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Attitudes to economic development

How the public view investment in places

Foreword

At times the UK can appear to be a nation divided on the big issues, from Brexit to the global pandemic. The Brexit referendum saw Leave and Remain voters divide on geographical lines, while the 2020 lockdowns have revived talk of a north-south divide. At the same time, devolution continues to bring decision-making closer to people, widening the differences between the UK's nations and regions in the process.

Against this seemingly fractured backdrop, the government has championed a programme of infrastructure investment to 'level up' the country. But is there common ground across nations and regions on what is required to build successful and sustainable places for people to live and work?

In the latest in Copper's series of insights into public attitudes to infrastructure we set out to explore whether the public are playing an active role in shaping the future of places, and what is seen as a priority for investment on the ground. We wanted to understand whether there are barriers to engagement which prevent people from getting involved and, if so, how those working in economic development can encourage others to join the conversation.

We also tested the public's understanding of the government's levelling up agenda and awareness of existing investment in towns and cities. Finally, we considered the impact of COVID-19 on priorities for investment and the degree of optimism or pessimism about the prospect of it affecting positive change.

While the results of our research do vary between regions, the overall picture which emerges does not conform to preconceived ideas of a nation divided on geographical lines. Instead, we see an opportunity to galvanise the regeneration of towns and cities right across the UK by offering citizens the chance to shape strategies and visions on their terms.

The challenge to those in government and business is to demonstrate an understanding of places which inspires engagement and engenders confidence that shared goals can be achieved by individuals and organisations working together.

James Gore

*Director – Economic Development,
Copper Consultancy*

Stronger communities and sustainable economies

Economic development aims to create stronger communities and sustainable economies – both objectives which most people support.

So why do attempts to transform towns, cities and regions sometimes face apathy or even resistance from the very people they are intended to benefit?

At the heart of this question is an underlying challenge which many public and private sector players face – getting the public involved early enough to meaningfully shape plans. A real understanding of what makes places where people want to live, work, study, visit and invest will increase the likelihood that investment will deliver positive results.

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Building on previous Copper research into attitudes to infrastructure, we sought to establish the public's priorities for investment in the places where they live. This time we went one step further and asked which institutions had an important role to play when investing in the future. We wanted to know whether the public were confident that these bodies, whether from the public or private sector, understood local challenges and would deliver on their promises – and, if so, how soon they expected to see results.



Key findings

To explore these themes, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,038 people during October 2020. In this report we analyse the findings and put forward recommendations for those interested and involved in economic development, and identify what they can learn from what the public have told us.



There is a low-level awareness of plans and visions for places, with 27% of people feeling involved in shaping these



COVID-19 has made people more pessimistic about the prospect of government investment making a difference



76% of people could be encouraged to get involved in shaping the future of places - but they want to do so on their terms



Awareness of existing investment in places is low - and those that are aware expect to see results quickly

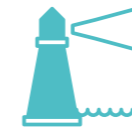


Priorities for investment remain relatively unchanged since COVID-19 - with housing, renewable energy, and waste and recycling deemed most important



Levelling up means different things to different people - and could therefore be hard to measure

We set out explore the public's views on the following key themes:



Vision

The starting point for regeneration projects is a guiding vision. Were people aware of the existence of such a vision for the place where they live, and had they been involved in shaping it?



Engagement

What would encourage people to get involved in shaping the vision for the place where they live? What type of engagement would appeal and just how involved do they want to be?



Awareness

Were people aware of recent investment in the places where they live?



Expectation

How soon did people expect to see results? And were they optimistic about investment delivering positive outcomes?



Priorities

We asked what the highest priorities for investment should be, and whether these priorities had changed since COVID-19.



Understanding

We tested understanding in two ways. Did the public understand the intent of 'levelling up'? And was the government perceived as understanding local challenges?



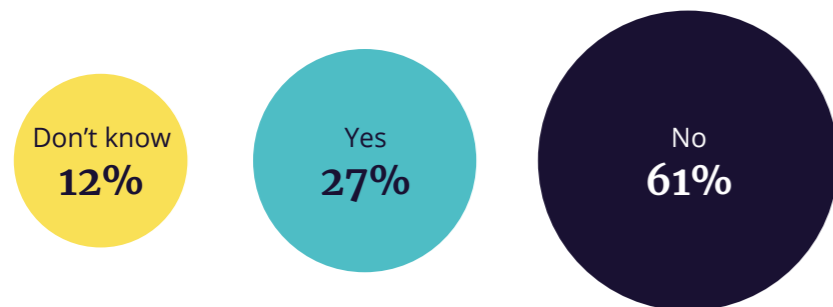
Roles

We wanted to know which organisations the public looked to for investment in places.

