

DEMOS

TRUSTWATCH 2024

A PLAYBOOK TO REBUILD
TRUST IN POLITICS

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. This report is part of Demos's work focusing on building a ***Collaborative Democracy***, which enables politicians, experts and citizens to work in partnership to tackle the challenges facing our country. By creating this new political environment, we can develop policies that work better for people, strengthen citizenry, and improve trust in the political system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trust in Britain's system of government is at a record low¹ and the relationship between politicians and the public feels increasingly fragile. Some 45% of the public 'almost never' trust governments of any party to put the nation's interests above their party's, while 58% 'almost never' trust politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner.² This lack of political trust threatens to thwart the government's ambitions for a "decade of national renewal" but also weaken the very functioning of our democracy. In this context, this report sets out to better understand the current state of political trust among the public, to diagnose what is going wrong, and to develop a playbook to rebuild political trust.

Trustwatch 2024 is a research project that Demos ran throughout the course of the recent general election campaign - when politics is most in the public's consciousness. At the centre of the project is our Trustwatch panel, comprised of 32 members of the public from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic groups, ages, political perspectives, and parts of the UK. Before, during and after the election campaign, we asked our panellists about their experiences of what builds and damages their political trust, and asked for their thoughts on key moments in the election campaign as they happened. These rich insights, along with original polling, engagement with secondary literature, and conversations with research and policy experts, have helped us diagnose six key drivers of low trust and build a series of strategies and recommendations that present a better way forward.

In this report, we argue that the government's current response to low trust is far too narrow to build the broader, more resilient form of political trust it needs to command the confidence of the public and safeguard the future of our democracy. Its current areas of focus - to build trust by delivering on its promises and improving integrity in office - are both key to this ambition but they cannot alone address the deep-rooted concerns the public have about how our political system is set-up and operates. In this report, we present an alternative way forward - a wider, more comprehensive playbook for building political trust

The below table sets out the key drivers of low trust, a series of strategies to build trust, and associated policy recommendations. Further detail about the policy recommendations is given in Chapter 4.

1 National Centre for Social Research. Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low. 2024. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

2 National Centre for Social Research. Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low. 2024. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

DRIVERS OF LOW TRUST	STRATEGIES TO BUILD TRUST	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
The political system is not trusted to deliver	Strategy one: Maintain the focus on long-term delivery	Given that the current government is focused on these strategies, our recommendations cover the additional strategies outlined in this report.
Political actors are not trusted to act with integrity	Strategy two: Sustain efforts on integrity	
The political system is not trusted to listen to the public's perspective	Strategy three: Put people at the heart of the policy making process	Embed public participation across national government policy making
Local politicians are not trusted to engage with communities	Strategy four: Build a stronger relationship between local politicians and communities	Empower MPs with resources, guidance and training to act as community champions
Politicians are not seen as representative or relatable	Strategy five: Make politicians more relatable and representative	Provide means-tested financial support to MP candidates to ensure cost is never a barrier to capable candidates
		Improve action on abuse of MPs from the government, parliament, and the police, with greater analysis, training, and resources
		Reform the selection of MPs to ensure processes are robust and transparent
The news media environment is not trusted to scrutinise and inform	Enabler: An informative news media environment	Create a new Institute for Public Interest News with public funding for local news to address market failure and improve the trusted news environment
		Develop ways to exert pressure on social media platforms to surface relevant public interest news to audiences at appropriate times in the political cycle
		Reform PMQs by allowing MPs follow-up questions and introducing cross-party agreement to improve the quality of debate
		Improve political knowledge among the public
		Help the public identify and challenge mis/disinformation

1. TRUST

THE BATTLE THAT DEFINES OUR POLITICAL ERA



The fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era. It is only by serving the interests of working people, and delivering real change that transforms lives, that we can begin to restore people's faith that politics can be a force for good"³

- Sir Keir Starmer, introduction to the first King's Speech - 17th July 2024

1.1. THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO REBUILD POLITICAL TRUST

Following a landslide victory in the 2024 UK general election, the newly elected Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, stood on the steps of 10 Downing Street, promising a government of national service. He spoke of a need to address "this wound, this lack of trust" and to demonstrate that "politics can be a force for good".⁴ While this commitment is laudable, the dire state of political trust means this will be no easy task.

Trust in Britain's system of government is at a record low.⁵ 45% of the public 'almost never' trust governments of any party to put the nation's interests above their party's (more than ever before), while most (58%) 'almost never' trust politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight

³ Crerar, P. Starmer counts on promises he can fulfil to rebuild voters' trust. The Guardian, 2024. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/17/starmer-counts-on-promises-he-can-fulfil-to-rebuild-voters-trust

⁴ UK Government. Keir Starmer's first speech as Prime Minister: 5 July 2024. Available at www.gov.uk/government/speeches/keir-starmer's-first-speech-as-prime-minister-5-july-2024

⁵ National Centre for Social Research. Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low. 2024. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

corner (comparable to the 60% recorded after the 2009 expenses scandal).⁶ Prior to the election campaign, Demos polling revealed that just under a third (32%) of the population believed the UK was a well-functioning democracy and that just 35% of people trusted the upcoming general election campaign to represent the concerns of “people like me”.⁷ There were also low levels of trust in people or organisations to level with them about future challenges, and in politicians to “get things done” if they were elected.⁸ These were accompanied by wider concerns around the functioning of our political ecosystem, with 62% of the public seeing media bias as a significant risk to the integrity of the upcoming election.⁹

This low trust environment threatens to hinder the new government’s ambitions and ability to achieve a “decade of national renewal”. Achieving net zero, fixing the NHS, solving the housing crisis and driving growth will all require sacrifice and compromise from citizens, which are difficult to secure in a low trust system. To buy into the government’s decisions, the public need to be able to trust that the government is making informed, competent judgements, grounded in a long-term ambition to improve life in the UK. More widely, the public needs to trust that the political system is set up to serve their interests and that the different actors in our system - parties, party leaders, MPs, national and local media, among others - are working to this end.

Building trust is vital for the success of the government but also for the future of our democracy. Without trust in individuals, organisations and institutions, citizens become politically disengaged. This then weakens our democracy and the legitimacy of its decisions and policies, and, as we have seen across liberal democracies across the world, can create conditions for extreme populists to prosper, making false promises and exacerbating polarisation. Starmer’s government has an opportunity to break this pattern and set the standard for a new high trust system in the UK, presenting an example that may be emulated elsewhere. As others have suggested,¹⁰ it has a chance to contribute to developing a playbook to beat the populist far right.

1.2. THE GOVERNMENT NEEDS A BROADER APPROACH TO ADDRESSING TRUST

The government has rightly made rebuilding trust a key tenet of its political platform. So far, this has centred on two key features - delivery and integrity. These features, as we will go on to outline, are vital in building trust. Materially improving the lives of the public, the functioning of the country (from house-building to public service reform), and the UK’s global standing are essential to restoring the idea that government can be a vehicle for positive change in people’s lives. The public want to be able to secure well-paid, high-quality work, access doctor’s appointments, and have pride in their local communities. They also want to know that their representatives are acting in the public interest and not being sidetracked by personal interests and private incentives. Making positive strides in these areas is essential, but they are also extremely hard; within weeks of the election the government is embroiled in a row over political appointments¹¹ and personal donations¹² that has already damaged its record on integrity.

6 National Centre for Social Research. Trust and confidence in Britain’s system of government at record low. 2024. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

7 Nationally representative polling, conducted by Yonder, n=2,000, 3rd-5th May 2024

8 This polling is covered in our launch paper: Huband-Thompson, B., Goss, D. and Bush, L. Trustwatch 2024: Live Citizens’ Verdict on the Election Campaign. Demos, 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Trustwatch-2024_final.pdf

9 This polling is covered in our launch paper: Huband-Thompson, B., Goss, D. and Bush, L. Trustwatch 2024: Live Citizens’ Verdict on the Election Campaign. Demos, 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Trustwatch-2024_final.pdf

10 Simons, J. To beat the populist right, Labour must be an insurgent government. The Financial Times, 2024. Available at www.ft.com/content/0ca9f07c-4c10-4098-9e2f-64c5c03478e7

11 Walker, P. Watchdog launches review after UK civil service ‘cronyism’ row. The Guardian, 2024. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/aug/30/watchdog-review-uk-civil-service-exceptional-appointments

12 Francis, S. PM will no longer accept donations to pay for clothes. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwyvvp1l1zq6o

It is right that the new government focuses on disciplined, effective governance and tangible change. However, delivery and integrity alone will not be enough to rebuild trust. Material progress cannot be guaranteed and is likely in many cases to be slow, particularly given the challenges the new government faces. Moreover, as we have seen through events such as the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a nation's progress is also at the mercy of external shocks that can compromise and derail progress at any moment. In this context, we need a strong, resilient form of trust; one that does not rest solely on a country's immediate material circumstances or a government's most recent achievements or shortfalls.

To win back trust the government must do more. To build a resilient, sustainable future for political trust, we need a combination of strategies, involving a series of structural changes and actions for politicians, media, and the public. In this report, we draw on extensive fieldwork over the general election campaign, secondary literature and expert interviews to present a new, developing playbook for building political trust.

1.3. THE 'TRUST' ELECTION

The 2024 General Election offered us a unique opportunity to explore how political trust is built, fractured and negotiated in real time. In many ways, this was the 'trust' election, where debate often centred less on substantive policy difference and more on the capacity of parties and politicians to be honest, understand and represent the concerns of the public, and deliver on what they set out during the campaign. Journalists and TV audiences repeatedly asked whether party leaders and their MPs could be trusted to be honest, to level with the public about the challenges they might face in government, to act in their constituents' interests rather than their own, and to deliver on what they set out during the campaign. Key moments like the betting scandal and long standing campaign fixtures such as manifesto launches were all framed in relation to trust.

Questions about trust have continued to shape Labour's early days in government. A spate of concerns have been raised about integrity at the top levels of government, with the appointment of political allies to top civil servant roles, questions about private gifts to leading Labour politicians, and a supposed briefing war in the Prime Minister's Office between different parts of Starmer's team. In this context, the Prime Minister's approval rating has suffered a significant fall.¹³ At the time of writing, the Chancellor and Shadow Chancellor are also engaged in a heated exchange about the supposed "black hole" in public finances Labour claims it inherited after forming the new government. Debates continue to rage about whether the Conservatives hid the true state of the nation's finances or whether Labour is falsely claiming to have been left in the dark.¹⁴ Some are questioning whether it was wise for Starmer to focus on the trust issue at all, given all that has since happened.

With 'trust' proving an enduring theme before, during and after the campaign, this summer's election presented a unique opportunity for us to better understand how political trust is won and lost, and what drives public attitudes towards politicians, the media and our political system at large. Elections are a critical time for trust - politicians face significantly greater public exposure and scrutiny while the public are significantly more engaged than usual. Through Trustwatch 2024, we spoke extensively with a panel of 32 members of the public over the course of the election campaign, gaining a range of insights that have helped us to, in this report, develop a playbook for building political trust.

¹³ Savage, M. Keir Starmer now less popular than Rishi Sunak, poll suggests. The Guardian, 2024. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/21/honeymoon-over-keir-starmer-now-less-popular-than-rishi-sunak

¹⁴ This builds on a key talking point during the campaign, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies accusing the two main parties of a 'conspiracy of silence' over public spending and the need for higher taxation. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Election Special: Is there a 'conspiracy of silence' between both parties?. 2024. Available at <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/election-special-there-conspiracy-silence-between-both-parties>

1.4. TRUSTWATCH 2024

In this report, we explore the drivers of low political trust in the UK and public perceptions of different actors and systems within our democracy. Drawing on original polling insights and extensive “Citizens’ Conversations” with our Trustwatch panel, we offer a unique account of the UK general election - when the nation’s mind is most tuned into politics. We reflect on the policy promises, debates, controversies, gaffes, and other moments that shaped the election and what these mean for political trust more broadly. While ‘trust’ is too often seen as an amorphous concept, we root our discussions in material experiences and events to explore the different forms and facets of political trust.

The journey to improving trust - not just in this government, but in our democracy as a whole - is a long and challenging one, riddled with barriers, limitations, and trade-offs. How does the government present a hopeful vision for the future while also levelling with the public about the challenges it will face? How does the media balance its commercial interests (generating clicks, reads and views) with the need to effectively scrutinise the government, sometimes on issues that don’t attract eyeballs? How do local MPs build a presence within their constituency while also delivering on their many other responsibilities? These are difficult questions that do not have straightforward answers. Through our Trustwatch panel, original polling, engagement with secondary literature, and expert interviews, we have sought effective ways of navigating these challenges, tensions and trade-offs, finding productive ways forward.

Ultimately, this report presents a playbook of strategies to rebuild trust in our government and our wider democracy - putting that activity, the rebuilding of trust, at the core of its operating system.

THE TRUSTWATCH PANEL

Our Trustwatch panel comprised 32 members of the public from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic groups, ages, political perspectives, and parts of the UK. The panel represented four segments of the population, reflecting different voting patterns.

We engaged with our Trustwatch panel in numerous ways before, during and after the election campaign, including:

- **Pre-campaign focus groups:** dug deep into public views about trust and engagement in elections, and in politics more generally, and how these attitudes have changed over time.
- **Campaign engagements:** used instant messaging, interviews and focus groups to capture the panel’s immediate takes on big campaign-defining moments and other topics related to political trust.
- **Post-campaign focus groups:** discussed key trust-related themes that emerged throughout the election and assess the extent to which politicians and the media have acted in ways that engender trust. In addition, we used these focus groups to discuss potential ways forward when it comes to building trust in elections and in politics more generally.

Our panel was made up of four groups:

- 1.** Non-voters: People who have not voted in any of the general elections they have been eligible to vote in.
- 2.** Sometimes voters: People who have not voted in at least one of the general elections they have been eligible to vote in and have also voted in at least one.
- 3.** Usually voters, swing: People who have Voted in 2019, and voted in most or all of the general elections they have been eligible to vote in. They have changed parties previously or may change parties at the next general election.
- 4.** Always voters: Have voted in all of the general elections they have been eligible to vote in.

We also took steps to ensure a range of voting patterns and perspectives (e.g. EU referendum vote, predicted general election vote) and demographics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic grade, education).

2. THE DRIVERS OF LOW TRUST

To shift the dial on political trust, it is essential that we understand what has driven us to this state of crisis. The current diagnosis - highlighting the failure of governments and politicians to deliver meaningful change and reflect integrity in public life - is an important and necessary one, but our research suggests that this view of trust is not only too narrow, it's unambitious. Delivering on promises, and doing so with integrity, are the minimum expectations for a government, not an operating model to reverse the precipitous decline in trust. Given the dire state of political trust that Britain finds itself in, a more comprehensive diagnosis is needed - one that explores the broader range of factors shaping trust in politics, and in turn exposes the additional levers that must be pulled to rebuild trust.

Drawing on our Trustwatch panel insights, original polling during the election campaign, engagement with secondary literature, and conversations with experts in this field, we have identified six key drivers of low trust in politics in Britain.

- 1 The political system is not trusted to deliver
- 2 Political actors are not trusted to act with integrity
- 3 The political system is not trusted to listen to the public's perspective
- 4 Local politicians are not trusted to engage with communities
- 5 Politicians are not seen as representative or relatable
- 6 The media environment is not trusted to scrutinise and inform

This chapter explains how these drivers affect our political system, which then goes on to shape our strategies for restoring trust in the following chapter.

2.1. THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IS NOT TRUSTED TO DELIVER

Government delivery failure is a leading cause of reduced trust in politics. The public gives up a lot for our political system - by paying taxes, giving legitimacy to the government's laws, and participating in our democracy. In return, they need a political system that delivers for them. Yet, in recent years, a weak economy, stretched public services, and a range of other issues have cast doubt on whether the political system does in fact deliver effectively. This was a common theme across our panel, from whom we often heard about a sense of hopelessness and the disengagement it can drive.

"No one from the Conservative Party is going to come in and be good. No one from Labour is going to come in and be good... we have a bit of a joke system. And there's nothing I can do about it. So I can only focus on myself and maybe stuff in my community"

- Non-voter, pre-campaign

PROBLEM

- a. Governments have failed to deliver on key promises
- b. Governments have prioritised short-term political gains over long-term improvements
- c. Politicians have failed to offer a vision combining clarity, ambition and deliverability

a. Governments have failed to deliver on key promises

Our panel demonstrated time and again that they feel let down by politicians not keeping their promises. Our panel often cited examples from recent governments, such as "the Lib Dems selling out after they went into coalition with the Tories", or the Conservatives "almost putting their whole reputation on stopping these boats, and they weren't able to do hardly anything".

"That's where the trust is broken, when the promises are not met.... I think it goes completely pear shaped from there"

- Always voter, pre-campaign

"[The Government] are incapable of delivering on their promises I think the last 5 years or so proves that"

- Usually voter, mid-campaign

The wider public clearly agrees. Polling shows that three-quarters of Brits think that parties generally go back on all or most of their policy promises, and just 1% say they keep all, or nearly all, of their promises.¹⁵ Many also think parties don't even try; even 61% of 2019 Conservative voters said in 2024 that the Conservative Party do not try to keep their promises.¹⁶ This concern also applied to the manifestos in the 2024 general election. Our panel felt that parties were not being transparent about the trade-offs and limitations they would face in government, undermining their credibility.

