed in neighbourhoods with these characteristics, including parts of Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Sunderland. Victims of hate crime during the disorder were also disproportionately drawn from these communities. While neighbourhood decline alone does not explain why unrest occurs, Belong’s work suggests it can contribute to a broader sense of frustration, disengagement and declining confidence in place.

The government’s flagship Pride in Place programme seeks to address the root causes of neighbourhood decline to support local leaders and strengthen social connection and community infrastructure in these areas. As previously noted, Pride in Place funding has been awarded to 28 neighbourhoods across 13 of the 14 local authorities where Belong has been working, and stakeholders described a range of positive early impacts. However, eligibility criteria, which include the skills level of the population, mean that areas with younger and healthier populations or areas with large numbers of students risk missing out on this funding. There is a clear need to find ways to address neighbourhood decline in areas outside of the Pride in Place programme.

“Pride and Place has brought capital investment, which is good for the town. It’s helped address massive decline, which is great. We as a council couldn’t have invested in it. It’s good for families and it makes you feel better and the overall wellbeing, where you live. And then I suppose for us, some of the other programmes which are run alongside it, which we have been able to link in, like everything we are doing to get people into employment.” [Local government official in focus group]

Attitudes to immigration have hardened

Immigration has long been a feature of national life in the UK but has increased over the last 25 years as a consequence of the arrival of EU citizens under free movement rules, sustained work visas, and student migration, family migration and the movement of asylum seekers and refugees. The overseas-born population of the UK grew from 8.3% in the 2001 Census to an estimated 19.6% in mid-2025.²⁰ At the same time, perceptions and feelings about immigration have also risen in salience and become a major challenge to social cohesion.

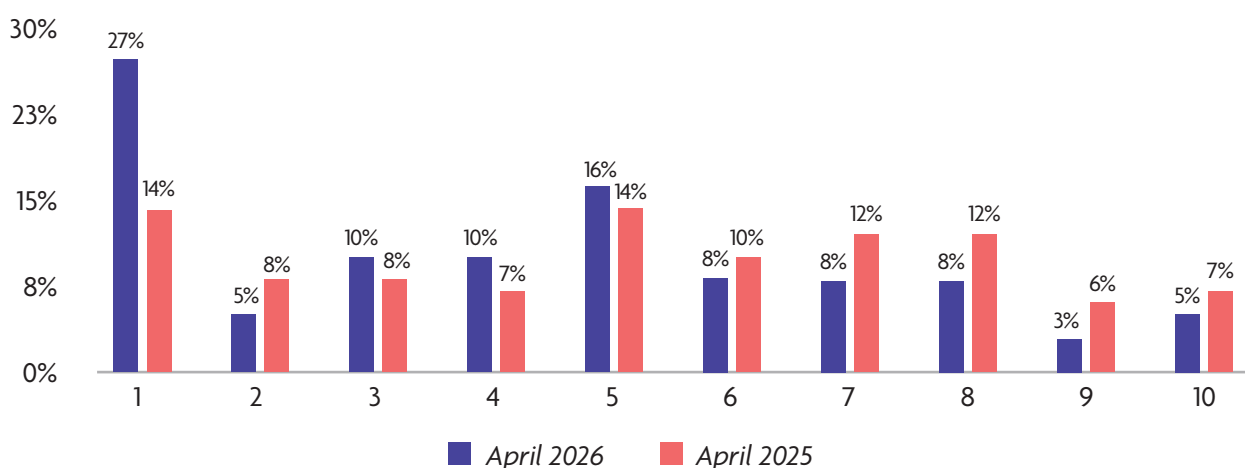
²⁰ ONS Mid-Year Population estimates 2025.

The *State of Us* research of 2025 showed that most people had positive views about those who come to the UK to work and support the principle of refugee protection, but these views were set alongside concerns about the asylum system.²¹ These misgivings focused on security and the lack of control over Channel migration, the integrity of the refugee determination processes, pressures on housing and public services, cultural change and a lack of integration. Belong's work shows that in many parts of the UK there is very little meaningful and sustained social contact between asylum seekers and local residents. Asylum seekers are largely barred from working and refugees are disproportionately likely to be workless.²² This means that public views are likely to be influenced by what they read online and in the media rather than by face-to-face interactions in communities and workplaces.

Belong believes attitudes to immigration have hardened over the last year. In the surveys that Belong undertook in 2025 for *The State of Us* and in 2026 for this report, we asked respondents to give a score between one and ten as to whether immigration had a positive or negative impact on the UK (Figure 3). Scoring between one and three, some 42% of people felt that immigration had had a largely negative impact on the UK, up from 31% in 2025. This trend is supported in other surveys. For example, the monthly Ipsos Issues Index has consistently shown immigration to have been in the top three issues of public concern throughout 2025 and early 2026.²³

Figure 3: Attitudes to immigration 2025 and 2026

On a scale of 1-10 how do you feel that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on the UK including your local community (1 = very negative, 10 = very positive)



Source: Focaldata survey of 2,243 UK adults undertaken 7-14 April 2025 and Focaldata survey of 2,999 UK adults undertaken 8-14 April 2026.

21 Puddle, J., Rutter, J. and Rolfe, H. (2025) *The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK*, London and Manchester, Belong and British Future

22 Migration Observatory (2026) *Migrants in the UK Labour Market*, Oxford: Migration Observatory.

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Across the UK, asylum hotels have been the focus of public discontent. Belong's public conversations and its 2026 survey indicate a widely held perception that it is unfair for asylum seekers to be housed in hotels while many households face rising living costs and difficulty accessing affordable housing. Survey respondents were asked to describe in their own words what they thought would address some of the divisions facing society. Of the 2,987 responses to this question, 24% of responses proposed reducing immigration, with 7% of all responses to the survey linking immigration with fairness and the cost-of-living crisis, as illustrated by the quote below.

"We need cost of living reductions. If people could afford to live without struggling there wouldn't be so much hate towards both people on benefits and immigrants. Working people see money being given away." [Open field responses to Belong survey, 2026]

Public concerns about immigration help to explain some of the recent asylum protests, although participation has been limited to a relatively small number of people – perhaps 37,000 at most. Belong's monitoring of these events suggests that in 2025 and 2026 these events have taken place in at least 134 local authority areas across the UK, including in six local authorities where Belong has been working.

The asylum protests have taken different forms. Some have been locally organised, and taken place alongside community meetings, petitions and the lobbying of councillors. A greater proportion have been organised by extremist groups partly or largely from outside the local area, as has been the case in Liverpool and Manchester. These protests have usually been small. But Belong is concerned about the increasing number of spontaneous protests that are taking place alongside night-time flashmobs, attempts to gain entry to hotels, vigilantism and vandalism of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). This form of 'protest' appears to be increasing, becoming more violent, and is hard to police.

A notable example occurred in Llanelli (Carmarthenshire), where Belong has been working. Following the Home Office's proposal to convert the Stradey Park Hotel into asylum accommodation, the town experienced many months of protests, alongside petitions and lobbying of councillors. While many demonstrations remained peaceful, there were arrests and reports of intimidation and criminal damage. Although the Home Office ultimately abandoned its plans, the protests divided the town and left a legacy of community tensions.

Campaigns have also broadened beyond opposition to individual hotels. Belong has observed a growing #NoToHMO campaign in parts of the UK, including in two areas where we have been working. In other places, opposition has centred on 'Raise the Colours' campaigns, in which national flags have been erected close to asylum accommodation. Belong's survey explored public attitudes towards this activity (Table 3). While 42% of respondents strongly supported the campaign, a small majority recognised its potential to feel exclusionary. In particular, 44% supported a middle-ground position, expressing comfort with the display of national flags while also believing that the campaign could appear intimidating or unwelcoming.

Table 3: Which of these three statements comes closest to your own views?

	UK
A Flying national flags from lampposts is wrong because it represents a political statement against immigrants	13%
B We should be proud to fly our national flags, but not hang them in places that would intimidate people	44%
C I support the campaign to fly national flags on lampposts, and we should be proud to fly our national flags.	42%

Source: Focaldata survey of 2,999 UK adults undertaken 8-14 April 2026.

Many of the asylum protests have been met by counter protests including in Liverpool, Manchester and Rushmoor. Belong's analysis shows that some people feel that counterprotests can increase polarisation, reduce the space for nuance, and make it harder to express mixed or moderate views. Instead of encouraging discussion, visible clashes between opposing groups can frame issues around immigration and the position of refugees in oversimplified ways.

Taken together, the hardening of attitudes on immigration and asylum, increased protests and a greater prevalence of flag campaigns have had profound impacts on social cohesion. Local authority staff and elected members described an emboldening of online and offline racism, as well as changing views about who belongs in local communities. In two areas where Belong has been working, officials felt it had become more difficult for service providers to argue for funding to support refugee integration.

Officials argued for better tension monitoring, resources and skills to support de-escalation and dialogue, as well as initiatives to boost the social and economic integration of migrants and refugees in local communities. While such interventions were seen as necessary and desirable, with a few notable exceptions, programmes of work to support integration are not being included in local authority social cohesion strategies.

Social media is changing the public debate and stoking tensions

Social media is fundamentally changing how we interact with each other. Misinformation and disinformation continue to stoke tensions, with 76% of people in the survey saying that they found it hard to know whether the things they read online were true. This view was supported Belong's public consultations and in responses to the open question in our survey.

In all 14 areas where Belong has been working, local authority staff, civil society and faith organisations described their concerns about increases in online racism, antisemitism and anti-Muslim prejudice. We were told that online prejudice was impacting on off-line relationships.

