

July 2020 Report

# Beyond Us and Them

## Perception of Covid-19 and Social Cohesion

Prof. Dominic Abrams, Dr Fanny Lalot  
(University of Kent)

Jo Broadwood, Isobel Platts-Dunn  
(Belong – the Cohesion and Integration Network)



University of  
**Kent**

School of  
Psychology

**belong**  
THE COHESION AND  
INTEGRATION NETWORK

# What is in this report?

This report presents first findings from our research project, “Beyond Us and Them” by the University of Kent with Belong – the Cohesion and Integration Network. The research is funded by the Nuffield Foundation. We are exploring how social cohesion within and between different groups and parts of the UK is being affected by the Covid-19 crisis.

Many communities are responding positively to the crisis, as neighbours organise for mutual support to help vulnerable people. But some groups and individuals are suffering more than others. We want to understand what aspects of people’s experiences might be increasing or reducing the potential for positive relationships between different groups in society.

Our questions should help policy makers to understand how their decisions can support individuals and local communities as the effects of the pandemic continue to develop or change.

This first report presents some preliminary findings from our second wave survey conducted in June. We describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents, show where the research fits in the timeline of significant national events, and the report details some key findings from our questions about trust and perception of changing relationships during lockdown.

This is the first of a series of reports that will build a picture over time. We will present more evidence as we gather new data and can comment on changes in people’s perceptions and views.

## June Survey

Between 9 and 24 June 2020 we sent an online survey to 2,027 respondents. The survey was distributed through local councils, and charities. It asked people how they viewed the impact of Covid-19 on themselves, others around them and their local area. We also asked about people's perception of relationships within and between different groups in the UK.

We offered participants a £5 voucher for completing the survey, and we also offered them the opportunity to donate the money to a charity rather than keep it for themselves. We are immensely grateful that an impressive 613 people donated, which meant we were able to raise a total of £3,065 for Age UK, Refugee Action, and NSPCC, and we plan to continue to offer options to support various charities in our future surveys.

## COVID-19 TIMELINE



# Who participated in the survey?

## Local Authority Residents (N = 1,160)

**Gender:** 354 Male, 795 Female, 9 Undisclosed

**Age:** average = 48.6 years old (SD = 15.0)

**Living in:** 21% city, 58% town, 21% village

**Ethnicity:** 83% White, 4% Indian, 4% Pakistani

**Religion:** 40% no religion, 26% Anglican, 10% Roman Catholic, 7% Muslim

34% **keyworkers** (mostly school and nurseries and key government staff, then social care workers and NHS staff)

## Community Organisations (N = 867)

**Gender:** 359 Male, 502 Female, 6 Undisclosed

**Age:** average = 43.9 years old (SD = 16.2)

**Living in:** 55% city, 29% town, 14% village

**Ethnicity:** 84% White, 4% Black, 3% Indian

**Religion:** 27% no religion, 31% Anglican, 14% Roman Catholic, 6% Muslim

31% **keyworkers** (mostly social care workers, then schools and nurseries, NHS, and key government staff)

24% have been **volunteering** for more than 10 years, 25% between 4-10 years, 30% between 2-3 years, and 21% for one year or less

# Covid-19: Levels of concern and perception of the guidelines

## Concern

When asked about the consequences of the pandemic, for the entire country, the local area, and people themselves, 88% of respondents expressed high levels of concern, saying they were very or extremely concerned. Only 6% were not concerned.

## Attitudes about the current guidelines

Respondents were generally apprehensive about the sufficiency of current government guidelines: 54% said guidelines were too relaxed or much too relaxed, while 37% said they were about right, and only 9% said they were too strict or much too strict.

There was very clear consensus that 'everyone should respect the restrictions introduced at any given time', with 89% agreeing strongly, 9% agreeing moderately, and only 2% disagreeing.

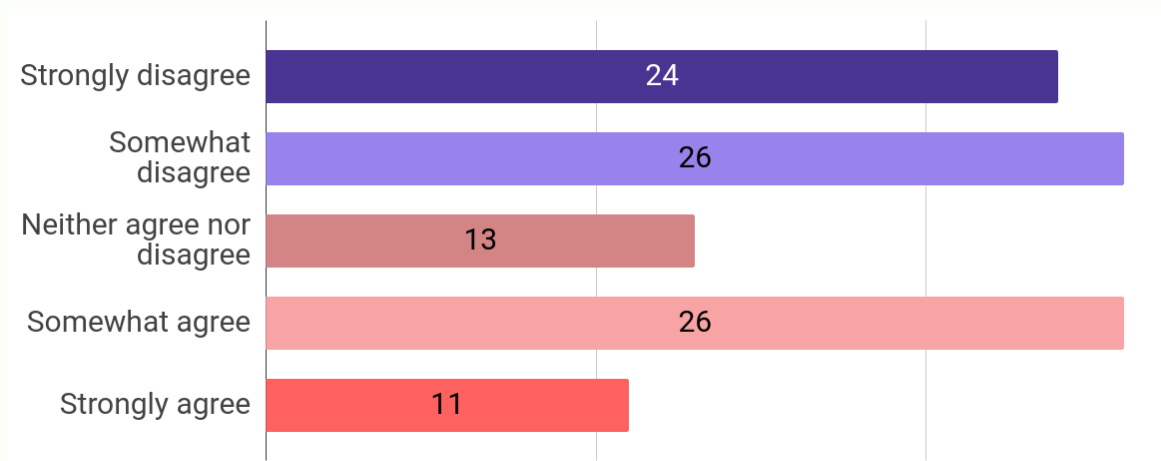
# Level of trust in the government and in other people

