

Statistical bulletin

# Unity and division in Great Britain: 24 April to 28 June 2020

The effect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on perceptions of unity and division in Great Britain, using the weekly Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN). Includes an assessment of unity and division over time and across numerous socioeconomic divides, such as age, sex and perceptions of community.

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## Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Understanding the impact on society](#)
3. [Expectations of a united Britain](#)
4. [Perceptions of unity and personal well-being](#)
5. [Perceptions of unity and division linked to respondent's views on society](#)
6. [Shifting perceptions of unity and division in Britain](#)
7. [Perceptions of equality and kindness in Britain](#)
8. [Unity and division data](#)
9. [Glossary](#)
10. [Measuring the data](#)
11. [Strengths and limitations](#)
12. [Related links](#)

# 1 . Main points

- Over the period as a whole, from 24 April to 28 June 2020, more adults on average thought that Britain will be united after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (46%) than thought that we were united before the pandemic (24%).
- In this same period, adults in Scotland were less likely (31%) to say that Britain will be united after the pandemic than those in either England (47%) or Wales (44%).
- Although women were as likely as men to say that Britain was united before the pandemic, they were more likely than men to think that Britain will be united after it, with half (50%) saying that Britain would be either very or somewhat united compared with 41% of men.
- Perceptions of unity within Britain are associated with higher average life satisfaction, happiness and feelings that things done in life are worthwhile as well as with checking on neighbours, feeling like the community is available to support you and thinking people are doing more to help others.
- As time progressed through the period, the percentage of adults who thought that Britain would be more united after the pandemic declined by 29 percentage points (from 57% in the first week of the period to 28% in the last week) so that by the end of this period, there was no difference in the percentage of people who thought that Britain would be united before the pandemic compared with those who thought it would be united after.
- Similarly, as time progressed through the period, there was only a small difference in the proportion of the population who thought that Britain would be equal after the pandemic (22%) compared with those who thought it was equal before (19%).
- Although perceptions of how kind people in Britain will be after we recover from the coronavirus pandemic declined from 67% at the start of the period to 56% at the end of the period, by the end there were still more people who thought that people in Britain would be kind after the pandemic than thought that people were kind before it (46%).

## Statistician's comment

“Today’s research shows that earlier in the national lockdown, people believed that a post-pandemic Britain would be a more united one.

“However, over subsequent weeks, this belief declined. Most people also expected that inequalities in society would remain. But interestingly, there is still a belief that we will be a kind nation, perhaps because of the many stories of individual kindness we have heard or experienced over this time”

Dawn Snape, Assistant Director, Sustainability and Inequalities Division, Office for National Statistics

## 2 . Understanding the impact on society

This bulletin contains data and indicators from a new module being undertaken through the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) to understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on British society.

The statistics in this publication are based on pooled data from the OPN weekly survey of adults aged 16 years and over in Great Britain, which includes England, Scotland and Wales.

The period covered by this bulletin is between 24 April and 28 June 2020 (inclusive). This includes two weeks during the national lockdown and seven weeks during which lockdown restrictions were eased at different rates across the countries of Great Britain.

The bulletin focuses on responses to six questions:

- How united or divided do you think Britain was before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
- How united or divided do you think Britain will be after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
- How equal or unequal do you think Britain was before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
- How equal or unequal do you think Britain will be after we have recovered from coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
- How kind or unkind do you think people in Britain were before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
- How kind or unkind do you think people in Britain will be after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?

For ease of interpretation, responses to each question have been combined into four responses: “very or somewhat united/equal/kind”; “very or somewhat divided/unequal/unkind”; “neither united nor divided/equal nor unequal/kind nor unkind”; and “don’t know/prefer not to say”.

It should be noted that the initial question in each case is retrospective, asking respondents to think about a time before the coronavirus pandemic. The second question asks about expectations of the future. The survey asked different people their views each week over the period covered, so the findings reflect the views of a representative sample of people in Great Britain each week during that period. They do not reflect changing views of the same individuals over time.

Results are based on 12,630 responding adults over the whole period. We also include statistics based on the individual weekly surveys over this period to show how responses have changed over time. Throughout this bulletin, “this period” refers to the period from 24 April to 28 June 2020. Where data for particular weeks are used, the dates are noted separately.

