

## **Perspectives on Place: what the English think about their local area**

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Over the past decade, geographical divides in our electoral politics – arguably expressed most notably and consequentially in the Brexit vote in 2016 – have encouraged a focus on place by British politicians and government, especially in the context of England (alongside the politics of the devolved nations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Researchers have noted the ‘geography of discontent’ in the British context (Quilter-Pinner et al. 2021), argued for place-based policymaking (Jennings et al. 2018) and begun to explore public attitudes to place and ‘levelling up’ in England (Hall et al. 2022). The politics of levelling-up was itself contentious and awash with contradiction (Jennings et al. 2021), but it did reflect a political recognition by the Johnson government that many people *felt* they and their area had been overlooked by Westminster. Under the Starmer government there has been a renewal of focus on regional inequalities and community-led regeneration, notably through the *Pride in Place* programme but also via initiatives such as the *Town of Culture* competition.

This briefing summarises findings from a survey conducted by YouGov in England in September 2025 which sought to measure and track how people view their local area (relative to other areas and the past) and understand the connection between those perceptions of place (and place-based attitudes towards government and politics) and material conditions – measured across a range of domains (e.g. crime, high streets, housing, health). The survey interviewed 2,610 adults online in England between 18 and 19 September 2025. It also asked about what people thought the most important issue was locally, what specific improvement(s) might make places better, prioritisation between growing the economy as a whole vs improving ‘left behind’ areas, and support for a range of proposals to tackle policy issues (such as on transport, high streets, education and skills). The survey included a number of items that previously had been fielded in surveys by UK in a Changing Europe (with KCL) and the Centre for the South at the University of Southampton in 2022 and 2024 respectively.<sup>1</sup> This enables us to determine how perceptions of place have changed over the past three years, and in particular since Labour took office in July 2024.

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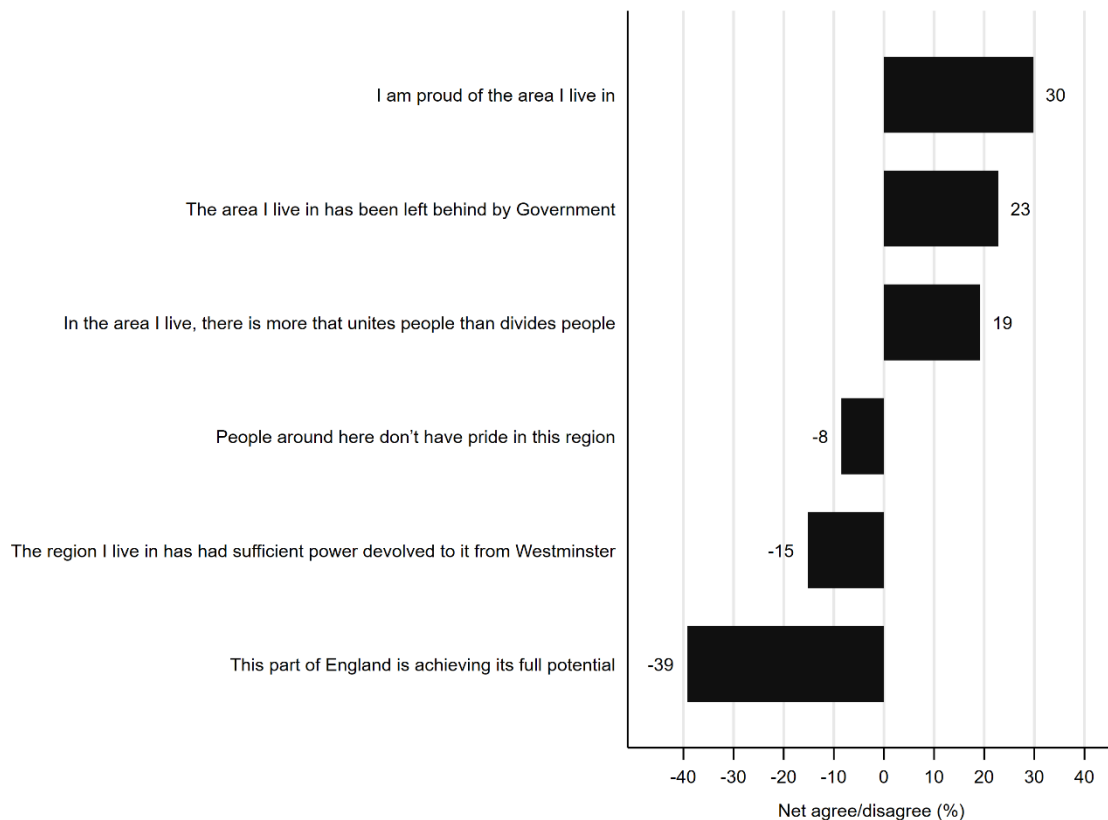
<sup>1</sup> Both surveys were conducted by YouGov. The survey for UK in a Changing Europe interviewed 20,835 adults in England between 19 April and 1 May 2022. The survey for the Centre for the South interviewed 1,645 adults in England between 19 and 22 February 2024.

Our data also enables us to link respondents to contextual data at constituency or local authority level (e.g. English Indices of Deprivation), such as on crime, health, housing or employment outcomes, so that we can determine if people’s perceptions of their area correspond to objective measures of conditions or outcomes.

### Pride in place?

We first asked people a series of questions about their feelings toward the area they live (and whether it has been left behind by government). Figure 1 plots the net agreement (percent agree minus disagree) with a series of statements. There is net agreement (+30) that people individually are proud of the area they live, and also agreement that there is more that unites than divides people (+19), but also a widespread view among the English public that their area has been left behind by government (+23) and disagreement that enough power has been devolved to it from Westminster (-15). There is also a deep sense of unfulfillment, with a large number of people disagreeing with statement that ‘this part of England is achieving its full potential’ (-39).

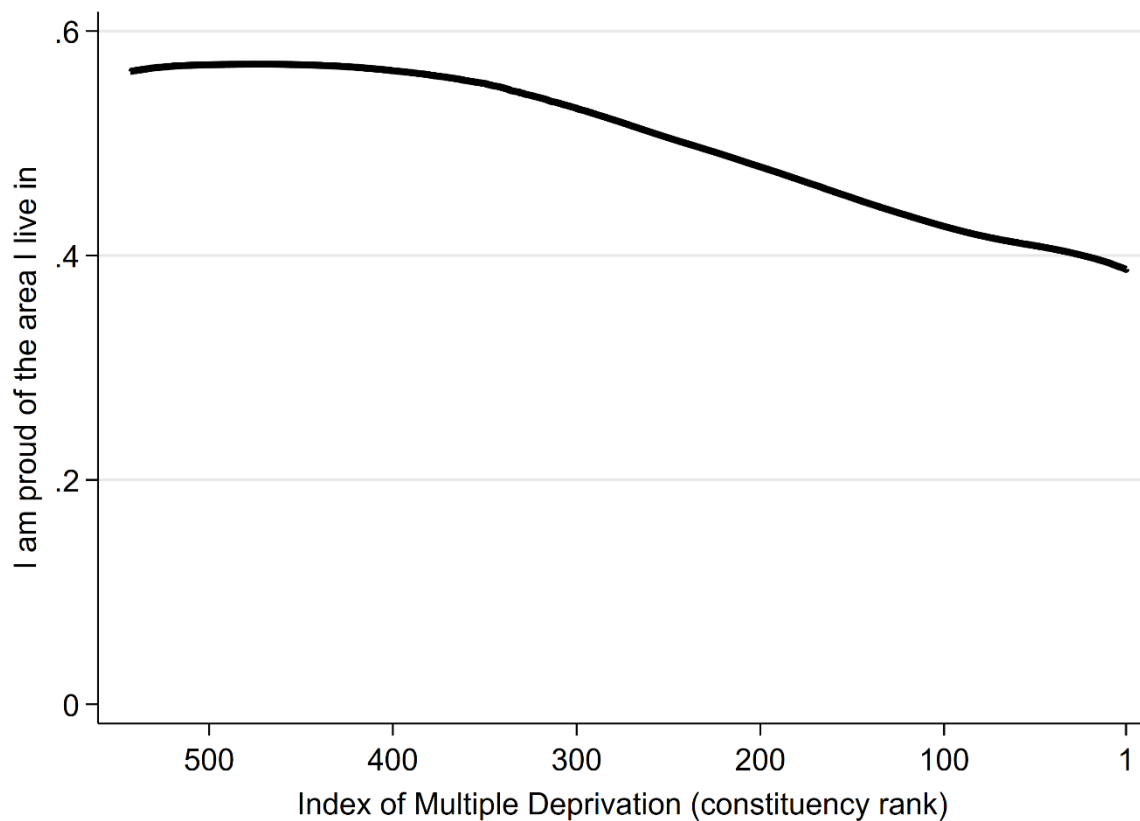
**Figure 1.** Net agreement with statements relating to place



How do these place-based perceptions reflect the local context of where people actually live?

Figure 2 plots the relationship between the proportion of people saying they are proud of their local area against the ranking of their constituency on the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (where 1 is the most deprived English constituency, Blackpool South, and 543 is the least deprived, Wokingham).<sup>2</sup> This shows clearly that people tend to be more likely to express pride in their local area in more affluent areas. There is seemingly a material basis to local pride. The difference between the least and most deprived English constituency is a little over 0.15 as a probability of expressing pride in the area. Note that these plots do not account for the sorts of people from our survey sample in each constituency (obviously, it would be anticipated that there are some compositional differences that reflect demographic variation between places).

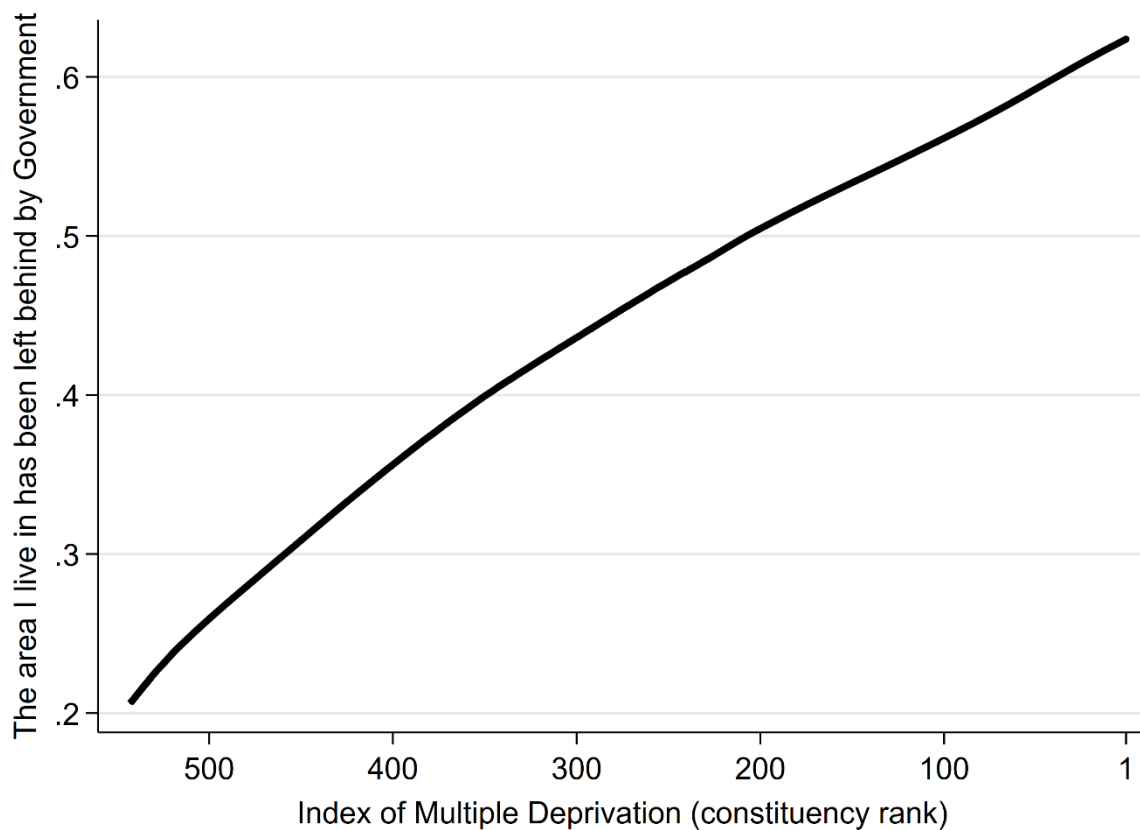
**Figure 2.** Proud of local area vs Index of Multiple Deprivation (parliamentary constituency rank)



<sup>2</sup> The line-of-best-fit is calculated with 'lowess' (locally weighed scatterplot smoothing), with a bandwidth of 0.8.