Lack of awareness and low engagement

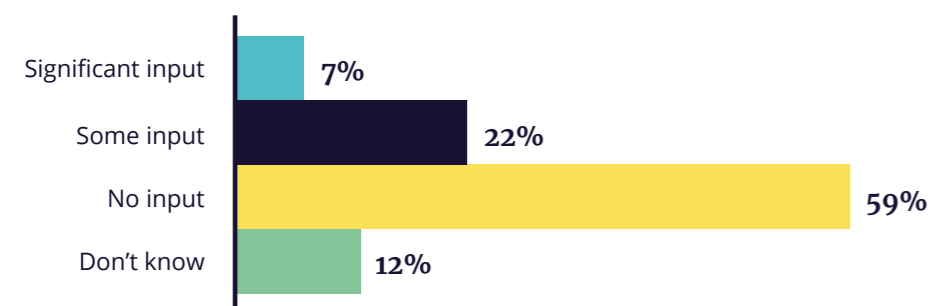
Across the country, our findings demonstrate a clear lack of awareness from the public of the opportunity to get involved with local planning or visions for the future in the place they live. We asked the public if they were aware of any plans or visions for the future. More than half answered no, with only just over a quarter saying they were aware of a local plan or vision.

Are you aware of any plans or visions that the place where you live has for the future?



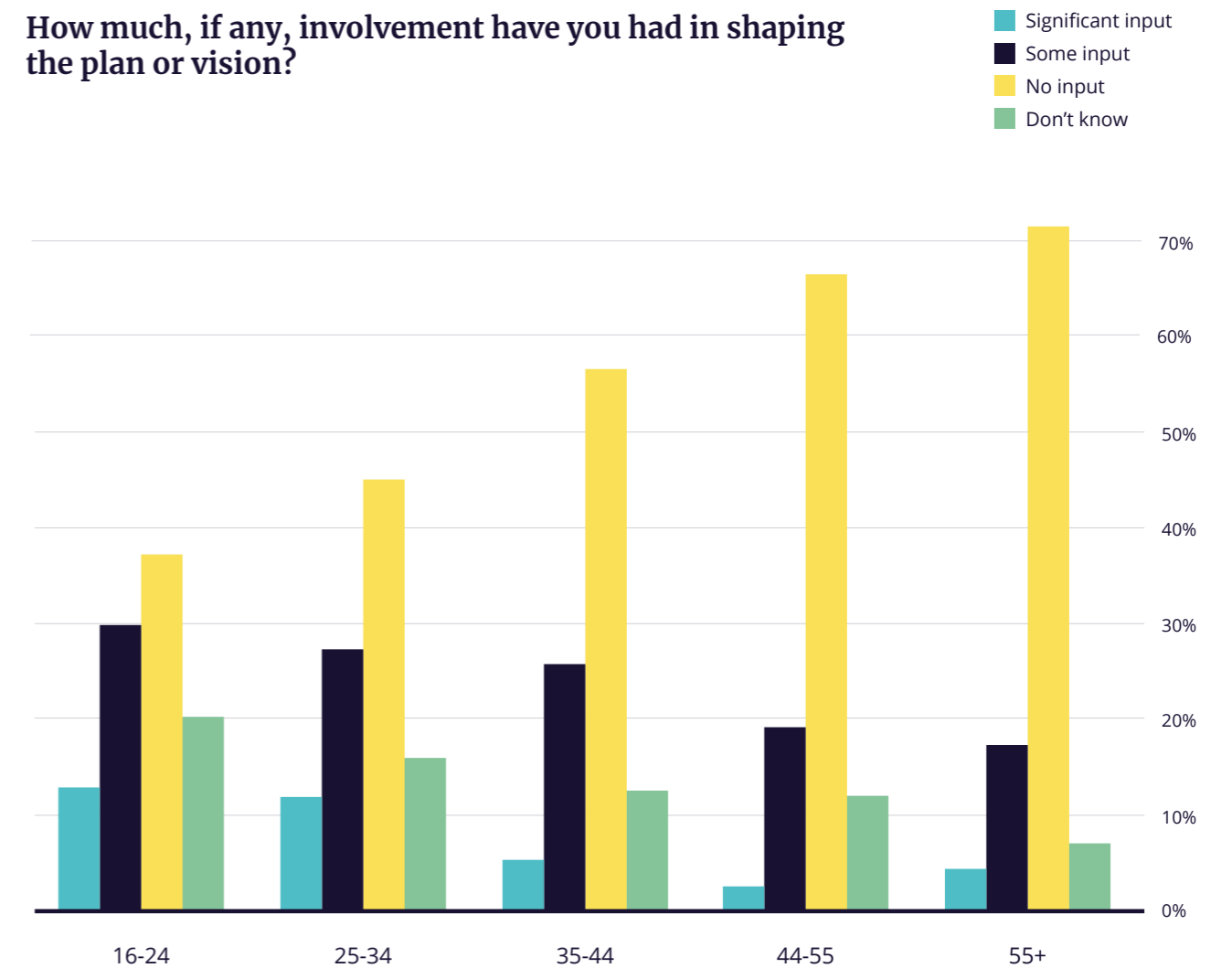
We also asked the public how much involvement they had in shaping a plan or vision. Again, the majority said they had no input, with around a quarter saying they had been involved. Younger people were more likely to be aware and involved, with those over 55 the least engaged.

