

Local Trust
trusting
local
people

**Reflecting on the
All-Party Parliamentary
Group for ‘left behind’
neighbourhoods,
2020-2024**

Local Trust

About this report

This report captures the work and contributions of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods over the course of its activities between 2020 and 2024, during which Local Trust served as the Group's secretariat. It refers to policy agendas, government departments and funding schemes 'as was' during this period.

Members of Parliament and their accompanying constituencies are also listed in the context of the 2019-2024 Parliament, with titles of expert witnesses recorded as the role in which they provided evidence to the Group.

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Front cover: Group sitting in park, Noel Park Big Local
Photo: Press Record



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Foreword from Local Trust

Local Trust believes that trusting communities and giving them more power will enable local people to significantly improve their quality of life and the places in which they live.

Over the last decade and a half, Local Trust has delivered Big Local, a unique programme providing over £1m of funding to local people in each of 150 deprived neighbourhoods across the country to transform their communities for the better. Alongside that we have provided whatever training, advice and mentoring they might want to help make the most of that opportunity.

Most importantly, we have given communities the time to develop and implement their plans – from the start of Big Local in 2012 through to its end in 2026 – and absolute trust that they are best placed to make the decisions about what is right for their local areas.

Over the course of the programme, we have gained direct and unique experience of the challenges faced by residents trying to make a difference in their neighbourhoods; the priorities they set for themselves when given the choice; and the issues that can prove challenging as they set about delivering change.

There is incredible diversity across each of the 150 Big Local areas. But some common themes have also emerged over the course of our work. The resident-led partnerships that saw early success generally had access to certain resources:

1. Places and spaces to meet
2. Strong physical or digital connectivity linking residents to opportunities and services
3. An already active and engaged community, made up of existing groups and organisations that help deliver local projects.

Communities that lacked these basic resources at the outset often needed more support as they established themselves, and often seemed to experience bigger challenges in relation to other key social outcomes, including health, education and crime.

In many ways this is unsurprising: these three key elements make up the social infrastructure of a place, the foundational layer of connection within and between local communities that helps build and sustain social capital, something that is critical to the success of any local neighbourhood.

The impact of these factors in Big Local areas led us to want to explore them more widely across England as a whole. We had two main objectives in mind. First, to gain insight to help us better support Big Local areas in delivering their ambitions. Second, to consider how these factors might cast light on the challenges facing deprived areas more generally.

Local Trust subsequently commissioned the Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) to develop the Community Needs Index (CNI). This index brought together an extensive range of national datasets to map down to a neighbourhood level the density of social fabric across the whole of England.

Whilst the output of this work was interesting in its own right, what stood out most from the data was the extent to which it interacted with national deprivation statistics. When the CNI was overlaid with the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) it highlighted a significant number of neighbourhoods in England that were suffering both from very low levels of social infrastructure and severe socio-economic deprivation.

This group of neighbourhoods – often concentrated in housing estates on the edges of post-industrial towns and cities, in former mining communities in the north, and in coastal areas in the south east – appeared to be doing significantly worse than other places that were otherwise equally deprived.

Compared to neighbourhoods with a similar position on the IMD, but benefitting from a base layer of social infrastructure, these places appeared to suffer from lower educational attainment and participation in higher education; higher levels of poverty and worklessness; and significantly worse health outcomes.

In the context of debates at the time around ‘left behind’ communities, we suggested that this might be useful starting point for understanding what that term might mean. More recently, other terms, including ‘double disadvantage’ – reflecting the extent to which places suffer from both deprivation and a loss of social infrastructure – have also come into use.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods (APPG) was established in 2020, reflecting a broad-based cross-party interest in addressing the needs of those communities. The APPG sought to better understand the challenges of these areas and develop practical policy solutions for them. This included exploring how to build community confidence and capacity, addressing issues around both public and private sector engagement in those neighbourhoods, and delivering improved social and economic outcomes for local residents.

Local Trust was pleased to serve as the group’s secretariat over the course of the 2019-2024 Parliament, bringing together voices and expertise from across parliament, civil society and communities to raise awareness of places facing the double disadvantage of deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure.

The work of the APPG has been incredibly impactful, and under the joint chair-ship of Paul Howell, the former MP for Sedgefield, and the Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, grew to be one of the most active and influential of its kind. Its research and activities helped build an extensive evidence base that underscores the importance of community leadership and strong, locally-led institutions to make the changes local people need.

One of the APPG’s most important contributions was its members’ advocacy for a Community Wealth Fund (CWF) to be funded from the expected new wave of dormant assets. Significant progress was made on the design of this new fund, but its launch was delayed by the 2024 general election. We are expecting an announcement from Government as to the initial shape of the new fund in early 2025.

While the activities of the APPG have come to an end, Local Trust remains dedicated to sharing learning from the Big Local programme as it enters its final phase, with many areas closing out from the programme and a number continuing their work through new community organisations.

By sharing this learning, we want to ensure that future neighbourhood regeneration schemes benefit from its evidence on the importance of long-term, patient, and flexible investment in deprived areas, that is grounded in trusting local people to know what is right for their community.

We also hope that the APPG’s wider bank of research and evidence-based policy solutions will provide fertile ground for future governments to develop a policy programme that recognises the critical role of strong and thriving neighbourhoods to our country’s success, as well as influencing and informing the work of the new Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods recently launched by Baroness Hilary Armstrong.

