DEMOS

FILL THE VOID

HOW FAILING LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAINS FUEL ASYLUM HOUSING CLASHES - AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

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NOVEMBER 2026

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Any errors remain the authors' responsibility.

Flynn Devine & Hannah Perry

November 2026

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is the UK's leading cross-party think tank producing research and policies that have been adopted by successive governments for more than 30 years. Our vision is for an upgraded democracy, to rebuild the broken relationships between institutions and citizens, and between citizens. To upgrade democracy, Demos calls for a New Deal between citizen and state – one which asks something of us all, delivers for all citizens and is built through collaboration. Resilient information ecosystems are a vital enabler of this more trusted democracy.

This research is part of Demos Digital's Epistemic Security programme that focuses on securing the UK's information supply chains and building democratic resilience to adverse influences. This research programme is designed to ground our policy development and programme design into the lives and pain points of everyday people at the local level. Understanding how information is produced, distributed and evaluated within local communities is vital to supporting our understanding of the national information environment - not only because the local makes up the national, but because it so clearly informs UK citizens' every-day lives and outlook on the country more broadly.

This 'comparative report', *Fill the Void*, is published together with a catalogue of dedicated reports specific to Epping Forest, Dudley Borough and Greater Manchester.

These reports will inform the design of a series of further pilots and experiments that will be launched in 2027 in partnership with local community actors to evaluate the impact of the policy and programmatic approaches proposed in this paper. If you are interested in partnering on future work in local areas please contact: hannah.perry@demos.co.uk.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

The supply chain of trustworthy information - from production and distribution, to acquisition, evaluation and decision making - is essential for people to understand their lives, their communities and, our democracy. But that supply chain is too often now dysfunctional, leaving friendships, communities, and even our national security at risk.

Events in Southport, Southampton, and Belfast show how distortions in the information supply chain contribute to real-world conflict and even violence in neighbourhoods across the country.

This study was designed to understand the local information environment from the citizen's perspective. Through this citizen-centred, mixed methods lens, it diagnoses what actually happens at a local level when information infrastructure breaksdown and misinformation intersects with real world conflicts. It takes the example of specific local clashes over the 'asylum hotel' policy and maps citizens' experiences in the local information supply chain that contributed to them.

Over the course of a year and across three locations - Epping Forest, Greater Manchester and Dudley Borough - researchers conducted 15 focus groups, engaging 131 residents; 21 in-depth interviews with a sub-selection of local residents that took part in focus groups to dive deeper into topics raised; 26 stakeholder interviews including local elected representatives, council staff, journalists, faith leaders, civil society, and more; and online analysis of information shared via 9 channels including Facebook, X, TikTok, and Instagram.[1] In total, 405,251 social media posts were analysed nationally and a total of 116,892 were analysed for the three local scans - meaning over half a million posts in total.

Together this data tells a story of collapsing trust in news media and government as traditional providers of institutional information, the increase in unmoderated misinformation and hate speech, the rise of the local influencer, and the new power of Facebook admins. It shows how the institutions that citizens might turn to at times of confusion or community tension such as local authorities have all but abandoned countering false or inflammatory narratives online. These institutions have been hamstrung by funding cuts while local journalism has been gutted by a failing business model.

Some local councillors describe what amounts to an intentional strategy of silence from the council and other institutional bodies - saying they prefer not to engage online for fear of personal abuse, "inflaming things", or from recognition of the already entrenched mistrust.[2,3]

1 Private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp were not included.
2 Note this should not be confused with a recommendation by communications scholar Wardle (2017) who advises avoiding being manipulated by disinformation actors by publicly discussing a false claim and thus drawing attention to it when it would otherwise not be seen by a wide audience.
3 Note this approach should not be confused with a recommendation by communications scholar Wardle (2017) who advises avoiding being manipulated by disinformation actors by publicly discussing a false claim and thus drawing attention to it when it would otherwise not be seen by a wide audience.

This leaves a "noisy void" full of distorted and one sided 'hyperpolitical' narratives, but with no meaningful connection or information to resolve it.[4] People told us they feel insecure and unsure of how to navigate this environment. They don't know who to trust. They want local institutions to intervene.

Local residents also want to tell and hear a proud story about their communities and their place in the world. But their day-to-day experiences are being characterised in ways they don't recognise - or never told in the first place. This hastens a feeling of disconnection, distrust and lack of control.

We have one call to action for local institutions: to recognise the urgency of this information and connection void, and to work hand-in-hand with local communities to fill it. Without this reconnection and bridge-building effort, divides between citizens and institutions, and between citizens, will deepen.

KEY FINDINGS

This research examined how residents in the three locations - Epping Forest, Dudley Borough, and Greater Manchester - made sense of the asylum hotel policy, and what that reveals about the health of local information supply chains more broadly. Across all three places, a consistent pattern emerged: residents are poorly served by the institutions that should be informing them, and the resulting gaps are being filled by decentralised, informal, and often unverified sources - some of which shut down debate and spread real harm.

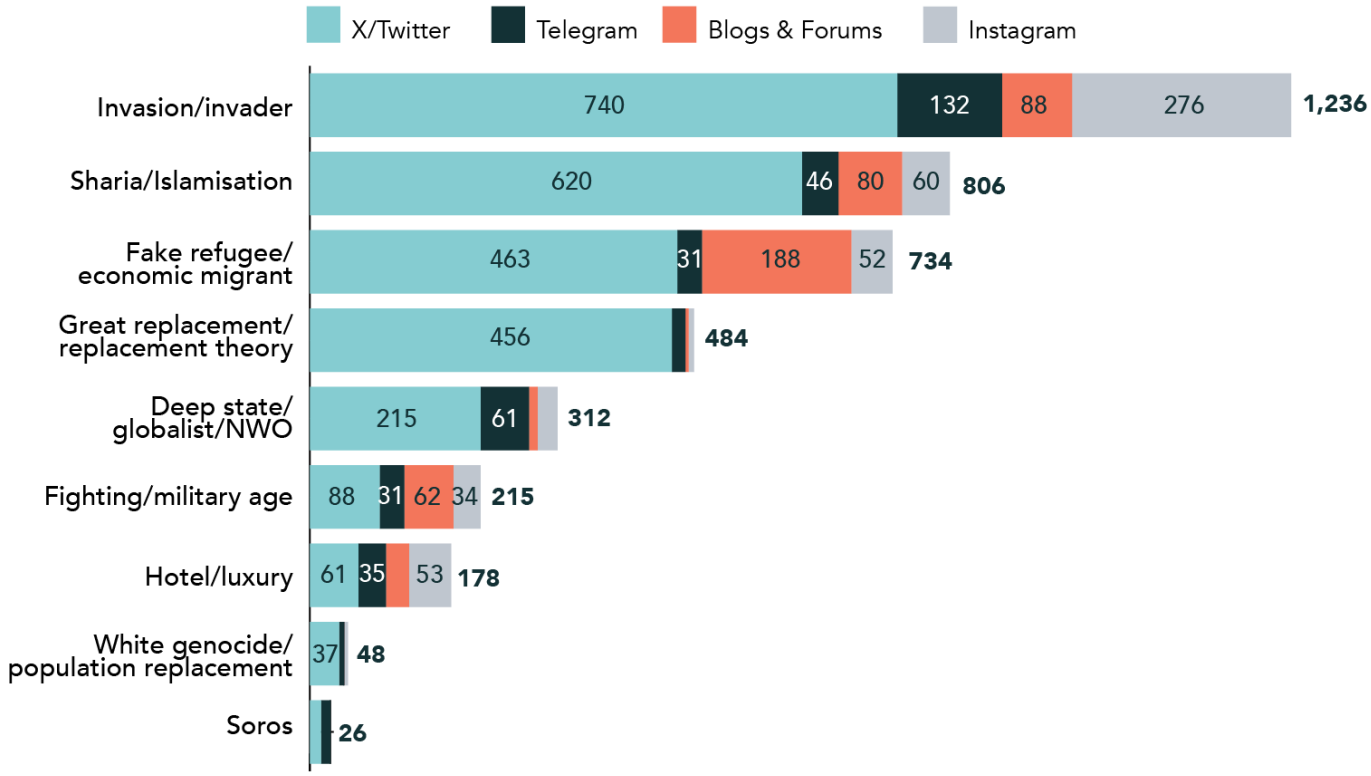
Asylum hotels became a lightning rod for deeper discontent. Residents in all three areas, but especially in Dudley, felt their local area was not working for them - few job opportunities, declining public services, and a sense of being 'left behind'. Opposition to asylum hotels was widespread, but for subtly different underlying reasons in each place: public safety in Epping Forest, a deep sense of unfairness and resource scarcity in Dudley, and concern for both public unrest and asylum seekers' own wellbeing in Greater Manchester. Most residents drew a clear line between opposing the hotels and being anti-asylum seekers, though the debate was frequently entangled with wider anxieties about illegal immigration and small boat crossings.

People learned about the policy after the protests, but still didn't understand the facts. They experienced information voids that made this worse. Many residents conflated asylum seekers, refugees and, illegal immigrants, and a minority did not know the policy was UK-wide or centrally (not locally) run. Awareness of which hotels were in use, and why, varied sharply: fairly high in Greater Manchester, partial in Epping Forest and very low in Dudley, where confusion led residents to protest outside the wrong building entirely. These voids - the absence of timely, reliable, visible information - created space for confusion and speculation and allowed other actors to fill the gap.

Those voids were filled with harmful narratives, both online and offline. Analysis of nine online channels from the height of the protests found recurring harmful narratives - invasion framing, "hotel/luxury/taxpayer" claims, Great Replacement conspiracy theories and "military-age men" tropes among them - in every location studied. Anti-immigration content completely outweighs pro-immigration in online spaces: Epping Forest 42:1, Dudley 34:1, Oldham 32:1, for example. Offline, some of the same false claims (rising crime, luxury accommodation, predatory behaviour) were repeated by residents with little challenge, particularly in Dudley Borough, where they reinforced pre-existing grievances about scarcity. Peer-to-peer fact-checking does happen, but it is rare.

4 Jäger (2023) 'Hyperpolitics: Extreme politicisation without political consequences'. https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/products/3460-hyperpolitics?srsltid=AU7gw4WfPhPb98SIMB8yCLpO5t-1g2tesuo4_hHstlTxAqvPPHJNGM4e; Mair (2013) 'Ruling the Void'. https://discovered.ed.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay/alma9924478460802466/44UOE_INST:44UOE_VU2.

CHART 1
RELATIVE SHARE OF CONSPIRATORIAL AND POTENTIALLY HARMFUL NARRATIVE POSTS ABOUT IMMIGRATION ON X, TELEGRAM, INSTAGRAM, AND BLOGS & FORUMS
January 2024 – December 2025 (post volume = 4,039)



The local information infrastructure that exists is patchy, and unevenly distributed. All three areas technically have at least one local news outlet, some council communications, elected representatives, civil society actors, and online community spaces - but this does not mean that they are meeting the information needs of local residents. Their quality, relevance and reach vary enormously, roughly in line with population size and economic strength. Greater Manchester's ecosystem is far more diverse and resourced than Dudley's or Epping Forest's - information inequality appears linked to local economic inequality.[5]

What people actually trust is decentralised, informal, and local. Facebook is the default local information source in all three locations - used and trusted by the majority of focus group participants - with its admins acting as de facto gatekeepers of local debate.[6] WhatsApp plays a similar role, except in Dudley, where it is notably absent. Livestreamed "hotel auditor" content - where people break into hotels and film those staying there - is valued precisely because it appears unmediated. Individual local figures (such as Adam Brooks in Epping Forest) have built more influence over the debate than most journalists or officials. Most residents are 'lurkers' - reading and absorbing this content passively rather than posting - and offline, word of mouth remains vital but breaks down specifically on this topic: residents fear repercussions for sharing their opinions, and some have lost friendships over it, despite wanting more safe spaces to talk.

5 See PINF/ Local Trust (2026) "Local news, social infrastructure and building community connection" https://storage.ghost.io/c/27/ee/27ee876d-8f09-407d-8f7d-d7506b4bb036/content/files/2026/06/Local-Trust-and-PINF-Briefing---Local-news--social-infrastructure-and-building-community-connection.pdf
6 Note this preference for Facebook as a top choice for local information is also reflected nationally in Ofcom's 2026 Local Media Survey.

Meanwhile, trust in traditional information pillars - news media, politicians and government - has collapsed. Local newspapers are seen as under-resourced and no longer truly 'local'; national media, especially the BBC, are seen as biased or corrupt; and elected representatives and government (local and national alike) are seen as either dishonest, out of touch, or simply unaware of what is happening. Councils in particular face a 'doom loop': low trust discourages them from communicating, especially for fear of 'adding fuel to the fire', which in turn deepens the very distrust they feared provoking. This is compounded by councillors' and MPs' own experience of abuse and by central government's failure to share basic operational information with local councils.

Residents hold contradictory views that point directly to the opportunity. They rely on social media while distrusting it; they want more information from councils while distrusting councils; some feel the BBC is corrupt, while others still use it for fact-checking; and they say they want more spaces to discuss local issues while not using the ones that already exist. Collectively, these describe where the unmet demand and the opportunity for intervention meet.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

- **End the 'strategy of silence'.** Central government needs to equip councils to communicate on national policies that are locally contentious with the appropriate strategy and skill. Councils must share this public interest information proactively, *before* local protests break out - silence deepens the distrust doom loop rather than avoiding it.
- **Meet people where they already are.** Any communications strategy must engage the decentralised, informal spaces residents actually trust - Facebook groups, livestreamed content, and credible local voices - not rely solely on institutional owned channels people rarely visit.
- **Proactively pre-bunk false and harmful narratives on contentious policies where people are.** Factual public interest information will not appear organically at the moments it is most needed; it requires active, planned support, alongside plain-language video and text explainers on basic definitions and process.
- **Invest in places, not just messages.** Physical community spaces and genuinely safe online forums for discussion are a precondition for healthy local sense-making, not a separate concern from information provision.
- **Support the people doing the communicating.** Councillors and officials need protection and resourcing to stay visible both online and in public spaces in the face of ongoing abuse. Without this, institutional trust cannot be rebuilt and public interest information will not be shared deep into local communities.
- **Messages need to be authentically local.** The reasons for opposition to contentious national policy will differ by location. Any messaging strategy must be locally-nuanced reflecting local needs, cultures, information infrastructure available, linguistic and visual cues and an understanding of where fear or speculation may stem from.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are designed to address the vulnerabilities in local information environments, not just in the three locations under evaluation, but all towns and cities across the UK. They each address specific ways to improve the functioning of the overall system.

Cutting across each recommendation is a clear message: it is no longer tenable for local or regional authorities, policy-makers, local institutions and civil society to treat the information environment as something separate to the real world in which they can choose to participate or not. It is now a key competency of leadership and responsibility of those who work with communities. The relationship between citizens and institutions, between citizens and state, and between citizens themselves, relies on it.

At a local and regional level:

Recommendation one: Local and regional government officials should experiment with new ways to engage local residents with public interest information on the issues they care about with the strategy and skill required. This work should be supported by the Government Communication Service, in collaboration with the Local Government Association, expanding their comms support function to build a new network that can facilitate cross-pollination of ideas and shared learnings.

Recommendation two: MHCLG should expand resourcing to local councils to support communications experimentation and expansion through a new national fund, with an initial focus on places with high community cohesion challenges. This could reflect part of our 1.5% NATO commitment on civil resilience.

Recommendation three: Councils should roll out mandatory communications training for councillors emphasising their role as local information actors to support them to effectively and responsibly communicate public interest information as needed in their community.

Recommendation four: Local and regional authorities should embed local information mapping as core practice in their crisis management planning to account for unique and shifting local information environments and ensure communications can meaningfully reach their communities in times of highest need

At a community level:

Recommendation five: Philanthropy and civil society should encourage healthier online spaces through support for community social media group admins to ensure they are fully equipped for their role.

At a national level

Recommendation six: Number 10 North's forthcoming Devolution White Paper should address the urgent need for information infrastructure to support the new democratic structures. The paper should include proposals for how strategic authorities build information channels, alongside mechanisms for ensuring accountability.

Recommendation seven: MHCLG should consider how best to utilise the assets and infrastructure they're supporting and creating via the Pride in Place strategy. This key scaffolding for better community engagement and communication, including physical spaces as well as Neighbourhood Boards and other governance infrastructure, could be a platform for new trustworthy ways of meaningful community engagement. This thinking should be a top priority for the Network for Neighbourhoods, assessing what works and sharing learnings.

Recommendation eight: DCMS should expand the size and ambition of the Local News Fund to maximise support for local news media sustainability and innovation. DCMS should consider the best model for safeguarding the future of the scheme and ensuring its independence from government. Options include putting the fund on a statutory footing or - as the Cairncross review suggested - creating a new independent institute to manage this funding moving forward.

Recommendation nine: DCMS should allocate ambitious funding to an arms length vehicle to support experiments in, and scaling of, new digital public spaces - with ranging possibilities in scale and form that could be launched in combination, from a £5-10m challenge fund to a SovAI style, £300-500m equity fund.

Recommendation ten: Civil society - in collaboration with the Government Communication Service, MHCLG, DCMS, and funded via philanthropy - should develop better epistemic health metrics to understand the location and severity of information supply chain vulnerabilities. This metric should be a primary guiding measure considered in the government's Resilience Action Plan and support assessment of community-based strategies such as Pride in Place.

Recommendation eleven: The Chancellor should increase the Digital Services Tax from 2% to 4% and expand its scope to include not just search engines, social media platforms, and digital marketplaces, but AI services too. This could raise £5billion over 3 years and expand the pot available to tackle the vulnerabilities in our local information supply chains.

The findings of this research are a rallying call to leaders at all levels to take more coordinated action to invest in local information infrastructure to help prevent real world harms and instead to equip communities to reconnect, resolve differences, and tell their own story.

Investing in local information infrastructure is particularly important at a time when further devolution is on the cards. There is not currently the information, relational or accountability infrastructure in place to support this without risking the further erosion of trust in institutions. **The risk is a democratic blackhole and further fractured communities.**

The findings of this research are a **rallying call to leaders at all levels to take more coordinated action to invest in local information infrastructure** to help prevent real world harms and instead to equip communities to reconnect, resolve differences and tell their own story.

In the next phase of this work, Demos will build on these insights to develop pilots to support local information ecosystems. If you are interested in partnering on these in a local area please contact: **hannah.perry@demos.co.uk**.

INTRODUCTION

Local information supply chains are vital to the UK's democracy. The platforms, individuals, and sources people lean on to understand events in their community are the foundations for an informed and active citizenry. Demos uses 'the information supply chain' as a way of understanding the elements that make up information infrastructure - they are the production, distribution, acquisition and evaluation of information, and how that informs decision-making and the actions people subsequently take.

Across the country - from Southport, to Southampton, and Belfast - there have been an increasing number of incidents where information supply chain failure has exacerbated real world tensions and left communities unsafe. There has never been a more important time to understand the vulnerabilities of the nation's local information supply chain and to identify how it can better serve local people and a healthy and resilient democracy.

Communities are experiencing their places and identities change, institutional capacity has been hollowed out, and there is a growing dissatisfaction with the country and its governing institutions. In the three places studied this is manifesting a sense of dislocation from country, from place, and from community for the public. Ever more fractured information environments create divergent realities between neighbours and a situation where the traditional anchors of local information - local journalism, local public bodies, and local elected representatives - are being replaced as trusted sources by social media, local individual actors, and community rumour.

It was hoped that decentralised media would be a boon for democracy: people trusting those around them and relying on community connections to keep themselves informed. However, the places and means available - engagement-driven social media feeds, polarising debates, and a decline of spaces for coming together - is leaving people feeling less informed than they would like, unable to safely discuss sensitive topics with their neighbours, and bombarded with speculation and mis/dis-information. This is exacerbating mistrust and feeding the democratic doom loop growing around the UK.

> *"There's so many different variations of actually what's gone on. I've got no idea. And also I don't know who to trust."* **- Chris, Epping, Established Liberal, 54**

This work comes as a new Prime Minister is committing to transferring power to devolved bodies. This will create new centres of power around the country that don't yet have the local information infrastructure to match this new democratic pattern. Without strengthening local information supply chains, a devolution agenda will struggle to fully develop the support of communities. Nor can those with new powers be effectively held to account. This risks both a relational and democratic blackhole.[7]

7 Demos (2026) 'Devolution Done Wrong: Risks a Democratic Black Hole'. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/blogs/devolution-done-wrong-risks-a-democratic-black-hole/

This paper evidences how the loss of important local information infrastructure contributes to the fundamental breakdown in communities' ability to engage in healthy democratic discourse and decision-making which can further feed a spiral into despondency, speculation, and collapsing trust. This is examined through the lens of the "asylum hotel" policy - not in order to examine that policy itself but because immigration has become the dividing issue of our time, and this policy is one that plays out on a street by street level meaning the local information supply chain matters more than ever.

In a political moment in which devolution takes centre stage, but people no longer know what's true at their local level, there must be increasing efforts placed upon ensuring local information supply chains meet citizens' needs. This should include: strengthening local institutional actors' capacity so that they can share engaging and resonant public interest information with communities; rebuilding spaces for public sense-making; and unlocking the resources that will enable both. At the moment there is a dangerous information void that fuels disinformation and distrust. Local institutions, this paper argues, must be supported to fill that void.

METHODOLOGY

This research maps the local information supply chains in three locations: **Greater Manchester**, **Dudley Borough**, and **Epping Forest**. Each had experienced local conflict over the asylum hotel policy in the summer of 2025.



To map each of the three locations holistically, a mixed methods approach was used. Fieldwork was conducted between January and May 2026.[8] This included:



Selecting the three locations based on the following criteria: a mix of population size, type (urban/ peri-urban/ rural), and region across England, political differences, and being a site where violent disorder broke out in relation to asylum hotels in the summer of 2025.[9]



Initial desk research on all three locations to identify possible key channels (e.g. local news outlets, local Facebook pages, online local bulletin boards), spaces (e.g. sports clubs, youth clubs, community centres), and actors (e.g. journalists, councillors, faith leaders, influencers, civil society organisations).



15 focus groups (five in Epping Forest, five in Dudley Borough, and five in Greater Manchester), engaging 131 residents across the three locations in a mix of settings (online and offline). Participants were recruited to be broadly diverse across key demographics, gender and ethnicity, and political attitudes within that specific location. Focus groups were designed based on More In Common's seven segments: Progressive Activist, Incrementalist Left, Established Liberal, Sceptical Scroller, Rooted Patriot, Traditional Conservative, and Dissenting Disruptor.[10]



Pre-group and post focus group surveys with 125 respondents to understand more individual and private attitudes and behaviour.



21 in-depth interviews across three locations with a sub-selection of local residents that took part in focus groups to dive deeper into topics raised.



26 stakeholder interviews across three locations, including: local elected representatives, local authority staff, journalists, local/regional police, civil society organisations, Facebook page admins, faith leaders, and academics.



Online narrative analysis concerning the topic of 'immigration' and specifically 'asylum seeker hotels' across 9 major social media platforms and outlets conducted by the research group *411*. This included a national scan to provide a broad background context, followed by focused scans of the online ecosystem of each location. Data was collected from between January 2024 and December 2025 and included analysis of 405,251 UK-relevant posts for the national scan and a total of 116,892 for the local scans.

The names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms.

8 See Appendix 2 for a more detailed explanation of each of our methodologies and sample
9 See Appendix 1 for more detail about the differences between each location ; political difference was assessed according to parties making up MP seats and local councils as of the start of 2026 - noting since that time, a local council election took place in all three places
10 See Appendix 2 for further information about each of these segments

THE 'ASYLUM HOTEL' POLICY

The research was designed to understand local information supply chains in relation to a particular subject: the asylum hotel policy. This policy was chosen because of the challenge of analysing and mapping information supply chains in discussion with local people when that underpinning infrastructure can seem so general and abstract. A common issue across the areas allows for a fair comparison and this policy area is both local in its effects, controversial and has timely elements.

This case study has been chosen not in order to examine that policy itself, but because immigration has become the dividing issue of our time, and this policy is one that plays out on a street by street level meaning the local information supply chain matters more than ever.[11]

In the UK-wide online analysis of immigration narratives for this work, accommodation for asylum seekers was identified as the third highest ranking topic in proportion of conversations between January 2024 and December 2025, demonstrating the policy's prominence in immigration discourse more broadly.

While the focus of this research is on the specific asylum hotel policy, it became quickly apparent from both the online analysis and the in-person discussions that the discourses of 'asylum seeker accommodation' and 'immigration' are deeply intertwined. Facilitators and interviewers did their best to re-centre the conversation, but in some cases this blurred discourse appeared central to the discussion. Likewise, online analysis indicated these topics were deeply integrated. For this reason, discussion within the paper may broaden to referring to immigration even when asylum hotel policy remains the subject.

For more information on the methodology and policy context see Appendix two.

11 For more information on the methodology and policy context see Appendix 2.



1. THREE PEN PORTRAITS

EPPING FOREST, GREATER MANCHESTER, AND DUDLEY BOROUGH

PEN PORTRAIT
EPPING FOREST

LOCATION

Essex,
south-east England

Epping town is the last stop on the London Underground's Central Line

POPULATION[12]

- ~137,000 residents
- Median age of 42
- Predominantly White (84%)

THE ASYLUM HOTELS

- **The Bell Hotel:** a three-star, 80-room hotel run by Somani Hotels Ltd, used on and off as Home Office contingency accommodation from 2020 until its contract ended July 2026.[15]
- **The Phoenix Hotel:** a 25-room hotel a couple miles outside of Epping town used as contingency housing on and off since the end of 2022.

ECONOMY

- Affluent commuter district popular for its transport links into London, sitting among the wealthier parts of Essex and the East of England.
- Varying inequality: home to "millionaire's row" and celebrities such as Lord Alan Sugar and Michelle Keegan, alongside wards of significant deprivation, such as Loughton Roding, where 31% of children live in income-deprived families.[13]

POLITICS (MPS & COUNCILS):[14]

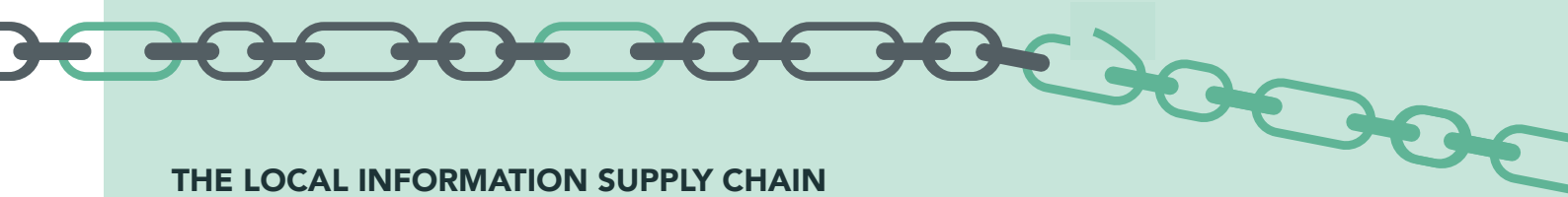
- Conservative parliamentary seat since 1974 with current Conservative MP.
- Epping Town Council, Epping Forest District Council, and Essex County Council all long-standing Conservative strongholds until the May 2026 local elections when Reform performed notably well.

