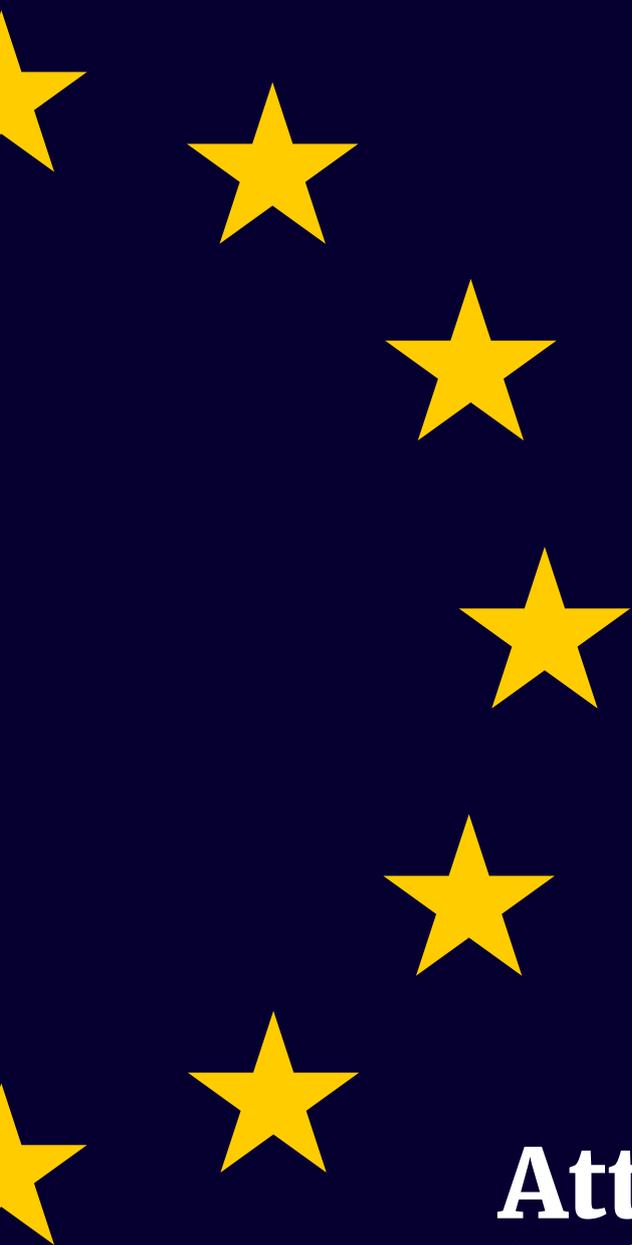


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Attitudes to infrastructure in Brexit Britain

What do leave voters want from the government's infrastructure revolution?

Foreword

The UK is going through a moment of change. The election result indicated an ushering in of a new era. Austerity is making way for a post-Brexit country where nations, regions, constituencies and voters outside London and the South East play a greater role in political discourse.

At no point in a generation have communities across the UK played such a central role in government direction.

The 2019 election debate was dominated by Brexit and infrastructure, and how transformative forces can deliver change in seemingly forgotten parts of the UK.

People who voted to leave the EU in 2016 did so partly because of frustration with Europe, but also in response to the sense that communities have been left behind.

Government now wants to take action and the public is expecting to see results. The additional £100bn investment that has been promised for new infrastructure to reconnect and revitalise towns and cities to address the gap between the urban areas and the rest of the UK is central to government policy.

But this leaves a number of questions:

- How is government going to use infrastructure to show that Brexit can make a real difference to people's lives?
- What kind of infrastructure do people who voted to leave want? The vote leave demographic is one of the biggest constituencies and holds enormous power in the UK, having dominated the last election. What does this group really want?
- How is infrastructure going to address their concerns and how should the industry build support amongst this demographic?
- What does the confluence of Brexit and infrastructure tell us about the UK in the 2020s?

In this report, we set out to consider these questions to bring insight to the infrastructure sector.

Martin McCrink
Managing Partner, Copper Consultancy

“At no point in a generation have communities across the UK played such a central role in government direction”

Why do we want to understand societal attitudes to infrastructure?

Project promoters face an increasing risk of public and stakeholder campaigns against investment, leading to project delays, increased costs and unstable political support.

By addressing these risks, projects are more likely to proceed without unnecessary hurdles and communities are more likely to feel they have been treated fairly.

Public attitudes to infrastructure – the story so far

Copper's insights into public attitudes to infrastructure have been shaping industry thinking since 2015. Our insights have found that the public expect the UK to deliver world class infrastructure, but is not supported in identifying the benefits it brings. There is no central big picture, instead the public are asked to place the individual pieces of the jigsaw together themselves – it's confusing, at times frustrating and unclear for them and promoters alike.

We also identified a 'use vs need' gap. If the public use something occasionally or have no direct involvement, such as an airport or a port for example, they do not understand the need case as clearly. Railways are used frequently and considered poor, and they are perceived as an investment priority.

