

DEMOS

**THE PEOPLE'S
TOWN SQUARE
ON PROTEST**

LOOKING BEYOND THE
HEADLINES

HANA KAPETANOVIC
NAEMA MALIK
MIRIAM LEVIN

SEPTEMBER 2024

Open Access. Some rights reserved.

Open Access. Some rights reserved. As the publisher of this work, Demos wants to encourage the circulation of our work as widely as possible while retaining the copyright. We therefore have an open access policy which enables anyone to access our content online without charge. Anyone can download, save, perform or distribute this work in any format, including translation, without written permission. This is subject to the terms of the Creative Commons By Share Alike licence. The main conditions are:

- Demos and the author(s) are credited including our web address **www.demos.co.uk**
- If you use our work, you share the results under a similar licence

A full copy of the licence can be found at **<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>**

You are welcome to ask for permission to use this work for purposes other than those covered by the licence. Demos gratefully acknowledges the work of Creative Commons in inspiring our approach to copyright. To find out more go to **www.creativecommons.org**



This project was supported by Liberty.

LIBERTY

Published by Demos September 2024
© Demos. Some rights reserved.
15 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2DD
T: 020 3878 3955
hello@demos.co.uk
www.demos.co.uk

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	PAGE 4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	PAGE 5
INTRODUCTION	PAGE 10
SECTION 1: INITIAL PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PROTEST	PAGE 16
SECTION 2: THE PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE AND MOVING FROM PERCEPTION TO INFORMED JUDGEMENT	PAGE 27
SECTION 3: THE PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE PRINCIPLES	PAGE 41
SECTION 4: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE PRINCIPLES	PAGE 55
CONCLUSION	PAGE 66
APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY	PAGE 67

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Liberty for supporting this research project.

The biggest thanks go to the 24 members of the public, who made up our People's Town Square, for coming together to discuss a contentious topic and providing crucial insights for this research through their discussions.

We would like to thank Daniella Lock for sharing her comprehensive knowledge on protest legislation with us and the participants of our People's Town Square. Thank you also to the numerous other experts we consulted for their contributions to this research.

At Demos, we would like to thank our colleagues Polly Curtis, Felix Arbenz-Caines, and Chloe Burke for their support.

Any errors remain the authors' responsibility.

Hana Kapetanovic

Naema Malik

Miriam Levin

September 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of record low public trust in our political system,¹ it is particularly important that we have legitimate democratic avenues to express our opinions. And yet instead we have seen a large number of new restrictions on protests introduced in the space of a few years by the previous government.

Concern about disruption to the lives of the 'ordinary public' has often been used to justify new restrictions by policy makers in recent years, on the assumption of the appeal of this stance to voters. But this is based on the top of mind perceptions of a proportion of the public – people's knee jerk reactions, based on an often limited knowledge of the protest landscape.

We wanted to go beyond this simplistic understanding of public opinion on protest and reach a more nuanced understanding based on in-depth deliberations that can consider trade offs, take a longer-term view and involve the public in a meaningful way. We should not think only about the significant proportion of the public (37%) who already have taken part in a protest, according to new polling for this research,² but about all of us who may one day find ourselves wanting to express our views on or raise awareness of an issue that matters to us.

This is why we chose to hold a People's Town Square, a deliberative process that brought together a representative sample of 24 participants from across the country over the course of four online sessions to learn about and deliberate on the topic of protest, with its findings tested for broader resonance through polling.³

This report provides new insight on how the public think about protest, with a greater level of depth than previous research in this area through the use of this deliberative research method. We set out a number of recommendations informed by principles developed by our research participants that will enable the new government to take political leadership in this area, in a way that brings the public along with it.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The public supports the fundamental right to protest

In new polling for this research, we found that the overwhelming majority (83%) of the public agree that everyone should be able to protest on issues they care about.⁴ This echoes what we heard in our People's Town Square, with participants seeing the right to express your opinion in a democracy as fundamental.

1 The Guardian, 2024. <https://amp.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/12/trust-in-british-politics-hits-record-low-latest-bsa-survey-finds>

2 We conducted two polls as part of this research: one was conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 with a UK nationally representative sample of 2,079; the other was conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 with a UK nationally representative sample of 2,115. This data comes from the first of these two polls. See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

3 See the introduction for more detail on deliberative methods, and the appendix for more detail on our research methodology.

4 Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

There are concerns about disruption, but these are more nuanced than is often reported

At the same time, the public feel there should be limits on the right to protest. We heard concerns about the impact of protests that cause serious inconvenience on people's lives in our People's Town Square, and our polling found that the majority (67%) of the public agree that restrictions should be put on protests when they cause serious disruption to people's everyday lives.⁵

However, when the public is asked to make trade offs between the right to protest and concerns about disruption, views are far more nuanced. We asked respondents to indicate where their views sat between two opposing statements: 'our right to protest must be protected even if the protest causes some disruption' and 'our right to protest should be limited if the protest causes some disruption'. The public was divided on this – 37% agreed more with the former, 40% with the latter, and 19% neither statement more than the other.⁶

Additionally, we found that support for a protest and its tactics varies depending on the protest's cause, with support for tactics that cause serious inconvenience increasing with the popularity of the issue. Views on protest causes are also not fixed, and can change over time, particularly when a protest is successful. We describe this in the report as the halo effect of historical distance: once a cause is successful it appears to have always been just, and even extreme tactics appear more justified.

Over the course of the People's Town Square, concerns about the right to protest and disruption shifted

Our participants began the People's Town Square with generally low levels of knowledge on the history of protest and protest legislation, and did not tend to discuss this issue with people whose views differ from their own. In this context, sharing new information and perspectives on protest as part of the deliberative process led participants to move beyond top of mind perceptions to informed judgement. In addition to feeling more knowledgeable about the topic, the views of some participants shifted over the course of the process.

The most significant shift in views was that concerns around disruption became less prominent, while the perceived need to protect the right to protest strengthened. A month on from the final session of the People's Town Square, we sent a follow-up survey to evaluate experiences of the sessions and assess any changes in views.⁷ Over half (57%) of follow-up survey respondents reported that they became more supportive of the importance of the right to protest in our society after the sessions.⁸

Participants began to think beyond the impact on individuals from protests, and towards a more societal perspective that encompasses a wider range of people. We found that levels of sympathy for different groups involved in protests generally increased over the course of the process: 52% of follow-up survey respondents reported an increase in sympathy for protesters, 52% for the general public, and 33% for the police (with a 24% decrease in sympathy – the highest of the groups).

5 Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

6 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

7 See the appendix for more detail on the follow-up survey methodology.

8 Almost all of the other half of participants responding to the follow-up survey became neither more nor less supportive of the importance of this right, with only 10% of participants saying they became slightly less supportive. See the appendix for more detail on the follow-up survey methodology.

SUMMARY OF PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE PRINCIPLES AND OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

One of our recommendations is that policy makers involve the public more in informing policy on divisive issues, and we see deliberative processes as one way to do this. The other recommendations are specifically informed by the six People's Town Square principles, which were developed by participants as part of the deliberative process. We found that these principles have resonance outside of the process through polling, with the vast majority of people agreeing with each statement, ranging from 74% to 87% of the public, depending on the principle.⁹

PRINCIPLE	INSIGHT	IMPLICATION	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
"Everyone has the right to protest peacefully and non-violently"	The right to protest is seen as fundamental, and participants grew increasingly convinced of this as the process went on. As part of this, it is important that protests are peaceful and non-violent.	Policy makers must protect the right to protest peacefully and non-violently, as well as recognise the public's views are more nuanced than recent legislation and political rhetoric accounts for.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission a comprehensive, independent protest review • Remove restrictions on noisy protests • Remove offence of being equipped to lock on • Clarify language on 'serious harm' and 'serious disruption' • Review sentencing for non-violent tactics
"Laws around protest should be clearer for protesters and police"	There is low starting awareness and knowledge on protest legislation. When informed about this topic, the aspect that stands out most is a sense that the law is 'vague' and not clear enough, making it difficult for police to implement and protesters to know their rights.	Policy makers, police and civil society should not assume a high level of knowledge on protest legislation, and should work to increase knowledge levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the knowledge threshold for breaching conditions imposed on a protest • Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering • Develop a communications campaign to inform the public of their rights
		Policy makers should ensure that language in legislation is clear enough to be able to be implemented, and that police officers feel confident implementing it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove offence of being equipped to lock on • Clarify language on 'serious harm' and 'serious disruption' • Review protest policing guidance to ensure police understand the law

⁹ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

PRINCIPLE	INSIGHT	IMPLICATION	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>“Everyone should feel safe, whether protesting or not”</p>	<p>Safety is a key concern. Over the course of the process, the conception of whose safety needs to be protected at a protest, and who is responsible for creating a sense of safety, broadened. It was seen as important that protesters and the general public feel safe, and that the police have a key role in ensuring this.</p>	<p>Protesters should feel safe and be clear on their rights, and police should be clear on how they can ensure that people feel safe in and around protests.</p> <p>Specific attention should be given to ensuring the safety of marginalised groups who are disproportionately likely to face the use of police force.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering • Integrate community mediators into the management of protests • Build evidence base on police de-escalation training
<p>“Everyone has the right to voice their opinion and raise awareness on issues”</p>	<p>Voicing your opinion and raising awareness on issues are seen as the key value of protest in a democracy. Therefore, it is seen as important that protesters are able to protest freely, and to communicate their message well.</p>	<p>Policy makers must protect the right for people to express their opinions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove restrictions on noisy protests • Review sentencing for non-violent tactics
<p>“The rights of protesters should be balanced with the rights of the general public”</p>	<p>There is concern about tactics perceived as disruptive, but it is also a divisive topic and views were more nuanced on this than is often assumed. Additionally, this became a less prominent concern for participants over the course of the process, with the focus increasingly becoming about balancing the rights of protesters and the general public.</p>	<p>Given the divisiveness of this issue, policy makers should recognise nuances in views and focus on areas of consensus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify language on ‘serious harm’ and ‘serious disruption’

PRINCIPLE	INSIGHT	IMPLICATION	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>"No one should be harmed, whether protesting or not"</p>	<p>Harm can include physical harm, intimidation, but also serious inconvenience. However, concerns about serious inconvenience were nuanced, and there was a lack of consensus on this amongst participants.</p>	<p>As above, given the divisiveness of concerns around inconvenience and disruption, policy makers should recognise nuances in views and focus on areas of consensus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify language on 'serious harm' and 'serious disruption'
		<p>Concerns about physical harm and intimidation point to the importance of ensuring the safety of people in and around protests, including politicians and their family members when in their homes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better coordination by local police to protect MPs' homes • Review protest policing guidance to ensure police understand the law • Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering • Integrate community mediators into the management of protests • Build evidence base on police de-escalation training

INTRODUCTION

WE ARE LIVING IN A TIME OF MASS PROTEST, WHICH MAY REFLECT OUR RECORD LOW TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

There have been certain periods in history where we have seen mass uprisings, revolutions, and protests around the world – we are living in one such period today when it comes to protests. The number of protest movements globally tripled between 2006 and 2020, according to a study of 2,809 protests across 101 countries.¹⁰

Over a similar period, the proportion of people in the UK who believe that democracy works poorly roughly doubled from 2004 to 2023.¹¹ Demos polling in May 2024 found that only 32% of people agree that the UK is a well-functioning democracy.¹² The crisis of trust is particularly worrying here – out of 30 countries surveyed by the OECD in 2024, we came second to last in terms of our levels of trust in our national government.¹³

The vast majority of people in our country don't feel heard by their political representatives – three-quarters of the public (76%) have little or no trust that politicians will make decisions in the best interests of people in the UK.¹⁴ It should be no surprise that when people feel the usual avenues of political representation aren't working, they look to other ways to express their opinions, such as protest.

BUT THERE IS SCEPTICISM FROM THE PUBLIC THAT PROTESTS CAN ACTUALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THIS CONTEXT

The lack of trust in politicians and democracy means there is a sense of pessimism that politicians will actually listen to protesters, with 73% of the public believing that protests rarely, if ever, make a difference.¹⁵ In this way, pessimism about politicians listening to ordinary people fuels pessimism about the possibility that protests can deliver real change.

In reality, many protests can and do make a difference. A significant proportion (42%) of the 2,809 global protests studied resulted in some demonstrable achievement.¹⁶ Historically, we can point to many successful protest movements in the UK – from protests that have led to legislative changes such as the 1963 Bristol Bus Boycott, which paved the way for the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts,¹⁷ to protests that have driven societal changes such as the annual LGBTQ+ Pride march which, since its origins in 1972, continues to increase visibility and awareness of this community.¹⁸ Protests have therefore been crucial for pushing forward socio-political change.

10 Ortiz, Burke, Berrada and Cortéz, 2022. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-88513-7#toc>

11 National Centre for Social Research, 2024. <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Damaged%20Politics.pdf>

12 Demos, 2024. <https://demos.co.uk/research/trustwatch-2024/>

13 OECD, 2024. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en

14 Demos, 2024. <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper/>

15 YouGov, 2023. <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/45232-majority-public-believe-protests-rarely-if-ever-ma>

16 Ortiz, Burke, Berrada and Cortéz, 2022. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-88513-7#toc>

17 Bristol Museums Collection. <https://collections.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/bristols-black-history/bristol-bus-boycott/>

18 House of Lords Library. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/pride-in-the-uk-50-years/>

A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY ALLOWS FOR THE RIGHT TO PROTEST, WHICH IS THREATENED BY RECENT LEGISLATION

In many ways, it is easier to protest now. We live in a globalised world where many of us carry around smartphones, which can tell us about anything from far-flung conflicts to protests happening on our doorsteps with one tap. Technology means it is easier than ever to find out about or organise a protest.

On the other hand, a large number of new restrictions have been imposed on peaceful and non-violent protests in a very short space of time. Over the past few years, policy makers have introduced or planned to introduce new conditions and restrictions in response to protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and Just Stop Oil.^{19,20} This has led to a balance of power that has swung too far away from the fundamental right to peaceful protest. Most recently, five Just Stop Oil activists were handed sentences of up to five years – the longest prison sentences for peaceful protest in British legal history – for planning to block the M25 in breach of the Crime and Sentencing Act 1977 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (PCSC) 2022.²¹

Such harsh sentences for peaceful and non-violent protest tactics have received extensive criticism, including from the UN last year.²² We are now at a point where violent tactics, such as those seen in recent far-right riots, are receiving shorter sentences than not only non-violent tactics, but simply ‘conspiring’ to use non-violent tactics.

On the 30th July 2024, far-right riots were sparked in Southport initially in response to a shocking attack on a children’s workshop, and misinformation surrounding the identity of the attacker.²³ These riots resulted in violent disorder mostly targeted at immigrant and Muslim communities, including attacking mosques and setting fire to hotels where asylum seekers are housed. Police officers were attacked, property damaged, and businesses looted. Many people of colour feared leaving their homes.²⁴ And yet the average sentence for those convicted so far from the riots is two years,²⁵ compared to the four to five year sentences for the five Just Stop Oil activists who planned the peaceful protest to block the M25.²⁶

The first of two key recent pieces of legislation that has led to harsher sentencing for peaceful and non-violent protest was the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (PCSC) of 2022.²⁷ This introduced new police powers to intervene in public processions and static demonstrations, including giving the police the power to intervene in instances where the noise generated by a protest may result in ‘serious disruption to the activities of an organisation which are carried on in the vicinity of the procession’.

Other aspects including lowering the level of knowledge needed for the offence of breaching protest conditions, moving from needing to ‘know’ that the conditions had been imposed, to ‘knowing or ought to have known’ about them, and creating a broad, new offence of ‘intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance’, defined as creating a risk of or causing serious harm or preventing the public from exercising their rights.

The second of the two key recent pieces of legislation was the Public Order Act (POA) of 2023, which built upon the PCSC Act by reintroducing aspects that had been defeated in the House of Lords.²⁸ This included the criminalisation of a number of peaceful and historically significant protest

19 HMICFRS, 2021. <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/uploads/getting-the-balance-right-an-inspection-of-how-effectively-the-police-deal-with-protests.pdf>

20 Home Affairs Committee, 2024. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43477/documents/218954/default/>

21 Scottish Legal News, 2024. <https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/england-record-breaking-sentences-for-just-stop-oil-activists>

22 BBC, 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn0p6ll3jjgo>

23 NY Times, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/08/world/europe/uk-riots-southport-timeline.html>

24 Washington Post, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/08/12/uk-riots-racism-muslims/>

25 BBC, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm23y7l01v8o>

26 Scottish Legal News, 2024. <https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/england-record-breaking-sentences-for-just-stop-oil-activists>

27 Home Office, 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill>

28 Home Office, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-order-bill-overarching-documents/public-order-bill-factsheet>

tactics such as ‘locking on’ (e.g. glueing or chaining yourself to something) and ‘being equipped to lock on’, as well as an expansion of police powers including the expansion of both suspicion-based and suspicionless stop and searches within protest contexts.

The POA also provided a new definition for serious disruption. This includes situations where an individual or an organisation are a) prevented or hindered by physical obstruction from conducting their day-to-day activities or construction and related activities, b) prevented or delayed by more than a minor degree from making or receiving a ‘time sensitive product’, and c) prevented or disrupted by more than a minor degree from accessing essential goods or services. This definition is subject to an ongoing legal case brought by Liberty, which resulted in a High Court ruling that the Government acted unlawfully in changing this definition, but is currently under appeal.²⁹

THE PUBLIC AGREES THAT THE RIGHT TO PROTEST IS CRUCIAL IN A DEMOCRACY

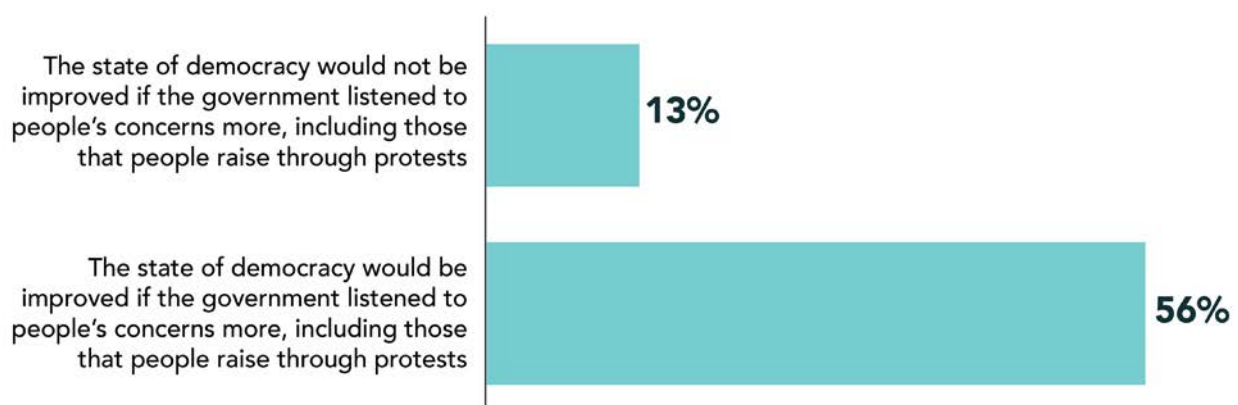
We see the right to protest as a key part of a well-functioning democracy, particularly a collaborative democracy that we at Demos are on a mission to build: one that enables politicians, policy-makers, experts and the public to work in partnership to understand and tackle the massive challenges facing our country.³⁰ Protest is a legitimate part of the democratic ecosystem.

The public tend to agree – in new polling for this research, when asked to indicate their preference between two opposing statements, 56% agree more that ‘the state of our democracy would be improved if the Government listened to people’s concerns more, including those that people raise through protest’ than that it wouldn’t be improved, with only 13% agreeing more with the latter.³¹

FIGURE 1

The majority of the public feel that democracy would be improved if the government listened to concerns raised through protests more

Proportion of respondents in our final poll saying that each statement comes closer to their view than the other when presented with two opposing statements on the state of democracy.



