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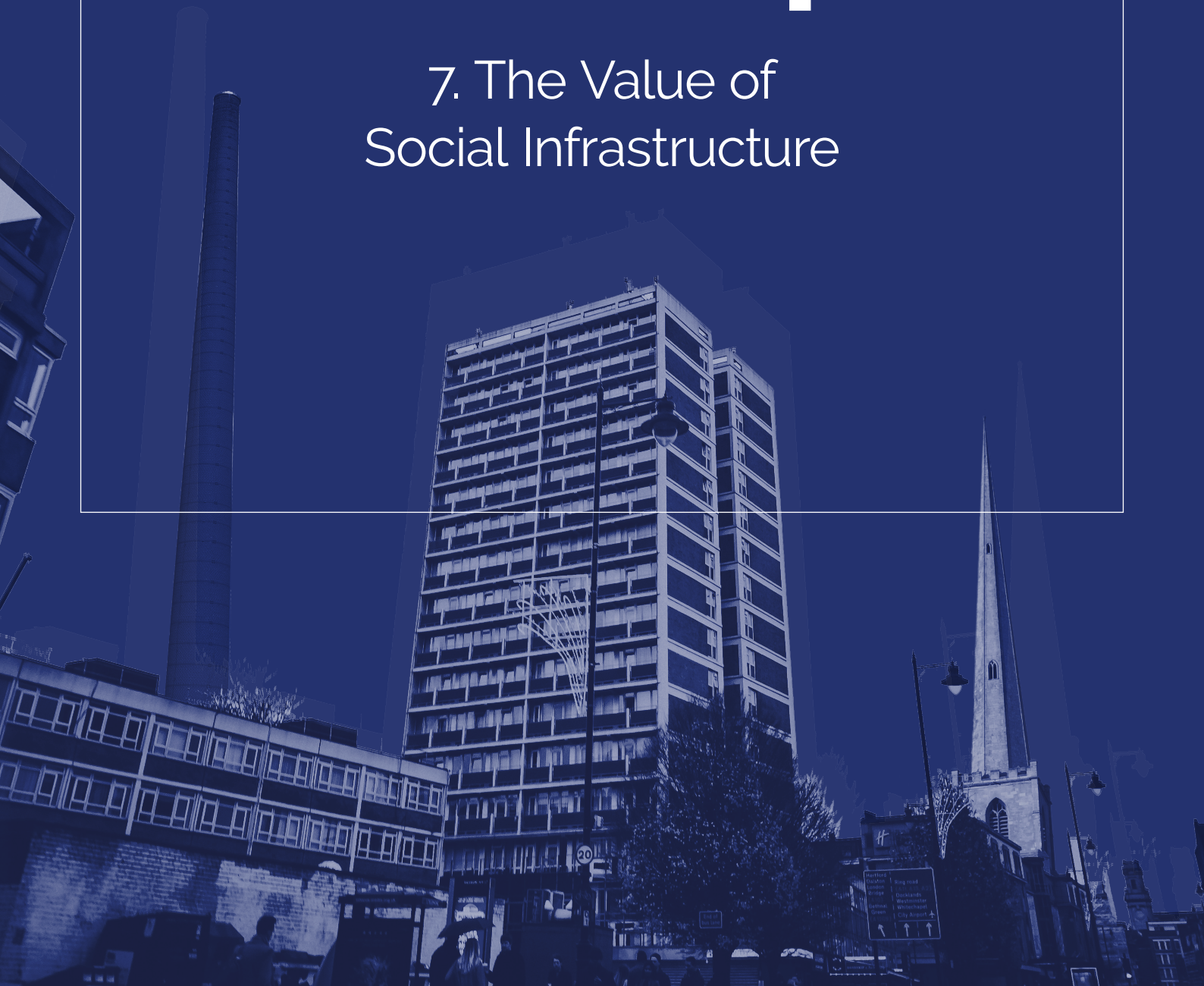
Policy Report Series

Townscapes

7. The Value of Social Infrastructure



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Foreword by Michael Kenny

The declining economic fortunes of many towns, and the chasm that divides the experiences and outlooks of many of their inhabitants from the metropolitan centres where wealth and power have become concentrated, are issues of growing interest in political life and public policy.

In the UK, the preponderance of support for Brexit among town-dwellers, and the countervailing values of many young urbanites, have sparked a deep debate about how and why towns are locked out of the circuits of growth in the modern economy, and how the inequalities associated with economic geography can be more effectively tackled.

The Townscapes project launched at the Bennett Institute brings together a variety of different data sources to offer a deeper analysis of how towns are faring across the regions and nations of Britain. It aims to step away from the generalisations and dogmas that infuse much of the contemporary policy debate and offer instead a more finely grained picture of how different towns relate to their wider regions and nations, as well as to their nearest cities. It showcases the merits of a more granular and regionally rooted perspective for our understanding of geographical inequalities and the kinds of policy needed to address them.

In this series, we argue that policymakers need to consider multiple town categorisations, to get beneath the broad groupings that have become so dominant in this debate such as 'university', 'coastal', or 'post-industrial' towns. Instead we adopt a more useful data-driven typology developed by the ONS (2019c) to contrast the fortunes of 'working', 'partially residential' and 'residential' towns in different parts of the country, and explore the crucial importance for many towns of their geographical distance from large urban centres.

These reports bust some of the prevalent myths about towns and their fortunes since the recession of 2007-08, and lead us towards a better appreciation of the very different circumstances and factors which affect the lives and opportunities of those who live in them. In addition to the insight and evidence which each supplies, we point policymakers to ideas and proposals that are tailored to the regional and national circumstances which are pertinent to the townscapes of modern Britain.

Professor Michael Kenny
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Executive summary

As governments across the UK start to lift lockdown restrictions, a debate is gathering about how to support those communities that have been most badly affected and how to promote economic renewal. These challenges arise in the context of the UK government's commitment to 'levelling up' Britain's 'left-behind' towns.

Within this debate, there has been a tendency in some quarters to champion investment in physical infrastructure as the surest way of attending to the spatial inequalities that the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated. In this report, we argue that investing in **social infrastructure** may be equally important for rebalancing the prospects of the UK's nations, regions, cities and towns. This social infrastructure – i.e. the physical spaces and community facilities which bring people together to build meaningful relationships – has been widely discussed in economic and policy circles in recent years, but its value is yet to be articulated in a robust way. We draw on a wide body of evidence to demonstrate the economic, social and civic value that these community facilities create. And we argue that, rather than seeing investment in social infrastructure as a rival to investing in large-scale infrastructure projects in areas like transport or digital, policymakers should be more focused upon strategic planning that brings together and better aligns these different kinds of infrastructure.

We also disaggregate, and discuss separately, the many kinds of value that good-quality community infrastructure can yield:

Economic value

Reinvigorating high streets: Town centres are struggling to respond to a cocktail of pressures, including the pandemic and the rise of online retail. In this context, the libraries, cafés, cinemas, pubs and heritage assets on our high streets are becoming increasingly important in attracting people to the high street. These amenities help to drive higher rates of footfall and incentivise shoppers to spend more in the local economy. They are also key to creating the vibrant atmosphere and sense of vitality that will encourage some people, who might otherwise leave, to stay in their home town, while also attracting innovative and productive individuals from other places.

Employment: Almost 2.3 million people are employed in social infrastructure-related industries in Great Britain. These industries provide almost half of all jobs in some towns. These sectors are also key sources of employment and training for those who might otherwise struggle in the labour market. Approximately 700,000 young people in the UK are employed in occupations linked to social infrastructure and over 60,000 disabled people work in pubs, bars and clubs.

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Boosting local skills: Libraries, language schools, museums, theatres and art galleries play a crucial role in supporting the development of local skills and lifelong learning. Libraries provide essential resources – including books, internet access and quiet study space – to those who lack these resources at home. They host a range of programmes, such as family literacy classes, coding clubs and CV workshops, which help to boost the skills and employability of local people. Similarly, theatres, museums, art galleries and sports clubs are often actively engaged in efforts to promote skills growth in their local communities through community co-creation projects, volunteering programmes and training schemes.

Social value

Community resilience: Communities with better social infrastructure find it easier to respond to, withstand and recover from crises. During the pandemic, towns with more community facilities tended to have a higher number of mutual aid groups per head of population. These facilities have also provided direct support for local communities during the pandemic, with libraries, community centres, football clubs and local pubs reaching out to help vulnerable and isolated residents.

Public health: The availability of social spaces can improve both physical and mental health. Access to green space is associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety and obesity. Community facilities help to mitigate loneliness and social isolation. Places with more social infrastructure facilities tend to have a lower rate of predicted loneliness among older residents. As social isolation and loneliness are associated with multiple physical and mental health conditions, investment in social infrastructure is likely to yield significant longer term savings in health-related spending.

Bridging divides: Village halls, community centres, local pubs and public gardens bring people together from different walks of life. They are therefore essential to building greater levels of trust and cohesion between the diverse sections of a community and can help to ameliorate tensions across generational, ethnic, class and religious boundaries. Bridging these divides helps to create local economic opportunities, as well as stronger communities.

Civic value

Identity and participation: When public facilities are well-maintained, accessible, attractive and safe, they shape residents' feelings about the identity, heritage and standing of their town. But when the local pub is shuttered, the park is unkempt and the high street has been hollowed out, the pride of a once close-knit or industrially strong community can give way to pessimism and disenchantment. At the same time, people's participation in the social, political and civic affairs of their community often depends on the presence of social meeting places.

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Key Recommendations

Given the wide-ranging benefits that social infrastructure can deliver, government should consider how best to support the expansion and revitalisation of these facilities, especially in those towns where the number of public meeting places has dwindled to precarious levels in recent years. We discuss a number of policy ideas in this area, including:

1. **Improve the availability of data on social infrastructure**. Current efforts to improve the provision of social infrastructure are hampered by the fragmentary nature of the available data. Government should work with ONS to develop a digital data repository, bringing together key data-sets relating to community facilities and their levels of use.

2. **Boost funding for social infrastructure**. Funds dedicated to levelling up reflect ingrained assumptions about the relative importance of physical infrastructure projects. Government should commit to ring-fencing 25% of the Levelling Up and Towns Funds for investment in social infrastructure, and should also earmark a portion of the Dormant Assets Fund for this purpose. Government should also seek to incentivise others, including those in the private sector, to invest in this area.

3. **Develop a strategy for social infrastructure support**. Central government should work with local and devolved authorities to devise a coherent social infrastructure strategy that establishes support for community facilities as a key pillar of the post-Covid recovery agenda. This might involve expanding the remit of both the National Infrastructure Commission and the National Infrastructure Bank. Local bodies should also be supported to develop their own social infrastructure strategies and to share best practice.

4. **Restore town centres.** The UK government should revisit its recent decision to allow developers to convert vacant retail premises, cafés, and other community facilities into residential properties. Allowing community and leisure spaces to be converted into private residences will hollow out town centres, damaging the quality of community life and diminishing the overall attractiveness of some towns. Government should instead consider how to breathe new life into these amenities.

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As governments across the UK start to lift lockdown restrictions, a debate is gathering about how best to deal with the economic impact of the pandemic, how to support those communities that have been most badly affected by it, and how to promote prosperity and economic renewal in its aftermath. These challenges arise in a context where the UK government has declared its intention to pursue the ambitious goal of levelling up Britain's poorer areas, including many 'left-behind' towns, with their wealthier and more prosperous counterparts. Even before the pandemic reached the UK, there was a growing recognition that the social and economic inequalities between and within its nations, regions, cities and towns needed to be urgently addressed, not least because of the deep political disenchantment which these fermented.

Since the Conservative Party won the general election of December 2019, an extensive debate has been underway within and outside government about what kinds of policy goals levelling up entails. Two broad streams of thinking are prevalent in this debate. For some, the scale of the challenge is thought to necessitate a significant expansion of the role of the state, with major investment needed to stimulate an economic recovery and government playing a major role in directing resources to poorer parts of the country (Collins 2021). This perspective raises the question of whether the British state can feasibly direct economic strategies and investment decisions from the top down without a significant degree of engagement and partnership with devolved authorities and local government.

For other advocates of levelling up, the focus is more on what communities themselves can do to catalyse local growth and build resilience for their own future (Kruger 2020; Pollard et al. 2021). On this view, policy should be bent to the goal of supporting community action and greater self-reliance. Advocates of this perspective suggest that meeting the twin challenges of the post-pandemic recovery and addressing entrenched deprivation in left-behind places will require upscaling and extending the work that charities, voluntary groups, housing associations, community businesses, local authorities and mutual aid groups have been doing. One of the key challenges facing this approach is that markedly different capacities exist in different places, making it more difficult to pursue a community-led approach to recovery in some areas than in others.

The first of these perspectives has tended to promote the idea that government should prioritise investments and initiatives focusing on major improvements in physical infrastructure – in part because these are decisions over which the centre can exert more control, and about which it feels more confident in terms of financial return. Considerable attention has been given to the role and importance of various kinds of physical infrastructure project, such as the rollout of full-fibre broadband, the expansion of the high-speed rail network and other initiatives to improve transport connectivity. Advocates of these projects often emphasise the value of improving connections between some of Britain's poorest towns and nearby cities. There has, more generally, been a notable tendency in the last few decades for governments to consider infrastructure in terms of new developments that promote improved forms of connectivity

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which are likely to enable and sustain new forms of mobility, especially those deemed integral to economic growth.

This approach reflects an ingrained assumption within government that infrastructure refers only to large-scale, physical support systems. On this view, a country's electricity grid, its road network and railway system, its patchwork of bridges and dams, and its network of digital hardware are all widely understood as 'infrastructure'. These are the systems and physical structures which facilitate the flow of goods, services and people within and across territories. They enable better and faster connections between and among people and places, and facilitate key forms of social, economic, political and cultural activity (Latham and Layton 2019).

Given the prevalence of this way of thinking about the nature and value of infrastructure in the modern economy, it is unsurprising that so much of the policy debate around levelling up in the UK has focused on headline-grabbing projects like HS2, the extension of 4G and 5G networks and upgrades to major roads. However, these projects represent only one mode of infrastructure, and their efficacy depends to an important – and often unheralded – degree upon the capacities, health and productivity of the communities and citizens they are designed to connect.

Bringing other kinds of infrastructure to the forefront of public policy thinking is, therefore, overdue, and especially important in the context of levelling up. That is why, in this report, we support the view of those calling for more attention to be paid, and greater investment in, the 'social infrastructure' of Britain's towns (British Academy 2021a; Calafati et al. 2019; Gregory 2018). A variety of different terms have been used to describe the foundations and spaces of community life. We follow those commentators who label these social amenities, physical places and community facilities 'social infrastructure' (Klinenberg 2018). Various researchers and campaigners have been arguing for some while that a community's social amenities and civic life are deserving of greater policy attention than they typically receive, because of the vital economic and social values which these forms of infrastructure support. But, while some powerful arguments for more support for them have been aired, less attention has been paid to the evidence relating to their tangible and potential benefits, in comparison with the far more extensive analysis of the idea of improving connectivity between deprived towns and urban agglomerations.