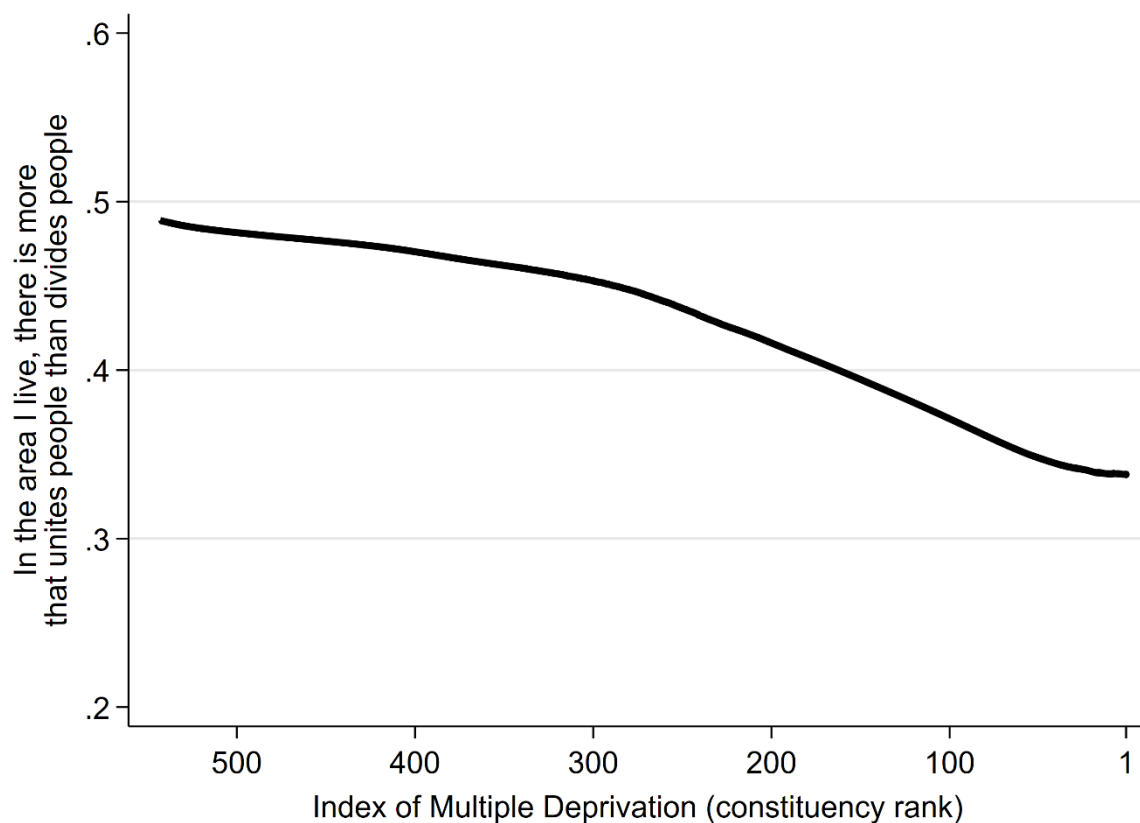
There is an even starker relationship between perception that an area has been 'left behind' by government and the Index of Multiple Deprivation, shown in Figure 3. The likelihood of believing that your area has been 'left behind' is over 0.6 in the most deprived constituency, compared with around 0.2 in the least deprived constituency.

**Figure 3.** Feel area left behind vs Index of Multiple Deprivation (parliamentary constituency rank)



Finally from this set of items, Figure 4 shows there is a negative relationship between levels of deprivation and perception that there is more that unites than divides people in an area. In the least deprived parliamentary constituency, the probability of respondents saying there is more that unites than divides people in their area is about 0.5, whereas this is around 0.35 in the most deprived constituency.

**Figure 4.** More that unites people vs Index of Multiple Deprivation (parliamentary constituency rank)

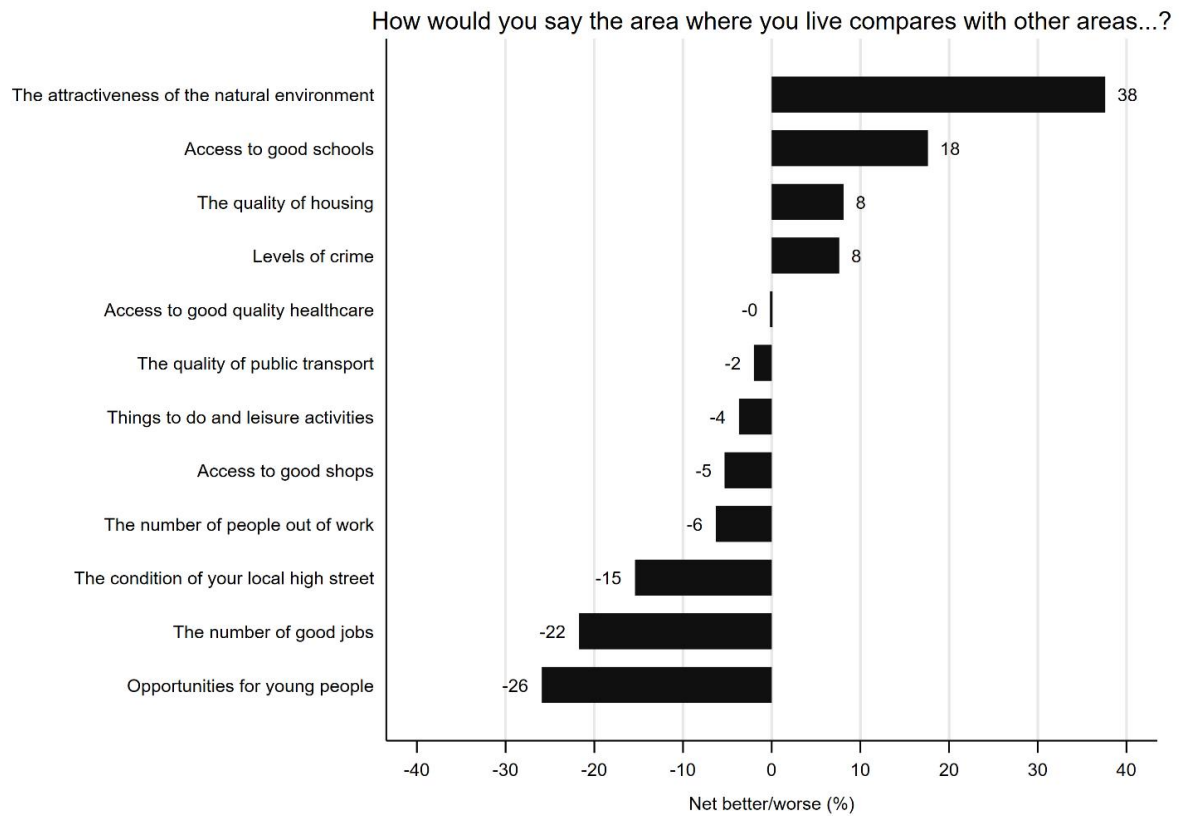


#### How areas compare

We next turn to consider how people view their own area compared to others across a number of social, economic and environmental dimensions – such as access to schools and healthcare, quality of public transport, and so on. Specifically, respondents to our survey were asked whether their area was better than nearly all other areas, better than most other areas, about average, worse than most other areas, or worse than nearly all other areas. Figure 5 plots the net measure for each item (the percent of people saying their area is better than other areas minus the percent of people saying their area is worse than other areas). These findings are especially interesting when keeping in mind that, *in theory at least*, the net measure should approximate to zero (as their should be as many areas below average as areas above it). People tend to view their own area most positively in relation to attractiveness of the natural environment (+38), access to good schools (+18), the quality of housing (+8) and levels of crime (+8). In the latter case this could be because people have (on average) relatively little direct experience of crime in their day-to-day lives but are aware of it as a wider (national problem). People tend to view their own area most negatively with respect to opportunities for young people (-26), the number of good jobs (-22),

and the conditional of their local high street (-15). This again seemingly highlights the material base to how people view their local area.

