

Statistical bulletin

Social capital in the UK: May 2017

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

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1 . Main points

- The most recent data show a largely positive picture of social capital in the UK over the longer-term with over half of the indicators showing improvement over a period of 3 years; a majority of indicators showed improvement or no overall change over the shorter-term 1 year assessment.
- Most adults in the UK have at least one close friend, rising from 95% in 2011 to 2012 to 97% in 2014 to 2015. However, there has been a fall in the proportion of people saying they have someone to rely on a lot in case of a serious problem; this figure fell from 86% in 2010 to 2011 to 84% in 2013 to 2014.
- Over two-thirds of UK adults (68%) report stopping and talking to their neighbours in 2014 to 2015.
- More people are engaging in unpaid volunteering; in 2010 to 2011 the figure was 17% compared with 19% in 2014 to 2015.

2 . Things you need to know about this release

This release is part of the ONS Social Capital Project and provides an update on the 2015 publication [Measuring national well-being: An analysis of social capital in the UK](#), which proposed 25 headline indicators of social capital selected on the basis of user consultation and feedback.

The original 25 headline indicators of social capital were proposed around a four domain framework based on earlier work by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (please see datasets for more information).

A number of these original indicators have similar counterparts included within the most recent [April 2017 Measuring National Well-being \(MNW\) indicator set](#). As a result, applicable social capital headline indicators have been revised and aligned with these. This will provide a clearer picture of UK progress and implement consistent use of data sources. Two social capital headline indicators have since been removed from the original set of 25; however, two remaining headline indicators are split into two levels of measurement. This leaves 25 separate indicators for change assessment in this release. Updates since the 2015 report can be found in the datasets. Alternative sources to provide international comparability will continue to be highlighted where applicable.

We are using the latest available data, constructing time series where possible, to give an indication of change over time. This is an important part of our vision of producing timely and useful data to inform decision-making. Change is only noted as an improvement or deterioration when statistically significant using 95% confidence intervals (with the exception of Voter turnout).

3 . Introduction and background

Social capital represents the connections and collective attitudes between people that result in a well-functioning and close-knit society. We measure social capital because the connections between increasing rates of social capital and positively functioning well-being, economic growth and sustainability are extensively noted. For example, [social capital is recognised as a driver for economic growth and as a facilitator for a variety of improvements for individual and wider community well-being](#). This makes social capital valuable not only as a snapshot of the UK's general community involvement and cohesiveness levels but also as a valuable source of information and insight for policy makers in terms of resource allocation and others looking to help strengthen and facilitate individual well-being, community well-being and societal cohesion.

We seek to monitor measures of social capital when new data become available in order to help inform policy initiatives that can improve people's lives within our communities.

