

Statistical bulletin

Social capital in the UK: 2020

How the UK is faring in four domains of social capital: personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement, and trust and cooperative norms.

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1 . Main points

- At the UK level, trust in national government fell by 11 percentage points in the year to autumn 2019.
- In our communities across the UK, positive engagement with our neighbours, such as exchanging favours or stopping to talk, fell by three and four percentage points respectively between 2011 to 2012 and 2017 to 2018.
- Our sense of belonging to our neighbourhoods across the UK declined between 2014 to 2015 and 2017 to 2018.
- In our communities across England and Wales, we reported feeling safer walking alone at night in 2018 to 2019 compared with 2012 to 2013, with a 12 percentage point increase for women and a 4 percentage point increase for men over this period; although women continue to feel less safe than men, with a 20 percentage point gap observed in 2018 to 2019, this gap has narrowed since 2012 to 2013.
- Within our families, parents in the UK were less likely to regularly give help to, and receive help from, their adult children not living with them in 2017 to 2018 than in 2011 to 2012, falling by four and six percentage points respectively.
- On an individual level, reported membership of political, voluntary, professional or recreational organisations declined by five percentage points in the UK between 2011 to 2012 and 2017 to 2018; meanwhile, social networking via the internet increased by 15 percentage points across the UK between 2013 and 2019.

Statistician's comment

"Our social capital findings show that we are engaging less with our neighbours but more with social media. We also note that we feel safer walking alone after dark in our neighbourhoods, but more recently fewer of us feel like we belong to them."

Eleanor Rees, Head of Social Well-being Analysis team, Office for National Statistics

2 . National engagement

[Social capital](#) is measured through the areas of our personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement, and trust and cooperative norms. It is a term used to describe the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society.

There are 25 indicators of social capital, and this is an indicator update. This update only comments on the data if there is a statistically significant change in one of these indicators and where the latest data refer to 2017 to 2018 onwards.

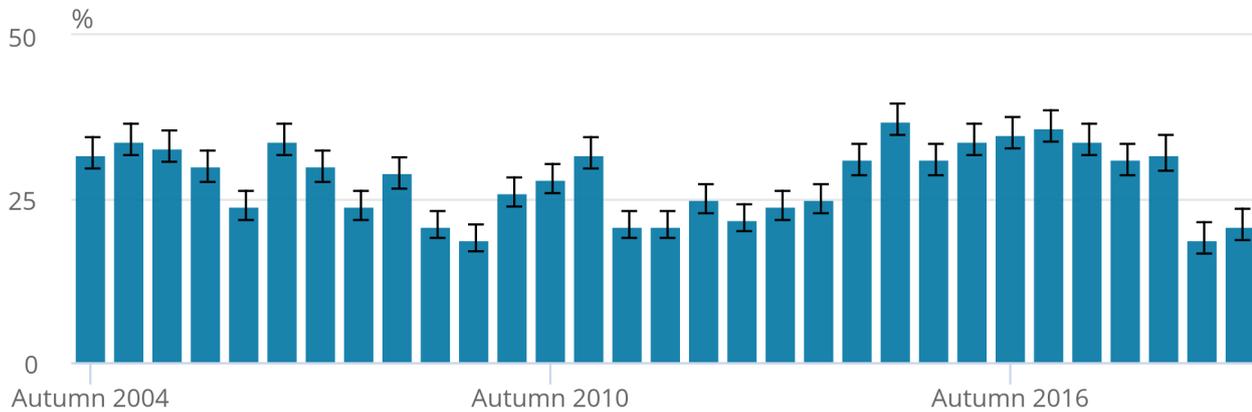
[National engagement](#) considers perceptions of, and engagement with, the UK political system.

