



Building Connection:
The Promise of a
Strategy for Community
Spaces and Relationships



THE CARES FAMILY

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Introduction

The Cares Family is a network of charities which bring people together across generations, backgrounds and experiences to build community and connection. Our vision is of **socially connected communities in which people feel less lonely, more united and that they belong**. Over the course of the last 11 years, our five local charities – North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares and East London Cares – have supported over 26,000 older and younger neighbours to meet, mix and connect. Nationally, we also run programmes through which we invest in and support local people working to build more socially connected communities all across the country.

We believe that many of **our most pressing social challenges are partially rooted in the loss of the institutions and associations which once underpinned feelings of trust, belonging and togetherness within local communities**. These social challenges include inequalities in health and wealth, our loneliness epidemic and the sense of disempowerment which pervades our politics and democratic life.

This conviction is grounded both in our first-hand experience of working across a number of communities and in independent research. We explored this trend – and summarised the available evidence as to how social disconnection is sapping our communities of economic opportunity, wellbeing and empathy – in a paper which we published with Power to Change in 2021, *Building our Social Infrastructure*¹.

Our organisation previously influenced the creation and contents of the government's loneliness strategy (which the then-Prime Minister Theresa May launched during a 2018 visit to a Cares Family social club). We believe that targeted action to support and enable people who are experiencing loneliness to reconnect with their communities is crucial. We also believe that, as a society, **we must do more to cultivate the networks of relationships and community ties which can prevent people from slipping into patterns of isolation, division and dislocation**.

We would contend that the government has an important role to play in supporting civic leaders and local policymakers to more fully respond to the needs of their place in this respect. This should be the central objective of its **Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships**, as announced in the Levelling Up White Paper².

In the first chapter of this policy paper, we argue that the government should shape this strategy to distinguish between the distinct forms of social infrastructure which tie our communities together and to **support community builders to generate the type of social capital their places need most**. We also propose that policymakers should take **decisive action to spur the growth of organisations and projects which foster positive and meaningful connections between people from different backgrounds and generations – or 'connecting institutions'**.

In chapter two, we set out how **the government could fuel the development of connecting institutions through facilitating the sharing of learning between community builders and providing vital capacity-building support**.

Ultimately, we believe that, through designing its Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships to realise this policy approach, the government could take major strides towards both delivering the goals at the core of its Levelling Up agenda and **unleashing the preventative and positive potential of associational life**.

1 The Cares Family and Power to Change (2021), *Building our social infrastructure*: <https://files.thecaresfamily.org.uk/thecaresfamily/images/Building-our-social-infrastructure-Final.pdf>

2 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022), *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf



Executive summary

The government pledged, in its Levelling Up White Paper, to bring forward a **Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships** aimed at strengthening our ‘*community and neighbourhood infrastructure*’ – the local spaces, facilities and organisations which boost social capital (*‘the strength of communities, relationships and trust’*). This is hugely welcome. But, just as an effective plan to improve the physical infrastructure of a region or place will invariably set out specific measures concerning roads, bridges and tunnels, a strategy to build social infrastructure must distinguish between the different ways in which members of local communities can connect with one another.

This is, in a nutshell, because **different forms of encounters between local people generate distinct forms of social capital**; and because people typically engage with one another differently in settings in which they are *expected* to associate than in spaces in which they *might* interact incidentally.

Interacting with people in ‘bumping places’ like parks, playgrounds and town squares allows us to develop ‘weak’ or ‘thin’ social ties, which produce important feelings of familiarity, comfort and security and boost our health and happiness. It’s also of course true that initially impromptu encounters can lead to more meaningful relationships. We are, however, more *likely* to form ‘strong’ or ‘thick’ ties – which underpin habits of co-operation, reciprocity and friendship – in spaces in which we are encouraged to actively and substantively associate with others. Indeed, the political scientist Robert Putnam’s work attests to the societal importance of community initiatives of this sort, such as sports clubs, choirs and voluntary associations.

We should be conscious too that most of us tend to form ‘bonding ties’ (connections with people of the same class, faith, ethnicity or generation) more readily than ‘bridging ties’ (connections which transcend those divisions). Social psychologists say this is a function of how our species evolved – we developed a preference for engaging with people whom we view as similar to ourselves as this facilitated co-operative behaviour within tribes. They have also demonstrated that the effect of this evolved tendency (‘homophily’) can be overcome – when people from different social and cultural groups meet and mix under conditions which enable them to connect meaningfully and positively, developing *strong bridging ties*. Casual interactions are less likely to embody those conditions – to be co-operative, equal-status and relatively intensive – than structured activities run by community initiatives.

Thin ties built in bumping places are, then, less likely to grow thick when we don’t instinctively see much of ourselves in one another.

Each of the distinct categories of social connection contained within this analytical framework – including *weak bridging ties* – generate social value. In fact, they could be conceptualised as separate but essential components of a strong and healthy society. Just as we all stand to benefit from a nutrition regime including each of the four main food groups – carbohydrates, proteins, fats and dairy – communities could be said to require a balanced diet of connection.

Equally, **limited resources should of course be targeted to generate the distinct forms of social capital and, by extension, social infrastructure which individual communities are most in need of.**

This is especially true because the social benefits produced by each category of social tie must be set against the degree of effort, and funding, that typically goes into building the corresponding form of social infrastructure.

Local civic leaders generally understand what type(s) of social infrastructure their area require(s) most, but are often unable to access the funding and support they need to build it. Through **embedding a policy and funding framework distinguishing between the distinct forms of social capital and social infrastructure which individual communities need to flourish in its forthcoming strategy**, the government could support civic leaders and local policymakers to respond strategically to the needs of their places.

Furthermore, through **investing in research and tools to enable civic leaders and local policymakers to map sources of social disconnection and social capital**, the government could support those individuals to acquire an even deeper understanding of their own places’ needs and to make powerful, evidence-based arguments to funders.

Implicit within these calls for action is a clear conviction that the state should play a proactive role in deepening and expanding social networks within communities. But we firmly believe that the government’s goal in this respect should be to galvanise civil society activity – not to seek to replicate or replace it.