4 . Assessments of change

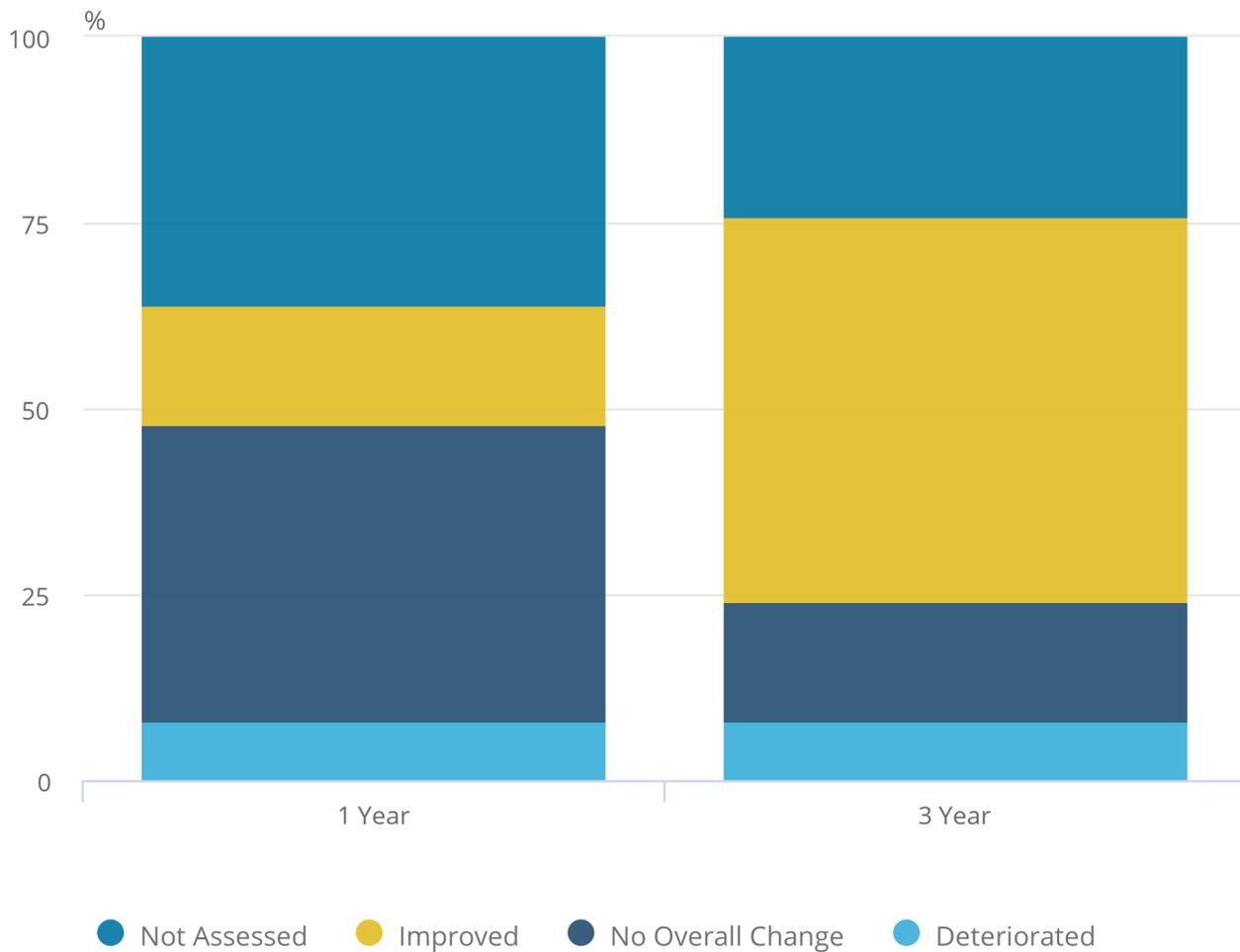
This release includes assessments showing the direction of change for each of the indicators, whether they have improved, deteriorated or shown no overall change (see Figure 1). Comparisons have been made with the previous year's data, or the previously published figure where year-on-year data are not available, as well as an assessment of change over a 3-year period. For more information on how we assess change, please see the "[Quality and methodology](#)" section.

Figure 1: Assessment of change – social capital indicators

UK, May 2017

Figure 1: Assessment of change – social capital indicators

UK, May 2017



Source: Office for National Statistics

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Although there are 23 headline indicators of social capital, measures of reciprocal help between parents and adult children is assessed separately as giving and receiving. Feeling safe walking alone after dark is also presented for both men and women, so as a result there are 25 measures to be assessed.

1. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

The most recent data show a largely positive picture of social capital in the UK over the longer-term with over half of the indicators showing improvement over a period of 3 years; a majority of indicators showed improvement or no overall change over the shorter-term 1 year assessment.

5 . Personal relationships

Table 1: Indicators for personal relationships

Measure	Geographical coverage	Current Source	Latest Year	Latest Data
Proportion of people who have at least one close friend	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	97%
Proportion of people who meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least once a week	UK	European Social Survey	2014	61%
Feelings of loneliness often/always	England	Community Life Survey, Cabinet Office	2015 to 2016	4%
Proportion of people who have used the internet for social networking in the last 3 months	UK	Internet access - Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN), Office for National Statistics	2016	63%
Proportion of people who regularly stop and talk with people in the neighbourhood	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	68%

Source: Office for National Statistics

Our personal relationships can be a source of enjoyment and happiness in our lives and provide a sense of comfort and stability. Research shows that [healthy personal relationships can be a protective factor against stress and other health issues](#) (Kreitzer, 2016).

