What has happened to trust and cohesion since Tier 4 restrictions and the third national lockdown (December 2020 – March 2021)? Further evidence from national surveys

Report for British Academy, March 6th 2021

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This report documents the changes in political trust and distrust, and perceptions of national and local division and unity, between December 2020 and March 2021. This complements previous evidence from December 2019 to October 2020 to cover the period when the whole of the UK entered lockdown and when the vaccination programme began to a point where 15 million people had been vaccinated (Lalot, Davies & Abrams, 2020). The data are from surveys involving 8003 respondents from different parts of the Britain and then a nationally representative survey involving 1005 respondents. This report shows the percentage of respondents that perceived improving or worsening levels of political trust at the national and local levels (both general political trust and COVID-19 related trust) and perceptions of unity and division at the national and local levels. We note the following key findings relating them to 3 time points: December 2020 prior to the Dec 19th imposition of Tier 4 restrictions over large parts of the Southeast and East of England and London; the three weeks following December 19th and into January 2021 as the vaccine programme gathered pace; and March 5th 2021, a few days after the Budget and by which time 21 million people had been vaccinated and announcements had been made about the timeline for reopening schools and phasing out of lockdown.

Trust

- Through December to January levels of general political distrust rose from 57 to 61%. Those expressing trust dropped from 24 to 21%. These levels persisted through to March 5th 2021. Distrust in local MPs reduced from 36% to 33% between December 2020 and January 2021, but rose to 40% by March 2021. Trust in local MPs remained relatively high but reduced from 39% to 36% between December and January and to 33% by March 2021.
- Through December to January, 60% of the UK population continued to doubt the UK government's competence in tackling the pandemic. Only 25-27% thought the government was competent. In contrast, only 24-28% thought their local councils lacked competence and 43-38% believed they were competent. By March 2021 when 30% of the population had been vaccinated and a timetable announced for unlocking, 54% still doubted the government's competence whereas only 21% doubted their local councils' competence.

- Continuing the trends observed earlier in the pandemic, a majority show distrust in the UK government whereas only a minority show distrust at the local level. Trust levels remain higher in local competence than in national competence to handle the pandemic.

Unity and Division

- Between December 2020 and January 2021, the percentage of people that perceived national divisions to be growing changed from 60% to 57%. The percentage that perceived national unity to be growing changed slightly from 20% to 23%. In March 2021, 78% of respondents perceived national divisions to be growing and only 10% perceived national unity to be growing.

- Between December 2020 and January 2021, the percentage of people that perceived local divisions to be growing changed from 24% to 26%. The percentage that perceived national unity to be growing changed slightly from 29% to 30%. In March 2021, 26% of respondents perceived national divisions to be growing and 23% perceived national unity to be growing.

- These data show that the large difference in perceptions of division and unity observed during 2020 have persisted. By March 2021, despite some closing of the national division/local unity gap during December 2020, people perceived substantially more division at the national then the local level, and greater unity at the local than the national level.

Implications for policy

Consistent with our earlier report, there are further implications for policy. Central to these are:

- Trust and cohesion are vital elements of a well-functioning society. The pandemic's deepening of fractures across different parts of society mean that it is crucial to address these directly and soon to prevent avoidable harms other than direct vulnerability to COVID-19;

- Efforts to build trust and cohesion that focus and capitalise on local structures as much as national ones are likely to provide the greatest resilience and capacity to emerge strongly from the challenges of the pandemic.

Introduction

Our earlier report, "Trust and Cohesion in Britain during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic across place, scale and time" underlined the point that a large body of research in social and political science shows that social cohesion (Manca, 2014) is an important driver of a nation's growth and political stability (Jenson, 1998). A central element of cohesion is political trust and an important index of cohesion is the strength of perceived unity and division across society (Abrams, 2010; Abrams, Lalot & Hogg, 2021; Chan et al., 2006). That report also provides more extensive theoretical background to the current work. It set out why trust, unity and division, and community belonging are crucial factors in determining the UK's capacity to recover from the coronavirus pandemic. The report drew together quantitative evidence between December 2019 and October 2020 to show how levels of political trust, community belonging, and division had progressed over that period of time. It provided insight into the strains the pandemic was placing on societal bonds and suggested implications for future policy and enquiry.