Research demonstrates that those places which have been identified by the government as most in need of Levelling Up suffer disproportionately from shortfalls in social capital and an absence of social infrastructure.

Various organisations, including Public First, Local Trust, Onward and Power to Change, have proposed that the government should respond to this challenge by establishing a capacity-building institution for community action. This new body would provide advice, training and resources aimed at growing the capacity of civic organisations in Levelling Up target areas to build the social infrastructure their communities need – including through successfully navigating government funding schemes.

A plan to create a capacity-building body for community action should, in our view, sit at the heart of this strategy.

But this organisation too must be **carefully designed to support the development of various forms of social infrastructure.**

Previous proposals have tended to suggest that this body should primarily support the delivery of relatively large-scale, high-visibility community projects. These might be aimed at acquiring and managing a community asset such as a historic building; launching a community energy project; regenerating a local estate; or opening a new community café, allotment or business hub. Initiatives of this sort can generate sustainable sources of employment and income, create savings for local people and help to revitalise town and city centres – all while impacting positively on community feeling.

On the other hand, relatively large-scale community initiatives will, typically, resonate with the interests, aspirations and inclinations of only so many local people – especially if taking part means investing a significant amount of time or energy. More to the point, the objective of nurturing relationships is, for those engaged in delivering these initiatives, generally secondary to that of improving a place's *physical community infrastructure* in a particular way.

United and dynamic communities are, ultimately, bound together by interweaving networks of relationships and attachments. Through organising smaller-scale projects which bring people together not to take part in a programme of work, but simply to share in one another's company, community builders can create multiple, low-barrier entry points into the common life of a community.

In addition, through fashioning settings in which meeting and mixing with others is largely the point, civic leaders are able to prioritise the vital and skilled work of nurturing authentic and reciprocal relationships between members of local communities.

In order to balance the various and competing benefits offered by both of these forms of community initiative, the proposed new body might adopt a twin-track approach. This would entail **supporting communities in Levelling Up target areas to pursue a small number of potentially transformative, relatively large-scale community-building projects**, while also **working to fuel the development of smaller-scale connecting institutions in those same places.**

These are organisations and projects which work in purposeful ways to shape encounters and foster positive and meaningful connections between people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations, nurturing strong bridging ties. It follows both that they fulfil a special function in connecting our modern, diverse and disaggregated communities together and that they are especially time, labour and knowledge-intensive to build and run.

Through **supporting civic organisations to draw on models of connecting institutions which have worked elsewhere**, however, the proposed body could make developing these high-input, high-impact initiatives significantly less burdensome – maximising the community-strengthening return on its capacity-building investment. Its goal in this respect should be to support groups of community builders to put these models into practice speedily, reliably and in multiple places simultaneously.

In order to fulfil this objective, this body will need to work closely with existing connecting institutions. The Cares Family last year launched a podcast with the think tank Onward, entitled *Building Belonging*. This podcast explores the stories of what our two organisations would contend are a new wave of connecting institutions which have sprouted up in communities across the UK in recent years and the techniques and approaches which underpin their impact. We believe that the conversations captured through this podcast demonstrate that **much can be gained by tapping into the expertise of civic innovators who have built and run organisations and projects of this kind.**

Equally, it is important to note that effective community initiatives invariably reflect the particular needs, characteristics and assets of their places. For this reason, the new body's work in supporting community builders to draw on the examples of impactful connecting institutions should be delivered in two stages.

Firstly, it should **work with civic innovators to identify the transferrable building blocks of a range of connecting institutions** – the specific methods and mechanisms which underpin their impact – and to distil this learning into toolkits and other resources. Later this year, we will publish a further short paper, *Building Connection: What We Know to Work*, with a view to showcasing how this approach might be applied. This paper will examine the techniques and tactics utilised by The Cares Family's local charities so as to create authentic and reciprocal intergenerational connections. It will also explore the ways in which these same approaches are put into practice by other connecting institutions whose work is profiled through the *Building Belonging* podcast (such as [Parkrun](#), [Good Gym](#) and [The Roots Programme](#)).

Secondly, the capacity-building body should **actively support civic leaders and community organisations to deploy the resulting blueprints in a way that works for their place**. This assistance might be provided directly by one of its staff or through structured learning programmes developed with the relevant connecting institution.

The Cares Family has developed a programme of this kind (using philanthropic funding). Through our *Ripple Effect* initiative, we will actively support organisations, groups and individuals to adopt and adapt our model and approach to create meaningful intergenerational connections in their communities. We successfully piloted this programme in York in 2022 and are now working to roll it across the UK. We are not seeking government funding for this programme, but believe it speaks to what could be achieved if community builders were energetically supported to share their learning and models with others.

The social fabric of 'left behind' places won't be restitched in one fell swoop, but rather by creating a rich tapestry of shared community institutions and associations in each of those areas. Through **establishing a capacity-building organisation for community action with a mandate to fuel the development of connecting institutions** in this way, policymakers could offer invaluable support to organisations and individuals who are engaged in the vital work of making that happen.

More generally, this strategy should be shaped to recognise the distinct and important role of connecting institutions in stitching our communities together. The community initiatives often fly under the radar of policymakers, especially at the national level, but spurring their growth will be key to developing the deep and expansive networks of relationships and community ties which can prevent people from slipping into patterns of isolation, division and dislocation.

This, in turn, would have a considerable impact on our nation's health and happiness as well as levels of trust and togetherness within and across our communities.



Chapter one: Investing in the forms of social infrastructure which communities need most



Roads, bridges and tunnels

The Levelling Up White Paper published in February 2022 is expansive in its analysis. It is notable, however, for the level of emphasis which it places on social capital, which it defines as relating to *'the strength of communities, relationships and trust'*³. The White Paper identifies shortfalls in social capital as *'a cause as well as a reflection of the under-performance of places'* and puts a commitment to building up communities' reserves at the heart of the government's policy response to economic and social inequality⁴.