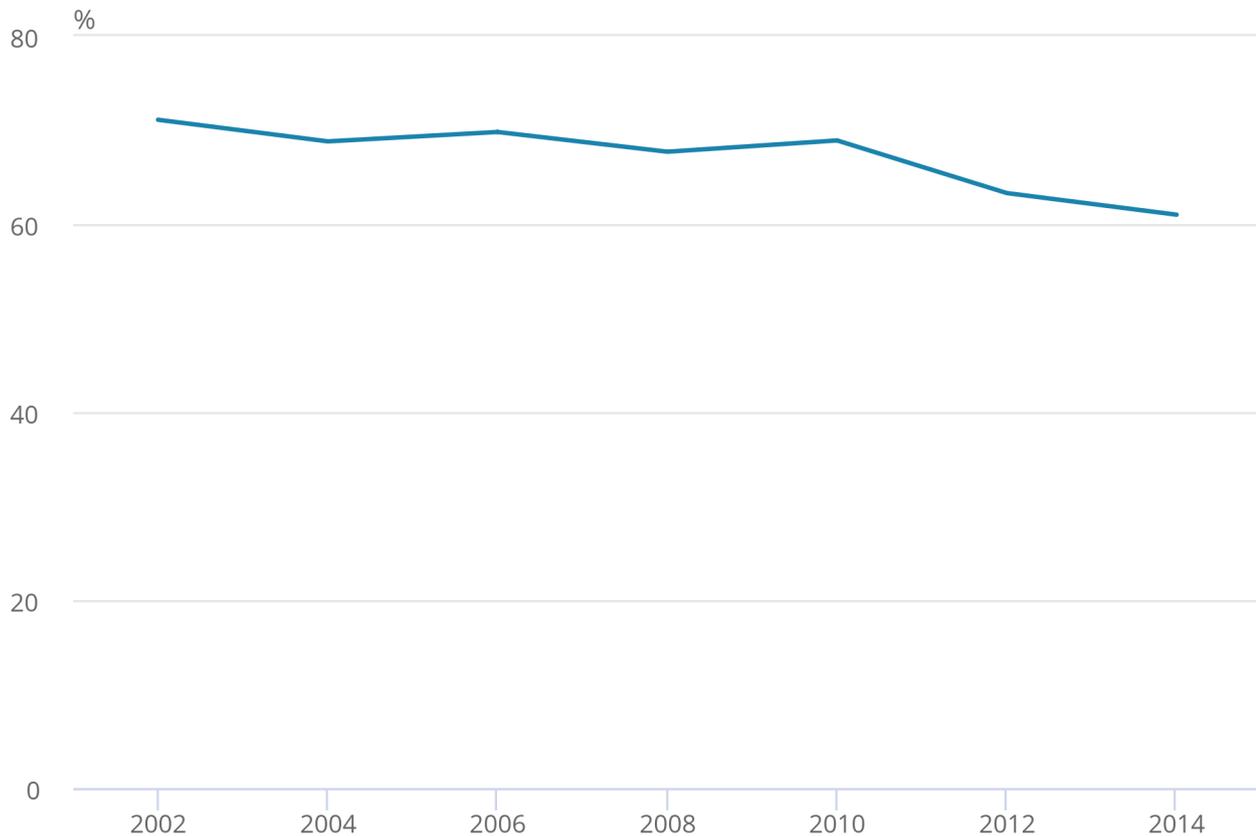
The percentage of people saying they feel lonely often or always has not changed significantly between 2014 to 2015 and 2015 to 2016, with the figure staying around 4% on average. However, the proportion of people meeting socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least once a week has decreased from 69% to 61% between 2010 and 2014 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Proportion of people who meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least once a week

UK, 2002 to 2014

Figure 2: Proportion of people who meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least once a week

