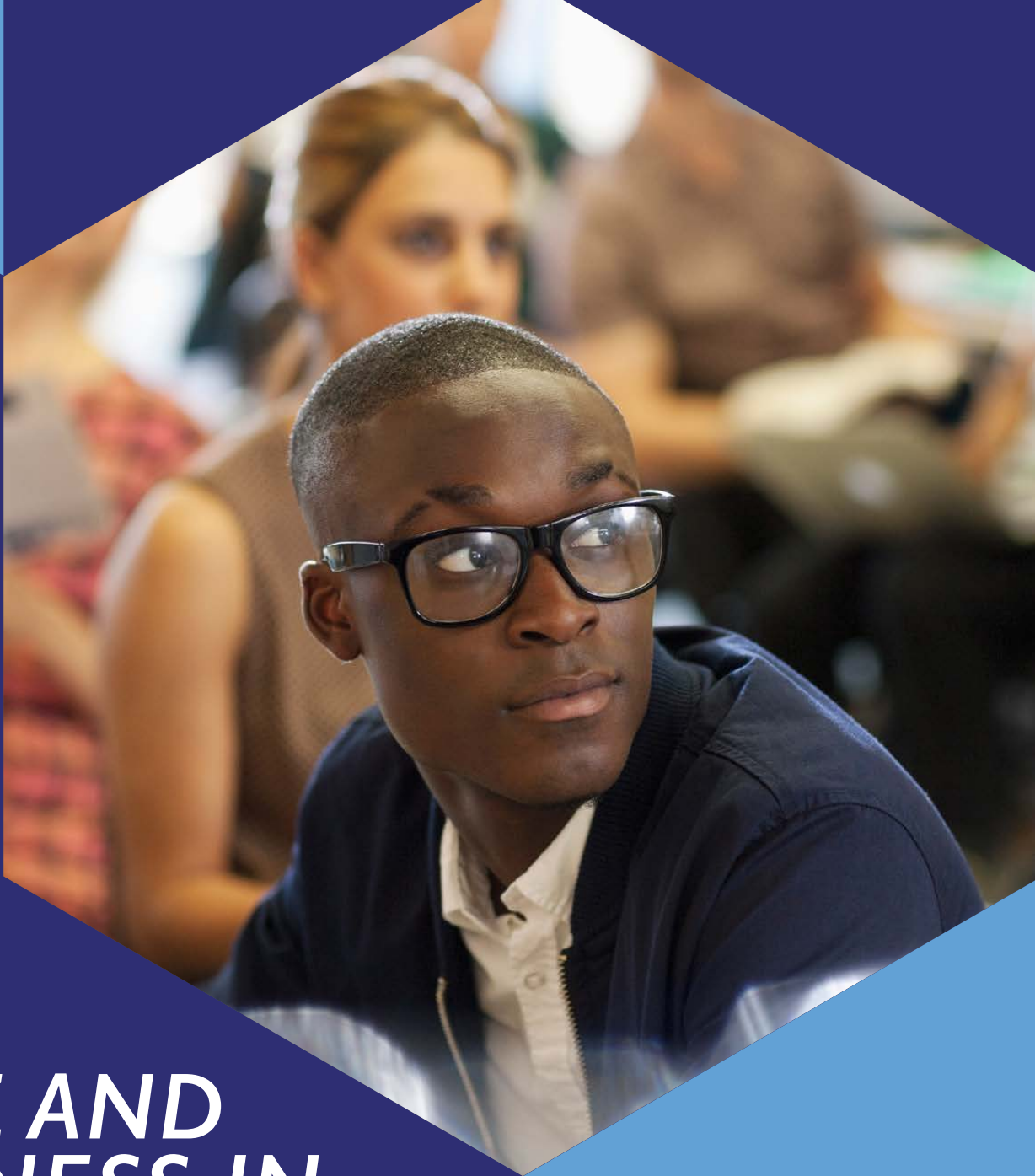




RACE AND FAIRNESS IN FRACTIOUS TIMES:

Public priorities for racial equity

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dr Barbara Adewumi, Sunder Katwala
and Tisha Dasgupta

The first publication of the *Voices for Equity: Moving from Evidence to Action* project

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

British
Future...

