DEMOS

LOCATION REPORT: DUDLEY

MAPPING INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAINS AROUND LOCAL ASYLUM HOTEL CONFLICTS IN ONE BOROUGH

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PART OF THE *FILL THE VOID* SERIES

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Any errors remain the authors' responsibility.

Flynn Devine & Caragh Aylett-Bullock

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. 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 make up the national, but because it so clearly informs UK citizens' every-day lives and outlook on the country more broadly.

This report is published together with a comparative report, *Fill the Void*, and a further two dedicated location-specific reports for Greater Manchester and Epping Forest.

These studies are informing the design of a series of further pilots that will be launched in 2027 in partnership with local community actors to trial the policy and programmatic approaches proposed in this paper. If you are interested in partnering on future work in local areas please contact: Demos Digital Director, hannah.perry@demos.co.uk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

People need trustworthy local information to understand their lives, their communities and the democracy they are part of. Across the UK the information supply chain is breaking down, leaving friendships, communities and even our national security at risk. Using mixed methods, this study diagnoses what is actually happening at a local level when information infrastructure breaks-down 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.

This paper focuses on the local information infrastructure of Dudley Borough specifically. It is one of three local studies conducted alongside Epping Forest and Greater Manchester. It should therefore be read alongside the comparative report, Fill the Void, which reflects our triangulated findings and full set of recommendations. In Dudley, our fieldwork included:[1]

- **5 focus groups with 44 residents in February 2026,** reflecting key demographic and political attitudes criteria using More In Common's 7 Segments, plus pre and post discussion surveys;
- **4 follow-up resident interviews;**
- **8 local stakeholder interviews and analysis of local social media channels.**[2]

The evidence in Dudley Borough paints a picture of a borough where its physical and information infrastructure has declined alongside the local economy. Residents are proud of their Black Country identity, but feel their borough has been left behind. Trust in the institutions that once informed local people, especially the news media and government, has collapsed. This degradation in the relationship between such institutions and Dudley's citizens has left voids filled instead by social media and community conversation. While this has created some opportunities for people to connect, it is more often enabling speculation and misinformation to run rife in moments where trustworthy information matters most.

1 For full details of the methodology see the companion comparative report, Fill the Void.
2 More in Common. 'Seven Segments'. See appendix on P28. Available at: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/seven-segments/

KEY FINDINGS

A clear picture emerges: a self-reinforcing cycle of residents feeling poorly served by the institutions that should be informing them and this lack of trust, combined with financial strain, is decaying institutions' confidence and capability to better inform. The resulting information voids are filled by decentralised, informal and, often, unverified sources - some of which shut down debate and spread real harm.

- **ASYLUM HOTELS BECAME A FLASHPOINT FOR DEEP FRUSTRATION.**

  Dudley residents felt abandoned and left behind. Opposition to asylum hotels was largely connected to a deep anti-elite sentiment, resource scarcity and feelings of unfairness. The asylum hotel debate was frequently entangled with wider concerns about illegal immigration and small boat crossings. Appetite for change was strong among participants, reflected in the surge in support towards Reform in recent Dudley Borough Metropolitan Council's elections.

- **THE INFORMATION VOID WAS SO DEEP THAT PROTESTERS TARGETED THE WRONG HOTEL.**

  In the absence of information explaining the policy to residents, speculation filled the void. In August 2025, around 200 people protested outside a hotel that was in fact housing people experiencing homelessness. When the council corrected this, some saw the correction as a cover-up - exemplifying the deep levels of mistrust in institutional information.

- **THE COUNCIL HASN'T CUT THROUGH ON THE ISSUE RESIDENTS DEMANDED TO HEAR ABOUT.**

  Residents shared frustration with a lack of information reaching them about the asylum hotels. Just 6 of the council's 2,963 posts on Facebook and X over two years touched on the asylum hotels or immigration. Council staff felt nothing they said would be believed, which made them less likely to try to communicate. However, the council's absence deepened the very distrust it was meant to avoid.

- **THE LOCAL INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE THAT DOES EXIST IS DECAYING AND BARELY KNOWN.**

  Dudley borough has three, Newsquest owned, local news outlets: Dudley News, Halesowen News, and Stourbridge News. While these outlets and regional media outlets - like the Express & Star - are known about in the borough, residents said that they are not trusted as sources of reliable information. Some 14 of the 44 participants said they use local news media, and most who see stories do so via Facebook. Residents criticised negative stories, sensational headlines and paywalls. They missed having reporters who knew the area.

- **MEANWHILE, TRUST IN THE TRADITIONAL INFORMATION PILLARS - NATIONAL NEWS MEDIA, POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENT - HAS ERODED.**

  One resident said, "If the news told me it was raining, I'd walk outside to check." The BBC drew particular criticism, but scepticism of 'mainstream' media was shared; some saw GB News as a more trustworthy alternative. Residents broadly believed national politicians "tell nothing but lies." Local councillors were trusted only slightly more.

- **FACEBOOK HAS BECOME DUDLEY'S TOWN SQUARE - THE SOURCE FOR TRUSTED INFORMATION - AND ITS ADMINS ARE THE NEW GATEKEEPERS.**

  Local Facebook groups are the default information source for everything - from potholes to the asylum hotel policy - and many first heard about the hotels there. Most residents trust these channels because they trust other locals. Residents also trust social media content that is filmed live, but worry about AI-generated material filling their feeds. Most are 'lurkers' who read posts and comments online but rarely share their views, largely due to fear of facing social backlash or being banned from these vital online spaces. This limits the potential for online engagement to become meaningful connection for people.

- **WORD OF MOUTH IS TRUSTED, BUT THERE ARE FEW PLACES TO TALK.**

  Residents trust what they hear from each other and rely on this to keep them informed, but funding cuts have removed community spaces, and the asylum hotel issue felt taboo to discuss in the main. Many said the focus group was the most open conversation they had ever had on the subject, and they wanted more spaces like it.

In the next phase of this work, Demos will design pilots to support the local information ecosystem informed by these insights. If you are interested in partnering in the local area please contact **Hannah Perry**, Director of Demos Digital: *hannah.perry@demos.co.uk*

SECTION 1
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 feeling unsafe. There has never been a more important time to understand the vulnerabilities of the nation's local information infrastructure and to identify how it can better serve local people and a healthy and resilient democracy.

Dudley Borough is one of three locations where this study was conducted, to understand vulnerabilities in local information supply chains and their contribution to the decline of trust. This is demonstrated by evidencing, through the lens of local citizens, stakeholders, social media analysis and desk research, how the local information environment performed in relation to the "asylum hotel" policy. 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.[3]

ABOUT DUDLEY: FRIENDLY, PROUD PEOPLE WITH AN APPETITE FOR CHANGE

Dudley Borough is a metroplitan borough in the West Midlands with a population of around 330,900 people.[4] In the heart of the Black Country, it is a short train ride away from Birmingham - a city that attracts many of those looking for broader opportunities.