In fact, protests themselves are often used to call for democratic improvements. A study of global protest movements, as categorised by the study author, found that the most common demand was for ‘real democracy’, representing 28% of the protests studied.³²

29 BBC, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-69043611>

30 As part of this mission, our Citizens’ White Paper, published in July 2024, sets out why, when and how the government could embed citizen involvement in national policy making. Link here: <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper/>

31 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

32 Ortiz, Burke, Berrada and Cortéz, 2022. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-88513-7#toc>

HOWEVER, A SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC OPINION HAS OFTEN BEEN USED TO JUSTIFY RECENT RESTRICTIONS ON PROTEST

One of the key justifications of recent protest legislation has been protecting other members of the public from disruption caused by protests, on the assumption of the appeal of this stance to voters. For example, then-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said of the Public Order Bill in 2023: 'We cannot have protests conducted by a small minority disrupting the lives of the ordinary public. It's not acceptable and we're going to bring it to an end.'³³

There is evidence that the majority of the public are concerned about disruption. Our polling for this research found that 67% of the public agreed that restrictions should be put on protests when they cause serious disruption to people's everyday lives, with a smaller proportion (40%) agreeing that protesters should be put in prison if they continuously engage in disruptive protest.³⁴

At the same time, there is strong support for the right to protest from the public, with our polling showing that a far larger proportion (83%) agrees that everyone should be able to protest on issues they care about. Additionally, over three-quarters (77%) of the public believe that 'people should be able to speak up on important issues without facing arrest', with only 6% disagreeing with this statement.³⁵

Evidently, it is not as simple as saying that the public dislike disruptive protests and have no concerns about restrictions placed on them. There is strong support for the right to protest without facing arrest alongside concerns about disruption. However, far more support restrictions on protests that are perceived to cause disruption than putting protesters who continuously engage in such protests in prison. There are clearly tensions and nuances within the public's views on this issue, which we seek to explore in this research.

It is also simplistic to focus only on contemporary public opinion on protest. Public opinion on a protest and its cause can shift over time, especially if the protest leads to social change. For example, in 1964, less than a year after Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech, almost three-quarters (74%) of Americans felt that mass demonstrations would hurt the cause for racial equality.³⁶

In hindsight, it is clear that these mass demonstrations were crucial in achieving equal rights for Black Americans, and public opinion is now strongly on the side of civil rights activists. In 2023, 81% of the American public had a favourable opinion of Martin Luther King, compared to only 44% in 1964.³⁷ Public opinion on protests is not fixed, therefore, and so to take a more long-term view on protest, we need a more in-depth, considered approach to understand how the public make judgements on this issue, beyond their current knee-jerk reactions.

WE LOOKED TO GET A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND HOW VIEWS CHANGE THROUGH DELIBERATION WITH PEERS IN OUR PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE

To go beyond the headlines on public perceptions of protest, we decided to hold the first piece of deliberative research on the topic of protest in the UK, as far as we are aware at the time of writing. This was our People's Town Square.

Deliberative research methods 'aim to involve the public in decision-making in a meaningful way',³⁸

33 Prime Minister's Office, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-takes-action-to-stop-disruptive-protests>

34 Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

35 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

36 Gallup Vault, 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/vault/246167/protests-seen-harming-civil-rights-movement-60s.aspx>

37 Pew Research Centre, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/10/how-public-attitudes-toward-martin-luther-king-jr-have-changed-since-the-1960s/>

38 Scottish Government Social Research Group, 2009. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2009/12/social-research-methods-guides/documents/deliberative-methods/deliberative-methods/govscot%3Adocument/Deliberative%2BMethods.pdf>

which we believe is crucial for the collaborative democracy that we at Demos are on a mission to build. Instead of simply consulting the public to understand their top of mind views on a topic, as methods such as polling and focus groups tend to do, deliberative methods inform participants about the topic, give them time and space to consider this information and various trade offs, and facilitate discussion between participants with different views and experiences to reach agreement on ways forward.

The result is an understanding of public *judgement*, which enables people to think beyond their own interests and about the common good, and may involve a shift in views over the course of the process in response to exposure to new information and perspectives, rather than an understanding of top of mind public *opinion* in the moment.³⁹

This is particularly important when it comes to contentious topics such as protest, where people tend to have strong views on different sides of the debate. Polarisation on this topic is likely being exacerbated by social media, which almost half of the public (47%) have used to access content on protest in the past year.⁴⁰ Social media, while opening people up to a range of views from across the world, has also been criticised for creating echo chambers, where people end up more likely to hear news that matches their views.⁴¹ This then shapes public perceptions on protest, making the debate even more polarised, and more difficult for people to think beyond their own interests.

Deliberative methods can be helpful here. Evidence suggests that deliberation is better at finding consensus or areas of agreement on controversial political issues than debate,⁴² which can help policy makers find a way forward on a difficult issue that brings a larger proportion of the public along with them.

For these reasons, we decided to use a deliberative method to examine the issue of protest. We also took a mixed methods approach, conducting two nationally representative polls over the course of the research to ensure that our findings were representative of the wider public beyond the participants in the People's Town Square. One of the challenges with deliberative methods is that while participants go through a process that results in public judgement rather than opinion, the broader public do not. It was therefore important to test that the outputs of the process, developed by participants, have resonance beyond it.

A short methodological overview is provided after a note on the context of the report, with full methodological details to be found in the appendix.

A NOTE ON THE CONTEXT OF THIS REPORT

Two key events inform the context of this research. One is the General Election, which was called by Rishi Sunak on the 22nd May. The deliberative sessions (the People's Town Square) were held in early June during the campaigning period, while the initial poll was conducted before the election was called, and the final poll after the election.

The other is the far-right riots that spread across the country from the 30th July to the 5th August initially triggered by a stabbing attack in Southport. Our engagement with participants and polling with the public had ended by this point, and therefore our findings do not reference the riots.

We see protests as distinct from riots, although protests may descend into riots. Under the Public Order Act 1986, riots involve 'unlawful violence for a common purpose' which would cause someone present to 'fear for his personal safety', and could lead to prison sentences of up to ten years.⁴³ In contrast, the right to protest peacefully is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

39 Demos, 2024. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Citizens-White-Paper-July-2024_final.pdf

40 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

41 Mozilla, 2021. https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Mozilla_YouTube_Regrets_Report.pdf

42 McAvoy and McAvoy, 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1942706>

43 Public Order Act 1986. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64>

In the Prime Minister's words, "Let's be very clear about this. It's not protest. It's not legitimate. It's crime and violent disorder."⁴⁴ The vast majority of the public agree – three-quarters (74%) described the events 'mostly as riots' compared to only 14% describing them 'mostly as protests' in recent polling by More in Common.⁴⁵ Our view is consistent with this: the 2024 summer riots were acts of racist, anti-immigrant and Islamophobic violence, and not legitimate protest.

While the riots neither feature in our research, nor are they within the scope of this research, they have undoubtedly shaped the context in which the report has been written, and in which it will be received.

METHODOLOGY

Initial poll

We started the research with a poll conducted from 8th-9th April 2024 with a nationally representative sample of 2,079 UK respondents. This poll allowed us to benchmark public views and experiences on protest and to inform the design of the deliberative process.

Deliberative process: The People's Town Square

To ensure that our sample of 24 participants in our People's Town Square was representative, we recruited a representative mix in terms of demographics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, a range of locations across England), as well as experience of protest and views on protests. We used findings from our initial poll to design a representative sample in terms of the latter two criteria.

We held four online sessions in June 2024 with our representative sample of 24 participants: an opening session, a learning session, a principles session, and a policies session. Over the course of these sessions, we provided participants with balanced information on the topic of protests,⁴⁶ the space and time to deliberate on that information in a group with people who have different views and experiences, and the opportunity to work together to find agreement and develop outputs that can inform thinking on this area. The main output in this process was a set of principles that should inform thinking about the role of protest in society.

We followed up with participants a month after the sessions with a short survey to understand their reflections on the process, including whether their views had changed over the course of it.

Final poll

Finally, we conducted a poll from 22nd-23rd July 2024 with a nationally representative sample of 2,115 UK respondents. This poll allowed us to test the representativeness of our findings from the deliberative process within the general public.

REPORT OVERVIEW

The first section of this report will examine participants' initial starting points on protest, supported by polling of the wider public. The second section will then explore how participant views changed over the course of the deliberative process, as well as setting out a 'mental model'⁴⁷ that provides new insight into how the public makes judgements on this issue. The third section will explore where participants got to by the end of the deliberative process by setting out the People's Town Square principles on protest, and examine the extent to which these resonate with the broader public. The final section will explore our recommendations based on our findings for policy makers, police, and civil society.

44 Prime Minister's Office, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-launches-new-clamp-down-on-criminal-and-violent-disorder>

45 More in Common, 2024. <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/what-do-britons-really-think-about-the-riots/>

46 See appendix for more detail on the information provided and how we ensured a balance of information.

47 As will be explored, mental models seek to represent how people think about a topic: how they reason, feel, make sense of it, and make decisions about it.

SECTION 1

INITIAL PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PROTEST

In this section, we will explore what we heard from our participants in our opening session, before they had been through the deliberative process, as well as our polling data that will help us quantify where the broader public is starting from on this issue.

ALMOST ALL PARTICIPANTS STARTED THE PROCESS VALUING PROTEST AS A DEMOCRATIC FREEDOM, BUT THERE WAS SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

There was a sense, from the very start of the process, that the right to protest and freedom to express your opinion in a democracy is important, despite varying opinions on protest causes and tactics. In our initial poll, we found overwhelming agreement with the right to protest in principle, with 83% of respondents agreeing with the statement that 'everyone should be able to protest on issues they care about.'⁴⁸

In this poll, when we asked what three words came to mind when thinking about protest, words relating to disruption came out strongest, as will be explored below. On the other hand, the most common positive words associated with protest were 'freedom', 'peaceful', and 'rights' in both our poll⁴⁹ and our People's Town Square opening session. Participants both with and without personal experience of protest viewed protests as a freedom people should have to express their opinions.

⁴⁸ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

⁴⁹ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

FIGURE 2

The public associate the words 'disruptive', 'annoying', and 'freedom' most with protest
A word cloud from our initial poll depicting the most common words given in response to the question 'what three words do you associate with public protests?'



"[The three words I chose were] freedom, opinion and expression, and these were the first three words to come to my mind. Mostly because you have the freedom to protest, you can express an opinion and [expressing] every opinion is an individual [right]."

Participant in opening session

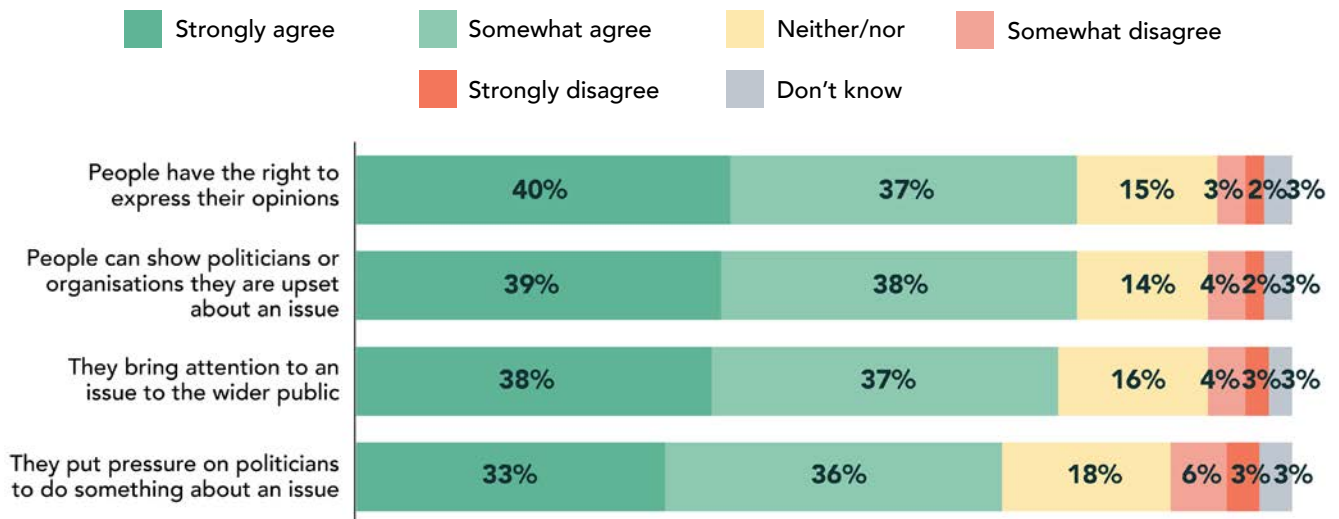
In our initial poll, of the reasons we provided why protests might be important, the right to express your opinion was also seen as the most important, with 89% of the public agreeing with this statement, while putting pressure on politicians to do something about an issue was seen as slightly less important (although still a very high level of agreement at 82%).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

FIGURE 3

The ability for people to express their opinions and show they are upset about an issue are seen as the key value of protest

Proportion of respondents in our initial poll agreeing with each potential reason that protests may be important. We provided a list of statements beginning with 'Protests are important because...' and assessed levels of agreement.



This reflects what we heard from participants – that expressing your opinion is the main value of protest, as there is scepticism that protests can achieve social change. This scepticism tended to be more about the perception that politicians won't listen, with a majority (60%) agreeing that 'people in power rarely ever listen to protests',⁵¹ than the fault of the protesters.

"No attention is actually paid to people walking in marches. It really is possibly the lamest way you're kind of making a political point."

Participant in opening session

However, participants with personal experience of protest were often more optimistic about this than others, and some expressed different perspectives on what success could look like – that it doesn't have to mean legislative change, for example, but can be about raising awareness of an issue, changing the public conversation or bringing the community together. These participants often expressed a more diverse set of reasons why they valued protests, relating it to their own experiences.

"You might not have changed how people feel about [new migrants through the anti-racist protest], but [the migrant] felt more accepted by the whole community coming out and saying, 'no, we want you here, we support you'. So maybe [that's a] measurable way of achieving success... students and the foreigners feel welcome and part of the community."

Participant in opening session

⁵¹ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

DISRUPTION WAS A KEY CONCERN FOR MOST PARTICIPANTS AT THE START OF THE PROCESS

The public tend to think about disruption when they initially think about protest, as can be seen in the prominence of 'disruptive' and 'disruption' in the word cloud above. When speaking about disruption, participants were generally alluding to serious inconvenience rather than major disorder. The most common example participants referenced when speaking about disruption was climate action groups such as Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain relating to tactics like locking on and blocking traffic. To a lesser extent, weekly pro-Palestine protests in London were seen as disruptive due to their central location, as well as their frequency.

"The anti fossil fuel and oil [protests], where they glue their hands to the road and hold up all manner of transport. Could be ambulances trying to get people to hospitals, people going to work, people just going about their normal [day]. Yeah, fine, protest, but don't hold everybody else up because of it, because you're not building up any warmth towards you by doing that."

Participant in opening session

"I cannot go in my capital city because people are protesting, and they're causing violent protests, and streets are locked off and for hours on end we cannot use public transport, which threatens not only people who are visiting London, but as Londoners who've only got a weekend to actually enjoy it."

Participant in opening session

However, only 15% of the public have been personally inconvenienced by a protest in the past year.⁵² At the same time, almost nine in ten people (89%) have engaged with media content on the topic of protest in the past year, including almost half (47%) with social media specifically.⁵³

It was clear, therefore, that for many participants perceptions about disruption were based more on media portrayals or politicians' rhetoric on protests than their own experiences, and this came through particularly strongly for a vocal minority that will be explored below. Evidence suggests that the media focuses on protest tactics over their message,⁵⁴ which results in a skewed view of these protests that focuses on their impact (for example any inconvenience caused) over their cause.

"Whenever I see any protests on the TV, it always ends up in some sort of fighting or rioting, and it's all based around London as well. You don't seem to get the protests in other parts of the country, or it's not publicised like it is when it's in London, and then it's always negative. It's always fighting and rioting, and how many people have been arrested and that."

Participant in opening session

52 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

53 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

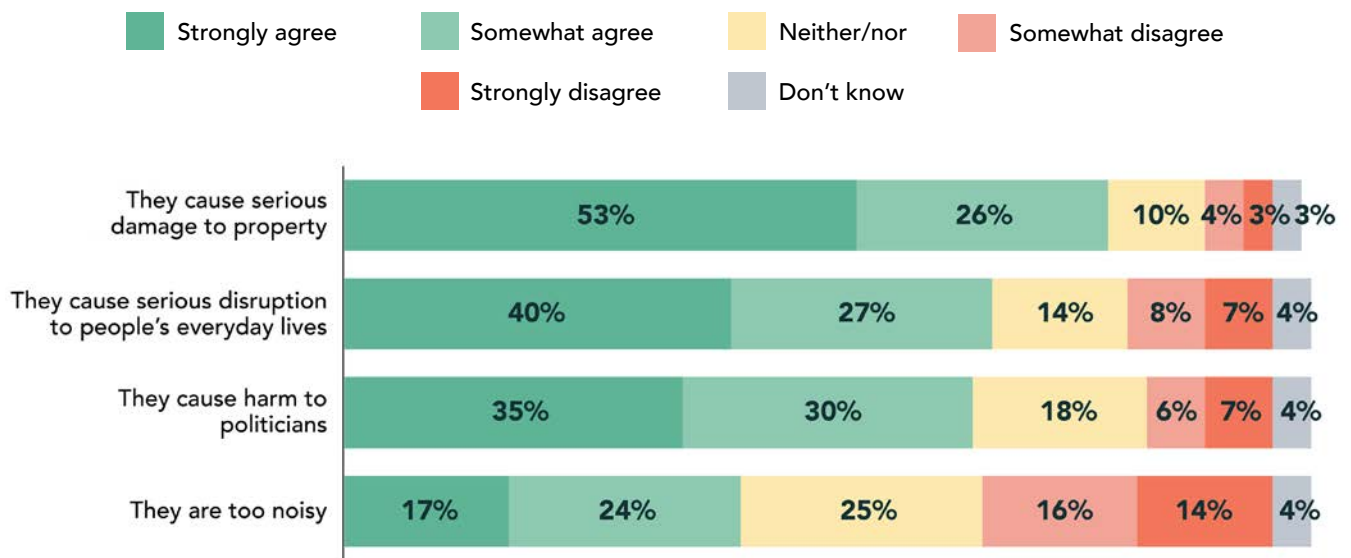
54 Gruber, 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/19401612221102058>

Concerns about disruption led the majority of the general public, and our participants at the start of the process, to favour restrictions on tactics they perceived as disruptive. In our poll, we listed reasons why restrictions might be placed on protests. Causing serious disruption to everyday people’s lives was the second most popular reason to place restrictions on protests, with 67% agreeing with this. A significant minority went even further, with 40% believing that protesters should be put in prison if they continuously engage in disruptive protest.⁵⁵

FIGURE 4

The majority of the public believe protests should be restricted when they cause serious damage to property, serious disruption, or harm to politicians

Proportion of respondents in our initial poll agreeing with each potential scenario where protests may be restricted. We provided a list of statements beginning with ‘Restrictions should be put on protests when...’ and assessed levels of agreement.



