

'A Portrait of Modern Britain': Youth



Repairing the Intergenerational Contract

Lara Brown and Iain Mansfield



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Endorsements

“Policy Exchange’s A Portrait of Modern Britain series provides policymakers with a clear message on the need to focus on the issues that bind us as a nation. British culture, although constantly changing and developing, needs to be at the forefront of the decisions that are made every day.

With the Government’s forthcoming Youth Strategy aiming to empower young people and communities, this report offers urgent insight and ideas. Its findings reflect the huge challenge that national institutions, such as the BBC, and governments of any colour, face to gain and retain the trust of young people worried about their futures.”

Rt Hon Dame Caroline Dinenage MP, Chair of the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee

“Policy Exchange’s A Portrait of Modern Britain: Youth delivers a timely and compelling message to policymakers. By offering a clear roadmap for how to re-engage young people, whether on the economy, public services or immigration and belonging — this paper provides essential guidance for any politician seeking to win back the trust of the next generation.”

Shivani Raja MP, Member of Parliament for Leicester East

About A Portrait of Modern Britain

A Portrait of Modern Britain is a major project being undertaken by Policy Exchange. It aims to analyse current demographic trends in modern Britain, including significant regional and local variations in age and demography – and how these are changing over time – while charting the wide range of views held by the populous on matters from healthcare to history; immigration to economics.

The first ‘Portrait of Modern Britain’ study was carried out for Policy Exchange in 2014 by two young researchers named Rishi Sunak and Saratha Rajeswaran, the first of whom would go on to become the UK’s first ethnic minority Prime Minister of modern times. Focusing on the lives and contributions of ethnic minority citizens, it was welcomed by politicians and political leaders across the political spectrum.

Using bespoke polling carried out exclusively for Policy Exchange, the project aims to identify how Governments can successfully focus on what unites us – and how to deliver for the country – building on the latent strengths of British identity and culture that bind us together, while fulfilling the legitimate material and economic aspirations of the younger generation.

Previous reports in the series have focused on [ethnicity and religion](#), on [attitudes towards the NHS](#) and [on attitudes towards crime and policing](#).

A Portrait of Modern Britain is being led by a team including Iain Mansfield, Rakib Ehsan and Lara Brown of Policy Exchange.

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Executive Summary

A Portrait of Modern Britain: Youth explores the changing relationship between young people, the state, and society. The report is driven by state-of-the-art polling conducted by Redfield and Wilton for Policy Exchange, which surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,100 young people aged 18-30. Our polling was supplemented with a range of data available on the financial and social situations of facing young people.

For young people (18 – 30 year olds), the social contract is breaking down, particularly in four areas:

- Housing – high house prices and rents make the dream of home ownership increasingly unaffordable for many young people.
- Income & taxation – stagnating incomes, historically high levels of taxation and student loan repayments mean a young graduate on the minimum wage faces an effective marginal tax rate of 37%.
- Family – young people are increasingly likely to be single, to have children later, and to not have as many children as they wish to.
- Mental health – an unprecedented proportion of young people report struggles with mental health, anxiety, depression and loneliness.

In contrast to some stereotypes, our polling demonstrates that young people are not, on average, radical progressives on ‘cultural’ issues such as race, free speech, immigration or gender. Though a little to the left of the general population, they support free speech, support a cap on legal immigration and think class is much more significant than race in determining a person’s life chances in Britain today.

Their primary concerns are material: homes they can afford, the cost of living, taxation, student loan repayments and the quality of public services. Political parties looking to appeal to young people should craft policies that deliver on these bread-and-butter issues, rather than seeking to win them over with their stance on cultural issues.

Declining faith in the state’s ability to deliver is driving an increasingly fragmented political landscape. Under 30s are abandoning the three established parties in increasing numbers with a rise in votes for the Green party, and, particularly amongst young men, a growing Reform vote. Political fragmentation is mirrored by media fragmentation: 69% of young people told us social media was their most important source of news, well ahead of television news (45%) or online newspapers (28%).

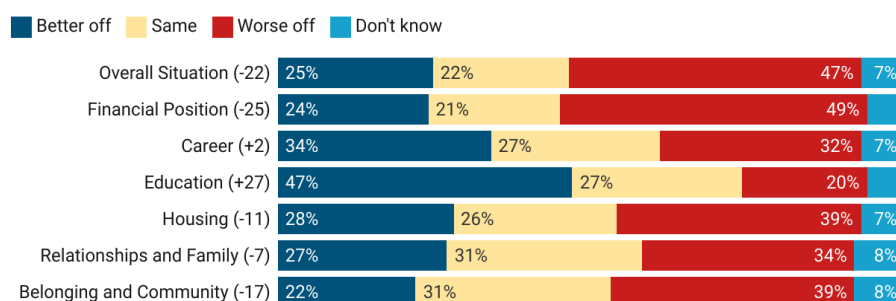
Alongside this there is a sharp decline in national belonging, with young people less than half as likely (19%) to report that a sense of Britishness was important to their identity compared to the general population (40%), a reduction in pride in the British Armed Forces and a high level of unawareness of key elements of British history.

Collapse in the Social Contract

Young people believe themselves to be worse off than their parents across most metrics.

Figure 1: Perception of life compared to parents (%)

Do you think you are better or worse off than your parents were at your age?



The only area polled where significantly more young people indicated they were better off compared to their parents was education (+27) – though this is not being reflected in an improved financial situation or in housing; nor is it leading to better relationships, family formation or sense of belonging. For many young people, the mass expansion of Higher Education has not delivered on the dream that it promised.

When asked about key barriers to success, results focused again on material challenges: with high house prices and rents, high taxes, a difficult job market, and student loans (which effectively increase the tax burden for graduates) ranking the highest. 59% of young people believed that 'residents preventing local housing developments in their area' is fairly or significantly present as a problem in the UK today, compared to just 42% of the general population, and 74% said they were 'fairly' or 'significantly' concerned that inheritances they receive will be disproportionately taxed – despite the fact that fewer than 5% of estates incur it.

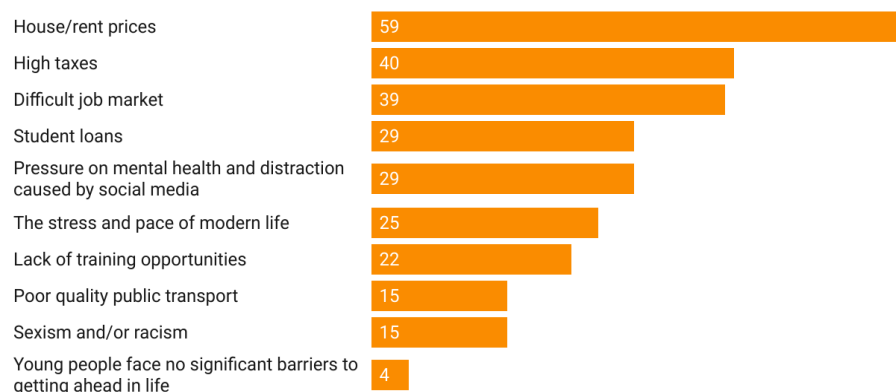
Mental health, distraction caused by social media and 'the stress and pace of modern life' were each cited by over a quarter of young people, reflecting the increasing prevalence of reported mental health conditions and broader well-being concerns about young people. Despite its prominence in some discourse, only 15% of respondents felt sexism and/or racism constituted a significant barrier to getting ahead in life – the joint-lowest response for any option polled.

There is evidence that these concerns have become exacerbated over the last ten years, with other long-term polling series, such as the Prince's

Trust Youth Index, showing declines in young people's happiness and confidence in areas including their financial situation, emotional health, work and employment and family relationships over the last ten years.¹

Figure 2: Biggest barriers to getting ahead in life (%)

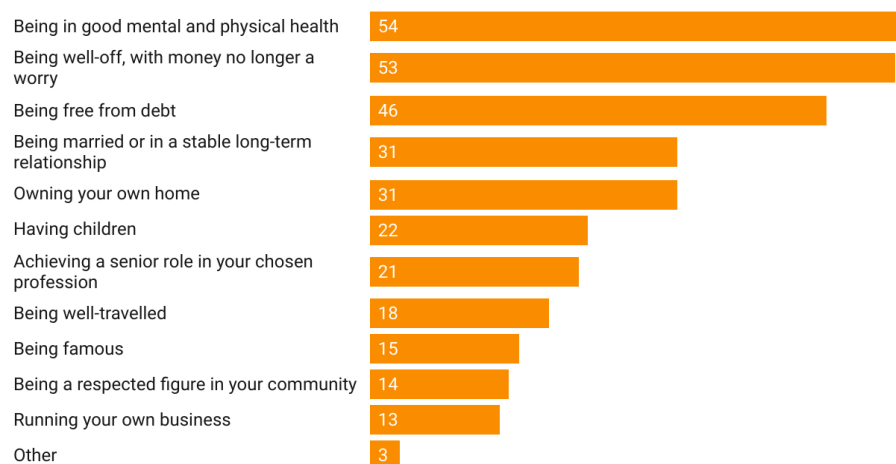
Which, if any, of the following do you believe are the biggest barriers for young people in the United Kingdom looking to get ahead in life?



When asked what success in life looked like for them, the highest aspirations were primarily targeted at the elimination of negatives (debt, financial strain, and poor health) rather than the attainment of historic markers of success such as running your own business, having children, or achieving a senior role in their profession.

Figure 3: What does success in life look like for you? (%)

What does success in life look like for you?

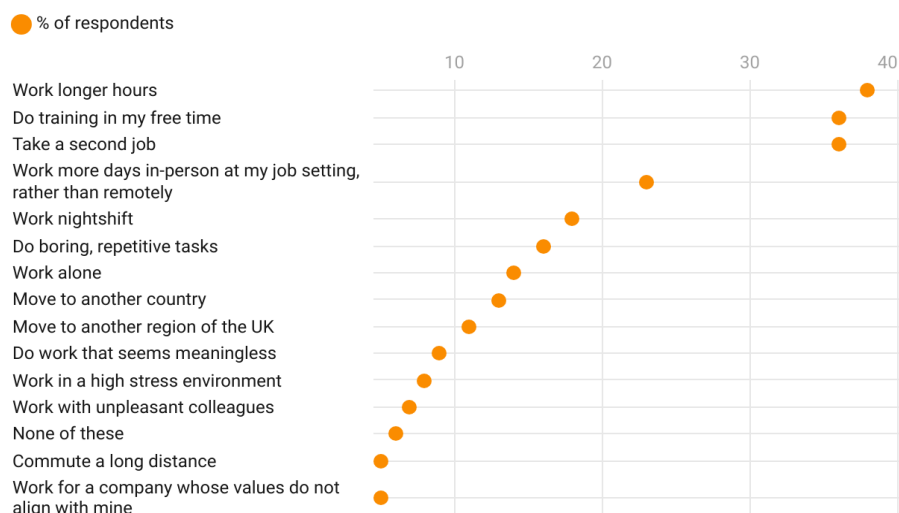


Despite this, young people were only willing to take a limited number of steps to increase their income:

1. The Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index 2024, [Link](#)

Figure 4: Which of the following would you be willing to do to increase your income (%)

Which of the following, if any, would you be willing to do to increase your income?



Young people are getting married later (if at all), having fewer relationships, and starting families at an older age. Birthrates are also declining, with the total fertility rate falling, in the latest statistics to 1.44, the lowest on record. Young people report significantly worse levels of mental health than other generations, with 32% of 16–39-year-olds reporting moderate to severe depressive symptoms. 30% of young people think one of the priorities for the NHS should be ‘to provide mental health services for those who need it’. IVF and Fertility treatments were also selected by more than 1 in 5 young respondents as a top priority of the NHS, compared to fewer than 1 in 10 of those in the population as a whole.

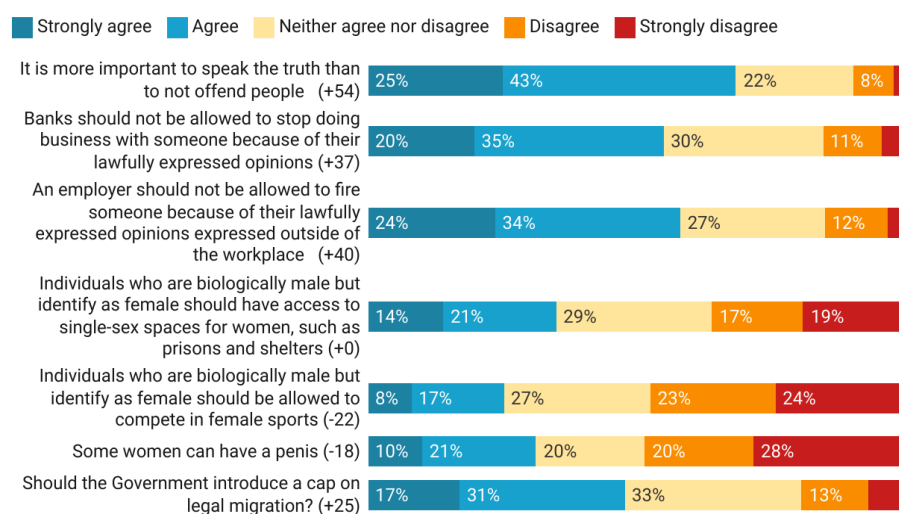
Not so ‘woke’

Throughout our polling, fundamental economic issues such as the cost of living, jobs, housing and public services were consistently rated more important than issues of culture and identity. 57% of young people consider class to be more important than race in determining a person’s ability to succeed, compared to only 18% who consider race as more important. Similarly, ‘sexism and racism’ were considered to be the least important barrier to success in the UK today (alongside ‘poor quality public transport’), selected by only 15% of respondents.

