PUBLIC FIRST

BENEATH THE FRACTURING

BRITISH VALUES IN AN AGE OF DIVISION



Report authors: Olivia Walsham, Vivian Gounari, Michela Arena, Ed Dorrell

in partnership with Pears Foundation

Table of Contents

01	Executive Summary	03
02	Key Findings	05
03	Introduction	06
04	Methodology	07
05	A Divided Britain	09
06	A Unifying British Identity	13
07	Articulating British Values	30
08	Strengthening British Values	34
09	Conclusion	40
10	Annex	41





01
Executive Summary

In the decade since the EU referendum, the dominant story told about Britain has been one of fracture. Read the news, follow political commentary, or listen to public debate and you encounter the same conclusion repeatedly: the UK is becoming ever more divided. Divisions over Europe have been followed by divisions over immigration, small boats, free speech, gender, race equality, national identity and the pace of social change. Alongside this, there is a growing sense that social cohesion has weakened, and that the ties that once bound people together are under strain.

Our research does not dismiss that diagnosis. On the contrary we find that Britain is indeed divided, and in many cases profoundly so. People describe a country that feels more polarised, more pessimistic and less certain of itself than in the past - and they do not relish it. Many feel politics has become antagonistic, organised around conflict and defined by its inability to deliver on the wants and needs of the electorate. If this were the whole story, it would be easy to conclude that Britain is now so fragmented that little remains to unite it.

But that is not the case.

Beneath the noise of political division, there remains a shared set of values that quietly underpin British society. Across age groups, social classes, regions, political traditions and groups that otherwise disagree on major issues, there are still common instincts about what matters, what it means to be British and what Britain should stand for, even if people find it hard to articulate themselves. These values are rarely expressed in abstract or institutional language. They are understood instead through everyday expectations of how people should behave, how society should work, and what people owe one another.

Recent years have seen political parties and national leaders attempt to articulate British values in the face of such a fractious political climate, and for fifteen years there has been an official definition of British values:

"Democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs"

the official definition of Fundamental British Values since 2011

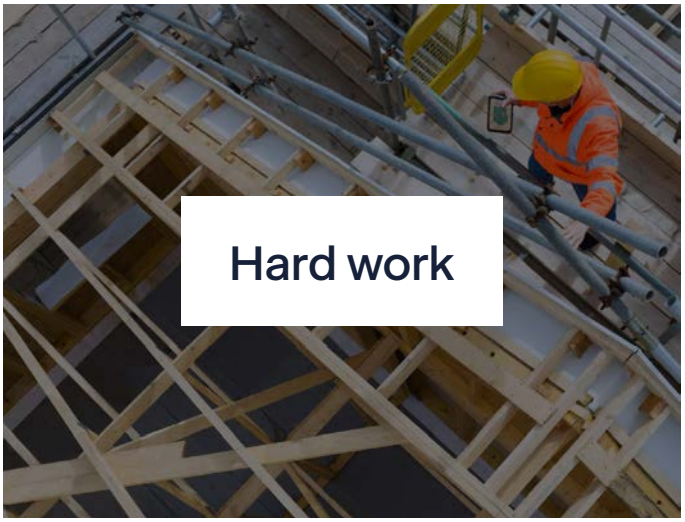
"I will never doubt British values. Rules that protect those in need...Respect for difference, under the same flag...The freedom to live and let live...I will never doubt that these values make us strong in a world that preys on weakness"

the words of Keir Starmer at Labour Party Conference 2025.

Yet our research suggests that these descriptions do not accurately capture what most people across the UK actually mean when they talk about the values that define the country.

We find three simple, grounded values that pull the country together:







These are the values that run deep right across the UK. They shape how people judge governments and institutions, how they distinguish between a country that is working and one that is not, and whether Britain still feels like a place in which they can take pride.

People are concerned that these values are eroding. Many feel that fairness is not always guaranteed, that hard work is less reliably rewarded, and that community spirit has weakened. Some worry that a shared national identity underpinned by these values has become more difficult to express: either because doing so is seen as divisive or exclusionary, or because the social foundations that once sustained it feel less secure than they did before.

Message testing shows that it is possible to articulate our shared values of fairness, hard work and community in a positive way that resonates across voter groups. Crucially, what works best is not a language of grievance or resentment, but a positive account of British identity: a country where fairness is upheld, hard work is respected, community is strengthened and people look out for one another. These messages do not ignore the frustration and pessimism many people feel, but they land better when they begin with what Britain at its best looks like, rather than only with what may have been lost.

There is still the basis of a shared identity in Britain, but it will not be rebuilt by doubling down on the issues that divide the country most sharply. Anyone who wants to repair an increasingly fractured and polarised politics need to step back and focus on what still unites people.

That means speaking to the values of fairness, community and hard work in a language that is positive, grounded and recognisable.

02
Key Findings

01 Britain is profoundly politically divided. Fewer than one in three people feel hopeful about the UK's future and nearly 7 in 10 believe things in the UK overall have got worse in the last 5 years. This widespread pessimism and frustration at the political class has translated into an increasingly fractured population along political lines.

02 The British public is pessimistic and worried about this fracturing. 65% of people believe the country is more divided than ever and many are fearful this division is going to deepen further.

03 Despite this, our research shows there is a unifying British identity shared across political lines, one that can provide an antidote to politics defined by grievance.

04 The 2011 definition of Fundamental British Values fails to capture how Britons understand British Values in practice. While the public recognises key concepts like the rule of law, democracy and individual liberty as important, they are not how the public understand and articulate everyday British values.

05 This identity is rooted in shared values of fairness, community and hard work and supplemented by a deep pride in uniquely British culture, including its institutions, its history, character and humour.

06 Community is closely tied to feelings of optimism. 62% of those who had volunteered at a local or national event in the last month felt optimistic or very optimistic about the future of their local area, compared with just 25% of those who had never volunteered.

07 Where the public feels anger at totemic public policy failings, it is often because they perceive the situation to violate British values they hold dear.

08 These values are not borne out of anger; they resonate most across groups when articulated positively. Even unpopular or divisive political figures can articulate this unifying vision of British identity.

09 While the British public themselves do think there is a distinct British identity, they overwhelmingly believe it is being eroded.

10 There is strong appetite for this process to be reversed: the British public want to feel proud of the UK again and be able to voice it.

03
Introduction

> Democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.
>
> the official definition of Fundamental British Values since 2011

> I will never doubt British values. Rules that protect those in need...Respect for difference, under the same flag...The freedom to live and let live...I will never doubt that these values make us strong in a world that preys on weakness.
>
> the words of Keir Starmer at Labour Party conference 2025

Are these definition of British values a fair reflection of the deeply held beliefs that are shared across Britain? Are these the concepts that really unite the country with a shared sense of pride and identity, regardless of political affiliation or divisions? When people see the Union Jack or the St George's flag, what is it that they think it represents?

To answer this question, Public First undertook extensive opinion research polling over 6000 UK adults and speaking to nearly 300 people in immersive qualitative interviews and focus groups from Falkirk to Wrexham, Sunderland to Southampton to understand whether, despite the very real polarisation of political views and the fracturing of traditional party politics, there are still common values and sources of pride that unite and ignite a sense of patriotism across the UK.

What emerges from this research is not a country irreparably divided without common values, but a country whose shared moral language is more practical, more emotional and more rooted in everyday life than official definitions and recent articulations imply. A country that has shared traditions and an innate desire to be patriotic even if it feels there isn't much to inspire that pride in the UK today.

At a time when many people feel Britain has become more divided, more pessimistic and less confident in its future, there remains a strong sense that certain values still matter deeply and still speak to something distinctively British. Across political and demographic lines, people return again and again to ideas of fairness, hard work and community - not as abstract principles, but as expectations about how life in Britain should work.

This report sets out those findings in full. It explores where the public's understanding of British values aligns with official definitions, where it diverges, and how a more resonant story of national identity might be rebuilt.

Brits believe that our shared values are disappearing. We argue that they need to be renewed - through a positive, inclusive and grounded language of identity which reflects how people actually live, relate to one another and take pride in the country today.

04
Methodology

We adopted a mixed methods approach to capture both generalisable and in-depth insights, producing a rich image of public opinion and definitions of 'British Values'.

Values Polling

We conducted an initial nationally representative poll of 4,000 UK adults to understand high level values and sources of pride shared across the UK population. We also used this poll to identify distinct groups within the population based on how people think about the country, their identity, and politics. The analysis drew on measures including strength of British, local and European identity; levels of optimism about the UK and local areas; feelings of pride and patriotism; views on key trade-offs such as change versus stability and immigration; and voting behaviour.

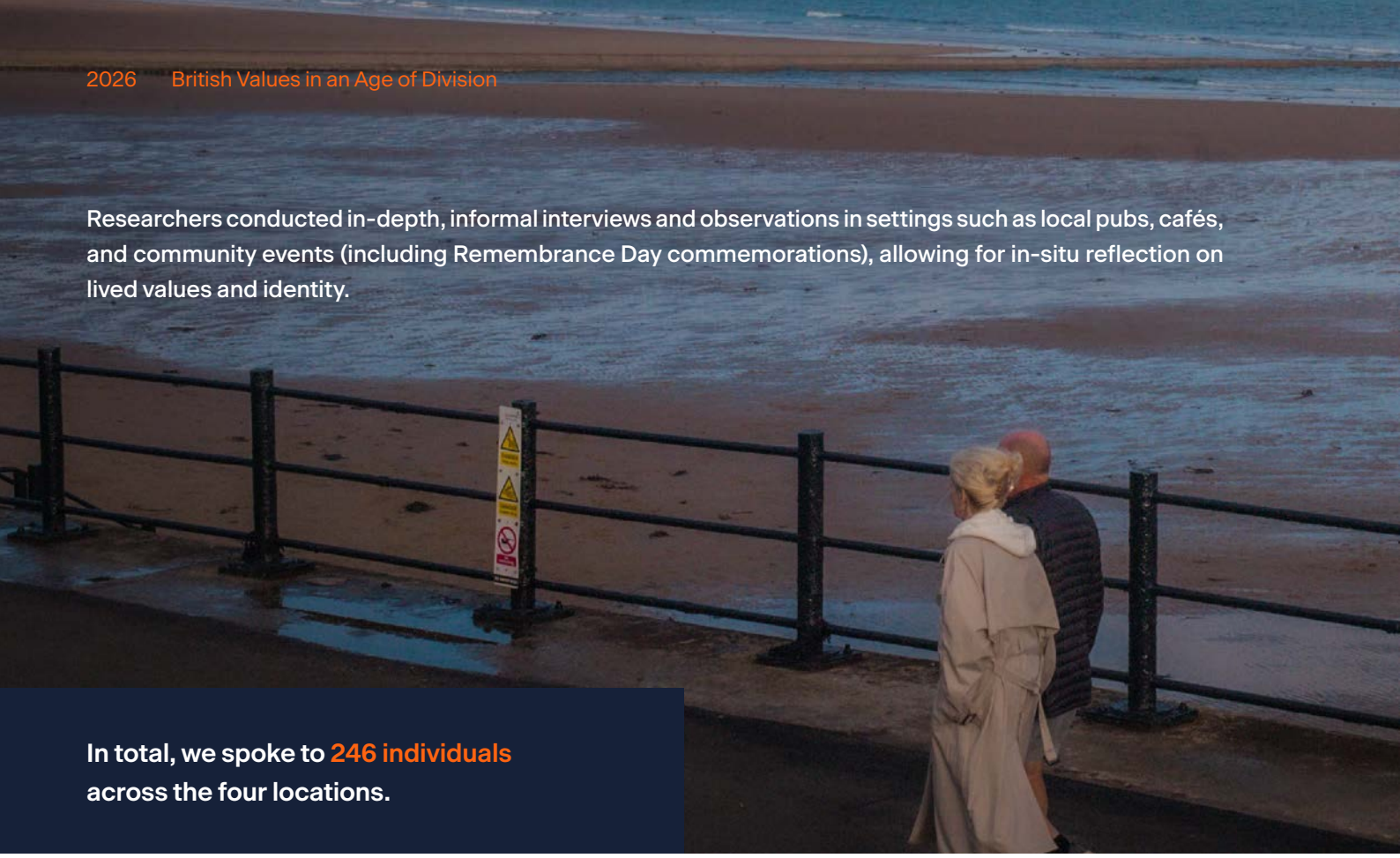
From this, we identified five groups within the population with different outlooks on Britain, political issues, and Britain's future. The purpose of these groups was to understand groups with differing views within the population and then look for the similarities in values and sources of pride which cut across these otherwise divided groups. This practical framework was used to guide the rest of the research, including focus groups and message testing.

Immersive Research

Building on the initial polling, we selected four locations for in-person ethnographic research (referred to as 'immersives') to speak to people in real-world settings. These locations – Sunderland, Manchester, Falkirk, and Nuneaton – were chosen because their socio-demographic profiles broadly aligned with the differing groups identified in the polling. The table below summarises how each location maps onto these groups.

Due to it's unique relationship to British identity, Northern Ireland was not included in the research.

Immersive	Group	Location Data
Sunderland	Older, male, rural North/Midlands, low-mid income, 93% White British, strongly leaning Reform UK	North East 41 years old median age 94.6% White
	Mid-aged, female-leaning, modest income, leaning Conservative/undecided	
Manchester	Young, higher income, highly educated, Labour/Green leaning	North West 30 years old median age 56.8% White, 20.9% Asian, 11.9% Black
Nuneaton	30s-50s, small towns/suburbs, mid-income, mixed 'classic' swing voters	West Midlands 39 years old median age 87.6% White, 7.8% Asian
Falkirk	40s, urban and city centres, middle income, degree-level, Labour/Green leaning	Scotland 43 years old median age 96% White



Researchers conducted in-depth, informal interviews and observations in settings such as local pubs, cafés, and community events (including Remembrance Day commemorations), allowing for in-situ reflection on lived values and identity.

In total, we spoke to 246 individuals across the four locations.

