

Next Generation

UK

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Foreword: British Council CEO

This generation of young Britons, like every previous generation, faces its own unique set of challenges. However, today's 18-30-year-olds are burdened with challenges that are global, interconnected and – some would argue – existential.

Not only must they find an occupation that suits them and a community where they feel at home, they also contend with these ills besetting our planet, despite having the most to lose if things don't improve. That's a heavy responsibility and one older generations must try to understand.

This report – the latest in the British Council's flagship research series – is a snapshot of young people's concerns and opinions at a particular moment in time and in response to a particular set of questions. But some key themes shine through.

Young people in the UK have a strong interest in the world beyond our national borders, expressed both in the desire to live abroad at least temporarily (shared by 72 per cent of our respondents), and the wish to see their political leaders take a lead on key international issues.

That international outlook includes the United Kingdom's closest neighbours, with 81% thinking it is important to maintain positive relations with other European nations.

At the same time, however, for many young people domestic concerns are uppermost in their minds – notably their ability to buy or rent suitable housing and the fear of many that their quality of life will not match that of their parents. On the other hand, almost two-thirds were optimistic about their future career prospects and quality of life.

Another positive finding is that education is seen as the most powerful tool for dealing with global challenges by more than half of those surveyed (57%), with the same percentage believing that young people in the UK can make an impact globally.

There are many issues that this generation must consider in a way previous generations didn't: there isn't much in life that today's teenagers and twenty-somethings can take for granted. That uncertainty can lead to a sense of powerlessness. It can also help to

develop strategies of resilience, of overcoming, and of finding new routes to success.

One fascinating finding is the way the definition of 'community' is changing. A 'community' is no longer simply the people living in the streets or the few square miles immediately surrounding your home. It can be genuinely global – defined by interest or identity, rather than by place. In an age when traditional ideas of community are fracturing, it has ironically never been easier to 'find one's people'.

This report reveals there is no single, uniform, 'youth perspective', in the United Kingdom, despite broad consensus on certain issues.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in a country composed of four nations and with such a culturally diverse population, the 18-30-year-olds we interviewed had a wide range of views on all the questions put to them.

Family background, religious affiliation, identifying with an urban or rural community – all of these have a powerful impact on the way a person looks at the world. What the young people in our report do have in common is an understanding of the scale of the challenges facing them, and of their own part in building the society that is to come, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. They also recognise the need to balance local action with global awareness, high aspiration with realism.

“
Young people have never wanted to be simply shaped by the world – they want to be its shapers.

In a period of social, economic and cultural upheaval, it is that capacity of young people to shape the future that will determine their success, as a generation and as individuals, in whatever communities they choose to build.

Scott McDonald
Chief Executive, British Council

Foreword: Youth Task Force

As young people living through some of the most transformative and challenging times in recent history, working on the Next Generation UK research really hit home for us. In a world of increasing global conflict, political upheaval, climate change, and navigating the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we're trying to make sense of our place in a rapidly changing world. Whether it's finding our feet professionally, building meaningful lives or grappling with uncertainty of our futures, this report speaks to the multifaceted challenges our generation faces today.

One of the most striking insights is the optimism gap. Many of us feel hopeful about our personal futures but when it comes to the future of the UK or the world, that optimism drops significantly. It's as though we have faith in our individual ability to shape our lives but are deeply concerned about the state of the world around us. This paradox highlights a sense of personal empowerment but also collective disempowerment, where we feel capable of controlling our own lives but are unsure of how we can influence the larger, systemic issues that shape our world.

Financial security is a top priority for many of us, but in reality, it feels increasingly out of reach. The rising cost of living, unaffordable housing, and changing job market makes it hard to feel secure about the future. While we've had to develop resilience, we struggle to keep pushing through without seeing any significant improvements. The financial strain is real and lacking the ability or the support to secure the future we hope for often takes a toll.

Our sense of community is also shifting. While the traditional connections that previous generations have relied on are diminishing, we are finding solidarity in online spaces. However, there's a noticeable disconnect for many, underscoring the need for more inclusive, physical spaces where communities can come together. On a global level, there is a strong desire for cross-border connections and a commitment to building positive international relationships. Unfortunately, post-Brexit barriers, such as visa restrictions and the loss of exchange programmes like Erasmus+ make it harder to fulfil those aspirations.

The education system is another area where we feel there is a disconnect. We place high value on learning,

yet many of us feel that the education we receive doesn't always align with the realities of today's job market. Degrees no longer guarantee employment like they once did. In fact, many young people are becoming open to exploring entrepreneurship as a way to gain financial independence.

Although we value creativity, and we're deeply engaged with pop culture, our relationship with the arts and culture sector is complex. Pursuing a career in the creative industries often seems financially unstable and many of us can feel held back because of this mindset. There is an urgent need for greater support and opportunities to help young people break into the arts without the constant worry of financial security. By providing a more stable environment for creative careers we can have a chance to fully pursue our passions.

Finally, political engagement remains crucial to us, but there is a growing sense of frustration with a system that doesn't speak to us. Young people across the UK feel that their voices aren't being heard which leads to a gap between our recognition of the importance of politics and actual active engagement with it. Although there is disengagement with traditional politics, we are finding new ways to express our political views – through social media, activism, and cultural movements.

The Next Generation UK report paints a vivid picture of our generation as resilient, creative, and globally minded – but also facing significant barriers. This research is a call to action for policymakers, educators, and youth organisations to engage with us, to listen to our concerns, and to help us unlock our potential.

“
If the challenges outlined in this report are addressed, there's no limit to what we can achieve.

Next Generation UK Youth Task Force



Executive Summary

Report structure

This comprehensive report addresses the multifaceted experiences, attitudes, and challenges faced by young people in the UK as of 2024. The structure of this report comprises five key chapters:

1. Global outlook following the UK's exit from the EU
2. Youth resilience and adaptation in a changing UK
3. Education: Bridging the gap between learning and life
4. Identity and expression: Culture, arts, and social cohesion
5. Voices for change: Political engagement and representation

The Next Generation UK report reveals a complex tapestry of experiences, attitudes, and aspirations among young people in the United Kingdom. This generation, coming of age in a period of significant global upheaval, exhibits a notable duality: they are simultaneously optimistic about their personal futures yet concerned about broader societal and global prospects. This paradox underpins many of the report's findings and offers crucial insights into the mindset of UK youth in 2024.

Main findings

Chapter 1: Global outlook following the UK's exit from the EU

The UK's exit from the EU has introduced substantial obstacles to travel and study opportunities, notably impacting programmes like Erasmus+ and Discover EU. These restrictions have limited young people's access to international experiences that were once easily available. Despite the challenges following the UK's exit from the EU, young people remain committed to global mobility and sustaining international relationships. Our regression analysis reveals the factors most closely linked to a desire to maintain positive relationships with other European countries as involvement in politics at the local, national, and global level, as well as demographic factors including gender, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment.

Countries like Australia, the USA, and Canada attract many young people due to their perceived higher quality of life, better pay, and richer cultural appeal. This interest in relocating is also shaped by the

difficulties they face in the UK, such as high living costs, financial insecurity, and limited job prospects.

Young people view education and global engagement as essential pathways to address global challenges like climate change, economic inequality, and social justice. They believe these opportunities offer critical skills and new perspectives through cultural exchange, equipping them for active global citizenship. To foster global citizenship and intercultural understanding, it is vital to create spaces for cross-cultural dialogue and provide programmes that facilitate direct interaction and practical resources for tackling real-world issues.

To realise these goals and respond to young people's aspirations, expanding international exchange opportunities and enhancing global mobility are essential. Initiatives such as new exchange programmes with non-EU countries, financial support for visa expenses, and simplified visa processes can help open doors to international experiences. In addition, digital exchange platforms and partnerships offering internships and volunteer opportunities can provide valuable international exposure, even amidst the constraints imposed by the UK's exit from the EU.

Chapter 2: Youth resilience and adaptation in a changing UK

Young people in the UK exhibit a distinct "optimism gap": they hold a more positive outlook for their individual futures, particularly in terms of career prospects and quality of life, than for the collective future of the UK or the global community. This discrepancy underscores a sense of independence and resilience while also reflecting their concerns about broader socio-political and economic issues.

Financial security is viewed as the most crucial factor for personal happiness and wellbeing, yet achieving this remains one of the most elusive challenges young people face. With economic conditions being uncertain and the cost of living rising, many feel financial stability is difficult to attain. This unmet need for financial security highlights a gap between what young people consider essential for a fulfilling life and what feels realistically achievable within the current landscape.

Young people are reshaping the concept of community, moving away from traditional place-based communities to those based on shared interests and

digital interactions. Social media platforms, online forums, and gaming communities offer spaces for them to connect with others based on common identities and passions, creating a sense of belonging that transcends geographical boundaries. By engaging in virtual events and global communities, young people are redefining what it means to “belong” in a way that aligns with modern digital lifestyles and fosters intercultural connections.

Young people also face a difficult balancing act between addressing domestic challenges and maintaining empathy for international issues. While they recognise and deeply care about global concerns such as climate change, inequality, and social justice, pressing domestic issues often demand immediate attention. Financial insecurity, housing affordability, and limited job opportunities are top of mind, pushing them to focus on local needs first. This tension reflects the complex prioritisation process young people navigate as they attempt to address both personal and collective goals, underscoring the difficult choices they make to balance their aspirations with immediate realities.

Chapter 3: Education

Bridging the gap between learning and life

Our research reveals a complex picture of young people’s experiences with education in the UK. While the system appears to prepare students relatively well for work, there are significant gaps in preparing them for other aspects of life. Young people express confidence in their academic achievements and professional preparation, yet many feel underprepared for practical life challenges and civic engagement. This disparity suggests a need to balance career-focused education with broader life skills development.

Many young people are exploring diverse career paths, including entrepreneurship, as alternatives to traditional employment models. While they demonstrate a strong interest in starting their own ventures, they often face challenges accessing resources, mentorship, and practical business knowledge. Similarly, while career guidance is available, young people advocate for more comprehensive support that reflects the evolving job market and different career trajectories.

To effectively address these needs, it is essential to develop an education system that bridges the education-employment gap while also nurturing youth entrepreneurship. This involves equipping young people with practical skills and knowledge relevant to their future careers and civic lives. Key strategies should include integrating structured work experiences, such as internships and mentorship

programmes, through partnerships with employers. Additionally, establishing networks and accessible resources for young entrepreneurs, along with opportunities for mentorship and business development support, will empower them to thrive in their ventures.

Utilising digital platforms can significantly enhance political education and engagement among young people. By creating engaging and trustworthy digital content that addresses political systems and civic responsibilities, young people will gain valuable insights into global issues and opportunities. Coupled with this, developing digital literacy programmes that emphasise critical thinking and fact-checking will empower them to navigate information effectively and engage with their civic responsibilities.

Chapter 4: Identity and expression

Culture, arts, and social cohesion

Young people in the UK place a high value on arts and culture, yet they perceive significant financial instability associated with careers in these fields. This perception is due to the often unpredictable and low-income nature of arts professions, which can make it difficult to achieve financial security.

Participation in arts activities reveals a socioeconomic divide, with individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds demonstrating greater engagement and appreciation for the arts. Interestingly, marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals and black respondents, exhibit higher levels of involvement in arts and culture, underscoring the importance of these spaces for identity expression and community building.

Pride in national identity among young people across the UK varies significantly, with many desiring a more inclusive and diverse representation that reflects their varied cultural experiences. Cultural activities play a crucial role in addressing this desire by fostering community engagement. They provide opportunities for young people to connect with one another, celebrate shared values, and bridge gaps between different groups. Through these interactions, cultural activities not only create a sense of belonging but also support the development of a more inclusive national identity.

To promote arts and culture as viable career paths, it is crucial to highlight the diversity of roles within the creative industries through targeted programmes and campaigns. Collaborating with creative organisations to provide paid internships and apprenticeships can create practical entry points into these careers. Furthermore, showcasing successful professionals from diverse backgrounds in the arts can inspire young people to pursue similar paths. Efforts to

celebrate diversity and foster an inclusive national identity could include campaigns that highlight various contributions to British identity, developing educational resources that explore the multicultural history of the UK, and supporting youth-led initiatives that celebrate diverse cultural heritages.

Chapter 5: Voices for change

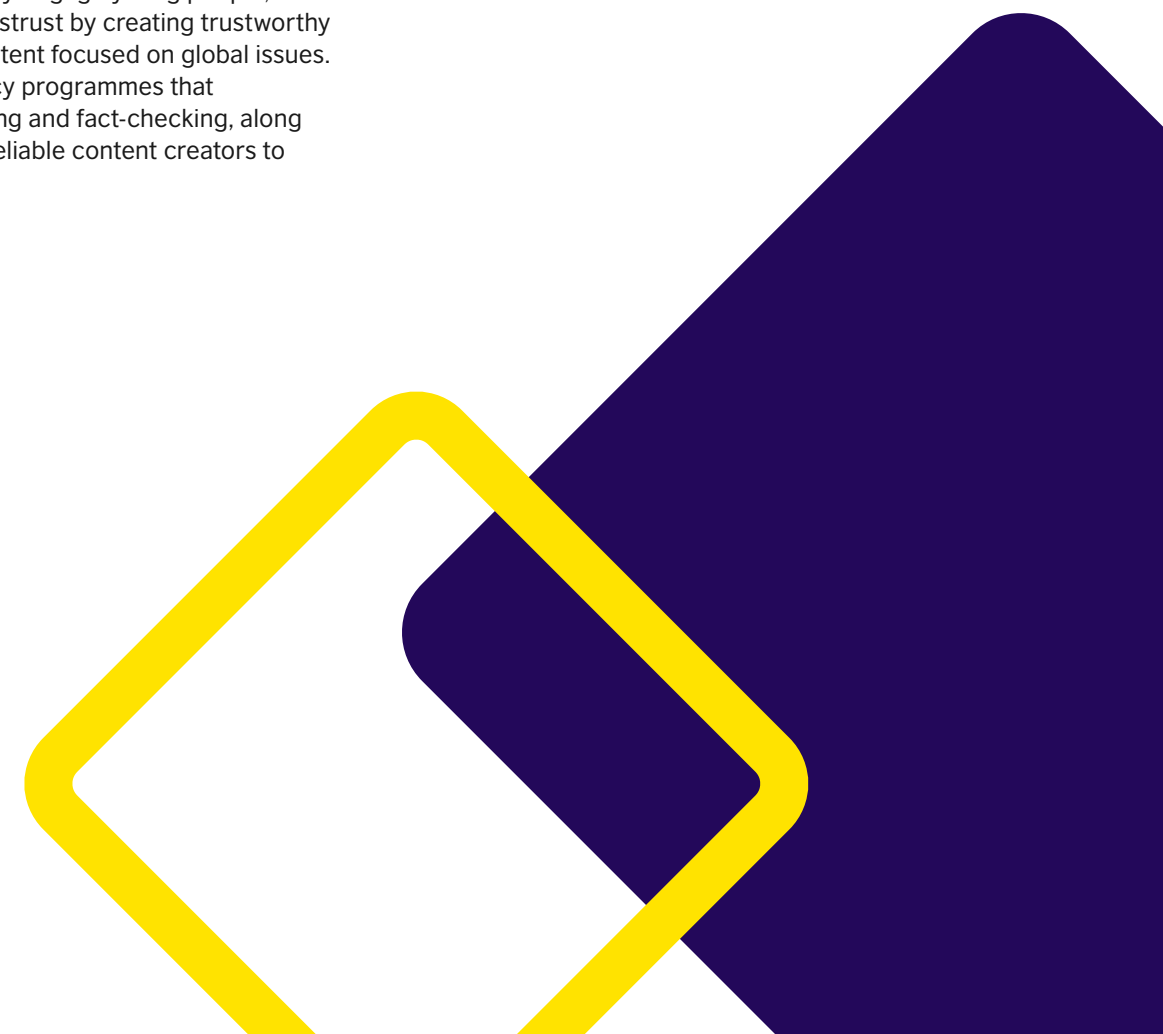
Political engagement and representation

Political engagement among youth remains low, with many feeling voiceless and underrepresented in the political landscape. This sense of powerlessness creates a significant political engagement gap, highlighted by the contrast between high voting intentions and low enthusiasm for voting. More than two in three (69%) young people indicated they are likely to vote in a UK General Election— however, it is estimated that less than half of registered voters participated. Many young people doubt the impact of their votes and perceive that their voices are not heard, leading to the belief that their participation does not result in meaningful change.

Social media serves as a primary news source for young people; however, its perceived untrustworthiness complicates efforts to boost political engagement. The prevalence of misinformation contributes to scepticism, making informed participation in political discourse challenging. To effectively engage young people, it is essential to tackle this distrust by creating trustworthy and engaging digital content focused on global issues. Developing digital literacy programmes that emphasise critical thinking and fact-checking, along with collaborating with reliable content creators to

produce educational materials, can help build trust and encourage informed political engagement.

In addition, establishing youth voice programmes is crucial for providing platforms where young people can express their concerns and perspectives. These initiatives foster dialogue, enabling policymakers to better understand and address the issues that matter most to youth, ultimately promoting a more inclusive political system.



Introduction

About Next Generation

The British Council's Next Generation research explores the needs, challenges, potential, and aspirations of young people globally. The purpose of Next Generation UK is to ensure that the voices of young people in the UK are heard, regardless of their background or gender, and that their experiences inform policy decisions that will have a lasting impact on their lives.

Next Generation focuses on countries that are experiencing periods of significant change that affect how young people view themselves and their place in the world. For example, research for the last iteration of Next Generation UK, published in 2017, took place in response to the EU referendum and the inter-generational divides it exposed.



Young people in the UK

In 2017, Next Generation UK explored the reaction to a seismic shift in UK politics. The aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum forced the UK to confront searching questions about its place in the world and how to unite a divided population. The referendum highlighted significant generational differences in political preferences and priorities, with polling data showing distinct voting patterns across different age groups.¹

Yet this political tremor did not precede a period of calm for young people in the UK, quite the opposite. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 affected every aspect of national life and preceded a cost-of-living crisis that has been financially crippling for younger generations. In the political sphere, the Labour Party gained power in July 2024 with a landslide general election victory – ending 14 years of Conservative government – while a power sharing agreement was re-established in Northern Ireland after a long period without a devolved government.

Against this backdrop of change, researchers have sought to illuminate the experiences of young people in the UK. The 2023 Annual Youth Voice Census highlighted a sense of disconnection and uncertainty among young people in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on the disruption of education.² Concerningly, the Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index 2023 survey revealed record-low levels of happiness and confidence among 16 – 25-year-olds in the UK, with the cost-of-living crisis taking a toll on mental health.³ In this context, the British Council commissioned Savanta to gather in-depth insights into the lives of young people in the UK as they navigate a unique set of challenges and look towards the future.

Aims of the research

Our research explored five broad themes:

- 1. The UK in the world**
What issues does the global community face in 2024, and what role should the UK adopt in addressing these issues? Should the UK prioritise domestic or international obligations?
- 2. Making international connections**
How do young people currently engage with the wider world, and how have their experiences – through diaspora, tourism, or education – shaped their perspective? How would young people like to engage with diverse people and places in the future?
- 3. Challenges and solutions**
What challenges do young people face? How do they view these challenges in comparison to those their parents and peers face? How can young people have a more prominent role in proposing solutions?
- 4. Education and employment**
How do young people feel about the education they receive in the UK? How does it prepare them for their future careers and for life in general?
- 5. Engagement with society**
What makes young people proud – or not – to be a citizen of the UK, as well as Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, or England? To what extent are young people engaged – or disengaged – with political and community participation? And what could boost that engagement?

In exploring these themes, the research aims to give young people from all four nations of the UK a platform and a voice to express their needs, priorities, and concerns. This, in turn, will allow policymakers and stakeholders on local, national, and UK-wide levels to make informed decisions that address the structural barriers most pressing to young people across the UK.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/520954/brexit-votes-by-age/>
² <https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/youth-voice-census/>
³ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/princestrustnatwestyouthindex2023>

Methodology

The British Council commissioned Savanta to conduct research into young people to explore the following objectives:

- **Informing policy:** Ensure this work is designed to improve policymaking for young people.
- **Gathering fresh insight:** Understand the attitudes and aspirations of young people across the nations in 2024.
- **Engaging young people in the research process:** Listen to all young people, encourage their participation, and offer opportunities to develop skills.

This research is an extension and update to the work done by the British Council and Demos in 2016, aiming to understand the post-Brexit landscape for young people as well as their hopes and fears for the future.

A multi-methodological approach was used to develop a clear understanding of the attitudes of young people in the UK.

Desk research

We began by conducting an extensive review of existing research. This review also encompassed other significant sources such as UK Youth surveys, British Council programme documents, and foundational research like Next Generation UK 2016. Insights gained from this desk research were instrumental in shaping our research questions and methodology.

Youth peer researchers

We recruited a diverse team of five young peer researchers aged 18–30 from across the UK. These peer researchers participated in a series of participatory research training workshops designed to introduce them to the study and build their research skills. They were actively involved in shaping the survey questionnaire, observing focus groups, participating in data analysis, and co-creating youth-friendly outputs. By embedding youth engagement throughout our research process, we ensured that our insights were truly reflective of the diverse experiences and aspirations of young people across the UK.

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders and experts

We conducted five in-depth semi-structured interviews (IDIs) with stakeholders with prominent voices in the youth community. The IDIs explored key trends and challenges, emerging issues, innovative youth engagement initiatives, effective engagement strategies, and the role of research in driving youth-focused policies and programmes. The insights and themes emerging from these IDIs informed the design of the survey questionnaire and focus group discussion guides.

Quantitative survey

Our quantitative survey was nationally representative and included a sample of 3,084 young people aged 18–30 from across the UK, with specific quotas for England (1,560), Scotland (542), Wales (507), and Northern Ireland (475). Quotas and weighting were set on key demographic variables: age, gender, region (England only), ethnicity, and socio-economic status to ensure representation.

A stepwise logistic regression analysis was also performed on the question 'Post Brexit, to what extent do you think it is important for the UK to have a positive relationship with other European countries?'. This analysis aimed to understand the underlying factors correlated with a desire to maintain these positive relationships post-Brexit. Full details can be found in the Appendix. Throughout this report, where we note significant differences between groups, these are based on statistical testing at the 95% confidence level, using z-tests for percentages and t-tests for means. As test results are dependent on base sizes, comparisons between groups with smaller base sizes require larger differences to be flagged as significant compared to those with larger base sizes.

Qualitative focus groups

We conducted a total of nine focus group discussions across the four nations and in different regions of England, providing a platform for young people to share their experiences and opinions. Each focus group engaged five to six participants in a 90-minute facilitated discussion, allowing for in-depth conversation. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a diverse mix of young people aged 18–30, and

diversity quotas were set to include participants from different diasporas and minority ethnic backgrounds.

To deepen our understanding of the specific experiences of two key demographics, we conducted two additional focus groups with South Asian and Eastern European youth.

Given their established presence in the UK, we analysed survey responses from South Asian participants (n = 103, including 75 Pakistani and 28 of Bangladeshi heritage) and conducted a focus group with six participants (four of Pakistani heritage, two of Bangladeshi heritage). While acknowledging the distinct histories and practices within these communities, their shared experiences as South Asian Muslims provided valuable insights into how these young people navigate life in the UK.

Furthermore, recognising the distinct experiences of Eastern European youth following the UK's departure from the EU, we analysed survey responses from 96 participants across twenty-one Eastern European countries⁴ and conducted a focus group with six participants (two Lithuanian, two Polish, one Romanian, and one generally Eastern European-identified).

For both groups, while the samples are not statistically representative, they provide important indicative findings about these communities' experiences. We acknowledge that experiences vary significantly based on factors such as country of origin, generation, and level of cultural integration. However, this focused analysis allows us to identify broader patterns and shared experiences among young people from these backgrounds, enriching our understanding of diverse youth perspectives in the UK.

⁴ Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine

Chapter 1: The UK in the world

1.1 Global outlook following the UK's exit from the EU

After the UK's departure from the EU, young people in the UK believe the country should remain dedicated to maintaining international relations and pursuing global mobility despite the challenges. Popular relocation destinations include Australia, the USA, Canada, and Italy, driven by factors such as quality of life and cultural appeal. However, the consequences of leaving the EU—particularly regarding visa requirements and the loss of mobility programmes and funding from initiatives like Erasmus+—present significant barriers to youth mobility.

1.1.1 Importance of maintaining positive relations

Four in five (81%) young people in the UK believe it is important to maintain positive relations with other European countries following the UK's exit from the EU. This highlights the commitment of UK youth to fostering global connections, even with the obstacles

brought by the UK's exit from the EU. Demographic differences emerge; women (83%) are slightly more likely than men (80%) to prioritise these relationships, and those aged 25–30 (83%) value them more than younger respondents aged 18–24 (79%). Furthermore, individuals with previous international experience (86%) place a higher importance on these connections than those without (81%).

The necessity to navigate and enhance existing agreements and partnerships continues to shape future policies, particularly as the UK seeks to strengthen its trade deals with both the EU and other nations. Qualitative discussions revealed that the UK's exit from the EU has significantly affected access to key EU educational and mobility programmes, notably limiting opportunities such as Erasmus+ and the DiscoverEU initiative—options that young people highly value.

Figure 1 Importance of a positive relationship between the UK and other European countries following the UK's departure from the EU

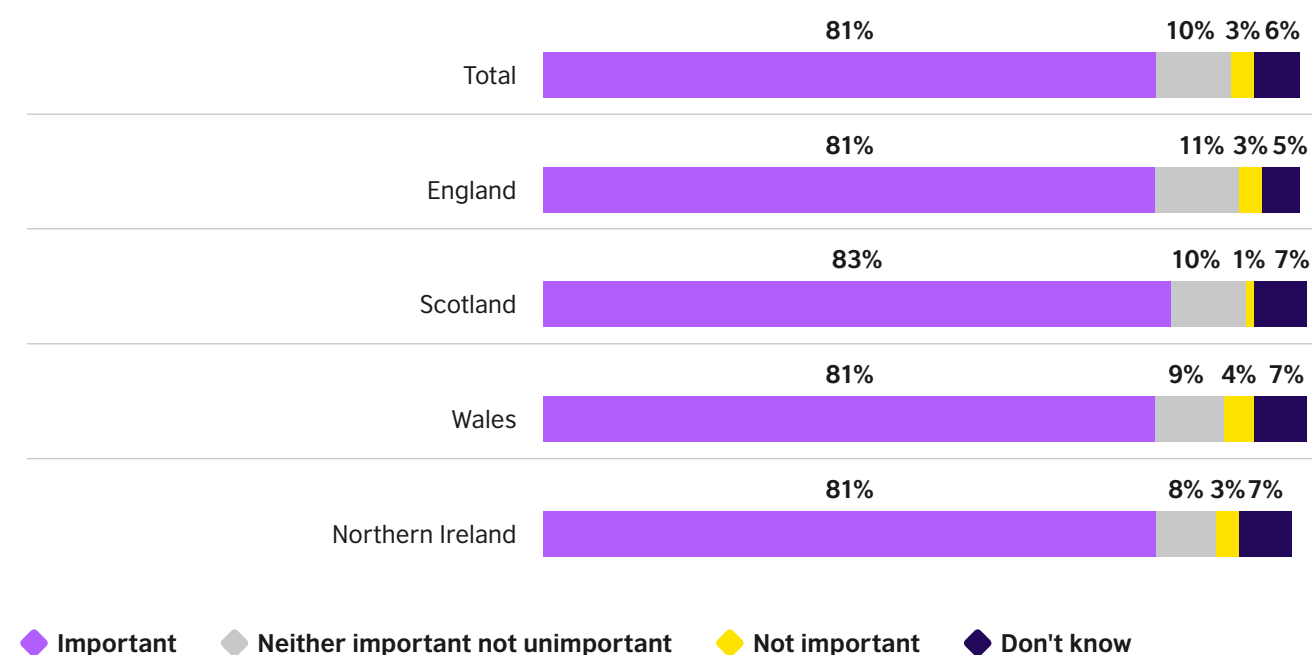
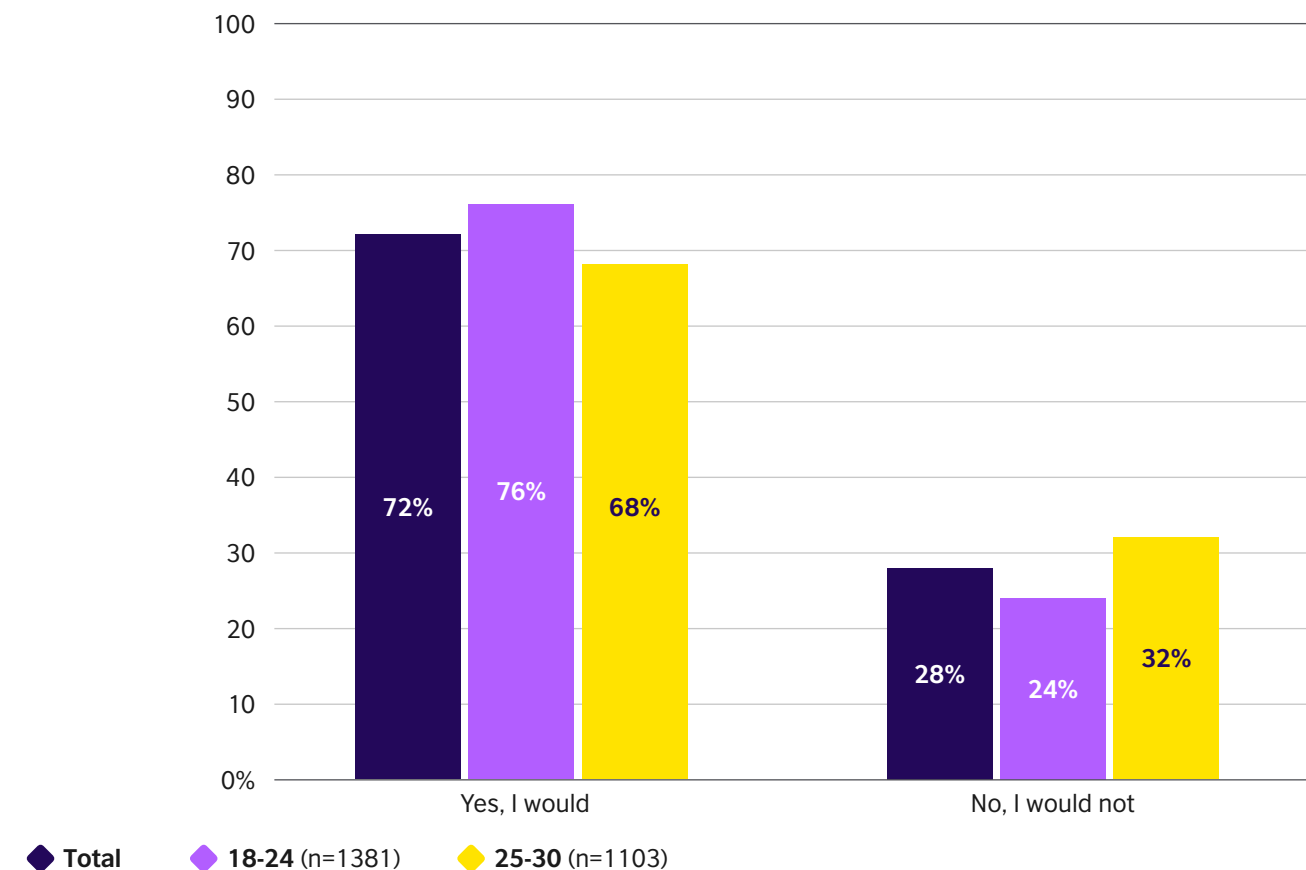


Figure 2 Willingness to move to another country by age



1.1.2 Positive views on global mobility

Global mobility is highly valued among UK youth, with over seven in ten (72%) of those who have not lived abroad expressing a willingness to consider a short-term or long-term relocation – a trend consistent across all nations in the UK. Their primary motivations include the perception of a better quality of life, enriching cultural experiences, and enhanced job opportunities. One young person reflected, “I don't want to live in the UK; I've lived here all my life. You read about people moving to places like Australia and Dubai and how much better life is elsewhere.” [Female, 25, Midlands, Peer researcher]. Additionally, factors such as the changing political landscape, the rising cost of living, and concerns about the quality of public services have driven many to seek greater stability and improved prospects in other countries.

