

Urban Patriotism:

The role of civic identity in our cities'
past, present and future

Opinion research for Landsec by Public First
December 2021



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Foreword

At Landsec, we focus on creating and curating three types of place: Central London offices, major retail destinations and mixed-use urban neighbourhoods in cities across the UK.

Our success – both as a commercial business and in delivering on our purpose – is tied to the future success of cities. We believe in the power of cities – the role they play in creating opportunity, the accumulation effect of bringing talent together, and their critical role in shaping a sustainable future for the UK.

But over the last two years, the role of cities has been challenged like never before. As an organisation that both benefits from and contributes to the success of cities, we believe we have a responsibility to understand how they can recover and shape a better and shared urban future.

Together with our partners, we are seeking to build a deep understanding of what factors are needed to help our cities thrive and their communities prosper – driving economic growth, environmental sustainability and quality of life.

As part of that journey, we've worked with Public First to answer the question of how important that sense of place is

to the people who live, work and spend their free time there and what role a sense of identity plays in creating new, urban neighbourhoods.

What this research clearly underlines is the vital importance of understanding 'urban patriotism' to anyone involved in creating and curating the built environment, and that by truly working with it and harness it, 'urban patriotism' can be a force for good.

Careful and conscious development comes from understanding the triggers for happiness and economic stability – development done well, will create that sense of place that has at its heart local identity and individuality.

This report is the start of a conversation about how the future of our urban spaces will develop. I would love to hear the views of others, so please do get in touch with your thoughts.



Mark Allan
CEO, Landsec

Introduction

Will cities as we know them be viable in the future? In the last 18 months or so, Covid lockdowns have battered cities financially, but has there been a cultural shift amongst the population that means people's relationship with them has changed for good?

The "triumph of the city" has been well-documented. We've become used to hearing about the supposedly unstoppable growth of city living. But Covid has made people begin to reassess many things, and the future of cities is one of them. It's too early to tell whether Covid has changed the game for good, but it's certainly not too early to start to ask: has our urban culture changed irreversibly for the people who live, work and play there? And what can people's attitudes today tell us about how to shape successful urban spaces for the future?

To answer those questions Landsec asked Public First to take a deep dive into people's perceptions of the cities in which they live. In doing so, we looked at every aspect of city life in detailed conversations with people in some of the country's leading cities. The project comprised 12 focus groups in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

The future of cities is a vast subject, with multiple, overlapping issues - the way conversations veered and meandered in the focus groups reflected this. We discussed what people loved about city-living; what the biggest challenges were; the impact on people's health; and how connected to nature people felt. We explored how important the city was to their sense of identity, the strongest factors attracting them to the city and what, if anything, might make them want to leave.

This paper draws those insights together to understand the role of civic identity in our cities' past, present and future.



Methodological note

Public First held 12 focus groups for Landsec. Four groups took place online and eight in person. Each group lasted for 75 minutes. Fieldwork took place during August and September 2021:

Three groups were held in each of London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds with compositions designed to broadly reflect the make-up of the working populations in each city. Qualitative research is not quantitative research, but it is possible to reflect the types of people who make their lives in these cities.

In each city, the groups were made up of the following:

Group 1: middle-class, employed, mixed gender, mix of Conservative and Labour voters, aged 41 to 60.

Group 2: middle-class, employed, mixed gender, mix of Conservative and Labour voters, aged 20 to 39, half with children aged under 10-years-old.

Group 3: working class background, employed, mix of Conservative and Labour voters, aged 20 to 60.

About Public First

Public First is a specialist policy research agency.

Using a mix of policy design and analysis, and qualitative and quantitative opinion research we help organisations understand and navigate complex public policy challenges.

Led by a group of people with experience at the highest levels of Government, Parliament, business, charities and campaigns, we work in dozens of international markets for some of the world's leading businesses, non-profits and national and local governments.

We are members of the British Polling Council and Company Partners of the Market Research Society, whose rules and guidelines we adhere to.

For more information, please visit our website: www.publicfirst.co.uk



Introducing urban patriotism



Introducing urban patriotism

The most important theme to emerge from this research is *urban patriotism*.

We use this term rather than civic identity because it denotes an emotional, visceral attachment to big cities which is core to its residents' identity. In small towns across the country, we have long picked up on the concept of "wounded civic pride" – a result of the decline of these towns' high streets, their major employers and, often, their shared spaces. In big cities, the relationship with their home is different for residents. It is tied up more with the city's size, influence, and general buzz.

If anything will keep people in big cities, it is this *urban patriotism* – and it's something that everyone with an interest in the future of cities needs to be keenly aware of, especially when considering how to shape the built environment. For many people, cities are much more than just places to live.

This can sound vague or ambiguous, but it is not. In every city we held focus groups, participants said the city formed a fundamental part of their identity. When

people spoke about how much they loved the city's culture and history, they were talking about their own culture, their own history. The city felt part of them, just as they felt part of the city. **Identity anchors people to their city.** This identity is part of who they are, part of how they see themselves. Something that contributes to their happiness and quality of life.

In all our discussions, it was clear there were **things that contributed to and reinforced this identity.** *Family and friends* living nearby forges incredibly strong bonds between people and their home city. When your family all hail from one city, it helps foster a shared identity with other people from the city who often share similar values and characteristics, such as the same accent, similar outlook, valuing local culture and history, and so on. This is true regardless of people's family heritage; cities unite people of different backgrounds.

This challenges the perception of cities as transient places of individuals, who stop only for a short time before moving on, never really gaining a deep attachment of any kind. The truth is that, just like towns and villages, cities are places many people feel rooted to through family ties, and as a result care passionately about them.

An inclusive identity

This does not, however, make for an exclusive, protected identity that is closed to people not born in the city. In fact it is the complete opposite. During focus group discussions, it was striking how newcomers to cities said they felt welcomed into this city identity immediately. This was equally true regardless of whether people had moved there from rural England, eastern Europe or the Caribbean. This openness was a source of pride for long-term residents, something satisfying and rewarding; they loved the idea of more people sharing their love for their city.

The city's physical aesthetics play a role too; the fabric of historic buildings being a reminder of the city's industrial heritage. From the present day, sporting heroes from the city competing on the national stage generate enormous pride, and put famous faces to the city's name. As well as helping to shape and reinforce a city's identity,

these cultural assets are also extremely inclusive; a shared appreciation of the city's architecture, or supporting a sports team together, is open to everyone.

This inclusiveness is something that contributes very positively to perceptions of a city, attracting new residents, commuters, students, visitors. And where people go, opportunity often follows; in contributing to the 'brand' of a city, urban patriotism helps to attract investment in new homes, shops, restaurants, bars, cafes and many of the things that draw people to cities.

Of course, this is not to say that urban patriotism is so strong that people will put up with anything, that they will tolerate declining living standards for themselves and their families. Clearly they will not, and that's not our point. Rather, what we are saying is that it is urban patriotism that fundamentally anchors people to cities, and makes them more likely to want to stay.





A spectrum of push-and-pull factors

For all the hold that cities have over their citizens' sense of self, sometimes it is not enough to stop them leaving. By understanding what is making people consider leaving the city, we get to the root of some of the most important problems facing cities.

