

# Post-pandemic aspirations: Young people call on the government to invest to secure a better future

August 2021

## Summary

With a number of Covid support measures, including the furlough scheme and £20 per week Universal Credit uplift, coming to an end in the Autumn, new research has found that most young people want the government to invest in order to build a better society. Polling conducted with 18-30 year olds across the UK found high levels of support for investment in the benefit system, social care, green initiatives, and affordable housing. Our research finds that young women have been harder hit by the pandemic than young men in many areas, but that, regardless of gender, young people do not simply want to return to pre-pandemic life but, instead, want the government to invest.

Key research findings include the following:

- **Around two thirds of young people support investment in a range of areas, including the benefit system, childcare, social care, green initiatives and housing.** Public investment in these areas is likely to disproportionately benefit women and contribute to furthering gender equality, but nonetheless young women and men are equally supportive.
- Importantly for the Government's 'Build Back Better' plan, **young Conservative voters are like their peers who support other parties in wanting to see the Government invest in building a more equitable and sustainable future.**
  - 58% of Conservative voters<sup>1</sup> want to see investment in the benefit system so that more people have access to Universal Credit, unemployment benefits and sick pay (69% of Labour voters said the same)
  - 69% of Conservative voters want to see early education better funded in order to increase the supply of affordable childcare, as do 73% of Labour voters
  - 65% of Conservative voters want money spent on social care for older people and disabled people so that it can be free (like the NHS), as do 75% of Labour voters
  - 62% of Conservative voters support investment in green initiatives towards a zero-carbon economy (67% of Labour voters)
  - 73% of Conservative voters support investment in affordable housing and security for renters (77% of Labour voters)
- **Removing the £20 uplift is, therefore, not only likely to push more people into poverty but is also out of step with public opinion, including young Conservative voters. who want to see more money spent on social security**

---

<sup>1</sup> Vote in 2019 election

- **In terms of impacts on their own lives, young women were more likely than young men to report that their situation had either worsened as a result of the pandemic, or is expected to get worse over the next 12 months:**
  - **More than 1 in 2 young women (54%)** said their mental health had got worse (compared to 42% of young men)
  - **Young women (16%) were twice as likely as young men (8%) to say their financial situation had a got 'a lot worse'**
  - **30% of young women are worried their hours** will be reduced when the furlough scheme ends in September, and **26% are worried they will lose their job.**

## Introduction

While the government has repeatedly declared an intention to 'Build Back Better'<sup>2</sup>, policy and spending decisions have not matched this rhetoric. In the Autumn, the government is removing the £20 weekly uplift, which had been provided to UC recipients since April 2020, even though modelling suggests this could push a further 760,000 individuals below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> The Spring Budget, in March 2021, set departmental spending for 2021/22 at £4 billion lower than pre-pandemic levels.<sup>4</sup> From 2022 onwards, spending is set to be between £14 and £17 billion lower than pre-pandemic levels every year. And all of this is occurring against a backdrop of increased demand on public services, with a sizeable backlog in the health sector<sup>5</sup>, widening educational inequalities<sup>6</sup>, and greater numbers of individuals out of work.<sup>7</sup>

Our research with young people suggests these decisions are also out of step with public sentiment, including young Conservative voters. The pandemic made visible the vital role that public services, social security and the natural environment play in supporting wellbeing. In our survey, young people articulated a strong desire to not just return to pre-pandemic life but to invest in society's foundations: public services, social security, affordable housing, and green initiatives.

This briefing sets out the results of our survey research with 18-30 year olds across the UK. It considers first their priorities for government action, before turning to young people's experience of the pandemic and their expectations for the next 12 months. It is clear, and

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Boris Johnson's foreword in HM Treasury (2021) Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth-html>

<sup>3</sup> Harrop, A (2021) Who loses? The impacts of planned Universal Credit cuts across society <https://bit.ly/3qAsZD>

<sup>4</sup> IFS (2021) Budget 2021: Initial IFS Response (<https://bit.ly/388J2cA>); see also Office for Budget Responsibility (2021) Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2021 (<https://bit.ly/3uV8Brg>)

<sup>5</sup> O'Dowd, A (2021) NHS waiting list hits 14 year record high of 4.7 million people, *BMJ* 373:n995, <https://www.bmj.com/content/373/bmj.n995>

<sup>6</sup> Blundell, R., Cribb, J., McNally, S., Warwick, R., and X. Xu (2021) Inequalities in education, skills, and incomes in the UK: The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, IFS, <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BN-inequalities-in-education-skills-and-incomes-in-the-UK-the-implications-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> ONS (2021) Labour market overview, UK: June 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/june2021>

consistent with existing research,<sup>8</sup> that young women, and in particular BAME women on low incomes, have been significantly impacted. Many have seen their mental health, financial situation and work situation worsen, or expect that it will over the coming year, and a substantial proportion are concerned that there is not adequate support available to them.

