

DEMOS

# The Optimism Project

Polly Mackenzie  
Adam Drummond  
Priya Minhas  
Nick Tyrone



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# Introduction

We are living in an age of outrage. Political discourse is dominated by division, resentment and hostility. Pessimism has set in about the prospects of the next generation, and about our institutions' capacity to respond to the problems of our time. The reward systems of social media enable and encourage a form of hyperbole and dissimulation that drives moderate and reasonable voices into retreat. Neither a paralysed government nor a radicalised opposition seems able to think beyond their own boundaries: when they call for unity it is always unity in the form of blind submission.

It is easy to despair: but the Optimism Project is driven by determination not to despair. This short paper sets out the role Demos, Britain's leading cross-party think tank, hopes to play in restoring a sense of national purpose, unity and optimism to our divided country. We will contribute our research, our ideas, and our commitment to the "demos", the shared identity of a nation, to this, one of the greatest challenges our democracy faces.

This paper - enabled by our partnership with Opinium, the strategic insight company - identifies the sources of division and discontent in Britain today. It sets out why and to what end Demos has launched the Optimism Project. It outlines the findings of Opinium's research, identifying where optimism is still strong, and what is driving it. Finally, this paper sets out our conclusions on how to build a successful, unifying programme for national renewal, that is rooted in the authentic experience of our citizens.

# 1. A TROUBLED AND ANGRY NATION

Democracy, when it thrives in an open society, is noisy. Opinions and ideas jostle for precedence. Winners crow and losers bristle. But something darker than dissent and disagreement is brewing in our society. There's a growing sense of anger and intolerance - with too many political actors explicitly seeking total hegemony, as if democracy were simply a way to legitimise the tyranny of the majority.

Much of this anger is driven by a sense of gloom about Britain's prospects, and outrage at the leaders and institutions who have permitted us to get here. Polling last September by Opinium suggested 47% of UK adults expect younger people to be worse off over the course of their lifetime than their own generation. The Resolution Foundation's Intergenerational Commission reported that Pessimists about young adults' chances of improving on their parents' lives outnumber optimists by two-to-one. This pessimism is most marked in relation to the key economic aspects of living standards – housing, work and pensions – where pessimists outnumber optimists by at least five-to-one

Perhaps they are right. This is not an easy time for our polity. The Brexit referendum not only began the largest economic upheaval of the postwar period, with our impending departure from the European Union, it also triggered a huge number of constitutional questions that remain unresolved. Every step the government takes is under threat of judicial review; Parliament's supremacy is questioned just as it is, supposedly, to be restored from Brussels; the authority of the people's mandate is brought to bear on any number of questions which did not feature on the ballot paper.

Meanwhile the biggest problems of our age are those that require collaborative, imaginative thinking. Demographic change and its impact on our public services; the transformations wrought on society and our economy by technology; a crisis of housing supply; climate change; violent extremism both domestic and international.

All this is happening at a time of global uncertainty, too. The economies of many of our closest allies and neighbours are growing strongly for the first time since the global crash of 2008. But enormous questions still remain about the governance of our globalised economy, and the characteristic sense of leadership from Washington DC for progress towards liberalisation and the freeing of trade has come to an end. The European Union - though coherent and unified in its approach towards Brexit - remains sclerotic and struggling to progress internal reforms, not least because of the rise, in many countries, of populist opposition to its approach.

But in the face of these challenges, it is hard to know who to turn to. We have undergone a crisis of legitimacy of all our institutions - government, media, charity, business. We have a wave of populists on both sides stoking and exploiting people's fear and anger. And in the middle, moderates frightened to listen to the will of the people because they don't like what they hear. What unites the populists and the moderates is that they believe in the worst of human nature. But democracy can't do that: it needs citizens to see the value in cooperation. If we want our country back, we need to start a new conversation.

- What do you like about Britain?
- What makes you positive about the future?
- What can we do to bring people together?
- What would make you proud again of our place in the world?

In exploring optimism, Demos is not trying to gloss over our difficulties but to acknowledge them, and find a way to conquer them. To hold together, let alone to thrive, a nation needs a demos - a shared sense of national identity and purpose, and a way of coming together in common cause. A cohesive society should be the ambition of our political and civic leaders in any era - but today, as Britain seeks to navigate change on an extraordinary scale, cohesion is essential.