Matt Leach

Chief executive, Local Trust

Introduction

When people talk about parts of the UK that have been 'left behind', they mean places like Bentilee and Ubberry. A postwar housing estate on the eastern edge of Stoke-on-Trent, Bentilee and Ubberry is home to around 11,000 people. Between 2015 and 2018, the city of Stoke saw a period of rapid growth, making it the eighth fastest growing economy in England per capita (City of Stoke-on-Trent, 2021). Yet the community in Bentilee and Ubberry has felt little of these benefits. More than 90 per cent of residents fall within the highest decile of income deprivation. Today, it remains one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England, with a male life expectancy more than three years lower than the average across the local authority, and over six years lower than the national average.

Roughly 4 per cent of people in England live in a 'left behind' neighbourhood like Bentilee and Ubberry. There are 225 across the country, largely concentrated in the North, in the Midlands, and in pockets of deprivation along the South Coast. There are very few 'left behind' neighbourhoods in London and other city centres. That is because to be 'left behind' is to suffer from a double disadvantage, which is rare in most English cities.

England's 'left behind' neighbourhoods are identified by combining data from the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and the Community Needs Index (CNI). The IMD ranks areas based on levels of social and economic deprivation. The CNI ranks neighbourhoods according to three metrics: physical and digital connectivity; levels of community and civic engagement; and the number of community spaces such as parks, leisure centres, community halls and libraries. The English neighbourhoods that rank amongst the most deprived 10 per cent in both the IMD and the CNI are the 225 classified in this report as 'left behind'.

The country has long agreed that these 'left behind' neighbourhoods need more help than they're getting. Polls show that the public regard area-based disparities

as the single most serious inequality in Britain today (IFS, 2021). The 2019 election delivered a strong mandate for the Conservative Party's pledge 'to level up every part of the United Kingdom' (Conservative Party, 2019). But it wasn't only Conservative voters or politicians who supported the levelling up agenda. The Labour Party manifesto also promised 'levelling up across the country', and the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and the Brexit Party all made similar commitments (Labour Party, 2019).



Mosaic sign in Newington Big Local
(Photo: Local Trust/Ben Langdon)

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, and the gap between England's most and least advantaged communities grew even wider and more conspicuous (APPG, 2020). It was in this context that a group of MPs and Peers from across the political spectrum came together in June 2020 to form the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods. The aim was to develop practical policy solutions to improve social and economic outcomes for the 2.4 million people who live in 'left behind' neighbourhoods like Bentilee and Ubbberley.

Between June 2020 and March 2024, the APPG held evidence sessions and a major inquiry into how to level the playing field between England's neighbourhoods. Despite years of funding and policies specifically targeted at reducing geographic disparities, the most disadvantaged communities have continued to miss out on their fair share of public and charitable funding. Worse, these communities have suffered disproportionately from external shocks such as COVID-19 and the rise in cost of living, producing long-term effects that have widened inequalities (APPG, 2023).

At the same time, the APPG observed countless examples of community-based activism and mobilisation outside the remit of 'levelling up' which have made a genuine, lasting difference to England's 'left behind' neighbourhoods. In Blackpool, Revoelution's community hub welcome over 100 people a week through its doors to access public services and build personal connections.

In Dover, the Big Local's community economic development project help countless local residents into high-quality and secure employment. And on the Eastern tip of Kent, Newington Big Local's Chill Club brings young people together to cook, create art, play sports and make friends.

The disparities between the most and least advantaged neighbourhoods remain a prominent feature of our society and economy. In the early days of a new parliament, the stage is now set for further debate on how to take forward and refine policies that will make a meaningful difference for those parts of England that experience significantly worse outcomes than elsewhere in the country. As that debate unfolds, politicians and policymakers would be wise to learn the lessons that have come from the APPG's investigation – both about the nature of the challenges 'left behind' neighbourhoods face and the approaches that work best to address them.

This report presents an overview of the APPG's findings over the course of its activities, which should inform the development and delivery of future programmes aimed at regenerating the most disadvantaged areas. Underlying them all is one key lesson: that the disparity between neighbourhoods – not the disparity between regions – is the defining feature of geographic inequality in England today.



Biggin Bizr. Town centre, Dover
(Photo: Local Trust/Zute Lightfoot)

Bentilee and Ubbberley is a perfect example. Approximately 32 per cent of residents claim unemployment benefits, compared to less than 9 per cent of those living in Longton East, just a 10 minute drive away. In 2021, the city council was successful in securing £56m of the government's Levelling Up Fund to progress three town centre regeneration projects. Bentilee and Ubbberley will not receive a penny of that funding.

Regional and national programmes are simply too broad to target the 'left behind' neighbourhoods they were designed to support. Going forward, policies intended to improve social outcomes and tackle inequality must be geographically targeted at the neighbourhood level, with priority given to 'left behind' neighbourhoods. This report sets out the APPG's recommendations for what those neighbourhood-level policies might look like. Crucially, it calls for local people to be given the opportunity and resources they need to make their own decisions and lead the regeneration of their own local areas. Too often, disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been left disenfranchised by initiatives that parachute in consultants and organisations from outside the area, thereby missing the opportunity to build community confidence or capacity.

Evidence presented to the APPG shows that the biggest improvements in outcomes occur when communities are authentically involved in and engaged with decision-making (CRESR, 2023). The experiences of countless community activists and volunteers who are struggling to carry out their work under the current system has underlined the critical importance of community leadership.

Together, the findings of the APPG inquiry and the recommendations made in the report that follows set out the case for a renewed focus on rebuilding the social and civic fabric of our neighbourhoods. This is the only way to undo the double disadvantage of economic deprivation and insufficient social infrastructure – the main barrier that stands between the residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods and the opportunities they deserve.

Above all, this report advocates a new way of thinking about our communities and the people who live in them – one which extends well beyond those 225 neighbourhoods. It is a call to put 'left behind' neighbourhoods in control of their destinies. With the power, the resources, and the trust of government, it's remarkable what local communities can achieve.