Further research in 2018 and 2019 delved into subject specific insight – urban transport, housing and net zero emissions. These insights pointed to a compromise and contradiction. People can and are entitled to hold two opposing views at the same time. There is support for housebuilding to allow people that live nearby to carry on doing so, but development needs to take place elsewhere; people support the idea of reaching a net zero emissions target by 2050 but are unwilling to pay for it to happen.

What have we set out to do now?

The 2019 election showed that the UK wanted to 'Get Brexit Done' and move onto a domestic agenda. Part of that agenda is a commitment to spend an additional £100bn on infrastructure.

The new Conservative government, led by Boris Johnson, won seats in the Midlands and the North, taking constituencies that have been traditionally Labour strongholds. There are a number of things that these red to blue constituencies have in common, but the clearest unifying factor is that they overwhelmingly voted to leave the EU.

Our research seeks to understand the views of people who voted to leave the EU in 2016. What are their expectations for infrastructure in the UK? What benefits do they want to see from infrastructure? Did infrastructure spending commitments play a role in how they voted in the 2019 General Election?

We set out to test a hypothesis that:



communities that have not enjoyed infrastructure investment and feel left behind are more likely to have sought change through the EU referendum



communities outside London feel that the south receives more investment, but leave voting communities across the South East also feel left behind and disenfranchised by a lack of investment in infrastructure



people want infrastructure which is meaningful to their lives and big ticket national projects alone do not satisfy this concern, they need to see change in their communities



the government's £100bn spending commitment will need to be linked to improvements to local neighbourhoods and recognised by people as worthwhile



the lack of a clear narrative to explain why infrastructure is needed and the benefits it will deliver means projects need to be explained on an individual basis, resulting in a piecemeal approach, creating confusion and apathy

Key findings



Expectation gap

People who voted to leave the EU welcome the government's promise to invest an additional £100bn on infrastructure but they want to see direct changes in their lives. An expectation gap could store up issues for individual projects if developers do not address these outcomes. Leave voters are expecting government to deliver in post-Brexit Britain.



Social infrastructure is a priority

Infrastructure means different things to different audiences. Improvements in healthcare, education and housing are expected to be delivered. Economic infrastructure projects will need to show how they are facilitating social outcomes.



Projects need to demonstrate levelling up the economy across the UK

The commitment to level up areas outside London is established in the minds of voters, especially younger people. Levelling up is expected across the UK, not just in the red wall seats won in traditional Labour heartlands. At present, the benefits of economic infrastructure are not fully understood by the public.



Compromises

Fast, new and inexpensive: voters want projects delivered in a timely way, but they do not want to accept the cost burden.



Solving the climate emergency is a priority, but people are unwilling to pay for it

Copper's 2019 research shows that the UK wants the government and industry to do more to strive for 2050 net zero targets, but the public is unwilling to pay for it. Leave voters prioritise renewable energy alongside healthcare, education and housing.



Bring infrastructure to the people

The public are not supported in understanding the practical implications of infrastructure and this is likely to create issues as government's £100bn spending commitment is realised. The public are likely to feel that while projects are being planned and built, there is minimal benefit to them. To overcome this, government and industry need to fill the expectation vacuum with meaningful explanation of what investment means and the tangible benefits for local people.

Why did people vote to leave?

Polls directly after the EU referendum indicated that people's most likely reasons to want to vote to leave the EU were:



Decision making should all happen in the UK



Control over borders



The EU had expanded its powers and membership with little say in the UK

“I think people are yearning... for this great Incubus [Brexit] to be pitchforked off the back of British politics. They want us to get on with some fantastic things for this country.”

Boris Johnson reflecting the views of many, that the government must deliver a domestic agenda beyond Brexit. Much of that hinges on new infrastructure.

Source: How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why, Ashcroft Polls, 24 June 2016