This bulletin presents a summary of results, with further data including [confidence intervals](#) for the estimates contained in the [associated dataset](#). Throughout the bulletin, we only comment on findings that are [statistically significant](#). The statistics presented are estimates and as with all estimates, there is a level of [uncertainty](#) associated with them. Where available, 95% confidence intervals have been shown. These indicate the range within which we would expect the true value to lie for 95 out of every 100 samples drawn at random from the population. Wide confidence intervals, often associated with small sample sizes or large sample variance, indicate a wider range of values within which we would expect the true value to lie.

Throughout this bulletin, we have assessed statistical significance using non-overlapping confidence intervals. This method has the limitation that some estimates with overlapping confidence intervals may be significantly different but will not be identified as such (that is, the false-negative rate will be inflated).

Only statistically significant differences are commented on in this release. Caution should therefore be exercised when making other comparisons between groups or time periods as observed differences may not be statistically significant.

### 3 . Expectations of a united Britain

Figure 1 shows that across the period from the end of April to the end of June, more people thought that Britain would be united after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (46%) than thought it was united before the pandemic (24%).

#### **Figure 1: Almost half of respondents thought that Britain would be united after the coronavirus pandemic compared with less than a quarter who thought it was united before**

**Percentage of people reporting different levels of unity in Britain before and after the coronavirus pandemic, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The question "How united or divided do you think Britain was before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?" is asked retrospectively.
3. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
5. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

#### **Where we live**

Considering the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on perceptions of unity across the different countries of Great Britain, although across all three countries significantly more people expected Britain to be united after the pandemic than felt it was united before, these figures are significantly lower for those in Scotland than those in either England or Wales (Figure 2). Almost half of those in England and Wales (47% and 44% respectively) thought that Britain will be united after we have recovered from the coronavirus pandemic, compared with less than a third of people in Scotland (31%).

#### **Figure 2: Although people in Scotland were more likely to think that Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic than think it was united before, they were less likely to say this than those in England or Wales**

**Percentage of people reporting different levels of unity in Britain before and after the coronavirus pandemic by country, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

## Notes:

1. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The question "How united or divided do you think Britain was before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?" is asked retrospectively.
3. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
5. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

## Sex

Perceptions of unity in Britain have been more positively impacted by the pandemic among women than men (Figure 3). While similar proportions of men and women, around a quarter, thought that Britain was united before the pandemic, significantly more women than men thought that it will be united after we have recovered from it (50% and 41%, respectively). Women were also significantly less likely than men to think that Britain was divided before the pandemic and fewer thought that Britain will be divided after we have recovered from it.

### **Figure 3: Men were more likely than women to think that Britain was divided before the pandemic and that Britain will be divided after we recover from it**

**Perceptions of unity and division before and after the coronavirus pandemic by sex, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

## Notes:

1. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The question "How united or divided do you think Britain was before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?" is asked retrospectively.
3. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
5. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

## Age

Around 3 in 10 adults aged 65 years and over thought that Britain was united before the pandemic compared with around a fifth of those aged between 25 and 64 years. However, although the pandemic has had a positive impact on perceptions of unity across all age groups, with more people of all ages thinking that Britain will be united after we have recovered from the pandemic, only around 41% of 25- to 44-year-olds thought this compared with almost half of those aged 45 years and over (Figure 4).

### **Figure 4: Perceptions of division after the coronavirus pandemic were greater for those aged 25 to 44 years than any other age groups**

Perceptions of unity and division after the coronavirus pandemic by age, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020

[Download the data](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
3. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
4. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

## **4 . Perceptions of unity and personal well-being**

Perceptions of unity and division have a clear link to personal well-being. Average ratings of life satisfaction, feeling that things done in life are worthwhile and happiness are consistently higher among those who think that Britain was united before the pandemic compared with those who think it was divided as well as among those who think that Britain will be united after we recover from it compared with those who think it will be divided (Figure 5).

Those who think Britain will be united after the pandemic on average rated their life satisfaction as 7.2 out of 10 compared with 6.8 among those who think Britain will be divided. Similarly, feeling that things done in life are worthwhile was on average rated as 7.6 among with those who thought Britain will be united after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic compared with 7.2 for those who thought that Britain will be divided, and happiness received ratings of 7.2 and 6.8 out of 10 respectively. There was no difference in average ratings of anxiety between the two groups.