This gap is what this report seeks to remedy. Based on an extensive review of the disparate literature devoted to the value and importance of the social infrastructure that underpins the lives of communities, as well as new data analysis, it seeks to provide a more systematic and rigorous answer to the question, 'What is the value of social infrastructure?'.

The report considers these issues primarily in reference to the challenges facing many of Britain's towns – a topic that has been the focus of this 'Townscapes' series of papers published by the Bennett Institute. These challenges are a major object of concern for the current UK government. In developing our argument, we draw upon research and evidence on the importance of social infrastructure in communities that are located in many different geographical locations, including cities, peri-

urban zones and rural communities. But we argue too that the decline and poor quality of social infrastructure is especially acute in many of Britain's poorer towns. And we contend that there may be particular economic and social benefits to be gained from addressing these deficits within the context of the government's levelling up programme.

Given the inevitable resource constraints that government will face in this area – which are likely to be made even worse by the economic impacts of the pandemic – and the ingrained preference within Whitehall for physical infrastructure spending as a tool for economic growth, the question of where funding and attention are directed is especially important. Government will want to know what is likely to be gained if it sets resources aside for renewing or further developing the built environment, public amenities and social facilities in different areas, as opposed to directing them towards better rail, road and broadband access. This report seeks to provide a more evidentially informed, proportionate and realistic guide for decision-makers in this area. While our focus is primarily upon the functional role that social infrastructure can play in supporting the delivery of these economic, social and civic outcomes, it is important to appreciate that these community facilities are unequally distributed across many different towns in Britain. Elsewhere, we have explored how inequalities of health track and contribute to disparities in levels of public service provision and economic fortunes in these communities (Goodair et al. 2020). Geographical variations in the provision of social infrastructure may also be a major obstacle to the challenge of levelling up many poorer towns.

A key additional reason for paying attention to the quality and nature of community level provision is that the facilities, civic culture and community life it sustains are more likely to provide real benefits to the poorest and most vulnerable of those living in Britain's towns than will be generated by better forms of connectivity which are often designed around improving commuting opportunities or promoting inward investment.

Understanding social infrastructure

Social infrastructure is an increasingly familiar term in policy and political circles, and has come to acquire a number of different associations. Interpretations of it can usefully be located along a spectrum. At one end of this continuum sits an expansive conception which encompasses all of the physical and natural endowments of, and facilities within, a place, including the medley of public services delivered to its people. In this sense social infrastructure is typically taken to include the following key elements (Slocock 2018):

- **Buildings and the built environment**: spaces, such as libraries, parks and community halls, where people can come together to build or sustain relationships, to care for one another, to innovate and to enjoy themselves.

- **Services and organisations**: public services such as adult day care, education and youth services, as well as private services such as those offered at leisure centres. Organisations like charities, housing associations and community groups also constitute social infrastructure under this definition.

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- **Strong communities**: productive relationships, shared norms and good levels of trust among members of a group and between different groups, as well as well-coordinated partnerships between organisations, and the inclusion of local people in local decision-making.

At the other end of this interpretative spectrum, the term is understood in a more confined sense to reference those physical spaces which allow people to congregate and build connections with one another. This would typically include facilities like playgrounds, places of worship, cafes, bookshops, parks, sporting and exercise facilities and public gardens (Klinenberg 2018; Latham and Layton 2019).

Which of these approaches is more pertinent remains the focus of debate. The first approach runs the risk of encompassing too many different kinds of phenomena and may well reinforce a conventional policy focus upon public services that marginalises the more informal, networked and cultural dimensions of a place's social fabric. But the latter has its limitations too. It may unduly narrow our understanding of the different kinds of relationship and social provision which affect the quality of life in a place.

We therefore opt for a definition that lies somewhere between these two opposed views, while hopefully reflecting some of the insights of both.

We suggest that policymakers treat social infrastructure as those physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within the diverse sections of a community, and where meaningful relationships, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity are inculcated among local people.

These physical spaces may be public and free to use, such as libraries, parks and youth centres, or they may be provided in commercial spaces, for instance pubs, cafés and restaurants. These kinds of outlet are integral to the quality and nature of life in many local communities. What links these disparate public and commercial amenities is that they provide the physical spaces in which people can congregate and interact, both within and across group boundaries. Our approach, however, extends beyond facilities and amenities, and also incorporates the workforce that provides various kinds of service within them (on both a paid and voluntary basis).

But while we draw particular attention to those services and people that support and encourage citizens to interact with others in their community, we do not include the full range of public services within our definition of social infrastructure. This allows us to focus on public facilities whose *principal* function is to foster inter- and intra-communal relationships, alongside businesses which are designed to bring people together in a physical location while also pursuing commercial interests. While lots of public social infrastructure facilities act as an interface between citizens and state because they house certain services, not all public services, and the physical spaces in which they are based, constitute social infrastructure.

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This broad definition enables a more targeted assessment of the values created by facilities, spaces and amenities of these kinds. It also enables an examination of whether there are correlations between the availability and quality of social infrastructure on the one hand, and other key variables like health outcomes, economic growth or social cohesion on the other. We consider, in particular, whether it is right to see a diminution in the quality and quantity of social infrastructure in towns that are relatively deprived as a key factor contributing to the decline in community life and as a potential source of political disenchantment, as some have recently claimed (Tanner et al. 2020). And we are mindful throughout that many of the social and economic outcomes which we want to bring into focus are not solely affected by community-level infrastructure. They will be determined too by central government policies on services and fiscal questions, and by deeper economic trends which produce considerable variation in fortunes and opportunities for different kinds of place.

As well as reviewing what a large and disparate research literature tells us about the known benefits of social infrastructure, we also seek to bring to the surface some of the less noticed values created by the facilities and amenities upon which local communities rely, arguing that policymakers should bear these in mind when making decisions about funding priorities and support.

We do this in two particular ways. First, when we consider the value of spaces and facilities available to a community, we suggest that more consideration be given to the people who work or volunteer within them. The paid and voluntary workforces in libraries, youth centres or art galleries are a crucial source of the value that community provision can yield. They are closely associated in the minds of users with the activity or service that is provided and make a huge difference in shaping how inclusive, welcoming and available it will be.

Second, we argue that more systematic attention be paid to the role that social infrastructure can play in relation to local feelings of identity and pride. This facet of community life has, we would suggest, been relatively neglected by the tendency to formulate arguments and generate evidence in ways that are relatively indifferent to the particularities of place. However, strong community bonds can promote positive ideas about a town's future and, in turn, contribute to an overarching sense of shared identity and greater cohesion. But those ties do not exist independently of the facilities, amenities and levels of provision within the town.

We therefore make the case that more attention should be paid to the civic – as well as economic and social – values generated by improved social infrastructure, and we argue that this consideration might well lead to different investment priorities on the part of public authorities. Historic buildings, community pubs, attractive green spaces and places of worship all contribute to the sense of belonging in a town. They might well be considered as especially valuable – sometimes symbolically powerful – assets which bring people together but also play a particularly important role in the life and cultural identity of a community. These kinds of institution can help convey the story and sense of direction of a place to its inhabitants and external

audiences. They are often the features of an area of which local people are most proud (Carr et al. 2020; Historic England 2020) and they typically serve as important focal points for community life. Their value, however, often only emerges as an issue of concern when they are – for whatever reason – under threat. One of the key arguments of this report is that we need to find a way of expressing and measuring the civic value of these shared amenities before such moments arise.

The decline of some of these pillars of community life is, according to some recent research, one of the driving forces behind the sense of decline and disempowerment which has broken the political surface in recent years, in the UK and elsewhere (Bolet 2021). And some surveys indicate that many people see the quality and decline of community-level provision as a first-order concern, unlike those who make decisions in government. These suggest that there is considerable latent popular support for directing public resources to sports and leisure facilities, centres for young people and more local jobs than to transport-based infrastructure projects of the kind that are generally favoured in policy circles (Shoben 2020). For example, in Morriston – a post-industrial town just outside Swansea – a recent survey of local people revealed widespread grievances stemming from the deterioration of local amenities over the last decade and an equally pervasive desire for investment in social infrastructure, especially in facilities for young people such as youth centres and skate parks (Calafati et al. 2019).

Outline of the report

Below, we make the case for government – both central and local – to think harder about the different kinds of value associated with improved or restored social infrastructure and to consider how these assets can support efforts to level up our more deprived towns. We suggest, in particular, that this might usefully involve a better data architecture which gathers information about the various available amenities and spaces that provide value for communities (see also Zenghelis et al. 2020).

The framework we propose offers a corrective to the ingrained tendency to marginalise or overlook the 'softer' forms of infrastructure that sustain communities and which have, in many places, been considerably eroded after more than a decade of fiscal retrenchment by central government in Britain. Social infrastructure investment needs to be more effectively aligned with other policies for economic renewal and physical infrastructure development. It is also important to note that the precise way in which social infrastructure can most fruitfully be deployed, and the specific goals it can help to achieve, will vary from town to town, depending on the existing assets, resources and priorities that exist in different places.

Our overarching conclusion is that government should take seriously the case for targeted spending and intervention in this area as an important tool it should deploy – alongside various others – as it develops strategies to tackle deeply ingrained, geographically rooted, economic inequalities. This means paying due regard to – and being willing and able to step in

to help – those social amenities which operate on a commercial basis, such as local pubs, as well as those supported by public authorities, like youth centres or community hubs. There is good evidence to suggest that targeted efforts to improve or protect playgrounds, libraries, pubs and community halls may be as significant for combatting the stagnation and decline of many British towns as investing in new dual carriageways or rail electrification near to them. And, importantly, efforts of the first kind may well lead to more immediate 'pay offs' than projects to improve transport connectivity do. Equally it may be that improving the level and quality of community provision in a place may actually be the best way to realise the full benefits of major transport projects, and so we argue that much more attention should be paid to aligning infrastructure development plans. Ensuring better connectivity between a large urban centre and an outlying town may well not benefit the latter unless its residents have the qualifications and skills that would enable them to get jobs in the larger centre. Government needs a multi-stranded approach to planning and investment in relation to infrastructure.

In Chapters Two, Three and Four, we disaggregate the different kinds of value – economic, social and civic – which better community infrastructure can yield, and consider each of them separately. We draw upon a body of recent, and some older, research and evidence to explore each of these. Finally, in Chapter Five, we offer a number of recommendations in the light of our analysis.

The economic value of social infrastructure

The benefits that arise from investing in social infrastructure are typically depicted in terms of their importance to the quality of relationships and connections among different parts of a community. Such an understanding rests upon the widely held belief that communities with more and better forms of social interaction are likely to be healthier, happier, more trusting and cooperative, and more replete with social capital. We will consider the merits of, and evidence for, these accounts of the social value of community provision below. But we start by exploring whether it is possible to demonstrate – and indeed measure – economic benefits in particular.

We consider this idea in part because the economic idiom is the one that carries most weight in government, and also because this focus brings to the fore some of the most striking, and potentially fruitful, consequences of investing in social amenities, particularly in towns that are struggling economically. There is, we suggest, good reason to see a connection between the protection of a community's cultural amenities and social spaces and the likelihood that an area will prosper in economic terms. The nature of the causal relationships involved is, however, indirect and relatively complex. But there is evidence to support the judgement that a town with a vibrant and attractive high street, which has good amenities and facilities and a relatively active and diverse civic life, will improve its economic fortunes more quickly than a counterpart which is comparatively lacking in these features.

Here, we highlight some of the particular characteristics of a town's social landscape which appear especially important in creating the potential for economic benefits, focusing on three features in particular: high streets, employment in sectors that contribute directly to the community infrastructure of a place, and skills development.

Reinvigorating town high streets

Perhaps the most important asset of any town is its high street and surrounding central area. This is typically the geographical location of much of its economic activity and also a crucial point of attraction (or otherwise) for incomers who might be drawn to visit, or live in, a place. For those assessing the relationship between community provision and economic growth, town centres are a primary point of concern.

Many of Britain's high streets and town centres are currently struggling in the face of a potent combination of long-range changes, including the rise of online retail, and short-term shocks, most notably the coronavirus pandemic. The deeper threat they face stems from changes in consumer behaviour. Between 2007 and 2020, online sales as a percentage of total retail sales increased from 3.4% to 27.9% (ONS 2020d). Meanwhile, the number of retail businesses located on the high street fell by 2% between 2012 and 2017 (ONS 2019b**).** The growth of out-of-town retail parks has also undermined many high street businesses (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee 2019; Astbury and Thurstain-Goodwin 2014). While retail parks experienced positive footfall growth between 2008 and 2016, shopping centres and high streets experienced a decline (Springboard and The NPD Group 2017).

Other factors have conspired to weaken further the position of town high streets. Underinvestment in local transport systems, especially buses, has made it more difficult for local residents to access their town centre, while high business rates and rental charges make it difficult for high street shops to compete with online companies (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee 2019). These long-range trends have combined to affect rates of footfall in town and city centres, which declined by 17.4% between 2009 and 2017 (Millington et al. 2018: 42). Relatedly, employment in high street retail also fell in more than 75% of local authorities between 2015 and 2018 (ONS 2020c).

The pressures facing high street retail have intensified since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the introduction of the first national lockdown in England, footfall in a sample of 154 English high streets was down by 89.9% on 28th March 2020, relative to the same day in 2019, and remained low throughout the rest of the year (High Streets Task Force 2020: 30). Even when non-essential shops were permitted to reopen in June 2020, and footfall peaked modestly, it was still 50.9% lower than it had been at the same point in 2019 (High Streets Task Force 2020: 30).

In the face of these pressures, it is clear that, for high streets to thrive, they will need to adapt to deep-seated changes in consumer behaviour. But it looks unlikely that most can do this without support, and this is especially true in poorer, economically vulnerable towns. Local and central government have a key role to play in this regard, particularly in relation to policy levers which are within their control – for instance disproportionately burdensome business rates and underfunded public transport systems. In 2018, the UK government announced a Future High Streets Fund, currently worth £1 billion, which is designed to support local areas to adapt to social and economic changes and to develop long-term strategies to ensure the sustainability of town centres and high streets into the future.

Declining high streets and depleted shopping areas reduce the economic prospects of a town quite considerably. Busy and popular high streets, with a good mixture of retail options, social amenities and public buildings (including public services) are more likely to prove attractive in terms of inward investment and commercial growth (Portas 2011). Research by We Made That and LSE Cities (2017: 26-29) shows that high streets are at least as valued by local residents for their contribution to the social fabric of a place as for their commercial implications. Rather strikingly, the High Streets Task Force (2020), commissioned by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2019, found that 'multifunctional' high streets – i.e. those that include a mix of shopping, leisure and social amenities – experienced a weaker decline in footfall in the year to June 2020 than their retail-dependent counterparts. The report suggests that these town centres, which have a more diverse 'offer' to make to local residents, will recover more quickly as the economy reopens.

