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Has Covid-19 reset the immigration debate?

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About this research

This study considers the impact of the coronavirus crisis on attitudes to immigration and the public's preferences for the points-based system. The analysis in this report compares responses from a subset of survey questions fielded in January 2020 for *The Reset Moment* report with responses from May 2020, one week after the first measures to ease lockdown were announced.

The findings in this report suggest that attitudes to immigration have remained broadly consistent since the start of the year. However, there is greater reported awareness of the role of migrants in the NHS and frontline services; and a subtle warming in attitudes to immigration, particularly among younger cohorts and ethnic minorities. Such incremental changes are part of a longer-term softening of attitudes towards immigration that began before the EU referendum, pre-dating the coronavirus crisis.

This study was produced by the [Policy Institute at King's College London](#) and [British Future](#), with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council through the UK in a Changing Europe and Global Dialogue. The pre-COVID survey ran on the ICM omnibus from 10-13 January 2020 with a nationally representative sample of 2,305 adults in Great Britain; the post-lockdown survey ran from 15-17 May 2020 with 2,043 adults in Britain.

Headline findings

- **There is a strong perception that the coronavirus crisis has been a catalyst for transforming views on immigration, particularly in relation to low-skilled workers.** A high majority of those surveyed (70 per cent) agree the pandemic has shown the contribution that immigration makes in staffing essential services, and almost two-thirds (64 per cent) say they now value the role of 'low-skilled' migrant workers more.
- Despite this perception, **we have not seen a sudden and dramatic change in attitudes to immigration and public preferences for the points-based system.** Overall, there has been little movement in attitudes to immigration since the start of the year, with only a slight increase in the proportion of the population who feel immigration has a positive impact on the UK or who would like to see the level of low-skilled migration increase.
- We are, however, seeing a more **subtle warming of attitudes when it comes to preferences within the points-based system.** Compared to before the COVID-19 outbreak, the public – particularly younger cohorts and ethnic minorities – are now more generous in their allocation of points across a wide range of professions, not just essential workers in the coronavirus response.
- **These incremental changes during the pandemic are part of a longer-term warming of attitudes towards immigration, starting before the EU referendum.** These trends suggest that immigration is both less salient as an issue and that the public have become more positive about the social, economic and cultural impact of migrants who come to live in the UK.

A transformation in attitudes to immigration?

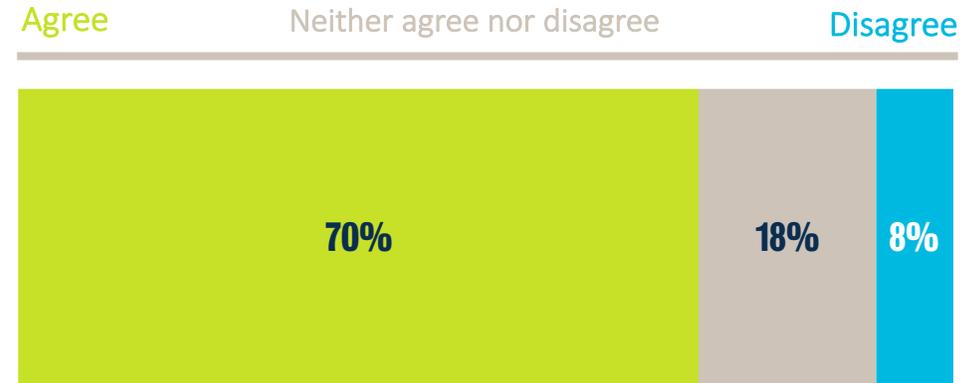
There is a strong perception that the coronavirus crisis has been a catalyst in transforming the public's attitudes to immigration, particularly towards low-skilled workers

A clear majority of the public agrees that the coronavirus crisis has demonstrated the importance of immigration in staffing essential services, with one in five agreeing strongly.

Many also feel their own views have changed, with almost two-thirds agreeing that the crisis has made them value the role of 'low-skilled' workers more than before. Just one in ten disagree.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

The coronavirus crisis shows how important a contribution immigration makes in staffing our essential services like the NHS



The coronavirus crisis has made me value the role of 'low-skilled' workers, in essential services such as care homes, transport and shops, more than before



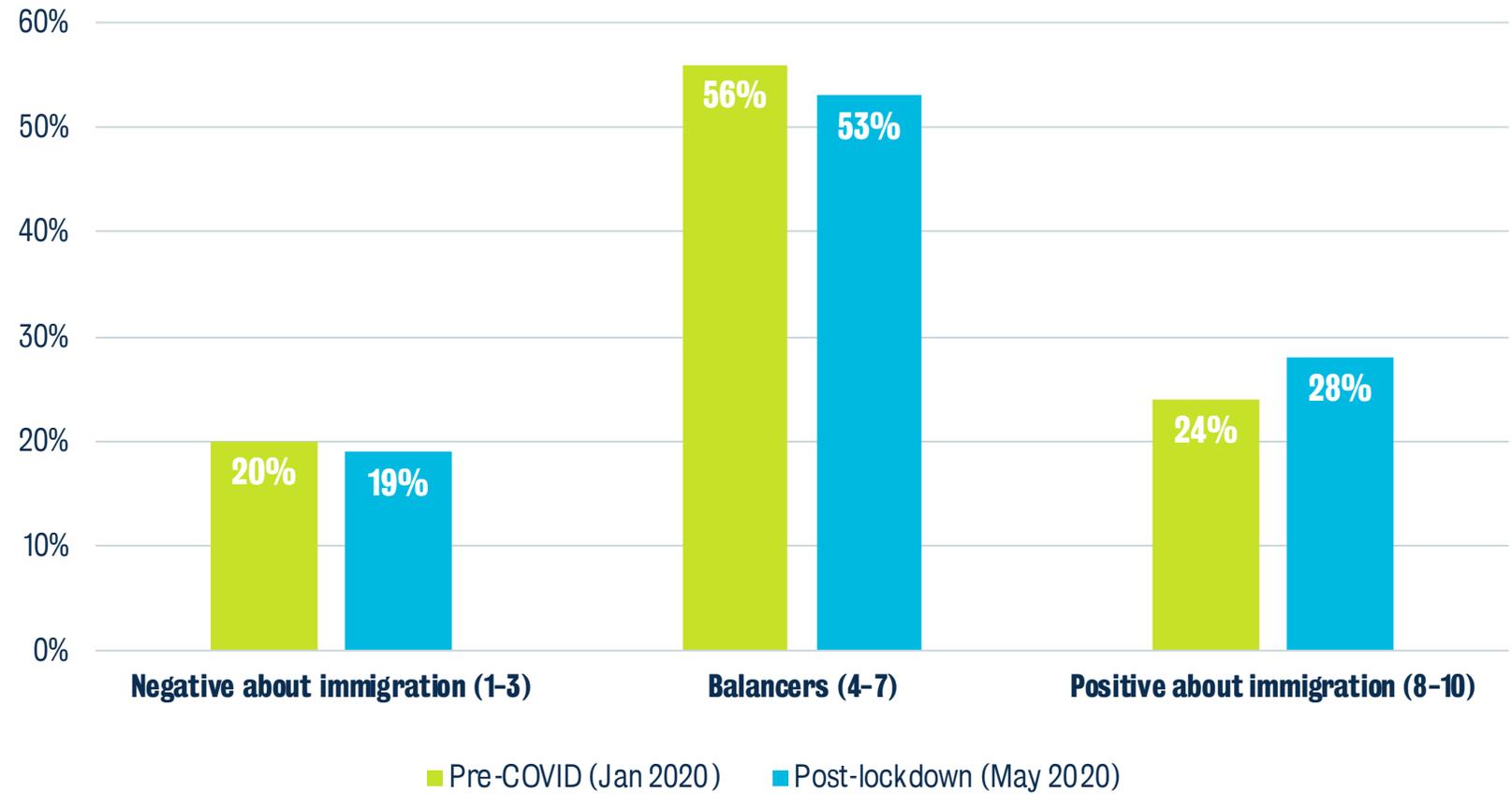
Actual shifts in immigration attitudes are more incremental

We have not seen a sudden and dramatic change in attitudes to immigration. Overall, there has been little movement, with only a slight increase in the proportion of the population who feel immigration has a positive impact on the UK or who would like to see the level of low-skilled migration increase.

