Session 1 briefing:

'left behind' neighbourhoods and the COVID-19 crisis: what we know so far

This briefing provides members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods with an overview of the early impact of COVID-19 on 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Drawing on the latest research and recent 'data dive' commissioned for the APPG it highlights the issues these communities face in order to help identify the best ways to support them.

At a glance

Whilst evidence is still emerging as to the likely effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on local communities, recent research and a 'dive' into the latest socio-economic data suggests that 'left behind' neighbourhoods are most exposed to the virus and more vulnerable to its likely consequences. The impact of COVID-19 therefore risks exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly in 'left behind' neighbourhoods with limited community capacity and confidence.

Initial data suggests 'left behind' neighbourhoods are potentially going to be hardest-hit, facing:

- **health risks**: greater clinical risk amongst residents and vulnerability to poor health outcomes

- **economic risks**: higher likelihood of financial hardship and food insecurity

- **social risks**: greater prevalence of vulnerable groups with increased social isolation

'Left behind' neighbourhoods have also had less access to resources to organise locally-led community responses. These have been most effective in meeting immediate and evolving neighbourhood needs through collaboration and cross-sector partnership-working. The data shows that 'left behind' neighbourhoods have lower concentrations of mutual aid groups and received less COVID-related charitable grants from UK foundations. This risks leaving communities more vulnerable to the pandemic's many negative consequences, and less prepared or equipped to stage a strong and sustainable recovery.

This contrasts with Big Local areas, among the 20% most deprived communities but benefitting from unrestricted funding and patient, long-term support from Local Trust. Tapping into local networks across the public, private and social sectors, they have responded robustly to the crisis, mobilising community spirit to provide quick, targeted and flexible help. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods with low levels of social infrastructure are in need of similar foundational support.

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What neighbourhoods are 'left behind'?

There are 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England, home to just under 2.4 million people, or 4.3% of the population. They range from post-industrial areas and housing estates on the edge of towns and cities in the north and Midlands to southern coastal communities. Suffering from a combination of social and economic deprivation, poor connectivity (physical and digital), low levels of civic engagement, and a lack of community spaces and places in which to meet - what we've termed 'social infrastructure' - these neighbourhoods rank in the top 10% of both the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (IMD) and the *Community Needs Index* (CNI).

Communities at risk

'Left behind' neighbourhoods that already lack the social infrastructure that other areas often take for granted face potentially significant and damaging consequences as a result of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown. The British Red Cross *Vulnerability Index* identifies 'left behind' neighbourhoods as more vulnerable to the pandemic, and the data dive for the APPG reveals the extent of the challenges they face and how exposed they are to increased risks to their health, wellbeing and economic and social fabric. Whilst it is still relatively early days in terms of the evidence available, it is clear that not only does COVID-19 risk exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, but a greater proportion of local residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are at particular vulnerability to COVID-19 and the communities they live in risk falling even further behind because of its impact.

Health risks

The risk of becoming seriously ill or dying with COVID-19 is greater among people living in more socio-economically deprived areas (*the Health Foundation*), but as age-standardised mortality rates have not yet been published, it is not possible to accurately compare the relative risk levels of contracting and dying from it across 'left behind' neighbourhoods to elsewhere. However, drawing on a wider range of data that looks at the prevalence of underlying health and wider risk factors it can be inferred that 'left behind' neighbourhoods are at greater clinical risk, more vulnerable to poor health outcomes and more exposed to any future waves of the virus. This is because compared to England as whole, they have higher proportions of people with:

- high-risk conditions identified by NHS England as making people 'clinically vulnerable' or 'extremely clinically vulnerable' to COVID-19, including higher levels of asthma (6.3% to 5.9%), COPD (3.0% to 1.9%), obesity (12.9% to 9.8%), diabetes (7.9% to 6.8%), coronary heart disease (3.7% to 3.2%) and chronic kidney disease England (4.7% to 4.1%)

- higher incidences of cancer than expected (incidence ratio of 113 to 100) to England as a whole, with significantly higher incidences of lung cancer (incidence ratio of 174 to 106)

- higher rates of Disability Benefits (10.6%, nearly double the level in England of 5.6% and higher than 9.1% in other deprived areas)

- limiting long-term illness, affecting almost one in four (23.4% - compared to other deprived areas of 21.3% and England as a whole of 17.6%)

Mental health risks

With more people across the country reporting isolation, anxiety, and depression (*Academy of Medical Sciences*), there is a risk that COVID-19 compounds pre-existing higher levels of mental health conditions in 'left behind' neighbourhoods. These areas score 88.9 on the Small Area Mental Health Index, compared to 74.4 across similarly deprived areas and double the national score of 42.6. Additional socio-economic stressors to already higher levels of poor mental health suggests people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods will face the biggest challenges (*Local Trust 2019*).