Similarly, while young people are slightly more progressive than those in the general population, they are, on average, significantly more aligned with the general population than is sometimes thought on issues such as free speech, trans and gender issues or on immigration – and in many cases to the right of current Government policy (for example, strong net support for a cap on legal migration).

Figure 5: Agreement or Disagreement on Sociocultural Issues (%)

Agreement or Disagreement on Sociocultural Issues



National Belonging and Political Fragmentation

Young people were less than half as likely as the general population to report that they felt a high sense of Britishness, with only 19% reporting answers of 8-10 on a 10 point scale that a sense of Britishness was important to their identity, compared to 40% of the general population – a number that dropped to 14% for those aged 18-24.

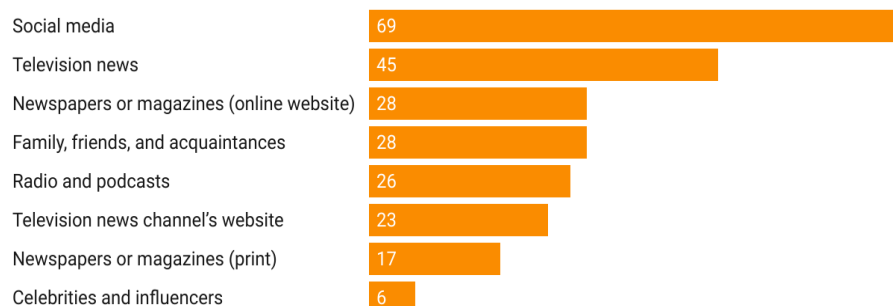
Although the British countryside (42%) and the Royal Family (31%) continued to be important sources of pride and belonging for young people, Britain's historical legacy and achievements were cited as fostering pride and belonging by only 16%, Britain's history of Parliamentary democracy by 16%, and Britain's record of scientific discovery and invention by 17%. The British Armed Forces were cited as a source of pride and belonging by only 12%, the lowest result of any option polled.

Almost 3 in 10 young people disagreed with the proposition that children who are raised in Britain should be taught to be proud of Britain and its history, with only 53% agreeing – considerably lower than amongst the whole population, where 72% agree and only 14% disagree. Similarly, only 50% of young people believe that, throughout history, Britain has been a force for good in the world, compared to 60% of the population as a whole.

Alongside this, we see a decline in the dominance of traditional news sources alongside increasing political fragmentation. Young people overwhelmingly identify social media as their important source of news (69%), more than double the proportion who cite newspapers, magazines or radio and significantly above those who cite television news.

Figure 6: Most important sources of news for young people (%)

Most important sources of news for young people



At the 2024 general election, 10% of 18–24-year-old men voted Reform and 12% voted Green. These numbers are both equal to or higher than the 10% of 18-24 year-old men who voted Conservative. Similarly amongst 23% of 18-24 year old women voted Green, a number higher than the Liberal Democrat and Conservative vote amongst this age-group combined. Polling since the general election has shown these trends continuing and deepening.

While social media may not be the root cause of these fragmentation, it is likely to be exacerbating it. As the views of young people diverge further apart, social media allows for young people to seek out highly supportive, and increasingly niche news environments, in a way which has historically been more difficult with legacy media. Reform's leader, Nigel Farage, has 1.3 million followers on TikTok – the only UK leader with a significant presence on the site. He also has more followers on Instagram than Keir Starmer, and over ten times more than Kemi Badenoch or Ed Davey.

A substantive offer, not gimmicks

Successive Governments have ignored the concerns of the young – targeting election promises at pensioners, often directly at their expense. Many young people are now profoundly discontented with a social contract which isn't working for them – with hard work and a good education no longer being seen as delivering the traditional markers of success such as financial security and the ability to own your own home – even for established professionals, particularly in London and the South-East. Major life milestones, such as relationship-formation or having children, are being put off until later or not happening at all, while reported mental health issues are surging.

Young people are not primarily looking for gimmicks, or virtue-signalling on progressive issues. Any political party looking to win over the young should look first to tackling their material economic concerns: on housing, taxation, student loan debt, the labour market, the cost of living and the financial cost of family formation. For the party – whether on the right or the left – that can both craft and genuinely deliver an offer that addresses these concerns, the loyalty of a neglected generation is the prize to be won.

Options for Change

The depth of disillusionment of many young people with the current state of the social contract is such that it will not be easily overcome by minor tweaks to the status quo. From policies on pensions, housing and student debt, to exogenous factors such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, the belief by young people that other generations have had ‘a better deal’ than they have done is fundamentally correct.

Unless the major parties address this, the likelihood is that political support will continue to leach away – to Reform on the right (and particularly amongst young men) and to the Greens and the Liberal Democrats on the left (and particularly amongst young women). Any political party seeking to win over the young will need to demonstrate to them that they are on their side in ways that are perceived to redress the current systemic intergenerational unfairness – and deliver real improvements in material well-being at large scale.

Although any changes would take years to fully redress the current intergenerational challenges, the policy options below are representative of the type of decisive, large-scale policies that could form a linch-pin of a renewed electoral ‘offer’ to young people: combining a highly symbolic element with significant real-world material impact. Most could conceivably be adopted by a party of either the right or the left.

Some of the policy options presented are fiscally neutral and, while others incur a fiscal cost, these are of a scale with the cost of other major commitments made in recent party manifestos. While it is politically unlikely that any party would choose to adopt all of the policies below, they provide a menu of options from a which a party seeking to construct a meaningful and credible youth offer could select.

1. **Liberalise planning laws, treble the New Homes Bonus and commit to urban densification to build 450,000 new homes a year, at least 100,000 of which should be social or affordable housing.** Increasing the building of new homes would alleviate the impact of high rents on young people and make home ownership once again an achievable ambition – while supporting growth. Although the Government has implemented some welcome measures to increase home-building, this will not in itself provide the scale of new homes the country needs: a comprehensive set of measures to support the level of ambition needed is set out in a previous Policy Exchange Report, *The UK’s Broken Housing Market*,²

2. Policy Exchange, *The UK’s Broken Housing Market* (2024), [Link](#)

2. **Cut tuition fees to £6,000 a year and introduce a tiered, income-contingent repayment system for graduates.** A young graduate on minimum wage currently pays an effective marginal tax rate of 38% - and with over £50,000 debt may continue to face repayments for 40 years. Depending on the modelling assumptions used, and the precise design of the repayment system, this would be estimated to cost between £3 billion and £5 billion a year, in steady state.³ Reducing the burden of debt and introducing a tiered repayment system would reduce marginal tax rates on lower earners and make paying off the debt more achievable for most graduates.⁴ This must be accompanied by measures to protect students from enrolling on courses with high drop-out rates and poor progression to graduate employment, which do not deliver value to the student or the taxpayer.
3. **Support an additional 100,000 apprenticeships for young people by providing a £3,000 subsidy to employers to take on 16-24 year old apprentices – alongside an additional £1 billion a year to support an additional 100,00 places a year for 18 – 24 year olds in further education colleges.** If the full 100,000 additional apprenticeships were generated, the total cost would be approximately £2 billion a year. More must be done to create opportunities for the more than 50% of young people who do not go to university – and to produce the skills needed within the economy.
4. **Freeze the national minimum wage for under 18 year-olds and 18 – 20 year-olds.** Reducing the gap between the minimum wage for young people and for those aged over 21 has reduced the incentive on employers to hire young people, making it harder for young people to gain valuable work experience and removing an important means by which young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – could support themselves through college and university. Freezing the minimum wage for under 18s and 18 – 20 year olds would make it easier for young people to take their first steps in the labour market.
5. **For those aged 16 to 30, the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) should become a conditional benefit, creating an age-defined approach.** Claim rates for young people have increased sharply and have tripled since 2019 for those aged 16-19. Transforming PIP to a transitional benefit, accessible only by those in work, studying or volunteering, would help to address the almost a million 16 – 24 year-olds not in education, work or training. In exceptional circumstances, the DWP should be able to opt individuals out of this proposed conditionality based on severity of condition, or where individuals have a terminal condition.
6. **Increase child benefit for parents of 0 – 4 year olds by 50%, at an approximate cost per year of £1.6 billion.** The first five years

3. Assuming that the RAB charge – a measure of loans that are not repaid – remains at 29%.

4. For example, a tiered rate of 3% of income between £15,000 and £30,000; 6% on income between £30,000 and £40,000; 9% on income between £40,000 and £60,000; and 12% on income above £60,000.

of a child's life are frequently associated with the greatest drop in parental income, as parents may need to step back from work or rely more heavily on formal childcare. Doubling child benefit payments in this period would enable more young people who wish to start a family to do so.

7. **Replace the 'free childcare' entitlements with a system of flexible vouchers, that parents can use to support nurseries, childminders or extended family providing care.** The current approach to supporting childcare has led to spiralling costs and reduced availability. A shift to flexible vouchers would maintain the support for parents at current levels whilst greatly increasing flexibility and choice. This should be accompanied with cutting red-tape on childcare providers, greater flexibility on staff:child ratios, and abolishing all Ofsted inspections and requirements on childminders, while maintaining the requirement to undergo a Disclosure and Barring Service check to maintain safeguarding standards.
8. **Cut Employee National Insurance by 3 percentage points, paid for by abolishing the upper age limit on National Insurance.** High marginal tax rates on employment depress economic growth and discourage labour market participation. Cutting Employee National Insurance would reduce the tax rate for all working age tax payers, reduce the marginal tax rate for over 80% of working-age tax payers, and establish a more equitable sharing of the tax burden between the generations, while supporting greater labour market participation. This change could, if desired, serve as a stepping stone to a long-term ambition either abolishing Employee National Insurance or merging the National Insurance and Income Tax regimes.
9. **To fund one or more of the policies above, the Government should abolish the pensions triple-lock.** When the triple-lock was introduced, pensioners were the most likely demographic to be in poverty. They are now the least likely – the triple-lock has served its purpose. Ending the triple-lock and increasing the state pension in line with inflation would enable a shifting of Government spending to younger demographics, whilst protecting the value of the state pension in real terms. Increasing the state pension by 1% for two years, followed by CPI, could generate approximately £15 billion over a five year period,⁵ with a fiscal saving of £5 billion a year in the final year – providing sufficient headroom to reinvest in one or more of the policy options above.

5. Period modelled is 2026 – 2030.

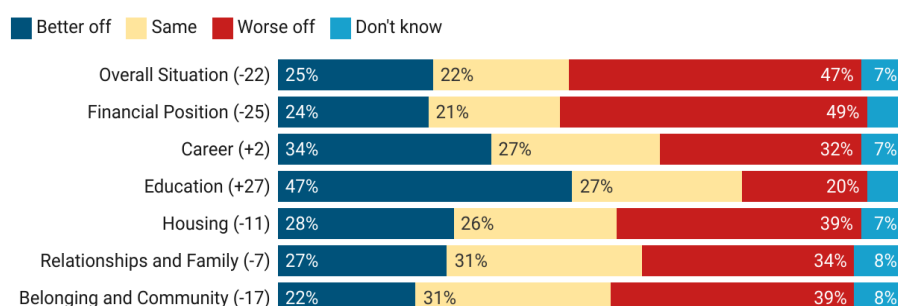
1. Collapse in the social contract

Our polling exhibited a strong view of long-term economic and social decline. A majority of young people (52%) believe that life in the United Kingdom is worse compared to ten years ago, with only 24% thinking it is better.

Young people also tended to believe that they are personally worse off than their parents, both overall and with respect to their financial situation, housing, forming relationships and starting a family and their sense of belonging in a community. The historic social contract is not working for them.

Figure 7: Perception of life compared to parents (%)

Do you think you are better or worse off than your parents were at your age?