We asked ourselves the question: what would it take to restore a sense of national optimism and end the age of outrage, so Britain can face these challenges with confidence?

To explore the potential for national renewal, Demos partnered with Opinium to conduct some initial research on where optimism is strongest in British society. The purpose of this research is to help inform our development of a programme for national renewal, by ensuring it is rooted in the authentic lived experience

of our citizens - including those people and places that have been left behind.

Listening and engagement has been a core component of Demos' research methodology since our formation in 1993. Those techniques and values are more important now than ever before, because at the heart of our national divisions is a sense of alienation between policy makers and citizens. In too many communities, it seems the populists are the only ones truly listening, and they listen predominantly to people's deepest fears and worst instincts. This project seeks instead to find the hope and positivity that remains, and build on it.

## 2. OUR FINDINGS

Many research companies have, now and in the past, measured and tracked a general sense of the population's optimism. For this research, Opinium sought to go much deeper. Opinium conducted a representative survey of 2005 nationally representative UK adults, seeking to calibrate optimism at a more granular level, exploring optimism across a variety of different domains of people's personal lives, community experiences and expectations for the country.

We explored eight "domains" of optimism:

- Health
- Living standards
- Career
- Political division
- The impact of technology on us as consumers
- The impact of technology in the workplace
- Prospects for the younger generation
- Prospects for the older generation

We asked how optimistic people were in each of these domains both for the short term and the long term. We also asked them to separate how they felt about the prospects in each domain for:

- Themselves and their family
- Their neighbourhood/community
- The country as a whole

Opinium also conducted a two-day "pop-up community", an online form of extended focus group where people were set a variety of tasks to explore these questions in a more qualitative way.

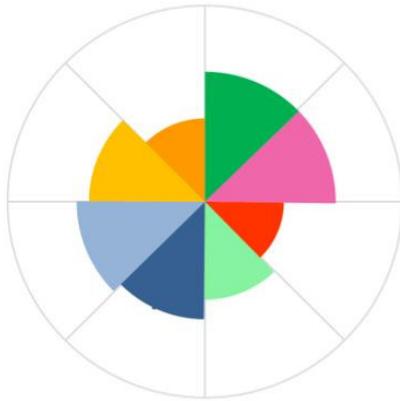
Across both methodologies, we also asked questions about what people loved most about Britain, what they thought our biggest challenges were, and for their reflections on political division and cooperation.

### 2.1 OPTIMISM IS STRONGER CLOSE TO HOME THAN AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

Generally, we found, people are more optimistic when it comes to themselves and their family compared to the future of the UK in general. Across almost every domain, when people were asked about the prospects for themselves or their family, they gave a far more positive response than when asked about the country - with their local area, community or neighbourhood falling in the middle. For instance, in terms of short term health prospects, half (56%) of UK adults are optimistic about their own and their family's health, while 40% are optimistic about the health of people in their local area and only 29% are optimistic about the health of people in the UK in general.

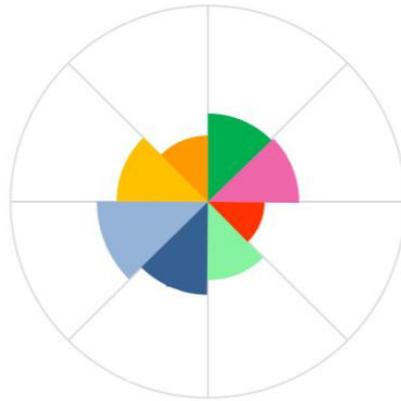
Mapping net optimism across each of the eight domains across the personal, local and national, we are able to create "wheels of optimism", in which this trend is clear. Each net optimism ranking is marked on a spoke of the wheel; the total area covered by the diagram gives an indication of overall optimism at each level.