Younger respondents aged 18-24 are particularly inclined to explore opportunities abroad, with 76% expressing this desire compared to 68% of those aged 25-30. Several potential factors may explain this difference: the older age group might have established more stable career paths, and their greater work experience could contribute to a more pragmatic assessment of international opportunities. Furthermore, the 25–30 age bracket may have already satisfied some of their international aspirations through prior experiences, though further research would be needed to confirm these hypotheses.

“I think obviously it's gotten more difficult for us here in the UK since Brexit, which I see as a massive loss. I think it's a real big shame.”

Female, 23
England North, Focus group

I had not had any issues until Munich in July when I got properly questioned at the border about why I'm here. But everyone else with an Irish passport sort of breezed through.

Female, 27
Northern Ireland, Focus group

Eastern European

Global citizens with complex loyalties:

Mobility and cultural adaptation

Eastern European youth showed significantly higher interest in international mobility (82% vs 72% overall sample), yet their views revealed complex attitudes toward further movement:

"For me, for example, if I was called for to work to move countries for work opportunity, I wouldn't take it because thinking about how hard you work to fit in into this country and adapt to the system and everything, I think it would be really hard." [Female, 19, East England, Focus group].

Their perceptions of the UK reflected this complexity:

“ In Bulgaria it’s both like very positive and very negative... You have either the perception that the UK is this old British Empire where people were very educated, and the economy is quite strong... On the other hand, there’s the perception that the people in the UK have lost their ways..

Male, 30
Scotland, Focus group

This seemingly contradictory attitude toward mobility - high willingness to move but hesitation about cultural adaptation - reflects the complex migration experience many have already undergone. Having already invested significant emotional and cultural capital in adapting to life in the UK, there’s understandable reluctance to restart this process elsewhere. This perspective is particularly meaningful given that many Eastern European youth have either migrated themselves or are children of migrants who have witnessed firsthand the challenges of cultural adaptation.

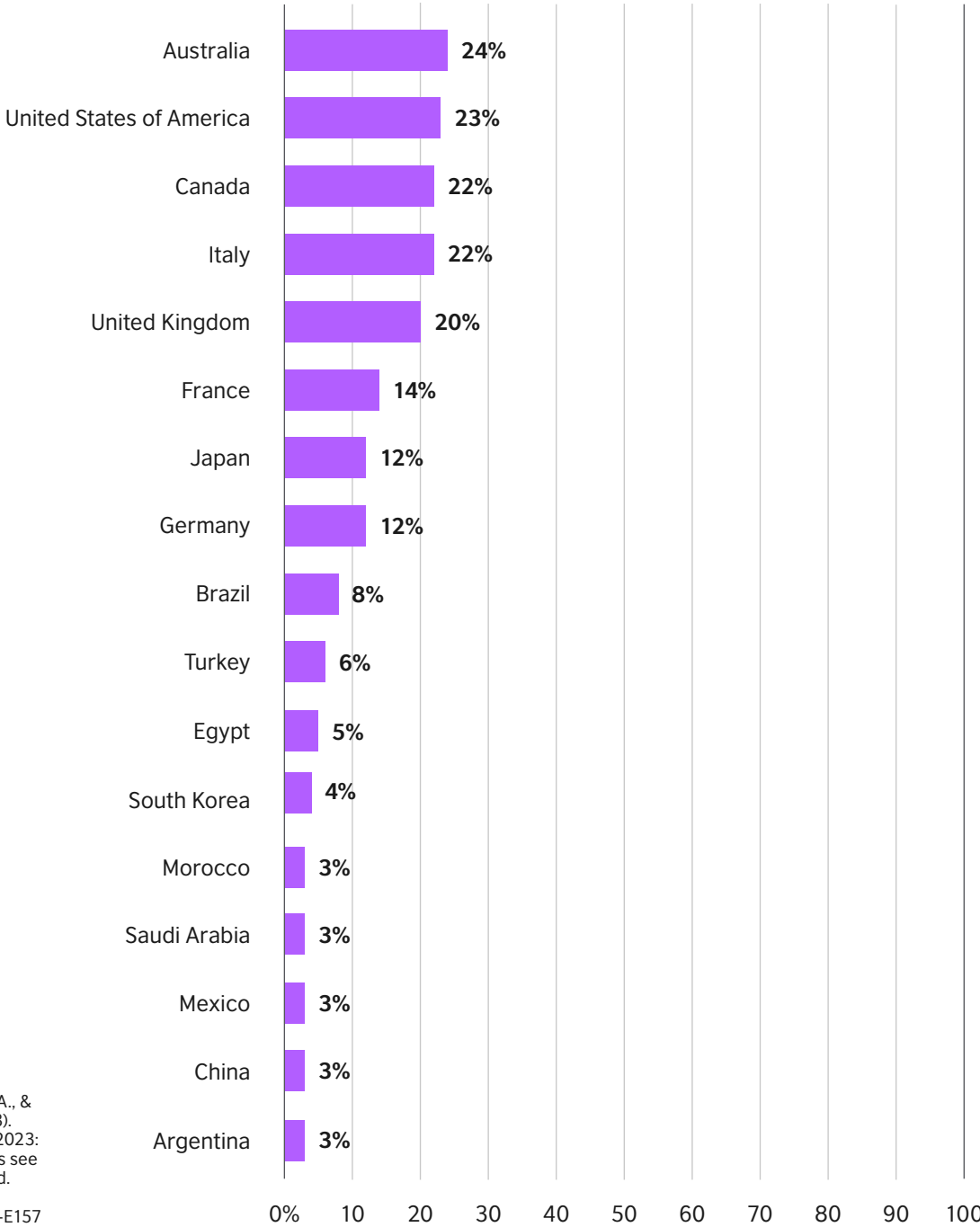
This duality extends to their information consumption - while using similar digital platforms to their peers, they showed greater scepticism about information reliability, particularly regarding news about their home countries.

1.1.3 Most attractive countries for moving abroad

When considering relocation, UK youth are most drawn to destinations such as Australia (24%), the USA (23%), Canada (22%), and Italy (22%). These countries are appealing due to their high quality of life, robust job markets, and cultural diversity. This roughly corresponds with other research, including the British Council’s 2023 Global Perceptions Survey,⁵ where UK youth ranked Italy first in terms of attraction, followed by Australia and Canada.

People from different countries in the UK show varying preferences for relocation; respondents from Northern Ireland are more likely than those from the rest of the UK to consider Australia (31%), the USA (27%) and Canada (27%) as attractive places to live. Moreover, notable gender differences in preferences emerge; women show a greater interest in moving to Australia (26%), Italy (28%), and France (17%), while men are more inclined towards the USA (25%).

Figure 3 Most attractive countries to live abroad



⁵ Desai, A., Duenbier, A., & MacDonald, A. (2023). Global Perceptions 2023: how 18–34-year-olds see the UK and the World. British Council. doi.org/10.57884/ST5C-E157

Young people in the UK recognise the value of multilingualism in today's globalised world. More than half (52%) of young people recognise the importance of learning additional languages for travel and employment, and to engage with and learn about other cultures (56%). When asked about the most important languages to learn, respondents identified several key languages after English. Spanish leads at 38%, followed by French (28%), while Mandarin and German are tied at 14%. Notably, individuals aged 18–24 are more likely than those aged 25–30 to consider Spanish important (41% compared to 34%) and French (31% versus 25%).

In Wales, 44% of respondents place a high value on learning Welsh, underscoring its significance within the region. In Scotland, 19% of respondents consider learning Scots to be important, while 27% in Northern Ireland view learning Irish as important. 14% of those in Scotland view learning Gaelic as important, compared to 10% in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, Scotland stands out in foreign language preferences, with 33% of respondents living in Scotland regarding learning French as important, a figure that is higher than in other UK regions.

1.1.4 Impact of the UK's exit from the EU on travel and study opportunities

One of the most immediate and pertinent impacts of the UK's exit from the EU has been the changes in freedom of movement for UK citizens. Many young people express frustration over new visa requirements and travel restrictions that complicate their ability to travel, work, and study across Europe.



Financial constraints are a significant barrier to international opportunities and experiences for many, with the high costs of visas being particularly prohibitive. One participant shared their experience:

“ I was offered a long-term residency at a university in Hamburg for six months, but after the UK's exit from the EU, the visa fee was around £4,000. It made it impossible for me to go because I just couldn't afford it. ”

Female, 22
London, Focus group

These changes in travel freedom have also had a direct effect on educational opportunities. Qualitative discussions revealed that many students feel disadvantaged by the loss of these valuable opportunities to study abroad. One participant shared their frustration:

“ My friend was studying in Barcelona and assumed he'd be able to go back and live there for a while, but after the UK's exit from the EU, he could only stay for a limited number of days. It's frustrating—not because I had necessarily planned to do the same, but because having those options taken away is really annoying. ”

Male, 24
Wales, Focus group

Figure 4 Most important languages to learn by age

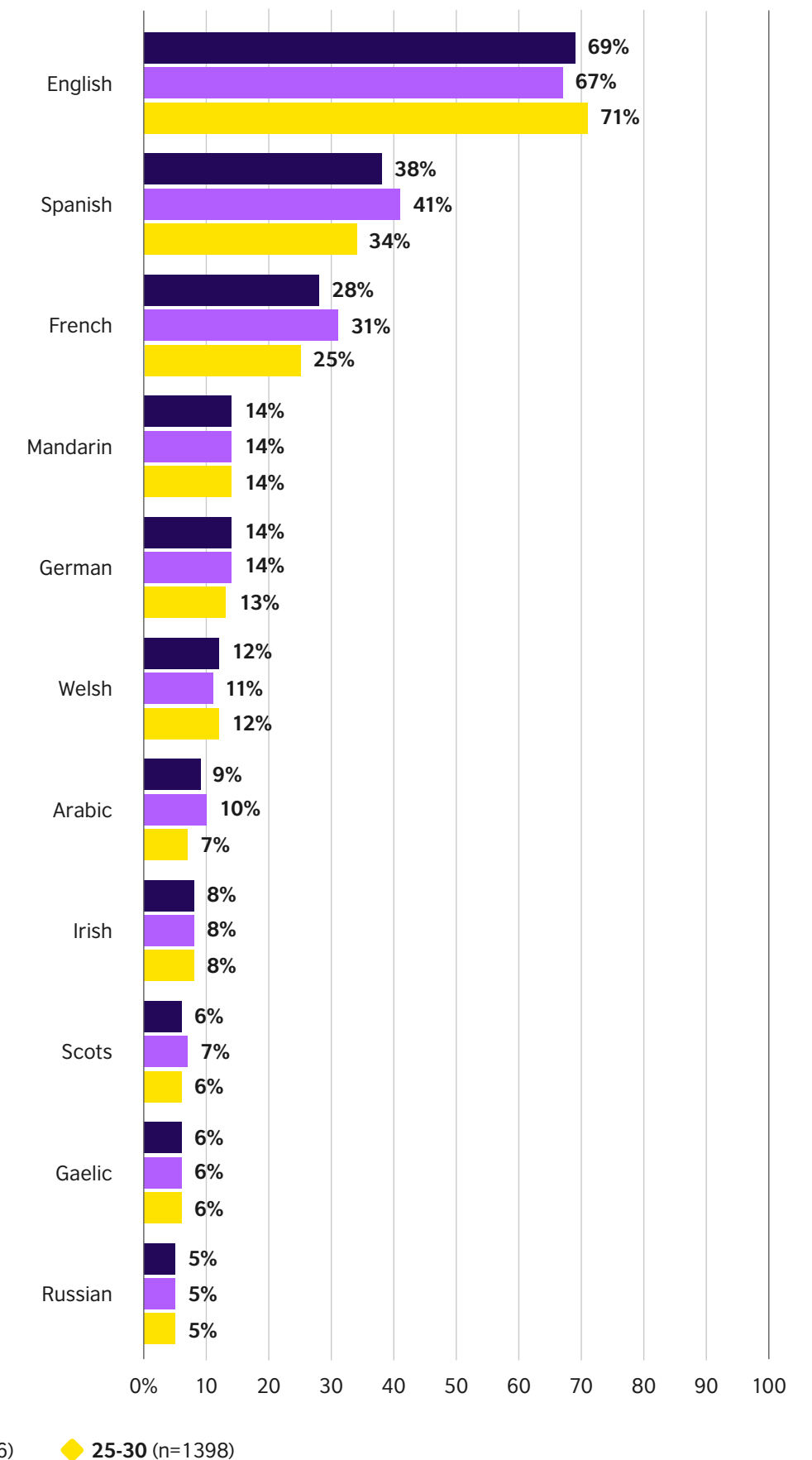
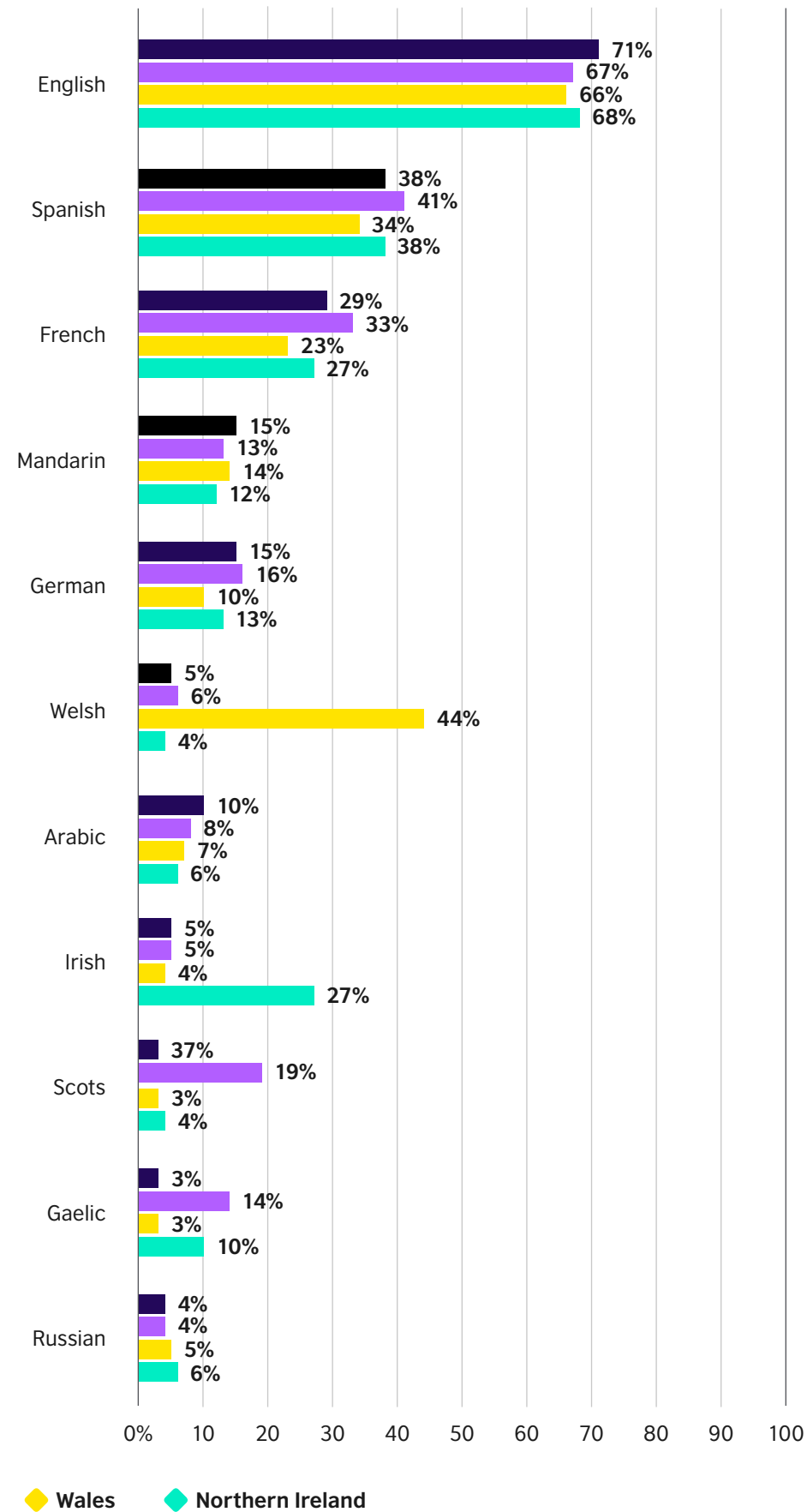


Figure 5 Most important languages to learn by nation



In addition to financial barriers, bureaucratic hurdles further complicate the process of obtaining visas. The complexity of visa applications, combined with potential delays, can discourage young people from pursuing opportunities outside the UK. Navigating these challenges requires time and resources that many young people do not have. The complexity of visa requirements does not just limit personal opportunities; it also affects the UK's international presence. When young people cannot move abroad easily, it reduces cultural youth exchanges and weakens diplomatic ties, which can hurt the UK's global influence.

Looking to the future, these barriers could cause long-term changes in how young people choose to move abroad. Many UK youth are now considering alternative destinations for their studies and travel, which may lead to decreased cultural youth exchange with European countries. As the political landscape continues to evolve, understanding these trends will be crucial for shaping future policies that facilitate international mobility for young people.

1.2.1 Optimism in global matters

Young people are optimistic about their ability to influence global matters, with 57% believing that UK youth can make a difference on global issues, compared to only 24% who think they can't. Gender differences are also notable; women (62%) are more likely than men (53%) to believe in their capacity to effect change. This positivity comes at a time when global issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and mental health are increasingly prominent in the world.

Although young people are optimistic about influencing global issues, many feel their true impact on effecting change is limited, with their voices often overlooked in decision-making processes. As one participant reflected,

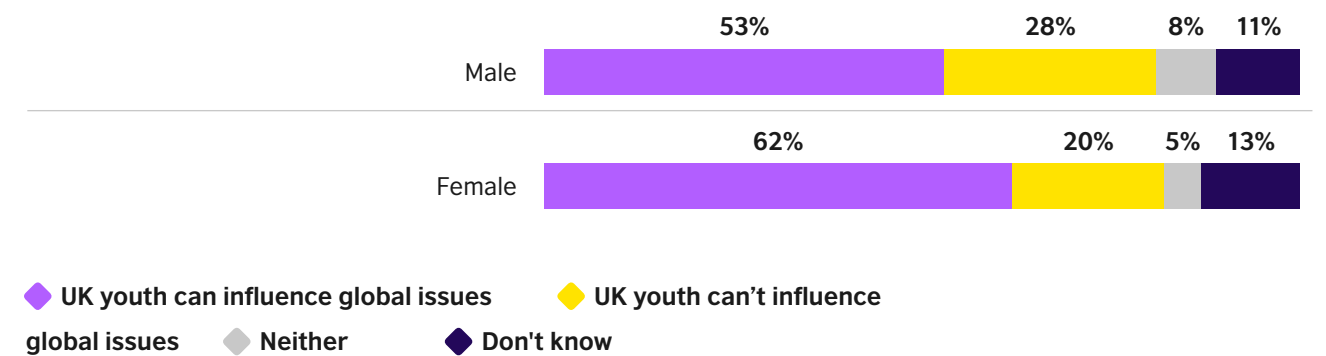
“You just have to look at the lack of representation of our generation in places like parliament.”

Female, 21
Scotland, Focus group

1.2 Youth influence on global issues

UK youth are increasingly recognising their potential to impact global issues and contribute to meaningful change on the international stage. Education is seen as a vital tool for empowering young people to engage with global priorities, and there is a strong demand for enhanced pathways into political engagement, enabling youth to navigate the complexities of global advocacy effectively.

Figure 6 Perception of UK youth's ability to influence global issues by gender



South Asian

Global consciousness with local roots

Young South Asians demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of global inequalities, informed by their connections to their ancestral homelands:



When you think of, let's say in Bangladesh for example, when they're on the rickshaws, they've got to put so much manual physical labour into cycling people to where they need to go. And when you think of how much they're actually earning, it's nothing.

Female, 25
North England, Focus group

This seemingly contradictory attitude toward mobility - high willingness to move but hesitation about cultural adaptation - reflects the complex migration experience many have already undergone. Having already invested significant emotional and cultural capital in adapting to life in the UK, there's understandable reluctance to restart this process elsewhere. This perspective is particularly meaningful given that many Eastern European youth have either migrated themselves or are children of migrants who have witnessed firsthand the challenges of cultural adaptation.

This duality extends to their information consumption - while using similar digital platforms to their peers, they showed greater scepticism about information reliability, particularly regarding news about their home countries.

In response to their perceived lack of influence, many young people are increasingly using social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok not only to amplify their voices but also to mobilise for political action, such as protests and marches. Qualitative discussions emphasised that these platforms are essential tools for organising and fostering community engagement. One participant noted:



You can reach a lot of people, especially younger ones, on platforms like Instagram and TikTok—they're the big ones right now.

Female, 24
North England, Focus group

Another participant remarked:



Protesting is often the only way people feel they can get their voices heard.

Male, 27
South England, Focus group

highlighting the frustration of feeling excluded from traditional political processes.

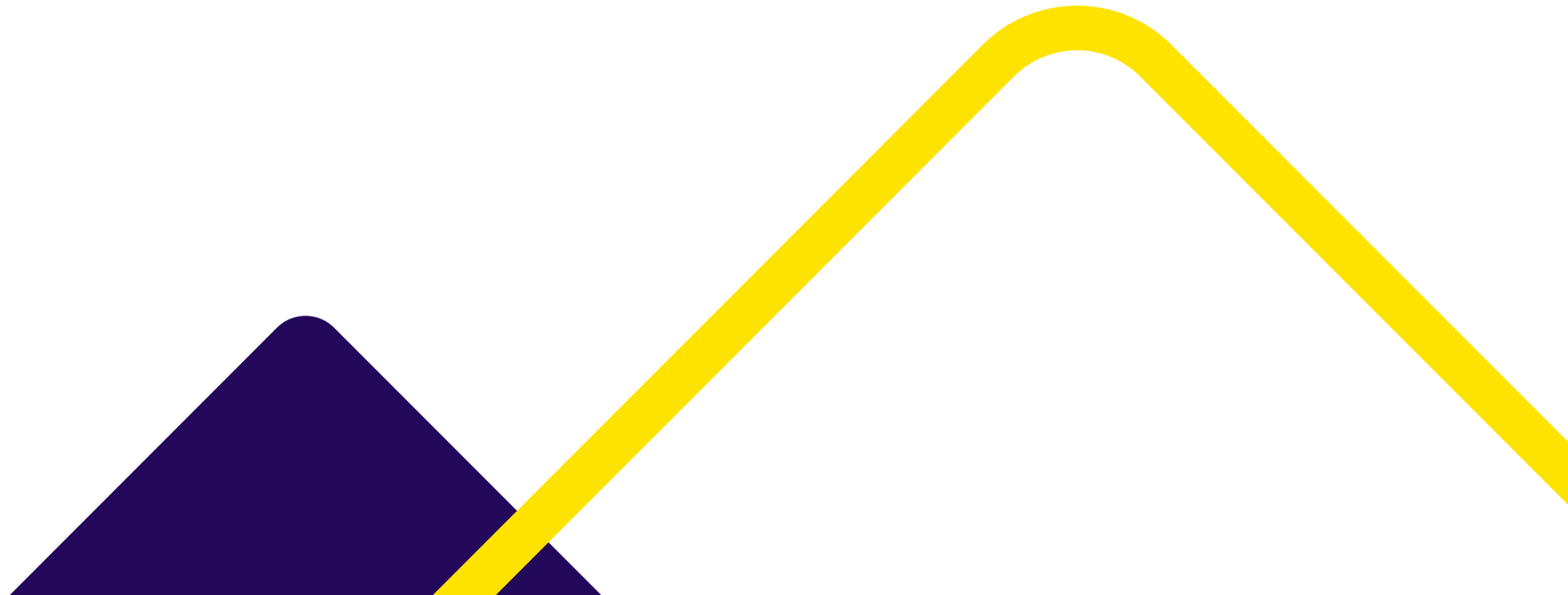
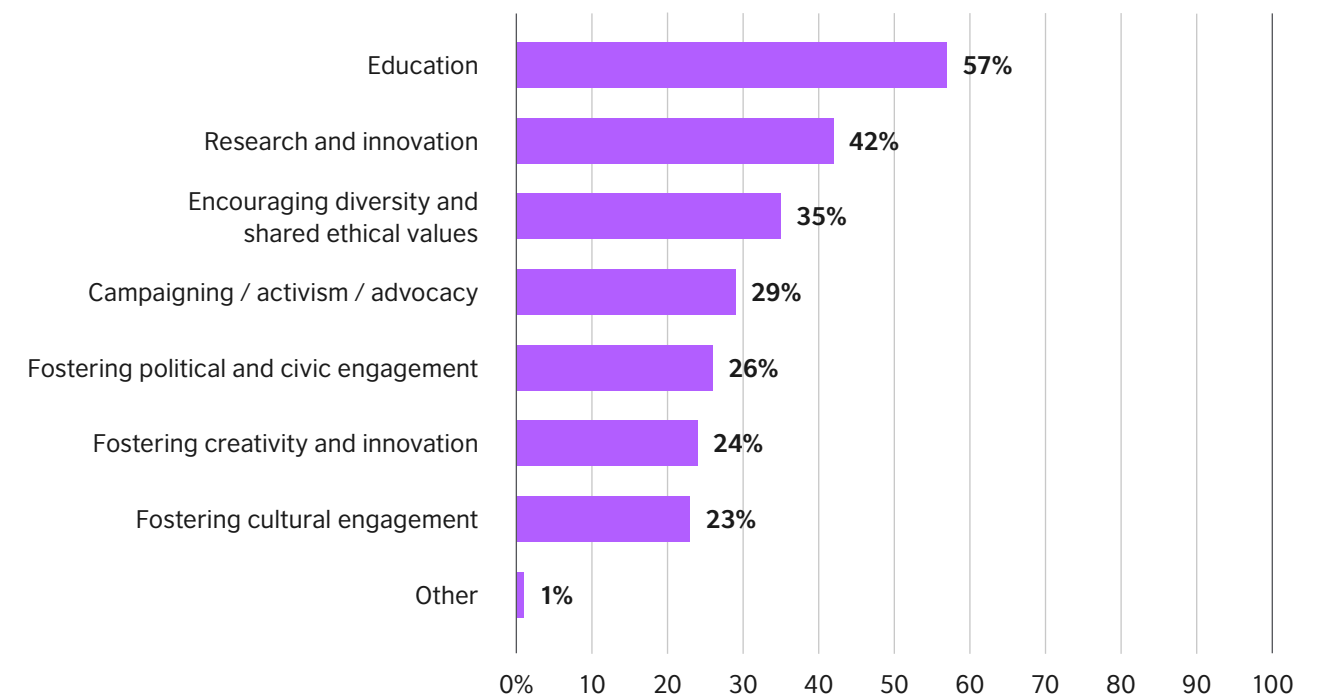
1.2.2 Education as a tool for global challenges

Fifty-seven percent of UK youth view education as the most powerful tool for addressing global challenges. Qualitative discussions revealed a strong demand to evolve education to connect academic learning with real-world issues, highlighting the need for enhanced community and political education in schools. Young people seek more awareness about political involvement opportunities and clearer pathways into politics. They believe schools should teach more about international issues and encourage political

engagement from a young age. This sentiment suggests that equipping young people with the right knowledge and skills is crucial for tackling complex global challenges.

Besides education, other powerful tools identified include research and innovation (42%), encouraging diversity and shared ethical values (35%), and campaigning and advocacy (29%). The survey also highlighted that women are significantly more likely than men to value education (61% vs 53%) and advocacy (32% vs 25%).

Figure 7 Most powerful tools to address global challenges



1.3 Global issues and the UK's role

Young people in the UK are highly cognisant of both global issues and the UK's role in addressing them. While they recognise the need for international cooperation and leadership, particularly on climate change, there is also a strong desire for the UK to confront its colonial legacy. Moreover, they seek to improve conditions at home, highlighting a clear distinction between global responsibilities and domestic priorities.

1.3.1 Top global issues

UK youth view the most urgent global issues as violence and conflict (31%), mental health challenges (31%), poverty and economic inequality (30%), and climate change (29%). This perspective was reflected in qualitative discussions, where conflict, poverty, and political instability were often cited as the primary global concerns, specifically mentioning the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts.

The prominence of these issues reflects the wider global context of increasing political instability and economic difficulties. The interconnected nature of today's world means that conflicts and crises in one region can have far-reaching consequences, shaping perceptions and priorities even in countries not directly affected. Gender differences are notable; women are more likely than men to be concerned about violence and conflict (34% vs 29%), mental health issues (37% vs 24%) and poverty and economic inequality (34% vs 26%). In comparison, men are more inclined than women to prioritise corruption (24% vs 18%), migration and refugees (21% vs 18%), and misinformation (19% vs 15%).

These gender differences might be explained by several factors, though further research would be needed to confirm these interpretations. The higher concern among women regarding violence, mental health, and economic inequality could potentially reflect their historically greater vulnerability to these issues, as well as traditionally stronger roles in caregiving and family welfare. Men's heightened focus on corruption, migration, and misinformation might stem from typically greater engagement with political news media and institutional systems, though such patterns are rapidly evolving in many societies. These differences may also reflect varying lived experiences and societal roles rather than inherent gender-based perspectives.

There are few differences by nation, though Welsh respondents (25%) are significantly less likely to perceive poverty and economic inequality as a major challenge for the wider world, while respondents from Northern Ireland (26%) are more likely than all other regions to view migration and refugees as a key concern.