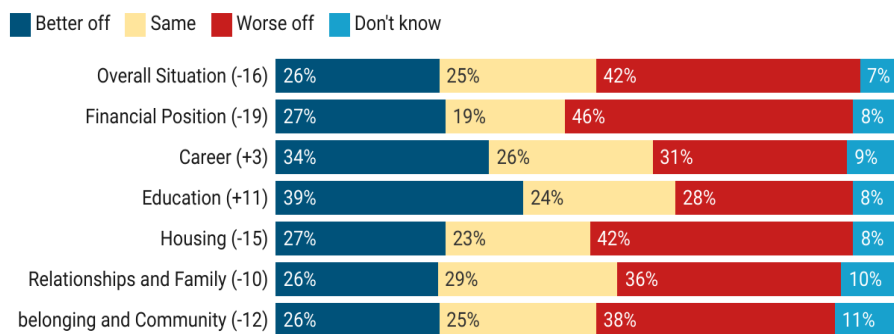
The only area where significantly more young people indicated they were better off compared to their parents was education (+27) – though this is not being reflected in an improved financial situation or in housing; nor is it leading to better relationships, family formation or sense of belonging. The finding may be partially explained by the significant expansion in the proportion of young people going to Higher Education (the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate increased from 40% in 2000-1 to over 50% today)⁶ – though the fact that this is not leading to better careers (at only +2) and to a worse financial position is a further indication, alongside declining graduate premiums, that for many of these individuals university has provided little or no benefit.

Young people also believe that the next generation will be even worse off than they are. As before, they consider things will become worse in every area with the exception of careers (flat) and education (slightly positive) – though as before, they do not anticipate this feeding through into meaningful improvements in living standards.

6. Hansard (2007), [Link](#); House of Commons Library (2025), [Link](#)

Figure 8: Do you think children in the UK will grow up to be better or worse off than their parents' generation? (%)

Do you think children in the UK today will grow up to be better or worse off than their parents' generation?

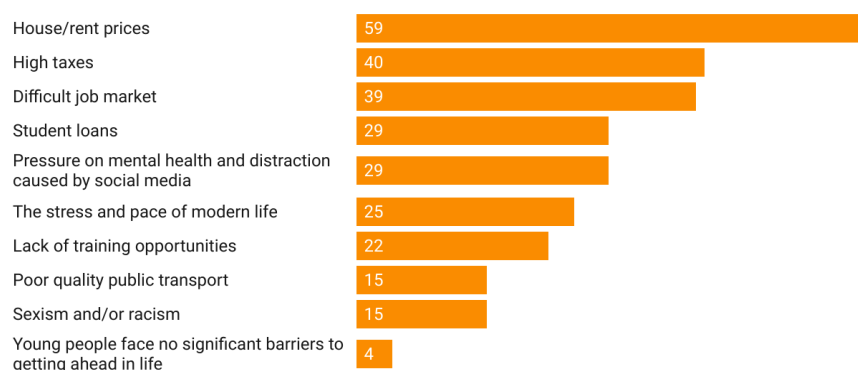


The most frequently identified barriers to young people were house and rent prices (59%), high taxes (40%), and a difficult job market (39%). The fact that the three highest barriers were financial and material in nature stands in contrast to the common perception that young people are primarily concerned about issues of social justice or identity matters. Interestingly, sexism and/or racism was identified as a major barrier by only 15% of respondents – the equal lowest response of all options.

Mental Health was also identified a pressing concern for young people. 29% of respondents cited pressure on mental health and distraction caused by social media as a problem while 25% of respondents reported struggling with the stress and pace of modern life.

Figure 9: What are the biggest barriers to young people? (%)

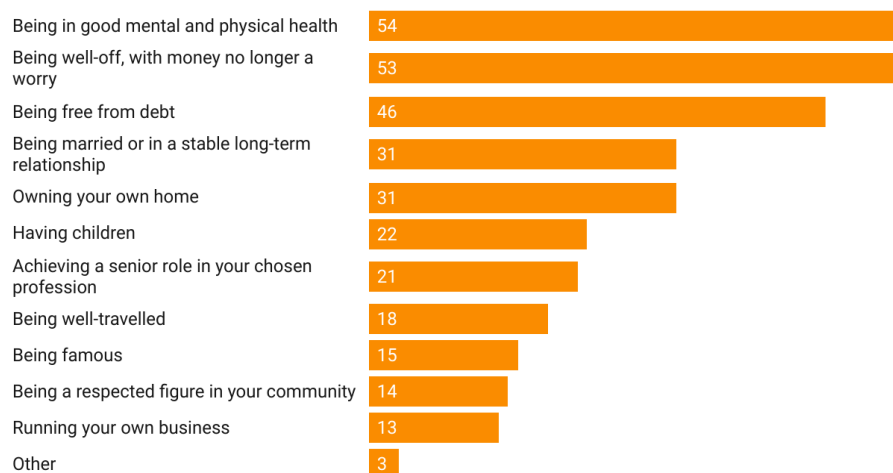
Which, if any, of the following do you believe are the biggest barriers for young people in the United Kingdom looking to get ahead in life?



The combination of declining living standards and the perception of significant material barriers to success appears to have produced lower aspirations for young people. When asked what success in life looks like, 54% of young people wanted to be 'in good mental and physical health'. The two other most popular answers were 'being well off, with money no longer a worry' (53%) and 'being free of debt' (46%).

Figure 10: What does success in life look like for you? (%)

What does success in life look like for you?



None of these are bad aspirations, but it appears young people are prioritising achieving a baseline – in which they are healthy, debt free, and not worrying about money – over more ambitious aspirations such as owning a business (13%) or achieving a senior role in their chosen profession (21%). This is, perhaps, a natural response to the environment in which they find themselves – but it is a sad indictment of the opportunities which society has offered them. Notably, even more modest goals such as home ownership (31%) or having children (22%), which a majority of people in previous generations would have achieved⁷, are given by relatively few respondents.

It is notable ‘being well travelled’ (18%) is more important to young people than ‘being a respected figure in your community’ (14%). Within the current labour environment, and against the backdrop of increased university participation, more young people than ever will live a significant distance from where they were born. This may be reflected in a fraying of civic bonds, and a de-emphasis on the importance of one’s community.

Something isn’t working for young people. Policy Exchange’s polling has identified a disconnect between input and output. Young people believe they’re better educated than ever – but they aren’t seeing the benefits in their housing, happiness, relationships, or finance.

There are four key areas in which the social contract for young people has broken down:

- Housing
- Family,
- Income & taxation
- Mental health

7. For example see, ONS Census 2021, ‘How does home ownership, health and more differ across society’, link. 59% of adults 60 to 69 years live in a home they own outright.

1.1 Housing

In Policy Exchange's polling, house and rent prices were identified as the largest single barrier to young people looking to get ahead, with 59% of respondents identifying this as one of their top three concerns.

The evidence shows that they are correct.

In 2020, the English Housing Survey found that the average age of a first-time buyer was 32, two years older than the top of our youth sample.⁸ Only 39% of 25 - 34 year olds own their own home, down from 59% in 2000.⁹ Meanwhile, the share of 25-29 year olds living with their parents has gone from 20% to 28% in the last 15 years.¹⁰

Housing prices in England have increased from under 4 times average salary in 1997 to over 8 times today:

Figure 11: Housing affordability ratio by country

Housing affordability ratio by country, 1997 to 2023



Source: House Price Statistics for Small Areas and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings from the Office for National Statistics

And rental prices have similarly been soaring. The December 2024 ONS figures found that the average UK private rents have increased by 9.1% in just the last year, and by 8.7% in the year before that. Average rents have increased to £1,362 in England.¹¹ The median gross annual earnings for a full-time employee in the UK was £37,430 in FYE 2024 – after tax and a student loan payment this is around £2,446. The average UK rent is 56% of this take-home salary.¹²

8. Gov.UK, '2019-20: English Housing Survey', p.26, [link](#).

9. Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024), [Link](#)

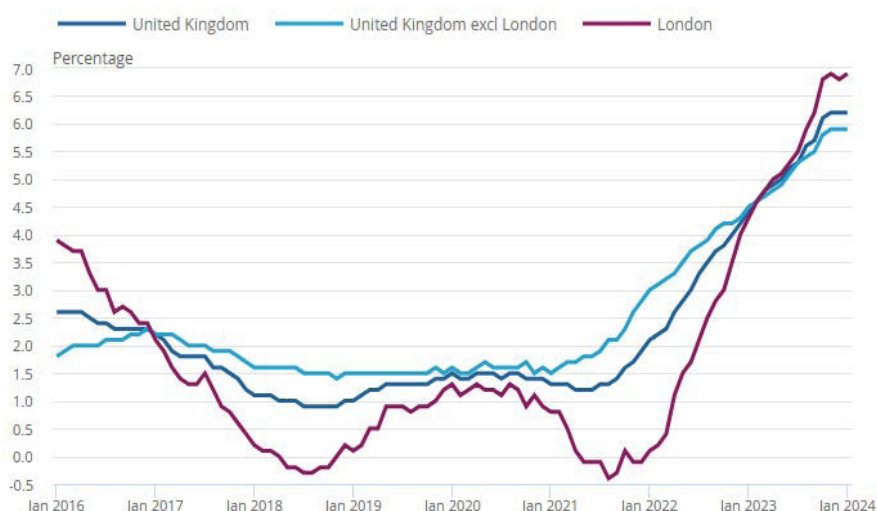
10. Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025), [Link](#)

11. ONS, 'Private rent and house prices, UK: December 2024, 18th December 2024, [link](#).

12. ONS, 'Employee earnings in the UK: 2024', 29th October 2024, [link](#).

Figure 12: Private rental price percentage change over 12 months

**Private rental price percentage change over 12 months, UK and London,
January 2016 to January 2024**



**Source: Index of Private Housing Rental Prices from the Office for
National Statistics**

Only 26% of young people in Policy Exchange's polling own their own home. This is compared to 25% who live at their family's home¹³ and 46% who live in rented accommodation – broadly in alignment with national figures.

Unsurprisingly, the likelihood of a young person owning their own home increases with age. However, even at the top of the sample, homeownership remained quite low. Only 39% of 30-year-olds and 38% of 29 year-olds own their own home. Even more concerning, only 56% of those currently renting or living in the family home believe it is likely they will be able to purchase a home in their lifetime, with 40% believing it is unlikely they will buy a house in their lifetime.

The impact of high house prices

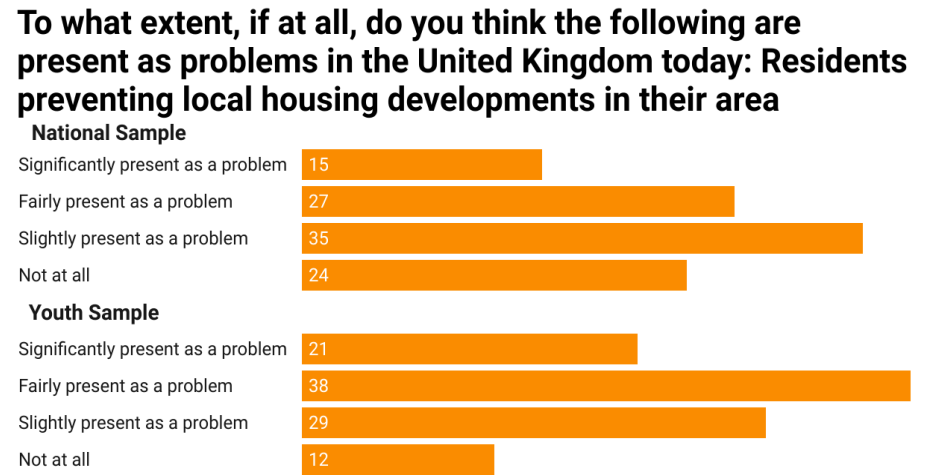
It is one thing to take a room in a shared house, or to be living with one's parents, when one is just starting out in their career. It is another for such a situation to persist into one's later 20s or 30s -when, in previous eras, a person would be becoming established in their career and may well have started a family. A small minority of young people may be choosing to live at home with their parents for cultural reasons. However, given that only 1% of respondents lived in a multigenerational household, we can assume this is a distinct minority and not what is driving the trend.

Living at home impacts the outlook of young people. Just 26% of respondents living at home have a positive view of the UK – compared to 35% in rented accommodation and 39% who own their own home.

13. Only 1% of respondents lived in a multigenerational household.

Young people also see NIMBYism as a significantly greater problem than older generations. 59% of young people polled believed that ‘residents preventing local housing developments in their area’ is fairly or significantly present as a problem in the UK today. This compares with just 42% of the National Polling sample described opposition from residents to local housing developments as a fairly or significantly present problem.

Figure 13: To what extent, if at all, do you think the following are present as problems in the United Kingdom (%)



There is a divide here between young people who are struggling to find housing – either due to high rents or house prices – and older generations who are already settled in areas where they don’t wish to see developments. These tensions have increasing political salience, with Labour committing to restoring mandatory housing targets and to give Combined Authorities new planning powers at the last election – a move which will have appealed to many young voters.¹⁴ Politicians from all parties, however, frequently oppose specific local developments where these are unpopular with existing residents.

The current housing situation is making young people poorer. High rents are taking an ever greater share of income, and for many the purchase of a house is entirely out of reach. This is causing young people to live at home for longer, reducing their disposable income and in some cases is causing them to delay family formation or damaging their overall impact of the UK.

