

RECOVERY POSITION

An exclusive poll for *The House* reveals support for the Chancellor's handling of the economy – but north-south divide over the government's 'levelling up' agenda. **Kate Proctor** reports

More than half the public believe Chancellor Rishi Sunak has made sound financial decisions during the coronavirus pandemic, but almost a year on from the general election there isn't the same level of confidence in the government's promise to "level up", and critics say the government should take note.

The House's autumn poll on the economy, carried out by Redfield & Wilton Strategies, found that 54% believe the Chancellor has made good financial choices for the UK to cope with the virus having ripped through normal life.

Only 13% disagreed. Other measures he has introduced also got the seal of approval – the majority of the public thought the £500 payment for those on low incomes to self-isolate is sufficient to live off, compared to 25% who did not.

There was also confidence in the jobs market with 71% of those who are currently employed saying it is likely they will still be employed by the same boss this time next year. For the self-employed, 69% think they will be doing the same type of work at the same point next year.

The poll was carried out on October 21 before Sunak announced more help for Tier 2 regions after significant complaints from regional leaders and the storm over free

school meals continuing in the holidays. Mark Littlewood, director general of the Institute of Economic Affairs, said so far there had been a "triage" of short-term financial measures and the Chancellor must now pivot to medium term economic recovery.

He said: "The initial approach was to provide a bridge to viable businesses and employees to ensure a swift spring back when lockdown was unwound.

"However, the longer the economy operates under restrictions, the more he will need to find policies which encourage the creation of new jobs rather than merely the protection of old ones.

"There is no doubt in presentational terms that the Chancellor's

calm, unflappable and straight-talking manner has curried considerable favour amongst the British public, but his next major challenge will be to ensure an impressive economic recovery over the medium terms rather than engaging in triage over the short term."

The number one sector that still requires further financial support from government, according to the public, is hospitality. Fifty-two percent thought should be given extra help, followed by 30% for the culture and arts, and 32% for tourism. Only 20% of people believed the aviation industry needed more support, and that



dropped to 12% for car manufacturing.

However when it comes to Boris Johnson's promise to level up the country, following his unprecedented win in traditional Labour seats in the north and midlands, the public were unenthused. Just days after the poll was completed more than 50 northern Tory MPs pointed out Johnson had won his huge majority off the back of the back of hard-working people in their constituencies and must re-commit to his election promise.

Our poll revealed that just 35% of people believe the government is still committed to "levelling up", compared to 24% who believe he is not committed. Yet with 28% of people polled neither agreeing nor disagreeing, there may be a lack of engagement on the subject altogether despite it being a significant election promise.

Marginally more people in the south of England (36.5%) believe the government is still committed to levelling up, compared to 35.4% in the north. Just 6% of people in the North West, North East, Scotland, Yorkshire and Humber, and West Midlands could say they 'strongly agreed' that the government is still committed to their election pledge.

Anna Round, Senior Research Fellow at IPPR North said: "The warm words we've heard from government on 'levelling up' have been welcome, but they haven't been followed through with action. Unfortunately, the north has

become far too used to promises, many of which have not been kept. That's why it's unsurprising that just 35% of respondents believe that the government is still committed to 'levelling up'. They'll believe it when they can see it."

the OECD to look at exactly this problem. Their conclusion, as one of the world's foremost economic agencies, was that the heavily over-centralised UK state is holding back the economies of cities and city regions outside the south east."

Boris Johnson has said repeatedly that he is absolutely committed to his agenda of bringing parity across the UK. A government spokesperson said: "We are absolutely committed to levelling up across the country and build back better after coronavirus." They said it was a "solemn promise" that they would



"Northerners may well remain sceptical of government rhetoric"

Less centralised control at Westminster and more "meaningful" devolution is needed, Round said, suggesting until that

happened "Northerners may well remain sceptical of government rhetoric".

Judith Blake, chair of Core Cities UK and Labour leader of Leeds City Council, said: "This poll starkly highlights the fact that, if Government is serious about levelling up, it needs to work more closely with local leadership to deliver.

"Levelling up has to be a long-term economic commitment. The UK has the worst economic disparity in Europe, which has been growing for decades despite the efforts of many governments. As chair of Core Cities UK, I worked with

improve people's lives and their ambitions for the country are unchanged.

Core Cities estimates that bringing all city regions up to the national economic average would put around £80bn a year into the economy.

The strongest north-south divide however came on views of whether mayor of Greater Manchester had been right to lobby the government for more money and resist going into Tier 3 restrictions. Overall both the north and the south thought he was more reckless than responsible in his demands for more money, though 40% of northerners thought he was responsible, compared to 35% of those in the south.

The North West was the only region in England where more than half – 56% – thought he had been responsible. 🇬🇧

54%

believe Rishi Sunak has made sound financial decisions for the UK economy since the onset of the pandemic



35%

of people believe the government is still committed to 'levelling up' the regions



52%

think that the hospitality industry should receive further financial support from the Government



43%

would support increasing the higher rate of income tax, while...



40%

would support an increase in corporation tax

