



COMMUNITY CALLING

People want more influence

Joe Sarling

New Local is an independent think tank and network with a mission to transform public services and unlock community power.

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Tel 020 7148 4601

Email info@newlocal.org.uk

www.newlocal.org.uk

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Any omissions or errors are that of the author.

Joe Sarling

Director of Policy and Research

INTRODUCTION

Everything feels polarised. Politics is polarised; debates are at the extremes; people's circumstances are oversimplified. The complicated and nuanced needs of people in communities are not being sufficiently heard. And the ideas and insight they have are not shaping services they want. It's time for a different approach.

For decades, policy debates have tended to oscillate between the idealised visions of either a centralised state-led approach and a market-led approach. This polarisation misses the crucial third approach that starts with people in their communities. This approach puts individuals at the heart in a way that a state-dominated model can't but, crucially, also recognises people as community members in the way a market-led model can't. We've missed this nuance for too long.

New Local has long recognised this desire for individuals to have more influence over the services, policies and decisions that affect their community. There are a series of disconnects: communities and the Westminster politicians that represent them; communities and those that develop policies and design services; communities and the agency to solve problems.

These issues have been brought into sharp focus by the overlapping crises of the cost of living, dissatisfaction with public services, poor representation and distrust of national politicians, and the sense that people feel they don't control their own destinies. Communities need to be heard and asked directly about issues they see for themselves and what could help overcome them.

New Local worked in partnership with Britain Thinks on a comprehensive study exploring these community desires, the sentiment of communities regarding where agency lies, and the role community power could play in overcoming challenges. Over 2,000 people were asked for their views as part of an online survey and seven focus groups were conducted across three separate age cohorts in 'Red Wall' and in suburban 'Swing Seat' areas.¹

¹ See Appendix for full methodology

HEADLINES

There is a fundamental lack of trust in Westminster politicians to tackle national issues

– The majority of people were unconfident in Westminster's ability to tackle the cost-of-living crisis (66% unconfident), loneliness/wellbeing (56%), Levelling Up (54%), and climate change (51%).

There is a strong sense of disconnect between those decision makers at the top and the public

– 79% think Westminster and Whitehall are making decisions about people and places they know little about.

There is an appetite for more local control

– 79% of people think the best decisions are made when the people who will be affected are closely involved in the process and 75% think that allowing communities to have more of a say in decisions that affect their area would be more effective than decisions taken centrally.

People want more control and influence but within existing governance structure

– the Red Wall and Swing Seat focus groups highlighted how existing tiers of government (local councils, parish councils) should play an important role to avoid duplication, overcome disagreements, and avoid exploitation of any new system.

Local figures are most trusted

– 53% of people had trust in members of their local community to have their community's best interests at heart with 45% trusting local charitable/grassroots organisations, 33% trusting councils, and 8% trusting national politicians.

People understand spatial variation

– the Red Wall and Swing Seat focus groups demonstrated a clear understanding that different places have different issues and will need different solutions.

An overwhelming majority of people support full funding of councils

– 79% of people think national politicians should guarantee funding for local councils so they can invest in communities.

Most people think community power should be politically committed to and legislated for – 73% think national politicians should transfer more power to local areas while 71% think that there should be a legal right for communities to have a say over how their local public services are run.

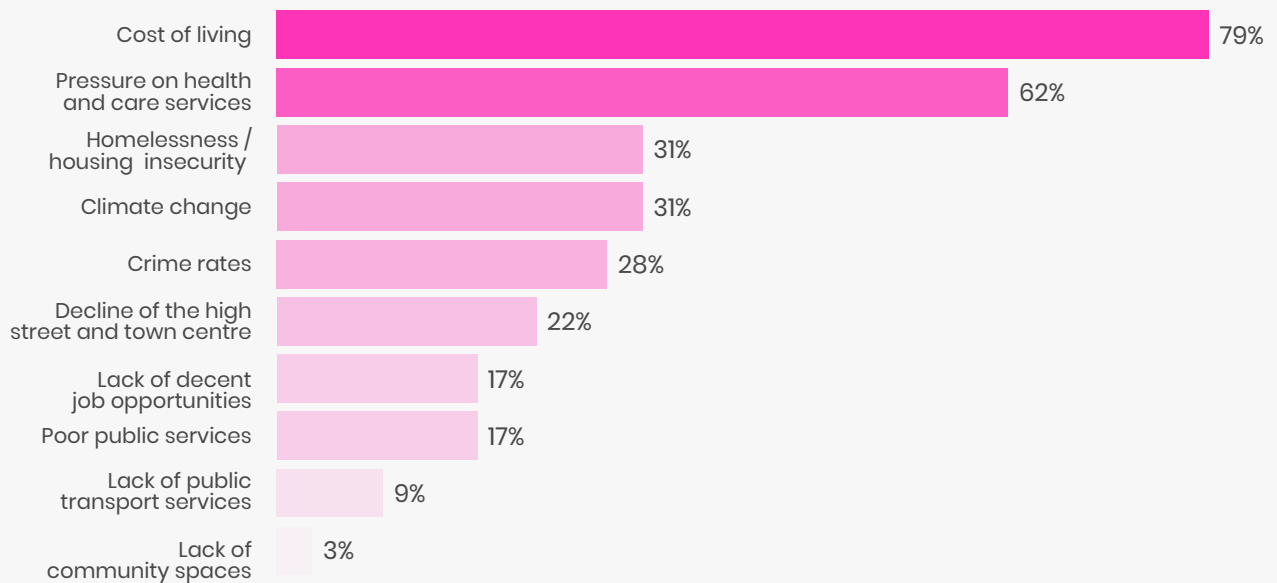
Most people would support a politician's commitment to community power – 72% would support a politician with this goal.

SECTION ONE: ISSUES AND TRUST

National crises loom large but manifest locally.

The public were clear that big national issues included things such as the cost of living and health care provision pressures but that at a local level issues of declining high streets, poor public services and homelessness came to the fore.