The government pledged in the White Paper to bring forward **a Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships**. This strategy will seek to draw *'together new and existing policies and programmes from across government and civil society to focus on how we can collectively strengthen the community and neighbourhood infrastructure needed to build social capital and enable all neighbourhoods to thrive.'*⁵

That the government is increasingly recognising the value of our *'social infrastructure'* – a phrase which the White Paper appears to employ to mean: the spaces, facilities and organisations which produce social capital – is hugely welcome. But, just as an effective plan to improve the physical infrastructure of a region or place will invariably set out specific measures concerning roads, bridges and tunnels, **a strategy to build social infrastructure must distinguish between the different ways in which members of local communities can connect with one another.**

The rapid evidence review of community initiatives produced for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) last year by the consultancy Frontier Economics helpfully sought to define the core components of our social infrastructure⁶. This review describes *'community infrastructure'* – a concept which it intends to be narrower in scope than the government's notion of social infrastructure – as *'the physical infrastructure within the community (including places, spaces and facilities) that supports the formation and development of social networks and relationships'*.

It further notes that for *'this infrastructure to support the community effectively, it needs to be utilised for purposes that facilitate community networks and interactions'*, describing the *'activity organisers or community-based institutions'* which do this as *'community initiatives that deliver effective community infrastructure'*⁷. While this review arguably seems to attach more value to **community infrastructure** than these community initiatives⁸, though, we would argue that **building both** should be **a key objective of the next phase of the government's work to narrow regional and local inequalities.**

Indeed, **the true value of community infrastructure cannot be unlocked without investment in community initiatives and vice versa.**

That is, in a nutshell, because **different forms of encounters between members of local communities generate distinct forms of social capital;** and **because people typically engage with one another differently in settings in which they are expected to associate than in spaces in which they might interact incidentally.**

These are, of course, not hard and fast-rules. We at The Cares Family know from our day-to-day work that making assumptions about how individuals will behave towards one another based on their age or background is often counterproductive. Nonetheless, social scientists have arrived at a number of conclusions regarding the ways in which people generally relate to one another in different community settings – and policymakers might usefully draw on these to support the work of community builders, as we will go on to show. (We use the phrase *'community builders'* throughout this paper to refer to organisations and individuals engaged in the work of bringing people together to strengthen bonds of connection and belonging).

3 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2022), *Rapid evidence review of community initiatives*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-evidence-review-of-community-initiatives/rapid-evidence-review-of-community-initiatives>

7 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2022

8 Frontier Economics do not explicitly argue that this is the case. Their evidence review is, however, structured in such a way so as to place particular emphasis on the role of *'physical infrastructure within communities'* in fostering social capital.

Through thick and thin

Interacting with people in ‘bumping places’ like parks, playgrounds and town squares allows us to develop **important feelings of familiarity, comfort and security**. The social psychologist Gillian Sandstrom has demonstrated that forming ‘weak ties’ with ‘*peripheral members of our social networks*’ – that is, exchanging a nod or a smile with a neighbour, pleasantries with the person who makes our morning coffee or small talk with someone who we see at the gym – boosts our health and happiness⁹. The social connection experts at Neighbourly Lab describe these instances of social contact as ‘*positive micro-interactions*’ which ‘*result in better subjective wellbeing, reduced loneliness and a greater sense of belonging*’¹⁰.

At The Cares Family, we often suggest that everyone should seek to have ‘*five a day, every day*’ – five mindful ‘*interactions with a neighbour, co-worker, bus driver, barber or stranger*’¹¹. This idea was first put forward by the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission¹² and frames our need for social connection in a way which intentionally foregrounds the importance of regular, passing-but-not-insubstantial exchanges.

It’s also true that **weak, thin or shallow ties can develop into strong, thick or deep ties**. In the words of the sociologist Eric Klinenberg, ‘*People forge bonds in places that have healthy social infrastructures – not because they set out to build community, but because when people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships inevitably grow*’.¹³ Most of us will be able to think of friendships in our own lives which built from initially impromptu encounters and it’s common sense that friendships – irrespective of how they start – enable us to experience a sense of affirmation, belonging and wellbeing in a way that more casual relationships don’t.

It’s common sense too that **we are more likely to form meaningful bonds in spaces in which we are expected to engage relatively intensively with others**. Most of us are more liable to strike up a rapport with people with whom we attend a class, play on a team or volunteer alongside than those with whom we have fleeting or incidental interactions.

The political scientist Robert Putnam’s work attests to the societal importance of **community initiatives in which people are encouraged to actively associate with one another**, such as sports clubs, choirs and voluntary associations¹⁴. In enabling people to forge relatively substantive relationships, these organisations and programmes enable us to form **habits of co-operation, reciprocity and friendship**. Rather than temporarily boosting our wellbeing, these institutions shape how we relate to others on an ongoing basis – to the point that deficits of meaningful connection can, as one of Putnam’s most famous studies shows, destabilise democratic systems¹⁵.

The Yale-based expert on conflict resolution Seth Kaplan has similarly argued that particularly powerful community bonds often stem from ‘*permanent associations*’ which generate ‘*a set of overlapping, linked and mutually reinforcing social ties*’¹⁶. According to Kaplan, this ‘*explains why social institutions – such as families, churches, bowling leagues, schools and unions... matter so much to social capital’s creation, maintenance and impact*’¹⁷. The very fact that they are structured as institutions with clearly defined forms of membership and affiliation means that these units foster a sense of shared identity and purpose which in turn affords those who associate with them something of **a shortcut to trust and connection**. Football supporters have, for example, been shown to invest trust in and to demonstrate a particular willingness to offer assistance to supporters of the same club, even those they don’t personally know¹⁸.

