

Making the government's missions work in neighbourhoods

# 3 Breaking down barriers

Opportunity for every neighbourhood

*"Our first mission in government is to grow the economy, and for that we need to harness the talents of all our people to unlock growth and break down the barriers to opportunity." — Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP*

## Summary

In the mission document 'breaking down barriers to opportunity' published ahead of the general election, the new Labour government has set out its intention to improve social mobility in the UK, and to spread education and employment opportunities more evenly around the country.

There is a lot the government can do - centrally - to improve childcare, schools, universities and employment in the UK, of course. **But all of these efforts will be made easier, and their impact amplified, if places first have a strong foundation of social infrastructure.** By this we mean the physical spaces, community groups and neighbourhood associations that turn places into thriving hubs of civic life and activity. These are the people who - formally or informally - organise breakfast clubs, homework catch-up groups, youth mentoring programmes, toddler play sessions, summer apprenticeship schemes, and so on, to improve opportunities in their local area.

**This fundamental organising capacity is a critical prerequisite to other policymaking.** Put another way: it doesn't matter how much money the government spends on schools if kids don't attend in the first place. Nor does it matter how good a job opportunity is if someone doesn't have the means to get there on time, or support to prepare for an interview. Social infrastructure, alongside targeted support to build community confidence and capacity, is the missing ingredient. It is what enables people to come together and organise extra-curricular activities and childcare schemes, bid for money to improve local services and facilities, and generally advocate for themselves and their future.

Many parts of the UK already have strong networks that help ensure children have a good start in life, and that support young people in education and into training and jobs. But we have identified **225 neighbourhoods around the country that face a 'double disadvantage'**: high levels of deprivation, and a lack of social infrastructure. This matters - these places suffer from worse educational outcomes and fewer employment prospects, higher school absences, lower attainment in GCSEs, as well as higher levels of poverty.

Repairing the local social fabric is hard. But at Local Trust, **this is our expertise**. The Big Local programme has helped communities develop strong civic institutions and activity in some of our most deprived neighbourhoods, often in former industrial heartlands or remote coastal areas, with proven results.

We recommend:

1. New holistic and wrap-around **early years hubs**. These should build on the learning from Sure Start, and the insight and expertise of local residents.
2. **Targeted support** to improve opportunities outside of the classroom, with community provision of extra-curricular and enrichment activities.
3. Community partnerships to help deliver a **two-week work experience guarantee**.
4. Locating 50 per cent of the network of **Young Futures hubs** in neighbourhoods that currently face the double disadvantage of high deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure as part of the efforts to rebuild organising capacity in these communities.
5. That a coordinated **neighbourhood-focused lens** on how this policy area interlinks with others at a hyper-local level should be applied by a dedicated team within government.

## About us

Local Trust is an independent charity established in 2012. For more than a decade, we have been delivering Big Local, a neighbourhood regeneration programme aimed at pockets of the country that have historically been overlooked for funding.

We work in 150 deprived neighbourhoods (with populations of 10,000 or fewer) across England, which have each received just over £1 million in funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. It is the largest neighbourhood-based investment programme since the last Labour government's New Deal for Communities.

Using the learning from the Big Local programme, we're working to bring about a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and other agencies engage with communities.

# Introduction

In the mission document 'breaking down barriers to opportunity' published ahead of the general election, the new Labour government has set out its intention to improve the UK's childcare and education systems, and to spread employment opportunities more evenly around the country. It says:

*"Britain's success relies on everyone having the chance to get on, but currently too many people are held back by the lack of a secure job, secure home, a safe community and public services that aren't there when you need them."*

**Accomplishing this mission depends on social infrastructure.** By this we mean the physical spaces, community groups and neighbourhood associations that turn places into thriving hubs of civic life and activity. These are the people who - either formally or informally - organise breakfast clubs, homework catch-up groups, youth mentoring programmes, toddler play sessions, summer apprenticeship schemes and so on, to improve learning and work opportunities in their area. Strong social infrastructure encompasses three things:

1. **Spaces and places:** town halls, leisure centres, parks, etc.
2. **An active and engaged community:** local leaders, organisations and social clubs.
3. **And physical and digital forums** that bring people together: public transport networks, websites, WhatsApp groups, notice boards, newsletters, etc.

