Britons want a bigger role for the state in delivering a social contract

A large majority of voters think that the government should fund a wide-ranging social contract, with guaranteed provision of a range of services including social care, early years education and care, public transport, and social and rented housing

Findings make it clear that belief in a small state, whose only functions are to provide security and safeguard property rights, is a minority sport among all sections of society, with a strong national consensus for a state-funded social contract

The areas with the biggest support for government funding are social care, early years and public transport, followed by housing, and support holds up well across people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, incomes and political views

When asked to prioritise these areas based on assumed limits to what the government can fund, people consistently prioritise social care, early years education and care, and housing, with some variations in the order of the other four

Setting the scene

There's no denying that the social contract - the unwritten expectation that we contribute to society, and society will support us in return - is under severe strain in Britain. It's no longer safe to expect that a hard day's work will be rewarded with a decent wage and being able to afford basic necessities such as housing, food and energy. And the outlook is even worse if you can't work and depend on benefits.

In 2021, the economist Minouche Shafik (Director of the London School of Economics) wrote a book called What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract. She spoke about it at an event that we ran with the Policy Institute in March 2022.

In the book, Shafik identifies a number of reasons that the social contract has broken down in recent years, such as changing expectations around gender divides, technological advances, ageing populations and climate change. She also suggests a range of solutions, such as investing more in early years education and lifelong learning, and providing more unemployment and retraining support. Her conclusion is that "if we invest more in each other, and expect more back in return, we will increase opportunity, security and efficiency".

There's an ongoing debate about the role of government (and, linked to that, the size of the state) in Britain. In many cases this splits along conventional political and party lines, with the Labour party and others on the left making the case for a larger and more interventionist (but also entrepreneurial) state, and the Conservatives and others on the right arguing for a smaller state, with lower taxes and spending.

We know that public attitudes to this debate vary depending on the question asked. For example, there is majority support for the government doing more to increase wages, reduce the cost of living and tackle inequality, but less support for increasing redistribution through the tax system.

But there's a gap in what we know about public attitudes to some of the specific solutions proposed by Minouche Shafik and other thinkers to repair our crumbling social contract.

Do people think that the government should be more active in rebuilding the social contract by investing in (or regulating for) some of these ideas? We set out to find out. Read on to see what we found from our national polling with Opinium.

The social contract

A large majority of Britons agree that it is the role of government to provide the funding (and necessary regulation) to ensure that everyone, regardless of their ability to pay, has access to a wide range of services that would support a broad-based social contract.

We asked about seven areas (social care, early years, public transport, social and rented housing, lifelong learning, minimum income and income protection).

We worded the questions to make it clear that the level of provision that we were asking about in each case was higher than its currently provided by the state, and focused on guaranteed minimum levels of provision (without specifying what those were, or what policies might achieve them).

We found that, looking across all seven areas, three in four people agree that it is the role of government to ensure that everyone can access them, regardless of their ability to pay (see the next question for views on prioritising them based on limits to the *government's* ability to pay for them).

The largest majorities (above 80%) agreed in relation to social care, early years and public transport.

More than 70% agreed in relation to housing and lifelong learning, while more than 60% agreed in relation to minimum income and income protection.

These findings suggest that there is strong support for the state to provide a stronger social safety net based on social insurance principles, as a way of repairing the social contract.

They also support the idea of 'social investment', of the state reaping both social and economic returns from investing in the capability of its citizens to become, or remain, productive members of society.

The seven areas that we asked about correspond to three of the five 'Fair Necessities': fair essentials (minimum income and housing), fair opportunities (early years and lifelong learning), and fair exchange (social care, public transport and income protection).

In principle, do you believe that it is the role of government to provide the funding (and necessary regulation) to ensure that everyone, regardless of their ability to pay, has access to the following...

