

WE'RE  
RIGHT  
HERE.

NOV 2022

The Campaign for  
Community Power

# TAKING BACK CONTROL FOR REAL


**WHY MAYORS AREN'T ENOUGH**

## We're Right Here

*We're Right Here* is a national campaign building a united movement for community power, spanning places and communities across the UK as well as the political spectrum.

We are campaigning for a Community Power Act to give communities more control over the spaces, services and spending decisions which shape their places and futures. We see this as the first step towards bringing about the fundamental change we need, and unlocking the power and potential contained within each and every one of our neighbourhoods.

Looking for answers?  
We're Right Here.

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# Executive summary

This briefing sets out some of the results of polling conducted for *We're Right Here* by Opinium in August<sup>1</sup>. These findings clearly demonstrate the limits of mayors as a route to 'Levelling Up'. We conclude that several key goals of the Government's Levelling Up agenda – including boosting people's pride in place and increasing satisfaction with town and city centres – will not be achieved simply by introducing more mayors.

We argue:

1. People in modern Britain do not feel that they have enough control over their own lives and communities.
  - While half of the UK population believe that local people (44%) or community organisations (6%) should have the most say over what happens in their local area, only 12% believe that this is currently the case.
  - Some 78% of the population believe that some form of local actor – whether local councils, community organisations or local people – should have the most say over what happens in their area.
  - Taken together, these statistics suggest a clear desire among the public for local actors to exercise significantly more control over local affairs.
2. The desire for meaningful control was a key driver behind the vote to leave the European Union in 2016. There is a clear case that, to fully fulfil the mandate generated by that referendum, the government must put power in local people's hands.

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<sup>1</sup> Opinium polled 2,001 GB adults between 17th-18th August. The sample was weighted to be politically and nationally representative. Additional questions were asked of a sample of 615 Conservative Members (demographically weighted), between 17th and 22nd August.

