

How Covid Changed Our Minds

And what's stopping us
changing our lives

The pandemic has triggered major changes in what British people want, but significant barriers to meeting our new hopes remain.



About us

Global Future is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders - from businesses to politics, arts and civil society - to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

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The Think Tank is supported by Global Future Partners, which is a consulting firm advising organisations on Purpose Driven Culture Change, Leadership and Talent.

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Acknowledgements

Global Future wishes to thank Kylie Bains, Tom Baldwin, Jonathan Olley and Priya Panesar for their support with this report.

This report was designed by Robert Archer from Archer Studio.

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Foreword

As we emerge from lockdown, many people across the country will be looking to personally “build back better” after a life-changing pandemic. This report reveals that we won't come out the same people as we went in.

British people are asking fundamental questions about what they do, where they live and who they love. The YouGov survey in this report reveals that over three quarters of people have reconsidered what is important to them as a result of lockdown.

One in three workers have considered changing job and 35% have considered moving. There also seems to be a strong desire for purpose and mission: 87% of us now claim that it's important to have meaningful purpose at work.

In many ways the pandemic has created the perfect psychological conditions to reconsider our lives. We are bombarded by high death tolls and many of us may know loved ones who have sadly lost their lives. This has forced us to confront our own mortality and focus on what we want out of the precious time available to us.

On top of that, our entrenched routines and habits of day-to-day life have been destroyed or disrupted, providing us with a neurological space to question their worth.

However, significant barriers are preventing people from pursuing their new dreams. Our findings suggest these barriers are largely economic in nature and have likely been exacerbated by the pandemic which has caused a spate of unemployment, house price rises and increased inequality.

The risk is that we could face a wave of discontent. As society emerges from lockdown, the widening gap between people's newly formed dreams and their ability to actually achieve them could result in high levels of dissatisfaction.



Gurnek Bains PhD. Managing Partner of Global Future Partners and CEO of Global Future Think Tank.

Ironically, this sense of frustration could come just as people expect increased agency in their lives as political freedoms return.

The British people have been courageous enough to ask big questions about their lives. What they need most now is for employers and government authorities to support them so they may pursue their newfound purposes. Simply returning old legal freedoms is not enough; we must provide people greater opportunity through economic and social change if they are to be able to realise their new post-pandemic dreams.

Executive summary

Crisis always brings change. During the long Covid lockdowns **more than three quarters of us say we have had to rethink what is most important** in our lives.

We are asking ourselves questions about where we live, what we do and who we love. More than a third of workers have thought about getting a different job, almost four in ten considered moving house, one in ten considered quitting the country and almost one in ten considered switching relationships during lockdown.

A third of workers want to work less but lots of us want more purpose in our lives, to make a better impact on society or to start volunteering. Those of us who are women or young are the most likely to want big changes in our lives.

Covid has created the psychological conditions for these changes. Bombarded by daily death tolls and the prospect of losing loved ones has forced us to confront our own mortality and question how best to use the precious time available to us.

Lockdown has provided the 'sudden shock' necessary to jolt us out of routine behaviours and habits. As the world stopped, many of us were given the neurological space needed to question what mattered to us for the first time in our lives.

But for all this desire for change, most of us admit we have not done anything about it and we're evenly split about whether we will do so in the next 12 months.

The problem is that whilst we've changed, Britain has not. Some 39% claim the main barrier is money, whilst 31% cited a lack of opportunity. Worse still, the pandemic has exacerbated these barriers through rising economic inequality, unemployment and an inflated housing market.

This disconnect between what we want to change and what we will be able to change is dangerous for our own well-being, as well as society. There is a real risk of rising psychological dissatisfaction amongst all of us who hoped the lifting of lockdown would bring freedom and opportunity back into our lives.

It's time to take our pent-up desires for change seriously. Action must be taken by government institutions, companies and society to give agency to all of us who have been brave enough to question our lives in the quest for greater meaning, purpose and fulfilment.