Our research included subsamples of young people in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Throughout the briefing, we highlight variation across Wales and Northern Ireland. A separate briefing will be available on the Scottish data.

### Young people want the government to invest in a better future

In his Foreword to the government's *Plan for Growth* (March 2021), the Prime Minister states that:

**“...we must grasp the historic opportunity before us: to learn the lessons of this awful pandemic and build back better, levelling up across our United Kingdom and fixing the problems that have held back too many people for too long.”<sup>9</sup>**

At a time when the government is about to embark on removing a number of key supports, including the £20 UC uplift, our research finds that the majority of young people want the government to act on this commitment to build back better. Around two-thirds of young people support investment to provide wider access to benefits, free social care for the elderly and disabled people, childcare, affordable housing, and to accelerate the transition to a zero-carbon economy:

- 63% of young people support investment in the benefit system so that more people have access to Universal Credit, unemployment benefits and sick pay
- 68% support investment in early education to create more affordable childcare
- 69% support investment in social care for older people and disabled people so that it can be free (like the NHS)
- 65% support investment in green initiatives towards a zero-carbon economy
- 71% support investment in affordable housing and security for renters

This shows that the reduction in spending on public services announced in the Spring budget and the decision to remove the £20 UC uplift are not only likely to lead to a widening of economic and gender inequalities but are also out of step with public opinion.

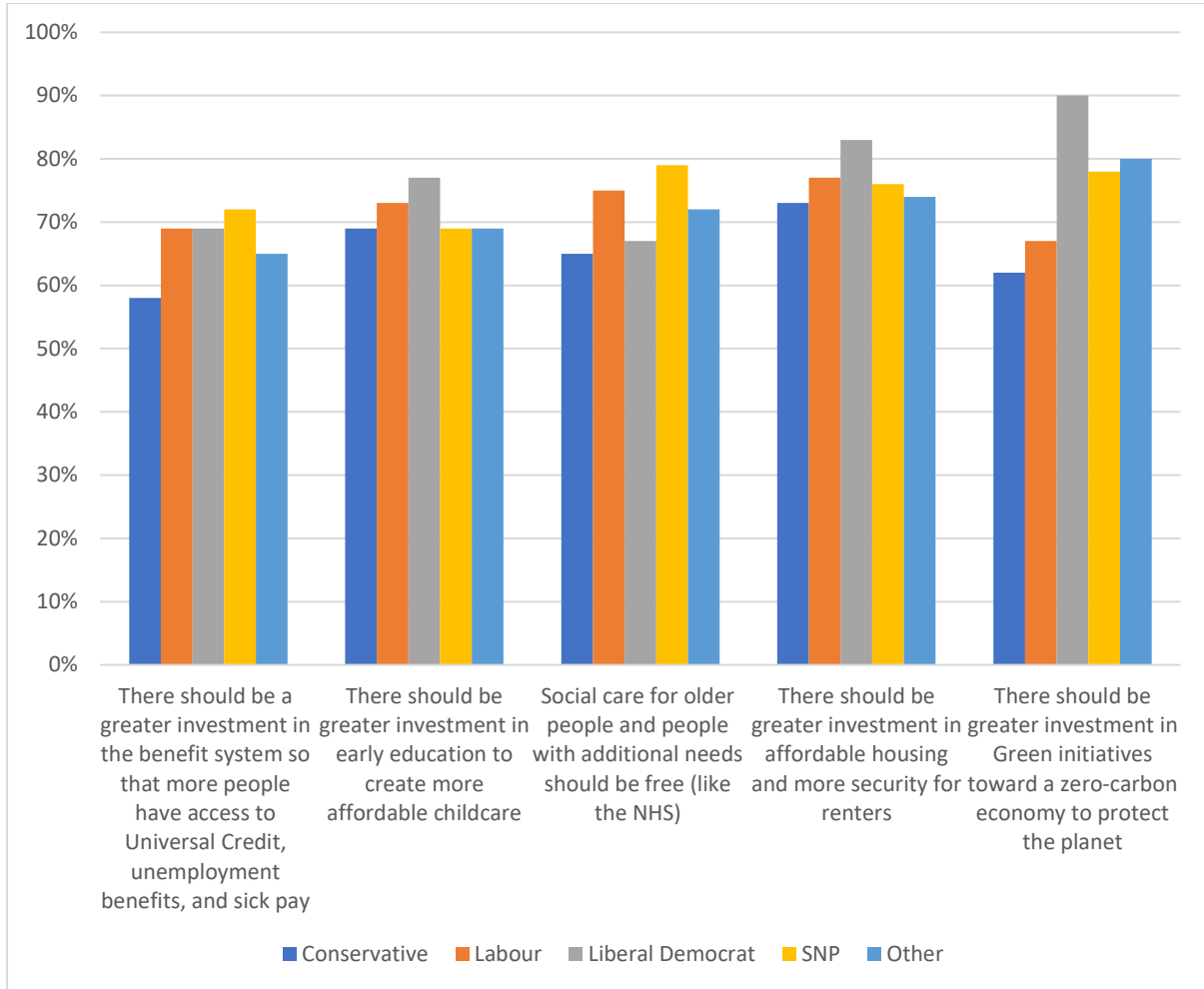
Figure 1 shows that there is a high level of support for such investment across the political spectrum, including among young people who voted Conservative at the 2019 election. While Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP voters are more likely to be supportive, the majority of Conservative voters either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that there should be greater investment. Moreover, there are few significant gender differences, with women marginally more likely to support investment in social care and childcare. This points to the broad-based support for investment.

