



"Security means knowing someone will be there for you if things go wrong, that laws will be respected and enforced. And it means strong communities – where people pull together instead of turning on each other." Yvette Cooper MP, Home Secretary

Summary

Social infrastructure builds solidarity. When people know their neighbours, take part in joint ventures and see that their communities are places where life prospects can improve, crime rates drop. The opposite is also true: neighbourhoods with weak social infrastructure lack the recreational spaces, social clubs and neighbourhood groups that can help divert people from criminal activity, and exhibit consistently higher levels of vandalism and criminal damage (OCSI, 2021).

We strongly support the new Labour government's position that high levels of crime are "an issue of social justice, with those who are vulnerable or on low incomes being much less likely to feel safe or secure," (Labour party, 2023). Yet **the social causes of crime vary from street to street, and even family to family**. Preventing illegality, then, takes an incredibly high degree of specificity – it demands local insight, and the strong foundations of shared civic life.

At Local Trust, this is our expertise. Across all our work, we have found that the missing ingredient in reducing crime is often not money, or knowledge – but **the capacity for local people to work in close partnership with the state, both locally and nationally, to make changes in their communities**.

As a starting point, Local Trust has identified 225 neighbourhoods in England that face a **double disadvantage**: high levels of deprivation combined with weak social infrastructure. These places lack spaces for the community to meet and the community groups and neighbourhood associations that turn them into thriving hubs of civic activity.

We recommend:

1. **Giving communities a formal role in the Community Policing Guarantee** to mobilise local expertise and networks in producing long-term crime prevention plans, and access to a **designated budget** focused on prevention in their local neighbourhood.
2. Embedding the **Young Futures programme** more directly within communities to rebuild trust between young people, the wider community and formal service providers.
3. 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.
4. 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

Places that have strong social fabric have lower levels of crime. This link is well-known - it has been proven time and again in research - but it is also common sense (Gulma, 2018; Frontier Economics, 2021; Albertson, 2021).

Intuitively, we know that when people feel a sense of agency - when they feel connected to the people around them, and have a sense of efficacy - they are less likely to resort to criminal activity. Shared physical spaces and the activities that take place within them - social clubs, football teams, mental health support groups, community gardens, after school childcare - are all things that can make people feel connected to a place, and create a sense of respect for friends and neighbours. **We call this social infrastructure.**

The causes of crime are messy, and changing the socioeconomic circumstances of a place - in the long run - is hard; particularly when the economy is weak, and governments do not have a lot of money to work with.

In this paper, we set out some **cost-effective ways to address the root causes of crime in the most disadvantaged parts of the country** by rebuilding their social infrastructure. While people often talk about things like funding for better public services, drug control, mental health provision and criminal justice reform, we believe that **local action as a factor has been historically overlooked, and is a prerequisite** enabling communities to address each of these other issues on their own terms, and according to what their neighbourhood needs.

Why social infrastructure?

In neighbourhoods stripped of their social fabric, the act of getting together as a community to improve the local area can restore social cohesion and residents' integration within their neighbourhoods.

Often, community action to build solidarity is focused on improving the local environment. Projects can include litter picking, tree-planting, reducing the number of derelict properties, painting murals and preventing fly-tipping. Time and again, evidence shows that these efforts reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

Community activities help build the relationships of trust and cooperation vital for addressing shared issues, including the reporting and prevention of crime and violence (Sampson et al., 1997). **But they are only possible when**

people have the physical spaces and social capacity to organise such efforts in the first place.

Strong social infrastructure has three core elements:

1. **Spaces and places:** community 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 over a decade, we have helped to build community confidence and capacity to deliver projects that do exactly this. Our evidence shows that high levels of crime in disadvantaged areas is not inevitable and **can be prevented through long term action by communities and the state working together in partnership.**

This is particularly the case for tackling crime committed by young people, where trust needs to be rebuilt, and safe spaces to connect and belong are paramount. Our work shows that community youth initiatives are key to achieve a sustained reduction in knife crime and gang violence. Small scale, community led initiatives can also dramatically reduce anti-social behaviour. In one Big Local area a project the community developed with the police and the local council **reduced antisocial behaviour by 35 per cent** (Local Trust, 2022a).

