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# A Network for Communities

Building the capacity for change in 'left behind'  
neighbourhoods

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## About this research

This research was commissioned by Local Trust to explore how communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods in England have engaged with regeneration programmes and capacity building activity, in order to make recommendations for how they could be better supported in future.

It draws in particular on the experience of New Schools Network in helping hundreds of communities around the country create free schools between 2011-2022, and the support that Local Trust has provided to 150 'Big Local' projects since 2012.

Its conclusions are based on detailed research into the evidence base for community regeneration, interviews with a wide range of community leaders, community workers, academics and government officials, as well as the experiences of the authors, New Schools Network staff and Local Trust staff in working with communities across the country.

We would like to thank all those who gave their time and expertise so generously in helping us compile this report.

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# Executive Summary

## Executive Summary

People in many parts of the UK feel that they have been 'left behind' in recent years.

But there is particular concern for 225 neighbourhoods that have been 'left behind' not just economically but socially.

Concentrated in estates on the outskirts of our post-industrial towns and cities and on our coasts, these places face the twin challenge of both high levels of deprivation and a weak social fabric, with fewer opportunities for people to get involved in the life of the community.

Across politics and civil society, there is a growing consensus that the way we support these communities to regenerate their area needs to change.

Instead of top-down initiatives and tightly controlled - often short lived - funding schemes, there is a recognition that regeneration is most successful when it combines patient, long-term investment with a strong role for local people and an emphasis on developing social infrastructure - the spaces and networks that bind a community together.

In response, the government has shifted its thinking too. Its recent Levelling Up White Paper highlighted the importance of social capital and social infrastructure in underpinning prosperity, as well as making a series of commitments to help strengthen them and empower communities. These included providing greater investment through programmes such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund considering proposals for a Community Wealth Fund, and greater localised decision making.

But not all communities are as well placed to benefit from this change in approach. Though people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods want a greater say and believe change is more likely when it involves them, they start from a weaker position to engage with government programmes or engage in the community activity that we know underpins successful regeneration.

We know that people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are less likely to have the some of the skills or time required to lead change, that these areas have less existing social infrastructure around which can be organised, and that residents are less used to participating in decision making or volunteering.

This leaves an important gap between how government wants communities to engage with its plans for regeneration and their capacity to do so. Simply streamlining funding pots or devolving power is unlikely to be enough to ensure these communities flourish. Without additional support, they are likely to fall even further behind.

The experience of previous programmes shows us that to truly drive the regeneration of their area, these communities need help over time to build local confidence and create a plan for change, access the right skills and expertise, engage residents, work effectively with government and other stakeholders, and link into networks of support.

A range of initiatives and organisations have shown how we can effectively help build up community capacity. For example, New Schools Network helped hundreds of communities open new state schools by building up expertise in how they can turn their vision into a detailed plan and convince government of their ideas. Local Trust has empowered residents in 150 areas across the country to deliver a range of 'Big Local' community projects through a sustained presence on the ground. And the Community Economic Development Programme enabled dozens of places to create a detailed plan for their local economy by providing mentoring and expert technical advice.

Each of these organisations or programmes has taken a distinctive approach, but there are some common success factors that point towards what works best in building community capacity.

It requires trusting relationships and advice based on substantial expertise, which often means focusing just on a small number of issues or a particular process at a time. Support needs to be proactive and flexible enough to match the needs of the community, and it must be independent of any agenda other than empowering local people. Wherever possible it should draw on the experience of communities themselves and link them together to create a network of peer support.

Unfortunately, this type of support is not reaching the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods. Current provision is not sufficiently targeted towards these places, engaging with it often requires skills, time and resources which communities may struggle to access, and is often focused on specific issues rather than the full range of things that local people want to achieve.

To turbocharge levelling up in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and deliver on the promise of its approach to regeneration, the government therefore needs to fill this gap.

This report proposes the creation of a new organisation that could do this: an independent Network for Communities, which would provide intensive support to help build the capacity of communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and help them achieve lasting change.

## A Network for Communities

The Government's Levelling Up White Paper proposes spending billions each year on regeneration programmes. But there is no dedicated support in place to ensure communities in left behind neighbourhoods are able to engage with this effectively or receive their fair share of funding.

A new Network for Communities could provide intensive support to the most left behind communities in England through:

- A dedicated community worker to help build up local capacity and develop priorities
- A dedicated adviser to help communities with detailed planning and their interaction with government initiatives
- Bespoke training and technical advice provided by expert partners on issues such as the use of community buildings
- Events and networking opportunities to enable communities to learn from each other and share experiences.
- Support with leadership development, communications, advocacy, and engaging government

This organisation would grow over time and could play a key role in supporting the rollout of government's Shared Prosperity Fund, the proposed Community Wealth Fund and other regeneration programmes.

We estimate that scaling up to provide support to 100 of the most left behind communities in England in its first three years would cost around £3.5m per year.

This organisation would draw on existing good practice in developing community capacity. Like New Schools Network, it would be based around personal relationships with each area, deep expertise in regeneration funding programmes and processes, and close relationships with policy makers. But like Local Trust and other community organising initiatives, it would work much more proactively to help local people design and deliver their plans.

## Recommendations

In order to give 'left behind' neighbourhoods the best chance of benefiting from its levelling up agenda, the government should create a Network for Communities as soon as possible.

To enable this and create the best policy environment for it to succeed, we make a series of further recommendations:

- 1. The government should consult on the creation of a Network for Communities as part of its forthcoming consultation on the expansion of the Dormant Assets scheme.** Alongside its commitment to consult on the creation of a Community Wealth Fund, the consultation should also seek views on what support will sit alongside it. Specifically, it should consult on the creation of a Network for Communities to support 'left behind' neighbourhoods, funded through the Dormant Assets scheme.
- 2. The government should commit to reviewing the impact of the Localism Act 2011 as part of its new Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships.** The Localism Act is a crucial tool for empowering communities and the Network for Communities would have a significant focus on helping those in 'left behind' neighbourhoods use the provisions within it. But more than a decade after it was passed, it is time to review the impact the legislation has had and where it could be improved further.
- 3. The government should require all spending on regeneration to ring-fence funding for community capacity building.** It is now standard practice for government programmes to ring-fence funding for evaluation or for policy decisions to consider their equality impact. But it is much rarer for government policy to take account of differing levels of local capacity. This creates an uneven playing field where the most 'left behind' communities miss out. The government should therefore establish a new principle which requires all programmes focused on regeneration to set aside a small proportion of their value for community capacity building.
- 4. The government, local councils, charities and civil society should work together to map provision and spending in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and commit to ensuring they receive a fairer share of investment.** Despite their acute need, communities in the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods also receive less charitable funds and see less voluntary and community activity than other deprived areas. Using the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Partnership as a model, national and local government, charities and civil society should work together to create a fuller picture of the interventions and investment these areas currently receive, why the investment they receive is not commensurate to their need, and what can be done to correct this.



# Introduction

***“Above all, we will listen to the people who have felt left behind by the last few decades of economic growth and want to have more control of their future.”***

Conservative Manifesto, 2019

***“For levelling up to mean something to people in their daily lives, we need to reach into every community in the country, from city centres to rural areas, in order to start to rebuild social capital and self-reliance in our most abandoned neighbourhoods.”***

Levelling Up White Paper, 2022

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a renewed concern about the state of our communities, especially those in neighbourhoods considered to be 'left behind'.

The EU referendum result, two subsequent General Elections and the uneven impact of the pandemic have all focused attention on places which have failed to share in the economic growth seen in the rest of the country and seem stuck in a cycle of decline.

Various indexes of need have shown how a small number of these places have been 'left behind' socially as well as economically. They face the twin challenge of high levels of deprivation and a weak social fabric, with fewer places to meet and less opportunity to engage in community life.

Unlike the large urban centres that have often been the target of regeneration policy, these 'left behind' neighbourhoods are largely concentrated in housing estates on the edges of post-industrial towns and cities and in coastal areas

At the same time, new research into the value of 'social infrastructure' has shown the crucial role it plays in underpinning the prosperity of an area, both in driving economic growth but also in reducing crime, boosting civic engagement, and improving people's life chances (Bennett Institute, 2021; APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods, 2021).

This analysis, and the evidence of where previous government regeneration efforts have been most successful, has led to a consensus that we need to change the way 'left behind' areas are supported.

Instead of top-down initiatives and tightly controlled - often short lived - funding schemes, there is broad acceptance that we need patient, long-term investment in the social infrastructure of communities, with local people given a much greater say in how this is spent.

In response, the government has made a series of commitments to empower communities. Its Levelling Up White Paper had a strong focus on devolving decision making and community partnerships, and promised to channel greater levels of funding and opportunity directly towards communities themselves (DLUHC, 2022).