12 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Epping Forest: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E07000072-epping-forest; Office for National Statistics (2021) 'Epping Forest: Census Area Changes'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000072/; Herts and West Essex Integrated Care System (2025) 'Neighbourhood Pack 2025: Epping Forest North PCN'. Available at: https://www.hertsandwestessex.ics.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Neighbourhood-Pack-2025-Epping-Forest-North-PCN-July-25.pdf
13 Ibid.
14 Epping Forest District Council (2026) 'Election Results Roundup'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/election-results-roundup/
15 High Court of Justice (2025) 'Epping Forest District Council vs Somani Hotels Ltd.'. Available here: https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Epping-Forest-DC-v-Somani-Hotels-Final-Judgment-2.pdf



ASYLUM HOTEL CLASH

- Weekly protests began July 2025 until the end of summer after a Bell Hotel resident was charged (and later convicted and deported) with sexually assaulting a teenage girl and a woman.
- This spurred on a wave of UK-wide protests outside hotels and made Epping the epicentre of the national discussion.
- National politicians including Farage, Robert Jenrick and Kemi Badenoch visited or publicly backed the protesters.[16]
- The council's legal attempts to close the hotel were rejected by the High Court, Court of Appeal and Supreme Court before the Home Office ended its use in 2026.[17]



THE LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN

Epping Forest is a leafy commuter district on the edge of London. It's affluent in places but economically divided. In July 2025, it became the epicentre of the national asylum hotel debate, and many locals resent that their town's story has since been written by outsiders. A local news dryland, its one paper - the Epping Forest Guardian - goes largely unread. Residents instead rely on a web of Facebook pages and WhatsApp chats, led by "Everything Epping Forest" - the closest thing, locals claim, the district has to hyper-local journalism these days. The council has struggled to have the communication scale or cut-through local people desire. Into that void stepped Adam Brooks, a local influencer known by most - trusted by some and distrusted by others. An active number of civil society and community-led groups have formed around the discourse - often to push back against the anti-immigration sentiment now associated with the town.

16 The Guardian (2025) 'Labour condemns Robert Jenrick's visit to rally attended by far-right activist". Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/aug/18/labour-robert-jenrick-visit-rally-far-right-activist-bell-hotel-epping ; Conservatives (2025) 'Kemi meets with parents concerned about migrant hotels'. Available at: https://www.conservatives.com/news/kemi-meets-with-parents-concerned-about-migrant-hotels

17 Epping Forest District Council (2025) 'Council Granted Interim Injunction to Stop Asylum Accommodation'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/council-granted-interim-injunction-to-stop-asylum-accommodation/

TABLE 1
THE LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN, EPPING FOREST

<table>
<tr><td>COUNCIL[18]</td><td>Epping Forest District Council
Total population:[19] 137,451
Total followers: 19,600</td><td>X
Facebook
Instagram</td><td>9.6k
6.5k
3.5k</td><td>Only 47 of 2,918 posts between January 2024 and December 2025 were related to the hotels, asylum seekers, or immigration debates more broadly.</td></tr>
<tr><td>LOCAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM[20]</td><td colspan="4">Local-news “dryland” and “monopoly district”.
One local news outlet: Epping Forest Guardian (owned by Newsquest).
Local Democracy Reporting Service allocated two reporters to Essex County Council for 2025-2027, which includes the district of Epping Forest.</td></tr>
<tr><td>NOTABLE LOCAL ACTORS</td><td colspan="4">Local online influencer, GB News panellist and former nightclub owner, Adam Brooks.
444,000 X, 200,000 Instagram and 141,000 Facebook followers - far outstripping any local news outlet or Facebook group.[21]
Views of him were sharply divided: trusted by many as an authentic local voice, but called an “outrage merchant” by critics for inflammatory and at times factually inaccurate content.</td></tr>
<tr><td>MOST TRUSTED SOURCES</td><td colspan="4">Facebook
Whatsapp
Word of mouth</td></tr>
</table>

18 Following numbers collected on 06.08.2026
19 Office for National Statistics (2024) ‘Epping Forest: Explore Local Statistics’. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E07000072-epping-forest
20 Public Interest News Foundation (2025) ‘PINF Local News Report 2025’. Available at: https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/blog/local-news-launches-closures-and-the-state-of-play-in-2025/ ; BBC (2025) ‘Local Democracy Reporter Contract Areas 2025 to 2027’. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/lnp/documents/local-democracy-reporter-contract-areas-2025-to-2027.pdf
21 EssexPR (N/A) ‘X profile’. Available at: https://x.com/EssexPR. Adam Brooks Media (N/A) ‘Instagram profile’. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/adambrooksmedia/. Adam Brooks Media (N/A) ‘Facebook profile’. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/adambrooksmedia/

PEN PORTRAIT
GREATER MANCHESTER

LOCATION

North-west England

10 boroughs and 247 electoral wards.

- **Altrincham**, an affluent market town in the Metropolitan Borough of Trafford.
- **Fallowfield**, a largely student-dominant area in Manchester City Council borough.
- **Oldham**, a working-class borough in the Pennine foothills to the north-east of the main city.

POPULATION[22]

~3 million across Greater Manchester as a whole.

- **Altrincham:** ~50,000
- **Fallowfield:** ~15,000 (of whom 54.7% are students)
- **Oldham:** ~250,000

THE ASYLUM HOTELS

- **Cresta Court Hotel and Ashley Hotel** in Altrincham (housing asylum-seekers since November 2024 and 2023 respectively).
- **Victoria Hotel** in Oldham (confirmed December 2021).
- **Best Western Hotel** in Fallowfield (used since 2022).

ECONOMY

Grown at roughly twice the national rate over the past decade.

Growth has been uneven: rents have risen 41.7% in five years - one of the biggest affordability shifts in the UK and high levels of deprivation across the city region.

POLITICS (MPS & COUNCILS):

Devolved under Mayor Andy Burnham (2017-2026, now UK Prime Minister).

All three areas have Labour MPs and are traditional Labour strongholds.

Council politics, historically Labour, are changing as of 2026 elections:

- **Oldham:** Reform UK up to 16 seats with no party in overall control.
- **Trafford:** Labour down 6 seats, with Reform, Green and Conservative parties up 2 each.
- **Manchester City Council:** remains Labour-run despite being down 24 seats, with the Greens up 17 and Reform up 7.

Greater Manchester is now home to the UK Government's new Northern HQ, No10 North (opened July 2026).

22 City Population (2026) 'Altrincham, Greater Manchester'. Available at: https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/northwestengland/greater_manchester/E63001395__altrincham/; Manchester City Council (2026) 'Fallowfield Ward Statistics'. Available at: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/online-directories/the-council-and-democracy-directories/statistics-and-intelligence-directories/ward-statistics/search-by-ward/fallowfield/fallowfield; Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Oldham: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000004-oldham



ASYLUM HOTEL CLASH

- Largest protests took place outside the Cresta Court in Altrincham, beginning July 2025 with clashes between anti-immigration and pro-immigration counter-protesters.
- Tensions escalated in October 2025 when protesters were launching small fireworks at the hotel and telling residents to jump from the windows.
- Smaller protests occurred outside the Best Western in Fallowfield (August-September 2025, six arrests) and outside a pub in Oldham (around 50 anti-hotel protesters, August 2025).

THE LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN

Greater Manchester, a region of three million people, is one of the fastest growing parts of the country, though its growth has been uneven. It has the richest local information supply chain of the three places studied: with a diverse array of local media and civil society actors sharing information with local communities. The Manchester Evening News is well established and known, whilst new outlet The Mill is exploring subscription based coverage of the region to fair success - its economic model and coverage focus means, however, only certain aspects of the city are reached. People still rely heavily on each other to stay informed, through religious communities, community centres, and social media groups. Trust in elected representatives and government as information actors is waning, but not totally lost.

TABLE 2
THE LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN, GREATER MANCHESTER

COUNCIL[23]	**Manchester City** Total population:[24] 630,000 Total followers: 361,900	X	203.9k	Posted extremely rarely between January 2024 and December 2025 about the hotels, asylum seekers, or immigration debates more broadly. **Manchester City Council:** 10 relevant / 4,967 total posts **Trafford Council:** 6 / 2,388 posts **Oldham Council:** 10 / 5,849 posts
		Facebook	124k	
		Instagram	34k	
	Trafford Total population:[25] 241,025 Total followers: 51,500	X	27k	
		Facebook	22k	
		Instagram	2.5k	
	Oldham Total population:[26] 251,560 Total followers: 80,700	X	30.4k	
		Facebook	43k	
		Instagram	7.3k	
LOCAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM	• Large and relatively diverse regional and local news ecosystem. • Regional outlets/coverage like the *Granada Reports* (ITV) and *Manchester Evening News* (Reach-owned, ~11 million online readers). • Hyperlocal outlets e.g. *Altrincham Today, Oldham Times, Trafford News.* • Newer, subscription based entrant, *The Mill.* • Community, language-based news media also exists in the form of TV channels.			
NOTABLE LOCAL ACTORS	N/A			
MOST TRUSTED SOURCES	• Facebook • Whatsapp • Word of mouth			

23 Following numbers collected on 06.08.2026
24 Manchester City Council (2026) 'Our Budget 2026/27'. Available at: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/the-council-and-democracy/budgets-and-spending/our-budget-202627
25 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Trafford: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000009-trafford
26 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Oldham: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000004-oldham

PEN PORTRAIT
DUDLEY BOROUGH

LOCATION

Black Country,
West Midlands, England

Short train ride from Birmingham.

POPULATION[27]

~333,900

- Largely white (84.9%) and working-class
- Notably high deprivation: 60% of people live in households deprived in at least one ONS dimension, and around 40% of children live in poverty.

THE ASYLUM HOTELS

- **One hotel:** the Dayz Away Lodge. Now closed for this use.[30]



ECONOMY

Struggling according to multiple metrics e.g. salaries, benefits claims, housing prices, and more.[28]

Dudley (split between Dudley town and Netherton) has been selected for the government's Pride in Place regeneration scheme, receiving £20m over ten years.[29]

POLITICS (MPS & COUNCILS):

Heavy Labour presense, with some contestation.

- Three Labour MPs in the borough
- Previous Dudley Town Conservative MP joined Reform UK after general election loss and was elected to Dudley Met Borough Council in 2026

The 72-seat Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (24 wards, 3 councillors each), saw 2026 results with Conservatives remaining largest party - 27 seats - but with Reform gaining seats to 21 total, while every other party lost ground.

!! ASYLUM HOTEL CLASH

- General frustration at lack of information and concerns over strain asylum seekers could place on stretched local resources.
- Multiple clashes - most noteworthy was when a separate hotel - the Superior Hotel, was wrongly targeted by protesters in August 2025. The council leader clarified it actually housed people experiencing homelessness, not asylum-seekers.

27 All About Dudley (2026) 'The Borough'. Available at: https://www.allaboutdudley.info/home/the-borough/
28 The Economist Intelligence Unit (2026) 'Dudley Economic Monitor'. Available at: https://www.theeiu.org/upload/reports/2026/03%20Mar/Dudley_Economic_Monitor.pdf
29 Regenerating Dudley (2026) 'Pride in Place'. Available at: https://www.regeneratingdudley.org.uk/pride-in-place
30 Dudley News (2026) 'Black Country hotel housing asylum seekers to close'. Available at: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/news/26228707.black-country-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-close/

THE LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN

Dudley is a struggling Black Country town whose residents are proud of where they're from, but frustrated by what it has become. After years of decline, many have all but given up trusting government, politicians, and mainstream media altogether. In its place, social media and community chatter have filled the void - sometimes building connections between local people, but completely dividing them in other places. A lack of information about the local asylum hotels left a void filled by speculation, misinformation, and polarising discourse that has compounded the collapsing trust in institutions and left a community demanding change.

TABLE 3
THE LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN, DUDLEY BOROUGH

<table>
<tr><td>COUNCIL[31]</td><td rowspan="3">Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

Total population:[32] 333,900
Total followers: 59,700</td><td>X</td><td>18.7k</td><td rowspan="3">Only 6 of 2,963 posts between January 2024 and December 2025 were related to the hotels, asylum seekers, or immigration debates more broadly.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Facebook</td><td>35k</td></tr>
<tr><td>Instagram</td><td>6k</td></tr>
<tr><td>LOCAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM</td><td colspan="4">• Three local news outets: Dudley News, Stourbridge News, Halesowen News (all Newsquest owned).
• Supported by one LDRS funded reporter in the area.
• Regional options include the Express & Star, Birmingham Live, Midlands Today and Radio Black Country.</td></tr>
<tr><td>NOTABLE LOCAL ACTORS</td><td colspan="4">Online actor Ryan Brooks (132,000 Facebook and 11,500 YouTube followers, running the page "Stop the Boats Black Country").
• Seen as a concern by multiple local institutional actors.</td></tr>
<tr><td>MOST TRUSTED SOURCES</td><td colspan="4">• Facebook
• Word of mouth
• Hotel Auditors - online creators who film the inside of hotels</td></tr>
</table>

31 Following numbers collected on 06.08.2026
32 All About Dudley (2026) 'The Borough'. Available at: https://www.allaboutdudley.info/home/the-borough/

2. THE FINDINGS

This section sets out the findings of the research. It begins with the context: what matters most to local people in the three locations studied, and how the asylum hotel policy has played out against that backdrop (2.1). It then examines how well residents understand the policy itself (2.2), and how the resulting information voids have been filled by potentially harmful narratives, both online and offline (2.3). The chapter then sets out which parts of it people actually use and trust (2.4), and which they have stopped trusting (2.5). Then the research identifies some of the contradictions in how residents relate to information about their communities (2.6). Conclusions are then offered of actionable insights (2.7) to inform the recommendations in the next section.

2.1 COMMUNITIES DON'T FEEL THEIR AREAS ARE WORKING FOR THEM, AND ASYLUM HOTEL ROWS SYMBOLISE THIS

While this study focuses on local information supply chains in the context of a specific case study - asylum hotels - it is important to remember the wider context and core needs residents were describing when they shared their views.

When asked what really matters to them, people cared about the essentials: public services, cleanliness, work opportunities, safety, and physical and social infrastructure. Residents' primary focus in focus group discussions was on their own place, and wanting it to be somewhere they could thrive.

However, when asked in the more private setting of an individual pre-group survey, many residents also described "immigration" as a key concern. Notably, once a local asylum hotel was raised in a focus group - either by a resident or by the moderator - it took hold of the discussion completely.

Concerns about struggling for a good life, and a country that works, lay the foundation for many of the challenges residents raised about immigration more broadly, and the hotel policy specifically. If people fear an asylum hotel puts their community's safety at risk, they feel negative about it; if they feel it will put further pressure on already stretched local public services, they feel negative about it; and if they feel it means taxpayers' money is going on this accommodation instead of the local infrastructure that badly needs investment, they feel negative about it. A recent study into public attitudes towards asylum accommodation found people "rarely discussed asylum accommodation in isolation. Instead, it was folded into wider

experiences of housing scarcity, overcrowding, homelessness and rising living costs."[33] This research reaches the same conclusion.

In all three locations, people didn't always feel their local places were working for them. This was strongest in Dudley Borough, where there was a near-unanimous and keenly felt sense that the area was in decline. Whilst there was a strong sense of Black Country identity, and an impression of community built around it, local people saw the physical state of their borough and its lack of economic opportunities as a clear sign they had been left behind by those in power. Few work opportunities, concerns about public safety, and anger about failed infrastructure projects came up readily when people were asked what they would like to change. People in Greater Manchester and Epping Forest were notably less frustrated than in Dudley, but the first things they raised when asked what mattered to them were similar: road quality, public services, and bin collections.

> *"I agree with what was said [about Dudley], it is run down. It is shabby, it's not lucky and it's not as good as it should be."* - **Chris, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 47**

When discussions turned to asylum accommodation, the vast majority of people opposed the use of hotels for asylum accommodation in their community. Almost everyone in the focus groups expressed strong negative sentiment about the policy, suggesting a fairly unanimous view. This shared attitude is especially notable given the broad range of political and other beliefs represented - though perhaps unsurprising given these locations were selected due to being sites of protest. For context, nearly a third (31%) of the UK population feel their local area is housing more than its fair share of asylum seekers.[34]

But these visceral opinions were driven by a varying array of issues. In Epping Forest, the primary concern for residents was public safety, especially for local women and children following an assault carried out by an asylum seeker staying at the local *Bell Hotel*. Alongside this, there was a strong dislike for the way the area's public image had been affected by the presence of the hotel, the protests that followed, and the political platforming that came with them. Some residents said that when they mentioned where they were from, people alternatively assumed their town was dangerous because of the asylum accommodation, or because it was "full of racists" - characterisations the local community strongly disputed.

> *"I think it's either way very negative and it's not a way that you would want your place of living to be talked about … there's been a couple of times where I've said to people, I'm from Epping and they say, 'oh the racist place'."* - **Hannah, Epping, Dissenting Disruptor, 24**

Many of these concerns had only become prominent in the last year, as controversy over the asylum policy intensified - despite the fact that the Bell Hotel had been housing people since 2020. This suggests the strong discontent has been driven less by the intrinsic nature of the policy than by particular incidents, and by the way public and local discourse around them has evolved.[35]

33 Institute for Public Policy Research (2026) 'Community cohesion and asylum accommodation', p. 5. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/articles/community-cohesion-and-asylum-accommodation

34 Ipsos (2025) 'Immigration tops Britons' concerns; public divided on whether it is acceptable to protest outside asylum accommodation'. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tops-britons-concerns-public-divided-whether-it-acceptable-protest-outside-asylum

35 Epping Forest District Council (2025) 'Bell Hotel: Background Information'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/bell-hotel-background-information/

In Dudley, people also frequently raised public safety concerns, especially in relation to children - something felt strongly in a borough where some residents described fear about walking around alone or letting their children travel unaccompanied.

> *"My eldest is 13 and she keeps asking to go out with friends and I'm like, no. But it's not her I don't trust; it's the world."* **- Angelina, Dudley, Incrementalist Left, 37**

However, conversations revealed that for many Dudley residents, dislike of the policy was rooted in something deeper: long-standing frustrations that had hardened into a sense of unfairness. In an area with real and perceived struggles across public services, infrastructure, and economic opportunity, many local people felt it was unfair that their taxes should house people who "get everything given to them" while they struggled themselves.[36]

> *"It just makes me angry, to be quite honest, that this country isn't looking after its own, but it'll hand out money to anybody and everybody else."* **- Stefan, Dudley, Progressive Activist**

Greater Manchester had the most nuanced view of the three locations - possibly due to its far larger size, but also plausibly linked to its stronger economy, infrastructure, and opportunities. A minority raised public safety concerns, and a couple of people spoke about economic concerns tied to supporting the policy, but more common were concerns about the broader risk of public unrest, and about the quality of life of those staying in the hotels themselves. While some concern for asylum seekers' safety was also raised in Epping Forest and Dudley, Greater Manchester had by far the largest proportion of participants whose opposition to the policy was driven by concern for asylum seekers' wellbeing.

> *"I know first-hand the conditions that they're living in are often quite poor in these places. …some of these people are starving and they've got nothing to do. But it's just twisted as like they're coming over here to allow scrounge off us or something."*
> **- Martin, Greater Manchester, Progressive Activist, 39**

Across all three locations, many of those who wanted the hotels closed and the policy changed said they had nothing against migration into the country, or against those escaping conflict, in principle. Anti-hotel sentiment often came with the caveat that it was unrelated to being anti-immigrant, or to judging anyone on their race or religion.

> *"I always say it's not the immigrants, it's the illegal immigrants. That's what I want to say. I don't mind immigrants, I don't care what colour they are. It's the illegal ones that shouldn't be here to start with."* **- George, Epping Forest, Established Liberal, 71**

36 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Dudley: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000027-dudley/indicators

"[I] Genuinely don't have a problem with genuine people seeking asylum. Not at all. If it's a genuine case, that's not a problem to me... But 99% of them [aren't genuine], but that's how I see it." **- Trevor, Dudley, Rooted Patriot, 48**

Views on the protests that erupted across all three places were divided. While many people said they neither took part in nor supported the protests, a small number thought they were generally justified, or even necessary. This broadly mirrors the wider UK picture: polling shows 36% of Britons think protests outside asylum hotels are acceptable, while 39% see them as unacceptable.[37] In Epping Forest, several residents claimed that many protesters were not local - some came from the wider area, others from across the UK. This frustrated residents who felt it was one thing for the local community to protest local issues, but another for their town to become a focal point for a protest movement serving broader political aims, or for platforming a national issue.

"Cause the problem, as somebody else said, the people who were involved in this situation specifically at the [hotel] Bell, they didn't even come from the area. They travelled here to cause problems and this is the reality of the world we live in today." **- Florence, Epping Forest, Rooted Patriot, 50**

Understanding these wider experiences - before turning to residents' understanding of the policy itself, and their experience of the information supply chain around it - is important context: these debates do not operate in a void. They are fundamentally situated within a wider societal context.

"I grew up on the council estate… and when we was younger we were growing up, everyone just have the doors open and people would just, I'd go out eight o'clock in the morning playing out. My mom would shout me when my tea's ready and stuff like that. Now my mom says, now because she still lives in the same house, no one speaks to each other anymore." **- Luke, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 31**

2.2 A POLICY PEOPLE HAVE HEARD OF, BUT INFORMATION VOIDS MEAN THEY CANNOT FULLY UNDERSTAND

The majority of people in the focus groups were familiar with the asylum hotel policy at a surface level. However, in all three areas, despite a strong interest in the topic, there were marked knowledge gaps - about how the policy was formulated nationally, how it was rolled out in communities across the UK, or exactly how it had been implemented in their own area. These are the information voids we identify in the supply chain.

In all three places, there was often limited understanding of key definitions, and a clear conflation between asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants. This is not only a reflection of the information environment's quality when it comes to the topic's finer details, but it also blurs the

37 Ipsos (2025) 'Immigration tops Britons' concerns; public divided on whether it is acceptable to protest outside asylum accommodation'. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tops-britons-concerns-public-divided-whether-it-acceptable-protest-outside-asylum

line in people's views on each issue. Conversations often strayed towards illegal immigration and small boat crossings, rather than asylum seekers in local hotels specifically. Several focus group members stated that it was illegal immigrants staying in these hotels, rather than asylum seekers.

> *"Every town has a hotel with illegal immigrants in it. It's a bit like a game of whack-a-mole. Then they're going to close that one. Where's everybody going to go?"* **- Laura, Epping Forest, Progressive Activist, 52**

There was limited awareness of what the policy did nationally, how it was rolled out, or why it was designed the way it was. Despite national coverage of asylum hotel use in communities around the UK, a minority of residents remained unaware this was a UK-wide policy at all. In all three areas, some - again a minority - were unaware this was a policy introduced by central government (i.e. the Home Office), rather than by their local council. Residents often raised complaints with local councils that, in fact, had very limited influence over the policy's design or rollout.

There was also confusion about how the policy was working locally - which hotels were being used, and for what purpose. For some, they hadn't heard of the hotel policy until local or national protests broke out; others had heard about it years earlier, through word of mouth or social media. This wasn't uniform across the three locations: in Epping Forest, people all knew about one hotel but few raised the other being used in the area; in Greater Manchester, most respondents were fairly confident they knew which hotels were in use; and in Dudley Borough, there was very little knowledge at all even while some people made strong claims or shared rumours they had heard.

> *"I think it all started sort of whispering amongst friends, oh, there's something going on, we're not sure. We're not sure. And then it was on the news, but I think the whole thing escalated so quickly from a whisper through to people on the streets…the rate of escalation was just incredible."* **- Darren, Epping Forest, Rooted Patriot, 53**

In Dudley Borough, there was such general confusion about how the hotel policy was operating that some residents ended up protesting outside the wrong hotel. One hotel in Dudley has been allocated to house asylum seekers, but few residents knew which one as there was incredibly limited public information available - it has since been identified as the Dayz Away Lodge in Kingswinford, following its shutdown for this use in June 2026.[38] Uncertainty about the hotel's location fuelled widespread speculation, and a general belief that more than one hotel was being used to house asylum seekers. This led to protests outside one hotel that was, in fact, housing local people experiencing homelessness.[39] The lack of clear information increased mistrust of local authorities, creating an intractable problem: local people wanted more information, while some in the local authority were reluctant, and concerned about providing it.

38 Dudley News (2026) 'Black Country hotel housing asylum seekers to close'. Available at: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/news/26228707.black-country-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-close/

39 ITV News (2025) 'Anti-immigration protesters wrongly target Dudley hotel housing the homeless'. Available at: https://www.itv.com/news/central/2025-09-05/anti-immigration-protesters-wrongly-target-dudley-hotel-housing-the-homeless

In Epping Forest, there was high awareness of the *Bell Hotel*, largely because of its prominence in the national conversation over the past year, but little to no awareness of a second hotel - the *Phoenix Hotel* - a site for asylum housing only a couple of miles outside Epping town centre, despite it being used for contingency housing since 2022 and also making headlines after a large fire in early 2025.[40] While the *Bell* was used to house asylum-seeking men, the *Phoenix* has been housing women and children.

In Greater Manchester, there was a fairly broad understanding of which hotels were being used. Those aware of the policy would often know which hotels, in the wider region or at least in their own ward, were being used. The *Cresta Court* in Altrincham received the broadest national coverage, after notable protests outside the site in summer 2025, and was the hotel most commonly raised by name - though others across Greater Manchester were mentioned too.[41]

In all three locations, this lack of clarity about what the policy was designed to do, why it was designed that way, and what it meant for the area, fuelled speculation and mistrust. A sense that the policy had been forced on communities, rather than something they were engaged with, deepened residents' anger at 'the system'. These information voids - the absence of timely, reliable, visible information to help residents understand the topic - created space for rumour, and allowed other actors to fill the gap, enabling further speculation and mis/disinformation to spread unchecked. Communication on contentious topics, especially those with safeguarding considerations or taking place in a broader environment where hate and violence is a very real risk, must - of course - be managed with strategy and skill. Not communicating at all, however, is not an appropriate way to manage community challenges.

2.3 INFORMATION VOIDS GET FILLED WITH HARMFUL NARRATIVES

Those information voids did not stay empty. The following sections set out the narratives that filled them - first online, then offline - and a pattern of silencing that made participating in the debate harder. The data reveals a significant skew in the debate between anti and pro immigration voices and the increasing prevalence of harmful narratives and mis/disinformation.

Defining and categorising types of 'harmful' narratives

The online analysis found both mis/disinformation and the prevalence of potentially and actively harmful narratives, across all nine channels analysed. The following section sets out such narratives that were most prominent in the online data analysed.

These narratives include well established conspiracy theories, as well as broader themes that are not consistently provably false, but are often weaponised and deployed in possibly harmful contexts.

These narratives are not all necessarily or provably false - and sometimes there are elements of truth. However, they are often weaponised and deployed in ways that can exacerbate offline harm, such as exacerbating dehumanising stereotypes of minority ethnic and faith communities and towards migrants and asylum seekers.

False or misleading claims are described as both 'misinformation' or 'disinformation' because it is not always possible to tell whether false online narratives are definitely 'disinformation' - i.e. being disseminated with malicious or purposeful intent - or 'misinformation' - i.e shared believing it to be true.

40 BBC News (2025) 'Hotel that caught fire was housing asylum seekers'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgpgzxer3jo ; North Weald Bassett Parish Council (2022) 'Parish Council Minutes, November 2022'. Available at: https://www.northweald-pc.gov.uk/assets/documents/pc-mins-nov-2022

41 Sky News (2025) 'Simmering division in town where hotel for asylum seekers is beacon for unrest'. Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/simmering-division-in-town-where-hotel-for-asylum-seekers-is-beacon-for-unrest-13403750

Providing an analysis of mis/disinformation and harmful narratives within debates about immigration and asylum hotel policy does not mean anti-immigration content and perspectives are inherently harmful, or built on falsehoods. Perfectly valid opinions and facts are of course raised when debating immigration policy. This section points to the prominence of harmful narratives within online anti-immigration discourse, and the broader impact this can have on the immigration debate as a whole.

