



**Building our social  
infrastructure:**  
Why levelling up means  
creating a more socially  
connected Britain



power to  
change

business in  
community  
hands



THE CARES FAMILY

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## Foreword: Putting relationships at the heart of levelling up

We lead two different organisations united by a core conviction. The Cares Family helps people find connection in a disconnected age by bringing together neighbours from different walks of life to share time, laughter, and new experiences. Power to Change supports and advocates for businesses run by local people for the benefit of their community. Our distinct experiences have led us to a shared belief that, as a society, we will only overcome the challenges we face if we break open the pockets of power and powerlessness which shape modern Britain and invest communities with the trust and tools they require to unleash their area's potential.

This joint report builds on Power to Change's *Backing Our Neighbourhoods* paper, which sets out the contribution which community organisations could make to levelling up if the government was to break with the centralised approach which has defined this agenda to date. In this paper, we show how a deficit of social capital – or connections between people – is compounding many of the issues which levelling up is intended to address, from long-running cycles of economic decline to regional inequalities in health and wellbeing and the feelings of dislocation and disempowerment which have upended our politics in recent years.

This paper explores the trends that have brought about what the CEO of the RSA and new chair of the government's levelling up taskforce Andy Haldane has deemed a '*crisis of social capital*'. Drawing on rich insights offered by neighbours involved in The Cares Family's programmes as well as new independent polling, we outline how the social fabric of communities across the UK has frayed because of a number of big societal trends – from globalisation and gentrification to digitalisation and cultural fragmentation. Having established that the shifts which have transformed our collective experience of community aren't solely economic, we examine the extent to which their effects might be offset or reversed through economic policy alone. We conclude that problems created by technocracy cannot be solved through technocratic solutions – that the levelling up agenda will only succeed if Ministers invest in and build up the social as well as the physical infrastructure of our nation.

In part, this is a matter of ensuring that community organisations can access the funding and support which they need to set up shop, grow, and meet their area's distinct needs while strengthening community networks. But we must also recognise that the diverse, digitalised, disaggregated Britain of 2021 faces a particular shortage of spaces and institutions in which people from different backgrounds and generations meet, mix, and forge the ties that bind healthy communities together. That's why this paper lays out a five-point plan to both invest in and expand our fabric of social relationships – building on the growth of the community business movement and of a wave of new initiatives which purposefully nurture social connection.

In 2008, the current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, called for "*a politics which [takes] relationships seriously*" manifested in action to "*put the replenishment of social capital at the heart of policy*." This paper shows that, in seeking to level up Britain, the government should treat these words as its guiding mission statement – and sets out how it might begin to deliver on them. To level up Britain, Ministers should put local relationships and local communities at the centre of decision-making – capitalising on the opportunity before them to implement a transformative policy programme with the power of social connection at its very core.



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## About The Cares Family and Power to Change

The Cares Family helps people find connection in a disconnected age by bringing together neighbours from different walks of life to share time, laughter, and new experiences. We also advocate for policy action to nurture relationships and bridge social divides within communities.

Power to Change supports community businesses in England both through specific programmes and by using our evidence and expertise to shape government thinking.

## Authorship

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# Executive summary

Through the 2021 Queen's Speech, the government laid out what it expects its levelling up agenda to achieve, noting that it is in part about '*strengthening community and local leadership, restoring pride in place, and improving quality of life in ways that are not just about the economy*'. In *Backing our Neighbourhoods*, Power to Change identified four areas where evidence indicates community-led activity and organisations can make a significant contribution to this policy agenda. This paper builds on this framework by exploring in detail how those organisations improve people's quality of life by providing spaces where they can meet, mix, and develop social capital. We utilise the prominent political scientist Robert Putnam's conception of social capital as referring to '*connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them*'.

## Why declining social capital matters

Organisations including the think tank Onward and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Left Behind Neighbourhoods have produced compelling evidence that a deficit of social capital is compounding the challenges of entrenched disadvantage and regional inequality which the levelling up agenda is intended to address. In order to contribute to our understanding of this emerging evidence base, this paper seeks to summarise the available evidence as to *how* a deficiency of social capital is holding back disadvantaged places. Drawing on academic studies and think tank reports, it demonstrates that:

- At the macroeconomic level, social capital is strongly linked to GDP growth. This is as connected communities produce more fulfilled and productive employees; as businesses are more likely to engage with one another co-operatively in high-social trust environments; and as people support local business more actively when they feel rooted within their community.
- Strong and diverse social networks have been shown to spread opportunity across communities and promote social mobility. This is in part because our developmental outcomes and opportunities to amass cultural capital are shaped largely by the people we encounter early in life. Studies have also shown that having access to a diverse network of social contacts helps adults to find new and better paid jobs and to gain the trust of their employers.
- Lower levels of social connection result in higher rates of cardiovascular disease and of mental health issues, while access to strong, diverse social networks has been found to reduce overall risk of mortality. To compound matters, more and more of us have come to experience loneliness and isolation as levels of social capital have declined – putting us at considerably increased risk of a range of physical and mental health conditions.
- There is a strong argument to suggest that social capital is highly predictive of wellbeing, not least as the absence of community bonds generates feelings of insecurity which affect life satisfaction in important ways.
- Where we don't experience positive and meaningful interactions with people from different social and cultural backgrounds, our ability to place trust in and engage empathetically with those belonging to other social and cultural groups is substantively constrained. Shortfalls of *bridging social capital* fuel the growth of 'othering' narratives and can lead people to withdraw from community life even if they belong to the majority group.
- Co-operative behaviours at the neighbourhood level are underpinned by feelings of affinity and trust, which develop from strong social ties. It follows that communities are less capable of exercising power and of seizing opportunities to shape their local area – and that pressure on public services is likely to be higher – in low-social capital areas.

Given the centrality of social capital – or relational wealth – to our outcomes in and quality of life, we consider *relational inequality* to be as pernicious and as inherently political as economic or social inequality. Decisions made by government at all levels, as well as other large institutions, shape what we value as a society and how we relate to one another within communities – and therefore impact significantly on people's capacities and opportunities to develop positive and healthy relationships. Given this, we believe that policy decisions should be made consciously to promote *relational justice*.

Polling research conducted by Opinium for this paper exposes marked geographic disparities in levels of community connection across the UK. People across the North East, North West, East Midlands, East of England, South West, Wales, and Northern Ireland say that they feel less connected to their local community now than they did ten years ago – whereas people in the other regions and nations say they feel better connected – underscoring the pressing need for action to foster social capital in certain areas of our country especially.

## How we could harness the power of social connection to level up Britain

If we are to address the shortfall of social capital which is sapping communities of growth, opportunity, health, wellbeing, empathy, trust, and power, we must first understand what has caused our bonds of connection and solidarity to loosen. Structural changes linked to globalisation, gentrification, digitalisation, and cultural fragmentation have served to reduce opportunities for interaction across perceived lines of difference and created feelings of estrangement, dislocation, and loss. This is borne out both in research and testimony provided by participants in The Cares Family's programmes ('older and younger neighbours') during focus group discussions held to inform the development of this paper.

Given that the trends which have led people to feel detached from their local communities are not solely economic in nature but also cultural and relational, policymakers should be realistic about the limited power of economic policy action to reverse or counteract their effects. As Onward have put it, levelling up '*must be a social as well as economic endeavour*'. In delivering this agenda, Ministers should seek to improve the social as well as the physical infrastructure of disadvantaged places – recognising the power of, and investing in, the local relationships and associations which underpin feelings of belonging, security, and wellbeing.

Our social infrastructure – the scaffolding of social capital – includes all of the community organisations, groups, and spaces in which we organically congregate as members of local communities and become anchored in neighbourhood networks. Older and younger neighbours repeatedly pointed to a shortage of these 'mixing places' as a key driver of declining community feeling. In a growing number of areas, however, community businesses are providing spaces in which people can meet, mix, and connect – stepping in where local authorities and the traditional private sector have withdrawn.

Our polling indicates that the public believes that investing in social infrastructure should be as much of a priority for the government as investing in physical infrastructure projects such as new dual carriageways. Of those respondents who stated a preference when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this proposition, more than three quarters (76%) said they agreed while less than a quarter (24%) said they disagreed.

## Why we need to build twenty-first century connecting institutions

Even where communities do have access to nominally shared spaces, the extent to which people meaningfully connect through them will tend to vary. This is in part a function of our evolved preference for spending time and building relationships with those who we perceive to be in some way 'like us' – the provision of shared community space is necessary but insufficient for the development of positive relationships across perceived lines of difference. Indeed, it has been convincingly argued that, over time, societies develop institutions which serve the specific purpose of cultivating cross-community attachments, empathy, and trust, but that modern Britain lacks *connecting institutions* of this sort.



In recent years, organisations and initiatives which work in an intentional manner to enable people from different walks of life to forge strong social ties have sprouted up in communities across the UK. A host of charities and civil society programmes which seek to fulfil the need of people living in socially and culturally diverse areas to connect with one another have formed and, in several cases, scaled rapidly. The growth of community business has likewise seen the emergence of a multitude of locally rooted organisations whose principal focus is on cultivating relationships within and across communities. These *twenty-first century connecting institutions* are alike in that they:

- Bring people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations together to share not just space, but positive experiences.
- Facilitate equal-status interactions between people from different walks of life.
- Recognise and nurture the inherent capacity of individuals to improve their own life and the lives of others.
- Conceive of providing a setting for friendship and fellowship as core to their purpose.
- Enable participants to build relationships with places as well as people.

In so doing, they enable people to connect meaningfully, including across perceived lines of difference, and play a crucial role in generating the social capital which communities need to thrive. If the levelling up agenda is to harness the power of local relationships to change lives – and rekindle feelings of togetherness in disadvantaged places and the country as a whole – it must encompass measures aimed specifically at supporting the development and growth of new connecting institutions.

## How the opportunity presented by community-led levelling up is being missed

Unfortunately, community organisations will face a number of significant challenges in seeking to access government funding so as to build up the social infrastructure of disadvantaged places. This paper examines the support on offer via the Levelling Up Fund, Community Renewal Fund, and Community Ownership Fund and finds that these funds are simply too distant from local places to be able to really target the needs of particular communities and neighbourhoods; that they each include tough barriers-to-entry for community organisations; and that there is an inadequate focus on building the capacity of communities to contribute to levelling up. In fact, this centralised, competitive approach favours those communities that already have the skills and capacity to respond and prioritises ‘oven-ready’ projects over those that will take time to develop. This is particularly problematic because it will adversely affect those areas that need support most acutely.

The success of levelling up depends on breaking this vicious cycle. The government must not only rebalance funding in favour of social infrastructure but also recognise that building and sustaining it necessitates a break with the current centralised approach and a focus on unleashing the potential of communities.

The public believes that communities are, at present, being given short shrift in decision-making. 45% of UK adults say they have ‘*not much control*’ and 26% say they have ‘*no control*’ over important decisions that affect their neighbourhood and local community. Polling included in this paper also reveals that a majority of the public would approve if the government were to move to remedy this community power imbalance through its levelling up agenda. 63% of UK adults say this policy programme should involve giving local people more power over the decisions, services, and spaces which shape the places where they live.

## A five-point plan to build up our social infrastructure

This paper sets out a five-point plan through which the government could meet this challenge and effectively enable community organisations to expand and develop the social infrastructure of disadvantaged areas, including through building new connecting institutions.

Firstly, to ensure that all communities have a chance to capitalise on new opportunities to generate social capital, **the government should look to the next tranche of the Dormant Assets Scheme to create a Community Wealth Fund.** This could be used to support a decade-long project of investment in growing the capacity of communities, drawing on the network of community foundations to bring resources closer to local areas.

More money must be directly controlled at the community level rather than by Whitehall, empowering those who really understand what needs to happen to create change locally. **25% of the future UK Shared Prosperity Fund should be passed directly to community-led partnerships to support the development of social infrastructure at the neighbourhood level.**

Community asset ownership is a key means of endowing communities with buildings and land through which they can generate income, foster social connection, and drive impact over the long term. **The government should have an ambition to accelerate community ownership in parts of the country where it is currently weaker, flexing its Community Ownership Fund to increase access for projects from more disadvantaged communities.**

Given the toll which our social capital deficit is taking on communities across the UK, we cannot afford to take a laissez-faire approach and assume that twenty-first century connecting institutions will simply appear in time. Accordingly, **the government should create a new national commission to explore why the new connecting institutions highlighted in this paper have achieved lift-off in the manner that they have and how we might support and spur on the development of twenty-first century connecting institutions.**

Finally, we believe that these measures will only achieve sustainable impact if they are accompanied by a bigger mindset shift. **Policy and decision-makers should be encouraged to consider how their choices affect the ability of people to develop life-improving social connections, and government policy frameworks should afford relationships a level of value reflecting their considerable impact on social and economic outcomes.**

Through investing a level of policy energy and funding into this project reflecting the critical importance of and need for relational justice, politicians and officials could level up community life across the UK and resolve our social capital crisis.







# 1. Community-led levelling up – an overview



Through the 2021 Queen's Speech, the government laid out what it expects its levelling up agenda to achieve:

*"[Levelling up] is about improving living standards and growing the private sector, particularly where it is weak. It is about increasing and spreading opportunity, because while talent is evenly distributed, opportunity is not. It is about improving health, education, and policing, particularly where they are not good enough. It is also about strengthening community and local leadership, restoring pride in place, and improving quality of life in ways that are not just about the economy."*

This task is clearly a challenging one. If levelling up succeeds on these terms it will have a life-changing impact on people and communities across the country. In *Backing our Neighbourhoods*<sup>1</sup>, Power to Change identified four areas where evidence indicates community-led activity and organisations can make a significant contribution:



- **Restoring pride in place by improving the physical fabric of places, particularly where investment is weak:** Community organisations' deep local understanding and connection, access to alternative capital, and phased approach to development enables them to progressively improve the physical fabric of neighbourhoods that have been blighted by vacancies and dereliction. This will be central to people's perceptions of whether levelling up is successful.
- **Strengthening community and local leadership:** Community organisations have a strong connection to local people. They are trusted and can reach into communities that the statutory sector struggles to engage. They are vital cogs in their local ecosystem, often acting as key trusted intermediaries between residents and the statutory sector. Community empowerment is central to their approach, and investment in this element of our social infrastructure is critical to our longer-term resilience.
- **Increasing and spreading opportunity by providing jobs and working with people furthest from the labour market:** By being locally rooted and trusted, community organisations create the routes that can connect those who are unlikely to be reached by traditional employment support programmes to new opportunities. Their success should not be measured by the absolute number of jobs they create but by who they are able to help into the labour market.
- **Improving quality of life by providing spaces where people can meet, mix and form connections:** In a growing number of communities, the need for spaces and places to meet and form connections is being met by community organisations. This is pivotal to improving people's quality of life.