Focus Groups

Following the ethnographic immersive phase, we conducted four online focus groups to explore in greater depth the language and meaning participants attach to British values and identity. The focus groups had a dual purpose: first, to inform the development of a subsequent quantitative messaging poll by stress-testing key framings and narratives; and second, to broaden the geographic spread of the research by including participants from Wales and the South East (Southampton), complementing earlier fieldwork.

The discussions followed a semi-structured guide covering themes of national and local pride, definitions of British identity, and perceptions of shared values in contemporary Britain. A central component of the sessions was an ideology mapping exercise, in which participants were asked to categorise a series of prompts (e.g. community spirit, fairness, multiculturalism, tradition, personal freedoms) according to whether they aligned with their own understanding of "being British," how they believed others might define Britishness, or whether they did not fit at all. This exercise enabled participants to articulate not only their own value frameworks but also their perceptions of whether a social consensus around values exists, and where divisions might arise.

Messaging Poll

We conducted a second nationally representative survey of 2,000 UK adults to test how different ways of talking about British values are received by the public. Building on insights from the polling and immersive research, the survey explored how people interpret key values such as fairness, hard work and community in practice, who they believe is responsible for upholding them, and how these values should be spoken about.

A central component of this phase was message testing. Respondents were shown a series of value-based statements, with the sample split so that the same messages were attributed either to a generic politician or to named political figures. This allowed us to distinguish between reactions to the message itself and reactions to the messenger, and to identify language that can resonate across different audiences. Messages were assessed based on levels of support and how they were perceived (for example, whether they felt unifying, credible, or divisive), providing a clear evidence base for which framings have the broadest appeal.

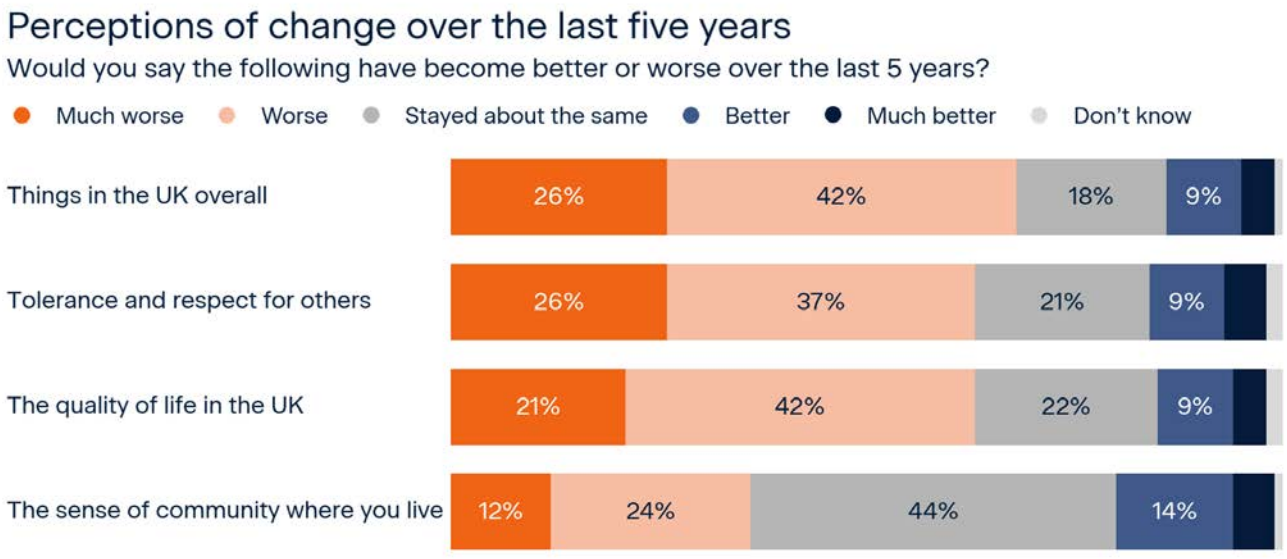
05
A Divided Britain

Key Finding 1
Britain is profoundly politically divided. Fewer than one in three people feel hopeful about the UK's future and nearly 7 in 10 believe things in the UK overall have got worse in the last 5 years. This widespread pessimism and frustration at the political class has translated into an increasingly fractured population along political lines.

Key Finding 2
The British public is pessimistic and worried about this fracturing. 65% of people believe the country is more divided than ever and many are fearful this division is going to deepen further.

It is no surprise to anyone paying attention to politics in recent years that the UK is going through a period of political fracturing. The country feels increasingly pessimistic, angry and divided. The public mood feels febrile. From public anger boiling over into riots across the country in 2024, through to Operation Raise the Colours, left-wing counterprotests and pro-Palestine marches, public pessimism and division is increasingly visible.

Our research clearly reflects this. The national mood is broadly pessimistic, with fewer than one in three people feeling hopeful about the UK's future. Almost half of respondents (47%) describe themselves as pessimistic (27%) or very pessimistic (20%). **Nearly 7 in 10 believe things in the UK overall have got worse in the last 5 years, and just 5% say the current government makes them proud to live in the UK.**



Deep frustration and pessimism about the state of the UK was made loud and clear. While many people expressed an instinctive desire to take pride in Britain and in being British, the majority lamented the fact there was little to be proud of in the UK today and found it difficult to articulate what it means to be British:

> It's not Great Britain anymore. It's not a great country anymore [...], we're a laughing stock on the world stage.
> Male, 60s, Sunderland

> Yes and no, as a whole with Britain. There are parts I'm very proud of, and there are parts I disagree with how the country is at the moment.
> Man, 30s, Manchester

> Last time I felt proud to be British was the mid-90s.
> Male, 50s, Sunderland

> I don't feel proud at all [to be British], but there are times I do feel proud...I can't really pinpoint, it depends how I feel on the day.
> Female, 30s, Nuneaton

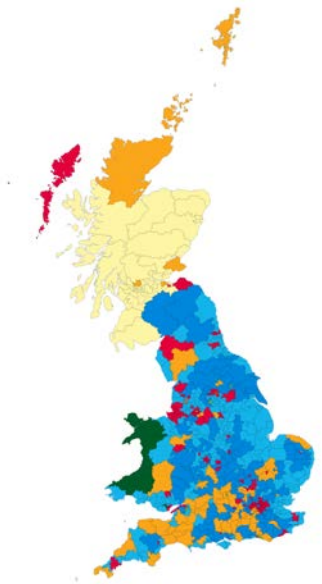
> There's a lot of things falling apart in Britain right now. And I'm prouder to say I'm Welsh, not British. I'd be ashamed to be asked to be called British. To be honest, there'd be nothing I would be able to be proud of about being British.
> Female, 30s, Wrexham

> Well I'm proud, I'm proud to be British...but now the country is too far gone now, we can't do nothing with it...We've been led on by a lot of people, not just this government but every government. And I feel sorry for the next generation for what they're getting, because there's nothing for them to do.
> Male, 70s, Sunderland

As a result, Britain's electoral map is increasingly fractured. Support for the main political parties is at a historic low, and the popularity of Reform UK and the Green Party is growing in their place. The Labour Party won a landslide majority in 2024, and yet in 2026 voting projections put Reform UK close to a parliamentary majority with Labour and the Conservatives trailing behind. This is symbolic of a seismic shift in the UK's political landscape and reflects the depths of public disappointment at a political system they do not believe works for them.

Projected voting intention overview

Stonehaven June 2026 MRP Modelling



Projected seats

Reform UK 37% of constituencies	234
Labour Party 22.5% of constituencies	142
Conservative Party 18.2% of constituencies	115
Liberal Democrats 12% of constituencies	76
Scottish National Party (SNP) 7.4% of constituencies	47
Green Party 1.7% of constituencies	11
Plaid Cymru 0.9% of constituencies	6
Other 0.2% of constituencies	1

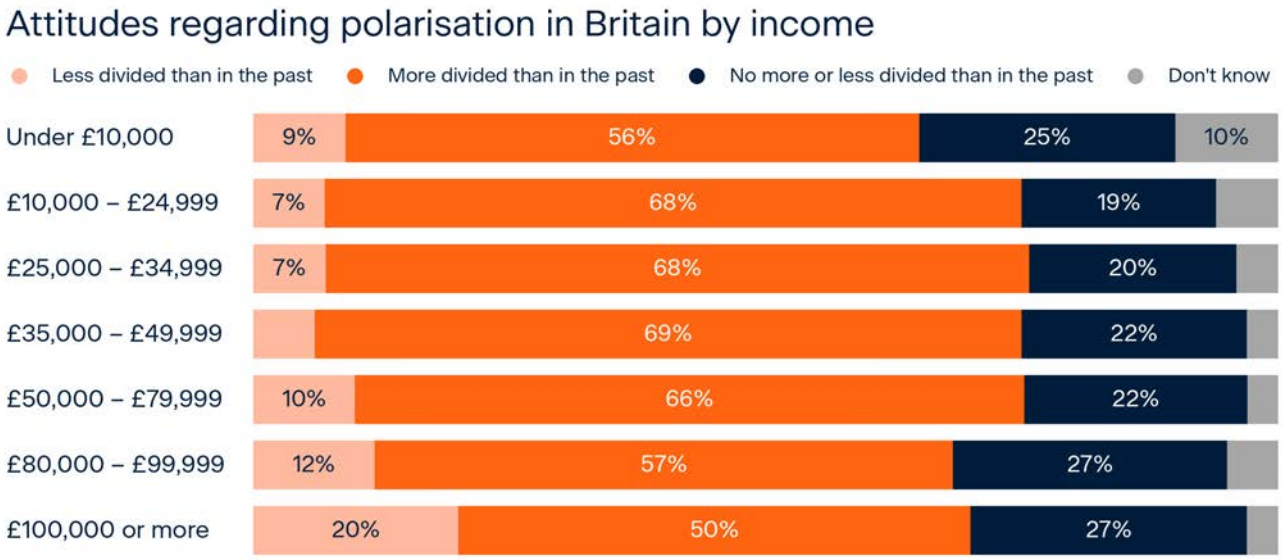
Source: Stonehaven MRP Modelling | July 2026

Around 65% of people believe the country is more divided than ever. 52% of those in urban areas think so, rising to 75% in villages and 71% in suburbs. Around three in four people who voted for right-leaning parties in 2024 say the same and 3 in 5 left leaning voters. Half of 18 to 24-year-olds see the country as more divided; among those over 65, the figure is more than three quarters. Importantly, this growing sense of division is not relished by the population:



> You can see more extreme groups coming together now, and gathering some momentum, which can be a bit scary. Overall, [I feel] a bit lost.
>
> Female, 40s, Newport West and Islwyn

> It doesn't feel like we have many traditions anymore...[We're] very fragmented and divided.
>
> Male, 40s, Newport West and Islwyn



Which of the following comes closest to your view? The Britain of today is...

This can't be explained by looking at 'haves' and 'have nots'; perceptions of division remain broadly similar across income groups and only fall meaningfully among households earning more than £80,000.



06
A Unifying British Identity

Key Finding 3
Despite this, our research shows there is a unifying British identity shared across political lines, one that can provide an antidote to politics defined by grievance.

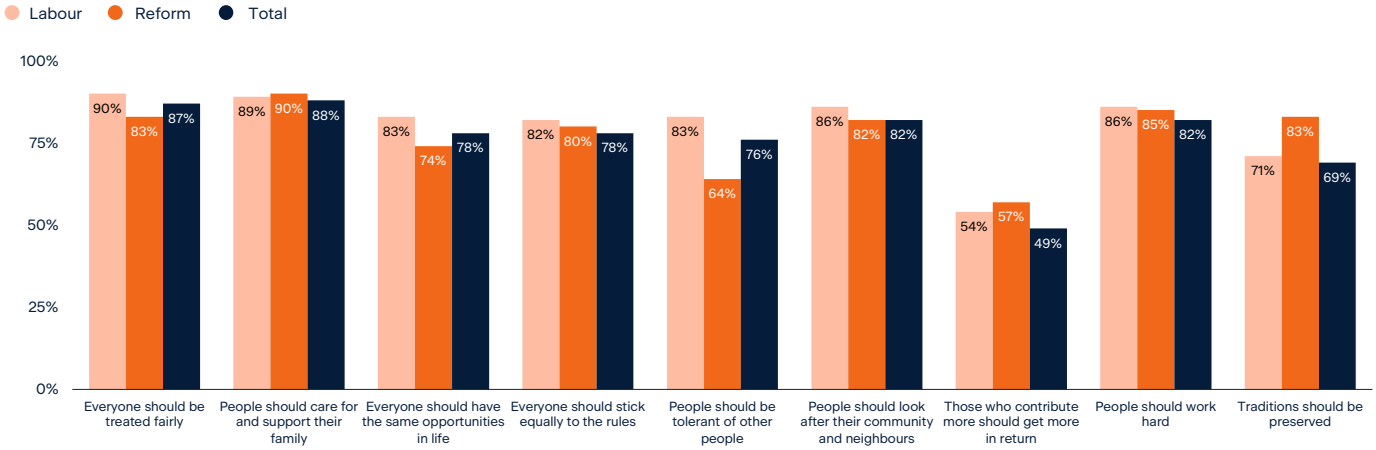
Key Finding 4
The 2011 definition of Fundamental British Values fails to capture how Britons understand British Values in practice. While the public recognises key concepts like the rule of law, democracy and individual liberty as important, they are not how the public understand and articulate everyday British values.

Key Findings 5
This identity is rooted in shared values of **fairness, community and hard work** and supplemented by a deep pride in uniquely British culture, including its institutions, its history and its character and humour.

Key Findings 6
Community is closely tied to feelings of optimism. 62% of those who had volunteered at a local or national event in the last month felt optimistic or very optimistic about the future of their local area, compared with just 25% of those who had never volunteered.

Despite the depth of disagreement in modern Britain, our research finds that there is still a durable, widely shared belief in a set of values that people see as distinctly British. Across the country, the values most commonly associated with Britain are looking after one's community, fairness and the importance of hard work. While these are values that people globally may agree are good principles to have, in the UK they are what informs almost every aspect of how people relate to one another and how Britain should be underpinned.

