

# Communities of trust: why we must invest in the social infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods



## A report of the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods

December 2020

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This report was researched and funded by Local Trust, secretariat to the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

**Local Trust**

## About the APPG evidence session

The APPG held its second evidence session on 22 September 2020. The session considered the importance of social infrastructure and social capital and the impact of their decline on 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Thanks to the expert witnesses who gave evidence to the APPG:

- Dan Gregory, independent advisor and researcher
- Anna Hunter, project worker, Tang Hall, York
- Will Tanner, Director, Onward

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## About the All-Party Parliamentary Group 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 neighbourhood initiatives and policies.

[appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk](http://appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk)  
[@appgleftbehind](https://twitter.com/appgleftbehind)

## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities to make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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## **Stop press: on the announcement of a £4bn Levelling Up Fund**

On 25 November 2020 as this report went to press, the Chancellor Rishi Sunak MP announced a £4bn Levelling Up Fund; to "support local infrastructure, prioritising places in need, those facing particular challenges, and areas that have received less government investment in recent years".

This is very welcome, but it won't do all the work we think is needed. With very little detail available, the focus of the Fund seems to be shovel-ready local 'bricks and mortar' projects, including some we would define as social infrastructure - in the form of community centres and arts and cultural projects, as well as bypasses and bus lanes to improve local transport connectivity. This is an excellent starting point, one we would like to see built on through complementary investment in the small scale activity that brings communities together, creating the social capital to drive significant targeted improvement in the places that have been 'left behind'; with communities in charge of the spend generating community confidence and capacity to achieve sustainable change.

# Foreword from our co-chairs

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods was set up to be the voice at Westminster for those deprived communities that for far too long have missed out on many of the things that most of us take for granted. Things like accessible places and spaces in the community for people to meet and interact, neighbourhood shops and facilities that serve the needs of local residents, active and vibrant community groups, organisations and institutions that strengthen local civic, social and cultural life, and good connectivity, both digital and physical.

Over the years, many 'left behind' neighbourhoods have seen vital social infrastructure such as this decline and disappear. As MPs representing constituencies with areas of multiple deprivation and high levels of unmet community needs, we know that such areas experience poorer outcomes across a range of indicators when compared to others similarly deprived. From low levels of educational attainment and participation in higher education to fewer job opportunities and significantly adverse health outcomes, the evidence shows that 'left behind' neighbourhoods are worse off.

Earlier research for our APPG exposed just how vulnerable the residents of these neighbourhoods are to the damaging effects of COVID-19, the impact of which is likely to exacerbate existing social and economic problems. It also showed how low levels of social infrastructure in 'left behind' neighbourhoods leaves them less well equipped to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic, lacking the funding and support necessary to as easily and effectively harness the community spirit mobilised to such effect in other parts of the country.

These communities must be at the forefront of the levelling up agenda, with investment in education and skills, transport and broadband. As we have seen from past regeneration programmes, however, sustainable improvement in local outcomes needs targeted investment in people as well as places. To secure transformational and enduring change, we must also provide the capacity building resources for communities themselves to take action on the issues that matter most to local people.

Investment in the building blocks of social infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods will not only help to deliver long-term improvements in the lives, livelihoods and the opportunities of local residents, it will also save money. As a prudent intervention upstream, it will avoid increased demand on more costly public services at a later date, as well as serving to grow the economy and increase tax revenues.



As we emerge from the damage wrought by the coronavirus and seek to build back better, it is vital that levelling up involves targeted investment into those neighbourhoods that need it most, and that such investment includes significant support for social infrastructure.

That is why as an APPG we are endorsing the proposals for a Community Wealth or Levelling Up Communities Fund, using the next wave of dormant assets to invest in foundational social infrastructure for 'left behind' neighbourhoods. This is a once in a generation opportunity, and it is essential that we seize it.

**Paul Howell MP and  
Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP**  
co-chairs of the APPG for 'left behind'  
neighbourhoods

# Executive summary

Recent research found that the places where the social fabric is most frayed and in need of repair are coastal areas, city suburbs and large towns (Onward, 2020), the peripheries of which make up many of the 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods across England identified by Local Trust and Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) research for the APPG (Local Trust, 2019a). Home to 2.4 million people, these areas have seen their social infrastructure decline disproportionately compared to the rest of the country.

Not only are these 'left behind' neighbourhoods economically deprived (as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation) but they also have high levels of community need (as measured by the Community Needs Index - see Box on page 34). They are communities which have low levels of:

- **civic assets:** the spaces and places in the community where people can meet and interact, from community centres, libraries and leisure facilities to cafes, pubs and parks
- **community engagement:** groups and organisations that do things and bring people together
- **connectivity:** digital and physical connections between people and opportunities – particularly economic opportunities.

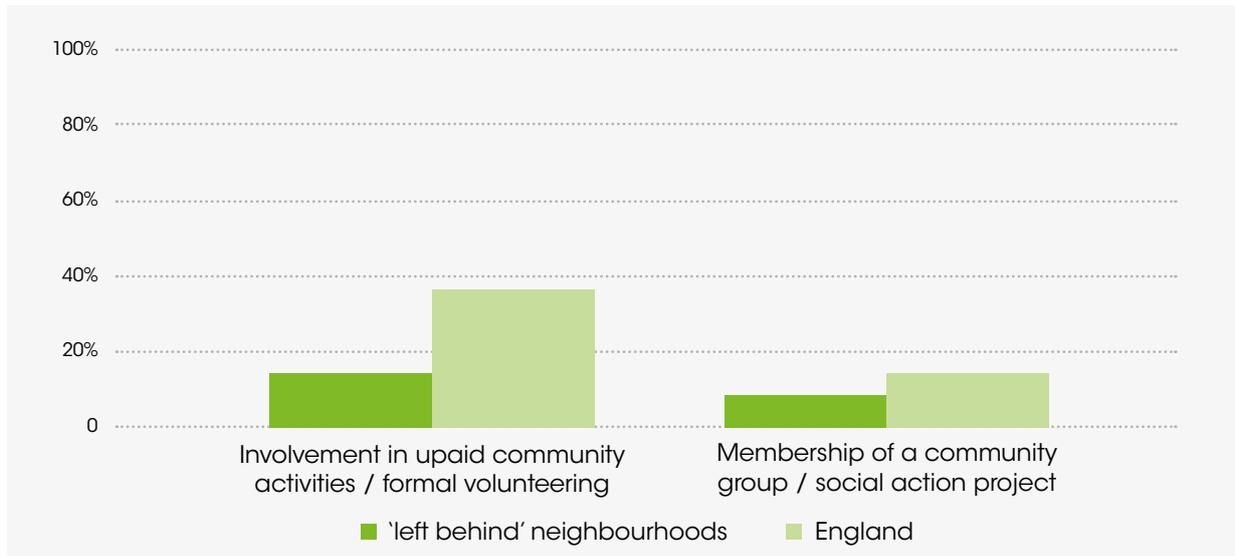
Taken together, these three vital aspects of modern life are the things we are referring to when we talk about social infrastructure. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods therefore have a social infrastructure deficit.

Due to this deficit, they can also suffer from depleted levels of social capital, the glue holding societies together, resulting in weakened connections between residents, organisations and public agencies, lower levels of volunteering and wider civic activity. Polling by Suration (2020) found that there were much lower levels of volunteering in 'left behind' neighbourhoods when compared to the national average. Only 14 per cent of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods were involved in unpaid voluntary activity in the past year, compared to 37 per cent of respondents to the government's Community Life Survey who said they took part in formal volunteering at least once in the last year (DCMS, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

The Suration (2020) polling also found that only 8 per cent of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods had been a member of a local community or social action group over the past year. This compares with an estimated 16 per cent of people in England who had been involved in local social action at least once in the last twelve month (DCMS, 2020).

<sup>1</sup> NB. In relation to these questions, Suration asks respondents whether over the last 12 months they have "been involved in any of the following activities" (listing six types of community activity plus 'other'), and to only include those activities that were unpaid; and whether they have "been a member of any of the following community groups in your local area" (listing six types of community groups plus 'other'). The DCMS Community Life Survey asks whether respondents have been involved in formal volunteering at least once in the last year, and social action at least once in the last twelve.

## Levels of resident involvement in community activities

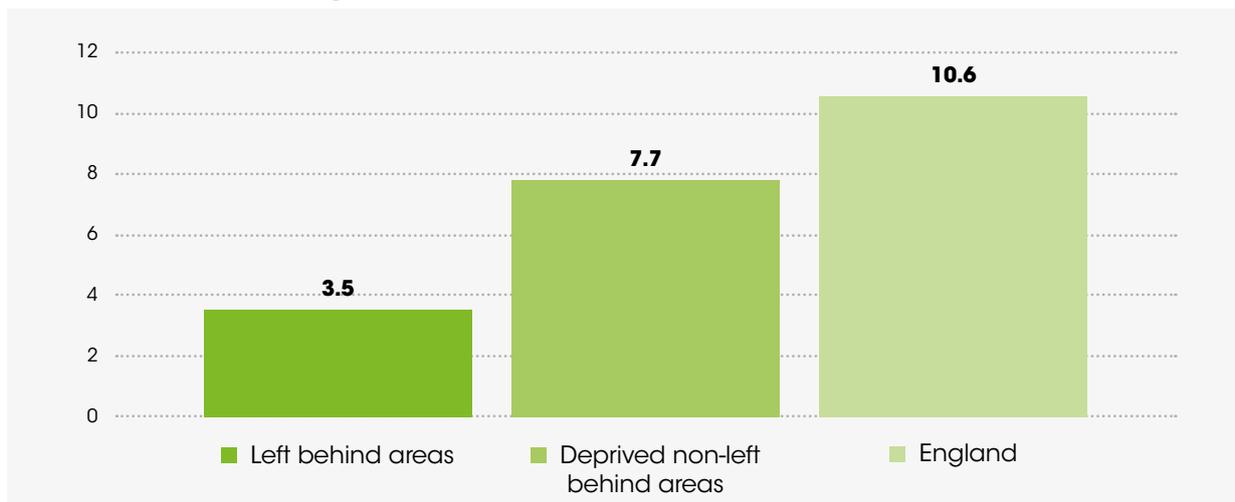


Source: Suration poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020 and DCMS Community Life Survey 2019-20

As a result, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have had less community capacity to respond collectively to issues and challenges as well as less access vital support and leverage resources from elsewhere. This specific problem was identified in APPG research into the early impact of COVID-19 which showed that 'left

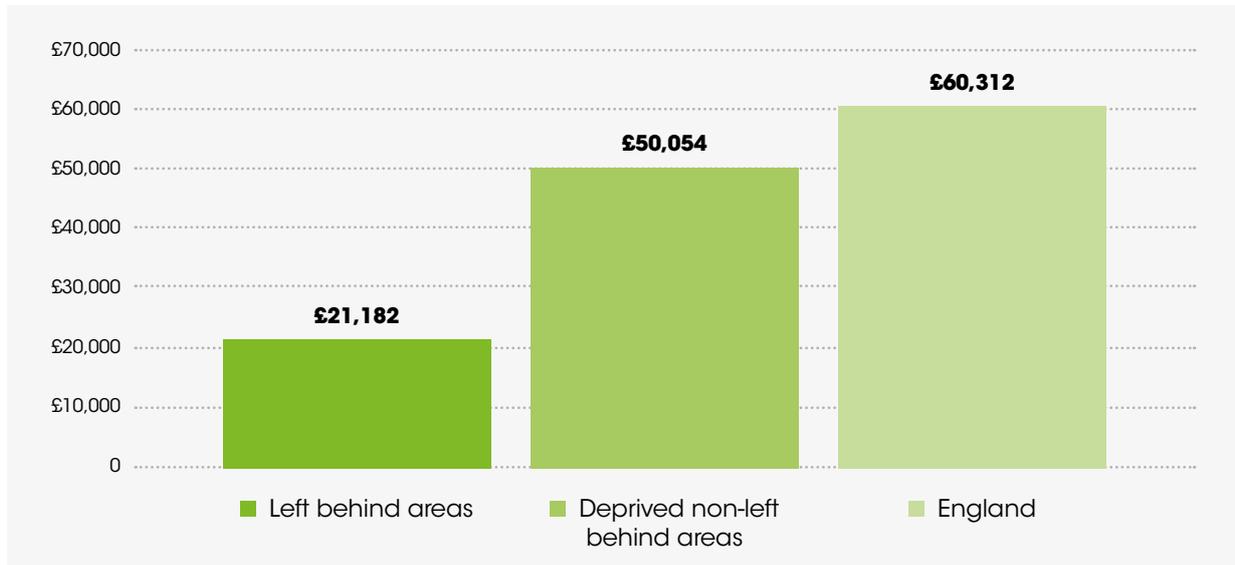
behind' neighbourhoods had lower levels of mutual aid activity than other equally deprived areas, and received significantly less external charitable funding support than these communities. On both counts, 'left behind' neighbourhoods reported around a third of the amount of the national average (Local Trust, 2020).