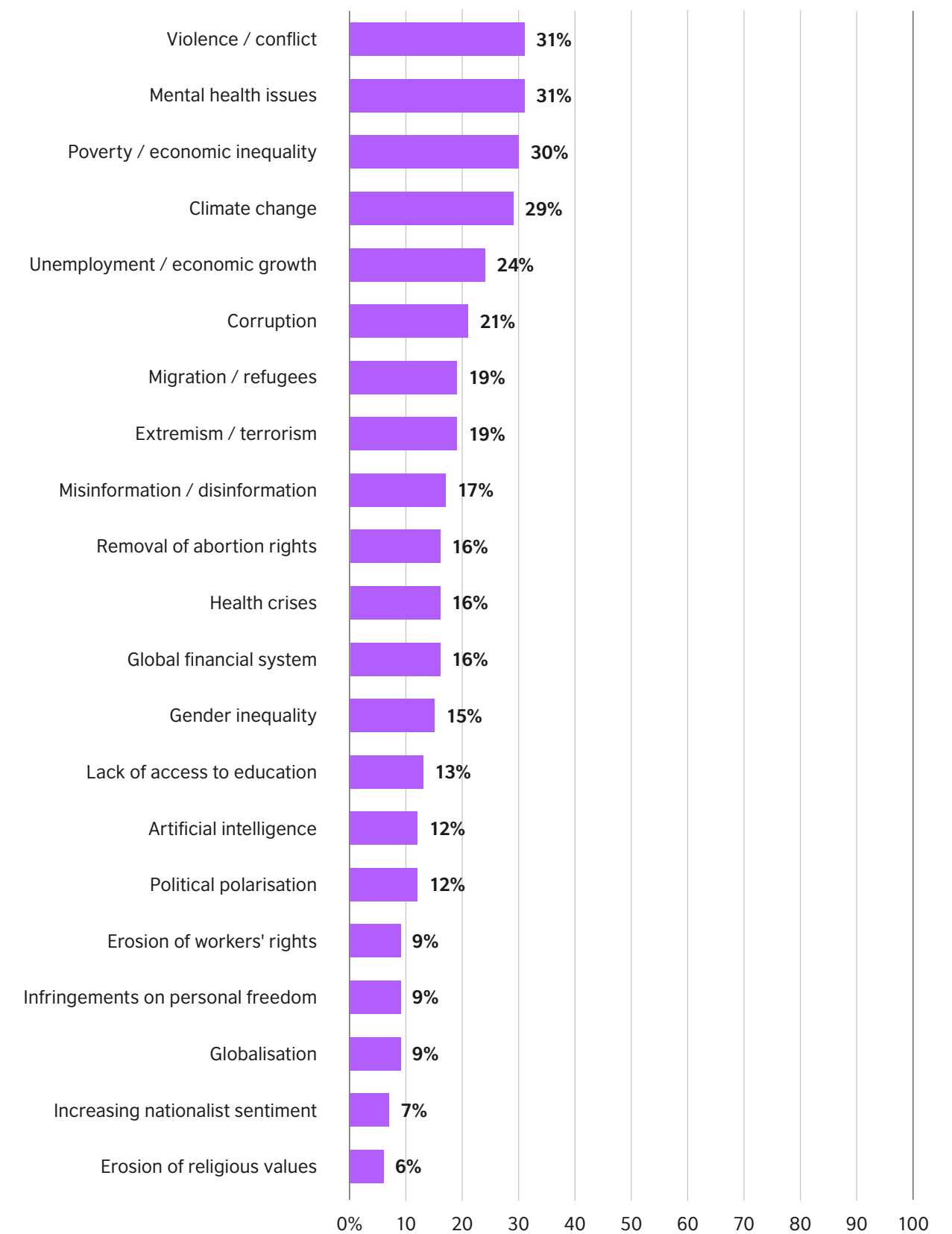
Despite these variations, UK youth generally recognise similar global challenges, acknowledging that these issues are interconnected and have far-reaching effects. One young person noted, "I think everybody needs to get involved; global issues, especially climate, are going to affect us all detrimentally" [Female, 23, North England, Focus group]. The effects of climate change, for example, are felt worldwide, impacting weather patterns, food security, and migration. Furthermore, political instability and economic problems are closely linked, as political turmoil can exacerbate economic difficulties and vice versa. However, while these connections may appear evident, it's worth noting that these specific interconnections were not explicitly discussed in our focus groups and represent our analytical interpretation of the broader context.

1.3.2 The UK's role in addressing global challenges following its exit from the EU

Since the UK's departure from the EU, opinions on the UK's role in addressing global challenges have varied significantly. Our focus group discussions showed that many young people believe the UK should adopt a leadership role, particularly in relation to climate change, which aligns with the government's priorities. As the UK navigates its new role outside the EU, the task of re-establishing international relationships and commitments adds complexity to its leadership on global issues. In the current geopolitical climate, the urgency for the UK to lead on climate change and other global challenges is increasingly apparent.

Broader research supports the importance of this leadership role. The 2021 Chatham House report on "UK Foreign Policy Post-Brexit" emphasises the importance of the UK leading by example, particularly through international and multilateral cooperation, along with a focus on renewable energy. The report notes that, as a significant historical emitter of greenhouse gases, the UK has a responsibility to spearhead efforts in renewable energy and sustainability, setting a positive example for other nations.

Figure 8 Most urgent global issues



Our survey findings show that UK youth hold divided opinions regarding the UK's foreign aid efforts: 35% believe aid is essential for conflict zones, while 36% feel it should be reduced due to concerns about ineffectiveness or corruption. Notably, gender differences in preferences are also evident; men (42%) are more likely than women (31%) to support reducing aid. This gender difference appears to align with broader trends identified in the Financial Times analysis (Burn-Murdoch, 2024)⁶; the analysis has documented an emerging ideological divide between young men and women across multiple countries, with young men often adopting more conservative positions on various social and political issues. While our research did not explicitly explore the underlying drivers of these gender differences in attitudes toward foreign aid, they may be part of this wider pattern of diverging viewpoints between young men and women on international and social policy issues.

Figure 9 Perspectives on the UK's foreign aid efforts

- ◆ UK aid is crucial for conflict areas
- ◆ UK aid should be reduced due to ineffectiveness
- ◆ Neither
- ◆ Don't know

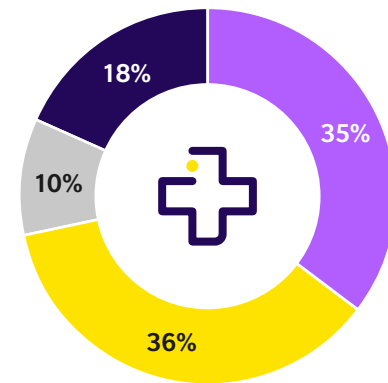
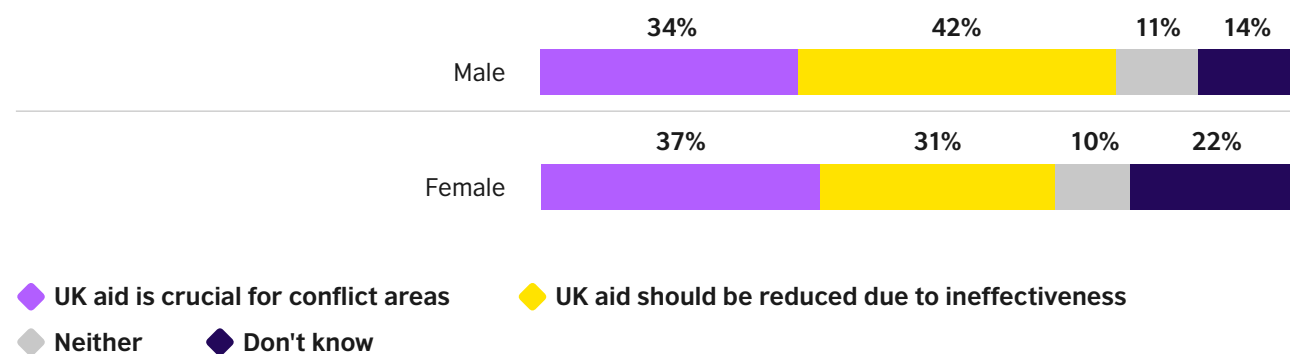


Figure 10 Perspectives on the UK's foreign aid efforts by gender



6 Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024) 'A new global gender divide is emerging', Financial Times, 26 January. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/29fd9b5c-2f35-41bf-9d4c-994db4e12998> (Accessed: 11th November 2024).

1.3.3 Broader perceptions of the UK's global role

Perceptions of the Commonwealth and the UK's global role are heavily shaped by its colonial and imperial past. Qualitative discussions explored the negative legacy of British colonialism, with some emphasising the long-lasting impacts on former colonies.

There is a strong call for the UK to confront its colonial legacy and take responsibility for the historical actions that have contributed to ongoing inequalities in various regions. This not only involves acknowledging past wrongs but also actively working to support development and address the injustices that persist. As one participant noted,

“Countries in Central America, Africa, and Southeast Asia have suffered economically and socially after British rule. While it's not entirely Britain's fault, it plays a significant role in the current situation. With that power, Britain should use it to benefit not just its home nation and allies, but also those it has wronged for the past two hundred years.”

Male, 19
London, Focus group

The impact of British colonialism still affects global relations today. For young people, how the UK addresses this history will be crucial for its future standing and influence in the world.

The UK's former role as a colonial power, combined with its status as a developed nation, creates expectations for it to play a significant role in aiding those fleeing conflict and persecution. However, growing nationalist sentiments and ongoing debates over immigration complicate public opinion regarding the extent of the UK's responsibilities. As one observer stated: "I think it should be seen as using power and wealth for good. A lot of the time, they're not. They should aspire to use that position to help people outside of the UK as well as in" [Male, 19, London, Focus group]. This sentiment reflects the belief that the UK has a moral obligation to assist those in need, regardless of the current political climate.

1.4 Discussion points

1.4.1 Brexit: The new Berlin Wall for working-class youth

Following the UK's exit from the EU, visa requirements and bureaucratic challenges have imposed significant barriers to global mobility, particularly impacting young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These new barriers limit their ability to pursue educational, professional, and cultural opportunities abroad, potentially widening the gap between those who can afford to be global citizens and those who cannot.

The loss of programmes like Erasmus+ is more than just the end of an exchange scheme; it represents the closure of numerous pathways to global experiences. As documented in the European Economic and Social Committee's report on EU-UK Youth Engagement (EESC, 2024)⁷, while the UK sought to implement alternative models to Erasmus+, youth sector representatives maintain that these do not match the voluntary youth mobility and non-formal learning opportunities nor the operational grant funding that Erasmus+ previously granted the UK youth sector. This situation risks creating a divide in the UK, where global citizenship becomes a privilege of the wealthy, potentially fostering a generation of more insular thinkers in an increasingly interconnected world.

1.4.2 Digital revolution of political engagement

This reliance on social media for mobilisation highlights a significant shift in political engagement, as many young people increasingly see conventional channels—such as town halls and leaflets—as obsolete. For younger generations, political activism has transitioned to the constant streams of content on social media, where they mobilise and express their voices on global issues.

This evolution raises critical questions: Are we witnessing the democratisation of political participation, or the rise of echo chambers? Is this digital activism empowering informed citizens, or merely producing clicktivists? The answers to these questions will be pivotal in shaping the future of political engagement and democracy itself.

7 EESC (2024) EU-UK Youth Engagement (own-initiative opinion). Brussels: European Economic and Social Committee. REX/580 <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/eu-uk-youth-engagement#downloads>

1.4.3 Confronting the colonial ghost: From empire's shadow to global partner

Young people in the UK view the UK's colonial legacy not just as a burden, but as a unique responsibility to drive global change. They acknowledge the problematic elements of colonialism and its role in today's issues related to imperialism while wanting to see tangible action to address historical injustices and contribute to sustainable global development, rather than mere symbolic gestures. This generation is challenging the UK to transform from a former empire to a beacon of global justice and sustainable development.

In this context, a significant opportunity arises to enhance awareness about the Commonwealth's objectives, as less than one-third of young people can identify them. With 40% prioritising access to health, education, and shelter, there is a clear expectation for the UK to leverage its Commonwealth connections to fulfil these development aspirations. The question is no longer whether the UK will acknowledge its past, but how it will use that acknowledgement to forge a new, more positive global identity and role.

These discussion points aren't just observations; they're a call to action. They underscore the need for policymakers, educators, and society to engage with a generation that is globally minded yet faces domestic constraints, is digitally empowered but economically challenged, and is burdened by history while determined to shape a better future. How the UK responds to these challenges will determine not just its own fate, but its place in a rapidly evolving global order.



Chapter 2: Youth resilience and adaptation in a changing UK

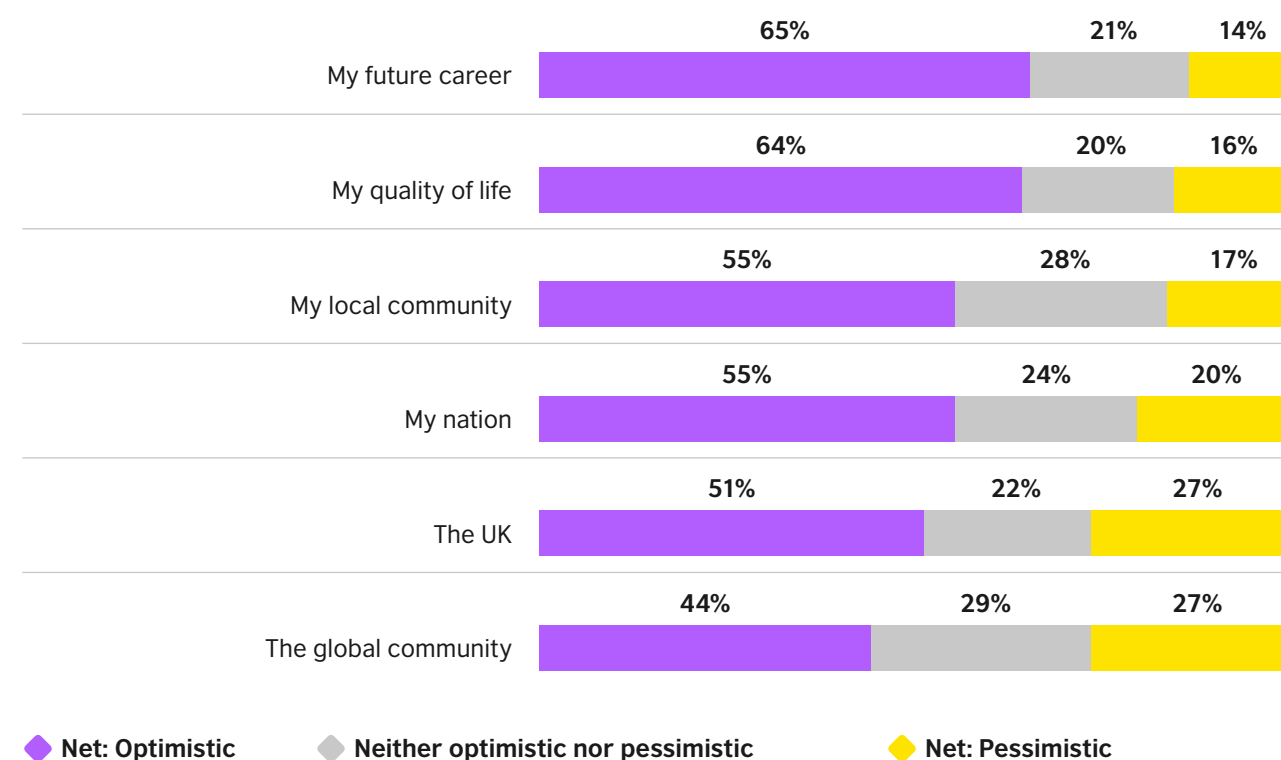
Life for young people in the UK has changed significantly since the publication of the previous Next Generation report in 2017. A global pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, and immense geopolitical volatility have created a landscape of profound uncertainty, forcing young people to fundamentally reconsider how they view their futures and navigate their present.

This chapter explores how young people are adapting to this uncertainty across different dimensions of their lives. It begins by examining the 'optimism gap' - a striking contrast between how young people view their personal futures versus broader societal prospects. This paradox provides crucial context for understanding how they approach financial insecurity and develop resilience in response to economic challenges. The chapter then explores how these adaptations extend to community building, where young people are actively reshaping traditional concepts of belonging to create new support networks. Finally, it examines how they balance immediate domestic concerns with broader international perspectives - a tension that reflects their position as a generation simultaneously facing local pressures while maintaining global awareness.

2.1 Individual versus shared futures: contrasting levels of optimism

Our survey sought to explore how optimistic young people feel about different aspects of their future. When asked, "How optimistic do you feel about the following?", respondents expressed higher levels of optimism about their personal prospects compared to broader societal outcomes. Young people were more optimistic about their future careers (65%) and future quality of life (64%). However, when considering collective futures, the levels of optimism decreased. Just over half (51%) were optimistic about the future of the UK, while 44% were optimistic about the future of the global community.

Figure 11 Outlook on the future



2.1.1 Respondents who identify as Black are more positive

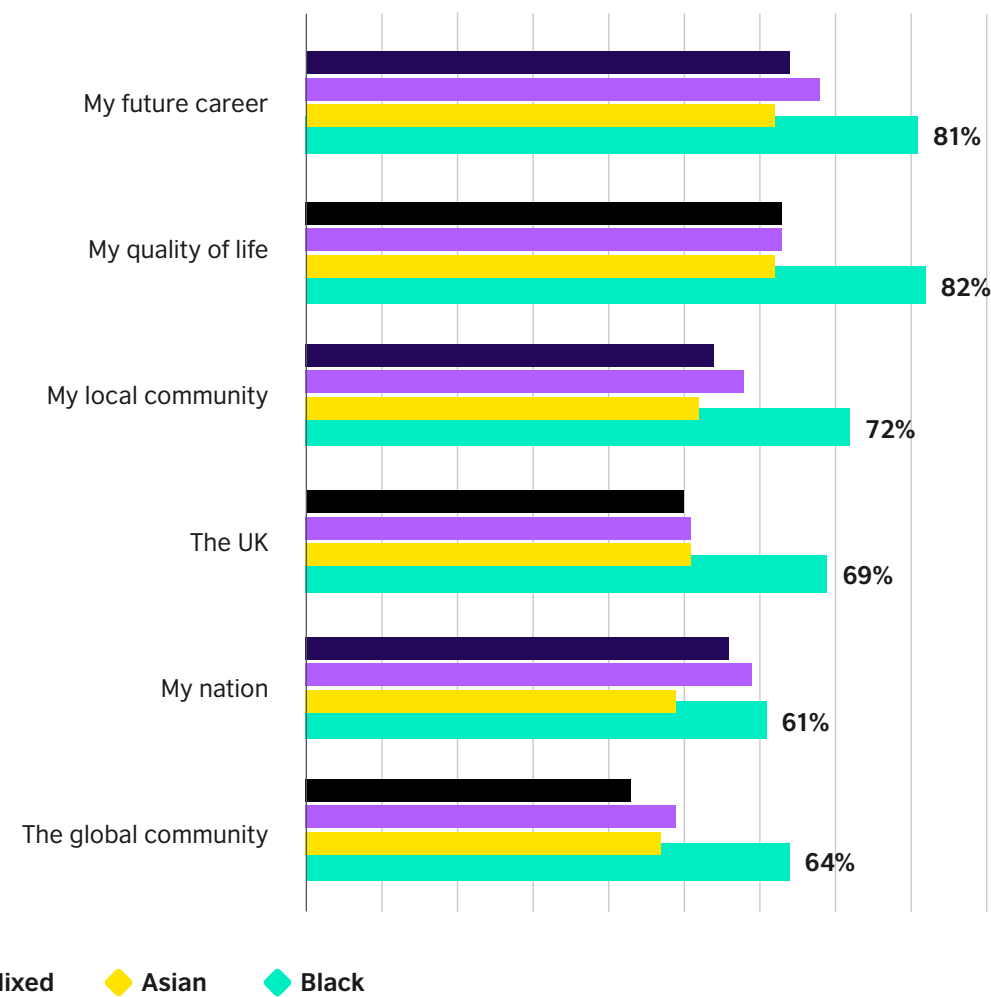
Respondents who identified as Black were significantly more likely than respondents from other ethnic backgrounds to be optimistic about their future career (81%), quality of life (82%), the future of the UK (69%) and the global community (64%). This notably higher level of optimism was consistent across all measured dimensions when compared to all other ethnic groups in our study.

In our qualitative discussions, peer researchers suggested one potential factor might be tangible connections with other countries – parents from Nigeria or a grandparent from Jamaica – which provide different perspectives on their situation relative to previous generations and those outside the UK. Peer researchers raised that White respondents, on the other hand, may have the sole reference point of their parents' or grandparents' perception that things were better in the past. While Asian respondents showed slightly lower optimism about individual prospects like career and quality of life, which appears to contradict the transnational connections theory, this pattern should be interpreted with caution due to the smaller sample size of Asian respondents in our survey.

This higher level of optimism among Black youth in the UK shows some parallels with international patterns. Research by the BBC in 2018 found that economically disadvantaged Black people in the United States were more optimistic than their White counterparts.⁸

⁸ Dr. C. Graham, 'Why are black poor Americans more optimistic than white ones?', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-42718303>.

Figure 12 Outlook on the future by ethnicity (Net: Optimistic)



2.1.2 Perceptions of decline

Though optimistic about their future quality of life, young people expressed a broad perception of decline in the UK. Just under two in three (63%) said their standard of living is worse than that of their parents' generation (though this figure decreased to 42% among Black respondents).

Discussions in the qualitative focus groups supported this sentiment. When asked how the place they grew up has changed over the last ten years, participants framed their responses – either explicitly or implicitly – in terms of decline. Some lamented the closure of shops and empty high streets, others said their area is no longer maintained, with footpaths overgrown or potholes unfilled. We posed a neutral question about change, without implying positive or negative trends. Despite this, most participants expressed a general sentiment that conditions have declined over time.

“I don't know if it's nostalgia kicking in, but it's just seemed grimy compared to it was when I was a kid.”

Male, 28
North England, Focus group

2.2 Financial security: The elusive key to happiness

Our research reveals a significant disconnect between what young people value most for their happiness and what they feel they can achieve. Financial security, or a lack thereof, sits alongside decline as a source of concern. Our survey asked young people which factors are the biggest contributors to their personal success and happiness, both now and in the future. The most common answer was financial security (55%), ahead of job satisfaction (51%) and getting married or being in a stable relationship (43%). However, of all factors surveyed, financial security was seen as the least attainable (58%), creating a stark gap between aspiration and perceived achievability. This is broadly similar for young people across the UK, regardless of where they live. The importance of financial security for overall happiness increases significantly with age (53% for 18–24-year-olds versus 58% for 25–30-year-olds), as individuals, in general, have greater financial responsibility and potentially increased anxieties about economic stability in the current climate.

Figure 13 Sources of personal success and happiness with statistically significant differences by age group

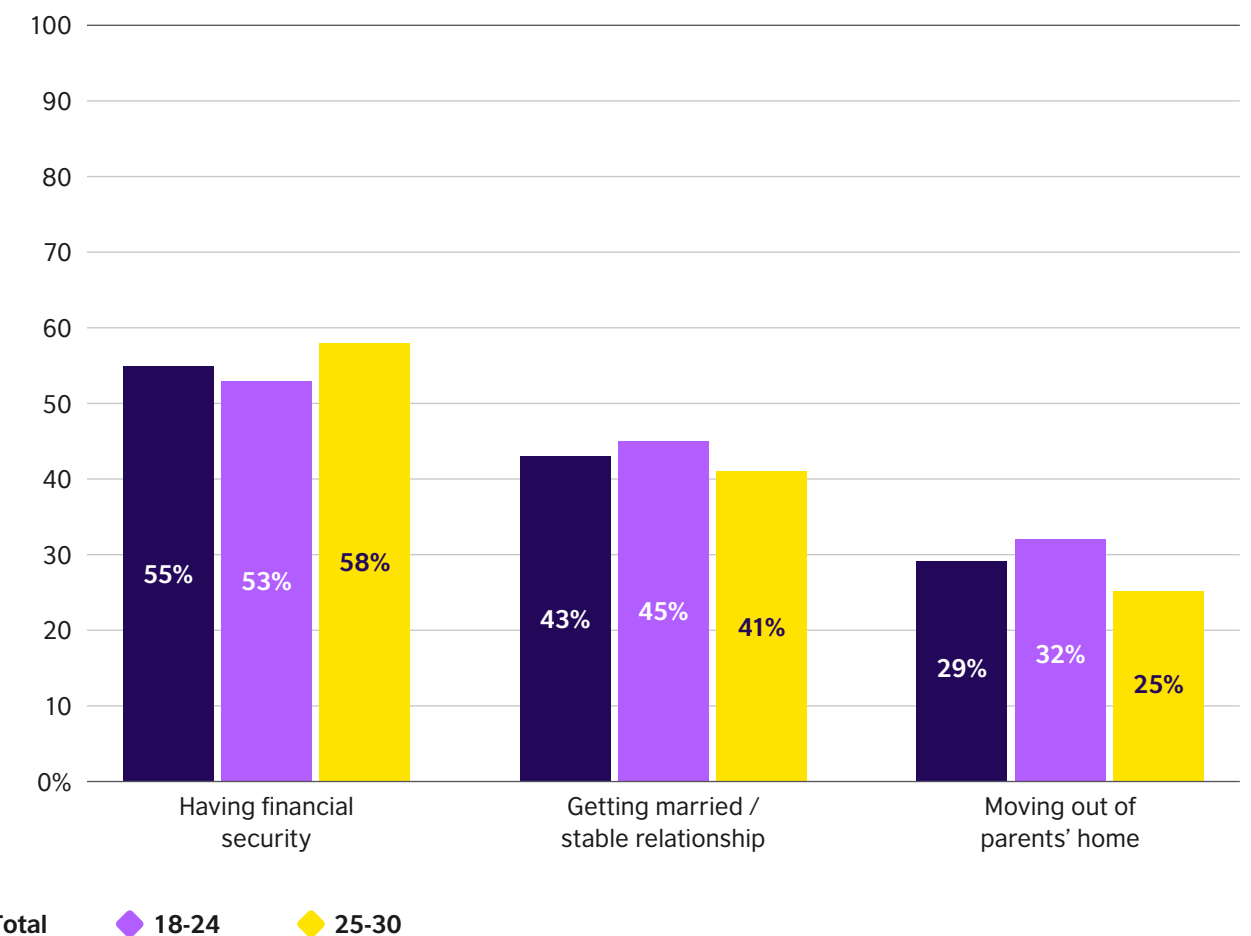


Figure 14 Sources of personal success and happiness

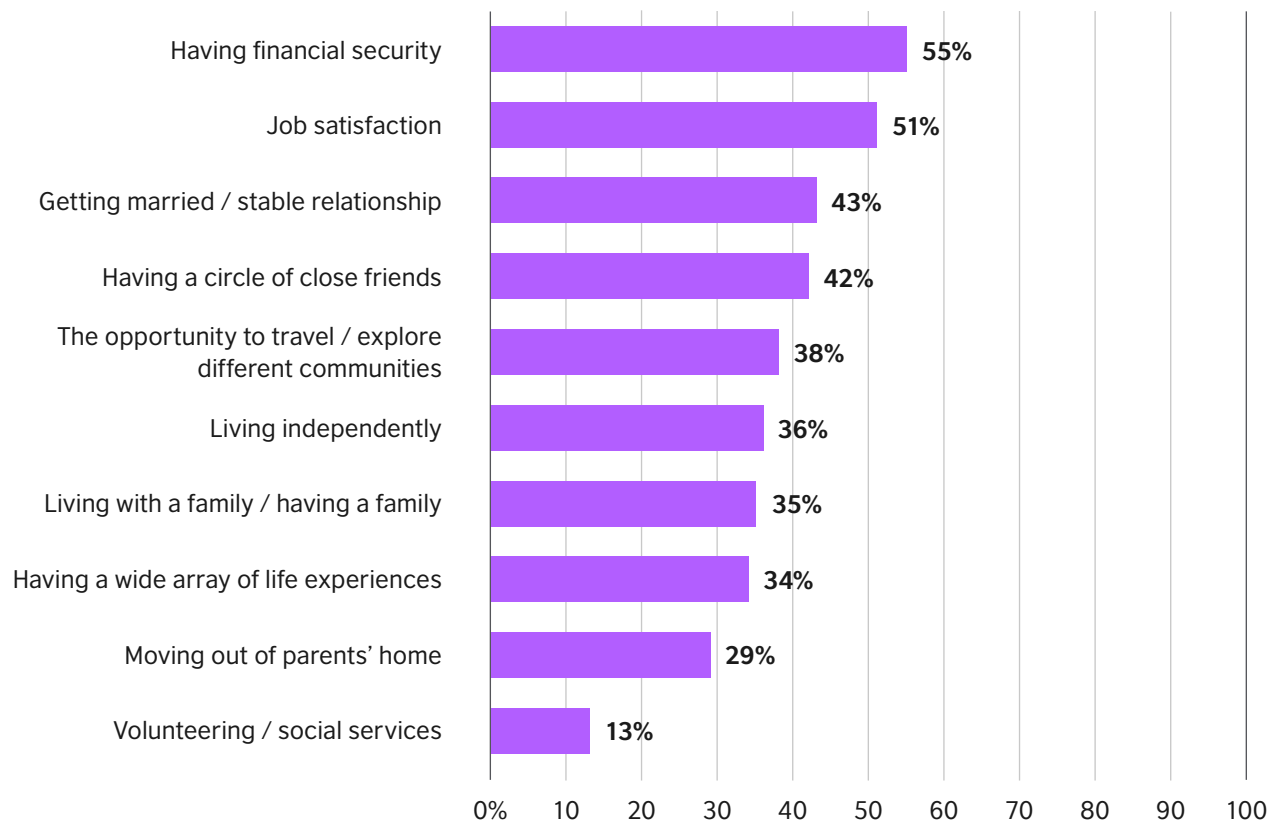
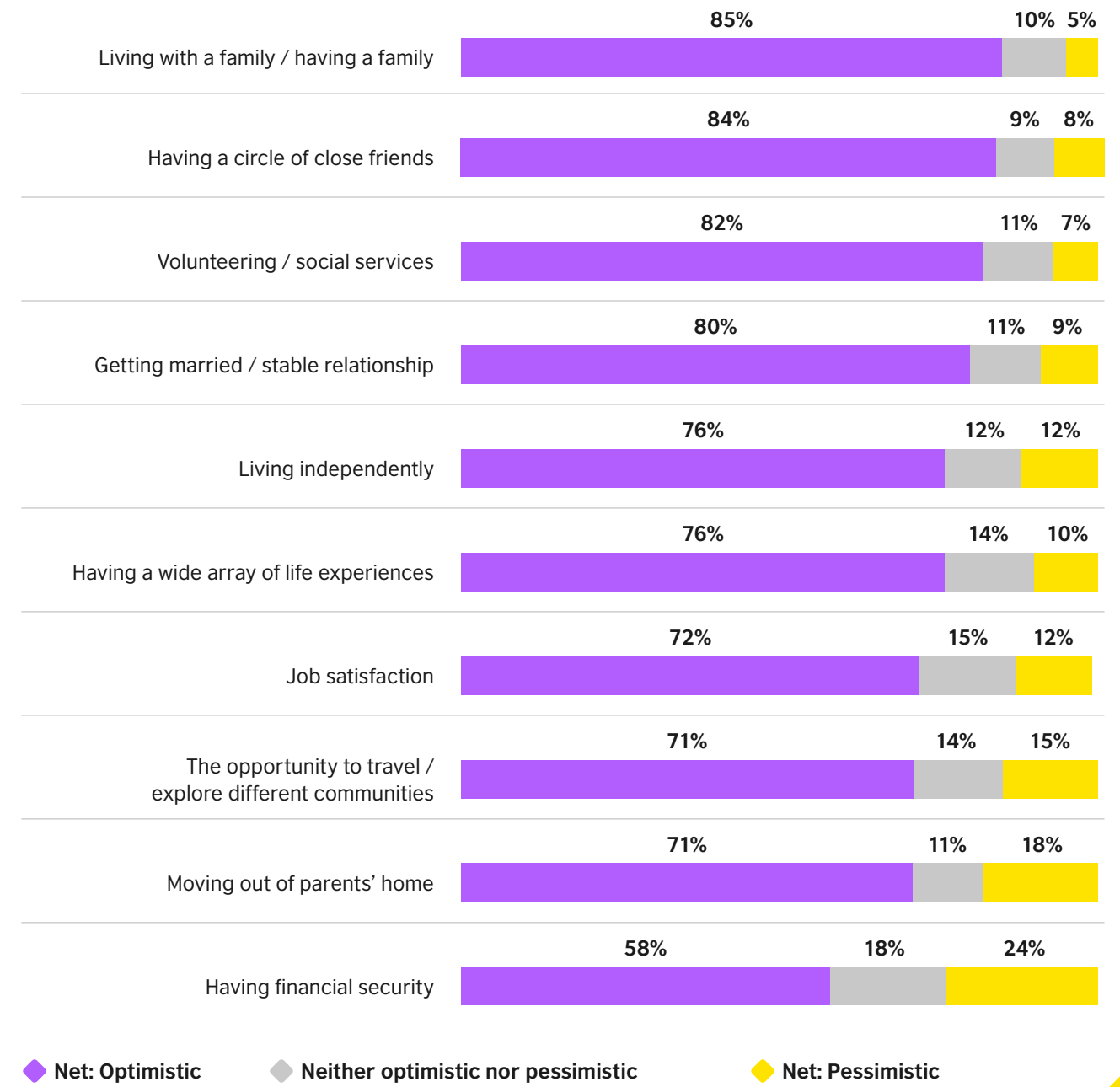


Figure 15 Achievability of sources of personal success and happiness



Given this chasm between importance and attainability, it is unsurprising that young people view their current situation through an economic lens. When asked what kind of challenges young people face in their area, participants from across the UK placed a similar emphasis on three main themes: unaffordable housing and difficulties in moving out of their parents' house, limited job opportunities, and the high cost of living.