Figure 1: In the UK, trust in government fell 11 percentage points in the year to Autumn 2019

Trust in national government in the UK, 2004 to 2019

Figure 1: In the UK, trust in government fell 11 percentage points in the year to Autumn 2019

Trust in national government in the UK, 2004 to 2019



Source: European Commission – Eurobarometer

Trust in national government in the UK has been variable since 2004. Until recently, it had remained relatively stable following a peak of 37% in spring 2015. Between autumn 2018 and autumn 2019, trust in national government fell by 11 percentage points, from 32% to 21%.

Voter turnout in the December 2019 general election fell slightly relative to 2017, having increased steadily since 2001

In terms of engagement with the political process, [provisional figures from the House of Commons Library](#) show that valid voter turnout (that is, the number of valid votes cast as a proportion of those registered to vote) was 67.3% in the December 2019 general election (see [Measuring the data](#) for more information). This was lower than in the 2017 election, which saw the highest voter turnout since the turn of the millennium (at 68.8%). Despite an increase in turnout since the 2001 election, the figures remain lower in this century than in the last: turnout had been above 70% in each general election from 1945.

[Analysis of the 2017 election by the Electoral Commission](#) suggests that younger people (that is, those aged 18 to 34 years) engaged more with the 2017 general election than that of 2015, though they remained less likely to have voted than other age groups.

3 . Local engagement

[Local engagement](#) considers how individuals interact with and within their communities.

Many indicators of local engagement have remained stable over the previous one to three years. However, the proportion of those saying they feel they belong to their neighbourhood has fallen since 2014 to 2015, while the proportion who talk to and exchange favours with their neighbours has also fallen relative to 2011 to 2012, suggesting lower engagement within our communities.

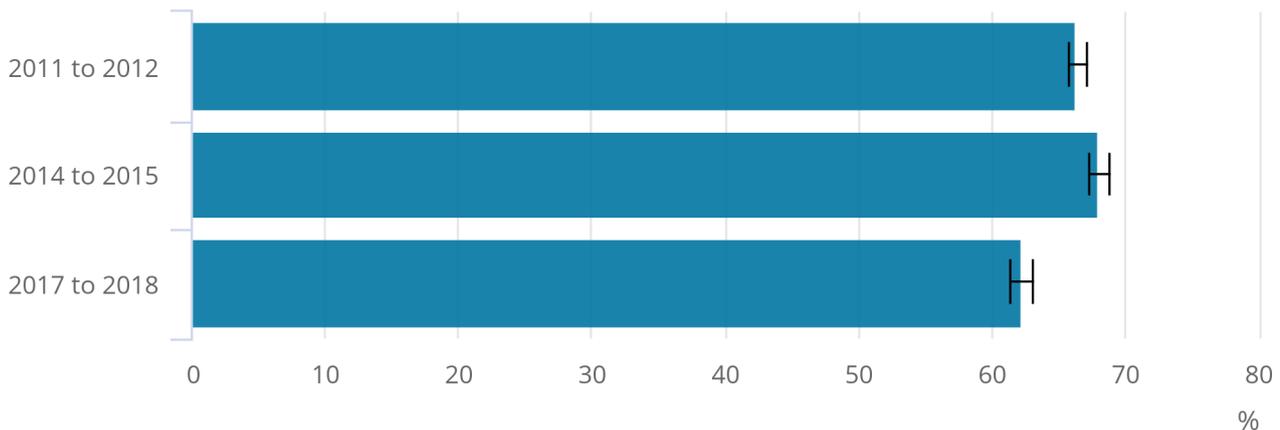
Both men and women more frequently report feeling safe walking alone after dark than they did in 2012 to 2013, and the gap between male and female experience has narrowed, although disparities continue between the sexes.