Attitudes to the impact of immigration on the UK [have seen little movement during the pandemic. A slight increase (4 points) can be observed in those who place their attitudes towards the 'very positive' end of the scale, along with a one-point drop in negative attitudes (19 per cent).

However, most people remain 'balancers' in their views on the impact of immigration (53 per cent), seeing both the pressures and the gains that it can bring to the UK.

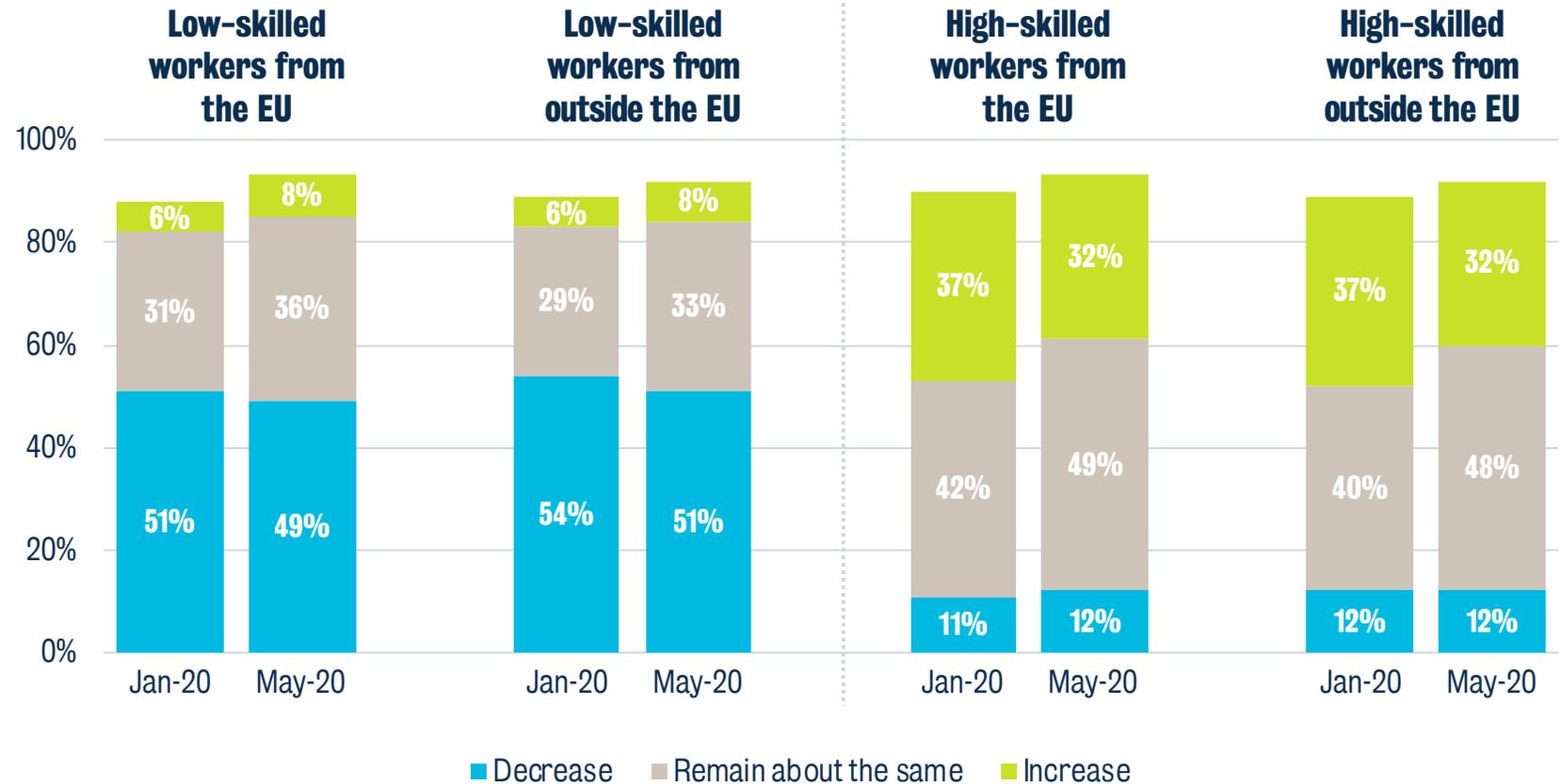
On a scale of 1-10, do you feel that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on the UK, including your local community? (1 is 'very negative', 10 is 'very positive')



Preferences for the level of migration to the UK have also remained consistent.

There has been a slight increase in support for low-skilled workers, both from the EU and beyond, be it to increase or sustain the current level of migration. Yet such shifts are still far from significant and remain overshadowed by much higher levels of support for high-skilled workers.

Policies on immigration often affect specific groups of people coming to live in the UK. For each of following groups, please tell us whether you would prefer the number of people coming to live in the UK to increase, decrease, or remain about the same?



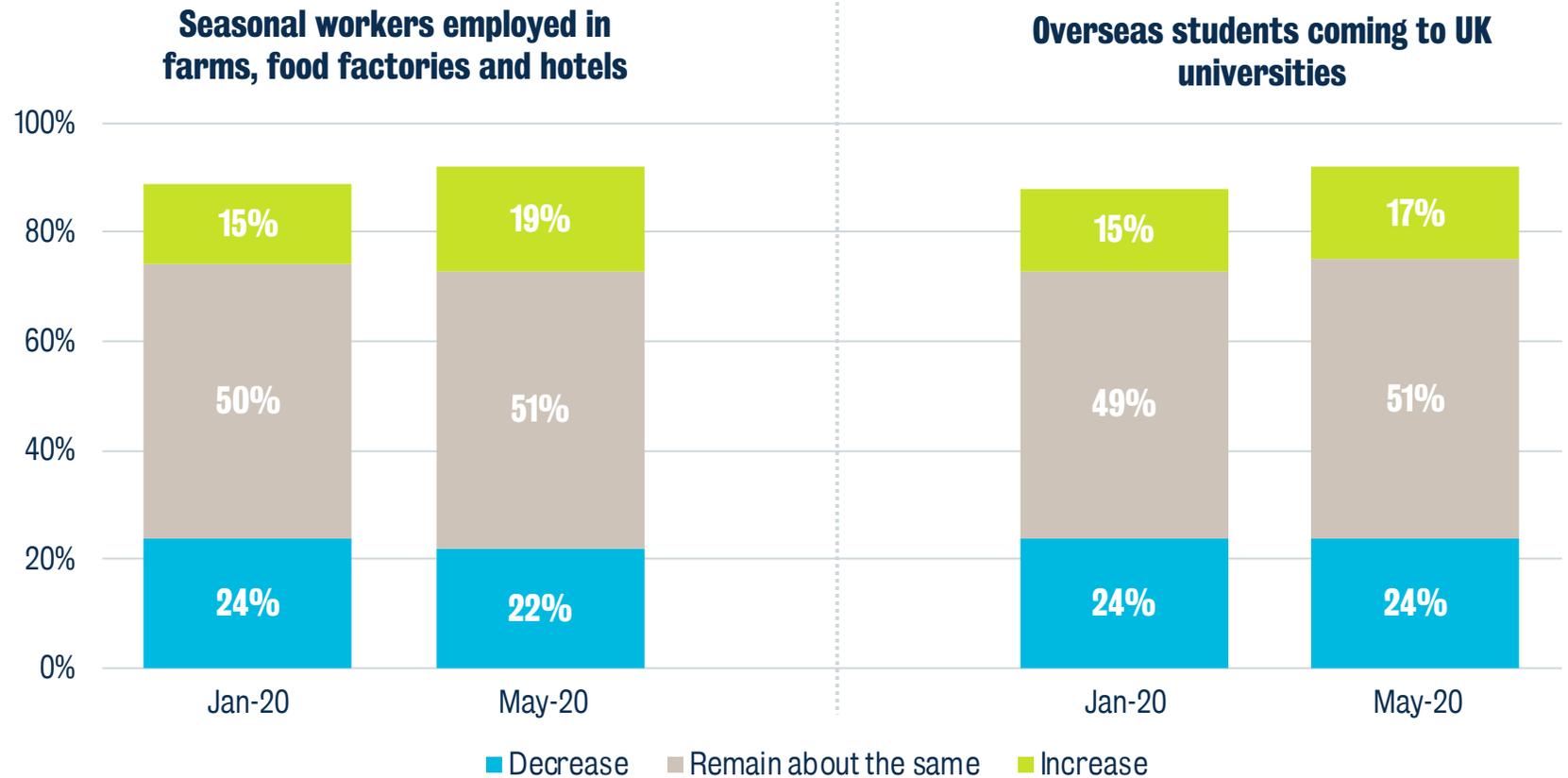
Source: ICM poll for British Future/Policy Institute – Pre-COVID poll fielded 10-13 January 2020 (n=2,305); post-lockdown poll fielded 15-17 May 2020 (n=2,043). Don't know's excluded.