The economic case

When it comes to tackling crime, **prevention is not only better than cure, it's also cheaper.** The government is right to be concerned that "too many young people are being left without support and so are not being diverted away from criminal activities" (Labour party, 2023). Over a decade of cuts have severely eroded youth services throughout the country, with areas outside of London worst affected.

Rebuilding this costs money - but evidence shows that each reduction in the number of youth centres directly corresponds to an increase in knife crime, while **the financial cost of a young person entering the criminal justice system is four times greater** than if we were to avoid it through the provision of youth work (APPG for Knife Crime & Violence Reduction, 2020; Ministry of Justice, 2023).

Where to start

In the mission document 'make Britain's streets safe', published before it's election into government, Labour set out its aim to halve serious violent crime and raise confidence in the police and criminal justice system.

We strongly agree with the position that crime is "an issue of social justice". Evidence supports this: Local Trust has identified **neighbourhoods (local places with a population of roughly 10,000 people or fewer) in England that face a double disadvantage**: severely high levels of deprivation, combined with weak social infrastructure.

These neighbourhoods are disproportionately impacted by crime, and face higher incidences of criminal damage and other offences – not only compared to wealthier areas, but also to places with similar levels of deprivation, which nevertheless have a strong base of social infrastructure (OCSI, 2021, p21).

This disparity has led to growing resident pessimism about their areas, including an erosion of civic pride and sense of belonging. As stated by UK in a Changing Europe, people in these neighbourhoods feel neglected and, as a result, "believe their local area has got worse on almost every measure... in particular worsening levels of crime" (APPG, 2023). This is why the new government's approach must address the root causes of the population's lack of a sense of security, particularly in the neighbourhoods in which this feeling is most intense.

The government's intention to create locally-specific crime prevention and reduction plans are a critical step forward, but the policy needs a specific focus on deprived neighbourhoods with poor social infrastructure – those with lower concentrations of invaluable community assets including recreational spaces when compared to similarly deprived areas.

These areas lack the community spaces, services and facilities that can divert young people from criminal activity and the **community organisations, led by people who are known and trusted locally, that can reach those most at risk of offending or of being affected by crime.**

In developing this policy area Labour can look to its legacy of neighbourhood-based approaches within the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme. A recent evaluation shows that the NDC reduced crime and improved residents' perceptions of anti-social behaviour and feelings of safety. This was because it gave residents the agency to shape local programmes, and encouraged action to restore local cohesion (CRESR, 2023).

The case studies below provide concrete examples of what can be achieved through building community confidence and capacity, as a foundation for tackling the root causes of crime.

Case study: East Marsh United

East Marsh is a small ward in Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire. For years it ranked among the worst places to live in the UK for crime – the 2019 IoD Crime Ranking ranked it in the top 3.4 per cent of wards in the country with the most crime (Local Insight, 2023).

In 2017, a group of residents formed East Marsh United. Initially created as a forum for volunteers to work on cleaning up the neighbourhood and restoring derelict buildings, their work has had a notable impact on residents' perceptions of crime, and cultivated a strong sense of pride which has prevented further destruction of the local environment.

More importantly, the sense of empowerment these early 'clean up' projects gave local residents has led them to more ambitious projects to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour. A community leader explained that improving the local environment can become a catalyst for tackling more complex local issues:

"In 2017, our main activity was framed around 'broken windows theory'. We began fixing metaphorical broken windows by going out and cleaning our streets with our own bin bags and brushes and shovels and so on. But we also sat together every week to work out what else was broken and how we might be able to fix things ourselves." (APPG, 2023).

The group has gone on to develop community arts programmes and employment and skills training for local residents, and now they have more ambitious plans to boost the local social infrastructure provision by building a new East Marsh village hall. They are a Community Benefit Society, and have now bought and refurbished ten local houses and want to increase their housing stock.