However, as the White Paper acknowledges, 'left behind' communities have been less likely to benefit from these initiatives, since they may lack the capacity to navigate multiple funding pots administered from Whitehall. Evidence on the distribution of charitable spending and the activity in the voluntary and community sector suggests these places have been 'left behind' by these too, with 'left behind' communities less likely to benefit than other deprived areas (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI), 2021).

Despite a commitment to give communities a greater role in decision making and simplify funding streams, there is a significant risk that the government's approach will not succeed in helping the most 'left behind' communities. We know from the evidence of previous programmes that sustained support in building the capacity of these communities is required to secure lasting change (Onward, 2021; Cambridge, 2019).

This report is designed to explore the gap that currently exists between how government would like communities to engage with regeneration programmes and the capacity of those most 'left behind' to do so.

It draws on the evidence base of previous community regeneration initiatives and interviews with a wide range of those who have engaged with them, including residents, community workers, academics, and government officials. This builds on the authors' direct experience of working with hundreds of community groups seeking to create free schools around the country, as well as the experience of Local Trust in delivering the Big Local programme.

Based on our analysis, it sets out why the government's intention to empower communities will only succeed in helping the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods if they receive dedicated support to build their capacity – which we propose should be delivered through a new organisation designed to work directly with local people there.

In the first section of the report, we summarise the latest thinking about regeneration policy, the government's current approach, and why this risks leaving 'left behind' neighbourhoods even further behind.

In the second section of the report, we explore the capacity challenges facing 'left behind' neighbourhoods in greater depth and look at the support they need to overcome them.

In the third section, we analyse how capacity can be built in a community, what is most effective in doing this, and what support is available to left behind neighbourhoods now. We conclude that current provision leaves a substantial gap that needs to be filled.

In the fourth section we set out how this could be done, proposing a new organisation – a Network for Communities – designed to provide intensive support to help build the capacity of communities in left behind neighbourhoods specifically.

Finally, we make a series of recommendations on the next steps required to create this organisation and other policy measures which would support greater levels of community led activity.



The case for  
communities

***“That’s what always happened, isn’t it? People come in and deliver projects, then they disappear. It was nice while it lasted.”***

Community worker

***“It always fascinates me because people that are offering the support are worried about people being disappointed or sort of upset. But that’s day-to-day life! Someone said to me, oh don’t get too excited about it, because we might not be able to give you the money. We don’t want you to be disappointed. I said, ‘Don’t worry about that. We’re used to disappointment!’”***

Local resident of a Big Local area

***“It’s about putting the resources into the people who live there, you know, encouraging them, supporting them to come up with their own ideas, their own solutions. And then, you know, if that needs money, fine, but often it’s not about money. It’s about raising confidence and just being there as a helping hand.”***

Community worker

## The case for communities

The challenge of how to regenerate areas experiencing decline is one of the toughest public policy problems facing any government. Every administration since at least the late 1960s has dedicated high profile programmes to this issue – from Harold Wilson’s Urban Aid Programme to the current government’s Levelling Up agenda (Onward, 2021). But evidence of sustained improvements in the fortunes of these areas is depressingly thin.

Sadly, there is a greater need to solve this issue than ever. In line with a range of existing analysis, the government’s recent Levelling Up White Paper (DLUHC, 2022) acknowledged the widening gaps between different parts of the UK, with some areas benefiting from a virtuous circle of agglomeration increasingly pulling away from others that are in a self-reinforcing cycle of decline.

The first section of this report sets out the relevant context, summarising what we know about ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, the evidence of previous efforts to regenerate them and the current government’s plans to support them.

## 'Left behind' neighbourhoods

In the last five years, there has been a particular focus on places that have been 'left behind' - not just economically but also socially.

These places have suffered from a lack of financial investment in the skills, employment opportunities and infrastructure that have traditionally been seen as the basis for prosperity. But they have also experienced a weakening of their social fabric. Many have either seen a decline in their meeting places and civic assets - from pubs, to playgrounds, to village halls - that bring the community together, or no new investment in creating these kinds of facilities.

As a result, it has been harder for local people to succeed financially but also to engage in community activity - whether being part of a local club or getting involved in a group trying to bring about positive change.

People in many parts of the UK feel they have been 'left behind' in some way. A large-scale poll for by Public First found that more than 30% of people feel the place they live has got worse in the last ten years, with people in large and small towns especially likely to think their area had seen a decline (Public First, 2021).

But recent analysis has shown that there are a small number of places that are acutely affected by the twin challenges of economic and social deprivation. Research conducted by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion on behalf of Local Trust has identified 225 wards in England that are ranked in the worst ten percent in both the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, which is widely used to measure poverty, and a new Index of Community Needs, which was created to look at the strength of civic assets, connectivity and community engagement by ward (Local Trust and OCSI, 2019).

People in these places have noticeably worse socio-economic outcomes than the residents of other equally deprived areas, including seeing higher rates of unemployment and child poverty, and worse health outcomes (Local Trust and OCSI, 2019).

In contrast to the large urban centres that have often been the target of regeneration policy, these 'left behind' neighbourhoods are largely concentrated in housing estates on the edges of post-industrial towns and cities, and in coastal areas. They are particularly likely to be found in the North and Midlands, with some in pockets of deprivation along the South coast (OCSI, 2020).

## What works in regeneration policy?

Multiple studies have highlighted that we know relatively little about ‘what works’ when it comes to regeneration – both for major government policy programmes and more localised, community driven initiatives (Cambridge, 2019; Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, 2016).

However, analysis of where initiatives have been more successful suggests a few key themes:

Firstly, the importance of community engagement for generating significant and lasting change. Government programmes have been more likely to be successful where local people have been given a high degree of ownership and control over how they were directed (Cambridge, 2019).

The New Deal for Communities, which ran in 39 deprived communities from 1998 to 2011 and was designed from the outset to have a strong focus on community engagement through a partnership model, has been used as a particular case study for this. An evaluation of the programme found that the best performing areas – as measured across change in six key outcome areas – were also those that saw the biggest increase in the percentage of residents getting involved in the programme (DCLG, 2010). Subsequent analysis has also shown that the majority of areas involved in the programme saw levels of deprivation up to 2019 fall faster than both the national average and in the surrounding local authority (Onward, 2021).

Secondly, the importance of ‘social infrastructure’ and its role as a basis for regeneration. This term has been used in a range of different ways, but recent definitions describe how it encompasses both the ‘harder’ forms of infrastructure within a community that provide space for people to come together, such as libraries, pubs or community centres, and the ‘softer’ infrastructure of groups and organisations, such as sports clubs, neighbourhood associations or activity groups, which shape the way people interact (APPG, 2021).

The evidence of large-scale government programmes, as well as smaller, localised ones, all point to the importance of **existing** physical and intangible infrastructure, with those places that have the strongest existing base of civic assets the most likely to see a sustained positive impact (Cambridge, 2019). For example, evidence from the New Deal for Communities programme found that those areas which had the strongest base of civic assets and most engaged communities were most likely to see the most sustained improvements (Onward, 2021). The importance of social infrastructure could also be seen during the height of the Covid pandemic, in which those areas with the strongest base of existing civic assets were most likely to see Covid mutual aid groups formed to support local residents (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, 2016).

Thirdly, there is a need for long term funding and support. An analysis of multiple government programmes stressed the way that insufficient timescales and resources could act as a barrier to success (Cambridge, 2019) and that piecemeal efforts had been unable to turn things around for communities long-term. But time itself is not enough. An important element of successful schemes has been an emphasis on building the capacity of the community over time, so that it is able to engage in programmes and decision making. The evaluations of the New Deal for Communities programme and the Single Regeneration Budget, an initiative from 1994-2002 in which activity was led by locally based partnerships accessing a simplified pot of funding, both stressed the way that individual projects had been most successful when they delivered sustained activity to develop local people’s ability to engage in community activity (Onward, 2021).

## The current approach

This evidence has prompted calls from across civil society and politics for a new approach to supporting 'left behind' communities. A range of policy papers have argued powerfully that we need to see patient investment in the social infrastructure of communities over time, and a bigger role for local people in decisions about how this investment is deployed (for example, Local Trust, 2021).

It has also led to a shift in thinking from the government. Its recent Levelling Up White Paper highlighted the importance of social capital and social infrastructure in underpinning prosperity, and that strengthening them must be a key part of efforts in reducing the wide disparities seen between different parts of the UK. References to the Community Needs Index in the paper showed how influential it has been in shaping thinking about which areas are most 'left behind' and therefore in most urgent need of support (DLUHC, 2022).

In response, the government made a series of commitments to empower communities and increase the investment made in them, with local people given a more prominent role. This included making investment in community led activity a priority for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, testing Community Covenants which bring together local people and public bodies, and plans for a new Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships which would cover issues such as how well existing Community Asset Transfer and Asset of Community Value schemes are functioning.