UK, 2002 to 2014



Source: European Social Survey

Source: European Social Survey

Although the percentage of people meeting socially has dropped, there has been growth in the percentage of people reporting having at least one close friend and this figure improved between 2011 to 2012 and 2014 to 2015, rising from 95% to 97%. This disparity could be due to the rise in the use of the internet for social networking over the past 3 years. In 2016, there were 63% of us who reported using the internet for this purpose in the last 3 months compared with 53% in 2013. Research into the relationship between social networking and social capital is still in its early stages but early research suggests that social networking may help bolster social capital in the form of [helping people strengthen relationships and aiding integration within communities](#) (Utz and Muscanell, 2015). We have therefore interpreted the increase in social networking as an improvement. The proportion of people who regularly stop and talk to their neighbours has also improved over a 3-year period, rising from 66% in 2011 to 2012 to 68% in 2014 to 2015.

6 . Social support networks

Table 2: Indicators for social support networks

Measure	Geographical coverage	Current Source	Latest Year	Latest Data
Percentage of people that have a spouse or partner, family member or friend to rely on a lot if they have a serious problem	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2013 to 2014	86%
Proportion of people who give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	20%
Proportion of parents who regularly receive or give practical or financial help from/to a child aged 16 or over not living with them	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2013 to 2014	Receive: 38% Give: 58%
Proportion of people who borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	42%

Source: Office for National Statistics

Our personal relationships form the foundations of our social support networks and are important for individuals as well as for community well-being. Social support can be particularly important in helping people and communities recover from periods of difficulty or times where we need reassurance, practical or financial help. We monitor a variety of measures focusing on how connected we are to others around us and the extent to which we can rely on them for support or provide support to others.

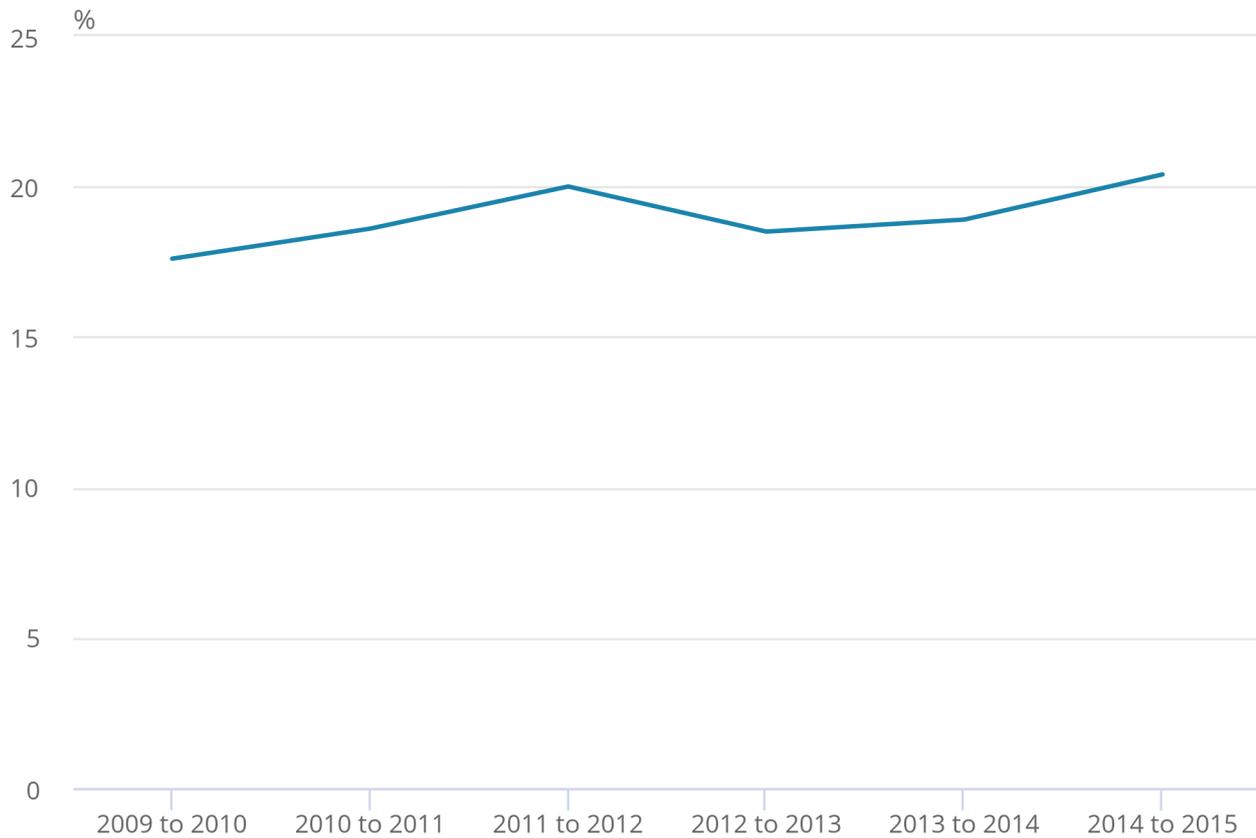
Having someone to rely on in times of adversity can help us cope better and be resilient in the knowledge that we have someone to help. However, between 2010 to 2011 and 2013 to 2014, there has been a deterioration in the proportion of people saying that they had a spouse, family member or friend to rely on “a lot” in case of a serious problem. This fell from 86% in 2010 to 2011 to 84% in 2013 to 2014. Furthermore, reciprocal support between parents and their adult children has decreased. The proportion of parents who regularly receive practical or financial help from a child aged 16 or over not living with them decreased from 42% in 2011 to 2012 to 38% in 2013 to 2014. Furthermore, the proportion of parents saying that they were giving help has also decreased between 2011 to 2012 and 2013 to 2014 (63% and 58% respectively). We have considered these measures from the perspective of the receivers of help and as a result assess this as deterioration.

