

Why civil society is essential to levelling up

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Summary

Without civil society, levelling up won't succeed. Decades of attempts to tackle the UK's entrenched regional inequalities have shown that the charities, community groups and volunteers that are at civil society's core can make the difference between successful, sustained local regeneration and flash in the pan spending with few long-term benefits.

From providing unparalleled insights into community issues at the planning and design stage of schemes, through to their ability to maintain the trust and buy-in of residents, civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in every stage of levelling up.

Civil society also has unique strengths to contribute to each of the government's levelling up objectives. It directly adds to economic growth, employing over 900,000 people and disproportionately providing opportunities to those furthest from the labour market, such as young and disabled people. It is a fundamental component of the public services people rely on, as the most substantial supplier of NHS-commissioned mental health support, the highest quality provider of social care services, a key component of the social prescribing model that is taking pressure off health services and improving people's wellbeing, and an effective contributor to reducing reoffending rates.

Participation in civil society is also closely linked to increased levels of social capital, neighbourliness and trust, which themselves improve people's health and wellbeing. And when communities are given the resources to meaningfully influence their local area, they often invest in places and spaces that build and sustain civil and community life, growing people's sense of pride in the place they live.

The importance of civil society to the realisation of levelling up is clearly recognised by people in those areas of the country earmarked for investment. New polling by YouGov for the Law Family Commission on Civil Society reveals that 27% of levelling up priority area residents want community groups and local charities to be in charge of deciding how levelling up funds should be spent. This far outstrips the 10% who think national government should be in charge.

Yet despite the essential nature of civil society's role in the government's levelling up agenda, its presence is noticeably lacking in the action government has taken so far. 95% of the £171.5 billion proposed spending on levelling up to date is committed to physical infrastructure such as rail, road, and broadband investments. Only a fraction makes a nod towards social infrastructure such as cultural assets, and civil society itself is hardly mentioned at all.

This oversight creates a substantial risk to the success of the government's flagship policy, particularly because the strong local civil society needed for levelling up to succeed is often lacking in those areas which need it the most. That was powerfully evident during the pandemic when the most deprived parts of the country had twice the demand for help from NHS volunteer respondents but 3.7 times fewer volunteers, leading to many requests for support going unmet. Residents in levelling up priority areas clearly recognise this gap, with 42% of those polled believing local cultural facilities are worse than other parts of the UK.



To increase the likelihood of levelling up making a real difference to people's lives, government should enable civil society to better contribute to each stage of the process. To ensure levelling up has a lasting legacy, empowering local neighbourhoods and organisations to drive the agenda forward is essential. To create the conditions in which communities can thrive, social infrastructure needs direct investment. And government should act to strengthen civil society in the places that need it most, intervening to reverse the cycle of decline.

By enabling, empowering, incubating and strengthening civil society in these ways, government will be able to maximise its chances of changing lives for the better through levelling up.

Summary of recommendations and proposals

The government must take three steps to ensure civil society can play its full and crucial role in delivering levelling up for those parts of the UK that need it most. These recommendations are drawn from both our own analysis and research, and from consultation with other leading organisations with expertise in both levelling up and civil society.¹

1. Directly invest to maximise the impact of civil society and reverse local declines

Create a national Civil Society Catapult Centre to identify the factors that reduce social sector organisational productivity and effectiveness, and develop and fund practical solutions.

Pilot local Civil Society Regeneration Centres in areas where civil society, and its supporting infrastructure, is weakest. These Regeneration Centres would be shaped locally, providing functions such as supporting networking and collaboration, co-ordinating local social action, and offering appealing spaces that demonstrate the value placed on local civil society.

2. Create the conditions in which civil society can thrive through the growth of social infrastructure

Fund social infrastructure to rebuild the places and spaces of community life. Social infrastructure should be incorporated into existing levelling up plans via ringfenced funds within the Levelling Up Fund or Towns Fund. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund and National Infrastructure Bank should also invest in social infrastructure.

Create new financing opportunities for social infrastructure. A Community Wealth Fund should be financed by the next wave of cash from the dormant asset scheme and private investment should be leveraged via a Social Infrastructure Investment Fund.

Develop a single social infrastructure data repository to support a sustainable, long-term strategy for developing social infrastructure.

3. Empower local neighbourhoods and civil society to drive forward the levelling up agenda and regenerate pride in place

Equip communities with the institutions, powers and skills to shape local economic plans and neighbourhood provision. Invest in a development programme for local leaders and launch a What Works Centre for Community and Neighbourhood Development.

Establish local levelling up partnerships between local government, public services, civil society and the private sector to define local priorities and develop levelling up spending plans that are right for their area.

¹ These include Onward, Local Trust, NCVO, NPC, Locality, Bennett Institute, Institute for Community Studies and Power to Change

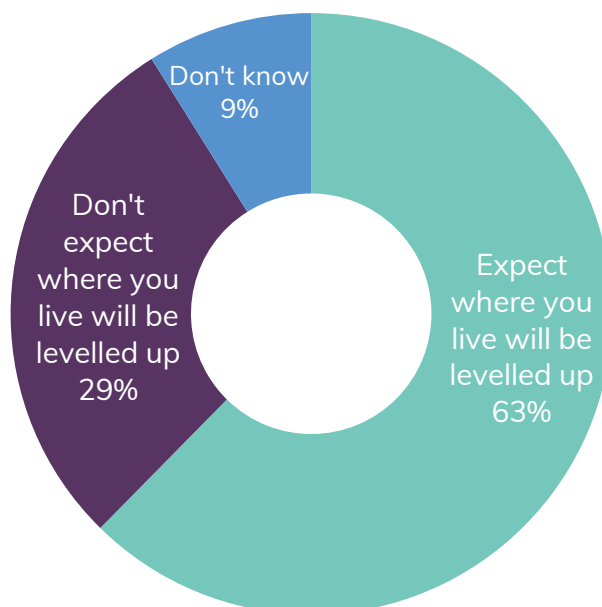
Is the government delivering what people want when it comes to levelling up?