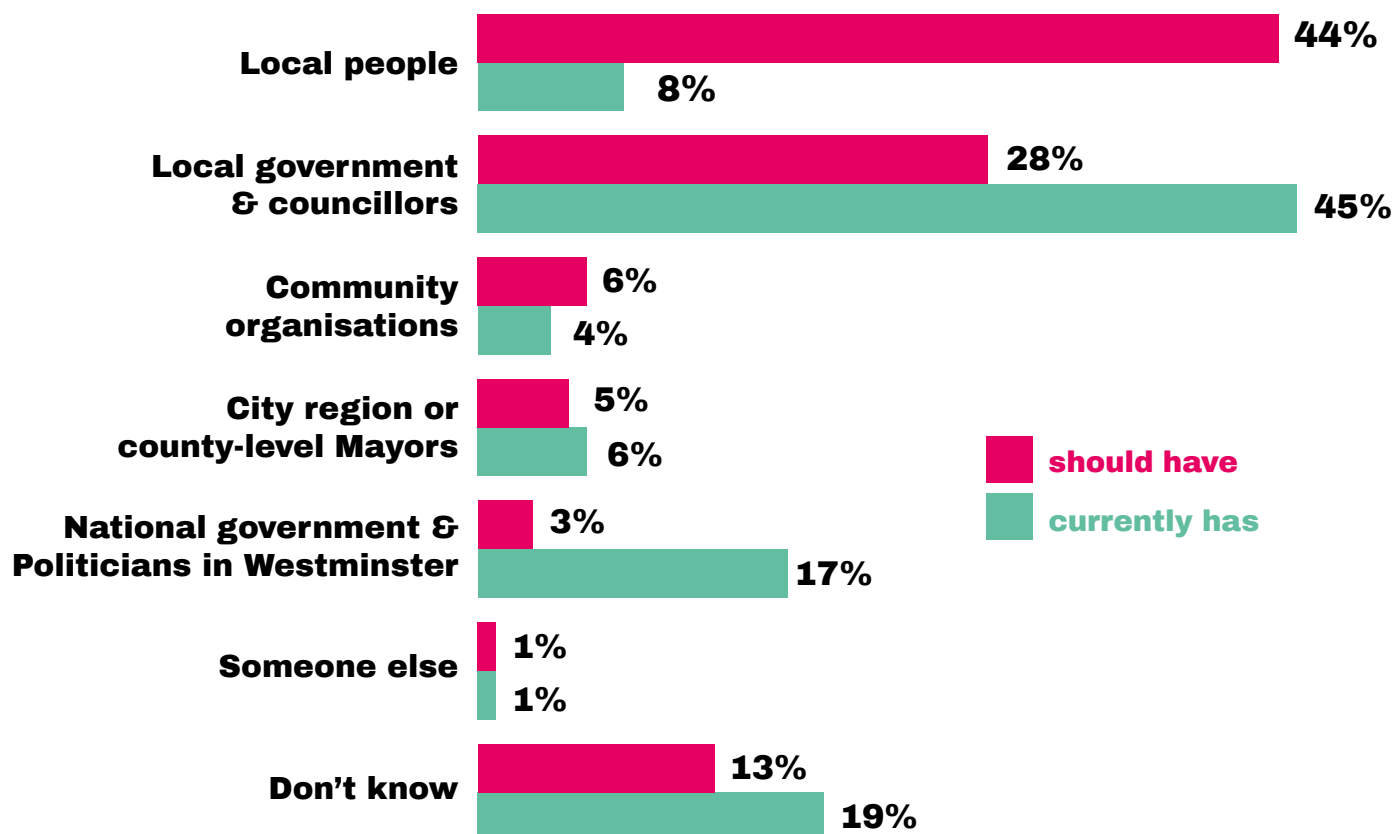
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the public agree that “to deliver on the spirit of the Brexit vote and people’s desire to ‘take back control’, the government needs to give people more of a say over the decisions that shape their communities”.
  - This figure increases to 71% amongst 2019 Conservative voters.
- 3.** The government has sought to respond to people’s desire to exercise more control over the decisions which shape their lives and communities through its Levelling Up agenda – and its plans to extend the Mayoral model to new areas.
- 4.** In our highly centralised system, it is a worthy goal to strengthen sub-regional government and improve coordination of local economic, transport, housing and skills strategies. But it doesn’t follow that establishing metro Mayors leads people to feel more pride in their area or that they have more control over local decisions, or that the issues they care about will be prioritised by those in positions of power.
- While almost half of UK adults (46%) said that action to empower community organisations and groups would lead to better outcomes on the local issues they care about, only 17% said that having a Mayor for their area has or would do the same.
  - Only 14% said that having a Mayor for their city region or county has helped or would help them to feel more in control of the issues affecting their community, and barely more than one in ten (12%) respondents said this has led or would lead to them feeling a greater sense of local pride.
  - By a margin of five to one, people would prefer the government prioritise empowering community organisations and groups (50%) over creating new Mayors (10%).

5. These findings raise serious questions about whether extending the Mayoral model will deliver the government's Levelling Up goals of increasing levels of satisfaction with town and city centres and boosting pride in place.
6. The new government should therefore commit to bringing forward a [Community Power Act](#) to complement the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. This would build a straight and steady track along which power could be devolved from Whitehall to regions, local areas and all the way to the neighbourhood level – providing the missing piece in the devolution puzzle and giving people the control over their lives and communities which they crave.