Despite this, the proportion of people who give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them has risen from 19% to 20% between 2013 to 2014 and 2014 to 2015 (see Figure 3). For the purpose of evaluation, we have assessed this change as an improvement from the perspective of those who are receiving the care or help. However, this measure doesn't give an indication of the frequency or nature of the help and the impact this caring has on the caregiver may be something that needs to be considered in the future. A further improvement is noted in that more of us borrowed or exchanged things with our neighbours in 2014 to 2015 where the figure is reported at 42% compared with 41% in 2011 to 2012.

Figure 3: Proportion of people who give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them

UK, between 2009 to 2010 and 2014 to 2015

Figure 3: Proportion of people who give special help to at least one sick, disabled or elderly person living or not living with them
UK, between 2009 to 2010 and 2014 to 2015



Source: Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study

Source: Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study

7 . Civic engagement

Table 3: Indicators for civic engagement

Measure	Geographical coverage	Current Source	Latest Year	Latest Data
Percentage who volunteered more than once in the last 12 months	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	19%
Proportion of people who are members of organisations, whether political, voluntary, professional or recreational	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	53%
Proportion of people who have been involved in at least one social action project in their local area in the previous 12 months	England	Community Life Survey, Cabinet Office	2015 to 2016	18%
Proportion of people who definitely agree or tend to agree that they can influence decisions affecting their local area	England	Community Life Survey, Cabinet Office	2015 to 2016	36%
Voter turnout in UK General Elections	UK	Electoral Commission	2015	66%
Proportion of people who have been involved in at least one political action in the previous 12 months	UK	Eurofound, European Quality of Life Survey	2011 to 2012	34%
Proportion of people who are very or quite interested in politics	UK	European Social Survey	2014	56%

Source: Office for National Statistics

Civic engagement is about making a positive contribution to the collective life of a community or society overall. For example, this could involve volunteering for a local or national cause, taking action on a social issue or belonging to an organisation outside of work like a sports club or neighbourhood watch. Strong civic engagement networks may help to foster greater trust within communities and as a result more people willing to work together to help the community as a whole.