The public supports the government's ambition to level up the country. There is strong support among the public for the government's ambition to level up. Recent research showed that [inequalities between more and less deprived areas are significantly more important to people in Great Britain than in other parts of Europe](#).

Moreover, new polling by YouGov for the Law Family Commission on Civil Society finds that people in levelling up priority areas recognise that their places are missing out (see Figure 7). They also believe the government will deliver improvements — almost two-thirds expect it to deliver.

Figure 1. Almost two-thirds of those who think their area needs levelling up expect it to happen

Do you expect the place where you live actually will be levelled up?



Source: YouGov/Pro Bono Economics Survey Results, 26-31 August 2021

Notes: Asked to those who say their area needs 'levelling up'; n= 712, total sample size was 1,011 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in levelling up priority 1 areas (aged 18+)

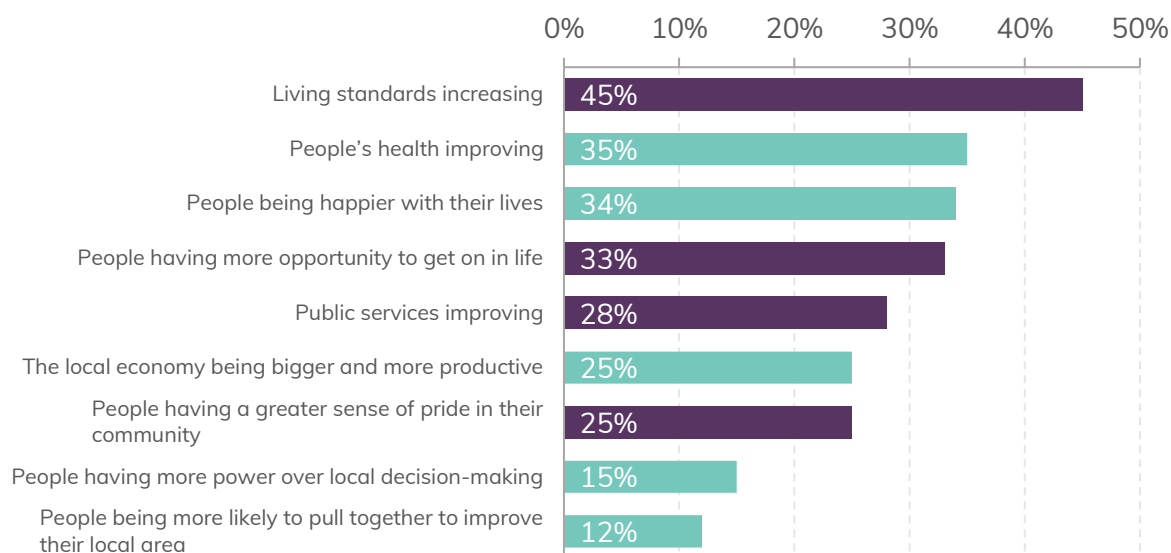
The government's ambitions for levelling up broadly match the public's priorities, but for a better match, policy makers need to dial up the focus on social outcomes

Our research suggests that recent government statements (by both the [Prime Minister's Office](#) and the [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities](#)) about tests for the success of levelling up — “to raise living standards, spread opportunity, improve our public services and restore people's sense of pride in their communities” — are broadly in line with what people living in these areas want.

Improved living standards is the most important outcome for the public, with almost half (45%) of those surveyed putting it in their top three, across all types of voters and demographic groups.

Figure 2. The Government's four measures of success for levelling up were generally popular with the public

What do you think should be the most important outcomes of levelling up an area?



Source: YouGov/Pro Bono Economics Survey Results, 26-31 August 2021

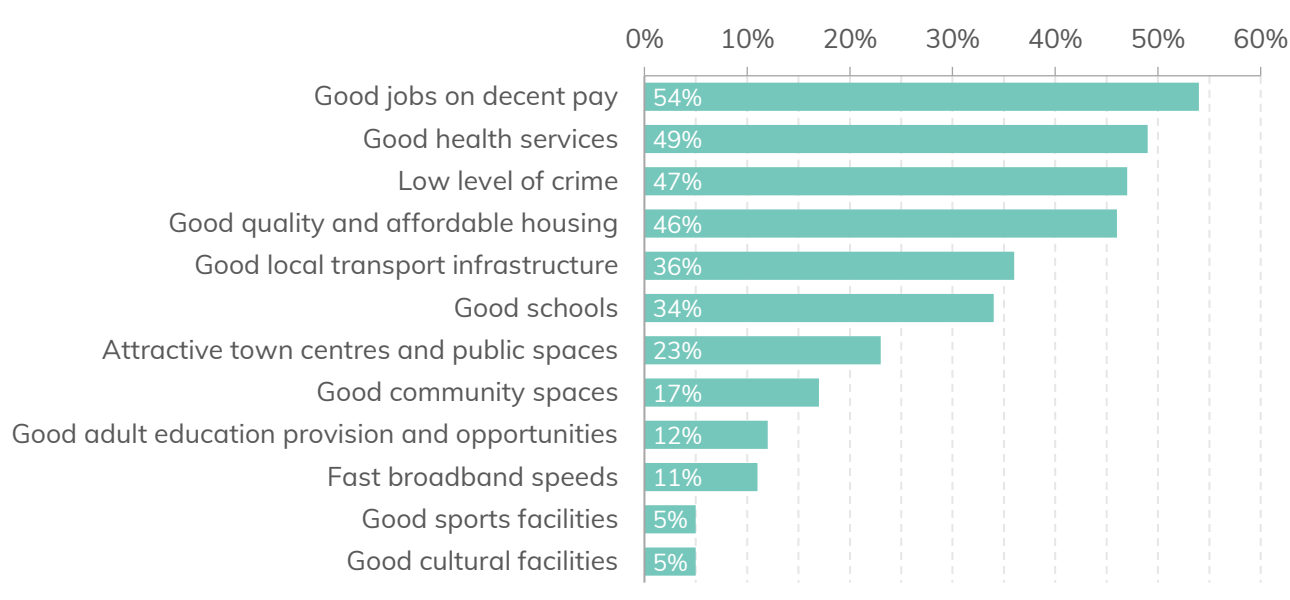
Notes: Total sample size was 1,011 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in levelling up priority 1 areas (aged 18+), residual is 'Don't know'. Purple bars show the government's four tests for the success of levelling up.