We also tested views on a range of specific protest tactics in our initial poll, and found that tactics that are seen as more disruptive (such as blocking traffic and glueing or chaining people to something i.e. locking on) tend to be viewed more negatively, with the public more likely to feel they hinder a protest’s cause. For example, 74% feel that blocking traffic hinders a protest’s cause and 71% for locking on, compared to the 66% who feel that marches or walks help a protest’s cause.⁵⁶

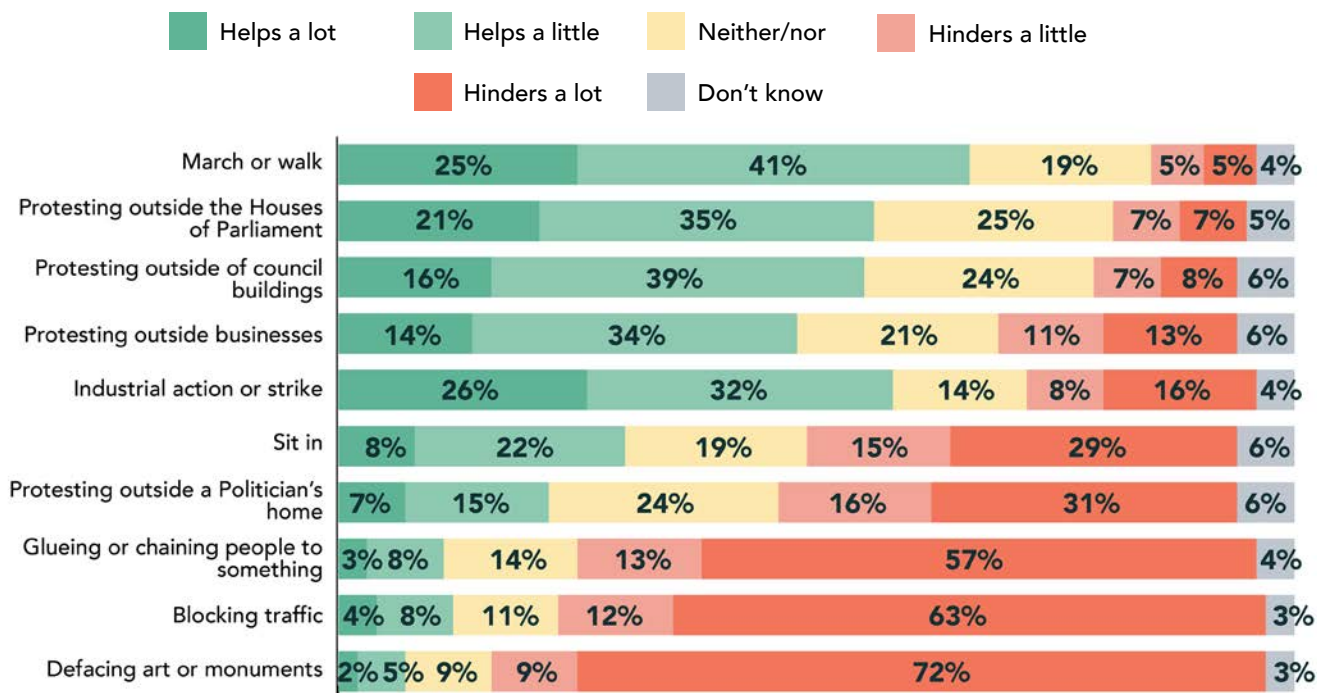
⁵⁵ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

⁵⁶ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

FIGURE 5

The public feel more strongly about tactics that are felt to hinder a protest’s cause, than those felt to help it

Proportion of respondents in our initial poll saying whether each tactic helps or hinders a protest’s cause.



However, even at the start of the sessions, a minority of participants defended the need for disruptive protest to attract attention and raise awareness of important issues in the opening session. This was also reflected in our poll, with 30% of the public agreeing more with the statement that 'disruptive tactics can sometimes be justified when protesters feel the need to urgently raise awareness of an issue' compared to 47% agreeing more that 'disruptive protest tactics can never be justified, even if protesters feel the need to urgently raise awareness of an issue'.⁵⁷

FIGURE 6

The public are reasonably divided when it comes to whether disruptive tactics can be justified by the urgency of an issue

Proportion of respondents in our final poll saying that each statement comes closer to their view than the other when presented with two opposing statements on the use of disruptive tactics.



57 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology

"If they're not disruptive, they're not going to make an impact. And if they don't make an impact, there's no change. So I think it's got to disrupt and it's got to inconvenience people in some way, shape or form."

Participant in the opening session

Experience of protest impacted views of tactics perceived to be disruptive, with those agreeing more with the statement that disruptive tactics can sometimes be justified rising to 44% of those who have protested, and only 21% of those who haven't. We also saw this in our People's Town Square, with participants who frequently protested much more likely to defend tactics that may cause serious inconvenience. In part, this was due to a belief that protests can be successful through using these tactics, compared to a general scepticism from others on this.

THE TACTIC THAT GENERATED THE STRONGEST NEGATIVE REACTION FOR MANY WAS VANDALISING STATUES

In our initial poll, 'defacing art or monuments' was the most likely tactic to be seen to hinder a protest's cause, with 81% of the public saying this, including 72% who believe this tactic hinders the cause 'a lot'.⁵⁸ Similarly, of the potential reasons that restrictions should be put on protests, the most popular reason by far, with 80% of the public agreeing, was when protests cause serious damage to property.

The majority of participants struggled to understand why you would vandalise a statue or a monument as part of a protest, and therefore did not see it as a legitimate protest tactic. Many were also surprised to hear in the learning session that this tactic is not illegal unless it causes criminal damage (with several strongly believing it should be illegal regardless of whether the damage caused is permanent or not).

"I think it's terrible if everybody wants to do anything to a statue, even if [they just] spray foam. I think that's criminal damage, although Daniella [the legal expert] said it could be wiped off and the police would [consider it] trivial. I think that's terrible, terribly wrong."

Participant in learning session

STARTING KNOWLEDGE ON THE PROTEST LANDSCAPE WAS LOW, LEADING TO MIXED PERCEPTIONS ON LEVELS OF RESTRICTIVENESS

Almost all participants began the process with little knowledge of protest legislation or on the history of protests. We measured this at the start of our learning session using an interactive online tool. We asked participants to rate their initial knowledge on different topics relating to protest from a scale of 1 (very weak knowledge) to 5 (very strong knowledge), allowing the tool to calculate an average rating. The ratings for both the history of protests and protest legislation were fairly low – at 2.3/5 and 2.1/5, respectively.

⁵⁸ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

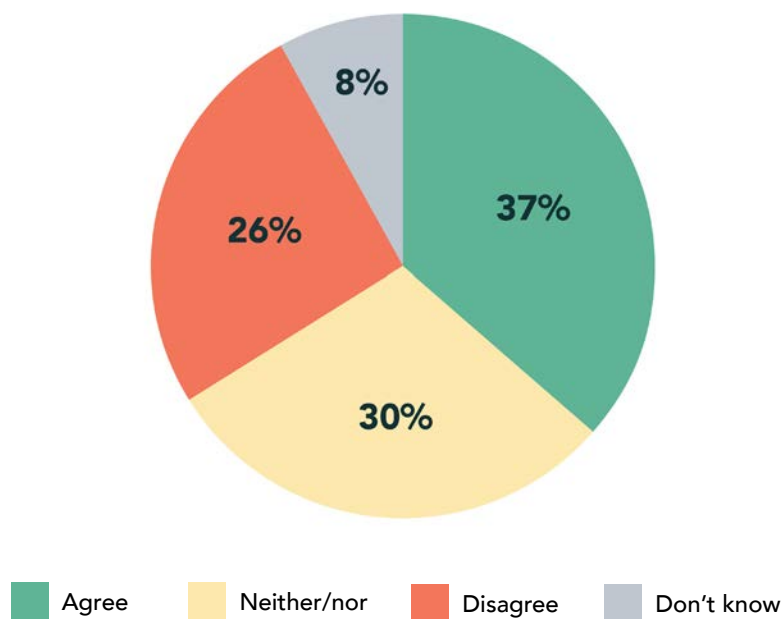
In contrast, participants displayed a reasonably high awareness of the protests that have been happening over the past few years. This was reflected in the self-reported levels of knowledge on different opinions on protest (3/5) and different protest tactics (2.9/5) in the same poll. In their initial associations, shared in the opening session, participants commonly referenced protests such as Just Stop Oil, pro-Palestine, Black Lives Matter and strikes. We found that perceptions of these protests had a formative influence on participants' thoughts and feelings on this topic, although this was more often than not through media portrayals and politicians' rhetoric rather than personal experience of these protests.

In the context of low awareness of protest legislation, the public are split on how restrictive the protest landscape is. When asked whether 'it should be easier to protest than it is now', 37% agreed while 26% disagreed.⁵⁹ High levels of the public saying 'neither agree nor disagree' (30%), in addition to the 8% saying they don't know, suggests that a significant proportion of the public have not made their minds up on this. This was reflected in the opening session, with the majority of participants seeming unsure on the level of restrictions, while others were divided between those who felt that there were insufficient restrictions, and those who felt that restrictions were too harsh or police too heavy-handed, sometimes informed by personal experience.

FIGURE 7

Views are mixed on whether 'it should be easier to protest than it is now'

Level of agreement from respondents with the statement that 'it should be easier to protest than it is now'.



We found strong demographic dividing lines in the polling data on this question by age, sexuality, ethnicity and disability. Younger, LGBT+, disabled, and ethnic minority respondents were more likely to agree that 'it should be easier to protest than it is now' – the latter three also tended to be more likely to have protested themselves. We saw this in our People's Town Square too, with some of our participants from these groups being the most likely to strongly and emotively defend the right to protest and oppose restrictions. It was clear that their own experiences of protests played a part in shaping their views on protests, in contrast to the vocal minority that will be examined below.

⁵⁹ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

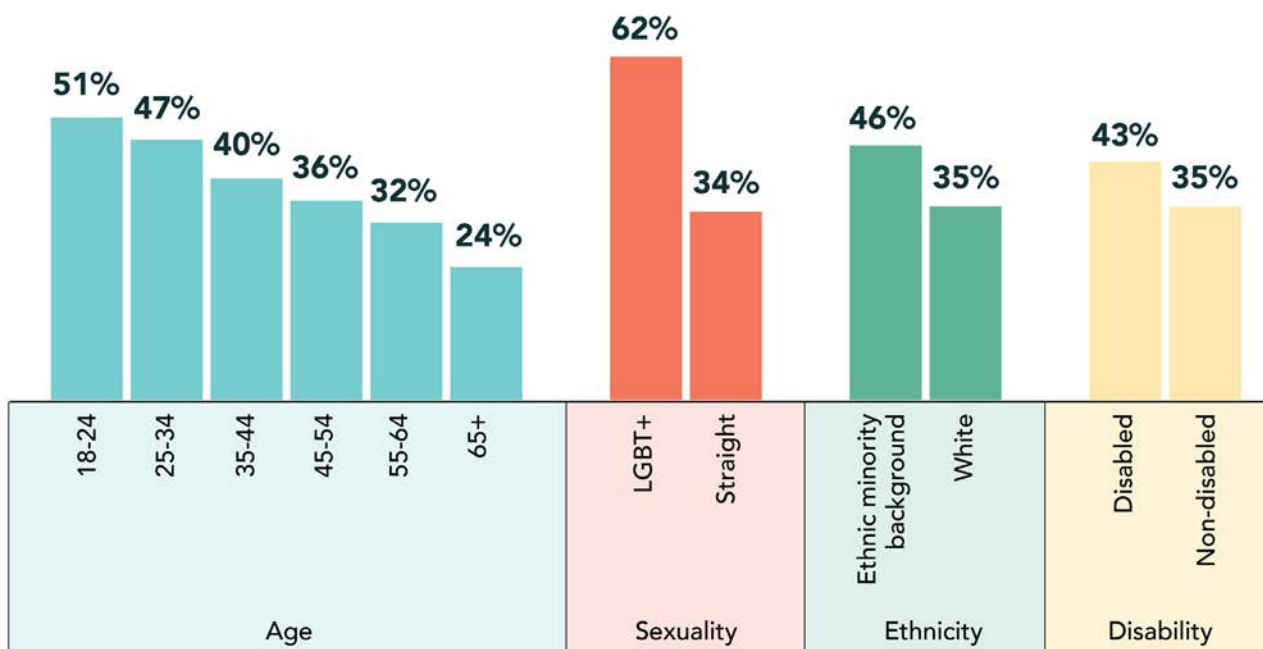
"It's like we're being hit everywhere, disabled people, or being totally ignored and things like that. I'm losing my rights bit by bit, quite a lot, since the last 14 years or something. So I think that we've got no choice but to protest, to be quite honest. Because if we can't do that, there'll be no way to demand fairness in the country anymore. And I think that's dangerous."

Participant in opening session

FIGURE 8

People who are younger and from marginalised groups are more likely to agree that 'it should be easier to protest than it is now'

Proportion of respondents in our initial poll saying 'it should be easier to protest than it is now' by demographic group.



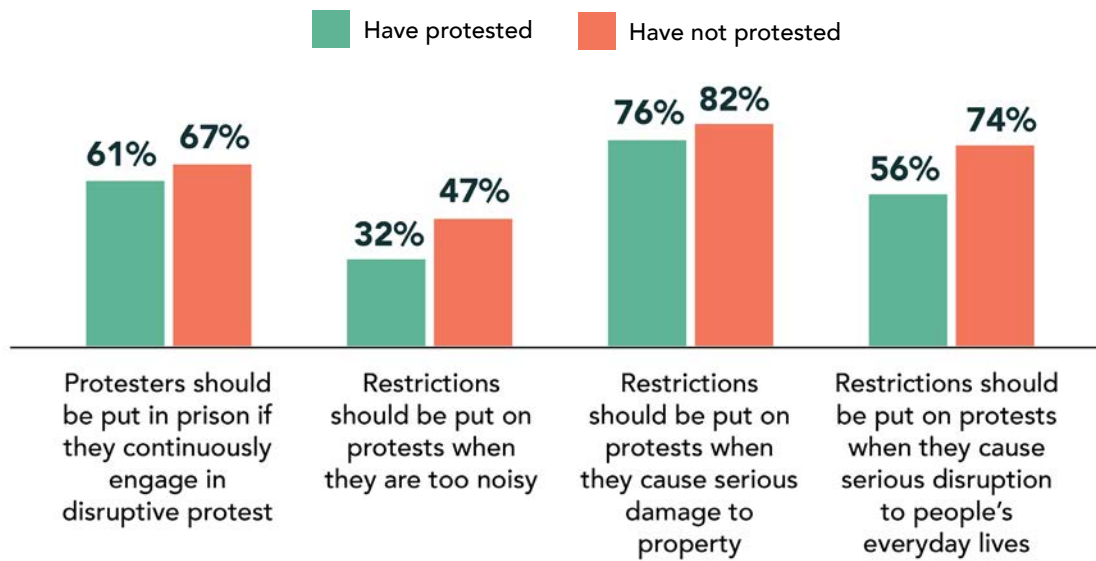
A VOCAL MINORITY THAT HADN'T PROTESTED BEFORE BEGAN AS THE MOST CRITICAL OF PROTEST, FRAMING THEIR VIEWS IN EMOTIVE LANGUAGE

There was a vocal minority of participants who had not taken part in protests, whose perceptions appeared to be shaped by media portrayals or politicians' rhetoric on these protests, rather than their own experiences. They tended to be the most critical of protests, due to perceptions of both disruption and danger at protests. In our poll, we found that respondents who had not taken part in a protest consistently felt more negatively about protests, and more supportive of restrictions.

FIGURE 9

People who haven't protested before are more likely to support restrictions on protests

Proportion of respondents (comparing those who have vs haven't protested) in our initial poll saying that they agree with each statement.



This vocal minority tended to perceive protests as volatile and even frequently violent with few consequences, using emotive language such as 'mob' and 'riot' in their descriptions of protests. These participants felt that not enough arrests are happening at protests, suggesting that they feel that a lot of criminal and violent behaviour, with vandalism used as one example, happens at protests unchallenged. This led these participants to see protest environments as generally unsafe, and therefore felt they or people they knew were too afraid to take part. For example, some said they felt unsafe going into central London with the large protests that are happening.

"As I've said before, the way they're policed – there's no need to allow people to sit in front of a car and block an ambulance getting through with a sick child in the back that needs to desperately get to hospital. There's no need to allow tens of thousands of people to walk, to surrender the streets to a mob walking through the streets of London every Saturday."

Participant in opening session

"This is my country, and I'd like to go to London sometimes. But when I've seen the news with some of these marches and things, and when they've got out of hand, you know, myself and people I've spoken to, they wouldn't want to come to London just because they wouldn't feel safe."

Participant in opening session

Negative perceptions based on fear were more powerful than positive perceptions. For example, while participants who frequently protested sometimes used emotive language to describe their experiences of protests or why they see protests as important, this was less common than the emotive language used by participants in this vocal minority to describe protests (usually not based on personal experience of them).

We can see this in the polling data too. Examining the chart showing views on different tactics (see figure 5), we can see that the public feel far more strongly about tactics that are felt to hinder a protest's cause, than those that are felt to help a protest's cause. For example, seven in ten (72%) think defacing or monuments hinders a protest's cause 'a lot', similarly for 63% of the public on blocking traffic and 57% on locking on.⁶⁰ In contrast, only small minorities of the public think that any tactic helps a protest's cause 'a lot', with the highest being 26% for industrial action (compared to 32% saying this helps 'a little'), 25% for a march or walk (compared to 41% saying this helps 'a little'), and 21% for protesting outside the Houses of Parliament (compared to 35% saying this helps 'a little').

These participants therefore started the process feeling that current restrictions on protest were not sufficient, given the perceived high levels of criminal behaviour, and that there should be greater restrictions, and greater enforcement of these by police.

"I think the punishment for when they are doing violence or damage is not high enough, because people still continue, because there's not a correct, kind of a severe punishment for it."

Participant in opening session

⁶⁰ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

SECTION 2

THE PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE AND MOVING FROM PERCEPTION TO INFORMED JUDGEMENT

Having set out the starting points on protest of People's Town Square participants in the previous section, this section will examine how and why views changed over the course of the deliberative process, which was designed to understand the difference between participants' initial perceptions and subsequent informed judgement. We will then describe how people form their views on this topic more broadly, through setting out a 'mental model'⁶¹ of protest.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE PROCESS, THE PERCEIVED NEED TO PROTECT THE RIGHT TO PROTEST INCREASED, WHILE CONCERNS ABOUT DISRUPTION DECREASED

The most significant shift in views observed over the course of the People's Town Square was that participants began to feel more strongly that the right to protest needs to be protected, whereas concerns about the disruption that protests may cause became less prominent.

Increase in the perceived need to protect the right to protest

While participants began the People's Town Square valuing the right to protest, its perceived importance grew over the course of the process. Over half (57%) of participants responding to the follow-up survey told us they became more supportive of the importance of the right to protest in our society over the course of the People's Town Square.⁶²

⁶¹ As will be explored, mental models seek to represent how people think about a topic: how they reason, feel, make sense of it, and make decisions about it.

⁶² Almost all of the other half of participants responding to the follow-up survey became neither more nor less supportive of the importance of this right, with only 10% of participants saying they became slightly less supportive. See the appendix for more detail on the follow-up survey methodology.

A key reason for this shift is that the perceived need to protect the right to protest within a democratic context became more prominent. Although participants did begin the process valuing the right to protest, this could feel quite abstract. However, through learning about and discussing protest legislation, many began to see the legislative landscape as more restrictive than they had previously thought (given low starting knowledge on this). This prompted participants to see this right as something that needs to be protected, and therefore of higher importance than when they started the process.

"If the demonstrations were banned, we wouldn't be able to possibly meet with like minded people, right? And then, how will we be heard? What other options would we have to be heard?"

Participant in principles session

Decrease in the prominence of concerns about disruption

We have seen that disruption was a key initial concern for participants when thinking about protest, and it remained an important concern throughout the People's Town Square, as it continued to feature in discussions, particularly around whether to place restrictions on controversial tactics such as locking on and blocking traffic. However, there was a shift towards concerns around disruption becoming less prominent and more nuanced, particularly on a broader, more abstract scale, which didn't always filter down to discussions around more tangible impacts of protests, as will be explored in the mental model.

We can see that disruption became a less prominent concern in the fact that in our final exercise of the sessions (held in the run up to the General Election 2024), when asked to write a postcard with one message to the next Prime Minister, almost no participants referenced concerns about disruption. Additionally, as part of the development of principles on the role of protest in the principles and policies sessions, we asked participants to rank the principles from most to least important. While concerns about disruption did feature in the top six principles, which will be set out in the subsequent section, other principles ranked higher.

However, not all participants experienced this shift in prominence, or experienced it in the same way. One set of participants remained just as concerned about tactics perceived as disruptive over the course of the process and in favour of strong restrictions on them. Others became more concerned about the impacts of these tactics on ordinary people's lives, which led them to emphasise the need to balance the rights of protesters and the public, although not necessarily in favour of strong restrictions. Still others became more understanding about why these tactics may be used when a cause feels important or urgent enough, and were therefore concerned about creating an overly restrictive atmosphere for protest.