Belong's work suggests that the impacts of social cohesion are broader than addressing prejudice, misinformation and disinformation. Social media is reshaping public debate itself, reducing space for nuance,

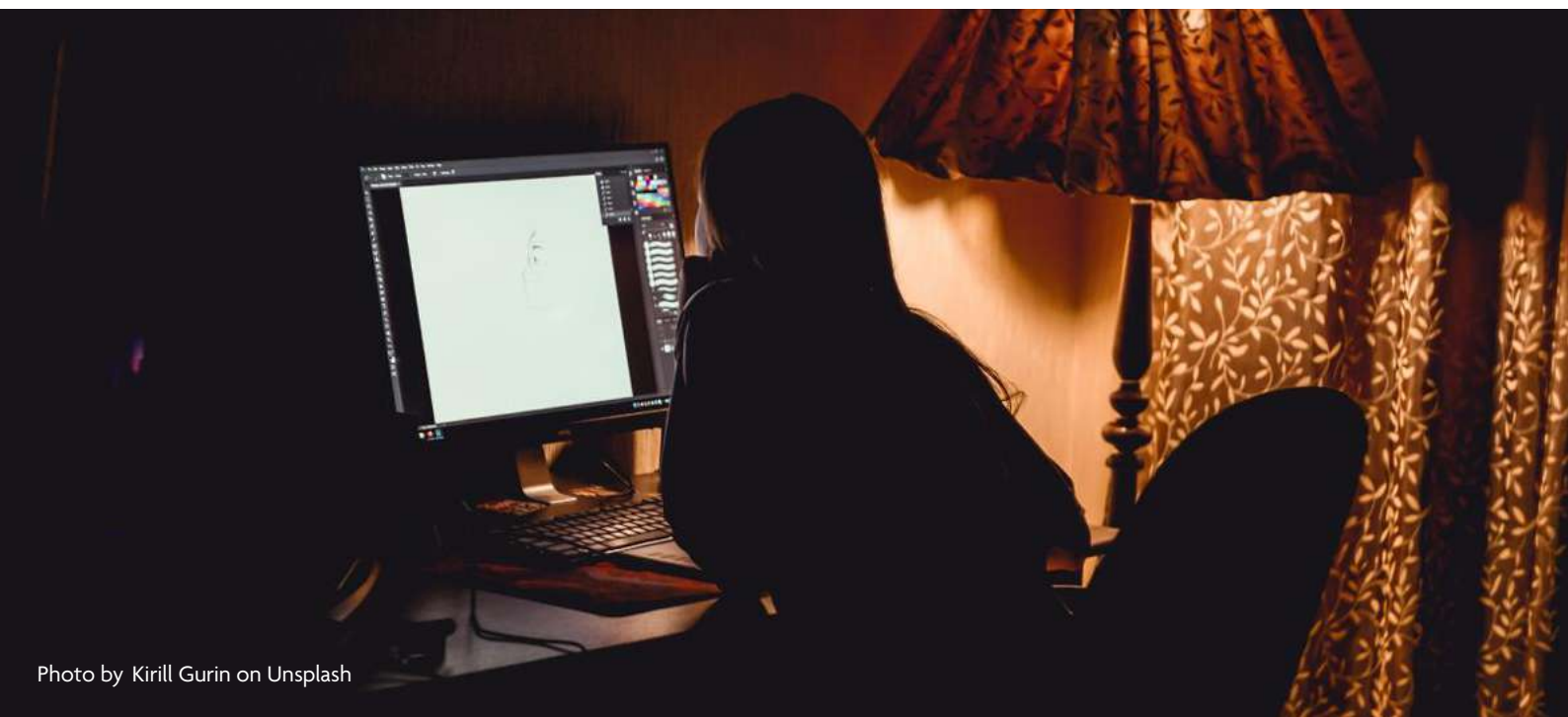
increasing divides and creating out-groups. Algorithms on platforms such as X amplify more emotive and adversarial content and steer discussion towards simpler, more populist solutions. Polarised perspectives on television and social media have the ability to create arguments seemingly out of nothing but which can quickly spill over into real life arguments. I

The echo-chamber effect is increasing political polarisation, which is a trend in almost all the areas where Belong has been working. Rising screen time is also displacing opportunities for faceto face discussion, diluting and reducing the frequency of everyday encounters and dialogue that help people to understand differences and resolve disagreements constructively.

Belong has seen some small-scale initiatives to address misinformation and disinformation, for example through immediate rebuttal and through digital inclusion programmes run by adult education services and public libraries. Yet addressing the impacts of social media on cohesion was the issue where local authorities felt most powerless to act. This view was expressed in every area where Belong has been working and in all focus groups with officials.

“The whole disinformation and social media thing is so hard. How do we equip local leaders with the right skills, capacity to be able to get ahead of some of those issues? What can the government do? What can we do locally? And how do we use kind of the best of our local skills to achieve that? Because we’re constantly behind in the game in this respect. But I think it’s pretty fundamental.” [Local government official in focus group]

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to counter individual pieces of misinformation or disinformation, but to strengthen the resilience of communities to these messages and to recover civil democratic debate. While local authorities have limited influence over the design of social media platforms and the algorithms that shape online discourse, small-scale initiatives demonstrate that, given the capacity and skills, they can deploy effective rebuttal messages and work with others to build resilience to misinformation and disinformation and encourage civil debate. Ensuring these practices are replicated requires local leadership and national systems of support that address officials’ sense of powerlessness.



Trust in politicians and democratic institutions is very low

Our survey showed that 79% of people felt that it was difficult to trust politicians because they put their own interests above the needs of the country, with mistrust now felt across all sections of society. Themes associated with low political trust comprised 10% of all responses to the open question in the survey, with typical comments about actions that would reduce divides given below.

“Force politicians to do good for the people instead of making themselves richer.”

“Stop politicians lying and being deceitful and make them deliver what they say they will do.”

“Trust in our politicians and councillors would make a huge difference but at present politics are totally broken.” [Open field responses to survey]

Falling political trust was a common theme identified by stakeholders and in community conversations. It was not only directed towards those who hold national office but also locally towards councils and councillors. We were told this was being driven by the corrosive impact of scandals, delivery failures on high-profile areas such as healthcare and immigration, and a public perception that people's voices are not being heard or their views are being discounted.

This environment can create space for misinformation and populist political narratives to take hold, with disaffection increasing the appeal of simplified accounts of complex political problems. The May 2026 local election results showed that people continue to turn away from the older, established political parties in England and Wales. With 39 councils and 3,844 council seats changing hands after the May 2026 elections, Belong has found that both local authority officers and civil society are worried about the loss of experience and institutional knowledge caused by these political changes, as well as the abandonment of programmes of work to build stronger communities. Should council services be disrupted or manifesto promises not upheld, there is a risk of a further weakening of political trust.

“There's just reams and reams on social media today about how incompetent the council is, and how greedy they are. People are just jumping on that and it just goes on and on, hundreds and hundreds of messages. But you can either have your council tax put up or we're going to have to cut costs and services. It is really hard as an officer, working for a council where you don't get to comment and you don't know what you can do. It is just a vicious circle.” [Local government official in focus group]

Local authorities have legal duties to make sure that elections are run properly, fairly, and securely, to uphold standards in public life.²⁴ In the past, some local authorities have proactively undertaken work to strengthen democratic participation outside of their statutory duties. This work has included voter registration drives, ‘use your vote’ campaigns, young mayor schemes, councillor visits to schools, participatory budgeting and deliberative democracy. But uncertainty about what the law enables them to do, funding constraints and a lack of experience in this area is constraining work to strengthen democracy at the very time it is under threat. There is a desire to undertake such work in some cases, but a sense of powerlessness about what officials and councils can practically and legally do to strengthen democracy.

²⁴ Belong and the Local Government Association (LGA) (2026) *Common ground: Building cohesive communities*, Manchester and London: Belong and the LGA.

Belong argues that democratic resilience is a core component of social cohesion. Drawing from the 2024 Khan review, we see this as the strength and adaptability of democratic systems to uphold fair processes and withstand challenges.²⁵ It includes people's confidence that their voices are heard and valued by government and local institutions and that democratic institutions remain robust and inclusive. It is clearly a priority area for action.

The difficulties of 'difficult' conversations

Belong has found that councillors, officials and local partners sometimes struggle to have open discussions on sensitive issues associated with race, migration, cultural practices integration and extremism. In some cases, Belong has been steered away from such discussions by local leaders or been told that specific issues lie outside the remit of its work in an area. Belong is not unique in this observation – the Cantle review,²⁶ the Casey review²⁷ and the Khan review²⁸ all highlighted reluctance to discuss and confront harmful behaviour.

Risk aversion, concerns about inflaming tensions or attracting criticism, being perceived as prejudiced or as taking sides can create a reluctance to engage directly with these topics. As a result, opportunities to address problems and to strengthen relationships across communities are often missed. Where action is taken, it is frequently delivered through separate policy silos, with work to prevent extremism operating largely in isolation from other aspects of social cohesion programmes of work.

Efforts to tackle extremism need to address the broader 'long tail' of low-level support and sympathy that can exist within communities, rather than focussing only on individuals who meet the threshold for law enforcement or the Prevent programme. A securitised approach to social cohesion and extremism has often had a chilling effect, making some communities feel unfairly targeted or alienated. This can reduce trust, discourage engagement and ultimately undermine prevention efforts.

At the same time, issues that fall below the threshold for security or criminal justice responses are often left unaddressed, allowing harmful attitudes, grievances and polarisation to persist and, in some cases, worsen over time. A more effective approach would combine proportionate security measures with community engagement and broader, interconnected programmes of work to promote social cohesion.