Three issues in particular jumped out at us:

- ***Rising house prices.*** Young people who have grown up in the city increasingly believe they cannot afford to live there - not if they want to own their own home. People who want to have children often do not feel they can afford a family-sized home in the city. This is not just something that affects them; residents are seeing their family and friends forced to move out, building resentment and weakening people's ties to the city;
- ***The pace of change being too fast.*** Dramatic and rushed changes to the built environment is another threat - with areas undergoing redevelopments so quickly that they become unfamiliar, that they no longer feel like home. Relatedly, participants spoke of their frustration that an increase in the cost of living and doing business was pricing out independent businesses - which add so much to the city's identity - with more corporate 'chain' outlets replacing them, which they feel detract from the city's culture. It is important to stress, however, that residents' views here were far more considered and reasonable than they are often given credit for. Many remembered what their cities were like years ago, before investment had regenerated parts of the city, and do not want a return to those days of run-down, neglected city centres blighted by crime. They do, however, want a better balance - before the pace of change harms the city's identity beyond repair;

- *Crime*, especially violent crime. It was clear that, for some participants, the fear of crime was making them question their long-term futures in the city. Where people were noticing a rise in crime in the last five years, the impact was particularly acute; they said they no longer feel safe. This was having a damaging effect on communities in all sorts of ways, including people having less trust in the people around them.

Below these more existential factors are a series of others that **sit in the middle of the spectrum of push-and-pull factors**. These, while important, do not exert the same level of influence on people's future plans:

- The city lifestyle is a huge draw for many. The density of the city translates into a great diversity of offer: everything from the exciting and enjoyable (the nightlife, shopping, the pace of life) to the convenient (shorter commute to work, amenities within walking distance and so on). But for all that they enjoy this

lifestyle, it is not something that, on its own, can sustain someone's desire to stay.

- A sense of neighbourhood community - knowing their neighbours, and feeling like they knew the people who lived near them. Not everyone wants this - they get enough interaction throughout the course of the working day, and do not want it when they get home - but for those that do, they can find it. Interestingly, we found that, increasingly, the conversations that create a sense of community are now happening online - in WhatsApp groups and apps like Nextdoor, providing a kind of middle ground for people who want that sense of neighbourhood community, but to have control over when and where it happens.
- A little further towards the 'push' end of the scale, participants often talked about the effect air pollution had on their health, or how disconnected they felt from nature. There were a whole number of issues which people strongly disliked,



but which they were prepared to accept as part of living in a big city.

The city-dwellers we spoke to came across as highly resilient, adaptable people.

- There is one other profoundly important factor, one that is both a push and a pull. While family plays a crucial role in making people want to stay living in the city, it was also one of the biggest reasons that might make someone want to leave. Specifically, starting a family of their own. Having (or planning to have) children would change their priorities – wanting to be away from the city lifestyle and the hustle and bustle, and instead to have more space and a slower pace of life.

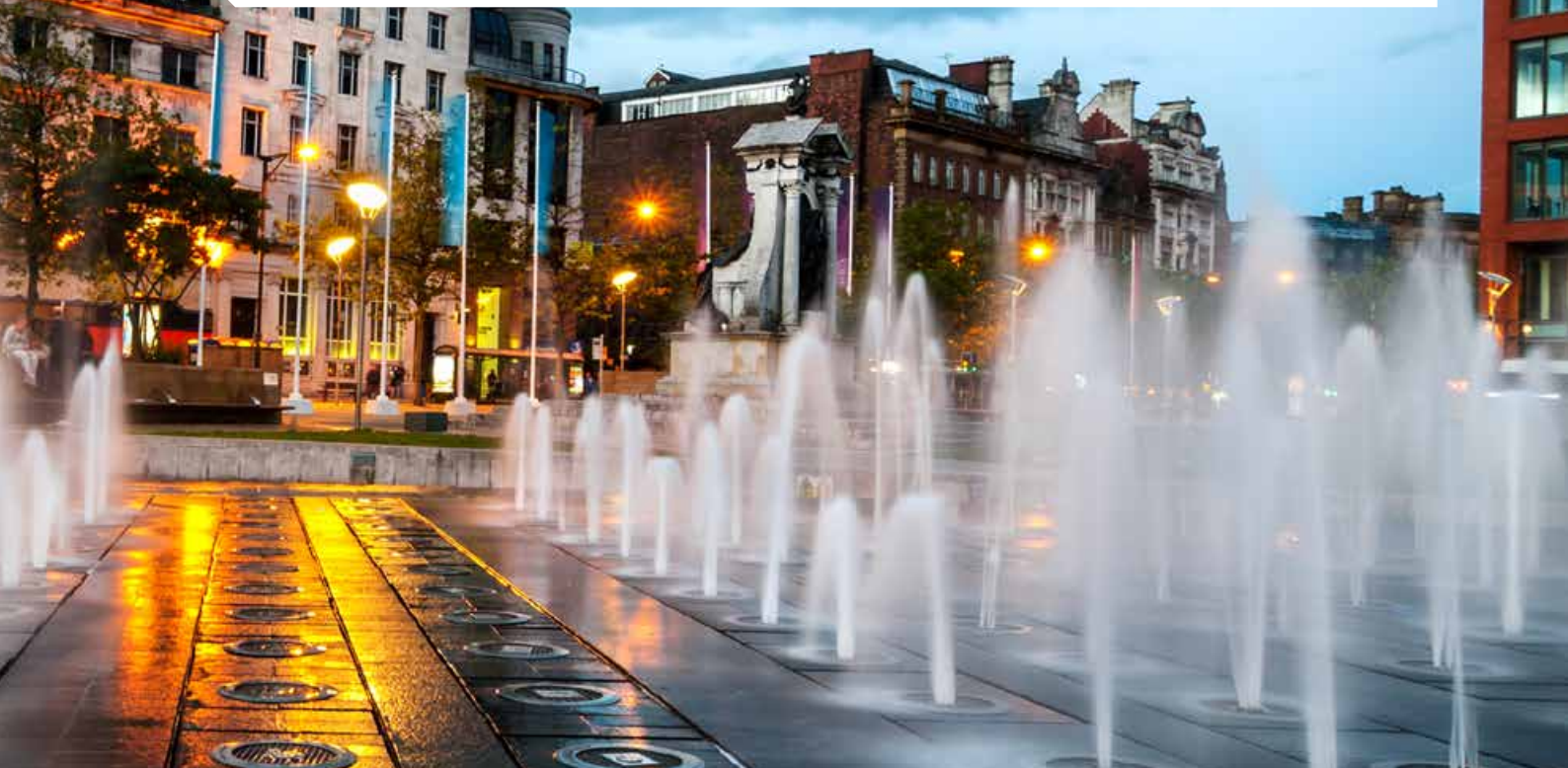
It was perfectly plausible that we would have found that people primarily talked about the convenience of city life - being close to work, to schools and hospitals were very much part of the conversation,

but convenience did not define city life. Urban patriotism defined it.

Why understanding urban patriotism is important

Understanding urban patriotism is important for anyone who has an interest in shaping the future of cities - including developers, investors, local authorities and political leaders. Urban patriotism is an essential part of people's 'why'; why they think the way they think, why they make the decisions they make, why they view the world the way they do. It is a crucial part of understanding city residents. And seeking to understand city residents - their thoughts and opinions on the place they call home - should be our first consideration when thinking about the future of cities.

The entire conversation around the future of cities, it could therefore be argued, can be seen through this prism of urban patriotism.



A deeper dive:

**Pull factors:
Identity - or urban patriotism**

Identity - or urban patriotism

In the focus groups, people expressed an emotional, deep-seated connection to their cities. They spoke with such passion and knowledge about the city's culture and history because it was their own culture and their own history they were talking about. They have been shaped by it growing up; they are part of the city, and the city is part of them - part of their character. Having family living nearby helps bind them to the city too; they are rooted here.

The city is therefore a core part of their identity. It is an essential part of their 'why'; why they think the way they think, why they make the decisions they make, why they view the world the way they do. It is a crucial part of understanding city residents, and the future of cities.