## Number of mutual aid groups per 100,000 population



Source: <https://covidmutualaid.org.uk>

## COVID-19 charitable grants per 100,000 population

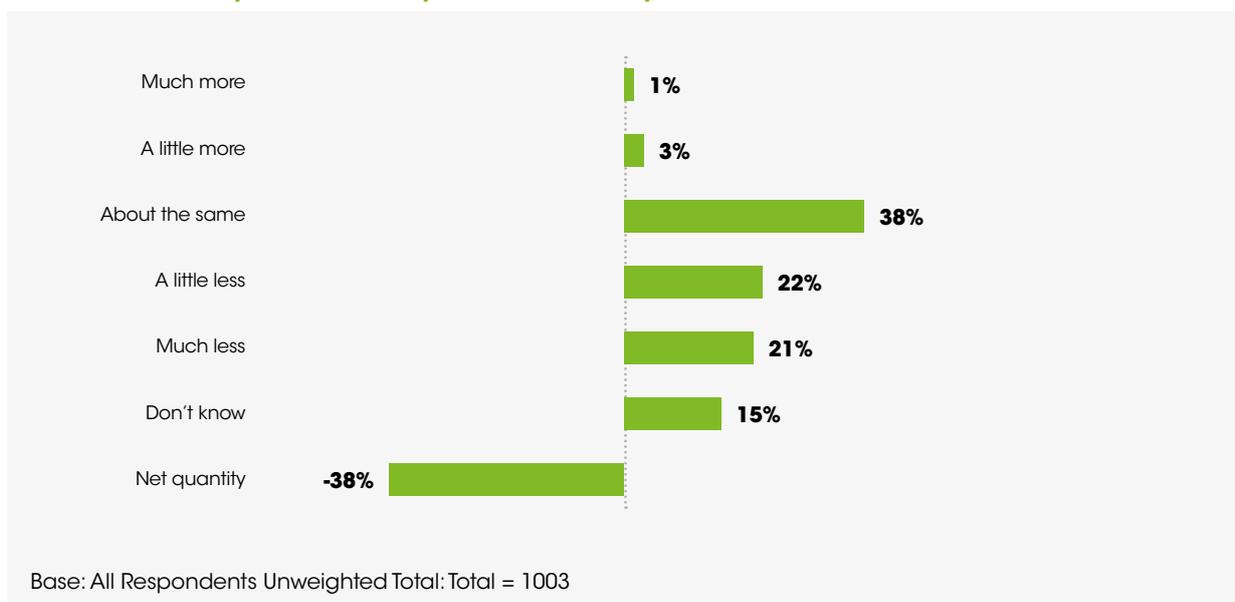


Source: 360 Giving Grant Nav <https://COVIDtracker.threesixtygiving.org/> 2020

These lower levels of community engagement and access to resources and facilities is reflected in the recent polling data. This found that over four in ten residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods felt that they were not getting their fair share of resources compared to other nearby communities

(Survation, 2020). Their primary concern was a lack of social infrastructure, with 'places to meet' cited most often as the area where 'left behind' neighbourhoods were not getting their fair share (57 per cent), closely followed by community venues such as leisure and sports facilities (55 per cent).

## Overall, do you feel your area gets its fair share of resources, compared to other communities in your town/city/local authority area?



Source: Source: Survation poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020

This sense that many communities feel of missing out is palpable. In response, government is committed to 'levelling-up' and improving outcomes for areas that have missed out in the past from the benefits of economic growth. Initiatives such as the £3.6bn Towns Fund should reflect the prioritisation of investment and its targeting at places that have not shared in the proceeds of growth in the same way as more prosperous parts of the country.

This investment has been focused on renewing and improving infrastructure that will form the bedrock for the recovery following the COVID crisis. However, a focus primarily on regional and town centre physical regeneration and large economic infrastructure projects risks overlooking the specific needs of communities located on the periphery of those towns and cities.

These 'left behind' neighbourhoods have suffered from a significant loss of social and economic infrastructure at a local level, and with high levels of multiple deprivation and unmet community needs may not see immediate benefits from – or be able to easily access – the results of this new investment.

In parallel to investment in economic infrastructure and creating new economic opportunities, long-term, targeted investment is needed at the local neighbourhood level, focused first on the needs of the areas that are most 'left behind'. Such investment should have a particular objective in building and sustaining new social infrastructure, something that the residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods have themselves identified as making the most difference to improving their lives and the local community.

As Onward (2020) have found in their recent research, for the 'levelling-up' agenda to be successful the government needs to "start building local institutions, seeding local networks, empowering local leaders and devolving power – real power – to places to take back control of their own place". In doing so, it will be possible

to create the foundations of a virtuous circle that builds social capital, underpins local economic development, supports local public services and strengthens community spirit and resilience.

It is this investment in social infrastructure to repair our fraying social fabric and replenish our communal wells of social capital and solidarity that will pay dividends over the long term. Investment in the form of a Community Wealth or Levelling Up Communities Fund for "perpetual investment in long-term, transformational, community-led projects in left-behind areas" is what is needed to tackle the deep-rooted spatial inequality that divides our country, leaving millions left behind and at risk of falling even further behind (Kruger, 2020). It is an investment in the potential of people to effect positive change over their own lives and that of their community – to enable them to share in our nation's prosperity.



# Introduction

“Policy makers and civil servants in Westminster especially focus very heavily on economic indicators and economic infrastructure, and not so much on some of the trends in societies and communities”.

**Will Tanner, Director of Onward, giving evidence to the APPG**

From the nation state to the neighbourhood, trust and confidence in human relationships, and in the organisations and institutions that these relationships enable, is essential to our way of life. Whether in the transactional relationships of the marketplace or the relational services we find in the voluntary and community sector, high levels of trust and confidence are necessary to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes. Our social and economic ecosystems depend on this – when trust is absent or erodes the impact on society is significant and can be dangerous.

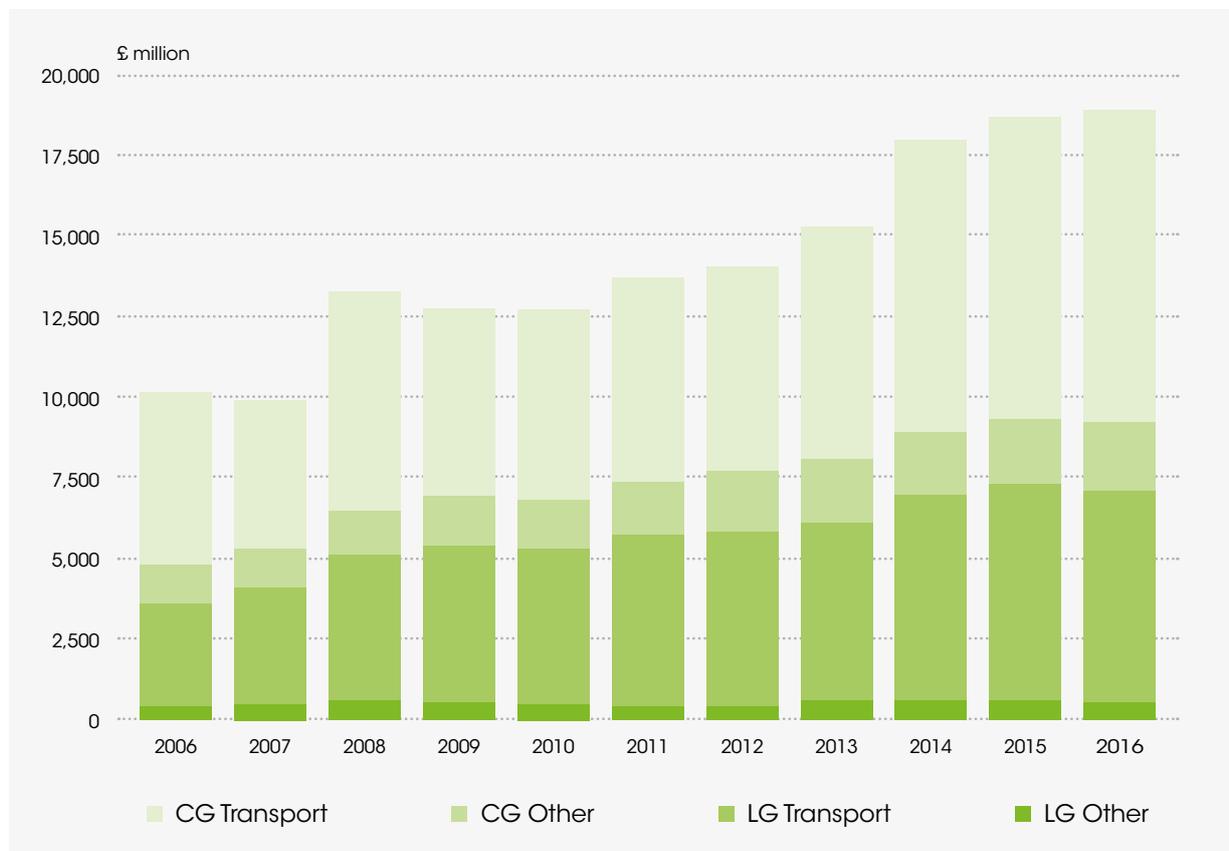
Much has been written about ‘social capital’ and the ties that bind us together – the reciprocity, social solidarity and propensity for collaboration that social capital engenders, and the greater individual and collective wellbeing that arises as a result.<sup>2</sup> But less explored is the idea of social infrastructure: a foundational concept encompassing many of those things upon which we are all dependent and which many of us take for granted.

Social infrastructure is essential to the functioning of our local economies and communities. It is the existence of social infrastructure that makes society possible, and which enables social capital to be created and to accumulate. Despite the essential day-to-day heavy-lifting it performs, social infrastructure is the Cinderella of the infrastructure world.

Whilst the case for spending on economic infrastructure is seen as open-and-shut, with investment necessary to underpin our economy and improve efficiency and productivity, the rationale for investment in social infrastructure is not yet universally recognised.

<sup>2</sup> See Putnam, Bennett Institute, Gregory and Klinenberh.

## Government infrastructure investment estimates, current prices UK, 2006 to 2016



Source: Office for National Statistics – Developing new statistics of infrastructure: August 2018

Investment in economic infrastructure has increased significantly in recent years, despite a constrained fiscal environment. There is a dedicated part of Government to manage such investment: the UK Infrastructure and Projects Authority. It was created in 2016 through a merger of Infrastructure UK and the Major Projects Authority, and with reporting lines to the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, following a 2015 OECD report which noted how the UK's protracted underinvestment compared to other OECD countries over the past three decades had resulted in an infrastructure deficit. The report argued that greater infrastructure provision would be instrumental in lowering regional disparities and bridging divides (OECD, 2015).

The same is not true of the government's approach to social infrastructure

– something that also suffers from a geographical divide. Despite its foundational role in underpinning the formation and development of social capital and civic life within communities – which is increasingly seen as critical to the health and sustainability of society – social infrastructure has often not been seen as a key, strategic investment priority.

Although there are rising levels of spatial inequality in terms of access to social infrastructure, there is no 'UK Social Infrastructure and Civic Assets Agency' tasked with mapping and monitoring the health of the nation's stock, or managing investment plans and programmes. There is no specific, long-term and ring-fenced source of funding for investment in supporting communities to develop the sort of social infrastructure they need to prosper.

Whilst the Home Nations' devolved administrations have opportunities to respond strategically to this agenda, in England there is no co-ordinated national approach to how we resource community wellbeing through social infrastructure. Since the last century, governments of all political colours have lacked the political will, ideological drive or pragmatic insight to ensure that our collective stock of social infrastructure is assessed, refreshed and maintained.

However, this picture might be set to change. The recent move by many local councils, Mayoral Combined Authorities and commissioners from across the public sector to invest in local 'community hubs' has received additional focus in the short term as a result of COVID-19. Supported by key funders and community sector organisations, often these hubs bring together public service activities and community-led initiatives, with a view to grounding them in a specific locality. The impact of COVID has also led to a renewed interest in community-led infrastructure, a concept that is gaining increasing political traction, as reflected most recently in the recommendations of Danny Kruger MP's radical report to the Prime Minister.