---

<sup>8</sup> Young Women's Trust (2021) Lockdown one year on: How young women are paying the price for the pandemic, <https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/our-research/lockdown-one-year-on/>

<sup>9</sup> HM Treasury (2021) Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth-html>

**Figure 1: Percentage of respondents that agree/strongly agree with each of the following statements**

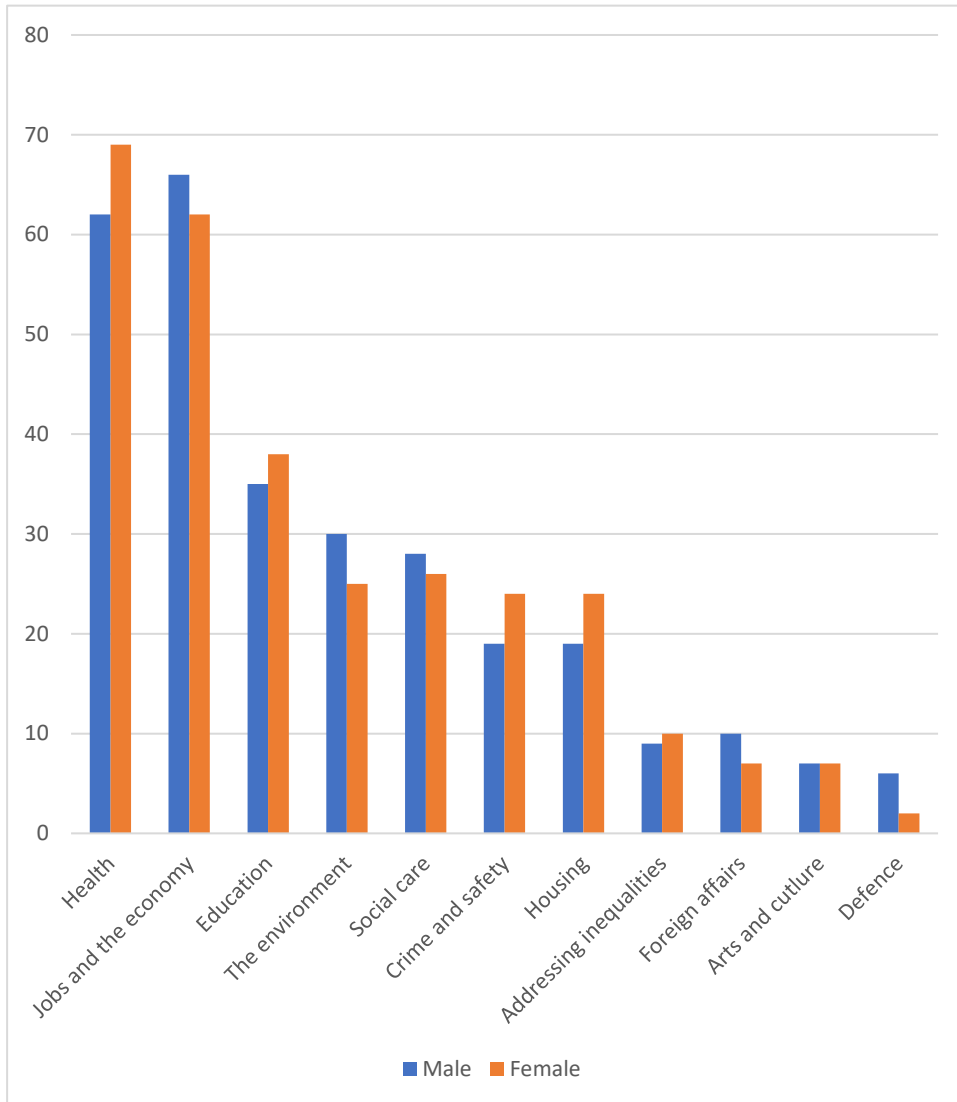


N=1026 UK 18-30 year olds

When asked to rank their priorities for government action, 'health' and 'jobs and the economy' were ranked as the top priorities, followed by 'education', 'the environment' and 'social care'. Young women were slightly more likely to rank 'health' as their top priority, while young men were more likely to rank 'jobs and the economy' as their top priority (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Percentage of respondents (by sex) indicating the issue as one of their top three priorities for the UK government as the country begins to recover from the coronavirus pandemic**

N=1026 UK 18-30 year olds



## Young people's experiences of the pandemic, and their expectations for the next 12 months

A substantial proportion of young people in our survey reported that their situation had got worse since the start of the pandemic, or that they expect it to deteriorate over the coming year. Young women, those on low incomes, and those from a BAME background were more likely to say that their situation had got worse and to express concern about the adequacy of support services to meet their needs.

### ***Work and furlough: furloughed young men more likely to have their wages topped up by their employer***

There were no significant gender differences in rates of furlough in our sample. However, it was striking that young men were considerably more likely to have their wages topped up by their employer. 54% of young men said their employer had topped up the government subsidy, while the same was true for only 37% of young women. Young women on low incomes (<£20,000) were the least likely to have the subsidy topped up, with only 30% stating they had received the additional 20% from their employer.

Labour market statistics have consistently shown that young people, and especially those aged below 18-24 years, have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. Even as employment begins to recover with the easing of restrictions, 18-24 year olds remain the age group that has seen the largest decline in pay-rolled employment since the start of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is concerning that a substantial proportion of young people in our survey expressed concern about the security of their job when the furlough scheme ends in September:

- **More than 1 in 4 (28%) young people are worried they will lose their job**
- **1 in 3 (32%) are worried their hours will be reduced**
- **2 out of 5 (39%) are worried they will not be able to find another job** in their current work area
- **Half (51%) of young people are concerned that if they do lose their job, benefits will not cover their essential costs.**

It is important that action is taken to ensure that young people's employment does not suffer detrimental impacts with the end of the scheme in September.

---

<sup>10</sup> ONS (2021) Labour market overview, UK: June 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/june2021>

## The perspective from Wales

Though the findings in Wales are largely consistent with the overall findings in the UK, there are some slight differences for work and furlough:

There is a significant gender difference in young people being furloughed in Wales, with 36% of men and 27% of women reporting they have been furloughed, compared to similar furlough rates between men and women in the UK.

Similar to the UK data discussed above, young women in Wales (57%) are worried that, if they are out of work, benefits will not cover their essential costs, compared to men (54%).

