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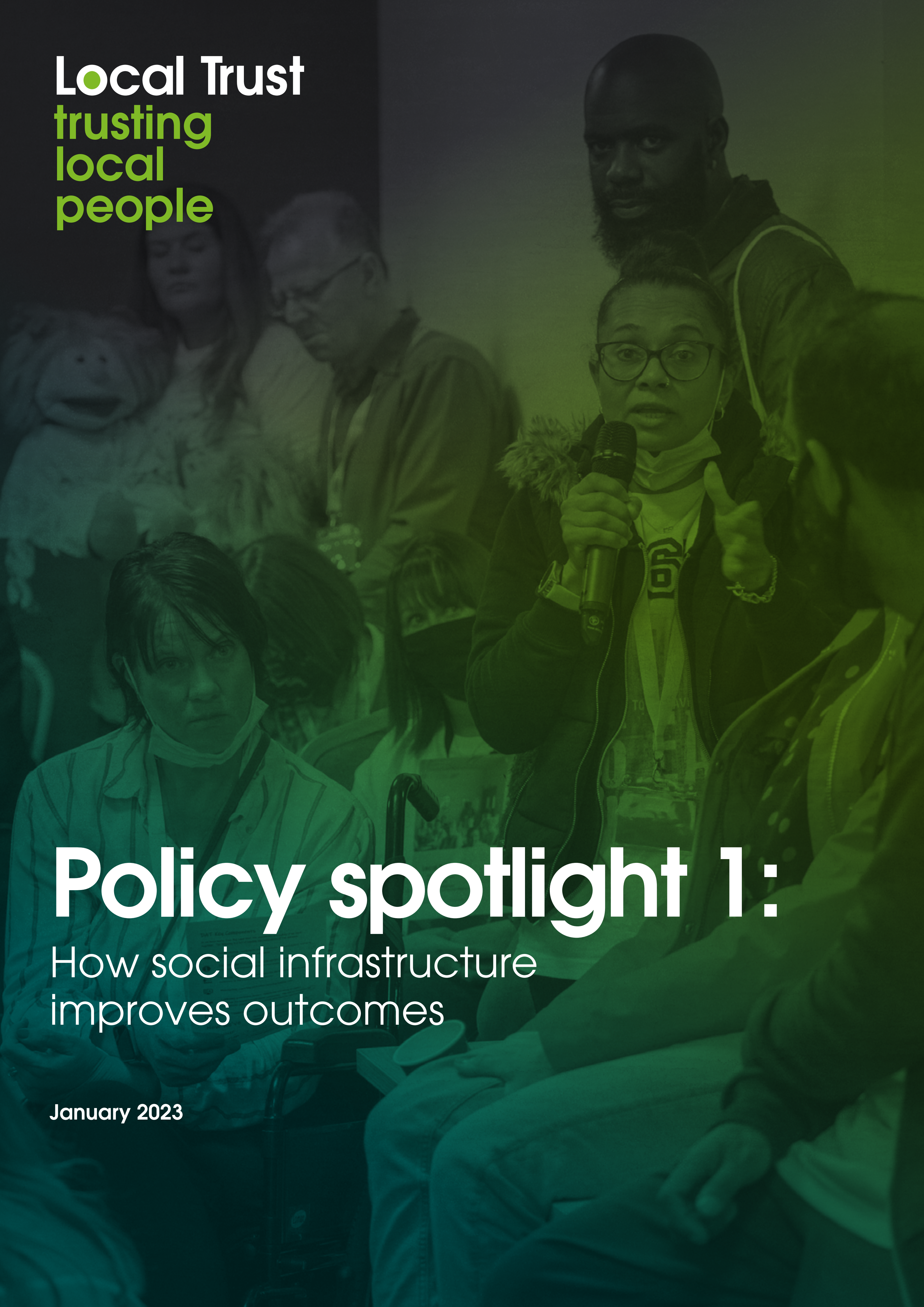
trusting local people



Policy spotlight 1:

How social infrastructure improves outcomes

January 2023

Local Trust

About this report

This is the first in a new series reviewing the evidence backing up our central belief: strong communities, with the power and resources to make key decisions on what is best for their areas, have the potential to transform outcomes. In this paper, we cover the vital importance of neighbourhood-level social infrastructure in building strong, cohesive and prosperous communities.

If we are to weather the cost of living crisis, communities must be empowered to harness local assets and institutions to help those in need. These spaces, places and connections that are vital to bring us together and support one another are collectively referred to as social infrastructure – and are the foundation stone of an active and connected community. However, for a while now, social infrastructure has been in decline, particularly in the most deprived and 'left behind' communities.

This paper summarises research evidence on:

- The continuing loss of our social infrastructure;
- How social infrastructure builds social capital, improves economic outcomes, and boosts the civic pride which is the heart of effective community action;
- How the poorest communities have been hardest hit by the social infrastructure crisis;
- Importance of investing in social infrastructure, and how a Community Wealth Fund could do this at no cost to the Exchequer whilst bringing considerable returns.

