

Levelling up local outcomes

The importance of community spaces to neighbourhood regeneration



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About this publication

This is the first in a new series exploring key issues facing the 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods across England. Each policy short will provide an accessible overview of the evidence and key recommendations for generating long-term improvements for these areas and their residents.

This paper builds upon the APPG's extensive work to-date on the importance of social infrastructure for community renewal and neighbourhood regeneration. It advocates for an evidence-led strategy that places social infrastructure at the heart of levelling up, a reinvented funding model that targets investment at 'left behind' neighbourhoods, and new community rights underpinned by resources from central government.

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About the APPG

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods is a cross party group of MPs and Peers. It was formed to increase opportunities and improve the quality of life for people living in areas which face a mixture of economic deprivation and insufficient social infrastructure – the connections, organisations and spaces to meet that enable communities to make positive changes for themselves.
appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk
 @appgleftbehind

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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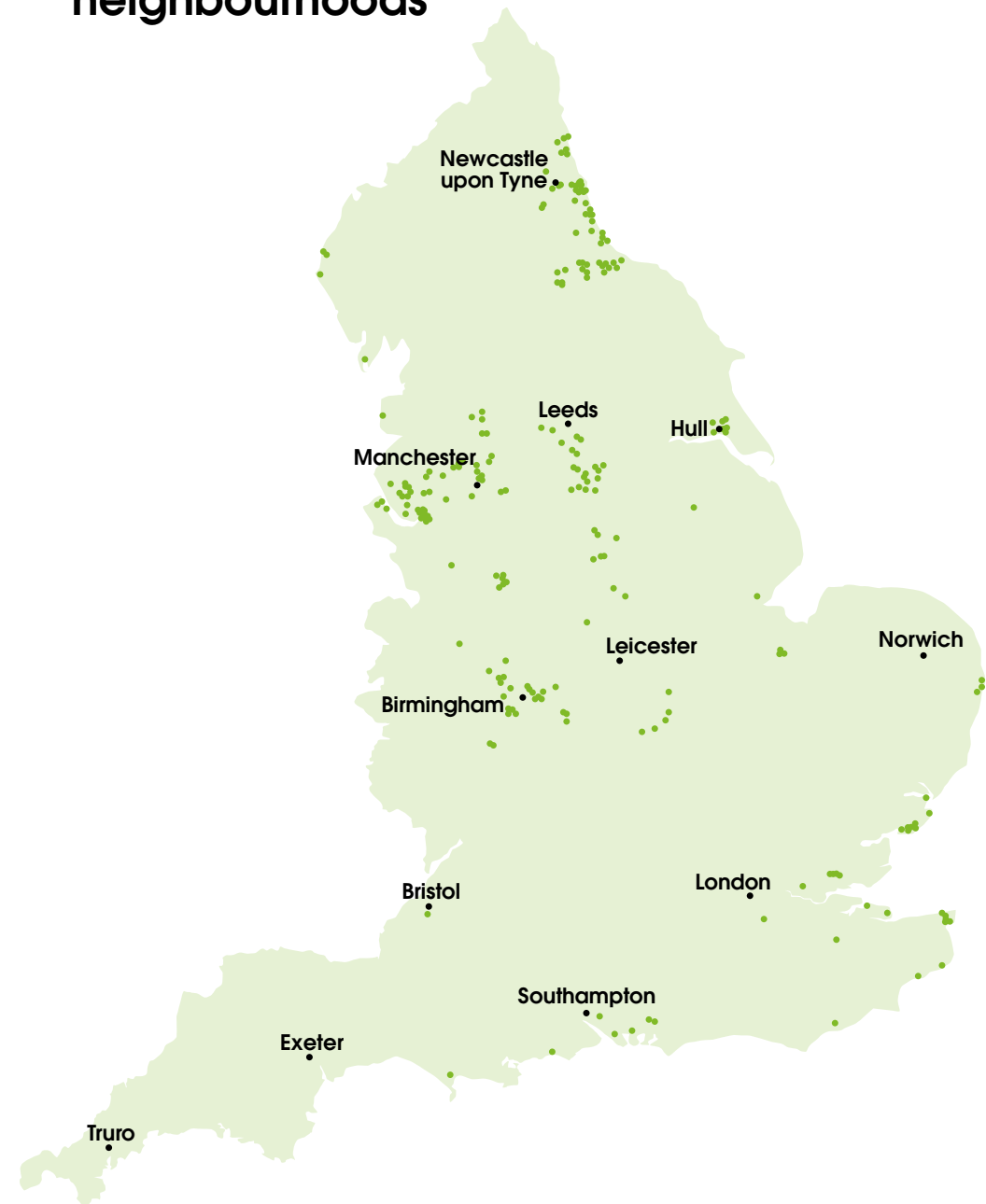
About OCSI

Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) works with public and community organisations to improve services. OCSI turns complex datasets into engaging stories, and make data, information and analysis accessible for communities and decision makers. A spin-out from Oxford University, OCSI has helped hundreds of public and community sector organisations to make their services more efficient and effective.
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About Reform

As Britain's leading cross-party public services think tank, Reform is dedicated to advancing ideas to radically improve the functioning of the State. Its mission is to reimagine how the State operates in order to shape a new social settlement fit for today and the coming decades. Reform has been providing policy support for the APPG's inquiry into levelling up.
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Map of 'left behind' neighbourhoods



60 second summary

'Left behind' neighbourhoods in England are critically lacking in social infrastructure, with a far lower density of community assets than both other similarly deprived areas and the national average.

One year on from the Levelling Up White Paper, and delivering on its promise remains a pressing political concern. This means more than strategies and analysis, it requires action and real change for communities, especially 'left behind' neighbourhoods, which have some of the poorest socio-economic outcomes of almost anywhere across England.

'Left behind' neighbourhoods (the 10% most deprived and lacking social infrastructure and connectivity) are worse off than other deprived areas in terms of the availability of community assets. Strikingly, this pattern holds for almost every type of community asset – from green spaces to heritage sites – as well as for the presence of locally-registered charities.

Social infrastructure, of which community assets are a core part, can help to level up social outcomes, build community resilience, support regeneration and local services, and develop civic pride and engagement. But this wealth of benefits is often inaccessible to 'left behind' neighbourhoods, precisely because they don't have the local assets that exist in other places – reflecting barriers around lack of time, community capacity and funding. In a vicious circle, communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are therefore also less able to take action to create and assume ownership of assets, with only 170 such community-owned assets in total across all 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England.

Addressing this problem requires a new, better-resourced framework to support the development of social infrastructure in 'left behind' places, based on three recommendations:

- **A long-term, hyper-local and evidence-led strategy that places social infrastructure at the heart of levelling up**
- **A reinvented funding model that targets investment at 'left behind' neighbourhoods**
- **New community rights, underpinned by new resources from central government**

By adopting these three measures, the government would send a strong signal that it is committed to making levelling up work. But, above all, it would offer a meaningful step towards improving the life chances and the wellbeing of people living in England's 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

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Co-chairs foreword

Over the past year, as communities have emerged from COVID, we have heard first hand how some of the most disadvantaged and 'left behind' neighbourhoods in the country have struggled with challenges such as high levels of debt, fuel poverty, the cost of living crisis and the continued loss of vital social infrastructure.

As co-chairs of the APPG, representing constituencies with areas identified as 'left behind', we know how important accessible and inclusive community spaces and places are. Neighbourhood facilities are essential in enabling residents to build trust and meaningful connections, and provide people with the space and support needed to meet, organise and take action locally. They provide a focus for bringing together individuals, groups and activities that can support people through tough times and help develop community resilience over the long term.

'Left behind' areas not only have less access to community assets, but with low levels of community capacity and confidence they are unable to access the funds needed to safeguard the assets they do have, nor acquire and develop the sort of facilities needed to help improve local outcomes. As research for the APPG shows, without such social infrastructure, and with poor levels of connectivity preventing people from accessing the opportunities and services that other, better-connected areas benefit from, 'left behind' neighbourhoods face worse outcomes in terms of poor health, employment and educational attainment compared not just to the national average, but also to other equally deprived areas.

This APPG 'policy short', the first in a new series of reports to contribute to the development of policy solutions that meet the specific needs of 'left behind' areas, is based on research and learning from the APPG's work to date. The series will highlight the issues faced by those communities that are not only severely deprived but also have low levels of social infrastructure, and make evidence-based recommendations centred on improving their prospects.

Our contention is that we need to enable communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods to take the lead in developing the sort of social infrastructure that meets their local needs and which works best for them in building a community they can be proud of. This is the firmest foundation and the surest route to level up these neighbourhoods.

