

April 2021

# Local Government Association & BritainThinks

## Has COVID-19 changed the way communities behave?

[britainthinks.com](https://britainthinks.com)

## What we'll be covering in the presentation:

**01**

What was the background to the research?

**02**

Has COVID-19 changed the way communities behave?

**03**

What did we learn from the research?

**04**

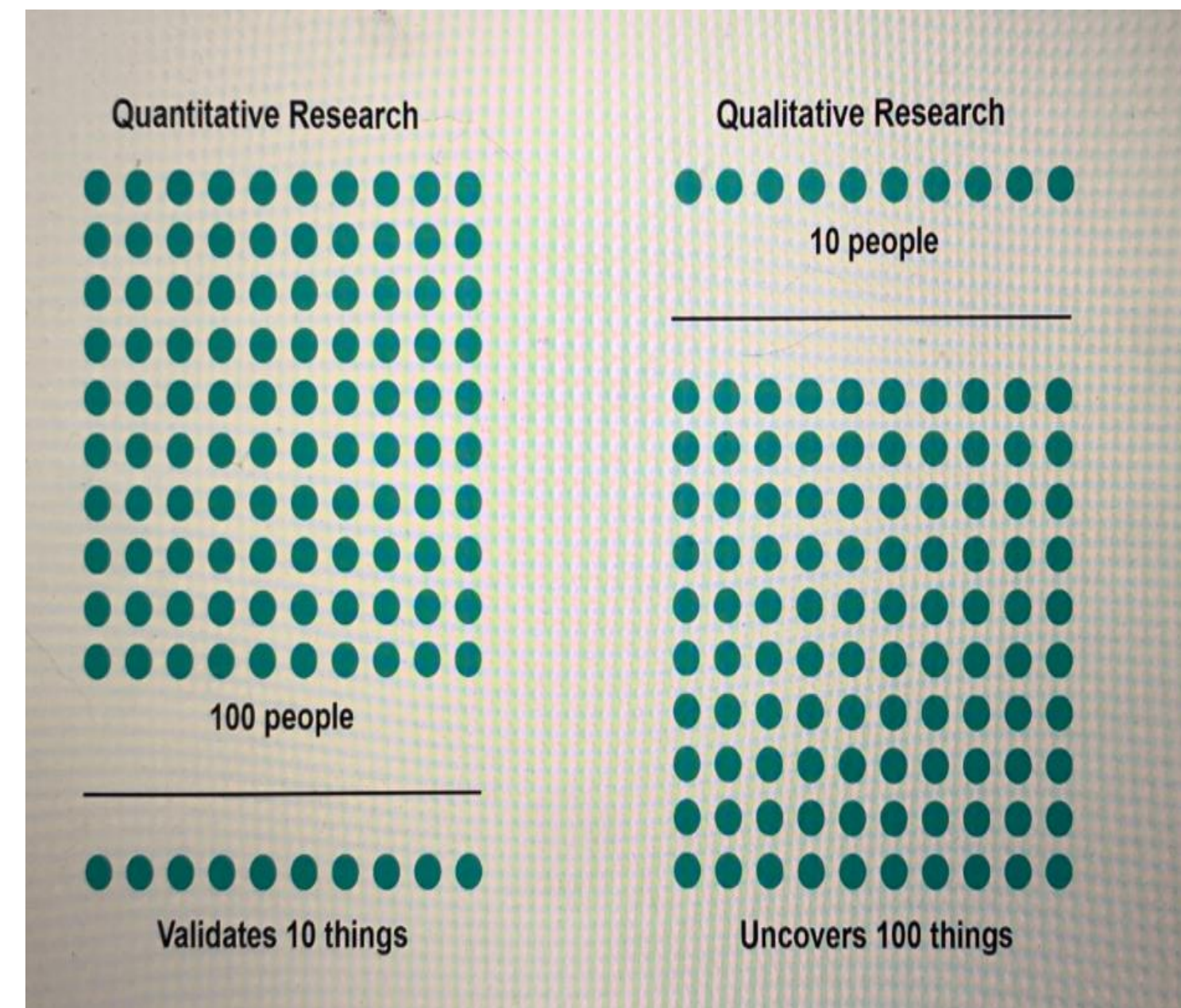
How are findings from the research being used?

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# 01 What was the background to the research?

# About the research

- About the Local Government Association
- Working in the COVID-19 environment
- Choosing a methodology
- Framing the research using thematic analysis



@CatherineCe, 27 November 2020

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# 02 Has COVID-19 changed the way communities behave?

# We spoke to 50 people living in six locations across England and Wales

## 1-week long pre-task completed online or on paper

- This stage of the research explored participants' initial views of their local area, experiences of the pandemic, priorities for change and views on civic participation.
- Fieldwork was conducted between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2020.