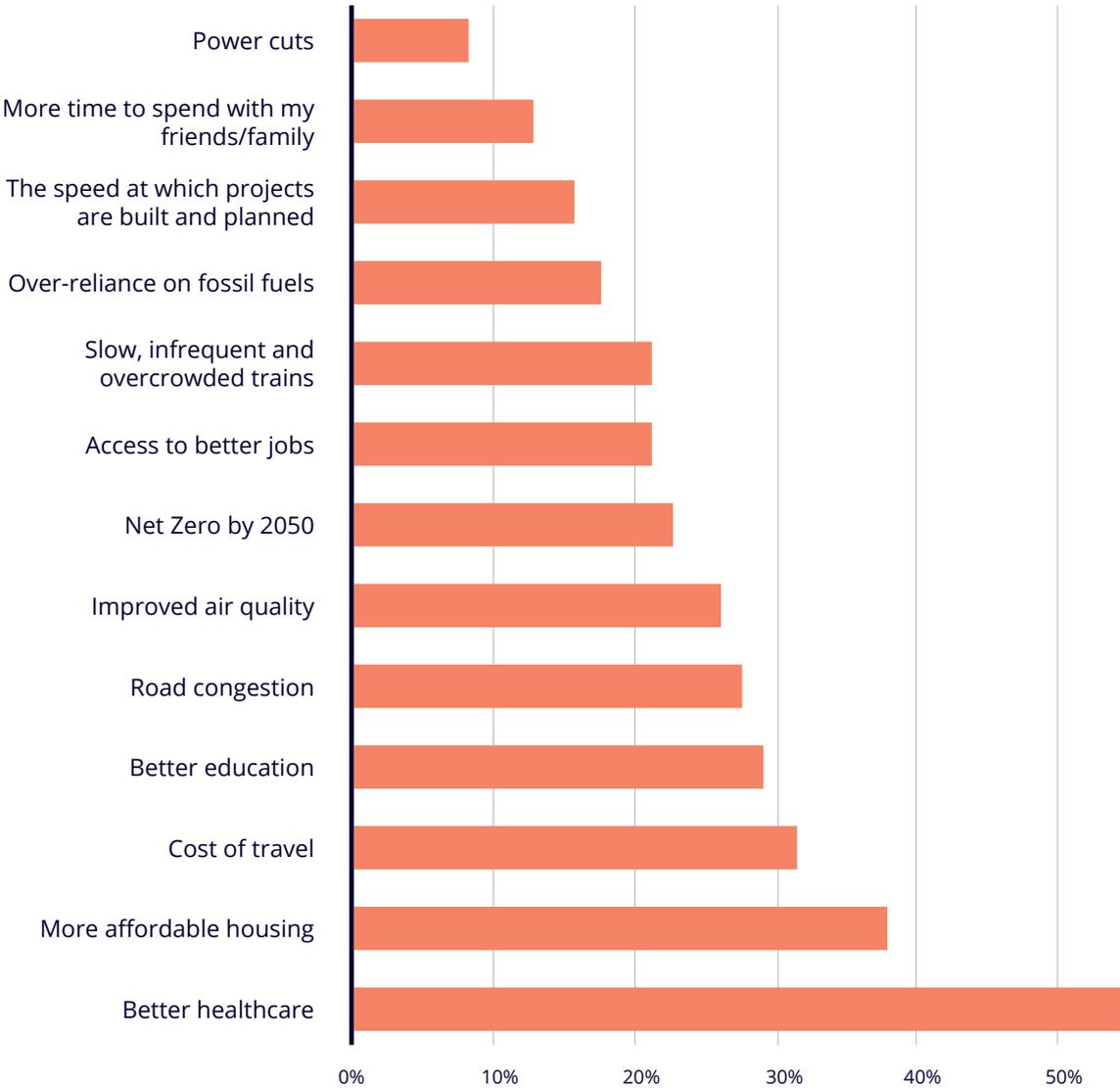
Leave voters want healthcare, housing and education improvements

Copper’s research indicates that leave voters prioritise specific benefits from infrastructure that immediately impacts their lives.

When asked to prioritise, social infrastructure – housing, healthcare and education – are preferred over economic infrastructure – roads, rail and energy supplies.

What problems, if any, do you hope the government’s plans for infrastructure investment will address?

(Sample - 1,000 people who voted to leave the EU)



Leave voters prioritise social and environmental infrastructure

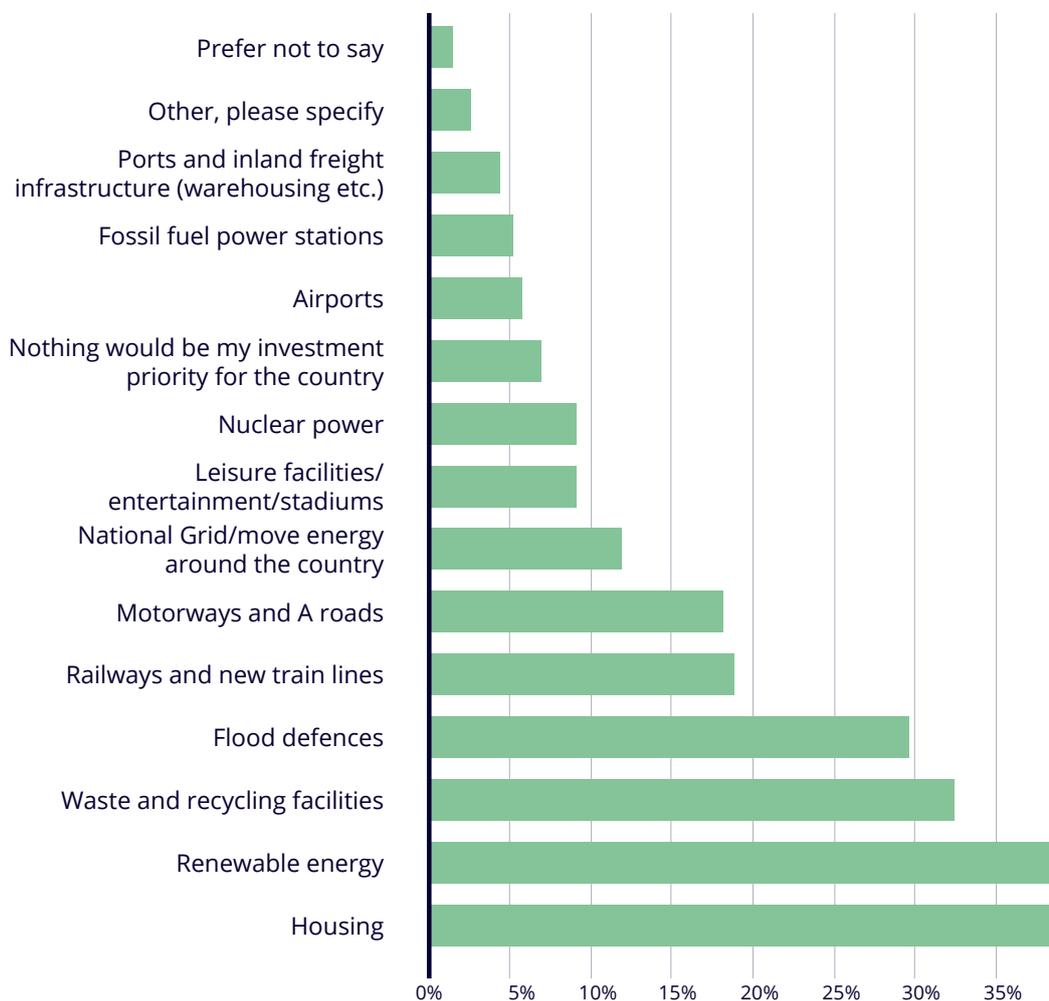
The support for more affordable housing was consistent across all regions, with small increases in the South West and London.