Paul Howell MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP

Co-chairs of the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods

The future of Levelling Up and 'left behind' neighbourhoods

Over the past few years, the levelling up agenda – a commitment to reduce the inequalities that exist between the most prosperous and most deprived parts of the UK – has been one of the government's defining political programmes.

But there remains much work to do if the goals of levelling up are to be realised in practice. The pronounced gaps between the most and the least prosperous areas of the UK remain entrenched in too many places. The legacies of the financial crash, austerity, Brexit, Covid-19 and the current cost of living crisis have all had an impact on this socio-economic divide.

There is a lot of discussion around what levelling up is. Making levelling up work involves more than just rhetoric, however. It relies on targeting support at the right places too.

Foundational research commissioned by Local Trust identified 225 areas of England that are in need of particular support from the government (Local Trust, 2020).

These 'left behind' places face a double bind: they are in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), whilst also ranking in the bottom 10% of areas for social infrastructure as measured by the Community Needs Index (CNI), developed by OCSI for Local Trust. Not only do they face extremely high levels of disadvantage, but they are also missing the vital civic assets, community engagement, and connectivity that can help to arrest – and reverse – local decline.

These 'left behind' communities are not just worse off than the most prosperous areas of England and the national average. They are significantly behind other, similarly deprived areas, precisely because they lack sufficient social infrastructure.

These places should be the primary targets of the next phase of levelling up, with improving social infrastructure recognised as essential to addressing socio-economic divides. If levelling up does not make a tangible difference in these places, it will have failed.

This short report sets out the problem facing 'left behind' neighbourhoods: how their lack of social infrastructure undermines levelling up and the cyclical issues that have entrenched this issue. But we also present three key recommendations – a long-term strategy for social infrastructure, a reinvented funding model, and a new community right to own – to revitalise levelling up as a programme to help 'left behind' areas.

Social infrastructure and ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods

What is social infrastructure?

Social infrastructure is not about costly public sector physical infrastructure – it doesn’t mean major hospitals or new prisons. Instead, it’s something broader in meaning, but more localised and community-focused in practice.

The APPG has previously described social infrastructure as “the framework of institutions and the physical spaces that support shared civic life” (APPG, 2020). This can include physical assets, such as community hubs or green spaces, but also networks of local organisations or informal groups that rely on these spaces.

In this paper, we focus particularly on the physical types of social infrastructure which are missing from ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods. These include:

- **Community spaces** – e.g. village halls or community hubs
- **Cultural assets** – e.g. libraries or galleries
- **Educational assets** – e.g. local nurseries and schools
- **Sport and leisure assets** – e.g. sports centres or bingo halls
- **Green assets** – e.g. local parks or allotments
- **Retail assets**
- **Heritage assets** – spaces of community value as defined by Historic England

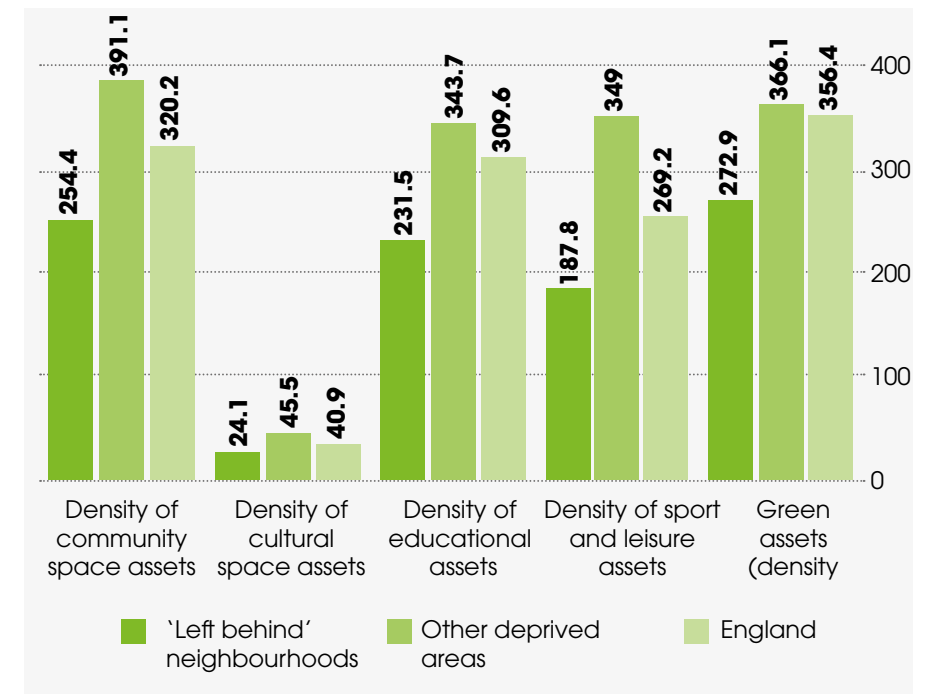
While these social infrastructure assets can be held by anyone and still deliver community benefits - e.g. a privately-owned sports centre can of course improve health outcomes - community-owned assets are especially important, as they give local people a stronger voice and are often much more responsive to changing local needs.