## 2 hour follow-up focus group or 1 hour telephone interview

- This stage explored views and behaviours reported in the pre-task in greater detail and probed to understand participants' considered views on civic participation.
- Fieldwork was conducted between the 26<sup>th</sup> October and 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2020\*.



## Key findings

- 1.** Perceptions of local areas and feelings of belonging were driven by long-standing factors. For most, those remained unchanged by the pandemic which had instead typically reinforced existing views.
- 2.** The behaviours that had most universally changed as a result of the pandemic were those directly connected to Government restrictions. A strong desire to 'get back to normal' meant that many did not want these behaviours to 'stick' in the future and the idea of the pandemic as an opportunity to do things differently was therefore not intuitive.
- 3.** Beyond this, behaviour change in local areas – in relation to leisure time, shopping, travel and civic participation – was highly varied, many felt that life hadn't changed much at all. Those who had seen more change were more open to sticking with them in the future, particularly where they were motivated to do so.
- 4.** Many felt engaging in civic participation was out of reach because of a lack of knowledge or lack of trust that it will effect genuine change. There was interest in hearing more, particularly in relation to how citizens can a) have a say in consultations, and b) participate online to overcome some of the barriers to getting involved.

# Perceptions of local areas



# Perceptions of local areas and feelings of belonging were typically driven by long-standing factors

## Best things about local areas:

- Include the people; the green spaces; the access to amenities; and the diversity and vibrancy.



*A photo from a participant showing local walks and natural spaces as the best thing in their area.*

## Worst things about local areas:

- Include anti-social behaviour and crime; traffic and potholes; a sense of decline; and a lack of community feel.



*A photo from a participant demonstrates empty shops as the worst thing in their local area*

## Sense of belonging:

- Was commonly linked to close proximity to friends and family, or detailed knowledge of the area.

*“In terms of a sense of community, I don't feel any attachment, but in terms of my personal history, it's where I grew up, so I feel tethered in that regard.”*  
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

## Despite an initial increase in community spirit during the first national lockdown, participants' feelings towards their local areas appeared to have remained largely unchanged

**Widespread appreciation for additional community spirit had not translated substantively into a greater sense of belonging.**

*"(I know) I've got good neighbors now. If anything needs to be done, they'll ask. I felt this way before the pandemic, (it's) stayed the same really."*  
(With children under 11, Rural)

**For those who felt more negative to their local area prior to the pandemic, they saw long-standing issues remain.**

*"There's more loneliness; more litter from facemasks; (still) a lack of decent local shops; lots of pollution from traffic... people are just busy with own lives."*  
(With children 11-18, Urban)

# Behaviour change as a result of COVID-19

## The pandemic has impacted all. However, the changes experienced had been far from universal

**Some participants reported experiencing big changes to the way they live, work and travel.**

*“Before lockdown I have never worked from home before... getting used to this took some doing, but now I find it second nature. I don't miss the daily commute, or the money spent on travelling expenses either”*

(With children 11-18, Urban)

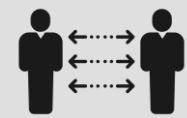
**Others described experiencing relatively little change to their lives as a result of the pandemic, except for reduced social contact with family and friends.**

*“Things haven't changed that much, work is work. Gardened during furlough. Other than that, not changed too much. I miss going to the pub to see my mates, and can't go out for meals as much, but quite happy at the moment.”*

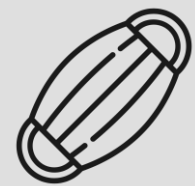
(With children under 11, Rural)

## While some behavioural changes as a result of the pandemic were more wide-reaching, others varied across our sample

### Personal changes experienced by all



**Restrictions on social contact:** being unable to freely socialise was the most salient change for many. All participants, particularly those who lived alone, were finding this difficult to adapt to.



**Hygiene and mask wearing:** Many reported difficulties adjusting to the mental load of having to remember to enact these behaviours.

### Wider changes experienced by some, but not all, participants



**Increased time:** leading to spending more time with family; leisure activities (e.g. cooking and reading); exploring the local area.



**Travel:** behaviours have fluctuated including: a reduction in travel and driving at the start of the pandemic and, more recently, a move away from public transport toward private transport.



**Shopping:** increase in online shopping; increase in shopping with local businesses; moving away from larger, busier supermarkets.