Similarly, there are only small shifts in attitudes to other forms of migration that have featured prominently in news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, there has been a 4-point rise in support for increasing the number of seasonal workers coming to the UK, including those employed in farms and food factories; and a 2-point rise in support for increasing the number of overseas students.

The majority view, however, is still for levels of migration in these cases to remain the same.

Policies on immigration often affect specific groups of people coming to live in the UK. For each of following groups, please tell us whether you would prefer the number of people coming to live in the UK to increase, decrease, or remain about the same?



Source: ICM poll for British Future/Policy Institute – Pre-COVID poll fielded 10-13 January 2020 (n=2,305); post-lockdown poll fielded 15-17 May 2020 (n=2,043)

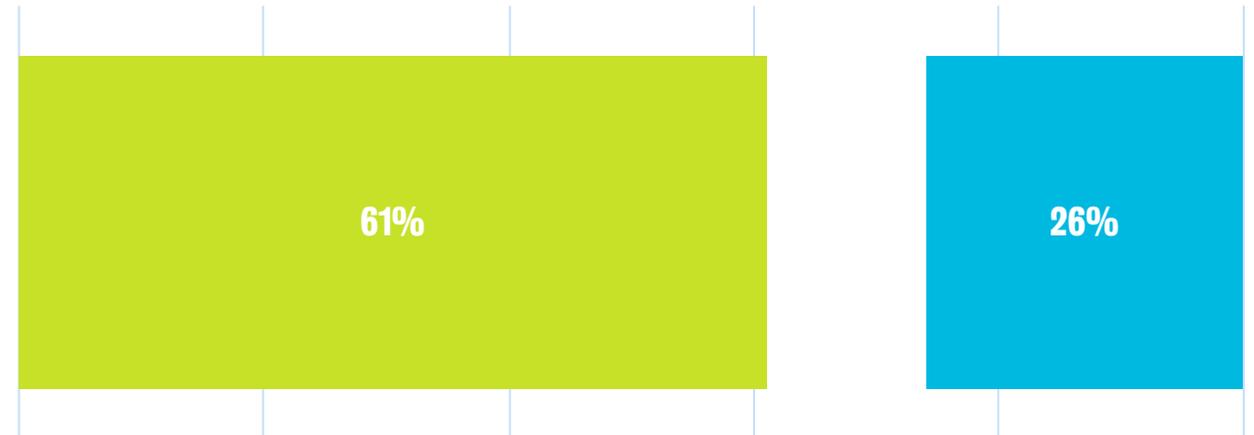
There has also been little movement in preferences around the salary threshold – despite the lowering of the minimum salary threshold to £25,600 in February 2020.

Just under two thirds of the population still agree that exceptions should be made for essential roles, such as nurses and care workers.

The Government proposed a minimum salary threshold of £25,600 per year that migrants must earn in order to get a visa to work in the UK. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- The Government should make some exceptions for people moving to the UK to do important jobs that need doing, such as nurses and care workers
- The Government should set the salary threshold and not allow anyone to move to the UK to work on a lower salary, regardless of the job they are doing

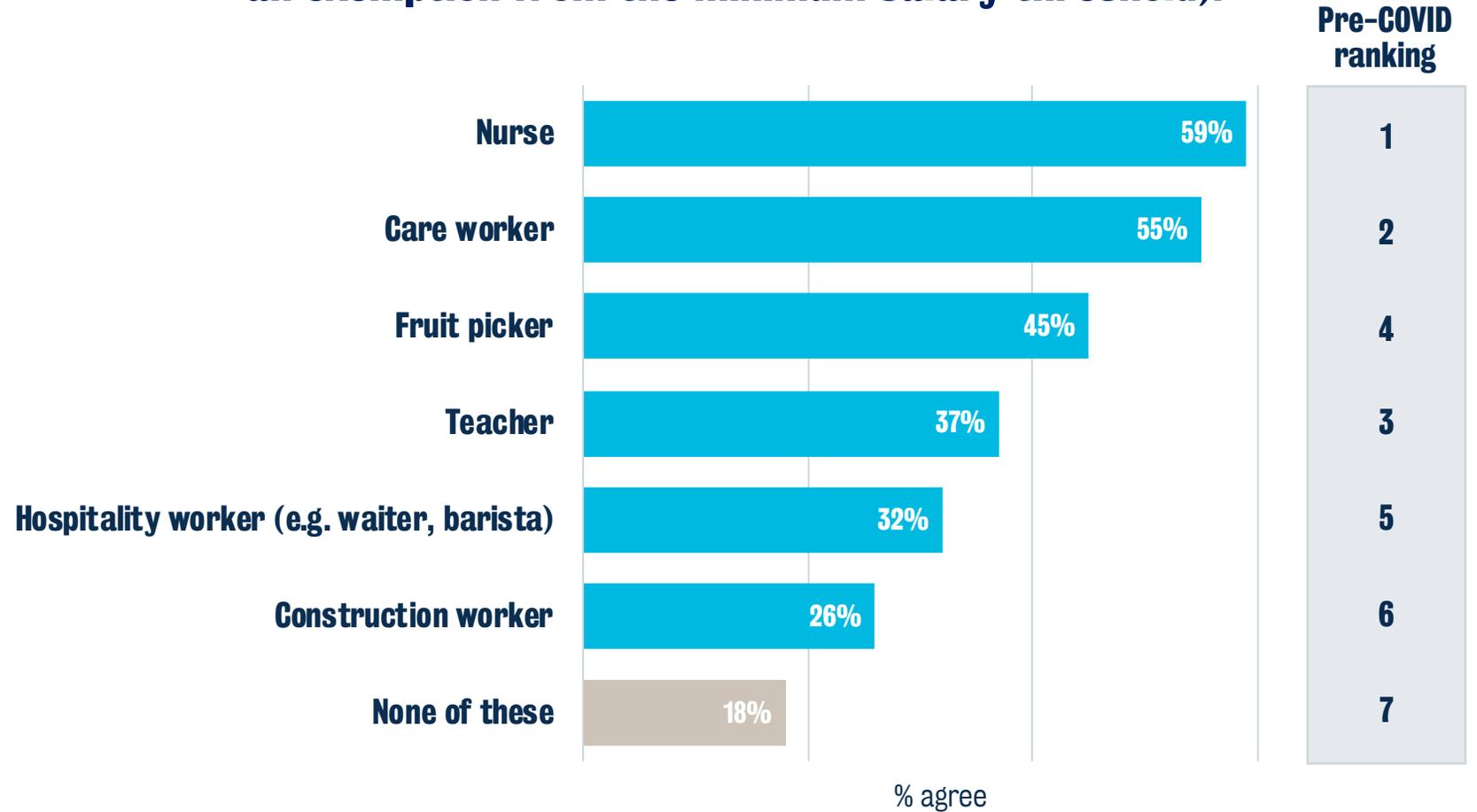
Post-lockdown
May 2020



Nurses remain top of the list of professions that the public think should be exempt from the salary threshold (59 per cent agree), closely followed by care workers (55 per cent).

