

# What do 'Comfortable Leavers' want from Brexit?

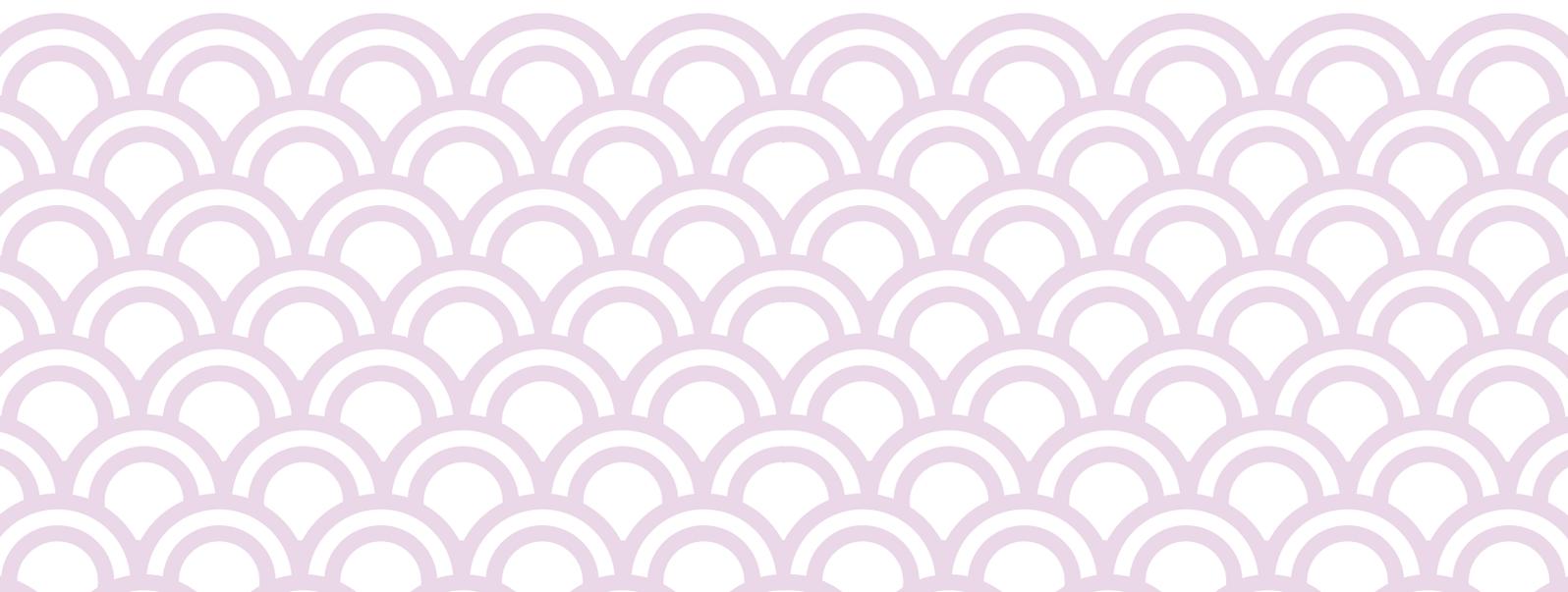
Ceri Davies, Helen McCarthy, Joshua Vey, Amelia Benson

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# Foreword

## Daniel Wincott

Research Director UK in a Changing Europe, Director Governance after Brexit Research Programme

There were two branches to the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum, each led by an ebullient politician. Both men – Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage – overflow with self-confidence; each conveys a spirit of bonhomie that embodies his privileged background more than disguising it. Yet the image of the typical Leave voter is quite different. Since the referendum a huge amount of attention has been focused on so-called ‘left behind’ people and places. The UK’s collective choice to leave the European Union often appears as ‘the revenge of the places that don’t matter’. Although low-income voters formed a key element of the pro-Leave referendum majority, even if few are as affluent as Johnson or Farage, many pro-Brexit voters are at least comfortably off. Excellent social science research has interrogated ‘the left behind’ and ‘globalisation’s losers’. Arguably, though, their comfortable counterparts have been neglected, allowing misleading mythology about the social bases of support for Brexit to grow up.

This report seeks to counterbalance that conventional story. It considers the attitudes and aspirations of these Comfortable Leavers. Commissioned by the [UK in a Changing Europe](#), NatCen conducted 8 deliberative workshops – six in different parts of England and one each in Scotland and Wales. Not, in itself a representative study, deliberative research of this kind adds richness and texture to our understanding of politics and society. Equally, this qualitative project was designed against the backdrop of earlier [NatCen survey-based research](#), which had identified a key group of ‘affluent Eurosceptics’.

The workshops provoked rich and wide-ranging discussions, among people who generally enjoy a good quality of life, but worry about crime and, often, about immigration. Some are also concerned that ‘British people’ are no longer willing to take on some jobs, so key sectors might suffer if migrants stop coming. Typically proud of their country, many have a sense that things were better before the UK joined the EU – and want to get back to that world. Most anticipate more investment in public services – the police and military alongside the NHS and social care. The road ahead could well be bumpy, but there was confidence in the pluck and resilience of ordinary people. A certain sense of nostalgia came through – though lots of things might have to change, the aim is to get back to a more authentic collective way-of-life.

Debate around Brexit and UK governance too often collapses into clichés – especially by treating places as homogeneous – populated by a single type of person. For example, debate about the ‘Red Wall’ that Boris Johnson’s Conservatives demolished in 2019 falls easily into ‘left behind’- ‘it’s grim up north’- type narratives, replete with assumptions about Labour winning back its ‘natural’ northern constituency. James Kanagasooriam’s original ‘Red Wall’ was that socio-demographically and economically [these constituencies seats look Conservative](#) seems to have been too easily forgotten. Danny Dorling points to [52%](#) those who voted for Brexit living in the south of England – but many Leavers in the north also enjoy comfortable lifestyles. Jane Green and Raluca Pahontu have [shown](#) that wealth increased the appetite of voters to choose change in 2016, since it insulated them from risk. Though not all our Comfortable Leavers are wealthy, these workshops and this report add to our understanding of the values, attitudes and aspirations of better-off leave voters. Alongside this wide-ranging report from NatCen, a UK in a Changing Europe [briefing](#) offers a complementary short analysis of this research.

The 2019 general election provided an opportunity to fulfil a long-standing aspiration for a project of this kind. It was originally designed as a face-to-face project in a series of particular neighbourhoods (inspired by the West Kent Golf Club – the place, legend has it, that Nigel Farage got his first break that led to a job in the City). But the Covid pandemic intervened. Fortunately, through the project ‘[How does post-Brexit Britain wish to exercise its Sovereignty](#)’ on the [Governance after Brexit](#) programme,

NatCen had already demonstrated that they were able to deliver effective deliberative workshops on-line. Doing so did involve a switch from working in particular neighbourhoods to a regional focus – although a strong sense of place nevertheless shone through many of the workshops. I am very grateful to Ceri Davies who led the project and the NatCen team who delivered for their flexibility and skill in challenging circumstances. And to the participants, from whom I learnt a great deal.

# Introduction

The vote in favour of leaving the EU has been widely interpreted as a protest vote by those who are said to be ‘left behind’ – that is, older people with relatively few, if any, educational qualifications living in economically less dynamic parts of the UK (Clarke et al., 2017; Goodwin and Heath, 2016). However, this group represents only part of the overall Leave vote.<sup>1</sup>

Less attention has been paid to more affluent Leave voters living in areas with relatively high levels of wealth. This is a group that we call ‘Comfortable Leavers’. They broadly share the same characteristics as the ‘affluent Eurosceptics’ identified by [NatCen](#): mainly higher income, Conservative voters with noticeably anti-welfare views. This group make up 23% of the population, 75% of whom voted Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum. Whilst previous research by the UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE) and others has shown that the idea of ‘left behind’ people and places has taken hold in public discourse; not enough work has yet been done to tease out and explain income-related differences in the Leave vote.

This report shares the findings from a study designed to explore what matters to Comfortable Leavers about the UK leaving the EU, as well as their priorities for their communities, and the UK more widely. It provides a rounded and in-depth understanding of the views of these voters, allowing us to draw more reliable conclusions about the similarities and differences between different income groups and places across Britain.

The findings were generated from eight deliberative workshops involving 130 people who voted both Leave (73) and Remain (55), as well as two people who told us they did not vote.

This project was initially conceived before the introduction of social distancing measures by the UK government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. This required us to move the workshops online from the in-person groups initially planned. These took place using Zoom in June and July 2020.

## Research Aims

The aim of this research was to explore the views and priorities of higher-income Leave voters for Britain after Brexit. It had the following objectives:

- To identify what matters to this group about the UK leaving the EU, with particular reference to socio-cultural dimensions
- To understand what changes this group anticipated to their communities and the UK as a whole as the UK left the EU
- To learn what priorities or hopes people had for these anticipated changes
- To consider whether such views on the future were distinct to Leave voters

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst there is no simple representation of the demographics of the Leave vote, work by [Swales \(2016\)](#) provides an analysis of segments of the population who voted strongly one way or another. Of those that map to characteristics of those said to be ‘left behind’, those ‘economically deprived anti-immigration’ make up 12% of the population, of which 95% voted Leave. Another relevant group – older working class make up 16% of the population, of which 73% voted Leave.

We wanted to explore these objectives in relation to four main subjects:

**SOCIETY** who lives here and how do we live?

**IDENTITY** what values, ideas or beliefs shape us?

**ECONOMY & SERVICES** producing and trading goods, jobs and the labour market

**GOVERNANCE** who makes decisions on the things that shape our lives and how?

## Methodology

Our original plan was to hold in-person deliberative workshops with Comfortable Leavers in eight locations across the country. These were: the East of England, London and the South East, the North East, the South West, Scotland, Wales, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Deliberative workshops are a form of facilitated group discussion that provide participants with the opportunity to consider issues in depth, challenge each other's opinions and develop their views to reach an informed position. This approach was selected to allow researchers to understand the underlying drivers that inform people's positions and perspectives.

In order to distinguish the views of Leave voters, we included a proportion of Remain voters in the workshops to understand the beliefs and priorities of each group, and how they are distinct from one another.

Each workshop was designed to have up to 16 participants, with a greater proportion of Leave (10) to Remain (6) voters in each. Where this was not possible, a minimum 50:50 split was achieved. After satisfying inclusion criteria on income - participants were included if their income was above the median for their statistical region - quotas were used to obtain a diverse sample of ages, levels of educational achievement, employment situation and property ownership (see Appendix A).

Workshops were 2.5 hours long and used a mixture of plenary and small group discussions. We split the group into two smaller, separate discussions depending on whether someone voted Leave or Remain.

These groups were initially scheduled to begin in April 2020. However, before the fieldwork started, social distancing measures were introduced. The research team decided to move delivery online using video conferencing software and fieldwork began in June 2020. Further detail of our approach can be found in Appendix B.

## Format of this Report

This report is designed predominantly to report the views and perspectives of participants who voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum. It is intended to show whether place is significant in shaping people's views, and to investigate the degree to which Leave views might be distinct (or indeed similar) to Remain perspectives.

Although we deliberately avoid giving numerical values, the data included helps us to identify trends in the meanings and explanations behind people's attitudes, and verbatim quotes are selected to illustrate salient points.

We begin this report by offering a snapshot of each workshop and then identifying the issues of importance across places. Chapters 3 and 4 then explore these issues in greater detail, drawing out people's priorities for post-Brexit Britain, as well as the changes they anticipate that leaving the EU will bring. The order in which these views were discussed with respect to our four subjects of interest changes between chapters, reflecting their prominence in discussions. We then conclude by summarising the findings on what our group of 'Comfortable Leavers' want from Brexit.

# What mattered to Comfortable Leavers about leaving the EU?

This chapter introduces the issues Leave voters identified as most important about exiting the EU. Their concerns were mostly related to the UK level and were articulated in the abstract rather than evidenced through people's everyday lived experiences or in ways specific to their local areas. We focus here on reporting the views of Leave discussion groups to give an overall sense of their points and considerations.

The chapter begins with a short overview of each workshop to summarise the general points covered in each location. Although these show some variation in emphasis across geography, we also draw out cross-cutting themes as they relate to the domains of society, governance, identity and the economy we had invited them to discuss. The final section of the chapter considers what might have influenced the views expressed.

## Workshop Overviews

The sections overleaf illustrate the general points covered in each location and highlight area-specific characteristics that people identified to the places they lived. They are presented alphabetically.

## EAST OF ENGLAND

A total of 14 people took part in the East of England workshop: seven who voted to leave the EU, and seven who voted to remain.

Those who voted Leave reported that they lived predominantly in an agricultural and rural environment, in a mix of country towns and villages. Only one participant lived in a city. Participants enjoyed living in their area, and commented on the beautiful countryside and woodland, which was particularly valuable to them during the Covid-19 lockdown. Traditional industry was part of the local economy, particularly grain farming. However, there were some concerns that the areas they lived in were part of the “commuter belt”, with people purchasing homes in their towns and villages to commute to London, Cambridge, Luton and Bedford.