Local responses to the pandemic demonstrated visibly the importance of social solidarity and community spirit. Communities came together to provide a rapid and effective response – often before state action or any formal support network had been set up – shielding the most vulnerable, coordinating access to essentials and prioritising the physical and mental wellbeing of residents over the long term (TSRC, 2020).

The extent, efficacy and impact of this local social action was dependent on the existence and health of the social infrastructure in the community. Research by Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC)/ Sheffield Hallam University (2020) for Local Trust into community action during COVID has suggested that "well-established 'community-led infrastructure' – networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money – can make for an effective community response to COVID-19."

High levels of social capital enabled communities to work together to share support and address need when and where it arose, and to bring in resources from outside to help meet it. And it is ready access to vibrant, local social infrastructure that created the wells of social capital on which local communities could draw.

This is not true in all parts of the country. In some communities, social infrastructure is not only weak or in a state of disrepair, but lacking altogether. In 'left behind' neighbourhoods that are the focus of this APPG, social infrastructure is notable primarily by its absence. This has had a significant knock-on effect not just in terms of a local community's ability to respond to acute challenges such as the pandemic, but in chronic, adverse impacts over the long-term.

# What is social infrastructure?

“Social infrastructure is something that people increasingly seem to be talking about. But actually there’s a range of views around what is meant by that”.

Dan Gregory, independent advisor, giving evidence to the APPG

There is no single definition of social infrastructure. What it is isn’t, in this context, is large public sector physical infrastructure such as hospitals, prisons or social housing (or the sort of alternative asset class favoured by institutional investors and pension funds that encompasses traditionally publicly-backed health and social care services, such as Private Finance Initiatives).

In his evidence to the APPG, Dan Gregory stressed that thinking about social infrastructure should not just be about the dichotomies of public and private - or state and market. It is equally important to recognise the role of coming together through structures, organisations and activities in the social, community, voluntary and mutual sectors. He identified two specific definitions of social infrastructure, that are not mutually exclusive.

- the range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community
- the places, structures, buildings, clubs and organisations that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer, co-operate

It is important to note that social infrastructure is not the relationships themselves nor the development of them, and neither is it the act of socialising within the activity or location itself, but rather the things that enable or support the social interaction.

Social infrastructure therefore refers to the framework of institutions and the physical spaces that support shared civic life. The community centre, pub, club, café, park and leisure facilities providing space for people to meet, engage and build relationships and trust that underpin any successful community. Other elements of social infrastructure are less visible and tangible – the networks of formal and informal groups, organisations, partnerships, activities and initiatives that both benefit from and sustain the physical and social fabric of a place.

This multifaceted nature of social infrastructure can sometimes make the term feel hard to pin down – or easier to overlook. But its importance is inescapable - “we all know it when we see it...and know how communities appear when it is not in place”; it is what “makes a place where people want to live, businesses want to trade and investors wish to invest” (Sloccock, 2018).

In giving evidence to the APPG, Will Tanner referred to Onward’s work exploring physical infrastructure, civic institutions and relationships, finding that people “talked about the physical infrastructure in their place... the kind of physical lived environment of the high street or a town square or some of the shared public spaces.. and the importance of civic institutions, including public sector institutions that go beyond the charities and the associational life that social capital typically focusses quite heavily on.”

An alternative description of social infrastructure is as the “civic operating system” upon which our society is run. It is “the long term asset that supports social action, volunteering, co-operation and social enterprise” (Gregory, 2018). It helps build trust amongst neighbours, a shared sense of community spirit and entry points that can enable residents to get involved in building the civic life of their local area.

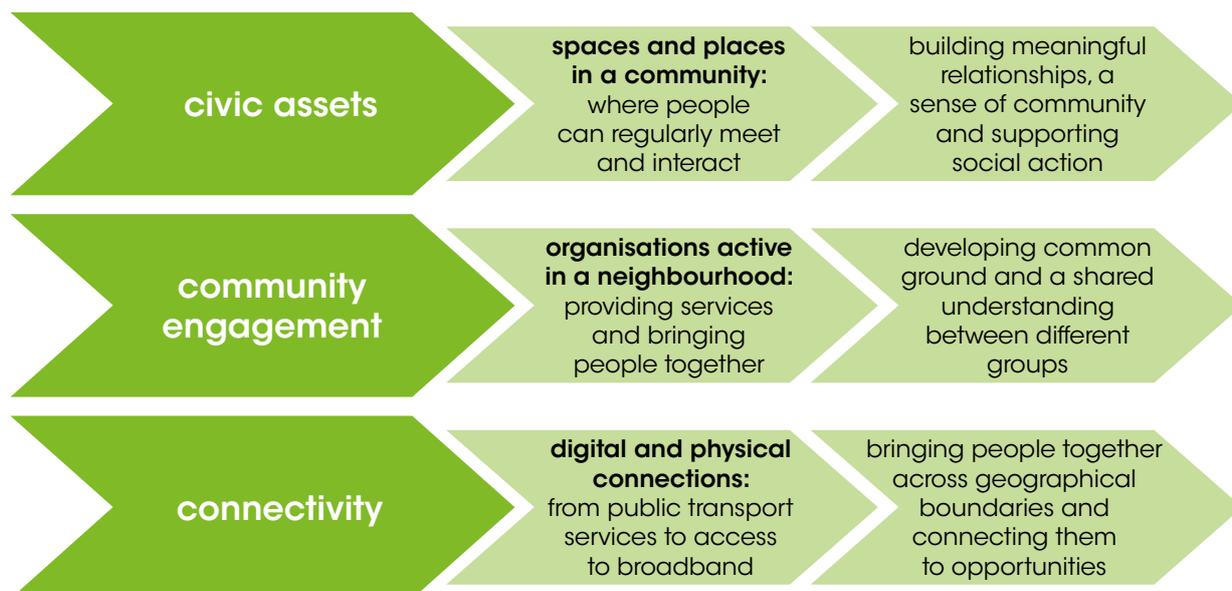
Like much in our way of life, social infrastructure is also digital and virtual. Through open and accessible online platforms, from Mumsnet and Facebook that support local associational community

networks, to more recent initiatives such as the Co-op Group’s Co-operate platform, digital social infrastructure that supports local activity and community engagement is increasingly common, and its development and use was particularly important during the COVID-19 crisis.

Some analyses might consider digital connectivity alongside physical connections such as road, rail and broader public transport provision to be purely economic or physical infrastructure. But Local Trust includes connectivity within its conceptualisation of social infrastructure, informed by learning from its national place-based programme, and recognising the critical importance of connecting people to places and opportunities, both online and off.

In the foundational research into the development of a Community Needs Index social infrastructure is identified and defined using a broad tripartite typology (Local Trust, 2019a). This features civic assets (in relation to the physical spaces), community engagement (networks, organisations and groups), and connectivity (physical and digital).

### A typology of social infrastructure used by Local Trust



Of course, from a community perspective, definitional issues are less important than their practical relevance to residents' perceptions of their local areas. Local Trust has identified investment in local community buildings and community-based activity as areas communities often prioritise most when given the opportunity to influence local spending decisions, such as through the Big Local programme (Local Trust, 2019b). This is particularly true in areas that do not have a rich source of social infrastructure on which to draw to support the development and health of the local community.

“We started with local assets that needed support and upgrading... Tang Hall Big Local focussed on providing a quality baseline for our activities. People in deprived areas want and deserve to have the same as those with more affluence”.

Anna Hunter, project worker, giving evidence to the APPG

'Harder' forms of social infrastructure, such as shared and accessible physical places where people can meet and congregate at low or no cost – and which are the location of community activities – are seen by local residents as vital. But of equal importance is the 'soft' social infrastructure of communities: the groups and organisations that help underpin community confidence and capacity, and the networks, connections and relationships they facilitate. Taken together, the continued interaction and interplay between civic assets and local community groups and networks, underpinned by good connectivity, supports community engagement and helps create a virtuous circle.

Importantly, and conversely, because one supports the other, without accessible places in a neighbourhood for people to meet and gather, it can be hard for groups to form and take collaborative action on things that matter most to the local community. This risks creating a cycle of decline.

### Social infrastructure helping create a virtuous circle locally



# Why is social infrastructure so important?

In his 2018 book *Palaces for the People*, Eric Klinenberg (2018) notes that

“When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves”.

Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 2018

As the places, organisations, activities and networks that help underpin social identity, inclusion and community spirit and cohesion, together with the connectivity systems and platforms that bring people together and access opportunities. Thus strong social infrastructure is a key ingredient for a successful community, and it could be argued, a critically important public good.

## Social capital: from bowlers to bankers

Twenty years ago, Harvard academic Robert Putnam popularised the concept of social capital and its role in supporting communities in his bestseller *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American Community*. According to the OECD (2009), the term ‘social capital’ first appeared in a 1916 book from the USA that explored how neighbours could work together to oversee schools. Putnam (1993) initially developed his concept after comparing the development of the north of Italy to the south. He attributed the progress of the northern regions since the 1970s to higher levels of social capital and historically strong civic society traditions, key building blocks for wealth creation (Putnam, 1993).

In recent years the significance of social capital has been championed by leaders from across the financial sector. A year into his tenure, in 2014, former Bank of England Governor Mark Carney emphasised the importance of social capital in building inclusive capitalism. Using Putnam’s definition of social capital as “the links, shared values and beliefs in a society which encourage individuals not only to take responsibility for themselves and their families but also to trust each other and work collaboratively to support each other”, Carney (2014) warned that “unchecked market fundamentalism can devour the social capital essential for the long-term dynamism of capitalism itself”.

In a key 2019 speech, Andy Haldane, Chair of the Industrial Strategy Council and ex-Bank of England Chief Economist observed how “to work well, towns, cities and regions need a blend of economic, financial and social capital.” Regarding declining social infrastructure, he noted that “when these social spaces are lost, social capital depreciates. That matters to the citizens of a region every bit as much as a loss of financial or economic capital; it is another reason to feel left-behind” (Haldane, 2019).

University of Chicago professor and ex-Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Raghuram Rajan, is the latest leading economist to explore this terrain. In his shortlisted FT Business Book of the Year 2019 ‘The Third Pillar’ he identifies the importance of devolved, grass-roots decision making and reviving the community in a rebalancing of its relationship with markets and the state (Rajan, 2019).

## Social infrastructure builds trust and social capital

“There are some places which people don’t really think about too much, don’t think about collectively, that are really important to the way that people get together and form that sense of community cohesion, of socialising with each other, of realising that we are all kind of part of the same community in a wider sense”.

**Dan Gregory**, independent advisor, presenting evidence to the APPG

Social infrastructure plays a particularly critical role in forming, supporting and boosting the levels of social capital in a local area. Social capital is not just the glue or the ties that bind us together by fostering trust and reciprocity: it’s essential for wider social and economic health and wellbeing – something that has become particularly important to communities seeking to respond to challenging social and economic circumstances.

At a basic level, social capital and trust between people within a community contribute to that sense of ‘neighbourliness’ that brings stability and security. The quality and quantity of accessible and inclusive social infrastructure is therefore

directly responsible for meeting key strategic public policy priorities such as promoting community cohesion. It can also support important work to bring people together such as bridging the growing intergenerational divide. It promotes interaction, activities and opportunities to bring people together for “shared experiences, building trust and understanding” (Cantle, 2008). Addressing conflict in communities that may, for example, have had a difficult history of living ‘parallel lives’ is reliant on decent and accessible social infrastructure.

Fostering such ‘bridging social capital’ (ie between different groups) is essential for creating a sense of a shared society, overcoming a potential ‘fear of difference’ or lack of shared experiences through contact and interaction, and creating the environment and conditions for building the ‘hopeful’ communities that Hope Not Hate (2020), for example, explores in its research. In its Social Fabric research, Onward (2020) found that areas with greater diversity typically score higher in terms of shared space and better access to physical and civic infrastructure that potentially allows people to “bridge” their differences (Cantle, 2008).

## Social infrastructure strengthens community resilience

“During the pandemic we worked with the local authority and food based organisations to deliver food parcels and prescription delivery in our area. We found ourselves getting to know our residents and stakeholder organisations in a much deeper way which has created an amazing community bonding and given us over 70 new volunteers”.

**Anna Hunter**, project worker, presenting evidence to the APPG

Strong connections between residents and organisations allow a community to work effectively together. This has been particularly visible in times of trouble and adversity, such as when communities experience catastrophic flooding, with people coming together to navigate the crises through a community response providing specific assistance to those in need.