“It’s worth saying that many [community] businesses that start off, for example as just a pub or a café, morph over time into becoming more of a community hub... they often respond to the needs of the local community and take on more and more activities and services in order to meet the needs of the community.”

Extract from oral evidence to the APPG’s evidence session ‘Taking ownership, taking control’ (2021).

What social infrastructure exists in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods

The 225 ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods are both some of the most deprived areas in England and those most lacking in social infrastructure. In terms of community assets, these neighbourhoods are behind in almost every major category – ranging from cultural spaces and sports and leisure facilities, to, crucially, community-owned assets.



Source AddressBase 2021

Note: Density relates to assets inside the ‘left behind’ ward, or within one mile of its boundary.

The graph above illustrates exactly this point, based on APPG research (OCSI, 2021). For every category of social infrastructure, ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods are significantly behind both the English average and the average for other deprived areas (neighbourhoods in the 10% most deprived on the IMD that are not included in our ‘left behind’ category).

For **community spaces**, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have a lower density (254.4) of these assets than both the English average (320.2) and other deprived areas (391.1). They have just 65% of the density of community spaces found in other deprived areas.

For **cultural assets**, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have a lower density (24.1) of these assets than both the English average (40.9) and other deprived areas (45.4). They have just over half (53%) the density of cultural assets found in other deprived areas.

For **educational assets**, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have a lower density (231.5) of these assets than both the English average (309.6) and other deprived areas (343.7). They have just 67% of the density of community spaces found in other deprived areas.

For **sport and leisure assets**, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have a lower density (187.8) of these assets than the English average (269.2) and other deprived areas (349.0). They have just over half (53%) the density of community spaces than other deprived areas.

For **green assets**, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have a lower density (272.9) of these assets than the English average (356.4) and other deprived areas (366.1). They have 25% fewer green assets than other deprived areas.

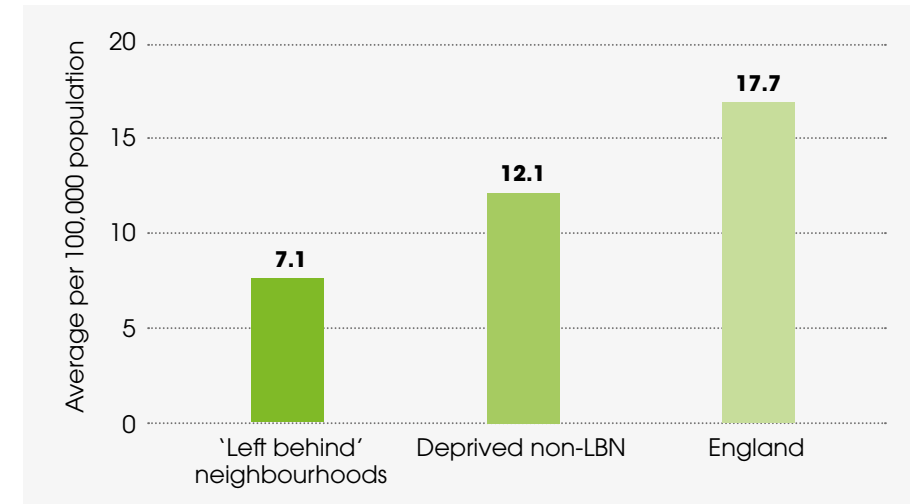
(OCSI, 2021)

Looking at other categories of community assets yields the same results. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods have both a lower density of heritage assets (Heritage Index data in OCSI, 2021) and of retail assets (Valuation Office Agency data in OCSI, 2021), when compared to both the national average and other deprived areas.