Policymakers need to appreciate that town centres' importance goes beyond their commercial and retail sectors. A key role within them is played by libraries, cafés, cinemas, art installations, pubs, heritage assets and green spaces (see, for example, High Streets Task Force n.d., Hart et al. 2019, Wrigley and Lambiri 2015: 56, and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee 2019). As Genecon LLP

and Partners (2011: 107) put it: 'The presence of a Citizen's Advice Bureau or library can be as important in drawing footfall as a café or fashion store'. As the pull of traditional retail outlets diminishes in the face of the convenience of online shopping, these kinds of amenity will become more and more important in attracting people into the town centre, with knock-on benefits for those businesses which do continue to operate on the high street. The positive effect of social spaces – including restaurants, pubs and bars – on footfall levels in town centres is reflected in the fact that, while daytime footfall declined by 3% between 2013 and 2016, footfall between 5pm and 8pm rose by 0.7%, and post-8pm footfall rose by 1.4% in the same period (Springboard and The NPD Group 2017). As the report's authors argue, 'Consumers are increasingly seeking trips that blend retail opportunities with a hospitality opportunity, and it is clearly this non-retail/experience led trip that has been driving uplifts in footfall post 5pm' (ibid.: 12).

They can also have positive effects during the day. Cafés, for example, have been found to boost high street economies by 2-4% because they generate greater footfall and longer 'dwell times' (Allegra Strategies 2014, cited in Wrigley and Lambiri 2014). As 51% of people prefer to shop in an area with multiple coffee shops (Allegra Strategies 2014, cited in Wrigley and Lambiri 2015: 56), these businesses help pull customers to the high street and rebalance the competitiveness of town centres relative to out-of-town retail parks and online retail.

Increased footfall is not the only benefit of having good social amenities located on the high street. They also bring parts of the community together in ways that might not otherwise be possible, and increase the overall number of people inclined to visit a town centre. One study suggests that people visiting town centres with friends or family spend up to 50% more per head than those visiting by themselves (see Hart et al. 2019: 4). Similarly, evidence from 170,000 exit interviews with shoppers in more than 100 retail centres across the UK demonstrates that consumers who make use of cafés, restaurants and other food and drink establishments while shopping spend approximately 48% more in the surrounding retail businesses than those who do not (CACI 2014, cited in Wrigley and Lambiri 2015: 56).

This kind of effect should not just be associated with cafés, bars and pubs – although they are undoubtedly critical to the feel and economic prospects of town centres. There is considerable evidence that cultural and heritage institutions also add significant value to businesses located nearby. The Association of Independent Museums (2019) estimates that museums attract visitor spending worth £440 million annually, of which £290 million – equivalent to 5,400 FTE jobs – is 'offsite', supporting other businesses in the local economy. In Wakefield, the 500,000 people who visited the Hepworth Wakefield in its first year of opening contributed an estimated £10 million to the local economy (Local Government Association 2013). Similarly, visitors to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park contribute roughly £5 million to the local economy each year (ibid.).

More widely, arts and cultural institutions make significant contributions to the local, regional and national economy as a consequence of the sector's multiplier effects. According to the

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Centre for Economics and Business Research (2019), for every £1 in turnover which the arts and culture industry generates directly, a further £1.24 in output is generated in the wider economy through indirect and induced multipliers. Similarly, for every 1 job created by the arts and culture sector, 1.65 jobs are supported in the wider economy (ibid.). Much of the value that arts and cultural institutions generate involve business to business purchases in the local or regional supply chain.

The degree to which amenities and institutions of these kinds impact upon footfall and consumer spending is likely to vary by place. Mumford et al. (2020) and the High Streets Task Force (2020) distinguish between 'holiday towns' (like Blackpool or Cleethorpes), 'speciality towns' (such as Windsor), 'multifunctional towns' (e.g. Ashford) and 'comparison centres' (like Manchester). On this classification, holiday, specialty and multifunctional towns are most likely to gain, whereas those dominated by comparison retail are less likely to gain.

Another key advantage of investing in the social spaces, amenities, heritage assets and cultural institutions which make high streets – and the towns where they are located – vibrant and attractive places to live, is that they can help to encourage talented local people to stay locally, rather than seek opportunities in larger cities elsewhere, while also attracting talented individuals from other places.

In this sense, social infrastructure can be integral to what Martin Sandbu (2020) has described as a 'strategy of attraction', whereby the quality of a place is deliberately configured to retain and attract those individuals who can fill high-productivity, high-value jobs in the knowledge and service economies. Many of Britain's left-behind towns have witnessed significant population decline over the last few decades, as young people seek opportunities further afield which they cannot find closer to home. Measures to reverse this trend are imperative, as are policies which make a town more attractive for these demographics.

More generally, as policymakers grapple with the question of whether there will be a shift towards more extensive remote working in the aftermath of the pandemic, it may well be that, for a proportion of the workforce, the need to reside in the same city in which people work will decline. And there is a potential opportunity to leverage this trend as an opportunity for previously struggling towns, where accommodation is cheaper. The quantity and quality of local amenities, heritage assets and cultural institutions will be an important tool for those towns trying to attract city-centre workers.

Providing funds to protect or expand a place's amenities may not always be enough to rejuvenate its high street or transform its economic prospects, but it is an important counterweight to the experience of decline for some areas, or a first step towards further economic development for others. Revitalising town centres in the 21st century means providing denser and more integrated residential units, co-locating public services along the high street, expanding technology-assisted services, like 'click and collect', promoting increased footfall, and leveraging public and private investment to fund regeneration initiatives and better public

transport systems. Within this policy mix, a strategic focus upon the community amenities of a place may well be of considerable importance in creating the conditions in which prosperity becomes more likely.

Employment

There are therefore a number of different economic goods associated with improved social infrastructure. One further gain arises from efforts to boost local employment opportunities, particularly in sectors where there is a strong sense of social purpose.

The Business Register and Employment Survey offers a broad picture of the number of people whose employment falls under the heading of social infrastructure. This category encompasses a wide range of sectors, ranging from service industries – including retail and hospitality – to cultural institutions and public services. In line with the definition of social infrastructure we set out above, these jobs are located in public facilities, such as libraries and youth clubs, as well as commercial establishments, such as pubs, cafés and restaurants. What links this very disparate array of sectors is that they provide the physical spaces, amenities and opportunities for different parts of a community to come together.

Table 1 presents employment estimates for most of the main types of social infrastructure in Great Britain.

According to the BRES, approximately 2.28 million people worked in sectors relating to social infrastructure in 2019.

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Table 1.
Employment in social infrastructure-related industries (Great Britain 2019)[1]

2007 SIC Code (5-digit)	2007 Standard Industrial Classification	Total employees	Full-time employees	Part-time employees	Total employment	Corresponding Ordnance Survey Point of Interest
56101	Licensed restaurants	475,000	201,000	274,000	486,000	Restaurants
56302	Public houses and bars	441,000	152,000	289,000	453,000	Pubs, bars and inns
56102	Unlicensed restaurants and cafés	343,000	140,000	202,000	355,000	Cafés
88910	Child day-care activities	206,000	102,000	103,000	208,000	Nurseries
93110	Operation of sports facilities	160,000	51,000	109,000	163,000	Sports complexes
93120	Activities of sport clubs	137,000	58,000	79,000	145,000	Sports clubs
56301	Licensed clubs	68,000	21,000	46,000	74,000	Nightclubs
94910	Activities of religious organisations	68,000	34,000	35,000	68,000	Places of worship
90010	Performing arts	46,000	29,000	18,000	52,000	Theatres, venues
93130	Fitness facilities	42,000	17,000	24,000	42,000	Sports complexes
55300	Camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks	39,000	20,000	19,000	40,000	Campsites
91020	Museum activities	31,000	18,000	13,000	31,000	Museums
91011	Library activities	28,000	13,000	16,000	28,000	Libraries
85510	Sports and recreation education	25,000	14,000	11,000	25,000	Martial arts, sports clubs
91040	Botanical and zoological gardens and nature reserve activities	22,000	13,000	9,000	23,000	Zoos
90040	Operation of arts facilities	19,000	11,000	8,000	22,000	Theatres, venues
91030	Operation of historical sites and similar visitor attractions	19,000	10,000	9,000	19,000	Historical / heritage buildings
47610	Retail sale of books in specialised stores	13,000	6,000	8,000	14,000	Bookshops
90020	Support activities to performing arts	12,000	8,000	3,500	13,000	Theatres, venues
85520	Cultural education	8,000	4,500	3,500	8,000	Dance schools, drama schools
47810	Retail sale via stalls and markets of food, beverages and tobacco	4,500	2,250	2,000	5,000	Markets
47890	Retail sale via stalls and markets of other goods	3,000	1,500	1,500	3,500	Markets
55202	Youth hostels	2,500	1,250	1,250	2,500	Youth organisations
47820	Retail sale via stalls and markets of textiles, clothing and footwear	1,000	600	500	1,250	Markets
	TOTAL	**2,213,000**	**928,100**	**1,284,250**	**2,281,250**	

1 BRES data is given for Great Britain. 'Employees' excludes working owners and the self-employed, and 'employment' includes them; 'part time' and 'full time' columns refer to employees, not employment; the Ordnance Survey POI column cross-references the SIC classes with their closest Ordnance Survey POI category.

Source: Nomis – Business Register and Employment Survey (2019); Ordnance Survey – Points of Interest (© Crown copyright and database rights 2021 Ordnance Survey (100025252))

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These sectors provide a significant number of jobs and are among the largest sources of employment in some towns. For example, in Skegness, the accommodation and food services sector, together with arts, entertainment, and recreation, account for 46% of total employment. In Newquay and Llandudno, these two sectors account for 42.5% and 40% of total employment, respectively (ONS 2020b).

Moreover, some of these sectors are able to support good quality jobs in occupations where further training and advancement are readily attainable. And, a sense of social purpose is common across the arts, sporting and cultural sectors which means that jobs can be directed to those who might otherwise struggle in the labour market – including young people (see British Academy 2021b), people with disabilities or learning difficulties, those with mental health problems, and ex-offenders. For some of these groups, employment in these roles can afford an opportunity to enter the workforce for the first time, to gain invaluable experience and begin to develop transferable skills. More generally, a large number of jobs generated in the sectors associated with social infrastructure and community provision are locally based, so that people who get them do not have to separate themselves from their local support networks in order to take advantage of these opportunities.

Our analysis of ONS (2020a) data shows that approximately 700,000 people aged 16-24 in the UK are employed in occupations linked to social infrastructure (see Table 2).[2] Young people are disproportionately represented in the workforce in this area. Whereas they comprise 11.42% of the total workforce across all industries according to this data, they represent approximately 31% of the social infrastructure-related workforce. In addition, of all young people in employment, just under 1 in 5 (18.83%) work in social infrastructure-related industries.

Most of the young people employed in social infrastructure-related industries work in restaurants, pubs, bars, and clubs, where many of the jobs are lower-paid. Almost fifty percent of people working in 'beverage serving activities' in these establishments are aged 16 to 24. Young people are also disproportionately represented as employees of bookshops, restaurants and sports clubs.

2 Whereas the Business Register and Employment Survey data presented in Table 1 gives employment statistics broken down by SIC sub-classes (i.e. 5-digit SIC codes), the ONS data used here is based on the Annual Population Survey and is broken down by SIC classes (i.e. 4-digit SIC codes). Because these data are taken from different surveys, the estimates of total employment per industry vary slightly.

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Table 2.
Youth Employment in Social Infrastructure-related Industries (UK 2019)[3]

2007 SIC Code (4-digit)	2007 Standard Industrial Classification	Employees aged 16-24	All Employees	% 16-24	Corresponding Ordnance Survey Point of Interest
5610	Restaurants & mobile food service activities	353,270	905,382	39.02	Restaurants
5630	Beverage serving activities	134,854	270,220	49.91	Pubs, bars, clubs
9311	Operation of sports facilities	54,710	164,071	33.35	Sports complexes
8891	Child day-care activities	41,988	241,335	17.40	Nurseries
9312	Activities of sport clubs	31,484	86,142	36.55	Sports clubs
8551	Sports and recreation education	15,288	65,435	23.36	Martial arts, sports clubs
5520	Holiday and other short stay accommodation	11,596	73,976	15.68	Youth hostels
9001	Performing arts	10,073	68,939	14.61	Theatres, venues
9313	Fitness facilities	7,027	39,348	17.86	Sports complexes
8552	Cultural education	6,335	45,920	13.80	Dance schools, drama schools
9004	Operation of arts facilities	4,540	16,683	27.21	Theatres, venues
9104	Botanical and zoological gardens and nature reserve activities	3,903	19,571	19.94	Zoos
9102	Museum activities	3,840	42,001	9.14	Museums
4761	Retail sale of books in specialised stores	3,757	9,134	41.13	Bookshops
9491	Activities of religious organisations	3,002	82,819	3.62	Places of worship
9101	Library and archive activities	2,981	49,368	6.04	Libraries
9002	Support activities to performing arts	2,676	25,644	10.44	Theatres, venues
5530	Camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks	2,458	12,120	20.28	Campsites
4781	Retail sale via stalls and markets of food, beverages and tobacco products	2,266	14,707	15.41	Markets
4789	Retail sale via stalls and markets of other goods	753	9,393	8.02	Markets
4782	Retail sale via stalls and markets of textiles, clothing and footwear	*	4,653	*	Markets
9103	Operation of historical sites & similar visitor attractions	*	5,423	*	Historical / heritage buildings
	Total Social Infrastructure-related Industries	**696,801**	**2,252,284**	**30.94**	
	Total All Industries	**3,699,685**	**32,397,402**	**11.42**	

3 Asterisks indicate that sample sizes are too small to provide reliable estimates

Source: ONS (2020) Employment by detailed occupation and industry by sex and age for Great Britain, UK and constituent countries 2019; Ordnance Survey – Points of Interest (© Crown copyright and database rights 2021 Ordnance Survey (100025252))

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Social infrastructure occupations are especially promising as a route into employment for people with disabilities or learning difficulties. This is significant given the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people. Whereas 82% of non-disabled people are in employment, the figure is only 53.2% for disabled people (ONS 2019a). For those with severe or specific learning difficulties, the employment rate is only 17.6% (ibid.). However, people with disabilities or learning difficulties who do find employment are often more likely to do so in social infrastructure-related roles than in others. 21.3% of those who staff clothing and footwear-oriented market stalls have a disability. In the 'accommodation and food service' sector, 11% of workers have a disability, with 96,777 disabled people working in 'restaurants and mobile food service activities.' A further 60,364 disabled people work in 'beverage serving activities' in pubs, bars and clubs (Slane 2017).

The government's Disability Confident scheme has also attracted many social infrastructure employers who are committed to providing inclusive, accessible recruitment processes and guarantee interviews to disabled people who meet the job requirements. Employers accredited under the scheme commit to providing at least one of a list of opportunities to disabled people, including paid employment, work experience, apprenticeships and internships. The greater sense of social purpose exhibited by employers in some of these sectors is an important aspect of the value that they can create, and this is as true of the more commercially focused enterprises that fall within this category as it is of third- and public-sector employers.