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Front cover: Attendees at the Big Local Connects event in Nottingham, 2021

COMMUNITY FUND

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Foreword

We know how essential social infrastructure is from over a decade's experience of delivering the Big Local programme. When it came to getting local activities and networks up and running, the places where it was most tricky and took longer were those where the community centres were closed or on their last legs; where the pubs had gone; and where there wasn't much in the way of community groups or associational activity. Without the places, spaces and networks to bring people together and form connections and trust, it was so much harder for residents to get involved and make a difference.

This lack of community capacity has a direct impact on outcomes. We commissioned primary research from the Oxford Consultations for Social Inclusion (OCSI, 2020) which shows that individuals living in communities with a strong foundation of social infrastructure – even those facing long-term deprivation – have greater employment opportunities, better health outcomes and higher educational attainment across every age group (OCSI, 2020).

If the Big Local programme has shown anything, it's that given the resources and support to improve their areas, communities prioritise investment in social infrastructure. Getting this in place sows the seeds for the transformation of neighbourhoods and for work to address entrenched issues like unemployment or mental health problems.

Clearly these residents in deprived and 'left behind' neighbourhoods are well aware of the vital role social infrastructure plays in turning things around. And in this paper we delve into what the research tells us about why. We review evidence on how social infrastructure replenishes the stocks of social capital necessary for connected, capable and cohesive communities, how it contributes directly to local economic growth and development, and how it makes residents proud of their area and its local identity once more.

As we continue to weather a cost of living crisis, having communities with the capacity and resources to respond to its challenges is proving crucial to make sure no one in urgent need falls through the gaps or is left without support. Right from the start, the crisis had a disproportionate impact on a group of 225 communities which have the lowest levels of social infrastructure and which are among the most severely deprived in England. Not only were they shown to have the highest number of residents at risk of being pushed into poverty by rising costs but – with fewer community places, spaces and activities – have been least able to mobilise and get support out to those in need. The stark reality is that this crisis will leave many communities falling even further behind.

Lack of provision has a cost. But if we are to make savings, we must invest in our future growth and prosperity. Research by Frontier Economics (2021) shows that a relatively small investment – £1 million in each of the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods – would yield benefits of at least £3.2 million over a 10-year period, through improved outcomes and lower public spending.

This makes our proposal for a Community Wealth Fund to support the development of social infrastructure in these neighbourhoods a no-brainer. In 2022, we were delighted that government consulted on proposals to create a Community Wealth Fund using the next wave of dormant assets. With a decision due in early 2023, a CWF could be quickly established without drawing on Exchequer funding.

Social infrastructure investment is needed now to start to level up these communities – to make the ground fertile for the local economic growth that they need and deserve, building resilience and resourcefulness from the roots up. Opportunity and prosperity is there, lying latent in our communities. It just needs to be unlocked.

Matt Leach
Chief Executive
Local Trust

No one left behind: addressing the social infrastructure deficit

Crises – public health, environmental and economic – are hitting us thick and fast. The period following the COVID-19 pandemic has offered no respite for communities; we have moved from the tragedies and turmoil of the pandemic to managing its persistent after-effects, not least on mental health.

The summer of 2022 broke extreme heat records, bringing wildfires to places that had never experienced them before. The warming climate will place new pressures on communities and on how residents live, work and care for each other. And, at the current moment, we are in the midst of an economic challenge that shows no signs of holding up, affecting the least well-off communities the most: a cost of living rising faster than it has for over 40 years. If we look forward into what might be to come, this is unlikely to be the last crisis of the decade.

There is an increasing recognition that to cope with such shocks – and come out the other side stronger and more resilient – we need powerful, cohesive and well-resourced communities. The pandemic illustrated this: communities acted as the first line of defence, responding with mutual aid and care for those most affected within neighbourhoods. But we cannot take such action for granted, and it can't be assumed that every community will have the resources and capacity to respond effectively to growing crises next time they come to bite.

It is in this context that anxiety about the state of community and how the fabric of civic life has frayed is becoming too much to ignore. From Minehead to Middlesbrough, there is concern about how the loss of shared places and institutions – community cafés, clubs, pubs, libraries and sports facilities – has eroded a sense of local civic pride, and brewed a feeling of decline on the local high street or in the neighbourhoods' centre.

The data is striking. For example:

- More than 760 youth clubs have shut across the UK since 2012 (YMCA, 2020).
- A quarter of libraries have been lost since 2005 (Onward, 2020).
- People are less likely to be volunteers, members of a local group or attend community and other local activities than they were ten years ago (Onward, 2020).

Whilst the trend is national, its impact is most felt in communities which are already deprived and lacking in community provision (Local Trust 2019, 2020). In England, 225 neighbourhoods have the lowest density of places and spaces to meet, the lowest levels of community activity, and the poorest digital and transport connections (see Box 4). These factors compound existing levels of deprivation and result in worse socio-economic outcomes (Local Trust, 2020). Local people are left feeling ignored and neglected by both the national and local state.