The prioritisation of new or improved train lines was significantly higher in the more urban areas such as London and the North West when compared with rural regions such as Wales and the South West.

Our research shows that 59 per cent of men would accept new infrastructure near them compared with 48 per cent of women; 25 per cent of women said they wouldn't accept projects, compared with 21 per cent of men.

What should the government's investment be focused on?

(Sample - 1,000 people who voted to leave the EU)



Age impacts people's expectations of infrastructure

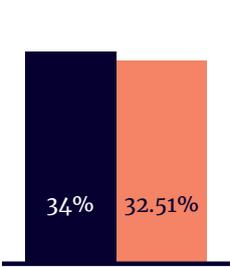
Leave voters over 55 prioritise economic prudence; younger voters want infrastructure to level up the rest of the UK with London.

There is desire for rapid affordable change which will see benefits delivered quickly, but 18-24 year olds have a far greater interest in longer term projects, which are more ambitious.

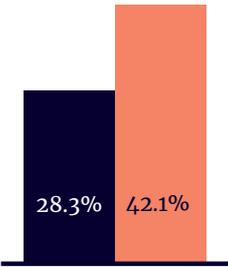
What, if anything, is important to you when considering new infrastructure promised by the government?

(Sample - 1,000 people who voted to leave the EU)

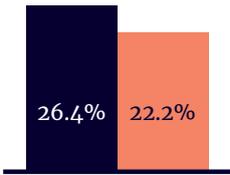
■ Up to 24 year old
■ 55+



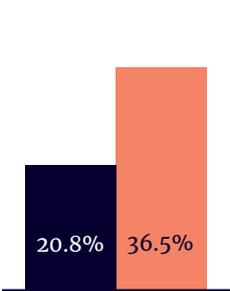
It levels up the quality of life between London, the South East and the rest of the UK



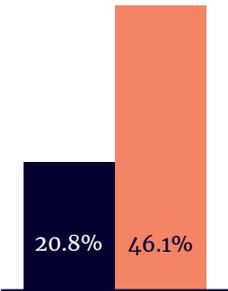
It improves productivity across the UK



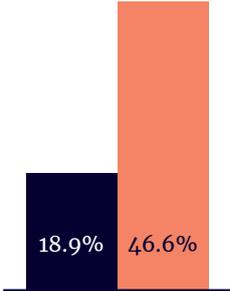
It does not impact me while it is being built