Figure 1: Percentage selecting each issue in their top 3 most important for politicians to prioritise



“It would be nice to see some more money spent on the town, I suppose?”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

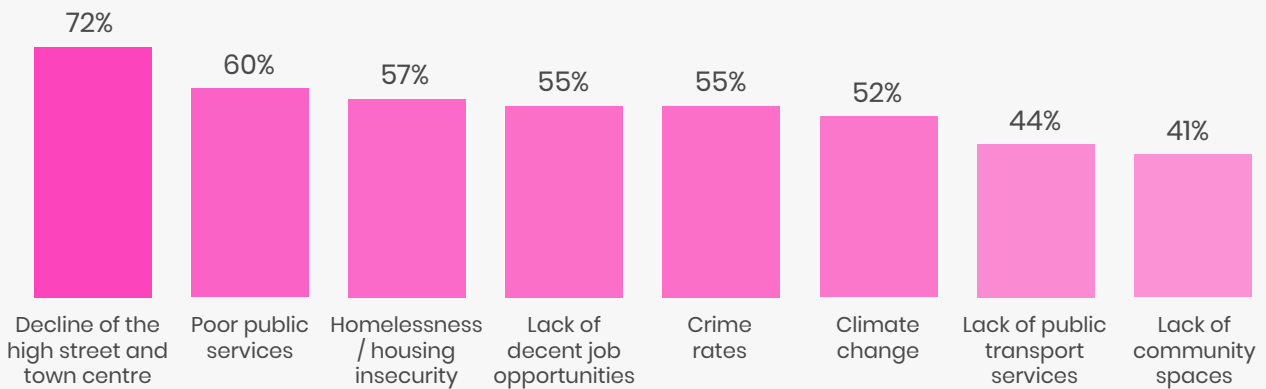
“The cost and availability of childcare is an issue that impacts me, but that’s everywhere and not just my area.”

Swing Seat, 18-34, BC1

“The issues are largely the same in the local area as the national ones, I suppose – you just experience them.”

Swing Seat, 35-44, BC1

Figure 2: Percentage who identify each issue as a problem in their local area (definitely + somewhat a problem)



Trust in national politicians and business to solve these social problems is low, but trust in community organisations is higher.

The majority of people lack confidence in national politicians' ability to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, loneliness, Levelling Up, climate change, problems in the local area or access to health services. Predominantly, there is a feeling that national politicians don't understand their communities nor the needs of the community, that they pursue their own interests, and they lack empathy - 66% think that national politicians do not understand them.

Figure 3: 'National politicians understand people like me'

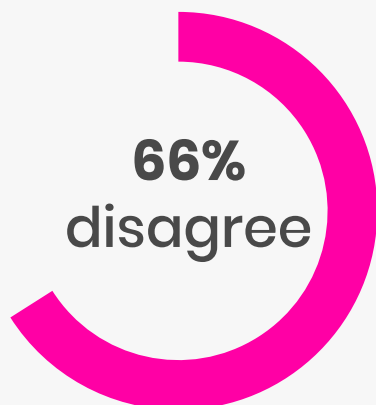
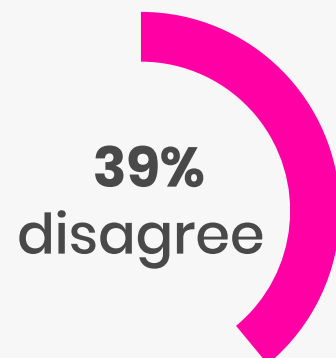


Figure 4: 'The needs of my local area are reflected in the decisions made by national politicians'



“People in power have loads of money - they’re not even on the same planet as us. They can claim £3,000 expenses every week, they have no idea of what it’s like being poor.”

Red Wall, 18-34, C2DE

“Distrust of politicians in general. They seem to just spout whatever they think is going to tick a box.”

Swing Seat, 35-44, BC1

The closer to the community decision makers and activities are, the more trusted they are in having the best interests of the community at heart.

Local councils were assumed to be closer to local issues and were four times as likely to be trusted to have communities’ best interests at heart when making decisions compared to national politicians. However, members of local community and local charitable and grassroots organisations were trusted further still.

Figure 5: Confidence levels that national politicians can tackle each issue

■ NET: % Confident (Very + somewhat confident)
 ■ NET: % Unconfident (Very + somewhat unconfident)

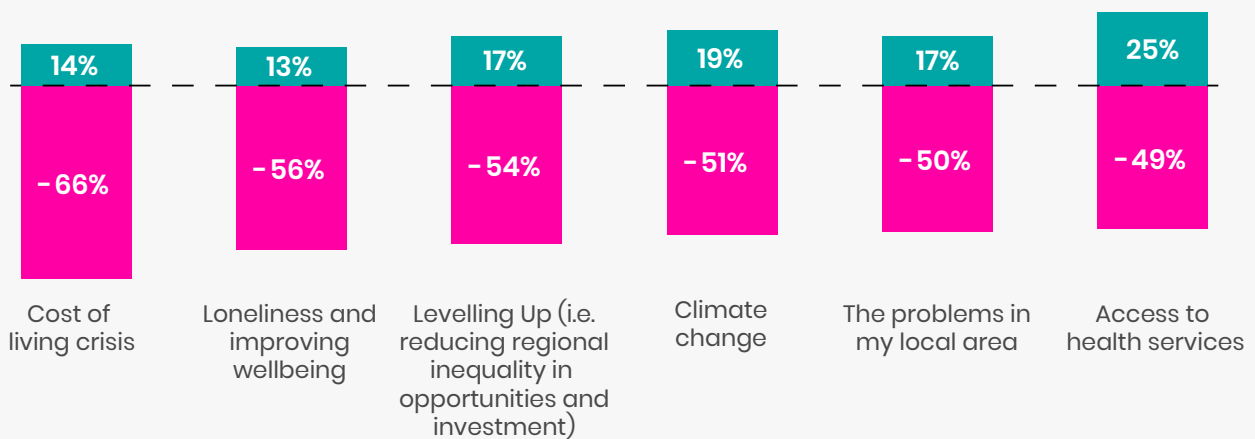
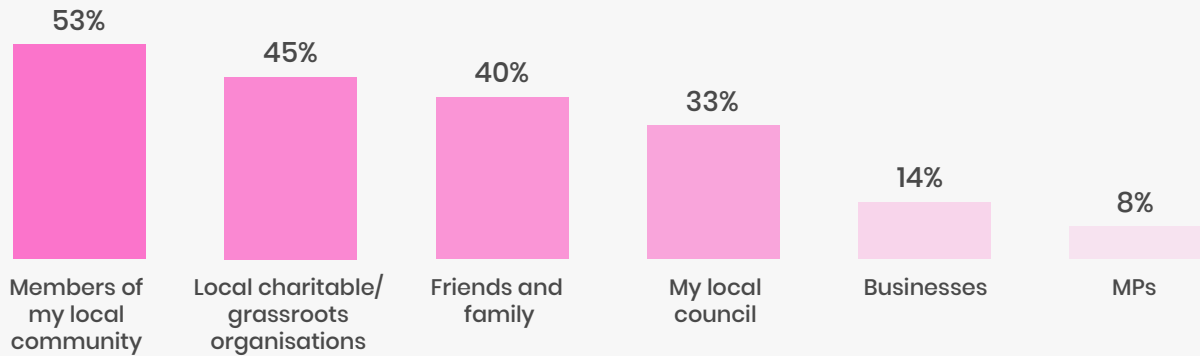