Just how crucial social infrastructure is in turning things around in these 'left behind' communities in increasingly clear, and its importance in equipping residents to deal with the myriad challenges they face cannot be overstated. Social infrastructure not only creates a sense of belonging and identity and improves residents' satisfaction with their neighbourhood. But, more than this, it acts as a foundation upon which anything from coordinated community action to local economic growth can take hold. Individuals and communities with high levels of social infrastructure have better outcomes across a range of indicators, including employment, health and wellbeing (Local Trust, 2019).

It is investment in social infrastructure that will level up 'left behind' communities and empower residents to take control of their own future – whatever it throws at them.

What do we mean by social infrastructure?

Definitions of social infrastructure vary. DCMS's (2022) recent rapid evidence review suggests that the phrase best refers to the infrastructure "necessary to enable social capital formation". This incorporates "the physical infrastructure (including places, spaces and facilities) within the community that supports the formation and development of social networks and relationships", either:

- Directly: how the physical infrastructure is purposefully used for bringing people together in one space, for example a community hub or green space; or
- Indirectly: how the infrastructure enables individuals within a community to connect together (such as transport or digital connectivity).

The Bennett Institute's (2021) Townscapes project takes a similar approach. It defines social infrastructure as community places and spaces whose principal function is to foster "inter- and intra-communal relationships".

However, Aldridge (2021, at an event hosted by the Bennett Institute) highlighted that focusing solely on the "physical rendering of social infrastructure may miss the crucial point: people matter as well as places". In other words, social infrastructure should encompass the community-based groups and neighbourhood associations who turn community places and spaces into thriving hubs of civic life and activity.

Social infrastructure should therefore be seen as encompassing three core elements:

- Community spaces and places;
- An active and engaged community;
- The physical and digital connections which bring people together and link them to a range of opportunities.

This way, we can capture how every aspect of social infrastructure – "activities, organisations and facilities" – has a mutually supportive and reinforcing effect, triggering the "formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in the community" (Gregory, 2018).

Why social infrastructure matters

1) Social infrastructure builds social capital

There is extensive literature on the importance of social capital to our social and economic wellbeing. For individuals, higher rates are associated with positive effects on upward mobility and personal resilience in the face of adversity (Chetty et al, 2022). At a community level, positive impacts range from improved local economic growth rates to better health outcomes and a reversal of the 'brain drain effect' (Sawhill, 2020). Research on Blaenau Ffestiniog showed that when young people have strong social networks embedded in a place, staying behind or returning after graduation is a positive choice not a default of the less capable or ambitious (Foundational Economy Collective, 2022). Lastly, on a national level, a decent dose of social capital is linked to greater feelings of trust in politicians and the political system and, relatedly, to more stable democracies (Sawhill, 2020). Social capital has also been found to be crucial to national economic prosperity because the characteristics it invokes - such as trust, reciprocity and civic engagement - feed an increase in productivity (Bennett Institute, 2020: 30-33). This is because a healthy bank balance of social capital improves the effectiveness and quality of institutions and governance, leading to better rates of growth and investment (Bennett Institute, 2020: 20-21).

So it is well worth considering the relationship between social infrastructure and how it functions as a builder and enabler of social capital and all of the community activity and association that that allows.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg first introduced the notion of 'social infrastructure' in his influential *Palaces for the People* back in 2018. He posited that social infrastructure is the basis upon which social capital takes root, showing that "when (it) 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" (Klinenberg, 2019).

Leading practitioners have since echoed this sentiment. In a key 2019 speech, Andy Haldane (current Chair of the Levelling Up Advisory Council and ex-Bank of England Chief Economist) observed how "when social spaces are lost, social capital depreciates". More recently, he explained that "civic institutions and social infrastructure serve as stewards of the community commons and scaffolding for social capital" because they provide the base for civic participation and activity to take place (Haldane, 2021).

The thesis is that social infrastructure fosters social capital as it provides the sites and means for strangers to meet and mix with others with whom they share their neighbourhood, enabling social connections and relationships to form and a sense of trust and shared purpose to develop (Mayor of London, 2020). There is research to back this up: quantitative evidence from New Zealand reveals a positive relationship between local public expenditure on social infrastructure and the formation and growth of social capital, albeit involving subtle and complex dynamics (Roskruge et al, 2010).

Lathan and Layton (2019) and Amin (2012) have worked to develop an evidence-led theory of change linking social infrastructure with social capital formation. Building on research projects in Europe, North America and New Zealand, they demonstrate that the formation of social capital is often a positive "social surplus" generated from peoples' practical daily routines rather than the conscious acts of community members (Lathan and Layton, 2019). Amin (2012) draws on Doreen Massey's (2005) concept of "thrown togetherness" to capture how communities represent a coalescence of people, spaces and built environments, and that as people go about their many interests and needs – from shopping to exercise and leisure activities – the different kinds of facilities they access locally double up as an interface with others with whom they share their neighbourhood. The long-term result of these habitual interactions is the gradual formation of social norms and expectations about how to use, act and engage with shared facilities and provisions; this, in turn, enables people from different households to see eye to eye and trust one another (Lathan and Layton, 2019). Trust, social ties and networks form, and a geographic area transforms into a connected and cohesive community.