Figure 2: People are interacting less with their neighbours compared with 2011 to 2012

Proportion who regularly stop and talk to their neighbours in the UK, between 2011 to 2012 and 2017 to 2018

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Proportion who regularly stop and talk to their neighbours in the UK, between 2011 to 2012 and 2017 to 2018



Source: Understanding Society: The UK Longitudinal Household Study

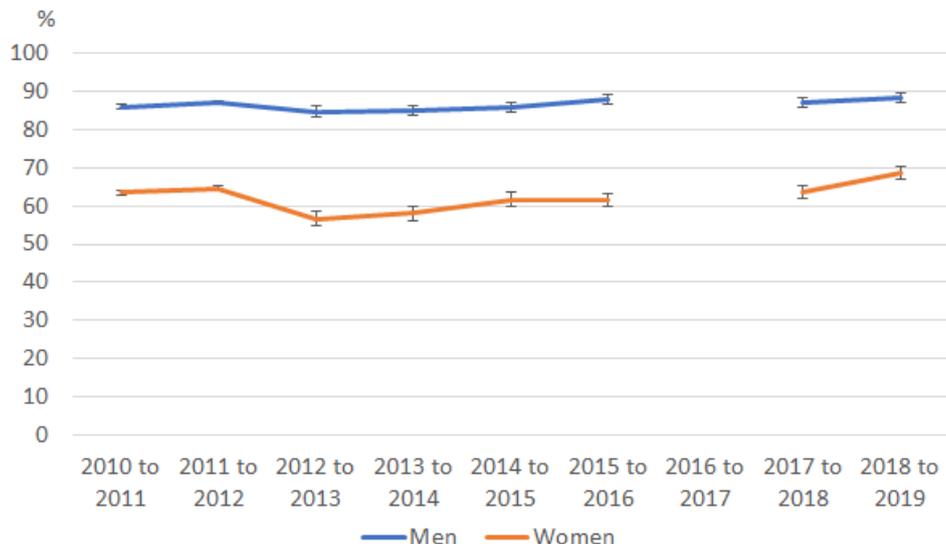
Although we remain more likely to regularly stop and talk to our neighbours (62%) than to borrow things from and exchange favours with them (38%), the proportion saying they regularly speak to their neighbours declined by four percentage points between 2011 to 2012 and 2017 to 2018.

In 2017 to 2018, (38%) of UK adults agreed or strongly agreed that they borrowed things from and exchanged favours with their neighbours; this was three percentage points lower than in 2011 to 2012.

Feelings of belonging to one's neighbourhood have also fallen over recent years. In 2017 to 2018, 62% agreed or strongly agreed that they belonged to their local area, compared with 69% in 2014 to 2015.

Figure 3: Men continue to be more likely than women to report feeling safe walking alone in their area after dark, but this gap has become narrower

Men and women in England and Wales feeling fairly or very safe walking alone in their area after dark, between 2010 to 2011 and 2018 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. The question relating to how safe people feel walking alone in their area after dark was only asked of one-quarter of the sample in the years ending March 2013 onwards.
2. The question relating to how safe people feel walking alone in their area after dark was not asked in the year ending March 2017.
3. The values shown by the lines are estimates. We can be 95% certain the true values lie between the markers.

In 2018 to 2019, 88% of men and 69% of women in England and Wales felt fairly or very safe walking along in their area after dark. For both men and women, this was higher than in 2012 to 2013, though women remain less likely to feel safe than men, illustrating that we may have different perceptions and experiences within our communities depending on who we are. For women, the proportion feeling safe increased by five percentage points on the previous year. This accompanies a wider pattern since 2012 to 2013 of women seeing greater increases than men in the percentage saying they felt fairly or very safe, meaning that the gap between men and women has narrowed.