Greenmoor, Bradford
(Photo: Local Trust/Andrew Aitchison)

Key themes explored

Between June 2020 and March 2024, the APPG held a series of evidence sessions exploring the key issues facing 'left behind' neighbourhoods and their residents, with expert speakers drawn from both the frontline of policy and practice as well as communities themselves. This is the evidence base that informed the group's reports and publications.

The impact of COVID-19

'Left behind' neighbourhoods were at greater risk of negative health and economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic due to their higher concentrations of clinically vulnerable people, alongside those suffering from financial hardship as a result of poor relative labour market positions.

The first APPG session on what makes a neighbourhood 'left behind' also examined how COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequalities in such neighbourhoods, using data and expert evidence from local authority and community perspectives.



[You can watch the session here.](#)

Communities at risk

The report, *Communities at risk: The early impact of COVID-19 on 'left behind' neighbourhoods*, presented socio-economic data illustrating the high-level challenges facing residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods over the first few months of the pandemic.

Key findings

'Left behind' neighbourhoods:

- Have higher proportions of people with long-term illness or disabilities.
- Have higher proportions of people with high-risk health conditions, including cancer (especially lung cancer), obesity, asthma, chronic kidney disease, diabetes and coronary heart diseases.
- Are home to residents who are more likely to work in health and social care sectors and therefore had higher exposure to COVID-19.
- Have a relatively high concentration of people employed in sectors adversely impacted by lockdowns, such as retail.
- Receive fewer grants, see less civil society activity, and have less access to resources and support than areas which have less acute needs and fewer challenges.



Communities at risk: the early impact of COVID-19 on 'left behind' neighbourhoods



A 'data dive' for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for 'left behind' neighbourhoods

This report is an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved or edited by either House of Parliament. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

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Social infrastructure

A lack of social infrastructure is what distinguishes 'left behind' neighbourhoods from other deprived areas. Social infrastructure is so central to the APPG's policy discussions and recommendation that its second evidence session was dedicated to defining the concept, along with social capital.



[You can watch the session here.](#)

As the APPG uses the term, social infrastructure refers to the framework of institutions and physical spaces that support shared civic life. This can be broken down into three subcategories:

- **Civic assets:** spaces and places in the community where people can meet and interact.
- **Community engagement:** groups and organisations that provide activities and bring people together.
- **Connectivity:** digital and physical connections between people and opportunities – particularly economic opportunities.

The report, *Communities of trust: why we must invest in the social infrastructure of 'left behind' neighbourhoods*, argued that long-term, neighbourhood-level investment in social infrastructure is essential to ensure lasting change in these areas. It called for investment in the form of a Community Wealth Fund to provide "perpetual investment in long-term, transformational, community-led projects in 'left behind' areas," thereby tackling the deep-rooted spatial inequality that divides the country.

Community asset ownership

The APPG found 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England to be critically lacking in community assets, with a lower density than other similarly deprived areas and a far lower density than the national average.

The policy short, *Levelling up local outcomes: the importance of community spaces to neighbourhood regeneration*, showed that 'left behind' neighbourhoods are behind in almost every major category of community assets, from cultural spaces to sports and leisure facilities. It recommended:

- A long-term, hyper-local, evidence-led strategy that places social infrastructure at the heart of levelling up.
- A reinvented funding model that targets investment at 'left behind' neighbourhoods.
- New community rights, underpinned by new resources from central government.

Crucially, civic assets in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are very rarely owned and managed by the community, restricting the range of benefits available to a neighbourhood and its residents. Community ownership can strengthen the economy and build civic pride, alongside supporting more responsive public services.

To discuss this increasingly popular model for improving local outcomes, the Group held a session entitled *Taking ownership, taking control?*, informed by OCSI's community data dive and new research by Renaisi into barriers to asset ownership (OCSI, 2020a; Renaisi, 2021).



[You can watch the session here.](#)

Employment, education and skills

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, people living and working in 'left behind' neighbourhoods faced constrained economic opportunities (OCSI, 2020b). This has meant:

- Lower numbers of locally based jobs and a striking lack of self-employment
- A greater likelihood of residents being excluded from the labour market due to poor health or disability
- Lower educational attainment from primary school to post-16
- A higher proportion of adults with no or low qualifications or who lack basic skills.

The session *A focus on employment, education and skills* examined the related challenges facing residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods. It explored OCSI's economic data dive on employment and training outcomes in 'left behind' areas. It also reflected on projects and initiatives that have sought to improve employment outcomes and close the educational attainment gap (OCSI, 2020b).

 [You can watch the session here.](#)



Visiting the MPower Kernow workshop
(Photo: Local Trust/Charlotte Sams)

Community-led regeneration

The APPG's evidence base shows that when communities play a greater role in local decision-making, they experience better social and economic outcomes. But a lack of social infrastructure in 'left behind' neighbourhoods hinders opportunities for community leadership. These communities are marked by depleted levels of social capital, weakened connections between residents, organisations and public agencies, and by lower levels of volunteering and other civic activity. This reduces their capacity for meaningful participation in local decision-making.

To be successful and sustainable, regeneration in 'left behind' neighbourhoods must:

- Be led by local people – the experts best placed to know what needs to be done to improve local outcomes
- Reflect local needs and local circumstances, not follow a national template
- Entrust decision-making (including funding) to communities, not Whitehall or the town hall
- Invest in communities for the long term, to build capacity, social infrastructure, opportunity and resilience.

Following on from Danny Kruger MP's report to government, *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant*, the APPG held a session to explore the practicalities of empowering communities to play a bigger role in local decision-making, and how this might improve social and economic outcomes for local residents (Kruger, 2020).

