

Sheffield South East Connect 2021/22

Clive Betts MP

Introduction

Welcome to the second Sheffield South East Connect report. Following the success and engagement with the launch of Sheffield South East Connect last year my team and I have decided to run this survey and report as an annual fixture. This will hopefully allow a constantly evolving picture of the issues facing the constituency and the priorities my constituents want raised at both a local and national level.

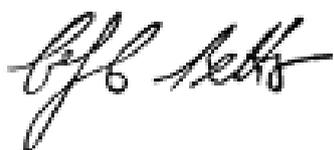
This year I have also been wanting to provide a more personalised survey that reflects the current circumstances and difficulties constituents are facing. This has meant as well as the usual questions on priorities I have also asked constituents about their experience of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis we are currently experiencing.

I have broken up this year's report into two sections: findings from the survey and their context and then the work I am doing on these issues throughout this coming year alongside my other commitments.

The first section on the findings will present the data in a clear and accessible way for people to understand the priorities and issues constituents have alongside contextual information as to how these issues have arisen in the first place.

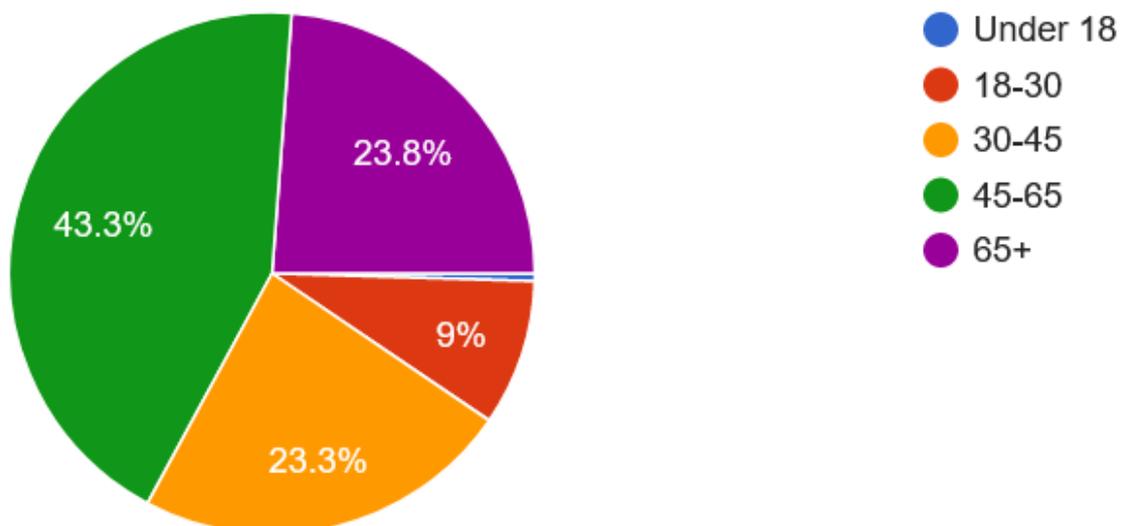
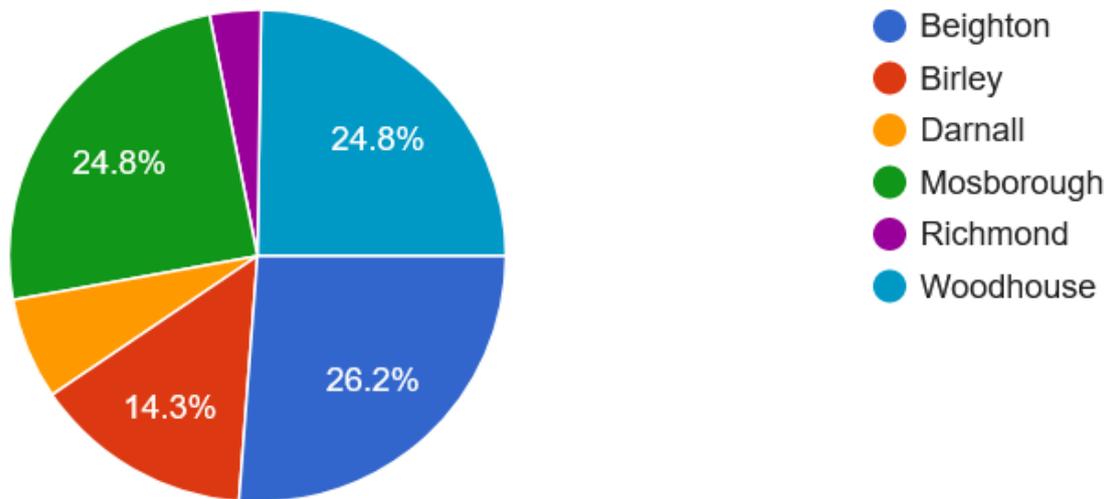
In the second part of the report I will discuss what I have been doing over the past year as well as the year ahead in relation to the priorities raised by constituents, both in Parliament and in Sheffield.