Published 2026 by British Future

Authors: Dr Barbara Adewumi, Sunder Katwala and Tisha Dasgupta

Editors: Steve Ballinger and Jake Puddle

© British Future 2026. The authors' rights have been asserted.

www.britishfuture.org

Bluesky: @britishfuture

LinkedIn: @BritishFuture



With special thanks to the team at the Nuffield Foundation Racial Diversity UK Fund for funding this research.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives.

The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. This project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

Find out more at:

www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org

LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation

Introduction

Across Britain today our classrooms, workplaces, and public spaces reflect the multi-ethnic society we have become. Greater diversity has brought new questions about how we maintain and expand a sense of shared belonging and mutual respect; and how barriers to fair treatment can be broken down. It can also require us to address rising incidents of racism from those who feel aggrieved by the pace of change and the rising visibility and status of ethnic minority Britons.

Political engagement on race has tended to be reactive and short-lived, in response to flashpoints like the tragic murder of Stephen Lawrence or the Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests of 2020. It is further problematised by the way we talk about race: consensus and coalitions for change can be made harder to build when political and public discourse about race has become polarised. And it is hampered, too, by the paucity of evidence on the perspectives and priorities of ethnic minority Britons and where these differ from, or concur with, their white counterparts. Nonetheless, if the fairness agenda – a central focus for the new government led by Andy Burnham – is to reach and uplift outcomes for all Britons, it will need to engage proactively on race. Labour will need to consider, too, how it can strengthen support among ethnic minority voters, with its historic appeal among minority communities having somewhat eroded in recent election performances.

In response this report, and the wider three-year project of which it is part, represents one of the largest and most comprehensive studies of ethnic minority public opinion in Britain. The research builds a dual perspective: mapping the nuanced experiences of ethnic minority Britons while measuring the levels of consensus and division in attitudes to race and equality among ethnic minorities and the wider White British public.

To capture both broad structural trends and the nuances of lived experiences, a mixed-methods approach was used:

- Quantitative: Two extensive, representative online surveys conducted by Number Cruncher Politics between 30th March and 29th April 2026. This included representative samples of 2,009 White adults and 3,014 ethnic minority adults.
- Qualitative: 12 in-depth qualitative focus groups conducted across various regions of the UK (Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, London (Peckham), Preston, Walsall) to capture nuance, generational dynamics and regional narratives.

The research was commissioned by British Future as part of its Voices for Equity: Moving from evidence to action project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation's Race Diversity UK (RDUK) programme. It finds shared, cross-ethnic concerns that progress on racial equality

has stalled or is going into reverse; along with sharply distinct views on the nature of inequality today and its causes. While the research identifies areas of divergence between white and ethnic minority opinion and experience, it highlights age and politics as the deepest divides in attitudes on race in Britain. And it further examines the diversity of attitudes and experiences within Britain's ethnic minority population, including differences by age, gender, education, politics and geography as well as between ethnic groups.

The research also examines where ethnic minority Britons most want to see change. A focus on fairness in the workplace emerges as a priority, with specific regard to recruitment, reward and progression. There is a desire to address systemic disparities in essential services like health, housing, and policing, ensuring institutions serve every citizen equitably. Unequal treatment of ethnic minorities in media reporting – brought into sharp focus in recent months with the intense media scrutiny of Cambridge University Professor Jason Arday – was also highlighted as an area of concern.

People across all ethnicities report a sense of community at a local level and share a desire for greater unity through community hubs and locally supported initiatives. There was also a desire to see greater efforts to tell a shared national story of Britain and its diversity, in schools and more broadly.

