

Local Trust
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Policy spotlight 3:

How investing in social capital
builds cohesive communities

November 2025

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About this report

This paper is the final in Local Trust's policy spotlight series. It summarises the evidence on social capital and its contribution to community cohesion. It outlines how a healthy bank of social infrastructure, collective efficacy and equitable access to opportunities can support the growth of social relationships and networks that enable local people to live alongside one another and work together to improve their neighbourhoods. The final section of the report offers practical recommendations for how social capital and community cohesion can be supported by policymakers and funders in England.

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Front cover: Sompting Big Local,
Sompting Big Local summer event 2024
Photo: Local Trust / Justine Claire



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Introduction

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. A series of papers by Demos commissioned by Local Trust and 3ni in early 2025 outlined the role of social capital in improving social and economic outcomes - from supporting health and creating a protective shield for children and families, to addressing crime and producing a virtuous cycle of economic growth and wellbeing. 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 has become increasingly stark. Recent years have seen a decline in community connectedness, falling trust in government, rising loneliness, and lower perceptions of safety and security at the neighbourhood level (Puddle et al, 2025). At its most destructive, a fragmented social fabric contributed to the conditions for the riots and unrest that took place in summer 2024 - impacting some of the most vulnerable members of our society (Rutter et al, 2024).

But all hope is not lost. Programmes and initiatives that nurture local social capital can create the foundation for people of different backgrounds and cultures to connect with one another and become proud neighbours. Evidence from the Big Local programme, the neighbourhood initiative Local Trust was set up to deliver, has shown that activities that build local connections and relationships promote the healthy functioning of our communities. When residents are trusted and given the resource and support to improve their

neighbourhoods, they develop places, activities and opportunities which respond to local need. It's not just about the new facilities that are created or clubs that are formed. It's also about the process of how people get there - coming together to work on shared goals, building the social capital that is the basis of cohesive, connected communities.

This paper will explore the link between social capital and stronger communities before providing a brief overview of the history of cohesion policy in England. It will then outline three areas - social infrastructure, collective efficacy and equitable access to opportunities - that support the growth of social capital in neighbourhoods. Finally, it makes practical recommendations to inform the scope and direction of future cohesion policy in England.

Social capital and its role in building connected, cohesive communities

Social capital is the support and resources available to individuals and communities through their relationships and social networks. It is “the bonds we feel to our neighbours, to our friends, to our colleagues and to our acquaintances [as well as] the support, the assistance and the courtesies we give others - and what we get back in return” (Coutts et al, 2025). It helps us build a common social sphere, creating a shared understanding of social and behavioural expectations, responsibilities and communication between neighbours.

Strong social capital is essential to maintaining successful societies – enabling people to live side by side peacefully and harmoniously, and to work together towards common goals. It is developed and strengthened by engaging at the hyperlocal level, in our neighbourhoods and with our neighbours. This is where the interdependence between individuals is most tangible and can grow into strong and resilient connections and networks (Fonseca et al, 2019).

Back in 2017, IPPR conducted research in Bedford to tease out the relationship between social capital and cohesion. The final report identified social capital – both ‘strong ties’ and ‘weak ties’ – as critical for cohesion. Weak ties are built by what some people refer to as ‘bridging’ capital. A neighbourhood has high bridging capital when people across diverse groups have frequent, positive interactions with one another. It is often built through informal, more casual connections that happen

largely in public spaces. When these weak ties are formed, they help bring together people who would not otherwise cross paths, enabling social codes, expectations and norms to be co-developed by, and pass through, different residents in a neighbourhood (IPPR, 2017). This creates commonality and shared understanding that is the foundation for mutual trust. It has the potential to bust divisive myths about minoritised people or communities, creating connections that supersede and challenge them. And it helps local people to create a more hopeful, open vision of living and working together.

The community activists and change-makers delivering Big Local have invested in everything from sports clubs, knit and natter groups, youth apprenticeship schemes to food growing projects. Whilst each activity has delivered tangible benefits to local people – from improving health, combating loneliness, to improving employment prospects – they have also had the more subtle but equally important effect of building trust, friendship and mutual self-support. In 2024, 91% of Big Local partnership members stated they had personally built new, positive relationships with others, and 88% said they had made new friends in the local community through Big Local.