As with last year I would like to thank all those constituents who have responded to my survey. This persistent and evolving conversation as we move through this Parliament is vital and is a huge help to the work my team and I do. I hope you find this report informative and remain engaged with the work I do over the next year.



Findings and response

This year saw a fairly even split between the wards within Sheffield South East. The only outliers were Birley and Darnall, as Richmond currently only has a small portion of its ward in the constituency. The survey also saw a concentration of 45–65-year-olds responding, although 23.8% were over 65 and 23.9% were 30-45. There is clearly a need to get better representation from younger generations and my team and I will like look into this for the next survey.



When asked what three issues I should prioritise nationally the clear front runner was the NHS with just under half of all respondents saying it should be a priority. This was followed by Poverty and Inequality and Crime in second and third respectively, although Care for the Elderly, Climate Change and Education all came very close to third place.

This remains similar to last year and really does reflect the huge challenges still facing the country, alongside a government that have wasted another year trying to address these problems. In some cases, it is even worse than last year. Just two examples; crime is up 14% and NHS waiting times are the highest on record and only set to increase to ten million by 2024. This is a depressing case of our government taking us backwards and not forwards, so it does not surprise me that these two issues remain top concerns for constituents.

Poverty and inequality also remains in the top three. This is a sad indictment of current national policy, but it also reflects the hardships many are experiencing. There was much the Government could have done to prevent this, for instance I voted against the Universal Credit cut, but the Conservative majority voted it through.

We also need to remember that a significant number of people in poverty are in work. This should never be the case. The implicit deal of employment should always be that for our labour and time we are compensated with enough to not be wanting for food, warmth or other basic necessities.

However, in the UK right now that is simply not the case. There are millions in work who even with that source of income cannot get by and are faced with choices no individual or family should have to make. In response to this I am backing a new deal for work that I'll set out in the next section.

When it came to priorities locally Crime, Council Services and Local Environment and Green Spaces were the clear top three priorities constituents wanted me to focus on.

Green spaces have been a huge safety net for many in the pandemic as a way of getting outside and helping their mental health through isolation and loneliness. We need to maintain their value and importance within our communities. We are facing the threat of the Government seeking an aggressive housing target for Sheffield, enforcing the construction of 13,000 extra homes than planned, they previously already set a target of 40,000 so in total there is a target of 53,000 homes. This will mean the Council will have to make some tough decisions, but I want to make sure that green spaces are protected as much as possible despite these challenging circumstances. Council services similarly have been the linchpin for our resilience in the pandemic, not only providing support and coordination with track and trace (doing a far better job than the Government and their dodgy contracts), but also in providing protection for the most vulnerable to the virus via adult and child social care. Despite the Government saying they would do whatever it takes to support these efforts they have not covered the significant money spent by local authorities, including Sheffield, in protecting our most vulnerable.

This means that while needing funding and support Sheffield City Council is having to navigate an incredibly difficult budget to meet the pressures of the pandemic and the delivery of its legal obligations to these key areas.

Locally crime has continued to be an issue, particularly low level anti-social behaviour and speeding. I'll go into more detail about these in the next section, but both are being driven by a lack of funding and consequently a lack of officers on the street. While there has been a slowdown in the rate of cuts the legacy of austerity proves that this cannot be solved overnight with a pledge to hire new officers. These officers need experience and resources to be able to tackle the issues facing their local areas.

This year I also asked some more current questions which also had interesting responses.

When it came to what Sheffield South East residents' concerns about Covid-19 going into 2022 there were some very stark results with the 31% of respondents saying they were worried most about the impact on mental health. Impact on non-Covid health problems was also the other leading answer given by respondents.

With the looming cost of living crisis back in October which we are only seeing intensify I wanted to get an early read from constituents to see if they were already experiencing difficulties or were worried about them in future.

Alarmingly only 26% of respondents were not worried with rising energy prices, the universal credit cut and energy and supply shortages. All other respondents were worried with one or more of the listed issues. Highest of those was rising energy prices which was something over 50% of respondents said they were affected by.

