

How does the public understand government?

Assessing the 'perception gap' between experience and trust among voters in England



About this report

This report is a collaboration between the Institute for Government, More in Common and the University of York. The research for this report was kindly supported by the York Policy Engine, at the University of York, and More in Common. The purpose of the work is to further understanding among national, regional and local policy makers in the UK of how the public perceive what government is and what shapes those perceptions, in line with the Institute's mission to make government work well for the people of the UK.

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Foreword

Public trust in government as a force for good is declining in several developed democracies, and the UK is no exception. In fact the UK is one of the lower-ranked countries for how much the public trusts the government to “do what is right” according to international comparisons.* This picture has been worsening over time.

This paper, a joint project from the Institute for Government, More in Common and the University of York, aims to get beyond the headline of declining trust in government to understand better what shapes public opinion about government in England, and what that means for policy makers at national, regional and local level.

We found a concerning ‘perception gap’ among voters – where individuals’ largely positive reported experiences of government do not carry through to greater overall trust in it. This disparity between experience and trust has important implications for any politicians and policy makers seeking to rebuild trust with a sceptical public.

As the UK makes further steps towards devolution of power from Westminster and Whitehall, to be accelerated by the Burnham government, it is important that policy makers and the wider policy community understand the relationship between devolution and public trust in government.

Our research finds that regional mayors, where they exist, experience higher levels of public trust than national or local government. However, that higher trust may be related to factors other than the existence of a mayor, and further research is needed to identify the factors driving trust in regions with mayors. For example, it could be related to where the population may have higher educational attainment, which is associated with higher trust in government more generally. Or it may be that the mayor is perceived as a champion of a place rather than a deliverer of public services, like the local council or national government.

Our hope in embarking upon this work is that it contributes to providing evidence to political leaders and policy makers at all levels so that they can better connect the work of government to the perceptions and experiences of the public they serve.

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* Edelman Trust Institute, 2026 *Edelman Trust Barometer*, 2026, p. 5, [www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/uk/2026-01/2026%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_UK%20Report%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/uk/2026-01/2026%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_UK%20Report%20(1).pdf)

Summary

We identified a 'perception gap' between people's experiences of what they saw as government and their feelings about trusting government to act in their interests. In focus groups, people reported a range of problems and complaints based on their experience of government; and when asked about trust in government, both in the survey and in focus groups, people were much more negative. Yet when asked in our large-scale survey, most people were favourable about their personal experiences of government. This implies that while constantly improving government delivery matters, it is not the only factor that shapes the relationship between the public and government.

The focus groups shed more light on why trust in government was so low. Low trust was largely attributed to 'broken promises' by successive parties and politicians, feeling that they had benefited themselves more than the public they were there to serve.

Several participants also mentioned actions during the Covid era as being instrumental in shaping their perceptions of government, from government information sharing during the lockdowns to questionable contracts with private providers. When asked what, if anything, government had done positively (at any time), Covid payments to businesses were mentioned. But that positive role for government did not translate into political support or to higher trust, suggesting, again, that delivery matters but does not by itself define the relationship between the people and government or the governing party.

Regional mayors are more trusted than national or local government in the places that have one, which is particularly the case for those aged under 45. However mayors are also not seen as responsible for very much compared to national and local government, so it may be that they are looked on more favourably because they are perceived as champions of their locality rather than as holding responsibility for implementing government policy or delivering public services.

Having a regional mayor did not by itself improve people's perceptions of government overall – though this varied greatly between areas, with London having a more positive perception of government. This may be due to factors other than the perceived efficacy of government in London – for example the higher educational attainment levels in the capital, or that London has had a mayor for longer than other regions, or the proximity to national government.

People tended to have a more positive perception of local issues associated with local services, such as how many good job opportunities there are, compared to issues that government is not wholly responsible for where people have a more negative opinion, such as the state of the local high street. This could suggest there is potential for effective government action in more areas of local life, or that government should have more focus on local action.