After improved living standards, overall people are most keen to see improvements in health and happiness, suggesting that indicators of health and wellbeing should be included within the measures tracking [the success of levelling up](#). Splitting by how people voted at the most recent general election, “more opportunity to get on in life” polled second for both Labour and Lib Dem voters, while “pride in community” came in second for Conservatives.

When it comes to what money should be spent on, our polling shows that good quality jobs are the top priority, followed by improved social outcomes including health, crime and housing.

Figure 3. The public want to direct spending towards improving jobs, public services, and social conditions

If the government were to provide more money to “level up” the place where you live, what should be the main priorities for investment?



Source: YouGov/Pro Bono Economics Survey Results, 26-31 August 2021

Notes: Respondents were asked to select their top 4, total sample size was 1,011 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in levelling up priority 1 areas (aged 18+)

The importance of prioritising social issues and focusing on improvements for people as well as places was also highlighted in [recent polling](#) from [NPC](#). Their survey showed that people thought the most important aspects of levelling up were reduced homelessness, poverty, crime, and unemployment, while better transport connections, fewer boarded up shops and improved parks and public spaces were further down the list of priorities.

This means investing in social infrastructure and civil society...

Social infrastructure and a strong civil society are central to delivering these social outcomes. Civil society thrives when people can make connections with each other, yet many of the most deprived places suffer from an additional deficit in social infrastructure. [Research by OCSI and Local Trust](#) demonstrates the impact that this has on local communities in ‘left-behind’ areas. The rate of formal volunteering in left-behind areas is less than half the national rate (14% vs 37% respectively), while membership of a community or social action group is half the national average (8% vs 16% respectively).

Investing to strengthen the UK’s broader social fabric offers good returns both socially and economically. Evidence from Frontier Economics suggests a yield of 3.2:1 over ten years for every pound invested. Research by [The Bennett Institute](#) highlights the economic, social and civic value of social infrastructure. It shows that social infrastructure-related industries provide almost half of all jobs in some towns, and highlights a link between higher levels of social infrastructure and lower rates of loneliness, as well as greater community pride.

...but so far, it's physical infrastructure that has dominated spending plans. Despite public desire for more focus on social outcomes, and the importance of social infrastructure and civil society in delivering these outcomes, levelling up spending plans are currently dominated by physical infrastructure.

[£163bn of the total £171.5bn of proposed levelling up spending to date](#) is committed to physical infrastructure projects.

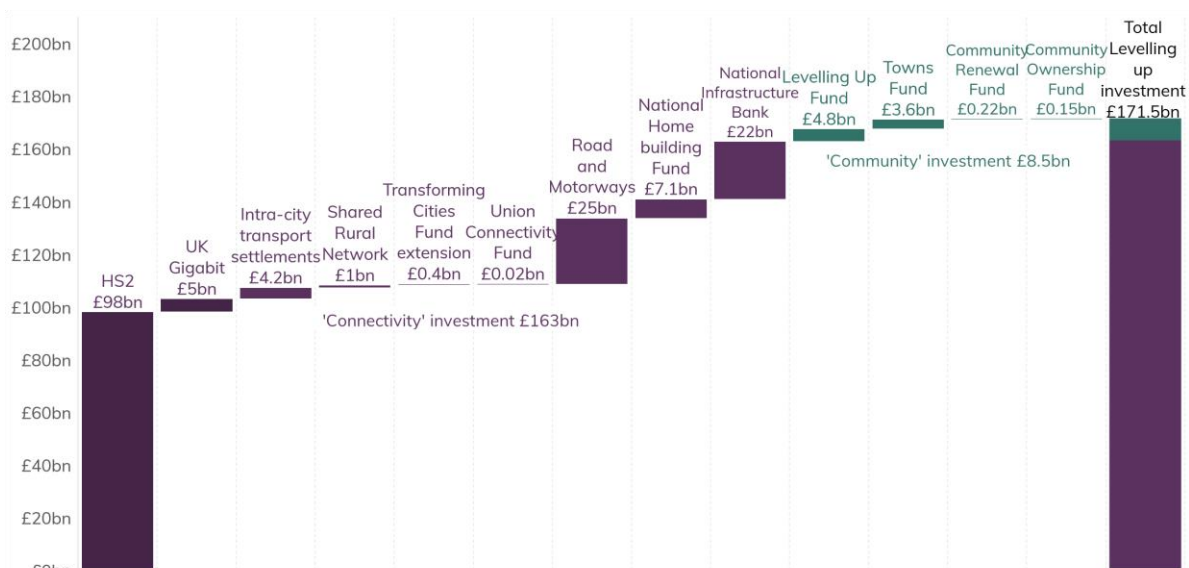
This encapsulates the 'connectivity' approach to levelling up that is most evident in the Government's ['Build Back Better'](#) programme. These investments aim to boost economic growth and productivity via physical infrastructure like rail development, road building, and broadband networks, with a particular emphasis on development outside of London and the South East.