Participants felt they lived in diverse communities, with a mix of young people, families and older people. The participant living in a local city reported that it was multicultural, which was seen as a positive change over the years. Those in villages and towns were concerned about the lack of local amenities, such as a good bus service, although others reported that they had access to local pubs, garages and schools.

Leavers in the East of England were concerned about immigration policy. They felt strongly that immigrants should contribute economically to the UK, with hard-working and English-speaking migrants welcomed. This contrasted with their anxieties about the lack of integration of non-English speaking migrants, with migrant women seen as dependent on their husbands for support. There were also concerns about social segregation in cities as a result. A lack of social integration between UK residents and migrants was seen as a threat to British culture. The emphasis on welcoming those who could work was related to the worries about funding for other more deserving issues. Respondents contrasted funding for children in social care with benefits paid to asylum seekers, suggesting that a decline in immigration would lead to an increase in funding for causes they supported.

However, the group recognised some challenges involved in reducing the number of immigrants within the UK. There were questions about whether British workers would take on low-paid work, such as fruit picking or care work, which had often been done by European immigrants. The “bad attitude” of many UK workers was seen as a barrier to filling job vacancies in these sectors.

The group also touched on the importance of British identity. Participants suggested that the Church of England was at the heart of British identity. The decline in church attendance was associated with a decline in moral standards, and the emergence of a multi-religious society was seen as undermining British identity. Particular concerns were raised about the increase in the British Muslim population.

Finally, governance issues were less important to this group than other factors, such as immigration policy and integration. However, they were hopeful that the UK would be able to act more nimbly when removed from the perceived bureaucracy of the EU. The major expected benefits from this included being able to control the UK’s borders and promote fairness for British workers.

## LONDON AND THE SOUTH EAST

A total of 16 people took part in the London and South East workshop: 11 who voted to leave the EU, and five who voted to remain.

Participants all lived in the London fringe – either in outer London boroughs or areas that bordered London. Leave-voting respondents living in London felt that their areas differed significantly from other parts of the South East. London was described as multicultural and multiracial. London was seen to have changed for the worse over time, as a result of demographic changes such as the elderly population dying and immigrants moving to the city.

Among participants in the South East, a few common themes emerged. In contrast to London, participants identified community spirit as one of the positives about their locations, especially in small villages. In more affluent and rural towns, participants reported good private schools and a lack of traffic, both of which were welcomed. However, for others in the South East, their areas were described as built-up, with new developments being added on the edge of the greenbelt. This was especially the case for commuter towns. Participants were concerned about the lack of accompanying infrastructure, such as shops or medical facilities, and these concerns were also mentioned by those living in London. Traffic was particularly problematic.

Finally, safety was raised by participants, both in London and in the South East. Participants reported increasing levels of knife and gun crime in their local areas. The closure of local police stations was viewed negatively as a result.

Leave voters in London and the South East supported changes to the immigration system, focusing on skilled migrants who could help address the economic needs of the UK. There were preferences for migrants from certain countries, such as China, who were seen as well-established within the UK, while immigration from other (non-disclosed) countries was seen as threatening to British identity due to extremist views. Migrants were welcomed if they spoke English, adapted to British culture, and worked. This group was concerned that English was becoming a second language in their local areas due to high levels of immigration. Like other groups, Leave voters in this area expected that reducing the number of immigrants would lead to greater financial support for other issues, such as homelessness, schools and hospitals. However, the loss of current European immigrants after EU exit was viewed as a negative consequence of the referendum, which would have an economic impact on several sectors such as health and social care.

For this group, core components of British identity included freedom of speech, friendliness, and a respect for British law. Referencing recent protests in Bristol that led to the removal of a statue, the group felt that monuments should be protected as part of freedom of speech, along with respect for the Union Jack. There were concerns that Britain had become “too soft” on criminals and that sentencing was too lenient. While there was agreement that a multicultural society was enriching for citizens, they thought British culture should be prioritised and adopted by migrants. People living in the UK should have a shared pride in the UK’s national identity, regardless of their background or origin.

The group felt that leaving the EU would lead to greater accountability in political decision-making in the UK, with central government required to take full responsibility for all decisions made.

## NORTH EAST

A total of 10 people took part in the North East workshop: two who voted to leave the EU, six who voted to remain and two who didn't vote. A further four Leave voters living in the North East were interviewed after the workshop.

Respondents who voted Leave in the North East had a strong sense of pride in their local area. Geographically, many respondents reported that they lived in quiet rural areas, which were short drives from beaches, the North Yorkshire Moors, Newcastle airport and local shopping towns. Participants felt this was the best of both worlds, allowing them to access the countryside and rural life while also remaining well-connected.

There was a strong sense of community. There were comparisons made between the North East and the South, with people in the South (particularly London) seen as unfriendly compared to their northern counterparts. People felt the North East was close-knit and that "banter" was a key part of their identity. However, while participants felt that it was positive that Indian and Sikh communities thrived in the area, they felt that they were not integrated with the local area, with little opportunity for communities to come together. Finally, there were negative aspects to community life. Participants reported high unemployment and teenage pregnancy rates in their area.

Participants who voted Leave reported concerns about crime, often on a national scale, with news media identified as a key factor in their fears. Participants were also concerned about the lack of integration within their areas, with some feeling unsafe when travelling in certain areas where many migrants live. There were distinctions made between immigrants who contributed positively to the economy and those who were viewed negatively for not working. Australia was given as an example of a country with positive immigration policies, including the ability to deport immigrants who had committed crimes. However, members of the group were concerned that European migrants would no longer feel welcome after the referendum, with participants emphasising that their referendum vote did not indicate a personal dislike for Europeans.

British identity was also a core concern for this group, seen to be based on parliamentary democracy, the respect for the rule of law, and a pride in helping others and welcoming refugees. However, for some, the British tradition of welcoming refugees, such as Jewish Europeans in the 1930s, had been undermined by the rise in British-born terrorists from ethnic minorities. Devolution was also seen to undermine traditional British identity, with Northern Ireland seen as a "half-way house" between Ireland (and the EU) and Britain. Participants felt that the UK as a nation had become too "soft", saying that political correctness and concerns with racism had gone "too far".

The return of British manufacturing was seen as a priority for this group. Pride in Britain's industrial heritage was one reason given for prioritising this after EU exit, in addition to supporting the North East's economy, which was seen to have suffered more from production being outsourced overseas. The redevelopment of local industry was key, with unnecessary EU regulations seen as a barrier to success. While the group acknowledged the need for many European workers, it was felt that a reduction in the number of immigrants would free up jobs for UK workers.

Finally, it was felt that the UK had a different political outlook to other European countries, with Britain preferring a right-of-centre government in comparison to social democratic models in Europe. This difference was seen as one important reason for the UK to have greater control and accountability in its political systems.

## SCOTLAND

A total of 21 people took part in the Scotland workshop: 14 who voted to leave the EU, and seven who voted to remain.

Leave-voters in Scotland were dispersed across different areas, with participants living in cities and towns, including Edinburgh and Aberdeen, smaller towns, and rural villages in the Highlands. The geographical diversity of the group meant that there were few commonalities in location, although many spoke of strong community ties. Those living in the countryside reported many positives, including living in beautiful rural areas, with access to local landmarks such as beaches, and being on the tourist whisky trail. Others focused on the economies of their local areas, which included farming, fishing, oil and gas, and military bases. For those in cities and towns, advantages included good infrastructure, including good transport links, and shopping and retail opportunities.

In comparison to Leave voters in other regions, those in Scotland did not identify immigration or identity as a key facet of their decision to vote to leave the EU. Several participants felt that they had never lost their Scottish identity, so leaving the EU would not affect how they identified. Instead, trade and the economy were key priorities. Participants wanted to have seamless trade with EU countries, although they said that, should tariffs be introduced, this could promote domestic production and sales. Leaving the EU was seen to ensure a greater ability to make deals with the rest of the world, with priority countries including the US and Canada.

The redevelopment of industry was also a priority. The loss of coal and steel industries was seen as significant for Scotland, with few large industrial centres now providing employment. Vocational training, such as in building or bricklaying, was seen as important to develop the skills of young people.

Politically, the group wanted the Scottish government to have more power after the UK left the EU. Scottish people were seen to be better served by a Scottish government, and it was important for the devolved nations to obtain more power in an independent UK. Participants distinguished between domestic and foreign policy, with domestic policy seen as managed best at Holyrood, while foreign policy for the UK should be managed by Westminster. This was seen as fairer for society.

The group also felt that a greater role was required for the devolved nations in negotiations with the EU, with examples given of Nicola Sturgeon being excluded from talks. However, the group did not feel that there was a case for an independent Scotland re-joining the EU, with one participant commenting that Scotland had more power as one of four countries in the UK, compared to being one of 27 countries in the EU. The group prioritised a greater role for Scotland post-EU exit within the existing UK political structures.

## SOUTH WEST

A total of 19 people took part in the South West workshop: 11 who voted to leave the EU, and eight who voted to remain.

Participants in the South West mainly lived in the countryside or in smaller towns. They described beautiful countryside and coastline, and characterised their areas as peaceful, picturesque and idyllic. Participants made reference to the historical monuments in their local area, including the city of Bath, and noted the importance of tourism for the local economy.

Leave voters in the South West region supported a change to immigration. Like voters in the West Midlands, this group believed that too many people sought asylum in the UK and felt that many were falsely travelling to the UK to receive benefits. There were also concerns about a lack of integration of immigrants, who were seen to be creating their own “little country”. Instead, the group felt that immigrants should assimilate through learning English and understanding British culture and beliefs.

The economy was another priority for members of this group. Participants felt that current patterns of immigration prevented young people from accessing skilled trades, such as building or HGV driving, with apprenticeships being reduced. The group suggested that priority should be given to British people to work in the NHS, with bursaries available to nursing students. This would, they argued, reduce the UK’s reliance on immigration for staffing.

Governance was also a concern, with some participants in the group suggesting that the UK would be able to “tighten” borders after leaving the EU. This would discourage people from seeking asylum in the UK and reduce the number of immigrants travelling for benefits. Others felt that the UK should welcome many types of immigrant, including asylum seekers and economic migrants, but widen its offer to take in migrants from around the world. Examples were given of Hong Kong citizens and the offer from the UK government to create a path to UK citizenship. This was seen as part of the UK’s role in supporting human rights around the world.

Finally, there was support for more decision-making at the local or regional level. The multinational government of the EU was seen to be unresponsive to local needs, with the centre of EU bureaucracy “divorced” from member countries. Returning accountability to the UK was a further priority for this group.

## WALES

A total of ten people took part in the Wales workshop: three who voted to leave the EU, and seven who voted to remain. A further four Leave voters were interviewed after the workshop.

Those who voted Leave in Wales reported concerns about the lack of easy communications and transport links in their areas. They felt that it was difficult to reach certain parts of Wales, such as the Heads of the Valleys in South Wales, which in turn made it harder for businesses to be established outside of larger cities. Several participants reported that there were few major employers in rural areas, with coal mines closed and a reduction in the number of people employed at steelworks, although technology companies were growing. Within the cities, more opportunities were reported. Cardiff and the surrounding area was identified as a central hub for employment, with large employers in the region including British Airways, Aston Martin and Cardiff Airport. In addition, tourism was important, as were local council roles and retail jobs.

Participants in rural locations were proud of their local area and felt it had natural beauty. Strong community links were reported, particularly in the villages, where respondents reported attending clubs including pre-school groups, social groups for older people, language classes, Weight Watchers and University of Third Age. This was seen as more unusual in cities, where community ties were less present.

Leave voters in Wales reported concerns about the integration of immigrants, with the group reporting that, in certain areas of Welsh cities, the majority of the population were Muslim or Polish immigrants. While several participants gave examples of previous generations of immigrants successfully integrating into mining towns in the past, some felt that it was now intimidating for white Welsh people to visit certain areas, particularly in cities. There were concerns about changes to Welsh identity and culture through immigration, which could lead to a “domino” effect across the UK, with a multiracial society replacing British identities.

In contrast to those in the Scottish group (see above), there were fewer concerns about increasing Wales’ political power following EU exit. The group was supportive of the view that the four UK nations should work more closely together, with a preference for UK-wide rather than devolved policy making, although equity across the regions and nations was important – in particular for ensuring that Wales was as important as London in decision-making. A closer relationship between Wales and England was welcomed, with Welsh nationalism rejected by the group. Differences in Covid-19 lockdown policies between the two countries were given as examples of where the UK should act as one entity, rather than four countries. The Welsh Parliament was unpopular with some. Several participants reported that a devolved assembly meant that people felt closer to the Welsh government than the UK government, although the Welsh government was less powerful.

Participants also felt that there were too many layers of government for Wales. Leaving the EU would mean that the UK would be more politically “nimble”. For the group, this meant trading with the rest of the world and being exempt from EU rules and regulations, although there were hopes that the UK would remain close to Europe, in a similar position to that of Norway or Switzerland.