How much, if any, involvement have you had in shaping the plan or vision?



While a quarter of those surveyed maintain that nothing would persuade them to get involved in shaping the future of the place where they live, many felt that digital tools such as online surveys and email questionnaires would encourage them to take part. A minority wanted to be significantly involved in shaping plans, with just under half preferring slight involvement, suggesting 'light touch' engagement options should be provided alongside more traditional long-form consultation materials, a theme picked up by the Government's Planning for the Future White Paper.

How much, if any, involvement have you had in shaping the plan or vision?

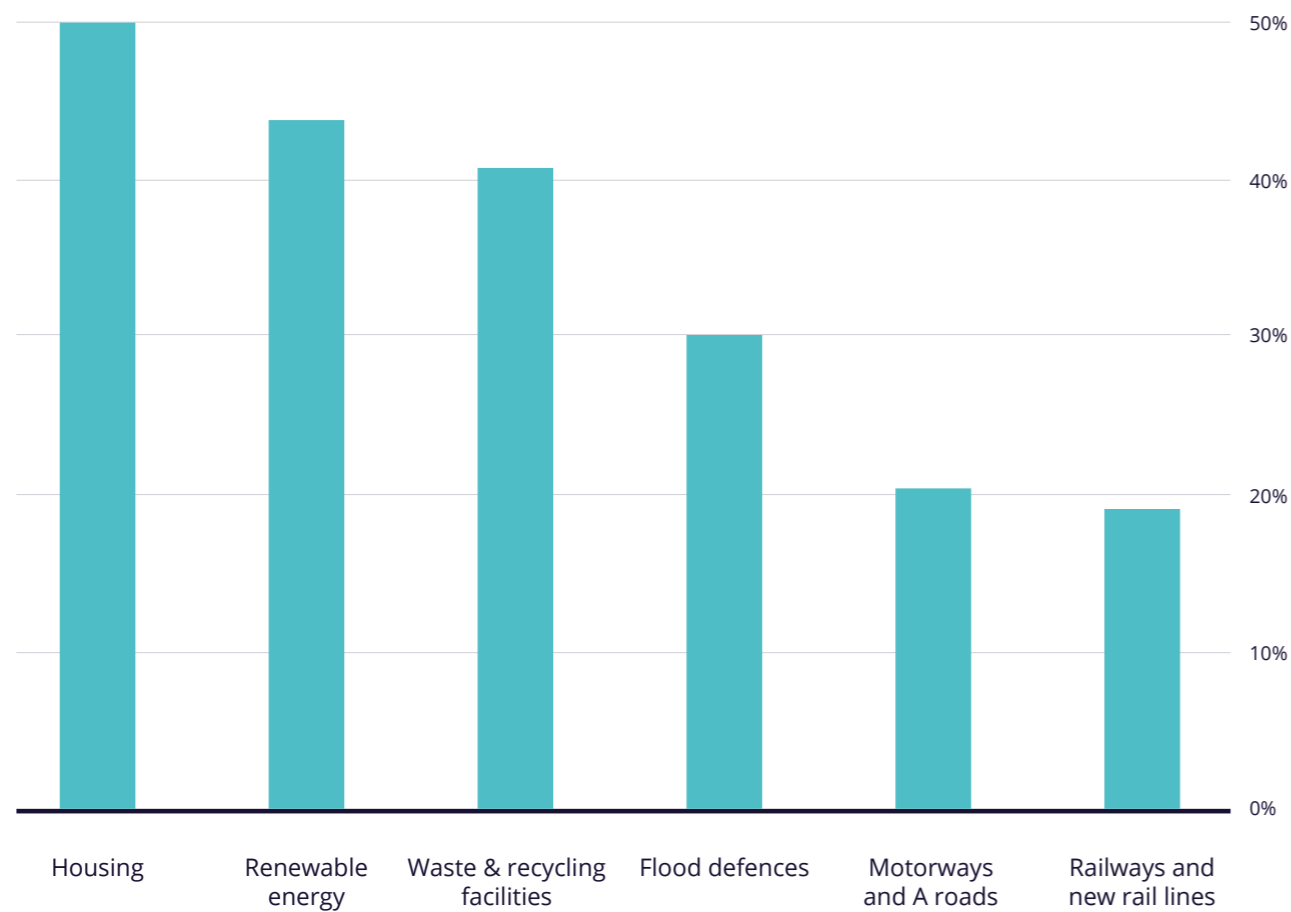


Investment priorities