Manchester

The culture of the city – its history of industry, its music, its sense of community – was something people felt was uniquely special to Manchester. This was a dominant, recurring theme in discussions - how much they loved the city, with each participant being able to articulate this pride in their own, personal way. For them, no city could compare to Manchester in what it offered to its citizens. Not just the pubs, bars and restaurants, but good transport links to all other parts of the country, the Peak District nearby, and great universities. They felt Mancunians were prouder of Manchester than Londoners were of London, and had every right to be, given its sense of identity and community – which was especially strong since the Manchester Arena bombing.

We have a very deep fabric in the city of industry, history and education. We've got sport that is world-beating. Anything you could ever want, you can find in Manchester.

Teacher in his late 30s, Manchester

When I was 13-years-old, I was in a pub - which I shouldn't have been at 13 - but basically someone gave me a tape and said 'this is a band called Oasis, they're going to be big one day'. I put the tape in my walkman and listened to it when I got home and thought, 'sold'. I love Manchester... Seriously, we have got soul.

Recruitment consultant in her late 30s, Manchester

London

For participants, London was an intrinsic part of their identity - to the point that it formed part of their character as resilient people. This seemed especially apparent when talking about the downsides of city life; for instance, living in an environment where there is a lot of crime, and air pollution. That they could take these problems in their stride - without complaint - was almost seen as proof that they were 'tough' enough to cope with the problems that came with living in the UK's biggest city. This set them apart from people who lived in other parts of the country.

You're always proud that you've got that sort of London mentality. People from big cities are sort of more aware all the time, more streetwise, you're always expecting something bad to happen because it often does. I think you take that with you for the rest of your life.

Compliance manager in his late 30s, London

For most it was even their primary identity, above their nationality. For the working-class group, London was all they had ever known. They take pride in telling new people they meet they are from London, and all had different things they said marked people out as being Londoners. The middle-class group talked about the culture, food, and the choices London offered them.

I definitely wouldn't say I'm British. I'm from London. It's definitely part of who I am.

Project manager in her 40s, London

I'm a Londoner, I was born here, I wouldn't want to move out because it's my home.

Musician in her 50s, London

London's definitely part of my identity. I think that's why I would like to stay here. I don't know anything different, I'm a 'home bod'. It's a big part of me.

Solicitor in her 30s, London

Birmingham

People also felt deeply connected to Birmingham and took pride in what they saw as the generous nature of the city's people. The first thing participants expressed was the perceived warmth expressed towards the city from residents and non-residents alike. People were friendly, and many remarked upon the role their accent played; wherever you go, people know you're from Birmingham. Others highlighted the industrial heritage, and its place as England's second city.

Being the second city, that makes me quite proud.

Builder in his late 30s, Birmingham

I absolutely love Birmingham. My life is here. My children are here. When my family come up from Cornwall, they think I've got so much - the shops, the theatre. I do identify with Birmingham and sometimes now I can hear myself sounding quite Brummie.

Beautician in her early 40s, Birmingham

The other thing I'm proud of is the history and the industrial revolution and everything around that. Birmingham is a real huge part of that.

Finance manager in his late 20s, Birmingham

The people who hadn't been born in Birmingham loved the fact that they were allowed to adopt the city as their own immediately - it was part of Birmingham's generous nature.

I do have to say, I couldn't say I'm a Brummie because I am Polish but having said that, if anyone says anything negative about the Brummies, I do get very, very defensive about that because I have lived around here for a long time now. I suppose I'm a Polish Brummie.

Accountant in her late 40s, Birmingham

I think I'm a St Kitts Brummie. Actually, I'm Brummie.

Purchase ledger and administrator in her early 60s, Birmingham

Leeds

People in Leeds have an unbreakable connection to the city. The level of pride in their sports teams - but also in the way the city is seen to be developing and progressing - is enormous. Whether it was in the UK or abroad, people in Leeds felt immensely proud of where they are from. The recent success of the football club was shared among everyone - even those who did not like football felt it had helped put the city on the map. Those who were born and bred in Leeds naturally saw the city as their identity - but even those who had lived there for a few years felt an instant warm welcome and a connection that will stay with them forever.

I go away with my Leeds shirt on or my Yorkshire towel and people instantly see me and give me a wave. It's like we're massively on the map as a city.

Admin assistant in her 30s, Leeds

When Leeds got promoted [to the Premier League] you had people saying how proud they were who aren't even football fans. Or when Calvin Phillips [Leeds midfielder] got his England call-up, you could just sense how proud the city was. They've helped put Leeds up there with Manchester and London and places like that again - it's amazing.

Manager in her 30s, Leeds

For many, being a ‘Leeds’ person and/or a ‘Yorkshire’ person was intertwined.

Some in the groups identified as Yorkshire first, Leeds second. But the majority loved the fact they were specifically from Leeds – with rivalry and tribal views towards other parts of Yorkshire they felt were less important than Leeds (Wakefield, Doncaster and Huddersfield were all mentioned). For the majority, Leeds was the shining light of the region.

I'd definitely say I'm a Leeds person first. Probably even before I'd say I'm English or British. I'm from Yorkshire and that's that.

Credit controller in his 50s, Leeds

I work outside of Leeds but live in Leeds and it's just obviously so much better. That's not to say other parts of Yorkshire are necessarily that much worse, but it just feels like Leeds is going at 100mph in terms of development and we're leaving the other places behind. We're a different beast to them.

Female solicitor in her 40s, Leeds



Pull factors: Family



Family

Across all four cities, for the majority of participants, family was one of the strongest ties binding them to the city. This was quite striking. Many people have the impression that cities have rather transient neighbourhoods; that they are places where people move to for work or educational opportunities, that cities are full of people who have moved away from their family.

Cities certainly have a higher turnover of populations than other parts of the country, but it is easy to miss that for many people, a city is where they and their extended family call home. Cities are not the places of atomised individuals they can be mistaken for, where people simply stop for a short time, never really gaining a deep attachment to. Just like towns and villages, cities are places many people feel rooted to through family ties, and as a result, care passionately about them.

Birmingham

In Birmingham, participants said family ties helped form an extremely strong connection to the city. Among the groups – the majority of whom were lifelong residents or who had lived there many years – being close to family (or friends they considered to be family) was a primary reason for continuing to live in the city. Those who articulated reasons for potentially wanting to move away - for example, because of rising crime or wanting a larger home (which wasn't available to them in the city) - the thought of leaving their families behind was just too hard to countenance. Whatever might be pushing them away, family always pulled them back.

I'd say family [is the biggest reason for staying]. Most of my immediate family are from Birmingham, although I do have family all over the globe. I just feel connected to Birmingham.

Carer in her mid-40s, Birmingham

The biggest reason I'd stay here is family. It's family. My husband would say it's Aston Villa.

Lunchtime supervisor in her 50s, Birmingham

I live with my partner. I moved here nearly five years ago now and we moved near my mum and his family – that caring responsibility. But we might move to Sutton or Solihull but we need to stay within the boundaries to look after family.

Sales assistant in her late 30s, Birmingham

Because I work in the courts, and I see the crime – what doesn't even hit the media – I would like to move out of Birmingham, but I think because I've lived here so long – and my family's here – I can't move as far as I want, because I still want that link.

Admin officer in her late 30s, Birmingham

The only thing that might outweigh family ties was, conversely, having children.

In the group conversations in Birmingham, this became one of the biggest splits in the groups: between those who had (or were considering having) children and so wanted to move out of the city centre, and those who were pre or post children were keen to move in.

Among the children-oriented group, more space – both within the home and outside it – was a driving concern, as was a slower pace of life more suited to children playing. In fact, a real complaint during this part of the discussion was the lack of *free* activities for children in the city.

Within the group for whom children weren't a consideration, younger people wanted the nightlife, while those who were older wanted the culture.

Leeds

As in Birmingham, ties to friends and family were some of the biggest reasons keeping them in the city. There were many reasons people said they never intended to leave, but remaining close to family was the most powerful. Many had lived in the city all their lives, and so had extensive family networks in the city.