The second strand of government thinking about levelling up can be characterised as the 'community' approach. It prioritises investment in communities once described by Boris Johnson as ["the forgotten people and the left behind towns"](#) and generally considered to experience the worst socio-economic outcomes relative to the rest of the country.

The [Levelling Up Fund](#) (£4.8bn), [Towns Fund](#) (£3.6bn), [UK Community Renewal Fund](#) (£0.22bn) and [Community Ownership Fund](#) (£0.15bn) cover a range of priorities, such as improving local transport infrastructure, regenerating town centres, investing in cultural spaces, skills, local business, communities and place, supporting people into employment and supporting community ownership of local assets.

The [Levelling Up Fund](#) and [Towns Fund](#) account for 96% of this 'community' investment and again focus on physical infrastructure, this time local transport, town centre and high street regeneration, development or restoration of cultural assets and development of enterprise infrastructure.

Figure 4. The vast majority of levelling up spending so far is directed towards physical infrastructure



Source: PBE analysis of [Build Back Better: our plan for growth](#), HM Treasury, March 2021

Note: Investments are not necessarily allocated across the same timeframes

[Analysis by NPC](#) of the Levelling Up Fund, UK Community Renewal Fund and Community Ownership Fund confirms that, while these schemes are ostensibly community focused, they are still heavily biased towards physical infrastructure and capital investments, with up to 87% of the £5.17bn available likely to go on transport infrastructure, buildings, and outdoor spaces, and very little to make its way into civil society organisations or social infrastructure.

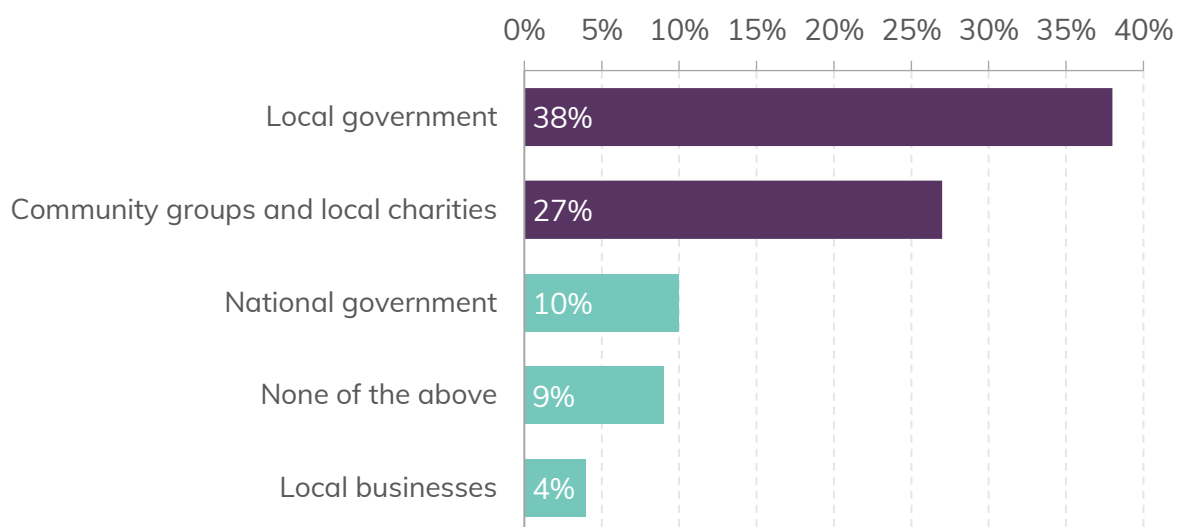
To get levelling up spending right, the public want local authorities and civil society organisations in the driving seat

The Prime Minister described local leadership as '[the most important factor in levelling up](#)', yet levelling up spending is currently controlled by central government. Whitehall departments control the design and distribution of funds as well as determining the investment priorities and the nature of the financing available.

Our polling suggests that public opinion is firmly in favour of local organisations directing the funding and delivery of levelling up. The public overwhelmingly want national government out of the picture and would strongly prefer local government and civil society to be in charge of spending decisions.

Figure 5. People want more power over spending decisions to be devolved to local government and civil society

If the government were to provide more money to “level up” the place where you live, who do you think should be in charge of deciding how the money should be spent?



Source: YouGov/Pro Bono Economics Survey Results, 26-31 August 2021

Notes: Total sample size was 1,011 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in levelling up priority 1 areas (aged 18+), residual is 'Don't know'

This echoes [polling](#) undertaken earlier this year in 250 'left-behind' wards on behalf of Local Trust, which showed only 2% of respondents believing that national government should be in charge of spending decisions.

What is civil society's role in levelling up?

Experience shows us that, for successful community regeneration to be sustained, it must involve civil society

Civil society's unique ability to mobilise and empower communities, improve social outcomes, and deliver economic benefits will be key to making levelling up a success.

Effective civil society organisations can help bridge the gap between communities, institutions, and decision-making processes. A stronger role for them in the design and delivery of levelling up will bring the twin benefits of improving the quality of decision-making and the subsequent 'buy-in' to the decisions that have been taken.

There is good evidence from previous attempts at regeneration that strong civil society involvement is vital to success. [Analysis of the New Deal for Communities programme](#) shows a strong link between the underlying strength of civil society in areas designated for improvements, and the success of regeneration schemes. It demonstrates that places with more civic assets and greater levels of community participation showed the greatest reductions in relative deprivation and were more able to sustain these improvements over time.

[Analysis by the Institute for Community Studies](#) shows that, despite totalling over £50bn of investment over the past 20 years, economic interventions have failed to reduce deprivation in the most deprived local authority areas. The research suggests that a lack of community and local involvement played a big part in leaving local people dissatisfied with the outcomes of these programmes.