In the next sections we briefly note key findings of the earlier report on trust and on perceived unity and division, and then present new substantive evidence from two sources that examined political trust and social division covering from December 2020 to March 2021. We conclude by consider how these findings sit in comparison with earlier data, and whether there are further implications for policy.

The Present Report

Our previous report tracked a form of political trust consistently measured across different social surveys, namely trust in government. It also tracked trust in the Government's effort to handle the coronavirus. The report also located measures that comparably assessed levels UK unity vs. division, and local unity vs. division. The new evidence in this report involves the same measures and therefore can be viewed as a continuation of the previous evidence.

Methodology

Data for the period December 4th 2020 to February 2nd 2021 are from the Beyond Us & Them project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and assessed trust and unity across 4 Metropolitan Authorities (Greater London Authority, Manchester Metropolitan Authority, West Midlands Combined Authority, West of England Combined Authority), as well as six smaller Local Authorities and the county of Kent and in Wales and Scotland two weeks before ($n = 4768$) and 5 weeks after ($n = 3235$) December 19th 2020. Although these different subsamples cannot be assumed to be constituted as a nationally representative sample across Great Britain, we adjusted for demographic variables in the analyses that follow to ensure broad comparability. Sample sizes and demographics are provided in Appendix 1.

During February 2021, the British Academy was asked by government advisors whether it was likely that the trends observed during 2020 might have changed in the light of the roll out of vaccines and prospects of a permanent release from lockdown. This was addressed by commissioning a further survey that focussed on trust and unity with a GB representative sample of just over 1000 respondents, conducted by the Centre for the Study of Group Processes on March 5th 2021. Sample details and demographics are provided in Appendix 1.

To maintain consistency with earlier surveys, the following questions were used to assess attitudes at national and local levels.

General Political Trust

National: Two items were used with 5-point response scales from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. We derived a mean score from these and cut offs of below 2.5 for distrust and above 3.5 for trust (remaining respondents classified as neutral).

> i) "Politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community" (reverse scored);
>
> ii) "Most members of the UK Parliament are honest."

Local: A single item was used with a 5-point response scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Those scoring below 3 were classified as distrusting, those scoring above 3 as trusting, those scoring 3 as neutral.

> "I trust my local member of parliament to represent the interests of all communities across the constituency."

Trust in Handling the Pandemic

National: A 5-point response scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree was used for the question.

> "I believe the UK Government is handling the causes and consequences of the pandemic competently."

Local: A 5-point response scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree was used for the question.

> "I believe my local council (i.e., town or city or district) is handling the causes and consequences of the pandemic competently."

Perceived Unity and Division

National: A 5-point response scale from Becoming much more divided to Becoming much more united, was used for the question.

> "To what extent do you think the UK as a whole is becoming more united or divided?"

Local: A 5-point response scale from Becoming much more divided to Becoming much more united, was used for the question.

> "To what extent do you think people in your local area are becoming more united or divided?"

General Political Trust and COVID-19 Related Political Trust

General Political Trust

Figure 1, showing data from December 2019 to October 2020, reveals that general political trust was low immediately following the 2019 General Election, with only 20% of respondents trusting the Government, and a clear majority (60%) indicating distrust in the government. After an uplift in general political trust, and downturn in distrust during the first lockdown in 2020, there was a reversion to pre-pandemic levels by October 2020, with only 23% of respondents indicating they trusted the government in September.