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'sudden shock' *necessary to jolt us*

out of routine behaviours and habits.

Results

Covid has transformed our hopes, making many of us re-think what we want out of life. This has been noted specifically in three key areas – what we do, where we live and who we love.

The problem is that whilst we've changed, Britain has not. Fundamental socio-economic barriers continue to constrain people's capacity to act on their dreams. Our psychological concern is that, as lockdown lifts, this may cause discontent and waste talent as people return to old routines which no longer align with their deepest hopes and aspirations.

The following conclusions are drawn from the data collected in our YouGov Survey, conducted in June 2021. 2,053 participants representative of the population of Great Britain were asked to provide answers to 15 questions about how the pandemic had changed their perception of personal purpose

and what matters most to them. People were asked to reflect upon the impact of Covid-19 over the last 12 months, spanning from June 2020 to June 2021. Full results will be available on the Global Future website.

The results below are divided into five sections. **Section 1** will show how lockdown has triggered people to ask fundamental questions about their lives. **Sections 2 to 4** will cover these changes in three significant dimensions of our lives: what we do, where we live and who we love. Finally, **Section 5** will unearth the barriers people are currently battling with in pursuit of their newly realised goals.



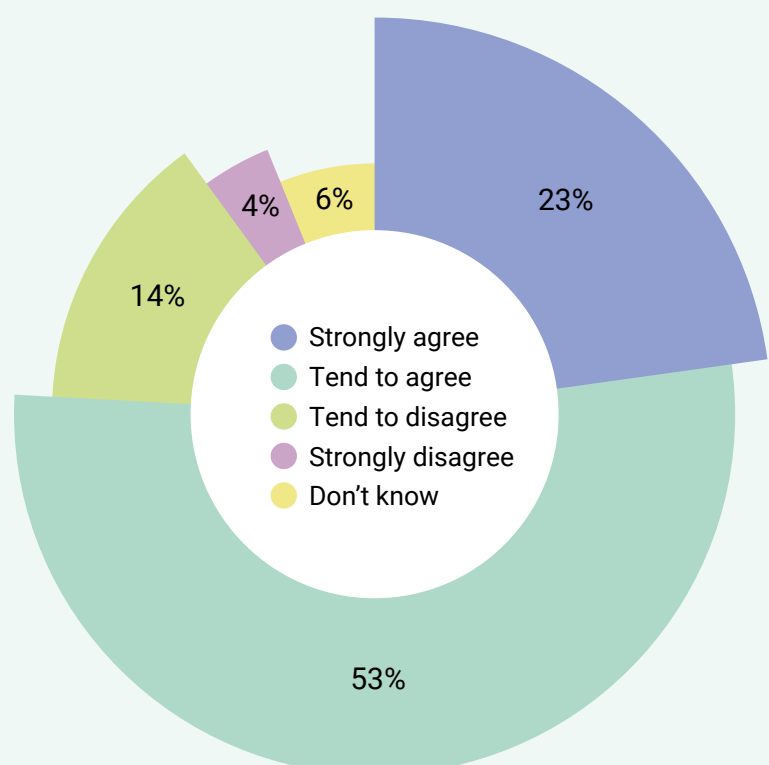
Questioning what matters

Over three quarters of people reported reconsidering what is really important in life because of the Covid pandemic. This sentiment is prevalent throughout the British population, although there are some strong demographic differences. Most significantly, women were more likely to re-think what is important to them (83%) compared to men (69%). This may be a result of socially learned and performed gender characteristics, which allow women the psychological space to be more emotionally introspective. This in turn gives them a greater ability to identify the factors in their lives that cause distress or dissatisfaction.

Age was also an indicator of agreement, with 80% of 18–24-year-olds re-thinking what is important to them versus 74% of 45–54-year-olds. This may be because younger people's lives have been more significantly disrupted by lockdown in terms of their job prospects, where they live and a lack of formative social interactions.