9 Sandstrom, G and Dunn, E, ‘Social Interactions and Well-Being: The Surprising Power of Weak Ties’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, April 2014

10 Neighbourly Lab, ‘Could casual daily interactions help you to lead a happier and healthier life?’, <https://www.neighbourlylab.com/post/could-casual-daily-interactions-help-you-to-lead-a-happier-and-healthier-life>

11 South London Cares (2021), ‘Let’s tackle loneliness, leaving no one behind’, <https://southlondoncares.org.uk/blog/no-one-left-behind>

12 Jo Cox Loneliness Commission (2017), *Combating Loneliness one conversation at a time: A call to action*: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/jcf/pages/164/attachments/original/1620919309/rb_dec17_jocox_commission_finalreport.pdf?1620919309

13 Klinenberg, E, 2018

14 Putnam, R (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

15 Putnam, R (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*

16 Kaplan, S, ‘Building Relationships, Strengthening Neighborhoods’, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2021

17 Ibid.

18 Levine, M, Prosser, A, Evans, D and Reicher, S, ‘Identity and Emergency Intervention: How Social Group Membership and Inclusiveness of Group Boundaries Shape Helping Behavior’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, May 2005

Birds of a feather (needn't always) flock together

Whether social ties are weak or strong is not the only dimension of difference which we should be aware of in assessing their potential societal impact. The rapid evidence review published by DCMS and DLUHC notes the distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital¹⁹. The former results from social ties between members of the same social or cultural group (for instance, of the same class background, faith, ethnicity or generation), while the latter is generated through ties which 'bridge' those divisions.

Most of us tend to form bonding ties more readily than bridging ties. It's well-evidenced that whereas we tend to 'ascribe' trust to those who we consider to be members of a social or cultural group to which we feel we also belong, we typically require those who we perceive to be different to us to 'earn' it. Social psychologists say this is a function of how our species evolved – we developed a preference for engaging with people whom we view as similar to ourselves as this facilitated co-operative behaviour within tribes. They refer to this tendency as 'homophily'²⁰.

Homophily's effects can be overcome. Specialists in social contact theory have demonstrated that, **when people from different social and cultural groups meet, mix and connect in positive and meaningful ways, trust grows and prejudice declines**²¹. In fact, there is a substantial body of research which suggests that interacting in this way with someone from a different class background, faith, ethnicity 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 generally²².

Encounters with people from different backgrounds or generations can, however, impact positively or negatively on our attitudes towards and perceptions of the social or cultural group or groups to which they belong. Whether these interactions lead us to develop a more positive view of that group or not depends upon **the nature of the encounter in question and the conditions under which it takes place**²³.

Social contact theory emphasises **the benefits of equal-status encounters and of forms of engagement which encourage people from different social or cultural groups to work towards common goals**. Jon Yates' book *Fractured*²⁴ draws on this same body of research to contend that we should build new state-sponsored institutions designed to enable people from different walks of life to meet and mix in ways which either engender routine or are particularly intense²⁵.

Casual interactions in a park, post office or other bumping place are simply less likely to embody those conditions – to be co-operative, equal-status and relatively intensive – than structured activities run by community initiatives. Thin ties are, then, less likely to grow thick by chance when the individuals involved don't intuitively see much of themselves in one another.

19 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2022

20 McPherson, M, Smith-Lovin, L and Cook, JM, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2001

21 Al Ramiah, A and Hewstone, M, 'Intergroup contact as a tool for reducing, resolving and preventing intergroup conflict: evidence, limitations and potential', *American Psychologist*, 2013

22 Social Integration Commission (2014), *Social Integration: a wake-up call*: <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SIC-2.-A-wake-up-call.pdf>

23 Brown, R and Hewstone, M, 'An integrative theory of intergroup contact' in *Advances in Experimental Psychology* edited by Zanna, M, 2005; Tausch, N, Hewstone, M et al., 'Secondary transfer effects of intergroup contact: Alternative accounts and underlying processes', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2010

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

25 Intense experiences (like taking part in a competitive football match or doing something you're afraid of, such as skydiving) both accelerate the bonding process (because they're by their very nature emotional) and imprint on our memory in a way which means they're more likely to affect our sense of our own identity. These effects are explored in more detail in Jon Yates' *Fractured*.

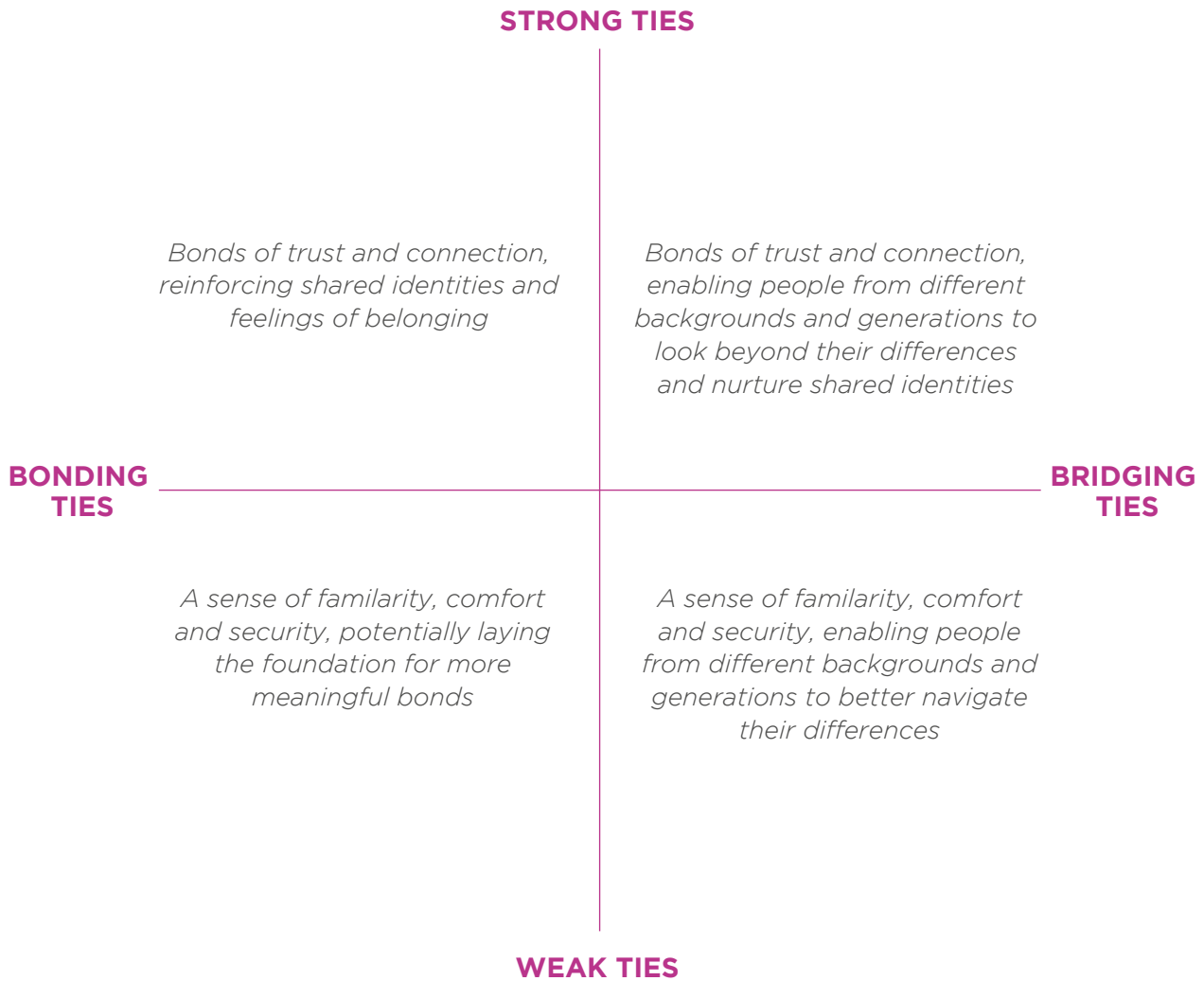
The upshot is that **our ability to look past our differences grows considerably where purposeful action is taken to nurture the development of strong bridging ties**. But, as the grid on page 13 implies, we should also be conscious that weak bridging ties do also generate social value. Bristol University's recently produced Everyday Integration Toolkit outlines the manner in which the '*routine encounters and exchanges we already experience every day*' with people from different social and cultural groups can help us to negotiate difference and to develop bonds of affection²⁶. And it is indisputably true that thinner ties – whether of the bonding or bridging variety – can be formed without community builders organising structured activities, whereas this is required to forge thicker ties (at least at scale).