As the Lord David Blunkett concluded in his [essay](#) to mark the launch of the Law Family Commission on Civil Society:

“Throughout past efforts by successive governments to bring about substantial restoration of the fabric of communities, long-term benefit has not been sustained because the people to whom the investment was committed were neither in a position to act as, nor embraced as, key partners in the driving force for change.”

Civil society is crucial to delivering many of the economic and social outcomes that the public want from levelling up...

The public place a high priority on generating good quality jobs and equipping local people to get them, as well as improving outcomes like health, wellbeing and crime levels. Investment in transport infrastructure, broadband speed and regenerating town centres can help, but this investment alone won't deliver either the economic or the social outcomes people want.

Many of the services that support people into jobs, including improving their health and wellbeing, are provided by social sector organisations.² For example, these organisations often provide services that support those furthest away from education and the labour

² For the purposes of the Law Family Commission on Civil Society, we define [social sector organisations](#) as charities, community groups and social enterprises that take asset-locked legal forms

market. Overall, social sector organisations provide [as much training as local authorities](#), and disproportionately serve female learners, people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, people from BAME backgrounds, and people aged 65 or older.

In terms of health, as well as the thousands of health support, research, and prevention charities that exist, civil society is a fundamental component of [social prescribing](#), which is increasingly becoming an integral part of primary health care. Evidence suggests that the practice of prescribing non-medical interventions, predominantly via referrals to local civil society organisations and community activities, has a significant impact on improved [patient wellbeing](#) and the reduction in demand for [GP appointments](#).

Meanwhile, an estimated 1.5million people access NHS-commissioned mental health support from the social sector each year, making it the [largest forum of provision](#) for such services. Studies have also shown that social sector providers of social care are [rated more highly](#) than their for-profit counterparts in terms of [quality of care](#).

And by strengthening communities, civil society improves levels of trust and social connection ('social capital'), creating the conditions for [better health outcomes](#) and [higher levels of wellbeing](#), as well as wider social benefits. For example, evidence from the [Nuffield Foundation](#) shows people living in local authorities that have specific schemes to improve social cohesion were twice as likely to volunteer during the pandemic, had a 10-percentage point higher sense of neighbourliness and greater trust in local government.

In terms of reducing crime levels, many social sector organisations [provide targeted support](#) to the disadvantaged groups that most often come into contact with the criminal justice system, as well as supporting people with mental health needs and substance misuse problems, and those facing homelessness and poverty. Criminal justice organisations in the sector help to [reduce one-year reoffending rates](#) among their service users by an average of 7 per cent, with some organisations having a much greater impact.

... while investing in social infrastructure generates pride in local communities, as well as social and economic benefits

Given the power and resources, local communities often choose to direct local investment towards the social infrastructure that restores people's pride in where they live. For example, the [Big Local](#) programme provides communities across the UK with 'no strings attached' funding for community-led projects. Many places have used their funding to celebrate local heritage and reignite people's pride in their area. From restoration of a local church to regeneration of a derelict park, the [evidence shows](#) that, when given the opportunity, civic participation means local communities use social infrastructure to regenerate pride and social cohesion in their area.

A [recent report by Frontier Economics](#) estimated that every £1m invested in social infrastructure (defined as the places, organisations and connections that support community life) would yield economic, social and fiscal benefits worth £3.2m over 10 years — including gains from increased employment, reduced crime, and improved health outcomes.

Case studies

The Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) helps incarcerated people into work by supporting their enrolment in distance learning courses before their release from prison. On average, their courses [increase a person's chance of finding work by 26%](#).

Place2Be's schools counselling service demonstrates improved outcomes in the form of reduced rates of truancy, exclusion, smoking, depression and crime, and also higher rates of employment and wages — leading to [estimated returns of £6.20 for every £1 invested](#).

Safe Ground's [Fathers Inside](#) project, a group-work programme for men in prison, is associated with a [reduction in one-year reoffending](#) from 40% to 24%.

But civil society is weak in many levelling up priority areas

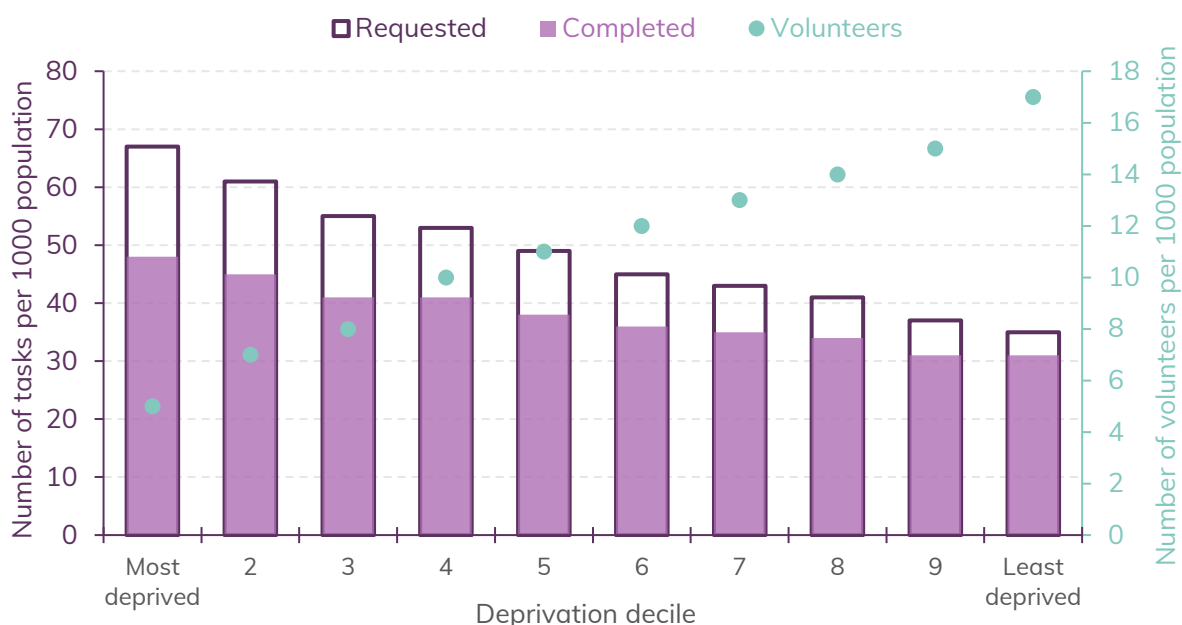
While civil society is fundamental to galvanising local communities and delivering the social and economic benefits that people want, a significant number of the most deprived places are lacking the organisations, social capital, funding, and social infrastructure that will support civil society to play its part.