■ Yes ■ Don't know ■ No

	Yes	Don't know	No
Social care	84%	9%	7%
Early years	84%	8%	8%
Public transport	81%	11%	8%
Housing	77%	12%	11%
Lifelong learning	71%	14%	15%
Minimum income	64%	16%	20%
Income protection	62%	22%	16%

We found a surprising level of consensus across groups among our nationally representative survey sample.

In most cases, there is little variation between generations. The area with the biggest generational differences in support is a guaranteed minimum income regardless of ability to work, which 73% of 18-to-34-year-olds think the government should in principle provide, compared to 54% of those over 65. On the other hand, the area with the smallest

generational gap in support is a guaranteed minimum level and quality of social care provision (84% compared to 86% support, respectively).

Similarly, there are very limited differences in views by gender, region, social grade or household income. People who are unemployed are especially focused on housing and minimum income, unsurprisingly, but others share their concern. Respondents who identify as belonging to ethnic minorities are particularly supportive of the role of

government in providing a stronger income protection system to help people who lose their jobs to get back into work.

While there are predictable variations across parties, on average there is still 68% agreement among both current and 2019 Conservative voters that it is the role of government to fund the seven listed areas, compared to 85% of current/2019 Labour voters, 76% of current/2019 Lib Dem voters and 75% of the general public.
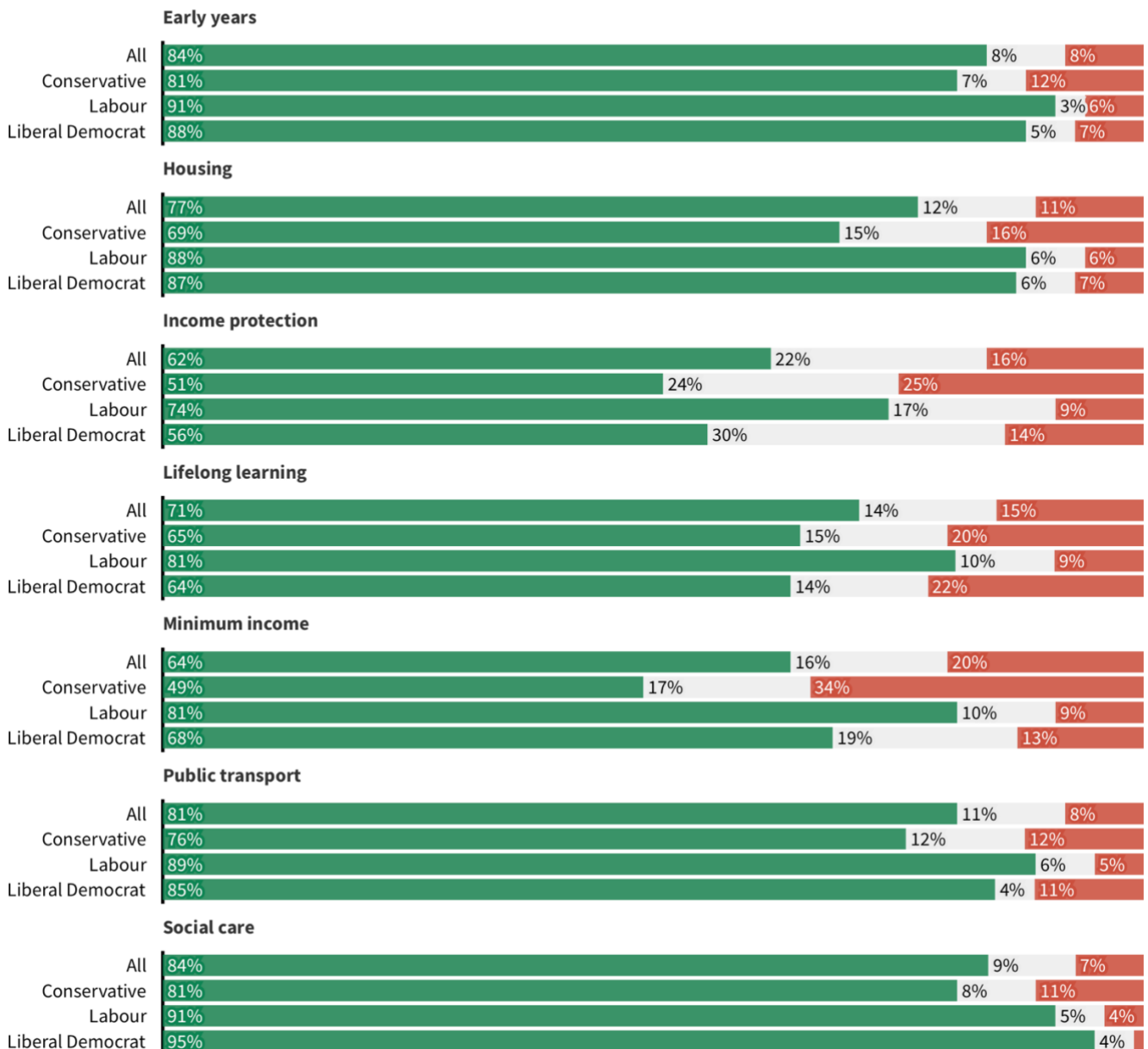
The areas with the most support from different groups of 2019 voters are early years among Labour voters (91%), early years and social care among Tory voters (81%), and social care among Lib Dem voters (95%). The areas with the least support from different groups of 2019 voters are income protection among Labour voters (74%) and Lib Dem voters (55%), and minimum income among Tory voters (49%).