Examples include the Gardener's Rest community pub in Neepsend, Sheffield which has partnered with the local charity Yes 2 Ventures to provide employment opportunities and training for people dealing with mental ill health, those with learning difficulties and people on the autistic spectrum. The pub is sensitive to the additional needs of these employees and provides flexible, short shifts of 2-3 hours. The No Limits Cafe in Devon, The Usual Place Cafe in Dumfries, Cafe Leep in Leeds and the Giraffe Cafe in Perth all provide training opportunities for young people with additional support needs to develop hospitality and catering skills that will help them to transition into paid employment. Access All Areas is a theatre company in London which stages 'disruptive theatre and performance by learning disabled and autistic artists'. And several professional football clubs, including Arsenal, Everton and West Ham, are also Disability Confident Leaders who actively seek to employ disabled people by guaranteeing interviews to those disabled candidates who meet the minimum requirements.

There is considerable potential for social infrastructure businesses and enterprises to provide valuable sources of employment for people with disabilities and additional needs, and government may well wish to make such practices a conditional requirement for towns and employers receiving funding. There is robust evidence to suggest that some sectors within this broad range are responsive to ideas of social purpose and diversity in relation to employment opportunity.

Box 1
Jubilee Pool, Penzance

Jubilee Pool in Penzance was first opened in 1935 and is the largest surviving seawater lido in the UK. The lido is a Grade II listed art-deco site which looks out across Mounts Bay to St Michael's Mount. It incorporates an open air sea water swimming pool, enclosed by a promenade with seating areas and changing cubicles.

In 2014, severe storms in Cornwall visited significant structural damage on Jubilee Pool, which only reopened in 2016. With a view to securing the longer term sustainability of the lido, the Friends of Jubilee Pool formed a community benefit society and secured a 99-year lease from Cornwall Council. The society, known as Jubilee Pool Penzance Ltd, has since raised more than £500,000 and is being supported by the Architectural Heritage Fund, which has lent a further £850,000.

This funding is being used to upgrade the facilities at the lido, which will soon host a 'unified hospitality zone' that integrates a café, reception area, retail outlets and a community and event space. Meanwhile, Cornwall Council has collaborated with Jubilee Pool and Geothermal Engineering Limited to install a geothermal well that provides heated seawater to a section of the pool, making it an attractive

leisure spot throughout the year. This shift to an annual operating model is anticipated to amplify visitor numbers and will create 18 new full- or part-time jobs. Given that every ward in Penzance falls within the 20 percent of most deprived wards in England, this is a very good illustration of how the development of a cultural amenity can also provide economic benefits for some of the poorest people in a community.

The regenerated lido will operate with a clear social mission in mind, offering priority access to the hot water zone for local residents in the most deprived neighbourhoods. The pool will also encourage particular groups to take advantage of its health and wellbeing sessions, including those with limited mobility, dementia, poor mental health and substance dependencies, as well as those suffering with loneliness and social isolation.

Source
Architectural Heritage Fund (n.d.)

Improving skills

Beyond the contribution it makes to the vitality of town centres and rates of employment, there are other ways in which improvements in a town's social infrastructure can contribute to its economic prospects. Cultural facilities like libraries, language schools and museums can play an especially important role in supporting the development of local skills and lifelong learning, especially for those who may experience periods of unemployment. And there is some evidence to suggest that they may also serve to support new forms of local economic innovation.

Libraries play a particularly important role in this area and are historically associated with rising levels of education and economic development. In the US, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie donated the equivalent of approximately $1 billion to build 1,500 public libraries between 1883 and 1919. Enrico Berkes and Peter Nencka (2020) have recently shown that this investment had an impact on rates of innovation within the economy, which they measure through the number of local patents approved. Cities that received a Carnegie library typically saw an increase in patenting rates of between 8% and 13% relative to similar cities which did not receive a library despite being eligible for a Carnegie grant. Recipient cities also saw an increase in the number of patents granted to women and immigrants. Berkes and Nencka (2020) provide evidence that the mechanisms through which library provision translates into greater rates of innovation include better access to scientific knowledge and opportunities for collaboration between library patrons. By providing meeting spaces for community activities, public libraries create opportunities for individuals with complementary skills to collaborate. In the US, this process resulted in greater rates of multi-authored patents in cities which received a Carnegie library than in those that did not.

Libraries play a clear and obvious role in supporting the development of skills in general, and they have, in the UK, increasingly been directed to promote educational resources and programmes for local populations.

There is evidence to suggest that growing up with virtually no books at home is associated with literacy scores below the average (Sikora et al. 2019). According to the National Literacy Trust, one in eleven children do not own a book of their own, and this figure rises to one in eight among children from deprived backgrounds (Clark and Teravainen 2017). Similarly, 12% of 11 to 18 year olds do not have a laptop, computer or tablet from which they can access the internet at home and a further 60,000 young people in this age bracket have no home internet access whatsoever (Lloyds Bank 2018). Most recently, since the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the closure of schools, research has shown that more than 20% of primary school children and 10% of secondary school children do not have access to a quiet study space at home (Andrew et al. 2020).

In this context, the provision of diverse and interesting reading materials, free computer and internet access, and quiet study space – all of which can be found in many local public libraries – is of singular importance, especially for those without access to these resources at home. The value generated by libraries is reflected

in the attitudes of children and young people themselves. A survey of 17,089 school children aged 8-16 by the National Literacy Trust found that 38% of pupils believed that visiting the library helped them perform better at school (Clark and Hawkins 2011).

Access to public libraries has been shown to have a positive impact on a range of educational outcomes in different countries. In the US, Gilpin et al. (2021) have shown that boosting capital investment in public libraries leads to higher reading test scores among children in nearby school districts. Rachana Bhatt (2010: 148) found that, controlling for other factors, 'library use increases the amount of time an individual spends reading by approximately 27 minutes on an average day'. She also found that using a public library increases the probability of parents reading to very young children (age 0-4) by 12.5 percentage points. In the UK, research for the Sutton Trust, based on the Millennium Cohort Study, found that library use was one of the largest single predictors of the gap in cognitive development between children in low- and middle-income groups, along with other material factors like internet access (Waldfogel and Washbrook 2010: 48).

Libraries across Britain also offer a range of educational classes and employment-focused programmes, such as family literacy classes, STEM and coding clubs, homework clubs, language classes, CV workshops, job hunting support and IT courses (Libraries Connected 2020a). Many of these additional services are particularly valuable for local residents who are experiencing a period of unemployment, or wish to acquire a particular skill. There is some evidence that libraries can help play a role in supporting people back to work. For example, a 2010 study for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council found that 86% of library authorities support the unemployed to access the internet; 76% support online job hunting and 71% offer help with CV writing (CFE 2010, cited in Arts Council England 2014 and Libraries Connected 2020a).

The value of these services to unemployed people themselves has been less well documented in the UK than elsewhere. In the US, Becker et al. (2010) found that 76% of people who use public library computers for employment purposes do so to search for job opportunities and 68% of these job hunters submit an application online.

Other cultural institutions, like museums and galleries, are also actively engaged in efforts to promote skills growth in their local communities, not only through collaboration with schools and colleges, but equally through attempts to bring local residents into their research, curation and exhibition activities. This focus on community co-creation - especially as a vehicle for supporting skills growth among deprived groups – is now well established. In 2001, the Heritage Lottery Fund sponsored the *Greater Pollok Kist Community Development Project* in Glasgow, which gave 11 local residents aged 16 to 67 from the deprived Pollok area the opportunity to curate and deliver a community exhibition in the local leisure centre. The participants afterwards acknowledged that the project had enabled them to develop valuable transferable skills including project management and research (Newman et al. 2005).

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In the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of similar, community-rooted projects. For example, the London Transport Museum's 'Route into Work' scheme supports young Londoners to secure apprenticeships in the transport industry by providing training on CV writing, presentation, communication and job-specific knowledge. Its 'Young Volunteers' programme similarly offers local young people a valuable opportunity to develop transferable skills in project management, exhibition design, event management and mentoring. More generally, the Local Government Association (2019) has recognised that, thanks to initiatives like the National Lottery Heritage Fund's 'Skills for the Future' training programme, museums are especially well-placed to support local people to develop skills in curation and building management, as well as a wide range of transferable skills, such as event organisation, budget management and visitor services.

All of these institutions provide important forms of skills development and they do so in ways that are more tailored to the needs of local people, employers and labour markets than national or regional strategies tend to be. These kinds of public organisation aside, there are important benefits arising from the work of a growing number of locally-focused initiatives. These include community-based English language interventions, such as MHCLG's 'ESOL for Integration Fund', which are designed to improve not only levels of English language proficiency but also degrees of social integration (MHCLG 2020). This and many other similar initiatives are provided in various multi-purpose community centres and spaces – like women's centres, churches and school halls – and they depend to a significant degree on flexible and well maintained social spaces.

A wider range of skills is also nurtured in community amenities, especially those related to sport and exercise. There is much evidence that participation in sports can have a positive effect on educational attainment among young people. A review of evidence on the social impacts of sport for DCMS found that organised exercise has a positive effect on young people's self-esteem, their perception of their own competence and achievement, their concentration and their social capital (Taylor et al. 2015). Given the clear social value of sport of various kinds, maintaining adequate provision – in terms of playing fields, athletic tracks, courts, gyms, swimming pools, and all-weather football pitches – should be seen as a vital contribution to the public good. And, given the numbers of these facilities which have been lost in preceding decades as local authority funding has been drastically reduced, there is a clear opportunity – and a genuine social need – to embark upon a concerted programme of investment and development of new facilities to enable exercise and a range of sporting activities (Ellson 2019; BBC 2015).

The development of a range of different social skills, improved self-esteem and both physical and mental fitness – all associated with physical activity – have all been identified as important contributors to levels of well-being, and, more widely, to economic productivity (Sawhill 2020). In this respect too, there are important indirect contributions which improved social infrastructure makes to the economic good.

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None of the benefits identified here can be easily accounted for in conventional monetary terms – with the exception perhaps of rates of employment – but each of them contributes importantly to the wider stock of social capital that is a crucial underpinning of a dynamic and growing economy (Zenghelis et al. 2020). And, as a number of leading economic figures, like Mark Carney (2021), have begun to critique the implications of an approach to market-led growth which neglects the social and civic foundations that functioning markets require, it is time for policymakers to consider much more carefully the civic culture, social institutions and associational cultures which have undergirded the development of market-led growth. More generally, a more considered, evidence-based analysis of the economic value generated by high-quality social infrastructure is overdue.

In order for such an analysis to be conducted, a precise and robust measure of social infrastructure provision is needed. We recommend that government, working through the ONS, works towards producing a better data repository, bringing together some of the key information sources about the number of amenities in different places, their resourcing and their levels of use. At present, important data sources about the social infrastructure that exists in communities are disparate, collected at different geographical levels and difficult to amalgamate. The absence of clear and coherent datasets at a more granular scale is a major impediment to the development of a more concerted and strategic policy approach by local councils, LEPS, combined authorities and central government.

The social value of community infrastructure

One of the defining features of social infrastructure is that it provides opportunities for members of a community, who might not have otherwise been able, to come together to interact with each other on a repeated basis. It can have a huge impact upon the character and quality of social relationships within an area, and has the potential to nurture an improved degree of mutual understanding among different parts of the wider community, and enhance levels of trust between them. In this sense social infrastructure can be an important facilitator of social capital, defined by US political scientist Robert Putnam as 'the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. (Putnam 1995: 67).

There is a large body of evidence about the positive effects of social capital – for citizens and local economies – but less examination of the role of the infrastructure that facilitates community interactions of various kinds in relation to it (see Roskruge et al. 2012). Here we draw attention to some of the particular social goods which, evidence suggests, social infrastructure can promote or enhance, and we highlight the importance of community amenities and facilities which promote the kind of cross-community social capital which is more likely to enhance cohesion and potentially provide an important bulwark against future shocks.

There is an ingrained tendency to conceive of community life and civil society as separate from – and perhaps more important than – the facilities, assets and underpinnings that public authorities and agencies supply. This habit has tended to direct the attention of policymakers away from the role and responsibilities of public authorities in general, and governments in particular, in relation to the infrastructure that underpins and enables civic life. Our argument, to the contrary, is that the state has a vital role to play in terms of enabling the provision of community facilities that stimulate healthy forms of community interaction.

More generally still, the tendency to separate state and civil society in much policy thinking has led to a diminished appreciation of the particularly important role that community-level infrastructure often plays as a point of interface between local communities and government. More attention should be paid to its importance as a source of connection between both – particularly at moments of crisis. For example, many public libraries operated as contact centres for health and social care services during lockdown – a simple, but important, illustration of the variety of social purposes to which publicly funded infrastructure facilities can be directed, and of the important role they can play in relation to the goal of making communities more resilient.

Community resilience

During the course of the coronavirus pandemic, the importance of understanding and promoting resilience – i.e. the capacity to withstand, respond to and recover from crises and other adverse shocks – in local communities has become very clear (Morrison et al. 2020). In the pandemic's aftermath, resilience in the face of ongoing economic damage will be equally important. There are good reasons to think that communities with more extensive and better forms of social infrastructure are more likely to promote this quality. In the early phase of the Covid-19

pandemic, a network of community-based mutual aid groups sprang up across the entire country. Run by local volunteers, these provided invaluable support to many of the most isolated and vulnerable members of Britain's towns.

Subsequent research, however, suggests that the degree of mutual aid activism varied considerably by area, and while some communities benefitted from a proliferation of such activity, in others there was little or no mobilisation (Agarwala et al. 2020: 20). And some analyses have pointed to striking correlations between how wealthy a place is and levels of mutual support (Felici 2020). Such findings should be treated with a degree of caution, as embedded forms of solidarity and mutual support may not be well reflected in these figures, but overall these findings echo other research which stresses the different levels of civic capacity which exist in different communities across Britain (Corry 2020).

We have ourselves looked carefully at whether there is also a correlation between the number of mutual aid groups that emerged in the context of the pandemic and levels of social infrastructure, and have examined data from Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK to consider whether there are important differences among Britain's towns in relation to levels of community action stimulated by the pandemic.