 [You can watch the session here.](#)

Connectivity

Residents of 'left behind' neighbourhoods face many issues as a result of poor physical connectivity. Factors such as the steady decline of bus services, combined with historical rail closures, have cut these places off from essential services and amenities.

Alongside this lack of physical connectivity, 'left behind' neighbourhoods also face a digital divide, which is more nuanced than simply a lack of access to the internet. Residents do have poorer access and slower internet speeds than other similarly deprived neighbourhoods: 49.1mb/s compared to 51.1mb/s. But 80 per cent of people living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods do not use the internet in their everyday lives, and a higher proportion of them are classified as 'e-withdrawn'. They use less data

now than other areas did pre-COVID. This suggests that to overcome digital exclusion, both access and skill level needs to be improved, so residents can make the most of online opportunities and services that are 'digital by default'.

To explore this topic further, the APPG held a session entitled *Buses, broadband and beeching*, which used OCSI's connectivity data dive on 'left behind' neighbourhoods to map investment priorities for connecting these communities (OCSI, 2020c). The session explored how a lack of connectivity in 'left behind' neighbourhoods leads to residents becoming isolated from public services such as healthcare, and missing out on opportunities including jobs and social or community activities.



[You can watch the session here.](#)

Connecting communities

The report, *Connecting communities: improving transport to get 'left behind' neighbourhoods back on track*, was released by the APPG in collaboration with the Campaign for Better Transport. It recommends ways in which hyper-local targeted investment could support connectivity in 'left behind' neighbourhoods..

Key findings

- 84 per cent of 'left behind' neighbourhoods have worse overall connectivity than the England average
- 40 per cent of households in 'left behind' neighbourhoods have no car, compared to the England average of 26 per cent
- Local authority-supported bus services in 'left behind' areas declined by 35 per cent from 2015-2021, while commercial services declined by 11 per cent.



Health inequality

Areas identified as 'left behind' have among the worst health outcomes in England, with growing disparities between these neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. People living in these areas were 46 per cent more likely to have died from COVID-19 than the English average, and even 7 per cent more likely to have died from the virus than those living in other deprived areas of England (OCSI, 2020d).

The session entitled *NHS: Neighbourhood health services?* discussed the health of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, one year on from the start of the lockdown. Using OCSI's health data dive, it investigated the lasting impact of COVID-19 and explored the sorts of hyper-local initiatives and neighbourhood-based preventative healthcare measures which can improve people's physical and mental wellbeing.



[You can watch the session here.](#)

Overcoming health inequalities

The report, *Overcoming health inequalities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods*, explored how tackling the health inequalities facing local authorities with 'left behind' neighbourhoods could add an extra £29.8bn to the country's economy each year.

The report recommended including a strand on reducing health inequalities at the neighbourhood and community level in the government's public health strategy and increasing NHS funding for more deprived local areas.



Overcoming health inequalities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods



A report of the APPG
for 'left behind' neighbourhoods
January 2022

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The report was researched by OCSI and Local Trust. It was funded by Local Trust. Secretariat to the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Local Trust  nhsa 

Climate action

While effective global responses to the threat posed by the climate crisis are critical, there is also a role for local residents at the neighbourhood level. Communities must therefore be supported to better adapt and respond to the climate emergency. Four in five people living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are concerned about climate change. 68 per cent of residents believe the transition to net zero will be beneficial for their area, and 62 per cent would like to see more local control over the process.

The session entitled *Communities and the climate crisis* examined what can be done to help 'left behind' neighbourhoods benefit from a just transition, ensuring that they do not disproportionately bear the costs of climate change mitigation or the move to net zero.



[You can watch the session here.](#)

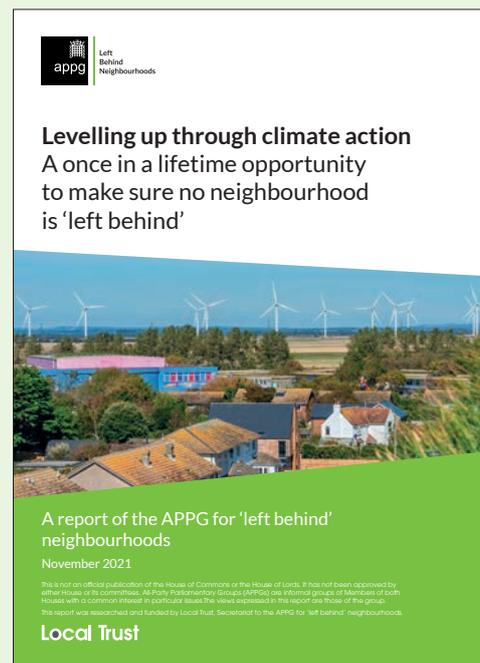
Levelling up through climate action

The report, *Levelling up through climate action: A once in a lifetime opportunity to make sure no neighbourhood is 'left behind'*, explores how communities can be supported at the local level to better adapt and respond to the climate emergency.

Communities need long-term investment in local capacity building to thrive in a time of transition. The government must empower communities to plan and to manage their own neighbourhoods as part of the national net zero agenda.

The report argues for the creation of:

- A Community Wealth Fund, to invest in vital social infrastructure and to support local leadership on a climate adaptation and mitigation project.
- A Just Transition Fund, targeted specifically to 'left behind' areas, to facilitate practical steps towards net zero, such as insulating homes and helping local businesses to adapt.



Liveability

Liveability refers to the overall wellbeing of a community. It is made up of the multiple, interacting characteristics which make a location a place where people want to live, and is reflected in the way a place looks and feels, such as the amount of green space and the feeling of safety.