The strength of the community response has been a hallmark of the pandemic. High levels of social capital enabled communities to work together to share support and to address need, including by bringing in resources from outside, when and where it arose (NLGN, 2020).

This clear demonstration of community resourcefulness and resilience and the revival of neighbourly spirit has been one positive to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis. The importance of social infrastructure in strengthening and supporting communities to build collaborations in order better to meet the needs of their areas cannot be over stated, a point underlined by the recommendations in Danny Kruger’s (2020) important report to the Prime Minister.

## Social infrastructure fosters community engagement and empowerment

“If various governments have been interested in things like volunteering, social enterprise, community cohesion, people helping each other over the garden fence in our communities... why aren’t we thinking about the idea of social infrastructure, and that the social activity will not run by itself with a bit more ... urging and nudging and encouragement and campaigns, but actually relies on the existence of underlying social infrastructure?”

**Dan Gregory**, independent advisor, presenting evidence to the APPG

Social infrastructure – in its physical and digital manifestations – supports local community activities and action that can then lead to greater levels of community engagement and participation within civic life and the wider public sphere. More opportunities for bringing people together creates a more supportive environment conducive to local grassroots social action and the forming of voluntary groups and organisations. In lockdown, local digital infrastructure enabled communities to organise mutual aid groups, direct volunteers and resources and take action. It also supported the move of community groups and activities online, such as local social and cultural events and community-based projects to promote mental health, health and wellbeing support.

Building greater community confidence and capacity has benefits in terms of the ability of individuals and groups to collaborate, forge partnerships, and access additional resources. This can help motivate and empower communities to take greater collective responsibility in identifying and responding to issues facing the local area, and to work together on solutions.

From informal collaborations and short term projects, to more formalised, longer term and institutional approaches that involve the community playing a greater role in local decision making, service provision and in the stewardship and ownership of local assets and facilities, for a community to take action requires the infrastructure to support it.

As the APPG heard, for communities to take greater control and responsibility – and advantage, for example, of the permissions granted under the Localism Act – requires not only an awareness and understanding of the options and how to apply them, but also support for people to use them. This comes down to having effective and appropriate levels of social infrastructure in place.

## Social infrastructure improves economic outcomes

“We support the aspirations of residents via community grants, directed commissions, training and volunteer opportunities that add to their skill set and employability... we support the hyper local economy ... and help to develop social enterprise with mentoring and financial support”.

Anna Hunter, project worker, presenting evidence to the APPG

Putnam’s initial studies of social capital noted its role in underpinning regional development and economic growth. With its importance to the country’s economic life recognised by leading economists alongside other forms of capital, social capital’s reliance on social infrastructure means that its role in improving economic outcomes should not be underestimated.

For individual outcomes, social infrastructure helps build levels of social capital across communities and the skills and networks needed to access the labour market. Low levels of social capital can help to explain

why it is difficult for those who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods to find the type of employment opportunities that can help them to exit poverty, whilst improving levels of social capital enables individuals to develop the skills and networks needed to access and progress in employment opportunities (Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2019).

Social infrastructure such as organisations and accessible community places are vital to supporting individuals into employment, for example through personalised employment support and benefits advice, as well as opportunities into the labour market such as apprenticeships and volunteering. As reported to the APPG, at the neighbourhood level, social infrastructure underpins local community efforts in influencing, informing and leading local regeneration initiatives, promoting local economic development and in some instances entering into the market itself, providing services and operating facilities that serve to improve local economic outcomes. Such approaches can help strengthen the local economy, generating revenue streams and accessing grant funding that is reinvested back into the local area.

More generally, social infrastructure builds social capital that improves trust which, in turn, increases productivity, lowering business costs, smoothing transactions and stimulating enterprise. This trust manifests itself in greater wealth flowing through the local economy, boosting economic outcomes and overall wellbeing (Hamilton et al, 2016). The role of digital and transport connectivity in supporting economic growth is also well documented – conversely, broadband coldspots and ‘notspots’ and poor public transport provision can hold back local economic performance and damage productivity.

## Social infrastructure supports effective public services

“We have some good examples of where community organisations who are already in partnership with councils strengthened that relationship – more equality in the partnerships in COVID, and that helped councils to respond more effectively”.

Participant at the APPG evidence session

Putnam’s original insights into social capital included reflections on how the effectiveness of sub-national government was determined by the presence or absence of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993). In looking at how communities can work together with local government, the wider public sector and other service providers in addressing locally-specific and often ‘wicked problems’, it is clear that active, engaged and empowered communities make a better partner with the state than those that do not have the capacity, confidence or experience to take on greater responsibility for change.

Neighbourhood-based services to the public that are rooted in the community, designed and delivered by local community organisations from a location or venue embedded in the area are not only often more accessible to residents, but are also able to better reach out to and connect with those whom public sector agencies may often miss – or deem ‘hard to reach’.

For those in need of support who may have a poor – or indeed no – experience of dealing with public authorities, provision in the community by a trusted community organisation and its local workers means that the needs of those residents are not overlooked. These are needs that may have otherwise gone unmet, requiring more intensive (and costly) state intervention further downstream, and healthy local social infrastructure can ensure they are identified, assessed and responded to.

Community organisations engaged in service delivery are not only much closer to their prospective client base, but are also much closer to what is happening on the ground in a neighbourhood and can be the source of valuable data and intelligence to public service providers. They are also better equipped to know and respond flexibly to existing and emerging local needs, from preventative work around health and social care, particularly for example in the interlinked areas of diet, mental health, loneliness and social isolation, and the aging well agenda, to outreach youth services and local family support, advice and guidance work. Social infrastructure such as these frontline community organisations designing and delivering services and interventions in, by and from the local community are valuable partners with the public sector.

# A social infrastructure health check

“On many aspects of community we see the hallmarks of decline and deterioration in those relationships and ties between one another. So we find that membership of local groups has fallen... So if you think of residents and tenants associations and local sporting or working men’s clubs, local WI groups – all of the membership of those types of groups has fallen”.

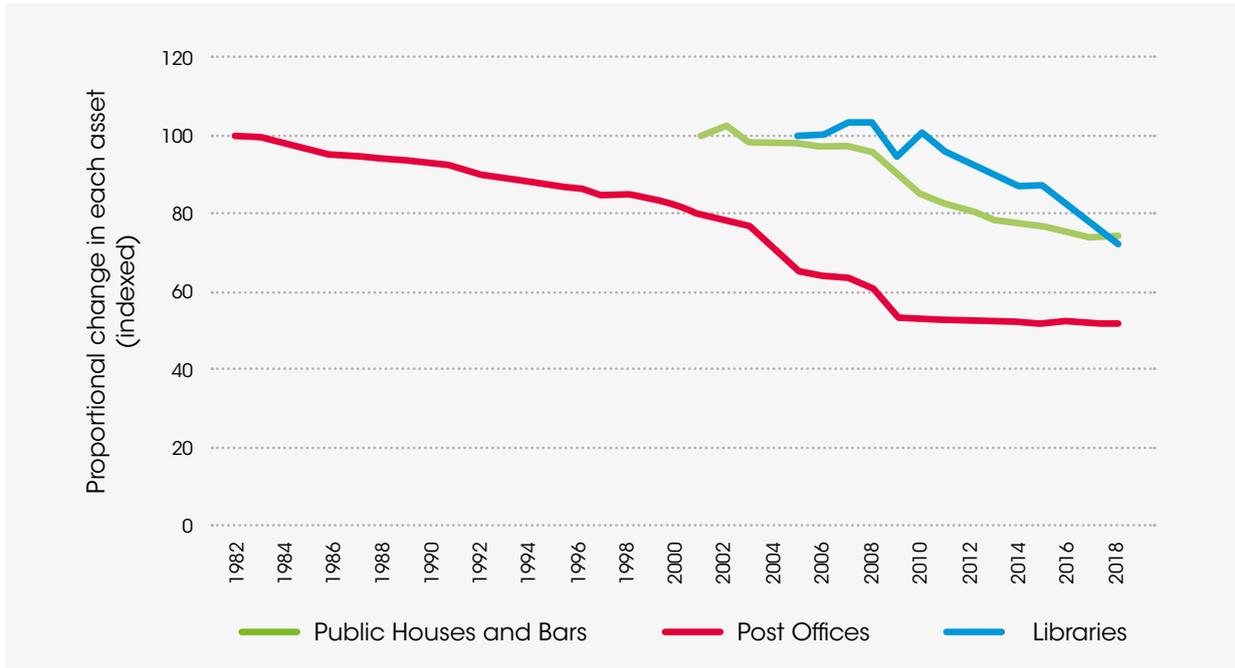
**Will Tanner**, Director of Onward, giving evidence to the APPG

Evidence from contributors to the APPG indicates that in recent years many communities have witnessed a deterioration across various types of social infrastructure. This is supported by the data, which indicates a steady decline in places to meet in the community, and in the organisations that support and facilitate local activities, spanning public, private and community sectors.

For example, over 25 per cent of pubs have called their final last orders since 2001, with 27 per cent of libraries closing their doors since 2005 (Guardian, 2018; Onward, 2020). Rates of civic engagement are also falling – membership of local groups and community organisations fell by a sixth from a peak of 61 per cent in 1993 to 50 per cent today – with the greatest decline amongst those aged under-40 (Centre for Progressive Policy, 2020). This suggests that younger generations might find it more difficult to maintain and build a local participatory or associational culture rooted in the community and a sense of place and belonging.

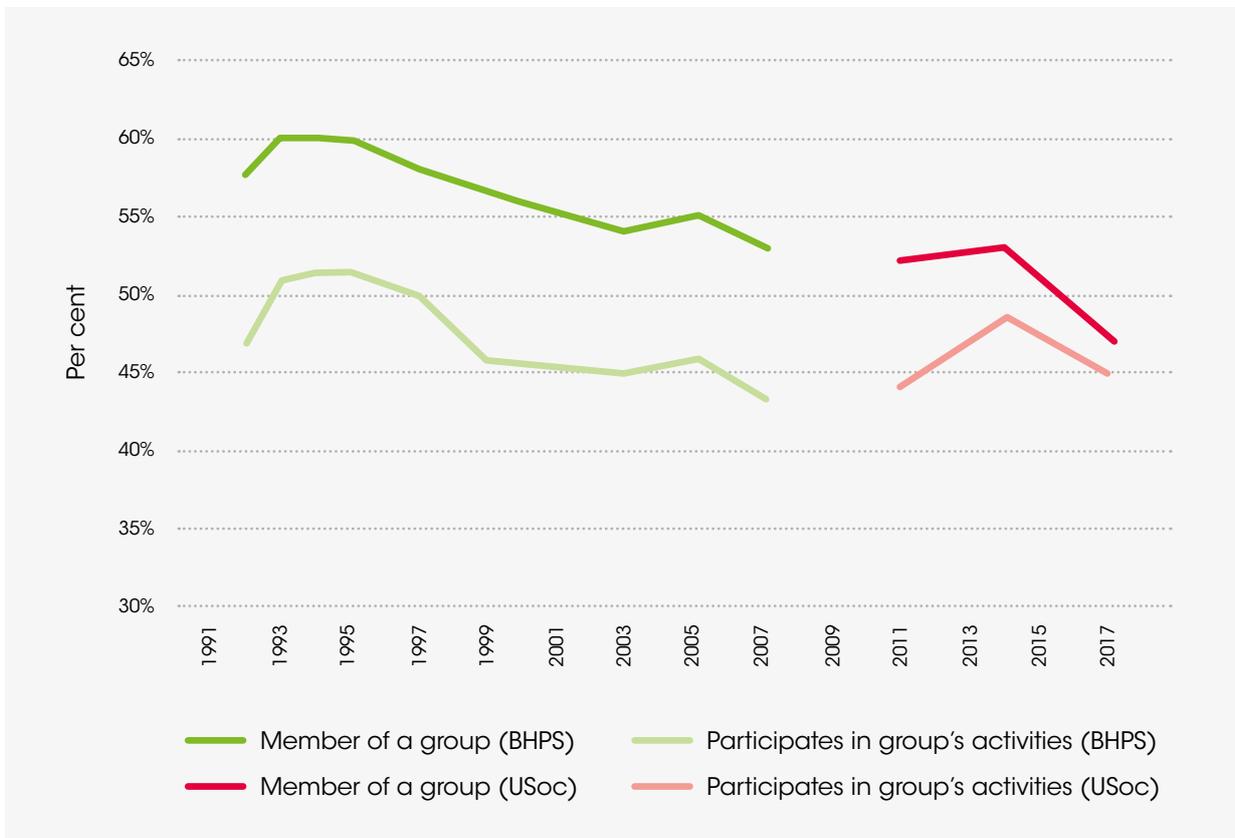


### Pubs, post offices and libraries



Source: State of our Social Fabric 2020, presentation to the APPG by Will Tanner

### Membership of local groups



Source: State of our Social Fabric 2020, presentation to the APPG by Will Tanner

It is clear that this is not simply about public sector budgets, a result of financial pressure on local authorities because of, for example, rising demand for adult social care. The gradual erosion of social infrastructure is a long-term trend: it has happened over decades, reflecting changing patterns in society and the economy as much as public sector spending decisions.