The public prioritised investment in housing above all other options. There was also clear support for renewable energy and waste and recycling facilities, reinforcing findings from Copper’s previous research which found that projects responding to the climate emergency resonated with the public.

This support for investment in housing, renewables and recycling remains undiminished by the coronavirus pandemic, but roads and rail are noticeably lower on the public’s list of priorities compared to our pre-COVID research (see next section). This could be due to the changes that have taken place in the way that people work and travel since March 2020.

What, if anything, do you think should be the highest priority for government investment?



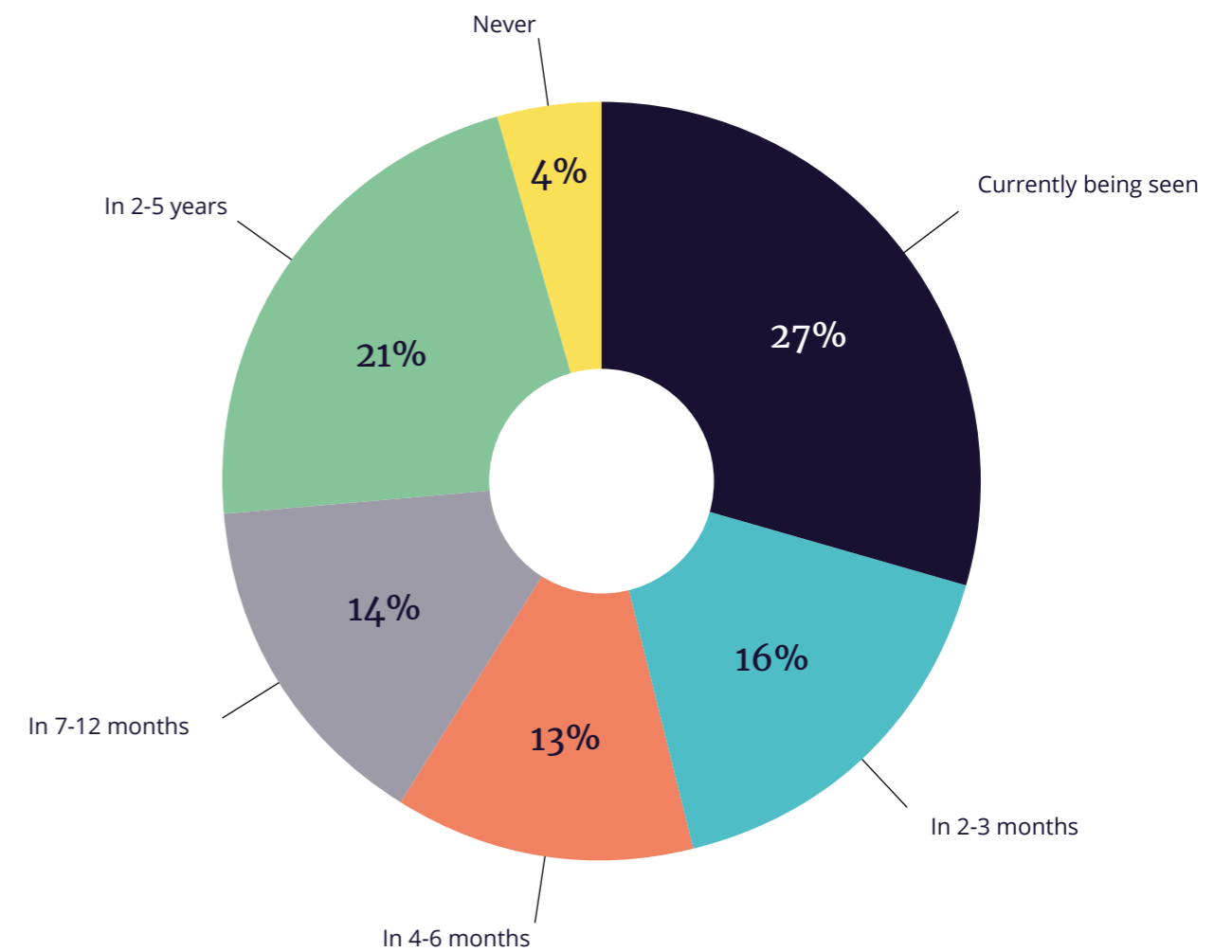
When do they expect to see the benefits of this investment?