# The Case for Community Power

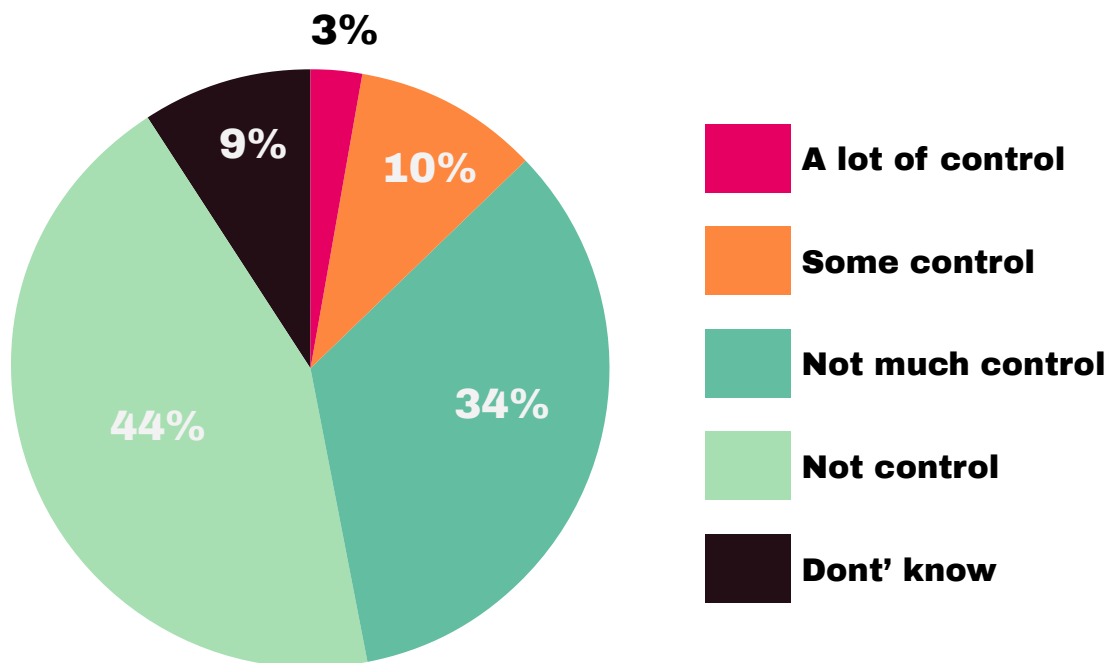
People in modern Britain do not feel that they have enough control over their own lives and communities. In exclusive polling for the We're Right Here campaign conducted this August,<sup>2</sup> Opinium found that, while half of the UK population believe that local people (44%) or community organisations (6%) should have the most say over what happens in their local area, only 12% believe that this is currently the case.

**Who do you think currently has, and who should have, the most say over what happens in your local area?**



<sup>2</sup> Opinium polled 2,001 GB adults between 17th-18th August. The sample was weighted to be politically and nationally representative. Additional questions were asked of a sample of 615 Conservative Members (demographically weighted), between 17th and 22nd August.

**How much control do you feel you have over important decisions that affect your neighbourhood and local community?**



In fact, almost 8 in 10 (78%) UK adults believe that they personally have 'not much' or 'no' control over important decisions affecting their neighbourhoods and local communities.

Some 78% of the population believe that some form of local actor – whether local councils, community organisations or local people – should have the most say over what happens in their area. This suggests that Community Covenant partnerships of the sort proposed by our campaign would command broad support from the public. These would take the form of neighbourhood level arrangements bringing local people, community organisations and local authorities together to share power and make decisions. Once a certain geographic share of the local authority area was 'covered' by Community Covenants, the government would be required to rapidly devolve substantial powers and associated resources to the relevant local authority. See page 17 for more details.

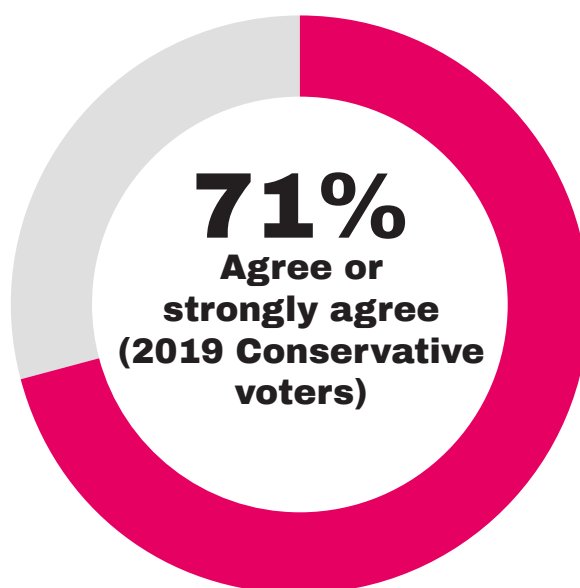
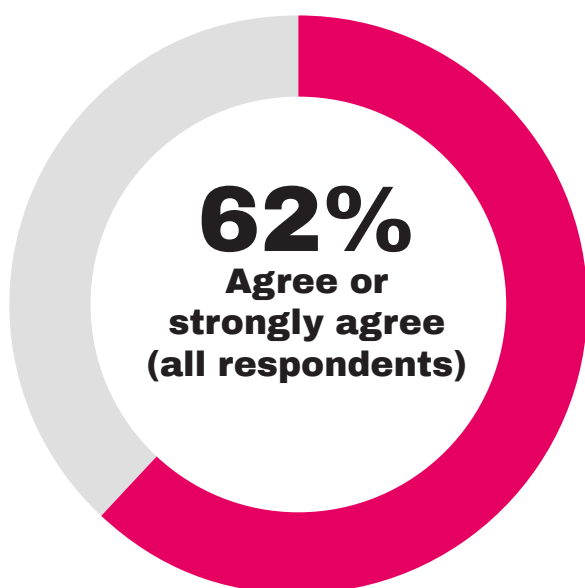
People's desire for meaningful control over their lives and communities was a key driver behind the vote to leave the European