1.2 Income and Taxation

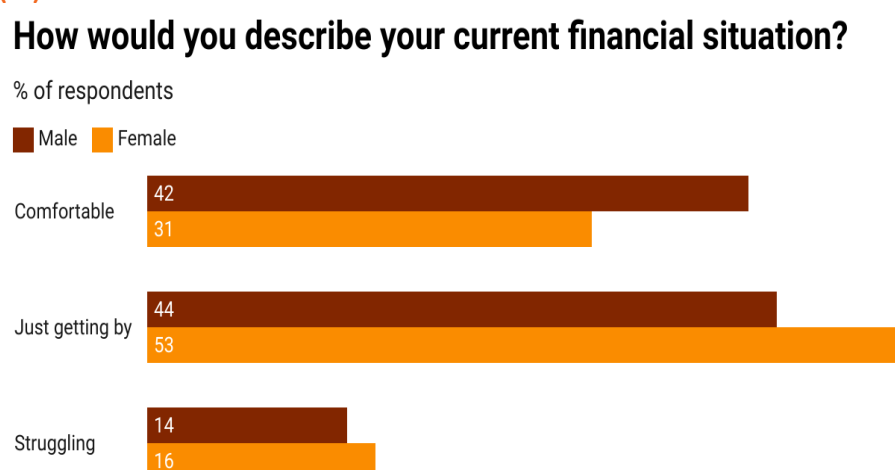
Living standards and household incomes have stagnated since the Financial Crisis of 2008. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that median incomes have grown just 6% since 2010.¹⁵ At the same time, the tax burden has increased to the highest level since 1948. The OBR has forecast it to rise from 36.4 per cent this year to a historic high of 38.2 per cent in 2029-30.¹⁶

14. Labour Party, ‘Manifesto: Change’, 2024, [link](#).
15. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024, [Link](#)
16. Economic and Fiscal Outlook, OBR, October 2024, [Link](#)

Young people are particularly impacted by negative economic conditions. They are less likely to have assets – including homes – built up in more clement conditions. They are more likely to be unemployed: the youth unemployment rate (for those aged 16 – 24) is more than three times the national figure.¹⁷ They are less likely to own their own home and therefore, as discussed above, be impacted by increasing rents. Those under 30 who went to university are also likely to still be paying off their student loan, which further reduces their disposable income. The Intergenerational Foundation has calculated that the bottom income quintile of under-30 households are spending 77% of their expenditure on essentials, 21% up over the last two decades.¹⁸

This was reflected in Policy Exchange's polling, with 48% of young people reporting that they were 'just getting by' and a further 15% describing themselves as 'struggling'. Women were 11 percentage points more likely to say that they were 'just getting by' or 'struggling' – perhaps because women, on average, work jobs which pay slightly less than men.¹⁹ It may also be because female higher education participation is higher (in 2022/23 57% of Higher Education Students were female) leaving more women with students loans decreasing their take-home pay.²⁰ In the past two decades, many female dominated professions have become graduate jobs. The Royal College of Nursing, for example, announced that nursing would become an all-degree profession in 2009. Secretarial and clerical office jobs are now often only available to graduates as well. Conversely, male dominated jobs, such as construction, HGV driving, and train driving, have not made the same move. It is not obvious that women have benefited from these changes.

Figure 14: How would you describe your current financial situation? (%)



17. Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics, 2025, [Link](#)

18. Blowing the Budget, Intergenerational Foundation, 2024, [Link](#)

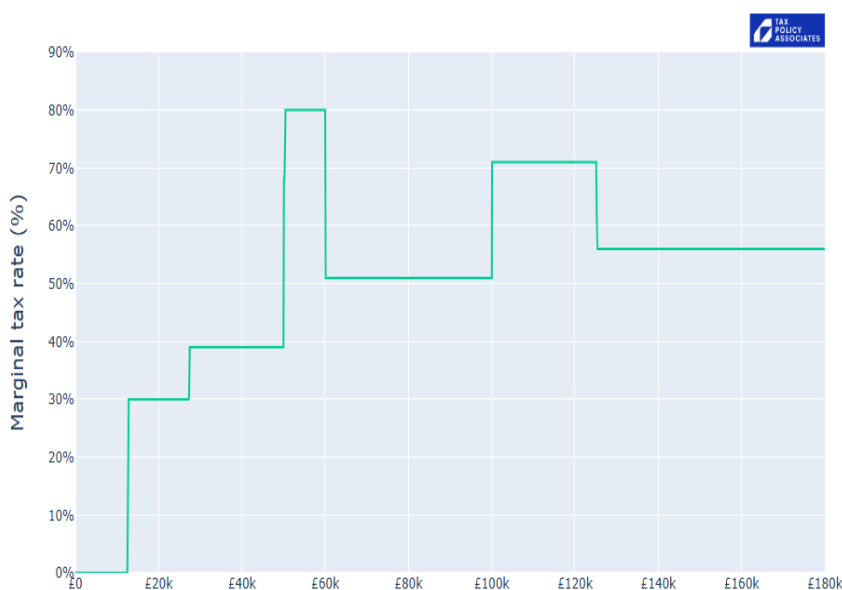
19. ONS, 'Gender pay gap in the UK: 2024', [link](#): 'Full-time median hourly earnings excluding overtime were £19.24 for men and £17.88 for women in April 2024'.

20. Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2022/23 – Student numbers and characteristics, 8th August 2024, [link](#).

The structure of the UK tax system creates particular challenges for young people seeking to settle down, buy their own home and start a family. National Insurance, as a tax paid only by those under state pension age, means that a disproportionate amount of revenue is raised

by those of working age as opposed to pensioners, with the recent cut to the employer allowance meaning that the increased employer National Insurance contributions falls disproportionately on low earners. Student loan repayments add an additional 9% to the effective tax rate for graduates earning over £25,000 – which, when combined with income tax and National Insurance, means a person working 40 hours a week on minimum wage will face an effective marginal tax rate of 40%. For those with children, the gradual withdrawal of child benefit from households in which one parent earns over £60,000 can increase the marginal tax rate to as high as 80%.

Figure 15: Gross employment income vs. marginal tax rate²¹
Gross employment income vs marginal tax rate



Young people are being taxed heavily, with low income growth by historic standards. However, because so many assets are currently held by the Boomer Generation, economists are predicting that in several decades time millennials will be subject to the ‘biggest wealth transfer in history’ when they inherit from their parents. Between 2017 and 2047, £5.5 trillion is expected to be transferred.²²

It may be in anticipation of this inheritance that a large proportion of those polled by Policy Exchange are concerned about inheritance tax. 74% of young people polled said they were ‘fairly’ or ‘significantly’ concerned that inheritances they receive will be disproportionately taxed. This is despite the fact that, in the tax year 2021-2022, only 4.39% of UK deaths incurred inheritance tax.²³

It is true that rising house prices are leading to a gradual increase in the number of estates which attract Inheritance Tax, but many are still worrying unnecessarily. Cuts to National Insurance, VAT or income tax, or revision of the student loan system, would be more likely to improve the prospects of young people – particularly as, based on current life expectancy and the

21. Graph from Tax Policy Associates, 2024, [Link](#)

22. Graph from Tax Policy Associates, 2024, [Link](#)

23. Passing on the Pounds: the rise of the UK's inheritance economy, King's Court Trust, 2017, [Link](#)

24. Gov.UK, 'Accredited official statistics: Inheritance Tax liabilities statistics: commentary', 31st July 2024, [link](#).

average age of parents, it is likely that those who inherit will do so much later in life – most likely after they have had children (if they do so) and faced a lot of the up-front expense of starting a family.

Figure 16: To what extent are you concerned that any inheritance you receive will be disproportionately taxed? (%)

Thinking about your future finances, to what extent, if at all, are you concerned that any inheritance you receive from your parents or other relatives will be disproportionately taxed?



1.3 Family and relationships

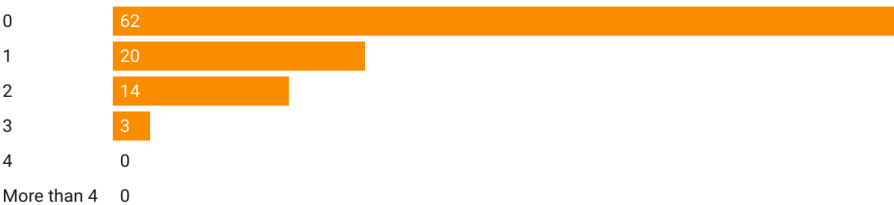
Young people are getting married later (if at all), having fewer relationships, and starting families at an older age. As of 2019 the average of a first-time marriage was 31.5 years-old for women and 33.4 for men. This figure has risen by 9.5 years in the last 40 years.²⁴ Birthrates are also declining, with the total fertility rate²⁵ falling, in the latest statistics to 1.44, the lowest on record.²⁶

These changes have been accompanied by sharp social change. In 2023, the average age of mothers was 30.9 (and the average age of a first-time mother likely even lower).²⁷ A significant number (38%) of newborns are born out of wedlock, a big change from the cultural attitudes of previous generations.²⁸

Unsurprisingly, those in Policy Exchange’s sample mirror this trend. The majority of respondents don’t have any children (62%) with only a small minority having one child (20%) and less than 18% of those we polled with more than one child.

Figure 17: Number of children (%)

How many children do you have?



25. ONS, 'National Statistical: News and insight from the Office for National Statistics', 1st April 2019, [link](#).
26. A measure of how many children the average woman will have in her lifetime.
27. ONS, Births in England and Wales 2023, [link](#)
28. ONS, 'Births in England and Wales: 2023, 28th October 2024, [link](#).
29. ONS, 'National Statistical: Married by 30? You're now in the minority', 1st April 2019, [link](#).
30. UCLA, California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), 2021, [link](#).

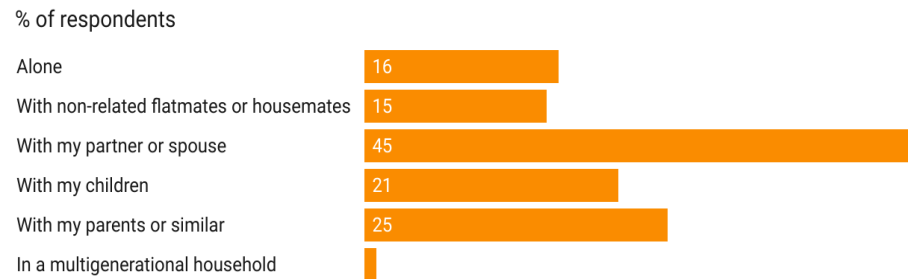
The younger cohort are also widely reported to be struggling with relationship formation. Research has found that young people aged 21-30 are having significantly less sex than previous generations.²⁹ Fewer than half (45%) of those in our sample reported that they were living ‘with my

partner or spouse’.

The generation we polled are the children of women who grew up with mainstream access to the contraceptive pill. First introduced on the NHS in 1961, for married women only, and widely available in 1967, Generation X were the first cohort in human history to gain access to family planning. The shift this prompted was significant – changing assumptions about the right to work, the expectations surrounding marriage and children, and dramatically increasing competition in the workplace. Those in our cohort have grown up in a world in which these shifts are seen as normal. It is very likely that the gradual detachment of the ages of first marriage and first child is a consequence of these developments.

Figure 18: Nature of your household (%)

Which of the following situations best describes the nature of the household in which you currently live?



Young people were slightly less likely than those in the population as a whole to say that having children was a good thing for society (41% vs 49%) and more than twice as likely to say it was a bad thing (16% vs 9%). However, simultaneously, there is more support for the state to provide support to help people have children.

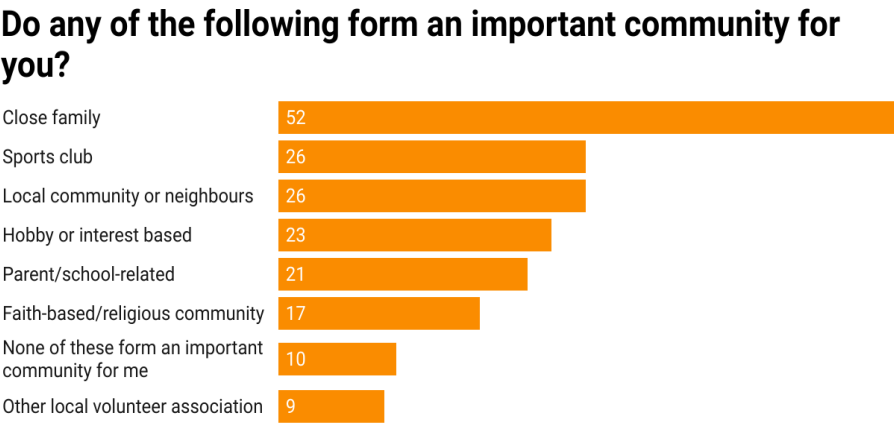
Amongst young people, 32% thought the state should generally encourage people to have children, and IVF and Fertility treatment was selected by more than 1 in 5 young respondents as a top priority of the NHS, compared to fewer than 1 in 10 of those in the population as a whole.