Own & Family



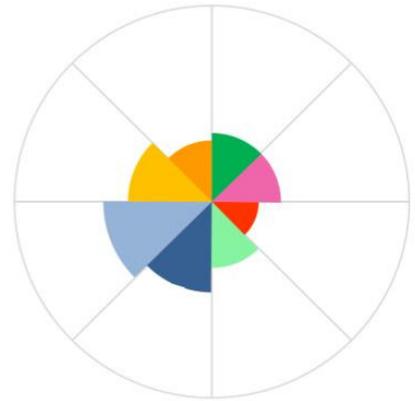
Average: 44.9%

Local Community



Average: 34.8%

UK



Average: 30.3%

Net Optimistic for the long term. Source: Opinium

### The Optimism Project

#### Eight Metrics



**Across every domain, when people were asked about prospects for themselves or their family, they gave a far more positive response than when asked about the country**

This may give us all cause to think more positively about the UK's prospects. Our general sense of gloom seems to be about the future not of ourselves but of other people, while those other people are - in fact - upbeat about themselves. It may not be that simple, however, as people's reflections on their own future are more likely to be affected by cognitive biases that distort the accuracy of their predictions. It is easier to take a rational, probability-based view of the nation as a whole than of one individual case - one's family - in which one is hyper-involved.

Nevertheless, for our purposes, the optimism associated with proximity remains of value. The closer people are to things, the better they feel about them; if our goal is to build hope, it is reasonable to assume we need to start by building connection.