In some instances, promises may need to be broken - circumstances may change or the government may otherwise reconsider its original plan of action. When promises are broken, steps can still be taken to maintain trust. For example, politicians can ensure that if promises are not delivered for reasons outside their control, they offer a clear and honest explanation as to why. Yet, many of our Trustwatch panellists felt this is not current practice.

"All [the government] do is they make decisions, but if the decisions are undone, we never know why."

- Non-voter, pre-campaign

b. Governments have prioritised short-term political gains over long-term improvements

The prioritisation of short-term political gains over long-term improvements seems to be a ubiquitous feature of UK politics and one embedded in our system of government. The problem is illustrated well in the failure to increase public capital investment (e.g. in infrastructure and technology) in the UK. Despite high public demand for improved public services - which, in the long-term, requires significant capital investment - the UK government has continually failed to increase capital investment to levels resembling most OECD and G7 nations.¹⁷ Doing so would mean sacrificing short-term economic boosts in favour of long-term improvements as the gains of such investment can take years to be realised. Governments have consistently failed to make this choice - with numerous reports citing short-termism as the reason.^{18,19,20} Attempts at longer-term thinking have consistently failed - reflected in the fact that the government has had 11 different industrial strategies or plans for growth since 2010.²¹

While successive governments have overlooked capital investment, they have given extensive focus to issues that the public consider less pertinent. For example, while people want less political discussion of 'culture war'-related issues, these have increasingly taken up space in the

15 Smith, M. Unrealistic and unaffordable: public opinion on the 2024 Conservative and Labour manifestos. YouGov, 2024. Available at <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49885-unrealistic-and-unaffordable-public-opinion-on-the-2024-conservative-and-labour-manifestos>

16 Jennings, W. A crisis of trust in our politics spells trouble for the government. Sky News, 2024. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/a-crisis-of-trust-in-our-politics-spells-trouble-for-the-government-13122344>

17 Demos survey in May 2024

18 Dibb, G and Jung, C. Rock Bottom Low Investment in The UK Economy. Institute for Public Policy Research, 2024. Available at https://ippr-org.files.svdcn.com/production/Downloads/Rock_bottom_June24_2024-06-18-081624_arsv.pdf

19 Hoddinott, S. Short-term policy making has trapped public services in a 'doom loop'. Institute for Government, 2023. Available at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/public-services-doom-loop

20 The King's Fund. 'Addiction to short-termism' put NHS future at risk, warn think tanks. 2023. Available at www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/press-releases/short-termism-nhs-future-at-risk

21 Dibb, G and Jung, C. Rock Bottom Low Investment in The UK Economy. Institute for Public Policy Research, 2024. Available at https://ippr-org.files.svdcn.com/production/Downloads/Rock_bottom_June24_2024-06-18-081624_arsv.pdf

media and political debate.^{22,23} Accordingly, six in ten people now feel that politicians invent or exaggerate culture wars as a political tactic - up from around four in ten (44%) in 2020 - while just 12% say this focus helps highlight ways we can improve society.²⁴

Both political actors and the public recognise this problem. In Demos's recent report, *Citizens' White Paper*, one senior political advisor noted how much political activity is "for the theatre of Westminster and feeding the lobby, rather than what it also needs to be about, which is actual delivery for citizens".²⁵ In our polling, just 17% of people said that they trusted the government, during a general election campaign, to act in the interests of the country, rather than just their own interests - while 60% disagreed with the statement.²⁶ Many in our panel also felt that politicians focussed too much on scoring points against one another, and too little on plans for the future.

"[For politicians] it's all about point-scoring or looking good. If an opponent had a good idea, they wouldn't say 'that's actually a good idea, credit to you'"

- Non-voter - pre-campaign

"We don't feel as the general public that they're ever doing anything, thinking about anything that is in our best interest.... they waste our time, to be honest. So most will just get on with it and stop pretending that they care"

- Non-voter, pre-campaign

c. Politicians have failed to offer a vision combining clarity, ambition and deliverability

Throughout our discussions, our Trustwatch panel expressed how they judged political visions against three key criteria:

- **Clarity** - so people can understand the plan
- **Ambition** - to address the country's significant problems
- **Deliverability** - to ensure promises are not broken

Over the course of the 2024 election, however, many members of the public felt the government was falling short on one or more of these areas. On clarity, while both parties highlighted the country's significant challenges, our polling showed that only four in ten people felt that Labour offered a clear vision for the future, and fewer than three in ten did for the Conservatives.²⁷

22 Tryl, L., Cunningham, J. and Burns, C. Backfire: Culture Wars and the General Election. More in Common, 2024. Available at www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/tagprsvs/backfire-culture-wars-and-the-general-election-final.pdf

23 National Centre for Social Research. Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low. British Social Attitudes, 39. 2024. Available at https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/bsa39_culture-wars.pdf

24 King's College London. Public increasingly see politicians as stoking culture wars, study finds. 2024. Available at www.kcl.ac.uk/news/public-increasingly-see-politicians-as-stoking-culture-wars-study-finds

25 Levin, M. and others. *Citizens' White Paper*. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper>

26 Demos polling conducted by Yonder between 3rd-5th May 2024, to a nationally representative sample of 2,000 people.

27 Demos polling conducted by Focaldata between Monday 1st July - Tuesday 2nd July 2024, to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people.

"Even now [Labour] are in power, they still haven't told us what they plan to do, and that scares me"

- Non-voter, post-election

"[Starmer] was saying 'we're going to smash the gangs', but obviously everyone wants to smash the gangs... so it seems like his solution was weak in response. It's easier to just say that, but once you get in power and start trying to do stuff like that, you'll realise it isn't as straightforward as 'we'll just smash the gangs'"

- Non-voter, mid-campaign

On ambition, many often felt the policies offered by politicians did not meet the scale of the challenges. This led some to pull away from political engagement.

"I don't think anything big is going to change as a result of the election. I think that we really do desperately need change, but none of the sort of conventional options are going to bring about that change"

- Non-voter, post-election

However, at the same time, our panellists felt that politicians often failed to offer a deliverable vision, instead over-promising and ignoring the risks and limitations that governments face.

"Leading up to elections, they're always over promising, just to keep everybody happy"

- Usually voter, post-election

"The [politician] that says we're going to improve the NHS, it wouldn't mean anything whatsoever, ... nobody really knows what's going to happen in five years time... the last time somebody did it, we then had Ukraine and Covid and everything else"

- Sometimes voter, post-election

The three demands can also create trade-offs. For instance, the more ambitious and clear a party's vision is, the greater the risk is that they won't achieve it. Governments therefore need to strike a careful balance and think strategically about how they communicate their vision to the public.

2.2. POLITICAL ACTORS ARE NOT TRUSTED TO ACT WITH INTEGRITY

People's loss of trust is often expressed in terms of key, memorable events such as the expenses scandal, 'partygate', dodgy Covid contracts, or the £350m figure on the side of Boris Johnson's Brexit bus. The 2024 general election was no different, with the betting scandal and the £2,000 tax claim both dealing blows to some people's trust.²⁸

Despite strong statements from Labour about strengthening standards in public life, issues of integrity have continued with the new government. The appointment of political allies to top civil servant jobs, a range of private gifts to top Labour politicians - as well as gifts to Keir Starmer's wife that were initially not officially declared - and a Labour MP found to be renting out flats in severe disrepair have all shown that controversies around integrity have not gone away.^{29,30,31} While our research spanned the election period and did not cover the subsequent scandals in the new government, our panel told us how perceptions of dishonesty and misbehaviour drive three related beliefs:

PROBLEM

- a. "Politicians use their position to further their own interests"
- b. "Politicians regularly lie"
- c. "Politicians are immoral people"

a. "Politicians use their position to further their own interests"

The MP's expenses scandal beginning in 2009 was a watershed moment in the problem around political corruption, misbehaviour and lies. After the reports, trust in politicians to tell the truth plummeted to an all time low.³² However, a broad range of events have contributed to the sense that politicians are mainly looking out for themselves, their finances, and their status - and that they use their position of power to do so, including:

- Politicians taking questionable second jobs
- Politicians taking questionable jobs after leaving Parliament
- Government awarding contracts to friends and family
- Close engagement with lobbyists or accepting their gifts
- Prime Ministers awarding honours or recommending peerages for questionable reasons
- Government appointing civil servants as party officials
- Governments appointing party officials into the civil service
- Accepting donations from questionable individuals

In these respects, Brits also have very low trust compared to other OECD countries by a significant margin. Just 18% of Brits say it is likely that a politician would refuse a job in exchange for a political favour, while 66% say it would be unlikely - the least trusting of any

28 The betting scandal (described later in this section) involved various officials potentially breaking gambling rules by betting on the election date. The £2,000 tax claim was a claim made by Rishi Sunak and others that, based on Treasury analysis, Labour would increase an average household's tax by £2,000 annually. The extent to which this analysis was independent was then contested by Labour and senior civil servants.

29 Pickard, J. Labour has been appalling at defending cronyism row appointments. The Financial Times, 2024. Available at www.ft.com/content/5f0ec7d0-2c14-48b0-955f-462009dbe399

30 Francis, S. No inquiry into gifts for Starmer's wife, say No10. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgeyy0dlp24o

31 Pike, J. Labour MP sacks letting agent over state of rental flats. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crkm15z1r82o

32 Campbell, D. Trust in politicians hits an all-time low. The Guardian, 2009. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/sep/27/trust-politicians-all-time-low

OECD country.³³ Many of our Trustwatch panellists echoed these sentiments. They felt that politicians were focussed on the financial gain of themselves, friends, or particular lobby groups who have influence over them - and not for the wider public.

"I just really don't trust politicians in general. They just seem to lie constantly, and they're not really for the people anymore... I think they're all for Big Pharma, Europe, things like that"

- Always voter, post-election

THE BETTING SCANDAL AND THE DAMAGE OF MISBEHAVIOUR

Around three weeks before the 2024 election, it was reported that the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister had placed a £100 bet that the election would be in July, three days before Rishi Sunak announced the election date. Reports followed that many others had placed similar bets, including senior Conservative staff, MPs, and multiple police officers.³⁴ This all had a damning impact on people's attitudes to politicians, and some people's voting behaviour.

In Demos's polling on this, three-quarters of the public had heard of the betting scandal. Of those who had heard of it, many reported significant damage to their trust as a result. For example, four in five said it suggests that politicians are in it for themselves, while over half said they trusted politicians in general less because of it. In our conversations with Trustwatch panellists, many felt they were not surprised - that it appeared symptomatic of their view of politicians being out of touch and self-interested.

"There are definitely a lot more shady scandals going on behind the scenes within UK politics, which I believe is part of the reason why there's no truth or transparency"

- Usually Voter, betting scandal briefing

Our polling also showed that a significant proportion of those who heard about the scandal felt it impacted their voting behaviour. Of the 75% who heard about it, one in six said it changed how they were planning to vote, while one in every seven said it made them less likely to vote. Some of our panellists echoed this.

"Yes I have changed my mind over the course of the campaign. What did it for me was the betting scandal (...) Was the last straw for me"

- Always voter, Voted Conservative in 2019

33 OECD. Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment. 2024. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en>.

34 Grylls, G. Gambling watchdog widens inquiry into Tory betting scandal. The Times, 2024. Available at www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/gambling-watchdog-widens-probe-into-tory-betting-scandal

b. “Politicians regularly lie”

The public often sees lying as a staple of political behaviour. For example, just 18% of people in our pre-campaign polling said they trusted then-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak not to lie during the election campaign.³⁵ This problem has become worse in recent years. Trust in politicians to tell the truth has fallen since 2021 to its lowest level on record, according to a survey by Ipsos going back 40 years.³⁶ This has wider implications for political trust - as our polling showed that “politicians being dishonest” was seen as the greatest risk to the fairness and integrity of the upcoming election.³⁷

These concerns are not wholly unfounded, with recent Prime Ministers often making factual errors and failing to correct these. For example, Full Fact - a respected fact-checking organisation - asked Rishi Sunak to correct the record on 11 of his statements that were deemed to be false, but he corrected the record only twice.³⁸ Similarly, in 2021/22, then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeated to the House of Commons that employment was going up at least 12 times. In fact, employment was going down. The UK Statistics Authority, the Office for Statistics Regulation, and the Liaison Committee, and Full Fact all challenged this claim.³⁹ Johnson later admitted the claim was false, but never officially corrected the record.

c. “Politicians often behave inappropriately”

Beyond acting in their own interest for money or power, the public also think politicians behave in a range of ways that indicate poor moral standards. Polling shows that just over half (52%) of the public believe that politicians have lower ethical standards than ordinary citizens, while only 5% think they have higher ethical standards.⁴⁰ Behaviours contributing to these concerns - and which have received great media attention - include:

- **Bullying** - which former deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab was forced to resign over.⁴¹
- **Sexual misconduct** - which led to MPs Chris Pincher and Neil Parish resigning.⁴²
- **Tax irregularities** - which drove controversies surrounding Nadhim Zahawi and Angela Rayner.^{43,44}
- **Racist, misogynist, and other discriminatory remarks** - as seen in the removal of the Conservative whip from the former deputy party chair Lee Anderson.
- **Cover-ups of scandals** - as seen around ‘partygate’.

On top of this, the failure to admit wrongdoing particularly angers people. Our panel explained that they would much rather politicians own up and apologise for inappropriate behaviour.

35 Demos polling conducted by Yonder between 3rd-5th May 2024, to a nationally representative sample of 2,000 people.

36 Ipsos. Public Trust in professions survey. Ipsos Veracity Index 2023. Available at www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-12/ipsos-trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2023-charts.pdf

37 Demos polling conducted by Yonder between 3rd-5th May 2024, to a nationally representative sample of 2,000 people.

38 Full Fact. Can I Trust: Rishi Sunak MP. 2024. Available at fullfact.org/can-i-trust/1077/rishi-sunak

39 Written evidence submitted by Full Fact (CTR 03). 2024. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/111164/html>

40 Renwick, A. and others. Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics. The Constitution Unit, 2023. Available at www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/ucl_cu_report3_digital_final.pdf

41 Gregory, J and Rhoden-Paul, A. Dominic Raab bullying report: Key findings at a glance. BBC News, 2023. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics

42 James, L. Neil Parish: MP who watched porn in the Commons ‘can’t believe’ Chris Pincher hasn’t had whip removed. The Independent, 2024. Available at www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/chris-pincher-tory-mp-whip

43 Edser, N. Nadhim Zahawi confirms nearly £5m paid for tax error. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/business

44 Daly, J. A simple guide to the Angela Rayner house row. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics

“People are wanting to be listened to, they want [a politician] to put your hands up and say that what you did during COVID was disgraceful. And own it, and be real with people and then try and build trust... people just don't forget”

- Always voter, pre-campaign

2.3. POLITICAL LEADERS ARE NOT TRUSTED TO LISTEN TO THE PUBLIC'S PERSPECTIVE

The 650 MPs in parliament and those who enter government are elected to represent the country. But even 650 people will struggle to share the experiences and concerns of 53m people in the electorate across the country. Nevertheless, they have a duty to understand the public's concerns - to represent them, weigh up different priorities and trade-offs, and drive changes to improve the lives of those they represent. Governments - both national and local - generally try to gain an understanding of public perception and priority through polling, focus groups, consultations, and local engagement. Our research showed that our Trustwatch participants were hungry to see this happening.

However, current methods of public engagement in policy making have not been effective at building trust. Many of the public - faced with little evidence that political leaders are listening attentively to their concerns - feel they have no ability to express a voice in politics. On top of this, when people see policies being implemented that appear to overlook their experiences or concerns, they may feel that their voice is not represented in the political system. This presents problems in policy making both at the local and national level.

PROBLEM

- a. National policy making does not sufficiently engage with the public on long-term decisions
- b. Effective public participation in local decision-making remains scarce

a. National policy making does not sufficiently engage the public on long-term decisions

The sense that the public has a voice in political decisions is essential for trust in a democratic political system. For example, polling for *Citizens' White Paper* showed that people told about policies formed through citizens assemblies were significantly more likely to say they would trust the government to make decisions in the best interests of British people than those who were told about policies developed by internal government.⁴⁵

Just 20% of British people feel the political system allows people like them to have a say in what the government does - significantly lower than the average across the OECD at 30%.⁴⁶ Many of our Trustwatch panellists felt that politicians did not listen to or understand the public, or that if they did do engage with the public, they did this in a performative, rather than genuine, manner.

45 Levin, M. and others. *Citizens' White Paper*. Demos, 2024. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper>

46 OECD. Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment. 2024. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en>.