I've got so many family members here that I'd find it hard to ever leave now. We are a part of their lives and they see my kids and we all hang out – I see them more than my friends sometimes. It's a big part of wanting to stay round here in the long term.

Manager in his 30s, Leeds

I grew up here and I've had friends live in a couple of other places who eventually come back and say that they wish they'd never gone. Once you live here and have friends and family here it's so difficult to want to ever go.

Lawyer in his 40s, Leeds

London

Among even the staunchest “I would never leave London” participants, raising children was making them think about leaving the city. Crime played a big part in their thinking, both in terms of their children potentially becoming victims of crime but also the fear they could be more likely to commit crime if they were to grow up in a high crime area, around friends or peers who may be influenced by gangs.

There's positives and negatives [to raising children in London] but it's quite worrying, especially as I've got a young boy, knowing there's all these crimes going on around different parts of London. You've got education benefits and job benefits, but in terms of the negatives - crime... it does play on my mind.

Solicitor in her 30s with an 18-month-old child, London

You're going to have issues anywhere you go, nowhere is perfect. But for me, perhaps being too inner-city with a lot of the gang cultures and the crime... For me, having a young boy, it just doesn't sit right with me. So I would like to get a bit further out.

Support worker in her 30s with a seven-month-old child, London

Manchester

Being close to friends and family was an extremely strong reason to stay, and with the city offering young people great educational and employment opportunities, it was hoped their children could also stay living in the city as they grew older.

It's family really. My parents are here, my brother is here. I wouldn't want to move away from them, I feel very lucky that we've all been able to live in Manchester.

Project manager in his mid-30s, Manchester

All my family are from Manchester, so there's that sense of wanting to be close to them.

Teacher in his late 30s, Manchester

I've been here all my life, so all my family is here.

Manager in his 30s, Manchester

The biggest thing making me stay would be my parents, as they're getting a bit older.

Manager in her 40s, Manchester

Again, as with Birmingham, one of the biggest reasons to leave was starting a family. Some participants said that the party lifestyle that attracted them to the city

was not something they wanted to follow forever; in the near future, they would want to move further out to start a family. This was because family-sized homes were beyond their reach in the city, and they wanted a home where the children would have more space – both within the home but also somewhere that would be safe for them to play outside the house. Other participants, regardless of starting a family, said they would not always want to live in such a busy part of the world and would move away for a quieter life. To them, the city was more for adults, and young adults, rather than somewhere designed for children. Not everyone agreed – other participants said they had enjoyed raising their children in the city.

The one thing that would make me leave would be the fact that I had a family, my own children. I walk round Manchester and I see people in St Ann's Square with prams and kids and I think, 'I can't imagine bringing up children here'. I'm sure it's a very good experience but in my eyes, bringing up children, you would want somewhere a bit greener, a bit more 'parky'. City centre is all restaurants, bars, having a great time. I can't imagine doing that. So having a family would make me leave.

Tax specialist in her early 40s, Manchester



Pull factors: City lifestyle

City lifestyle

This part of the discussion - about what the city offered them - often went along in a matter-of-fact kind of way. The city offered them almost everything they could want in their lives - and all close to their home. The density of the city led to a diversity of experiences that could not be beaten, in everything from culture to entertainment to employment.

But the conversation about all these things rarely carried on for long; the convenience was important, but not defining. The pull of the city lifestyle could not compete against the desire to find a family home or avoid rising crime.

London

Participants said the city had the best job opportunities and best pay in the country, and living in the city meant they didn't have to commute far to reach them. The city had everything in close proximity; parks and green spaces, bars and restaurants, schools, shopping, and transport links. They placed a high value on this and the convenience of accessing it.

I think for me it's the commute into the city, that's one of the main factors. I also think it's the area and the amenities around, so South-West London obviously has lots going on. We're quite spoilt round here to be honest.

HR manager in his 30s, London

It's the location, for schools and transport links and those kind of things - we're one stop away from King's Cross which means you can get to anywhere in London within about 20 or 30 minutes, which is pretty good. One of the things that enticed me and the wife was the amount of bars and pubs on the Angel high road. It's just one great big long road of bars and restaurants and pubs, it's fantastic.

Compliance manager in his 30s, London

Leeds

Leeds has everything a city could offer even as their lives changed. The participants, having spoken about the things they enjoyed most now, would then often talk about things they had previously enjoyed at earlier stages of their lives. For example, one participant said how important the parks and green spaces were for spending time with her children, but had also said how good the nightlife was in Leeds even though going to pubs wasn't something she did very much of now.

Leeds is pretty unique. It's got a park usually within no more than a 10 or 15 minute walk away, and then you've got built up areas with modern bars and pubs. It's a great place to live.

Nurse in her 20s, Leeds

I used to go out a lot when I was younger but even as I've got older there's stuff I can do with my family and things out in the suburbs that I probably never experienced when I was younger. It's a city that develops with you as you grow up.

Manager in his 30s, Leeds

Birmingham

Participants loved what Birmingham offered them: canal-side bars, shopping and cinemas – and it was a real benefit having so much of what they enjoyed doing within walking distance.

I'm really close to the city centre. Genuinely, everything's just there. So that's where I grew up. It's like a home from home. Got my brother and my mum.

Primary school teacher in her early 30s, Birmingham

It's so nice just popping out for things right on your doorstep and then at night being able to stumble back home.

Secondary school teacher in her late 20s who lives in the Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham



Birmingham has got fantastic restaurants and bars and theatres, and everything is really good. I do love it. It's like a central hub because I know lots of people from Leamington and Warwick and we always meet in the city centre. It's always vibrant – always something going on.

Accountant in her late 40s, Birmingham

Manchester

Manchester's size – with most things in walking distance – helped retain its identity.

Most participants had made compromises when choosing their most recent home – mostly in terms of the amount of space they had. But this was a price worth paying to have what they were most looking for – being close to where they worked, but also being able to have the 'city lifestyle'. Being in a lively, bustling place that has lots of bars and restaurants was incredibly important to them.

What's making me stay? The size of it. I guarantee you, if I go out in Manchester and meet someone, you'll meet them again. Other places, they're too vast. You go and meet someone and never see them again in your life.

Admin assistant in his 50s, Manchester



Pull factors: Sense of neighbourhood community

Sense of neighbourhood community

Across every city, whether participants felt there was a sense of community in their local neighbourhood was very mixed.

Some people liked knowing their neighbours, as it made them feel more secure that there were people around them they could rely on - to water the plants while they're away, or if they were confronted by a crisis. But others actively avoided contact - their home was their refuge from the busy-ness of the city and the last thing they wanted at the end of a long day was another conversation with someone.

This does not negate the lessons on family and urban patriotism; it's not that people do not care. It is more that neighbourhood community means something different in a big city, and that the cities are held together differently.

Perhaps two conclusions that could be drawn were that, for those who wanted community, they could find it; and that the nature of 'community' is changing by moving online to WhatsApp groups and apps like Nextdoor.

London

Most did not know their neighbours well but this is how they preferred it. Leading busy lives, where they are often spending time in crowded places surrounded by others, arriving home was somewhere they did not want further interaction with people.

You've got to be careful about saying 'hello' to neighbours, because if you do it once you've got to do it for the rest of your life. You can't just stop saying 'hello' one day. People either side of me, yeah, but everyone else I tend to leave it.

Compliance manager in his 30s, London

Most of my neighbours, I don't talk to them. I don't mind that, it's a bit of a chore bumping into random people and having a five or ten minute chat when you could just go about your day.

Student in her 20s, London

I wouldn't stop for a chit-chat with my neighbours. I prefer that, I prefer to keep myself to myself.