Across the 14 areas where it has worked, Belong has concluded that more healthy and honest conversations about sensitive issues are needed. Social cohesion programmes should not avoid these tensions but should create the structures and conditions for open, respectful and evidence-based dialogue.

Efforts to promote social cohesion must not shy away from addressing issues such as gender-based violence, sexism and harmful practices, wherever they occur. Social cohesion requires the application of the same standards of law and protection across all communities, while avoiding the stigmatisation of migrant and minority groups or other marginalised communities.

²⁵ Khan, Dame S. (2024) *The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience*, London: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

²⁶ Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: Report of the Independent Review Team*, London: Home Office.

²⁷ Casey, L. (2016). *The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration*. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

²⁸ Khan, Dame S. (2024) *The Khan Review: Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience*, London: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Localised or less prevalent challenges

Factors that have negative impacts on social cohesion differ in their prevalence, salience and impact on community and cohesion. While many of the challenges and barriers described above are widespread and not limited to specific locations, the ways in which they manifest and play out are typically place-specific. Other challenges that are more closely rooted in local contexts can vary enormously but include:

- Factory closures and pockets of high unemployment
- Second home ownership
- Perceptions about public safety in some areas
- High-profile crime including the impact of grooming gang activity
- London's current 'red versus blue' youth violence
- The impact of non-UK conflicts on inter-group relations in the UK – Israel-Gaza, Iran and the Kashmir conflict, for example
- 15-minute neighbourhood conspiracy theories

While most protests have been peaceful, pro-Gaza campaigning has been perceived by some to have increased political polarisation, antisemitism and anti-Muslim prejudice in several places where Belong has been working. Tensions resulting from the violence in Israel and Gaza have heightened anxieties within faith communities, strained relationships between different groups and made constructive dialogue more difficult. Inter-faith activities have been reduced. In some areas, long-established inter-faith networks have been placed under severe strain.

We have found that in situations where trust is low, any disagreement can escalate into a social cohesion challenge. In one local authority where Belong has worked, tensions rose after new segregated cycle lanes were introduced, reallocating road space and widening pavements. Local residents complained of parking chaos, and some disabled people felt that the cycle lanes compromised their safety. Both groups felt their concerns were not heeded, leading to a breakdown of trust in the council. Soon, conspiracy theories about 15-minute neighbourhoods began to circulate on social media. This escalated with deliberate damage to road signs and the abuse of council staff.

In the past, social cohesion was seen as an issue that was largely relevant to ethnically diverse inner-city areas. But these examples and Belong's work in suburban areas, smaller towns and rural communities shows that this is not the case. In today's society, every area faces its own set of cohesion challenges, tensions and lines of division, which are typically amplified by social media, and reduced trust in institutions, but which can play out in very different and place-based ways. For that reason, every local authority should have a clear plan for strengthening social cohesion and building resilience to future challenges.

4. Approaches to building stronger, resilient and cohesive communities

Belong believes that we are at a critical juncture for social cohesion in the UK. The challenges outlined in the previous chapter, which we see playing out in different places in different ways, pose a significant threat to our social fabric. Without a sustained and strategic response, there is a risk that the tensions we see being generated could escalate into widespread unrest in many parts of the UK.

But there is also cause for hope. Belong's work across the UK has highlighted some key elements of effective responses to these challenges. These are common strands in effective approaches to building stronger, more resilient, more cohesive communities. In this chapter we aim to capture these.

How Belong works with local authorities

Belong works in partnership with local authorities across the UK to understand local cohesion challenges, strengthen community resilience and develop practical responses tailored to place. Our approach combines research, community engagement and strategic support to help councils build stronger and more cohesive communities.

Our work is shaped by the principle that every place is different. While many of the drivers of division are shared, the way they are experienced, and the most effective responses, vary from one community to another. We therefore work closely with councils, elected members, partner organisations and residents to understand local circumstances and co-produce solutions.

Depending on local need, our work can include:

- Evidence reviews and analysis of local cohesion challenges
- Community conversations and engagement with residents, stakeholders and partner organisations
- Development and co-production of local social cohesion strategies and action plans
- Support to strengthen partnership working across councils and with civil society, education, policing, health and other local partners
- Training for councillors, officers and partner organisations on social cohesion, community engagement, conflict resolution and responding to local tensions
- Advice on embedding social cohesion across policy areas, services and decision-making

Our aim is to help local authorities develop long-term, preventative approaches to social cohesion that build trust, strengthen local relationships and increase resilience to future challenges.

Common elements in effective approaches

Begin local: Belong's work across the UK shows that most people still have confidence in social relationships in their immediate neighbourhoods. This is an important foundation on which to build. While national debates can often feel polarised and divisive, people's day-to-day experiences of living alongside others are often much more positive. This is backed up by survey data (see for instance Figure 2 above). Efforts to strengthen cohesion should therefore start locally, building on the relationships, trust and goodwill that already exist within communities. Small-scale initiatives that bring people together through schools, sports and other hobbies, faith, volunteering or community events can build social cohesion because they are rooted in the places and relationships that people know and trust.

Local leadership matters: Belong's work suggests that strong place-based leadership and a shared local vision are crucial for social cohesion. Ultimately, only local government can deliver this. Councils with clear leadership and a longterm vision are better at preventing crises and are better at responding to shock events such as pandemics or disorder. We have seen that cohesion improves when local leaders are willing to discuss problems openly, articulate a vision for change and make it core to their work, rather than being a standalone activity.

Seek to bridge divides: Social contact really matters. Inter-group 'bridging' social connections across ethnic, faith, class and age divides help to reduce stereotyping, prejudice and threat perceptions, creating inter-personal trust and shared identities. Belong has seen much effective work to build these connections through sport, cultural and community events in schools, linking programmes and volunteering initiatives.

In Leicester, Belong has seen the work undertaken by Leicester City FC in the Community, Leicestershire and Rutland Cricket in the Community, and rugby and basketball clubs. This has included targeted work with groups less likely to take part in sport as well as activities that bring people from different backgrounds together. The football foundation runs a football welcome initiative targeted at asylum seekers and refugees, offering weekly sessions, which also support participants' social and economic integration, enabling them to practice their English, find work, meet others and become part of their new communities. Much of this work is volunteer led. There is clear potential to upscale this work and the UEFA Men's Football Euros in 2028 presents an opportunity to put in place an ambitious community programme that boosts health, wellbeing and social cohesion.

Build on and support existing voluntary sector work: Belong has encountered many remarkable civil society and faith-based social justice organisations undertaking work to build strong and cohesive communities.

Inspired in Leicester and All Souls Bolton are among many that stand out. These organisations often form the backbone of local community support, providing essential services such as foodbanks, youth clubs, sports and recreation programmes, debt advice services, careers guidance and other forms of practical assistance. Many are volunteer led and deeply embedded within the communities they serve, enabling them to address tensions and divisions while responding to local needs. However, not every area is served by organisations that have community development and conflict resolution skills. Too many organisations lack the secure funding, skills and organisational capacity needed to play a fuller role in building strong, resilient and cohesive communities. Civil society is an unrealised asset.

Support and expand opportunities for volunteering: Belong's community conversations show that that many people want to do more. With the right support and infrastructure, there is scope to increase levels of volunteering across the UK, including in activities that bring people of different backgrounds together and support social cohesion. Nearly half of people (49%) in our survey offered their time as volunteers, an activity that research shows has the capacity to increase the bridging social contact that helps to build empathy and trust.²⁹

Belong has talked to litter-picking groups and those volunteering in foodbanks. In Rushmoor, we met people volunteering on a project to bring military and civilian communities together by documenting local history and running Armed Forces Day and Remembrance Day events. Through initiatives such as the Bede's Bakehouse community café and the A Space 2 Grow community garden, volunteers in St Peter's Church (Sunderland) have helped to reduce social isolation.

In Tamworth, a local church runs a volunteer-run welcoming project for asylum seekers living in a local hotel which includes a volunteering scheme for asylum seekers. Participants took part in litter-picking drives and weeding a town centre graveyard, enabling them to practice their English. The town experienced riots in 2024 and there are still ongoing tensions, but seeing asylum seekers work in the graveyard broke down some of the divides and told a different and more human story

Include a strong focus on employment activities: Employment is foundational for cohesion. Our survey showed that 77% of people socialise with work colleagues. Workplaces are among the most important settings in which adults interact with people from different backgrounds. This can strengthen both bonding and bridging social connections, as well as trust and a sense of belonging, through shared goals, identities and norms of behaviour. But these benefits cannot be realised if people are excluded from the labour market. In every local authority where Belong has worked, there are neighbourhoods or communities with very high levels of unemployment or economic inactivity. In some wards we have worked in, up to 45% of the working-age population was outside the labour market, with most of these residents classified as economically inactive rather than unemployed. Unlike unemployed people, who are actively seeking and available for work, economically inactive people are not currently looking for or available to start work, often because of ill health, caring responsibilities, study or other barriers.

Being unemployed or economically inactive disconnects people from others and can undermine people's sense of identity and security. It can also increase feelings of frustration and resentment, making some people more susceptible to divisive narratives.

We have seen initiatives that help people find and progress in work across the areas where Belong has been working. In Manchester, the Working Well employment and support project, (part of the broader Working Well programme, coordinated and funded by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority), targets people who are economically inactive through ill health. It uses a place and support model, helping people move quickly into work, then giving them intensive mentoring and health advice to help them stay there.