Union in 2016. Our polling shows that to fulfil the mandate generated by that referendum, the government must put power in local people's hands.

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the public agree that *"to deliver on the spirit of the Brexit vote and people's desire to 'take back control', the government needs to give people more of a say over the decisions that shape their communities"*. This figure increases to 71% amongst 2019 Conservative voters, whose support the government will need to maintain if they are to remain in office beyond the next election.

**To deliver on the spirit of the Brexit vote and people's desire to "take back control", the government needs to give people more of a say over the decisions that shape their communities.**



# The impact of Mayors on levels of local satisfaction, control and pride

The government has sought to respond to people's desire to exercise more control over the decisions which shape their lives and communities through its Levelling Up agenda. The Levelling Up White Paper set out plans to *'bring greater power and control back to people in England, by extending, deepening and simplifying devolution and boosting the mayoral model'*<sup>3</sup> and the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill includes measures to enable the creation of Mayors for non-urban counties.<sup>4</sup>

We believe that growing and strengthening sub-regional government in our country is an important and worthy objective, not least as the UK is the most centralised country in the Western world<sup>5</sup>. Sub-regional democratic institutions like combined and Mayoral authorities can have real and significant impact in shaping sub-regional economic strategies as well as in coordinating transport, housing and skills policies.

We do not, however, believe that establishing Mayors at the city region or county-level leads people to feel that they have more control over local decisions or that the issues they care about are being prioritised by those in positions of power.

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<sup>3</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022), Levelling Up the United Kingdom: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1052706/Levelling\\_Up\\_WP\\_HRES.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The current version of this Bill is available here: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3155>

<sup>5</sup> IPPR North (2019), Divided and connected: Regional inequalities in the North, the UK and the developed world – State of the North 2019: <https://www.ippr.org/files/2019-11/sotn-2019.pdf>

As Sacha Bedding, who sits on our Campaign Team and manages the Annexe centre in the Dyke House area of Hartlepool, put it when providing oral evidence to the Levelling Up Bill Committee:

**“ Teesside is well known for what our metro Mayor, Ben Houchen, is doing. If you were to ask people in my community what that means to them — the purchase of an airport; the decarbonisation of industry; carbon capture and storage — they would say that they are good things, and the macroeconomic circumstances arising out of them could be a positive, but it feels as though they are a million miles away from having an impact on their life. When we talk about local leadership, I would like us to move beyond the sub-regional. From a Westminster perspective, that is more local, but from a community perspective, to really feel for those people in left-behind neighbourhoods, of which ours is one, it needs to be most local leadership.”<sup>6</sup>**

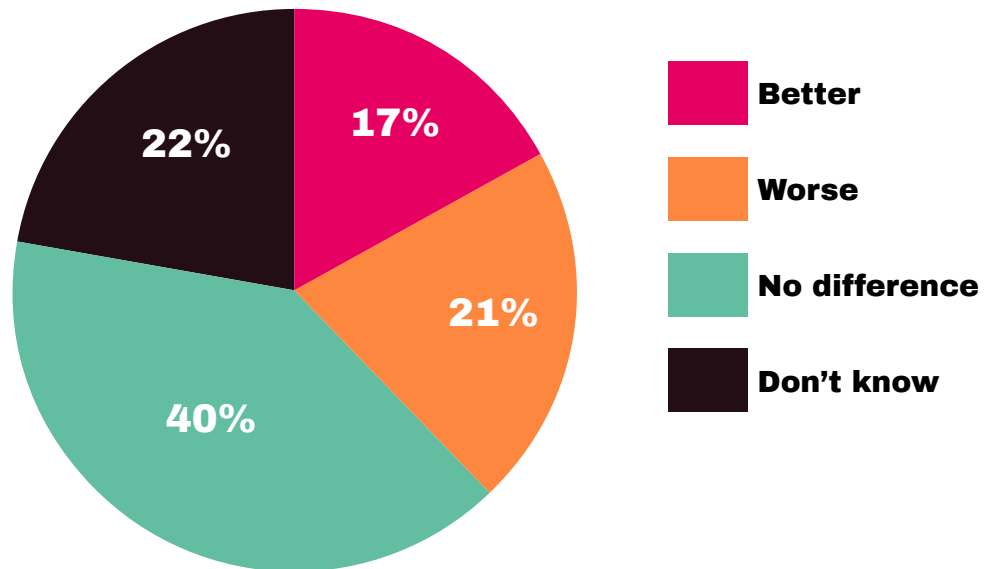
**This sense of separation between Mayors and communities, and desire for local control, is borne out in our polling.**