Not only do the public have clear priorities for where they want investment to be made, there is also an expectation that results will be delivered quickly. Over 40 per cent of people expect to see the benefits of government investment within a year. Not only is there an expectation that projects deliver tangible benefits – these benefits

are also expected to be realised in the relatively short term.

As a result of these findings, those charged with investing in places face a dual challenge: aligning projects with the priorities of the public and demonstrating results fast.

When, if ever, do you expect to see the results of this investment?



Regional priorities

Whilst the general public hold clear priorities for government investment, these vary between regions. As a result of this developers must be aware of the needs and priorities of the communities that they operate within. By understanding these, plan-makers can align their projects with each region's unique priorities and begin to build advocacy amongst their key stakeholders, which will in turn help minimise risk.



What, if anything, do you think should be the highest priority for government investment?



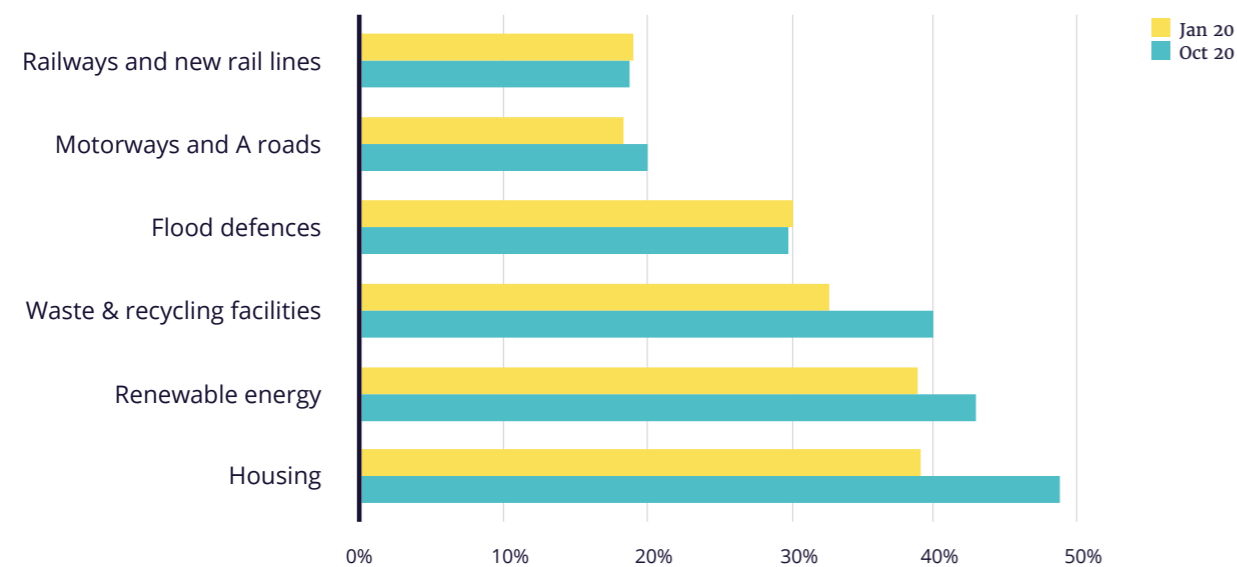
The impact of COVID-19

In January 2020 we asked the public what their priorities for government investment were, but back then few could have predicted what the rest of the year would bring. Perhaps surprisingly given recent events, the public's priorities for investment remain broadly the same, with support for investment in housing and renewable energy even increasing.