The picture is the same for community-owned assets. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods have far fewer community-owned assets than other deprived areas and have only around 40% of the density of these assets compared to England as a whole (Renaissi, 2021).

In fact, there are just 170 community-owned assets in total across all 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods. In 57% of neighbourhoods (128 in total), there are no community-owned assets whatsoever (Renaissi, 2021).

Community owned assets per 100,000 population



Why does social infrastructure matter?

But why does social infrastructure matter? What are the implications for 'left behind' neighbourhoods of lacking these assets and how does this undermine levelling up?

Social infrastructure provides a number of benefits, playing a crucial role in:

- Levelling up social outcomes
- Supporting regeneration efforts and protecting local services
- Building community capacity and resilience
- Developing civic pride and community engagement

First, social infrastructure can help to **level up social outcomes – including health and educational performance**.

'Left behind' neighbourhoods are more likely than elsewhere in England to have low literacy and numeracy skills, with over 50% of adults in these areas having no or low qualifications (OCSI, 2020a). Research by Power to Change (2020) found that community hubs can benefit educational outcomes by providing skills development and training, with 65% of employees and 27% of volunteers at community hubs having received such opportunities.

On health, previous research by the APPG has found that 'left behind' neighbourhoods perform especially poorly on indicators of health and wellbeing (APPG, 2022). By contrast, those individuals who use community assets – which may include sports and leisure centres or green spaces – have been found to have "higher health-related quality of life than those who do not, even after accounting for potential confounding factors" (APPG, 2022).

“The literature is now quite clear that community-owned assets as a form of social infrastructure are significant in terms of providing places to meet... people come together to tackle loneliness and isolation which we know is a significant problem across multiple age ranges in the UK, and the associated health impact of that, be they physical or mental health impacts.”

Extract from oral evidence to the APPG’s evidence session ‘Taking ownership, taking control’ (2021).

Secondly, social infrastructure can **support regeneration efforts and protect local services**. Research from Locality (2018) found that the main motivation for a community to take ownership of social infrastructure was to prevent these spaces closing permanently.

Community ownership of social infrastructure is, therefore, most often an attempt to retain valuable local services that may otherwise be lost – whether in terms of health, education or simply local businesses that provide essential functions. Other spaces, such as community hubs, particularly showcase the diversity of local services that social infrastructure can provide – acting as flexible assets that can adapt to changing community needs. Ultimately, protecting social infrastructure is about protecting local services, retaining those assets that can support regeneration and community activity.

Thirdly, social infrastructure can **build community capacity and resilience**. The presence of community assets can provide a range of opportunities to help build social capacity, by teaching the skills needed to run community groups or facilitating networks of like-minded local people. This is especially important for empowering communities to take ownership of local assets, as a knowledge base around how to utilise social infrastructure effectively contributes to the community capacity needed to take over other local spaces.

Social infrastructure can also support community resilience. For example, open and accessible places such as community hubs can provide a base for local community action and a focal point for a community’s response to emerging challenges. By being rooted in and led by the local community, such bottom-up responses can adapt more rapidly to the needs of local people than top-down or nationally-run services, as well as filling in any gaps in local government provision.

The vital importance of community-led efforts is illustrated throughout Covid-19 by the creation and scaling up of mutual aid groups. For ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, this resilience was lacking: 201 of 225 ‘left behind’ areas “recorded no mutual aid groups set up to work specifically on Covid-19

“Covid proved how essential it is to have anchor organisations in an area – organisations that aren’t going anywhere, that can support communities through crisis.”

Extract from oral evidence to the APPG’s evidence session ‘Taking ownership, taking control’ (2021).

response in the local area” (OCSI, 2021). Addressing social infrastructure can help build the resilience and capacity needed to respond to crises.

Finally, social infrastructure can **develop civic pride and community engagement**. Restoring local pride is a central aim of the levelling up agenda and social infrastructure is core to this (HM Government, 2022). From local parks to sports centres, community hubs to library spaces, these features are central to how people experience their local communities and the pride they take in them. Indeed, assets owned by the community can be expected to be particularly meaningful, with local people taking pride in what they themselves have built in their neighbourhoods.