Financially, a priority for this group was revitalising the Welsh economy through development of infrastructure, funded by central government, and support for town centres. Higher education and tourism were two potential areas of growth for the economy, while the NHS required more funding to rise to the same level of quality as services in England.

## WEST MIDLANDS

A total of 21 people took part in the West Midlands workshop: 14 who voted to leave the EU, and seven who voted to remain.

Participants predominantly lived in Birmingham or in the surrounding countryside, and the majority had been born in the West Midlands region. Those living in Birmingham reported that the city was extremely diverse. There were some concerns about local deprivation and fly tipping. Residents of the city appreciated the large number of parks and green spaces and felt that this was often overlooked when driving in the city.

Other participants reported living in the countryside, with benefits including a slow pace of life and general “peace and quiet”. Participants felt that their areas were good places to bring up children, particularly due to the number of parks. However, for one participant, this was also associated with people having “old-fashioned” views. There were also concerns that the local sense of community, which participants had experienced in their childhoods, had diminished over time. Participants felt that the ‘Clap for Carers’ had brought their communities back together during lockdown.

Leave voters in the West Midlands saw Brexit as an opportunity to improve negative aspects of British life, including more funding for the police and prisons to prevent crime and more funding for youth clubs to provide structure for young people. Changes to immigration were part of this, with concerns in the group about a lack of integration between immigrants and British people. The group had mixed views about asylum seekers: participants suggested that “deserving” asylum seekers, who faced death in their home countries, should continue to stay in the UK, but also argued that some asylum seekers came to the UK solely for the generosity of the benefits system. The government was believed to lack control over immigration, leading to the UK being “taken over” by immigrants.

Changing demographics also had an impact on the group’s concept of British identity. Christianity was seen as a traditional part of British identity, and participants were concerned that other religions were respected more than Christianity, with examples given of multi-faith assemblies held in schools while Nativity plays were said to have been banned. Leaving the EU was viewed as an opportunity to reflect on national identity, which was seen as currently “apathetic” and too politically correct. Yet views on identity varied across the group, with one black participant reporting discomfort with the concept of a British identity due to perceived associations with racism and the National Front.

Like Leave voters in the North East and Scotland, those in the West Midlands wanted to see local industry redevelop after leaving the EU. Participants reported a lack of employment for young people in the local area and wanted British workers to be prioritised. However, there was also a belief that British people were unwilling to take low-paid jobs. For these voters, a change in attitude was essential in stopping people from relying on benefits and taking on low-paid work instead. Yet while the group supported jobs for British workers, there was a recognition that immigrants should be valued especially in sectors such as farm labouring.

Finally, there were mixed views on whether leaving the EU would bring positive changes to laws and regulations. Aspects of EU policy were welcomed – such as limiting carbon emissions across Europe and promoting tolerance and equality – but others were seen as over-bearing, such as defining what constitutes a sausage in law. Concerns about losing workers’ rights were expressed, with the group suggesting that strong trade unions would fill this role after leaving the EU.

## YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER

A total of 19 people took part in the Yorkshire and Humber workshop; 11 who voted to leave the EU, and eight who voted to remain.

Leave voters in Yorkshire and the Humber came from across the region, with participants reporting high satisfaction with their local areas. A number of respondents lived in Leeds, and said that they lived in small communities, with good shops and local high streets. Infrastructure was also important, with green spaces, roads and public transport valued by the group. This area was seen as a good place to bring up children, with friendly neighbours. Participants reported a lack of racial diversity. Those living in smaller towns and villages in Yorkshire also reported strong community ties and enjoyed living in open, green spaces.

A key priority for Leave voters in Yorkshire and the Humber was investing in British workers and giving British people educational and economic opportunities. This was related to concerns about crime, with young people seen at risk of leaving school and entering into criminal activity. The group advocated advertising all roles to UK workers before recruiting overseas workers and suggested that those in the armed forces should also receive priority. However, the group did not identify as anti-immigration, and although they were not in favour of freedom of movement, spoke positively about the work ethic of eastern European workers. Instead, participants thought that the immigration system should be made fairer, giving examples of computer programmers from India and teachers from Australia who currently could not easily work in the UK. Participants felt that immigration to the UK should not be based on one's country of origin, but instead should focus on the skills need of the UK economy. This would combat several issues identified by the group, including overuse of cheap labour from eastern Europe and the 'brain-drain' of skilled professionals from developing countries.

Independent decision-making was also a key priority within this group, with one participant describing EU membership as "barbaric" for determining parts of UK legislation. EU laws were seen as unsuitable for the UK because making a single decision for all 28 member states would mean that legislation could not be tailored to the needs of individual countries. Furthermore, the EU political system was difficult to understand, with a lack of clarity surrounding the Commission, Council and Parliament. In contrast, the UK system was easily understood, and the power of one's vote was more apparent, leading to greater political accountability.

# Important issues

The workshop overviews demonstrate a clear convergence of the views of Leave voters on immigration and governance and how these relate to identity. The discussion in Scotland was an exception to this, with a clearer emphasis on the economy. The following section sets out further detail on these cross-cutting themes before exploring what might be significant in the framing of these perspectives.

## SOCIETY

The question of immigration was frequently brought up by Leave voters, with two main concerns raised. The first was a perceived lack of integration of immigrant communities in the UK. There was a view that integration was in some ways failing in communities, which was illustrated by participants' views that many immigrants do not speak English. There were also concerns about segregation and certain areas of towns becoming unrecognisable.

*"They're such tight communities that they all live together, and they don't find it necessary to actually speak English because they don't involve themselves in the British culture. I think that's why a lot of people are so against immigrants coming into this country."* [Leave, East, female]

In some groups, these discussions were also linked to perceptions about increases in crime and fears of violent extremism. These conversations did not make explicit reference to race or ethnicity. However, immigrant groups that featured in these discussions were mainly ethnic minorities (for instance, Turkish, Somali, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Muslim groups) although Polish immigrants were also sometimes mentioned.

The second concern related to the view that immigrants should – and in some cases were perceived not to – make a contribution to the UK.

*"There's too many people coming in, and those people, there are a lot that don't actually contribute to the economy here."* [Leave, London and South East, male]

There was a strong belief that many immigrants put pressure on public services and a view that people move to the UK to access benefits because the UK has a generous system and is seen as a "soft touch". In a number of groups this was referenced by the idea that the UK's asylum system was being taken advantage of. This discussion was linked with concerns about a lack of integration, as participants largely held the view that people could not contribute if they were not integrated. While participants did distinguish between immigrants that they felt did contribute (for example, Chinese immigrants and some eastern European workers), there was still a sense that the UK had finite resources that were put under pressure from the number of arrivals each year. In these discussions, the UK was often described as a "small island" that was already "bursting at the seams" with people.

## GOVERNANCE

Alongside immigration, governance was the other fundamental concern in voting to leave the EU. The value of having sovereignty, independence and control was what mattered to participants and, once again, the significance of Britain being an island was raised.

*"I just think we are an island and we should be independent."* [Leave, East, female]

Three main reasons were given as to why these issues mattered. Firstly, Leave-voting participants viewed laws that had come from the EU as lacking legitimacy. There was a view that the EU was not democratic, that people in the UK did not get a vote and therefore that the rules were all made by "unelected" people and then "imposed" on the UK against its will. These laws and regulations were seen as "absurd" or "silly".

*"Some of the decisions that are made in Europe that are imposed upon us, that we just say, 'Well, that's ludicrous. Why are we following that law when we think it doesn't actually make sense?'"*

*So, maybe we have some more independence to make rational decisions, rather than just follow something because it was agreed in Brussels or wherever.” [Leave, West Midlands, male]*

An example given was the role of EU courts. This was discussed with particular reference to human rights, where the idea of the UK government being obliged to give prisoners the right to vote was raised. There was a view that decisions made in UK courts should not be able to be overturned in EU courts.

Secondly, participants thought that if the UK made its own laws they would be more appropriate to the needs of the UK. It was felt that the UK would be able to be more flexible and nimble in its law-making, as previously the UK government had had its “hands tied by EU law”. The “one size fits all” approach that the EU was seen to espouse was thought to be inherently problematic, as it was impossible for the same rules to be suitable for so many countries. Participants felt it was important that laws and regulations were responsive to local needs and they felt that decisions taken at a local level would achieve this.

Finally, for Welsh and Scottish Leave groups, there was a view that there should be a fairer distribution of powers across the UK. For the Scottish group this primarily meant more power for the Scottish government, although there was a recognition that some things, such as foreign policy, should be handled at the UK level. For the Welsh group, there were mixed views on the devolved institutions in Wales. While all participants recognised the unequal power distribution between Westminster and Wales, some felt the solution lay in strengthening the devolved powers while others felt that there were too many layers of government in Wales.

## IDENTITY

The question of identity was also clearly important to Leave participants but mostly in relation to matters of immigration or governance, as described above. In groups in England, participants often referred interchangeably to English and British identity, whereas in Wales and Scotland, participants appeared to distinguish between Welsh or Scottish identities and British identity, while also often conflating both.

Among Leave-voting participants in England and Wales there was a view that the UK had been too accommodating of other cultures that had come to the UK through immigration, one result of which was a loss of identity. Key to their understanding of British identity was being open and welcoming, freedom of speech and Christianity - aspects they deemed under threat due to the perceived lack of integration by some immigrant communities.

*“My strong opinion is that all people coming here, they have to be involved in this culture (...) I think most of the British people voted to leave because they want to save British identity, and this is the main purpose of Brexit.” [Leave, London and the South East, male]*

Some participants in England and Wales explicitly linked becoming a more multi-racial and multi-religious society to their feelings of unease and fear that British identities were being changed or lost in some way. As an example, the devoutness of Muslims was contrasted with the decline in value of the Christian faith in British society. Linked to this was a view that society had become too politically correct and thus a core British value – freedom of speech - was under threat. Reflecting her view of the situation in Wales and more widely at the UK level, one participant commented:

*“We’ve become a nation - and I think this is across the UK - of being frightened almost in saying anything without fear of offending somebody” [Leave, Wales, female]*

This in turn meant, as they saw it, that key British traditions, such as the school Nativity play, were under threat. As a result, British identities were slowly being erased.

However, this discussion was nuanced within groups, with a handful of participants challenging the idea that political correctness – as a characteristic constraining British identity - was purely problematic. They made the point that it was right that certain comments that had been acceptable in the past were no longer deemed acceptable. There was also a view that British identity was more complex today and was explicitly multi-racial, with one Welsh participant expressing annoyance with “idiots” who implied that being British was equated with being “Anglo Saxon”. This handful of participants were critical of a sense

of nostalgia in trying to return to past ideas about identity.

*“What are we going to do? Are we going to kick out everybody who doesn’t conform to what was 100 years ago, the English person?”* [Leave, West Midlands, male]

These discussions tended to occur in groups that contained ethnic minority participants – in London and the South East, and the West Midlands – who made reference to their own experiences.

Relatedly, there was broad agreement across groups in England about a desire to reclaim symbols of British and English identity – particularly the flag (both the Union Jack and the St George’s Cross) – and to restore pride in those symbols. Participants lamented that flags were only flown on special occasions and wanted to disassociate them from connections with the far right.

*“We were proud to display the flag. I want that to return. I want people to be reminded how we should be proud of our country and we should look after it.”* [Leave, South West, female]

The other key theme here was associated with people’s concerns about governance. In this view, the UK making its own laws – being “captain of our ship” – was fundamental to restoring pride in British identity. From this perspective, regaining decision-making powers was also connected to having greater autonomy over investment decisions in industry and there was a strong desire to be more self-sufficient in many ways.

*“What it means to be British (...) it’s thinking about doing more in-house.”*  
[Leave, West Midlands, female]

Implicit in these views was a certain degree of nostalgia for a time when Britain was seen to have managed on its own, had been an industrial powerhouse and when there had been more “common sense” in decision-making.

In the Scottish Leave group, identity was discussed less explicitly as an issue of importance, although a sense of shared Scottish identity appeared to be taken for granted by participants. However, there were differences within the group, with some participants identifying only as Scottish while others identified as both Scottish and British. Nevertheless, there was broad agreement on the importance of devolved powers and identity was discussed in relation to questions of governance with the other UK nations, and the role of the Scottish National Party.

## ECONOMY

There were three main areas that mattered most for Leave voters when thinking about the economy: autonomy over trade relationships, prioritisation of British people for jobs and a return of manufacturing. However, although participants acknowledged the importance of the economy, these issues tended not to be considered the most important in making the decision to leave the EU. Instead, the economy was talked about more in the context of participants’ priorities for the future (see Chapter 3) and their expectations about changes to come (see Chapter 4).

Linked to the theme of independence and sovereignty, autonomy over trade relationships was an important issue for Leave voters. The UK being able to conduct its own trade negotiations and not be constrained by EU rules was seen as crucial in order to thrive economically.