Support worker in her 30s, London

For many, community has gone online. Participants highlighted using the Nextdoor app to communicate with their neighbours and keep an eye on their area. Others talked about street WhatsApp groups, describing how these gave them a sense of community. The working-class group were sad at how community has declined, although they said it still exists, and talked about how they took care of older neighbours during the pandemic.

I have the Nextdoor App, and it's a wonderful online community ... that is a community policing itself online.

PA in her 60s, London

There has been a lot of mobile theft around Haggerston ... and you always see it on Nextdoor, it's like the Facebook of the neighbourhood.

Sales manager in his 40s, London

During Covid, we were quite involved with the neighbours, especially older neighbours ... we all came together, and we would bring food round and help do stuff.

Hairdresser in her late 30s, London

Birmingham

How well people knew their neighbours was very mixed. Some participants knew the people who lived next door really well, doing small favours for each other or even socialising together. For those that did this, it was something they really appreciated and said it gave them a greater sense of community to know their neighbours so well.

I get on well with both sides (neighbours). In fact, I cut the old woman's lawn next door and get her shopping. The other side they're a bit younger but they'll come round and have a few beers with me in the back garden. The others, we do acknowledge each other in the street. That's half the battle, if you have bad neighbours you'd want to move straightaway.

Builder in his late 30s, Birmingham

For others, they barely knew who lived nearby. But what they never had, they didn't miss.

I've been in the place for four months and I've only met the neighbour once just to tell him to turn the music down a little bit.

Recruitment consultant in his late 20s, Birmingham

No-one really talks to each other. There's parties and people come and tell you they're having parties but that's about it.

Graduate in his early 20s, Birmingham

For those more inclined to be sociable, many had become far more active in online neighbourhood groups and apps. This was before the pandemic but the lockdowns meant that they had the contact details of people who they knew better as a result and who might need help. This was very much the case for everyone in the older group who all knew their neighbours and had either grown up with them and/or socialised with them.

Ours [neighbours] are really friendly. They take our rubbish out. Since Covid we've had a WhatsApp group so since then we've had a really good community group. And there's been a couple of celebrations in our gardens, so I know all the other neighbours now as well.

Sales assistant in her late 30s, Birmingham

We've got a really nice community Facebook Messenger group. I pop round for a cup of tea with my neighbour. She owns [her home] as well so she'll be there for a while. That makes a difference. Even in Covid we'd sit on our balconies and have a little catch up. It was really nice.

Secondary school teacher in her late 20s, Birmingham



Manchester

There was a real mix of how well they got on with their neighbours. One participant who had been living in the city for six years said she regularly socialised with her neighbours, meeting for coffee or going round each other's houses for dinner.

We know each other well, there's three or four us. On one side, I look after her dog when she's away. The other side, she waters my flowers if I'm away. We're not 'besties' but... I was burgled six years ago, not just me but all the apartments, and it makes a difference that you all know each other. It's nice, I will always want that.

Recruitment consultant in her late 30s, Manchester

But others painted a very different picture. Some participants said that while they didn't make a habit of speaking to their neighbours, they preferred it this way.

I used to live somewhere where all the neighbours spoke to each other. Where I live now we don't have that, but to be honest I don't mind. I quite like the anonymity of the city centre. Little fish in a big pond. But again, as I get older, I will want to revert back to that, having that sense of community.

Civil servant in her late 30s, Manchester

I don't know my neighbours at all, but it suits me when I'm rolling into my flat at three or four o'clock in the morning.

Assistant to financial advisors in her 20s, Manchester

This was fairly typical of the discussion; clearly for some participants, having good relationships with their neighbours mattered. For others, community was important, they just didn't find it in their street, but instead with friends elsewhere in the city.



Push factors: Crime

Crime

In cities where people have noticed a rise in crime in the past five years, even life-long residents are considering leaving. Especially those with children.

It was a dominant factor in London and Birmingham. Violent attacks taking place near their homes or in the public spaces they often frequent is proving an incredibly strong push factor - the strongest of all. When people learn of a stabbing in the city centre, for example, they can picture it vividly because they know the city so well. Where an escalation in violence was perceived to be especially recent - the past five years or so - it was particularly powerful; it was not a gradual change they might become used to over time, but something that shocked and frightened them. In London crime was more an accepted part of living in a big city, but the sheer volume of assaults, robberies and thefts in everyday life was testing even the most resilient of city folk.

Overall, in Britain's capital and second city people said they feel increasingly unsafe, and the only control they have is potentially moving away.

Birmingham

Crime was a recurring theme throughout the discussions, being raised by life-long Brummies and newcomers alike.

This issue being raised so frequently was perhaps partly due to it being perceived as a recent change; participants said that crime had got worse in the last five years. Crime was something the participants were witnessing in their everyday lives, as well as noticing in local press reports and on social media. The group were acutely aware of stabbings and muggings happening to others in the city, while some had personally experienced crimes: one participant spoke about drug dealing in the apartment block where she lived; another having their car broken into; one person being the victim of a homophobic attack.

There's a lot of crime in the city centre. There were stabbings at the weekend, at one of the nightclubs. A taxi driver, he got mugged, I think he got stabbed as well. And there was the one lad, he got killed. It's quite scary, it's only just up the road.

Lunchtime supervisor in her 50s, Birmingham

I frequent the gay village in Birmingham and there was, the other week, an incident outside which has been deemed a homophobic attack on two lads. A bottle was used to knock one of them out and slash one of the guys faces. We get a lot of cars driving round, people shouting out homophobic abuse. Muggings. Attacks. It just feels unsafe sometimes.

Bartender in his early 30s, Birmingham

I moved into my place about eight years ago, when I first moved in it was so nice. It was quiet, people were friendly. And now things have changed a lot. There's a lot of drugs in the area, even in our apartment block. You get people tailgating you, there's been break-ins, there's always a lot of police around... There's a lot of knife crime. It's no longer safe.

Carer in her mid-40s, Birmingham

Every Saturday I help out at a homeless shelter. One of our volunteers got attacked by a 15-year-old lad, who was carrying a knife. I mean, to find out there's 15-year-olds carrying knives and stuff like that... the crime in Birmingham, it's getting really bad.

Male in his late 20s, currently unemployed, Birmingham

It's a bit random, but people have been breaking into cars to steal the, what's it called, the catalytic converter? It's happening around 3am or 4am. It's costing people £300 or £400 to get it sorted afterwards.

Security guard in his 20s, Birmingham

There was the sense among the entire group that they had no control over this whatsoever, other than being more vigilant. They also noted a sharp decline in respect for the police – in terms of people committing crime not fearing their presence – compared to when they were younger.

Crime was the biggest reason that people might leave the city. In the working-class group, the majority of participants said if it got much worse, they would have to move – their language during this part of the conversation wasn't caveated, but definite. This was especially the case for the participants with children or grandchildren, whom they feared might become victims of violent crime.

If crimes shoots up even more than it has, I will have to move to somewhere I feel a bit more safe... because I've had friends that have suffered homophobic attacks. There's all that what's been in the news from the other weekend. If it carries on then, no, I'm done.

Bartender in his early 30s, Birmingham

If crime goes up then, yeah, I would leave Birmingham... I would leave Birmingham.

Male in his late 20s, currently unemployed, Birmingham

Years ago people used to fight with their fists, and now it's... they've got to use a weapon. I worry about my children to be fair. I've got a 21-year-old, going out up town, and I think, 'are they going to be safe?' because of these stupid people?

Lunchtime supervisor in her 50s, Birmingham

London

There was a divide between a minority who felt crime might make them leave London, and the majority who saw it as part-and-parcel of living in a big city.

Participants across all the London groups talked of crime in their neighbourhoods, but this was not the first thing they mentioned, nor was it something they were furious about. The middle-class group said that they had seen an increase in crimes such as animal theft, or parts of cars being stolen, while the working-class, who were more concerned about traffic and the congestion charge, noticed areas have become rougher. Here, they expressed both a desire to have more police on the streets and a lack of faith in police at the same time.