Building on this framework, this paper will investigate the fourth and final dimension of community-led activity set out here in more detail. It will explore how and why enabling people in disadvantaged places to meet, mix, and develop social capital should be a key objective of the levelling up agenda. We will utilise the prominent political scientist Robert Putnam's conception of social capital as referring to *'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Power to Change (2021), *Backing our Neighbourhoods: Making levelling up by putting communities in the lead*, available at: [https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/PTC\\_3822\\_Backing\\_our\\_Neighbourhoods\\_DR3-1.pdf](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/PTC_3822_Backing_our_Neighbourhoods_DR3-1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Putnam, R D (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster

## 2. Why declining social capital matters

In his recent Community Power lecture for Local Trust, former Bank of England Chief Economist Andy Haldane argued that the UK is experiencing ‘a crisis in social capital’<sup>3</sup> – in ‘trust and engagement, relationships and reciprocity, communities and civic institutions’<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, there is compelling evidence that a deficit of social capital is compounding the challenges of entrenched disadvantage and regional inequality which the levelling up agenda is intended to address.

The think tank Onward’s *State of our Social Fabric* research found that coastal communities, large towns, and city suburbs are disadvantaged as much by a lack of strong local civic institutions and relationships between local people as by the quality of their physical infrastructure and economic outcomes<sup>5</sup>. In Onward’s analysis, the social fabric of ‘left behind’ places has become frayed as their performance against key economic indicators such as the rate of employment and average income has declined and as their high streets and transport networks have deteriorated, but also as the institutions and behaviours which generate social capital have waned<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, research conducted for the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Left Behind Neighbourhoods has shown that 2.4 million people across the UK live in places which suffer at once from significant levels of economic and social deprivation and a marked shortage of the ‘social infrastructure’ which builds social capital<sup>7</sup>. This includes shared spaces and meeting places, groups and organisations which bring people together, public transport links, and digital connectivity.

In order to contribute to our understanding of this emerging evidence base, this paper will seek to summarise the available evidence as to how a deficiency of social capital is holding us back – and the ways in which fostering social connection might help to ‘level up’ those places.

## Economic growth

At the macroeconomic level, social capital has been shown to be strongly linked to GDP growth<sup>8</sup>. A 2017 study produced by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) on behalf of The Big Lunch from the Eden Project suggests that disconnection within communities costs the UK approximately £32 billion annually<sup>9</sup>. The CEBR attributes £12 billion of this total to productivity costs associated with the reduced self-esteem, increased health risks, and unhappiness which flow from lower levels of engagement with community activities and initiatives<sup>10</sup>. These numbers might be considered conservative, however, as economists have posited that shortfalls in relational wealth hamper the economic performance of nations in various other ways.

“At the macroeconomic level, social capital has been shown to be strongly linked to GDP growth.”

A series of landmark studies have compellingly demonstrated that businesses and organisations are more inclined to engage with one another co-operatively in high-social trust environments<sup>11</sup>. This leads to increased appetite for strategic risk-taking and to considerably reduced supply chain management, administrative, and legal costs<sup>12</sup>. It’s also the case that the development of trusting relationships within and across communities has been found to facilitate the flow of both investment and money-generating ideas<sup>13</sup>.

3 ‘The Local Trust community power lecture with Andy Haldane: The Second Invisible Hand’, available at: [https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Andy-Haldane\\_Community-power-lecture\\_6-July.pdf](https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Andy-Haldane_Community-power-lecture_6-July.pdf)

4 Ibid.

5 Onward (2020), *The State of our Social Fabric*

6 Ibid.

7 All-Party Parliamentary Group for Left Behind Neighbourhoods (2020), *Communities of trust: why we must invest in the social infrastructure of ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods*

8 Dincer, O C and Uslaner, E M, ‘Trust and Growth’, *Public Choice*, 142:1 (2010); Zak, PJ and Knack, S, ‘Trust and Growth’, *The Economic Journal*, 111:1 (2001); Knack, S, and Keefer, P, ‘Does Social Capital have an Economic Pay-Off? A Cross-Country Investigation’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112:1 (1997)

9 The Eden Project (2017), *The cost of disconnected communities: Executive summary*

10 Ibid.

11 Dincer, O C and Uslaner, E M, ‘Trust and Growth’; Halpern, D, ‘Social capital: the new golden goose’, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Cambridge University (1999); Fukuyama, F, ‘Social Capital and Civil Society’, IMF Working Paper No. 00/74 (2000)

12 Humphrey, H, and Schmitz, H, ‘Trust and inter-firm relations in developing and transition economies’, *Journal of Development Studies*, 34(4) (1998)

13 Yates, J (2021). *Fractured: Why Our Societies Are Coming Apart and How We Put Them Back Together Again*, London: HarperCollins



A further explanation for the relationship between social capital and economic growth relates to the conditions under which locally rooted businesses tend to succeed. Research by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) for Power to Change shows that community businesses thrive in areas characterised by high levels of *bonding* (or within-group) social capital especially<sup>14</sup>. CLES theorise that these strong social networks facilitate the development of collective identities, increase local people's self-esteem, and enable us to feel that we have a greater amount of control over our local economies. It's also true that people are more likely to wish to actively support local business when they feel at home in and attached to their local areas<sup>15</sup>, and that feelings of belonging are closely correlated with levels of social capital<sup>16</sup>.

## Economic opportunity

According to the Princeton sociologist Alejandro Portes, social capital is an expression of '*the value that can be extracted from social relations*'<sup>17</sup> – it denotes the fact that, for individuals, it's often not what you know but who you know that matters. It's certainly well-evidenced that strong and diverse social networks spread opportunity across communities and promote social mobility.

**“It's often not what you know but who you know that matters. Strong and diverse social networks spread opportunity across communities and promote social mobility.”**

This is partly because our developmental outcomes are shaped largely by the people we encounter early in life<sup>18</sup> – including the children we mix and play with<sup>19</sup>. Young people from wealthier backgrounds also benefit from the ability to draw on family networks which their less advantaged peers lack<sup>20</sup> and from experiences which enable them to develop greater cultural capital (or '*the knowledge and capabilities we acquire from mixing with others about how to behave, how to dress or how to speak in certain situations*'<sup>21</sup>). It's important to note that this knowledge often relates to norms established over time by people in culturally privileged positions, and its propagation in this manner therefore serves to replicate and reinforce that privilege<sup>22</sup>.

Studies have also shown that having access to a diverse network of social contacts helps adults to find new and better paid jobs<sup>23</sup> – as recently as 2010, 40% of jobs in the UK were found through personal connections<sup>24</sup> – and to gain the trust of their employers to take on additional responsibilities<sup>25</sup>.

14 Centre for Local Economic Strategies (2013), Building an inclusive economy through community business: *The role of social capital and agency in community business formation in deprived communities*

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25 Pettigrew, T and Tropp, L, 'A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90:5 (2006)



Nunsthorpe is an estate in Grimsby with roughly 2,500 households, but no secondary school and just a few shops. It's in the top 3% for multiple deprivation and just 49% of its 16–74-year-olds are employed.

Centre4 is a community hub that has been at the heart of this estate for 26 years. It is committed to the social and economic regeneration of the area – a place that has seen centrally-developed neighbourhood regeneration schemes come and go. These have helped the area to varying degrees but have never fully addressed the causes of inequality. The inequalities that have been emphasised by COVID-19 existed before 2020 and are deep rooted in many places.

As COVID hit, a response to the need for local people to get into good jobs was already underway at Centre4 – the establishment of an ethical recruitment agency, ERA employment (ERA). ERA is a socially responsible employment agency for North East Lincolnshire. It is community-led and provides a personalised service to help people into work, with all surpluses used to support community projects and the ERA's 'members' – the people who are looking for jobs, who standard agencies might call candidates or jobseekers. ERA's approach starts from the needs of the person looking for work, rather than those of the business offering a job. So, if work isn't immediately available, ERA supports its members to develop the right skills for local job opportunities through training, and to gain valuable experience and build confidence through 'social action' jobs at local community projects.

During the pandemic, many members of ERA, including people who had been made redundant or were furloughed, got involved in these social action jobs: activities like shopping, digital buddying, gardening, and collecting prescriptions for neighbours – all the while developing their own skills and confidence, building connections in the community, and collecting 'points'. The experience makes a useful addition to a jobseeker's CV, and the points collected can be spent with local businesses or on further training.

As a result, 60 people were in temporary jobs in early 2021, 12 of whom have been offered permanent employment. Another 18 are already in permanent roles. Some of these are people who had previously been rejected when they had applied to their current employer, or were previously in retail and hospitality roles – sectors badly hit by the pandemic. ERA has helped those people see the strengths that they have, providing hope and opportunity, and can do so because those running ERA can respond to local need within the local employment landscape, rather than a set of centrally dictated themes or outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

## Health

Beyond economics, a number of major studies have demonstrated that social capital is positively associated with improved health outcomes in many different ways<sup>27</sup>.

When we are confronted with people with whom we don't feel we share a natural affinity, our stress levels rise. Lower levels of social connection consequently result in higher rates of cardiovascular disease<sup>28</sup> and of mental health issues<sup>29</sup> – especially, in the latter case, amongst children<sup>30</sup> – while access to strong, diverse social networks has been found to reduce the risk of mortality more generally<sup>31</sup>. This is in part as our perceptions of what's normal and acceptable with regard to eating, smoking, drinking, and exercising, and our health consciousness more generally, are shaped to a large extent by the people within our social networks<sup>32</sup>.

**“Lower levels social connection result in higher rates of cardiovascular disease and mental health issues, while access to strong, diverse social networks has been found to reduce overall risk of mortality.”**

26 This case study is adapted from: McNabola, A, and Gutherson, P (2021), 'Across the Great Divide – What does Levelling Up mean for a town like Grimsby?', *Bennett Institute for Public Policy blog*, available at: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/great-divide/>

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30 van der Linden, J, Drukker, M, Gunther, N et al., 'Children's mental health service use, neighbourhood socio-economic deprivation and social capital', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 38:9 (2003)

31 Holt-Lunstad, J, Smith, T B and Layton, J B, 'Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review', *PLoS medicine*, 7:7 (2010); Kauppi, M, Kawachi, I, Batty, G D, Oksanen, T, Elovainio, M, Pentti, J, Aalto, V, Virtanen, M, Koskenvuo, M, Vahtera, J, and Kivimäki, M, 'Characteristics of Social Networks and Mortality Risk: Evidence From Two Prospective Cohort Studies', *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 187:4, (2018)

32 Christakis, N A, and Fowler, J H, 'The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network Over 32 Years', *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357(4) 2007; Fowler, J H, and Christakis, N A, 'Estimating Peer Effects on Health in Social Networks', *Journal of Health Economics*, 27(5) 2008

The Bromley by Bow Centre is a vibrant community organisation in the heart of East London. The Centre was founded over 35 years ago and evolved from its previous use primarily as a church. Since then, it has built a national and international reputation for its innovative approach which inspires and empowers local people to transform their lives. The organisation delivers a broad range of activities based on its understanding of the local community and delivered through a unique model that combines social entrepreneurship, the arts, learning, social support, horticulture, and holistic and integrated health programmes.

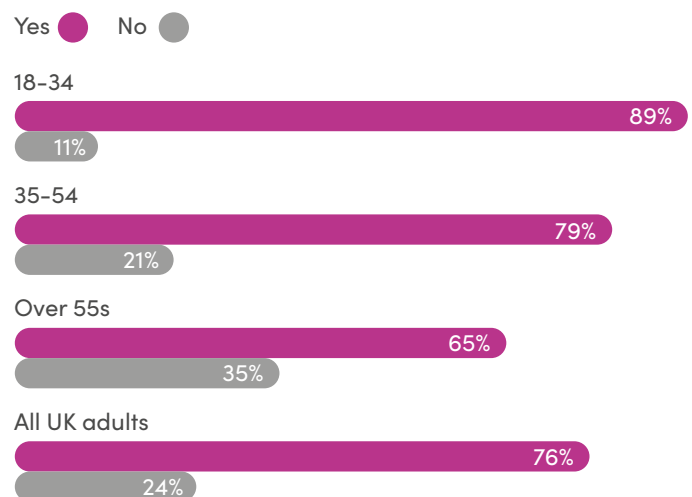
Together these services and opportunities make up an integrated health model delivered in partnership with local GPs in the Bromley by Bow Health Partnership. Community activities and statutory health services are combined to tackle the high levels of poverty and health inequalities in the community.

The Bromley by Bow model has led to many national innovations and breakthrough interventions such as Healthy Living Centres, Social Prescribing, DIY Health, and Public Health England's flagship embedded community research project, Unleashing Healthy Communities.

Importantly, their approach is rooted in the belief that social connection is central to meeting the needs of community members. Their theory of change states that building connection leads to *'stability of a relationship over time, a "family" network and diversity of connections that help a person grow'*<sup>33</sup>. Users of their building have commented on its role *'bringing community together'*, as a safe, impartial space, *'where people can go, meet, share'*<sup>34</sup>.