Total Agreement with Statements by Vote Intention



Taking each in turn, would you say you agree or disagree with the following?



In London and the South East, 76% agree that British values mean looking after one's community; in Yorkshire and the Humber, 76% say treating people fairly is a British value; and in the North West, 76% say the same of hard work.

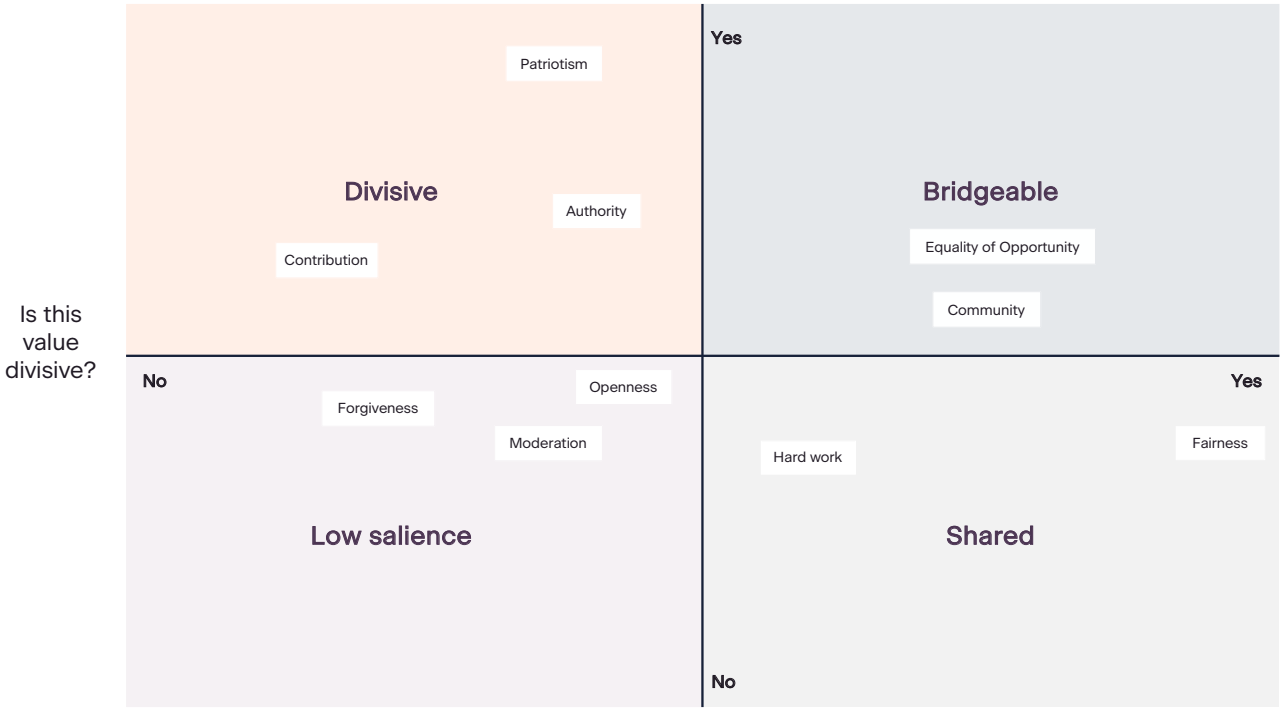
Agreement with statements as British values by 2024 vote



In the polling, we presented participants with a number of value statements and asked them to choose which values they found most and least important from small sets of options. This forced respondents to make trade-offs and therefore reveal their true priorities rather than allowing them to rate everything highly. From these choices, we calculated an overall popularity score for each value (net score = how often it was selected as most important minus how often it was selected as least important).

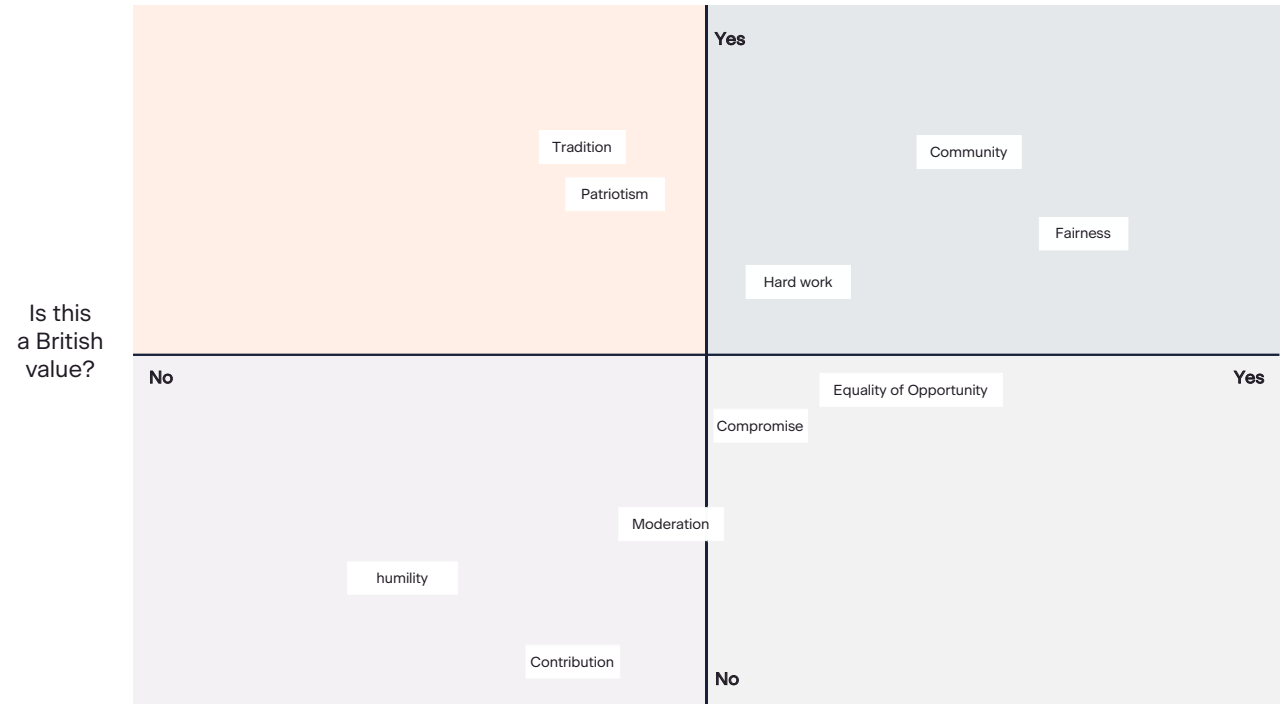
We then examined how consistent that support was across different parts of the population, including age, gender, income, region, and political leaning. This allowed us to measure not only how popular a value is overall, but also whether support is broadly shared or concentrated in specific groups. Then we plotted each value on these two dimensions: overall popularity and level of disagreement between groups which enabled us to identify which values are shared, divisive, bridgeable, or low-priority. The value statements on hard work and fairness enjoy broad support and low disagreement. Community as a value has a lot of support but is slightly more unevenly distributed. Our qualitative research suggests the perceived decline of community spirit in practice might explain why the value, while popular, is seen as slightly more divisive in this poll.

Popularity vs divisiveness



We also compared how people prioritise these values personally with how "British" they perceive them to be. Together, these two dimensions distinguish between the moral values that people live by and the ones they see as defining national character. Again, the values of community, hard work and fairness score highest for being both important and considered to be a British value.

Britishness vs. personal importance:



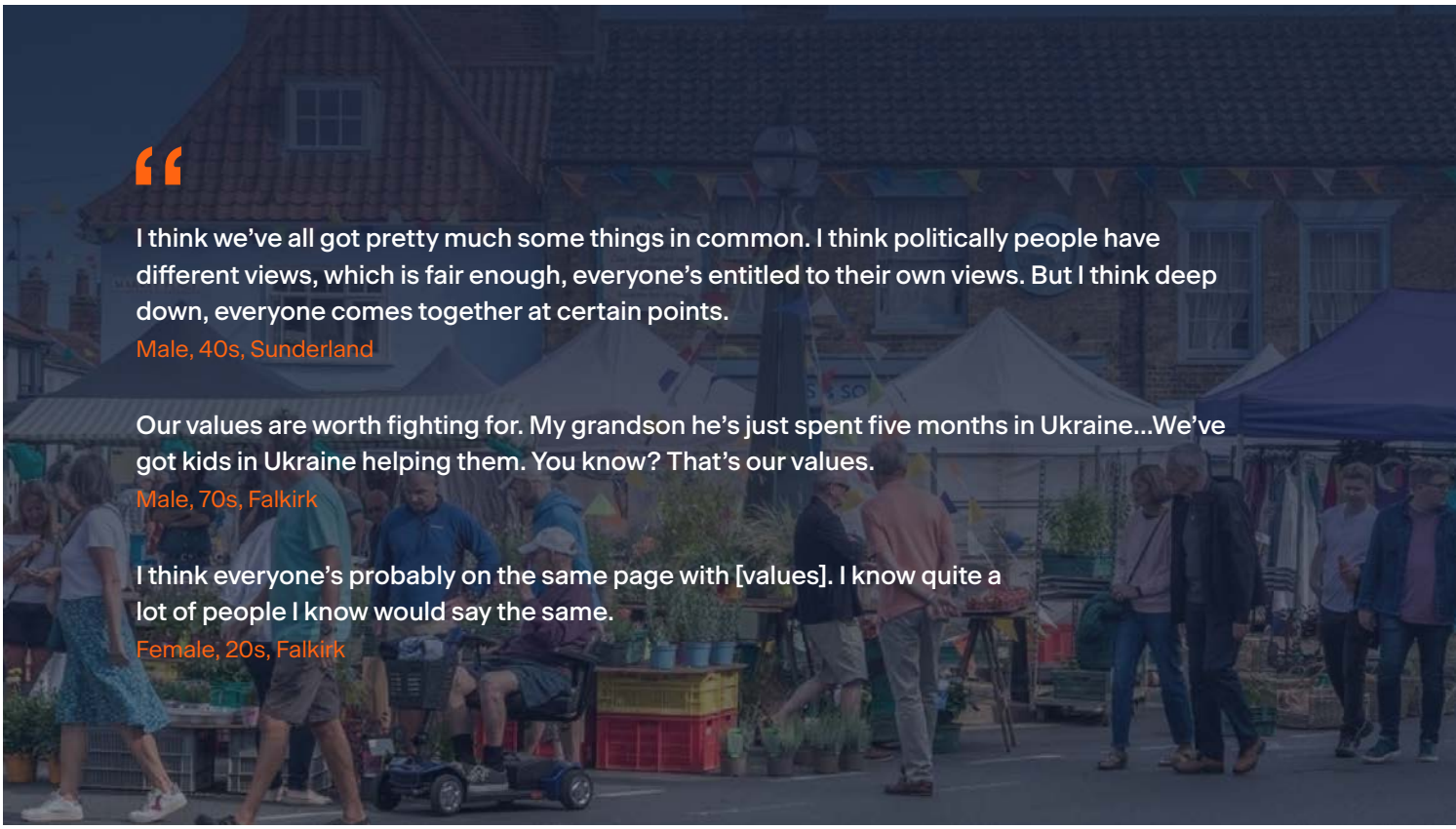
These are not abstract principles to the British public. They are the moral language through which people interpret everyday life: whether the system feels fair, whether effort is rewarded, whether neighbours still look out for one another, and whether people feel part of something bigger than themselves.

This points not to the absence of a shared British identity but to the persistence of one that is often misunderstood. Throughout our qualitative research across the country, this persistence was often expressed in grievance seeking restoration. For example, people's dismay with life feeling unfair, not feeling their hard work is rewarded and that their community fabric has declined. In this sense, pessimism and grievance were simultaneously a statement of people's sustained and deep approval of these values, rather than their insignificance.

Importantly, this is a different statement of values from formal definitions of "Fundamental British Values" or attempted articulations from political leaders in recent years. While the public may recognise principles such as democracy, the rule of law and individual liberty as important, those are not the terms in which most people instinctively describe what Britain stands for or the values they hold most dear.

Instead, when people talk about British values in their own words, they return to a more grounded moral language. These values are practical rather than abstract, rooted in everyday expectations of how people should behave, how society should work, and what people owe one another.

Crucially, the public themselves think there are shared values. Three quarters of UK adults believe that, despite our disagreements, Britain still shares a common set of values. That instinct runs across the political spectrum, from 70% of Reform-leaning voters to 83% of Labour-leaning voters.



