Local Trust

IVAR

The Future for Communities:
Perspectives on power

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Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Marilyn Taylor and Leila Baker. It is based on research carried out by the authors together with Houda Davis, Helen Garforth, Charlotte Hennessy and Katie Turner.

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Foreword

Last year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Young Volunteer Force Foundation – what became the Community Development Foundation (CDF). Originally established as a vehicle for getting younger people involved in community activity, CDF championed community engagement, through both practical programmes and a strong history of high-quality research and evaluation.

One of CDF's last major initiatives before it wound up in 2016 was the foundation of Local Trust, the national charity which delivers the Big Local programme. Funded through a £200m endowment from the Big Lottery Fund, Big Local is the biggest place-based funding programme ever launched by a major UK lottery distributor.

In each of 150 neighbourhoods across England, local communities are taking the lead in deciding how to spend £1m to improve where they live. As a founder member of the consortium that established Local Trust, CDF helped set the initial framework for the delivery of Big Local, which in many ways reflects the vision of CDF's final Chief Executive, Alison Seabrooke, and Chair, Andrew Robinson – who subsequently served on Local Trust's Board from 2012 to 2018.

Local Trust was therefore hugely grateful to benefit from over £500k of 'legacy' funding following CDF's closure. Some of this money, along with generous support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has helped to provide the resource to commission this important new report from IVAR. Based on extensive dialogues with people working with and living in disadvantaged communities across the UK's nations and regions, the report explores what factors will be important to the creation of powerful communities in the next decade.

It paints a picture of strong, resourceful communities struggling to cope with the challenges of poverty, transience and isolation; but also people and places where resilience and hope offer the prospect of positive transformation and change. In particular, it highlights the need for sustained investment in supporting community-level infrastructure – places to meet, organisations to bring people together and people to facilitate engagement. These issues were at the heart of CDF's mission, and remain central to the vision of Local Trust and Big Local.

Matt Leach,
CEO of Local Trust.

Introduction

Introduction: Perspectives on power

How do we ensure that communities become more powerful and change their lives for the better? Across the country, we see communities with tremendous unrealised assets – not least the imagination, energy and commitment of local residents. But where those communities have been at the sharp end of social and economic change, who and what can support them in becoming more powerful and changing their lives for the better in the future? How can we ensure that these disadvantaged communities are equipped to meet the challenges of the next decade?

This report brings together findings from research commissioned by Local Trust and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which asks: *What needs to happen for communities to feel and be powerful in the 2020s?*

Implicit in this question were three premises which we continually tested throughout our research:

- **Place is important**
  That, despite rapid changes in the economy, in technology and in the way we relate to each other and society, place is important to people, especially many of those in disadvantaged areas – people who have been left behind by the pace of change.

- **Power is collective**
  That people benefit from working together, to identify common issues, to find ways of addressing them together and to be seen and heard by state, business and other actors whose decisions influence their lives.

- **Identity matters**
  People benefit from drawing on connections with members of groups and communities they identify with in order to have the confidence to get involved and take action in the place where they live.

In the conversations we have had, five issues kept coming to the surface and these are the main focus of this report:

- **Communities and poverty**
  Poverty, including in-work poverty, is affecting people's capacity to get involved. How will the changing job market of insecure work affect people's engagement in the future?

- **Communities and transience**
  Changes in the housing market are reshaping more and more communities. Population change can bring new life and dynamism. But it can also bring insecurity. What does community mean for people who may not be able to put down any roots?

- **Communities and fragmentation**
  Divisions and distrust within diverse communities make them less powerful. In a changing world, can place still be a source of strength to everyone who lives there? And how do we maximise the benefits of our diverse society?

- **Communities and isolation**
  Public spaces are shrinking. Where are the spaces where people can meet, talk and learn about each other? Will people increasingly retreat into their own homes and into virtual spaces?

- **Communities and democracy**
  Much has been written about alienation from politics, especially in the poorest places. Can we find new ways of doing politics that will re-energise our democracy?

These five issues capture the factors that hold people back, and are the focus of this research. Contributors repeatedly told us that they were facing tough times, sometimes in bleak terms. But experience on the ground shows how change offers opportunities too and that, at the hyperlocal level at least, people are finding ways to improve where they live. In the following sections, we will share what we have heard in each case:

- About what keeps people and communities from realising their potential in our least powerful communities and how this is likely to play out in the future ('What's happening in communities').
- About the opportunities that change brings and the positive ways in which communities themselves are shaping their future ('What can be done locally').
- About what the rest of society – the state, business, charities, media, and so on – can do to release the potential in these communities across the UK ('Action beyond the locality').

We will then discuss what this means for working with and in communities in the future and offer recommendations.

The research

In this research we have taken a snapshot of the experiences, ideas and opinions of as wide a variety of people as we could manage living, working or active in disadvantaged communities in the UK. We invited them to reflect on what is happening in communities today, what's coming down the line and what that means for the kind of support they need in order to become connected and powerful in the future.

Our research sits alongside a number of other inquiries also taking place during 2017–18 that cover civil society, localism, campaigns and activism, economic justice, immigration and integration.[1] We touch on each of these themes, but they are dealt with in depth elsewhere. The environment, including the future of energy, is also an important issue for the future of communities but is not featured here as it was rarely raised by our contributors.

[1] We have mainly drawn on findings from Locality's Commission on the Future of Localism; interim findings from IPPR's Commission on Economic Justice https://www.ippr.org/cej; and the National Conversation on Immigration. For more information about Civil Society Futures and some of the other inquiries also taking place, see https://civilsocietyfutures.org/8-inquiries-civil-society-tell-us-future/

We have chosen to frame our research as being about power, but acknowledge its relationship to debates around inequality (wealth, class, race, opportunity). We could not hope to detail the nature of disadvantage and inequality in communities; that too is being done elsewhere. This piece of work is about understanding what may be inhibiting the ability of communities to become powerful – poverty, racism, for example – and then understanding how communities are working within those scenarios.

Between March 2017 and March 2018 we carried out three overlapping 'dialogues' through a combination of interviews, meetings and conversations (face-to-face and on social media), workshops and conferences.

Dialogue 1	Dialogue 2	Dialogue 3
Scoping the issues Scoping the issues and ideas that we need to explore	**Nations and regions** Testing and developing findings so far in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, asking people to look ahead	**Localities** Hearing from people in East Cleveland Villages, Merthyr Tydfil, Milton Keynes, Rotherham
170+ individuals engaged through interviews and online survey	**550**+ individuals engaged through interviews and workshops	**100**+ individuals engaged through interviews, meetings and in conversation at events

The themes that emerged as the dialogues progressed were then tested at successive stages as well as being tested in workshops that were held throughout the research and at conferences and events. The findings from each dialogue were published online. The research was also informed by an open call for contributions via an online survey; and ongoing literature searches.

Towards the end of the research, we held the Imagining Powerful Communities conference, which used creative techniques to test and refine our findings with contributors from across all aspects of the research.

The report and how we'd like people to read it

Many of the terms we have used in this report are contested. During the research we avoided definitions because we wanted people to discuss our research questions 'on their own terms'. In writing up our findings we have needed to make some decisions about the terms we use for the sake of clarity and consistency and we explain those here. Within the report there are quotations from contributors who may be using these terms in different ways.

Community: We use the word 'community' in this report when discussing our findings, which focus specifically on disadvantaged communities of place in the UK. Where we use the term 'community' in relation to identity or special interest we say so.

Power: We use 'power' not 'empowerment'. 'Empowerment' was often negatively associated with 'doing to' and 'top down' programmes in communities. However, we acknowledge here that in Northern Ireland the opposite may be true: there the term 'powerful communities' is associated with paramilitarism and 'empowerment' is a more helpful, neutral term.

Community development: We use this as an umbrella term to embrace a range of approaches variously described as community organising, asset-based community development, community work, community learning, critical community practice, and so on. This is discussed further in Part six.

We use 'contributor' for anyone who fed into the research whether through interview, survey, meetings or workshops. Quotations are unattributed and appear in italics.

You can download a summary of the report by visiting
www.ivar.org.uk/our-research/future-of-communities

Part one: Communities and poverty

Communities and poverty

In summary:

Poverty makes it difficult for communities to become powerful.

- The pressures of poverty, including in-work poverty, affect people's capacity to engage with their communities let alone collaborate, plan and deliver change – their energies are consumed in the struggle to survive.

- Communities are doing interesting and positive things to sustain their communities. But without a viable economy and access to jobs, it is difficult to achieve lasting change. How do we best support communities who are always at the sharp end of economic change?

Will the future be one where people are in ever more insecure, poorly paid jobs? What can be done locally and what needs to happen beyond poor localities?

Context

The UK economy *'is no longer raising living standards for a majority of people'* and *'we face profound challenges and opportunities in the next decade for which we are not well prepared'.*[2] Our contributors told us that this was particularly so for those already marginalised and cut off from economic growth. In-work poverty is increasing alongside stagnant wages and falling benefit income. This is draining the power from communities and individuals within them.

What's happening in communities?

Many of the most marginalised areas have been marginalised for years. Often they are areas that have been affected by the loss of industry and have seen regeneration programmes come and go. But austerity has made things worse. Poverty was the number one issue for these communities across the UK's nations and regions as these quotations from contributors in Wales and Scotland illustrate:

> *It's alarming. If you walk around Cardiff, you can see the destitution.*

> *In our very deprived areas, there is no hope.*

[2] From Institute for Public Policy Research (2017) *Commission on Economic Justice: Interim report.* The challenges they identify are Brexit, globalisation, demographic change, technological change, and the environmental imperative.