There is a reason that Putnam's seminal work included the word 'alone' in its title. As the ties that once bound our communities together have loosened, more and more of us have come to experience loneliness and isolation<sup>35</sup>. Longstanding and serious concerns about loneliness in later life<sup>36</sup> have been added to in recent years as a number of research projects and major surveys have concluded that this problem has grown particularly acute among younger age groups<sup>37</sup>. In fact, new public polling conducted by Opinium for this paper reveals that, while three quarters (76%) of UK adults say they have experienced feelings of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, this rises to almost nine in 10 (89%) among 18-to-34-year-olds.

## Have you personally experienced feelings of loneliness during the pandemic?



“New polling reveals that, while three quarters of UK adults say they have experienced feelings of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, this rises to almost nine in 10 among 18-to-34-year-olds.”

<sup>33</sup> Stocks-Rankin, C-R, Seale, B, and Mead, N (2018), *Unleashing Healthy Communities: Researching the Bromley by Bow model*, London: Bromley by Bow Centre

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Putnam, 2000; The Campaign to End Loneliness, *Is loneliness a growing problem?*, available at: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/frequently-asked-questions/is-loneliness-increasing/>

<sup>36</sup> Age UK (2018), *All the Lonely People: Loneliness in Later Life*

<sup>37</sup> Achterbergh, L, Pitman, A, Birken, M, Pearce, E, Sno, H, Johnson, S, 'The experience of loneliness among young people with depression: a qualitative meta-synthesis of the literature', *BMC Psychiatry*, 20(1) (2020); Onward (2021), *The Age of Alienation*; BBC, *Who feels lonely? The results of the world's largest loneliness study*, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2yzhfv4DvqVp5nZyxBD8G23/who-feels-lonely-the-results-of-the-world-s-largest-loneliness-study>



In 2017, the US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness to be a public health epidemic<sup>38</sup>. In the UK, the Royal College of General Practitioners has made a similar declaration<sup>39</sup>. Chronic loneliness has been shown to harden our arteries, increase inflammation of the gut, heart, and joints, and to slow the production of antibodies<sup>40</sup>. Being lonely also puts us at increased risk of a range of mental health conditions, including depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety<sup>41</sup>. Worryingly, researchers have demonstrated that people living in deprived areas are more likely to experience loneliness than those who live in wealthier areas<sup>42</sup>. For all of these reasons, loneliness should be understood as a key dimension of our disconnection crisis.

**“In 2017, the US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness to be a public health epidemic. In the UK, the Royal College of General Practitioners has made a similar declaration.”**

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## Wellbeing

There is persuasive evidence to suggest that being anchored in strong and diverse social networks leads us to experience a greater sense of wellbeing generally. Having analysed large data sets derived from the World Values Survey as well as a number of North American research projects, Robert Putnam and John Helliwell concluded that *‘wellbeing is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one’s social connections.’*<sup>43</sup> In the UK, a recent analysis by Pro Bono Economics found that the presence of community assets (such as libraries, leisure centres, charities, and community organisations) within a particular area may be a better predictor of its residents’ life satisfaction than its average household income or GDP<sup>44</sup>.

Research conducted by Onward suggests not only that there has been a *‘broad-based and long-term decline in the strength of local community’*, but that this loss *‘matters deeply to people’s sense of belonging’*. Whether it manifests in reduced neighbourliness, in the erosion of the unique character of a place, in a broad sense of rootlessness, or in more pronounced instances of isolation or alienation, it engenders feelings of insecurity which impact on our quality of life *‘in critical ways’*<sup>45</sup>.

**“Whether it manifests in reduced neighbourliness, the erosion of a place’s unique character, a broad sense of rootlessness, or more pronounced instances of isolation and alienation, declining community feeling reduces our quality of life in important ways.”**

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38 Karma, R, ‘Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy on America’s loneliness epidemic’, Vox, available at: <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/11/21245087/america-loneliness-epidemic-coronavirus-pandemic-together>

39 BMJ, RCGP calls for national campaign to tackle loneliness, available at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/361/bmj.k2283>

40 Cattell, V, ‘Poor people, poor places, and poor health: the mediating role of social networks and social capital’, *Social Science & Medicine*, 52:10 (2001)

41 Mushtaq, R, Shoib, S, Shah, T, and Mushtaq, S, ‘Relationship Between Loneliness, Psychiatric Disorders and Physical Health ? A Review on the Psychological Aspects of Loneliness’, *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research*, 8(9) (2014)

42 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Wellbeing and Loneliness – Community Life Survey 2020/21*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021-wellbeing-and-loneliness/wellbeing-and-loneliness-community-life-survey-202021>; Victor, R C, and Pikhartova, J, ‘Lonely places or lonely people? Investigating the relationship between loneliness and place of residence’, *BMC Public Health*, 20(1) (2020)

43 Helliwell, J F and Putnam, R D, ‘The social context of well-being’, *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society B Biological Sciences*, 359(1449):1435–46 (2004)

44 Pro Bono Economics (2021), *Levelling Up: On the right track?*, available at: <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/levelling-up-on-the-right-track>

45 Onward, 2020

## Empathy and trust

The extent to which we experience a sense of wellbeing is, of course, determined in no small part by how we are treated and perceived by those around us, and numerous studies have confirmed that social capital is positively associated with both empathy and trust<sup>46</sup>.

That spending time and building relationships with others leads us to become more empathetic is perhaps unsurprising. Empathy is often described as a ‘muscle’ – in the words of Stanford University psychologist Jamil Zaki, ‘*left unused, it atrophies; put to work, it grows*’<sup>47</sup>. This is, furthermore, a two-way relationship – it is through empathy that we are able to understand and appreciate perspectives and views which differ from our own, so exercising this muscle is crucial to cultivating connections with others.

The relationship between social capital and generalised trust is similarly close. Simply put, being a part of strong and diverse social networks makes us more inclined to extend trust to those around us. Equally, the absence of those networks can lead to a collapse of social trust and breed division, particularly where we don’t consider those around us be ‘like us’<sup>48</sup>.

It’s generally true that, whereas we tend to ‘ascribe’ trust to those who we consider to be members of our own social or cultural tribe, we typically require those who we perceive to be different to us to ‘earn’ it<sup>49</sup>. This is a function of our evolved preference for spending time and building relationships with people whom we view as similar to ourselves, which psychologists refer to as ‘homophily’<sup>50</sup>.

Homophily’s effects can be overcome. When people from different social and cultural backgrounds meet, mix, and connect in positive and meaningful ways, they build *bridging social capital*. As a consequence, trust grows and prejudice declines<sup>51</sup>. Cross-group ties are, generally, forged less frequently and more tentatively than within-group ties, but are crucial to the development of bonds of trust and empathy within diverse communities. In fact, there is a substantial body of research which demonstrates that interacting in this way with someone from a different social background, ethnicity, faith, or generation leads us not just to place more trust in people from that particular social or cultural group, but in those who we perceive to be different to ourselves more generally<sup>52</sup>.

Where we don’t experience positive and meaningful interactions with people from different walks of life, however, our ability to place trust in those belonging to other social and cultural groups is significantly constrained. This fuels the growth of ‘othering’ narratives as well as feelings of estrangement and disconnection<sup>53</sup>.

**“A lack of positive contact between people from different social and cultural backgrounds fuels the growth of ‘othering’ narratives as well as feelings of estrangement and disconnection.”**

46 Tausch, N, and Hewstone, M (2010), ‘Intergroup contact and prejudice’ in *The Sage handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination* edited by Dovidio, F, Hewstone, M, Glick, P, and Esses, V M, Newburg Park, CA: Sage; Johnston, B M, and Glasford, D E, ‘Intergroup contact and helping: How quality contact and empathy shape outgroup helping’, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 21(8) (2018); Venkatanathan, J, Karapanos, E, Kostakos, V, and Gonçalves, J, ‘A network science approach to modelling and predicting empathy’, ASONAM ‘13: Proceedings of the 2013 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (2013)

47 Futurity, *Empathy is a Skill. Here’s how to cultivate it*, available at: <https://www.futurity.org/cultivate-empathy-2079842-2/>

48 Levine, M, Prosser, A, Evans Lancaster, D and Reicher, R, ‘Identity and Emergency Intervention: How Social Group Membership and Inclusiveness of Group Boundaries Shapes Helping Behavior’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(4) (2005)

49 van Staveren, I, and Knorringa, P, ‘Unpacking Social Capital in Economic Development: How Social Relations Matter’, *Review of Social Economy*, 65(1):107–35 (2007)

50 McPherson, M, Smith-Lovin, L and Cook, JM, ‘Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27 (2001)

51 Al Ramiah, A, and Hewstone, M, ‘Intergroup contact as a tool for reducing, resolving, and preventing intergroup conflict: evidence, limitations, and potential’, *American Psychologist*, 68:7 (2013)

52 Social Integration Commission (2014), *Social Integration: a wake-up call*

53 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration (2017), *Integration Not Demonisation: The final report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration’s inquiry into the integration of immigrants*

Some studies additionally suggest that homophily curtails our ability to place trust in not only those who we consider to be different to ourselves but to members of our own tribe. A shortage of social links across groups sets in motion the loosening of ties within groups – leading to the development of an altogether less caring and compassionate society. Robert Putnam has, for example, argued that people living in ethnically diverse communities tend to place less trust in their neighbours (including those of the same ethnicity and cultural background). They ‘*hunker down*’<sup>54</sup> – assuming markedly more negative attitudes towards their local areas and ‘*withdraw[ing] from collective life*’<sup>55</sup>. Research carried out in Britain<sup>56</sup> tends to imply, however, that this cycle can be broken through enabling people of different ethnicities to meet, mix and generate bridging social capital. In fact, the political scientist Eric Uslaner has argued powerfully that it is structural barriers to cross-group connection, such as residential segregation, which lead to lower levels of trust; and has produced research demonstrating that the formation of diverse social networks substantively increases trust within multicultural communities in the UK as well as the US, Canada, Sweden and Australia<sup>57</sup>.

## Power

Our social capital deficit constrains our ability to exercise power both as communities and individually. In their analysis of the cost to the UK of disconnection within communities, the CERB estimate that increased neighbourliness could generate £14 billion in savings annually<sup>58</sup>. In practice, this value would be generated through local people sharing resources and supporting one another. After all, co-operative behaviours at the neighbourhood level are generally underpinned by feelings of affinity and trust, which develop from strong social ties<sup>59</sup>.

It follows that demand on public services is likely to increase in low-social capital areas<sup>60</sup>, and that attempts to empower communities to play an active role in the design or delivery of these services are less likely to succeed within those same areas. In other words, in the absence of strong and diverse social networks, communities are less capable of banding together and of seizing opportunities to shape their local area – their collective agency is constrained substantially. Studies have also demonstrated that feelings of personal agency are positively linked to social capital<sup>61</sup>.

**“Co-operative behaviours within neighbourhoods flow from feelings of affinity and trust, which develop from strong social ties – so demand on public services is likely to increase in low-social capital areas.”**

Where communities do come together, bolstered by strong levels of social capital, they can harness opportunities on offer and drive change in their area. If levelling up is to address not just the physical fabric of places but also the lives of those who live there, then tapping into the web of local networks and relationships possessed by community organisations will be essential. These are organisations that have a strong connection to local people, that can reach into the communities that the statutory sector struggles to engage. They are vital cogs in their local ecosystem, often acting as key trusted intermediaries between residents and the statutory sector. Importantly, they are largely run by and with local people. The average community business, for instance, has more than 200 members, who get a say in how it is run and help facilitate its social impact<sup>62</sup>.

54 Putnam, R D, ‘E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century – The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture’, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30:2 (2007)

55 Ibid.

Putnam’s ‘hunkering down’ thesis is supported by numerous North American studies<sup>55</sup> – for instance, Alesina, A, and La Ferrara, E, ‘Ethnic Diversity and Economic Performance’, *Journal of Economic Literature*, 43 (2005); and Stolle, D, Soroka, S, and Johnston, S, ‘When Does Diversity Erode Trust? Neighborhood Diversity, Interpersonal Trust and the Mediating Effect of Social Interactions’, *Political Studies*, 56 (2008).

It has also been supported by a cross-national analysis of European datasets which indicates that interpersonal trust is lower in more ethnically diverse communities: Gerritsen, D, Lubbers, M, ‘Unknown is unloved? Diversity and inter-population trust in Europe’, *European Union Politics*, 11 (2010).

It is important to note, however, that this interpretation of diversity’s impact on trust is contested by academics<sup>55</sup>, as can be seen in Sturgis, P, Brunton-Smith, I, Read, S, and Allum, N, ‘Does Ethnic Diversity Erode Trust? Putnam’s ‘Hunkering Down’ Thesis Reconsidered’, *British Journal of Political Science* 41, (2011).

56 Laurence, J, ‘The Effect of Ethnic Diversity and Community Disadvantage on Social Cohesion: A Multi-Level Analysis of Social Capital and Interethnic Relations in UK Communities’, *European Sociological Review*, 27(1) (2011)

57 Uslaner, E (2012), *Segregation and Mistrust: Diversity, Isolation, and Social Cohesion*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

58 The Eden Project, 2017

59 Putnam, 2000

60 Andrews, R, ‘Social capital and public service performance: a review of the evidence’, *Public Policy and Administration*, 27(1) (2012)

61 Ling, C, and Dale, A, ‘Agency and social capital: Characteristics and dynamics’, *Community Development Journal*, 49(1) (2013)

62 Harries, R, and Miller, S (2021), *Community business: The power on your doorstep*, London: Power to Change, available at: [https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Power-on-your-doorstep-Full-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Power-on-your-doorstep-Full-Report_FINAL.pdf)



## The Multiplier

Between October 2020 and August 2021, The Cares Family supported eleven local leaders to develop organisations and projects aimed at strengthening the bonds of community and building social connection in places across the UK – from Belfast to Birmingham, Cardiff to Cornwall, and London to Liverpool. This first cohort of ‘Multipliers’ are currently delivering locally-rooted initiatives designed to bring a diverse community together and reclaim space through football in north London; foster intergenerational relationships through park-based activities in Liverpool; provide space for men in later life to build connection in Nottinghamshire; help parents in Northern Ireland to access peer support and friendship; and fulfil a range of other social missions.