Community connectedness and cohesion is often the byproduct of local people coming together and putting on fun, affirming activities that rekindle bonds between neighbours. Over time, these can be consolidated into social networks and relationships that last. This is why the current renewed focus on cohesion policy should look to unlock the community-based organisations and initiatives that offer connection, a shared sense of identity and a broader focus on community life.

A brief history of cohesion policy in England

The term 'community cohesion' has been a mainstay of public policy since the early 2000s. After Ted Cante's review into the conditions that led to riots in northern English towns in 2001, efforts to restore cohesion by rebuilding community infrastructure and tackling inequality became rooted in New Labour's neighbourhood regeneration policy and practice (Donoghue, 2018). But when a Conservative government came to power in 2010, the impacts of austerity ended many of the interventions that had been building social capital and improving prospects in disadvantaged communities (Crisp et al, 2023). This led Dame Louise Casey, author of the 2016 review into 'opportunity and integration', to conclude that widening deprivation and socio-economic exclusion was creating a major barrier to cohesion.

Following the 2019 general election, the Conservative government's levelling up agenda aimed to address the country's inequalities with investment targeted at 'left behind' areas and regions. But the challenge of strengthening cohesion remained. In 2024, the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities published another review into cohesion by Dame Sara Khan which identified declining trust in government and democracy as an area requiring targeted action.

From Cante, to Casey and Khan, the core idea of what it means to achieve community cohesion has not changed considerably over the past two decades. All three identified the need for clear, joined-up government strategy – be that a specific task force or dedicated

department – to deliver coordinated action to support cohesion. They have also all pointed towards the importance of meaningful interaction and intentional relationship building between the different people and groups who share a neighbourhood as critical to any cohesion-focused programme. Policymakers focused on this agenda today need not start from scratch – but draw on this foundation to build a neighbourhood-led approach to cohesion policy.

Recent policy announcements suggest the tide is already turning in this direction, with renewed government focus on neighbourhoods policy as a method to strengthen community connectedness and cohesion. The government's Pride in Place programme will give residents the resources and decision-making power to rebuild their own communities, while the Community Wealth Fund will be established to build social infrastructure in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England (MHCLG, 2025). There is a unique opportunity here to be harnessed: communities will be empowered to kickstart the sports sessions, art clubs, summer fayres and anti-loneliness projects that build the social capital that brings people together, helps them to trust one another and form social networks that are strong, resilient and give local people hope and ambition for the future.

How can social capital be strengthened?

1. Accessible and inclusive social infrastructure

The presence and equal distribution of social capital in a neighbourhood cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Just as human capital is supported by an education system to upskill and train individuals, social capital needs tended ground to germinate and flourish. This is underpinned by what we term “social infrastructure”: the pubs, parks, sports teams and social clubs where people meet and build bonds with friends and neighbours who they wouldn’t normally see at home or at work (Local Trust, 2023a). These are the spaces, networks and associations where trust can be built by people in communities who might share a postcode but, on the surface, not much else.

There has been a growing body of work on the relationship between social infrastructure, cohesion and wellbeing. In a study of disadvantaged areas in Germany, community-led infrastructures were found to contribute to cohesion and improve perceptions of local quality of life (Manthey, 2024). This is because they “[facilitate] collective life...by providing opportunities for residents and frequent visitors to observe each other engaged in similar activities and shared pursuits, encounter familiar faces and engage in incidental social contact” (Zahnnow, 2024).

To best facilitate cohesion, social infrastructure must be accessible and inclusive. In other words, it must be designed to bring the widest number of possible people and social groups together. Examples include having spaces which are free at the point of use or entry,

or which provide support for people to attend or take part, like offering food or childcare.

Aldrich (2023) writes that green spaces like a playground or a park can be effective at providing “reliable, convenient and non-obligatory sources of daily contact for otherwise isolated individuals”. Free to use, visible and child-friendly, they can enable trust and bonds to grow between people from very different backgrounds and circumstances.