"I think we've all got pretty much some things in common. I think politically people have different views, which is fair enough, everyone's entitled to their own views. But I think deep down, everyone comes together at certain points.
Male, 40s, Sunderland

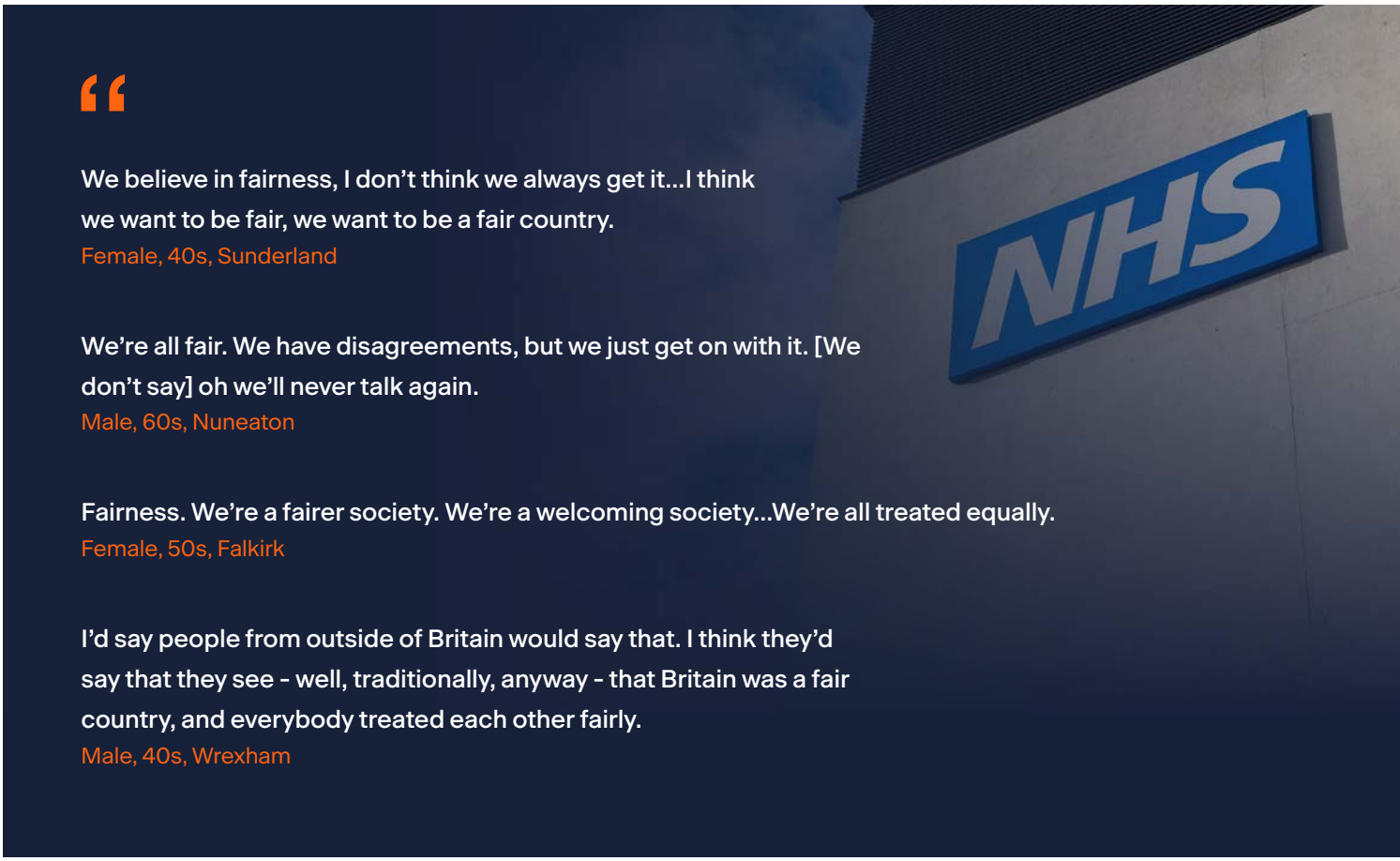
Our values are worth fighting for. My grandson he's just spent five months in Ukraine...We've got kids in Ukraine helping them. You know? That's our values.
Male, 70s, Falkirk

I think everyone's probably on the same page with [values]. I know quite a lot of people I know would say the same.
Female, 20s, Falkirk

Fairness

Fairness is the clearest and most powerful value through which people understand what it means to be British. It underpins almost every part of how people describe the country at its best, and equally how they explain what they think has gone wrong.

Polling shows that this is one of the least politically divisive parts of British identity: 72% and 75% of left- and right-leaning voters respectively say that treating everyone fairly is a British value and 63% and 64% say that everyone should have the same opportunities in life.



> We believe in fairness, I don't think we always get it...I think we want to be fair, we want to be a fair country.
> Female, 40s, Sunderland

> We're all fair. We have disagreements, but we just get on with it. [We don't say] oh we'll never talk again.
> Male, 60s, Nuneaton

> Fairness. We're a fairer society. We're a welcoming society...We're all treated equally.
> Female, 50s, Falkirk

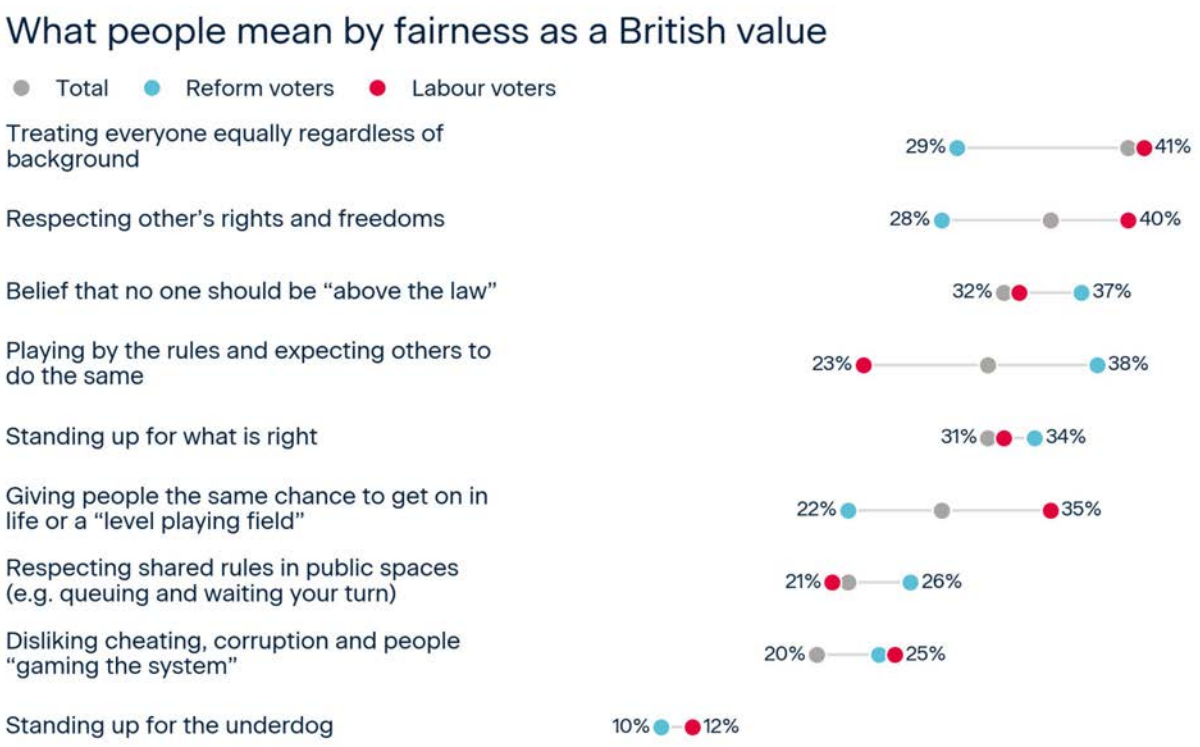
> I'd say people from outside of Britain would say that. I think they'd say that they see - well, traditionally, anyway - that Britain was a fair country, and everybody treated each other fairly.
> Male, 40s, Wrexham

Fairness is not always named outright. It appears indirectly in the examples they use people to describe British life at its best: queuing, the NHS, fair play, taking turns, treating people equally, and the expectation that everyone should abide by the same rules. The same instinct helps explain the enduring pride many people feel in the NHS, which is valued not only as a national institution but as a symbol of equal treatment, common contribution and care based on need rather than status. These references point to a deeply embedded sense of fairness which, even when not explicitly stated, underpins many of the norms, institutions and behaviours people instinctively associate with being British.

> Fairness aye...Everyone liked sport, cricket it was always about fair play.
> Male, 30s, Sunderland

> I think it's really important that healthcare is free. It's an equaliser, and it's very unfair if you can't get the healthcare you need because of money, or you have a condition. That's why I'm quite proud of the NHS.
> Woman, 30s, Manchester

There is some variation in interpretation within a broad consensus. While younger and Labour-leaning voters are more likely to emphasise equality and opportunity, older and Reform-leaning voters are more likely to stress rules and responsibility. But both instincts are rooted in the same broader moral principle: that Britain should be a country in which people are treated justly and where the rules apply fairly.



Some people say "fairness" is a British value. What do you think they mean by that? Select up to three

Where people are frustrated or angry about political issues - whether that is illegal migration, poor public services or welfare - often it is because they perceive the current situation to fly in the face of British values. Where people feel the social contract no longer works, where they perceive a particular group to being treated differently to others, they do not simply see policy failure; they see a breach of the British value of fairness.

In the same way Americans are recognised as valuing individual liberty above all else, this research suggests the same could be said of Britons and the concept of fairness.



"

I run my own business... but I know people put down here on PIP, 'anxiety', who will get £349 a week, £18,000 a year. My friend has just been made redundant. He's working as a delivery driver for minimum wage for an agency, and he makes £379. My friend is on £30 a week [more], and he's worked 40 hours getting up at six o'clock in the morning to get to work at seven. And that's wrong.
Male, 40s, Sunderland

We're not anti-immigrants but you walk the streets in Glasgow, and you see people homeless every corner and they can't even get a bed for the night...Look after your own first, then you can offer to other people.
Female, 50s, Falkirk

The people with the need should have the help.
Male, Newport West and Islwyn

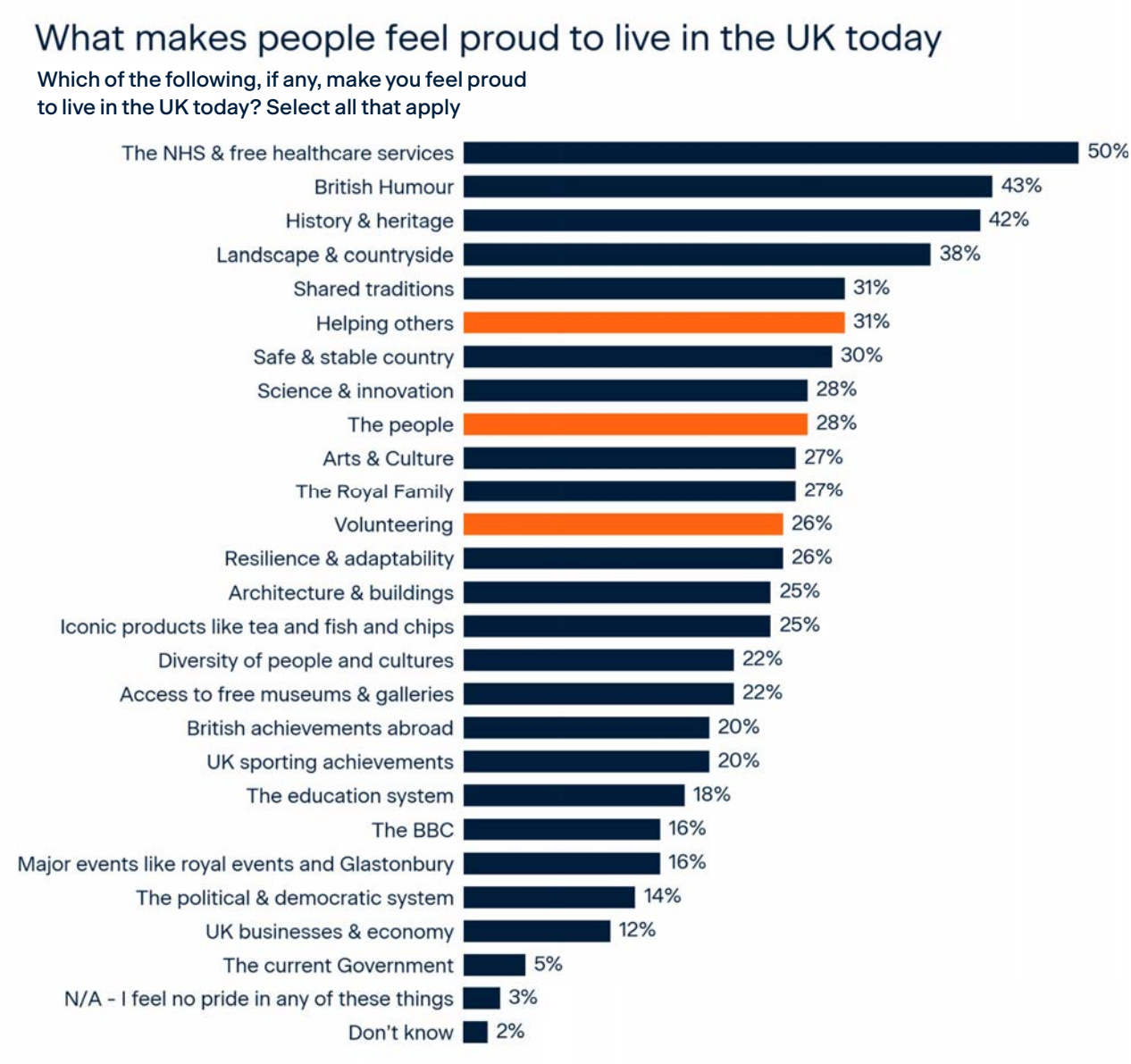
It's hard for anyone to get a job, it's hard to get housing...if you start now it's near impossible.
Female, 30s, Nuneaton



Community

The second core value is community. If fairness is the country's moral compass and hard work its character, then community is the everyday social practice through which British identity becomes visible.

Community is one of the deepest sources of pride in the UK. A third of UK adults say that the willingness of British people to help and support others in everyday life makes them proud of Britain today, while 26% say the same of volunteering and giving back to the community and 28% say 'the people'. These community traits rank ahead of tea and fish and chips, sporting achievements, the BBC, and the UK's arts and culture.