For more than a decade Local Trust has been working with communities who, with a relatively small amount of funding and appropriate confidence and capacity building support, have successfully built these kinds of networks as part of the Big Local programme. This is our expertise as an organisation. We know what works - and crucially, we know why.

## The challenge

Today in Britain, opportunity is a postcode lottery. The best predictor of a child's life chances at birth is not their ability, or their work ethic, but where they are born. We know that wealth is a big factor. But social networks - particularly at the local level - also matter more than we think. Without them, whole cohorts are being left without the support they need.

Spatial inequality is hard to address. This is often because the issue is hyper-local, with pockets of deprivation in otherwise affluent areas. We believe that the most meaningful geography at which to consider the issue, therefore, is the neighbourhood - communities of around 8,000 to 10,000 people.

As a starting point, we have identified **the 225 neighbourhoods in the UK that face a double disadvantage:** high levels of deprivation, combined with weak social infrastructure. The evidence is clear: young people living in the neighbourhoods that are both severely economically deprived **and lacking in social infrastructure** have worse educational outcomes and employment prospects.

They:

- are less likely to meet expected standards at key stage 2, a gap which widens by key stage 4
- are more likely to be persistently absent from their school
- suffer from poorer educational attainment at GCSE; and

- experience low levels of participation in post-16 education, with only one in four progressing onto university (OCSI, 2022).

They are also more likely to grow up in 'out of work' households, and twice as likely to grow up in households which are income deprived. This is not only compared to more affluent areas, but also to areas that are similarly deprived but which nevertheless have basic social infrastructure. The issue is not that parents do not want the best for their children, but that socioeconomic pressures mean a focus on essentials like housing and food. Parents are more likely to be juggling multiple work and caring responsibilities, this means they are less able to spend time supporting their child's development or teaching them at home (RCPCH, 2024; SHS, 2023).

Young people are not the only ones who suffer. Without strong support networks, their parents, teachers and the wider community are also more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as higher rates of mental health problems, greater incidences of crime and a weaker local economy.

## How does social infrastructure help?

Community institutions and civic activity provide the support and opportunities young people need to develop their full potential inside and outside of the classroom – all while enhancing ties within the community that build collective capacity to manage challenges (Benkwitz & Healy, 2019).

Such organisations also help parents by providing financial support, advice, childcare and a range of other services that, in turn, can help children to stay in and do well at school. Without these, there is a much more limited "safety net" if a pupil is struggling at school or at home, and a much higher risk of poor educational outcomes which can damage long-term life chances.

This is not a new idea. Common sense tells us that, when young people have a strong support network, they are more likely to succeed. This is backed by research from the London School of Economics, which shows that school attendance is directly linked to social infrastructure, with poor attendance driven by a breakdown in trust between schools, pupils, their parents and communities (Eyles et al, 2023). Community groups, then, play a vital role in acting as a "middle man" in rebuilding this trust and tackling disengagement (Eyles et al, 2023).

## Community support at every stage

Community projects have the potential to remove the barriers to opportunity at each key stage:

### **Childcare and early years**

Ask any education professional, and they'll tell you that the early years are absolutely critical. When children have spaces to play, learn and socialise from a young age, their life chances are transformed.

This is particularly vital in more deprived areas, where community groups can develop tailored and affirming ways of making sure children and young people are secure and happy at home through childcare, family and learning support and other projects. These groups also help to build a child's pride and sense of self – a key plank of the Early Years Statutory Framework and other child development strategies.

### **School attendance and attainment**

Big Local areas have often used their funding to develop targeted programmes that improve school participation and attainment. This includes summer holiday breakfast clubs, homework catch-ups, and youth mentoring schemes.

The Centre for Education and Youth (2021) has found that community-based settings are more likely to enable those persistently absent from school, facing suspension or exclusion, to re-enter education and get back into the classroom. Strong local institutions are also well-placed to prevent digital exclusion, through schemes to share equipment and materials like laptops and Wi-Fi that are necessary for homework and remote learning.