Poverty affects the likelihood of communities becoming powerful. The pressures of poverty – *'all-encompassing, post-industrial, deeply rooted social poverty'* – militate against people's ability to engage with others in their communities. Our contributors told us about how, in these communities, people's energy is consumed in the struggle to survive and how many people may be holding down several jobs and/or working in the insecure 'gig economy' to make ends meet. Some people may be financially excluded and unable to open a bank account, or be facing such urgent financial need that they put themselves at risk with loans from illegal lenders and/or at unaffordable interest rates. Welfare reform and the benefits system *'saps people's resilience down to nothing'* and were described by one contributor as *'a conveyor belt of human misery'.* In particular, contributors reported an increasing reliance on food banks, and a significant increase in social isolation and mental ill health. There was a risk that some places were becoming 'two-tier' towns or cities.

Alongside the impact of poverty and austerity on individuals, people reported that charities were finding it less easy to get involved or advocate for change because they too are struggling just to keep going; funding for the voluntary sector has dropped off with those previously funded by local authorities particularly hard hit: *'The landscape is changing, the third sector is currently very vulnerable, organisations are disappearing'.*

So, poverty was a dominant issue for the communities we were interested in and that made it difficult for people to engage.

> *The trouble with austerity is that it means people batten down the hatches and can't think creatively. It is difficult to engage with futures thinking when people are preoccupied with how to get through today.*

And the key to addressing this, our contributors said, was through jobs and a viable local economy. People told us that post-industrial collapse and the loss of local industries, mining especially, had been compounded by other challenges including: the impact on small businesses of the failure of Carillion; the sustainability of local economies heavily reliant on migrant workers post Brexit; and poor transport links as well as the effect of very low qualifications in the local workforce on people's job mobility. Our contributors also talked about unfulfilled hopes and opportunities that had failed to materialise such as: losing out on HS2; succession to EU funding; or new industry that appeared unlikely to fulfil promises to use local labour.

> *HS2 would have made a big difference but it's not stopping in Rotherham.*

> *Mining went. People were unemployed. It's gone down the generations. Not working becomes a way of life.*

What can be done locally?

So, the pressures of poverty militate against people's ability to engage with their communities – their energies are consumed in the struggle to survive. When we asked people – especially residents – what the key problems were locally and what would make their community more powerful, access to jobs (and the transport to get to them) was a recurring theme.

It is beyond the scope of this research to suggest how to alleviate poverty or reverse the impact of austerity, both of which are impacting the ability of communities to become powerful. But our research demonstrated that, even in this context, there are things you can do. Contributors described many interesting and useful local projects and activities being initiated within communities to alleviate the effects of poverty, destitution and degradation locally.

Community gardens and food projects are one response to poverty; and initiatives such as LETS[3] or Timebanking have their place, although perhaps only within *'walkable neighbourhoods'.*

Some contributors discussed with us ways to use technology to collectivise and address poverty and disadvantage. We heard about ways for individuals to collectivise and save money on things like energy: *'The Cape Project goes into communities and works with them to aggregate demand for energy schemes. They use satellite information about which roofs are oriented for energy and then ask the providers'.*

Local enterprises, community businesses, credit unions – these are all making a difference and can play a part in the local economies of disadvantaged communities. Without the stability that has historically been provided by the public sector, these tend to have a finite life. Often reliant on one person, they tend to provide low levels of employment, they are small and mainly undercapitalised. Nonetheless these organisations are, on the whole, for and of the community. So there are things that can be initiated and carried out locally even though some of them may be hard to sustain or contain within a locality over the long term.

[3] Local Exchange Trading Schemes: these are locally based, democratically organised schemes where people exchange goods and services.

Action beyond the locality

Communities are taking action, but they can only do so much. Our contributors were clear that they need help from outside.

> *What people can do locally is absolutely at the margins. We know that poverty is not created locally and cannot be resolved locally. But it can be drawn attention to. People can't find jobs, housing, material conditions – they can't solve this for themselves.*
>
> *Poverty is huge and endemic. It won't be solved with a couple of big events. It will be a long hard slog … things like allotments all play a role but you need political power, economic power, formal or informal.*

While recognising that our focus has been on what communities can do, therefore, they also suggested the following:

- **Work** – *'If you can't create jobs and enterprise you won't regenerate your community'.* Contributors wanted *'aspirational employment'* as well as better pay and greater job security, especially for their young people. There was widespread support for the idea that businesses need to take responsibility and that achieving this would need more 'muscle' than any one community can command.

- **Investment** – *'Impoverished communities need economic investment that stays and circulates within localities rather than just flowing through them'.* Measures to address economic disadvantage need to be joined up with social issues to *'create a human future for work'*.[4] They need to build on the idea of 'sticky money' and spread this and other tried-and-tested approaches to social value that help local economies.

- **Income** – *'In the end, the solution is money and that means a universal basic income'.* During the period in which we carried out our research, the idea of a basic income took hold and we found support for this among many of our contributors. There was also interest in measures to address the 'poverty premium' (the extra costs that poorer people pay for goods and services).

[4] See for example Women's Budget Group What is feminist economics; Raworth, K. (2017) *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist,* Cornerstone; Civil Society Futures Independent Inquiry (April 2018 Work in progress) *The story of our times: Power in our hands?*

Part two: Communities and transience

Population movement is part of life. However, increasing housing insecurity is making it difficult for communities to become powerful.

Communities and transience

In summary:

Population movement is part of life. However, increasing housing insecurity is making it difficult for communities to become powerful.

- Private renting has grown as a proportion of the housing market. It can be a positive choice, but where people have short-term leases and move frequently, it is difficult for them to feel they belong, or commit to local activities. In rural areas, families and low-paid workers find themselves priced out of the housing market by second home owners and incomers from more affluent areas.

- A powerful community is one where people choose to live, where they feel connected and where they feel safe. Community campaigns are having some success in improving conditions for private tenants; and some communities are experimenting with community land trusts and community-based housing associations, but these are still small scale compared with the size of the problem.

- It is difficult to see this insecurity changing in the future without a significant shift in housing policy including reform of rules on tenure, as well as an increase in house building and, in some areas, better affordability.

Will the communities of the future be more and more transient and will poorer people have less and less choice about where they live? What will 'community' mean if this is the case?

Context

For many years the phenomenon of disadvantaged communities was often synonymous with social housing. Large-scale regeneration programmes were often directed at large council estates, and this is where many community workers worked. But this is no longer the case. In England, the proportion of households in social housing has halved over the past 50 years, while the proportion of households in private rented accommodation more than doubled between the mid 1980s and the mid 2000s.[5] Right to Buy council housing has turned into 'right to buy to let' and some 40% of properties purchased under the Right to Buy scheme are now being rented out privately.[6]

Private renting can be a positive choice and long-term. It may suit people at different stages of their life – elsewhere in Europe this is certainly the case. But it does not have the security of social housing: there are often fees to pay to estate agents and rents are typically higher. The impact of housing instability on children's health, education and life chances is widely accepted.[7]

[5] Department of Communities and Local Government (2017) *50 years of the English Household Survey* London: DCLG
[6] Inside Housing, 7.12.17, *7% rise in former Right to Buy homes now rented privately*
[7] See for example, Harker, L. (2006) *Chance of a lifetime: The impact of bad housing on children's lives, Shelter*

Social housing is now the smallest tenure with ever longer waiting lists. Battles have been waged over the redevelopment of some housing estates in London, which, critics say, offer little in the way of affordable housing, leaving existing tenants with limited prospect of return. Welfare reform, meanwhile, has meant that, when housing benefit reaches its ceiling, families are forced to move not only from their neighbourhood but sometimes to a completely different part of the country. Universal Credit introduces a new level of uncertainty, and we heard from contributors that housing associations are already having to focus their resources on dealing with an expected surge in arrears. We return to this in Part six.

In rural areas the story is different. Social housing here is a rarity, especially after Right to Buy. But here the problem is gentrification, as small towns and villages become attractive to urban dwellers, whose superior purchasing power can price out local families. New arrivals can bring new skills and energy to a village. But not if they lead to a village becoming a dormitory as incomers commute out, when second homes are occupied by a succession of people with little or no local commitment, or when young families have to move far away from their support networks and the place they call home.

What's happening in communities?

Population movement is part of life. And our contributors confirmed that a dose of new energy can be an asset. But many of our conversations highlighted the more negative effects, including poor housing conditions and spiralling rents.

> *People in our area have exercised their Right to Buy, but these are now largely rented out as people have moved on. This is the main source of transience in the area. There are some terrible landlords and as letting agencies get more money if there is high turnover, they encourage the owners to raise their rents. This creates problems with the young families who tend to live there trying to keep their children in the schools.*

A private tenant told us:

> *I don't like the area very much and don't see it as a community, but it is what I can afford … And this leaks into the rest of my life – I feel dissatisfied with everything, it's not easy to be rational about it. I don't expect to stay.*

Contributors found that this made it difficult to get people involved:

> *This is a difficult area to work in, lots of transience, lots of people haven't been involved in things.*

> *Settled ex-mining communities are easier to engage, but now transience is becoming routine because of market forces – social networks are eroded because of enforced moves.*

We were told of places where the increase in short-term lettings had caused a spiral of decline, where renters had left in arrears and landlords had just tipped their belongings out onto the street, or where drug use and crime had increased.