The borough is largely working-class, with a slightly above national average white population (84.9%), and features notably high levels of deprivation - 60% of households in at least one of the Office of National Statistics's four areas of deprivation and around 40% of children living in poverty (compared to 31% nationally).[5,6]



3 For more information on the methodology and policy context see the parallel report, Fill the Void, Appendix 2
4 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2024) 'Profile: Dudley'. Available here: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E08000027-dudley#wd
5 All About Dudley Borough (2025) 'The Borough'. Available here: https://www.allaboutdudley.info/home/the-borough/
6 Ibid ; Child Poverty Action Group (2025) 'Child poverty statistics – new record high and further breakdowns'. Available here: https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-statistics-new-record-high-further-breakdowns

Dudley is a recipient of the government Pride in Place scheme, launched "to make long-term improvements that residents want".[7] The £20m funding will be largely managed by a Dudley 'Neighbourhood Board' composed of community groups, community representatives, politicians, the police, anchor institutions and businesses - aligned to three goals of the programme: thriving places, stronger communities and taking back control. People who live and work within the area have been asked to take part in a survey to inform how funding is allocated - results are expected later in 2026.

In 2024, Dudley town's parliamentary seat was won by Labour's Sonia Kumar with a vote share of 34.1% - toppling former Dudley North Conservative MP Marco Longhi - whilst Stourbridge is represented by Labour's Cat Eccles, Halesowen by Labour's Alex Ballinger, Tipton & Wednesbury by Labour's Antonia Bance, and Kingswinford and South Staffordshire by Conservative MP Mike Wood.[8] Recent Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council elections saw Conservatives remain the largest party - with 27 seats - but showed a surge in support towards Reform, who gained 22 while all other parties lost seats.[9] The borough voted in favour of Brexit by a significant 67% in 2016.[10]

DUDLEY'S ASYLUM HOTEL POLICY BACKLASH

In 2025, amongst UK-wide protests on the hotel policy, Dudley saw a peak in anti-hotel and anti-immigration protests, often met with counter-protests. Although patterns of activity had been bubbling for months, tensions spiked when 200 people attended a protest rally on 17 August 2025 outside a suspected hotel housing asylum seekers: the 'Superior Hotel'.[11] These groups were met with counter-protestors and the campaign group, Stand-up to Racism, putting up an information tent in the town centre.[12] The leader of the council, Patrick Harley, later clarified that the Superior Hotel was in fact being used to house people experiencing homelessness, rather than asylum seekers - but even this was met with suspicion, some accusing the local government of a cover-up.[13]

After the protests in Dudley in August 2025, spurred on by a series of national gatherings against the hotels, coverage from Stourbridge News reported that 86 asylum seekers were being housed in hotel accommodation in Dudley, but emphasised that it was not known which hotel(s) in particular.[14] In early September 2025, protestors continued campaigning outside a full council meeting in its building.[15] The hotel in question was only confirmed for the first time in June 2026 via a Home Office press-release setting out which hotels would no longer be in use.[16]

This section sets out the findings of the research. It begins with the context: what matters most to local people, 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). The chapter then sets out which parts of information infrastructure they have stopped trusting (2.3) and which they actually use and trust (2.4), before turning to conclusions.

7 UK Government (2025) 'What is Pride in Place'. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/what-is-pride-in-place
8 BBC News (2024) 'Dudley - General election results 2024'. Available here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/constituencies/E14001204 ; Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council 'Contact your MP'. Available at: https://www.dudley.gov.uk/council-community/elections/contact-your-mp/
9 Sky News (2026) 'Dudley | England Councils 2026 - Election Results'. Available here: https://election.news.sky.com/elections/england-councils-2026/dudley-4739
10 BBC News (2016) 'EU Referendum local results - D'. Available here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results/local/d
11 Black Country Radio (2025) 'Leader says Epping asylum ruling changes nothing'. Available here: https://www.blackcountryradio.co.uk/news/local-headlines/leader-says-epping-asylum-ruling-changes-nothing/
12 Dudley News (2025) 'Dudley sees hundreds attend anti-asylum seeker protest'. Available here: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/news/25397874.dudley-sees-hundreds-attend-anti-asylum-seeker-protest/
13 ITV News Central (2025) 'Anti-immigration protesters "wrongly" target Dudley hotel housing the homeless'. Available here: https://www.itv.com/news/central/2025-09-07/anti-immigration-protesters-demonstrate-outside-hotel-housing-homeless
14 Stourbridge News (2025) 'Asylum seekers in Dudley hotels up by 68% in three months'. Available here: https://www.stourbridgenews.co.uk/news/25656584.asylum-seekers-dudley-hotels-68-three-months/
15 Black Country Radio (2025) 'Council leader to meet asylum hotel protestors'. Available here: https://www.blackcountryradio.co.uk/news/local-headlines/council-leader-to-meet-asylum-hotel-protestors/
16 Dudley News (2026) 'Black Country hotel housing asylum seekers close'. Available here: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/news/26228707.black-country-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-close/

SECTION 2
FINDINGS

2.1 DUDLEY RESIDENTS FELT LEFT BEHIND – SO THE ASYLUM HOTEL POLICY FELT UNFAIR

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

Residents are proud to be from the Black Country, but Dudley needs more

Residents emphasised their pride in being from the Black Country and their strong sense of community amongst friendly, hardworking, and 'down to earth' people. Despite this, people nearly unanimously described the borough itself as run down. Declining local infrastructure, bad roads, vandalised community infrastructure and a lack of shops in the Dudley town centre were all top concerns.[17]

> *"Even the animals in the zoo look sad"*
> ***(Phil, Incrementalist Left, 43)***

Immigration policy is an active concern

Roughly a quarter of residents across focus groups said that their main concern regarding the local area was immigration.[18] Even in the Progressive Activist group, which are generally the most pro immigration, all but one of the attendees flagged this as a *primary* challenge.[19]

Concerns about asylum hotels were broadly linked to concerns about strained public services and infrastructure

Opinions about asylum seeker hotel accommodation were generally negative. While many residents across segments expressed support for helping people escape persecution, there was heavy criticism of the policy's perceived efficacy and impact. In some cases, this spilt over into more general anti-migrant sentiment. Some believed that, while supporting asylum seekers is important, many of those being housed locally weren't there under legitimate claims.

> *"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, Rooted Patriot, 48)***

17 Out of 44 residents who attended focus groups, 13 stated this in pre-focus group surveys.
18 Out of 44 people, 9 said this in pre-focus groups surveys.
19 More in Common analysis shows Progressive Activists are generally more likely compared to the rest of segments to say immigration levels should increase or stay the same. Available here: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/research/progressive-activists/

A majority of groups expressed frustration around asylum seekers' use of public services and the pressure this might put on already stretched resources. One local resident said her daughter has been on a waiting list for mental health support for three years while she believes asylum seekers 'skip the queue'; others pointed to the challenges faced by people in the area struggling with homelessness, who they felt weren't being properly supported.