When people thought things were going badly in their area, the UK government took the largest share of the blame, whereas when things were going well, local authorities tended to get more credit. For instance, in areas with a regional mayor, across the eight issues we asked about, an average of 46% of those with a negative view blamed the UK government, but only 30% of those with a positive view credited it. Local councils were credited more often (45%) than blamed (32%). Regional mayors themselves were credited around twice as often as they were blamed (13% against 6%).

Recommendations

Our research has informed five key recommendations for any policy makers working to improve low levels of trust in government. To start to bring about this change, national government should:

- **Prioritise local delivery of local priorities, both in policies and in communications.** People want to see how their priorities close to home are reflected in what the government at Westminster does and says. For example, this could mean a new road or rail line that the mayor or local council has campaigned for.
- **Remember the public want credible promises delivered, and more honest and transparent communication.** Improving everyday experiences of public services matters but the relationship between the public and government also depends on the extent to which people feel politicians are prioritising *their* interests and making credible promises they can deliver on.
- **Empower mayors to retain their distinctive voice as champion of their region.** The relative credibility of mayors is a strength to build on, but may depend on mayors being able to continue voicing the interests of the people of their region rather than being seen as another arm of government service delivery.
- **Review the uneven responsibilities between mayors and regions at the next stage of devolution.** The confusion among the public about which layer of government is responsible for what is not helped by the patchwork of responsibilities across governments in England. This should be reviewed at the next stage of devolution to improve public accountability and transparency.
- **Make social cohesion a local, regional and national priority.** The gap between regions' perceptions of how well people of different ethnicities and cultures get on is stark (positive +34% in London compared to +2% in Yorkshire and the Humber). This is important for policy makers to be aware of and to address through effective approaches to strengthen social cohesion such as supporting local community groups on the ground.

1. What the public sees as 'government'

People claim they are reasonably knowledgeable about government. Some 57% of our 5,000-person survey said they know a 'great deal' or a 'fair amount' about how government works, and only 6% thought they know nothing at all.* This was fairly consistent across the different age groups.

Urban areas with mayors, like London and Manchester, said they had higher levels of knowledge about how government works compared to other places. However, perceived knowledge in places like the North East of England and West Yorkshire, which have mayors but are less urban, was lower than the national average. This could be more to do with factors like how long the mayoral post has existed (London has had a mayor since 2000, Manchester since 2017; Hull and East Yorkshire only since 2025), and the education level in the area, rather than solely attributed to whether the region has a mayor or not. Men were much more confident they knew a fair amount or a great deal about government compared to how much women said they knew about government, at 67% and 48% respectively.

Although people say they felt they generally knew a reasonable amount about how government works in the UK, they do not say the same about their fellow citizens. Less than a third of respondents said they thought 'the average person' knows a great deal or a fair amount about how government works in the UK (31%), compared to 57% who say that about themselves.

When it comes to what people consider to be part of 'government' in the UK, more people cited national responsibilities like defence and the economy than local ones like social care and neighbourhood safety. This may be because they don't see a role for government at all in these areas, or that they consider 'government' to be something distinct from their local council. In our focus groups, people voluntarily brought up local issues like bin collections and personal safety as priorities. People who supported Reform UK at the last general election are less likely to see core areas of social policy like health as being part of government in the UK (66% average vs 60% Reform); the same was true for education (65% average vs 61% Reform) and social security (60% vs 55% Reform).

Given the choice between different levels of government, eight in ten say national government has the most impact on the country, with fewer than one in 20 suggesting local government (5%). However, a quarter say local councils have the most impact on them personally, compared to 55% who say national government.

* In response to the question from the survey "How much, if anything, would you say you personally know about how government works in the UK?": a great deal / fair amount 57%; not very much / nothing 40%; a great deal 10%; a fair amount 47%; not very much 34%; nothing at all 6%; don't know 2%. Total respondents 5,000 18+ adults in England. Respondents have been weighted according to age/sex interlocked, region, 2024 general election vote, ethnicity and education level.