Many studies have reported an increase in loneliness amongst young people. In 2024, the Centre for Social Justice found that seven in ten young people report feeling lonely. 29% noted they felt a fundamental separateness from other people in the wider world. This cohort reported the highest levels of loneliness, with under half of the over 65 age group identifying themselves as lonely. They found the root causes of this phenomena to be high levels of family breakdown, a lack of stable family formation, and more time spent online.³⁰ The ONS have found that young adults aged 16-24 report feeling lonely more often than those in older age groups.³¹ Policy Exchange’s polling found that close family was the most important source of community for young people, with sports clubs, local communities and hobby-based communities also being important for some. 10% of respondents said that none of the options offered formed

31. CSJ, ‘Lonely Nation, Part 1: How family can help to end the loneliness crisis’, May 2024, [link](#).
32. ONS, ‘Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 13 December 2023 to 1 January 2024’, [link](#).

an important community for them.

Figure 19: Do any of the following form an important community for you?



1.4 Mental Health

Young people now report struggling with their mental health more than any other generation. As of the 2021 census, 32% of 16–39-year-olds reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms. This is in comparison to just 15% of 40–69-year-olds and 9% of those 70 years and over.³² This is seriously affecting the day to day lives of young people. The proportion of young people out of work in the UK because of mental health problems has nearly doubled since 2012 according to the Health Foundation.³³ The mental health crisis is also placing pressure on NHS mental health services and on the Special Educational Needs and Disability system in schools.

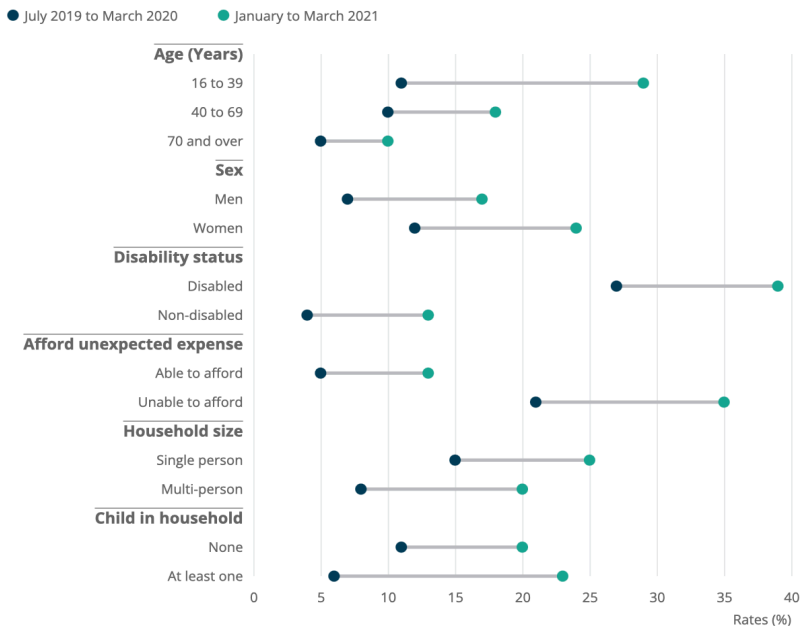
33. ONS, 'Coronavirus and Depression in Adults, May 2021, [link](#).

34. Health Foundation, 'What we know about the UK's working-age health challenge', 17th November 2023, [link](#).

Figure 20: Rates of depressive symptoms for adults aged 16 to 39 years³⁴

Figure 2: In early 2021, rates of depressive symptoms for adults aged 16 to 39 years were more than double when compared with before the pandemic

Great Britain, July 2019 to March 2021

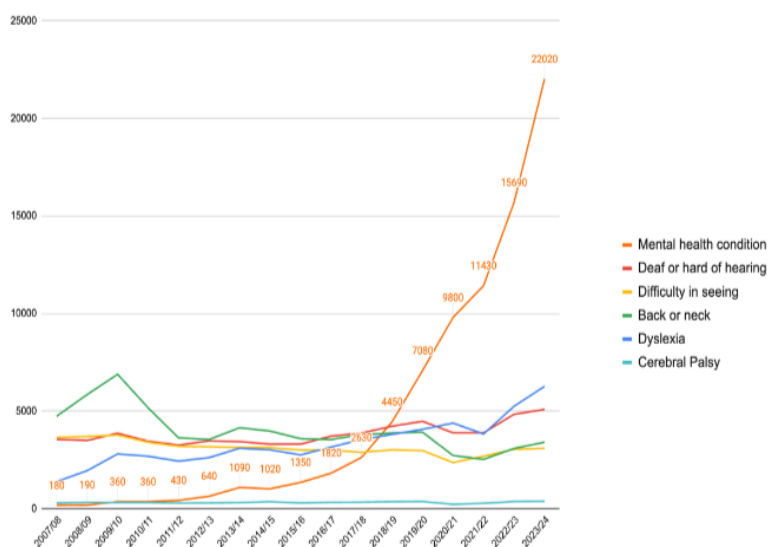


There is debate over what is driving the increase. Jonathan Haidt has written compellingly about the influence of smart phones in young people, combined with diminishing childhood freedom and over-supervision in the real world, as one of the key causes of anxiety and depression in young people.³⁵ Others have suggested that the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are having a long-term impact, whilst still others have suggested that to some extent elements of the human condition that would have previously considered unextraordinary or temporary are now being classified as mental issues.

These causes are not mutually exclusive and it is likely that the causes are multifactorial. Regardless of what is causing the increase, there is no doubt that it is having a real and negative impact upon the lives of many young people – including, amongst many other things, driving a sharp increase in the number of young people claiming incapacity benefit for mental health reasons.³⁶

35. Figure from ONS, 'Coronavirus and Depression in Adults, May 2021, [link](#).
36. Jonathon Haidt, 'The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness', March 2024.
37. For Whose Benefit? Policy exchange, 2025, [Link](#)

Figure 21: Total Access to Work Recipients Approved by Primary medical condition



Source: Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2024 [\[link\]](#)

In turn, this drives young people's expectations of the NHS. 30% of young people think one of the priorities for the NHS should be 'to provide mental health services for those who need it'. This is close to the number of people who believe the NHS' most important job is providing services free at the point of use (33%) and higher than the number of people who wish to see the NHS providing good treatment for major life-threatening disorders. Similarly, 26% of respondents believe the NHS needs to change to provide 'better provision of mental health services'.

While the clear stated preference for young people indicates a need for more mental health services, the evidence doesn't necessarily support this. Abigail Shrier has argued that many therapeutic approaches taken towards younger people with anxiety induce rumination and more severe depressive episodes.³⁷ Research for the National Library of Medicine into 'Patient experience of lasting negative effects of psychological interventions for anxiety and depression in secondary mental health care services' found that psychological therapy for anxiety and depression does not help a significant proportion of young people. 14.1% of those they sampled reported a lasting negative effect as a result of their treatment, while 13.7% reported being 'neutral' about whether therapy had a negative effect.³⁸

The declining mental health of young people is impacting their quality of life, their ability to form friendships and romantic relationships, their ability to work and their ability to pursue their life ambitions. Whatever the causes, our society has not yet found the solutions, for the numbers are continuing to climb – providing one further way in which many young people feel the social contract has broken down.

38. Abigail Shrier, 'Bad Therapy: Why the Kids aren't growing up', 2024,

39. National Library of Medicine, 'Patient experience of lasting negative effects of psychological interventions for anxiety and depression in secondary mental health care services: a national cross-sectional study', 17th November 2021, [link](#).

2. Values and Priorities

Like all members of the public, young people are characterised by more than immediate material concerns – they also have values and principles which guide their behaviour, both generally and politically. Of course, these values and principles are partly shaped by their material experience of the world, but they can also be shaped by factors such as upbringing, religion, social context, and education.

As Policy Exchange details in *A Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion*, the younger age groups in Britain are rapidly diversifying. For example, between 2011 and 2021, the median age of the ‘Black Other’ ethnic group in the census fell from 23 to 19 years. Conversely, the median age of the ‘White British’ group increased from 42 years to 45 – making them one of the oldest ethnic groups in the census. The 18-30 age group have grown up in an age where racial diversity is the norm.

It is often perceived that young people’s primary concern in politics and public policy relates to issues such as identity, race, gender and climate change. It is certainly true that some young people do care deeply about these issues and, previous polling has shown they are more likely to take a more ‘progressive’ position on such matters than older generations. What is not always clear, however, is (a) by how many young people are such views held, and what is the broader spread of opinion; and (b) how important are such issues compared to more fundamental economic issues such as the cost of living, jobs, housing and public services.

As set out above, Policy Exchange’s polling demonstrated that young people feel the social contract has broken down, and that the greatest barriers they see to getting ahead in Britain is not discrimination on the basis of sex or gender, but more traditional issues such as the cost of housing, the labour market and high taxes. In this section, Policy Exchange examined young people’s views on a variety of other matters, including on identity politics, attitudes to authority and protest, to immigration, and to workplace issues such as working from home. We find that, although in many cases these are a little to the left of the population as a whole, they are not overall particularly radical – and, in many areas, including on gender or on immigration, continue to be less ‘progressive’ than the policies adopted by the Government or by many public bodies.

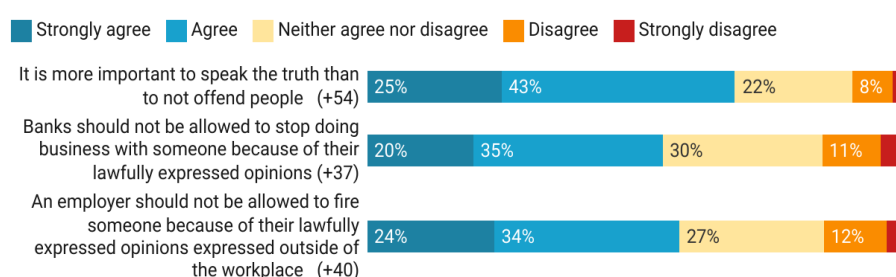
2.1 Free Speech, Gender and Race

Free Speech

The polling tested attitudes towards free speech with regards to three questions. First, a high-level question regarding whether telling the truth is more important than offending people, and then two specific questions which have been relevant in recent years in UK society: whether banks can stop doing business with someone, or whether employers can fire someone, for their lawfully expressed opinions or political views.

Figure 22: Attitudes to Free Speech

Attitudes to Free Speech



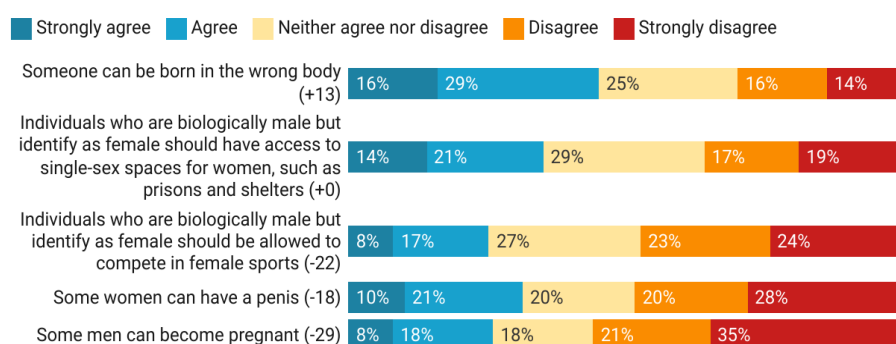
In each case, the balance of opinion amongst young people was strongly on the pro-free speech side. While it was not quite as positive as amongst the population as a whole (which were, respectively, +63, +48 and +55), there was very clearly strong majority support for free speech, even where it is offensive – and opposition to employers or banks who seek to penalise people for expressing it.

Trans and Gender

A further contentious issue in the category of identity concerns questions related to trans, sex and gender. Although these questions were not polled in the youth sample, an assessment of young people's views can be obtained from considering the relevant subset of the whole population poll.³⁹

Figure 23: Attitudes to trans and gender

Attitudes to trans and gender



40. Aged 18 – 34, n = 548.

In addition, 60% of 18–34-year-olds in the whole population sample believed that if a child is questioning their gender, the child should be offered counselling and support to help them understand why they feel this way, with other interventions being deferred for a period, until it can be seen whether the child persists in this belief or moves on from it (sometimes known as the ‘watchful waiting’ approach), with only 24% believing that the child should be affirmed in their belief and encouraged to change their name and pronouns, to dress as the gender they wish to be, and to take puberty blockers to prevent or delay puberty (sometimes known as the ‘affirmative approach’).

There is some nuance to these responses, with young people more receptive to trans ideology than the population as a whole. A plurality of young people believe someone can be born in the wrong body and divided opinions on whether biological males should have access to single sex spaces. However, on other matters – including on competing in sports, or on how children questioning their gender should be treated, young people are sceptical of the view promoted by many trans rights campaign groups, with views that align more strongly with those of gender critical persuasion, who would support a watchful waiting approach for children, that men cannot become pregnant, and that the women’s category in sport should be reserved for biological women.

Race and Class

As discussed above, when asked what the principal barriers were for young people looking to get ahead, racism and sexism was the lowest reason selected (alongside poor quality public transport), with only 15% of young people selecting it as one of the biggest barriers.