Our contributors also confirmed the increased pressures on social housing as local authorities have fewer options for housing people with priority needs. Those at the top of housing lists are likely to be those in most need, which puts pressure on already stretched local services and support networks. We heard reports of refugees being housed locally, without the support or facilities needed to make this work. In one village we visited, residents said that the housing association was *'filling houses with no vetting taking place'* – they argued that this had resulted in moving individuals with a record of anti-social behaviour into the area, which made them feel unsafe. Where social housing becomes more and more stressed, people told us:

> *If you move here, your aspiration is to get off* [the estate].

Analysis commissioned to support this research[8] reported that young people are leaving rural areas and small towns because they can't afford to stay, and/or because there is little prospect of employment. Contributors in a semi-rural community confirmed that it was hard for young people to stay in the area as there weren't the available flats and rented properties. Those who do stay may have to accept unsuitable accommodation; we were told that some private landlords had been taking advantage of young people's need for affordable housing and were providing below-standard accommodation. Again, we were told:

> *If you can go, you do … with the view that you can create something better for yourself if you go somewhere else.*

In summary, changes in the housing market meant everything from families being priced out of their communities to increasing transience and stress. One contributor described this as the *'Catch 22'*:

> *If your location is not very rich/accessible or* [it's] *awkward in some way, you won't get development and you stay poor. If you make it more attractive (a road, a railway, a bridge, a big development) then you get priced out and have to leave. Without social housing and rent controls this dilemma seems endemic. Catch 22.*

What can be done locally?

There is increasing interest in **community land trusts**, whereby communities form a non-profit organisation to develop and manage housing and other assets for the benefit of the local community. There are now almost 290 community land trusts in England and Wales and they have developed 826 permanently affordable homes to date. An additional 5,800 homes are predicted in the next few years.[9] Some contributors were sceptical about the likelihood of these developing at any scale, particularly in poorer areas: others emphasised the difference they could make in

[8] Localis (2018) *Place matters: How communities in England are changing,* Local Trust.
[9] http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/what-is-a-clt/about-clts

smaller neighbourhoods and villages. The movement is growing and along with it the experience to expand its contribution.

Community-led neighbourhood plans, meanwhile, have given local residents some sense of control over the size and composition of new developments. However, like community land trusts, unless there is support available, it is the more affluent areas that are more likely to have the skills and resources to make these work.

In Glasgow, **community-led housing associations** often invest in providing community facilities and services like meeting places, debt management services, employability projects or computer training. They see this as an important part of their social/community role, and also as an investment in having more satisfied tenants, therefore having fewer 'voids' and 'hard to let' housing units. These kinds of housing associations have avoided being swallowed up by the market in larger conglomerates and they work because they are very local and in community control.

Support for private tenants is crucial if they are to engage with their community. ACORN, for example,[10] has brought private tenants together in several localities to campaign for improvements as well as supporting individual tenants threatened with eviction or suffering from poor housing conditions. In Bristol it has succeeded in getting an ethical lettings charter adopted by the local authority and had some success in changing bank lending policies that make it difficult for benefit claimants to find housing for rent.

Action beyond the locality

Many of the issues raised here will need to be addressed beyond the local neighbourhood. They are unlikely to change without significant shifts in housing policy. Our contributors suggested that:

- If private renting is going to continue to rise in the future, as most commentators suggest, reforms which offer greater security for tenants would allow individuals and families to put down long-term ties in communities and this, in turn, would help create stronger and more powerful communities. In July 2018 the UK government announced its intention to pursue longer rental terms for tenants.

- If existing ideas like community land trusts and asset transfer are to deliver more homes to poorer communities – urban and rural – then more support is needed to make this happen.

- More generally, communities will continue to need national agencies, housing associations, local authorities and responsible landlords to work together to increase the supply of affordable homes for rent where people need them.

[10] For more information see www.acorntheunion.org.uk

Will the communities of the future be more and more transient and will poorer people have less and less choice about where they live?

Part three: Communities and fragmentation

Communities and fragmentation

In summary:

A powerful community is one where people feel they belong and where everyone can contribute.

- New arrivals can bring positive energy into a community. However, major population change in already stressed communities also brings challenges in relation to identity and people's sense of security. When differences within communities – age, race, class – create divisions, it is hard for them to find common cause and become powerful. Divisions exist and persist but they are not inevitable if the economic stresses that feed them are addressed.

- There is considerable experience to build on. Activities like community arts, food and gardening are building bridges and understanding between different groups, but the media needs to play its part. And where population movement and migration increase demands on already stretched services, external investment is needed to ensure that communities can live and work together successfully.

Will the future, therefore, be one of fragmented communities and fear or will we find ways to maximise the benefits of our diverse society and find common cause?

Context

The UK has always been racially diverse, and successive waves of immigration have brought a great deal to our culture. Our contributors were adamant that if communities were to become powerful in the 2020s, diversity needed to be welcomed and celebrated rather than feared. Community programmes through the decades have wrestled with this issue without necessarily arriving at answers that could easily be transferred and replicated. Nonetheless, our research contributors did have many useful observations to make and we share them here.

In this part, we focus first on race, as this was the issue that contributors raised most often, and then consider what we have learnt about other forms of exclusion and division.

What's happening in communities?

Population change can be positive. In more than one community, an influx of young Polish families had been a real boost to the local primary school. In another, a Syrian arrivals project was having a positive impact on the local economy in a rural area which had become just a weekend retreat for city bankers or a dormitory economy. We had some reports of people leaving communities because of *'a lack of progressive change'* and others welcoming people who will bring about social change.

For communities that have been diverse for a long time, this diversity can be a positive part of their identity, although wave after wave of new arrivals can put stress on already stretched services. Sometimes it is communities that are not used to change that have more difficulties. But where contributors reported resurfacing of racial tensions, this was often attributed to rising immigration into areas that are poorly resourced, facing economic stress, and poorly prepared for population change. They commented that this had intensified post Brexit.

> *Since Brexit there has been an increase in hate crime – a woman in a hijab was spat on, people think they have carte blanche to say anything.*

Northern Irish contributors commented on the fact that Brexit and austerity between them had threatened the progress that had been made following the Peace Agreement there.

Young people told us about being treated with suspicion; fear of terrorism has fuelled Islamophobia:

> *It's seen as negative when a group of Somali young people raise money to go on a tour of Somaliland, and then come back and raise money for sports kit for the local Somali kids they've met … to many … in the north London community that's seen as deeply suspect … if people are interested in their homeland community it does NOT mean they are terrorists, and … being transnational citizens is very positive.*

As the above example demonstrates, racial divides can be reinforced by faith divides and misunderstandings. And if there is little contact between people from different ethnic groups and faiths, the scope for misunderstanding increases and it is easy to stereotype. So faith schools were a source of concern for some, while others criticised the fact that faith had become the principal identifier in the way some communities are perceived:

> *I have a real problem with faith. It's a huge force for good and one of the biggest divides.*
>
> *There's greater intersectionality but the principal identifier has become religion. What if I changed my beliefs tomorrow? I'd still be Asian.*

Fear and a culture of blame have been whipped up by parts of the media and some politicians. Faced with this, it is not surprising if people feel safest in their own ethnic or faith groups. And lack of contact reinforces this misunderstanding. Contributors pointed out that for newcomers, place – the area where they live – may not be as important as their city-wide, global or other kinds of attachment. But their neighbours may simply see it as not mixing – keeping themselves to themselves. Similarly, newcomers may come from a culture where volunteering is not the norm and raising their head above the parapet is extremely risky:

> *Some refugee communities come from communities with no civil society so volunteering is not encouraged or positively dangerous. So you're already on a sticky wicket.*

Women from Pakistani communities [in this northern city] *who do neighbourly things would see little relevance in a neighbourhood group.*

These fault lines play out differently in different parts of the country and according to local circumstances. Some towns and cities had to contend with the further complication of child sexual exploitation – the fact that it was associated with a particular ethnic group marked everyone from that group and created fertile ground for the far right. So much so, that one contributor said *'If people ask where I'm from, I don't say'.*

Following the grooming and abuse, there was wave after wave of fascists. Fascists camping out for months. It didn't help the girls and it didn't help communities to heal … The town was besieged by the media … morale was very low in all communities. It was devastating.

In Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland, it is faith that divides in ways that go back through the centuries and re-emerge in generation after generation. In Northern Ireland, years of conflict have had a huge impact on mental health with a very high suicide rate among young men.

All this matters because communities are less powerful when they are divided. This can open them up to 'divide and rule' by external authorities as well as making them vulnerable to political extremes. But this is not just about race and it is essential not to see everything through the lens of race. This is about race in the context of communities already facing significant material disadvantage, cuts in services and stigma. We heard a lot about the erosion of working-class identities because of economic change, along with the institutions that supported them (see Part five). Stripped of their identity, there is a danger that defence of their neighbourhood and ethnic identity seems their only refuge.

What can be done locally?

We know that when people with much to divide them are given the time to get to know one another, they can often find some common ground. In relation to people connecting and becoming powerful, this was not about forging friendships or even needing to like or be interested in one another. It was about people finding ways to come together, to break down cultural silos or other divisions in order to act together on local issues.