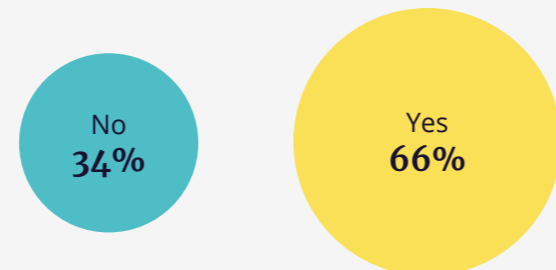
Whilst most sectors saw a small increase in their support, investment in rail was seen as a reduced priority. This is most likely due to the changes that the coronavirus pandemic has had on how people travel and plan to travel in the short term.

What is clear is that despite the events of recent months, there is still overwhelming support from the public for investment in housing.

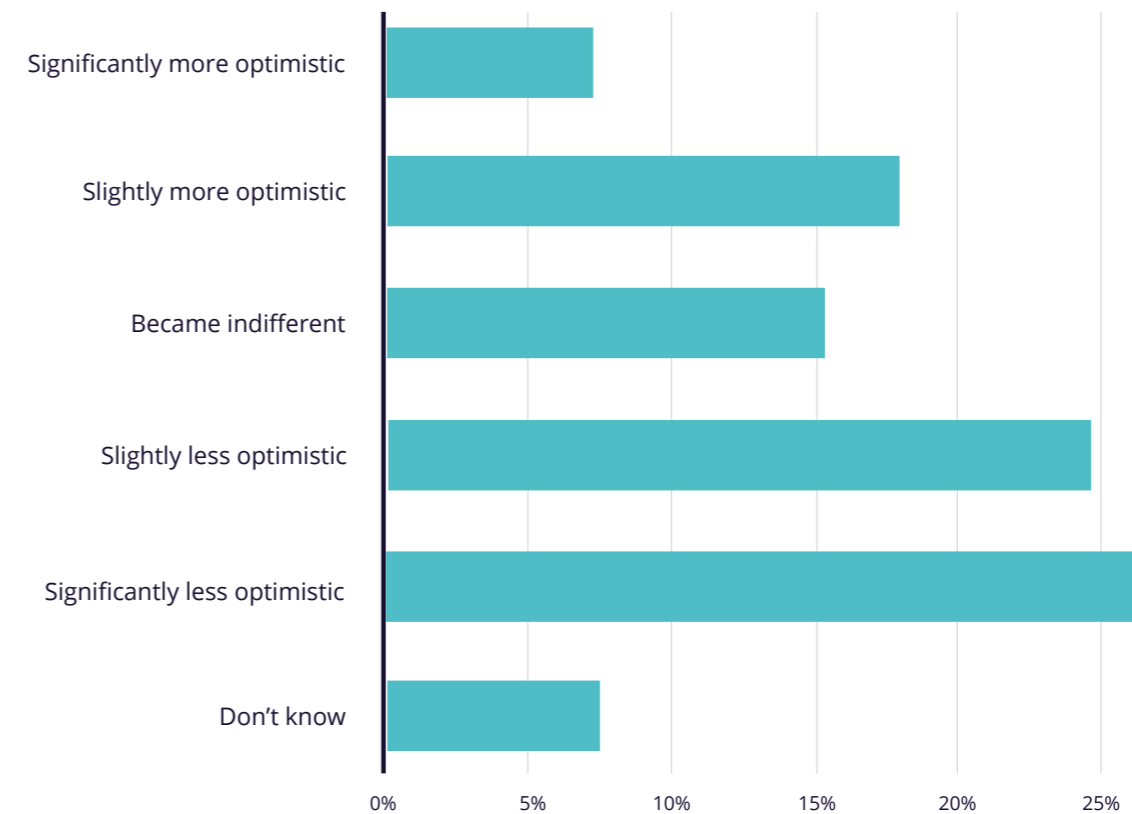
Changes in investment priorities



Has your opinion on priorities for government investment changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



Compared to how you felt before the COVID-19 pandemic, are you more or less optimistic about government investment addressing problems?