This may depend on which types of policies they perceive as affecting their lives more. For example, those most concerned about tax set nationally may say national government, and those concerned about local transport may say the local council. Few say their mayor has the most impact on them locally, in regions where mayoral devolution exists, though this is higher in London at 13% compared to 9% in other mayoral regions.

On the whole, people have a reasonable understanding of who is responsible for what. They are more likely to say local councils are responsible for bins, libraries, how much council tax is paid, buses, planning, providing council or social housing, childcare services, adult social care and children in care. Even where they say national government is responsible for things that are delivered locally like hospitals and GPs, policing and schools, it could be that they associate national government with being responsible for funding, so it may not be that this is due to the individual misattributing national responsibility.

There are still, however, large proportions who put responsibilities at the 'wrong' level of government, and having a mayor did not appear to make this clearer, so there does appear to be an issue with governance in English regions not mapping well to the public's understanding. This may be exacerbated by the patchwork nature of devolution in England, which means there is inconsistency between regions in which responsibilities lie where. Accountability and transparency to the public will be an important issue to address as responsibilities change between levels of government.

The public do clearly have a sense that different tiers of government – their local council, regional mayors and the UK government – have responsibilities for different kinds of issues. We asked our survey participants to describe "in a few words... the last thing your local council/regional mayor/UK government did which affected your life?" Figure 1 shows the most common words and phrases in these comments reflecting the associations across each tier – what could be characterised broadly from local to mayor to UK government as bins, buses and taxes.

Figure 1 **Words and phrases most commonly brought up by the public when asked how UK government, regional mayors and local council last affected their life, Aug 2026**

	UK government	Regional mayor	Local council
1	Tax	Bus	Council tax
2	Increase	Transport	Bin
3	Cost of living	Bus fare	Road
4	Change	Local	Increase
5	Raise	Improve	Local
6	Pension	Public transport	Pothole
7	Energy	Service	Change
8	Winter fuel payment	ULEZ	Waste
9	Price	Good	Raise
10	Reduce	Tax	Bin collection

Source: Institute for Government, More in Common and University of York analysis of More in Common survey, August 2026. Notes: Words and phrases are those included in open-text responses to the question 'In a few words, what was the last thing your local council/regional mayor/UK Government did which affected your life? Filler words and 'n/a'/'nothing' have been removed. See the Annex for a more complete list.

Where do people form these perceptions?

Most people we surveyed get their news about government from news channels on TV, radio and websites (61%), though participants in the focus groups said they didn't seek out this information but happened upon it. The rest is from newspapers and their websites (38%), social media (37%), and friends and family (36%)*. Only a quarter said they got their news about government from a direct source like a government or council website or app, and fewer (16%) from political parties or campaigning materials.

"They [government] should be trying to provide an environment or a country for the people that doesn't cost you a fortune just to live a basic life. They should be trying to provide a safe environment, which obviously means more police, more law and order, and more hospitals and doctors and everything that you can rely on and you can get looked after, and somewhere where you can have what should be really the basics of life for the sort of minimum price, like energy and stuff like that... it seems like public services and the quality is continually diminishing, but the cost is going up and up." – *Man from the North East of England, August 2026*

"Making sure we're not forgotten about up here, and that they look at what we actually need in our area because that would be totally different to what is needed further down south." – *Woman from the North East of England on what local government should be for, August 2026*