Outreach by agencies is part of this – faith-based organisations have a significant footprint and many are reaching out beyond their own faith. We all know that we should make more effort to talk to people but most of us probably won't unless we are put in a situation where we have to.

It's just a troubled time. If there's one thing we should try to do each day it's talk to someone who you wouldn't otherwise talk to.

Food-based activities, including gardening, were great ways for people to find common ground with people of different cultures, to build shared identities of place.

Gardening can bring a touch of home to diverse migrant communities. Everybody eats, food connects.

In Rotherham, a wildlife group was having some success in reaching the Roma community.

Community arts were also powerful in bridging divides and changing the image of divided communities: '[our town] *was really hurting and the community arts needed to speak into that hurt, otherwise hate would'.*

The annual Art in the Park festival was set up by Milton Keynes Islamic Arts and Culture Organisation to create a space for positive narratives about the role and contribution of Muslims living in Milton Keynes. Before the festival, the good work being done by young Muslims (e.g. street clearing) and Muslim ladies (e.g. providing meals for homeless people) was going unrecognised and ran counter to efforts to educate young Muslims about their cultural values of compassion and voluntary action.

Storytelling schemes involving video and digital technology have bridged generational divides with young people sharing their skills with older people.

Sport can also unify. Many of our contributors talked about the power of football to unite a population in *'one club cities'* like Newcastle as well as the power of sport in general to engage communities. However, there were also instances where sport had reinforced divisions.

There are also valuable lessons to be learnt from other excluded groups. In particular, agencies run with or by disabled people find that the measures they take to address exclusion and get them involved in decision-making are likely to benefit the community more widely. For example, contributors also noted that literacy – and of course language – remains a barrier for some forms of community involvement. People with learning disabilities have championed 'easy read' – a now established approach to making information more accessible. A few contributors suggested that 'easy read for everyone' could take the lessons learned and techniques developed by people with learning disability and apply them to wider community engagement.

But reaching out to new communities and finding ways of working with them while holding onto traditional users is a skilled process that needs resourcing. Our findings also suggest that working separately with excluded groups to begin with – maybe through the faith or city-wide groups they relate to – builds the confidence for them to open up to other groups in the community.

Action beyond the locality

Racism is endemic in our society, but not inevitable. Much of what we got back from contributors suggested that by taking action on the economic stresses – employment, housing – that communities face, it may be possible to address the 'othering' that is going on as well, and this is a point that has been made strongly

elsewhere.[11] However, there is a risk to seeing everything through a race lens and that is not what we are suggesting here. General policies to address poverty and marginalisation will benefit all groups, given higher proportions of people from black and minority ethnic groups in many of these communities. This applies equally to other marginalised groups. Our contributors also suggested:

- **Small grants and buddying or mentoring support** with few strings attached to support small informal groups.
- **Financial and strategy support** for communities experiencing change. Businesses as employers have a role to play here too.
- Moves towards localism **need to take into account city-wide allegiances** of some groups, especially BME communities, particularly where there is no critical/ population mass. Otherwise, for these groups, the move to localism has the potential to increase marginalisation.
- **Positive media images and stories** about migrant groups and others who are negatively portrayed.
- **Psychological injuries and trauma** that affect whole communities are complex and may need professional expertise if they are to be addressed in the long term.

[11] Sagger, S., Somerville, W., Ford, R. and Sobolewska.M (2012) *The impacts of migration on social cohesion and integration*

A powerful community is one where people feel they belong and where everyone can contribute.

Part four: Communities and isolation

Communities and isolation

In summary:

When people in communities are isolated and lonely it makes it difficult for them to become powerful.

- The infrastructure that supports social relationships – the spaces where people meet formally and informally – is wearing away. This is due to public sector cuts and market forces – the decline of high streets and the closure of local facilities from pubs to post offices – and the fact that we do more online. Fear of crime, whether justified or not, and heightened security measures in our housing and schools, affect people's willingness to go out and make them feel unsafe. All of this can lead to loneliness, isolation and stress.

- A powerful community is a well-connected community. Social infrastructure needs to be seen in the same light as economic infrastructure – investment is essential in the spaces and activities that help people to connect. Social media may create new spaces and has potential to connect people, but only if everyone is supported to access and use it – and it is most effective when combined with opportunities to meet face-to-face.

The future could be one where many people will find new ways of connecting. But will this leave others more and more isolated?

Context

We are social beings and the connections we make with each other help us to realise our potential and power. The spontaneous connections we make when we go out and about in our communities – to the local shops, the local park, the library, a local café or the pub – have *'a massive value that is often unrecognised'.* We recognise the importance of economic and human capital for a functioning society. But in recent decades, interest has grown in the concept of 'social capital' – the trust, understanding and networks that arise from social connections within and across communities.

Social capital has been linked with a wide variety of positive outcomes in relation to the economy, health, crime, democracy and so on. Through community networks people can look out for each other. More recently, the term 'social infrastructure' has been coined to describe the factors that contribute to this social capital – 'the range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community'.[12]

[12] Local Trust (2018) *Skittled Out? The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure,* London: Local Trust.

For people on low incomes or in receipt of benefits, proximity is an important factor in forming social networks[13] – they are more likely to make their friends locally. The connections made at local community level are especially important for people who cannot afford to travel out of their neighbourhood more than they absolutely have to, or who are unable to get around. In challenging times, people find strength in these connections, supporting each other, finding their concerns are shared, working together to make the changes they want to see or to make sure their voice is heard by authorities and businesses whose decisions affect their lives. It is easier for them to be seen and heard when they work together.

What's happening in communities?

What we found in our research was that, especially in the poorest communities, the social infrastructure is wearing away. Again and again in our conversations, we were told about the loss and privatisation of community spaces – this is an issue that has featured strongly in other enquiries too – on localism and the future of civil society. There are fewer public places where people can congregate without having to pay and without feeling stigmatised, under constant surveillance or unsafe. Pubs, bank branches and post offices are closing along with libraries, churches, play facilities and bingo halls.[14] Why is this?

De-industrialisation is one reason. Over recent decades, for example, the loss of the mining industry has had a profound impact on the social infrastructure across significant parts of the country. One of our contributors described the impact on a Welsh valley community:

> *It was a proud community with a strong sense of community. There was a chapel on every street, active unions and education institutes and these were very important both to the community and to the growth of the Labour movement. But the closure of the mines saw alcohol and drug abuse spiral and the social fabric disintegrate. The chapels and other buildings closed (although many are still there unused). It was a social, ethical and spiritual crisis …*

More recently, it is the result of **austerity and public expenditure cuts,** with local services closing down or centralising, local authorities selling off parks and closing libraries, community centres being forced to close. The places that remain often have to charge – to make ends meet, to make a 'business case' to their funders, to pay off PFI debts or because they are now managed by a private provider. Play schemes are becoming too expensive and youth services have been decimated. In Merthyr, for example, the closure of lots of facilities meant there was nothing for young people to do, nowhere for them to go – some said this could lead to vandalism and anti-social behaviour:

> *We need things that don't cost… games places so that they can hang around and interact with other kids.*

[13] Swales, S, and Tipping, S. (2018) *Fragmented communities, the role of cohesion, community involvement and social mixing.* London: Natcen
[14] Local Trust (2018) *Skittled Out? The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure*

Cuts also affect maintenance, meaning that grass verges aren't cut, streets are not swept, and litter is not collected, which in turn encourages private neglect, fly tipping and vandalism.

Recent **market developments** have also stripped out social infrastructure: out of town shopping malls replacing local high streets; banks and the post office closing local branches; football grounds charging ever higher prices. In Rotherham, people told us,

> *The town centre bears no resemblance to what it was. It had a bustling town centre. I rarely go down to town now …*
>
> *If the centre dies, the community spirit dies as well.*

Meanwhile **new housing developments are built without facilities** – or planned facilities are added after everything else is finished. So people travel outside their community for the services they need and for entertainment – if indeed they have a car or public transport is available. In Milton Keynes, one fifth of the population is without a car and low-density housing development means there isn't always enough demand to make public transport viable. One contributor said that this left young mums in a new development isolated from their social networks and with nowhere to go.

More and more services are going online. Going digital when services are being cut is tempting for providers but managing welfare benefits and other services online can cause major hardship for someone with no access to a computer, especially as libraries and other potential access points close. And there are many people, particularly older generations, who do not feel comfortable with new technologies:

> *Machines replacing ticket offices – it is dehumanising – that's the effect on older people in particular.*

Safety and security measures, while often justified, mean access is reduced to schools and other facilities. Sometimes security measures – gates at the end of landings in blocks of flats for example – make it difficult even for neighbours to pop in on each other. Young people may find themselves barred from shopping malls and homeless people are routinely asked to move on. We heard about access codes in libraries making it difficult for people to just drop in without going through a registration process. And fear of crime, whether justified or not, stops people going out at night. When areas get stereotyped as high crime areas, we were told, people *'keep themselves to themselves',* not wanting to be associated with the neighbourhood in any way.

Sometimes the erosion of public spaces simply reflects **changes in the way we live** – the digital revolution, people preferring to access shopping and entertainment online, the pub no longer the centre of the community. We stay at home more.