On the flipside, a lack of social infrastructure prevents people from building the relationships needed to create cohesive communities. Without it, people often struggle to make new connections within their community and across life experiences and cultures. This is particularly striking amongst young people. A collaboration between the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY), BeeWell Manchester and Local Trust on the experience of young people growing up in deprived neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester found that, without access to vital social infrastructure, a higher proportion felt there were not people they could trust in their local area (22.5% compared to 17.6% in other neighbourhoods) and suffered from higher levels of loneliness and isolation (Carleton et al 2025).

2. Collective efficacy

Collective efficacy is the ability of local people to organise, have their voice heard, and feel like together they can make a difference. Collective efficacy and social capital are mutually reinforcing. Wilson et al (2025), researching the experiences of low-income communities on the Cumbrian coast, found that local people felt more able to build trust, respect and thus strong social networks between acquaintances they met on the streets, in parks and the wider neighbourhood than more geographically distant elected representatives. This foundation of social capital makes local people more willing to participate in civic and political life with one another. Local decision making and co-production have also been found to improve levels of social capital and sense of community across eight studies in low-income communities in the UK and internationally (Pennington et al, 2017).

Some of the first research linking collective efficacy to social capital was released during the New Labour years, showing that areas which were given support and resource for new and established communities to engage in joint action were more connected and less likely to show signs of social tension (Blake et al, 2008).

In 2007, the then Department for Communities and Local Government published a paper which explicitly mentioned collective efficacy as a route to community connection and cohesion. One recommendation was a "bottom up approach" where services and activities are shaped by local people, with the local community sector playing a bigger role in public service delivery (DCLG, 2007). Giving people a tangible stake in their

local area would make them more likely to come together in the first place and make efforts to understand and respond to collective needs.

More recently, areas involved in the Big Local programme have found that joint action on a local issue is something that can increase connection between people who would otherwise be unlikely to cross paths. Local activities often begin small – for example, holding a community celebration or planting trees – providing something for local people to convene around and a reason for them to get to know one another and work together. This helps to build the relationships and trust that enables residents to consolidate their social and support networks. Often, this leads to a positive feedback loop, where strengthened social capital enables communities to tackle more complex issues together, like poor housing or a lack of decent local employment (Local Trust, 2024).

Collective efficacy also raises important questions regarding who feels able and empowered to take part in local decision-making and thus access the social capital and skills it generates. Research by Brap (Afridi et al, 2021) showed that Big Local partnerships have employed varying tactics to ensure that the 'usual suspects' (those with power in the community, often older white men) do not dominate decision making. However, some residents described feelings of exclusion based on class position, gender, race and age: that their opinions and experiences had been deprioritised and skills and knowledge overlooked.

But with patient and flexible support, local people can develop community-led initiatives which support positive 'bridging' between people from different

backgrounds. Reflecting on the need to support Big Local areas to create the conditions for people to have positive, open-minded interactions, Local Trust developed the Community Leadership Academy (CLA) to build confidence and capacity in community development workers, activists and volunteers working to transform their neighbourhoods. Community leaders were supported to develop and apply learning on how to distribute leadership throughout their communities. Evaluation of the CLA shows that participants gained new skills, tools and techniques that enabled them to understand and challenge local infrastructure, decision making and power dynamics and build wider community connections linked to the change they wanted to see in their neighbourhoods (Local Trust, 2023c).

When resource and support is given to building the capacity of local people, different ways of making decisions, sharing roles and responsibilities can be developed – spreading collective efficacy and social capital more equitably across neighbourhoods (Afridi et al, 2021).

3. Opportunities and services that are equitably accessed and shared

When local people have access to opportunities and services that promote social equity, they are more likely to meet their neighbours and peers on equal terms and develop strong relationships and networks.

Reflecting on the fact that areas with high deprivation were more likely to engage in the 2024 summer riots, the Runnymede Trust suggest that inequalities had had a “powerful and corrosive effect on community ties” through exacerbating division and tension within neighbourhoods (Runnymede Trust, 2024; Equality Trust, 2025). Whilst reviewing what worked to strengthen cohesion in previous policy and practice, the Trust explain that housing, employment, education and healthcare have been routinely overlooked in recent years, despite playing a role in shaping the types and quality of relationships that can be built between the people and communities who share a neighbourhood (Runnymede Trust, 2024).