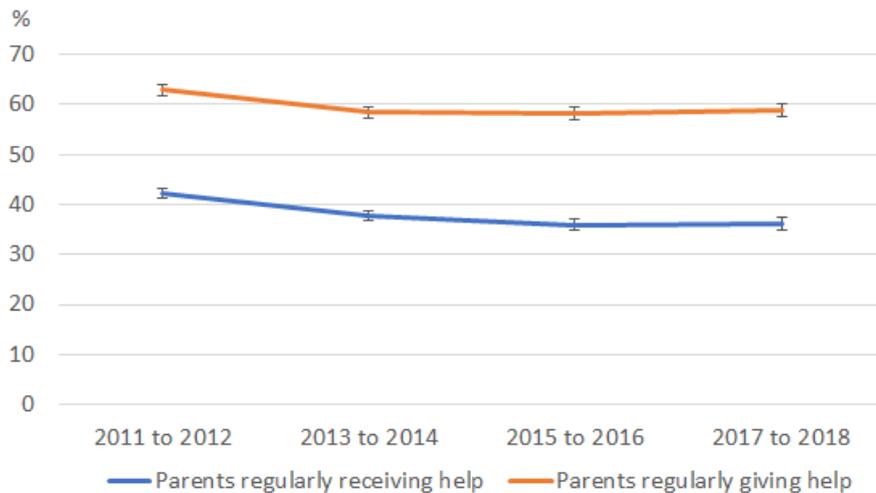
4 . Individual engagement

Individual engagement considers individuals and their interaction with their personal environment and networks.

Over the previous one to three years, the majority of indicators relating to the individual remained stable. However, the most recent data show that individuals are less likely to engage with wider interests through organisational membership in both the shorter and longer terms. Also, compared with 2011 to 2012, people are less likely to provide help to others through providing special help to sick, elderly or disabled persons or through parental links after children have left home. People are more likely to say they have at least one close friend and to have used the internet for social networking in the last three months.

Figure 4: The proportion of parents giving help to or receiving help from their grown-up children not living with them has decreased since 2011 to 2012

Parents in the UK regularly giving help to or receiving help from children aged 16 years and over not living with them, between 2011 to 2012 and 2017 to 2018



Source: Understanding Society: The UK Longitudinal Household Study

Notes:

1. Tasks include “Giving them lifts in your car (if you have one)/Shopping for them/Providing or cooking meals /Looking after their children/Washing, ironing or cleaning/Dealing with personal affairs e.g. paying bills, writing letters/Decorating, gardening or house repairs/Financial help/Anything else”.
2. The values shown by the lines are estimates. We can be 95% certain the true values lie between the markers.

In 2017 to 2018, 36% of adults reported regularly or frequently receiving help from their children aged 16 years or older not living with them; this was six percentage points lower than in 2011 to 2012. Meanwhile, 59% reported regularly or frequently giving the same type of help to their children in 2017 to 2018, compared with 63% in 2011 to 2012.

The fall in parents receiving help from, and giving help to, children not living with them could be related to more parents and adult children living together. Multi-family households (consisting of two or more families) were the fastest growing [household type](#) between 1999 and 2019; this could reflect a growth in multigenerational families choosing to live together or out of necessity because of, for example, housing affordability, childcare responsibilities or caring for older relatives.

In 2017 to 2018, 17% reported giving special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them; this was two percentage points lower than in 2011 to 2012.

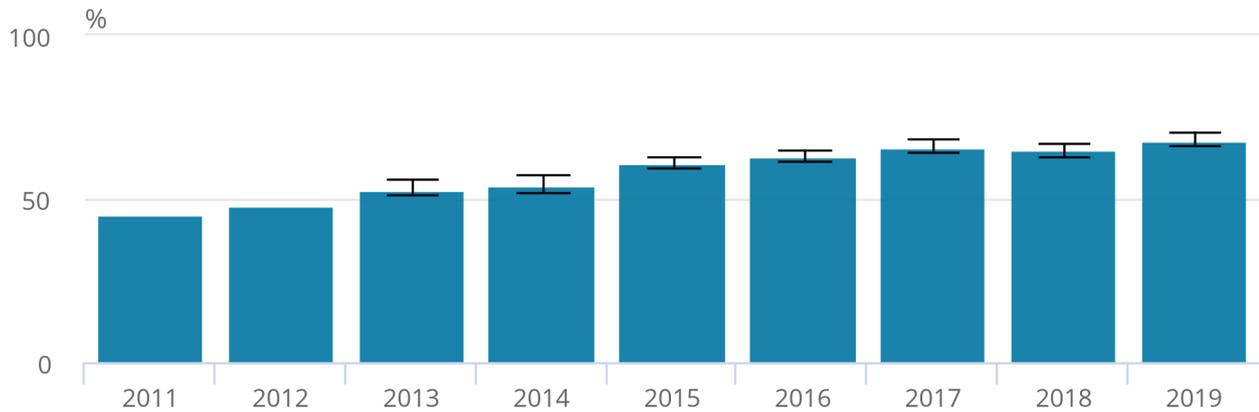
Over the longer term, people are more likely to say they have at least one close friend (97% in 2017 to 2018 compared with 96% in 2011 to 2012) and to have used the internet for social networking in the last three months (68% in 2019 compared with 53% in 2013).