You've got kids riding along on mopeds nicking phones out of people's hands, it's got ridiculous now. I'm not sure what you can do about that.

Compliance manager in his late 30s with two children, London

But while they felt they had no control over the biggest problems in their neighbourhoods, most didn't expect to have any control either. An example of this was one participant who highlighted the increasing instances of thieves on mopeds snatching phones out of people's hands. While it upset them, they didn't expect to be able to influence this. This was echoed by others who, even though they had personally been victims of crime, had a certain tolerance or acceptance that this came with the territory. Life in a big city had upsides and downsides, and crime was just part of that life. In many cases, they just adapted.

What can I do? Write to my MP or the council? What's the point? I just don't have my phone out as much any more.

Compliance manager in his late 30s with two children, London

It goes without saying, there's crime happening just like any area of London. Personally I wouldn't know where to start with a problem like that. I think it's best to just 'shut up and put up' with it.

Solicitor in her 30s with an 18-month-old child, London

"There is always going to be crime in London, it comes with living in a city. You just get on with it."

Support worker in her 30s, London

"I've lived in London my whole life. Yes there is crime but I'm not moving because of it, it doesn't impact me on a day to day basis, we are very lucky to live where we live."

Teacher in his 50s, London

We all love this city, but there is an acceptance now that if a crime is committed and it's low-level, they [the police] are not going to come out.

Car salesman in his late 50s, London

Among those with children, tolerating crime was becoming harder and harder.

Most of the participants with children were born and raised in London and found it hard to admit that the fear of crime, including gang culture, was making them consider whether it would be better to move out of the capital. Only one participant was actively planning to leave London, primarily motivated by the amount of crime in Islington, as well as wanting a bigger house and more outdoor space to enjoy.

Until I had a child, it didn't really affect me all that much. But now I'm bringing up a young boy, in inner London, it does worry me. It's one of the main reasons why I'd like to move, to an area with much less crime, maybe a bit more suburban as well.

Support worker in her 30s with a seven-month-old child, London

Across all the groups, people felt they had no control whatsoever over crime and the other problems in their neighbourhood, and there was debate about whether this was the Government's responsibility or the Mayor's.



Push factors: The pace of change being too fast

The pace of change

In Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, participants said that development is taking place at an alarming rate. The pace of change - with what feels to them like dramatic and rushed changes to the built environment - is so quick that they are finding parts of the city becoming unfamiliar, that they no longer feel like home.

Participants in Manchester and Leeds especially (and to a lesser extent Birmingham) spoke of their frustration that increasing prosperity was pricing out independent businesses. These add so much to the city's identity and are being replaced with more corporate 'chain' outlets, which they feel detract from the city's culture.

Many remembered what their cities were like years ago, before this period of investment, and do not want a return to those days of run-down, neglected city centres blighted by crime. They do, however, want a better balance - before the pace of change harms the city's identity beyond repair.

There was not the same perception in London; the city was always changing, and in fact if anything they wanted the effects of investments to spread further to regenerate deprived areas.

Manchester

The pace of change and level of development was threatening the city's identity.

The perception among all participants was that, in the past five years, as more investment has come in, the city's shops and restaurants have become more corporate. As a result, big chains are pricing out independent businesses, with the city's unique culture being eroded for something far more mainstream. The city's music scene was suffering too, with venues closing down. Trying to make Manchester a more global city - 'the London of the North' - was being done without the expressed approval of long-term residents. Participants also felt that development was reducing both the amount of green spaces like parks but also general greenery around the city.

For me now - and I don't want to be pessimistic about Manchester because I do love the place - but in the last five years the corporates have got into the Northern Quarter and they're slowly eroding that feeling that Manchester has had, that independent feel that Manchester has had for years and years. The music scene is nowhere near as strong as it once was. You go to Apollo and it's all very mainstream. 20 years ago, there'd have been riots if a chain had been put in the Northern Quarter. That kind of sums it up. It's losing its way. Its identity has gone a bit too mainstream for me.

Builder in his 30s, Manchester

The school that I teach at, the third floor looks over towards Beetham Tower and Deansgate, and at one point - this was three years ago - my form counted 84 cranes across the skyline of Manchester. Now each of those cranes represents some sort of office block or residential block and I don't think that has slowed down. It might have been on hold for a little bit, but the growth of the high-rise buildings in Manchester is massive, because there's obviously no more space to grow [outwards].

Teacher in his late 30s, Manchester

That's going to be the future. You could be blind-folded and parachuted into a city, and you wouldn't know where you are, they're all the same. It could be Glasgow or Manchester or London... That sense of difference or independence is going.

Cleaning operator in his 60s, Manchester

Investment is perceived to be pricing out residents too. The continued development was seen as something that may change the city's sense of itself, with more people moving from other parts of the country and abroad, while Mancunians were being forced to move out - or seeing the area changing beyond recognition. Participants noted how attractive Manchester was for people in wealthier parts of the country, who could get more for their money and in turn were pushing up prices. The same was said of foreign investment, with one participant claiming apartment blocks were being built and left empty. The end result was a city that was becoming too expensive for people like them.

You've got born and bred people who have been living here before it was up-and-coming. Then you've got lots of people moving into the area, hipsters, who want lots of changes in the area, like the blocking off of the roads. You know, they want all the gentrification and investment - which is good, but they're disregarding the thoughts and feelings of people who are born and bred here.

Sales assistant in his 40s, Manchester

The flats are going up, they're throwing them up, and they're staying empty, because they're holding on for high-earners, high rent payers. They want what London's got... All these companies are moving their offices here because the rents are cheaper than London and people are moving with it. It's all foreign investment.

Recruitment manager in his 30s, Manchester

But the contrast with 20 years ago was strong, and balanced their views.

Interestingly, the participants spoke not so much with anger about the perceived overdevelopment, but more in terms of disapproval. Not only did they accept them as inevitable – the city would always keep changing – but there was recognition that in previous decades Manchester had been a place in desperate need of investment. They recognised that investment didn't always bring changes they liked, but they preferred the way the city was now.

There can be a bit of a rose-tinted view of what things were like, you know when people are complaining about all the gentrification. You go back 20 years, Manchester, it was a grim, grim place to be with all the gang violence. People wanted out.

Builder in his 30s, Manchester

Birmingham

Overall, participants were noticing a lot of change in the city. This ranged from increased development activity to rising crime. One participant mentioned the forthcoming clean air zone charge for vehicles, which he anticipated forcing him to change the way he goes about his daily life. One participant voiced the concern that, with more development and new transport links (such as the tram) on the way, the city would continue changing.

Sometimes you're just sitting in town and you're like 'where's this building come from?'

Admin officer in her late 30s, Birmingham

They need to stop building. There's wind tunnels where there never used to be any. Birmingham has got the worst architecture in the country. We build buildings and knock them down again.

Network Rail worker in her mid 40s, Birmingham

What annoys me is that you come into the town for a day for a shop and there's nowhere really to go and sit. There's nowhere just to sit outside with the kids. We've done ten shops, tell you what, let's have a little sit and give the baby a bottle. There's nowhere.

Youth worker in his mid 40s, Birmingham

I live on my own so I've been in the city centre for the last three years but I'm thinking of moving out because of the rent that I do pay I think I can probably get a two-bedroom and a garden. I like the city life, though. I'm originally from Brixton.

Recruitment consultant in his late 20s, no children, Birmingham

Leeds

There was unhappiness about overdevelopment, congestion and lack of green spaces. Every participant was aware of how much development was taking place in the city, especially house building, but also new road/traffic changes that were causing a great deal of disruption. While it was accepted that development was inevitable, their impression was that this had led to the loss of open spaces and green areas, something that was of real regret and the long-term impact of which they were concerned about for the future.