> *"There are homeless people out in our country that need housing first and as the other guys said they're [asylum seekers] going past the country that would house them…they come in, they take everything"*
> ***(Sarah, Established Liberal, 49)***

These same residents raised concerns about capacity in vital public services, especially existing struggles with NHS waiting lists or the strain additional children could add to a struggling school system. Through all of these comments, there was a sense of unfairness that asylum seekers were being housed and supported while local people were suffering.

> *"We just haven't got the NHS waiting lists and schools and everything. We just can't support people like that. It's just there's not enough spaces for everybody."*
> ***(Julie, Progressive Activist, 62)***

Some residents had stronger concerns regarding the impact of the policy on public safety and rising crime rates

People across a variety of political segments often linked safety concerns in Dudley to asylum seekers, although unrelated fears around groups of loitering young people also stood out. This came up more strongly in focus groups than in pre-focus group surveys - where only 2 residents mentioned crime or safety as a key concern. Multiple residents across groups emphasised how increased crime made it much less likely for people to talk to strangers, further severing a sense of community connection.

> *"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, Incrementalist Left, 37)***

Challenges were emphasised when some in the groups made claims that were sometimes entirely false, including claims of crimes in the area increasing due to criminal activity from asylum seekers or the fact that asylum seekers were being housed in 5* hotels around the UK.

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

> *"You're putting [asylum seekers] in nice four or five star hotels…"*
> ***(Bradley, Sceptical Scroller, 26)***

These concerns were often compounded by more conspiratorial ideas. Claims were made that there was an 'invasion' taking place against the UK - by asylum seekers they plainly saw as only 'military aged males'.

> *"It's just always grown men and they [asylum seekers] look like they're from here from the army or something. It terrifies me."*
> ***(Bella, Traditional Conservative, 37).***

A strong desire for political change

A desire for change came through strongly among residents across all segments. This was evident even in Progressive Activist and Incrementalist groups that one might expect to be more supportive of the, currently in-power, Labour government. This sentiment appeared to be rooted in a deeply held view across Dudley residents that the country is broken and needs drastic measures to fix.

> *"I just think we are a laughing stock as a nation now. We're not Great Britain"*
> ***(Phil, Incrementalist Left, 43).***

2.2 THE INFORMATION VOID WAS SO DEEP THAT DUDLEY RESIDENTS WERE PROTESTING OUTSIDE OF THE WRONG HOTEL

While some frustration should be attributed to broader political and long-standing grievances, the impact that real information voids have had in Dudley Borough should not be underestimated. This section explains where citizens' information gaps were apparent.

Knowledge gaps regarding local implementation of the asylum hotel policy remain

In focus groups, most residents across all segments were aware of asylum seekers being housed in hotel(s) in Dudley, but knowledge on exactly how it was manifesting locally remained sparse. A lack of clear insights only fed speculation that in fact far more than one hotel had been repurposed, with focus group members naming multiple different hotels in the area as contingency housing - sometimes, with incredibly high conviction - which had in fact never been used.

As outlined in the introduction, this lack of clear information became most obvious when around 200 people protested outside the town's Superior Hotel - a hotel they believed was being used to house asylum seekers that was, in fact, being used to support local people struggling with homelessness. Even once the council confirmed this was the case and asked protesters to disperse, these updates were met with scepticism.

Knowledge gaps about the 'real facts' regarding the national policy also persist

There was almost unanimous surface-level awareness of the policy and the protests that had unfolded in Dudley and across parts of the UK more widely, although means of learning varied. One resident read an information pack online describing what the government provides to asylum seekers, one physically walked into a hotel housing asylum seekers, while another saw TikTok videos on the topic.

However, residents emphasised that they often felt unaware of what the real facts were regarding the policy in general. The mere knowledge that rumours existed around the asylum hotel policy - fed by a lack of accurate information- left residents additionally doubtful of the information they came across.

> *"Nobody ever stands up and tells us exactly what it looks like, exactly what it means for us, exactly what it will entail, where it will be, how many will be coming onto my street, how many will be coming."*
> ***(Amelia, Progressive Activist, 43)***

Among some residents, particularly the Dissenting Disruptors, much of the uncertainty appeared to stem from a fundamental lack of trust in information shared by mainstream media and institutional actors. Some went so far as to suggest that the people in videos about the hotels or the protests were deliberately staged and the participants were in fact actors.

"I've heard about fake actors in these situations."
(Sarah, Dissenting Disruptor, 31)

Detailed understanding of exactly who the policy impacts - e.g. asylum seekers or economic migrants - was also sparse. In many conversations there was a clear conflation between asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants - with many using these terms interchangeably. These knowledge gaps suggest how effectively the policy was being communicated, or - in this case - not. Specifying who is being housed in these hotels and why is a foundational piece of information needed to properly understand and assess a policy unfolding in the local area.

"Can't get a hotel room... They're all full of immigrants."
(Trevor, Rooted Patriot, 48)

The lack of information shared with local people in Dudley was real and tangible. Both the national policy and how it was manifesting locally were poorly understood. The next section discusses the condition of the local information environment and how this was utilised in the context of this policy.

2.3 COLLAPSING TRUST IN THE INSTITUTIONAL PILLARS OF LOCAL INFORMATION

This section outlines the collapse in traditional pillars of the local information environment: a local news media ecosystem with almost no engagement; a crisis in trust in national mainstream media; a broader erosion of faith in national politicians and political institutions; and low levels of information cutting through from local authorities and local elected representatives.

Residents feel poorly served by local news media

Engagement and trust in the local news outlets is low

In Dudley, there are three local news outlets: Dudley News, Stourbridge News, and Halesowen News. Accompanying this, larger more regional outlets are also available in the forms of the *Express and Star, Birmingham Live,* and *Midlands Today,* which all cover regional topics. All three local titles are owned by Newsquest and edited by the deputy regional group editor for all of Newsquest's Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Stourbridge titles.[20]

Even though these local titles are broadly available and many focus group members were aware of their existence, engagement with its reporting and trust in information shared was low. Only a couple of residents mentioned that they would look at the outlets - the majority of which highlighted that most local media coverage they'd see would be via Facebook where they would post stories.

The Express and Star is a household name in Dudley, but the focus groups reflected scepticism around the quality of its reporting. The only regional outlet that seemed to get any real favour - by the small portion that consumed it - was Black Country Radio.

In surveys following focus groups, residents were asked which news sources they generally pay most attention to for news and information about their local area - a third (14) of the 44 respondents said that they use local news media such as local newspapers or radio in order to access local news.

20 Dudley News (2024) 'Alicia Kelly: new editor'.
Available here: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/news/24104152.alicia-kelly-new-editor-kidderminster-shuttle/

Concerns about the tone and quality of available local news

Residents gave variable reasons for not engaging with their local news outlets. While the Progressive Activist group were the most regular consumers of local news, they were highly critical of the negative tone of local coverage. A majority of this group shared complaints about this negativity and that, even when the stories were more positive, comments under them on Facebook were often negative.