The way that people meet in communities is changing, and how civic assets are owned and controlled is also evolving. This brings with it a range of opportunities, as well as threats. So whilst there is positive news about an increase in viable community-owned pubs and community shops, the latter having increased tenfold since 1996, this is from a low starting point and is reflective in itself of diminishing levels of private sector social infrastructure as evidenced by the decline in pubs in recent years (Onward, 2020).

'Left behind' neighbourhoods may face particular challenges in developing such community-driven responses because these require a significant store of community confidence and capacity. This goes to the nub of the issue: when communities are faced with a loss of social infrastructure, such as the closure of local civic assets, those communities with ready access to existing social infrastructure and high levels of social capital are better equipped to develop a community-led response.

Other aspects of social infrastructure are also under pressure. A recent report for the Urban Transport Group (2020) representing the UK's network of city region transport authorities found that bus and light rail systems would be negatively impacted without continued Government support post COVID. The country also still suffers from an ongoing digital divide, with some areas more worse off than others. Lloyds Banking Group's (2020) Big Conversation: Helping Britain Recover's recent roundtable discussion explored the severity of the digital divide in the North East, looking at how digital connectivity, access to devices, data and digital skills can increase social mobility.

As reported at the APPG, the development and upkeep of social infrastructure has not to date been a particularly salient political issue nationally. Where low levels of social infrastructure impacts most is at the community level. It is those areas where infrastructure that is often the most tired and worn out, and which requires updating and renewing, or where it has disappeared completely and needs recreating and refounding, that should be the first target of attention. For without social spaces for people to connect with one another in a community, local social capital is weakened and the sense of community itself may be placed at risk.

# Social infrastructure and 'left behind' neighbourhoods

"You need to invest in the community first, before considering what to do with the asset".

Participant at the APPG evidence session

Declining levels of social infrastructure is a problem that has disproportionately affected those 225 neighbourhoods identified by Local Trust and OCSI research as being 'left behind'. These neighbourhoods have tended to receive lower levels of public funding over many years, creating cumulative underinvestment. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods receive on average £827 per head to spend on core Local Government services compared with £843 across England as a whole, despite higher overall levels of need (Local Trust 2020).

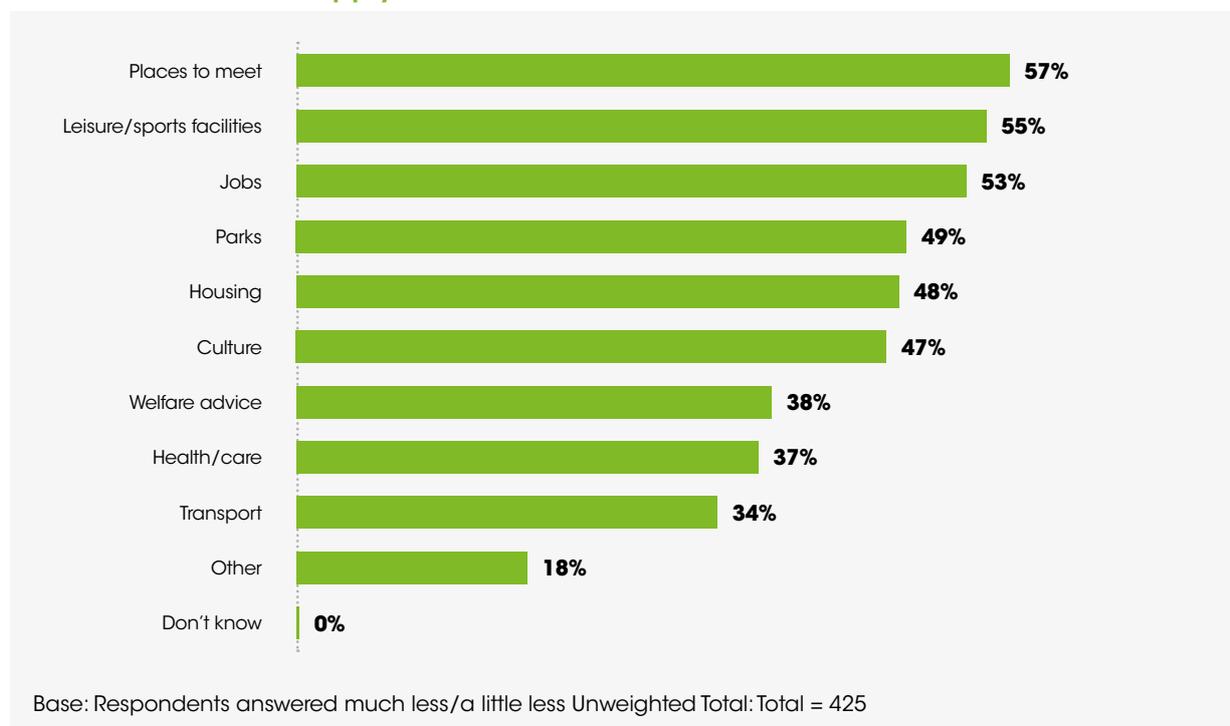
Lower core spending power has also led to a loss of private sector-driven economic activity, leading to the withdrawal of private sector facilities, assets and services such as pubs and shops. This sense of unfairness in access to resources is a very real and pervasive feeling among a sizeable minority of people living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods. This was demonstrated in the Survation (2020) polling, with over four in ten respondents (42 per cent) feeling that their area gets 'much less' or a 'little less' than its fair share of resources compared to other communities in the locality. (Only four per cent felt they received more, with 38 per cent saying it is about the same – perhaps suggestive that comparable areas had

what was perceived to be a similar social and economic profile to the local area of the respondent).

For those that felt their local community was getting less resources, it is noticeable that when asked what they feel they are missing out on, key civic assets such as 'places to meet' and 'leisure and sports facilities' took the top two spots (with 57 per cent and 55 per cent respectively). This highlights the importance that residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods place on local social infrastructure that serves to bring people together, with both seen as more important than investment in job opportunities and tackling employment, the third highest priority at 53 per cent.

Another civic asset, 'parks' also took the fourth spot (with 49 per cent); given the impact of the pandemic, accessible public outdoor green space is increasingly seen as a vital part of a community's local social infrastructure. A further third of respondents felt 'transport' was also an area where their community missed out, highlighting the importance for some 'left behind' neighbourhoods of investment to improve connectivity (Survation, 2020).

**You said your area gets less resources, which areas do you feel are missing out?  
Please select all that apply.**

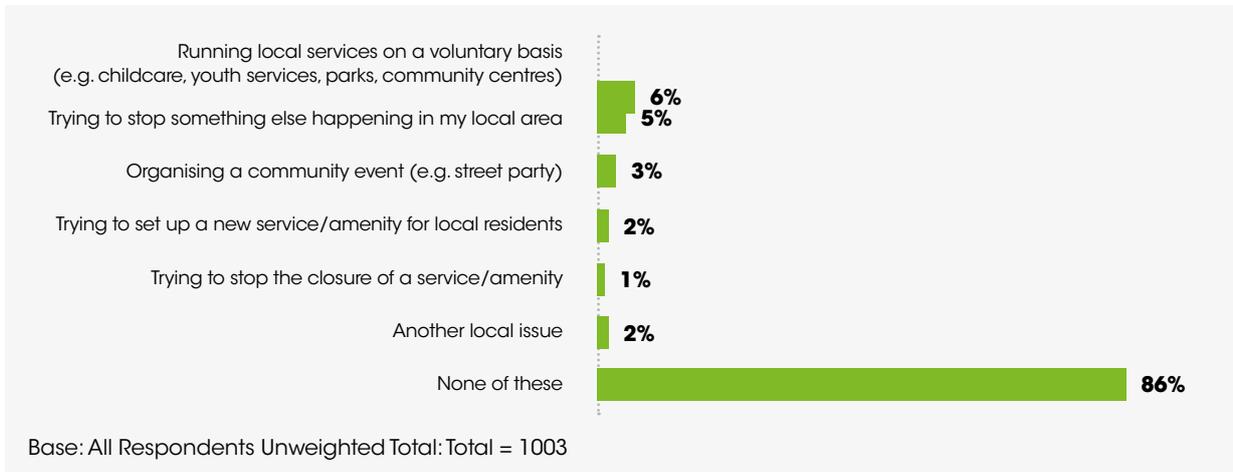


Source: Suration poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020

A lack of social infrastructure such as civic assets in 'left behind' neighbourhoods undermines their ability to support local community activity. The Suration (2020) research shows that residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods participate much less than England as a whole. This is partly because of a lack of opportunity and the availability of places and spaces to meet, as well as smaller numbers of community groups and organisations that enable and support engagement and participation locally.

Only 14 per cent of respondents had taken part in unpaid voluntary activity in the past year (Suration, 2020). This is much lower than other areas, with the government's latest national Community Life Survey finding that 36 per cent of people said they took part in formal volunteering at least once in the last year (DCMS, 2020). (It is also notable that for the national survey results, the percentages have been in decline in recent years, with the numbers taking part in formal volunteering and those involved in social action falling from 45 per cent and 19 per cent respectively in 2013-14).

**Have you been involved in any of the following activities, in the last 12 months?  
Please select all that apply. Please only include those activities that were unpaid.**

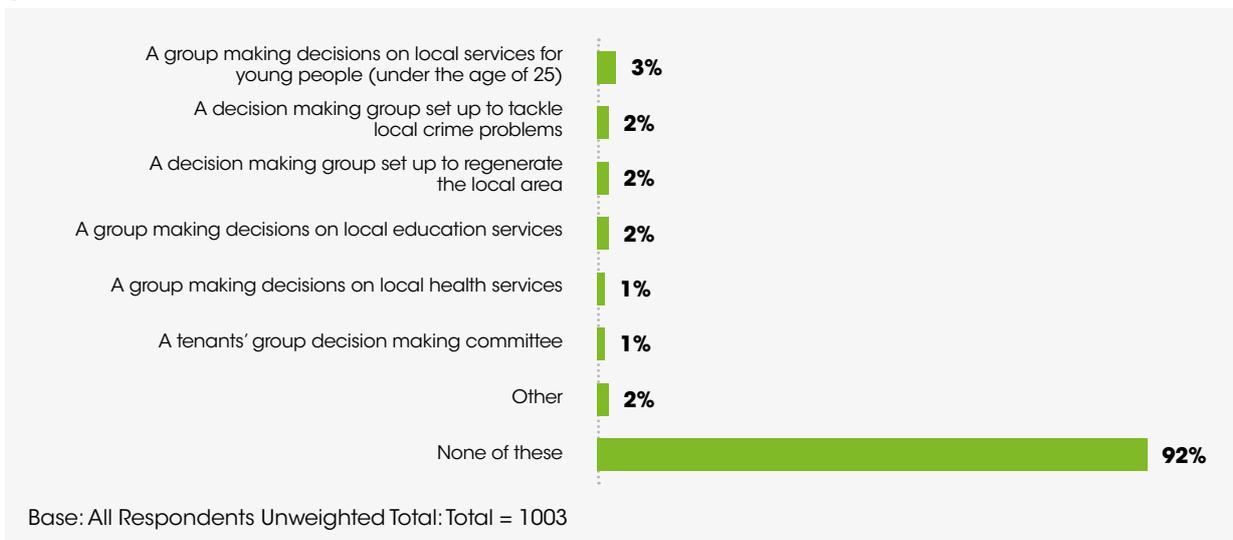


Source: Survation poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020

The Survation (2020) polling also found that only eight per cent of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods had been a member of a local community or social action group over the past year. This compares with an estimated 16 per cent of people in England who had been involved in local social action at least once in the last twelve month (DCMS, 2020). Such low levels of participation have a significant impact on the ability of local community groups to form and operate,

and of local residents to work together collectively to effect positive change and improve local outcomes in their neighbourhoods. Without the experience of involvement in community change, 'left behind' neighbourhoods can lack the confidence and capacity to respond to local challenges, leverage in external resources (eg from charitable funders or local government) or take advantage of the localism rights granted to communities.