Community participation is strongly linked to this. Social infrastructure gives people a stake in their community and the opportunity to change it for the better, encouraging local participation. This is a particular benefit for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods as 98% of these areas have lower rates of volunteering than the national average, 97% have lower rates of civic engagement, and 92% have lower voter turnout (OCSI, 2021).



Par Bay Community Garden, 2021 (James Ram/Local Trust)

Why are 'left behind' neighbourhoods so lacking in social infrastructure?

While 'left behind' neighbourhoods suffer most from this phenomenon, the decline of social infrastructure is a major problem across the whole of England.

Research from Locality (2018) found that in excess of 4,000 public spaces are sold every year, with many never reopening to serve their communities again. Similarly, analysis by Onward (2020) found that more than 25% of pubs have closed since 2001 and 27% of libraries closed between 2005 - 2018. The YMCA (2020) also reported a 70% drop in funding for youth services between 2010/11 - 2018/19.

The reasons for this are complex, reflecting a mix of funding challenges driven by a series of economic shocks. From the 2008 recession and the impact of austerity, through to more recent challenges including the pandemic, and the current cost of living crisis, the decline of social infrastructure has mirrored the wider issues facing the UK's economy.

As research from Locality (2018) explains, the main motivation for a community to seek ownership of assets is to ensure they are not lost permanently. But for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, stepping in to prevent loss of social infrastructure is more difficult, because of a self-perpetuating set of barriers to community ownership of assets.

In research for the APPG (Renaissi, 2021) has broken down the barriers to community ownership into 3 categories, with 'left behind' neighbourhoods facing challenges in each:

- Time
- Capacity
- Funding

The first barrier is **time**. APPG research has shown that residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods are more likely to be both cash and time poor than those living elsewhere (OCSI, 2020). This partly reflects a higher prevalence of caring responsibilities and levels of ill health (OCSI, 2020b). But it is also caused by economic pressures restricting people's freedom to engage in voluntary work, with those in work in 'left behind' areas working more hours on average than elsewhere (Munford, Mott et al, 2022) and earning less per week, even when compared to other deprived areas (OCSI, 2020a). According to research for the APPG, 'left behind' areas also have nearly twice the proportion of people out of work due to sickness than the England average and people living there are more likely not to be in employment due to mental health conditions (Munford, Mott et al, 2022).

All of these factors reduce the free time that people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods have available to get involved in supporting community assets. And it also hampers efforts to successfully complete the processes involved in taking ownership of social infrastructure.

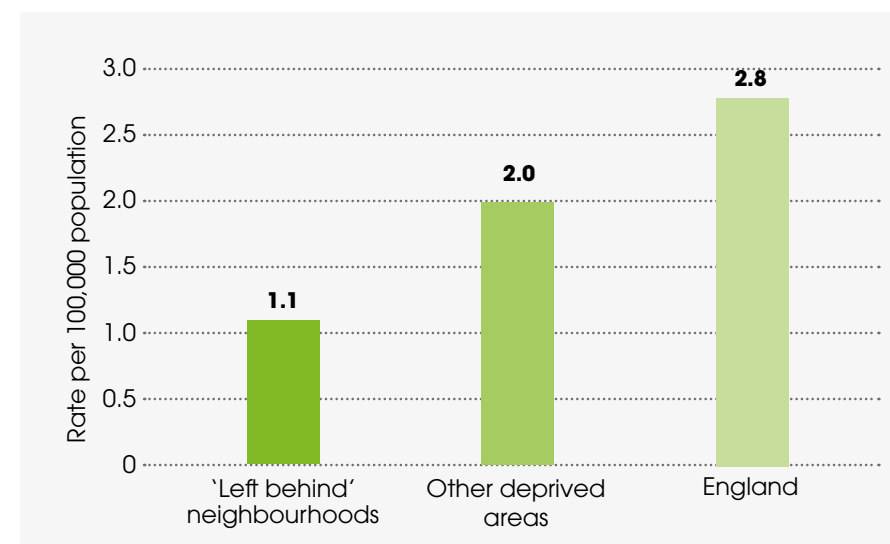
“Collaboration is hard and takes time, and if you are time poor and need to work collaboratively to take on a community owned asset, it feels like another barrier.”

Extract from oral evidence to the APPG's evidence session 'Taking ownership, taking control' (2021).