69% of 2019 Tory voters also support the principle of government funding to provide a minimum level and quality of social or rented housing provision, and there is higher support than opposition among this group for both a minimum income (49% support, 34% opposition) and a more generous income protection system (51% support, 25% opposition).

In principle, do you believe that it is the role of government to provide the funding (and necessary regulation) to ensure that everyone, regardless of their ability to pay, has access to the following...

■ Yes □ Don't know ■ No

Early years

	Yes	Don't know	No
All	84%	8%	8%
Conservative	81%	7%	12%
Labour	91%	3%	6%
Liberal Democrat	88%	5%	7%

Housing

	Yes	Don't know	No
All	77%	12%	11%
Conservative	69%	15%	16%
Labour	88%	6%	6%
Liberal Democrat	87%	6%	7%

Income protection

	Yes	Don't know	No
All	62%	22%	16%
Conservative	51%	24%	25%
Labour	74%	17%	9%
Liberal Democrat	56%	30%	14%

Lifelong learning

	Yes	Don't know	No
All	71%	14%	15%
Conservative	65%	15%	20%
Labour	81%	10%	9%
Liberal Democrat	64%	14%	22%

Minimum income

	Yes	Don't know	No
All	64%	16%	20%
Conservative	49%	17%	34%
Labour	81%	10%	9%
Liberal Democrat	68%	19%	13%

Public transport

	Yes	Don't know	No
All	81%	11%	8%
Conservative	76%	12%	12%
Labour	89%	6%	5%
Liberal Democrat	85%	4%	11%

Social care

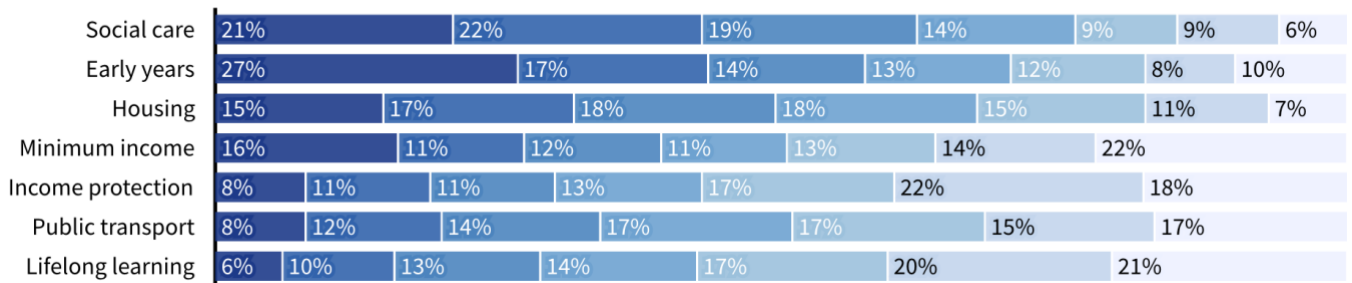|	Yes	Don't know	No
All	84%	9%	7%
Conservative	81%	8%	11%
Labour	91%	5%	4%
Liberal Democrat	95%		4%