By 2025, The Cares Family will, in partnership with UnLtd, support 50 Multipliers to foster togetherness and build bridges within their communities in their own ways. Participants receive six months of coaching and training in strategic leadership, operational management, fundraising, coalition-building, and storytelling. Through The Multiplier, The Cares Family is working to promote and embed relational ways of working in developing community-led initiatives. The programme isn’t an incubator, but rather a Multiplier – participants are encouraged to pass on what they learn through it to other local leaders and are supported to tell their story in the hope and expectation that it will inspire others to action.

The Multiplier is grounded in a recognition that those that know and love their community often understand what it needs to thrive much better than others based in distant centres of power. The nuances of how to build community in a village in Cumbria are known by the people who call that village home. The details of how disconnection can be dismantled in a town in Glamorgan are known by the people in that town in Glamorgan.

The first eleven Multipliers were selected from a pool of 129 applicants.

## Relational inequality and justice

As this paper has shown, our ability to form strong and diverse social networks substantively affects the employment opportunities which we are able to access as well as how successful we are at work; how healthy and happy we are; whether we are able to relate positively to those around us; and whether we feel able to exert personal agency and impact positively on the world around us. Given the centrality of relationships to our outcomes in and quality of life, we consider *relational inequality* to be as pernicious and as inherently political as economic or social inequality.

“Given the centrality of relationships to our outcomes in and quality of life, we consider relational inequality to be as pernicious and as inherently political as economic or social inequality.”

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Decisions made by government at all levels, as well as other large institutions, shape what we value as a society and how we relate to one another within communities – and therefore impact significantly on people’s capacities and opportunities to develop positive and healthy relationships. Given this, we believe that policy decisions should be made consciously to promote *relational justice*.

Relational justice might be measured according to the distribution of social capital but speaks as a concept to the moral principle that we should seek proactively to be fair in making decisions which may impact on the ability of others to build life-improving social connections.







# 3. What Britain thinks about levelling up and communities



Polling research conducted by Opinium for The Cares Family and Power to Change suggests that people in different parts of the UK feel connected to their local community to notably varying degrees.

In generally positive news, 31% of the UK public say that they know their neighbours better today than they did prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (whereas just 5% say they know them less well); but this uptick in neighbourliness has not been experienced to the same extent across the regions of England. While 44% of Londoners and 31% of people in the South East say they know their neighbours better today than they did prior to the pandemic, this figure is just 25% in the North East, North West, and East of England.

### Do you know your neighbours better or less well today than you did prior to the pandemic?

	North East	North West	Yorkshire and Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	London	South East	South West	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK-wide
Better	25%	25%	34%	29%	32%	25%	44%	31%	28%	21%	31%	35%	31%
Less well	4%	7%	4%	0%	8%	6%	4%	6%	2%	2%	3%	7%	5%
No change	71%	63%	60%	68%	57%	67%	48%	57%	66%	73%	58%	50%	60%
Don't know	0%	5%	2%	3%	3%	2%	4%	6%	4%	4%	8%	8%	4%

More generally, people in the North West and East Midlands, as well as in the East of England and South West, are more likely to say that they feel less – rather than more – connected to their local community now than they did before the pandemic. In contrast, people across the other regions of England are more likely to say that they now feel a greater sense of connection to their community.

### Do you personally feel more or less connected to your local community now than you did before the pandemic?

	North East	North West	Yorkshire and Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	London	South East	South West	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK-wide
More connected	23%	19%	32%	14%	27%	17%	37%	26%	15%	18%	30%	17%	24%
Less connected	16%	20%	16%	21%	19%	20%	19%	15%	23%	20%	10%	16%	18%
No change	54%	53%	49%	63%	49%	58%	38%	53%	57%	57%	53%	57%	52%
Don't know	7%	8%	3%	2%	5%	5%	6%	6%	5%	4%	7%	10%	5%

*“People in the North West, East Midlands, East of England, South West, and Wales feel less connected to their local community now than they did before the pandemic.”*

This polling research further suggests that levels of community connection have been declining within the five English regions identified above for some time. People in the North East, North West, East Midlands, East of England, and South West are more likely to say they feel less – rather than more – connected to their local community now than they did ten years ago. On the other hand, people in London, Yorkshire and Humberside, the West Midlands, and South East all more likely to report that they feel more connected to their community now than they did then.

Do you personally feel more or less connected to your local community now than you did ten years ago?

	North East	North West	Yorkshire and Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	London	South East	South West	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK-wide
More connected	16%	16%	27%	23%	25%	17%	31%	24%	15%	18%	28%	18%	22%
Less connected	17%	27%	19%	27%	21%	23%	21%	22%	30%	21%	13%	22%	22%
No change	60%	48%	47%	45%	47%	54%	40%	47%	49%	55%	50%	50%	48%
Don't know	7%	9%	7%	5%	7%	6%	8%	7%	6%	6%	9%	10%	7%

*“People in the North East, North West, East Midlands, East of England, South West, Wales and Northern Ireland feel less connected to their local community now than they did ten years ago.”*

Scots are considerably more likely than most UK adults to report that they feel more connected to their local community now than they did prior to the pandemic. The Northern Irish are marginally more likely to say that they feel more connected, while the Welsh are more likely to say that they feel less connected.

Whereas people in Scotland are additionally more likely to report having come to feel more connected to their community over the course of the last decade, people in both Wales and Northern Ireland are more likely to say that they have come to feel less connected to their community during that time.

The marked geographic disparities in levels of community connection exposed by this polling – both in England and across the nations of the UK – underscore the pressing need for action to foster social capital across our country, and in certain areas of it especially.

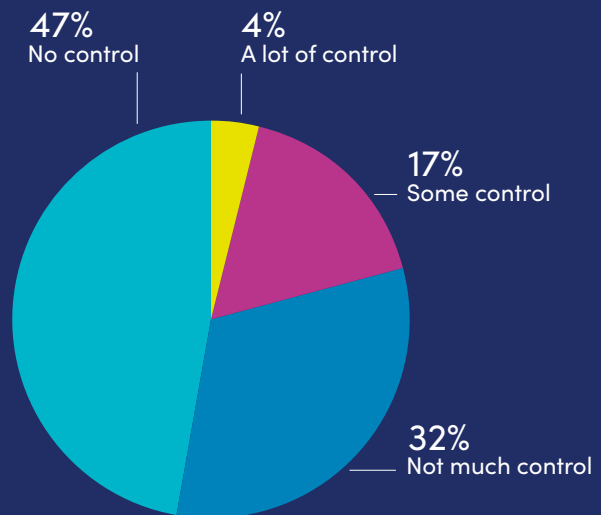
More encouragingly, this research supports the notion that the pandemic has led to greater appreciation of the benefits of and appetite for local togetherness – confirming that a plurality of UK adults would value being able to spend more time taking part in community activities and connecting with their neighbours as the country gets back to normal. 47% say they would value this, compared to 31% who say they wouldn't and 22% who say they aren't sure. In every region and nation, people are significantly more likely to say that they would, rather than wouldn't, value this.

*“47% of UK adults say they would value being able to spend more time taking part in community activities and connecting with their neighbours as the country gets back to normal.”*

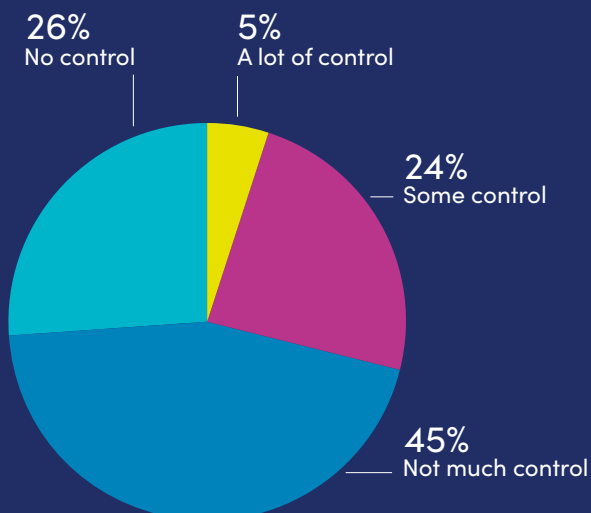
It is also clear from this polling that the public believes that too much power is located within Westminster and Whitehall and that people believe that communities across the country are being given short shrift in decision-making:

- 45% of UK adults say they have ‘not much control’ and 26% say they have ‘no control’ over important decisions that affect their neighbourhood and local community.
- 42% say they have ‘not much control’ and 37% say they have ‘no control’ over decisions that affect the country.
- 47% say that local people should have the most say over what happens in their local area, while 35% say local authorities and councillors should and 8% say politicians in Westminster should.

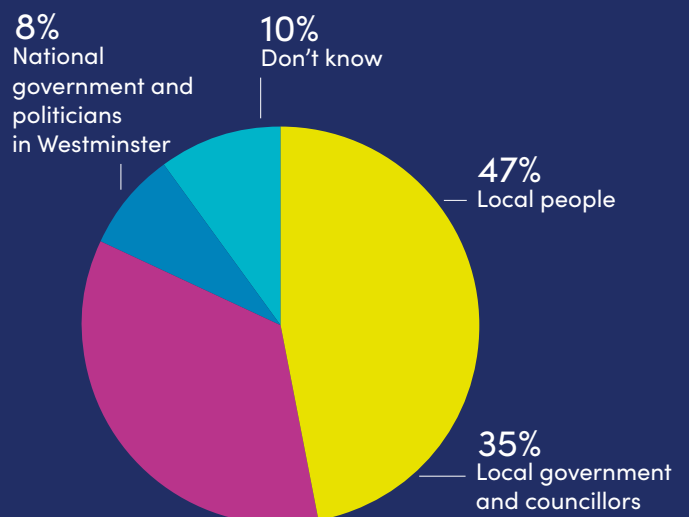
How much control do you have over the decisions that affect the country?



How much control do you have over important decisions that affect your neighbourhood and local community?



Who do you think should have the most say over what happens in your local area?

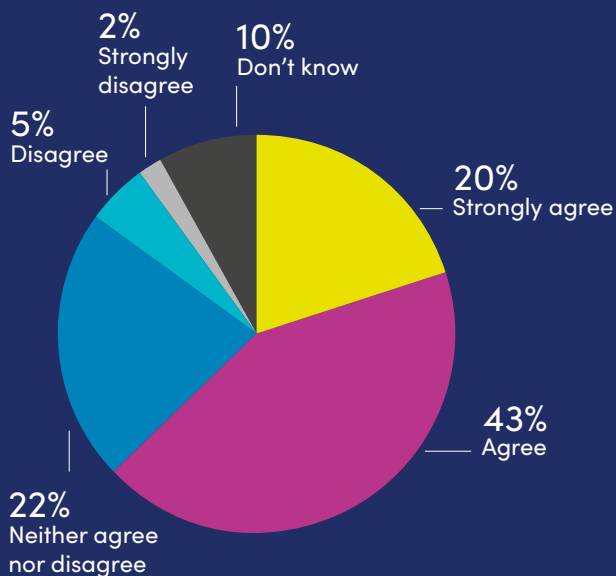




*“71% of UK adults say they have no or not much control over important decisions that affect their neighbourhood and local community.”*

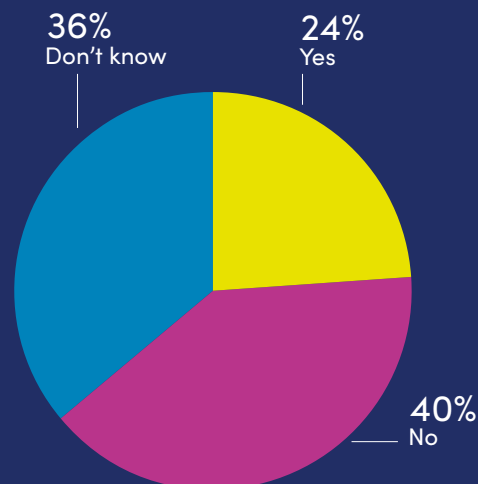
A majority of the public would approve if the government were to move to remedy this community power imbalance through its levelling up agenda. 63% of UK adults say this policy programme should involve giving local people more power over the decisions, services, and spaces which shape the places where they live, while only 7% disagree. (A further 8% of the population say they don't know, while 22% say they neither agree nor disagree with this proposition.)

How far do you agree with the following statement: 'The government's 'levelling up agenda' should involve giving local people more power over the decisions, services and spaces which shape the places where they live'?



Certainly, the public is not currently convinced that levelling up will deliver the change their communities need. Less than a quarter of UK adults (24%) say that they believe the levelling up agenda will have a positive impact in their local area. This compares to four in ten (40%) who say that they do not think it will have a positive impact. This finding should serve as a warning to the government that the way in which it is articulating the levelling up agenda at present isn't resonating with the public<sup>63</sup>.

The government has said that it wants to 'level up' the country. By this, it means improving living standards, increasing opportunity and boosting pride in place so as to reduce regional inequality. Do you think the government's levelling up agenda will have a positive impact on your local area?



*“63% of UK adults say levelling up should involve giving local people more power over the decisions, services, and spaces which shape the places where they live.”*

<sup>63</sup> The levelling up agenda was described to poll respondents as 'aimed at improving living standards, increasing opportunity, and boosting pride in place so as to reduce regional inequality'.

The government may also be interested to learn that its levelling up messaging has landed better with young people than with the older people who constitute a particularly important part of their electoral coalition in 'Red Wall' seats<sup>64</sup>. Young people are the only age group who are on balance more likely to say that levelling up will have a positive impact in their local area, with 35% of 18-34-year-olds saying that it will and 32% saying that it won't. Over 55s are least likely to say that it will have a positive impact, with 45% saying that it won't compared to only 16% who say that it will.

