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COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTEERING

THE KEY TO A NEW SENSE OF NATIONAL OPTIMISM

WHAT PUBLIC OPINION SUGGESTS ABOUT LOCAL PRIDE,
TOGETHERNESS AND THE NATIONAL MOOD

Research by  PUBLIC FIRST

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Britain's national mood is one of pessimism.

The public is not only politically frustrated; it is emotionally pessimistic about the direction of the country. Nearly seven in ten people say things in the UK have got worse over the last five years and 65% think Britain is more divided than it used to be. On the surface, that can look like a story of drift and decline.

But from speaking to people right across the country, new research from Public First finds reason to be hopeful. Beneath the pessimism, there is still a durable, widely shared belief in community and "helping each other out" being at the heart of what it means to be British and to take pride in your local area.

Our findings suggest that a strong sense of community spirit and active engagement within communities is a key tool to increasing levels of optimism amongst the public, with those who have recently volunteered or helped out their neighbours much more likely to feel optimistic

about their local area and the UK as a whole. At the same time, there is widespread disappointment that the UK's sense of community has been eroded and continues to decline.

The implication is important. If Britain is to feel more together and more upbeat about the future, steps need to be taken actively - by civil society, government and leaders - to nurture a sense of community and togetherness and provide opportunities for people to come together. This is not peripheral to the task; it is central to it.



65%

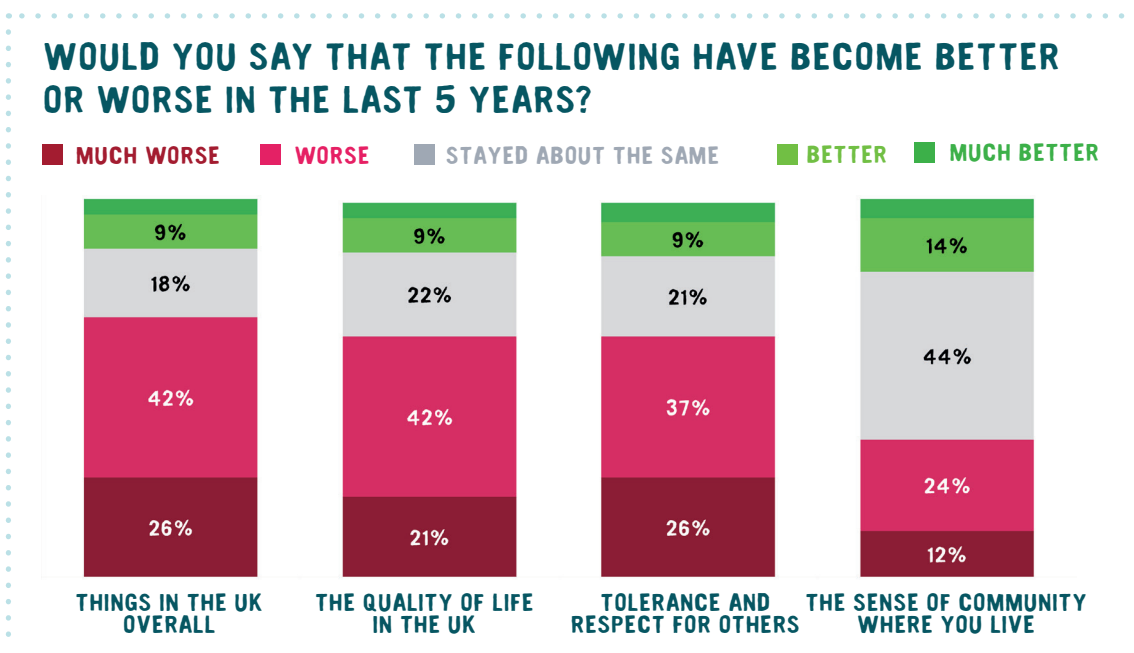
think Britain is more divided than it used to be

Public First carried out extensive public opinion research across the country to understand the values and sources of pride that are shared and can unify a British public that too often feels divided and fractious. The research found that the concept of 'community' is central to the British identity and that it can be a driver of optimism and pride. This paper sets out how that community is a route to national optimism and its implications for organisations working to improve community spirit.