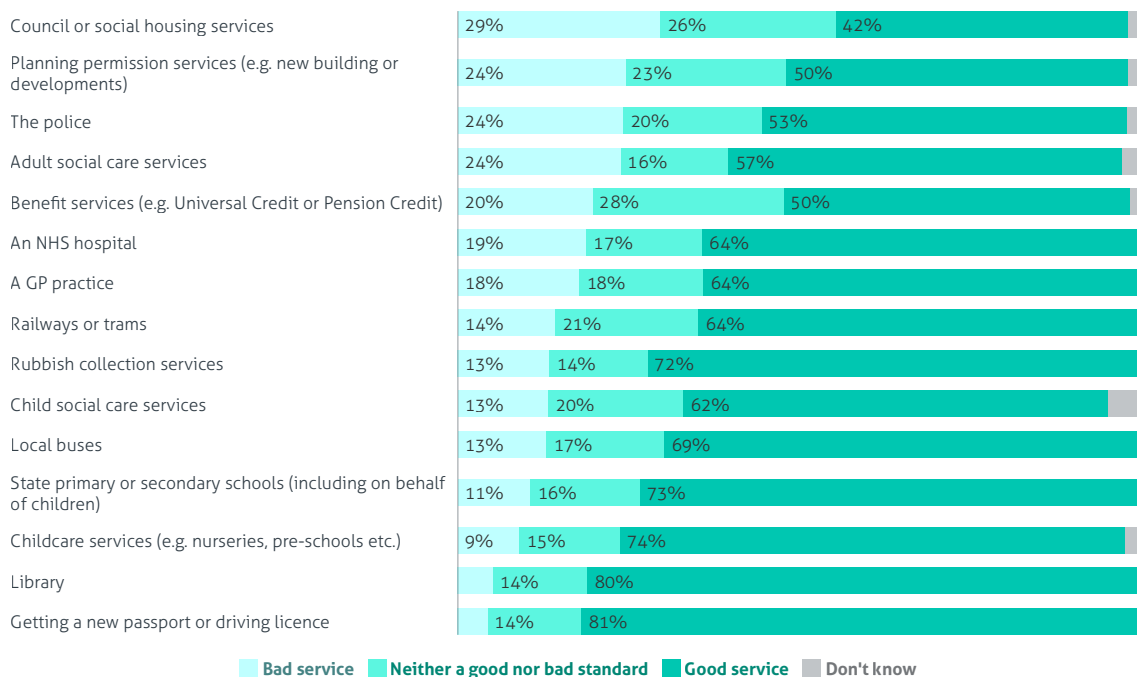
* In response to the question from the survey "From which of the following, if any, do you get information about what 'government' is doing from? Please select all that apply." Social media (e.g. Facebook, X / Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc.) 37%; newspapers (including their websites or apps) 38%; news channels (including TV, radio or their websites) 61%; personal experiences of using public services 27%; conversations with friends or family 36%; political parties or campaigning materials 16%; government or council website / apps 25%; podcasts 11%; search engines or AI tools 16%; other (please specify) 1%; I don't get information about what government is doing 8%; don't know 4%.

2. The 'perception gap' between experience and trust

There is a concerning 'perception gap' between people's experience of government and more general trust in it. Most people said they had no contact with the UK government personally in the past year (68%), or with their regional mayor where they had one (72%). However, only 3% had had no contact with a government delivery service at all in the past year, suggesting very high levels of engagement across a range of national and local services.

Contrary to popular discourse on the state of public services, a clear majority of service users said this was delivered to a good standard (64%), compared to fewer than a fifth saying it was to a bad standard (16%).

Figure 2 **Public opinion on services delivered in the local area, Aug 2026**



Source: Institute for Government, More in Common and University of York analysis of More in Common survey, August 2026. Notes: Respondents were asked 'Based on your experience, do you think the following services are being delivered to a good standard, bad standard, if either, in your local area?' Only includes respondents who have used the named service in the past 12 months. See methodology for further details of the survey.

The local question

Despite a generally favourable response to the delivery of local services (with some important exceptions like council housing and policing, where levels of satisfaction were lower), trust in local government is generally low. At 54%, more people say they have 'not much' or 'no' trust in local government compared to 39% who said they have 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal' of trust to act 'in the interests of people like you'.

Half said they have not very much or no trust in their local council to do their job well compared to those who said they had a fair amount or a great deal (43%). And 51% said they trusted the local council to follow the rules, against 41% who said they didn't, while as much as 66% said they didn't trust their local council to admit when they made mistakes.

But when it comes to whether people believe the government will 'act in the interests of people like you', trust collapses. Over two thirds say they have 'not very much' or 'no' trust in the UK government (67%), against just 28% who say 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal'.