"[Politicians] need to go out and be seen to be talking to people and listening to them and not just give it lip service.... [and] follow through on that rather than going 'the trains aren't running but I'm parking that because I don't really care'"

- Usually voter, pre-campaign

b. Effective public participation in local decision-making remains scarce

A lack of participatory policy making also contributes to delivery failure. Demos's report, *Citizens' White Paper*, details multiple problems with current policy making processes that undermine long-term delivery:⁴⁷

1. The 'Whitehall bubble' is too removed from the everyday experiences of citizens
2. Policy makers - at every level - feel disempowered to try new things
3. Policy making is often informed only by the 'usual suspects' who shout the loudest or don't offer rigorous enough challenge
4. Political turbulence isn't conducive to long-term policy making

People across our panel also alluded to the link between a public voice in policy making and effective policy. People spoke of how they felt political organisations were 'too far removed' and so reflect the wrong priorities, unlike local organisations who can understand the 'nuances' of people's lives.

"[Local organisations are] closer to the ground of what is actually happening within that local community, understanding the nuances... and therefore whatever services or messaging that they put out is reflective of what is actually true.... Whereas I find with political organisations.... it's so far removed. And some of the stuff that they come out with, I'm like 'what planet are you living on that you think that is important?'"

- Usually voter, pre-campaign

2.4. LOCAL POLITICIANS ARE NOT TRUSTED TO ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITIES

Politicians engaging directly with the public is essential for political trust. In meeting with and listening to the public, local politicians can show their constituents that they care and want to respond to their concerns. This can help build strong personal connections between politicians and members of the local community, with ripple effects across the constituency. If politicians can then understand the community's priorities and communicate their ability to deliver in response, this can help build a more resilient form of local trust. However, if engagement is done poorly - if it is scarce or seen as done for the wrong reasons - this can drive resentment.

47 Levin, M. and others. *Citizens' White Paper*. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper>

This is what we see too often in politics today. Two key problems underlie this issue.

PROBLEM

- a. Current methods of local engagement do not reach enough people
- b. MPs are often not seen as community champions

a. *Current methods of local engagement do not reach enough people*

Politicians engaging with local issues and local people is critical for trust. Research during the pandemic, for example, showed that one-to-one engagement between politicians and constituents - particularly if face-to-face (when such engagement was possible during the pandemic) - meant people were less likely to lose trust in politicians.⁴⁸ Of the very few positive sentiments we heard about politicians from our panel, most were based on such face-to-face engagement.

“My local MP, I don’t trust his party, but I certainly think very highly of him. He will not hesitate to knock on the door, and he will... I see him regularly. I see him in the street. He’s knocking on the door, and not just before the election. So there is some sort of appreciation - maybe a trust”

- Always voter, post-election

“People are more likely to gravitate towards somebody that represents something they’ve actually got a personal link to, or they’re seeing a person that they can actually approach, rather than just somebody in Westminster off the TV. So I think it’s quite important for your MP to engage locally as much as possible”

- Sometimes voter, post-election

In theory, the UK’s political system should be highly effective at driving local engagement. Our single-member constituencies mean each MP represents and is accountable to a specific set of constituents. All MPs have publicly available emails for constituents to contact them. Most hold surgeries in their constituency for members of the community to meet them face-to-face. Some will try to get a mention of their constituency at Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs).

In reality, however, engagement between the public and politicians is very low. A 2013 survey, for example, found that just 22% of people knew the name of their MP, suggesting the level of engagement is not particularly high.^{49,50} And as we have seen, a local focus is only associated with increased trust if constituents know the name of the MP.⁵¹ Across our Trustwatch panel, there was a broad sense that while proactive engagement occurs during election campaigns, it is a rare occurrence outside these periods.

48 Weinberg, J. Building Trust in Political Office: Testing the Efficacy of Political Contact and Authentic Communication. Political Studies, 2023. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231185706>

49 Hansard Society. Audit of Political Engagement, 10, 2013. Available at https://Audit_of_Political_Engagement_2013

50 While this data is from over a decade ago, Demos is not aware of more recent data on this question

51 McKay, L. Does constituency focus improve attitudes to MPs? A test for the UK. The Journal of Legislative Studies, 2020, pp. 1–26. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2020.1726635>

“When there’s an election coming up, then obviously you see these people. You see your MPs walking up and down streets, and they’re canvassing, and they’re active and they’re visible. But for most constituencies, the rest of the year you don’t see them”

- Usually voter, post-election

“[My MP is] always busy. So anything that would make us think they are trying to listen to us, see us, hear us, communicate with us, think about us, anything would be good”

- Non-voter, post-election

One of the most notable ways that MPs try to engage with constituents face-to-face is through surgeries. Yet, these were rarely mentioned in our groups. Given that most MPs hold surgeries regularly, this may, at least in part, be a problem of low awareness, though there are some challenges that appear inherent to the design and delivery surgeries:

- Surgeries are designed for people who take the initiative to seek contact with an MP, but these people may be more likely to already be engaged in politics.
- If a much greater number of people did want to start engaging with MPs, one-on-one surgeries alone would be unable to manage that demand.
- Some constituents may face barriers to accessing surgeries, such as if:
 - They are working at the time surgeries are hosted
 - They have difficulties travelling to the location
 - They do not have online access that allows them to book surgery appointments (for MPs who host appointment-only surgeries)

These difficulties may reduce the number of people attending surgeries and leave them feeling overlooked or forgotten by their MP. Many of our Trustwatch panellists instead felt MPs should make the first move to reach out to them, rather than the reverse.

“If the politician wants us to get engaged with them, then they will have to make the first move. They will have to actually reach out to the general public and listen to the grievances”

- Always voter, pre-campaign

While face-to-face contact is perhaps an ideal form of engagement, others (e.g. emails, letters, social media interactions) are also important for building relationships and trust. Here, research suggests the effectiveness of this engagement for public satisfaction relies on the

response being personalised, and to some degree timely.⁵² The challenge, however, is that both personalisation and timeliness require time and resource, and so put pressure on the capacity of MP's offices.

Currently, MP's community engagements are often highly personalised, but in the form of casework, i.e. responding to particular constituents' needs.⁵³ This takes up a significant proportion of MP's office staff time and the bulk of their community engagement work.⁵⁴ Yet, like surgeries, casework will only reach a small proportion of the public, and as responsive engagement, will generally fail to reach the less-engaged. Some forms of casework are more scalable but less personal. For example, some MPs use template emails to respond to constituents. These are generic responses that can be sent out across all constituents who get in touch about a particular issue. Although this is useful for maintaining capacity while delivering many responses, it is often not only generalised across constituents, but also generalised across constituencies, creating a significant degree of depersonalisation. This could see local politicians miss out on opportunities to build trusting relationships with constituents.

b. MPs are often not seen as community champions

Beyond listening to and engaging with local communities and constituents, MPs can also play a unique role in championing their concerns and interests. This is expressed in what MPs say, but more importantly what they do. If an MP effectively champions their interests, local communities can feel that the political system understands and cares about people like them, even if they disagree with political decisions at the national level - building a more resilient form of trust. Accordingly, research shows that an MP focusing on their constituency (measured by the frequency with which they talk about their constituency in the House of Commons) as well as the perception that they focus on their constituency is associated with both trust in the specific MP, but also in MPs in general.⁵⁵

Many in our panel explained that they wanted MPs who were visible and making a difference to the community.

"[We need] MPs where, if there's a hospital going to close, then they stand up for that hospital and make sure it doesn't close... being active in the community, someone who, if they weren't an MP, would be trying to do stuff in the community"

- Non-voter, post-election

"What I would like to see MPs do is visit local communities, but without the cameras. Actually do the work behind the scenes. When they've collated enough information, then you can talk about it on a media level"

- Non-voter, post-election

52 Soo, N., Weinberg, J., and Dommett, K. One moment, please: Can the speed and quality of political contact affect democratic health? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2020, pp. 460-484. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120919683>

53 McKee, R. *MPs' Staff, the Unsung Heroes an Examination of Who They Are and What They Do*. The Constitution Unit, 2023. Available at www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/ucl_cu_report3_digital_final.pdf

54 IPSA. *Annual budgets, costs and claims*. Available at www.theipsa.org.uk/mp-staffing-business-costs/annual-publications

55 McKay, L. Does constituency focus improve attitudes to MPs? A test for the UK. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 2020, pp. 1-26. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2020.1726635>

Several of our panellists also noted that building a reputation as a community leader is a long-term endeavour and that MPs often face various demands and pressures that pull them away from such work. With significant numbers of newly elected 2024 MPs becoming ministers (which is not normally the case), this may be a challenge for the government.^{56,57}

“An MP should stick to his constituency to start with, and he should, over many years, build up his constituency - not after three months or two months suddenly decide that he’s going to take a ministerial post” -

Always voter, post-election

2.5. POLITICIANS ARE NOT SEEN AS REPRESENTATIVE OR RELATABLE

Many politicians would be thrilled to achieve the public’s special status of ‘someone I could get a pint with’. This status was often ascribed to Nigel Farage or Boris Johnson.⁵⁸ It acts as an indication that people are comfortable with and can relate to the politician in question. For the special few, it also provides a critical political dividend; Farage and Johnson remain the two most popular British politicians (former or current) in surveys, and clearly have a knack for engaging with and attracting voters.⁵⁹

The obvious ingredient to relatability is shared backgrounds and experiences. Many people feel that a politician who shares their experiences - be that where they are from, their ethnic background, their gender, the kind of school they went to or the jobs they have had - can understand their concerns. But clearly this is not the whole picture. Very few people could say they share many experiences with Johnson or Farage, for example. Another factor at play is perceived authenticity - politicians saying what they believe and behaving like their true self. This is an essential characteristic to convey to build a sense of connection, but this is easier said than done, particularly with all the pressures politicians are under and the scrutiny they face.

Two key sentiments are driving a sense that politicians are not relatable and harming political trust.

PROBLEM

- a. “Politicians do not understand my life and concerns”
- b. “Politicians behave inauthentically”

a. “Politicians do not understand my life and concerns”

Across our Trustwatch focus groups, many of our panellists felt that politicians were detached from the day-to-day struggles they face - often due to their privileges. People felt this undermined politicians’ ability to do their job effectively.

56 Culbertson, A. The newly elected MPs given top jobs in Starmer’s government. Sky News, 2024. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/the-newly-elected-mps-given-top-jobs-in-starmer-s-government>

57 McKeon, C. Starmer gives more new MPs frontbench jobs. The Standard, 2024. Available at www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-foreign-office-mps-tony-blair-government-b1171609.html

58 Hyde, M. Nigel Farage: a man I would gladly have a pint with. The Guardian, 2013. Available at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/03/nigel-farage-superpower-politics-lightly

59 YouGov. The most popular politicians & political figures (Q2 2024). Available at <https://yougov.co.uk/ratings/politics/popularity/politicians-political-figures/all>

"I feel [politicians] don't have a reality or a concept of reality that we face. I think maybe if they did, they would make better decisions for the country"

- Non-voter, pre-campaign

"I don't think many politicians understand the problems of people, they mostly come from privileged homes, although Sunak did speak about how hard it was not to have Sky TV"

- Usually voter, mid-campaign

This affects people's feelings about politics in general. Our survey in May 2024 showed that just 35% of people felt the General Election campaign would represent the concerns of people like them, with 37% disagreeing.⁶⁰ This is particularly the case for people of lower social class. Just three in ten people in the lowest socioeconomic grades (DE) said the election would represent the concerns of people like them, compared to four in ten of those in the highest grades (AB).

This sense of detachment arises partly due to the demographics of MPs, which do not align with those of the general population in various ways. For example, even though the 2024 Parliament is arguably the most diverse in history, it remains that:^{61,62}

- 23% of MPs went to private school, compared to 7% of the UK population
- 90% have been to university, compared to 19% of UK adults
- 40.5% of MPs are women, compared to 50.5% of the population
- 14% of MPs are from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to 17% of the population

There is also a significant lack of MPs from working class occupations. In 2022, while 34% of Brits had 'working class' occupations, just 7% of MPs and just 1% of Conservative MPs previously came from such occupations.⁶³ This has an impact on engagement with politics. For example, research suggests that the turnout of working class people is significantly reduced when MPs of the two main parties are of a similar social class (measured by occupational backgrounds) - a much greater effect than that of the parties' policy platforms.⁶⁴ Alongside the harm to trust, poor representation can therefore also drive the disenfranchisement of certain groups, which in turn allows the political system to have less regard for those groups' interests.

60 Demos polling conducted by Yonder between 3rd-5th May 2024, to a nationally representative sample of 2,000 people.

61 Mahmood, S. Record levels of diversity in parliament - not by chance but because of purposeful effort. Sky News, 2024. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/record-levels-of-diversity-in-parliament-not-by-chance-but-because-of-purposeful-effort-13176726>

62 Holt-White, E. Parliamentary Privilege 2024. The Sutton Trust, 2024. Available at www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Parliamentary-Privilege-2024-1.pdf

63 Savage, M. Just one in 100 Tory MPs came from a working-class job, new study shows. The Guardian, 2022. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jul/24/just-one-in-100-tory-mps-came-from-a-working-class-job-new-study-shows

64 Heath, O. Policy Alienation, Social Alienation and Working-Class Abstention in Britain, 1964–2010. British Journal of Political Science, 2018, pp. 1053-1073. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000272>

b. “Politicians behave inauthentically”

Politicians seeming inauthentic can immediately turn voters off - and studies suggest this is particularly the case for non-voters, who tend to place more value on authenticity.⁶⁵ This was clearly a key concern for our panel during the election campaign, many of whom expressed extreme distaste at politicians doing performative photo ops that did not reflect their reality.

“I don’t like it when someone is blatantly fake. I just detest that sort of photo op crap where they always get dressed up in costumes”

- Always voter, pre-campaign

“Rishi Sunak is married into a billionaire family. And there was an article about him going green, and him driving a VW Golf parked up in a petrol station. That’s just complete nonsense”

- Sometimes voter, mid-campaign

Here, this is no simple solution, as different people have very different perspectives on authenticity. Any one politician’s character may appeal to some, but not others. During the election campaign, for example, both Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak were frequently cast as ‘boring’ and ‘uninspiring’. While some of our panellists felt they would trust a charismatic leader more as it would convey their ‘personality’, others expressed cynicism towards charisma, feeling it was an inauthentic method of distraction from serious issues.

“[Blair] had personality. He was a brilliant speaker, and would make a very good car salesman - used-car salesman. And in a way Boris was exactly the same ... And I trust people that have got a bit of personality”

- Always voter, pre-campaign

“Somebody who has lots of charisma, I immediately distrust them, because you’re putting on a show... That is taking attention away from the important things, which is actually doing what you said you’re going to do, working hard to achieve it”.

- Always voter, pre-campaign

This shows how politicians have to make trade-offs about the kind of authenticity they try to convey, leaving some people unhappy. During the election campaign, one period in particular put these trade-offs in the spotlight, showing how leaders attempting to seem relatable and authentic can garner some support, but can also create a backlash. This was seen through the following events: firstly Farage becoming leader of Reform (3rd June), secondly, the first televised debate between Sunak and Starmer (4th June) and lastly Sunak referring to ‘Sky TV’ as an example of something he went without as a child (12th June).

⁶⁵ Clarke N. and others. The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics. 2018 Available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108641357>

FARAGE, THE LEADERS DEBATE AND THE SKY TV GAFFE - AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHARACTER

Nigel Farage - well-known for his outspoken views - unsurprisingly divided opinion when he entered the election race on 3rd June. Yet, even his opponents had mixed views on how this impacted their trust in politics. While some opponents felt nervous about Farage polarising debate, some praised his openness.

"Oh 100% less there is a lot of negativity and rock throwing with [Reform UK] and with Nigel at the helm, it makes me nervous about people being quite polarised, and believing the lies"

- Always Voter, mid-campaign

"Although I can't stand Farage, at least his party is explicit about what their plan is... He's charismatic and makes bold statements, in contrast to many other politicians who try to say nothing"

- Usually Voter, mid-campaign

The next day saw the first head-to-head leaders debate between Sunak and Starmer. Backgrounds played a key role in the debate, with Starmer emphasising his working class upbringing. Some of our panel felt more trusting of Starmer as a result, but others felt Starmer's efforts were inauthentic.

"It makes me feel that Keir Starmer has experienced what most of this country have been through in their life and Rishi Sunak doesn't know what it feels like"

- Usually Voter, mid-campaign

"I have heard this story from him a million times, and remembering your phone getting cut off once as a child doesn't tell me he ever suffered hardship for real"

- Sometimes Voter, mid-campaign

Later in the week, Sunak's comments about going without Sky TV were reported. This drove anger in two ways. In one sense, people felt such a claim confirmed his privilege and lack of relatability. On the other hand, as one of our panellists expressed, the gaffe exposed Sunak's failing efforts to try to seem relatable, and therefore a lack of authenticity.