BRITAIN IS CURRENTLY PESSIMISTIC

The British public feels let down by politics, sceptical about leadership, and anxious that social divisions are deepening. This is not simply frustration with one government or one party. It is a broader sense that the social contract has weakened and that Britain as a place is not working as it should.

Nearly 7 in 10 UK adults believe things in the UK overall have become worse, and only 29% are optimistic about the future of the country.

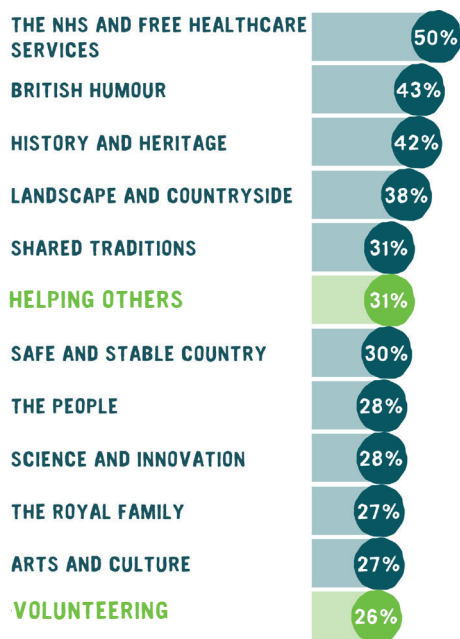


The same is true for the sense of community spirit, with 35% of people saying the sense of community has become worse in the last 5 years and 44% saying it has stayed the same. Fewer than 20% think it has got better.

BUT THERE IS REASON TO BE HOPEFUL

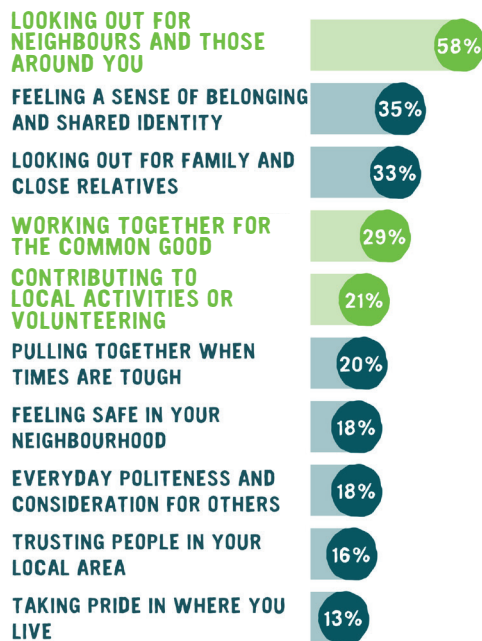
Despite the negativity, our research found that the concept of ‘community’ is central to people’s understanding of the British identity and is a deep source of pride in the UK. A third of UK adults (31%) say that “the willingness of British people to help out and support others in everyday life” is something that makes them proud of Britain today, while 26% take pride in British people’s willingness to volunteer and give back to their communities. These community traits are ahead of iconic products like tea and fish and chips, the UK’s sporting achievements, the BBC and the UK’s arts and culture.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING, IF ANY, MAKE YOU FEEL PROUD TO LIVE IN THE UK TODAY?



Note. Respondents were asked to select all that apply. Visual shows the top 12 sources of national pride.

SOME PEOPLE SAY “COMMUNITY” IS A BRITISH VALUE. WHAT DO YOU THINK THEY MEAN BY THAT?



Note. Respondents were asked to select up to three responses from the list shown.

However, when people talk about community, they do not do so in vague or sentimental terms. They describe practical acts of solidarity: helping someone who is struggling, keeping local places like parks and cafes active by going, taking part in shared events, looking after older neighbours, cleaning up the area, and creating spaces where people feel they belong.



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

“I think 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...We’re like that as a whole.”

- Female, 50s, Sunderland

“Oh, what makes us proud to be Scottish? The community, and also everyone in Scotland is funny and watches out, because I was living down south in Essex for 28 years...what a difference. The community spirit is there. Everybody looks out and helps one another.”

- Female, 50s, Bo’ness

“[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. So I think the more that you lose, then you do lose that sense of being in a community.”