Figure 6: Trust in groups to have communities' best interests at heart when making decisions on issues



“You can make the changes because you know what you want changing. Other people who don’t live in the area are making the changes and they don’t know.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

“The local people know what’s best for them and the decisions that need to be made.”

Red Wall, 35–44, C2DE

“We do have quite a good access to the parish council and local council, and the police hold meetings. For the local area, you are well listened to.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

“They’re [all politicians] in board rooms and offices, not out on the street, so they don’t actually see what’s going on. They just go by what they’ve been told, by people that aren’t on the streets, they just go off what they think is happening in the world and decide based on what they think they should be seen doing.”

Swing Seat, 35–44, BC1

SECTION TWO: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND MAKING MEANINGFUL POLICY DECISIONS

The idea of 'community power' lands well with people.

In our focus groups, the concept stimulated positive associations of working together and collaborating, having a greater say in decision-making and thus improving the political system and representatives, and being a force for positive change in their local area by prioritising the most important issues to them.

“Collaboration of a number of people within the local community that can voice their opinions and then upwards nationally, as opposed to the other way round.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

“Communities should have more say in decision-making and asked what they want. We never get a real say in what is happening, they should be given more power by being able to do that.”

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

“The Government have failed and the people need to have their opinions matter and to make positive change.”

Red Wall, 35-44, C2DE

Anticipated positive differences community power would make:

Create community spirit

Community power is seen as a way in which stronger communities could grow, especially in areas which currently lack community spirit. By providing opportunities for people to be heard, community power is felt to encourage care and respect for the areas where people live.

"Would help get rid of apathy if people could see that there is a result of their actions. There are a lot of people who can't be bothered. But if they could see how they could change it and see the result of their actions, they'd want to take part."

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

Better political system and representatives

Community power is felt to ensure local people are heard (which is not seen within the current political system). Commitments to it would enable communities to hold elected officials accountable and push them to do more for the communities they represent, leading to more positive action on issues.

"Local council elections tend to gravitate to the party who is in power because people think they'll get more [funding] for their community. So this community power... you'd end up with councillors with genuine interest in the area, not just career people."

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

Prioritise the most important issues

Empowering local people to put forward their own ideas would help ensure the issues affecting local people are prioritised. Some suggest community power could lead to more mental health services, nicer town centres and investment in local infrastructure like schools and GP practices because those are the things that matter to them.

"I worry there aren't any spaces for people like my teenage son to go... It might bring some of the community back together."

Swing Seat, 18-35, BC1

'Community' provides important benefits such as support networks, information sharing, and pride of place.

People understand and are positive about the benefits of an empowered community that can achieve goals together. People understand the benefits of communities within the current structure and system but need help in visualising and realising what a new or different system would look like.

The challenge, here, is for policy makers and local organisations to bring to life what the future possibilities are for an active and participatory community, and what needs to change in order to harness this power.



Provide support networks	Inform one another	Create pride in place	Achieve joint goals
<p>Community is seen to help tackle loneliness and other hardships experienced by those within it, as well as providing community services like after school clubs and food banks.</p>	<p>Being part of a community is felt to ensure people remain informed of local plans, events or other changes that might affect them, particularly when there is concern these plans will be detrimental to the community.</p>	<p>Community spirit is felt to create strong communities that are more likely to have pride in, and take care of, the places they live in, as well as bringing people together into community events.</p>	<p>Having a community enables people to draw on others for support when issues that affect the community arise. This is felt to make it more likely that complaints and challenges will be listened to by those making decisions.</p>

Figure 7: Participant responses to the word 'Community'



“I know my children can go out and they’re going to be fine because someone will be keeping an eye on them.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

“People that all sort of live in the same area that help and support each other. You feel comfortable and safe in the place you live.”

Red Wall, 18-34, C2DE

There is strong recognition that different places have different problems and local communities are best placed to shape solutions.

Both Red Wall and Swing Seat focus groups (across all ages) were comfortable with the idea that different places across the country might have different answers to particular issues and they saw that community power would help influence and shape their design.

“Every single community is different. So there should be a difference.”

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

“So communities know the local issues and the local problems, they will have an idea on, you know, what's best for the local area.”