Various analyses show that more deprived places tend to have [fewer charities](#) or [voluntary organisations](#) per capita than less deprived areas. A recent [study by the Bennett Institute](#) found that during the pandemic there were fewer active mutual aid groups per head in more deprived local authorities.

Our analysis of the NHS Covid Volunteer Responders scheme shows that despite having higher demand, more deprived areas had a significantly lower supply of volunteers than the least deprived areas.

On average the most deprived local authorities had less than a third of the number of volunteers per capita than the least deprived areas. This resulted in a greater level of unmet need for volunteer support, with almost 30% of requests in the most deprived areas going unfulfilled compared to just 10% in the least deprived areas.

Figure 6. During the pandemic more deprived areas had fewer volunteers per capita despite having greater levels of need, leading to a significant undersupply of volunteer support



Source: PBE analysis of NHS England data accessed from future.nhs.uk/NHSVolunteerRespondersCOVID.
 Notes: Data pertains to period April 2020 to March 2021. Tasks refer to request for support from the NHS Volunteer Responders programme

The most recent [Community Life Survey](#) reaffirms these variations in levels of social capital. People in more deprived areas are more likely to have weaker support networks and lower levels of community belonging and satisfaction, and are less likely to participate in civil engagement and volunteering.

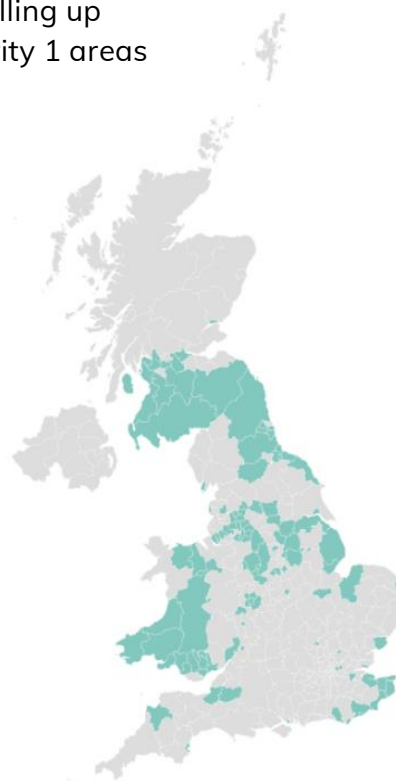
[Local Trust](#) have also highlighted an imbalance of charitable grant funding that disadvantages ‘left-behind’ communities. And this has been exacerbated by trends over the last decade. Research from the [University of Southampton](#) into local authority funding of charities between 2009-10 and 2016-17 shows that, while the average charity in the least deprived decile of local authorities experienced little change in their income, the average charity in the most deprived decile of local authorities suffered a 20% decline in local government financing.

Analysis of Levelling Up Fund priority areas reinforces the picture of ‘left-behind’ places having relatively weaker civil society.

Research by NPC shows there are 28% fewer local charities per 1000 people in [Levelling Up Fund priority 1 areas](#) compared to the lowest priority areas. Analysis of Onward’s [Social Fabric index](#) (a composite measure of the relative strength of the community in every local authority) shows:

- Of the 10% of local authorities with the weakest Social Fabric (excluding Northern Ireland), 73% are [Levelling Up Fund priority 1 areas](#)
- Of the 20% of local authorities with the weakest Social Fabric (excluding Northern Ireland), 72% are [Levelling Up Fund priority 1 areas](#)
- Of the 10% of local authorities with the strongest Social Fabric (excluding Northern Ireland), none are [Levelling Up Fund priority 1 areas](#)
- Of the 20% of local authorities with the strongest Social Fabric (excluding Northern Ireland), 4% are [Levelling Up Fund priority 1 areas](#)