These examples demonstrate that employment support should be viewed not only as an economic intervention but also as a contribution to social cohesion. While Jobcentre Plus remains the principal source

²⁹ Abrams, D., Davies, B. and Horsham, Z. (2023) *Linking Volunteering and Social Cohesion: Causal Evidence in the UK and Beyond*. Manchester: Belong

of employment support for many people who are unemployed or economically inactive, the strongest outcomes are achieved through partnership. Local authorities, combined authorities, Jobcentre Plus, employers and civil society organisations all have a role to play in helping people overcome barriers to work and participate more fully in community life.

Effective collaboration between local and strategic authorities: In local authority areas covered by strategic authorities, Belong has seen that social cohesion can be strengthened through effective collaboration between local and strategic authorities.

Elected mayors and strategic authorities can contribute to social cohesion in four ways:

1. By providing visible leadership and using their public platform to promote unity, particularly during times of crisis – one example of this would be the leadership provided by Andy Burnham after the Heaton Park Synagogue terrorist attack in Greater Manchester
2. By convening partners and advocating for policies and initiatives that support cohesion and integration – West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin has often undertaken this role
3. By funding and commissioning programmes that promote strong and cohesive communities in areas within their remit.³⁰
4. By developing explicit policies on social cohesion such as those developed by some elected mayors and strategic authorities – for example, Greater Manchester's Live Well strategy and London's All of Us strategy on social integration. Both strategies aimed to strengthen community connection and to address inequalities.

Belong's experience suggests that the greatest impact is achieved through partnership between strategic and local authorities. Strategic authorities can provide leadership, convening power and investment, while local authorities are best placed to deliver programmes tailored to local communities. Examples include digital literacy initiatives in the Tees Valley Combined Authority and employment support for people with limited English in Greater Manchester.

³⁰ These responsibilities vary between strategic authorities but commonly include oversight of the Adult Skills Fund, which covers digital literacy, English (ESOL), literacy and numeracy. In Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and London, elected mayors also hold policing and crime commissioner powers, giving them responsibilities relating to community safety, hate crime and extremism.

Common Ground guidance for local authorities

Many of the approaches identified in this report have been brought together in *Common ground: Building cohesive communities*, national guidance for local authorities authored by Belong and endorsed by the Local Government Association (LGA). The guidance translates the lessons from Belong's research and practical work with councils into a step-by-step framework for developing and sustaining local social cohesion strategies. It covers leadership, governance, partnership working, community engagement, strategy development, responding to local tensions and embedding social cohesion across council services, supported by practical tools, case studies and examples of good practice.

The guidance is accompanied by a programme of training for councillors and council officers, delivered by Belong in partnership with the LGA. This training helps participants develop the practical skills needed to lead difficult conversations, understand local cohesion challenges, engage communities effectively, build cross-council ownership of social cohesion, and develop evidence-based local strategies.

Taken together, the guidance and training provide a practical framework for councils seeking to translate the principles and recommendations in this report into action.

Benefits of a cohesion-focused approach

At a time when budgets and capacity in local government are stretched perhaps more thinly than they have ever been, there can be understandable hesitancy about committing resources to non-statutory responsibilities like cohesion, where outcomes can sometimes appear intangible and uncertain.

But evidence and experience suggest that there is a strong case for, and significant pay-offs from, investing relatively modest amounts of resource and capacity in building social cohesion. Some of the evidence and theory behind this was outlined in chapter 2 under the heading 'What is social cohesion and why does it matter?'. We can add to that here with what Belong has observed in the course of its recent work with local authorities.

Councils that have invested in integration and social cohesion have been better placed to respond to asylum protests and the Raise the Colours flag campaign, preventing tensions from escalating into violence and unrest. A range of variables determine whether demonstrations are relatively peaceful or involve disorder and criminality – the choices made by the demonstrators are the key factor. Tensions monitoring, communications channels that could be mobilised to address residents' concerns, responses to misinformation and networks of civic mediators are among the practices that have prevented tensions from turning into unrest.

Local authorities that have invested in social cohesion can have better outcomes in relation to civic resilience and social cohesion. As previously mentioned, research undertaken during the course of the pandemic showed that local authorities which had been supported to invest in cohesion had higher levels of inter-personal and institutional trust and were better able to mobilise volunteers during the pandemic than comparable local authorities that had not.³¹

Evidence from individual projects also points towards positive outcomes where increasing social bridging contact was a key aim.^{32 33} For example, the Linking Network works in 28 local authorities including Bolton, Bradford, Calderdale, Leicester and Manchester. It brings together classes of children from different backgrounds to undertake activities in neutral spaces. After the classes meet, teachers receive more support, then the children visit each other's schools. Evaluations of the programme have shown that this approach encourages participants to be more confident in forming new relationships with those who they see as being different. Many Linking Network coordinators have also been involved in a wider range of activities to increase social cohesion in their local areas and have been strong local voices for investment in this work.

Belong's experience suggests that developing a cohesion strategy in itself can have positive impacts on social cohesion. There is no evaluation data yet on the medium and long-term impacts of new social cohesion strategies developed by local authorities after the 2024 riots. These areas include Bolton, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Rushmoor, Sefton, Sunderland and Tamworth – where Belong has been working. However, early indications from Belong's work suggest that the development of a cohesion strategy and a council-wide approach to cohesion, particularly in collaboration with local partners, can have a range of positive impacts.

These benefits can include:

- A shared understanding of local challenges by bringing together evidence, community and partner organisation perspectives, and different viewpoints into a common framework – culminating in a shared vision for place
- A greater commitment to having difficult but necessary conversations among elected members, officers and partner organisations about local tensions, mistrust and community relations
- A raised profile of social cohesion within the council and among partner organisations, helping to ensure it is considered alongside other policy priorities rather than treated as a standalone issue
- Promoting cross-departmental working, encouraging teams responsible for housing, education, planning, public health, community safety and economic development to consider their collective contribution to cohesion

31 Abrams, D., Broadwood, J., Lalot, F., Davies Hayon, K. and Dixon, A. (2021) *Beyond Us and Them: Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19*, London: Nuffield Foundation, University of Kent, The Belong Network.

32 Hesketh, R., Lawson, G., Haggart, T., Noman, C., and Ventura-Arrieta, M. (2023) *What Works in Social Cohesion and Overcoming Tensions?* London: Policy Institute, King's College London.

33 Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al-Ramiah, A., Wagner, A., Vertovec, S. and Hewstone, M. (2014) Contextual Effect of Positive Intergroup Contact on Out-group Prejudice, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(11), 3996-4000.

- Embedding a cohesion lens in council decision-making, prompting officials and councillors to consider the potential impacts of policies and services on different communities to a greater extent than was previously the case – in two local authorities where Belong has been working, town centre regeneration plans now consider social cohesion
- Strengthened relationships with local partners, including colleges, universities, health and civil society organisations
- Enabling a greater understanding in local authorities of the challenges faced by smaller civil society organisations, for example in securing funding – this has in turn led to plans to increase the capability and financial sustainability of these organisations
- Helping local authorities and their partners to identify opportunities and assets that could be utilised to increase social cohesion – these assets include heritage organisations, green space and community, cultural and sporting events.
- Increased commitment to meaningful engagement with residents and giving people who have felt voiceless opportunities to talk about their concerns and experiences – for example, in one local authority we were told that before Belong undertook its community conversations, residents in a particular locality felt that their opinions were being ignored.



5. Building a safer, stronger future: recommendations for change

There is a growing recognition of the value of investment in social cohesion. The experiences of recent years have shown that cohesive communities are resilient communities in the face of shock events and societal change. The UK Government is now committed to taking action through the new Pride in Place programme and the Protecting What Matters strategy. But these are relatively new initiatives. Their impact will depend on whether commitments are translated into sustained action rather than the stop-start approach of recent decades where government reviews, policy initiatives and funding streams have not been followed through. In this sense, policy continuity will be important.

However, we believe that turning this renewed commitment into lasting change will require further evolution of policy and a stronger focus on the areas of concern set out in this report. At the heart of this must be a clear settlement between central, devolved and local government. Social cohesion cannot be delivered from the centre alone, nor can it be left solely to individual councils to manage without guidance and support from central government. Rather, central government needs to set the key aims and the overall direction of policy, while giving local authorities and their partners the tools to take local action to respond to the needs of their communities. Strategic authorities will also have an important role to play.

With these aims in mind, drawing together all of the evidence and learnings from Belong's work which we have presented in this report, **our recommendations for change are set out below.**

1. **Every local authority should have a plan for social cohesion that they have developed in close consultation with local residents and stakeholders as part of an explicit social cohesion duty, underpinned by a robust national accountability mechanism that is subject to parliamentary scrutiny.**

Local authorities should have flexibility and discretion in how they develop these strategies and what they include in them. But every council should be required to produce such a plan through an explicit cohesion duty placed on local authorities as place leaders. This plan should aim, among other things, to:

- Strengthen local leadership and vision
- Prevent, monitor and deescalate community tensions
- Increase inter-group social contact between people from different backgrounds, particularly in places with a history of division or low inter-personal trust
- Listen to concerns and grievances across minority and majority communities, responding in a clear, open and transparent way
- Include and be joined up with local authorities' work to assess and prevent extremism, as part of a more holistic approach to countering extremism and promoting cohesion

- Embed cohesion considerations in local decisionmaking and across public services and housing
- Strengthen community engagement with local residents, particularly those whose voices are less likely to be heard
- Build local capacity, sustainability and skills in partner organisations such as the police, schools and colleges, and civil society
- Communicate a clear vision of place and strong, resilient and cohesive communities living in this place in language that resonates with the public

The more consistent national approach adopted in Wales, supported by statutory duties and national coordination, provides an example of the model that this recommendation seeks to replicate. Far from being an unwelcome burden, such a duty was supported by many of the officials, councillors and stakeholders we spoke to.