### ***Financial situation: young women twice as likely to say their financial situation had 'got a lot worse'***

Young people's worsening employment situation has had a knock-on effect on their finances. 30% of young people said their financial situation is worse now than before the pandemic, with young women more likely to report a negative impact:

- **Twice as many young women (16%) than young men (8%) said their financial situation had got 'a lot worse'**
- **Young women (25%) were also more likely than young men (16%) to say they were 'somewhat unconfident' or 'very unconfident' that they have 'enough money for at least the next 12 months'**

## The perspective from Wales and Northern Ireland

In Wales, young women were also more likely than young men to be concerned about their financial position. 1 in 3 young women (31%) in Wales said they are 'not confident' that they will have enough money for the next 12 months, compared to 22% of young men.

The findings in Northern Ireland were consistent with the UK as a whole, reiterating that the fact that women are more likely to face financial risks as a result of the pandemic.

### ***Mental health: young women more likely to say their mental health is worse now than before the pandemic***

Consistent with previous research<sup>11</sup>, young women in our sample reported the most significant impact on their mental health. While some of this may be related to young women's greater awareness of mental health, it is also likely to stem from the disproportionate impacts the pandemic has had on this group.

In our research:

- **54% of young women said their mental health is worse** now than before the pandemic, whereas this was true for 42% of young men.
- **Young women aged 18-24 were most likely to report that their mental health had got 'a lot worse'**, with 28% stating this was the case (compared to 16% of 18-24 year old men and 22% of 25-30 year old women).

Young women were also more likely than young men to be concerned about the adequacy of mental health support. 1 in 4 (25%) young women said they were either 'somewhat unconfident' or 'very unconfident' that they will have 'adequate mental health support over the next 12 months' compared to 17% of young men.

### **The perspective from Wales and Northern Ireland**

In Wales, there were stark differences in the mental health reports of young men and women, with particularly disproportionate impacts for disabled women:

- Over half of young people (56%) in Wales report that their mental health had got worse, with a pronounced difference between women (68%) and men (45%).
- These figures are even higher for disabled women with 80% reporting that their mental health has got worse and half stating that it has got a lot worse (compared to 62% and 26% for non-disabled young women). Though, the rates are smaller in the UK findings, more disabled women (58%) still reported that their mental health had got worse, compared to non-disabled women (52%).
- Young women are also less likely to feel they have adequate support available to them – over a third (35%) said they are 'not confident' they would have adequate mental health support over the next 12 months, compared with 24% of young men.

In Northern Ireland, 35% of young women aged 18-24 stated that their mental health had got 'a lot worse' compared to just 19% of 18-24 year old men and 25% of women aged 25-30.

These findings emphasise the need for the Government to prioritise mental health for young women after the pandemic.

<sup>11</sup> Young Women's Trust (2021) Lockdown one year on: How young women are paying the price for the pandemic, <https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/our-research/lockdown-one-year-on/>



## Many young people expect inequalities to worsen as a result of the pandemic

The government has expressed an intention to 'level up' across the United Kingdom,<sup>12</sup> and for its' Covid response and approach to the recovery to be 'fair'.<sup>13</sup> However, a significant proportion of young people in our survey expect inequalities to increase as a result of the pandemic:

- 38% expect economic inequality to increase
- 33% expect regional inequality to increase
- 28% expect racial inequality to increase

Findings from our survey suggest that these may already be the case, with Black, Asian and ethnic minority women disproportionately impacted (see below).

---

<sup>12</sup> HM Treasury (2021) Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth/build-back-better-our-plan-for-growth-html>

<sup>13</sup> HM Treasury and Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP (2021) Budget Speech 2021 (<https://bit.ly/3e8HqDM>)

## Experiences of Black, Asian and ethnic minority women

Our previous research found that Black, Asian and ethnic minority women experienced disproportionate economic impacts as a result of the pandemic. They were more likely than white women to be concerned about being able to pay their rent or mortgage, make ends meet in the next three months, and about increasing debt.

This research found a mixed picture. Young Black, Asian and minority ethnic women were less confident than white women about their housing and work situation, but more likely to describe themselves as optimistic about the future.

- 38% of young white women said they were more optimistic about the future, compared to 47% of Black, Asian and ethnic minority young women.
- Black, Asian and ethnic minority young women were less confident about the security of their housing for the next 12 months, with 15% saying they are either 'somewhat unconfident' or 'very unconfident'. By contrast, only 10% of young white women and 9% of young men from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds felt the same.
- Job security was also lower for this group of young women, with 25% unconfident about the security of their job for the next 12 months compared to 18% of white women and 11% of men from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds.