Levelling up
priority 1 areas

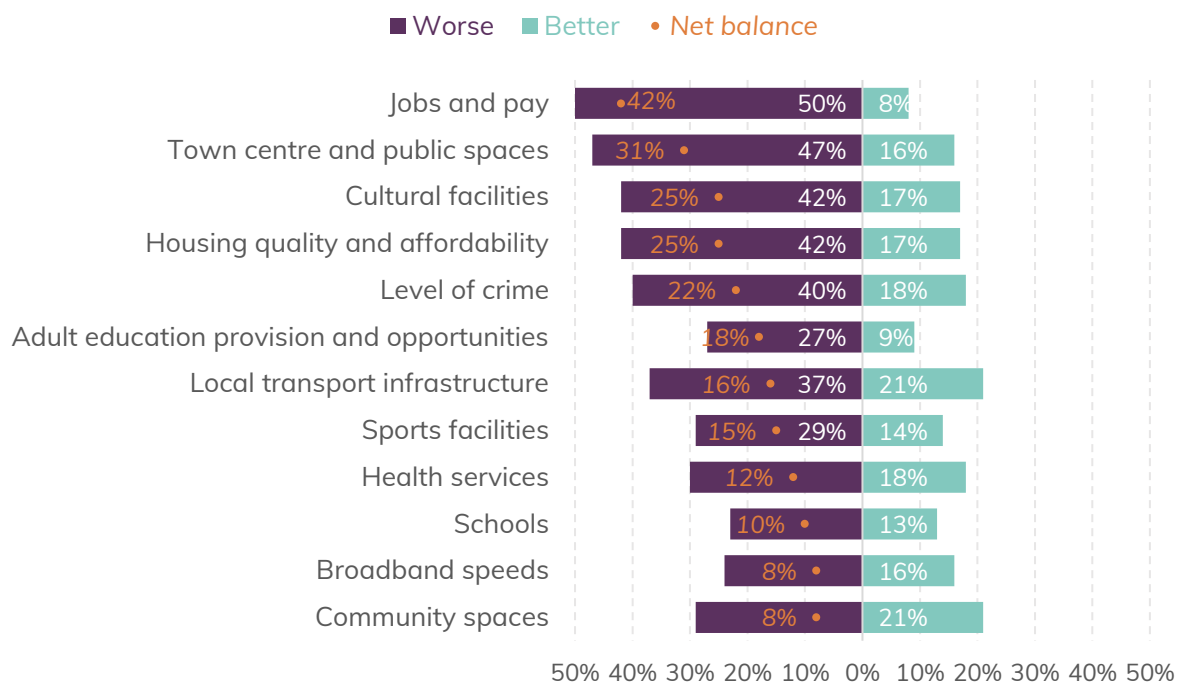


Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2021 • Created with Datawrapper

Our polling also demonstrates the extent to which the public perceive an inequality in the quality of places and spaces that support community life. Almost half (47%) felt that their town centres and public spaces were worse than other parts of the UK, 42% felt the same about their cultural facilities, 29% said the same of their local sports facilities and the same proportion (29%) also perceived their local community spaces as worse than in other parts of the country.

Figure 7. People living in places prioritised for levelling up funding perceive where they live to be worse than the rest of the UK. Jobs, pay and housing were high priorities, but the quality of social infrastructure is also a problem for many

Compared to other places in the UK, how do you think the place where you live compares on each of the following?



Source: YouGov/Pro Bono Economics Survey Results, 26-31 August 2021

Notes: Total sample size was 1,011 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in levelling up priority 1 areas (aged 18+), residuals are 'Don't Know'

Recommendations

The government should take three steps to ensure civil society can play its full and vital role in delivering levelling up effectively and meeting public expectations for its outcomes. These must accompany a transparent set of metrics to measure success, including health and wellbeing measures, and a focus on stable and long-term investment, as highlighted by the [Industrial Strategy Council](#).

1. Invest to maximise the impact of civil society and reverse local declines

The social sector currently trails the private sector on a number of factors which limit its effectiveness, like digital adoption and leadership and management skills, as well as issues like collaboration. For example, [87% of senior charity decision makers](#) say that productivity is a challenge within their organisation, with over half (55%) finding it considerably or extremely so.

Unlike other sectors, there is no central organisation which identifies and funds improvements to civil society effectiveness at scale, as there is for local government through the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) and for swathes of the private sector through the Catapult Network. Civil society leaders work hard to maximize their impact with limited funds, but with substantial pressure to focus spending on the frontline, government can play a significant role in supporting greater effectiveness in the sector.

When civil society does have the resources to make investments in effectiveness, it can revolutionise the difference it makes for people and communities. From matching volunteer shifts to resource helplines at their busiest times, to freeing up senior time spent on navigating paperwork to focus on delivery, models developed by a national Civil Society Catapult Centre could make all the difference.

Recommendation: A national Civil Society Catapult Centre

Create a national Civil Society Catapult Centre to identify key problems that hold back social sector organisational productivity and drive innovation and efficiency, building on successful models such as the Catapult Network.

As with the Catapult Network, a Civil Society Catapult Centre would bridge the gap between researchers and delivery organisations, generating and collecting evidence and identifying potential improvements and innovations. It should fund trials to test new approaches and ways to increase efficiency.

For example, the Civil Society Catapult Centre could design and test a model for running shared back-office functions for small and micro charities. This would free up significant resources for tens of thousands of small organisations.

Areas of focus for the Civil Society Catapult Centre could include: digitizing services, outsourcing and automation, leadership and management practices, organisational collaboration, CRM systems and software.

The Civil Society Catapult Centre should work in partnership with other organisations that hold expertise in specific areas, such as the [Clare Social Leadership programme](#) which provides bespoke training for social sector leaders. This could involve working together to develop further research and practical delivery models. The Centre could also act as a central repository and quality assurance hub, signposting to the best guidance and insights produced elsewhere.

While the Civil Society Catapult Centre should be primarily focused on organisational efficiency and innovation, it could also help organisations maximise their impact by acting as a repository for the evidence about effective practice and promising innovations in different sub-sectors, similar to the [Centre for Homeless Impact's evidence finder](#).

Second, the government should invest in local civil society support in the areas that need it the most and that currently do not have a strong enough social sector. Existing civil society infrastructure organisations, ranging from councils for voluntary service and community foundations to Impact Hubs, play important roles in facilitating networks, organisational development, and coordination of the social sector at all levels — all of which are key to effectiveness. However, not all areas have the capacity, funding and coverage they need. The government should therefore invest in those levelling up priority areas where existing infrastructure support is thinnest and there is most need to strengthen local communities and civil society organisations.