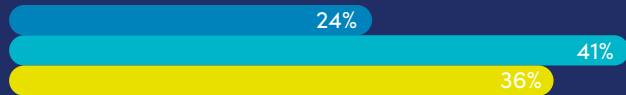
### Do you think the government's levelling up agenda will have a positive impact on your local area?

Yes ● No ● Don't know ●

18-34



35-54



Over 55s



64 Elledge, E, 'The collapse of Labour's Red Wall owes more to age than class', *The New Statesman*, available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/05/collapse-labour-s-red-wall-owes-more-age-class>

# 4. Why our community ties have frayed – a ground-level perspective



It is clear that relational injustice is at once precipitating and compounding the entrenched disadvantage and inequality which the government's levelling up policy agenda is aimed at tackling. If we are to address the shortfall of social capital which is sapping communities of growth, opportunity, health, wellbeing, empathy, trust, and power, we must first understand what has caused our bonds of connection and solidarity to loosen.

In its work over the last decade, The Cares Family has witnessed first-hand the ways in which once deep and lasting identities and associations – with places, institutions, and even nations – have been eroded by breakneck changes linked to globalisation, gentrification, digitalisation, and cultural fragmentation. The impact of these structural shifts on our community bonds is borne out in research and reflected in testimony provided by participants in The Cares Family's programmes ('older and younger neighbours') during focus group discussions held to inform the development of this paper<sup>65</sup>.

**“Deep and lasting identities and associations – with places, institutions, and even nations – have been eroded by breakneck changes linked to globalisation, gentrification, digitalisation, and cultural fragmentation.”**

## Globalisation and gentrification

Focus group research carried out by the Pew Research Centre in both the US and UK in 2019 attests to the ways in which the forces of globalisation have left many feeling ‘rudderless’<sup>66</sup>. Participants spoke about how the industries around which whole communities once organised have collapsed – leading to a significant reduction in secure well-paid jobs and weakening social ties. They also highlighted how local businesses have been driven out of the market by multinational corporations and online retailers – eroding the unique character of local places<sup>67</sup>.

This latter trend came up repeatedly during the group discussions held to inform this paper, with older and younger neighbours underscoring that high streets and work places are places of civic pride and community as well as work and economic activity. Neil from Bootle in Merseyside, who is 92, lamented the state of the New Strand shopping centre, which opened in 1968 as part of a celebrated redevelopment of Bootle's town centre. Whereas ‘The Strand’ had, he said, once been a vibrant and exciting centre of commerce, ‘now if a person's setting up a business, it's either a coffee shop or a hairdresser’ while the lower level is ‘full of charity shops’. Trish from Rochdale in Greater Manchester, 30, commented that ‘the high street, in history, had more local businesses or family names or [shops that had] been set up for many years’, arguing that this meant both that they contained more ‘history and community’ than the purpose-built shopping centres which have in some cases superseded them and that ‘there's more people that you know and you recognise in [high street] shops’.

Other Pew focus group participants described their areas as having been ‘swept up’ by globalisation as investment and the arrival of new industries supplanted traditional work and inflated property market prices. In findings which echo those of other research projects on this issue, these individuals spoke about how advancing gentrification has stoked fear of displacement among longstanding residents<sup>68</sup> and has led to the loss of valued community spaces<sup>69</sup>.

65 Two focus group discussions with participants drawn from across The Cares Family's branch charities and programmes were held on Wednesday September 8 2021 and Thursday September 9 2021. Some testimony quoted in this paper has been drawn from previous interviews with older and younger neighbours undertaken by The Cares Family staff.

66 Pew Research Centre (2020), In U.S. and UK, *Globalization Leaves Some Feeling ‘Left Behind’ or ‘Swept Up’*, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/05/in-u-s-and-uk-globalization-leaves-some-feeling-left-behind-or-swept-up/>

67 Ibid.

68 Atkinson, R, ‘The hidden costs of gentrification: Displacement in central London’, *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 15(4) (2000); Gibbons, J R, Barton, M S, and Reling, T T, ‘Do Gentrifying Neighbourhoods Have Less Community? Evidence from Philadelphia’, *Urban Studies*, 57(4) (2019)

69 Runnymede Trust and CLASS (2019), ‘We Are Ghosts’: *Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice*

While the government's levelling up agenda appears to be targeted primarily at those areas which have unequivocally lost out from globalisation, it is notable that participants in the Pew Research Centre's focus groups from both 'left behind' and 'swept up' areas spoke about its impact on them in similar terms<sup>70</sup>. Change at the community level had led them to experience feelings of alienation and dislocation and 'a profound sense of loss'<sup>71</sup>.

**“Change at the community level had led people both in areas which have been left behind and swept up by globalisation to experience feelings of alienation, dislocation, and loss.”**

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If Pew's research appears to give voice to longstanding residents of 'swept up' areas who feel that they have been pushed to the margins of their place by gentrification, the younger people who take part in The Cares Family's programmes are more likely to have moved to those areas more recently and to belong to the demographic groups which typically drive that process. It is notable, then, that while they certainly described the effects of globalisation and gentrification from a distinctly different perspective, they also articulated feelings of loss stemming from those trends.

To some extent, this is a matter of empathising with the perspectives of the older people who they meet through participating in a Cares programme. Claire, 44, who lives in south London, spoke about how watching an area change dramatically over time *'isolates you and makes you feel that you are no longer welcome in an area that you had previously thought was yours'*. Others described the way in which formerly stable communities had become anonymous, isolating places for the older people who they have been 'matched' with through The Cares Family's *Love Your Neighbour* scheme. The impact of 'sharing economy' services such as AirBnB proved to be a particular point of concern in this respect, with several younger neighbours expressing anxiety that the use of properties for short-term lets can 'hollow out' communities.

## Rootlessness and its impacts

Equally, numerous younger neighbours identified a sense of rootlessness or of disconnection from their local area and community as an issue which takes a toll on them personally. Emily, 33, recalled that, when she moved to Camberwell (in Southwark), she *'didn't have any connection to its history. I was told it was changing but I didn't exactly know what from.'* She explained how taking part in social club events run by South London Cares and hearing older neighbours' stories about the area allowed her to *'get to know my new home, and its residents, so much better'*, describing the experience as providing an *'anchor to my community'*.

**“Numerous younger neighbours identified a sense of rootlessness or of disconnection from their local area and community as an issue which takes a toll on them personally.”**

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Interestingly, some younger neighbours offered observations which suggest that the desire of newer arrivals to overcome feelings of rootlessness and dislocation is leading to the establishment of new community institutions targeted specifically at their demographic groups. Claire said that there had been something of a *'backlash'* against the decline of the high street as a community hub in some urban centres – noting that her area of London is now once again home to many independent businesses, such as butchers and fishmongers, which lend it a distinct character and enable customers to build relationships with business owners and workers. She went on to speculate, however, that these are *'priced prohibitively for certain sections of the community'*.

70 In the UK, the Pew Research Centre carried out its research in Birmingham, Edinburgh, London, and Newcastle

71 Pew Research Centre, 2020

Trish from Rochdale made a similar point regarding housing developments built for younger professionals, remarking that *'these new renovations are kind of offered and promoted as like a community – because they've not just got flats in there. They might have a coffee shop on the ground floor and a social space on the rooftop. So, [housing developers are] trying to sell that as a bit of a community, and it may well be one, but there's no consideration for families or local people that are in the area that are kind of priced out of it.'* Claire summarised this analysis powerfully when she said that *'it's the idea that community is a luxury these days and that, if you can't afford it, you're not a part of it.'*

**“Claire from South London, 44, expressed concern that a sense of community is ‘a luxury these days... If you can’t afford it, you’re not a part of it’.”**

This example offered by Trish is indicative of broader patterns of social segregation which arguably shape communities' experiences of gentrification. While that process by definition sees (typically younger) upwardly mobile people moving to less economically advantaged urban areas, it doesn't appear that people from different backgrounds tend to actually mix much in these places<sup>72</sup>. This trend has almost certainly been exacerbated by the rise of developments aimed specifically at young professionals and purpose-built student housing blocks. Living arrangements of this sort result in exactly the sort of diverse but divided communities which breed mistrust and lead residents to 'hunker down', as discussed earlier in this paper.

Britain's experience of gentrification might go some way towards explaining the Be More Us campaign's 2019 finding that, while 72% of UK adults believe that knowing our neighbours is important, 73% do not know their neighbours themselves<sup>73</sup>. This deficit of neighbourliness should be understood as both a manifestation and key driver of our social capital crisis – one with roots in a number of societal shifts, including some caused by broader cultural headwinds.

While it is a distinct issue from that of gentrification, it should be noted that rising residential segregation (i.e. people from different walks of life living in different areas altogether) has certainly led many of us to experience fewer encounters with people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations. The privatisation of the UK's housing stock and growth of private renting have helped to shape a housing market in which different socio-economic groups increasingly live apart<sup>74</sup>. Research by the Intergenerational Foundation similarly shows that, partly as a consequence of rising housing costs, younger and older people also now live in different areas to a much greater degree than was the case in years gone by (with the former moving to gentrifying urban centres and the latter more concentrated in suburbs, towns, and rural areas). In fact, the level of segregation between retirees (over 65s) and young adults (18–34-year-olds) roughly doubled between 1991 and 2016<sup>75</sup>. These trends have arguably recently been compounded by the emergence of the short-term rental market, which has led to increased displacement among economically marginalised people<sup>76</sup>.

## Digitalisation

At the same time as globalisation and gentrification have transformed our local communities, our mass culture – particularly as expressed through our preferences and behaviours with respect to entertainment and information-sharing – has fragmented. The rapid development of digital communication technologies in the last quarter-century has enabled us to access sources of information and entertainment reflecting our particular tastes and personal views – and thus to self-segment – like never before.

72 Davidson, M (2011), 'The impossibility of gentrification and social mixing' in *Mixed Communities: Gentrification by Stealth?* edited by Bridge, G, Butler, T, and Loretta, L, Policy Press Scholarship Online; Loretta, L, 'Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?', *Urban Studies*, 45(2) (2008)

73 Be More Us, 'Get To Know Your Neighbours', available at: <https://bemoreus.org.uk/get-to-know-your-neighbours/>

74 Murie, A (2016) *The Right to Buy? Selling Off Public and Social Housing*, Bristol, UK: Policy Press Shorts

75 Intergenerational Foundation (2016), *Generations Apart: The growth of age segregation in England and Wales*

76 Rae, A, 'The rapid rise of short-term lets and the implications for the housing market' in the *UK Housing Review 2019*, Chartered Institute of Housing; Butler, C, 'Who are we (not) designing for? Part 3: Airbnb and the impact on long term renters and communities', *Spotless*, available at: <https://www.spotless.co.uk/blog/who-are-we-not-designing-for-part-3-airbnb/>



The manner in which this trend has served to fuel political polarisation is well-chronicled<sup>77</sup>. While academic evidence does not tend to support the popular argument that both our tendency towards confirmation bias and internet algorithms are leading most of us to consume more news stories reflecting our political worldviews – creating online ‘echo chambers’<sup>78</sup> – heightened feelings of belonging to a distinct cultural ‘tribe’ almost certainly do lead us to ascribe more value to news providers which we perceive as sympathetic to our pre-existing views. It could also be argued that generalised mistrust of digital news<sup>79</sup> provides a permission structure for us to dismiss news and information which doesn’t align with our perspective or biases. Meanwhile, relatively small, politically driven groups are banding together to fuel social media debates on ‘culture war’ issues and, in so doing, exercising outsized influence on our broader political discussion<sup>80</sup>.

It is, further, generally accepted that our ‘great sorting’<sup>81</sup> has led to fewer cultural experiences and reference points being shared across communities and society<sup>82</sup>. Put simply, we have less to talk about than we once did.

Digitalisation’s direct impact on our social capacities and the health and strength of our relationships has been less comprehensively evidenced, though researchers have demonstrated that social media, smartphone, and internet use increases the risk of loneliness and depression<sup>83</sup>. In addition, several younger neighbours relayed stories which seemed to support the common view that older people in particular can be left feeling bewildered and detached from wider society as a result of technological change; while also expressing a sense of being overwhelmed by the role which digital technology plays in their own lives. Indeed, while it’s true that the internet has enabled people to connect in new ways, online interactions have been shown to be less emotionally and mentally nourishing than the face-to-face variety<sup>84</sup>.

It’s clear, moreover, that life’s becoming ‘digital by default’ has reduced our opportunities for everyday social contact<sup>85</sup>. A theme that arose repeatedly when older and younger neighbours discussed the impact of digitalisation on their lives was the importance of incidental meetings and casual connections and the ways in which new technologies can undercut these. Anne, 71, provided a personal example when she said that ‘if I’m given the option in a supermarket or anywhere, and there’s both tills on and self-service, I prefer to go to the cash desk where you can speak to someone and have a joke. Like, I’ve been out today shopping with a friend of mine in Bury, and I was having a joke with the assistant at the till, and it was nice – having that interaction rather than just pressing a few numbers.’ Eleanor, 41, from Liverpool gave voice to a similar sentiment when she said that ‘if you go to your local coffee shop, and you order coffee via an app and you don’t actually speak to the barista anymore, it just takes away those little everyday encounters that I think can help people who feel lonely.’