The White Paper also confirmed that the government would consult on the creation of a Community Wealth Fund, as part of its plans for releasing a further £880 million in Dormant Assets Funding. This proposal, which is supported by a cross-sector coalition of nearly 600 organisations, which includes around 50 local and combined authorities and regional leaders such as the Mayor for the West Midlands and the Mayor for Greater Manchester. The idea of a Community Wealth Fund, which is also supported by over 200 Parliamentarians from across the political spectrum (Civil Society, 2022), would provide long term funding to residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, so that they can invest in their area's physical fabric, fund more community activity, and create sustainable new civic institutions.

## The need for greater support

This change in emphasis from the government is welcome from a policy perspective. It is also likely to have the support of people in 'left behind' neighbourhoods themselves. Recent polling in 225 'left behind' wards found that when they were asked about a new hypothetical fund set up to support the area, 75% of residents thought that local people or local charities and community organisations should make decisions about how this was spent, compared to only 19% saying local government should decide and only 2% in favour of national government (Survation, 2021).

However, as the White Paper acknowledges, some communities have struggled to engage with regeneration schemes coming out of Whitehall. Requiring local areas to navigate a complex landscape of multiple, time limited funding pots can advantage those which are good at bidding for them, despite them being invariably less in need of the funding (Onward, 2021). For example, despite the UK Community Renewal Fund being designed to support 'people and communities most in need across the UK', only 21% of funding went to the 20% most deprived local authorities in the country (Centre for Levelling Up, 2021).

This problem is not just limited to government. Analysis of the 'left behind' neighbourhoods identified by OCSI has also highlighted that they also received well under half the charitable grant funding per head seen in other deprived areas between 2004 and 2021 (OCSI, 2021).

In response, the government committed in its Levelling Up White Paper to streamline the current myriad of funding schemes which support community activity and provide greater help to local areas attempting to access them. It has also recognised the way that stop-start funding can lead to local people's hopes being raised as investment comes into an area, only for them to be dashed as programmes come to an end (DLUHC, 2022).

But reforming funding streams will not by itself help create the empowered, self-reliant communities envisioned in the White Paper, even if it helps create more equitable access to government funds.

This is particularly the case in the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods, in which even relatively successful regeneration programmes have struggled to make a sustained impact. The evaluation of the New Deal for Communities, for example, found that it saw lower rates of change in precisely the 'stable, homogeneous, peripheral, 'white' estates on the edge of non-core cities' which feature heavily in the OSCI's list of 'left behind' neighbourhoods (DCLG, 2010).

We know from the experience of previous initiatives that there is a need for a sustained focus on building community capacity in these places – not just to successfully bid for government funds but also to help local residents engage in a full range of community led activity.

Without this kind of dedicated support, the government's suite of levelling up interventions is likely to fail in the same way that others have, with the complexity and bureaucracy of top-down schemes intended to empower communities making demands on the financial and social capital of 'left behind' communities in ways which preclude genuine community empowerment (Localis, 2020).



The challenge  
of capacity

***“The greatest problem we faced was the lack of aspiration locally that people had the right to change things”***

Free school founder

***“In communities like these ... from outside, the attitude is basically that you can't trust these people. You won't find people who can create a plan. It just won't happen because it's not retired doctors or retired lawyers, or whatever. But that's a massive mistake because the people with the potential to deliver fantastic planning for their community and more importantly projects that can make a real difference ... they 100% exist in every community. It's just that we need to unearth them and give them confidence.”***

Community worker

## The challenge of capacity

The previous section of this report summarised why there is a compelling case to for investing directly in communities themselves and giving the people in them a much greater role in how this investment is made.

However, policy makers trying to enable greater community input face a 'Catch 22': the 'left behind' neighbourhoods which are in most need of regeneration are often also those where the social fabric is weakest. This makes community engagement in local decision making and investment – which is key to sustainable change – even harder.

The challenge of capacity is therefore a key issue to address. Whilst localism may be the right approach in principle, handing more power to communities without recognising the different levels of capacity and resources they have to use it may in fact entrench existing inequalities, further marginalising those already 'left behind' (Locality, 2018) or risk setting them up to fail .

This section considers in further detail what makes up the capacity of a community, the evidence we have about capacity in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and what previous regeneration programmes tell us about the challenges this can cause.

## What do we mean by the 'capacity' of a community?

Though the capacity of a community is frequently referred to in the relevant literature, it has no agreed definition.

When discussing capacity for this report, we are primarily referring to the extent to which a community possesses the skills, assets, knowledge, and time to be able to change itself in the way it wants to. Or, put another way, whether they have the 'community power' which Danny Kruger has described as "local people, acting together spontaneously or through enduring institutions" to "design and deliver the kind of neighbourhood they want to be part of" (Kruger, 2020).

We also agree it is important to emphasise that all communities, even those considered to be 'left behind' have 'a wealth of knowledge, skills and assets within themselves' (New Local/Local Trust, 2021). As such, it is important to take an asset-based approach, which builds on what is already in place within a community, rather than use a deficit model, which begins by looking at what the community lacks.

Clearly, the capacity of a community encompasses a very wide range of activities and involve a large number of different people, who each have different roles. But for this report we have focused on three dimensions of it:

- **Firstly**, whether individuals have the skills and time to take a leadership role, for example by sitting on a partnership board or mobilising other people to get involved.
- **Secondly**, whether local residents are motivated or able to get involved in other ways – from volunteering to help deliver projects to attending meetings or completing a survey about local priorities, or even simply using community facilities or attending events.
- **And finally**, whether the community has the 'social infrastructure' that underpins this activity: the institutions, networks and physical spaces that enable people to meet and allows social interaction to take place.

## What do we know about the capacity of communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods?

Recent research has helped quantify the substantial gap between 'left behind' neighbourhoods and other parts of the country, underlining the challenges local people face in being able to take greater control of decisions that affect them.

Whilst there has been a general decline across the country in the number of civic spaces where community activity takes place, this has been particularly steep in 'left behind' places (Onward, 2020).

Looking at the 225 neighbourhoods identified as 'left behind' by the Community Needs Index, we can see that 73% of 'left behind neighbourhoods' have less community space assets, such as village halls, youth clubs or church halls per person than the national average. These areas are also substantially less likely to have educational assets such as schools and colleges, cultural assets such as libraries or museums, or shops and leisure assets such as pubs, leisure centres and green spaces (OCSI, 2021).

We also know that these places are less likely to have the sort of networks that help communities organise themselves, with 'left behind' neighbourhoods less than half as likely to have a registered charity in their area and significantly less likely to have other types of third sector organisations, such as co-operative societies and mutual societies (OCSI, 2021).

As a result, it is unsurprising that participation in community activities also tends to be much lower than in other areas. Polling of those in 'left behind' neighbourhoods found that only eight per cent of residents had been a member of a local community or social action group over the past year, compared to an estimated 16 per cent of people in England who had been involved in local social action at least once in the same time period (APPG, 2021). Similarly, only 14% of residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods reported taking part in unpaid voluntary activity of some sort, compared to 36% across the country (APPG, 2021).

Beyond actively volunteering or being involved in organisations, data from the national Community Life Survey shows that people from 'left behind' neighbourhoods are less likely to engage in decision making activities, such as taking part in a consultation about local issues or services (OCSI, 2021). This data also suggests that 'left behind' neighbourhoods also suffer from weaker social connections between people generally. For example, people in them are less likely to feel they can borrow things or exchange favours with their neighbours or be comfortable asking them to mind their children for half an hour.

Finally, we also know that 'left behind' neighbourhoods are less likely to have access to a full range of the skills involved in community regeneration. Of course, a lot of community activity does not require formal qualifications. As we will see, having the trust of local people and the soft skills needed to organise or encourage others can often be just as important. But 'left behind' neighbourhoods do have substantially fewer people educated to degree level, only 12% compared to 27% across England, which implies they are more likely to struggle in accessing the expertise needed for particular tasks or experience of navigating government processes (OCSI, 2021).

Local people may also have less time to get involved in community activity. Higher rates of unemployment and much lower rates of job density in 'left behind' neighbourhoods means people are more likely to be busy looking for work or having to travel farther for it, limiting their free time. Other issues, such as higher rates of chronic ill health, may also act as barriers to people being able to participate in community activity (OCSI, 2021).

## What support do communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods need?

To explore how this lack of capacity affects communities in practice, we spoke to a range of residents and community leaders in similar areas and the community workers with experience of working alongside them. We also analysed the experience of previous community led regeneration efforts, such as the Big Local programme and attempts to open free schools.