Age, education and personal politics

Lack of trust in government to act in their interest is higher among older age groups. Trust in government is slightly higher in mayoral areas but this is skewed by the higher levels of trust in London – other mayoral areas show lower trust in government overall. It is also much lower among those without degrees than with: three quarters of those without degrees (who account for more than half the adult UK workforce) say they have no or not much trust in UK government (74%) compared to 55% of degree holders, though that this latter figure is still low means it is not simply a social or educational divide. Personal politics also plays a part: people who voted Reform UK or Green at the last general election are also more likely to have low trust in government.

Government competence to do its job well also emerged as an issue of concern among the public. Some 64% overall don't trust the UK government to do its job well, compared to 32% who do. Unsurprisingly, the responses on this question were particularly partisan according to which political party respondents supported, with Labour voters much more positive. However, across all voters, trust on basic moral questions like following the rules and honesty illustrate most starkly the level of breakdown between the public and government as an institution: 59% of the public don't trust the UK government to follow the rules (just 36% do), while 72% do not trust the government to admit when they make mistakes.

Clean streets

People tended to have a more positive perception of local issues associated with local services (even if delivered through private contractors) such as the cleanliness of the streets and the local public transport system. They had a more negative opinion about areas that government is not directly responsible for, such as the state of the local high street or how many good job opportunities there are. This could suggest that there are important areas in peoples' lives that should be addressed with effective action that have not always been seen as within government service delivery, or that government should have more focus on local action.

"They work for us, so they should be serving us with our best interests at heart. And I don't think that's always the case... For starters, being open and transparent about where spending is being spent. Because at the end of the day it's our money they're spending. And it is to benefit us." – *Woman from the East of England, August 2026*

"Whether it was the mayor or whether it was the UK government with all the absolutely atrocious lies and then we were told, you can't do this, you can't do that. The majority of us stuck with that and then all of a sudden, bingo, government are doing what they want. So I think a level of our trust, I mean obviously it happened before, was lost throughout that time. So since Covid now it's got worse. Absolutely worse." – *Woman from the East of England, August 2026*

"You've noticed over the years, it's like the new cabinet gets selected and within a year, half of that cabinet is vying for the main man's job. And it's like, OK, so at what point was there any actual trust? How many political games are going on in the background?" – *Man from the North East of England, August 2026*

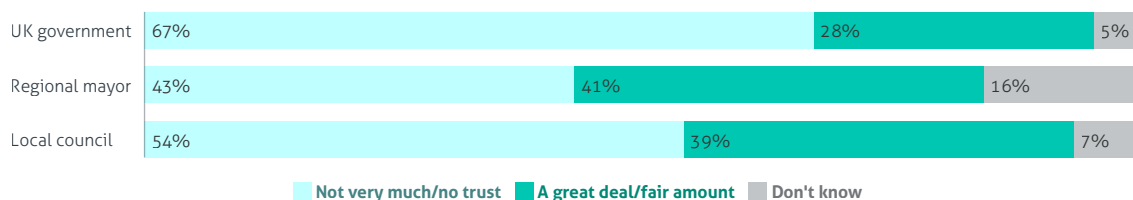
"And whichever power gets in, it's all the same, isn't it? All the money seems to be in London... And the rest of the country seems to be just ignored. Or we get the minimum, which is a shame. But that's just the way it is, isn't it?" – *Man from the East of England, August 2026*

"There's that many things the government can do more of, like education, youth services, the NHS, the police, the judicial system, more prisons, more immigration centres, more immigration control... But it's never going to happen, is it? Because it's just the way the government works. They don't want to spend, they reduce services rather than add to them. – *Man from the East of England, August 2026*

Public perception of mayors

Public trust in mayors was higher than trust in UK government in the places that have mayors. Four in 10 people say they trust their mayor to 'act in the interests of people like you' either 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' (41%) compared to just 28% who trust the UK government, with local councils closer to mayors at 39%.

