

DEMOS

# REBOOTING BRITAIN

FROM  
**RENEW NORMAL:**  
THE PEOPLE'S COMMISSION  
ON LIFE AFTER COVID-19

DECEMBER 2020

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# INTRODUCTION

Political leaders and governments risk underestimating the disruptive impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the public's opinions, expectations and preferences. Our research shows the disease and the measures taken to suppress it have triggered substantial change in public attitudes that will lead to lasting economic and social change, and should be factored into the government's response.

Attempts to return the United Kingdom to the way things were will not be successful, because it is not what the public want or what businesses will invest in. While overall the pandemic has had a negative impact on the public's health and wellbeing, and will continue to have serious consequences for our economy, it has also caused changes in the way we live our lives, and what we want from our society, that the public wants to maintain. This includes:

- the expectation of a substantial shift in patterns of working, especially in white collar sectors, to increase flexibility in terms of place and time of working
- an increase in community engagement and volunteering in our public services
- a desire for greater economic resilience against global shocks, even at the cost of higher prices or taxes



- spending substantially more of our work and leisure time online.

If governments try to use subsidies or regulatory mechanisms to return us to the systems that were in place before the pandemic, they will be pushing uphill, and will end up wasting money. Instead, governments and other political leaders need to invest in supporting the transition to a new economic and social model, and mitigating the risks or impacts of that new model. That includes:

The increased urgency of digital inclusion

- The need to adapt urban spaces and transport networks
- A new approach to planning and resilience in public services and trade
- Devolution to local areas who are better able to mobilise communities and volunteers.

A key area where opinions have been disrupted, potentially permanently, has been on inequality and the safety net our society offers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when so many people have found themselves newly reliant on state support, our research identifies a marked increase in public support both for help for those on the lowest wages and those out of work - including those without children. Our research suggests people have become more aware of inequality in our society, and there is a strong consensus that the government should do more after the pandemic than it did before: however, it is important to note that the public has long believed that inequality between rich and poor is too great. It seems likely that the pandemic has shifted people's perspectives to make measures to tackle inequality - whether through taxes, benefits or public services - more palatable to the public in the future.

Britons' expectations, preferences and ambitions for our country have been dramatically altered by the pandemic. It is vital that we build a policy approach that responds to that change.

# ABOUT RENEW NORMAL

Renew Normal is a national conversation on how the United Kingdom should change in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our goal in conducting this work was to involve as many members of the public as possible in a programme to identify the ways in which this experience has changed our lives, and what that should mean for the future of our country. After years of political division over Brexit, Demos and the Renew Normal Commissioners believed that we needed to build consensus about the future, bridging divides through a process of consultation, engagement, and collaboration.

At the core of Renew Normal has been our desire to focus on change: the change that has occurred in our daily lives, in the way we are governed, and in our attitudes to each other and the society we live in. Over the last eight months, we have worked with more than 50,000 members of the public to analyse all that change. We have sought to use a range of methods to identify, among that tidal wave of change, what has been welcome and unwelcome, what will endure and what will drift away.

Of course, many people wanted change of all sorts long before Covid-19 arrived on our shores. Campaigners of left and right, of liberal and communitarian traditions have been and will continue to argue for reform and innovation that has nothing to do with this pandemic. That is why Renew Normal has aimed to identify, and then focus exclusively on, the ways in which experience and opinion has actually changed during and as a result of the pandemic. We are looking for issues on which there is momentum for change, instead of going back to the way things were. And that momentum must have emerged from this crisis in some way.

For example: Theatres have been badly affected by this crisis: but in our analysis thus far, no-one is arguing the industry should change dramatically.



Public ambition is to get it back to 'normal'. So we have not looked at that sector. Tax avoidance is an area where, in other Demos work, we have shown the public would like to see change in government policy. But that has not been provoked by this crisis. So we have not looked at tax avoidance.

By contrast, inequality has been badly affected by this crisis, and our research suggests people want to see a new settlement rather than returning to the old one. Therefore we are looking in depth at inequality.

This focus on where opinion and expectation have changed during the crisis enables us to understand how the fortunes of a range of political movements will be affected by the shifted landscape of public opinion.

### **DIVIDED AND ANXIOUS: FINDINGS OF THE FIRST STAGES**

The first report of Renew Normal, Britain Under Lockdown, chronicled the lives of citizens during the first and most intense period of restrictions. It brought together stories and statistics about the change we lived through: demonstrating the extraordinary divergence of individuals' experiences, from freedom to deep trauma. It became clear that early suggestions that lockdown would be a great leveller in society were simply false.