This suggested five broad challenges which communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods are likely to need support with:

### **1. Building local confidence and creating a plan for change**

Many of those we spoke to talked about challenges stemming from 'left behind' communities lacking trust and confidence in government initiatives. For some, this was linked to the 'belief fatigue' identified in other research, caused by previous programmes failing to achieve lasting change or ignoring local people's priorities (APPG, 2021). In other places, the absence of action by government or other organisations was the issue, meaning that people simply hadn't been given opportunities before. One Big Local community worker described how, "in our area they weren't even doing things to people... they just weren't doing anything". This lack of successful activity makes it difficult to convince people that their involvement could make a difference. As one free school founder put it, "the greatest problem we faced was a lack of aspiration locally that people had the right to change things", whilst one resident talked about a lack of confidence holding back the ambition of local people, who questioned "why would people want to give us that money to spend?".

Without experience of successful local action, one resident talked about how it was "difficult to frame something where there are no previous examples, especially in an area where change hasn't happened before around a plan". Another community worker explained how local residents "didn't know where to start" in terms of developing their ideas, leading to initiatives taking several years to get off the ground. This was mirrored by the experience of the New Deal for Communities programme, which found that in some areas, a lack of capacity within communities contributed in the early stages of the Programme to problems and conflict amongst local residents (DCLG, 2010).

Those leading change therefore need to be supported and empowered in setting a vision for their area and developing a plan to deliver it. One Big Local partnership member talked about the importance of 'translation': taking what people wanted and turning this into a programme for action. In their area, outside organisations had played an important role in this by working with the local group on their initial plans, helping them to feel more confident and 'think big' about what was possible.

## 2. Accessing the right skills and expertise

When asked about the challenges created by low skills, interviewees focused on two issues. Firstly, the way a lack of experience of delivering projects or managing funding – as well as “the boring stuff like making sure meetings have an agenda or chairing meetings” – made it harder to organise community activity. Secondly, the need for help accessing the right technical skills for complex processes, like preparing a neighbourhood plan or incorporating an organisation. With many areas particularly keen to take on or create new physical assets, such as community hubs, support with community ownership and asset transfer processes was particularly needed (Local Trust survey, 2021). But this also highlighted how skills were an ongoing challenge, with one interviewee talking about how they feared a community centre was at risk of falling into disrepair without people who could manage it effectively.

Time was also a critical issue, with one resident involved in community work reflecting that if local people “have got the time they may not have the skills; if they have the skills then they may not have the time” and a general feeling that it was unrealistic to expect them to take on very significant responsibilities on a voluntary basis. Finding a few key individuals with the right skills and time was seen as fundamentally important to the success of Big Local projects; this was also identified in the evaluation of the New Deal for Communities programme too (DCLG, 2010). One interviewee talked about the very different outcomes of two areas, less than five miles apart, where the presence of two people with a background in community development had made all the difference.

Communities therefore need support in accessing the “right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time”. But those we spoke to talked about this coming in two ways. Firstly, through providing access to outside expertise that could bring fresh perspectives and technical knowledge. And secondly through developing capacity from within by finding and empowering residents. They gave the example of a local man who had never been involved in community activity before but was now a key member of the Big Local partnership, as well as running a social enterprise and being elected as a councillor. Being given the opportunity and encouragement to get involved had been crucial since, “if it wasn’t for Big Local, he’d still be pottering about in his garden instead of helping people”.

### **3. Engaging the community**

Engaging with the full breadth of the community was also seen as a significant issue. A survey of Big Local partnerships found that ‘getting people engaged and involved in the partnership’ was by far the most common challenge identified by respondents (Local Trust survey, 2021). This also reflects the experience of the New Deal for Communities programme, where many areas found it difficult to engage a broad range of residents (DCLG, 2010).

A number of those we spoke to talked about how this lack of participation risked decisions and activity being skewed in favour of the “loudest voices” who were already active in the area, rather than the real priorities of residents. Several highlighted how early meetings in Big Local areas were dominated by local politicians or existing organisations – “in a meeting packed with local residents, they were the only people speaking” – and that they had to create other opportunities for ordinary people to be heard. For one group, this was often best done by engaging people through low-stakes, individual activities that gave them a taster of being involved, rather than big meetings.

Local leaders therefore need support in effectively communicating with residents, especially inspiring those who may not been given much opportunity to have their say before to think about what could be possible. This is partly about the materials used, which need to be grounded in language and examples people can relate to. But it is also about help to put in the right structures and processes to ensure the genuine voice of the community is heard. Those from outside the community can be well placed to do this, since they can play a neutral role without being seen to have any pre-existing agenda. Time also matters. One recommendation emerging from the New Deal for Communities programme was that projects should have a ‘Year Zero’ to plan their approach and set systems up before there was pressure to spend money or start projects (DCLG, 2010). Those we spoke to who had been given a similar period of time dedicated to planning said they really felt the benefit of this.

## 4. Engaging government and other stakeholders

Analysis of previous regeneration initiatives has repeatedly found the complexity of interacting with government – and the time and resources this requires – to be a major barrier for community organisations (Localis, 2020). This was certainly reflected by those we spoke to.

Though some councils were a source of significant support, others failed to engage or simply tried to impose their views onto community led initiatives. “Bureaucracy and risk averse attitudes” could frustrate plans and undermine local people’s confidence. This was particularly the case for some free school founders, where local authorities might refuse to engage on the need for a new school, hampering their bid to the Department for Education, or in securing a site. Similarly, one community worker talked about how obstruction from the local council meant it took 5 years to transfer a youth centre to the community, even though it was due to be closed anyway.

These examples highlight how residents will often need support in understanding their rights and asserting them, especially where they are not used to interacting with council officials and members in order to achieve change. Interactions with central government can be even more challenging, with one interviewee reflecting on the “steep learning curve” they had faced in trying to translate the “passion and goals of the community ... into a government framework”. In both cases, support in helping local people understand what was being asked of them, as well as brokering a relationship by gaining the trust of residents and government, are crucial. Others talked about the importance of getting help in lobbying government for change, since an organisation that can reflect the collective voice of communities can do this in a way individual places cannot.

## 5. Accessing networks of support

A number of interviewees told us how residents in 'left behind' neighbourhoods could feel isolated as they tried to lead change in their communities. Since many were doing this for the first time, they lacked successful examples to follow, or sources of advice, with one community worker reflecting that this meant "most groups don't know what they need".

Those we spoke to talked about two kinds of networks that it was important to build up. The first was local, where links to existing organisations could help boost capacity or just provide a forum for people to get engaged. One free school founder said that their team used to joke about the school being dreamt up on the side-lines of a rugby pitch, since the local rugby club proved to be a hub that connected many of those who eventually got involved. Though this kind of social infrastructure is rarer in 'left behind' neighbourhoods a community worker said it added real value by linking residents with partners in the local voluntary sector. Regional and national networks were also important in helping people to "see the bigger picture" and providing inspiration.

Communities therefore need help building up their network at each level and in being given the opportunities to make best use of it. This is about formal peer learning or training but those we spoke to also talked about the importance of having an informal set of contacts who can provide moral support with challenges and help "put into perspective" what a group may be going through.



Building capacity  
in 'left behind'  
communities

***“Some communities need a lot of healing. The foundation of that is having the right people, in the right places, at the right time, with the right skills - but also having really strong, trusted relationships ... and they don’t come in through an organisation just turning up to give support. They take years to build up.”***

Community worker

***“I think first of all you need to start with confidence. Confidence like we received ... from people who came to the area ... and helped tell us how the system works .. how funding works, and helped us form a group. There’s a lot of groundwork that needs to be done first to get residents like us confident enough and empowered enough to think big and be aspirational.”***

Big Local partnership member

## Building capacity in 'left behind' communities

The previous section of this report outlined how a lack of local capacity can create significant barriers for communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Without additional support to build this capacity, programmes focused on regeneration are unlikely to succeed because they will not create the kind of community engagement that underpins sustainable change.

There is already a wide range of community capacity building activity taking place and lessons we can draw from previous initiatives. But the extent to which this provision is accessible to the most 'left behind' communities or allows them to focus on their priorities is less clear.

This section summarises approaches to building community capacity, provides case studies of how this has been done in different contexts, and then analyses the extent to which current provision is likely to meet the needs of 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

## How can capacity be built in 'left behind' communities?

Looking across the evidence of a range of different initiatives and previous regeneration efforts, not all of them focused especially on 'left behind' communities, we find six broad types of activity which support capacity building:



**1. The creation of new structures** in which programmes create new opportunities for residents to participate in community led activity, often supported by training which boosts their individual development. For example, those who were involved in the partnership boards used in the New Deal for Communities programme benefited from improved perceptions of their skills, confidence and views about the local community (DCLG, 2010). Similarly, around 30% of paid workers across the Big Local programme are residents who have progressed from some voluntary involvement in the project to working on it directly (Local Trust, 2019).