Among respondents with very high life satisfaction, 53% thought that Britain will be united after the pandemic compared with only 29% of those with low life satisfaction.

### **Figure 5: Those who thought Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic had higher average ratings of life satisfaction, feelings that things done in life are worthwhile and happiness than those who thought Britain will be divided**

[Download the data](#)

## Notes:

1. Each well-being question is asked on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is "not at all" and 10 is "completely".
2. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
3. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
5. "\*" shows where significant differences have been found between the well-being of those who felt that Britain would be united compared with those who felt that Britain would be divided after the coronavirus pandemic.

The relationship between well-being and perceived unity noted here is similar to findings in our [technical report on optimism and personal well-being](#). Specifically, those who were optimistic about the future of the UK reported higher life satisfaction on average than those who were pessimistic. Further supporting this relationship, those who were optimistic about how quickly we would return to normal, reporting less than six months following the coronavirus pandemic, were more likely to report that we will be united (49%) than those who were more pessimistic (41%), reporting over a year or never.

Respondents who reported feeling hardly ever or never lonely were more likely (63%) to have felt that Britain was united before the pandemic, compared with those who reported feeling lonely often or always (54%). However, perceptions of unity after the pandemic did not significantly differ among those people who reported differing degrees of loneliness. Of those who reported feeling lonely often and always, perceptions of unity differed by 26 percentage points between the two questions, before and after the pandemic (compared with 21 percentage points for those who hardly ever or never felt lonely).

## 5 . Perceptions of unity and division linked to respondent's views on society

In this section, we explore how views and actions within our communities are related to a perceived sense of unity in Britain. We also look at how a sense of being well-informed about the pandemic is associated with views about unity or division.

### Community support and engagement

Perceptions of community cohesion and support are significantly associated with expectations of unity in Britain after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. For example, around half (51%) of respondents who agreed that "if they needed help, other local community members would support them" thought that Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic, compared with only 26% who disagreed.

Furthermore, 51% of those who reported having checked on a neighbour at least once in the past seven days thought that Britain will be united after the pandemic, compared with 40% of those who reported not having checked on neighbours in the past week. Similarly, those who thought that people were doing things to help others more since the coronavirus pandemic were much more likely to expect Britain to be united (51%) after the pandemic has passed than those who thought people were doing less to help others (19%) or the same (24%).

### **Figure 6: People with perceptions of neighbourliness and people helping others out more were more likely to think that Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic than on average in Great Britain**

**Percentage of respondents who think that Great Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. The percentages shown in this chart are the proportion of respondents that felt that Great Britain would be “Very/somewhat” united after the coronavirus pandemic.
2. Responses for very united and somewhat united have been combined.
3. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.

### **Sufficient information to stay safe**

A sense of being fully informed and understanding how to avoid catching COVID-19 is also associated with expectations of a united Britain, while a perceived lack of information is associated with expectations of a divided country.

Respondents who reported that they had enough information to protect themselves from COVID-19 were more likely (47%) to say that Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic than those who said they did not have enough information (33%).

### **Figure 7: Those who felt they had enough information to protect themselves from COVID-19 were more likely to report that they thought Britain will be united after the coronavirus pandemic than those who did not**

**Perceptions of unity and division after the coronavirus pandemic by perceptions on having sufficient information to stay safe, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
3. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
4. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

## 6 . Shifting perceptions of unity and division in Britain

While findings on perceptions of unity and division among all of those surveyed between late April and late June suggest that the pandemic may have contributed to a greater sense of us all being in it together, looking at the changes week on week reveals that expectations that Britain will be united after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic declined significantly over this period, while expectations that it will be divided increased (Figure 8).

While perceptions of unity in Britain before the pandemic have remained fairly stable over time, expectations of a united Britain after the pandemic declined by 29 percentage points between 24 April and 28 June 2020, and expectations of a divided Britain increased by 33 percentage points over the same period. This suggests a shift in expectations about the future of British society as we moved through the lockdown and into the progressive easing of restrictions.