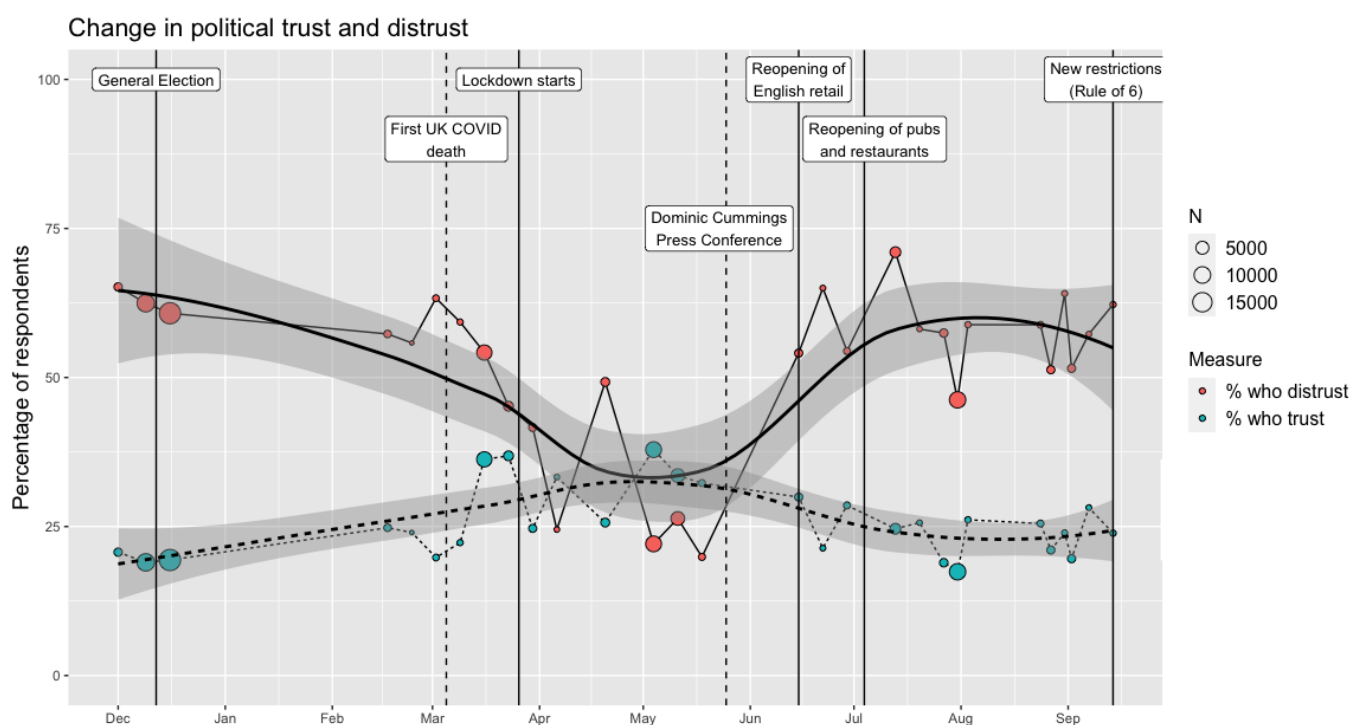**Figure 1.** *Change in political trust and distrust from December 2019 to October 2020*

Figure 2 below shows the levels of both general political trust and distrust (here labelled 'national' trust) and local trust and distrust (trust in local MP) at the 3 new time points. It shows that general distrust (national level) in the UK government reduced slightly after December 19th but then reverted to high levels again at 61% by March. Levels general trust also declined slightly and stood at 21% in March. In contrast, a higher proportion of people felt neutral and the balance of trust (33.4%), distrust (39.8%) and neutrality (26.4%) about their local MP was more even and fairly stable.