“...there is some kind of very explicit statutory requirement for local authorities to produce, carry out and demonstrate how they are delivering social Cohesion Work across the whole council.” (Local government official in focus group)

The duty would complement the Prevent Duty by strengthening the upstream, preventative role of social cohesion – ensuring that efforts to counter extremism are proportionate, inclusive and rooted in wider societal resilience and not narrowly aimed at or focused on some groups and communities, while allowing security-based interventions to remain focused on those at greatest risk.

This duty should also be supported by demarcated multiyear funding made available through the local government finance settlement. In return for this, local authorities should be held accountable in the discharge of this duty through robust national measurement that would be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. Alongside a published plan, local authorities should be required to produce an annual report setting out the actions they have taken and monitoring progress against agreed benchmarks, which could include the LGOF indicators set out in Table 2 of this report. Should local authorities fail to produce a plan or demonstrate reasonable progress, ministers should be able to apply proportionate sanctions to make sure the duty is being discharged effectively.

2. As part of the evolving devolution settlement in England, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should set out the respective responsibilities of central government, strategic authorities and local government in relation to social cohesion.

These responsibilities should be built around the social cohesion duty for local authorities outlined above but, on top of this, should set out the responsibilities of national government and those of strategic authorities. This framework could also serve to clarify the role and responsibilities of other public services and civil society in this sphere. As noted in chapter 4, strategic authorities and elected mayors can play important roles in supporting cohesion through their convening power, leadership in times of crisis, commissioning in areas like digital literacy, and an ongoing collaborative approach with local authority partners. These examples of good practice should be the norm and the expectation.

3. **The government should increase employment support for those who are economically inactive, extending and scaling- up models like Greater Manchester's Working Well and the Jobcentre Plus programme.**

Our experience of working in areas with high levels of economic inactivity is that this creates significant challenges to cohesion. There are some schemes to help the economically inactive into work, but their reach is limited and awareness of them is low. Jobcentre Plus and Greater Manchester's Working Well programme are examples of good practice in this and are among the best in the UK in that both reach people through community-based links. The government should seek to develop and scale up these community-based schemes which can help a wider pool of economically inactive people into work.

4. **Every Pride in Place Neighbourhood Board should be encouraged to develop a volunteering plan in partnership with civil society organisations.**

Volunteering can play an important role in bringing people together and encouraging them to have a stake in their community. This is a particularly important consideration in more deprived, high population churn neighbourhoods. We recommend that every Pride in Place Neighbourhood Board is encouraged to develop a volunteering plan in partnership with civil society and faith organisations.

This plan should aim to:

- Broaden participation among social groups that are less likely to volunteer
- Encourage more employers to become involved in volunteering programmes in the Pride in Place neighbourhood
- Use volunteering to support pathways into skills development, employment, local leadership and civic participation
- Increase the numbers of people volunteering



5. Sport should be used to build shared and inclusive identities – the UEFA Men's Euros 2028 tournament provides a major opportunity for this.

Sport can be a powerful catalyst for social cohesion through its ability to build shared identities and to bring people from different backgrounds together, including through event volunteering. As already discussed, we know that bridging social contact builds inter-personal trust and shared identities that help to address prejudice, misconceptions and boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. The UEFA Men's Euros 2028 provides a major opportunity for this. Government should work with governing bodies, football clubs, councils and community organisations to develop an ambitious programme of work that uses the opportunities the Euros will provide to boost both physical wellbeing and social cohesion. This should aim to bring people from different backgrounds together and increase volunteering.

More broadly, national governing bodies and publicly funded sports organisations should embed social cohesion principles within the planning and delivery of major events, participation programmes and community engagement activities. Where public funding is provided, organisations should be expected to demonstrate how they will strengthen social cohesion and this should form part of funding agreements.

6. The government should prioritise the development of an England-wide strategy to support the economic and social integration of migrants and refugees, honouring the commitment made in the Protecting What Matters strategy.

The strategy should promote both social and economic participation by setting clear expectations around English language learning, employment and civic participation, while ensuring access to the support needed to achieve these measures. Local authorities should be given a clear leadership and coordination role in developing local integration strategies and ensuring that they are delivered.

The strategy should aim to cover all groups of migrants and refugees who have a legal right to live in the UK. It should ensure that asylum seekers are evenly dispersed across the UK, while addressing pressures on local services. It should ensure that employment support and English language provision are sufficient. And it should promote integration through 'welcoming hubs' offering advice, conversational clubs, social activities and volunteering opportunities that increase social contact between newcomers and receiving communities.

Strengthening democratic resilience

7. The government and funders of civil society organisations should invest in building the skills, capacity and confidence to navigate difficult conversations among community leaders and others working in places experiencing neighbourhood decline, population churn and deprivation.

Whether as part of Pride in Place programmes or in similar community development initiatives, dedicated funding should be made available for training and capacity building in social cohesion and related areas such as community development, deliberative democracy and conflict resolution. In particular, training should equip participants with the skills to prevent tensions from escalating.

Local authorities should also work with trusted local partners to strengthen the local information environment and provide credible, accessible sources of information that can counter misinformation and

disinformation circulating on social media. This should include timely and transparent communication from councils themselves, alongside support for trusted local media, community organisations and other respected local institutions that can help residents access accurate information and engage in informed public debate.

8. Citizenship education in schools should be strengthened, with stronger focus on skills like oracy and critical dialogue that enable young people to navigate disagreement and conflict.

As part of the commitment made in Protecting What Matters to strengthen media literacy in the National Curriculum, the Department for Education should strengthen the role of oracy, critical dialogue and deliberative discussion within the citizenship programme. Schools should be supported to adopt structured approaches to discussion including Socratic dialogue and other evidence-based methods that develop pupils' ability to listen actively, question assumptions, evaluate evidence and engage constructively with differing viewpoints.

9. Strategic authorities should expand digital literacy programmes which focus on developing critical skills and building resilience to misinformation and disinformation.

Strategic authorities should work with colleges, adult education services, libraries and civil society organisations to expand the provision of digital literacy programmes for adults and young people. These programmes should include a core curriculum covering the identification and critical assessment of misinformation, disinformation and other forms of misleading online content. Provision should also support participants to develop the skills needed to engage constructively with different opinions online, in respectful and evidence-based discussion.

10. The government should urgently implement the recommendations set out in the Protecting What Matters strategy, providing a timeline and setting out more detail.

The government should publish a more detailed implementation plan for the report's recommendations, setting out the responsibilities of central government, devolved administrations, strategic authorities and councils, and timelines to deliver at pace. Where external partnerships are required for delivery of key policies the government should identify and connect them. Parliament should monitor progress to provide transparency and accountability.

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Appendix

Summary of the research methodology

This report draws from four sources of data:

1. An analysis of Belong's insights from the 14 local authority areas where it has been working – see Table A for contextual data on the local authorities where Belong has worked between 2024 and 2026. This evidence included literature reviews, notes from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with local stakeholders and the public. In most places where Belong has worked, it has also undertaken street interviews, talking to people in public places and in locations such as cafes, pubs, clubs and colleges. Framework analysis, a recognised systematic method for identifying themes in the qualitative data, was used to examine this evidence.
2. A key word literature review focussing on policy and practice interventions on social cohesion challenges. The review analysed research, evaluations and policy reports to identify and assess which interventions have been found to be effective in addressing cohesion challenges and strengthening communities.
3. Two stakeholder focus groups with social cohesion leads in areas where Belong has worked and senior local authority leaders who were members of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). The focus groups examined the research questions set out in chapter 1.
4. A nationally representative survey of 2,197 UK adults, which was undertaken by Focaldata between 8 and 14 April 2026. In addition to the core representative sample of 2,197 people, the survey was boosted to cover 400 adults in Scotland and 402 in Wales, making a total sample of 2,999 adults. The survey questions were designed to explore some of the themes highlighted in the above qualitative research. Additionally, the survey asked an open field question on what they felt would address some of the divisions facing society in Britain. There were 2,987 responses to this question, which were coded thematically using a framework analysis methodology.

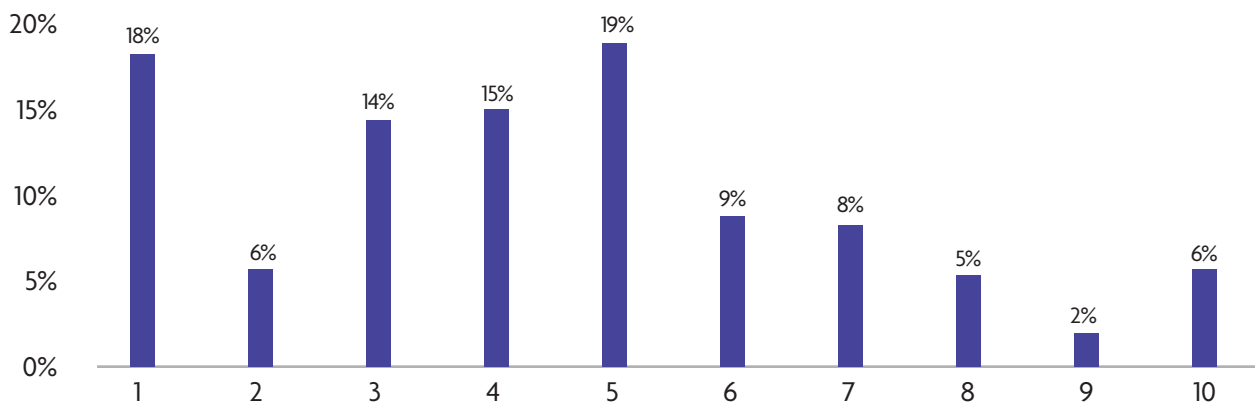
Table A: Contextual data for local authorities where Belong has worked in, 2024-2026