- 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

Participants describe lost community centres, disappearing youth clubs, weaker neighbourly ties, and a growing feeling that everyone is increasingly out for themselves. What comes through is not a rejection of community, but grief at its erosion. People miss the institutions, habits and shared spaces that once helped hold everyday life together and this is contributing to a sense of pessimism about the UK and their local areas, albeit to a lesser extent.

VOLUNTEERING IS CLOSELY TIED TO FEELINGS OF OPTIMISM

Our findings suggest that 'community' is not just something people say they value in theory; it is closely connected to how hopeful they feel in practice. Those who have volunteered at a local or national event are more likely to be more optimistic about the future of their local area and the UK as a whole than those who have not.

Indeed, those who have recently helped out a neighbour are more optimistic about the future of their local area and the UK as a whole than those who have not done so.

62% of those who had volunteered at an event in the last month felt very optimistic (26%) or optimistic (36%) about the future of their local area, compared with only 25% (3% very) of those who had never volunteered.

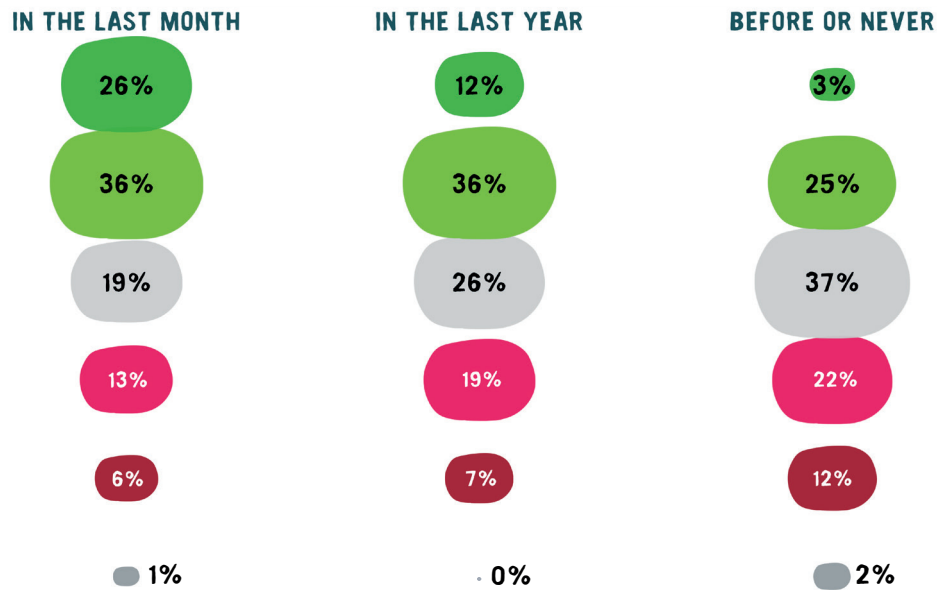
35% of those who had helped out a neighbour in the last 6 months felt optimistic about the UK as a whole, compared to 19% who had never.

The evidence suggests therefore that volunteering, neighbourliness and shared local activity do more than just deliver services or fill gaps. They can reinforce feelings of optimism about the local area and the UK as a whole. In that sense, nurturing community spirit and encouraging people to take part in community activities is not just socially beneficial; it can provide an antidote to the feelings of pessimism and divisiveness across the UK.