Ultimately, the point we are driving at is not that one type of social tie is inherently more valuable than another, but that different forms of social capital – and, by extension, social infrastructure – generate distinct varieties of social value. Each of the categories of social bond described in this paper boost our health and happiness, but they impact on our ability to trust and empathise with one another and to experience a sense of togetherness in different ways and to varying extents.



26 University of Bristol (2022), *Everyday Integration Toolkit*: <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Everyday-Integration-Toolkit.pdf>

The forms of social value generated by different types of social tie



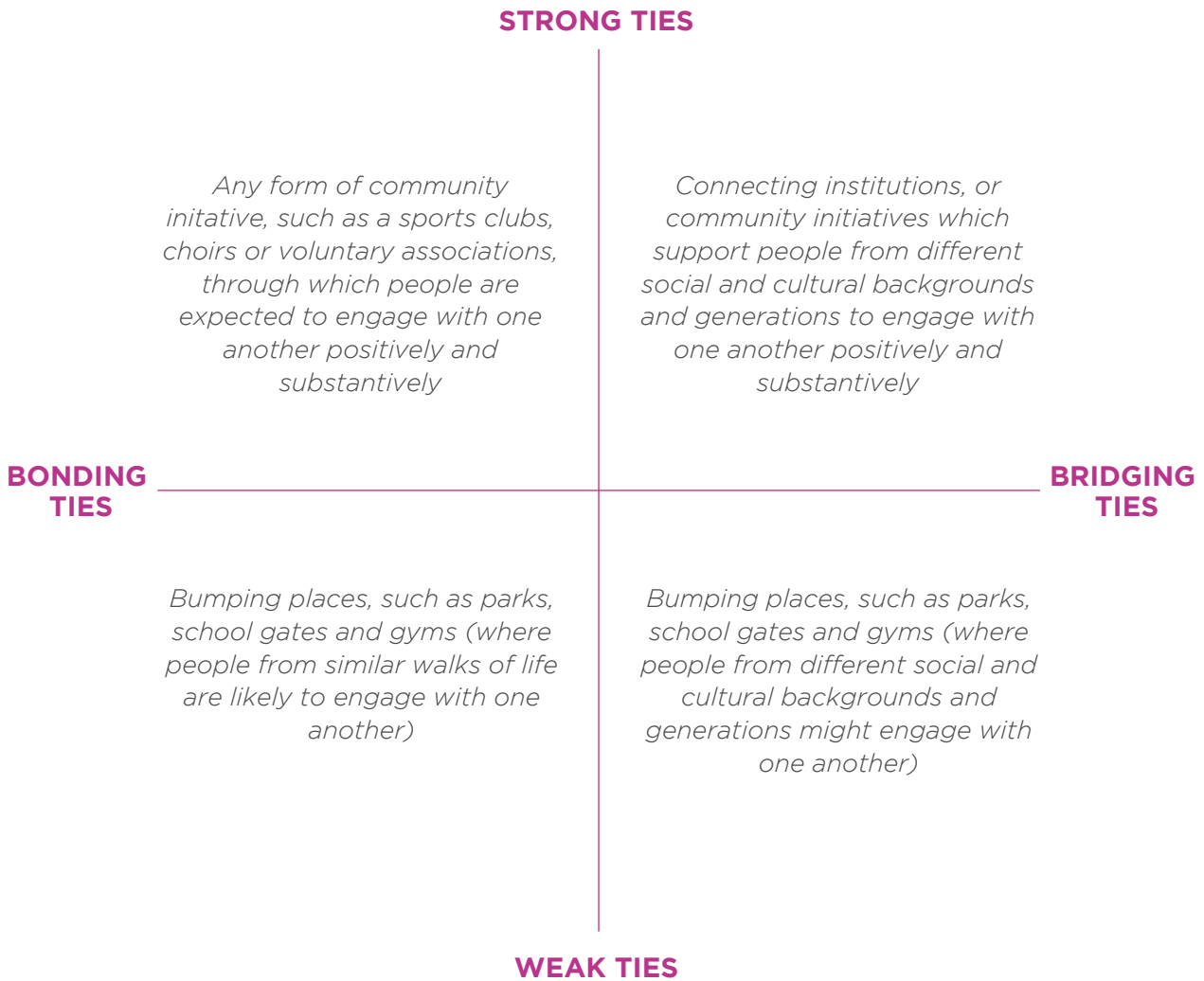
Shaping policy frameworks to better support community builders

Indeed, these distinct forms of social connection could be conceptualised as **separate but essential components of a strong and healthy society**. Just as we all stand to benefit from a nutrition regime including each of the four main food groups – carbohydrates, proteins, fats and dairy – communities could be said to require **a balanced diet of connection**.