*“I think it’s the removal of the restrictions, the restrictions to do trades with other countries.”*  
[Leave, North East, male]

Opportunities for trade were identified with countries such as China, Japan, Brazil, India, the US and Canada. Some participants were wary about a future trade deal with the US and the potential lowering of food standards, but there was an expectation that the UK could and would uphold its own standards in future trade deals.

The second economic concern for Leave voters was the prioritisation of jobs for British people. There was something of a contradiction in terms in how participants framed this discussion. On the one hand, there was a desire to invest in training and education for young British people and to prioritise them for jobs. On the other hand, there were negative views about British people’s perceived lack of work ethic

and a recognition that many immigrants did worthwhile jobs that British people did not want to do.

The third key issue identified was a return of manufacturing and the development of new industries. This matter was particularly highlighted in Wales, the North East, Scotland and the West Midlands. Participants identified several potential strengths in the UK economy, including technology, green energy production, medical research and freeports. At the time of the fieldwork, that the UK was the fifth-largest economy was cited as a reason why it would be successful outside the EU.

*“We’re one of the strongest economies in the world, I believe. Not the strongest by any means, but we’re far, far stronger than our counterparts throughout Europe, in my opinion.”*

[Leave, Wales, male]

Finally, it is worth comparing these ‘Leaver’ priorities with the much higher level of concern about the economy, relative to other issues when thinking about exiting the EU among Remain groups. Participants were concerned about the loss of specific industries in their local areas, particularly car makers in the East, North East and Yorkshire. More widely, Remain-voting participants were concerned about the loss of EU funding for infrastructure, research and agriculture. Remain groups also raised issues of the potential for lowering standards for new trade deals, with this appearing as a particular risk from a trade deal with the US. The potential reduction in migrant labour for sectors such as agriculture and health and social care was an issue of concern (a point acknowledged by Leave-voting participants as well - see Chapter 4), as was the potential impact on local tourism if travel between the UK and EU becomes more difficult.

## Underlying narratives

A notable aspect of discussions – in both Leave and Remain groups – was that sometimes views had been shaped by information that may not be entirely accurate or by overly simplified narratives. In the workshops, participants occasionally acknowledged this issue, commenting on the difficulty of knowing what to believe about the Brexit debate and the promises related to staying in or leaving the EU.

Misperceptions and misunderstandings arose in a number of different ways. Some were driven by media narratives, whereas others were derived from messaging from the EU referendum campaign. Some appeared to be shaped by a combination of personal experiences and anecdotal stories. Finally, others were simply the result of a lack of information or a conflation of unrelated issues. However, even when participants acknowledged that certain pieces of information might not be true, often this recognition did not lead to a wholesale shift in the views expressed.

Across the Leave groups the Vote Leave campaign messages of ‘taking back control’ and in particular ‘control of borders, money and laws’ had resonated with notable strength. This [phraseology](#) was repeatedly referenced.

Leave-voting participants also appeared to align with the Vote Leave campaign [message](#) that ‘unelected EU bureaucrats’ were in charge of deciding rules in the EU, while that some participants acknowledged that the UK held democratic elections to the European Parliament.

Similarly, in respect to human rights, participants were concerned about EU courts overruling UK courts. Participants appeared to conflate cases before the European Court of Human Rights with the European Court of Justice, despite the former not being a European Union institution. In one case, a participant acknowledged that on the issue of human rights, it is “more complicated than it was made out” [Leave, North East, male]. However, the general disquiet about having court decisions imposed remained.

On the subject of immigration, views appeared to be shaped by wider media narratives and, to some degree, by personal experiences, combined with anecdotal stories. Leave participants’ concerns over immigration were rarely specifically focused on EU migration, and hence closely tied to the issue of Brexit. In discussions about the perceived lack of integration, participants usually identified non-EU migrant groups, which was occasionally acknowledged.

*“There was confusion because I think a lot of people were referring to immigrants that weren’t from the EU anyway” [Leave, East, male]*

However, participants felt that immigrants in general put undue pressure on public services. Whilst acknowledging the fact that EU immigrants did contribute through working, the wider concern around the lack of contribution made by immigrants remained.

Some Remain voters showed similar concerns over immigration to those expressed above. This led to some broad areas of agreement between these two groups. For instance, a handful of Remain participants acknowledged that some migrants may be “working the system” to get benefits which echoed the concern about a lack of contribution to the UK. However, these views did not appear to have been decisive in shaping their views on leaving the EU. Instead, one participant said that they had voted “instinctively” without full knowledge of the facts.

Issues about the trustworthiness of sources of information were raised in both groups. In particular, the media was thought to sensationalise stories and to push certain agendas. This was felt to be bad for society in many ways, but in particular in terms of how it promoted division in the context of the referendum and its aftermath.

*“A lot of the media inflames a lot of people’s opinions I think, changes people’s opinions. We get a lot of false information these days. I’d like to see that put paid to really and somebody must be able to stop all of this interfering false news, because how can we have valued opinions when we only go by what we read and what we hear in the media?” [Leave, South West, female]*

*“The media doesn’t give a balanced view any more. It’s all about selling newspapers or selling time on the television or whatever. So they sensationalise things. So whichever side of the coin you look at, if there’s some issue around racism or whatever, it’s sensationalised, which almost has a detrimental effect on the way some people might think in the UK sometimes. The media has got an awful lot of power to influence things and I don’t think the way they report things are always in the best interests of the nation as a whole” [Remain, West Midlands, female]*

Participants acknowledged that the media played a powerful role in shaping views, but it was not common in workshops for people to critically engage with media driven narratives in distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate information.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the cross-cutting issues of concern for Leave-voting participants, which were strongly weighted to issues of immigration and governance. These two issues linked closely to discussions of identity. Participants’ perception of a lack of pride in British identity, alongside a feeling that this identity was under threat, was the main concern of those who voted to Leave.

The exception to the focus on immigration, governance and identity, was the Scotland Leave group. Alongside Remain groups, this Scottish group focused more on the question of the economy when discussing what mattered about leaving the EU.

Our analysis also sought to identify what narratives or information participants commonly drew on in articulating their views. These had been influenced by media narratives, official campaign messages, personal experiences and anecdotal sources. In some cases, views were built on misapprehensions or inaccurate information, or were the result of participants lacking information or conflating unrelated issues.

The following chapter will explore what issues mattered most to participants. Chapter four then discusses the actual changes people anticipated as a result of Brexit and the degree to which those aligned with their priorities and concerns.

# Priorities for Comfortable Leavers after Brexit

This chapter explores the priorities participants identified for their communities, and more widely, when thinking about the changes Brexit could bring. The priorities speak both to concerns about EU membership and to a much wider set of grievances that broadly embodied the things participants saw as having been wrong with the ‘state of the nation’ until now.

In both cases, participants were quick to identify the broad types of changes they would like to see. However, they generally struggled to convey a meaningful sense of detail about how or to what extent it was likely their priorities might be realised as a result of changes to our membership of the EU.

This chapter addresses priorities for governance, society and the economy in turn.

## For Governance

Two priorities emerged in relation to governance. At the parliamentary level, restoration of sovereignty was key. With respect to their regional and local communities, participants also hoped for new modes of engagement in politics.

### RESTORING SOVEREIGNTY

Brexit was seen as an opportunity to restore parliamentary sovereignty. Unique to Leavers, this priority was underpinned by the belief that EU law restricted Britain’s ability to act in its own interests. As identified in Chapter 2, Leavers hoped Britain would become more independent and influential through Brexit.

Leavers named border control, fishing, agriculture and trade as key sectors they thought had suffered under EU membership. The EU’s fishing and agricultural policies were considered wasteful, with the overproduction of milk and obligations to discard surplus fish given as examples. A smaller number of Leavers also stressed the importance of maintaining influence on global politics post-Brexit, for example via continued involvement in the G7 and intervention on global human rights issues. In London and the South East, Leavers agreed that Britain should continue to collaborate with the EU on issues like climate change and international crime.

A number of Leavers tended to discuss the need for sovereignty in exaggerated terms. For example, by sharing their view that the European Commission must be consulted “every time any form of law needs to be amended, or regulation changed” [Leave, Wales, Male]. Another participant suggested that Brexit would mean the government would “be able to run this country exactly the way they want to” [Leave, North East, Male]. These perspectives were stated without recognition that Britain would remain bound to international agreements such as those set out by the WTO and the recent trade agreement with the EU.

Others cited Britain’s history or geography as reference points for the kind of nation it should become post-Brexit. For example, by suggesting that Britain should act like a “smaller British empire once again” [Leave, West Midlands, male] or by suggesting that it would make sense for Britain to act independently because it is an island nation.

Though restoration of sovereignty was not a priority for Remainers, they too stressed the importance of maintaining influence on the world stage. However, they saw close collaboration with the EU as being more important to this than Leavers generally did.

## NEW MODES OF ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS

Brexit was also viewed by participants as an opportunity to carve out new platforms for engagement in local, regional and national politics. Driving this was the idea that the British political system did not do enough to guarantee equal representation for all communities and demographics.

### LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Leavers were keen to see a more ‘bottom up’ style of local governance that would better account for local needs. A variety of ideas were put forward about the forms this could take:

- Some participants wanted better allocated funding. For example, Leavers in the North East complained that expensive, large-scale projects such as HS2 appeared to take priority over basic local needs.
- Some suggested that direct citizens’ votes on spending would help decide this in a way that greater benefited local communities.

Another view was that MPs were not doing enough to understand local priorities or communicate them with Westminster. People thought it was important to have new platforms of engagement to facilitate dialogue. In the North East and West Midlands, Leavers suggested that public consultations and citizens panels could offer a way forward and help to address differences in representation between deprived and privileged communities. Leavers in the West Midlands picked up on and praised Marcus Rashford’s involvement in the food poverty debate. They suggested that further involvement of celebrities in politics would help raise the profile of such issues, further pinpointing the feeling that, without reform, government could not be relied on to account for the most basic of local concerns.

Participants spoke positively about the passion teenagers and school children had for topics such as Black Lives Matter. However, they worried about the under-representation of this demographic and thought it was due to a lack of platform for these groups to engage meaningfully on such issues. One Leaver in the West Midlands had experience of direct involvement in local youth engagement forums and complained that initiatives had stopped due to funding cuts.

### DEVOLUTION

Across groups, participants acknowledged that Westminster did not give equal voice to Britain’s regional concerns. To address this, several changes to devolution were favoured.

Participants in central and southern England tended to want more centralised governance that better integrated concerns from across each nation. They argued, for example, that disparities in tuition fees and nurses’ pay were unfair. They also felt Westminster should be able to enact laws equally across UK nations in response to issues of national importance, such as Covid-19.

Some Leavers in the East and North East complained that England did not have a devolved parliament to voice its concerns directly, despite having the largest economy and population.

*“We’ve got a UK government that supposedly speaks for the UK, but [ . . . ] who’s speaking for England?” [Leave, East, male]*

Welsh Leavers expressed varying degrees of support for devolution. There was some consensus that devolution has brought improvements to local Welsh communities and one hope was that, through Brexit, Wales will have stronger lawmaking powers. This was considered important for strengthening Welsh identity. In contrast, one Leaver argued that devolution has introduced unnecessary levels of bureaucracy, wasted resources and led to poor integration between local authorities and social services. The introduction and subsequent scale back of 22 local health boards was given as one example. Therefore, within this group, one priority was less about the extent of devolution but a more efficient distribution of money and resources under the current devolved institutions.

A number of Welsh Leavers commented that Covid-19 has highlighted inconsistencies in governance across devolved nations and some would have preferred a “one size fits all approach”.

Remainers voiced similar concerns to Leavers about political engagement and put forward many similar proposals on possible new approaches. In the South West, participants were particularly concerned about further supporting politically and environmentally engaged youth.

On devolution, Scottish Remainers tended to favour greater decentralisation, but didn't go as far as to favour independence. They complained that Westminster had failed to act on Scottish concerns because it was wrapped up in its own "bubble".

*"... it would have been much nicer for Scotland to have its own little grouping to look after itself. The government's much more local and much more intense, rather than a Westminster bubble that seems to be totally immersed in its own ends."* [Remain, Scotland, male]

## For Society

Three priorities were discussed by Leavers in relation to society: on immigration, attitudes to employment, and identity.

### IMMIGRATION

Participants viewed Brexit as an opportunity to reconsider who was allowed to live and work in Britain. Views of Leavers were generally driven by a desire for greater control. At the same time, remaining welcoming was also a priority, with the two sometimes in conflict.

### CONTROL AS GREATER PRIORITY

Controlling immigration was a priority unique to Leavers, to whom it meant various things. For some, it meant tougher border control without necessarily tougher settlement criteria. These participants hoped Britain would be able to monitor its borders more closely, independently dictate what documentation was required to enter, and to decide for itself what rights migrants had upon entry.