Opinium asked respondents to this nationally representative poll whether having a Mayor for their city region or county has led or would, in their view, lead to better or worse outcomes on important issues in their local community.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The relevant Hansard transcript can be found here: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-06-21/debates/13f490ce-6958-4789-8c7d-cd682dd7a82f/Levelling-UpAndRegenerationBill\(SecondSitting\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-06-21/debates/13f490ce-6958-4789-8c7d-cd682dd7a82f/Levelling-UpAndRegenerationBill(SecondSitting))

<sup>7</sup> Opinium asked people in city regions which already have a metro Mayor whether this 'has led' to better or worse outcomes, and people in other areas whether this 'would lead' to better or worse outcomes. The same basic formulation also applies to the next two questions discussed in this briefing.

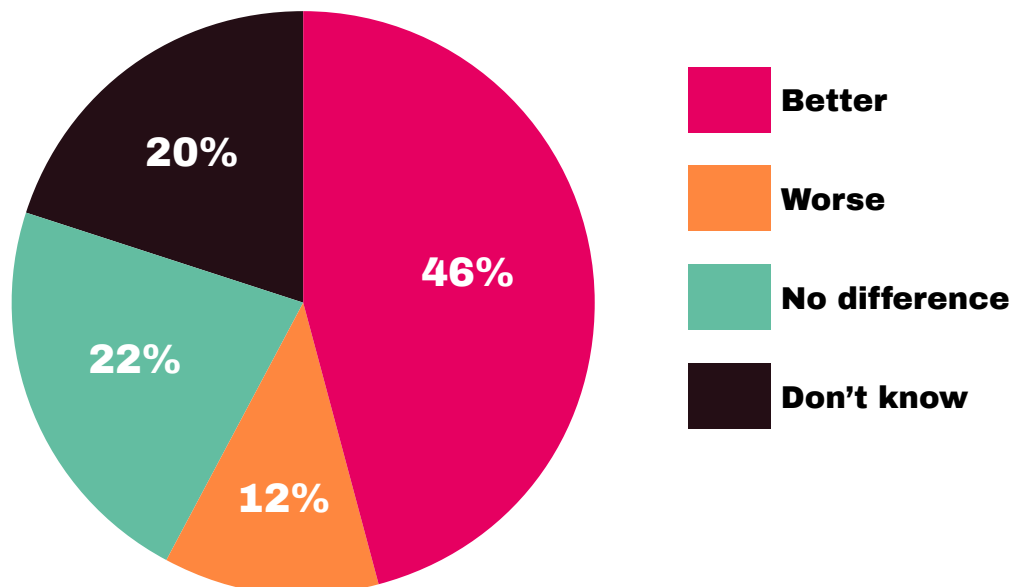
**Do you think that having a Mayor for your city region or county has led or would lead to better or worse outcomes on important issues in your local community?**



Just 17% said that they think having a Mayor for their area has led or would lead to better outcomes, whereas 21% said that having a Mayor has led or would lead to worse outcomes.