> *People become isolated and this gets worse with social media because people aren't around so much, or everyone is looking at their phones.*
>
> *It is cheaper to buy a 12-pack of beer from the supermarket and have a sky sports subscription than it is to go to the pub.*

These developments hit all communities – but they affect the most marginalised places most keenly. These are places that don't offer much of a market to big business, so it shuts up shop and goes elsewhere. Public service cuts hit these places the hardest because their residents are most dependent on these services. Public transport is essential but often not profitable enough to warrant a reliable and frequent service to the places that matter to people or to services that have been centralised.

The loss of these spaces takes the heart out of the community. A lonely older person may only have contact with people when she goes to the local post office or visits the local shop. More generally people are much less likely to bump into others outside their immediate circle. More formal groups have nowhere to meet or hold events that bring the community together, nowhere to hold classes, have a fundraising sale. Government has invested in community organising and local government in asset-based community development. But it is difficult to organise people around common concerns if there is nowhere to meet. And while some people spoke about people having to 'meet in front parlours', this was not always suitable:

> *There is a lot of distrust in some areas and high crime, so people don't want to invite other people into their homes.*

What can be done locally?

There is a lot communities can do to address the issues raised here. Contributors talked about a wide range of spontaneous activities – from street parties and festivals to litter picks and local history groups.

East Cleveland's Scarecrow Festival is put on by five villages. Each year residents make and display scarecrows that represent that year's theme. The villages each put on entertainment and provide home-cooked food in the village halls on the day of the festival. Last year they raised £1000 from the food and raffles. Local residents said that it brought people into the area but also encouraged people who live in the villages to stay there over the festival weekend and spend their money in the shops there, rather than go to the nearby town.

But people who are isolated may first need one-to-one support to engage – having someone to listen, to befriend them, for example, encouraging them to tell their stories. People often join in because they are encouraged to do so by someone they know and trust.

Many contributors underlined the value of community work in its many forms in supporting local activity. This often starts with knocking on doors and **listening** to people individually. Community workers then have an important role as **community connectors,** helping to build networks of relationships that can reduce individual isolation, foster a sense of community identity and act as a foundation for action. We will return to this in Part six.

A common theme in our discussions was the importance of a community hub:

> *We need somewhere to go to see people, whether it be a pub, a shop, a community centre … you need your 'vehicle' – an excuse to see people.*

A library in Rotherham and a community resource centre in Hartlepool were among the many examples people gave of multi-use centres that people could drop into, visit the café maybe and engage in a wide variety of activities.

Mowbray Gardens Library provides a home to a huge number of groups who use the premises to meet and organise. It provides a home to Rotherham Anglo-Polish Group, Feed Our Communities, Afghan Unity Group, Asian Carers' Group, Visually Impaired Group, Elderly Readers and many more. Mowbray Volunteers & New Arrivals community group are based here and arrange events, lessons and activities for the benefit of the wider community. Education professionals meet disengaged pupils at the library for one-to-one sessions, Community Police Officers hold a drop-in for local people.

Other classes and activities include sewing and knitting, arts and creative writing, IT, employability, confidence building, reading groups, henna art, citizens advice. Above all, the library offers a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.

'Libraries are not just about books, but also activities ... We always have a biscuit and cup of tea for a child that's hungry. It's about education, learning about other communities. I now have personal Asian friends that I would not have met otherwise'.

In Merthyr, the Gellideg Foundation community hub runs its own youth programme, with photo shoots, alternative fashion, magazine, and productions.

These places provide friendship and support. As one person said:

> *With Aspergers, you feel like you're alone in the community. When you come here, you can share with others.*

They provide an opportunity for chance encounters with people you might not otherwise meet, and the fact that they house many different groups and activities means that people who just drop in for a cup of coffee may chance across something else that is going on that interests them. Even for those who don't visit, these hubs can be a visible symbol of a connected community.

We saw in Part three how community arts and outdoor activities can help to bridge cultural divides and challenge negative stereotypes about an area. In Merthyr, the refurbished town hall – the Red House – offered the potential to become a catalyst for local cultural regeneration. Contributors also felt there was a real opportunity to develop Merthyr as a tourist destination because of its Roman and industrial history and its proximity to the Brecon Beacons National Park.

> *Arts and heritage are underestimated … but an awareness of heritage is so important to communities … Merthyr has always had its history we should be bringing more people in.*

Meanwhile, **outdoor activities,** from clean-ups and community gardens to walking groups and sports clubs, create an environment people can be proud of and opportunities to gain confidence.

Premier League Kicks aims to create safer, stronger communities by working with children and young people in disadvantaged communities across the UK. They *'locate an area where there's drinking, violence, fighting, and take a bag of balls ...'.* A lot of the Kicks coordinators are former participants who went on to obtain qualifications.

In East Cleveland, the annual Klondike cycle race has brought villages together and given the area a much higher profile.

Storytelling and local history can also bridge generational divides. However, one person worried about looking too much to the past: *'it must be very depressing for young people to be told about what you've lost all the time'.*

Most of these recommendations are not rocket science – they build on decades of experience. But many of them are at risk as cuts bite deeper, more public assets are sold off and commercial considerations gain the upper hand. Their social value needs to be recognised and given weight so that communities can continue to draw on them in the future.

The power of digital media

The major prospect for creating new spaces and connections may lie with **digital technology and social media**. Although we referred earlier to the drawbacks of online services and lifestyles, they also offer great potential.

- **Cost** – it is cheap for organisations and individuals.
- **Ease of access** – it lowers the threshold for collective action because it gives access to a wealth of information; it is also an easy way for organisations and groups to keep their constituency informed and to engage them in discussions and decisions.
- **Reach** – it is an effective way to engage young people; several people commented that they had found it was also a good way to reach BME women, who use it to keep informed and in touch with each other.
- It can **foster new relationships** and **allow different communities to connect and learn from each other** – within and beyond the UK. It also allows local communities **to link up with national campaigns** and developments.
- It has opened the door to **crowdfunding**, which offers new ways of raising funds and keeping people in touch with a cause.

In Milton Keynes, researchers and community development workers[15] have examined the role and value of social media in newly created estates: *Social media is playing an important role in enabling early residents to interact with one another, the efficient sharing of information, and in facilitating an emerging sense of community identity in this development area. However, our research to date suggests that social media plays a more significant role in building bonding rather than bridging capital, creating informal networks that are characterised by homogeneity rather than diversity, through residents' closed social media groups. We suggest that a key task for community workers is to drive social media traffic towards open, facilitated forums that link together the whole community. This means engaging with all social media platforms and being alert to residents' shifting preferences for different platforms.*

Digital media have been a particularly useful way to build connections between younger and older generations. Social media and video also add a valuable extra dimension to arts and heritage activities.

As such, digital media offer communities new skills, new ways to connect and organise. Some advocates even suggest that, because communication has become possible without the need for a resource-rich physical base, action and information will in future be based around networked individuals rather than organisations.[16]

Dragon Hall is a London-based charity working with young people to improve their lives. One of its initiatives – SoapBox – is *'a 21st Century Youth Centre' that uses 'technologies, innovations and ideas, such as 3D printing, virtual reality and artificial intelligence, to help bridge the digital divide, broaden young people's horizons and enable them to realise their potential'.* Examples of their work include 'Crowd Action', a social action programme that sees young people use technology to address social issues in their local communities.

There are drawbacks. The first and most obvious is the fact of digital exclusion. Not everyone has access to this technology.

[15] Jacklin-Jarvis, C. and Cole, M. (2018 unpublished working paper) *It's just houses: the role of community space in a new housing development in the digital era,* Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, Open University and Community Action MK
[16] McCosker, A. (2015). 'Social media activism at the margins: managing visibility, voice and vitality affects'. *Social Media + Society*, 1 (2)

Digital exclusion

- 10% of UK residents did not have broadband access in 2017
- An estimated 14.9% of adults (15.2 million) do not currently use the internet
- 23% of adults (12.6 million) lack basic digital skills
- 90% of non-users are likely to be disadvantaged
- 4.1 million adults living in social housing are offline
- 27% of disabled adults (3.3 million) had never used the internet

ONS 2015, 2017; National Housing Foundation, sourced through the Royal Geographical Society (21st Century Challenges); The Good Things Foundation

Research so far[17] suggests that digital media may be better for reinforcing bonds within groups rather than building bridges between them. **Nor do the connections they create always travel offline.** An initial surge of interest may soon lapse into sporadic and 'fairly banal' engagement.[18] However, research does suggest that use of social media reinforces social connections and is particularly important for diaspora communities and dispersed communities of interest.

A third caveat relates to **the time needed to manage social media** and other forms of digital technology. Websites need updating, virtual conversations need mediating, the pace of technological development needs someone who can keep on top of changes, upgrades and advances.

In years to come, however, the barriers to the use of digital media will fall, as a media-savvy generation grows older and as more people get to grips with the technology. People will adapt. More frontiers will be breached. But there was a strong feeling that powerful communities will be those that can combine the advantages of online with offline spaces for face-to-face connections.

Contributors also stressed the need for support if the benefits of technological advances were to be shared.

> *Tech won't happen by magic, you need human interaction.*
> *Tech is part of the story but not sufficient in itself.*

This being the case, there is an urgent need for community workers and others working with communities to get on top of technological advances and use them creatively.

