

Summary notes

Local government workshop: *Neighbourhood-level approaches to identifying community strengths and addressing needs*

Tuesday 26th March 2024

12.30pm-4.00pm, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

About New Local

New Local (formerly the New Local Government Network) is an independent think tank and network of councils, with a mission to transform public services and unlock community power.

We look for new, community-based solutions to some of our society's biggest challenges – and team up with innovative people from across all parts of government and communities to achieve change.

At the heart of all our work is the belief in community power – the idea that people should have more say over the places they live and the services they use.

Our 60+ members benefit from each other's experience as well as our events, our research and practice support to drive innovation and bring fresh thinking into their Council and their community relationships.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a national charity set up in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a unique programme that puts residents in neighbourhoods across England in control of decisions about their own lives and areas.

We aim to demonstrate the value of long term, patient, resident-led funding, and use our learning from delivering the Big Local programme to bring about a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and other agencies engage with communities and their neighbourhoods.

Big Local is a Lottery-funded programme which committed £1m each to 150 neighbourhoods across England. Each area has 10 – 15 years to spend the funds it has been awarded through the programme. Local Trust provides support in the form of ongoing mentoring, peer networking and specialist technical support.

At a glance

- Participants discussed how the Community Needs Index could be used by their authority to target investment and interventions in priority neighbourhoods.
- The discussion explored local government's critical role in supporting asset-based community development, building on the strengths characterising individual neighbourhoods and cultivating meaningful partnerships with communities to deliver positive change.
- Attendees discussed the innovative approaches taken by Wigan Council and Essex County Council in investing to strengthen social capital and infrastructure and build community capacity and resilience.

Summary of discussion

Matt Leach, Chief Executive of Local Trust welcomed attendees to the event and introduced Local Trust's new programme of work with local government, developed in partnership with New Local throughout 2024.

The event was facilitated by Adam Lent, Chief Executive of New Local.

Speakers brought a range of expertise to the session from across local government, policy and academia, drawing on research and data as well as practical experience.

Presentation 1: Stefan Noble, Director and Head of Research, Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI).

Stefan presented on OCSI's development of the Community Needs Index, which measures social infrastructure in neighbourhoods across the country. The presentation explored the components of the CNI, how it can be combined with the Index of Multiple Deprivation and its potential use by local government to develop interventions to improve life outcomes. OCSI were commissioned in 2018 to map community and social challenges that have not been captured in traditional deprivation metrics such as the [Indices of Deprivation](#), at the hyper-local level across the country. The [Community Needs Index \(CNI\)](#) was developed as an output from this research.

The CNI is unique because it measures the strength of social infrastructure in neighbourhoods, defined to include:

Civic assets: This measures the presence of key assets of community value in the local area. These include youth clubs, libraries, public parks, community centres, leisure facilities, and village halls – places that provide things to do and spaces for people to meet, often at no or little cost, which are important to how positive a community feels about their area.

Connectedness: This looks at access to key services, amenities and employment opportunities and wider connectivity issues including social connectedness, digital connectedness, access to private transport and access to GP appointments.

Active and engaged community: This measures the levels of active participation in community and civic life, barriers to participation, perceptions of social cohesion, and the strength of the third sector locally.

Identifying doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Participants heard how research by OCSI and Local Trust combined the CNI with the Index of Multiple Deprivation to identify a subset of priority 'doubly disadvantaged' neighbourhoods nationally - sometimes referred to as 'left behind' – to capture the entrenched disadvantage and high levels of community need resulting from a historical lack of resource and opportunity.

Research on life outcomes in these neighbourhoods shows that they experience poorer outcomes across a range of socioeconomic indicators, even compared to other equally deprived areas that benefit from a basic level of social infrastructure, including across health, wellbeing, education and employment outcomes.

The discussion highlighted the merits of a hyper-local, neighbourhood-level approach to examining community strengths and needs, ensuring that pockets of acute disadvantage are not overlooked as a result of neighbouring or headline affluence at local authority geography. Such an approach can

also help ensure that the unique characteristics of individual neighbourhoods and drivers of disadvantage in different settings – for example, urban, rural and coastal communities, are reflected in local government interventions.

Participants discussed how the CNI can and has been used across funding and policy initiatives, to ensure investment is targeted to places with the greatest need. One participant reflected on its potential to inform a new strand of neighbourhoods work, developing the council's understanding of the drivers of disadvantage in an urban context. It was also noted as a potential tool to join-up thinking between different tiers of local government, providing hyper-local intelligence that could feed into economic strategies at combined authority level, enabling progress measurement that goes beyond traditional economic metrics.

Investing beyond short term electoral cycles is critical to delivering meaningful change in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Discussion covered how the updated CNI 2024's strengthening of the granular evidence base, providing data at the Lower Layer Super Output Area level, could prove to be a tool to guide long-term investment and provide stability and continuity for local government interventions through political cycles. However, participants also expressed concern that it is not as simple as identifying areas of need and investing accordingly because funding pressures on local government mean there is often not enough resource to meet demand or to make longer term budget commitments, even when they would be of value.

Presentation 2: Alison Mckenzie-Folan, Chief Executive, Wigan Council

Alison presented on Wigan Council's approach to neighbourhood-level capacity and resilience building. The presentation reflected on the learnings from more than a decade of the Wigan Deal – a unique, asset-based approach to partnership working with communities, which will be carried forward into a new era of community-led investment.