The pollsters also asked the public the following question:

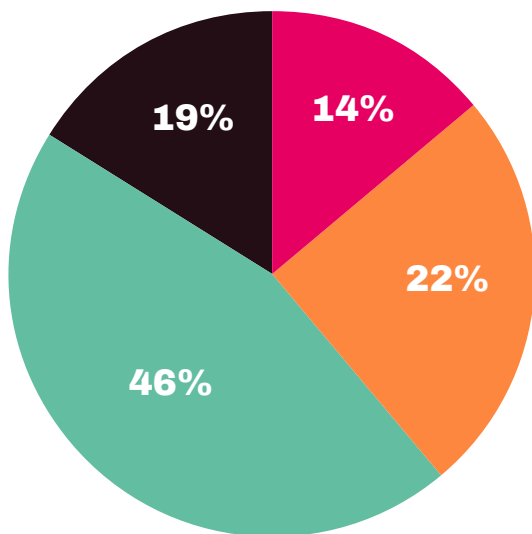
**Do you think that local community organisations and groups having more power over and input into local decisions would lead to better or worse outcomes on important issues in your local community?**



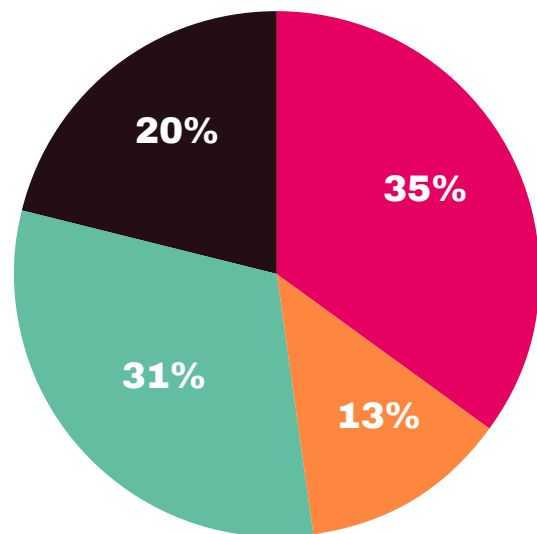
Almost half (46%) said that empowering community organisations and groups would lead to better outcomes on the local issues they care about – over double the 17% of the population who said having a Mayor for their area has or would do the same.

In addition, people not only feel that action to strengthen community power is more likely to lead to better outcomes on local issues than having a Mayor, but also that it is more likely to make them feel more in control of the issues affecting their community.

**Do you think that having a Mayor for your city region or county has led or would lead to you personally feeling more or less in control of the issues affecting your local community?**



**Do you think that local community organisations and groups having more power and input over local decisions would lead to you personally feeling more or less in control of the issues affecting your local community?**

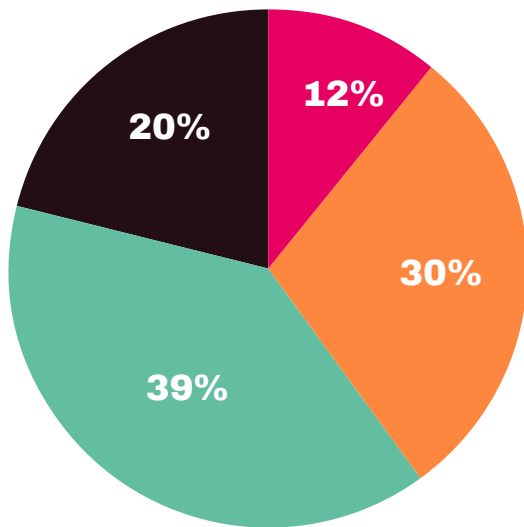


Again, while only 14% of respondents said that having a Mayor for their area would give them a greater sense of personal control, over twice this proportion (35%) said that local community organisations and groups having more power over and input on local decisions would give them this sense of control.

In fact, the public appear to be very sceptical about the idea that having a Mayor will lead to them having more control over their local area – 22% said that this would actually lead to them feeling less in control, while almost seven in 10 (68%) said that it would either lead to them feeling less in control or make no difference.

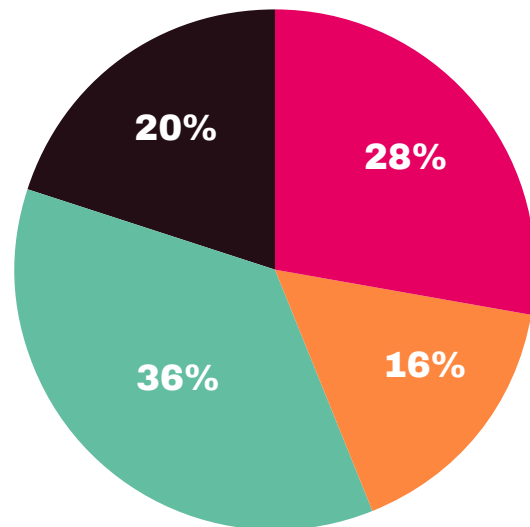
Opinium also asked the public whether having a Mayor for their city region or county has led or would lead to them being prouder of their local area, and whether local community organisations and groups having more power and input over local decisions would do the same.