But there is one caveat: a *diverse* range of community facilities is necessary for neighbourhoods to function as social spaces (Lathan and Layton, 2019; Mayor of London, 2020). These must be accessible for all, particularly those on lower incomes (Mayor of London, 2020: 61). This is to enable the growth of "bridging capital" (ties and relationships between different groups in a community, for example), which is essential to creating cohesive and hopeful communities (Chetty et al, 2022). Research from Chetty et al (2022) shows that the strength of an individual's social network and community is an important factor in upward economic mobility. In other words, those based in communities with more economic connectedness – people interacting across socio-economic class – are much more likely to rise out of poverty. Chetty et al (2022) therefore advise that investment be targeted at creating spaces conducive to interaction and friendship-building across classes. This would go some way to break down barriers and lead to improved socio-economic outcomes for those on lower incomes, and for the community as a whole.

What this means in practice is ensuring that a significant number of peoples' different needs or interests can be addressed locally, and that everyone is given the opportunity to mix within and across different social groups (Mayor of London, 2020). Libraries to access digital resources and borrow books. Leisure centres for physical exercise and wellbeing. Soft play for entertaining children on a rainy day, and so on. Each space facilitating interactions which are both frequent and varied and connections with a range of different people, making us realise that we share more with our neighbours than just a postcode (Hope not Hate, 2021).

The rich bank of evidence on social infrastructure and its role in generating social capital has led to it being recognised as a priority for decision-makers. The Government's recent Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022), for example, identifies social capital as a critical underpinning of a successful economy – alongside institutional, financial, physical, and human capital. And, just as these other forms of capital require well-resourced and maintained infrastructure to seed growth and development, a healthy stock of social capital must be supported by the social infrastructure that revives and replenishes it (DLUHC, 2022).

2) Social infrastructure improves economic outcomes

There is evidence that social infrastructure improves economic outcomes through replenishing the stocks of social capital so vital for economic growth (Power to Change and The Cares Family, 2021; Muringani et al, 2021). This is particularly crucial in regions at a disadvantage when it comes to levels of education and skills.

Outcomes from improving communities' bank balance of social capital include both the benefits of increased employment as well as sizeable public spending savings. For example, a 2017 study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) shows that disconnected communities could be costing the UK approximately £32 billion annually. Of this total, £12 billion is attributed to the productivity costs associated with the reduced self-esteem, increased health risks, and unhappiness which come from a lack of community activity (CEBR, 2017).

But the DCMS (2022) rapid review also found evidence of direct positive economic outcomes as a result of "community initiatives that deliver effective (social) infrastructure". The review draws on Frontier Economics's (2021) independent assessment of the potential economic, social and fiscal returns from social infrastructure investment. Focusing on the impact of targeted investment to improve outcomes in 'left behind' areas, they found that £1m in investment in each neighbourhood would likely generate a corresponding £3.2m in social and economic benefits over a 10-year period. This includes: £2m in increased employment, health and wellbeing, GVA (Gross Value Added) in the local economy, and £1.2m in fiscal benefits through employment, tax and benefit savings, and the reduced costs of crime, healthcare and employment services. The return from supporting unemployed people into work – seen in higher revenue from employment taxes and lower expenditure on benefits – is estimated at £0.7m. This is 'cashable', as these effects provide a direct saving to the Exchequer. And these estimates are likely to be conservative.

A bank of other research reports have also highlighted the economic outcomes from social infrastructure investment. The Bennett Institute's (2021) report on the value of social infrastructure concludes that it generates economic as well as social value through the local employment and training opportunities it supports. Almost 2.3 million people are employed in social infrastructure or related industries (Bennett Institute, 2021). Similarly, both Archer et al (2019) and Reeder (2017) show that a high density of social infrastructure results in higher employment levels. An example is community pubs, which have been found to create regular, paid, local employment opportunities. Currently, as the majority of community pubs are in rural areas, they can be a very significant employer and a source of training and upskilling for local people (Plunkett Foundation, 2020).

Social infrastructure also helps to address disparities in human capital – specifically training, skills and work experience – a factor closely linked to labour market outcomes (Bennett Institute, 2021). Cramer (2017), researching the strong social infrastructure evident in coastal communities in Oregon, cites it as the main contributing factor for high levels of human capital amongst individuals and the community at large. Cultural facilities like libraries, community centres and museums can play an important role in the development of local skills and lifelong learning, especially for those who may experience periods of unemployment (Bennett Institute, 2021: 25). There is also some evidence that civic institutions support new forms of local economic innovation (Bennett Institute, 2021: 25).