**2. Community leadership programmes** which provide dedicated training, mentoring and networking opportunities for both existing community leaders with formal roles, and for individuals who communities look to for leadership (Local Trust, 2018). For example, the Community Leadership Academy run by Local Trust for volunteers helping to run Big Local programmes has found initial, strong evidence of positive individual change in terms of the confidence and connection with peers of those participating in it (Local Trust, 2022).



**3. Community development work or community organising programmes** in which trained workers support communities to mobilise and take action on local issues. For example, the Community Organisers programme, which the Cabinet Office funded from 2011-2015, recruited 5,000 local volunteers and supported nearly 1,500 community projects in over 400 deprived communities (Cabinet Office, 2015).



**4. Grant making** in which communities themselves allocate funds to the projects and issues local people want to prioritise. For example, the Community First programme distributed £80 million of matched government funding to 600 local panels in order to support community groups and initiatives (DCMS, 2017). This stimulated new community activity, as well as boosting the skills of those applying for funds and making funding decisions. Similarly, many areas participating in the Big Local programme have used their £1m endowment to run small grants programmes.



**5. Membership bodies and networks** which provide support, guidance and peer learning opportunities for community organisations able to join them, and advocate on their collective behalf through campaigns and policy development. For example, Locality has a membership network made up of 1400 community organisations around the country (Locality, 2022), whilst the Plunkett Foundation and Power to Change specifically support community run businesses and those who want to create them.



**6. Support interacting with government programmes** in which groups receive help with application processes or other statutory processes. For example, New Schools Network was funded by government to provide guidance and support to those establishing free schools. Similarly, the Right to Build Taskforce was established to support community groups and others looking to build their own homes, and Neighbourhood Planning Support provides grants and technical assistance for communities preparing neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood development orders.

The case studies below provide a more in-depth look at three initiatives that have sought to build capacity in 'left behind' areas:

## Case study 1: New Schools Network

New Schools Network was an independent charity, founded in 2009 to support the introduction of the free school programme. It had a particular focus on helping community groups to open new and innovative state funded schools – alongside charities, existing schools and others – who can prove there is demand for a new school in their area and that they have the capacity to run it successfully.

In its early days, New Schools Network spent a significant amount of time helping the Department for Education (DfE) to design the programme, by feeding in the views of those preparing applications to open schools and the challenges they had in opening them successfully. “Building the track whilst shoving people along it”, as one free school founder put it. Its ability to act as an independent intermediary between government and the groups it was supporting was something all the free school founders we interviewed valued highly, since it provided space for them to develop their ideas before taking them to government – something that one founder felt “wouldn’t have worked psychologically” if New Schools Network had been an Arm’s Length Body. New Schools Network’s insight into what was happening on the ground also gave officials a source of live feedback often lacking in government programmes. One senior civil servant explained how this meant it came to be seen as an “expert and trusted adviser”, whose “independent perspective” was actively sought by Ministers as they made decisions.

New Schools Network also had a key campaigning role early on: both in making people around the country aware of the opportunity and helping them mobilise local campaigns for a new school, and as a constant advocate to policymakers and the national media. Those we spoke to talked about how New Schools Network’s ability to help them explain what the policy offered their community and make them feel part of something bigger boosted their confidence to go ahead, especially when they faced challenges locally. As one community group leader told us, “I can’t express how important it was to know we had your (New Schools Network’s) support”.

As the programme became established, the majority of New Schools Network’s services focused on providing free support to applicants as they completed the documents required by the application process, which asked for hundreds of pages of detail. This was coordinated via a dedicated adviser, who works with a small caseload of projects to provide detailed feedback on the bid documents and answer questions as the application proceeds, and signpost them to resources and other free schools. Applicants were also offered support via training events and bespoke support from specialist consultants on issues such as finance and governance. More recently, New Schools Network also developed a service for free schools in the pre-opening stage to assist with project management and challenges around preparing the school’s building, as well as for free schools in their first years of opening as they work towards their first Ofsted inspection.



For the free school founders we spoke to, New Schools Network's role was critical, with a number echoing the view that "without New Schools Network it (starting the school) wouldn't have happened". This was largely due to its practical expertise in the application process, which all applicant groups – even those with highly skilled individuals – found challenging. New Schools Network's ability to "decipher and decode the criteria and expectations of the DfE" and fill the "gaps between what was written down ... and what was being demanded of us" was something all the founders we spoke to valued. The most important aspect of this was assistance with developing a clear vision which matched both the community's aspirations and what DfE would find credible, with one founder talking about how "everything fell into place" once New Schools Network had helped them do this. This expertise was seen to come from New Schools Network's unique status as both extremely close to government and Ministers' thinking but not being fully part of it, and always acting in the best interests of founders.

The role of New Schools Network's advisers was also seen as crucial. Building up a relationship with applicant groups, often over several years, enabled advisers to act as critical friends, who both understood the demands of the process but also had a "real, full understanding of what was going on at grassroots level". One founder contrasted the trusted role their adviser came to play in their bid to unsuccessful attempts to work with a paid consultant, whilst another talked about how "we were project managed by New Schools Network" through their adviser challenging them and helping the group stay focused. By developing this understanding, advisers were then able to guide them towards specialist support on issues like school finance – which was a common challenge – much more effectively.

Finally, all those we interviewed commented on how much they valued being part of a wider network of free schools – "the networking was incredible and would not have happened without New Schools Network". One interviewee talked about the "collegiate feel" that New Schools Network developed between prospective and existing schools, where through events and other opportunities, applicant groups were encouraged to "come in and be amongst those that had been successful". For another, this was crucial in helping them "put into perspective what we were going through" as well as getting practical help from peers on their challenges. A senior government official talked about how New Schools Network's ability to share learning via this network – "a free school in a box" approach that ensured everyone understood the basics whilst not constraining ambition – saved officials and founders huge amounts of time.

When asked what could have been improved, interviewees tended to focus on how a more localised approach would have been helpful. Though advisers got to know individual projects well, as a small organisation covering the country, New Schools Network lacked relationships with Local Authorities and others who founders needed to work with, though in later years the charity attempted to address this by organising the caseloads of advisers regionally and working much more closely with councils on their plans for new schools. One interviewee also talked about the importance of learning from both success and failure in the programme, with the former getting much more attention as New Schools Network campaigned to ensure free schools survived successive governments.

## Case study 2: Big Local

Local Trust was established in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a Lottery-funded programme which committed £1m each to 150 neighbourhoods across England. In contrast to usual top-down, time limited funding, the programme is unique in giving each area the ability to spend this money over 10-15 years on priorities decided by the local community, within a very broad range of outcomes.

Though the programme is designed to be resident-led, with few outside rules, Local Trust have made a range of light-touch support available to each area, in part reflecting the fact that many of them were selected because they had low levels of civic activity and community organisation.

The core elements of local support provided to each area has remained consistent: each area partnership has a 'rep' (typically an experienced community worker) who supports residents 1-2 days a month and a nominated Locally Trusted Organisation (for example, a charity) to help administer funding and deliver activities, with many also choosing to employ a community worker in the area. Networking between areas and peer learning opportunities have also always been a key part of the programme.

However, Local Trust's central support offer has evolved significantly over time. Originally, the goal of letting each area determine its own priorities meant that support was quite unstructured, but it has become "much more hands on over time" as their needs have become clearer. Alongside resources and training, specialist support is provided by a small number of external organisations that work closely with areas on issues such as communications and land management. Local Trust has also restructured its teams so that they focus on different regions or types of Big Local project (e.g. coastal communities) in order to move towards a 'much more targeted, relational and qualitative understanding of the areas'. Though working with 150 places means knowing them in-depth will always be a challenge, the aim is that by 'underpinning and fine tuning ... what is going on in those areas much better', the team will be able to point them towards support more effectively. In addition, a new Community Leadership Academy pilot has also started offering dedicated mentoring and training for those leading Big Local partnerships.

Those we spoke to were generally very positive about the support Local Trust provided. One rep thought this was now "absolutely outstanding", with another agreeing that partnerships were "very well supported by Local Trust". Much of this was based on the patient way it had been able to build up relationships with each area, especially through the reps – who in some cases had now worked with two or three areas for almost a decade and



knew them intimately. Trust came up repeatedly as an issue with one rep simply stating that “because we’ve been around for a long time, people have started to trust us more”. Several reps talked about the way that Local Trust’s independence gave them a unique opportunity to focus solely on providing support without being seen to have an agenda, as every other local body did. This was a key advantage in empowering residents who couldn’t always be sure who to trust and a big change from other organisations who, as one resident put it, “just turn up and think everything can be solved in a twelve-week programme”.