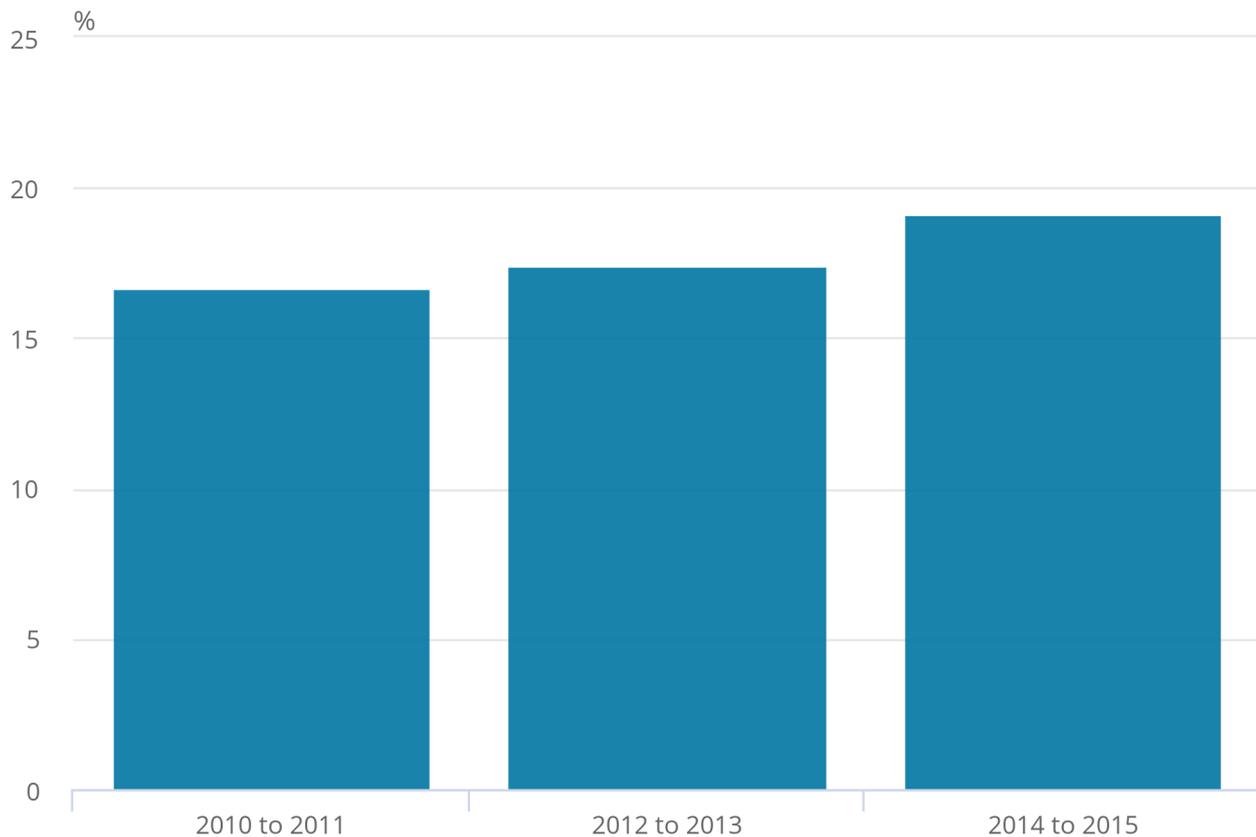
The proportion of people who participated in unpaid voluntary work has increased between 2010 to 2011 and 2014 to 2015. In 2010 to 2011, there were 17% of people who had volunteered several times a year or more, whereas in 2014 to 2015, this figure had risen to 19% (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage who volunteered more than once in the last 12 months

UK, between 2010 to 2011 and 2014 to 2015

Figure 4: Percentage who volunteered more than once in the last 12 months

UK, between 2010 to 2011 and 2014 to 2015



Source: Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study

Source: Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study

The percentage of people who took part in a social action between 2014 to 2015 and 2015 to 2016 remained unchanged. Similarly, the percentage of people in the UK who reported membership of organisations whether political, voluntary, professional or recreational also remained unchanged between 2011 to 2012 and 2014 to 2015 (52% and 53% respectively). Being a member of an organisation can create bonds between people who have common interests and who come from different backgrounds, therefore, being a member of a political, voluntary, professional or recreational organisation alongside others could contribute to improved social integration within communities.