Lack of time is strongly related to a second barrier: **capacity**. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods have much less well-resourced community groups, with participation in formal or informal voluntary work, local decision-making groups, and even consultations on local issues being much lower than the national average and other deprived areas (OCSI, 2021).

Furthermore, despite falling into the 10% of most deprived areas in England, 'left behind' neighbourhoods have remarkably few registered charities in their communities. Once again, they fall below both the national average and other deprived areas (CharityBase data in OCSI, 2021). These issues constitute a critical lack of capacity, with few institutions or people available to help take over community assets in 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Registered charities from CharityBase per 100,000 population



Source: Charities Commission https://charitybase.uk/chc_2021

The final barrier is widely recognised: **funding**.

Despite the hardship that characterises many 'left behind' neighbourhoods, they received just £7.77 in charitable grant funding per head between 2004 and 2021, compared to £12.23 per head across England and £19.31 per head for other deprived areas (360 Giving Grant Nav data in OCSI, 2021).

This problem was also evident during Covid-19, where 'left behind' neighbourhoods received funding equivalent to just 58% of the total Covid-specific charitable grants awarded to other deprived areas (360 Giving Grant Nav data in OCSI, 2021). In other words, these 225 neighbourhoods - despite being in the 10% of most deprived areas in England - are critically underfunded.

Because of these three barriers, 'left behind' neighbourhoods face particular difficulties in taking control of what community assets they do have, for example when faced with the need to save remaining social infrastructure when it is faced with (often permanent) closure or sale. They are also at a disadvantage when it comes to acquiring new assets, lacking the knowledge and structures needed to access charitable grants and government support, such as through the Community Ownership Fund, and without ready access to the financial, legal and other skills needed to take on and manage assets. In the long-run, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle, meaning that social infrastructure increasingly declines, while, over time, these neighbourhoods fall even further behind other parts of the country.

“[There is] a kind of a vicious circle of 'left behind' neighbourhoods having less social infrastructure, which leads to less capacity to organise, less access to networks and therefore skills, less access to the capital and resources... which means that they are less likely to be funded than non-'left behind' areas.”

Extract from oral evidence to the APPG's evidence session 'Taking ownership, taking control' (2021).

Recommendations

The problem facing 'left behind' neighbourhoods is clear. Enhancing the social infrastructure available to these places, particularly in terms of community-owned assets, is essential. It would be a major step to supporting regeneration, levelling up social outcomes, building community capacity and resilience, and developing civic pride and engagement.

Achieving this is no easy task. Social infrastructure is either more or less non-existent or in a precarious state in these 225 neighbourhoods, reflecting major barriers (time, capacity and funding) to community ownership and a sustained, long-term decline in the overall number of these spaces.

But if levelling up means anything at all, it must involve addressing this issue.

The APPG is calling on government to take forward 3 recommendations to improve social infrastructure in the most deprived areas:

Recommendation 1: A long-term, hyper-local, evidence-led strategy that places social infrastructure at the heart of levelling up

A new vision for developing social infrastructure in deprived areas is clearly necessary. The lack of an effective framework to support the development of community assets has prevented 'left behind' neighbourhoods from reaping the benefits that levelling up has promised. In that context, the government's proposal for a new framework - the Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships - is a positive development.

- **1.A. Ensure that the new Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships places community leadership and social infrastructure at its heart, setting a vision for at least a decade.**

This strategy must emphasise the importance of community leadership as the driver of effective, sustainable change in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, while also recognising the value of social infrastructure to rejuvenating these areas. And it must be a long-term vision, covering at least 10 years, in order to reverse the historic decline in community spaces.

A strategy is only valuable if it actually changes outcomes. The government has already developed a series of performance metrics to evaluate progress on levelling up, which the APPG will adapt to produce measures of improvement in 'left behind' neighbourhoods (relative to both other deprived areas and the national average).

- **1.B. Create a new independent evidence and evaluation initiative (EEI), tasked with identifying and communicating what works for neighbourhood regeneration.**

To achieve better performance, we need to understand what works. To achieve this, we are calling for a new independent EEI that would discover, curate and disseminate what works for neighbourhood regeneration.

This body would serve both a technical and an educational function – it would seek to plug gaps in the existing evidence base and it would teach what works, to inform local funding decisions. This should be funded by DLUHC and DCMS but sit outside of government, ideally being led by an academic institution with expertise in this area – as with other What Works Centres.