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

Almost all of the residents in the Dissenting Disruptors and Sceptical Scrollers segments were critical of the quality of the journalism in local news. They generally deemed its coverage to be poor, rarely focused on issues that really mattered in the local community, and/or felt the headlines were too sensationalist. Partly as a consequence, residents believed online outlets shouldn't charge for access to content - with multiple focus group members criticising the paywall to access these outlets.

Nostalgia for truly local reporting that was more freely available

Local news outlets appeared to have historically been more important to this community compared to today. Some residents - especially older people - spoke with nostalgia about local newspapers they used to read. One resident noted that there used to be a free newspaper that was delivered to the house each week that they would enjoy leafing through.

Other residents highlighted the absence of on-the-street reporting by local journalists who really knew the local community and covered the things that residents felt were important. Some reflected on a time when reporters would interview local shopkeepers and residents and stated very clearly that - back then - they would be more inclined to trust local papers over national ones since reporters are perceived to really know the area.

> *"They [local media] seem 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, Incrementalist Left, 37)***

CASE STUDY: DUDLEY NEWS - A NEWSQUEST PUBLICATION

Founded in 1985, Dudley News is now owned by Newsquest. The paper covers local stories generated by regional Newsquest reporters - it lists 6 journalists on its staff pages - but, like all group-owned newspapers, it will also frequently post more general, less locally specific stories shared to the outlet across 'the wire'.[21]

Dudley News benefits from the BBC-funded Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) which supports a local reporter to cover local politics for a number of outlets across the region.[22] The structure of this scheme means any stories generated by the LDRS-funded journalist are put out for any outlet to use, meaning their stories could be picked by other local and regional outlets, as well as any other outlets across the UK.

21 Dudley News. 'Our Journalists'. Available here: https://www.dudleynews.co.uk/author/journalists/
22 Muck Rack. 'Martyn Smith - LDR'. Available here:

National media is not trusted

Multiple different national mainstream media outlets were raised as optional sources of information, including BBC, Sky News, ITV, as well as outlets like LBC and GB News. All of these had varying levels of trust, but overall it was clear that these 'mainstream' UK-wide outlets were not the primary piece of information infrastructure for the majority of local people. Fundamentally, there was a belief that information being reported from established journalistic outfits was not trustworthy.

> *"If the news told me it was raining, I'd walk outside to check. I don't believe a word they say"*
> ***(Chris, Sceptical Scroller, 47)***

Trust in mainstream outlets varied somewhat by political orientation

Across all the political segments, Progressive Activists were the most likely to engage with 'mainstream' news, with several mentioning watching the BBC, Sky News or ITV as primary sources of information for them. Those who did engage with these national media outlets generally felt they could believe what was shared due to the integrity of the information verification processes.

Trust in media across the different political segments was, however, not universally shared. Some were strongly critical in news media reporting, believing it to be incorrect or purposefully biassed. Interestingly, this spanned all segments, including those that one might assume would be more sympathetic to the mainstream media.

> *"[The national mainstream news is] generally a pack of lies"*
> ***(Darren, Progressive Activist, 53)***

Residents were largely negative about the BBC

There was a particular focus on the BBC, with the vast majority of comments turning negative. One resident highlighted how the national broadcaster was too left wing, while others said it was controlled by people in *"ivory towers"* ***(Catherine, 53, Sceptical Scroller)*** or believed the broadcaster plays a role in *"cover-up stories"* ***(Darren, 53, Progressive Activist)*** These more conspiratorial sentiments were often backed up with true or rumoured instances - for example, the BBC case regarding a misleading editing of one of Donald Trump's speeches or citing incidents they had heard about BBC staff speaking out against the broadcaster and being dismissed for it.

> *"You get the left wing BBC and stuff like that. They don't record it properly… it's run by the woke of the society."*
> ***(Gary, Rooted Patriot, 48)***

> *"A couple of people have been sacked from the BBC for telling the truth"*
> ***(George, Established Liberal, 65)***

The Dissenting Disruptor group were particularly mistrusting of the BBC, due to what they perceived as a lack of transparency. They described the BBC as corrupt or swaying to the government of the day, with some highlighting a belief that many institutions, including the BBC, were conspiring together for their own agendas.

> *"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, Dissenting Disruptor, 39)***

GB News was highlighted as an alternative trustworthy source

GB News was contrasted to the BBC as a more trustworthy source of information, particularly by Dissenting Disruptors and Traditional Conservatives. Some trusted it just because of it 'not being the BBC'. One interviewee stated that they prefer it because it represents more of the political right, in opposition to perceived left-leaning BBC, and that this brought more balance to the conversation. Others shared that they had found their way to trusting GB News via particular personalities, for example a support of Nigel Farage driving them to the organisation that has now become a more staple part of their news diet.

> *"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 East Footage and then I started watching GB News"*
> ***(Bella, Traditional Conservative, 37)***

While focus group conversations had emphasised low trust in mainstream media, post-focus group surveys showed over half (27 of 44) residents still reporting that traditional news media is a common source of information in their lives. This suggests that while some Dudley Borough residents are still drawing on mainstream media, this is not indicative of trust or a feeling that their information needs are met.

Faith in local government has collapsed

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council is reasonably large. There are 72 elected councillors representing 24 wards. While each ward has 3 councillors, awareness of who these councillors were appeared limited across residents. Furthermore, there was a high level of scepticism around local councillors and the council and a belief that local people were receiving less information from these actors than they would like.

An appetite for more information from local government, but very low expectations

A significant proportion of residents desired more facts and information from their local councillors, including on the policy of asylum seekers in the local hotel. One resident argued that it was the council's responsibility to inform residents of these details, including how many asylum seekers are being housed in the area or what updates there were on timelines, plans, and overall direction for the policy. Something they saw was sorely missing.

Traditional Conservative and Dissenting Disrupters in particular often described a more transactional and self-serving relationship between local councillors and local people - that councillors only spoke with them at election time in order to secure votes - leading to a lack of trust in what the Council or councillors generally had to say. This fed an underlying view that information shared by local elected representatives was more informed by what might be popular, not the truth.

> *"I just think your local councillors would tell you what you want to hear."*
> ***(Bella, Traditional Conservative, 37)***

This lack of trust was also evident among Established Liberals and Incrementalist Lefts and had been exacerbated by what residents view as a failure to provide solutions to local issues. Indeed, residents frequently drew attention to the issue of potholes in the area and a sense that the council could find money for some things, but weren't able to repair the roads - an issue which had a daily impact on local people. Some felt this reflected biassed decision-making while others gestured a sense that the council simply didn't know what was going on, so couldn't be a trustworthy source even if the council was communicating more.

"I don't think they [the council] really know what's going on to be honest"
(Angelina, Incrementalist Left, 37).

Poor opinions regarding the local council as an information actor were backed up by the perceived lack of online communications coming from the local authority or useful resources available through, for example, the council website. A minority mentioned that they used the council website to find out about things like bin collection dates or half-term activities for children, however most didn't even consider the council website as a potential source for up to date information on other issues that mattered to them.