"One things that stood by me for the past few days is how both parties are trying so hard to connect with the 'common' working population. 'My dad was this, I slept in onesies, we didn't have Sky TV' - it's getting to a point where it's almost embarrassing to listen to"

- Sometimes voter, mid-campaign

2.6. THE NEWS MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IS NOT TRUSTED TO SCRUTINISE AND INFORM

With an electorate of 53 million adults, the media is a vital way for national politicians to communicate with the public. The relationship between politicians and the media is complex - on the one hand, the media provides an invaluable channel for government messaging, particularly around new policy announcements. At the same time, the media and news media specifically play a vital scrutinising role - holding the government (and other parties and politicians) to account and exposing areas in which they may be falling short. This relationship between politicians and the news media has been complicated further by the growth of digital media, which presents opportunities and challenges regarding effective communication. It matters not just what message politicians say, but who their messages reach, how the public engages with these messages, and where else the public's attention is being drawn.

Currently, there are several challenges relating to news media and its relationship with politicians that may compromise efforts to build political trust.

PROBLEM

- a. Traditional news media is not trusted by the public to inform or scrutinise politicians
- b. Social media is rife with mis/disinformation and resilience is low
- c. Politicians have prioritised sound bites over substance
- d. Lack of knowledge puts people off engaging with political news media

a. Traditional news media is not trusted by the public to inform or scrutinise politicians

A lack of trust in the news media is widespread. A great portion of the public think the news media are an elite and closed-off network; rather than serving the public interest, they serve their own interests and/or the interests of the powerful. For example, half of people in the UK say journalists "try to manipulate the public to serve the agendas of powerful politicians".⁶⁶ While mistrust of news media is widespread internationally, OECD polling finds that Britain had the very worst of all 30 countries.⁶⁷ Two-thirds of people reported low or no trust in news media (compared to an OECD average of 44%), and only a fifth reported high trust (vs an OECD average of 39%).⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Mont'Alverne, C. The trust gap: how and why news on digital platforms is viewed more sceptically versus news in general. Reuters Institute, 2022. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-gap-how-and-why-news-digital-platforms-viewed-more-sceptically-versus-news-general>

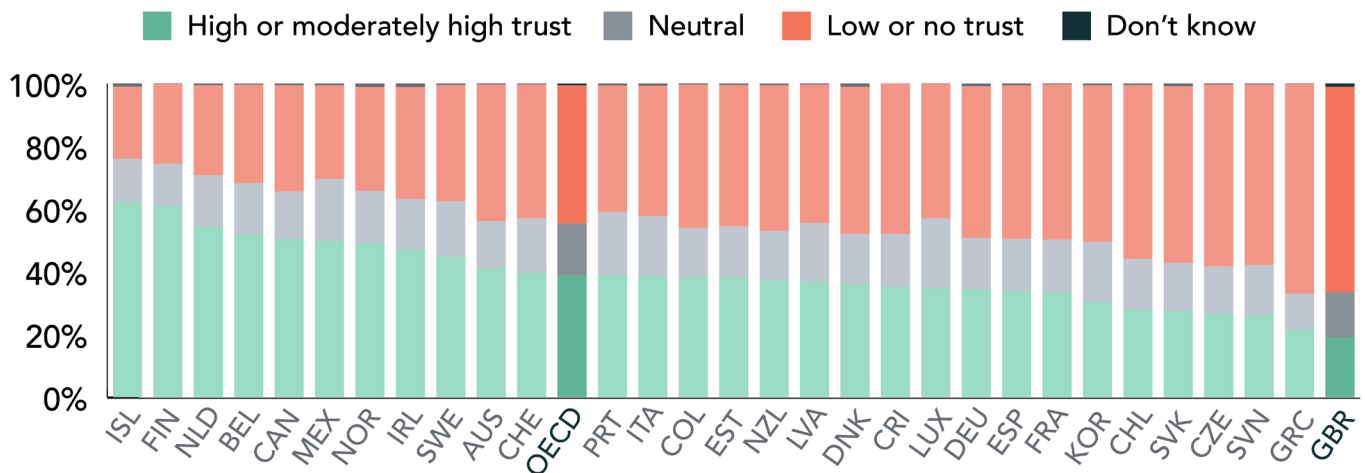
⁶⁷ OECD. OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions - 2024 Results. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

⁶⁸ OECD. OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions - 2024 Results. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

CHART 1

Great Britain has the lowest trust in news media of any OECD country⁶⁹

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely, how much do you trust the news media?



Trust in the news media has also decreased rapidly in recent years. Overall, data by Reuters shows levels of trust in the news media decreasing from 51% to 36% from 2015-24 - with particular falls following the Brexit referendum.⁷⁰ This damage to trust has also been associated with people increasingly trying to avoid the news, reflecting increased political disengagement.⁷¹ That said, the state of trust varies greatly across outlets, with 61% of the public trusting the BBC and 59% trusting Channel 4 News, while other outlets, like GB News (28%) and the Daily Mirror (23%) command less trust.⁷²

Overall, the reasons for a decline in trust in news media are complex, but at its core is a feeling across the public that news media, while facing many competing pressures and trade-offs, has fallen short of delivering its key responsibilities. Across our Trustwtach panel, people felt that political journalism should:

1. Focus mainly on the facts, while grounding any opinions in solid evidence
2. Effectively challenge and call out politicians
3. Report on the stories that are important to the public

On each of these points, however, the public feels the news media has more to do to build their trust. In our polling, less than half of the public each agreed that the news media: (i) had been fair in the level of scrutiny it had applied to different politicians and parties (36%); (ii) effectively held politicians to account during the election campaign (39%); and (iii) had focussed on the stories that matter to people like me (37%).⁷³

⁶⁹ Chart adapted from OECD. OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions - 2024 Results.

Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

⁷⁰ Newman, N. United Kingdom. Digital News Report 2024. Reuters Institute, 2024. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/united-kingdom>

⁷¹ Newman, N. Overview and key findings. Digital News Report 2023. Reuters Institute, 2023. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary>

⁷² Newman, N. United Kingdom. Digital News Report 2024. Reuters Institute, 2024. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/united-kingdom>

⁷³ Demos polling through Focalldata. Nationally representative sample, n=1,000. Conducted 1st-2nd July 2024.

While not the only challenge, a significant one that has influenced the quality of news reporting in recent years is the widespread financial challenges that newsrooms face. Such challenges have included the decline in revenues due to the near collapse in print journalism, the increased competition for attention from digital-first news and social media platforms, changes in media format appetites driven by innovation in entertainment media including short-form video formats, and the shifts in news distribution via search engines and social media platforms. Such challenges have put even the most financially-robust news organisations under considerable pressure to replace revenue shortfalls through putting its highest quality journalism behind pay-walls or relying more heavily on advertising and thus the attention and 'clicks' of audiences. Such market pressures over the last 15-20 years have seen three of the largest regional news publishers in the UK cut their newsrooms by two-thirds, while over 270 local print titles have vanished.⁷⁴

These market changes have also influenced approaches to reporting. Clickbait headlines - sensationalised or misleading headlines designed to attract engagement and increase views to support advertising revenue - are another common example. One study, which used language modelling on 1.67 million Facebook posts by over a hundred media organisations found that use of clickbait-style headlines is widespread and increasing.^{75,76}

Political news is not immune. It is too often about 'gotchas', maximising opportunity for attention-grabbing entertainment, over providing more sobering, accurate and important information. Robbie Gibb, former Director of Communications for Theresa May and BBC political news editor, once explained the following:⁷⁷

"Back in the day, the role of reporter and presenter was to act as an agent for viewers at home, wanting to know what's going on. What's happening now is that the incentives are 'retweets' and 'likes', which totally distorts the type of interview which is done."

As a result, while it is of course important for news media organisations to attract audiences to their work and sustain themselves financially, this should be balanced with maintaining high standards of journalistic integrity and coverage of information that is in the public interest. Our panel recognised the financial pressures that news media organisations face but generally felt that they were not getting the informative balanced perspectives they wanted.

"The print media is really struggling, and you're getting clickbait style news. You're trying to get rage bait, click bait....rather than getting a balanced view"

- Non-voter, post-election

74 Press Gazette, 2024. Available at: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/colossal-decline-of-uk-regional-media-since-2007-revealed/> Ibid, 2022. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/uk-local-newspaper-closures-2022/>.

75 Rony, M. M. U., Hassan, N and Yousuf, M. Diving Deep into Clickbaits: Who Use Them to What Extents in Which Topics with What Effects?. IEEE/ACM International Conference, 2017, pp. 232-239. Available at <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3110025.3110054>

76 Clickbait is defined as "a form of web content that employs writing formulas and linguistic techniques in headlines to trick readers into clicking links, but does not deliver on promises"

77 Adams, T. In Britain's gotcha-clip election, only the shameless politician will survive. The Guardian, 2019. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/17/general-election-car-crash-interviews-destroying-nuance

b. Social media is rife with mis/disinformation and resilience is low

The spreading and harms of mis/disinformation on social media have been well-documented, but we only need to look at the recent riots across the UK to understand some of the risks that can pose.^{78,79} While its direct influence on offline behaviour remains contested, polling shows that the public are concerned about the role that mis/disinformation plays in leading people to miss out on 'important information' or 'challenging viewpoints'.⁸⁰ Members of our panel echoed these concerns.

"The one thing that makes me a bit weary of [social media] is the algorithm behind it. They are leading you to this news article because you've read something previously. So are you getting the full story, getting both sides, or just the little snippet they want me to hear?"

- Usually voter, post-election

Mis/disinformation can spread rapidly and widely across social media, particularly during periods where there is an information vacuum or political and/or social upheaval. Studies show that falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than truthful statements, and that false news reached 1,500 people about six times faster than the truth.⁸¹

Mis/disinformation was a particular concern going into the 2024 general election, given the rise of AI-generated content in recent years. Our polling showed that a quarter of the public thought they had knowingly encountered generative AI or deepfake content during the General Election campaign, and only three in ten felt confident about knowing how to spot it.⁸² Almost two-thirds of people felt concerned about the impact of AI or deepfake content on the political information they consume (63%) and a similar proportion (62%) felt less trusting of online media content as a result.⁸³ Whilst there is limited evidence that AI-generated mis/disinformation had a direct influence on offline voting behaviour, its existence online has clearly contributed to low trust in the accuracy of information more broadly.

c. Politicians have prioritised sound bites over substance

If, when politicians are giving interviews, the most controversial short statements will often be amplified by the media and the wider message is lost, politicians face an incentive to stick incredibly closely to their key message. This can create very robotic interviews that can make for frustrating viewing. For example, Rishi Sunak was criticised for repeating the same few sentences multiple times during interviews, or saying "stick to the plan" (or very similar) 15 times

78 Knight, S., Birchall, C and Knight, P. Conspiracy Loops From Distrust To Conspiracy To Culture Wars. Demos, 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Conspiracy-Loops_Report.pdf

79 Definitions of mis/disinformation are contested. Here we refer to commonly used definitions based on the work of Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, of misinformation as 'false information that is shared, but where no harm is meant, while disinformation refers more specifically to 'false information that is designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit'. The term 'mis/disinformation' is used when we refer to both concepts.

80 Newman, N. Digital News Report 2023. Reuters Institute, 2023. Available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

81 Church, Z. Study: False news spreads faster than the truth. MIT Sloan School, 2018. Available at <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/study-false-news-spreads-faster-truth>

82 Huband-Thompson, B., Kapetanovic, H and Goss, D. Trustwatch 2024 retrospective on the election campaign. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/blogs/trustwatch-2024-retrospective-on-the-election-campaign/>

83 Huband-Thompson, B., Kapetanovic, H and Goss, D. Trustwatch 2024 retrospective on the election campaign. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/blogs/trustwatch-2024-retrospective-on-the-election-campaign/>

in a 30-minute interview.^{84,85}

Our panel generally felt that politicians were dishonest in interviews and briefings, and that they often avoided answering questions.

“A lot of politicians are just liars when it comes to the media, because they’re too scared to open up and be honest”

- Always voter, post-election

“I don’t really enjoy watching [politicians in the media], because the journalists are really trying to trap them and the politicians aren’t giving a straight answer”

- Always voter, post-election

This scepticism also applies to the government communicating its plans - an issue on which the UK performs poorly relative to other countries. Just 28% of Brits say that it is likely that the government, if making a reform, would clearly explain the impacts of those reforms for people, while 53% say that it is unlikely.⁸⁶ This is a lower level of trust than almost all OECD countries - higher than only Latvia, Israel and the Czech Republic.

d. Lack of knowledge is putting people off political discussion

A key feature of our democracy is the open, informed, respectful exchange of ideas. However, in our polling, we found that just over a quarter (26%) of the public had avoided talking about politics during the election campaign because they felt they did not understand it well enough.⁸⁷ There are likely several factors at play here. The current political climate - and particularly our media and social media ecosystem - does not always lend itself to constructive debate and the public may feel reluctant to engage in discussion for fear of being ridiculed or ‘piled on’. There will also be some instances where people do encounter someone who has a particularly keen interest in politics and feel reluctant to express their own views as a consequence, as was the case for one of our Trustwatch panellists:

“If the other person or group had strong feelings or were being very vocal. I avoided the conversation completely as I would not have been able to hold my own. I did talk to others who weren’t engaged like me, but neither of us knew anything!”

- Sometimes voter, post-election

84 Craig, J. Rishi Sunak stuck to his new slogan relentlessly - but some MPs believe it backfired spectacularly. Sky News, 2024. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/rishi-sunak-stuck-to-his-new-slogan-relentlessly-but-some-mps-believe-it-backfired-spectacularly-13051068>

85 Schofield, K. ‘Return Of The Maybot’: Rishi Sunak Rinsed Over Toe-Curling TV Clip. HuffPost, 2023. Available at www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/return-of-the-maybot-sunak-rinsed-over-tv-clip_uk_647618fce4b02325c5dd344c

86 OECD. Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results. 2024. Available at www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

87 Huband-Thompson, B., Kapetanovic, H and Goss, D. Trustwatch 2024 retrospective on the election campaign. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/blogs/trustwatch-2024-retrospective-on-the-election-campaign/>

The fact that just over a quarter of the voting-age population reported avoiding political discussions over the course of the election campaign may also suggest that a lack of political knowledge is acting as a barrier to engagement, which could, in turn, affect trust.

The causality here is likely complex. OECD data suggests that trust in government is closely related to media consumption habits - just over a fifth (22%) of those who prefer not to follow political news have high or moderate trust, compared to 40% of those who follow it in some way.⁸⁸ Here, it may be that some people disengage because their trust is low, but also that disengagement itself drives a lack of trust. As noted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the media faces “the twin challenges of news fatigue and news avoidance” while political disillusionment may itself contribute to declining interest in the news.⁸⁹

Notwithstanding the complexity of the relationship between knowledge and engagement, at present, much of the public have felt they lack sufficient knowledge to engage in political discussion. This threatens to narrow the functioning of our democracy and hinder political trust.

Overall, to improve political trust, we need to create a more positive and credible news media environment and a better-informed, more productive political debate. This will require actions for politicians, social media companies, news media organisations, educators, and the public themselves.

SUMMARY: THE SIX DRIVERS OF LOW TRUST

Through in depth deliberative workshops with 32 ordinary members of the public we have identified six drivers of low trust. Next, we turn to devising strategies for addressing each of these drivers.

88 OECD. Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results. 2024. Available at www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

89 Newman, N. and others. Overview and key findings. Digital News Report 2024. Reuters Institute, 2024. Available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

3. STRATEGIES FOR REBUILDING TRUST

Restoring trust will require ambitious, evidenced strategies that collectively tackle each of the drivers of low trust. The reward, however, will be more effective and constructive politics in the UK, addressing the worrying trends in disengagement and the drift to populism seen elsewhere in the world that threaten the health of our democracy.

The current strategic paradigm does not, however, meet the range or scale of the challenge. Ensuring long-term government delivery and striving for more integrity - which currently makes up the bulk of government efforts to rebuild trust - is critical. Yet, these are basic requirements for a trusted political system. It focuses on ensuring people have a positive experience of political outcomes - i.e. the economy, public services, and the news stories people hear about national leaders - but does not address the deeper sense of detachment from the political system. The government's current narrow approach brings significant risks for two reasons:

1. People may not be persuaded even by positive outcomes without feeling a sense of connection to the political system. In the US, Biden's government has delivered broad economic improvements to the American economy in recent years - including falling inflation and rising wages - but the public do not feel that the economy is improving and trust in the government has stayed level.^{90,91} This suggests delivery is not always enough.
2. Positive outcomes cannot be guaranteed - they are affected by economic shocks, international events, or crises like the pandemic - and a system of trust that relies wholly on outcomes is liable to booms and busts.

To ensure efforts to rebuild trust are successful, and to build a more resilient form of trust, we need a strategy that addresses the wider drivers of low trust beyond delivery and integrity failure. As we've seen in Chapter 2, many people feel detached from the political system.