Those on the ground appreciated the way that Local Trust’s support offer had become better grounded in an understanding of the local area, with external partners paid for development time to gain this. Initially, there had been some scepticism about bringing outsiders in, with one partnership feeding back that they were worried “a bunch of strangers would come into our community, they’d swan around and say you ought to have that bigger or smaller”, and some reps sceptical about how much value national organisations could add. But one rep talked about how they now felt confident they could find “the right bespoke training they need” for partnership members.

Many of those we spoke to talked about the value of networking via Local Trust, with events and other opportunities creating a “self-help” network between Big Local areas, that “really is like a family now” for some of them. For another resident, the “major benefit of being part of Big Local is talking with and interacting with other Big Local areas”, especially since “a lot of areas are doing similar things ... even in different ways”. This was also true for those who had been part of the first Community Leadership Academy cohort, who still keep in touch regularly.

For most of those we interviewed, the main frustration with Local Trust’s support was that it hadn’t been as direct and effective as it was now: As one rep put it, “some of the opportunities areas have got now have come 5 years too late”, which will limit how much difference they can make before the programme ends. A member of the Local Trust team acknowledged “10 years is a long time for policy makers and funders but not for a community”, especially when starting from a low base of capacity.

For others, there was still a gap between the relationship they had with their rep and Local Trust itself. One resident said they found Local Trust very helpful when they needed to access data but “I wouldn’t ring them up and say ‘how do you do this?’, as they would with their rep. Partnerships that were more confident in what they wanted to achieve also felt they could be given more specialist support, such as legal advice or help with planning, since Local Trust’s ability to procure this at scale could save individual areas “a lot of time, energy and money”.



## Case study 3: Community Economic Development Programme

The Community Economic Development (CED) Programme was a £1.45m government funded initiative which ran from between 2015 and 2017 and was delivered by a partnership of third sector organisations, led by Co-operatives UK (Co-operatives UK, 2017). It supported 69 communities across England -ranging from neighbourhoods in large cities to coastal towns – each of which had applied to join it and contained at least one of the 20% most deprived wards in the country.

The aim of the programme was to develop a better understanding of how communities can engage with and start to resolve their own economic issues, through developing their own plans for economic development and building partnerships across private, community and voluntary sectors, as well as local government. It drew on the concept of CED, which aims to help people take greater ownership of economic development within their area, in order to make the local economy work better for the community and connect the environmental, social and economic issues it faces.

Each area was offered a mix of grant and technical support to help them produce a well-supported, dynamic and deliverable local economic plan over one year. This included being allocated an experienced adviser, who acted as their main point of contact and provided guidance as the plan developed, as well as helping groups determine what further technical support they might need to complete it. This support was delivered through a range of programme partners, who helped areas with more technical aspects of their plan, such as community entrepreneurship, financing and how to strengthen local economic impact. In addition, a grant of £5,000 was made available to each area to fund activities such as community consultation. Finally, a range of training events were provided to participating areas, as well as a suite of learning resources and online networking opportunities.

The CED programme was seen as providing a valuable framework through which each community could think in depth about its own development, which led to a concrete output – the Community Economic Development Plan – that would then act as “a template they could use ... to lay the foundations for a more ambitious local economic development approach”. The rigour of the CED process, as well as the expert technical support provided, was seen by many as particularly helpful, as it left them in a stronger position to take forward local issues since, as one area put it, they now had, “a well-evidenced plan that can really help conversations with stakeholders”. In another case, developing the plan enabled the area to secure funding to put its aims into action.

The way the programme encouraged communities to develop partnerships and provided “reflective space” for these to develop through the support of each area’s adviser was also seen as, “very, very valuable for an awful lot of them”. This allowed several areas to develop beyond a focus on particular projects to a better joined up view of economic development. For example, one area talked about how the programme had enabled it to, “think more strategically about the longer-term options for the regeneration of the town and seafront” by considering environmental issues and other factors, as well as the desire to bring the local pier into community ownership.

However, the programme’s evaluation found that time and capacity was a frequent challenge for the areas participating – and suggested that in future communities should be given greater resources and a longer period in which to deliver their plans. There has also been some criticism of the rigidity of the CED process, which some believed could have been more successful if it had been more flexible and responsive to the circumstances of different areas. Finally, there was an acknowledgement that developing a CED plan itself could only help so far since it lacked any official status (unlike a neighbourhood plan) which meant its implementation was still heavily dependent on the cooperation of the Local Authority and other stakeholders.

## What works well in building capacity?

The evidence above provides us with a range of different models for empowering communities and developing their capacity.

Though the schemes described here all worked in different areas and on different issues, adopted different methodologies and ran for different lengths of time, it is possible to identify five common factors in what seems to have made them successful:



**The importance of relationships.** For support to be most effective, it needs to be based on trusted relationships that are built up over time. This is particularly the case in 'left behind' neighbourhoods that may have seen a blizzard of short-lived initiatives but little lasting change. New Schools Network and Local Trust have been able to build up relationships with areas and projects over years and have used advisers and reps to make a personal connection and get to know places in depth, enabling them to guide and challenge projects more effectively.



**The practicality of advice.** Advice and guidance is most useful when it is practical and based on solving specific issues, even if these are unique to the area or project. To provide it, organisations need to build up substantial expertise, which often means focusing on doing a smaller number of things well. There can be a tension between this and empowering communities to decide their own priorities but providing structure and having a dialogue around a process can help. For example, the content of Community Economic Development plans or free school applications varied enormously, but all communities could be supported in completing them to a high standard. Bringing in external expertise, as Local Trust does by working with other organisations as part of its support offer, or as New Schools Network did by using consultants as specialist advisers, can also help – though this needs to be managed carefully to maintain the quality of relationships and ensure advice is properly tailored to local contexts.



**The flexibility of support.** It is important to match the support offered to the capacity of the group and the stage they are at. Doing this requires time and for those working alongside communities to work flexibly, so that their support is tailored to local needs as far as possible. In 'left behind' neighbourhoods it will often require proactive work to build up the confidence of the community and guide them towards the help they need, as Big Local reps can do, rather than waiting for people to ask for support.



**Maintaining independence.** External organisations may lack local knowledge but their independence from local politics also gives them an advantage. As a neutral body, they can bring different partners together and create the right structures for a community's voice to be heard. New Schools Network in particular has been at its most effective when playing a brokering role between community groups and government.



**Peer learning.** Community groups can provide insights and an empathy to their peers that organisations delivering support cannot. Creating opportunities for a network to develop is key but this needs to be guided so that communities make the most effective connections and have the right opportunities to learn from them.

## To what extent are 'left behind' communities able to access this type of support?

Based on analysis of existing provision and the views of those we interviewed for this report, there is a genuine question about whether what is in place currently meets the needs of those most 'left behind'.

Existing provision fails to map onto the needs of 'left behind' communities for three reasons:

- 1. It does not reach the right areas.** Most programmes supporting 'left behind' communities are limited in their geographic coverage. Big Local, for example, works in 150 communities but only a small subset of these – between 20-30 – overlap wholly or partly with the "left behind" neighbourhoods identified in the Community Needs Index (OCSI, 2020). Similarly, though we know community organising can have a positive impact, Citizens UK (Citizens UK, 2022) is currently focused on 17, predominantly urban areas, and has limited overlap with these neighbourhoods. Given that the most 'left behind' areas are less likely to engage with other national, more generalised support offers, there is arguably a need for a specific focus on them.
- 2. Engaging with it often requires pre-existing capacity and resources.** Existing networks can provide valuable support for their members but joining them requires community organisations to be established and looking outwards for help. Since we know 'left behind' communities have less of this activity, they may need support getting to this stage or more pro-active outreach to help residents get organised. Similarly, the support provided by organisations like New Schools Network or on issues like neighbourhood planning can be highly technical, requiring a level of capacity to engage with it and a pre-existing vision for what the community wants to achieve. A gap exists in capacity building *ahead* of the provision that is currently offered, so that people and organisations can get to the point of benefiting from it.
- 3. It is focused on specific activity.** Organisations such as the Plunkett Foundation or Power to Change do excellent work on specific activities such as community enterprise but this is just one aspect of what a community may need. As we have seen, many 'left behind' communities need time and support in determining their priorities and engaging residents on a plan of action – again suggesting a need for more generalised capacity building support.

Those we spoke to felt that these factors meant there was a gap for an organisation that could provide support to communities across the country and turn their ideas into action, especially in 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

Other research has also identified this as an issue and suggested the creation of a 'New Schools Network for Communities' that could take best practice from New Schools Network and other capacity building organisations (Onward).

Based on our findings, we agree with this analysis. The next section of this report outlines what such an organisation could look like.