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

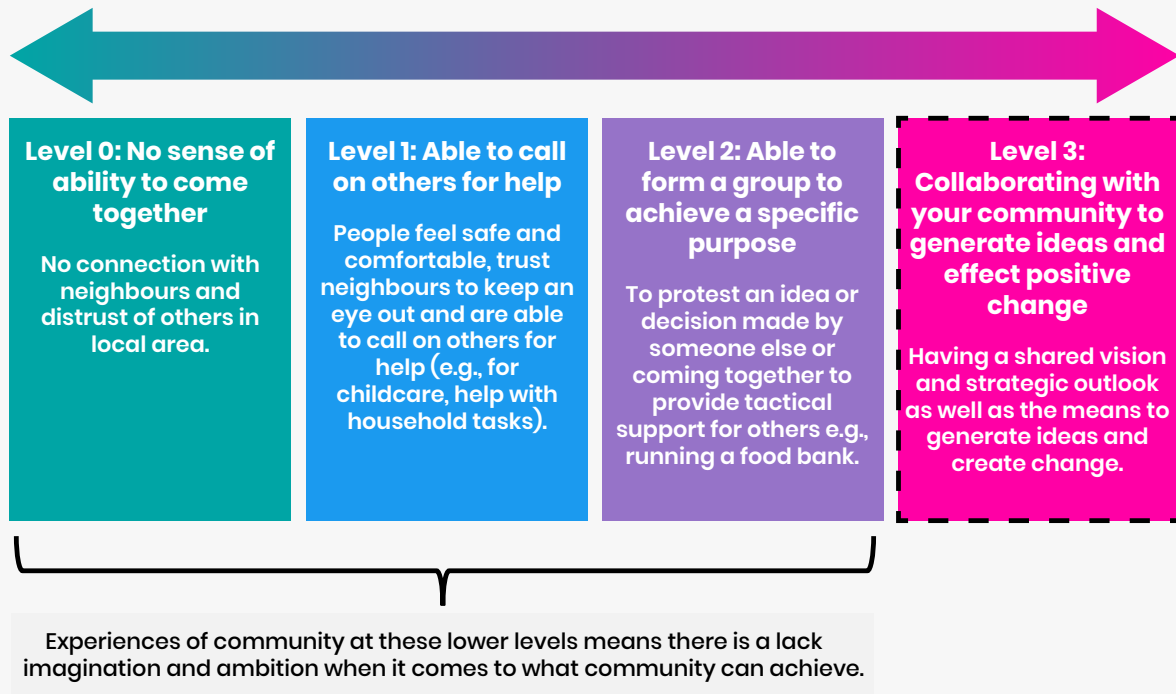
There is a distinct lack of understanding of both how the current political system operates and what a better or new community-based system could look like.

As such, it will become increasingly important to demonstrate how the current political, decision-making, and service design processes are not working.

Amongst the public, there is a lack of clarity on how the political system works beyond a basic understanding that representatives are elected to make decisions on their behalf. Beyond this, people struggle to identify:

- Which decisions are made where (i.e., at Westminster, in devolved Governments, or by local Councils).
- What issues and decisions are in the remit of these different bodies.
- How, if at all, the public and communities are able to inform these decisions and are consulted, beyond electing representatives.

Figure 8: The Maturity Model



Source: Britain Thinks analysis

“I have no idea how they make any decisions. Our MP is quite active but other than that I have no idea how they make any decisions.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

“But how do they get our views and opinions? The Government, how do they know what we think? I don’t know how they get the information from the general public.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

There is a clear desire for community power to be rooted in existing structures and governance.

The focus groups wanted to explore what community power looked like in practice and were keen on emphasising the role of councils and parish councils as examples of existing structures to work with. These were highlighted partly as a way to frame and explore the topic but also to mitigate risks of duplication and exploitation.

"It does sound positive. It's not just saying that local communities have the full power but I like the sound of local communities working together with the council."

Red Wall, 18-34, C2DE

"Initially it sounds great, but you wouldn't want people who are very affluent getting these positions. It's all well and good transferring these powers to the community but if its going to people who don't represent the community it's even more frustrating."

Swing Seat, 18-34, BC1

"To work collaboratively with the council that would be good and because it's an Act it would have to happen. I just think we need to be sharing the input."

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

There is a real desire for more voices to be heard and for these voices to influence decision making more prominently.

Large majorities of people think national politicians need to ensure communities have more influence to respond to issues and almost half (42%) have declared they'd want to get more involved themselves.

Figure 9: Percentage levels of agreement with each statement

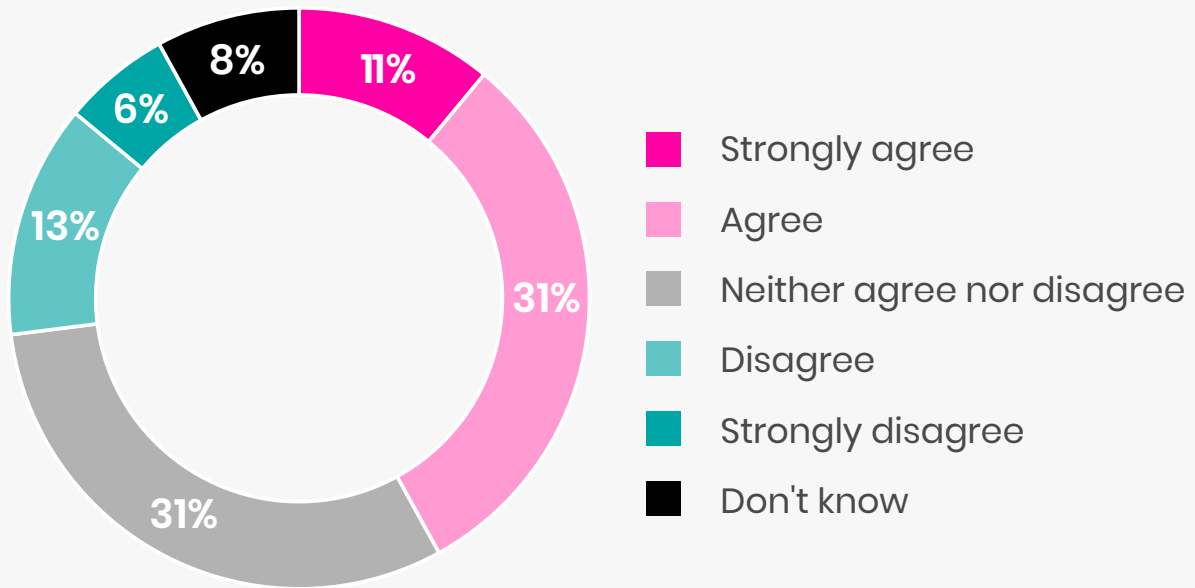
'National politicians need to let communities affected by the rising cost of living have more influence over how this issue is addressed'