'Left behind' neighbourhoods generally suffer from what might be described as 'poor place quality' or 'low liveability'. Data commissioned by the APPG shows that 'left behind' neighbourhoods have (OCSI, 2021):

- A lower concentration of green assets (272.9 per 100,000) than other deprived areas (366.1) and England as a whole (356.4)
- A lower concentration of recreational green space (5.8 percent) than the average among other deprived areas (8.7 per cent) and across urban England (6.9 percent)
- Higher recorded incidents of criminal damage (17.8 per 1,000 people) than other deprived areas (16.6) and England as a whole (9.0)
- A relative lack of development, with a lower proportion of new build houses as well as a higher proportion of vacant and undeveloped land.

The session entitled *Cleaner, safer, greener* discussed: what local 'liveability' issues residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods experience; what can be done to help improve how local areas look and feel; and how communities can be better supported and resourced to make improvements in their neighbourhoods.



[You can watch the session here.](#)



Children play in park and sports fields on Antony Green
(Photo: Local Trust/Claudia Leisinger)

Access to funding

While people who live in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are often eager to participate in community-led initiatives to improve the local area, many lack the time, the resources or the existing networks

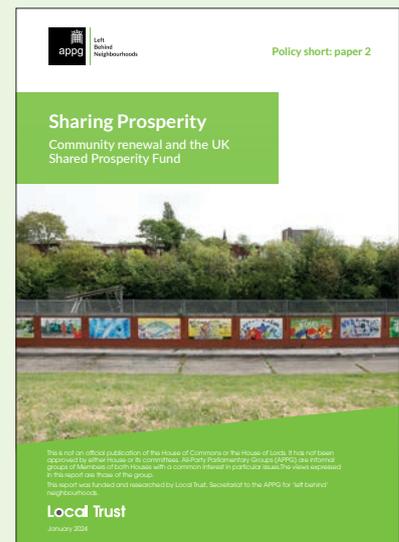
they need to secure vital funding. Funding schemes must therefore reflect local priorities in the most disadvantaged areas and include greater investment in community engagement and capacity-building.

Sharing prosperity

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which was introduced in 2022 to replace EU Structural Funds, was a central pillar of the government's plans to spread opportunity more equally across the UK. The APPG's policy short, *Sharing Prosperity: Community renewal and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund*, revealed glaring regional disparities in UKSPF allocations. Short funding timeframes and turnarounds reduced spending efficiencies across the programme. In many areas, lead authorities redirected funding to backfill existing projects and priorities.

Key recommendations

- A reinvented funding model that targets hyper-local investment at 'left behind' neighbourhoods.
- Confirming UKSPF funding for the same seven-year period as the EU Structural Funds it replaces, at a minimum.
- Building in a ring-fenced capacity-building budget to the 'communities and place' strand of the UKSPF.
- In the absence of devolution, making community involvement in 'local partnership groups' mandatory.



Arts and culture

Arts and culture make important contributions to individual wellbeing, positive social change, and to community and local economic development. In 'left behind' neighbourhoods, residents are less able to access cultural assets and have historically missed out on arts and cultural funding.

Data commissioned for the APPG shows that 'left behind' neighbourhoods (OCSI, 2023):

- Have fewer cultural assets compared to the English average – 88 per cent have a lower density of cultural assets and 86.2 per cent have a lower density of leisure assets.
- Receive less cultural investment than other equally deprived areas, including grant funding from Arts Council England and the Department for Culture Media and Sport.

- Have fewer businesses and less employment in the creative, arts and entertainment activities sector than other similarly deprived areas of England.
- See lower participation in arts and culture activities than anywhere else in England.

The final session of the APPG explored the benefits of arts- and culture-led regeneration to individual wellbeing and local economic development.

 [You can read the summary notes here.](#)

Inquiry into levelling up

The APPG began a major inquiry into the government's levelling up agenda following the publication of the *Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper* in the spring of 2022.

The White Paper set out four main objectives for government (DLUHC, 2022):

1. Boosting productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.
2. Spreading opportunities and improving public services.
3. Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging.
4. Empowering local leaders and communities.

The White Paper was accompanied by funding schemes to develop local infrastructure, to boost community ownership of local assets, to promote town centre regeneration, and to drive investment in deprived places.

Sessions

In 2022 and 2023 the APPG held inquiry sessions to assess the extent to which the White Paper's policy programme aligned with the needs and aspirations of people who live in the most deprived or 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Session 1: Social outcomes

This session brought together two panels of expert witnesses to explore the White Paper's missions relating to education, skills, health, and wellbeing (OCSI, 2022b).

A key takeaway from the first panel was that education does not exist in a vacuum: educational participation, performance, and outcomes are all influenced by broader external factors. These might be concrete circumstances, such as the availability of local amenities, services and transport. More subtle factors include community mental health, cultural attitudes to education, and beliefs about opportunity and social mobility.



Pottery decorating at Par Community Garden, Cornwall
(Photo: Local Trust/James Ram)



It's about prioritising the most vulnerable communities in levelling up spend, investing long term in communities and investing so residents themselves hold the purse strings and are empowered to create and deliver projects that best work for them."

Reece Pocklington, Ewanrigg Local Trust, oral evidence to inquiry session one

Witnesses from the second panel stressed that the causes of health inequalities experienced by 'left behind' neighbourhoods are multifaceted and therefore unlikely to be solved by increasing health service provision alone. External factors such as financial insecurity can exacerbate health problems. Improving a community's health outcomes requires a holistic approach that considers the broader determinants of health.

Both panels expressed in-principle support for the aims of the Levelling Up White Paper. However, witnesses stressed the need to pay attention to the unique challenges faced by residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and the importance of giving communities the power and resources to create their own solutions.