[17] McCabe, A. and Harris, K. (2017) *Community action and social media: trouble in Utopia?,* Working Paper, Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre
[18] Matthews, P. (2016) 'Social media, community development and social capital', *Community Development Journal,* 51 (3), 419–435

Action beyond the locality

As far as digital technology is concerned, the need to extend mobile phone reception and broadband coverage is a given. What we need beyond this is investment in social infrastructure. This needs to be at several different levels. Here we describe three proposals from our contributors:

- **Small grants**
  Experience over the years has highlighted the value of **small 'at risk' grants,** i.e. without difficult forms to fill in, conditions to be met. And they can be very small – enough to hire a venue for an event, provide equipment and materials, for young people to go on a trip – *'even £10 is a lot if you only want to meet to have a chat'.*

- **Social prescribing**
  Sustainable investment can be woven into the fabric of systems and services. One possibility suggested to us rests with social prescribing, which recognises the health benefits of the range of activity we have discussed above.

- **Community Infrastructure Levy**
  A joint publication from Local Trust and Locality suggests that *'We may need a national sinking fund for social infrastructure, or changes to the rules around the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106'*.[19]

- **Support for communities in acquiring and managing local assets**
  Community rights to bid for local assets are welcome but poorer communities in particular need support in the technicalities of acquiring these assets, making them fit for purpose and managing them over the long term, so that parks and buildings can be of real benefit to the communities that take them on and not a liability.

Money isn't everything. There is scope, particularly for business, higher education and other institutions, to offer more support in kind – people, tech support, equipment and space.

[19] Local Trust (2018) *Skittled Out? The collapse and revival of England's social infrastructure*

When people in communities are isolated and lonely it makes it difficult for them to become powerful.

Part five: Communities and democracy

Communities and democracy

In summary:

Already marginalised communities find it hard to see how they can become powerful through the formal political system.

- Alienation from traditional politics and the democratic system is fuelling a politics of blame. Many communities are tired of consultations that go nowhere.

- A powerful community is one where people can debate their differences, organise and can stand up for what they believe in without fear. We need spaces where difficult conversations can take place. Crucial to the development of informed public debate is effective political and civic education and an understanding of how power works. Change also needs to come from beyond the community. Power holders – in the public sector and business – need the will and the skills to work effectively with local communities.

The future is likely to be one where the old politics will continue to lose trust and people will search for new ways of doing democracy. How can we ensure these work for all communities?

Context

Becoming more powerful as a community starts with social connections. But it is also about people being able to discuss and understand different views and opinions – having opportunities to talk about problems in a non-judgemental, open-ended way. If they are to be more powerful, communities need access to information and they need to understand how the system works, how power works. People then need opportunities to take decisions locally, but where this is not possible to join with others to make their voices heard. They also need faith in the democratic system. This requires decision makers to engage on an equal footing with citizens – to have the capacity and ability to listen and recognise the value of local knowledge and experience. And communities need faith that the political system exists to benefit all members of society and not just the few.

What's happening in communities?

What we found in our research – and what has been clear from public discourse about the loss of faith in conventional politics – is that these conditions do not apply, especially in the poorest communities. The resulting alienation has been most forcefully expressed in the Brexit referendum, but is also evident in voting turnout.
One contributor from Wales commented that:

> *At election time only 20% of people from the poorer communities voted as opposed to 80% from more middle class areas.*

Some describe this as apathy, but our contributors were more likely to see it as alienation, a loss of faith in the democratic system and an understandable response to being left behind by the pace of change:

> *People live in the now – people live day-to-day and whatever comes, people find a way to live with it. People living on estates just accept their lot. They are not 'empowered' to have a voice and even if they were, they are fed up with being 'consulted and nothing ever changes'.*

This alienation works at many levels. In Part four we argued that **the disappearance and privatisation of public spaces** affects the connections that people in communities can make with each other. We also commented on the disappearance of the working class institutions where people learnt about politics and power and found their collective voice.

People spoke of the **'depoliticisation of public life'.** The opportunity at local level to learn about and debate local issues and national issues should be the bedrock of our democracy, turning private troubles into public issues in order to achieve the potential of people in all walks of life. But instead, politics is seen as something distant from the concerns of ordinary people, something that happens in Westminster, carried out by career politicians who in no way reflect their experience or circumstances. This doesn't stop people expressing their opinions but there is little sense of negotiation and reconciliation in current public debate. The media and politicians are too ready to lay problems at the door of the individual rather than society, fostering a **politics of blame.** This, as we argued in Part three, makes it easy to 'divide and rule'. It can too easily become a breeding ground for populist and far right politics.

Contributors also spoke about **not being heard.** People in the communities we visited told us that they were tired of consultations that went nowhere, while partnership working had been experienced by many as top-down – window dressing rather than real power.

There is also much talk about devolution and localism. But contributors argued that this was often **devolution of responsibility without power.** Communities are finding there is little their local authority can do – given the huge cuts they have faced, authorities are struggling to provide even the services they are statutorily obliged to provide. Resources for community engagement and development have fallen victim to these cuts in many authorities and the expertise to engage with the community has gone. Most of the community discourse in government now is about services and social enterprise, although in Scotland there is still reference to community learning and development. However, even here, a contributor commented that *'the decentralisation of responsibility is accompanied by a centralisation of power'.*

There was also concern about **the silencing of critical voices.** The expansion of opportunities for participation in the 2000s was welcomed by many – who felt that critics were too dismissive of the achievements of partnership working. There was also a cautious welcome for 'co-production' as a possible way forward for the future. But contributors were concerned that these developments had somehow delegitimised popular protest and advocacy, co-opting communities into government agendas and squeezing out the advocacy they wanted to do. More recently, controls on campaigning have left groups uncertain about what they can say, especially if they

have government contracts. So they self-censor. And some of our contributors felt that community development had *'lost its edge'.*

> *That's what, unfortunately has gone out of community development … Consciousness raising, political education, understanding the power dynamics that are operating around you. It's all about programmes, what we need you to do.*

This is not just a question of pressure from above. **Putting your head above the parapet is risky** in some communities – and can make you a target for extremists and criminals.

People often say they want to avoid being seen as 'political'. But if it means having conversations across the country about the society we want to see, how we might achieve it, and how to debate and reconcile different views of the world, perhaps it is a term we need to rehabilitate.

> *There needs to be much more of a democratic debate about what kind of society we live in, what is the state for, what is the economy for, why are we poor?*

What can be done locally?

Contributors talked about the need to re-animate civic space – *'citizens in dialogue with each other for the common good',* a theme that was picked up by the Localism Commission:

> *So start with the power of the community. The task of our political system should be to support this, harness it and reflect it in our national debate.*

So how can this happen? Our discussions highlighted the need first and foremost to create **spaces for grown-up conversations** that make allowance for the expression of different opinions, where difficult conversations can take place but also where differences can be respected, accommodated, negotiated and resolved with support where necessary – *'convivial spaces, sharing food, giving people the autonomy to express their own views of the world'.* These spaces are needed at many different levels, within and across neighbourhoods and with external actors whose decisions affect the neighbourhood, both public and private. But if their voices are to be represented in the official participatory spaces into which they are invited, people in communities need first to have their own independent spaces where they can shape their contribution to wider debates.

Our contributors underlined the importance of **political education,** giving people the opportunity to understand how power works, to evaluate the information they are given and to find out how to navigate complex and often opaque power systems. This needs to start in the schools.

> *There's a difference between the rage of injustice – no zebra crossing, for example – and having some kind of analysis about how to affect or change that issue.*

A contributor from Wales underlined the need to be *'connecting with people around the issues that concern them and providing the conscientisation* [political consciousness] *that the chapels, unions and education institutes used to provide'.*

Some of our contributors also spoke about the constant need to challenge the way 'discourse' frames and shapes the experience of disadvantaged communities, who suffer greatly from the narrative of strivers and skivers and the negative stereotypes that grow up around their areas and are perpetuated by the media. Public narratives and lazy stereotypes like this shape the way that people think about their situation, what they think they can change and what they think is inevitable.

People may shy away from anything that is badged as political but learning opportunities can take many forms. A sewing class for Bengali women or a language class can provide a forum for learners to share other concerns, gain confidence and hear from professionals and other communities about how to address local issues.

People need support if they are to engage with external power holders. One contributor who had moved to a rural area talked about a successful campaign against a proposed dump, which had led to a *'real vibrancy – loads going on'.* But he acknowledged that the campaign and the Neighbourhood Plan that the community then embarked on would not have happened without the technical expertise that he and other incomers had provided. Poorer communities need access to this expertise and a sophisticated analysis of power.

> *Knowing where the power lies – a lot of people on the ground don't have those skills and that knowledge. You need particular skills to have a dialogue with elected representatives. They need to arm themselves with that information.*

Contributors emphasised the value of community organising and other forms of community development in supporting this process and we return to this in Part six.