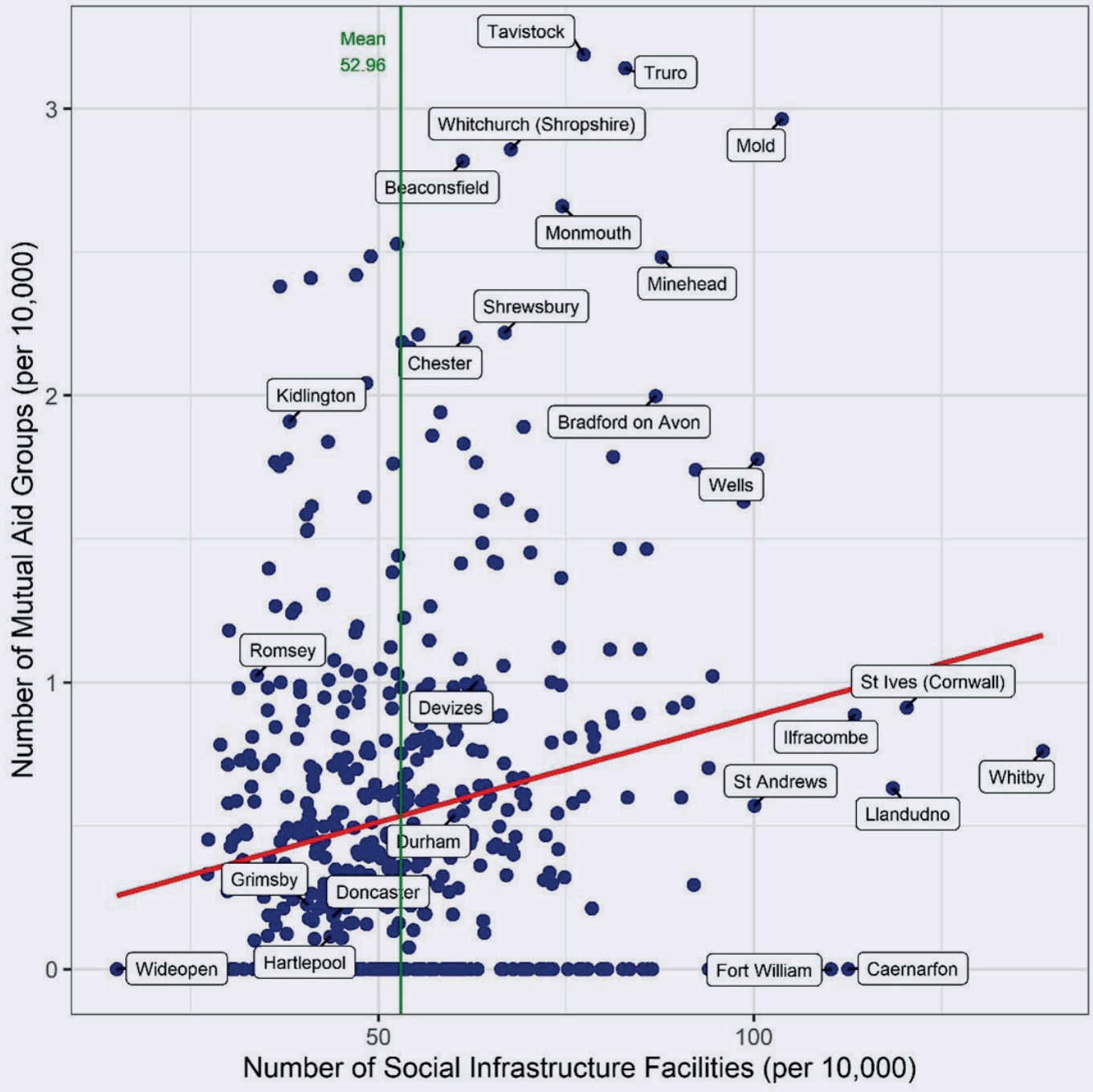
Figure 1 indicates that there is indeed a correlation between the number of social infrastructure facilities and the number of mutual aid groups in a town during the pandemic[4] Towns like Tavistock, Truro and Mold had the highest numbers of mutual aid groups and have above-average levels of social infrastructure. At the other end of the spectrum, there are a number of small urban conurbations with relatively low levels of community amenities and very few reported mutual aid groups. Wideopen, a small town in North Tyneside, has the lowest density of social infrastructure of all towns in Great Britain and no reported Covid mutual aid groups.

Identifying this kind of correlation should not be taken as evidence of a direct causal relationship between levels of civic provision and the number of mutual aid groups, but it does suggest an important potential relationship between them. This data also raises the very important question of whether factors like wealth and educational levels in a place are themselves drivers of better social infrastructure (perhaps because these communities are better able to demand, bargain for and support facilities), or whether access to good social infrastructure is itself an important part of what makes a place attractive to those who are better off.

The correlation we identify in this data is not absolute. There are a number of towns – such as Barrow-in-Furness, Caernarfon and Penrith – which have more than the average number of social infrastructure facilities, but where mutual aid groups are not reported. There are clearly different factors determining the kinds and level of voluntary activity that emerge in

4 The correlation coefficient is 0.2. The data on mutual aid groups was collected from Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK on 27th January 2021 and represents a snapshot of the number of such groups, which fluctuated throughout the pandemic.

Figure 1.
Mutual Aid Groups vs. Social Infrastructure Facilities



Source: Ordnance Survey – Points of Interest (© Crown copyright and database rights 2021 Ordnance Survey (100025252)); Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK

communities. Nevertheless, at an aggregate level, the amount of social infrastructure in a place appears to be a more important factor in shaping community activism than is often acknowledged. And this may tell us something important about which communities have proved, and will prove, more resilient in the face of the health and economic shocks associated with the pandemic. Conversely, places in which the social infrastructure is weaker and less well resourced, are less likely to exhibit the same degree of community vitality and resilience. These findings make a strong case for investment in those towns where there are fewer social infrastructure facilities per capita, such as Wideopen, Slough and Basildon, and especially in those where it has declined significantly and appears to be significantly under resourced.

Academic Eric Klinenberg's (1999) research on the 1995 Chicago heat wave offers an instructive lesson for policymakers increasingly focused on the imperative of resilience. During one week in July 1995, a combination of extreme weather conditions, including temperature highs of 41 degrees Celsius, 'real feel' temperature highs of 52 degrees Celsius, scant cloud cover and the absence of cooling winds, resulted in the excess deaths of 739 people (Klinenberg 1999; Klinenberg 2018). But these deaths, he argues, should not just been seen as a natural consequence of unusual weather conditions. There was, in fact, a significant spatial variation in Chicago's mortality rate during the heatwave. Adjacent neighbourhoods with similar demographic characteristics experienced starkly different rates of excess mortality. His analysis shows that this difference in outcomes could not be attributed to variation in the proportion of elderly residents, or in education levels, ethnicity, or income. Instead, the key difference between them was the prevalence and quality of their social infrastructure.

"When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves."

Eric Klinenberg (2018: 5)

He concludes that in places which are designed to encourage regular, casual social interaction among friends, family, neighbours and strangers, the dense skein of relations that ensues may well provide an important form of protection against exogenous shocks. In towns and cities which residents find walkable, and which provide multiple communal spaces in which they can meet and socialise on a regular basis, it is easier for people to support one another during a crisis. Communities in which residents were not typically isolated in the private spaces of their homes and workplaces, but where they were used to occupying attractive shared spaces on a regular basis, enjoy the kinds of social relationships and levels of trust that make it easy for neighbours to check in on one another.

The social value of community infrastructure

In the UK, social infrastructure has been an important, largely unacknowledged, underpinning of community resilience during the pandemic, and has afforded resources that have been adapted to the local challenges that communities faced during lockdown. Even if social distancing meant that libraries had to close, many of their staff still managed to provide valuable services to their community. Teams throughout the country made 130,000 calls to elderly and vulnerable patrons during lockdown (Libraries Connected 2020b). Over 75% of library services delivered well-subscribed online events including rhyming and reading sessions for young children, school readiness programmes, jobs sessions and arts clubs (ibid.). And, many library buildings were converted into community support hubs, providing a base for local volunteers, shielding operations, and food delivery initiatives.

Importantly, however, key parts of the infrastructure contributing to community life and support lie beyond the direct reach of the state. Innumerable churches, synagogues, mosques and temples adapted their voluntary activities to the new challenges that the initiative, helping churches to support supported their local communities during the pandemic by providing a range of services, including debt relief, food banks, mental health support and employment programmes.

Other community organisations did much the same. Many football clubs played a key role in their local communities as the pandemic got underway. Players from Burnley FC made phone calls to check in with older fans and the wider club provided a range of services for local people, such as phone mentoring for vulnerable adolescents, socially distanced bootcamps and food delivery services. The same was true in other sports. Wasps – the Premiership rugby union team based in Coventry – launched the #MakeThatCall initiative, which saw players and managers phoning vulnerable supporters to offset the risk of loneliness and identify fans that needed support (BBC 2020). Forthill Community Sports Club in Dundee – which incorporates cricket, hockey and rugby teams (among others) created and distributed a series of educational workbooks to support the parents of the club's younger members with home schooling during lockdown (Sport Scotland 2020).

Similarly, pubs – although forced to close their doors – remained active in supporting the local community. The Bevy – the only community pub on a housing estate in the UK – provided meals on wheels for vulnerable people during lockdown, and The Swan in Windsor offered virtual coffee mornings, online pub quizzes and online bingo nights.

There are rich and organic links between community institutions and the kinds of activism and mutual support which local communities sustain. Ascertaining the precise causal relationships between them is hard because they relate to each other, and to publicly supported amenities, in the fashion of an eco-system, rather than having a linear relationship. The values and benefits that accrue when the relations between institutions, community groups and public bodies work in a healthy and productive way, and the damage and harms that follow where they do not, have both been dramatically illustrated in the extreme circumstances triggered by Covid-19.

Box 2
@TheGrange, Blackpool

Community hubs have also been able to adapt to the pandemic.

@TheGrange, a community hub in Blackpool run by the charity Groundworks, is normally a vibrant social space. It boasts a community shop and café, a community farm, a library, a pharmacy, a theatre and meeting rooms. It houses an Adult and Family Learning team, a financial support officer, a neighbourhood officer, and the Blackpool North community police team. It caters to all residents of all ages, with programmes like *Ping & Serves* (a table tennis club), *Knit & Natter*, *Guys on Grange* (an alcohol-free pub games evening) and *Colouring Club.*

During the pandemic, as social distancing prevented @TheGrange from delivering its usual programmes, the hub pivoted in order to continue supporting the community. During lockdown, @TheGrange became a central hub for Blackpool Council's relief effort. It was a space from which:

- Food parcel deliveries were coordinated
- Calls to vulnerable and isolated residents were made
- Easter eggs and home growing kits were delivered to local families
- A 'meals on wheels' service was delivered

A recent Groundworks report described the importance of hubs like @TheGrange for communities' resilience during the coronavirus crisis and their prospects for recovery post-pandemic:

"Even when people cannot come together physically, the social networks created by the community hubs have an important role to play in community resilience. Friends made at the community hubs check in on each other and staff have been making sure that vulnerable people are accessing the support they need.

"These spaces will have an important part to play in the recovery too. People who have lost the confidence to venture beyond their front door will need safe, trusted places to turn to and additional support to deal with the financial, social and health effects of lockdown."

(Groundwork UK 2020: 10)

Source:
Groundwork UK (2020)
Holland (2020)
@TheGrange
Gavell (2020)

The social value of community infrastructure

Government alone is not going to be able to repair all of the damage done to the UK's economy and society by the Covid-19 pandemic, and while commercial development and inward investment will be integral to the wider economic recovery, business too cannot provide all of the answers. It is the ingenuity, understanding, generosity and commitment of communities themselves – which have been thrown into relief during the pandemic – that are some of the most important assets and resources within a place, and which can play an important role in determining how well different areas will respond to the kinds of challenge posed by the pandemic and its aftermath.

Public health

The pandemic has also drawn attention to the persistence of a number of significant health inequalities across the geography of Britain, and has, in key respects, accentuated pre-existing divides. In this context, the question of whether there are public health gains to be reaped from improvements in social infrastructure is an especially important one.

A solid body of research reports correlations between the availability of green spaces – like parks, community gardens, urban farms, woodland, or rivers and streams – that are well maintained and accessible to local people, and better health outcomes. For example, a recent review of 21 studies conducted across nine countries found that access to green space is associated with higher levels of physical activity, less time spent watching television, lower body mass index and lower weight status among children and adolescents (Jia et al. 2020). These findings confirm those of a previous study which found that 68% of the 60 papers analysed demonstrated a positive relationship between access to green space and various indicators of obesity-related health (Lachowycz and Jones 2011). One of these papers found that exposure to green space is associated with lower premature mortality from circulatory disease in England (Mitchell and Popham 2008), and a second found that areas with more green space in the Netherlands had lower rates of disease, including coronary heart disease and diabetes, than more built-up areas (Maas et al. 2009). The English study also concluded that access to green space can help mitigate the effects of income deprivation on health inequality by counterbalancing the negative health consequences of deprivation (Mitchell and Popham 2008; see also Goodair et al. 2020). In the current context, as government considers which policy tools may be most instrumental in tackling obesity in particular, it should pay due regard to this wide body of evidence linking green space to population health improvements.

There are also well-documented mental health benefits of access to green space. In 2010, a Danish study explored the mental health effects of access to it among a sample of 10,000 citizens. Its authors found that living more than 1km away from green space raises the likelihood of experiencing high levels of stress by 40% relative to those living closer to these spaces (Stigsdotter et al. 2010). In the UK, a similar study has shown that residents of urban areas which have good accessibility to green areas experience lower levels of mental distress (e.g. depression or anxiety) and higher well-being (measured as life satisfaction), than those living in tarmac-covered

neighbourhoods (controlling for average levels of income, education, employment and crime in the neighbourhood) (White et al. 2013). Similarly, a longitudinal study in the UK has shown that moving from a heavily built-up urban area to a greener urban area is associated with sustained mental health improvements, controlling for standard socioeconomic variables (Alcock et al. 2014).