And yet the research confirmed the scale of change and innovation that people had experienced. Some were far better off, some far worse off. Some were eating better, some worse. Over half (56%) of respondents said that they had learned to use some new technology that they did not use at all before the start of the pandemic.

Britain Under Lockdown also identified the extent to which Covid-19 was changing opinions, as well as lives. Thousands of people told us what they had learned, or changed their minds about, during the crisis.

*"We need to recognise the value of front line healthcare workers, carers, delivery drivers all those that kept the country going during the crises because they were deemed key workers and pay them accordingly."*

#### **Woman, 50s, East Midlands**

*"Working from home, even to manage a team spread across their own homes, has been fantastic. The team feels closer as individuals, productivity has increased, work-life balance is far better and if we could work like this forever (and if I can make it so we will) once the world is back to normal then everybody in the team*

*would be happier."*

#### **Man, 30s, North East England**

*"We as a family have always been family orientated but this experience has cemented this even more. We have found walks around the corner from our home we didn't know were there. We have enjoyed playing board games as a family and we have so missed our extended family. I hope the rest of the nation has also experienced the more simple pleasures in life and that life will continue with these principles in mind."*

#### **Woman, 30s, West Midlands**

*"That life is never stable and what we believed to be normal has now changed into what feels like a dystopian novel."*

#### **Woman, 70s South West England**

*"[I have learned] I no longer have trust in the elected government to make the right decisions for the country as I feel their motives are not driven by public health."*

#### **Woman, 50s, Yorkshire & Humberside**

The second report, entitled **What Next? Priorities for Britain**, quantified these changes across the public with a large-scale nationally representative poll. It confirmed that overall, Covid-19 has had a net negative impact on a range of factors in people's lives, from job security to mental health, but a substantial minority reported positive impacts on every topic. There were also some areas where people were more likely to report improvements to their lives: connection to their local community, to friends and family and – for parents – relationships with children.

Middle class people were by far the most likely to report upsides from this crisis. For example, 22% of those on incomes of less than £20,000 felt their spending habits had improved, rising to 37% of those on incomes of more than £50,000. More than a third of those in social grade A said they felt happier, compared to just 18% of those in grade E. We also found that people perceive themselves to now put greater importance on a range of issues, including green space, self-sufficiency, and air pollution.

This report identified that Covid-19 had created sharp social fractures between groups who take a different view about the appropriate personal or policy response. Our findings showed that the social divide on the key questions associated with Covid-19 – such as mask wearing or lockdown

rules – ran deeper than the divide over Brexit. This is a serious alarm bell for Demos, and our mission to bring a divided country together. Gone was the sense of national solidarity that had been identified by researchers in the early days of the pandemic. A combination of fatigue, intolerance, and poor communications had contributed to the resurgence of national division about how to manage the future.

The goal of Renew Normal remains to identify a policy programme that can counteract this, and bring the country together around a shared vision of the future. To enable us to do that, we identified the eight areas where there was clear evidence of a shift in public opinion and new momentum for change.

#### **Our daily lives**

Community networks and volunteering - there has been a substantial shift in people's experiences during lockdown, there is new infrastructure in place, and the public reported a strong desire to see more volunteering in the future.

Green spaces - this topped the poll when it comes to a shift in what people value most. There may be an opportunity to improve access for all, and this should see improvements in wellbeing and mental health.

#### **Our working lives**

Where we work - the shift to more widespread home working has been one of the most obvious and dramatic changes during the pandemic. It has huge knock-on consequences for town and city centre economies. And our survey demonstrated there is substantial appetite for lasting change.

National resilience - our survey showed that the issue of Britain's ability to be self-sufficient for essential goods and services is of huge importance to the public in the light of the pandemic, and its salience has substantially increased.

#### **The social contract**

Low paid workers - The pandemic demonstrated to many people the importance of low paid workers in our economy, and while there is some sign of regression, there is nevertheless a substantial number of people who believe their change of heart will be long lasting.

Inequalities - Our survey suggested a small, but meaningful increase in the number of people who are concerned about a range of inequalities including on health, race, and education.