"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, Rooted Patriot, 49)

Dudley Council has a social media following, but does not use it to discuss contentious policy

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council does have a social media presence. Across X, Facebook, and Instagram, it has almost 60,000 followers - a figure that may seem high at a glance, but only scratches the surface of the 330,000 people living in the area.

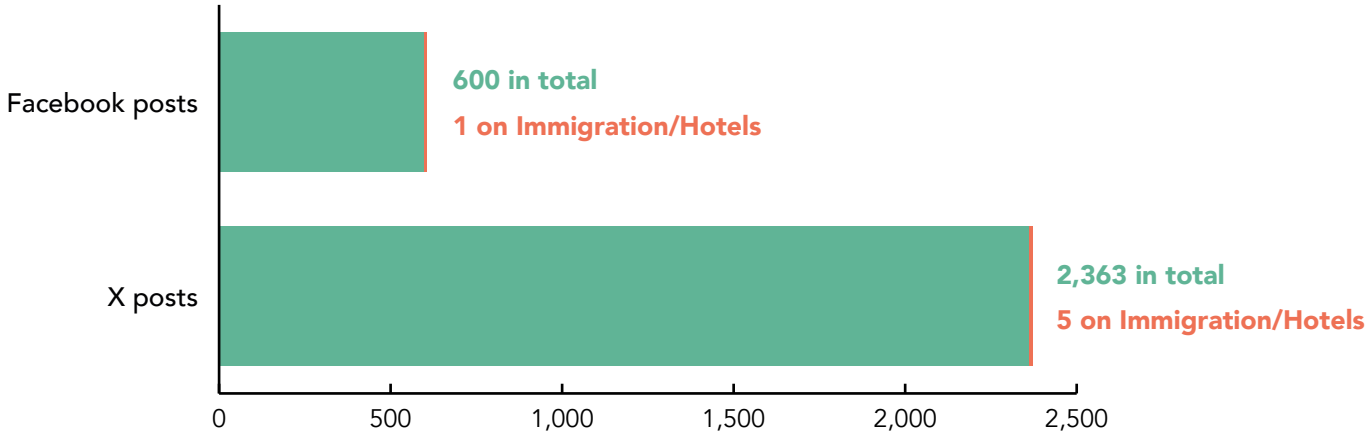
SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING OF RELEVANT COUNCILS ACROSS X, FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

COUNCIL	PLATFORM	FOLLOWING[23]
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Total population = 330,000	**X**	**18.7k**
	Facebook	**35k**
	Instagram	**6k**
	Total followers	**59,700**

Online analysis demonstrated that, although the council was engaging in some of these local Facebook channels - sharing 944 posts in these spaces over a two year period - they appeared to have posted just once on Facebook and five times on X about the asylum hotel topic from January 2024 - December 2025, covering the two most heated summers of protests.

23 Follower figures noted 06.08.2026

DUDLEY COUNCIL X AND FACEBOOK COMMUNICATIONS ON LOCAL HOTELS



It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that people - who, as section 2.4 covers, rely predominantly on social media for local information - struggled to describe a central source of information they could trust on the local issues that matter to them, such as updates on the asylum hotel policy. Residents expressed that they would like to hear more from the local council, especially examples where the council was making a positive impact in Dudley.

> *"I want to hear how they're trying to make things better, that kind of stuff"*
> ***(Darshan, Rooted Patriot, 24)***

The council has attempted multiple means of engaging residents with limited success

The apparent resident appetite for engagement sat in contrast to perspectives shared by a number of local councillors and council staff. One councillor explained how the council does indeed send out emails and newsletters which include many facts and updates about what is happening in Dudley, but the problem - in their eyes - is a lack of trust from local people in these updates.

This same councillor mentioned how they had historically held open meetings between local people and councillors, but shared these had been very controversial and led to conflict within the community. In order to resolve this, the council has tried various different formats to enable community engagement, but felt these opportunities often attracted people with specific grievances who would dominate the conversation rather than ask constructive questions or be open to broader discussion. Following these meetings, some attendees fed back that they were too frightened to ask any questions, meaning fundamentally people were not using these spaces for discussion.

> *"I think even if we offered everybody £1,000 free of charge, they still wouldn't engage with us"*
> ***(Dudley Council staff)***

On the asylum hotel policy specifically, local institutional stakeholders highlighted multiple reasons that, in some cases, it seemed better to not engage in the conversation at all. First, engagement may give the local community a sense that the council had more influence over the policy than it really did - this being a Home Office policy with little council engagement means they have relatively little power to control it. This lack of control is partly why Dudley Council - among others in the UK - looked into taking legal action against the central government to stop the local hotel being used as contingency housing.[24]

24 BBC News (2025) 'Council boss says asylum hotels a drain on economy'. Available here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y0jy4z8zno

Secondly, a majority of the housing is handled by Home Office contractors like Serco, Mears Group and Clearsprings Ready Homes. [25] This means that the council, whilst they likely knew which hotel was being used, had relatively little information beyond this. Councils can't communicate about information they don't have.

> *"The only ones that we knew where they were 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)***

Finally, with such little community trust in information coming from the council and other institutional bodies - some were concerned engagement may only add fuel to the fire and feed a growing conversation. This, however, creates a declining cycle: low trust feeds low engagement which then feeds low trust.

A significant gap of trust appears to exist between the council and residents meaning any information the council shares is met with scepticism. The total lack of trust from the public in any council communications leaves it, at best, going into the void or, at worst, pouring fuel on the fire around concerns of conspiracy and corruption. Clearly this is not only about the provision of information, but the rebuilding of trust with the local community. This is not helped, however, by a retreat in communication altogether.

CASE STUDY: MARCO LONGHI - REFORM COUNCILLOR AND ONLINE INFORMATION ACTOR

Marco Longhi is a current Reform councillor in Dudley, elected in 2026. He was previously the Conservative MP for Dudley North between 2019-2024 and joined Reform after leaving Parliament. Longhi has an apparent influence within the local information environment, with social media analysis indicating he is one of the top authors of relevant content in online spaces for Dudley. His online content includes both local discourse and posts about immigration rhetoric from US Vice-President, JD Vance, and calls to 'Stop the Boats.' While he was raised only a couple of times by residents and other key stakeholders, he received mixed responses from various actors - some simply noted his position of authority while others criticised his actions online as a councillor.

> *"Justin Welby (The ex Archbishop of Canterbury) said something about asylum seekers actually saying, you know,... mildly like, 'You have to treat these people like human beings'…Marco Longhi went straight for him on Twitter"*
> ***(Religious Leader, Dudley).***

Not our politics - a demand for a change

Trust in national government and elected officials was incredibly low across the board in Dudley. This mistrust appeared to predominantly stem from an anger in the community around a sense that their area, and the country as a whole, was not working for them. This directly carried over into a lack of trust in national political bodies and individuals as information actors.