Figure 3 **Public trust in UK government, regional mayor and local council to act in the interest of 'people like you', Aug 2026**



Source: Institute for Government, More in Common and University of York analysis of More in Common survey, August 2026. Notes: Respondents were asked 'How much trust, if any, do you have in UK government/local council/regional mayor to act in the interests of people like you?' See methodology for further details of the survey.

Trust in regional mayors is higher among those aged under 45 than over. Mayors are generally trusted more than the UK government to do their job well, and follow the rules. Regional mayors, like national and local government, were not trusted to admit when they make mistakes.

However, people in mayoral areas did not believe their mayors had many powers (and were not asked in the survey to comment on whether this was a good or bad thing), so it may be that the higher trust with mayors is associated with a perception that mayors act as a local champion for the region rather than as primarily a deliverer of government policy or services. This came through in the focus groups when participants discussed the role of the mayor, which they tended to describe as a public voice for the region rather holding than direct powers, though this may vary according to the region and when the mayoralty was created. The London mayor, for example, has a much more established profile due to the powers, funding and longevity of the role.

How mayors perceive the relationship between government and the public

Interviews with several mayors showed that they themselves felt the public were not always very clear on the responsibilities they held, in part where they were newer than established government structures and in part because mayoral responsibilities differ between mayoralties. Our survey showed that people in mayoral areas felt slightly more knowledgeable about government (60% for those in a mayoral area compared to 54% without), but there were marked differences between mayoral regions, with 68% of Londoners saying they knew a great deal or a fair amount about how government works, compared to just 48% in Yorkshire and the Humber.

It is vital to address this regional disparity as the country moves towards greater devolution, so that accountability of government is not further weakened. The potential for friction between communities within an area came up in several of the mayoral interviews, as well as the focus groups and surveys. For their part, mayors – particularly in areas where people feel resources are squeezed – described how allocation of support for migrants was a continuing flashpoint. Controlling migration was a high priority for voters in our survey, across all regions.

One area that was particularly striking in our survey was the very wide perception gap between regions on the question of how well people say that people of different ethnicities and cultures get on in their local area. While every region had a net positive score, disparities between regions were large. In London, +34% have a positive opinion, while in the South East of England this falls to just +7%. In Yorkshire and the Humber this is just +2%, in the South West +4%, and in the North East +10%.

Among those who had a negative opinion, the issue was largely attributed to the UK government rather than local councils or mayors. Overall, 38% nationally were positive about how well people of different ethnicities and cultures get on, 26% negative, and 29% were neutral. But more than a quarter of people holding a negative attitude towards community cohesion should concern policy makers. It is important that policy makers at all levels understand this regional perception gap in efforts to improve social cohesion.

The mayors and mayoral teams we spoke to felt that the mayors had the potential to be part of rebuilding trust with the public they serve, if they deliver visible and tangible improvements on local people's priorities. We heard in the focus groups how mismatched our participants felt national government's priorities were compared to the needs of their local areas.

This also came through in our interviews with some of the mayors. They said people's priorities on the doorstep are usually things that affect them directly – like bills, potholes, local transport, safety and their adult children not being able to afford a home of their own – yet the messages from central government are often about high-level measures that don't affect them. Mayors tended to describe trust with the public in the basic terms of only promising what you know you can deliver, and delivering it fast, particularly when too many new initiatives seem to take far too long.

"I feel like when they [local government and mayors] write their manifestos they like cover everything and they say they're going to change everything. I'd rather they were just a bit more transparent and linked to what our economy can actually do and I just think they'll be a bit more truthful if they do that. So just don't aim so high maybe." – Woman from North East of England, August 2026

"[Local government] need to be the voices that tell the government what they need. I think the government give them a lot of regulations and milestones and performance variables to hit but they need to push back and say no, this is what we need. And when the government tells them 'build this brand new house in the estate, we've got 450 migrant families coming to you today, so you need to give them somewhere to live', to go 'No, that's not going to happen.' You know, I think they do stuff like that. They'll get the backing from us." – *Woman from North East of England, August 2026*