However, fruit pickers now rank higher in the public's preferences for exceptions to the salary threshold, compared to January 2020 when the salary threshold was set at £30,000 per annum.

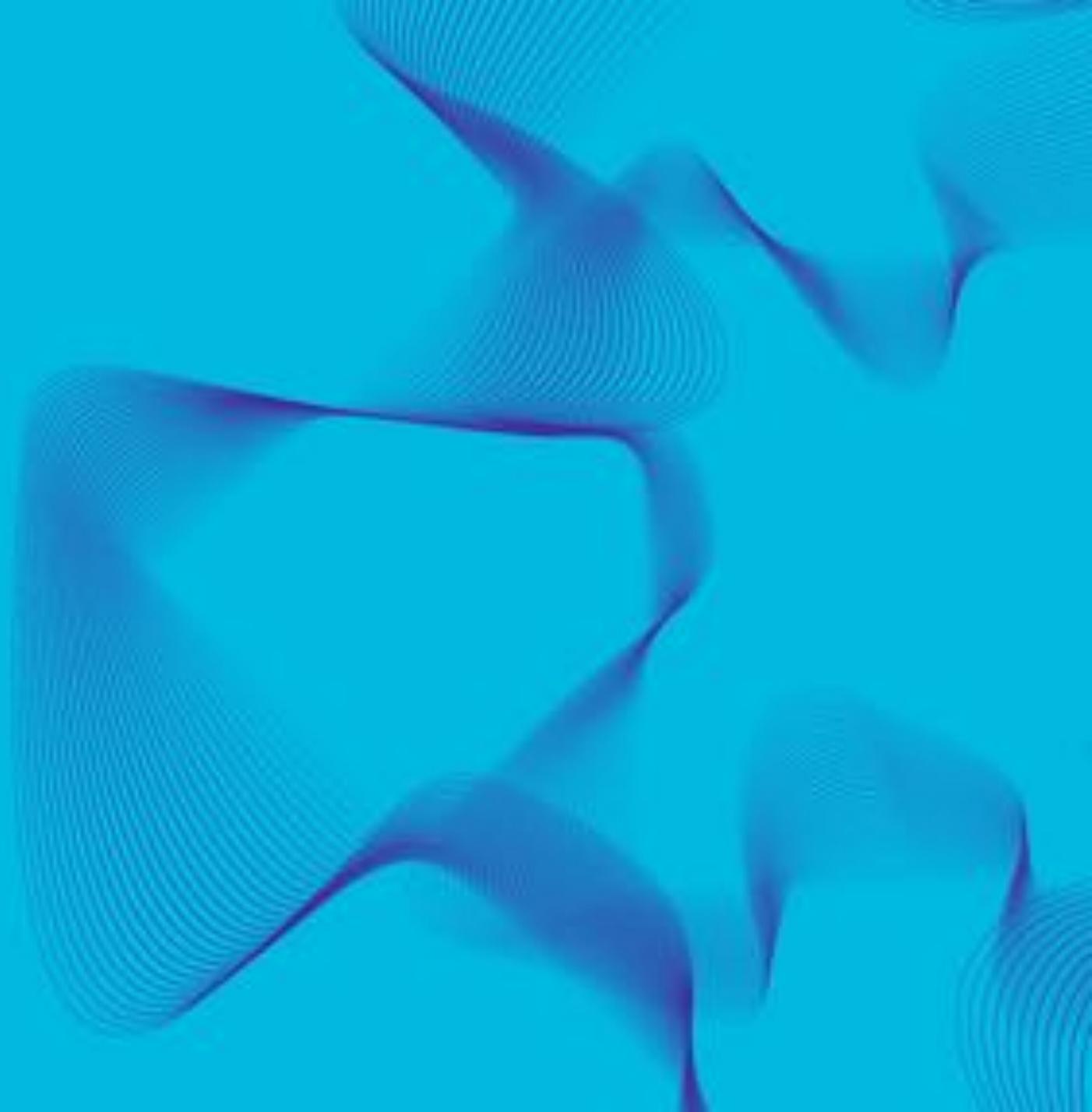
Which of the following jobs, if any, do you think that people should be allowed to move to the UK to do, on a salary of less than £25,600 (using an exemption from the minimum salary threshold)?



Source: ICM poll for British Future/Policy Institute – fielded 15-17 May 2020 (n=2,043). Direct comparison with the pre-COVID baseline from January 2020 is not possible due to the change in threshold from £30,000 per annum to £25,600

Warming within the points-based system

We found a subtle warming of attitudes in preferences within the points-based system. Compared to before the COVID-19 outbreak, the public – particularly younger cohorts and ethnic minorities – are now more generous in their allocation of points across a range of professions, not just essential workers.



The points-based system

The Government has introduced an Immigration Bill that is currently going through parliament.

ICM asked survey respondents for their views on the 'points-based system' that the Government is seeking to introduce. In both the pre-COVID and post-lockdown survey, respondents were told:

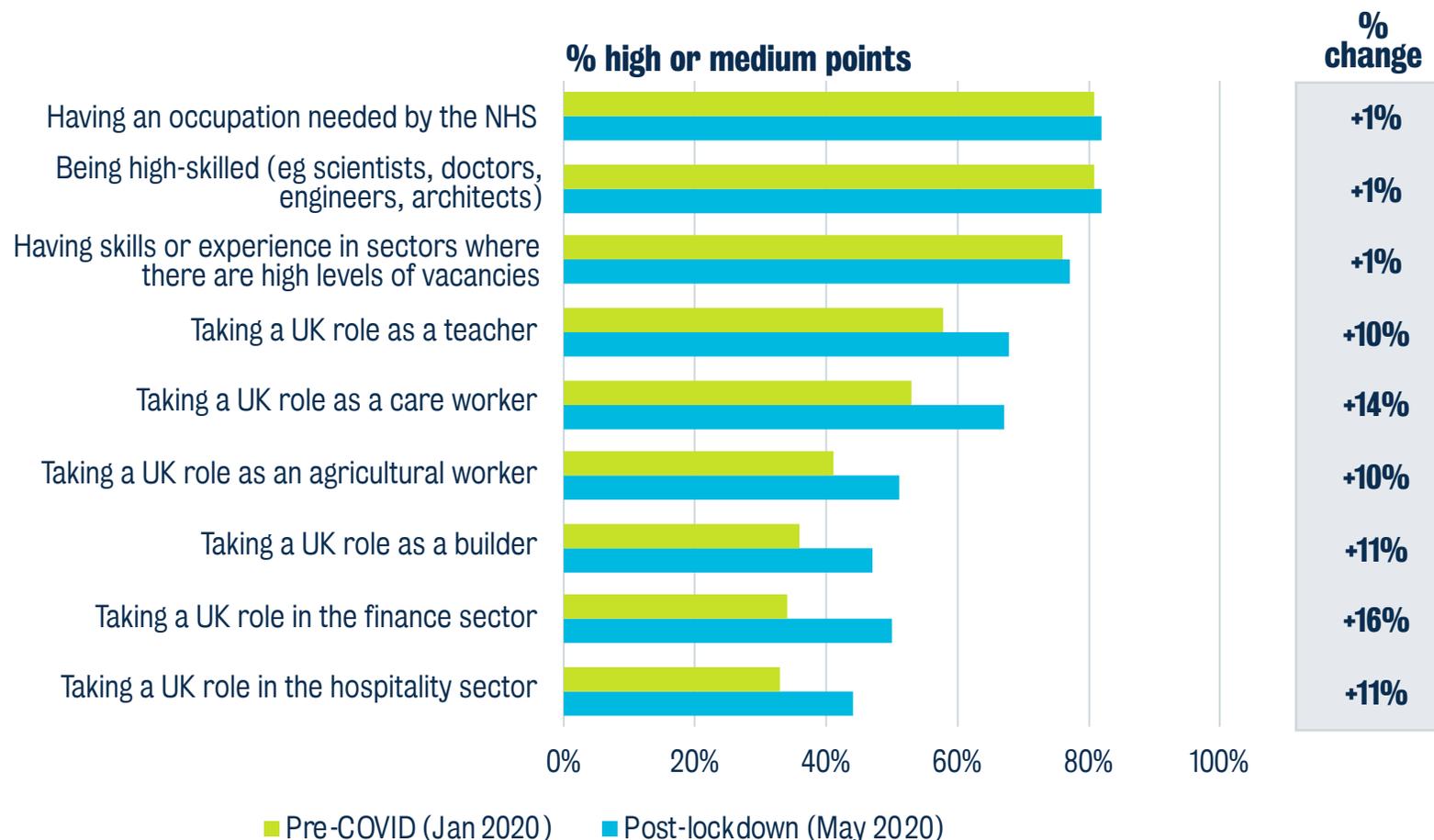
“The Government has said it will introduce an ‘Australian-style points-based system’ for immigration to the UK. This will mean that people who want to move to the UK will need to gain enough points to get a work visa. Applicants will be assigned points based on a number of professional and personal characteristics, with higher points awarded for more desirable traits.”