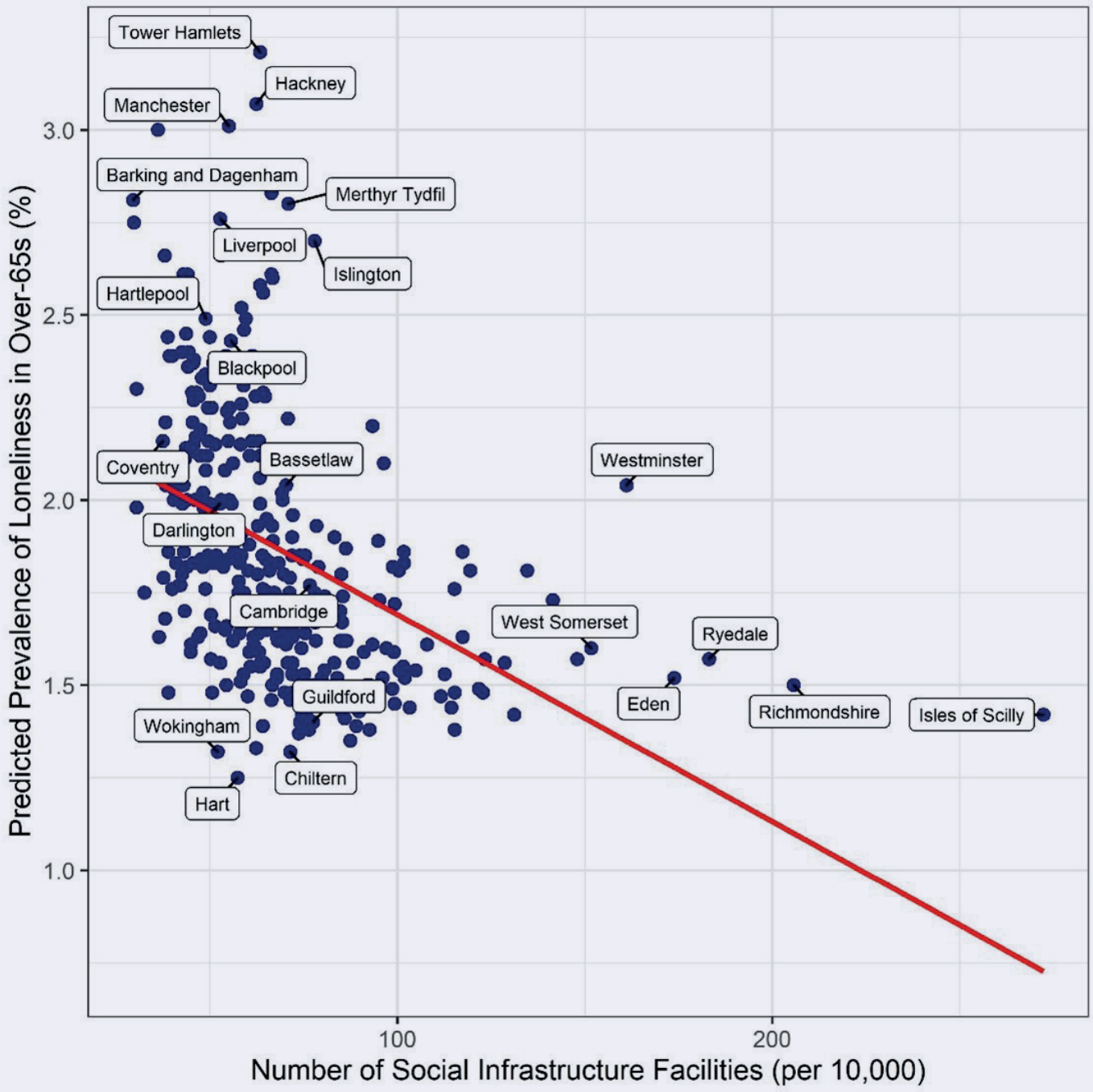
Given these well-documented relationships, improvements in access to good quality green space should be a priority within a broader focus upon social infrastructure. Areas which have higher rates of income deprivation generally have fewer environmental amenities (including green space) than their wealthier counterparts, and the former also tend to suffer more from adverse environmental harms like higher rates of air pollution (Pearce et al. 2010). Addressing these imbalances in provision within some of Britain's most deprived towns, would make a significant difference to the life experiences and prospects of many of their inhabitants.

Policies tailored to improve access to, and the provision of, managed natural spaces represent an important, underused, tool in tackling some of the pronounced forms of physical and mental ill-health which affect people unevenly across Britain. A sustained programme of improvements in this area should be seen as an integral part of a wider social infrastructure strategy. These are places and spaces that can provide tangible individual benefits in terms of exercise and good health, and they are also often sites where different parts of the community can interact. In some cases, the focus should be on improving access and upgrading facilities in parks and other natural spaces. In others, a more radical approach to 'greening' a largely urban area may be needed.

This emphasis is valuable too as it may well help address a different social problem – the dual challenges facing a growing number of older people of loneliness and social isolation. In order to understand what kind of relationship exists between levels of social infrastructure and feelings of loneliness, we compared data on the predicted prevalence of the latter and the number of social infrastructure facilities in local authorities, per head of population.[5]

5 The predicted prevalence of loneliness is based on a statistical model developed by Age UK using Wave 5 (June 2010 – July 2012) of the English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (ELSA) survey: https://data.gov.uk/dataset/f1e93560-fa24-41fb-90eb-a5982913cc8c/loneliness-prediction-of-prevalence-score-among-over-65s. The data has been rescaled to reflect the predicted percentage of the over-65 population which is lonely.

Figure 2.
Predicted Prevalence of Loneliness in Over-65s vs. Social Infrastructure Facilities



Source: Ordnance Survey – Points of Interest (© Crown copyright and database rights 2021 Ordnance Survey (100025252)); Age UK and ONS (2019) Loneliness (Prediction of Prevalence) Score Among over-65s

The social value of community infrastructure

As Figure 2 shows, a statistical relationship between the predicted prevalence of loneliness among the over-65s and the density of social infrastructure provision is discernible in this data.[6] This does not hold absolutely, but overall there is a notable tendency for local authorities with fewer social infrastructure facilities per head of population to have a higher proportion of residents who are at greater risk of feeling lonely.

This finding is broadly consistent with a larger body of research which shows that places which are richer in community facilities have higher rates of social interaction and lower rates of loneliness among their residents. A recent study in Montreal found that – controlling for age, education and depressive symptoms – older people living within a 5 minute walk of a greater share of neighbourhood amenities had higher rates of social participation. The amenities covered in the study include a multitude of social infrastructure facilities, such as leisure centres, sports centres, restaurants and cafés, libraries, parks and places of worship (Levasseur et al. 2011). This built upon earlier work which showed that when residents perceive their local area as neighbourly and offering decent facilities, they are more likely to participate in social activities (Bowling and Stafford 2007) and to experience higher levels of mental wellbeing (Buke et al. 2009). Similarly, Age UK (2018) has found that people over the age of 50 in England are 3 times more likely to feel lonely often if they do not feel that they belong to their neighbourhood.

Strategies designed to improve the quality of, and access to, public spaces outdoors should be seen as complementary to a focus upon social cohesion and cross-community mixing. The adverse consequences of social isolation and loneliness have been extensively documented. Social isolation is associated with a higher risk of coronary heart disease (CHD), with the most socially isolated more than twice as likely to die from CHD than the most socially integrated (Heffner et al 2011), and with a heightened risk of suffering from cardiovascular disease (Leigh-Hunt et al. 2017; Bunker et al. 2003). Given that loneliness is closely associated with lower levels of physical activity (Schrempft et al. 2019), investments in more accessible outdoor spaces, park wardens, outdoor cafés and exercise classes are all likely to yield significant savings, in health terms, down the line. Loneliness is also clearly linked to decreased physical activity (Newall et al. 2013, Pels and Kleinert 2016), weaker cognitive function (Shankar et al. 2013, Boss et al. 2015), poorer heart health and greater risk of stroke (Valtorta et al. 2016), as well as with worse mental health, with lonely people more likely to experience depression, anxiety and stress (Lee et al. 2019, Domènech-Abella et al. 2017).

In towns where facilities that enable people to meet up easily have been lost, or where these spaces are difficult to access because of poor bus services or high crime rates, elderly residents will generally remain at home for a greater proportion of time. The absence or inaccessibility of the town's community centre, pub, library or park can be a major obstacle to realising the benefits of community life for many older people. By contrast, accessible and affordable social infrastructure invites older residents to venture into the shared spaces of their community, where they can interact with others, and where the possibility arises that people will encounter others across some of the most powerful divisions within our society – for instance, people from different ethnic communities or generations (see Cantle et al. 2001).

6 The correlation coefficient is -0.42. The City of London has been excluded as it is a significant outlier in terms of social infrastructure per head of population.

The social value of community infrastructure

One further potential benefit of good-quality community provision also deserves emphasis. This concerns the extent to which the underpinnings of community life enable forms of social interaction that bring people together across some of the most powerful divides within British society. This is what Putnam evokes through the term 'bridging capital', and which he contrasts with those forms of capital that strengthen existing bonds between people already inclined and minded to congregate with each other (Putnam 2000). The search for ways to promote bridging capital has been a recurrent theme in the policy world over the last two decades and has been the subject of a huge amount of research. It relates closely to the developing policy focus on community cohesion since the late 1990s, an idea that was central to the landmark Cantle Report which was published in the wake of riots that took place in some Northern towns in 2001 (Cantle et al. 2001).

A large and varied body of evidence shows that there are multiple sources of this kind of connecting capital. A body of research highlights the social and economic effects of those facilities and spaces – village halls, libraries, community centres and pubs being prime examples – which are designed around the ethos of bringing parts of the community together. Policymakers interested in the merits and importance of social infrastructure should pay particular attention to these kinds of place, we would contend, given the documented benefits of bridging capital (see, for example, Muringani et al. 2021). A premium should be placed on facilities that are designed and managed with inclusion in mind, and which are affordable for local people from different demographic, social and cultural groups to access.

The kind of capital that can be created in these spaces may well also make local communities more resilient to future shocks. Baroness Casey (2016), a former Victims' Commissioner who led a review into opportunity and integration in isolated and deprived communities, identified this kind of social mixing – across age, ethnic, class and religious boundaries – as important to the goals of reducing prejudice, increasing trust and nurturing a greater sense of unity in a community, and also to widening employment opportunities. Places that are home to communities with high levels of bonding – but little bridging – capital tend to have lower rates of participation in the labour market for women from ethnic minority backgrounds (Casey 2016: 55). Research for the Social Integration Commission in 2015 highlighted the lost economic opportunities associated with a lack of integration. It put this cost at approximately £6 billion each year, specifically through long-term unemployment (£1.5 billion), recruitment and career progression (£0.7 billion) (see Casey 2016: 20).

Importantly, a good deal of research indicates that social capital is most likely to be created in places where people are more likely to interact with each other in person, and where many people work, and live. As government seeks to determine which towns in Britain are most in need of assistance and investment, this is an important – and under examined – consideration, given the relatively large number of towns which are, in economic terms, 'commuter' places with relatively little economic life within them. In a recent Irish study, the author concludes that: 'Persons living in walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods [in Galway] have higher levels of social capital compared with those living in car-oriented suburbs. Respondents living in walkable

Box 3
Men's Sheds

The Men's Sheds movement is an excellent example of a community-led initiative which aims to combat loneliness by bringing people together in a shared space to build friendships while pursuing mutual interests and developing new skills. The movement originated in Australia in the 1980s but has since spread to the UK, Ireland, Canada, the US, New Zealand and Denmark.

These spaces are rarely actual sheds and may be warehouses, garages, empty offices, Scout huts, sports pavilions or a wide range of other types of building. These local facilities provide the space in which older men in particular, but also younger men and women, can meet others in their community. The activities that 'Shedders' engage in are varied, but often orient around learning and practising skills such as woodworking, metalworking, mending and electronics. As the Men's Sheds Association makes clear, 'Many Sheds get involved in community projects too – restoring village features, helping maintain parks and green spaces, and building things for schools, libraries and individuals in need.'

'Shedding' is as much about socialising and promoting health and wellbeing as it is about learning new skills. And there is a strong focus on combatting loneliness and isolation among older men in particular. According to the Men's Sheds Association, 'One of the best things about Men's Sheds is they facilitate conversation about subjects that men might usually find difficult to talk about.'

Sources
Men's Sheds Association (2020)
International Men's Sheds Organisation (2018)

neighbourhoods were more likely to know their neighbours, participate politically, trust others, and be socially engaged' (Leyden 2003: 1546). Other studies also highlight the value of places with facilities that are in easy reach and which are more likely to bring people out of their homes to interact.

Towns themselves are also beginning to recognise the value of social infrastructure in bridging divides across groups lines. For example, in Boston, Lincolnshire, residents have been keen to celebrate the town's historical connection, via the medieval Hanseatic trading network, to other towns across Northern and Central Europe. Through historical market stalls, re-enactments and flag-making workshops, residents have endeavoured to frame a sense of belonging that extends to the migrants from Eastern Europe who also live there. This effort to foster inclusivity by reminding people of Boston's long history of mutually beneficial multiculturalism is significant in a town long described as among the most ethnically polarised in Britain (Newson 2018).

Given the ingrained bias in policy circles towards expensive projects that aim to achieve better connectivity between urban centres and satellite suburbs and towns, this is an important countervailing set of findings. Rectifying decaying community infrastructure and funding forward-looking and ambitious local projects to improve facilities and upgrade amenities may be as beneficial in social and economic terms as investing in large-scale infrastructure projects.

The civic value of social infrastructure

We have set out above some of the main social benefits that social infrastructure can generate, and tried to be more specific in delineating these than much of the commentary on it tends to be. And, while the values created may well elude conventional forms of cost-benefit or value-for-money assessments, they can and should be more systematically incorporated within the evaluation frameworks and strategic planning of central and local governments.

To enable this, there is, we suggest, a need for a data repository to be created that will help policymakers understand the quality, accessibility and resourcing of social infrastructure in towns and cities across the country. This might well provide some of the data needed for policymakers interested in estimating the potential economic value of funding social infrastructure projects, and would afford some of the evidence required for the effects of interventions in different left-behind places to be evaluated. Given the different kinds of benefit associated with improved community provision, and the variability of the social and physical environments where it is supplied, we should expect considerable variation in the levels and kinds of value that will result from it.

In this section we offer an exploratory discussion of a separate — and relatively less examined – kind of benefit which improved infrastructure might generate for communities. This we call its civic value. By this we mean the potential for investments in community institutions and amenities to promote and unlock powerful feelings of shared identity and belonging within them. A second, related benefit which we also consider under this heading is the idea of improving levels and forms of active participation within the life of the community.

Both of these ideas figure repeatedly in commentary upon social infrastructure, but they have been less fully explored by researchers in this area, and tend to figure fleetingly in policy discussions about it. In part this is because these kinds of intangible goods are hard to document and measure, and also because community provision is only one of a much wider set of factors and contingencies that shape people's relationships with the places they inhabit. Our contention is that there may well be important, additional benefits from investment in community provision – specifically in terms of investments aimed to repair or improve the damaged fabric of poorer towns as well as support for well-designed initiatives that aim to amplify the values of mutual aid, co-operation and better interaction.

We argue too that the civic value of shared social amenities often goes underappreciated until the latter are at risk of being lost. It is often only when an area's community pub or football team is on the brink of closure that the contribution these institutions make to people's sense of well-being, local connection and pride in their place of residence becomes apparent. Cultural and social institutions such as these, even when financially endangered, are often the centre of community life in poorer towns (see Starkings and Brett 2021). And, particularly when other local amenities, high street brands and public services have been lost, these institutions take on additional meaning and emotional significance as the last vestiges of the identity and heritage of a town and its community. The social, symbolic and emotional importance of these places is reflected in the

readiness of communities to defend them when they are threatened with closure or, as in the case of Bury FC (see Box 4), to come together to recreate them, against the odds, when they are lost. A better appreciation of the importance and values of community institutions is a necessary step towards authorities and policymakers identifying their value and providing support where necessary, before they are thrown into jeopardy.

A large number of research studies suggest that when a town's public facilities and social amenities are well-maintained, accessible, attractive and safe, they help to shape residents' feelings about the worth of their place of residence, and its identity, heritage and standing (e.g. Algan et al. 2020; Atkinson et al. 2012; Francis et al. 2012; Christiaanse and Haartsen 2020). By contrast, in places where the local pub is shuttered, the park is unkempt, and the high street is a shadow of its former self, the pride that once came with being part of a close-knit community or a town that was once a site of industry and employment can give way to a debilitating feeling of pessimism and disenchantment about its prospects. At the individual level, volunteering and other forms of civic participation often provide opportunities for people to enhance their skillsets, grow their social networks, improve their employability and sustain higher levels of wellbeing (see, e.g., Kay and Bradbury 2009; Paine et al. 2013; Bradford et al. 2016; Russell et al. 2018).