“

No one can afford anything, no one can afford to rent. And if they can't afford to rent, that means they won't be able to save up for a mortgage.

Male, 27
South England, Focus group

“

I feel like these days it's literally just living like pay check to pay check. You can't really save that much anymore.

Female, 28
Wales, Focus group

Even if you're working full time like you can't afford anything.

Female, 28
Scotland, Focus group

These all relate – directly or indirectly – to financial security and the perception that it is a distant prospect.



Eastern European

Beyond survival:

Economic aspirations shaped by migration experiences

While financial insecurity was a common theme of this research, Eastern European youth expressed particular concerns about the quality of employment opportunities rather than just survival. This reflects cultural expectations around social mobility, where migration to the UK has historically represented an opportunity for significant life improvement:

“

It's not many opportunities that young people can have these days. You know, people, half of the people I know end up working in Greggs.

Female, 18
East England, Focus group

Their perspective emphasised the distinction between mere existence and truly living:

“

There's a difference between just existing, you know, just getting by and, you know, living... if you can't go out and enjoy certain activities, you know just everyday activities like going out for a drink, you know, going to the cinema, going to see a play, traveling a little bit, then you know you're just existing.

Male, 30
Scotland, Focus group

This disappointment with current economic realities hasn't dampened their entrepreneurial spirit - quite the opposite. Eastern European youth showed higher entrepreneurial interest than the overall sample (62% vs 55%), likely reflecting cultural expectations around social mobility and progress. Many Eastern European migrants come from countries where upward mobility is deeply valued and where moving to the UK has historically represented an opportunity for significant life improvement, not just basic survival. Their disappointment with entry-level salaries and job quality suggests a gap between these cultural expectations of migration-driven advancement and the current UK economic reality.

South Asian

The strong entrepreneurial drive among South Asian youth (71% interested in starting their own business versus 55% overall) reflects both cultural heritage and economic pragmatism. Many South Asian communities have strong traditions of family businesses and self-employment, partly born from historical experiences of discrimination in formal employment. While access to finance remains the primary barrier (cited by 51%), their high entrepreneurial interest suggests the endurance of this cultural orientation toward business ownership.

2.3 Domestic priorities and concerns: Understanding a complex balance

Young people in the UK face a complex balancing act between domestic concerns and international empathy. Focus group discussions revealed sophisticated perspectives on this relationship, while survey results - which required choosing between competing statements - highlighted how immediate pressures can influence priorities. This section explores the tension between immediate local needs and a broader global outlook, reflecting young people's pragmatic responses to personal challenges alongside their instinctive awareness of international responsibilities.



I think the UK should be involved with these issues, mainly because a lot of the time they've been the root cause.

Male, 22
North England, Focus group

I think it would be good if the UK were an example of actually doing something for other countries to follow perhaps.

Male, 25
Wales, Focus group

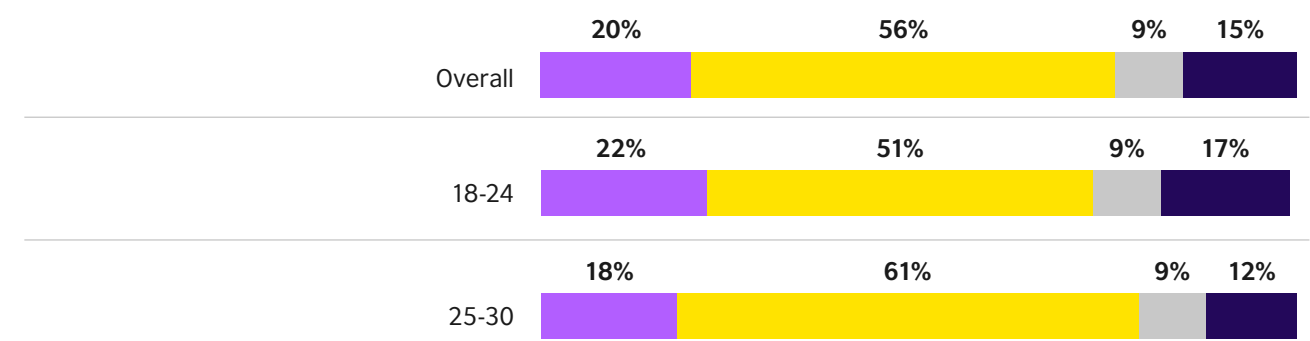
When discussing the relationship between domestic and international obligations in the focus groups, young people demonstrated far more nuanced views. Participants spontaneously revealed a belief that the UK has an obligation to lead by example on important global issues, such as conflict resolution (mainly in reference to the war in Gaza) and the climate crisis. Indeed, several participants acknowledged that the UK, with its colonial past, has contributed to many of the problems the international community now seeks to resolve.

2.3.1 Understanding survey responses in context

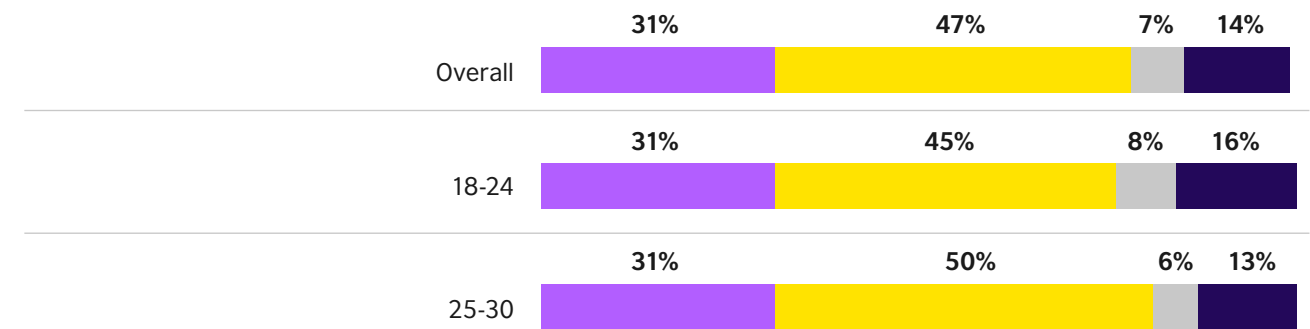
Our survey put pairs of competing statements to young people and asked them to select the statement they agreed with more. While this approach helped identify primary concerns, it's important to note that these statements were not mutually exclusive - a young person can believe both that the UK should address domestic challenges while maintaining international commitments.

Within each pair of statements, one advocated for a focus on domestic issues, while the other prioritised international intervention. When asked to choose, young people tended toward domestic priorities: 56% said the UK should focus on domestic issues compared to 20% that said the UK should focus on international aid. Similarly, 47% agreed with the statement that UK youth should focus on local issues, while 31% thought UK youth should support international causes.

Figure 16 Outlook on the UK's role and the involvement of young people in international issues



◆ The UK should focus on international aid
 ◆ The UK should focus on domestic issues
 ◆ Neither
 ◆ Don't know



◆ UK youth should support international causes
 ◆ UK youth should focus on local issues
 ◆ Neither
 ◆ Don't know

When it came to immigration, 48% said the UK should limit refugee intake to prioritise its own citizens, compared to 28% who said the UK should increase refugee intake from conflict zones. A prioritisation of the domestic was especially pronounced in Northern Ireland; discussion in the focus groups and input from our peer researchers suggest this reflects a thoughtful awareness that Northern Ireland is a post-conflict society, with participants expressing the need to 'get our own house in order' before seeking to help others.

Respondents aged 25–30 were significantly more likely to prioritise the domestic when it came to focusing on local issues over international aid (61% vs 51% for 18–24), that the UK youth should focus on local issues (50% vs 45% for 18–24), and that the UK should limit refugee intake (vs 43% for 18-24). While our data shows that respondents increasingly prioritise financial security as they approach the age of 30, we can only speculate about the relationship between these patterns. The greater focus on

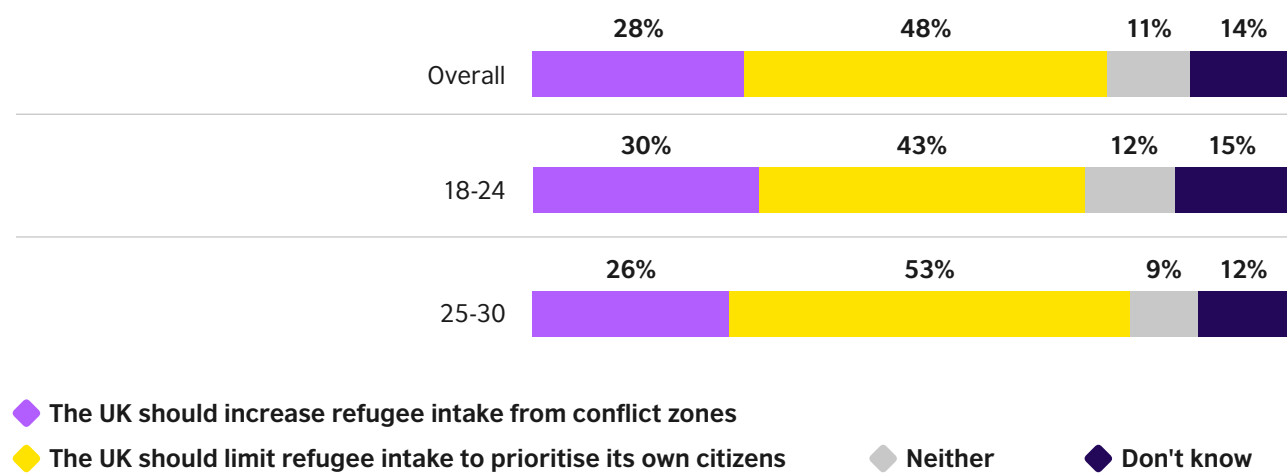
domestic issues among 25–30-year-olds may be linked to increased awareness of financial precarity but, could also be influenced by other factors such as career stage, family responsibilities, or changing perspectives on local versus global issues.

2.3.2 Prioritisation of the domestic does not mean a rejection of the international

Our survey phrased the question in a binary way to elicit the respondent's main priority. But in reality, the paired statements were not mutually exclusive. It is possible to hold two views at once. For instance, a young person can think the UK should focus on domestic issues, and also think the UK should provide international aid.

When we discussed the balance between domestic and international obligations in the focus groups, it became clear that young people hold far more nuanced views than a survey allowed them to express.

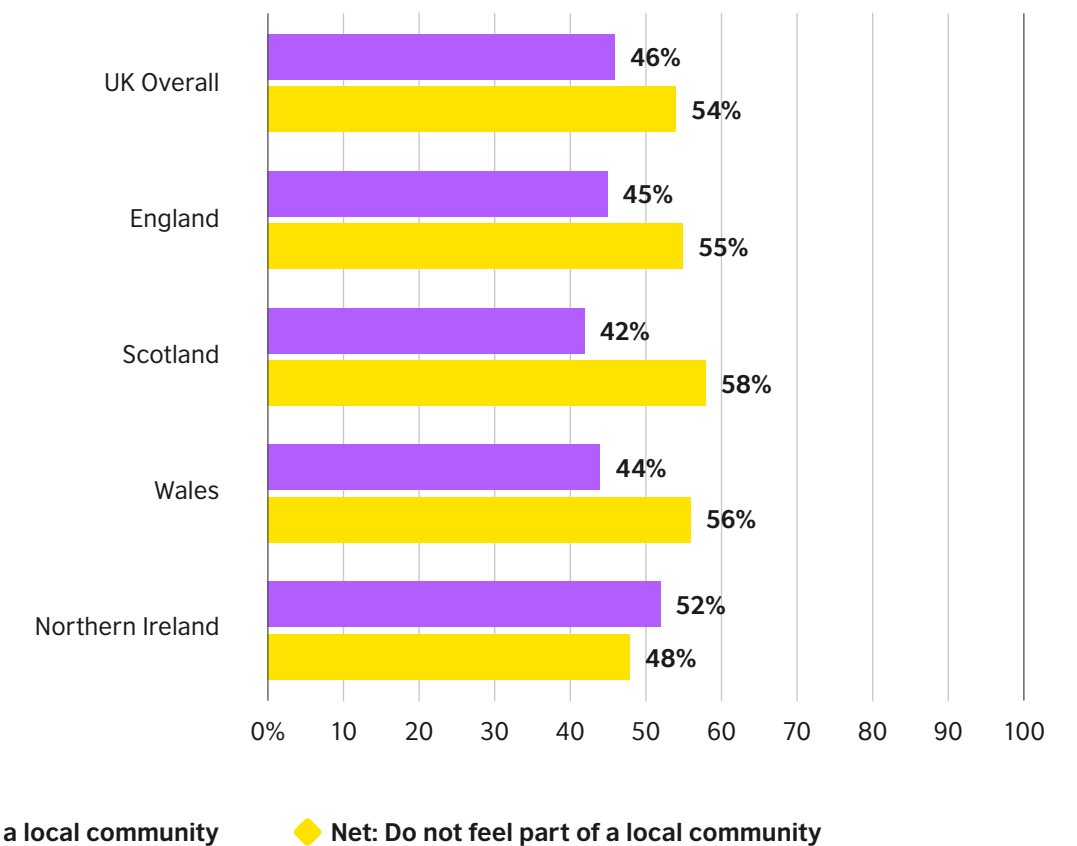
Figure 17 Outlook on the UK's obligations to balance refugee intake with prioritising its own citizens



Participants spontaneously revealed a belief that the UK has an obligation to lead by example on important global issues, such as conflict resolution (mainly in reference to the war in Gaza) and the climate crisis. Indeed, several participants acknowledged that the UK, with its colonial past, has contributed to many of the problems the international community now seeks to resolve.



Figure 18 Proportion of young people who feel they are part of a local community, by nation



2.4 Redefining community

Based on our survey, young people are more likely to say they do not feel part of a local community (54%) than that they do (46%). This applies to all nations within the UK apart from Northern Ireland (52% do feel part of a community vs 48% who do not).

Though most young people do not feel part of their local community, that is not to say they do not feel part of any community. In the focus groups, we asked participants which communities they feel part of. Many struggled to answer this question initially. But when we encouraged them to broaden their concept of community, they realised that they were active members of sporting, student, or cultural communities based around shared identities and interests. Several participants added that it is easier than ever for young people to find their 'tribe' online, whether through gaming or social media.

Focus group participants from traditionally marginalised groups tended to have a broader concept of community and required fewer prompts to see community as something other than place-based. For example, several LBGTQI+ participants spontaneously mentioned how that community was a

source of support when they were less comfortable with their identity. In the focus group made up of members of the South Asian diaspora, participants discussed how religion provides a strong sense of community. Indeed, one participant specifically mentioned how her faith – and, specifically, praying – is so meaningful because it goes beyond the 'local', and allows her to participate in a shared act with a global, imagined community.

“
I feel like a community can kind of be like a family, especially being gay myself. Like moving to Manchester and finding queer community, that was really important to me.

Male, 25
 Wales, Focus group



I still am fond of the local LGBTQI+ youth support group and the Oxfordshire LGBTQI+ community. Huge respect to all these people who extended their hands to support me just because I was questioning or unsure of myself when I was younger and hadn't grown into myself quite yet perhaps.

Non-binary, 21
South England, Focus group

South Asian

The research reveals how religious and cultural traditions profoundly shape community engagement and identity formation. Unlike the overall sample, South Asian youth's sense of community is deeply rooted in religious institutions and practices:



I always feel part of the community, even if I'm praying at home. We're all praying at the exact same time, facing the exact same way. No matter where we are across the world, we're all the community praying in one direction at the same time every day at 5:00 in the morning.

Female, 23
North England, Focus group

This strong sense of religious community (56% feel part of their local community compared to 46% in the overall sample) reflects the central role of Islam in South Asian culture and the way religious practices create bonds that transcend geographical boundaries. The higher levels of community connection also reflect cultural values emphasising collective identity over individualism.

Eastern European

Rebuilding community:

The search for belonging in a new context

The research revealed a complex relationship with community and belonging. While 45% felt part of their local community (similar to the 46% overall sample), their conception of community was distinctly shaped by Eastern European traditions. The emphasis on physical community spaces reflects cultural practices where shared spaces like 'dom kulturalny' (cultural houses) traditionally played central roles in social life. The lack of such spaces in the UK may contribute to their sense of social disconnection and could explain their specific focus on repurposing empty buildings for community use:



Even just, you know, somewhere to sit down... like community buildings, you know, like the old buildings are empty at the minute we could repurpose them into community hubs.

Female, 23
North England, Focus group

This desire for communal spaces intersects with their navigation of dual identities. Unlike some migrant groups who maintain clearly distinct cultural identities, Eastern European youth often operate in a more ambiguous space - culturally proximate to British society while still marked as 'other'. This creates unique challenges in forming a coherent sense of identity and belonging.

2.5 Discussion points

2.5.1 The paradox of youth optimism: Empowered personally but disempowered collectively

Young people are optimistic about their individual futures - the aspects that they can control - while harbouring pessimism about shared national and global prospects. This optimism gap reveals young people's faith in their agency to determine their own outcomes, regardless of broader economic and social challenges. Positivity about individual futures coexists with a relative pessimism about their shared futures, both on a national and international level. This may reflect a perception that the future of the UK and the global community are not factors young people can control. It raises critical questions about the long-term implications of a youth population that feels empowered personally but disempowered collectively.

2.5.2 The elusive dream: Financial security in an age of precarity

What is the result of financial precarity, and a perception that economic stability is unattainable? It forces young people to make the best out of a challenging set of circumstances. The focus groups revealed that this takes many forms. It means accepting that home ownership is a pipe dream, and that staying with family or living in a house share are the only viable options. It means living from pay check to pay check and the forgoing treats or luxuries to make ends meet.

Participants expressed frustration at what they perceived as oversimplified solutions to complex economic challenges. When discussing financial advice they'd received, several participants mentioned suggestions about reducing discretionary spending - such as cutting back on subscription services or casual dining - which they felt didn't adequately address the broader economic pressures they face.

In adversity, young people have demonstrated remarkable resilience and strength. The question, however, is how long this can continue without a light at the end of the tunnel.

2.5.3 Redefining community in the digital age

Our research reveals a complex relationship between young people and community. While traditional place-based communities may feel less accessible - particularly given housing instability and affordability challenges - different forms of connection are emerging. Digital platforms enable

young people to build communities around shared interests and experiences that transcend geographical boundaries. This shift appears particularly significant among marginalised groups, whether LGBTQI+ or those from an ethnically diverse background, who are highly attuned to the importance of communities based around shared identities. Community membership presents the opportunity for these young people to be insiders in a society that often sees them as outsiders.

However, our research suggests an interesting disconnect; while young people are actively participating in various forms of community, they don't always recognise these connections as such until prompted to think beyond traditional place-based definitions. This raises important questions about how we understand community in contemporary society. As housing instability and digital connectivity reshape young people's social connections, how do we recognise and support these evolving forms of community without assuming they completely replace the value of local connections?

2.5.4 Global citizens in local crises: The tension between domestic needs and international empathy

In the context of the challenges young people in the UK face - and their limited optimism about the future of the UK - it is unsurprising that they prioritise the resolution of domestic issues.

Yet it is too simplistic to conclude that domestic issues are more important to young people than international issues. The precarious situation that many young people face means they demand action on a domestic level. But they also show a remarkable capacity to empathise with people across the globe and to appreciate the nuance of global events. As highlighted above, and to be explored in further detail below, in 2024, young people in the UK are outward-facing by instinct, but inward-looking by necessity.

These discussion points highlight the complex realities facing UK youth as they navigate personal aspirations, financial challenges, evolving social structures, and competing priorities in a rapidly changing world. They underscore the need for policymakers and society to engage with these tensions and contradictions to support a generation striving for stability and meaning in uncertain times.



Chapter 3: Education

Bridging the gap between learning and life

Education has consistently been at the forefront of national policy discussions in the UK. When Tony Blair made his famous “Education, education, education” declaration in 1997, it highlighted the centrality of educational reform to British social policy. Nearly three decades later, education remains a critical priority, particularly as young people navigate an increasingly complex economic and social landscape. This chapter opens with a discussion of young people’s dissatisfaction with the state of education in the UK and goes on to explore a perceived gap in how well education prepares young people for work and life in general. Following this is a section on the disconnect between education and the harsh realities of the job market, and the chapter closes with a look at perceptions of career guidance and the skills young people need now and in the future.

3.1 The state of education

3.1.1 Young people are dissatisfied with the education system

Young people in the UK are dissatisfied with the quality of the education they receive. Our survey asked respondents to select statements they agree with from a list. Just under one in three (32%) agreed that the quality of education in their country is good, and agreement was significantly lower among Welsh respondents (27%) compared to their peers in England (32%), Scotland (36%) and Northern Ireland (36%). Concerningly, just one in five (21%) agree that the quality of education in their country is improving. The implication is that the perceived decline – or, at best, stagnation – that young people see in their standard of living and economic situation, also applies to education.

When asked which areas of the education system require the most improvement, almost a quarter (23%) said the quality of teaching, followed by 21% who cited the school curriculum. While we did not directly ask about the state of education in the qualitative focus groups, it was clear from related conversations that young people appreciate the structural challenges that educators face. In other words, dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching does not necessarily denote a belief that teachers are not sufficiently skilled or knowledgeable. Rather, when this topic arose, participants evaluated the quality of education in the context of austerity throughout the 2010s and understood that overworked and under-resourced teachers cannot deliver an optimum education.

Figure 19 Proportion of young people who agree with statements about education

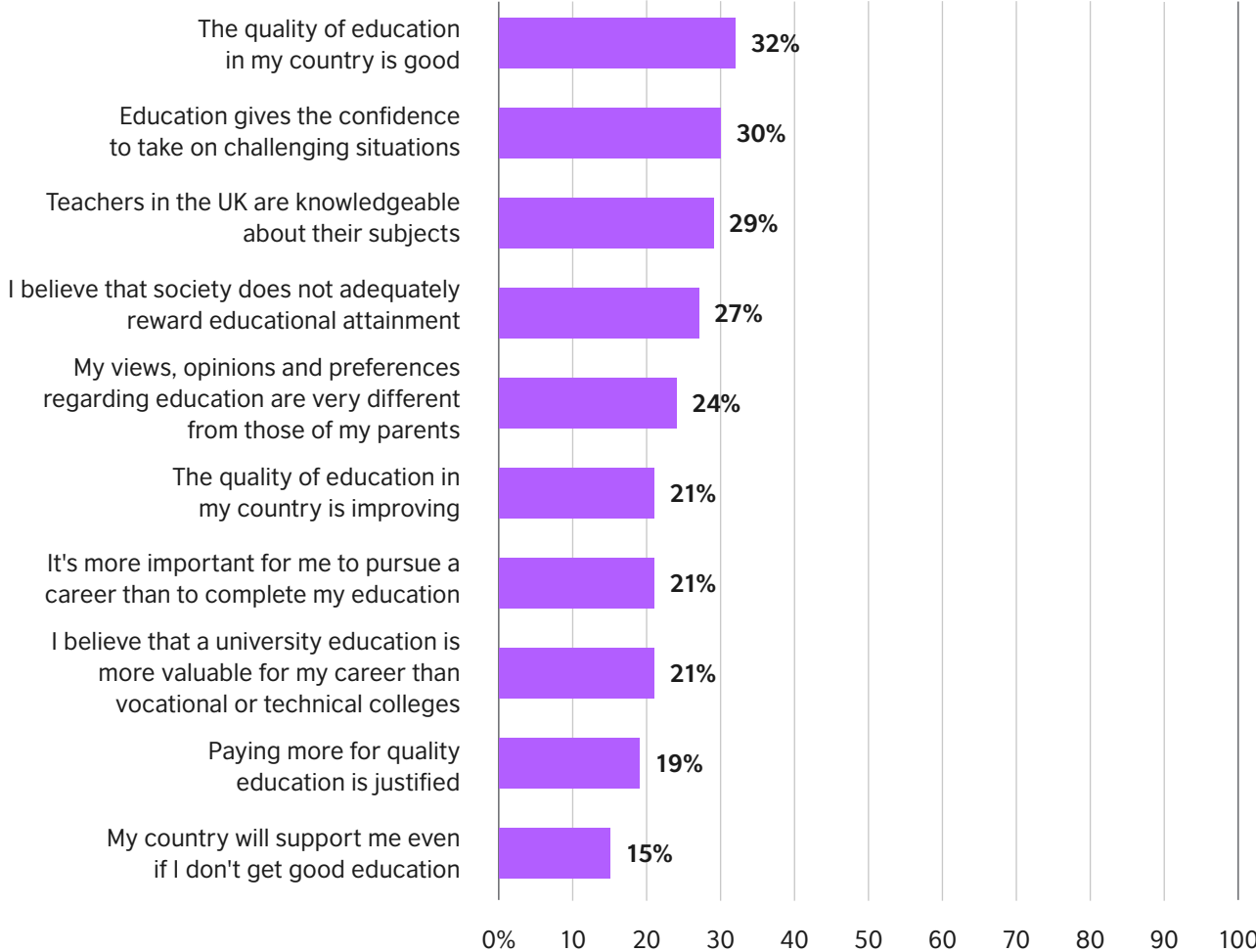


Figure 20 Proportion of young people who agree with the statement ‘the quality of education in my country is good’ by nation

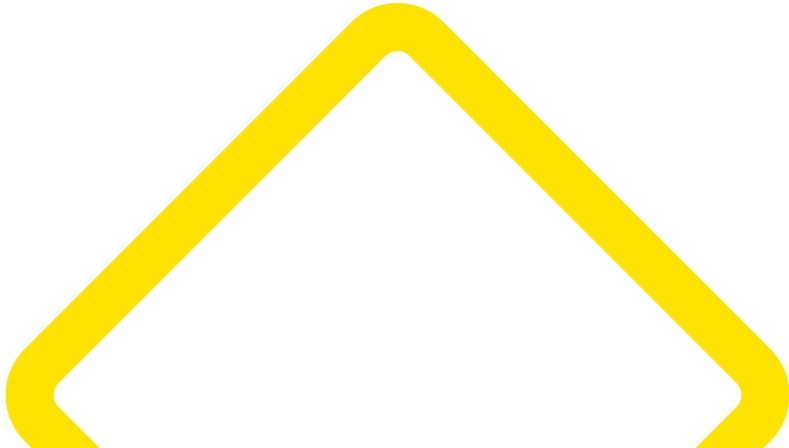
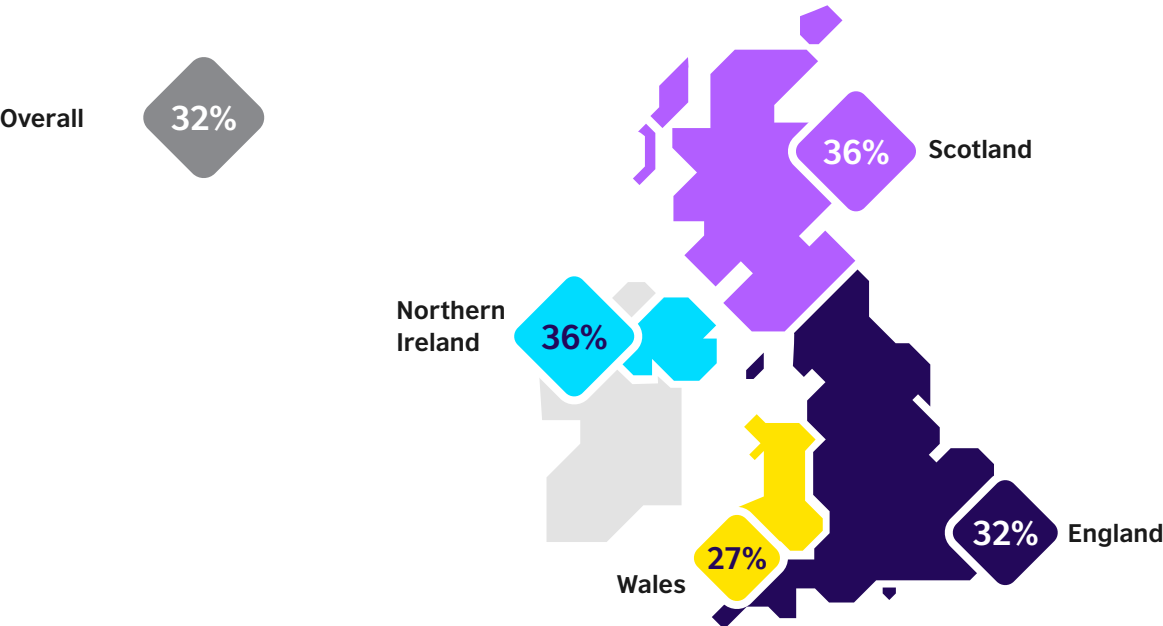
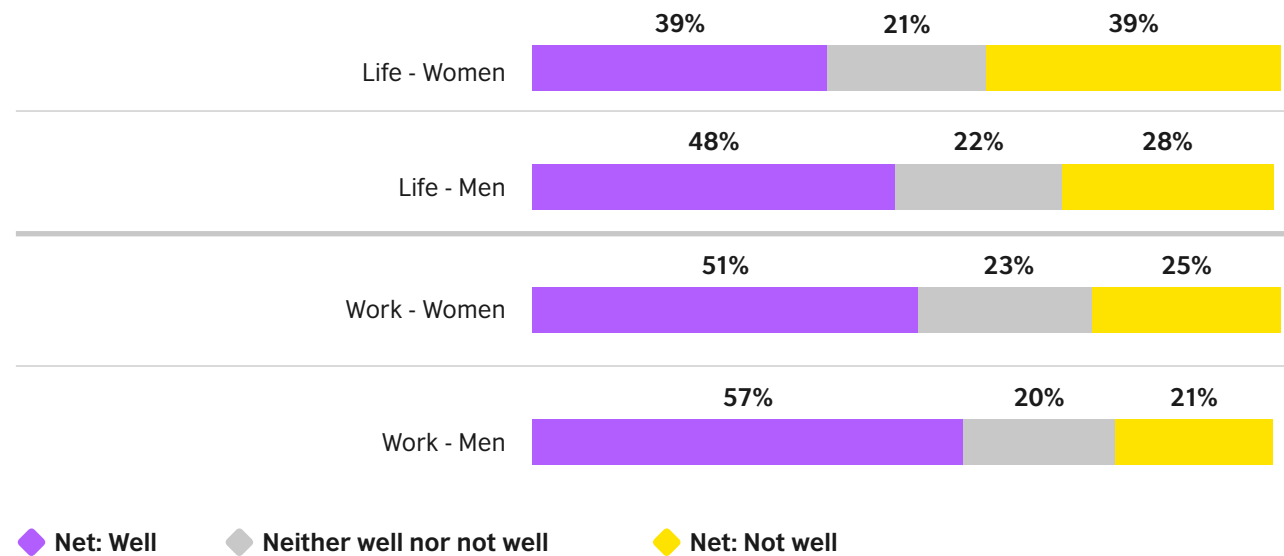


Figure 21 Perceptions of how well education prepares you for general life and work, by gender

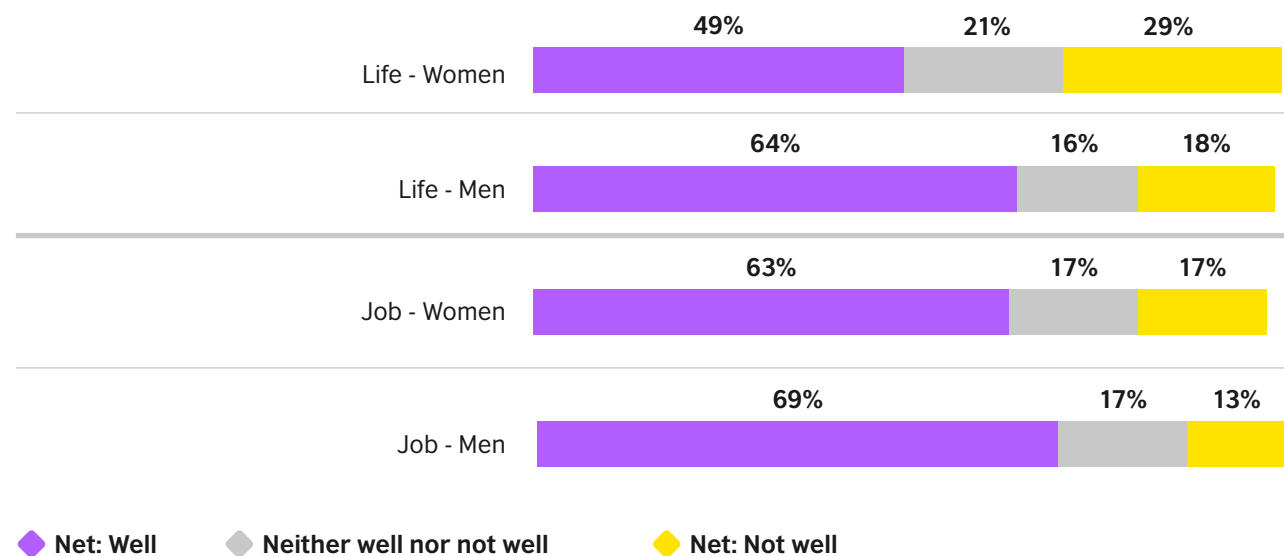


3.1.2 Education prepares UK youth better for work than for life

Young people believe education prepares them better for employment than for the challenges of everyday life. Just over half (54%) say their education has prepared them well for work, compared to 44% who say their education prepared them well for general life. Within these overall figures, young women were significantly less likely to say education has prepared them well for work (51% vs 57% for men) and life (39% vs 48% for men). Respondents who identify as Black were significantly more likely than respondents from other ethnic backgrounds to say that their education

has prepared them well for both work (73%) and general life (69%). This pattern continues for higher education. Two-thirds (66%) said university has prepared them well for their current job, and 70% said their degree was important in obtaining their current job. Over half (57%) said their university has prepared them well for general life outside education, which is still fairly positive. Again, young women were significantly less likely than young men to say university has prepared them well for their current job (63% vs 69%) and life (49% vs 64%), and that their degree was important in obtaining that job (66% vs 73% for men).