⁹⁰ Burn-Murdoch, J. Should we believe Americans when they say the economy is bad?. The Financial Times, 2023. Available at www.ft.com/content/9c7931aa-4973-475e-9841-d7ebd54b0f47

⁹¹ Pew Research Centre. Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024. 2024. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>

People feel they lack a voice in politics, have no relationship with their local representatives, and are not represented by or cannot relate to the politicians that operate across the country. Problems are also created by a media environment that - due to misinformation and low context information - does not effectively enable delivery or integrity and is losing the public trust, deepening their sense of detachment from the political system. A wider set of strategies is needed to address these problems.

We have identified five key strategies for rebuilding trust that would help improve not just people's experience of political outcomes but their feeling of connection to the political system.

DRIVERS OF LOW TRUST	STRATEGIES FOR REBUILDING TRUST
The political system is not trusted to deliver	Strategy one: Maintain the focus on long-term delivery
Political actors are not trusted to act with integrity	Strategy two: Sustain efforts on integrity
The political system is not trusted to listen to the public's perspective	Strategy three: Put people at the heart of the policy making process
Local politicians are not trusted to engage with communities	Strategy four: Build a stronger relationship between local politicians and communities
Politicians are not seen as representative or relatable	Strategy five: Make politicians more relatable and representative
The news media environment is not trusted to scrutinise and inform	Enabler: An informative news media environment

The illustration below shows how these strategies come together - going above and beyond the current approach to usher in a new ambitious operating model for the government to win back trust.

It also shows how these strategies amount to a shift from being entirely dependent on improving people's positive experiences of political outcomes to a stronger feeling of connection to the political system.

FIGURE 1
ILLUSTRATION OF CURRENT STRATEGY AND FULL STRATEGY NEEDED



Given that delivery and integrity currently receive significant attention from the government, in this report we commit our focus mainly to the other strategies - those too often missing from the current discourse on trust. While our analysis provides lessons for trust at multiple levels of government (devolved, regional, local), we focus specifically on the politics and media around national government, including MPs and Westminster.



3.1. STRATEGY 1

Maintain the focus on long-term delivery

The delivery of meaningful change is essential to building political trust. It shows the public that the political system can make a real impact on their lives. We have seen how various failures in delivery - economic stagnation and failing public services, broken promises, short-termist politics, and political visions without clarity or ambition - have diminished trust in recent years and threaten to continue doing so unless substantial improvements are made. The government is therefore right to put delivery at the heart of its trust-building strategy.

Long-term delivery requires, among other things, a strategic view on the economy - and the government has sent some positive signals in this regard. The Chancellor's changes to the fiscal policy making process - to hold only one fiscal event each year and have a spending review every two years, covering at least three years of spending - should help ensure fiscal policy is less subject to political whims and takes a longer-term view.⁹² Similarly, Labour's pre-campaign proposal to combine the various bodies dealing with infrastructure development into one 'super agency' - which follows the Demos recommendation in our report, *Powering the Superpower* - should also help support longer-term thinking by ensuring that the people responsible for planning and delivering infrastructure are embedded within the long-term strategy for infrastructure.^{93,94}

However, some areas that have received less attention from the government remain essential pieces of the puzzle for long-term delivery. For instance, there remains a lack of accountability for long-term delivery at the top levels of government. The Liaison Committee (a select committee made up of the chairs of other committees which takes evidence from the Prime Minister)⁹⁵ only meets two to three times a year, receives little attention, and is not set up for scrutiny of long-term plans and delivery,⁹⁶ while the format of PMQs does not lend itself to substantive discussion or scrutiny. The government must continue its focus on ensuring long-term delivery by tackling such issues.



3.2. STRATEGY 2

Sustain efforts on integrity

An Ethics and Integrity Commission is needed, but it must also drive meaningful reform

The government has also rightly focused on integrity. Its proposal to form an Ethics and Integrity Commission to oversee and enforce standards in government could mark a critical step forward in improving standards of integrity among political figures, and in turn public trust.⁹⁷ However, we await further details about this body and whether it will be given the powers and recognition required to have a substantial impact. It is also worth acknowledging that the government is starting on the back foot here after a series of scandals around political appointments and donations to key figures.

92 Pope, T. Rachel Reeves must reset spending reviews to deliver on the government's missions. Institute for Government, 2024. Available at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/chancellors-statement-spending-review

93 Williams, J. Labour vows to break 'inertia' of UK infrastructure delivery. The Financial Times, 2024. Available at www.ft.com/content/4f8337e9-e0f4-4d5a-a320-eee1870ef2d6

94 O'Brien, A. and Goss, D. Powering the Superpower: Upgrading the UK's industrial infrastructure to unlock technological transformation for growth. Demos, 2023. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/powering-the-superpower-upgrading-the-uks-industrial-infrastructure-to-unlock-technological-transformation-for-growth/>

95 White, H. Parliamentary Scrutiny of Government. Institute for Government, 2015. Available at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Parliamentary%20scrutiny%20briefing%20note%20final.pdf>

96 White, H. The Liaison Committee. Institute for Government, 2023. Available at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/liaison-committee>

97 Riddell, P. The unanswered questions posed by Labour's plan for a new Ethics and Integrity Commission. The Constitution Unit, 2024. Available at <https://constitution-unit.com/2024/07/01/the-unanswered-questions-posed-by-labours-plan-for-a-new-ethics-and-integrity-commission/>

Chapter 2 described how the new government has faced a series of challenges around integrity in its first months in government. But these should not cause them to shy away but provide further impetus to strengthen the focus on integrity. It must ensure the Ethics and Integrity Commission is established and given sufficient powers to make a difference. There are also a range of ways for the government to improve standards of integrity covered extensively in existing policy recommendations. For example, the Institute for Government, UCL Constitution Unit, and the UK Governance Project signed a letter recommending that the government: (i) Provide independent enforcement of a new ministerial code; (ii) Establish new systems for managing conflicts of interest and lobbying; (iii) Improve regulation of post-government employment; (iv) Ensure appointments to the Lords are only made on merit and other public appointments are rigorous and transparent; and (v) Strengthen the independence of the honours system, including by ending prime ministerial patronage.

Similarly, a recent Demos paper, *The Integrity Mismatch*, found that, because politicians and civil servants face different standards of integrity (e.g. it may be permissible for politicians to favour electoral advantage over ethical concerns, but not for civil servants) the code of conduct for civil servants witnessing behaviour by politicians is unclear.⁹⁸ The paper calls for clearer codes of conduct and mechanisms to drive a culture shift. In particular, civil servants need better options for responding to ethical concerns. Current methods - such as raising concerns with colleagues, raising concerns with the politician, asking for 'letters of ministerial direction', or blowing the whistle - are hindered by concerns they will either be ineffective at deterring the behaviour or may lead to reprisal against the civil servant.⁹⁹ Instead, the government should introduce more effective processes that minimise the risk of reprisal. This could include:

- More active use of reporting channels to senior staff, particularly accounting officers, the Cabinet Secretary or the Civil Service Commission
- Use of letters of ministerial direction to identify concerns about behavioural integrity, rather than just about public spending decisions
- Greater record-keeping on reports of misbehaviour and scrutiny of records by the National Audit Office or a parliamentary committee.

This recommendation is echoed in the Cabinet Office report on Downing Street parties during the pandemic, which called for "easier ways for staff to raise such concerns informally, outside of the line management chain."¹⁰⁰ It also reflects recommendations from the Institute for Government and the Boardman Report on government contracts during the Covid pandemic.^{101,102}

Stronger efforts are needed to crack down on lies and factual errors by political figures

With 58% of people 'almost never' trusting politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner, it is vital that steps are taken to reduce lying and build trust in our political discourse.¹⁰³ The Welsh government is taking quite dramatic steps to address this problem. After pressure from Plaid Cymru, the government promised to introduce a ban on politicians lying by 2026,

98 Boo, M. *The Integrity Mismatch*. Demos, 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/The-Integrity-Mismatch_MB_Paper_August.pdf

99 A 'letter of ministerial direction' is an official letter from a civil servant if they think a spending proposal does not meet the required standards.

100 UK Government. *Findings of Second Permanent Secretary's Investigation Into Alleged Gatherings on Government Premises During Covid Restrictions*. 2022. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1078404/2022-05-25_FINAL_FINDINGS_OF_SECOND_PERMANENT_SECRETARY_INTO_ALLEGED_GATHERINGS.pdf

101 UK Government. *Boardman Report on Cabinet Office Communications Procurement*. 2020. Available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/608a6e0ce90e076ab07a6d92/Boardman-Review-of-Cabinet-Office-COVID-19-Communications-Procurement-final-report.pdf>

102 Durrant, T. *Rebuilding trust in public life*. Institute for Government, 2024. Available at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/restoring-trust-in-public-life.pdf

103 National Centre for Social Research. *Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low*. 2024. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

whereby any politicians or candidate found guilty of deliberate deception would be removed from the Senedd.¹⁰⁴ While this reform recognises the importance of the issue at hand, there is a danger that this could harm the quality of political debate and undermine the legitimacy of parliament. UCL's Citizen Assembly, for example, felt that having political processes deal with the conduct of MPs, rather than courts, was core to a healthy democracy.¹⁰⁵

An alternative way to tackle politicians lying is to support fact-checking by respected organisations. Research suggests this can be effective, with a study in the US showing that sending letters to legislators reminding them of fact-checking activities - and emphasising the potential reputational consequences of negative fact-check ratings - made legislators half as likely as others to receive negative ratings from fact-checking organisations in the future.¹⁰⁶ To emulate this in the UK, the House of Commons Library could send around a quarterly newsletter to all MPs to detail all factual errors it has confirmed in Parliament (which happens when MPs report these errors to the Library), as well as any corrections made, and the dates of both.

Strategy 1 and Strategy 2 have recognised the importance of the government's reforms to ensure long-term delivery (e.g. fiscal planning reforms) and its plans to ensure integrity (particularly its proposed Ethics and Integrity Commission). Yet, on delivery, there remains more to be done, and on integrity, we are yet to see how the plans play out. To ensure meaningful improvements, the government needs to maintain and strengthen its ambition, drawing on the wealth of existing research and policy development concerning delivery integrity. In the rest of this chapter, we explore a set of wider strategies that aim to address other important drivers of low trust, arguing that these warrant significant attention if the government is to build a more resilient form of political trust.



3.3. STRATEGY 3

Put people at the heart of the policy making process

It is critical that the public feel that they and people like them have a voice in politics - and that politicians and the government will respect their voice. Yet, we have seen that national policy making does not sufficiently engage the public on long-term decisions, and this undermines the sense that the public has a voice in decision-making. As outlined in the *Citizens' White Paper*, addressing this requires embedding public participation across national government policy making.¹⁰⁷

The government should embed participatory policy making processes across national government, by introducing participatory methods at various levels of policy making, reforming civil service procedures and developing independent oversight of participatory methods

104 Deanes, D. Ban on Welsh politicians lying promised by 2026. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cv2gme2y98no

105 Renwick, A. and others. Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK. The Constitution Unit, 2022. Available at www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/report_2_final_digital.pdf

106 Nyhan, B. and Reifler, J. The Effect of Fact-Checking on Elites: A Field Experiment on U.S. State Legislators. *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 59, issue 3, 2015, pp. 628-40. Available at www.jstor.org/stable/24583087

107 Levin, M. and others. Citizens' White Paper. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper>

We've seen how current policy making processes are limited by the closed-off networks, norms, power dynamics, and political norms of Westminster. This undermines not only trust in the policy making process, but the quality of those policies as well. Escaping this requires opening policy making up to bring in people and organisations beyond Westminster. Changes such as greater devolution to local or combined authorities, greater power and funding to the third sector and community groups, or government officials being moved outside of London may play a role in this. But it also requires a fundamental shift in the process through which we design policy - not just where policy is designed.

Our research at Demos suggests one important piece in this puzzle is to bring the public directly into the policy making process. The *Citizens' White Paper* shows that participatory processes can provide a uniquely refreshing view - one that:

- a. Is not affected by the 'Whitehall bubble'
- b. Can empower policy makers to try new things
- c. Isn't simply informed only by the 'usual suspects'
- d. Which is less captured by short-termist political turbulence.

As a result, bringing people into policy development upstream can also help governments avoid the costs - not only to trust but also to public finances - of policy failure, u-turns or inertia (when resistance to change holds back progress). Despite this, it is not yet mainstream in the policy areas where the public think it should be (e.g. public services (74% agreed), moral issues (70%), and infrastructure issues (66%)).¹⁰⁸ Crucially, it might not be right to involve the public on all issues - participation will offer greater benefits on some issues over others. In our polling, for example, less than half (45%) felt the public should be involved in international or defence issues.

Demos's research with politicians and civil servants shows that many barriers to wider uptake remain, including a lack of political will, knowledge and skills amongst policy makers.¹⁰⁹ To address these, various changes should be made, including:

- **Embedding participatory methods at various levels of policy making** - including in the prioritisation and design of the government's missions, specific politically knotty and publicly salient issues, select committee enquiries, and post-legislative scrutiny
- **Reforms to civil service procedures** - including training and support, building departmental participation units, developing senior civil service champions, and new policy making guidance.
- **Developing independent oversight** - such as independent advisory board overseeing the participatory methods in government, moving towards a new independent, arms-length body.

¹⁰⁸ Levin, M. and others. *Citizens' White Paper*. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper>

¹⁰⁹ Levin, M. and others. *Citizens' White Paper*. Demos, 2024. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper>



3.4. STRATEGY 4

Build a stronger relationship between local politicians and communities

While the UK's single member constituency system is set up to build strong relationships between local politicians and communities, this promise is not always realised. Instead, weak relationships threaten to hinder political trust. Through our research, we have found that two key issues underlie this problem:

- Current methods of local engagement do not reach enough people
- MPs are often not seen as community champions

Our proposed strategy should help to build stronger relationships between local politicians and communities

Empower MPs to act as community champions

To empower MPs to act as community champions, the government should provide them with additional funding. IPSA should also provide a greater focus on community outreach in the job roles and responsibilities it outlines for MP offices, and training should be provided for new MPs on community outreach and being 'community champions'.

We have seen that MPs reaching out to communities and acting as community champions is essential for building trust among the public. Many MPs already do this very well, holding surgeries in different parts of their constituencies, meeting with community groups, and ensuring their constituents feel well-represented through casework. For instance, the website of Chi Onwurah MP, former Shadow Minister for Industrial Strategy, Science and Innovation, and the current Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee, emphasises the 49,000+ constituent cases she has helped.¹¹⁰ This helps to show that alongside her other important roles in Westminster, she is still a strong local champion for her constituents.

There are countless other examples across different parties of MPs who rightfully place their constituents at the heart of their work. However, at present, a lack of training and staff resources can present challenges to MP's local impact and engagement. This needs urgent attention, particularly in the context of so many new MPs taking up their positions after the recent general election.

To empower MPs to engage in more community outreach, they need to have:

- Training on effective outreach
- Support through formal guidelines
- Greater capacity and resources

Training on effective outreach and championing constituents

MPs currently receive a variety of training: the Hansard Society provides training on parliamentary processes, the Members and Peers' Staff Association on getting offices set up,

¹¹⁰ Chi Onwurah MP. Available at: <https://chionwurahmp.com/>

and the Institute for Government on government engagement.^{111,112,113} Such training encourages new practices, and helps ensure they are done effectively. However, as far as we are aware, there is currently no training for MPs and their offices on community engagement and outreach. This is something that should be offered to all MPs, funded by the parties and provided by a third sector organisation.

This training should provide insights and expertise on scalable methods of community outreach and championing community interests, beyond those used regularly at the moment, including:

- a. Speaking at public events or ‘town hall meetings’ and in one to ones with constituents** (where politicians speak to audiences of local constituents, with a question-and-answer session). Town halls are often used in the United States, and multiple studies show that even online versions increase attendees’ trust in their Member of Congress.^{114,115} Town hall meetings are rarely hosted by UK MPs, perhaps due to the cost or security risk, but running these online could help address both of these concerns.
- b. Street surgeries.** Patsy Calton (Lib Dem MP for Cheadle from 2001-05) was praised for doing surgeries in different streets across her constituency, with one report noting how she had, at the time, covered over two-thirds of her constituency streets.¹¹⁶ This practice could help address barriers that constituents might face in accessing MP surgeries (e.g. difficulty travelling or searching online for bookings).

Support through formal guidelines

MPs are guided to manage staff activities through IPSA guidelines, which describe staff job descriptions and responsibilities.^{117,118} Within this, there are mentions of responsibilities for engaging “professionally, confidentially and with care and integrity with members of the public, through a variety of methods” or “engaging, targeted content and messages across a range of channels”. However, this does not point MPs to the kind of proactive engagement that is needed.

IPSA also currently outlines 18 different ‘executive’ job roles (those focussed on public engagement) listed in the IPSA guidelines. Yet, none of these has a specific focus on proactive engagement or outreach. In fact, across the long list of key responsibilities for IPSA job roles, there is no mention of ‘community’ nor ‘outreach’.¹¹⁹ While there are discussions of roles on social media and to ‘assist with arrangements for events’, there is no mention of responsibilities around, for example, leafleting, hosting public events or Q&A sessions, engaging with community organisations (only a responsibility to “maintain positive on-going relationships with members of the public, organisations in Westminster and constituents”), or reaching communities with low engagement or who face barriers to engagement.