"I'm torn. There may be a particular issue that warrants [blocking traffic]. I'm not quite sure what this issue could be [but] there's so many things [to consider]"

Participant in principles session

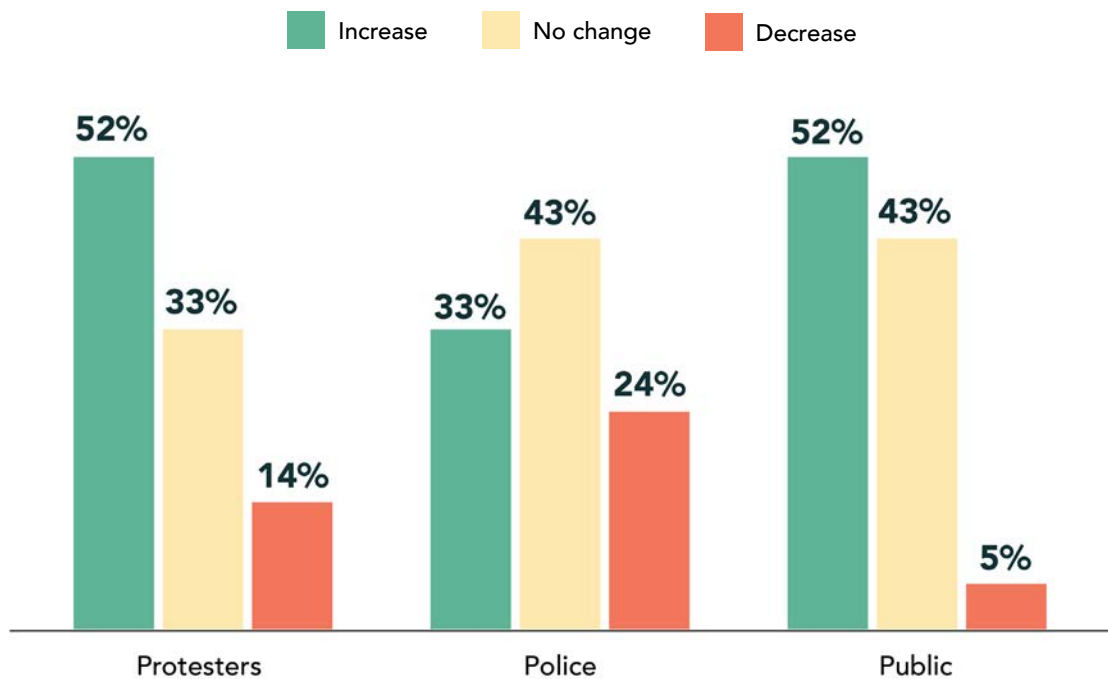
The principle most related to disruption, that the rights of protesters should be balanced with the rights of the general public, demonstrates the shift towards more nuanced views on disruption over the course of the process. We saw an increase in sympathy for different groups over the course of

the People’s Town Square, as evidenced by the results of our follow-up survey a month on from the sessions. Sympathy increased most for both protesters and the general public (with 52% of respondents becoming more sympathetic towards each), which points to the perceived importance of these groups, and therefore the need for rights to be balanced between them.

FIGURE 10

Sympathy towards both protesters and the public increased over the course of the People’s Town Square

Self-reported change in the level of sympathy participants felt for each group after the People’s Town Square, in response to our follow-up survey.



PARTICIPANTS BEGAN TO CONSIDER A BROADER RANGE OF PEOPLE WHEN THINKING ABOUT SAFETY

The changes in levels of sympathy for different groups is an important part of the way views shifted – people began to consider the views and experiences of a broader range of people, which often led to an increase in sympathy. This is reflected in the discussions around safety, which was an important concern for participants when thinking about protests, and became one of the top principles, as will be explored in the subsequent section. Over the course of the People’s Town Square, participants began to consider the safety of a wider group of people than at the start of the process.

As has been seen, a vocal minority of participants spoke about safety at the start of the process in the context of their fear that protests are dangerous. For them, protesters were the main threat to safety, especially bad faith actors who were there to cause trouble. This continued to be the main safety concern for these participants, with a few arguing that masks or face coverings should be banned at protests due to a presumption that these protesters are hiding something, and pose a threat to safety.

“During a protest, the police should be able to arrest anyone who’s wearing a mask or face coverings... I don’t see if you’re going to do a demonstration or protest, and you really think that you know you’re right, and this is why you’re behind it, why on earth you [would want to] cover your face? For me, that’s if you’re doing something wrong or you’re being nasty or being an agitator.”

Participant in principles session

However, as the process went on, other participants increasingly began to raise concerns about actors beyond protesters as a threat to safety. A significant minority shared concerns that police may pose a threat to safety to the general public, and particularly to the safety of marginalised groups, through abusing their power. For this reason, we found that 24% of participants responding to the follow-up survey said their sympathy for police decreased over the course of the process.⁶³

“I do agree that these [police] powers are dangerous to some extent, because they do undermine the right to protest, and I think it can lead to a lot of racial discrimination, and I think again, to kind of link it back to our principles, we need clearer, fairer laws that protect both public safety and individual rights.”

Participant in policies session

Therefore, as well as broadening the conception of who might be a threat to safety at a protest, the conception of whose safety needs to be protected also broadened – especially from those negatively impacted by protest to protesters, but also the police too. For this reason, the principle ended up including the safety of people ‘whether [they are] protesting or not’.

WE SEE THESE CHANGES IN VIEWS AS A SHIFT FROM AN INDIVIDUAL TO A SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVE ON PROTESTS

Many participants entered the People’s Town Square thinking about the impact that protests have from an individualistic standpoint. This can be seen in concerns about disruption in particular, with participants often emphasising the perceived inconvenience protests cause to individuals trying to go about their daily lives. In contrast, the desire to protect the right to protest was a societal one. Participants did not just want to protect this right for certain individuals, but for broader society to ensure that anyone can express their opinions peacefully and non-violently. The shift from an individual to a societal perspective can also be seen in the broadening of the conception of safety at protests, as previously explored.

There appeared to be two key reasons why thinking about protests shifted from an individual perspective to a societal one over the course of the process. One is that as part of the deliberative process, participants began to consider different viewpoints, learn new information, and make trade offs. The other is that the topic of protest, which few thought about often in their daily lives, began to feel more relatable and tangible. Each reason will be explored in more detail below.

⁶³ See appendix for more detail on follow-up survey methodology.

From the individual to the societal as a facet of the deliberative process

Despite the potential sensitivity and divisiveness of the topic of protest, 95% of our participants rated their experience of the People's Town Square positively, with the majority (66%) giving it the highest rating. That is not to say that everyone got along at all times, and certainly people disagreed with each other frequently. However, we made an effort to encourage participants to disagree agreeably, which they generally did. In fact, one of the most common aspects of the process that stood out (positively) to participants in the follow-up survey was the experience of speaking to people with different views and experiences from them, whom they otherwise wouldn't have spoken to on this topic.

"I think being exposed to others with views and experiences of protest did make me consider my own views and where they naturally sit."

Participant in follow-up survey

"I enjoyed the first session the most as it gave me real insight on different peoples opinions of protests. It was interesting to hear different points of view (even if it brought some tension and conflict)."

Participant in follow-up survey

Exposure to other viewpoints encouraged participants to consider these, and therefore think differently, as we saw with increases in sympathy for different groups over the course of the process (see figure 10). When participants with no personal experience of protest spoke to participants that had protested before, their understanding of why people protest tended to grow. In one instance, someone who was generally an avid supporter of protest spoke about their experiences in a group setting. Two participants that had not protested before referenced this as they shifted their thinking from an individual to a societal perspective. One participant realised they were only considering the inconvenience a protest may cause without also thinking about the cause it may have been pursuing.

Participant A: "[The three words I associate with protest are] march, noise and togetherness. I was at a protest last year in Lincoln where we marched down the high street. Lincoln's a very small place, so it tends to start at the top of the high street and finish at the bottom of the high street. So not massively imaginative. I haven't been on tons of protests, probably my fifth or sixth, and it was just a really good one, very noisy. We had lots of drummers, lots of musicians, lots of singing, and, yeah, just the sense of togetherness, because we have quite a few problems here in Lincoln."

Participant B: "I actually wrote disruptive, inconvenience and expression [for my three words]. I also haven't been on [a protest] before, but perhaps my opinion has changed a little listening to the comments, because I was probably selfishly thinking how it would affect me if it was stopping me from going about my business... because I've..."

...never actually taken part in any protest myself, personally. So I almost interpreted the question from that sort of outsider view."

Participant C: "My three words were rights, freedom and angry... But actually, you can have good coming out of a common anger, I guess, to [participant A's] point about the togetherness."

Discussion in the opening session

Another aspect of the deliberative process is learning new information, particularly given low initial awareness and knowledge on some aspects of protest. Participants' knowledge increased substantially after the learning session, with self-reported knowledge on laws increasing from an average rating of 2.1/5 to 3.7/5 (where 1 is very weak and 5 is very strong knowledge), and similarly on the history of protest from 2.3/5 to 3.7/5. In particular, participants were generally surprised to learn about recent legislation on protests. For example, we started this part of the session with an online quiz which listed a range of tactics and for each asked our 24 participants: 'Could you currently be arrested for doing the following as part of a protest?' In multiple instances, the majority of participants answered incorrectly, suggesting that this aspect of protest legislation was new to them.

FIGURE 11
RESULTS FROM A QUIZ DURING THE LEARNING SESSION

TACTIC	PERCEPTIONS OF WHETHER THIS IS AN ARRESTABLE OFFENCE	LEVEL OF ACCURACY
Vandalising a statue	21 said yes	All incorrect – it depends on whether criminal damage is caused
Carrying items that could be used to attach yourself to other people, objects, or buildings	5 yes, 3 maybe, 13 no	16 incorrect – you could be arrested for doing this as part of a protest
Setting up camp in a public place	12 yes, 3 maybe, 6 no	15 incorrect – you could not be arrested for this, although you cannot stay indefinitely
Being too noisy	7 yes, 5 maybe, 9 no	14 incorrect – you could be arrested for doing this as part of a protest

Participants were surprised to hear that some tactics were banned, while for other tactics there was more leeway than they had thought – for example, whether vandalising a statue or setting up camp as part of a protest is an offence depends on the circumstances. But what stood out most to many participants was a sense that there are more restrictions on protest than they had assumed, leading them to feel more concerned about protecting the right to protest for the good of society.

"It's just this overriding feeling that perhaps they're just chipping away little bit by little bit at our rights. You know, you can't make too much noise, you can't lock on."

Participant in policies session

A final aspect of the deliberative process that may have shifted views was that participants had to consider trade offs. For example, in a discussion in the principles session on tactics perceived as disruptive, while some participants raised concerns about the impact of blocking traffic on ordinary people, others, some of whom hadn't previously been supportive of these tactics, suggested that inconvenience should be contextualised in the context of pursuing the greater good. Similarly, in the follow-up survey, many participants expressed the sentiment that some inconvenience must be tolerated to protect protest, which had not been a popular sentiment at the start of the deliberative process.

"Even though protests can disrupt certain aspects of life, it's so important to keep those things in place because the government just wants to do what they want to do. They don't think about the public, so we need protests."

Participant in follow-up survey

The impact that making trade offs can have is somewhat reflected in our poll. The opposing statement question format pushes respondents to make trade offs between two opposing statements. We asked respondents to indicate where their views sat between the statement that 'our right to protest must be protected even if the protest causes some disruption' (37% agreed with this more) and 'our right to protest should be limited if the protest causes some disruption' (40% agreed with this more). The impact of pushing the public to consider this trade off is that the results were more divided than when considering the statement that restrictions should be put on protests when they cause serious disruption to people's everyday lives alone (where 67% of the public agreed).

From the individual to the societal as a result of the topic feeling more relatable

When discussing a contentious topic, people tend to start from very different perspectives. Generally, people are influenced by what feels most tangible to them – whether that is memories of going to a protest, or hearing stories about negative impacts serious inconvenience can have on the general public. Unless linked to specific causes and tactics, protests can feel like a reasonably abstract topic. By making different aspects of protest feel more tangible, participants were able to put themselves in others' shoes and consider a wider variety of perspectives, and therefore take a more societal rather than individual view.

Aside from participants who frequently attended protests, few participants appeared to think much about protests in their daily lives, beyond hearing about it in the media. They tended not to identify strongly with protesters and therefore did not feel particularly concerned about restrictions on protests (although they generally had little knowledge of these). By making a protest cause feel more relatable, views shifted even on what tactics are acceptable as part of that protest, as we will see in our mental model.

Similarly, by making protest legislation feel more relevant to an individual's everyday life, this can increase concern about the restrictiveness of this legislation. For example, following Liberty's presentation of their policy proposal which included examples of non-protesters being arrested and wrongly accused of carrying equipment to lock on, several participants raised new concerns about this law. These participants imagined themselves being caught up in the law, for example for carrying a bike lock, leading them to oppose this restriction.

"I think it was ridiculous that people were getting arrested for the nail glue and things like that, and the rape alarms. I mean, if I had a bicycle, I could have a padlock and chain, you know, and get arrested for having that when I'm going to lock up my bike."

Participant in policies session

On the other hand, tangible examples of serious inconvenience caused by protests raised concerns about the impact that these tactics may have on ordinary people, even for participants who had been more supportive of such tactics. Many participants were particularly upset by a news clip we shared of an individual missing a job interview due to a group of protesters blocking a road. Participants continued to reference this specific clip throughout the process and even in the follow-up survey a month after the sessions.

"It's an inconvenience, and it's disrupting people's normal everyday lives. You know they might not be into all of this stuff, and especially the Just Stop Oil one where he missed an interview. Whether he was going to get the job or not, he lost the opportunity to put himself out there for the job regardless... I would say [blocking traffic] should be banned."

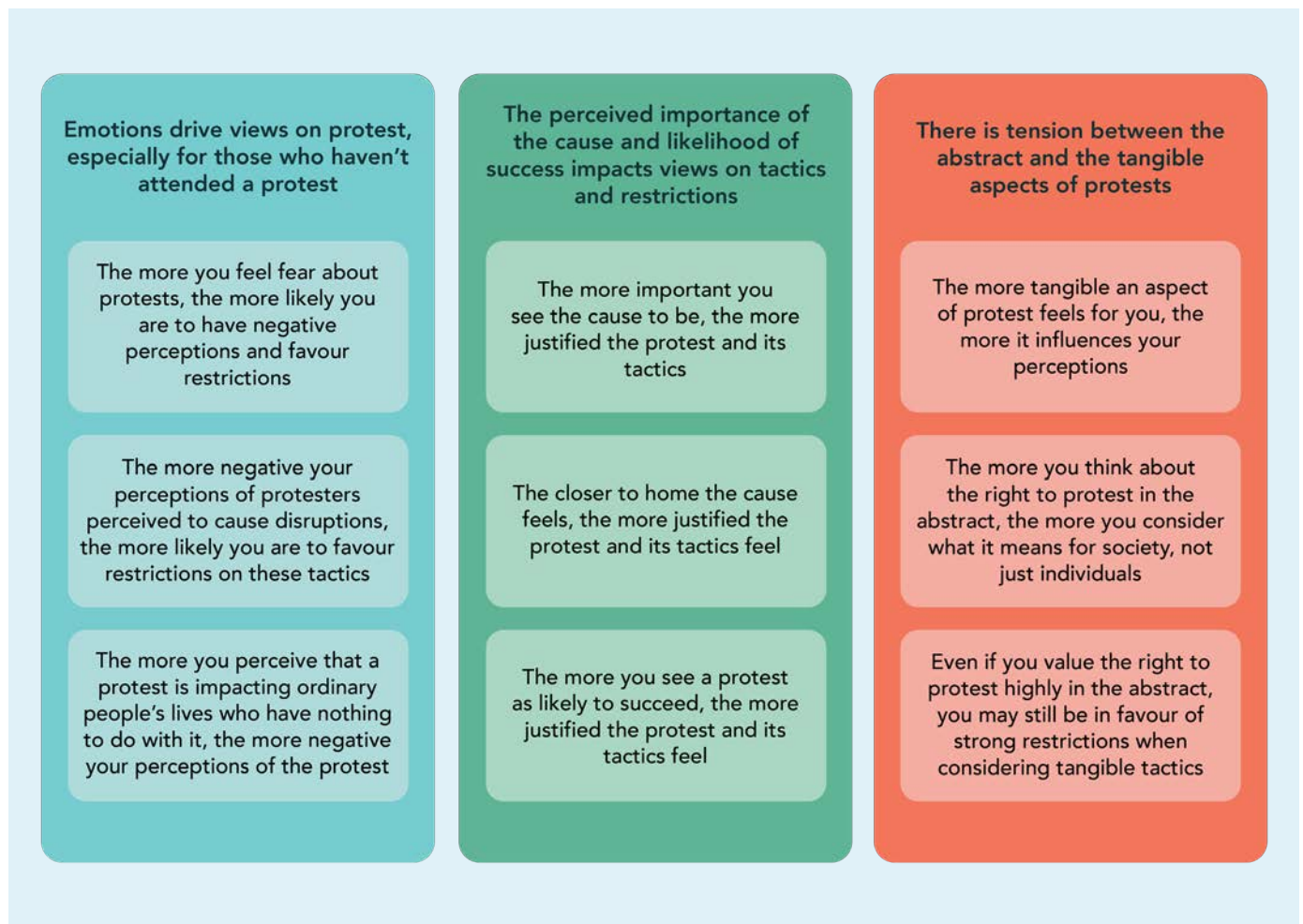
Participant in principles session

SETTING OUT A MENTAL MODEL FOR PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PROTEST

Through engaging in a deliberative process with participants, we gained in-depth insight into not only how the public perceives issues around protest and how views change when presented with new information and perspectives and asked to make more informed judgements, but also *how* the public thinks about protest. Mental models seek to represent how people think about a topic: how they reason, feel, make sense of it, make decisions about it. By setting out a mental model on protest based on our research, we can better understand the reasoning behind public opinion and judgement on this topic, particularly where there are apparent contradictions. This could help policy makers make decisions that are informed by a deeper understanding of public perceptions, beyond the headlines.

We have identified three key ways that the public form their views on protest that make up the mental model:

- Emotions drive views on protest, especially for those who haven't attended a protest
- The perceived importance of the cause and likelihood of success impacts views on tactics and restrictions
- There is a tension between the abstract and the tangible aspects of protests



Emotions drive views on protest, especially for those who haven't attended a protest

Even in the poll, we could see emotions around protest coming through with the prominence of the word 'annoying', as can be seen in the word cloud on page 17. But when we dug deeper through conversations with our participants, we found a lot of fear beneath this annoyance, particularly for a vocal minority who hadn't attended protests but were concerned about them. To a lesser extent, we also heard frequent protesters speak emotively about why they protest, especially if it was a cause that impacts them personally.

These emotions inform not only the public's perceptions of protest, but also what they think should be done about it – for example, in our poll, people who hadn't protested consistently had more negative views on protest and were more likely to favour restrictions, and vice versa for those who had protested, as can be seen in Figure 9, page 25.

There were also strong emotions surrounding perceptions of who takes part in protests, particularly for participants with no personal experience of protests. Several participants expressed emotive,

negative views about protesters, which meant they struggled to empathise with or relate to protesters, and were therefore unlikely to see their protest as justified. Common themes included protesters being selfish, and deserving any harm that might come to themselves from their actions. This came out particularly strongly when discussing the tactic of locking on. These negative emotions towards protesters led these participants to generally favour restrictions on tactics perceived to cause disruption.

“Protesters seem to think it’s all about me. I’m the most important [person] around here, and you are nothing really. I must have my say. So let’s stop everybody else going to work or school or just getting around. So I think it’s a silly idea, and I [would] block it completely... You’re not the most important person in this world. You know, everyone has to get on together, and we can all have our say... but don’t stop everybody else getting on with their life.”

Participant in principles session

“[When discussing locking on] Let them stay there and let them rot.”

Participant in principles session

“You can see these protesters are coming there at 6.30 in the morning... Oh, it’s a Monday. It’s a nice day out there. I’ve got a cup of coffee. Let’s just sit outside and annoy people.”

Participant in principles session

Additionally, there were concerns about those who are impacted by protests, with a sense that too often ordinary people’s lives are being negatively impacted by protests which they have nothing to do with. Concern for these ordinary people led to support for restrictions on tactics or protests that may impact their lives. For example, we found broad consensus against protesting outside a politician’s home. Concerns about this focused more on the impact on the politician’s family and neighbours, who aren’t the target of the protests but are nevertheless impacted, than the politicians themselves.