It's important that people have places to live and we've got to make sure we sort it out, but you've got to remember that the city is already bursting at the seams. The roads are so busy and the transport is rubbish - unless they're going to sort that out how are we going to cope with thousands of new houses?

Safeguarding officer in her 50s, Leeds

When you drive round Leeds it's absolutely terrible. But then you don't have much choice because the buses and trains are no better. It makes things so difficult and then you wonder how we're going to handle it. And then you start losing parks and other green areas as a result of it - is it all worth it?

Credit controller in his 50s, Leeds

Despite Leeds changing its face over the last decade, participants said there are issues causing it to lag behind other parts of the country. Most across both groups - particularly in the over 40s - felt Leeds was beginning to change beyond recognition. The city centre was transforming, with high rise buildings and new bars, restaurants and shopping plazas, turning it into a metropolitan hub. But the majority across both groups felt this was not telling the full story - with issues around connectivity, inability to retain talent and lack of highly paid, skilled jobs causing problems beneath the surface. In that sense, the makeover Leeds was going through felt a little thin, with much to fix underneath.



You look at Leeds in a picture or at a glance and you think 'wow'. But if you scratch at the surface, the buses are rubbish, we don't have a tram system, you can't get to the other parts of the city without sitting in traffic or changing about 3 buses. It might look glamorous but we're stuck with third rate infrastructure that is stopping us properly growing as a city."

Admin assistant in her 30s, Leeds

Leeds is definitely a better, cleaner, more modern place than when I first grew up here. That's brilliant, but we've not solved any of the stuff that makes it hard to live here. And that's what will hold us back from getting a better city in the future. The council blew a load of money looking at a new tram system only to not go ahead with it in the end. We need to get it sorted.

Credit controller in his 50s, Leeds

There are also worries about the rapid rise in housing developments. Given the above concerns about connectivity, many across both groups felt a nervousness about the huge increase in new housing developments. This was true for the younger group too - despite their acceptance that more houses are required. The worries stretched from traffic to availability of school places and GP waiting lists - the standard concerns we often see concerning housing, but felt particularly strongly given the already busy nature of Leeds as a city.

I'm lucky and own a house but I'd say that even if I was renting, I'd be nervous about how many houses are going up even if I was trying to get on the ladder. Schools and doctors are so overcrowded and the connections between the different parts of the city are just so poor. All these new people will suffer the same problems and it isn't fair."

Delivery manager in his 30s, Leeds

London

For the London participants, the pace of change was something they welcomed.

Change has been mostly positive, with less affluent areas benefiting from regeneration and becoming more desirable as a result. Change happened around them all the time and they just get on with their lives.

For me, Brixton's come a very long way. It's quite gentrified now, whereas probably 20 years ago it had quite a bad reputation. Whereas now Brixton has really come up as quite a hip place... there's lots of new places that have been popping up over the years, bars and restaurants, which is really nice.

Support worker in her 30s, London

For Hackney, an area that, not that long ago, was kind of struggling economically, it now feels like a nice area. It's continuing to improve but still retains what feels like a lot of people who have been here for generations. It's not just those who have moved in in the last five years. There's authenticity there too.

Climate change expert in his 30s, London

If anything, they wanted more change to bring improvements to other areas.

You can walk along some of the posh shopping streets in the centre and there's not a bin anywhere, but there's not a single piece of litter in sight. But it's like that because it's geared towards all the businesses there. What I would really like is to spread that further out, to the rest of London so that we don't have the graffiti, we don't have the litter, we don't have people urinating in the street.

Support worker in her 30s, London

One group wanted more housing, the other less. The middle class group showed concern at the idea of more people moving to London, as one person said 'there is no room for more houses'. Another listed it as a reason that would make him consider moving out of the city. Whereas for the working-class group, affordable housing was in short supply, and they talked about how far they would have to move in order to find somewhere they could afford to live.

Everywhere they are building tower blocks and looking down at you everywhere. There's a space then and suddenly, it's just gonna become a tower block, or if it's a church, and they're just gonna knock it down.

Sales assistant in her 50s, London



Push factors: House prices

House prices

We found participants in all cities - not a majority, but a significant minority - express the view that high house prices could be one of the few factors that would force them to leave the area. This would be to find a larger home once they start a family, with more and bigger rooms and a garden for their children to play in. Or it might be that moving out of the city was the only way to get a foot on the property ladder.

Often, they did not state this was an issue of affordability - it would take several steps in the conversation, prompted by the moderator, to land on 'high house prices' as the problem. They often spoke as if larger homes with gardens did not even exist in cities.

London

Owning their own home or having more space was only achievable by moving away. The majority of participants were happy living in London. Among the minority wishing to leave, a desire for more space and a better overall environment was frequently mentioned. Many who wished to own their own home only thought this would be possible if they moved out of the area.

I think just probably getting more from your money, in terms of buying [a house] and a sort of, more suburban... less crime. A better area for bringing up children.

Support worker in her 30s with a seven-month-old child, London

The cost of the properties in West Hampstead is just going through the roof. So if I did ever get to thinking about owning a property, that would be a major factor, in terms of moving out of the area.

Solicitor in her 30s with an 18-month-old child, London

What might make me leave? Being able to afford a property, because I don't ever see that happening around here, not anytime soon anyway. That would be the biggest thing.

Student in her 20s, London

There's not many open spaces, there's lots of crime. When they get to being teenagers I'll be a nervous wreck, I'll be sending them out in kevlar vests every day. It's pollution, it's not a healthy lifestyle. I think they'll be much happier out in Hertfordshire, with more space, more open spaces.

Compliance manager in his late 30s with two children, London

Manchester

A significant minority of participants in Manchester said that they would have to leave the city to find a family home. Houses with more space and a garden just weren't available to them in the city, with new developments focused on building more and more flats. This was a realisation among those looking to start a family soon, but also among those for whom having children was imminent; it was nonetheless already on their minds that needing a larger home meant moving out of the city.

With my job I visit quite a lot of houses in the city centre, apartments, and the ones with the very small young families are looking to move and want a house with a garden. That's understandable, isn't it.

Detective constable in her mid-40s, Manchester

Birmingham

In Birmingham, some participants felt that although the city was not the most expensive in the country, prices were rapidly putting family homes beyond their reach. Some said they faced choosing between living where they wanted – close to friends and family in the city – and home ownership.

It's not that expensive here compared to London, but it's quite expensive to be fair. And I feel like other cities, houses are a good ten grand cheaper.

Security guard in his 20s, Birmingham

It scares the crap out of me that I can't afford to live close to my network. I'm like the single person that everyone drops in on. I'd like to move in the vicinity but it's an expensive area.

Network Rail worker in her mid 40s, Birmingham



Push factors: Impact on health

Impact on health

The effects of city-living on people's health was overwhelmingly viewed in negative terms: air pollution; poor access to a GP; a lack of open green spaces close to their home. Given how important health is to a person's quality of life, it was perhaps surprising the issue only came up when the question was asked directly.

However, it is reasonable to assume that people do not make too strong a connection between city life and poor health – it is perhaps a few too many steps removed from how they think of the things that really affect their health: their diet, how much exercise they do, their knowledge (or lack thereof) of how to live healthily, and so on – all of which are just as much helped as hindered by city-living.

London

They believe living in cities can be bad for their health, but it is not a strong enough reason to leave. When asked what impact city-living has on their health, air pollution was raised in all the London groups immediately. Most participants had noticed a contrast during lockdown, which they said had resulted in cleaner air, as well as more wildlife in the area. The difference was something they also recognised when travelling back from outside the capital.