Psychologists find this re-invigorated appreciation for meaning and purpose unsurprising. Bombarded with death tolls and often surrounded by loved ones falling ill, the pandemic forced us to confront our own mortality and autonomy. It is natural that we would want to reflect more deeply on how to make the best use of the precious time available to us, especially when global events can suddenly constrain freedoms that may have previously been taken for granted.

Lockdown has made me **re-think what is important** to me.



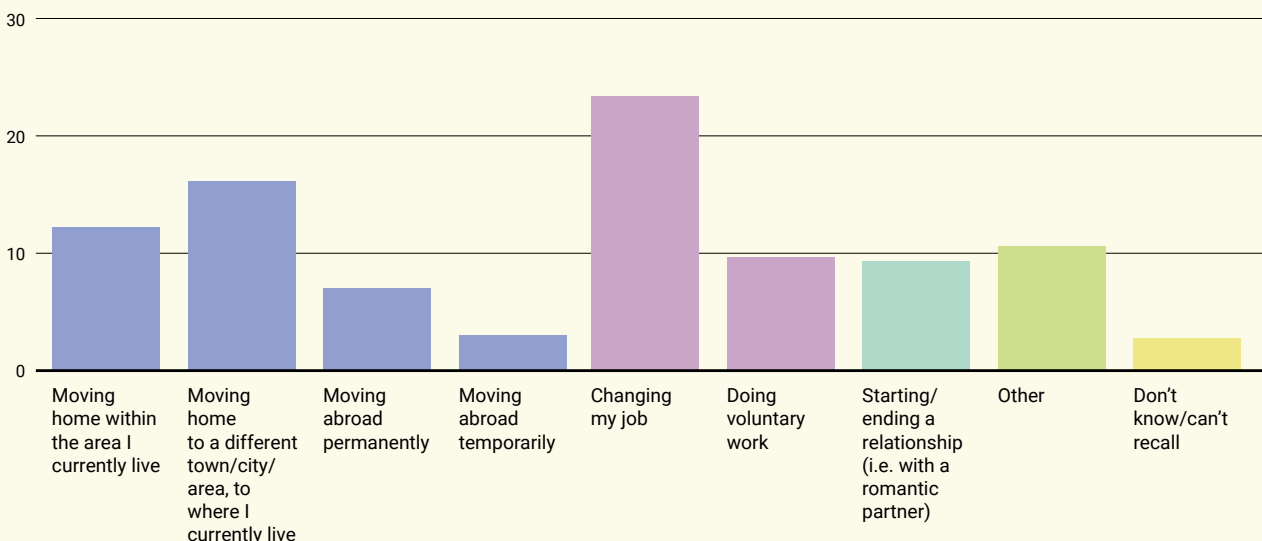
Changing what we do

Almost a quarter (24%) of British people have considered changing their job in the last 12 months. This rises to over a third if you just include those presently working. This desire is most prevalent among 25–34-year-olds, with almost half (47%) considering making this change. Furthermore, one in ten people have considered taking up voluntary work in the last year. These results show that people, and especially young people, are questioning the most fundamental cornerstones of their daily lives. Breaks in routines and changes to working practices through technology may well have fuelled these questions. Working from home may have given some of us a

better work life balance that we now wish to maintain, whilst others may have faced increased stress as the natural break that came from the commute was broken down and people instead found themselves working all hours leading to burnout.

*Over a third of workers have considered **changing job.***

Which, if any, of the following changes have you considered making to your life in the last 12 months?