Controlling immigration also meant introducing criteria that barred the entry of migrants who would immediately depend on state support; for example, by introducing stricter pre-requisites around proof of employment or ability to find it. Underpinning this was a desire to protect Britain's benefits system, which Leavers praised highly but argued needed protecting from migrants they viewed as undeserving. Several Leavers protested that if British people living in countries such as Greece or Spain could not claim benefits then neither should migrants living in Britain. One Leaver in the West Midlands, for example, suggested that Britain's net wealth had decreased under free movement due to an increase of remittance outflows<sup>2</sup>, which should therefore be banned post-Brexit.

To others, controlling immigration meant introducing criteria that barred the entry of migrants below a certain skill level. The Australian immigration system was referenced as a model for this, but Leavers did not convey a sense of how it should work in Britain. However, they did argue it was needed to prevent the entry of foreign workers into low-paid jobs, such as fruit picking, which currently made it too easy for unmotivated British people to claim benefits instead of working.

### BEING WELCOMING

Participants were generally concerned about how migrants perceived Britain. They shared a hope that Britain would continue to be seen as a welcoming place to live and work, but the reasons given for this differed by vote.

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<sup>2</sup> Remittance outflows are transfers of money to other countries. They are typically made by migrants to people living in their country of origin.

Leavers valued the economic benefits free movement afforded Britain. This included ease of settlement for highly educated students and workers who contributed to scientific advancement in areas such as the environment. Leavers living in tourist-dependent areas, such as Harrogate, also emphasised the importance of being able to easily attract tourists. While Leavers said that Britain may come to be perceived as intolerant or racist as a result of the Brexit vote, they did not generally elaborate on this concern further than suggesting that Britain would lose out economically because of it.

Remainers not only valued free movement for its economic benefits, but also for the intercultural exchanges it facilitated via work, travel and education. A Scottish Remainer protested that politics reduced migrants to their economic contribution when Britain benefited from their cultural influence. Remainers feared that because of Brexit, British people would struggle to empathise with migrants and attitudes would harden. One solution put forward was furthering the teaching of European languages, and wider cultural initiatives, in schools.

*“If politicians are portraying that as something, ‘We’re doing it for the cash, we’re doing it for the demographics, but we don’t really want these people to be here, we don’t value them’, then that message will come across in the media. It will stick in people’s minds, and they won’t be as open to integrating the different cultures, I think. I’m really quite worried about that.”*

[Remain, Scotland, female]

## ATTITUDES TO EMPLOYMENT

Participants also viewed Brexit as an opportunity for Britain to realign collective attitudes around which types of work were considered valuable and worthwhile. Brexit was considered an important time to achieve this because, until now, Britain had depended on a pool of foreign labour that would significantly decrease.

Leavers across groups perceived there to be an unwillingness amongst unemployed British people to seek work in low-paid jobs, despite unmet demand. One Leaver in the West Midlands believed that, until now, a popular excuse had been that EU migrants were taking these jobs. Others attributed this perceived lack of work ethic to Britain’s benefits system which, as they argued in relation to migrants, made it too easy for undeserving people to claim something for nothing.

Leavers also felt it wrong that British people tended to perceive vocational work as being a less valid, worthwhile and necessarily lower-paid alternative to the pursuit of careers that follow higher education. Personal anecdotes were given of having been “brainwashed” about university in school or frowned upon for considering alternatives. It was seen as counterproductive to place such emphasis on pursuing higher education when there was great unmet demand for vocational workers, locally and nationally, in jobs such as health and social care, teaching and the skilled trades. To accompany a shift in mindset, they argued that the availability and quality of training schemes, apprenticeships and careers services should be improved for school leavers.

Remainers did not voice the same concerns about Leavers in relation to low-paid jobs but they did share many of the same concerns about vocational work. However, they generally discussed those concerns to a lesser extent.

## NATIONAL IDENTITY

Participants saw the EU referendum as having heightened Britain’s social divides and in general felt it important that Britain had a clear sense of identity to unite over post-Brexit. However, there was not a clear sense across groups of what this identity should be.

Participants in Scotland and Wales articulated a sense of Scottish or Welsh identity to varying degrees. Some felt strongly patriotic towards Scotland or Wales, whilst others identified as British, or held a dual sense of identity. In the Scottish group, some Leavers argued that Scottish produce should be prioritised post-Brexit. In Wales, one Leaver complained that the growing presence of migrants in cities such as Cardiff and Newport had made those places feel less Welsh. Participants generally did not discuss how

such concerns about identity might be acted on as a result of Brexit. One Welsh Leaver argued that “the other issues are far more important than, how Welsh do we feel?” [Leave, Wales, male].

Leavers tended to centre their identity on the past, evoking times they felt had gone by when the national anthem and British (or English) flag were proud reminders of what it meant to be British (or English). The Second World War was referenced as a time when people were encouraged to “Buy British”, and the post-war years as a time when other advertising slogans such as “Keep Britain Tidy” were associated with Britishness. Leavers expressed disappointment at the perceived lack of respect shown by young people for such national traditions. Some felt their freedom of cultural or religious expression had come under attack. For example, one Leaver in the South West complained about the sign of the cross being removed from a local crematorium for fear of offending others. A Leaver in London and the South East was disheartened at the association of the St George’s cross with the far right.

Remainers tended to focus not on the past but on the growing feeling Britain was an uncaring nation. They hoped Britain might carve out a forward-facing identity centered on a duty of care for others, and to the world. They suggested Britain might achieve this by championing standards in care for the environment, for its elderly population and by encouraging a sense of global citizenship.

*“We [ageing British people] are - and I include myself in that - we are the largest growing sector in the marketplace, in the UK. The government just tend to think we’re not worth investing in.”*  
[Remain, East, male]

*“...what we’re all talking about, is being a society that cares. Yes, caring for everyone and all creatures. How wonderful would that be?”* [Remain, South West, female]

## For the Economy

Three priorities were expressed in relation to the economy: post-Brexit trade, British industry, and investment and funding.

### POST-BREXIT TRADE

Leavers were mostly clear on the provisions of EU membership they wanted left out of any agreement; for example, the need to follow EU VAT rules on all products and to make annual budget contributions to the EU. A smaller number of Leavers were willing to see certain priorities, such as greater sovereignty or immigration control, take lower preference if it guaranteed an otherwise favourable agreement. Leavers were less clear on the benefits of EU membership they wanted to see protected in a potential agreement. However, they generally wanted to maintain some degree of reciprocal free movement, albeit on Britain’s terms.

By contrast, Remainers were happier to maintain provisions of EU membership in their current form, including freedom of movement, and wanted to strike a deal that entailed closer cooperation with the EU.

Participants on both sides of the vote generally concurred that a close, mutually beneficial agreement with the EU would be preferable. They hoped that Britain would promptly move beyond the antagonism that has characterised negotiations to date and strike an agreement without a further extension to the deadline.

### BRITISH INDUSTRY

The types of industry considered important by Leavers varied by workshop location, but all groups shared a common desire to see more goods produced in Britain and to higher standards. Food, manufacturing and post-industrial services, such as tourism, emerged as three main industries in which to prioritise post-Brexit growth.

## FOOD INDUSTRY

Leavers generally wanted to maintain high food standards post-Brexit. However, views varied on exactly what was acceptable.

Some Leavers felt it important that Britain maintained the highest food standards possible. One Leaver in the North East even viewed Brexit as an opportunity to adopt standards higher than those of the EU. They were concerned about potential trade agreements with countries such as the US, the possibility that food standards might drop as a result and that products such as chlorinated chicken might be introduced. One exception was another Leaver in the North East who was willing to accept such concessions if it secured a US trade deal that benefited the British economy – so long as food was clearly labelled.

Other Leavers argued strongly that where food could be produced nationally it should always be the first choice of consumers and retailers. They said that eating food produced locally, or nationally, gave them confidence that the conditions in which it had been grown and kept were high. Another argument was that local producers needed support from British consumers more than ever. To encourage a shift in loyalty towards British produce, they suggested governments and supermarkets should bring back “Buy British” advertising campaigns. To prioritise affordability, they suggested maximising government subsidies for producers and supermarkets. A number of Leavers were willing to see the range of choice limited to national produce as it is seasonally available. One Welsh Leaver stressed the importance of adopting and improving on farming subsidies set up by the EU. They identified small Welsh hill farms as one type of producer not supported under EU membership that should be prioritised post-Brexit.

Remainers shared similar concerns about food standards and the implications of future trade deals with countries outside of the EU. A number also wanted to prioritise British produce post-Brexit, but the reasoning sometimes differed from that of Leave voters. For example, in Wales, one Remainer commented on the environmental benefits of becoming less dependent on imports.

## RE INDUSTRIALISATION VS POST-INDUSTRIALISATION

A range of Leavers from Scotland, Wales, the East, North East and West Midlands lived in areas that had undergone extensive de-industrialisation in the 20th century. They tended to idealise a rejuvenation of the steel and fossil-fuel-based industries that once characterised their communities. That said, they widely recognised that Britain’s resource depletion and competition with countries such as India and China would preclude successful attempts at doing so. In response to this challenge, some felt their areas should see a targeted shift towards green industry while others felt that a focus on light industry or post-industrial services should be the answer.

For participants living in areas once dependent on metal production for the provision of jobs, shifting to green energy production was once again favoured as a viable solution. For example, one Welsh Leaver living in Newport said that post-industrial decline had pushed the majority of young people out of the area, and often out of Wales, in search of work. She complained that a nearby windfarm was Spanish owned and produced, when developing the capacity to do it all locally would have created growth and jobs. Furthermore, she felt that the local area had untapped potential for tidal energy production.

A Leaver in the North East explained that his local area, Middlesbrough, had been founded on British steel. Traditionally, locals spent their lives in steel or petrochemical manufacturing jobs and he saw a spirit of hard work as characterising the “DNA” of local people. He took great pride in his local history, including the fact that Sydney Harbour Bridge had been manufactured in Teesside. However, he explained that de-industrialisation had brought decline and deprivation to the area and that without a rejuvenation of industry the region would lose its identity. He praised the recent shift towards the manufacture and export of wind farms and felt that further inward investment and the acquisition of freeport status would be key to this continuing. He also saw Brexit as a crucial opportunity to strengthen local industry.

For other participants, shifting towards manufacturing consumer-based goods was a viable solution. They complained that production was too often outsourced to the cheapest global tender and suggested

Britain could challenge countries such as China by prioritising the quality, not quantity, of nationally produced goods, especially when they characterised the local area. One Scottish Leaver suggested that the kilts sold in Edinburgh Castle should be “Made in Scotland. Made in Perth” not “Made in China” (Leave, Scotland, male). Another Scottish Leaver suggested repurposing Aberdeen’s disused shipbuilding factories to produce food and clothing. EU regulations were considered by some to be barrier to innovation. To become more competitive, they wanted Britain to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach under which small business could thrive. For example, Leavers in the West Midlands complained that traditional pottery businesses had moved abroad and hoped that, through Brexit, they might get the support needed to operate successfully at a local level.

Another set of participants considered post-industrial services to be the most viable replacement for heavy industry. A Welsh Leaver commented on the decline of steel production in Port Talbot. He explained that other areas within the region, such as The Gower and Swansea, were receiving increasing levels of tourism and maintaining this should be prioritised post-Brexit. A Scottish Leaver in Edinburgh echoed this, arguing that tourist-driven events such as Hogmanay and the Edinburgh Fringe should be capitalised on further because they created significant revenue and employment opportunities for the region.

## PRIORITIES FOR INVESTMENT & FUNDING

Participants placed great emphasis on the need for better investment and funding. They made few attempts to suggest how Brexit might enable this. However, many were taken with the idea that a significant amount of funding would materialise after Britain had ended its annual EU budget contributions, as discussed in the following chapter. They hoped any money freed up, or created, as a result of Brexit would be targeted at two key areas: infrastructure and public services.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

In strengthening the post-Brexit economy and making it work better for people, Leavers hoped the government would prioritise the improvement of public transport nationwide. Some favoured large-scale projects, such as HS2 or the Welsh intercity line, arguing that they would better enable people to commute to where their skills were needed. Another argument was that better transport would create a more socially connected Britain.

Leavers felt pessimistic about Britain’s lack of affordable housing supply. Older participants compared their experiences to those of today’s young adults. Participants wanted getting on the housing ladder to be something every young person could realistically aspire to, as this would give them more optimism about their future. It was suggested that the government should increase the availability of skilled tradespeople, which was needed to increase Britain’s housing supply and thereby lower the cost of housing. Some also criticised the current Help to Buy scheme for its limitations. One Scottish Leaver feared that many Conservative Party donors may wish to maintain the artificial inflation of house prices.

## PUBLIC SERVICES

Public services that were identified as targets for greater post-Brexit funding included education and youth services, health and social care, local authorities, the police service and the armed forces. Of these, health and social care was discussed most extensively.