## 2.2 WE'RE REMARKABLY SIMILAR

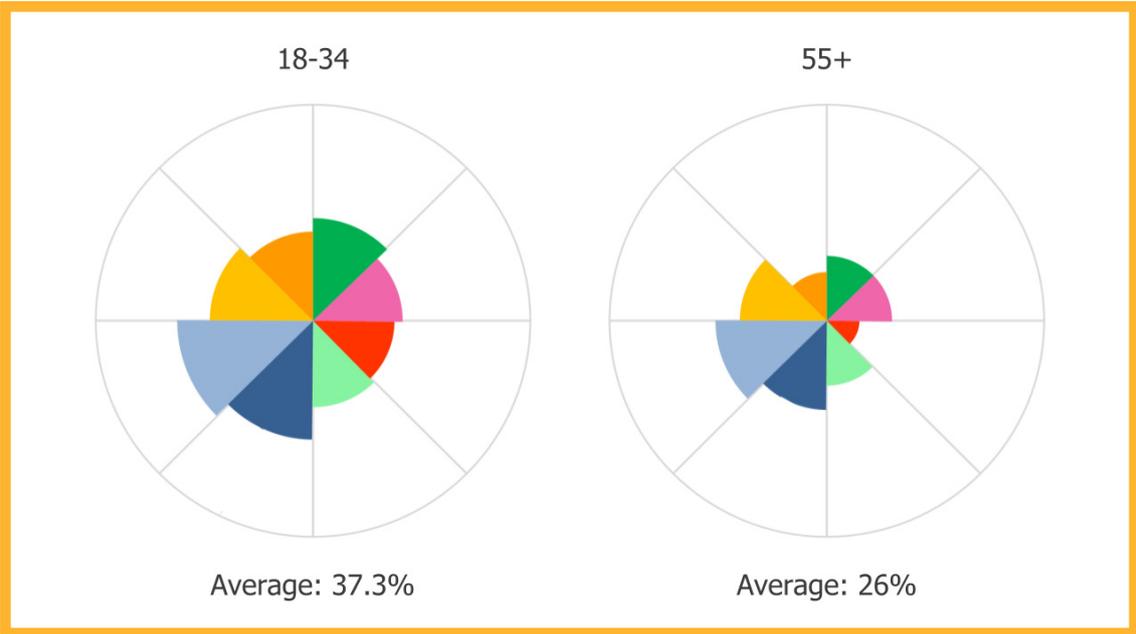
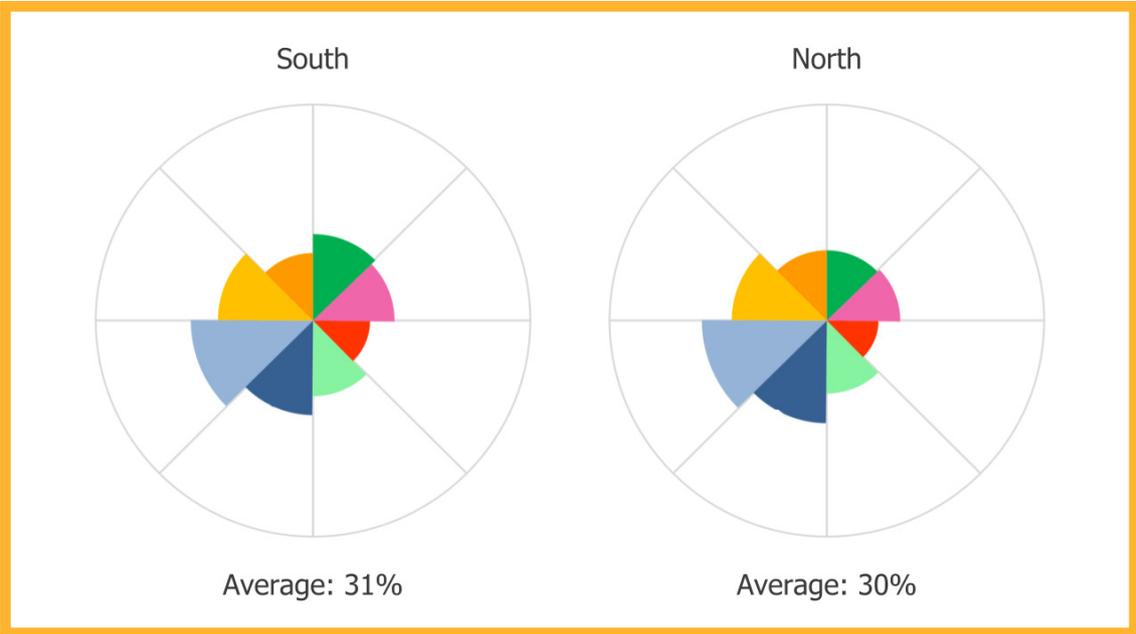
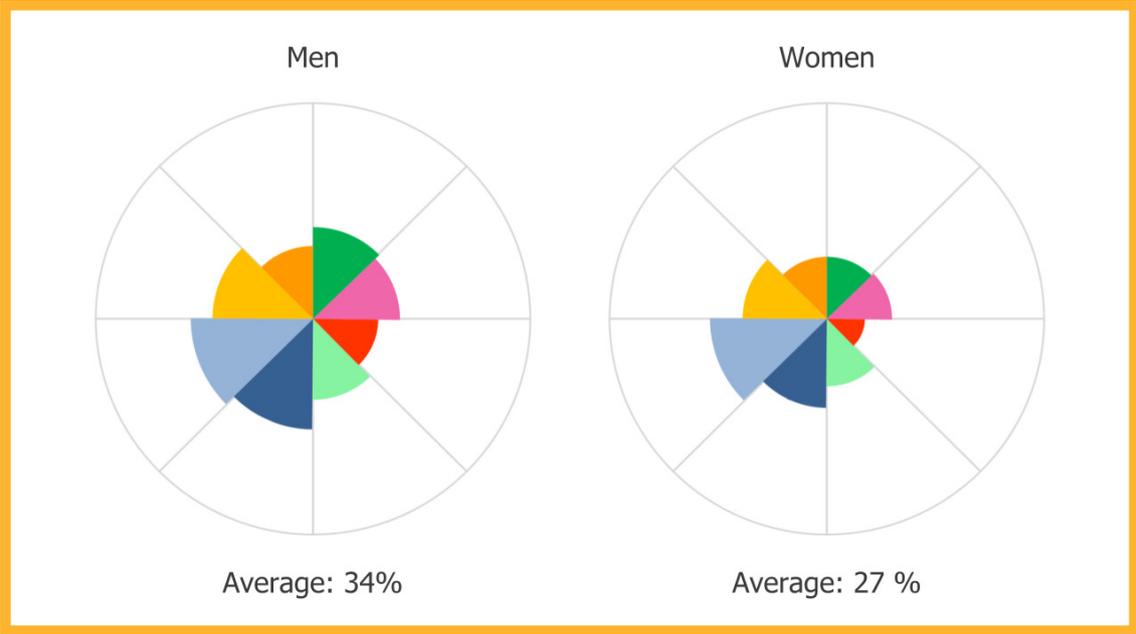
The data from our survey can be analysed demographically, with breakdowns possible across age, gender, region, income and voting pattern. But the most striking fact is that, regardless of the demographic breakdown we choose, we find groups have a remarkably similar view of which areas of our lives merit optimism. With a few exceptions - the oldest demographic was not optimistic about their health in the long term, for example - the domains achieved similar scores across all demographic categories. We really do have more in common than divides us.