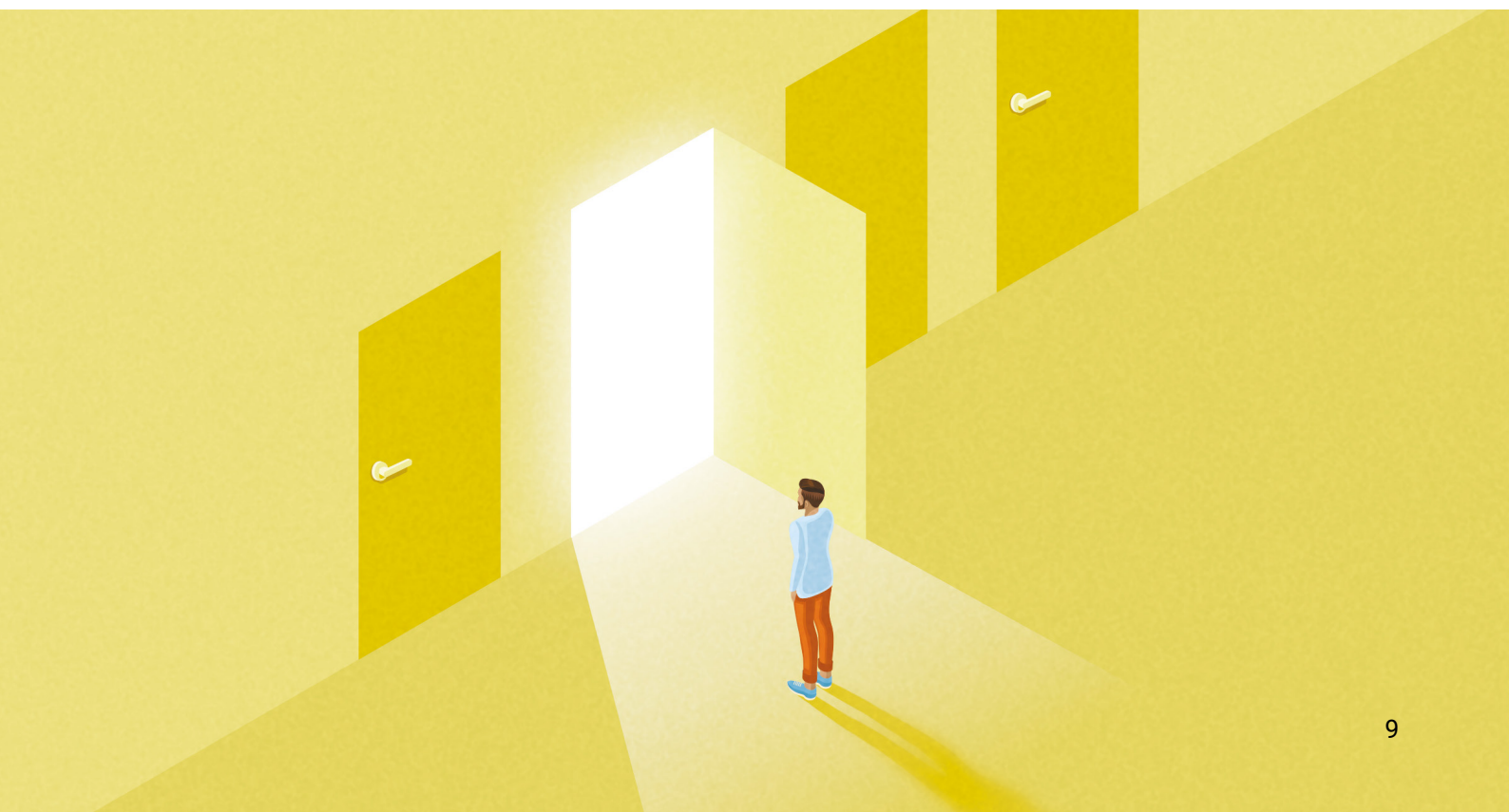
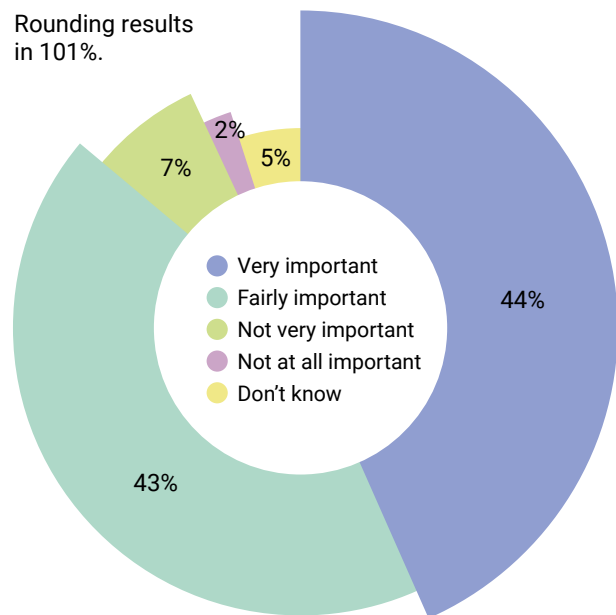