## Trust in politicians is mixed

57% of respondents agreed that 'most politicians think they do not need to respect the law as much as normal citizens do', while 21% disagreed and 22% do not take position. However, 43% did report that they trust their local MP to represent their interests (30% did not and 27% were neutral).

When asked how well they think the government is handling the pandemic, the picture is fairly mixed, with 37% of respondents thinking that the government is taking adequate measures, 50% disagreeing, and 13% not taking a position, as shown below.

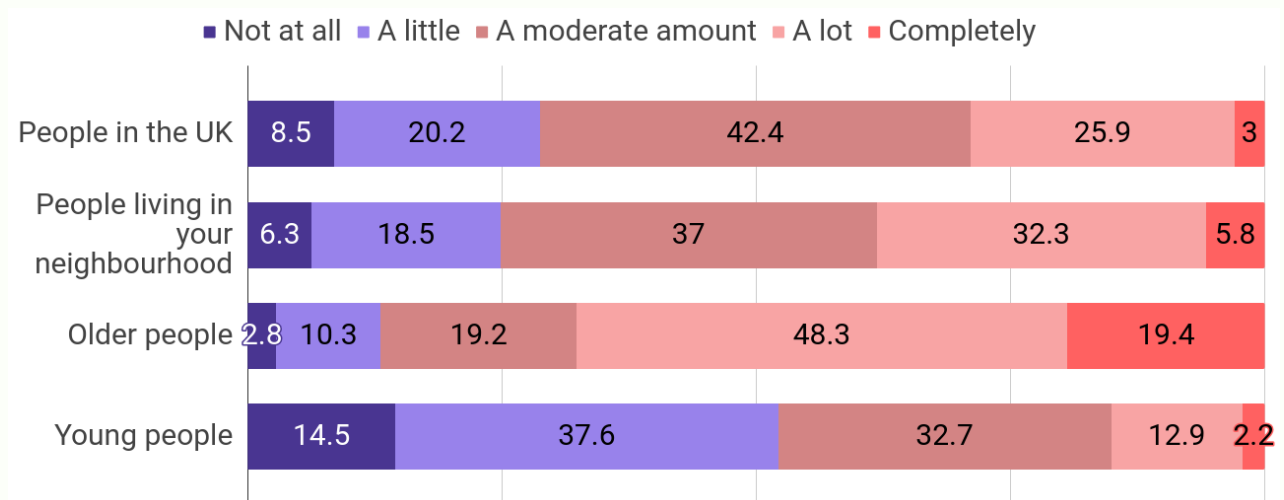
## I believe the UK Government is taking adequate measures to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic



## Trust in others

Trust in other people to follow the guidelines depended on which groups people were being asked about. Trust in people in general was mixed (29% trust a lot or completely) whereas trust in people living in one's neighbourhood was higher (38%), demonstrating higher trust in local people than in the general population. There is high degree of trust in older people (67%) but a much lower level of trust in younger people (15%), revealing a substantial and worrying gap, as shown below.