Figure 2. *Percentage expressing political trust and distrust at national and local levels from December 2020 to March 2021*
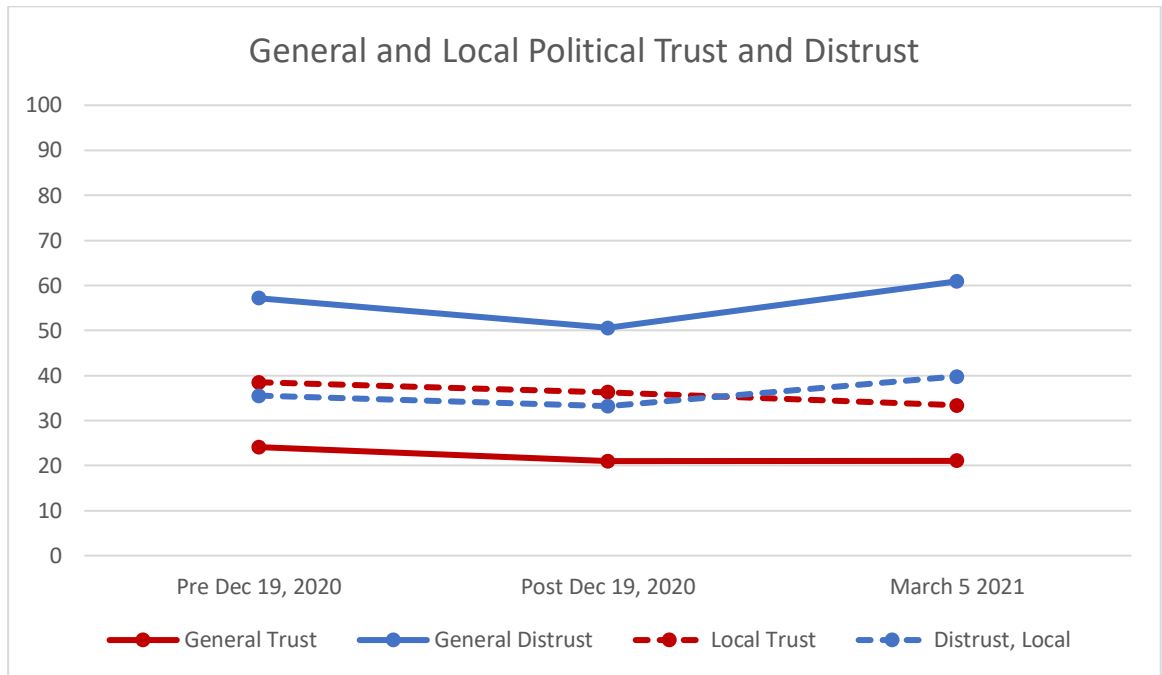
COVID-19 Related Trust

The more specific measures of COVID-19 related trust focus on the perceived competence of the UK Government and Local Government handling of the pandemic. Figure 3 shows that across most of 2020 a majority regarded the UK government's response to be generally incompetent rather than competent.