**Figure 5.** How own area compares to other areas across a range of dimensions

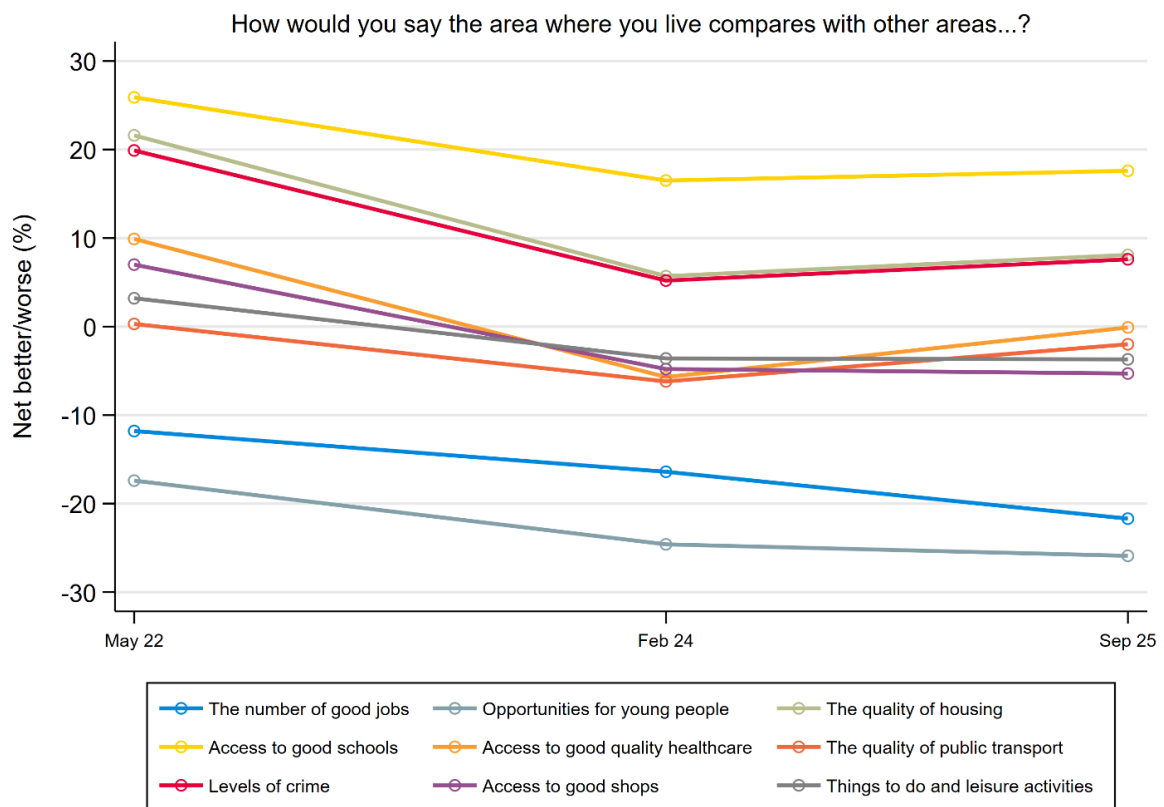


Because we fielded an identical question in surveys conducted by YouGov in 2022 and 2024 (or rather had the foresight to repeat the same question in our most recent survey), it is possible to see how perceptions of place have changed over time. Specifically, we can track how people viewed their areas compared to others in **April/May 2022** and **February 2024**, when the Conservatives were in government (under Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak respectively), and in **September 2025** when Labour had been in government for a little over a year. Figure 6 plots the net perception of whether people consider their area to be better or worse than other areas across most of the measures discussed above.<sup>3</sup> This reveals a similar ordering of the dimensions on which people tend to think their area compares better than others. Perhaps most notable is the substantial drop (on average around 10 points) between April/May 2022 and

<sup>3</sup> 'The attractiveness of the natural environment' and 'The condition of your local high street' were not included in the April/May 2022 survey, and 'The number of people out of work' was not included in the April/May 2022 or February 2024 survey.

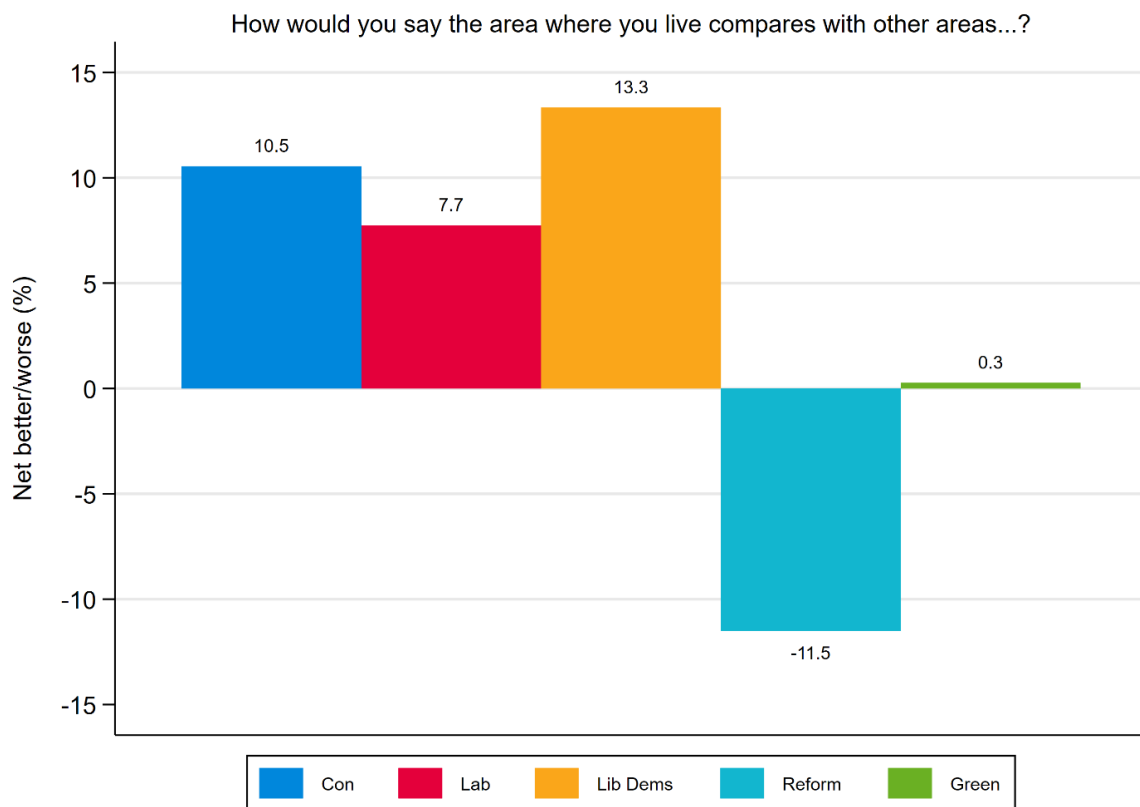
February 2024 under the Conservatives, and slight evidence of a rebound between February 2024 and September 2025 since Labour took office. One might speculate about the reasons for this decline in how people view their area (for example it could have been a function of the rising cost of living or related to wider public dissatisfaction about public services), but crucially it is clear that a significant deterioration in perceptions of place occurred *before* Labour took power in July 2024.

**Figure 6.** How own area compares with other areas across a range of dimensions, 2022-2025



As a further extension of this analysis, in Figure 7 we plot the average response across these measures for supporters of each party (captured by Westminster voting intentions) in **September 2025**. Here we see that Reform UK supporters are, by some distance, the most negative about their local area while Liberal Democrat supporters tend to be most likely to consider their area as being better than other areas. This seems intuitive given that Liberal Democrat support tends to be higher among more affluent groups (Ford et al. 2025), whereas Reform tends to do better among low-income groups in more deprived areas. Regardless of compositional drivers, this partisan divide in place-based perceptions is noteworthy: those currently backing Reform tend to view their own area as doing worse than other places.

**Figure 7.** How own area compares with other areas, average all dimensions, by voting intention, 2025

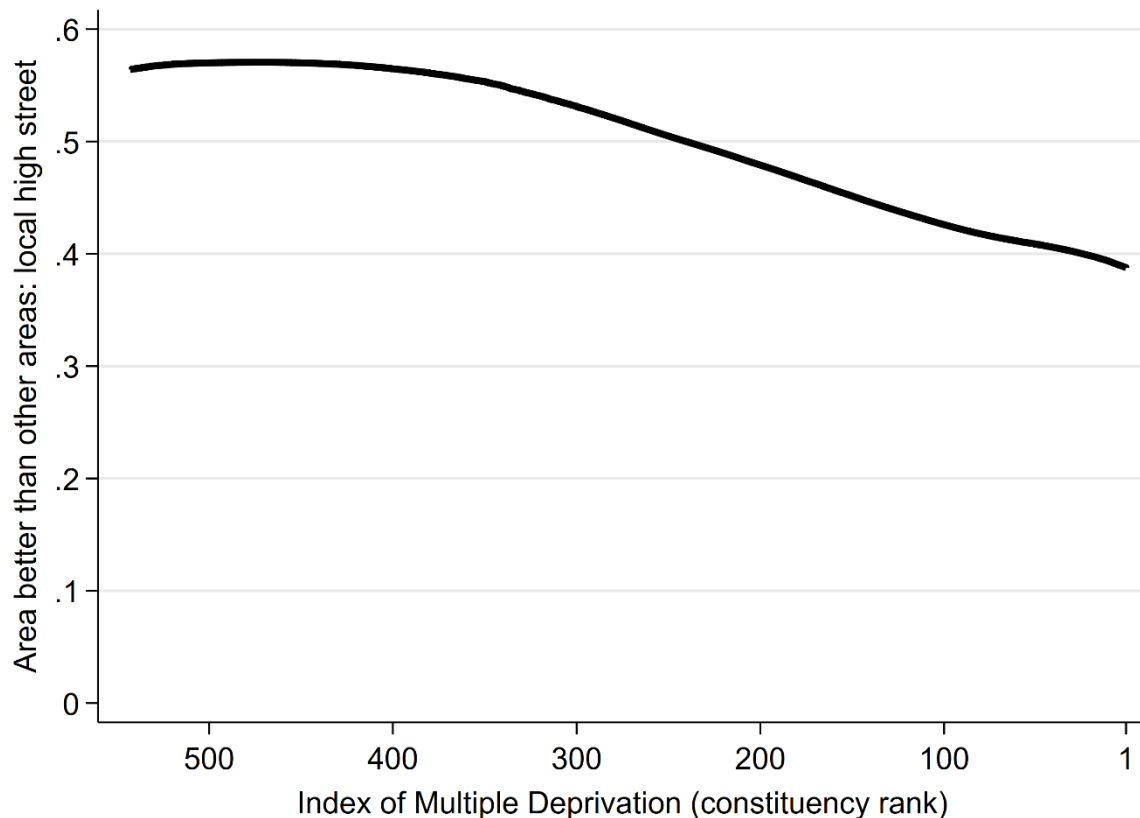


To what extent do these assessments of whether one’s area is doing better/worse reflect material differences between places? In Figures 8 to 13, we plot the proportion of people saying their own area is doing better than other areas on a range of dimensions (local high streets, crime, schools, healthcare and good jobs) vs measures for each of these dimensions at the level of parliamentary constituencies taken from the English Indices of Deprivation (House of Commons Library 2025). For this study, we do not have a good measure for the state of England’s high streets, so in Figure 8 we plot people’s perception of how their area is doing compared to other areas against its overall constituency ranking on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. This shows that the proportion of people saying their area is better than others for their local high street is around 0.55 in the least deprived areas and around 0.4 in the most. For the case of crime, Figure 9 shows that the likelihood of someone saying that their area tends to be better than others for crime is highest (about 0.6) in areas where the constituency rank of personal and material victimisation is lowest and lowest (about 0.1) in those where the rank of victimisation is highest. As such there is a clear correspondence between crime incidence and people’s perception of how their area compares to others on this. We see a similar slope in Figure 10 in the correspondence between