Britain's inequalities cut across race, class, gender, age, geography and education. A fairness agenda should pursue policies that tackles them together, undermining zero-sum resentments and building lasting consensus. While a lack of trust in politics, government and other institutions to make things better came across strongly in the research, our analysis does identify opportunities as well as challenges for pursuing policy responses. These will be taken forward in later stages of the Voices for Equity project.

These findings present both a challenge and an opportunity for building consensus on racial equality. The challenge is that conversations about race need to bridge a widened political and generational divide, with signs that discussion of the topic is becoming harder rather than easier. Fatigue with the subject has grown over the last five years, with some framing their frustration in terms of competing grievances rather than hostility to equality itself.

The opportunity lies in the strength of underlying agreement: most people, across differences by race, age and politics, believe racial inequality is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. It is precisely because these divides cut across ethnic lines, rather than existing simply between white and minority Britons, that there is scope to build coalitions for change that do not depend on race alone.



Executive Summary

In a society where one in six people are from ethnic minority backgrounds, efforts to address structural barriers and discrimination in a diverse society will require policymakers to find a clear voice on race and fairness.

Yet successive governments have rarely held a sustained focus on race. Themes of race equity and tackling racism have received reactive, often sporadic attention in the wake of high-profile incidents, from the murder of Stephen Lawrence to the Home Office Windrush scandal and Grenfell Tower tragedy. A process of lengthy commissions followed by largely unfulfilled recommendations has tended to follow, with little in the way of sustained strategy for driving long-term change.

The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in particular saw a significant mobilisation in politics and across institutions from the arts to employers. Yet a backlash in the years that followed, over contested ideas for promoting inclusion, often left policymakers and key sectors more anxious of engaging on race and fairness for fear of getting caught in a culture war cross-fire. The two years since the 2024 General Election have seen a series of heightened events, with riots and violent disorder in the summer of 2024 targeting asylum-seekers and ethnic minorities; and sharply contested arguments about immigration and asylum.

Most recently, the tragic death of Professor Jason Arday this August came after his role at Cambridge University received fierce controversy, not just about how far the scrutiny of academic standards was legitimate or disproportionate, but much broader claims and counter-claims about equality, diversity and inclusion, and institutional responses to structural racism.

It is in this context that the Voices for Equity project seeks to undertake a major research study, mapping the issues and, crucially, the priorities of people from ethnic minority backgrounds across the UK for change, through one of the largest representative surveys of this group to date and an extensive series of focus groups. The research aims to deliver new nationwide insight on how the government and major institutions can pursue a clearer agenda for change, which is able to command popular support.

It explores where there is consensus for policies and practices across minority ethnic groups and where there are more nuances between groups, genders, generations or regions. In a background of heightened polarisation, including on issues of racial fairness and community cohesion, the research also explores where the attitudes of the white majority empathise or where there are signs of zero-sum ‘us versus them’ competition.

This is the first report of the Voices for Equity project, setting out key areas of discrimination and inequity experienced by people from ethnic minority communities and their broad priorities for policy action. Further research over the following two years will then build on these foundations: exploring the views of young people in more depth over year two, and undertaking a deep-dive on key areas for action in year three.

Key findings: Attitudes on racism and inequality

Shared fears that race equality progress is going into reverse – but differences on the everyday reality and its causes

Our research finds a cross-ethnic consensus on the direction of racial equality in Britain: both white and ethnic minority respondents are more likely to believe it is getting worse than better. White respondents (48%) feel this even more strongly than ethnic minorities (44%). Well over half of ethnic minority Britons (62%) see racial inequality as a serious problem, a view supported by 57% of the white population. But this shared unease does not extend to agreement on the present-day picture: white respondents are consistently less likely than ethnic minorities to see structural barriers in education, work and public services, and are more likely to believe minority communities receive equal or even preferential treatment.