**Community spirit:** greater familiarity with neighbours; greater awareness of and contribution to local causes.

**The behaviours that had changed the most were those that have been mandated by the Government and are specific to the pandemic; rather than those that people have been driven by people's own motivations or 'nudged' into due to the changing context of the pandemic.**

## When looking to the future, participants spontaneously voiced a desire to 'return to normal' – especially social contact with loved ones

### Socialising in person

*"I want coronavirus to go away so people can feel comfortable with life again. Normality would be happiness. I would see my grandkids again."*  
(Vulnerable, Urban)

### Resuming leisure activities and travel

*"I miss crowds at football matches and the atmosphere, and festivals."*  
(Children under 11, Rural)


### Stop feeling there is a set of (changing) rules to follow

*"A sense of freedom. Not having to go to Google every time you want to do something and see if you're breaking rules....just feeling like I haven't got a leash around my neck anymore."*  
(18-39 with no children, Urban)


**Inherent in this desire to return to normal – participants expected their behaviour to 'return to normal' too. As the most top of mind changed behaviours were those which have been 'forced' on them and are specific to the pandemic. Prioritising a 'return to normal' meant the pandemic as a time for change is not intuitive.**

# Beyond initial priorities for returning to 'normal', some new behaviours were viewed more positively and potentially likely to continue




 **Shopping**


Changes in shopping behaviour are likely to persist, due to the motivation of 'convenience' for online shopping and the shift in attitude driving the support of local businesses.

 **Time**

For some, more time was one of the few positive changes – the appetite is there for this to continue but it is expected to be hard as 'normal' life and schedules resume, limiting opportunity to do so.

 **Travel**

Change in travel behaviour was often a result of restrictions – most held little motivation to see it continue. The move away from public transport is likely to continue whilst safety remains a concern.

 **Community spirit**

For most, the sense of feeling connected was starting to ebb as the pandemic wore on and was unlikely to lead to substantial changes. A minority wanted to prioritise changes in this area in the future.

# Creating change and civic participation



## Spontaneously, key things participants wanted to improve about their local area were often unrelated to the coronavirus pandemic

### Traffic and potholes

*"[There's] lots of pollution, traffic; there was a child killed by 'boy racers' [even] during lockdown"*  
(With children 11-18, Urban)

### Anti-social behaviour

*I've had some bother with [youths] coming onto my property – acting stupid. I'm 65, not in fantastic health so I wasn't going to chase them..."*  
(Vulnerable, Urban)

### A sense of decline

*"(We) really need to improve maintenance of buildings (and the) town centers – it's become run down, it's like the council don't care anymore"*  
(40+ with no children, Rural)

### Lack of community feel

*"There isn't as much of a community as there should be. The posh people tend to mix with people outside the area. The younger upwardly mobile population are interested but don't really participate."*  
(18-39 with no children, Urban)

**These factors generally (far) pre-date the pandemic, though some feel lockdown may have worsened these issues, or drawn their attention to them.**

## However, most participants felt they had relatively limited scope to make change in their local area, and address these issues

- Most are unsure about what civic participation is or how to create change in their local areas themselves.
- Therefore, most have not participated in any change locally, beyond small, individual actions, e.g. choosing to shop locally.
- The minority who have taken more active steps to engage are often those with:
  - Something to react against;
  - A personal interest in a specific issue;
  - More ties to the community, particularly children

*"Personally, keep doing what I'm doing. Keep buying locally and support small businesses. I do already do this as I have lived here all my life."*  
(40+ with no children, Urban)

*"If it's something you feel strongly about, the only way you can do it is by doing a petition. Seen lots of people around here that if they want something done, they write to the council or even the government. That's the best way to do it."*  
(With children 11-18, Urban)

## The public point to two key barriers to civic participation:

**Lack of information about *how* to participate was the most common barrier, often underpinned by an assumption that you cannot enact change alone**

*“The will is there, it’s knowing what actually needs to be done, what can be done to contribute to it.”*  
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

**An assumed need for a regular commitment, meant many felt they lack the time to participate**

*“I think we could all play our part, but it’s having the time do to it. Everyone has their own stressful world to live in, so as much as we say we would love to do our bit, it’s not always that easy.”*  
(Vulnerable, Urban)

# We shared a presentation with participants introducing high-level information on civic participation:

- The presentation covered several key areas about the role of councils, councillors, and consultations:
  - What are councils for?
  - Who are the local councillors?
  - How do councillors represent me?
  - How can I get involved?
- Three case studies were used to highlight how these things can work in practice:
  - Low Traffic Neighbourhoods in Hackney
  - Saving Darlington Library
  - Friends of Alexandra Park, Manchester

Local area focus group

## How can I get involved?

- Sometimes councils need to know more about what the residents, local businesses and other organisations think about issues that affect them.
- In these cases they may run a **consultation**:
  - A consultation is any opportunity to give residents a voice before decisions are made or priorities are set.
  - These can include residents' surveys, telephone surveys, face-to-face conversations or community meetings.
  - Consultations may be run about many things, but are often done when the council wants to hear views about matters which may affect you, e.g. school closures; cycle lanes; and regenerating particular areas
- Consultations can help to improve decision making and increase participation in creating change in the local area.