Figure 5: The proportion of people using the internet for social networking has grown steadily since 2011

Proportion who used the internet for social networking in the last three months in the UK, 2011 to 2019

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Proportion who used the internet for social networking in the last three months in the UK, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Internet access: household and individuals; Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

Notes:

1. Confidence intervals for 2011 and 2012 were unavailable.

Across the UK, reported membership of political, voluntary, professional and recreational organisations has also seen a decline from 53% in 2014 to 2015 to 48% in 2017 to 2018.

5 . Social capital in the UK data

[Social capital headline indicators](#)

Dataset | Released 20 February 2020

Current headline indicators for social capital in the UK. It includes the latest data for each indicator with time series and an assessment of change to track change over time.

6 . Glossary

Social capital

Social capital is a term used to describe the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society.

National engagement

National engagement considers perceptions of, and engagement with, the UK political system.

Local engagement

Local engagement considers how individuals interact with and within their communities.

Individual engagement

Individual engagement considers individuals and their interaction with their personal environment and networks.

7 . Measuring the data

Social capital indicators

We capture social capital through a 25-indicator framework, covering the topics of social network support; trust and co-operative norms; personal relationships; and civic participation. These domains match the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's \(OECD's\) framework for measuring social capital](#). This bulletin focuses on the main points and changes in the most recent indicator data. Data for each of the 25 indicators are available to download via our [Social capital headline indicators](#).

We seek to monitor measures of social capital when new data become available in order to help inform policy initiatives that can improve people's lives within our communities. Because of the different sources used for these indicators, caution should be taken when comparing indicators or change therein.

For each indicator, the most recent data have been used. Indicator data were known to be current as at 15 January 2020.

Data have been used at the UK level wherever possible. Any exceptions to this are noted in the text.

Assessment of change

We have only commented on data where the latest period available is 2017 to 2018 onwards. This is so that we are presenting an up-to-date reflection on the state of social capital in the UK. We have also only commented on the data if there is a statistically significant change.

Throughout the article and [accompanying data table](#), "short-term" change refers to the most recent data available compared with the previous year, while "long-term" change refers to the most recent data compared with 6 years previously. Any exceptions to this are noted in the text.

The majority of the 25 social capital indicators are sourced from self-reported survey data. These sources use samples of the total measured population to produce estimations. Given this, indicators have only been assessed as having increased or decreased if the difference between the comparison periods is statistically significant using 95% [confidence intervals](#). If a difference is said to be statistically significant, it is unlikely that it could have occurred by chance.

Voter turnout has been assessed using the actual increase or decrease, as this is not an estimation. Some indicators, including people willing to help neighbours and neighbourhood trust, have not been assessed using the long-term change measure, because there are not enough data points to provide a comparison.

Change over time

The time frame used for over time change has been updated in this release to better align to the method used by [Measuring national well-being: domains and measures](#). This dataset assesses short-term change as one year and long-term change as five years. However, owing to the nature of the indicators included in the social capital release, short-term change here has been assessed as one year where available or most recent period available, and long-term has been assessed as six-year change. Six-year change was selected to better align to the periodicity of the data. Where these definitions are not possible to implement, a note has been made on the indicator page of the reference table.