Some aspects of EU funding were praised; for example, by one participant in Swansea who had benefited from theatre group funding. However, the decision making behind EU funding was questioned, and a number of Leavers felt spending could have been better targeted by first consulting local communities about their priorities. One group of Welsh Leavers, for example, argued that although EU funded cycle paths were beneficial, their first choice for spending would have been roads and railways, where the need for spending was considered greater.

Leavers tended not to argue that EU membership had negatively affected Britain’s own public service

funding. They agreed that post-Brexit funding should be allocated in a way that improves the quality and consistency of service provision nationwide, with a particular focus on communities they saw as having been underfunded in recent years. However, they were sceptical that Westminster could be trusted to properly address such inequalities.

Across Leave groups, better-funded health and social care was considered a key priority. Participants felt it was wrong that the NHS had faced such mounting pressure in recent years when it is one of the most highly valued and in-demand public services and will continue to be as Britain's population ages further. Some Leavers thought migration had contributed to the problem, but without referencing EU migration specifically. One Leaver in the South West shared an anecdote from a relative working in the NHS, who suggested the cost of providing interpreters was "astronomical". They further complained about health tourism, suggesting the NHS had been used as a "holiday hospital" by foreign nationals who returned home without paying for treatment. There was some consensus amongst Leavers that all foreign nationals should be made to provide proof of insurance or ability to pay outright before receiving treatment. Some also considered a small usage charge or tax increase for British residents acceptable if it helped stabilise the NHS.

Remainer views were broadly similar to those of Leavers on these points. With respect to infrastructure - Welsh Remainders felt there was a need to develop transport links between major Welsh cities and the heads of the Welsh valleys, as this would encourage business to take place within Wales and in turn generate economic growth.

Improving the quality and consistency of public service provision nationally, with a focus on health and social care, was a key priority, though they were generally less critical of EU funding. As with Leavers, this group were also sceptical about trusting Westminster to act public service improvements.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to explain in more detail the issues participants most wanted to see addressed as a result of Brexit. They can be separated into priorities with direct relevance to Britain's membership of the EU and connected priorities that participants nonetheless believed should be addressed as a result of leaving.

In freeing itself from the conditions of EU membership which they deemed unfavourable Leavers wanted Britain to gain parliamentary sovereignty and independence. They believed this would afford it the influence needed to better control key issues such as immigration, trade, agriculture and the production of British goods.

Participants also conveyed a sense of disillusionment around a wider ranging set of issues they believed had come to define the status quo in Britain since it joined the EU. The exact set of grievances identified differed by group, but they all shared the sense that the government had not done enough to understand such grievances or act in a way that tangibly improved the lives of those negatively affected by them. In some instances, participants made the argument that these negative effects had been worsened by Britain's membership of the EU. In others, participants openly acknowledged that they were not directly related to Britain's EU membership but hoped all the same that by leaving, in the words of one participant, "change will trigger change".

The following chapter examines some of these anticipated changes in more detail and how our workshop participants were looking to the future after Brexit.

# Anticipated changes from Brexit

This chapter presents the findings on the changes that participants thought would happen because of Brexit. Participants generally had difficulty articulating in specific detail what these changes might be. Groups were also more likely to talk about changes in certain domains, such as the economy, than in others, such as governance or society. This was in part linked to views about the combined effects of Brexit and Covid-19 at the time the research was conducted.

There was a high degree of uncertainty when discussing the future, in part due to the fact that negotiations on a future trade deal between the UK and the EU were still ongoing during our fieldwork. The potential for these negotiations to fail was felt to contribute to this uncertainty. Participants also felt in many cases that they did not have enough information to talk about potential changes.

This chapter begins by discussing the economy, society, governance and identity, and then goes on to explore the perceptions of what was driving the need for change. The final section explores how participants viewed changes in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Differential impacts of changes from Brexit

In discussing the changes that they anticipated Brexit would bring, participants acknowledged the differential impacts for different groups or sectors in society.

### ECONOMY

There was a shared expectation across both Leave and Remain groups that there would be a negative economic impact from Brexit in the short term. Participants expected to see rising costs, particularly with respect to food, and a decline in living standards. Participants anticipated disruption to trade flows and an increase in difficulty for the UK to both import and export goods. Some participants identified the likelihood of an increase in trade bureaucracy and paperwork, and an increase in tariffs, as the causes. Both Leavers and Remainers noted that these changes would have uneven impacts across the country, with poorer groups, described as low-income families and the “have-nots”, likely to be worse affected. In contrast, some participants, in both groups, acknowledged that they may be relatively insulated from such changes:

*“The great difficulties [sic] is going to be families that are affected that are low-income families. I think it will affect them more greatly than I think the majority of us - middle class,”* [Leave, West Midlands, female]

Despite a broad convergence of views around short-term negative economic impacts, there was a strong sense among Leave groups that the economic situation would improve over the mid to long term. Leave voters expected to see a range of positive economic changes as a result of Brexit. These included increased targeting of investment in industries with the money that was no longer spent on EU membership, a return of manufacturing and better trade deals with other countries around the world. Perhaps more important for some Leave participants was that leaving the EU would engender a shift in mindset and a greater sense of entrepreneurial spirit in the UK.

*“I’m hoping that coming out of the EU will free up more of that entrepreneurial spirit, if you like, in the economy (...) I’d like it [this country] to be more entrepreneurial and more wealth-creating.”* [Leave, Yorkshire, male]

These positive expectations appear to have been shaped by two prominent narratives of the 2016 Vote Leave referendum campaign. The first was the ability to recoup money spent on EU membership and re-

invest it in line with UK priorities. Although a number of Leave-voting participants acknowledged that the amount promised during the referendum (£350 million per week) was not correct, there was still a strong belief that there would be a net gain. There was a view that this money would be spent more wisely and with greater accountability by UK politicians than in the hands of EU counterparts.

As this monetary gain was understood in fairly straightforward book-keeping terms, with a simple return of money 'saved', rather than as part of a broader trade-off, participants were keen for transparency about how the money was spent.

*"It hasn't been publicised where they've made the saving from the EU spend, where that's going to be pumped into. (...) Would it be good for them to actually say, 'Well, this is how much we've saved.' I know it's very general at our level, but I think I would like to see where the savings have been made and what they're planning to do with that money, specifically."* [Leave, West Midlands, female]

The second assumption made by Leave voters about economic impacts was that the UK would be able to strike trade deals that were more favourable outside the EU. There was a belief that the EU had restricted who the UK could trade with. As a result, there was an expectation that over the mid to long term, as trade deals were reached with other countries, the economic outlook would improve.

*"It will get better, because we're allowed to choose who we want to have trade deals with and where we can purchase everything from everyday items"* [Leave, South West, female]

There was scepticism about some of the official predictions of negative impacts to trade, such as difficulties importing medicines, which were repeatedly described as "scaremongering". There was also a view among Leave-voting participants in London and the South East that economic forecasting in general, and Treasury forecasting in particular, could not be trusted.

Beyond a generalised sense of a negative impact on trade (at least in the short term), Leavers also anticipated differentiated changes for specific sectors of the economy. The agricultural sector was expected to be particularly affected as a result of two changes: 1) a change to the immigration system, meaning farmers would lose easy access to migrant labour; and 2) the loss of agricultural subsidies from the EU. The potential prospect of tariffs on agricultural exports was another issue raised by a participant in the North East whose daughter was a sheep farmer.

The other key sector identified as likely to experience negative impacts was the health and social care sector. Again, the negative impact was expected to come from changes to the immigration system, which would make it harder to recruit staff. Nevertheless, there was a sense of hope among participants that this would lead to an increase in wages in the sector in order to attract a British workforce.

In some groups, Leavers identified other sectors that could be negatively affected after Brexit. For instance, there was a view among participants in Wales that the aeronautics industry – an important local industry – could be particularly affected. Participants in the South West expected their area, and other rural areas like theirs, would be somewhat shielded from the consequences, as they felt that the financial sector and manufacturing would be more affected as headquarters moved abroad.

The one exception to the negative impacts described above was the fishing industry. Leave-voting participants in the West Midlands, Scotland, Wales and the South West anticipated that this sector would benefit from changes following Brexit, assuming that UK politicians took a tough line in their negotiations with the EU. It was felt to be significant that fishermen would no longer have to throw away catch due to quotas from the EU.

Remainers also picked out specific sectors that would be particularly negatively affected, which corresponded with those identified by Leave voters – health and social care, and agriculture. One Remain voter also raised the prospect of challenges facing the music industry, with touring being made harder. However, as noted earlier they expected these consequences to be longer term and did not identify any areas that would benefit from leaving the EU.

## SOCIETY

As above, across Leave and Remain groups there was an implicit expectation that changes to the immigration system and the end of free movement would lead to a reduction of people coming to the UK to work in specific sectors such as agriculture, and health and social care. However, when asking Leavers what changes they expected to see, few explicitly stated that they anticipated a major decrease in immigration to the UK. This was surprising, given the importance of this issue when asked what mattered about leaving the EU (see Chapter 2).

Nevertheless, Leave-voting participants did anticipate that there would be changes to the immigration system, leading to more “control”, such as the examples identified in Chapter 3 on moving to points-based immigration. This suggests that a desire for more control did not necessarily imply an expectation of lower numbers for Leavers. In the few cases where the level of immigration was explicitly commented on, participants expressed a view that they did not actually anticipate much change. One participant commented, for example:

*“I’m not convinced that leaving is going to materially affect immigration from Europe or elsewhere.” [Leave, North East, male]*

For most Leavers, the issue of immigration appears to be about re-establishing control over who comes in rather than a question about overall numbers of arrivals.

Apart from immigration, there was also a view among participants in both Leave and Remain groups that there would be practical changes to travel for British citizens. Although this was seen as a direct consequence of Brexit, there was less specificity about how people expected things to change, aside from a general expectation that it would entail potentially longer queues at EU border check points or that they may not have access to the reciprocal health insurance schemes.

*“I think we’re going to miss the freedom of being able to travel (...) just that very thought of not having the freedom to travel around Europe as easily as we did or have the European Health Card and things like that, that’s going to be a huge change for the future.” [Leave, West Midlands, female]*

For Remainers, there was a feeling of regret about this change. However, once again, participants expected other groups to be more affected than them. Those identified as being more impacted included young British people who want to move to study or work in the EU, British citizens who want to move to Spain, and British citizens who want to work in multinationals, which - it was implied - had offices within the EU.

## IDENTITY

Leave-voting participants centred their discussions of changes to identity around changes to governance. There was a sense that the ability to make laws in the UK was closely linked to feelings of pride in their identity. This tallies with the priority given to governance arrangements for Leave-voting participants (see Chapter 3). There was a view that the UK had always had a different legal tradition than the rest of the EU and that in many ways the UK’s laws and regulations were ahead of the EU in upholding standards.

*“We tend to drag people up to our standard not the other way around, so I think there are endless opportunities that are available there” [Leave, London and the South East, male]*

As a result, having greater controls of laws and regulations, and being independent and sovereign would re-invigorate a sense of pride in identity - whether British, Welsh, English or Scottish or multiple identities.

*“I think that’s an important point that you just raised in that giving us back our identity as Welsh citizens rather than European, and living by their laws, well, let us make our own laws.” [Leave, Wales, female]*

In this view, far from diminishing the UK's place in the world and the way other countries saw the UK, changes after Brexit would enhance the UK's global identity.