While the percentages of people in the UK taking part in these social activities showed no overall change, the percentage of people who were engaged with political actions has increased from 17% in 2006 to 2007 to 34% in 2011 to 2012.

Free and fair elections give people a chance to make decisions on how their country is run. Voter turnout in UK general elections shows an increase from 65.1% in 2010 to 66.2% in 2015. The percentage of people who say they are interested in politics also rose from 48% in 2012 to 56% in 2014.

8 . Trust and cooperative norms

Table 4: Indicators for trust and cooperative norms

Measure	Geographical coverage	Current Source	Latest Year	Latest Data
Percentage of those who have trust in national Government	UK	Eurobarometer	Autumn 2016	35%
Proportion of people who would say that most people can be trusted	UK	European Social Survey	2014	35%
Proportion of people who would say that most people in their neighbourhood can be trusted	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	70%
Proportion of people who definitely agree or tend to agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	England	Community Life Survey, Cabinet Office	2015 to 2016	89%
Felt fairly/very safe walking alone after dark (men/women)	England and Wales	The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), Office for National Statistics	2015 to 2016	M: 88% F: 62%
Proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that people around where they live are willing to help their neighbours	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	74%
Proportion of people who agreed or strongly agreed that they feel they belong to their neighbourhood	UK	Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study	2014 to 2015	69%

Source: Office for National Statistics

Trust provides glue that holds society together; it enables relationships to flourish and people to feel safe in their neighbourhoods. Less trust within a community can mean less sense of community solidarity and cohesion.

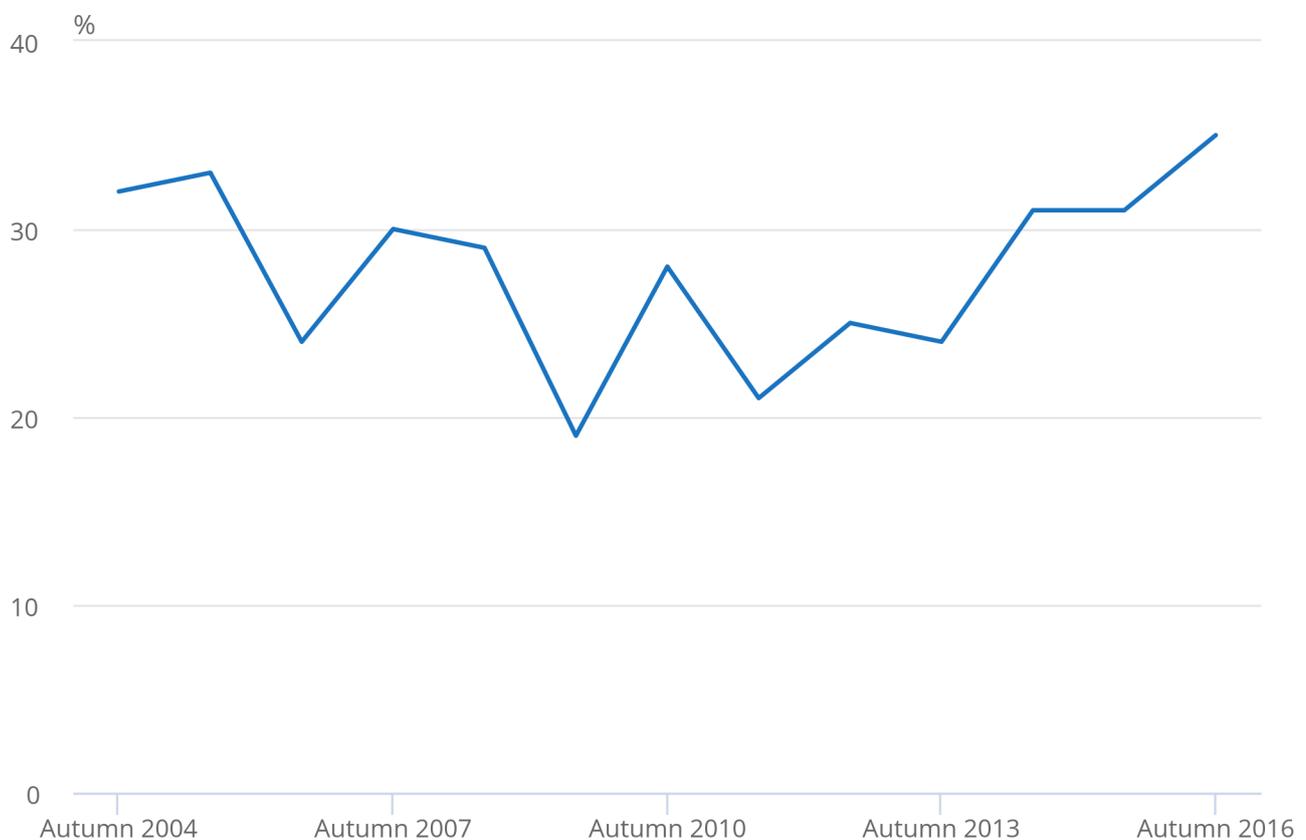
To assess generalised trust, the European Social Survey asks, “Generally speaking would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Respondents are then asked to score their ratings on a scale, from 0 to 10, where 0 means you can’t be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted. In 2010, there were 35% of people who rated their general trust as high (7 to 10) and this remained unchanged in 2014. Another source assessing trust in national government however, over a 3-year period, noted the proportion of people who said they “tend to trust” the national government rose from 24% in the autumn (September to November) of 2013 to 35% in the autumn of 2016 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of those who have trust in national government