Socioeconomic disparities create material conditions which make it harder for certain individuals and groups in an area to have regular, positive social contact with their neighbours. For example, when housing policy meets local people’s needs whilst also protecting the long-term sustainability of the community, a wider proportion of residents can invest in their relationships and connections with their neighbours. Otherwise, those on lower incomes are left in disproportionately poorer housing conditions – often stuck in short term rental cycles and the threat of displacement from rising rents – making relationships and connections more fragile and transient.

The Flowhession Foundation work in the London Borough of Camden to support the development of cohesion-focused interventions in tandem with diverse communities. They have reflected upon the fact that the “public policy debate... on community cohesion and integration tends to focus on ethnicity, religion and migration”. Despite being important to people and communities across Camden, researchers found that “class, income and housing tenure are as important”.

Stakeholders involved in the project suggested that improving access to high quality, genuinely affordable housing would address the challenges of “population churn, spatial segregation from other [housing] tenures and a lack of access to community spaces [which together] work against community cohesion”. Co-housing was one initiative recommended as a way to break down social cleavages and enable long term relationships and networks to be built across and within Camden’s diverse communities (Flowhession Foundation, 2017).

Inequality and poor opportunities can limit resources, time and spaces for community connections. Deprived neighbourhoods have faced the brunt of austerity, seeing their community centres, youth clubs and libraries deteriorate or shut down. Without a lack of accessible social infrastructure, free at the point of use or of little cost, the spaces available to build social capital and connection have been severely squeezed.

For many living in these neighbourhoods, the cost of travelling to an event or activity outside of the area becomes an obstacle, as does the price of a sports club membership or paying to eat out in the café in the nearby town. People are, therefore, more likely to have to retreat into their homes and immediate relationships (Puddle et al, 2025). The barriers to civic participation and community life faced by those at the sharp end of socioeconomic inequalities can cause an individual to feel dissatisfied with the neighbourhood and local area (Deo et al, 2024). This can, at times, contribute towards the fracture of bonds and bridges between different individuals and groups that share a neighbourhood.

The data is particularly striking amongst young people. Research on the experience of young people living in the most deprived areas in Greater Manchester showed that low access to community activities and spaces combined with poor or limited socioeconomic opportunities acts as a “barrier to [their] mobility” - leading to higher levels of dissatisfaction with their local area than similarly deprived neighbourhoods and the national average (Carleton et al, 2025). Restoring that satisfaction and trust will require opportunities and services that are delivered locally and help young people to achieve their potential (Carleton et al, 2025).

Putting it into practice: Recommendations for policymakers

Reweaving the social fabric and strengthening cohesion needs to be done in neighbourhoods with local people in charge of designing the specific threads of an approach for their area. But this cannot happen without capacity building and support. It must be complemented and supported by a long term, cross-government neighbourhoods strategy which coordinates and leads on efforts to build social capital in and across communities. Our experience of delivering Big Local, along with evidence from other neighbourhood programmes, has highlighted what is required to enable the community-led initiatives that build the relationships and networks needed for resilient and hopeful neighbourhoods. The following recommendations harness what we know about how to build social capital in order to strengthen community connectedness.

1. Provide long term investment in community-led social infrastructure

Over a decade of disinvestment in social infrastructure has severely reduced the capacity of local people to get to know and support one another. This is having a damaging impact on our country's social cohesion and resilience: 23 of the 27 UK cities and towns that experienced riots in the summer of 2024 performed below the median score on Onward's Social Fabric Index – revealing a critical lack of places to meet and green spaces in these areas (Westerling et al, 2024).

A review by Frontier Economics (2024) of neighbourhood initiatives both in the UK and internationally showed that long term investment in social infrastructure - coupled with capacity building support to ensure local people had the skills, confidence and expertise to develop and guide it – was a common feature of programmes which

successfully brought local people together and sparked trust and cooperation between them.

This is something mirrored in Local Trust's experience of delivering the Big Local programme. The majority of Big Local areas have used the opportunity of long-term funding and wrap-around support for community leaders and volunteers to invest in building or maintaining social infrastructure – improving social connection locally, making people feel like they belong, and bolstering pride in place in the process (McCabe et al, 2020).

Whilst consistent resource and support for all kinds of social infrastructure reaps positive benefits for cohesion further upstream, we have observed three types which are particularly successful at strengthening it at the neighbourhood level: places and spaces; celebrations and events; and sports and arts activities.