Respondents were then asked whether a range of characteristics and job roles should merit high, medium, low or no points under the new system.

Areas that had previously received high or medium points from the public, such as occupations needed by the NHS or in sectors with high levels of vacancies, remain consistent.

However, a more generous allocation of high or medium points can now be seen across various occupations – many of which had been assigned low or no points by a majority of respondents before the pandemic, such as the finance or hospitality sectors, or roles in construction and agriculture.

For each of the following characteristics, please tell us whether you think they should earn a person a high number of points, a medium number of points, a low number of points, or no points at all?

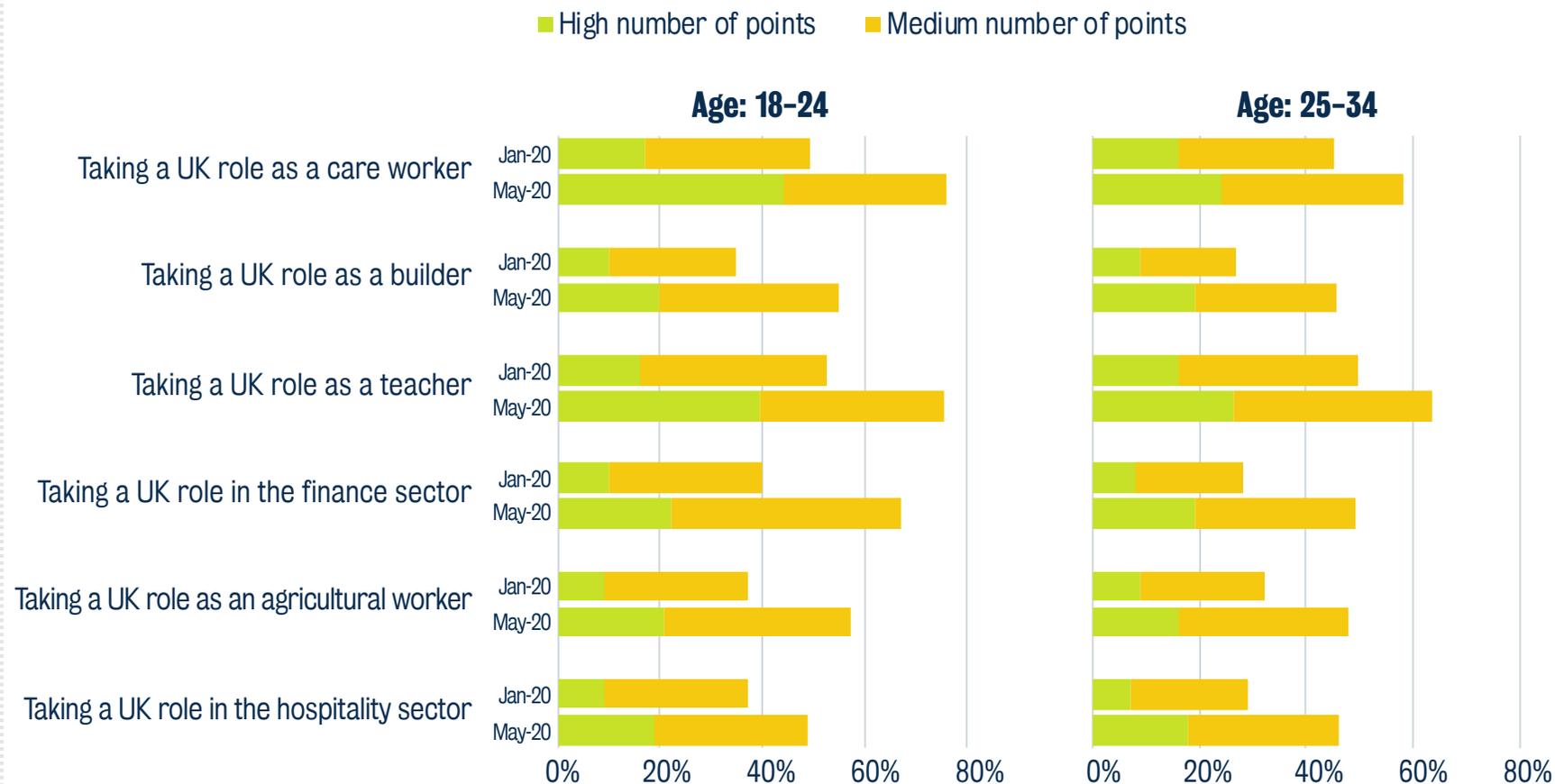


Source: ICM poll for British Future/Policy Institute – Pre-COVID poll fielded 10-13 January 2020 (n=2,305); post-lockdown poll fielded 15-17 May 2020 (n=2,043)

This shift to more favorable allocation of points can be seen most strongly among younger cohorts. For respondents aged 18-24, the shift exceeded 20 percentage points across the board. Many of these points were picked up from 'don't know' responses in January.

Increases in the allocation of high and medium points among those aged 25-34 similarly ranged between a 12- and 21-point difference since January.

For each of the following characteristics, please tell us whether you think they should earn a person a high number of points, a medium number of points, a low number of points, or no points at all?