The quick ‘sugar rush’ of community feeling provided by a passing but friendly interaction with a neighbour is an important component of this diet; as, of course, are the deeper relationships which structure our lives and help us to grow and heal. But – just like the carbohydrates and proteins to which thin and thick ties could, respectively, be compared – they benefit us differently.

As this paper has detailed, however, **different spaces, facilities and organisations are required to cultivate distinct forms of social connection within communities** and it follows that **limited resources should be targeted to generate the forms of social infrastructure which individual communities are most in need of**.

The forms of social infrastructure required to nurture different types of social tie



Local civic leaders generally understand what type(s) of social infrastructure their area require(s) most, but are often unable to access the funding and support they need to build it. Some places will, for instance, be relatively rich in bonding ties but comparatively segregated by class background, faith, ethnicity or age. Community builders in those places might seek to focus on developing initiatives aimed at generating bridging social capital.

Other communities might have become more atomised generally. In these areas, community builders might seek to prioritise the creation of more bumping places in which people could share incidental interactions and plant the seeds of friendship. This is especially true because the social benefits produced by each of the categories of social tie described in this paper must be set against the degree of effort, and funding, that typically goes into building the corresponding form of social infrastructure. And, as has already been alluded to, it is generally true that thin (and bonding) ties can be fostered with less of an investment of time and capacity than thick (and bridging) ties.

In any case, through **embedding a policy and funding framework distinguishing between the distinct forms of social capital and social infrastructure which individual communities need to flourish within its Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships**, the government could support civic leaders and local policymakers to respond strategically to the needs of their place.

Policymakers should, furthermore, actively consider how they might help community organisations and local authorities to generate the evidence regarding the particular form(s) of social infrastructure which their places are short of. Through **investing in research and tools to enable civic leaders and local policymakers to map sources of social disconnection and social capital**, the government could support those individuals to acquire an even deeper understanding of their own places' needs and to make powerful, evidence-based arguments to funders.

The importance of connecting institutions

This paper will go on to argue that the government should additionally shape its Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships to provide particular support to civic leaders seeking to launch or develop **community initiatives aimed at producing strong bridging ties**.

These organisations and projects allow us to develop bonds which have a significant impact on our health and happiness and to do so with individuals who we would otherwise be considerably less likely to meet or mix with. The case we would make is not that they are necessarily more important than other forms of social infrastructure – although they do **fulfil a particular function in fostering cross-community empathy and connecting our modern, diverse and disaggregated communities together**, which is why we refer to them as **connecting institutions**. Instead, we would submit that the government should take targeted action to spur the growth of community initiatives of this kind because developing and running them is especially **time, labour and knowledge-intensive**.

After all, these organisations and programmes **work in purposeful ways to shape the encounters which members of communities have across social, cultural and generational lines** and to **enable those individuals to engage with one another meaningfully and positively**. They are, often, purpose-built to counteract homophily and to make us **feel a part of 'something bigger'**.

Through supporting community builders to adopt and adapt these models in a way which will work for their place, **the government would be directing limited resources to achieve the maximum possible impact in strengthening community and connection**.

Connecting institutions

Connecting institutions are community initiatives which create positive and meaningful connections between people from different social and cultural backgrounds and generations. They work in purposeful ways to shape encounters across difference and to nurture strong social ties between people who might not otherwise meet and mix – fostering cross-community empathy.

The government's role in addressing our social capital crisis

Implicit within each of these calls for action is a clear conviction that **the state should play a proactive role in deepening and expanding social networks within communities**. Given the toll which our social connection deficit is taking on communities across the UK – as explored in *Building our social infrastructure*²⁷ and the Levelling Up White Paper²⁸ – policymakers simply cannot afford to take a laissez-faire approach to this area of public life.

Equally, we firmly believe that **the role of the government in addressing our social capital crisis should be to galvanise civil society activity – not to seek to replicate or replace it**. Put simply, the state can't build relationships on our behalf and nurturing feelings of attachment isn't its strong suit. It's also true that – in such an unsettled age of change and choice – we must create connecting institutions through which **people can meaningfully and positively engage with their neighbours in ways which fit with the rest of their lives**. This will require nimbleness, creativity and a deep understanding of place – qualities which often characterise community-led or civic action, but which are hard to legislate for.

While the state should not seek to build new connecting institutions, then, it should actively and energetically work to create the conditions in which they are likely to flourish. In fact, we believe that our ambition as a whole society should be to replicate the **institution-building programme** which connected Britons from diverse backgrounds and with radically different experiences during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, strengthening our nation's social fabric considerably²⁹.

In a recent book, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett describe how a similar **boom in associational life** contributed to an 'upswing' in community feeling and solidarity in early and mid-twentieth century America³⁰. In the second chapter of this paper, we will set out how the government might **fuel the development of new and existing connecting institutions** through facilitating the sharing of learning between community builders and providing them with vital capacity-building support – bringing about an upswing of this sort in modern Britain.



27 The Cares Family and Power to Change, 2021

28 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022

29 Many voluntary associations which endure to this today – including myriad local Rotary Associations; the Women's Institute; The Scouts; the Guides; the Boy's Brigade; and the Mother's Union – were formed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as were countless friendly and mutual improvement societies. This trend is described in more detail in Jon Yates' *Fractured*.