Figure 22 Perceptions of how well university prepares young people for their current job and life outside education, by gender



As with education in general, Black respondents were significantly more likely than respondents from other ethnic backgrounds to say university has prepared them well for their current job (82%) and general life outside education (74%). This reflects the trend we discussed in Chapter 2, that Black respondents may feel more optimistic about various outcomes because they have tangible connections to other countries that provide a sense of perspective. White respondents, on the other hand, may only have their parents' or grandparents' views as a point of reference.

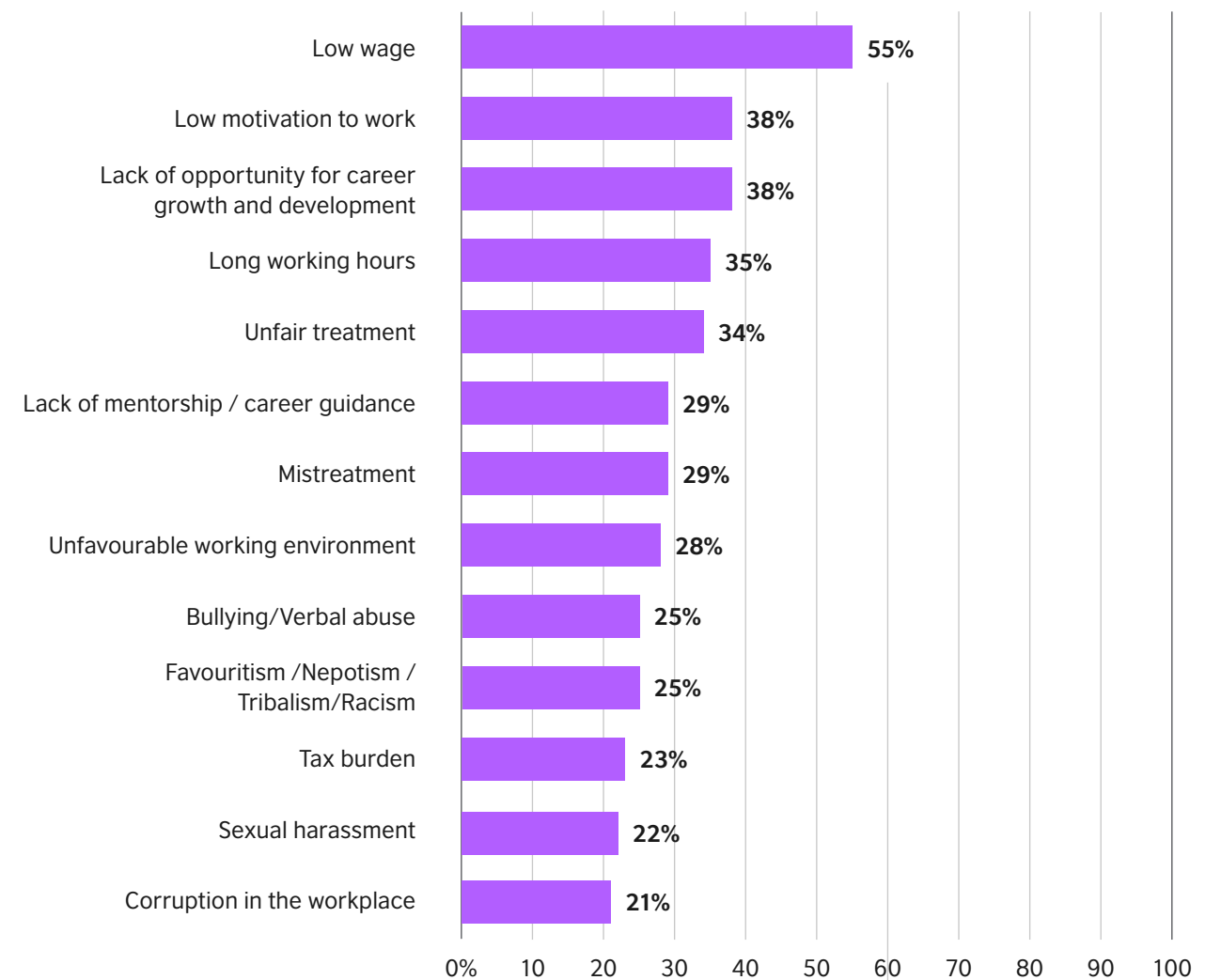
work, there are still challenges when transitioning from education to employment. The education system does not exist in a vacuum, isolated from the challenging economic landscape outlined in Chapter 2. Though young people believe education prepares them well for work, they struggle to find jobs that allow them to live comfortably. Our survey asked respondents to identify the main challenges facing young people in employment. Over half (55%) cited low wages, by far the most common answer. Just under two in five (38%) cited a lack of opportunities for career growth and development, and given these challenges, it is understandable that the same proportion (38%) said a lack of motivation to work.

3.2 Disconnect between education and job market realities

3.2.1 Well-educated young people struggle to find work

While young people do think more positively about how education and university have prepared them for

Figure 23 The challenges faced by youth in employment



Conversations in the focus groups corroborated our survey data. Participants lamented a double challenge in the transition from education to employment:

1. The job market is highly competitive for young people. There are limited jobs available, and when there is a vacancy, the number of applicants breeds a sense of despair. Our peer researchers, who observed the focus groups, also noted a shared perception that employers demand unrealistic previous experience, which creates further frustration among young people who have spent considerable money and effort on their education.
2. If you get a job, it is unlikely to pay enough to live comfortably. Entry-level salaries have not risen in line with inflation and the wider cost of living. This issue is particularly acute in London, where the broader pool of jobs is concentrated, though participants noted this concentration of opportunities often comes at the cost of facing higher living expenses.

This double challenge is intertwined with the perception, outlined in Chapter 2, that financial security is simultaneously crucial and unattainable.



I saw a statistic that for every job opening, there are like 1,000 people going for it at the moment.

Female, 22
London, Focus group



You've got some of the most well-known universities here [Manchester] in the whole of the country. It's supposed to be a hub for students and graduates. And you're not able to find a single job.

Male, 25
Midlands, Focus group

3.2.2 Young people question the value of university

In the context of this challenging transition from education to employment, young people are exploring alternative routes to a successful career. Just over one in five (21%) agree that 'a university education is more valuable for my career than vocational or technical college'.⁹ Agreement with this statement is significantly higher among 18–24-year-olds (23%) than 25–30-year-olds (18%). This may reflect a realisation among the older cohort that they are burdened with student debt but have little to show for it compared to their peers who attended technical colleges or completed apprenticeships. Faith in university education also varies by nation, with young people in England more likely to rank it above vocational training (23%) than those in Scotland (21%), Wales (18%), and Northern Ireland (16%).

⁹ It is worth noting that this question gauged agreement in a passive way, by presenting respondents with a list of statements and asking them to select the statements they agree with. This often leads to lower levels of agreement than a question that is structured in an active way, by presenting respondents with a series of statements and prompting them to indicate their level of agreement on a scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

South Asian

Education holds particular cultural significance in South Asian communities, often viewed as both a path to social mobility and a source of family pride. This cultural emphasis is reflected in their high valuation of university education, with 78% rating their degree as important for employment (42% very important, 36% quite important). This disconnect between educational achievement and employment opportunities is particularly frustrating given the cultural investment in education as a means of advancement. The emphasis on resilience in their narratives reflects both economic necessity and cultural values:



I think we have to be massively resilient nowadays. You can't just get away with just doing like your minimum wage job, for example, and being able to survive by yourself...

Female, 25
North England, Focus group

Eastern European

Eastern European youth demonstrated high educational attainment (34% holding undergraduate degrees) but face unique challenges in translating this into career success. Only 26% felt their education prepared them "very well" for work, suggesting a significant gap between educational achievement and employment outcomes. This disconnect is particularly stark given the cultural emphasis on formal education in Eastern European societies and the challenges of qualification recognition in the UK.

3.2.3 The appeal of entrepreneurship

Young people are not only considering alternative forms of education and training but are also showing an interest in starting their own businesses. More than half (55%) of young people are interested in starting their own business in the next five years, with men especially keen on the idea of entrepreneurship (61% vs 49% of women).

There are interesting differences between the nations when it comes to interest in starting a business within the next five years. Scotland stands out, with only 49% of respondents showing interest, which is significantly lower than England (57%), Wales (56%), and Northern Ireland (55%).

Figure 24 Interest in starting a business within the next 5 years, by nation

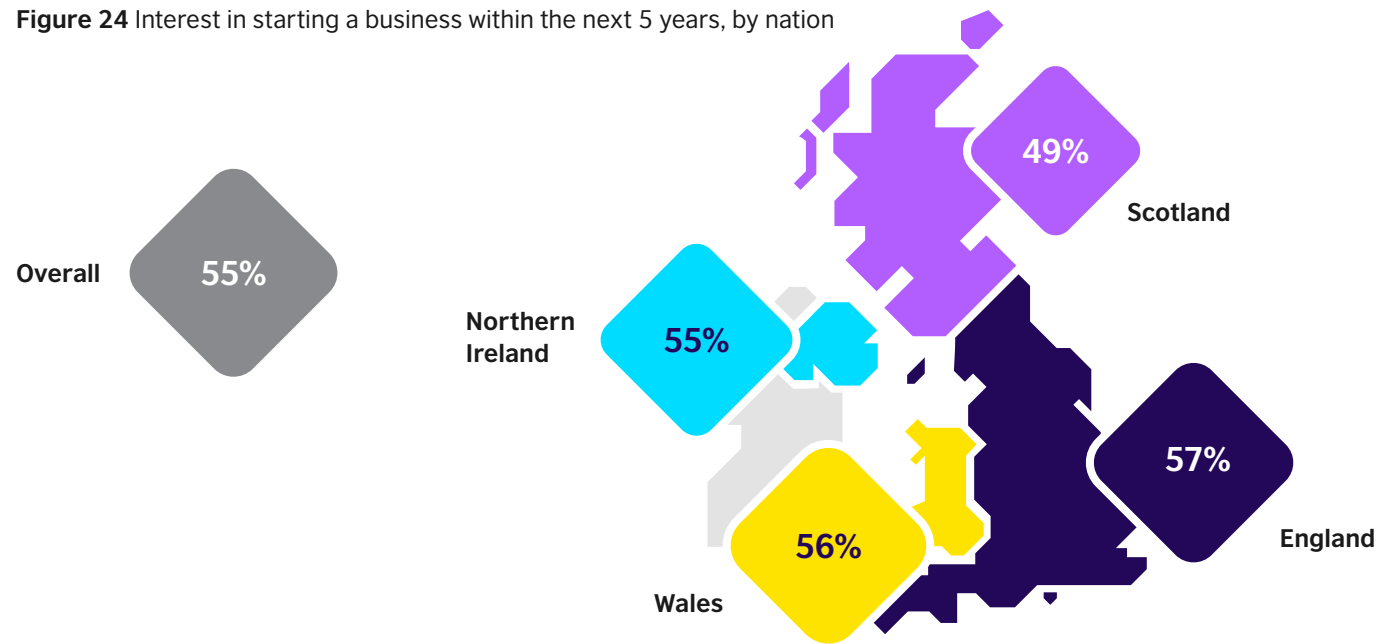
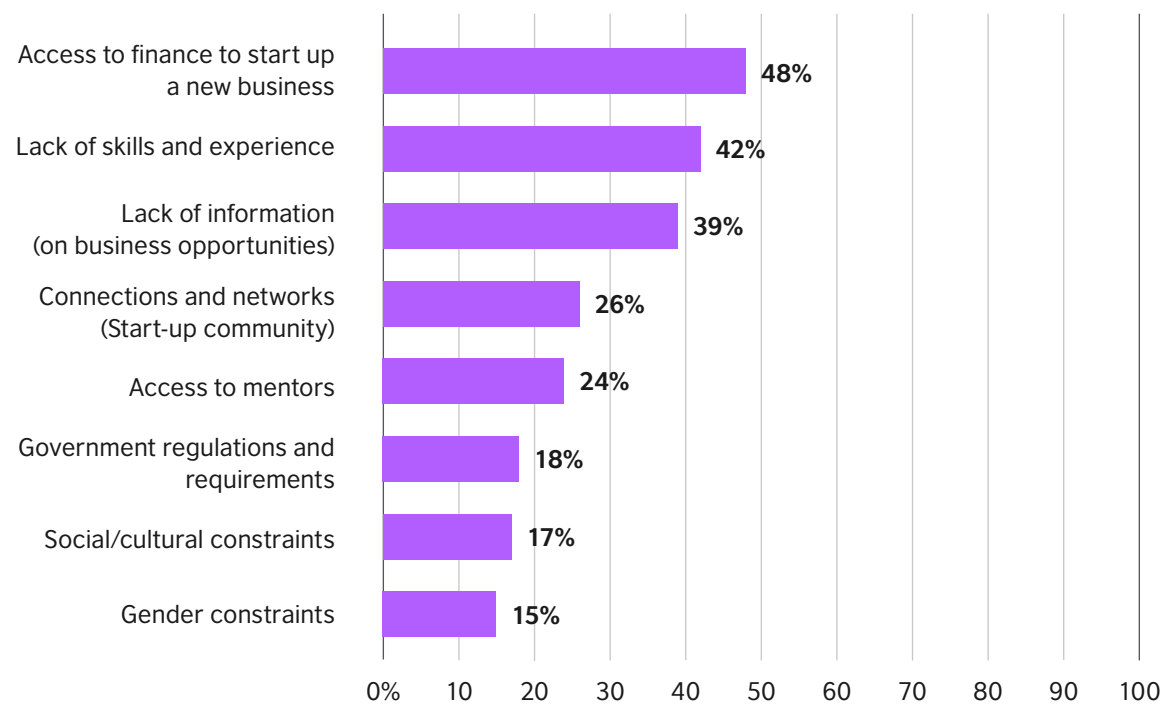


Figure 25 The main barrier encountered in starting a business



Yet starting from scratch is not easy. Our survey asked the 55% who expressed an interest in starting their own business what they see as the main barrier. Almost half (48%) said access to finance, while 42% cited a lack of skills and experience, and 39% said a lack of information.

There is a clear appetite for innovation; however, young people require a financial leg-up and access to expertise to unlock their entrepreneurial potential.

3.3 Career guidance and future skills

3.3.1 The guidance gap

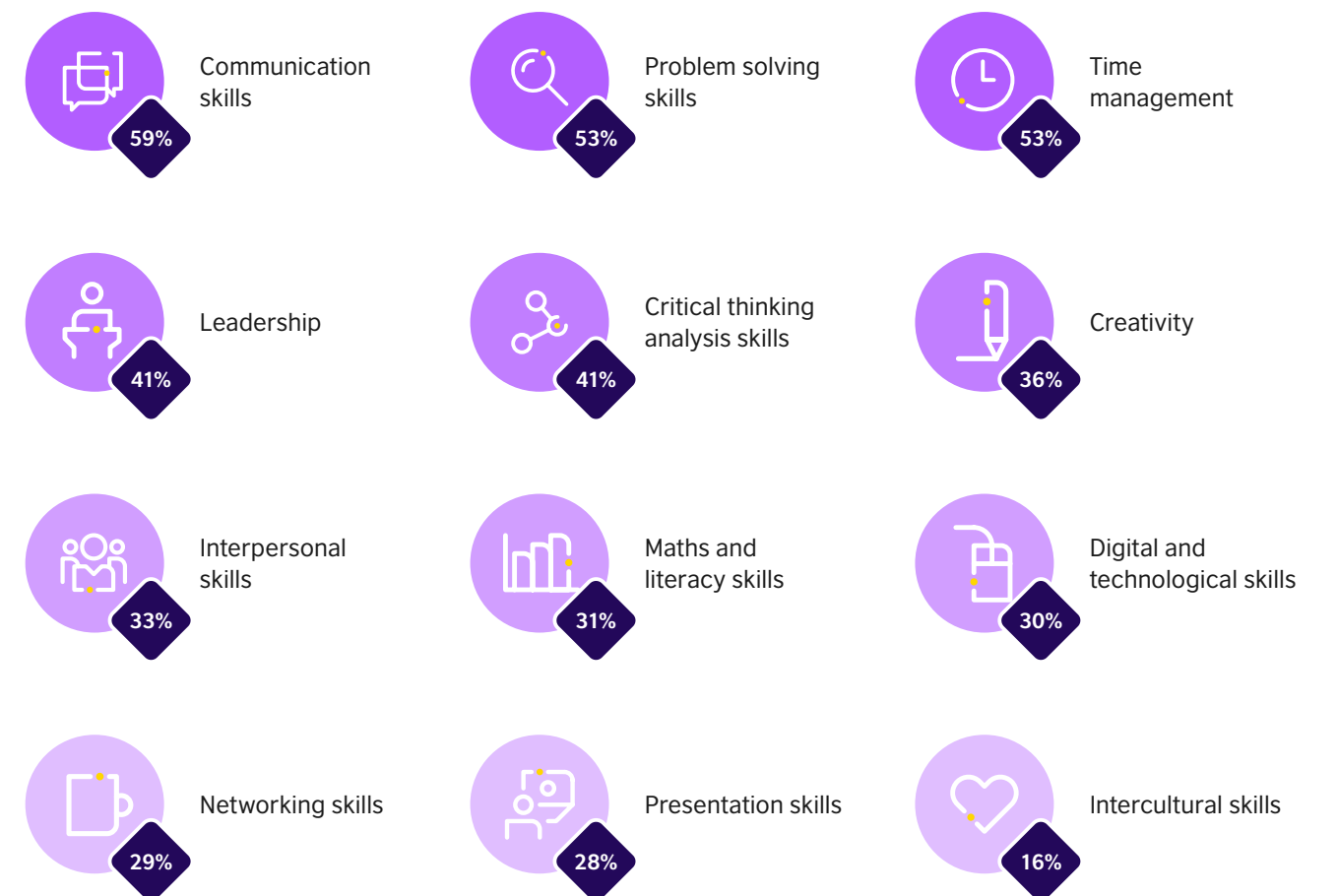
Our survey data revealed a gap when it comes to career guidance. Over half (55%) of young people have received some form of guidance, whether from advisors at school or their careers service at college or university. The proportion of young people who say they have received career guidance is significantly higher in Northern Ireland (62%) than in England (56%), Scotland (54%), or Wales (49%).

Just under two-thirds (65%) of respondents who received career guidance found it useful. As with perceptions of how well education prepares young people for work and life, women report a more negative experience of career guidance. Only 59% of women who received career guidance found it to be useful, compared to 72% of men.

3.3.2 Skills for the future

Young people see communication as key. When asked about the most important soft skills to possess, just under three in five (59%) said communication, followed by problem-solving skills (53%) and time management (53%). It is interesting in the context of rapid technological change – which means that many future careers may not even exist yet – that young people saw ‘digital and technical skills’ as among the least important soft skills (30%). However, this may be because respondents considered it to be a practical rather than ‘soft’ skill.

Figure 26 Most important soft skills when it comes to employment



The focus groups revealed that alongside a belief in the importance of communication, young people want to improve their political literacy. Participants said political processes and means to engage with politics are opaque, especially in focus groups with young people from Wales and the Midlands. As a result, even those who may want to get involved with politics do not know where to start. This aligns with an insight in Chapter 2 that young people want enhanced community and political education to connect academic learning with real-world issues. For further discussion of youth engagement with politics, see Chapter 5.



I think maybe more of an understanding of how it all works. I don't know that much about politics. But even if I did want to, I wouldn't know how to go about that. So maybe educating people a bit more [on politics].

Female, 19
Wales, Focus group

3.4 Discussion points

3.4.1 Education falls short

Young people are not blind to the structural and resource issues that afflict the education system. They see the effects in their own outcomes and are not receiving the quality of education that they want or need. This applies across the education system, including higher education. Perhaps most concerning is the resounding lack of faith that the state of education is improving, although as we shall see in Chapter 5, our research showed there is cautious optimism in the new Government to address what young people see as several years of decline.

3.4.2 The preparation paradox

A contradiction emerges when we consider how well – or not – education prepares young people for their next chapter. Although young people think education prepares them well for the world of work, actually obtaining work remains the key challenge. Discussion in the focus groups revealed that young people see themselves in a scramble for jobs, with a surplus of well-qualified and employable applicants, but a crippling shortage of opportunities. And low pay means that a job offer does not solve all of their problems.

3.4.3 Tools for life

There is a demand for more practical support throughout the education process to prepare young people for the challenges of general life. This is not a new phenomenon. Some people have always argued for a 'School of Life' approach to education, in which – for example, tax returns and scrutinising a tenancy agreement become more prominent on the curriculum. Our research suggests young people are interested in preparation for general life in a broader sense, such as an increased emphasis on political literacy. Looking ahead, as disinformation becomes more widespread, equipping young people with the tools to critically assess the origin, veracity, and intention of a piece of information will become a crucial life skill.

3.4.4 The educational gender gap

A deeply concerning gender divide runs throughout the education system. Young women feel significantly less prepared than young men for work and general life, and this applies to both university and education in general. Women even have a poorer perception of the career guidance they receive. This is not an isolated data point but a clear trend that should provoke further research into why this divide exists, and how education can better prepare girls and young women.

3.4.5 Forced resilience

The disconnect between education and employment is a bitter pill for young people to swallow when the social contract has traditionally dictated that hard work in education will be repaid with a job that enables a good standard of living. Not only is it difficult to get a foot on a property ladder that increasingly resembles a drawbridge, which is out of sight for many, but young people are also losing faith in the principle that academic attainment leads to a respectable job and a decent salary.

This leads us back to the idea of forced resilience. Young people demonstrate remarkable strength to compete with waves of fellow applicants for a job that may pay enough for them to exist, but not enough for them to live. Yet we return to the question posed in Chapter 1: how long can we expect this resilience to last without a light at the end of the tunnel?

3.4.6 Entrepreneurial spirit provides hope

It is unsurprising that so many young people are interested in starting their own business as an alternative to the nine-five grind. Starting a business represents a means to gain agency in a labour market that feels exclusionary for – or even exploitative of – young people.

Yet this could go one of two ways, in the context of the economic challenges established in Chapter 2. On the one hand, the perception that financial stability is unattainable could mean young people cannot access the finance to start their own business, or absorb the risk if it goes wrong. On the other hand, young people may turn to entrepreneurship as the only way to achieve financial stability in a system that currently works against them. Either way, this entrepreneurial spirit is further testament to the resilience and determination of young people in the UK in 2024.



Chapter 4: Identity and expression: Culture, arts, and national pride

This chapter delves into the intricate tapestry of cultural identity among young people in the UK and the values of arts, culture, and history. We discuss the value placed on arts and culture as career paths and academic pursuits, revealing demographic differences in engagement, and investigate how culture contributes to national pride, with notable variations between different UK nations. The chapter also delves into the value of diversity in addressing global issues, and the importance of cultural exchange in communities.

4.1 The struggle for recognition: Youth perspectives on arts and culture

In a rapidly evolving social, economic, and political landscape, arts and culture can be used to explore important topics of discussion and, at times, contention.¹⁰ It's important to note that we didn't provide a specific definition of arts and culture to our participants, allowing their responses to be based on their own understanding.¹¹

We provided young people with a list of statements about how they value arts and culture in a professional, academic, and societal sense, and found that just under one-third (32%) agreed that the arts are as respectable as any profession. Statistics continued to show a mixed picture regarding how arts and culture are valued in society, with a further 30% who agreed that participating in arts/cultural activities as a valuable as academic achievement, and 30% who agreed that investing more in arts/culture is essential for the enrichment of society. These numbers suggest that only about one-third strongly value arts and culture in professional and academic settings. However, it is crucial to note that these percentages represent those who actively agreed with the statements, not necessarily the total who might value arts and culture to some degree. As noted in other research, often young people engage in the arts without being acutely aware they are doing so:

¹⁰ Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M., & Wright, D. (2009). *Culture, Class, Distinction*. Routledge.

¹¹ For future research, it might be beneficial to include a clear definition before asking about engagement in arts and culture, similar to the approach used in the Government's Participation Survey. In that study, exploration of participation and engagement in the arts encompasses both physical and digital activities, such as painting, attending concerts, reading, and watching live-streamed or pre-recorded videos [etc]. See full list in the Government's Participation Survey (2023-2024), Annex 3: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2023-24-annual-publication/main-report-for-the-participation-survey-may-2023-to-march-2024#Arts>



In film and TV you work from project to project, obviously when you're freelance you might have a bit of a break between the cycles. It would be nice to have full-time work for at least a little bit longer than two months, so I've been looking into that. But most of the jobs are in London and then the starting salaries are what, like £25,000 a year. And although five years ago that would have actually been quite good, it really isn't now.

Female, 22
North England, Focus group

"Another factor that must be considered is the fact that some of the young people [...] may not know that a lot of the activity that they do on a daily basis is an art form e.g. playing video games, board games, using websites, movies and online video content."¹² (Page 17)

Our findings are in line with wider research that reveals how arts careers are often seen as financially unstable, noting young people without family support or independent financial resources often find it challenging to gain experience and build networks in the professional arts world, as they are unable to work without wages.¹³

Additionally, our research revealed that financial security (55%) and job satisfaction (51%) were the top contributors to both present and future personal success and happiness, evidencing a priority for stability in both of these areas; however, financial security was found to be the most elusive goal for many (24% who said it was unachievable). Given the pressures of financial stability and prevailing concerns over unpredictable wages, this could be an indicator of why young people are hesitant to pursue career paths within the arts sector.

4.1.1 The socio-economic divide in arts engagement and appreciation

Interesting contrasts emerge between different socio-economic groups. We see higher levels of agreement from those in higher socio-economic groups (ABC1) - 34% who agree that the arts are a valuable academic achievement and 34% who agree that investment in arts and culture is essential for the enrichment of society) compared with only 27% of those in lower socio-economic groups (C2DE) who say the same across both statements. The lower percentages amongst this group align with other findings in research about attitudinal barriers to arts engagement. For example, the "How can we engage more young people in arts and culture?"¹⁴ report

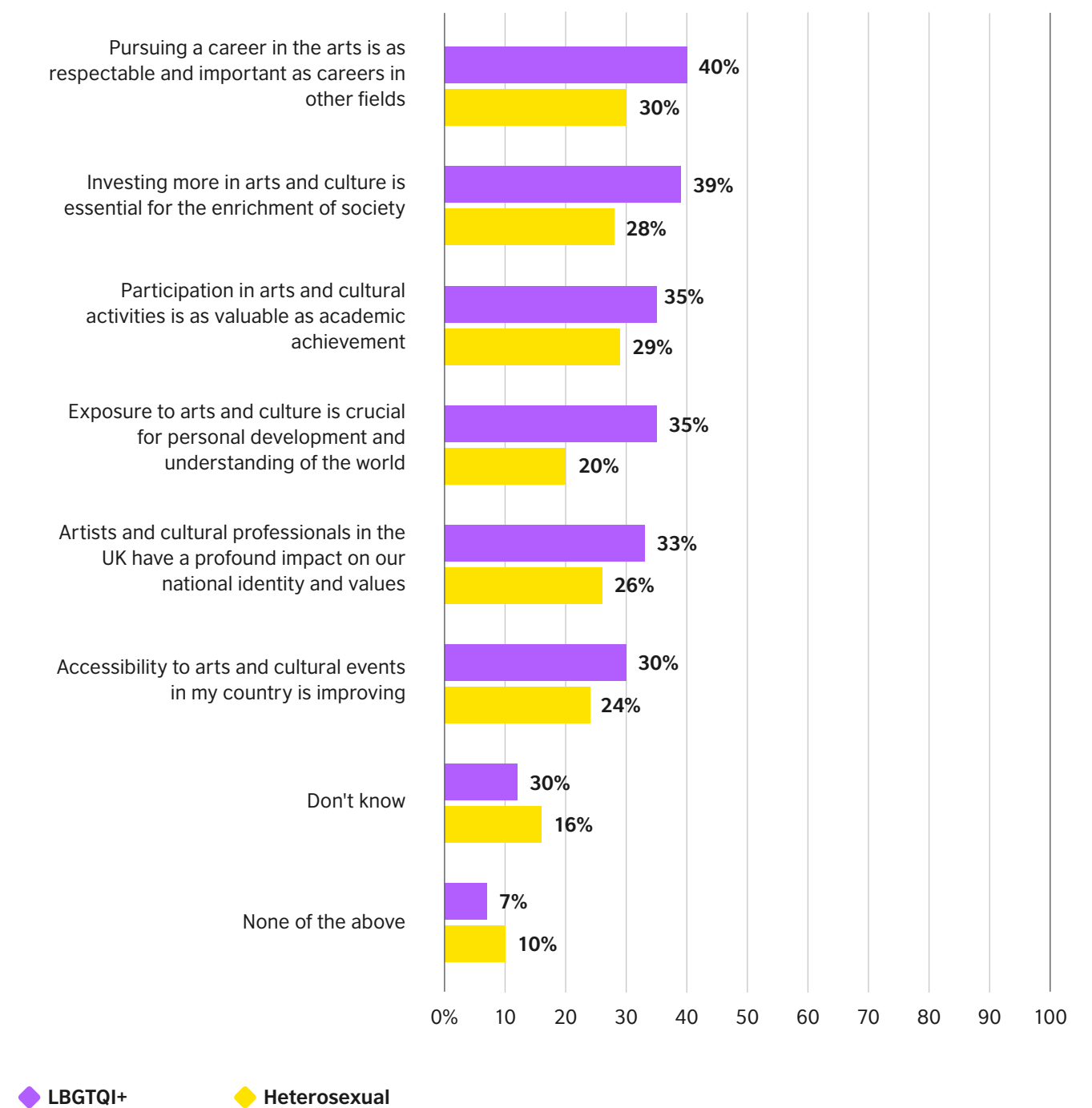
noted persistent perceptions that the arts are produced by and for the middle and upper classes (ABC1), which can make people feel the arts are "not for them", suggesting some rooted societal attitudes that may be influencing these valuations.