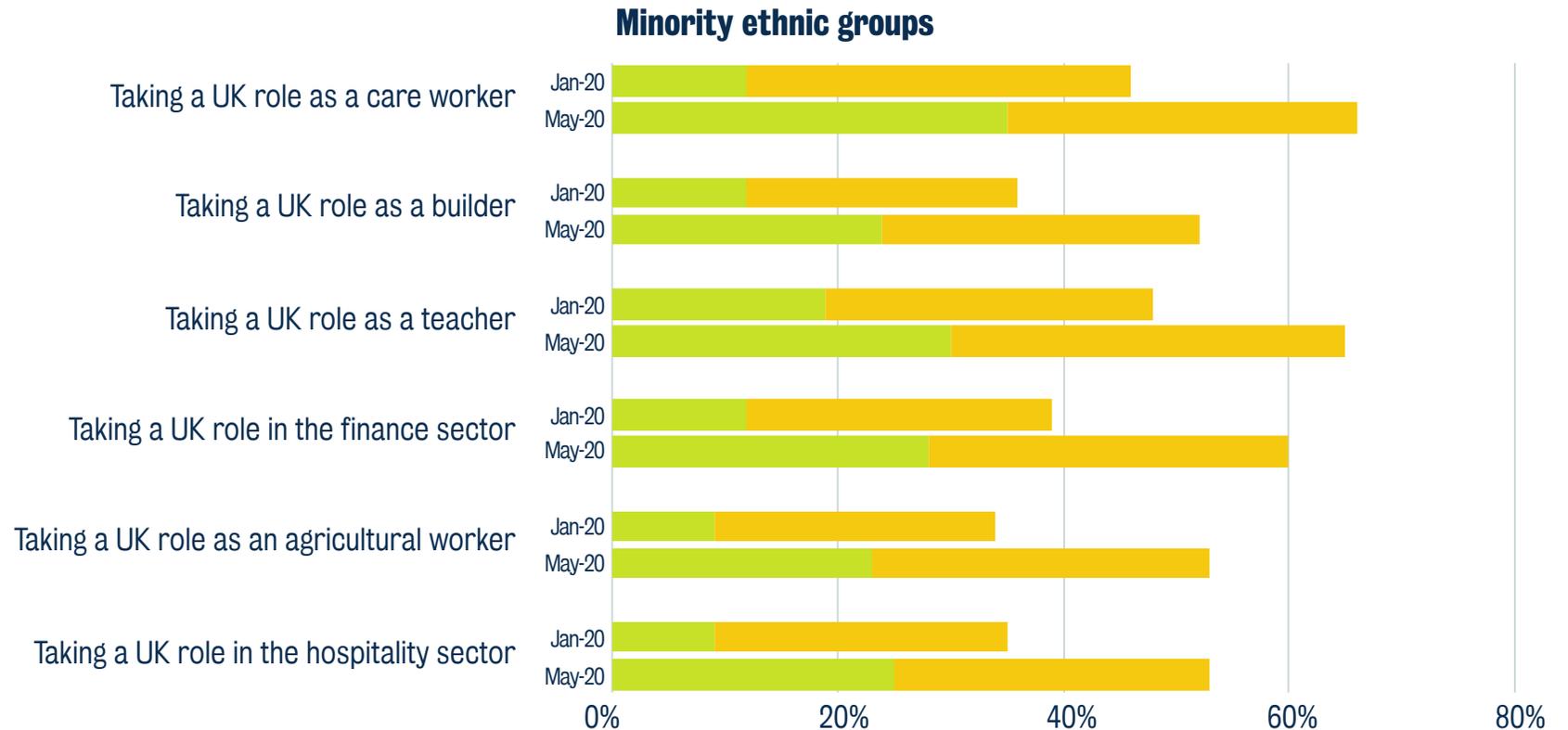
Source: ICM poll for British Future/Policy Institute – Pre-COVID poll fielded 10-13 January 2020 (18-24, unweighted base n=190, weighted base n=276; 25-34, unweighted base n=398, weighted base n=367); post-lockdown poll fielded 15-17 May 2020 (18-24, unweighted base n=261, weighted base n=247; 25-34, unweighted base n=263, weighted base n=324)

Similar warming can also be found among responses from minority ethnic groups, where the allocation of high or medium points increased by 16-21 points since the start of the year.

These trends also parallel a sharp increase in support among minority ethnic groups for increasing migration to the UK – particularly in the case of seasonal workers (36 per cent agree, 20-point change), and low-skilled workers from both within and outside of the EU (22 per cent agree, 10-point change; 21 per cent agree, 12-point change).

For each of the following characteristics, please tell us whether you think they should earn a person a high number of points, a medium number of points, a low number of points, or no points at all?

■ High number of points ■ Medium number of points



Source: ICM poll for British Future/Policy Institute – Pre-COVID poll fielded 10-13 January 2020 (BME sub-sample, unweighted base n=186; weighted base n=260); post-lockdown poll fielded 15-17 May 2020 (BME sub-sample, unweighted base n=205; weighted base n=231). BME data is a subgroup of a nationally representative sample. Quotas have not been set within specific sub-groups; however, the profile has been checked and is consistent between waves.

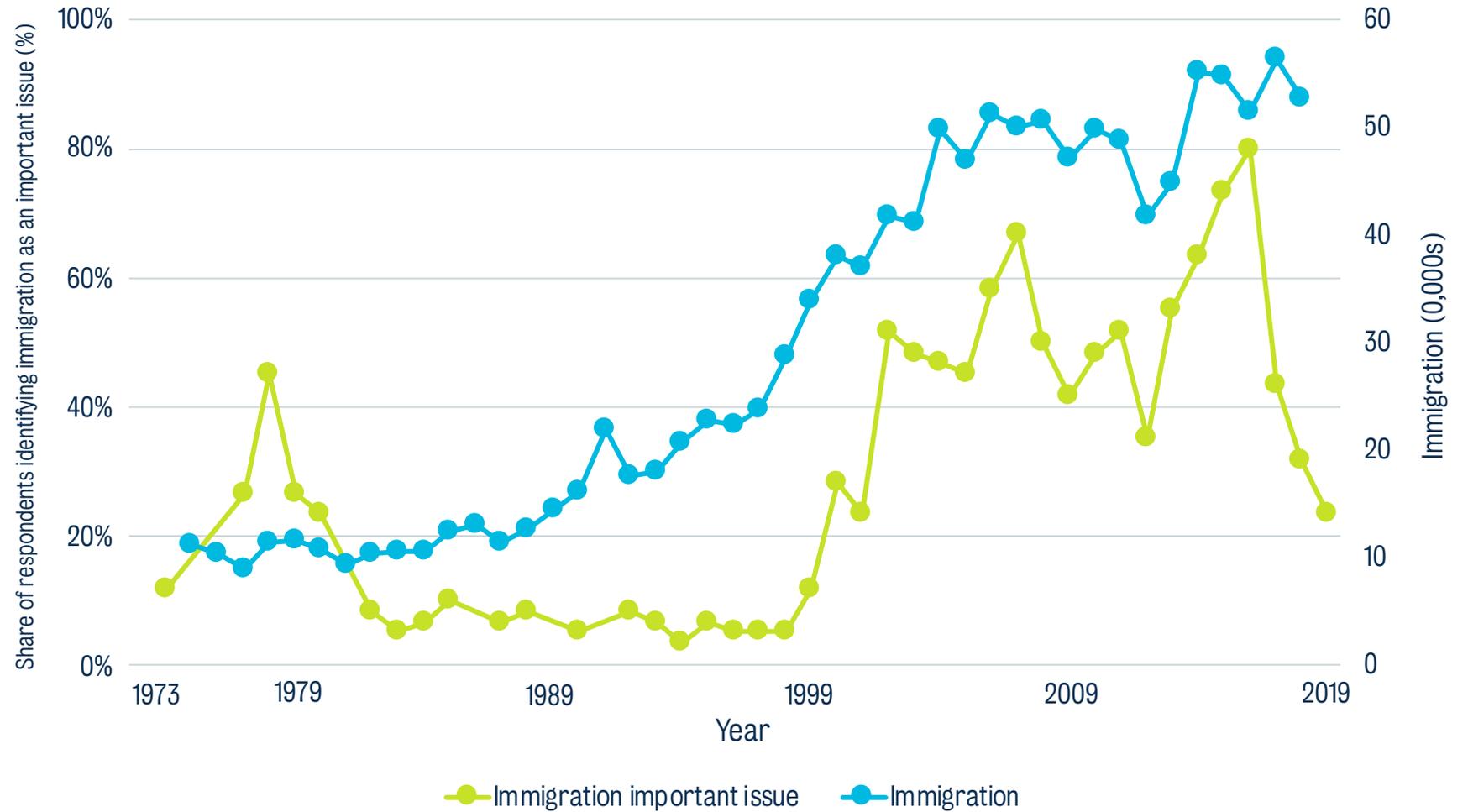
These shifts are part of a longer-term warming of attitudes

The incremental attitudinal changes observed during the pandemic are part of a longer-term softening of attitudes to immigration, starting before the EU referendum, rather a sudden burst of support for migrants filling essential roles during the pandemic.