30 Putnam, R and Romney Garrett, S (2020). *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*



Chapter two: Building the capacity of civic organisations



A capacity-building organisation for community action

Last year, the research consultancy Public First published a report, commissioned by Local Trust, arguing for the establishment of a new organisation ‘designed to provide intensive support to help build the capacity of communities in left behind neighbourhoods’³¹. This report was co-written by the author of the Conservative Party’s 2019 manifesto Rachel Wolf and built upon an idea which had previously been proposed by organisations including Onward³² and Power to Change³³.

As earlier research by Local Trust for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Left Behind Neighbourhoods has evidenced, the places which have been identified by the government as most in need of Levelling Up suffer disproportionately from shortfalls in social capital and an absence of social infrastructure³⁴. This new organisation would **provide advice, training and resources aimed at growing the capacity of civic organisations in Levelling Up target areas to build community spaces, facilities and organisations** – including through successfully navigating government funding schemes. In this way, it might significantly boost the ability of local people to come together and deliver local priorities.

This is, in our view, a positive and persuasive proposal, the implementation of which would represent a significant step towards addressing the local discrepancies in social capital and community agency³⁵ which perpetuate inequalities in health and wealth. A plan to **create a capacity-building body for community action should, then, sit at the heart of the planned Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships**. But – building upon the argument put forward in chapter one – we will contend in this chapter that **this body must be carefully designed to support the development of various forms of social infrastructure**.

A twin-track approach

Previous proposals for an organisation of this sort have tended to suggest that it should primarily support the delivery of relatively large-scale, high-visibility community projects. These might be aimed at acquiring and managing a community asset such as a historic building; launching a community energy project; regenerating a local estate; or opening a new community café, allotment or business hub. Locally-led initiatives of this kind can enable communities to generate sustainable sources of employment and income, create savings for local people and revitalise town and city centres – all while impacting positively on community feeling.

There are, moreover, a number of practical arguments to suggest that the proposed body should adopt this focus. Through amassing expertise on a limited and specific range of models and processes, this organisation could provide particularly high-quality advice to civic organisations; but, if it is to hone in on certain forms of community-building intervention, it should arguably prioritise the most obviously impactful ones. And, if helping community builders to access government funding schemes is to be one of its key objectives, surely it should assist them to develop projects and programmes matching those schemes’ criteria, which tend to be geared towards generating social or economic change at relative scale³⁶.

Equally, relatively large-scale community initiatives will, typically, resonate with the interests, aspirations and inclinations of only so many local people – especially if taking part means investing a significant amount of time or energy. If the proposed capacity-building body was to solely support the delivery of these types of projects, its reach into those communities would likely be limited.

31 Public First (2022), *A Network for Communities Building the capacity for change in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods*: https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/NETWORK_FOR_COMMUNITIES_002.pdf

32 Onward (2021), *Turnaround: How to regenerate Britain’s less prosperous communities by helping them take back control*: <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Turnaround-Publication-3.pdf>

33 Power to Change argued that a capacity-building institution of this kind should be established in unpublished briefings shared with The Cares Family.

34 All-Party Parliamentary Group for Left Behind Neighbourhoods (2020), *Communities of trust: why we must invest in the social infrastructure of ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods*, Local Trust: <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/8118-APPG-Communities-Report-NEW.pdf>

35 The sociologist Robert Sampson has sought to measure neighbourhoods’ ‘collective efficacy’, which refers to ‘the process of activating or converting social ties among neighborhood residents in order to achieve collective goals’. Collective efficacy, Sampson writes, results from ‘repeated interactions, observations of interactions and awareness of potential interactions that ... establish shared norms (a sense of the ‘we’) beyond the strong ties among friends and kin.’ See: Sampson, R (2013). *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*

36 If the government does utilise dormant assets to create a Community Wealth Fund modelled on the Big Local programme and to be directed towards locally set priorities – as advocated for by the Community Wealth Fund Alliance – recipient communities might of course seek to direct their share of this fund to smaller-scale initiatives. As a member of that alliance, The Cares Family would view this as extremely welcome and we would fully support the proposed capacity-building institution playing a key role in the rollout of such a fund. Equally, we do not believe that this would negate the need for community organisations to be supported to access other government funding streams.

More to the point, the objective of nurturing relationships is, for those engaged in delivering these initiatives, generally secondary to that of improving a place's physical community infrastructure in a particular way. This matters: as we explored in chapter one, enabling people to connect positively and meaningfully – especially across social, cultural or generational lines – requires intention and focus.

Public First's report cites the Big Local scheme run by Local Trust as one whose impact and approach might inform the design of this capacity-building institution³⁷. Through this programme, 150 community partnerships across England have been provided with £1 million to spend over a ten-to-fifteen-year period on local plans and priorities and we would argue that the decisions made by these partnerships are instructive. A 2016 NCVO analysis found that, while some Big Local partnerships have sought to channel their energies into developing a single, high visibility community-building project, it's proven more common for them to seek to run **several smaller-scale initiatives centred on group social activities, such as community choirs and local history projects**³⁸.

United and dynamic communities are, ultimately, bound together by interweaving networks of relationships and attachments³⁹. Through focusing on bringing local people together not to take part in a programme of work, but simply to pursue common interests and share in one another's company, community builders can create multiple, low-barrier entry points into the shared life of a community. In addition, through fashioning settings in which meeting and mixing with others is largely the point, civic leaders are able to **prioritise the vital work of nurturing authentic and reciprocal relationships between members of local communities**.

There are, then, compelling arguments for both of these approaches. In order to balance the various and competing benefits offered by both forms of community initiative, the proposed capacity-building organisation might adopt a twin-track approach. In practice, this would entail **supporting communities in Levelling Up target areas to pursue a small number of potentially transformative, relatively large-scale community-building projects, while also working to fuel the development of connecting institutions in those same places**.