Libraries provide an excellent example of such a civic institution. They offer a range of educational classes and employment support: in a recent survey over 50 per cent of people agreed that their library put them in a stronger position to find a new job (Libraries Connected, 2020: 6). Many house Business and IP Centres, where people can come together to learn, network, and access free and low-cost information and support in protecting and commercialising a new business idea, with the creation of 12,500 businesses supported by libraries in the three years up to 2020 (Libraries Connected, 2020: 6).

Crucially, the skills development and training provided by civic institutions is tailored to local people and the characteristics of the local labour market. More in tune with the local neighbourhood and residents' needs and aspirations, support is flexible and more tailored to local people and the characteristics of the local labour market. It is based on understanding local circumstances. This makes it more targeted and effective than provision based on regional or national strategies (New Local, 2020). Often the trust and relationships residents have with those in their local library or community centre are much stronger and more authentic than with those working at the job centre in the neighbouring town. This means that those furthest from the labour market are more likely to seek support and successfully move towards employment (New Local, 2020: 24).

3) Social infrastructure boosts civic pride

Civic pride is about knowing where you come from and how it made you who you are. It comes from feeling connected to the people and assets that turn an area into a thriving and cohesive community. Civic pride is generated in the clubs and pubs, playparks and street parties that foster a strong sense of identity and belonging and that enable local people to feel confident in who they are and where they live and work.

One important quality of civic pride is that "it is aspirational … people with pride tend to place high value on self improvement for themselves and their local area" (Collins, 2016: 176). In other words, civic pride fosters greater levels of civic participation and engagement, with people more likely to act when they feel more is at stake.

The Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022 suggests that local pride is both an emotional outcome (community characteristics shape how we feel about our area) and a driver of further civic participation (feeling proud of our area makes us more willing to invest time and energy into it). It is a measure of "people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community" (DLUHC, 2022: 7), meaning that "a loss of civic trust and pride (can also be understood as a) driver of, as well as a sign of, decline" (DLUHC, 2022: 83).

If civic pride is lost, civic shame fills the void. Where areas lack social infrastructure, the 'social narratives' that are told about a neighbourhood become overwhelmingly negative (DLUHC, 2022: 46). Negative narratives and imagery start to shape the perceptions of some areas and how people feel about living in them. In areas where the local pub is boarded up, the park is littered and unkept, and shops and retail chains have disappeared from the high street, the pride associated with being part of a close-knit community that was once a hub of industry and employment can give way to feelings of disenchantment and disillusion (Bennett Institute, 2021: 43).

Local civic pride can only be rebuilt by rekindling "the connection between people and place (that) generates a shared sense of belonging and local identity" (MHCLG, 2019: 5). It is about shifting the stories that people tell about themselves and their communities – and which are told about them – from ones of deprivation and deficiency to ones of resilience and strength.

The Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022: 78) itself acknowledges that "endowments of social capital and social infrastructure are closely related to … the stories local people tell about their communities". The existence of community assets, active local groups, and organisations – as well as whether residents connected residents feel connected to opportunities and services elsewhere – shapes residents' pride in meaningful ways.

Evidence shows that people's perceptions of a place are related to ideas of whether its central areas and core facilities are well maintained (Public First, 2020). The loss of local public services, retail chains and social spaces can reduce people's willingness to engage in the community and with politics altogether (Algan et al, 2020; Bennett Institute, 2021: 43).

But low-income neighbourhoods retain a strong sense of community and pride when certain local assets or activity are present in their area. This can be a key driver of life satisfaction and wellbeing. The Foundational Economy Collective (2019) analysed the lived experience of residents in Morriston (a town with a population of 30,000, almost 3 miles north of the centre of Swansea). The research found that residents' satisfaction with the area, their confidence and their wellbeing were rarely based on economic wealth alone (Foundational Economy Collective, 2019: 2). Residents do not separate the social and the economic. Household wellbeing was based on the condition and accessibility of three types of infrastructure: "grounded local services infrastructure" such as housing, utilities, education and social care, "mobility infrastructure" to connect with nearby towns and regions and, last but by far not least, social infrastructure (Foundational Economy Collective, 2019:2). Social infrastructure - parks, libraries, community hubs and high streets - provided the foundation of the community's sociability. It was not only crucial to residents' strong sense of pride in the place where they lived, it also provided them with a space to see friends, develop connections and secure both social and economic opportunities that would not otherwise be accessible to them (Foundational Economy Collective, 2019).

More recently, the Bennett Institute (2022) has highlighted how civic pride is "linked to, and can be a source of, some of the other 'goods' and values that policymakers believe important to promote – such as community cohesion and social capital". When people are proud of their areas, a sense of connection with their place and optimism about its prospects are more likely to generate higher levels of local participation in civil society and greater rates of volunteering (Bennett Institute, 2022: 9). Enhanced feelings of optimism about, and connection to, a place can contribute towards building the conditions necessary for creating local economic growth (Bennett Institute, 2022: 6).