### **Pathways to employment**

In later years, as young people start to leave school and think about continued education or employment, community networks can play another vital role. Social clubs become a way to develop leadership skills and confidence. Community training schemes get young people interested in a particular vocation, or connect them to mentors.

And more generally, shared ventures ensure that those from the poorest backgrounds can access sports, art, science and drama, while gaining skills in communication, problem solving, team working and time management. These all correlate with better school retention, higher educational achievement and social mobility (Donnelly et al., 2019).

The following case studies provide examples of how three Big Local areas have built local capacity, providing new opportunities and services to support children and young people and improve their prospects.

### **Ramsey Million Big Local**

Ramsey Million - as members of the Big Local partnership point out - is not really on the way to anywhere else. The Cambridgeshire town is approached from the west on a bumpy B-road over the fens, and its two Victorian railway stations have long since closed, adding to the sense of disconnection from the wider county.

Formerly a market town that thrived selling produce from local farms, over time Ramsey lost out to large-scale agriculture and more corporate supply chains. Its west side is among the 30 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, and a quarter of people of working age are without educational qualifications. There is a feeling that geographic isolation has made Ramsey a poor relation to its neighbours, and remote from the cares of policymakers. "Nobody ever listens to us," one resident said.

In 2010, Ramsey became one of the areas to receive just over £1 million of Big Local funding. With few existing learning and employment opportunities for young people, a big focus for residents was to create affordable activities and clubs. These included a toddler group, a summer play scheme for children and a youth club for teens. Young people were encouraged to lead activities and projects, and volunteer with younger children.

Several of these young participants have since gone on to formal training and qualifications, pursuing a career in youth work. Some were even recognised with awards from the police and town council, positively impacting residents' perceptions of young people. "It's big, it's ambitious... there's huge potential here now," said one resident. "This is part of people feeling proud about where they live".

## North East Hastings Big Local

Ore is a neighbourhood that sits on the outskirts of Hastings. The coastal town is the thirteenth most deprived in England, with parts of its north east amongst the most deprived 0.5 per cent.

In 2018, a programme of cuts led to the closure of Ore Library in North East Hastings, formally run by East Sussex County Council. "The council said closing the library wasn't going to be a problem for the community because Hastings main central library is just a bus ride away," said one local resident, "ignoring the social and economic deprivation in the area".

For many families, the bus ride to the main library was either too expensive, or too difficult an activity to organise. Some children living on the area's two housing estates had never visited the seaside only two miles away. Recognising this barrier, North East Hastings Big Local provided an initial grant of £6,000 – match funded by a local housing association – for volunteers to approach the council to allow the community to run the library on a peppercorn rent.

Despite setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the renamed Ore Community Library reopened in May 2021 and has gone from strength to strength. Open three days a week, it now has more than 1,000 members – more than half of whom are under the age of 16 – and a rota of 23 eager volunteers. Local primary schools visit regularly and the library hosts a book club which is so oversubscribed they have had to start a waiting list.

Now that the library is up and running, and clearly so loved by the community, securing grants and support from other sources has become more achievable. The library has been such a success that in early 2024 the council granted it a new lease, this time for 20 years, meaning that it will continue to act as a literacy boosting community hub for years to come.



## Par Bay Big Local

Alongside prosperous areas that benefit from tourism and picturesque coastlines, there are pockets of real, unseen deprivation in Cornwall. Par Bay, on the south coast of Cornwall, is one such area. In recent years, it has been in the top 10 per cent most deprived places in the UK, with high unemployment, low educational attainment, and few opportunities – particularly for young people.

After receiving Big Local funding in 2010, the partnership purchased a building - 'Cornubia' - which has been turned into a community hub. This led to further projects including a new skate park, a film club, and a community garden, providing fresh vegetables and produce for the community. Residents started a walking group, a craft fair, and a signposting service for vulnerable people. The centre is also a space for people to access employment and benefit support, and regular sessions are held with the County Council, local police and health practitioners to make it easier for people to access statutory services without having to travel.