Across the population, the most optimistic reading of all was for health, with career and living standards close behind. Optimism about the impact of technology was surprisingly strong, and 43% of people were positive about the prospects of young people - at least in their area.

Compare the "wheels of optimism" on the next page which span demographic categories we might usually expect to have strong differences of opinion.

The table below sets out the broad findings - consistent across the demographics - on levels of optimism across our eight domains.

	Short term	Long term
Health	55%	53%
Living standards	52%	53%
The impact of technology in the workplace	50%	48%
The impact of technology on us as consumers	48%	52%
Prospects for the younger generation	43%	47%
Career	39%	40%
Prospects for the older generation	35%	34%
Political division	32%	32%



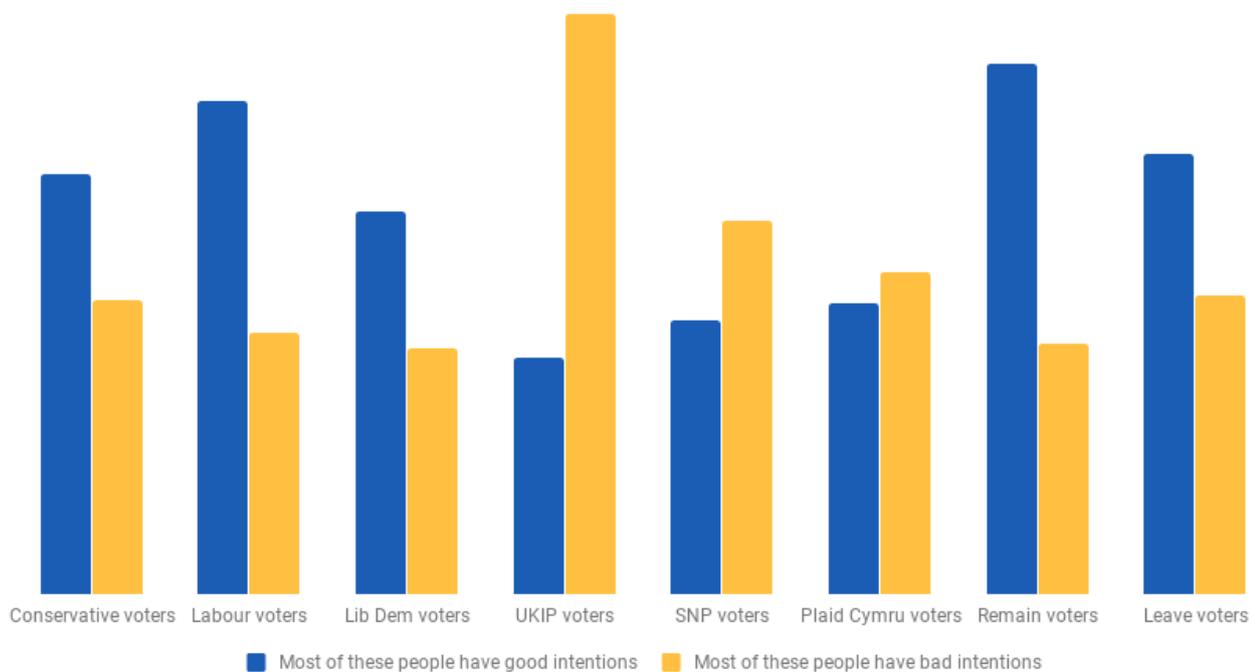
### 2.3 POLITICAL DIVISION IS STOKING NATIONAL GLOOM

The clear laggard across every demographic group was optimism about levels of political disagreement in our country. Just 25% were optimistic about this issue. Of course, political division has huge merit: an open society is one in which ideas and ideologies are challenged and changed. Citizens have often complained that all the parties are the same; while this is perhaps ideologically less true than it has been in a generation, public discontent with the political classes remains embedded.

Our polarised, oppositional age does not reflect the wishes of the voters. The majority of UK adults (76%) want to see politicians of different parties collaborating more to solve the issues the UK faces, with Lib Dem voters (89%) desiring this the most out of all the different party voters.