**In the last 12 months, have you been a member of any of the following community groups in your local area?**



Source: Survation poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020

Research into the early impact of COVID-19 carried out for the APPG (Local Trust, 2020) revealed the damaging effects of such low levels of social infrastructure. It showed that 'left behind' neighbourhoods had less access to resources to organise locally-led community responses, with lower concentrations of mutual aid groups than other communities: only 3.5 groups per 100,000 population, half that of similarly deprived areas (7.7) and around a third of that in England overall (10.6) (Local Trust, 2020).

Those organisations with a presence in 'left behind' neighbourhoods also received significantly less external COVID-related charitable funding support than those based in other, equally deprived, communities. UK charitable foundations gave 'left behind' areas less than half the funding per head (£21,182 per 100,000 population) awarded in other deprived areas (£50,054), and approximately one third of the amount received in England as a whole (£60,312) (Local Trust, 2020). Altogether, this leaves these communities more vulnerable to the pandemic's many negative consequences, and less prepared or equipped to stage a strong and sustainable recovery.

In addition to the impact of COVID-19, Local Trust's and OCSI's (2020a) research suggests that a lack of civic assets, community engagement and connectivity are associated with significantly worse broader social and economic outcomes for the residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods and the communities they

live in. In areas where there are fewer places to meet, lower levels of community activity and engagement and poor connectivity, residents face significantly worse socio-economic outcomes than areas that are similarly economically deprived but benefit from stronger social infrastructure. For example, they have:

- lower skills levels and higher unemployment than other deprived areas and the gap has been increasing
- much lower job density than other deprived areas, meaning further to travel for work – alongside relatively low levels of car ownership and longer public transport journey times
- lower pay than across other deprived areas, with household income more than £7,000 lower on average than across England as a whole
- poorer outcomes for both physical and mental health, with instances of lung cancer more than 60 per cent the national average
- higher numbers receiving welfare benefits (just under one-in three of working-age adults is in receipt of at least one benefit) than other similarly deprived areas and nearly double the England average
- just under one in three children is living in poverty, higher than levels across other deprived areas and nearly double the national average
- higher crime than the national average for all major crime types, with notably higher levels of criminal damage

# Rebuilding social infrastructure

“Is the problem that the community group has to make the community centre financially viable? If this is thought of as infrastructure, we wouldn’t have to do this and the financial support would come from elsewhere – as it does for roads, for instance”.

Participant at the APPG Evidence Session

Government is committed to ‘levelling-up’ and improving outcomes for areas that have missed out in the past from the benefits of economic growth. Initiatives such as the £3.6 billion Towns Fund should reflect the prioritisation of investment targeted at places that have not shared in the proceeds of growth in the same way as more prosperous parts of the country.

This investment has focused on renewing and improving infrastructure that will form the bedrock for the recovery following the COVID crisis. However, a focus primarily on regional and town centre physical and economic infrastructure projects risks overlooking the needs of communities located on the periphery of those towns and cities, who have also suffered from significant loss of social and economic infrastructure at a local level, and may not see immediate benefits from – or be able to easily access – the results of that new investment.

In parallel to investment in economic infrastructure, long-term, targeted investment is needed at a local spatial level, focused on the needs of areas that are most ‘left behind’, with a particular focus on building and sustaining social infrastructure. In doing so, it will be possible to create the foundations for a virtuous circle that builds social capital, supports economic development, and strengthens community spirit and resilience.

As Onward (2020) have found in their recent research, for the ‘levelling-up’ agenda to be successful the government needs to “start building local institutions, seeding local networks, empowering local leaders and devolving power – real power – to places to take back control of their own place”.

In areas that have seen a loss of social infrastructure, and in particular areas that are categorised as ‘left behind’, long term investment is needed to address that social infrastructure deficit. Evaluation of past area-based programmes suggests that this is likely to be most successful where control of decisions, design and resources is in the hands of local people (CCHPR, 2019).

“We had a New Deal for Communities in our area... £62 million, no capacity, built a bit of infrastructure. The New Deal was managed by the local council and has had no long term effect on the area, in some ways it has made the area worse.. tracts of land left unbuilt on. Our community has belief fatigue in government, council, housing associations”.

Participant at the APPG Evidence Session

Local Trust's experience in delivering the Big Local programme suggests that to be successful, funding would need to be on an unrestricted basis and over the long term, providing communities with the time to develop their capability, confidence and skills outside of the constraints of political or Treasury finance cycles. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods with low levels of social infrastructure are in need of similar foundational support and investment in social infrastructure.

## Places to meet

“We support local facilities such as community centres to improve or upgrade their offer to be part of a community and to link organisations together on the ground”.

Anna Hunter, giving evidence to the APPG

Often communities struggle to sustain themselves because they cannot easily or affordably access places to meet or organise activities. Where these 'harder', physical forms of social infrastructure and community resources – civic assets – have disappeared, evidence given to the APPG and data from Survation (2020) polling of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods show that local people have prioritised investment in them.

As well as the demise of private sector assets such as pubs, over 4000 public buildings are sold off every year, and in recent years the growth in communities taking ownership and control of local civic assets has been supported by a number of national programmes, delivering some notable successes (Locality, 2018). Community ownership of these civic assets can improve their sustainability:

- over 6,000 such community-owned assets in the UK, 76 per cent are in 'very good' or 'good' financial health (Power to Change, 2019).

- community-owned shops have increased tenfold since 1996, from 34 to 346. With a long-term survival rate of 94%, they are a robust and sustainable form of social infrastructure (Plunkett Foundation, 2018).
- community pubs are beginning to flourish, with 85 having registered and opened as of January 2018 and 1,250 registered as 'assets of community value' under the Localism Act 2011 (Power to Change, 2019).

This is all part of a growing movement towards greater community ownership of civic assets. The *Levelling Up our communities* report (Kruger, 2020) calls for a new Community Right to Buy, giving communities organisations the right of first refusal for any public assets coming to market, and an expansion in the size and scope of the planned Community Ownership Fund, a Conservative Party Manifesto commitment. Other work is ongoing to look at how these assets can be better protected for the benefit of the community in the long term (Practical Governance, 2019).

Proposals to support community ownership of local assets and programmes to promote asset transfer are a key part of rebuilding social infrastructure, but can pose significant challenges for 'left behind' neighbourhoods. This is because, as numerous participants in the APPG evidence session made clear, asset transfers and community ownership often require significant pre-existing levels of social capital and community capacity, skills and experience to maximise their chances of success.

“If the incentive is because if you don't you'll lose it, that isn't a real choice. There are many reasons people aren't taking on assets, including complexity, time, the belief that there is a single cohesive view within communities”.

Participant in the APPG Evidence Session

This is in addition to the ability of community organisations to adopt a business planning and social enterprise approach, and success in attracting start-up investment and financing. Local Trust’s experience of working in communities with low levels of pre-existing community capacity is that long term patient support can be needed to get a community to the point where it is capable of taking on ownership of an asset and managing it on a sustainable basis.

### **An active and engaged community**

Many communities need time and considerable support to organise themselves to start to make a difference. Lacking significant existing civil society activity, they do not have a pool of engaged and experienced individuals to draw on, and areas where shops and other businesses have withdrawn face even bigger challenges.

For many communities, such as those in Big Local areas, building local civil society capacity and/or supporting the development of local micro-enterprise are early priorities. This has often included

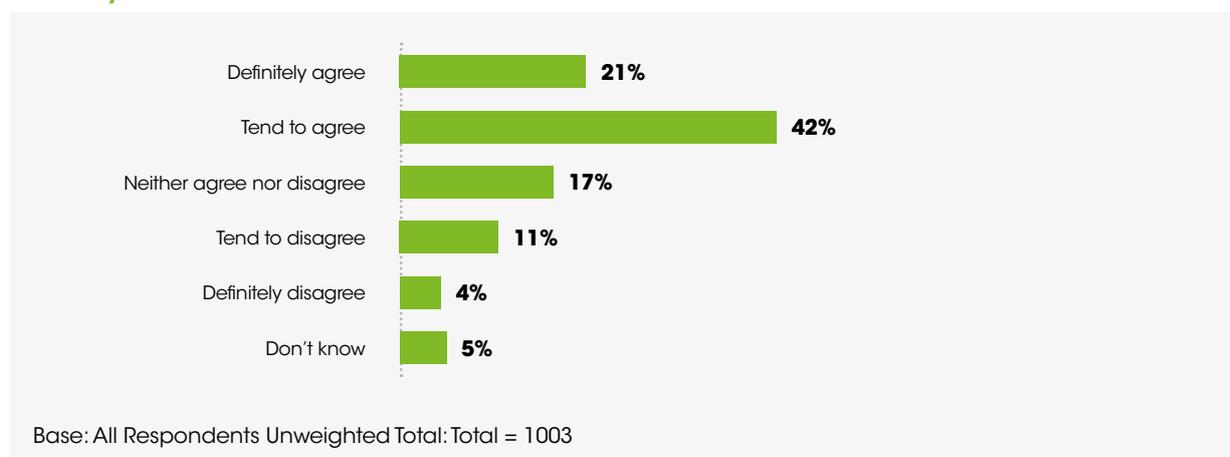
investment to improve an area’s economic prospects through, for example, community-owned affordable housing, renewable-energy schemes, or reviving local shops (Local Trust, 2019b).

Local Trust’s experience working in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods is that levels of interest in participating in the decision-making of local government can be lower than in other countries. This may reflect low levels of confidence on the part of local residents, but also a level of distrust about engagement with statutory agencies. By way of contrast, when new resources are made available specifically for improving local areas, local people can show considerable enthusiasm for leading decision-making about how those resources are spent.

Survation (2020) polling demonstrates that the vast majority of residents of ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods do not doubt the efficacy of local resident involvement in their community, with almost two thirds of respondents (63 per cent) definitely or tending to agree with the sentiment “when people in this area get involved in their local community, they can change the way that their area is run”.

### **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**

**When people in this area get involved in their local community, they really can change the way that their area is run.**



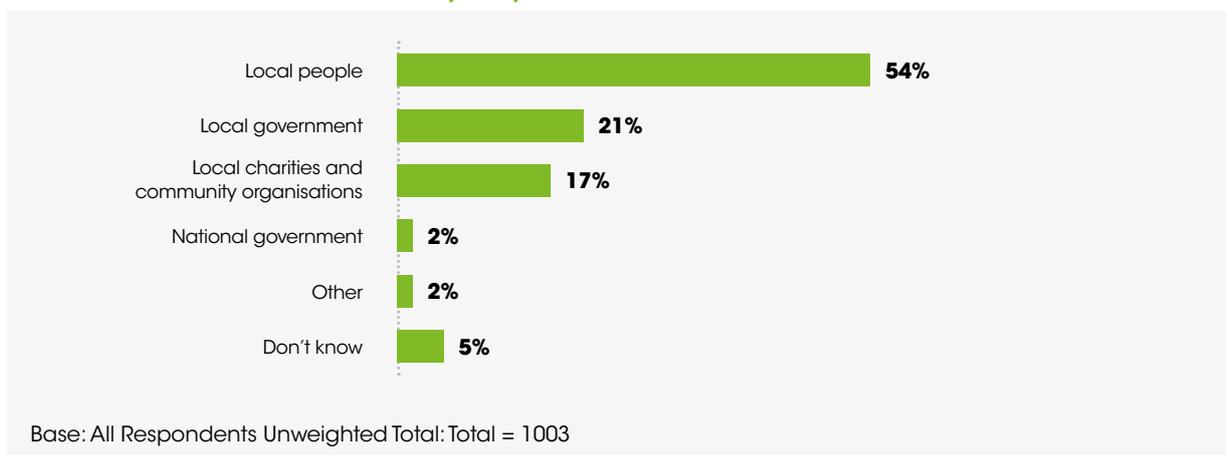
Source: Survation poll of ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods 2020

Whilst local people are interested in getting involved in improving their local area, they are less interested in getting involved in local authority decisions about their area, suggesting that people clearly differentiate between the local authority and local community. Only 28 per cent answered 'yes' when asked whether they would "like to be more involved in the decisions your council makes which affect your local area", compared to 52 per cent nationally (Survation, 2020).