The evidence tells us, therefore, that social infrastructure is so much more than it is often given credit for. It not only "fosters powerful local identities, pride in place and the confidence and wellbeing of local people", but also provides the impetus for residents to devote their time and energy to developing local solutions to the myriad of challenges we face (Kelsey, 2021). The social connection it fosters provides the conditions for sustainable, long-term economic growth (Bennett Institute, 2022).

Case studies in community and social infrastructure

Ambition Lawrence Weston

Lawrence Weston is a post-war housing estate in north west Bristol with a population of roughly 7,000 people. Ambition Lawrence Weston (ALW) is a third sector organisation, set up to oversee and deliver local regeneration on behalf of a resident-led partnership. After discovering that 70 per cent of residents were struggling with energy bills, ALW partnered with Bristol Energy Cooperative (BEC) to build a solar farm. The solar farm generates enough electricity to power 1,000 homes a year, with profits reinvested into community projects. The Partnership isn't stopping there: it has secured planning permission and external funding to build a community-owned wind turbine. The planned 4 MW turbine will power 3,500 homes and generate £50,000 a year.

Scotlands and Bushbury Hill Big Local

In October 2014, residents in Scotlands and Bushbury Hill heard about the planned closure of their local community centre. The Big Local partnership quickly got to work to develop a plan to take it over from Wolverhampton City Council. They set up a social enterprise, Big Venture Ltd, to run the centre in a sustainable way. The Big Venture Centre was opened in 2017 and is now fully self-sustaining. Establishing this successful social enterprise has increased many residents' knowledge and skills of how to plan and coordinate community action. The centre provides access to services such as employment support groups, working closely with Access to Business, and hosts Wolverhampton Credit Union. The community café is a popular local spot for residents to get together and support one another.

Social infrastructure health check: a worsening condition

DCMS's (2022) rapid evidence review confirms that there has been a decline in the volume and condition of our social infrastructure in recent years, marked by a "decrease in funding for, and closure of, civic institutions and community spaces". For example, over a quarter of pubs have closed since 2001, and over a quarter of libraries have closed since 2005 (Onward, 2020).

A study by Locality (2018) makes for bleak reading: it finds that over 4,000 public buildings and spaces are sold every year. A high proportion never re-open; organisations are closed and services boarded up (Locality, 2018: 5). Funding for youth services decreased by 70 per cent between 2010 and 2016, leading to the loss of 760 youth centres (YMCA, 2020). Our public parks are deteriorating, their condition eroded, staff and skills lost, with a knock-on impact on the community buildings and small businesses whose existence relies on them (APSE, 2021).

Civic engagement and voluntary association have also waned. In 2017, just under half the population were members of a group of some kind, a decline of around 10 per cent since 1991 (Onward, 2020: 55). The decline in membership has particularly hit local groups. For example, from 1991 to 2017 the number of people who are a member of a working men's or social club has fallen by around a quarter to one in ten people, whilst the number who are members of a tenants' or residents' association has fallen by 38 percentage points to just 6 per cent of the population (Onward, 2020: 55). This has knock-on effects, reducing the strength of trust, reciprocity and neighbourliness, key norms which allow community action to thrive.

But this is not for want of a desire to get involved. Polling conducted by Opinium shows that just under half of UK adults would value being able to spend more time taking part in community activities and organisations and developing greater connections with fellow residents (Power to Change and The Cares Family, 2021). Polling in 'left behind' neighbourhoods shows that, although just one in ten people had been involved in a local community group over the previous 12 months, 41 per cent would be interested in getting involved in making decisions and driving local improvements (Survation, 2020).

The capacity to meet and connect with neighbours and friends – whether physically or digitally – is at risk for many. In 2019, 1.5 million people in England were found to be at high risk of 'transport poverty': they struggle, or are unable, to make journeys to access not only employment and training, but also a wide range of goods and services, and community and recreation activities (NatCen, 2019: 25). Across the UK, 10 million people lack the most basic digital skills to access online communities, with 1.5 million households still having no internet (Good Things Foundation, 2021). This makes it even harder to tap into physical or online communities, organise a get together, and build relationships.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social infrastructure

COVID-19 highlighted the inequalities that exist between communities – and how some struggle to muster the resources to meet residents' needs. Research from the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods (2020) found a less strong response from the voluntary and community sector in 225 'left behind' areas in England. Relatively fewer local mutual aid groups were established and such areas received lower levels of charitable grants awarded by UK foundations in response to the pandemic (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic has accelerated the decline in social infrastructure. More than half of public leisure facilities in England are at risk of closure, in addition to the 400 gyms, pools and community centres that shut in the first year of the pandemic (UK Active (2020). In 2021, the District Councils Network reported that one third of district councils planned to close one or more leisure or sports facilities due to financial pressures as a direct result of the pandemic (Peters, 2021). 70 per cent of theatres and production companies risk going out of business, and 93 per cent of grassroots music venues face permanent closure (LGA, 2020).