In fact, in the latest period for which data are available (25 to 28 June), there is no significant difference in the proportion of people who think that Britain was united before the pandemic as think that it will be united after we recover from it. The same is true when comparing the proportions of the population who think that Britain was divided before the pandemic as think it will be divided when we emerge from it. This suggests that any increases in perceptions of unity that were experienced during lockdown have gradually dissipated as things have slowly started to return to normal.

### **Figure 8: Perceptions of unity after the coronavirus pandemic have declined over time, while those of division have increased over the same period**

**Percentage of people reporting different levels of unity in Britain after the coronavirus pandemic across time, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. Responses for very united and somewhat united, very divided and somewhat divided, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The data used in this chart come from 10 individual waves of data collected from 24 April to 3 May and 25 June to 28 June.
3. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
4. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

## 7 . Perceptions of equality and kindness in Britain

While perceptions of a united Great Britain after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic declined between 24 April and 28 June 2020, perceptions of how equal Britain will be after the coronavirus pandemic remained broadly stable week on week and over the period as a whole; there was only a small difference in the proportion of the population who thought that Britain was equal before the pandemic (19%) and the proportion who thought that it will be equal after we recover from the pandemic (22%) (Figure 9). Together, these findings suggest that the pandemic has not impacted on perceptions of inequalities in society to the same extent as it did on perceptions of unity.

### **Figure 9: Slightly more people thought that Britain will be equal after the pandemic than thought it was equal before**

**Percentage of people reporting different levels of equality in Britain before and after the coronavirus pandemic, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

#### **Notes:**

1. Responses for very equal and somewhat equal, very unequal and somewhat unequal, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
3. Questions asked are: "How equal or unequal do you think Britain was before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?" and "How equal or unequal do you think Britain will be after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?".
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
5. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Looking at perceptions of kindness in British society, for the period as a whole, significantly more people think that people will be kind in Britain after we have recovered from the coronavirus pandemic (63%) compared with those who think that people in Britain were kind before the pandemic (44%) (Figure 10). However, perceptions of kindness declined over this time, from 67% at the start of the period to 56% by the end. Although this is similar to the pattern seen for perceptions of unity, at the end of the period there were still significantly more people who thought that people in Britain will be kind after we emerge from the pandemic than thought that people in Britain were kind before it.

### **Figure 10: More people thought that people in Great Britain will be kind after the coronavirus pandemic than thought people were kind before it.**

**Percentage of people reporting different levels of kindness in Britain before and after the coronavirus pandemic, Great Britain, 24 April to 28 June 2020**

[Download the data](#)

## Notes:

1. Responses for very kind and somewhat kind, very unkind and somewhat unkind, and don't know and prefer not to say have been combined.
2. The data included in this chart use a pooled dataset covering the period 24 April to 28 June 2020.
3. Questions asked are: "How kind or unkind do you think people in Britain were before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?" and "How kind or unkind do you think Britain will be after we have recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?".
4. Base population for percentage: adults aged 16 years or over.
5. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

As might be expected, perceptions of equality and kindness are associated with perceptions of unity. Significantly more of those who thought that Britain will be equal after the coronavirus pandemic (80%) also thought that Britain will be united, compared with those who thought that Britain will be divided (13%). Similarly, 59% of those who thought that people in Britain will be kind after the coronavirus pandemic thought that Britain will be united, compared with 28% who thought it will be divided.

## 8 . Unity and division data

[Estimates of unity, equality and kindness](#)

Dataset | Released 25 August 2020

Estimates of unity, equality and kindness in Britain before and after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with breakdowns of unity by social groups, countries and regions of Great Britain, personal well-being, and perceptions of society.

## 9 . Glossary

### Personal well-being

Our personal well-being measures ask people to evaluate, on a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied they are with their life overall, whether they feel they have meaning and purpose in their life, and their emotions (happiness and anxiety) during a particular period.

### Lockdown

Lockdown is the shutting down of all non-essential activities to slow the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). In the UK, this had seen strict limits imposed on daily life, including:

- people ordered to only leave the house for essentials such as food, medicine, exercise or to care for a vulnerable person
- the closure of non-essential shops
- the banning of gatherings of more than two people

The UK lockdown was applied on 23 March 2020. This has formed the basis for each nation's Stay at home guidance. Specific Stay at home guidance for [England](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) is available. During the majority of the period covered in this release, all countries of the UK remained in strict lockdown, but from 1 June 2020 the limits in England were relaxed, with groups of up to six people allowed to meet while socially distancing. The data in this release only cover England, Scotland and Wales.