Engagement through direct local community activity is preferred over involvement with

the remoter local state bureaucracy. This is particularly the case when it comes to local spending decisions. When asked who should decide on spending from a hypothetical fund to provide more support to the local community, over 70 per cent of residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods thought that responsibility should lie either with local people (54 per cent) or local charities and community organisations (17 per cent). Local government was favoured by only just over a fifth (21 per cent), and national government by only two per cent (Survation, 2020).

### If a fund was set up to help provide more support to your community, who should lead decisions about how the money is spent?

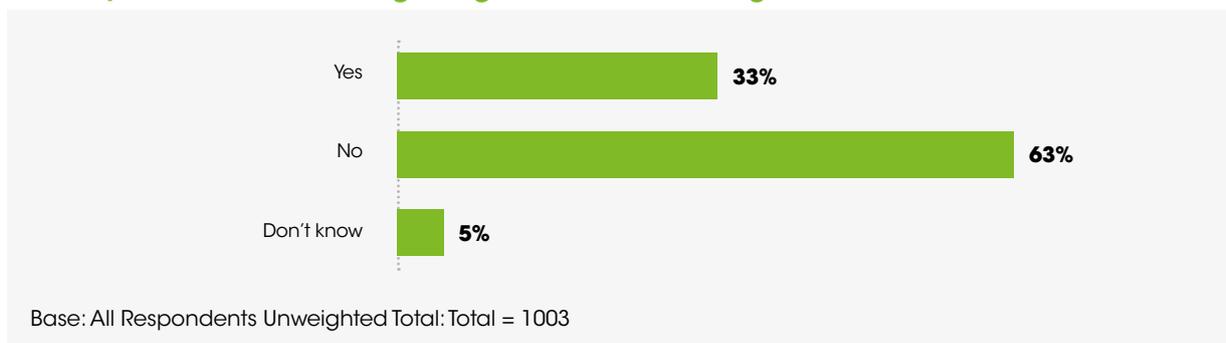


Source: Survation poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020

Whilst there is latent potential for community action in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, people are more reticent when it comes to expressing a personal interest in making

those decisions; only a third reply in the affirmative, with 63 per cent not interested in being involved (Survation, 2020).

### Would you be interested in getting involved in making those decisions?



Source: Survation poll of 'left behind' neighbourhoods 2020

This disconnect between on the one hand the belief in the efficacy and real benefits of community involvement in the local area and the certainty that local residents should lead on spending decisions about additional investment to support the community, and on the other the doubt, dispassion and disinclination of many at an individual level to be part of any decision-making is likely the result of weakened social infrastructure.

It suggests considerable latent appetite for getting involved in improving the local community, with the finding that 33 per cent of residents would personally like to get involved in decision-making, perhaps paradoxically both despite these areas missing out from investment in community assets that help nurture a thriving community spirit, and because of this lack of investment.

Evidence from the Big Local programme reveals concentric circles of involvement in community activity (Local Trust, 2019b). At the centre, there is a small group of dedicated residents who shoulder the bulk of the work, leading out to those involved as volunteers and participants on specific activities or events (Local Trust, 2019b). This suggests the need to ensure that the level of responsibility placed on key individuals is recognised, and appropriate support is provided to them.

These findings demonstrate the importance of investing in civic assets and the social fabric of a local place to support and harness a latent appetite for participation. Foundational investment in social infrastructure over the long-term will help overcome a lack of experience, confidence and capacity, building on the real interest of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods in supporting local people to act on their insight and knowledge of local issues, and get involved to meet the needs of the local community.

## Connectivity

Improving connectivity has been a priority for those communities in peripheral areas suffering from limited public transport and poor digital connectivity. A lack of connectivity has made it difficult for them to access labour markets and public services or build the partnerships they need to improve outcomes for themselves and their areas. Community action has ranged from petitioning to save local bus services and developing transport improvement plans to themselves providing imaginative alternative transport options, setting up online training programmes, and obtaining digital licences and devices to keep residents connected (Local Trust, 2019b).

The internet has made it easier to forge connections and build communities beyond geographical borders, having a "positive effect on both the size and diversity of people's personal networks" (Klinenberg, 2018). However, those unable to use and access digital devices and broadband are prevented from benefitting from many of the things that most of us now take for granted, from online shopping to public services that are increasingly digital by default.

During lockdown, the role of the internet was of paramount importance, enabling people to connect with friends and family, and work and learn from home. The pandemic was also a stark reminder that those without access to the internet risk becoming even more isolated and 'left behind', as the world moves ever more rapidly online.

In the Suration (2020) polling of 'left behind' neighbourhoods, "fast and reliable internet coverage" and "better public transport, such as buses and trains" were identified by respondents as top ten priorities for any new resources to invest in their communities. As the evidence shows, when appropriately supported and resourced, communities have been able to take action on a range of connectivity issues.

Some communities have invested in local community-owned broadband services to ensure access, whilst others have set up online training programmes and obtained digital licences and devices to get and keep residents connected (Local Trust, 2019b).

Connectivity will feature in a future APPG evidence session in 2021, informed by new in depth research from OCSI and the Campaign for Better Transport.



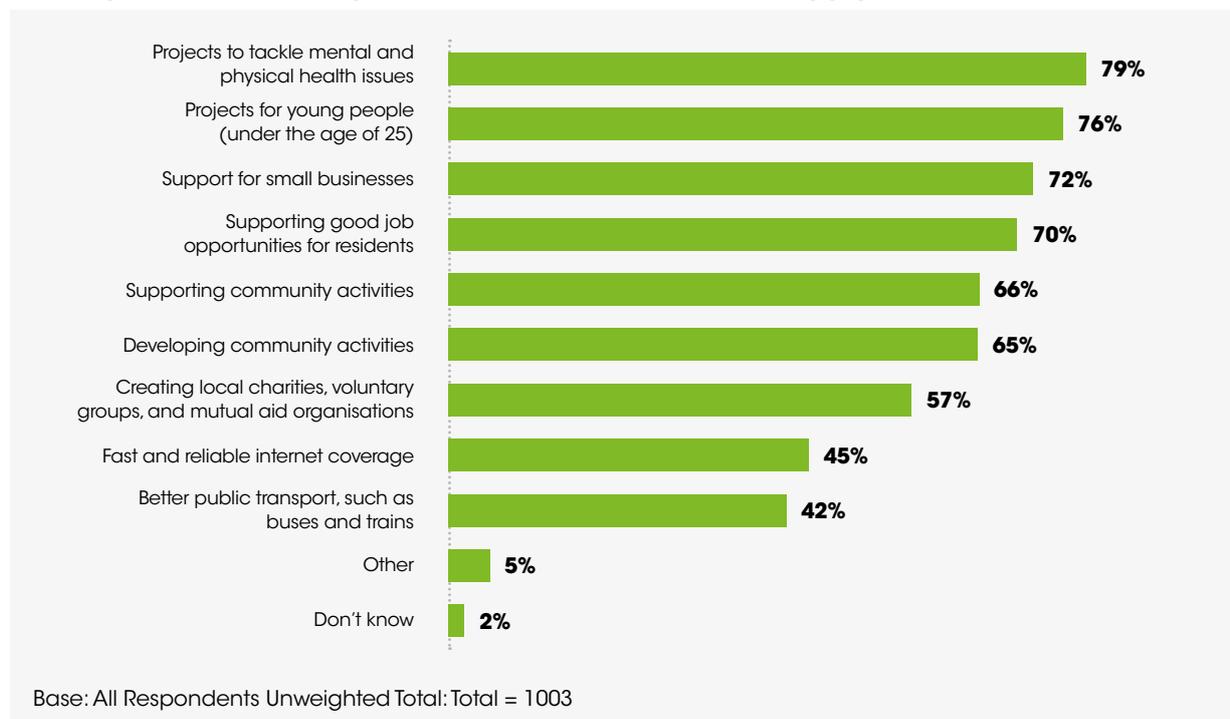
# Conclusion and recommendation

If they are to prosper for the long term, 'left behind' neighbourhoods must be a focus of the levelling up agenda. As reported to the APPG and reflected in Survation polling, investment needs to balance creating new economic opportunities with improving local levels of social infrastructure. Both are critical to levelling up social and economic outcomes.

Residents are best placed to know what is needed to help turn their neighbourhoods around, and should funding be available for levelling up in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, local residents are clear on what it needs to be spent on. People feel it should be targeted on improving health and

wellbeing outcomes, including for young people, support for businesses and employment opportunities, and investment in foundational social infrastructure: support for community activities, facilities, and local groups organisations, and improved connectivity.

If there was a fund to invest in your community's needs, which of the following things would you like to see it spent on? Please select all that apply.



These priorities reflect the essential role social infrastructure plays in creating the levels of social capital needed for communities to function, and it is investment in social infrastructure to repair our fraying social fabric that will pay dividends over the long term. As the APPG heard, trusting people and putting power and decision-making in their hands is the catalyst for improving social and economic outcomes: supporting local communities to respond to their own priorities and fulfil aspirations for a better future.

As we recover from the COVID-19 crisis, the opportunity is ripe for a bold, hyper-local policy approach that delivers long-term transformative change. In his report to the Prime Minister, Danny Kruger MP (2020) recommended the creation of a new Levelling Up Communities Fund for “perpetual investment in long-term, transformational, community-led projects in left-behind areas” to tackle the deep-rooted spatial inequality that divides our country.

This echoes calls from the Community Wealth Fund Alliance (CWFA) for significant investment in social infrastructure in those ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods across the country that need it most. The CWFA represents a cross-sectorial alliance campaigning for a Community Wealth Fund financed through stranded assets and designed on principles proven effective in rebuilding social infrastructure and the foundations of local civic life:

- investment at the hyper-local level (directly to communities of c. 3,000-10,000 residents)
- long-term, patient funding (ten to fifteen years)
- community-led decision making
- appropriate support provided to build community confidence and capacity

Distribution along these lines will establish in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods the essential social infrastructure that underpins thriving and successful local communities and economies everywhere. By trusting individuals and communities, and giving them their fair share of the resources they need to effect positive change over their own lives and that of their community, we can ensure that no one is left behind as we seek to build back better from the COVID-19 crisis.



## **'Left behind' neighbourhoods and the Community Needs Index**

The term 'left behind' became commonplace in political debate in the run up to the 2019 General Election, as parties sought to highlight the challenges of places that had suffered not just from economic disadvantage but also a wider neglect in terms of public investment and opportunities for the people who live there. Whilst there is no formal definition, the term was often applied to former industrial towns and cities and some coastal communities.

In 2019, Local Trust commissioned research from OCSI to seek to explore how data might help identify and understand the challenges of such areas, and support the development of policy responses. This work sought to map three different aspects of social infrastructure:

- civic assets – spaces and places for communities to meet, green space and recreational opportunities
- community engagement; civic participation – number of registered charities, voter turn-out etc
- physical and digital connectivity; travel times to key services, car ownership, broadband speeds, one person households.

OCSI used these characteristics to create a new Community Needs Index (CNI). Overlaying the worst 10 per cent of areas on the CNI on top of the 10 per cent of the most deprived areas in the country according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation highlighted 206 wards which were notable for being both highly deprived and lacking in the social infrastructure to support local people to address those challenges (Local Trust, 2019a). These areas tended to experience significantly poorer social and economic outcomes across a number of key indicators than other similarly deprived areas. The report suggested that these wards might be classified as the most 'left behind' in the country.

In an update of this research published in July 2020 for the APPG, 225 wards now fall into the category 'left behind' (OCSI, 2020b).

## The Community Wealth Fund Alliance

The Community Wealth Fund Alliance (CWFA) seeks to secure significant investment in social infrastructure in those 'left behind' neighbourhoods across the country that need it most. It is a cross-sectoral campaign seeking to persuade government that the next wave of dormant assets should be invested for this purpose. Local Trust provides the secretariat to the Alliance and is one of its founders.

The CWFA has over 300 members. Membership is mostly comprised of civil society organisations and also includes some public and private sector organisations. Local Trust provides the secretariat to the Alliance and is one of its founding members.

The campaign is steered by an Advisory Group, which includes representatives from NAVCA, Small Charities Coalition, People's Health Trust, NCVO, brap, Race Equality Foundation and Lloyds Bank Foundation. The CWFA also has dedicated member champions who take an active role in promoting the campaign within their own sectors.

The CWFA has called for the creation of a Community Wealth Fund which would secure long-term support for the most 'left-behind' neighbourhoods. The proposal is to establish a new permanent national endowment providing funds to support neighbourhood level investment, with community control over spending decisions over a 10-15 year period. It is campaigning for government to agree to provide £4bn from the next wave of dormant assets in support of the proposal. This level of endowment could transform the social infrastructure of 'left-behind' neighbourhoods over the long term.