It doesn't cost me anything



Projects are completed as fast as possible



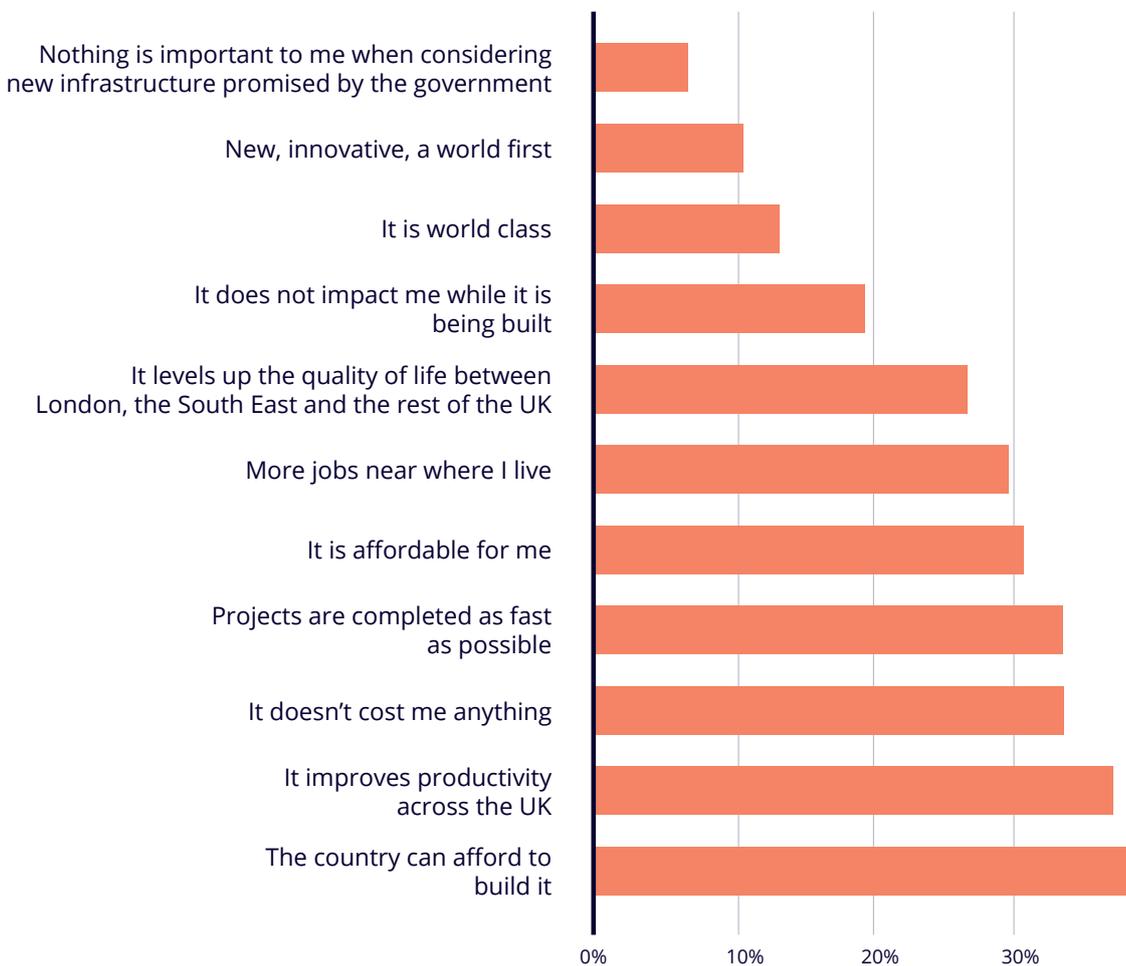
The country can afford to build it

Who pays for infrastructure?

Across all demographics the top priority was that the UK can afford new infrastructure (38.7 per cent) and the third was that the costs of investment are not passed on to members of the public (33.7 per cent).

What should the government be striving to achieve with its investment into new infrastructure?

(Sample - 1,000 people who voted to leave the EU)