Indicators from the [Community Life Survey](#) have not been assessed using the long-term change measure. These include loneliness, people who have people who would be there for them, social action projects, decisions affecting the local area, and people from different backgrounds getting on well. This is because the Community Life Survey moved to a self-completion online and paper mixed-method approach from 2016 to 2017 onwards, with an end to the previous face-to-face method. Data from the 2016 to 2017 survey onwards are not comparable with data from the 2015 to 2016 or earlier surveys.

All analysis has been done on unrounded figures. Some figures may not sum because of rounding.

National, local and individual measures

For the purpose of this analysis, the 25 headline indicators for social capital were classed depending on whether they related to individuals, their local community, or their engagement at the national level. The indicators were grouped as per Tables 1 to 3.

Table 1: National engagement indicators

Indicator	Most recent period	Geography	Short-term change	Long-term change
Percentage of those who have trust in national government	Autumn 2019	UK	Decreased	Decreased
Voter turnout in UK general elections	December 2019	UK	Decreased	Increased
Proportion of people who have been involved in at least one political action in the previous 12 months	2016 to 2017	UK	Increased	Increased
Proportion of people who are very or quite interested in politics	2016	UK	Increased	Increased

Source: Office for National Statistics – Social capital indicators

Table 2: Local engagement indicators

Indicator	Most recent period	Geography	Short-term change	Long-term change
Proportion of people who have been involved in at least one social action project in their local area in the previous 12 months	2018 to 2019	England	No overall change	Not assessed
Proportion of people who definitely agree or tend to agree that they can influence decisions affecting their local area	2018 to 2019	England	No overall change	Not assessed
Proportion of people who definitely agree or tend to agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	2018 to 2019	England	No overall change	Not assessed
Felt fairly or very safe walking alone after dark (men)	2018 to 2019	England and Wales	No overall change	Increased
Felt fairly or very safe walking alone after dark (women)	2018 to 2019	England and Wales	Increased	Increased
Percentage who agreed or agreed strongly that they felt they belonged to their neighbourhood	2017 to 2018	UK	Decreased	No overall change
Proportion of people who regularly stop and talk with people in their neighbourhood	2017 to 2018	UK	Decreased	Decreased
Proportion of people who borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours	2017 to 2018	UK	Decreased	Decreased
Proportion of people who would say that most people in their neighbourhood can be trusted	2014 to 2015	UK	Increased	Not assessed
Proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that people around where they live are willing to help their neighbours	2014 to 2015	UK	Increased	Not assessed

Source: Office for National Statistics – Social capital indicators

Table 3: Individual engagement indicators

Indicator	Most recent period	Geography	Short-term change	Long-term change
Proportion of people who have used the internet for social networking in the last three months	2019	UK	No overall change	Increased
Feelings of loneliness often or always	2018 to 2019	England	No overall change	Not assessed
Proportion of people who are members of organisations, whether political, voluntary, professional or recreational	2017 to 2018	UK	Decreased	Decreased
Proportion of people who give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them	2017 to 2018	UK	No overall change	Decreased
Proportion of people who have at least one close friend	2017 to 2018	UK	No overall change	Increased
Proportion of parents who regularly receive practical or financial help from a child aged 16 years or over not living with them	2017 to 2018	UK	No overall change	Decreased
Proportion of parents who regularly give practical or financial help to a child aged 16 years or over not living with them	2017 to 2018	UK	No overall change	Decreased
Percentage of people that have people who would be there for them if they needed help	2018 to 2019	England	No overall change	Not assessed
Proportion of people who meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least once a week	2016	UK	No overall change	Decreased
Proportion of people who would say that most people can be trusted	2016	UK	No overall change	No overall change
Percentage who volunteered more than once in the last 12 months	2016 to 2017	UK	Decreased	No overall change

Source: Office for National Statistics – Social capital indicators

Social capital in the devolved administrations

The UK's devolved administrations also collect and publish data on social capital.