Furthermore, the purpose of sharing this insight is not in support of a recommendation to ban, censor or remove this form of speech from platforms. Such evidence is presented because it shows the scale of these online narratives that could be impacting and undermining others' ability to participate in democratic debate online and indeed offline.

The following common narratives across platforms are divided between: those that reflect well-established conspiracy theories (Table 4), those that reflect a narrative framing that is both false and harmful (Table 5), and those where there are some elements of truth, but can be harmful in certain contexts and depending on their deployment (Table 6).

TABLE 4
WELL ESTABLISHED CONSPIRACY THEORIES DISSEMINATED ACROSS X, TELEGRAM, INSTAGRAM, AND BLOGS & FORUMS

The following narratives are clearly related to well-known themes broadly accepted as being conspiratorial in nature. There is little to no established evidence to support these claims.

THEME	MEANING	EXAMPLE FROM ANALYSIS
Deep state/ globalist/New World Order (NWO)[42]	Narratives about grand conspiracies run by powerful actors secretly controlling events. Typically associated with anti-semitic tropes.	*"The globalists will continue to flood people into every free country until each country collapses, it's not by accident."* **- Facebook comment, 2 August 2025**
Great Replacement theory[43]	Narratives that a secretive cabal of global elites is deliberately orchestrating mass migration to replace existing populations and erase their culture. Typically associated with anti-semitic and Islamophobic tropes.	*"Immigration is all exactly as planned… They're not asylum seekers they're UN soldiers trained and shipped here by Serco on behalf Home Office Ltd to replace us. Order out of Chaos is their motto never forget"* **- Facebook comment, 16 August 2025**

42 Hutchings, S (2026) 'Deep State Conspiracism and/as Disinformation: A Journey to the Heart of Democracy's Truth Crisis'. Available at: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/download/26038/5302/108468?inline=1 ; Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2022) 'The New World Order'. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-explainer/the-new-world-order/ ; Campaign Against Antisemitism (2026) 'Conspiracy Theory Guide'. Available at: https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Conspiracy-Theory-Guide.pdf

43 George Washington University Program on Extremism (2025) 'Where Did White People Go?' Available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/where-did-white-people-go ; The Conversation (2024) 'What is the Great Replacement Theory? A scholar of race relations explains'. Available at: https://theconversation.com/what-is-the-great-replacement-theory-a-scholar-of-race-relations-explains-224835

THEME	MEANING	EXAMPLE FROM ANALYSIS
White genocide[44]	Connected to the Great Replacement theory: the idea that "white culture" or "white identity" is being deliberately eroded or destroyed.	*"We knew this was coming years ago. Ethnic cleansing of white and Christian people. Racist and supported by liebour [sic]."* **- Facebook comment, 13 August 2025**
Soros conspiracy[45]	Narratives claiming the billionaire philanthropist George Soros is secretly masterminding world events. Typically associated with anti-semitic and Islamophobic tropes.	*"It is clear that the left poses a significant threat and should be challenged. Many leftist groups across Europe, often supported by governments or NGOs funded by Soros, need to be addressed. There are no right-wing fascist groups here, only concerned citizens."* **- Facebook comment, 16 August 2025**

TABLE 5
PROMINENT LANGUAGE AND FRAMING THAT IS BOTH FALSE AND HARMFUL ACROSS X, TELEGRAM, INSTAGRAM, AND BLOGS & FORUMS

The following narratives and language are misleading and harmful in their characterisation of immigration and asylum seeking, but are not linked to specific and established conspiracy theories.

THEME	MEANING	EXAMPLE FROM ANALYSIS
Invasion framing	Narratives suggesting immigrants and asylum seekers are invading the country as if in a coordinated attack on UK citizens. Often presented in combination with a need to 'protect' women and girls.	*"not even one 'asylum seeker'. All INVADERS."* **- Facebook comment, 8 August 2025**
Fighting-age/ military-age males	Narratives that the vast majority of refugees and asylum seekers are military or fighting-age men suggesting they should be feared as a threat to safety. Often linked to invasion framing and again with the need to 'protect women and girls'.	*"We had to make an evening trip from Stamford to Portsmouth last year. On the return journey we passed 4 buses full of boatees all happy and waving. All luxury coaches full of fighting age young men and from what we could see not one female or child."* **- Facebook comment, 2 August 2025**

44 Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2022) 'White Genocide'. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/White-Genocide.pdf
45 Richardson, J. and Wodak, R (2022) 'Anti-Sorosism: Reviving the 'Jewish World Conspiracy'. Available at: https://keele-repository.worktribe.com/output/423053 ; Campaign Against Antisemitism (2020) 'George Soros: The Conspiracy Theories'. Available at: https://antisemitism.org.uk/research-reports/antisemitic-tropes-and-conspiracy-theories/george-soros-the-conspiracy-theories/

THEME	MEANING	EXAMPLE FROM ANALYSIS
Sharia law/ Islamisation	Narratives that asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants want to impose Sharia law - the body of Islamic religious law derived from the Quran and the Sunnah - on the UK, often by force.	*"In the not too distant future sharia law will be prominent in our society in this once great country"* **- Facebook comment, 3 August 2025**

TABLE 6
PROMINENT POTENTIALLY HARMFUL NARRATIVE THEMES ACROSS X, TELEGRAM, INSTAGRAM, AND BLOGS & FORUMS

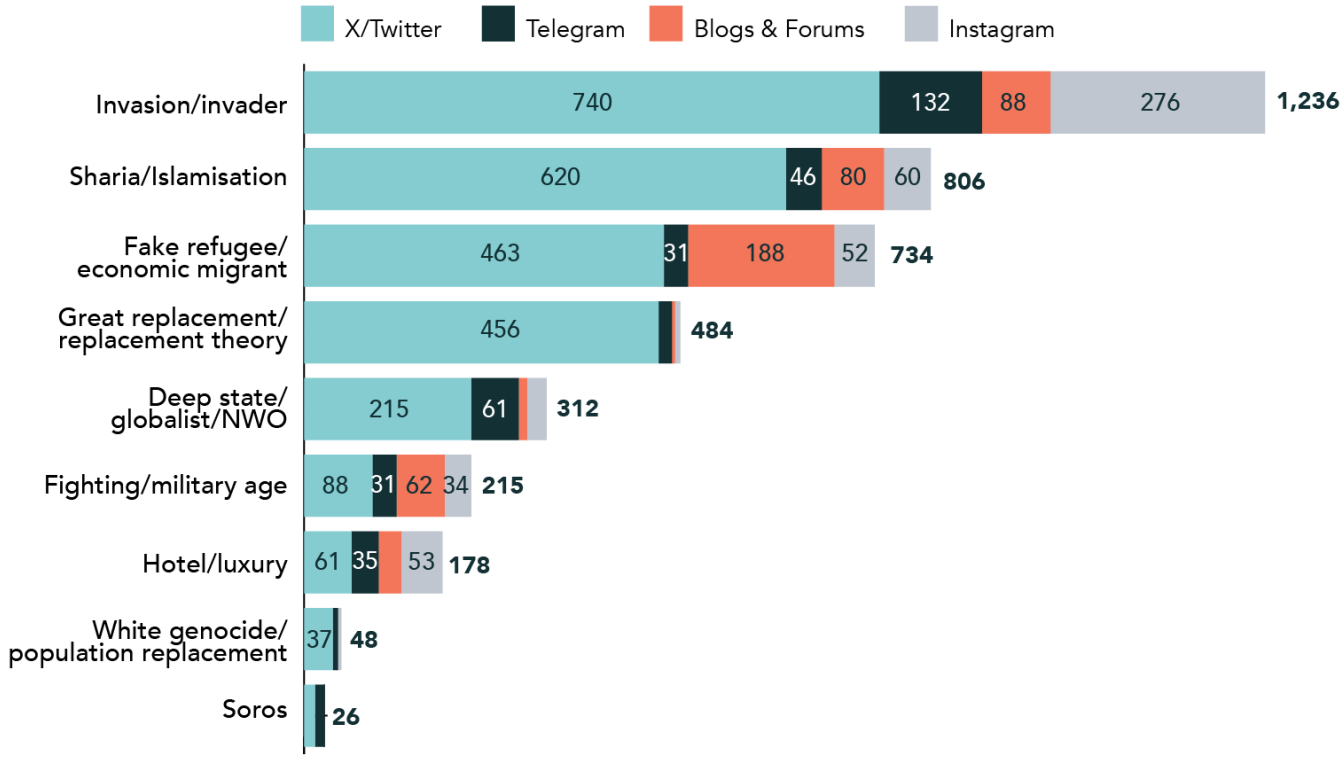
Other narratives surfaced through this research are not conspiratorial in nature and, as outlined above, could contain some truth and/or not be possible to totally disprove. The reason they are highlighted here is that these narratives can be misleading as well as harmful when deployed in certain contexts, against certain people, or weaponised for certain means.

THEME	MEANING	EXAMPLE FROM ANALYSIS
Hotel/luxury/ taxpayer	Narratives suggesting taxpayers are funding a luxury lifestyle for asylum seekers funded to stay in luxury hotels, often linked to resource-scarcity narratives for UK citizens ("they're getting everything, while we have nothing").	*"Thanks to the Tories, asylum seekers are being placed in 4- and 5-star hotels under contracts lasting 2 to 5 years. These deals are costing taxpayers a fortune. It was their choice to handle it this way."* **- Facebook comment, 6 August 2025**
Fake refugee/ economic migrant	Narratives that all or most people coming to the UK fake their backgrounds, claiming persecution while really seeking financial gain.	*"It's not fascism or racism, it's reality, these are not refugees or asylum seekers, they are economic migrants."* **- Facebook comment, 2 August 2025**

The prominence of harmful narratives

Chart 1 below outlines how prominent these various narratives were across the platforms analysed.

CHART 1
RELATIVE SHARE OF CONSPIRATORIAL AND POTENTIALLY HARMFUL NARRATIVE POSTS ABOUT IMMIGRATION ON X, TELEGRAM, INSTAGRAM, AND BLOGS & FORUMS
January 2024 – December 2025 (post volume = 4,039)



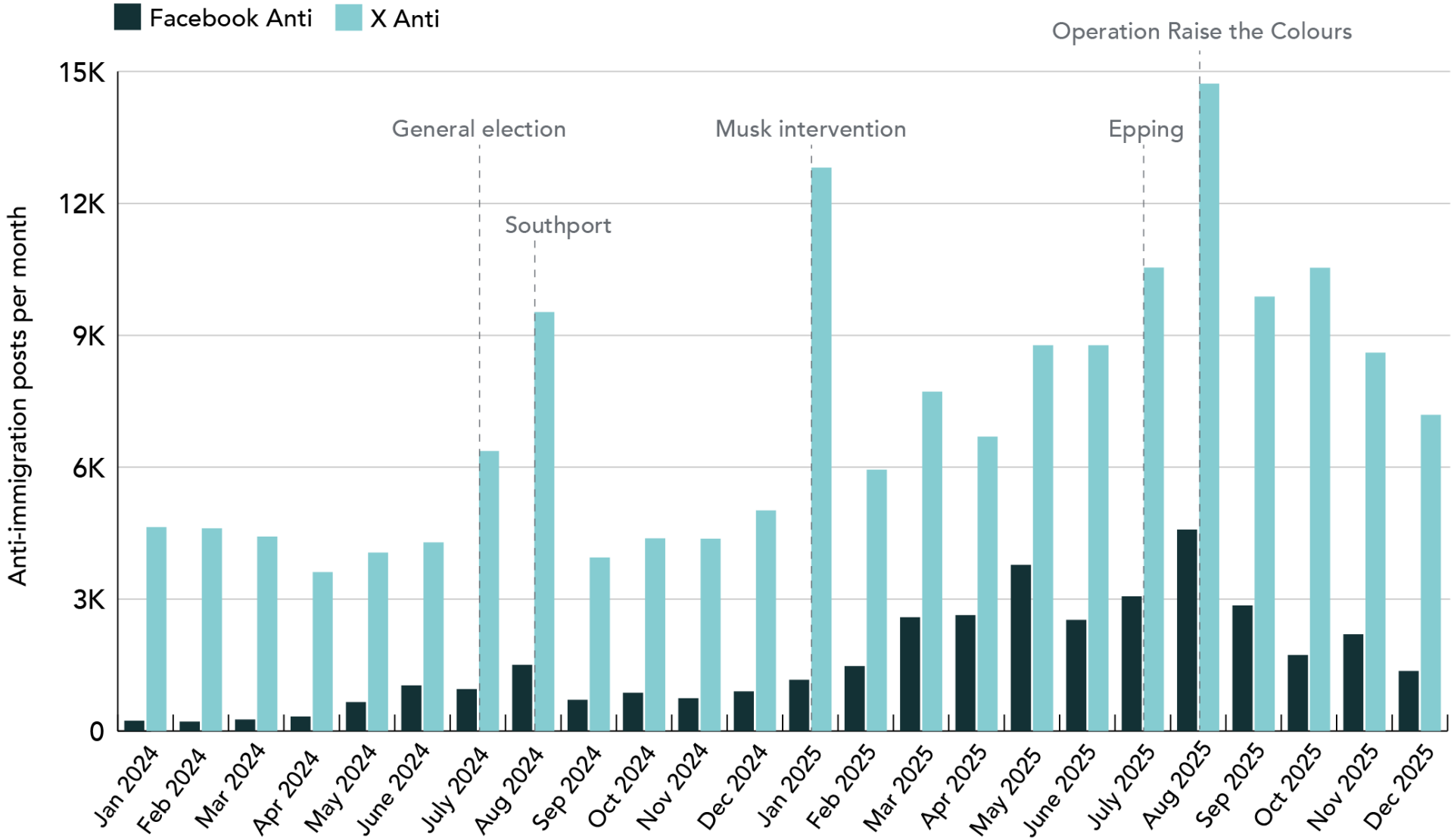
Online analysis between Jan 2024 and December 2025, as well as the stories heard from local people, demonstrates that discourse online around hotel policy-adjacent discourses, like anti-immigration discourse more broadly, are driven primarily through key moments.

In Chart 2 below, there are four notable spikes in volume of posts reflecting anti-immigration discourse, starting with the UK general election in 2024, moving onto the Southport attack and the associated protests, then jumping to an incident where Elon Musk was posting about the Greater Manchester Grooming Gangs inquiry, and finally the largest spike aligning with 'Operation Raise the Colours' in 2025 - an online campaign and series of coordinated activities involving marches, flag raising, and related activity across the UK. This clearly shows that around real-world issues, ones largely started or exacerbated offline and in-person, online discussions spike.

Investigations into groups and actors mobilised against immigration policy have found highly organised and concerted efforts around online messaging in key moments as well as by those seeking to make money, which would explain - together with engagement-based algorithms - how such peaks have been achieved.[46]

46 The National (2026) 'Inside far-right groups behind Glasgow's anti-immigration protests'. Available at: https://www.thenational.scot/news/26289071.inside-far-right-groups-behind-glasgows-anti-immigration-protests/ ; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2025) 'King of slop: How anti-migrant AI content made one Sri Lankan influencer rich'. Available at: https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2025-11-16/king-of-slop-how-anti-migrant-ai-content-made-one-sri-lankan-influencer-rich ; BBC News (2026) 'Anti-immigration AI videos traced to overseas fakers, BBC finds'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgpyn30dp3o ; London Centric (2026) 'London TikTok fake news creator: hate immigrants'. Available at: https://www.londoncentric.media/p/london-tiktok-fake-news-creator-hate-immigrants

CHART 2
VOLUME OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION CONTENT ON FACEBOOK AND X FROM JAN 2024-DEC 2025



The balance of narratives

Online narratives in all three areas were heavily skewed towards anti-hotel, anti-immigration content. While the ratio of anti- to pro-immigration content in community pages and platforms varied across locations, the overall trend towards anti-immigration is clear.

TABLE 7
RATIO OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION TO PRO-IMMIGRATION ONLINE NARRATIVES BY LOCATION, JANUARY 2024 – DECEMBER 2025

LOCATION	ANTI-IMMIGRATION : PRO-IMMIGRATION
Epping Forest	42 : 1
Dudley	34 : 1
Fallowfield (Greater Manchester)	17 : 1
Oldham (Greater Manchester)	32 : 1
Altrincham (Greater Manchester)	22 : 1

The online conversations on immigration and, as an extension, the conversations around asylum hotels were heavily skewed in one direction. Some 69% of Britons think immigration over the past 10 years has been too high and 43% believe immigration has been mostly bad for the country, so it's not totally surprising to see prominent anti-immigration rhetoric online.[47] However, if polling implies the country is more nuanced on these questions, then it would suggest the online discourse should also be slightly more balanced.

This heavy skew to one side in online spaces could mean multiple things: people who have anti-immigration views are more online, anti-immigration views garner more attention and therefore people are more likely to post them, people with more pro-immigration views are less likely to share out of concern for response or something else, or a combination of all of these. The concern of this negative skewing may be that it generates a slightly false sense of understanding about the true nature of this divide in opinion.

How harmful narratives echo in offline spaces

Among the valid concerns, complaints, and views - both well-informed and less so - that residents shared about the hotels and the broader policy, evidence of mis/disinformation and harmful narratives was also found being repeated, and shared, offline.

Misinformation was by far most apparent in the Dudley focus groups. Claims included that the crime rate was rising because of asylum seekers, and that asylum seekers were frequently housed in four- or five-star hotels - *The Bell Hotel* in Epping and the *Cresta Court* in Altrincham are both three-star hotels, for example, whilst the *Dayz Away Lodge* in Dudley has two-stars.[48] These narratives appeared to build on existing frustration, almost always returning to an argument about resource scarcity: that local people were suffering while asylum seekers were provided for.

47 YouGov (2026) 'Britons have a more negative view of immigration in 2026 than in 2016'. Available at: https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/55329-britons-have-a-more-negative-view-of-immigration-N-2026-than-in-2016
48 The Bell Hotel, Essex (2026) 'The Bell Hotel'. Available at: https://the-bell.hotels-essex.com/en/ ; Holiday Extras (2026) 'Cresta Court, Manchester'. Available at: https://www.holidayextras.com/airport-hotels/manchester/cresta-court/low-prices.html ; Skyscanner (2026) 'OYO Dayz Away Lodge, Kingswinford'. Available at: https://www.skyscanner.net/hotels/united-kingdom/kingswinford-hotels/oyo-dayz-away-lodge/ht-140198917

"The crime rate's gone up higher since they've entered the country... put two and two together people." **- Sarah, Dudley, Dissenting Disruptor, 31**

"Giving him 3000 pounds, you're putting him in nice four or five star hotels…" **- Bradley, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 26**

It was clear in all three locations that these provocative pieces of false information carried significant weight with the residents who encountered and believed them. This was especially true when they built on the pre-existing foundations set out in section 2.1 above. These narratives felt powerful in Dudley in particular where they drew on a broader sense of resource scarcity, in a borough where people feel its public services and infrastructure are not being invested in as they should be. The common sentiment expressed was 'why should they get things handed to them, when we are fighting so hard for the basics'.

Other narratives included claims that many asylum seekers are criminals, sexual predators or dangerous, that they are shoplifting and driving up consumer prices, or that they receive greater luxuries than other vulnerable people in the UK. When asked where these claims came from, residents often pointed to local or wider social media. Greater Manchester showed notably higher levels of scepticism and criticism of such claims than Epping Forest or Dudley Borough.

"You go in at Tesco's and you'll see all the prices have gone up by 20-30 pence. And when you say why, well we've got accounted for the shoplifting and let's face it, all those, I dunno how many people are in the Bell Hotel. They're standing around doing nothing all day long. They're going to wander around and they go in these stores and they're, oh, I'll have that because I've got no food, I'll have that. And then somebody else said, well if they're doing it, I'll do it. The whole law breaks down." **- George, Epping Forest, Established Liberal, 71**

"A lot of these are known rapists from other countries or known thieves... give us their criminal records from other countries and let us judge if they're safe." **- Phil, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 43**

Peer-to-peer fact-checking happens, but rarely

There were examples of peer-to-peer fact-checking, or of residents offering different opinions. In Epping Forest, for instance, one resident challenged the suggestion that asylum seekers were shoplifting in Tesco - though such examples were few and far between.

"We go shopping there [in Tesco]. I've never seen anyone walk in there and shoplift… I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but what I'm just saying is that there is an awful lot of sensationalism with journalism and with social media these days and you'll get people who have a specific opinion." **- Richard, Epping Forest, Incrementalist Left, 63**

These occasional peer challenges showed some communal sense-making does happen, and that some residents feel able to challenge what they hear. More often, though, false or misleading claims went unquestioned, or actively gathered support within the group - especially in Dudley and Epping Forest. As section 2.6 explores, one possible cause is a general reluctance to engage in dialogue on the asylum hotel policy at all; alternatively, there may simply not be the right facts at hand for anyone to draw on.

Summary: Voids are filled one way or another

While the asylum hotel policy was unpopular in all three locations studied, the reasons varied, and so did residents' understanding of the policy itself. Broadly, there was limited understanding of how the policy was being rolled out, and how it was manifesting through specific hotels in the community.

Mis/disinformation and harmful narratives about the policy, and about immigration more broadly, are common and, when they gain traction, powerful in shaping individual and community reactions. This type of information is prominent online, and spreads across the platforms communities rely on to learn about the world - from Facebook to X and Instagram, as explored further below. It then moves offline, into conversations between residents. For those who believe them, these narratives carry real weight, and heavily inform views on the asylum hotel policy - showing the influence such information can have on how a community understands, and engages with, this issue.

2.4 WHAT PEOPLE ACTUALLY TRUST: DECENTRALISED, INFORMAL, AND LOCAL INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

This section sets out which parts of the information supply chain residents engaged with, and trusted, most. There was considerable similarity in the infrastructure people used and trusted across the three communities - including on the asylum hotel policy - even accounting for the varying size of these places, and the infrastructure that exists in each. This suggests it is not only the prevalence of a piece of infrastructure that shapes how communities respond - a larger local and regional news ecosystem in Greater Manchester, for instance - but broader factors around trust.

KEY CHAPTER FINDINGS:

- Local social media pages and groups - especially local Facebook groups - are by far the most accessed and the most trusted source of information on local topics, including the asylum hotel policy.
- Live streaming is a new trusted source - appreciated *because* it's unedited - unlike traditional journalism; exemplified by the rise of 'hotel auditors' who live-stream confrontational interactions with those 'guarding' alleged asylum hotels
- Word of mouth is a consistent method of information-sharing that people in all three areas rely on and largely trust, but space to have discussions on contentious topics is often missing.
- Local individual actors, especially very online ones, can become prominent sources of trusted information - more so than journalists and local or national government sources.

Social media is the norm

Key section findings:

- The vast majority of people in all three locations use local Facebook groups and pages regularly to find out about local issues.
- WhatsApp and other group-messaging platforms made up a large portion of local information-sharing, except in Dudley, where there was an apparent void in online group chats across any platform.
- People find information passively across these platforms, but often are 'lurkers' - not actively posting anything on the asylum hotel policy themselves.
- Residents choose social media as a primary source because: they trust the local people posting there; it's free (in a cost of living crisis); and it's fast.

Facebook is the new town square

In every location, Facebook was, by a large margin, the most widely used source of local information across all groups. Nearly all (112 of 125) participants said, in post-group surveys, that they use Facebook as a source for what's happening in their area.[49] Not only did they use their own feeds to find information from friends and family, but most were members of numerous Facebook pages and groups, both public and private. While people named a wide range of pages and groups, they often gestured to the many local groups that exist, and said people generally just joined whatever had the name of their town or area in it.[50]

In one location, there was a clear central group: "Everything Epping Forest" was the most named and best-known Facebook page in Epping Forest, run by a former editor of the Epping Forest Guardian. Some said this page was the closest thing the town had to hyper-local journalism, since the newspaper's own hyper-local coverage has declined.

Greater Manchester and Dudley did not have one dominant Facebook source; instead, this online space took the form of a loose array of channels across the regions. These Facebook pages and groups form an interconnected web of regional, local, and hyper-local-focused groups, offering insight at every level of locality.

Discourse about local asylum hotels was split across these Facebook channels. Some conversations unfolded on general pages and groups, which sometimes led to comments and threads being shut down by moderators wanting to keep the space free of politics. In other cases, channels formed specifically to discuss the hotels or their community implications. Local actors described situations where one group's moderation or admin rules led some residents to set up a "splinter group" of their own, in retaliation, often with far more relaxed moderation.

> *"So I think you can say that there's been a, you know, a schism. Obviously there's tended to be various different local community groups, but there's even more now, because some people are uncomfortable on some groups, and, one seems to be administered in a different way…"* **- Greater Manchester Councillor**

49 Note this reflects surveys of 125 focus group respondents in 3 locations, not nat rep surveys. Ofcom (2026) Local Media Survey reports that nationally the most common route for the public (16+) to access local news is word of mouth (54%) and social media (48%). The top individual source is also social media. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/adult-and-childrens-news-consumption-survey-2026/ofcom-local-news--media-survey-2026---questionnaire.pdf?v=425355

50 See location reports for more detailed examples of pages and groups shared per location.

In all three locations, residents discussed the politics of Facebook pages, and grievances towards local admins - from shutting down conversations some thought were perfectly acceptable, to choosing which local tradespeople could advertise on the page. This suggests Facebook page admins have become new gatekeepers or stewards of local information, deciding what can and cannot be discussed and by whom, with real consequences.

WhatsApp groups are key to the social fabric

WhatsApp group chats have also emerged as a prominent source of information. Around 45% of participants overall said, in post-group surveys, that they use WhatsApp as a source of local information.[51] Groups with friends, family, colleagues, interest groups, and neighbours were a common feature of information-sharing and sense-making in Greater Manchester and Epping Forest, with people again reporting membership of a large number of groups for different purposes.

A minority said these chats were how they first found out about the asylum hotels in their community, and were often the first place they heard updates on the policy. For others, WhatsApp surfaced information that partly shaped their views - an update on a local incident, or suspected suspicious behaviour - without their spending much time discussing the policy itself on the app. WhatsApp appears to function as everyday information infrastructure for most communities: an important channel through which local information travels.

In Dudley, WhatsApp groups were notably less prominent. No one mentioned it in pre-group surveys, and only 11 of 45 residents named it as a common information source in the post-group survey, compared with 26 of 45 in Epping Forest, for example - with even fewer mentions in the focus groups themselves. Some residents said they used to use WhatsApp more, but grew tired of the notifications.

> *"WhatsApp groups are a nightmare. No part of any of them. ... Ding ding ding ding ding ding ding ding. Just go away, leave it alone."* **- Chris, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 47**

Relatedly, while the messaging app Telegram did not come up in any focus group conversation, the online narrative scans found it played a prominent role in the online ecosystem around the hotel policy specifically.[52] In Epping Forest, for example, it accounted for roughly 16.9% of posts about the town and immigration; in Altrincham (Greater Manchester), roughly 10.1% of related content was Telegram-based. This was in complete contrast to places such as Fallowfield (Greater Manchester) and Dudley, where Telegram had essentially no detectable presence in the online scan - mirroring the WhatsApp findings among Dudley residents in this research. This could either be a limitation of the research methodology, or suggest that network effects for these apps simply have not taken hold in these areas, and that this layer of information infrastructure hasn't yet latched on.

Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat bring in the national view on local issues

Other platforms - Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat - were mentioned by 50–60% of participants in each location in the post-group survey. However, focus group discussions made clear that use of these platforms tended to focus on national and international news, rather than local. Greater Manchester, given its size and number of city-based content creators, appeared to generate

51 Note this reflects surveys of 125 focus group respondents in 3 locations, not nat rep surveys.
52 The research analysed 5,938 Telegram data points in total

more place-relevant content that people mentioned; in Epping Forest and Dudley Borough people referenced more generic content.