4.1.2 Marginalised groups finding value in artistic expression

Our qualitative insights revealed that how young people in the UK perceive arts and culture can also be influenced by other identity markers, and not just socio-economic status. For instance, individuals from LGBTQI+ communities may find unique value in artistic and cultural expressions that resonate with their identities and experiences, perhaps leading to an increased engagement and value in these avenues. Furthermore, quantitative data revealed that members of the LGBTQI+ community feel more positively towards arts and culture, with LGTBQI+ respondents more likely to agree with all statements provided. For example: 40% agreed that pursuing a career in the arts is a respectable avenue, compared with 30% of heterosexual respondents, and 35% agreed that exposure to arts and culture is crucial for personal development and understanding of the world, compared with 20% of heterosexual respondents. This is in line with findings from the government participation survey¹⁵, where heterosexual adults engaged less with the arts physically and digitally than those who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

12 Art31 'Young People and Arts Engagement: What We Need. ART31 - Young People and Arts Engagement_0.pdf (artscouncil.org.uk)
13 Tait, R et al (2019) 'How can we engage more young people in arts and culture?' A guide to what works for funders and arts organisations
14 Tait, R et al (2019) 'How can we engage more young people in arts and culture?' A guide to what works for funders and arts organisations
15 Main report for the Government's Participation Survey (2023 to 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2023-24-annual-publication/main-report-for-the-participation-survey-may-2023-to-march-2024>

Figure 27 Agreement levels with statements about arts and culture by sexuality



4.2 Pride and prejudice: The complex landscape of culture and national identity

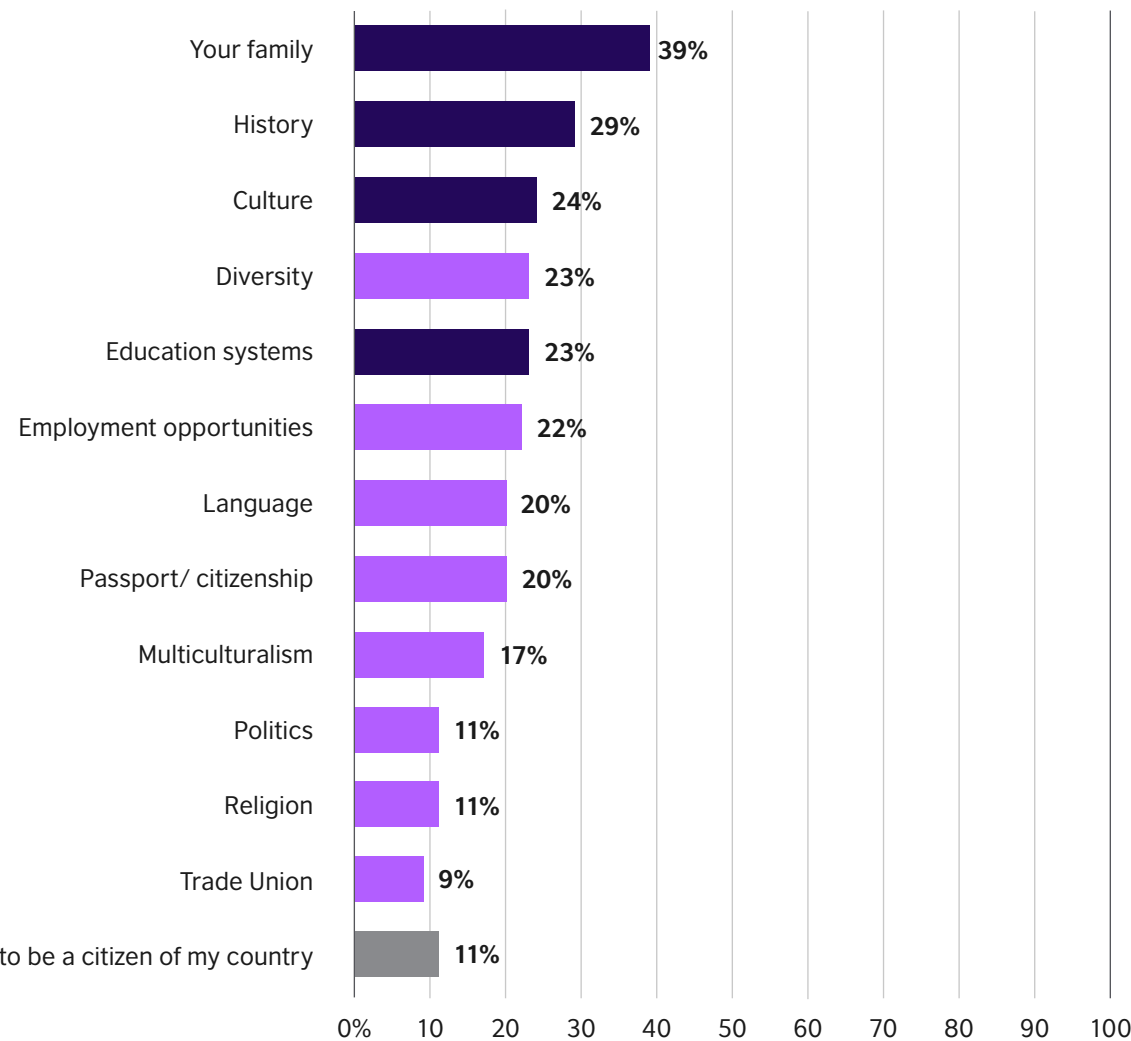
4.2.1 The pillars of national pride: family, history, and culture

Quantitative data found that while family (39%) ranked as the top reason that young people were proud to be a citizen of the UK, history (29%), culture (24%), and diversity (23%) trailed closely behind [see figure 28 below]. Respondents often viewed their own nation's history and culture more favourably than that of the UK overall. This was especially true for Scotland (history 50%, culture 48%) and Wales (history 47%, culture 45%), which was further reflected in qualitative discussions where young people noted that perceptions and their own opinions of individual nations often differed from that of the UK as a whole, as discussed in more detail below.

4.2.2 A tale of four nations: Diverse perceptions within the UK

Qualitative discussions revealed that young people's perceptions and opinions of individual nations often differed from that of the UK as a whole. Respondents in Scotland generally perceived Scotland more positively within the UK compared to England, associating it with better behaviour, rich history, and scenic tourism. Respondents in Wales, on the other hand, suggested that Wales garnered more sympathy and fewer negative associations with colonialism than England. Respondents living in Northern Ireland were vocal with their opinion on the association Northern Ireland has with historical conflicts. They expressed that it is perceived 'less developed' or 'backwards' compared with other countries in the UK and that people from outside Northern Ireland do not always understand its history and distinctive context.

Figure 28 Factors that make young people proud to be a citizen of the UK (% saying the following)



If people know the difference between the two, they have a more positive view of Scotland. People are warmer and nicer, and especially to foreigners than English people are.

Male, 30
Scotland, Focus group

I think Welsh people are often let off, so we're not really seen as colonisers. But we were a part of that, as were the Scottish, because we were forced to join them (England) after being colonised ourselves.

Male, 19
Wales, Focus group

I feel like they still see us as sort of backwards, fighting with each other. Almost painting us like 'all these poor people need us to go over and help them'. And it's like, no, we're like a fully functioning society.

Female, 27
Northern Ireland, Focus Group

Despite these distinctions, there was a common understanding that people outside the UK often view the country as a monolith or assume that the UK is synonymous with England. Responding to this assumption, there was a strong consensus that people from individual nations were keen to highlight their unique historical and cultural identities. There were inferences of redefining 'Britishness' so that nations can embrace their regional distinctiveness while fostering a sense of shared heritage.



Even my own mom from time to time still says, 'oh yeah, you have this in England' and I'm like, I have never lived in England.

Male, 30
Scotland, Eastern European, Focus group

4.2.3 Cultural heritage pride vs influential figures

When asked "Who influences your views the most?" young people indicated that their immediate social circle has significantly more influence than public or historical figures. Family members (54%) and peers/friends (42%) ranked as the most influential groups, while historical leaders (10%) and actors/musicians (10%) received considerably fewer mentions.

This pattern suggests that despite the importance of history and cultural heritage in shaping national identity, young people's day-to-day views are primarily shaped by their personal relationships rather than historical or cultural figures.

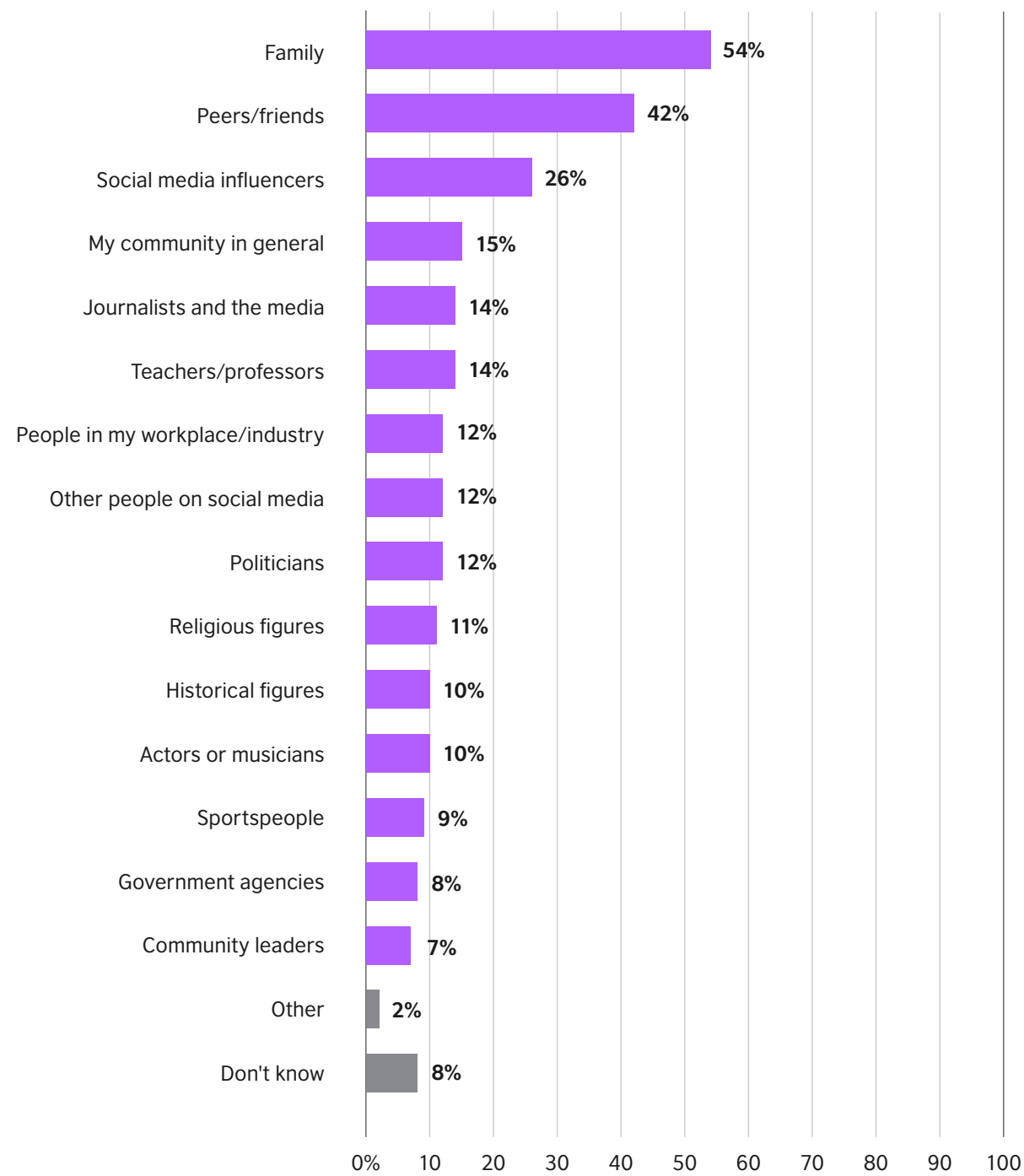
4.3 Arts, culture, and diversity in shaping perceptions

4.3.1 Aspirations for a cultural renaissance

As we consider how young people perceive their national identity, it's important to explore how they believe the UK is viewed on the global stage, particularly in terms of its cultural contributions.

Despite awareness of how recent political instability and historical legacies have somewhat tarnished perceptions of the UK, qualitative insights uncovered young people's aspirations for how they want the UK to be viewed across the world. Many conversations highlighted aspirations for the UK to be seen as a leader in thriving and influential cultural exports and arts sectors, as well as being recognised as a multicultural and accepting society.

Figure 29 Who influences young people’s views the most (% saying the following)

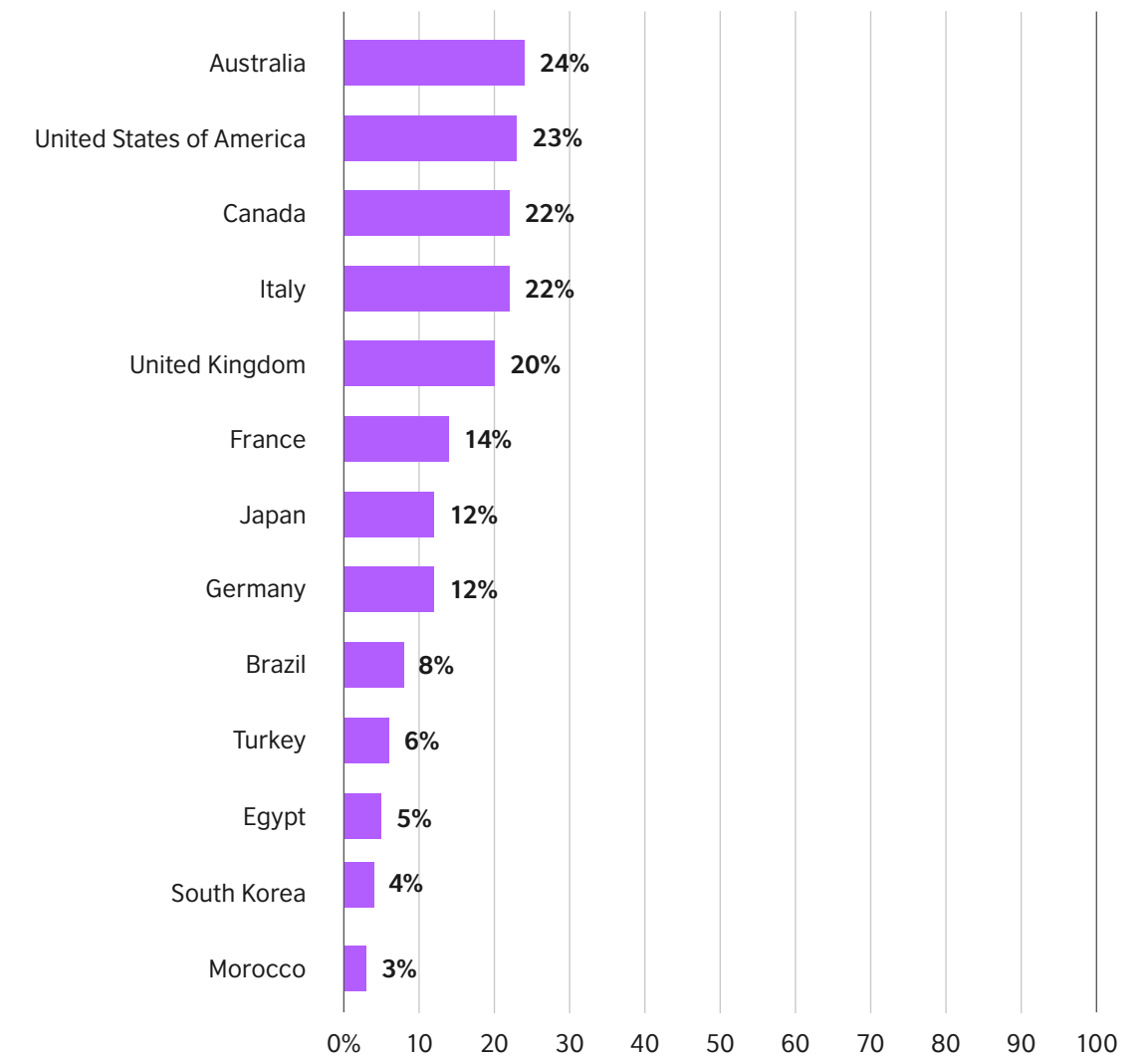


This was also evidenced by 38% of respondents who said that the UK’s language, history, and culture were what made it an attractive country to them. Young people view arts, culture, and diversity as attributes for the UK to celebrate, take seriously, and take pride in. They want these elements to underpin the UK’s identity, reflecting their significant role in shaping the nation’s character and global image.

Interestingly, identity and pride extend to an interest in language, history, and culture outside of the UK as well. When asked which countries from a provided list they would be interested in living in, while quality of life consistently came out on top, young people also ranked language, history, and culture as one of the top attributes that made these countries attractive to them [see figure 31 below], highlighting the universal appeal of cultural and historical richness in shaping preferences and identities.

Figure 30 Which of the following countries do you think are most attractive to you personally?

NB: Showing all countries with respondent base size > 100



I think we should be really proud and celebrate the arts in this country, especially music events, festivals, and arts. That is something that we should be really proud of – we’ve got so much talent in this country. [We should take pride in] being so multi-cultural and showing that all diversities can come to the UK and enrich our businesses and jobs.

Female, 27
Midlands, Focus group



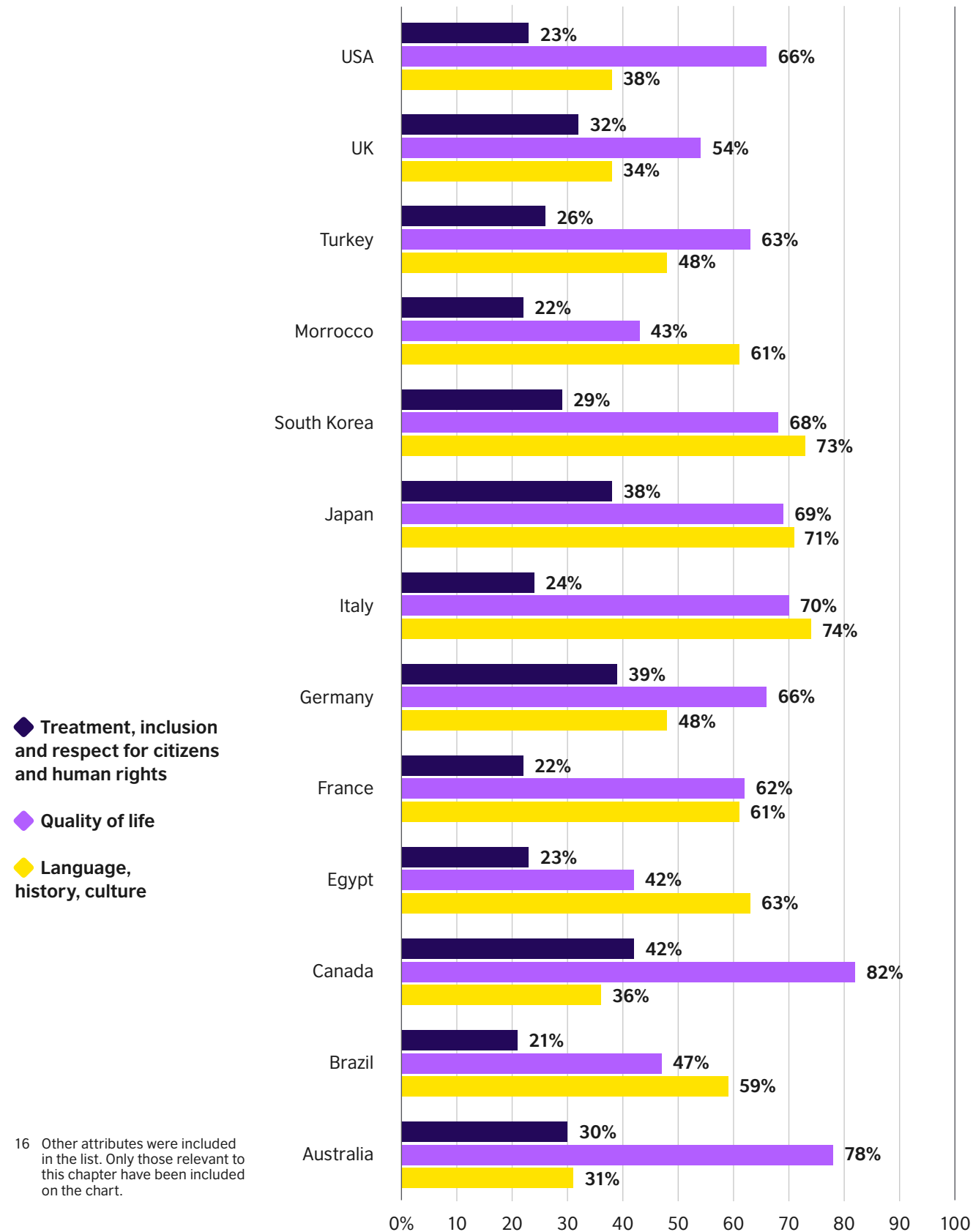
I think the UK should aspire to be seen as a tolerant and accepting society that is equally striving to reduce inequality. We should also strive to have strong cultural exports and a well-funded arts and creative sector, as that’s what people know us for abroad.

Male, 21
South England, Focus group

Figure 31 Factors that make different countries attractive to young people¹⁶

NB: Respondents were asked to choose the countries that are most attractive to them personally, and the analysis and results for each country are based solely on the responses of those who selected that specific country, so should not be compared to one another.

Showing all countries with respondent base size > 100



¹⁶ Other attributes were included in the list. Only those relevant to this chapter have been included on the chart.

4.3.2 Perceptions of the UK in a global context

Furthermore, while eager to be perceived as a cultural powerhouse, our qualitative discussions revealed that young people believed global views of the UK, particularly concerning its arts, history, diversity, and culture, were complex and varied. They felt that although the UK was still regarded as a cultural beacon—boasting iconic symbols like the monarchy, the BBC, and its multiculturalism, tradition, and historical richness—there were also notable concerns about the UK’s declining status and internal disorganisation. This nuanced view reflected the complex relationship young people had with their country’s cultural identity and its place in the world.

Young people noted that within Europe, views on the UK’s cultural contributions were mixed but generally positive. However, outside Europe, the UK was often grouped with other European countries, leading to less distinct perceptions. According to their perceptions, outside Europe, the UK was often grouped with other European countries, leading to less distinct perceptions. Young people suggested that while the UK’s cultural impact was recognised, its unique identity on the global stage might have been diminishing, particularly beyond European borders.

4.3.3 Diversity: A catalyst for global problem-solving

In exploring the most powerful avenues for addressing today’s global challenges, such as violence, conflict, mental health issues, and economic

inequality, young people identified education (57%), research and innovation (42%), and encouraging diversity and shared ethical values (35%) as their top three solutions. Interestingly, intersectional differences emerged in the data; female respondents (38%), LGBTQI+ community members (44%), and Black (46%) and mixed-race (42%) respondents were notably more likely than their counterparts to prioritise “encouraging diversity” as a key driver in tackling these issues, which may be linked to their shared experiences of marginalisation and a deep understanding of the importance of inclusive values.

Qualitative focus groups further illuminated these views. When asked what it means to be a “global citizen,” young people consistently emphasised the value of diversity and cross-cultural understanding. They spoke passionately about respecting and engaging with different cultures and thinking beyond national borders, and there was a widespread sense of empathy for varied experiences and backgrounds. Furthermore, quantitative data revealed that a majority (56%) of young people believe that the most important reason for learning another language is to enable engagement and learning about other cultures in other countries, underscoring the continuing value of cross-cultural understanding and diverse engagement.

The collective perspective of young people highlights a powerful message: diversity is not just a value to uphold, but a fundamental catalyst for addressing global challenges and fostering a more inclusive and empathetic world.

Figure 32 Most powerful tools that can be used to deal with global challenge(s)



As we consider the global impact of UK culture and the importance of diversity, it's crucial to examine how these factors play out in local communities, shaping engagement and social cohesion.

4.4 Community engagement through culture

4.4.1 Cultural activities: Bridging the community disconnect

Culture plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and unity within communities, especially among young people. Our research found that despite a significant portion of young individuals feeling disconnected from their local communities, with 46% saying they do not feel a part of one, cultural and social activities provide opportunities for connection and engagement. Young people in our study highlighted that events like weddings, festivals, and other cultural celebrations serve as vibrant platforms that bring people together, allowing them to celebrate shared values and traditions. This aligns with wider research showing how cultural gatherings can bridge cultural divides and leave lasting impressions on young participants, contributing to a stronger sense of community.¹⁷

4.4.2 Diverse patterns of engagement: From disengagement to active participation

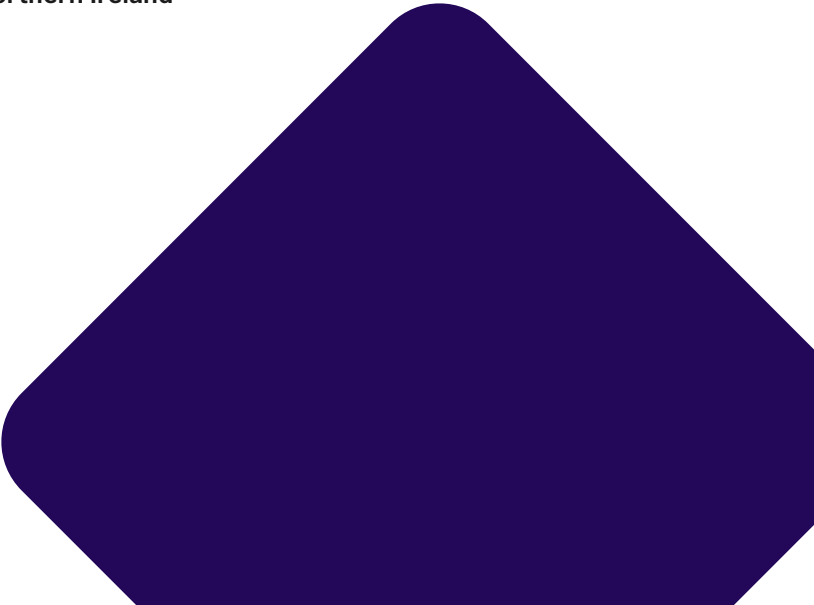
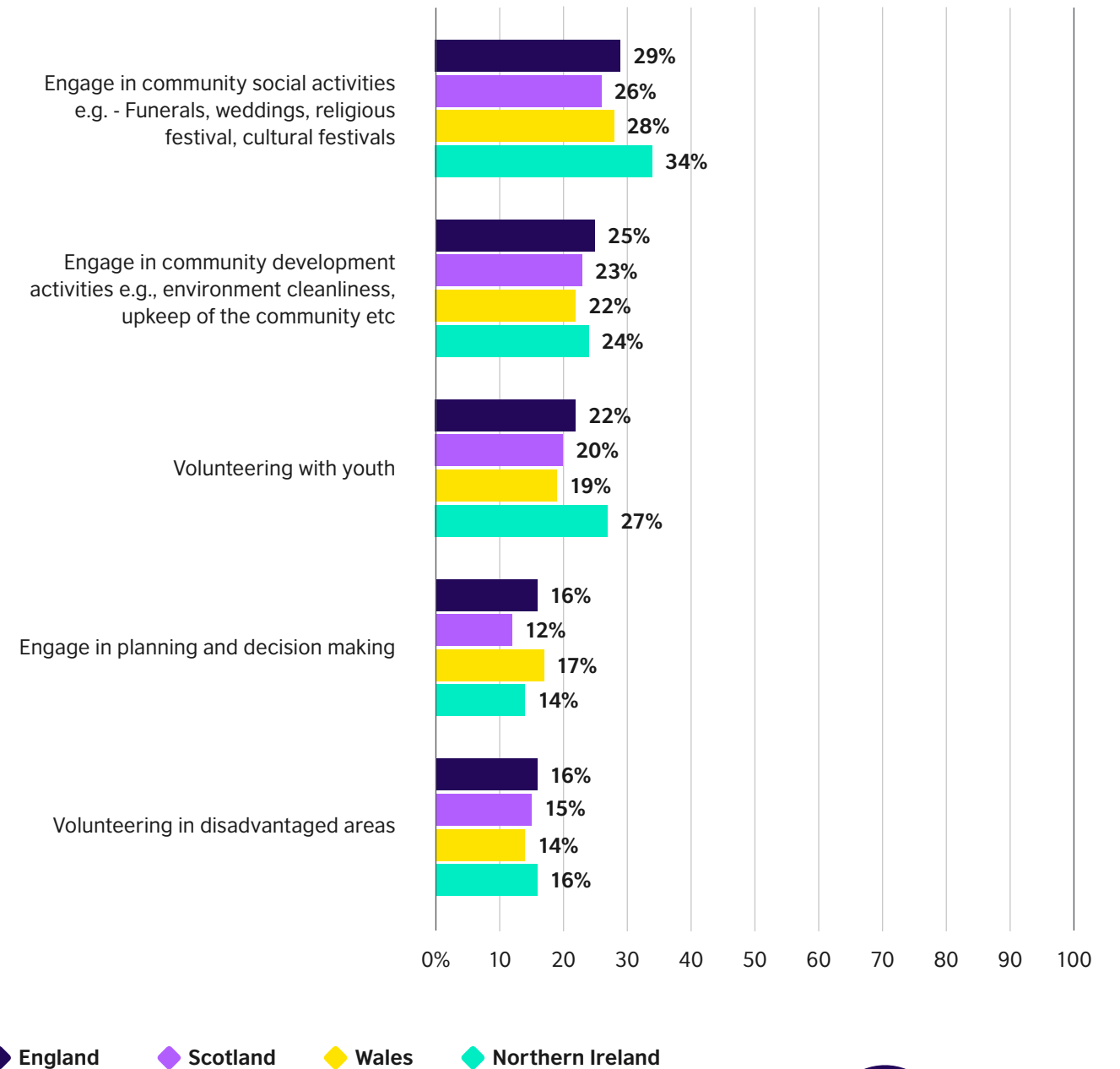
While a notable 35% of young people said they do not engage with their local community at all, 29% of young people reported participating in community-based social activities such as local events, sports clubs, cultural celebrations, and community gatherings. These activities provide spaces for young individuals to connect, collaborate, and contribute to their communities. Higher levels of engagement with local community can be observed among Black (62%), Northern Ireland (52%), and religious respondents (52%), with qualitative insights highlighting the profound impact that cultural events and festivals can have in fostering community connections. It could be inferred that these events act as platforms where people from diverse backgrounds can come together to celebrate shared values and traditions. Whether it's a local food fair, a music festival, or a traditional holiday celebration, the resonance of these experiences extends far beyond the event itself and builds a sense of togetherness (see Chapter 2 for more detail on community).

17 Giulia, Alonzo., Giulia, Rossetti. (2023). 5. Festivals as instruments of cultural welfare: A theoretical reflection. Welfare e ergonomia, doi: 10.3280/we2023-001003



Figure 33 Which of the following countries do you think are most attractive to you personally?