The situation is similar for community centres and hubs. Community Matters (2021: 18, 28) highlight that financial insecurity led many community buildings to "(close) their doors for good", whilst others are "reaching the end of their financial reserves". It seems that the pandemic amplified the "crisis" facing community buildings and facilities across the country (Community Matters, 2021: 28).

Left behind: poorest communities hardest hit by social infrastructure crisis

A particular group of communities have suffered disproportionately from the decline in social infrastructure. They currently have the lowest density of neighbourhood places and spaces, community engagement, and connectivity in England. And, just as these neighbourhoods – which are often referred to as the most 'left behind' – suffered disproportionately during, and since, COVID-19, these neighbourhoods are also set to be those uniquely vulnerable to the rising cost of living (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2020, 2022).

The erosion of social infrastructure has been uneven, exacerbating existing inequalities between better-off neighbourhoods and those that have historically lacked funding and resources. Locality (2018: 5) found that "the poorest places are often most reliant on public buildings and spaces", therefore their closure has a "devastating impact" on communities which were already facing poorer outcomes. The most deprived communities often shoulder the brunt of declining services, facilities and community buildings (JRF, 2015).

OCSI's Community Needs Index (CNI, see Box 4) measures both levels of socio-economic deprivation and the presence, or absence, of social infrastructure in a neighbourhood. The Index shows 225 areas have been found to have the least social infrastructure and the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage in England. These areas have also tended to receive the least grant funding over many years, less than half that of other similarly deprived areas which have better social infrastructure (OCSI, 2021). They have also received less public funding, creating cumulative underinvestment: an average £827 per head is spent on core local government services compared with £843 across England as a whole, despite these areas having higher levels of need (Local Trust, 2020).

New research has shown that these places – which suffer from the compound disadvantage of deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure – are also most at risk from ever-escalating living costs (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2022). Findings show that financial vulnerability, including fuel poverty, is higher in 'left behind' neighbourhoods than in other deprived areas and in England as a whole (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2022). And, that people in these areas have seen a sharper rise in fuel poverty, with more than a quarter of residents facing income deprivation (APPG for 'left behind neighbourhoods, 2022). These communities are, therefore, disproportionately affected by rising energy caps and food prices, and, at the sharp end of the cost of living crisis, they are more likely to be pushed into the choice between heating and eating at home.

And, as we saw during the pandemic, without the social infrastructure to support local people to access the help they need, 'left behind' neighbourhoods risk being caught in a spiral of decline.

The way in which communities mobilised during COVID-19 demonstrated the value of social infrastructure in enabling people to get together and develop a localised and effective response to reach the most vulnerable in the community. But these most at-risk areas have some of the lowest levels of community activity and the fewest civic assets in the country. Research from OCSI (2021) shows they have a lower density of community spaces, cultural, educational, leisure and green assets than other deprived areas and half the likelihood of having a registered charity in their local area than the England average. These neighbourhoods have also seen a striking decline in civic engagement – resulting in much lower levels of people taking part in community activity and in formal or informal volunteering than across England (OCSI, 2021: 18). They therefore run the risk, not just of the immediate impacts of the looming crisis this winter, but also of being ill-equipped to deal with the devastating impact it will cause, and so are in danger of falling further and further behind.

Indeed, this lack of social infrastructure is already having a direct impact on outcomes in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, compounding the already high levels of deprivation that residents in these communities face. Prior to the sharp rise in the cost of living, research found that these 225 neighbourhoods had markedly worse unemployment and health outcomes and lower educational attainment than other areas, which are equally deprived but which have such community assets (Local Trust, 2020).

Together, this shows just how important social infrastructure is in the most 'left behind' areas and how its provision should be a key element in any government's response to the cost of living crisis and other future challenges.

What do we mean by 'left behind' neighbourhoods?

Local Trust contracted OCSI – the research consultancy who support the development and maintenance of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) – to map and explore local areas in England. OCSI developed the Community Needs Index (CNI), a new measure of the density of social infrastructure in an area.

The research, published in 2019 and updated in 2020 (Local Trust, 2019, OCSI, 2020), overlaid the CNI with the IMD to identify 225 of the most 'left behind' wards in the country. These are largely concentrated in peripheral housing estates, on the edge of post-industrial towns and cities, primarily in the Midlands and the north of England and in coastal communities in the south and south east of England (Local Trust, 2019).

The research shows that – across all key metrics – people in these areas experience worse socio-economic outcomes than other equally deprived communities with social infrastructure. Impacts include lower educational attainment, lower participation in higher education, fewer job opportunities and worse health outcomes (Local Trust 2019, OCSI, 2020).

What can be done? The importance of social infrastructure investment

Long-term, patient investment is needed to address the deficit in areas where social capital has been depleted and social infrastructure is buckling and under-resourced. Research suggests that this is likely to be most successful where control of decisions, design and resources is in the hands of local people (Localis, 2020; CCHPR, 2019).