“If you go to your local coffee shop, and you order coffee via an app and you don’t actually speak to the barista anymore, it just takes away those little everyday encounters that I think can help people who feel lonely.” Eleanor from Liverpool, 41

77 ‘Levy, G, and Razin, R, ‘Social Media and Political Polarisation’, *LSE Public Policy Review*, 1(1) (2020)

78 Dubois, E, and Grant, B, ‘The myth of the echo chamber’, *The Conversation*, available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-myth-of-the-echo-chamber-92544>

79 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, ‘An election fought on screens big and small: how British voters get their news’, available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/election-fought-screens-big-and-small-how-british-voters-get-their-news>

80 More in Common (2021), *Dousing the Flames: How leaders can better navigate cultural change in 2020s Britain*

81 President Obama’s Farewell Address, Chicago, January 10 2017, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell>

82 Beer, D (2019). *The Quirks of Digital Culture*, Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing

83 Lapierre, M A, Zhao, P, and Custer, B E, Short-Term Longitudinal Relationships Between Smartphone Use/Dependency and Psychological Well-Being Among Late Adolescents, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 65(5) (2019); Primack, B A, Karim, S A, Shensa, A, Bowman, N, Knight, J, and Sidani, J E, ‘Positive and Negative Experiences on Social Media and Perceived Social Isolation’, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 33(6) (2019); Ybarra, M L, Alexander, C, Mitchell, K J, ‘Depressive symptomatology, youth internet use, and online interactions: a national survey’, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2005;36(1) (2005)

84 Subrahmanyam, K., Frison E, and Michikyan, M, ‘The relation between face-to-face and digital interactions and self-esteem: a daily diary study’, *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2 (2020)

85 Allen, C, ‘How the digitalisation of everything is making us more lonely’, *The Conversation*, available at: <https://theconversation.com/how-the-digitalisation-of-everything-is-making-us-more-lonely-90870>

Michelle, 43, from north London pointed out that, for many people, passing encounters have taken on additional importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Explaining why she sometimes misses engaging with a shopworker at a checkout, she noted that *'if it's a day [on which] I've been working from home, there's just that little interaction – even if you sort of crack a joke, or somebody says something. I think, if we're completely pushed towards [self-service], we'd definitely be losing something important.'* Describing the sort of interactions which can take place in community institutions such as post offices, Claire said that *'they might be with people whose names you don't even know, but they are a part of the fabric of your life, and I think those are the sort of things that do get missed if all commerce goes online.'*

## Cultural change

To the extent that digital technologies have fragmented our communities, they have arguably accelerated and compounded a process of social transformation with deeper and more diverse cultural roots. For example, even if smartphones, tablets, laptops, and consoles have come to play a more and more central part in our lives since the beginning of the new millennium, we first began to spend more time indoors, and apart from one another, following the invention of a different device – the television<sup>86</sup>. But the rise of TV is just one of the trends which served to erode community bonds throughout the post-war period. Others arguably include the rapid expansion of an economically self-sufficient and geographically mobile middle class<sup>87</sup>, the decline of the extended family<sup>88</sup>, and immigration<sup>89</sup>.

In his recently published book *Fractured*, the ex-government adviser Jon Yates argues that Western societies face a *'trilemma'* between cohesion, choice, and change<sup>90</sup>. Increased choice accentuates individuals' tendency to cluster with those who they perceive to be like them, while change disrupts the habits and preferences which the norms and institutions which bind us together evolve to reflect. So, Yates says, *'if we want to restore the common life, we must either reduce the pace of change or the level of choice in our societies'*<sup>91</sup>.

This framework might help us to understand why each of the post-war trends alluded to above are often pinpointed as key drivers of social fragmentation. After all, each of these societal shifts precipitated significant change to both the demographic composition of our communities and the manner in which they are organised; while also fundamentally increasing the capacity of individuals (particularly those with financial and social capital) to choose where to live, who to live alongside, and how to spend their time.

Indeed, the growth of personal choice, particularly as a manifestation of an increasingly materialistic and individualistic culture, has been identified as a core cause of the loosening of our social bonds by a number of influential sociologists and political scientists.

In *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett chart the fluctuating balance between individualism and communitarianism in American culture over a 125-year period and conclude that a period of intensifying co-operation and cohesion which began in the 1900s came an end in the 1960s<sup>92</sup>. Following this juncture, a consensus that personal freedom should be valued over *'institutional solidarity'* – and expressed through the commercialisation and marketisation of public life as well as the growth of identity politics – developed and consolidated decade-on-decade.

<sup>86</sup> Putnam, 2000

<sup>87</sup> Aldridge, S and Halpern, D, with Fitzpatrick, S (2002), *Social capital: a discussion paper*, London: Performance and Innovation Unit

<sup>88</sup> Brooks, D, 'The Nuclear Family Was A Mistake', *The Atlantic*, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/605536/>

<sup>89</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration, 2017

<sup>90</sup> Yates, 2021

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Putnam, R D, and Romney Garrett, S (2020). *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster

While no study of this scale and ambition has been attempted in the UK, this conclusion is consistent with Yates' contentions that *'over the last half-century we have become more committed than ever to the importance of choice'*<sup>93</sup> and that *'shifts in attitudes away from cooperation, and towards personal success and wealth, are helping to drive the decline'* of community institutions<sup>94</sup>.

Putnam's analysis focuses in large part (though not exclusively) on the decline of community institutions which once brought different sections of American society together, and Yates places a great deal of emphasis on the contraction of voluntary associations as a cause of rising division in the UK<sup>95</sup>. Certainly, when asked what explained the perceived lack of community feeling in their local area, older and younger neighbours consistently pointed to a shortage of spaces in which local people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations can meet and mix. Several older neighbours highlighted the role which faith institutions and community centres had played in this respect in decades past. South Londoner Claire said that *'the only spaces that I can instinctively think of where I see a real cross-section of the demographics of people who live here are places like the parks'* and leisure centres. She went on to note, however, that there is an important distinction between places which people from different walks of life make use of or occupy simultaneously and those in which they tend to actually socialise; before offering that bars and restaurants in her area are *'stratified according to, sort of, the trendy places that the young people go'* and places for other residents. Commenting on the way in which public spaces have in recent decades been designed in north and central London, Michelle remarked that *'to a certain extent, social interaction has been designed out, and it needs to be designed back in.'*

**“When asked what explained the perceived lack of community feeling in their local area, older and younger neighbours consistently pointed to a shortage of spaces in which local people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations can meet and mix.”**

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The theme of 'mixing places' is one which this paper will go on to explore in more detail. Having identified a number of structural changes and trends which have caused our community ties to fray, though, it will firstly assess the extent to which the government's levelling up policy approach – as articulated to date – is likely to meaningfully address or counteract their fragmentary effects.

93 Yates, 2021

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.







# 5. The limitations of economic policy in tackling our social capital crisis

It's clear from this analysis that the societal trends which have transformed what it means to be a community are, in no small part, economic. It follows that targeted investment in and substantive action to reinvigorate local economies in 'left behind' areas must – as has been argued elsewhere – sit at the heart of any meaningful policy response to the challenge of diminished social solidarity.

Supporting independent businesses to establish and grow and reviving high streets and town centres in disadvantaged places will be key to inspiring the feelings of civic pride and common ownership which bond communities together and to creating more opportunities for local people to meet, mix, and connect. In fact, a recent project from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge suggests that cafes, pubs, cinemas, and certain shops should be counted among the 'communal spaces'<sup>96</sup> which 'foster greater mutual trust and reciprocity among neighbours' and 'amplify individuals' attachment to their local area'<sup>97</sup>.

It's also the case that levelling up employment and education opportunities in 'left behind' areas won't just improve the standards of living and health and wellbeing of individuals – it will significantly boost levels of social capital within communities. People with secure good-quality jobs are more likely to feel rooted in their local area<sup>98</sup> and to engage in community activities<sup>99</sup>, while those who work near where they live come to know their neighbours more easily<sup>100</sup>. Furthermore, enabling young people to get good jobs and continue to live in the areas where they grew up, should they wish to, would strengthen the family ties which often underpin broader community networks.

Well-designed economic policy measures therefore hold the potential to substantially grow the relational as well as the financial wealth of disadvantaged places.

However, it is clear both from the brief overview of relevant research set out in this paper and from the stories and testimony offered by The Cares Family's older and younger neighbours that the societal shifts which have transformed our lived experience of community are not solely economic in nature. The trends described in this paper are also cultural and relational – concerning how we interact with and relate to one another as social rather than economic actors. New infrastructure projects or measures to spread economic opportunity will not reverse or counteract the structural changes which have led people to feel detached from their local communities. Policymakers must, accordingly, be realistic about the limited power of economic policy action to address their effects.

**“New infrastructure projects or measures to spread economic opportunity will not reverse or counteract the structural changes which have led people to feel detached from their local communities.”**

This is especially true with regard to the current approach to levelling up, which doesn't enable government to harness the power of community-led activity. Without action and investment to generate social capital in and repair the social fabric of 'left behind' areas, a vicious cycle sets in. Those communities that have less social infrastructure inevitably have less capacity to organise, which limits the networks and skills that they can tap into, which in turn reduces the funding and resources they are able to draw into their community.

<sup>96</sup> Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2021), *Townscapes 7: The Value of Social Infrastructure*

<sup>97</sup> Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2021

<sup>98</sup> Lup, D, and Booth, J E, 'Work and Volunteering: Longitudinal Relationships between Work-Related Experiences and Volunteering Behaviour', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 57(3) (2019)

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



The government will not, then, resolve our social capital crisis through economic policy action alone. This is not, however, a reason to either underestimate the significant and positive change which policymakers could bring about through measures of this sort or to imagine that the state is powerless to strengthen community bonds. Instead, it is a reason to consider how investment in physical infrastructure and action to reinvigorate local economies might be complimented by measures aimed specifically and directly at nurturing relationships within local communities and bridging social divides.

If isolation from people who are not 'like us' is a gateway into economic, health, and social inequality as well as loneliness, othering, and broader polarisation, the answer must be community, and the diverse relationships that underpin it.

“We must consider how action to reinvigorate local economies could be complimented by measures to nurture relationships within local communities and bridge social divides.”

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# 6. How we could harness the power of social connection to level up Britain



This paper has shown that the trends which have worn down our community bonds are cultural and relational as well as economic in nature. As a number of other organisations have argued, the government's policy response to the issue of declining community feeling and belonging must be similarly multidimensional – as Onward put it, levelling up *'must be a social as well as economic endeavour'*<sup>101</sup>. In delivering this agenda, Ministers should seek to improve the social as well as the physical infrastructure of disadvantaged places – recognising the power of, and investing in, the local relationships and associations which lift people up and underpin feelings of belonging, security, and wellbeing.

**“To level up Britain, Ministers should seek to improve the social as well as the physical infrastructure of disadvantaged places – recognising the power of, and investing in, the local relationships and associations which lift people up and underpin feelings of belonging, security, and wellbeing.”**

The scaffolding of social capital includes all of the organisations, groups and spaces in which we organically congregate as members of local communities and become anchored in neighbourhood networks – from pubs and sports clubs to libraries, barbershops, and other local businesses. A key finding of the Bennett Institute's Townscapes project is that investing in these places and facilities may be *'as significant for combatting the stagnation and decline of many British towns as investing in new dual carriageways or rail electrification near to them'*<sup>102</sup>.

## The vital role of community businesses

In a growing number of communities, the need for spaces and places to meet, mix and connect is being met by community businesses, stepping in where local authorities and the traditional private sector have withdrawn. The community ownership sector in England is conservatively estimated at more than 6,300 individual assets, and is growing fast<sup>103</sup>. While many community-owned assets date back to the nineteenth century, there has been a sharp increase in their prevalence since the early 2000s. These community businesses comprise everything from repurposed civic buildings such as the Meltham Carlile Institute in Holmfirth, to the Ivy House pub in Nunhead – London's first community-owned pub – and a community-owned bakery in Anfield, Liverpool, which has now set its sights in developing affordable housing on a site adjacent to the bakery.

**“In a growing number of communities, the need for spaces and places to meet and form meaningful connections is being met by community businesses, stepping in where local authorities and the traditional private sector have withdrawn.”**

These assets contribute £220 million to UK Gross Value Added (GVA), with 56p of every £1 they spend staying in their local economy<sup>104</sup>. Their sustainability is secured through resilient community businesses that own and manage the assets, employing local people, improving the physical fabric of local areas, and offering a mix of services and amenities to improve the quality of life locally.

101 Onward, 2020

102 Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2021

103 Archer, T, Batty, E, Harris, C, Parks, S, Wilson, I, Aiken, M, Buckley, E, Moran, R, and Terry, V (2019), *Our assets, our future: the economics, outcomes and sustainability of assets in community ownership*, available at: <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Assets-Report-DIGITAL-1.pdf>

104 Ibid.

Of all the self-reported social impacts community businesses record, reducing social isolation (85%) and increasing community cohesion (82%) are the two most commonly reported<sup>105</sup>. This is perhaps not surprising given that community businesses are often founded by residents who come together over a shared cause or challenge.

Early evidence based on analysing hyper-local boosters of the government's Community Life Survey, conducted in areas where there is a well-established community business, demonstrate that community businesses have positive impacts on issues relating to social capital and social connection, such as civic participation and social trust. For example, Bramley Baths in Leeds is a community-owned and run leisure centre. Of the 38 Community Life Survey outcome measures used to measure the impact of community businesses, seven show statistically significant improvements in Bramley and none show any detriment compared with a matched control group. We see other similarly positive impacts for other community businesses, although not all<sup>106</sup>.

## The four values of community business

Community businesses come in many shapes and sizes. At Power to Change we have found that organisations that are locally rooted, accountable to the community, trade for community benefit, and create broad community impact are particularly effective at empowering people to make their local places better, and we support organisations that share these values.

What do we mean by these values?

### Local roots

A business started by local people that will benefit the community around it.

### Accountability to the local community

The local community has a genuine say in how the business is run.

### Trade for the benefit of the local community

Community businesses sell services and products in and around their local area.

### Broad community impact

Community businesses engage with a variety of different groups in their community and address different community needs. They may have a specific focus on a disadvantaged group or support the local community more widely.