25 Migration Observatory, University of Oxford (2025) 'Q&A: Who is responsible for housing asylum seekers and refugees?' Available here: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/qa-who-is-responsible-for-housing-asylum-seekers-and-refugees/

*"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, Sceptical Scroller, 49)

When asked about communications from the national government, people would almost always shift the focus specifically to politicians as individuals and a class of people, rather than communications coming from, say, a government department.

While the majority were critical of such national politicians, the Progressive Activists segment held a slightly less hostile attitude than others. This group was critical of what they saw as 'wishy washy' information sharing from the government and were heavily focused on wanting facts and accurate information about what was happening within the borough, but directed less aggression towards elected individuals.

"[I just want] accurate information on the exact amount of asylum seekers"
(Geoff, Progressive Activist, 42)

In the Established Liberal, Rooted Patriot and Incrementalist Left segments, there was a lack of trust in politicians more fundamentally as what they considered to be part of an 'elite' that people appeared to disdain. This anti-elite sentiment extended to the blurring of lines between actors and institutions that these local residents saw as part of the same system, with some naming the government and the BBC in the same, negative, sentence.

"BBC and the news and the governments and all that crap. They talk so much crap. I don't listen to 'em anymore, not interested"
(Shannon, Sceptical Scroller, 49)

Dissenting Disruptors and Rooted Patriots represented the most hostile approach to national politicians overall. In some cases, there were conspiratorial tones in their comments - one of whom stated that the current government is increasing the number of migrants to the UK in order to secure votes for their party.

"Government do it for all the votes anyway. For the Muslim votes."
(Gary, Rooted Patriot, 48)

One stakeholder told us that local *"trust in officialdom... politicians, whatever, is probably at an all-time low"* ***(Religious Leader, Dudley)***. When residents were pressed on why they didn't trust national politicians, several of them highlighted the COVID-19 pandemic as a time when their trust in politicians wavered, sharing their frustration towards a political system and class that managed the crisis poorly or demonstrated bias, hypocrisy, or lack of interest in properly serving UK communities.

"I think since [COVID-19] lockdown they've just messed everything up. They tell nothing but lies. You can't trust anybody."
(Shannon, Sceptical Scroller, 49)

Many residents shared a sense of hopelessness in the face of current politics. A couple commented that the state of British politics made them feel overlooked and ignored by the national government. This was echoed by residents who shared there was no point in voting at all.

"Whatever I do makes no difference. Whatever I say makes no difference. I'm just going to get smashed by somebody. So I'll just do what I do, go to work, earn my money, feed my kid."
(Chris, Skeptical Scroller, 47)

This mistrust, hopelessness and growing hostility towards national politics left many sharing an active appetite for a political change. Indeed, in the survey submitted before focus groups, 36 of the 44 residents stated they planned to vote for Reform in the next general election - even though the majority had voted for a spectrum of other parties in 2024. This was underlined by the swing in local council seats to Reform as discussed in the Introduction. A couple of residents explicitly stated that Reform seemed to offer something different compared to other parties and that was the driving motivation for their vote. This clear desire for change stemmed from a total distrust in existing institutions to serve the town and its people after years of decline.

This section has demonstrated the collapsing trust in the typical institutional pillars of information in local communities where: local news is ignored, mainstream media is not trusted, and the national government is seen as biased and corrupt.

2.4 ONLINE SPACES AND LOCAL CONVERSATIONS ARE ALL PEOPLE REALLY TRUST (OR THINK THEY HAVE)

The primary means through which people in Dudley Borough access information about the local areas is through social media - especially local Facebook groups and pages, as well as TikTok, Instagram, and X. This next section of the report will identify which platforms and people residents use to discover information about the local area and to what extent they trust this information.

Facebook as the local town square

The use of local Facebook groups dominates the way in which residents receive information about Dudley. This was true across all segments and a vast array of topics - one resident highlighted how they learned about the local metro development, while another mentioned they even get 'posthole warnings' added to a Facebook group so that people can avoid driving over them in the area. This was equally true for the hotel policy.

> *"We've got local community Facebook groups … And that would be where I get my local news from."*
> ***(Julie, Progressive Activist, 62)***

The inter-connected web of local Facebook groups and pages

The local Facebook channels mentioned by residents of Dudley form an ecosystem of overlapping spaces at various local and hyperlocal levels - from district to ward-level. Some are pages (public, one-way broadcasting tools) and others are groups (two-way, community-focused spaces that more easily enable discussion and peer-to-peer engagement).

Multiple Facebook groups/pages were mentioned - including *Netherton Community Group*, with 19.1k members, and *Spotted: Dudley*, 5.4k members - while others were named that could not be located, assuming in reality the names are variations on those names that came top of mind to residents. Through online research, multiple large populace pages were identified including, but not limited to, *I'm from Dudley*, boasting 28.6k followers.

Trust in posts on Facebook groups varied across segments. The majority of people within the Progressive Activist segment highlighted the importance of Facebook groups in finding out information; while they believed a lot of information that they saw on the platform, some were critical of certain aspects. Several Progressive Activists referred to concerns about misinformation and that local groups and pages can include a lot of negative and hateful content, which generally makes them less enjoyable spaces for people to use.

Concerns about AI content, particularly for older community members

A number of others from various segments were concerned about the level of AI-generated content on the platform, which made some less trusting of content on Facebook overall with difficulties identifying what was real.

> *"I'd like to see less AI videos as well, because [there is] a lot of false AI videos"*
> ***(Geoff, Progressive Activist, 42)***

Young people in Dudley were jointly concerned about AI-generated content out of a protectiveness towards older members in the community, even if they themselves felt reasonably sure they could spot generated content. One group member shared how they were frequently explaining AI content to their parents and grandparents who would share it without knowing its origin or nature.

Content that is filmed live or shared by other local people is more intrinsically trustworthy

Dissenting Disruptors and Incrementalist Left segments were more willing to trust content in community Facebook groups. This trust appears to have stemmed from two key factors: that the content was written by people in the community - who they were more willing to trust - and because some of the content was live videos.

> *"If it's someone local, if it's your friend for instance, posting, then why would he report something that's completely fake? There's no agenda. He's not paid by anyone, he's not Associated Press, for instance. He's just your mate in the town centre filming it"*
> ***(Lewis, Dissenting Disrupter, 39)***

A majority of residents in these groups shared concern over the scripted nature of mainstream news media - believing this made content untrustworthy as it could be pushing an agenda or biases. Livestreamed videos on social media or YouTube, however, could be trusted because it's happening right before their eyes.

A couple residents shared that they watched specific content creators on this topic known as 'Hotel Auditors' - creators who go inside asylum hotels around the UK (often illegally) and film or live-stream those staying there. Such Hotel Auditors often use these videos to paint an image that asylum seekers are living in luxury. [26] People shared that they found this content useful because it was the only 'real' insight they had as to what was really happening in these hotels. The attraction seemed to largely derive from an information void. People weren't hearing trusted updates from more official sources, so they wanted a glimpse inside these hotels for themselves.