"[Local government] could be the driving force to make the change [improving high streets]." – *Woman from North East of England, August 2026*

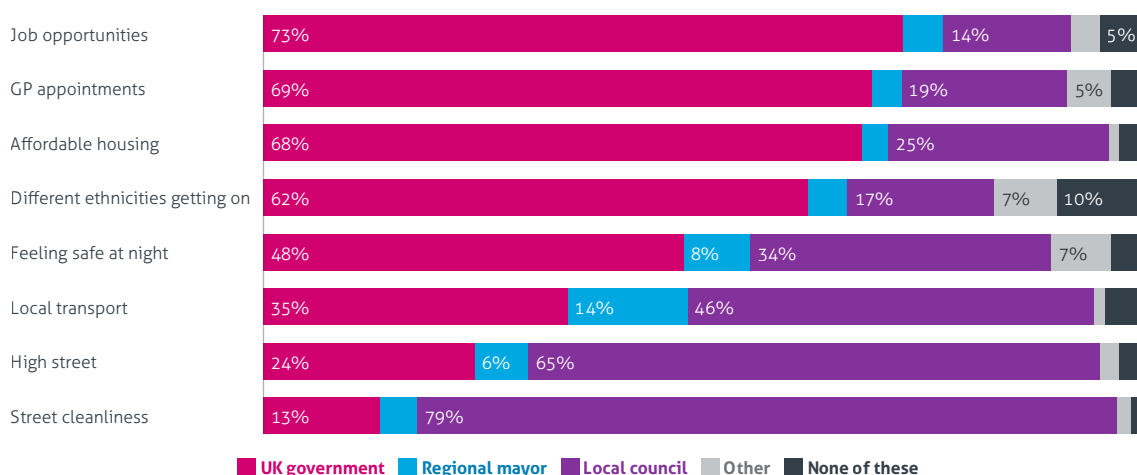
3. Who gets the credit or blame when things go right or wrong?

We asked our survey participants whether they had a positive or a negative opinion of various local issues, from the cleanliness of the streets and local transport to affordable housing and job opportunities. Where participants had a positive opinion, we asked to what extent they gave any credit to the UK government, their council or (for those in mayoral areas) their mayor. Where they had a negative opinion, we asked to what extent these were to blame.

In mayoral areas, the UK government attracted more blame than credit on seven of the eight issues (with the exception of 'street cleanliness'), while councils were more often credited than blamed. Mayors were named by fewer respondents as attracting any credit or blame, but where they were, they were credited around twice as often as they were blamed. For example, when people felt positively about local transport in their area, they credited their regional mayor for this 24% of the time, but when they felt negatively about it, blamed them 13% of the time.

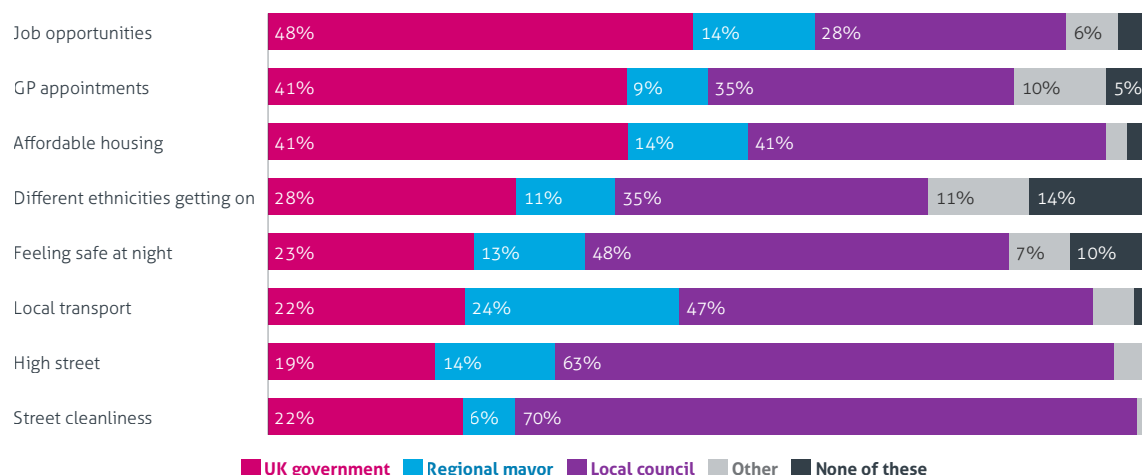
The same dynamic is at play across all the other measures: regional mayors get more credit when things are going well than blame when things are going badly. Compared with areas without mayors, it appears the credit for mayors is drawn partly from credit that would ordinarily be given to councils – put another way, councils in mayoral areas appear to keep a portion of their blame for negative public services but pass on a portion of their credit for positive public services.