Divides by age and politics are deeper than those by ethnicity

The sharpest divides in British attitudes to race are not, however, primarily between white and ethnic minority Britons. Age is the strongest fault line: younger people of all backgrounds are more alert to everyday discrimination and more comfortable discussing race, yet paradoxically more hopeful that things can improve. Older respondents recognise the progress that has taken place, but combine less awareness of present-day inequality with greater pessimism and fatigue with the subject.

Political affiliation also divides opinion on race at least as much as ethnicity does. Supporters of Reform UK and the Conservatives are far less likely than Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green supporters to see racism as structural or serious – a divide most stark on whether minorities now receive preferential treatment.

The research also finds that “ethnic minority” is far from a single, homogenous viewpoint. Black respondents reported concerns about treatment by institutions, but were often more optimistic for the future than Bangladeshi and Pakistani respondents – whose heightened anxiety appears linked to the 2024 riots and their Islamophobic character. Women, particularly ethnic minority women, are also more pessimistic than men throughout.

Nearly half of people from ethnic minority backgrounds have faced prejudice in the past year. One in three note feeling less safe after the 2024 riots.

Nearly half (46%) of ethnic minority respondents had faced prejudice based on their race or nationality in the past year (including 25% reporting instances in public spaces, 20% on social media and 14% at work or education). Experiences were notably higher among young people aged 18-24 (58% faced prejudice) than over-65s (18%). Of those who had experienced prejudice, only a small minority said that they had shared what happened with the police (15%), a charity (10%) or with their employer/education institution (19%).

There is shared concern across ethnicities about everyday discrimination, yet growing zero-sum conflict over who is treated fairly by government.

Most ethnic minority respondents agree that “Racial discrimination is common in everyday life in the UK” (57% agree/13% disagree), as do just over half of white participants (51% agree/17% disagree). In all age groups and across supporters of all major political parties, the public prove substantially more likely to agree than reject this foundational view.

Most of the white British public also hold broadly tolerant racial attitudes. Two thirds (64%) of white British participants would be comfortable with an ethnic minority Prime Minister, although a one-in-six group hold overtly racist views – with 16% reporting they would be uncomfortable with a national leader that is not white. Similar proportions say the same for a child’s partner being from an ethnic minority background (65% comfortable/17% uncomfortable).

However, white respondents were more split (37% agree/33% disagree) over the statement ‘In the UK, people from ethnic minority backgrounds are treated better than people who are white British’, suggesting that perceptions around action on racial inequity risks becoming more polarised without efforts to build mutual understanding.

Asked how the UK government treats people by ethnicity, white respondents are more likely to say there is ‘similar treatment’ (41%) but equal proportions now feel that ethnic minority groups receive ‘better’ treatment (24%) or ‘worse’ treatment (25%). Perceptions that the government treats minorities better than others have increased by nine percentage points since British Future tested the same question in 2020.

High levels of concern about institutional discrimination, particularly in the media and police.

Four in ten (43%) respondents in the ethnic minority survey feel the police treat minorities worse than white people, (while 27% feel they treat both groups similarly and 17% say ethnic minorities are treated better). One in three (35%) say that national government treats ethnic minority groups worse (34% similar treatment; 17% better). A similar proportion (35%) feel that national newspapers treat minorities worse (32% similar; 16% better). We heard particularly strong concerns across the qualitative discussions about police profiling and people feeling stereotyped by national media and political debates over immigration and integration.

White respondents tend to share concerns about discrimination by police (44% say they treat ethnic minorities worse / 32% same / 14% better) and in national newspapers (31% treat worse; 41% the same; 14% better). Asked about each of the largest ethnic and faith minority groups, we also find that a majority of white respondents acknowledge they face ‘a lot’ or ‘a little’ prejudice in society.

There is low trust in political parties to treat people of different ethnic backgrounds fairly, with the Greens and Labour sharing a narrow lead and strong concerns about Reform.

Among ethnic minority voters, Labour receives a net trust score of +13 (38% trust / 25% distrust) that the party treats people of different backgrounds fairly. The Greens are net +15 (34% trust/19% distrust). The Lib Dems are net +6 (27% trust/21% distrust) and Conservatives -1 (29% trust/30% distrust). Reform UK prompts markedly stronger distrust with a net score of -31 (16% trust / 47% distrust).