[You can read the summary notes here.](#)

Session 2: Economic outcomes

This session examined the White Paper's missions relating to living standards, transport infrastructure and digital connectivity (OCSI, 2022a).

Expert witnesses expressed significant concern about the economic outcomes of 'left behind' neighbourhoods and the increasing pressure placed on them from rising energy bills and inflation. Residents in these areas have lower resilience to these external shocks than the rest of the population, due to their higher levels of financial vulnerability.

A common theme throughout the session was the importance of listening and responding to local communities during the development of policy solutions. One witness stressed that regeneration cannot be achieved through a 'top-down' process: actors like local government must work directly with communities to identify priorities.



[You can read the summary notes here.](#)



There's not a single template that covers everything for regeneration. Each project should be guided by existing knowledge (and) expertise of grassroots organisations in the neighbourhood. Top-down management of regeneration is a waste of existing resources and expertise."

John Angell, Dover Big Local, oral evidence to inquiry session two

Session 3: Communities

This session examined the White Paper's missions relating to pride in place, housing and crime (OCSI, 2022c).

Evaluation of previous regeneration initiatives in the United Kingdom has found strong evidence to support community-led approaches across policy areas such as housing, crime and pride in place: the most transformative improvements in neighbourhoods have almost always been accompanied by meaningful participation from local people.

There is also a strong link between effective community regeneration and people's pride in their local area. It has also been shown to have knock-on benefits in other spheres, including positive health outcomes resulting from improvements in housing or the local physical environment.



[You can read the summary notes here.](#)



Although on a day-to-day basis we are busy dealing with people's immediate needs, we know that if we want to improve the lives of residents in the long term, we need to work on the bigger picture... That means empowering and enabling people to be involved in strategic conversations."

Angie Buss, Blackpool Revue Big Local, oral evidence to inquiry session three

Session 4: Investment

This session examined the White Paper's ambition to empower local leaders and communities, especially in places that lack local agency (OCSI, 2022d).

As previous inquiry sessions outlined, there is a strong evidence base for the critical importance of empowered communities to effective regeneration efforts. But 'left behind' neighbourhoods face significant challenges caused by a lack of social infrastructure, which makes it more difficult to develop local leadership or to mobilise around a shared project or common goal.

The panel discussed how the efforts of community groups, local government, and statutory agencies alike might be strengthened through effective partnership working, as well as how to connect urban centres to surrounding areas.



[You can read the summary notes here.](#)



Ultimately, we do have a view of how we want to live. And actually it's pretty much the same as everybody else on the planet. A nice home, safe, attractive and green neighbourhood, good neighbours and enough money not to have to worry all the time."

Billy Dasein, East Marsh United, oral evidence to inquiry session four

A neighbourhood strategy for national renewal

In October 2023, the APPG released the final report from its inquiry into levelling up, *A neighbourhood strategy for national renewal*. The report used the evidence provided to the APPG over the course of the inquiry to outline a vision for 'left behind' neighbourhoods and assess the ability of the levelling up agenda, in its then-current form, to achieve that vision.

The report identified three key areas where change needs to happen:

1. Redistribute power from the centre to community

Powers, responsibilities and accountabilities are too concentrated in Westminster and Whitehall. Improving the lot of 'left behind' neighbourhoods demands devolution that decentralises power to neighbourhoods themselves – those who best understand local needs and priorities. It is vital that communities are given a real say in the decisions that affect them.

2. Transform funding and resources

Evidence shows that 'left behind' communities often struggle to access investment and miss out on their fair share of funding. Centrally managed competitive bidding effectively screens them out, demanding significant effort with no guarantee of success. Other blocks include convoluted application procedures, stringent eligibility criteria, little supportive civic infrastructure, and a 'language gap' between how people think and talk about their lives, and the terminology used by government and – often – civil society organisations. What's more, the dominant funding model favours one-off capital investment over the revenue funding critical for community development. Meaningful progress requires targeted investments in social capital, local leadership, and community capacity building.

3. Shift culture from control to trust

National appraisal systems rarely reflect specific local needs. We must move towards a culture of trust in which local people are empowered to act and then held accountable, and away from a culture of control by the centre.

To effect these necessary changes, the report made a number of recommendations for central and local government, as well as established community organisations working to make a difference in 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

“They ('left behind' neighbourhoods) can continue to be places where human flourishing is limited and potential squandered. Or these places can become a cornerstone of our national recovery from a decade of challenges, and a new source of resilience for the even greater challenges ahead.”

A neighbourhood strategy for national renewal, quoted in *The Guardian*



Sale West's community green
(Photo: Local Trust/David Oates)

The campaign for a Community Wealth Fund

What is the Community Wealth Fund?

The campaign for a Community Wealth Fund aims to secure funding for the 225 most 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England from the expanded dormant assets scheme. This scheme transfers unclaimed financial assets – for example, bank and building society accounts – to good causes.

The campaign was successful in securing dormant assets for the Community Wealth Fund. The government was expected to respond to the consultation on the design of the Community Wealth Fund, but this did not come before parliament was dissolved ahead of the 2024 general election.

Many members of the APPG supported the creation of a CWF, alongside the Community Wealth Fund Alliance (CWFA) – a group of over 800 public, private and voluntary sector organisations.

The Alliance's proposal for a Community Wealth Fund was based on four key principles:

- Provision of long-term funding (10-15 years)
- Neighbourhood investment at the hyper-local level
- Community-led decision making
- Building community confidence and capacity.



Residents of North West Ipswich Big Local at 'the Friendly Bench'
(Photo: Local Trust/Glen Flarthing – Red Wren Studios)

Key milestones in the APPG's support for the CWF campaign

2020:

APPG co-chairs Paul Howell MP and the Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP write in [Times Red Box](#) in support of the Community Wealth Fund proposal.