Scotland's social capital index is a national indicator that forms part of [Scotland's National Performance Framework](#). It monitors aggregate changes in levels of social capital since 2013 through the four domains of social networks, community cohesion, community empowerment and social participation. More information can be found on the [National Performance Framework website](#).

In Wales, measures of loneliness, volunteering and influence decisions affecting the local area are included within the [national indicators](#) to demonstrate progress towards Wales' seven well-being goals. Further data relating to social capital at a Wales level are collected through the [National Survey for Wales](#).

Northern Ireland publishes [data on social capital](#) from its [Continuous Household Survey](#). This includes data on perceptions of the local area, trust in people in the area and action taken to solve problems affecting local people.

Some indicators are not currently measured at the UK level. Indicators measured through the Community Life Survey include data for England, and the indicator on feeling safe walking alone in the area after dark covers England and Wales. Where this is the case, alternative data sources may be available for the devolved nations, but differences in methodology may affect the comparability of the data.

For some indicators, it may be possible to find more recent measures of the concept from a different source than that used as the headline indicator. For example, where we may use a UK-level source for an indicator, more recent data may be available at a UK nation level, such as the Community Life Survey, the National Survey for Wales, the Scottish Household Survey or the Continuous Household Survey for Northern Ireland. Caution should be used when analysing or comparing data from these sources, as differences in methodology or wording may affect the comparability of the data.

Improving measures of social capital

In November 2019, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published [Principal component analysis of social capital indicators](#) in response to frequent requests for a single question, or short set of questions, to measure social capital on surveys. The analysis identified the indicators best capturing the underlying concepts of the ONS social capital framework, providing a robust statistical rationale for a short question set. In the coming months, we will consult with users and experts to agree a recommended short question set. This will supplement the existing 25 headline indicators of social capital, which will continue to be updated.

8 . Strengths and limitations

At the time of publication, the voter turnout data from the December 2019 UK general election were not available from the Electoral Commission. In the interim, this figure has been sourced from the [House of Commons Library](#) ahead of the Electoral Commission's publication of electoral data later in 2020. This figure is measured as the number of valid votes declared on election day as a proportion of the base electorate. This figure is subject to revision.

In this release, the "Rely on" indicator has been updated to a different source and is now defined as "Percentage of people that have people who would be there for them if they needed help", taken from the [Community Life Survey](#). This replaces "Proportion of people who have a spouse, family member or friend to rely on if they have a serious problem" taken from [Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study](#). The reason for this change in definition is to ensure new data are regularly available, as the previous data were last updated in 2014 to 2015, with no planned update before 2021.

For more information on the indicators and their sources, please see the [Social capital headline](#) indicators published alongside this bulletin.

9 . Related links

[Four interpretations of social capital – an agenda for measurement](#)

Working paper | Released 10 December 2013

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) paper clarifying the range of different elements that are encompassed by the term, “social capital”, and discussing what needs to be done to further statistical research and development in order to lay the groundwork for establishing guidelines for better comparative measures in the future.

[Principal component analysis of social capital indicators](#)

Article | Released 18 November 2019

A proposal for a short social capital indicator set informed using principal component analysis.

[Measuring Social Capital](#)

Article | Released 18 July 2014

Suggests a list of headline measures using a framework that covers four core aspects of social capital. Highlights some examples of the importance of measuring social capital, including the relationship between social capital and reduced crime rates.

[Northern Ireland: social capital data](#)

Dataset | Released 15 March 2017

Data from the Continuous Household Survey. The survey asks questions on a variety of topics, such as internet access, the environment, tourism, libraries, health, sport and education.

[Scotland: National Performance Framework](#)

Web page | Live page

Monitors aggregate changes in levels of social capital in Scotland since 2013 through the four domains of social networks, community cohesion, community empowerment and social participation.

[Wales: National indicators](#)

Web page | Released 26 September 2019

Measures of loneliness, volunteering and feeling able to influence decisions affecting the local area are included within the national indicators to demonstrate progress towards Wales’ seven well-being goals.