Key findings: priorities for action

The research then sought to understand ideas for how policymakers and institutions could drive progress on racial equality, including the public’s priorities for change.

Ideas that tackle race and class together unlock broad public support and reflect the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The research highlights that the public do not want to choose between race and class when addressing social disadvantage and that action to address both together can command broad support.

In both the white and ethnic minority surveys, gaps between rich and poor are seen as the most important divide impacting the UK. In focus groups, participants shared how barriers to opportunity were often layered, reflecting a person’s race alongside other factors such as poverty or regional inequalities.

Meanwhile, white survey respondents are more likely (43%) to believe that class and race are equally important to someone’s life chances, while 25% saw class as more important and 15% saw someone’s race as the primary factor. This suggests that action to address inequalities would better reflect the priorities of ethnic minorities, and achieve broader consensus with white British people, where policies address socioeconomic and racial inequality through a joined-up lens.



A shared call across ethnic minority voters for closing racial pay gaps.

Asked to select priorities for change, from a list spanning media representation to housing and health equity, a focus on equal pay emerged top across all reportable minority ethnicities. One in four (25%) selected this as their most important issue and nearly four in ten (37%) in their top three. This was also the issue most selected by white respondents for addressing racial disparities.

Beyond equal pay, wider work is prioritised on progression, fair recruitment and senior representation in leadership.

This is accompanied by a broader set of priorities for fairness in the workplace, seen as essential to promoting equitable opportunities and removing unfair barriers.

Improving representation and progression of ethnic minorities in employment and leadership roles came through as a key issue (ranked 1st by 19%, top-three by 41%). In focus groups, we heard experiences of many feeling they worked twice as hard but faced being overlooked for promotion by management who often failed to reflect and represent the diversity of their area.

Ensuring fair recruitment practices and tackling workplace discrimination also surfaced among the top priorities (ranked first by 15% and top-three by 43%) to avoid bias creating barriers to opportunity. Focus group participants shared a range of challenges they faced in finding jobs, from having to westernise their name or mask their ethnicity in their CV to get a hearing, through to newer arrivals being passed over by employers for requiring additional visa paperwork.

Collecting race data is seen as common sense for effective outcomes.

There is wide consensus permission for policymakers to collect statistics on minority groups in areas such as employment, health and policing to help identify and address disparities. The vast majority of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds (74%) see this as essential or fairly useful, as do six in ten white respondents (61%). Only a fringe of 9% in the white sample consider this unnecessary or irrelevant.

Beyond government, community groups are considered effective champions for change.

Asked about their ideas for change, many people from ethnic minority backgrounds tended to voice scepticism about national progress. This took the form of mistrust in the government to pursue pro-equality policies and anxiety about increasingly fractious political conversations about diversity, inclusion, immigration and education in the UK. However a clear contrast was drawn with

more local initiatives to promote cohesion and togetherness across ethnic lines, and to build trusted relationships for change-making within and between racial groups. These grassroots groups and spaces for neighbourhood local action were seen as vital hubs for hopeful optimism. Spaces that foster cross-ethnic connections were viewed with more confidence and interest, with participants calling for these local efforts to be better supported, to bring meaningful change and moments for connection closer to communities.

Recommendations

The core challenge for the new government is to set out a stronger vision for how we handle our differences and ensure fair chances for all. The report sets out a framework for a stronger vision of how a changing society should treat people from different backgrounds fairly, respect their differences, and bring people together.

1. Be proactive, not just reactive, about equality and fairness in an increasingly diverse Britain

The government should use National Windrush Day, 22 June, as an annual moment to communicate its vision of fair chances for all, review progress and barriers in priority areas, and explore policy changes needed.