Most said that while their feeds could include current affairs and other news-oriented content, few used these platforms as a deliberate means of accessing news - usage was mostly for entertainment. Some, though, said they found information about asylum and immigration in their Instagram or TikTok feeds that influenced their views on the topic. Three people in Dudley said they followed political content creators or figures on TikTok or Instagram - Nigel Farage was one of the more common names raised, especially among Traditional Conservatives and Sceptical Scrollers - and that this may shape their views on the issue.

> *"Well I do by Nigel, so I have seen a lot. He's always videoing them coming over in the boats. That was when I first became aware of it when I saw on his Footage and then I started watching GB News."* **- Bella, Dudley, Traditional Conservative, 37**

One woman in Dudley described how content she saw on TikTok shaped her views on the policy - for example, a video in which a person identified as an "asylum seeker" told the person filming they were going to "take over" the UK. It is, of course, impossible to verify whether the subject of the video was in fact an asylum seeker and demonstrates the challenge created by the increase in unedited or live-streamed content being made available with little context or counterpoint being offered by trusted local journalism.

> *"I watched on TikTok. You went to this person and went up to him [and said], 'F*ck off out of my country'. It wasn't his country, obviously he's an asylum seeker. He said, 'We are going to take over, we're going to take over.' I watched that."* **- Shannon, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 49**

Living as "lurkers" on local social media

Even those who frequently used social media to learn about their area - including about the local hotels - often said they would not actively share their own opinions on these platforms. Many self-identified as "lurkers": reading posts, and often enjoying the discussion in the comments, but rarely posting their own views. In Greater Manchester and Dudley, over at least a third of participants said, in the post-group survey, that they had never posted or commented on political issues on social media.[53]

> *"I read them, but I would never comment."* **- Gemma, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 48**

This reluctance to participate was largely driven by fear of negative repercussions. The polarised nature of the topic left many feeling that sharing their view could bring pushback, attacks, judgement, or pressure from friends, peers, or family. A couple of residents said they had been banned from Facebook for their views in the past, leaving them disenchanted with sharing

53 16 people in Greater Manchester and 29 people in Dudley shared they have never posted or commented about political topics in post-focus group surveys. This data was unfortunately not collected in Epping Forest.

opinions on the platform; others described losing friendships over views they had posted.

> *"I might regret something that I say and my son's always saying to me 'don't put anything on there'."* **- Patrick, Epping Forest, Rooted Patriot, 62**

There were some generational patterns in social media habits - but not as marked as national data suggests

While there were some divides in social media use by age, they were less stark than national usage trends might suggest. Snapchat was distinctive in being mentioned only by participants under around 25; younger participants generally opted for platforms other than Facebook, such as TikTok or Instagram, which they saw as less outdated.

However, our focus groups found a notable number of younger residents were still avid Facebook users; others said that while they did not use the platform directly, they were tagged in posts by parents or older relatives, or heard news shared via word of mouth from family who used Facebook. This shows how influential Facebook remains in local information dissemination, even where direct engagement with the platform is relatively low.

Conversely, residents of all ages engaged with platforms like Instagram and TikTok, with many middle-aged and older focus group members describing them as an important part of their information diet - though these platforms were not as prominent a part of trusted information infrastructure for these age groups as Facebook or WhatsApp.

Live streaming as a new trusted source, and the rise of "hotel auditors"

A specific form of content raised by a vocal minority in Epping Forest and Dudley was livestreaming. They particularly flagged accounts making livestreamed content about hotels used for asylum accommodation around the country. This topic has given rise to a new form of content creator, and a new content economy: 'hotel auditors'.

The primary reason people found this content trustworthy was precisely that it was live. In their view, a livestreamed video could not be edited or 'doctored', and so should be highly trusted.[54] At a time when people feel they cannot always trust what they see from local or national news, or take government and other public bodies at their word, they valued a format that directly contrasted a typical journalistic practices of video editing and instead described something unfold in front of them unedited as seeing it with their own eyes.

54 This could be linked to a phenomenon discussed by Lewis (2019) who highlights how content creators have adopted certain celebrity practices that stress authenticity to contrast themselves deliberately with traditional journalistic practices adopted by 'mainstream media'. Available here: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1527476419879919

CASE STUDY
HOTEL AUDITORS

This new category of online content creator tends to gain entry - sometimes illegally - to hotels, livestreaming what they see and interrogating staff and those staying there. In Epping Forest and Dudley, 'auditors' were named as a source that a minority of local people regularly engaged with to learn about the hotels. This is an inherently online medium, developed and rewarded by the social media age. Some prominent auditors - such as *Bare Britain Audits* (~120k YouTube subscribers) or *ST Audits* (~7.7k YouTube subscribers) - have amassed thousands of views on their videos, and are estimated to earn thousands of pounds a month from their content.[55] Residents who said they watched auditors could rarely recall their names, suggesting this is a more passive form of general consumption than a detailed following.

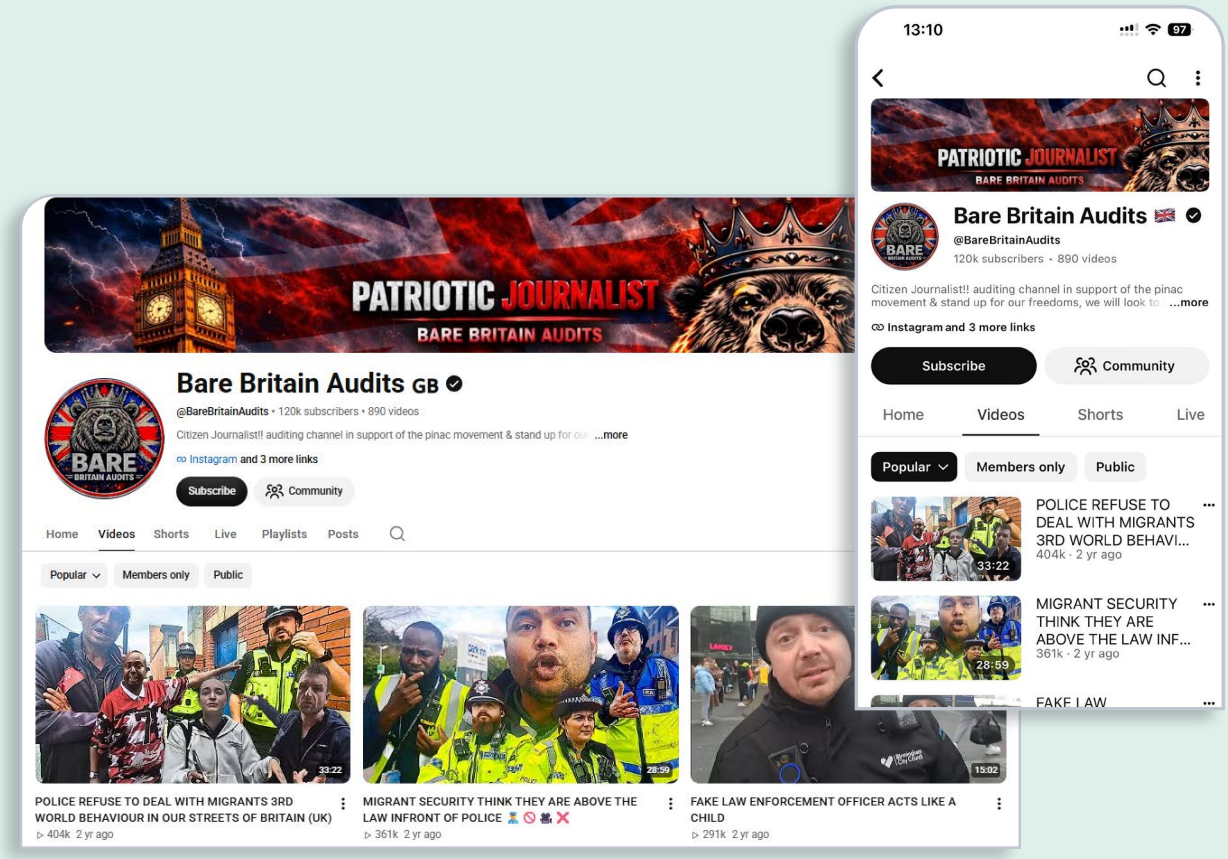
What makes 'hotel auditors' interesting is that some residents perceive them as non-political. One resident who enjoyed this content said she valued how "unfiltered" or "unbiased" it was - without factoring in the aims of the video, or the nature of the act of filming the hotel itself.

> *"There's certain pages I follow and they're like auditors and they are going to the hotels, they're confronting the security at the hotels. They're asking, 'What's the hotel? Can I come in?' And they're like, 'No, no'. 'Who's paying you to close this hotel? …' When you actually physically see it with your own eyes, the more you see their bedrooms and you see their TVs and you see them having all these meals and everything."* **- Jenny, Dudley, Rooted Patriot, 49**

However, as one local councillor told us, these content creators will often stir up a confrontation off-camera - for example, with a hotel security guard - and only begin filming once the interaction is under way, giving the impression on video that they are behaving peacefully and it is the security guards being unreasonable.

55 Channel 4 (2025) 'Inside the lucrative industry of online auditors targeting migrant hotels in the UK'. Available at: https://www.channel4.com/news/inside-the-lucrative-industry-of-online-auditors-targeting-migrant-hotels-in-the-uk ; Bare Britain Audits YouTube channel. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/c/BareBritainAudits ; ST Audits YouTube Channel. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjvfR70ZZcsJbBU_tQsvMpw

FIGURE 1
SCREENSHOTS OF BARE BRITAIN AUDITS' YOUTUBE CHANNEL, RANKED BY "POPULAR" VIDEOS[56]



Being shown "live" or "unedited" does not inherently mean content is free of bias or motivation. Interestingly, people who liked this content would often point out that although traditional public service media has offered live reporting as a core service for years, that coverage is often "scripted" - which they framed as a negative.

> *"I don't trust the news. I think they lie. I think they hide stuff… I think some of it's scripted as well."* - **Lucie, Epping Forest, Progressive Activist, 18**

56 Taken 07.10.26

Why local people trust local social media so much more than the alternatives

There are three main reasons residents choose social media as a primary source of information: they trust the local people posting there; they like that it's free; and they like that it's fast.

First and foremost, residents trust local social media pages and groups because they trust other local people. At a time when trust in institutions is so low, people turn to others in their community to stay informed. This was true across groups and segments, and emerged as a real thread running through many of the trust patterns observed.

> *"I would trust more what I see on Facebook from another mum or parent more than I would for what I see on the news."* **- Sandra, Epping Forest, Traditional Conservative, 70**

Second, social media is free. With many across the UK feeling the pinch on their spending, and seeing less value in local journalism, a free-to-use platform like Facebook offers what feels like an affordable alternative. This is, of course, self-reinforcing: users accustomed to information being surfaced for nothing (setting aside the role of advertising) have even less incentive to pay for a newspaper or other information service.

> *"It's [Facebook] easier to access [than local news media]. There's no charge. You can see everybody's views on it."* **- Laura, Dudley, Dissenting Disruptor, 50**

Third, the speed of social media offers genuine value. Hearing about the latest news far sooner than through other sources should not be underestimated - especially when communities are experiencing tension, and community members want to know what's happening as soon as possible.

> *"I think it's more, you kind of get it straight away, don't you? Firsthand it could literally be, and I feel like that is the benefit of social media and things like that because you get it in a timely manner."* **- Charlotte, Greater Manchester, Rooted Patriot, 38**

This speed, of course, comes with real trade-offs, especially on a topic like the hotel policy. Fast reaction times, combined with algorithms that spread information rapidly, mean speculative, misleading, and unvalidated information, not just trustworthy updates, can quickly take hold of a local community. By the time officials, journalists, or community leaders have had time to investigate and share more accurate information, the damage may already be done. Residents were not blind to this, and some named the rapid spread of speculation as a genuine problem.

> *"Unfortunately people are very quick to put something on Facebook in a comment and at times it can be scaremongering… because it's not been verified. So… you have to be careful where you get your sources of information from it [Facebook]. And if something hasn't been verified, then just be careful how much of it you actually believe."* **- Patrick, Epping Forest, Rooted Patriot, 62**

Alongside the challenge of virality, some residents raised concerns about the growing prevalence of AI-generated content on social media, and its impact on people's ability to distinguish fact from fiction. This was raised by at least a couple of people in each location as a genuine concern, and something they would like to see addressed.

> *"I feel like you can't trust anything because I personally can't tell. I've sent things before and then someone's come back and been like, 'That's AI'. I think it's really hard and difficult to tell and it'll only get worse."* **- Louise, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 23-26**

Even so, it appears the trade-offs around AI content, fast-spreading rumours, and speculation are, for most residents, worth the access and speed social media provides for learning about their area.

Offline discussion breaks down when faced with contentious topics

Key section findings:

- Offline spaces for word-of-mouth information-gathering and discussion matter more than ever in all three communities.
- Even where places for discussion exist, many don't feel comfortable discussing the topic of asylum hotels.
- Some residents have lost friendships after attempting to discuss the topic of asylum hotels.

A healthy information environment is not just about the production and dissemination of accurate, trustworthy information, but about the existence of places and spaces in which to evaluate that information, and work out how it shapes people's views. The importance of word of mouth, and opportunities for offline discussion, was raised repeatedly as a permanent and crucial part of people's information diets. Conversations with friends and neighbours, calls with extended family, or chance encounters on the street, were something everyone described as a source of local insight, and a means of making sense of their area. Likewise, a pint at the pub, chats with fellow worshippers, or conversation over coffee at a community gathering, were all ways people might hear about - and discuss - local information.

The presence of spaces for offline discussion varied between locations

While ad hoc conversations on the street may be useful for some updates, key to a healthy information environment are places where people can gather, talk, and make sense of what's happening in their community. The presence and use of these spaces was not consistent across the three locations.

> *"Well, to be honest with you, I just got to the local co-op and they're all chatting in there and then gossiping in there, so that's how I find that a lot of stuff. My neighbour works in there as well and when she sees me she always fills me in with all the latest what's happening while I'm in the queue."* **- Maria, Epping Forest, Rooted Patriot, 52**

Greater Manchester had the highest number of reported spaces, places, and groups where people could come together, with a wide range of sports clubs, faith groups, and other physical centres of community. Dudley Borough, by contrast, appeared to have very little community infrastructure that was known or used by residents. A couple mentioned a religious community they belonged to, without describing it as important to forming their views on local issues; a local councillor mentioned in-person interest groups meeting at a town hall in their ward, but was unsure how many residents even knew these existed.

Dudley has been identified to receive funding under the UK's *Pride in Place* strategy, which is largely oriented around investment in physical spaces. While this is promising, Dudley Town's MP, Sonia Kumar, raised concerns in Parliament in April about the funding being split between two local constituencies, which could dilute the programme's impact.[57]

Contentious issues are too challenging to discuss offline

Even though word of mouth was emphasised repeatedly as important for discovering and sharing information, discussion within communities appeared fractured - in some cases non-existent - on the specific topic of asylum hotels. As with views on posting online, many people across all three locations, from all groups, told us that even where they had places or opportunities to discuss local matters, they probably would not raise this subject in particular: the polarising nature of the debate had left people afraid to share their thoughts, for fear of repercussions.

> *"You wouldn't mention it when you were out in a social setting because it causes issues. It's quite emotive isn't it? We are all different. We're all human beings. Everyone's going to have a different opinion. So I wouldn't bring it up with friends."*
> **- Gemma, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 48**

While this was not true of every respondent - a minority described respectful discussion of the topic with family or colleagues - a couple of residents told us they had lost friends over things said in person, and others described negative interactions with colleagues or family that had put them off.

> *"What I found is that I lost friends… I was posting things and people were getting annoyed at me in the past. So people who were my friends suddenly started disappearing."* **- Rufus, Epping Forest, Dissenting Disruptor, 66**

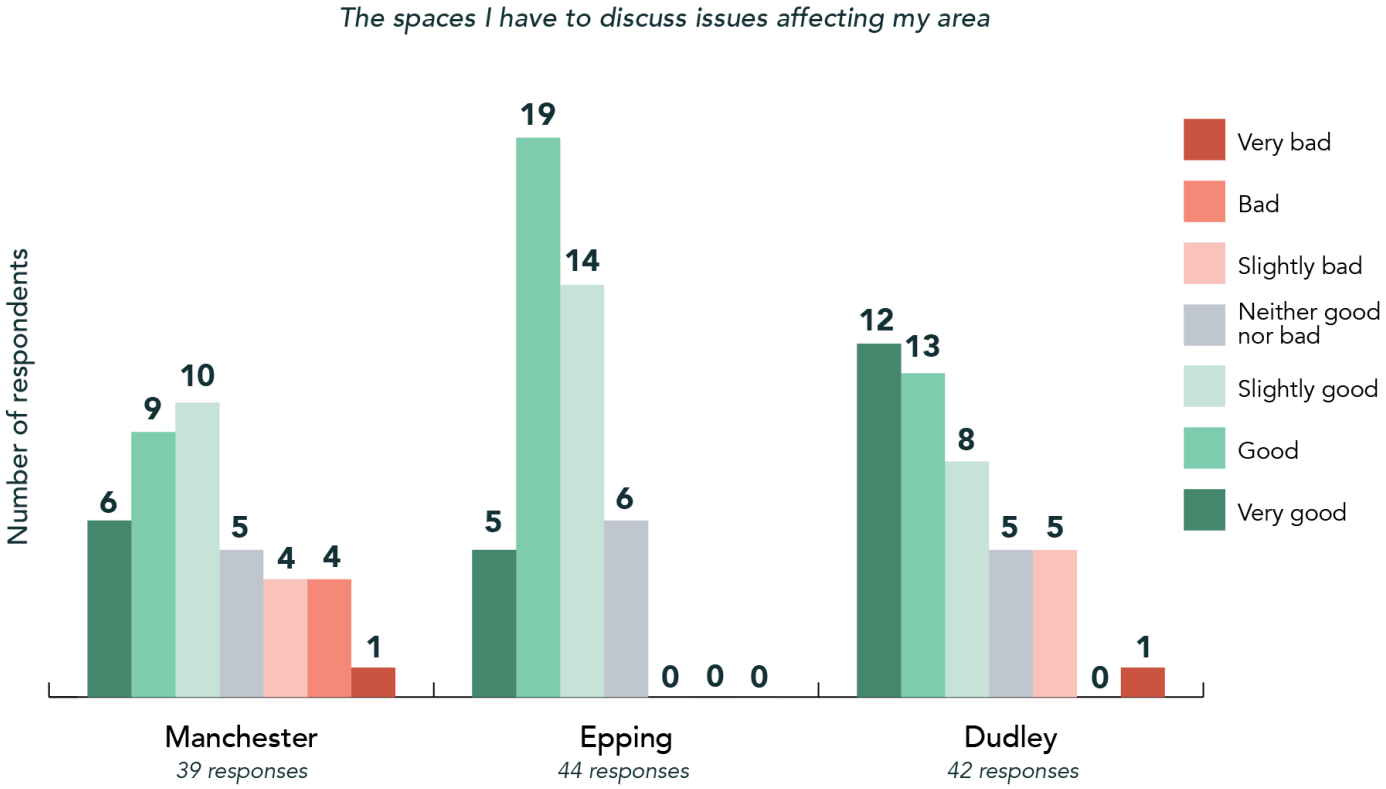
For a few residents - especially Sceptical Scrollers and Dissenting Disruptors in Dudley - this sense of what can and cannot be discussed appeared closely linked to a broader perceived debate about free speech. A couple even said they believed they could face legal consequences for sharing their own views.

57 UK Parliament, House of Commons (2026) 'Pride in Place: Community Spaces', 13 April. Available at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2026-04-13/debates/D8755C99-1E3F-4FBC-B3B9-E42202B1A432/PrideInPlaceCommunitySpaces

"I personally believe that in the last 15 years or so, we've gone from a country where you can have a conversation with a person with no fear to now being in fear of the police knocking your door saying or you're being done for a hate crime." **- Chris, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 47**

Comparing post-group survey responses with what people said in the room is revealing. In surveys, residents were relatively positive about the spaces available to them (see Chart 3). But in the focus groups themselves, at least 20% of participants independently raised a lack of safe space to discuss the asylum hotel policy - often to agreement in the room. This raises the question of whether something about this particular policy makes it harder to discuss in collective spaces. It may be that while the spaces available are useful and valued for day-to-day community life, something is missing when it comes to the most difficult or contentious topics.

CHART 3
POST-GROUP SURVEY: SENTIMENT TOWARDS SPACES AVAILABLE TO DISCUSS ISSUES AFFECTING THEIR LOCAL AREA



Note: these figures reflect only those who took part in these focus groups; they are not representative of the broader public in these places.

This matters not only because it affects the personal wellbeing of people who want to discuss issues that matter to them, but because it affects a community's ability to collectively evaluate information and make sense of what is happening. If many residents in these three areas felt they could not discuss the asylum hotel topic in any of the spaces available to them - combined with their reluctance to share views in the online spaces they use, as set out above - it becomes easier to understand why division builds more readily, and community connection can decline around this issue. A broad range of other research, including Demos's own deliberative workshops on the topic, has shown that by providing physical spaces and moments where

people can share views, exchange ideas, and engage more tacitly in shaping thought, can help improve relationships and therefore prevent unrest, anti-social behaviour and violence.[58]

Online, local people can be highly influential and gain large followings

Key section findings:

- In the smaller local information environments, specific local actors have developed bespoke audiences and are having an outsized impact as a result.
- Greater Manchester, the largest location, does not have the same central alternative local authority figure.
- The attraction to these individuals in Dudley and Epping Forest seems to be broadly drawn from a desire to have local voices represented and heard.

This section explains how, on the topic of asylum hotels, certain individual local actors gained particular prominence in some areas, often through their social media presence. Individuals have always been trusted information actors, and key pillars of local information environments - elected representatives, community elders, faith leaders, local GPs and others. But the dominance of social media has created a new route for everyday figures to build large audiences. Gaps in trust in mainstream media and traditional community leaders have propelled some audiences towards new, informal local influencers.

The emergence of local social media influencers

In both Epping Forest and Dudley residents quickly gravitated, in focus groups, towards particular figures as important voices on the asylum hotel policy.

In Epping Forest, one name came up in every group: Adam Brooks. A "proper Essex boy", as participants described him, turned online commentator, who has posted consistently about the Bell Hotel and the asylum hotel policy in the region. Adam has around 444,000 X and 141,000 Facebook followers - significant reach by any measure.[59] While focus groups were split on the quality of his output, almost everyone knew who he was, and named him as a key voice - trusted or not - in providing information about, and driving discussion of, the *Bell Hotel*. Notably, views on Adam did not track neatly with archetype: people from Progressive Activists to Dissenting Disruptors both liked and distrusted him to some degree. Younger participants tended to be less familiar with his content.

> *"There's a guy... Adam. He's all over social media... he's basically doing it all for the Bell Hotel, for all the speaking on everyone's behalf and he's amazing. I think he's absolutely brilliant."* **- Maria, Epping Forest, Rooted Patriot, 52**
>
> *"He [Adam Brooks] spread a lot of disinformation... he made out that... you can't walk safely... Well, I live here, and I know I don't see that ever. He just lies. And there's no one to challenge this."* **- Local Facebook admin**

58 ICON (2025) 'Social Infrastructure and Social Capital' (p. 9). Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/ICON-Social-Infrastructure-and-Social-Capital-report-FINAL.pdf ; Institute for Public Policy Research (2025) 'Closure of community spaces fuelled tinderbox for far right to spark Southport riots, says report'. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/media-office/closure-of-community-spaces-fuelled-tinderbox-for-far-right-to-spark-southport-riots-says-report ; Demos (2026) 'Your Voice on Immigration: Report on the Findings from Public Deliberation on Work-Related Immigration for the Home Affairs Committee'. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/research/your-voice-on-immigration-report-on-the-findings-from-public-deliberation-on-work-related-immigration-for-the-home-affairs-committee/

59 EssexPR X profile. Available at: https://x.com/EssexPR ; Adam Brooks Media Facebook profile. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/adambrooksmedia/ ; Brooks Reports Facebook profile. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/BrooksReports/

In Dudley, Ryan Brooks - no relation to Adam - was the most prominent personality raised throughout the research. He came up a couple of times when residents were asked whom they might hear information from, and was independently flagged by staff at the local authority, the police, and a member of a faith group, as a person of concern given his role in organising activity around the hotels - using his sizeable social media following of 132k Facebook followers.[60] Ryan does not appear to have the same reach among the general Dudley public as Adam Brooks has in Epping Forest, but for organising and discussion specifically about asylum hotels, he emerged as a notably influential - and, for local public authorities, concerning - figure.

Unlike the other two locations, Greater Manchester had no single figure singled out for their role in the information environment. Residents named various individuals who had commented on the policy - such as Totes Inappropes (236k Facebook followers) and Ben "The Ginger Patriot" (2.2k Facebook followers, 19.8k YouTube subscribers) - but no single focal point emerged.[61] Greater Manchester generally does not face the same challenge as Dudley and Epping Forest in making its views heard on key issues - a gap some Epping Forest residents felt Adam Brooks helped fill - likely because its information environment is much larger, with far greater news media coverage and political voice.

An appetite for local individuals over faceless institutions

Declining trust in faceless institutions, alongside rising trust in local - as opposed to national - actors, may be the primary driver of this shift. Many residents said that while they did not agree with everything these figures said, and were uneasy about their possible broader political motivations, they valued that these were local people, with families in the town, who cared about the area.

> *"The thing that draws me to [Adam Brooks] is probably…He lives in the area. He's got young family and one of the things he says now, whether you trust his views or not and whether you have the same opinion of him or not, he genuinely stands there and says, 'I am doing this for the future of my family'. And that passion makes me go, I really, really hope all this stuff you're feeding me is right, because I want to believe your passion."* **- Rufus, Epping Forest, Dissenting Disruptor, 66**

From an information-theory perspective, this could be understood as "mass self-communication": self-ascribed 'citizen journalists' and content creators using horizontal communication networks - social media and video platforms like YouTube - to bypass traditional institutional gatekeepers.[62] More broadly, it may point to a wider preference for following individuals over institutions: someone whose face you can see, whose story you know, and whose beliefs you can recognise in yourself. This pull towards a local, relatable figure was palpable among residents in the two smaller information environments.

60 Brooks Reports 'Facebook profile. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/BrooksReports/ - data collected 14.09.26

61 Totes Inappropes Facebook profile. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/totesinappropes123/ ; The Ginger Patriot YouTube channel. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/@TheGingerPatriot ; Bando Ben Facebook profile. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/bando.ben.77/

62 Castells, M. (2009) Communication Power. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Communication-Power-Manuel-Castells/dp/0199595690

CASE STUDY
ADAM BROOKS

Within Epping Forest's local information ecosystem, one local influencer has emerged as a prominent - and divisive - voice on asylum accommodation. Adam Brooks was raised in all five resident focus groups. Some view him as a dangerous "outrage merchant", whose anti-migrant content fuels community division, pointing to repeated instances of misinformation. Despite this, the majority saw him as an authentic community figure sharing trusted local information.

Born and raised in Essex, Brooks wears several hats. He has become a national social-media personality, joined GB News as a panellist in 2021, previously owned a nightclub in Loughton, and has recently moved into celebrity boxing. Under the handle @EssexPR, he has become a national online voice on the Bell Hotel in Epping. His output covers UK immigration, policing, and debates about free speech and "cancel culture", with commentary aligned with right-wing populist views.

For more on Adam Brooks, see the Epping Forest report published alongside this paper.

FIGURE 2
SCREENSHOT: ADAM BROOKS' X ACCOUNT, POST DATED 25 JULY 2025



The rise of trusted local actors online raises important questions about how best to understand and engage with local information environments. Such reach could create real opportunities to improve information environments, if used to share trustworthy, accessible information. But without effective verification, it also creates risks around the spread of false or misleading information - especially where trusted institutional sources sharing factual updates are scarce.