It is critical that MPs are enabled and encouraged to engage in more community outreach by IPSA. IPSA should introduce new staffing roles and guidance focussed on these areas.

111 Hansard Society. Hansard Society. Available at: <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/>

112 The Members and Peers Staff Association. The Members and Peers’ Staff Association (MAPSA) Available at: <https://w4mp.org/w4mp-guides/groups-which-staff-can-join/representation/the-members-and-peers-staff-association/>

113 The Institute for Government. IfG Academy. Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ifg-academy>

114 Boulianne, S. Building Faith in Democracy: Deliberative Events, Political Trust and Efficacy. Research Online at MacEwan, 2018. Available at <https://roam.macewan.ca:8443/server/api/core/bitstreams/76226497-1f85-4d61-8742-acc3812be491/content>

115 The Congressional Management Foundation. Online Town Halls, A Tool to Re-establish the Public’s Trust?. 2015. Available at www.congressfoundation.org/news/blog/1097-online-town-halls-a-tool-to-re-establish-the-publics-trust

116 BBC News. Baroness Williams’ tips for the top. 2004. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3664262.stm

117 McKee, R. MPs’ Staff, the Unsung Heroes an Examination of Who They Are and What They Do. The Constitution Unit, 2023. Available at www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/ucl_cu_report3_digital_final.pdf

118 IPSA. MP Staff Job Descriptions and Pay Bands for 2023-24. 2023. Available at https://assets.ctfassets.net/s90k6prbkeee/3eN8MaLMcUU0AMi4j7A0uM/5a7ca19be9b89f5e4f53185459d19/MP_staff_JDs_spreadsheet_2023-24.pdf

119 IPSA. MP Staff Job Descriptions and Pay Bands for 2023-24. 2023. Available at https://assets.ctfassets.net/s90k6prbkeee/3eN8MaLMcUU0AMi4j7A0uM/5a7ca19be9b89f5e4f53185459d19/MP_staff_JDs_spreadsheet_2023-24.pdf

Greater capacity and resources

While training and guidelines would help support community activism and outreach, a key barrier preventing MPs doing more of this remains time and cost. The most effective solution here would be to increase funding for MP offices. While some political parties do take steps to fund local community engagement, this generally focuses on public engagement with the parties rather than with the MP and their work for constituents.¹²⁰ If MPs were provided with additional funds - specifically earmarked to community outreach and delivery - they could hire more staff or fund resources to support this (e.g. surveys or leaflets).

In 2022-23, each MP was typically restricted to an office budget of £28,570 and a staffing budget of £221,750.¹²¹ The total spend of MPs was £121.5m on staff and £13.9m on offices - £135.4m in total. The table below lays out the impacts of two options for funding increases.

FUNDING INCREASE	TOTAL COST (2023-24)	% OF GOVERNMENT SPENDING	ADDITIONAL CAPACITY PER MP
25% increase	£33.9m	0.003%	An additional £55,400 for MP staffing and £7,100 for MP office costs - enough to hire an additional senior staff member in each office.
40% increase	£52.4m	0.0045%	£88,700 for staff spending - enough to fund two additional staff members in each office.



3.5. STRATEGY 5

Make politicians more relatable and representative

In Chapter 2, we documented a disconnect between the public and the politicians that aim to represent them, with our Trustwatch panel voicing concerns that politicians do not understand their life and concerns, and that politicians behave inauthentically. This threatens to drive a rift between people and politicians, and hinder trust-building.

To address this issue, we must ensure that high-quality potential politicians, and those who feel more relatable to the public, are not deterred from politics due to financial barriers or other concerns, such as fear of potential abuse or threats. Beyond this, political parties must ensure they are set up to select a strong field of representative, relatable, and competent candidates. This requires:

- a. Removing financial barriers to becoming an MP
- b. Making politics a safer and more attractive profession
- c. Ensuring robust and transparent processes for selecting MPs

¹²⁰ The Labour Party. NEC Development Fund Application. Available at <https://labour.org.uk/resources/nec-development-fund-application/>

¹²¹ Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. The Scheme of MPs' Staffing and Business Costs. Available at: <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/publications/the-scheme>

Remove financial barriers to becoming an MP

Parties should bolster the means-tested grants available to candidates who may struggle with the financial burden of becoming an MP, to cover the full expected costs for that candidate.

Running a campaign to become an MP is expensive. After taking into account reduced working hours, plus costs of advertising, transport, childcare, technology, accommodation (e.g. campaign office) etc., one study puts the average cost of being a parliamentary candidate in the 2015 election at around £11,100. This cost tripled for those with a good chance of winning a marginal seat, and Conservatives who won in marginal seats reported spending £121,000 on average.^{122,123}

A range of interviews with candidates or potential candidates suggests the cost does put people off running.^{124,125} This is reported to primarily affect people on lower incomes. Isabel Hardman, who wrote the book *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians* in 2018, noted that the “greatest barrier to us getting the right MPs was the sheer cost of standing for parliament”.¹²⁶

Both main parties do have bursary schemes, but they are too small and candidates can still face significant financial barriers. If we want high-quality candidates, representing a range of backgrounds and perspectives, we need to remove cost-related barriers to becoming an MP.

PARTY	REASON	AMOUNT	POTENTIAL COVERAGE
Conservative	For candidates “on low incomes in marginal seats”, to support them “to give up work or work part time for the run in to the election.” ¹²⁷	Total amount available across all recipients is £50,000 per year on average.	This would cover the full costs for less than five candidates on average, and less than half the costs of a single candidate in a Conservative marginal.
Labour	For candidates from working class or low income backgrounds, or as disability support	The maximum bursary for those from working class or low income backgrounds is £5,000. ¹²⁸	This would cover less than half of the average costs, and a quarter of the average cost of winning in a Labour marginal. ¹²⁹

122 Hardman, I. So few can afford to stand for parliament, it's no wonder we get the wrong MPs. The Guardian, 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/24/westminster-star-politicians-parliament-political>

123 Allegretti, A. 'Huge' cost of becoming an MP 'pricing people out of politics'. Sky News, 2018. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/huge-cost-of-becoming-an-mp-pricing-people-out-of-politics-11489543>

124 Hardman, I. So few can afford to stand for parliament, it's no wonder we get the wrong MPs. The Guardian, 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/24/westminster-star-politicians-parliament-political>

125 Murray, R. It's a rich man's world: How class and glass ceilings intersect for UK parliamentary candidates. International Political Science Review, Vol. 44, issue 1, 2023, pp. 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211040025>

126 Hardman, I. So few can afford to stand for parliament, it's no wonder we get the wrong MPs. The Guardian, 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/24/westminster-star-politicians-parliament-political>

127 Ross, T. Tories to recruit more working-class MPs with £250,000 for bursaries. The Telegraph, 2015. Available at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/11909908/Tories-to-recruit-more-working-class-MPs-with-250000-for-bursaries.html

128 The Labour Party. How to be selected as a Parliamentary Candidate. Available at <https://labour.org.uk/resources/how-to-be-selected-as-a-parliamentary-candidate/>

129 Allegretti, A. 'Huge' cost of becoming an MP 'pricing people out of politics'. Sky News, 2018. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/huge-cost-of-becoming-an-mp-pricing-people-out-of-politics-11489543>

Make politics a safer and more attractive profession

The police need to ensure that politicians are given the support and protection they need, alongside guidance on how to respond to abuse and intimidation. In addition, the government and parliament as an institution need to take steps to create a safe, more inclusive environment for politicians.

If we want talented people from different backgrounds and perspectives, and with a range of knowledge and skills, to enter political life, we need to create a safe environment to be a politician. Politics will always be a demanding career and politicians should expect to receive intense scrutiny from their constituents, the press, fellow politicians, and others. However, in recent years we have seen a deeply concerning coarsening of our political discourse and of political life in general, which needs to be addressed.

Hate speech, abuse, harassment and death threats are common experiences for politicians. Police data shows that MPs reported 342 alleged crimes in 2018, while a 2019 BBC survey of MPs found that over 60% of respondents had contacted the police about threats against them in the year prior.^{130,131}

Abuse is particularly severe for women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. For example, a study by Amnesty International of tweets about women MPs found that BAME MPs received over three times the number of abusive tweets.¹³² These problems also exist within parliament. Women MPs and MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to feel that the culture of parliament is inclusive, likely deterring potential candidates from pursuing a career in parliament.

- a. Only 37% of women MPs agreed that 'the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me', compared to a majority of men (55%).¹³³
- b. 69% of women MPs and 49% of all MPs have witnessed sexist behaviour in Parliament in the last five years.¹³⁴
- c. 62% of BAME MPs responding to a survey by ITV reported facing "racism or racial profiling" while in parliament, with 51% reporting this from other MPs.¹³⁵

As well as causing great harm to individuals, families, friends and communities, this threatens to create a downward spiral, where a career in politics is seen as less attractive, fewer good people enter it, public life becomes poorer, and this increases hostility towards politicians.¹³⁶ Moreover, these findings raise concerns that people from backgrounds that are already less represented in parliament will be put off a career in politics.

130 Oral evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, 8 May 2019, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/9296/pdf/>

131 Manning, L. and Kemp, P. MPs describe threats, abuse and safety fears. BBC News, 2019. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49247808

132 Amnesty International UK. Black and Asian Women MPs Abused More Online. 2017. Available at www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps

133 Fawcett Society. A House For Everyone: A Case for Modernising Parliament. 2023. Available at www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone

134 Fawcett Society. A House For Everyone: A Case for Modernising Parliament. 2023. Available at www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone

135 Walker, P. Most BME MPs have experienced racism in parliament, study finds. The Guardian, 2020. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/17/black-minority-ethnic-mps-racism-in-parliament-study

136 Ganesh, J. The doom loop of modern politics. The Financial Times, 2024. Available at www.ft.com/content/81614cb1-162e-400e-9d7e-f6ee22e3eafc

Beyond deterring people from becoming politicians, abuse has a clear impact on MP's ability to do their job properly, as reported by MPs themselves:¹³⁷

- a. 93% of women MPs said that online abuse or harassment negatively impacts how they feel about being an MP
- b. 73% of women MPs said they 'do not use social media to speak on certain issues because of the abusive environment online', compared to 51% of men

Abuse may therefore also lower a politician's propensity to take risks or decisive actions, for fear of the abuse and intimidation they might receive. Much more needs to be done to create a political environment that is welcoming and safe for all, and to build more trusting, productive relationships between politicians and the public. This should include greater analysis of the problem, training for police and parliamentarians, and resources to support parliamentarians and their families.

Ensure robust and transparent processes for selecting MPs

Parties should ensure that official processes for selecting parliamentary candidates are more democratic, transparent, and robust. In constituencies where political engagement is particularly low, or in safe seats in which individual candidates face little democratic pressure once elected, primary selections (with the vote open to all constituents) should be considered.

Local constituents choose their MP in elections. Yet, given how little most people know about specific MP candidates as people, most people vote based on the party they represent. The specific MP candidate therefore mainly gets their personal mandate from the party - when they are selected by party members and/or central party staff - rather than from the public. This selection process is often opaque, rushed, and without due process. If we want to build political trust, parties need better processes for picking candidates.

Michael Crick, a journalist who has spent several years investigating local candidate selections, argues that the process by which central parties select candidates often seems politically motivated or done in an unprofessional manner.¹³⁸ He recalls investigating the selection of Jared O'Mara, who was imprisoned for fraud:

"It was purely a system of NEC [National Executive Committee] panels, each region had a panel, and spent one day picking all the candidates in non-held seats in that region, purely on the basis of three people sitting round a table with a member of staff going through the CVs and applications and saying 'Right, he'll do for this. Ring him up and tell him....No interviews, no questions, no meetings, no meeting the members"

Before becoming party leader, Keir Starmer recognised the issue of excluding party members from selections, arguing that "The selections for Labour candidates needs to be more democratic and we should end NEC impositions of candidates. Local Party members should

137 Fawcett Society. A House For Everyone: A Case for Modernising Parliament. 2023. Available at www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone

138 Gimson, A. and Goodman, P. Interview: Crick on the "purge" in candidate selections of the Labour Left, and the threat to democracy posed by localism. Conservative Home, 2023. Available at <https://conservativehome.com/2023/03/15/interview-crick-on-the-purge-in-candidate-selections-of-the-labour-left-and-the-threat-to-democracy-posed-by-localism/>

select their candidates for every election".¹³⁹ He has since faced criticism for failing to follow through with this as leader, particularly before the 2024 General Election. After various safe seats were left without candidates not long before the election (because the previous candidate stood down, for example), Labour imposed emergency measures to allow small three-person panels from the NEC to select candidates, without input from party members.¹⁴⁰ Subsequently, many NEC members themselves were selected.

Efforts should be made to ensure that selection processes are more democratic, transparent, and robust. This will help parties access a wider field of candidates. While we do not recommend that the UK emulate countries like New Zealand, which have laws requiring democratic procedures in candidate selection processes, it is essential that parties take steps to change in this area.¹⁴¹

One option to improve selection and the representativeness of politicians would be the introduction of primary contests (which open up candidate elections to constituents beyond party members). Primaries have been used in Britain many times - with the Conservatives running hundreds of primary selections since 2003 (although the number has decreased over time).¹⁴² These were run in two forms:¹⁴³

- **Primary meetings** (the more common format) where constituents could attend a meeting and vote for candidates, with attendance from generally 100-500 people.
- **Postal primaries** (used very rarely) where all registered voters in a constituency could vote by postal ballot. These have seen relatively large turnouts, at 25% and 18% of the constituency in the Totnes and Gosport primaries respectively.¹⁴⁴

One concern with primaries, however, is the cost, with primary meetings estimated to cost £10,000, and postal primaries estimated at around £40,000.¹⁴⁵ With this in mind, parties could prioritise primary elections in seats where trust is particularly low or in safe seats where MPs may face little electoral pressure from the constituency.



3.6. ENABLER

An informative news media environment

National politicians primarily engage with the public through mass media - be that television, radio, newspapers, or social media. Politicians use the media ecosystem to inform the public about their work, but they are also held to account by it. How this complex relationship works, and how the public engages with it, is critical in enabling both delivery and integrity on the one hand (by effectively holding politicians to account on this) and people's feeling of connection to the political system. However, as detailed in Chapter 2, we have seen that four key problems with the media environment continue to drive low trust:

- Traditional news media is not trusted by the public to inform or scrutinise politicians
- Social media is rife with mis/disinformation and resilience is low

139 Tweet (X) by Keir Starmer, 4th Feb. 2020. Available at https://x.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1224662165271056385?lang=en-GB

140 Haf Jones, C. Labour criticised for 'parachuting' in candidate. BBC News, 2024. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cw993v797ggo

141 New Zealand Government. Electoral Act 1993, s 71. Available at www.parliament.nz/mi/visit-and-learn/how-parliament-works/parliamentary-practice-in-new-zealand/chapter-3-electoral/#_ftn115

142 Alexandre-Collier, A. The 'Open Garden of Politics': The impact of open primaries for candidate selection in the British Conservative Party. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 18, issue 3, 2016, pp. 706-723. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116636518>

143 Williams, R. and Paun, A. What works in candidate selection?. Institute for Government, 2011. Available at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/What%20works%20in%20candidate%20selection.pdf

144 Williams, R. and Paun, A. What works in candidate selection?. Institute for Government, 2011. Available at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/What%20works%20in%20candidate%20selection.pdf

145 Williams, R. and Paun, A. What works in candidate selection?. Institute for Government, 2011. Available at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/What%20works%20in%20candidate%20selection.pdf

- Politicians have prioritised sound bites over substance
- Lack of knowledge puts people off engaging with political news media

Each of these problems needs to be addressed. The strategy therefore involves four key objectives:

- a. Correct the market failure in trusted news
- b. Encourage more informative parliamentary debates
- c. Improve political knowledge among the public
- d. Help the public identify and challenge mis/disinformation

Correct the market failure in trusted news

The government should increase its focus on supporting quality, independent, public interest journalism to give people more faith in their understanding of what's happening in politics

The debate about poor information environments has been imbalanced with an overly narrow focus on preventing and removing mis/disinformation. In addition to strengthening resilience to mis/disinformation (discussed below), we need to rebalance the conversation to improve the availability and accessibility of high-quality news to people when they need it.

Academia, campaigners and policy-makers have focused on strategies to tackle mis and disinformation in order to improve trust in the information environment and its consequences for political understanding and debate. However, less attention has been paid to strengthening the information environment to ensure people have access to high-quality, public interest news when they need it to help them understand a political debate or context.¹⁴⁶

The government has already committed to a strategy to support local and regional news to thrive and help counter some of the problems experienced by the participants in our research.¹⁴⁷ The commitment to a local news strategy is a welcome development from the new government. We would urge them to consider two specific things within it:

- 1. Create a new Institute for Public Interest News with public funding for local news to address the market failure in provision of public interest news, as recommended by the Cairncross Independent Inquiry.¹⁴⁸**

Cairncross recommended: “the creation of a new Institute for Public Interest News. Its governance should be carefully designed to ensure complete freedom from any obligations, political or commercial. Its strategic objective would be to ensure the future provision of public-interest news.”