Recommendation: Local Civil Society Regeneration Hubs

The government should establish pilot local Civil Society Regeneration Hubs to help to reverse community decline and stimulate the growth and health of civil society in places where it is weakest. These pilots should be locally led, building on learning and insights from the most effective existing social sector infrastructure organisations, as well as successful national programmes like [Big Local](#). They should go beyond existing infrastructure by focusing on mobilising communities and being a resource for people who want to organise within their area. These hubs should include the following, either in collaboration with existing infrastructure or adding to what is already there:

- Networks, collaboration and brokering: enabling stronger partnerships between local civil society and local policymakers by acting as a single point of contact, providing opportunities for local businesses and local civil society organisations to meet and develop new relationships, and encouraging collaboration between local civil society organisations
- Community mobilisation: providing support for local people who want to get involved in their local communities or charities and mobilising people within areas that currently have little community action
- Organisational development: acting as a centre of excellence — providing training and resources, sharing best practice, and creating spaces for organisations to develop innovations in delivery and operations (such as improving volunteer management)
- Co-ordination: promoting local social action and coordinating civil society activity to address local needs and national levelling up priorities, enabling better join-up and co-ordination of services/avoiding duplication, acting as a local civil society data hub, and connecting local people to volunteering/social action opportunities
- Influence and representation: amplifying the voices of local communities in local decision making, increasing use of existing and new community powers such as community ownership and right to buy, and helping local government support the smallest community groups and new neighbourhood institutions
- Offering appealing spaces: the new local centres could be based in an attractive, modern building — a visible civic asset that demonstrates the value placed on, and fosters pride in, local civil society. They could offer co-working and community events space, with local community involvement in the design of the spaces

2. Direct more investment towards social infrastructure

In order to rebuild the places and spaces of community life in the areas that need it most, the government must reappraise its approach to financing social infrastructure — looking at existing funds, forthcoming funds, and creating the data to guide effective funding in future.

Recommendation: Design and retrofit Levelling Up related funding to prioritise investment for social infrastructure

In the short-term this should include amending existing levelling up-related schemes such as the Levelling up Fund or Towns Fund, to include specific prioritisation and/or [ringfencing a proportion](#) of each scheme for investment in social infrastructure.

In the long-term, the upcoming [UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#) and National Infrastructure Bank both provide opportunities to enhance the government's approach to social infrastructure in the areas which need it most.

Recommendation: Create new financing opportunities for social infrastructure

Create a [Community Wealth Fund](#), financed by the next wave of cash from the Dormant Assets Scheme and [leverage private investment](#) through a Social Infrastructure Investment Fund.

Recommendation: Develop data on social infrastructure and community strength

A sustainable long-term strategy for developing social infrastructure is only possible with reliable, comprehensive data that maps areas of strengths and weaknesses. At present, there is a lack of comparable data, and what exists is disparate and hard to access.

The Government should [develop a single data repository](#) to house the various datasets relevant to the current amount and usage of social infrastructure in the UK, as recommended by the Bennett Institute. This data should be tracked over time and used to inform future investment decisions.

3. Empower local neighbourhoods and civil society organisations to drive forward the levelling up agenda

Empowering local government, neighbourhoods and communities with the institutions, powers, and skills they need to take back control of their local area is vital to meeting the public's expectations of levelling up.

Recommendation: Support communities with the institutions, powers and skills required to take control of levelling up their areas

The government should devolve additional powers from Westminster to local areas. These should include enabling communities to hold local government to account by having a say in shaping local economic plans, the ability to trigger reviews of local neighbourhood provision, and stronger legal rights over assets of community value.

Ensuring these powers operate at the right level will require a new layer of governance, and the development of the capacity and skills of local communities. We support proposals for a development programme for local leaders (akin to [Local Trust's Community Leadership Academy](#)) and for a What Works Centre for Community and Neighbourhood Development to provide an evidence base and innovation centre for best practice in community and neighbourhood development.

Recommendation: Establish effective local levelling up partnerships

Many organisations have called for local levelling up partnerships between local government, public services, civil society, and the private sector to have control over levelling up related spending. These partnerships would provide local level strategic oversight to drive through the profound economic and social changes needed.

Suggestions as to how this could be done in practice include the Institute for Community Studies' recommendation to implement the findings of the Commission on the Future of Localism, while [NPC's](#) proposal for developing local levelling up roadmaps could provide the opportunity for local levelling up partnerships to establish their priorities, develop local social infrastructure strategies and spending plans and be held to account for delivery by both local people and DLUHC.

Conclusion

People want levelling up, but they don't want it to just be about roads, rail and broadband. The aspirations of the “forgotten people and the left-behind towns” are considerably broader than the Government's current infrastructure heavy approach will deliver. Without local people's involvement, evidence suggests that levelling up will fall short. Recently, these points have started to be reflected to a much greater degree in the government's rhetoric and appointments; they now need to be driven through the emerging policy agenda and funding decisions.

Harnessing the unique insights, networks and expertise of civil society will give the Government the best possible chance of success. Civil society can help to improve opportunities for those furthest from the jobs market. It can contribute to better public services and deliver interventions which reduce demand. Charities and voluntary organisations can help raise living standards by improving people's mental and physical health, reducing crime and reoffending rates, building trust and social capital in our communities and contributing to increases in people's life satisfaction.

Empowering and resourcing local communities can also act as a catalyst for regenerating people's sense of attachment to their local area, with investment in social infrastructure often a key step on the road to restoring civic and community pride.

But the most deprived places are often not adequately equipped with the strong and well-resourced civil society required to support levelling up. This needs to be addressed if levelling up is to be a success. First, by establishing national and targeted local schemes that help civil society organisations become more effective and increase their impact. Second, by investing in social infrastructure to regenerate the spaces and places of community life. And finally, by empowering civil society by giving neighbourhoods greater control over their local area and allowing local partnerships between government, civil society, and business to have more power over levelling up related funding.

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