'Communities should have more say over how their local public services work, for example the healthcare and transport on offer'



Figure 10: Response to following statement: 'I would be keen to get more involved in decisions that affect my local area if I had the right information and support to do so'



"Issues from community to community are probably similar but whether they're being actioned on is a different thing. I don't personally feel they are listened to or actioned on very well."

Swing Seat, 18-34, BC1

"There are definitely people with ideas. With a bit of investment and someone spearheading the way, it brings a bit of pride. People being proud of the town and it instils the same in others and people get more involved."

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

"I think they make decisions that they feel they should be seen to be doing rather than actually doing the stuff that needs doing. I think it comes across as detached from the real world."

Swing seat, 35-44, BC1

"I liked the idea that it focuses on people within the community making the decisions. Why should someone in London be making the decisions for Dudley."

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

"What we want isn't taken into consideration. They have a plan and then give us a choice about two things that are going to happen anyway."

Red Wall, 18-34, C2DE

"When it's time for the government to have your vote they can seem like they're on the same page but when they come to power it's a completely different story."

Red Wall, 35-44, C2DE

"If it was available for me to get involved in I would, but I don't have time for that."

Swing Seat, 18-34, BC1

"It depends on what kind of involvement. We'd be happy to fill in surveys and give our opinions and ideas in that respect."

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

The benefits of community power can only be realised with accompanying committed budgets.

Both Red Wall and Swing Seat focus groups (across all ages) were clear that a commitment to higher local budgets was equally important and that local communities would be well placed to shape where this investment goes. There was also a recognition that this commitment would help galvanise community action and support.

"Decisions are better off made locally"

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

Any engagement should provide opportunities for everyone in the community to participate around their day-to-day lives.

There is a desire to harness online platforms and technology, to use short time periods or ad hoc engagement, a need for a multichannel approach to ensure all can participate, and an encouragement for engagement that benefits the whole community.

SECTION THREE: THE MESSAGE AND THE MESSENGER

People support community power and would think more favourably of a politician who commits to it.

Nearly three-quarters of people support a commitment to community power, seven in ten people would be favourable to a politician if they supported it, and over two-thirds of people would consider voting for a politician who backed it.

Figure 11: Percentage that would support community power

72% indicate they would support this commitment to Community Power

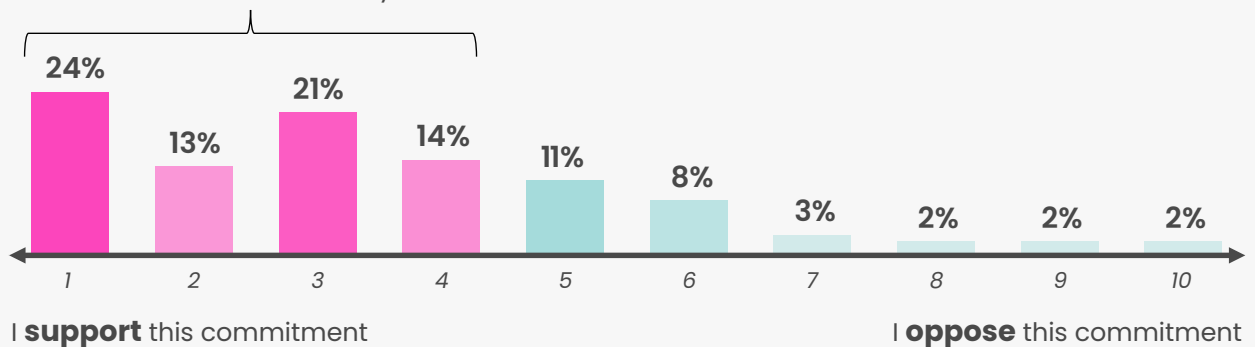


Figure 12: Percentage that would be favourable towards a politician committing to community power

70% indicate they feel favourable towards a politician making commitments on community power