### Can [...] be trusted to follow the government instructions about social distancing?



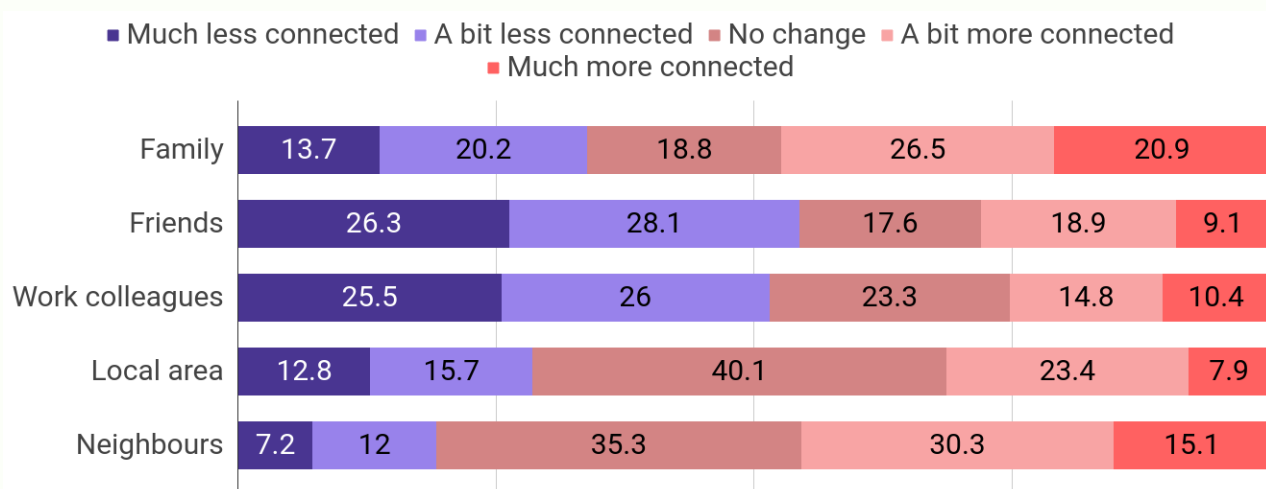
We also found that trust in both the government and in other people was higher amongst men than women, higher amongst people living in cities than those living in towns or villages, and higher amongst people with a higher income than those with lower incomes.

# Are people becoming more united or more divided during the pandemic?

## Personal relationships

Relationships were redefined during lockdown, as revealed by our finding that 51% respondents reported a loss of connection with their friends and 54% with work colleagues. But 47% reported increased connection with their family, 45% with neighbours, and 31% with people from their local area, as shown below. Older people reported feeling less connected than did younger people to their friends and family. People with lower incomes reported feeling less connected to others in general than did those with higher incomes.

## How would you say your connection with [...] has changed during lockdown?





## Are people within groups becoming more or less united?

Almost half of the respondents (49%) perceived the UK as a whole as becoming more divided, with smaller numbers perceiving no change (16%) or more unity (35%). In contrast, 44% viewed their local area as becoming more united or with no change (34%), and only 22% viewed it as becoming more divided (22%). This suggests a sense of growing local unity and national disunity.

## Are divisions between groups becoming larger or smaller?

55% respondents perceived the UK as becoming more opposed to the rest of Europe, only 14% perceiving greater unity, and 31% perceiving no change. Division within the UK emerges as 42% of respondents viewed London as becoming more opposed to the rest of the country, only 16% seeing it as more united, the remainder seeing no change. Young and old people are also viewed as being increasingly opposed by 40% of respondents, 22% seeing greater unity and 38% no change.

## Detached keyworkers

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed admiration for keyworkers (93%), and keyworkers were mostly aware of this support (81%). However, despite public support, keyworkers were feeling more detached than other people. Keyworkers report less compassion for those most vulnerable to Covid-19, less trust in politicians, and experiencing less connection with their family than are non-keyworkers. These differences cannot be explained by other demographics factors such as age, gender, and income.

## Connected volunteers

In contrast, people who had volunteered in the context of the pandemic reported higher trust in all people to follow the guidelines, higher trust in the government, higher compassion for people living in their local area, and stronger connections with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours, as compared to people who had not volunteered. This shows that volunteers have experienced more positive behavioural and emotional engagement with other people around them. They also feel more connected to their local area.

## What's next?

### Conclusions

These preliminary results suggest that the pandemic has affected trust and engagement differently for different people. Focus seems to have switched from global to local, with increased relationships, trust and engagement at the local, but a growing perception of divisions and mistrust towards other groups at a broader level.

### What's next?

Respondents will be invited to participate in the next round of the study, which launches in the third week of August, then again in September and October. We are currently working with focus groups and conducting 1-to-1 interviews (on-line) and these participants will be invited to meet again in October.

Our team at the University of Kent will be doing further analysis to understand more about how the unique characteristics of local places affects the findings and how local policy and previous programmes of work might have contributed to local resilience and recovery. The next report will be issued in September.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to our project partners: Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Calderdale Council, Waltham Forest Council, Walsall Council, the Jo Cox Foundation, Near Neighbours, Spirit of 2012, Streetgames, and Volunteering Matters, for their invaluable help in planning the surveys and helping us to recruit participants.

Thank you also to National Citizen Service, Humanists UK, Sporting Equals and the Linking Network for their support in the recruitment of participants.

The project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

For more information, visit the webpages dedicated to the project on the Belong website (<https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/news-and-events/beyond-us-and-them-covid-19-research>), Nuffield Foundation website (<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/social-cohesion-covid-19>), and the University of Kent website (<https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/psychology/2020/04/16/kent-psychologists-awarded-234000-grant-for-research-on-community-response-to-covid-19-pandemic/>).

## The 6 English local areas featured in the survey

The six locations that feature in the survey findings include Bradford, Calderdale, Walsall, Waltham Forest, Blackburn with Darwen and Peterborough.