The warming of attitudes observed in the last five months are situated within a longer-term trajectory of attitudes softening towards immigration since the EU referendum in 2016.

For example, the salience of immigration as one of the most important issues facing Britain – which quickly became a key issue in the early 2000s after steady growth in immigration levels over the preceding decade – has dropped significantly since 2016.

What do you see as the most important issues facing Britain today?

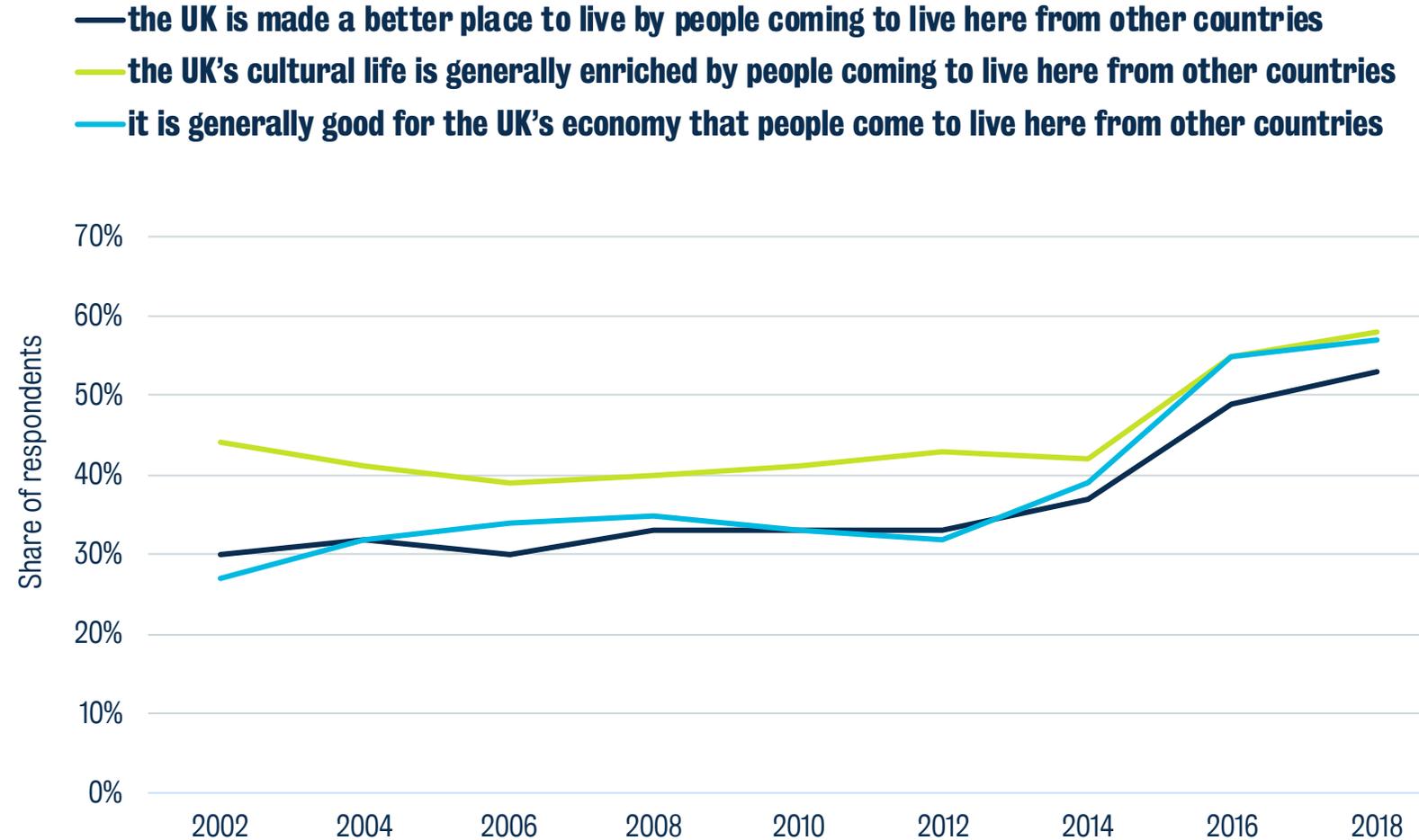


Immigration important issue: Ipsos Mori Issue index – 2019, 2018, 2017, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012 full year aggregate; 2016 June. 2011 and earlier: Ipsos Mori Issues Index (adapted from Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration. Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith, Ipsos Mori, 2013) 1974 Sept, 1977 Oct, 1978 Aug, 1979 Apr, 1979 Apr, 1982 Nov, 1983 Jun, 1984 Jun, 1985 Jun, 1987 Aug, 1988 Jun, 1990 Aug, 1992-2011 Jun

Data from the European Social Survey also reveals that in recent years the UK has become more positive about the social, cultural and economic impacts of immigration.

For example, in the years after the EU referendum, the idea that immigration enriches cultural life, that migrants have a positive effect on the economy and make the country a better place to live in has become a majority view in the UK.

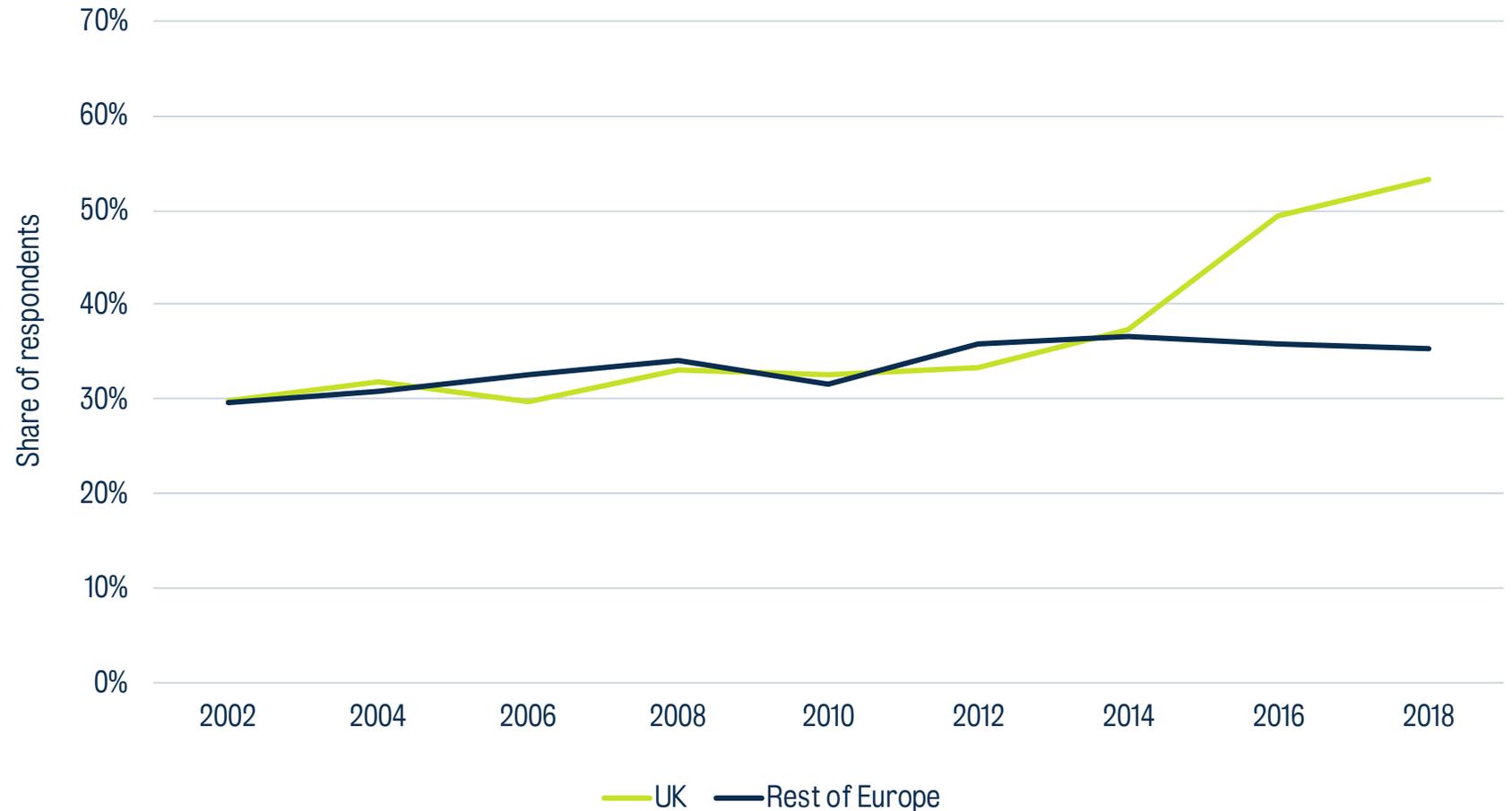
Would you say that...