NB: Showing all countries with respondent base size > 100



4.5. Discussion points

4.5.1 The value-engagement paradox in arts and culture

Young people engage with arts and culture, but there's a disconnect between this engagement and the perceived value of arts careers. Greater support and clearer communication about arts-based careers are needed to unlock potential in the UK's creative industries and prevent the loss of talent.

Policymakers and educators should align young people's interests with viable career paths by re-evaluating arts education, creating stable jobs, and challenging societal perceptions. Strengthening support and improving communication about arts careers can foster a sustainable and vibrant future for the UK's creative sectors.

4.5.2 Diversity: An untapped resource for global solutions

Diversity is not just a buzzword for young people – it's a powerful tool for solving global challenges. This perspective, particularly strong among marginalised groups, represents a paradigm shift in problem-solving. Our findings show that young people, especially those from LGBTQI+, Black, and mixed-race backgrounds, prioritise ensuring diversity as a key tool for addressing complex issues like violence, conflict, and economic inequality.

Harnessing this approach could revolutionise how we tackle global problems. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of decision-making processes, ensuring that diverse voices are not just heard but actively shape solutions. Organisations and governments that embrace a youth-driven, diversity-centric approach may find themselves at the forefront of innovation and social progress.

4.5.3 Redefining 'Britishness': A nation of nations

The concept of British identity is undergoing a radical transformation, driven by diverse regional perspectives across the UK and changing relationships with the wider world. Our research uncovers significant variations in how young people from different UK nations view their history, culture, and identity. This reimagining of national identity presents both a challenge and an unprecedented opportunity. While there's a risk of fragmentation, there's also potential for a more nuanced, inclusive understanding of 'Britishness'.

Embracing this complexity could forge a vision of national identity that celebrates regional distinctiveness while fostering a sense of shared heritage. This evolving concept of 'Britishness' has profound implications for everything from domestic policy to international relations, potentially positioning the UK as a model for multi-faceted national identity in a globalised world.



Chapter 5: Voices for change: Political engagement and representation

Politics runs through this report as the golden thread. It is simultaneously the cause and the solution to the challenges young people face. It determines the UK's interactions with the wider world. It informs education, arts, and culture. Yet in 2024, young people struggle to find their place in the political landscape.

This chapter begins by exploring a sense among young people that they are unheard, underpinned by a belief that they are not represented in political circles. Following this is a discussion of the engagement gap, whereby more young people think it is important to engage with politics than actually do engage. There is an exploration of voting behaviour that shows young people's intention to vote does not reflect their enthusiasm for it. This chapter closes with reflections on how to boost political engagement among young people in the UK.

5.1 Young people do not feel heard

5.1.1 Unheard and a sense of being powerless

At various levels of politics, young people in the UK do not feel their concerns and suggestions are heard. This perception has allowed a sense of powerlessness to grow and fester. Our survey asked respondents to what extent they think the voices of young people are being heard on national issues. On a UK-wide level, fewer than three in ten (29%) said their voices are heard and followed by subsequent action. It follows that seven in ten young people either think that their voices go unheard or that their voices are heard but ignored.

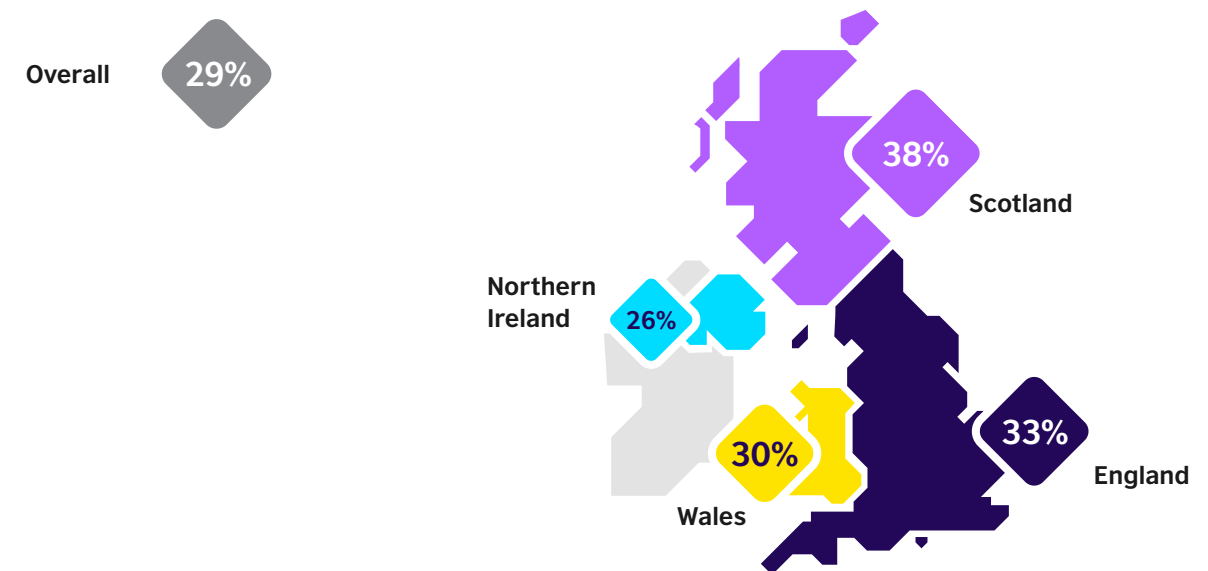
There is variation at national level. Young people from Scotland (38%) are more likely to feel their voices are heard and provoke action than their peers from England (33%), Wales (30%), and Northern Ireland (26%).



I would say now I trust it like the least more than ever. And I'm not optimistic. I think for our generation now, it is just so difficult in terms of living. It is like people are literally working just to pay their bills and then kind of scrape by. And it is only getting worse.

Female, 29
London, Focus group

Figure 34 Proportion of young people who feel heard with at least some action taken at state and national levels



The qualitative focus groups reinforced this sense of not being heard. After participants had discussed the challenges young people face in their area, we asked how much influence they have in proposing solutions to these challenges. This revealed a common sentiment across most groups: young people are rarely consulted, and when they are, those consultations rarely lead to tangible policy changes. Participants also suggested that politicians' engagement with young people is tokenistic at best and cynical at worst. It is designed to create an impression of empathy but lacks substance. Participants recognised that youth apathy both contributes to and causes this. Politicians overlook young people, in part, because older generations are more likely to vote. Young people become more apathetic in response, to complete the vicious circle.



I see people being like, 'We want to involve young people in decisions', but I don't think at the end of the day that those opinions are actually taken on board when decisions are being made.

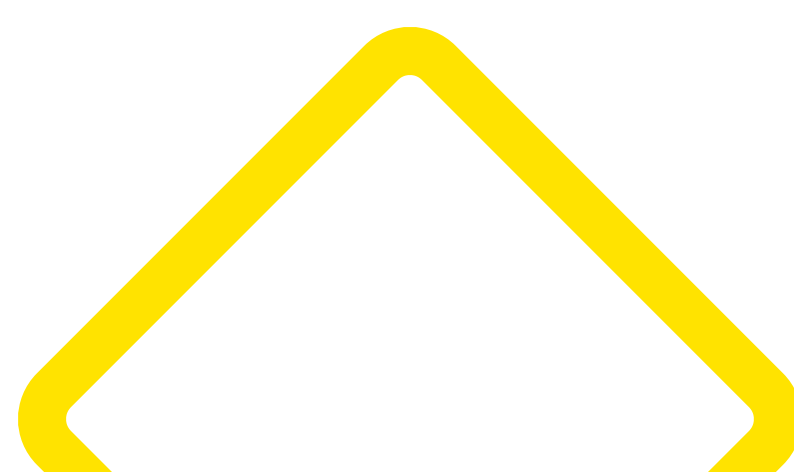
Female, 27
Northern Ireland, Focus group

The reason they [politicians] don't tend to account for young people's views, or adequately account for young people's views, is that young people don't vote in the same numbers as older people

Male, 24
Wales, Focus group

We haven't got any routes to make things happen. All we can really do is sign petitions and stuff.

Male, 19
Wales, Focus group



Conversations about voicelessness revealed two further reflections:

1. Many young people do not feel heard – or, as we discuss in the next section, feel unrepresented – at the ballot box. This has led to an increase in direct action. But with increasingly harsh sentences for protesters, young people perceive the Government to be thwarting this alternative form of expression. It should be noted that participants discussed protesters in the context of campaign groups like Just Stop Oil, rather than the far-right riots that took place in the summer of 2024.

“A lot of people find that’s [direct action] the only way they can actually get their voices heard. And now we’ve got the state responding to that by putting people in prison for four plus years. So again, it further reduces the voice that we as members of the public have, which obviously leads to more people in power who will just do what they want regardless.”

Male, 27
South England, Focus group

2. Though less widespread, there was a notable cynicism towards young people who do have a voice, on the basis that they must be privileged to have gained that voice. And, as a result of their perceived privilege, they are not in a position to represent or advocate for the majority of young people.

“I think you have to be in a bit more of a privileged position to make sure you’ve got your say, like if you’re going into youth parliament or something like that. You need the means to be able to.”

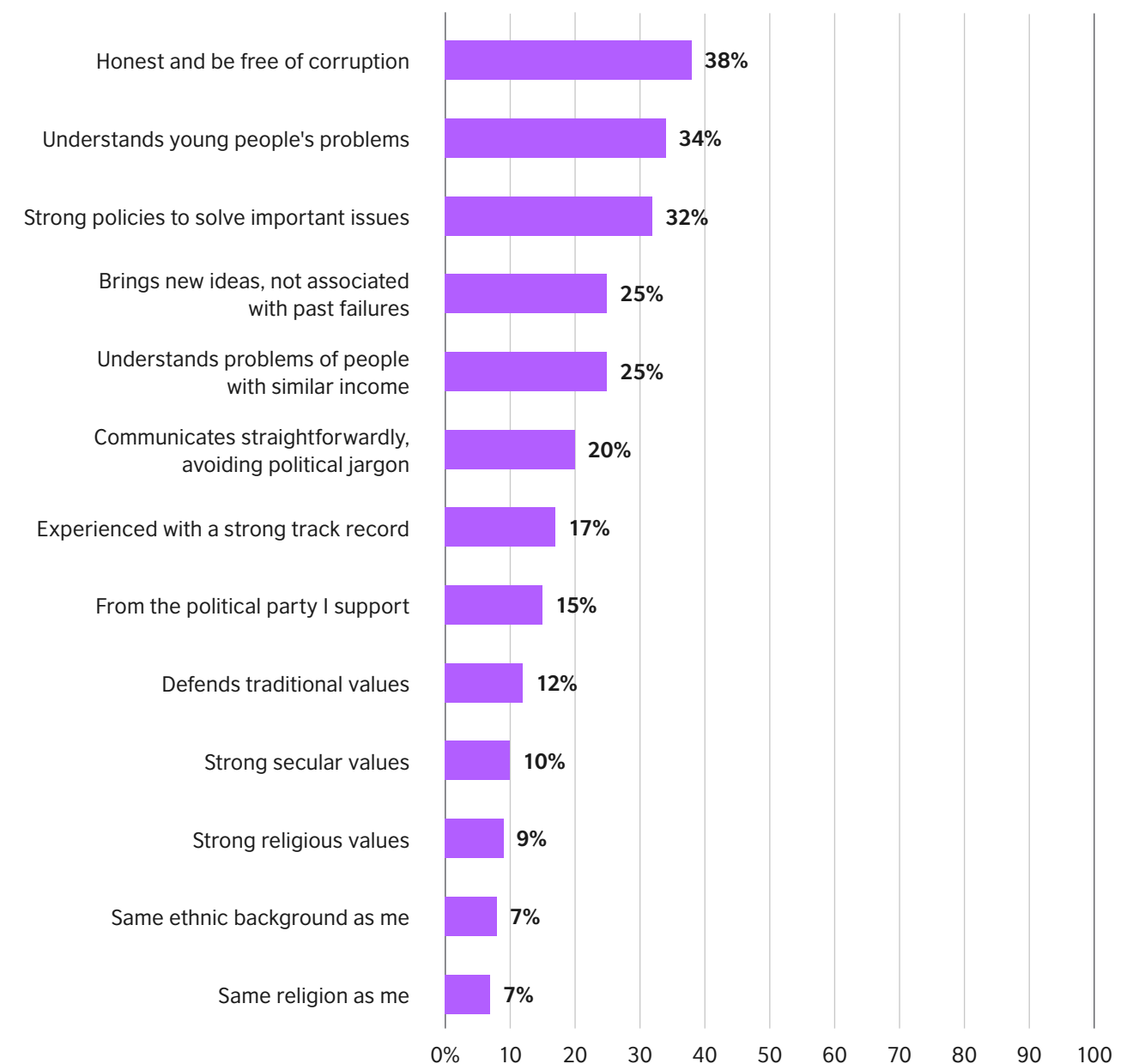
Female, 27
Midlands, Focus group

5.1.2 Lack of youth representation

A sense of voicelessness is closely linked to the perception that young people are underrepresented in Westminster. When asked to choose the important qualities they look for when voting for a candidate, over one-third (34%) of respondents said their main criterion is someone who understands young people’s problems, second only to being honest and free of corruption (38%). An understanding of young people’s problems was especially important for 18–24-year-olds (39% vs 29% of 25–30-year-olds) and women (38% vs 30% for men) as young people seek representation from people who understand them. Yet those representatives do not necessarily need to be young themselves. Indeed, one focus group participant cited a senior parliamentarian in their seventies when prompted for examples of current MPs that advocate for young people – suggesting that effective youth representation isn’t necessarily tied to the representative’s age.



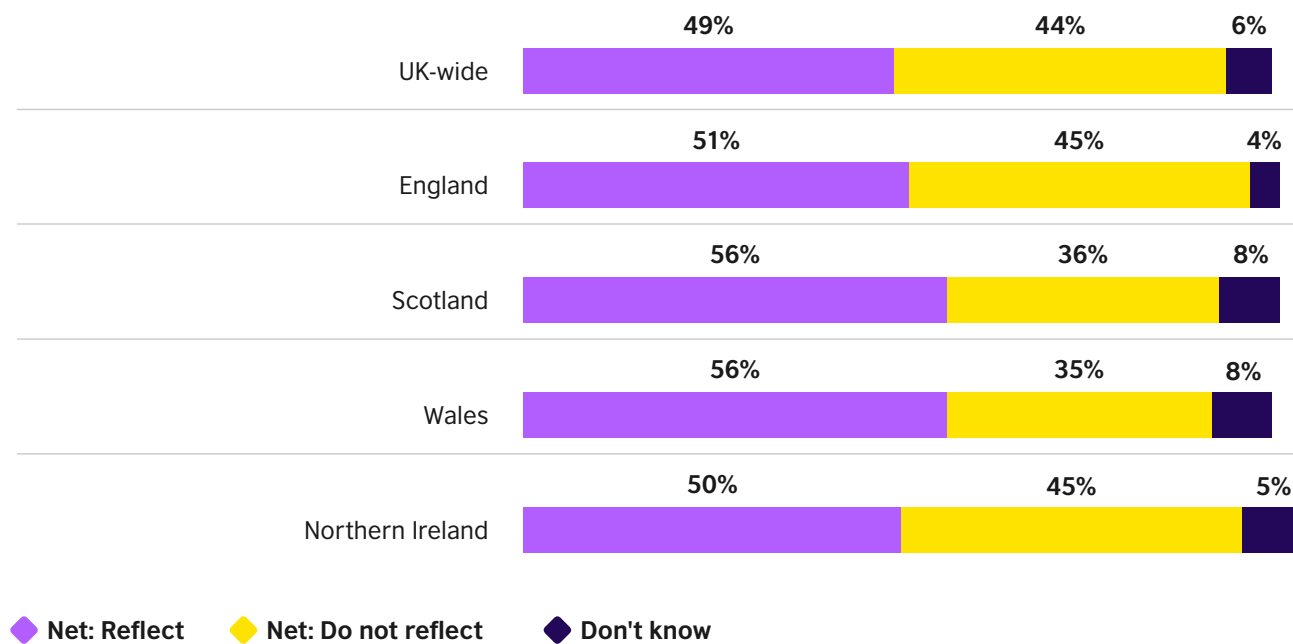
Figure 35 Most important qualities for young people when voting for a candidate



While just under three in ten (29%) believe their voices are heard and acted upon at a national level, nearly half (49%) of survey respondents feel that politicians’ decisions reflect the views of young people. This suggests that while direct engagement may be lacking, the overall policy directions are somewhat aligned with young people’s interests. Variations among regions indicated differing levels of satisfaction and perceived representation; in Wales and Scotland, 56% of young people think politicians take decisions that represent their views, compared to 51% in England and 49% in Northern Ireland.

Participants in the focus groups were far more scathing of their ‘representatives’. The overwhelming sentiment was that MPs are detached and cannot relate to the issues young people face because most of them are of a different generation. And there was not just a perception of generational detachment. One participant’s description of parliamentarians as ‘men and women in suits’ implies a class-based detachment, which ties in with the broader view that those who have a voice must be privileged.

Figure 36 Proportion of young people who think the decisions taken by politicians reflect the views of young people, by nation, and at the UK-wide level



*Methodological note: Respondents were asked to what extent they think decisions taken by politicians reflect the views of young people at two levels, in their own nation (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) and also at the UK level.

“I feel like the people in power don’t really understand what young people need because they’re so old. They’re men and women in suits who don’t really grasp what is needed.”

Male, 24
Midlands, Focus group

In all honesty, I think we have so many members of Parliament, we have prime ministers, we have so many people up there, but there’s no one to actually advocate for the people and for the young people.

Female, 25
North England, Focus group

The quotes displayed primarily relate to views on representatives in the UK Parliament, rather than devolved parliaments in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. When nation-specific representatives were discussed, participants were not notably more positive about their national representatives. Initiatives like Youth Parliaments and Citizens Assemblies were also discussed, and participants mentioned being aware of them but were largely unaware of what they did or how to get involved.

5.1.3 Cautious optimism about the new UK Government

The focus groups revealed a (very) cautious optimism about the new Labour Government. Participants welcomed a change in national leadership. For most of them, however, this came from a frustration with the Conservative Party rather than enthusiasm for Labour. Yet there was a feeling that Labour MPs are more transparent and in tune with ‘normal’ people – with one participant citing Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner as a specific example.

“I feel like the politicians in this Labour Government are more like us. Like, I know Angela Rayner left school at 16, pregnant. [It’s] certainly not, you know, the type of people that the Conservatives would be having in their cabinet.”

Male, 19
Wales, Focus group

My opinion [of Labour] is negative, but that being said, I do find them more trustworthy. They are being more honest about what they’re doing. And like I think they came out this week and said it’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

Female, 21
Scotland, Focus group

It is important to note that focus groups took place in August 2024, firmly within the new Government’s honeymoon period. If we were to repeat the research several months down the line, polling data suggests that optimism may have faded.¹⁸

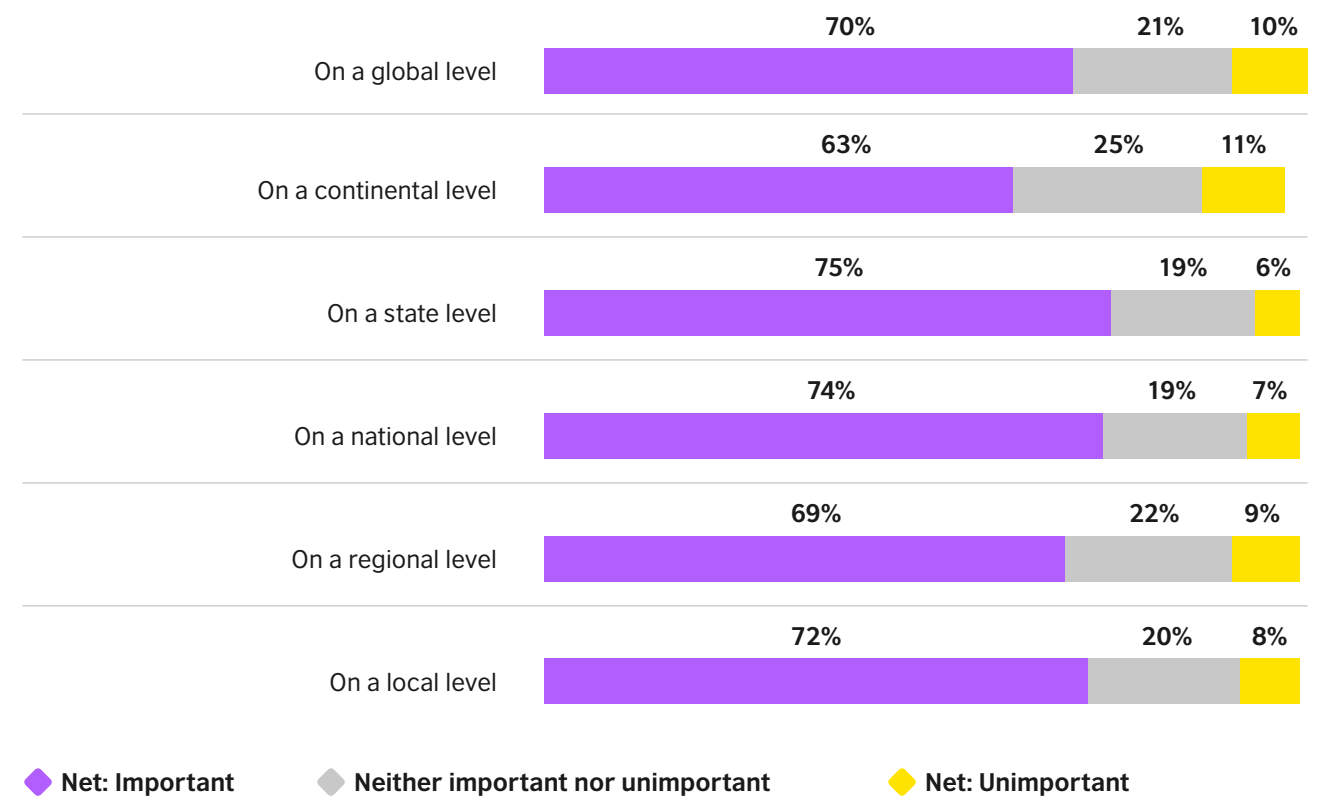
5.2 The political engagement gap

5.2.1 Engagement is seen as important

Despite the perception of voicelessness and a lack of representation, young people still believe in the importance of engaging with politics. Three in four (75%) said it is important to engage with politics at a UK-wide level, and a similar proportion (74%) felt it is important to engage at a national level. Young people perceived engagement to be slightly less important at a local level (72%) and a regional level (69%).

¹⁸ According to polling by Techne UK, support for the Labour Party dropped 20 points among 18–34 year olds, from 56% (2–3 August) to 36% (16–17 October), www.techneuk.com/tracker.

Figure 37 Perceived importance of being engaged with politics at different levels



South Asian

Political participation: Some engagement, but limited influence

The research reveals a complex relationship with political engagement among South Asian youth that largely mirrors the broader youth experience in the UK. They show similar patterns of engagement (63% either very or somewhat engaged compared to 58% overall), and share common frustrations about being heard but not heeded:



They do ask us for opinions, but they don't actually implement it.

Male, 20
Midlands, Focus group

In all honesty, I think we have so many members of Parliament, we have prime ministers, we have so many people up there, but there's no one to actually advocate for the people and for the young people.

Female, 25
North England, Focus group

Like their peers across the UK, they express a desire for greater diversity in political representation:



I definitely think so, or at least a couple more like a diverse age range... rather than the same age group consistently throughout.

Female, 25
North England, Focus group

While these experiences align with those of the overall sample, they take on additional significance for South Asian youth given the long history of South Asian political participation in the UK and the growing electoral importance of these communities. Their continued levels of engagement despite feelings of limited influence suggests both the resilience of community political traditions and the ongoing importance of representation for minority ethnic communities.

Eastern European

Political outsiders: Trust, engagement and the post-migration experience

Lower levels of political engagement (52% vs 58% overall) and institutional trust reflect both their migrant experience and cultural heritage. Only 19% expressed “a lot of trust” in UK-wide politics, and voting intentions (65% likely to vote) suggest some disconnection from formal political processes. The lower levels of political trust and engagement may be influenced by political cultures in their countries of origin, where there can be higher levels of scepticism toward political institutions. This perspective, combined with their status as migrants or children of migrants in the UK, could contribute to a sense of political marginalisation. Their slightly lower voting intentions might also reflect uncertainty about their long-term place in UK society.

5.2.2 Actual engagement is lower

There is a gap, however, between the proportion of young people who say it is important to engage with politics, and the proportion that actually do engage. Just under three in five (58%) said they are personally engaged with politics in general, with young men and those aged 25–30 significantly more likely to be politically engaged (62% vs 53% of women, 60% vs 56% of 18–24s). The level of engagement also varies by nation, with young people in England the most

likely to be engaged (61%), followed by Scotland (57%), Northern Ireland (54%), and Wales (52%).

Our survey presented respondents with a list of political activities and asked them to select the ones they had participated in the last 12 months. The top activity was voting in local elections (39%), followed by signing a petition (31%), and boycotting products for political reasons (18%). More than one in five (22%) selected ‘none of the above’, making it the third-most selected option.

Figure 38 Proportion of young people who say they are engaged with politics, by nation

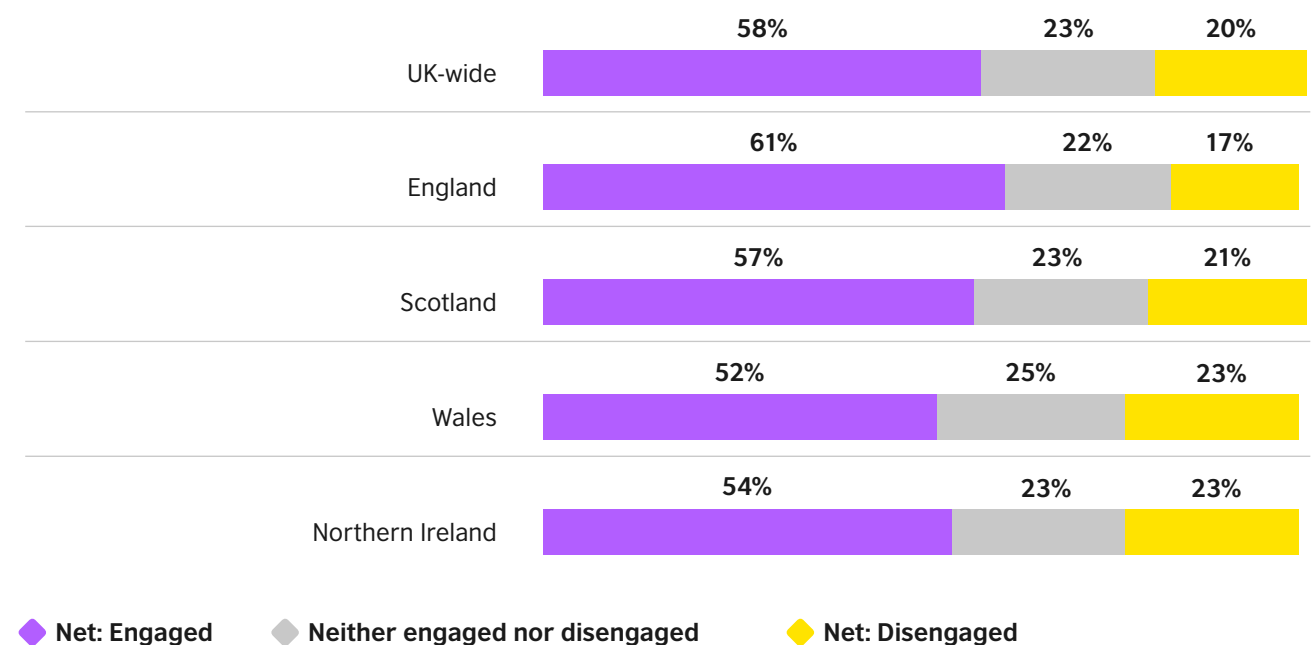
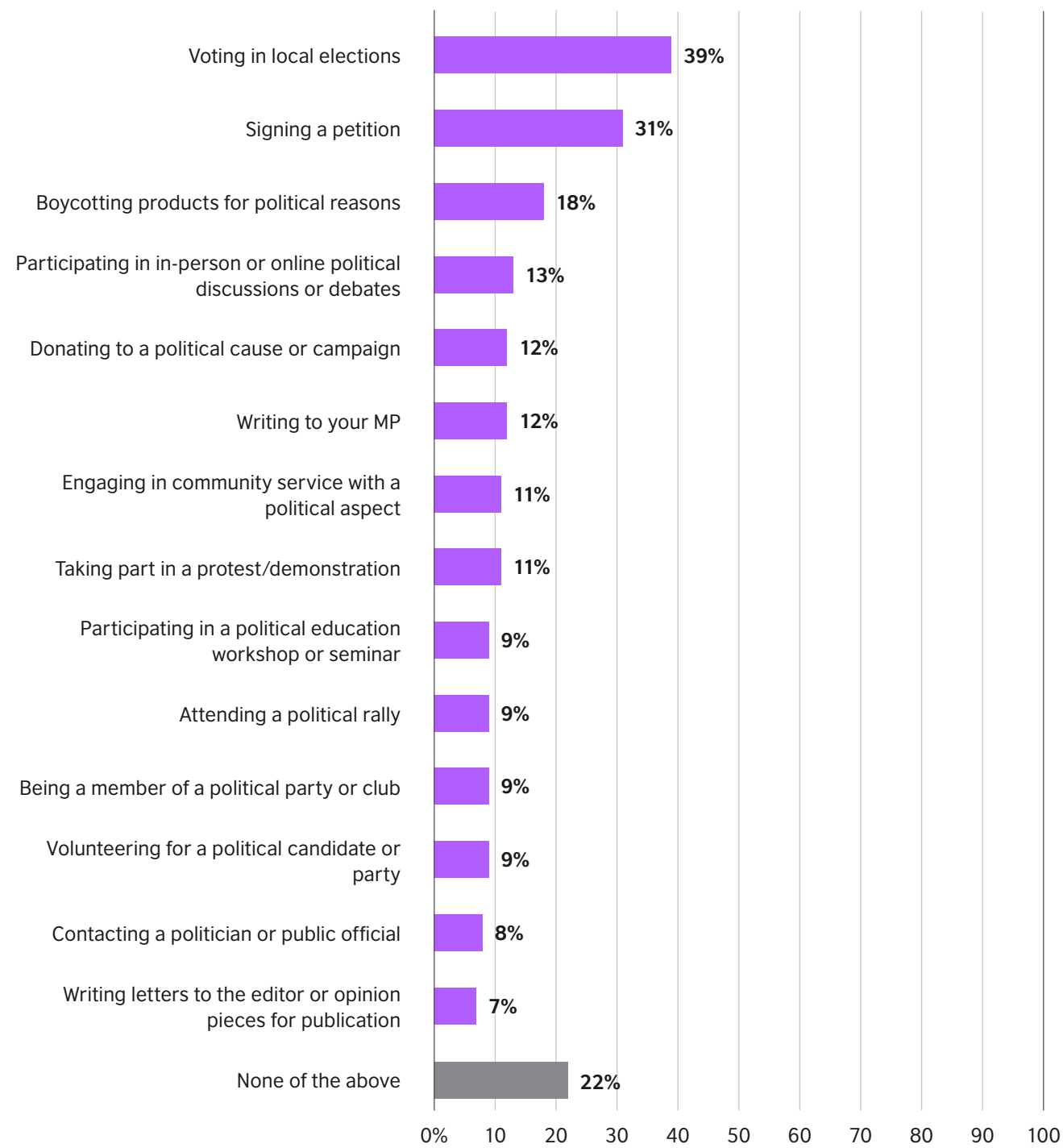


Figure 39 Most important qualities for young people when voting for a candidate



5.3 Voting behaviour

5.3.1 Intention to vote does not equate to enthusiasm

More than two in three (69%) respondents indicated they are likely to vote in a UK General Election, significantly higher than the estimated turnout among young people in the 2024 General Election, which was held just days before our survey launched. Among the older cohort of 25–30-year-olds, the likelihood of voting was notably higher at 73%, compared to 65% for those aged 18–24. There were also variations by nation: young people in England (73%) were the most likely to express an intention to vote, followed by Scotland (70%), Northern Ireland (63%), and Wales (63%). However, it is essential to consider the ‘say-do’ gap between stated intentions and actual behaviour. Therefore, we should be cautious in expecting this stated intention to vote (69%) to translate into an equivalent turnout among 18–30-year-olds at the next General Election.