Places and spaces to meet

Places and spaces, like community centres, hubs, allotments and football pitches provide lasting opportunities for people to meet and connect. Research from New Local (2025) shows that “community centres can help provide the scaffolding for cohesion locally”. They provide a physical space where community groups can convene, overlap and work together, offering a basis for activity that is visible and accessible to everyone who lives in that area.

The community leaders involved in the Big Local programme have often prioritised the management or ownership of community hubs because they have “created a focal point in neighbourhoods” (Wilson et al, 2024). Most Big Local areas have managed to make these centres, cafes and parks financially self-sufficient so that they will continue beyond the end of the programme in 2026 (Wilson et al, 2024). Through building and maintaining permanent spaces, community activity is less vulnerable to shifts in policy and funder priorities, as well as the specific political context in a given area or region.

Despite their clear benefits, many community spaces and assets continue to be under threat from council sell-offs and private developments in neighbourhoods up and down the country. To bring them back into the hands of communities, we welcome the government’s commitment to implementing a Community Right to Buy as part of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. But we stress that this must be coupled with targeted support for less affluent communities with limited social infrastructure – who will otherwise be unable to take full advantage of this opportunity. This might include seed funding allocated according to need for communities to gather expertise, knowledge and form the groups and organisations necessary to take on an asset. Once they have developed foundational capacity, underserved neighbourhoods should have access to a revolving loan fund or another form of support to help them purchase land or buildings for community use and benefit.

Case Study: Thurnscoe Big Local

Thurnscoe is a former mining community located on the outskirts of Barnsley. The area was heavily impacted by pit closures, leading to widespread unemployment and a decline in community cohesion. The Big Local partnership’s vision was to strengthen the community by bringing residents together through environmental projects and community events. The partnership was mindful of the community’s lack of faith in previous funding initiatives and gradually used the money to put on activities, building trust, and proving their commitment over the long term.

One of the major projects for Thurnscoe Big Local was the development of a Community Plaza. The plaza was built on an underused piece of land in the centre of the village, as the partnership wanted to design something that was both visually pleasing and widely accessible, as well as requiring minimal maintenance. Plans were also focused around constructing a skatepark for young people in the area, alongside a garden and seating for the wider community.

The finished plaza has become an established part of the local landscape, succeeding not just as a place for young people, but as a multi-use space for the whole village. The partnership view the plaza as one of their proudest achievements, successfully proving themselves and their vision to the council, other partners, and importantly, the Thurnscoe community. Its opening in June 2022 attracted hundreds of people and numerous local performers.

Shared celebrations and events

Many Big Local areas have focused on organising and delivering community events as a way to bring residents together. These festivals, funfairs, day trips and celebrations have provided an opportunity for different sections of the community to gather in the same space, at the same time and deliver significant individual and collective wellbeing benefits.

The final report of the Jo Cox Foundation's (2023) 'Moment to movement' project revealed that participating in community events makes people happier and less lonely, as well as inspiring people to go on and engage more deeply in their local community.

Big Local areas have often reported that community events have been a chance to see their neighbours in a new, fun setting, bringing people out who have, in the past, felt that these activities were not for them. Community events, particularly those which are a regular or annual feature of the local calendar, can spark conversations about belonging and support the growth of positive and inclusive shared identities (Finch et al, 2023). People build shared experiences and memories, helping them to actively develop more in common with their neighbours and acquaintances.

This is backed up by research: a study by Lockstone-Binney et al in 2020 found that the temporary lapse of everyday social boundaries brought by a big event like a fireworks night or summer carnival can support a deeper level of engagement and inclusion at the neighbourhood level. The benefits are particularly strong for those who become actively involved in the preparation and delivery of an event (Smith et al, 2021).

Nurturing and growing the spread of annual or routine community festivals and events requires recognition that they are an important facet of social infrastructure, in need of resource and support. We echo Spirit of 2012's (2025) recommendation that funders of community events should prioritise low social capital neighbourhoods whilst "recognising that there may be additional costs per participant to deliver activity in places with weaker voluntary sector infrastructure."