Case study: Grange Big Local

The Grange is an estate in East Finchley, nestled between High Road and the North Circular in London. It has around 7,000 residents, and severe pockets of deprivation - despite the fact that you can walk around 20 minutes from it and find yourself on Bishops Avenue, where the average house price is just under £7.5 million.

A big worry for local residents was knife crime, and before Big Local, there was a lack of diversionary activities. To fill this gap, the Grange Big Local partnership funded a local martial arts gym, and organised self-defence activities to reach and gain the trust of young people living locally at risk of knife crime and gang violence.

The group was able to build on the success of this project by employing trusted youth workers to provide support to the most vulnerable young people, without them feeling judged or monitored. Two attendees had the scheme written into their youth offending orders, because - as one said - if he'd had it earlier, maybe he "wouldn't have got into trouble".

Another local project is a nail bar for young women and girls. It is such a simple idea, but also so clever: people can come to learn how to paint and get their nails done, and while that is happening they talk. There isn't the stigma of going to talk "to" someone; it's just a conversation. With an element of touch, with an act of doing something nice for someone else, and with no need to make eye contact.

The setting is flexible enough for group work or one-to-one, and can be extended to include obtaining qualifications. You can also bring other people into the conversation easily, like a Young Domestic Violence Adviser, who can talk about healthy relationships.

Case study: Brinnington Big Local

Brinnington is a north-eastern suburb of Stockport, a town in Greater Manchester, overlooking the Tame Valley. Here, a team of residents successfully developed a volunteer-led domestic abuse campaign called the "Orange Umbrella" project. This involved training local residents to provide support to victims of domestic violence, and providing support workers with pins and bright orange umbrellas so they could be easily identifiable by those seeking help.

The campaign has been successful in helping local people to come forward, particularly those from marginalised communities who have missed out on support in the past. To this day, the Orange Umbrella team works with volunteers to provide a discrete domestic abuse service for Brinnington residents, and has become one of Stockport's most important women's support services.

What needs to happen

With these lessons in mind, the new Labour government should:

1. Extend the proposed **Community Policing Guarantee**. In its current form, the guarantee mentions that local people and businesses should be given a role in setting local policing priorities. However, to maximise long term impact, it should go further: giving communities **a formal role in co-producing long-term crime prevention plans**, as well as access to a **prevention-focused budget** for their neighbourhood, in order to mobilise local expertise, knowledge, and networks.
2. Embed the proposed **Young Futures programme** within communities. The key to this programme's success will be ensuring that programmes benefit from local expertise and rebuild trust and partnership between young people, the wider community and service providers. Labour should learn from its previous experience of the NDC programme, which showed that community engagement was vital, with particular emphasis on young peoples' engagement in youth services. This was because it ensured a focus on the genuine as opposed to the perceived needs of the community; it was more likely to sustain activity beyond the initial programme period, and thereby helped to build local capacity for future preventative action independent of the programme.
3. 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.
4. 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

Tackling crime starts locally. It begins with neighbourhoods in which residents have a strong sense of agency in their partnership with state run services and are socially connected. Where people have the capacity to act, and advocate for the place they live. Building social infrastructure is a crucial preventative measure to reduce the impact of crime in disadvantaged areas, as set out in the new Labour government's mission to 'make Britain's streets safe' and halve serious violent crime.

Building social infrastructure to prevent and reduce the impact of crime is at the core of our experience with the Big Local programme and other neighbourhood initiatives. In areas with such community programmes, evaluations have found that crime rates were reduced, and that anti-social behaviour and criminal damage were consistently lower, as well as there being fewer fluctuations in recorded instances than benchmark areas (OCSI, 2023).

Prevention works. And by supporting the growth and development of social infrastructure and social capital, as well as restoring civic pride and belonging in areas where it has been undermined, the government can play a critical role in showing that crime in disadvantaged areas is not inevitable and can be prevented by long term, community-led action.

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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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