Economic risks

Given the rapidly changing economic picture the scale of rises in unemployment and their spatial distribution, it is too early to draw clear conclusions in terms of long-term labour market trends. There has been a notable increase in unemployment in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, with one in four jobs furloughed, in line with the national average, as well as:

- more than one in ten people are unemployed (10.6%), compared to 6.5% nationally

- a faster rise in unemployment between March and May than nationally (4.1% to 3.4%)

- a higher proportion working in the 'at risk' retail sector (18.5% compared to 15.9% nationally)

Increases in unemployment and furloughing has exacerbated economic stress, with residents at a higher risk of financial hardship and food insecurity than other deprived areas, and reporting far higher levels of vulnerability that the English average. Nationally, food bank use has seen a 120% rise in demand for families with children due to COVID-19 (*JRF*). 'Left behind' neighbourhoods in isolated towns and suburban areas form one of the highest risk groups, and most likely to lack a range of local food shops, affordable pricing and transport to larger towns (*Food Foundation*).

Social risks

'Left behind' neighbourhoods contain higher concentrations of vulnerable groups that are at particular risk of negative outcomes including increased social isolation, as well as being in need of additional public and social sector resources and support, including health and social care. With huge increases nationally in calls to helplines, evidence indicates that the crisis could cause an acute increase in abuse in vulnerable households in these areas (*Centre for Social Justice*). They:

- have a higher prevalence of vulnerable groups including people with a learning disability, households headed by a lone parent, and people aged over 65 living alone

- have more people likely to be providing care for others, with higher levels of unpaid care, intensive care, and with 3.9% of working aged adults unable to work due to caring responsibilities and receiving Carers Allowance. This is double the national rate of 1.9%.

'Left behind' neighbourhoods are also among the most digitally excluded, with those residents who are older and with the lowest incomes least likely to be able to have digital equipment and/or skills (*Oxford Institute for the Internet*). Young people are least likely to be able to access home-schooling, and those made unemployed lacking digital connectivity are less able to access the online Universal Credit system (*Cambridge University*).

Communities vs COVID

Quality partnerships between communities and local government will be a key element in determining how well neighbourhoods come out of this crisis (*Onward*). Another crucial measure in the efficacy of a community's response to COVID-19 is functioning local social infrastructure and an active and engaged civil society sector. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods have seen a considerably lower level of response by local voluntary and community organisations, leaving them more vulnerable and less prepared or equipped to stage a strong and sustainable recovery. It found:

- organisations in 'left behind' neighbourhoods received less than half the funding per head in COVID-related grants from UK charitable foundations (£21,182 per 100,000 population) than other deprived areas (£50,054), and approximately one third that of England as a whole (£60,312)

- lower concentrations of local self-help mutual aid groups, with only 3.5 groups per 100,000 population, half that of similarly deprived areas (7.7) and around a third of England (10.6)

Big Local areas in 'left behind' neighbourhoods

How 'left behind' neighbourhoods with a Big Local have responded to meet new and immediate needs offers a window into community responses on the ground:

- **Distributing food and medicine.** Newington Big Local in Kent is working alongside Fareshare, supporting over 100 households a week through a community larder and food bag deliveries

- **Emergency hardship fund.** Thurnscoe Big Local in South Yorkshire has established a Relief Fund, with grants of up to £500 available for any group responding directly to COVID-19

- **Improving skills and combating social isolation**. Heart of Pitsea Big Local in Essex has set up business and food hygiene courses, with places for 100 local people. They have also compiled 200 lockdown activity packs – 100 for children – to distribute to residents

Locally-rooted community organisations have proven more adaptable to meeting changing local needs than "government, councils, big charities and funders". This is due to their ability to mobilise "existing connections" between people "who already trusted each other" prior to the crisis, enabling agreement on and implementation of rapid solutions to the crisis (*Power to Change*). For example, in Bromford and Firs, a 'left behind' neighbourhood in Birmingham, organisations including the Big Local partnership Neighbours Together, local community development agency Open Door, and youth charity Worth Unlimited, were already collaborating effectively at the neighbourhood level and had existing relationships with residents. This meant vulnerable residents could be quickly identified and supported in the first few days of lockdown (*Local Trust, 2020*).

'Left behind' neighbourhoods need of extra support

Success in Bromford and Firs was underpinned by residents mobilising long-standing mutual relationships and tapping into local networks across the private, social and public sectors. The relatively small financial investment in the Big Local programme, in addition to the community assets, social infrastructure and relationship-building that it supports, has helped resource, cultivate and channel local levels of community spirit (Local Trust, 2020).

Supporting and investing in 'left behind' neighbourhoods

Local Trust is a member of the Community Wealth Fund Alliance and an advocate for a Community Wealth Fund. This is a proposal by an alliance of over 200 public, private and voluntary sector organisations for investment in 'left behind' neighbourhoods across England, specifically in social infrastructure in order to develop community confidence, capacity and resilience. Informed by learning from previous local area initiatives, this fund will be based on the following principles: resident control; investment over the long term; a flexible approach which responds to local circumstance; the development of an asset base in the community; and attention to legacy.