UK, between Sept to Nov 2004 and Sept to Nov 2016

Figure 5: Percentage of those who have trust in national government

UK, between Sept to Nov 2004 and Sept to Nov 2016



Source: Eurofound: European Quality of Life Survey

Source: Eurofound: European Quality of Life Survey

Further improvements include the proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that they feel they belong to their neighbourhood rose from 63% in 2011 to 2012 to 69% in 2014 to 2015. In addition to this, the proportion of women who felt “fairly” or “very” safe walking alone after dark rose from 57% in 2012 to 2013 to 62% in 2015 to 2016.

9 . Related links

[Measuring National Well-being: Life in the UK, Apr 2017](#)

[Understanding Society](#)

[Community Life Survey](#)

[European Social Survey](#)

[Eurofound: European Quality of Life Survey](#)

[The Electoral Commission](#)

[Crime Survey for England and Wales](#)

[Internet access: households and individuals](#)

10 . Harmonisation

Unlike the 23 social capital headline indicators, five domains are currently referenced as a framework for the [ONS harmonised recommended social capital question set](#), which was last revised in 2003 (civic participation, social participation, social networks and social support, reciprocity and trust, views about the local area).

This is the set of recommended questions we put forward for use on surveys that seek to measure social capital. The aim of the harmonisation project is to make it easier for users to draw better comparisons between data sources.

We plan to review the use of the 2003 harmonised question set in current surveys and assess which questions are still in use in present-day surveys. We will seek further user feedback and discussion around the current uses or proposed uses of social capital indicators to ensure the harmonised questions are relevant to their users.

Please contact nationalwell-being@ons.gsi.gov.uk for more information or if you wish to contribute to this project.

11 . Quality and methodology

The ONS Social Capital Project set out to establish measures that would help people to understand social capital and also help monitor it as part of the Measuring National Well-being (MNW) Programme. This report includes assessments showing the direction of change for each of the social capital indicators.

Broadly speaking, indicators have only been assessed as having improved or deteriorated if the difference between the comparison periods is statistically significant using 95% confidence intervals. If a difference is said to be statistically significant, it is unlikely that it could have occurred by chance.

Confidence intervals give a measure of the statistical precision of an estimate and show the range of uncertainty around the estimate. As a general rule, if the confidence intervals around the estimate overlap with the intervals around another estimate, there is no statistically significant difference between the estimates.

Voter turnout has been assessed using the actual increase or decrease as this is not an estimation. Other indicators have not been assessed because there are not enough data points to provide a comparison.