Figure 3. *Change in COVID-19 related trust and distrust from March 2020 to October 2020*
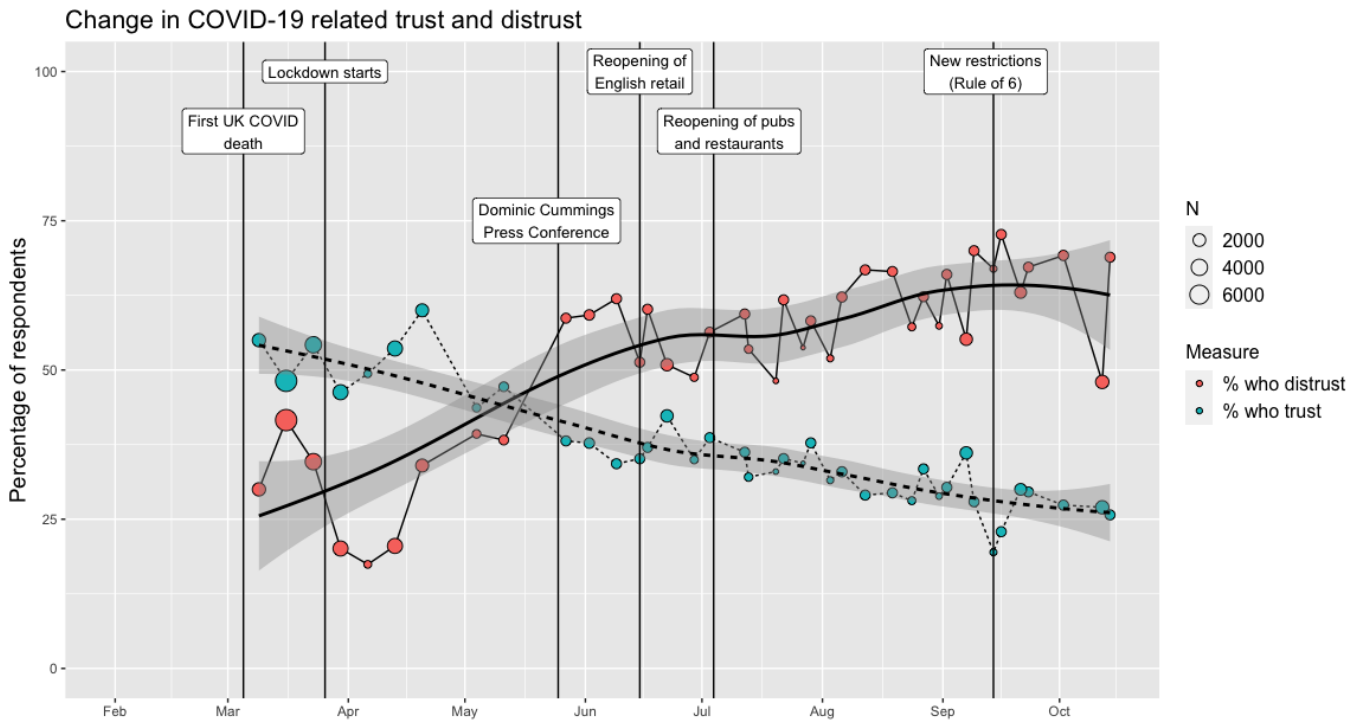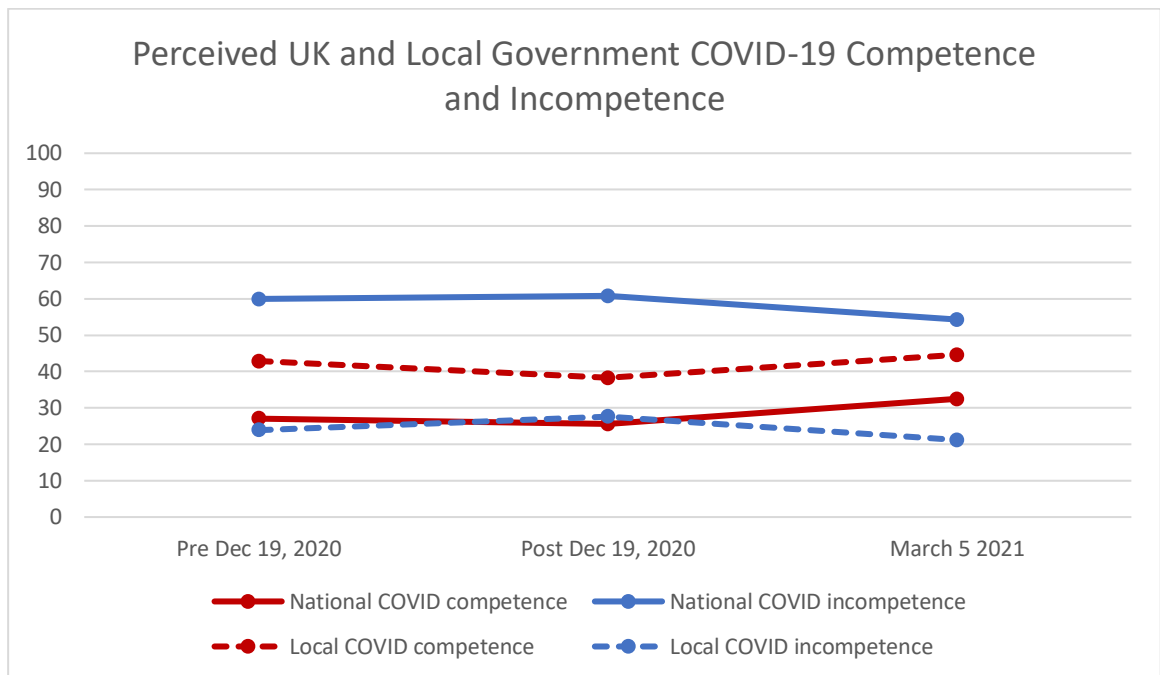

Figure 4 shows that subsequent to October 2020, shifts in perceived competence and incompetence follow the same pattern at UK and Local levels but their average levels are very different indeed. Distrust in the UK Government's handling which had stood at 68% in September 2020 had improved somewhat to be at 59.9% at the start of December 2020, and improved further to 54.3% by March 2021. Levels of trust in UK Government competence improved slightly 25% in October to 27.1% at the start of December and then 32.5% in March.