One of the biggest successes has been **Mpower Kernow** (MPKC) – a social enterprise focused on science, technology, maths and engineering. As its first venture, the team led a keystone project to restore a local railway turntable in St Blazey. This was a Grade II listed site that had fallen into disrepair, with fears that it would never operate again.

In just ten weeks, the MPKC team carried out repairs - in record time, and within budget - alongside a huge team of volunteers, contractors and partners including Network Rail, DB Cargo, and special educational needs trainees from a local Cornish intern programme. In April 2023, the Flying Scotsman became the first locomotive to use the newly restored turntable. Now removed from the 'Heritage at Risk' register, the turntable has become a permanent community asset, even facilitating the return of Cornwall's famous steam trains, and provides a source of income from local tourism.

This one-off project has since evolved into a fully-fledged training centre for STEM skills and engineering, enabling young people to earn a living, develop their CV, and move into mainstream employment. Young volunteers have gone on to complete engineering courses, and partnership members have reported that MPKC is now developing a national accreditation scheme so the venture can be recognised as a viable, self-sustaining vocational training pathway for local young people.

## Our recommendations

We believe Labour's mission to break down barriers to opportunity for children and young people will only be achieved in the most deprived areas through the reinvigoration of social infrastructure. Evidence clearly shows community groups in these areas do vital work in improving young people's attendance and attainment at school, enhancing their home learning environments, and their longer-term skills and employment opportunities.

Particular attention will need to be paid to doubly disadvantaged areas if the government hopes to improve life chances in a geographically just and balanced way, and harness hitherto untapped economic potential. We suggest the following priorities:

1. **New holistic and 'wrap-around' early years hubs.** These should offer support before and after school, such as breakfast clubs and regular after school provision that runs until 6pm or later. The Sure Start programme was an excellent example of joined-up,

place-based support to the areas that need it most, but a lack of 'embeddedness' in local communities may have prevented the programme reaching and engaging with the most disadvantaged. Prioritising early years support in areas that lack social infrastructure will have the greatest impact. We also recommend that these hubs are led by residents – alongside targeted support to build local capacity – giving them the ability to shape the services, activities and facilities delivered. There is also potential to integrate hubs with a number of the government's other youth commitments, including the proposed Young Futures hubs.

2. **Targeted support to improve opportunity outside of the classroom.** Evidence shows that community-based provision of extra-curricular and social enrichment activities can effectively tackle a range of barriers to opportunity, including poor mental health, school absence, social disengagement and a lack of employability skills. Again, funding would be best targeted in those neighbourhoods where existing provision is weakest, building community confidence and giving local people control over how the money is spent to ensure it reflects local needs and aspirations.
3. A **two-week work experience guarantee** in partnership with communities. Locally tailored support and mentoring in community settings should be built-in to the work experience offer for young people living in deprived areas, particularly those which also lack social infrastructure, to rebuild the trust that young people have lost in the current system, and address educational and other inequalities that stifle aspiration.
4. Locating 50 per cent of the network of **Young Futures hubs** in neighbourhoods that currently face the double disadvantage of high deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure as part of efforts to rebuild organising capacity in these communities. In addition, local residents - and young people with lived experience of knife crime and its impact - should be given a key role in developing the services provided in the new Young Futures hubs so that they are tailored to local needs and secure the neighbourhood buy-in they require to succeed.
5. That a coordinated **neighbourhood-focused lens** on how this policy area interlinks with others at a hyper-local level should be applied by a dedicated team within government.

## Conclusion

Evidence clearly shows that community groups do vital work in improving young people's attendance and attainment at school; reaching the most disengaged young people; supporting families to enhance home learning environments; and generating skills and employment opportunities that make a difference to life prospects.

There are already brilliant organisations delivering these efforts in affluent areas, which have strong community networks and connections. **But there simply aren't enough country-wide, particularly in the most deprived neighbourhoods.** Now, the government has an opportunity to develop a more systematic strategy, with the potential to transform outcomes for the most deprived children and young people across the country.



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## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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# Local Trust

Canopi | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR  
General enquiries 020 3588 0565 Registered in England and Wales  
Charity number 1147511 | Company number 07833396