#### **Life online**

Fake news and misinformation - Our survey reported

a substantial shift in public attitudes about the importance of this issue, which is becoming even more salient as vaccines become available. This may open new areas of public policy debate.

Living online - This is an area where people's habits changed very dramatically, and there is clear evidence that people will not shift fully back to the way things were. We will explore public attitudes to the implications of this shift.

# HOPE RENEWED: LATEST FINDINGS

Throughout this process, it has often been challenging for researchers, members of the public, and the experts with whom we have engaged, to get a clear fix on what they wanted for the future. There has been so much uncertainty about if or when we would ever be able to remove the restrictions that have so upended people's lives, and what shape our economy would be in when that time comes.

The news at the end of November that a range of effective vaccines will soon be available against Covid-19 has changed this. While we still face substantial uncertainty, we can look forward with relative confidence to 2021. It seems likely that most restrictions will be lifted, at least within the UK, within the first half of the year.

That does not mean we are out of the woods. As Chancellor Rishi Sunak set out in the Spending Review on 25 November, much of the economic impact of the pandemic is yet to be felt. The months ahead will be difficult from a social, economic, and health perspective, not least for those separated from loved ones, facing the loss of their job or livelihood, or suffering from the growing backlog in non-Covid related healthcare treatments.

Nevertheless, we decided to conduct an additional wave of research to capture the mood of the nation at this moment when hope for the future has been partially restored. This section of the report outlines the findings of a nationally representative poll conducted soon after the first news of the vaccine reached us. It asked people to reflect - now that they



could see light at the end of the tunnel - on what kind of landscape they wanted to emerge into.

We have identified three themes in responses to this survey.

- First: confirmation that this year has had a huge disruptive impact on people's opinions and expectations about the future, both for their personal lives and for society as a whole.
- Second: people understand how enormous the impact of Covid has been on the public finances, the relationship between the citizen and the state. They expect this to lead to change.
- Third: a clear majority want to see major shifts in the way we live in the United Kingdom, though this is not overwhelming, and governments will have to work hard to identify a unifying policy programme.

Our work to identify that policy programme, focused on the eight domains set out above, continues. The final report of Renew Normal will be published in January 2021.

## CLEAR EVIDENCE OF A DISRUPTIVE IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S OPINIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Events of this scale shape identities, values, opinions and lives. Secretary of State Matt Hancock, announcing news of a vaccine, argued that this was a "day to remember in a year to forget." It

may be a clever rhetorical flourish but it is essential to recognise that this cannot and should not be forgotten. Expectations and preferences of millions of individuals have changed, and this will have profound impacts and consequences as those altered perspectives and choices feed into our economy, society and politics.

The evidence collected by Renew Normal suggests that far more people have altered their opinion about big issues than in a normal year. However, this includes people who have reinforced their views as well as those who have reversed them.

We asked people to tell us if they had changed their mind or reinforced their views on a number of topics: what's important in their life, what's important in society, how we should run the economy, and how we should run public services.

On all domains, people were about twice as likely - or more - to have reinforced their views than to have changed their minds. Nevertheless, we believe this still backs up our hypothesis that the Covid-19 pandemic will have a long lasting disruptive impact on public preferences and political choices. First: people who have doubled-down on their beliefs as a result of this pandemic are more likely to change their actions or political choices because of the new found strength of their opinions. They could be mobilised as activists or make different choices about how they spend their work or leisure time.

	What's important in my life	What's important in society	How we should run the economy	How we should run public services
Reinforced my views	55%	51%	42%	44%
Changed my mind	21%	20%	22%	24%
Neither	22%	26%	27%	24%
Don't know	2%	3%	9%	7%

Secondly, it's vital to recognise that it is genuinely unusual for 20-24% of the population to change their minds about big issues quickly. Shifts in public opinion about matters like homosexuality, climate change and the welfare state tend to be largely as a result of generational changes, as those on one side of the debate die and are replaced by a generation with different views. We have seen what many consider a big change in public opinion about climate change over the last five years: Ipsos Mori polling found 85% concerned about climate change in 2019, compared to just 60% in 2013.<sup>1</sup> But that's a 25 percentage point change over six years, not six months.

### PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE HUGE IMPACT OF COVID ON THE STATE AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS WITH CITIZENS

After the pandemic, about 60% of the public expect people to demand more of government and be more reliant on it. Only 1 in 10 thought change would go in the other direction. However, the great challenge is that Covid-19 seems to have reduced trust in those very government institutions on which we many find ourselves relying. Half of us forecast reduced trust in government, while only 22% expect it to increase. There is far greater confidence in local community organisations (60% confident, 29% not) and local government (51% confident, 44% not) than central government (42% confident, 51% not) to deliver a good service after the pandemic.

We have seen in earlier stages of Renew Normal that it is improvements in local connection, community trust and family relationships that have been the most positive impacts of the crisis. People expect these changes to last. People predict we will be:

- Kinder (48% more, 14% less)
- More connected with families (55% more, 10% less)
- More connected with communities (49% more, 14% less).

However, people also predict a range of negative changes in the future. We expect to be:

- More angry about the way the country works

(48% more vs 16% less)

- Less happy about the way the country works (42% less vs 19% more)
- Less well off (63% less, 14% more)
- Less mentally healthy (51% less, 21% more).

It is important to acknowledge that this evidence is not a direct forecast of what will happen. In general, the public tends to be more optimistic about their own prospects than that of their community, with the nation's prospects coming last. This Optimism Gap, identified in 1998 by David Whitman,<sup>2</sup> has been seen in a range of Demos research over the years, including our own Optimism Project in 2018. Nevertheless, public expectations can have a substantial impact on individual choices and confidence, and should be of interest to policy makers. An expectation of challenging times ahead is likely to increase public willingness to accept even disruptive policy change where this is seen to be to the benefit of society.

### A CLEAR MAJORITY WANT TO SEE BIG CHANGES TO THE WAY THE COUNTRY WORKS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

It is clear that many of the impacts of Covid-19 are unstoppable. The Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that the pandemic will have caused our economy to shrink 11 per cent this year – the largest drop in over 300 years. The economy will not recover to its pre-virus level until the end of 2022. Support for public services, households and businesses will have cost £280 billion this year, pushing the deficit to £394 billion, and debt above 100 per cent of GDP for the first time since 1960.<sup>3</sup> The Resolution Foundation predicts this will have a sustained impact on household finances, too: overall Household incomes are on course to grow by just 10 per cent in the 15 years since the start of the financial crisis in 2008, compared to the 40 per cent growth seen in the 15 years running up to the crisis.<sup>4</sup>

This context will make it challenging, to say the least, for any government to meet the aspirations of the country for its future. Nevertheless, it is important

to articulate what those aspirations are, to inform the strategic approach our governments take as they seek to rebuild prosperity after the pandemic. The evidence from Renew Normal is that, as the economy is built back, the public want to see a greater emphasis on levelling up between citizens, as well as places, a more generous social security system, and more flexibility in the workplace.

Of course, many people wanted these things before the pandemic. Our work suggests that, for each of the issues set out below:

- About 50% of those who want change believe the pandemic has reinforced their views about how important that change is
- About 25% of those who want change say this is an issue on which they've changed their mind as a result of the pandemic.

As set out above, this combination of stronger feelings among existing advocates and a cohort of new advocates, may be enough to trigger a shift in the political logic of pursuing these policy goals.

The changes for which there seems to be greatest enthusiasm are:

#### Better pay for the low paid

Seven in ten (71%) would be willing to pay higher taxes and prices to provide better pay and conditions for low paid workers. This appears to be a shift from pre-pandemic research: in February 2019 Survation found 64% of the public believed all public sector workers should be uplifted to the real Living Wage.<sup>5</sup> Our question asked the public to accept a substantial trade-off - higher taxes and prices - and yet still found a substantially higher proportion of the public were willing to support this change.

#### A more generous welfare system

A clear majority (57%) want benefits for the unemployed and low paid to be more generous after the pandemic than they were before. Ahead of a substantial expected rise in unemployment, this appears to be a major shift in attitudes in particular with respect to out of work benefits. The British Social Attitudes Survey 35<sup>6</sup> reported that only 20% of the public wanted higher benefits for the

unemployed, and 31% wanted wages topped up for low income couples without children. BSA reported much higher support for benefits for couples with children and lone parents (58% and 70% respectively) but our survey did not rely on reference to children to secure support for increased benefits.

#### More remote working

The majority (51%) of those who can work from home want to do so more often than they did before the pandemic. This has been a major work stream as part of Demos' Renew Normal commission, and this evidence supports our view that home-working will stay substantially higher than it was pre-pandemic, even after restrictions are removed.

