

How investing in social capital builds cohesive communities

Local Trust's policy spotlight series reviews the evidence backing up our central belief: strong communities, with the power and resources to make key decisions on what is best for their areas, have the potential to transform outcomes. Our latest paper explores the vital importance of social capital in building more connected and cohesive communities.

Social capital is back on the policy agenda and now routinely invoked as the missing ingredient for delivering positive change in communities across the country. But what has yet to be explored is social capital's role in something more intrinsic and fundamental to people's lived experience and satisfaction with their neighbourhood. Put simply, it is the social networks and connections that underpin an area's sense of cohesion and togetherness.

The evidence for what happens when social capital is not intentionally supported and nourished has become increasingly stark. Recent years have seen a decline in community connectedness, falling trust in the government, rising loneliness, and lower perceptions of safety and security at the neighbourhood level. At its most destructive, a fragmented social fabric contributed to the conditions for the riots and unrest that took place in summer 2024.

Our research shows we can help build social capital and stronger connections in neighbourhoods by supporting:

Social infrastructure

The spaces, places and networks within communities that help facilitate cohesion through deeper relationships across different life experiences and backgrounds.

Collective efficacy

The ability of local people to organise, have their voice heard, and feel like together they can make a difference.

Equitable access to opportunities and services

The foundation for people to meet their neighbours and peers on equal terms and develop stronger relationships and networks.

To help achieve this, we recommend the government takes full advantage of the opportunity provided by its new suite of neighbourhood initiatives in doubly disadvantaged areas, through:

Long term investment in community-led social infrastructure

- It is vital that social infrastructure is accessible, inclusive and designed to bring the widest number of possible people and social groups together.
- Without considering community need and inclusivity at every stage of design, some groups may struggle to make new connections and be prevented from building the relationships required to foster cohesion.

Developing robust and accessible neighbourhood governance structures

- Neighbourhood governance structures need to be re-worked to allow people in every community to take full advantage of hyper-local governance, not just those in affluent areas
- Established community organisations that meet key criteria should be given the same powers of parish councils or neighbourhood forums, and supported to work with local authorities to deliver services based on local need and ambitions

Providing opportunities for young people

- Community-led initiatives like youth-mentoring schemes, homework clubs, and work experience allow young people to connect, develop and learn within a safe environment that helps build aims and ambitions for their own futures.
- Effective development of these schemes must involve young people directly in design and delivery, bringing them together to identify the problems they face and work on addressing them together.
- Funding should be used to safeguard the places and spaces that young people rely on in their neighbourhoods, recognising them as a key site for building connection and resilient relationships.

Case study: St Matthew's Big Local

St Matthew's is a housing estate just north of Leicester city centre, home to around 4,500 residents. The area is compact, with mid-rise flats surrounding a central green space. It ranks in the top 9% of all English areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Local socioeconomic outcomes reflect this hardship: 38% of residents have no formal qualifications, and 48% of working-age residents claim DWP benefits, well above city and national averages.



St Matthew's is also highly diverse, with large Indian (41%) and Black African (31%) communities. The population is notably young, with more than 33% under the age of 16. The area has long struggled with challenges around safety, lack of opportunities, and youth engagement. Concerns from local parents centred around the absence of secure environments for young people, coupled with fears of exposure to drugs, gang activity, and exploitation.

St Matthew's Estate Big Local, supported by long-term funding of just over £1m through the Big Local programme, organised a community consultation, which confirmed the demand for a dedicated, safe space where children could play, families could gather, and young people could thrive.

The turning point came with the transformation of a previously derelict, overgrown field. Once associated with drug use and antisocial behaviour, it became a vibrant community sports facility. Following consultation with residents and in partnership with a range of partners - including the council, Leicester City in the Community, Football Foundation and Cruyff Foundation - this space was redesigned and built as a community multi-use games area (MUGA). The aim was to create more than just a football pitch. The Big Local partnership envisioned a welcoming venue that balanced structured sports sessions with open, family-friendly access.

Importantly, the facility was kept open access, built on trust in the local youth. The Big Local believed that locking the space would push young people into unsupervised or illegal use of the area. Open access was seen as a way to foster respect, responsibility, and inclusion. Initially, high demand was met with unstructured usage. However, project leaders quickly found that while the young people enjoyed free play, structured sessions delivered five to six days a week were more impactful. These offered not only safe recreation but a pathway into broader youth development.

Recognising that sport could serve as a powerful hook for wider youth development, the team launched a volunteer pathway during the COVID-19 pandemic. This one-year structured programme provided young people with a variety of opportunities, from workshops and training to qualifications and work experience. Graduates of the volunteer programme became eligible for paid coaching roles. This ensured that the programme nurtured talent from within the community. It created a cycle where participants could see real pathways into leadership, employment, and further education.



The impact was transformative. Young people who may have once felt disempowered or directionless were now volunteering, gaining skills, and giving back. Older residents have reported stronger relationships with local youth, shaped through collaborative activities and shared space. This shift has fostered greater social cohesion, across both age and

ethnicity, as well as resilience in the face of hardship, whether through economic precarity or social isolation.

By embedding progression routes into its delivery model, the project ensured that its work was sustainable and long-term. As older participants moved on to college or employment, younger ones were already stepping up, ready to lead, to serve, and to shape the future of St Matthew's.