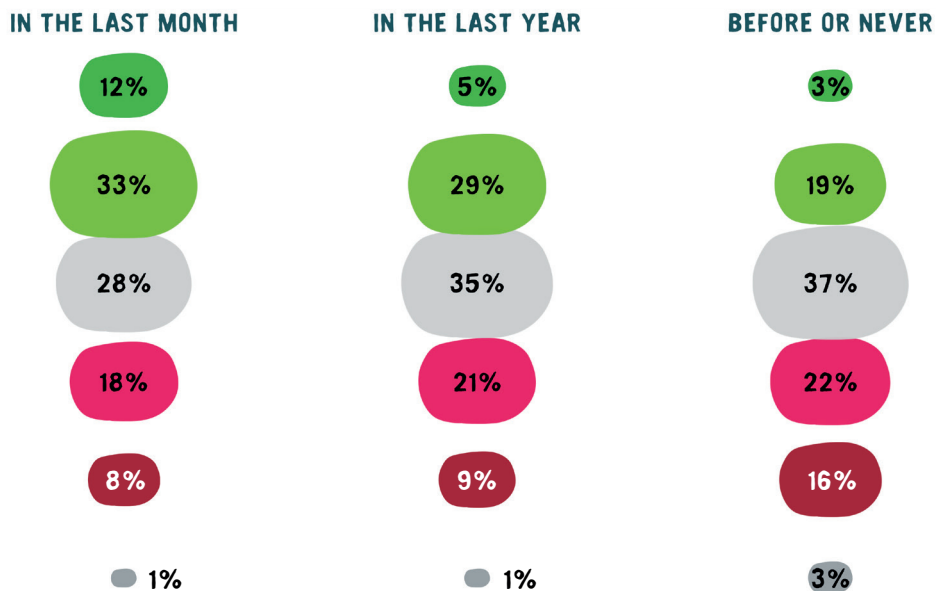
HOW OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE FUTURE OF YOUR LOCAL AREA?



...BY WHEN RESPONDENTS LAST VOLUNTEERED



...BY WHEN RESPONDENTS LAST HELPED A NEIGHBOUR



HOWEVER, OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ARE NOT EQUALLY SHARED

There is, however, an important socioeconomic disparity in the findings. Community spirit may be widely valued, but participation in some of the activities that deepen it is not evenly distributed. Around a quarter (26%) of respondents in the highest socioeconomic groups (AB) say they have never volunteered at a local or national event. Among those in the lowest socioeconomic groups, that rises to nearly half (49%).

Similarly, there is a socioeconomic divide in optimism about the communities in which people live. 40% of those in lower socioeconomic

groups (DE) say the sense of community where they live has got worse overall in the last five years, compared to 29% of AB respondents.

This matters because our findings suggest participation is linked to stronger optimism and civic pride.

Lower-income groups are more likely to be missing out on structured opportunities to translate community values into civic participation.



BRIDGING NEIGHBOURLINESS AND FORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Our findings suggest that people often respond most instinctively to the idea of neighbourliness: looking out for one another, lending a hand, checking in, helping with everyday problems. This feels immediate, familiar and recognisable. Formal volunteering is also valued, but it may sound more organised, more institutional and incurs a time or cost commitment.

Informal neighbourliness is one of the clearest ways people recognise community in action, while formal volunteering keeps many of the institutions of community that people value so highly alive, from youth groups and sports clubs to food banks and local events.



“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 and 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, Bo’ness

Findings suggest that the initiatives which bridge the two may be ideal to nurture a renewed sense of community: creating low-pressure, welcoming opportunities for people to do small acts of participation that can then grow into deeper habits of contribution. There is a need for community initiatives that support social action and civic participation with low barriers to entry, ensuring that all communities across the UK can take part. This, in turn, can help create a virtuous feedback loop of growing optimism, volunteering and neighbourliness.

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

Britain's low national mood is bound up with a deeply felt weakening of community. Yet the research shows that it still matters deeply, and that when people experience togetherness locally, they are more likely to feel pride, cohesion and optimism.

Organisations that strengthen these forms of togetherness are therefore doing something bigger than supporting good causes. They are helping restore the conditions in which optimism, pride, and social cohesion can grow again.

There are so many examples of good work across civil society - with The Big Lunch being one example highlighted by a

participant in the research explicitly - which are providing opportunities for the kind of civic engagement that leads to higher optimism - but we need more of it.

If Britain is to feel more optimistic about the future, steps need to be taken actively - by civil society, government and leaders - to nurture a sense of community and provide opportunities for people to come together.

This should be a source of hope to everyone concerned about the widespread pessimism feeding into a fractious political environment. By facilitating greater community participation, we can build a more optimistic Britain.



Research by  **PUBLIC FIRST**

This research was funded by the Pears Foundation as part of a wider project into modern British values.

Public First surveyed over 6,000 UK adults across 2 online nationally representative surveys between November and February and interviewed 246 people across the UK through immersive qualitative research in Sunderland, Manchester, Falkirk and Nuneaton. This was supplemented with 4 online focus groups in Wales and Southampton.

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council (BPC), and all quantitative work was carried out in line with the BPC's rules.