Recommendation 2: A reinvented funding model that targets investment at ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods

The current levelling up funding model places far too great a reliance on short-term, competitive bidding and on matched funding. For ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, this is a serious problem. They lack both the capital and the individual and institutional knowledge and capacity to apply for funding and, if this barrier could be overcome, to manage it, meeting various different reporting standards, negotiating different relationships, and doing so repeatedly due to short time frames. They lose out on funding as a result.

The levelling up funding model should be simplified, devolved to be much closer to the places that need it, and managed through direct collaborations between local communities and local government.

- **2.A. Adapt the UK Shared Prosperity Fund by weighting the funding formula (via measures such as the CNI) to benefit areas lacking in social infrastructure.**

To increase the money reaching ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, the emphasis should be on adapting formula-based streams (such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund), rather than strengthening those which are based on competitive bidding. Appropriately weighted, this funding can be much more effectively targeted to the places that need it most.

- **2.B. Approve the Community Wealth Fund that was written into the Dormant Assets Act 2022, to help pay for social infrastructure projects in ‘left behind’ areas.**

Boosting the total level of investment available for social infrastructure projects is clearly essential. Unlocking such investment should remain a priority even amid current, economically turbulent times – not least because economic recession and inflation will be felt more keenly in ‘left behind’ places, and deplete even further the facilities and services available to them. Further investment should in part be funded by measures already promoted by the APPG, such as the proposed Community Wealth Fund.

- **2.C. Reduce the number of fragmented funding streams and pursue whole-area budget pooling to give local communities control over what they invest in.**

More generally, the government should seek to reduce central control over funding, with a less siloed and fractured approach to investment. Instead, communities should be supported with single, locally managed grants to invest in the local priorities they decide on, rather than endless sub-pots, distantly held by central or even local government. This model would build on a history of trialling and piloting whole-area budget pooling approaches at various points across the UK. These experiments have delivered some promising results for community engagement (House of Commons, 2013). It is time now to normalise the devolution of funding in this way.

Recommendation 3: New community rights, underpinned by new resources from central government

Communities and local places will also require new rights in order to promote the development of social infrastructure and genuinely ‘level up’. It is for this reason that community-led campaigns like We’re Right Here have called for stronger powers (We’re Right Here, 2022). We strongly agree that community rights must be enhanced.

Like all rights, these will in turn create new duties on the part of central and local government. And to have meaning, such rights must be backed up by meaningful resources. In this recommendation we focus on communities’ ability to directly own assets of local importance.

- **3.A. Create a new Community Right to Own, whereby local communities are granted a statutory right to buy spaces that have been registered as assets of community value (ACVs) –with a more expansive definition of this written into law.**

For 'left behind' neighbourhoods, the inability to take ownership of community assets at risk of closure has been a major issue. It has led to a self-perpetuating decline in social infrastructure: as local community facilities have closed, institutional capacity and community skills have been lost, meaning that 'left behind' neighbourhoods have found it ever more difficult to attract the funding needed to take over social infrastructure.

This is despite the existence of measures that give communities some pathways to obtaining community assets. The Localism Act 2011 empowered communities with the ability to designate local spaces as ACVs and a legal right to bid for such spaces, when their owners decide to sell them (House of Commons Library, 2022). But these powers are too limited – they only take effect if an owner decides to sell and there is only a right to bid against other prospective buyers, not a statutory right to buy.

Communities should have the statutory right to take ownership of these assets and the definition of ACVs should be relaxed - to include any building or land that has the potential to further social wellbeing, foster civic pride or improve local outcomes.

- **3.B. Expand the Community Ownership Fund to provide an enhanced package of blended financial support, with grant funding and ability to access multi-year, interest-free loans to cover up to 75% of the purchase price of community assets, including any upfront deposit, and in some instances access to 100% grant funding.**

But a new community right alone will not solve the problem. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods have a critical lack of capital and are already struggling to take advantage of the existing, more limited powers. These places are, after all, some of the most deprived places in England and have few local charities based in their area or vicinity that can bid for funds.

To make this new right into a practical reality, government should provide much more flexible funding to support local communities who are trying to take ownership of community spaces and to create new, urgently needed community spaces. This should build on the existing Community Ownership Fund and reflect proposals already put forward by other organisations in this space (We're Right Here, 2022). An expanded scheme could be used for communities to create new assets and spaces, rather than safeguard ones that would otherwise be lost.

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