#### Greater effort to address inequality

In our survey, 53% said they wanted to see more done to tackle age inequality than before the pandemic. 49% wanted to see improved efforts to tackle inequalities between ethnic groups, and 57% wanted to see more done to tackle wealth inequality. It appears from other evidence that this is in part because inequalities have become more visible and apparent to people: Opinium reported that 39% believe that inequality is worse in Britain than they realised pre-pandemic.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to observe that there has long been an overwhelming consensus in the UK that the gap between those on low and high incomes is too large: BSA 36 in 2019 reported that 78% are of this opinion.

#### Increased government spending

As noted above, government expenditure has expanded enormously during the pandemic in order to provide support to people, businesses, and public services at a time of crisis. There is now a debate to be had about the extent to which government should continue to support the economy if we go into an extended recession. Here, the evidence is clear that only a small minority of 15% want spending to be reduced. 26% say government should maintain spending while 47% say government should spend more. This is in marked contrast to public attitudes in 2010, where 60% of voters viewed spending cuts as unavoidable for the Coalition government.<sup>8</sup> Other work by Demos suggests the public on balance supports increasing taxation in order to pay for this

1 Skinner, G. Concern about climate change reaches record levels with half now 'very concerned'. 2019. Ipsos MORI. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/concern-about-climate-change-reaches-record-levels-half-now-very-concerned> Access Date: 7th December 2020

2 D Whitman, The Optimism Gap: The I'm ok – they're not syndrome and the myth of American decline (New York: Walker and Company, 1998)

3 Office for Budget Responsibility. Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2020. 2020. OBR. Available at: <https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-november-2020/> Access Date: 7th December 2020

4 Resolution Foundation. Covid crisis prolongs Britain's 15-year living standards squeeze and leaves austerity in place for many public services. 2020. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/covid-crisis-prolongs-britains-15-year-living-standards-squeeze-and-leaves-austerity-in-place-for-many-public-services/> Access Date: 7th December 2020

5 Living Wage Foundation. Low Pay Spotlight: Public Sector. 2020. Available at: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/news/low-pay-spotlight-public-sector> Access Date: 7th December 2020

6 Phillips, D., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Perry, J. (eds.) (2018), British Social Attitudes: The 35th Report, London: The National Centre for Social Research. Available at: [https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35\\_full-report.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35_full-report.pdf) Access Date: 7th December 2020

7 Compassion in Politics. Over one in three adults admit inequality in Britain is worse than they thought pre-Covid. 2020. Available at: <https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/inequalityworse> Access date: 7th December 2020

8 Wells, A. 'Unavoidable cuts'? 2010. YouGov. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2010/10/19/unavoidable-cuts-story> Access Date: 7th December 2020

spending, though the consensus is that those tax rises would be best timed once the economy has recovered more fully.

When it comes to spending and investment, our survey suggested the priorities are:

- More and better maintained green spaces (74% support)
- Community activities and engagement (67% support)
- Getting the digitally excluded online (59% support)
- Digital infrastructure such as broadband (54% support)
- Planning for future disasters - even if there is a chance the disasters never come and that money is wasted (52% support).

# NEXT STEPS

Demos will publish the final findings of the Renew Normal process in January. It will include final policy recommendations for an agenda that will draw Britain back together in 2021 and beyond.

There is still time to get involved. You can email your ideas for how the UK should change after Covid-19 to [renewnormal@demos.co.uk](mailto:renewnormal@demos.co.uk), or you can contribute on our website at [renewnormal.co.uk](http://renewnormal.co.uk).

There you will find a range of Polis surveys where you can contribute your opinions on a range of ideas and value statements on each of our core research topics, including ideas submitted by other members of the public. You'll also find all our previous research and data.

## HOW POLIS WORKS AND WHY WE USE IT

Demos has pioneered the use of Polis, an online tool which allows respondents to interact with each other constructively: mapping out the lay of the land (with regard to opinion on a given subject), identifying attributes that define and differentiate between different clusters of opinion, and crucially, highlighting areas of consensus between otherwise disparate attitudinal groups.

Polis conducts a 'cluster analysis' of results to understand not just the average view, but whether there are distinct clusters of opinion. The Polis algorithm uses machine learning to analyse all votes on all statements. Then, it generates an opinion 'landscape' in which people with similar sets of responses are clustered near each other. The number of clusters depends on the results, and is not predetermined.



# DEMOS

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At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

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