A consultation document prepared by Hackney Council on how to improve walking and cycling in the local area.

Local area focus group

## CASE STUDY | Saving Darlington Library

- In 2016 Darlington Borough Council responded to funding cuts from the UK Government by voting to close the town library and move it to the leisure centre.
- The community came together in person and on social media to fight the decision, by protesting and contacting their local councillors; joining forces with local organisations, e.g. the local newspaper; creating a petition; and forming their own organisation 'Friends of Darlington Library'.
- In 2018 the Council overturned their decision, and the library was to remain open. Since then Friends of Darlington Library and the local council have worked together to plan the future local library provision.

### Darlington Library - Keep it at Crown Street

Public group · 1.6K members



## On balance, participants responded positively to this information and going forwards called for more information and simple opportunities to participate

- The information raised awareness of ways of participating and made achieving change feel like more of a possibility
- As a result, many participants felt councils should do more to inform them about consultations and how they can get involved locally.
- Participating online was viewed as a simple and easy way to participate in change:
  - There is a desire for websites or other online tools where individuals can find out about ongoing consultations and issues in their area.
  - However, some highlighted the difficulties this could pose to elderly or disadvantaged individuals without online access.

*"It sounds good, like something I would look into [...] It makes it sound like other towns are doing it, so it's possible to do. It plants a seed in your head to think: I could do that."*  
(Vulnerable, Urban)

*"It's up to the council to make us aware of how we can affect decisions, if we're asked we're obliged to respond. If you're engaged, it's a lot more natural to engage back. I think the onus is on the council to engage with us a lot more."*  
(18-39 with no children, Rural)

## Recap: Key findings

1. Perceptions of local areas and feelings of belonging were driven by long-standing factors. For most, those remained unchanged by the pandemic which had instead typically reinforced existing views.
2. The behaviours that had most universally changed as a result of the pandemic were those directly connected to Government restrictions. A strong desire to 'get back to normal' meant that many did not want these behaviours to 'stick' in the future and the idea of the pandemic as an opportunity to do things differently was therefore not intuitive.
3. Beyond this, behaviour change in local areas – in relation to leisure time, shopping, travel and civic participation – was highly varied, many felt that life hadn't changed much at all. Those who had seen more change were more open to sticking with them in the future, particularly where they were motivated to do so.
4. Many felt engaging in civic participation was out of reach because of a lack of knowledge or lack of trust that it will effect genuine change. There was interest in hearing more, particularly in relation to how citizens can a) have a say in consultations, and b) participate online to overcome some of the barriers to getting involved.

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# 03 What did we learn from the research?

## **This research served as a reminder of:**

**1. The importance of a neutral starting point - even if you have clear hypotheses**

**2. The benefits of an in-depth approach - including individual and group feedback**

**3. The ways we can ensure (remote) research methods are accessible to all**



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# 04 How are findings from the research being used?

# Using the findings

- Thought leadership
- Decision-making and insight
- Organisational tone and narrative
- Departmental focus
- Role of dissemination

Local Government Association

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## COVID-19 public opinion research - BritainThinks

To help councils with their thinking and to shape a narrative that will resonate locally, we commissioned BritainThinks to research how the pandemic has changed public opinion and behaviour, and what matters most for them.

Communications support | 11 Feb 2021

### Background and objectives

Report (download)

### Background and objectives

The Local Government Association (LGA) is supporting local authorities in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## COVID-19 and community behaviour

4 March, 2021 by Councillor Peter Fleming OBE  
Councillor Peter Fleming OBE is Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board

Twitter LinkedIn Facebook

**The LGA has commissioned a report into shifts in public attitudes and behaviour caused by COVID-19 and the implications for local government.**

Coronavirus has impacted on all of us; our working lives, our leisure time, our ability to travel and, not least, our health and mental wellbeing.

To help councils as they respond to the pandemic, the LGA commissioned BritainThinks to explore the ways in which COVID-19 has changed public attitudes and behaviours.

The research, 'Has COVID-19 changed the way communities behave?', also aimed to understand more about how the public defines 'local' as a result of the pandemic, including any changes in attitude towards civic participation.

Perceptions of local areas and feelings of belonging were found to be driven by long-standing factors. For most, the pandemic has typically reinforced existing views rather than changed them. For example, the best things about local areas included the people, green spaces, access to amenities, diversity, and vibrancy, whereas the

# Questions and discussion

# Thank you

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