*"I think we will be a force to be reckoned with again on the world stage, in a lot of things."*  
[Leave, North East, male]

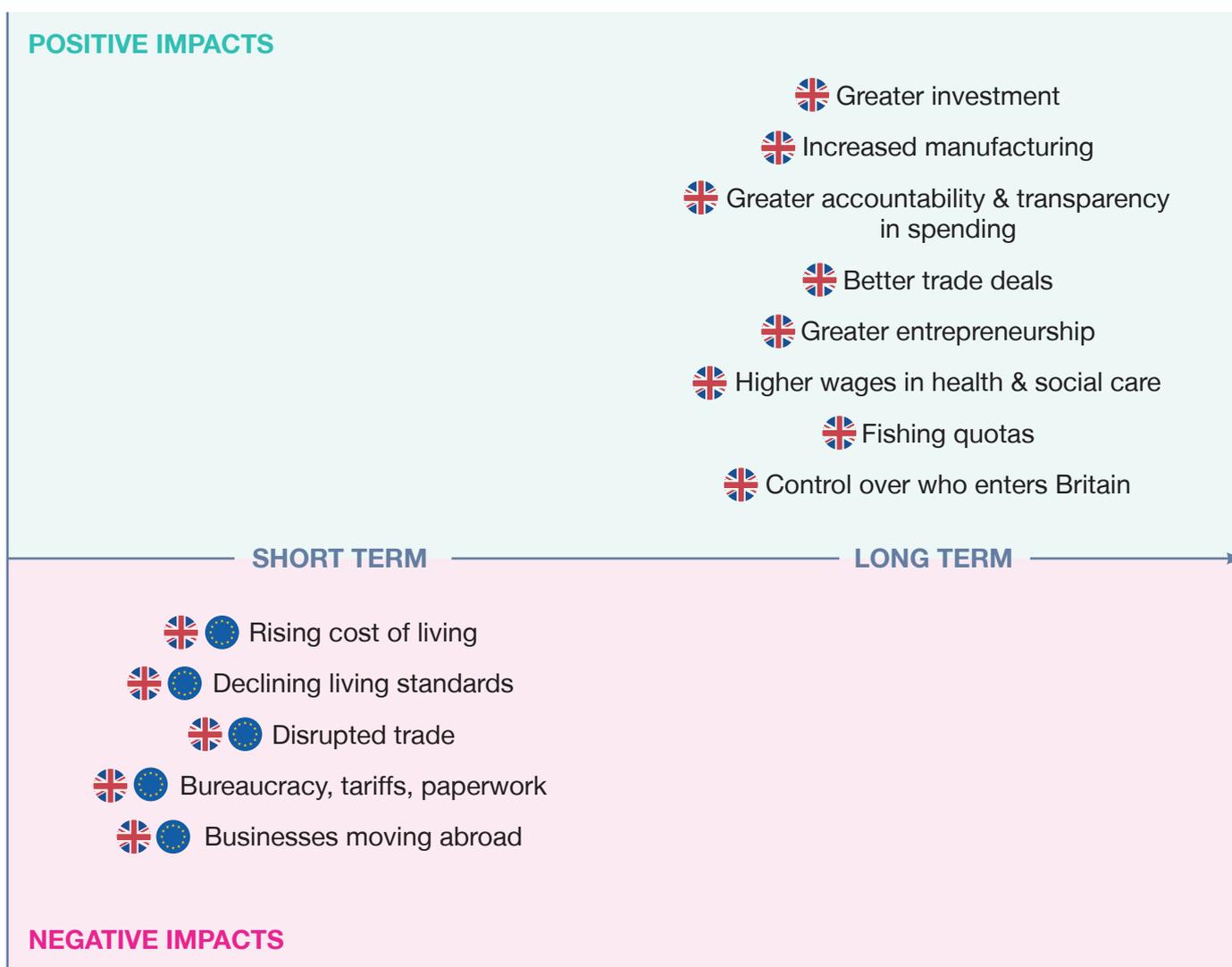
In contrast, Remainers discussed changes to feelings of identity in more detail than Leavers, and more commonly framed these in relation to societal changes. In this group, participants thought some of these changes had already happened, including an increase in intolerance, a rise in nationalism and a view that the UK was turning inwards and becoming parochial.

*"We're going to get more of a realistic sense of what we are, which is an offshore island to Europe that's got an interesting long-term history. (...) Actually we are not all that important except in our own eyes, and I think we're going to learn that."* [Remain, North East, male]

*"We're a small island and we're actually quite inward looking and parochial"* [Remain, West Midlands, female]

## PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF BREXIT OVER TIME

 Leave opinion       Remain opinion



# Drivers of the need for change

Underlying the changes and priorities that people identify as linked to Brexit are a number of issues and concerns of wider social and historical resonance.

The concerns Leave voters raised about social transformations or political accountability were in many cases those projected onto the context of Brexit, even when they may not be directly related to the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In part, this apparent conflation of Brexit with wider issues may be further explained by many people viewing the process of Brexit, combined with the impact of Covid-19 (discussed below), as symbolising a moment of national change. However, as this quote demonstrates, it was not always the case that participants felt clear about how any of these changes would be achieved:

*“So, whilst Brexit might not automatically look at those kind of issues, at least there's something where, change triggers change. I just think that, I don't know how Brexit's going to turn out. I don't know whether it'll be the biggest mistake we've ever made, but I feel like we need to do something, because it could be the best thing we've ever done.”* [Leave, West Midlands, female]

Our analysis identified four main factors as driving Leavers' perceptions of a need for change.

Firstly, on an economic front, there was a clear sense that Leave-voting participants wanted to see a reverse in de-industrialisation and the decline of manufacturing in some parts of the country. This was particularly the case in groups in the North East, Scotland and Wales who all talked extensively about manufacturing and industry, although this sentiment was also echoed in other groups. There was a desire for a return of manufacturing to the UK, which they hoped would be facilitated by Brexit. There was a view that the UK's ability to invest in industries had been constrained by the EU, although specific examples were not given. However, some participants acknowledged that leaving the EU may not generate the changes they were hoping for.

*“We took the hit [in this area] when we closed down all the steelworks, the mines, etc., and that was when everything changed here. I don't know that leaving Europe, in this area, will change very much at all.”* [Leave, Scotland, female]

Secondly, policies of austerity and a lack of funding for key public services, including the NHS, appeared to be another key factor. Leave groups talked of pressures on public services, such as schools, local councils and the NHS - evidenced in their inability to get a GP appointment. As these pressures were felt to be driven primarily by an increase in the number of immigrants, there was a sense that public services would improve after Brexit. These discussions were somewhat nuanced, with one view expressed in Yorkshire that for the longer-term funding of the NHS the public needed to have a “grown up” conversation that acknowledged it could not all be funded through general taxation. However, a general desire for better public services came through strongly.

A further societal factor driving a need for change among Leave voters was a view that the UK's welfare system, and modern society more widely, had become “soft”. Negative views about younger people, and their perceived lack of work ethic, were underpinned by a view that it was too easy for people – both British citizens and immigrants – to claim welfare rather than working. A view summarised by one participant

*“That's the problem with our society (...) the benefit system. The English are feral, and they were fed for years and years off, if you stubbed your toe you got Disability Living Allowance for the rest of your life, and you don't go to work”* [Leave, West Midlands, female]

Once again, it was expected that a decrease in immigration as a result of Brexit would lead to greater pressure on British people to accept less appealing jobs.

On issues of governance, as identified in Chapter 3, implicit in many discussions was the sense for both Leave and Remain was that there was a lack of accountability or representation in the UK's political systems. There was agreement across both groups one on clear change they anticipated after Brexit: politicians no longer being able to “hide” behind the EU for their decisions.

## Change in the context of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the context for the end of the transition period and was frequently mentioned by both Remain- and Leave-voting participants. There was a view that the pandemic had overtaken Brexit in both the media and the public's attention and was seen by participants as a major disruptive moment likely to lead to more substantial changes than Brexit alone. There was a view that Covid-19 had exacerbated or revealed a number of underlying societal issues, which could act as a catalyst for positive change. However, the situation was also felt to add to the general sense of uncertainty about what to expect for the future.

The biggest impact that Covid-19 was expected to have was in terms of making the economic outlook substantially worse. What this involved in detail was often not specified by participants, but where it was it was described in terms of large increases in government borrowing and a rise in unemployment. Leave-voting participants felt that this would affect Brexit in two main ways. One view was that the effect of Brexit (including any negative effects) would be subsumed by the negative economic effects of the pandemic

*"Covid-19 is going to just completely wipe that Brexit effect off the map"* [Leave, South West, male]

There was a degree of matter-of-factness to this view – the scale of the challenges after Covid-19 seeming to dwarf any Brexit-related challenges. Some participants however saw an advantage to this, as it would mean dealing with both issues at once.

*"I'm absolutely sure that the two problems, Covid-19 and Brexit, will overlay to a point where you won't ever be able to differentiate which was which, but I think it's great to get them out of the way at the same time."* [Leave, London and the South East, male]

The second view among Leavers on the impact of the worsening economic situation was that it would put at risk the changes that they had hoped for as a result Brexit.

*"I really want exiting Europe to be a good a thing, but I haven't seen any figures that have convinced me that it's going to be a good thing, particularly for the North East. I hope it is, I really hope it is, but I also have this fear now (...) that the country has, we've created so much debt to deal with corona [sic], that that may become the excuse for not investing in all these things that we were promised we would see investment in"* [Leave, North East, female]

This was echoed by participants in London and the South East, who worried that the negative economic context created by Covid-19 would make it harder for the UK to take up the opportunities of Brexit. As a result, one participant explicitly commented that they may have voted differently in light of the pandemic. However, the opposite view was also to be found. Among the Yorkshire Leave group was the view that given the government had spent a lot of money on the pandemic response, it may mean they would "loosen the purse strings" for investment in the regions.

Beyond economic impacts, this situation was thought to have brought to the fore some underlying issues within society, and Leavers were hopeful that these could lead to more positive long-term changes. Covid-19 had highlighted the importance of the NHS and social care, and the need for sustainable funding. There was also a view that the experience of the pandemic had led to a re-appraisal and a revaluation of what some participants called "menial" jobs – including social care workers and cleaners. The reliance on jobs that had previously been disregarded was seen as an opportunity to promote the value and dignity of that kind of work (some of which it was acknowledged had previously be done by immigrant workers). There was a hope that this could lead to a re-appraisal of the sort of jobs to value.

*"Making something that's, doesn't seem as an appealing job, maybe isn't appealing, you may find after this Covid-19 thing now that all these domestics that work in hospitals, people look at them going, 'Hey, that's not too bad.' That's become a first, frontline job that now. It's brought a lot of - truck drivers, delivery drivers - it's brought a lot of people that were in the background to*

*the forefront in people's minds."* [Leave, North East, male]

There was another view among Leavers that the pandemic had demonstrated the importance of the UK having its own manufacturing base. The example given was the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and that the UK was not able to manufacture sufficient amounts and be self-reliant. More widely, participants commented on changes in the way people were living their lives and the longer lasting effect this could bring about. These included shifts to working from home, which it was felt could have long-term effects on housing and residential distribution around the country, and changes to travel, which were expected to have wider environmental impacts. As a result, for some Leave voters, the disruption created by the pandemic presented an opportunity to push for positive change on this front.

*"I think in a way, it could be seen as fortunate that they're happening simultaneously, because it gives us a chance to look at the world after Covid-19 and after Brexit, then. Perhaps at least it's an opportunity to try and think what kind of country we want."* [Leave, Yorkshire, male]

For both Leave and Remain groups, the restrictions that had come alongside Covid-19 had also raised questions about the relationship between the different nations of the UK. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these issues were raised particularly in the groups in Scotland and Wales. For these groups, there were mixed views on whether having the devolved governments responsible for Covid-19 restrictions was positive or negative. One view among Leave voters was that it would have been more sensible to have the same rules across the UK. In contrast, other participants felt that the devolved administrations were more clearly focused on what was best for the specific country. However, the differences in regulations had also highlighted the powers of the devolved administrations to participants in England.

*"The patchwork nature of Covid-19 restrictions across the UK, for instance, have almost built on that previous uncertainty as to how we, as a United Kingdom, are going to move into this new relationship with Northern Ireland, with Scotland, Wales, etc."* [Remain, London and the South East, male]

Among participants in England, there were different views expressed as to whether this was positive or negative which were not closely tied to whether people had voted to Leave or Remain. However, across the board there was a recognition that having these differences exposed may lead to calls for further devolution in the future.

Remainers also shared many of the views of Leave groups in relation to the impact of Covid-19. In particular the way it had shone a spotlight on the importance of the NHS and social care. However, the discussion amongst Remainers of the combined economic impact of Covid-19 and Brexit included a view that the impact of the pandemic would enable politicians to "hide" the impact of Brexit. As one participant put it:

*"I think Covid-19 will cover up the sins of Brexit"* [Remain, Scotland, male]

## CONCLUSION

Looking to the future and discussing changes after Brexit was riven with uncertainty for participants in both Leave and Remain groups.

Whilst there was broad agreement on all sides about anticipated short-term negative economic changes, Leavers tended to be more optimistic that in the mid to long term Brexit would drive positive economic developments. Returning decision-making powers to the UK and having more control over immigration flows were also seen by Leave voters as positive changes to come.

Changes after Brexit were discussed by all participants with repeated reference to Covid-19. Both events were seen as precipitating major changes in society, although for many the negative economic impact of the pandemic was thought to outweigh any Brexit effects. The pandemic had also highlighted a number of underlying social issues, many of which linked back to wider societal concerns participants hoped to see tackled after Brexit. Thus, for some Leavers, the concurrence of the two events opened up opportunities for more substantial changes.

# Conclusion

The aim of these eight deliberative workshops was to explore the views and priorities of higher-income Leave voters for Britain after Brexit. We sought to gather detailed insight into what mattered to them about Britain leaving the EU, as well as their hopes and the changes they anticipated in future. People's views tended to overlap across these areas but were distinct in terms of the scale at which their discussions were had; from the more abstract and generalised (to the UK as a whole) when discussing what mattered, to points more rooted in lived experience and their local places when thinking about the future.

## WHAT MATTERS TO COMFORTABLE LEAVERS?

This study clearly demonstrates that for these Leave voters issues of immigration and governance were of greatest significance, and these themes occupied much of this discussion. The idea of taking back control resonated strongly and this was underpinned by a sense that EU membership constrained independent decision making for the UK and risked muddying a clear sense of British identity. Economic concerns were secondary (with the exception of Scotland) at this point. This was not to suggest these did not matter, but these issues tended not to be considered the most important in making the decision to leave the EU.