Similarly, when polled as to whether race or class was more important in determining a person’s ability to succeed and do well in Britain, a clear majority (57%) of young people considered class was more important, with only 18% selecting class. As with other issues in this area, this was a slightly lower differential than for the population as a whole (where the ratio was 58%:13%), but still similar in directionality and magnitude. Material factors, over identity politics, were repeatedly throughout our polling weighted as more important.

2.2 Attitudes to Authority

Policy Exchange’s polling tested a number of elements of young people’s attitudes towards authority, in regards to education, crime and protest.

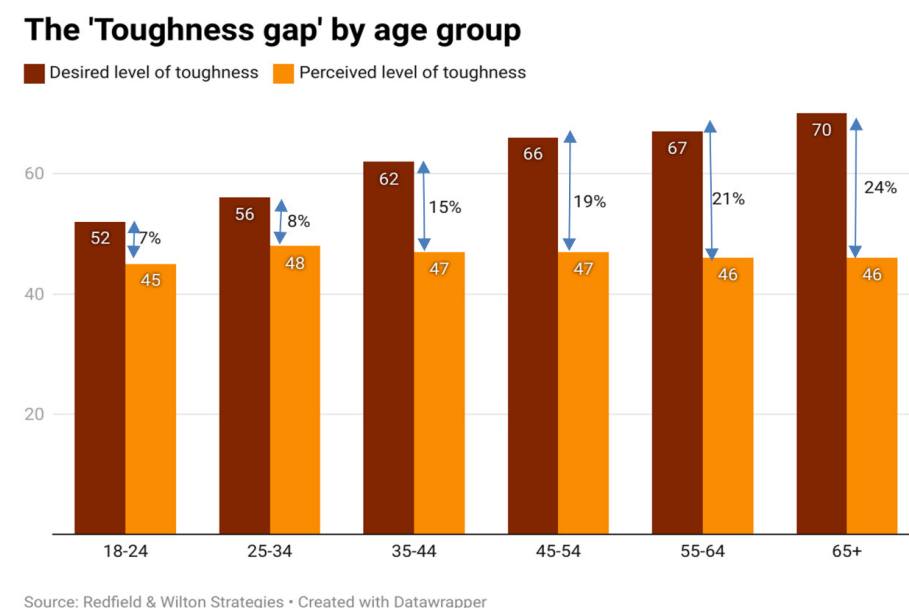
When asked to consider their time in school, almost half of respondents (47%) agreed that adult authority was present the right amount, and rules were clear and well enforced. Of the remainder, 28% felt that adult authority was not present enough, leading to disruption and bullying by other children, and only 12% felt that adult authority was too present, in a way that was strict, overbearing or bullying.

This stands in stark contrast to the narrative that is often presented of schools being overly harsh, or that strict behaviour policies in schools are

responsible for contributing to the mental health crisis. In fact, a clear majority of young people believe that schools either got it right or should be stricter – with fewer than 1 in 8 believing the opposite.

When it came to the police, amongst the population as a whole, the older a respondent is, the more unsatisfied they are likely to be with the toughness of policing in the UK.

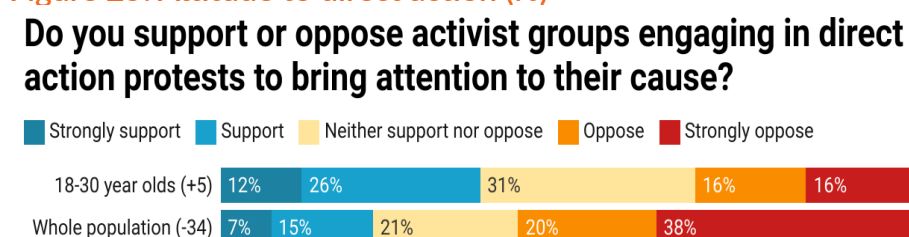
Figure 24: The 'Toughness gap' by age group



Young people had the smallest 'toughness gap' of any age-group polled. However, it is notable that, even amongst younger people, there is a belief that the police should be tougher than they are.

One area where young people did differ significantly from the population as a whole was in their attitude towards direct action protests (i.e. protesters blocking roads or bridges, defacing artworks and monuments, disrupting sporting events or official meetings, in order to bring attention to their cause). The population as a whole clearly opposes such activities (net -35 opposed); however, amongst the youth sample a small minority supported such activities (net +5 support) – the only age group to do so.

Figure 25: Attitude to direct action (%)



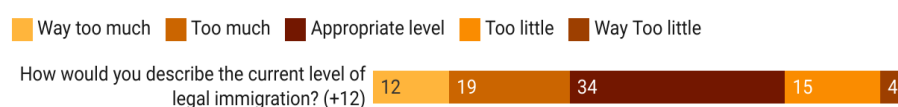
2.3 Immigration

Immigration is another area where it can be assumed that young people will be strongly on a left. Policy Exchange's polling, however, found that while young people were more positive about immigration than the population as a whole, and while they held nuanced views over the areas where it had had positive or negative effects, overall, by a small but significant margin, they considered that immigration was too high, that immigrants get more priority from the Government than UK citizens, and that they would support the Government introducing a cap on legal immigration.

A third of young people thought there was an appropriate amount of legal immigration, with almost another third thinking there was too much, and only 19% thinking there was too little.

Figure 26: Views of Legal Immigration (%)

Views on Legal Immigration



Young people supported the Government introducing a cap on legal migration by a net margin of +25.

Figure 27: Support for a cap on legal migration

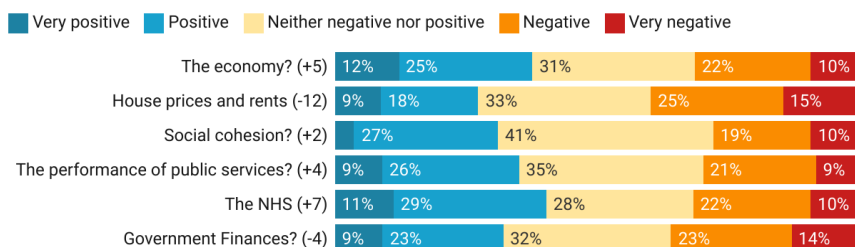
Should the Government introduce a cap on legal migration?



When it came to the impact of legal immigration on various aspects of UK society, young people took a nuanced view, with relatively split views on whether it had had a positive or negative impact. The strongest areas it was felt to have had an effect was on house prices (-12 net negative effect) and on the NHS (+7 net positive effect).

Figure 28: Has legal immigration had a positive or negative effect? (%)

Has legal immigration primarily had a positive or negative effect on the following:



Finally, when it came to public services and Government support, a plurality of young people (37%) felt that immigrants were getting priority over UK citizens, with only 21% believing the opposite (a further 24% believed that UK citizens and immigrants were getting equal priority). Despite this, 52% of young people believed that the UK should follow international law on such matters, with only 25% believing the UK Parliament should decide – a stark contrast to the population as a whole, who were split on the matter (43% to 41%).

2.4 Career Ambitions

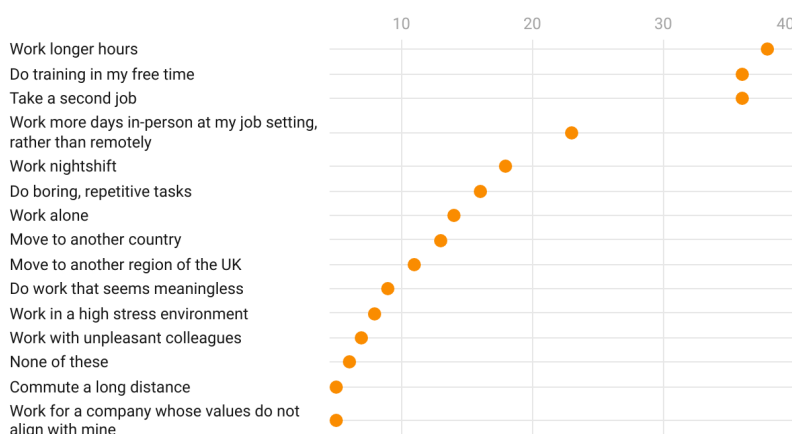
71% of those we polled are currently satisfied with their current job. This is despite the fact that, as noted previously, 63% of those we asked believed they were just getting by or struggling, and that almost half thought they were worse off than their parents were at their age.

Notably, when we asked respondents what they would do to increase their income, young people were relatively unenthusiastic about changing their lifestyle to improve their earnings.

Figure 29: Which of the following would you be willing to do to increase your income?⁴⁰

Which of the following, if any, would you be willing to do to increase your income?

● % of respondents



41. Respondents were asked to tick all the answers that they applied.

Over a third of respondents were prepared to work longer hours to increase their income, to take a second job or to do training in their free time, suggesting that hours themselves are not the issue – and perhaps reflecting a willingness to take on a ‘side-hustle’ amongst some young people. Less than a quarter (23%) of those polled would be prepared to work more days in-person at their work, and only 5% to commute a long distance, suggesting that for many young people, patterns of working at home established in the pandemic may have become entrenched.

Young people were, however, reluctant to accept a job that they enjoyed less. It is perhaps unsurprising that fewer than 1 in 5 were willing to move to another country or to another region of the UK (although historically many people would have done this). However, only 16% were willing to do boring, repetitive tasks and fewer than 10% were willing to work in a high stress environment, with unpleasant colleagues, to do work that seems meaningless or to work for a company whose values do not align with theirs.

Given one of the strong themes of our polling was young people’s concern about financial barriers such as house prices and the cost of living, a lack of readiness to make big changes to their working environment is surprising.

However, this trend might be explained by a few concurrent phenomena. On the one hand, young people are products of their context and the context created by previous generations. To some extent, a lack of willingness to improve their earnings may come from a feeling that, even if they increase their salaries, the real fruits – such as the ability to afford their own home – will still be out of reach. The implicit social contract on which our society rests, which promises greater opportunity and prosperity to each new generation, does not appear to have been met.

The findings also suggest that maintaining work-life balance is simply very important to young people. They seem to prioritise maintaining mental health over increasing their income, or getting promoted at work, even if they have indicated dissatisfaction with their current financial status. This also suggests that the increasing emphasis placed on well-being and mental-health may be taking a longer term toll on Britain’s workforce, by impacting the readiness and aspirations of young people to take jobs that are not actively fulfilling or welcoming.

3 . The Centre Cannot Hold

3.1 The rise of fourth party voting

Across the Western world, young people are turning away from established political parties and towards more radical alternatives. These manifestations of anti-system frustration are heterodox and highly contextual – but they are united by a shared belief in the need for change and a shared disillusionment with business as usual.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in Europe. The French 2022 Presidential Election saw a significant upswing in youth backing for movements like the RN (on the right) and the LFI (on the left)⁴¹. This corresponded with a breakdown in support for traditional parties of the centre-right (Les Republicains) and the centre-left (Parti Socialiste), while the centrist movement of President Emmanuel Macron captured most of its support amongst older cohorts.

The groundswell of youth support for the AFD in Germany in the recent February 2025 German Federal Election signalled the end of long-established voter coalitions. Not only did the AFD nearly double their voter share from the last election, but they also commanded 21% of the vote from the 18-24 group and 23% from the 25-34 group. Traditionally, the German political system has been dominated by the centre-right CDU and the centre-left SPD – but in recent years, these traditional allegiances have broken down. While the CDU commanded 28.5% of the overall vote, this only translated into 13% of 18–24-year-olds and 17% of 25–34-year-olds, suggesting younger voters are abandoning traditional parties. Similarly, only 12% of 18–34-year-olds supported the SPD in contrast to 16.4% overall.⁴²

Similarly, The Greens and Die Linke, two parties of the left, saw increased support amongst younger voters, at the expense of the SPD. But in recent years, the AFD has also been able to capture the energy of some young voters, winning support on a platform which promises a marked break from the status quo.

The 2024 American Election bore witness to a similar trend. While Donald Trump stood for a major party, his campaign relied heavily on a narrative focusing on the fact “the system is rigged against our citizens”. Polling data shows this allowed him to gain traction with many groups, including young men.⁴³ Indeed, when compared to his victory in 2016, Trump’s biggest positive shift in support came amongst younger cohorts.

From Javier Milei’s radical libertarianism in Argentina to the socialism of Lopez Obrador (and latterly Claudia Sheinbaum) in Mexico, young

42. Ipsos, 'Sociologie des Électorats et Profil Des Absentionnistes, 30th June 2024, link<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-06/ipsos-talan-sociologie-electorats-legislatives-30-juin-rapport-complet.pdf>.

43. DW, 'German election results explained in graphics', Kristin Zeier and Gianna-Carina Grün, 27th February 2025, [link](#).