A new Network  
for Communities

***“There’s nobody in any local community whose job is simply to support people to get their ideas turned into action. I don’t think there’s any organisation operating really locally saying: ‘we’ll help you to realise your ambition.’”***

Community worker

***“I think there should be some sort of body to oversee that (a Community Wealth Fund) ... to be accountable and to give that guidance and that vehicle to share best practice between areas that are suffering from similar challenges.”***

Big Local Partnership  
member

## A new Network for Communities

The first part of this report summarised the case for investing in 'left behind' communities and giving them a direct role in efforts to regenerate them. The second explored the capacity challenges which can preclude communities in these areas engaging in this way, and the support they need to overcome them. The third then looked at examples of capacity building support available and what we might learn from them, though it concluded that current provision fails to reach 'left behind' neighbourhoods effectively.

Taken together, this analysis suggests that the government's proposals to empower communities in 'left behind' areas and give them a greater opportunity to be involved in regeneration will not succeed without further support. Unless this is put in place, we are likely to see the gap grow between these places and others, who start from a stronger position to engage in this way.

For the government's approach to succeed, we need to fill the support gap between the way it would like to see communities participate and engage in regeneration, and the reality of where they are now.

This section of the report therefore turns to what is required to fill that gap. It proposes the creation of a new organisation – a Network for Communities – which is dedicated to helping communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods take full advantage of greater investment and devolution of power and supporting them in engaging as many local people in this as possible.

This would be particularly important for the delivery of a Community Wealth Fund but a Network for Communities should also play a broader role in supporting 'left behind' areas engage in regeneration through other funding programmes and community activity including community and neighbourhood governance processes.

## What principles would guide Network for Communities work?

Network for Communities would aim to blend the most effective elements of work carried out by Local Trust, New Schools Network and other initiatives, as well as targeting its support so that it avoided duplicating what is in place already through other organisations.

This would see advice, resources, training and networking opportunities all provided to areas which were eligible to benefit from government community regeneration initiatives such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Towns Fund or the proposed Community Wealth Fund.

Like New Schools Network, the relationship between each area and the organisation would be managed by dedicated advisers and support would be focused on a limited number of practical challenges or processes with other support brokered in. It would also have a strong focus on developing relationships with policymakers in order to help them successfully deliver their aims by, for example, feeding back the experience of communities involved in the initial rollout of a Community Wealth Fund, levelling up funds, or new or re-energised community or neighbourhood governance models (community covenants, parish councils or neighbourhood forums).

However, given the lack of local capacity in many 'left behind' neighbourhoods, the organisation would need to do much more proactive work than New Schools Network carried out, in order to help them build a team and develop their priorities. This would also mean focusing on a smaller number of areas at one time, rather than providing support across the full breadth of the country. In this way its model therefore also borrows heavily from Local Trust and community organising initiatives, with community workers providing far more 'on the ground' support and a far greater local presence.

The new organisation should be guided by the following design principles:



## **A focus on the most 'left behind' communities**

A range of services already exist for those with the social capital and networks to access them. Both New Schools Network and Local Trust have also faced challenges in trying to work with a very large number of areas at once.

Network for Communities should therefore focus solely on supporting community organisations in areas that are most 'left behind' – perhaps drawn only from the 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods identified by OCSI.

In doing so it should deliberately aim to serve a limited number of places, so that it is able to build up a deep understanding of the particular challenges that they face and provide intensive support.



## **Depth before breadth**

Network for Communities should focus on building expertise in a limited number of areas and processes, rather than providing support on a wide range of issues – though it could signpost them towards help with these.

Initially, this could mean focusing on support in accessing funding streams such as the Shared Prosperity Fund or Towns Fund.

If a Community Wealth Fund is created, then Network for Communities should also play an important role in helping communities to engage with it, for example by supporting them in putting together plans for spending their allocation of the fund and then helping them put this into action.



## **Locally driven**

To build up an understanding of the needs of each community, Network for Communities' support should be delivered as close to each community as possible.

This means its employees and functions cannot all be run out of an office in London. Though some national presence is important for engaging central government and leveraging support at scale, the organisation and its partners need to be decentralised and located as close to those on the ground as possible.



## **Genuinely independent**

In order to secure the trust of communities, the Network for Communities must be – and be seen to be – fully independent and act only in their interests, rather than any other agenda. Apart from a commitment to change being led by local residents, it should be neutral on what communities should focus on or how they choose to organise themselves.

This does not preclude it engaging closely with central government, local government or other agencies: indeed, doing so will be crucial to its success, as it will have an important role as an advocate and in policy design. But its governance, funding and operations should be fully independent of government.



## **Build in learning from the start**

A lack of evidence for what works is an important barrier to successful community regeneration.

The Network for Communities has an opportunity to change this by building robust evaluation into its work from the start, with the experience of each of the areas it supports helping to add to the evidence base.

Evaluation should not become a distraction for those working in communities; their primary focus should be on delivering local change rather than monitoring and reporting. But every community organisation should be supported to generate as much data as possible about their activity, with Network for Communities evaluating their impact overall and feeding evidence back into the network.

## What services would Network for Communities offer?

In order to effectively support groups of residents, Network for Communities will need to undertake a range of functions, including:

### **a) Campaigning and community outreach**

A focus on the most 'left behind' communities means that Network for Communities will initially have to undertake significant amounts of work in these areas to make local people aware of opportunities for regeneration.

This will require a sustained presence from community workers on the ground to build awareness amongst residents, help recruit those who want to get involved, support them in getting organised to meet the requirements of any funding available and then delivering their plans. It will also be important to build relationships with councils, other agencies and the local community and voluntary sector in order to help support residents' interactions with them.

Clear messaging about what is possible and what is required will be essential – especially in underlining the importance of activity being resident led. Network for Communities should both develop effective communication materials to use itself but also provide resources to residents to ensure there is consistency.

In addition to local campaigning, Network for Communities should also be an advocate for community led change at a local and national level – helping to promote the value of this approach and the achievements of communities.

## **b) Advice and guidance**

Network for Communities should aim to become the first-place residents in target communities would turn to for support when they cannot answer a question themselves.

Each area should have a named adviser at the organisation who is there to answer questions, signpost them to further information and connect them to other areas or experts who may be able to help. These advisers will need to become experts on the relevant processes community groups are trying to navigate and the communities themselves, so they understand what each group is trying to achieve and the barriers they face. It will be crucial for them to develop trusting relationships with each group of residents, so they are able to act as critical friends – challenging thinking where appropriate and keeping the group focused on relevant deadlines or tasks.

Building up this level of knowledge means each adviser should have a relatively small caseload of areas, so that they can get to know them in depth. Caseloads and teams should be organised by geographic area and/or type of community to help link communities together and ensure common challenges are shared across Network for Communities.

To support this work, Network for Communities will also need to produce practical resources – such as guidance and template documents – for groups of residents to use. Where applicable, this should be turned into direct training and offered virtually or at a local level. Rather than trying to cover every type of activity, resources should be focused on the most common issues groups of residents are likely to be dealing with.

For some issues, it will be necessary to partner with organisations offering specialist advice on planning, finance or legal processes. Network for Communities should help to broker this support at scale, so that community groups can access it cost effectively. Partner organisations should also work closely with residents over time, so that they are able to build up an understanding of their context.

## **c) Networking**

Network for Communities will have a crucial role to play in linking different groups of residents together so that they can share experiences, support each other and think beyond the boundaries of their own area.

Networking opportunities should be provided in a range of different formats and built around different topics or geographies. A major national event, held annually, should be the focal point of this activity but this should be supplemented throughout the year by other events held regionally. Experience suggests that physical visits to areas is likely to be the best way for groups to build relationships and learn from each other, but virtual networking opportunities can help avoid the costs and time commitments that prevent people being able to take part.

Networks will not emerge organically, so Network for Communities advisers and staff on the ground will need to play an important role in connecting groups with others who may be able to help them. Where appropriate, they may also be able to help residents engage with local or regional organisations that may be able to support them, in order to build the pool of social capital and skills they are able to draw on.

## **d) Data and analysis**

Network for Communities should have a particular focus on data. Though its primary role should be to provide practical support to communities, the organisation will have a unique opportunity to analyse the impact of different initiatives being undertaken at a local level and across 'left behind' neighbourhoods overall. This can help build a better evidence base for what works in community regeneration.

Network for Communities could also play a role in providing data and analysis for groups of residents, who are likely to need this for their own activities – e.g. statistics on their neighbourhood or modelling potential benefits of initiatives – but may lack the skills locally to generate it.

## **e) Government engagement and advocacy**

Given its key role in the delivery of government community regeneration programmes including potentially a Community Wealth Fund, Network for Communities should be closely involved in feeding back to government on how such programmes are delivering on the ground in 'left behind' neighbourhoods. A Community Wealth Fund is likely to be piloted and then grow over time; Network for Communities' role should be to advise on its design and delivery. Though its independence should not be compromised, Network for Communities will need to work with government on a much closer basis than other stakeholders if it is to be most effective, as New Schools Network did during the early stages of the free school programme.