“

It’s all about coming together, in my opinion, unity. That’s British. Everybody’s willing to help each other.
Male, 30s, Wrexham

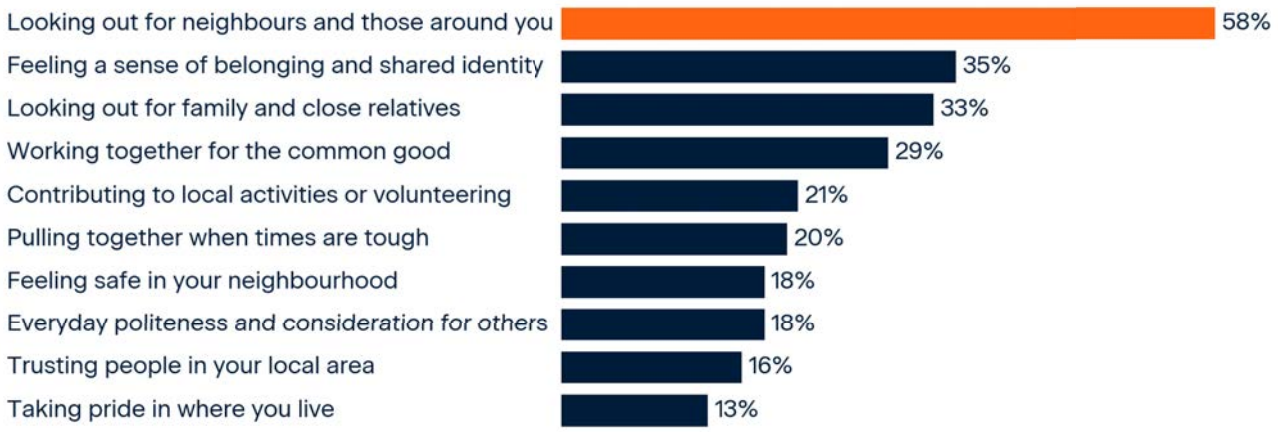
There’s a lot of working class families, particularly where I live around here...
they get on with things and stick together, you know, they just get stuck in.
Female, 50s, Sunderland

The community spirit is there. Everybody looks out and helps one another.
Female, 50s, Falkirk

In polling, 58% define community as looking out for neighbours and those around you, and 83% agree that people should do this. When people talk about community, they usually do so in tangible, practical terms: helping someone who is struggling, cleaning up the local area, checking in on neighbours, taking part in local events, and creating places where people feel they belong.

What people mean by community as a British value

Select up to three



Some people say “community” is a British value. What do you think they mean by that? Select up to three

But if community is a major source of pride, it is also one of the areas where people most strongly feel decline. Participants repeatedly described lost community centres, disappearing youth clubs, weaker neighbourly ties and a broader sense that everyone is increasingly out for themselves. What comes through is not that community no longer matters or isn't an important value, but that people feel the habits and structures that sustained it have been allowed to erode.

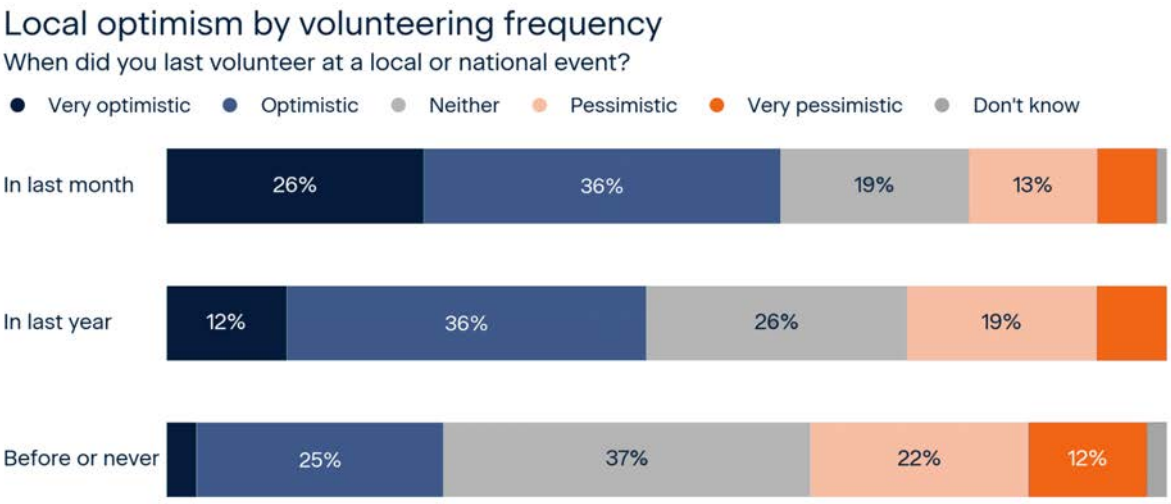
> [We're in the process of losing our] sense of community. Everyone's out for themselves at the moment, which is understandable in some ways, but people don't help other people as much.
> Male, 20s, Manchester

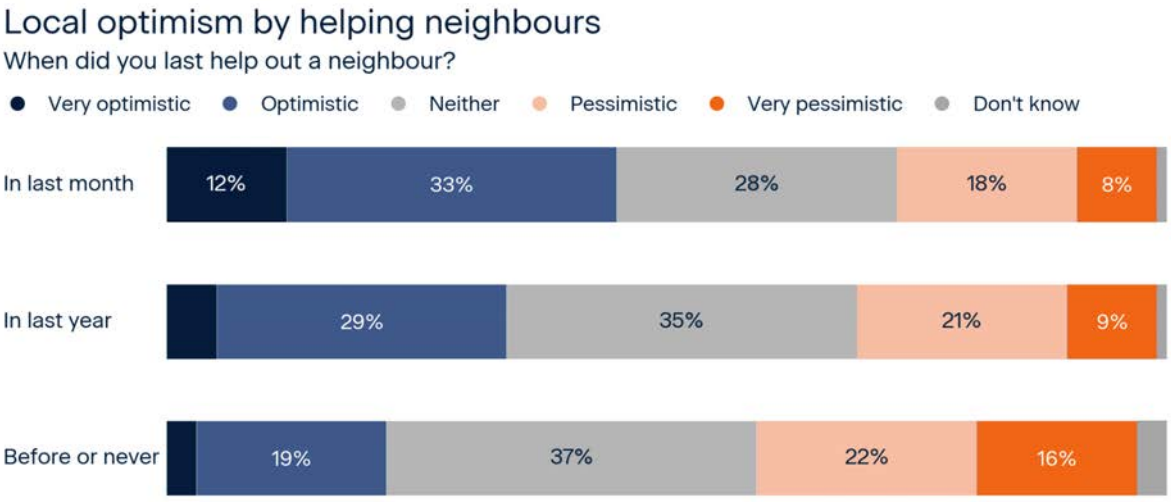
> We've lost a lot of our community centres now, so there aren't places that you can go to and the children don't have the youth clubs that used to be at our local community centre to go to.
> Female, 60s, Southampton

> [What is it about Sunderland that makes it turn out for Remembrance Sunday?] Community. Because it was a massive shipbuilding town, it was a mining town. We lost all that in the 1960s. So [Remembrance] keeps everyone together.
> Female, 60s, Sunderland



The polling shows that this matters for more than just sentiment. Community is closely tied to optimism. 62% of those who had volunteered at a local or national event in the last month felt optimistic or very optimistic about the future of their local area, compared with just 25% of those who had never volunteered. 43% of those who had helped a neighbour in the last six months felt optimistic about their local area, compared with 24% of those who had never done so. Yet these opportunities are not equally distributed: 26% of AB respondents say they have never volunteered at a local or national event, compared with 49% of DE respondents.





Community is not just a value people admire in theory. It is closely connected to whether they feel hopeful, engaged and proud in practice.

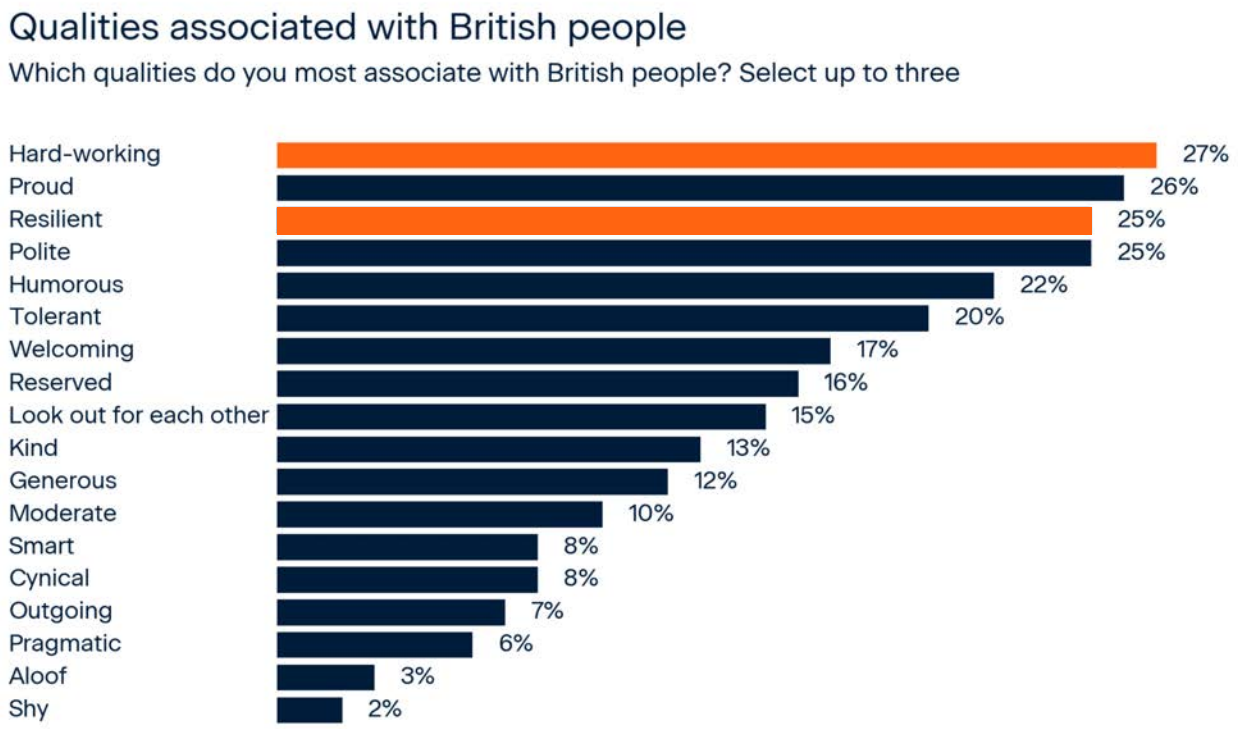
"

I do something called the Big Lunch and I've moved house recently, and I've bought it with me, and they say, ''oh, it's just like it was in the 1970s when we reigned in some other queen, and everyone was out in the streets with their tables, etc'' and I think pulling together is a sense of community spirit.
Female, 40s, Southampton

For people] who struggle financially, as soon as that's happened, people have come together. There's nothing too difficult for them...there's all these community groups cleaning up the town, the group that put all the plant pots [out].
Female, 40s, Falkirk

Hard Work

Being hard working stands out strongest when we ask people what it means to be British. In polling, it stands out as the single most common characteristic used to describe British people (27%), and 70% agree it is a core value. People spoke about hard work less in terms of ambition or career success, and more as a way of operating: a sense of duty, reliability, and doing what is required to get by.



At its core, hard work is closely tied to providing for others. More than half of respondents (52%) define it as providing for yourself or your family, followed by 33% who see it as building something for yourself rather than having it handed to you. In interviews, this often translated into everyday sacrifice - going without so that children do not have to and ensuring your household's basic needs are met despite financial pressure. Provision becomes a visible measure of responsibility, where working, paying taxes, and supporting a household are seen as central to one's role. It was primarily through the prism of strong work ethic and resilience to provide that the importance of 'family' became intertwined with values held dear.

Hard work was also closely tied to resilience, particularly among those from more traditionally working-class backgrounds. Many described it as something ingrained early in life - shaped by upbringing, local culture, and necessity - and internalised as part of who they are. Being "hard-working" was not framed as a choice so much as a marker of being a decent, responsible person. This was especially pronounced in places like the North East, where participants spoke of hard work as a defining feature of both community and identity.



Working hard for your money, paying your taxes, going to work, putting bread on the table, keeping the roof above your kid's head, keeping clothes on their back. I haven't had new clothes in years, but these two [pointing to his children] have got brand new clothes, looking after your family is a very British thing.
Male, 30s, Sunderland

Up here, it's always been instilled in me, you work hard but you expect to get a fair deal...little things like the state of our roads, I know the railways are not nationalised anymore but they're not going that well, the roads are not the best.
Male, 30s, Sunderland

I left school on the Friday, I did my paper round, I had my tea. And after I had my tea my mum told me to go down the pop factory and ask about a job. I got one driving vans. I started on the Monday. These days, the amount of kids that are bone idle. They just want to sit down and do nothing.
Male, 50s, Sunderland

Most people I know are proud of working, proud of working hard.
Male, 40s, Sunderland

Hard working, for the Northeast. I think we're hard working, we're not upper class, I wouldn't even say we're middle class...very friendly people around here, proud of their heritage.
Male, 40s, Sunderland

I'd like to say hard work, but I feel more and more through my job and just in life that that value sort of diminished.
Female, 40s, Southampton

This emphasis on hard work cuts across political and social groups, despite some variation by voting intention. For example, Reform UK voters are slightly more likely to define hard work as providing for yourself or your family (58%) compared to Labour voters (45%). Differences are more visible by income: 60% of those earning under £10,000 say working hard is a British value, rising to 72% among those earning £35,000–£49,999 and over 80% among those earning £100,000 or more. This gradient suggests that those who feel more materially secure may be more likely to see hard work as recognised, rewarded, and therefore valued.

At the same time, agreement remains high even among those not currently in work but seeking employment (71%). Rather than contradicting the income pattern, this points to the dual role hard work plays: it is both reinforced by lived experience and sustained as an aspiration. Even when people are out of the labour market, they continue to identify with the ideal of being "hard-working," reflecting its status as a socially valued trait.

Symbols of British Identity and Pride

A large majority of people continue to identify with being British (78%), and there remains a strong shared core of what British culture means in practice. The NHS (50%), humour (43%), history and heritage (42%), landscape and countryside (38%) and shared traditions like Sunday roasts (31%). These are the things people value most about British culture.

These findings suggest that there is a set of widely recognised reference points that underpin how Britishness is understood and ignites pride.

Among these, the NHS stands out as the most unifying symbol. Its importance cuts across political and social divides, with similar proportions of Reform UK (47%), Labour (46%), and Conservative (43%) voters identifying it as central to British identity. It is also particularly valued among lower-income groups (52% DE, compared to 39% AB), and increases significantly with age (38% among 18–24 year olds, rising to 61% among those aged 65+).