Key elements of any such programme would include:

- investing in the provision or improvement of shared places to meet
- supporting the development of healthy and vibrant civic activity
- developing better connectivity – physical, digital and organisational – to other people, places, resources, and opportunities

# Appendix: Social infrastructure case studies

## Case studies from Big Local – community control in action.

The Big Local programme was founded on the premise that 'previous programmes have often failed because they have given residents insufficient control'. The programme has provided £1m over a 10 to 15 year period for residents in each of 150 disadvantaged areas around England. Majority resident-led partnerships have been formed to develop and implement improvement plans for their areas, aiming to grow a sense of ownership over the process, with solutions tailored to local circumstances and time to build on learning. Big Local encourages local people to take control of the use of their funding – it is up to them to specify, arrange and supervise delivery of their own plan for their area.

### Case study: building a community hub from scratch, Thurcroft, South Yorkshire

Thurcroft is a former mining community near Rotherham in South Yorkshire. In 2012, Thurcroft received funding from the Big Local programme to make the area a better place to live – decisions over how the money should be spent were left to local residents, and their knowledge, plans and aspirations for the future of the community.

The Big Local Partnership – a committed group of 14 local residents from the area – initially held a series of visioning events on how to make Thurcroft a better place. The idea that stood out was to refurbish the old cricket pavilion, which had hosted a variety of local sports and social groups. However, it turned out that this was not possible: the pavilion was in a serious state of disrepair. So, Big Local embarked on a bigger, bolder project: building a new hub in its place.

It developed the project in partnership with Thurcroft Institute and Recreation Ground (TIRG), a charitable local organisation

responsible for the provision of the existing sports ground. Half a million pounds of Big Local investment was used to build the Hub. The Partnership used this initial funding as leverage to secure additional grants, including £24,600 from Power to Change to strengthen their business plan; £10,000 from Carlsberg for a sports bar; £25,250 from the fees to give to the local Miners Institute and an additional £20,000 from the local Miners charity for equipment.

The Hub, which officially opened in 2017, is an impressive example of social infrastructure designed by and for the community; complete with sports pitches, an indoor sports hall as well as modern changing facilities. There is also a meeting room and a multipurpose room accommodating up to 80 people, both of which are available for hire and provide a steady source of income. Lastly, the bar and kitchen are places for people to relax and get together with good food and maybe a drink or two – enabling them to build the connections that are so important for creating a strong sense of community.

'Now that we've got the Hub, people from across the area recognise the value of residents sticking together, it has become the real centre of the community'.

**Thurcroft resident and Big Local Partnership member**

Thurcroft Hub has created a focal point for community activities: it is the 'go to place' for local residents who want to get more involved in their community. There are a wide range of weekly groups, activities and clubs on offer, bringing residents together to work alongside one another, learn something new and have a good time. From arts and crafts courses, mindfulness sessions to cardio classes, football clubs and the 'walk and talk' fitness group, the Partnership has ensured that the Hub is a space that brings people of all ages and interests together in one space.

The Hub has also provided a much-needed anchor for the work that Big Local Partnership has been doing to support the community during COVID-19. It provided a space to centralise the distribution of food donations from local supermarkets as well as food purchased using the £6,000 secured from public donations, given to those residents most vulnerable to the virus. The kitchen was used to provide hot meals for 35 people, four times a week. Having access to storage, equipment and a place to coordinate activities ensured support was provided efficiently, leading the Big Local Partnership to receive praise from the Local Council for ensuring that no one was left behind during a truly challenging time.

## **Case study: rekindling social bonds, Warwick Ahead in West Yorkshire**

Warwick Ahead Big Local is based on the Warwick housing estate in Knottingley, sitting between Wakefield and Leeds. The estate was originally built to house the workforce of local mines and power stations. As these have now been closed for some time, the area no longer has a steady supply of readily available jobs for local people, as well as the community spaces, shops, leisure and social facilities that developed alongside them.

However, the resident-led partnership of Warwick Ahead knows that although the area has not been receiving its fair share of funding and other resources, the community spirit that exists between neighbours and friends has not withered away. Their aim is to build on these vital social bonds to provide the foundations of a Community Village. This will be a group of community spaces on the estate with the needs of local people at their heart, providing the opportunity for local social, enterprise and leisure activities to flourish.

Warwick Ahead's first step in realising this ambition has been to establish a Community Shop in the centre of the area, which will act as a designated place where residents can get together, socialise and learn new skills, as well as providing a base from which to explore future social and economic activities. In November 2019, it was granted a short-term lease for the shop from WDH, the local housing association.

Since then, COVID-19 has brought its challenges, but has not stopped the Partnership from seeing through the refurbishment of the space to ensure it is accessible and has high quality amenities. It is now a welcoming space where residents can meet, have coffee, talk through problems and enjoy tai-chi or simple card games. Citizens Advice are already providing support services on a weekly basis in the Shop.

To enable them to pursue their wider vision of a Community Village, the Warwick Ahead board have already set up a CIC (Local Communities Working Together) in order to run a planned café, plus hold the land, building assets and personal contracts ready for when the Big Local funding is finished. The board are also considering creating a CIO, which will enable them to undertake greater income generating and trading activities. The plan for the Village is to provide a café with a high-quality kitchen, which can be used to teach cooking to youngsters, an internet bar and training rooms and spaces for local businesses to rent. It is planned that the Village will be established over several stages, depending on funding and residents' requirements.

Although the opening of the Community Shop might seem like a modest first step towards a busy and thriving Community Village, Warwick Ahead would be the first to emphasise that establishing that initial space to rekindle social bonds is a necessary foundation stone for rebuilding the social infrastructure of the estate, piece by piece. It may take time until the full extent of their plans are achieved, but this is clear evidence of long-term, resident-led change taking place despite the myriad economic and social challenges they face.

### **Case study: community purchase and transformation of a public asset in a 'left behind' neighbourhood, Eastern Sheppey in Kent**

Eastern Sheppey Big Local is on the eastern end of the Isle of Sheppey, an island on the north coast of Kent. It is made up of a cluster of small villages, including Warden, Eastchurch and the seaside resort of Leysdown-on-Sea, each with a rich history in the aviation and maritime industries. Today, the area is quite isolated as a result of poor transport links with the mainland, with much of its local infrastructure only catering to seasonal tourists and visitors. There are limited job opportunities for local residents, with poor educational attainment, and a lack of services and places for the community to come together to help make things happen.

Since 2012, Eastern Sheppey Big Local has sparked the resurgence of community life in the area; funding dozens of local groups, holiday play schemes and numerous projects to help people into work, as well as tackling loneliness and improving mental health. However, in 2019, the resident-led partnership decided that the best way to ensure that projects can continue sustainably over the long term would be to establish a community hub, creating a central place for advice, drop-ins, groups and activities in the area.

This was seen as especially important as services to support locals had been cut back in recent years, meaning that the area suffered from a lack of facilities open to the community. This was having a knock-on effect for community groups, parish councils and local business start-ups, who all lacked a suitable space to get up and running. Due to the lack of local facilities, a number of community groups had to be bussed 'off island' to venues outside the area, providing a barrier for many locals to get involved.

Sheppey is working tirelessly to turn this around: seeing the establishment of a community hub as the key to ensuring that every resident can get involved in community life in the future. In 2019, the first step to achieving this was made when it successfully applied for the Leysdown Police Station to be registered as a Community Asset through a Community Right to Bid order, as laid down in the Localism Act 2011. With the support of Swale CVS, the Big Local Partnership is now in the process of submitting a planning application to the Local Authority to renovate and refurbish the building to make sure it is a friendly, accessible and high-quality space for all.

The Big Local Eastern community hub will provide a vibrant multi-purpose community resource centre, including a walk-in community meeting place, offices, counselling rooms, youth centre, job club, storage for local groups (charities and commercial) and opportunities for business start-ups. But the Big Local Partnership has also recognised that as a rural community, they need to make sure that benefits accrued from the building are shared

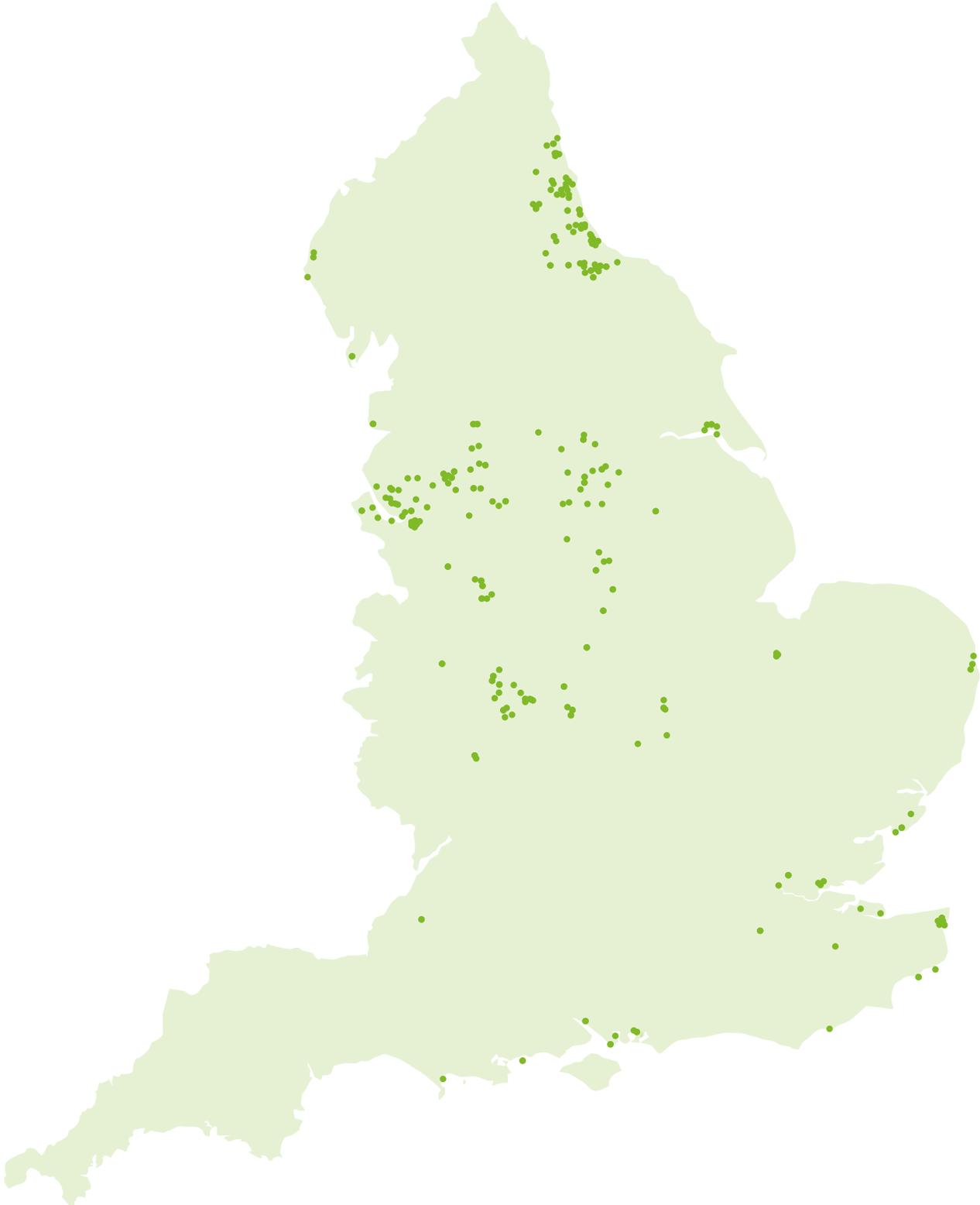
across the whole area. This is why the hub will also provide the 'spokes' or anchor to a range of mobile or satellite services to the surrounding area, making sure no one in Eastern Sheppey gets left behind.

To make sure that activities and services are up and running once the doors of the community hub are opened, has trialled a number of projects that plan to base themselves in the building. They have proved to be a huge success and include a mobile 'coffee and cake' caravan to tackle loneliness and isolation, a youth activity club for 10-14 year olds, and a befriending club for elderly residents.

But the partnership also recognises that the local community needs to decide what works for them: although activities may evolve and adapt to residents' needs over time, what is important is that the hub will be an asset that can be counted on in the future. In the words of one partnership member "we are leaving something behind that is valuable and will be used in years to come and that is what's important."



Map of 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England



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Left  
Behind  
Neighbourhoods

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