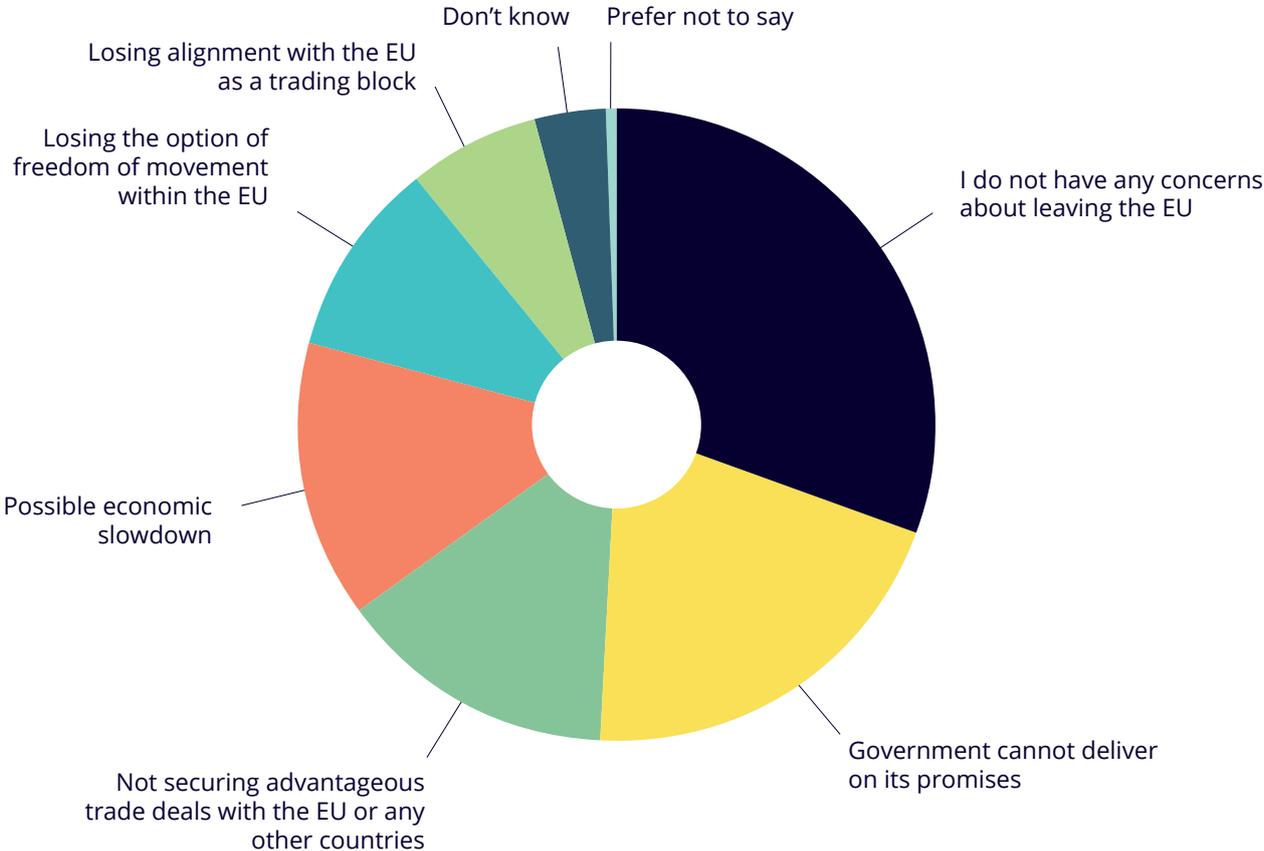


People who voted to leave the EU want to see action from government

People who voted to leave the EU want demonstrable actions from the government. The biggest concern about the UK's departure is that government will not act on its promises.

What, if any, are your concerns about leaving the EU?

(Sample - 1,000 people who voted to leave the EU)



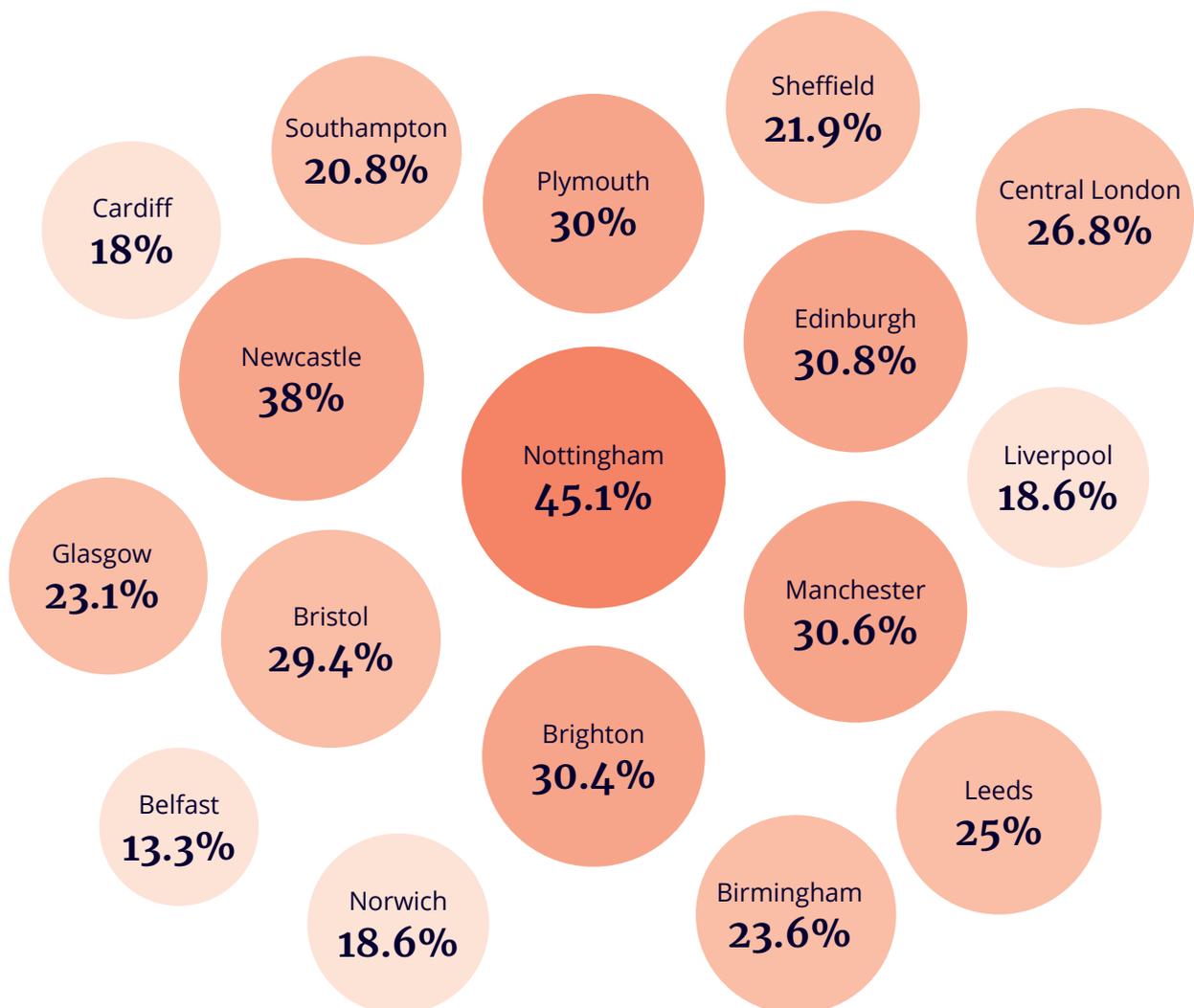
Levelling up the UK economy

The regions that placed the greatest emphasis on levelling up the economy between London and the rest of the UK were the East Midlands (45 per cent), the North East (37 per cent) and the South West (30 per cent).