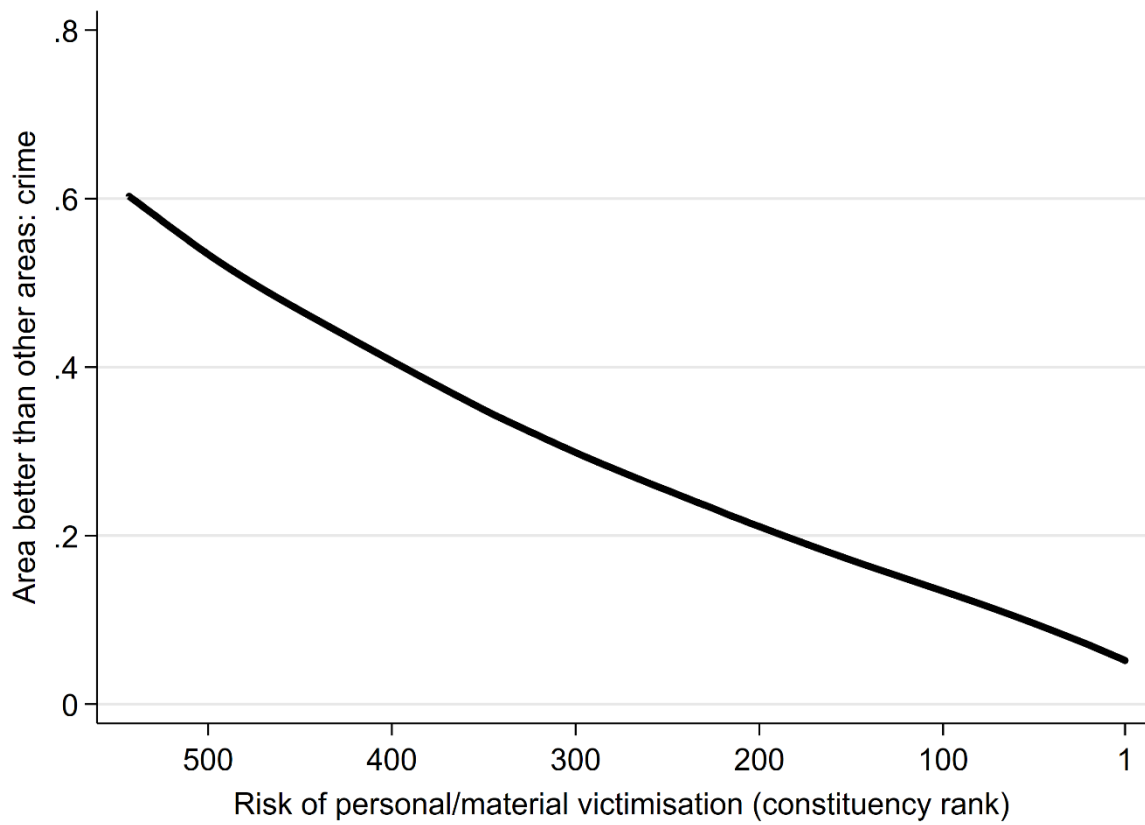
perception of how the local area compares on schools, against the level of attainment/skills in the local population. For perceptions of healthcare in the local area, Figure 11 shows a weaker relationship with the risk of premature death and impairment of quality of life through poor health - but still a fair decrease from about 0.3 probability for the least deprived areas (in health terms) compared to under 0.2 for the most.

In the survey, we also asked people about whether their area housed more asylum seekers compared to other areas. We plot responses to this against data at local authority level in Figure 13. This reveals a strong positive slope, indicating that people are more likely to perceive that their area houses more asylum seekers as the actual number of asylum seekers rises. Similarly, this time using census data at constituency level, Figure 14 shows that people perceive the level of immigration in their local area as higher than others when the share of the local non-UK born population is higher. While immigration is often a polarizing issue, this data suggests that people are able to distinguish whether they live in an area with higher or lower numbers of migrants.

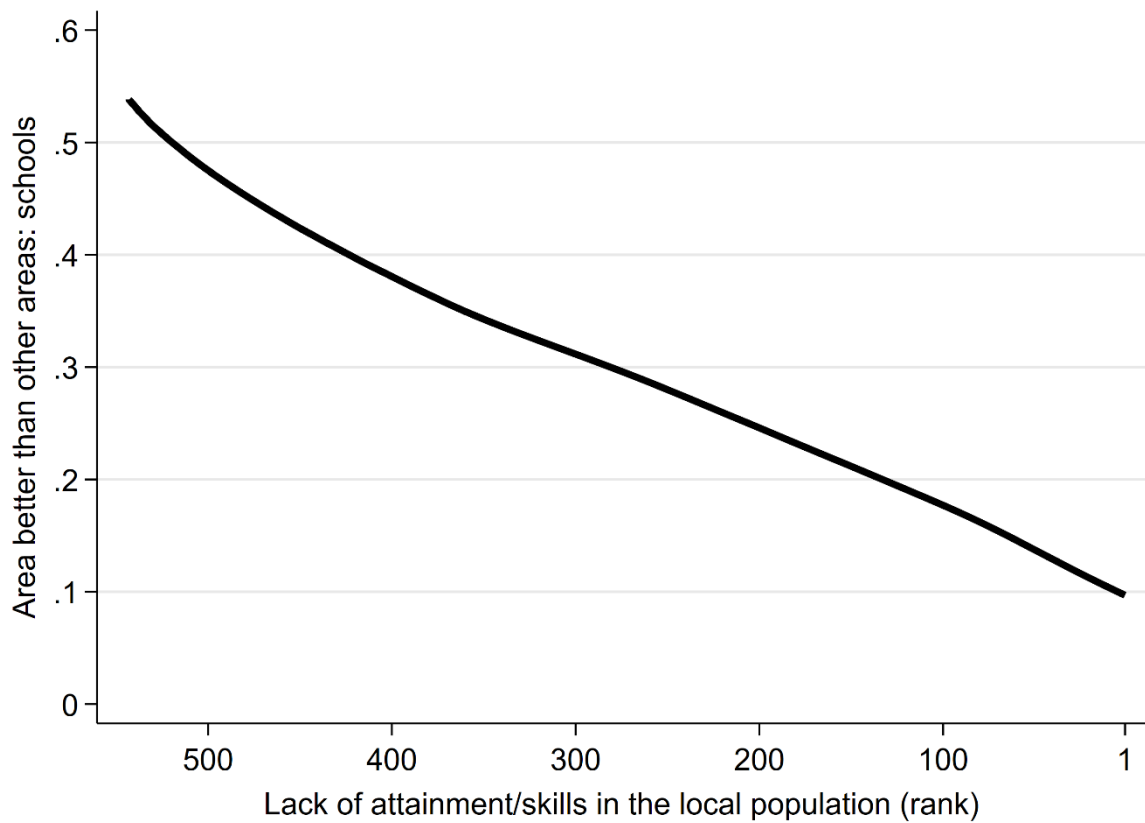
**Figure 8.** Area better than others for local high street vs index of multiple deprivation (constituency rank)



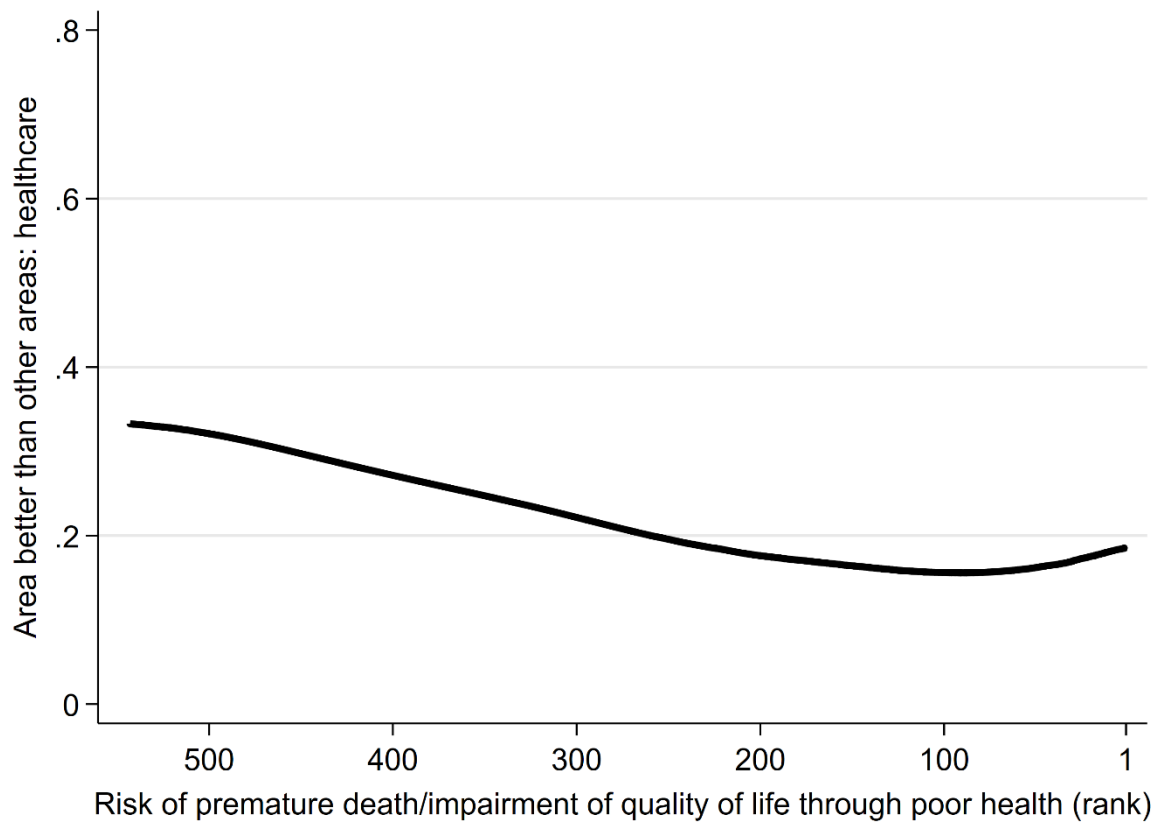
**Figure 9.** Area better than others for crime vs risk of personal/material victimisation (constituency rank)



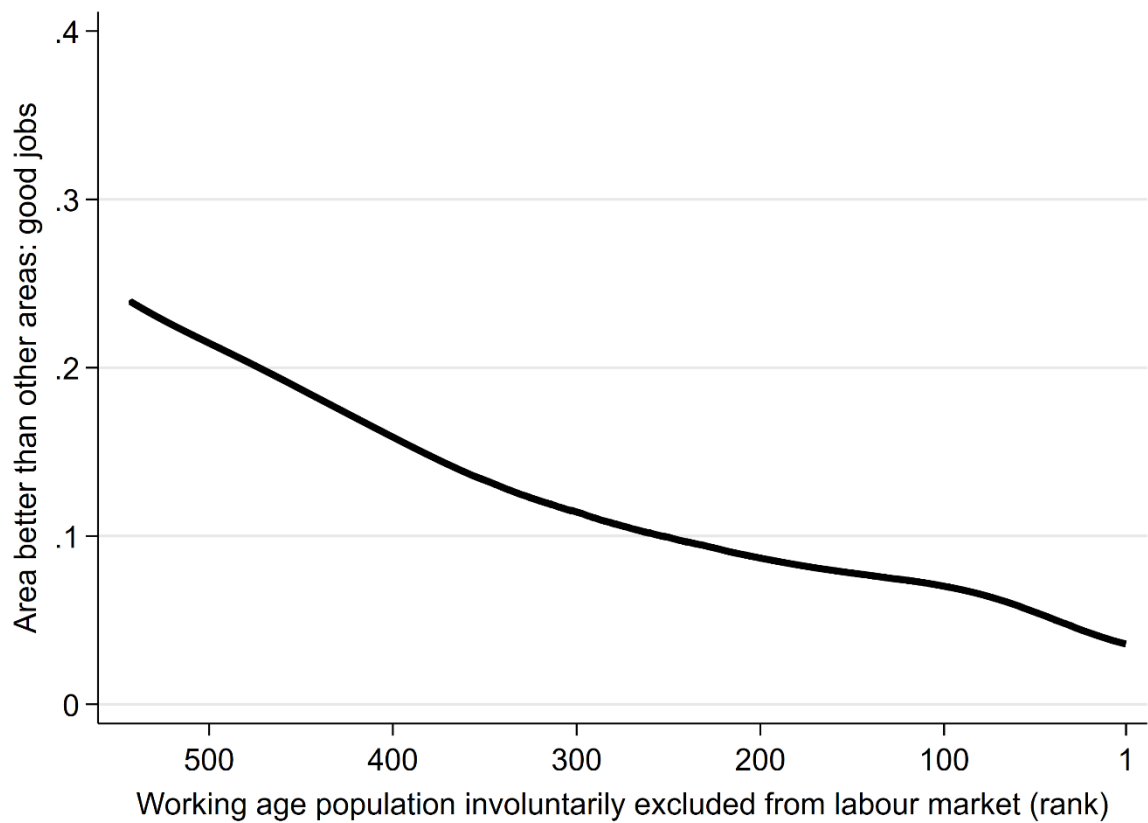
**Figure 10.** Area better than others for schools vs level of attainment/skills (constituency rank)