“It gets me annoyed when people think that they are so great and that their cause is so big that they have the right to go and stand outside someone’s home, and they’ve got kids and things like that in there. Who do they think they are?”

Participant in principles session

At the same time, we have seen that emotions, while powerful, may not be as fixed as we might assume. Many participants’ sympathy for protesters, police, and/or the general public changed over the course of the deliberative process. Therefore, being exposed to new information and discussing

and attempting to find areas of consensus on a contentious issue, particularly with those you might not usually discuss it with, can change not just views, but the way people feel about an issue.

The perceived importance of the cause and likelihood of success impacts views on tactics and restrictions

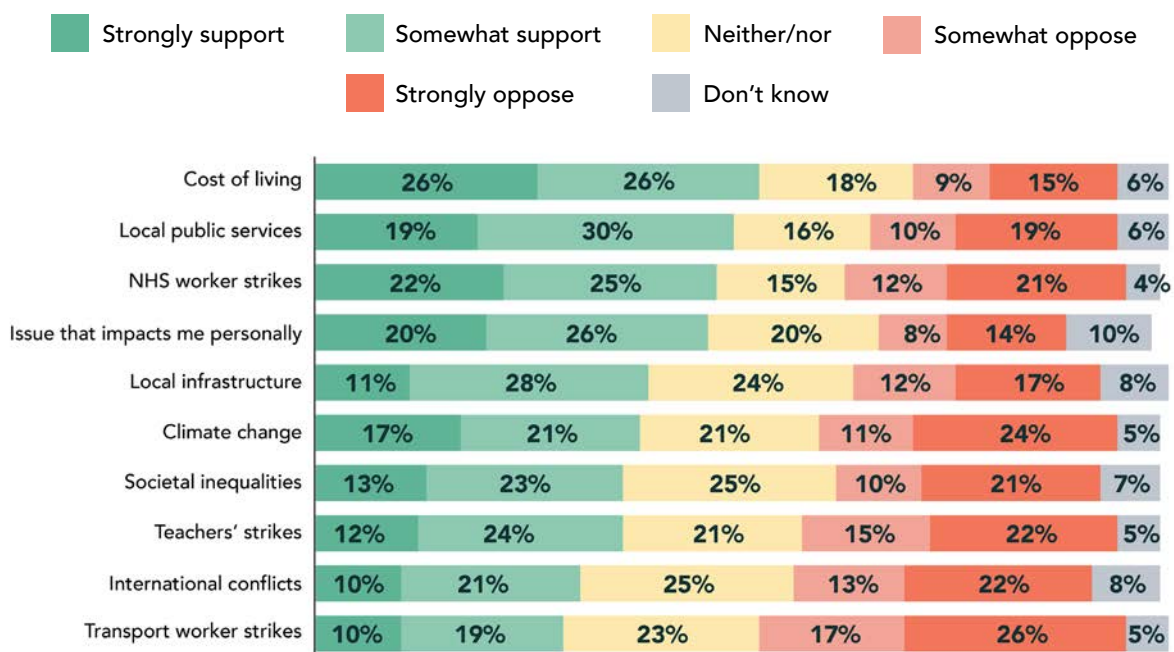
The public do not always have a single, consistent view on protest; it can depend on the cause, the tactics used, and the perceived likelihood of the success of the protest. The closer to home the cause feels, the less the tactics impact the lives of ordinary people, and the higher the perceived likelihood of success, the more justified a protest feels, and therefore the less restrictive views are.

This is true even of the most controversial tactics, those that are perceived to cause serious inconvenience. We found that tolerance for serious inconvenience depends on the popularity and perceived importance of the protest cause, even amongst the broader public. In our poll, we asked to what extent respondents would support or oppose the use of tactics that cause serious inconvenience to others for a range of protest causes.

FIGURE 12

The public are more supportive of the use of disruptive tactics for protests about causes that are important to them

Level of support from respondents in our final poll for 'tactics that cause serious inconvenience' by protest cause.



The more popular a protest's cause is, the more justified that protest feels, even if it causes serious inconvenience through its tactics. For the last couple of years, the top issues for the general public have been the cost of living, the NHS, and the economy.⁶⁴ There is a clear correlation between the most important issues for the general public and the protest causes that garner the most support for tactics that cause serious inconvenience, with around half of the public supporting these tactics for protests about the cost of living (52%), local public services (with the example given in the poll being a hospital) (49%), and NHS worker strikes (47%).⁶⁵

64 Office for National Statistics, 2024. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritain/june2024>

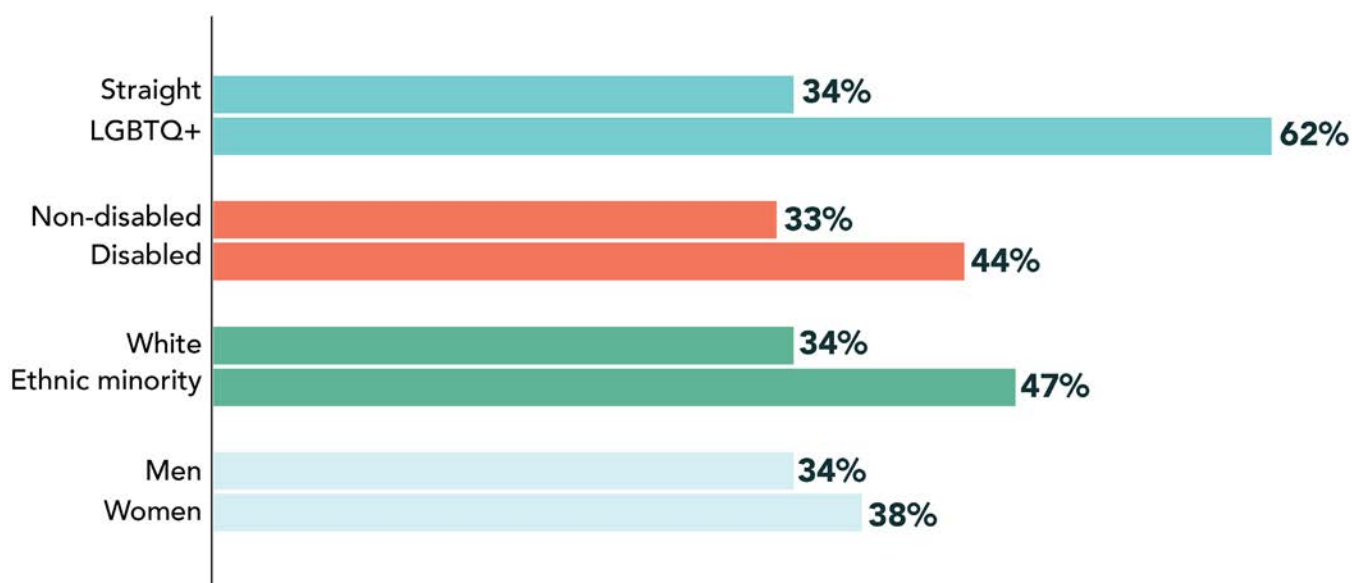
65 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

Almost half (46%) also support tactics that cause serious inconvenience for ‘an issue that impacts me personally’, which points to a personal element of the ranking of topics. The closer to the individual the cause feels, the more justified controversial tactics are. The highest levels of support are for causes that tend to be ranked as the most important issues, and are therefore likely to impact many personally. We can also see this play out with the issue of societal inequalities, which are likely to feel closer to home for marginalised groups. Consequently, people from marginalised communities are more likely to support the use of tactics that cause serious inconvenience for protests about societal inequalities.

FIGURE 13

People from marginalised groups are more likely to support the use of disruptive tactics for protests on societal inequalities

Proportion of respondents (split by demographic factors) in our final poll that expressed support for tactics that cause serious inconvenience for protests on societal inequalities.



There is also higher tolerance when it comes to causes that are *physically* closer to the individual, in part due to a sense that the protester might have a higher chance of getting heard by the target audience. Local issues are more likely to garner support for tactics that cause serious inconvenience, with 39% supporting the use of these tactics for a protest about local infrastructure, in addition to local public services.⁶⁶ Conversely, international conflicts are one of the least likely to garner support for these tactics, with 31% supporting, and 35% opposing.

This provides further insight into the large proportion of the public (77%) who believe that ‘people should be able to speak up on important issues without facing arrest’ – the more an issue is perceived to be important, the less justified legal restrictions are seen to be. But, as we have seen, whether the issue is perceived to be important somewhat depends on the individual.

Perceptions of whether an individual feels personally connected to or agrees with a protest’s cause were also used by some to evaluate protesters’ intentions. A small minority of participants expressed scepticism around people’s motivations for protesting. These participants felt that some protesters don’t even really believe in or understand the cause, that they’re just there for the sake of it, or to cause trouble at the protest. These concerns were particularly strong from this small group of participants if the cause was seen to be something that didn’t personally impact the protester.

66 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

"It's when you get all these sorts of people coming in who are militants, who will protest for anything because they think it's a good Saturday out, right?"

Participant in learning session

"I think everyone has the right to strike if they really don't think they're getting the right conditions or pay or whatever. And I get that. But I think some of these political strike protests, the people who are at them probably don't even know why they're protesting. They're there for the wrong reasons. They're there because they want to be antagonists."

Participant in principles session

The perceived importance, or popularity, of issues may also change over time. After the learning session, when we informed participants about the Suffragette movement and the tactics used, which involved violence as well as causing serious inconvenience, there was far more sympathy for this cause and the necessity of using such tactics, than for current climate protests, even though these don't tend to involve violence, even if they can cause inconvenience. Therefore, despite participants' sympathetic views when it came to the Suffragettes' use of controversial tactics, few applied this to their views of current tactics, even when they broadly agreed with the cause.

We see this as the halo effect of historical distance. People tend to view historical protests with causes that now seem obviously just to most of us, such as the women's right to vote, more favourably than current protest causes. Today's protest causes have not yet been proved to be just, in part due to their lack of success so far. Once a protest is successful at creating the intended societal change, and some time has passed, it appears to have been obvious that this protest was justified, even if more controversial tactics were used.

"Protests which are going on today, you might roll your eyes on it, but 50 years later, somebody might go, 'oh, actually, you know what, that, I don't know, environmental protest which happened actually did make a difference.'"

Participant in learning session

"I know the Suffragettes used [locking on], but you know, that was many, many years ago... I do think that protest tactics do need to change now, to move on. Because obviously people that have done locking on, have they accomplished what the Suffragettes accomplished? No, they haven't."

Participant in policies session

For this reason, participants often considered whether they thought a protest would be successful when evaluating it. Causes perceived as likely to lead to social change were seen as more just, and therefore protests for these causes should not be restricted.

"I think if it's genuinely a fair grievance that you're not getting paid enough for what you're doing, or you haven't had a pay rise for so long, it could be teachers, nurses, whatever, doesn't matter who it is, or if you feel that your working conditions are wrong. I think, yes, I get the point of striking for that, and it will probably achieve something."

Participant in principles session

However, there was some understanding that it is not only about how just the cause is that determines the success of a protest, as there was widespread scepticism that politicians listen to the public's concerns, with the majority of the public (60%) agreeing that 'people in power rarely ever listen to protests'.⁶⁷

"Are there any statistics or anything on does [blocking traffic] actually work? Does this kind of tactic make a difference?... I'm not saying don't ban it, but maybe I'm more middle of the road, depending on what it is."

Participant in principles session

There is a tension between the abstract and the tangible aspects of protests

We found that despite big picture shifts over the course of the People's Town Square – particularly from a focus on the individual to the societal – these did not always appear to play out in specific discussions on the tangible impacts of protest tactics perceived as disruptive. Although there was an overall shift towards disruption as a less prominent concern, when discussing the specific tactics of locking on and blocking traffic in a more tangible way, many participants continued to support strong restrictions on these, as will be explored in section three.

In a similar way, when considering the value of protest, participants discussed the right to voice your opinion, a more tangible concept, most in discussions, but valued the right to protest peacefully and non-violently above all in the principles, which were a more abstract exercise. This points to a tension in how people think about the abstract versus tangible aspects of protests.

Thinking about specific protests and tactics feels far more tangible, and can therefore be more influential in discussions, than thinking about protests as an abstract concept. Discussions tended to focus on specific protests and tactics, unless participants had been guided by us to think about protest in a more abstract or bigger picture way.

As we have seen, aspects of protest can be made to feel more tangible, thus shifting views. For example, when we asked participants to think more abstractly and about protests overall, the focus of conversations changed, and views shifted towards more of a concern about the need to protect the right to protest.

The tension between the abstract and the tangible sheds light on why the public tends to value the right to protest highly, but also appears to have a low tolerance for certain tactics used by protests. Similarly, it sheds light on why in our deliberative process people's views shifted far more on the former than the latter.

⁶⁷ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

SECTION 3

THE PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE PRINCIPLES

When the participants got to the third session of the People's Town Square, the principles session,⁶⁸ they had already shared their initial views on protest and learnt about the history, legislation and different points of view on the topic. In this session, after some deliberation on the value of protest and the level of restrictions that should be placed on controversial tactics, we tasked participants with working together to develop principles that politicians should consider when thinking about protest.

The top six principles, as shortlisted and ranked by participants from most to least important in the fourth session, are:

- 1 "Everyone has the right to protest peacefully and non-violently"
- 2 "Laws around protest should be clearer for protesters and police"
- 3 "Everyone should feel safe, whether protesting or not"
- 4 "Everyone has the right to voice their opinion and raise awareness on issues"
- 5 "The rights of protesters should be balanced with the rights of the general public"
- 6 "No one should be harmed, whether protesting or not"

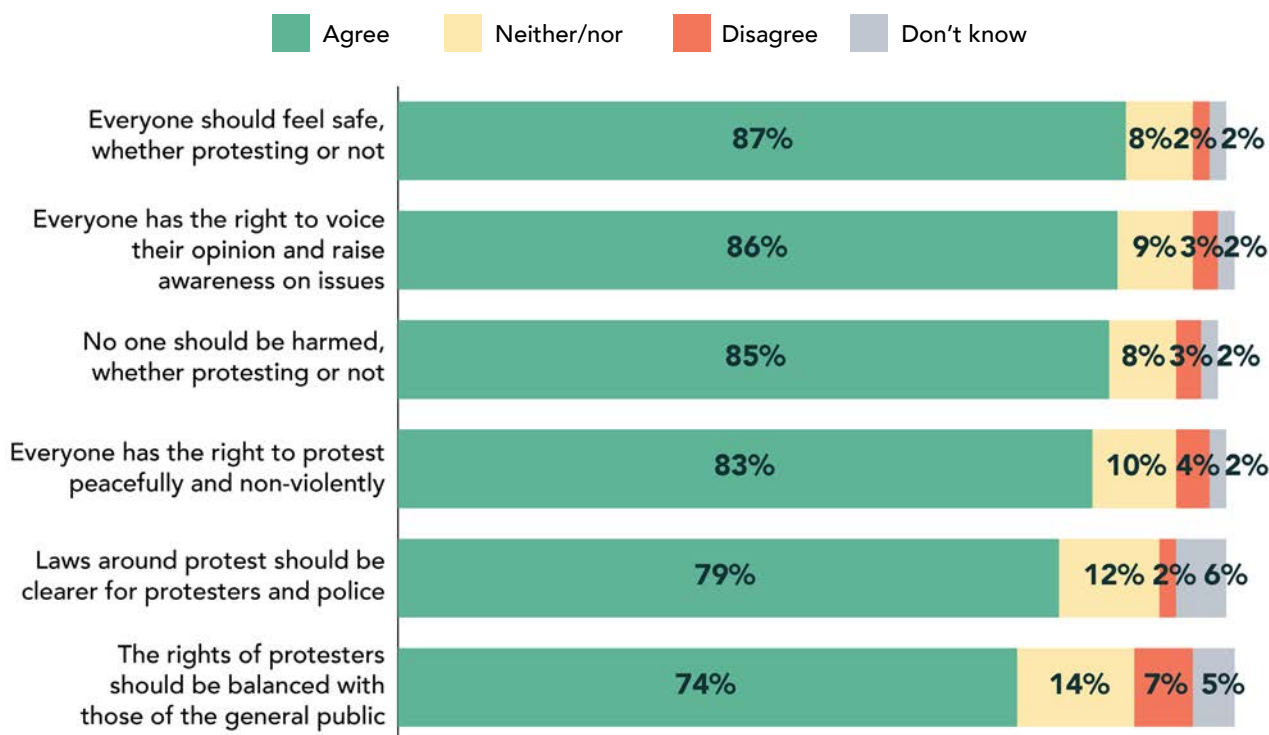
⁶⁸ See appendix for more detail on the sessions.

We tested levels of agreement amongst the general public for these principles in our final poll to get a sense of their representativeness. We found that strong majorities agreed with each, which suggests that these principles resonate with the broader public. However, the order differed slightly from our participants' ranking.⁶⁹ It is expected that the results would differ given that polling can only understand initial reactions, and cannot replicate the experience of a deliberative process. In fact, differences demonstrate that the deliberative process has produced something new.

FIGURE 14

The vast majority of the public agree with each People's Town Square Principle

Level of agreement from respondents with each principle.



For example, although the proportion of the public agreeing that 'laws around protest should be clearer for protesters and police' is high (79%), this principle had the second lowest level of agreement compared to the others, despite being ranked second highest by participants. This supports our assessment that it is a principle that emerged as a result of learning and discussion in the People's Town Square.⁷⁰

Additionally, participants assessed the principles knowing the thinking behind them, whereas the general public could not. This section will therefore explore the thinking behind each principle.

⁶⁹ Note that respondents in the poll were not asked to rank the principles relative to each other, but asked about their agreement with each separately, and so it is not the same as a ranking exercise.

⁷⁰ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

PRINCIPLE 1

EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO PROTEST PEACEFULLY AND NON-VIOLENTLY

The top People's Town Square principle that should inform the role of protest is that 'Everyone has the right to protest peacefully and non-violently', which 83% of the public agreed with in our poll.⁷¹ In our final exercise of the sessions, when asked to write a postcard with one message to the next Prime Minister,⁷² the most common theme was asking for the Prime Minister to protect the right to protest.

"Please protect our right to peaceful assembly and protest. Please do not chip away at our right to make our voices heard."

Participant in postcard to the Prime Minister

The right to protest began to be increasingly framed as fundamental in a democratic context, as has been examined. While 'democracy' came out relatively strongly in the word cloud from the initial poll on page 17, and was discussed by participants in the opening session, this became a more common way that this right was discussed. For example, without this right, many felt we would be living in a dictatorship. To a lesser extent, the right was also seen as important in a democracy so that people can push for social change and hold politicians to account.

"Protesting is crucial for democracy. It helps improve who we are as a society."

Participant in postcard to Prime Minister

"The ballot box is one way of [getting your voice heard], but sometimes something happens where you really do have to stand up like, you know, the women's votes back with the Suffragettes. That had to change, and they had to take drastic measures. And they didn't have the vote... So they had to get that in the first place."

Participant in principles session

There was a sense for many that the right to protest is almost innate. When we asked participants to imagine a scenario where protests were banned, many felt this law would be impossible to implement, as people would find ways to protest anyway. There was a strong link made between rights and freedoms, with freedom of expression in particular perceived as the key element of the right to protest, as will be explored.

71 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

72 The People's Town Square was held in June 2024 during the election campaign period.

"You can't ban [protests], because if you do, they'll go underground, and people will still protest. They will still have marches and demos. They'll just be in secret."

Participant in principles session

There is a caveat to this principle-protests should be peaceful and non-violent. There were some differing views on what this should look like in practice from participants. For example, the vocal minority that felt fear around protests tended not to see many protests or tactics as truly nonviolent and peaceful. We found that the tactic that provoked the strongest negative emotions for many participants was vandalising statues, and there was a sense from some participants in this group that this is a violent tactic.

"Usually you just want to protest to be peaceful, but if you're destroying all the statues and stuff, it just doesn't help yourself. They'll just turn people against you. And especially if you're someone living in that community and you feel like it's being destroyed by these protests, you'll be more against it."