To make a tangible difference in the most disadvantaged areas, bespoke, proactive approaches are needed to make sure that events and celebrations build social connection and capital. Cross-community involvement and participation should be considered at every stage - from an event's design to evaluation. This should involve tailored planning and participation strategies that bring different parts of the community together and actively harness the moment brought by an event or celebration to map out and build shared identities and interests. For national events, plans should embed a sustained effort to "nurture local and community elements", with local people in charge of deciding what that might look like in their neighbourhood and playing a central role in its delivery (Spirit of 2012, 2025).

Case Study: Boston Big Local

Boston is a remote and multicultural town in Lincolnshire, which from the early 2000s has seen an increase in migrant communities in the area. Before the Big Local programme started, there was a lot of tension between the various different communities. One of the reasons Boston was chosen as a Big Local area was to create an opportunity to bring those communities together.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the resident-led partnership wanted to find ways to bring the community together, so they set up a virtual coffee morning group. Through this they were able to reach different groups and find out what people were doing and how they were coping with lockdowns. The conversations were kept open, and from them came different activities and projects. The Big Local partnership were not always directly involved but they created the space for different people to come together at a difficult time.

Boston Big Local have worked hard to ensure they support all the different communities in the area as much as possible. One of the ways they have done with is by hosting events that appeal to everyone. Their annual event, 'Boston beach' has been particularly successful. A beach is installed in Central Park in Boston just before the summer holidays and only gets taken down in early September. For two days in the summer they hold the beach event itself, with donkeys, giant tortoises, beach volleyball and so on. Different organisations are invited, who each bring a free beach-themed activity. The partnership have received feedback on the event, through which members of the community from many different backgrounds and cultures have expressed how they enjoyed it and how wonderful it was to have the whole community come together.

The role of sport and art

Community sports and arts activities help encourage people from different backgrounds to come together and develop a shared interest and purpose. They give residents things to do, often at no or little cost, and can foster the social capital and networks that enable local people to go on and provide mutual support to one another outside of the initial activities that brought them together (OCSI, 2023).

The evaluation of Breaking Boundaries, a Spirit of 2012 funded programme delivered in five English cities, highlights the role of sport in fostering friendship and trust across young people from different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Tanner et al, 2023). Regular sport-themed engagement – from football and cricket to Bhangra

dancing and archery – was found to improve the confidence, socialisation and mental health of participants. The wider impact of bringing different people together in new ways helped to ease a range of local tensions which, in the past, had left residents feeling powerless and disengaged (Tanner et al, 2023). The result was a growth in community participation and engagement, with participants feeling heard and more empowered to enact change locally (Tanner et al, 2023).

Community-led arts programmes have a similarly positive impact on cohesion. A review of 74 European projects found that participation in arts and cultural projects had increased feelings of “community belonging, tolerance, trust and empathy for people of different backgrounds” (Hammonds, 2023). Local arts projects, installations and performances also

improve residents' pride in the local area, and help them feel ownership of its buildings, green spaces and highways (Puddle et al, 2025).

Community-led sports and arts activities should play a prominent role within future cohesion policy, requiring both government and other funders to pay attention to their growth and development.

Evidence on the benefits provided by arts and sports suggests a more strategic, place-based approach is needed.

Any plans to broaden access should target those neighbourhoods with the least existing social infrastructure, fewer opportunities and lower arts and sports participation (OCSI, 2023; Puddle et al, 2025).

Case Study: Plymouth Hope

After arriving in Plymouth as an asylum seeker in 2008, David Feindouno decided to organise football sessions as a way to combat the isolation felt by fellow asylum seekers. The sessions attracted 54 participants from over 20 different countries, including local residents, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and students. From this, Plymouth Hope FC was created, and in 2013 the establishment of Plymouth Hope Charity.

Plymouth Hope are driven to create a cohesive community and build equality and equity. From starting out by organising football session to now founding a charity that provides support that is "both need-led and beneficiary-focused". To date Plymouth Hope have helped children with educational attainment, facilitated a holistic health and wellbeing project, supported migrant social integration, and provided essential guidance to help people through the asylum process (Plymouth Hope, 2025).