	Mid-year Population Estimate, 2024	Geography	Unrest leading to arrests	Community Recovery Fund	Number of Pride in Place programme areas	Nature of Belong Support
Bolton NW	310,100	Urban with rural fringe	2024	Yes	2 areas plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Bradford YH	563,600	Large urban city with extensive rural fringe			3 areas, plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Calderdale YH	210,900	Mixed urban and rural			1 area	Strategy development & capacity building
Hartlepool NE	98,200	Mostly urban, post-industrial coastal town	2024	Yes	1 area plus £1.5 million impact fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Leicester East Midlands	388,300	Predominantly urban	2022		3 areas, plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Liverpool NW	509,000	Predominantly urban	2024, 2025 2026	Yes	4 areas, plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Manchester NW	589,700	Predominantly urban	2024 2025 2026	Yes	5 areas, plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Middlesbrough NE	156,200	Mostly urban post-industrial town	2024	Yes	2 areas, plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Redbridge London	321,200	Suburban with some green-belt fringe			NA	Strategy development & capacity building

Rushmoor SE	105,800	Largely urban comprising two towns of Aldershot and Farnborough	2024	Yes	1 area	Strategy development & capacity building
Sefton NW	286,300	Mixed urban and rural	2024	Yes, £3.6 million	1 area	Community engagement in Southport in 2024, later strategy development
Sunderland NE	288,600	Mostly urban post-industrial city	2024	Yes	3 areas plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Strategy development & capacity building
Tamworth West Midlands	81,100	Predominantly urban town	2024	Yes	1 area	Strategy development & capacity building
Carmarthen-shire Wales	190,800	Predominantly rural, with market towns and village settlements			1 area, plus £1.5 million Impact Fund	Capacity building and training

Findings from the nationally representative survey

1. Thinking about the UK as a whole, on a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided do you think the UK is at present? (1 = divided, 10 = united)



The mean score for the UK was 4.4. The above results are broken down by nation as shown below.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Mean score
England	17%	6%	14%	15%	20%	9%	9%	5%	2%	4%	4.4%
Scotland	20%	8%	13%	16%	18%	10%	8%	4%	1%	3%	4.0%
Wales	22%	5%	13%	16%	19%	8%	6%	5%	0%	2%	4.1%
Northern Ireland	28%	2%	22%	8%	13%	8%	5%	11%	0%	4%	4.0%

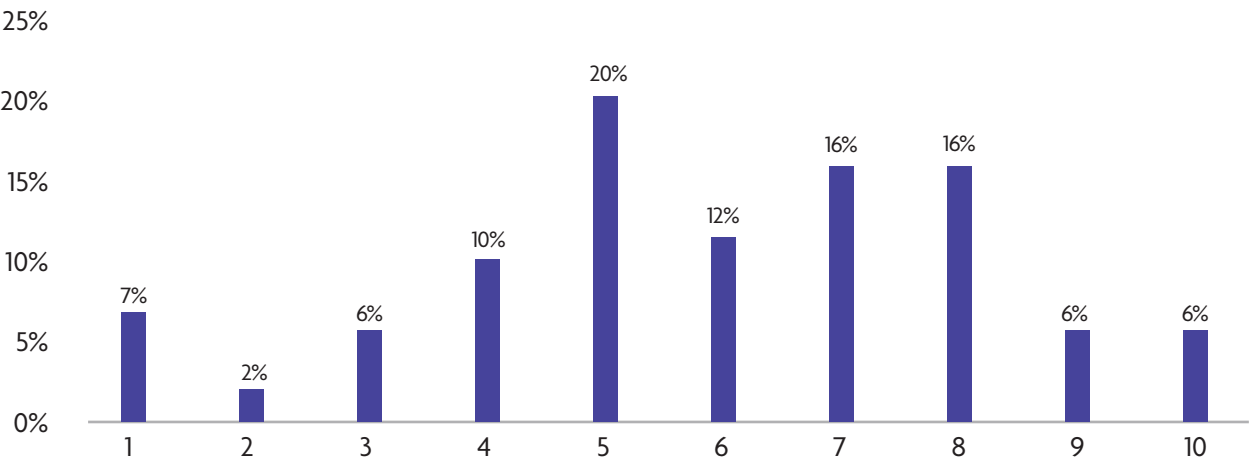
*small sample size

Analysis

Scoring between 1 and 3, 38% of people thought the UK was very divided. A slightly larger proportion of people in Scotland and Wales thought so, although in their case this may have been a consequence of upcoming elections at the time of the survey. There was little difference in the scoring between different social groups, although people of black ethnicity gave higher scores (mean = 5.7), as did people of Asian ethnicity (mean = 5.4), people of mixed ethnicity (mean = 5) and other ethnic groups (mean = 6.5) than did people who were white (mean = 4.1). This suggests that minority ethnic groups have a stronger sense that the UK as a whole is united, a finding that is consistent with the research described below.

The same question was asked in a survey undertaken in December 2020 for British Future and the Together Coalition.¹ At that time, COVID-19 cases had seen a significant increase, with intense debate about the need for new lockdown restrictions. Brexit negotiations had also reached a critical point before a last-minute deal was struck on 24 December 2020. At that time, some 29% of people gave the lowest score of 1-3. The Belong survey findings from 2026 suggest that perceptions of national division have increased over the last five years in the UK.

2. And now just thinking about your local community, on a scale of 1 to 10 how united or divided do you think it is at present? (1 = divided, 10 = united).



¹ Rutter, J. and Puddle, J. (2021) Our Chance to Reconnect: final report of the Talk Together Project, London: British Future and the Together Coalition

The mean score for the UK was 5.8. The above results are broken down by nation as shown below.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Mean score
England	7%	3%	6%	10%	20%	13%	15%	15%	6%	6%	5.8%
Scotland	7%	2%	5%	7%	23%	10%	19%	15%	6%	6%	5.9%

*small sample size

Analysis

Comparing this with question 1 – which focused on the UK as a whole – suggests that respondents had greater confidence in social relations in their immediate community. However, this view does not extend to everyone. Just over one in seven (15%) gave the lowest scores of 1-3, perceiving their local area to be divided.

People who were over 65 (mean = 6.3), lived in small towns (mean = 6.8) or owned their properties outright (mean = 6.3) gave higher scores, perceiving their community to be less divided, as did people who voted for the Liberal Democrats in the 2024 general election. Non-voters (mean = 5.2), Reform voters (mean = 5.2) and people who lived in social housing (mean = 5.2) gave lower scores, perceiving their local community to be more divided. There was also an association between perceptions about local unity or division and area-based deprivation. People who lived in the most deprived 20% of areas (Indices of Multiple Deprivation Quintile 1) scored a mean of 5.5, while those who lived in the most prosperous 20% of areas scored 6.3. The full results across area deprivation quintiles are:

Quintile 1 (Most deprived areas) Mean = 5.5

Quintile 2 Mean = 5.7

Quintile 3 Mean = 5.9

Quintile 4 Mean = 6.1

Quintile 5 (Least deprived areas) Mean = 6.3

3. Which of these descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household income nowadays?

	UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland*
Living comfortably on current income	16%	17%	13%	15%	21%
Coping on current income	41%	40%	43%	41%	47%
Finding it difficult on current income	24%	25%	21%	28%	17%
Finding it very difficult on current income	17%	17%	20%	15%	16%
Net difficult	41%	42%	41%	43%	33%
Don't know or prefer not to say	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%

*small sample size

Analysis

More than four in ten people (41%) were finding it difficult to manage on their current income.² People who were aged 35-54, were of black ethnicity, lived in social or private rental accommodation, were in lower socio-economic grades or lived in the most deprived areas were more likely to report that they were struggling.

This question was asked in Belong’s State of Us research in 2025, when 32% of people reported that they were finding it difficult or very difficult on their current income. The rise in perceived financial stress over the last 12 months may pose an increased risk to social cohesion, as more individuals struggle to cope and feel that the current system is not working in their interests.

4. On a scale of 1-10, do you feel that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on the UK, including my local community? (1 = very negative, 10 = very positive).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Mean score
UK	27%	5%	10%	10%	16%	8%	8%	8%	2%	5%	4.4
England	26%	4%	9%	11%	16%	9%	8%	8%	3%	6%	4.4
Scotland	31%	4%	11%	9%	11%	8%	9%	10%	2%	5%	4.2
Wales	28%	7%	10%	8%	19%	7%	7%	8%	2%	3%	4.2
Northern Ireland	25%	0%	11%	4%	19%	4%	8%	14%	7%	9%	5.0

*small sample size

Analysis

The survey showed that 42% of UK adults gave scores of 1-3 and fell into a group which has been termed ‘migration rejectionists’. This question was asked in April 2025 in Belong’s State of Us research, when 31% of people gave scores of 1-3 with a mean score of 5.5, compared with 4.4 in 2026.³ This indicates a hardening of attitudes to immigration over the last year.

Belong’s survey shows that attitudes to immigration have become more polarised by age, ethnicity, education, social grade, where people live and by party politics over the last year. (This finding is also supported by insights from public discussions in the places where Belong has been working). The mean score for someone with a degree was 5.3, compared to 3.9 for those without a degree-level qualification. People of black ethnicity (mean = 6.8), Asian (mean = 5.5) and mixed ethnicity (mean = 5.7) gave higher scores, while people of white ethnicity scored lower (mean = 4.1). People who lived in major urban areas also gave higher scores (mean = 4.8) than those who lived in small towns (mean = 3.7) or accessible rural areas (mean = 3.9).