Changing what we do

A whopping 87% of Britons now think it is important to have a meaningful purpose at work. Where once a job was simply a place to make money, it's increasingly becoming a place to find meaning and identity. Although this trend pre-dates Covid, it's highly relevant today when so many of us are looking to change employment. Our survey revealed that 39% of people looking to change their job claimed that they wanted to do so to find greater "purpose" and "meaning" rather than raising their income. By breaking entrenched routines, we would argue that the pandemic has provided a unique neurological window for reflection, fuelling a drive to find more purpose in our lives in general and our work in particular. The fact that many people have lost loved ones has driven us to ask these existential questions as we look to make the most of the precious time available to us.

The importance of meaningful purpose at work.

Rounding results in 101%.

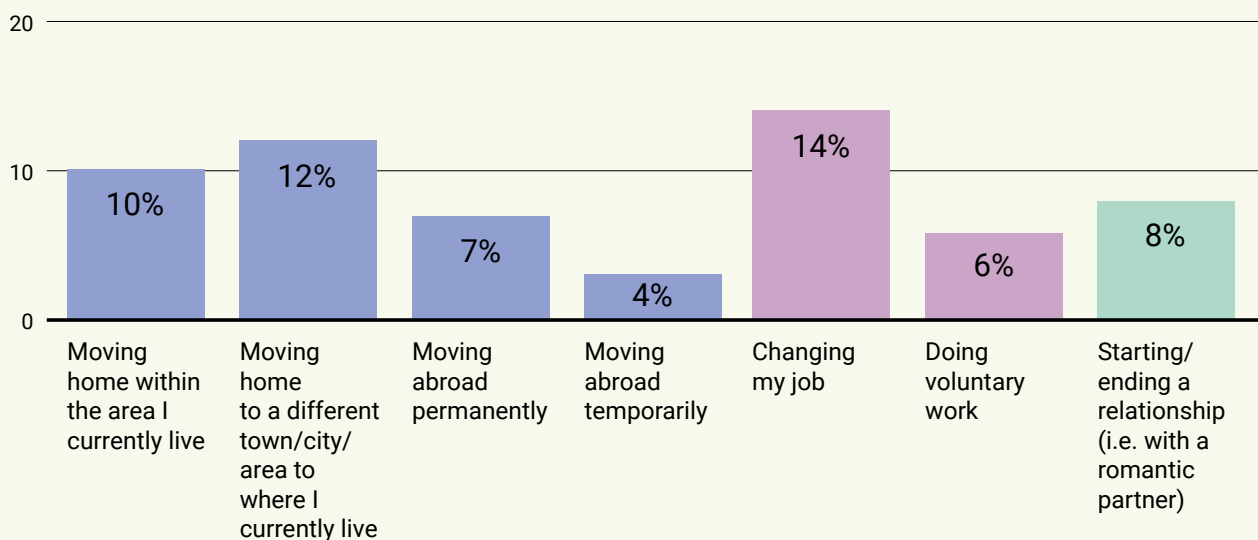


Changing where we live

Roughly a third of the UK population (33%) claim that moving is the number one change they want to make in their lives, within their current locality, outside of it or abroad. Lockdown gave us the social permission to use technology to work from anywhere. As people worked remotely, stuck within the confines of their homes, the importance, meaning and use of these spaces evolved. Our homes were able to serve as offices regardless of geographical location. Meanwhile constraints on our ability to travel forced us to engage with the immediate natural environments in our