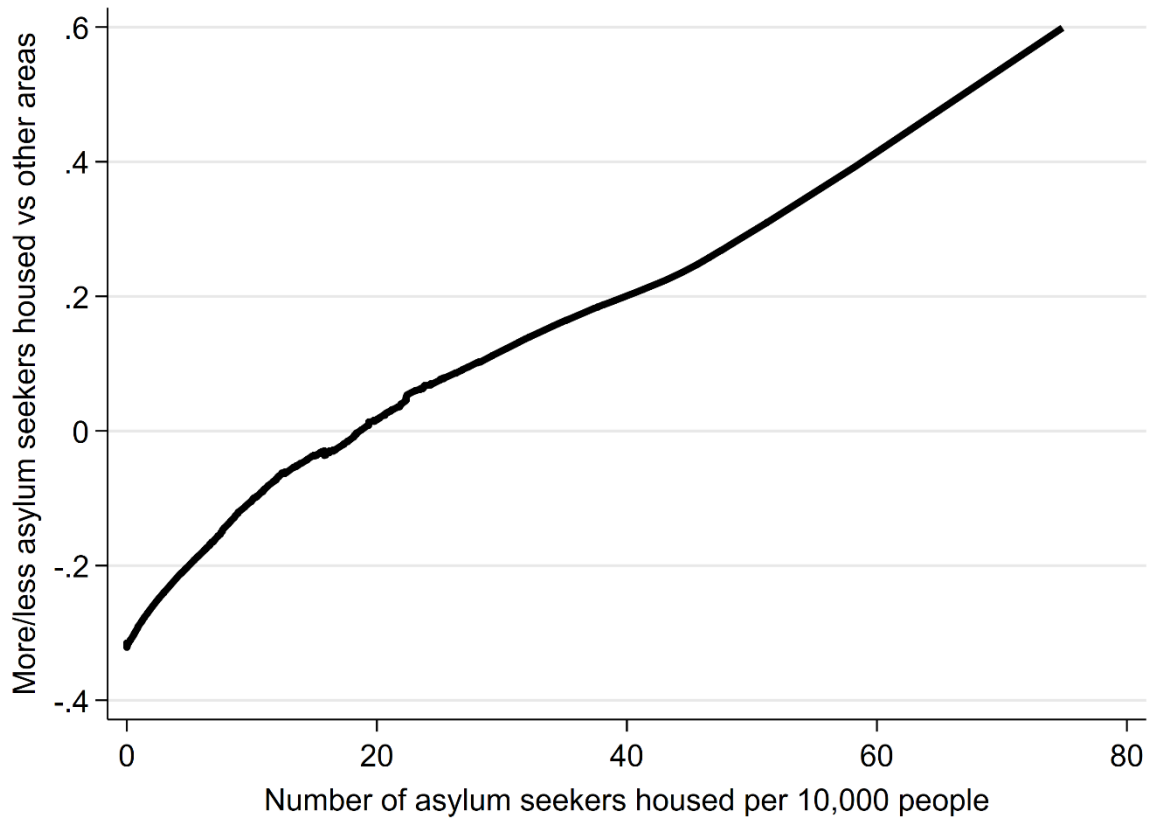
**Figure 11.** Area better than others for health vs risk of premature death/poor health (constituency rank)



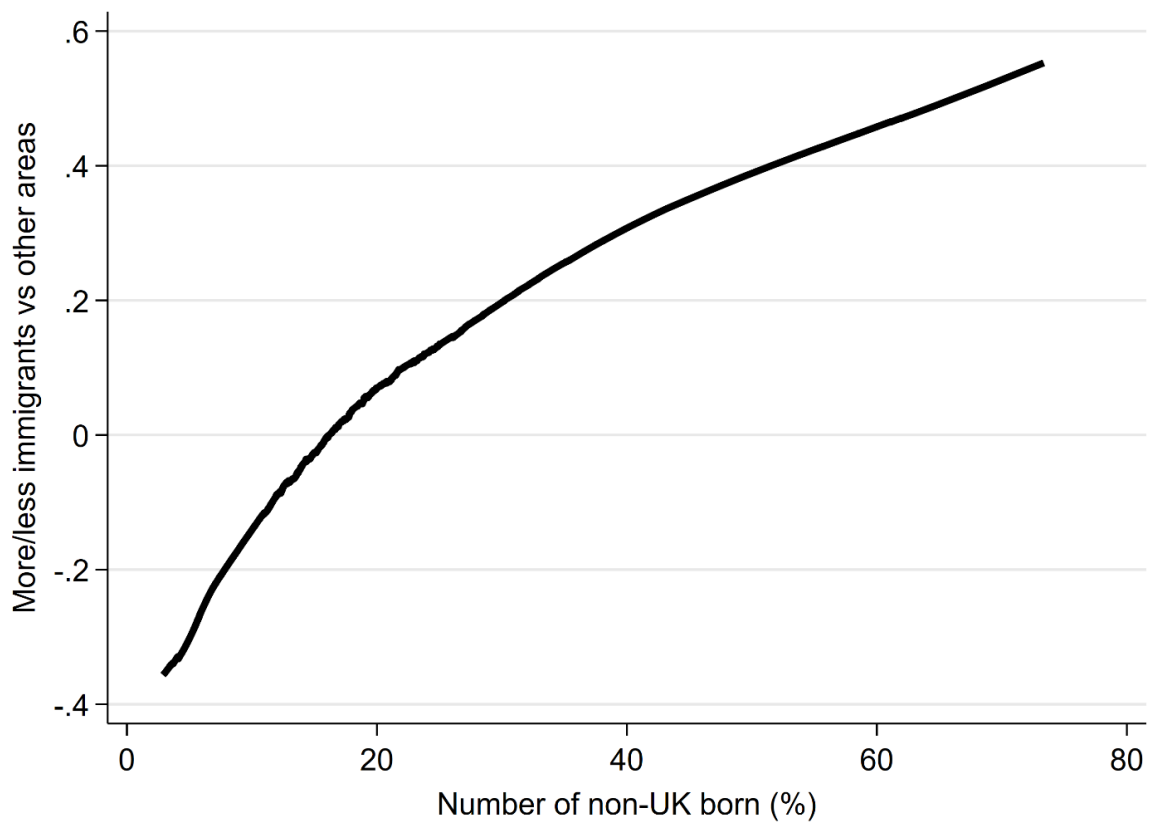
**Figure 12.** Area better than others for good jobs vs English index of deprivation (constituency rank)



**Figure 13.** More asylum seekers housed than other areas vs number of asylum seekers housed



**Figure 14.** More immigration compared to other areas vs. number of non-UK born population



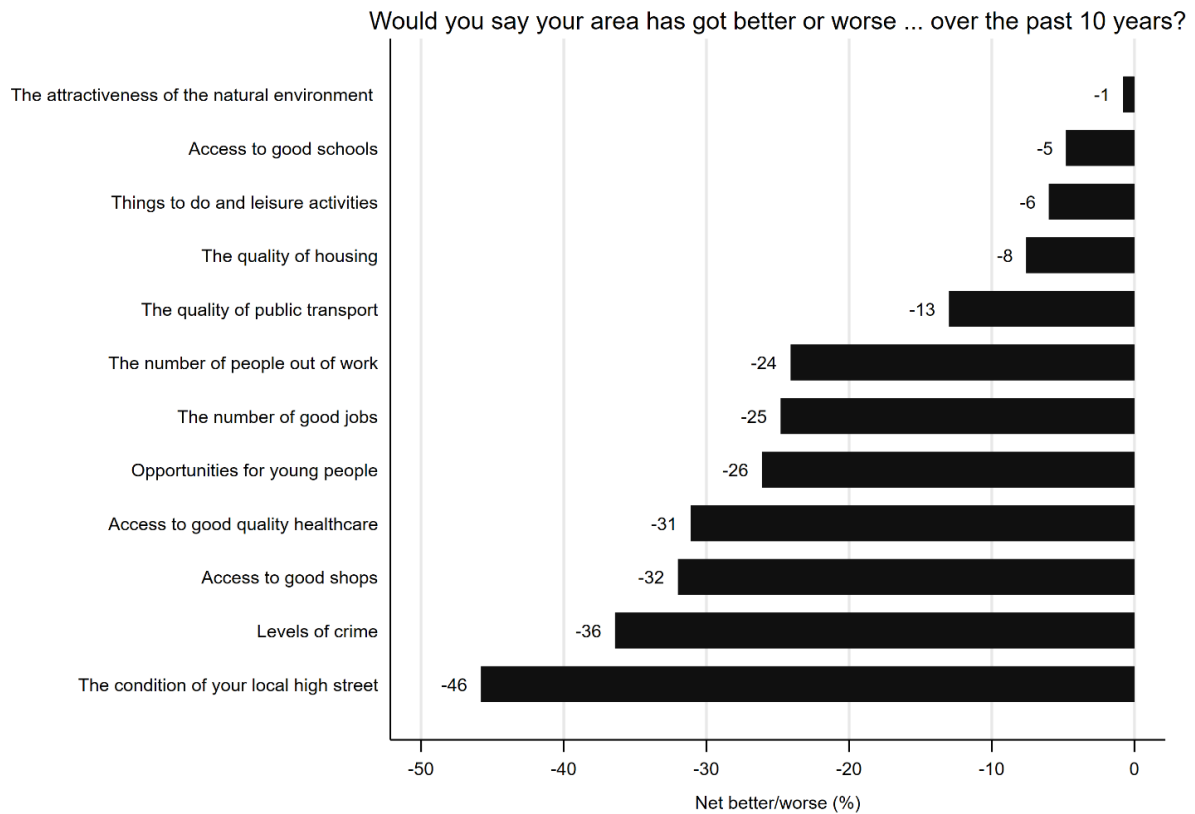
### A sense of decline?