Voter registration drives are commonplace in US community development. And however broken the electoral system might feel, elections are the only process that everyone can be involved in, so contributors felt it could not be ignored. In Milton Keynes, the council has invested in ensuring that people are registered to vote as part of their policy of holding referenda in relation to new developments:

> *The electoral team at the council is very good. They are using tablets to go out and register people … The ballot is quite significant.*

Digital technology has considerable potential in the political arena. It can expand reach, especially to those who are often under-represented in the average place-based community group – young people, members of different BME communities, disabled people, LGBTQ populations and others. It can reach beyond the locality and link people with common interests in different places. It can amplify issues and provide evidence for campaigns through its ability to mobilise and draw on the experience of large numbers of people in a cost-effective way. Organisations like 38 Degrees have demonstrated their power in mounting campaigns, as have more mainstream third-sector organisations. It offers *'another way to do politics'.*

But there were caveats. Recent publicity about data harvesting reminds us that power over the main platforms that people use lies in very few hands, and that what look like empowering spaces can be invaded spaces. In addition, a great deal has been written about the impact of trolling on the one hand and, on the other, the tendency of social media to create 'bubbles' rather than exposing people to a variety of views and opinion.

One criticism levelled at internet campaigning through organisations like 38 Degrees and others relates to 'clicktivism'. Do these campaigns lower the barriers to engagement so far that they fail to engender any real commitment? As we suggested in Parts three and four, a combination of technologies is needed: *'We need to talk to each other'.* Campaigning groups use social media to mobilise and inform members, but they also engage members face-to-face through running market stalls, knocking on doors and listening to local concerns, and in organising campaigns.

Action beyond the locality

Engagement with politics is not just a question of working with communities. Politicians need to change. There is still much to be done to change government cultures – at national and local level. Contributors recommended the following:

- **Deliberative and participatory democracy**
  Over the years there have been experiments with different forms of deliberative and participatory democracy – citizens' juries and participatory budgeting are examples. These need support and investment if they are to be worthwhile. But there is a strong case for expanding these beyond isolated instances and small pots of money.

- **Parish and town council structures and powers**
  Some areas have or have had neighbourhood forums, though the resources for these are at risk from cuts. However, significant parts of the country are parished and there is also a strong argument for extending parish and town council structures, with their power to raise a precept. Ensuring that these are truly democratic and accountable so that they have the credibility they need in the community can be a challenge. One interesting initiative in this respect is the work that the Community Organisers Programme is carrying out with the National Association of Local Councils to train councillors in the principles and practice of this approach.

- **Creating standards for participation**
  In Scotland, the previous government commissioned a set of Community Engagement Standards from the Scottish Community Development Centre and these have recently been updated. The 2015 Community Empowerment Act, meanwhile, has introduced a 'participation requests process', which makes it easier for communities to request a public body to take action along with the community on issues of community concern:

> *This gives a right to communities to say, 'there's something going wrong, we'd like the public bodies to work with us to do something about it'. So it kind of puts the ball at the foot of the local community – communities can now trigger action on things they think are important.*

- **Business sector**
  Businesses are decision makers too and have a major effect on their surrounding communities. Can employers be encouraged to have a stake in place that goes beyond traditional economic issues? This needs to go beyond corporate social responsibility.

- **Going beyond the local**
  Much discussion of community action and control focuses on the hyperlocal. This is where change needs to start. But it can't end there. We have stressed that the roots of many local issues lie beyond the neighbourhood or village. It is necessary to link what is happening at the local level to the 'bigger picture'. Contributors talked about the importance of: *'working upriver, opening up new spaces, putting pressure on, negotiating'.* National bodies in the community sector could do more to gather up local experience and knowledge and use it to stimulate and inform national debate, providing gateways for local communities to represent their concerns at national level. There are opportunities that a coherent national voice can play into.

Part six: Working with and in communities in the future

Working with and in communities in the future

In summary:

A powerful community is one that has access to the support it needs where it needs it, and which is linked to other communities from whom it can learn and with whom it can create change.

Poor communities know how to be 'resilient'. But they cannot be expected to go it alone, especially if they are expected to take on more responsibilities.

Many communities in the past have benefited from access to support, resources and infrastructure – spaces to meet, community development and other support workers, and funds. But these resources have been drastically cut and those that remain are often tied to service delivery contracts, with a loss in flexibility and independence.

Continued investment in this support, building on the experience of the past, will allow people to make the most of the assets, energy and ideas that they have. But real change also depends on communities having the resources to come together and have a national voice to address the barriers that they face to realising their potential.

Building on community strengths

Throughout this research, we have been impressed by the immense commitment shown by people living and working in communities, their energy, their willingness to try out new ideas, their responses to adversity.

The poorest communities, we were forcefully reminded, *'know how to be resilient; being told to be resilient is patronising'*. They put immense effort into *'making ends meet, supporting families and friends, improving their lives and communities, making choices and taking chances to escape poverty'*. [20]

However, a strong message from all our dialogues was that communities at the sharp end of economic and social change cannot be expected to go it alone. If they are expected to take on a larger role then this has to be matched with resources proportionate to their needs.

More affluent communities often have the skills and expertise required to manage assets, develop neighbourhood plans, mount campaigns and tackle the changes they want to see – although they too may benefit from support. But poorer communities and those faced with substantial changes cannot be expected to grapple with these on their own.

[20] Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016) *We can solve poverty in the UK: a strategy for governments, communities and citizens,* York: JRF

From our discussions in this report, we can identify four essentials that will be needed by those living and working in communities if they are to address the challenges in our changing society and become more powerful. These essentials, which have remained constant over the years[21], are:

- Spaces to come together: to meet, learn, debate, plan, and act – what we have called the 'social infrastructure'. These may be face-to-face or digital, ideally both.
- Financial support: from seedcorn funding that will cover basic costs to larger-scale investment.
- Access to support from community development workers or others who can link communities in with developments elsewhere, share information, learning and skills, alert them to new possibilities and challenge them where necessary.
- Skills and the will on the part of decision makers to recognise the assets and knowledge within communities and work alongside them to create change.

We begin this section by discussing in more detail community development support – what it can offer and how it can be resourced. We end by calling for investment in all four of these elements and outlining the conditions under which it is most likely to work.

What is community development?

> *The government should target specific community development funds to pay for community organisers, community development officers or other specifically tailored support, for those areas with the lowest amounts of social capital.*
> (House of Lords Select Committee)

The term 'community development' comes trailing a variety of definitions, judgements, assumptions and expectations. In this report we use it as an umbrella term to describe an established way of working with communities that has lasted 50 years or more, with an extensive literature and backed up by training courses across the country. It embraces a range of approaches: community organising, asset-based community development, community work, critical community practice, community development learning, and so on, as well as the skills that these require and the values they embody. These approaches may be adopted by workers with a particular community work label, or by others working closely with communities. What binds them together is that their practice is informed by a common set of values and principles that can be summarised as follows: people-led, collective, inclusive, and concerned with change, social justice and equality.[22]

[21] *Firm Foundations: the Government's framework for community capacity building* (2004) was produced jointly with community sector organisations and specified the following basic components of support: a meeting space; seedcorn funding; access to workers with community development skills, an inclusive local forum or network: access to learning opportunities.

[22] See, for example, http://www.esbendorsement.org.uk; https://www.corganisers.org.uk/about-us; http://www.scdc.org.uk/who/what-is-community-development/

Community development approaches support people in communities of place, interest and identity to work together: to identify the changes that they want to see locally; to find ways of addressing them together; and to have more control over the decisions and actions – whether those of the state, business, third sector or media – that affect their lives. They give people in communities the confidence that comes from being listened to and taken seriously. They provide external knowledge and skills to supplement those already in the community and they promote community learning. They help communities to develop structures, organisations and ways of working to achieve their goals. They bring a strategic perspective: *'understanding the strategic context and what's coming down the line, always having that in mind'.*

Having someone to turn to who is detached from the stresses and strains of day-to-day life is especially important when there are disagreements or when there are difficult conversations to be had.

> *The passion that people bring means that disagreements can be taken personally especially because they are friends and neighbours – this brings with it risks to personal relationships and local standing.*

A trusted outsider can also ensure that contact and accountability is maintained with the wider community and that new energies and ideas are welcomed. Contributors spoke highly of the inspiration and dynamism that individuals within the community could bring, but they were critical of community leaders who were out of touch: one referred to the need for *'community naysayers – leaders who look to the past and are pessimistic about the prospects for change'* – to step aside. With the best will in the world, the responsibilities and time involved in managing a community asset or representing a community on a partnership, can detach community leaders from those they represent. While criticism of the *'usual suspects'* is unfair to the many who put huge efforts into their community (and a useful let-out clause for power holders), there are times when, as one community member put it, representatives who get access to positions of power *'pull the ladder up after them'.*

It is also important to have someone who can hold the ring though the inevitable ebbs and flows of energy. After an initial wave of enthusiasm, many groups find it difficult to engage new people and some of our contributors were worried about succession in their group – who might take over when they stopped. While there is no point in keeping a group going for the sake of it, community development can provide continuity and hold things together when the going gets tough.

Finally, there are any number of handbooks and websites sharing 'best practice'. And seeing what *'people like us'* have been able to do is inspiring. But groups need support in applying something that succeeded elsewhere to their own, inevitably different situation.

Challenges

Funding

Community development support might come from a full-time community development worker, or access to more occasional 'light-touch' support from infrastructure organisations, and other service providers, such as youth workers. However, all these resources are at risk. Community development has been at the sharp edge of funding cuts within local government. But so too has funding for other organisations that can provide this support, especially in poorer areas.[23] And while housing associations continue to support tenants' organisations, one housing association worker told us that community development support from this quarter, too, is threatened:

> [Austerity] *is having a big impact on housing associations because their tenants are having their benefits cut. So now they are expending all their nergy on getting the rents in and being a landlord and community development teams are being cut.*

In Wales, meanwhile, the closure of Communities First – a major funder from 2001 to 2017 – has left many organisations and community hubs struggling to survive.