neighbourhoods, placing a higher premium on living in beautiful, natural areas, with nearly a quarter of people surveyed stating that they will place a higher value on connecting with nature after lockdown. This may explain why only 26% of people living in rural areas are looking to move, as opposed to 34% of urban dwellers. Moving home may entail a greater physical and psychological severance than changing jobs, as it requires the entire uprooting of established life – often of entire families - and therefore it is a telling sign of the contemporary appetite for change.

Which one, if any, of the following would you **like to change the most in your life** right now?



Changing who we love

Lockdown has allowed us to spend significantly more time with partners and families at home; this has both strained and accelerated key relationships in people's lives. With extended proximity to each other, some of us have become closer with those we live with whilst others have been driven apart. 8% of all people surveyed would most like to start or end a relationship with a romantic partner. This could be because lockdown had both a 'push and pull' effect on relationships. For some, the "pull" occurred as partners fast tracked moving in or forming a 'bubble' together during lockdown. For others not living together, there was a 'push' as they drifted apart by seeing less of one another due to lockdown restrictions.

Overall, almost half of people surveyed (48%) claimed that they get the most meaning in life from their families. During periods of crisis, it is understandable that people rely most heavily on close, inner circles, perhaps explaining why one in three want to work less after lockdown in order to improve their work-life balance. A climate in which health is put at risk and loved ones' lives are threatened may also contribute to an overall sense of familial closeness. In this context, it's interesting to note that some 40% of us claim that we will miss lockdown life in some form after all restrictions are lifted.

It is important to note that, from our survey, the impact of lockdown on young people's relationships has been particularly pronounced. For many, a lack of connection with friends who were once a huge part of our lives has brought on feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly for those who found themselves living back with parents. For those aged between 18-24, at a stage where social interactions between peers is paramount to psychological development, a significant majority (66%) are looking forward to spending time with friends again.

Young people are also more likely to say that they thought about ending or starting a new relationship during lockdown. Our survey found that a quarter of 18-24 year-olds are wanting to either begin or end their relationships. Although young people might always be expected to see a higher turnover of relationships, they are also less likely to live with partners, so social distancing restrictions may have made existing romantic relationships particularly difficult to maintain compared to those who live together.

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Barriers to change

But despite all this desire for change, most of us admit we have done little to nothing about it and we're evenly split about whether we will do so in the next 12 months. The most pronounced barrier to achieving change was financial concerns (39%); and amongst 25–34-year-olds, money concerns restrict an astounding 57%. The economic uncertainty around the pandemic means that the current job market is particularly volatile, meaning that many of us who want to change jobs may not feel financially secure enough to take this risk. Furthermore, rising house prices and job losses in certain sectors have deepened existing inequalities, making it harder for many of us to pursue our dreams.