2 Puddle, J., Rutter, J. and Rolfe, H. (2025) *The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK*, London and Manchester, Belong and British Future

3 Puddle, J., Rutter, J. and Rolfe, H. (2025) *The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK*, London and Manchester, Belong and British Future

5. Over the last three months have you given any unpaid help or worked as a volunteer for any of these groups? Please tick all that apply.

Category of volunteering	Percentage undertaking this activity UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland*
Helping out a neighbour or someone I am not related to	30%	28%	30%	35%	33%
Helping out at a one-off or informal activity in my local area, e.g. a neighbourhood clean-up, street barbecue, Parkrun, bird-watching group or book club	11%	12%	10%	11%	12%
Volunteering for an organisation based in my local area, e.g. a sports club, faith organisation, environmental group, foodbank or community organisation	14%	15%	12%	13%	5%
Volunteering for a public service, e.g. in a school, hospital, as a special constable or reservist	7%	9%	6%	6%	3%
Volunteering for a national organisation, e.g. Scouts, National Trust	5%	5%	4%	3%	9%
Other volunteering	2%	2%	3%	3%	6%
None of these	51%	50%	51%	50%	52%

*small sample size

Analysis

As discussed in the main body of the report, volunteering increases social cohesion, and higher social cohesion also makes people more likely to volunteer. The survey showed that about half of the adult population (49%) had had a recent experience of volunteering. Levels of volunteering were higher among young people and those in higher socio-economic grades, among Londoners, those with degree-level qualifications (62%), people of Asian ethnicity (65%) and people with the most positive attitudes to immigration (88%).

Volunteering was also strongly associated with faith. Some 63% of people for whom faith or religion was very important in their lives had had a recent experience of volunteering, compared to 56% of people for whom faith or religion was somewhat important. Among those for whom faith or religion was not very important, 47% had had a recent experience of volunteering, falling to 34% among people for whom faith or religion was not at all important.

The survey also showed differences in the type of volunteering that people do. People in social grades A and B and with degree-level qualifications were more likely than the overall population to volunteer for a more formally constituted local organisation (21%) or a public service (12%). Londoners were more likely to volunteer for a public service (11%) or national organisation (10%) than the overall population, perhaps reflecting the differences in volunteering opportunities in the capital.

6. How important is religion or faith in your life?

	UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland*
Very important	17%	20%	12%	10%	23%
Somewhat important	26%	26%	28%	24%	41%
Not very important	24%	22%	25%	27%	22%
Not at all important	33%	32%	35%	40%	15%

*small sample size

Analysis

A question about faith and religion was asked to understand whether having a faith or religious belief impacted on civic participation or perceptions of division or unity. The question itself showed differences in religiosity by place of residence and across different ethnic groups. Having a faith or religious belief was strongly associated with ethnicity, with 93% of black people and 84% of Asian people reporting that faith or religion was very or somewhat important in their lives, compared with 37% of white people and 54% of people of mixed ethnicity. These ethnic differences meant that 68% of Londoners were most likely to report that faith or religion was very or somewhat important in their lives, as London is the most ethnically diverse region in England.

7. Which of these three statements comes closest to your own views?

	UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland*
A Flying national flags from lampposts is wrong because it represents a political statement against immigrants	13%	14%	16%	11%	19%
B We should be proud to fly our national flags, but not hang them in places that would intimidate people	44%	43%	43%	48%	56%
C I support the campaign to fly national flags on lamp-posts, and we should be proud to fly our national flags	42%	43%	41%	41%	26%

*small sample size

Analysis

The impact of the Raise the Colours flag campaign is described in the report. Its potential for divisiveness prompted us to want to examine views on this activity in the survey. As might be expected, attitudes towards flags and the Raise the Colours campaign were associated with attitudes to immigration. Those who gave the lowest score of 1 to the immigration question (Question 4 above) comprised 27% of respondents in the survey. Of this group, 72% gave unqualified support to the Raise the Colours campaign (Option C).

Across the UK, one in seven people (13%) opposed the Raise the Colours flags campaign because they associated it with a negative statement about immigrants. Being aged 18-24 years old, having a degree-level qualification, being of Asian ethnicity and being in socio-economic grade B were also associated with higher rates of disapproval for the flag campaign.

There was no statistically significant difference between attitudes to the flags between the UK as a whole and Scotland and Wales. However, people who lived in London and Northern Ireland were more likely to disapprove of the flag campaign and less likely to support it. London's disapproval of the flag campaign may be an outcome of its younger, left-leaning and more ethnically diverse population, whereas the use of flags has long been a visible symbol of the political and cultural divisions between communities in Northern Ireland.

Overall, over four in ten (44%) people supported the middle-ground option B, being proud of national flags but recognising that the Raise the Colours campaign can be intimidating and unwelcoming. Black people (51%), Asian people (56%) and people who scored between 4 and 7 on the attitudes to immigration question (56%) were more likely to support this middle ground.

8. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

Questions	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Net agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Net disagree	Don't know
8A Large-scale public unrest is likely in the UK over the next year	21% UK 20% EN 23% SC 21% WA	41% UK 41% EN 43% SC 37% WA	62% UK 61% EN 66% SC 58% WA	22% UK 22% EN 19% SC 23% WA	9% UK 9% EN 9% SC 11% WA	3% UK 3% EN 2% SC 1% WA	12% UK 12% EN 11% SC 12% WA	5% UK 5% EN 5% SC 6% WA
8B Protests are having an impact on how people in my community get on with each other	10% UK 10% EN 11% SC 9% WA	27% UK 27% EN 26% SC 23% WA	37% UK 37% EN 37% SC 32% WA	30% UK 30% EN 31% SC 28% WA	19% UK 18% EN 19% SC 23% WA	10% UK 9% EN 10% SC 13% WA	29% UK 27% EN 29% SC 36% WA	4% UK 5% EN 2% SC 5% WA

8C Sometimes I find it hard to know whether the things I read online are true	32% UK 31% EN 34% SC 35% WA	44% UK 44% EN 46% SC 39% WA	76% UK 74% EN 80% SC 79% WA	14% UK 15% EN 12% SC 15% WA	7% UK 7% EN 7% SC 6% WA	2% UK 2% EN 0% SC 4% WA	9% UK 9% EN 7% SC 10% WA	1% EN 1% EN 1% SC 1% WA
8D It is difficult to trust politicians because they put their own interests above the needs of the country	44% UK 43% EN 49% SC 45% WA	35% UK 36% EN 34% SC 34% WA	79% UK 79% EN 80% SC 79% WA	14% UK 14% EN 12% SC 14% WA	4% UK 4% EN 4% SC 5% WA	2% UK 2% EN 1% SC 1% WA	6% UK 6% EN 5% SC 6% WA	1% UK 1% UK 1% SC 1% WA
8E I would be neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote	45% UK 44% EN 46% SC 46% WA	25% UK 25% EN 25% SC 23% WA	70% UK 69% EN 71% SC 69% WA	17% UK 18% EN 18% SC 18% WA	6% UK 6% EN 4% SC 6% WA	5% UK 5% EN 5% SC 6% WA	11% UK 11% EN 9% SC 12% WA	2% UK 2% EN 1% SC 2% WA
8F My local area has become a better place to live over the last five years	7% UK 8% EN 5% SC 5% WA	19% UK 19% EN 19% SC 19% WA	26% UK 27% EN 24% SC 24% WA	39% UK 38% EN 39% SC 42% WA	20% UK 20% EN 21% SC 22% WA	12% UK 12% EN 15% SC 13% WA	32% UK 32% EN 36% SC 35% WA	2% UK 3% EN 2% SC 1% WA

Analysis

Overall, nearly two-thirds (62%) of people agreed that large-scale public unrest was likely over the next year.

The last 12 months have seen protests on many issues, including on asylum accommodation and conflict in the Middle East. People were broadly split three ways in relation to the disruption caused by protests to local community relations. However, younger people (52% of 25-34 year-olds), Londoners (48%), people with degree-level qualifications (47%), people of Asian ethnicity (51%) and black people (60%) were more likely to say that protests were having an impact on community relations.

Over three in four people (76%) agreed that it was sometimes hard to know whether things they read online were true, a view that did not significantly differ across different social groups.

Some 79% of people felt that it was difficult to trust politicians because they put their own interests above the needs of the country. Low levels of trust in democratic institutions was an issue highlighted

in Belong’s work with local authorities and its State of Us research in 2025.⁴ The 2026 survey showed that there was little difference in people’s level of trust and mistrust across different social groups, including in party political support and education. This finding suggests that low levels of political trust are now felt across all sections of society.

While political trust was low, most people were still committed to voting, with 70% agreeing that they would be neglecting their duty as a citizen if they did not vote. Unsurprisingly, 25% of people who did not vote in the 2024 general election agreed with this statement. Just 49% of 18-24s agreed that it was important to vote and 17% of this age group disagreed. Social grade, living in social housing and area deprivation were also associated with different values placed on the duty to vote. Some 80% of people in socio-economic grade (SEG) A agreed that they had a duty to vote, falling to 78% (SEG B), 75% (SEG C1), 62% (SEG C2), 60% (SEG D) and 59% (SEG E).

Civic pride helps to foster shared identities, while neighbourhood decline can be a barrier to social cohesion. People are less likely to meet and mix with each other in deprived areas where they feel unsafe. Narratives of decline also risk reinforcing feelings of marginalisation, hopelessness and resentment toward outsiders or political institutions. Overall, a quarter of people (26%) felt their area had got better, with a larger proportion (32%) feeling that it had declined or had seen no changes (39%). The survey showed that people’s perceptions of neighbourhood change were complex and associated with differences in their education, social grade, ethnicity and voter behaviour, although there was no strong association with area deprivation. For example, 37% of people with degree-level qualifications and 50% of people in socio-economic grade A felt that their local area had got better over the last five years, compared with 22% of people without degree-level qualifications and 21% of people in socio-economic grades D and E.