2. Develop consistent neighbourhood governance structures

Improving collective efficacy supports the development of positive relationships and networks – making communities stronger and more cohesive. Wilson's (2025) extensive research on the subject with a focus on 'left behind' coastal communities in Cumbria shows that neighbourhood-level decision making can promote strong, trusting relationships in communities and leaves local people with a more positive, hopeful vision of the future.

These findings echo our direct experience of delivering the Big Local programme – where resident-led decision making has helped to re-engage local people and given them the impetus to bring different parts of the community together.

There is latent energy and motivation in neighbourhoods across England to play a greater role in the decisions that affect them. This needs to be unlocked to support people to convene around local issues, developing networks and relationships to address them and which are resilient to ongoing challenges and change.

But, as things currently stand, local people do not feel like the current system provides the support for local people to exercise their collective efficacy. A consistent and coherent neighbourhood governance system across England does not exist. Doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods (suffering from both deprivation and a lack of social infrastructure) tend to have the least coverage of available community governance mechanisms. Data shows that these neighbourhoods are more likely to be unparished and lack neighbourhood forums (Local Trust, 2023b).

Neighbourhood governance structures need to be reimagined, especially in areas where they don't work or struggle to get going. A report by the Future Governance Forum (Smith et al, 2025) argues that delivering the government's missions for national renewal hinges upon returning power to these communities so that they can harness their latent skills, knowledge and experience to improve and transform their neighbourhoods. They stress the need for consistent neighbourhood governance, achieved in part by making it easier to establish parish councils or allowing other bodies to have equivalent powers if they meet the same assessment criteria (Smith et al, 2025).

But structures alone will not deliver meaningful change. Doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods will need flexible and patient support to make this happen – especially if they are to be empowered to develop rich 'bridging' between diverse individuals and groups in their communities. One approach would be to develop a community capacity building programme, grounded in learning from past initiatives. Reflecting on what was learnt from Local Trust's Community Leadership Academy, a series of roundtables led to a set of principles to inform future initiatives to build capacity for positive, distributed decision making and leadership in neighbourhoods (Just Ideas, 2024):

- Programme design should be accessible, flexible, person-centred and relational.
- Community leadership support should not be uniform but draw from a rich tapestry to suit diverse needs.
- Lived experience and expertise should inform how capacity building programmes are designed and delivered, ensuring that the skills, knowledge and techniques developed and shared are appropriate, effective and context specific.

These principles need to be harnessed to develop a responsive, national support programme which sits alongside efforts to spread neighbourhood governance to areas where it currently is not working or does not exist. This would support local people to build the confidence and

capacity to hone approaches that work for them and their communities – involving local people from different backgrounds and with varying levels of time and resources in decision making in context-appropriate, flexible and meaningful ways.

Case study: Leigh West Big Local

Leigh is a small industrial town close to Wigan. As a group, the Leigh West Big Local partnership uniquely predated the Big Local programme. Rather than being formed from scratch, it developed out of a pre-existing group, the Leigh Neighbours Project, which had received funding to support community connection.

Over the course of their 11 years as a Big Local partnership, they invested time and resources into different types of community consultation to inform their work. The group took part in a scheme called 'Planning for Real', which involved taking a map of the area to different places in the community, including schools, libraries, and church services. Residents could then write down the issues they felt needed to be addressed and pin them to a specific location. The issues included things like the presence of drug dealing, the need for a bike lane, and fly-tipping problems. The group wanted to engage with everyone in the community and were able to gather feedback from homeless people, asylum seekers, and refugees.

By the end of the Planning for Real process over 700 people had been interviewed and this formed the basis of the Leigh Neighbours community plan. The Leigh Neighbours Project now has four key priorities: community spirit, education, employment and training, environmental improvements, and housing.

Following reports of racial tensions building between residents on one local street, the partnership brought in the Peace Centre (a foundation based nearby in Warrington, Cheshire) to conduct community mediation and support residents in finding ways to live alongside each other. The partnership supported this work by introducing neighbours, hosting coffee mornings, and facilitating consultation in a range of venues and by publicising events and activities. The partnership felt this area of their work significantly improved community relations in Leigh.

3. Provide opportunities for young people

Young people are the future of their communities. When given the chance, communities often choose to invest in young people as a way to leave a lasting legacy in their neighbourhood: it was an explicit priority for almost 80 percent of all Big Local areas (Wilson et al, 2022). Ten years into the programme, the total number of estimated beneficiaries for projects related to young people either partly or wholly financed by Big Local funding was 26,900 (Local Trust, 2025).