Despite broad agreement on democracy and free speech being a value, attitudes towards cultural differences and diversity are somewhat more complicated than this would suggest. Overall, 42% believe the country would be better off with fewer cultural differences, though this view is less common among younger people (29% of 18–24s vs. 54% of over 65s), ethnic minorities (30% vs. 44% white respondents), and Labour voters (31% vs. 68% Reform UK voters).

> I know it sounds crazy, but the NHS, when you think about the NHS, you think Britain.
> Female, 40s, Southampton
>
> Oh 100%, a million percent. Heritage, the scenery, the people, the culture...Just what we had to face. Our character in general.
> Female, 30s, Falkirk
>
> The monarchy, I'm proud of our heritage. Our King, our Queen. I'm proud of that, I'm proud that we've got that. That makes us who we are in my eyes. The history of this country when you look back from the Vikings.
> Male, 40s, Sunderland

Interestingly, those who identify as British are more likely to hold this view (44%, compared to 30% of those who do not), but are also more likely to describe British people as "welcoming" (19% vs. 11%), pointing to a more complex and sometimes contradictory relationship with diversity.

> Historically, some of Britain's roles haven't been great in colonialism and imperialism. In current times, the economy is also going downhill. We're not paving the way.
> Woman, 20s, Manchester

> Proud to be British, the history, one of the best empires...what we gave to the rest of the world; industrialisation, education, parliament.
> Male, 50s, Sunderland

Differences are also evident in levels of pride and historical interpretation. Over one in five of those who identify as British say there are aspects of the country that make them feel ashamed, rising to more than one in three among those who do not identify as British. Similarly, 66% of those who identify as British agree that the UK has a history to be proud of, compared to 16% of those who do not while 65% believe the British Empire made a positive contribution to the world, compared to 12% among non-identifiers. These views also vary politically, with stronger agreement among Reform UK voters than Labour voters.

Taken together, this suggests that while there are divides in how people relate to the country's history, diversity, and sense of pride, there is a broadly shared foundation to British identity anchored in institutions like the NHS.

Key Finding 7
Where the public feels anger at totemic public policy failings, it is often because they perceive the situation to violate British values they hold dear.

Anger and British Values

Taken together, fairness, hard work and community help explain why certain political and policy issues generate such strong public reactions. Whilst British values are not borne out of anger or grievance, they do offer an explanation as to why certain policy issues generate such public frustration.

People are not responding to welfare, migration or social breakdown in a purely technocratic way. They are interpreting them through a moral framework that is shared across the UK. These issues become especially charged when they appear to violate the values people associate with Britain.

This is particularly clear in attitudes to welfare. Most participants did not reject the principle of welfare support; many explicitly accepted that those who genuinely need it should be helped. But frustration emerged when they felt the system no longer distinguished properly between those who could not work and those who, in their view, chose not to. That frustration is powerful because it is experienced as a breach of fairness and a failure to respect hard work. In other words, a breach of British values.

Migration, and specifically illegal migration, is often understood in similar terms. In qualitative research, people frequently distinguished between migrants who come to Britain to work and contribute, which was considered fair, and those seen as arriving outside the rules which was seen as unfair. Whether or not these perceptions are accurate in practice, they are powerful because they are experienced as evidence that fairness, reciprocity and contribution are no longer being upheld.

More broadly, concerns about poor public services, benefit fraud, insecure work, the erosion of community institutions and the weakening of neighbourly ties are all understood through the same moral lens. When people talk about Britain no longer working, they are often expressing more than dissatisfaction with policy outcomes. They are expressing a deeper fear that the country is no longer living by British values.

The central lesson is that Britain's shared identity has not disappeared. It remains real, widely recognised and surprisingly consistent across groups that are otherwise politically divided. But it is increasingly experienced through loss as well as pride: the sense that fairness is weaker than it should be, that hard work is less reliably rewarded, and that community fabric is weakened. The values that unite Britain are still there. The challenge is that many people now feel they are being eroded in practice.

> "I'd be better off if I quit my job and popped out children because that's how you end up actually being able to live.
> Female, 30s, Nuneaton

> We do need migration but certainly don't need illegal people. [...] [We need to] defend our way of life, instead of worrying about being called racist every time. I'm not racist regarding colour, what I am racist about is them coming in, never ever paying a penny into the system and getting it all.
> Female, 70s, Nuneaton

> Anybody who wants to come here and work for a better life is welcome. As long as you're willing to put in the work.
> Female, 50s, Sunderland

> Defend your borders. People are coming in on a boat and it's disgusting. I can't go where I go on holiday without a passport...We've got a Royal Navy, why don't the Royal Navy go out and stop this?
> Male, 50s, Nuneaton



> I served ten years in the British Army... and now I am not even recognised. I can't even get a home. But when they come on the dinghy, they get everything.
>
> Male, 50s, Sunderland

07
Articulating British Values

Key Finding 8
These values are not borne out of anger; they resonate most across groups when articulated positively. Even unpopular or divisive political figures can articulate this unifying vision of British identity.

Despite some differences in how people might describe values such as fairness, hard work and community, it is possible to articulate those values into a description of modern Britain in a way that resonates across voter groups, providing a more positive vision of the country which emphasises that which draws us together over that which divides.

The practical implication is that political actors who want to speak credibly about British values can do so without defaulting to grievance-led rhetoric. The research shows the public does not only respond to a language of Britishness that is primarily angry, punitive or nostalgic in a narrow sense. In fact, what resonates more strongly is a language of renewal: restoring fairness, rewarding hard work, strengthening neighbourliness, protecting universal institutions, and rebuilding a sense that Britain is a country where people look out for one another. These messages do not ignore decline or frustration which as this research shows are feelings deeply held by many in the UK, but they do not begin from them. They begin instead from a positive account of what Britain at its best looks like.

In the message-testing stage, statements were shown to a representative sample of 2,007 UK adults, presented either as coming from a generic politician, from Keir Starmer or from Nigel Farage. The purpose was to test not just which values mattered, but how they could be expressed in a way that felt persuasive across otherwise divided sections of the electorate.

Fairness may be understood as equal opportunity by some and as reciprocity and rules by others. Hard work may evoke provision, resilience or personal responsibility. Community may mean neighbourliness, volunteering or a broader sense of belonging. But the message-testing shows that these differences do not prevent the construction of a shared public language.

We presented respondents with different articulations of the three values. Some were framed negatively (e.g. we cannot become a country where contribution is optional - where people expect something for nothing, whether by entering illegally or turning to benefits as a first resort) and positively (e.g. this country is at its best when neighbours look out for one another). No message tested attracted less than 60% support across framings, suggesting a broad underlying consensus with the values identified in this research but framing them positively attracted most support.

Messages that talked about British values in affirmative terms consistently outperformed those that were rooted in a sense of loss. The public responds best when British values are presented as something to uphold, rather than as a list of complaints about what has gone wrong:

Reciprocity



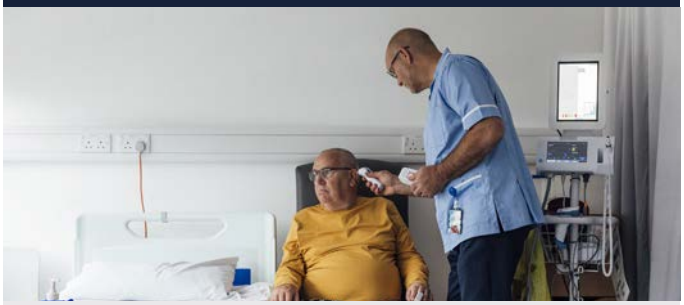
'If people work hard and contribute through taxes, the government should do its part in return. That means decent living standards, reliable public transport, shorter NHS waiting times, high-quality education, and affordable childcare'

Equality of opportunity



'In Britain, your chances in life shouldn't depend on where you start. If you're willing to put in the effort and aim high, you should be able to find good work and have a decent life.'

Universal access to public goods

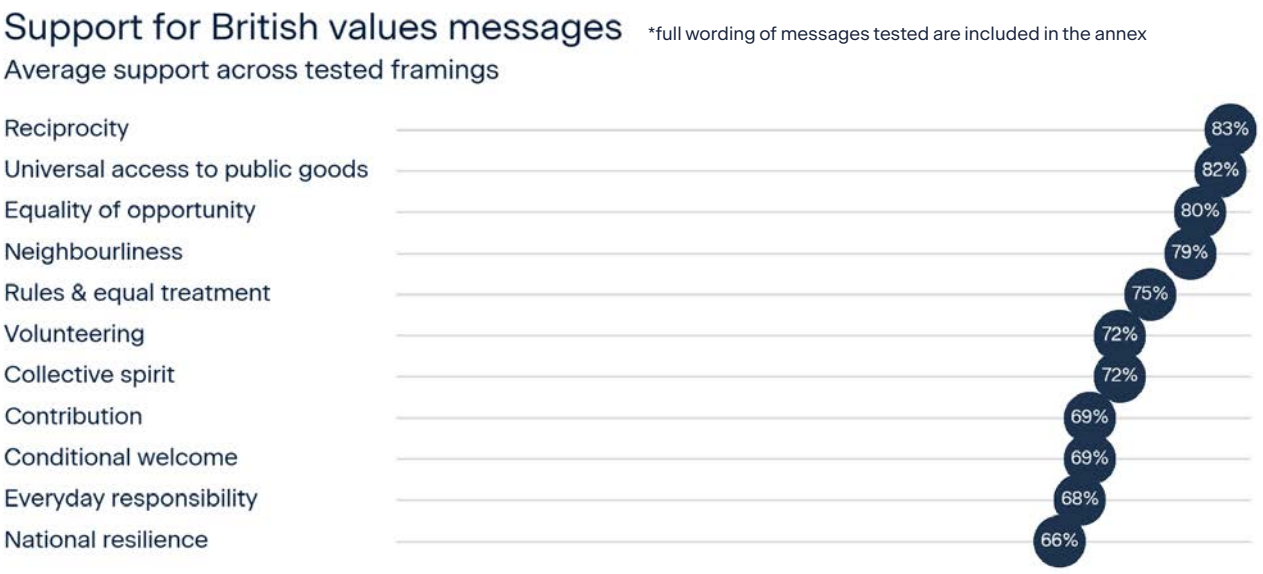


"Our society works best when everyone – no matter where they come from or what they do – can count on the basics being there. Seeing a doctor when you're sick, knowing your children are getting a good education, and feeling safe in the places you live and gather."

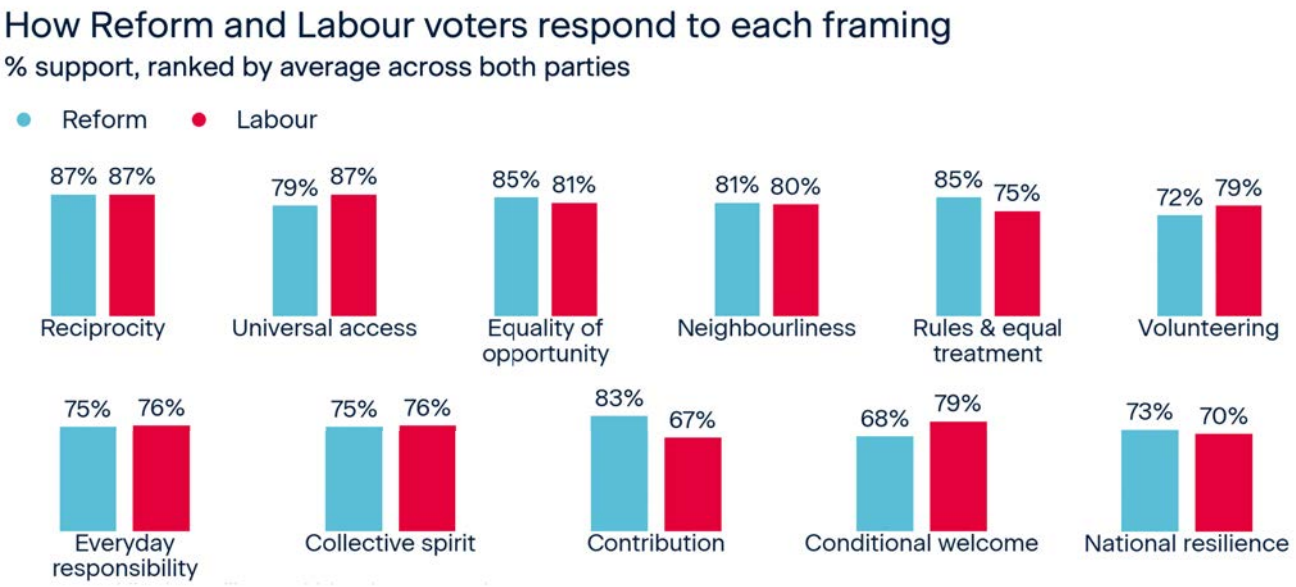
Neighbourliness



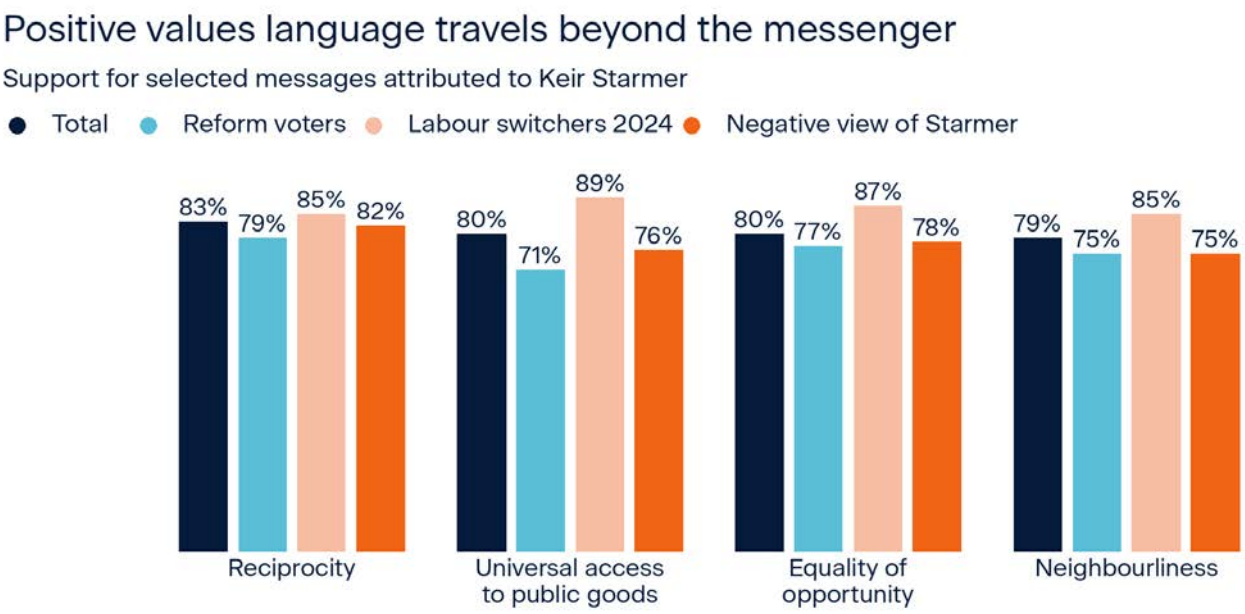
"This country is at its best when neighbours look out for one another whether that's bringing a lasagna round when someone's broken their leg, or putting the elderly neighbours' bins out."