Setting priorities

Of course, there is a difference between asking what people would like government to provide in principle, and what they would prioritise when constrained resources require difficult choices to be made. So we asked respondents to prioritise which of the seven listed areas should receive government funding, by ranking them from one (fully funded) to seven (not funded at all), on the assumption that only half of the necessary funding to support all seven was available.

We found that, consistently with how respondents had answered the first question, the highest-ranked areas were social care and early years, although housing was the third most prioritised area. The least prioritised area was lifelong learning, which mirrors results from previous surveys that perhaps reflect a lack of widespread public understanding of the nature and benefits of this kind of provision.

Please rank each service from 1 to 7, where 1 represents the service being fully funded, 4 just under half the funding, and 7 not funded at all.

■1 ■2 ■3 ■4 ■5 6 7

Service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Social care	21%	22%	19%	14%	9%	9%	6%
Early years	27%	17%	14%	13%	12%	8%	10%
Housing	15%	17%	18%	18%	15%	11%	7%
Minimum income	16%	11%	12%	11%	13%	14%	22%
Income protection	8%	11%	11%	13%	17%	22%	18%
Public transport	8%	12%	14%	17%	17%	15%	17%
Lifelong learning	6%	10%	13%	14%	17%	20%	21%

Calculating an average rank for each of the seven areas allows us to compare views across different groups. Here, some interesting variations emerge, although they are more differences of emphasis than deep-seated disagreements about what is seen as most or least important for government to fund. For example, Labour voters put minimum income and income protection above public transport and lifelong learning, while Conservative voters do not.

Early years, social care and housing are consistently top-ranked. The only exceptions are that people who are unemployed consider a minimum income to be the highest priority, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds rank income protection and minimum income above housing.

Please rank each service from 1 to 7, where 1 represents the service being fully funded, 4 just under half the funding, and 7 not funded at all.

Average rank for each service (ordered in descending priority for funding)

Service	Average rank
Social care	2.7
Early years	3.2
Housing	3.4
Minimum income	4.2
Public transport	4.3
Income protection	4.4
Lifelong learning	5

Methodology and data sources

The questions were designed with input from polling experts and based on conversations with a number of members of our expert contributors network. Many of the questions link to one or more of our five Fair Necessities (essentials, opportunities, rewards, exchange and treatment).

Fieldwork was carried out by Opinium between 22 and 23 March, with a nationally representative sample of 2,052 adults across the United Kingdom, weighted to nationally representative criteria and various political criteria. The order of options presented in each question was randomised.

The full data tables can be downloaded here.

We described the options in the survey as follows:

- *Early years:* Good quality education and care in the pre-school years
- *Housing:* A guaranteed minimum level and quality of social or rented housing provision
- *Income protection:* A system that pays people who lose their job a percentage of their income to help them get back to work
- *Lifelong learning:* Support with costs for learning or retraining in adult life
- *Minimum income:* A guaranteed minimum income regardless of ability to work
- *Public transport:* A guaranteed minimum level and quality of public transport provision
- *Social care:* A guaranteed minimum level and quality of social care provision

Read more online

Visit roleofgov.uk to read this report online. The online version includes:

- **Visualised breakdowns by a wide range of demographic groupings for each question**
- **Links to related statistics from the Fairness Index and relevant third-party reports**