I think as everybody said, you get used to the pollution and you don't really think about it. But once you're outside the city and then come back, you're like – oh yeah, there is quite a lot of pollution.

Engineer in his 20s, London

But when asked about whether noticing this contrast made them want to live somewhere without air pollution in the future, this just was not something they considered. It was a problem they were all aware of, but like crime, Londoners viewed it as simply part of living in a big city.

Just live with it. It's part and parcel of a major city isn't it.

Key cutter in her mid-50s, London

Access to health services was an issue, both in terms of hospitals and GPs, which they thought was particularly bad compared to other parts of the country because of how many people were living in London.

Overcrowding is getting so bad. Like, the NHS is worse than anywhere - in London - because there's just so many people. It puts so many demands on things.

Compliance manager in his late 30s, London

On the other side of the ledger, participants in two groups highlighted how they walked and cycled more than their friends who lived in different parts of the country. Most were happy with London's green spaces and all talked about their local parks with a sense of pride. For those with a range of large parks and green spaces nearby, they unquestionably felt they were close to nature, despite living in the city. But for others where the options for parks were more limited, they said they felt a disconnect - although this wasn't strong enough to make them move away.

I keep banging on about the Commons but Clapham Common is huge, Streatham Common, Tooting Common, Wandsworth Common - we're so spoilt for green space here.

HR manager in his 30s, London

I'm riding my bike a lot more in London than anywhere else.

Barman in his 30s, London

I don't feel that connected to nature to be honest. But I've grown up my entire life, you know, surrounded by buildings.

Programme administrator in her 20s, London

Manchester

The impact of city-living on their health was also viewed in terms of access to health services, which was mixed. Participants reported how difficult it was to get an appointment with a GP or dentist, which they felt had got worse as the rate of development in the city had increased.

People being here is not an issue, personally. When a new bar becomes popular, people are going to find out about it. But it's the services that's the thing. Getting into a dentist, it's like a three year wait for one that's in the centre and will cost a fortune. Or getting a GP appointment - where I am, you have to ring at 8am and just ring for five minutes straight like that [taps the table repeatedly] because it's engaged.

Recruitment manager in his 30s, Manchester

Everything's growing but essential services just can't keep up.

Sales assistant in his 40s, Manchester

The provision of mental health services was also raised, which many felt was contributing to the amount of homelessness in the city centre. In fact, participants felt homelessness had 'boomed' in the past five years, which they equated with drug use, drug dealing and mental health issues. One participant linked the rate of development on open spaces with rough sleeping becoming more visible.

There are now less spaces for homeless people, all the development that's going on, taking over green spaces. So they're more on show than they were before... they're being pushed into open spaces.

Project manager in his 30s, Manchester

The prevalence of rough sleeping was a cause of sadness among participants, not just for the people experiencing homelessness but also for how it reflected on Manchester as a city. Few were confident what the right solution was, but the overwhelming sentiment towards the issue of homelessness was one of sympathy and regret, a situation very much at odds with all the investment pouring into the city.

The dark side of Manchester, you now see during the day time.

Teacher in his late 30s, Manchester

There's a lot of judgement out there. What's that saying? You're only two missed pay-cheques away from losing your home. So there's a lot of judgement about what it's like for people who find themselves living on the street. If I was living on the street, I'd want to be in that state [on drugs]. So you don't know if the drugs came after they were homeless, you can't pass judgement. It just makes me exceptionally sad.

Civil servant in her late 30s, Manchester



Most participants strongly felt that living in the city had a negative impact on their health, especially in terms of air pollution. There was also recognition that they felt disconnected from nature, even though the city did have some nice green spaces.

Oh it's got to be bad for your health [living in the city]. 100%. I mean, air pollution, for one. That's got to have a bad effect on your health.

Manager in her 40s, Manchester

Birmingham

Air pollution was mentioned most in this context - something that was very noticeable to them at certain moments, but also something they became used to over time.

In regards to air quality, when I first came back from Edinburgh, there was a different smell in the air. It wasn't as pure. There was an element of... you want to call it 'smog'. But now I don't notice it anymore. It's like the difference between drinking bottled water and drinking tap water. The first time you go back to tap water you notice the difference but by the third glass you're fine.

Finance manager in his late 20s, Birmingham

There was a divide between those who wanted more green spaces badly, and those who just accepted they wouldn't have them. For a minority of participants, the experience of lockdown had made them want to have much greater access to larger, green open spaces. They appreciated the local parks, but they didn't consider that as nature.

To me a park in the city is still very man-made. It's got boundaries. It's like walking on a golf course.

Finance manager in his late 20s, Birmingham

However, the majority of participants just did not expect to have nature on their doorstep. It was part of the deal one accepts when living in a big city, a compromise they were content to make.

Nature? There's not much nature in Birmingham. If I want to explore nature, I'll go to Devon. Don't get me wrong, I love a bit of fresh air, but there ain't much to offer with the parks. They've created something and called it a hub but it's got no grass and they've taken all the trees out so what are they talking about? How's that nature?

Network Rail worker in her mid 40s, Birmingham

Leeds

Leeds is seen as unique for its access to green space. Most participants lived within a short walk or drive from a big green space - be it a park or countryside walk. This was one of the key factors for wanting to continue living in the city. Some had visited friends in Manchester, Liverpool and other major cities but found no ability to quickly be in a big green space. It was a badge of honour for many in the groups.

We're so lucky to have all these parks so close by - Roundhay, Middleton and others - and you don't get that in other cities. It's great to see all the families enjoying it and young people just sitting and relaxing. It makes the city such a diverse place.

Legal secretary in her 40s, Leeds

Lockdown had given them a new appreciation for several things, including the outdoors and doing things for free. Participants spoke of how much more important walking had become, and therefore being able to have nice places to walk with their families; parks, but also longer walks away from where they lived. Lockdown had changed some long-held habits, including finding a new appreciation of things that were free such as going to the park or for a walk, instead of other leisure activities they used to do quite often, such as the cinema or bowling or shopping.

I had absolutely no idea I had this amazing river walk that led to these rolling fields about 10 minutes from my front door. It just encouraged you to get out and explore your community a little bit more.

Lawyer in his 40s, Leeds



The impact of Covid

The focus groups carried out for this research were held throughout August and September 2021. During this time, the rollout of the UK's vaccine programme, combined with warmer Summer weather, meant the threat of Covid was declining from its lockdown-peak. Restrictions were starting to ease, furlough was winding down and people were starting to feel more confident that the worst was behind us.

In all the hours of in-depth discussions with city residents, the effects of lockdown did not feature heavily in people's reflections about city-living. It would come up in conversation occasionally, most often in relation to how connected people feel with nature; the events of the past 18 months had given them a new appreciation for parks and open green spaces. Or they had enjoyed the streets being quieter, traffic being less congested and the air feeling cleaner. They made the best of the situation and enjoyed it for what it was.

I've tried a lot of places nearby that I had no idea existed before lockdown. We used to take the kids on long walks instead of going to pay for bowling or eating out and we've explored and found such amazing new places.

Manager in his 40s, Leeds

But as restrictions have come to an end and city life has begun to resume, they reverted back to their previous city lives with ease. They enjoy the hustle and bustle again, going to the pub after work, meeting friends for dinner - *being with other people.*

But during Covid, without all of that [places to socialise], suddenly it was a really crap place to be because you want to go on big walks somewhere and you have to think about how you're going to get there. There's only so many times you can walk the canals. So Covid made me re-evaluate, but it's so good now that everything is opening up again.

Secondary school teacher in her late 20s, Birmingham

People still want to go back in the office. I still really want that human contact. You do lose a lot when you don't have that.

Accountant in her late 40s, Birmingham

As we found throughout our discussions, city residents are typically an adaptable, resilient bunch - traits that got them through the pandemic, and will no doubt take them past it.



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