Reciprocity and equality of opportunity remained in the top three messages for support across demographics and political groups. Neighbourliness and universal access were also frequent top-five performers across the analysis. There are some differences of emphasis. Messages centred more explicitly on rules and contribution tended to resonate slightly more strongly among Reform UK voters and older respondents. But the broader picture is still one of overlap rather than fragmentation. **Not all voters mean exactly the same thing when they talk about British values but there is enough common ground to sustain a public language that feels legitimate and familiar across divides.**



This values-language can travel beyond the messenger. Even when messages were attributed to a politician with low approval ratings - Keir Starmer - those rooted in reciprocity, equal opportunity, neighbourliness and universal access still secured high support among Reform voters, 2024 Labour switchers and Starmer sceptics. The same values also resonated when voiced by Nigel Farage, including with Labour voters. In a political environment where party brands are often highly polarising, this is an important finding. **It suggests that the content of the message can, to a meaningful degree, cut through partisan suspicion when it speaks to values people already recognise as their own.**





08
Strengthening British Values

Key Finding 09
While the British public themselves do think there is a distinct British identity, they overwhelmingly believe it is being eroded.

Key Findings 10
There is strong appetite for this process to be reversed: the British public want to feel proud of the UK again and be able to voice it.

While three quarters of Britons say that, despite our disagreements, there are shared core values in Britain, the research clearly found that people across the country also feel that those values are being eroded.

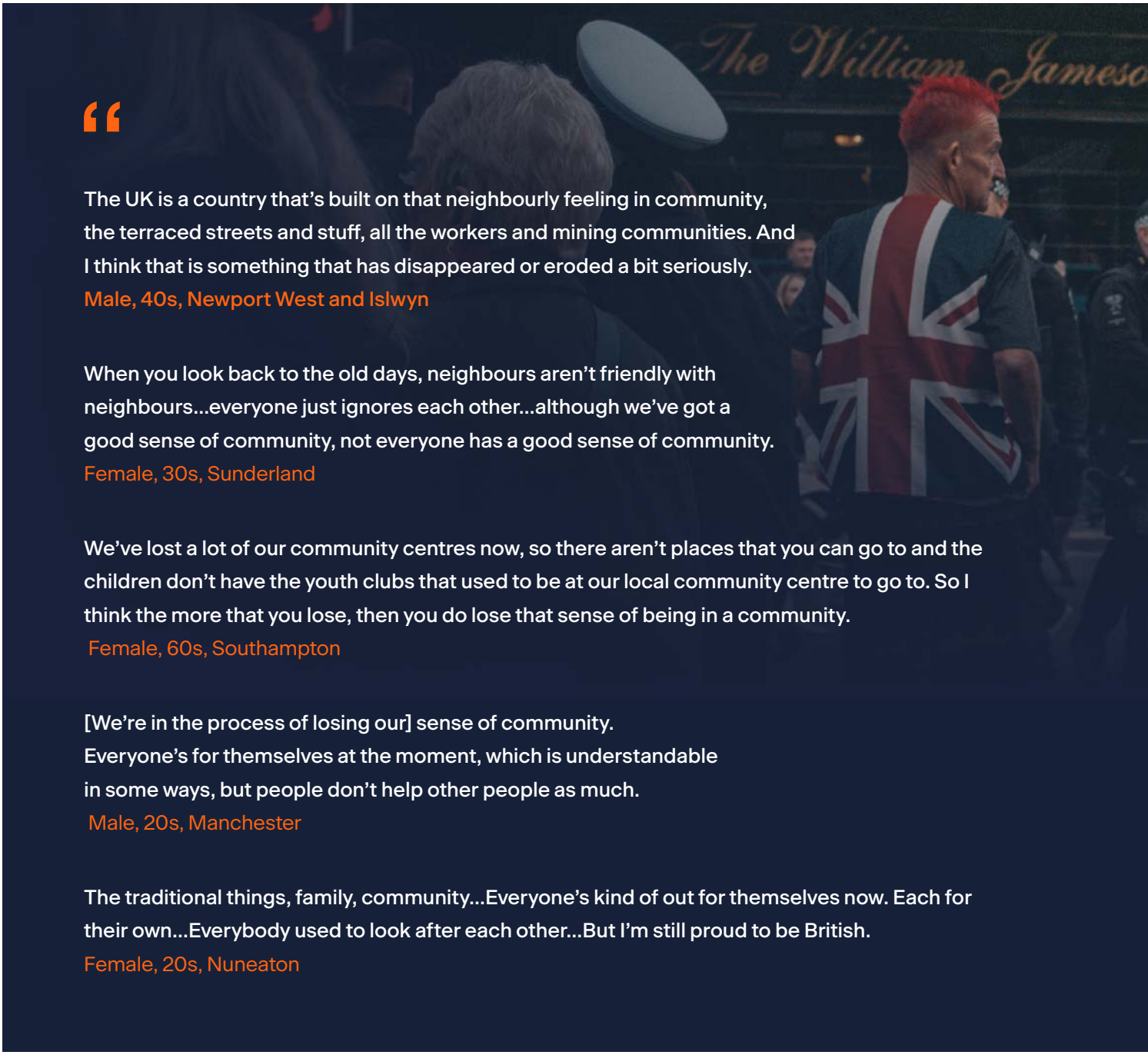
This feeling of erosion came through strongly in both the polling and the qualitative work. Participants often struggled to define national identity in simple terms, not because they believed it did not exist, but because they were unsure what shape the values they understand to be British now take in practice.

If one value stands out as being felt to have eroded most visibly, it is community. Community remains central to how people understand British identity and is also a deep source of pride as discussed earlier in this report however, people repeatedly describe community as something that has frayed. In the polling, 35% of the public says the sense of community where they live has worsened over the last five years. 40% of DE respondents say so, compared with 29% of AB respondents.

The value remains emotionally powerful and lots of people can point to examples of community spirit in their local area, but many feel that the institutions, habits and spaces that sustain it have weakened.

> I feel proud of the values we have had but I think we're very gradually eroding that.
> Female, 50s, Southampton

> I can't define a national identity. That's the problem. I think maybe that's where we are. And maybe it isn't just politics that's creating this. Maybe we just don't know what that looks like. I'd be really interested to know if someone could define it all.
> Male, 30s, Newport West and Islwyn



> The UK is a country that's built on that neighbourly feeling in community, the terraced streets and stuff, all the workers and mining communities. And I think that is something that has disappeared or eroded a bit seriously.
> Male, 40s, Newport West and Islwyn

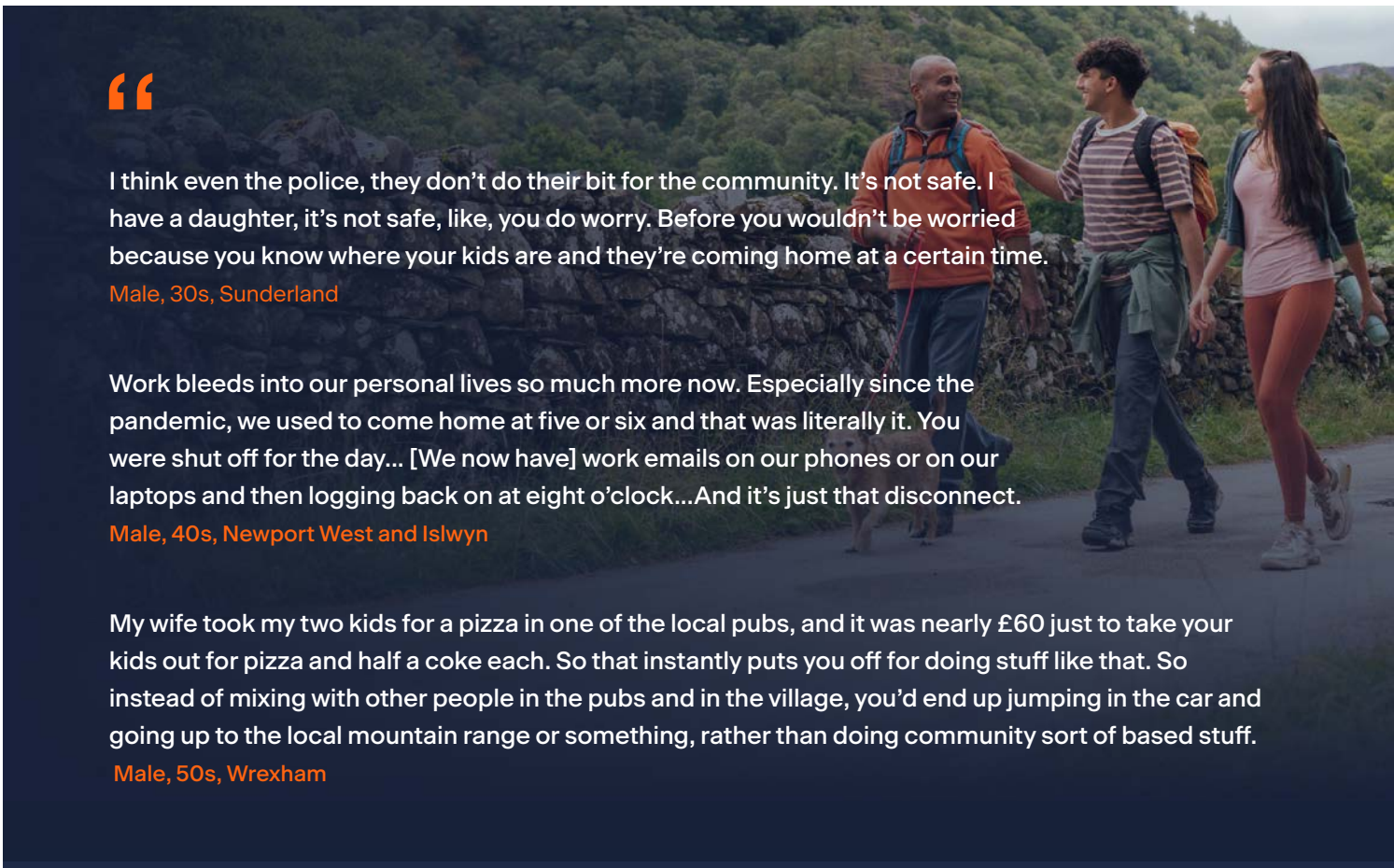
> When you look back to the old days, neighbours aren't friendly with neighbours...everyone just ignores each other...although we've got a good sense of community, not everyone has a good sense of community.
> Female, 30s, Sunderland

> We've lost a lot of our community centres now, so there aren't places that you can go to and the children don't have the youth clubs that used to be at our local community centre to go to. So I think the more that you lose, then you do lose that sense of being in a community.
> Female, 60s, Southampton

> [We're in the process of losing our] sense of community. Everyone's for themselves at the moment, which is understandable in some ways, but people don't help other people as much.
> Male, 20s, Manchester

> The traditional things, family, community...Everyone's kind of out for themselves now. Each for their own...Everybody used to look after each other...But I'm still proud to be British.
> Female, 20s, Nuneaton

Explanations for community decline tended to fall into three categories: the loss of shared social spaces and infrastructure as discussed above, concerns about public safety and a growing wariness of others and changes to everyday life meaning there is less time for community togetherness.



I think even the police, they don't do their bit for the community. It's not safe. I have a daughter, it's not safe, like, you do worry. Before you wouldn't be worried because you know where your kids are and they're coming home at a certain time.
Male, 30s, Sunderland

Work bleeds into our personal lives so much more now. Especially since the pandemic, we used to come home at five or six and that was literally it. You were shut off for the day... [We now have] work emails on our phones or on our laptops and then logging back on at eight o'clock...And it's just that disconnect.
Male, 40s, Newport West and Islwyn

My wife took my two kids for a pizza in one of the local pubs, and it was nearly £60 just to take your kids out for pizza and half a coke each. So that instantly puts you off for doing stuff like that. So instead of mixing with other people in the pubs and in the village, you'd end up jumping in the car and going up to the local mountain range or something, rather than doing community sort of based stuff.
Male, 50s, Wrexham

Throughout the research, attitudes to diversity were mixed. With inward migration being seen by some as having contributed to the erosion of their sense of community and British identity. For some people, increasing ethnic diversity in their communities had led to a sense of erosion of a shared British identity and they felt that tolerance of their own traditional views was reducing.