Participant in opening session

On the other hand, we saw peacefulness and non-violence used as a justification for tactics perceived as disruptive by participants who tended to be less supportive of restrictions on protests. They argued that tactics such as blocking traffic and locking on, while inconvenient, remained peaceful and nonviolent, and therefore should be allowed.

"But locking on, I guess, in itself, isn't a violent tactic. It's just a way of staying where you are if you want to be in a certain place to make a point. So if a major assumption is not a violent act, they're not doing harm to anyone at that point. I think the whole point of locking on is a demonstrative act."

Participant in principles session

PRINCIPLE 2

LAWS AROUND PROTEST SHOULD BE CLEARER FOR PROTESTERS AND POLICE

The second highest ranked People's Town Square principle is that 'laws around protest should be clearer for protesters and police'. This principle was sparked by what participants heard about protest legislation in the learning session. This may explain why it's ranked lower by the general public than participants, although there is still a high level of public agreement (79%).⁷³ Once this idea took hold, however, it continued to be referenced by participants throughout the process (and even in our follow up survey a month on), and became a lens through which many considered Liberty's policy proposals.

"What stood out most to me was the patchwork of augmented legislation that governs this whole area and the amount of grey areas that are open to interpretation and implementation."

Participant in follow-up survey

As we have seen, participants started the sessions with a low level of awareness and knowledge of protest legislation. In the learning session, we had a legal expert share information on protest legislation, most of which was new to participants.⁷⁴ More so than any specific law or power, what stood out to participants was an overall sense that the laws are too complicated and vague.

"My first reaction was how many of [the laws] are open to interpretation, because there were words like serious disruption. Who decides when it becomes serious? The police have been criticised because they're not using their powers, but they must be in a quandary as well, because what is reasonable if you talk about reasonable force? So to me, they were all very much open to interpretation."

Participant in learning session

The main concern was that the lack of clarity makes it more difficult for police to properly implement the laws, especially given perceptions from some that police are already not making enough arrests. This increased sympathy for the police for some, with a sense that this makes their job difficult, and that many do not have sufficient training to deal with the complexity of the laws. We found that 33% of participants responding to the follow-up survey said they became more sympathetic to police over the course of the process.⁷⁵

⁷³ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

⁷⁴ See appendix for more detail on the content of this session.

⁷⁵ See appendix for more detail on follow-up survey methodology.

"It's already been mentioned how the laws about protest for police are very vague and open to interpretation. And you tend to think, 'oh, well, the police know what they have to do,' but it's not that easy, really."

Participant in policies session

There was concern not only for the police, however, but a significant proportion of participants also expressed concern that unclear laws make it difficult for protesters to know their rights, and what they are and aren't allowed to do. These concerns tended to come from people more opposed to restrictions on protests, while concerns about the impact on police tended to come from those more supportive of restrictions. Nevertheless, both shared the view that the law is vague, and that it needs to change.

"I think what I was surprised about going through the changes in the law [was] just how open everything seems to be to interpretation. It all just seems to be a real grey area. And so as a protester going out on a protest, you really don't know where you stand, do you?"

Participant in learning session

"I found the legal situation on protest demonstrations very confusing. I think there was a lot of 'you can do this if this happens, and you can do this if this happens, but you can't do that.'"

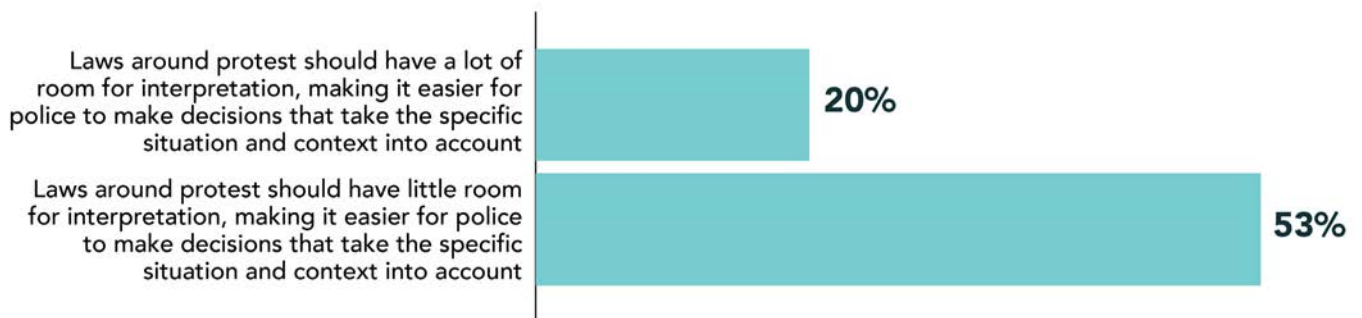
Participant in principles session

The sense that the law is vague led many to argue that it should be more black and white, with little room for interpretation. The broader public appears to share this view. We asked respondents in our poll to indicate whether their view came closer to the statement that 'laws around protest should have a little room for interpretation, making it clearer for protesters to understand and for police to implement' or 'laws around protest should have a lot of room for interpretation, making it easier for police to make decisions that take the specific situation and context into account'. Half of the public (53%) agreed with the former more than the latter, with 20% agreeing with the latter more, similar to the proportion that said they agreed with neither more than the other (22%).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

FIGURE 15

Over half of the public feel that laws around protest should have little room for interpretation
Proportion of respondents in our final poll saying that each statement comes closer to their view than the other when presented with two opposing statements on laws around protest.



"Make it more obvious on what you should be arrested for, and whatnot, because the police [are] having a hard time, like deciding when to arrest and when to not, but most of the time they're just not arresting, just leaving it."

Participant in learning session

Concerns about 'vagueness' also centred on the language in the legislation, and a sense that certain terms were not clear enough. This came out in discussions on the policy proposals that were presented by a representative from Liberty in our policies session. For example, when discussing proposals to 'remove police powers to clamp down on noisy protests', many participants agreed, partly due to a perception that laws against noise would be hard to implement.

"What level [of noise]? How long does the level have to last?... So it's another law that [the police have] been given that's unenforceable and just complicates the matter."

Participant in policies session

There were also concerns about vague terminology when Liberty presented their policy proposal to 'scrap broad and disproportionate protest offences such as locking on', specifically in relation to the offence of being equipped to lock on. This aspect of the law felt overly restrictive due to how broad it is, and could lead to the arrest of innocent people. As has been explored in the previous section, the concern was partly driven by participants imagining themselves being impacted by this law if carrying something that might be seen as equipment to lock on.

"I still think it should still be an offence to lock on, rather than maybe the equipment, because that's the hard one."

Participant in policies session

PRINCIPLE 3

EVERYONE SHOULD FEEL SAFE, WHETHER PROTESTING OR NOT

The third principle that ‘everyone should feel safe, whether protesting or not’ received the highest level of support from the broader public in the poll, with 87% agreeing. This was reflected in the views of participants – safety was a key concern for participants, and an emotive one for some. As has been explored in section two, there was a broadening of considerations about safety, from a narrower group of people to a wider one. For this reason, the principle ended up including the safety of people ‘whether [they are] protesting or not’.

“I think safety should be first as well. Like, you know, the safety of the protesters, the public, the law enforcement officers. I think that should be like, top priority.”

Participant in principles session

However, safety was conceptualised in different ways by different groups – some were more concerned about the safety of members of the general public who aren’t protesting due to perceptions of violent behaviour from protesters (particularly for the vocal minority described in section one), while others were more concerned about the safety of protesters at the hands of police, especially the safety of marginalised groups, with both people from marginalised groups themselves and others raising this concern.

“Well, I personally wouldn’t want to go [to a protest] and put myself in that sort of situation. Some things I would love to go and sort of demonstrate against, but I feel it’s just too, too risky to do it. You know, I’ve got personal safety. I’ve got other people that rely on me. So, you know, I don’t want to get arrested or injured or anything.”

Participant in opening session

“I think the police have too much power in this situation, so restricting it a little bit would help the public just to feel a bit safer and not feel so probably threatened or targeted, with the police forces, you know, With using their powers [or] abusing their powers, should I say.”

Participant in policies session

This can be seen in the discussion around Liberty's policy proposal to remove police powers to stop and search people at a protest without suspicion. Discussions tended to focus more on the stop and search aspect more broadly than the power to stop and search specifically 'without suspicion', with safety a common concern. While some argued in support of stop and search powers to help people 'who have nothing to hide' feel safer, others against, driven by a concern for a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups who may be made to feel unsafe by these police powers.

"In one sense, stop and search powers could make other protesters feel safe, but then it could make those who are the target of those powers feel unsafe."

Participant in policies session

There was broad consensus, however, that the police have an important role in ensuring the safety of both protesters and the general public. Participants looked to police to manage protests, preventing violent and criminal behaviour, and arresting those who take part in it.

PRINCIPLE 4

EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO VOICE THEIR OPINION AND RAISE AWARENESS ON ISSUES

There is strong agreement from the public (86%) on the fourth principle that 'everyone has the right to voice their opinion and raise awareness on issues'.⁷⁷ Participants felt this was the key value of protest from the start of the process, and continued to do so throughout. Despite the fact that this ranked lower than the principle on the right to protest peacefully and non-violently in our People's Town Square, in discussions, when people spoke of the right to protest and the value of protest, it was mostly framed around being able to voice your opinion on issues you care about, and to a slightly lesser extent, raise awareness of issues. The right to protest was key at an abstract level, while the freedom to express your opinion was the more tangible reason for the importance of this right.

"The whole point of protest is being able to have your say, express your point of view... and the idea of either protest being a vehicle to express your rights, or potentially to demand more rights or rights in a particular area."

Participant in opening session

"You are entitled to give your opinion about something, and if that's not causing any harm to anybody, why should it be punished? That is the right. That's the principle of the right to protest, being able to express your opinion."

Participant in learning session

⁷⁷ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

As with the broader right to protest, this right was increasingly expressed in a democratic context – that in a democracy, you should be able to express your opinion on issues that matter to you. In the context of record low trust in government and politicians,⁷⁸ it was felt to be even more crucial that protest could provide a way for people to try to get their voices heard and hold politicians to account, if (and according to many participants, when) the usual avenues aren't working. In fact, some felt that politicians not listening to protesters' demands leads to more protest, or more extreme tactics being used.

"If you have long serving politicians, it can kind of have a check on their power that they're still listening to the public and not taking their position for granted."

Participant in principles session

"So it makes it more clear for me that, unless you are very loud and very obnoxious, no one's going to really listen, and you won't even be making [a difference]."

Participant in learning session

For this reason, how protesters communicate their message was seen as key. The more direct and verbal the communication, the more it is seen to be clearly expressing an opinion, and therefore the more justified it is. Tactics that involve direct, verbal communication of a message (for example, chants and banners) rather than more indirect, physical forms of communication (for example, locking on, blocking traffic, vandalising statues) were seen as more justified, and therefore should be less restricted.

"Statues are there for a reason, and that's just common decency that you wouldn't vandalise a statue. Doesn't matter what your cause is or what your what your intent is, why would anyone in their right mind want to vandalise a statue? What does that prove? What does that do?"

Participant in learning session

Participants were therefore most supportive of Liberty's policy proposal to 'remove police powers to clamp down on noisy protests', as many considered noise to be central to a protest's effectiveness. This was reflected in the initial poll, with the least popular reason for restricting protests being if they are too noisy, with a minority of the public (41%) agreeing with this, and 30% actively disagreeing.⁷⁹

"I think the noise is a key part of what makes protests effective, right? I mean, if we have over 10,000 people in one protest, and they're all talking in [a] normal voice, it's going to sound loud, right? Because there's so many people to put together. Then I think, yeah, this is how people make their voices heard and stuff."

Participant in policies session

⁷⁸ National Centre for Social Research, 2024. <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

⁷⁹ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

PRINCIPLE 5

THE RIGHTS OF PROTESTERS SHOULD BE BALANCED WITH THE RIGHTS OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The principle that related most to concerns about disruption was that ‘the rights of protesters should be balanced with the rights of the general public’. As we have seen, disruption became a less prominent and more nuanced concern over the course of the People’s Town Square, resulting in a principle that recognises the importance of the rights of both the general public and protesters, and the need to balance them. As it is a principle that evolved over the course of the People’s Town Square, this is likely the reason that this principle had the lowest level of agreement compared to the others (although still high at 74%).⁸⁰

“Please can we work towards fairer laws that safeguard public safety without undermining our fundamental democratic rights!”

Participant’s postcard to the Prime Minister

In section two, we explored some of the nuances in views on disruption, especially when considered at a high level, such as increased tolerance for tactics that cause serious inconvenience when the protest is for more popular causes, or those that feel closer to home. At the same time, when discussing specific tactics perceived to cause disruption, without mention of the protest cause, participants tended to favour restrictions on these. The two tactics we examined most closely were locking on, which seven in ten (71%) members of the public feel hinders a protest’s cause, and blocking traffic, which three-quarters (74%) of the public feel hinders the cause.⁸¹

“It’s disrupting the country or disrupting the city. We have marches or protests, whatever you want to call them and they glue themselves to the streets and block streets from traffic moving, which could have ambulances in, taking people to hospital. That’s not being physically violent to anybody. It’s just being a bloody nuisance.”

Participant in learning session

When we discussed the level of restriction that should be placed on protests that block traffic, the majority felt that these protests should be restricted, and even banned due to the serious inconvenience they can cause for the general public. However, there was recognition that measures could be put in place to limit the inconvenience, making it unnecessary to entirely ban these protests. For example, protesters could allow ambulances through or inform the police of blocked roads so that people can take alternative routes.

⁸⁰ Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

⁸¹ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

“And if I get my holiday cancelled because I can’t get to the airport, I’ll be absolutely fuming. But my thinking is, this is bigger than me. This is bigger than my life, my current day, today and my current holiday. Those people blocking the traffic. Sorry, people are blocking the traffic because they [are] trying to make the world better for all of us.”

Participant in principles session

The majority of participants leaned towards restrictions on protests involving locking on too. Concerns centred around serious inconvenience caused to the general public (for example from interfering with infrastructure), physical harm caused to protesters themselves (through glueing or chaining) and any costs associated with that (for example on the NHS), and any damage to whatever is being locked onto.

“I think it’s just a hassle. It should be totally banned because there’s too much hassle and they have to call the police and special people to unglue themselves. It’s just too many things involved. It’s just you cost you more money for no reason at all.”

Participant in principles session

Despite concerns from many participants about disruption and a tendency towards a restrictive attitude when discussing specific tactics perceived as disruptive, there was a consistent minority of participants who felt that these tactics could at least sometimes be justified. For example, if the cause is important or urgent enough. This meant that consensus was not reached on the limits of these tactics.

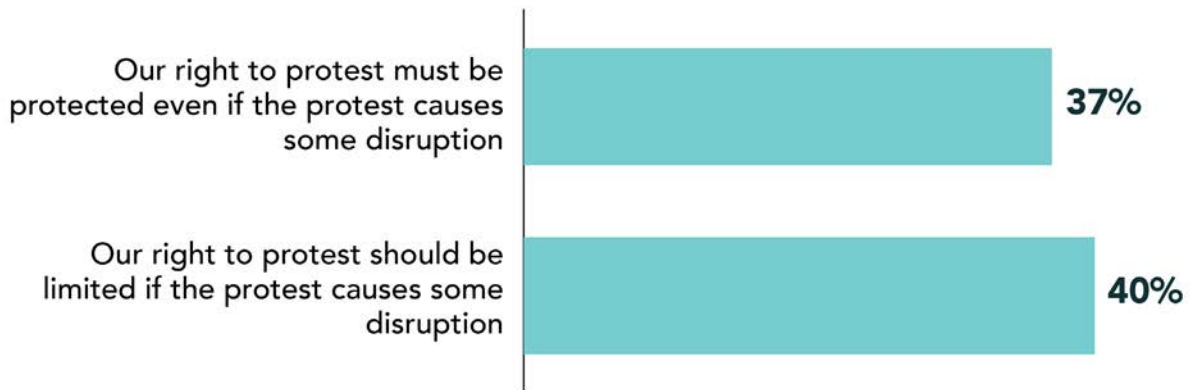
Both our participants and the broader public are split on where to draw the line on protests perceived to cause disruption at a high level, when contrasted with the right to protest. In our poll, we asked respondents to indicate where their views sat between two opposing statements: ‘our right to protest must be protected even if the protest causes some disruption’ and ‘our right to protest should be limited if the protest causes some disruption’. The public was divided on this – 37% agreed more with the former, 40% with the latter, and 19% neither statement more than the other.⁸²

82 Nationally representative poll conducted 22nd - 23rd July 2024 (n=2,115). See appendix for more detail on methodology.

FIGURE 16

The public are split on whether our right to protest should be limited if the protest causes some disruption

Proportion of respondents in our final poll saying that each statement comes closer to their view than the other when presented with two opposing statements on the right to protest and disruption.



Amongst our participants, after sharing videos on different sides of the debate relating to disruption, we found that participants were split on whether disruptive tactics should be allowed, with 10 saying 'never allowed', 7 saying 'sometimes allowed' and 3 saying 'definitely allowed'.⁸³

"If you're actually committing an act of freedom which harms others, then you don't have the freedom to commit that act. And that is, I think, where you need to draw the line. I think it is potentially a little sinister, if you have the government telling the people how they can protest, although I do think there does need to be legislation in place on issues such as civil disobedience"

Participant in opening session

PRINCIPLE 6

NO ONE SHOULD BE HARMED, WHETHER PROTESTING OR NOT

The other principle that related, at least in part, to concerns about disruption was the sixth and final principle that 'no one should be harmed, whether protesting or not'. This principle had one of the highest levels of agreement among the general public, despite being ranked lowest by our participants. This may be explained by a different interpretation of what is meant by 'harm'.

For respondents in our poll, the word 'harm' may appear to be about physical harm and more closely linked to the principle around safety (which did relate to more physical harm and had a

⁸³ We had 20 out of 24 participants complete this poll as four participants were unable to complete it using the online platform.

similar ranking to this principle – 87% for safety and 85% for harm). However, harm had a broader meaning for our participants – not only physical harm, but intimidation and serious inconvenience too (for example, missing a hospital appointment or job interview due to a blocked road). Some also referred to physical harm caused to protesters by their own tactics, such as that which may be caused by ‘locking on’.

“The issue for me would be when you’re blocking the traffic, you just don’t know who’s sitting in the traffic with what and how it would affect them. In terms of ambulances, it’s probably an easy one, right? Because they blow the siren, hopefully, and people do move out. And that the ambulance is let through is great, but there could be so many other people sitting in the traffic, and it could be anything.”

Participant in principles session

While the principle may suggest low tolerance, therefore, for serious inconvenience, other findings suggest there is more nuance to the public’s views. As we have seen, not only did participants not reach agreement on the issue of disruption and inconvenience, but there is even variance within individuals’ own tolerance of inconvenience depending on the protest cause.

A final aspect of harm relates to strong concerns about protests outside a politician’s home that are perceived to be intimidating. In our poll, the majority of the public (65%) agreed that restrictions should be put on protests when they cause harm to politicians.⁸⁴ When discussing protests outside a politician’s home, there was an even stronger consensus that these should be banned. The vast majority (16) of participants said this should be ‘never allowed’, while 4 said ‘sometimes allowed’, and 2 ‘definitely allowed’.⁸⁵

This was due to the negative impacts on the politician’s family and neighbours, even more so than the politician themselves. It was felt by many that it was unfair that these protests were negatively impacting people who weren’t the actual target of the protests. But there was also concern for politicians themselves; for example, that they should be allowed to have a private life, and not be intimidated in their own homes.

“[What] we need to consider when thinking about this are the other people that will be impacted, you know, their family and other people around them, and maybe that protest can happen against politicians but in public spaces.”

Participant in principles session

“I still kind of almost agree with what the MP was saying in this [video]. If I protest outside the MP’s office, protest outside somewhere else, the home thing seems a bit more personal, so that’s where I would also draw the line.”

Participant in learning session

⁸⁴ Nationally representative poll conducted 8th - 9th April 2024 (n=2,079). See appendix for more detail on methodology, and our definition of protest.

⁸⁵ We had 22 out of 24 participants complete this poll as two participants were unable to complete it using the online platform.