What, if anything, is important to you when considering new infrastructure promised by the government?

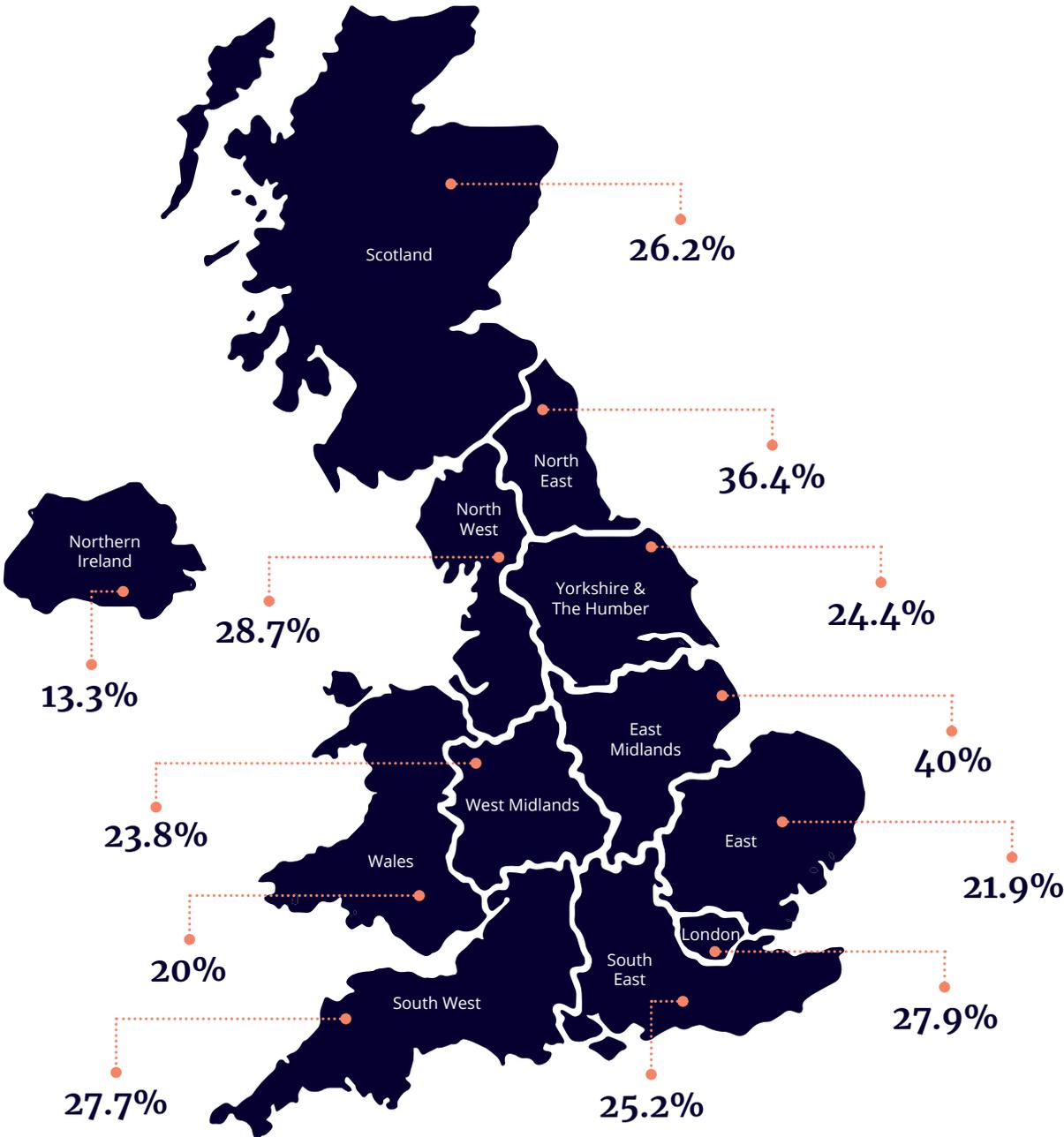
Areas which chose: *It levels up the quality of life between London, the South East and the rest of the UK*

Breakdown by city:



Breakdown by region:

The research indicates that levelling up is not necessarily a north/south issue. People in London and the South East place a greater emphasis on rebalancing between different regions of the UK than those in Wales, the West Midlands or Yorkshire.