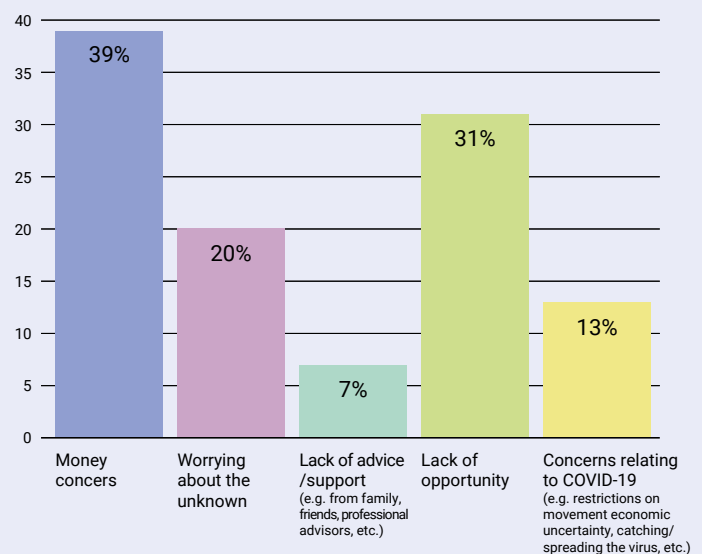
Unsurprisingly, such worries are heightened for those in lower income brackets, with over three quarters (77%) of those on a household income of under £5,000 a year feeling as though money is the main aspect preventing significant life changes in contrast with only 14% of those with a household income of £100,000 to £149,999 a year. Unsurprisingly, it is evident that the possession of wealth opens more doors to more opportunities, as changing jobs and pursuing risky, unpredictable life changes are privileges that not all can afford to pursue.

Another considerable barrier to achieving change cited was “lack of opportunity”, with almost one in three identifying this as the biggest hurdle. Switching jobs is often fraught with risk, particularly for those who are economically insecure. This pattern is compounded by geography, with Londoners roughly 10% less concerned about the lack of opportunity compared to the rest of the country. Across Britain as a whole, around 30% of people report lack of opportunity as a significant barrier to achieving change, compared with just 23% in London. This suggests that employment opportunities are not evenly distributed across the UK and more needs to be done to spread access to good jobs across the nation.

There is also an association between social grade and feeling that a lack of support or guidance is a barrier to making change, since less well-off social grades (C2DEs) are more likely to feel unsupported by friends and family compared to more affluent social grades (ABC1s). All of these findings suggest that opportunities to pursue purposeful change are a privilege, with more needing to be done in order to support and facilitate British people who are brave enough to consider fundamental changes. Our survey shows that the government’s focus on the “Levelling Up” agenda is timely, pertinent, and in need of genuine commitment.

What are the **biggest barriers** you face to achieving the change in your life you would most like to make?

Respondents were allowed to pick more than one option which is why the totals add up to over 100.



Recommendations

The prospect of lockdown lifting brings renewed hope for opportunity and increased agency in our lives. However, as people's new hopes run into economic barriers, we may face a new wave of dissatisfaction. To avoid this, we are making the following series of recommendations for companies, government institutions and civil society. With support, people should be able to overcome these hurdles and regain the agency they need to pursue new dreams after the pandemic.

Government Institutions

Deliver housing support: The government should offer more support for those trying to move house or find their first home, particularly through better social and affordable housing.

Connect people with nature: The government should increase the quality, quantity and availability of green spaces as people increasingly value their connection with nature. Making sure local environments are kept clean and safe is a crucial part of this.

Deliver job security: Safety measures should be put in place to ensure job security after the pandemic so that people aren't forced into unemployment or under-employment. Decent pay and safe working conditions are essential if work is to also provide a sense of agency.

Deliver protection from over-working: Work-life balance protection through regulations to stop work expanding into people's private or domestic lives – particularly as some of these safety measures may be lost after leaving the European Union.

Companies

Provide flexibility: People's ideal work-life balance varies across individuals and therefore companies should avoid a one size fits all policy. Giving employees a reasonable degree of choice over working from home or in the office, as well as when they work, would be welcome.

Provide limits: In order to manage people's stress and job satisfaction, remote working time management could be better enforced by restricting working hours e.g. not sending emails after 5pm on a Friday.

Provide training: Companies could provide training on purpose-driven careers as well as understanding their own purpose and facilitating employees' engagement with this.