2021:

Paul Howell MP introduces a [10-minute Rule Bill](#) to call for the transfer of dormant assets to create a Community Wealth Fund.

2022:

Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP speaks in support of a Community Wealth Fund at the [Dormant Assets Bill Committee](#).

Co-chairs of the APPG make a [submission](#) to the Dormant Assets consultation, setting out how the CWF meets the government's 'essential' and 'desirable' criteria for a new cause.

In their response to this consultation in March 2023, the government announced that community wealth funds would join youth, financial inclusion and social investment wholesalers as named causes to benefit in England from the expansion of the dormant assets scheme beyond bank and building society accounts to new asset classes such as insurance.

This vital new investment would be 'distributed to communities in deprived areas and released over a long time period, with local residents empowered to make decisions on how to use the money' (DCMS, 2023a).

2023:

Co-chairs make a [submission](#) to the technical consultation on a Community Wealth Fund.

APPG Session: The Community Wealth Fund and dormant assets funding

In May 2023, the APPG held a session for APPG members to discuss the key principles and next steps for the Community Wealth Fund.

Four main topics were discussed:

1. Methods for identifying the neighbourhoods most in need of investment, stressing the importance of the CNI.

2. Methods of evaluating community-led social infrastructure investment.

3. The development of a 'Community First' graduate scheme to make community development a career aspiration for the next generation.

4. The value of resident-led decision-making and evidence on key lessons from the Big Local programme.



You can read the summary notes [here](#).

In September 2023, the government announced a technical consultation on the design principles underpinning a CWF. In their submission to this consultation, the co-chairs of the APPG outlined their support for a 'least first' approach to investment that would meet the needs of England's most 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

In the same month, the government also released its statement of intent regarding funding for the CWF. The Dormant Assets Scheme is expected to release £350 million for England between 2024 and 2028. The government intends to allocate this money equally between the four causes, generating £87.5million for the CWF over this period (DCMS, 2023b).

Core objectives for a CWF:

1. To improve social infrastructure in places with relatively high deprivation and/or low social capital.
2. To empower local people to identify needs and make decisions on what is best for their area.
3. To reduce inequalities and enhance community cohesion and integration.

The APPG recommended that the Community Wealth Fund is implemented in line with the principles outlined by the CWF Alliance.



Residents celebrating the opening of Kirkholt Pavilion, Greater Manchester
(Photo: Local Trust/Mark Robinson)

Recommendations

Over the course of its activities and publications, the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods developed a series of core policy recommendations:

- 1. Create a devolution model that takes better account of the specific needs of 'left behind' neighbourhoods.**
 - a. Revamp the devolution model to empower different tiers of government to allocate, redistribute and target resources more effectively.
 - b. Commit to 'double devolution': devolution below the level of combined and local authorities, which gives decision-making powers and resources to residents.
- 2. Commit to community empowerment and a new era of community ownership.**
 - a. Pilot community covenants.
 - b. Refresh and recommit to the Communities Framework.
 - c. Create a Community Wealth Fund.
 - d. Develop the promised Community Spaces and Relationships Strategy, including a roadmap to boost community ownership of locally important assets.
- 3. Reinvent the funding model.**
 - a. Amalgamate the multiple funding pots for tackling place-based inequality into more flexible levelling up funds.
 - b. Target investment on a non-competitive, long-term basis using the Community Needs Index.
- 4. Invest in social infrastructure.**
 - a. Recognise that social infrastructure: replenishes the stocks of social capital necessary for connected, capable and cohesive communities; contributes directly to local economic growth and development; and makes residents feel proud of their area.
 - b. Provide consistent and long-term investment to build local social infrastructure in 'left behind' neighbourhoods by creating community groups, meeting places, social networks and civic assets.
- 5. Address local transport needs to increase connectivity in 'left behind' neighbourhoods.**
 - a. Support local authorities and strengthen their ability to better identify and respond to local transport needs.
 - b. Provide clear commitments for future local bus funding, alongside that promised in the National Bus Strategy.
 - c. Move to a single, ring-fenced, multi-year funding framework for Local Transport Authorities.
- 6. Address spatial health disparities.**
 - a. Include a strand in the national levelling up strategy on reducing spatial health disparities through targeting multiple neighbourhood, community and healthcare factors.
 - b. Set up long-term, ring-fenced funding to ensure more effective delivery of resources on the ground, and to deliver targeted health inequalities programmes (drawing on initiatives such as Healthy New Towns) with a hyper-local focus on 'left behind' areas with the worst health outcomes.
 - c. Safeguard community public health budgets to boost health resilience in deprived communities and to ensure that action to relieve acute NHS backlogs does not undermine efforts to tackle the root causes of ill health.

Conclusion

Every one of England's 225 doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods has its own, unique challenges. The barriers a former mining town in County Durham faces are different from those faced by a postwar estate on the outskirts of Stoke-on-Trent – different, in fact, from a former mining town in Nottinghamshire.

So in setting out to reverse England's geographical inequality, one broad-strokes approach must not be replaced with another. The success of the community-based regeneration projects the APPG saw over its four years of activity is a result of their diversity. On the Lincolnshire coast, Coastal Community Challenge (CCC) responded to the closure of local rail networks by creating new local transport routes and community centres for residents. On the outskirts of Wakefield, Warwick Ahead combatted social isolation on the Warwick Estate by building a new 'Community Village' on the estate from scratch.

As different as these initiatives have been, they have all had one very important thing in common: they have been locally conceived, locally led, and locally run. Throughout the APPG's lifetime, the group consistently saw that when you trust local people to define their own priorities and make their own decisions, you create targeted, lasting and positive change.