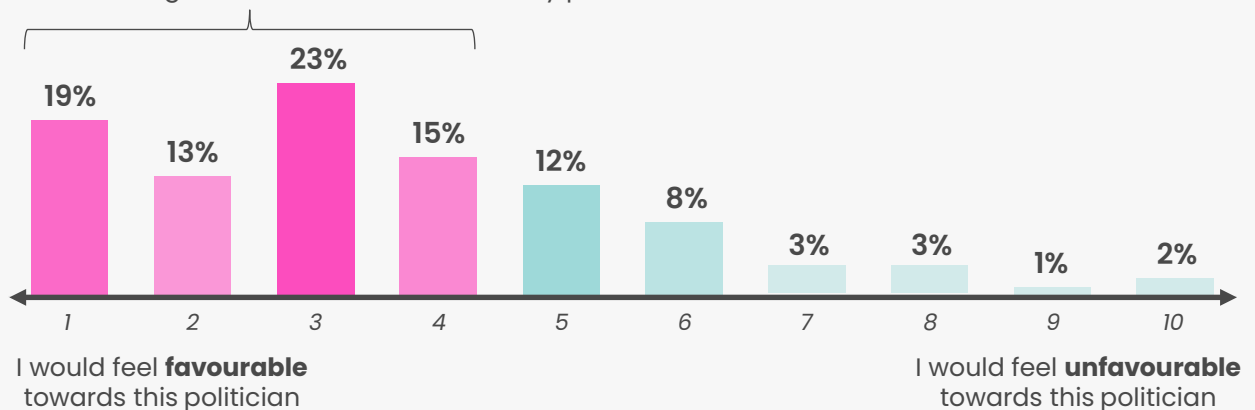
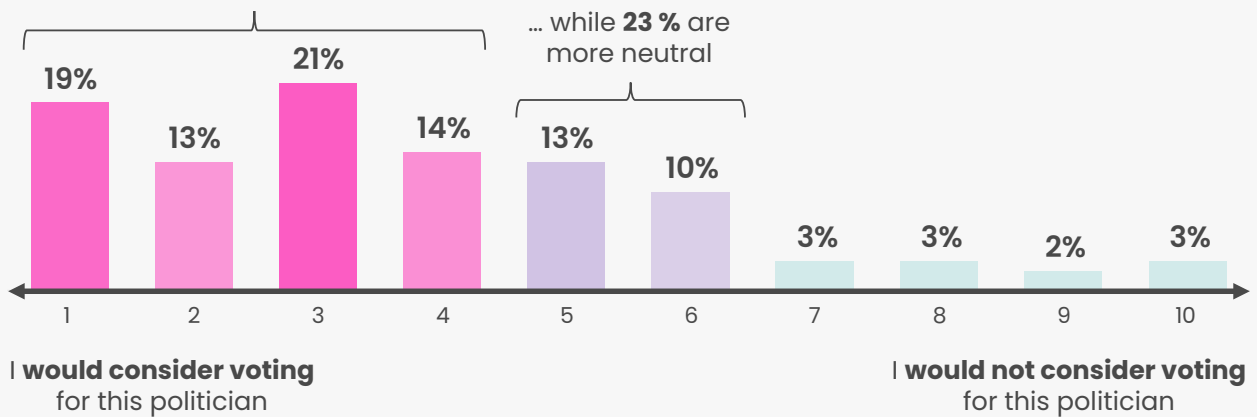


Figure 13: Percentage that would consider voting for a politician committing to community power

67% clearly indicate they would consider voting for someone making these commitments...



"I agree in that there are clearly some issues that need to be ironed out but I would probably vote for them just to see, as if you do nothing you're going to achieve nothing and there needs to be a change." Swing seat, 18-34, BC1

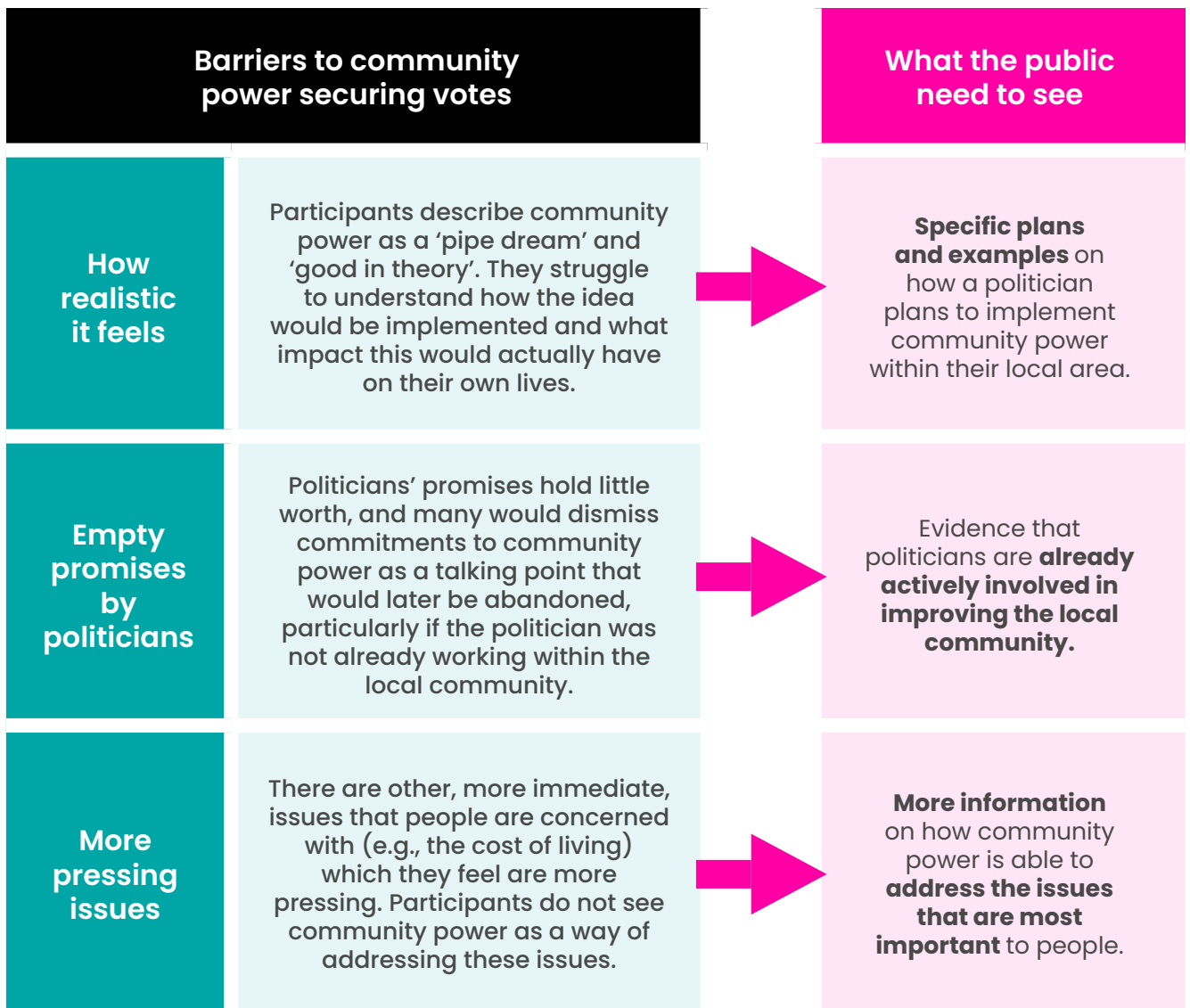
"For me, if they're saying [community power] is already working or it's already in place, if there was evidence to prove, then yeah, they would definitely get my vote." Swing seat, 35-44, BC1

"If [the person committing to community power was] on the list of people I would look into anyway then definitely, it would be on the winning vote for me." Swing seat, 18-34, BC1

"It'd depend on the person, maybe already doing similar things. Seeing is believing. If you can already prove you're doing that sort of stuff it makes it easier to vote for that person." Red Wall, 35-44, C2DE

The challenge is to harness the support of national politicians without eroding the support of the concept.