## Disability

To define disability in this publication, we refer to the [Government Statistical Service \(GSS\) harmonised "core" definition](#); this identifies as "disabled" a person who has a physical or mental health condition or illness that has lasted or is expected to last 12 months or more that reduces their ability to carry-out day-to-day activities.

The GSS definition is designed to reflect the definitions that appear in legal terms in the [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#) and the subsequent [Equality Act 2010](#).

The GSS harmonised questions are asked of the respondent in the survey, meaning that disability status is self-reported.

## 10 . Measuring the data

The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) is a monthly omnibus survey. In response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we have adapted the OPN to become a weekly survey used to collect data on the impact of the coronavirus on day-to-day life in Great Britain. Data from the OPN covering the period from 24 April to 28 June 2020 was used in this publication.

The survey results are weighted to be a nationally representative sample for Great Britain, and data are collected using an online self-completion questionnaire. Individuals who did not want to or were unable to complete the survey online had the opportunity to take part over the phone.

Where differences between groups and periods are presented in this bulletin, associated [confidence intervals](#), which are included in the [associated dataset](#), indicate their significance.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [OPN QMI](#).

## Sampling

For each wave of the OPN, a sample of 2,500 households was randomly selected from those that had previously completed the Labour Market Survey (LMS). From each household, one adult was selected at random but with unequal probability. Younger people were given higher selection probability than older people because of under-representation in the sample available for the survey.

Further information on the sample design can be found in the [OPN QMI](#).

## Weighting

Survey weights were applied to make estimates representative of the population. Weights were first adjusted for non-response and attrition. Subsequently, the weights were calibrated to satisfy population distributions considering the following factors: sex by age, region, tenure, and highest qualification, employment status, National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) group and smoking status. For age, sex and region, population totals based on projections of mid-year population estimates for May 2020 were used. The resulting weighted sample is therefore representative of the Great Britain adult population by a number of socio-demographic factors and geography.

## Next steps

Going forward, we aim to carry out more in-depth analyses to understand more about groups who had differing perceptions of society during lockdown and the period of subsequent easing of lockdown restrictions and how they may have contributed to the different expectations of unity and division in Britain after the coronavirus pandemic.

## 11 . Strengths and limitations

The main strengths of the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) include:

- it allows for timely production of data and statistics that can respond quickly to changing needs
- it meets data needs: the questionnaire is developed with customer consultation, and design expertise is applied in the development stages
- robust methods are adopted for the survey's sampling and weighting strategies to limit the impact of bias
- quality assurance procedures are undertaken throughout the analysis stages to minimise the risk of error

The main limitations of the OPN include:

- the sample size is relatively small: 2,500 individuals per week with fewer completed interviews, meaning that detailed analyses for subnational geographies and other sub-groups are not possible unless waves are pooled together and response categories are combined
- comparisons between periods and groups must be done with caution as estimates are provided from a sample survey; as such, [confidence intervals](#) are included in the datasets to present the [sampling variability](#), which should be taken into account when assessing differences between periods, as true differences may not exist

## 12 . Related links

### [Coronavirus and anxiety, Great Britain: 3 April 2020 to 10 May 2020](#)

Article | Released 15 June 2020

The number of people reporting high levels of anxiety has sharply elevated during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This article will provide insights into which socio-demographic and economic factors were most associated with high levels of anxiety during the first weeks of lockdown.

### [Optimism and personal well-being: technical report](#)

Article | Released 12 March 2020

Exploratory analysis of the relationship between optimism and personal well-being using questions from the 2019 Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN).

### [Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 7 August 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 7 August 2020

Indicators from the OPN covering the period 29 July to 2 August 2020 to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people, households and communities in Great Britain.

### [Personal and economic well-being in Great Britain: June 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 18 June 2020

Estimates looking across personal and economic well-being covering the period from 20 March to 7 June 2020, to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people and households in Great Britain.