Many discussions took place at a relatively abstract level, drawing on headline information in general terms. Much of people's deliberations related to the UK as a whole rather than a delineation of what was important by place or region. Participants were also not particularly reflective about their views suggesting the strength of their opinions on Brexit have remained unchanged over time.

When asked to concentrate on what was most important, their priorities were in the main an extension of concerns on governance and immigration, with sovereignty and a clearer sense of national identity (arising from greater control over the perceived impacts of immigration) rising to the top. However, after some discussion, people tended to be more considered about why these things were a priority. The rhetoric on immigration was toned down and Leavers spent more time imagining what things like free movement meant for a range of people, including themselves, e.g. in terms of travel and visas. There was also acknowledgement on the value of – albeit certain types of – immigration or immigrant with respect to the labour market.

These discussions clearly signalled a desire to rebuild Britain based on a clear sense of identity and investment in certain types of industry. Both Leavers and Remainers saw the EU referendum as having heightened Britain's social divides and felt it important that the country has a clear sense of identity to unite itself over post-Brexit. However, there were clear differences in what Leavers and Remainers wanted Britain to take pride in.

Leavers tended to see sovereignty as a means to be independent, with a re-establishment of national pride, which, if got right, could improve our standing and ability to run the UK as we wished. In doing so, a more nostalgic view was referenced by many Leavers that we could or should – through leaving the EU - return to a time more characterised by the British empire, where Britain was 'in charge'. In contrast to Remainers more concerned with being 'open' to the world, this perhaps underscores how strongly Leavers feel about this as the route to reclaiming or re-establishing of Britain and the opportunities they think this affords.

## WHAT DO COMFORTABLE LEAVERS WANT FROM BREXIT?

What was clear from discussions was that Comfortable Leavers felt left out on issues of governance and identity. Their discussions indicated they were hoping for a clearer sense of national identity as the UK left the EU, based on a more nostalgic vision of British values and priorities.

In many ways, the more affluent Leave vote can also be understood as a protest vote in socio-cultural terms, rather than economically, and this discontent has driven a wish to take the opportunity of Brexit to force a moment of national change. This is not necessarily a wholesale rejection of the status quo, but that having greater control of laws and regulations, being independent and sovereign, would re-invigorate a sense of national pride - whether British, Welsh, English or Scottish or multiple identities. This extended to taking back control, not just for Britain, but also at local and devolved levels in terms of political accountability and deciding economic priorities.

There is also some sense that Leave voters wanted reassurance from the Brexit result that their view of what life should be like can be prioritised and created. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, many aspects of this in terms of social transformations or political accountability were projected onto the context of Brexit, even when they were not be directly related to EU exit.

More concretely, participants also wanted to see investment in the places they lived, particularly in those areas with an industrial past and, again, thought Brexit would help re-align Britain's economic priorities

to do this.

The changes people actually expected to see were more tempered and reflective than the distinct views held in earlier discussions on what mattered to them. This was in part because there were few specifics available at the time of fieldwork on the future policy direction and Covid-19 had created additional uncertainty. People were also less confident in naming specific changes that might otherwise be logical end points for some of their earlier expressed priorities. For example, the outcome of wanting less immigration was not expressed as a desire to see less multicultural communities.

With a lack of clarity on what Brexit might actually deliver, participants instead discussed the broader list of grievances they had on the 'state of the nation', as explored in Chapter 3. This also gave rise to some discussion that indicated scepticism and a lack of trust among Leavers that the UK government would deliver a deal in line with the things that mattered to them.

On both sides of the vote, participants generally concurred that a close, mutually beneficial agreement on exiting the EU would be preferable. They hoped for Britain to promptly move beyond the antagonism that has characterised negotiations to date and strike an agreement without a further extension to the deadline.

Leavers and Remainers also both identified the likelihood that there would be short-term negative economic consequences to Brexit, but Leavers were much more confident that this would quickly improve and the impact (on them at least) would not be too great. These discussions brought attention to the fact that even where less favourable consequences of Brexit were identified, these did not particularly affect the views or priorities of Leave voters.

Comfortable leavers therefore remained optimistic that over the mid to long term Brexit would spur positive economic developments and return decision-making to the UK, providing more control over immigration especially.

# Appendix A. Sample Composition

Table 1: Sample composition across workshops

<b>VOTE</b>	<b>East of England</b>	<b>London &amp; SE</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>	<b>Yorkshire</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Leave	7	11	6	14	11	7	14	11	81
Remain	7	5	6	7	8	7	7	8	55
Didn't vote	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2

<b>AGE</b>	<b>East of England</b>	<b>London &amp; SE</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>	<b>Yorkshire</b>	<b>Totals</b>
18-24	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	1	6
25-44	4	5	2	11	3	5	5	3	38
45-64	4	7	7	6	10	3	11	12	60
65+	6	3	2	4	5	6	5	3	34

<b>SEX</b>	<b>East of England</b>	<b>London &amp; SE</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>	<b>Yorkshire</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Female	7	8	4	10	11	8	13	9	70
Male	7	8	10	11	8	6	8	10	68

<b>EMPLOYMENT STATUS</b>	<b>East of England</b>	<b>London &amp; SE</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>	<b>Yorkshire</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Employed	6	12	11	11	7	7	15	10	79
Self-employed	1	0	0	4	3	0	2	0	10
Retired	6	3	2	5	7	4	4	7	38
Unemployed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Not working currently (studying, caring, illness or disability)	1	1	1	1	2	3	0	1	10

<b>HIGHEST LEVEL OF QUALIFICATION*</b>	<b>East of England</b>	<b>London &amp; SE</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>	<b>Yorkshire</b>	<b>Totals</b>
A level and above	10	14	10	17	12	13	13	15	104
Lower than A levels	4	2	2	3	3	1	5	2	22
Missing	0	0	2	1	4	0	3	2	12

<b>TENURE*</b>	<b>East of England</b>	<b>London &amp; SE</b>	<b>North East</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>West Midlands</b>	<b>Yorkshire</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Owner occupier	13	12	10	14	14	13	14	14	104
Private rental	1	3	2	4	1	1	2	3	17
Social rental	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	4
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Missing	0	0	2	1	4	0	3	0	10

\* Some data for tenure and educational qualification was missing from the sample file. This is likely due to the change in recruitment mode.

# Appendix B. Methodology

## WORKSHOP DESIGN

Traditional deliberative [approaches](#) include a learning or briefing component to enable all participants to have a shared level of understanding before proceeding to discussion. In this case, the length and aim of the workshops meant that we did not include a formal learning component or access to expert input but drew on deliberative techniques to support discussions.

The workshop format allowed us to talk across common issues with participants (i.e. definitions and understanding of economic contexts) before giving people the opportunity to talk in more detail about their views and attitudes. The choice to separate participants by EU Referendum vote was taken to give people the opportunity to speak freely about their views rather than risk being dragged into the debates about the merits of either side of the debate. We also wanted to be able to clearly attribute views to different types of participant and isolate Leave views in particular.

The group sessions kicked off with participants having a discussion in their small group on the characteristics of their area. This served both as an ice breaker and also provided some insight into what they thought was distinct about their region, and the importance of place to the participants.

In order to support discussions, we provided a short presentation back in a plenary session that summarised the key content we were asking participants to discuss (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: Workshop material presented to participants.**

<p><b>SOCIETY</b> Issues relating to who lives and how we live together. Some examples -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• EU citizens may be asked to comply with stricter requirements to come and live in the UK, which could make a difference to the make-up of who lives and works here.</li><li>• The UK might offer more favourable immigration rules to Commonwealth countries for example.</li></ul>	<p><b>ECONOMY &amp; SERVICES</b> Issues relating to how we produce and trade goods, jobs and the labour market. Some examples -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some of the possible options might mean changes to types of industry or employment available in a certain area.</li><li>• There has been much debate about trade deals, e.g. how trading with the USA could lead to accepting lower standards on animal welfare.</li></ul>
<p><b>IDENTITY</b> Issues relating to the values, ideas or beliefs that shape us. Some examples -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some people feel very strongly 'European', whilst others think leaving the EU might provide an opportunity to develop stronger regional identities.</li><li>• The UK would have to decide whether to participate in programmes, such as European City of Culture in which towns and cities represent what they think makes them unique.</li></ul>	<p><b>GOVERNANCE</b> Issues relating to who makes decisions on the things that shape our lives and how those decisions get made. Some examples -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Whilst we will no longer be subject to EU laws, it isn't clear if local authorities or regional authorities will be given more decision-making powers.</li><li>• Leaving the EU might make it clearer who is responsible for changes affecting our lives.</li><li>• Some global challenges, such as climate change, may be best tackled at the international level. The UK would have to decide who to co-operate with on these kinds of issues</li></ul>

We also included an acknowledgement that the live context of Covid-19 may influence how people were thinking about these issues.

Participants were then again split into two groups (according to EU Referendum vote) for moderated discussions on three key questions.

- What matters to participants about the UK leaving the EU?
- What changes do participants anticipate to their communities [and the UK as a whole] as the UK leaves the EU?
- What priorities or hopes do people have for the future with these anticipated changes?

Facilitators had associated prompts where necessary. The workshop closed with a plenary session that summarised participant discussions across groups and to check that researchers captured salient points.

## COVID-19 ADAPTATIONS

As indicated above, our original study plans were affected by the introduction of social distancing guidelines in late March 2020. At that point, our approach was finalised, and we had begun arranging the recruitment (via a recruitment agency) and logistics for several of our workshops.

In consultation with UKICE, we decided to adapt our approach to carry out the workshops online using Zoom. We selected Zoom as it provides several functions to ensure security, stable audio/visual quality and it allows participants to move between plenary and small group discussions using 'breakout rooms'. The software also enables facilitators to adjust a number of settings – e.g. on screen sharing and recording which maximises participant safety and appropriate use. Although this did not have significant implications for the workshop design, it did affect the recruitment of participants and introduced considerations for facilitators about the practicalities of delivering in a different mode.

## Recruitment

Prior to this adaptation, we were planning to work with a recruitment agency in order to target the very local geographies in which we wanted to hold workshops. Typically, recruitment agency methods tend to be a mixture of database contacts and on-street recruitment; the latter of which was now no longer feasible.

We instead changed approach and used the NatCen panel to derive a sample from which to begin our recruitment. The panel is a probability-based online and telephone panel that runs an omnibus survey six times a year. This gave us the advantage of a readily available sample who we already had lots of information about and had many of the characteristics we were interested in. A further advantage was that most respondents to NatCen panel surveys complete them online, and so we could also be more confident that a proportion would have the available technology to attend workshops.

However, one significant trade off was that we had to widen the geography of the localities we were originally interested in to ensure that we could recruit a sufficient number of people to the workshops. This meant expanding localities of interest to a regional level in England. The regions were based on the NUTS 2 regions for the UK, although London and the South East were combined as discussed further in the workshop overview. This did however give us the advantage in Scotland and Wales of drawing participants from across the country to a single workshop without logistical restrictions.

Once areas were selected, we sent an invitation email to our sample outlining the research and how they could get involved. In order to confirm that they met our inclusion criteria on income and availability for the planned workshop dates, interested participants were asked to complete a short survey. It was from this group that we then sent workshop invitations, and these were followed up with telephone calls to complete our quotas and confirm attendance.

## Going online

The team at NatCen were familiar with using Zoom for deliberative research and already had a number of available resources to support participants with getting online and understanding what the workshop might be like. Facilitators had experience moderating deliberative discussions virtually and were able to provide technical support on the day.

Despite this, the change in mode did affect participation in two ways. First, there were a small number of people (12) in our sample who were interested in the research but told us they did not have the technology or confidence to join an online session, which meant in some cases spending more time on recruitment to ensure we completed our quotas for attendees. Second, there was attrition between recruitment and attendance. Although we were expecting a higher rate of attrition than is usual for face-to-face events, in the first two workshops (North East & Wales) 'on the day' attendance was low, particularly for Leave voters.

## Supplementary interviews and augmenting the recruitment approach

As we had an under-representation of Leavers— our key group of interest – in these early workshops, we took two mitigating actions. The first was to re-contact those who did not attend workshops to invite them to a 45-minute telephone interview (covering equivalent content to the workshops). This resulted in eight interviews with participants in the North East and Wales.

The second was to augment our approach for the remaining workshops to boost the number of people we had recruited by working with the databases of a recruitment agency in the West Midlands and Scotland. This proved successful in ensuring a good turnout and resulted in a higher number of participants than originally planned in workshops.

Details of the number of participants and composition by vote are included in the workshop overviews given in Chapter two.

## ANALYSIS

Facilitators took notes of small group discussions, which were also audio recorded and transcribed. To support the write up of the final report, we developed a thematic coding framework that reflected our key research questions and accounted for the discussions had by participants, for example on their priorities and concerns. Coded data were grouped into themes from which analysis plans and the reporting structure develop.