**Do you think that having a Mayor for your city region or county has led or would lead to you being prouder of your local area?**



**Yes** **No**  
**No difference** **Don't know**

**Do you think that local community organisations and groups having more power and input over local decisions would lead to you being prouder of your area?**



**Yes** **No**  
**No difference** **Don't know**

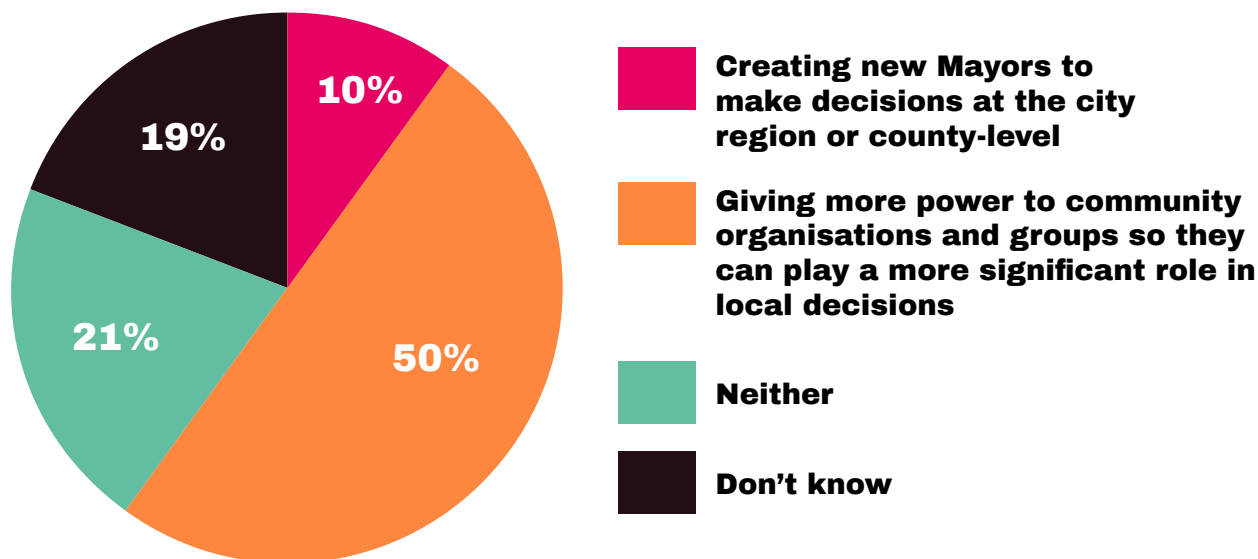
It is important to note that people were most likely to respond that neither option would lead to them feeling a greater sense of local pride. Nonetheless, the 28% who said that action to empower community organisations and groups would make them feel prouder of their area is over double the 12% who said the same of having a Mayor.

This polling further demonstrates clearly that **the public does not view having a Mayor as a source of local pride**. While barely more than one in ten respondents said that having a Mayor for their city region or county has led or would lead to them feeling a greater sense of local pride, three in 10 (30%) said that having a Mayor for their area would not make them feel this way.

While people generally, then, put stock in the idea that strengthening community power would lead to better outcomes on important local issues, and to them feeling more in control and proud of their area, they **overwhelmingly do not believe that having a Mayor for their city region or county has resulted or would result in any of these changes**.

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that **people would, by a margin of five to one, prefer that the government prioritise empowering community organisations and groups over creating new Mayors**.

**Which of the following would you prefer the government to prioritise?**



These findings do not mean that extending the Mayoral model is a bad idea, but they do raise serious questions about whether doing so will deliver the government's Levelling Up goals of increasing levels of satisfaction with town and city centres and boosting pride in place. Certainly, they imply clearly **that the public does not believe that having a Mayor for their city region or county is tantamount to taking back control**.