While the public's priorities for government investment remained broadly the same, there is less optimism that these priorities will be addressed.

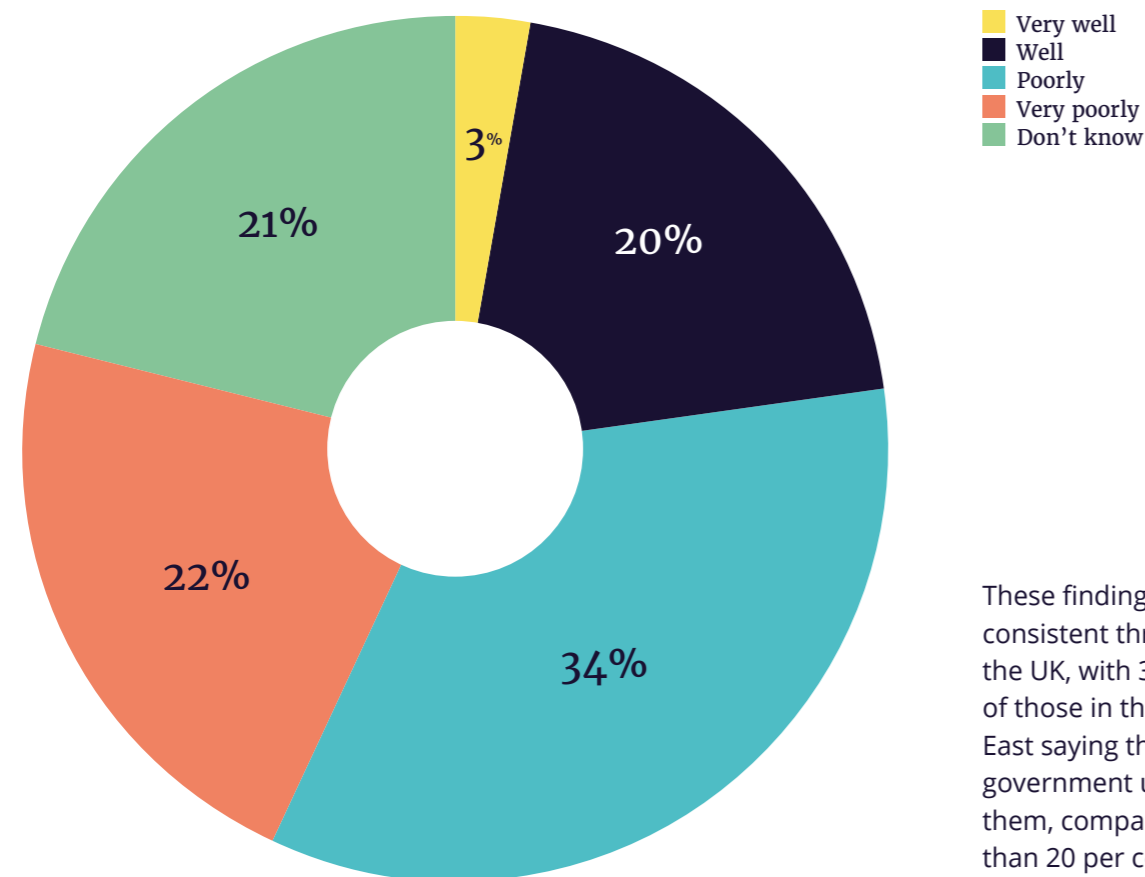
As a result of this, plan-makers and developers face a challenge to build trust with communities who may be pessimistic about the outcome of investment. They must effectively communicate their plans and projects, aligning benefits with the public's priorities and constructing effective and meaningful conversations with their local communities.

Who do the public look to for investment in places?