European Social Survey data collected every two years 2002-2018. Each scale ranked from 0 to 10; chart is proportion answering 6-10. Exact question wordings: 'Is Britain made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?'; 'Would you say that Britain's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?'; 'Would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain's economy that people come to live here from other countries?'

These trends in the UK diverge markedly from trends in the rest of Europe. For example, from 2002 to 2014, European and UK respondents were indistinguishable when thinking about whether immigrants made their country a better place to live. Yet in 2014, UK respondents became more positive than respondents from the rest of Europe, as the UK trends increase dramatically while the rest of Europe roughly follows their previous courses.

Would you say that the UK is made a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? (2002-18)

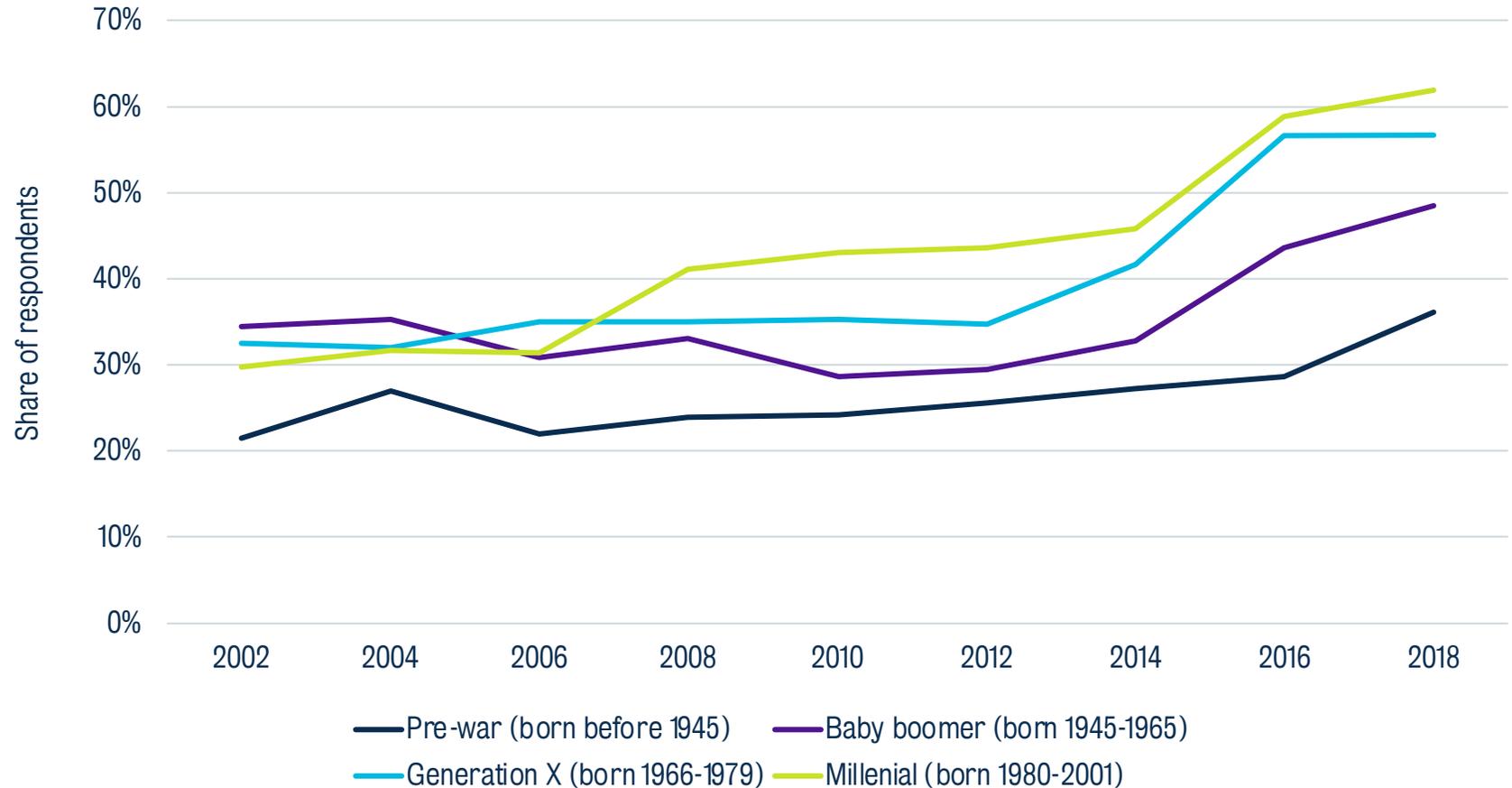


European Social Survey data collected every two years 2002-2018. Each scale ranked from 0 to 10; chart is proportion answering 6-10. Exact question wording: 'Is Britain made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?'.

Similarly, perceptions of immigration's effects on the UK as a place to live have also changed over time across different generations.

In general, the generations shared similar views at the beginning of the 21st century (with the exception of the pre-war generation), but have begun to diverge over time. However, at the same time all generations have also become more likely to perceive positive effects of immigration.

Would you say that the UK is made a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? (2002-18)



European Social Survey data collected every two years 2002-2018. Each scale ranked from 0 to 10; chart is proportion answering 6-10. Exact question wording: 'Is Britain made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?'

Reflections

The common perception that attitudes to immigration have grown more positive during the COVID-19 crisis is only partly true. People do report that they are more aware of the contribution that migrants make to the NHS and other front-line services; and the contribution of so-called 'low-skilled' workers in general is more widely recognised. Attitudes to immigration have also grown slightly warmer among some segments of the public.

The more noticeable shifts, however, have happened over a period of 3-4 years, rather than 3 months, as attitudes to immigration started to grow warmer in the run up to the EU referendum. Immigration is also a far less salient issue than it was five years ago. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, it had fallen out of the top five issues for voters. Recent research has found that it has now fallen out of the top ten.

The Government's recent U-turns on the NHS surcharge for NHS workers, along with the extension of unconditional leave to remain for the families of NHS staff and carers, demonstrate the importance of shifting attitudes to policy debates, despite the Government's large majority.

This report provides a snapshot of attitudes in May 2020 compared to January 2020. Further changes in the social, economic and political climate over the longer-term could well shift public perceptions of immigration again, be it significant reductions in migration as we emerge from the pandemic, the impact of an economic recession, the politics of COVID-19, Brexit and new events, or new views about cohesion or division.

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