As trust in politicians is so low – particularly when it comes to representation, understanding communities, and making a positive impact to local areas – any message needs to be grounded in reality, backed financially, and evidenced alongside politicians being active in their communities.

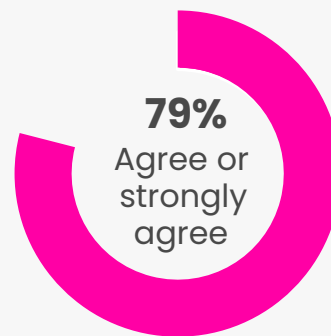


Source: Britain Thinks analysis

For organisations advocating for community power this research has proven that there is a huge appetite for community-led choices.

While we need to walk that difficult tightrope of securing the backing of politicians while making sure they aren't perceived to 'own it', we should feel confident that we know communities want more of a say, want to be heard, and want more influence.

Figure 14: "Westminster and Whitehall are making decisions about people and places they know little about"



I agree that Westminster and Whitehall don't know anything that's going on at a granular level."

Swing Seat, 18-34, C2DE

"These guys are all out-of-touch with the rest of world."

Red Wall, 18-34, C2DE

Figure 15: "The best decisions are made when the people who will be affected are closely involved in the process"

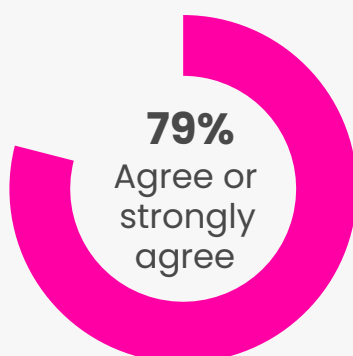
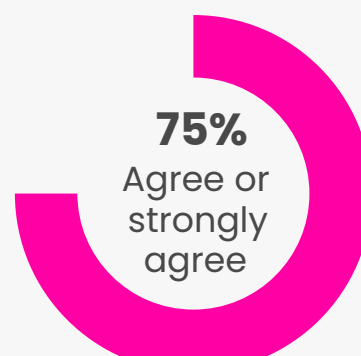


Figure 16: "Allowing communities to have more say in decisions that affect their area would be the most effective use of public investment"



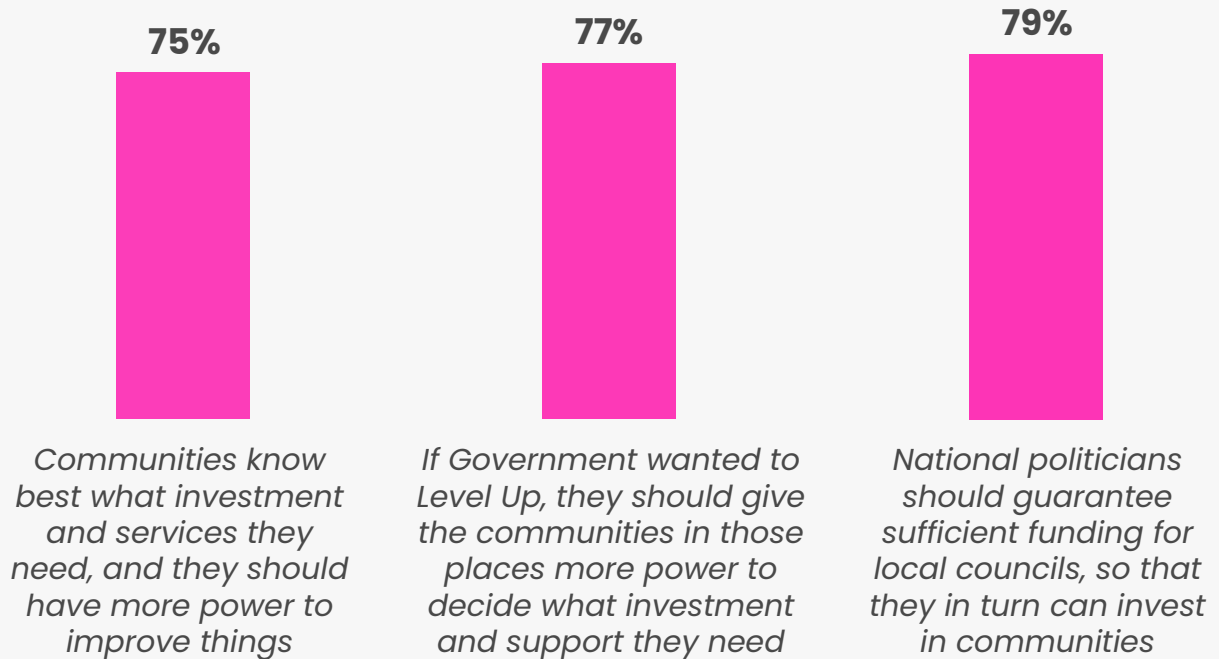
“I agree with it. You want to be part of the conversation, not just dictated to.”

Swing Seat, 35-44, BC1

“100% agree with that statement. It’s people making decisions about things they know about.”

Swing Seat, 45+, BC1

Figure 17: Percentage levels of Net agreement with each statement (Strongly and somewhat agree)



“During Covid, we had a lot of people who set up charities. They’ve received funding now and they’re blossoming.”