Some recent polling suggests that people's sense of how well or poorly their town is doing is often linked to the disappearance of chains and businesses from the high street (Public First 2020). And, there are suggestions in some research that the feeling that a place is losing key parts of its infrastructure may be linked to deepening pessimism and rising political disaffection. For instance, in France, Yann Algan, Clément Malgouyres and Claudia Senik (2020) have shown that places which have experienced the closure of a grocery shop, cinema, bookshop or other social amenity are more likely to have witnessed a *gilets jaunes* protest. More generally, there is evidence that perceptions of a place's fortunes are closely tied to judgements about whether its central areas and core facilities are well maintained and cared for (Public First 2020; Shoben 2020). And much commentary has observed that in more deprived communities, the feeling that a place has been abandoned or overlooked by local authorities and central government runs high. Equally, there is evidence that the loss of local public services, retail facilities and social amenities can depress people's willingness to participate in politics altogether (Algan et al. 2020).

Pride in place, a sense of local identity and feelings of belonging matter also because these civic goods are associated with a wider set of benefits that matter to policymakers. The most obvious, and important, of these is population health and wellbeing, including mental health. Some recent studies show that a secure sense of belonging to a community is key to effectively managing a wide set of health conditions, including stress, depression, addiction, and chronic physical ill-health (Haslam et al. 2018).

Depression and anxiety are thought to affect approximately 20% of people in the UK (ONS 2016) and mental health problems more widely

Box 4
Bury FC

In November 2020, Bury FC – a two-time FA cup winning club founded in 1885 – fell into administration. In 2019, after it had been promoted to League One, the club was expelled from the English Football League when a takeover bid collapsed at the eleventh hour and the management failed to convince the EFL of the club's financial viability.

The club had been a major focal point for the community in Bury, with a loyal cadre of fans filling the 11,800 seats at Gigg Lane each Saturday, many of whom had been supporting 'The Shakers' for several decades. In 2002, when the club again found itself in administration, fans formed 'Forever Bury', a supporters' group which successfully campaigned and raised funds to keep the club afloat.

When the club was threatened with expulsion in 2019, fans again mobilised to try to save it, staging a series of protests in the build-up to the EFL's deadline. When interviewed by Forever Bury, several fans spoke of how they would feel 'distraught', 'bereft' and 'with nowhere else to go' if the club went under. Joy Hart, whose father, Les Hart, had been associated with the club for 44 years as a player, physiotherapist and manager, chained herself to a drainpipe in the stadium grounds in order to raise the profile of the local campaign. Supporters also marked the sense of loss that the potential collapse of their club would generate by placing a coffin outside the directors' entrance to the stadium.

Ultimately, these efforts were unsuccessful. But, in a way that reflects the central importance of football itself to the community in Bury, fans established a 'phoenix club', known as Bury AFC, in December 2019. The club was allocated a place in the tenth tier North West Counties League for the 2020-21 season. The community-oriented focus of this new club is clear: having partnered with the Bury Treasureline Lottery, Bury AFC is using proceeds from the lottery to develop a number of community teams, including a veterans', women's and walking team, as well as supporting local mental and physical health initiatives.

Sources
BBC (2019)
Freeman (2020)
McDonnell (2020)

are estimated to cost the UK economy around £35 billion a year (Parsonage and Saini 2017). Efforts to tackle depression include prescribing anti-depressants to target serotonin deficiencies in the brain or supplying cognitive behavioural therapy to address the cycle of unhealthy thoughts, feelings and behaviours which can trap people in depressive states.

But a growing body of research suggests that a different, 'social' kind of treatment can also be highly effective in managing and reducing individual depression, and there may be an important linkage from this idea to the quality of community life and its underlying amenities and facilities. A study in England showed that individuals who join social groups, such as choirs or neighbourhood clubs, were less likely to experience a first bout of depression, regardless of their age, gender, socio-economic status, relationship status and other relevant factors (Cruwys et al 2013). More strikingly still, the mental health benefits of joining social groups were measured in this study as three times greater for those individuals who had a history of depression. For these people, joining one social group reduced the probability of relapsing into a new depressive episode from 41% to 31%, and joining three groups reduced this risk to 15% (ibid.). Activities that generate forms of social interaction of this kind can be transformative both in relation to mental well-being and the wider civic culture, and may well reduce levels of demand on health services down the line.

There is one particular kind of infrastructure which has become more prominent in relation to concerns about community cohesion and feelings of belonging in towns in general, and left-behind communities in particular. The idea that investing in heritage assets and iconic cultural institutions may represent a particularly valuable way of reversing the decline in feelings of pride in a locality, and of re-animating feelings of belonging and identity has become increasingly familiar in the last few years.

Several of the areas included in Local Trust's *Big Local* project, for example, have opted to use part of their funding to invest in local heritage projects that seek to connect residents to their past and 'reignite pride in their community' (Newson 2018: back cover). In Ramsey, Cambridgeshire, local residents have decided to use the town's heritage assets – including Ramsey Rural Museum, a Victorian walled garden and the relic of a World War II training camp – to revitalise the local area and reconnect its citizens with the town's history. Heritage open days, together with investment in a walking trail and a free, vintage bus connecting the various sites, have helped to double or, in some cases, treble the usual footfall at the different attractions, creating knock-on benefits for local retailers (Newson 2018: 17). These kinds of initiative reveal the civic role that certain kinds of community institution can play. And they show too how some of these can help communities craft a story about their place which affords a meaningful connection between today's residents with the local past and may help people feel more proud of where they live. In Ramsey, local surveys show that people are beginning to feel more positive about living there (Newson 2018: 19).

Box 5
Derby's Museum of Making

In Derby, a new Museum of Making will open in spring 2021 on the site of the world's oldest factory, a former silk mill in Derby city centre dating to 1721 (Doward 2021). This museum, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Derby City Council and Arts Council England (among others), is envisaged as 'a contemporary space [that will tell] Derby's 300-year history of making to inspire new creativity' (Derby Museums n.d.). Its design is the result of an extensive consultation with the local community and, while retaining aspects of the original factory's architecture, it will also integrate features from different historical periods, showcasing the rich and complex history of Derby as an industrial city. Local residents have volunteered to clean 11,000 bricks from the original factory which will be reintegrated into the new design (Doward 2021). And, alongside displays of almost 30,000 artefacts, the museum will also house a functioning workshop for local businesses to manufacture product prototypes. The Museum of Making is an interesting example of the way in which innovatively designed social infrastructure can help to express and amplify the identity of a place, while also contributing to its economic revitalisation.

The civic value of social infrastructure

The participation of local people in the conversion of an 18th century silk mill in Derby into a Museum of Making (see Box 5) reflects another kind of civic benefit that community infrastructure projects can foster – wider participation in the life of a community and a stronger sense of being a stakeholder in it. The current pandemic has shone a light on the depth and potential of volunteering in many communities. And there have been innumerable kinds of mutual aid provided for the frail or otherwise vulnerable, many of whose needs were not easily met by local councils and other public bodies.

Beyond its importance at times of crisis, this kind of community-level participation yields other societal and individual benefits. Political scientist Robert Putnam, in his seminal study of variations in the quality of sub-national governance in Italy's regions, concluded that 'the norms and networks of civic engagement', including political participation in elections and membership of local associations, 'were the hallmarks of a successful region' (Putnam 1995, p 66; Putnam 1993). This, he declared, is because citizens who are situated within broad and active social networks are able to participate in a coordinated way in the civic and political affairs of their region, and to demand a higher standard of responsiveness and delivery from the public authorities which serve them.

More generally, there are good reasons to think that in order to tackle some of the entrenched causes of economic decline or social deprivation, it is vital to ensure that decision-makers have access to the insights and understanding of the communities themselves. A huge body of information about local circumstances and history is stored within localities, but rarely accessed or engaged by those making decisions that affect the services, infrastructure and economies within them. The better the quality of the facilities, spaces and services shaping the life of a community, the more likely it is that local authorities will be able to identify and tap into key sources of local expertise – among charities, businesses, campaigners and voluntary service providers.

Overall, there has been a notable decline in rates of civic participation across the UK in recent years. It has been widely reported that membership of key associational bodies – like the Women's Institute, trades unions, housing associations and local clubs – has dropped markedly, and levels of volunteering have also fallen in many places (Tanner 2020). Care is needed in making judgements about the deleterious impact of such shifts, given that changes in habit and culture may account for some of these trends. But much research suggests that there is also a significant relationship between lower rates of civic participation and how deprived a community is, with less affluent places being far more likely to have fewer people volunteering in them (Tanner 2020: 43). These same areas also have fewer active charities operating within them (Corry 2020).

For policymakers interested in boosting levels of social capital and reviving participation in these groups, community infrastructure represents one of the few tools that can be reliably deployed. While there is a paucity of academic research on the link between community infrastructure and levels of social, political or civic participation in

the UK, some international evidence does find a powerful connection. Zhu (2015) finds that, in Guangzhou, China, the presence of more communal spaces within a neighbourhood – such as shops, cafés, swimming pools and playgrounds – indirectly affects levels of community participation (measured by activities like reporting neighbourhood problems and voting for homeowners' association members). These spaces foster greater mutual trust and reciprocity among neighbours, and amplify individuals' attachment to their local area. These sentiments, in turn, lead to greater levels of participation. Similarly, LeVan (2020) finds that American neighbourhoods which are designed to promote social interaction – for example, by incorporating open porches and front gardens – promote greater levels of conversation among neighbours than neighbourhoods with 'isolating' features such as cul-de-sacs or hills. This greater level of neighbourly contact is, in turn, associated with higher turnout at elections. While LeVan's study does not focus on social infrastructure *per se*, it does support the contention that physical features which foster social interaction can thereby encourage greater levels of participation in social, political and civic life.

Sports clubs, adult day centres, libraries, community cafés, museums, and a plethora of other facilities are the mainstay of voluntary activity, partly because they so often depend on the goodwill of volunteers to remain viable. Similarly, the members of book clubs, sports teams and wind bands would be unable to congregate without the local café, athletics field or village hall. As these social amenities have so often been among the casualties of fiscal retrenchment over the last decade, it is unsurprising that these forms of engagement have dwindled. Ensuring that there are good quality and well maintained spaces for community life is a necessary – though not sufficient – condition for protecting and revitalising the civic cultures of different kinds of place.

Policy

Below we identify and briefly sketch a number of proposals that flow from the core analysis and main arguments developed in this report. These are designed to be illustrative of the range of policy areas and governmental goals to which social infrastructure is relevant, rather than prescriptive. They are, for the most part, directed at central government because of its current commitment to levelling up, although we sketch too the kind of role that local councils and devolved authorities could play in this area.

Our guiding aim has been to elaborate a more robust and evidentially informed understanding of the different kinds of value associated with improved, or restored, social infrastructure. This broad ambition would be significantly enabled, we suggest, if we had better, more coherent, data about different levels of community amenities and space across the country, and a more reliable understanding of where these are most lacking, and where particular community institutions are at risk.

We have suggested too that government, central and local, should be more alive to the case for strategic investments in community assets, spaces and buildings which are especially important in promoting social and civic value in those towns that are struggling economically and also those likely to face acute challenges in the face of the difficult economic circumstances that will emerge in the wake of the pandemic. And, to help inform judgements about value in this area, we make the case for the development of a data repository.

The values-based framework for understanding community provision that we advance here should help those keen to provide a robust alternative to the tendency to consider 'softer' or local forms of infrastructure as secondary in importance, and potentially less valuable economically than 'hard' or big pieces of physical infrastructure. Challenging this entrenched way of thinking is especially important, we suggest, given the extent to which key parts of this infrastructure, the central areas of many towns and the built and natural environments of many localities have all been so adversely affected by the consequences of declining council budgets following a decade of fiscal retrenchment.

With a more rigorous grasp of the different, interconnecting values of social infrastructure, and informed by more reliable and coherent data about levels of provision and use, government should have more confidence, as well as better information, to support a programme of targeted investments in different amenities in the context of its levelling up programme, and to evaluate the impacts of such interventions.

Government should also pay close attention to the lessons that can be learned from recent policy innovations in other countries. In France, for example, the *Action Cœur de Ville* initiative is designed to stimulate economic development in 222 smaller towns and cities through the revitalisation of local amenities, shops, housing and offices. This policy package includes a focus on enhancing public space, heritage assets and communal facilities. It is designed around the ethos of partnership, with officials at the local, regional and central levels required to collaborate, together with private sector partners, to deliver a programme of urban renewal.

Policy

There is considerable evidence to suggest that efforts to improve or protect playgrounds, libraries, pubs and community halls may be more significant for combatting the stagnation and decline of many towns in the short to medium term than investing in new dual carriageways or rail electrification near to them. And it seems probable that such interventions are more likely to touch the lives and well-being of the poorest and most vulnerable in many different local communities – a particularly important gain which improvements to transportation and digital connectivity may not guarantee to the same extent.

Interventions of the first kind may well also lead to more immediate 'pay offs' than projects to improve transport connectivity can do – an important consideration given the pressures on politicians to show results for spending programmes generated by the electoral cycle. Equally, it may be that improving levels of community provision in a place may actually ensure that the full value of large-scale transportation projects can be realised, and so we suggest that much more attention should be paid to aligning different kinds of infrastructure investment, and a greater role allocated to social and community-level provision within large-scale infrastructure planning.

Our account of the case for social infrastructure and the values it can generate is distinctive in other respects too. We argue that more consideration be given to the people who work for organisations – some of which will be in the commercial sector – that play an important role in the facilitation of community interaction, improving relationships between people, creating public spaces and contributing to a more vibrant cultural life. The workforce that is employed in publicly funded entities, like libraries, youth centres or art galleries, are an especially important source of the value that community provision can yield, and the role of people in relation to social infrastructure needs to be given greater emphasis, with more thinking and resource allocated to training and skills development in local arts, leisure and cultural amenities.

We also argue that more systematic attention be paid to the role that community-level infrastructure can play in relation to residents' feelings of identity and local pride, which we identify as crucial sources of civic value. Distinctive local institutions and forms of heritage can promote positive ideas about a place's future, and in turn contribute to an overarching sense of shared identity within it, reaching across some of the most salient divides of the current era (including that between older and younger people). And, the forms of connection that make community life rich and meaningful, and which can inject a degree of resilience into communities that are vulnerable to shocks, are, we suggest, inseparable from the quality and accessibility of facilities, amenities and spaces provided within an area.

This kind of consideration should inform investment priorities on the part of public authorities – especially a UK government focusing upon the goal of levelling up. Historic buildings, community pubs, attractive green spaces and places of worship all contribute to the sense of belonging in a town or village. They might well be considered as especially valuable

from a public value perspective (Moore 1995), and therefore in need of support or resource. There is a tendency, we note, to articulate their value only when they face serious threat. An appreciation of the roles that these kinds of assets and institutions play in bringing people together and shaping the life and cultural identity of a community should be hard-wired into the thinking of relevant authorities.

Key recommendations:

1. Bringing together available data

Efforts to improve the quality and quantity of our shared spaces are impeded by the absence of coherent, accessible data about the amount and quality of social infrastructure in Britain's towns, and the lack of an overview available to decision-makers, locally and in the centre, about how different places are doing in this regard. Bringing together some of the key different sources of data about a number of key community institutions – libraries, community centres and spaces, playgrounds and parks, for example – and developing an up-to-date picture of these, and of the numbers of people who use them and are employed by them, should be considered a key first step if a more coherent and informed approach to social infrastructure is to emerge.