What is clear from the prominence of actors like Adam Brooks is that people value seeing themselves and their community represented by platformed figures - something they may feel is missing as trust in, or shared views with, elected representatives declines, and journalism feels less locally representative. As local people and places lose, or lose trust in, the traditional actors who once spoke to and for them, this creates a unique opening for online influencers to fill the gap.

Summary: Local people trust local people

The information infrastructure people trust most in Epping Forest, Dudley Borough, and Greater Manchester shares two features: it is decentralised, and it is led by local people. In these communities, the most trusted voices are other community members - whether in a Facebook or WhatsApp group, in person on the street, or as an individual local actor. Sometimes these voices are amplified by the online age, as with Epping Forest's Adam Brooks, whose profile has grown across Facebook, X, and YouTube.

In some ways, this could signal a genuine shift for the better in local democracy: communities looking to support, engage with, and collectively navigate challenges alongside each other. But the means by which they do this are not optimised for healthy information environments. Social media algorithms designed for engagement, unverified or unlabelled AI-generated content, and sensationalist gossip are not always damaging in isolation - but combined, and where they make up the majority of a local information diet, they can be highly damaging. It is this lack of counterbalancing, trustworthy information that the next section explores.

2.5 THE OLD PILLARS IN DECLINE: MEDIA, POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENT

Engagement with, and trust in, mainstream news media, elected politicians, and government are all remarkably low in Epping Forest, Greater Manchester, and Dudley Borough. This was fairly consistent across almost all groups, regardless of political affiliation or ideology - in line with broader UK trends. Even so, the scale of disconnection and mistrust identified is unsettling for a democratic society.

In each location, a rich variety of information actors - key organisations, bodies, or people - play a role in providing information, or holding space for local sense-making. These range from youth clubs and Facebook page admins, to faith leaders, journalists, service-providing charities and local public officials. Many clearly aspire to engage their communities in ways that leave people feeling served and informed, but often lack the capacity, support, or structures to do so fully. Despite that intent, therefore, many are struggling to gain, or regain, public trust.

Key chapter findings:

- Trust in 'mainstream' media at the national and local level is collapsing
- Trust in elected representatives as information actors is low across the board, but slightly higher for councillors compared to MPs
- Trust in government as information actors is dwindling, but there is a specific opportunity for councils to be trusted more

Diminishing appetite for, and trust in, 'mainstream media'

Key section findings:

- The size and shape of the local news media ecosystem varied significantly across the three locations, with Greater Manchester having both a higher supply of local news media and more engaged readers.
- Many residents lament the declining quality and price of local news media, and a lack of truly local reporting and radio presenting.
- New subscription models, such as The Mill in Manchester, could offer new hope for local news sustainability, but readership in these focus groups was sparse.
- Trust in national 'mainstream news media' was low across the board, with the BBC a particular focal point for criticism of "corruption" and "bias".
- Persistently negative news coverage appears to further national and local news avoidance.
- Residents want to shape their own local story - though a shift to a more hopeful narrative is needed in Dudley.

Local news media faces an ongoing struggle between financial sustainability and quality

While each location has some form of local media, unlike some local "news deserts" elsewhere in the UK, that which exists in all three locations is not locally-based or even fully locally focused. Epping Forest has one local publciation whilst Dudley has three news outlets in the Borough. Both places once had a more diverse, flourishing local news ecosystem, which has dwindled over the last twenty years to limited coverage from regional, rather than place-focused, editors and reporters. In Dudley, a small number of residents said they follow regional outlets like *BirminghamLive* and *Black Country Radio*; in Epping Forest, residents reported minimal consumption of any hyper-local or regional news
at all.

Greater Manchester, by contrast, has a notably larger local news ecosystem, dominated by the *Reach* owned *Manchester Evening News* (MEN) - the city's largest newspaper, with a reported 11 million monthly readers, almost four times the population of Greater Manchester.[63] Each ward also often has its own hyper-local outlet, such as the *Oldham Times* or *Altrincham Today*, alongside *The Mill* - an online, subscription-based publication discussed further below.[64]

Trust and consumption were generally low across all three places. A minority of respondents said they frequently use local news media, and those who did were predominantly in Greater Manchester, where the diversity and supply of news is higher - none were from Dudley.[65]

Even where readership was higher, the experience was not always positive. Many in Greater Manchester named the MEN as a prominent source of information, but trust and satisfaction with it varied - people criticised the quality of its journalism, and the user experience of its website. This reflects a wider UK-wide challenge: with few people paying for news, outlets rely on advertising revenue to survive, driving the kind of cluttered website experience that then puts readers off.

63 Manchester Evening News (2026) 'Manchester Evening News reaches 11 million monthly readers and adds thousands of 'Premium' subscribers'. Available at: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/manchester-evening-news-reaches-11-33539084

64 While there are other notable local and independent examples in Manchester such as the Meteor, those referenced here are those mentioned by members of the public.

65 29 of 131 in the pre-group survey shared this view.

"You can't actually read it [the MEN] because soon things pop up, it's too rapid. It just like video start playing and you're like information overload." ***- Cameron, Greater Manchester, Progressive Activist, 44***

In Epping Forest and Dudley, residents were frustrated that their remaining local papers no longer felt truly local. Many felt these publications no longer had local journalists able to engage with residents and report on stories that mattered to their community - as was true of local radio and other outlets. Residents felt they could no longer see themselves and their community reflected in this reporting.

"The [local media] seems to be more dramatic about the bigger stories that are happening. Things which aren't even in this area. It's not local enough." ***- Angelina, Dudley, Incrementalist Left, 37***

All of the local news outlets in Dudley and Epping Forest are owned by *Newsquest*, whose editors and journalists cover multiple locations, and have limited capacity to focus specifically on either town. This pattern holds across much of the UK: just three organisations - *DMG Media, News UK* and *Reach* - control 90% of UK national newspaper circulation, a 20% increase in market concentration since 2014.[66] Combined with an overall lack of trust in large institutions, this leaves people with news media that not only fails to speak to or represent their community, but is owned by corporations they know nothing about.

"The other problem is as well, the local radio stations have been swallowed up by companies such as Global Media… and you don't even have local presenters anymore. It's all done centrally now. And then a small section, you'll get a bit of local news, so you don't even get local people on local radio anymore ... " ***- Lewis, Dudley, Dissenting Disruptor, 39***

Others criticised the price of local news, particularly compared with the *BBC*'s free-to-access coverage, or the free information available on social media. Across many groups, people found it absurd that a local newspaper might cost even a couple of pounds, with some recalling when free papers came through the door. Prior to the more recent announcements of BBC job cuts, including to local services, some wider commentary from journalists, academics, and policymakers has criticised the *BBC*'s earlier expansion into local and regional coverage, arguing its model could undercut local journalism.[67] Others in these ecosystems have praised the *BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service* (LDRS) - which funds local journalists in outlets including those in Greater Manchester and Dudley - but were critical of how it is set up.[68] The LDRS currently favours larger outlets, such as *Newsquest* and *Reach*, over smaller independent outlets

66 Media Reform Coalition (2025) 'Who Owns the UK Media?' (p. 2). Available at: https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2025-Who-Owns-The-UK-Media-report.pdf
67 Press Gazette (2026) 'BBC to cut local radio and regional TV news, with 90 jobs at risk'. Available at: https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/bbc-to-cut-local-radio-and-regional-tv-news-with-90-jobs-at-risk/ ; Hold the Front Page (2026) 'BBC should not undercut local media, say MPs'. Available at: https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2026/news/bbc-should-not-undercut-local-media-say-mps/
68 BBC (2026) 'Local Democracy Reporters'. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/lnp/ldrs

that lack the capacity to manage the tender process.[69]

> *"I still pick up the Metro if I'm on [the train]. I think it was free I would [read a local newspaper] but they want one pound 10, so no one's going to go and pick it up."*
> **- Ryan, Epping Forest, Progressive Activist, 48**

New subscription models, such as *The Mill*, offer possible hope for financial sustainability

In Greater Manchester - and in Birmingham, Dudley's nearest large city - new, independent, innovative local journalism outlets have emerged: the *Manchester Mill*, and the Mill's newer sister publication, the *Birmingham Dispatch*. While it is encouraging to see new outlets adapting to modern conditions and operating in new formats, low awareness and consumption among our respondents suggests these outlets still have work to do to reach and engage news avoiders who might most enjoy their free-tier coverage.

CASE STUDY
THE MILL

The Manchester Mill ("The Mill") is a subscription-funded digital local news outlet covering Greater Manchester, built primarily around email newsletters rather than a traditional website-and-advertising model. It is the flagship title of Mill Media, run by The Millers Publishing Company Limited.[70]

The publication was founded in 2020 by Joshi Herrmann, a journalist who previously worked at mainstream outlets such as The Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Evening Standard and The Spectator. It launched in an attempt to find new ways to support journalism, and push back against the decline of local news.[71]

Its editorial approach favours long-form, deeply reported storytelling over short-form or wire-based coverage. Herrmann has been explicit that The Mill will not write about celebrities or viral internet stories, and will not copy and paste press releases.

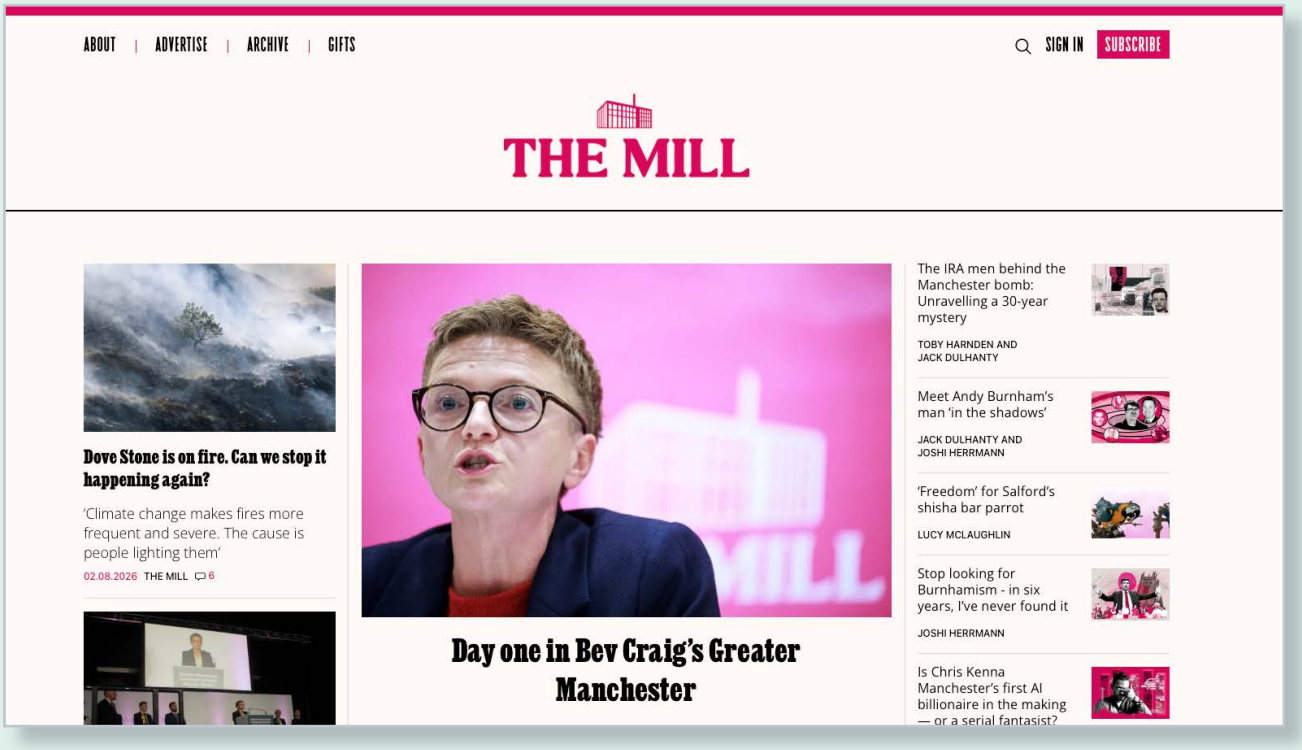
The Mill is funded by subscription. Its free tier gives "access to [their] free service, including Monday Briefings and some long reads". An £89/year membership, and a £175/year "Super Supporter" tier, unlock extra members-only stories, interviews, long reads and podcasts, plus access to a private community.[72] In 2023, it raised £350,000

69 Public Interest News Foundation (2026) 'PINF vision for a community-first BBC'. Available at: https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/blog/pinf-vision-for-a-community-first-bbc/ ; Hold the Front Page (2020) 'Make Democracy Reporter scheme fair for smaller publishers, BBC says'. Available at: https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2020/news/make-democracy-reporter-scheme-fair-for-smaller-publishers-bbc-says/
70 Manchester Mill, homepage. Available at: https://manchestermill.co.uk/ ; Birmingham Dispatch, homepage. Available at: https://www.birminghamdispatch.co.uk/
71 Mill Media Co., 'About'. Available at: https://millmediaco.uk/about/
72 Manchester Mill (2025) 'The moment has come: our campaign is under way — can you help?'. Available at: https://manchestermill.co.uk/the-moment-has-come-our-campaign-is-under-way-can-you-help/#/portal/signup

in equity investment - from backers including Sir Mark Thompson, CNN CEO and former BBC Director General - at a £1.85m valuation, to fund expansion into other cities.[73]

There are now seven local publications under the Mill Media umbrella: in Birmingham (The Dispatch), Leeds (The Exchange), Liverpool (The Post), Sheffield (The Tribune), London (The Londoner), and Glasgow (The Bell).[74]

FIGURE 3
SCREENSHOT: THE MILL HOMEPAGE[75]



Trust in national news media is low, with criticism centred on the BBC

At the national level, there was some broad consumption of public service broadcasters and UK-wide outlets - *Sky, ITV, the BBC, the Guardian, GB News* and others. In line with established national trends, news consumption was slightly higher among older participants, with younger participants relying predominantly on social media.

> *"It sounds kind of stupid, but it seems like an old person's kind of thing. I couldn't imagine my Nan reading the newspaper. I could just go on the internet and type in and have a look."* **- Dylan, Dudley, Progressive Activist, 22**

73 TheBusinessDesk.com (2025) 'The bold and the brave with Joshi Herrmann, founder of The Mill'. Available at: https://www.thebusinessdesk.com/northwest/news/2152511-the-bold-and-the-brave-with-joshi-herrmann-founder-of-the-mill
74 Mill Media Co. 'Our Sites'. Available at: https://millmediaco.uk/our-sites/
75 taken 03.08.26

While engagement with mainstream national news varied, overall trust in national outlets was consistently low. *BBC News* (though often referred to as simply 'the BBC') drew particularly focused criticism - a few across groups said they trusted *Sky News* or *ITV News* ('ITV') only marginally more. In Epping Forest and Dudley especially, many residents said they did not trust the *BBC*, viewing it as "biased" or "corrupt". Asked why, they pointed to specific recent controversies, such as the misleading editing of a speech by President Trump, or described a belief that the broadcaster had strong political leanings or agendas. This distribution of trust is notable, given that UK-wide trust in the *BBC*, though declining, remains generally higher than for other broadcasters - with nearly half of UK adults surveyed (46–47%) saying the *BBC* is better than 'most others'.

> *"I used to be a fan of mainstream news, but it's too corrupt I'm afraid, especially BBC… Because the institution's being corrupted and along with the government as well, they seem to be working in cahoots with each other, BBC being the prime example."* **- Lewis, Dudley, Dissenting Disruptor, 39**[76]

Negative news coverage appears to drive deliberate news avoidance

Criticism was strong and consistent for both national and local news media: what people hear and read is depressing. Many self-described news avoiders in the focus groups said mainstream news was too off-putting, angering, or sad to consume, and so chose a degree of self-protection by avoiding it entirely. This extended to local news media too, seen as reporting mainly on crime and sensationalism, with local gossip and social media then perpetuating these negative narratives.

This reflects a UK-wide phenomenon - recent research found 46% of UK residents sometimes avoid the news, while high interest in the news has fallen to 37%, from 70% in 2015.[77] Optimising for social media algorithms has created an incentive for outlets to focus on sensationalist headlines and attention-grabbing coverage. 2025 research analysing around 40 million headlines from English-language news outlets over the past two decades found that online news headlines have become longer, more negative, and increasingly focused on click-through rates, regardless of journalistic quality.[78]

> *"I do like a newspaper, but it tends to be very few success stories and more negative information if I'm honest."* **- Amelia, Dudley, Progressive Activist, 43**

Who gets to shape the public narrative about a place provoked strong emotion

One theme that came through strongly in all three places, but especially in Dudley Borough and Epping Forest, was the power of narratives about place. In Epping Forest, people in every group expressed frustration about the area's national public profile, and the way the town's identity was, in many ways, being written by outside actors rather than those who live there. This

76 Demos has elsewhere recommended how to strengthen the level of independence and public accountability for the BBC with a view to tackling this type of mistrust. https://demos.co.uk/research/our-bbc-a-blueprint-for-a-more-independent-and-future-proofed-bbc/

77 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2025) 'Digital News Report 2025: Executive Summary'. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/dnr-executive-summary ; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2026) 'Digital News Report 2026'. p. 13. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2026-06/DNR%202026%20FINAL_2.pdf

78 Max Planck Society (2025) 'Journalism online headlines shift from concise to click-worthy'. Available at: https://www.mpg.de/24742557/journalism-online-headlines-shift-from-concise-to-click-worthy

was partly a product of Epping being used as a political platform by national actors, and partly of online discourse about the place. This lack of control over their own story came through as strongly disempowering, and, in many cases, as a source of real anger.

Dudley had a different self-perception, and so a different shared narrative. The characterisation of Dudley as a declining, unsafe, left behind borough was, in fact, driven largely by local people describing their everyday experience. While there was a strong sense of regional pride - with a majority in every group expressing some positive sentiment about Black Country identity - discussion of Dudley itself was overwhelmingly negative.

> *"It's hard to feel pride in place when there's nothing to be proud of."*
> **- Dudley Council Staff**

Some of these sentiments about Dudley are rooted in real, tangible socio-economic factors - infrastructure, public services, and more. But the overarching negativity appeared only to deepen the sense of dread many residents described. The stories people tell about themselves, and their ability to shape their own narratives, clearly play a powerful role in how a place, and its community, functions and comes together. If the goal is for places to grow, achieve greater cohesion, and build more resilient information ecosystems that serve local people, local people need the power to shape stories that represent and inspire them.

Academics have argued that news avoidance is not apathy, but a rational response to a news environment that does not serve you.[79] It is not a new finding that people want more positive stories about the place they live. But at a moment of such high dissatisfaction with the state, disenfranchisement and division, this is the right time to seriously question the role that narratives, and the broader information environment, play in how people see their local area and community. If residents opt out of trustworthy journalism altogether, some of the opportunities to address the dissonance and disconnection behind much of the protest and anger seen across the UK are lost.

Little trust in national and local elected representatives

Key section findings:

- Trust in elected representatives, including local councillors and MPs, as local information actors is incredibly low.
- Trust in these key local actors is often built through engagement with local citizens.
- Local representatives struggle to communicate on national policy, facing backlash locally while already experiencing high levels of abuse.
- A lack of effective communication from elected representatives, particularly online, may be undermining trust-building efforts.

Knowledge of political representation is low

Despite multiple layers of political representation - from Parliament to mayoralty to council - relatively few residents in Greater Manchester, Dudley Borough, or Epping Forest had knowledge of their local elected representatives.

79 Toff, B., Palmer, R. and Nielsen, R.K. (2024) Avoiding the News: Reluctant Audiences for Journalism. New York: Columbia University Press. Available at: https://cup.columbia.edu/book/avoiding-the-news/9780231555883/

Where figures were well known, this appeared to stem primarily from an active social media presence, or memorable offline community engagement - for example, visiting schools or other gathering places. Holly Whitbread, a Conservative councillor for Epping West and Rural, has an active social media presence that multiple people across Epping Forest groups noted. Similarly, a handful of Greater Manchester residents mentioned Connor Rand, Labour MP for Altrincham and Sale West, after he visited their children's schools to give talks. Importantly, awareness of these representatives did not always correlate with how much residents liked or trusted them - but there was broad support for the fact that they were sharing information and engaging with the community.

Trust in elected representatives' communications is consistently low

Recognition aside, trust in elected representatives' communications was low across the board. Many residents did not engage with any information shared by representatives, or said they never saw any; a minority across the three locations said that, where they did see information, they found it untrustworthy, questioning representatives' competence or suspecting less benign motives.

One of the stronger sentiments towards elected representatives was a belief that they are genuinely corrupt, with no real interest in serving local people. This was particularly pronounced in Dudley, where there was visceral anger, and in some cases outright disgust, towards elected representatives - most prominent among Sceptical Scrollers and Dissenting Disruptors, but with real purchase across all groups. While this anger was primarily aimed at national politicians, it extended, be it only slightly improved, to local councillors. It appeared to stem from a perception that elected representatives had let local people, and the country, down, and were failing to do their jobs.

> *"They [elected officials] tell nothing but lies. You can't trust anybody. They're fully full of sh*t basically. And I've gone to a stage now where I don't believe it. They're all lawyers and try and suck you in and they'll give you broken promises and nothing happens."* **- Shannon, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 49**

Relatedly, in all three locations there was a broad sense that whoever the politicians were, some bias towards their party's views, a particular group, or a particular agenda was inevitable. This reinforced a feeling that elected representatives were not always acting in the best interests of local people and local issues, but were instead shaping their communications to serve party politics.

> *"You're going to get the Labour's interpretation of the view. If the other council's Conservative, if you're going to get a Conservative, if it's a Reform council, you're going to get Reform. Do you know where I'm coming from?"* **- Nial, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 49**

Less extreme, but equally damaging, a fair number of residents across the three areas believed local representatives simply did not know what was going on themselves, and so were incapable of acting on the policy. On the local hotels specifically, there was a sense that councillors and MPs clearly did not know what was happening - otherwise, residents reasoned, there would be clearer communication from them.

"[I] Don't think they [representatives] really know what's going on to be honest."
- Angelina, Dudley, Incrementalist Left, 37

Local representatives struggle to communicate on contentious national policy

Local councillors and MPs have a vital role in local information ecosystems: they sit between citizens and government bodies, local and national, and often hold insight into policy areas and their ramifications for their communities that other actors simply do not have. And yet, in all three places, information shared by these actors - where it existed at all - did not appear to cut through to residents.[80]

Councillors who engaged in interviews pointed strongly to external factors shaping this, particularly given how contentious the topic is, and that the policy originates with, and remains owned by, the Home Office rather than the council.

"Of course, this isn't a council issue… we very much have a policy of only boasting about things that we can actually achieve. Whereas the hotel is not a council issue. We have got nothing to do with contracts to use the hotel. There's actually nothing much we can do about it." **- Greater Manchester councillor**

Abuse and misinformation are shaping how representatives communicate

Coverage of, and protest about, the policy also comes at a time when abuse towards local representatives is already at a high. In 2025, 72% of councillors in England and Wales reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the previous 12 months, rising to 88% among parish and town councillors; crucially, over half reported being the target of misinformation.[81]

MPs face similar challenges. An Electoral Commission report on MPs' experiences during and after the 2024 general election found 55% of respondents had experienced some form of harassment, intimidation or abuse, leading 56% to avoid some form of campaign activity at least once, out of fear of abuse.[82]

These experiences were reflected by councillors in Epping Forest, Greater Manchester, and Dudley. Arooj Shah, former leader of Oldham Council and a key local political figure in Greater Manchester, was the subject of a racist political deepfake, first shared on a local Facebook page before spreading further online.[83] A Dudley councillor described directly in this research their fears of having their words turned into a soundbite, or used against them.

The type and level of abuse experienced by councillors appears to be shaping how, and where, they engage with residents. While some remained active on local Facebook pages and other online spaces, others were turning towards in-person engagement only. One councillor described a scheme run with community groups at a local town hall, going door to door to share updates on local projects. While they felt this analogue approach was working well, and rebuilding some trust with residents, relying on it alone limits the number of people reached - particularly given how much residents rely on social media for local information.

80 Important note: we did not interview any MPs for this research due to limited resources
81 Local Government Association (2025) 'Debate Not Hate: Survey of Councillors 2025'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-survey-councillors-2025
82 Electoral Commission (2024) 'Report on the 2024 UK Parliamentary General Election' (pp. 28, 30). Available at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/Report%20on%20the%202024%20UK%20Parliamentary%20general%20election.pdf
83 The Oldham Times (2025) 'Oldham council leader slams racist, malicious AI deepfake videos'. Available at: https://www.theoldhamtimes.co.uk/news/25647999.oldham-council-leader-slams-racist-malicious-ai-deepfake-videos/

Training exists, but uptake is low

Training and support for councillors on online communication is available from national bodies, such as the Local Government Association (LGA).[84] Epping Forest, Oldham, Trafford (where Altrincham is) and Manchester City (where Fallowfield is) councils all offer resources or training courses on social media for councillors.[85] However, only a small number of councillors had engaged with these resources, and none described any training or support they had found genuinely useful. It is unclear whether uptake is low because training is not being promoted effectively, or because it does not meet the needs of councillors.

While local elected representatives are partly distrusted because of the wider collapse in trust in institutional and democratic processes, this is not helped by a lack of communication from councillors online. Many councillors recognise this gap, but are stuck on how to close it. Rebuilding trust in local elected representatives will require finding ways for councillors to engage online - alongside their in-person engagement with constituents - effectively and safely. It offers a sharp contrast between the influence this research documents on local influencers with no democratic mandate, and the councillors who are elected to represent.

Collapsing belief in government as an information actor

Key section findings:

- Expectations of local government as an information actor and communicator are low in all three locations.
- Council communications channels exist, but are not being used effectively on contentious topics, or in a timely way.
- Trust in national government as an information actor is also very low.
- This lack of trust is deeply tied to feelings of dissatisfaction with the state of the UK, and with these places specifically.
- Local government is struggling to communicate - especially on contentious, national government-led topics.
- In some cases, local government appeared to be strategically silent, for fear of fuelling further unrest or giving the false impression this was an issue they had a say on
- In others, councils did not have the information to share - because of a lack of communication from the Home Office or private contractors.

Alongside low trust in elected representatives, there was an extremely low belief in government's - local and national - ability to deliver for local people, extending to low engagement with government as a local information actor. Echoing the wider dissatisfaction with the state described in the introduction, residents in these places felt strongly that government systems and service delivery were not working as they should. This directly shaped trust in government bodies, and in the information they share.

84 Local Government Association. 'Social media guidance for councillors: Introduction'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/communications-and-community-engagement/social-media-guidance-councillors/introduction

85 Epping Forest District Council (2021) 'Bulletin - Friday 22nd January 2021 12.31 pm'. Available at: https://rds.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=794&MId=10717&Ver=4; Oldham Council (n.d.) 'Training'. Available at: https://committees.oldham.gov.uk/mgListTraining.aspx?UID=5775&DR=03%2F07%2F2023-13%2F07%2F2024&nobdr=2; Trafford Council (2023) 'Social Media Guidance. Available at: https://democratic.trafford.gov.uk/documents/s44921/Social%20Media%20Abuse%20Guidance%202023.pdf' Manchester City Council (2019) 'Members Training and Development Programme September 2019 – May 2020'. Available at: https://democracy.manchester.gov.uk/documents/s16573/Appendix%202%20-%20Members%20Training%20and%20Development%20Programme%20September%202019%20-%20May%202020.pdf

"I think even if we offered everybody £1,000 free of charge, they still wouldn't engage with us." **- Dudley Council Staff**

When moderators tried to establish whether people were speaking about national or local government, sentiment was often conflated, with "government" treated as one entity. When pushed, there was slightly higher trust in local government than national - echoing earlier studies.[86]

Low expectations of local government as a communicator

Local government communications capacity exists in some form in all three locations, even if stripped back over the past decade. All respondents knew about council-owned communications channels, such as the website, but few were confident about where to find specific information, and a couple were unaware that some of the updates they wanted on the asylum hotels might even be on the council website - analysis below evidenced that sometimes this was true. This appears rooted in generalised sentiment towards the council, rather than direct experience: few residents saw the council as a valid information source at all, or only for a few specific topics and services - bin collections, planning, or amenities over bank holidays. This suggests expectations of councils as a key local communications actor are currently very low.