As observed by those present, local government has historically been at the forefront of hope and optimism about improving the status quo for communities and residents. The presentation considered the challenge that local authorities face to provide essential services for residents and continue to nurture this optimism despite the significant pressures created by the current financial operating environment.

To deliver transformational change and tackle pervasive inequalities in those communities where it is most needed, in the face of these challenges, innovation is key – i.e trying new approaches to fixing entrenched problems. The presentation reflected on how fostering innovation requires the council as a corporate whole to change how it thinks and does things, so that individual staff members are equipped with the tools, training and permission to depart from established approaches.

Participants heard examples from Wigan of where this has been successful in practice, including a council-wide initiative to train staff to be ethnographers, working with an anthropologist to examine embedded cultures of decision-making and systemic drivers of disadvantage. Another example was an immersive training experience celebrating the communities making up Wigan; ensuring staff onboarding and subsequent training is rooted in an appreciation and understanding of the neighbourhoods it serves.

Adult social care was cited as a service area where innovation is particularly crucial to relieve a disproportionate and growing cost on local government budgets. The presentation raised ethical home care as an example of how Wigan Council has approached the need to harness new approaches to save costs whilst delivering quality services; supporting people to retain their autonomy and place within the community whilst meeting their needs.

As well as focusing on closer working with communities, participants considered how regeneration of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods depends on effective collaboration between different tiers of local government. Participants reflected on the challenges for lower and upper tier authorities to share intelligence and collaborate effectively to deliver meaningful change where it is most needed. One participant raised the need for different tiers of local government to share an approach to measuring progress, acknowledging that combined authorities tend to focus on economic metrics. Efforts to build inclusive economies must centre on the priorities and harness the experience of the neighbourhoods making up a wider geography and progress measurement should factor this in.

Further attention was drawn to the role that local businesses and organisations play in contributing to developing and maintaining community assets, infrastructure and investment and the need for local authorities to be in pro-active and in regular conversations with stakeholders from a range of sectors.

Presentation 3: Rebecca Gipp, Head of Levelling Up Coordination, Essex County Council

Rebecca presented on Essex County Council's development of a 'levelling up' strategy, which is guiding investment to strengthen the social capital and infrastructure of priority neighbourhoods. Levelling up funds have been invested to build capacity and cohesion in neighbourhoods identified as priority by the CNI.

In Basildon, investment in the delivery of the 'Achieve, Thrive, Flourish' community hub by an anchor organisation has improved socio-economic outcomes through a focus on physical activity and education, generating thousands of contacts with residents monthly. It has also proved to be an effective channel for other skills and education initiatives delivered by the County Council.

Similarly, the Clacton Pedal Power project took a targeted approach to aligning infrastructure, investment and opportunity to improve life outcomes. The project created a cycle route to link Clacton with Jaywick Sands, also providing 1300 free bikes to eligible residents. This was welcomed by the two communities and is delivering significant socio-economic benefits by removing barriers to health, employment and educational opportunities.

A common theme throughout the session was the importance of combining quantitative data analyses and frameworks with qualitative research into the human stories at the neighbourhood level. Targeted interventions to improve life outcomes require an equal footing in data and lived experience to ensure investment is directed in line with community priorities.

Participants reflected on the meaning and importance of an asset-based approach to community development. An asset-based approach requires local government to work with partners to identify, harness and build on the unique strengths, assets and networks characterising a neighbourhood to deliver improvements to life outcomes, rather than focusing solely on deficits, and what is lacking or needed.

Discussion on how to foster a truly preventative strategy explored the importance of joining up service users and providers to have honest conversations on needs and priorities, as well as parties reflecting openly on what is and isn't working within existing provision. In practice this often requires local government to try to remove administrative and other barriers to community participation to support community leadership and action. One participant reflected on how their local authority had facilitated a 'Big Conversation' with residents across the locality. This involved extensive

community outreach to ensure that voices at risk of marginalisation were enabled to identify their priorities for local government investment.

Discussion considered how local government can harness residents' expertise in building on community strengths and insight to address local priorities. This was noted as particularly important in the context of so many new estates being built without adequate community infrastructure, with further distances to shops, GPs and public transport. Strong relationships between local government and neighbourhoods can ensure that Infrastructure Levy and developer monies are invested in community assets that stand the test of time.

While community leadership can be an essential ingredient to building confident, resilient communities, the success of this ultimately depends on long-term funding stability for the neighbourhoods most in need. Local government has a key role to play in investing to build strong relationships with neighbourhoods that cultivate trust, benefit from community expertise and facilitate effective partnership-working to drive neighbourhood renewal where it is most needed.

Next steps

As part of this developing work programme, Local Trust will be organising a study visit and at least one further workshop later this year.

Depending on interest and demand, it was hoped that this might help develop a broader network of local authorities interested in issues relevant to social capital, social infrastructure and neighbourhood focused regeneration.

One output from this work might include a “playbook” for local authorities seeking to develop their work in this area, drawing on existing best practice, tested evidence diagnostics, and the latest academic research.

Local Trust would be hosting a stand at the LGA Conference Exhibition and a workshop at New Local's [Stronger Things Conference](#) and looked forward to engaging further with local authorities at the events.

For further information please contact: sarah.stearne@localtrust.org.uk