84% of respondents said that they did not believe Government is spending its budget in the right places which was reflected in the next question where 73% of individuals said that Government should be spending more money on a combination of local government, policing, social care, health and climate change.

Going Forward

This year should all be about recovery from the pandemic and combating a cost-of-living crisis. This is being hampered nationally by the Conservative Government who are presiding over a high tax and low growth economy. Currently our productivity is nowhere near where it should be with Germany producing in four days what we do in five. This needs to change. We need to kickstart growth and I will support legislation and policies that give the necessary investment to develop our economy as well as strengthening our public services.

In terms of the more pressing problems around cost of living I am committed to campaigning for a freeze to VAT on energy bills and targeted support for the poorest in our society, funded by a windfall tax on the big energy companies. Already this year we have seen the big six energy firms make over £1 billion in profits and in 2020 they made £3 billion. We can't expect ordinary people to shoulder the costs of soaring energy bills while this ludicrous profit is being made.

Frustratingly the only measures the Government have announced on this is a £200 loan that will be paid back from 2023 over the course of five years and a one of reduction of £150 in council tax. This has been estimated to not even cover half the expected cost for the average household this year alone. This really is not enough, and I am anticipating even more casework related to the cost of living in my inbox over the coming months.

Locally I will be focusing my attention to supporting local businesses and organisations, continuing the work from last year of encouraging investment into the constituency, particularly in Attercliffe where we are starting to see a real transformation into becoming a hub for advanced industry and cutting-edge research. I am excited to this alongside the new South Yorkshire Mayor and the LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership).

I have already had encouraging meetings on this front and am glad to see the support of both local businesses and Sheffield City Council. They have made great use of the grants available to them to get the initial investment in the area to support further investment.

Recently as well the micro-pub that I supported has opened in Mosborough High Street which is great to see. Revitalising and reimagining our High Streets is a huge task for the next decade as we move away from department stores. These sorts of ventures will be key to that success, so I am looking forward to supporting Craftworks and similar ventures across the constituency.

In a similar vein myself, Councillor Tony Downing and community activist Samantha Nicholson were able to secure Christmas lights for Mosborough High Street and we are hoping for hanging baskets and other features to help brighten up the area and make it desirable for customers to visit the local businesses.

These are some of the first steps in my work with businesses to help them recover from the pandemic and I will continue to have these conversations going forward. I regularly deal with businesses as well as constituents in my casework as well, so if you own a business and think I can help then do get in touch.

I will also be following up on ongoing concerns around speeding and anti-social behaviour.

On the former I am pleased to finally see the launch of the Mosborough Speeding Review being carried out by Councillor Tony Downing and Police and Crime Commissioner Andy Billings.

The type of speeding plaguing the constituency remains split between boy racers who are incredibly difficult to track down and everyday drivers thinking they can get away with it. The boy racers drive dangerously at high speeds in stolen vehicles, or vehicles with fake plates or no plates at all. This means speed cameras cannot curb this sort of speeding. It is also the case that often officers are unable to pursue due to the risk a chase would cause innocent bystanders. This is why we need to see the off-road teams who serve all South Yorkshire in our area as much as possible. They are trained and equipped to deal with this exact problem and make real progress in catching people in the act, with the expertise and training to chase them down if needed.

The latter can be stopped with consistent action, but this needs to be backed up with funding from Government. I will be pushing for both in the year ahead. In particular a speed camera situated near the British Oak.

Andy Billings as Police and Crime Commissioner and Chief Inspectors has done a great job expanding this part of the force, but it started with only one team for the whole of South Yorkshire. Thanks to Alan's work that has been doubled to two teams that cover the area with hopefully more to follow.

When it comes to anti-social behaviour, I am glad to see that Sheffield City Council has been receptive to my concerns and those of my constituents and this year they will be rolling out Council officers attached to the new Local Area Committees to deal with this issue, alongside fly-tipping across the constituency. I will be seeing how these new roles perform over the next year, but I believe positions focused on these two sole issues will make a significant difference in the responsiveness of these problems locally with officers dedicated to combating them.

The police still face huge pressure. Only the other day I was reading how South Yorkshire Police teams were having to apply for money to work overtime to deal with ongoing crime in their areas. This should not be something they have to wait in uncertainty to secure, they need the proper funding and resources to do their job and be seen and approachable by members of the public.

I look forward to pushing for measures to help better equip and resource local police teams to tackling community crimes like ASB.