"Even your local council webpage, there probably wouldn't be anything useful on there to be honest. I've never looked, I really wouldn't. I generally tend to just use the council website to just pay council tax or pay for your green bin to be empty and just stuff like that really just more for paying stuff than finding out what's going on."
- Jenny, Dudley, Rooted Patriot, 49

Council channels exist, but aren't used effectively on contentious topics

Having a communications channel is very different from using it effectively to build an engaged audience, and facilitate information-seeking and democratic discourse on contentious topics such as asylum hotels.

All three councils have a website and social media presence, though followings vary dramatically (Table 8). Manchester City Council has by far the largest following across all platforms, and Epping Forest District Council the smallest - unsurprising, given the difference in population. Instagram generally has the smallest following, with X or Facebook in the lead, depending on the council.

86 Institute for Public Policy Research (2026) 'The Political Trust Crisis'. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/articles/the-political-trust-crisis; New Economics Foundation (2024) 'Voters twice as likely to trust local politicians to improve their area, polling shows'. Available at: https://neweconomics.org/2024/04/voters-twice-as-likely-to-trust-local-politicians-to-improve-their-area-polling-shows

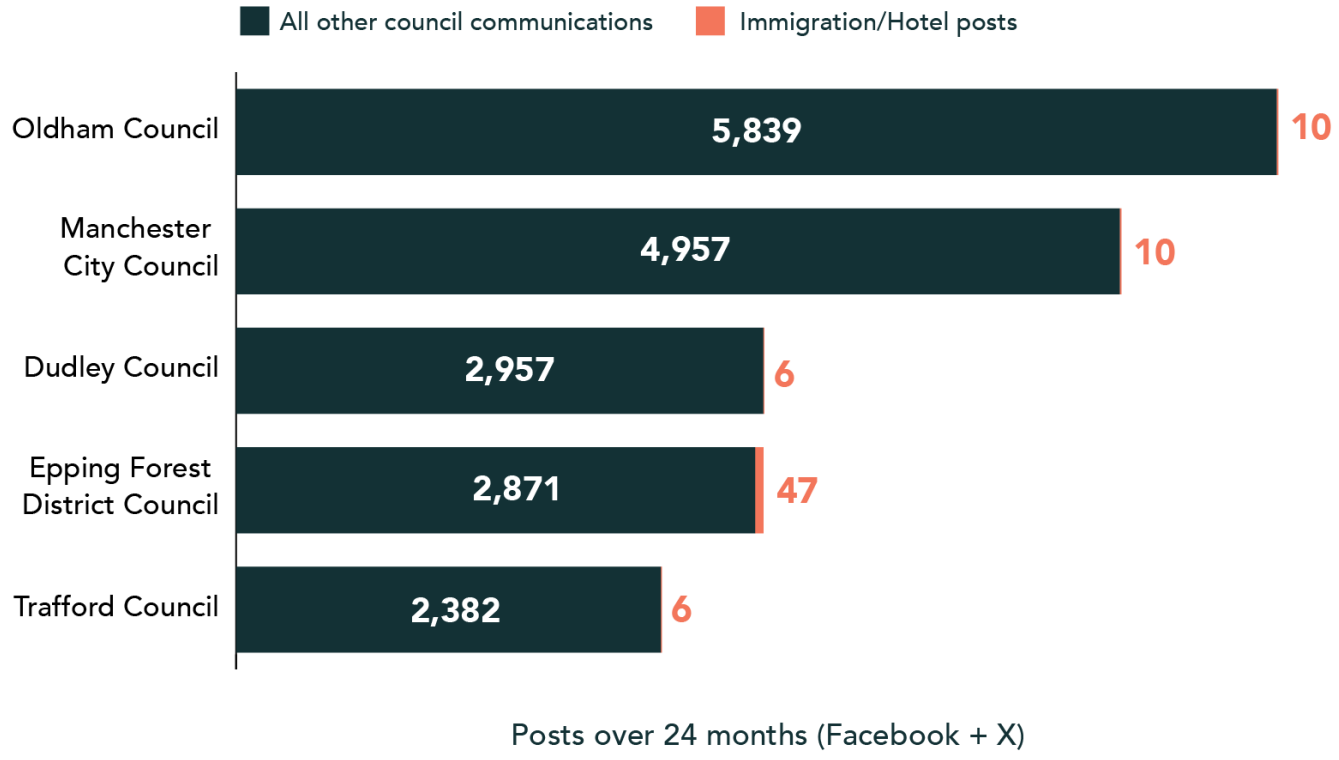
TABLE 8
SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING OF RELEVANT COUNCILS, X, FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

COUNCIL	PLATFORM	FOLLOWING[87]
Manchester City Total population[88] = 630,000 Total followers = 361,900	X	203.9k
	Facebook	124k
	Instagram	34k
Trafford Total population[89] = 241,025 Total followers = 51,500	X	27k
	Facebook	22k
	Instagram	2.5k
Oldham Total population[90] = 251,560 Total followers = 80,700	X	30.4k
	Facebook	43k
	Instagram	7.3k
Epping Forest District Council Total population[91] = 137,451 Total followers = 19,600	X	9.6k
	Facebook	6.5k
	Instagram	3.5k
Epping Town Council Total population[92] = 12,000 Total followers = 3,772	X	2.6k
	Facebook	908
	Instagram	264
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Total population[93] = 333,900 Total followers = 59,700	X	18.7k
	Facebook	35k
	Instagram	6k

A following on these channels does not mean information is being shared on the topics that matter to residents. Our online scan found that, of all posts by these councils on Facebook and X over the two-year period studied (January 2024 – December 2025), an incredibly small number related to local asylum hotels - using keyword analysis covering asylum, immigration, named hotels, asylum/migrant/immigrant/refugee hotel, and contingency accommodation (Chart 4).

87 Noted 06.08.2026
88 Manchester City Council (2026) 'Our Budget 2026/27'. Available at: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/the-council-and-democracy/budgets-and-spending/our-budget-202627
89 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Trafford: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000009-trafford
90 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Oldham: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000004-oldham
91 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Epping Forest: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E07000072-epping-forest
92 Epping Town Council. 'About Epping'. Available at: https://www.eppingtowncouncil.gov.uk/About_Epping_35168.aspx
93 All About Dudley (2025) 'The Borough'. Available at: https://www.allaboutdudley.info/home/the-borough/

CHART 4
PROPORTION OF COUNCIL X AND FACEBOOK COMMUNICATIONS ON LOCAL ASYLUM HOTEL POLICY



Council website coverage is similarly limited. Epping Forest District Council is an outlier: it has a dedicated page on the Bell Hotel, posting fairly consistently between July 2025 (its first post) and December 2025 (the cut-off for this research), with 26 posts in total. Other council websites are far less informative.[94]

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council has no dedicated page, though it does have an FAQ on asylum seekers; our desk research found a similar lack of centralised information across Greater Manchester council areas.[95] Typing "Cresta Court" on Trafford Council's website returns zero results; searching "Victoria Hotel" on Oldham Council's website returns nothing relevant either. Manchester City Council's website (covering Fallowfield) returns a couple of results for "asylum accommodation", with the first stating simply:

> *"Manchester is home to many people seeking safety, including those applying for asylum in the UK. Who is responsible? The Home Office is in charge of asylum in the UK. They provide support and housing for people seeking asylum who have no money or home. Manchester City Council is not responsible for asylum support or housing."*[96]

Searches for the Fallowfield hotel by name - the Manchester South Hotel, known as the Best Western Hotel until 2021 - return nothing of relevance.

94 Epping Forest District Council. 'Bell Hotel'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/category/news/bell-hotel/; Epping Forest District Council (2026) 'X post'. Available at: https://x.com/eppingforestdc/status/1995867502358700542
95 Dudley Council. 'Asylum seekers'. Available at: https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/register-office/asylum-seekers/
96 Manchester City Council. 'Newly arrived migrant communities: People seeking asylum'. Available at: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/people-and-communities/migrant-communities/newly-arrived-migrant-communities/people-seeking-asylum

Any and all communication on such a contentious topic - especially one with such specific safeguarding considerations and a policy unfolding in a broader national context of anti-immigration sentiment spilling into violence - must be handled with significant skill and care. Sharing almost nothing at all does not reflect that care.

Residents were frustrated that councils only communicated once protests began

Whether or not councils attempted to communicate about asylum hotels, the perceived failure of local government to explain what was happening before protests broke out was a core driver of frustration - not only with the policy, but with local government itself. This frustration was strongly and widely felt: a significant proportion of every group, in all three locations, described frustration with the lack of accessible information about the local hotels, the strategy behind them, likely timelines, and how and why the policy had been introduced.

> *"I think the council has a really big part to play in. The fact that nobody's heard anything from Trafford Council is pretty shocking to be honest."*
> **- Leon, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 24**

This lack of information fed two sentiments: that local government was withholding information deliberately and/or that it simply did not know what was going on. Both suspicion and cynicism are damaging to confidence in government and democracy more broadly.

> *"I think if you heard from your local council you wouldn't have to keep trying to find the information online and stop all the chat and hearsay. It'd just be nice if like [name] said, this is what's going on, this is what's the truth."*
> **- Emma, Epping, Dissenting Disruptor, 43**

National government was widely seen as biased or self-serving

For national government, while people received some information through their broader diet of news, social media and other sources, there was broadly little trust in it as an information actor. Some believed what they heard was biased, or filtered through political agendas; others, echoing views on elected representatives, felt national government was simply a self-serving machine, not even trying to serve citizens or improve the country.

> *"Because they're [government] all lying. All lying, just lie to get what they want. Don't care if they're Labour, Conservative, whoever they are, they're just lying people. I don't trust them as far as I can control."*
> **- Peter, Greater Manchester, Dissenting Disruptor, 58**

A perception of bias in national government was present across all three locations, but strongest in Dudley, where the sense that the borough had been left behind ran through attitudes to democratic and public institutions generally. Several groups - especially Dissenting Disruptors and Sceptical Scrollers - repeated the sentiment that government focused on the south of England, and London in particular, at the expense of Dudley and the Black Country.

"It seems like the government don't care about the Black Country, they're just worried about down there [London]."
- Hugh, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 57

As with elected representatives, there was a sense that government was simply incapable of doing a good job, and communicating effectively - more often attributed to national government, but also felt strongly about local authorities.

"They [national government] couldn't organise a piss up in a brewery, could they?"
- Phil, Dudley, Sceptical Scroller, 43

At both national and local level, residents believe the information they got from government - where they got any at all - was either biased, designed to serve an agenda, or simply not worth their time. All three sentiments are deeply damaging to any effort to rebuild belief in government as a source of trustworthy information.

This isn't imagined: local government genuinely struggles to communicate on contentious, nationally-led topics

Questions of communications effectiveness aside, in this policy area there was often limited, or no, communication from local councils at all. This absence created information voids - a lack of accessible, trustworthy information - leaving the door wide open to speculation, rumour and mis/disinformation.

"There doesn't seem to be an end [to the policy], doesn't seem to be a long-term plan of how it's going to be dealt with."
- Robert, Greater Manchester, Incrementalist Left, 75

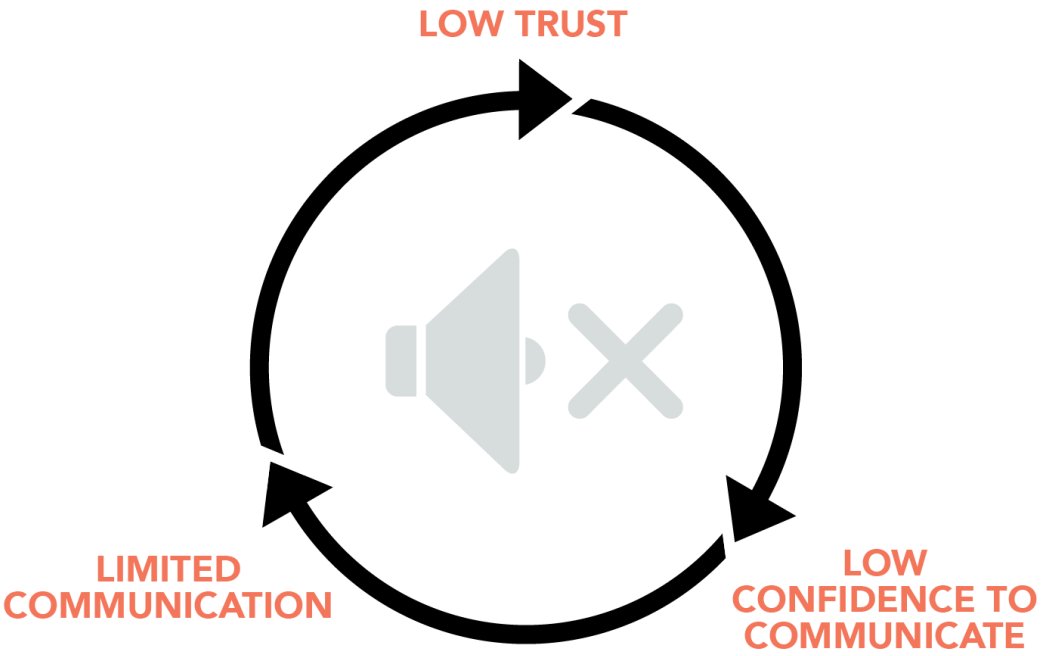
This silence appeared to be, in some cases, deliberate. One councillor from Greater Manchester, for example, told us that their local council had made a conscious choice to limit communication about an asylum hotel opening in its area. Having seen the civil unrest that followed elsewhere in the country, the council instead limited communication from anyone associated with it, and opted to go door to door, speaking only to residents in the immediate vicinity. While this kind of personal, offline engagement can build trust - and councils should do more of it - it is no substitute for broader, transparent communication.

"We basically did everything we could to actively discourage other councillors and other interested groups from communicating. In a public domain, because we wanted to to basically deescalate by limiting the amount of people who were attending [protests]"
- Greater Manchester councillor

Other councillors and council staff in Dudley described a similar sense that, given such low public trust in the local authority, any public information on this policy risked adding fuel to the fire - that residents might see any communication as part of a cover-up, or some other nefarious act.

This produced what amounts to a strategy of silence in place of information provision, which itself fed the frustration created by limited public information. This is a central challenge: low trust drives worse information provision, which in turn feeds further declining trust - a vicious cycle that is hard to break.

FIGURE 4
THE DOOM LOOP OF LOW COMMUNICATION



For this particular policy, the way central government made its decisions also left local authorities feeling constrained in how they could communicate with residents - reflected in public statements and court cases in the three areas studied, and beyond. The decision to house asylum seekers in local hotels was taken by central government, with relatively little consultation or collaboration with local government.

In some cases, councils were not told where asylum seekers were being housed by the private company contracted by the Home Office to manage allocation. Asylum seekers are housed not only in hotels but across a broad mix of private lodging, council housing and other accommodation; without information on the types of accommodation used, or where households were placed, councils could not support these households, or share general information with their communities, even if they wanted to.

Some councils were also wary of public communication on the topic, in case it gave residents the false impression that they had more influence over the policy than they in fact did. This disjointed relationship between central and local government, and its effect on councils' confidence to communicate, appears well-placed to create ambiguity among citizens about who is responsible - and therefore accountable - for decisions affecting their community.

"The only ones that we knew where they were the 72 in the contingency hotel. So we weren't helped by [central] government at all. The problem is, we don't know where these asylum seekers are. They may need help. They may need assistance. They may need signposting. They're in the hands of Serco [Home Office contractor]."
- Dudley Councillor

Constrained resources further limit council communications

Alongside a possibly deliberate strategy, constrained funding and limited resources are a key barrier. Without adequate financing, local authorities struggle to build the capacity needed to engage communities effectively on this and other issues. Dudley Council has faced serious financial difficulty in recent years, coming close to bankruptcy, and Oldham Council has had to address a serious financial deficit.[97] When put at odds with the rising cost of certain key services, such as education and social care, communications funding appears to have been deprioritised.[98]

This has had real consequences at moments of need. In one area, a community cohesion team had lost its own communications capacity entirely, meaning all its messaging had to go out via local policing channels - with real implications for how these messages were communicated and received, and for the team's ability to fulfil this core function. This was especially challenging given the community cohesion implications of the hotel policy, and current UK-wide tensions between the public and police.

Guidance for councils does not go far enough

There appears to be limited guidance, from councils or central government, on how to communicate on such a challenging topic, leaving many local public servants feeling ill-equipped. While the Local Government Association, some journalistic bodies, and some charities offer frameworks for managing misinformation or handling sensitive communications, interviews suggested these fall short of equipping local actors with what they need.[99]

Public bodies also lacked clear central guidance on whether, or how, to actively counter mis/disinformation, share counter-narratives, or address falsehoods before they spread. This often resulted in a default institutional position of stepping back and staying silent - a source of real frustration for some local councillors and council staff. Every information actor who participated in an interview was concerned about active mis/disinformation in local information environments, and said it made their work harder. This echoes national research showing UK council heads of communication ranked tackling mis/disinformation among their top three concerns in 2025.[100]

97 BirminghamLive (2026) 'Dudley council to cut £40m borrowing as reserves dwindled'. Available at: https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/black-country/dudley-council-cut-40m-borrowing-34138694 ; BBC News (2024) 'Council facing £36m budget hole looks to cut jobs'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy5903eg77o

98 UK Government (2025) 'Local authority revenue expenditure and financing, England: 2024 to 2025 budget'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2024-to-2025-budget/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-2024-25-budget-england

99 Local Government Association. 'Guide: Disinformation affecting local authorities and their communities'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/guide-disinformation-affecting-local-authorities-and-their-communities ; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2017) 'Fake news, propaganda and influence operations: a guide for journalism in a new and more chaotic media environment'. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/fake-news-propaganda-and-influence-operations-guide-journalism-new-and-more-chaotic-media

100 Local Government Association (2025) 'Heads of Communications Survey 2025'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Heads%20of%20Communications%20Survey%20-%20Research%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf

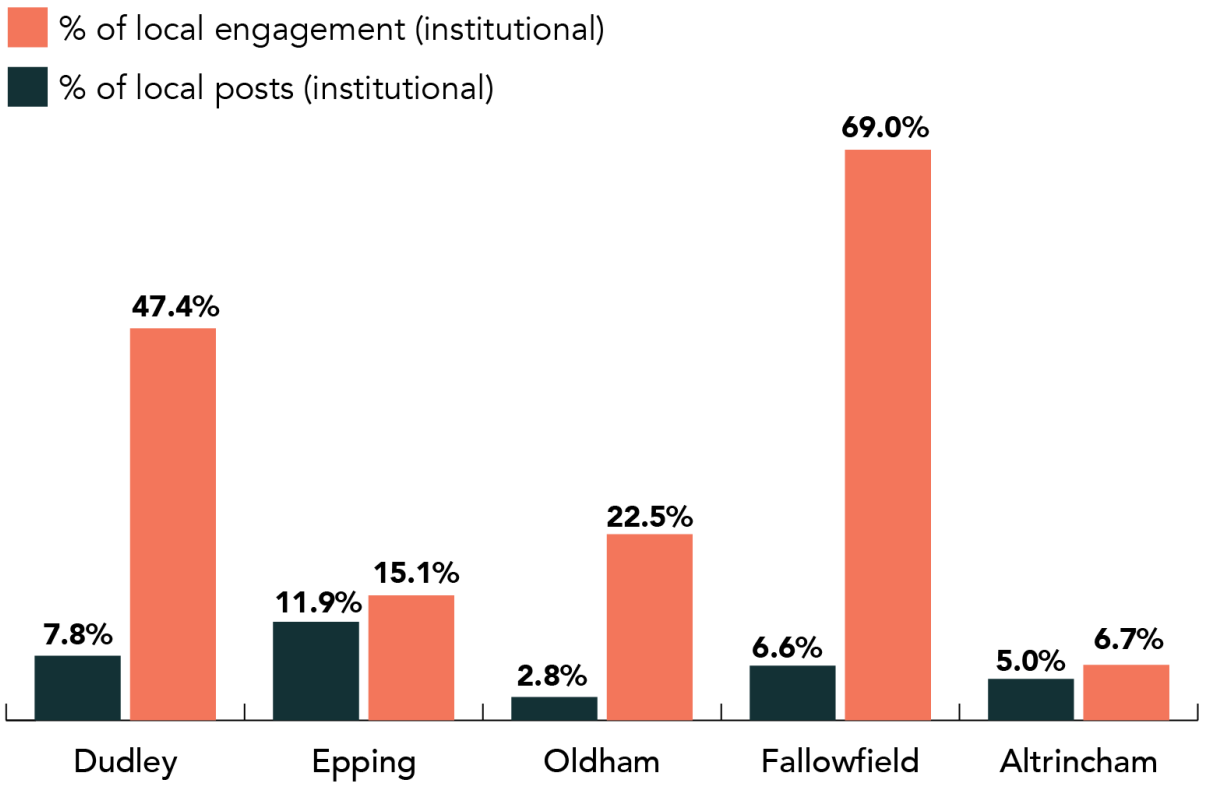
"The misinformation should have been nipped in the bud, and I think that wasn't done quickly enough by the comms department at Epping Forest District Council."
- Epping Forest Councillor

Summary: a missing opportunity

Many of the traditional pillars of a local information environment - especially on local policy issues - are no longer considered trustworthy by local residents. Local and national news media, local and national government, and local and national elected representatives, all face serious challenges to their role as trusted information actors in these communities.

Yet this research shows that institutional actors have significant reach, and the ability to penetrate online information environments. Chart 5 shows the share of all tracked posts from institutional actors - local councils, local news media, local councillors, local police, and NHS bodies - against the share of local user engagement these posts accounted for. Even though institutional posts made up a minority of all social media posting, they accounted for a disproportionate share of local engagement. Yet, there was very little information at all on the topic of asylum hotels - a clear missed opportunity. Engagement does not automatically equal trust, as our conversations with residents show, but institutional actors retain a reach few others can match.

CHART 5
PROPORTION OF LOCAL POSTS FROM INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS AND LOCAL POST ENGAGEMENT



Poor trust matters for several reasons, but chief among them is a genuine lack of verified, trusted policy information in these local information supply chains. Government and journalists are often the only actors with access to certain verified information, particularly on a policy area like asylum hotels. Where they are absent, not actively sharing information, or not trusted or sought out, this creates real information voids - voids filled by newly trusted sources: local chatter, social media posts and individual content creators, who may offer valuable insight, but may equally spread mis/disinformation and polarising content.

This section has established some key elements of this research: That people want better information from institutional actors where they live and that there are serious blockers to institutions communicating. But there is also what amounts to a strategy of silence whereby certain institutional actors - councils among them - may believe they are doing the right thing by not communicating.

2.6 COMPETING VIEWS: THE CONTRADICTIONS IN HOW RESIDENTS RELATE TO INFORMATION

Throughout this research, residents' attitudes towards, and behaviour around, the information environment were often contradictory. Three tensions stood out.

Residents rely on social media, but don't fully trust what they find there

Social media was clearly residents' most prominent source of local information. While people described real frustration and concern about the accuracy of what they found there, this was not enough to move them off these platforms. This may partly reflect a lack of satisfactory alternatives.

Residents don't trust their council, but want more information from it

In each of the three places, there was a clear demand for more information, answers and engagement from the local council - alongside a clear lack of trust in it. Residents broadly recognised the value of council information, often acknowledging that important updates, such as on getting the local asylum hotel closed, might not be available from any other source. Yet when such information was available, or reached them, it was often met with hesitation, or even suspicion. Councils have an opportunity here to re-engage and rebuild trust - but doing so is likely to require a multi-faceted approach, not simply a different style of communication.

Residents want more spaces to gather, but don't use the ones they have

In all three locations, to varying degrees, spaces exist for people to gather and discuss local issues - events at town halls, MP surgeries, meetings hosted by civil society groups - yet turnout was reportedly low. At the same time, residents said clearly that they would like more safe spaces to discuss and make sense of what is happening in their town with their peers and neighbours, and to engage with local leaders. Several explanations may be at play: residents may simply not be hearing about events as they happen; the events on offer may not provide the kind of opportunity people want, or trust will lead to a positive outcome; or the way they are promoted may not persuade residents it is worth their time. Any, all, or none of these may be true - and can only be properly tested, and improved, by piloting alternatives to each.



2.7 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

The key insight from this work is that there needs to be a concerted effort to fill the void in informational infrastructure.

The strategy of silence is wrong - local institutions need to fill the void

- Real, or perceived, silence on this policy area - before protests break out - was the single biggest driver of frustration with local government as information actors in our focus groups. Councils and central government need to get ahead of the story and communicate with skill, not just react to it once tensions spike.
- Strategic silence backfires: withholding information to avoid adding fuel to the fire just deepens the trust doom loop
- Consistent, every-day communication matters more than crisis-mode messaging.
- Central government needs to give local councils basic operational information (which hotels, what type of accommodation, rough timelines) - councils can't communicate what they aren't told, and Home Office/Contractor silence towards councils cascades into councils' silence towards residents.

Institutions need to fill the information voids

- Facebook groups/pages and their admins are de facto local information gatekeepers - any strategy to reach residents needs to engage with these and other community-driven decentralised, informal spaces, not just on institutional channels people don't visit.
- Institutional posts get disproportionate engagement when they do appear (Chart 5) - the problem isn't reach, it's that institutions post about this topic so rarely. Showing up consistently, not just more loudly, is what's needed.

- Trusted online individuals (Adam Brooks, hotel auditors, etc.) are filling a vacuum left by declining trust in institutions. There's a real opportunity (and risk) in how local, trusted voices get identified, resourced - if supporting the dissemination of accurate public interest information - or countered if not.
- Livestreamed/"unfiltered" content is trusted precisely because it looks unmediated - traditional institutions could learn from this format (e.g. more visible, unscripted engagement) rather than relying on polished statements.

There is a need for places and spaces that work for people

- People say they want safe spaces to discuss this topic but don't use the ones that exist - the gap isn't *just* about availability, it's about trust that these spaces are genuinely safe from social/political fallout. Any new forums need to actively solve for that fear, not just exist.
- Investment in physical community infrastructure (community centres, pubs, clubs, faith spaces, libraries, etc.) - as in Dudley's *Pride in Place* funding - is not a side issue to information policy; weak third-space infrastructure directly weakens a community's capacity to collectively make sense of what it's hearing.

Local institutions need help to communicate better

- Councillors and officials are self-censoring or retreating to in-person-only engagement because of abuse or backlash - protecting and resourcing them to stay visible online is a prerequisite for rebuilding institutional trust and resilience, not a separate HR issue.
- Existing guidance and training for councils on handling contentious topics and misinformation in the context of safeguarding risks and mistrust isn't fit for purpose - there's a clear gap for better, more specific and skillful approaches (and take-up support, since uptake of existing training is very low).