> *"You can see their [asylum seekers'] bedrooms and you see their TVs and you see them having all these meals and everything"*
> ***(Jenny, Sceptical Scroller, 57).***

Residents heard about asylum hotels for the first time via local Facebook groups

When it came to information about the asylum hotel policy itself, Facebook was also a primary source of information - filling the gap left by a lack of engagement with existing local news outlets, or trust in local government communications. Residents across multiple groups and interviewees stated that they first heard about asylum hotels on the platform and that it was the only real place they would get updates on what was going on.

Analysis of Dudley community Facebook posts about immigration over two years indicated that 80.1% of posts were negative in sentiment. Considering the conflation between asylum seekers

26 Reuters (2025) 'How combative videographers fire up Britain's asylum hotel protests'. Available here: https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/how-combative-videographers-fire-up-britains-asylum-hotel-protests-2025-12-17/

and immigration more broadly in focus groups, it is reasonable to expect that a lot of this online conversation was therefore negative.

Facebook group admins are local information gatekeepers in Dudley

Across segments, residents described Facebook admins as a key actor in the local information supply chain: it's admins that get to choose what is discussed in what spaces and by who. Opinions varied broadly across segments on the benefits and risks of different local admins' approaches. For some, there was a sense that active Facebook admins could improve the quality of information or discourse in some Facebook spaces; others were more critical. Many in these groups expressed frustration around what they saw as a current state of 'over-policing' in these spaces.

> *"[On] Facebook won't leave it there for long. It's removed very quick. And I don't understand that, because to me you're just sharing in the community, but before you see it it'll be like 'this content's been removed'. Now, I don't see why."*
> ***(Angelina, Incrementalist Left, 37)***

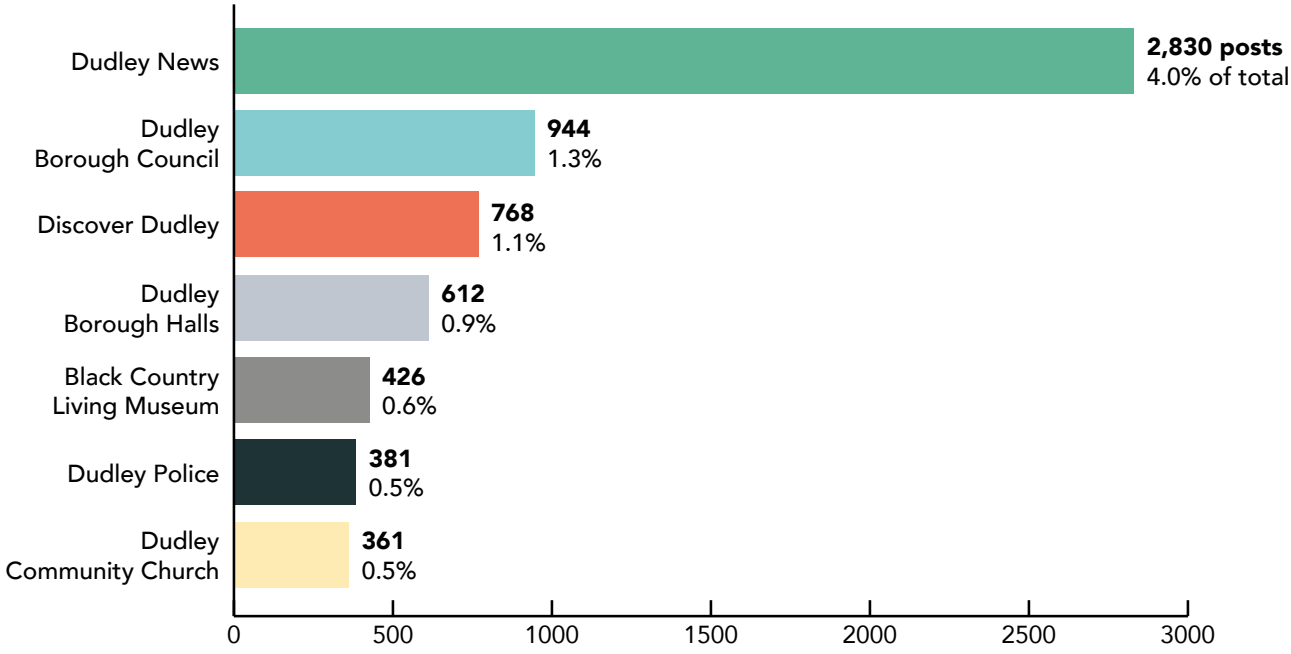
Residents suggest they fear social backlash if they post on Facebook

Interestingly, while Facebook was shared as a prominent place for local learning and discussion, many residents described themselves as 'lurkers' who would read what was posted, but rarely post themselves. One resident referred to modern online culture as a 'witch hunt'; others argued that they aren't able to post online because they'll be labeled 'racist' or face other kinds of social backlash for sharing views.

Some went so far as giving examples of where they had their Facebook accounts deleted - presumably by Facebook itself - describing these examples as occasions where they felt speech was heavily policed. Multiple said they have been banned from groups for some of what they had previously posted. One resident explained that he has many different Facebook accounts because they had been reported for inappropriate language.

Institutional presence on Facebook

Online analysis demonstrates that local institutions use community Facebook groups heavily for sharing updates, including everything from local news media, council services, cultural events, heritage, to policing updates and religious or other local community activities. The following chart illustrates the proportion of posts made by different local institutions in these groups.



Other social media filling some of the void - but from a national perspective

While other social media platforms are frequently used, this is more for international and national information than for local insight. Dudley residents across all segments highlighted the use of non-Facebook platforms for less Dudley-oriented information. In particular, younger residents utilised these platforms as foundational parts of their information ecosystems - even slightly more than Facebook.

WhatsApp groups were less active in Dudley than other locations

Unlike Facebook groups, and indeed the other two areas included in the wider research programme - Epping Forest and Greater Manchester - WhatsApp groups did not appear to be in prevalent use for community-wide discussion in Dudley besides for some family group chats. Only one resident described WhatsApp group use in her street - describing how, on her local whatsapp groups everyone ' looks out for each other'. Others described the WhatsApp groups they were members of as a nightmare because of the number of annoying messages they received.

> *"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, Skeptical Scoller, 47)***

TikTok mostly used for entertainment, but politics makes its way in

A couple of residents mentioned that they frequently use TikTok for news about the local area, but this was by far a minority. One respondent outlined how their area-specific consumption was mostly through one local content creator that they followed called Ryan Brooks, who is discussed in more detail below. A couple thought TikTok deliberately showed a lot of content about Dudley due to its algorithm, but this was a small portion of the group.

> *"Because of your algorithm on TikTok you start watching stuff about Dudley then more stuff will come up and stuff like that"*
> ***(Phil, Incrementalist Left, 43).***

A handful of Sceptical Scrollers and Dissenting Disrupters mentioned that TikTok and Instagram provided them with information about asylum seeker hotel policy specifically - even if not Dudley focused. One resident drew attention to watching 'hotel auditors' as well as more political figures like Nigel Farage or commentators on these platforms, as they did with Facebook. For most people, however, these platforms were for more everyday information consumption and entertainment than political or policy content.