We next turn to how people perceive their area as having changed over time. Our survey asked respondents specifically whether they see their area as having got better or worse over the past ten years across the same dimensions as discussed above. Notably, for every dimension the net score (percent of people saying better minus the percent of people saying worse) is negative. There is no item for which people believe things are better now than a decade ago. The dimensions on which people perceive there has been least deterioration in their local area are the attractiveness of the natural environment (-1), access to good schools (-5), things to do and leisure activities (-6), and the quality of housing (-8). The dimensions on which most decline is perceived are the condition of the local high street (-46), levels of crime (-36), access to good shops (-32), access to good quality healthcare (-31), opportunities for young people (-26), the number of good jobs (-25) and the number of people out of work (-24). There is clearly a sense in which places have become worse off in terms of their economic and physical security.

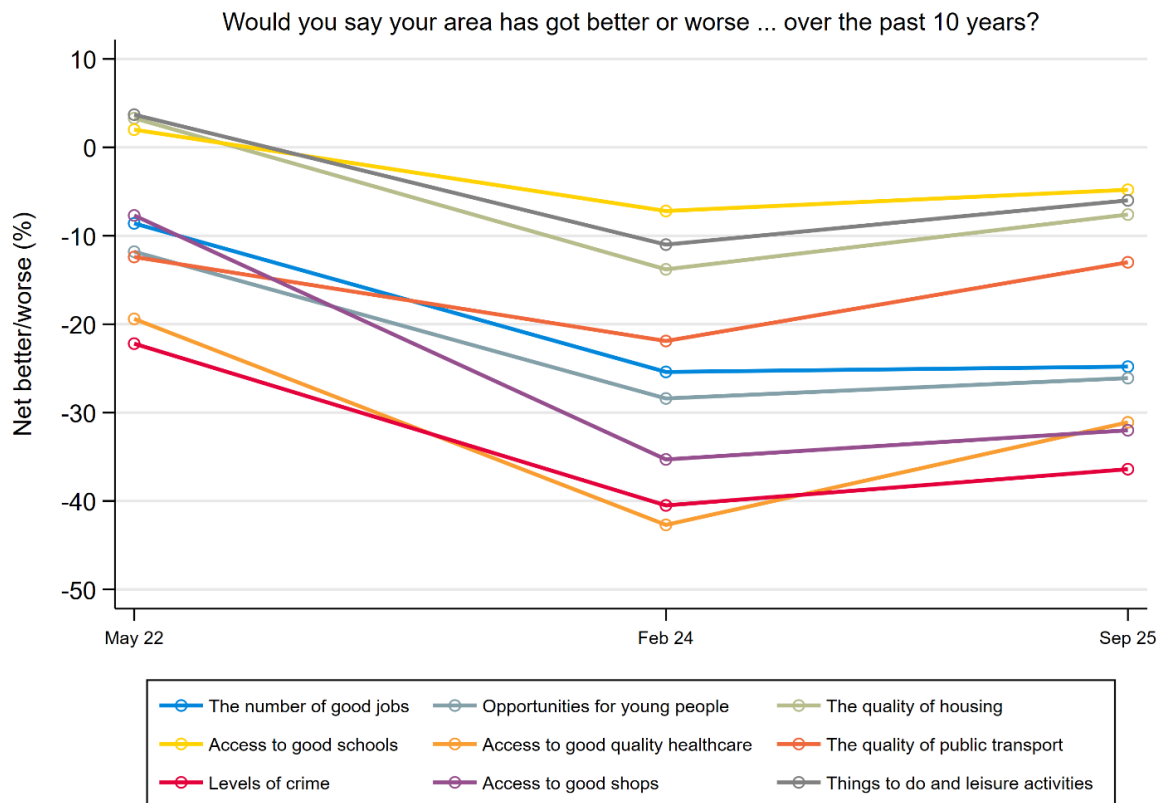
Again because we fielded an identical question in surveys conducted by YouGov in 2022 and 2024 we are able to plot how perceptions of decline have changed in the period from the later period of the Johnson government (in May 2022) to the closing months of the Sunak government (in February 2024) to the Starmer government a little over a year into office (in September 2025). Figure 16 reveals a similar pattern to that we observed for how people view their area compared to others on the same dimensions (see Figure 6): across the board there was a collapse in people's perception that their local area had got worse between May 2022 and February 2024. Some of the net declines during this period of Conservative government exceed 20-points, such as for healthcare (a fall from -19 to -43) and access to good shops (-8 to -35), with crime (-22 to -41) and opportunities for young people (-12 to -28) not far behind. In the period between February 2024 and September 2025, under the Starmer government, there has been a partial rebound for all of these measures – with the largest observed for health care (-43 to -31), public transport (-22 to -13) and housing (-14 to -8), arguably all priorities for Labour in office.

Finally for this measure, we consider the average perception that things have got worse rather than better across all dimensions, by voting intention in 2025. Figure 17 reveals that Reform supporters are most likely to say that their area has declined over the past 10 years (-35), followed by Green backers (-19), Conservative (-18), Lib Dems (-15) and Labour loyalists (-10). A felt sense of decline is shared both by the radical right challenger to the mainstream parties and its eco-populist counterpart on the left.

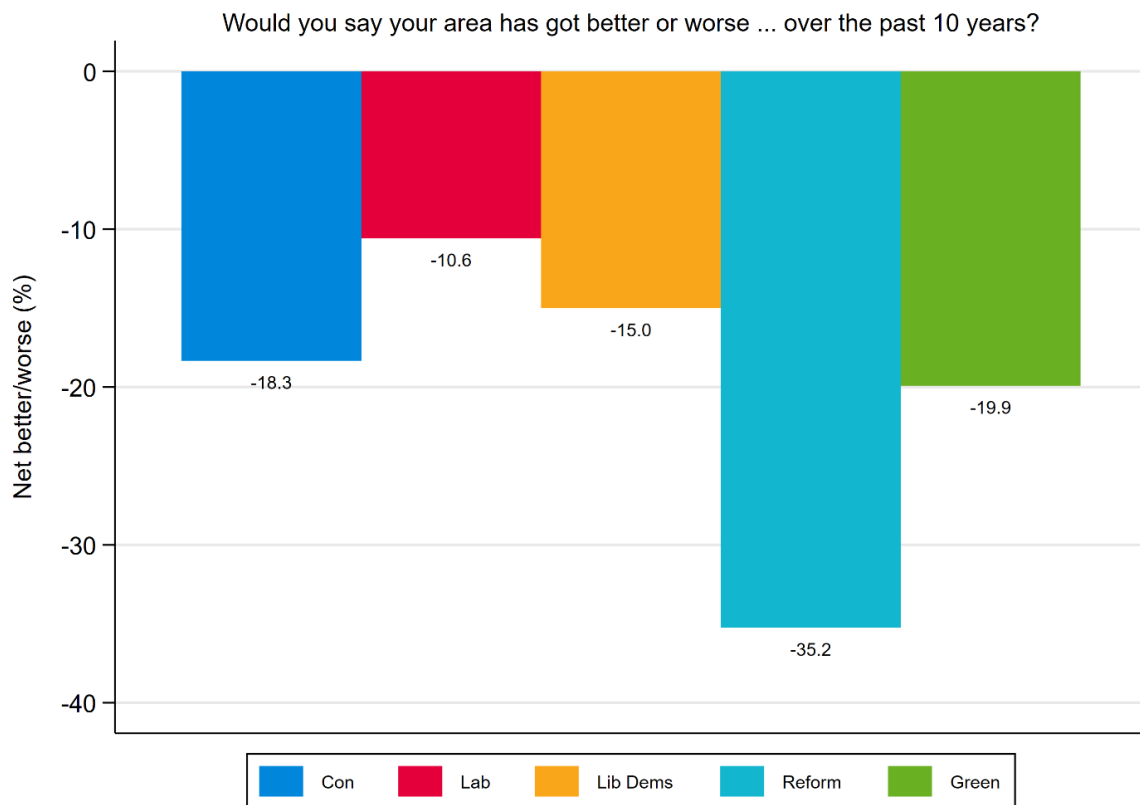
**Figure 15.** Has area got better or worse over past 10 years across a range of dimensions



**Figure 16.** Has area got better or worse over past 10 years across a range of dimensions, 2022-25



**Figure 17.** Has area got better or worse over past 10 years, average all dimensions, by voting intention, 2025

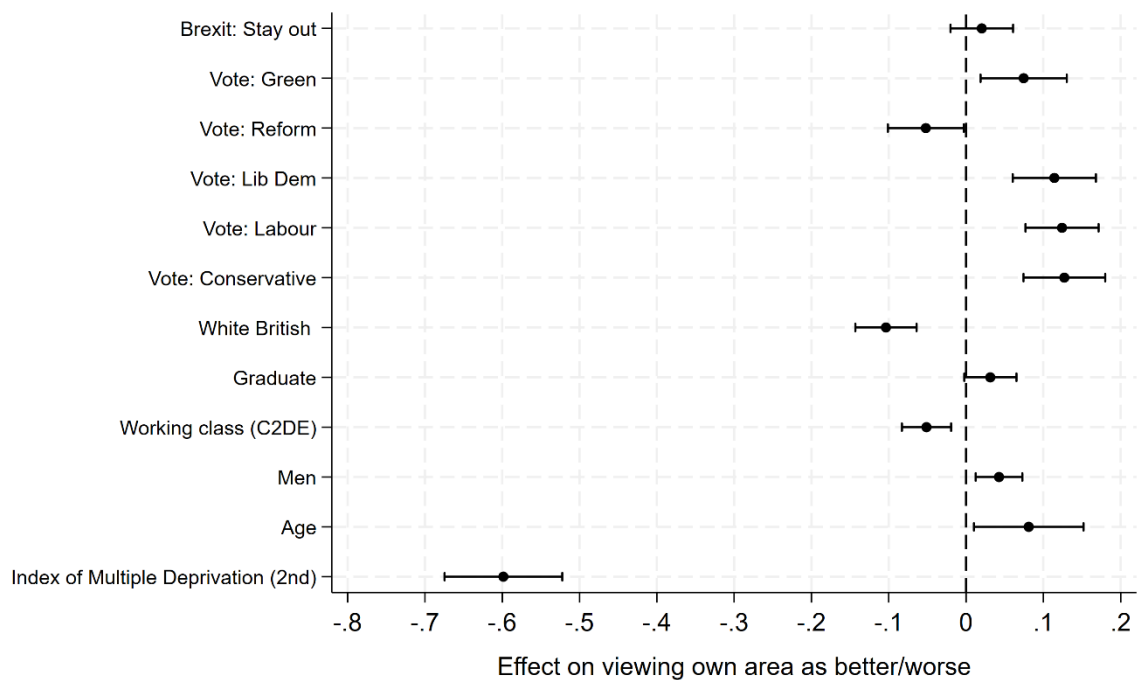


Are party differences due to composition or context?