Supporting documents

All published in 2020 unless otherwise stated

Academy of Medical Sciences, *Understanding People's Concerns about the Mental Health Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis*, K Cowan

British Red Cross, *COVID-19 Vulnerability Index for Wards in the UK*

Cambridge University, *Pay the WiFI or feed the children? Coronavirus has intensified the UK's digital divide*, G Burgess and H Holmes

Centre for Cities, *How will coronavirus affect jobs in different parts of the country?*, E Magrini

Centre for Social Justice, *Domestic Abuse and the Lockdown*

Food Foundation, *Vulnerability to Food Insecurity since the COVID-19 Lockdown*, R Loopstra

Health Foundation, *Emerging evidence on health inequalities and COVID-19*

ICNARC (Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre) *COVID-19 Report Improvement Service, Poverty, Inequality and COVID-19*

JRF (Joseph Rowntree Foundation), *Surge in food bank use shows we need stronger lifelines to stay afloat*, I Porter

Local Trust (2019), *Left Behind? Understanding Communities on the Edge*

Local Trust (2020*), Community Responses in Times of Crisis*, S Wyler

ONS, *Deaths Involving COVID-19 by Local Area and Socioeconomic Deprivation*

Onward, *Building a social stimulus to tackle the COVID-19*
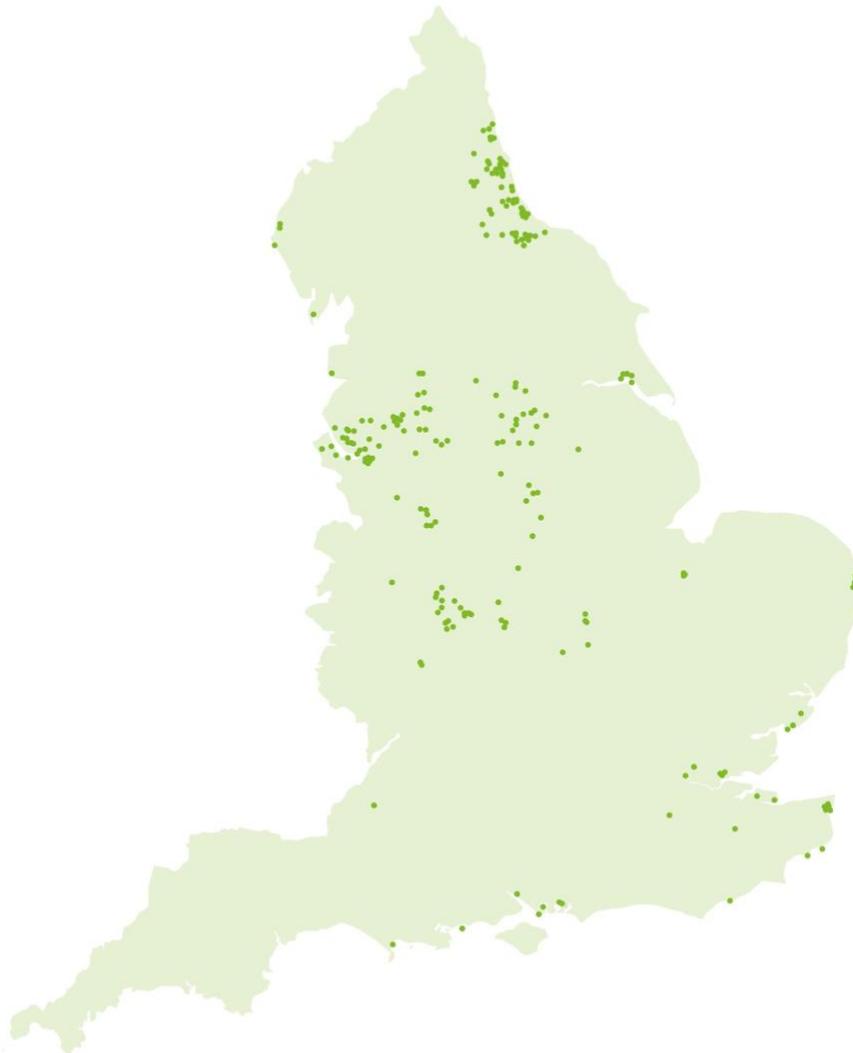
Oxford Institute for the Internet, *Local Geographies of Digital Inequality*, G Blank, C Calvino and M Graham

Power to Change, *Local Heroes: How to Sustain Community Spirit Beyond COVID-19*, V Alakeson and W Brett

About the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods is a cross-party group of MPs and Peers. It is committed to improving social and economic outcomes for residents living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, through the development and advocacy of hyper-local initiatives and policies.

Map showing 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England

All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, July 2020

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