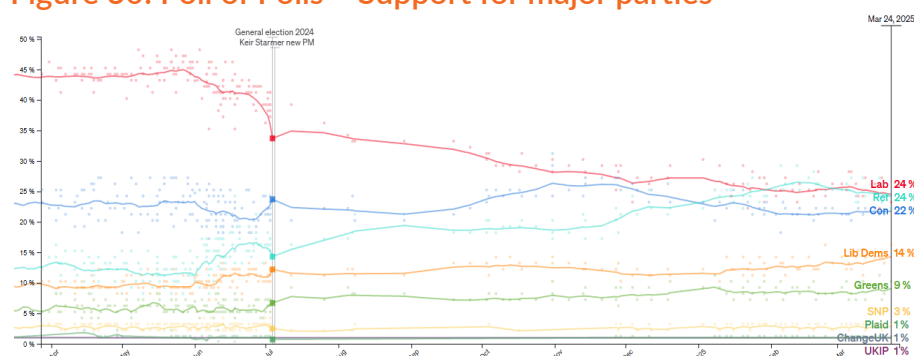
44. Forbes, 'Harris Won the College Educated Vote – But Trump gained young and Latino Voters, Here's the breakdown', November 6th 2024, [link](#).

people are turning towards political alternatives which promise sweeping change to the status quo. This is directly related to a perceived stalling of growth in living standards or life prospects for young people, and as such, strong opposition to traditional parties is emerging globally.

Historically, the UK has been shielded from these trends, in part due to the First Past the Post electoral system which encourages voters to support larger parties, and provides little incentives for supporting a candidate unlikely to secure a majority (save for the protest vote). This means that smaller parties like Reform (formerly Brexit Party) and the Greens have for many years gained culturally traction, or social media attention, which has not necessarily translated into votes. The 2016 Brexit referendum and subsequent debates likely also subsumed a populist right-wing energy. However, the 2024 General Election and events since saw a shift in this established trend.

The 2024 general election saw many voters of all ages abandoning the established three-party settlement and supporting fourth parties or independents. The combined vote share of the two major parties fell below 60% for the first time since the Second World War – and as Politico’s Poll of Polls shows, opinion polling during 2025 has regularly found both the Conservative and Labour parties polling at 25% or below.⁴⁴

Figure 30: Poll of Polls – Support for major parties



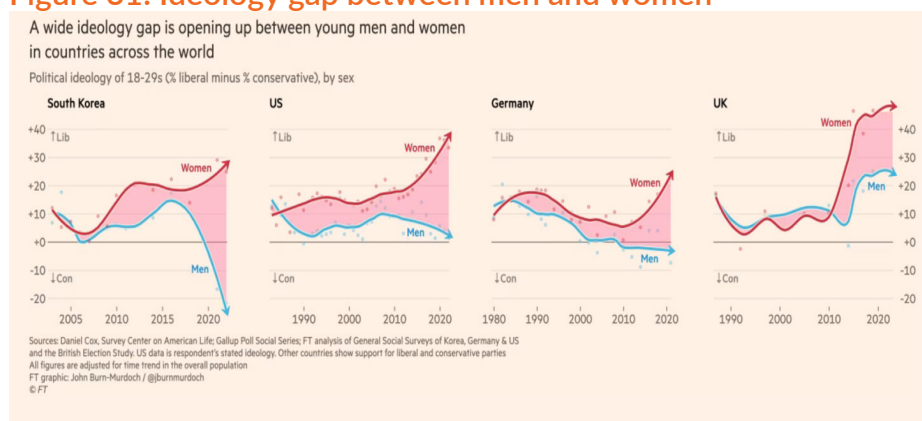
An emerging divide between the sexes

Over recent years there has been some evidence of a divergence of political opinions between young men and young women. For example John Burn-Murdoch of the Financial Times has written about a global gender divide which has seen young women identify far more closely with progressive or left wing ideas than their male counterparts.⁴⁵ Notably, according to Burn-Murdoch’s research, this gap in the UK is a product of women shifting leftwards faster than men, rather than a male move to the right.

45. Poll of Polls, Politico, last accessed on 27 March 2025, [Link](#)

46. Financial Times, ‘A new global gender divide is emerging’, 25th January 2024, [link](#).

Figure 31: Ideology gap between men and women

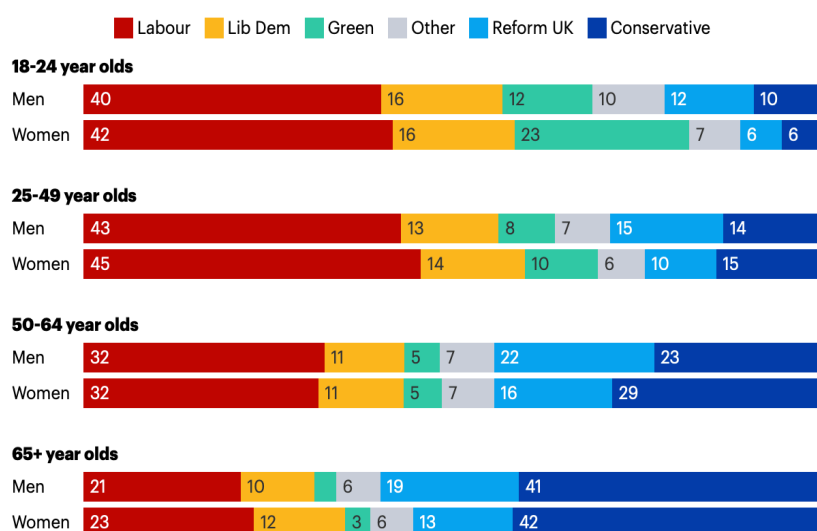


Amongst young people, 10% of 18–24-year-old men voted Reform, 12% voted Green. These numbers are both equal to or higher than the 10% of 18-24 year-old men who voted Conservative. 25–29-year-old men voted 15% Reform and 8% Green. Amongst 18–24-year-olds, 23% of women voted Green, a number higher than the Liberal Democrat and Conservative vote amongst this age-group combined.⁴⁶

Figure 32: How Britons voted at the 2024 general election

How did Britons vote at the 2024 general election: age and gender

Which party did you vote for at the General Election in July 2024? % of 35,205 voters



YouGov

5-8 July 2024

A fragmented news environment

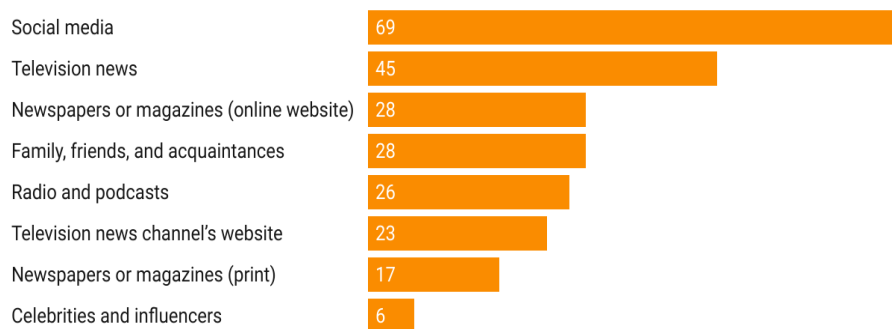
Our polling found that by far young people's most important source of news was social media, with 69% selecting it as one of their top three sources of news. Social media provides a far more fragmented environment than traditional news media – something which can have advantages, in

47. YouGov, 'How Britain voted in the 2024 general election', Adam McDonnell, [link](#).

enabling other voices to be heard and making it harder for inconvenient truths to be suppressed, but also disadvantages, in that conspiracy theories can flourish and people more easily retreat to within their own ‘filter bubble’. A world in which social media is increasingly important as a source of news is one in which it is harder for the traditional parties to retain their monopoly, and where it is easier for challenger parties to attract voters.

Figure 31: Most important sources of news for young people

Most important sources of news for young people



The future of the centre

There is no reason we should not expect such trends to play out in the UK – where young people are faced with many of the same issues – demographic change placing a heavy burden on a smaller portion of taxpayers, rising immigration, an expensive welfare state, and declining quality of public services. Over the next five years, one of the central challenges for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, will be identifying a policy offering which can tempt young voters away from Reform, Green, and Independent parties – while the challenge for Labour will be how to retain them, despite the difficult choices involved in governing.

However, we should also not make the mistake of assuming that this trend is an inevitable one. In recent years, examples from other Anglosphere nations, with similar political system, show that centrist parties are capable of winning over young voters with a focus on material improvements to their economic position, particularly by focusing on housing and income. In Canada, the rise of Pierre Poilievre’s Conservative Party captured the imagination of many centre-right thinkers around the world. Poilievre had managed to revive his party’s political fortunes with a laser-focus on issues such as housing – in doing so, he was beginning to win the affection of many young voters without alienating the Conservative Party’s traditional base. Poilievre’s fortunes took a major down-turn following Trump’s inauguration, with a sudden Liberal resurgence at the beginning of this year which saw Mark Carney’s Liberals win the election with a vote share of 43.1%, compared to Poilievre’s 41.7% - and a collapse in support for the other parties. The way in which first Poilievre and then Carney gained

support shows that centrist parties can do well with young voters when they focus on the correct issues.

And in New Zealand, the centre-right National Party of Christopher Luxon has managed to govern on a similar basis, in coalition with the populist New Zealand First and the classically liberally ACT Party. As in Canada, Luxon's pitch has focused on reviving the economic assumptions of 20th century Anglophone conservatism, promising career progression and property ownership, with an ancillary focus on law and order, immigration control, and preference for material over ideological concerns.

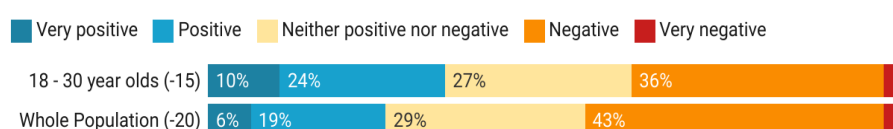
These two case studies demonstrate that traditional political vehicles on the right can be made attractive to younger voters – but that, in order to do so, these parties need to embrace a belief in the need for system change. This belief need not be radical or all-consuming, and it can embody the same pragmatism which has traditionally characterised movements of the centre-right. Similarly, while Mark Carney's revival of the Liberal Party of Canada's fortune has been primarily driven by a patriotic Canadian response to President Trump's words and actions, it has also involved quietly abandoning some of the more 'identity based' progressive policies and language of his predecessor in favour of the centre ground.

3.2 Decline in faith in the state

When asked about their overall view of the UK as a whole, young people had a negative view, though slightly less negative than the population as a whole.

Figure 34: Do you have a positive or negative view of the UK?

Do you have a positive or negative view of the UK as it is today?



As has been set out above, in our polling young people identified the biggest barriers for young people in the UK looking to get ahead as house/rent prices (59%), high taxes (40%) and a difficult job market (39%). In other questions, we explored their confidence in public services, in particular in the NHS and in crime.

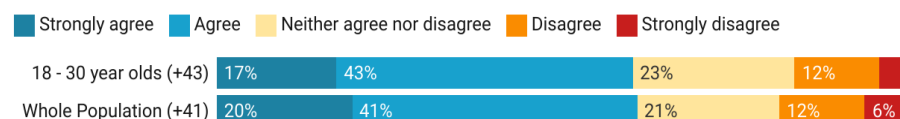
3.2.1 Public Services

Young people were confident, by a large margin, that if they needed healthcare they would receive good treatment from the NHS. In this, their views were very similar to those of the population as a whole. In terms of their priorities for the NHS, their top three were similar to that of the population as a whole: to see a GP if they needed one (56%), that they

received good treatment after an accident (39%); and that it remained free at the point of use (36%); however, compared to the general population, they placed a lower emphasis on treatment for life-threatening diseases such as cancer (28% vs 44%) and a higher emphasis on mental health (30% vs 26%) and on contraception and fertility treatment (22% vs 10%).

Figure 35: Confidence in the NHS (%)

If I needed healthcare, I am confident I would receive good treatment from the NHS

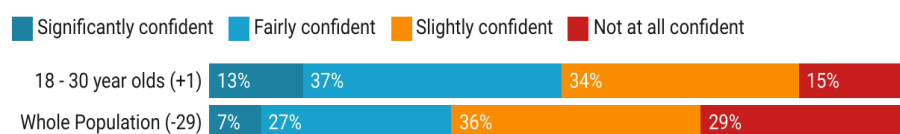


In contrast, young people have significantly greater confidence in the police to protect them from crime than the general public. Whilst not high, at +1, the confidence of young people is significantly higher than the -29 expressed by the whole population.

Encouragingly, this also extends to young people who have been victims of crime in the last two years (18%, marginally lower than the 20% in the whole population sample). 42% of young people who had been victims of crime were satisfied with the police response, with only 31% dissatisfied; this compares to 33% satisfied and 50% dissatisfied in the population as a whole. This may in part explain why young people have the smallest 'toughness gap' – the difference between how tough on crime they perceive the police are, and how tough they would like them to be.

Figure 36: Confidence in the police (%)

How confident are you in the police to protect you from crime?



By a small margin (45% to 35%), young people agreed with the statement, 'I would rather pay more tax if that meant public services improved' over 'I would rather pay less tax even if that meant public services got worse'; however, when those who had said they would be willing to pay more were asked how much more they would be willing to pay, over a third said up to £10 and 60% said £25 or fewer.