SECTION 4

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PEOPLE'S TOWN SQUARE PRINCIPLES

Having set out the findings from the research, this section will explore what this means for the future of protest, and set out recommendations for policy makers, police, and civil society.

These recommendations are based on our analysis of the findings drawn from the deliberations in the People's Town Square, especially from the principles developed directly by our participants.

The previous government was influenced by public opinion on this issue, but it failed to understand the more nuanced views that the public hold. Our research suggests that, in turn, politicians and the media influence the views of the public on protest, particularly in the absence of personal experience of protest, but we recommend further research to understand the impact of this in more detail.

We have already seen the consequences of poor consultation on this issue. The consultation as part of the Public Order Act 2023 carried out by the previous government was found by the High Court to be unlawful as part of an ongoing legal case brought by Liberty, which is currently under appeal.⁸⁶ The High Court ruled that the consultation was "one-sided and not fairly carried out" as it only invited groups supportive of its plans, such as policing bodies and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), rather than community groups, protest groups or the broader public.⁸⁷ This demonstrates the risk of not involving those who will be impacted by a policy in its development.

One of our recommendations is therefore that policy makers involve the public more in informing policy on divisive issues, and we see deliberative processes as one way to do this. In addition to this, we set out a number of recommendations based on the principles developed by participants in our People's Town Square.

⁸⁶ The Telegraph, 2024. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/08/28/yvette-cooper-revive-anti-protest-laws/>

⁸⁷ Liberty, 2024. <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/court-finds-government-anti-protest-legislation-unlawful-after-liberty-legal-challenge/>

The recommendations fall into four key areas:



PRINCIPLE	INSIGHT	IMPLICATION	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
“Everyone has the right to protest peacefully and non-violently”	The right to protest is seen as fundamental, and participants grew increasingly convinced of this as the process went on. As part of this, it is important that protests are peaceful and non-violent.	Policy makers must protect the right to protest peacefully and non-violently, as well as recognise the public’s views are more nuanced than recent legislation and political rhetoric accounts for.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commission a comprehensive, independent protest review Remove restrictions on noisy protests Remove offence of being equipped to lock on Clarify language on ‘serious harm’ and ‘serious disruption’ Review sentencing for non-violent tactics
“Laws around protest should be clearer for protesters and police”	There is low starting awareness and knowledge on protest legislation. When informed about this topic, the aspect that stands out most is a sense that the law is ‘vague’ and not clear enough, making it difficult for police to implement and protesters to know their rights.	Policy makers, police and civil society should not assume a high level of knowledge on protest legislation, and should work to increase knowledge levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the knowledge threshold for breaching conditions imposed on a protest Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering Develop a communications campaign to inform the public of their rights
		Policy makers should ensure that language in legislation is clear enough to be able to be implemented, and that police officers feel confident implementing it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove offence of being equipped to lock on Clarify language on ‘serious harm’ and ‘serious disruption’ Review protest policing guidance to ensure police understand the law

PRINCIPLE	INSIGHT	IMPLICATION	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>“Everyone should feel safe, whether protesting or not”</p>	<p>Safety is a key concern. Over the course of the process, the conception of whose safety needs to be protected at a protest, and who is responsible for creating a sense of safety, broadened. It was seen as important that protesters and the general public feel safe, and that the police have a key role in ensuring this.</p>	<p>Protesters should feel safe and be clear on their rights, and police should be clear on how they can ensure that people feel safe in and around protests.</p> <p>Specific attention should be given to ensuring the safety of marginalised groups who are disproportionately likely to face the use of police force.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering • Integrate community mediators into the management of protests • Build evidence base on police de-escalation training
<p>“Everyone has the right to voice their opinion and raise awareness on issues”</p>	<p>Voicing your opinion and raising awareness on issues are seen as the key value of protest in a democracy. Therefore, it is seen as important that protesters are able to protest freely, and to communicate their message well.</p>	<p>Policy makers must protect the right for people to express their opinions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove restrictions on noisy protests • Review sentencing for non-violent tactics
<p>“The rights of protesters should be balanced with the rights of the general public”</p>	<p>There is concern about tactics perceived as disruptive, but it is also a divisive topic and views were more nuanced on this than is often assumed. Additionally, this became a less prominent concern for participants over the course of the process, with the focus increasingly becoming about balancing the rights of protesters and the general public.</p>	<p>Given the divisiveness of this issue, policy makers should recognise nuances in views and focus on areas of consensus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify language on ‘serious harm’ and ‘serious disruption’

PRINCIPLE	INSIGHT	IMPLICATION	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>"No one should be harmed, whether protesting or not"</p>	<p>Harm can include physical harm, intimidation, but also serious inconvenience. However, concerns about serious inconvenience were nuanced, and there was a lack of consensus on this amongst participants.</p>	<p>As above, given the divisiveness of concerns around inconvenience and disruption, policy makers should recognise nuances in views and focus on areas of consensus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify language on 'serious harm' and 'serious disruption'
		<p>Concerns about physical harm and intimidation point to the importance of ensuring the safety of people in and around protests, including politicians and their family members when in their homes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better coordination by local police to protect MPs' homes • Review protest policing guidance to ensure police understand the law • Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering • Integrate community mediators into the management of protests • Build evidence base on police de-escalation training

The public see the right to protest peacefully and non-violently as fundamental, and we found this to be even more the case having gone through a deliberative process. Increasingly through the process, participants began to see the right to protest as more at risk than they had previously thought due to the legislative landscape. Therefore, it is crucial that the new government takes political leadership to protect the right to protest, and recognise its own role in shaping perceptions on protest.

At the same time, the public feel there should be limits to the right to protest. However, public judgement on these limits is nuanced, in contrast to recent restrictions which are based on a simplistic understanding of public opinion on this issue. In taking political leadership on this issue, the new government must bring the public along with it, having an open and honest dialogue and finding areas of consensus between different views held by the public. Whilst our research has deepened understanding of the public's views, it is also important for the government to involve other stakeholders in policy making on protest.

Commission a comprehensive, independent protest review

The Government is due to publish a report reviewing a number of measures in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022, and has committed to carrying out post-legislative scrutiny of the Public Order Act (POA) 2023 in May 2025, earlier than usual.⁸⁸ We support the need for these legislative reviews, but also believe a more wide-ranging review is needed to assess legislation in the round, as well as the application of the law, for example sentencing and policing guidance.

We are calling for the Government to commission a comprehensive, independent review of the state of protest legislation and the policing of protest in the UK, which should involve a range of stakeholders including experts, police, justice sector, civil society organisations, protest groups, and the public. This review should seek to understand the nuances within views, and find areas of consensus, as our deliberative process has done.

Use participatory methods to involve stakeholders on divisive issues

Our research has demonstrated the depth of insight that can be gained from holding a deliberative process on a contentious topic, compared to only seeking to understand surface level public opinion. We see the key benefits as:

- Providing participants with balanced information on a contentious topic, and understanding the impact that this information has on their views
- Enabling people to go beyond their echo chambers on a contentious topic by engaging with people who can share new perspectives and experiences, and understanding the impact this has on their views
- Building a deeper understanding of public perceptions of protests, including exploring apparent tensions and contradictions
- Moving from public opinion to public judgement on the issue – from people expressing their top of mind views to taking the time to consider information and other viewpoints, make trade offs, and come to considered collective judgement
- Finding areas of consensus, and ways to disagree agreeably, on a contentious topic

⁸⁸ UK Parliament, 2024. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-07-19/808>

But deliberative processes are not the only form of participatory policy making, and the Government should consider different methods for different issues, and whether a participatory method is appropriate at all. Our Citizens' White Paper sets out different participatory policy making methods, and how and why they should be used.⁸⁹ On contentious topics, the Government may want to consider:

- Deliberative methods such as this one (e.g. Citizens' Assemblies, Citizens' Panels, deliberative workshops)
- Methods that allow a deep dive into the views of a particular group, for example marginalised groups who are disproportionately impacted by an issue (e.g. community conversations or more traditional qualitative research methods like focus groups or in-depth interviews)
- Co-design methods to bring together a range of stakeholders to design solutions (e.g. co-design workshops)

LEGISLATIVE REFORM

In the space of a few years, the previous government passed two significant pieces of legislation relating to protest (PCSC 2022 and POA 2023), and progressed another before it was dropped by the new government (Criminal Justice Bill 2024).⁹⁰ This has added to an already complex legislative landscape. For example, as part of its legislative scrutiny for the POA 2023, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) argued that these additional offences were not needed given the existence of various laws that already prohibit many of the tactics it sought to further restrict.⁹¹

We have recommended a comprehensive, independent review of the protest landscape above for this reason. However, we also make our own recommendations for legislative reform based on the findings of our People's Town Square, that the review should consider. Despite the divisiveness of the topic of protest, we found areas of consensus. Drawing on these, we have made a number of recommendations below.

Remove restrictions on noisy protests

The PCSC Act 2022 gave the police power to intervene in instances where 'the noise generated by protest persons taking part' may result in 'serious disruption to the activities of an organisation which are carried on in the vicinity of the procession'.

There was a broad rejection of this restriction by our participants as many felt that noise was central to an effective protest, particularly given that the key value of protest was seen as the ability to express your opinion, and that there was support for tactics that verbally communicated the message of the protest in a peaceful and non-violent way.

Additionally, the sense that laws are not clear enough led some participants to feel that 'noise' was too vague and broad a term – for example, what counts as an unacceptable level of noise? There was concern that this made the law difficult to implement, further strengthening the case to remove this restriction for participants.

We therefore recommend removing the restriction on noisy protests in the PCSC Act 2022.

⁸⁹ Demos, 2024. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Citizens-White-Paper-July-2024_final.pdf

⁹⁰ The Constitution Society, 2024. <https://consoc.org.uk/legislative-wash-up-post-office-act/>

⁹¹ Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR), 2022. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22681/documents/166680/default/?utm_source

Remove offence of being equipped to lock on

The POA 2023 introduced new offences for 'locking on' and 'being equipped to lock on'. There was general consensus from participants that the latter offence should be removed, whereas there was more disagreement on the former.

As with the previous recommendation, the sense that laws are not clear enough meant participants wanted language to be clearer and less broad. There were concerns that if language left too much room for interpretation, as with 'being equipped to lock on', it could lead to arrests of innocent people. The legislation, for example, does not specify types of equipment for locking on, leading the JCHR to raise concerns about everyday items falling under the offence.⁹²

We recommend removing the offence of being equipped to lock on in the POA 2023.

Increase the knowledge threshold for breaching conditions imposed on a protest

We found that participants started from a low level of awareness and knowledge on protest legislation, which suggests that a high level of knowledge about restrictions should not be assumed.

Therefore, we recommend repealing Section 75 of the PCSC Act 2022 which significantly lowered the level of knowledge required to establish a criminal offence from "knowingly" breaching a condition to "ought to have known".

Combined with our later recommendations that aim to raise awareness of conditions placed on a protest, protesters will be more likely to know whether they are breaching a condition or not, allowing this law to be applied fairly.

Clarify language on 'serious harm' and 'serious disruption'

Language could also be made clearer around 'serious harm' in the PCSC Act 2022, and 'serious disruption' in the POA 2023, by ensuring the definition is not too broad.

The PCSC Act introduced the offence of 'intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance', referring either to creating a risk of serious harm (including serious annoyance and serious inconvenience) or preventing the public from exercising their rights. The definition of 'serious harm', which ranges from 'death' to 'serious annoyance', is too broad, and therefore not in line with the public's views.

The definition of 'serious disruption' was changed by former Home Secretary Suella Braverman to include 'more than minor' disruption, pushed through in 2023 as secondary legislation to the Public Order Act 1986.⁹³ This lowered the threshold of what counts as disruption, and broadened the scope of what could be included. This is subject to an ongoing legal case that resulted in a High Court ruling that the Government acted unlawfully in changing this definition, and is currently under appeal.⁹⁴

Considering nuanced views from participants on the level of disruption that should be allowed, as well as concerns around clarity and broadness of language, we recommend clarifying the definitions of both 'serious disruption' and 'serious harm' and raising the threshold for the level of inconvenience needed to fall under these offences.

⁹² House of Commons Library, 2023. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05013/SN05013.pdf>

⁹³ House of Lords Library, 2023. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/draft-public-order-act-1986-serious-disruption-to-the-life-of-the-community-regulations-2023-fatal-and-regret-motions/>

⁹⁴ The Telegraph, 2024. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/08/28/yvette-cooper-revive-anti-protest-laws/>

Review sentencing for non-violent tactics

Our participants valued peaceful and non-violent protests highly, and conversely condemned violence at protests. Safety was also asserted as an important principle. Cases where the sentencing has been far harsher for peaceful and non-violent tactics than violent ones are therefore out of step with the principles our participants generated.

For example, five Just Stop Oil activists were sentenced to four to five years in prison for conspiring to block the M25⁹⁵ compared to an average prison sentence of two years for recent rioters.⁹⁶ The Just Stop Oil activists were sentenced under the new offence of 'intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance' in the PCSC Act, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years,⁹⁷ the same limit as the offence for rioting,⁹⁸ although few of the recent rioters have been charged with this specific offence.

As part of the comprehensive, independent review on protest legislation, we recommend reviewing sentencing with a view to resetting the balance between peaceful and non-violent protest and violent protests or riots, so that the latter carries a far harsher sentence than the former.

There is an opportunity for further deliberative research in this area, as in our People's Town Square we covered restrictions on protests but not what the consequences of these restrictions should be (e.g. sentencing).

BETTER POLICE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION

Our participants raised concerns that the police may not understand protest legislation well enough to be able to implement it effectively and fairly due to a perception that the laws are unclear. This is supported by a review in 2020 by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) of protest policing which found that "many police officers find the laws that apply to protest unclear and overly complex".⁹⁹

In the context of increased police powers due to new legislation, it is imperative that as well as reviewing these powers, we ensure that police are able to use them appropriately. This is particularly important for communities who face discrimination at the hands of the police – for example, the Casey report in 2023 found that the Metropolitan police is institutionally racist, misogynistic, and homophobic.¹⁰⁰ This can be seen in the disproportionate use of force against Black people, who are 5.7 times more likely to have force used on them than White people.¹⁰¹

These recommendations focus on improvements that the police can make to use the powers they have more appropriately, which may help to rebuild trust with marginalised communities.

95 The Times, 2024. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/law/article/just-stop-oil-activists-to-appeal-sentences-after-rioters-given-shorter-terms-ccb32wpxm>

96 BBC, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm23y7l01v8o>

97 Prospect Magazine, 2024. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/law/law-and-order/67536/why-are-sentences-for-violent-disorder-lower-than-those-for-peaceful-protest>

98 The National Archives. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64>

99 His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), 2021. <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/getting-the-balance-right-an-inspection-of-how-effectively-the-police-deal-with-protests.pdf>

100 The Guardian, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/metropolitan-police-institutionally-racist-misogynistic-homophobic-louise-casey-report>

101 HMICFRS, 2021. <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/disproportionate-use-of-police-powers-spotlight-on-stop-search-and-use-of-force.pdf>

Review protest policing guidance to ensure police understand the law

We broadly support the HMICFRS review's recommendation to ensure police have up to date, accessible guidance on protest policing and a greater understanding of human rights law. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and College of Policing have updated the 'authorised professional practice' (APP) on public order public safety (POPS) in 2023 in line with the review's recommendations, but HMICFRS are yet to publish a review of this update, which we recommend that they do.

Build evidence base on police de-escalation training

'De-escalation' training is provided to police officers and staff in frontline roles as part of the Public & Personal Safety Training (PPST) foundation courses.¹⁰² De-escalation is a way to manage conflict between the police and the public that defuses the situation in a way that avoids the use of force. Advocates argue that it could help build trust in the police, and better relationships between police, protesters, and civil society. However, there is currently a lack of evidence in the UK on police use of force and on this type of training.¹⁰³

We recommend the police build the evidence base on the effectiveness of de-escalation training in reducing the use of force and building trust in protest policing. We support the College of Policing's recommendation to do this through working with police partners and academia,¹⁰⁴ but also emphasise the need to consult civil society organisations and experts specialising in racial inequalities to ensure that any training helps rather than hinders the issue of disproportionate use of force against marginalised communities.

Better coordination by local police to protect MPs' homes

One tactic that participants almost universally agreed should be restricted was protesting outside of MPs' homes, partly due to a concern about intimidation of the politician, partly about the impact on their family and neighbours. In the context of unacceptable levels of intimidation faced by political candidates in the last election,¹⁰⁵ and with politicians from marginalised groups who are already underrepresented in politics disproportionately likely to experience intimidation,¹⁰⁶ we face a real challenge to our democracy if we allow elected politicians, or those standing for election, to be afraid to represent their own, their party's or their constituents' views.

Concerns about intimidation of MPs and MPs' safety are heightened, especially since the murders of Jo Cox in 2016 and David Amess in 2021. In light of the murder of Jo Cox, the Committee on Standards in Public Life published a review on the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates in 2017.¹⁰⁷ Although her murder did not occur outside her home or relate to protest, the inquiry examined the issue of intimidation outside MPs' homes and found that "the current criminal law is sufficient in the case of offences against the person and damage to property, as well as credible threats of violence".

Given that restrictions have been added rather than taken away since 2017, we do not suggest that additional legislation is needed to protect MPs from protests outside of their homes. Instead, the law that does exist must be applied more effectively, which we suggest should form part of the independent review we have recommended.

102 Metropolitan Police, 2022. <https://www.met.police.uk/foi-ai/metropolitan-police/d/november-2022/de-escalation-training/#:~:text=De%20de%20escalation%20forms%20a,are%20required%20to%20complete%20PPST.>

103 College of Policing, 2020. <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2020-09/Conflict-management-guidelines.pdf>

104 College of Policing, 2020. <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2020-09/Conflict-management-guidelines.pdf>

105 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4ng3j1pnpqo>

106 House of Commons Library, 2024. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9192/CBP-9192.pdf>

107 Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81c4c1e5274a2e8ab55b85/6.3637_CO_v6_061217_Web3.1__2_.pdf

As a start, we recommend better coordination by local police to protect MPs' homes, echoing the recommendations in the JCHR's 2019 report on threats to MPs.¹⁰⁸ Specifically, better data collection by local police forces to enable a clearer picture of the challenge, as well as clearer central guidance about the action that needs to be taken to protect MPs.

RAISING AWARENESS OF PROTEST LEGISLATION, CONDITIONS AND RIGHTS

We found low awareness and knowledge of protest legislation at the start of our People's Town Square, which raises two key concerns. One is that if we want to involve the public in the debate around protest, we need to ensure that people have the information they need to meaningfully contribute. The other is that we need to ensure that people are aware of the conditions placed on a protest, as well as their rights whether they are protesting or not, in part to ensure their safety.

Additionally, to ensure the safety of people in and around protests, which was paramount for our participants, there needs to be good communication between the police, protesters, communities and civil society. This is particularly important, but also particularly difficult, between marginalised communities and police, where there is a particular lack of trust, as has been described.

We need a reconceptualisation of the role of police at protests: they should not just be there to enforce the law, but to raise awareness of it too, which will enable them to better enforce it. There is scope for experimentation with different models here – for example, Northern Ireland has an independent body called the Parades Commission that is responsible for placing restrictions on parades.¹⁰⁹ As a starting point, we have recommended two avenues that may warrant exploration.

Civil society organisations can also play a role here in informing the public on their right to protest and its limits according to current legislation, and so we have also made a recommendation aimed at these organisations.

Reform the role of police liaison team officers to guarantee independence from intelligence gathering

Police liaison team (PLT) officers are police officers who are present at protests, and responsible for communicating with protesters, but should be independent of any intelligence gathering happening at a protest. However, the aforementioned HMICFRS review in 2020 found that often there was not a clear separation of roles and they were responsible for some intelligence gathering, leading to a lack of trust from protesters.¹¹⁰

We recommend a clearer delineation of roles to ensure that PLT officers are not responsible for intelligence gathering. We also recommend these officers play a more active role in raising awareness of conditions placed on the protest and relevant restrictions and being available to listen and respond to any safety concerns from protesters. The police may want to consider developing printed materials that they can distribute at the protest.