Although the work of the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods has come to a close, its legacy should be the beginning of a new commitment to community-led regeneration. For, as much as each 'left behind' neighbourhood faces its own, unique challenges, each also possesses its own unique character, history and strengths.

Lincolnshire's coastal towns, for instance, have a strong seasonal tourist economy, which has enabled CCC to provide local residents with qualifications in hospitality. Because the Warwick Estate was already a tight-knit community whose residents felt a deep connection to the place, Warwick Ahead's community initiatives found enthusiastic volunteers and participants straight away. To reverse the grave geographic inequalities that exist in this country, we must become better at harnessing local strengths like these.

As the new government settles into power, it is essential that parliament appropriately prioritises 'left behind' areas to ensure they are supported to thrive. As set out in this report, the APPG has identified the best way to approach this.

As a first priority, the government must provide 'left behind' neighbourhoods with targeted resources to build foundational social infrastructure and to improve specific metrics such as health or educational attainment. Funding for tackling geographic inequality should be more flexible and accessible, and it should be allocated on a non-competitive, long-term basis.

On a structural level, the UK needs a more coordinated and holistic approach to addressing the interconnected challenges 'left behind' neighbourhoods face. The government must facilitate greater collaboration between different levels of government and different policy areas. And it must increase engagement with local communities so that local voices are heard and local needs are met.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the government must devolve more power and resources to local communities. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods deserve to be given more control over their own destinies, so that they can develop and implement their own solutions to the challenges they face.

These are the concrete steps the new government can take to help England's 'left behind' neighbourhoods thrive. But what the APPG recommends above all is a new way of thinking about the relationship between the nation and the neighbourhoods that make it.

It is inequalities at the neighbourhood level that drive regional and national disparities – not vice versa (Patias et al, 2021). When certain neighbourhoods are allowed to be 'left behind', the knowledge, the skills and the energy of the people who live there, get left behind too. There is no shortage of talent or ambition in England's 225 doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. But they are not currently put to good use.

2024 is a critical point for 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Before us lie three possible futures. Do nothing and allow these neighbourhoods to fall even further behind the rest of the country. Do the bare minimum and watch them continue to struggle. Or choose to enable these neighbourhoods to thrive, by designing policies and devolving powers to support and empower the people who live there.

The course chosen will determine the future not only of England's 'left behind' neighbourhoods but of the entire country. The potential that lies in these disadvantaged communities cannot afford to be squandered any longer. For the future prosperity and health of the country, we have to find ways to realise this potential.



Sompting Big Local summer event, August 2024.
(Photo: Local Trust/Justine Claire)

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Appendix

Timeline

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 2020 | |
| June | APPG Launched |
| July | Session – What makes a neighbourhood ‘left behind’ and how has COVID-19 affected these neighbourhoods? Report – Communities at risk: the early impact of COVID-19 on ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods |
| September | Session – Social capital and social infrastructure: why it matters? |
| November | Session – A focus on employment, education and skills |
| December | Report – Communities of trust: why we must invest in the social infrastructure of ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods Session – Communities in control – capacity, confidence, cash |
| 2021 | |
| January | Session – Buses, broadband and Beeching |
| March | Session – NHS: neighbourhood health services? Report – Connecting communities: improving transport to get ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods back on track |
| June | Session – Taking ownership, taking control? |
| September | Session – Communities and the climate crisis |
| November | Report – Levelling up through climate action: A once in a lifetime opportunity to make sure no neighbourhood is ‘left behind’ Session – Cleaner, safer, greener? |
| 2022 | |
| January | Report – Overcoming health inequalities in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods. |
| April | Inquiry session 1 – Levelling up social outcomes |
| July | Inquiry session 2 – Levelling up economic outcomes |
| November | Inquiry session 3 – Levelling up communities |
| 2023 | |
| January | Inquiry session 4 – Levelling up investment |
| February | Policy short – Levelling up local outcomes – The importance of community spaces to neighbourhood regeneration. |
| May | Session – The Community Wealth Fund and dormant assets funding |
| October | Inquiry report – A neighbourhood strategy for national renewal |
| 2024 | |
| January | Policy short – Sharing prosperity: community renewal and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund |
| March | Session – Arts and culture-led regeneration |

Overview of members

The APPG's membership included over 70 parliamentarians and 60 external members. Below is a list of the group's officers at the time of dissolution in March 2024.

Paul Howell MP Co-Chair – Conservative Member for Sedgefield

Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP Co-Chair – Labour Member for Kingston upon Hull North

Jack Brereton MP Vice-Chair – Conservative Member for Stoke-on-Trent South

Jo Gideon MP Vice-Chair – Conservative Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central

Paulette Hamilton MP Vice-Chair – Labour Member for Birmingham, Erdington

Sharon Hodgson MP Vice-Chair – Labour Member for Washington and Sunderland West

Dr Kieran Mullan MP Vice-Chair – Conservative Member for Crewe and Nantwich

Nicola Richards MP Vice-Chair – Conservative Member for West Bromwich East

Alexander Stafford MP Vice-Chair – Conservative Member for Rother Valley

Rt Hon the Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top Vice-Chair – Labour peer

Mike Amesbury MP Officer – Labour Member for Weaver Vale

Sally-Ann Hart MP Officer – Conservative Member for Hastings and Rye

Eddie Hughes MP Officer – Conservative Member for Walsall North

Ian Levy MP Officer – Conservative Member for Blyth Valley

Andrew Lewer MBE MP Officer – Conservative Member for Northampton South

Karin Smyth MP Officer – Labour Member for Bristol South

Lord Glasman Officer – Labour peer

Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts CBE Officer – Conservative peer

About Local Trust

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

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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