To what extent are differences between parties a function of composition (due to demographic characteristics of individuals), context (the material conditions of the local area) or political preferences (voting preferences or political outlook)? We use the average measure of viewing one’s area as better or worse compared to other areas (across all dimensions) and estimate a regression with normalised predictors (taking values between 0 and 1) that include measures of context, demographics and political preferences. This allows us to directly compare the *strength* of association between the predictors and perceptions of the local area. For local context, we use the index of multiple deprivation, specifically the percentage of households in a constituency deprived in at least two of the seven core domains (income, employment, education, health, crime, housing, or living environment). For demographics we include gender, age, ethnicity (identifying as white British), social class (‘C2DE’, being working class), and holding a university degree. For political preferences we include current Westminster voting intentions (for Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Reform, and Greens) and current support for Brexit (staying out of the European Union). Figure 18 shows that certain demographic characteristics are associated with

viewing one's area as better off than others – being a man and being older – while others are associated with viewing one's area as worse off – identifying as white British and being working class. Interestingly, while supporting Labour, the Conservatives, Greens and Liberal Democrats is associated as viewing one's area positively, supporting Reform only has a modest (though statistically significant) association with viewing one's area as worse off than others. Notably, an area's level of deprivation has by some distance the strongest association with viewing it as worse off. As such, while there are differences between party supporters, these are dwarfed by the material conditions of local context.

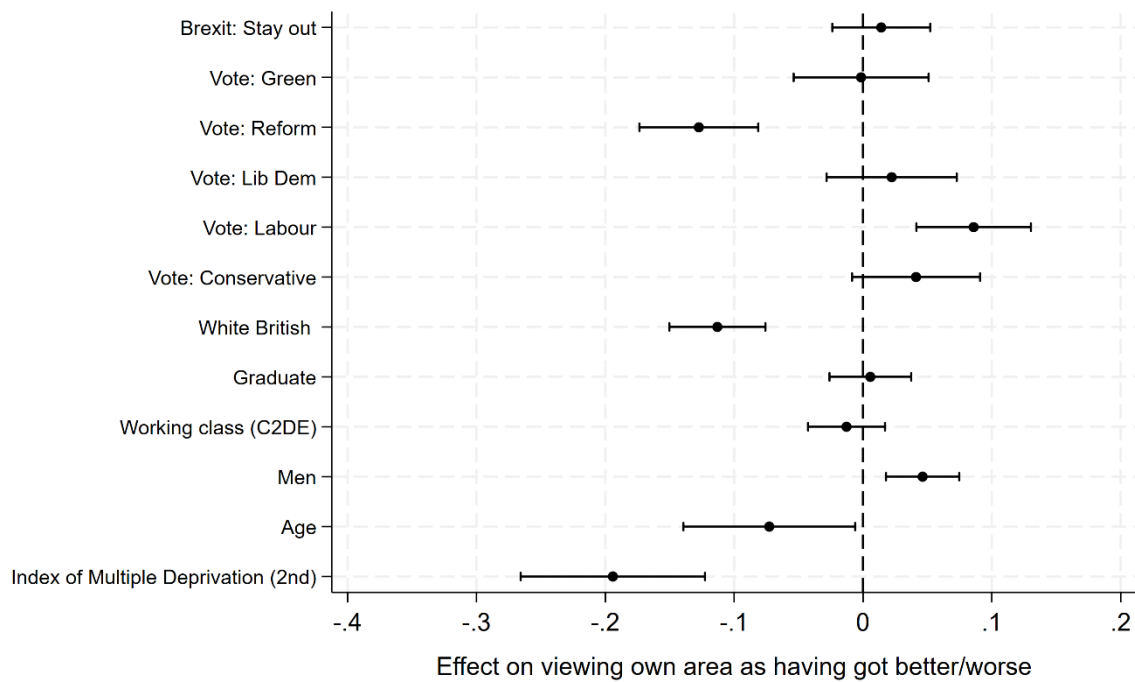
**Figure 18.** Predictors of viewing own area as net better/worse than other areas, average all dimensions, 2025



The findings are slightly different for perceptions that one's area has got better/worse over the past ten years. Those identifying as white British are more likely to see their area as having got worse, while older people are similarly likely to perceive worsening (though with much wider confidence intervals). Men in contrast are more likely to perceive their area as having got better. This is also the case for Labour supporters, but interestingly not the case for Liberal Democrats, Greens or Conservatives (as was the case for viewing one's area as doing better than others currently). There is, however, a stronger association for Reform supporters who are more likely to view things as having got worse in their area. While living in a deprived area is again the strongest predictor, the gap with other predictors is not as substantial (with the confidence intervals overlapping with support for Reform, identifying as white British

and age). Nevertheless, it remains the case that material conditions in a local area are a strong predictor of perceiving things having got worse. The key conclusion, then is that feelings that areas are doing poorly and have got worse over time are heavily linked to the material experience of people in those places, even if these are expressed in partisan divides.

**Figure 19.** Predictors of viewing area as having got better over last ten years, average all dimensions, 2025

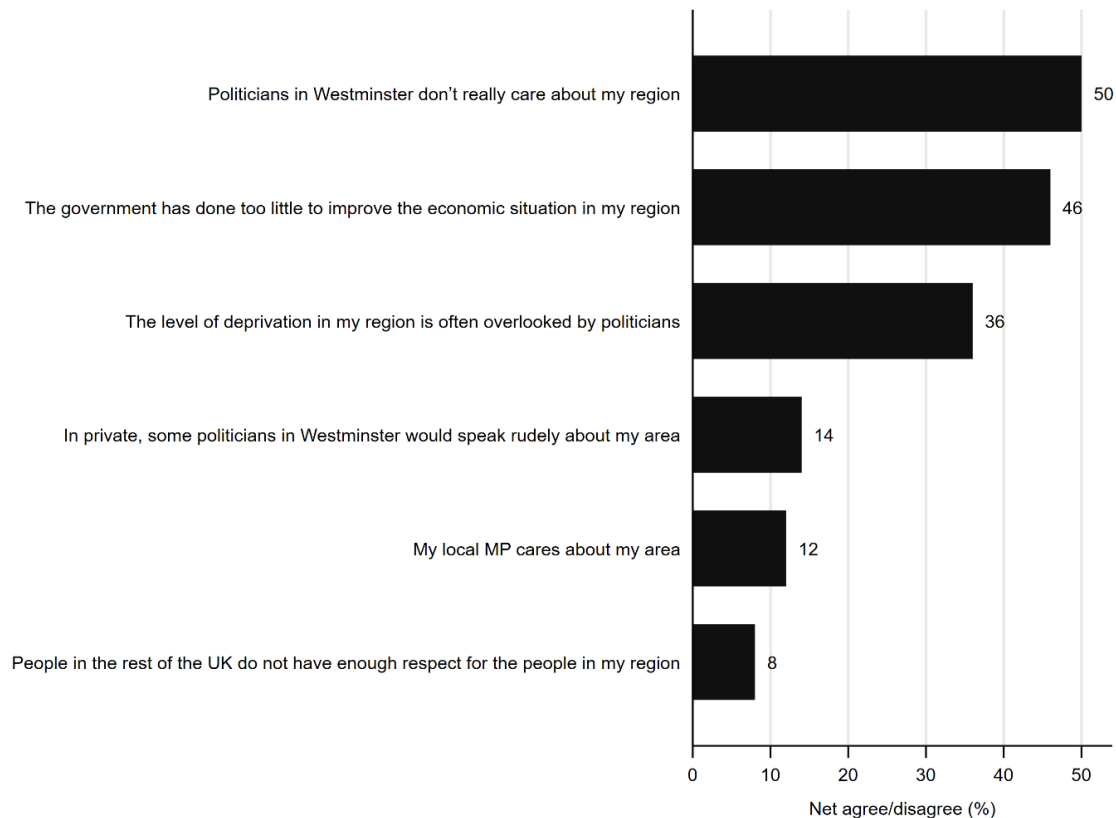


#### Place-based resentments?

To what extent do people’s material concerns about their local area manifest themselves in grievance with government and democratic politics? In the survey we asked a series of questions about how people believe politicians in Westminster view/act towards their area/region. Net agreement with each of these statements is plotted in Figure 20. These reveal a deep sense of place-based resentment. The view that “politicians in Westminster don’t really care about my region” is widespread (+50), as is the belief that “the government has done too little to improve the economic situation in my region” (+46) and the view that “the level of deprivation in my region is often overlooked by politicians” (+36). There is more modest agreement with the belief that “in private, some politicians in Westminster would speak rudely about my area” (+14) and that “people in the rest of the UK do not have enough respect for people in my region” (+8). There is net agreement, however, that “my local MP cares about my area” (+12). Overall,

place significantly shapes attitudes towards British government and how much politicians care about the local area.

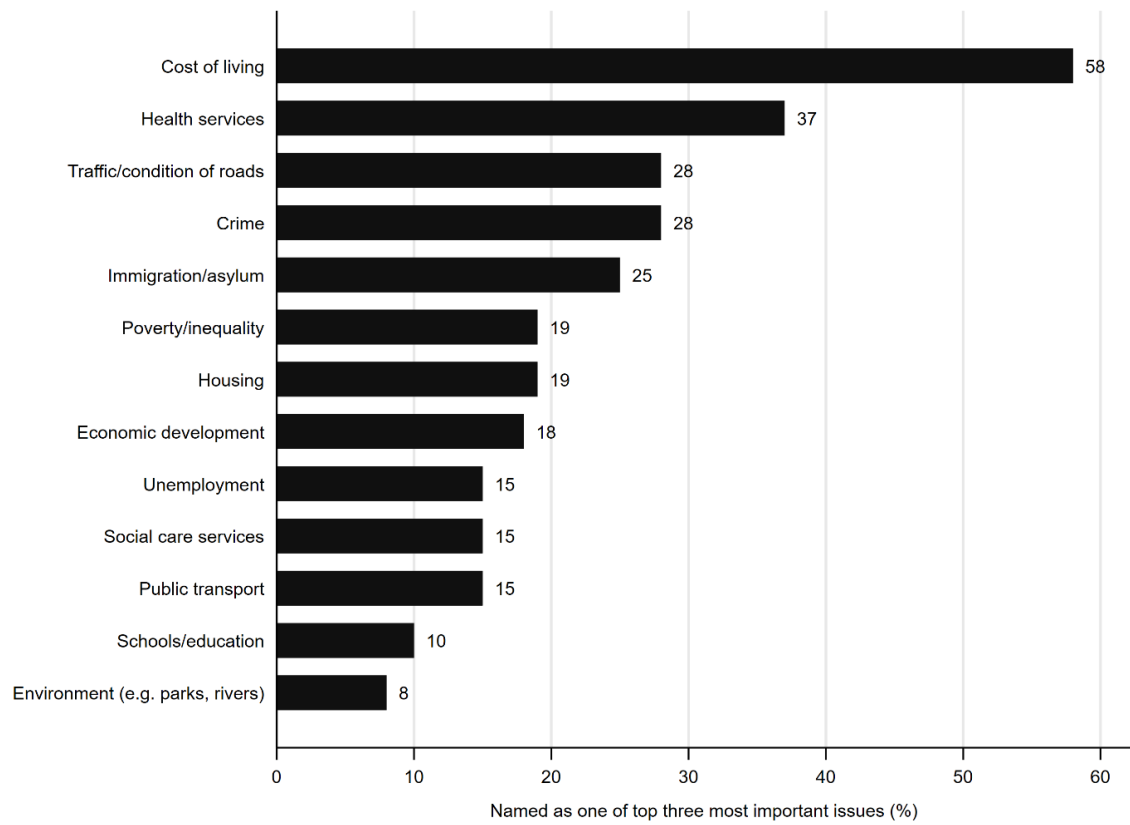
**Figure 20.** Net agreement with statements regarding how politicians act towards local areas/regions