This mixed picture is likely due the varied experiences and circumstances of Black, Asian and minority ethnic women that are unidentifiable in grouped data

This higher level of concern about jobs and housing compared to white women was impacting on the choices that these young women were making. Young Black, Asian and minority ethnic women were less likely to enrol in further or higher education than young people from white backgrounds. The net effect, which is defined as the percentage more likely to enrol minus the percentage less likely to enrol, for all UK young people in our sample was +8% for further education and +0% for higher education, whereas for young women from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds the net effects were -4% for further education and -9% for higher education. This means that while white young people say they are more likely to enrol now than before pandemic, the opposite is true for young women from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. It is noteworthy, that young men from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds do not seem to experience the same penalty, with net effects of +6% for further education and +3% for higher education.

## Conclusion

The Prime Minister and senior Ministers in his government have variously talked about 'building back better', 'levelling up' and adopting a 'fair' approach to the recovery. Our research with young people shows that they want this to be more than just rhetoric. Having experienced the pandemic and seen first-hand its unequal impacts, young people want the government to invest in building a more secure, just and sustainable future. They understand that this will require investment in the benefits system, essential public services such as social care and childcare, green initiatives and in affordable housing. Young people don't want to go back to life as it was before the pandemic; they want a better tomorrow.

## Key Recommendations

Together as women's organisations we have consistently called for the following actions throughout the pandemic and the current research only strengthens the urgency of these recommendations as well as demonstrating widespread support for these measures:

**Stronger safety net:** This pandemic has highlighted the importance of social security for alleviating and preventing poverty, and the current research shows that there is strong support for this among young people from across the political spectrum. This runs counter to the recent decision to remove the £20 per week uplift to UC and we strongly urge the government to not only reconsider this, but also to further increase support for low-income families and unemployed people.

**Sectoral support:** A significant proportion of young people in our survey were concerned about losing their job, or hours being cut, when the furlough scheme ends in September. It is vital that the post-COVID recovery includes support for hardest-hit sectors such as retail, hospitality, leisure and tourism, which are important employers of women and young people. Such measures should be joined up with the transition to a zero-carbon economy as well as with those that seek to address regional inequalities.

**Investment in care:** Urgent funding is required for the early years sector to avoid widespread closures that would have a huge impact on women's employment as well as to ensure that social care for the elderly and people with disabilities is properly resourced. Both measures would reduce the burden of unpaid caring, which continues to disproportionately fall to women and has intensified in the course of the pandemic. Nearly two-thirds of young people in our survey supported greater investment in care.

**More representation:** To ensure policy addresses diverse needs within society, government needs to include more women at the decision-making table as well as other key stakeholders, such as young people and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

## Methods

**Polling data:** *The figures cited in this briefing are drawn from data collected by Survation with fieldwork conducted 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> June 2021 with the exception of the NI fieldwork which finished 12 July 2021. The survey was conducted via an online panel. Invitations to complete surveys were sent out to members of online panels. The UK-wide statistics cited in this briefing are drawn from a nationally representative sample of 1,026 adults in the UK aged 18*



to 30 and over. The devolved nation statistics are drawn from representative samples in each nation: 507 adults in Wales; 509 adults in Scotland; and 515 adults in Northern Ireland.

## About us

This research was conducted by the [UK Women's Budget Group](#), [Fawcett Society](#), [Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group](#), [Women's Equality Network Wales](#), [Close the Gap](#) and [Engender](#). We would like to acknowledge the support of Young Women's Trust in designing the polling questionnaire and providing feedback on the report.

Standard Life Foundation has supported this as part of its mission to contribute towards strategic change which improves financial well-being in the UK. The Foundation funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK. It is an independent charitable foundation registered in Scotland (SC040877).

This study was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT). Responding to the growing crisis of democracy and erosion of trust in the political class and institutions, JRRT's priority area of work for both grant-making and external activities is democratic and political reform.

For more details contact:

[admin@wbq.org.uk](mailto:admin@wbq.org.uk)

[info@niwbq.org](mailto:info@niwbq.org)

[Alison.Henderson@fawcettsociety.org.uk](mailto:Alison.Henderson@fawcettsociety.org.uk)