I am also hoping on spending time this year looking at protecting our local green spaces. The Government have set a very aggressive target of building an extra 13,000 extra homes in Sheffield than the originally planned 40,000 as mentioned previously. This will force the Council to make some very difficult decisions as to where these new homes will be. Put simply there is not enough brownfield sites, or investment in decontaminating the soil so they are suitable for residential zoning. I will be pushing for more funding to allow this, as well as more residential properties in the city centre as we see a shift in how our High Streets work with a fall of the retail sector in this area.

That is why in Parliament I am challenging the Government on their current strategy and calling on the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities to radically reform planning legislation so local authorities and the communities they represent have a greater say in how their areas are developed. The Secretary of State also needs to provide the funding to develop brownfield sites to be built on, thereby protecting valuable greenbelt land.

I will also continue to work with green groups across the constituency and further the work we have made on developing the Ochre Dyke Green Corridor running from Waterthorpe through to Beighton. I am also aiming to run a consultation on local green issues given the concern from residents at both climate change and the local green areas locally with the support of local green groups.

I am also hoping to work closely with Oliver Coppard who I am sure will win the support of South Yorkshire on his platform to bring in high paid jobs and expand the tram network for the region. He has ambitious plans, particularly around public controlled buses which I am excited to see become a reality for Sheffield and South Yorkshire. The fact that London gets over three times more spending per head than Yorkshire is an outrage, and I am glad Oliver is fighting our corner for better transport.

When it comes to Parliament, I remain committed as chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee. This year we will be continuing our work on cladding. We maintain our fundamental position that no leaseholders should have to pay for any work that they did not cause and knew nothing about. The Government's current plans simply aren't strong enough and we need to see wealthy developers pay out to repair the buildings they have built, or when the companies no longer exist the Government should step in.

Alongside cladding we will also be undertaking work on social housing and what levelling up actually means.

The recent reports by ITV showing the squalor of some social housing in this country have been deeply disturbing which is why myself and the Select Committee felt we had to work on this issue. As we come to rely on social housing providers more, we need to ensure that they are acting responsibly and hold them to a high standard. Our Select Committee work will hopefully help legislation arrive that succeeds in these areas for the benefit of the most vulnerable in our society. It should also be noted that the private rented sector is even worse, despite being more expensive, and also needs to be addressed.

Levelling up has begun to take shape following the Government's white paper, but its ambition still exceeds what the Government has currently announced, and the Select Committee will be exploring that gap and why the Government aren't providing any real funding or powers to help transform left behind communities.

In order to ensure a strong recover and end in work poverty I will be spending my Parliamentary time supporting a new deal for work which would seek to radically reform our current system with better pay, better conditions and full employment rights from day one alongside an end to zero hour contracts and fire and rehire.

I also remain committed to my position on providing local authorities with adequate funding to best serve their community and I will continue to use my Parliamentary time to call out this fact in the Commons. Right now, local authorities have been hit hardest by austerity and fundamentally let down by a lack of Government support during the pandemic. Without this funding levelling up will never happen and Council's will be forced to raise Council Tax on residents.

As always, this work will be in addition to my usual duties on behalf of individual constituents and the cases that they seek my help with. If you or your family or friends think my office can help with a particular case do get in touch.

Final Thoughts

2022 presents as many opportunities as it does challenges. We are clearly in the recovery phase of the pandemic and just like before when our nation has gone through huge hardships, we can demonstrate what this country is about. Just as the post-war years of the late 40's and 50's and the founding of the NHS we should be equally radical in our compassion and vision to build a society that vows to not repeat the mistakes of the Coronavirus pandemic.

This requires boldness that any Government should readily embrace. Top of that agenda should be devolution of powers and funding to regions and local authorities. We remain one of the most centralised countries in Europe and it shows. Allowing local communities to take key decision-making into their own hands empowers and emboldens local recovery and growth as people have a sense of being able to choose their own path.

This of course has to come with the relevant funding to use these powers in a meaningful way and I shall continue my calls for the Government to reverse the awful damage austerity has done on local authorities and the services they provide.

Many of the big aspirations I speak about with local leaders and residents such as local wealth building and publicly owned public transport are simply not possible with diktats from Westminster.

I look forward to another year representing Sheffield South East and am eager to see what the year bring, alongside the discussions and ideas brought forward by local residents.

I hope you have found this year's report interesting and informative. I certainly have appreciated the time taken by constituents to help inform my work for this year.

If you want to discuss any aspect of the report further or want to raise any specific issues, then please get in touch with me via email at officeofclivebettsmp@parliament.uk or phone on **0114 275 7788**.