The new data on perceived trust and distrust in Local Authorities provides a strong contrast. Distrust in Local Authorities fell slightly from 23.9% to 21.2% and trust remained similarly steady, changing only from 42.8% to 44.6% between early December 2020 and March 2021. Therefore, despite the appreciable changes in the direct threats posed by the coronavirus, public confidence in the authorities that deal with the pandemic remains substantially lower when they consider the competence of the UK government relative to the competence of local government.

Sense of Unity and Division

Measures of UK division concern the extent to which respondents feel that the UK is becoming more divided or more united over time. Figure 5 shows that there had been changes in perceptions of unity and division across the year. By September only 15% of respondents perceived growing national unity whereas 66% perceived growing national divisions, as compared with only 19% perceiving growing division at the local level.

Figure 5. *Change in feelings of division and unity among the UK (in blue) and local communities (in yellow) from December 2019 to October 2020*


Change in feelings of division and unity among the UK and local communities
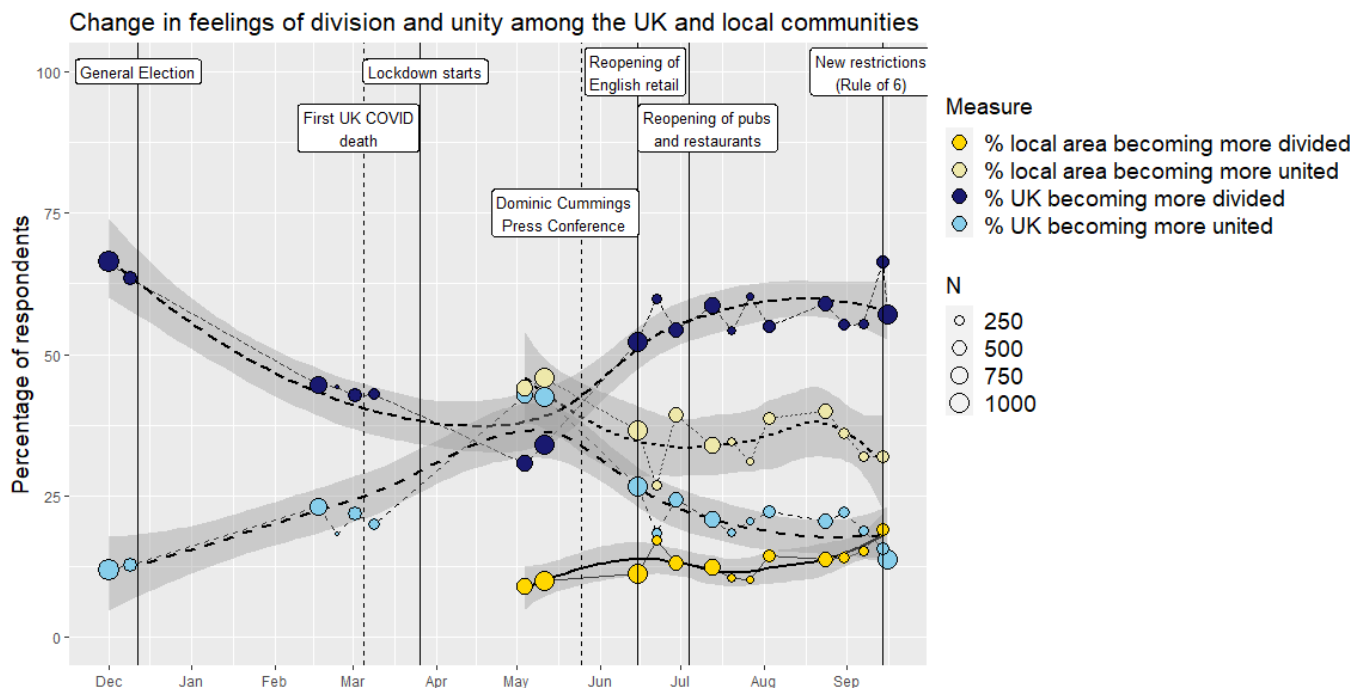
        As shown in Figure 6, between December 2020 and March 2021 this pattern fluctuated and differed at national and local levels. The percentage who perceived growing national division decreased slightly to 59.9% at the start of December 2020, but showed a sharp increase to 77.7% following the Budget in March 2021. Those perceiving growing national unity dropped from 20.2% at the start of December to only 10% in March. Perceptions of local division remained stable, however, changing only from 26.3% to 25.6% between December and March. Perceptions of growing local unity declined from 29.6% to 22.6% but perhaps a key point is that whereas the majority (51.8%) continued to perceive no changes at the local level a much smaller minority (12.3%) perceived stability at the national level.