¹⁴⁶ ‘Public interest news’ refers to ethical and impartial journalism that informs and empowers the public about the things that matter most to us.

¹⁴⁷ McKeon, C. Tech companies should do more to promote local news, says Nandy. 2024. Available at <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/tech/labour-party-prime-minister-liverpool-society-of-editors-b1183673.html>

¹⁴⁸ The Cairncross Review. 2019. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c6bfcd4e5274a72b933311d/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf

As Cairncross conceived it, the Institute for Public Interest news, which follows international and US precedence, would have a governance system designed to be entirely independent of both commercial and political interests and would have several functions, including (but not limited to):

- Collaborating with partners on funding proposals, and providing a central focus point for the many institutions seeking to contribute funds, organisation or ideas: not just the BBC but also the platforms, industry bodies, and philanthropists. The Institute, constituted to be independent of government interference and commercial interests, should act as a channel for funding to the sector.
- Becoming a centre of excellence and good practice for public-interest news, carrying out or commissioning research, building partnerships with universities, and developing the intellectual basis for measures to improve the accessibility and readership of quality news online.
- Using its convening power to encourage the adoption of proven good practice across the industry.
- Working with relevant partners in developing ways to increase media literacy and trust in journalism among the adult population in particular.
- Conducting research and collecting information about the challenges faced by the newspaper industry to inform consideration of mergers, especially among local and regional publishers, by the Competition and Markets Authority.
- Liaising with public bodies, to help them present information in ways that are more accessible to public-interest journalists. This might include reforms to the way courts and inquests report their work and their decisions.

Since the last government ruled out pursuing the central body in response to Cairncross, trust in politics and faith in the information ecosystem has declined even further.

We urge the government to take action on Cairncross's recommendation, which was widely welcomed internationally.

Furthermore, the Cairncross Review, the Culture Media and Sports Select Committee, Nesta and the News for All campaign have all previously called for public funding for local news to address the market failure in the provision of public interest news.¹⁴⁹ Demos has also previously suggested a £50 million a year investment could stimulate the local news market. This should be administered via Local News Funds, modelled on the network of community foundations, and could be informed by Local News Plans.^{150,151} We urge the government to also consider this recommendation.

2. Develop ways to exert pressure on social media platforms to surface relevant public interest news to audiences at appropriate times in the political cycle.

The provision of quality trusted and relevant news to people, close to where they live, is only part of the story of improving the information ecosystem. We also have to ensure that it is appearing in the social media feeds and search results where most people now find their information. Lisa Nandy, Secretary of State for DCMS, has suggested that she will use the local news strategy to look at how the government can negotiate with the social media and search

¹⁴⁹ House of Commons, 2023. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcmums/153/summary.html>; Nesta, 2023. Future News Pilot Fund. Available at https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Nesta_Future_News_Pilot_Fund_End_Of_Prog.pdf; News For All. Public Interest News Foundation. Available at <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/news-for-all>

¹⁵⁰ Demos and PINF. Driving Disinformation. 2024. p104 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Driving-Disinformation_final.pdf

¹⁵¹ UK Community Foundations. Available at <https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/>

platforms to get local news a “fair hearing online”.¹⁵²

Demos has previously called for a “Must Carry” bridge into social media platforms for local news.¹⁵³ Much like television broadcasting’s Must Carry duties, stipulated in the Communications Act 2003, DCMS and Ofcom should consider requiring tech platforms to carry certain forms of local news, including news that meets people’s critical information needs during emergencies as well as elections at important and sensitive moments in the political cycle.¹⁵⁴

Big tech platforms should also be legally required to negotiate in good faith with local news providers whose content they carry to ensure they are treated on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms, including in the distribution of relevant data and revenue. The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumer Act, passed during the ‘wash-up’ process in May 2024, has already afforded new powers to the new Digital Markets Unit, a division of the Competition and Markets Authority.¹⁵⁵ This empowers the DMU to oversee negotiations between designated big tech platforms and the third parties that rely on their services, including news providers. However, as highlighted in our recent report, there is a risk that this framework will create further incentives for news providers to publish eye-catching content that does not support healthy information ecosystems - if, for example, big tech platforms offer more favourable terms to publishers of clickbait, because they receive more traffic, than to publishers of balanced local reporting.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, we recommend the new regulator monitor the outcomes of the legislation against the principles agreed at the Big Tech and Journalism conference in Johannesburg in July 2023, which include public interest, plurality and diversity of news.¹⁵⁷

Encourage more informative parliamentary debates

Parliament must reform Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) - the most widely viewed event in Parliament - to enable a more substantive discussion of ideas, and fewer attacks and soundbites.

Politicians appearing in the media are too often focussed on generating sound bites over making in-depth arguments. While this practice is, to an extent, inherent to democratic politics (as politicians compete to grab attention), it is also encouraged by particular formats of discussion. This was clearly reflected during the election campaign when we compared reaction to the first head-to-head TV leaders debate with the Sky News show in which both leaders were interviewed separately. Our panel felt the latter format was much more constructive.

152 Brown, F. Ministers talking to tech bosses about giving local media as ‘fair hearing online’. 2024. Available at <https://news.sky.com/story/ministers-talking-to-tech-bosses-about-giving-local-media-a-fair-hearing-online-13220888>

153 Demos and PINF. Driving Disinformation. 2024, p106. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Driving-Disinformation_final.pdf

154 Communications Act, 2003. Available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/part/2/chapter/1/crossheading/general-conditions-mustcarryobligations>

155 Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024. Available at <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3453>

156 Demos and PINF. Driving Disinformation. 2024, p106. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Driving-Disinformation_final.pdf

157 Gordon Institute of Business Science. Big Tech and Journalism - Principles for Fair Compensation. 2023. Available at <https://www.gibs.co.za/news/big-tech-and-journalism---principles-for-fair-compensation>

THE LEADERSHIP DEBATES AND INTERVIEWS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMAT

During the election campaign, the first TV debate between Sunak and Starmer happened on ITV on 4th June. People were sceptical about its usefulness, feeling that the leaders just said what people want to hear or criticised the other, rather than detailing their own beliefs and plans.

I don't like how people try to win votes by undermining and slating the opposition. I feel a leader should be professional and fight their own side, not defeat their opponents by fighting and arguing

- Non-voter, mid-campaign

Participants were particularly frustrated with the format, feeling that quick-fire questions encouraged soundbites rather than discussion of ideas.

In contrast, participants were positive about the format of the Sky News leaders interviews on 12th June. In this programme, the leaders sat down separately for 45 minutes, taking questions from the anchor and then the audience (who also got a follow-up question). People felt this was conducive to fewer attacks and more substantive discussion.

I saw the first debate. I think hosting them separately is a much better way of doing it. I think you definitely need longer per question and maybe fewer questions.

- Non-voter, mid-campaign

Outside of election campaigns, the problems with political media platforms are most clearly reflected in PMQs. This is one of the most widely viewed political events in the UK, with 2014 data showing that 54% of Brits had seen or heard some of PMQs in the last year.¹⁵⁸ Yet, PMQs attracts widespread negativity, with our panel criticising the fact that questions are rarely answered, and politicians instead prioritise soundbites and attacks. This damages trust. Studies comparing people who are shown clips from PMQs with those who are not shows that watching the clips drives a decline in trust in parliament.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Skinner, G. PMQs Poll. Ipsos, 2024. Available at www.ipsos.com/en-uk/pmqs-poll

¹⁵⁹ Convery, A and others. Questioning scrutiny: the effect of Prime Minister's Questions on citizen efficacy and trust in parliament. Montana State University, 2021. Available at <https://scholarworks.montana.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/68b10fb5-28b4-4d1a-82e7-417730630e73/content>

Various party leaders, including Tony Blair, have promised to reform PMQs, but often failed to do so.¹⁶⁰ However, a natural experiment was presented for PMQs after Jeremy Corbyn began asking 'questions from the public' - reading out chosen questions that were sent in by members of the public.¹⁶¹ Research shows this reduced the rate of personal attacks.¹⁶² Additionally, the Hansard Society tracked public attitudes before and after 'questions from the public' were introduced by running the same poll in 2013 (when David Cameron faced Ed Miliband) and 2015 (when Cameron faced Corbyn). It found that people were:

- Half as likely to say it was too noisy and aggressive
- A third less likely to say there was too much party political point-scoring
- Over twice as likely to say the MPs behave professionally
- Equally likely to say PMQs was exciting to watch

The reason why such practices have not been maintained is likely because provocative and sensational remarks help create headlines and shareable clips. To tackle this, reforms should be made to the format of PMQs so that it reduces the incentive to prioritise such remarks over substantive and informative debate.

Improve political knowledge and strengthen public debate

The education system must ensure that all citizens have the knowledge and skills to be able to engage confidently and effectively in political discussion.

With over a quarter of the public (26%) avoiding talking about politics because they feel they do not understand it well enough, we need to support the public to feel better placed to discuss politics.¹⁶³ While low trust can adversely affect political engagement, a lack of quality political engagement may also act as a drag on trust. To build trust, we therefore need to support an informed citizenry that are confident and keen to engage in political discussion.

For the public to assess the strengths and weaknesses of our political system and to offer an informed view of how the government and its MPs are operating, they need a foundational understanding of the function of the House of Commons and House of Lords, the role of MPs, and how bills become law, among other aspects of our political system. A clear way of equipping the public with this knowledge is through Citizenship education, which can help ensure future voters have an understanding of our democracy and their important place within it. Currently, Citizenship is a compulsory National Curriculum subject at Key Stage 3 (11-14) and Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16), though some 81.9% of secondary schools are academies or free schools,¹⁶⁴ which are not required to follow the national curriculum (although many schools and

160 Perkins, A. Jeremy Corbyn should reform PMQs to make it prime minister's answers. The Guardian, 2015. Available at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/15/jeremy-corbyn-prime-ministers-questions-reform-david-cameron-labour

161 BBC News. Jeremy Corbyn should reform PMQs to make it prime minister's answers. 2015. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34264683

162 Waddle, M., Bull, P. and Böhnke, J. R. "He Is Just the Nowhere Man of British Politics": Personal Attacks in Prime Minister's Questions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, Vol. 38, issue, 1, 2019, pp. 61-84. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X18767472>

163 Demos polling conducted by Focaldata between Monday 1st July - Tuesday 2nd July 2024, to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people.

164 UK Government. Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Academic year 2023/24. 2024. Available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

trusts continue to provide excellent Citizenship education for their pupils).¹⁶⁵ Following the new government's Curriculum and Assessment Review, a new national curriculum will be mandated for all schools up to age 16. This presents an opportunity to ensure that all young people, regardless of background, are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in our democracy, with Citizenship forming a key part of this.

A range of actions need to be taken to support Citizenship education in our schools. Following the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the new national curriculum should provide more detail on required Citizenship content,¹⁶⁶ particularly given that there is a shortage of Citizenship subject specialist teachers and classes are often covered by non-specialists as a consequence.¹⁶⁷ In addition, to increase the supply of Citizenship subject specialists, the government should follow the recommendations of the Association of Citizenship Teachers, including but not limited to the introduction of funded bursaries for initial teacher training in Citizenship and the raising of CPD professional standards and entitlements for Citizenship.¹⁶⁸

Productive political discussion also rests on wider disciplinary knowledge of Maths, History, Geography, Science, the arts, and other areas that interact with and influence political life. This knowledge is fundamental to an informed citizenry, a greater standard of debate and ultimately, a functioning democracy. As the government embarks on its Curriculum and Assessment Review, they have committed to "build on the hard work of teachers who have brought their subjects alive with knowledge-rich teaching, to deliver a new national curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive and innovative".¹⁶⁹ Here, it will be important to balance the various ends that education serves, such as preparing young people for future careers, with the important role that education has in empowering young people to fully participate in our democracy. This means recognising the importance of Citizenship education but also the wider knowledge base (through History, Geography and other subjects) that young people need to make informed judgements and to engage in political discussion.

As well as gaining knowledge of the political system and wider disciplinary knowledge, young people should have opportunities within and outside school to engage with current political debates and participate as democratic citizens. This will give opportunities for young people to develop and test out their ideas and beliefs in a safe and supportive environment. The Association for Citizenship Teaching's (ACT) Core Citizenship Curriculum has entries focused on citizenship skills,¹⁷⁰ while debate programmes like Debate Mate¹⁷¹ and youth social action initiatives such as #iwill,¹⁷² can help young people engage with contemporary debates and gain experiences of political engagement. More broadly, Labour's manifesto¹⁷³ sets out its interest in oracy - speaking skills - which could also help equip young people with the competencies and confidence to contribute to political debate.

165 Tobin, J. Teaching citizenship and life skills in schools. House of Lords Library, 2023. Available at <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/teaching-citizen>

166 As documented by The Association for Citizenship Teaching, 2014 changes to the National Curriculum "led to an unfortunate narrowing of the subject curriculum for Citizenship and less detail in the teaching requirements". Written evidence submitted by The Association for Citizenship Teaching (DAD0070). 2019. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/438/pdf>

167 Written evidence submitted by The Association for Citizenship Teaching (DAD0070). 2019. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/438/pdf>

168 Written evidence submitted by The Association for Citizenship Teaching (EDU0063). 2023. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/120846/pdf>

169 UK Government. Government launches Curriculum and Assessment Review. Department for Education. 2024. Available at www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-curriculum-and-assessment-review

170 Association for Citizenship Teaching. Key Stage 4 Model Core Citizenship Curriculum - curriculum map and resources. Available at www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/ks4-curriculum-map

171 Available at <https://debatemate.com>

172 Available at www.iwill.org.uk/the-movement/youth-social-action

173 The Labour Party. Breaking Down the Barriers to Opportunity. 2023. Available at <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>

Help the public identify and challenge mis/disinformation

Schools have a vital role in equipping pupils with the knowledge and skills they need to identify and critique mis/disinformation.

In our increasingly digitised media landscape, there are great concerns about the growth of mis/disinformation and the consequences this may have for news media consumption and political trust and engagement. Social media is now the main platform for news for some 83% of 16-24 year-olds and 81% of 25-34 year-olds,¹⁷⁴ while the growth of engagement-based algorithms continues to shape people's consumption habits. The previous government was right to recognise the threat that mis/disinformation poses to the "intrinsic values and principles of the UK"¹⁷⁵ and the need for action. Given the passing of the Online Safety Act, the success of its enforcement and platforms' effective and timely removal of mis/disinformation will need to be persistently reviewed. However, while Ofcom consults on its duties and codes of practice, and during the time before these powers come into force, the circulation of mis/disinformation online on platforms is likely to persist. The announcement that the skills needed to critique mis/disinformation will be considered in the upcoming Curriculum Review is also welcome. This subsection therefore focuses on another crucial part of the response - equipping the public with the knowledge and skills required to critique the content they consume.

Just as schools have an important role to play in nurturing informed citizens who can make productive contributions to political discussion, they have some, proportionate role to play in supporting young people to critique the content they consume. As discussed in the previous sub-section, strong disciplinary knowledge is vital in supporting productive debate. It can also act as a safeguard against mis/disinformation, with young people able to identify where information they are consuming departs from established ground truths. Here, it is important that pupils are given opportunities to practise transference - applying what they have learnt to particular contexts. For instance, this could involve looking at examples of the spread of misleading AI-generated videos on TikTok.

While knowledge and transference skills can be a strong safeguard against mis/disinformation, more harmful content rarely proliferates on topics with universally established and agreed-upon truths. Instead, such content can often emerge and circulate in a highly evolving and politically contested environment and/or where there is an 'information vacuum', for example, the period before the identity of the Southport attacker was released. This puts teachers in a challenging position, as they face both the risk of accusations of political bias depending on what they present as 'accurate' or 'the truth' as well as the risk of being later found to be incorrect when new information or 'facts' come to light. In the context of a packed curriculum and significant workload constraints, teachers need clear guidance on how to work with pupils to critique material and narratives that exhibit tropes pervasive in mis/disinformation; clear parameters around what types of live mis/disinformation should be covered and how to avoid risks of accusations of political bias; and timely updates on trends in mis/disinformation that they should be aware of to ensure their efforts are responsive.

It is vital that our education system equips young people with the knowledge and skills they need to be able to identify and critique mis/disinformation. These efforts should exist alongside, not instead of, efforts from government, social media organisations and other actors to identify and address mis/disinformation.

¹⁷⁴ Ofcom. News consumption in the UK: 2023. 2023. Available at <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand-research/tv-research/news/news-consumption-2023/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2023?v=329963>

¹⁷⁵ Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report. 2019. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/2184/218402.htm>

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REBUILDING TRUST

To put the strategies into action, we recommend a set of 10 policies. Given the broad focus in government and research on delivery and integrity, we do not outline further policies in these.