# The opportunity before the government

The government has made welcome progress in recent years in recognising the potential of our communities to tackle some of society's biggest challenges. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill includes positive measures to strengthen the agency of local authorities and local people at the neighbourhood level. For example, the Bill provides for 25% of the Infrastructure Levy raised locally to be passed directly to local people in the form of a 'neighbourhood share', if those areas set up a parish or town council or implement a neighbourhood plan.

However, in spite of these positive measures, the overarching devolution framework contained in the Bill essentially stops at the sub-regional level and thus does not adequately address the sense of powerlessness which pervades our country.

That is why the new Prime Minister should commit to bringing forward a Community Power Act to complement the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

This legislation would build a straight and steady track along which power could be devolved from Whitehall to regions, local areas and all the way to the neighbourhood level – providing the missing piece in the devolution puzzle and fundamentally changing where power lies in this country.



Our proposal for an Act of this sort<sup>8</sup> has three pillars.

## 1. Establishing **new community rights**:

- A Community Right to Buy, giving communities the right of first refusal once important local buildings and spaces with significant community value come up for sale.
- A Community Right to Shape Public Services, significantly strengthening and expanding the scope of the existing Community Right to Challenge and encouraging greater collaboration between communities and public institutions when designing, commissioning and delivering local services.
- A Community Right to Control Investment, creating a mechanism through which a proportion of all public regeneration and local economic devolution funds allocated to a neighbourhood could be controlled and invested directly by a neighbourhood-level institution and giving communities the power to trigger “open book accounting processes”.

These rights are designed to support and encourage local communities to take actions to shape the future of their neighbourhoods.

## 2. Enabling **Community Covenants** – neighbourhood level arrangements bringing local people, community organisations and local authorities together to share power and make decisions.

Local authorities might enter into a Community Covenant agreement with either a single Covenant partner or with multiple partners. Covenant partners might include parish councils, neighbourhood forums, independent community anchor organisations and local alliances of community organisations, associations and informal and unconstituted groups.

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<sup>8</sup> Our campaign's full proposal for a Community Power Act is available here: <http://right-here.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Community-Power-Act-Were-Right-Here.pdf>

They would be required to demonstrate to the relevant council their intention and ability to work alongside and involve broader networks of community organisations and groups as well as local people in general – passing five tests of local accountability.

Having formed a Community Covenant, Covenant partners would be able to draw down a range of powers from an agreed menu of options and would receive resources and capacity-building support to allow them to exercise these powers effectively.

Once a certain geographic share of the local authority area was ‘covered’ by Community Covenants, the government would be required to rapidly devolve substantial powers (including fiscal powers) and associated resources to the relevant local authority.

3. Establishing a **Community Power Commissioner** – an independent office charged with ensuring action is taken across government to uphold the new community rights, enable the formation of Community Covenants everywhere and generally unlock community power.

To ensure they could carry out this function effectively, the Commissioner would have statutory power to:

- Conduct ad hoc reviews of the degree to which any government policy, practice or body is consistent with communities’ rights and with the principle that communities should be able to exert significant control over the spaces, services and spending decisions which shape their places and futures.
- Require government departments and public bodies to provide any information which their office might require in order to conduct full and thorough reviews of this kind.
- Make binding recommendations to government departments and public bodies as to how they might more fully uphold communities’ rights.

These three pillars of a Community Power Act are mutually complementary and reinforce each other. The three new rights make it much easier for communities everywhere to shape their areas. Community Covenants offer a convenient vehicle for communities to exercise these rights, while also triggering the devolution of extra powers down to the community level as well as to the relevant local authority. And the Community Power Commissioner would both drive the formation of Community Covenants and work to ensure that the government upholds communities' rights fully and effectively.

There is already a large and growing movement of people around the country taking action in their communities. This Act would remove some of the institutional and legal barriers in their way. In addition, by changing the basic assumption about where power lies, it would help inspire others to take action so that ultimately every neighbourhood in the country is supported to take control of its future .

This briefing sets out some of the results of polling conducted for *We're Right Here* by Opinium in August. These findings clearly demonstrate the limits of mayors as a route to 'Levelling Up'.

We conclude that several key goals of the Government's Levelling Up agenda – including boosting people's pride in place and increasing satisfaction with town and city centres – will not be achieved simply by introducing more mayors.

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