People recognise that it isn't easy to change your mind. Only 26% of our respondents admitted they had changed their mind about an issue on which they had a strong opinion, after an argument or debate with someone who held a different opinion. Many people in our pop up community told us they'd had to stop arguing with members of their family, or close friends, in particular about Brexit, for the sake of family harmony. They wished politicians would do the same.

Generally, people have a broadly good or neutral opinion of those who disagree with them politically. The public are more likely to think that people who vote for a particular party have good motivations than bad motivations for doing so, with the exception of people who vote for UKIP and the SNP. The UK public are most likely to think that people who vote for Labour have good motivations for voting this way (28%). The table below shows the public's thoughts on the people who vote for a particular party and on those who voted remain or leave in the European referendum:



Source: Opinium

Even on the most divisive issue of our time, Brexit, voters on both sides frequently gave the others credit for good motivations.

In our pop-up community, the same sentiments were voiced. Respondents told us it is important to listen to other's views and that it helps them inform their own opinions. However for this to work the debates must be healthy and respectful where the individuals acknowledge each other's views but don't try to force their opinion on the other and subsequently find it easy to agree or disagree at the end. When people become nasty, force their opinions on others or are racist or homophobic participants say they find it harder reach an 'agree to disagree' conclusion.

*"Not everyone has to agree with everyone and not everyone has to have the same opinion, the world would be a pretty boring place if everyone thought the same." - SP*

*"Ultimately everyone is entitled to their own opinion and it is vital we listen to each other's views. I believe it is just as vital to challenge views and question people appropriately on their opinions and a debate is healthy." - KE*

*"I voted Remain and my partner voted leave, while I don't agree with her opinion, I respect it. I tried to argue my case to her before the vote and vice versa. It was a healthy debate and in the end we just decided we don't agree." -SD*

*"There have been many instances where I have changed my opinion based on a good argument (not a row) and have accepted that my view was probably wrong." - BC*

But the community was cynical that politicians could match this collaborative, open approach.

*"I don't think these problems are going to be solved by politicians anytime soon because politicians are inclined to exaggerate differences to sure up votes rather than bring people together. They prefer to create a sort of us vs them environment. If anything, they're partially responsible as well as the tv and newspaper media which are kind of owned by an ever-smaller number of people pushing their own perspective." - GC*

## 2.4 OUR GREATEST ASSETS

Across the survey and the pop up community, we explored what people love about their local area, and about Britain today, to help identify the solid ground on which a positive narrative about the future could be built.

When asked to identify the best things about life in this country, our panel were clear in choosing free health-care (64%), followed by heritage (39%) and our free education system (38%).

Our pop up community mentioned similar issues: the most mentioned reasons people enjoy living in the UK are its beautiful green spaces, its history and its diversity. In terms of their local areas, inexpensive costs of living, access to green spaces, good transport links and friendly people were commonly mentioned.

*"I'm an outdoors orientated person so probably the favourite thing about my country and the local area would be the natural landscapes, I like the variation across the UK from hills, mountains, the differences in coastlines, national parks and just the difference between rural Wales for example and the greenery of Kent where I live." - GR*

*"I love the diversity of the country and not just the past traditions we have but the traditions the ethnic minorities and people who are migrating are bringing with them but also the traditions in different areas of the UK. People in one place chase cheese down a hill, other areas they go snorkelling. It's very diverse in that respect." - JH*

*"I think it's quite friendly, it's fun, I think people here are very down to earth and accepting. You can go anywhere and feel fairly safe." - LN*

*"I love the culture of politeness and just simple things like the general simple niceties people go to the effort of making." - JT*

In our survey, our open questions told a fascinating story about the future - and the opportunities or changes that inspire most hope and enthusiasm. Many people had invested a huge amount of hope in a new start for Britain after Brexit: this was the most common issue cited by our respondents in the survey, though it came behind "nothing". Brexit was mentioned as a source of optimism in our pop-up community, too. This should give pause to politicians on both sides of the argument: those who are delivering Brexit have a huge weight of expectation on their shoulders, while those opposed need urgently to answer the question of how to offer an alternative source of hope.

Technological advancement was also something that many were excited about, as well as the younger generation. The monarchy - including the prospect of King William - was often cited as a source of hope and national identity.