2. Challenge zero-sum thinking – by embedding race equality in a broader agenda for fair chances

As the UK's ethnic minority presence in public life grows, it increases pressure for race equality action but also risks backlash from those who see it in zero-sum terms.

Sustained progress requires political leadership that frames race equality within a broader mission of fair chances for all, backed by practical tools to embed this approach across public policy.

3. Audit fair chances – to make the fairness case when specific interventions are necessary

Some of biggest gains for race equality may come from progress in government action on universal goals, such as the elimination of child poverty. But an effective fairness strategy will also need the tools to address specific barriers.

An audit can help to show how these meet a public 'fairness test' – that there is a specific gap that needs more attention. Where there are such gaps, for example in employment, health or education, targeted interventions should prioritise those from different minority and majority groups who risk falling behind.

4. Increase the local and regional understanding of disparities in opportunities, including race equality, and recommend local/regional responses

As part of its broader devolution agenda, the national government should work with city-regions and others to break down opportunity data within regions – by ethnic group, social class, generation and gender. This would enable a region-specific approach to narrowing key gaps.

5. Make the practical case for progress on key priorities – for example the unfairness of ‘CV name bias’

Despite a polarised debate on race, broader public support can be unlocked, across all groups, when there is a clear fairness case about the need for action, with a practical agenda to address key challenges.

One of the most compelling examples is the evidence that having an ‘ethnic-sounding’ first name or surname significantly affects how many interviews you will get when applying for a job. The government should set a clear priority to eliminate this obvious unfairness – and challenge all sectors to step up.

6. Prioritise fairness at work – and depolarise the debate about equality, diversity and inclusion

Fairness at work emerged in the attitudes research as a key public priority. Employers should not retreat from promoting fairness at work in the face of heated debates about equality, diversity and inclusion.

The government should consult on how mandatory pay gap reporting for large employers of over 250 people can be extended to include medium-sized and smaller employers.

7. Tackle racism of every form – and pay more attention to the causes of racism too

Progress on tackling racial prejudice feels stalled or reversed, driven partly by online racism spilling into offline spaces. The government should push Ofcom harder on platform compliance and use soft power against platforms that protect toxic and unlawful content.

The UK has had no hate crime strategy since 2016-20. Racially motivated hate crimes get far less policy attention than religious hate crimes, though they outnumber them by a factor of ten times. A joined-up strategy should extend consistent definitions and principles across all forms of hatred, distinguishing legitimate protest from prejudice. It should back this with education, robust risk monitoring, and transparent reporting to Parliament and the public. That should include partnering with civil society to test interventions that shift perpetrator behaviour and protect at-risk groups from radicalisation into hatred.

8. Ensure that people from all backgrounds benefit from policing strategies for safer streets

Policing faces cross-pressure amid “two-tier” accusations from multiple directions. The NPCC’s Action Plan was too narrowly focused on the Black community, without setting this in the context of policing across all ethnic groups and the majority population too. It risked undermining important commitments through performative rhetoric about anti-racism.

Instead, fair treatment should be reasserted for everyone and monitored in practice – with police recruitment gaps closed as an operational necessity, not just a diversity target, alongside better training and monitoring of victim experiences across ethnic groups.

Local community consultations would help forces understand specific trust drivers and tailor place-based approaches across ethnicity, faith, generation, gender and class.

9. Strengthen the foundations of shared identity in schools

National and local government should ensure there are strong educational resources to help students understand the making of multi-ethnic Britain. Efforts should also promote contact between students from different backgrounds; and critical thinking skills to help identify mis- and disinformation online.

10. Empower Local Communities and rebuild grassroots cohesion

Local initiatives are more trusted than national government to deliver change on inequality. But national government can support local and grassroots activity, including bringing more voice and power to local communities through Community Consultation Committees, and providing targeted micro-funding to support local, resident-led initiatives.



Scan the QR code to
view the full report



British Future...

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

British Future
13 Elliott's Place
London N1 8HX
www.britishfuture.org
info@britishfuture.org