As well as raising awareness of restrictions among protesters, there is evidence that better engagement with the community by police can increase perceptions of safety, reduce disorder and anti-social behaviour, and increase confidence and trust in the police.¹¹¹

108 JCHR, 2019. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201919/jtselect/jtrights/37/37.pdf>

109 UK Government. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/parades-commission-for-northern-ireland>

110 HMICFRS, 2021. <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/getting-the-balance-right-an-inspection-of-how-effectively-the-police-deal-with-protests.pdf>

111 College of Policing. <https://www.college.police.uk/app/engagement-and-communication/engagement>

Integrate community mediators into the management of protests

Community mediators are community leaders who are independent from the police, but with whom the police can establish a relationship to help facilitate dialogue and engagement with a specific community or protest group, increase understanding of the community or group, and reduce conflict.¹¹² They have often been found to be a more effective communication channel with community-based groups than PLT officers.¹¹³

We recommend that the police work to more actively identify and use community mediators to communicate with protesters via a more trusted channel, particularly in local or community-based protests. The police should complete a thorough community impact assessment to ensure the most effective community members have been identified and engaged.

The role of community mediators should also be strengthened from mostly being a communication channel to being trusted by police to taking a more active role in the management of protests, for example by being involved in the policing plan for the protest.

Develop a communications campaign to inform the public of their rights

Additionally, civil society organisations should work to raise awareness of protest rights and limitations amongst the public, for example through a communications campaign. We found that raising awareness of the legislative landscape increased the public's desire to protect the right to protest, and so such a campaign could also be used to increase support for policy proposals to remove recent restrictions on protests.

Given the public placed great importance on peaceful and non-violent aspects of protests, if civil society organisations want to bring the public along with them, they may wish to emphasise these aspects, including when discussing potentially controversial tactics. For example, some participants justified tactics perceived as disruptive by noting they are still peaceful and non-violent.

112 College of Policing, 2023. <https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2023-06/National-protest-operational-advice.pdf>

113 National Police Chief's Council, 2022. <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/NPCC/Protest-Operational-Advice-2022.pdf>

CONCLUSION

The issue of the right to protest has been contentious and contested in recent years. It is also urgently important at a time where people are feeling that they are not being heard by the current democratic system, a system in which trust is broken. Sir Keir Starmer has said that the fight for trust will be the “political battle of our age”. While trust is in that state, protest will be a feature of our democratic landscape.

Against this backdrop we set out to engage the public in a more in-depth, nuanced deliberative discussion about the right to protest and, in this context, worked with them to find consensus on the difficult questions. Our People’s Town Square resulted in a set of principles that guided our policy recommendations, and should guide any future legislation.

Our recommendations point to the need to involve a wider range of stakeholders in a more substantial way on the issue of protest. If we want to build a future-facing protest landscape, we need to involve the public in decision-making in a way that goes beyond our currently simplistic understanding of public opinion on this issue.

This report calls into question the large number of new restrictions on protest introduced in the space of a few years, justified by this simplistic understanding of public opinion. We are now in a situation where peaceful and non-violent protesters have received harsher sentences than those charged with violent disorder as part of the recent riots.¹¹⁴

This goes against our participants’ belief in the importance of peaceful and non-violent protest, which grew over the course of the People’s Town Square. The clear message from our participants is that peaceful and non-violent protests are legitimate, and that the Government must protect this right.

On the legitimacy of disruption as part of protest, the message was less clear. Views were nuanced and, for many, shifted over the course of the People’s Town Square. We did not reach consensus on where the line is for disruption as part of legitimate protest. On the other hand, there was consensus that the rights of protesters and the public should be balanced. What exactly this looks like requires further thinking that should involve a variety of stakeholders with different perspectives, as the question of balance can be subjective.

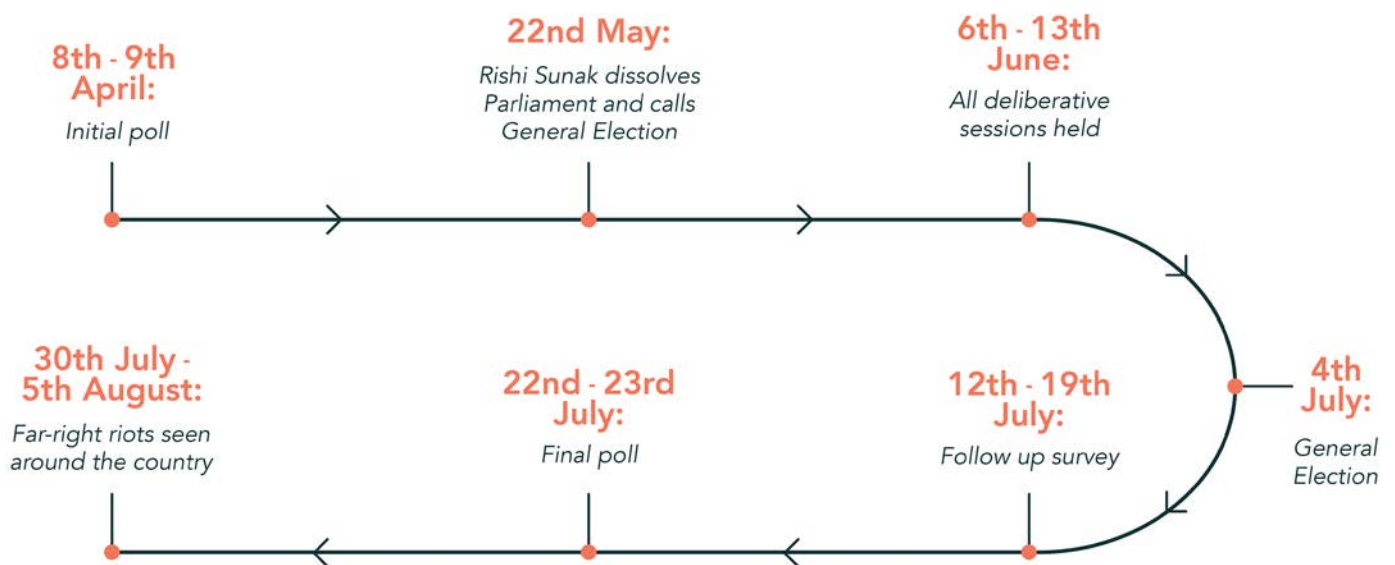
Ultimately, in the decades to come, we want to be able to feel grateful for the protests that have improved our society, and proud of our response to them at the time, a response that struck a balance between everyone’s rights, whether participating or not in the protest.

¹¹⁴ Prospect Magazine, 2024. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/law/law-and-order/67536/why-are-sentences-for-violent-disorder-lower-than-those-for-peaceful-protest>

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

TIMELINE



Initial poll

We conducted two nationally representative polls as part of this research. The first poll was conducted from 8th to 9th April 2024 with a nationally representative sample of **2,079** respondents.

The aim of the poll was to:

- Benchmark public views on the right to protest (e.g. views on tactics, restrictions, and the importance of protest)
- Quantify how many people in the population have had direct experience of being involved in a protest – we provided respondents with a list of potential activities and categorised four as protest for the purposes of our analysis: boycott, physically joining a public protest, industrial action or a strike and a targeted online protest as part of a coordinated campaign
- Inform the design of the sampling and sessions of the deliberative research

We analysed the data by various subgroups (e.g. demographics, experience of protest), and we have identified differences by subgroups throughout the report that are statistically significant, unless otherwise specified.

Deliberative process: The People's Town Square

Sampling

We recruited 24 participants for our People's Town Square – aiming for a representative mix in terms of demographics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, a range of locations across England), experience of protests, and views on protests. We drew on the results from our initial poll to design the sample. For example, we found in our poll that views on protest vary by disability and sexuality, and therefore we included quotas on these demographics.

In our poll, we found that 37% of the public had taken part in a protest. We aimed to reflect this in our sampling, but our final sample skewed towards people who have protested at fourteen compared to people who haven't at ten. This represents a limitation in terms of the representativeness of our participant sample.

However, we found that participants who had not protested were often more vocal than those that had, and so we feel confident that our findings reflect the views of this group. Additionally, we recruited participants with a range of views on protest, as detailed below, which is the more crucial factor in ensuring a balance of views.

As a proxy for views on protest, we chose to replicate levels of agreement with the statement that 'it should be easier to protest than it is now' in the poll, as the public were relatively split on this issue (compared with, for example, broad agreement on the right to protest in principle). In our poll, we found 37% of the general public agreed with the statement, 30% neither agreed or disagreed and 26% of the public disagreed. We recruited eleven participants who agreed, seven that neither agreed nor disagreed and six that disagreed. We feel confident that this meant we heard a range of views which sufficiently represent the views of the general public.

The online sessions

We held four online sessions in June 2024 with 24 participants:

- **The opening session (two hours):** The purpose of the opening session was to introduce participants to the People's Town Square and to understand their initial thoughts and associations with protest.
- **The learning session (three hours):** This session was designed to provide a balanced set of information on the history of protest, protest legislation and controversy around protests with the help of a legal expert, and provide a space for participants to share their initial thoughts on these.
- **The principles session (two hours):** This session was designed to facilitate deliberation on the value of protest and the level of restrictions that should be placed on controversial tactics (selected on the basis of our initial poll), before developing principles that politicians should consider when thinking about protest. After this session, we compiled the principles developed by the different breakout groups into one longlist.
- **The policies session (two hours):** From the longlist of principles, participants were asked to rank their top five principles in order of importance, resulting in a list of six top principles. A representative from Liberty shared three policy proposals for our participants to consider, which they did with reference to the principles they had developed.

Throughout the deliberative process, we used the interactive online platform Mentimeter. Mentimeter is a highly engaging tool that allows participants to take part in activities such as polls, quizzes, and open text questions.

Information presented to participants

In the learning session, we shared information on three topics related to protest: the history of protest, protest legislation and the controversies relating to protest.

We involved a legal expert in designing and presenting information on the topic of protest legislation. The expert shared the legal context of the right to protest (including its limits and protections), police powers to intervene in protests (e.g. breach of the peace, public order offences, criminal damage), new police powers to intervene in protests (e.g. Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, Public Order Act 2023), and methods for police to intervene (e.g. Public Order Act 1986, Police Act 1996, Police Reform Act 2002, kettling).

Our legal expert also presented information on the history of protest through three case studies we had chosen: the Iraq war protests, the Suffragette movement, and the Miners' strikes (1984-5).

On the controversies relating to protest, we shared a variety of video clips on three key areas of debate:

- *Should protests be allowed to be disruptive?* We showed a clip of a protester sharing concerns about being able to protest given new restrictions, a clip of a commentator arguing that protests disrupt ordinary people's lives and that police are on the side of protesters, a clip of someone who missed his job interview due to protests blocking traffic, a debate about what counts as serious harm or disruption between people with different views, and a clip of a Just Stop Oil activist arguing for the need for civil disobedience given the urgency of the climate crisis.
- *Should you be allowed to protest outside a politician's home?* We showed a clip of protests outside Tobias Ellwood MP's home, the perspective of the MP himself, and the perspective of a protester on an LBC call in show.
- *What should the role of the police be?* We showed a clip from a police commissioner speaking about balancing rights of different groups in public order policing, a former chief superintendent sharing his view on the difficulties of public order policing in the context of politicisation, and an academic arguing that police power is applied disproportionately against marginalised groups.

Ensuring balance, impartiality and independence of information

We recognise the importance of providing a balanced set of information to participants, particularly on a contentious topic. We compiled the information independently from our funder, Liberty, and retained full editorial independence on the information we chose to share. We also stressed the importance of impartiality to our legal expert, and reviewed the information on protest legislation they compiled to ensure it provided an overview of the facts, rather than opinion on the topic.

We chose our three protest case studies to reflect a range of tactics, causes, types of protesters, and levels of success to present a balanced view of the history of protest in the UK, as far as possible within time constraints.

The information on protest controversies posed the greatest challenge for impartiality, as this information is by its nature partial rather than impartial. We therefore strove for balance in terms of the content to ensure we adequately covered different sides of the debate. We did this not only by considering a balance of content, but also a balance in terms of the length, format and type of videos. We involved multiple team members in reviewing this content to ensure we felt that balance had been achieved.

Liberty's policy proposals

We introduced a representative from Liberty to share three policy proposals in the policies session, which participants were encouraged to ask questions on and evaluate using the principles they had developed. The proposals shared were:

- Remove police powers to clamp down on noisy protests
- Scrap broad and disproportionate protest offences such as locking on
- Remove discriminatory police powers to stop and search people at protest without suspicion

The follow up survey

We followed up with participants a month after the sessions with a short survey to understand their reflections on the process, including whether their views had changed over the course of it. We received responses from 21/24 participants.

Final poll

The final poll was conducted from 22nd to 23rd July 2024 with a nationally representative sample of **2,115** respondents.

The aim of the poll was to test the representativeness of our findings and our hypotheses from the deliberative process within the general public. This included levels of agreement with the principles, opposing statements that encourage respondents to make trade offs, engagement with media on protest, and views on 'tactics that cause serious inconvenience' for different protest causes.

As with the previous poll, we analysed the data by various subgroups (e.g. demographics, experience of protest), and we have identified differences by subgroups throughout the report that are statistically significant, unless otherwise specified.

Licence to publish

Demos – Licence to Publish

The work (as defined below) is provided under the terms of this licence ('licence'). The work is protected by copyright and/or other applicable law. Any use of the work other than as authorized under this licence is prohibited. By exercising any rights to the work provided here, you accept and agree to be bound by the terms of this licence. Demos grants you the rights contained here in consideration of your acceptance of such terms and conditions.

1 Definitions

a 'Collective Work' means a work, such as a periodical issue, anthology or encyclopedia, in which the Work in its entirety in unmodified form, along with a number of other contributions, constituting separate and independent works in themselves, are assembled into a collective whole. A work that constitutes a Collective Work will not be considered a Derivative Work (as defined below) for the purposes of this Licence.

b 'Derivative Work' means a work based upon the Work or upon the Work and other pre-existing works, such as a musical arrangement, dramatization, fictionalization, motion picture version, sound recording, art reproduction, abridgment, condensation, or any other form in which the Work may be recast, transformed, or adapted, except that a work that constitutes a Collective Work or a translation from English into another language will not be considered a Derivative Work for the purpose of this Licence.

c 'Licensor' means the individual or entity that offers the Work under the terms of this Licence.

d 'Original Author' means the individual or entity who created the Work.

e 'Work' means the copyrightable work of authorship offered under the terms of this Licence.

f 'You' means an individual or entity exercising rights under this Licence who has not previously violated the terms of this Licence with respect to the Work, or who has received express permission from Demos to exercise rights under this Licence despite a previous violation.

2 Fair Use Rights

Nothing in this licence is intended to reduce, limit, or restrict any rights arising from fair use, first sale or other limitations on the exclusive rights of the copyright owner under copyright law or other applicable laws.

3 Licence Grant

Subject to the terms and conditions of this Licence, Licensor hereby grants You a worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive, perpetual (for the duration of the applicable copyright) licence to exercise the rights in the Work as stated below:

a to reproduce the Work, to incorporate the Work into one or more Collective Works, and to reproduce the Work as incorporated in the Collective Works;

b to distribute copies or phono-records of, display publicly, perform publicly, and perform publicly by means of a digital audio transmission the Work including as incorporated in Collective Works; The above rights may be exercised in all media and formats whether now known or hereafter devised. The above rights include the right to make such modifications as are technically necessary to exercise the rights in other media and formats. All rights not expressly granted by Licensor are hereby reserved.

4 Restrictions

The licence granted in Section 3 above is expressly made subject to and limited by the following restrictions:

a You may distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work only under the terms of this Licence, and You must include a copy of, or the Uniform Resource Identifier for, this Licence with every copy or phono-record of the Work You distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform. You may not offer or impose any terms on the Work that alter or restrict the terms of this Licence or the recipients' exercise of the rights granted hereunder. You may not sublicense the Work. You must keep intact all notices that refer to this Licence and to the disclaimer of warranties. You may not distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work with any technological measures that control access or use of the Work in a manner inconsistent with the terms of this Licence Agreement. The above applies to the Work as incorporated in a Collective Work, but this does not require the Collective Work apart from the Work itself to be made subject to the terms of this Licence. If You create a Collective Work, upon notice from any Licensor You must, to the extent practicable, remove from the Collective Work any reference to such Licensor or the Original Author, as requested.

b You may not exercise any of the rights granted to You in Section 3 above in any manner that is primarily intended

for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation. The exchange of the Work for other copyrighted works by means of digital file sharing or otherwise shall not be considered to be intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation, provided there is no payment of any monetary compensation in connection with the exchange of copyrighted works.

c If you distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work or any Collective Works, you must keep intact all copyright notices for the Work and give the Original Author credit reasonable to the medium or means You are utilizing by conveying the name (or pseudonym if applicable) of the Original Author if supplied; the title of the Work if supplied. Such credit may be implemented in any reasonable manner; provided, however, that in the case of a Collective Work, at a minimum such credit will appear where any other comparable authorship credit appears and in a manner at least as prominent as such other comparable authorship credit.

5 Representations, Warranties and Disclaimer

a By offering the Work for public release under this Licence, Licensor represents and warrants that, to the best of Licensor's knowledge after reasonable inquiry:

i Licensor has secured all rights in the Work necessary to grant the licence rights hereunder and to permit the lawful exercise of the rights granted hereunder without You having any obligation to pay any royalties, compulsory licence fees, residuals or any other payments;

ii The Work does not infringe the copyright, trademark, publicity rights, common law rights or any other right of any third party or constitute defamation, invasion of privacy or other tortious injury to any third party.

b Except as expressly stated in this licence or otherwise agreed in writing or required by applicable law, the work is licenced on an 'as is' basis, without warranties of any kind, either express or implied including, without limitation, any warranties regarding the contents or accuracy of the work.

6 Limitation on Liability

Except to the extent required by applicable law, and except for damages arising from liability to a third party resulting from breach of the warranties in section 5, in no event will licensor be liable to you on any legal theory for any special, incidental, consequential, punitive or exemplary damages arising out of this licence or the use of the work, even if licensor has been advised of the possibility of such damages.

7 Termination

a This Licence and the rights granted hereunder will terminate automatically upon any breach by You of the terms of this Licence. Individuals or entities who have received Collective Works from You under this Licence, however, will not have their licences terminated provided such individuals or entities remain in full compliance with those licences. Sections 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 will survive any termination of this Licence.

b Subject to the above terms and conditions, the licence granted here is perpetual (for the duration of the applicable copyright in the Work). Notwithstanding the above, Licensor reserves the right to release the Work under different licence terms or to stop distributing the Work at any time; provided, however that any such election will not serve to withdraw this Licence (or any other licence that has been, or is required to be, granted under the terms of this Licence), and this Licence will continue in full force and effect unless terminated as stated above.

8 Miscellaneous

a Each time You distribute or publicly digitally perform the Work or a Collective Work, Demos offers to the recipient a licence to the Work on the same terms and conditions as the licence granted to You under this Licence.

b If any provision of this Licence is invalid or unenforceable under applicable law, it shall not affect the validity or enforceability of the remainder of the terms of this Licence, and without further action by the parties to this agreement, such provision shall be reformed to the minimum extent necessary to make such provision valid and enforceable.

c No term or provision of this Licence shall be deemed waived and no breach consented to unless such waiver or consent shall be in writing and signed by the party to be charged with such waiver or consent.

d This Licence constitutes the entire agreement between the parties with respect to the Work licenced here. There are no understandings, agreements or representations with respect to the Work not specified here. Licensor shall not be bound by any additional provisions that may appear in any communication from You. This Licence may not be modified without the mutual written agreement of Demos and You.

DEMOS

Demos is a champion of people, ideas and democracy. We bring people together. We bridge divides. We listen and we understand. We are practical about the problems we face, but endlessly optimistic and ambitious about our capacity, together, to overcome them.

At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

Demos is an independent, educational charity, registered in England and Wales. (Charity Registration no. 1042046)

Find out more at www.demos.co.uk

DEMOS

PUBLISHED BY DEMOS SEPTEMBER 2024

© DEMOS. SOME RIGHTS RESERVED.

15 WHITEHALL, LONDON, SW1A 2DD

T: 020 3878 3955

HELLO@DEMOS.CO.UK

WWW.DEMOS.CO.UK