It would help central government, local authorities, charities and community groups to consider in a more informed way how the quality and density of social infrastructure varies from place to place, and to get a sense of how it changes over time. And it should enable more rigorous assessments to be made of the relationship between social infrastructure and various economic, social and civic outcomes which government is interested in – although measuring social and civic outcomes in precise ways is an inherently challenging undertaking in this area.

It would be really valuable to have a better understanding of the rates of use and accessibility of key community assets. Knowing that there is a library in a town does not tell us much. We need to know, at a minimum, how many hours it is open per week, its rate of circulation, the size of its budget, how accessible it is via public or other transport, whether it is solvent or not, how many staff are employed or volunteers involved, and how physically accessible it is. And the same is true of the other institutions identified above.

Local councils in particular would benefit enormously from such a resource, providing that they have the capacity to analyse it. Given that it will take considerable co-ordination and new investment to assemble this kind of data repository, we would recommend in the meantime that local and devolved governments undertake to audit the community assets that fall within their jurisdiction and monitor their fortunes more systematically. At present, the Localism Act 2011 requires councils to maintain a list of 'assets of community value' – i.e., land or buildings which further the 'social interests' of the local community, including its cultural, recreational and sporting interests. However, this list typically records details of their location only. The data repository we propose would provide a single digital store for the main relevant data-sets, and should also include interactive features that allow the user to create bespoke datasets

at different spatial scales. It would provide an important resource for authorities bidding for some of the new funding schemes – for instance, the Levelling Up Fund and the Cultural Recovery Fund – that have been developed by the current government.

2. Funding

Current levelling up funding streams reflect ingrained assumptions about the higher value and greater returns associated with large-scale infrastructure projects designed to improve connectivity. Looking across the various funds dedicated to this ambition, one recent estimate suggests that £163 billion of the total £172 billion that has been allocated has been directed to projects of this kind (Pro Bono Economics 2021; Whittaker 2021). The remaining £9 billion is earmarked for investments locally that may incorporate social infrastructure but are also likely to reflect the focus upon economic growth and improved connectivity. These include the Levelling Up Fund (£4.8 billion), the Towns Fund (£3.6 billion), the Community Renewal Fund (£0.22 billion) and the Community Ownership Fund (£0.15 billion)[7]. Davis and Collinge (2021) estimate that 87% of the Levelling Up, Community Renewal and Community Ownership funds combined is likely to be allocated to capital investments which are predominantly focused upon physical infrastructure.

This skew reflects the ingrained bias towards transport and physical infrastructure in Whitehall, and an enduring scepticism both about the idea that social infrastructure reflects value for money, and perhaps also about the very notion that it is the state's responsibility to look after the facilities and spaces of community life. But, given the multiple, demonstrable benefits that social infrastructure generates in relation to some of the core goals that government pursues – including economic growth, improved productivity, public health and community cohesion – and the release of new funds for infrastructure development, this may well represent a significant missed opportunity.

In order to rectify this oversight, and to help decision-makers move towards a more balanced approach to infrastructure development, we offer the following suggestions:

The UK government should aim to allocate a minimum of 25% of the Levelling Up and Towns funds for investment in social infrastructure. Separating out spending on community infrastructure from other kinds of infrastructure is not entirely straightforward, given that some funds (like the Towns Fund) invite applicants to develop bids that are geared simultaneously to different goals. But government could send a clearer signal that it is receptive to proposals relating to community provision, as well as economic recovery, and setting itself a reasonably ambitious target of this kind would help convey this message.

7 These funds cover different spending timeframes and sometimes different geographies. For example, the Towns Fund applies only to England, whereas the Levelling Up Fund will be made available to the whole of the UK.

Policy

Government should adapt the assessment criteria it is using in relation to the Levelling Up Fund so that physical transport projects are not automatically given higher priority. It has already signalled a readiness to adjust conventional measures of 'value-for-money' in relation to the Towns Fund allocations it has approved, and it should adopt a similar approach in its allocation of other key funds. The Levelling Up Fund is currently billed as covering three broad themes: local transport; regeneration and town centre investment; and cultural investment, and bids from local councils are assessed against four criteria: the place's level of need, deliverability, strategic fit with fund priorities and value-for-money. This ought to be a potentially significant source of investments in a wide range of local infrastructure. But the fund's prospectus makes very clear that transport projects will perform particularly well on value-for-money criteria, a statement that is very likely to shape the strategies and priorities of those bidding to it. There is a compelling need to redefine this scheme and to signal the variety of forms of infrastructure that could be supported by it.

Government should earmark a portion of the Dormant Assets Fund to support local social infrastructure projects. This is an idea that has been championed by a welter of civil society organisations, led by The Community Wealth Fund Alliance. This is calling for the next wave of dormant assets funding to be used to create a Community Wealth Fund, which would endow small communities (c. 3,000-10,000 people) with long-term funding that they could choose how to use. £745 million has so far been spent under the scheme since its inception in 2011 and the government has announced plans to expand the kinds of asset that can be used. Currently these comprise dormant bank accounts, but there are plans to expand this category to include insurance products, pensions, and securities. There is a compelling case for it to consider broadening even further the definition of a 'dormant asset', and thereby to incorporate derelict public buildings, vacant land, and abandoned public spaces.

Central Government should create a new fund specifically for investment in social infrastructure. Government should consider ways to incentivise other key actors, including those in the private sector, to invest in and build social infrastructure. There are a number of international examples of initiatives to leverage private investment in social infrastructure which could serve as blueprints for government action in this area. For example, in Toronto, developers are required to allocate a portion of all new developments as park space or, alternatively, to pay a Parks Levy Fee which can be used to improve existing parkland or develop new parks (Kristie and Strickland 2017; City of Toronto 2021). The levy is set at between 5 and 20 percent of the value of the development, depending on the size of the site (Toronto Municipal Code $415-24). Between 2006 and 2016, the levy raised just under CAN $483 million, of which $260 million was spent on 624 park projects in the same period (City of Toronto 2017).

In England and Wales, the existing Community Infrastructure Levy operates in a similar way, with local authorities permitted to levy a charge on new developments, or to accept new infrastructure construction as a payment in kind. However, whereas Toronto's Parks Levy Fee is ring-fenced for spending on social infrastructure projects, the Community Infrastructure Levy

is used for a wider range of physical as well as community infrastructure, from transport and flood defence projects to play areas and sports facilities, depending on the local authority's development priorities. There is scope for considering whether and how the Community Infrastructure Levy might be adapted so that more community-based facilities, amenities and spaces benefit from it. And government might also consider introducing a new compulsory requirement for developers to integrate a minimum level of social infrastructure into new development projects..

More widely, government should consider how the planning system could be improved to promote the integration of social infrastructure into housing and other developments. Again, there is much to learn from some international examples, such as the Alt-Erlaa social housing estate on the outskirts of Vienna, which incorporates an impressive array of community-level provision, including health centres, kindergartens, schools, a library, a gym, a church, playgrounds, swimming pools and bars and restaurants.

3. Strategy

UK Government should develop a strategy for social infrastructure support across England. Central government has in recent years given strategic priority to, and allocated significant funds for, a variety of major physical infrastructure projects. By comparison, investments in social infrastructure are much smaller, more fragmentary and piecemeal in character. It is often left to local authorities to respond to crises facing community institutions, and they are often hampered in doing so by their own fiscal position and capability deficits. In the context of the pandemic, and the economic challenges it has generated, there is a significant risk of a new wave of closures affecting iconic local institutions like football clubs, galleries, theatres and libraries, as well as high street stores, pubs and cafés. Their demise could have a major adverse cultural and economic impact in many parts of the country.

Central government needs to take a considered overview of these kinds of change, and work in partnership with local and devolved authorities to devise strategies to avoid or mitigate them, or to secure alternative forms of support and investment. This requires a coherent social infrastructure strategy, akin to the existing national infrastructure strategy, which would help establish this focus as a clear priority in the context of the post-Covid recovery agenda. Such a strategic framework would incorporate a review of the main economic, social and civic benefits which good-quality community provision can achieve, monitor changes in levels and quality of social infrastructure, and also identify key goals and targets which governments – central and local – should pursue. We would suggest that responsibility for developing such a strategy be allocated to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Expand the remit of the National Infrastructure Commission to include social infrastructure. At present, the National Infrastructure Commission provides the government with advice on the various physical infrastructure challenges it faces and develops a broader strategic understanding to inform policy-making and key decisions. The Commission is clear that its current remit does not cover social forms of infrastructure. But, given that the full benefits of investment in physical

infrastructure require more attention being paid to community-level assets and amenities, there is a strong case for requiring the NIC to broaden its scope in this regard.

Incorporate social infrastructure within the scope of the new National Infrastructure Bank. The new Bank will be launched in Spring 2021 with a financial capacity of £22 billion. This includes £12 billion of debt and equity capital, and the ability to deliver £10 billion in guarantees. It will also be able to borrow from private markets and grow through the recycling and retention of returns on investment. It is designed around the core mission of raising investment for physical infrastructure projects. But there is no good reason why other community-related projects, which met the threshold for return demanded by the Bank, could not be considered within its remit.

Local bodies should be supported in developing their own social infrastructure strategies and sharing best practice. Local authorities play a key role as funders and regulators of key community facilities. And so too do lower tiers, including parish councils. Local councils should be encouraged to review the state of the key facilities within the areas they cover, engaging with other tiers of authority beneath them as well as local communities, and drawing up a register of vulnerable assets and institutions.

Those authorities applying for the various levelling up funds should be required to provide a plan for community infrastructure maintenance and development as part of their bids, and asked to indicate which are the economic goals and social objectives these are currently meeting, and which they are not. There should be a particular requirement to audit the state of existing facilities in poorer towns and areas within their jurisdiction.

Councils, more generally, should reflect on progress made towards enabling communities themselves to take responsibility for community assets and different kinds of facility and space. Many key cultural amenities are owned and operated by community groups. Community pubs, heritage sites and green spaces, for example, are often managed and actively supported by local people. Councils and devolved authorities should be encouraged to support community and mutual aid groups being involved in bids to support and develop social infrastructure assets. For example, in 2020 Norfolk County Council established a £1 million Social Infrastructure Fund and gave community groups the opportunity to bid for up to £250,000 each (Norfolk County Council 2021). This scheme allowed the council to take advantage of these groups' understanding of the challenges local people faced during the pandemic. This funding was used to support initiatives that add real value to the lives of local people. The Nancy Oldfield Trust, for example, used their endowment to grow their fleet of boats, dinghies and wheelchair-friendly paddleboards. This in turn allowed the Trust to expand its services and to support more people who are disabled or disadvantaged to explore the Norfolk Broads, connect with their natural environment and enjoy a degree of physical exercise.

Policy

4. A programme to restore town centres

The UK government should revisit its recent decision to allow developers to convert vacant builds that housed forms of community infrastructure into residential properties. The Johnson government recently passed secondary legislation which allows developers to convert a range of amenities into residential properties without planning permission if they have been vacant for more than three months (Town and Country Planning (etc.) Order 2021). These rules apply not only to vacant retail premises, but also to a whole range of venues that provide invaluable social spaces including cafés, restaurants, creches, leisure centres, cinemas and bingo halls. The government has argued that the new rules will 'revitalise England's cherished high streets and town centres' (MHCLG 2021) and insisted that, 'Allowing unused commercial buildings to be changed into homes will encourage more people to live near local high streets and come to the area for work and leisure' (ibid.).

An understanding of the importance and value of community spaces and amenities raises concerns about this approach. Allowing community and leisure spaces to be converted into private residences may well damage the quality and nature of community life. A high street whose public amenities have been converted into private dwellings ceases to function as a local centre. If there are fewer places to see, shops to visit and things to do, the overall attractiveness of a town is likely to decline markedly.

Rather than helping expedite a deep-rooted economic trend which is leading to more and more communal spaces being turned into private accommodation, government should be considering how to breathe new life into vacant amenities like cafés, art galleries or nurseries in a way that rejuvenates their value to the local community. This may mean making it easier for community organisations to take ownership of these properties – for example, by amending the Localism Act 2011 to give community groups that wish to purchase assets of community value more time to raise the necessary finance. Alternatively, it may mean supporting local authorities to invest in these facilities directly, or giving communities first option to take control of the buildings where endangered local institutions are sited.

Policy

Conclusions

These broadly drawn proposals reflect some of the key evidence and core arguments developed in this report. Focusing more concertedly on social infrastructure, and allocating more direct funding in this area, would enable central government to deliver some of its core policy ambitions. It is very likely that initiatives aimed at restoring or boosting community infrastructure may well yield more visible results and make more difference to local people's lives than some of the large transport projects which have been central to the levelling up agenda, and which are being developed over a much longer timescale.

There is an ingrained bias in government towards large-scale projects that aim to achieve better connectivity between urban centres and satellite suburbs and towns, but micro-level interventions that seek to restore decaying community infrastructure and dilapidated town centres, or that aim to support local initiatives to improve facilities and upgrade amenities, may be far more beneficial in social and economic terms than policymakers have generally appreciated.

More importantly still, there is a very strong case, we would suggest, for giving much greater consideration in the development of large-scale infrastructure programmes to their alignment with investments in community provision and amenity. To realise the full potential of new railway stations, bridges between places or new, connecting roads, it is also vital to attend to the needs and capacities of the communities who will make use of them. A more integrated approach to different kinds of infrastructure requires a wider strategic approach to planning and funding. It will also make imperative a more rigorous evidence base, and a fuller understanding of the kinds of value – identified here as economic, social, and civic in kind – which social infrastructure can realise.

Notes

[i] The Business Register and Employment Survey is the official source of employment estimates and provides a breakdown of the distribution of jobs by industry, using the 2007 Standard Industrial Classification (SIC). The usefulness of these classes for estimating employment levels per type of social infrastructure varies because the SIC categories often do not align with the Ordnance Survey's points of interest categories (which we use to identify social infrastructure in this report).

Some of the SIC classes, such as 'Library activities', capture the number of people whose employment is associated with a single type of social infrastructure (in this case, libraries). These are the most useful categories as they provide an accurate estimate of the number of people whose employment is owed to the presence of a specific type of social infrastructure. However, other classes cover a selection of employment activities associated with more than one type of social infrastructure, such as restaurants and cafés, which the Ordnance Survey treats as separate points of interest.

Similarly, in some cases, employment estimates linked to one type of social infrastructure may be divided across two or more SIC classes. For example, the Ordnance Survey category 'sports clubs and associations' matches with three SIC classes: 'sports and recreation education', 'activities of sports clubs' and 'operation of sports facilities'.

Finally, some SIC classes group employment activities that are associated with a particular type of social infrastructure together with employment activities that are not linked to social infrastructure at all. For example, the 'activities of religious organisations' class groups of employees working in places of worship – a type of social infrastructure – together with funeral services employees.

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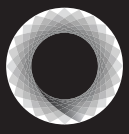

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