Messages need to be authentically local

- The dominant driver of opposition differs by place- a single national messaging strategy will miss the mark; local nuance in framing matters when it comes to contentious topics and when the need to build and maintain trust is so critical.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS
HOW TO FILL THE VOID

The findings from this extensive study tell a clear story: citizens live within a chaotic information environment, in which former sources and standards of authoritative information that helped anchor their lives have been systematically undermined and sidelined.

Institutional actors are increasingly paralysed by low trust, limited capacity, and insufficient guidance to improve their approach. Some have even taken what amounts to a strategy of silence in their approach to dealing with online conflict for fear of fuelling the flames. Subsequent information voids are being filled by speculation and misinformation and online spaces are dominated by a vocal minority of highly polarised content. The physical and digital spaces that might enable healthier collective sense-making have been allowed to collapse.

With the current focus on devolution, there is both an opportunity and a challenge: without building the effectiveness and resilience of our local information environments, devolution could struggle to have the meaningful impact government hopes; but the devolution agenda provides space and opportunity to discuss how to reimagine communications and engagement capacity and provides vehicles to build back stronger.

The recommendations below are designed to address each of these failures directly. They are designed to help fill the void and reconnect citizens with trusted sources of information, and each other.

To tackle these challenges there must be greater support for institutional actors - such as local government, councillors, and local news media - to take brave and urgent action to fill these voids by updating the ways they engage with citizens, acknowledging the new information environments in their area. There must also be a concerted effort to create the online spaces and conditions local people need, but currently lack, to actively make sense of the world around them.

These changes are particularly vital for the success of a new devolution agenda - you cannot have strong and empowered places that work for local people if you do not have a local information environment that facilitates it. A new layer of democratic institutions will simply relocate distrust without strategies to actively engage communities between the Town Hall and the Mayor's office. Any new devolution agenda should include these shifts to ensure maximum chance of success in moving power away from Westminster and into local places.

AT A LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Local and regional government officials should experiment with new ways to engage local residents with public interest information, supported by the Government Communication Service, in collaboration with the Local Government Association, expanding their comms support function to build a new network that can facilitate cross-pollination of ideas and shared learnings.

The strategy of silence is failing. Councils aren't communicating enough with their local communities about divisive policies, like the asylum hotels, and even when they are, it's not cutting through. This communications gap creates the perception that local government is not working on behalf of local people and creates information voids that can be rapidly filled with speculation and mis/dis-information. New strategies are needed to tackle this lack of cut-through, especially to those residents less likely to trust local government.

Councils and combined authorities must be supported to experiment and learn new ways to engage their citizens in online and offline spaces in order to rebuild audiences for, and trust in, the information they share. This should include running pilots to trial various new and creative communications methods over a set period of time and assessing their impact on community engagement and trust. They must also have the support and skills required to communicate on topics that require such sensitivity and humanity and that also carry both personal and professional risk.

This experimentation should be supported by the Government Communication Service (GCS) infrastructure, in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA) to enable cross-pollination and distributing learnings and ensure these don't become one-off experiments that fail to produce actionable insights and lessons. This could take inspiration from programmes like the *Strong Cities Network* or *The Responsive Cities Network*, enabling a shared vehicle for interaction between MHCLG, GCS, the LGA, and other partners, and focus on connecting councils, ideas, and public reporting on the work.[101]

Importantly, local and regional governments shouldn't view these experiments as only testing one-way information provision, but engagement, dialogue, and collaboration with the community to rebuild trust. For example, this could include: partnering with local community actors on disseminating comms about a specific policy, local influencer campaigns, co-creation exercises with residents, engaging in community online spaces, or supporting the development of new online and offline spaces altogether.

101 Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 'Strong Cities Network'. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/programme/strong-cities-network/ ; Harvard Kennedy School Data-Smart City Solutions. 'Responsive Cities Network'. Available at: https://datasmart.hks.harvard.edu/responsive-cities-network

RECOMMENDATION TWO

MHCLG should expand resourcing to local councils through a new national fund supporting comms experimentation and expansion, with an initial focus on places with high community cohesion challenges. This would reflect the UK's 1.5% NATO commitment on civil resilience.

Many councils would jump into the work outlined above but are completely hamstrung by years of budget cuts reducing comms capacity. Without more resourcing, experiments will die before they get off the ground.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government should launch a new multi-year, multi-million pound fund to support local and regional government officials to experiment with new ways to engage local residents with public interest information, as well as resourcing the associated LGA cost. This should initially support c.20 councils around the UK who have particularly high community cohesion challenges over 2 years before these learnings inspire a larger unlock of funding. The scale of this funding needs to match the urgency of the challenge.

Existing ad hoc resilience funding is already made available for specific councils by MHCLG to tackle mis/disinformation risks. Local authorities have also previously been provided training to respond to serious information incidents.[102] This approach instead focuses on preventative approaches of rebuilding trustworthy information infrastructure, and should be recognised as part of the NATO 1.5% commitment to strengthen civil resilience.[103]

In the long term, once effective strategies have been identified, communications and engagement with citizens should be funded by local and regional governments' core budgets with dedicated staffing to ensure buy-in and sustainability, not just enabled by one-off external grants.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Councils should roll out mandatory communications training for councillors emphasising their role as local information actors and informing how to effectively communicate public interest information as needed to support their community and nature of their relationships with constituents.

Councillors are a key actor in the information environment: they're the connective tissue between local people and local government, they can take on communicative roles that no other actor can. They will be vital in the devolution transition. Yet, trust in elected councillors is incredibly low and therefore the trust in the information they provide isn't high enough to ensure information is getting through. Right now, effectiveness of councillor communication largely hangs on the personal preferences of each councillor and the communication approaches they decide to take.

102 UK Government (2026) 'A Safe, Informed Digital Nation'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-safe-informed-digital-nation/a-safe-informed-digital-nation#fn:5

103 NATO (2025) 'The Hague Summit Declaration'. Available here: https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration

As is the case with many councils where specific safeguarding training, finance training, and/or housing planning training is mandatory before sitting on certain committees, comprehensive communications training should be made part of a standing order for taking on any leadership or committee positions in a council. This training should build on resources available to the council by the LGA and MHCLG, but have a dedicated budget, staffing, and lead staff member who manages the training development to account for local contexts in the community, local information infrastructure, and other relevant council initiatives.[104] This training should be deployed for new appointments and repeat at least every 3 years to ensure up to date knowledge and skills for any changes to the information environment and audience's needs.

Ideally, in time, this kind of commitment to communication of public interest information would become a broader part of a councillor's role - for example through the next iteration of the LGA's *Model Councillor Code of Conduct* - and be mandatory for all councillors, whether on a committee or not.[105]

This training must go hand in hand with ongoing work to better safeguard local elected representatives against abuse online and the development of stronger guidelines on what local elected representatives can and cannot share in the local information environment e.g. misinformation.[106]

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Local and regional authorities should embed local information mapping as core practice in their crisis management planning to account for unique and shifting local information environments and ensure communications can meaningfully reach their communities in times of highest need.

There's been a tragic parade of crises exacerbated by information incidents over the past five years - from Epping to Southport, Southampton to Belfast. Even with the best intentions and very hard work, institutional actors have often struggled to have effective crisis responses that can curb information related risks before they spiral out of control. Especially if devolution decentralises more crisis management into localities, there's never been a more important reason to ensure effective responsiveness.

Local councils, combined authorities, and mayoralties must update regional and local governments' crisis management and response assets and mechanisms to be fit for purpose for their modern local information supply chain.

Crisis protocols should account for modern fragmented information supply chains - acknowledging different crises, communities, and context require working with different information actors and infrastructure. While there are local area and regional systems in place to support some level of coordinated reaction from public bodies, these often fail to fully engage the more diverse information actors that engage many parts of the community. Police forces, for

104 Local Government Association. 'Model guidance: councils and elected members' use of social media'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/communications-and-community-engagement/model-guidance-councils-elected-members-use ; Local Government Association (2021) 'Councillor introduction to digital communications'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/councillor-introduction-todigital-communications

105 Local Government Association (2020) 'Local Government Association Model Councillor Code of Conduct 2020'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct-2020

106 Local Government Association (2023) 'Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors'. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-ending-abuse-public-life-councillors

example, will often have a Key Individual Network - AKA 'KIN list' - which maps key community groups, leaders, and contacts that can be utilised by the law enforcement in a crisis moment. However, access to this is limited and sparse and the quality fully depends on the work of a small number of individuals.[107]

Crisis preparedness should require up to date mapping of existing local information infrastructure that flexes to different crises and contexts to identify and connect key channels, outlets, and actors to engage in any given scenario. Councils should be equipped to update these as needed. This should build on the 'KIN list' practice but be designed to engage various trusted actors throughout the system and the thinking done by Internews and others on how best to integrate information mapping and crisis preparedness.[108]

This should be led by crisis response teams in local councils in collaboration with community cohesion, communications teams, and local police partnerships. It should be supported with training and ecosystem mapping expertise to develop the internal capacity needed. All of this should build upon Demos' previous recommendations around information crisis response.[109] Funding for this should primarily come from emergency planning budgets.

AT A COMMUNITY LEVEL

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

Philanthropy and civil society should support healthier online spaces through support for community social media group admins to ensure they are fully equipped for their role.

A healthy local information supply chain isn't just about the production and dissemination of trustworthy and accessible information, it's about having spaces to evaluate and make sense of this information. While the vital importance of in-person community spaces is obvious, online spaces are now the connective tissue for local people to engage with local information and other residents. Facebook, WhatsApp, and NextDoor group admins are therefore a new and prominent de facto actor in the local information environment, yet have rarely been paid attention or seen as an actor requiring support. In all three places researched, local admins became a central focus of discussion.

These admins - often everyday citizens, or sometimes local journalists, civil society actors, or even elected representatives - have immense influence over what is seen and discussed online in these places and by whom. Frustrations with the admins' rules lead to confrontation and 'splinter groups', further fragmenting an already fragmented information environment. Subsequently, this role can take a toll on the admins themselves. These local people can end up taking on a large amount of pressure, especially in moments where the community is so divided around a local issue.

Local civil society should create and convene structured learning networks for local social media group admins to offer opportunities for self-reflection, peer to peer learning, and explorations on how to operate in these roles, for example on how to generate and maintain moderation

107 His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2021) 'Key individual network'. Available at: https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/glossary/key-individual-network/
108 Internews (2023) 'Information Ecosystem Preparedness for Emergency Response'. Available at: https://internews.org/resource/information-ecosystem-preparedness-for-emergency-response/
109 Demos (2026) 'Epistemic Security for Crisis Resilience'. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Epistemic-Security-for-Crisis-Resilience_Report_2025_Jan_optimised.pdf

guidelines, develop strategies to best support healthy information engagement and community deliberation, and ensure admin well-being.

There is sparse academic literature that can be used to inform thinking around the roles of admins and an existing catalogue of community building and learning networks to take inspiration and learnings from, such as *Big Local*'s peer learning groups or *Community Organisers'* peer learning circles.[110,111]

This should be funded by independent philanthropists. It is important this work is tangibly separate from government - national or local - to support and build upon the community-led trust in these online spaces and not gesture towards any kind of government overstep. This programme could show impact with funding on the scale of around £3-5m over two years.

AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

RECOMMENDATION SIX

Number 10 North's forthcoming Devolution White Paper should address the urgent need for information infrastructure to support the new democratic structures. The paper should include proposals for how strategic authorities build information channels, alongside mechanisms for ensuring accountability.

The devolution White Paper will set the tone for what ambitions this government has around community empowerment and moving decision-making away from Westminster. It must, therefore, demonstrate the government has a real understanding of what will enable, or hamper, local powers to be effective in this transition.

The government should take this opportunity to outline where, and how, they will bring thinking on local information supply chains into the strategy - to support effective policy communication from new devolved and strategic authorities, build local trust in these new institutions from the start, and enable civil society, local news, and local people to hold these new authorities to account.

The White Paper process should include consultation with civil society and local authorities to ensure on the ground priorities and learnings are represented in the process and fully take advantage of this moment of reinvention. The other recommendations in this paper around local authority communications and crisis planning should be considered.

110 Eitan, T. (2025) 'The Digital Campfire: Ritualized Linguistic Practices and Leadership Among Facebook Group Administrator'. Available here: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/casp.70258 ; Sultana, S. et al. (2022) 'Imagined Online Communities: Communionship,Sovereignty, and Inclusiveness in Facebook Groups'. Available here: https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3555132 ; Schwartz, H. et al. (2024) 'Facebook in Local Governance: A Missed Opportunity for Two-Way Communication, Service Customization, and Democratic Enhancement'. Available here: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01900692.2024.2395886

111 Local Trust. 'Peer learning networks for Big Local areas'. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local-support-centre/peer-learning-networks-for-big-local-areas/ ; Community Organisers. 'Peer learning circles'. Available at: https://www.corganisers.org.uk/news-events-and-publications/news-and-blog/peer-learning-circles/

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

MHCLG should recognise the assets and infrastructure they're supporting and creating via the Pride in Place strategy as key scaffolding for better community engagement and communication, including physical spaces as well as Neighbourhood Boards and other governance infrastructure that could be a platform for new ways of meaningful community engagement. This thinking should be a top priority for the Network for Neighbourhoods, reflecting on what works and sharing learnings.

The *Pride in Place* strategy has recognised the importance of physical spaces to local communities. This strategy is a major investment in local places, spaces, and initiatives and should be recognised as the opportunity it is for government to rebuild trust in, and engagement with, its communication with local communities.

Pride in Place creates new platforms and venues for engaging local communities, with more community places and spaces providing a medium to reach communities where they are. It also establishes new forms of neighbourhood governance - e.g. Neighbourhood Boards - in areas which offer an opportunity to centre communications as a core strategic priority in new initiatives.

The 2025 *Devolution Bill* mandated new neighbourhood governance arrangements in every local authority. But simply putting new forms of governance in place will not create legitimacy within communities. Stronger communication strategies are one element to securing this.

Within *Pride in Place*, and the development of subsequent neighbourhood governance arrangements across the country, the government must recognise the importance of building the information and communication infrastructure to support this and reallocate focus in this area through funding, sharing information, and evaluating best practice. There is an opportunity to embed better information infrastructure in the new local governance arrangements from the outset.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT

DCMS should expand the size and ambition of the Local News Fund to maximise support for local news media sustainability and innovation - not just increasing the scale and duration of resourcing, but the independence of funding. The model of which deserves extra attention, but could include putting the fund on a statutory footing or - as the Cairncross review suggested - creating a new independent institute to manage this funding moving forward.

Local journalism is vital to healthy local democracies - without it, stories go untold, actors are not held to account, and people feel less connected to their places. At least 293 local newspapers have closed since 2005 - equivalent to around a third of the sector - but, for those that are still surviving, local journalists are aware their audiences no longer primarily read physical newspapers or visit news sites; they're on social media and other online platforms.[112]

112 UK Government (2020) 'The Cairncross Review: A Sustainable Future for Journalism'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2026) 'Digital News Report 2026'. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026

If local news is to survive then it must move with the times, but funding limitations are holding many back. In Dudley and Epping Forest there has been a sharp decline in the local news ecosystem and, even in Greater Manchester where the local news space is far larger, the cracks in public consumption, engagement, and trust are obvious.

The recently announced Local News Fund - which will provide up to £12m between now and the end of 2028 and puts a specific emphasis that *"The funding can be used to invest in the tools and services - such as apps or innovative use of multimedia channels - needed for sustainable innovation which can help local media tap into new or younger audiences and generate new sources of revenue."* - is a fantastic start, but must go further.[113]

It is vital that local news organisations be supported to experiment with new forms of content to reach audiences where they are, especially those disengaged from or poorly served by traditional news. This should go beyond short-form video and podcasts, towards new collaborations with local actors, mixing in-person and online experiences and gatherings, and more creative means to imagine the role of journalistic storytelling in the modern era. This could include exploring building new online spaces where news and information can not only be shared, but actively engaged with and discussed and support local sense-making. This could not only open new business models for local news outlets, but be a key new site in supporting those who have been disenfranchised by damaging social media platforms to still stay informed and connected. This work could take inspiration from the likes of the *Bristol Cable* app that integrates news feeds with community social feeds and *Chicago.com*, a collaboration between *Chicago Public Media* and *New_Public* trialling neighbourhood-level deployments of the new pro-social platform, *Roundabout.*[114]

Doing this takes real capital; not only to support the innovation, but to first fill the gaps left by collapsing revenue for outlets. Outlets cannot innovate or evolve if they cannot meet their basic costs. DCMS should expand the size and ambition of the Local News Fund - not just increasing the scale and duration of resourcing, but the independence of funding. One option would be to put the Fund on a statutory footing, which would make it more difficult to abolish and safeguard its future. The legislation could set out governance arrangements to give the fund greater independence from government than at present, however it would likely still exist as an arms length body. An alternative option could be to implement the recommendations of the Cairncross review and create a new independent institute to manage this funding moving forward, which would also create an opportunity for philanthropic funding to be brought in. Independence in this funding is now more important than ever and decisions should be made to safeguard that moving forward.

113 UK Government (2026) 'Local journalism to benefit from new government funding to reach new audiences'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/local-journalism-to-benefit-from-new-government-funding-to-reach-new-audiences

114 Jacob Granger (2025) 'Bristol Cable launches hybrid news and social networking app in bid to double membership'. Available at: https://www.journalism.co.uk/bristol-cable-launches-hybrid-news-and-social-networking-app-in-bid-to-double-membership-2/ ; New Public. 'Chicago.com'. Available at: https://newpublic.org/chicago

RECOMMENDATION NINE

DCMS should allocate ambitious funding to an arms length vehicle(s) to support experiments in, and scaling of, new digital public spaces - with ranging possibilities in scale and form that could be launched in combination, from a £5-10m challenge fund to a, SovAI style, £300-500m equity fund.

Online platforms aren't serving the UK's local communities. This paper's analysis reveals the influence of different platforms and how they amplify mis/disinformation, support a polarising information environment, and degrade local deliberation, with local people left not knowing if what they're seeing is true or not. Without healthier online local spaces, local democracy will struggle. In all three locations researched, people feel reliant upon, yet unhappy with, social media platforms in their current form.

Central government should actively support the creation of healthier online social spaces and view this as a vital element of the UK's epistemic security. Around the world there are emerging experiments in new platforms that support healthier information environments at the local, national, and international levels - from New Public's *Roundabout*, to experiments with AI as a bridging system between ideas by *Jigsaw,* and the creation of local platforms developed in collaboration with the communities who will be using them by *Newsmast Foundation*.[115] Many platforms have struggled to build scaled audiences, often due to lack of funding and support at early stages. Investment should be ambitious, but take business models seriously and not purely support ideas that provide non-sustainable public good on paper.

The UK government should support ambitious experiments in building new online spaces that better support a healthy information environment - this could look like:

- An ARIA programme backed by £50m for Epistemic Security that includes funding for new platforms/spaces and support for experiments and spaces with epistemic health as a driving design choice
- A Venture Studio inspired by the likes of *360 Social Impact Studios* or *Nesta's* 'Mission Studio', investing £15-20m over 3-5 years into supporting experiments and scaling winners[116]
- A challenge fund designed to award £5-10m for new digital development, hosted by *Challenge Works* or a similar trusted partner[117]
- A *Sovereign AI Fund* style equity investment body that could invest around £300m into healthier digital public infrastructure directly from government[118]

115 New Public. 'Roundabout'. Available at: https://newpublic.org/local ; Jigsaw (N/A) 'Reimagining the Town Hall Meeting'. Available at: https://jigsaw.google/our-work/reimagining-the-town-hall-meeting/ ; Newsmast Foundation. 'How it works: For hyper-local communities'. Available at: https://newsmastfoundation.org/how-it-works/for-hyper-local-communities/

116 Nesta 'Mission Studio'. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/mission-studio/ ; Bethnal Green Ventures. Available at: https://www.bethnalgreenventures.com/ ; 360 Social Impact Studios. Available at: https://www.360socialimpactstudios.org/

117 Challenge Works. Available at: https://challengeworks.org/

118 UK Government, Sovereign AI Unit. Available at: https://www.sovereignai.gov.uk/

RECOMMENDATION TEN

Civil society and researchers - in collaboration with the Government Communications Service, MHCLG, DCMS, and funded via philanthropy - should develop better epistemic health metrics to understand where local information supply chain vulnerabilities are and how bad the situation is. This metric should be a primary guiding measure considered in the government's Resilience Action Plan and support assessment of community-based strategies such as Pride in Place, the Digital Inclusion Action Plan and the Media Literacy Action Plan.

Right now, there is a very limited understanding of the vulnerabilities of local information infrastructure across the UK, including what they are and where they are at their most acute. Without this evidence, strategy, funding, and action by national and local government and civil society is ad hoc at best, and shooting in the dark at worst.

Civil society should take on the pursuit of mapping and creating effective metrics to help us really understand the challenge in front of us. This could draw on broader understandings of concepts like 'Epistemic Welfare' - which tracks the equitable distribution of knowledge and access to the tools needed to produce and engage with such knowledge - and take inspiration from projects like the US *Civic Information Index*, Local Trust's *Community Needs Index*, and analysis carried out by the International Panel on the Information Environment.[119] Demos is interested in actively pursuing this and beginning initial work now.

The government should then use this as a key guiding metric for its Resilience Action Plan and draw on these metrics to inform national strategies that aim to support devolution, strengthen social cohesion, extremism and safety ('Protecting What Matters'), the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, Pride in Place, the Media Literacy Action Plan, as well as the Local Media Action Plan.[120] Work should include an epistemic health review as a starting baseline and also be included in post-intervention assessments.

119 ALGEPI (2024) 'Glossary of Key Terms'. Available at: https://www.algepi.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ALGEPI-T1.1-Glossary-of-Key-Terms.pdf ; Civic Information Index (n.d.) 'Civic Information Index'. Available at: https://civicinfoindex.org/ ; International Panel on the Information Environment (2026) 'Misinformation, Disinformation, Resilience Index Review'. Available at: https://www.ipie.info/research/tp2026-1-misinformation-disinformation-resilience-index-review ; Local Trust (2023) 'Community Needs Index (CNI)'. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/evidence-insights/community-needs-index-cni-2023/

120 UK Government (n.d.) 'Protecting What Matters: Towards a More Confident, Cohesive and Resilient United Kingdom'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom ; UK Government (2025) 'Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-inclusion-action-plan-first-steps/digital-inclusion-action-plan-first-steps ; UK Government (2025) 'Pride in Place Strategy'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-strategy ; UK Government (2026) 'A Safe, Informed Digital Nation'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-safe-informed-digital-nation/a-safe-informed-digital-nation ; UK Government (2026) 'Amplify the Local Media Action Plan'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/amplify-the-local-media-action-plan/amplify-the-local-media-action-plan

RECOMMENDATION ELEVEN

The Chancellor should increase the Digital Services Tax from 2% to 4% and expand its scope to include not just search engines, social media platforms, and digital marketplaces, but AI services too.[121]

In a fiscally constrained environment, all citizens, businesses and public institutions are finding new ways to contribute. Digital service providers, and particularly AI companies, should be treated no differently - including those whose headquarters are based in the US.

The Digital Services Tax (DST) is overdue for an update - its scope pre-dates the significant growth of AI services. It currently includes three digital service activities: internet search engines, social media services and online marketplaces - plus associated online advertising, where revenue is attributable to UK users. Despite some AI company annual revenues being forecast at above $50billion and an estimated 73% of the UK public using AI in their everyday lives, they are not yet in scope of this tax.[122]

The UK's 2% rate is also low by European standards. Companies in scope are only liable if worldwide digital services revenue exceeds £500m and UK digital services revenue exceeds £25m. The UK's DST is currently 2% of UK digital services revenue above the allowance. France, Italy and Spain's levy is 3% and Austria's is 5% - and higher rates are back on the agenda despite pressure from the US.

Recent economic modelling by ResetTech has suggested a 4% DST that includes AI services could raise £5.3billion more than the OBR forecast over three years - more than tripling receipts by FY2030-31.

The Chancellor should amend the Finance Act (2020) to increase the DST to a 4% rate and correct the current exemption we afford for AI services - expanding the pot that could tackle the vulnerabilities created in our local information supply chain.

121 UK Governmet (2020) 'Finance Act 2020'. Available here: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/14/part/2

122 Reuters (2026) "OpenAI's September annualized revenue nears $50 billion." https://www.reuters.com/business/openais-annualized-revenue-20-billion-less-than-previously-signaled-ft-reports-2026-10-08/ ; UK Government (2026) 'AI Skills for Life and Work: General Public Survey Findings'. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-skills-for-life-and-work-general-public-survey-findings/ai-skills-for-life-and-work-general-public-survey-findings

CONCLUSION

The local information environment is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, yet people in this research told us time and again they feel let down by traditional sources of trustworthy information. People no longer trust what they read in the local newspaper - if they even have one - or believe what they hear from their elected representatives - if they know who they are - all while the places and spaces communities have to come together and make sense of what's happening around them have been disappearing or getting more polarised.

Many of the traditional pillars of local information provision are losing trust or dying out - including local journalism, local government, and local civil society - and being replaced with more decentralised, digital information infrastructure; most prominently, social media. In these online spaces, unelected social media admins have immense influence over what is discussed and by whom, but with little support, training, or oversight; new online influencers are rising to become spokespeople for populations and issues through algorithmic boosting; online forms of content like live-streaming are becoming trusted sources in a world of scepticism of more highly produced media; and hyper-polarised feeds and online discourse is leaving many reluctant to engage in the conversation or share their views.

While these mediums are not intrinsically negative, many of the systemic safeguards local information ecosystems had are now on the decline. Transparency, accountability, due process, healthy deliberation - all vital for the provision of high quality information but not all necessarily accounted for by these new actors and platforms. Local institutional actors have the accountability mechanisms, access to information, and frameworks needed to provide vital information on local policy and yet, as evidenced, when they don't engage the voids left by their silence are filled by speculation and misinformation.

The current "noisy void" of hyperpolitics feels full - it is overflowing with protest, outrage, and shock videos.[123] But, as Mair argues, the space between citizens - now occupied by digital platforms - lacks the capacity to strengthen social ties and resolve political differences.[124] Citizens have retrenched into ever smaller bubbles and increasingly online; meanwhile politicians and policy makers have retrenched into their institutions and put up the shutters. The space for connection has vanished.

Institutions are ill equipped and nervous to intervene. They think the right thing to do is to stay out of the debate. Some institutions report what amounts to a strategy of silence they think is helping when online debate is fierce. What surfaced through this research was people's frustrations that such actors are absent and not giving them information they can relate to or trust. That frustration is targeted at local institutions.

123 Jager (2023) 'Hyperpolitics: Extreme politicisation without political consequences'. https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/products/3460-hyperpolitics?srsltid=AU7gw4WfPhPb98SIMB8yCLpO5t-1g2tesuo4_hHstlTxAqvPPHJNGM4e.
124 Mair (2013) 'Ruling the Void'. https://discovered.ed.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay/alma9924478460802466/44UOE_INST:44UOE_VU2

The key call to action in this report is for institutional actors to have the bravery - and be equipped - to **step into the void, reconnect and engage with their communities**, especially when debate is most prominent.

The key call to action in this report is for institutional actors to have the bravery - and be equipped - to step into the void, reconnect and engage with their communities, especially when debate is most prominent. The recommendations are designed to build the funding, knowledge and therefore capacity to take on this difficult and courageous responsibility.

Years of failure, driven by both national and international incidents and trends, has left many in the UK highly dissatisfied with the system's status quo and increasingly disenfranchised with politics, politicians, and even democracy as an idea. At the national level, 2025 research found 49% of people rated the national government's performance as poor and only 23% believed the government can make substantial progress on key priorities in the next decade.[125]

Broader research has evidenced drivers of this low trust: doubts about government delivery ability, trustworthiness of politicians, public voice being accounted for, and a lack of effective media scrutiny.[126] This dissatisfaction with the status quo and the institutions that are seen to uphold it leads to a deep mistrust. It appears apparent that one of the biggest drivers of vulnerabilities in local information ecosystems is this foundational scepticism among the public.