5.3.2 Reasons for voting

When we asked respondents who indicated they were likely to vote about their motivations, the most common reason given was the desire to influence decision-making in the country (44%). Additionally, more than one-third (35%) stated they would vote out of a sense of national duty or civic responsibility. This

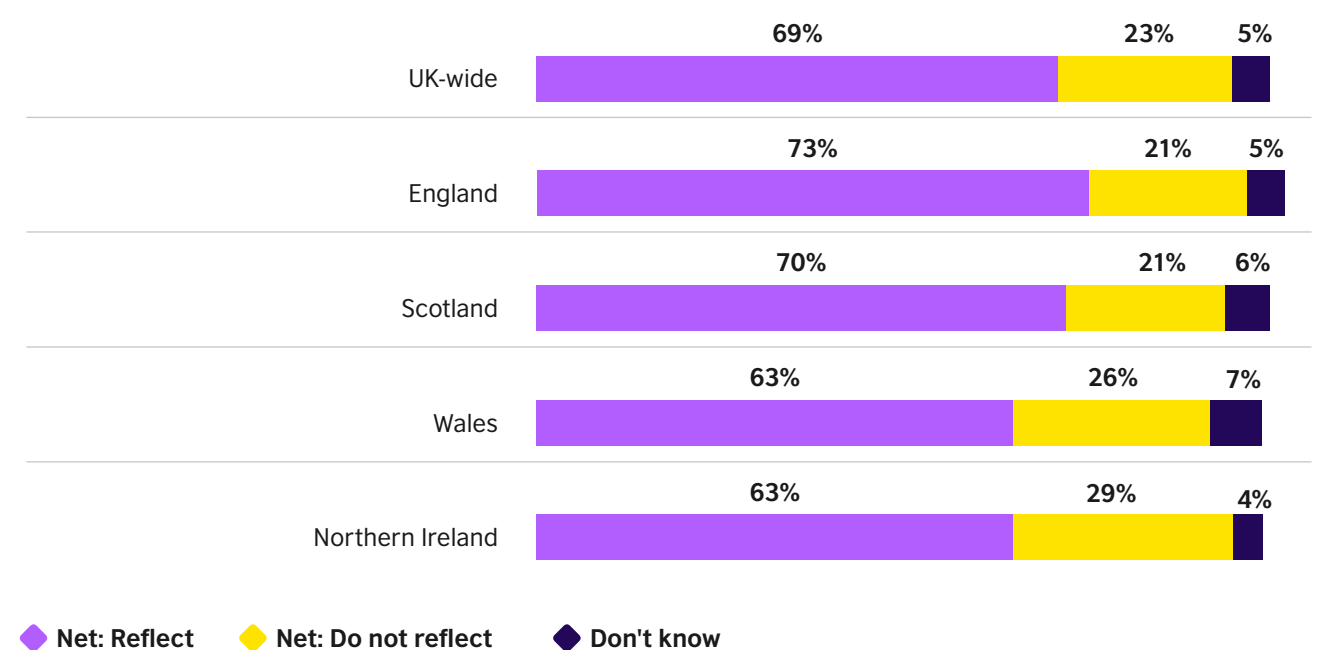
aligns with insights from the focus groups, where many young people expressed that they feel a weary obligation to vote rather than genuine eagerness.

5.3.3 Concerns about voting

Among those who indicated they were unlikely to vote in a UK General Election, more than one in three (36%) believed their vote would not lead to any meaningful change. Three in ten (30%) expressed uncertainty about whom to vote for or stated they do not like any of the political parties. This resonates with qualitative findings indicating that young people perceive a lack of choice in the political landscape.

Additionally, the research revealed that the relatively high intention to vote identified in the quantitative study does not match the enthusiasm for voting we heard in the qualitative research. Participants in the focus groups, held weeks after the 2024 General Election, expressed a lack of excitement about the prospect of casting their votes, citing two primary reasons: first, they were not inspired by the candidates or parties; second, they were sceptical that their votes would lead to tangible change, as discussed earlier. Consequently, young people often do not see voting—which is generally viewed as the most basic form of political expression—as a means to ‘have their say.’ Instead, they do not regard the ballot box as a solution to their feelings of voicelessness.

Figure 40 Proportion of young people who say they are likely to vote in a UK General Election, by nation



◆ Net: Reflect ◆ Net: Do not reflect ◆ Don't know

Figure 41 Top reasons for voting

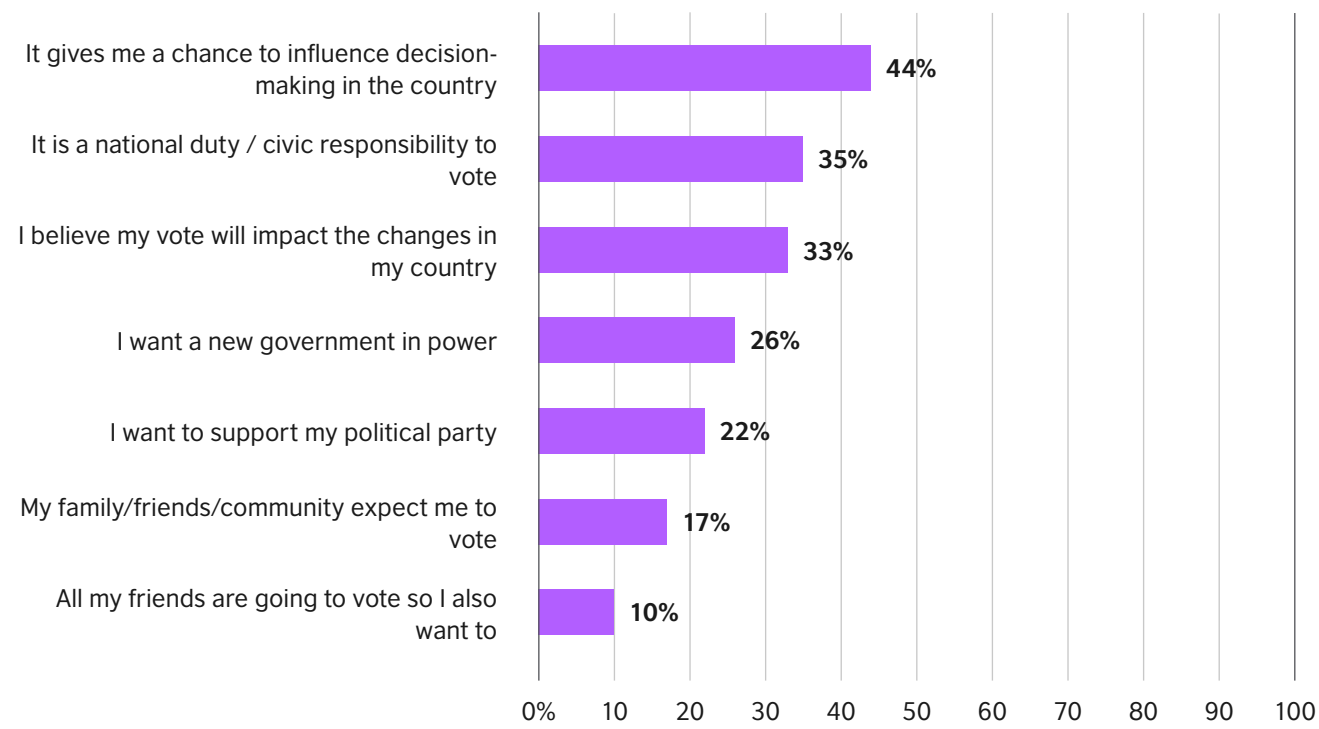


Figure 42 Top reasons for not voting

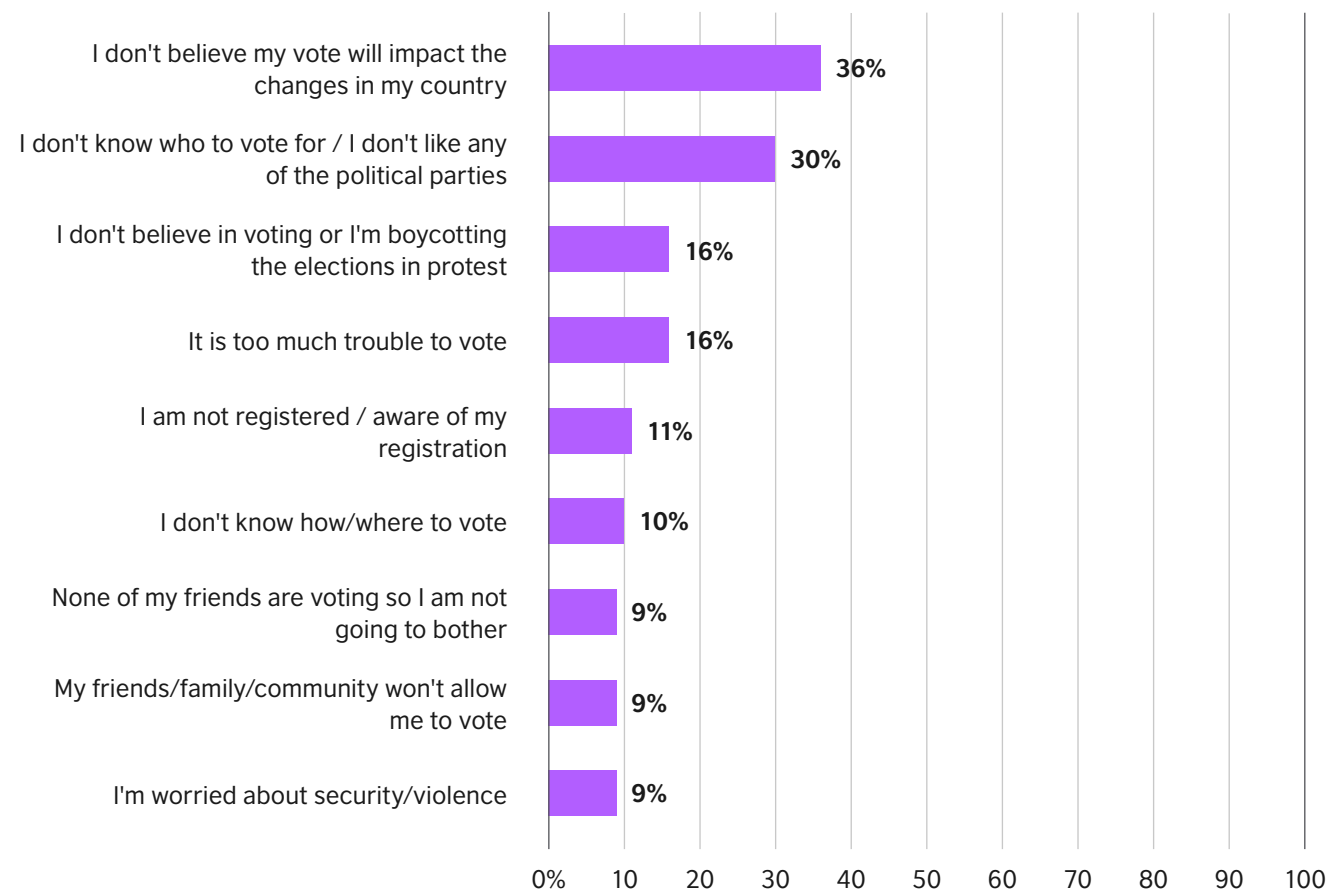
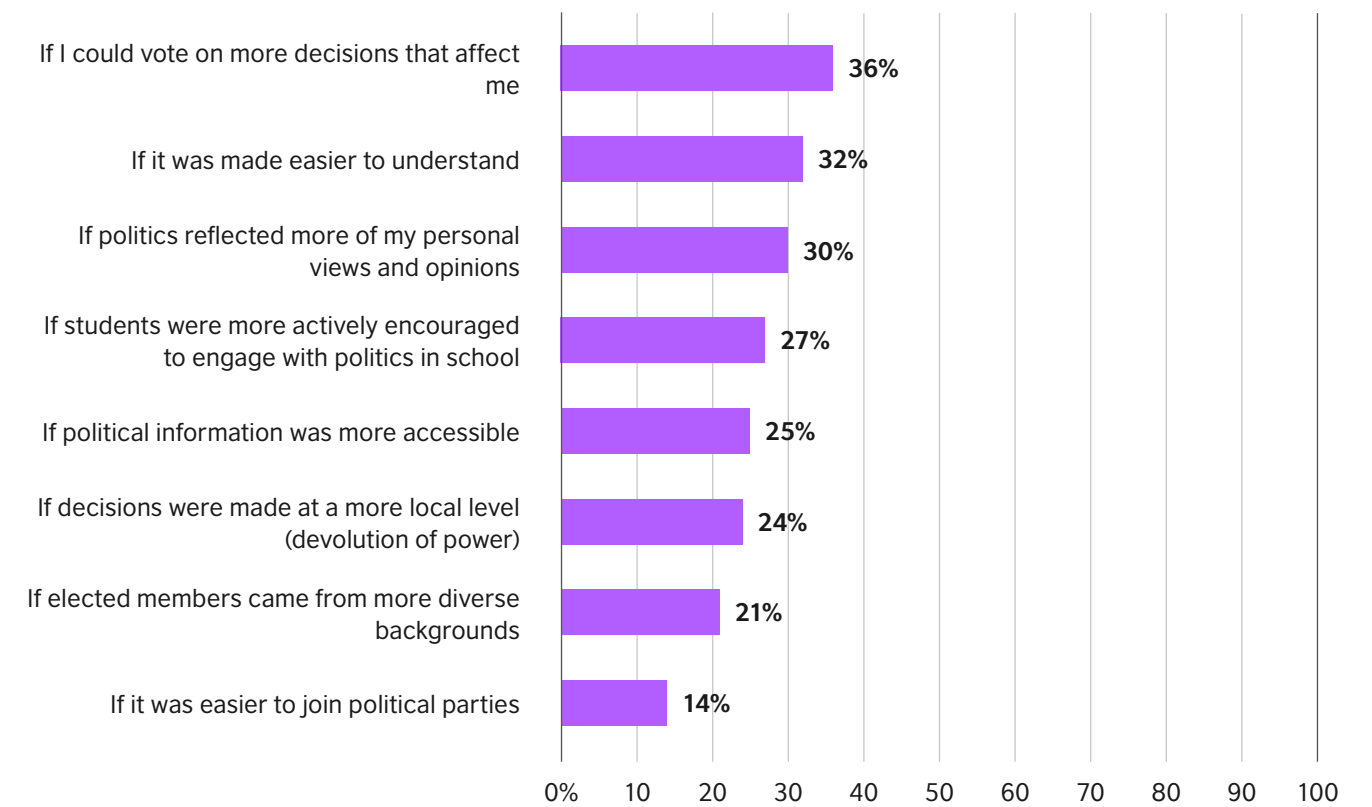


Figure 43 Measures that would encourage young people to increase their engagement with politics



5.4 Boosting engagement with politics

5.4.1 Greater sway on relevant decisions

All respondents were asked what would encourage them to increase their engagement with politics. More than a third (36%) of respondents cited an ability to vote on more decisions that affect them, implying that, at present, they feel excluded from decision-making. Just under a third (32%) said they would engage more with politics if it were easier to understand, and this was significantly higher among women (37% vs 26% for men). In a similar vein, a quarter (25%) said they would be more likely to engage if political information were more accessible. Furthermore, qualitative insights revealed how young people from Wales and the Midlands in England stressed the importance of political education in schools, aiming to make politics more accessible and relevant to youth issues. Additional proposed strategies included initiatives at universities, youth councils, forums, and promoting political involvement opportunities on youth-centric platforms. These last few suggestions fit neatly with insights from Chapter 3, that young people want more education on how politics works and how they can get involved.



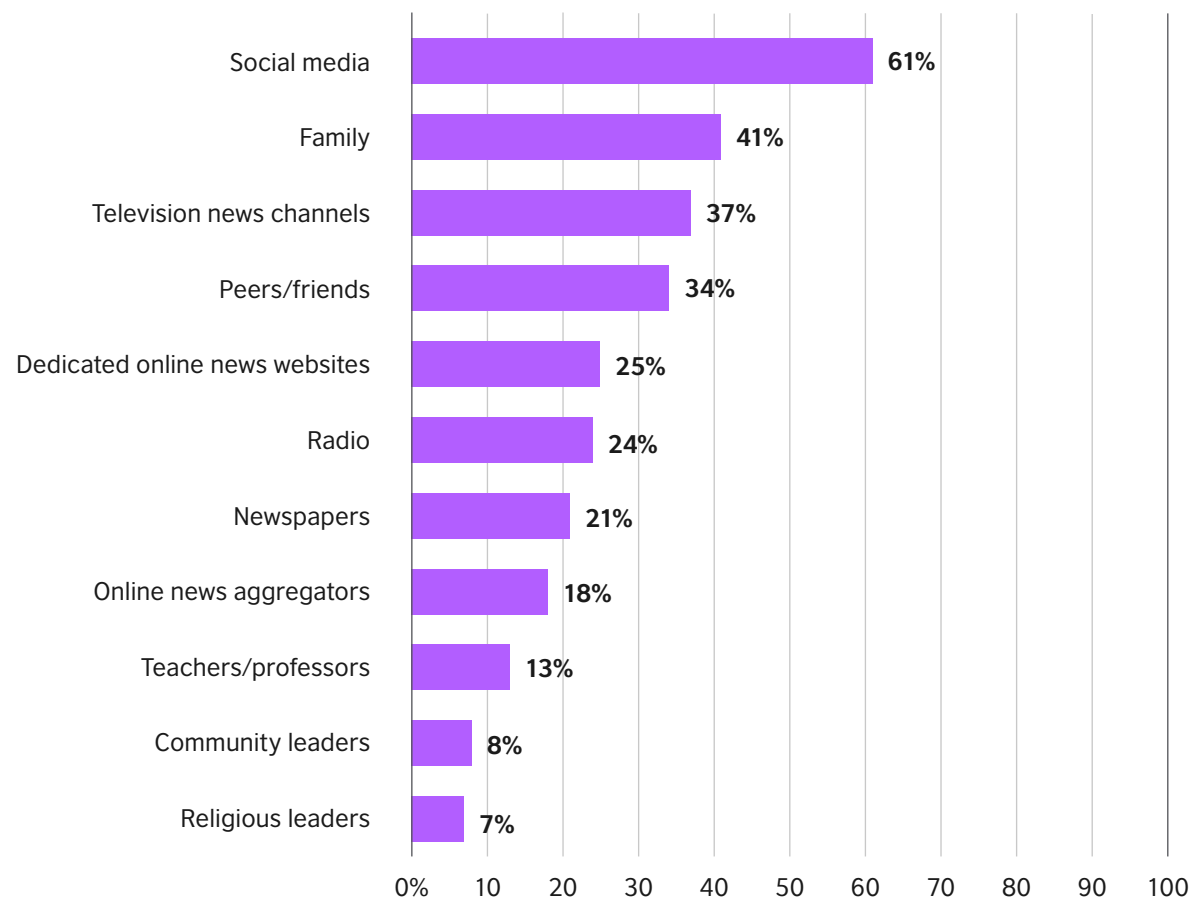
I don't think we have any say really. Like, we vote every four years or five years, and it's based on tribal politics.

Male, 27
South England, Focus group

In addition to the aforementioned desire for more political education, participants suggested social media as a means to reach and engage young people, bringing politics to their terrain. Qualitative insights uncovered a dynamic intersection of digital culture and political engagement. Young people explored how social media can profoundly influence and educate young people, with youth from the North and the Midlands in England emphasising the pivotal role of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, along with influencer collaborations.

Our survey confirmed that social media is – by far – the most popular source of news, with three in five (61%) getting information from platforms like TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). The data is split by gender, with social media a particularly common source of information for women (65% vs 57% of men).

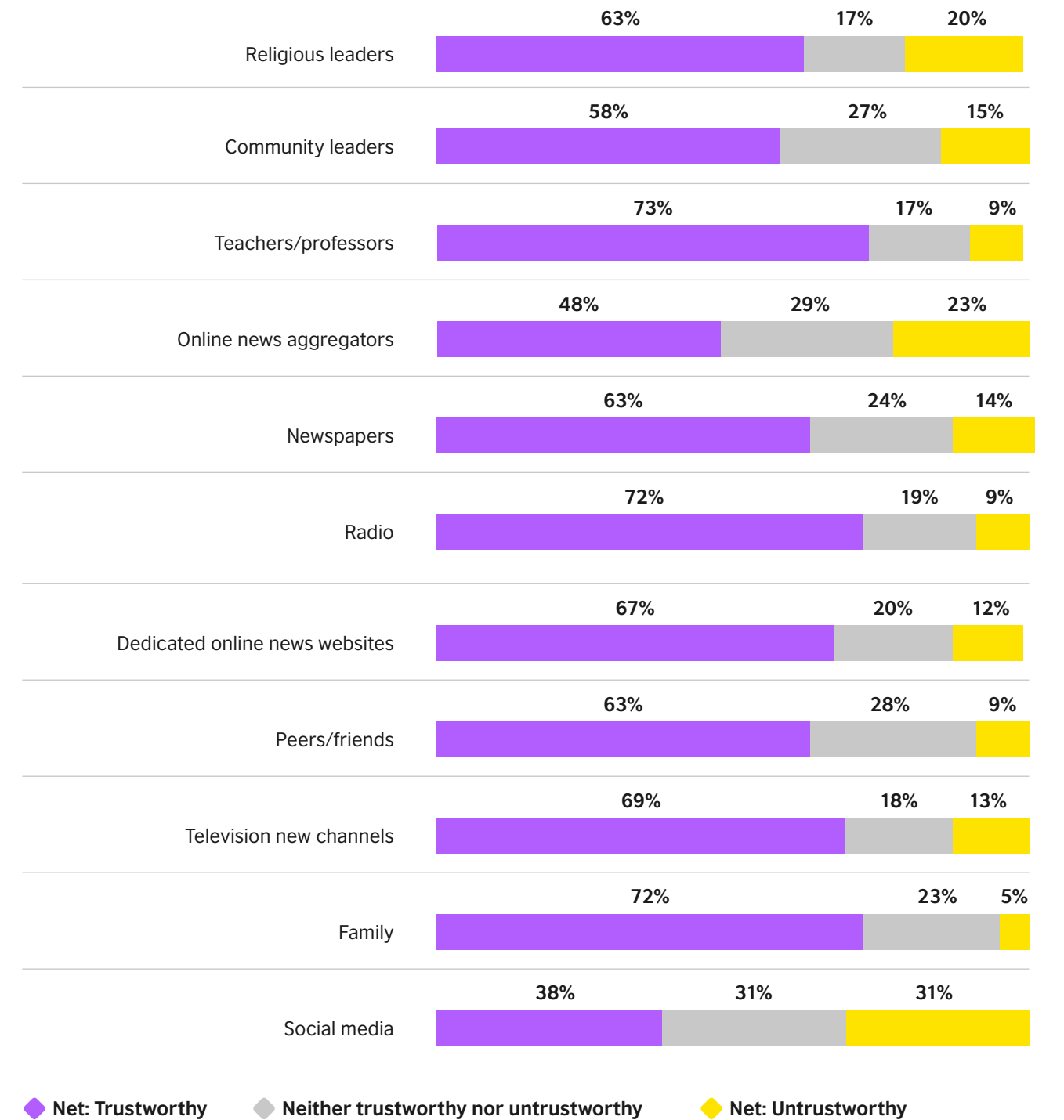
Figure 44 Sources of information for news and current affairs



Yet the use of social media does not infer trust in social media. Indeed, young people deem social media to be the least trustworthy source of information. Less than two in five (38%) think social media is trustworthy, a far lower proportion than traditional forms of media like radio (72%), newspapers (63%), or television news channels (69%).

Though women are more likely than men to access the news through social media, they are also more circumspect. Just 31% of women think social media is a trustworthy source, compared to 46% of men.

Figure 45 Proportion of young people who think the following sources of information are trustworthy



◆ Net: Trustworthy ◆ Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy ◆ Net: Untrustworthy

5.5 Discussion points

5.5.1 Apathy: the risk of being unheard

Young people do not feel heard. They face considerable challenges yet feel they are shouting concerns into a void. This is particularly pronounced in Northern Ireland, where only 26% of young people feel their voices are heard and acted upon, significantly lower than Scotland (38%), England (33%), and Wales (30%). Although the average age of the 2024 Westminster parliament is now 46, making it the youngest on record and a five-year decrease from the 2019 average of 51, it has not resonated with young people in the UK.

Concerns about voicelessness and a lack of representation are deep rooted. They reflect a broader distrust of, and dissatisfaction with, the political class in the UK. This is not unique to young people, but young people are justified in their frustration and sense of abandonment. Once again, they are forced to be resilient. Politics – in the broadest sense – must engage young people in a way that goes beyond mere tokenism. The alternative is a slide into widespread apathy.

5.5.2 Political disengagement in Wales and Northern Ireland

The slide into apathy feels alarmingly close in Wales, where young people are less likely than any other nation to say they are engaged with politics and among the least likely to vote in a general election, along with their counterparts in Northern Ireland. The reasons for why this is the case in Wales is less clear, making it all the more concerning and highlights the need for further research into why young people in Wales feel so detached from politics.

In Northern Ireland, there are historical, religious, and community identity reasons that could be alluded to that may inform and explain low turnout. For instance, the legacy of the Troubles which left a lasting impact on political engagement, with some young people feeling disillusioned by the community divisions that continue to influence politics in Northern Ireland and the recent suspensions of the Northern Ireland Assembly further contributing to political disengagement.

5.5.3 A shrug of the shoulders at the ballot box

While our survey revealed a relatively high intention to vote at UK General Elections, focus group participants viewed the act of voting with a collective shrug of the shoulders. For many young people, the act of voting does not reflect an eagerness to vote. There are several reasons for this, chief amongst them a lack of choice, and a scepticism that their vote will bring about change and that their voices will be heard. Young people need to feel that participation in elections is worthwhile. There needs to be an increase in the perceived 'return' on their vote relative to older generations.

5.5.4 Social media: strings attached

Both our quantitative and qualitative research revealed that social media is the most straightforward way to reach young people due to its prominent role in providing information and an opportunity to share their opinions. But reliance on an untrustworthy medium to reach an already sceptical group of people is a high-risk strategy. Engagement at the expense of trust is a trade-off that the political landscape in the UK can ill afford.

Discussion of social media provokes a broader reflection about the nature of political engagement. What does 'engagement' mean in 2024? Is someone engaged if they scroll through political news on social media, with a fleeting glance at the headline before moving on with a swipe of the thumb? Or does true engagement require more active participation? Language is fluid, and 'to influence' has already evolved in social media vernacular. Perhaps the same evolution is occurring with 'engage'. We must be mindful, in this context, that young people may feel engaged without feeling included.



Conclusion

The Next Generation UK report reveals a complex tapestry of experiences, attitudes, and aspirations among young people in the United Kingdom. This generation, coming of age in a period of significant global upheaval, exhibits a remarkable duality: they are simultaneously optimistic about their personal futures yet concerned about broader societal and global prospects. This paradox underpins many of the report's findings and offers crucial insights into the mindset of UK youth in 2024.

Global outlook following the UK's exit from the EU

Despite the challenges posed by the UK's exit from the EU, UK youth remain committed to international engagement and global mobility. The report highlights a strong desire to maintain positive relations with European countries and a continued interest in living and working abroad. However, new barriers to mobility, including visa requirements and the loss of programmes like Erasmus+, have made international opportunities harder to access, leading to frustration among young people—especially due to the additional financial and bureaucratic challenges that have emerged since leaving the EU.

Resilience in the face of adversity

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this generation is their resilience. In the face of financial insecurity, educational challenges, and a sense of political voicelessness, young people in the UK have developed a remarkable ability to adapt and persevere. The report highlights how financial stability is viewed as crucial yet elusive, forcing many to adjust their expectations and develop coping mechanisms. This forced resilience, while admirable, raises questions about its long-term sustainability and the potential consequences for individual wellbeing and societal progress.

Redefining community and identity

The report reveals a generation actively redefining concepts of community and national identity. Moving away from traditional, place-based notions of community, young people are forging connections based on shared interests, values, and online interactions. This shift is particularly pronounced among marginalised groups, who find belonging in communities of shared identity. Similarly, the concept of British identity is undergoing a transformation, with young people from different UK nations expressing varied perspectives on history, culture, and identity. This reimagining presents both challenges and opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of 'Britishness'.

Education and employment: bridging the gap

A critical theme throughout the report is the perceived disconnect between education and the realities of the job market. While young people believe their education prepares them reasonably well for work, they struggle to find jobs that allow them to live comfortably. A university degree is no longer seen as enough to guarantee employment opportunities, with 'entry-level' jobs now demanding years of work experience on top of educational qualifications. This gap between educational attainment and employment prospects is leading many to question the value of traditional educational paths and explore alternatives, including entrepreneurship.

The value-engagement paradox in arts and culture

A notable paradox emerges in young people's relationship with arts and culture. While they engage with and value these areas, there's a disconnect when it comes to pursuing careers in creative fields. This gap highlights the need for greater support and opportunities in the creative sectors, as well as clearer communication of the value of arts-based careers. The risk of losing a wealth of creative talent underscores the importance of addressing this disconnect.

Political engagement and representation

The report reveals a generation eager to engage with politics but feeling unheard and underrepresented. There's a significant gap between the perceived

importance of political engagement and actual participation levels. This disconnect stems from a sense of voicelessness, lack of representation, and scepticism about the impact of their participation. However, the report also shows that young people are finding alternative ways to express their political views, often through cultural activities and social media engagement.

The double-edged sword of social media

The report highlights the central role of social media in young people's lives, particularly as a source of information, a platform for expression, and a vehicle for forging new communities that transcend geographical boundaries. However, it also reveals a paradox: while social media is the most popular source of news among young people, it's also the least trusted. This contradiction poses significant challenges for information dissemination and political engagement strategies targeting youth.

In conclusion, the Next Generation UK report paints a picture of a generation facing significant challenges yet demonstrating remarkable resilience, creativity, and global mindedness. Their experiences and perspectives offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and organisations seeking to support and empower UK youth in an increasingly complex world.

Appendix

A stepwise logistic regression analysis was performed on the question 'Post Brexit, to what extent do you think it is important for the UK to have a positive relationship with other European countries?' to understand the underlying factors correlated with a desire to maintain positive relationships with other European countries post-Brexit. An odds ratio for each independent variable was created to show much more likely a respondent is to think the UK should maintain positive relationships with other European countries post-Brexit.

The questions that fed into the analysis were:

- Q24 - How likely are you to vote in a UK General Election?
- Q23. Which of the following political activities have you taken part in, in the last 12 months?
- Q20 How important do you think it is to be engaged with politics at the below levels?
- Q18_2 Which of the following sources do you use?
- Q16. When looking at news and current events, where do you get your information?
- Q23. Which of the following political activities have you taken part in, in the last 12 months?
- EDUCATION. What is the highest educational level that you have achieved to date?
- Q21. How engaged you would say you are personally with politics in general?
- UK COUNTRY. Which country do you live in?
- GENDER2. How would you describe your gender?
- QLE4. Are you willing to move to another country?





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