**Over 11,000 community businesses already play a vibrant role in local places across England<sup>107</sup>.**

<sup>105</sup> Harries, R, and Miller, S (2021), *Community business: The power on your doorstep*, available at: [https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Power-on-your-doorstep-Full-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Power-on-your-doorstep-Full-Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>106</sup> Crawshaw, R, Hamlyn, R, Coutinho, S, Fitzpatrick, . and Williams, J (2020), *Measuring the impact of community businesses at neighbourhood level*, available at: [https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PTC\\_3734\\_Community\\_Life\\_Survey\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PTC_3734_Community_Life_Survey_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>107</sup> Power to Change, 'What is community business?', available at: <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/community-business/what-is-community-business/>

## Social infrastructure – a public priority

Whereas government announcements on levelling up have largely overlooked the importance of social infrastructure to date, the public is well aware of the social value generated by community organisations and shared spaces. A 2020 survey by Survation for Local Trust, utilising a representative sample of people in 225 ‘left behind’ areas, found that four in ten people felt that they were not getting their fair share of resources compared to other nearby communities. Of those saying they got less, over half cited ‘places to meet’ as the biggest area where ‘left behind’ communities were not getting their fair share (57%), closely followed by community facilities such as leisure and sports facilities (55%)<sup>108</sup>.

Polling conducted by Opinium for this paper further indicates that the public believes that investing in social infrastructure should be as much of a priority for the government as investing in physical infrastructure projects such as new dual carriageways. Of those respondents who stated a preference when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this proposition, more than three quarters (76%) said they agreed while less than quarter (24%) said they disagreed. (In total, 41% agreed and 13% disagreed – 33% of respondents said they neither agreed nor disagreed, while 13% said they didn’t know.)

**“76% of those polling respondents who stated a preference said that investing in social infrastructure should be as much of a priority for the government as investing in physical infrastructure.”**

This research also demonstrates that the public believes that having more shared spaces in which local people from different backgrounds and generations could meet and mix would strengthen community ties in their area. Of those respondents who stated a preference when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this proposition, 84% said they agreed while only 16% said they disagreed. (In total,

48% agreed and 9% disagreed – 31% said they neither agreed nor disagreed, while 11% said they didn’t know.)

Developing the social infrastructure of ‘left behind’ areas must, in the first instance, mean finding ways to recognise the social value produced by community organisations, groups, and spaces in policy frameworks and decision-making processes. Using only robust evidence and with conservative assumptions, Frontier Economics estimates that a £1 million investment in community-led social infrastructure in a ‘left behind’ area could generate approximately £1.2 million of fiscal benefits and £2 million of social and economic benefits over a ten-year period, as well as other non-monetised benefits<sup>109</sup>.

## Why we need to build twenty-first century connecting institutions

Even in these places and spaces, though, the extent to which we meaningfully connect – and do so as social rather than economic actors – will tend to vary. Sharing the same space with someone, or even exchanging the occasional greeting, can generate valuable feelings of familiarity and wellbeing<sup>110</sup>, but ultimately only allows us to form weak ties. Many of the benefits of social capital discussed in this paper will, quite simply, only be realised in the event that people living in disadvantaged places are supported to build strong ties, or relatively substantive relationships.

It’s also true that the mere presence of nominally shared spaces within local areas is unlikely to counteract our evolved preference for spending time with those who we perceive to be in some way ‘like us’. Upon entering a space of this kind, we are prone to seek out the company of those individuals who we will find it easiest to relate to. In addition, encounters with people from other social and cultural backgrounds or generations can impact positively or negatively on our perceptions of and attitudes towards the group or groups to which they belong, depending on the nature of the encounter and the conditions under which it takes place<sup>111</sup>. We might therefore conclude that the provision of shared community space is necessary but insufficient for the development of positive and substantive relationships across perceived lines of difference.

<sup>108</sup> Local Trust, ‘Left behind’ areas missing out on community facilities and places to meet, available at: <https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/news/left-behind-areas-missing-out-on-community-facilities-and-places-to-meet/>

<sup>109</sup> Frontier Economics (2021), *The impacts of social infrastructure investment. A report for Local Trust*

<sup>110</sup> The Young Foundation (2012), *A Nod is as Good as a Wink: Measuring Social Impact at The U*

<sup>111</sup> Brown, R and Hewstone, M (2005), ‘An integrative theory of intergroup contact’ in *Advances in Experimental Psychology* edited by Zanna, M. San Diego: Academic Press; Tausch, N, Hewstone, M et al., ‘Secondary transfer effects of intergroup contact: Alternative accounts and underlying processes’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99:2 (2010)



In *Fractured*, Jon Yates draws on research in the field of intergroup contact theory to contend that, over time, societies develop institutions which serve the specific purpose of connecting together people from different walks of life<sup>112</sup>. Yates also argues compellingly that deindustrialisation, the fragmentation of our education system along class lines, and the rapid decline of voluntary associations and faith institutions during the second half of the twentieth century has left modern Britain lacking a ‘common life’<sup>113</sup>. By this phrase, Yates means a set of institutions in which we meet and mix with others from different backgrounds under conditions which encourage us to develop cross-community attachments, empathy, and trust. Others have described the same phenomenon as the loss of the ‘congregational spaces of the twentieth century’<sup>114</sup>.

New congregational space of this sort have, it could be argued, begun to sprout up in communities across the UK in recent years. From The Cares Family’s programmes to Parkrun, Good Gym, The Sunday Assembly, Chatty Cafes, and Participatory City’s Every One Every Day initiative, a host of charities and civil society programmes which seek to fulfil the need of people living in socially and culturally diverse areas to connect meaningfully have formed and – in several cases – scaled rapidly. The growth of community business has likewise seen the emergence of a multitude of locally rooted organisations whose principal focus is on cultivating relationships within and across communities, from the Bromley by Bow centre and the Halifax Opportunities Trust to Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth and Back on the Map in Sunderland.

“In recent years, a host of charities and civil society programmes which seek to fulfil the need of people living in socially and culturally diverse areas to connect meaningfully have formed and, in several cases, grown rapidly.”

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These organisations and initiatives all enable people to form strong social ties, including across perceived lines of difference. They play a crucial role in generating the social capital – and the bridging ties – which communities need to thrive and might be considered a distinct category of social infrastructure, which this paper will refer to as ‘connecting institutions’.

It’s certainly true that these charities, local associations, and community businesses do not begin to compare with those which Yates argues bound us together during the industrial age (such as the church and the friendly societies) in reach, cultural significance, or overall societal impact. It’s arguably also true, however, that they enable people to connect across perceived lines of difference more effectively than the connecting institutions of the past. This is exactly because they have been intentionally designed to fulfil this purpose and thus reflect the huge strides that we have made towards better understanding human psychology and social relations. Modern day connecting institutions can, accordingly, be recognised as they are alike in a number of important ways.

<sup>112</sup> Yates, 2021

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> The Challenge (2016), *Integration City*

**Connecting institutions don't simply bring people from different social and cultural backgrounds or generations together in a shared space, but rather support them to share positive experiences.** In practice, this might entail taking part in physical or social activity together, discussing a shared interest, or working together to overcome the challenges they face as a community.

They also typically **seek to ensure that people from different walks of life are able to engage with one another in a reciprocal or mutually beneficial manner.** This is as people are more likely to engage meaningfully with others when they view them as peers<sup>115</sup>. In facilitating equal-status interactions, these institutions embody a key principle of intergroup contact theory<sup>116</sup>.

On a related note, it is striking that each of the civil society initiatives highlighted in this paper do not follow the top-down 'service' model in which staff or volunteers seek to help 'clients' – instead creating environments in which people can support one another and fulfil each other's needs. Similarly, the community businesses alluded to above seek to avoid drawing rigid distinctions between 'service users' and 'providers' – instead bringing local people to explore the challenges they face, identify the strengths that they possess as a community, and develop shared solutions. This is as twenty-first century connecting institutions **recognise and nurture the inherent capacity of individuals to improve their own life and the lives of others.**

It is for this reason that these organisations and initiatives put such a premium on the transformative power of human relationships. In the words of Emily, who has been taking part in events run by South London Cares since 2015, they provide *'the setting for something so essential but [which is] often in short supply: friendship and fellowship'*. Connecting institutions can be recognised in part, then, as they **exist in large part simply to enable people to share one another's company and to foster social connection.** These institutions may, through their work, provide the things that make life liveable, but they invariably put as much emphasis on seeking to make life worth living.

This paper has already quoted Emily's remark that South London Cares provides *'an anchor to my community'*, and this sentiment relates to another core dimension of connecting institutions – they **enable participants to build relationships with places as well as people.** After all, experiencing a sense of belonging within particular settings matters deeply to people. Innovative research by academics at the University of Surrey for the National Trust has shown that forging an emotional connection with a physical environment leads us to experience feelings of wellbeing; and that our sense of our own identities is shaped in no small part by the places in which we invest meaning<sup>117</sup>. Perhaps it's for this reason that we often come to feel more connected to others when we associate them with a place that matters to us, whether a home, neighbourhood, community space, or local business. In this sense, connecting with our local area helps us to connect with those whom we share it with.

### The five key aspects of twenty-first century connecting institutions

A category of social infrastructure, twenty-first century connecting institutions are defined by a focus on supporting people to meaningfully connect across perceived lines of difference. These charities, local associations, and community businesses are alike in that they:

- Bring people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations together to share not just space, but positive experiences.
- Facilitate equal-status interactions between people from different walks of life.
- Recognise and nurture the inherent capacity of individuals to improve their own life and the lives of others.
- Conceive of providing a setting for friendship and fellowship as core to their purpose.
- Enable participants to build relationships with places as well as people.

<sup>115</sup> The Challenge (2017), *All Together Now*, 2018

<sup>116</sup> Allport, G W (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*, Cambridge, MA: Addison Wesley

<sup>117</sup> National Trust (2017), *Places that make us*

## The Cares Family's approach to building social connection

Across London, Manchester, and Liverpool, The Cares Family's five charities bring together older and younger neighbours to share time, laughter, and new experiences at Social Clubs and through Love Your Neighbour, its one-to-one intergenerational friendship matching programme.

Social Clubs take many forms – from cooking classes, film screenings, and discos to podcasting clubs, Pride celebrations, and woodworking lessons. The Cares Family builds these events around such a broad array of activities partly in order to attract people with diverse interests and inclinations – and of all ages – to take part. Some are purposefully structured around activities that people are familiar and comfortable with, such as pub quizzes, so as to minimise barriers-to-entry. Equally, the team have found that more **challenging or novel shared experiences can facilitate more meaningful engagement between older and younger neighbours**. Team activities which push people out of their comfort zone – like improvised comedy – can serve as levelling experiences and lead neighbours to feel that they're 'in it together'. Asking neighbours to 'show and tell' an object which means something to them or relate a life experience to a song (at 'Desert Island Discs' sessions) provides a window into their lives and personal histories and engenders feelings of intimacy. Perhaps the key rule which The Cares Family staff follow in designing Social Clubs is that they should require enthusiasm more than skill – we typically run 'singalongs' which are open to everyone and intended to be fun, rather than choirs which require people to be able to sing beautifully. This allows us to create inclusive spaces and lets older and younger neighbours laugh together, which promotes social bonding.

The emphasis which The Cares Family places on effort over ability also reflects our focus on facilitating equal status interactions between older and younger neighbours. We seek to **enable neighbours to build reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships** and this is reflected in the way in which we **describe both our purpose as an organisation and our programmes**. Even at the point of approaching older neighbours about our Love Your Neighbour programme, team members highlight the contribution which they can make to young people's lives. In the words of one staff member, *'Rather than saying, "Oh, do you want a volunteer to come and visit you once a week?" we say, "We have this community of younger people who've recently moved to the area. You've been here for five years, 10 years, 30 years – you know so much about the area and how it's changed."*' Similarly, during induction events, the team emphasise to younger neighbours that *'you're not here to befriend someone' but to form 'a relationship where you're going to give and you're going to take.'*

This focus on **fostering a sense that everyone's equal** carries through to programme delivery. During Social Clubs, we seek to 'mirror responsibility' among the young and old – asking people to see to it that new arrivals are welcomed warmly or simply to make cups of tea irrespective of their age. Clubs are consciously designed to enable neighbours of all ages to feel they can contribute – for instance, our pub quizzes include some rounds of questions to which older neighbours are more likely to know the answer and some which are more suited to younger neighbours. Sometimes, an older and younger neighbour will even pair up to write and host the quiz together.





A core aim of The Cares Family's programmes is to **create environments in which people feel able to tell their stories**. In part, this is because hearing about one another's lives provides both older and younger neighbours with an insight into experiences and worldviews which are different to their own; while allowing them to discover all that they have in common (including 'micro-similarities', such as having annoying siblings, which can help them to relate with one another). It's also the case that telling one another stories helps to build older and younger neighbours' confidence in engaging with each other and – crucially – trust. After all, good relationships create the sense of safety which is a prerequisite for intimacy and meaningful connection. One team member who delivers the Love Your Neighbour programme has commented that *'the point at which my matches succeed is when older and younger neighbours share the "not good" stuff. That's when we know the neighbours are truly comfortable with one another.'* In this way, we **help neighbours to come to view one another as sources of comfort and support – to become friends**.

Stories help us to bridge gaps, including those between people and places. Hearing older neighbours recall what their local area was like in the past helps younger neighbours to feel bonded to their neighbourhood and community. In addition, coming to understand what younger neighbours do for a living and in their social lives – what goes on in places which they can otherwise feel are closed off to them – allows older neighbours to feel more connected to the world around them. The Cares Family also seeks **to support older and younger neighbours to feel that they belong in their local area** by running Social Clubs in **spaces which they might not otherwise visit**. These range from newly opened hipster bars and vegan cafes to community halls, greasy spoons, and pubs which are well-established but might cease to exist without the support and custom of newer residents.

If the levelling up agenda is to harness the power of local relationships to change lives – and rekindle feelings of togetherness in disadvantaged places and the country as a whole – it must encompass measures aimed specifically at supporting the development and growth of new connecting institutions.