Overall, despite a generalised sense of dissatisfaction with the UK, young people are relatively confident in public services. It is their more immediate personal life – their salary, relationships, and life progression

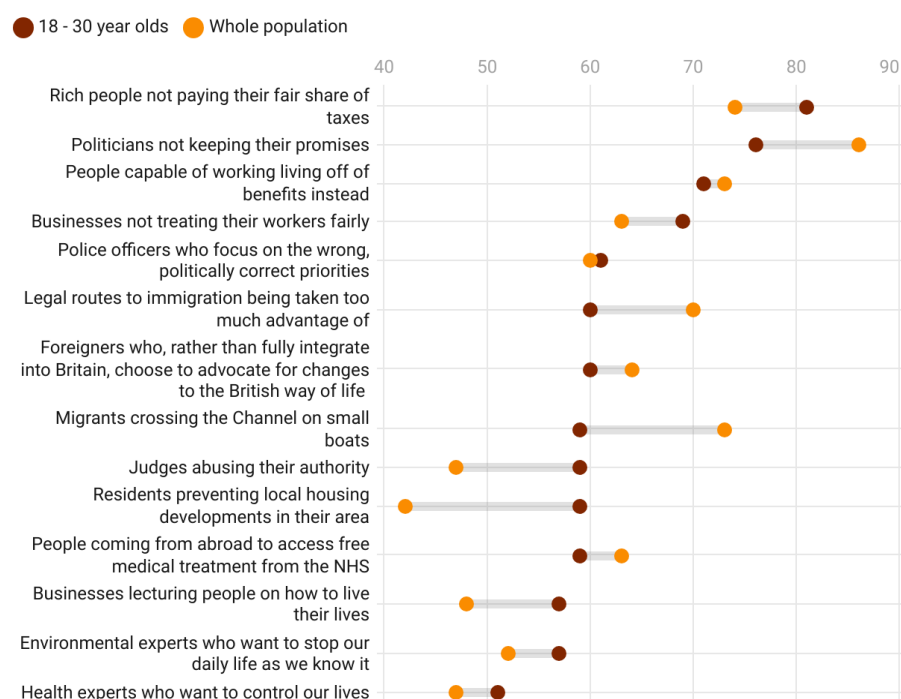
– which is disappointing young people.

3.2.2 Who's to blame?

In order to assess who young people held responsible for the state of the nation, we asked them a series of questions as to whether certain issues were problems in the UK today. These were deliberately framed provocatively – 'Rich people not paying their fair share of taxes', 'Politicians not keeping their promises' – to reflect the way such criticisms might be commonly encountered on social media, or in tabloid newspapers, to assess which problems resonated most with young people.

For each issue, we asked whether it was significantly present, fairly present, slightly present or not at all present as a problem.

Figure 37: To what extent are the following problems in the UK?
To what extent are the following problems in the UK today?



With questions posed in this deliberately provocative manner, the absolute level of each response is less important than the relative level – both compared with each other, and compared to the views of the general population.

Using such a lens, it is noteworthy that the four highest concerns of young people – with the exception of 'politicians not keeping their promises' – all concerned direct, material complaints, rather than cultural or social ones, and are also concerns traditionally associated with both the left and the right: 'rich people not paying their fare share of taxes', 'people capable of working living off of benefits' and 'businesses not treating their workers fairly'. This provides further evidence for the hypothesis that

young people's greatest concerns are economic and material, rather than cultural or identity based.

The issue with the greatest difference between young people and the general population was on housing, with young people 17 percentage points more likely to believe that 'residents preventing local housing developments in their area' was a problem – again, aligning with their belief that high house prices and rents are the greatest barrier to young people getting ahead in the UK today.

On more cultural issues, on all four of the issues related to immigration, young people were less likely than the general population to consider this a problem – though in each case, approximately 60% or more felt that the issue raised was fairly or significantly present as a problem. This is consistent with the findings presented in Chapter Two, in which young people, though less negative about immigration than the general population, are still concerned – particularly at a perception that immigrants may be 'taking advantage' in some way. Similarly, they expressed a similar level of concern to the general population about 'police officers who focus on the wrong, politically correct, priorities.'

Though these were not their highest concerns, young people were also somewhat more distrustful of the role of authorities – whether environmental and health experts, judges or businesses – in determining how people should live their lives, potentially reflecting a declining trust in the role of the state to know what is best.

3.3 Belonging

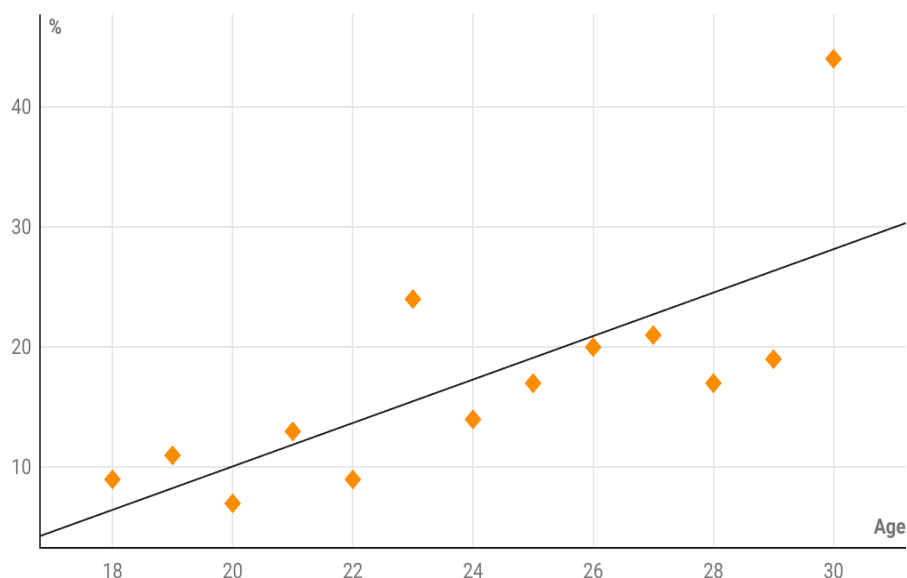
Young people were less than half as likely as the general population to report that they felt a high sense of Britishness – with only 19% reporting answers of 8-10 on a 10 point scale that a sense of Britishness was important to their identity, compared to 40% of the general population. When compared against the results for our ethnic minority polling⁴⁷, young people were less likely to report a high sense of Britishness than every (all-age) ethnic minority polled – demonstrating that this low sense of Britishness cannot be attributed to demographic or ethnic change.

Within the age range, there is a strong relationship between age and reporting a high sense of Britishness, with only 14% of 18 – 24 year olds doing so compared to 24% of 25 – 30 year olds. Breaking the data down further, we find a strong relationship between age and likelihood to report a high sense of Britishness. It is unclear whether the extent to which this is an age effect (and that 18 year olds will become more patriotic as they get older), or a cohort effect (in which something – e.g. shifting attitudes towards Britishness in schools, or in media experienced at a formative age – has resulted in a genuine reduction in sense of Britishness that will persist).

48. As set out in A Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion, Policy Exchange (2024), [Link](#)

Figure 38: Percentage of young people reporting a high sense of Britishness by age (%)

Percentage of young people reporting a high sense of Britishness by age



When asked to select the top three things that are most important in fostering a sense of pride and belonging in Britain, there were both important similarities and differences between young people and the general population. For the general population, the top four factors were the British countryside (42%), the Royal Family (31%), Britain's record of scientific discovery and invention (30%) and British historical legacy and achievements (29%). By contrast, for young people, the top four were the British countryside (35%), British sporting achievements (25%), the Royal Family (21%) and Britain's music and literature (21%).

We can see that while the Royal Family and the countryside continue to imbue a sense of pride and belonging, matters related to Britain's historical achievements have declined. British historical legacy and achievements were cited as fostering pride and belonging by only 16%, Britain's history of Parliamentary democracy by 16%, and Britain's record of scientific discovery and invention by 17%. The British Armed Forces were cited as a source of pride and belonging by only 12%, the lowest result of any option polled.

One reason for this may simply be that they are less aware of them. When asked about 18 major features or events in British history, there were only six features which more than half of respondents said they were 'significantly' or 'fairly' familiar:

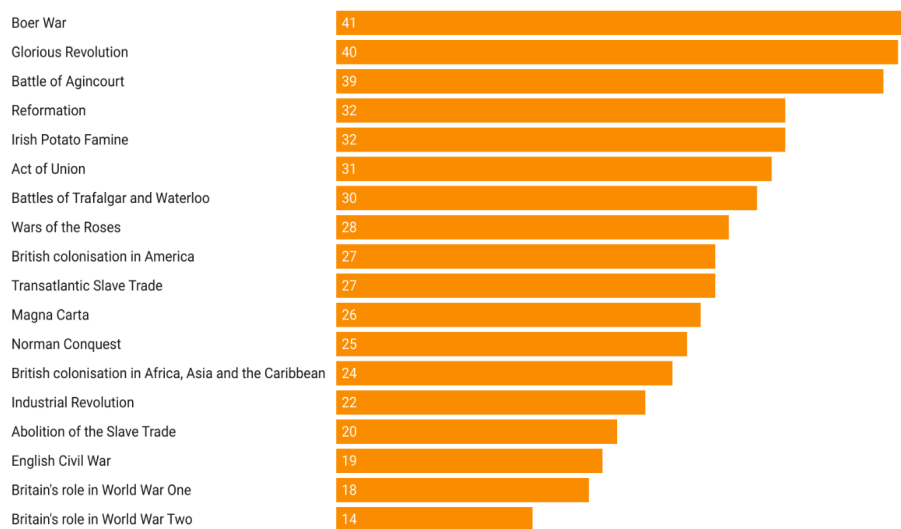
- The English Civil War
- The Abolition of the Slave Trade
- The Industrial Revolution
- British Colonisation in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean

- Britain's role in World War One
- Britain's role in World War Two

To consider the flip side of the coin, with the exception of the World Wars, a significant minority of young people professed to be 'not at all' familiar with many of the events polled, including 41% who were not at all familiar with the Boer War, 40% who were not at all familiar with the Glorious Revolution and 39% not at all familiar with the Battle of Agincourt. Almost a third were not at all familiar with the Reformation and with the Act of Union.

Figure 29: Young people 'not at all familiar' with each event (%)

Young people saying they are 'not at all familiar' with each event (%)



Of course, because some people say they are 'not at all familiar' with something does not mean it was not taught in school: many people will forget things they have learned.⁴⁹ While school was cited as one of the most significant sources of their knowledge of British history by most young people (60%), film and television (41%), parents or family (37%) and books (26%) were also significant sources for many. But when considering both the six most well known events, and the events which more people were not at all familiar with, it is clear that knowledge of British history amongst young people tilts heavily towards more modern history, and topics such as the World Wars, colonisation, the slave trade and its abolition and the Industrial Revolution – all important topics, certainly, but far from the full spectrum of British history.

In particular, the lack of knowledge of core elements of British Constitutional History, including the Reformation, Glorious Revolution and Act of Union, as well as of formerly much-renowned victories such as Agincourt, Waterloo or Trafalgar – which would, until 1-2 generations ago, have had a central position in the story of our nation – could be a factor in explaining both the reduced sense of Britishness and the reduced pride in British historical accomplishments. Increased emphasis of these elements

49. A forthcoming Policy Exchange report will explore in more depth what is taught in schools.

of our history – whether in schools or in wider cultural endeavours – would be likely to strengthen young people's sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, despite this lack of knowledge, young people believe that, throughout history, Britain has been a force for good in the world (50% agree, with only 14% disagreeing) and that children who are raised in Britain should be taught to be proud of Britain and its history (53% agree, with 29% disagreeing). Although both sentiments are notably lower than in the general population, this nevertheless provides a strong foundation on which a greater level of historical knowledge, belonging and Britishness could be built.

Conclusion

The portrait painted by this report is not a positive one. Many young people are profoundly discontented with a social contract which isn't working for them. Successive Governments have ignored the concerns of the young – targeting election promises at pensioners, often directly at their expense. At the same time, they are shouldering the financial burden of a demographic shift which is driving a steady increase in the dependency ratio – as well as a welfare system in which an increasing number of people are on out-of-work benefits.

High house prices – both on the rental market and for purchase – are driving falling quality of living for young people. While older generations have seen the value of their assets increase, young people have been priced out of the market. The increase in house prices and rental costs also contributes to declining relationship formation and family formation. Unable to achieve the basic milestones of modern life, the aspirations of the under 30 cohort have been gradually eroded. Most would now be happy with simply being debt free and healthy.

The problems identified in this report are resolvable. The trend towards political fragmentation is not inevitable – but instead reflects a failure of the major parties to engage meaningfully with the under-30 cohort.

Young people are not primarily looking for gimmicks, or virtue-signalling on progressive issues. Any political party looking to win over the young should look first to tackling their material economic concerns: on housing, taxation, student loan debt, the labour market, the cost of living and the financial cost of family formation. For the party – whether on the right or the left – that can both craft and genuinely deliver an offer that addresses these concerns, the loyalty of a neglected generation is the prize to be won.



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