A common theme that surfaced alongside the popularity of social media, however, was concerns around the role of algorithms and recommender engines in influencing local people's feeds. One resident in Dudley drew attention to X and argued that they used to really enjoy using the platform but now if they go onto it they are repeatedly shown, what they called, 'racist' content.

Not such an age divide in social media platform usage in Dudley

Some stakeholders hypothesised that in line with national trends, it was mostly people over the age of 30 who used Facebook and that younger community members were more likely to use TikTok or Instagram. However, younger Dudley respondents evidenced that this age divide wasn't as prominent in Dudley as these stakeholders assumed, with many still using Facebook actively. Furthermore, residents above 30 also use TikTok and Instagram for their short form video and image platforms, implying there is a broader spread of platform use than one might assume.

CASE STUDY: RYAN BROOKS - A LOCAL INFLUENCER IN DUDLEY

Ryan Brooks is a content creator who regularly posts videos based in Dudley, especially around asylum hotel-related content and immigration policy more broadly. With 132,000 followers on Facebook, and 11,500 on YouTube he styles himself as a reporter, delivering "reporting on asylum seekers, migrant hotels, refugee housing, and HMPs across the UK" - promising "Authenticity. Credibility. Reliability. Facts". [27] He doesn't only post on his own individual channels and profiles, but is reported to run multiple groups and pages, including the local Facebook page 'Stop the Boats Black Country'.[28]

Police and the Council in Dudley showed real concern about the impact of Brooks on the information landscape in the area.

"Ryan Brooks was really active… he was orchestrating action against asylum seeker hotels, and he was organizing protests"
(Police Officer, Dudley).

"[Local people] would rather get the news from Ryan Brooks than the word from the people who do their best to run the borough"
(Councillor, Dudley).

The level of concern about the influence of Ryan Brooks presented by these local stakeholders did not seem to match residents' awareness or perception. In focus groups, residents only mentioned Ryan Brooks twice, though those that did stated that they trusted his videos because they were often live. While these individuals did appear to trust Brooks, it is significant that he was raised so little and yet is garnering noticeable attention from various local actors. This suggests that Ryan Brooks' level of penetration into the general information environment is not as significant as his following across various social media platforms suggests, but his content could have an outsized impact in certain discourses and groups.

Black Country conversation as a source of truth

Almost every resident shared how word of mouth is a reliable and trustworthy source in their local information diet.

Trust in news from others in Dudley appeared to be deeply connected to the broader sense of community and a collective Black Country identity. Across segments, there was praise for fellow Black Country - 'down to earth', 'good' - people. These sentiments fed the belief that there's no reason news you'd hear from fellow residents would be, at least purposefully, untrue.

Residents who didn't use social media platforms as much tended to be more reliant upon hearing updates directly from friends and family. This was particularly true for Progressive Activists who were less likely to trust information from social media platforms and more likely to receive information directly from friends or relatives. They emphasised how information can spread quickly and easily amongst these communities.

27 Figures collected 10.09.26 ; Ryan Brooks, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/BrooksReports/ ; Ryan Brooks, YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@BrooksReports

28 Facebook. 'Page: Stop the Boats - Black Country'. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/events/ibis-styles-oldbury-birmingham/stop-the-boats-black-country/1543662146809377/

"To be honest, most of my news comes from friends and family. Word of mouth. It's like a call tree. One person finds out something and then suddenly your phone's blowing off. And that's basically how I get most of my information locally anyway"
(Carol, Progressive Activist, 32)

"If my next door neighbour does not know what's going on, then nothing's going on. She knows that's the person we'd be looking for. The one who knows everything, she knows everything. You don't need a ring [video camera-based] door bell because she'll phone me up and tell me who's at my front door"
(Rupert, Progressive Activist, 59).

Despite these examples of community engagement through word of mouth with close friends and family, there was a sense that wider community spaces for open and honest discussion were limited. Many residents shared that, besides maybe seeing other parents at a school drop off or some friendly locals at a sporting event, most socialising would happen by visiting other people's houses. Conversation about topics like the asylum hotel policy, however, would never really happen in these spaces.

"I think it's quite a taboo subject"
(Bella, Traditional Conservative, 37)

Residents drew attention to how funding has been cut for local community spaces and how this took away vital, neutral space where key issues could be raised. Religious spaces were highlighted by a very small number of residents as somewhere people were able to connect with their community, but they didn't necessarily see it as a place to talk about these kinds of issues.

Many reflected how the conversation being had in the focus group was the most honest and safe discussion they felt they had ever had on the topic of asylum hotels in the borough and actively shared a desire for more space and opportunities. A majority of respondents felt if they were to share their thoughts, that they may receive negative repercussions. This was especially true for those who had, as outlined in section 2.4, been removed from social media or had other negative interactions based around discussing local hotels.

Residents across segments highlighted the desire for more opportunities to engage in these conversations in safe spaces with the council and local elected officials - which is in direct contradiction to the challenges local council staff raised that shared how hard it was to get anyone to engage with the events or gatherings they've facilitated in the past.

"We need more groups. We need bigger groups and you need to listen to what's being said because we're the people who are being affected, not you in your ivory tower"
(Catherine, Sceptical Scroller, 53).

SECTION 3
CONCLUSION

The people who engaged in this research feel let down by the institutions designed to serve them. Years of decline and a lack of meaningful engagement has left them angry and desiring change.

As the people of Dudley Borough have turned away from the faceless institutions of news media and government that they once trusted for information, they have shifted to social media and each other to stay informed. The media and political institutions that should be providing accurate and trusted information of this policy have largely retreated out of fear they will only make things worse when trust is so low. But this absence only deepens the mistrust of local people and leaves voids that are quickly filled with speculation and mis/dis-information.

Many find social media a useful tool to stay connected to others in the community and quickly and cheaply learn about local issues. However, these spaces don't support the community dialogue and trusted information access that people desire - with fears of repercussions around sharing their own opinions on these platforms or rising worries around the content they see being fabrications, speculation, or AI generated content. A lack of offline and online spaces for these discussions has removed the opportunities for sharing information and making sense of the topics facing the community, only deepening divisions throughout the community.

These combined directions of travel have degraded the agency of people in Dudley, with a growing sense that information can't be trusted and few are trying to provide the information the community needs and deserves. This has only fed the existing grievances in a borough that feels left behind by the government and the UK more broadly.

Dudley's institutions must forge connections with the community where its trust already lives - in its Facebook groups, through the few in-person spaces people inhabit and via its shared Black Country identity - and rebuild the spaces where that trust can do its work. If this isn't seen as a top priority and the local institutions aren't given the broader resourcing and support they need, then this fracturing will only grow.

APPENDIX: THE SEVEN SEGMENTS[29]



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.

29 More in Common. '7 Segments'. Available here: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/seven-segments/

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DEMOS

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