Building a new institution of this sort in a disadvantaged place requires an ability to innovate, a deep understanding of the community or communities that it is designed to serve, and a changemaker's mentality. This is, in other words, a task for community organisations rather one which can be effectively managed from afar. Ministers and officials should seek, however, to ensure that suitable funding streams can be accessed by the social entrepreneurs and local leaders who possess the skills, knowledge, and capacity to drive this work.

# 7. How the opportunity presented by community-led levelling up is being missed – an analysis of current funding support

The current support for levelling up – notably the Levelling Up Fund, the Community Renewal Fund, and the Community Ownership Fund – is poorly targeted to support the development of connecting institutions and broader social infrastructure at the local level.

There are three issues with the current approach, which relate primarily to how government funding for levelling up is spent and targeted. Providing more funding for social infrastructure – or even for a specific sort of organisation or project – without making changes to how it is deployed is unlikely to be effective.

First, funds are too distant from local places to be able to really target the needs of particular communities and neighbourhoods. While this may not have been the intention, we believe it is a result of how the funds have been rolled out to date. While the UK is one of the most regionally unequal countries in Europe, we also know that inequalities within regions and cities dwarf those between regions. This suggests that to be successful, the government's levelling up strategy must marry a regional focus for the purposes of improving large-scale physical infrastructure with the ability to respond to the specific needs of individual places. However, the current approach neglects this second dimension: funds are distributed on the basis of competitive processes devised and decided upon in Whitehall. Decision-making is remote from the places that need support and cannot adequately harness the intensely local knowledge of community organisations or the enabling role of local authorities. This approach sits in stark contrast to a recent intervention across the Atlantic.

**“To succeed, the government’s levelling up strategy must marry a regional focus for the purposes of improving large-scale physical infrastructure with the ability to respond to the specific needs of individual places.”**

## The US Community Revitalization Fund

President Biden’s Community Revitalization Fund, a \$10 billion investment in civic infrastructure projects, puts government funding directly in the hands of communities. The Fund is targeted at *‘economically underdeveloped and underserved communities’*. Importantly, funds will be provided to *‘community-based organizations, non-profits, community development corporations (CDCs) and their partners, centering the community as direct beneficiaries and drivers of project outcomes’*. Of the \$10 billion fund, \$500 million is set aside for planning and capacity-building to prepare groups to take on more substantial funds in future. The approach puts communities in the lead, while encouraging partnership with local government, philanthropy, and community development financial institutions<sup>118</sup>.

Importantly, this fund has been designed so as to recognise the central importance of social capital to community revitalisation – the Biden administration has said that it will be aimed in part at *‘strengthening social cohesion’* through *‘projects that provide for intercultural and intergenerational mixing’*.

Second, the ways in which the Levelling Up and Community Renewal Funds are administered create real barriers for community organisations. They have to advocate to their local or combined authority to be included in a larger bid and, in the case of the Levelling Up Fund, also secure the support of their MP. In addition, the scale of the funds on offer can be beyond the capacity of community organisations, and the direct or opportunity costs of competitive bidding processes can be too heavy for these organisations to carry. These aspects of delivery create significant barriers for community organisations to access funding, rather than unleashing the potential of communities to contribute to levelling up locally. Groups are forced to compete with each other when far more could be achieved by enabling ecosystems of community organisations to work together to support regeneration.

<sup>118</sup> White House (2021), Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Actions to Build Black Wealth and Narrow the Racial Wealth Gap, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/01/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-new-actions-to-build-black-wealth-and-narrow-the-racial-wealth-gap/>



The Community Ownership Fund is simpler, with community organisations being able to bid directly for funding. However, there is a clear challenge with this approach too, with civil servants in Whitehall deciding between projects with hyperlocal nuances. Furthermore, the requirement that communities have to find 50% match funding will act as a significant barrier to many being able to raise the funds to take on an asset, especially in those communities that are most in need of better social infrastructure. Given the competitive nature of the fund, with demand likely to be in excess of the £150 million available, this could see support going to more affluent communities better able to raise the required match funding. For example, we know from Power to Change's support for community pubs that rural communities have been successful in raising millions in community shares to support the purchase of their local pubs, reducing their need for external grant and loan funding. The same model has struggled in more deprived urban areas in part because fundraising directly from the community cannot generate the same level of investment<sup>119</sup>.

The third challenge is that there is an inadequate focus in existing funds on investment to build the capacity of communities to contribute to levelling up. In fact, the centralised, competitive approach currently in place favours those who already have the skills and capacity to respond and prioritises 'oven-ready' projects over those that will take time to develop. This is particularly problematic because it affects those communities that need support most acutely. An audit of public and community assets in the 10% worst-off council wards found they had disproportionately fewer public spaces and buildings, and were less than half as likely to have charities and community groups in their local area<sup>120</sup>.

In combination, these three factors constitute formidable barriers to the generation of greater social capital in communities and to the very success of levelling up. As Andy Haldane has commented:

*"Competitively-bid central pots of finite, short-termish money tend to lock in the advantages of those who already have resources. In other words, competitive bidding can increase the magnetic attraction of the 'have' over the 'have-not' places, the opposite of levelling up."*<sup>121</sup>

The success of levelling up depends on breaking this vicious cycle. The government must not only rebalance funding in favour of social infrastructure but also recognise that building and sustaining it necessitates a break with the current centralised approach and a focus on unleashing the potential of communities. Ministers should develop a strategy for the development of neighbourhood-level social infrastructure and connecting institutions to ensure that all communities have opportunities to foster vital social capital.

**"The government must not only rebalance funding in favour of social infrastructure but also recognise that building and sustaining it necessitates a break with the current centralised approach and a focus on unleashing the potential of communities."**

119 Thornton, A, Litchfield, A, Brooks, S, Britt, R, and Hitchin, J (2019), *More Than a Pub programme evaluation Interim Report*, available at: [https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PTC\\_3612\\_More\\_Than\\_a\\_Pub\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PTC_3612_More_Than_a_Pub_Report_FINAL.pdf)

120 OCSI (2021), *'Left behind' Neighbourhoods: Community data dive*, available at: <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/APPG-Community-Data-Dive-Report-for-APPG-S7.pdf>

121 'The Local Trust community power lecture with Andy Haldane: The Second Invisible Hand'





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# 8. A five-point plan to build up our social infrastructure



The task of building a more socially connected Britain is not one which should fall exclusively (or even primarily) on the shoulders of the government. As this paper has established, the decline of community feeling is in many ways a cultural issue which is bigger than matters of public policy and, in any case, the state cannot build relationships on our behalf. There are, however, a range of measures and steps which policymakers could and should take in order to address the challenges identified in this paper and enable community organisations to expand and develop the social infrastructure of disadvantaged places. More to the point, and as this paper has shown, the government's level of success in fulfilling this strategic enabling role will likely prove pivotal to the larger success or failure of its levelling up agenda.

In order to build up our social infrastructure and unleash the potential of communities to drive levelling up locally, we would recommend that Ministers and officials should follow a five-point plan.

Firstly, to ensure that all communities have a chance to capitalise on new opportunities to generate social capital, we need to invest in building the capacity of communities. This is a long-term project that cannot be achieved with the existing funds alone whose scope is too narrow and timescales too short. **The government should look to the next tranche of the Dormant Assets Scheme to create a Community Wealth Fund.** This could be used to support a decade-long project of investment in growing the capacity of communities, drawing on the network of community foundations to bring resources closer to local areas.

Secondly, two other opportunities for investment in communities are the forthcoming UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Community Ownership Fund. More money must be directly controlled at the community level rather than by Whitehall, empowering those who really understand what needs to happen to create change locally. **We recommend that 25% of the future UK Shared Prosperity Fund should be passed directly to community-led partnerships to support the development of social infrastructure at the neighbourhood level.**

Thirdly, community asset ownership is a key means of endowing communities with buildings and land through which they can generate income, foster social connection, and drive impact over the long term. Less prosperous communities are less likely to own assets, thus missing out on the well-evidenced economic, social, and civic impacts of community ownership. **The government should have an ambition to accelerate community ownership in parts of the country where it is currently weaker, flexing its Community Ownership Fund to increase access for projects from more disadvantaged communities.**

Enacting each of these measures would significantly bolster the ability of community organisations and social entrepreneurs to access the funding they will require to boost levels of social capital within disadvantaged places – including through establishing and growing new connecting institutions.

Ministers should, in addition, take proactive and targeted steps to encourage the development of these initiatives. As the stories of The Cares Family<sup>122</sup> and a raft of other organisations demonstrates, genuine congregational spaces can and do spring from within communities – but it's also true that they typically take time to develop<sup>123</sup>. Moreover, The Cares Family's work in supporting local community leaders to develop bridge-building initiatives through its Multiplier programme<sup>124</sup> suggests that our country possesses reservoirs of untapped potential in this regard. Given the toll which our social capital crisis – and a shortfall of strong social ties in particular – is taking on communities across the UK, we cannot afford to take a laissez-faire approach and assume that twenty-first century connecting institutions will simply appear in time.

<sup>122</sup> Smith, A, *A decade on: Fred, the riots and seeking a more connected age*, available at: <https://alexsmith1982.medium.com/a-decade-on-fred-the-riots-and-seeking-a-more-connected-age-40a031811bb5>

<sup>123</sup> Yates, 2021

<sup>124</sup> Information regarding The Multiplier programme can be found at: <https://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/the-multiplier>

Rejuvenating our associational life may require us to dismantle a range of structural, cultural, and institutional barriers to participation in community activity – and to reassess who bears responsibility for this task. Accordingly, **the government should create a new national commission to explore why the connecting institutions highlighted in this paper have achieved lift-off in the manner that they have and how we might support and spur on the development of twenty-first century connecting institutions.** This is the fourth plank of our plan, and we believe that this commission should be tasked with developing policy recommendations with the particular objective of strengthening community bonds in those areas of the UK that are most deprived of social capital.

Our shared national ambition should be to replicate the programme of institution-building which actuated the end of a previous period of *'inequality, political polarisation [and] social dislocation'* in the nineteenth century's Gilded Age as captured by Robert Putnam and Romney Garrett in *The Upswing*<sup>125</sup>. During this period of American history, reformers created and convened a diverse range of organisations – such as the Rotary Club and other societies and associations with a focus on both mutual aid and socialising – which generated huge amounts of social capital and enabled the development of a more connected and just society<sup>126</sup>. Jon Yates' work details how a comparable *'boom of associations'* during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods connected Britons from different backgrounds and with radically experiences of life together<sup>127</sup>, with huge positive social impact.

We now need to unleash a new boom in associational life – not one that harks back to the approaches of the past but one that learns from what is working today and seeks to build on it.

**“We need to unleash a new boom in associational life – not one that harks back to the approaches of the past but one that learns from what is working today and seeks to build on it.”**

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If it is to succeed in the long run, this programme of institution-building may require significant direct investment on the part of the government. We would note that building connection in a disconnected age will also ultimately require us to prioritise what's important over what's efficient, which is rarely easy and can be especially difficult given the stresses and strains of modern life. Attaching costs to technologies and business practices which contribute to social fragmentation might go some way towards rebalancing the incentives we encounter in our daily lives. Such an approach might encourage the moments of passing connection which can help to sustain us<sup>128</sup> as well as the formation of more meaningful relationships, while also raising funds which could be directed towards building new connecting institutions.

Finally, we believe that policy action to improve our social infrastructure, including through building new connecting institutions, will only achieve sustainable impact if it is accompanied by a bigger mindset shift. **Policy and decisions-makers should be encouraged to consider how their choices will affect the ability of people to develop life-improving social connections, and government policy frameworks should afford relationships a level of value reflecting their considerable impact on social and economic outcomes.**

<sup>125</sup> Putnam, R D, and Romney Garrett, S, 2020

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Yates, 2021

<sup>128</sup> The Young Foundation, 2012

Promoting relational justice in this way will be key to breaking open the pockets of power and powerlessness which shape modern Britain. It will be vital in boosting economic opportunity and improving living standards in disadvantaged places and fostering feelings of belonging, security, and wellbeing in every corner of our country.

Through investing a level of policy energy and public funding into this project reflecting the critical importance of and need for relational justice, politicians and officials could level up community life across the UK and resolve our social capital crisis.

### Our five-point plan

1. Create a Community Wealth Fund using the next tranche of the Dormant Assets Scheme
2. Pass 25% of the future UK Shared Prosperity Fund directly to community-led partnerships
3. Accelerate community ownership in parts of the country where it is currently weaker, flexing the Community Ownership Fund as required
4. Create a new national commission to explore how we might support and spur on the development of twenty-first century connecting institutions
5. Encourage policy and decision-makers to consider how their choices will impact on the ability of people to develop life-improving social connections, shaping policy frameworks accordingly





# 9. Conclusion



Levelling up Britain will require action to expand and develop the social infrastructure of communities across our country – including through supporting the growth of community businesses and the development of new locally rooted institutions in which people can connect meaningfully with one another. This is the path to a more prosperous, healthy, and fair country.

Equally, a huge number of organisations and initiatives are already supporting members of communities across Britain to come together, form relationships, and improve the lot of their place. They are playing a vital role in repairing our fraying social fabric and fostering the social capital needed for our nation to flourish. The government has an opportunity to support them as they seek to level up the country. They should be vital, trusted partners in this pursuit.

Ultimately, new infrastructure projects or measures to spread economic opportunity will not reverse or counteract the structural and deep-rooted cultural changes which have led people to feel detached from their local communities. Restoring the local associations and bonds of trust which underpin strong and healthy communities will take concerted action to nurture social relationships, bridge social divides, and empower communities to build a better future for themselves. This is no easy task, but one with the potential for huge reward. Now is the time to seize this opportunity – to level up through creating a more socially connected Britain.

**“Restoring the local associations and bonds of trust which underpin strong and healthy communities will take concerted action to nurture social relationships, bridge social divides, and empower communities to build a better future for themselves.”**

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