Swing Seat, 35-44, BC1

“Covid showed a lot of the good spirit in the communities, it highlighted a need for something.”

Red Wall, 45+, C2DE

Figure 18: “Too many places for communities to meet, come together and support each other have closed in recent years”

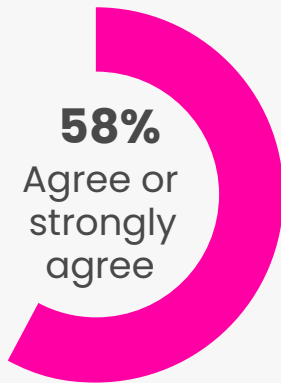
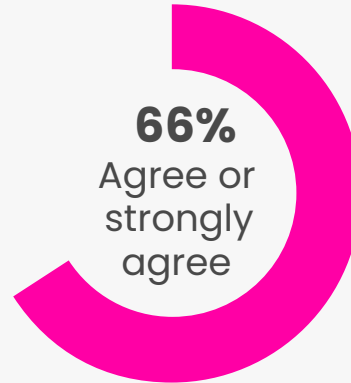


Figure 19: “Community spaces create strong communities. More of them should be funded”



“I agree about the fact we’ve lost too many places. How are you able to act like a community if there is no space for you to be one.” Swing Seat, 18-34, BC1

SECTION FOUR: FOCUS GROUP PROFILES

Red Wall

Importance of 'community'; distrust of politicians; and recognition of variation

Across all age groups that participated, Red Wall participants had a strong positive association with the term and notion of community which mostly centred on 'place' but there was an understanding of wider communities. They all had a significant distrust of national politicians, particularly in their ability to understand their community and their needs and ability to solve big issues. Importantly, there was a broad recognition that different places have different issues and so it seemed eminently sensible to them that these places would therefore need different solutions.

Support for community power but needs appropriate budgets

When exploring the notion of community power, Red Wall participants were supportive of the concept but would need to hear more about what it actually entails, the details of how a new system would work, and insisted on the need for it to be accompanied by appropriate budgets. However, groups did raise the concern that politicians and decision-makers should already be listening more to communities and they were cautious in reflecting that community power should avoid creating another layer of political governance outside of what already exists.

Differences across focus groups

There were some differences across groups. The younger group seemed more enthusiastic about the potential for greater influence but were also more reflective about the fact that they don't get involved in decision-making much already. The older group were more concerned about national issues and security, felt that they were 'out of the loop' on decision making in general, and raised rising inequalities more than the other groups.

Swing Seat

Support for 'community'; understanding of spatial variation; big demand for social infrastructure

Swing Seat groups had an extremely positive reaction to the concept of community and emphasised the potential it has in overcoming local challenges. Participants were entirely comfortable with the notion that different places will have different issues and so will need different solutions – local communities, they proposed, know what they need more than anyone else. And this was emphasised when considering national politicians: they felt that their community is not being heard sufficiently and that politicians don't understand them or recognise their issues. Swing Seat participants had a stronger focus on social infrastructure than Red Wall groups – they want improvements to schools, health care, and community services.

Support for community power but needs to work within existing structures

There was strong support for community power from these groups but a real emphasis on this working hand-in-hand with other tiers of existing government. For example, they were keen to understand and explore the role of community power alongside local councils and parish councils, conscious to avoid duplication of work but also exploitation of a new system.

Differences across focus groups

There were some differences across the age groups. For example, the older age group were more forgiving of the difficult role national politicians have and were concerned about any local decision-making process to be undertaken by an unrepresentative group of people. The 36-44 age group were more focused on social infrastructure and were keen to emphasise how local councils have been underfunded or squeezed for a while now. The younger group were much more bullish regarding national politicians, saying that parties don't understand people like them and that austerity has created a lot of division and resentment when considering local services.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

This research, commissioned by New Local and undertaken by Britain Thinks, was built around two main activities: focus groups and an online survey.

Focus groups

Seven 90-minute online qualitative focus groups were undertaken between 8 March 2022 and 24 March 2022. Focus groups had five to seven participants in six of these groups plus one smaller group of three participants. All groups had a mix of genders and a minimum quota of those from ethnic minority backgrounds to reflect the population. All participants were swing voters (having voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election but now unsure of who they would vote for), and from either Swing Seat (participants were recruited from suburban swing seats for the focus groups) or Red Wall constituencies across the UK.

Participants were recruited from the following:

Red Wall

- Blackpool South
- Bridgend
- Bury South
- Burnley
- Dudley North
- Heywood
- Middleton
- Rother valley

Swing Seats

-  Bury North
-  Crewe
-  Gloucester
-  Great Yarmouth
-  Ipswich
-  Milton Keynes North
-  North Swindon
-  Reading West
-  South Swindon
-  Vale of Glamorgan

Focus groups were split by constituency type, age and socioeconomic grade (SEG):

	Swing Seat (BC1)	Red Wall (C2DE)
18-34 year olds	2 x focus groups	1 x focus group
35-44 year olds	1 x focus group	1 x focus group
45+ year olds	1 x focus group	1 x focus group

Online survey

The online survey comprised eight questions alongside core breakdown questions. The survey asked a nationally representative sample of 2,164 adults, with booster to achieve 250 in Swing Seats (defined as constituencies that became Conservative from Labour in the 2010 or 2015 election) and was in the field between 08 April 2022 and 10 April 2022.



Communities want to have more influence over the issues they face, the challenges they want to overcome, and the services they use.

This report sets out the passion for that change. People understand that different places may face different issues and may need different solutions. They understand the nature of both national and local problems and they have ideas for what their community needs and how they can be part of the solution. They also trust and recognise the important role of councils and community groups and want more opportunity to influence decision-making.

People want their national politicians to reflect this community passion and champion this movement. Communities want to be heard. Together, let's build a system where their ideas are heard more widely.