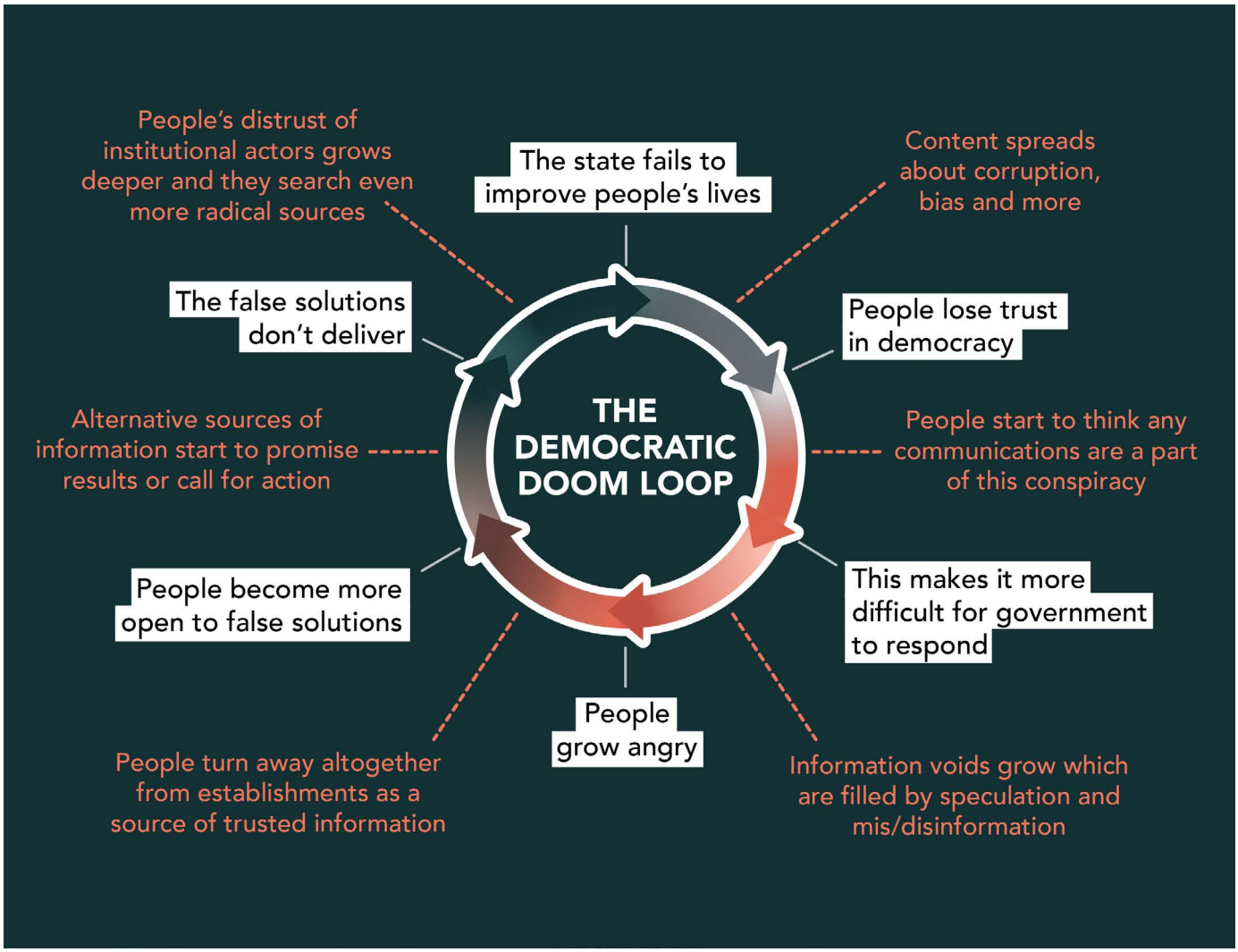
Demos's driving mission is to reverse the doom loop in which UK democracy is spiralling. When people lose trust in the system, governments struggle to build consent for difficult decisions, which leads to short-term, risk-averse policymaking that only further undermines effectiveness and trust. As frustration grows, political incentives shift toward polarisation and populism, deepening the cycle.[127]

When a local information environment is healthy, it can support a functioning democracy, with civic discourse that empowers local people and the effective engagement from institutions that serve them. It can start the hope loop. When a local information environment is unhealthy, however, this compounds upon collapsing trust and feeds the negative spiral.

When a local information environment is healthy, it can support a **functioning democracy, with civic discourse that empowers local people** and the **effective engagement from institutions** that serve them.

125 Ipsos (2026) 'Britons pessimistic about government performance, short and long term, survey reveals'. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/britons-pessimistic-about-government-performance-short-and-long-term-survey-reveals
126 Demos (2024) 'Trustwatch 2024'. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Trustwatch-2024_Report_October.pdf
127 Demos (2026) 'The New Deal Papers 2026'. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/The-New-Deal_Papers_2026_June.pdf

FIGURE 5
HOW INFORMATION VOIDS CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEMOCRATIC DOOM LOOP



Strengthening local information infrastructure has never been more important than now, in a time where two key forces are coming to head: a political shift towards decentralisation of power from Westminster, pushing more control to the places where citizens live, and a moment in time where trust in institutions and community cohesion are collapsing while the number of information driven crises continues to rise. Institutions need to do the work to fill the information void.

To ensure this transition goes well, there must be concerted support for institutional actors to step into the noisy void, to re-engage in their local information environments, support some of these new information actors, and bolster the spaces and places UK citizens have for local sense-making. All of this requires some funding and a lot of ambition. **But at this moment, anything short of a huge leap will fall short. A healthy democracy is worth the effort.**

APPENDIX 1
LOCATION BACKGROUND

For this research programme three locations were selected:

- **Greater Manchester**
- **Dudley Borough**
- **Epping Forest**

These three locations were chosen as they all had experienced noteworthy events (mostly protests) around the policy to house asylum seekers in local hotels and where this policy had become a real topic of local conversation.

While sharing this policy commonality, the three locations were chosen to also represent diversity in:

Population size (as of 2024)

- **Greater Manchester:** 3,009,664[128]
- **Dudley Borough:** 333,900[129]
- **Epping Forest:** 137,451[130]

Urban vs rural

- **Greater Manchester:** large metropolitan centre
- **Dudley Borough:** large metropolitan borough
- **Epping Forest:** district made up of small towns

Location in England

- **Greater Manchester:** North of England
- **Dudley Borough:** Midlands
- **Epping Forest:** South East

128 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Greater Manchester: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E47000001-greater-manchester
129 https://www.allaboutdudley.info/home/the-borough/
130 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Epping Forest: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E07000072-epping-forest

Political make-up

- **Greater Manchester:**
  - MPs:
    - Oldham has 2x Labour MPs[131] - Debbie Abrahams and Jim McMahon
    - Altrincham has a Labour MP - Connor Rand[132]
    - Fallowfield is largely represented by a Labour MP, Afzal Khan, but the asylum hotel is within the constituency of Manchester Withington, which is represented by Jeff Smith[133]
  - Council:
    - Oldham Council has no overall control, with the top three parties being Labour (18 seats), Reform UK (16 seats), and Oldham Group (10 seats)[134]
    - Altrincham (Trafford Council) has a Labour majority[135]
    - Fallowfield (Manchester Council) has a Labour Majority[136]
- **Dudley Borough:**
  - Three Labour MPs: Sonia Kumar, Alex Ballinger, and Cat Eccles[137]
  - Council with no overall control, with the top three parties being Conservative (27 seats), Reform UK (21 seats), and Labour (15 seats)[138]
- **Epping Forest:**
  - Conservative MP - Dr. Neil Hudson[139]
  - Council with no overall control, split between Reform (11), Conservative Party (4), Independent Loughton Residents Association (3)[140]

A note on the focus on 'England'

This work selected locations in England only to enable better cross-comparison across all three locations given the various governance, decision-making structures, legislation, laws, and other differences between England and the devolved nations. However, these learnings and recommendations will still be relevant to communities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A note on 'Greater Manchester'

While 'Greater Manchester is discussed at a whole-of-city level, due to the size of the city and the concentration of activities related to asylum hotels, the research is specifically focused on three parts of the city: Oldham (a metropolitan borough in the north east), Altrincham (a ward in the southern borough of Trafford), and Fallowfield (a ward in the central borough of Manchester).

131 Oldham Council. 'Member Index'. Available at: https://committees.oldham.gov.uk/mgMemberIndexMP.aspx?bcr=1
132 UK Parliament. 'Member contact page, Connor Rand'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/5159/contact
133 UK Parliament. 'Member contact page, Afzal Khan'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/4671/contact ; UK Parliament. 'Member contact page, Jeff Smith'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/4456/contact
134 Oldham Council (2026) 'Council political makeup'. Available at: https://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/200038/elections/2106/council_political_makeup
135 Open Council Data (2026) 'Council data: Trafford Council'. Available at: https://opencouncildata.co.uk/council.php?c=289&y=0
136 Open Council Data (2026) 'Council data: Manchester City Council. Available at: https://opencouncildata.co.uk/council.php?c=262&y=0
137 UK Parliament (n.d.) 'Member contact page, Sonia Kumar'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/5274/contact; UK Parliament. 'Member contact page, Alex Ballinger,'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/5238/contact; UK Parliament. 'Member contact page, Cat Eccles,'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/5293/contact
138 Open Council Data (n.d.) 'Council data: Dudley Council'. Available at: https://opencouncildata.co.uk/council.php?c=270&y=0
139 UK Parliament (n.d.) 'Member contact page, Dr Neil Hudson'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/4853/contact
140 Epping Forest District Council (2026) 'Election Results Roundup'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/election-results-roundup/

APPENDIX 2
METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

For this research programme, Demos conducted the design of the research including location selection and led the integrated analysis and reporting across the different research methods. Demos also conducted the follow-up resident interviews and stakeholder interviews. During the programme, Demos also worked with several partners:

- More in Common who supported the design and organisation of focus groups, including their recruitment and facilitation, provision of transcripts and an initial summary of insights.
- 411 who carried out social media analysis, including data collection and data analysis according to pre-defined guidelines.
- Demos Fellow Sameer Padania also supported the programme by conducting a literature review, a policy scan, and feeding in expertise and experience at multiple points of research design, analysis, and reporting.

METHOD	ENGAGEMENT
Focus groups	15 focus groups in total (5 in Epping Forest, 5 in Dudley, and 5 in Greater Manchester), engaging 131 residents across the three locations. Per location, two groups were conducted in person and three were online. Participants were recruited to be broadly representative of key local demographics, gender, and ethnicity. To reflect political opinion in the area, recruitment was also conducted according to More in Common's 7 segments: Progressive Activist, Incrementalist Left, Established Liberal, Sceptical Scroller, Rooted Patriot, Traditional Conservative, and Dissenting Disruptors. See below for detail on these segments and here for breakdown by location. **Epping Forest** (between 3rd and 4th February 2026) • Group 1: All Incrementalist Left, Established Liberals, or Sceptical Scrollers segments • Group 2: All Rooted Patriots (online) • Group 3: Women's group, all Rooted Patriots or Traditional Conservatives (online) • Group 4: All Progressive Activists (in person) • Group 5: All Dissenting Disruptors (in person)

METHOD	ENGAGEMENT
Focus groups	**Dudley Borough** (Thursday 19th February 2026) • Group 1: All Incrementalist Left, Established Liberals, or Sceptical Scrollers segments (in person) • Group 2: All Rooted Patriots or Traditional Conservatives (in person) • Group 3: All Progressive Activists (online) • Group 4: All Dissenting Disruptors (online) • Group 5: Young person groups, All aged between 16 and 26, no more than 3 per segment (online) **Greater Manchester** (between 18th February and 10th March 2026) • Group 1: All Incrementalist Left, Established Liberals, or Sceptical Scrollers segments (online) • Group 2: All Rooted Patriots or Traditional Conservatives (online) • Group 3: All Progressive Activists (in person) • Group 4: All Dissenting Disruptors (in person) • Group 5: Young person groups, All aged between 16 and 26, no more than 3 per segment (online) More In Common recruited locally using pre-recruitment screeners to check validity of respondents according to the agreed criteria and conducted pre-focus group screening calls. Respondents were advised groups would be for market research, but did not have the topic of conversation shared with them. Participants were paid £50 for their time.
Pre-focus group screener	As part of recruitment, we asked each focus group member to fill out a pre-group screener that included questions we would use to decide who would be in what groups, but also give us insights into some aspects of how they saw and related to their information environment. Every recruit took part.
Post focus group survey	Every member of every focus group was invited to take part in a post-group survey where we captured further insights and reflections. Of all invited (131), 125 people participated.
Resident follow-up interviews	Out of the residents engaged in focus groups, Demos invited anyone interested to put themselves forward for a 1-2-1 interview. Demos then calibrated this pool according to multiple demographic considerations and reached out to the local residents individually. Demos aimed to have 10 per location (30 in total), but due to mixed response rates follow-up interviews were conducted with 21 residents in total. • 10 in Epping Forest conducted in February and March 2026 • 7 in Greater Manchester in February and March 2026 • 4 in Dudley in February and March 2026 Participants were paid £50 for their time.

METHOD	ENGAGEMENT
Stakeholder interviews	Demos researchers carried out mapping exercises for each of these locations to find key actors across the various sectors and spaces. The final interviews list included: local elected representatives, local authority staff, journalists, local/regional police, civil society organisations, Facebook page admins, faith leaders, and academics. Demos aimed to have 10 per location (30 in total), but due to mixed response rates with follow-ups, there were 26 interviews with actors in total. • 11 in Manchester conducted in February and March 2026 • 8 in Dudley conducted between February and April 2026 • 7 in Epping Forest conducted in March and April 2026
Online social media analysis	For social media analysis, 411 carried out two scans, according to specifications made by Demos: 1. One UK wide 2. And one targeting the three specific areas **This scan included public facing:** • Facebook groups, pages, posts, and comments • X posts, • Instagram posts and comments, • Telegram posts, • Blogs and Forums, • Reddit posts and discussions, • TikTok posts and comments, • YouTube posts and comments, • Podcasts • Telegram message **Data collection and analysis** Data was collected from a two year period - January 2024 to December 2025 to include changes over time and multiple relevant focal points in the asylum housing and immigration discussion, most notably the 2024 Southport attack and 'Operation Raise the Colours' in 2025. In total, 411 analysed 405,251 UK-relevant posts for the national scan and a total of 116,892 for the local scans. The study relied on nine data sources. Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, blogs and forums were collected via the Brandwatch API using a national-level immigration Boolean query; Reddit collection was additionally scoped to 300+ UK-specific subreddits spanning politics, news, regions, cities, universities and community-interest forums. YouTube and podcast data were gathered through Brandwatch

METHOD	ENGAGEMENT
	API too alongside manual researcher account discovery. Local-authority communications data was collected from named council Facebook. X/Twitter was collected through a separate Brandwatch query applying the same Boolean language, retrieved as manual CSV exports from the Brandwatch interface, as API access was not available for this source and was limited in export scope. Telegram data, was collected using Telepathy, an open source Telegram data searchable database, monitoring public channels and group chats. TikTok data was collected using Exolyt, supplemented by Brandwatch at the national search level. Exolyt enabled researcher-led account discovery capturing hyperlocal and activist content not visible through standard platform search. Classification was run using two LLM layers. Topic and theme labels were generated by Google Gemini (2.5 Flash and 3 Flash). UK-relevance both zero-shot but also topic bounded. Agreement between the two classification lineages was measured across 922,458 URL-matched posts, with 81.9% stance agreement overall. Stance was assigned by Anthropic's Claude Opus 4.8: each post was placed in a UK-relevance tier, and UK-relevant posts were assigned one of four stance categories: anti-immigration, pro-immigration, neutral/informational, or contested. Reddit was subject to the platform's export ceiling of 100 posts per month, which prevented full-volume collection. The data labelling was conducted in line with a codebook developed in discussion with Demos and deployed by 411. This codebook can be made available to researchers on request.
Desk Research	Desk research was used for mapping potential locations and identifying relevant facts and figures against predetermined criteria.
Literature review, including policy audit	Sameer Padania, a Demos Fellow, also supported the programme by conducting a literature review on the history and practice of information ecosystem mapping and an audit of relevant policy programmes at the national and local level as they related to the recommendations and early findings.

APPROACH TO DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, EQUITY AND JUSTICE

As part of Demos's ongoing efforts to facilitate greater diversity, inclusion, equity and justice (DIEJ) in all areas of our work, we assess and publish our approach to meeting our goals in each of our publications.

DIEJ considerations were embedded into this research by:

- **A diversity of belief and thought was built into the process by design.** Participants were recruited deliberately for a range of views on immigration and asylum housing, so that they encountered people who disagreed with them.
- **Voices that are not often heard in the immigration policy debate were actively sought out.** To minimise self-selection, participants in each workshop were recruited to be broadly representative of the local population, remunerated and offered support for accessibility needs. Conditions were created so that everyone in the room could be heard through conversation guidelines agreed with participants, facilitators encouraging quieter voices to speak up, and ensuring conversations were not dominated by a vocal minority. We also used post-group surveys to capture any insights people may have forgotten to share or felt less comfortable to share in a group setting to ensure these views and experiences were accounted for.
- **The report publication has been made accessible** through the use of 'plain English' as far as possible and accessible design practices such as:
  - Using structured headings' hierarchy and built-in style
  - Using sans-serif fonts at a minimum of 12pt
  - Ensuring high colour contrast
  - Using labels in addition to colour in graphs
  - Adding alt text to images and marking decorative ones accordingly
  - Using clear, descriptive hyperlink text
  - Exporting as tagged PDFs and validating accessibility settings
  - Testing with screen readers and accessibility tools

MORE IN COMMON'S SEVEN SEGMENTS

For this work, focus groups were selected based upon demographic factors, but also More in Common's seven segments. They are as follows:[141]



Progressive Activists

12% of population

Highly engaged group driven by concerns about social justice. Politically active but increasingly alienated from mainstream politics. Maintain a strongly held and sometimes uncompromising approach to their beliefs.



Incrementalist Left

21% of population

Civic-minded, community-oriented, generally left-of-centre but with an aversion to the extreme; prefer gradual reform over revolution. Trust experts and institutions yet are largely tuned out of day-to-day politics.



Established Liberals

9% of population

Prosperous, confident segment who believe the system broadly works and trust experts to deliver continued progress. Strong belief in individual agency which can make them less empathetic to those who are struggling. Maintain faith in democratic processes and have a strong information-centric way of engaging with issues.



Sceptical Scrollers

10% of population

Digitally-native group whose unhappiness with social contract means they've lost faith in institutions and seek alternative sources of truth online. Shaped by experience of the Covid pandemic, they prefer individual influencers over mainstream media and are increasingly drawn to conspiratorial thinking.



Rooted Patriots

20% of population

Patriotic but politically untethered, feels abandoned and overlooked by political elites and yearns for leaders with common sense, but does not want to overthrow the system. Particularly concerned about community decline and the pressures of migration. Interventionist economics but conservative on social issues.



Traditional Conservatives

8% of population

Respectful of authority and tradition, believe in individual responsibility and established norms that have served them well. Nostalgic for the past but optimistic about the future, they deeply sceptical of many forces of change such as immigration or the path to net-zero.



Dissenting Disruptors

20% of population

Frustrated with their circumstances with an appetite for radical solutions, crave dramatic change and strong leadership. Highly distrustful of institutions, opposed to multiculturalism and feel disconnected from society. Drawn to political movements promising to overhaul status quo.

141 More in Common. 'Seven Segments'. Available at: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/seven-segments/

THE 'ASYLUM HOTEL' POLICY

The research was designed to understand local information infrastructure, including how that information infrastructure operated in relation to a particular subject: the asylum hotel policy. A widely memorable and contentious topic across the community, the asylum hotel policy, was chosen because analysing and mapping information ecosystems can be challenging to do in discussion with local people when the infrastructure that underpins it can seem increasingly general, abstract and 'every-day'. For example, scrolling through Facebook can have less friction than switching on the radio or buying a newspaper.

In the UK-wide online analysis of immigration narratives, accommodation for asylum seekers was identified as the third highest ranking topic in proportion of conversations between January 2024 and December 2025, demonstrating the policy's prominence in immigration discourse more broadly.

Further background on the 'asylum hotel' policy

Many UK readers will be broadly aware of the asylum-seeker accommodation policy introduced in 2020 and the contention that surrounded it that erupted in 2025, some basic background information is provided here as grounding context.

The UK has been housing asylum seekers in hotels as "contingency accommodation" since around 2020. A surge in arrivals, combined with growing asylum approval administration backlogs and housing shortages, created challenges around finding suitable accommodation. Policy responses have included housing asylum seekers in hotels and other residents in local areas across the UK. Hotel use for asylum seekers peaked at 56,042 people in September 2023.[142]

The asylum seeker accommodation policy was a national government policy, with minimal engagement with local authorities. Oversight and delivery was primarily led by the Home Office. Private contractors, like Mears Group, Serco, and Clearsprings Ready Homes, were brought in to help acquire and manage housing for asylum seekers.[143] This lack of engagement with local authorities by both central government and private contractors has led to notable push-back, including multiple councils and regional governments taking the government to court in an attempt to disband and/or ban asylum hotels in their areas. This includes Epping Forest Council, whose original plea and appeal was originally denied.[144]

When the Starmer-led Labour government came to power in July 2024, they pledged to reduce reliance on hotels, though progress has been uneven. The most recent milestone came at the June 2025 Spending Review, where Chancellor Rachel Reeves set a target to end the use of asylum hotels entirely by 2029, pledging £200 million to cut the asylum backlog and build new government-owned accommodation, with reforms estimated to reduce asylum costs by at least £1 billion per year by 2028–29.[145] Multiple asylum hotels have indeed since been closed, including the Bell Hotel in Epping and the Dayz Away Lodge in Dudley.[146]

142 House of Lords Library (2025) 'Asylum accommodation: Support and use of hotels'. Available at: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/asylum-accommodation-support-use-of-hotels/
143 Migration Observatory, University of Oxford (2025) 'Q&A: Who is responsible for housing asylum seekers and refugees?' Available at: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/qa-who-is-responsible-for-housing-asylum-seekers-and-refugees/
144 Epping Forest District Council (2026) 'Council refused permission to appeal High Court decision on Bell Hotel'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/council-refused-permission-to-appeal-high-court-decision-on-bell-hotel/
145 House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2025) 'The Home Office's management of asylum accommodation. Fourth Report of Session 2024–26'. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmhaff/580/report.html
146 UK Government (2026) 'Asylum hotels close as government scales up use of large sites'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/asylum-hotels-close-as-government-scales-up-use-of-large-sites; Epping Forest District Council (2026) 'Home Office confirms end of contract with Bell Hotel'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/home-office-confirms-end-of-contract-with-bell-hotel/; Dudley News (2026) 'Black Country hotel housing asylum seekers to close'. Available at: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/news/26228707.black-country-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-close/

A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

'The Information Supply Chain' and other associated terms

This research has undertaken 'information supply chain mapping' which is also known by others as 'information ecosystem' or 'information networks' mapping.[147]

The local information supply chain reflects: **a network of institutions, infrastructures, collaborations and people through which a specific community produces, distributes, accesses, evaluates and acts on information, including local news, civic information, and engagement.**[148] In the UK context, a 'local' information supply chain is one available to a local community living in a geographical area united by a specific local authority. The scope of a local information supply chain is defined by the community i.e. where they go for 'local' news, information and engagement to support their day-to-day needs as a citizen in a democracy. This concept is not currently widely used by other intersecting policy areas.

Older frameworks that referred to 'media systems', 'news ecosystems', and even the 'public sphere' - have proved increasingly out of step with how people actually experience communication, information and media in the platform, and now AI, era. By contrast, the information supply chain metaphor can encompass a range of factors that other, more rigid metaphors struggle to combine, such as complexity, nonlinearity, interdependence, scalability and locality.

The information supply chain enables us to view the flow of information through key stages from production, through dissemination, evaluation and acquisition, and sense-making to inspire someone's actions. It enables us to map not only how/where information is created, but the entire route it takes towards influencing an individual and a community's understanding and decisions.

An information supply chain can include information infrastructure which includes:

- **Public channels** e.g. local news media, Council mailing lists, medical practice notice boards, Parish magazines, Substacks, public Facebook groups
- **Private channels** e.g. Private Facebook groups, Nextdoor groups, WhatsApp groups.
- **Public spaces** e.g. town hall meetings, faith group gatherings, interest group sessions, etc.
- **Private spaces** e.g. the more intimate spaces for gathering between close friends, families, peers, and other groups
- **Messengers** (formal and informal) e.g. local GP, Councillors, school leaders, police, local football coach, barbers, religious leaders.
- **The messages themselves** e.g. TikTok videos, reels, text/ Whatsapp messages, memes, articles, leaflets, letters

147 Internews (2024) 'Information Ecosystem Model'. Available at: https://internews.org/about/our-strategy/information-ecosystem-model/ ; Internews (2025) 'Sudan Media Mapping 2025'. Available at: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Internews-Sudan-media-mapping-2025-V2.0.pdf ; Internews (n.d.) 'Information Ecosystem Assessment: Jordan Media Landscape'. Available at: https://internews.org/resource/information-ecosystem-assessment-jordan-media-landscape/ ; Médecins Sans Frontières (2022) 'Information ecosystem mapping for tailored digital health promotion campaign'. Available at: https://www.msf-siu.org/blog/information-ecosystem-mapping-for-tailored-digital-health-promotion-campaigns ; Columbia Journalism Review (2026) 'Charlotte 2026'. Available at: https://tow.cjr.org/charlotte-2026/ ; Listening Post Collective. 'About Us'. Available at: https://listeningpostcollective.org/about-us/ ; Demos (2024) 'Driving Disinformation: Democratic Deficits, Disinformation and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods — A Portrait of Policy Failure'. Available at: https://demos.co.uk/research/driving-disinformation-democratic-deficits-disinformation-and-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-a-portrait-of-policy-failure/

148 Democracy Fund (2024). 'What Is a News Ecosystem?' Available at: https://ecosystems.democracyfund.org/what-is-a-news-ecosystem/

This infrastructure can be broadcast as well as more two-way and dialogic. Some are freely available where others are locked behind a paywall.

It can also circulate lots of types of information. When this report refers to '***public interest information***', it is referring to:

- Information that is in that community and community segment's interest
- Information that relates to a topic/ issue that affects citizens' ability to claim their rights / exercise their own agency
- Information that has particular meaning/ relevance to those people in terms of identity and/ or where they live

The terms 'information supply chain', 'information ecosystem', 'information infrastructure', and 'information environment' can also be used somewhat interchangeably. Each term refers to the broad array of actors, sources, and spaces that co-exist to make-up an information supply chain.

'Mapping' means evaluating what information infrastructure within the information supply chain exists and how people relate to it, allowing greater nuance and non-linearity between the infrastructure and information itself. Having identified the vulnerabilities, it becomes easier to design interventions to ensure the supply chain can strengthen and be more resilient to crises.

Distinguishing 'immigration' and 'asylum hotel policy'

While the focus of this research is the specific asylum hotel policy, it became quickly apparent from both the online analysis and the in-person discussions that the discourses of 'asylum seeker accommodation' and 'immigration' are deeply intertwined. Facilitators and interviewers did their best to re-centre the conversation, but in some cases this blurred discourse appeared central to the discussion. Likewise, online analysis indicated these topics were deeply integrated. For this reason, discussion within the paper has in some places broadened to refer to immigration even when asylum hotel policy remains the subject.

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