In other words, moving forward "necessitates a break with the current centralised approach (to investment) and a focus on unleashing the potential of communities" (Power to Change and The Cares Family, 2021: 52). This would mean supporting communities to build, design, maintain and deliver social infrastructure in the ways that best meet local needs and local people's visions of the future. To prepare for future challenges we must "strengthen and expand the community led social infrastructure that underpins the vital services and support structures needed to enhance local resilience, particularly in the most deprived areas", in the most striking recommendation from *Shaping the COVID Decade* (British Academy, 2021).

We need long-term, targeted investment to enable communities to rebuild their social infrastructure in ways that best support the growth and flourishing of social capital, with emphasis on those neighbourhoods which need it most urgently.

The Community Wealth Fund

The Community Wealth Fund offers an opportunity not to be missed here. Taking the form of an independent endowment, with monies drawn from dormant assets, the Community Wealth Fund would be designed to provide funding and capacity building support to reinvigorate social infrastructure in the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods. The Fund was recently included in the national consultation on the distribution in England of funds from the expanded dormant assets scheme.

Such a fund would help ensure that residents in these areas do not miss out as the nation levels up. It could build on important learning from past regeneration programmes and more recent initiatives such as the Big Local programme. By putting local people in control of spending decisions and providing long-term investment over 10-15 years, Big Local has successfully built community capacity and confidence, increasing social and economic capital and contributing to making communities more resilient for the future. A Community Wealth Fund would, ultimately, empower residents in 'left behind' communities to put the social infrastructure decline into reverse, and embark on a more prosperous and hopeful future.

A new era of community-led social infrastructure?

Despite national trends pointing to a decline in social infrastructure, DCMS's (2022) evidence review also points to an "increase in a certain type of community led social infrastructure". This is exemplified by community pubs (which have increased tenfold between 1996 and 2019), and community asset ownership (which has seen a marked increase over the last ten years, mostly driven by assets other than community hubs or centres) (DCMS, 2022; Plunkett Foundation, 2020; Archer et al, 2019).

This shift towards community ownership of civic assets has economic benefits. Community-owned assets contribute to UK GVA, with 56p in every £1 they spend staying in the local economy (Archer et al, 2019: 70). Community ownership can also trigger knock-on benefits, for example, through developing local confidence and capacity or, in the case of community-owned renewable energy for example, normalising energy efficiency to improve individual household and neighbourhood sustainability (Community Energy England, 2022).

However, not all areas are able to reap the benefits of community-led social infrastructure. The lack of existing community provision in 'left behind' neighbourhoods puts them at a significant disadvantage. Separate research findings from Power to Change and The Cares Family (2021) and from Localis (2020) have shown that community asset transfer is "too reliant on pre-existing local capacity and resources" and "access to finance". As a consequence, more than half of 'left behind' neighbourhoods have no community-owned asset at all (Renaisi, 2021).

Conclusions

Communities have the potential to identify the acute and long-term needs of their residents, and develop localised, strategic plans which both respond to and enable them to transcend the challenges they face. And so it follows that our wellbeing and prosperity as a country are dependent on the strength and resilience of our communities.

A problem we need to face up to is that not every community has the same access to resources, experience and opportunity. This means that in a proportion of neighbourhoods, residents are not able to address their challenges, respond to external shocks, or achieve their potential both to make their area a better place to live and improve the prospects of individuals and communities. There is now a consensus that we need to build confidence and capacity in these neighbourhoods in order to level up the country – marking "an end to the geographic inequality" which leaves former mining communities, outlying urban estates and coastal communities on the back foot (DLUHC, 2022: xii).

Government's aim to "(repair) the social fabric, building pride in place and creating the foundations for economic growth" in these neighbourhoods is, therefore, very welcome and an important commitment (DLUHC, 2022: 273).

What this paper has shown is the vital role that social infrastructure will play in making sure that this agenda shifts the dial. A focus on conventional economic infrastructure will only go so far, investing in the social as well as the economic is the only way to unlock the potential of 'left behind' communities, empower the people who live there and build the foundations for local economic growth.

Social infrastructure is to social capital what roads and railways are to national productivity. It also establishes the foundation upon which local economic growth is built. It increases employment, boosts human capital, and provides significant savings for the public purse. Social infrastructure rebuilds civic pride, making people confident in who they are, where they come from; it gives them an assurance that if they get involved in their local area they can turn things around.

To be effective, investment to address the social infrastructure deficit must be targeted at those neighbourhoods which need it most. It must be provided over the long term, in order to build community confidence and capacity and support the development of other community assets, including new social institutions, which will leave a lasting legacy in areas. Lastly, trust in local residents is key; parachuting in consultants and organisations from outside the area will not achieve the same traction nor nurture the next generation of civic leaders in the same way as projects designed and delivered by the local community, tailored to achieving their hopes and aspirations for the future.

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About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources, and decision making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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