Figure 6. *Percentage perceiving increased division and unity of UK and of local communities from December 2020 to March 2021*
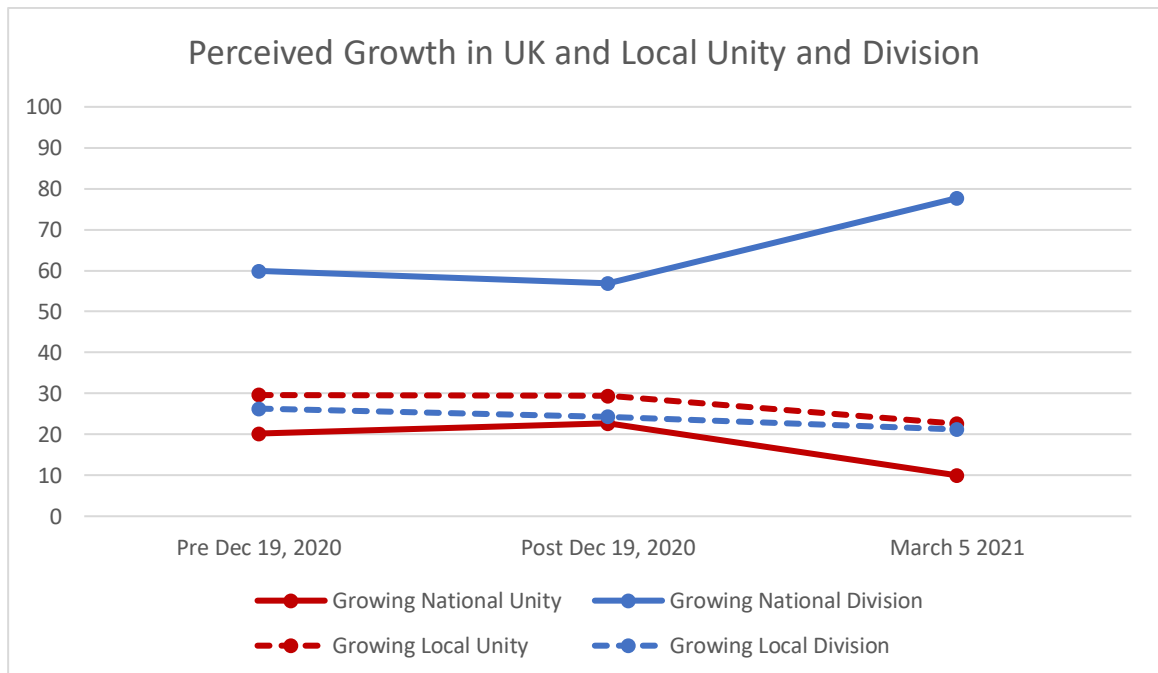
Conclusion and Implications

Overall, the trends in trust and cohesion between December 2020 and March 2021 observed in this report are consistent both with those that we anticipated from a wider body of theory and research (see our earlier report), and with the trends and differences that were observed up until the end of October 2020. The immediate and steep incline in trust and cohesion that followed the first lockdown in 2020 gradually eroded and reverted towards pre-crisis levels that were already far from optimal because they were at the culmination of an extremely rancorous period in the UK's political and economic history, namely a decade of austerity followed by Brexit.