4 Puddle, J., Rutter, J. and Rolfe, H. (2025) The State of Us: Community Strength and Cohesion in the UK, London and Manchester, Belong and British Future

9. Are you spending more or less time on the following activities than in 2019 (the year before the COVID pandemic)?

	A lot more time	More time	About the same amount of time	Less time	A lot less time	I've never spent time on this activity	Don't know
Working from home	10% UK 10% EN 8% SC 7% WA	13% UK 13% EN 12% SC 13% WA	16% UK 17% EN 16% SC 14% WA	8% UK 9% EN 6% SC 7% WA	7% UK 6% EN 8% SC 6% WA	44% UK 41% EN 46% SC 48% WA	3% UK 3% EN 4% SC 5% WA
On social media	16% UK 16% EN 18% SC 14% WA	25% UK 26% EN 28% SC 22% WA	34% UK 34% EN 32% SC 38% WA	11% UK 11% EN 11% SC 9% WA	6% UK 7% EN 4% SC 7% WA	7% UK 7% EN 6% SC 9% WA	1% UK 1% EN 1% SC 1% WA

Socialising in person with work colleagues (meal breaks and after work)	5% UK 5% EN 4% SC 4% WA	12% UK 12% EN 11% SC 11% WA	30% UK 30% EN 28% SC 29% WA	16% UK 16% EN 20% SC 14% WA	14% UK 14% EN 11% SC 16% WA	20% UK 19% EN 23% SC 23% WA	4% UK 4% EN 3% SC 3% WA
Volunteering in my local community	4% UK 5% EN 3% SC 3% WA	11% UK 12% EN 14% SC 9% WA	25% UK 25% EN 23% SC 28% WA	10% UK 10% EN 8% SC 10% WA	8% UK 8% EN 7% SC 9% WA	39% UK 38% EN 43% SC 38% WA	2% UK 2% EN 2% SC 3% WA
Meeting new people through hobbies, sport or cultural activities	6% UK 6% EN 5% SC 6% WA	14% UK 16% EN 13% SC 16% WA	34% UK 33% EN 34% SC 32% WA	17% UK 17% EN 15% SC 17% WA	11% UK 11% EN 14% SC 11% WA	16% UK 16% EN 16% SC 16% WA	2% UK 4% EN 2% SC 2% WA

Analysis

Much media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic has portrayed this event as the great disrupter of social lives as people worked from home or spent more time using social media. The survey shows that this narrative must be taken with caution. Just 23% of people said they were spending more time working from home and 17% were spending less time socialising with work colleagues since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some of these findings give cause for concern, particularly in relation to the use of social media. Some 41% of all adults reported that they were spending more time on social media since the pandemic, although this rose to 55% among 18-24s, many of whom would have been under 18 years old at the time of the pandemic.

Londoners (33%), the under 35s (31%), people with degree-level qualifications (30%) and people in socio-economic grade A (40%) were more likely to say that they spent more time working from home, suggesting that the impacts of this working practice are being differentially felt across society.

10. Open field question

The survey included an open question, with participants asked 'In your own words, what would address some of the divisions facing society in Britain? These could be actions that councils, the government or charities could take, or things that the public could do.'

There were 2,987 responses to this question. Answers were coded thematically using a framework analysis. Dominant themes were:

Need for action to address the cost-of-living crisis and/or improving public services and housing – 25% of all responses

Reducing or stopping immigration – 24% of all responses

Public trust perceptions of politicians – 10% of all responses

Proposals for increased bonding and bridging social contact – 8% of all responses.

Timeline of social cohesion policy interventions 2001-2026

2001 – The government publishes its National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, located in the Department for Communities and Local Government oversees the New Deal for Communities Fund, which supports the regeneration of deprived areas.

2001 – The Home Office commissions the Cantle review of community cohesion after civil unrest in northern towns and cities in mid-2001. Further local reports examine unrest in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. The Home Office also publishes its own inter-departmental review on cohesion.

2002 – The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 provides the legal basis for the Life in the UK citizenship test, English language requirements, citizenship ceremonies and the oath of allegiance and pledge taken by new British citizens, all of which aim to increase integration.

2002 – Citizenship education becomes mandatory for 11- to 16-year-olds in English schools, although this National Curriculum requirement does not apply to those with academy status.

2004 – The Civil Contingencies Act receives Royal Assent, providing the legal basis for emergency planning and introducing the term ‘resilience’ into the UK policy lexicon.

2005 – The 7/7 terrorist attacks prompt the Home Office to publish its cohesion strategy Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society, which mostly focuses on building resilience to extremism.

2005 – The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland publish A Shared Future, the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland.

2006 - Central government responsibilities for social cohesion pass from the Home Office to the department which is now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

2007 – Publication of the final report of the independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion, chaired by Darra Singh.

2008 – The government publishes consultations on interfaith dialogue and a review of migrant integration.

2008 – The government publishes its first Prevent strategy, a programme that works in the non-criminal space by tackling the ideological causes of terrorism and intervening early to support those vulnerable to radicalisation.

2009 – Getting on Together: A Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales is launched by the Welsh Government. The strategy was updated in 2016.

2010 – The Equality Act is passed, placing a legal duty on public bodies to ‘foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it’.

2010-2011 – The Migration Impacts Fund, the Refugee Integration and Employment Service and the Connecting Communities Fund (which focused on cohesion) are scrapped in cross-government action to reduce public spending.

2012 – The government publishes its integration strategy *Creating the Conditions for Integration*.

2014 – Publication of the first New Scots refugee integration strategy. The third New Scots Strategy runs from 2024-2026.

2014 – The Welsh Government starts to fund regional community cohesion posts, which work across a group of local authorities.

2015 – The Welsh Government passes the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, which places a statutory duty on public bodies, including local authorities, to pursue seven well-being goals, one of which is explicitly a Wales of cohesive communities. Public Services Boards in each local authority area must assess and plan for well-being, including cohesion, on a five-year cycle, with independent oversight from a Future Generations Commissioner.

2016 – The Controlling Migration Fund, which ran from 2016-2020, made £140 million available to councils to deal with the local impacts of immigration.

2016 – Publication of the Dame Louise Casey review of integration and opportunity.

2017 – The government creates the Commission on Countering Extremism. This was initially an agency of the Department for Communities and Local Government but has been accountable to the Home Office since 2021.

2017 – The government publishes *Every Voice Matters*, its democratic engagement plan, later updated in 2019.

2017-2019 – Revival of a cross-departmental working group on social cohesion, co-chaired by the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. This group later wound down.

2019 – Publication of the government's Integrated Communities Action Plan with £50 million funding also made available to five Integration Action Areas (Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest) to carry out programmes of work to boost integration and cohesion.

2020 – The Welsh Government publishes *Connected Communities: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation and Building Stronger Social Connections*.

2021 – Publication of the most recent National Security Strategy outlining key security threats to the UK.

2022 – Publication of the UK-wide Levelling Up white paper.

2023 – The government sets up an independent review into the 2022 Leicester riots.

2023 – The government publishes the independent Bloom review of faith engagement.

2024 – Publication of the Dame Sara Khan review of social cohesion and democratic resilience. At the same

time the government updates its definition of extremism.

2024 – The government announces a £15 million Community Recovery Fund for the 35 local authorities in England and Northern Ireland that experienced rioting in the summer of 2024.

2025 – The government publishes its Plan for Neighbourhoods, which succeeds the Levelling Up policy of the previous Conservative government. The plan covers devolution, regeneration and economic development, community engagement and cohesion. It makes funding available through the Pride in Place programme.

2026 – The government extends the Pride in Place programme and publishes its cross-departmental social cohesion strategy Protecting What Matters. This makes 90 commitments, which include:

- A new ministerial steering group to lead cross-government, UK-wide work on social cohesion, which will work alongside MHCLG's Social Cohesion Task Force
- Commitments to bring together a better evidence base and more support for local authorities experiencing tensions
- A new High Street Strategy and High Street Innovation Fund
- A Waste Crime Action Plan to tackle fly-tipping
- Every police force to have an anti-social behaviour (ASB) coordinator and to produce an ASB strategy
- A UK Town of Culture competition and action to boost the power of events to bring people together
- Changes to the National Curriculum in England to cover digital and media literacy
- Extra funding for school linking projects and for Near Neighbours interfaith groups
- An integration strategy for migrants and refugees covering England, and a review of English language provision
- Greater support to help groups such as refugees find work
- Improved reporting mechanisms for hate crime, as well a non-statutory definition of anti-Muslim hostility and the appointment of a special government representative on anti-Muslim hostility
- A review of measures to combat misinformation and disinformation, and a Media Literacy Action Plan to build societal resilience to misinformation, disinformation and harmful online content
- Strengthened responses to extremism, for example monitoring university and college efforts to prevent students from becoming involved in terrorism
- An annual state of extremism report to increase accountability on government actions

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Stronger Together: What we know and must do about cohesion has been written by Jill Rutter and Manon Roberts, Policy and Research Leads at Belong, and Andrew Dixon, Belong Associate.

About Belong

The Belong Network is a national social cohesion focused non-government organisation and network of partner organisations established in 2019 with a vision to build a more connected, less divided society. Based in Manchester, our work spans place-based programmes, research, policy development and capacity building. We exist to connect, support and mobilise all those working to build stronger, more resilient, connected communities.