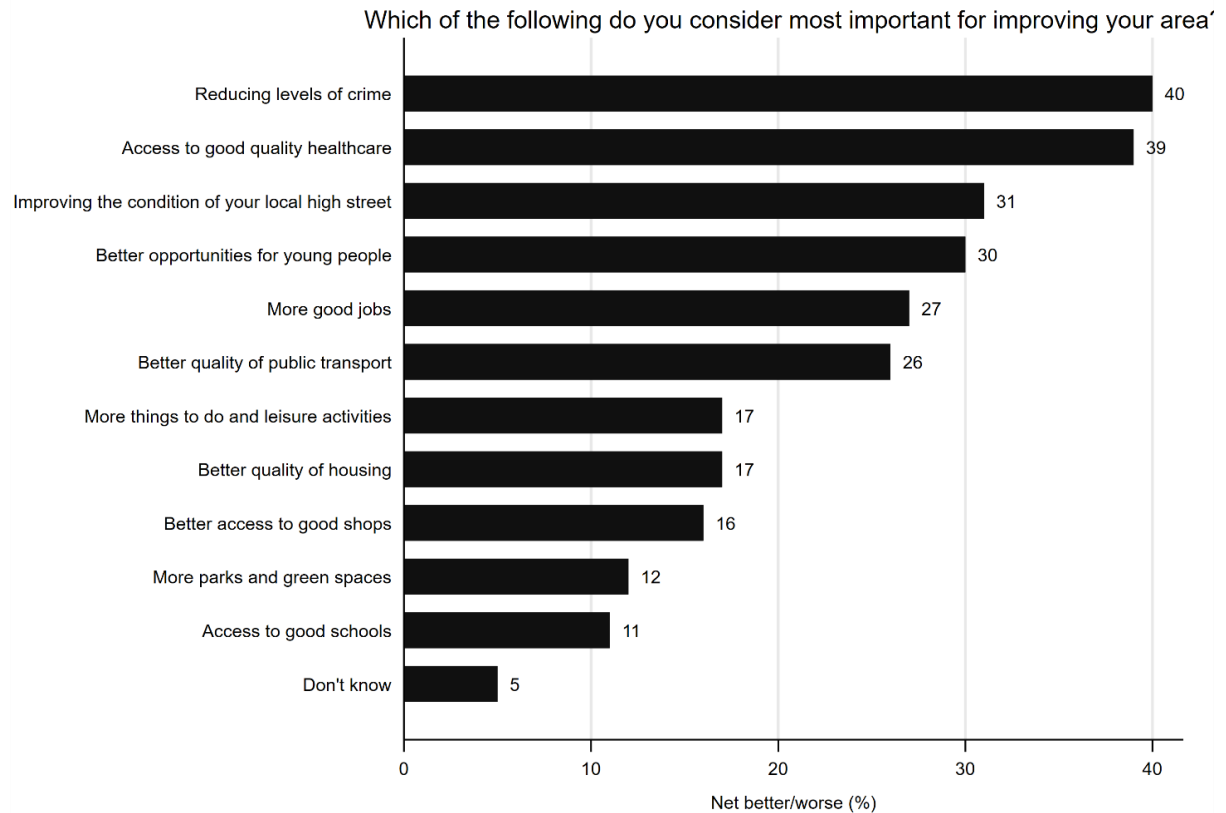
### Local issues and priorities

What are the issues that people identify as being significant in their local area? Do these differ from national issues? In the survey we asked people to name the most important three issues facing their local area. Their responses are shown in Figure 21. Notably, a substantial number of people identified the cost of living (58%) as being the most important issue, followed by health services (37%), traffic and the condition of roads (28%), crime (28%) and immigration and asylum (25%). These issue concerns are not entirely out of kilter with what people tend to respond about the most important issue facing the country, but it is notable that health, roads, and crime all rank above immigration and asylum. Alongside this, we asked people what they thought was most important for improving their local area, plotted in Figure 22. Interestingly, reducing crime was named by the largest number of people (40%), followed by good quality healthcare (39%), improving the condition of the local high street (31%), better opportunities for young people (30%), more good jobs (27%), and better-quality public transport (26%).

**Figure 21.** The top three most important local issues, 2025



**Figure 22.** Most important for improving the local area, 2025



Alongside this, we asked people whether they supported or opposed a range of alternative policy proposals. The percent of people expressing support for these proposals is shown in Table 1. This reveals high levels of public support for focusing on the quality of roads and reducing traffic (85%) as well as more spending on local public transport links (79%) and links connecting the respondent's area with other areas. These suggest high levels of support for investment in transport. There was also support for government buying empty and abandoned buildings for community use (75%). Interestingly, there is little support for a tax on online shopping that would fund improvements in the town centre (33%).

**Table 1.** Support for alternative policy proposals

Would you support or oppose the following?	Support (%)
A focus on improving the quality of roads and decreasing congestion for motorists	85
More spending on better local public transport links within my immediate area	79
More spending on better public transport links connecting my area with nearby cities and towns	79
Local and national government buying empty and abandoned buildings for community use	75
Offering children greater careers advice and work experience	71
Improving the quality of schools in my area	67
Increasing out-of-classroom learning and development for local children	63
Increasing the use of high street units for residential use	40
A tax on online shopping that would fund improvements to the town centre	33

Lastly, as summarised in Table 2 we asked people about whether they prioritised economic growth, even if that meant a lot of changes in an area (47%), or if they would rather live in an area where things stayed much the same (31%). Notably we found much greater support for the proposition that it is

important to improve areas that have been ‘left behind’ rather than focusing on growing the economy as a whole (52% to 30%).

**Table 2.** Support for economic growth vs supporting left behind areas and things staying much the same

Which of the following best reflects your view?	%
<i>Change and growth or stability and low growth?</i>	
I would rather live in an area where things stayed much the same, even if there was not much economic growth	31
I would rather live in a place that had a lot of economic growth and opportunity, even if that meant a lot of changes	47
<i>Focus on left behind areas or economic growth overall?</i>	
It is more important to improve areas that have been left behind than growing the economy as a whole	52
It is more important to grow the economy as a whole than improve areas that have been left behind	30

#### Reflections on levelling-up and pride in place

People are proud of their area (and believe there is more that unites people than divides them), but believe in almost equally large measure that the area they live has been ‘left behind’ by government. There is also a widespread view that particular locales are not achieving their full potential. We have shown that there is a *material core* to pride in one’s local area, as this is correlated negatively with the level of deprivation, while feelings of left-behindedness are strongly correlated with deprivation. We have shown that across a wide range of dimensions, people’s evaluation of how their area compares to others is a clear function of objective measures – such as for crime, health, skills and housing of asylum seekers. People are able to tell where their area stands compared to others. Our data shows a clear feeling of decline – as people believe their area has got worse across a wide range of dimensions over the past decade. It also reveals a collapse in that perception of decline under the Conservative government between 2022 and 2024. It is also evident from the data that party support is aligned with place-based

views – with Reform supporters most likely to say their area compares worse to other areas and most likely to believe that things have got worse over the past decade. Interestingly, we find greater support for improving areas that have been ‘left behind’ over growing the economy as a whole. Whether government could afford to reject the prospect of national economic growth – to pay for increased public investment – is another question.

In our essay in *The Political Quarterly* in 2021, we argued that “Levelling up creates opportunities for high-profile initiatives and symbols of change through which the government can craft a narrative of success. It may also help ... appeal to voters that lean one way on economics but another on social issues by targeting attention and interventions in specific places—in a way that speaks to some voters’ feelings of having been neglected over many decades and having lost status to other groups in society” (Jennings, Stoker and McKay 2021). The evidence presented here confirms the persistence of place-based resentments – with feelings widespread that politicians and government in Westminster overlook people’s areas/regions. It has also shown how place-based concerns still reflect material conditions of the economy, society and public services. **Pride in Place** arguably represents the successor to **Levelling-up**: as a £5bn *community-led* programme – rather than being centrally/politically coordinated. It arguably lacks the visibility that levelling-up had under the Johnson government. Notably, the smaller £150m **Pride in Place Impact Fund** prioritises visible material improvements within two years – reflecting importance of *delivery* for political returns. But time is already running out. The survey evidence presented here suggests places require substantial material uplifts across a range of domains (e.g. health, jobs, crime, high streets) that go well beyond Pride in Place in order for them to represent significant improvements in how people perceive regional and local inequities. It is also important to differentiate there are both structural and cyclical drivers of high street decline and demographic pressures on public services.

On the question of place, political communication needs to speak to felt concerns about material conditions. It is fundamentally important for Labour to craft a narrative about how it is delivering symbolic and material improvements for people *and* places. People may not have understood what ‘levelling up’ was, but the phrase enabled the Johnson government to craft a narrative that demonstrated understanding of, and being seen to care for, ‘left behind’ places (even if that levelling-up agenda eventually unravelled). People like the policy-solutions that we presented to them (especially where there

is funding and on transport) but would need them to be connected to a political message about who the government represents and stands for (i.e. 'people like me', 'communities like mine').

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**Appendix.** Comparison of survey items fielded in 2022, 2024 and 2025.

<b>% agree</b>	<b>April 2022</b>	<b>March 2024</b>	<b>August 2025</b>
<b><i>Pride in place</i></b> <i>Net support (% agree minus % disagree)</i>			
People around here don't have pride in this region	Not asked	+12.8	+8.5
This part of England is achieving its full potential	Not asked	+39.7	+39.2
In the area I live, there is more that unites people than divides people	Not asked	-20.1	-19.2
<b><i>Net perception of area</i></b> <i>% area compares better than other areas minus % compares worse than others...</i>			
The number of good jobs	-11.8	-16.4	-21.7
Opportunities for young people	-17.4	-24.6	-25.9
The quality of housing	+21.6	+5.7	+8.1
Access to good schools	+25.9	+16.5	+17.6
Access to good quality healthcare	+9.9	-5.7	-0.1
The quality of public transport	+0.3	-6.2	-2.0
Levels of crime	+19.9	+5.2	+7.6
Access to good shops	+7.0	-4.8	-5.3
Things to do and leisure activities	+3.2	-3.6	-3.7
The attractiveness of the natural environment	Not asked	+37.7	+37.6
The condition of your local high street	Not asked	-17.8	-15.4
The number of people out of work	Not asked	Not asked	-6.3
<b><i>Net perception of area compared to ten years ago</i></b> <i>% area got better minus % got worse</i>			
The number of good jobs	-8.6	-25.4	-24.8
Opportunities for young people	-11.8	-28.4	-26.1
The quality of housing	+3.3	-13.8	-7.6
Access to good schools	+2.0	-7.2	-4.8
Access to good quality healthcare	-19.4	-42.7	-31.1
The quality of public transport	-12.4	-21.9	-13.0
Levels of crime	-22.2	-40.5	-36.4
Access to good shops	-7.7	-35.3	-32.0
Things to do and leisure activities	+3.7	-11.0	-6.0
The attractiveness of the natural environment	Not asked	-4.9	-0.8
The condition of your local high street	Not asked	-50.8	-45.8
The number of people out of work	Not asked	Not asked	-24.1

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