What we observe in the present evidence is that although some trust and confidence in national government's competence in dealing with the pandemic has been restored, there is still a large gulf between trust in national and trust in local government. Moreover, there appears to be a clear deterioration in perceptions of national unity perhaps to an unprecedented level. Perhaps this reflects people's concerns that the local elections will see a strengthening of tendencies towards devolution and separatism. Perhaps it reflects that people are more acutely

aware than before of growing inequalities and disparities across different groups in society. Whatever the reason, it is noteworthy that it is not a case of overall decay of the social fabric of the UK. Indeed, perceptions of national unity remain relatively constant, suggesting that what we are observing is a turn not just away from national structures but perhaps a retrenchment at the local level.

In our earlier report we looked ahead towards some of the imminent challenges such as distribution of vaccination, and dealing with employment, housing, health and education. We pointed to the inevitable need for government and local authorities to communicate regularly with the population in order to manage these areas effectively. We also pointed out that effective communication depends on whether those receiving the messages have sufficient trust in relevant systems of governance and feel well connected to local agents with whom they are most likely to interact and turn to for support and guidance. Our conclusion remains the same and is perhaps reinforced by the new data presented in the present report. Without reiterating all of the underlying reasoning we therefore amplify the following key policy implications.

- Trust and cohesion are vital elements of a well-functioning society. The pandemic's deepening of fractures across different parts of society mean that it is crucial to address these directly and soon to prevent avoidable harms other than direct vulnerability to COVID-19;
- Mitigation strategies in response to coronavirus, and other crises, may be more effective when national strategy can effectively include and embrace the strength of cohesion that is achievable at more local levels;
- Efforts to build trust and cohesion that focus and capitalise on local structures as much as national ones are likely to provide the greatest resilience and capacity to emerge strongly from the challenges of the pandemic.

The local and national trends in trust and cohesion continue to illustrate that change is possible to achieve and that good use can be made of what we know. They point to the opportunities for policy to address and develop strategies to build social cohesion at multiple levels, from national to hyperlocal, in our efforts to make positive advances in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. *Sample Characteristics*

	Sample 1 (overall)		Sample 1 – first timeframe		Sample 1 – second timeframe		Sample 2 (overall)	
	Dec 2020 – Feb 2021		Dec 4th-18th 2020		Dec 19th – Feb 2nd 2020		March 5th 2021	
Demographic categories	Frequ.	%	Frequ.	%	Frequ.	%	Frequ.	%
Gender								
Male	3594	44.9	2123	44.5	1471	45.5	520	48.8
Female	4361	54.4	2609	54.7	1752	54.2	542	50.8
Undisclosed	48	0.6	36	0.8	12	0.4	4	0.4
Age								
18-24	525	6.6	315	6.6	210	6.5	74	6.9
25-34	1268	15.8	838	17.6	430	13.3	230	21.6
35-44	1461	18.3	841	17.6	620	19.2	189	17.7
45-54	1494	18.7	813	17.1	681	21.1	177	16.6
55-64	1590	19.9	925	19.4	665	20.6	248	23.3
65-74	1292	16.1	798	16.7	494	15.3	128	12.0
75+	372	4.6	237	5.0	135	4.2	20	1.9
Undisclosed	1	0.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Ethnicity								
White / White British	6660	83.2	3995	83.8	2665	82.4	906	85.0
Asian / Asian British	528	2.9	253	5.3	275	8.5	82	7.7
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	259	3.2	109	2.3	150	4.6	38	3.6
Mixed / Multiple ethnicity	145	1.8	76	1.6	69	2.1	20	1.9
Other ethnicity	67	0.8	37	0.8	30	0.9	15	1.4
Undisclosed	344	4.3	298	6.3	46	1.4	5	0.5
Political orientation								
Left-wing	3210	40.1	2047	42.9	1163	36.0	483	45.3
Centre	2655	33.2	1508	31.6	1147	35.5	312	29.3
Right-wing	2121	26.5	1202	25.2	919	28.4	271	25.4
Undisclosed	17	0.2	11	0.2	6	0.2		
Subjective socio-economic status								
Mean (*SD*)	4.43 (1.30)		4.43 (1.28)		4.44 (1.33)		4.38 (1.18)	
Total	8003	100	4768	100	3235	100	1066	100