Our research suggests that the public have clear priorities for investment in places. These priorities have been largely unchanged by the coronavirus pandemic. However, it is also clear that the public do not believe that

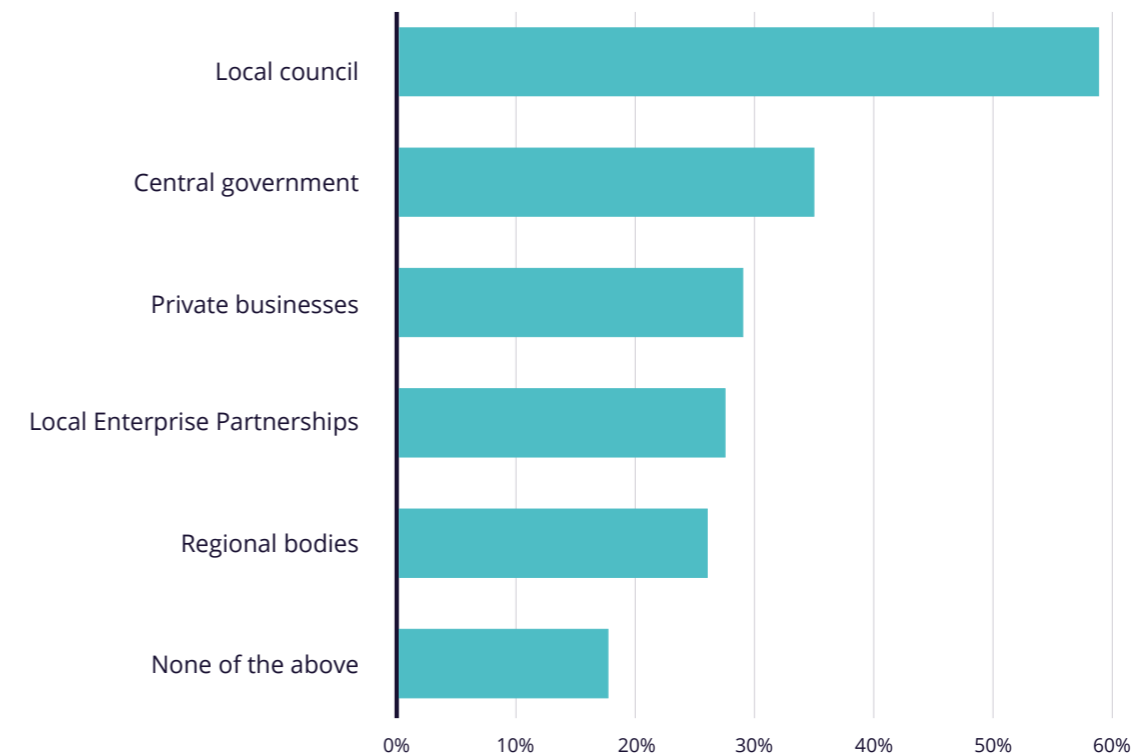
central government alone holds the answer to 'levelling up', with varying views on whether local challenges and opportunities are fully understood in Whitehall and Westminster.

How do you think central government understands the challenges and opportunities in your area where you live?



These findings were not consistent throughout the UK, with 30 per cent of those in the South East saying that the government understood them, compared to fewer than 20 per cent of those living in the North West.

Which, if any, of the following do you believe has an important role to play in investing in the future of the place where you live?



Despite some scepticism over central government's understanding of the local context, it is still seen as an important source of funding – second only to local authorities, and ahead of private businesses. This suggests that partnership working between central and local government will be positively received, combining investment funds with local expertise.

While local councils were identified as having the most important role to play in the future development of communities, the results also show the public's understanding that this will be influenced by a variety of organisations. Central government, private businesses, Local Enterprise Partnerships and other regional bodies are all seen as influential, suggesting a collaborative process across public and private sectors will be most effective in generating support.

**“Projects must have real impact.
They must be delivered within this Parliament.
And they must command local support, including
from their Member of Parliament.
This is about funding the infrastructure of
everyday life:
A new bypass.
Upgraded railway stations.
Less traffic.
More libraries, museums, and galleries.
Better high streets and town centres.
This government is funding the things people
want and places need.”**

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer
Spending Review, November 2020



Recommendations

Based on the findings set out in this report, we suggest the following five steps for organisations seeking to engage the UK public in planning the future of our places.



Move away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach to consultation in favour of tailored options which enable local people to engage on their own terms in whatever time they are willing to spare



Be positive about the benefits of your project and tap into the strong public support for investment in housing, renewable energy and waste recycling, encouraging local people to be advocates for investment



Build a coalition of partners across central and local government and the private sector, maximising funding and building confidence in your ability to deliver positive outcomes



Maintain channels of communication throughout development and delivery, celebrating milestones to demonstrate progress towards shared goals



Make use of digital tools alongside traditional face-to-face engagement to bring more people into the conversation

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