This should also be of benefit to the groups of residents that Network for Communities supports. By communicating a detailed understanding of processes related to a Community Wealth Fund or other initiatives, Network for Communities can give them a crucial insight into how they should approach these.

At a local level, Network for Communities will also need to build up relationships with Local Authorities and other agencies or bodies, in order to help groups of residents work effectively with them and navigate local bureaucracy.

## How would Network for Communities operate?

The requirement to be locally driven means Network for Communities should operate through a hub and spoke model, with one team working on the programme nationally and a larger number of staff located around the country, closer to the communities they are supporting. This is likely to require one main office, which should be located outside London, and then a presence in each region.

The majority of its staff would be focused on working directly with communities. They would either be advisers, whose role is to understand and translate the requirements of a Community Wealth Fund and other programmes and processes into advice for groups of residents, expert community workers who would spend most of their time in the communities themselves supporting residents, and specialists working to provide resources and support across the organisation, for example on communications.

Where appropriate, external partners would be commissioned to offer consultancy support and training on particularly technical subjects, in a similar manner to the way New Schools Network used its specialist advisers or Local Trust's current support offer.

It could also look to formalise its support offer for those leading community change into a structured training programme. This could build on the pilot of a Community Leadership Academy, which has been operated by Local Trust in partnership with Koreo, the Young Foundation and Northern Soul (Young Foundation, 2022). This provided an 18-month programme to around 120 community leaders, with an interim evaluation finding it has had a positive impact on those participating, especially through coaching and peer-to-peer support (Local Trust, 2022). Funding is not yet committed to the programme beyond 2022 but as a body dedicated to working with community leaders in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, Network for Communities could be a strong choice to take it forward.

However, careful thought should be given to whether Network for Communities should act as the What Works Centre for Community and Neighbourhood Improvement which has been proposed by other research (Local Trust 2021 Dividend & Onward, 2021). Though the organisation should be driven by data and build in a strong focus on evaluation, a 'what works centre' requires a different set of skills and a different kind of organisational outlook. Those we spoke to for this research felt that New Schools Network, Local Trust and others had been at their most effective when offering highly practical support, and this should be Network for Communities' primary focus.

## How should it be set up?

The government should seek to establish Network for Communities as soon as possible if it is to make a significant difference to the Levelling Up agenda.

As well as providing practical support to communities, it can also play a key role in helping officials to shape new policy – for example, the design and delivery of a Community Wealth Fund or the initial rollout of the Shared Prosperity Fund – by feeding the experience of those on the ground back into government.

The experience of New Schools Network suggests Network for Communities could be created and scale up at pace: it was founded in the autumn of 2009 and was able to help the Department for Education deliver the free schools programme from mid-2010, with the first free schools opening in September 2011.

After an initial phase focused heavily on campaigning and community outreach, Network for Communities would be able to build up its provision of guidance and networking, as groups of residents begin to make use of it.

Reflecting the principle of depth before breadth, we would recommend Network for Communities rolls out its offer to a limited number of places over time. Growing over its first three years to provide support for around 100 areas would be a sensible rate of change based on the experience of other organisations.

## How much would it cost and how should it be funded?

Based on costs of existing provision, we estimate that providing intensive support to 100 'left behind' neighbourhoods through the model above would cost around £3.5m per year.

This includes:

- A team of 20 staff, half of whom act as advisers to 10 areas each (enabling them to provide 2 days of support a month) and half of whom provide cross cutting support on functions such as communications, research and evaluation, and financial assurance;
- A team of around 20 expert community workers, each of whom works with 5 areas for 2 days a month to provide support on the ground;
- The provision of specialist training through external partners;
- Budget for producing research and publications; and
- A range of networking opportunities, including a major annual event.

Given the need for Network for Communities to be independent, this funding could be drawn down from dormant assets funding rather than come through a government grant. This would reflect the purpose of dormant assets funding in providing additional investment into communities, as well as complementing the potential use of dormant assets funding in creating a Community Wealth Fund.



# Conclusions & recommendations

This report has set out the case for a new organisation – a Network for Communities – to help build community capacity in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods and enable them to interact successfully with the government’s approach to regeneration.

Establishing this organisation is a necessary but not sufficient response to the challenge of community capacity. For it to succeed in helping ‘left behind’ communities, we also need to see broader changes to the policy environment.

We believe the following recommendations should be taken forward:



**The government should consult on the creation of a Network for Communities as part of its forthcoming consultation on the expansion of the Dormant Assets scheme.**

The government has now taken the welcome step of committing to consult on a Community Wealth Fund as one of the options for how an expanded Dormant Assets scheme can be directed.

But as this report has set out, limited capacity in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods means they would need support to take full advantage of Community Wealth Fund investment. It is vital that the government thinks through what support will be put in place around such funding at the same time as providing it.

Therefore, alongside questions about the design of the scheme, the consultation should also seek views on what support will sit alongside it. Specifically, it should consult on the creation of a Network for Communities to support ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, funded through the Dormant Assets scheme.

Following the consultation, this would enable such an organisation to be established alongside the creation of a Community Wealth Fund, and enable it to start working with communities as they engage with this initiative and other regeneration programmes.



## **The government should commit to reviewing the impact of the Localism Act on communities as part of its new Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships.**

The Levelling Up White Paper included plans for a new Strategy for Community Spaces and Relationships, which would cover issues such as how well existing Community Asset Transfer and Asset of Community Value Schemes are functioning.

This is a welcome development: some of those we spoke to for this research talked about frustrations with the pace of Community Asset Transfers, for example.

This strategy should look broadly at the processes and regulations which shape how communities are able to develop social infrastructure. In particular, this should mean a focus on the Localism Act 2011, which sets out a range of rights for residents and community organisations, as well as how Local Authorities should interact with them.

Several of those we spoke to for this research talked about the 2011 Act as central to what they have and haven't been able to achieve in local regeneration. A Network for Communities would have a significant focus on helping communities in 'left behind' neighbourhoods use the provisions within it.

Given that the Act is now ten years old, a review of the impact it has had on communities and where it could be improved to further empower communities would be timely.



## **The government should require all spending on regeneration to ring-fence funding for community capacity building.**

It is now standard practice that the government undertakes certain processes or reserves a proportion of programme budgets to help support the design and delivery of new policy.

For example, a focus on evaluation is now a central part of any significant programme. *Managing Public Money* guidance describes evaluation as an 'essential' part of decision making, and the Treasury's Green Book states that 'monitoring and evaluation should be part of the development and planning of an intervention from the start'. In practice, this usually – but not always – means government programmes reserve a small percentage of their value for evaluation before they have even started.

Similarly, all government policy and decisions should take account of the Public Sector Equality Duty, with many programmes building in measures to ensure equality of access and promote diversity of participation.

But despite the challenges outlined in this report, it is much rarer for government policy to take account of differing levels of local capacity in policy and programme design. This can contribute to an uneven playing field – where the most 'left behind' communities miss out on funding, undermining the intent of policies that are designed to help them.

The government should therefore establish a new principle which requires all programmes focused on regeneration – and especially competitive bidding processes such as the Towns Fund or Levelling Up Fund – to set aside a small proportion of their value for community capacity building. This might, for example, be directed through relevant bodies who can support these areas via grants or training related to the programme or bidding process, or on community development generally.

This has the potential to unlock a significant amount of funding for capacity building. Onward have noted, for example, that reserving just 5% of the 2021/22 allocations for the Levelling Up Fund (£600m), Community Renewal Fund (£220m) and Towns Fund (£621m) for capacity building would provide a £72 million boost to the areas that need this most (Onward, 2021).

# IV

## **The government, local councils, charities and civil society should work together to map provision and spending in 'left behind' neighbourhoods and commit to ensuring they receive a fairer share of investment.**

The need for a Network for Communities is based on a gap in the provision offered to communities in the most 'left behind' neighbourhoods.

As we have seen, they are not just less likely to benefit from government regeneration initiatives but also less likely to receive charitable funds and less likely to have an active voluntary and community sector than other deprived areas (OCSI, 2021).

This initial research has given us an insight into the ways that certain areas have been 'left behind' but there is a need for more detailed analysis and tracking over time. The government's commitment in the Levelling Up White Paper to work with the ONS to improve statistics on the economics and value of civil society will play an important role in this, but creating a full picture also requires the involvement of the charitable and civil society sectors themselves.

To achieve this, the government should convene and work with these sectors to produce better mapping of the interventions and investment the 'left behind' areas currently receive, why they do not see their fair share of investment, and what can be done to correct this.

The work of the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Partnership – which DCMS helped fund and convene in order to coordinate civil society's response to the Covid pandemic – provides a good model for how this kind of activity can more effectively target resources on the places that need them most.

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