Evidence from the Big Local programme has shown that community-led initiatives like youth-mentoring programmes, homework clubs, apprenticeship schemes and work experience are highly successful at bringing young people together and developing things in common with their neighbours and peers (McCabe et al, 2020).

Supporting community organisations to take on and engage young people as volunteers, apprentices or employees helps young people to develop entrepreneurial, leadership and interpersonal skills. At the same time, it enables them to build relationships with colleagues, neighbours and peers that have the potential to unlock future opportunities and support.

Community organisations are often best placed to provide accessible, meaningful opportunities for disadvantaged young people because they know their local

neighbourhood intimately, and can develop tailored engagement and support (Plunkett Foundation, 2021). The Plunkett Foundation's 2021 Better Business report notes that each community shop engages on average three to four young people through employment, work placements or volunteering experience.

Developing high quality opportunities that reflect young people's needs and ambitions starts with involving them in the process from the start. Research from CfEY and #BeeWell (Carleton et al, 2025) found that meaningful involvement in local decision making can begin to break down levels of distrust and hopelessness amongst younger people. This could start with a neighbourhood mapping exercise of the activities and locations that are important to them and then build towards long-term youth involvement in how these insights are acted upon. They recommend that policymakers ringfence funding to safeguard the spaces and organisations that young people rely on in their neighbourhoods - identifying them as a launchpad for community-led initiatives that increase young people's access to opportunities like community work experience placements and apprenticeships (Carleton et al, 2025).

Case study: Palfrey Big Local

In Palfrey, a neighbourhood in Walsall, the Big Local partnership worked to increase training opportunities for young people and inspired them to use their voice to put forward their ideas for how to tackle problems in the area.

The partnership wanted to set up early intervention programmes, creating activities for young people, along with opportunities to identify skills and offer training.

One initiative was the Lionheart Challenge, a nationwide enterprise programme which the partnership commissioned to come to Palfrey. Through this programme young people learnt about marketing, business plans, human resources and finance. This was an excellent opportunity to bring young people into a learning session outside of school. The area had struggled previously with tensions between schools and some of the young people had not even been out of their local neighbourhood or seen the town hall.

Working as a team the young people were asked questions such as, 'how can you make improvements to Palfrey?' and 'how can you make Palfrey a better place to live?'. The teams then presented their ideas to a panel made up of Palfrey Big Local, the police, the council and youth justice team. The presentations covered topics such as social connection, helping refugees, food banks, concerns for the elderly and online scammers. The partnership were very impressed with the ideas put forward and offered to fund the youth initiatives and bring some of the projects to life. The initiative successfully met the partnership's intentions of bringing young people together to create tolerance and learn how to behave outside of the school setting.

Conclusion

Over recent years we have seen a decline in community connectedness, falling trust in government, rising loneliness, and lower perceptions of safety and security at the neighbourhood level. But it doesn't have to be this way. Building local social capital can help create an environment where people of different cultures are proud to live side by side and call each other neighbours.

Local Trust's experience of delivering the Big Local programme has shown that when you provide the support and funding for local people to come together, communities develop spaces and opportunities that go on to create vital bonds between neighbours. Over time, these bonds become social networks and connections that last. This paper has explored why a renewed focus on cohesion policy should look to unlock the community-based organisations and initiatives that offer connection, a shared sense of identity and a broader focus on community life.

The Government's emerging neighbourhoods policy provides the opportunity to build social capital in areas where community activity and the infrastructure that supports it is most lacking. Long term investment in community-led social infrastructure

will create the spaces, places, and networks that facilitate cohesion in our communities. Development of robust and accessible neighbourhood governance structures will provide local people with the ability to organise, have their voice heard, and feel like together they can make a difference. This must coincide with efforts to create equal access to housing, employment, education and healthcare to allow neighbours and peers to meet on equal terms and develop strong relationships and networks. Spreading opportunity in ways that explicitly target and respond to young people is especially important, giving them the opportunity to connect and learn within safe environments that help to improve their neighbourhoods and build on ambitions for their own futures.

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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 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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