Figure 4 **Public opinion on blame for poor performance on local issues in mayoral areas, among those with a negative view of those issues, Aug 2026**



Source: Institute for Government, More in Common and University of York analysis of More in Common survey, August 2026. Notes: Respondents were asked 'You said that you have a negative opinion of each of the following in your local area. Who from the following, if any, do you blame for each being in a negative state?' Weighted sample of 2,656 respondents in mayoral areas, with bases varying on each issue from 462 to 1,104. Excludes 'Don't know'. See methodology for further details of the survey.

Figure 5 **Public opinion on credit for good performance on local issues in mayoral areas, among those with a positive view of those issues, Aug 2026**



Source: Institute for Government, More in Common and University of York analysis of More in Common survey, August 2026. Notes: Respondents were asked 'You said that you have a positive opinion of each of the following in your local area. Who from the following, if any, do you credit for each being in a positive state?' Weighted sample of 2,656 respondents in mayoral areas, with bases varying on each issue from 652 to 1,425. Excludes 'Don't know'. See methodology for further details of the survey.

Across the sample as a whole, who gets the blame when people are dissatisfied does not change all that much according to which political party participants supported. On average across the eight issues we asked about, Labour voters at the 2024 general election blamed the UK government on 46% of occasions, against 47% among Conservative voters, 50% among Liberal Democrats and 51% among Greens. Reform UK voters had the highest levels of blame (at 55%) and were also the most negative about their local area across most issues.

The clearest difference by party was on the credit side. Labour voters credited the UK government for positive local outcomes 33% of the time, markedly above the Conservative voters' 26%, Greens' 25% and Liberal Democrats' 24%. Credit for mayors is close to flat across all of the main parties.

These findings indicate that as people become more dissatisfied with services, the more the blame for this travels upwards to the UK government rather staying at the local level – with regional mayors and councils being the key beneficiaries of this dynamic. The least satisfied with public services in this sample were the most likely to target their blame for their poor experiences at the UK government.

Conclusion

The opportunity to find out more about what the public understands about government has provided a rich baseline of data that should be a valuable source for policy makers at all levels of government.

The research has revealed some concerning challenges – from public perceptions of relatively weak social cohesion in several regions in England to long-standing questions of trust in government more generally.

It has also revealed some opportunities to improve public experience, and perceptions, of government. These include how to empower mayors as regional champions in a country that remains politically unequal between people and places, and the opportunities for more localised visible government action.

There is much further to go to understand how public perceptions of government are shaped, and how trust in government may be rebuilt, including in Scotland and Wales. We hope this work contributes to the evidence available to policy makers and provides practical ideas on how government at all levels can work well for the people of the UK.

Annex: Methodology

Fieldwork for this survey was conducted by More in Common between 4 and 13 August 2026. The survey included a sample of 5,002 respondents and is representative of adults aged 18 and over living in England. Responses were weighted by age and sex, region, 2024 general election vote, ethnicity, and education level. Focus groups in the North East and East of England were conducted by More in Common. Interviews were held with several mayors and their teams in the English regions. The authors would like to thank all research participants for their participation.

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