*"There is an element of the old guard to this country - and world - which is now on the way out for good, and I do think that in general, our world will be in safe hands with a much more socially aware set of young adults voting over the next decade." - Anon*

The participants in our pop up community told us they feel most connected as a nation during times of tragedy when everyone bands together to help and support one another. However, they also feel connected during national events such as the Olympics, the world cup, royal events such as weddings, concerts and Andy Murray winning Wimbledon. Other people felt connected as a nation simply by talking to others when out and about, having shared interests and being kind to one another.

*"National sporting events tend to bring people together (until we lose!)."*

*"I feel most connected with strangers whenever I happen to meet and bond with strangers. For example recently when I joined the local choir or when I helped people out of snow drifts during the recent cold weather."*

*"When there was the Manchester bombing last year, it really showed the spirit of the city, everyone came together to help and it didn't matter your background or upbringing, everyone was involved and supportive."*

Not all is well, of course.

Many people identified leaving the European Union as a source of huge fear; others mentioned their concerns about the future of the economy, the future of the NHS, terrorism and immigration. The growing population and the effects this could have was also another commonly cited worry.

In our pop-up community, people expressed real concern about the future funding of our NHS; there was a strong sense that this - our national treasure - was under threat and that this jeopardised not just healthcare but something meaningful about the country as a whole.

*"At some stage in the next couple of years we need to decide how we're going to pay for the NHS. Me personally I think everyone should pay a bit more tax...my partner's mum had terminal cancer and I've seen the problems in the NHS; lack of funding in certain areas, the staff that are over stretched, they're doing a really good job in some poor conditions at times." - SD*

### 3. BUILDING AN AGE OF RELATIONSHIPS

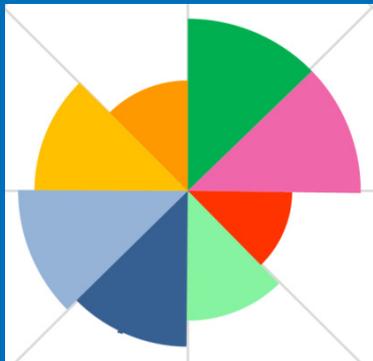
At the outset of this research, we asked the question: what would it take to restore a sense of national optimism, to equip Britain to face the challenges of the age. This research gives us some clear directions that will help us establish that new narrative of positive change. A programme for national renewal must:

- Be rooted in the personal and local: without connection and relationships within and between communities, we cannot rebuild our shared sense of purpose and optimism. This means starting where people are: the strongest feelings of hope for the future are those attached to family and community. If we strengthen those connections and increase the times and places where communities come together collaboratively, we can bring to an end the age of outrage - replacing it with an age of relationships.
- Be relentlessly ambitious about investment in the services that give people faith in Britain: to feel upbeat about our national journey, people need to see the services they care about thriving. Investment in our NHS pays a double dividend: delivering not just better health and wellbeing, but a sense of honour and identity about Britain and what we stand for.
- Stretch beyond "red book" issues to those that speak to identity and pride: the era of fiscal consolidation since 2008 has led to an extraordinary focus by politicians on policies of tax, spend and benefits. The numbers matter: the money a family has to spend has a huge impact on their living standards, and financial matters will always be at the core of a government's agenda. But national optimism has its roots in ideas and identity signifiers that go far beyond cash. Our research should encourage politicians and policy makers of all kinds to think creatively about initiatives that build communities, increase our access to public space, celebrate our culture and heritage, and bring the nation together in common purpose.

Our research also sends a message to our political leaders that collaboration and dialogue are essential. The oppositional, winner-takes-all approach that so many have adopted in recent years is not just destroying citizens' faith in our government. It is actively undermining our ability to come together as a nation in the face of unprecedented change. Name-calling, division and abuse should have no place in our political discourse.

Blind optimism will not resolve the challenges ahead of us. But despair and outrage are self-perpetuating. We need to make a deliberate decision to change our tone of voice, and direct ourselves in a spirit of hope and collaboration to the most difficult conversations.

In 2018 and beyond, Demos will take a leading role in bringing partners together from across the political spectrum, in dialogue with our citizens and with civil society. As part of our ongoing mission, we will develop a cohesive policy agenda for building an age of relationships and optimism in Britain today.



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