In Scotland, contributors stressed the value of continued government investment at national and local level:

> *Due to* [declining] *funding and staffing, the third sector interface people are constantly changing – looking for new jobs etc.*

But here too, funding is stretched and focused on specific contracts.

In the absence of dedicated support, many groups turn to infrastructure bodies. But contributors commented on the collapse of community and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations at national and local level. This has left many smaller groups with nowhere to turn for the information, advice and help they need. In Northern Ireland, we were told that previous government investment had left a legacy of *'good community anchors that have a strong sense of place, a strong ethos'.* But grassroots rural infrastructure here has been badly affected. Scotland is the exception with some limited government core funding for this infrastructure.

Meanwhile, community development training has suffered across the UK as a number of dedicated courses in further and higher education have been closed down. These courses are essential for critical community development practice; they also offer a route for many residents who had become active in communities to gain qualifications and the skills to practice more widely.

[23] A study of third sector organisations in the North found that those in the poorest areas were more likely to be dependent on public money and three times as likely to have falling income over the past two years than those in the richest areas. IPPR North (2017) *Third Sector Trends in the North of England,* Institute for Public Policy Research

Cuts to funding do not only affect community development. They affect direct funding to community groups. In Northern Ireland we were told that despite the continued existence of community hubs, everything is *'spread thinner'* – funding for grassroots groups has dropped, and activities in town halls have dropped (*'even dancing'*). Across the UK, we were told, local authority grants programmes are being cut along with community and voluntary sector liaison officers. And authorities strapped for cash are unlikely to be able to provide the in-kind support – in the shape of meeting rooms and advice – that they used to.

The influence of the market

Where funding remains, contributors were critical of the wholesale application of **business norms** to community organisations:

> *Local community centres … worked to get professionals on their boards and devise business plans because their funders required it – now local people feel like professionals have taken over their community centre as well as the board.*

Increasing dependence on a **competitive contracts market** threatens the cooperation on which many small community groups rely.

> *Local third sector organisations don't work together and we have a family centre that is reluctant to get involved in case we take something away from them.*

Indeed, some were critical of what they saw as **competition between different 'brands'** in the community development field. There are considerable benefits in having a variety of approaches under the community development umbrella and they can work well together. But there have been occasions in the past where different approaches have failed to work together on the ground – this applies to community programmes too. We heard of more recent examples where this is changing, which is welcome. Defensiveness, unwillingness to collaborate or even competition can only be detrimental to the whole field.

There was irritation too with **the need to demonstrate or claim 'innovation'** – and a failure to acknowledge or build on the past.

> *We just thought we were running lunch clubs. Now it would be called … social innovation.*

New ideas and a new interest in promoting community initiatives and approaches are both welcome and necessary. But rather than reinventing the wheel, contributors wanted to see new generations standing on the shoulders of those who went before.

> *There is a lot to learn from the past. It's not that innovation is a bad thing per se but when innovation turns into a paradigm it becomes counterproductive.*

Loss of independence

A major challenge for our contributors was to their independence. At times, ironically this is the result of the mainstreaming of community development. In Wales, for example, there is a statutory requirement for public authorities to work with the wider voluntary sector. While this is welcome in many ways, some thought it had turned the voluntary sector into a delivery arm for government policy. In Northern Ireland, contributors talked about the *'statutorisation of community development' and 'paying off communities instead of addressing poverty and unlawful behaviour'.* In Scotland, where there is still some local authority investment in community learning and development, we were told that:

> *Workers are fed up applying for their own jobs, trying to fit around competencies … An SCDN survey in 2015[24] found that most were working in a top-down environment with little space to nurture independent grass roots, holistic action.*

Contributors reported that funding for community groups comes with more and more strings attached, strings that threaten to divert them from their core business or detach them from their community roots. Community workers had to work to very specific outcomes, which meant they couldn't go into a community with no agenda or change their approach to reflect what local people were telling them:

> *Instead of the state being accountable to communities, communities are now being asked to be accountable to the state.*

As we reported in Part five, this can either stifle or squeeze out the work that groups want to do on voice and advocacy.

But for many, the biggest risk was that community development would support communities in *'filling the gaps left by the state'*. Against a background of austerity, community development and community organisations inevitably face the challenge that they are complicit in an agenda that expects the poorest and most marginalised communities to fill the gaps left by a rapidly retreating state. Asset-based approaches have had to vigorously defend themselves against accusations by critics that by emphasising that *'people are imbued with a multiplicity of strengths',* they are letting government *'off the hook'*:

> *It's difficult to get around the 'collaborator argument'. If you help people adapt you are partly responsible for implementing austerity for central government.*

Contributors felt that community development these days was acting as a *'sticking plaster',* supporting small groups to ameliorate social problems.

> *Communities being involved with running libraries – it's not just going to happen.* [There] *needs to be a partnership between the LA who need to release some control and the community who need there to be some CD/community infrastructure to support them.*

Some argued that, too often, community programmes lacked *'a systemic understanding'* of the underlying causes of poverty and economic adversity affecting the communities they are there to support.

[24] Scottish Community Development Network (2015) *Community Development Practice in Scotland – the reality behind the rhetoric*

There are undoubtedly circumstances when it is empowering for communities to do things for themselves but only if they have the support and resources to do so. Often, they want the public service to which they have been entitled in the past.

Nonetheless, some thought that co-production might well be an important path to pursue for the future. Working with community organisations may be the only way innovative public authorities feel they can preserve the services their communities need, let alone tackle the crises in relation to mental health and social care that many of our contributors referred to. But others were wary of the 'co-production' discourse. Genuine co-production will require skill in avoiding the co-option and substitution that many feared and it will require public authorities to gain the skills to work effectively **with** communities – a change of culture which still has a long way to go.

Supporting communities in the future

What is happening now?

In identifying the challenges that those living and working in communities face, it is important to emphasise that not all is doom and gloom. Community organisations are developing community businesses and testing out alternative income streams – small and large. For example, Starting Point is a community organising venture in Stockport which runs two coffee shops/cafes and sells training in community organising, digital inclusion activities and getting online[25] in order to fund community organising on the ground. Another organisation, Community Roots CIC used Bright Ideas funding from Power to Change to kickstart a project for local people to buy and sell through a Revival Room – this allows people in the community to recycle goods, to save and make money, but part of the proceeds go back to the organisation to support its own community organising work. Power to Change is supporting the development of community businesses, with funding from the Big Lottery Fund. Communities funded through programmes like Big Local are using their initial investment to plan for a sustainable legacy. There are many other examples. But it will take time to test the extent to which these alternatives can be sustained over the long term.

Beyond the community, some local authorities are still finding ways of continuing to fund community development or similar approaches and of maintaining grants programmes. We were given examples of authorities that were *'mainstreaming a community development approach across all departments'* – but much depended on the conviction of particular individuals, backed up by the council leadership. Health authorities, meanwhile, are showing increasing interest in community development and this could be a growth area.

Nationally, there are programmes in the different parts of the UK funded by government and foundations – such as the Big Lottery Foundation – that continue to support communities and training in this field. Good training courses may have been lost in higher education, but some remain and there are also training programmes linked to national programmes in community organising and asset-based community development.

[25] https://startpoint.org.uk

What needs to happen?

All these are developments that need to be built on. At the beginning of this Part, we identified four essentials for supporting communities on the ground: accessible spaces, financial support, community development support and the skills and will on the part of external agencies and decision makers to work alongside communities to create change. Some of this can be provided by organisations still working locally – housing associations, health centres and services, schools, further and higher education – providing small grants, investing in the social infrastructure, providing in-kind support, offering training and learning opportunities, training their own staff to work in different ways where necessary. More needs to be done, too, to get local businesses to recognise the value of investing time and money in the communities where they operate and from which they draw their workforce. It is essential that:

- Support of this kind **respects communities' experience, ideas and independence** and works to their agenda.
- Support is **proportionate to the needs of different communities** – small grants and light touch support can make all the difference to some communities but others may need more intensive support and/or investment.
- **Agencies and programmes work alongside each other,** aware of what is already going on and how they can support it.

But sustainable long-term change also needs a national commitment. It is essential for policy makers to realise that expecting communities to fill the gaps left by a retreating state is not empowering unless this is a choice and is backed up by the investment that is needed to make it work. A serious commitment to empowering communities means investing in the social, community development and political infrastructure – again, in ways that respect local experience and independence. It means ensuring local institutions have the means, freedom and incentives to provide this support. Disadvantaged communities need investment for jobs and enterprise; those facing major population change need the resources to allow them and their local services to accommodate and welcome this; communities need access to technologies that can help them collectivise around things like energy that will make a difference in their lives. We have provided more detailed recommendations in the relevant Parts of the report. All this means investing in the long term. The conditions that marginalise communities have developed over years. It will take time to turn them around. But investment now will set that process in motion.

We have referred repeatedly in this report to the commitment and energy with which communities and those who work with them have responded to adversity. These communities need policies and investment that recognise the disadvantages that these communities bear and challenge lazy and discriminatory assumptions in the media and elsewhere about the people who live there. Society – government, business and wider civil society – needs to get behind them.

To read more about the research, please visit
www.ivar.org.uk/our-research/future-of-communities

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