Provide space: Give employees the opportunity to take volunteering days in order to explore different occupations or walks of life. Employees could also benefit from the chance to try different positions within the same company or adult work experience programmes, both of which help upskilling and support a more dynamic and robust workforce.

Civil Society

Take risks: Although changing your life is a privilege that involves resources, support and opportunity, it does also require individuals to have the courage to ask big questions about their lives and act on those decisions. We hope more people will have both the emotional courage and the material support necessary to face uncertainty and prevent regret.

Take stock: We urge people not to lose sight of the importance of family and a healthy work-life balance. The pandemic has clearly highlighted people's priorities in this area, and it's important to live your life according to these priorities rather than always rushing to complete the next task without reflection or boundaries.

Have conversations: Changing your life can't be done alone. We recommend exploring your own sense of purpose with people you trust. Don't be afraid to ask bigger, deeper questions about what really makes you happy, special and/or fulfilled.

Conclusion

The pandemic has been a moment of crisis, providing the psychological shock necessary to break old routines and ask ourselves brave, existential questions about our meaning and purpose. The British people are re-evaluating the fundamental cornerstones of our lives: what we do, where we live and who we love. However, major barriers are stopping us from making these changes - primarily concerns about money and a lack of opportunity. These barriers aren't evenly experienced throughout the population and appear to be higher hurdles to jump for lower income groups and those living outside of London. With the economic recovery from lockdown shaky and

unequal, these barriers are likely to be even harder to overcome. The danger is that this risks a wave of discontent, as people emerge from lockdown with new dreams but remain unable to materialise them. Government action and corporate reform is needed to give people the agency they need to realise their new aspirations. As lockdown regulations begin to ease, we should support our citizens to help turn their regained political freedoms into the substantial life changes they want and deserve. Such action won't just serve our economy and society, it will also help individuals live more happy, fulfilled and purposeful lives.

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Case studies

Case study 1 – Anonymous

This interviewee asked to remain anonymous as they have not yet left their job.

The pandemic has transformed my outlook on work; the presence of such a deadly virus has made me realise that you have to spend your time wisely, doing what you love. I trained and work in fashion so it was daunting to realise that I no longer see a future in my job, but the experience I have gained volunteering at garden centres has massively helped me make the decision to work in a job I enjoy. When I was able to spend lots of time gardening at my parents' place over lockdown, I found it to be very rewarding. For me it was the shift away from working in an office– I had enjoyed the office environment and got so swept up in that lifestyle that I never stopped to question whether I found the work itself either meaningful or fulfilling. I still want to look

for that same social aspect in my new line of work, perhaps by working in a community garden. When given the time to pause, it was scary to realise that I was no longer finding the same level of meaning and purpose from my job. There are also sacrifices involved with switching to work in horticulture, such as the financial consequences of taking a pay cut, so I wanted to try it out before ditching everything I know and taking the leap. I think a problem for many people is that once you're in full time work it's very difficult to find the time to experience other lines of work, but when working in horticulture I know I will be on a new journey, building new relationships and learning new skills, which will be extremely rewarding.

Case study 2 – Dan, 28, North London

A year ago, the Covid pandemic made me decide to change my profession from a science teacher to a baker. My original plan had been to take a break from teaching and travel, but since I couldn't do that, I found myself with a good opportunity to explore other options and assess what else I could do. I was fed up with the pressure put on teachers and the bureaucratic elements of the job, and since I've left, I've seen this pattern still affecting people in the profession. I wanted to do something that I am really passionate about and since I began working as a baker I take enormous satisfaction in coming to work every day, knowing I'll be doing something I am genuinely interested in. The decision to change my job did come at a cost, since I now have to get up very early in the morning, work weekends and unsociable hours and took a considerable pay cut. Some people were shocked that I decided

to take such a large cut in salary, but others understand the importance of me doing something I love and support the decision. The ability to undertake two or three days' work experience was crucial to my decision, as well as providing me with my first job at the bakery, which I still have now.





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