It should adopt a particular focus on connecting institutions as these organisations and projects work in purposeful ways to shape encounters between people from different social and cultural groups, enabling those individuals to engage with one another authentically and reciprocally. It follows both that community initiatives of this sort are uniquely effective in fostering cross-community empathy and connection and that building and running them is particularly time, labour and knowledge-intensive. Through **supporting civic organisations to draw on models of connecting institution which have worked elsewhere**, however, this body could make developing these high-input, high-impact initiatives significantly less burdensome – maximising the community-strengthening return on its capacity-building investment.

Adopting and adapting what works

Indeed, we would suggest that the capacity-building organisation's goal in this respect should be to support groups of community builders to put these models into practice speedily, reliably and in multiple places simultaneously; and that fulfilling this objective will necessitate working closely with existing connecting institutions.

The Cares Family last year launched a podcast with the think tank Onward, entitled *Building Belonging*. This podcast explores the stories of what our two organisations would contend are a new wave of connecting institutions which have sprouted up in communities across the UK in recent years and the techniques and approaches which underpin their impact⁴⁰. We believe that the conversations captured through this podcast demonstrate that **much can be gained by tapping into the expertise of civic innovators** who have built and run organisations and projects of this kind.

³⁷ Public First, 2022

³⁸ NCVO (2016), *A study of community engagement within the Big Local programme*: https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/local_trust_ncvo_community_engagement_within_big_local.pdf

³⁹ Sampson, R, 2013

⁴⁰ The connecting institutions profiled through this podcast Parkrun, Good Gym and The Roots Programme. For more information on *Building Belonging*, visit: <https://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/blog/building-belonging>

Equally, it is important to note that effective community initiatives invariably reflect the particular needs, characteristics and assets of their places. **A model which works in and for a particular community might need to be adapted in order to achieve the same impact in a different area** – as we have learned through delivering programmes in five urban communities across the UK. We would propose that this body's work in supporting community builders to draw on the examples of impactful connecting institutions should, therefore, be delivered in two distinct stages.

Firstly, it should **work with successful civic innovators to identify the transferrable building blocks of a range of connecting institutions – the specific methods and mechanisms which underpin their impact – and to incorporate this learning into shareable resources and toolkits**. Later this year, we will publish a further short paper, *Building Connection: What We Know to Work*, with a view to showcasing how this approach might be applied. This paper will examine the techniques and tactics utilised by The Cares Family's local charities so as to create positive and meaningful intergenerational connections, as well as the ways in which these same approaches are put into practice by other connecting institutions explored through the *Building Belonging* podcast.

Secondly, this body should **support civic leaders and community organisations to deploy the resulting blueprints in a way that works for their place**. This assistance might be provided directly by one of its staff or through **structured learning programmes developed in concert with the connecting institution** in question.

The Cares Family has developed a programme of this kind (using philanthropic funding). Through our *Ripple Effect* initiative, we will actively support organisations, groups and individuals to adopt and adapt our model and approach to create meaningful intergenerational connections in their communities. We successfully piloted this programme in York in 2022 and are now working to roll it out in communities across the UK. We are not seeking government funding for this programme, but believe it speaks to what could be achieved if community builders were energetically supported to share their learning and models with others.

Restitching our social fabric

Creating new reasons for people in 'left behind' areas to share time, laughter and new experiences might, on first glance, seem like a trivial task when compared to that of regenerating crumbling town centres or revitalising local economies. In fact, this work will be key to **restoring the foundations of social connection and habits of everyday solidarity which communities – in 'left behind' places especially – require to seize opportunities to shape their own futures and thrive**.

The government's Levelling Up White Paper rightly highlights the connection between a community's level of social capital and its capacity for 'self-reliance'. After all, we can only hope to join in common cause with our neighbours if we are able to put a certain amount of faith in one other. But social scientists have repeatedly shown that feeling detached from our communities constrains our ability to extend trust in this way⁴¹.

It follows that, if the proposed capacity-building organisation is to have real impact in enabling communities in Levelling Up target areas to band together and make positive change, it must seek to create opportunities for local people from all walks of life to meet, mix and weave meaningful connections with one another. **The social fabric of 'left behind' places won't, in other words, be restitched in one fell swoop, but rather by creating a rich tapestry of shared community institutions and associations in each of those areas**.

Through establishing a capacity-building organisation for community action with a mandate to fuel the development of connecting institutions, policymakers could offer invaluable support to organisations and individuals who are engaged in the vital work of making that happen.

41 Sampson, R, 2013

Conclusion



Through this paper, we have argued that policymakers have an important role to play in galvanising civil society activity to address our social capital crisis. We have also set out how the government could do just that – and build upon the welcome focus on social infrastructure in its Levelling Up agenda – through its forthcoming Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships.

We believe that Ministers and officials should shape this strategy to:

- Incorporate a **policy and funding framework distinguishing between the distinct forms of social capital which individual communities need to flourish** – and aimed at **enabling community builders to access the investment and support required to build the form(s) of social infrastructure their places need most.**
- Fund and produce **new research and tools to enable civic leaders and local policymakers to map sources of social disconnection and social capital in their areas** – supporting them to acquire an even deeper understanding of their own places’ needs and to make powerful, evidence-based arguments to funders.
- Establish a **capacity-building organisation for community action** with a mandate to support the development of various forms of social infrastructure, including connecting institutions.

More generally, this strategy should be shaped to recognise **the distinct and vital role of connecting institutions** – organisations and projects which work in purposeful ways to bring people together across backgrounds, generations and experiences – in **building cross-community empathy.**

These community initiatives often fly under the radar of policymakers, especially at the national level, but fuelling their growth will be key to developing the **deep and expansive networks of relationships and community ties which can prevent people from slipping into patterns of isolation, division and dislocation.** This, in turn, would have a considerable impact on our nation’s health and happiness as well as levels of trust and togetherness within and across our communities.

Ultimately, however, this particular strategy, and these specific measures, form only a partial response to our social capital crisis. We believe that they should form a part of a **wider programme of legislative reform and policy action** aimed at realising the possibilities which exist beneath the surface of each of our communities and turning modern Britain into a nation of neighbours. We will outline this programme of change in a further policy paper, *Building Connection: A Manifesto for Policymakers*, which will be published later this year.





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