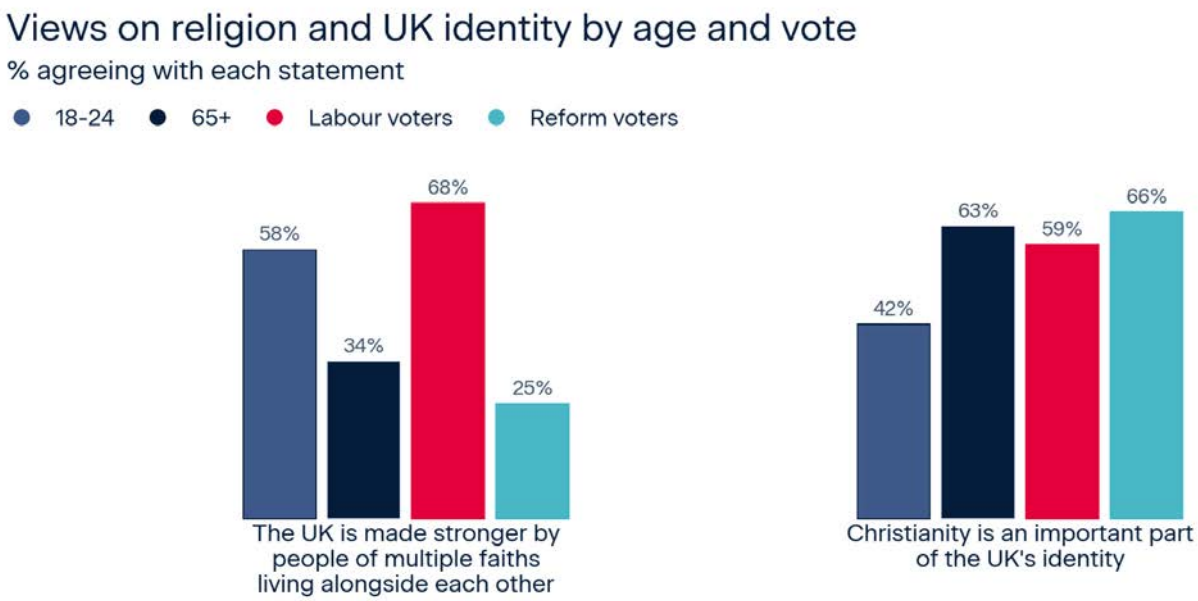
Other countries respect our tradition more than we do...They think of Great Britain but they don't know the mess we're in and that we're being taken over...we're just surrounded...
Female, 70s, Sunderland

The amount of people, the amount of houses that are getting built...and then obviously you've got lots of people coming, a lot of them through no fault of their own, a lot of people coming to the town which is growing, this creates bigger problems with the crime.
Male, 40s, Nuneaton

> [Migration] is a very contentious issue...with illegal immigration, something needs to be done about that, definitely. People are feeling very scared about things at the moment. Whether that's justified or not, I don't know. But I do feel we're having things thrust upon us at the moment, things we're not happy with... it's just chaotic.
>
> Female, 60s, Nuneaton

The divisiveness of the issue is consistent with polling results, where 1 in 2 believe immigration has had a negative impact on the UK and only 2 in 10 said that the diversity of people and cultures living together make them proud to live in the UK today, compared with 1 in 2 selecting the NHS and 31% selecting shared traditions like Sunday roasts.

Similarly, religion and the perceived erosion of the UK as a Christian country was divisive. While Reform and Labour voters agree that Christianity is an important part of the UK's identity their views differ substantially on whether the UK is made stronger by diversity of religion with 68% of Labour voters thinking it does and only 25% of Reform voters. Age is also an indicator of different attitudes on this question with nearly 60% of 18-24s agreeing with the statement compared to only 34% of over 65s.

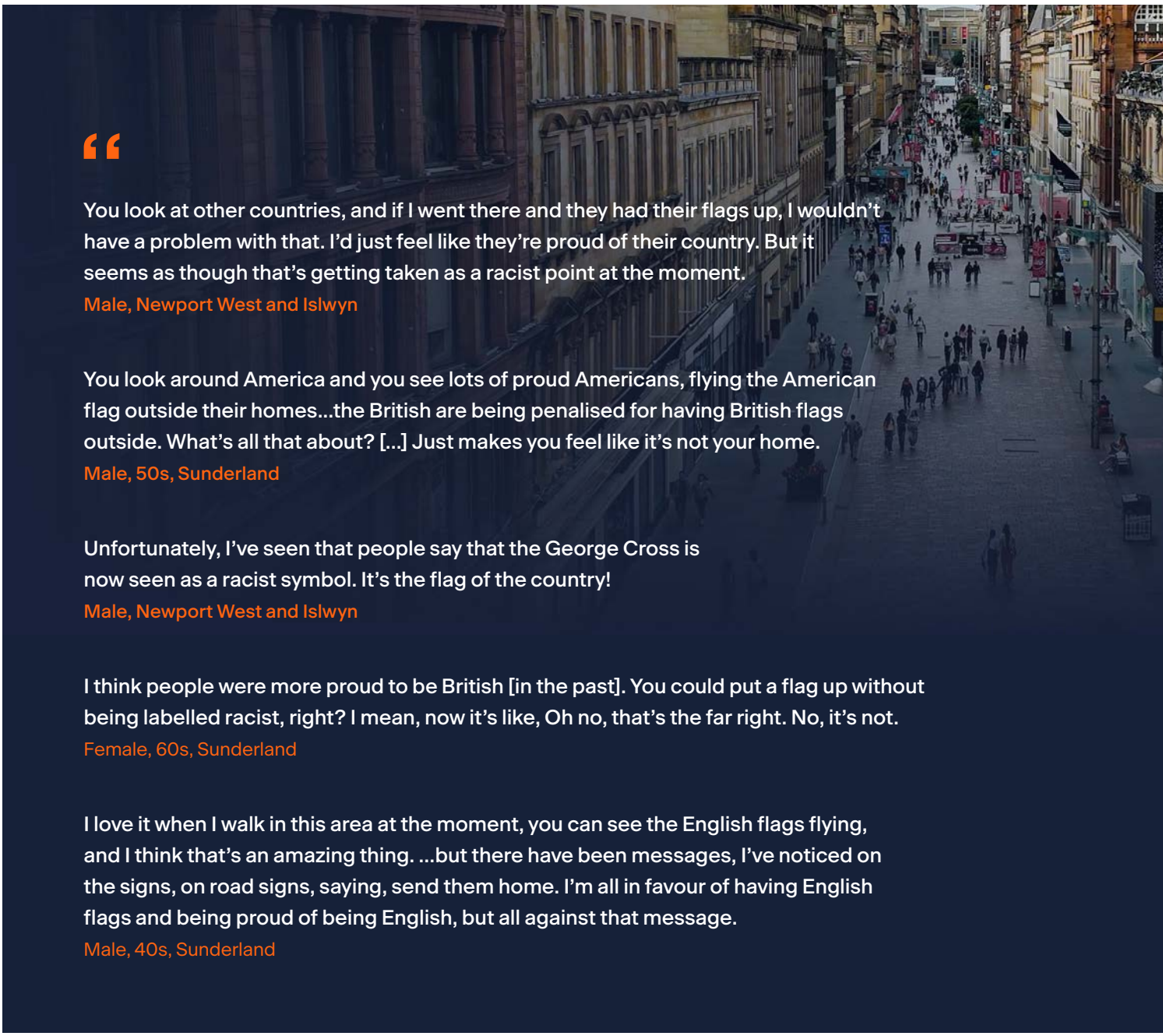


To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements?

The perceived erosion of British values is also felt closely tied to patriotism itself. Many participants do not reject the concept of having or expressing national pride. In fact, many felt an innate desire to be patriotic and take pride in the UK, but they do feel it has become harder to do so both in terms of having a country to be proud of and articulating pride in a straightforward, undivisive way.

This problem is demonstrated by the politicisation of national symbols. In the absence of a widely shared and confidently held national story, debates about British identity increasingly become concentrated around symbols like the flag. Throughout the research, this symbol represented a genuine flashpoint with people expressing conflicting feelings about the flag and what it represents, whilst others expressed frustration that it held any deeper meaning than straightforward patriotism.

For some, flying the flag represents a simple and inclusive expression of national pride, comparable to the routine display of national symbols in countries such as the United States or Canada. Hostility towards these displays was therefore interpreted as hostility towards patriotism itself, or as an attempt to delegitimise ordinary expressions of attachment to the country.



> You look at other countries, and if I went there and they had their flags up, I wouldn't have a problem with that. I'd just feel like they're proud of their country. But it seems as though that's getting taken as a racist point at the moment.
> Male, Newport West and Islwyn

> You look around America and you see lots of proud Americans, flying the American flag outside their homes...the British are being penalised for having British flags outside. What's all that about? [...] Just makes you feel like it's not your home.
> Male, 50s, Sunderland

> Unfortunately, I've seen that people say that the George Cross is now seen as a racist symbol. It's the flag of the country!
> Male, Newport West and Islwyn

> I think people were more proud to be British [in the past]. You could put a flag up without being labelled racist, right? I mean, now it's like, Oh no, that's the far right. No, it's not.
> Female, 60s, Sunderland

> I love it when I walk in this area at the moment, you can see the English flags flying, and I think that's an amazing thing. ...but there have been messages, I've noticed on the signs, on road signs, saying, send them home. I'm all in favour of having English flags and being proud of being English, but all against that message.
> Male, 40s, Sunderland

For others, however, the meaning of national symbols depended heavily on context. Displays of the flag were often viewed towards migrants or ethnic minorities. The recent prominence of flags was seen by many as evidence of politicisation, with participants suggesting that more consistent and everyday use in previous decades may have prevented them from becoming so ideologically loaded. The St George's Cross in particular was frequently associated with politicisation, leaving some people uncomfortable displaying it despite feeling positively about being British.



Patriotism is being co-opted by the right. The flag, you see a St George's Cross, you think racist or football fan.
Male, 30s, Manchester

Less [proud to be British] recently. Everywhere I drive I see British flags up, it feels like being British isn't what it stood for. It stood for equality, building up politeness, we were known for being so inclusive and welcome people with open arms...Now it feels like it's changing, it doesn't make me as proud to be British.
Male, 20s, Manchester

I don't agree with the flag being up now. I think if we didn't put them up for St George's Day, if we didn't put them up for Remembrance Day, why did they suddenly go up? Now, I know why they suddenly went up, but why didn't we do that before?
Female, 50s, Southampton

The result is that the majority of people feel caught in the middle. They want to be able to express attachment to the country but are unsure whether doing so will be read as inclusive pride or divisive politics.

Crucially, however, the public does not describe this erosion of values with indifference. It laments it. People want to feel like the UK is worthy of their innate pride in being British. They want national identity to feel less muddy, less divisive and less politically fraught. They want to see British values reflected in institutions, shared spaces and everyday life.

09 Conclusion



This research began from a simple but important question: is there still anything that meaningfully unites Britain? The answer is **yes**.

Our findings confirm that Britain is a country marked by deep political and economic fault lines. Many people feel pessimistic about the future, distrustful of politics, and anxious that the ties that once held the country together have weakened.

But beneath the divisions, there is a shared moral core: a set of values that still command broad recognition across age, class, region and political affiliation. Those values are not most naturally expressed through official definitions of "British values", but through the language and day to day experiences of fairness, hard work and community.

These values matter because they help explain both what people still feel proud of and why they are so frustrated. They are visible in the public's attachment to the NHS, in the importance placed on reciprocity, in the instinct to look out for neighbours, and in the expectation that society should reward effort and treat people decently. They also explain why anger about issues which symbolise the erosion of this social contract such as migration and welfare is often so intense. It is because many people experience these not as policy failures, but as evidence that Britain is no longer living up to its own values.

The challenge is not to invent a new national story from scratch but instead to recognise, articulate and renew the one that still exists quietly in every corner of the UK. The message-testing in this report shows that this can be done. Even in a fractured political environment, positive messages rooted in reciprocity, equal opportunity, neighbourliness and universal access resonated across voter groups, including groups that otherwise disagree sharply. British values are most powerful when they are framed not through grievance, but through a hopeful language of renewal.

Political leaders, institutions and civic actors should start building from the values that still unite the country. That means speaking in the language of fairness, recognising the national pride in hard work, rebuilding community institutions and creating more opportunities for people to participate in a shared national life. Britain's common identity has not disappeared, but it is at risk of being misunderstood and further eroded. Renewing it will require deliberate effort. The prize for doing so is significant: a more cohesive society, a less polarised politics, and a stronger, more confident sense of what Britain stands for in 2026 and beyond.

10
Annex

Messages Tested

Rules & equal treatment	"People who work hard and contribute shouldn't be worse off than those who haven't'. No one should jump the queue whether that is for the chip shop, the bar or access to services like housing and the NHS.''
Reciprocity	''If people work hard and contribute through taxes, the government should do its part in return. That means decent living standards, reliable public transport, shorter NHS waiting times, high-quality education, and affordable childcare"
Equality of opportunity	"In Britain, your chances in life shouldn't depend on where you start. If you're willing to put in the effort and aim high, you should be able to find good work and have a decent life."
Universal access to public goods	"Our society works best when everyone – no matter where they come from or what they do – can count on the basics being there. Seeing a doctor when you're sick, knowing your children are getting a good education, and feeling safe in the places you live and gather."
Conditional welcome	"Britain is proud to be an inclusive and tolerant country, welcoming people from around the world. But integration is a two-way street: opportunity comes with responsibility to work hard, contribute, and respect British values."
Everyday responsibility	"Britain is a nation of grafters- people working hard every day to put food on the table and provide for their families."
National resilience	"Britain is a nation that keeps going when times are tough, punching above its weight through hard work and resilience, and taking pride in the effort of its people"
Contribution	"We are a country built on hard working people who support themselves and their families to get ahead in life. We cannot become a country where contribution is optional - where people expect something for nothing, whether by entering illegally or turning to benefits as a first resort."
Neighbourliness	"This country is at its best when neighbours look out for one another whether that's bringing a lasagna round when someone's broken their leg, or putting the elderly neighbours' bins out."
Volunteering	"Volunteers are the backbone of our communities keeping streets clean, running youth groups, and sustaining local spaces. Supporting organisations like the local food bank, Scouts, and local sports clubs keeps that spirit alive."
Collective spirit	"Britain is a nation proud of the character and resilience of its people, of communities up and down the country who keep going when times are tough, pulling together and looking out for one another. Time and again, from the Blitz to the Covid pandemic, we have shown that our greatest strength lies in our ability to stand together."

PUBLIC FIRST