To deliver a respected public voice in policy making, we recommend:

1. Embedding public participation across national government policy making

To deliver a strong relationship between local politicians and communities, we recommend:


2. Empowering MPs with resources, guidance and training to act as community champions



To deliver more relatable and representative politicians, we recommend:


3. Providing means-tested financial support to MP candidates
4. Improving action on abuse of MPs from the government, parliament, and the police
5. Reforming the selection of MPs to ensure processes are robust and transparent

To deliver an informative news media environment - and enable a more productive political debate we recommend:


6. Creating a new Institute for Public Interest News and public funding for local news to address market failure
7. Developing ways to exert pressure on social media platforms to surface relevant public interest news to audiences at appropriate times in the political cycle.
8. Reforming PMQs by allowing MPs follow-up questions and introducing cross-party agreement to improve the quality of debate
9. Improving political knowledge among the public
10. Helping the public identify and challenge mis/disinformation


STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p data-bbox="129 469 430 577">Put people at the heart of the policy making process</p>	<p data-bbox="456 226 779 370">Embed public participation across national government policy making</p>	<p data-bbox="806 226 1989 258">To embed citizens' participation in policy making, the government should develop:</p> <ol data-bbox="819 284 2123 1305" style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Five flagship Citizens' Panels to feed into new Mission Boards: a 100-person Citizens' Panel for each Mission Board to refine the priorities, work through trade-offs, and inform the policies, drawing on a standing citizens' pool. 2. A central hub of participatory policy making expertise in government: ramping up existing expertise and accelerating the diffusion of skills across government. 3. A programme of flagship Citizens' Assemblies in the first term to tackle knotty politically and publicly salient issues outside of the missions. 4. Levers to encourage participatory policy making across government: such as training and support, building departmental participation units, developing senior civil service champions, new policy making guidance via a 'Citizen Participation Assessment', and a clear narrative about the value and impact of participatory policy making. 5. Citizen involvement in select committee enquiries: guidance to select committee chairs and clerks on how to engage citizens in inquiries in effective and meaningful ways. 6. A Duty to Consider Participation: requiring bill teams to give consideration to participation via a Citizen Participation Assessment, set out in guidance by the Parliamentary Business and Legislation (PBL) Committee of the Cabinet. 7. Citizen involvement in post-legislative scrutiny: such as convening a Citizens' Audit Group to provide testimony on the actual impact of the legislation on the ground. 8. Independent standards setting: Creating a mechanism to scrutinise processes and set standards, beginning with an independent advisory board overseeing citizens' panels and national assemblies, moving towards a new statutory independent arms-length body.


STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p>Build a stronger relationship between local politicians and communities</p>	<p>Empower MPs with resources, guidance and training to act as community champions</p>	<p>The government must take action to ensure MPs have the capacity and resources, guidance, and training to more effectively reach out to constituents and act as community champions. To do this, the following should be delivered:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The government should provide additional funding for MPs offices earmarked for constituency outreach and engagement activities. 2. IPSA should outline, in its document MP Staff Job Descriptions, a role of “community outreach officer”. There should be a more specific focus on community outreach methods, including: leafleting, engagement with community organisations, and hosting public town halls and events, both in-person and online. Introducing this new role and its responsibilities would help shift MPs towards more proactive forms of engagement, and in turn to reach groups of people who are less-engaged. 3. Parties should fund training for MPs on community engagement, likely run by a third sector organisation. This should include training on best, practice, opportunities and risks concerning a wide range of engagement methods, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Running online town hall meetings b. Speaking at local events and in one to one meetings c. Hosting street surgeries across the constituency d. Training in better more personalised communications with constituents
 <p>Make politicians more relatable and representative</p>	<p>Provide means-tested financial support to MP candidates to ensure cost is never a barrier to capable candidates</p>	<p>All parties that do not offer bursaries for parliamentary candidates should introduce means-tested bursaries, while Labour and the Conservatives should increase the value of their bursaries for parliamentary candidates to cover up to 100% of the expected cost of becoming an MP. The expected cost should be based on the average cost to candidates in previous elections for similar seats (e.g. with similar chances of winning).</p> <p>Candidates should be awarded funding to the extent that they cannot cover the costs, determined on the difference between the two calculations below:</p>

STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p>Make politicians more relatable and representative</p>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Means to pay: Household savings and expected income for the campaigning period 2. Expected costs: Expected spending on essential items during that period (e.g. housing costs, childcare, food) plus campaign costs.
	<p>Improve action on abuse of MPs from the government, parliament, and the police, with greater analysis, training, and resources</p>	<p>Recommendations from The Jo Cox Foundation that have not yet been implemented should be introduced. Several of these are outlined below.¹⁷⁶</p> <p>Government should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement and resource a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of all politicians. This would include coordinating existing initiatives, resourcing new solutions, and facilitating information sharing between agencies. This unit should be responsible for better measurements and analysis of the problem, and should be expected to produce an annual report on the scale of the problem, actions taken, and impact. • Cover the costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation for all parliamentarians. <p>Parliament should provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources for the families of politicians about dealing with abuse. • Training for both parliamentarians and their staff on preventing and addressing abuse, online and in-person. <p>The police should provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear briefings to parliamentarians, staff and families must receive clear briefings on how to respond to abuse and intimidation, and how to ensure security. • Ongoing training for police officers about their responsibilities for dealing with threats against elected representatives. • Stated minimum levels of protection measures for politicians.

176 Jo Cox Foundation. Jo Cox Civility Commission recommendations. 2024. Available at www.jocoxfoundation.org/our-work/respectful-politics/commission/recommendations

STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p>Make politicians more relatable and representative</p>	<p>Reform the selection of MPs to ensure processes are robust and transparent</p>	<p>Parties should ensure that, following a candidate selection, a report providing details on the selection process is submitted by the secretary of the party's constituency membership organisation to the central party office. Reports should include details on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The timescale of each part of the process. • The involvement of central party offices, with reasons why in reference to official party processes. • The involvement of local party members, with reasons why in reference to official party processes. • The use and setup of hustings, with explanations of why. • The scope of due diligence checks. • Any complaints made about the process, and responses to those. • The exclusion of any candidates and the reasons why. • The vote count and the safeguards in place to ensure integrity. <p>This should then be published by central party offices in a quarterly report on its candidate selections.</p> <p>Parties should also consider ways in which they can better manage the trade-offs between selecting MPs for national delivery vs selecting them for local representation and engagement.</p>

STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p data-bbox="120 545 434 651">Enabler: An informative news media environment</p>	<p data-bbox="456 236 779 459">Create a new Institute for Public Interest News with public funding for local news to address market failure</p>	<p data-bbox="806 236 2119 459">We urge the government to adopt the recommendation following the Cairncross review, which was welcomed internationally, to create a new Institute for Public Interest News to ensure the future provision of public-interest news. As Cairncross conceived it, the Institute for Public Interest news, which follows international and US precedence, should have a governance system designed to be entirely independent of both commercial and political interests and would have several functions, including (but not limited to):</p> <ul data-bbox="806 485 2119 1311" style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating with partners on funding proposals, and providing a central focus point for the many institutions seeking to contribute funds, organisation or ideas: not just the BBC but also the platforms, industry bodies, and philanthropists. The Institute, constituted to be independent of government interference and commercial interests, should act as a channel for funding to the sector. • Becoming a centre of excellence and good practice for public-interest news, carrying out or commissioning research, building partnerships with universities, and developing the intellectual basis for measures to improve the accessibility and readership of quality news online. • Using its convening power to encourage the adoption of proven good practice across the industry. • Working with relevant partners in developing ways to increase media literacy and trust in journalism among the adult population in particular. • Conducting research and collecting information about the challenges faced by the newspaper industry to inform consideration of mergers, especially among local and regional publishers, by the Competition and Markets Authority. • Liaising with public bodies, to help them present information in ways that are more accessible to public-interest journalists. This might include reforms to the way courts and inquests report their work and their decisions. <p data-bbox="806 1337 2119 1407">The Cairncross Review, the Culture Media and Sports Select Committee, Nesta and the News for All campaign have all previously called for public funding for local news to address</p>

STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p>Enabler: An informative news media environment</p>		<p>the market failure in the provision of public interest news.¹⁷⁷ Demos and the Public Interest News Foundation have also previously suggested a £50 million a year investment could stimulate the local news market. This should be administered via Local News Funds, modelled on the network of community foundations, and could be informed by Local News Plans.^{178,179} We urge the government to also consider this recommendation.</p>
	<p>Develop ways to exert pressure on social media platforms to surface relevant public interest news to audiences at appropriate times in the political cycle.</p>	<p>As part of the Department of Culture, Media and Sports’ development of a local news strategy, consider how the government can negotiate with the social media and search platforms to get local news a “fair hearing online”.¹⁸⁰ This could include a “Must Carry” bridge into social media platforms for local news.¹⁸¹ Much like television broadcasting’s Must Carry duties, stipulated in the Communications Act 2003, DCMS and Ofcom should consider requiring tech platforms to carry certain forms of local news, including news that meets people’s critical information needs during emergencies as well as elections at important and sensitive moments in the political cycle.</p> <p>Following the Digital Competition and Consumer Act and creation of the Digital Markets Unit, as part of the Competition and Markets Authority, the new regulator should monitor the outcomes of the legislation particularly when overseeing negotiations between designated big tech platforms and third parties that rely on their services, such as news providers. Such negotiations should follow the principles agreed at the Big Tech and Journalism conference in Johannesburg in July 2023, which include public interest, plurality and diversity of news.¹⁸² This approach should help guard against creating further incentives for news providers to publish eye-catching content that does not support healthy information ecosystems and prevent big tech platforms offering more favourable terms to publishers of clickbait, because they receive more traffic, than to publishers of balanced local reporting.¹⁸³</p>

177 House of Commons, 2023. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcumeds/153/summary.html>; Nesta. https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Nesta_Future_News_Pilot_Fund_End_Of_Prog.pdf; Public Interest News Foundation. <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/news-for-all>.

178 Demos and PINF, 2024, p104 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Driving-Disinformation_final.pdf


179 UK Community Foundations. <https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/>.

180 <https://news.sky.com/story/ministers-talking-to-tech-bosses-about-giving-local-media-a-fair-hearing-online-13220888>

181 Demos and PINF, 2024, p106 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Driving-Disinformation_final.pdf

182 Gordon Institute of Business Science, July 2023. <https://www.gibs.co.za/news/big-tech-and-journalism---principles-for-fair-compensation>.

183 Demos and PINF, 2024, p106 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Driving-Disinformation_final.pdf

STRATEGY	POLICY RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
 <p>Enabler: An informative news media environment</p>	<p>Reform PMQs by allowing MPs follow-up questions and introducing cross-party agreement to improve the quality of debate</p>	<p>To address the problem of questions not being scrutinising enough, each MPs should be allowed a follow-up question. In questioning of other ministers - which occurs in hour-long slots from Monday to Thursday - all MPs asking questions are entitled to one follow-up question. This is not the case, however, in PMQs. Allowing MPs a follow up would ensure that MPs could call out the Prime Minister if they felt their question was not answered, placing additional pressure on the Prime Minister to answer directly.</p> <p>Alongside this, the Speaker of the House of Commons should bring all party leaders together to sign a letter of intent to, for collective efforts to rebuild trust, reduce shouting during PMQs.</p>
	<p>Improve political knowledge among the public</p>	<p>Following the government’s Curriculum and Assessment Review, the new National Curriculum should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise the important place of Citizenship education in the national curriculum. • Provide greater detail on required Citizenship content and more detailed teaching requirements, building on consultation with Citizenship teachers, The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT), and others across the sector. <p>To increase the supply of Citizenship subject specialists, the government should follow the recommendations of ACT, including but not limited to the introduction of funded bursaries for initial teacher training in Citizenship and the raising of CPD professional standards and entitlements for Citizenship.¹⁸⁴</p>
	<p>Help the public identify and challenge mis/disinformation</p>	<p>The DfE should provide clear guidance to help teachers identify and challenge mis/disinformation, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to work with pupils to critique material and narratives that exhibit tropes pervasive in mis/disinformation. • Clear parameters around what types of live mis/disinformation should be covered and how to avoid risks of accusations of political bias. • Timely updates on trends in mis/disinformation that they should be aware of to ensure their efforts are responsive.

184 Written evidence submitted by The Association for Citizenship Teaching (EDU0063). 2023. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/120846/pdf>

5. WHAT'S AT STAKE

Sir Keir Starmer is right to state that “The fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era”.¹⁸⁵ But we urge him to be more expansive and ambitious in his approach to winning this battle by adopting the set of strategies we outline in this report, which together amount to a new operating model for trustworthy government.

Over the course of the election campaign, our 32-person Trustwatch panel voiced their frustrations at a political system they felt was not set-up to deliver in their interests. They explained how key moments - policy announcements, manifesto launches, leadership debates, campaign speeches, and events like the betting scandal, among others - affected their trust in individuals and organisations within our political ecosystem, and how this influenced their propensity to engage in politics. In the process, they detailed a political system that was not working as it should, and offered reflections on what it would take to rebuild their political trust.

In this report, we have combined Trustwatch panel insights, original polling, engagement with secondary literature, and conversations with researchers and policy experts to better understand the state of the nation’s political trust and build a playbook to rebuild trust in politics.

This report has highlighted a range of ways in which our political ecosystem could function more effectively and engender greater trust. As you read this report, there may be strategies that sound appealing and others that you are more sceptical of. For every proposed strategy, there will be trade-offs to navigate and careful considerations around implementation, risks and rewards.

Our Trustwatch panel recognised these challenges - they acknowledged that politicians and the media face difficult decisions everyday, navigating high-pressure, complexities and difficult trade-offs.

¹⁸⁵ Crerar, P. Starmer counts on promises he can fulfil to rebuild voters’ trust. The Guardian, 2024. Available at www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/17/starmer-counts-on-promises-he-can-fulfil-to-rebuild-voters-trust

"It's probably very difficult to make any big change just because of how chaotic and fast the system is. I don't necessarily think there's like sinister people behind the scenes, like ruining the country on purpose. I just think that it is just chaotic. And everyone's trying to pull in one direction or different directions"

- Non-voter, pre-campaign

"The more information [the public] have got, the more you might even understand the picture and think actually, [being a politician] is a really hard job, because you've got not enough money to stretch across enough places"

- Usually voter, pre-campaign

"I think it's difficult because the world is changing, media is changing. I don't know if people are interested in newspapers, let alone small local newspapers, so it's a very hard job they've got"

- Non-voter, post-election

They also acknowledged that the actions of politicians and the media are influenced by the wider structures they operate in. For instance, they know that media organisations will be under pressure to generate clicks, views and reads to ensure income, and that this might affect what receives coverage. Many of our proposed strategies therefore focus on how our political system can better enable and incentivise individuals, parties, media organisations and other actors to engage in trust-building behaviours and practices.

It is absolutely vital that trust-building sits at the heart of the government's promise of a "decade of national renewal". So far, the government has focused on delivery and integrity, both of which are vital in restoring the idea that government can be a vehicle for positive change in people's lives. However, with economic uncertainty and the threat of external shocks, we need to build a more resilient form of trust - one that does not rest solely on a country's immediate material circumstances or a government's most recent achievements or shortfalls. This requires a wider set of strategies that take a broader view of political trust, founded on stronger relationships between the public, their elected representatives, and the policy making process itself, enabled by a better media environment and stronger public debate.

We have set out a series of additional strategies beyond delivery and integrity: putting people at the heart of the policy making process through participatory processes; building stronger relationships between local politicians and communities; making the political class more relatable and representative; and taking steps to improve the information environment in which politics operates. Together this would embed trust building strategies at each step in the interface between citizens and politicians, creating many more opportunities to build back trust. This multi-pronged approach would broaden the fight to restore trust from demonstrating the government can be trusted, to making the public feel like they can trust the political system in a variety of ways.

The urgency and importance of rebuilding political trust cannot be overstated. Much of the British public has lost faith in the idea that our democracy can represent their interests and be a positive force for change. In the absence of trust, dangerous populism threatens to fill the

void, causing further damage to our democracy and doing nothing to address the material challenges the country currently faces. In the longer-term, driving economic growth, investing in infrastructure and tackling the dire state of our public services will all help rebuild trust. However, this will take time - and much longer than the public may expect. In the immediate term, we need to take actions to fix the fractured relationships between the public, politicians, the media and other actors within our system. We need to break up the 'doom loop' of modern politics, where our political climate deters good people from entering politics, which lowers the quality of public life and, in turn, furthers hostilities.¹⁸⁶ We need a politics that embeds trust-building in every facet of the government's operation - in how it represents people, designs policies, delivers on its missions, and is held to account.

In this report, we set out this new operating model - a partnership between politicians and the public to more honestly and effectively navigate the challenges ahead. The government needs to put political trust at the heart of its strategy. This is vital not just for its own success and popularity but for the democratic future of our country. We hope that this report will serve as a developing playbook for restoring political trust.

¹⁸⁶ Ganesh, J. The doom loop of modern politics. The Financial Times, 2024. Available at www.ft.com/content/81614cb1-162e-400e-9d7e-f6ee22e3eafc

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