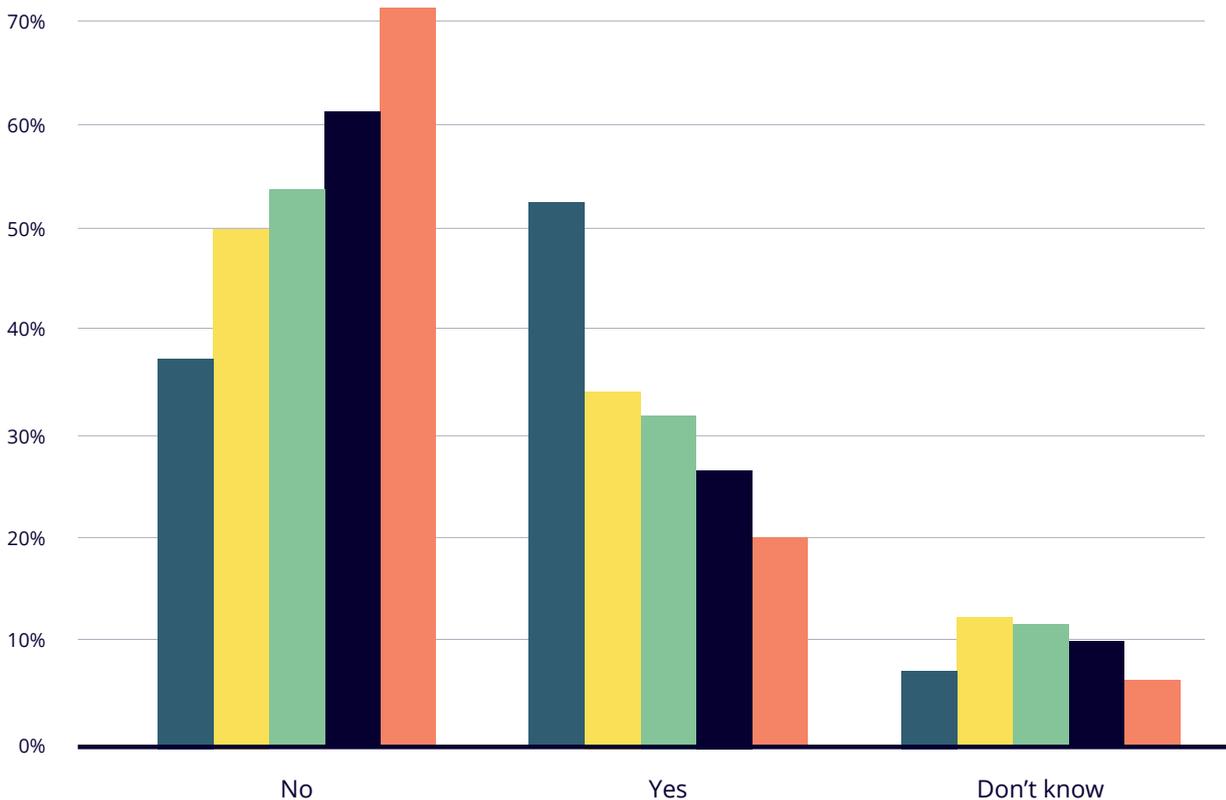
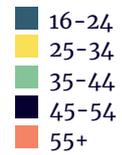


Did infrastructure impact the election?

Over 50 per cent of young people were swayed by the political parties' views on infrastructure during the last election. The younger the voter, the more infrastructure impacted people's voting intentions.

Did the political parties' views on infrastructure sway how you voted in the 2019 General Election?

(Sample - 1,000 people who voted to leave the EU)



Recommendations

There is a clear connection between the ongoing desire for improved services and the political earthquake that resulted in Brexit. People across the UK feel disconnected from power and decision making, and associate this disconnect with the poor quality of their local infrastructure. The challenge the government faces is that this disconnect is unlikely to be addressed solely by improvements to core infrastructure, unless it is possible to demonstrate that large scale, nationally significant projects can deliver tangible societal benefits. This trickle-down effect will take time to become real for individuals and communities. In the meantime, the infrastructure sector will need to adopt a different approach to communicating investments to the public, if the infrastructure revolution is going to be seen as a success in leave-voting areas of the UK.



Link projects to social outcomes for political support

Leave voters expect to see healthcare, education and housing improvements from government investment. Infrastructure projects need to make the case, demonstrating the societal outcomes that will be delivered. This is important to secure backing from the public and politicians – relying on policy cases alone will not resonate or be enough to gain political support.



Affordability and cost

Projects which are perceived as expensive without a clear narrative around benefits are likely to be opposed by leave voters.



The public want a common-sense based conversation

People understand that disruption is likely for new infrastructure but they want to know what they will get in return for this impact; a disconnect between impact and outcome is more likely to lead to campaigns against investment.



Do not underestimate the public mood and populism's impact on projects

Leave voters are expecting to see action and results. A lesson from Brexit is that one of UK voters' biggest concerns is that people in positions of power will break promises. Without public support, projects will be less likely to be supported by a government.



Young people are advocates for infrastructure; work with them

Young leave voters want to see a balanced economy and over half were influenced by the infrastructure debate in the 2019 General Election. They see infrastructure as a route to better societal outcomes; engage and enthuse them and decision makers will listen.



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